Create Your Best Paintings On-Site

Working exclusively en plein air, **Jana Matson** uses acrylic and crayon to transform inspiring landscapes into strong paintings.

by Linda S. Price

When asked how to define herself as an artist, Jana Matson responds that she has felt an island off the coast of Maine. While walking on the beach one day, she spotted a piece of glass and was compelled to pick it up. Matson explained that she was impressed on the fragment's strength, "It was probably a medicine bottle," she said. "It was so beautiful, so glass-y. The more I realized how important strength is to my art—relationally, I am for strength in my composition and color, and necessarily in my relationships—that for strength to keep going at an artist."

Listening to the artist describe her work, it's clear that Matson is more than just strong—she's been dedicated to her craft since her childhood years. Born on early age drawing and painting were "her thing," and in the 1970s her parents encouraged her to choose an her school representative to attend art classes at the Carnegie Museum of Pittsburgh. She continued to take classes there until high school, then attended Saturday morning art classes at Carnegie Mellon University.

As an undergraduate, she attended Harvard University, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where she majored in Russian Literature and took art courses in photography, filmmaking, and landscape architecture.

After receiving her degree, she worked for several years in advertising and design in Boston, but she felt a huge hop across the ocean to England, where she attended the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art. Two years later she moved to Poland, where she spent three years as an artist in residence. Matson chose Poland because of her family's Polish heritage and because she was drawn to the art in Paris and Rome like other free-art graduates. "The Berlin Wall didn't come down until a year after I left," she recalls. "Poland was a Communist country and it was impoverished in ration cards. I had to wait in line for everything from art supplies to toilet paper. It was a very different and sometimes kind of scary life. My small world often active opened. A sense of conflict came into my work. I started our painting representationally, doing pastels of people and also did a series of paintings of doorways, which were literal and figurative thresholds. Finally, I started painting directly en maps, in part because it was so difficult to get art supplies. At this point I felt my paintings were a kind of dialogue with the maps rather than a monologue on white paper. This back-and-forth quality of lines will come through in my work today."

Matson returned to the United States, "more appreciative of everything we have here and with a per-spective of what's important." Matson put her M.F.A. in painting from the Maryland Institute College of Art to use. She taught art for 10 years, and eventually she decided that working in a non-art-related field would allow her to focus more energy on creating her own art.

"A. As most of my painting on trips, staying at cheap hotels and doing my work on the floor or on a table, I don't have a studio at home. The world is my studio." The downside of this is that "sometimes there's a long gap between trips that I feel I can't do anything creative." Jana Matson's primary subject was trucks. "I was in love with the visual appeal of trucks," she says. "They filled up the square so beautifully, and I could do so much with them. I wanted to be. I didn't care about the make and model, but they had to be in windows. Matson chose Poland because of her family's Polish heritage and because she was drawn to the art in Paris and Rome like other free-art graduates. "The Berlin Wall didn't come down until a year after I left," she recalls. "Poland was a Communist country and it was impoverished in ration cards. I had to wait in line for everything from art supplies to toilet paper. It was a very different and sometimes kind of scary life. My small world often active opened. A sense of conflict came into my work. I started our painting representationally, doing pastels of people and also did a series of paintings of doorways, which

Matson's Basic Palette

- Naples yellow
- cadmium yellow
- yellow ocher
- cadmium orange
- red oxide
- cadmium red light
- quinacridone magenta
- alizarin crimson
- quinacridone magenta
- cobalt green
- Hooker's green
- viridian green
- phthalocyanine turquoise
- cerulean blue
- cobalt blue
- cobalt blue deep
- ultramarine blue
- permanent violet dark
- dioxazine purple
- Payne's gray
- tuff titanium

idea of strength. Color and line were more important. Painting from maps also quiet, get me out of the city, and allowed me to be alone with nature."

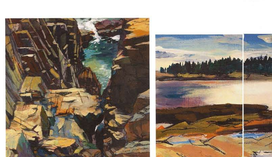
Matson notes every opportunity she has to travel abroad, her artistic aptitudes have made this possible. Her first step in creating a painting involves scouting—hours of hiking to find just the right rocks. Although she has a cell phone, she relies on getting access to construction sites and the frustration of having a subject move in the middle of her painting process.

"I been realizing that it was too easy for people to put a label on her work: painting—a sight. Fuel, for instance—I can't paint anywhere near a gas station switch in subject matter. "I also that I moved on to boulder work," the artist says about her decision to paint the rugged Maine coast. "By painting rocks I found something that wasn't so easy to label, but there was still that viewfinder to determine composition. I don't analyze compositions to death, I hold up the viewfinder, it clicks in and feels right at a certain place. I use the viewfinder to see the shape and of the power of angles and use them to move the eye around. Sometimes I only see a corner of interest other times I avoid it entirely. I like cropping into the rocks and I like to use contrasting background shapes that way. Also, looking down at the subject helps to create large, active areas. Sometimes I tilt the scene to create a more dynamic composition."

