

CUISINE

So just what was the recipe for the Curb Cuts?

Sometimes the artist is coy, evasive or inscrutable: mixed media, mixed technique, *détrempe*. And sometimes he is all too frank: the artist's blood, his urine, elephant dung. An old friend always claimed to use only monkey-nut oil. No such thing. Chefs play the same game, a pinch of this or a dram of that; whatever I happen to have on hand; pop it into the oven until done ... it is all cuisine.

Ingredients:

- Rice paper
- Acrylic binder
- Plaster (or marble dust)
- Powdered pigments
- Paint sticks / Oil bars
- Acrylic gesso
- Oil colors
- Linseed oil
- Paste wax

You will also need:

- Measuring tape
- Straight edge
- Scissors
- Push pins
- Pencil
- Masking tape
- Bowls
- Brushes
- Rags
- Palette knife
- Turpentine (to clean up)

I start out worrying about dimensions and scale. Am I thinking big or small, horizontal or vertical, square or elongated? The support I work on is rice paper and it comes in sheets roughly 73 x 40 inches. So the question is, do I use a full sheet or do I cut it down and do two medium sized ones, or into three, or six ... or all the way to the smallest size, 10 x 6 inches? Or am I feeling expansive and

dare I commit to multi-panel works: diptychs, triptychs: doubling up, tripling up sheets? Today, however, I decide to cut one sheet into three strips of 40 x 24 and then creating 12 small formats out of part of another sheet. One of my great sorrows is that I will wind up with a strip of left-over paper at the end of a full sheet of small formats, losing about 2 inches.

The Belgian artist Pierre Alechinsky once explained to me that the only paper he used, or that anybody ought to use, is rice paper. I asked him where he got such large sheets of the stuff and he told me Hong Kong. By the ream. After a long and what seemed like futile search I finally found a source somewhat closer to home and in rolls of 20 sheets rather than 500. I have been hooked on Akawara machine-made pinkish paper—for there exist a greenish hue as well—since 1990.

So out comes my roll of paper and I extract two sheets, then carefully roll back up the remaining paper. I measure off 24, 48, 72 inches, first one side and then the other and, using straight edge and pencil, I partition the sheet with two clean lines. It is already looking good. Next comes the cutting. Scissors sliding through the paper blades agape and, just as your kindergarten teacher told you, keeping close to the line. The 12 small formats require more measuring, more lines—a grid in fact—and more cutting. And, alas, always that darned left-over strip.

I work on the wall so we have to pin up the paper with my paint covered metal push pins. My painting walls are tattooed with the outlines of previous works and the drip lines beneath lead to pools congealed color on the floor. The outlines make the paper placement easier and once all the sheets are pinned at the top corners I step back to check verticality and spacing but also to admire what I call the Fontana Effect: the paper curls up from the bottom corners and creates sail-like volumes.

After tacking down the bottom I measure the one inch margins and mark them top and bottom, and on the long sides, the middle. Now out comes the masking tape. While it may seem banal, the tape question is one of the trickiest: If it is too sticky the masking tape will not let go of the paper and tear it; not sticky enough the paper pulls out from under the tape or pulls off the wall. One hopes for the best. Then comes one of the best parts of this process: I love the sound of the tape as it comes off the spool. Tearing, roaring, crashing down. Amazingly loud. Once the tape is on and silence has returned, I again step back to admire the disposition: no longer sculptural but planar.

And now for some color. Get out your mixing bowls. I use plastic bowls with lids. Add a half cup plaster and a teaspoon of a powdered pigment. We will use three colors, a red, a yellow and a blue. Mix together with a cup or so of acrylic binder, but not too well: I want a lumpy texture. Now with our large round brushes or with a palette knife we cover the paper allowing a nice bumpy relief to develop. I use a different color for each sheet of paper and alternate for the little guys as well.

Red yellow blue, red yellow blue, red yellow blue. Step back and admire. Let dry. This will take several hours depending on how thickly the acrylic mixture is applied. I usually let them set overnight.

