



Bee Seeds

2010, acrylic and graphite, 30 x 40 x 1½. Private collection.

Creating the Element of Surprise With Acrylics

Britt Freda uses experimental techniques and takes on unconventional subjects to challenge viewers with the unexpected.

by Linda S. Price

Britt Freda studied fine art and creative writing at St. Lawrence University, in New York, where she earned honors in both majors. Despite this scholastic achievement, the artist considers the seven months she spent studying in Italy to be the most significant part of her art education. At the Lorenzo de' Medici School, in Florence, the studio art curriculum focused on learning to draw and paint in the classical manner. Although Freda's current work is far from traditional, she says she can't imagine being able to create abstract or conceptual art without her firm foundation in traditional techniques. While in Italy, she drew and painted from live models, painted en plein air, and studied photography and sculpture. This resulted in a mastery of various tools and genres that the artist often adapts to suit her ever-changing style and subject matter.

“When I went to college I had every intention of being a doctor,” Freda recalls. “I wanted to make a significant contribution to the world. I’d been painting and drawing for as long as I can remember, but I didn’t consider it a serious enough profession. Finally I realized that painting and writing were things that I uniquely owned.” Upon moving to Seattle from her hometown of Aspen, Colorado, she contemplated graduate school but wasn’t convinced the degree was necessary for her painting career. She started her own business, which left little time for painting. Pregnancy led her back to art, and she settled on acrylics because of the health risks of working with oils.

“When I first started painting in acrylic, I was working in a small studio, so I had to paint on a small scale,” she says. “The change was very freeing. I also liked being able to merge a traditional background with something that felt very fresh.” Today she paints in both oil and acrylic, choosing whichever medium fits her schedule. When she has to meet her gallery’s timeline and has to work quickly, acrylic fits the bill. “But if I feel I’m getting stuck or too tight and rigid,” she notes, “I switch back to oil.”

When Freda and her family moved out of urban Seattle to a more rural area on Puget Sound, she started *Roots, Soil, and Seeds*, a series of paintings that explored themes of home, being uprooted, and the promise of new growth. Currently, the artist is fascinated by the insect world. She paints beetles because she likes their luminous colors, shell structure, and the fact that they “walk around with their houses on their backs. Moths, magnificent in their metamorphosis, are often considered pests, but they are valuable and gorgeous in their

own right.” The artist is particularly captivated by bees, which have served as the inspiration for several pieces. Our ambivalence toward bees, Freda believes, can create tension in a painting. “I like the fact that they produce luscious honey and that they are integral to the pollination process that produces so much of the food we eat,” she says, “and it’s unfortunate that so many honey bees are dying.

“The majority of my subject matter comes from the natural world,” Freda continues. “The most basic, simple things are the most extraordinary. I like to slow down my busy life with a family of two young children and

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a career, and discover things with a fresh eye, see anew, and communicate that experience.” The artist hopes she can get viewers to share her discovery. Her aim is not to replicate nature, nor give the viewer what he or she expects, but to provide surprises.

“Surprise” is a word that frequently arises in a conversation with the artist, who experiments with composition, texture, color, and brushstrokes. Take, for instance, her preference for moths over butterflies, which are much more

popular among painters. In *Only After Leaving Home Could They...* she purposely allowed the third moth to lead the eye off the canvas to throw the viewer off balance and force the eye to consider the negative space. In doing so, Freda invites viewers to explore the potential for what lies beyond the canvas instead of comfortably resting on the expected focal point.

The artist also exploits unconventional tools and techniques. She often pours paint onto her surface rather than use a brush. In *Bee Seeds*, she employs this technique to create the dark lines of the grasses and circular shapes around the seeds. “There’s more spontaneity and freshness without a brush,” she explains. “Sometimes I even pour with my left hand so that it looks less controlled.” She works with a plastic squeeze bottle, at times cutting the nozzle to allow more paint to come out, and she describes her technique as “almost a throwing motion.” Additional elements of surprise are the graphite lines over the surface of the paint and the drips featured in her work. “Sometimes they work out in ways I couldn’t have foretold,” she says. “Other times they don’t work out at all. When that happens I wipe it away and keep working to get the right drip.

