



# A Human Touch

Whether he's directing his gaze at a hardworking waitress or a homeless man on the street, Tim Gaydos' pastels capture different shades of the human experience.

By Michael Chesley Johnson

*Slow Time II (28x39)*

**W**alk into Tim Gaydos' summer studio on the coast of Maine and you may think you've accidentally stumbled into an urban diner. There in front of you is the diner booth, complete with catsup and mustard bottles, salt and pepper shakers, and sugar and napkin dispensers. It's arranged so realistically that you're tempted to sit down and order an egg over-easy with sides of toast and bacon.

Gaydos, noted for his pastel figurative work, has long been drawn to diners as a source for painting material. For him, it's not so much the classic roadside charm but the down-to-earth people who are the attraction. "They're not there to impress anyone," he says. "I catch people in real moments and get a good cross-section of society."

The artist visits the local diners near his home in Paterson, N.J., as many as two or three times a week—and eats a lot of breakfasts in the name of research. When his favorite diner went out of business several years ago, he bought one of the booths, along with accoutrements, to create an inventory of props for his work in the studio.

### From Sketch to Surface

Gaydos, who works in a variety of media, reserves most of his pastel work for his studio in New Jersey. This 1,300-square-foot studio, a renovated loft in an old Brooks Brothers plant, has a high ceiling with skylights, large windows on the east and south sides, and supplemental fluorescent lighting. But before he's ever in the studio, Gaydos starts with some on-location sketching. Armed with a set of Holbein oil pastels (to minimize the mess he leaves behind) and Strathmore charcoal paper, Gaydos orders breakfast and then starts drawing—sometimes waitresses, sometimes clientele—whoever intrigues him. He's careful to use his manners, never staying much longer than an hour and a half, and even less time if the diner is busy. "I don't want to overstay my welcome," he says.

Back at the studio, in order to continue working from life, Gaydos will hire a model for two- or three-hour sessions and pose him or her based on one of his sketches—or lately, even from memory. The posing is the easy part, though; what's far harder is composing the painting. Using his vast collection of props, Gaydos constructs a virtual diner around the model, taking care to make the scene look as much like the real thing as possible.

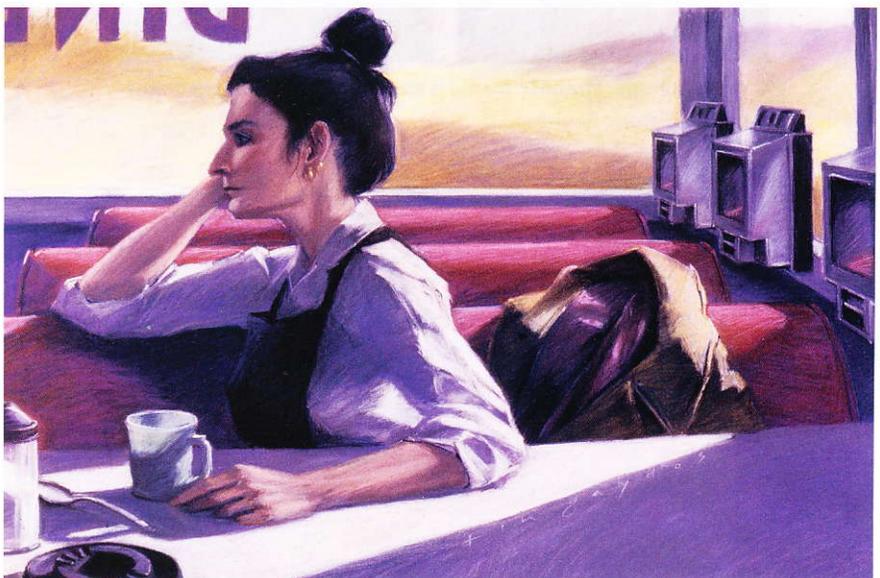
Once satisfied with the pose and the design, the artist chooses a surface. One favorite is a full 19x25-inch sheet of Canson Mi-Teintes. "Canson is the first paper I used and I stick with it," he says. "It holds the pastel and takes abuse." He



*More Coffee?* (37x43)



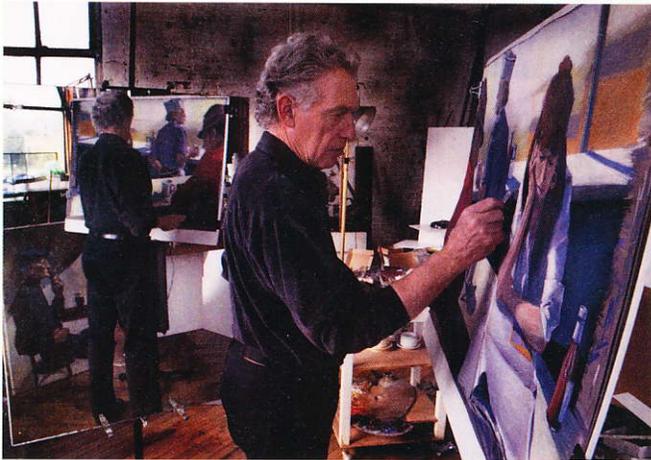
*Slow Morning* (27x43)



