



Micoette Box (00x00)

Don't let this artist's meticulous attention to detail fool you; he's also skilled at the art of improvisation.

BY SARAH A. STRICKLEY

Abel Marquez

AS MANY EXPERIENCED ARTISTS WILL tell you, it certainly pays to have a plan, but the finest discoveries are often made when we deviate from the course we've charted. For Abel Marquez, the ability to remain open to a painting's possibilities lives at the center of his process. "The work suggests the roads I might take," he says. "As an artist, I then decide which of those will lead me to the better destination, but if I make a mistake, I'm always willing to turn around."

In the case of *Micoette Box*, his Ruth Richeson/Unison Pastels award-winning painting, an alternate route appeared in the form of a last-minute suggestion. "Once he was in front of the painting, my friend Mario Marioni said, 'I imagine this work with a dark red color as a background,'" says Marquez. "That same night, I decided, without giving it much thought, to give the work a substantial change and transform the medium gray that framed the central figure in a dark red. The advice was timely and very appropriate."

Outside of the late adjustment to the background, the process of painting *Micoette Box* was remarkably smooth. "It was one of those works that, from the very beginning, start to flow without inconveniences," says the artist. "I knew that the only things needed were patience and time to reach a good end."

Marquez was drawn to the intense yellow of the quinces and the red of the box; the other colors in his palette were selected to serve at the altar of those passions. "I always allow intuition and sentiment to lead me to my subjects, which may in turn lead me to my choices regarding color," he says.

The Early Days

The story of Marquez's life as an artist begins in his childhood habit of borrowing the margins of

his grandfather's newspapers—the only paper available to him—as a canvas for his drawings of small houses, shoes and suns. "It used to bother my grandfather a little, but then he would laugh and encourage me to proceed," says Marquez.

The piquant scent of his mother's oil paints and her seemingly magical ability to mix colors amazed the young artist. The discovery of Picasso's paintings in an issue of *Life* magazine—"A Spaniard, just like me, and he was very famous!"—gave him a sense of possibility and ambition. Soon, he was helping his classmates with their drawings.

After abandoning his studies in medicine, Marquez enrolled in the School of Arts at the University of Cordoba in Argentina and discovered the great classical masters. "I was especially impressed by Caravaggio, Ingres, Millet and Vermeer," he says. He also cites the Chilean master, Claudio Bravo, as an important influence.

The dearth of quality pastel products prevented Marquez from experimenting extensively with the medium early on, but when he moved to the United States, a gallery director suggested that he give it a try. By 2005, he was creating his first professional works in pastel. "The main characteristics that attracted me to pastel painting techniques were the matte-finish look, which is so even and velvety, and the manner in which color vibrates after being applied," he says.

He also appreciated the opportunity to use his fingers as tools and pastel's subtle finishes that rival the values achievable with oils. "I'm currently wholly devoted to the use of pastel, trying to make my work grow technically and conceptually," he says. "I believe that if we must grow on both levels in order to possess the strength and energy required to create a true work of art."



Building the Foundation

In order to become a subject in one of Marquez's still lifes, an object must generally carry a sense of history—it has to invite his imagination to track its past so that he can begin to envision it in a given scenario. "It must be able to tell me something so that I can re-create a story," he says. "It should have a particular energy that communicates to me, a special bridge that I find only in some objects."

He places a great deal of importance on the generation of ideas—planning setups, managing light, working out the composition in his head—which he then polishes by playing with the objects, adding or removing details. He usually shoots about 60 to 80 photographs of his setups once he has them, documenting the process.

When his pastel arsenal finally comes into play, it includes Unison, Sennelier and Rembrandt pastels. "I know, of course, that there are other brands on the market," he says. "But I haven't had the opportunity to work with them yet." He uses only about 12 colors in a single painting, but expands his palette by mixing them in different proportions. That is, for example, how he achieves a greater variety in his grays.

Marquez's paintings begin with a very loose drawing. He never determines color in advance; rather, he lets the composition and the palette develop simultaneously. "I let them interact and the work starts showing me different possibilities," he says. "I begin to choose which path to take and which to discard." The process may be meticulous, but he cautions against mistaking his calculations as cool; rather, he's simply a very deliberate worker.

**The Guardian
Flame (00x00)**

**The Serenity
of a Thought
(00x00)**



"Details, for instance, appear very slowly," he says. "I don't dedicate work to these in the initial stages. In the beginning, my attention is occupied by other issues that must be resolved—the more general aspects of the visual language, such as the main contrast, focal point, the ratio of the subject to the background."

Capturing the Poetry

Once he has mastered the more general aspects, Marquez dedicates the bulk of his time to carrying out adjustments that are increasingly precise. The details only begin to emerge in the final layers of pastel. "I customarily use my fingers on 95 percent of a work," he says. "The remaining 5 percent is treated with rubber brushes and pastel pencils." He uses tiny chips of pastel to render the most minuscule of details.

Fixative also plays a role in Marquez's process. In the beginning stages, he applies it generously, affording himself room for many subsequent layers of pastel. As the work becomes more meticulous, he applies his fixative lightly because he doesn't want to lose the intensity and the brightness of the top layers of pigment, especially in areas of light.

Speaking of light, the artist regards it as "the magic wand that can transform the object, giving it height and charm, and making us fall in love at its feet." It plays a fundamental role within the process and development of his work. "We may speak about 'virtual' light, the one we believe we are seeing and achieve through the play of chiaroscuro, and the other 'real' light, the one that makes the color emanate once it's applied," he says. "Both of them are very important since they work together to infuse the painting with life."



Oranges, Lemons and Other Fruits (00x00)

Marquez says he doesn't pay too much attention to rules or plans; he simply does what he needs to get the results he desires. "I go down a long road until the work is finished," he says. His careful modifications ensure that the poetry and the life that he imagined for the painting will be the central players in the finished work.

The Path to the Gallery Door

The fantastic light from a small window in Marquez's Miami, Fla. studio brightens his spirits, as do the natural surroundings. "The apartment is located in a historic place in downtown Miami, which is full of plants palm trees and a unique tranquility that allows me to work comfortably," he says. He believes, and has always believed, that the main preoccupation of an artist must be the work and the opportunity to grow. "Once the work has matured enough, it's then the appropriate time to worry about the road that it will have to take after leaving the studio," he says.

When he was a very young boy, Marquez spent hours working on an illustration commemorating Columbus Day for a homework assignment. The result was so impressive that his teacher refused to believe that he'd done the drawing himself. She accused him, in front of his entire class, of attempting pass off his parents' work as his own. In the end, he had to go straight to the top—the principal, who was already appraised of his artistic talents—

Abel Marquez (www.abelmarquez.com.ar) is an Argentinian pastel artist based in Miami, Fla. His work has received awards from the Pastel Society of America and the Salmagundi Art Club and has appeared in several solo exhibitions in Argentina and group exhibitions in the United States. His winning painting, *Micoette Box*, was also the winner of the Pastel Society of America's Award in Memory of Flora B. Giffuni in 2010. NAME OF TRANSLATOR assisted in the interview process for this feature.

for help defending his work. "My first defense of copyright," he calls the incident.

The artist has come a long way since those days, of course, but the results of his hard work and incredibly meticulous process are no less astounding to behold. He's able to achieve an incredible level of detail in his playful, yet impeccably balanced compositions that merit both recognition and celebration. You might even say that these hard-won paintings have paved a solid path to the galley door. 

Sarah A. Strickley is features editor of *The Pastel Journal*.

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