WEAVING A LIKENESS

Discover how a basic technique can help breathe new life into your pastel portraits.

By Mario Robinson

I'm inspired by ordinary people set in everyday situations, and I want to use my pastels to capture these precious moments as realistically as possible. So I've developed my approach around the cross-hatching technique. This technique in itself isn't unusual; many pastel, pen and graphite artists use it, building up color or tone by applying successive layers of strokes, with each layer at an angle to the preceding one. However, two things set my approach apart: First, I use lots of layers—sometimes as many as 40—to get the look I'm after. Second, my strokes always run either vertically or horizontally. Using this simple approach, I literally weave realism into my work, as each successive layer of pastel mixes optically with the one before it instead of covering it. In the process, I'm able to create a wonderful feeling of depth. With patient application, my approach can do the same for you.

Reach for Emotion

I use realism to draw the viewer's eye, but I've found that it takes emotion to hold the viewer's attention. To get the necessary emotion in a painting, it helps if I'm in control of each element in the planning stages, down to the last detail. So I begin the process by buying the appropriate clothes for my model—clothes that suit my vision of what the finished piece should be. I also like to style the model's hair before I explain my objectives to him or her. I look for a relaxed pose with a slightly blank expression. When I'm satisfied with these elements, I take a number of reference photos, one of which will serve as the basis for the painting.

My next concern is setting a goal for the kind of painting I want. Composition, mood, lighting, color and texture all come into play as considerations at this point (I often decide to create a contemplative mood by pulling my color back to produce a muted scene). I then choose a reference photograph that suits all of my criteria. Using 1-inch drafting tape, I mark off the borders on my 300-lb. Arches watercolor paper. Then I'll use a graphite pencil to create a detailed drawing on my working surface. Once the drawing is in place, I spray it with fixative. This ensures that the drawing won't be disturbed, allows for any color removal later and preserves the tooth of the paper.
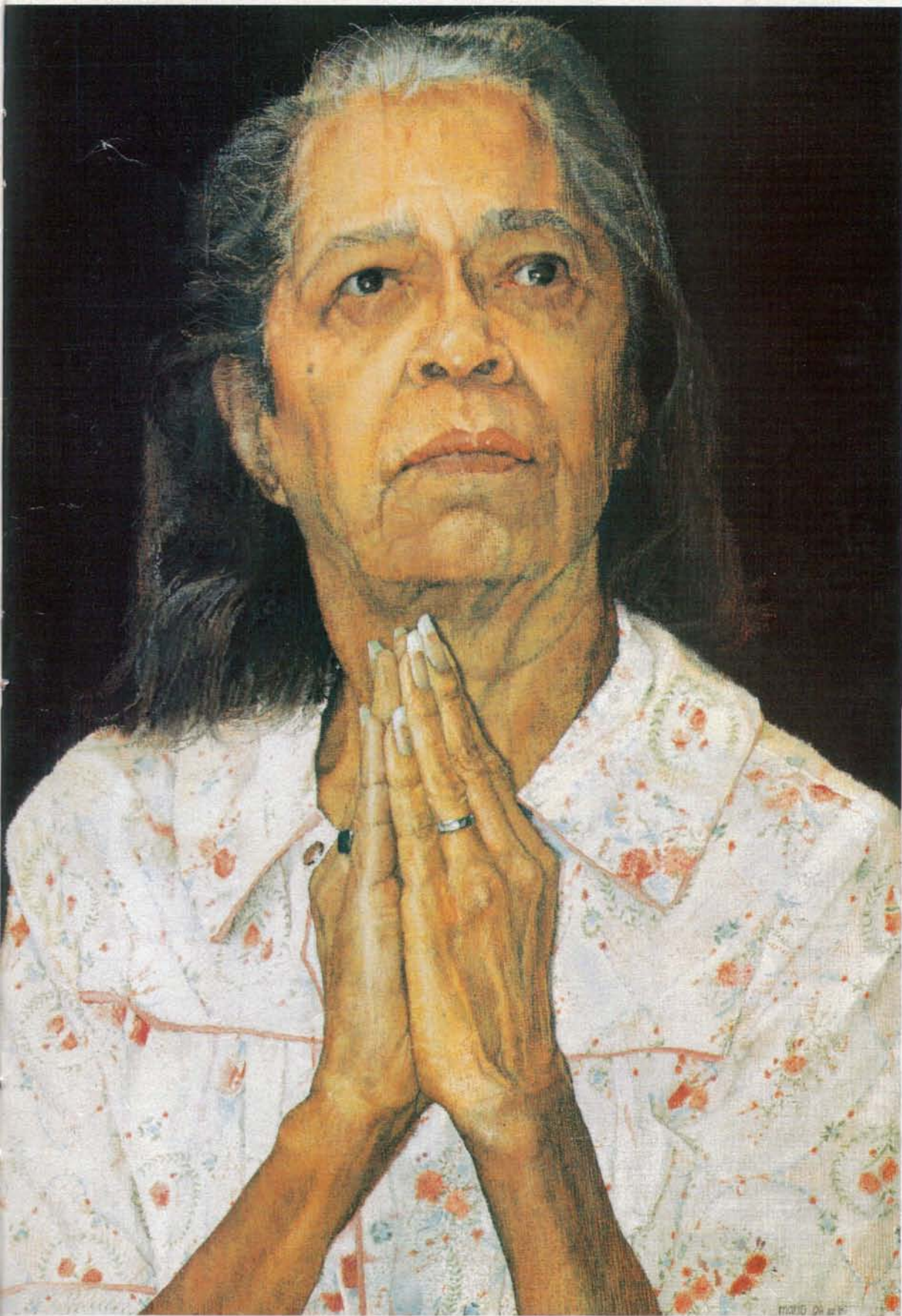
Face the Challenge

