in the details
Brian LaSaga shares his techniques to realistically capture the subtleties of snow and other nuances of our natural world.

By Susan Byrnes
D\rift, crust, powder—there are many words to describe the characteristics of snow. In St. George’s, Newfoundland, where the average annual snowfall is 155 inches, Brian LaSaga can be found carefully observing these characteristics he later translates into paintings that are spectacularly detailed. Not only is LaSaga a keen observer of snow, he’s a lifelong student of the natural environment during every season in his native province.

LaSaga’s body of work consists of intimate land, water, sky and snow scenes that often feature elements of human presence or natural processes. Focused on the familiar, indigenous, raw and sacred, his paintings reveal a quiet reverence for the wild and tamed, touched and untouched beauty of his sparsely populated surroundings.

An ordinary occurrence like sunlight on snow might point out a singular moment like the confluence of natural elements as in Winter Fir (above, left), with its sunlit icicle adorning the small tree or those in Whiskey Jack and Wood (opposite), with its side-lit woodpile and jaybird. Decaying structures such as the vehicle in Winter Relic (above, right) and wood posts in Wretched Breakwater (see page 84) serve as visual counterpoints for the natural elements of snow and water. In Two for Joy (see page 84), nature’s own relic, a sculptural driftwood log, delights two crows.

Lessons of Mistakes

Although LaSaga has worked as a professional artist since the latter part of the ’80s, he has no formal art education. He is self-taught, learning from many hours of practice full of trial and error. From a very early age he used colored pencils and watercolors, developing his skills by drawing and painting superheroes and cartoon characters from comic books and television shows.

LaSaga is an experimentalist, and views his paintings as a “series of corrected mistakes” which acrylic makes possible due to its quick drying time. Earlier in his career, he drew scene studies prior to creating the final painting. These days, once he has decided upon an image, he dives right into painting the scene. Still, there is a lengthy process that precedes making a new work. The process begins with nature itself—visual material is gathered during

A tiny icicle on the branch of Winter Fir (above, left; acrylic on panel, 21x16) captures the subtleties of snow. Intense blue shadows shape the foreground snow in Winter Relic (above, right; acrylic on panel, 12x18).

The contrast between the warmth of wood and coolness of snow in Whiskey Jack and Wood (opposite; acrylic on panel, 16x24) leads the eye.

The addition of yellow to warm the white snow on the upper drifts in After the Blizzard (previous page; acrylic on panel, 14x24) subtly balances the strong, purple shadow in the foreground.
hiking and kayaking field trips. Photographs taken during these trips serve as references for the paintings. Always seeking the perfect scene, LaSage usually selects three to six shots and incorporates elements from them into one image using Adobe Photoshop. Once satisfied with a composition, he prints a copy to use as a reference, sometimes making further changes as he goes.

Building Brushes
Important to LaSage’s experimentation is his creation of his own unique tools. He works in an attic studio at a homemade easel table that he designed and built, and paints under daylight fluorescent lighting. He paints with round synthetic brushes but also reaches for hog hair and bristle brushes in all forms, shapes and sizes. Because LaSage views painting more like drawing with a brush, he has developed an array of homemade or modified brushes over the years that make the exact kind of marks he needs to paint the texture of wood and clouds. He explains, “I cut some of my liner brushes with an X-ACTO knife for a finer point when I paint fine blades of grass. Plus I cut down regular household paintbrushes and make my own smaller versions by using old, discarded artist brush handles—these I use for painting old

Toolkit

**BRUSHES:** Hog hair and bristle brushes: Masterstroke by Dick Blick and Winsor & Newton; Taklon brushes: Artisan Classique, Gold Sable by Robert Simmons, Heinz Jordan, Royal & Langnickel Royal Soft Grip brushes and Winsor & Newton

**COLORS:** Alizarin crimson hue, burnt sienna, dioxazine purple, Hansa yellow light, Hansa yellow opaque, Mars black, napthol red light, phthalo blue, phthalo green, titanium white and ultramarine blue

**EASEL:** Homemade drafting-type table/easel combination

**PAINT:** Golden Heavy Body Acrylics

**PALETTE:** Plastic cafeteria tray with wet cotton rags and parchment paper over the rags, with plastic or metal clips secured to tray to hold parchment paper in place.

