

RIGHT

Laura Wind

2009, watercolor,
8 x 13. Courtesy Gurari
Collections, Boston,
Massachusetts.

BELOW

Laura Back

2009, watercolor,
9 x 8. Collection the
artist.

OPPOSITE PAGE

Caroline Lollipop

2006, watercolor,
10 x 6. Collection the
artist.



Painting the Fluid Figure in Watercolor



Wendy Artin's detailed paintings and drawings benefit from her quick watercolors of fleeting poses by the model.

—
by Bob Bahr

Wendy Artin's watercolor paintings of Italian classical statues are compelling in their demonstration of both a solid technical foundation and an artful approach. Although the medium certainly contributes to their appeal, the fact that Artin is a dedicated figure drawer may also be at the root of it. "I have spent years and years working from the model, and I think that is my favorite thing to paint and always has been," says the artist, who was born in the United States and now lives in Rome. "When I paint statues, I try to see the people who originally posed for them. It's very freeing—it breathes life into the statue."



BELOW

Piera Hands Clapsed

2005, watercolor, 13 x 8.
Collection the artist.



Artin is able to enliven her paintings and drawings of statues because she has such a strong background—and continuing interest—in drawing from the live model. She is so adept at capturing the life in a human body that she can transfer it to a drawing of a sculpted form. She drew from the model at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, in Paris, and she continues to hire dancers and actors to pose in her Rome studio. Artin generally gives the models free rein. “If I don’t tell them what to do, they do more beautiful and unusual things than they would if I posed them,” says the artist. “I do give them some guidelines, such as ‘never cover your stomach.’ They put on a show for me. They knock themselves out; they’re very expressive. For a while, a Brazilian dancer posed for me every day, and he did poses where he would end up shaking. I could not think of more difficult poses for him to do than what he came up with.”

RIGHT

Alex Back and Forth

2001, watercolor, 14 x 20.
Private collection.



These poses are, not surprisingly, short. Some last 30 seconds, just to warm her up. “I can’t imagine holding some of these for five or 10 minutes, but they often do,” Artin says. Her longest poses are a half-hour. She loads a large, pointed brush and paints the shadows, blending some of the edges with a wide, flat brush. “I’m trying to have the watercolor be the puddle of shadow that is on the figure, the shape of



the shadows,” she explains. “On longer poses, sometimes I wet the page in certain areas before I start, and I control the wetness with the wadded-up paper towel that’s always in my left hand.” Artin makes a point of being highly aware of how much pigment is on her brush at all times. The color is usually a mixture of red madder and sepia. “I pay no attention to the color temperature, although the temperature

of the overall painting is important,” says the artist. “A lot of red makes them feel electric, so I don’t use just red madder. Sometimes I use just sepia, but only for landscapes. A mixture of the two can approximate the color of flesh in shadow. I don’t premix the color, though—I squeeze a blob of each one and mix as I go so that different parts of the painting can be warmer or cooler.”



ABOVE
Dome With Trees
2010, watercolor,
8 x 11. Private
collection.

RIGHT
**Via del Fori
Imperiali**
1999, watercolor,
11 x 20. Private
collection.



Her approach is spontaneous, and she generally works outward from one spot, rather than creating an envelope for the figure that she fills in. "If the model is in a tricky pose, for example with an arm above his head, and I think it will be likely to move, I paint that first to fix it in place," says Artin. "Often, just out of habit, I will start with the head. Sometimes I start at the center and work outward." The artist doesn't concentrate on measuring specific body parts, preferring to see the figure as a whole and find the correct proportions that way. "If you are not going to map proportions out, it is really very good to try to keep moving your eye around so that you have constant comparisons," she explains. "I force my gaze to make a big circle around the whole figure." This approach isn't so much a preference as a pragmatic decision on short poses that don't allow time for precise measurements. But on longer poses, the whole view must sometimes be imposed on the painting process. "With a longer pose I go slower and am capable of really getting lost in an elbow, which never leads to anything good," Artin says. "At that

point it is really valuable to either look away or make yourself look in a circle around the entire figure."

Artin's relationship with the model is a mix of empathy and independence. She finds it helpful to imagine what the pose feels like for the model, and she cites an early teacher who made all the students in the figure-drawing class briefly assume the pose of the model before trying to depict it. But Artin explains that she expects the model to bring his or her own experience to the session. "I completely project



ABOVE
Laura Chest
2008, watercolor, 11 x 11. Courtesy Gurari
Collections, Boston, Massachusetts.



LEFT
Marzia Reaching
2010, watercolor, 8 x 10. Collection the artist.



