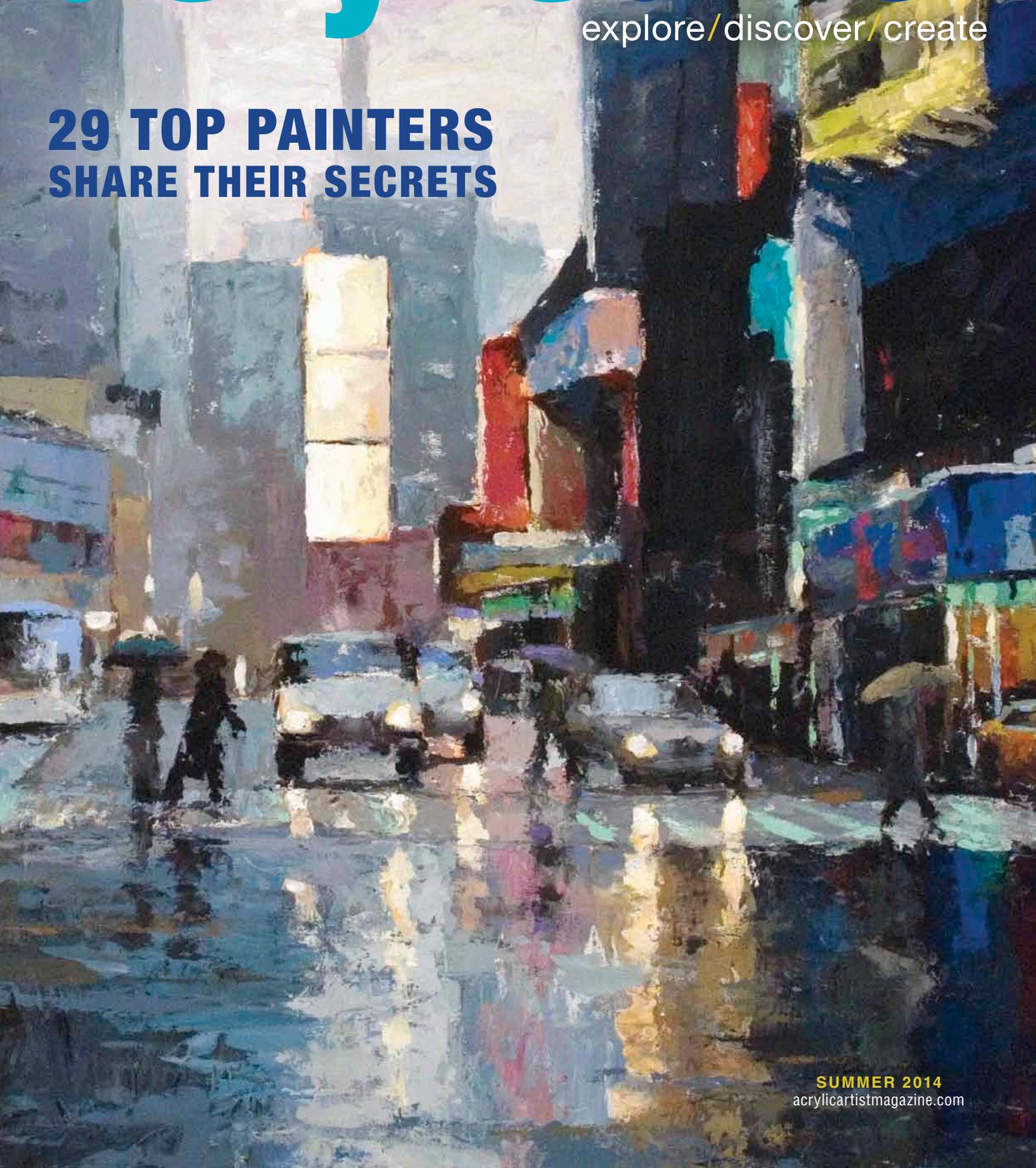


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FREEDOM REIGNS; **BEAUTY RESULTS**

Mary Alice Braukman finds that having a few rules at the beginning of a workshop allows participants to better enjoy the bountiful artistic liberties that characterize her mixed-media work.

