

Shifting Your Viewpoint

Explore pastel artist Barbara Rachko's secrets for creating art that lets you get a new angle on your subject.

By Greg Schaber

Seven years ago, Barbara Rachko was in the midst of a growing career in portraiture, but she felt unfulfilled. "After a while, I said to myself, 'There's no creativity here; there's no room for growth,'" she says. "I was bored."

As vague dissatisfaction grew into restlessness, Rachko began to experiment with different subjects and settings, which eventually led to her *Domestic Threats* series. Marked by colorful, phantasmagorical figures,

unusual viewpoints, skewed perspective and strong narrative themes, the paintings in this series—which have elicited responses from "humorous" to "ominous"—have helped her define a style that's completely her own. And yet, because her approach is built on solid, universal principles, it offers valuable lessons for all artists.

Designing a Dreamscape

Rachko's paintings usually start with a group of characters

drawn from her collection of brightly colored Mexican papier-mâché creatures and masks. She chooses a group of figures then arranges them in one of the rooms of her home. Over a period of three or four weeks, she looks at these characters, searching for potential interactions between them. "If I look at them long enough, I begin to see personality traits," she says. "I come up with a minimal story about what's going on. I move the figures around and imagine what they're saying to each other."

As she develops her story line, Rachko also focuses on formal design considerations. "As I'm composing, I look for something that I think is exciting," she says. "I tend to use lots of angles and lots of patterns."

In *Reality the Frogs Were Men* (at right) clearly demonstrates Rachko's use of both angles and line as design devices. For example, notice how the penguin's beak, the fishing poles and lines, and even the gaze of the fish in the background conspire to lead the viewer's eye to the solitary frog seated on the sink divider. To arrive at the unusual viewpoints that often characterize her work, Rachko looks at her setup from as many angles as possible, often standing on a chair or small stepladder to find the look she wants. "For example, in *At First He Vehemently Denied the Accusation*, the subject had

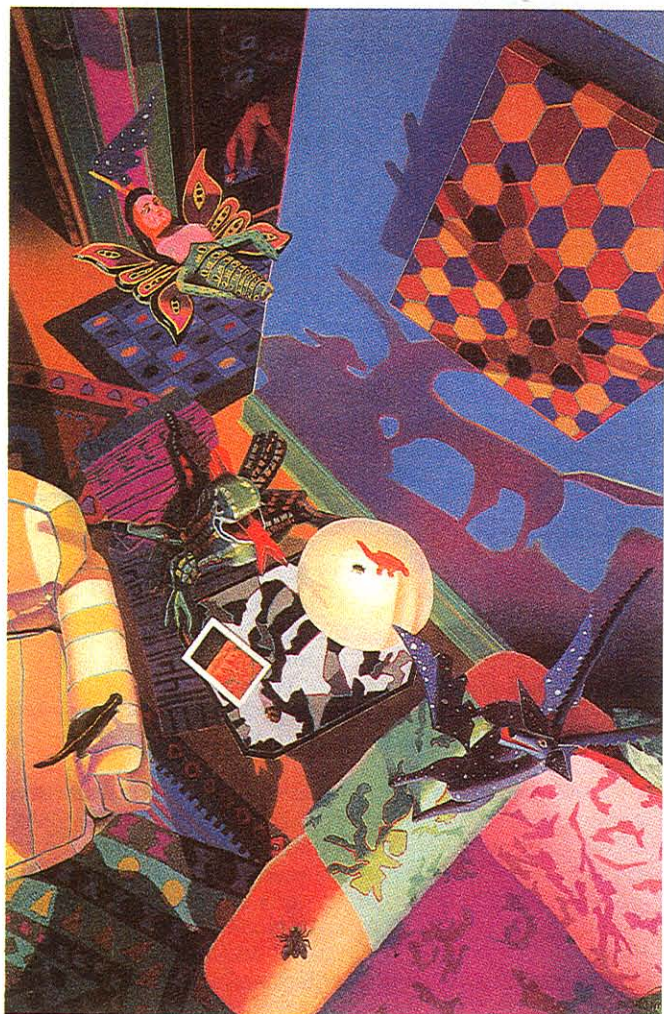
Building Fantasy on Solid Skills

While Rachko's bright colors and unusual subject matter may initially steal your attention, it's her strong drawing skills that give these pastel pieces their punch. As you look at *In Reality the Frogs Were Men* (58x38), for example, notice how clearly Rachko rendered all of the elements—the fantasy characters, the fruit, the knives, the cup, the sponges and even the faucet—and how these elements work together to give the scene a critical hint of credibility.

been surprised in the act, so I wanted to be looking into his face," she says.

