

Automotive Paints and the Fine Artist By Donn Shanteau

Sometimes enlightenment comes on the heels of grueling research; other times it is the fruit of some insight that is offered from a mentor. Of course, you never can discount the age old "It fell from the sky and bonked me in the head" method of seeing some kind of light. At the risk of seeming somewhat mundane, I reached my epiphany by misadventure, in the form of marriage.

When I met the love of my life, she had already started to crack the code of becoming a successful artist. After a wonderful education in the arts, she learned that she had to be very flexible in how she applied her talents to earn income. Of course, she could draw and paint up a storm, but the mostly rural locality where she plied her trade was not the best market for "fine art" sales. Yes, she sold drawings and paintings in many venues, but a consistent predictable income was, as of yet, beyond her reach. She began to diversify her offerings to include—among other things—automotive custom painting. She wasn't interested in painting cars and motorcycles as much as she just wanted to airbrush cool things on them.

As time went on, the custom auto and cycle airbrushing became the core of our business. We became knowledgeable in the ways of automotive paints and what you can and can't do with them. All the while, my wife still yearned for the freedom of doing art for art's sake, and the hired gun thing required her to take some direction from the client in most cases. Whenever her schedule allowed, she would usually escape into one of her fantasy paintings. That's where she could make her own rules.

One of her new rules was, "You don't have to be normal. Why do things the same way everyone else does?" Instead of using her water-based paints and inks, she started covering her Claybord panels with automotive lacquers or some type of automotive acrylic urethane paint. It was explained to me that these paints could be used in the same way that traditional mediums are used. Transparent auto candy paints equate to watercolors. Automotive reducers are the kissing cousin of linseed oils in oil paints. Opaque automotive base colors translate to opaque versions of oils, acrylics and so forth.

The cool thing about automotive paints is that there are myriad special effect paints that among other qualities can shimmer and change colors as well as any peacock or exotic bird on the planet. Once these paints are applied and clear-coated with shiny urethane paint, they capture and reflect light like no other medium. This "look" makes almost any painting pop out of a crowd of traditional works that have been painted with the standard fare of mediums.

I realize that working in a strange new medium can be intimidating. Automotive paints are generally flammable, not healthy to breathe, and most require the user to wear a charcoal respirator when working with them. Lacquer paints are soon to be outlawed for the most part, so I would not recommend investing in them. Single-stage enamel paints were used back in the day (well into the 1960's) before two-stage paints (lacquers) that require a base color that is covered with a clear-coat protective coating. Lacquers have been supplanted by urethane paints, which are the most commonly used paints today.

On the horizon is the invasion of water-based paints. These pigments have a toehold in some OEM (original equipment manufacturer) production lines and auto body repair businesses. Custom painters have not embraced water-borne paints as of yet, but sooner or later Uncle Sam will dictate use of these paints based on their ecologically safer chemical formula and the reduced health risk for the people who work with them.

Creating a painting with "car paint" isn't as crazy as it sounds. My wife now has the reputation as the "edgy artist" in the fine arts crowd. You may want to try this medium for yourself and create your own edge.

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