

Susan Murphy



Susan Murphy graduated from Syracuse University with degrees in biology and anthropology. She subsequently worked for a biological research lab and taught science in a middle school. Murphy first became interested in watercolor 12 years ago when she wanted to illustrate her own children's book. She studied privately with Barbara Nechis and enrolled in courses taught by William Maxwell at the College of New Rochelle, New York. Since moving with her family to the Washington, DC, area, Murphy has studied with Charles Reid, Frank Webb, and Al Brouillette.

Murphy's paintings have been included in competitive exhibitions organized by the Southern Watercolor Society, the Butler Art Institute, the Midwest Watercolor Society, and the American Watercolor Society. She has won gold medals from both the Baltimore Watercolor Society and the Catharine Lorillard Wolfe Art Club.

Galleries representing the artist include the Capricorn Gallery, Bethesda, Maryland; Miriam Perlman, Inc., Chicago, Illinois; and the Purnell Art Company, Baltimore, Maryland.

I HAD BEEN painting in watercolor full time for two years when my first son was born. Before his birth, I naively thought I had enough time for a baby and an art career. After his birth, I wondered how I would manage the art career at all! Surprisingly enough, I found it was manageable and, in fact, I would have to say my painting has improved because of my son, Paul, and his brother, Ben, who followed 20 months later. Paul is now three, and I would like to share some of the strategies I learned for maintaining an art career and raising small children at the same time—without handing them over to full-time day care.

Obviously, some concessions have to be made. I find it almost impossible to paint with two mischievous children constantly in the house. I have found a day-care sitter living very close by who takes them four to five mornings a week. During this time, I try to concentrate exclusively on painting and don't allow myself to be distracted by anything that can be done later when the kids are with me; phone calls, paperwork, and the like can erode precious hours, if I am not careful. Excursions to art exhibitions, trips to the art supply store, or photograph sessions to obtain reference material—all those can be done with children in tow. They enjoy being with me, and we save on the expense of the sitter.

I do not apologize for the use of photographs I take myself as reference material. With small children, I do not have the luxury of being able to paint outdoors whenever the weather happens to be favorable. All my painting has to be done very efficiently between 9 A.M. and 12 noon, in my studio. I do believe firmly that the photos you use should be your own and should be of subjects with which you are personally acquainted.

This brings me to a discussion of subject matter! One fact that has helped my art career grow is that several years ago I focused on a certain subject and style and have pretty much stuck with them. With an extremely limited amount of painting time, I cannot afford to spread myself too thin. Therefore, I've concentrated on producing a body of work that I can place in good galleries and exhibit in solo exhibitions. In developing a career, it is best to be identified with one style or subject and to have one's work evolve slowly. An artist can diverge occasionally from his or her chosen theme in order to continue to grow, or for variety and fun, or to fill another marketing need. But the artist shouldn't display these other paintings with his or her main body of work.

When my children were born, my work took a major step in a more professional direction. I no longer had the time to participate in art festivals where the artist interacts directly with his or her public. I think, though, this had a positive effect. Although festivals are a good way to get started, they ultimately stifle the artist's creativity, because he or she is influenced by what the public likes and buys. Now I paint mainly to satisfy my own sense of aesthetics. Luckily, I have found an