By Bob Bahr

SILVER IRIDESCENT FLUID ACRYLIC PAINT, DISCARDED BUTTONS, TAR GEL, SOFT MOLDING PASTE, SHAVINGS FROM A KEY-MAKING MACHINE, GOUACHE AND WATERCOLOR, WINDOW-SHADE FABRIC, FINE PUMICE GEL, CUSTOM-DYED TISSUE PAPER—THESE ARE A FEW OF THE MATERIALS Mary Alice Braukman uses in her art. Nearly everything she has created recently has been mixed media or collage, with imagery ranging from the sparse to the thickly layered, and subject matter varying from the extremely abstract to the subtly representational. One thing has remained constant, though: All the physical elements are as archival as possible.

Braukman, N.W.S.



"I switched to Golden Fine Pumice Gel from beach sand and builder's sand because I couldn't be certain that the builder's sand was completely clean or that I could wash all the salt out of the sand," says Braukman. "Every artist needs to choose the best materials that can be found because you never know if something is going to turn out to be the painting. You must use archival materials, always. Even if the piece you're working on isn't *the* painting, it's practice for it."

When examining Braukman's work, it's imperative to consider her art materials carefully, because they're what free her. She has very thoughtfully selected the list of materials that she uses and that

she chooses for her workshop participants; the materials are selected because they work well together. Braukman has pulled off the nearly impossible: She has convinced art material manufacturers to provide products for her workshops even though she also uses products from their competitors. The lion and the lamb both give her paints, in part because they know she's selecting individual items specifically for their compatibility with the rest of her setup.

As a result, each student has many "toys" to play with—plus 5x7 cards that Braukman has prepared ahead of time with various gels, mediums, and applications of layered materials. Through experimentation, the students are able to see firsthand how



Workshop students were supplied with an array of materials. The working surfaces at a Braukman workshop tend to be rather full.

For *Untitled* (opposite; artist-dyed tissue, tar gel, illustration board, and acrylic on canvas, 10x10), Braukman mixed gray acrylic paint with tar gel to create the design on the top layer. The black rectangle is illustration board wrapped in tissue paper. "This is a good example of how you can see what something is going to feel like before affixing it," she says. "I moved that piece around on the collage before I applied it. Seeing this forgiving process makes students feel better."

Braukman's Materials

FROM GOLDEN ARTIST COLORS, FLUID ACRYLIC

IN THESE COLORS: quinacridone crimson, nickel azo yellow, phthalo turquoise, bone black, naphthol red light, titan buff, titanium white, dioxazine purple, Hansa yellow medium, iridescent micaceous iron oxide, interference violet, interference green, interference gold, iridescent pearl, iridescent silver fine, iridescent bright gold fine

ALSO FROM GOLDEN, THESE MEDIUMS: fluid matte medium, acrylic glazing liquid satin, polymer medium, clear tar gel, soft gel, self-leveling clear gel, pearl glaze, acrylic ground for pastels, fine pumice gel, heavy molding paste, light molding paste

FROM M. GRAHAM & CO., GOUACHE IN THESE COLORS: Hansa yellow, azo yellow, pyrrole red, phthalocyanine green, phthalocyanine blue, ultramarine blue, cerulean blue, lamp black, zinc white

ALSO FROM M. GRAHAM, WATERCOLOR IN THESE COLORS: azo yellow, gamboge, cadmium red, phthalocyanine green, phthalocyanine blue, ultramarine blue, cerulean blue, sepia

FROM DALER-ROWNEY, FW WATER-RESISTANT INK IN THESE COLORS: antelope brown (transparent), indigo (transparent), turquoise, red earth, flame orange, Rowney blue, olive green, purple lake, white (opaque)

ALSO FROM DALER-ROWNEY, PEARLESCENT LIQUID ACRYLIC INK IN THESE COLORS: silver pearl, white pearl, silver moss, bell bronze, moon violet, volcano red

FROM CRESCENT: cold-pressed illustration board (20x30 and 15x20), watercolor board (20x30)



The artist gathers a rich and varied array of materials and tools in preparation for painting, but doesn't do much planning to start. For paintings such as *In the Flow* (mixed media, stamped textures, and collage, 10x10), she lets inspiration take the lead.



After she had created *Look What Popped Up, No. 1* (artist-dyed paper and mixed media on canvas, 10x10) and a few other pieces in this series, Braukman came across variations on the same theme independently pursued by artist friends—one created a similar piece with metal sheets; the other made one with Post-it Notes.



applying or layering pastels, crayons, graphite, inks, and other fluid or heavy-bodied paints will look on the various surfaces.

