



ABOVE
**Young
Cottonwoods**
2007, acrylic, 20 x 18.
Collection Bernie and
Joan Fried.

Making All the Rules

IN ACRYLIC

Whether she's painting on the beaches of Orange County or on her 1,200-acre ranch in the valley, California plein air painter **Marcia Burt** takes advantage of the freeing, expressive qualities of acrylic to design her own adventure through the art-making process.

by Allison Malafronte

Marcia Burt loves the freedom and flexibility that painting in acrylic affords her, and after 40 years of working with the medium she wants to offer an alternative to artists who may have felt intimidated or inhibited by the oil-painting process. "Oil paint is one of the most intrinsically beautiful, lush, and painterly media you can use," the artist admits, "but I always felt limited by the rules that must be followed in order to paint in oil well. I often use the analogy of people taking a vacation when describing the differences between oil painters and acrylic painters: if you prefer to stick to a set schedule and itinerary, and know exactly which sites, museums, and attractions you want to see, then oil might be the medium for you. However, if you like to view a vacation as an adventure and just see where the day takes you and respond to new directions in the moment, you may have an affinity for acrylic. That's personally why I like working in this medium—it's like a wonderful journey that allows me the freedom to make my own decisions and discoveries as I go."

Burt is aware that acrylic may seem like a challenge to those trying it for the first time or to someone who is accustomed to working in oil, and she helps students in her landscape-painting workshops overcome these obstacles by educating them on both the limitations and possibilities of the medium. The first fact of

acrylic that artists need to face is that it dries extremely quickly, so using oil-painting techniques such as wet-in-wet are not possible. Acrylic painters need to mist their paints frequently with water to keep them workable, and many use glazing medium instead of water in very arid climates to prevent the paint from drying before it's applied to the canvas. Burt actually counts acrylic's fast-drying nature as one of its greatest advantages, and she has devised a way to counterbalance some of the flatness that quick-drying properties can produce. "Acrylic dries fast and thin, enabling me to continually repaint areas without losing freshness," the artist says. "When my first thin wash works, I can leave it alone and enjoy the brilliance of an almost watercolorlike effect. If, as usually happens, I want to rework or adjust shapes once something dries, I am able to paint over the dry layer immediately.

"This is one of the greatest benefits of acrylic's fast-drying properties: If you change your mind about something as you're painting, you don't have to wipe it off and start over, you can just paint over it because it's already dry," the artist continues. "And, unlike oil, you don't have to follow any hard-and-fast rules, such as having to paint dark to light, with your darks thin and your lights opaque. Because acrylic dries to a nearly uniform opacity, if I need to restructure shapes or value relationships, I can do that



either by painting the negative space around it to carve out a new shape or by painting a darker or lighter value or color on top.”

As a California plein air painter who does the majority of her on-site painting in coastal climates or standing directly on the beach, a lot of acrylic’s disadvantages are automatically avoided, but Burt still has found ways to make sure her paints stay moist and her equipment complies with her choice of medium. She begins the plein air process by deciding on a landscape to paint, whether it’s a beach scene in Southern California or a summertime landscape bathed in golden light in Northern California. “I am a sucker for reflections, absolutely love any body of water, and am partial to early-morning or early-evening light,” the artist says. “But choosing a location is based on many variables. If I haven’t been painting much, I can spend whole days driving around looking for a subject. If I’ve been painting regularly, everything looks beautiful. That’s the reward for spending hours intensely observing nature—you start seeing beauty everywhere.”

Once she’s chosen a vista, Burt sets up her equipment. She uses a Jullian French easel and carries her paints in a Plano fishing-tackle box with molded dividers. The artist discovered early on that she can prevent her acrylic paints from drying out when

ABOVE

Light on the Water

2008, acrylic, 11¼ x 14.
Collection the artist.

traveling by carrying them in this fishing box, which is normally used to transport worms and therefore retains moisture. In fact, she says, you can keep acrylic paints

in a tackle box, unopened, for up to three months and they will not dry out. To keep her paints moist while she’s working, Burt either mists them with water or uses glazing medium to keep them momentarily workable. She prefers not to use the typical acrylic retarder, as she is not fond of its jellylike consistency.

