

Complete Guide to Oil Mediums: What, When, Why, & How

# the Artist's magazine

30<sup>th</sup>  
ANNIVERSARY  
1984-2014

Joseph  
Raffael  
Moving Toward  
the Light

What's Hot? Encaustic!

May 2014  
[www.artistsmagazine.com](http://www.artistsmagazine.com)





A renowned master  
talks about the journey  
and joy of art and life  
from his studio on  
the Côte d'Azur.

## Joseph Raffael: Moving Toward the

# Light

BY BETSY DILLARD STROUD

**RIGHT:** Raffael's still lifes transcend any modern definition of realism. The peony in *New Cycle* (watercolor, 73½x89) pulls us into a complex composition of ambiguous passages.

All images in this article are courtesy of Nancy Hoffman Gallery, New York City.





"For me, painting is a mysterious, wordless journey, and I try to impose as few ideas on it as possible."  
Joseph Raffael

**A**N ARTIST WHO FITS no decided mold. An artist who left the American art scene for an idyllic sanctuary in Cap d'Antibes that provides him with the inspiration, the grace, and the solitude to create. An artist whose iconic paintings, monumental in scale, and masterly use of color already place him in the preeminent echelon of 21st century painters. The artist is Joseph Raffael, and the following is a précis of our conversations over a four month period.

**Betsy Dillard Stroud:** Your paintings exude a shimmering essence, a profound quality that depicts the evanescence of nature.

**Joseph Raffael:** That's good to hear, because what occurs in the painting is Life, bubbling and alive, although I am not consciously aiming for that. Actually I "aim" to be open to what Creative Spirit wants to express in the painting as the painting comes through. For me, painting is the subject of the painting.

The images of the path (i.e., flowers, water, fish) are just the shell of the body of the painting. The visual events which take place in the actual painting process are everything to me.

**Your work captures a specific moment in time—distilling that quality for the viewer.**

The idea of staying in the moment has been a constant exercise for me for decades. Often as I paint, what I consider to be off the mark, these disappointments, turn out to be the heartbeat of the painting and often the most unexpected, most successful, and creatively vibrant parts of the piece.

That is one of the reasons I love watercolor. It has a mind of its own. It dries in ways I can never imagine. It insists upon being itself.

**RIGHT:** In *Flower Dreaming* (watercolor, 77½x87), a bevy of rich reds contrasts with the border, whose spaces between brushstrokes draw us back to the light.





**BELOW:** In *Crescendo* (watercolor, 53½x75½), recognizable and unidentifiable forms become one universe of color, life, and spirit.

In *Flower Dream* (see pages 48–49), the pale green-gold border is a perfect foil to the brilliant magenta, reds, and pinks in the hydrangea and the bright yellow, magenta, reds, and cerulean blue in the background. How did your borders originate?

About 35 years ago when I was doing lithographs with David Salgado, the tusche brush marks left over from the lithographs were so beautiful that, at David's suggestion, I began incorporating that look into my paintings as a border.

With *Crescendo* (below) and *Renewal* (pages 46–47), there's a total integration of the painting and the borders. I see koi and yet somehow, simultaneously, they dissolve into sparkling light and color, in communion with water and tiny, mysterious particles.

My artist friend Madison Cawein calls those mysterious particles "celestial squiggles." Yes, I have fallen in love with these little granular events, streaming and speckling—spermatozoa, and amoeba, and stardust—and it all has

come about in the most natural of ways.

In some of your paintings, there is a Baroque quality of lavishly colored backgrounds acting as a melodic weaving of forms that resemble rich fabrics. How did your experiences in the world of textile design influence your paintings?

After finishing at Yale, I worked at Jack Prince Design Studio in New York City. We did designs of our own invention, and if

a company bought a design, we'd have to make a repeat—we had to retain and reproduce the spirit of the original improvisation and extend it so it could be reproduced more fully for fabric, always keeping the same character.

It was essential to repeat it mathematically—vertically and laterally—so that the original image could be reproduced. What a great drawing lesson for me—hundreds and hundreds of excellent drawing hours, having to reproduce identically the spirit and substance of an image. In later years, that lesson helped me enormously when I worked from photographs.

Would you give us a synopsis of the actual process you go through, beginning to end?

I project the photographic image onto a piece of paper attached to the wall and then draw it in. When I complete the drawing, I attach the paper to two tubes and place it on my

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**BELOW:** (A) The computer regards the painting; the painting regards the computer. On the computer screen is the photo that Raffael is working from. The artist's work table shows an array of containers of intense, transparent watercolors. (B) Later, Raffael will attach the painting to a wall, as he works on the border.





## Like Dreams

In *The Nature of Spirit, the Spirit of Nature*, the yellow is as dazzling as sunlight; a red-yellow rose blooms in its prime, and a passage of rich cerulean blue exudes vibrancy. Is there a dichotomy between

spirit and nature? Raffael writes: "It's all a dream. Who creates the scenarios for dreams? Where do they issue from? Why are they so mysterious? Dreams are like paintings."



ABOVE: *The Nature of Spirit, the Spirit of Nature* (watercolor, 55x58)



ABOVE: *Renewal* (watercolor, 79½x89)





always paint details of details, which are far from their original forms. In essence, when I paint, I let go of the mind and, for the most part, all planning, all devices, all conscious thoughts, and I basically move through the process as witness.

**As I think about your color, which is intense, opulent, resplendent, I am reminded of your time with the renowned expert on color, Josef Albers, your professor at Yale.**

The basic influence of Albers remains with me, but not on the conscious plane. It is in me. He was among thousands of color influences I have cherished. Other color events affecting me as a child and as an adult: seeing sunsets and sunrises in the skies and reflections on the water; my wife Lannis's blue eyes; the light from behind the television screen; and the color I now see since my cataract operation.

**You mark each day, not only with your painting, but with your journaling. In September, 2013, you wrote:**

"While talking to a friend, I summed up chronologically recent challenges and accomplishments in my life. Before I knew it, I was up to that very moment in time, concluding the list with 'I am now moving toward the light.'"

**As I look at Raffael's paintings, forms dissolve and reveal a new universe of light charged with a confluence of incredible colors**

**perhaps not found in anyone's vocabulary. The great theologian Thomas Merton wrote: "The last great mystery to be solved will be the mystery of color." Surely the answer to that mystery lies in the paintings of Joseph Raffael as he moves toward the light. ■**

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painting table. Then, I begin painting the image in a scroll-like manner. I go from area to area, whenever an entryway shows itself to me. The next day, the same process begins again. I rarely see the whole image because the scroll stays rolled. I do take in-progress photos, to be reassured that something has actually been accomplished.

The process is an abstract one because I

**LEFT:** In *Flower Dream* (watercolor 53x75¼), a hydrangea anchors itself to the border with the strength of one perfectly painted leaf.