

# Janice Cipriani-Willis

## The subtle art of portraiture

IN HER LIVELY AND COLOURFUL PORTRAITS, JANICE CIPRIANI SEEKS TO GO BEYOND WHAT SHE CALLS “JUST A PORTRAIT” BY CAPTURING THE INTIMACY OF HER MODELS. THE ARTIST TELLS US MORE.

Travelling, camping, and hiking from the time I was a child, I was fascinated with the play of light on trees, the reflected light in a pool, clouds' shadows across a meadow. I was drawn to respond in some way. Watercolour is a natural medium and it seemed the perfect way to express the balance of control and chaos found in nature. After painting landscapes in watercolour for many years, I gradually drifted toward observing and painting people. My current work has

been inspired by watching people from all walks of life in situations that engender a range of human emotions. I focus on the depth of expression seen in their faces. Travelling and observation have inspired me to find and express in watercolour the subtle and often obscure beauty I find in the places and faces I've seen. I see the play of light over forms as a marvellous mosaic. In my watercolours (in which the lightest light is the white of the paper) I very carefully rearrange these bits of light into an image of the world's beauty.

### Expressing inner feelings

An introvert by nature, I find that I prefer to observe people from a distance rather than engage them up close. I watch expressions and imagine what a person may be feeling and what led them to this moment. I'm especially drawn to pensive and thoughtful expressions. I once watched a young woman waiting for a flight at Denver airport. She drew a letter from her backpack, slowly opened it and began to read. As she read, her changing expres-



### KEY FACTS

Janice Cipriani-Willis lives and works in Temecula, USA. She began her art education with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from California State University, Los Angeles. Watercolour has been her favourite medium for the past 15 years. She has trained with artists such as Don Andrews, Gerald Brommer, Frank Francese, Fealing Lin, Ted Nuttall and Frank Webb. In 2014, Janice Cipriani-Willis became a Signature Member of the National Watercolor Society. In 2018, she was appointed Master Signature Member of Watercolor West and will be giving a workshop there in 2023. [janicecipriani.com](http://janicecipriani.com)



**One per Day.** 53 x 30.5 cm. "The pensive look of the subject with his cane and medicine suggests a personal 'story' that goes far beyond the simple image."

Santos Carver

76.2 x 53.4 cm

"The addition of the carving and the knife is an example of adding an element to a photo to suggest a story."







**Togo Cook** 58.4 x 45.7 cm  
 "The warm colour treatment dominating this painting suggests the steaminess of a hot African kitchen."

**Against the Wall** 43.2 x 63.5 cm  
 "Walking past Pike's Market in Seattle, this man's fervid stare suggested an intensive search for a lost thought."



**Mikey Thinks it Over** 50.8 x 63.5 cm  
 "I took many photos of Mike as he was talking with my husband. I emphasised the warmth of the late afternoon sun on this biker's face and arms."

"An introvert by nature, I prefer to observe people from a distance rather than engage them up close."

**Jamayla** 28 x 38.1 cm  
 "There was a glow in her manner that caught my attention. Some of the colour in the face was drawn out in order to integrate the figure with the background."



sions mirrored a range of emotions. Finally, she folded the letter and carefully put it away. I chose one of those moments to paint, attempting to convey the entirety of the experience in that one image.

**Values and colours**

I play up the contrast between the lights and darks, sometimes even letting the light side completely wash out. I let the pure white of the paper become the lightest lights. I search for the subtleties of colour in the mid-tones and darks of the image and push those colours. There may be light blues or greens in a face or lavender tones in the hair. I also pay special attention to colour variety in the shadows.

**Composition**

I work out the composition in small thumbnail sketches, trying different placements and angles. The position of the figure

on the page is extremely important. In a portrait, the viewer's eye is most often drawn to the eyes, which usually become the focal point of the painting. If the composition allows, I'll place the eyes in or near one of the upper "sweet spots" of the golden rectangle. I place the head very near the top of the page and even sometimes crop the top part. If the eyes and head are placed too low, the figure will seem to be sinking. To add variety, I make the space and distance from each part of the figure to the paper's edges different. I often tilt the figure diagonally to add drama to the composition, using the occasional vertical and horizontal for contrast and stability.

**Enlightening moments help us to move forward**

Improving your painting of course comes with practice and more practice, but there have been there one or two "tricks" I discovered along the way. One such "aha moment" occurred in a workshop with the noted artist, Fealing Lin. She emphasised crossing the edges of the image with the first application of colour. This gives the eye a way out of the form into another shape or the background. As painters, we want to lead the viewer through our compositions, keeping them engaged in our work for as long as possible.

**A meeting of souls**

I would hope that my paintings might inspire the viewer to see beyond the surface and discover something of



**Between Flights, Denver** 50.8 x 71 cm  
 "I took twenty photos of this subject. I was drawn by her intensity. Opera Pink was used for the jacket and as a base to 'peek' through the dark background."