Inspiration is given free reign. That's how Braukman works, and she ensures that her students have the same opportunity. "I can't do too much planning," she says. "That would take all the fun out of it. And once I've done it, I've done it. I may make something similar, something that has some of the same elements, but it will appear different. Even dreaming about a piece means I'll never paint it, because I've already completed the thought. No two people see the world or a subject the same way. That's the exciting part! My main goal is to keep it fresh and let it have meaning."

Braukman intentionally avoids extensive planning for her work, and pieces like *Windmills of Your Mind* (above; acrylic and mixed media, 20x29) and *Going With the Flow* (opposite; acrylic and mixed media, 10x10) are the result of this process.

She also prepares items—both intentionally and unintentionally—for use in future pieces. Because she adheres to a consistent and fairly limited palette, Braukman can dye pieces of art tissue paper in advance, confident that the colors will work in a future collage. She also peels off the mixtures and puddles of acrylic paint from her used freezer-paper palette and adheres the colorful, random result to her support. The brass shavings from a hardware store's key-making machine caught her eye one day, and now she visits that store occasionally and cleans their machine with a brush to gather the glinting metal shards.

"My friend Annie Morgan told me to look at the ground wherever I go," says Braukman, "and now I always find things on the roadside that look interesting. I'm constantly looking. I'm a scavenger." These discarded bits become meaningful tokens in the artist's work, although they may be buried under a thick skin of clear tar gel tinted with red acrylic paint or covered



in tissue. A first glance at a Braukman work might suggest abstraction to the point of meaninglessness—until the order and movement of the collage begin to reveal themselves. All of Braukman’s abstract pieces represent something to her. And, they’re all are rooted in strong design and a rigorous artistic background.

Years ago, Braukman drew realistic sailboats and seagulls and beach scenes, and sold the work in the Tampa Bay area. She was represented by a local gallery and had items in gift shops all along the Gulf Coast of Florida. But she wasn’t enthralled by realism. “It was selling, but it wasn’t satisfying me,” she says. She began to experiment and, rather quickly, her work became abstract. Her gallery stuck with her, thrilled

Meet Mary Alice Braukman

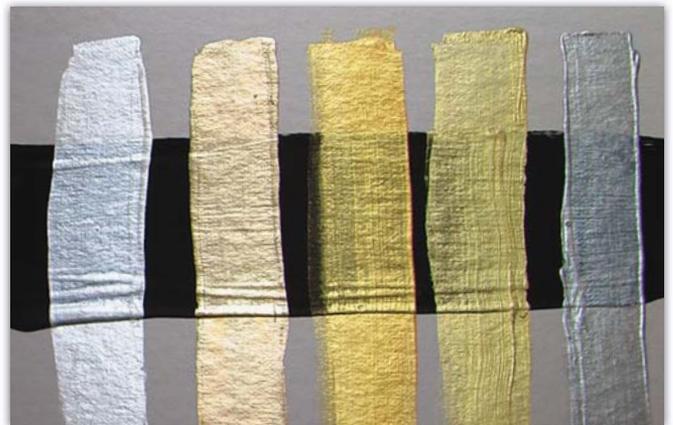
Mary Alice Braukman is a signature or elected member of numerous artists’ groups, including the National Acrylic Painters Association USA, the National Watercolor Society, and the Florida Watercolor Society, of which she is a former president and board member.



She teaches workshops in experimental watermedia and collage, and regularly serves as a juror in regional and national exhibitions. Her work is frequently featured at the Morean Arts Center, in St. Petersburg, Florida. To learn more, visit mabraukman.com.



One of the mediums from Golden that Braukman uses is crackle (at left), which allows an artist to incorporate a cracked surface into a piece and emphasize it either by painting the exposed surface or by allowing a colored surface beneath the medium to show through the cracks. Braukman prefers Golden Fine Pumice Gel (at right) instead of simply mixing beach sand or builder's sand with medium because of the product's archival quality.



"A hint of interference color will add a lot to a painting," says the artist. "It moves; when you look at the painting from a different angle, the color changes. But don't overuse these colors. I love them, but a piece can become gaudy if you're not careful."



with the development. "She's gone wild," one show announcement from her gallery read. "I put a lot of movement in my work," Braukman says. "Each piece is different, but some people recognize my work by my movement. I want people to be able to follow a design. Every color has to connect so that your eye follows it in, as if you're going across a stream from stepping-stone to stepping-stone. I don't feel that every painting has to have a center of interest. It just has to flow."