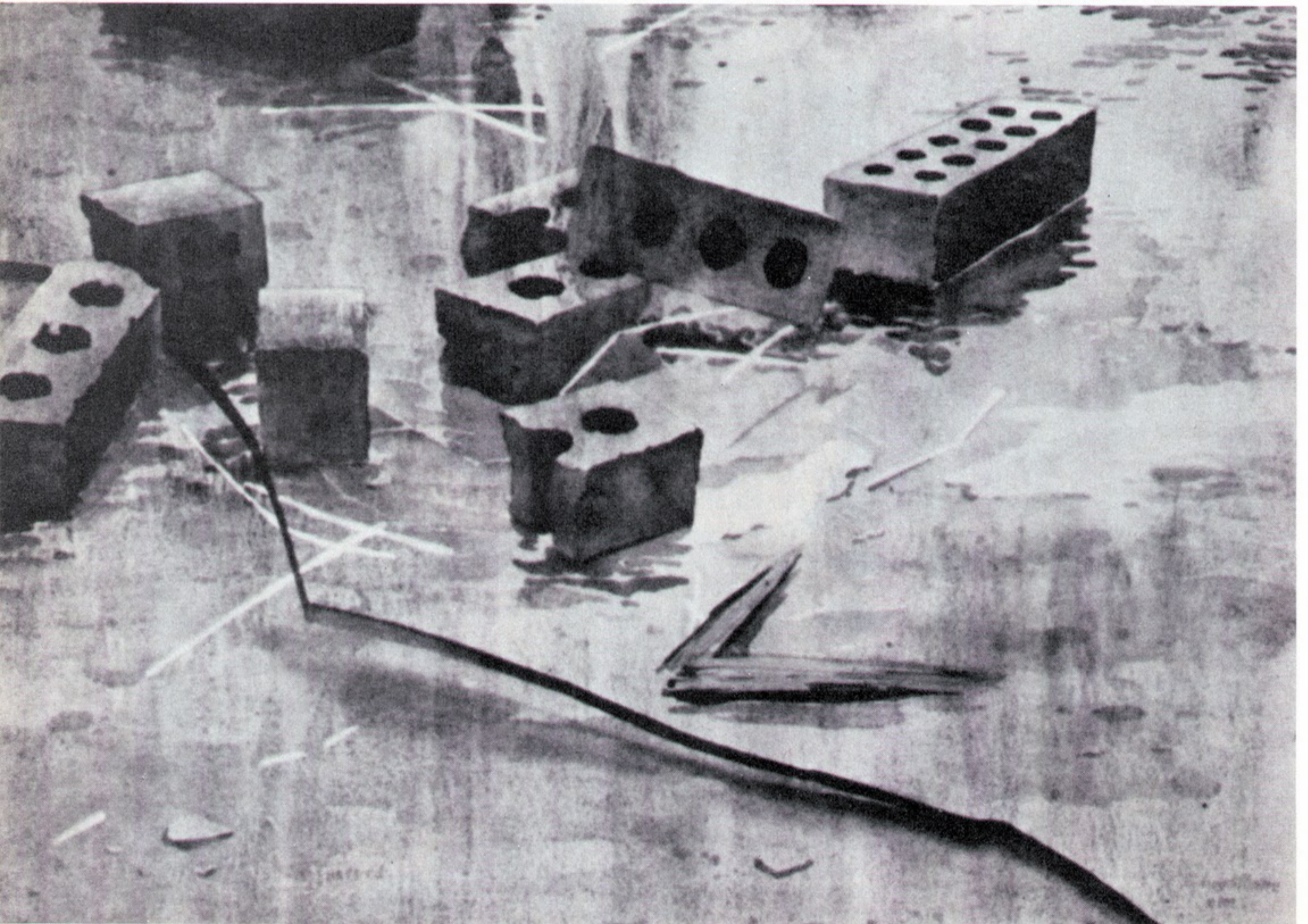
Opposite page: *Sunkissed*, 1983, 22 x 15. Collection Mr. and Mrs. John O'Brien. This painting won the Abstract Award in the 1983 Baltimore Watercolor Society's Mid-Atlantic Regional. It illustrates the importance of overall abstract design in an otherwise realistic painting.

