



OPPOSITE
Release (watercolor
on paper, 22x30)

BELOW
River Rocks
(watercolor on
paper, 11x15)

Watercolor artist Rick Surowicz revels in negative space, often using masking fluid and the white of the paper to take advantage of unusual viewpoints, textures and patterns in nature. “After years of observation, looking at art, creating art and trying to understand art, it clicked,” Surowicz says. “My work should be less about recording what I see and more about interpreting what I see and want to communicate. What I *don’t* paint is just as important as what I *do* paint.”

Surowicz is a keen observer, making a point, he says, “to look where others don’t look and see what others don’t see.” He goes on to point out, “It’s not the typical pretty picture that inspires me. It’s the view behind the briar bush on the rocky edge of a creek that brings inspiration.” He

sources most of his material from his home in Northeastern Ohio and from trips he has taken with his family or when teaching workshops.

Ultimately, the subject itself becomes irrelevant as Surowicz delves into the relationships between the positive and negative spaces in order to understand what lies between the objects. “As important as it is to set up a composition, a piece really begins to evolve when I start to consider the spatial relationships and stop thinking about just painting things,” he



The SPACE BETWEEN

RICK SUROWICZ doesn’t ban negative space to the background of his paintings. Instead, the artist uses it to push edges, build layered scenes and explore relationships between objects. BY REBECCA DVORAK

says. "I look at the larger shapes and value structures first." Much of the surface area of his paintings will never be touched—and it's what he does with all of the other shapes around that space that brings it to the foreground.

Surowicz is a bit of a purist in this regard. He shies away from opaque colors and white paint, and relishes the challenge of transparent watercolor. "With this medium," he says, "I think it's important to be *in* control, but not *to* control. I know what to expect from the paint, but I also let the watercolor be watercolor."

DRAWING & PERSPECTIVE

Surowicz focuses on three fundamentals when working on a painting—drawing and perspective, composition and design, and technical craft. He stresses how important it is for him to be able to anticipate what's going to happen with the different properties of the paint. "For example, I have to know what to expect when I take paint to dry paper versus wet paper," he explains. "This is a basic

fundamental that absolutely cannot be overlooked."

In addition to understanding moisture content and utilizing the white of the paper, he also works with his paper at an angle to embrace gravity and control the bead of the paint so it doesn't roll right off the page. By understanding the core principles of the medium, he can carve out his painting while still letting the watercolor flow and mingle on the surface.

Throughout his career, the artist's style has evolved from very tight, detailed early pencil drawings to the more expressive, loose watercolors of his current oeuvre, but he's always careful not to lose balance and tip into abstract expression.

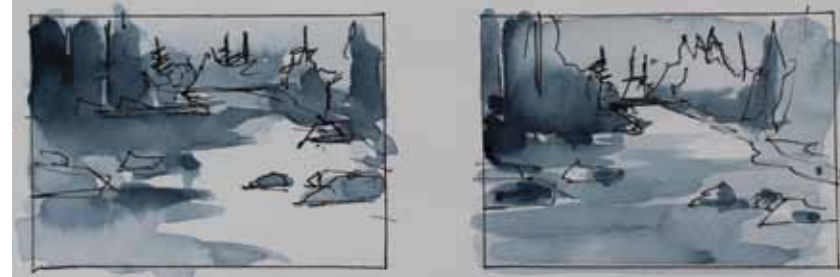
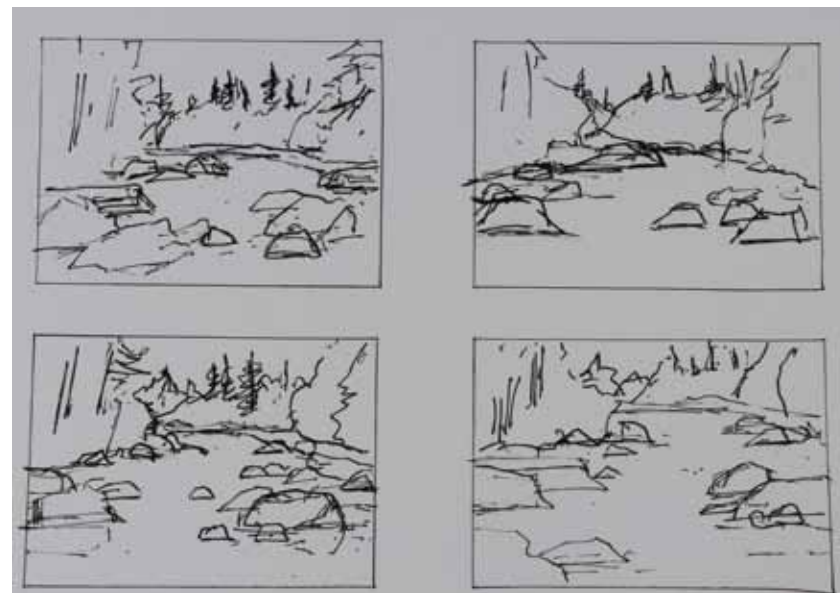
OPPOSITE TOP
Metropolis
(watercolor on paper, 22x30)

