ABOVE: "To get the look of the pitted and weather-beaten stone in ***Selinunte I*** (mixed media, 38x50), I sprinkled salt into the washes when they were wet," says Rubenstein. "As the ink wash dried, each grain of salt pulled a bit of dark ink around it, making a dense texture."

ART AMONG the RUINS

Ephraim Rubenstein's new series of mixed media drawings of ancient temples and cathedrals harnesses the expressive power of the wax-resist method.

BY JUDITH FAIRLY

GROWING UP IN NEW YORK CITY, Ephraim Rubenstein felt the power of art to transcend time and place at an early age. As a child, living in a loud, crowded urban milieu, he found a refuge among the tranquil galleries at the Brooklyn Museum. "The fact that a painting could create an alternative reality really got to me in an immediate way," he says. Rubenstein learned how to draw and paint from his grandfather, Edward H. Freedman, a commercial artist and illustrator, and continued his art education at the Art Students League of New York and Columbia University, where he received his undergraduate degree in art history and a master of fine arts degree in painting before embarking upon a career as artist and teacher.

Rubenstein has taught at the University of Richmond, the Rhode Island School of Design and the Maryland Institute College of Art. "I teach my students the importance of basic skills and of a thorough knowledge of their materials," he says.

"When students ask me, 'When will I be ready for better materials?' I tell them, 'When you can tell the difference between them.'" Rubenstein also encourages his students to be conversant in as many techniques as possible. "While it is imperative that they feel deeply about things, their feelings cannot be communicated without a language; if they are not intimate with the range, strengths and weaknesses of each medium, they cannot exploit its potential for expression."

Working in Series

Rubenstein tends to work in series, whether it's a cycle of paintings inspired by abandoned buildings in rural Virginia, sunny Italian landscapes, urban cityscapes, or a variety of still lifes, drawings, Vermeer-like interiors, or riverscapes inspired by the poems of Rainer Maria Rilke.

"On some level, painting all subjects is the same," says Rubenstein. "We do not paint with cloth or flesh or trees or stone; we paint with shapes of colored paint on a flat surface, and if we get it right, it will look like a piece of

BELOW: "Most of these temples have been on the ground at some point," says Rubenstein, "either through sheer entropy or through a cataclysmic event like an earthquake, and then they were rebuilt. So, at any given moment, the stones are moving, ever so slightly. It is this dynamic quality that I have tried to highlight in ***Agrigento I*** (mixed media; 38x50)."

Variations on a Theme

BY EPHRAIM RUBENSTEIN

Much like a printmaker who inks the plate differently for subsequent proofs, in some instances—for example, in ***Cathedral V*** (**A**) and ***Cathedral VI*** (**B**) (above; both mixed media, 50x38)—I have taken the same basic drawing and developed it two different ways. Drawing **A** is of a brighter, clearer day, and I have emphasized the sculptural forms of the gargoyles. In **B**, I tried to evoke a rainy day by keeping all of the forms softer and wetter, which makes the gargoyles' function as drain spouts more obvious.

The "mapping out" and the first waxing stages were identical for both drawings. But for **A**, I allowed the ink to spatter on dry paper so that the splashes and drips held their dynamic shapes. Then, for **B**, I kept the paper wet so that the ink washes dissolved into a more traditional wet-into-wet look.

While I was working on these, I went to an art supply store and asked to buy anything that made a black mark. I wanted to find an instrument that could put down the darkest, most velvety black. That material turned out to be a black Nupastel stick.

drapery or a figure or a landscape or a building. I am mostly interested in what I have to say, emotionally. If it takes a figure to say it or a foggy riverbank or a ruined Doric temple, so be it. Jamie Wyeth said that even a bale of hay can be a self-portrait if it is painted with feeling."

Resisting With Wax, Mixing Media

In his new series, Temples and Cathedrals, Rubenstein employs almost a dozen materials to construct dramatic mixed-media portraits of the remnants of lost empires and majestic feats of architecture. "The emotional appeal of the subject matter dictates the medium," says Rubenstein. The wax-resist technique allows him to unite the classical subject material with the abstract and uncontrollable properties of the medium, resulting in a dynamic chiaroscuro rendering that invests the monumental structures with movement and depth.