**Almost Apple Pie** 43 x 53 cm  
 "Large areas of blues and greens contrast with the warmth of the face and hands. Notice the progression from warm to cool across the shoulders."



the inner person and the depth within -whether my subject is obviously attractive or not, young or old. I find that one tiny change in the rendering of an eyelid or the corner of the mouth can completely alter the feeling that I'm trying to express. It is said that the eyes are "the window to the soul." I find this to be true and I endeavour to discern and reveal whatever message those eyes might hold. A silent dialogue between the viewer and the subject is what I seek.

**My process**

I decide which parts of the photo will enhance the composition and the mood and which will distract. I may change or minimise the background to suggest a place or atmosphere, or create a completely different background to fit the mood suggested by the figure. I often introduce an object that wasn't in the original photo, such as a small accessory, a set of keys, a napkin, a letter, a vial of medication, or a walking stick. Though this addition doesn't tell a story, it may nudge the viewer to imagine something beyond what is seen in "just a portrait."

**The challenges of portraiture**

Portrait and figure painting come with challenges. Of course, lighting and photography are important. I

take several photographs of the subject at eye level or lower. The use of a telephoto lens catches the subject unaware, thus avoiding self-consciousness or a pose. The lens also prevents the distortion of facial features. I've learned to avoid the frustration of attempting a portrait from a studio-lit photo as they are usually lacking in dramatic lighting, but, I find the most challenging aspect of portrait painting is finding a subject that intrigues me. My subjects may be strangers I will perhaps never see again, but I feel that I know them on some intuitive level. I take a lot of photos as I need one that captures a mood and shows the spirit of the person.

**My models**

Most of my models are strangers. I occasionally use friends or relatives as models if they aren't expecting a literal portrait. Friends and relatives tend to expect to see the preconceived image of the subject that they carry in their minds. This can be very different from what the artist sees and paints. My husband, being an artist himself, doesn't have these preconceptions and is a willing model. He also makes a great apple pie.

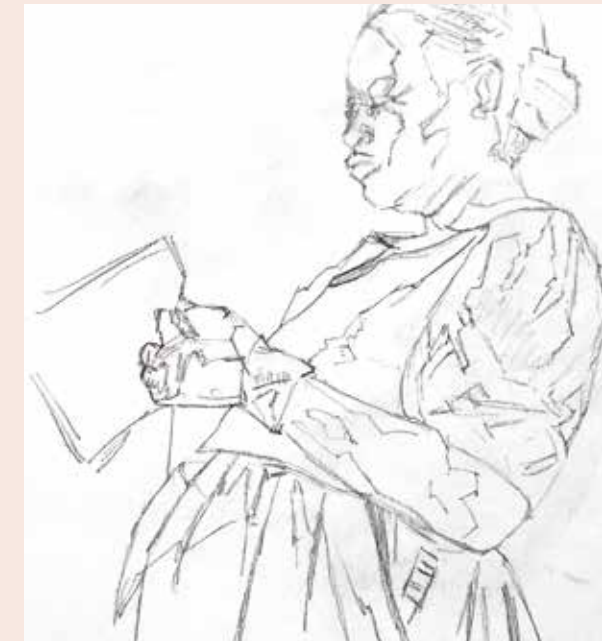


*Nascar Fans, 35.5 x 45.7 cm*  
 "A telephoto lens at a low angle captured these figures intent on getting to their seats."

# Step by step

## Waiting. 71.1 x 53.3 cm

I was drawn to the subject of this pregnant woman working as a waitress.



**Step 1: Composition**

I do my improvising in small preliminary studies and don't improvise much after I begin painting. After deciding on a composition, I make 4-6 photocopies of the drawing and try out various colour combinations.



**Step 3: The first washes**

Using a light box, I transfer the drawing onto 300 g cold-press Kilimanjaro bright white watercolour paper. I stretch the paper before beginning so that the paint will flow smoothly across the surface.



**Step 4 : The intermediate washes**

I often begin a portrait with an underpainting of very light blues or greens in the shadow areas, so that there will be hints of cool showing through the warm. I let those colours cross the lines of the subject matter to allow the eye of the viewer to move through the composition, rather than becoming trapped in small areas

**The final painting**

I may during later stages apply a "band aid," a stroke of paint that again crosses the lines of the subject. I soften all edges that don't need to be hard, aspiring to a balance between hard and soft edges. Soft edges also avoid the "cut-out/pasted on" look and integrate the figure with the background.

**My material**

My paper of choice is Cheap Joe's 300 g cold-press bright-white Kilimanjaro paper. Its slightly textured surface is durable, lifts well and allows for layering. I use paints from different manufacturers, but have a special affinity for Opera by Daniel Smith. I love its intensity and transparency. Even though it's not rated highly light-fast, I've never seen it fade, even after twenty years.