Perspective With a Twist

The final design step involves Rachko's personalized handling of perspective. After studying the classical approach, she deemed it too static for her work. So she began to subtly slant the space in her paintings. "I pick a point as my perfect vertical," she says. "Then as you go out to the right and the left, the verticals slant. It has sort of an unsettling quality to it, because you're not on very firm ground at any particular place



Storming the Heights

To get the most from her setups, Rachko looks at them from as many angles as possible. To get radical viewpoints for pieces like *Will Wonders Never Cease* (58x38), she often views her characters from a stepladder, then has them photographed using a tripod that adjusts to a height of about 8 feet. But she doesn't reproduce these photos literally—her interior colors, for example, come from her imagination. Her home is actually done in neutral tones.





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Laying On the Color

As long as three months and as many as 25 or 30 layers of pastel often lie between Barbara Rachko's initial charcoal sketch and a finished painting. These 12 steps demonstrate a portion of this evolutionary process at work in *He Didn't Take Seriously the Threat From Below* (see the finished piece at right).

Rachko's multilayered approach begins with her working surface, *Ersta* extra-fine, No. 500-grit sandpaper. "My technique evolved around this paper," Rachko says. "It has a very fine tooth, but it's surprising how much pastel it holds." The other components of her approach are her pastels—ranging from medium-hard Rembrandts to soft, creamy Schminke and Sennelier sticks—and her method of stroking on color and blending it with her fingers. She does occasionally brush away color, particularly if an area begins to get waxy. But her knowledge of the working characteristics of various pastels minimizes the need for this. "I don't have to do it very often," she says.



Getting the Colors Right

Rachko estimates that the steps at left represent about half of the color layers used in *He Didn't Take Seriously the Threat From Below* (58x38). To finish the piece, she continued her process of refining and modifying various elements.

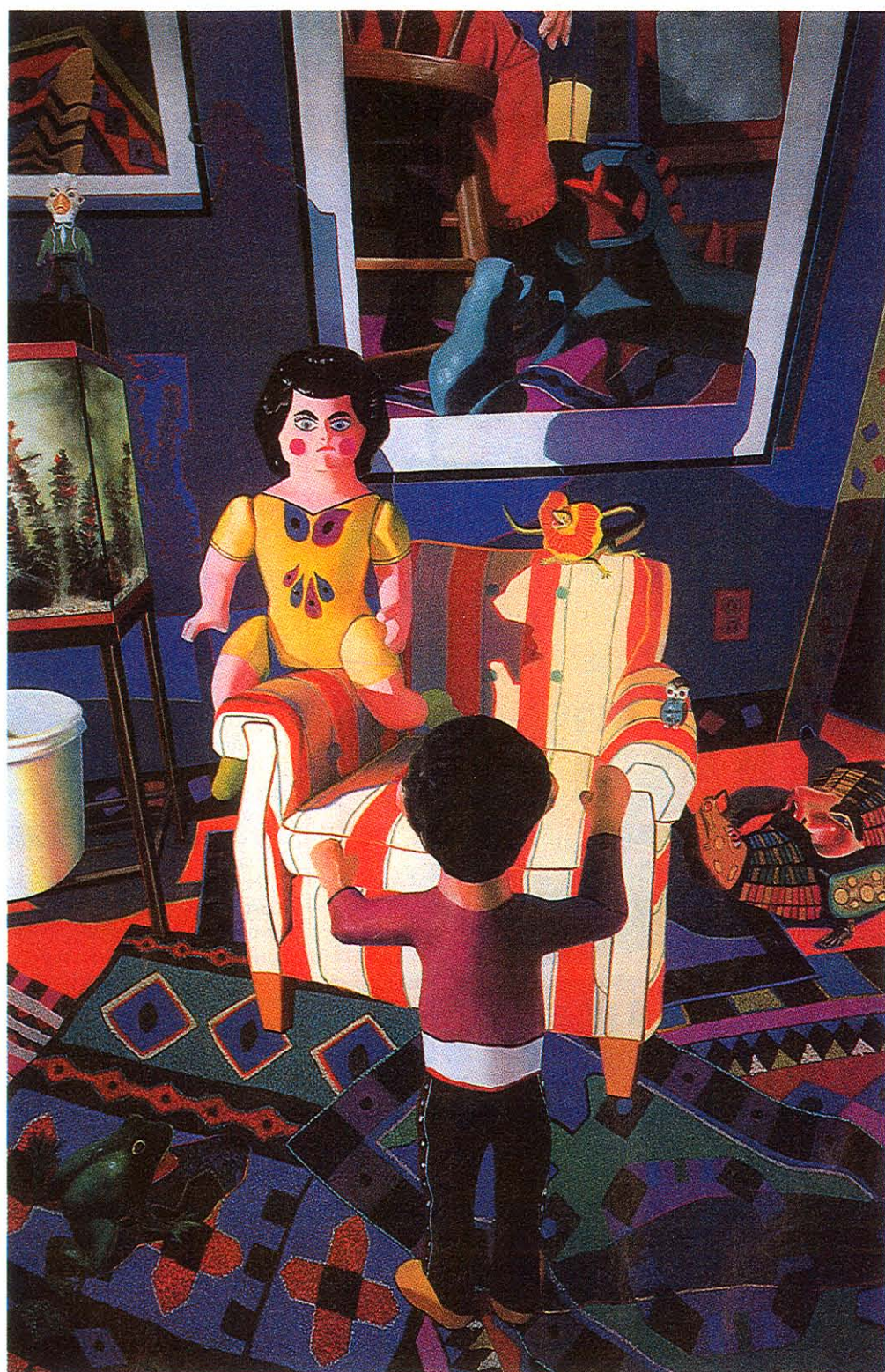
in my pieces. I think the subject matter and everything in my work lends itself to having things askew."