When I'm ready to paint, I cut my pastels into tiny pieces, each about the size of a Tic Tac breath
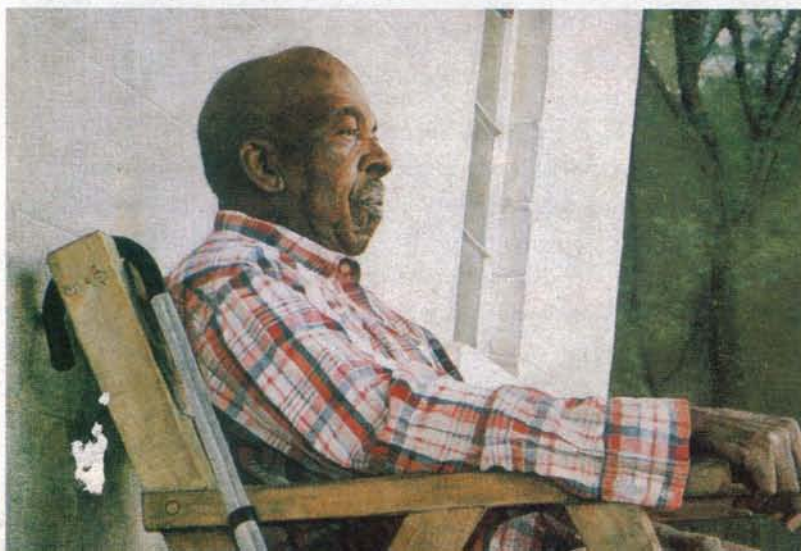
Directing Attention

In Oscar (pastel, 22x30), I wanted to draw the viewer's attention to the subject. I did this by building up massive layers of pastel in the foreground, while using thin layers of color to create an obscure background.

1 I develop my portraits in small sections. In this step, I'd already completed the area on the right in several sections, and I began to work on the area of the cheek and eye on the left. You can see how I used straight strokes of color to block in the skin tones.

2 Once the ground layer was in place, I went back over the section again and filled in the remaining holes. Then I moved on to softer pastels to increase the intensity of the colors and add touches of detail. I used warm colors on the upper layers of the underpainting to capture the sunlight falling on the model's face. I also began to lay in the underpainting for the forehead area.

5 Working in the same way as before, I completed the remaining sections of the face, using soft Sennelier pastels for the highlights. Then I moved on and began to crosshatch the neck and shoulders.

3 I continued the weaving process, and the face now began to take on a plaid appearance. Notice how I built texture with each layer.

4 I brought the forehead section to completion and began to drop in the minor details. This provides a road map for me to follow when it's time to add the final highlights.

