



ALSO IN THIS ISSUE



2026 Online Workshops

Workshop 2 with Jane Beata
is now open!



Ready Cut Watercolor

100% Cotton, 100% ready to frame.



Ambassador Challenge

Got 15 minutes? Join Sofia
Pavan Macias for her tips on
squeezing some art into your day.



Art FAQ

Buckled watercolor paintings got
you down? Check out our tips and
tricks for safely flattening your art.

MAIN FEATURE

A Study in Light and Form on Toned Paper

By Ryan Mirzaun



I am obsessed with Strathmore's 400 Series tan toned sketchbooks! It has been my go to sketchbooks for the past 13 years.

It all started in 2004 when my dad came home with a copy of The Lord of the Rings The Return of the King that he had rented from

our local video store in the Bronx. As we got to the end credits, I was in awe as I saw Alan Lees drawings flashing on the screen that were done on toned paper.

It was unlike anything I had ever seen before. I was 9 years old at the time, and those



“

Again and again, I'm reminded: even a small, seemingly simple illustration can carry deep personal meaning for someone.

”



drawings had such a huge impact on me that I would go to the dollar store near where I lived to buy low quality watercolor sets so I could create washes with earth tones on white printer paper. It never worked out well, as the paper was too thin to handle watercolor washes.

But throughout my childhood those Alan Lee drawings were so inspiring and lived at the back of my mind. It wasn't until 2013 when I walked into an art store in Manhattan after school, that I discovered sketchbooks that looked similar to the paper I had seen used in the end credits of *The Lord of the Rings*. It was Strathmore's 400 Series tan toned sketchbook.

By that point I was already familiar with Strathmore as I had been using their paper for four years. So while there were other toned paper options, I went with Strathmore because it was the paper company I trusted. When I got home and tried it for the first time, I was immediately hooked. This was the paper I had always dreamed of having.

For this tutorial I'll be using a [Strathmore 400 series tan toned sketchbook](#) to create a mixed media drawing a Gray cat. I'll be using charcoal, pastel, and acrylic paint.



Step 1: For the first stage of this drawing, I'm using a soft vine charcoal stick to lightly sketch the basic proportions of a gray cat. I'll be using comparative measuring to make sure everything is as accurate as possible. I start by drawing two horizontal lines, one at the top to mark the top of the head, and one at the bottom to mark the chin. Then I draw a vertical line down the center of the face.

Next I locate the horizontal midpoint, which falls just at the bottom of the cat's eyes. I also notice the head is roughly four eye lengths from top to bottom. Then I locate the midpoint between the bottom of the eyes and the chin, and I see that it also falls halfway between the top and bottom of the nose.

For the ears, I measure and find that the left ear is about the same length as the distance from the top of the eye down to the midpoint of the nose, while the right ear is roughly the same length from the top of the eye to the bottom of the right eye. With the ears in place, I can establish the width of the face. The widest part of the face almost matches the distance from the top of the left ear down to the bottom of the chin.

I follow this same approach when placing the rest of his facial features. I look at how each part of the face relates to the others. The more you practice this, the more your eyes will start to naturally see these relationships. After a while you can start to trust your instincts and get it right just by guessing, without having to measure every single detail.

By starting with these measurements and using comparative observation, I can make sure the cat's features are placed accurately before moving on to more detailed rendering.

Once I'm happy with the outline I lightly draw over it with a 6B charcoal pencil.

Step 2: Next, with a vine charcoal stick I carefully scribble over my outline.

Then using a natural bristle stencil brush, I gently blend the area until it's smooth, creating a tone that sits between the natural midtone of the Strathmore tan paper and the darker tones I'll add later.

You'll also notice that even though I used a brush to blend, my initial outline sketch is still clearly visible. Pressure control is key for this technique.

In the previous step, I applied just enough pressure to my 6B charcoal pencil so that the initial sketch remains visible, but not so heavy that I can't erase or soften the edges later.

At a very young age, I used to practice controlling pressure by doing daily sketches with a ballpoint pen. This helped me develop a light touch to create subtle gradients, a skill that translates really well to both drawing and painting.



Step 3: Using the reductive method, I use my mechanical eraser to lift out the midtones I covered earlier. As I erase, I follow the natural direction of the fur. At this stage, I keep things simple and focus on basic shapes instead of small details.

I also add a light shadow around the cat. This creates contrast and will help the lighter tones and highlights I add later stand out more.

Step 4: Now that I've re established the midtones, I can start blocking in the darker values. Since the paper already sits at a midtone and I've pushed certain areas slightly darker with my initial tone, I can now focus on building those deeper shadows. At this stage, I'm not worried about detail, just simplifying everything into basic shadow shapes



Step 5: In this step, I apply white pastel powder using a synthetic bristle brush. It's important to wait until the midtones and dark tones are established first, because applying charcoal over white pastel too early can create an unwanted bluish mark. I only apply white pastel to areas without charcoal, directly on the paper or on areas that were lightly erased. This makes the highlights appear much brighter than if I applied white directly over charcoal, which tends to look bluish.

This is also when I start paying close attention to subtle transitions between the tones we've been building. I also start to soften some of the edges to create smoother gradations.



