

SPECIAL SECTION:

6

Top Pastel Painters Share Materials & Techniques

by M. Stephen Doherty

Achieving Drama and Unity on Black Paper

Californian **Clark Mitchell** finds that working on a black sheet of Art Spectrum paper helps make his orange compositional lines and initial layers of colors stand out to give him a clear direction for his pastel painting.

After decades of painting with pastel, Clark Mitchell found that working on black paper allowed him to achieve exceptionally dramatic, unified, and impactful paintings. “For the past few years I have been doing most of my work on Art Spectrum black paper, a surface that has a distinct tooth well suited to pastel painting,” he says.

Mitchell first makes several black-and-white thumbnail sketches of potential painting subjects to determine the best compositional arrangement of shapes and values. Once he is satisfied that he has established the best plan for presenting the subject, he begins working on the painting. “I tape the paper to a board and outline the basic shapes of a landscape with a fat Conté pastel pencil when I’m working on location from nature or in my studio from photographs and field studies,” he explains. “Once the largest shapes are outlined, I fill them in with one layer of hard Nupastels, working from light to dark, so I have a good sense of how the values will work. At that point I am not necessarily concerned about the local color of the trees, sky, fields, or water.

“I then use a 1-inch flat oil-painting bristle brush to apply Turpenoid (or alcohol if I am traveling outside the country) over each color so it is covered with a layer of color defining the shapes,” Mitchell says. “Once that surface is completely dry, I layer pastel on top, varying both pressure and color choice to reinforce a sense of distance: rough strokes and bold colors for objects nearby; smoother and paler applications for farther away. That variation in texture and opacity helps convey the sense of depth and atmosphere in a landscape. I handle the sticks of pastels on their sides, starting with the medium-soft pastels such as Rembrandt, Holbein, and Girault brands and ending with soft Unison, Schmincke, and Sennelier pastels.” At every stage of the painting process, Mitchell moves the pastel across the form as if he were actually following the three-dimensional shape of the object. Toward the end of the process, he uses the finer points of the pastel to establish the highlights. He never uses fixative during the painting process. For more information on Mitchell, visit his website at www.cgmitchell.com.

Photos: Kenneth Gabrielson, Croton-on-Hudson, New York

BELOW

Autumn in the Canyon
by Clark Mitchell, 2008, pastel,
25 x 20. Collection the artist.

BOTTOM AND OPPOSITE PAGE

**Autumn in the
Canyon** (detail)



BELOW

Koi Reflections
by Urania Christy Tarbet,
2009, pastel, 20 x 24.
Collection the artist.

BOTTOM AND OPPOSITE PAGE

Koi Reflections
(detail)



Glazing Pastels to Suggest Depth and Atmosphere

Urania Christy Tarbet uses a wide range of materials and techniques depending on the subject she is painting and the response she wants to elicit from viewers.

“The fact that I have every brand of pastels in my studio does not mean I use all of them every day,” says Californian Urania Christy Tarbet. “I usually reach for a particular color by a certain manufacturer, be it Unison, Great American Art Works, Sennelier, or Winsor & Newton. I know what the color can do, and I rely on my experience to select a particular palette to create a harmonious representation of the subject I’ve chosen. I may add or subtract colors and intensities to match the mood of each painting.”

In pointing to the painting shown here in detail, Tarbet explains that the challenge of capturing the multiple layers of water, submerged plant material, and reflected sky necessitated using the pastel as a thin glaze. The choices of substrate Tarbet uses include Ampersand Pastelbord, Kitty Wallis museum-grade paper, and Jack Richeson & Co. sanded surface laminated to Gatorboard.

“I recommend that my students decide on a dominant hue for a painting and determine what would be the complement of that color,” Tarbet explains. “They should start by using the hardest pastels to block in the basic shapes of the composition and then dissolve that first layer of pastel with rubbing alcohol or odorless thinner. Once the paper is dry, they can select three values of each color and develop the image, starting with the lightest colors and proceeding to the darkest. When they apply one particular color, I recommend that they look for other places where they can place that color to establish harmony within the painting.”

“Glazing is the technique of applying pastel with the lightest possible touch,” Tarbet goes on to explain. “I tell my students it’s the touch of an angel whisper and only requires the application of a small amount of color. It’s one of the best techniques for suggesting the depth and reflective surface of water, as in the case of the koi pond I painted from photographs of Patricia Suggs’ magnificent pond at her home in San Jose, California.” For more information on Tarbet, visit her website at www.uraniachristytarbet.com.



Planning Ahead While Remaining Open to Change

Duane Wakeham makes quick compositional sketches from images recorded in his digital photographs, and then he does 8"-x-12" studies of those landscapes. The preparatory work helps launch his large paintings on prepared sheets of watercolor paper, but he remains open to changing the colors, shapes, and composition.

