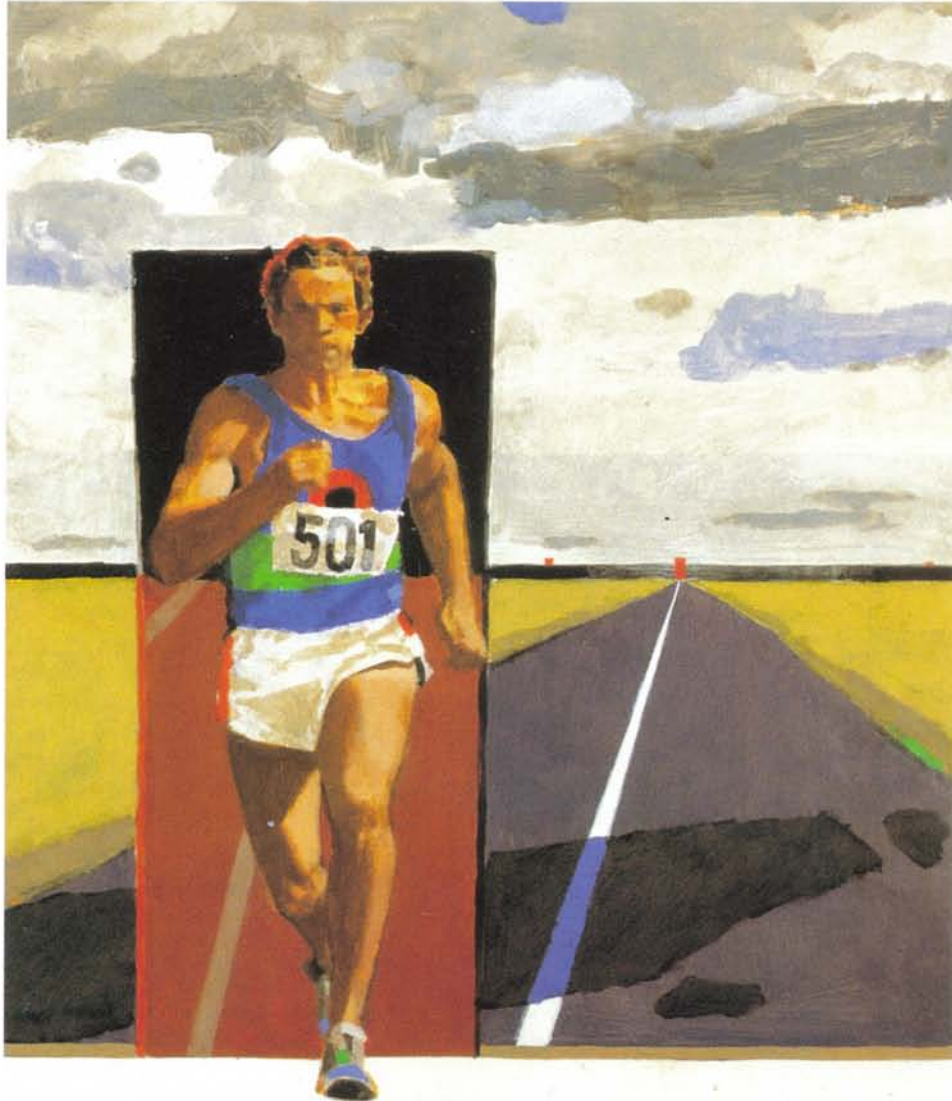


Robert M. Cunningham



step-by-step process



1 Cunningham makes many thumbnail pencil sketches on bond paper to help him decide what direction to take. The sketches can become quite abstract as he considers different solutions.

2 The photographic reference for the finish line idea (the center color sketch) was of blurred figures going across the line. "That's an okay image," Cunningham says, "but photography does it just as well as art, maybe better."

3 He makes full-color sketches from a number of his thumbnails to see what the color "feels like." He saves his palette so he can refer to it later (see Step 10).

4 Cunningham works standing up at a drawing board lit by a fluorescent lamp. The reference he finally decides upon is from Focus on Sports, a sports stock library he's used for years. With a rear projection system the reference slide is projected onto a screen right above his drawing board. He has a remote control to turn the projector on and off as he works. With rear projection he needn't be in the dark in order to refer to his reference. He's been using this system for 30 years and for him "it's almost like being there. Everything's frozen in time."

5 For his illustrations, Cunningham does not like to work up more than 50%. "It becomes something different when it's too big." A good size is 18- by 24-inches, and sometimes even smaller, though he's worked as large as 3- by 4-feet. For larger pieces, he paints at an easel and must rearrange the projector and screen.

Working on a Strathmore Bristol 3-ply board, he lays down the silhouette shape of the figure using Liquitex Raw Sienna. He uses Liquitex paints exclusively. Raw Sienna is the "local color that works with anything" as a medium tone. It is the ground for the basic flesh of his figures. He paints everything with bristle brushes except when he's working very small—then he uses Winsor & Newton Series 7 red sable brushes.

6 He puts the shadows on the figure by mixing Raw Umber and Raw Sienna. For warm tones he uses Reds, while Blues and Greens make "coolish" tones.



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7 The square shape behind the running figure is Mars Black. Ivory Black is "too cool." The red highlight around the runner's head is Cadmium Red Light.

