a brief tour of the fantastic world of watercolor

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Swordwhale Walking: illustration

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Really, it's not as hard as it looks... the other PDFs will have given you the basic tools and techniques. Here, I'll say something about how I did each of these pieces (if I can, ahhhhh, remember....argh! Mind... like ...a steel... sieve!)

Did this in 1983. drew the horse and rider first (watercolor is transluscent, even transparent, the foreground characters can't be painted over the sunset!). You have two options here: mask (masking fluid) the characters and paint the sunset. Or paint the sunset around the characters. I've done both in other pieces. I masked this one, because the sunset is horizontal straight lines. I had a good photo of a sunset; which I painted wet into wet: wet the paper, trail globs of color across it and watch it run, creating the "mare's tails" clouds.. Usually I start with lighter colors and work toward dark. If you put darks down first, you'll pick them up, smear them, as you paint the lighter colors. I shot the yellow in last. Horse and rider were done with a less wet brush into dry paper, using a damp brush to blend the edges of each brushstroke.

I've had several bay horses like these, hence the prediliction for painting them.

Similar techniques were used on "Metamorphorsis".

Draw it.

Paint the horses (damp-ish brushes, and a brush dampened with only water to smear the edges a bit).

Blur the background in with trails of wet water-color on wet paper (wet the part of the paper you want the color to run over).

The spray was done with opaque white paint (gouache is best, acrylic is ok but translucent. Even white house paint would work) applied with a toothbrush. Any stiff bristly brush (house painting brushes) would do.

"Voronwe" (a character from JRR Tolkien's Silmarillion). I had somebody pose in a silvery cloak, and I had reference of seaweed and sand and the wall. Drew it first. Painted around Voronwe. Worked light to dark.Sand and sky are wet wet wet. The wet silvery look of the cloak comes from high contrast: lights next to darks. Skin tones here are burnt sienna and burnt umber, with hints of other colors thrown in. The cloak also reflects some of the colors in the background; wall, sea and sand. The rockweed (on the sand) has air bladders that make it float: I picked up (erased) green paint with a damp brush to create the light areas in the center of each bladder.

The character is the last of an ill-fated Elvish fleet that set sail to try to reach the Elves' ancestral lands in the Uttermost West. Voronwe is saved from the wreckage by a sea god, cast up ashore, soggy and stunned, to eventually aid a human hero, Tuor, in a quest. His name means "Faithful" and he is the iconic Faithful Sidekick. He's one of my favorite (and obscure) Tolkien characters.

Top right, previous page: Winter Twilight (originally Winter Forest Guardian). I did a series of these Elves, guarding wilderness reaches (this guy seems to be a victim of Global Climate wierdness: the civet and the fennec are definitely warm weather creatures). Winter Forest Guardian was a straight watercolor: drew the guy and his critters. Had reference of a kid in a National Geographic photo (changed it significantly so as not to steal sombody's photo image). Had reference of civet and fennec fox. Had reference (my photos) of winter woods. Painted trees behind Guardian from foreground (nearest, darkest trees first) to background. Feeling of distance is created here by trees growing paler (fading into the mist/air/snow) as they go away from you.

If the overlaid horse seems familiar, it is. I dithered the piece on Photoshop, adding the horse from "Twilight Run" (bottom of page) to create a fantasy montage, a more dreamlike piece. I could paint this whole idea in watercolor, but it's much easier and more effective to use the magic of CG to create layered images.

"Twilight Run", was inspired by JRR Tolkien's Elves, who could speak to trees, rocks, critters of all sorts, and ride horses without saddle or rein. I actually trained one of my geldings to work without a bridle, I have a book by Robert Vavra, famed horse photographer, which shows an entire kids' drill team riding without bridles, a young woman entered a horse in a contest recently riding him without saddle or rein in the insanely complex horseback ballet they call "Reining", and when they recreated "Lord of the Rings" on screen, a dedicated stunt rider rode "Shadowfax" the way Gandalf did, Elf-style, without saddle or rein... fantasy meets reality.

