Pam Rosenblatt
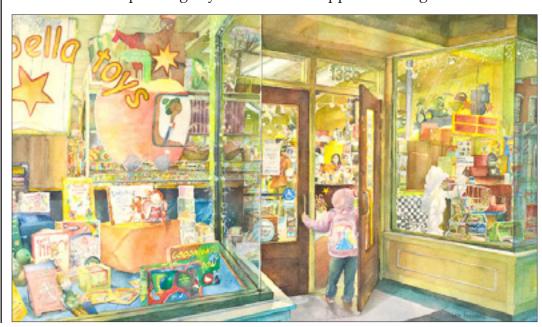**The Visual Energy of Watercolor Artist Seth Berkowitz**

Visual energy is always admirable to have in a painting. Such vigor captures the moment on paper, canvas, or even wood. But this gestured movement isn't always easily communicated successfully in a painting. It takes a trained hand to articulate on a surface what is in that photograph or simply on the mind of the artist.

Somerville artist Seth Berkowitz has that special ability to produce scenes on paper through the use of a paint brush and watercolors or a pencil in hand. Whether it is a sketch, a drawing, or a watercolor painting, Berkowitz skillfully creates a focused scene from a photograph or from his highly trained eyes and makes it into a flash scene.

Perhaps this technical ability derives from his architectural background. Besides being a water colorist, he is also a landscape architect who received a Master's degree in Landscape Architecture from Harvard University's Graduate School of Design in Cambridge, Massachusetts after graduating with a Bachelor's degree in Architecture from Carnegie-Mellon University's College of Fine Arts in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Berkowitz also received training in art during childhood.

He currently teaches art and architecture at Wentworth Institute of Technology, Boston Architectural College, and Brookline Adult and Community Education.

Much of his artistic training developed from self-teaching. He learned from watercolor books and CDs and a few art classes. Berkowitz admires the works of such watercolor artists as John Salminen from Duluth, Minnesota and Stephen Quiller from Crede, Colorado. He respects the artworks of renowned artists like Winslow Homer (1836 – 1910), Edward Hopper (1882 – 1967), and John Singer Sargent (1856 – 1925). His works sometimes echo paintings by Homer and Hopper and Sargent. He even

can paint in a surrealist style reflective of surrealist Salvador Dali (1904 – 1989).

But Berkowitz energies the contents of his paintings and drawings in a different way than these prominent artists. If you take a look at his web-site, sethberkowitz.com, you will find many water colors by Berkowitz in **Urban Scenes**, **Beaches**, **Landscape**, and **Construction** settings.

Under the **Urban Scenes** section, there is "T-Stop" watercolor, (28" x 34" framed), which is a rather concrete painting with a bus driver sitting in his seat with his hand on his face. He is looking at a passenger. The bus

is a yellow and white MBTA one with "Sullivan Station" as a destination point. The subject matter is easily attainable by the audience's eye and a sample of Berkowitz's early watercolor style.

"Time for Toys" (24" x 35" framed) is another early Berkowitz **Urban Scenes** watercolor. The scene is simple yet complex at the same time. A little girl in a pink winter jacket enters a toy store that is well lit – a bright and happy scene. The front store windows are filled with toys and games. Once again, the subject matter is concrete and easily retained by the viewer. This painting is an earlier piece by Berkowitz.

Then Berkowitz's style changes a bit, as seen in another **Urban Scenes** called "Coffee Shop Entrance" which is a watercolor, (28" x 36" framed). Here a man pushing a baby carriage enters a coffee shop. This man is wearing sunglasses and off to his right is the slight image of a biker passing the shop. Again, the painting is

very active, with many different colored papers posted on a wall and three various sized holes for waste receptacles on a countertop. The scene is

abstract yet decipherable. It is a more modern work by Berkowitz.