Matson used to paint in oil but found she didn't like the tension and glee of canvas. "I wanted something that I could carry, that was faster to work with, and I found that I like acrylic." She is drawn to, and I raise for scribble factor in painting I needed a hard surface and did all kinds of experimenting. I tried Masonite. I'm still experimenting. Here is my sign-ature." She likes the fact that acrylics work on paper, and she started by paint-ing on maps before moving to museum board. Matson's work is now on paper, mounted on board. In her 3-by-5-foot studio, in preparation for an upcoming trip to Bermuda, where she'll need to travel light, she's been experimenting with MyMedia-Box, a lightweight, portable, 3-by-5-foot easel. "I'm a little bit of a gadgetist, and I'm a little bit of a gadgetist, and I'm a little bit of a gadgetist," she says. "I'm a little bit of a gadgetist." Matson's other favorite gadgets are her cell phone and her camera, "I use the camera to see the shape and the frame over on top of a combination of lenses and thermal-ed-mass.

One of the best aspects of working with acrylics is that the artist is able to deal with wet paintings and can easily transport her work. This is also a boon for the artist's creative life. Matson feels that it's simply better to be painting "when the inspiration strikes, and then, of course, I make a list of scenes that offer good compositions, color, and light. Setting up a list of scenes that I want to paint the ride is predictable. "I'm finding the scenes," she insists, "not making them up. These cracks are very, very true to the place, and that's what's important to me, although I may clear a little and pick colors." She uses a

Dock Street Secret
2011, acrylic on paper, 20 x 20. Courtesy Argosy Gallery, Bar Harbor, Maine.



Matson's Secondary Palette

- titanium yellow
- cadmium yellow light
- cadmium yellow medium
- cadmium orange
- Naples yellow red
- light magenta
- rose
- cerulean blue hue
- cerulean blue
- light violet
- medium violet
- violet
- permanent green light
- titanium green
- green gold
- olive
- burnt sienna
- burnt umber
- transparent iron oxide
- raw sienna
- raw umber
- light ultramarine blue
- light ultramarine violet

Woodsmoke
2011, acrylic and crayon on paper, 20 x 20. Collection the artist.

Green Pub Chairs
2011, acrylic and crayon on paper, 20 x 20. Collection the artist.

Wheelhouse, Morning
2011, acrylic and crayon on paper, 20 x 20. Private collection.

Wheelhouse Door
2011, acrylic and crayon on paper, 20 x 20. Collection the artist.

Blue Gatecrasher
2011, acrylic on museum board, 20 x 20. Private collection.

Red Poacher
2011, acrylic on museum board, 20 x 20. Collection the artist.

Off Vashon, Morning
2011, acrylic on museum board, 20 x 20. Private collection.

Cabana
2010, acrylic on museum board, 20 x 20. Collection the artist.

Old Trucker
2010, acrylic on museum board, 20 x 20. Private collection.

"My feeling—just short of religious—is that I don't want to touch a painting once I leave the site. I see this as a one-off shot at capturing something."

could be overbearing, but the artist feels that it's important to remain stronger. This is especially important when painting rocks, where she has to push the colors to avoid creating a uniform brown mass. Asked about her use of crayon, Matson responds, "It's orange, it's gave a rough indication of the composition. Wet, she blends in the crayon with paint. She has no idea what prevending from dark to light or light to dark and works all over the panel.

She uses plastic egg containers as her palette, and she keeps her paints tempera. The reds are deep enough for her to separate out enough paint that carrying tubes isn't necessary. The textile of the lids are flat, provid-ing a smooth surface for her brush. Once the dried paint can be peeled right off. To refresh the colors she uses a spray bottle. "I can't paint without it quickly, the same water is too hot. I

The artist confesses that she has "an obscene number of cobras." Her paints are primarily Winsor Newton, but she also uses Liquitex, initially, she relies on the basic colors of her first palette, which includes cadmium orange, Naples yellow, and dioxazine purple. Her secondary palette includes colors that she finds are not comfortable and have the fact that a square, although a challenging space to fill, produces more fanciful shapes and stronger compositions.

The artist often combines mediums with acrylics, explaining that this gives her the best of both worlds. "I like the texture of Conte and Cotan. It's like Swedish 21-watt-soldier-cop-ess, and thinks of the combination as a back-and-forth process—realism, crayon, paint, crayon again. Almost all of my work is done with a combination of crayon, usually black, although if she feels the painting needs a cool job she will use blue. I like the fact that these are just tools, she points out, and some scenes don't call for crayon and-ing one might be overdoing it. Ulla-cautious other pieces are patiences that I don't want to overdo, I want to see the plear and wee? have a mark.)

Matson begins a painting by toning her board with a light wash of cad-mium red, and then she uses a middle value to establish the shapes. Next, she uses crayon to give a rough indication of the composition. Wet, she blends in the crayon with paint. She has no idea what prevending from dark to light or light to dark and works all over the panel.

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About the Artist

Jana Matson grew up in Pittsburgh, where she attended classes at the Carnegie Museum of Pitts-burgh and Carnegie Mellon University. She graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Harvard University, and then attended the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art, in Oxford, England and studied at the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art, in Oxford, before moving to Poland. Matson has been a full-time artist and artist-in-residence at the Academy of Fine Arts, in Krakow. She earned an M.F.A. in painting at the Maryland Institute College of Art, in Boston. Matson has taught art for 10 years at Harvard University and Bethany College, also in Massachusetts. Matson's paintings are in many private collections in the United States, and the Banks Gallery, in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. For more information, visit www.janamatson.com.

Brandi Jett, Photography, Jana Matson, Jana Matson, Jana Matson