27 Best Watermedia Paintings of the Year

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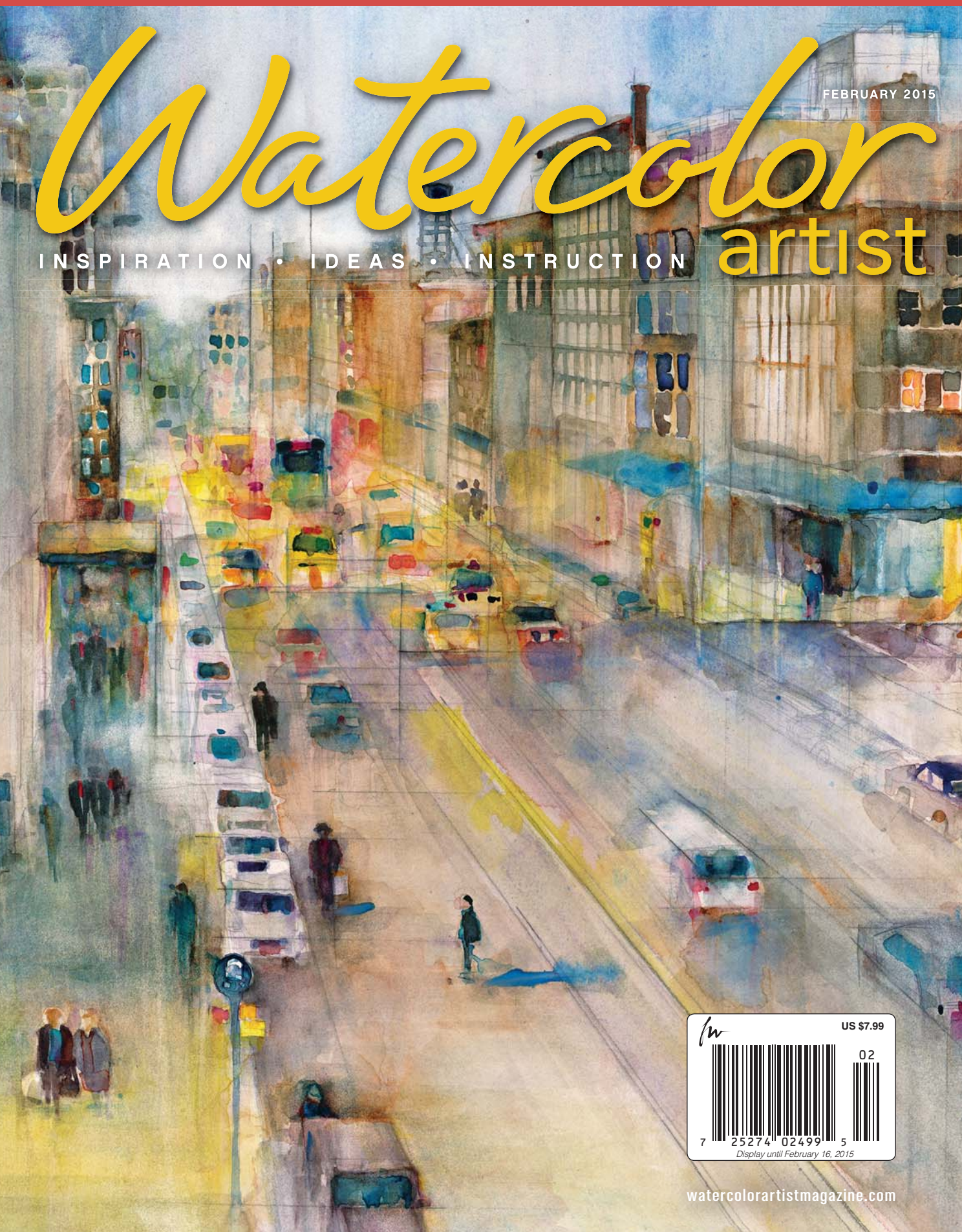
6 Top Artists Reveal Their Go-To Surfaces