**SURFACE:** ¼-inch Masonite wood panel

**VARNISHES:** Krylon matte and satin spray
**Step-by-Step Demo of Wintery Welcome**

**STEP 1:** I sketched in the first rough layer of my basic colors and cover up as much white as possible.

**STEP 2:** I continued working on the background with my selected colors (burnt sienna, dioxazine purple, Hansa yellow, phthalo blue, phthalo green, titanium white and ultramarine blue).

**STEP 3:** Background details started to form after I'd done quite a bit of work.

**STEP 4:** I started to do more refining work in the background.

**STEP 5:** Drawing with paint is always key, and with more work, the background was done.
STEP 6: Then I started to focus more on the middle ground and refined the snow and fir tree.

STEP 7: The snow on the tree was nearly done and I kept layering and scumbling to bring out the texture and softness of the snow.

STEP 8: I moved to the foreground with my usual techniques of layering to add more detail but at the same time I tried to keep it soft.

STEP 9: Finally I worked on details such as the branches sticking out of the snow. I went over the entire painting, which is 16x24, once more and added more accents and highlights.
weathered wood. I rarely throw away used up brushes because they are invaluable for special techniques. Sometimes I deliberately wear down new brushes for my own purposes. To capture my clouds and skies, I use a lot of scrambling with shorthair bristle and synthetic brushes. The brush has to match the subject to capture the effect.”

LaSage finds an advantage in working with acrylic because he paints quickly in layers, blending the colors visually, rather than physically on the canvas as one would with oils. This visual blending is a technique that abuts or overlays colors to produce the optical effect of a different color, rather than mixing two colors on the canvas to make a different color. He uses Golden Heavy Body acrylics with water, and mixes his paint with a palette knife on a cafeteria tray covered with parchment paper over cotton rags, or anything that holds water well. To prevent the paint from drying too quickly, he sprays water over the paints from time to time, and covers the paint with a non-polybead styrofoam cover. LaSage’s surface of preference is a Masonite wood panel sanded to produce a matte finish and cleaned with a damp cloth. When the panel is dry he applies five coats of acrylic gesso with a paint roller in alternating directions, letting each coat dry before applying the next, and sanding between coats to remove any lumps. The last coat dries overnight before the final sanding of the panel, using 150- to 180-grit sandpaper. His favorite surface size to work with is 16x24, but he works in other sizes depending on the subject matter.

Moving Forward
Once he begins the actual process of painting, LaSage always starts from back to front, completing the area farthest in the background first, and working his way forward, finishing with the foreground. In Autumn Memories (above), he begins with the sky, mixing all the colors he needs for that section, then moves to the trees and buildings in the middle ground. Next, he paints the grass and goldenrods. Finally, he completes the picket fence and the grass that overlaps the bottom of the fence.

“Knowing where to place your darks and lights is the key to all realism,” LaSage insists. Without

LaSage painted the looming clouds in the background first in Autumn Memories (above; acrylic on panel, 14x18), and the blades of grass overlapping the fallen fence in the foreground last.

In Wretched Breakwater (opposite, top; acrylic on panel, 17x26) gentle waves painted with a soft brush slowly erode a broken, weather-beaten structure.

Birds in flight are present in several of LaSage’s paintings, such as these crows in Two for Joy (opposite, bottom; acrylic on panel, 20x28).
In Winter Woodpile (above; acrylic on panel, 18x24), a high key treatment of the background reduces the contrast in that area to create the atmospheric effect of blowing snow.