*Coffee Break* (26x40)

## About the Artist

Tim Gaydos of Paterson, N.J., works in a variety of media, including pastel, acrylic, watercolor and sculpture. He has won more than 200 awards in state and national exhibitions, and in 1987, he was designated a master pastelist by the Pastel Society of America. His work is included in major collections such as those of the Butler Institute of American Art, the Metropolitan Opera and the Montclair Art Museum. He's represented by Gallery 51 in Montclair, N.J.; Cygnet Gallery in Portland, Maine; and Woodwind Gallery in Machias, Maine.



As seen in this photo, Gaydos makes frequent use of mirrors for his work. "Especially if I'm using myself as a model," he says. "I'll use two if I'm painting my back."



Gaydos' summer studio in Maine is an original 1822 duplex on the National Historic Register.

admits to using the "wrong" or smooth side of this paper. Another surface he likes is a piece of Luan plywood coated with a homemade mixture of acrylic gesso and pumice powder (see his recipe on page 32). He finds that this board works particularly well for larger works because, unlike paper, it doesn't expand or contract with fluctuations in humidity.

Gaydos prefers a toned surface for his pastels, but not his acrylics. "Acrylic, which can be transparent, needs a white background to make the color glow," he explains. "The light from the canvas is refracted through the paint, and canvas dulls the paint down if it's not white. This doesn't happen with pastel." For that medium, he selects either a dark gray Canson paper or tones his pumiced board with black acrylic paint.

Once he's got his surface, he first roughs out the drawing with charcoal to capture that much labored-over composition. Sometimes the composition doesn't fit, and rather than squeeze it in, Gaydos expands the size of his support by adding another section of paper or wood. To do this with board, after laying the original piece and new section face down, he adds a narrow splicing strip that just overlaps both pieces, securing the assembly with glue and screws. He then fills in the crack with wood filler and spreads some pumice mixture over it to smooth out the seam. With paper, he takes a similar approach, using an adhesive, Rollataq from Daige Products, to attach the splicing strip. "It's harder to disguise the seam on paper," he says, "so I try to find a vertical line in the composition that I can use to hide it."

### Moving to Color

Once he's satisfied with the drawing, Gaydos marks out the patterns of dark and light areas and fills them in with pastel. He uses Rembrandt pastels for most of the painting, and has some favorite colors for this underpainting stage. To create dark Caucasian skin, for example, he first applies caput mortuum red to the shadow areas and light oxide red (or English red) to the light areas. To cool down the warm red and "keep it in the shadows," he layers a bluish-green over it. To the light areas, he may apply light orange or light red to the light oxide red on a figure's cheeks. As he moves toward the finishing stages, he may—for the brighter colors—use the softer Schmincke or Sennelier pastels.

Because he believes building a rich fabric of pastel involves colors that can't be found in any one set of pastels, Gaydos does a lot of layering. "Pastel is

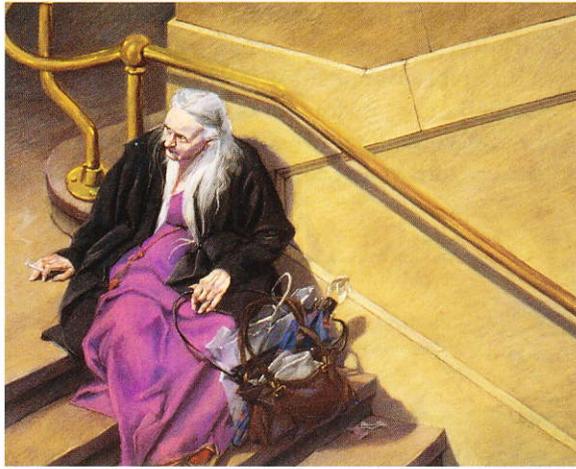
all about layering," he says. "Because of this, they take longer. In acrylic, you can mix color right away. Also, in pastel, there's some trial-and-error. In acrylic, you can see the color you've mixed immediately on your palette. In pastel, you see the color develop as you paint." Recently, Gaydos reorganized his pastel supply in an effort to simplify. "After all these years, I finally separated my pastels into colors. I got tired of looking for the right one," he says. "It does save time." And this is a factor that can become important when you're working with—and paying for—hired models.