Like many pastel painters, Californian Duane Wakeham prefers to prepare the surfaces on which he will work rather than buy ready-made papers or boards. "I do my preliminary studies on sheets of UART paper; my large exhibition pieces are painted on sheets of Arches 300-lb cold-pressed watercol-

or paper that I soak with water, stretch on drawing boards, and give two coats of a mixture of $\frac{2}{3}$ cups acrylic gesso, $\frac{1}{3}$ cup tap water, and 3 tablespoons of powdered pumice. I like working on a hard surface," Wakeham explains. "When the gesso is completely dry, I brush on a thin layer of diluted oil color. All of that gives me a large, textured surface toned with a warm color (a combination of alizarin crimson and purple). I usually prepare half a dozen sheets at a time so that I have several available for the next paintings.

"The next step is creating an underpainting by loosely blocking in the main shapes with hard Nupastel and then dissolving the block-in with an odorless turpentine substitute or alcohol. I begin to build color by applying strokes of hard pastel—closely related in value and intensity—quite freely across the surface of the paper with little concern for defining shapes or areas. At this early stage in the painting process, I am interested in shapes only as elements of composition, not as specific things or objects. I continue to work over the entire surface of the paper, striving to keep everything at the same level of completion. Only when I am satisfied with the overall distribution of shapes and colors do I begin to concentrate on creating subtler gradations of color by using more uniform strokes and focus on describing forms with some degree of specificity.

"Because hard pastels offer a limited range of colors, values, and intensities, at the point that I want greater variety and subtlety I switch to softer pastels made by companies like Rembrandt, Daler-Rowney, and Unison that I attempt to keep organized by color and value in a 2'-x-3' box divided into about 30 compartments," Wakeham says. "I used to believe that it was possible to complete paintings in one sitting, but now I spend days and weeks resolving a single painting. I find that keeping several paintings going at the same time produces a more unified body of work, which I think is important when preparing for an exhibition."

LEFT
Spring Twilight
by Duane Wakeham,
2007, pastel, 19 x 29.
Collection the artist.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Spring Twilight
(detail)





Pastel artists pick Blick.

REMBRANDT	CARAN D'ACHE
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PASTEL SPECIAL SECTION

Relying on Dark Colors to Present Figures Within Interiors

Well known for interior scenes, Louisiana artist **Sandra Burshell** reintroduced figures into her pastel paintings that she develops after carefully considering the shapes, values, and directional movement within the composition; as well as the application of rich, dark colors.

BELOW
Serene Afternoon, New Orleans

by Sandra Burshell, 2008, pastel, 22 x 13. Courtesy Carol Robinson Gallery, New Orleans, Louisiana.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Serene Afternoon, New Orleans (detail)

Sandra Burshell has long been captivated by the way artificial and natural light play off surfaces within interior scenes, especially when she focuses on one corner of a room, a particular time of day, or a fleeting scene that only exists for a moment. Those paintings, which she calls "roomscape," rarely contain the representation of figures. "I wanted the paintings to be about an incidental

pattern of light and shadow, and adding figures would have subordinated the patterns to the implied human activity," she explains. "My attitude began to change after Hurricane Katrina caused a mass evacuation out of New Orleans, and people were slow to return to their normal routines in the city. I felt the need to reintroduce figures to my paintings in the same way I needed to see people coming back into the city."

Many of Burshell's recent paintings are of people sitting in well-known local restaurants and hotels, and the titles sometimes identify those establishments. She also captures people sitting in airport waiting areas who are oblivious to her investigation of their poses and expressions.

Burshell develops her paintings from sketches and photo-



graphs, but she first explores the elements of a scene in tonal sketches or field studies. "I make a simple sketch with three Prismacolor markers (light, medium, and dark values) and add word descriptions and color notes along the sides of the paper," she explains. "Then I try to recreate the scene's intangible qualities that first attracted my attention. I squint while looking at the photographs to identify the abstract shapes and patterns of dark and light values, and I block in the scene with hard Faber-Castell Polychromos and Cretacolor pastels on a sheet of Kitty Wallis paper toned with Golden air-brush colors or Art Spectrum paper held vertically in a Best Classic Santa Fe II easel.

"Composition is very important to me, so I spend a great deal of time considering how to crop the image," Burshell explains. "I respond intuitively to the way the image changes, so the only way I can really consider various options is by laying strips of white paper over the painting and evaluating whether one set of changes is better than another. Quite often I wind up with dimensions that are not standard."

After first applying the hard pastel and considering whether or not to adjust the dimensions of her paintings, Burshell continues building up the surface from dark to light values with progressively softer pastels including Great American Art Works, Terry Ludwig, Diane Townsend, Rembrandt, Schmincke, Sennelier, and Unison. For more information on Burshell, visit her website at www.sandraburshell.com.