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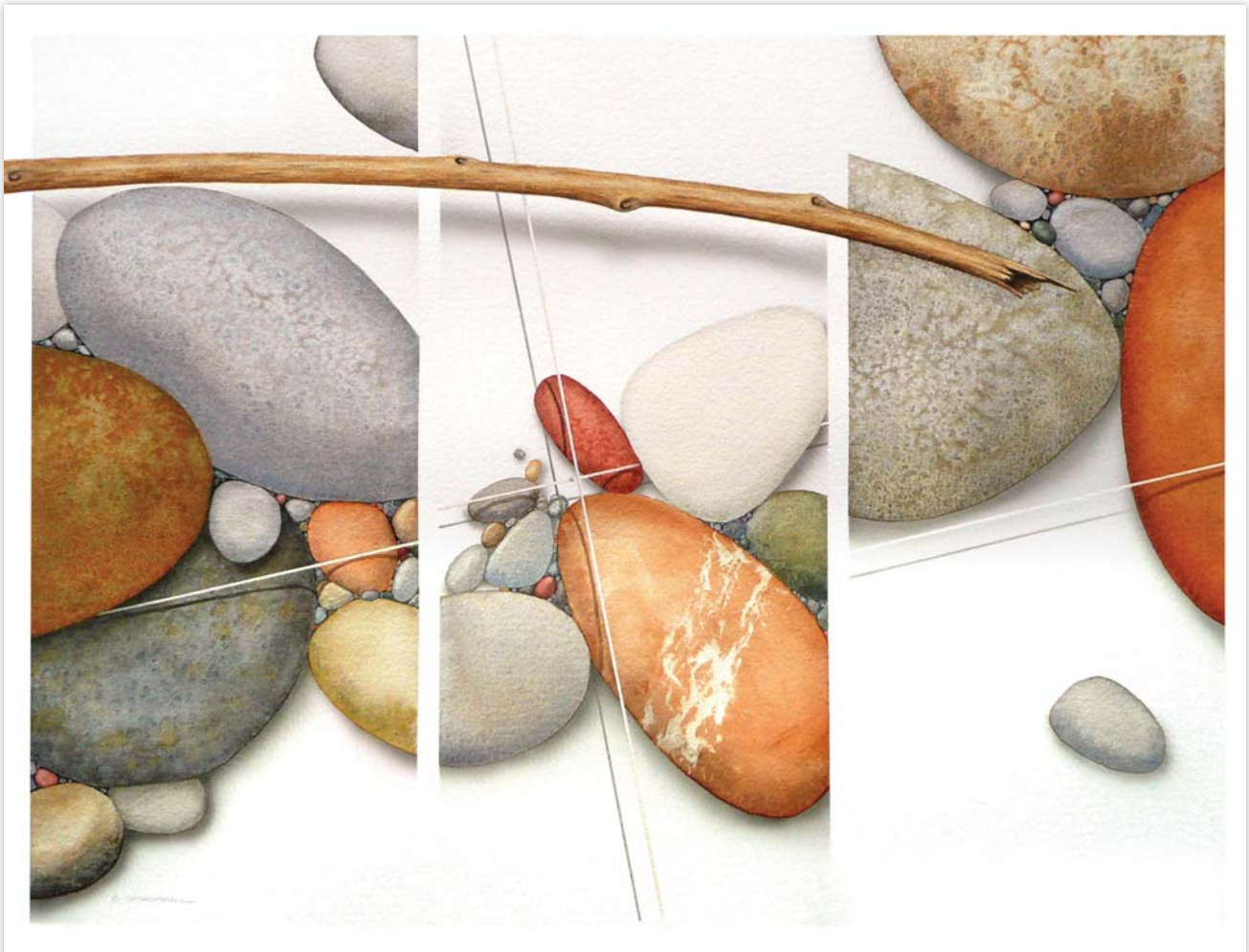
On the Surface

Six accomplished watercolorists share the surfaces that best complement their styles and methods. Which foundation is right for you?

