

Fixatives and Varnishes—Another Journey

Karen Rhiner (CA)

First of all, I have no illusions about my work. People at the Louvre in 2314 will not be fussing over removing dirty varnish from my work—because my work won't be in the Louvre, and it won't be around in 2314! So I don't need an isolation coat. I work for love and not for sales or big publicity—I just have fun.

Somewhere around 2004, I got disgusted with having to put my drawings behind glass (plexi or whatever) because no matter how well hung a show is, there is still a glare on that glass creating a barrier between the work and the viewer. I figured if acrylic and oil painters don't have that barrier, why should I? So I started trying things.

Problem #1: The support

I tried gluing my drawings to stretched canvas, but I feared the flexibility would wreck the paper—the boing-boing effect, you know—when you tap the canvas. Then I discovered Ampersand cradled boards. (I've read some of you folks talking about boxes, which I think would be limiting. There is a lot more variety of cradled boards. Google on Dick Blick. I usually use the 2".)

Problem #2: Getting the drawing on the board

I asked a respected book artist friend, Genie Shenk (<http://www.centerforbookarts.org/artistmember/bio.asp?artistID=294>) what she uses to stick the drawing onto the board. You know how obsessive book artists are! She suggested using double tack—so I trotted off to Dick Blick, bought a sheet, and began the process of learning how to use it properly. Then I taught the process to Ester Roi, who has conquered the vexing problems inherent in its application beautifully. The woman's a genius.

Problem #3: My cut-and-paste drawings

It's fun to cut drawings up and reassemble them, but you can't stick irregularly shaped pieces down with double tack. I

tried Genie's suggestion of Yes glue, but didn't like it. So I went back to my old standby of matte medium. Any excess can be wiped off with a damp paper towel—easy. Weight while drying makes it stay flat. BUT, when I'd get a bit of the medium on the virgin colored pencil, it would sometimes pull or smear the color.

Problem #4: Keeping the pencil color from smearing

I figured I needed to spray the drawing before gluing it—and before varnishing it. I used my old favorite Krylon Crystal Clear, but it crackled and flaked. I tried a couple others and wasn't happy with them, either.

Stumbling around Dick Blick one day, I saw a spray can of Prismacolor Final Gloss Fixative. I figured if Prismacolor made that and the pencils, too, maybe it would work. It did.

I learned that I needed about five coats, and that the first one had to be very, very light because too much fixative on the virgin pencil would run and smear the pencil just like matte medium would. A couple light coats, then a couple medium ones, and a final have-at-it did the job.

I wipe with a paper towel after the third coat to make sure color isn't coming off—and the roughness of the paper towel helps kick off any dusty things that have gotten stuck in the spray.

I use gloss because there are two types of people in the world: gloss people and matte people. I'm a gloss person. I love the glow of oil paintings. I also learned about the problems inherent in matte coatings like you did, Jeffrey (see page 41, January 2014 issue of TTP)!

Problem #5: Varnish

If my work is going to be floating around in galleries and shows, it has to be protected. It's just paper, after all. Brushing varnish onto paper that hasn't been coated with the Prismacolor fixative will just pull the color. When I was in Wayne Wilcoxon's studio (<http://www.flatfishstudio.com/>)



"Looking" (24 x 18 x 2) by Karen Rhiner (CA). She says, "Yes, there are drawings on all four 2" sides!"

one day, he told me he had tested numerous varnishes and liked Golden Polymer Varnish with UVLS (gloss).

I tried it, and it's worked beautifully for me for ten years. I make sure I thin it with water as recommended and brush it on with a very soft paintbrush. I use five thin coats. It works! Ester has talked to the Golden people, who said they are quite sure that five coats will provide good light protection.

I taught all this to Ester Roi, my genius art friend, and she has blogged excellent instructions. She's perfected everything I've discovered and explains it better than I ever could at <http://esterroi.com/blog/category/framing>.

Karen is a member of CPSA DC 202–San Diego, CA, and joined CPSA in 1999. To see more of Karen's work, visit <http://www.westcoastdrawing.com>, the organization Karen founded in 2003. Her website is <http://www.rhinerart.com>, although she says, "it's been a while since I've updated it."