ABOVE
Parthenon Cape and Skirt
2010, watercolor, 41 x 68. Collection the artist.

onto the model—not in a heavy way, but I fall into thinking that I’m in that pose,” she says. “I think it is very important to connect with the model, but I don’t want them to watch me drawing and painting. I want them to be busy expressing themselves, not concerned about what I’m painting.” There is an inevitable disconnect between the artist and the model, however, and it can sometimes work to the artist’s advantage. Artin says models sometimes have off days, but she can get great drawings from sleepy models if she is in good form. Likewise, the model may have a dynamic day but Artin can’t seem to capture it. “There is no guarantee that if the model is fantastic, I will be, too,” she says. “So many times I have had models do incredible things and I have just been too clumsy or too enthusiastic, and nothing comes of it. But things can really be magical when the model is in top form and I am also up to snuff. I can’t emphasize enough how many of these quick watercolors I throw away or don’t show. They may seem very quick and easy—which they are in a sense because they are the result of a magic moment when everything came together—but they are rare.”

Because Artin likes her watercolors to have a wet look, she uses a lot of water and is very careful when blending any edges she wants softened. “That’s one of the trickiest things in watercolor,” she says. “If you try to do it before it’s ready, before it has dried enough, it won’t work. You must

be patient. I like it to be nice and wet in the shady part, but you have to wait until it has sat there a little bit before you go back in. It takes experience; you have to do it over and over again. The drying time changes depending on the season, whether you’re in the sun, the humidity level, and the type of paper you use. There’s a certain unpredictability to watercolor that keeps the paintings organic. Watercolor is beautiful because you have the stain that goes into the paper and bleeds out—it has a life of its own.”

Her quick watercolors from short poses demonstrate this organic feeling. But Artin works wonders with more painstaking projects as well. Her charcoal drawings of figures have a similarly spontaneous feel, even if they were more meticulously executed. “Charcoal is great for atmospheric light, whereas watercolor is really nice for fixed light and for direct, crisp shadows,” says Artin.

With watercolor, it can feel as though you’re working with quicksilver, and attempting to completely control every wash and stroke can result in a dead painting. Many of the best watercolorists seem to collaborate with the medium, allowing room for its ebullient nature while providing some structure for it. A look at Artin’s recent series of watercolors depicting the Parthenon frieze shows how immediate, fresh-looking washes can add up to a startlingly realistic picture. “They are very washy and they look wet,” says Artin. “It’s very tricky to do it in a quick movement, but the truth is, the more you go over it, the less fresh they look. I try to get all of the details in the moment that I am doing the first wash. If I feel that something is not popping out enough, I will go in and give it more depth. But right now I am consciously trying to get



“When I paint statues, I try to see the people who originally posed for them. It’s very freeing—it breathes life into the statue.”

everything in one go.” Artin says she considers the frieze to be a pinnacle of drawing and painting, as it creates the illusion of three dimensions from a nearly flat surface. “Some of the people who have seen my watercolors of them have thought that they look like rubbings, which I consider a great compliment,” she says. “It has been incredibly gratifying to work on them because they are halfway dimensional; I get the feeling that I am pulling them out of the paper. I sometimes felt as though they were emerging from the flat plane when I was working on them.”

Artin had long planned to draw and paint the part of the frieze installed at the British Museum, in London, and when a friend mentioned that the bas-relief sculptures,



TOP
Parthenon Sacred Bull
2010, watercolor, 41 x 51. Collection the artist.

ABOVE
Trajan's Column
2009, watercolor, 14 x 27. Private collection.

About the Artist

Wendy Artin earned a B.A. in fine arts and French literature from the University of Pennsylvania, in Philadelphia, and an M.F.A. in painting from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. She also studied at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, in Paris. The subject of more than a dozen solo exhibitions in Paris, Boston, and New York, her work hangs in numerous public and private collections. For more information, visit www.wendyartin.com.

which were executed around 440 B.C., were likely to be returned to Athens soon, the artist was spurred into motion. She couldn't be sure that once the sculptures, which form the bulk of the so-called Elgin Marbles, were installed in Greece, they would be under the same favorable light conditions or that the Greek museum would be as artist-friendly as the British Museum. "The life-sized work I have been doing could never have been done at the museum," Artin recounts. "In fact, the pictures were too big for my apartment, but I had the chance to get a studio at the American Academy and ended up with a giant pavilion with a skylight, making the light remarkably similar to the British Museum gallery where the reliefs are."

Although the artist can settle down and tackle an extensive series of paintings such as her Parthenon frieze watercolors, Artin is prone to tangents. The columns of the Villa Adriana captured her attention for a time, but their form is echoed in the vertical shape of nearby parasol pines, a subject the artist was moved to depict as well. "I may think I'm embarking on a series of pictures of such and such, and I end up doing something similar, but not that," she says. "I ended up doing a lot of cars when I thought I was going to do a lot of street scenes, for example." Artichokes from the produce stand can enrapture her, and any interesting item in her studio may provoke a painting. It's likely Artin would find inspiration anywhere, given her attuned eye, but certainly she lives in an ideal location for an artist. "Rome is a fantastic place for painters," she admits. "It's beautiful, and the weather is perfect for painting outdoors."



OPPOSITE PAGE, ABOVE

Antinoüs

2009, watercolor, 30 x 22. Courtesy Galerie du Passage, Paris, France.

OPPOSITE PAGE, BELOW

Square Wall With Columns

2008, watercolor, 17 x 18. Private collection.

LEFT

Lilac Artichoke

2010, watercolor, 14 x 7. Collection the artist.