Mastering Classical Realism, One Skill at a Time

In a recent workshop at the Bay Area Classical Artist Atelier, **Juliette Aristides** *took students through the course of a completed painting, emphasizing the importance of mastering drawing, grisaille, and two-color painting before students move to using a full palette.*

BY AUSTIN R. WILLIAMS

Workshop photos: Issa Wehab Photography

For any student of art, embarking on a long-pose figure painting can be a challenge. First, the artist needs a reliable drawing. Then, once the artist begins painting, he or she is confronted by a swarm of considerations and problems: value, color, reflected light, atmospheric perspective, hard and soft edges, and more. To help make the painting process less overwhelming, artist and instructor Juliette Aristides leads students through a sequence of skills that helps them focus on one variable at a time, working first with line, then value, then color temperature.

Aristides recently brought this approach to an eight-day workshop at the Bay Area Classical Artist Atelier, LLC (BACAA), located in San Carlos, California, just south of San Francisco. During the workshop, Aristides presented an abbreviated version of the curriculum at the Classical Atelier, the four-year atelier program she founded and instructs in Seattle, at the Gage Academy of Art.

In the first year of the Classical Atelier program, students work entirely on drawing. In their second year, they begin painting grisailles—black-and-white

Juliette Aristides worked on a copy of a master painting during a workshop she taught at the Bay Area Classical Artist Atelier (BACAA), in San Carlos, California.

Artistides guided students through a process that focused first on drawing, then grisaille, then two-color painting, and finally painting with a full-palette.

paintings that teach the fundamentals of value, light, and shadow. After mastering these skills, students move on to two-color paintings, which teach principles of color temperature and in turn provide a transition to using the full palette. "Two-color painting eases into the world of color by using temperature as a gateway," Aristides explains. "By this point, students already understand values; now they are just throwing one more thing into the mix." The artist notes that she often encourages students to use burnt sienna and ultramarine for these pieces, although many other color combinations will teach the principle as well. After students have mastered two-color painting, they move into working with a full palette and developing concepts for their own paintings in order to achieve an individual artistic vision.

A one-week workshop does not allow for anything like the slow and steady accumulation of practice that a four-year program can offer, but it can expose students to new methods and leave them better equipped to work on the skills to which they have been introduced. With this in mind, Aristides' eight-day workshop at BACAA provided, she says, "a tiny microcosm of that whole process." The workshop followed the progression of the Classical Atelier's curriculum, both in the instructor's lectures and demonstrations, and in the students' own work completing a long-pose figure painting. During the mornings of the workshop, Aristides explained the theory behind such practices as value studies, two-color paintings, and color temperature, and students attempted short studies exploring these concepts. Afternoons were devoted to a long-pose figurative piece that students took from beginning to end throughout the course of the eight days. Afternoons also featured group discussions and demonstrations by the instructor.

Aristides' Palette

- Naples yellow light
- yellow ochre
- transparent red oxide
- cadmium red light
- burnt umber
- raw umber
- ultramarine blue
- olive green
- ivory black
- flake white

Although Aristides enters every workshop with an ambitious course of study planned, she knows that in most cases she will need to tailor her instruction to the skill levels and personalities of individual students in order for them to get the maximum possible benefit from the workshop. "Before a workshop, I'm not sure of the levels of every student coming in, so my instruction tends to be dual-track: Everyone starts with the same things, then we customize it," she says. "It can be frustrating for a beginner to feel stuck trying to finish a beautiful figurative piece. But the goal is not to finish the best painting you've ever done; it's to be exposed to different ideas. To do that, a person has to be ready to take a little risk and be exposed."

Aristides' students began their paintings by completing a line drawing. Good drawing is critical to the success of representational paintings—portraits in particular. But Aristides says that she must help students find the right balance between creating a strong drawing that will support a finished painting and

BELOW AND BOTTOM
Aristides' class visited the Legion of Honor Museum, in San Francisco, where they copied from master paintings and drawings.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Eris
2011, oil, 24 x 30.

not overemphasizing this step. "When a portrait or figure painting is weak, most of the time it's a drawing-related issue," she says. "And the tighter the style, the more egregious the drawing mistakes will be—they can really sabotage the piece, unless you're a loose or impressionistic painter." However, it's possible to spend too much time on a drawing and become over-reliant on it. "There's a tendency to hold onto the drawing, and then the painting can never get going," the instructor says. To prevent this from happening in her workshops, Aristides encourages her students to stick to linear underdrawings, then begin painting after no more than two afternoons of working on the drawing. More often than not, however, students would rather get the drawing done quickly than spend a lot of time perfecting it. "What makes artists great is their command of the fundamentals, but those are the things most people want to spend the least time on," Aristides observes. "But often, if someone is a really good artist, it's not because of extraordinary talent but because they work hard and have mastered the basics."

