

New Zealand might be called a fantasyland of flora and fauna. Isolated by a vast ocean for more than 80 million years and featuring microclimates that vary from rain forests to near-deserts, the country possesses a rich biodiversity. As such, there's no need for a representational painter to exaggerate color or invent scenes. Photorealist pastel painter Julie Freeman agrees. "To create what I see so realistically pays homage to the beauty that surrounds me every day," she says.

Freeman's work possesses a diversity that vies with that of her native country. Her portfolio features both animals and humans, still life florals, and near-abstractions of water lilies and seaweed. "My subjects are varied, and that

keeps me motivated and enthusiastic. Many professional artists are known for one style or subject, and when making a living, that's often advantageous," she notes. Freeman's love of variety hasn't hampered her success and recognition, however.

A NATURAL EVOLUTION

Born just north of Wellington along the Kapiti Coast, Freeman excelled at art in high school. She elected not to pursue art at university, however, considering it to be more of a hobby than a profession. As much as she loved art, raising two children with fellow pastelist Michael Freeman (featured in the June 2019 issue of *Pastel Journal*) kept her from getting serious about it.

It wasn't until the family returned to New Zealand after living in the U.S. for eight years and the U.K. for six that her time opened up and her interest surged. Soon the artist was selling animal portraits she had drawn using graphite and colored pencil. Pastel was the natural next step in Freeman's evolution. "I love to blend, so I found that pastels suited my style of work," she says.

While working in an art store, she became friends with Merle Bishop, a fellow pastelist. "When the hours were reduced at the shop, we'd spend Fridays in Merle's art studio." After a joint exhibition with Bishop and another artist, Freeman joined the Pastel Artists of New Zealand (PANZ) and won her first award in a PANZ national show. From there, the self-taught artist has gone on to earn awards and designations from several pastel societies, including Master Pastelist with PANZ, signature status with the Pastel Society of America and entry into the Master's Circle of the International Association of Pastel Societies.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT
Andy (12x9)

Rambo (16 $\frac{3}{4}$ x16 $\frac{1}{2}$)

Southern Kelp V (15x39 $\frac{1}{2}$)



KINDRED SPIRITS: PHOTOREALISM AND ABSTRACT ART

In human portraits such as *Andy* (opposite) and animal portraits like *Rambo* (top), the effect is so real that you feel you might catch the subject breathing if you looked long enough. In other paintings, Freeman borrows tools for a more abstract approach. She may crop a scene so closely that the subject is no longer the thing

being painted; instead, the subject becomes the complexity of underlying shapes and colors.

In *Southern Kelp V* (above), for example, she paints long snaking lines and distorted curved sections, all spangled with a prism of colors. Yet this abstraction is overlaid with a skin of reality so the viewer can still recognize it as a depiction of kelp.

No matter which approach, Freeman is proud of the realism she brings to her subjects. She laments

that photorealists—and abstract painters—often get a bad rap.

“Of all the art genres, photorealism and abstraction are probably the most vilified,” she says. “It’s quite common to hear comments like ‘Photorealism isn’t real art’ and ‘Why not just take a photo?’” Freeman believes that all art forms have something to offer and should be respected. “I also feel it’s important to follow what makes you feel happy and fulfilled as an artist,” she says.

8 TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Freeman shares her must-have tools and materials for achieving a flawless photorealistic appearance in her pastel paintings.

Camera: “My Canon SX60 HS digital camera is a key part of my process. I use my own references, so having a good-quality camera with the ability to zoom—mine has a 60x optical zoom—is necessary. The pullout screen also enables me to achieve unique viewpoints.”

Tablet: “I use a tablet to upload my reference photo and view it as I work. To be able to drill down for details and view subtle colors are essential to my painting process.”

Photoshop: “A computer program like Photoshop gives me so many more options for composition, color and value.”

Fingers: “My fingers are my best—and cheapest—tools for blending. Blending works better with a little pastel or corn flour on the fingers to remove the oil from the skin.”