Then, in the **Beaches** section of his website, Berkowitz paints "Marching Parasols" (17" x 27" framed), "Summer Shade" (19" x 27" framed), "The Beach Life" (20" x 23" framed). and "Sunshine at the Shore" (19 x 24" framed). Each of these four watercolors shows different aspects of a beach scene. The "Marching Parasols" focus the audience's eyes mainly upon the oversized beach umbrellas. The watercolors in this painting are bright, sharp, and detailed. The people are abstracted. And Berkowitz's "Summer Shade" reveals more of an ocean in the background with parasols. People are sitting in beach chairs enjoying themselves but your still cannot visualize their faces. Then there is the piece called "The Beach Life" where people, ocean, and sand are much more visible yet their faces are still blurred. In "Sunshine at the Shore" the scene is calmer with darker colors, and the beach umbrellas are still prominent. The people in the scene are more scattered yet still most of them are undistinguishable. Each of artworks in the **Beaches** series shows much fluid planning and skill with the paintbrush.

Sometimes it takes thirty to forty hours to complete a watercolor. This time factor is not including the hours spent in the primary sketching and/or drawing stages of the artwork.

"I do a lot of drawing. With watercolor you have to do a decent amount of planning ahead especially for bigger pieces because, unlike with oils and acrylics, it's a layering process from light to dark. White is the white of the paper. There is no white watercolor. So you have to plan ahead regarding where you're going to leave white and light values," said Berkowitz in an October 16, 2015 Wilderness House Literary Review interview.

The process is an intricate one. "Sometimes I work from reference photos. Sometimes I work outside. The works that are more loose and gestural are done onsite. I don't try to do larger finished paintings outside because I need to be in a more controlled environment," he explained.

Berkowitz does preliminary design/composition sketches in the initial planning stages for an artwork. "I'm figuring out the composition and also the value structure of the painting – the general areas of light, middle and dark color – so when I apply the colors I know what areas I am going to leave white or a light value, and make sure I leave those areas untouched.

For larger paintings I work from multiple reference photos and use the preliminary sketches to explore how I am going to combine multiple elements from each photo into one interesting/compelling composition. I am also thinking about format, vertical or horizontal," he said.

As he sketches and zooms into the part of the picture that he wants to capture, Berkowitz is always editing in his mind. "I'm thinking, 'What is this painting going to be about? What areas am I going to accentuate? What am I going to edit out and have people focus on? And how do I want them to travel through the painting to get to the focal area, which is usually the area of greatest contrast - the whitest whites against the darkest darks," he mused.

After the preliminary composition study is complete, when he thinks he has developed a composition that he believes will make for a strong painting, he begins to draw the key shapes on watercolor paper. He frequently uses masking fluid over the areas that he wants to remain white because – as he earlier mentioned – there is no white watercolor, only

the white of the watercolor paper itself. The use of masking fluid allows Berkowitz to paint the initial washes of watercolor as loose and gestural as he desires, without concern for working over the white and light value areas. After the initial washes are complete, he removes the masking fluid with his hand or with a rubber cement pickup. In most cases, the painting is almost 2/3 complete by this point, with the final third focused on adding overall depth and detail in and around the focal point.

Berkowitz is mainly a watercolor artist, though he has started working with markers a bit lately. In the beginning, he had a more controlled and refined painting style. The details in his artworks were articulate, light and dark color values clearly distinctive, as seen in his "Time for Toys" (24" x 35" framed) and "Antique Ambiance" (28" x 36" framed). As his artistic technique has developed, Berkowitz has become looser, more abstract, and even more active with the watercolor brush, as apparent in "Inman Square" (24" x 30" framed), "Bus Reflections" (30" x 24" framed) and "Harvard Square Crossing" (24" x 30" framed). He isn't as concerned about making "mistakes" in his paintings. In fact, he accepts them.

Once again, the visual energy that comes to life in Berkowitz's sketches, drawings, and watercolors is memorable and eye-catching. To see a Berkowitz artwork is to remember it for its vivacious compositional value and color quality.