Step 6: And now the fun part! This is where the portrait starts to come alive. Now that we have our foundation we can start to add the fine details. Let's start with the whiskers, I start by carving out its shape with a mechanical eraser instead of jumping straight away with a white charcoal pencil. My favorite part about drawing portraits of cats is how expressive you can make the whiskers. Just like we did in Step 5, completely erasing the charcoal before drawing the whiskers with white charcoal ensures that the highlights really pop. In some areas I made the whiskers slightly thicker than they appear in real life to draw in the viewers attention. I'm also adding more pressure to the white charcoal pencil to increase the intensity of the highlight.

I also thought it'd be interesting to introduce some color to this portrait. I used a sepia pencil to color the inside of the ear and a soft green pastel stick for the eyes. I colored in the pupils and top of his eyes with charcoal, then using a paint brush I blend. I add that charcoal along the top of the eye because that area naturally sits in shadow as there's less light hitting it. When it blends into the green underneath, it creates a deep green almost black that transitions smoothly into the brighter areas of the eye.

For the lower part of the eye, I layer in white charcoal and softly blended it into the green. This helps create a more natural, rounded look and gives the eyes a sense of depth.

The final step is adding the highlights. I use titanium white heavy body acrylic paint for this. Those small bright dots really make the eyes pop and bring the whole portrait to life.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Ryan Mirzaun is a New York City based artist who creates realistic charcoal portraits of people and pets. He works with light, shadow, and subtle tones to capture more than just a likeness by giving his subjects a soft dreamlike presence that feels like a fading memory.

Ryan shares his process through videos on social media and teaches his method in courses, showing the thought and technique behind each piece.



Strathmore® **ONLINE** **WORKSHOP SERIES**

Join us for Strathmore's
FREE 2026 Online Workshops!

Strathmore's Online Workshops feature free video lessons and downloadable instructions created by experienced artists. Follow along in the online classroom as instructors guide you through various art topics. After a lesson releases, it remains on the site for viewing the rest of the year. #StrathmoreWorkshops

Share all the fun on
[Instagram](#) and [Facebook](#)
using #StrathmoreWorkshops

Workshops start March 3 and continue through December 31, 2026

WORKSHOP 1 NOW OPEN

Painting Faces & Florals: A Stylized Watercolor Series

Instructor: Jane Beata

In this four-part watercolor series, you'll learn to create expressive portraits paired with loose, flowing florals. Beginning with simple floral studies and simplified portraits, you'll gradually combine the two through sketchbook explorations before completing a finished portrait step by step. Along the way, you'll build confidence, loosen up your approach, and develop a more intuitive watercolor painting style.



LESSON 1

Expressive Florals in Watercolor

Opens July 6, 2026



LESSON 2

Simplified Watercolor Portraits

Opens July 13, 2026



LESSON 3

Faces + Florals: Sketchbook Studies

Opens July 20, 2026



LESSON 4

Final Piece: A Stylized Floral Portrait

Opens July 27, 2026

WATCH HERE



READY CUT WATERCOLOR



Cotton Sheets in Frame-Ready Sizes

Ready Cut Watercolor combines the professional performance of our 500 Series watercolor paper with the convenience of pre-cut sheets in popular frame sizes. Made from 100% cotton fiber and available in cold press and hot press surfaces, these archival-quality sheets are ideal for original artwork, commissions, cards, and frame-ready pieces - no measuring or trimming required.

100% Cotton • Cold Press & Hot Press • 140lb / 300gsm

Pre-Cut, Frame-Ready Sheet Packs: **5"x7", 8"x10", 11"x14"**



THE 15-MINUTE PAINTING CHALLENGE



WITH
STRATHMORE
AMBASSADOR
SOFIA
PAVAN MACIAS

Between work and life, it can sometimes be hard to find more than 15 minutes a day to be creative. That's why I've started doing '15 Minute Gouache', where I set a timer and paint a small illustration in just 15 minutes.

Setting a time limit is actually helping me evolve both my illustration style and painting practice. Within those 15 minutes, I have to be quick and decisive, which helps me paint more confidently and better understand what works and what doesn't. This exercise doesn't mean I'll always be painting with a timer. I still love my long, leisurely painting sessions and taking time to relax with my paints and a good podcast! But adding this practice on busy days helps me exercise my creative muscles while teaching me new things about my techniques and style.

I really recommend this exercise if you're looking to paint more, don't always have time for longer painting sessions, or want to challenge yourself to discover new techniques and evolve your style. My only tip is to work on a smaller scale, such as a small journal page or piece of paper, so you can complete the illustration within the time limit. Apart from that, feel free to choose a subject that's as simple or as complex as you like. The beauty lies in figuring out how to capture its essence in just 15 minutes!





TIPS FROM OUR WEBSITE

How to Flatten a Buckled Painting

Has your watercolor paper dried with waves or buckles? This is a common result of uneven moisture absorption and drying across the sheet.

The best way to prevent buckling is to prepare the paper before painting, but if your artwork is already dry and wavy, there are ways to flatten it. In this article, we'll walk through two methods that help restore a flatter sheet while protecting your finished artwork.

[CLICK HERE FOR
TWO METHODS FOR FLATTENING
A BUCKLED PAINTING](#)

Artwork by Karen Jerome