LaSage views dirty, icy snow as "mini mountains" and paints them similarly, using a sharp brush to create jagged chunks and crystals as seen in Below the Hill (opposite; acrylic on panel, 20x18).

a consistent logic to the direction of light, the painting becomes more of an abstraction. When he paints, LaSage always keeps the location of the light in mind. This tells him where to place his highlights, mid-tones and cast light and deep shadows on all of the objects in his paintings—from the largest rock and mountain to a single blade of grass.

Capturing Snow

Knowing where to place your darks and lights is one thing, but knowing what color to paint them is quite another, especially when painting snow. Here, LaSage’s dedication to observation and experimentation has resulted in the mastery of painting snow. When most people think of snow, they think white, but not LaSage. For him, snow is alizarin crimson, phthalo blue, ultramarine blue and dioxazine purple. And yellow. "I always use yellow in snow," he shares. "You have to because of the sunlight, very subtly." He uses Hansa yellow combined with small amounts of white, blue, orange, purple and sometimes red. For rendering shadows in his winter scenes, he uses dioxazine purple in every painting, because it tones down the yellow. To create the effect of blowing snow, as in Winter Woodpile (above), he paints in high key with lots of white and brushes with bristles that have been worn down with sandpaper so the paint can be scumbled, not brushed onto the panel. Because less detail is needed to paint light, fluffy snow, a softer brush is used so that very little detail is visible, as in Winter Relic. In Below the Hill (opposite), which depicts areas of frozen, dirty snow, a sharper brush is used to paint tighter chunks of ice.

LaSage’s paintings with water showcase his exceptional ability to blend transparency with reflectivity. The artist envisions water as mirrors and windows. The mirror is the top surface of the water, reflecting the sky, while the window allows us to peer through the water to the rocky bottom. Whatever is on the bottom of the water, such as rocks and shells, are painted in higher key colors, using more white, and in a distorted, abstracted way. Often a softer brush is used for best effect. At the same time, LaSage will paint the surface of the water as well, essentially painting the top and the bottom of the water together. Here he uses Liquitex’s transparent mixing white with some blue for an overglaze to give the surface sheen. LaSage explains that, "usually close to shore is sunny, with
a low angle, so you’re going to get some coloring in the rocks, but it’s more of a bluish tint. Also, the waves are softer at the shore. When you’re down at a low angle to the water you’re going to have less contrast and when you’re higher up you’re going to have more contrast.” The top of the water is painted to reflect the color of the sky. In the paintings Beachwood Snag (opposite) and Close to Shore (above), LaSaga uses the window and mirror effect in the bottom areas of the paintings.

From the deepest winter shadow to the brightest crest of a summer wave, LaSaga’s paintings draw viewers in with dramatic luminosity, rich textures and captivating terrain. The artist has spent a lifetime studying nature and developing his own particular techniques of “corrected mistakes,” a journey he considers as important as the end result of his work. “Nature is chaos and nothing is perfect,” LaSaga declares. “Nature always offers me something I haven’t thought of, and that’s what inspires me.”

Susan Byrnes is a visual artist whose work encompasses traditional and contemporary forms and practices, including sculpture, multimedia installation, radio broadcasts, writing and curatorial projects. Byrnes resides in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Close to Shore (above: acrylic on panel, 11x16) shows Liquitex acrylic transparent white mixed with blue to create an over glaze.

In Beachwood Snag (opposite: acrylic on panel, 17x14) rocks in the water are painted with soft, abstract strokes to create the illusion of looking through water.

Behind the Paint: Brian LaSaga

**LATEST ACCOMPLISHMENT:** Finalist in International Artist’s 2016 Landscape Competition for my painting After the Blizzard II.

**NEXT GOAL:** A solo show.

**BEST ADVICE RECEIVED:** Never stop trying.

**BEST ADVICE TO GIVE:** Paint what you see but feel what you paint.

**FAVORITE QUOTE:** Without a struggle, there can be no progress.—Frederick Douglass

**READING NOW:** Cat books (we have five cats).

**WEBSITE:** brianlasagarealism.com

Paintings are a series of corrected mistakes. —BL