OPPOSITE BOTTOM
Sunny Days
(watercolor on paper, 22x30)

BELOW
Good Place To Be
(watercolor on paper, 11x15)



"A piece really begins to evolve when I start to consider the spatial relationships and stop thinking about just painting things."



LEFT
Before painting, Surowicz's first step is to create a series of small (about 3x4-inch) thumbnail sketches (top), value studies (middle) and color studies (bottom) to explore the possibilities of a scene.

COMPOSITION & DESIGN

To accomplish his carefully rendered pieces, Surowicz maintains a regular process and relies on a basic set of materials and equipment that he doesn't often veer away from. His work has become more consistent over time. "I have a process that I follow," he says. "My materials don't change much, and I'm more focused on composition and design. I do more planning than I used to."

In fact, advance planning is a crucial step for Surowicz as he strives to save the whites and lights in his composition, focusing first on value, then on color. As seen in the thumbnail sketches for a river landscape (at left) he starts with a series of loose waterproof ink-pen sketches and studies, exploring different compositions, interpretations and value structures in his Canson 7x10-inch mixed-media sketchbook. He then paints over those sketches with Payne's gray to create his value studies. Those are followed by color studies, in which the artist uses ink pen and distributes warm and cool watercolors until he lands on his composition. Once he completes this contemplative planning process, he's ready to start the final piece.

TECHNICAL CRAFT

As Surowicz begins to develop the painting as a whole, he starts with a Silver Black Velvet synthetic/squirrel blend round or a Princeton Neptune brush to create light values, large shapes and soft edges with less detail. "These early washes create 'the personality' of watercolor," he says. With landscapes, this means his pieces often evolve from background to foreground as he works with primarily wet paint on dry Lanaquarrelle 140-lb. cold-pressed watercolor paper.

"With this medium, I think it's important to be *in* control, but not *to* control. I know what to expect from the paint, but I also let the watercolor be watercolor."



"I like the way this paper handles, and I like the whiteness of it," he says. "I don't prestretch or soak my paper; rather I mount it on a piece of Gatorboard with contractor-grade masking tape." He then uses a No. 4, 6 or 8 Escoda round or a Princeton Aqua Elite brush to layer on darker values, smaller shapes, harder edges and more detail.

When playing with color, he shifts hues, value and chroma to reach his desired result. When applying washes, he'll often incorporate multiple warm and cool colors. He uses a ceramic 30-well palette and currently has 25 colors within his preferred palette, eight to 10 of which he uses frequently. Surowicz relies on a combination of Holbein, Daniel Smith, American Journey and DaVinci paints, plus Winsor & Newton Payne's gray, keeping the warm colors of the color wheel on one side of the palette and cool colors on the other. He likes to make use of color complements. "I try to establish a warm or cool dominance in the composition and position bright against neutral at times," he says.