Wet and dry techniques collaborate in the creation of multilayered, large-scale works that tread the boundary between drawing and painting. Beginning with sheets of Lenox 100 paper (similar to paper used for printmaking), Rubenstein builds up layers composed of graphite, wax, ink, vine charcoal, compressed charcoal, Alphacolor Char-Kole, black Conté crayon, black Nupastel and black pastel that produce a tactile, velvety surface.

The wax-resist approach plays areas of light, where the paper is glazed with wax, against a wide range of darker tonal spaces. "I am not sure I would have been able to master the wax-resist technique without my experience in

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Wax-Resist With Ink, Charcoal, Conté Crayon and Pastel

BY EPHRAIM RUBENSTEIN


1


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4

1. Map out the drawing: This image shows the initial "mapping" stage of the drawing, which I ordinarily do on white Lenox 100 paper with a B, HB or F graphite pencil. I call this the "mapping" stage because it functions as a road map, telling me first where the wax is going to go and, later on, where the plane breaks, cast shadows and the like are. It is important to have a very firm, legible contour because when you get to the messy, wet part of the process, it is easy to lose the drawing in all of the ink washes.

2. Apply first wax-resist layer: At this point I identify those areas of the drawing that I wish to remain white. When I have located these, I protect them by drawing over them with the (invisible) wax. (I use finger-size pieces of wax that I cut off the block with a penknife). I then wet the paper lightly with clear water so that the surface will be receptive and even. Next I introduce a very light gray ink wash (what I call "gray No. 1") by diluting my black ink with a large proportion of water and brushing the ink onto the white paper. Those areas that I have "stopped-out" with the wax won't darken like the rest of the paper but will remain light.

3. Access the Wash and Resist: In this detail, you can see that, even though the wax acts as a resist to protect the light areas of the paper, the ink can bead up on the surface of the wax. You can wipe this off with a sponge or paper towel, or leave it (as I often do if it helps add to the texture I am trying to render).

4. Apply second wax-resist layer: At this stage I have a very light gray paper with selected areas of white shining through. I now try to identify those areas of the paper that I would like to remain light gray, and I draw over (protect) them with the wax. I again wet the paper with clear water and apply a slightly darker ink wash (my gray No. 2). When this dries, I have a slightly darker gray with areas of lighter gray and white shining through.

5. Note the protected light areas: You can see in this detail that, as you begin to build up the darks, the protected light areas glow in response. (This is very different from a light that is added on top; this light is shining from below, from the lowest layer of the paper.) This process of masking areas with wax and adding darker and darker ink washes can go on as many times as you like. I have done as many as five or six layers, but I generally get by with about three, as I did for this piece.

6. Begin to build up the darkest darks: Up until this stage, I work with the lightest lights in the drawing and am gradually making my way toward the darks. Now, I shift gears and, using my Char-Kole (extremely fine, very black charcoal particles compressed into sticks), I identify the very darkest areas of the drawing and begin to build these up as darks.

7. Think ahead when applying dark pigment: As you can tell in this detail, I do not really care about rendering at this stage—I care only about getting just the right amount of this densely compressed, extremely black charcoal down on the surface of the drawing. The reason I use the Char-Kole, as opposed to any other black stick, is that it's bound with gum arabic, which means that it is water-soluble—a crucial factor in the ink wash process (see images 8a and 8b).

I have to decide how much of the Char-Kole stick to lay down, depending on how dark I want any given area. If I want it superblack, I lay it on extremely thickly, working the pigment into the weave of the paper. If I want a lighter dark, I might just scumble the stick lightly across the surface of the paper, barely catching the fibers. Throughout this process, you have to decide ahead of time what effect you want and then prepare for it.