Gaydos makes many changes as he works. He may find that a hand looks better in a different position than the one he sketched and posed earlier. To erase a section, he may use either a bit of chamois cloth or the foam inserts that come with pastel packaging. "The foam," he says, "scrubs off everything right down to the paper. Even if I erase a deep dark, I can put pure white right over it."

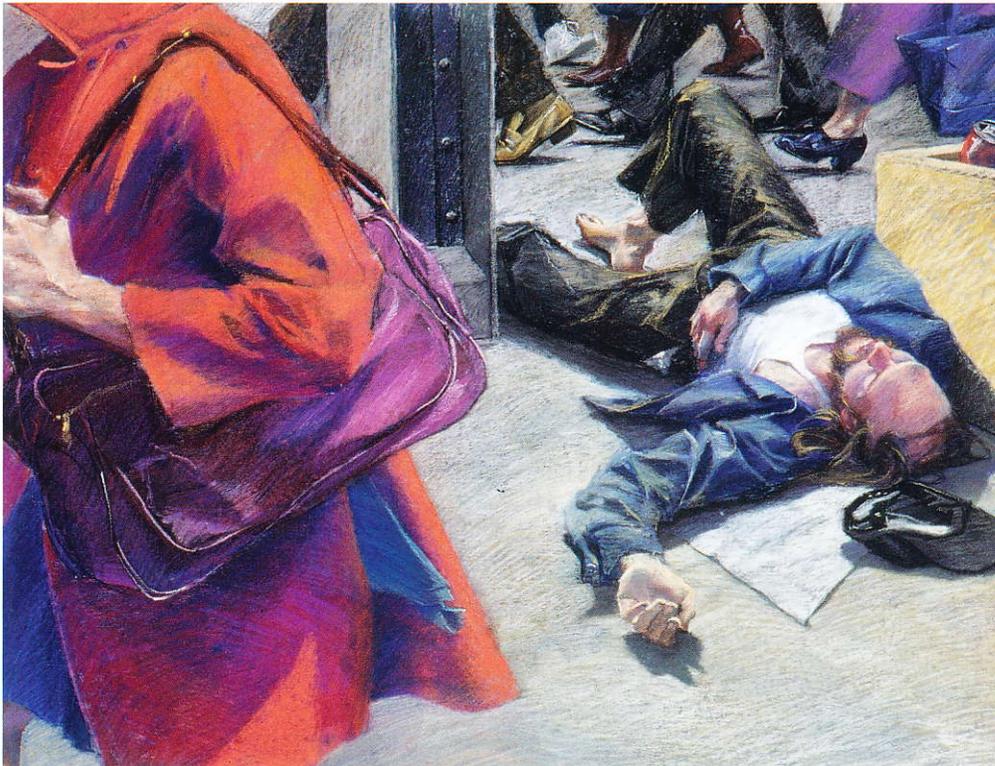
### Coming to a Close

When it comes to that recurrent question of knowing when a painting is finished, Gaydos

declares a painting done when he can't find anything else to do with it. At this point, he blows off excess dust with canned air (purchased from a photographer's supply shop) and applies a light coat of workable fixative. "I just make a couple of very light passes," he says. "I don't find the pastel darkening like people talk about unless you really soak it."



*On the Stairs* (31x41)



*Rush Hour* (34x45)



*At the Terminal* (40x26)

The artist finishes up by photographing and then framing his work. For photography, he uses the time-tested combination of tungsten lamps and tungsten film. And although it's recommended that you shoot works-on-paper unframed to avoid reflections, he has a solution for shooting pastels under glass when necessary. "The room has to be dark," he says "and I shoot at night so only black is being reflected. Sometimes I put a cloak over the camera to cover the shiny parts so they don't reflect."

Although he does use mats for paintings done on a full sheet of Canson or smaller, Gaydos has a different approach for larger pieces on paper (30x40 or so) or for works on board. For these, he prefers framing with a 3-inch liner. And rather than a cloth-covered liner, he prefers a raw wood

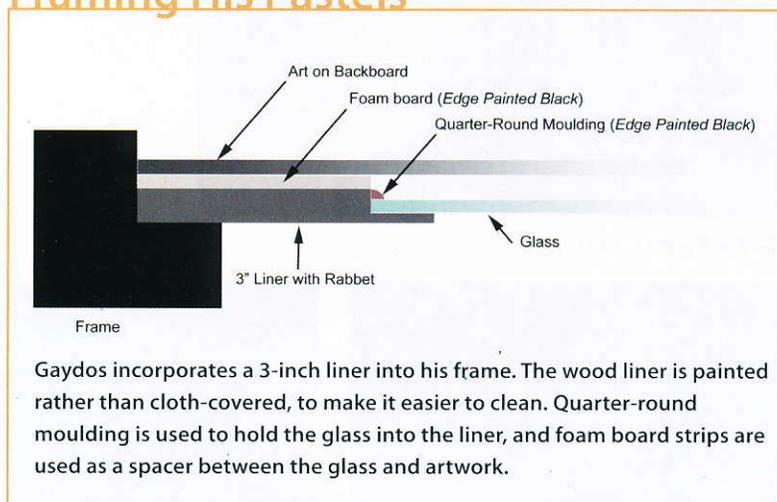
liner that he can paint. "Linen gets messy with dust over time, so this makes it easy to clean." Additionally, he uses a foam board spacer between liner and artwork and a piece of quarter-round moulding to hold the glass into the liner's rabbet. He paints both the moulding and the edges of foam board black to enhance the brilliance of the pastel (see the illustration at left).

