

What underlies the radiant light of Nava Grunfeld's watercolors? A story of survival through art.



primary colors

THE *NATURE MORTE* HAS NOTHING to do with Nava Grunfeld's ecstatic still lifes, where time is blissfully suspended. The still life tradition—to present abundance at the moment before it decays—has no place here. Like Matisse and Vuillard, who loved patterns, Grunfeld plays with decorative motifs derived from Turkish tiles, African

BY MAUREEN BLOOMFIELD

and French textiles, Oaxaca embroidery and Talavera pottery she finds in her travels. Like another artist she admires, Bonnard, she employs a bird's eye view; seen from above, all the elements of a still life are flat and schematic. Working in watercolor or acrylic, she lets the light emanate from the paper, and her choice of a restricted palette simplifies forms. As a result, red, blue and yellow become shapes of light.

This commitment to the primacy of light was hard-won. Her name translates to "lovely green field," but nothing about her early life was as uncomplicated as that phrase would imply. She was born in Sweden to Eastern European parents who had been incarcerated at Auschwitz. When she was 3 years old, her parents separated; mother and daughter moved to Israel. She and her father were reunited when she was 23, when she found out that both he and his brother survived the concentration camps because of their talents as artists. Her father, a gold-

Rainier Cherries (acrylic, 30x40)

Materials

Paper: Arches 300-lb rough paper

Brushes: Daniel Smith autograph series, kolinsky sable No. 12

Favorite underpainting colors: Winsor & Newton (WN), Daniel Smith (DS) transparent yellow (WN), permanent rose (WN), cobalt blue (WN)

Other favorites: cobalt teal blue (DS), quinacridone coral (DS), ultramarine blue (DS), Hansa yellow dark (DS), manganese blue hue (DS), viridian green (DS)

pre-primed canvas

Acrylics: Golden-transparent colors

smith, fashioned jewelry out of metals gleaned from the dead. Her uncle, Benny Grunfeld, author of an illustrated memoir, *A Teenager in Hitler's Death Camps* (Benbella Books, 2007) drew portraits of Nazi troops that his captors sent home as greeting cards.

By the time she and her father met again in Stockholm, she was an art student; her father, she discovered, was also an artist, working in oil pastel.

Connecting through Art

“As an art student, you go through many phases, and I was very attracted to the works of Egon Schiele and Gustav Klimt,” Grunfeld remembers. “I’d been hinting to my husband that I wanted this fancy book on Klimt for my birthday. When I was visiting my father in Sweden—we had to have a translator for even the simplest conversation—I’d never mentioned who my favorite artists were. My birthday came, and my husband gave me the book on Klimt. A few days later the same book arrived, as a gift from my father. Hanukkah was a few months later, and my father sent me a book on Egon Schiele.”

Her Romanian father spoke Swedish and Hungarian; he called her Suzie, her original

name. “We were culturally and geographically separated, and we never had a traditional father-daughter relationship,” she says. “The way my father and I connected was through art.”

Reflecting his wartime experiences, her father’s paintings were “horrific with screaming faces” that are difficult for her to look at even now.” She explains, “One is a self-portrait entitled *The Singer*, a colored pencil drawing that shows his head thrown back with guts seeming to burst out of his open mouth and swirl around him—like a bloody Vincent van Gogh.” Toward the end of his life, her father evinced a calmer state of mind by painting stylized figures, often Hassidic musicians reminiscent of Chagall’s. Her father’s experiences led him to a graver expression, while Grunfeld’s work celebrates the secular and spiritual sensation of plenty, the opposite of deprivation: flowers and fruits, an abundance of light, the comfort of pattern. Nonetheless, Grunfeld observes, “someone pointed out to me that my father and I were painting with the same colors.”

Bold Color

Though shapes of color are what she works with now, Grunfeld’s early works, like that of most young artists, were linear, with little or no color. Drawing from the figure was her focus: “I spent most of my time at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts drawing from

life, learning anatomy, developing a sensual line and learning how to see. My language at the time was the language of line, and I found the transition to painting—seeing the form in planes and in colors—challenging.” Abruptly she had to stop art and start working full time, first as a graphic designer and later as an advertising creative director. For years she didn’t pick up a brush. “When I was able to start painting again,” she says, “I just wanted to paint what I was attracted to: strong color.”

But in what medium? After the 10-year hiatus, she turned to watercolor, in part because she didn’t have a separate studio. “I couldn’t live with the oil fumes—they gave me headaches. Painting on paper seemed natural because I loved drawing on paper so much. I didn’t have models to work from, so I set up still lifes—fruit, flowers and everyday objects. I tried to figure out how to achieve a saturated luminosity in watercolor—which took me years.”