He finishes with minor glazing and calligraphic touches, using a Dynasty Black Gold quill brush across the composition to sharpen an edge or tone down a shape. He'll do linear brushwork along the edges of trees, buildings or distant hills to balance the colors and finalize the effect. This is Surowicz's favorite stage in the process. "At this point, the painting has little to do with the original reference," he says. "It's about my response to what evolved through the process."

ART IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Surowicz's meticulous process and intimate understanding of his medium has made him an excellent teacher, and

ABOVE
Don's Place
(watercolor on paper, 22x30)

LEFT
Coastal Waters
(watercolor on paper, 11x15)

he has experienced great success on YouTube. His channel on the platform has almost 50,000 subscribers and 3 million views, and it features more than 300 videos that include instructional content with step-by-step explanation. The most frequently viewed are the series of 15-minute videos that describe the fundamentals of watercolor, specifically those discussing moisture content, working with gravity and leading a bead of water. He's currently growing his online course catalog as a replacement for the many in-person workshops that were canceled over the last year.

Surowicz's YouTube presence has fostered global connections and ushered in an entirely new learning experience for him. He has heard from people all over the world—many of them serious watercolor hobbyists—who have turned to his videos for expertise, connection, education and distraction. "It's incredibly rewarding to see that, though the fundamentals are the same, we don't all paint the same trees or mountains," he says.

ART HISTORY

Surowicz's passion for art was ignited by his own art teacher in high school. "I always enjoyed artsy things as a child," he says, "but never really thought of myself as an artist—until my high school art teacher opened my eyes to the rigor of drawing and perspective, design and color, and working in a variety of media."

After graduating from high school, Surowicz attended the Columbus College of Art and Design (CCAD) with the intention of becoming an industrial designer. Before he finished his second year, however, he joined the Air Force in order to meet the financial obligations of school.

OPPOSITE TOP
Edge of Furnace Run (watercolor on paper, 22x30)

OPPOSITE BOTTOM
Winter River's Edge (watercolor on paper, 11x15)

BELOW
Wild River Valley (watercolor on paper, 11x15)



Meet the Artist

Rick Surowicz (rsurowiczart.com), a painter living in Medina, Ohio, discovered how much he enjoyed the challenges of watercolor in 1992. From 1992 to 2000 he exhibited in regional and, later, national shows. After the birth of his first son in 2000, Surowicz took an extended break from painting to focus on his family and career. It wasn't until January of 2016 that he picked up his brushes again. He has been painting vigorously ever since. Surowicz is a Signature Member of the Ohio Watercolor Society and was recently elected to one of the trustee positions. Recently, his paintings have juried into several national and international exhibitions. A selection of his watercolors also appeared in *Splash 21*. The artist's YouTube Channel, "Rick Surowicz Watercolor," was selected by Feedspot.com as one of the Top 75 Watercolor Painting YouTube Channels, placing it 8th on their list. The channel has now surpassed 50,000 subscribers and has more than 3 million views.

"I planned to continue my art education at the end of my four-year enlistment," he says, "but, instead took advantage of the educational opportunities available through the Air Force and ended up getting a Bachelor's degree in manufacturing."

Throughout his 30-year manufacturing career, during which he held various supervisory and management roles, Surowicz continued making art. He kept up his pencil drawings as well as some airbrushing and, eventually, gave watercolor a try. In 1993, he began taking night workshops with watercolorist Fred Graff. Surowicz was leading classes of his own and getting accepted into national shows by the time his first child was born in 2000.

Once again, the artist put aside his paints until 2016,

when he was impacted by a reorganization at his company. His wife encouraged him to get back to his art, so he picked up his brushes and started to paint again. Since 2016, his paintings have been accepted into the American Watercolor Society, Transparent Watercolor Society, Ohio Watercolor Society, Louisiana Watercolor Society and Georgia Watercolor Society exhibitions.

Surowicz's artistic career may have evolved in stops and starts, but he never ceased to see himself as an artist. "My artist mentality, while ever evolving, always remains a constant," he says. **WA**

Rebecca Dvorak is an arts writer and editor living in New York City.