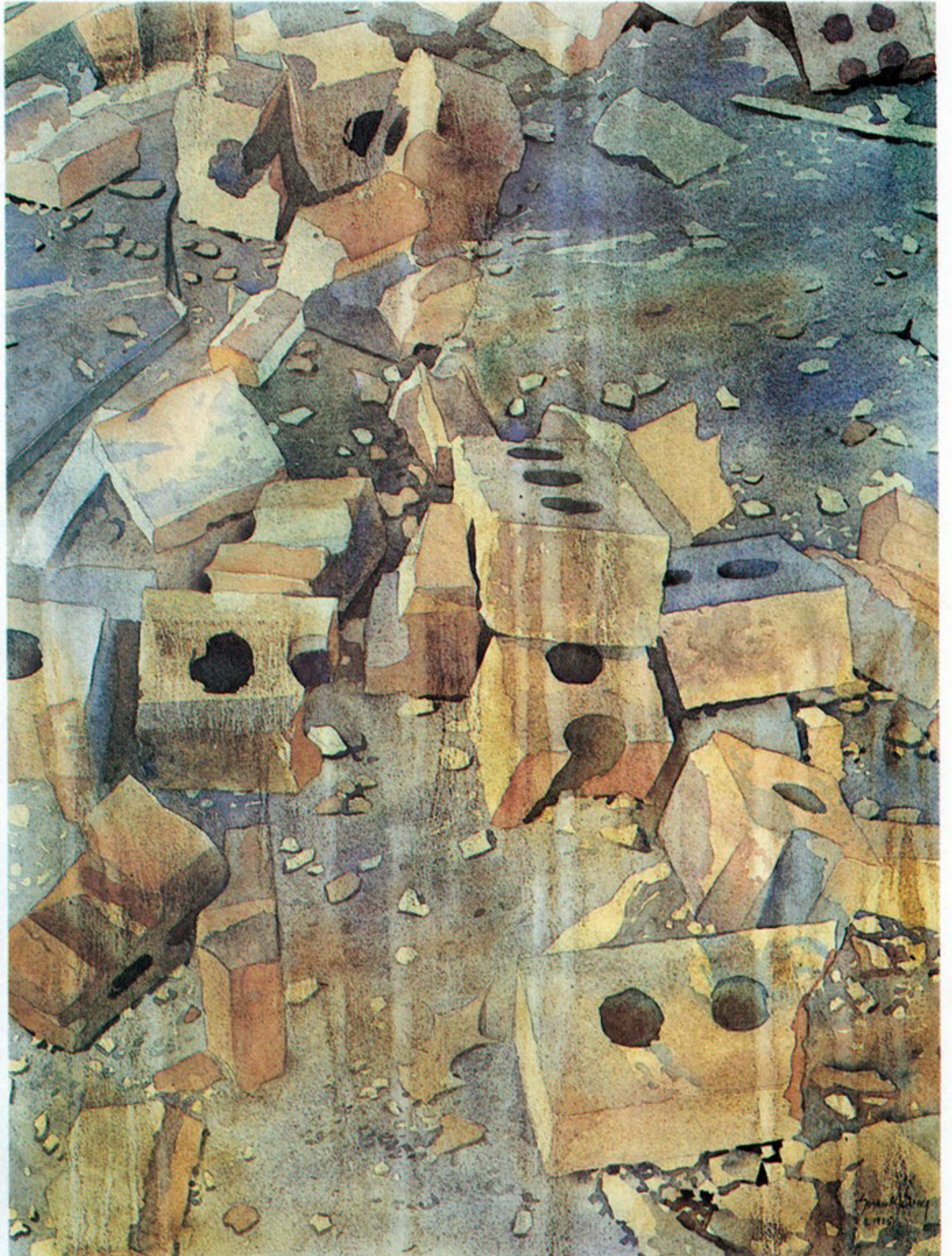
excellent gallery that enjoys marketing the kind of unusual subject matter illustrated on these pages.

I have resigned myself to the fact that you cannot expect to make a profit on your artwork while your children are young. Their day-care expenses will eat up most of your earnings. Look on this period as a time to develop a personal painting style that will help your reputation grow. Try to accumulate credentials for a good professional résumé—through juried shows and the occasional one- or two-person shows at respectable locations—and try to become affiliated with a good art gallery that carries original and creative work. You will not be able to produce very much, so you must make every painting count. Tell yourself that every new painting will be better than the last one. Concentrate very hard on each painting so you don't repeat past mistakes. Stop for a period of evaluation before each new phase of the painting. Make notes on what works and what doesn't, and review your notes periodically. And, most important of all, be true to yourself. Paint only what you really want to paint so your heart will be in it. Otherwise, you will produce mediocre work.

Rainy Day, 1984, 22 x 30. Collection Mr. and Mrs. Harvey Maisel. This is one of my favorite recent paintings because of the somewhat offbeat composition with the black metal band coming down through the picture. I used a combination of umber pigments to create a granulated background wash, and the effect is reminiscent of an old-fashioned sepia-toned photograph.

If you really wish to develop a reputation as an artist, it is important to be original in your choice of imagery—whether realistic or abstract (even a nonobjective painting can be trite). You don't necessarily have to have anything profound to say, but a true artist should be, to some degree, original. I am fortunate that very few artists, at least in my area, have thought of construction rubble as being feasible subject matter.