### Inspiration and Influence

Though he has quite a command of the pastel medium, Gaydos didn't start out with pastel, and doesn't work in it exclusively. He discovered the medium while giving portraiture classes at the Montclair Museum in Montclair, N.J., where he started teaching in 1976. "I had students who wanted to learn pastel, so I decided I'd better learn myself," Gaydos recalls. "I started off using pastel to do preliminary studies for my oil paintings, but eventually I reached the point where I didn't get to the oil at all. I really got hooked."

The artist rarely paints in oils now, instead favoring pastels for his figurative work and acrylics for his outdoor work, which he does primarily during the summer at his studio in Maine. Part of this versatility is no doubt due to an upbringing in which both parents were commercial artists who did fine art on the side. His father was a member of the Society of Illustrators and taught at the High School of Art and Design in New York; his mother was a top artist for a major greeting card publisher. Also, at age 14, Gaydos had an encounter that he says greatly influenced his career choice. While taking advanced art classes in high school, a rare example of positive peer

## Framing His Pastels



## A Homemade Pastel Support

### Supplies

- Luan plywood
- Acrylic gesso
- Black acrylic paint
- Pumice powder (FFF or FF)

To make his own pastel panels, Tim Gaydos adds enough black acrylic paint to acrylic gesso to make a 40% gray. Next, he adds pumice powder, which can be found in some hardware stores or through an art supplier such as Daniel Smith ([www.danielsmith.com](http://www.danielsmith.com)). "Add the powder gradually, stirring constantly to keep the pumice in suspension," he says, "and continue to add it until you can feel the grain when you rub a bit of the mixture between your fingertips." Gaydos brushes on at least three thin coats of the mixture onto his plywood, letting each layer dry between coats. "The more coats you apply," he explains, "the more consistent the grit."

pressure occurred when two older students came up to him and said: "You'd be crazy not to become an artist!"

Gaydos followed the tip, attending the University of California, Berkeley, where he studied with Angelo Ippolito (American, 1922-2001), the well-known New York Abstract Expressionist. "Two words from Angelo Ippolito were enough to move a student in the right direction," he says. Gaydos eventually ended up in Italy where he studied for a year in the class of Expressionist sculptor Marino Marini (Italian, 1901-1980). Upon returning to the U.S., he took up freelance book jacket design and illustration in order to support his new family, which includes two daughters, Paloma and Sabrina (now working artists themselves). Then, about 15 years ago, Gaydos was able to devote his time exclusively to fine art.

### Art & Soul

Such long-term involvement in a variety of media, both two- and three-dimensional, makes the artist an able judge of fine art, and Gaydos does some judging work—about one event a year. Most recently, he was a Juror of Awards for the 2006 American Watercolor Society show. "When I judge, I have three criteria in mind: technical ability, originality and emotional content." The last is the most difficult and most subjective.

"Art has to give the viewer some kind of insight into life," he says. "If it has no soul, it doesn't qualify as art. It's just a rendering, good craftsmanship." Even if he doesn't personally like a painting, he says, he can still realize its value if it has emotional content.

Gaydos has had no trouble finding an emotional story in the faces and figures he encounters. In addition to the hardworking waitresses he's brought into view over the years, the artist has also shone a spotlight onto the unfortunate world of the city's homeless. His paintings of these people are powerful glimpses of a segment of the population that's so often overlooked. "I empathize with them," Gaydos says. "People have trouble dealing with people who have problems. I want to present them in a less threatening way



"Change?" II (56x36)

and get the viewer to have more empathy for these fellow human beings."

Gaydos, who volunteers for an overnight shift at a homeless shelter once a month, often heads out in the mornings after his shift with his sketchbook. He makes his way to the nearby park and here he starts working, trying to capture—as only an artist can—another example of the human experience. 

---

Michael Chesley Johnson ([www.michaelchesleyjohnson.com](http://www.michaelchesleyjohnson.com)) is an award-winning painter and workshop instructor. He lives in the Canadian Maritimes where he teaches at Friar's Bay Studio Gallery. His new book, *Through a Painter's Brush: A Year on Campobello Island*, was just released this summer.