A lack of fundamental skills can also cause artists to rely on preconceived notions about parts of the figure or other shapes. "The less experience artists have, the more they rely on what they *think* an eye or a hand looks like," Aristides says. "That artist will draw it as if it's a sign or a pictograph. Many students have trouble trusting that if they just believe their eyes, they will progress in leaps and bounds and their art will be a more authentic representation of who they are."

Helping students to gradually attain that sort of artistic self-actualization is the long-term aim of Aristides' instruction. At her Classical Atelier program, at the Gage Academy of Art, in Seattle, which she has now run for 12 years, she has been able to see students progress

The Bay Area Classical Artist Atelier

Founded by Linda Dulaney, the Bay Area Classical Artist Atelier, LCC (BACAA), located in San Carlos, California, hosts weekly classes for artists of all skill levels and also offers about 10 workshops per year with leading artists in the contemporary classical realist tradition. Classes range from drawing and painting from casts and live models to visits to local galleries and museums.

The school will host an upcoming four-month master program led by artists Juliette Aristides, Dan Thompson, Michael Grimaldi, Jon deMartin, Carl Dobsky, and others.

The BACAA studio provides an excellent environment for painting and drawing, with north-facing light and 25-foot-high ceilings. For more information, visit www.bacaa.org, or e-mail info@bacaa.org.

Melissa
by Linda Dulaney, oil, 22 x 28.

from making unconfident line drawings to becoming independent artists capable of singular interpretations of their subject matter. "The vision for my program is to create a monastic environment for the study of art," Aristides explains, and to help achieve this, she sets up her teaching space to be several degrees removed from everyday life. "Even through the design of the entranceway we try to send signals," she says. "Leave the world behind, leave your cell phone behind. You'll spend all day making and contemplating art."

Aristides also uses the Old Masters to both teach fundamental concepts and to connect her students' activities to a long legacy of representational painters. On the first day of the workshop, Aristides demonstrated copying by working from a reproduction of a Sargent painting. Following her demonstration, students worked to create a limited-palette sketch from reproductions of master paintings that the instructor provided. Midway through the workshop, the class took a trip to the Legion of Honor, in San Francisco, where students drew from the museum's large collection of Old Master drawings. "Working at the museum was a highlight of the workshop," Aristides says. "It's an incredibly beautiful location, and a solid collection."

Although copying the work of master artists is a major part of Aristides' teaching—both in her workshops and in the Classical Atelier program—when it comes to citing her own major influences, she often turns first not to visual artists but to authors. "I find my closest allies are writers," she says. "I relate to the work of people such as Tolstoy, J.R.R. Tolkien, or Joseph Conrad—what they've written about the process of creating; wrestling with the spirit of things."

Finding "the spirit of things" is a major part of what drives many classical realist painters, and it's the larger purpose behind the long, intense course of study that Aristides helps her students through—whether they are studying with her for eight days or four years. The methods of this patient process may be demanding, and the accumulation of skills might seem slow, but ultimately, it is all done in the service of learning to better be able to see, appreciate, and portray the world around you. ■

Austin R. Williams is an associate editor of American Artist.

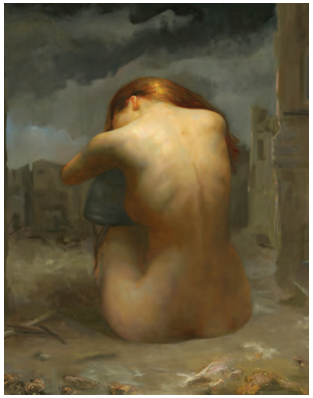
OPPOSITE PAGE, LEFT
Soldier

OPPOSITE PAGE, RIGHT
Soldier
2011, oil, 30 x 24.

BELOW
James
2010, charcoal on toned paper, 24 x 18.

BOTTOM
Memorial
2010, oil, 30 x 24.

BELOW RIGHT
The Poets
2009, oil, 54 x 26.



About the Artist

Juliette Aristides is the author of the books *Classical Drawing Atelier, Classical Painting Atelier*, and the forthcoming *Lessons in Classical Drawing* (all Watson-Guptill, New York, New York). She studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, in Philadelphia, and the Atelier Studio Program of Fine Art, in Minneapolis, and is a founding member of the Water Street Atelier, in Brooklyn. Among the awards she has won are the Elizabeth Greenshields Grant and the Wilder Prize for drawing from the National Academy School. She is the founder of the Classical Atelier program, at the Gage Academy, in Seattle. She exhibits nationally and is represented by John Pence Gallery, in San Francisco. For more information, visit www.aristidesarts.com and www.aristidesatelier.com.