6 I pulled the whole subject together with color, making sure the skin tones were even. I then detailed the fabric (inset) and added the background to complete *Kenyatta* (pastel, 15x14).
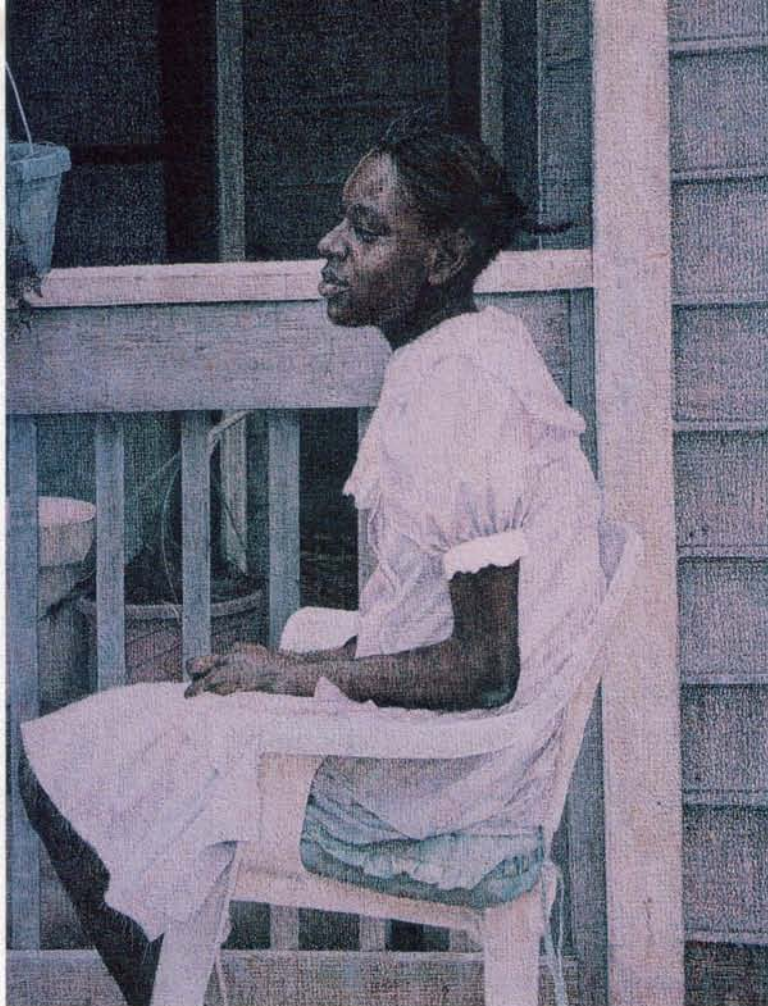
mint. When I began working with pastel, I discovered that this approach helps me maintain a linear effect—I'm not tempted to turn the pastel on its side and add a broad, shaded area. Using these small pieces of color, I proceed to develop the face of my subject in three phases before moving on to complete the rest of the piece. Because of the richness of pastel and the number of layers I use, I work with a very light touch throughout. I start by using the cross-hatching technique to block in the ground layer. I use medium-soft Rembrandt pastels in this stage and keep the colors dark. This allows me to add lighter colors later without distorting the skin tones. I work in small sections—roughly 2 inches by 2 inches—applying short strokes to cover the area.

Uniformity is key in my cross-hatching approach. It's important that the lines be cross-hatched as straight and close together as possible so that I can produce smooth looking areas, where necessary, or to leave more visible texture. By working in small sections, I ensure that my lines will be straight. When I finish an area, the colors look like a plaid, with gaps between the strokes of color. So I fill any remaining holes in this area by blending with my pastels. I then cover the unpainted areas and spray the section I've been working on with fixative. Generally, I use about six layers of color in this initial phase.

Next I move into a transitional phase. My goal at this point is to refine the skin tones and

I'm now ready to add the lightest lights to the skin tones. At this point, I usually reduce my palette to only two or three colors, and I switch to very soft Sennelier pastels. Depending on the skin tones, I usually use raw sienna with some yellow ochre, which works well for sunlit skin tones. In some cases, I may also use white in this stage. When adding details, it's important to know when enough is enough—too many details can be distracting. I also tend to leave a little rougher texture in those areas around my center of interest, where it helps draw the viewer's eye.

As I complete one section of the face, I move to another area and develop it in the same way. I continue this process until the face is finished.

Frame the Backdrop

Once I'm satisfied with the face, I add the clothes and other elements. Then I frame the background around my subject. I think a painting's background should support the subject without being overpowering. And since I work from reference photos, I pay close attention to the surrounding elements during the planning stage. I use fewer colors for this—no more than 12 layers, and I try to keep my backgrounds simpler and flatter to help punch up the subject. To tie my paintings together, I generally pull colors from the model's clothes into the skin tones. For example, if you look closely at *Kenyatta*, you'll see that the purple of the dress is reflected in the girl's face. I work this last phase until I'm happy with the way the painting looks. Then I double-check the colors and the overall mood of the piece. If I'm still happy, the painting is finished.

Layers of Patience

Pastel is known for its spontaneity and immediacy, but my approach offers a slower pace built around meticulous strokes. While a single work can take up to four months, depending on the size, the results are worth it. My weaving process lets me apply layers of color on top of one another, entirely covering the previous color and giving my works an added sense of dimension that brings my subjects to life. ◆

Washing Out the Detail

To create the illusion of light in White Shoes *(pastel, 18x14) I built up layers of color where the sun is hitting the woman's dress, then used my pastels to blend the area, producing a washed-out look. To further exaggerate my point, I increased the amount of detail in the background.*

drop in minor details. Still using Rembrandt pastels, I pay close attention to the color temperature, the direction of the light source and the shadows. These factors will ultimately determine how light or dark I begin this phase. I prefer to keep the shadows light early on and slowly build the dark values. By maintaining the integrity of the skin tones in the shadows, I'm able to keep the darkest darks lively. I work patiently here, continuing to build with crosshatching. I use about eight layers of pastel to punch up the color at this point, adding layers with the six colors I used in the previous phase, plus two brighter colors. Since I don't do any blending after the first phase of my process, the lines in these layers must connect as much as possible. I don't apply fixative here. Instead, once these colors are in place, I move directly to the next phase.

About the Artist

A native of Altus, Oklahoma, MARIO ROBINSON *studied art at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York. In 1994, he turned his attention to pastels. Since then, his work has won national recognition, and has appeared in several solo and group exhibitions. Now based in New Jersey, Robinson is represented by the Just Lookin' Gallery in Hagerstown, Maryland.*