

# New Challenges, New Growth:

## An Oil Painter Takes on the Figure in Watercolor

Primarily an oil painter, **Elizabeth O'Reilly** makes a point of painting the figure in watercolor, where she stretches her painting skills to solve new kinds of problems. | **by Lynne Moss Pericelli**



**ABOVE**

**Large Woman  
With Umbrella**

2006, watercolor,  
16K x 12K. Courtesy  
George Bilis Gallery,  
New York, New York.

**OPPOSITE PAGE**

**Male, White Shirt  
& Shorts**

2006, watercolor, 10 x 7.  
Courtesy Dolan/Maxwell,  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

**A**lthough she is known primarily for her oil landscapes, Irish-born, New York-based artist Elizabeth O'Reilly has recently taken to painting the clothed figure in watercolor, where her exploration of composition and color assumes entirely new forms. In all her work, she says, composition is critical: "It's almost everything to me. It's intuitive, but I'm still aware of it—thinking about the warm and cool shapes, being conscious of figure and ground." Of particular interest is the warmth of the flesh contrasted with the cool colors of the model's clothing, which creates not only an opportunity for play but also a challenge to her skills. "I'm drawn to a challenge," O'Reilly states, "and the time element of short poses is good for my work. It makes me less self-conscious."

O'Reilly's watercolor classes in still life and figure at the National Academy School of Fine Arts, in New York City, reintroduced her to the medium. Recognizing the difficulty of painting the figure—"any drawing problems will be obvious," she says—she decided to explore it further. Soon the artist began attending figure-painting sessions at Spring Street Studios, where a clothed model







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**LEFT**  
**Woman and Tall Pole**  
2006, watercolor,  
14½ x 10½. Courtesy  
Dolary/Maxwell,  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

**OPPOSITE PAGE**  
**Cowboy**  
2006, watercolor,  
10 x 7. Private  
collection.

poses on Wednesday afternoons. "I love to go and work from the model in costume," the artist describes. "The model will have three or four costumes in a day, such as street clothes or a sailor outfit. Sometimes, such as in the sailor outfit, the model wears white, which is perfect for watercolor. I paint the negative shape and leave the white of the paper for the clothing."

The artist's approach centers on drawing with the brush. She works directly on pads of Arches 140-lb hot-pressed paper, enjoying the movement of the paint and concentrating on shape, not line. "I'm always looking at the arrange-

ment of shapes—the sizes of them, areas of warm and cool—rather than describing the figure," she explains. The sessions offer only quick poses of two, five, 20, or 40 minutes, so the artist must work quickly. "It's a challenge with watercolor. Unlike with oil landscapes, where I can continue to work until I have it right, I have to establish the shadow areas in that time and retain the light areas," O'Reilly says. The process requires seeing shadows as more than flat shapes, and the artist follows her own advice to her students in this

regard, looking at the variation in value and temperature. "I tell them to try to see how shadow can move from dark to light and warm to cool at the same time. In the areas around the form, the shadows are all different. The artist must see all the variations."

When O'Reilly first started working with the figure, she used heavy weight, rough paper. Later she switched to cold-pressed, which she used for a few years before turning to hot-pressed. "It goes back to liking the challenge," she says, referring to her preference for the smooth, slick surface of hot-pressed paper. "It's harder to control the paint." To









As in her approach to composition, the artist relies on her instincts to set up the value structure. "I did a lot of value studies at one time, and now that process has become second nature," she describes. "The painting almost makes itself." Rather than improvising or approximating, she establishes the darks and lights in her mind early on and sets them down right away. Working directly in this way, the artist can better preserve the transparency and spontaneity of watercolor, which she believes hold the beauty of the medium. "You can't fiddle with watercolor too much,"

she adds. "It's easy to make it look overworked and muddy. I try not to go back into the painting. I pay attention to what I do as I do it."

As a further challenge to her skills in this process, she often incorporates more than one figure in a composition. Working from four two-minute poses—one after the other—she assembles all of them on one page, such as in *Four Sailors*. "The rectangle of the page is very important," she explains. "I'm thinking about the page as I place the figures. That's the fun part, and it's really a challenge."





**LEFT**  
**Four Sailors**  
2006, watercolor,  
10 x 14. Private  
collection.

**RIGHT**  
**Seated Sailor**  
2006, watercolor,  
14x x 10x. Courtesy  
George Blis Gallery,  
New York, New York.

**BELOW RIGHT**  
**Man With NYC  
Shirt**  
2006, watercolor,  
10x x 14x. Courtesy  
Dolan/Maxwell, Phila-  
delphia, Pennsylvania.

