

Artist finds expression in palette of powder coatings

A self-taught artist wields a spray gun instead of an artist's brush, using powder coatings to break artistic ground and render the masters in a modern light.

Steve Foley Senior Editor

Susan Coughlan became an artist by working with a different kind of palette—powder coatings. She didn't start with temperas, evolve to oils, or dabble in watercolors. Instead, she met a man who developed powder coatings, a meeting that changed her life forever—she had met her husband. But she also found a new path that inspired her to leave a stable career and become an artist. For Coughlan, powder coatings were downright inspirational: “When I saw what the materials were and what I could do with them, I had to start creating with them.”

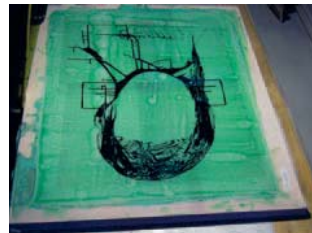
Coughlan draws inspiration from her surroundings in Wrightwood, Calif., where she lives on the edge of a forest with the mountains as a backdrop. She finds guidance in and material for her work through contemporary artists, such as Miro, Kadinsky, Chagall, Mondrian, Giacometti, Georgie O’Keeffe, and Elise Armitage. “Art has too long been ignored; it’s necessary in one’s life,” Coughlan said.

Her passion led her to develop a painting process that no one has ever done, combining powder, painting tools, computer imaging software, electrostatic equipment, and a souped-up hot plate. “I am so pleased to have been able to put this whole process together, to start where I did, when I did,” she said. “In terms of all the materials and processes that have been developed...you don’t work in a vacuum. Nobody does. To have all these things come together so that I can do this is a real thrill.”



Applying the powder base

A sheet of aluminum serves as the canvas. Coughlan applies a powder base that is 2 mils thick. The base color can be white, black, or sometimes transparent. Next, a radiant heater on a propane tank partially cures and sets the powder. Coughlan watches for the material to transition from a very flat, dull, no-gloss finish until it gets really glossy, indicating the powder is crosslinking. “I’m concerned that it crosslinks enough so that the powder will hold to the base and it will hold anything I put on top of it,” she said. “As I go, I have to heat each layer that I put on.”



Transferring the image to canvas

Before applying the powder base, Coughlan generates the image for the piece in several steps. Using cotton-type cord dipped in inks and dyes that are mixed with materials used for blowing bubbles, the artist makes images, such as the woman’s face, onto canvas or foam core. Coughlan takes a photograph of the image and makes a transparency using Adobe Photoshop 7. The transparency is used to generate the silk screen. Shining a light on the transparency for 20 to 30 minutes washes out the black section. Coughlan lays the powder-coated aluminum sheet flat, puts the silk screen on top of it, and pushes the powder through to generate the image on the canvas. The fine-grained powder easily goes through the size 10 XX silk screen. “I want a fine, real thin base that’s smooth, flat, and without pinholes,” she said. “The integrity of the work is important to me.”





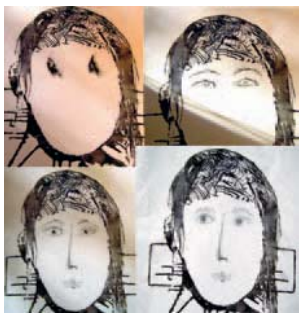
Cleaning and setting the image

Coughlan uses a kneaded eraser to clean up the image before setting the powder. A converted hot plate cures the powder on the canvas. The hot plate can be positioned above or below the work. (Because this is a flat piece, the hot plate will be positioned below the work.) Coughlan places the piece on a grid and moves the image around until all the desired parts are set by the heat source.



Adding color

Next, Coughlan brushes in bright colors in the earrings. First, she applies the red and orange and then sets it with heat. Next, she adds yellow. After applying the colored powders, she uses a kneaded eraser to clean up the powder and make sure no errant colors are outside the area before setting the powder. "If I put large quantities of powder on, I have to set them pretty quickly," Coughlan said. "You can't disturb the work. I have had pieces that I have worked on for too long and bumped them and then lost them. It's like not saving a file. As long as it's in powder, however, I can change it. Once it's heated, I have to overcoat."



Making faces

After setting the outline of the woman's figure, Coughlan applies powder with a brush to make the facial features. The powder affords flexibility. After applying a dab of material, the powder can be spread around to achieve different looks. After deciding on the look of the eyes, Coughlan's daughter, Tracie, helps with the nose and lips. With the facial features finalized, the image is set on the grid and set by heat from the hot plate. "With liquid, you put it on and that's pretty much where it is and where it's got to stay," Coughlan said. "With powder, you can move it and change it and get it to where you like it. That's the difference."



Masking and spraying the pedestal

Coughlan uses the powder gun to apply powder for the pedestal. Before applying powder, she masks the area around it with sticky notes. After shooting the powder, she pulls the sticky notes off and cleans the work again with a kneaded eraser. She also uses a template to mask off two areas within the pedestal. After setting the main color of the pedestal, she then fills in the two box-shaped areas; one in green and the other in blue.



