

Speaking of Art

By Christopher Schink

The Discipline of Freedom

"I'd like to be looser in my paintings. I want my watercolors to be free and bold!" In every workshop I teach, I have various students inform me that this is what they want most to achieve in their paintings. Conversely, I don't remember any students ever asking me to help them get tighter and more inhibited.

There's no question that boldness and freedom can be attractive qualities in a painting. They're reflections of the artist's confidence and sure hand. We're impressed with the casual skill and ease that an experienced artist displays. It's exactly what we want to learn to do. We believe that if we practice being bold and free, or get someone to show us how, we'll soon be creating impressive works.

In truth, boldness and freedom in painting are easily achieved. Each and every one of us can boldly and freely cover a sheet of paper with red and green paint and not take more than two minutes to do it—if we don't care what the results look like. In the same way, I can boldly and freely play the piano, although I have a tin ear and no experience with the instrument. However, the sounds I'd produce wouldn't be pleasant. I don't know how to play and, more important, what to play.

To be bold and free in painting, you have to know not only how to paint, but what to paint. You have to be clear in your concept and confident in your craft. In fact, most of the painters I know whose work is characterized as bold think very little about achieving that effect when they're working. They're simply stating what they see, think or feel in the most direct way. They know exactly what they want and can put it down

with minimal fuss. The results are clear and direct. Taking their example, perhaps our emphasis on freedom is somewhat misplaced. Maybe our *real* goal should be to create art that's clear and direct, even sincere. If we do that, we'll certainly gain the freedom to be bold. ●

Christopher Schink is a well-known watermedia artist and a popular workshop instructor.

The Rewards of Clarity

A loose, free painting style is usually the product of evolution. For example, you can see how I progressed from 1963's New Mexico Barn (below, watercolor, 22x30), to the more recent French Café (at right, watercolor and acrylic, 44x28).



SENSATION

I'm intrigued by people — their feelings, thoughts and interactions. So like most of my figurative work from the last 10 years, my recent "French café" series (which includes this painting) attempts to convey people's emotions and moods. These paintings are primarily the product of my imagination. I'm not trying to depict actual people or places seen in my travels, but rather to portray a convincing mood.

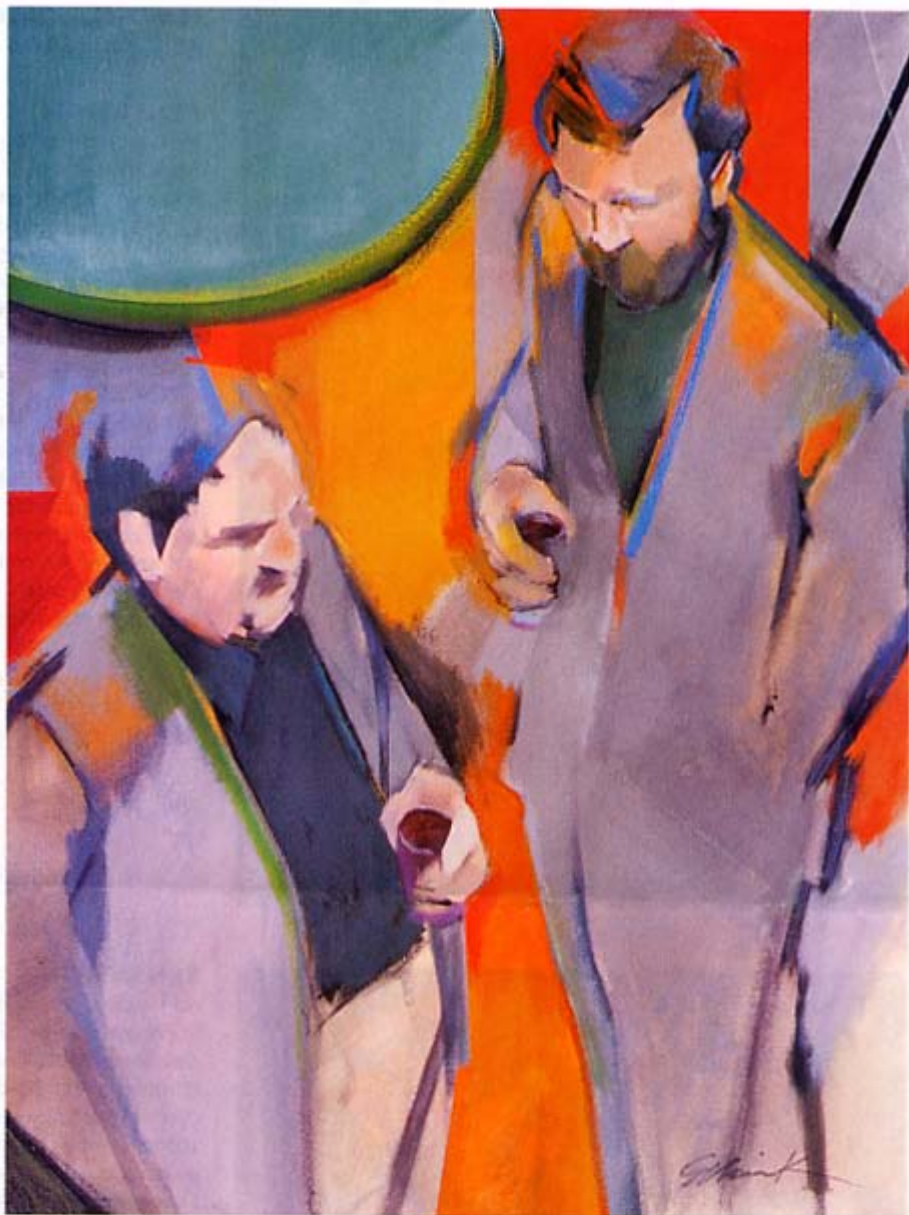
My initial inspiration came from a photograph of a group of people. I was particularly drawn to the gestures of these two figures on the fringe of the group. Focusing on their relationship, I placed them in my composition to not only create an effective design, but to suggest an air of separation and isolation. Their faces, expressions and clothing were all fabricated to convey that mood and a sense of place. I also chose a high viewpoint, causing the viewer to be an observer rather than a participant in the scene.

As in almost all of my work, my treatment of form and space is relatively flat and shallow. I'm not much interested in conveying three-dimensionality or depth. Neither of these "realistic" qualities would contribute much to the mood of the work that I hoped to achieve.

PROCESS

I find I work best when I can work big, swinging my arm to find rhythmic movement of line and shape. So most of my figure paintings are done on large, stretched sheets of rough watercolor paper ranging from 24 x 38" to 34 x 48" (51 x 86cm to 86 x 122cm).

Before I started painting, I determined what kind of contrasts I would use and where I would place them. In most of my recent paintings, I have used contrasts of



CHRISTOPHER SCHINK, "Friday Afternoon", mixed watermedia, 38 x 30" (96.5 x 76cm), Redwood City, California

intensity and value, which seemed to fit this particular subject. I began with some watercolor tints and tones to quickly block in my positive and negative elements. Then I immediately surrounded them with large areas of mixed grays to achieve a dominance of neutral color.

When my preliminary watercolor washes had dried, I began to adjust the shapes and color and add small touches of intensity using acrylics. To keep the surface from

becoming too shiny, I lightened my acrylic mixtures with gesso rather than one of the acrylic whites.

In the last stages of my painting, I worked on adjusting edges and capturing the facial expressions. This final process of "fussing" took a long time and a lot of reflection on my part. I wanted the painting to not only look right, but to feel right. It was several weeks before I finished and felt satisfied.