“I like the surface itself to be a focal point and for the viewer’s eye to move between the surface and the subject,” she continues. She goes on to explain that, as a painting reaches completion, she likes to use iridescent and interference paints that catch the light and make shapes jump off the surface. “This is particularly effective on the wings of insects,” she says. Freda does offer some words of caution before advising the use of these paints. Metallic colors reflect light differently depending on the time of day, the light source, and the position



LEFT
Only After Leaving Home Could They...

2010, acrylic and graphite on linen, 48 x 24 x 1½. Courtesy Giacobbe-Fritz Fine Art, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

ABOVE
b.3

2010, acrylic and graphite on canvas, 36 x 12 x 1½. Private collection.



Seeds Planted

2010, acrylic and graphite on linen, 48 x 24 x 1½.
Courtesy Giacobbe-Fritz Fine Art, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

of the viewer, which can distort the painting and/or distract from the focal point. Consequently, it's crucial during the painting process to move the painting around to see how it will look under conditions other than studio lighting. For instance, outdoor light often produces strong reflections. Strong sunshine from a side window in a dark room, while illuminating the metallic paints, will make the flat colors almost disappear. Technically, she warns that metallics lose their luster if combined with more than a small amount—10 to 20 percent—of non-metallic paints. It's preferable to lay down thin veils of color mixed with Tar Gel medium over the metallics to alter their color and value.

Freda's comfort with metallics likely springs from her preference for unconventional colors. Although she paints nature, she seldom uses the greens that are so abundant—and predictable—in the Pacific Northwest. Instead, she prefers muted colors, which she feels better express the emotional nuance that compels her to paint a scene. The artist loves the feelings evoked by long, golden light, foreboding gray skies, or the layered colors of a dry field. Her color choices are always changing, and she often uses elaborate mixtures of seven or eight different colors to create a specific mood. "I use many, many more colors than it looks like," she explains. She does, however, consider raw umber her favorite color. "It's universal, one of those grounding colors," she says. "It's not bright or gorgeous, but it is rich and honest. So much can be built from it. It's my foundation."

The artist likes to use Daniel Smith paints, because, "They are made here in Seattle, and I can go to the factory and talk to the people involved in the process," she says. Golden's Clear Tar Gel is her preferred medium, because it changes the consistency of the paint, giving it, "a drippy, honey body" that's ideal for creating transparent layers.



ABOVE

House Studio Seeds

2010, acrylic and graphite on linen, 30 x 20 x 1½; and 30 x 40 x 1½.
Private collection.

RIGHT

Honey Hole

2010, acrylic and graphite on canvas, 10 x 10 x 1½.
Courtesy Giacobbe-Fritz Fine Art, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Following the traditional fat-over-lean rule, she uses it in the final stages of the painting process. To increase the open time when working outdoors in the summer heat or on a very large painting, she uses a retarding medium from Golden. "I like Golden mediums," she says, "because they do extensive health and safety research and because they are really good products." She primarily uses flat and round brushes, although her collection—accumulated over 20 years of painting—contains all shapes and sizes. She seldom discards a brush, finding those well-worn sable or ox-hair brushes give her a stiffness she can't get with new acrylic brushes. "It's important to have a mixture of brushes for variety," she says. "I prefer big brushes. Even for detailed work, big will often work better than smaller."

Freda begins every painting with a loose idea of composition and a collection of reference material, including her own photos, pictures from the internet, and actual specimens of leaves, grasses, rocks, and dead

insects, many of which are collected by her children, who are happy to help. The dead insects allow her to understand their structure and form before she commits it to canvas. The practice of matching colors to natural specimens is an exercise she brought back from her studies in Italy.

The artist prefers to work on stretched linen canvas because she likes the smoothness of the surface. "When I want paint to drip, it is not advantageous to have a textured canvas," she points out. She begins with a blank canvas, with minimal sketching or a very loose underpainting, and the belief that a painting is more rigid and less honest if too well planned. "The canvas communicates as the process evolves," she notes. In the manner of the Dutch Masters, she often starts with a thin layer of raw umber and pulls out the subject matter from the wet paint. With acrylic, she has to do this quickly, even though she adds a lot of water to the wash and has a spray bottle of water at hand.