The watercolor was drawn (from a Robert Vavra photo, again, modified, not copied directly). I used my own reference for the woods. Had reference for wrinkly boots (the girl), cheetah. Painted the leaf textures first, painted the tree branches in around and through the leaves. The main trunks were drawn in first, though. The grey horse is easy: subtle greys, blues, browns washed in lightly, gradually darker. A pale horse picks up the greens and other colors around him. The cheetah was: golden colors first, then shadows, darks and details last. There are a few acrylic highlights fired in last; some of those leaves and other lights are opaque paint laid in over top. Do not mix white paint with watercolor, it creates a horrible chalky mess! Paint lights in over the top later.

The Nurc's Pool, next page was from a bit I heard on National Public Radio, an intro to a piece of classical music, something Germanic, I think, about a water faerie in his pool. I did this with the faerie sitting on the log, then modified it on Photoshop, because the figure looked a bit out of date, but I still like the background. Yeah, I cheesed in the reflection of the harp, and a few other details on Photoshop, but you can do it in watercolor too. I drew this in detail first. Had a photo of the place (along the Connewago Creek), some harp reference. The far background (sky, distant trees) is wet into wet, very pale colors. The leaves are easy; a bunch of squiggly leaf-shapes drawn with a pointy brush (leaf reference!!!), connected by pointy-brush lines (vines). The bark textures on the log require a good photo and some dry brush, and some pointy brush details. The hardest part was the logs and branches underwater (at least there wasn't a lot of surface reflection; this was in the shadows). I sketched in where the logs were, and painted the lights first, then the darker and darker shadows around and between the logs. The ethereal glow of the harp is Photoshop's airbrush tool, but you could do that with Prismacolor pencil or opaque gouache (thinned).

A Photoshop possibility: do a rough of your piece on Photoshop (piecing and layering photo reference), then paint what you see on your rough.
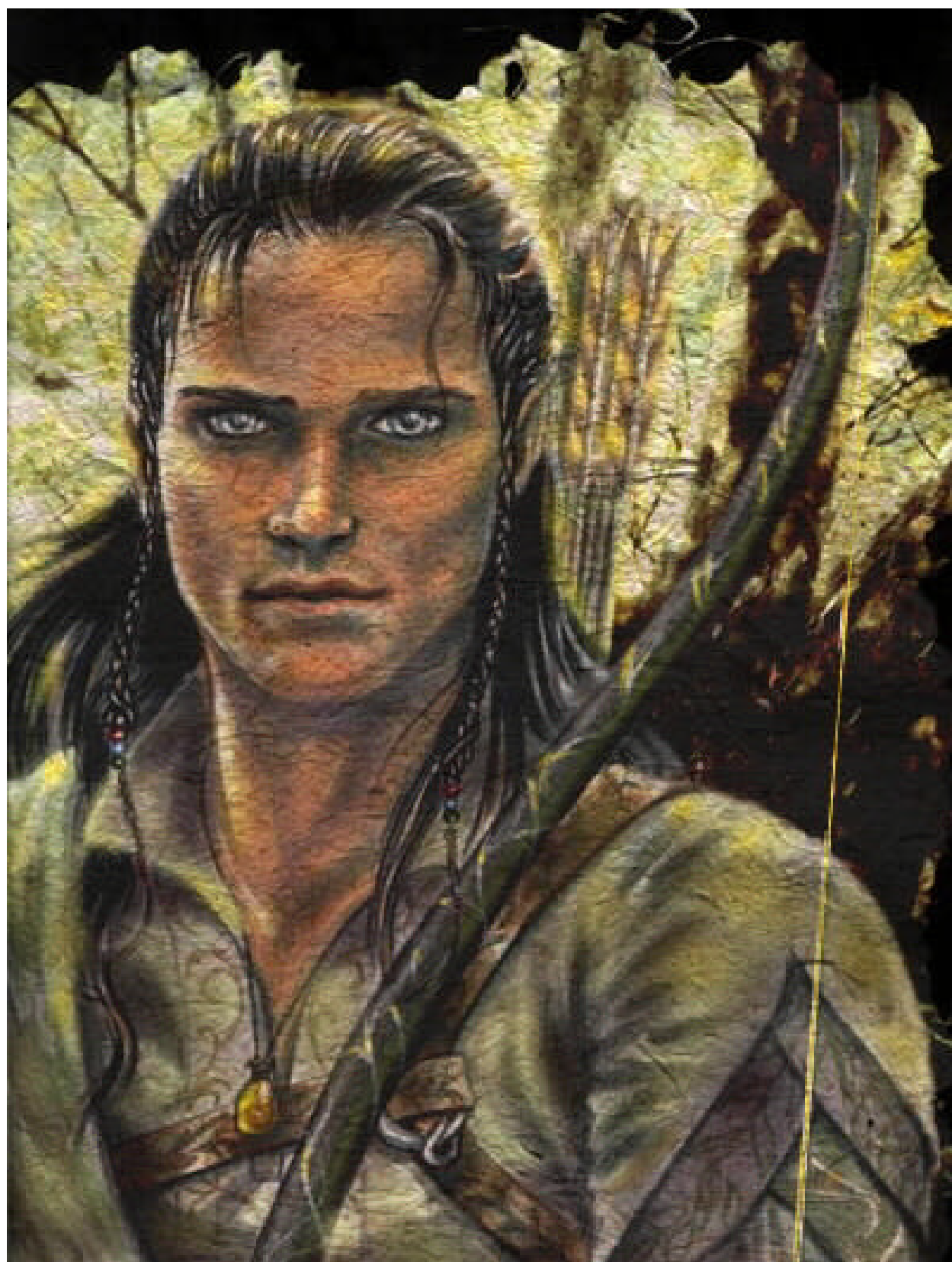
Previous page: Beleg Cuthalion ("Strongbow") from JRR Tolkien's tales. This character's tale sprawls through the Silmarillion, Unfinished Tales, and Lost Tales. It was finally put together by Tolkien's son in "Children of Hurin", recently published with beautiful illustrations by Alan Lee, my icon of awesome watercolors. Lee also did "Faeries" with Brian Froud back in the 80's, and an illustrated Lord of the Rings for Tolkien's 100th birthday (1992), as well as being a consultant for the films. I drew my Beleg from a photo of Orlando Bloom (Legolas, in the films), modified it, did my own costuming. Ultimately, the photo reference gives me a jumping off point, I try not to be welded to it. I also used other reference (dolls and action figures can be lit from various angles) for the lighting and shadows. The eyes wee the focus here: Tolkien continually describes the "Elven light" in the eyes of his characters; the intense power of the soul showing through. The background is from another watercolor; I joined them on Photoshop, and overlaid all on a scan of coarse textured rag paper. You could paint directly on coarse paper, but you would not get the detail you get on smooth paper (I prefer Vellum Bristol).

