

Overcoming the Fear of People

by Mark Fortier

The thought of rendering a person, face or figure can strike fear in the heart of many artists, many of whom are successful and well established. It petrified me. For some reason we all have the courage to tackle difficult compositions, color studies, complex perspective and many other challenges, but ask us to paint or draw a face and/or a person, we freeze and our blood runs cold. Many never try. Many have spent years in avoidance.

Unfortunately, to perpetually ignore the human element in your artwork is to give up so much dimension. People add warmth, character and an element the viewer can instantly relate to. People add interest. People provide unlimited inspiration. Adding people brings life and interest to a piece. Sometimes adding a figure to a piece will push it from a moderately successful piece to one that stands out, pops and becomes memorable. People relate to people. I know of no better means to draw the viewer into your

piece and have the viewer respond than by incorporating humanity into your artwork.

I always felt safe tackling a “people free” subject. I felt that I had a respectable chance at producing a legitimate piece of art without embarrassing myself. Why would I want to try and tackle something that was so daunting and held great promise of failure? Fortunately, I ran into a dilemma that made me start to think differently. I had taken a photograph of a shrimp boat unloading early in the morning. It was docked. The sun was bathing the scene. The water glistened. The subject matter was very interesting and I wanted to do the piece. The one thing preventing me was, of course, the “people factor”. There were two men working on the shrimp boat and the picture would not work if I removed the figures from the composition. Thankfully logic prevailed. I began to evaluate instead of avoid. I learned a lot from tackling that piece.



“The subject matter was very interesting and I wanted to do the piece. The one thing preventing me was, of course, the people factor.”

The Angel Dawn
Colored Pencil
© Mark Fortier

The first and foremost lesson I learned was to study the figure and/or face. Study and study and more study. As I did this I found the figure became a compilation of shapes and colors and it was reduced to the same elements as everything else I had previously drawn. Sometimes there is genius in simplicity. The simple elements of shape and color removed the “mystique” that shrouded the rendering of a person. Instead of seeing a face which I was petrified to draw (because everybody knows a face is the hardest thing to do), I saw a pattern of shapes and colors.

Those first few figures taught me something else. They were simple. They were not a primary focal point. They were not full faced. I would try to encourage you to start in much the same manner. Keep it simple. Most anyone could build up enough courage to try a simple background figure. A small step is better than none at all. You will surprise yourself. You are bound to succeed. Remember a figure is still just shapes and color, the same elements as everything thing else you’ve mastered.

The success of those first figures gave me courage to take a bigger step. I was very excited about a new

piece I wanted to do. I called it “Another Man’s Treasure”. It was filled with exciting compositions and a variety of subjects. I had driven down a country road and came upon this old homestead type house filled to overflowing with flea market items. I pulled over and introduced myself to the proprietor of the establishment. His front porch was totally engulfed with his collection of wares. I asked permission to photograph. I explained I was an artist and was intrigued with his place. I began shooting scores of pictures. While I was photographing, the man went to his mailbox and retrieved his mail. At that point inspiration overcame timidity. I asked the man to be a part of the picture. It took some coaxing but he agreed to sit on the porch and read his mail. At first he was uncomfortable and his poses were not usable, but after awhile he became comfortable with me snapping pictures from every angle. Then I had my first picture that was going to have a person as a focal point. My creative inspiration and abandon was now causing me to stretch once again. I approached this subject in much the same manner. I studied my figure, I broke it down into simple shapes and colors. I reassured myself success was possible.

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Another Man’s Treasure
Colored Pencil
© Mark Fortier



I tackled my subject with a bit more confidence than my first figures. To improve as an artist we must force ourselves out of our comfort zone. I know of no other subject that can do this so easily. I finished the piece. The man on the porch was a success and I gained substantial confidence.

With each piece I still employ the basics. I am now enjoying the freedom to pursue my inspiration unimpeded by the fear of people as subjects. I carry my camera at all

times. I photograph people everywhere I go. I am now tackling pieces which I like to call "peoplescapes." My first was a room full of diners which I took while on vacation. This piece had a total of 24 people in it. Thus the name "Two Dozen Diners". I am now nearing completion of a piece which depicts an airport terminal. It is full of people of all ages sitting and waiting. I would never have the courage to tackle such subjects if I hadn't overcome my fear of people in the small steps I described. 📷



© Mark Fortier

“To improve as an artist we must force ourselves out of our comfort zone.” **Doing Time**
Colored Pencil



Street Songs
Colored Pencil
© Mark Fortier

ABOUT THE ARTIST
Mark Fortier

A self taught, emerging artist, Mark Fortier discovered his gift mid-life. After turning 40, he discovered a talent to draw, and has been developing this talent for over three years. Within a short period of time he began entering juried competitions and exhibitions and has achieved great success.

He received first place in the Strathmore 2004 National Art Competition and was selected for the CPSA Memphis 2004 International Exhibition, receiving an award of excellence. Currently he has a piece in the 2005 CPSA Chicago Exhibition which has also won an award of excellence.

His work has been published in this spring's issue of *Direct Art Magazine*. His work was selected for exhibition in the National Juried Halpert Bi-annual Show.

This fall the Agora Gallery in New York City will have a show of Mark's work. He currently creates from his studio in western North Carolina.

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