8a, 8b (Details) Apply water and manipulate the black ink wash: Now I take a 2-inch house-painting brush and introduce water into the areas of Char-Kole. As I rub the wet brush around in the dust, it begins to generate a beautiful black ink that I can spread, splash and push into whatever areas I want darks. The value of generating a black ink in this manner is that, unlike the shellac-based ink used earlier for the washes, this ink can be rewet, lightened and erased.

For me, this is the hardest but most exhilarating part of the process—hardest, because it can feel like everything is getting out of control, and you're


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8a


8b

forced to make split-second decisions about where to put darks before the ink dries; exhilarating, because you just have to let go and trust your instincts.

9. Adjust and refine with dry media: At this point (if everything has gone right), all the big darks and lights should be organized within the drawing. Once the paper dries, I go at it with vine charcoal, compressed charcoal, Conté crayon, Nupastel, black pastels and anything else and do whatever clarifying, adjusting or rendering that I want to the image, as I did with ***Selinunte II*** (mixed media, 50x38), my drawing of some of the ruins at the ancient Greek archaeological site Selinunte on the southern coast of Sicily.


9

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printmaking," says Rubenstein. "Working up an intaglio plate taught me to think in specific stages, to plan ahead and not to move on until I have done what I need to do at each stage."

A Complex Approach

Because the drawings are built up in as many as eight to 10 discrete stages, wax-resist is a method that cannot be done *alla prima*. Rubenstein switches between his easel and the floor, where he lays the paper to do the washes (see Studio Setup, below). Some drawings can be finished in a day; others take many weeks.

The complexity of this approach (and the unwieldy size of the paper) requires that the drawings be completed in the studio rather than on location, and he relies on reference photographs, such as those, which he took by the hundreds, of the temples at Paestum and Pompeii. "If you have spent a lifetime painting in front of your subject, you know what nature looks like, and you learn to use the photograph and to compensate for its deficiencies," he says. "If you have not, you become a slave to the photo and you get into trouble."

Materials

The wax-resist technique is a mixed media process, so Rubenstein uses many different materials.

Surface: Lenox 100 paper, which is made of stratified layers that allow the paper to expand and contract upon wetting and drying, so the paper stays relatively flat ("I generally use the 50x38 sheets," says Rubenstein, "but you could go either up or down in size. You can also use 140-lb. **Arches** watercolor paper, but it's more expensive.")

Easel: large drawing board with bulldog clips

Media:

graphite pencils (HB, F, B)

wax (paraffin or canning wax, usually sold in a package of brick-shaped blocks as **Gulf** wax), cut into finger-sized pieces

Higgins, **Pelikan** or **Winsor & Newton** black ink (waterproof, lightfast)

Quartet/Weber-Costello Alphacolor Char-Kole sticks (extremely fine black charcoal particles compressed and bound in gum Arabic, which makes it water-soluble); other compressed charcoal

vine charcoal

black **Nupastel**s

black **Conté** crayons

Rembrandt and **Sennelie**r black soft pastels

Brushes: Natural-hair Chinese bristle brushes—1-, 2- and 3-inches (good quality house-painting brushes work just fine)

Other:

Lascaux fixative

Fan to expedite drying

Pocket knife for cutting and scraping down the wax

Table salt ("Sprinkling salt into wet areas of the wash creates the pitted, distressed look of old stone," says Rubenstein. "This is an old printmaker's technique akin to 'foul-biting'; as the wash dries, each grain of salt pulls some moisture and the dark ink toward itself, making a distinct dark halo around a lighter center.")

Studio Setup

BY EPHRAIM RUBENSTEIN

This is the drawing after the first or second wax stage. I do the dry parts of the process—drawing, applying the wax and so forth—with the surface upright on the easel. I do the wet parts—the ink washes—with the board flat on the floor. That way, I do not worry about gravity pulling all of my washes in one direction, and I can move around the image freely, attacking it from all sides.

I have everything I may need handy on my taboret because it only takes a couple of seconds for a value to dry and be no longer adjustable. I try to do as much of the work as I can standing up; remember, these are large, expressive drawings that are meant to be read from a distance. I constantly need to back away from them just to see what I've done. As you can see, I use clips to hold the drawing to the board; I do not tape the paper down.