In short, there's a method to her madness. Workshop participants find this out on the first day of a Braukman workshop. "I have them go back to the basics by tackling color and value," says the artist.

"The first day is all technical. One exercise is to choose a color they work with a lot and break it down by value, and then experiment using only those colors and their complements. These students—and all of my students are at advanced or intermediate levels—haven't done this for years. They roll their eyes, but at the end they say, 'Gosh, I had forgotten all this.' By the third day, the students are completely on their own, and I just walk around helping them resolve problems."

Often, this means putting a troubled piece aside and starting over, or recycling the unresolved piece. Braukman prefers that each student have an 8-foot table as a workspace, but often tables must be shared.



Braukman makes miniature collages out of construction paper (opposite, bottom left) while she's watching television at night. She says it helps her remember to "push design. Design is simply the study of shapes," she explains.

Clear tar gel mixed with acrylic paints (opposite, bottom right) can affix found objects to a surface.

"I'm a scavenger," Braukman says as she reflects on **Found Objects on My Path** (mixed media and collage on canvas, 10x10). "I'm constantly looking, and I find things on the roadside that interest me."

"The young ones sometimes leave their tables and get down on the floor," she says with glee. This process mimics her working style: Once the basic rules are established, freedom reigns, and beauty results.

Braukman says layering elements is a key component of her art. "It's almost the reverse of unearthing," she says. "I disguise things with paint or medium; I want everything layered. I want the viewer to get into that work and crawl through it and feel it, dig down, and find those elements." Sometimes she'll go back into a layered work with a razor and peel off layers to reveal what's happening below.

Not surprisingly, the artist studied geology and archaeology in college, and she's fascinated by the crevices and exposed areas in mountains that reveal history through geological layers. Her old geology textbooks remain in her rotation of reading material. Also not surprising: Braukman visits rock and mineral stores and buys the small, flat chips that settle at the bottom of big boxes of rocks for use in her collages. Her strict rule for layering is to blend the elements

so they're completely integrated into the work. "If the viewer can figure out what you did, then you've lost your painting," asserts the artist. Braukman wants the viewer to see the work as a whole and not become fascinated by a certain technique. All the various processes must become one integrated whole.

The subtly revealed layers are analogous to the stages in one's life, Braukman says. Art is critical to her emotional life. Creating art and otherwise immersing herself in it helps the artist deal with loss and pain and joy. "You have to have art in your life in some form every day," she says. "No, I don't paint every day. I will dive in one day and stay there, working on pieces, for three to five days. Then I'll stop and work at my art a different way—I will study books or magazines or visit galleries. But I'm touching art every day."

The creative act both engages and disengages the brain, allowing an open person to express feelings in a constructive, illuminating way. For Braukman, finishing a large piece isn't necessary. The creative act can be achieved simply by cutting colored

The artist says that **Spinning Gold Nests From Tatters** (mixed media and collage, 30x22), which was created at a pivotal moment in her life, has never been shown. "The bird represents peace, and there's a figure in the upper left reaching out to the bird," she says. "I wanted there to be a nest in it because I wanted to show life, as represented by the red egg."

Found in Stone Walls (opposite; acrylic and mixed media, 12x12) is one of Braukman's more recent works, likely completed while she was working on other pieces. "My mind is like a ping-pong ball," she says. "I might be working on something and look over at another piece, get an idea, and run over and do what I've thought of for a while, then go back to the first."





construction paper into various shapes and placing them under a matted window, as the artist often does while watching television at night, or by slicing magazine images into ribbons and weaving them together, searching and pushing for a strong design. “I like collage; until the pieces are adhered, you can move things around,” she says. “This frees up my students because they’re not worried about something being in place forever. They can move things about, study the results, go away from them, come back, and change something. That’s freedom.”

Braukman takes this liberty even further, allowing herself to work on several collages during the same painting session. At any given time, she may

have five works in progress. For Braukman, freedom not only means being allowed to place any mark she likes on a surface but also being free to destroy a piece, recycle it, or simply abandon it for a burning idea she has for another work. Only the best are allowed beyond her studio door—she’s a tough editor of her own work. “If you do three to five outstanding paintings a year, you’re doing it!” Braukman says. “I keep my pieces for a month and study them. I have to be proud of what I’m putting out.” /aa

BOB BAHR is a writer and a former editor of *American Artist*.