Initially, she begins work with a brush, and then a rag, describing this as "a discovery process, finding the subject on the canvas, translating something from 3-D to 2-D, and identifying what is significant in the painting."

Freda is always looking for new ways to engage the viewer. At the moment, in response to a gallery's call for works created on alternative canvas shapes and sizes, she's cut out the center of canvases to put smaller paintings inside, insets that can be changed out. "I think of the insects like jewelry," she explains. "They can be changed up, dressed up or down. I love the idea of the viewer being able to participate." For instance, one inset is gold and silver and formal;

another is black and white, stark and drippy; another red and bold. She also paints diptychs, but not necessarily in the traditional way. Although they are usually the same height, they are not always the same width, and she stresses that they don't have to be hung next to each other. Instead, they can be moved around, hung at opposite ends of the room like a reflection, or around a corner—whatever will give people something to discuss and ponder. This way, Freda feels, her paintings are not just decorative pieces but part of an ongoing conversation; they come alive.

"I work hard to create a fresh, loose feeling in my paintings," Freda explains. "I like surprises, but I'm traditional in my construction of a painting. They are created with layers of research and continual practice of technique." When asked if there's a message in her work, she says, "I hope my paintings ask a question, evoke a silent dialogue, rather than make a proclamation. There are lots of ways to see something. The world is constantly changing; life is a state of motion. I want my paintings to have a bit of that feeling, too." ■

About the Artist

Britt Freda received a B.F.A. in studio fine art and a B.A. in English writing from St. Lawrence University, in Canton, New York. She also studied in Italy at the Lorenzo de' Medici Institute of Fine Art, in Florence, and at La Cipressaia, in Montagnana, with Rose Shakinovsky and Claire Gavronsky. In addition, she studied web design at Colorado Mountain College in Aspen, Colorado. The artist, who has exhibited in numerous group and solo shows throughout the Pacific Northwest, is represented by Giacobbe-Fritz Fine Art, in Santa Fe, and RARE Gallery in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. For more information, visit www.brittfreda.com.



Pollination of Words
2010, acrylic and graphite on linen, 48 x 24 x 1½. Courtesy Giacobbe-Fritz Fine Art, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

DEMONSTRATION: TRADITIONS 1

Step One

Freda began by covering her canvas with a loose, drippy layer of color. She then did a loose sketch of her subject—the colander—with big brush strokes. Duochrome saguaro green served as the underlayer on the copper colander. Although this color is iridescent and can be overbearingly bold, the artist remedied this later with darker washes.

Step Two

Copper paint was added to the colander, along with more duochrome saguaro green as the artist continued to develop her subject. She wanted to keep it looking fresh and loose while still conveying the idea that it is a colander, "not just mushy colors."

Step Three

Freda then added the lobster, making sure to periodically check the painting under different lighting conditions as she went along.

Step Four

The artist continued to develop the lobster. Red, she says, "is a happy element and it makes a painting more playful, more joyous."

Step Five

Iridescent and interference gold on the lobster highlighted the patterns of light and color and made its traditional red shell a bit more interesting. Thin layers of dark purple and graphite "tarnished" the colander, softening the metallics while still preserving some of their luminous, reflective qualities.



ABOVE, THE COMPLETED PAINTING:
Traditions 1
2010, acrylic and graphite, 30 x 30 x 1½. Courtesy Jeanne Roberts Fine Art, Bellevue, Washington.

Freda's Palette

- yellow ochre
- new gamboge
- rich green gold
- aureolin hue
- transparent red oxide
- permanent alizarin crimson hue
- sap green
- Prussian blue
- ultramarine blue
- duochrome saguaro green
- burnt sienna
- raw umber
- graphite gray
- Payne's gray
- titanium white
- interference gold
- iridescent gold
- iridescent silver