As he works, Cunningham shifts two old, "L"-shaped mattes like a frame around the picture plane to help decide on the cropping of the pictures. He doesn't refer to the thumbnails—which were just tools in the early, decision-making process. Once he begins the painting proper, he's "winging it," because "the colors change everything. It's a kind of evolution."

On a bond paper palette he mixes the undertone colors for the wheat fields on either side of the road. The colors are: Cadmium Orange, Cadmium Yellow Light, Hooker's Green, and Black.

He applies the underpainting to the wheat landscape. Although it's not evident in the photograph, Cunningham has changed the position of the horizon line. "It's a gut thing, not a head thing." When he's done something that he doesn't like, he just paints it out with gesso.

Because he likes the color of the track in one of his full-color sketches, he copies it using Red Oxide, Cadmium Red Light, Yellow Oxide, and a very small amount of White. When he applies the paint, he says it's better if the paper shows through to keep it looking fresh.

The highway color is Raw Umber, Ultramarine Blue, Black and White, "a fairly opaque color."

The large, darker cloud bank in the upper right is created by mixing Raw Umber, Ultramarine Blue, Black and White. Cunningham pushes the warm by using more Raw Umber than Blue. The slightly lighter clouds are the reverse, made by pushing the Ultramarine over the Raw Umber. For the whitish clouds, he uses the same colors as above, but with a lot of water, making a kind of glaze.



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13 He puts down a White underpainting where the runner's jersey will be. It's not absolutely necessary—he could put Blue directly over the flesh tone, but the White ground brightens it.

14 He checks the image in a big mirror he always keeps behind him while he paints. "Things show up that you didn't notice."

15 The work up to this point.

The jersey is Ultramarine Blue with White. After deciding to put a red circle in the center of the jersey, he applies White over the Blue so the Red will be bright and clean. He uses Cadmium Red Light, which, he says, often appears darker when reproduced.

Cunningham points out that he's made many changes to arrive at this stage. For example, the jersey had been painted red at one point; also, the runner's shoulders had been much bigger so he carved them down to correct the proportion.

17 The shorts are Raw Umber mixed with White. The shadows are painted with a sable brush. Here he puts a Black accent on the shorts.



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Cunningham feels it's better to have a combination of opacity and transparency. On top of the opaque road color (see Step 11) he applies the same colors (Raw Umber, Ultramarine Blue, Black and White) more transparently and adds just a touch of Dioxazine Purple, though he cautions that if the reproduction of this piece is too purple, it can be "sickening."



19 Using his thumb, he rubs the color to get it even and to give the effect of a good wash. If he's laid down too much paint, he spreads it with his whole hand.

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20 To vary the flatness on the wheat field, he applies an over-painting using Yellow Oxide and White.

21 He gets dimension at the edge of the wheat field using Raw Umber, White and Black. He may have accidentally gotten a touch of Ultramarine Blue on the brush, "but it works just fine."

To create the runner's shadow he first put down Black over the roadway and then decided it needed to be lightened a bit. Using a bristle brush he scumbles over it with a Grey, made simply with Black and White.

Cunningham decides on the shapes of the three black shadows after making one of them. "Once you make one thing, it's easy to relate it to another. It's extremely important to cover the paper as soon as possible so things can relate to each other."



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23 He draws two pencil lines with a ruler to make the border around the piece and covers the pencil marks with Raw Sienna and White.

24 The red stripe on the shorts is a mix of Cadmium Red Light with White.

25 The doors are Cadmium Red and White. "The doors are repeated symbols of the rectangle the runner is currently in. They represent different times."

26 He puts the shadows in the jersey using Ultramarine Blue, White, and Black. Cunningham had the most trouble with the runner's face. "If you don't have subtle definition in the features, it can look flat and strange."

27 The flesh on the runner's leg is Cadmium Red Light, Yellow Oxide, and White. He adds more White at the top of the thigh.

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The bright sky color is Ultramarine Blue and White.

29 The divider line in the road is white over the black roadway. Where the runner's shadow is, Cunningham first puts Black over the line so the shadow won't be too bright. Then he applies Ultramarine with a touch of Dioxazine Purple over the Black.

30 The flesh in the face is Cadmium Red Light, Yellow Oxide, and White.

He adds White to highlight the flesh color of the nose.

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Cunningham has some advice: "Have fun. But discipline is crucial, you've got to produce. Not only is your career on the line, so is the art director's who hired you." Throughout his career Cunningham has been given a lot of freedom. "So," he says, "when a piece is bad it's usually my fault." He doesn't generally do preliminary sketches, though there have been times when he's had to show one. Sometimes, if there's a technical problem he'll do a pencil sketch. But he doesn't want to use up his juices; he'd rather completely redo the piece than overwork it.

His deadlines determine how long he works on a piece: if he's got four weeks, he'll take four weeks. "Sometimes I'm lucky and I hit what I want right away. Sometimes I never get it." And sometimes he ends up using what he started with in the first sketch, but he has to "go through the woods" before he comes out where he started.

He spends as much time on a spot illustration as he does for a poster. He just "does the work."

When the job is complete, he'll wrap it up and leave it on the covered well to be picked up by FedEx.

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