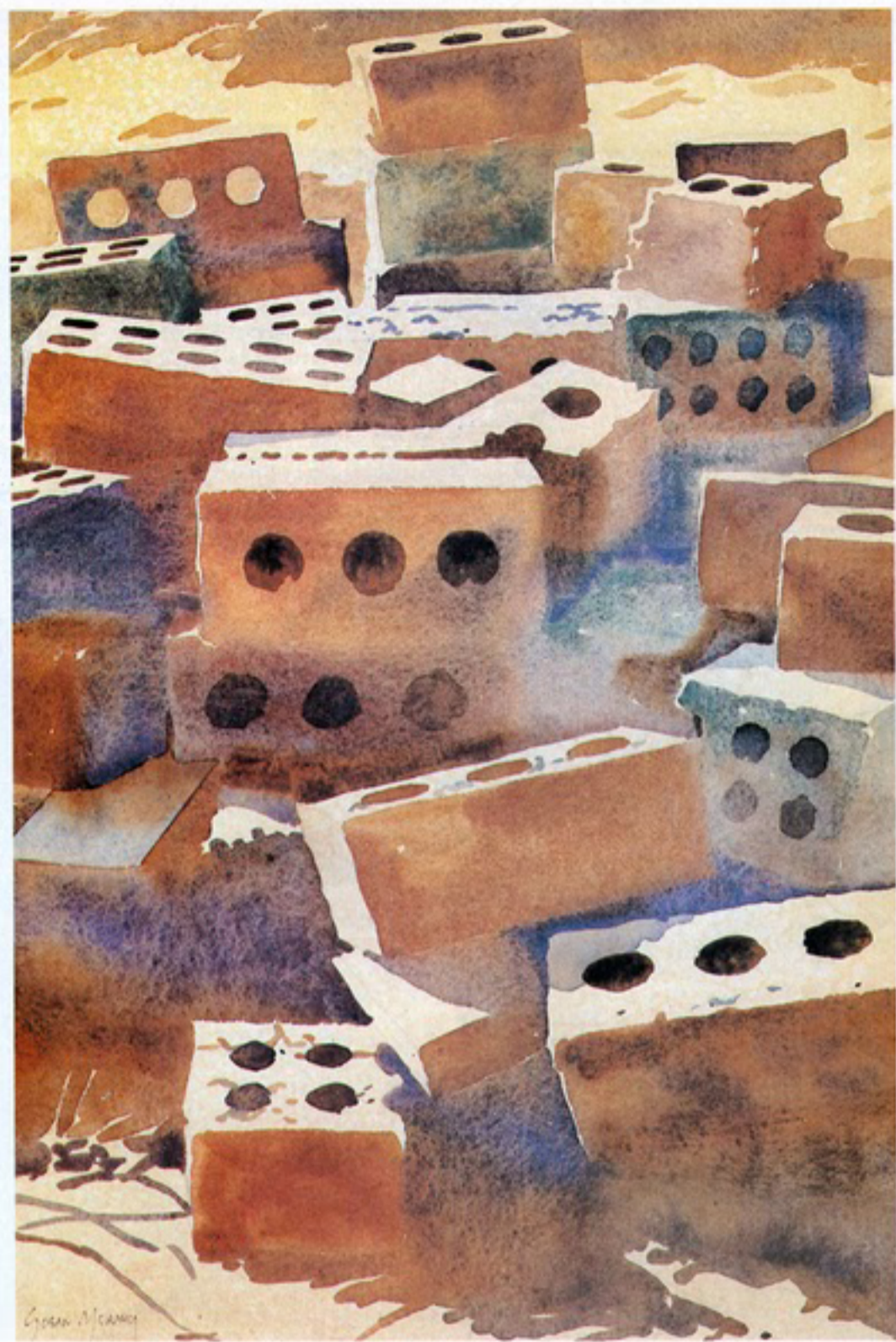


Progressive stages of *Construction Abstraction*, 1985, 30 x 22. Courtesy Capricorn Galleries, Bethesda, Maryland. The two photographs I took while working on this painting demonstrate how I establish a textured background before identifying the objects in a picture. The first stage shows the dark contour lines of the bricks that I drew using a grid for a guide. I then painted washes of burnt umber, cobalt green, Davy's gray, Indian red, and manganese blue across the top of the paper, which had been soaked with water. I let those washes run down the paper, forming ridges as they moved, and allowed the paper to dry completely. The second illustration shows how I began to define the medium values with a No. 8 kolinsky sable brush, making an effort to blend the shadow areas from one brick into another. The larger illustration of the completed painting demonstrates how I pulled the painting together with adjustments in certain areas and detailing in others. For instance, small shapes were penciled on the ground and a grayish wash was painted around them to give the appearance of shadow.