Rubber blender or clay shaper: “I use this tool on sanded surfaces for small areas that require smooth blending. It doesn’t work well on larger areas because it leaves marks, so I prefer to use my fingers in those

situations. It also can work like a paintbrush in that I can pick up color and put it somewhere else.”

Dividers: “I use these for checking measurements against my reference photo and between areas in a painting. Proportional dividers enable me to scale the size of my work up or down.”

Kneadable eraser: “Different-sized erasers are useful tools. The small ones are great for removing pastel down to the surface in areas in which I need to add a light value or color and have it at its most intense. An eraser is also adept at cleaning up edges, removing a large area of color, picking off color if shaped to a point or blending.”

Transfer paper: “I use this paper for transferring complicated underdrawings for my artwork. Color choice is important; I don’t use a graphite-colored paper for a pale-colored subject because the dark graphite is more difficult to cover. I use a lighter-colored paper for transferring a drawing to a dark paper.”



ABOVE
Resting (9½x23¼)

OPPOSITE
Reflected Tranquility
(26x31½)

makes it seem more real and offers more impact. On the other hand, my portraits have all been made through personal connections, and they’re smaller and more intimate.”

Next, Freeman prints out a grayscale print that’s the same size as the painting surface. This serves not just as a value reference but also as something against which to check measurements and as a tool to refer to when transferring the design. In addition to the grayscale print, the artist loads a color version on her Samsung Galaxy 4 tablet, which sits beside her Mabef easel. She notes that although color varies in prints, a digital version seen on-screen provides the most accurate reference.

Freeman’s next step is to select the painting surface; her top choices are Art Spectrum Colourfix and PastelMat. Both have qualities that she likes. “Colourfix papers hold many pastel layers and provide a base color that can complement or be sympathetic to a subject,” she says, “while Pastelmat is magical for blending once you get past the initial layers.” In the case of PastelMat, she chooses

MAKING IT WORK

Freeman and her husband, who enjoy traveling, shoot hundreds of reference photos on their trips. “I may take 500 images of waves but end up using just a few,” she says. When waves or animals are the subject, she may shoot a burst of images in stop action by using sports mode on her Canon SX60 HS digital camera. Deciding what part of the scene to focus on when shooting involves creative choices.

For example, when working with animals, Freeman may seek a species native to New Zealand and a particular look that’s unique to it. With kelp, on the other hand, she looks for movement, contrast and reflections. When composing a painting, she sometimes incorporates elements

from more than one shot. In the photo reference of water lilies used for *Reflected Tranquility* (at right, bottom), she liked the placement and variety of lily pads but believed the scene could use more color. “I used Photoshop to add goldfish from another reference photo,” she says.

Once she’s satisfied with a particular concept, she crops the image on her computer to a format and size to enhance the idea. “I don’t work with standard sizes, as that would compromise the work.”

For large subjects such as her kelp paintings, Freeman prefers a large size in landscape format. “An analogy would be that music is so much better in ‘surround sound’ or that watching a movie on a big screen



“My goal is to bring a subject to life. I take a two-dimensional image and create another that has a greater sense of depth. My aim is always to be better than my photographic reference.”

a light gray tone with the intention of covering the entire surface.

After taping her chosen surface to a sheet of hardboard, she transfers the image. If the design is complex, she uses the grayscale print. She then rubs a complementary pastel color to the subject onto the back of the print, places it face-down on the surface and traces the basic shapes using an embossing tool. Sometimes she'll use transfer paper instead. “I don't trace every line or detail,” Freeman says, “since most will be covered with pastel, but the lines serve as a good road map.” If the design is simple, she may just draw it freehand using

a pastel pencil and then use a divider to check measurements against the grayscale print. Finally, she fixes the drawing with a light acrylic wash of either Winsor & Newton's Payne's gray or white, depending on the subject's color.