LEFT: The great European cathedrals were built over a period of 500 years. "Over that time," explains Rubenstein, "the relationship between the size of the windows and the walls changed considerably. The cathedral in ***Cathedral VII*** (mixed media, 38x50) is particularly massive and fortresslike, and its gargoyles are very old, looking more like ancient animal figures than what we think of as gargoyles."

Perfecting Techniques

It took Rubenstein close to 10 years before he felt as if he had achieved some level of mastery of the wax-resist technique. A friend, David Dodge Lewis, a professor of fine arts at Hampden-Sydney College in Virginia, introduced him to the method more than 20 years ago. "Lewis's work, some of the most powerful and engaging you will ever see, has pushed me to get as much emotional intensity out of my subject matter as possible," Rubenstein says.

He had previously spent another decade making prints—etchings, dry-points and some lithographs—and he also works in oil, pastel, gouache and a variety of mixed media. "All of these processes have taught me something, have added some dimension to my work," he says. "Many artists I know stopped drawing once they got out of art school. They get preoccupied with painting projects, and drawings do not sell. But I think that is unfortunate. Besides the obvious pleasures of the materials, drawing keeps you honest and keeps your thinking and your hand-eye coordination sharp."

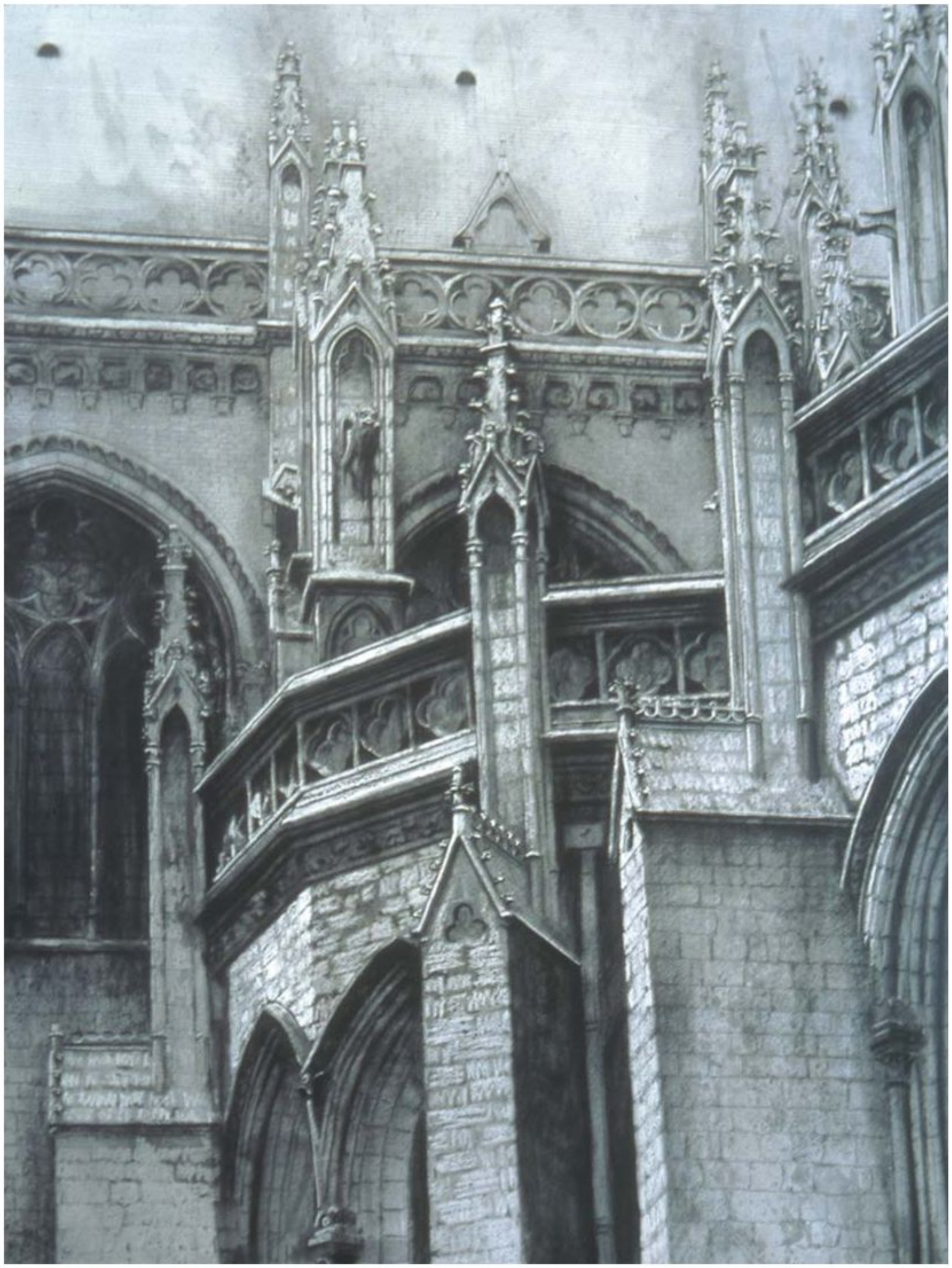
Many years ago, Rubenstein attended an exhibition at the Boston Museum of the works of Camille Pissarro that had a profound effect on the way he thought about color. "It made me realize how brown all of my paintings were and that I had to start to explore warm/cool relationships rather than just value ones." Though drawings don't attract as large an audience as paintings do, Rubenstein says he wants to return to the "basic power" of black and white.

