

Untamed

Joseph Zbukvic explains what sports cars and feral horses have in common with watercolor: They may be wild, but they always promise an exciting ride.

By Sarah A. Strickley

Although his paintings are often described as sensitive and moody, Joseph Zbukvic's work has none of the touchy-feely sweetness often found in work that risks tonal complexity. And although his style is often described as impressionistic, he's not the type to sacrifice precision for effect. Zbukvic is a responsive and receptive painter, one who prides himself both on his skills as a draftsman and his refined sense of tonal balance.

He's also the rare artist who can put his thoughts about painting into words with the same combination of grace and gusto that breathes such life into his watercolors. Perhaps it's for this reason that he's known as an exceptional teacher; he's also written a successful book, *Mastering Atmosphere & Mood in Watercolor* (International Artist, 2002), which brings together many of his ideas about technique and process; and he's a sought-after judge and juror on the international watercolor competition scene.

Zbukvic is one of those artists who seems to have a metaphor for nearly every aspect of his work at the ready. Whether he's comparing the watercolor medium to a brumby (an Australian free-roaming feral horse), or the drying of paint to the lifespan of a butterfly (as brief as it is beautiful), one thing is certain: There's never a dull moment in this artist's life or his work.



Unfettered In The Final Effort (watercolor on paper, 59x 118¹/₁₀) Zbukvic captures the excitement and intensity of the race with a variety of strokes and textured accents, offering viewers an inside line to the finish.

I recently had the distinct pleasure of talking to Zbukvic (pronounced Zer-book-vitch) about all of this and more. The following is a transcript of our correspondence.

SAS: You've said that you were born and raised in Zagreb, Croatia (formerly Yugoslavia), on a small farm—a place where a strong work ethic and a connection to nature were valued above all else—and that your grandmother recognized your talent when you were quite young. You've also mentioned that you began your artistic journey as a child, drawing on footpaths using bits of broken bricks. There were quite a few steps between those early drawings and the work you're doing in watercolor today, of course, but which early steps stand out to you now as pivotal?

JZ: Naturally, apart from my grandmother, and well-meaning primary school teachers, who recognized my talent, other circumstances occurred to help me with my decision to become an artist. At the age of 14, I was befriended by a wealthy family in a neighborhood where the houses were filled with art and books. It was probably the first time I became aware of art on the world stage and was exposed to museum quality art.

Until then, my interest in art was simply a passion, but it also made me stand out from the crowd. You must remember that this was a communist system and individuality was greatly discouraged. They did, however, provide a well-rounded education system, so my schooling also encompassed visual and performing arts, and the history of art.

The true opportunity to pursue art as a career really didn't occur until 1970, when I emigrated to Australia. Back in Yugoslavia, I'd started studying languages in order to pursue a teaching career in English. This obviously came in handy when I came to Australia, as I could speak English quite well. I was therefore able to enroll in a local university to study industrial design, which I'd always imagined as a dream job, as it encompassed both drawing and my love of cars. (The idea was that I was going to design cars.)

It was during this course that I was introduced to the medium of watercolor. I'd been painting in other media—acrylics, gouache and oils—but if there was any moment in my life that changed my future, it was probably that first simple lesson in placing washes over my drawings in order to

present my designs for final exams. Very soon, I began to experiment with painting landscapes in this medium and simply fell in love with it. It was so quick and immediate and alive compared to anything else. It was not long after that, that my painting became a full-time profession, even though I still held a degree for industrial design.

SAS: You returned to Zagreb in 1990 after a 20-year absence to a reception as an artist. Tell us that story.

JZ: Like everything else in life, that was just sheer coincidence. I ran into a fellow artist from Australia, who was visiting Zagreb, and who introduced me to the director of the Mimara Museum. He was very impressed with my work and liked the story of a poor immigrant kid making it in Australia,

Field Work

Inside the Sketchbook



Joseph Zbukvic is a strong believer in the benefits of painting on location. In order to keep that “magic touch” alive, he says, one has to sketch, draw and take notes outdoors, even if the work is completed in the studio. For this purpose, he carries a briefcase full of supplies—a small paint box, a few brushes, some pencils and a sketchbook—wherever he goes. The painting begins, he says, the



moment one looks at the subject, not the moment one brings paint to paper, as many believe.

The subjects of Zbukvic's paintings vary greatly—he's as likely to paint a bustling street scene as he is to paint the quiet countryside—but he's always been interested in interactions between man and nature. “I must admit that I'm not much for pure virginal landscapes,



such as lakes, mountains and rivers,” he says.

