

Watercolor Techniques with Cathy Johnson

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PRACTICAL CREATIVITY

Living Through Art

Creative insight from Cathy Johnson

If you ignore your fantasies, you may be ignoring one of the most direct routes to your creative well. You see, creativity and fantasy are two sides of the same coin. You can use fantasy to spark your creativity, or use creativity to express your fantasy life. Either way, quick, fresh, expressive watercolor is a wonderful medium for putting your fantasies to work. And if you make a commitment to developing your fantasy life, you'll see the rewards in your painting.

Plugging into Fantasy

How do you access your fantasies? You may be out of practice, if, like many of us, you're short of time and long on responsibilities. You may even see this as a waste of time. It's not. Let yourself go. Be honest. Don't judge your fantasy, just have fun with it. And don't worry if you can't quite see how to integrate it into your day-to-day experience. It may be that its main value is in play itself.

Sit quietly and let the images come to you—whatever strikes your fancy. Imagine yourself as part of the Arthurian legend, or settling happily into a cozy little hobbit house. Could you see yourself as a heroine or a magician or a free spirit dancing with fairies? How about settling the American frontier or exploring the African veldt?

Listen to music—perhaps a piece you've never heard before will spark a fantasy. I once visualized an entire scene in an 18th-century inn, just from hearing a lovely Irish harp tune. Or maybe you've cherished favorite images since childhood that could spark a painting. You could be a queen or a pirate. Now what's to stop you from actually seeing yourself in your fantasies, and painting what you see?

Substitute Characters

If you feel odd about picturing yourself doing these fantastic things, use your



children or pets as models. You can paint your kids playing with dinosaurs or riding a magic carpet—they'd love it. Kids understand imagination instinctively. I once decided my cats needed to do something to pull their own weight, so I did a series of paintings of them working on my old farm—washing clothes, chopping wood, and so forth: productive labor.

IMAGINATION AT WORK

Go Antiquing

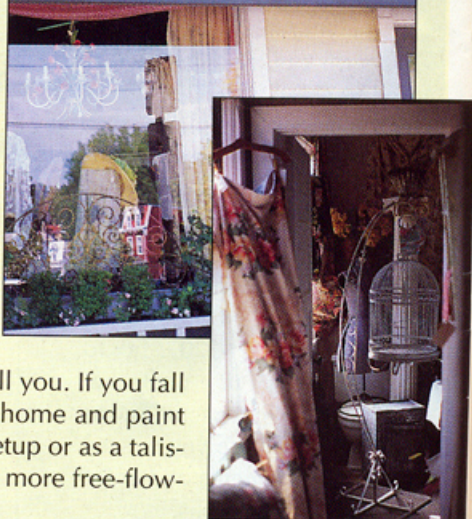
Set aside a morning or afternoon to browse through antique stores. Whether you're interested in buying a fine *objet d'art* or not, the cluttered, often artfully arranged, displays inspire a kind of reverie. You may spot crystal vases, embroidered tablecloths, or china tea cups that are duplicates of those you remember from your grandmother's home. You might see a Tiny Tears doll or a promotional plate (commemorating the St. Louis World's Fair, for instance) that conjures up your own youth. Old mirrors,

with their abraded surfaces, are especially moody, as are silver cosmetic cases. Musty furs, friable silk dresses and preposterous boas speak of the glamour of a vanished time. Sometimes the silliest items—miniature ceramic salt and pepper shakers in animal shapes, for instance, can enthrall you. If you fall in love with something, take it home and paint it—as an element in a still life setup or as a talisman that could induce another, more free-flowing, meditation.



ANTIQUES

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Now that's a fantasy—a cat doing something besides looking independently beautiful.

Putting Fantasy to Work

Your fantasies can be windows into another reality beyond the day to day, or a door to creative resolution of a situation that has had you stymied for months. But anyway you look at them, think of making art with your fantasies as building your creative muscle. Here are some more ways fantasy can work for you:

Fantasy as Problem Solving. The images in your fantasies can be very

“Inspiration may be a form of superconsciousness, or perhaps subconsciousness—I wouldn't know. But I am sure it is the antithesis of self-consciousness.”

—Aaron Copland

powerful—and liberating. If you feel helpless in a situation, for instance, or not taken seriously, create a fantasy in which you are being brave and fearless and fierce. You may be able to tap into some of that boldness in real life when the need arises.

Fantasy as a Test Run. Sometimes you need a new direction in your life or your artmaking—you can “practice” your new approach by fantasizing, then painting the image you come up with. For example, my hobby is reenacting the Revolutionary War period. When I need to change the character I portray, I fantasize, then do a painting of how I want to look, based on research into clothing and accoutrements available at the time.

Fantasy as Exploration. You can use fantasy to explore new frontiers, literally and figuratively. There are places I will never get to go, more than likely—Antarctica, China, the moon. But what's to stop me from discovering them with my art? The sky is literally the limit.

Practicality Rears its Ugly Head

So how do you make these images come to life on your page? Sometimes you can simply use the images that arise inside your head, but for some things you need to do some research. No one has seen a unicorn, but if you study the shapes and movements and configurations of a deer, a pony, or other graceful, four-legged beasts you can come up with a credible substitute. Do a variety of sketches from various angles and combine them with whatever else you want in your picture.

I once painted myself riding astride the back of my huge black cat—he was not that huge, of course, but big. I com-

bined sketches of my cat walking with those of me in my mirror, in poses that might look as though I were riding the beast—it worked reasonably well and let me get the image out of my system.

Combine research photos in new and fantastical ways. A castle in Ireland, gleaned from a picture book, might work quite well to stand in for your castle in the air—or let dream images live on your paper, as well.

Fantasy is Life

As Henry David Thoreau said, “If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should

“No amount of skillful invention can replace the essential element of imagination.”

—Edward Hopper

be. Now put the foundations under them.” You can’t actually dance with the fairies or ride a unicorn, but you can certainly paint yourself doing those things—or anything else you can imagine. ♦

Cathy Johnson is a contributing editor for *The Artist’s Magazine and Country Living*. She’s written 22 books.

“Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up.”

—Pablo Picasso

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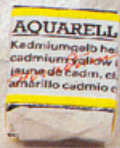
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