Another way Burt prevents the drying-out process on location is to keep her paints out of direct sunlight, by setting up her easel so that either her own shadow or the shadow of the canvas and easel fall across her colors. Burt works almost exclusively with Golden Acrylic paints, and her palette includes cadmium yellow light, cadmium yellow medium, cadmium orange, cadmium red light, primary magenta, phthalo green, chrome oxide green, permanent green, phthalo blue (by Liquitex), cobalt blue, dioxazine purple, violet oxide, and titanium dioxide white. The artist mixes all her colors on a palette first, in the same way an oil painter does, which allows her to achieve a fuller range of color possibilities. She also notes that mixing a broader spectrum of colors



with a limited palette is now an easier feat with Golden's recent introduction of the three primary colors. "All you need is their primary cyan, primary yellow, and primary magenta, and you can pretty much mix any variation of value and color," she says.

With her subject selected and equipment set up, Burt likes to get right into the painting process with little or no preparation, working large, fast, and free while following her intuition. "I start with a huge brush and try to just concentrate on painting what I'm seeing, not overthinking any one decision too much," the artist says. "Acrylic allows me to begin with abandon and proceed with great freedom. No drawing, no thumbnail sketches—just plunging in with any color and any value. It also means there are no rules and no mistakes, just constant revision. Starting with big shapes, I gradually refine all the relationships, both the structure and the values. Slowly, I move to a smaller brush, but I try to reserve this until the end. I find that working with a brush that's too small prevents me from seeing the big picture and causes me to sacrifice the overall effect to smaller details. When that



TOP
In Memoriam, Ray Strong
2006, acrylic, 18 x 20. Collection
Nan Withington.

ABOVE
Wind on the Water
2006, acrylic, 36 x 60. Collection Scott &
White Memorial Hospital, Temple, Texas.



happens, I pull out the big brush again and ruthlessly repaint.” Part of the repainting process for Burtt involves ending with a drybrush technique, which allows her to achieve rich layers of color that often take on the appearance of a finished oil painting. “Instead of painting everything wet,” Burtt says, “I use a lot of dry color scumbled over already dried layers of paint so that some or most of the previous layer shows through. To do this, I mix a color I like, wipe most of it off of the brush onto a rag, and drag the nearly dry brush over an area of the painting.”

After a day on the beach or in the mountains, Burtt brings her plein air paintings back to her studio and gallery in Santa Barbara, or to her bucolic cattle ranch in the valley, and sets them up in a place where she can evaluate the painting with her eye and not her hand. “I think the best way to judge a painting is to put it in a place where you cannot physically work on it and can therefore process your interpretation of it in a more subconscious way,” she says. “Talking on the phone while looking at your painting is one of the best ways to analyze it, because the verbal side of your brain is engaged and therefore the creative side of your brain is free to figure out what’s working and what’s not. If you put yourself in a position where you can’t run and grab the brush, you will notice a much clearer critique process taking shape.”

Self-critiquing one’s work will be just one of the topics Burtt plans to discuss while thoroughly covering the advantages and possibilities of acrylic painting in her two full-day workshops and half-day demonstration at *American Artist’s* Weekend With the Masters Workshop & Conference, September 23 through 26 at the Laguna Cliffs Marriott Resort & Spa, in California. For more information and to register for her “Making the Most of

About the Artist

Acrylic plein air painter **Marcia Burtt** graduated from the University of California, Berkeley with a major in psychology and earned an M.A. in art from the University of Montana. Her paintings have been included in exhibitions organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History, in California, and a number of other regional museums. She has twice been a guest of the Forbes family and *American Artist*, participating in painting events at the Forbes’ ranch in Colorado and their chateau in Normandy. She also painted for a month in Yosemite National Park as an artist-in-residence. Burtt is a founding member of The Oak Group and of SCAPE (Southern California Artists Painting for the Environment), artists’ groups that have collectively raised more than a million dollars to preserve natural landscapes. Her work frequently appears in art publications, and recently she was awarded first place in the San Luis Obispo plein air festival and artist’s choice in the Sedona plein air event. For more information on Burtt, visit her website at www.marciaburtt.com.

Acrylic” and “Passion Without Planning” plein air workshops, as well as her “Meaning & Composition” indoor demonstration and lecture, visit www.aamastersweekend.com. ■

Allison Malafronte is the senior editor of American Artist.



OPPOSITE PAGE

Dusk Over Goleta Slough

2008, acrylic, 24 x 36.
Collection the artist.

TOP

High Mesa

2004, acrylic on panel,
10 x 18. Private collection.

ABOVE

Broad Beach Reflections

2008, acrylic, 24 x 36. Collection
Birnam Wood Golf Club.