The English topographical watercolor tradition—think of Sandby and Turner—is characterized by what is essentially a line drawing tinted with color. Those subtle effects didn’t appeal to Grunfeld. Having grown up on the Mediterranean as opposed to the Thames, she liked strong contrasts. The color she was attracted to

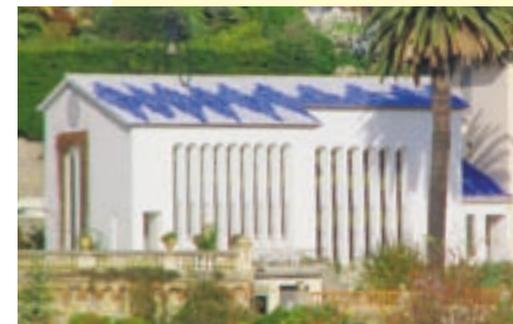
Chapel at Vence

Matisse created dazzling work throughout his life, but it wasn’t until his last 14 years, when he was well past 70, that his work became transcendent. Confined to a wheelchair, working with paper and gouache, he cut out shapes of acanthus leaves and anemones, seaweed and coral, spirals and torsos for *gouaches découpés*. When he was 77 he embarked on a new project at the urging of Sister Jacques Marie, who had, as Monique Bourgeois, answered his ad “for a young and pretty night nurse” years before. Mme. Bourgeois took care of him as he recovered from an operation for cancer, modeled for him, and finally helped him by moving around and pinning his cutouts to the studio walls.

When Mme. Bourgeois left Matisse’s employ, she entered the Dominican convent as a novice, taking the name Sister Jacques Marie. As a nun, she asked him to work with an architect to create the interior design of Chapelle du Rosaire de Vence in southeastern France. For the last seven years of his life, Matisse created designs for the windows and doors, the murals and the priest’s vestments. Matisse described his work at Vence as his life’s greatest achievement. The designs tell the Christian story of creation, from the tree of life to the crucifixion, but they transform representational iconography. Graphic, simple and bright,

Matisse’s designs attest to what is acknowledged by all faiths: the spiritual nature of light.

For Further Reading
Henri Matisse: The Vence Chapel: The Archive of a Creation by Father Alain Couturier and Louis-Bertrand Rays-guier (Skira, 1999)



Primary Layers of Color



1. I first figure out the composition and do a detailed drawing on a sheet of Arches 300-lb rough paper. I then apply washes of transparent yellow to the parts of the painting that will be bright and warm. I let the first wash dry overnight; the next day I deepen the color with another glaze.



2. I apply frisket only on the tiniest areas I want to remain white. In the larger areas, I make a note to myself with a “W” to remind me to save the white. I start the blue underpainting, which includes different shades of blue and different degrees of color saturation.



3. I glaze permanent rose over the yellows that will become brown, in this case, on the centers of the sunflowers. The underpainting helps me see where the midrange darks and lightest areas are and to determine the cooler and warmer areas.



4. After the left side of the brain has taken care of the underpainting, I layer colors over others in some, though not in all, places, usually wet into wet, but allow each final layer to dry before I start again in *French Sunflowers* (watercolor, 30x40).



ABOVE: *Two Goldfish* (acrylic, 30x40)

RIGHT: *Five Mangoes* (watercolor, 30x40)



ABOVE: *Strawberries* (acrylic, 30x40)

was bold and bright. It wasn't until she visited Mexico that she realized she had been painting as if she were Latin. "On my first day in Mexico, I felt as though I'd been there before. I realized my face hurt—from smiling so much. **Underpainting in Yellow, Red, Blue** How then does she create such bold color in watercolor? She starts with an underpainting using each of the primary colors, letting each color dry between layers, a procedure that's akin to the offset printing process. Her favorite colors for the underpainting are transparent and non-staining: transparent yellow, permanent rose and cobalt blue.

As for her brushes, she maintains that "no one needs more than two brushes as long as they are of the highest quality." Her favorites are Daniel Smith autograph series, kolinsky sable, Number 12 and a big French squirrel mop (the bigger, the better for large washes). "Both are expensive," she says, "but I would tell a beginner just to buy the best and biggest you can afford." She stresses the importance of all the materials. "Watercolor, more than any other medium, requires the best quality," she says, "because the light comes first from the paper." Grunfeld uses Arches 300-lb rough paper and applies frisket sparingly, "only for little dots like the highlight on an orange." She saves the white of the paper (for the depiction of eggs, for instance) by making notations in pencil on the drawing, "W" for white.