This slanting technique can be seen to some degree in virtually all of the paintings in this series. For instance, in *At First He Vehemently Denied the Accusation*, notice how the picture frames, the fish tank, the carpets and even the fishing line hanging above the central character's head slant away from the vertical center of the painting, contributing to the overall sinister mood of the piece.

Capturing the Image

After composing her setup, Rachko creates a reference photograph. With a photographic assistant who operates a 4x5 view camera, she sets up her lighting, chooses the viewpoint and checks everything in the camera's viewfinder. After as many as 10 Polaroid test shots to settle on lighting, contrast and depth of field, she has two 4x5 color negatives made and chooses one of them to serve as the model for her painting. This photo serves only as a stepping-off point, however. "As time goes on, I find myself looking at the photos less, relying more on my imagination, and trying to avoid being literal," she says.

Next, Rachko makes a painting-size compositional sketch on charcoal paper. This is no small task—the size of her finished works, usually 58x38, dictates that she must tape several sheets of charcoal paper together before beginning to draw. "My sketch lets me see if the composition works in terms of the basic shapes and the lights and darks," she says. "It usually points out any problem areas." This early sketch also lets Rachko compensate for the differences in format between her



And the Walls Came Down

Rachko's use of slanted perspective depends on the mood she's trying to create. To add to the overall feeling of *His Sudden Return Was Not Entirely Welcome* (58x38), she slanted the frames of the pictures and door so that the wall appears to loom out over the unwelcome male subject, accentuating the emotion projected by the female figure.

54 The Artist's Magazine

elongated painting surfaces and her reference photos.

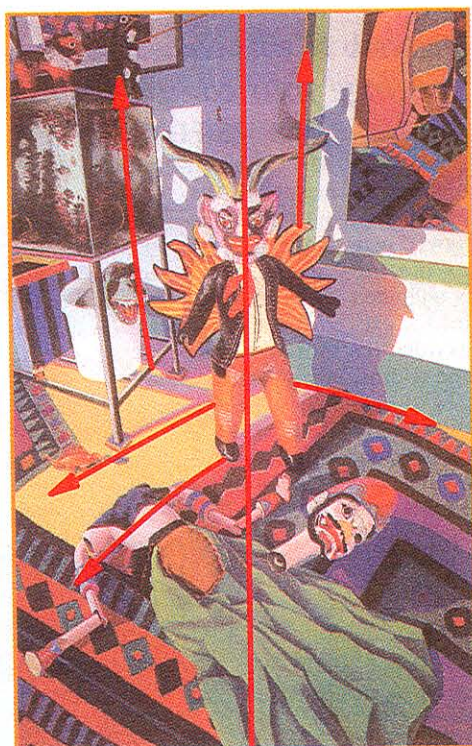
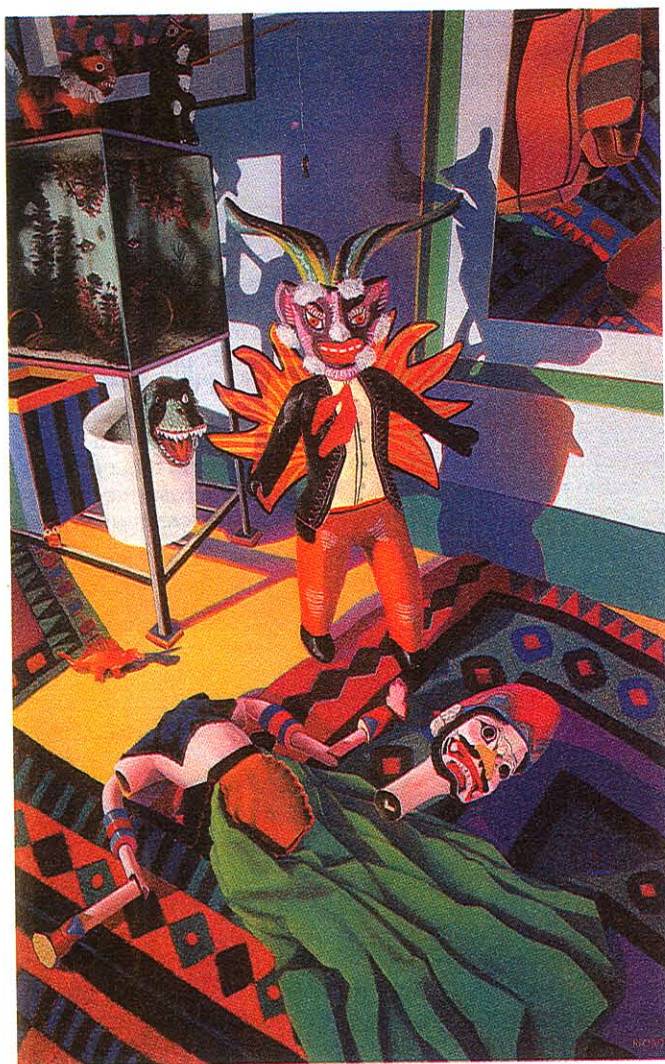
Once she's satisfied with the preliminary sketch, Rachko creates a more refined charcoal outline on her sandpaper painting surface. "To keep the charcoal from mixing with my colors, I erase this sketch before adding pastel, leaving just enough of the outline to let me see the major shapes," she says.