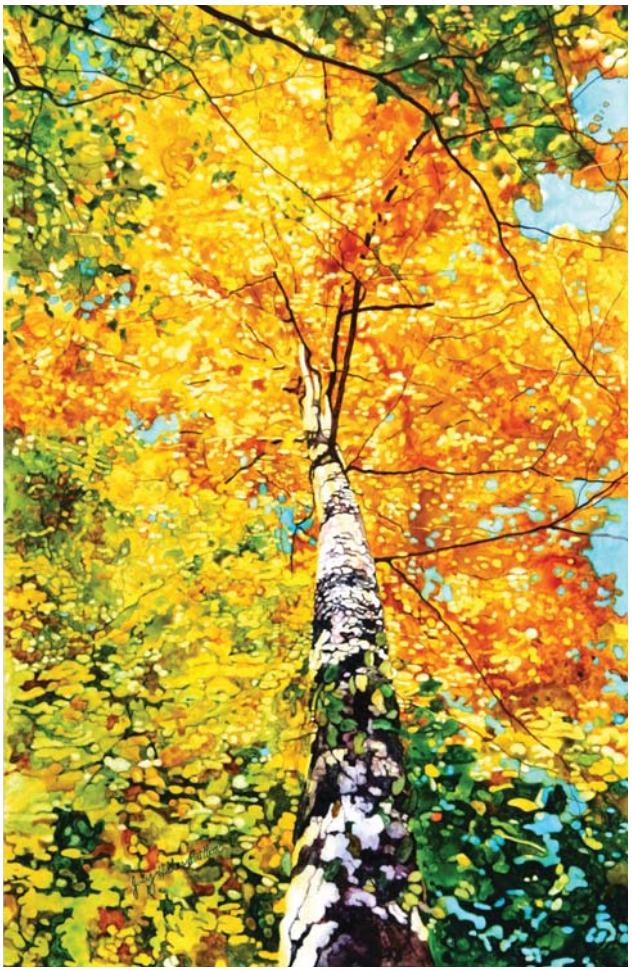


Three Rivers Series: The Rogue
(triptych; watercolor on paper, 22x30)
by Geoffrey McCormack

Geoffrey McCormack: Cold-Pressed Paper

"*The Rogue* [above] was the first painting in my 'Three Rivers' series, which refers to the rivers of western Oregon. I draw and design directly on Arches 300-lb. cold-pressed paper and paint with transparent watercolor. The cold-pressed paper takes advantage of the granulating quality of some pigments to create realistic textures and enhanced salt lifts. I used tape in a variety of widths to save the white of the strings and control the edges of the triptych panels."

Red Coat, Blue Mood (watercolor on paper, 22x15) by Bev Jozwiak



Sous-Bois (watercolor on YUPO, 19⅞x12⅞) by Josy Britton

Bev Jozwiak: Hot-Pressed Paper

"I've always been under the assumption that paintings should look like paintings and not photographs. With that in mind, I try to create movement in my work by showing brushwork; adding water; and creating runs, drips and spatters. Lost and found edges help to create movement throughout the painting. I paint on hot-pressed paper because the slickness causes paint to sit on the surface, which allows me to create deep, colorful blacks and, with lots of water, to let the paint run, splash and puddle."

Josy Britton: YUPO Synthetic Paper

"When I'm after particularly vibrant colors, I choose YUPO because the surface doesn't absorb the paint. The colors stay on the surface, so they don't lose any of their intensity. My traditional watercolors are very planned out, but I paint my watercolors on YUPO by first mixing a color and then using a sponge roller to cover the paper completely. I then use a brush filled with water to lift out the subject. I can fill the white that's revealed with other colors. I paint faster on YUPO because I know that I can always scrub back to white; nothing is permanent."

Dorrie Rifkin: Wet-Media Board

"I spent the first half of my life searching for the perfect paper to achieve the effect of color blending and fading that I wanted. I was in an art supply store in Kingston, N.Y., when I was first introduced to Strathmore wet-media board (which I like to call my 'magic paper'). This paper keeps the colors intense and allows me to mess around with the paint, even after it dries. I use a paintbrush, paper towels

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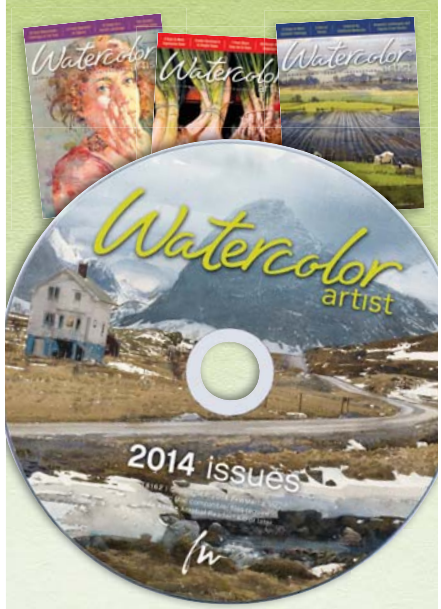

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by comparison

Cold-pressed paper: The most commonly used watercolor surface, it has a medium absorbency and slight texture, works well with layering and glazes, and facilitates easy paint lifting.