Lately, Zbukvic's interest has alighted upon equine subjects, and where better to observe the interactions between a horse and its rider than the racetrack? In these pages from the artist's sketchbook, we find him observing his subject in the field. Drawings of horses and their riders are accented with color washes, and



the sketches are peppered with the artist's thoughts and observations of the day. In paintings such as *Beach Races*, *Barwon Heads* (above, right) we see the culmination of these early notes in a major work.

Not only is the sketchbook a unique record of the development of the artist's work, but it's also a unique record of his life.



Equine Design *Beach Races, Barwon Heads* (watercolor on paper, 20¹/₂ x 28³/₁₀) shows the culmination of work that begins when the artist first casts his gaze upon the subject.



Flip through the pages of Zbukvic's sketchbook online at www.artistsnetwork.com/article/zbukvic-sketchbook.

“Drawing is the skeleton onto which you place the flesh—color and tone.”



Soft Pastures In *Late Afternoon* (top left; watercolor on paper, 9¹/₁₀x11⁴/₅) Zbukvic uses foregrounded detail to provide balance.

Street Sound *Homeward Bound* (top right; watercolor on paper, 12³/₅x 10¹/₂) takes viewers inside a bustling city scene.

Countryside Light In *Twilight* (bottom right; watercolor on paper, 12³/₅x 20¹/₂) we find a sensitive look at the Australian countryside.

Pedestrian *Campo De Populi, Florence* (bottom left; watercolor on paper, 11⁴/₅x8⁷/₁₀) depicts a locale the artist paints often.

despite his background. I was installed as a guest artist, provided with a studio space, and I did numerous television, radio and newspaper interviews. I also left a painting, which is now in the permanent collection of the museum.

The studio was in the fortifications of the old city, and I had an entire floor in the clock tower. The problem was, every day at midday, a canon was fired from the window above me to mark the time. This had been done for 300 years, since before people had watches. No matter how I watched my time and waited for the noon shot, it managed to catch me by surprise, giving me a heart attack just about every time. I fixed it by starting to take very early lunches.

In the end, I met some lovely people and learned to love my country of birth again.

SAS: What role does drawing play in your process today?

JZ: I've always been a gifted drawer. I take no claim for this—it was given to me at birth. I've always loved it and still draw most days, simply for the love of it. I carry a briefcase with me

wherever I go, along with a sketchbook and pencils, and I draw at every opportunity—at cafes and on park benches. I'll even stop the car to draw things. I have numerous sketchbooks filled with these kinds of drawings (see “Field Work” on page 30). Sometimes they grow into major paintings, but most are just for my private record.

I see these drawings like piano scales for a concert pianist. By honing my skills, I'm constantly improving my drawing, which, of course, is the backbone of all of my paintings. Drawing is the skeleton onto which you place the flesh—color and tone. Sadly, the skill of drawing isn't taught today and is lacking in most of the work I see. Everybody wants to play with paint, but few are willing to put many hours of work into their drawing skills. I've exhibited some of my drawings, but they're seen as a poor sister to my paintings by the clientele.

SAS: What attracted you to the watercolor medium? Have you always been drawn to it?

JZ: I'll elaborate by saying that no matter what other medium I try, and I certainly have tried

Bright Light *Roman Holiday* (watercolor on paper, 8⁷/₁₀x12³/₅) was painted as a demonstration of how to create the appearance of bright sunshine by employing strong contrasting tonal values.

others, I find watercolor, with its magic translucency and ability to capture light, irreplaceable as a medium. It has a certain magic because it's never quite tamable and I find its elusive behavior enticing and exciting. It has many limitations, but that very fact makes you work ever harder, trying to conquer it and express what you want to say within the constraints of the medium. It's a bit like a wild brumby or an exotic sports car, never quite tamable or controllable, which makes for an exciting ride.

SAS: Your handling of the paint is immediately recognizable as your own. I suppose I'd call it a loose and impressionistic style, but it's also very

precise and the depth you're able to achieve is remarkable. How did you develop your unique watercolor "voice," so to speak?

JZ: I've never had any lessons, apart from that very first half-hour introduction, which consisted in creating either a flat wash or a gradual wash. The rest I learned by trial and error, and my process is still developing today. I mentioned drawing before and I must say that originally, I simply colored in drawings, so to speak.

Eventually, I came to realize that tone was equally important, or at least no more important than drawing in creating depth. So I'm very fortunate that along with my drawing ability I've also developed a keen sense of tonal balance. I

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Rush Hour Dusk, Clifton Hill, Melbourne (watercolor on paper, 12³/₅ x 8⁷/₁₀) captures a peak hour of traffic—a stressful situation for some, but just another opportunity for a painting for Zbukvic.