Laying on the Color

Next, Rachko blocks in her first layer of color, a process that takes about a day. "I tend to start in the middle of the piece," she says. "Then, I put in shadows to establish their relationships to the figures. From there, I begin to build up detail. In the first few days I make my major creative decisions that influence the rest of the painting. After about a week, I settle into the basic composition, and I just keep refining, constantly checking the relationships of shapes and colors.

Although the scenes are set in her home, Rachko's interior colors spawn from her imagination. "As the piece evolves, the colors are always changing," she says. "For example, I may put a color in the floor that influences everything else. I'm constantly adjusting and searching for the best, strongest and most exciting color I can find. (I have several thousand pastels to choose from.) I experiment. I play with complements a lot—in *At First He Vehemently Denied the Accusation* (at right), for instance, I set the main character's orange wings and trousers against deep blue shadows on the wall."

This search for the perfect color may lead Rachko to build up 25 to 30 layers of pastel in certain areas of the painting. "Some areas I get pretty quickly," she says. "These may have



A Fresh Perspective

To create the feeling that the viewer is on unstable ground, Rachko often identifies a vertical line near the center of a painting, then slants the vertical lines as she moves out from that point. In *At First He Vehemently Denied the Accusation* (58x38), for instance, the picture frames, the fish tank, the fishing line above the subject's head and carpets defining the floor all slant away from the center. Even the subject is positioned so that he appears to be standing on a skewed floor.


only five layers of pastel. But the more realistic areas take more applications because I'm adding more details. For example, figures usually take more layers than backgrounds."

No matter how many layers she adds, however, Rachko never uses fixatives. "My paintings have a velvety quality, a real soft feel," she says. "Spraying over the pastel with fixative would destroy that. Instead, I blend the layers with my fingers, pushing the pastel into the paper. I've never had any problem with pigment flaking off. I do have to be careful when I ship my work, however. I pay extra to have it shipped flat so that the color won't shake off."

Rachko calls a given piece complete when she reaches "a point where it's as good as I

think I can do it. I know my abilities and I know what the pastel can do. I push the pastel—and myself—as far as I can."

Skills at Work

Rachko's approach clearly demonstrates the rewards to be had from mixing solid skills with imagination. The message here is simple: Hone your drawing and design skills, but don't stop there. No matter what your style, remember that these skills are only tools to do the bidding of your creativity. So let go. Explore your own ideas. Look at your work from different viewpoints. Play with the angles, and most of all, imagine. Like Rachko, you may find that a whole new world full of possibilities is as close as your living room. 

About the Artist

"I keep a note taped to the wall next to my easel," Barbara Rachko says. "It reads 'Give it all you've got and keep going.'"

Before becoming a full-time artist eight years ago, Rachko served as an officer in the United States Navy. While working at the Pentagon, she began searching for a diversion and discovered the Art League School in Alexandria, Virginia. She began taking drawing classes, and soon after resigned her commission to dedicate herself to a career in art. Since then, her work has appeared in numerous exhibitions, and can be found in public, corporate and private collections. Rachko divides her time between Alexandria and New York City. She's represented by several galleries around the United States, including Brewster Arts and the Art Alliance (both in New York City).