Hot-pressed paper: On this smooth surface, painted edges stay crisp, colors remain vibrant and paint lifts easily. Layering and glazing can be difficult, and blooms can occur.

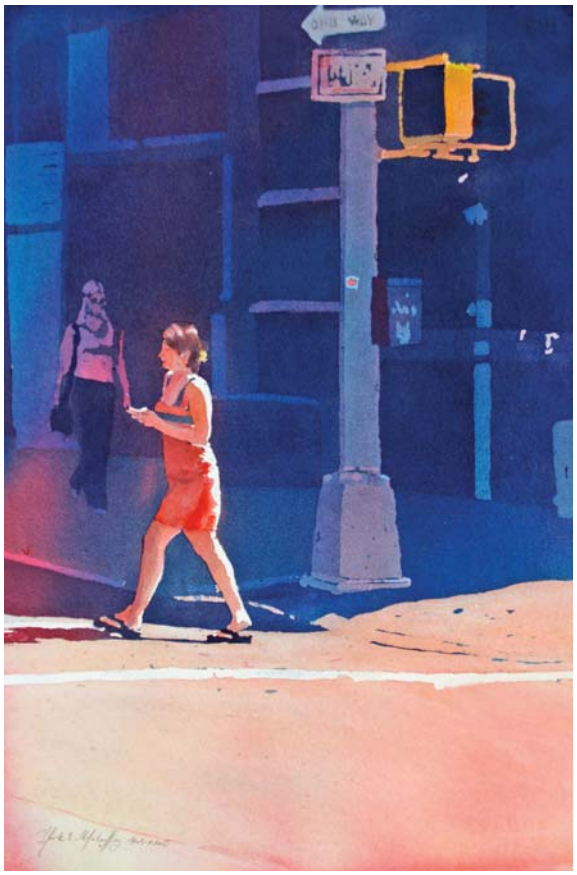
YUPO synthetic paper: Waterproof and stain-resistant, the smooth, slick surface allows for complete lifting of paint; it forms interesting textures, but makes it difficult—if not impossible—to layer color.

Wet-media board: As it consists of a lightweight sheet of paper mounted to an acid-free cardboard backing, no additional support is required; it can withstand repeated reworking and scrubbing.

Rough paper: Characterized by prominent peaks and valleys, it's ideal for broad brushstrokes and minimal detail. As the paint settles into the hollows, lifting can be difficult.

Watercolor canvas: Combining the texture of woven fabric with a gesso designed for water-based paint, it won't buckle or tear like paper, and can be framed with or without glass.

A View From the Highline (watercolor on wet-media board, 20x28) by Dorrie Rifkin



Crosswalk (watercolor on paper, 22x15) by Mark Mehaffey

The Magical Mossy Forest 4 (watercolor on canvas, 46x36) by Heleen Cornet

or my fingers to mush it up a bit in places, which helps with the flow of the painting.

"For *A View From the Highline* [opposite], I started with a detailed drawing, then added background colors. I should have let the paint dry, but instead I began the cars, overworking the painting and making puddles and mud pies. The beauty of watercolor painting, however, is that if one works with and not against it, there's always a solution. After the paint dried, I started again, the wiser for the misstep. Because I painted on a surface that can take a beating, I was able to remove most of the mud with water and paper towels and then slowly add more color."

Mark Mehaffey: Rough Paper

"Because I wanted the large shapes, both in the foreground and the background, to be smooth so that the focus would be the light hitting the figure in *Crosswalk* [above], I used rough paper. It may seem odd, but the little hills and valleys in rough paper visually smooth out imperfections in a wash, whereas a smooth paper, such as hot-pressed, makes it more difficult to hide brushstrokes."

Heleen Cornet: Watercolor Canvas

"I normally work on Fredrix watercolor canvas. To start, I mount the canvas on a piece of plywood with staples, and then I make a drawing with a Rotring ArtPen and waterproof ink. To establish my lights and darks early on, I make an underpainting with Dr. Ph. Martin's India Ink. After that, I start painting in watercolor. To add texture, I press found objects—pieces of fabric, lace, string, yarn, leaves or other organic materials—into the still-wet paint, allow them to dry in place, then carefully pull them off the surface. The advantage of working on canvas is that I don't need to frame my painting behind glass. I just take the canvas off the plywood, put it on stretchers and spray-varnish it."

KELLY KANE is editor-in-chief of *Watercolor Artist*.