I arrived at painting rubble in a very natural way. We live in a new housing development, and I have always been able to find interesting rubble right up the street. I enjoy the subject because it allows me to use a variety of textures, colors, and form, all within a certain geometrical motif; I can generate images that have an overall abstract impact. The sunlight and shadow on these shapes can be beautiful, as can the effect of water on surfaces on a rainy day. I began by photographing these materials, and then I produced a few paintings. I found them exciting to paint and did more and more paintings. Gradually, through several stages, a series evolved. After completing nearly 40 paintings, the subject still has continuing possibilities for me. The following is a brief description of how I approach a typical "rubble" painting.

First, I select the main photo from which I want to work and any corresponding photos that I may use to create a composite. I study the photos for about an hour to decide how to treat the subject: how the composition might be improved and simplified, how the image might be cropped, what size sheet I will use, what colors will be emphasized, and what my method of attack will be (mainly whether to mask any complicated whites or paint around them, which I prefer, and whether to do a background wash). Next, I mount the photo behind a mat board

Continued on page 81



MARCH 1986 53

MURPHY
Continued from page 55

window, with the cropped portion showing, and I draw a 16-square grid on the photo with a grease pencil. Using a sheet of 300-pound d'Arches paper proportioned equally to my cropped photo, I draw the same type of grid on the paper lightly in pencil. Then I carefully do a contour drawing, showing the main edges that will be painted. It is important with geometrical shapes to get the perspective on each block correct, which is why I bother with the grid. If the entire sheet is to be given a background wash, the drawing should be made fairly dark.

Unless I want bright sunlight in the picture, I usually create a textured background to unify the composition and add interest. I have discovered an excellent way to get an interesting textural effect. Using a large flat brush, I paint the surface with fresh raw or burnt umber, with other colors mixed in for variety, then tilt the paper vertically. The umber will granulate and form beautiful rivulets as the excess water runs down the paper. I have used this rivulet effect a great deal in my rubble paintings and find that it creates a fascinating textured background. When you paint shapes on top of it with more transparent pigments, the rivulets show through nicely.

Now for the hard part: painting the shapes. Usually proceeding from top to bottom on a slightly tilted board, I paint the medium values with a No. 8 round sable brush, trying to tie them together as I move from one shape to another. The shadow side of one shape blends into the shadow of another, or into the background; i.e., the edges are somewhat lost. It is much more effective not to delineate all the edges but rather to rely on a "closure" effect whereby a suggestion of some edges causes the viewer to close the remaining edges with his or her eyes.

Continued on page 90

MURPHY
Continued from page 81

As I paint the medium values, I try to incorporate different colors for variety, particularly some of the more opaque colors such as cobalt green, manganese blue, and Indian red. Bricks are not a delicate subject; I use the more opaque colors to convey a feeling of solidity and heaviness. Other pigments I employ most frequently are burnt sienna, Davy's gray, cadmium orange, cadmium red, yellow ochre, Prussian blue, ultramarine blue, and dioxane purple, most of which are from Winsor & Newton.

Once the medium values are well under way, I start to add a few darks. The holes in the bricks add a wonderful contrast and liven up the picture considerably. I love the idea of all the square bricks with their round holes; the opportunity for repeating a motif is inherent in the subject. Usually, no background has been added yet except for the initial wash. Backgrounds are tricky and can ruin an otherwise good painting. Ordinarily, the background should play a secondary role. In my rubble paintings, the background is generally a rendering of dirt with pebbles or straw. I pencil in these little shapes and paint around them with a thin, variegated wash. Finishing touches are important and usually include adding more dark accents, more texture, and painting shadows.

I let the painting sit for a few days so I can decide whether it is finished. I then mat, photograph, and frame it, and put it on the wall to keep it out of harm's way. I am often surprised at how much I am able to accomplish in spite of the children. Needless to say, it is extremely frustrating at times, but with plenty of perseverance, an artist can maintain an art career and raise small children at the same time. •