

Fall 2012 Baldwin Trophy Winner

Richard Walz's Salt Point



Though it uses time that I could otherwise spend in front of a TV, I somehow complete one diorama each year. This year's effort, Salt Point, recreates one of Maine's rugged peninsulas. With a lighthouse at its peak, Salt Point's granite arm is almost completely surrounded by the sea. Crossing the rear of the diorama is a multi-span deck bridge of the Portsmouth and Androscoggin Railroad.

Each of my dioramas is built for eventual transfer to the permanent layout in my basement. But transferring this latest effort threatens to be tricky, and I've become pretty resolute in postponing that job.

The problem centers around Salt Point's water. Both the diorama and my permanent layout have lots of it. I've always assumed that it would be next to impossible to create an invisible joint between the diorama's water and the layout's water. So to avoid splicing areas of water together, I've built the diorama so that every 3-D object--the peninsula, the bridge, the boats, and so forth--can eventually be separated from the water and repositioned on my permanent layout... while the diorama's then forsaken water would become fodder for the dumpster.

I did this by casting a layer of simulated water--Envirotex Lite resin--over the entire area of my diorama. Then to the Envirotex' dried surface I glued all the diorama's previously completed 3-D objects. (The fact that these objects are sitting on the water's surface rather than extending down into it, is all but undetectable.) Gluing the objects was a crapshoot. I wanted everything stuck on well enough that the diorama wouldn't spontaneously disintegrate--but not stuck on so well that the thing couldn't eventually be dismantled. It'll be interesting to see what becomes of my generally genial personality should those glue bonds prove indestructible.

Anyway... building dioramas has given me opportunities to try things before committing to them on my permanent layout. Salt Point has provided a first chance at modeling water, and I'm pretty happy with the results. Water is protean stuff, changing its look from one hour to the next. Since I could model only one of those looks, I tried to make that look resemble water as it is most commonly seen. Right off, I rejected the often-heard advice to use black for the water's color. While black might be okay for small areas of water, my feeling is that over large expanses it's overpowering. Blue water is an obvious alternative but--especially since most of the water on both my diorama and my layout will be seen from a fairly high angle--I decided that green would be the best choice.

Most (though not quite all) of the water's color comes from the water's painted base of 3/4" paper-coated plywood. I sprayed the plywood with Floquil's Pullman Green, then oversprayed a couple of shallow-water areas with Rail Brown. With painter's tape forming a temporary dike around the edges of the plywood, I poured in my Envirotex. (I chose Envirotex to model my water for no more profound reason than that it's the stuff that most other people seem to use.) There's one drawback to Envirotex that I know of: while drying, it creeps up the sides of objects placed in it. That wasn't a factor on the Salt Point diorama, though, since there were no objects in the water when I poured the Envirotex.

Let me parenthetically note that when the Envirotex instructions say to use their product at temperatures between seventy and eighty degrees, they mean it. On the bleak winter day when I made my pour, the temperature at my basement workbench was about fifty. I had expected the Envirotex to "flow like water." But at fifty degrees it oozes along more like honey. The result was a surface that was disconcertingly bumpy. Fortunately, the instructions recommend two pours. For Coat Two, I waited until the first insufferably hot day of summer and found that at eighty, Envirotex really is like water, mercifully hiding all the lumpy topography of my first pour.

To both pours, I added a drop of blue Castin' Craft transparent resin dye (code # EN0434) to each ounce of Envirotex. I'd hoped that the dye would give the water a bluish tint in areas of distant water, where the viewing angle would be more oblique. But it's now obvious that more dye--maybe two drops per ounce--would be needed to add any discernible blue to the water. To what was now a glass-smooth surface, I glued on my 3-D objects. Then, again trying to match the look that water would most commonly have--a basically calm sea--I set about adding wave patterns. I created gentle ripples by pushing Golden's soft gel acrylic medium into parallel ridges with a Loew Cornell 7600 1/2" filbert mop brush. In areas of protected, smoother water, I patted on Liquitex gloss medium with a smaller filbert brush. I added patches of lightcatching texture to areas of the smooth water by poking a Raphael series 8400 #5 brush--a stubby, round sable brush--straight down into the Liquitex. In a few other areas I added breaking waves, building up the gel gloss with overlays of Woodland Scenics Water Effects. I topped these waves with a drybrushing of acrylic white paint.

One minor problem I haven't been able to lick is that the soft gel retains hints of bristle marks. As a possible solution, I tried applying the gel with a palette knife, but my results with the knife were embarrassingly inept. I've been making the water on my permanent layout basically the same way that I did on the diorama, though I've yet to add the Envirotex. Like the diorama, the layout's water is mostly colored Pullman Green. I have darkened the water for several inches at the layout's front edge, though, with the addition of some Engine Black. And I've oversprayed the last ten inches of the water at the rear of the layout's forty-inch shelf with Light Blue. Over those forty inches then, the color of the water transitions from darkened green to green to bluish green. Of course, there are lots of parts to Salt Point besides water. And if a guy were standing over me with a baseball bat, I'm sure I could be persuaded to talk about some of them. But since water is what's been new for me, it's been the center of my interest. And since I trust no one will read this stuff anyway, I think I'll pull the plug right here.

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