DEMONSTRATION: *Bridget*

Step 1
Aristides laid out her composition with a charcoal sketch on a canvas that she had previously primed with gray gesso. The artist sometimes puts considerable time into this step, although she finished this drawing fairly quickly. "The idea behind this sketch is that you're not trying to tackle your problems all at once," Aristides explains. "You're trying to compartmentalize, and right now you're solving proportional issues."

Step 2
The instructor fixed her drawing with a thin permanent marker, then applied a wash of raw green umber to the canvas.

Step 3
Using a soft cloth, the artist began pulling the light areas out of the dark wash. "I tend to go for the large, clear light shapes first and leave the more subtle or ambiguous ones for down the road," she says.

Step 4
At this point Aristides had finished pulling out the lights on the figure and began pulling out the light on the ground plane as well. She cautions that although there's no need to race through this step, artists should not be too meticulous at this point or the paint may dry.

Step 5
Aristides laid flake white paint in the lightest areas of the figure. This completed what she referred to as her "quick-and-dirty" grisaille underpainting.

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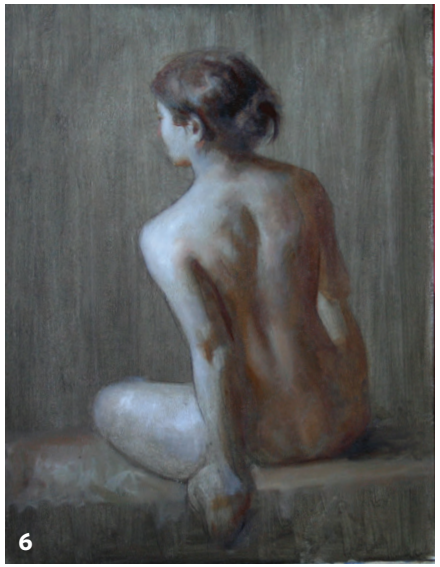
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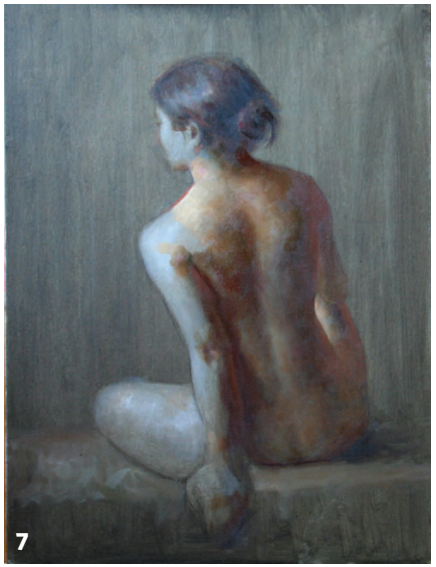
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Step 6
Aristides had made a color study of her composition prior to working on the canvas, so she already knew roughly what the painting's main colors would be. She now started laying in color, beginning in the large shadow areas on the model's back and keeping the paint fairly transparent. "Starting in the shadow areas is fairly forgiving—it gives you time to get acclimated to the piece," she says. "From a noncritical shadow area, you can then work up to the focal points."

Step 7
The instructor started working out from shadow shapes into the lighter areas. Because she had already set her drawing, she was able to focus on creating value and getting a good color match. "The idea behind this process is that you've worked very broadly up to this point, so now you can afford to be pretty myopic," she explains.

Step 8
Aristides finished the shoulder area and worked her way down the arm, moving from shadow to light. She continued in this fashion until the whole figure was painted.

Step 9
The artist worked on the figure's face and hair, the latter of which she treated similar to a broad shadow shape. She then moved into painting the background and large shadows.


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Step 10
After finishing the background, Aristides considered the entire canvas and looked for edges that needed to be integrated into the background and looked to make sure the foreground, middle-ground, and background worked well together. "At this point, you come back to more global questions," she says. "Is the whole thing working well as an image? Where does my eye go? Do I need to soften an edge to cause the eye to move elsewhere?" Aristides also notes that at the end of the painting process, artists can reconnect with the inspiration or emotion that initially drew them to the specific pose or composition. "It's where the beginning and ending come together," she says. "You're looking for an emotional resonance—something to hold on to."

THE COMPLETED DEMONSTRATION:
Bridget
2011, oil, 24 x 18.
Private collection.