

Tip #30

Catching the Sense of the Surf

A recent trip to San Francisco for the Sierra Summit 2005 found me enthralled by the western ocean once again, just as I was when I was 18-but this time I had my sketchbook with me!



Painting or drawing moving water on the spot is always a challenge - obviously, without a camera, you can't stop the motion of the waves. If you're working en plein air, you need to look for repeated patterns - you won't be doing a portrait of specific waves, but of the eternal dance of the ocean with the shore. That give and take has been going on since Creation, and it's as powerful and moving as ever.

Art 30-1, Sketch from my field journal, "September 10th" at Ocean Beach, part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area

Look for shapes, patterns, and "internal logic." Try to engage your memory, too...I drew the ink sketch for this at the beach, and added color while waiting at the airport for my flight home, remembering as much as I could about the colors, values, and shapes. It's good practice, and teaches us to observe carefully. Below are some of my reminders to myself...

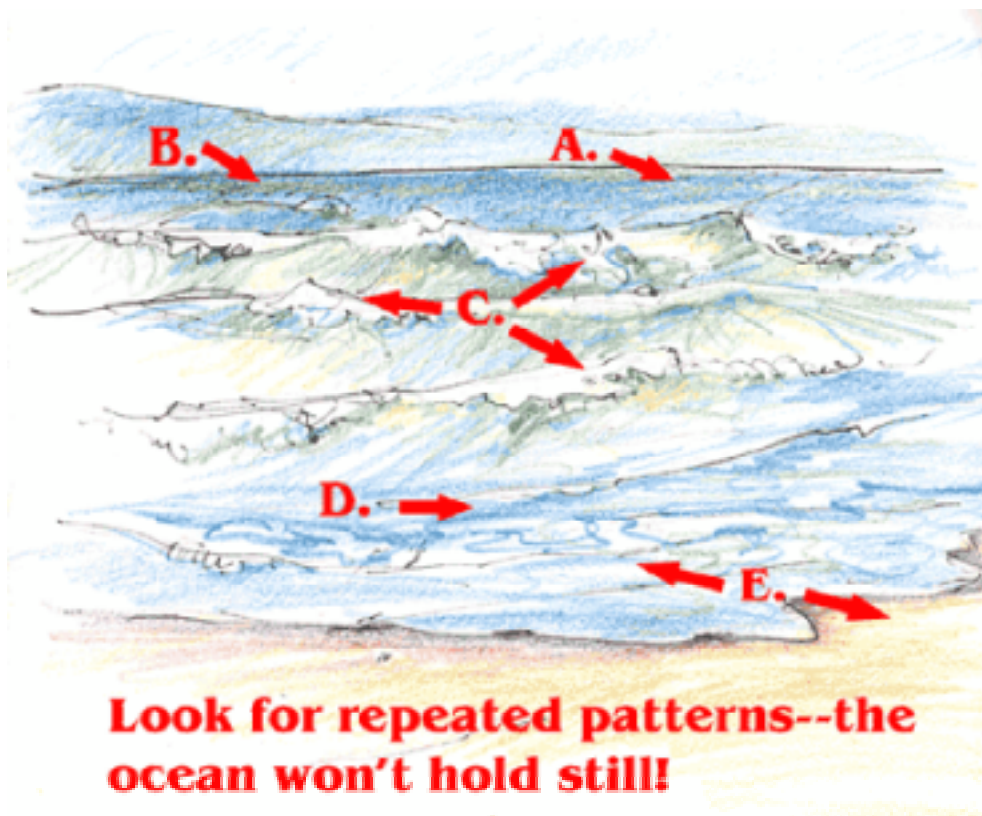
A.--Beyond the breakers the sea is smoother, more featureless, often darker (unless the sun is low enough to strike fire!), and the horizon is flat.

B.--Unless there is a storm, the farthest waves look smaller (both because they are and because of perspective-they'd look that way anyway.)

C.--Larger waves take up the next segment-here you'll see white foam, spray tossed into the air, huge blue-green curls. (Surfers live for this section!)

D.--Closer in, where waves begin to break against the shore, they're much smaller and simpler in overall form, but still with a complex pattern of foam.

E.--Finally, the backwash is much smoother and lighter colored, reflecting the sky. Then, where the water just touches the sand, there is usually a line much darker than the beach itself.



Art 30-1

(Later, when I downloaded my photos, I discovered I'd hit it pretty closely!)

Art 30-2, Detail sketch of waves

Suggest the action of the waves with relatively simple shapes, squiggles, and shadow contrasts. These were done VERY quickly, trying to capture the sense of the surf and it swept in to the shore.

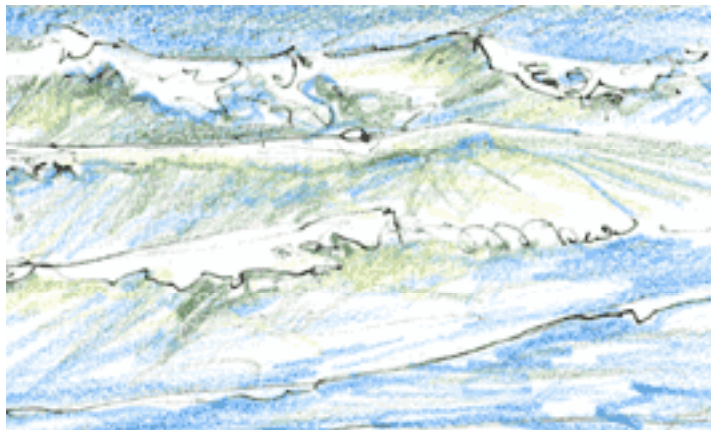
(Yes, I got wet! There's always that one wave that comes farther up the beach than you expect!)

Art 30-3, Small sketch of the Caribbean Sea

Like everything else in nature, the sea follows the rules of perspective, whether you're looking at the waves straight on, as above, or as they recede into the distance down the shore.

The waves were not nearly so big in this simple little sketch as they were in California, but the perspective shows clearly.

(On a rock-bound coast the challenge is different -some aspects are the same, but the point where the sea meets the land may be quite different! We'll address that in a future tip...)



Art 30-2



Art 30-3

For more on painting the sea, check my North Light book, *Watercolor Pencil Magic*, (pages 64-66) from your local bookstore, or from North Light Books, <http://www.artistsnetwork.com/nlbooks/index.asp>, or from Amazon, <http://www.amazon.com>, or buy it direct from me and have it signed, <http://www.cathyjohnson.info>.

I'll be addressing this subject in my online classes - check my website for more information on starting dates and so forth!

You'll find my artwork on new products in my Cafepress store at http://www.cafepress.com/cathy_johnson and original fine art auctions on eBay at <http://members.ebay.com/aboutme/cathyjohnsonart>.