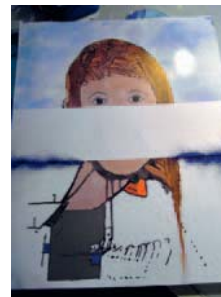
Applying skin tone without powder

To achieve skin tone, Coughlan uses a mica pigment that doesn't have a carrier. She has used powder previously to get skin tones, but she found that there were too many separated colors that she didn't want to be concerned with mixing together. "The pigments give a shimmer that reflects a soul-like quality," she said. "You get a little glow from them."



Dripping the horizon

Coughlan masks the horizon with sticky notes and drops powder onto the masked area. She then tilts the canvas and lets the powder fall off the edge and onto the canvas below. The powder runs down like dripping paint, reminiscent of Jackson Pollack. She then cleans off the



areas she didn't want the powder on with a kneaded eraser and then removes the sticky notes. "You don't want to drop a lot of powder onto the piece," she said. "It can go all over."

Coughlan said that after doing the horizon, she thought it was placed too high, so she repositioned the mask, dropped powder onto the work, and reset the horizon. After curing, however, the area appeared too dark, so she lightly dropped white powder onto the painting to lighten it.



Finishing the work

After a number of modifications and detailing, such as rescreening the image to intensify certain areas of the image and adding unground resin chip as a highlight for the eyes, the piece goes through a final cure. After that a new medium has created a new art form that acknowledges its forbearers. "To me it's amazing," Coughlan said. "Some of the images are just startling. Stunning."



Works by the artist



Powder reproduction



Drawing study

Works in translation

A portion of Coughlan's work consists of using powder to reproduce pieces by artists such as this study of a baby's face (above) by Leonardo da Vinci. Powder offers a translation of an artist's work—an opportunity to revisit or encounter for the first time a piece from a different vantage point provided by powder. Translating the piece allows Coughlan to see their work through her eyes as she generates it. "Powder helps me get my ideas to other people and shows other artists' work to more people," she said. "It's about looking. It always has been and always will be. What are you going to take in and what are you going to get out? What's the best you can do with it?"

Powder allows the art to reach some unexpected audiences. Coughlan used powder in chip form to render the baby's blue eyes. In addition to producing a beautiful and vibrant image, the powder makes the work very durable and tactile. Coughlan can show this work to a friend who is also a painter that has macular degeneration. Her friend experiences these works through touch. "It's another way to pass art on."



Powder painting on metal, paper, and stone



Cityscape-Grattage on 28-gauge steel

Coughlan uses two metal types: 28-gauge steel and aluminum. The steel has to be cut and treated before use. Sometimes, she abrades the steel using a sanding disk and then shoots a transparent powder on the surface, applying enough coating to cover the texture. This base provides depth to the colors applied afterwards. Coughlan gets thin aluminum plates from a newspaper house. They're lightweight and easy to hold. She cleans the aluminum with alcohol. The surface isn't shiny and it's porous enough for the powder to adhere to it.

Artist and His Model on 140# cold-press watercolor paper

Coughlan also applies powder to canvas, paper, and stone. She lays 140-pound, cold-press watercolor paper or canvas flat and applies the powder with a brush. Despite not taking a ground, some attraction exists between powder and paper. The material goes out in a thin film. "With powder, there are grains that go all over the place, and it tends to make a mess sometimes," she said. "I control it with a kneaded eraser. In the case of the stone, I push the powder through the silkscreen to get the image onto the stone without shooting a base."

Coughlan and her husband, David, own a business in which he custom tints powder coatings and makes other specialty materials. Through him, Coughlan learned how to get the materials to blend together and how to pigment powders to make a specific color. David has mixed specific colors for her paintings, but this is a rarity. Instead, Coughlan works with samples of powders that her husband is developing for customers. "Or if somebody makes a sample and they don't like it, I get the powder," she said. "It's a use for materials that otherwise might be discarded." **PC**

Powder coatings: **DuPont Powder Coatings USA, Houston, Tex. 713/939-4000. www.dupontpowder.com**

Powder coatings: **Spraylat, Gainesville, Tex. 940/665-9590. www.spraylat.com**

Application equipment: **ITW Gema, Indianapolis. 317/298-5000. www.itwgema.com**

Custom powder coatings: **Polychem Industries, Pinon Hills, Calif. 760/868-5282. www.polychemindustries.com**

Editor's note: For more information about this topic, see the Article Index in the Reference & Buyer's Resource Issue, *Powder Coating* vol. 14, no. 10 (December 2003), or visit [www.pcoating.com] and click on Article Index.

The artist can be contacted at [thefineline@snowline.net]. To see recent works, visit the Orlando Gallery, Encino, Calif. Upcoming exhibits in July 2004 include BMW Artfest at O'Fest, Pasadena, Calif.; and Orange County Center for Contemporary Art, Santa Ana, Calif.