Long Road In Flags and Awnings (watercolor on paper, 28³/₁₀ x 17⁷/₁₀) the artist draws the viewer deep into the scene with seemingly effortless grace.



Wet Way The artist has lived nearby the scene depicted in *Wet Day, Melbourne* (watercolor on paper, 20¹/₂ x 17⁷/₁₀) for 20 years. He believes there to be no better medium for portraying wet roads than watercolor.

A Spot of Tea

According to Joseph Zbukvic, in order for your painting to have depth and atmosphere, your tonal values have to be correct. And the key to understanding tonal values is recognizing that different tonal values of the same color are not different colors—it's only the concentration level that's different. Zbukvic has developed a rather edifying system for recognizing pigment consistencies:

Tea: The weakest wash. Great for light, misty paintings with soft clouds and luminous skies. Will bead and spread easily.

Coffee: Darker than the tea wash. Perfect for backgrounds and shading. Will leave behind a tone. Can be drybrushed for wispy lines.

Milk: Probably the most popular wash. Half-toned, relatively solid in appearance. Forms granulating effects when used over large areas. Great for colorful images.

Cream: Too thick to bead. Usually reserved for large, dark areas. Great for drybrushing. Works well for shadows, trees and rocks.

Butter: As strong as you can go. Good foil to large areas of weak washes. Can provide tremendous contrast. To be used sparingly.

Using Zbukvic's system, you'll find that there are enough tonal values here for most paintings.



Tea weakest tone
Coffee one-quarter tone
Milk half-tone
Cream three-quarter tone
Butter full-tone



Adrift The artist enjoys painting the lagoon as he has in *The Lagoon, Venice* (20^{1/2}x 12^{3/5}) as much as the more intimate canals in Venice.

now find color almost superfluous, apart from it being cold or warm, as required. When you combine good drawing, good tonal range and a variety of edges in your painting of shapes, you then have the full arsenal available to a watercolorist to express anything you see in your own way.

SAS: Which artists (or paintings) have you looked to for inspiration and guidance over the years?

JZ: I've never had any gurus, but did discover the English school of painting some 15 years ago—people such as Thomas Girtin [1775-1802] and Richard Parkes Bonington [1802-28], and to some extent, J.M.W. Turner [1775-1851]. The only artist I truly admire is John Singer Sargent [1856-1925], particularly for his watercolors and sketches, but not so much for his academic work. You could say I'm completely self-taught. I do have some close painting companions, who are not well-known, but are of enormous moral support and good critics of my work.

SAS: Your work has been described as atmospheric and tonally moody. When you visit a site that you're considering painting, what elements speak to you? Is your focus your own emotional response to the place, or is it something altogether different?

JZ: An artist is a combination of the poet and the surgeon.



One Wave One senses the water's motion in *Chioggia* (17^{1/10}x 20^{1/2}). For painting waves, Zbukvic recommends loading the brush with a wash of a cream consistency (see "A Spot of Tea," opposite). Paint each wave with a single stroke of a medium-sized brush.

If you get too emotionally involved in your subject, you forget the basic rules of painting and your patient will surely die. At the same time, if you're too conscious of your techniques and go for the safe, you end up with work lacking any emotion. Obviously, a balance has to be struck.

Usually, I'm attracted to the quality of light in any given subject. I'll analyze it in terms of composition, tonal values and the feel or mood of the moment, and then simply release that onto the paper after I see the image in my mind's eye. It doesn't always work. My subject matter is versatile and covers everything from landscapes and streetscapes to nudes, interiors, equine art and portraits. I must admit I'm not much for still lifes.


SAS: Do you often paint *en plein air*? Or do you more regularly work from notes taken on-site or photographic references?

JZ: Over the last few years, I've slowly increased the amount of *plein air* work to the point of producing probably 80 percent or more on-site. I only do my major pieces in the studio. I find the relationship between myself and the subject is at its best when we're eye to eye. I make decisions I would never make

in my studio, because I simply have to work faster due to the changing light conditions. Some of these sketches of course are painted on a larger scale later on, and I use photography extensively as a reference for those studio pieces as well.

SAS: What lessons are most important to you as a teacher?

JZ: As a teacher, I've learned many things from my students by simply observing what they see as mistakes. In reality, there's no such thing as a mistake in watercolor—I now call them gifts from heaven, because, as I said, the very unpredictability of what the medium will do is its greatest strength.

I always say, go with the flow. If you listen to your watercolor as you paint, it will actually tell you where it wants to go. And if you learn to live in the lifetime of any given watercolor while it's wet, you can travel an amazing journey and be quite relaxed about it, rather than hurrying in your own time. After all, a butterfly lives only for a day—that is its lifetime. A watercolor can be wet for mere minutes—that's its lifetime! 

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