In this series, he explores the warm and cool nuances of black (and white); while some ostensibly black materials tend toward the warmer brown tones, others veer toward the cooler blues.

Holistic Expression

Rubenstein is currently on the faculty of the Art Students League of New York and the National Academy of Design School; he also teaches life drawing to medical students in the Program in Narrative Medicine at Columbia University. The class is part of an innovative program that helps the student "to see the patient in a holistic manner rather than as a sum of separate parts, to humanize medicine," he says.

"During the course of my career, I have gone back and forth between two poles: sometimes drawing and painting in a linear, tighter style with a higher degree of finish, sometimes becoming looser and more painterly,



RIGHT: The view in ***Cathedral II*** (mixed media, 50x38) has a tremendous amount of architectural information in it—the windows, balconies and all the decorative carvings on the facade. "The richness of the ornamentation was overwhelming," says Rubenstein, "so the trick was to keep all of the details in balance so as not to lose a sense of the whole. As I worked through the later stages of the drawing, I ended up removing details, not adding them."

ABOVE: "I sat for hours and watched the sun and shadows move across this wall of pillars for ***Paestum IV*** (mixed media, 38x50). The contrast between this ancient building and the fleeting effects of light was so mesmerizing, I hardly knew where to start to capture the subtle differences in tone. This was by far the most complex wax-resist drawing I had ever done."

emphasizing the materials and language of painting more expressively," says Rubenstein. "Even if you have got your technique under your belt at an early age, technique only gets you so far. Struggling with the initial concept for a painting constitutes the greatest challenge for me," says Rubenstein. "There is always a gap between the depth of your feelings and what comes out on the paper." ■

JUDITH FAIRLY is a writer, artist and third-generation New Mexican who lives in Texas.

Meet Ephraim Rubenstein

Ephraim Rubenstein has had 10 one-person exhibitions in New York City: seven at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery, one at Tatistcheff & Co., and two at George Billis Gallery in Chelsea, where he now shows. He has exhibited his work at the Butler Institute of American Art (Youngstown, Ohio), the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (Richmond, Virginia), the Maier Museum of Art (Lynchburg, Virginia), and the National Academy of Design School (New York City), where he won the Emil and Dines Carlsen Award in painting and the Beatrice and Sidney Laufman Award in Drawing. His work can be found in numerous public and private collections, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and three of his paintings are currently on loan to the U. S. Department of State as part of its Art in Embassies Program. Learn more at www.ephraimrubenstein.com.