Above: Chesapeake Bay (a pun: the horse's color is Bay: burnt sienna to umber with black mane, tail and legs... and the marking is a map of the Chesapeak Bay). Drew it, (had to get the map exact), the background is wet on wet, leaving the white spaces in the waves. (water reference!!!). The big breaking wave edge is wet into very wet to get that blur effect. The dark sky is Prussian blue with some umber in it. Maybe some Ultramarine too. I tend not to make the whole page wet for this kind of thing, but work with blobs of wet paint on a brush, blending the edges as I go with another wet brush. The blacks in the horse are burnt umber and ultramarine, more umber in the parts around the muzzle, and the shadows. There is only a little white paint worked back into the hairs of the mane. The horse is burnt sienna, lighter colors laid down first, darker (umber) shadows worked in later. Here's that complimentary color scheme (opposites) I used before with bay horses! Blues and oranges.

Next page: I combines all of these (and the horse from Twilight Run again) to create a book cover idea. Photoshop is my friend. Note that Beleg has had a rejuvenation: I needed a young character for this cover idea. The overlay of the pinto marking on his face, and the sameness of the eyes, suggests that he *is* the horse. The white horse becomes one of "Manannan's Horses", the wave horses of the sea.

Marsh Magic started as some watercolor sketches in the salt marshes of Assateague Island, Virginia. Nearby Chincoteague is known for its once a year wild horse roundup, and the kids' book "Misty of Chincoteague". This was early in the year, March, I think, so the colors are different from the summer colors most tourists see. The background is mostly wet into wet, from the original sketch and photos and color notes taken on the spot. I drew this, did the background in wet watercolor, then did the guy finding the magic sword in acrylic. I also used some acrylic on the foreground grasses. Below: more from Assateague: looser watercolor, with Prismacolor line visible around the edges.