FROM PHOTO TO PASTEL

When it comes time to select pastel sticks, Freeman first studies the color digital reference. After years of experience, she knows instinctively how to “read” a color and where to find it among her pastels. Still, she first tries

out her choice on scrap paper, often finding she needs to adjust it using other colors. For soft pastels, she prefers Unison, Art Spectrum, Sennelier, Schmincke and Girault; for pastel pencils, Derwent, CarbOthello and Faber-Castell. Most of her portraits, which are small and require more detail, are made using pastel pencil; larger works, such as landscapes and abstractions, are made using soft pastels that can cover a large area quickly and be easily blended. In any given painting, Freeman may use a combination of the two.

The artist finds that blending is key to achieving a high degree





ABOVE
Fallen (13½x23½)

OPPOSITE
Everest (23½x31½)

of realism. Because blended areas often don't have the impact of a pure stroke of color, Freeman plays up the contrast between the two to create a richness in the painting. "I'm never completely happy with any piece, as I know there are areas I could have spent more time on or where my technique could have been better," she says. "I take this with me to the next painting as a lesson learned."

One challenge Freeman encounters in her pastel practice is a scarcity of quality art materials. Although New Zealand is a self-sufficient country, its remote location makes certain brands of pastel expensive or difficult or even impossible to get.

What's more, sending her finished work abroad presents issues. Shipping and insurance, duties levied, and delays in customs can be expensive. Despite this, Freeman finds that sending work to overseas exhibitions is rewarding. "It's a costly exercise, but I consider it an investment and part of the marketing of my work, and if any are sold or win an award, it's well worth it."

PRETTIER THAN A PICTURE

So how does Freeman's award-winning work avoid the charge of being a copy of a photo? When you look at one of her paintings, there's an ineffable quality that moves it into a realm well beyond a reproduction. "I'm not sure I can define what it is that makes my work look 'better' than the photo," she says. "Maybe it's an affinity with the subject. I push contrast and value beyond what I see and put more feeling into it.

"Although my work is considered photorealistic, photorealism isn't solely what I'm trying to achieve," the artist continues. "My goal is to bring a subject to life. I take a two-dimensional image and create another that has a greater sense of depth and

feeling. My aim is always to be better than my photographic reference.

"A tradesman came to my house one day," she says, "and he saw that I was painting. He noticed the photo reference and said he thought my work was better than the photo. To me, that was the ultimate compliment."

Pastelist **Michael Chesley Johnson** (mchesleyjohnson.com) is the author of *Outdoor Study to Studio: Take Your Plein Air Painting to the Next Level* and other books, and is a painting instructor who's featured in Artists Network TV videos (artistsnetwork.com/store). He teaches workshops throughout the United States.



New Zealand self-taught pastel artist **Julie Freeman** (juliefreemanco.nz) is a Master Pastelist with the Pastel Artists of New Zealand, a signature member of the Pastel Society of America and a Master Circle artist with the International Association of Pastel Societies. Her work has earned national and international awards and can be found in private collections in Australia, the U.K. and the U.S. Freeman currently teaches workshops on request and offers private workshops in her studio, in Auckland. Her work is represented by The Artist Room Fine Art Gallery, in Dunedin, and Black Door Gallery, in Parnell, Auckland.


*Turn the page for a
demonstration*

demonstration *Wavering Light*



Step 1: After I've done the initial underdrawing, I create a light wash using pastel and water. I highlight some contrast areas in the waves and sky.



Step 2: Working from the background to the foreground, I lay down a dark and a mid-value of blue to create the appearance of movement in the water. I add highlights, being careful not to be too consistent with the shapes and spacing; otherwise, they'd look unnatural.



Step 3: Adding the dynamic energy of the wave is the fun part. To depict movement, I add contrast and directional strokes to create the heavy foam and water spray. I blend white with blues and violets and then add highlights to depict the foam.



Step 4: I introduce transparent blue and green for the rising wave, as well as in some contrast and shadow areas.



Step 5: The foaming water meets the lighter-value sand. I add highlights of white and blue for the heavier foam—and to create reflective areas.

Final: I do more foreground work to the water as it thins out across the sand. Some reflections are highlighted in the shadow areas of **Wavering Light** (12x24). *PJ*