She works on a number of paintings at once—applying, for example, the underpainting layers on several at a time. "My studio floor is covered with paintings drying—in various stages of completion. My dog Topper, my constant companion in the studio, was trained to tip toe between paintings."

Having set in the darks and lights with

the underpainting, she then continues more loosely, wet into wet, applying a succession of transparent washes that will increase the saturation and depth of the color.

Pattern after Pattern

She starts by arranging the still life objects—fruits, bowls, textiles—on the floor, so she can look down on them and photograph different arrangements. She works from life or from photographs or from both. The bird's-eye view makes the objects appear schematic and abstract. Seeing the objects as pattern and variation on pattern is integral to her work.

In addition to the patterns that the bowls, fruit, flowers and the like create through repetition, she loves depicting the extrinsic patterns that ceramics and tapestries present. This love of pattern, she says, comes from her childhood: the influence of Arabic cultures, for instance, from Morocco, Turkey and Iran, that converged in Israel and, later in New York City, where Latin and African music were added to the mix. Finally, and maybe most profoundly, her love of pattern derives from Modernist painters like Bonnard and Matisse. "Matisse has had a very big influence," she says. "Last November we had planned to go to Vence to see the Chapelle du Rosaire. Because it was off-season, the chapel was closed. We did get to the Matisse Museum in Nice, where I recognized a chair he'd used in many paintings, and in Paris I stumbled on an old art supply store where I imagined him shopping." (See the sidebar on the Chapel at Vence, page xx.)

Two Goldfish (acrylic, 30x40, previous page ••) invokes Matisse in its gorgeous variations on blue and violet and in the subject, goldfish that

INFLUENCES

HENRI MATISSE (1869–1954) French painter whose work celebrated *luxe, calme et volupté*

PIERRE BONNARD (1867–1947) French painter famous for mottled color who often employed a bird's eye view

ÉDOUARD VUILLARD (1868–1940) with Bonnard, known for depicting intimate scenes from daily life

MARC CHAGALL (1887–1985) Russian born painter active in France; he derived his fairy tale imagery from Jewish folklore

EGON SCHIELE (1890–1918) Austrian painter and draftsman famous for his tortured line and graphic intensity

GUSTAV KLIMT (1862–1918) Austrian painter and graphic artist famous for female figures inlaid in richly patterned, decorative settings

J. M. W. TURNER (1755–1851) English painter known for his rhapsodic landscapes in oil and his meticulous landscapes in watercolor

PAUL SANDBY (1730–1809)

topographical watercolorist who was a founding member of the Royal Academy

web
EXTRA

To see more of Grunfeld's paintings, go to www.artistsnetwork.com/article/navagrunfeld

figured prominently in Matisse's early work. The blue notes in the water in the bowl are barely contained; the boundaries between elements are fluid. The mangoes on the plate, the fruit painted on the plate, the designs on the tablecloth—everything becomes part of a rapturously beautiful and moveable feast of color.

Trying Acrylic Acrylic is a new medium for her, but her approach to acrylic is not that different from her approach to watercolor. "I work with primarily transparent pigments, as I do in watercolor, and I layer colors as I do

with watercolor. The effect is very similar, but the process goes faster because the drying time is quicker since I don't have to let things dry overnight. I paint on canvas, which is easier to transport than paper, so I can paint bigger works. I use no medium, only water, as I do with watercolor."

She finds subjects by paying attention to what's around her: "Last year in Mexico, I saw the textile in *Five Mangos* (acrylic, 30x40, page 66) in the window of an Oaxacan shop. I'd had passed the shop every day; on the last day of my trip I brought various plates and fruits and, with the proprietor's permission, set up the still life on the sidewalk where the light was best."

If you look closely at Grunfeld's work, it's impossible not to delight in the recurrent patterns and vivid color; it's impossible not to feel an upsurge of joy. "At first I thought I should be painting my parents' story," she says, "but that did not come. I'm drawn to sensuality, color and creating beauty. I'm grateful that I'm here and can tell my story." Albert Einstein once observed, "There are two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle." Grunfeld is of the latter persuasion. ■

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Meet Nava Grunfeld

Nava Grunfeld has a bachelor of fine arts degree from the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia and a master's degree in art education from Smith College. Among the many publications that have featured her work are *Watercolor Artist*, *The Artist's Magazine* and *Splash 8: The Best in Watercolor* (North Light Books, 2006). Hasbro Games has produced a

Nava Grunfeld Artist Signature Series of jigsaw puzzles based on her paintings (available at Target stores). At present she is working on a book about her art. She lives in Northampton, Massachusetts but teaches workshops in Mexico every winter. To check the schedule, visit www.navagrunfeld.com.

RIGHT: **Earthly Delight** (watercolor, 22x30)