Redbacked salamanders enliven a display called "Soil: it's not just dirt" at Nixon County Park, York PA. I studied the field guide, doodled some real salamanders, cartooned them. These are watercolor, with Prismacolor line. The texture is created by first coloring the salamander with white crayon which resists the watercolor, creating the texture found on the dark grey parts of redbacked salamanders.

The underwater Christmas Tree on the previous page comes from direct experience: decorating several in local quarries with the dive club (in December, in 40 degree water, in a wetsuit). I drew this in great detail first, using reference for the various fish, birds, otter, beaver. Some of the reference was sketches from life (I volunteered with some wildlife rehabbers and had handled beavers and otters). The distant background is simple, to balance the complexity of the underwater goings on. The treeline is wet grey watercolor, with the branches and trunks painted in after the blurry effect of the twigs. The water surface is a slightly cartoony version of how the waterline looks through a mask; woogity woogity, lights and darks and wave shapes.. I painted the characters and animals first, and did the tree textures (needles) around them. The swirl of tropical colored magic the young illusionist is doing was done early; you can't paint that over the greens. Note how I left light spaces between the needles of the pine. And light paper showing through around the lights. Only the bubbles were put in later with white paint (too complicated to paint around). The highlights on fins and tanks and characters is the white paper shining through. The green water was painted in around the characters and the tree, using wet paint, a fairly blobbly wet brush, onto dry paper, but a damp brush to soften the edges of the green brushstrokes. The fish below were drawn, outlined in Prismacolor, and watercolored.

red & black
6mm shortie
7 lbs w/ Rockets seems
heavy fr snorkeling
w/ Ollie's fins (light
warm water) fine, can
dive easily to bottom,
float up, somewhat
buoyant, with breath
out, sink easier, still
slightly pos. buoyant

dark band →

red eye ←

baby bass actual size

SUNFISH   includes bass +
perch which are
related ——

there are many hybrids, bluegills are most common + probably
most popular freshwater game fish in US (audubon field guide)

faint vertical pattern
orange breast

they grow to 12"

the Bainbridge
Pirhanas

some just
countershaded

eyes dark
or reddish

gill cover extension
spot

posterior
dorsal
fin
spot

seen at
Willow Springs
pond book calls it "orange spotted"
Lepomis humilis, 4-5"
no red on gill cover

red
on gill
cover

pumpkinseed —
blue & orange cheeks
blotchy "Indian corn"
pattern on sides
ranging from dark
top to orangey belly
to 8"

Watercolor is useful in journals and sketchbooks, a quick and easy way to make color notes (as in these sunfish and bass observed on dives in the quarry), to sketch a landscape. I doodled in pencil, splashed in some color, made some notes (including the water conditions and the wetsuit and weights needed to meet them, top left) .

Legolas and Gimli go to Fangorn Forest is based on a bit in Tolkien's Lord of the Rings: after the events of the book, these two former enemies make a pact: Gimli will go to Fangorn (he is terrified of forests) and Legolas (who talks to trees and hates being underground) will go to the Glittering Caves with Gimli. I made sketches of taxidermy and photo reference at Nixon Park, drew this, used some Prismacolor pencil outlining, and painted with a few pointy brushes (#00 to #4) on dry paper. Notably: the fur is done with small pointy brushes leaving lots of the white paper showing through. The animals of "Fangorn" are actually natrive to PA.

A couple of grey horses, my other favorite flavor:

"Angel" has a pretty rough and sketchy background, just a suggestion of tree textures. Note the white paper shining through. You can see the Prismacolor lines.

"Southwind" (as in the Creator took a handful of southwind and created the Horse) is mnostly swirling colors, done wet into wet. I drew the horse first, then played with color.

Makenuk's Fin

Ah, the wonders of tradigital. I originally designed this logo for my illustration work, and for my sea kayak (Makenuk's Fin) in watercolor. The character is from my own stories and is a marine biologist/underwater filmaker who happens to be an orca shapeshifter (based loosely on Northwest Coast Indian tales, where one of the words for "orca" is "makenuk"). I later did him again using my own photos and painting directly on Photoshop; the airbrush tool can be used transparent, like watercolor, or opaque, like airbrush.