"I'm careful where I put the head when I start, and I pay attention to where the figure goes off the page—the abstraction of it, the arrangement of shapes. If that doesn't work, it doesn't matter how well I paint something. What matters is that the shapes are pleasing."



"There's not a moment to procrastinate. We artists tend to overthink, but I love that feeling of the painting making itself. I have the knowledge stored up, and it goes from my mind to my hand, based on years of painting."

O'Reilly advises her students not to have preconceptions about painting the figure and instead to be open to wherever the process takes them. "People say they don't like long poses, or they don't like short poses, but the knowledge from one transfers to the other." She also tells them not to be too self-critical, because any learning



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OPPOSITE PAGE

**Bather**

2006, watercolor,  
12K x 9. Courtesy  
George Bilis Gallery,  
New York, New York.

BELOW LEFT

**Red Hair**

2006, watercolor,  
8 x 10. Courtesy  
George Bilis Gallery,  
New York, New York.



## About the Artist

Born in Ireland, **Elizabeth O'Reilly** studied education and art at the National University of Ireland before earning her M.F.A. at Brooklyn College. She has participated in many group and solo exhibitions, most recently in "American Artists in Rural Ireland, The Ballinglen Experience," at the Concord Art Association, in Concord, Massachusetts. Her work hangs in such prominent collections as the State Department, in Washington, DC, and the Office of Public Works, in Ireland. O'Reilly has taught at a number of schools and has led classes at the National Academy School of Fine Arts, in New York City, since 2004. She is represented by George Bilis Gallery, in New York City, and Dolan/Maxwell, in Philadelphia. For more information on O'Reilly, visit [www.elizabethoreilly.com](http://www.elizabethoreilly.com).

process is uncomfortable. "You have to let yourself be uncomfortable once in a while, because that's how you grow. If you find yourself with a certain facility, you need to push yourself into that uncomfortable zone."

In her own practice, the artist focuses on understanding the nature of the medium rather than pursuing technical mastery. To her mind, the movement and transparency of watercolor need not be so tightly controlled. "Being fixated on technique is a trap," she emphasizes. "Other things are

more important, such as color, value, and movement. Understanding those is what makes a painting work." To that end O'Reilly is cautious about demonstrating, seeking to ensure that her students find their own way as artists. "I like to put up the paintings at the end of a class and see that each one is different. Each student is approaching the work in his or her own way and finding unique solutions. It's no help to them to paint as I paint. Painting is really about problem solving."



## O'Reilly's Materials

### PALETTE

Winsor & Newton Artists' Water Colours in the following colors:

- cerulean blue
- French ultramarine
- cobalt blue
- aureolin
- cadmium yellow
- lemon yellow
- rose madder genuine
- permanent rose
- cadmium red
- alizarin crimson
- raw sienna
- burnt sienna
- Winsor green
- viridian

### OTHER

- Arches 140-lb hot-pressed watercolor blocks in various sizes
- two No. 12 Raphaël Kolinsky sable brushes
- two white plastic palettes

most sessions she brings watercolor blocks of many different sizes and moves from pad to pad while the paintings dry. For paints, she uses a limited palette similar to the one she uses for landscapes: cerulean blue, cobalt blue, French ultramarine; aureolin, cadmium yellow, lemon yellow; rose madder genuine, permanent rose, cadmium red, alizarin crimson; raw sienna and burnt sienna; Winsor green and viridian. She brings only two No. 12 Raphaël Kolinsky sable brushes to a session, one for warm and one for cool.

Her setup is simple, with a table at an angle to the model and two containers of water (one for clean water and one for rinsing the brushes). Within arm's reach are her pads, two brushes, and two inexpensive white plastic palettes. She always stands when painting the figure.

OPPOSITE PAGE

### Man in Bowler Hat

2006, watercolor, 16¼ x 12¼.  
Courtesy George Blais Gallery,  
New York, New York.

BELOW

### Figure in Orange Dress

2006, watercolor, 12¼ x 9¼.  
Courtesy George Blais  
Gallery, New York, New York.



Intuition rules in O'Reilly's creative process, although her constant awareness of shape and form guides her in creating the most effective composition. Her consideration of the figure's relationship to the ground means that her compositions never involve the figure floating on the page. Often the placement of the figure is such that it extends beyond the picture plane, setting up the kind of negative shapes that O'Reilly finds so appealing, especially in working with watercolor. "I'm careful where I put the head when I start," she describes, "and I pay attention to where the figure goes off the page—the abstraction of it, the arrangement of shapes. If that doesn't work, it doesn't matter how well I paint something. What matters is that the shapes are pleasing."