While the nascent paintings are drying, a parenthetical remark or two about glue. Pierre Aleschinsky, when he told me about rice paper also told me about how to glue it to canvas, a technique with a French name, *marouflage*. He told me to use “any vinavilic glue. Egbert’s in America is very good, it has a cow on the bottle.” Egbert’s ... Elmer’s. And “vinavilic” is not a Croatian spa but a poly-vinyl resin “Vinavil.” And for quite a while I did happily use Egbert’s, as I still call it, until I discovered Primal aka AC33, an acrylic resin beloved of fine arts restorers and me as well.

Once they are dry, time to apply the second coat. I usually alternate the colors: the red will go on the yellow, the yellow on the blue and blue on red. And once again, let dry. With the two colors superimposed we have created a third, more nuanced tone. But most importantly, the acrylic binder will seal and protect the paper from the invasive nature of the next layers.

The time has come to get out the daybook and choose which sketches I want to develop. There need to be three which will be happy to be enlarged and a dozen others content to remain of modest size. The drawing is done with a black oil stick, or oil bar, depending on who sells them. Whatever they call them, they remain great big greasy crayons. Terrific drawing tools, they give a frank and unfussy line. With all the lumps, drips, and other irregularities of the surface it is not easy to control the oil stick but then that allows for a more open drawing leaving room for accident and surprise.

The next step is scumbling. I sometimes think that I do it just because I love the word. It means applying an opaque and usually lighter layer over a painted surface. I use a palette knife to scrape very unevenly some acrylic gesso—with a little off-white powdered pigment mixed in to give it some “tooth”—over the acrylic and give volume to the forms created by the drawn line. So at this point my works in progress are black line drawings on very mottled, splotchy surfaces. The black paint stick will take a couple of days to cure, so I will let these adolescent paintings rest.

More color! The oil stick has passed the tacky paint test so today we will put a patina of oil color over the whole surface of each painting, big and small. Squeeze out a nice nightcrawler of color into a plastic bowl and mix a in bit of linseed oil to thin it out. Then apply with a rag, rubbing in the color to all the nooks and crannies. With a clean rag rub off the excess and burnish the surface. The acrylic gesso and the acrylic binder each will take the color differently and the result is a complex surface with a marked relief, a surprise to me each time. Once again there is drying time. Here it will depend on the color, blues and greens will be quicker and reds and yellows slower. And on the quality of the

paint: more wax filler will make it quicker, more oil slower.

For years the next layer would have been paste wax with a little pigment mixed in. This step has dual, or, in fact, triple purpose: to seal the work and to give it a uniform matt finish but also to add a last bit of color and an even greater relief. The Curb Cuts demand that I flatten them out and reduce them to two tones, but with lots of accidentals. So, once again, out come the paint stick/oil bars. A great big one called “antique white” and a smaller one called ... “antique white.” Completely different the one from the other! The smaller one, actually called a “Paint Stick,” is really quite white and the fatter one, from the august firm Sennelier, is warmer, creamier. I apply the two whites in such a way that the ground color filters through, as though in a fog. Let dry.

Now comes the wax. But before scraping it on, rubbing it in and wiping it off, let me say that this part of my cuisine was very problematic. Here we are in the domain of encaustic, an ancient technique heavily charged with myth and prejudice. All you really need is wax and pigment. To get the wax into a liquid or paste form you can either heat it or dissolve it with turpentine. The mess I made melting wax scared me and I did not like heating volatile mixtures so, after experimenting with both approaches I settled for a third: buying Dorland’s wax medium ready made. I will mix two batches of the wax paste, one with an asphalt colored pigment and the other with a lighter greenish earth color. I will spread the asphaltum on the creamier areas and the terra verde on the whiter then rub them in with a rag. Let dry for the last time. And that’s it: the paintings are finished. All that is left is to remove the masking tape, zipping down quickly but carefully, like Band-Aids.

So there we have it: cuisine. *Bon Appétit!*