Prismacolor pencil, opaque gouache and watercolor on mat board (it doesn't wrinkle). The blacks and whites of the orca and wetsuit are watercolor. It's faster and creates a different texture than Prismacolor pencil.

Below: more tradigital: the jaguar (originally painted as "Guardian of the Night", based on a South American Indian legend), and the white cat (part of a larger watercolor of a medival bard... the cat belonged to a friend, and his name was Bard) are watercolor. The cat-eyed Elf is airbrush tool on Phtoshop: drawn and painted totally on the computer, and layered with the other two pieces on Photoshop. The night sky is part of the jaguar piece.

My red-haired illusionist returns, helping an otter learn to fish. This is unique watercolor: it's done on colored mat board rather than white paper. I used Prismacolor and white paint for the highlights.

Shenzi was drawn from photos I took of my friend's Belgian Malenois (one of three Belgian Shepard types). Drew it, Prismacolor pencilled in line and some fur texture (the fine lines). Watercolored the main color using mostly small pointy brushes. The watercolor is faster for large areas, Prismacolor gives fine detail quicker than tiny #000 watercolor brushes.

some basic terms and techniques

Paper: I use vellum bristol, a sort of eggshell finish. Enough tooth so your brush doesn't slide all over the place, and enough smooth so you can get detail. There is also rough and cold press paper. Rough is the roughest. 80-100 lb is good for 8 x 10 or 9 x 12. For larger sizes, go with 150 - 300 lb.

Stiff bristly brushes are fine for textures and dry brush effects and spatter. You need soft, springy water-color brushes, pointy or flat, for *water* color.

It's WATER color. It should not look like house paint on your palette. It should look like ink. Like pond wa-ter teeming with life. Like milk, lemonade, orange juice. If it looks like semi-melted ice cream, you need to add more water.

Transparent; is the word which best describes watercolor. You can paint dark over light, but not light over dark. Never never never mix white paint with watercolor: the white paper is your light. You can fire in some highlights with light acrylic colors (or gouache) at the end, sparingly. Masking fluid over the parts you want to leave light is your best bet. Rubber cement works in a pinch, but it's stinky.

Watercolor, when it dries on your palette, can be used forever. (Just add water). It also picks up on your painting; you can lift some color off after it dries. This does not work with acrylic, which can probably sur-vive hurricanes, tornadoes, nuclear disaster, alien invasions and, should you choose to use it, will be dug up by some archaeologist twenty centuries from now.

Wet into wet: wet paper, wet brush. You can think of the degree of wetness like a grey scale, or a per-centage: 0-100. 0 being dry, 100 being Finding Nemo. You can also paint...
wet into dry: the edges of your brushstroke stay sharp, unless you blend them out with a damp brush.
dry into wet: the problem here is your brush will pick up the wet from the paper, rather than leak paint onto the paper. Experiment with different levels of wet paper and brush.
dry into dry... dry brush, sharp textures and lines. fine details. Cat whiskers., fur, bark, blades of grass, grains of sand.

Tape; your paper down on all four edges to avoid wrinkling. For larger sheets: soak it in the tub and sta-ple it to plywood, let dry, it'll never wrinkle.

Paint; any water-based paint works, even house paint (those sample jars are cheap). Beware cheap wa-tercolors (those horrible tray sets they sell to kids), craft paints, poster paints, and house paint; these are usually tints (mixed with white as opposed to pure basic colors which you can make other colors from), opaque, and will make your painting chalky and dead if used wrongly. Opaque paints can be used over top at the end for some highlights. Purist watercolor painters never use opaque paint. I'm so not a purist.

Try tradigital: paint a watercolor, scan it, play with it on Photoshop or some other graphics program. Add effects, layers, layer with other paintings or photos. Print and paint over the print (card stock or other heavy paper works best). Or mix watercolor and acrylic, crayon, Prismacolor pencils, pastels. You could even paint oils over a watercolor base (but not watercolor over oils).