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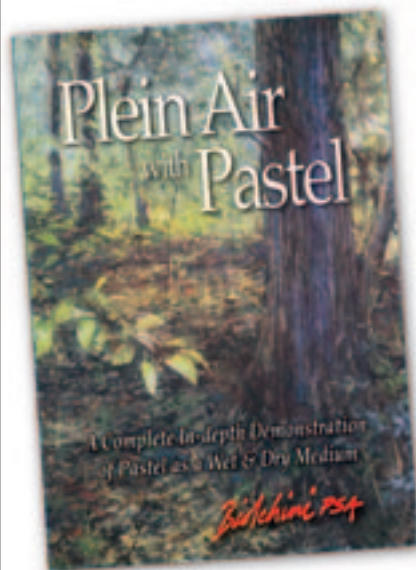


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PASTEL SPECIAL SECTION

Working From Simple Three-Value Ink Drawings

Californian **Kim Lordier** uses small compositional sketches as the basis of her vibrantly colored pastel landscape paintings.

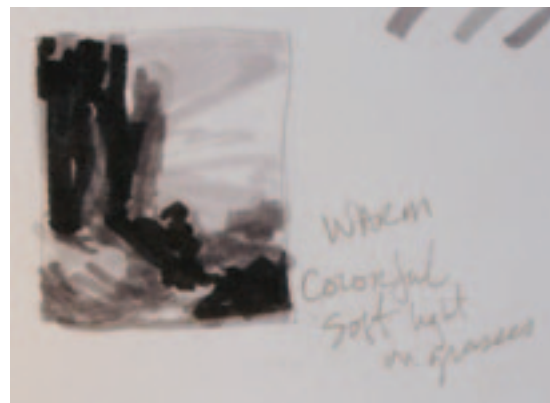
Using three Tombow brush pens, Kim Lordier makes small sketches to define the basic elements of a landscape and the abstract composition of her intended paintings; and then she builds layers of pastel, moving from large shapes to small ones.

During a workshop, Kim Lordier was introduced to the idea of making quick compositional sketches using Tombow brush pens available in several shades of gray and black. That approach quickly became an essential part of her regular process of recording fleeting images, breaking down compositions to their most essential elements, and evaluating the abstract, two-dimensional designs of paintings. She refers to the sketches as *notans*, a Japanese word that identifies simplified drawings dominated by positive (dark) and negative (light) shapes.

Lordier makes notan drawings when she is outdoors considering scenes to paint en plein air, when she is inspired by a masterpiece reproduced in a book or on view in a museum, when she notices a potential subject while riding in a car, or when she is looking into the back of her digital camera at a snapshot visible through the LCD screen. "When I paint with pastels, I want a reminder of what I saw and a diagram of how the major shapes might be presented," she explains. "I don't want to consider the details until I am sure I have a design of intriguing shapes and harmonious colors."

Once a plan has been evaluated, Lordier starts marking the dark shapes with a stick of either indigo or blue violet Nupastel on a sheet of Wallis Belgian mist paper, or she will

use a sheet of UART paper that she tones with a thin coat of raw umber acrylic paint. She then brushes Turpenoid solvent (or denatured alcohol if working indoors) over the paper to dissolve the dark pastel and provide a fully developed under-painting of the



notan. When the paper is dry, she starts applying progressively softer pastels as she focuses on smaller shapes within the composition. The particular brands of softer pastel include Terry Ludwig and Unison.

"I'm attracted to highly dramatic lighting, so starting with the darks and building to the light values helps me establish strong contrast," Lordier explains. "I allow the dark areas to remain thin and transparent while I apply thicker strokes of pastel, always pushing the intensity and judging colors and values against what I see. I tend to work intuitively and respond to what is happening on the paper rather than follow a well-developed plan of action. I do apply Krylon workable fixative as I am layering pastels and once the painting is completed. I don't mind the slight color shift, and I like to make sure there isn't a loss of pastel when I ship paintings to galleries or juried shows."

Lordier usually has five or six paintings in stages of development at the same time. "I really need time to evaluate paintings before I frame them, especially if they were done on location," she explains. Her Millbrae, California, studio is separate from her residence, and it is equipped with an air purifier and vacuum that remove particles of pastel from the air. In addition, the artist usually has a window open for ventilation while she is working. For more information on Lordier, visit her website at www.kimfancherlordier.com.

ABOVE
Tender Is the Eve
by Kim Lordier, 2009,
pastel, 30 x 24.

Exhibited in the
California Art Club
Gold Medal Exhibition
in 2009.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Sketch for Tender Is the Eve

by Kim Lordier, 2009,
ink, 4 x 6.

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PASTEL SPECIAL SECTION

Morning Barns in Paso Robles

by Gil Dellinger, 2009,
pastel, 24 x 48.
Collection the artist.



Working Outdoors With a Limited, Dynamic Palette of Colors

By combining hard, medium, and soft pastels into one portable set, Californian **Gil Dellinger** is able to respond directly to what he sees in nature.

The keys to success in painting outdoors in any medium are organization and flexibility. Artists have to carefully select their painting materials and supplies to keep the weight and bulk to a minimum, and they have to get the maximum benefit from everything they carry on their backs or in their arms. All of this is especially true when painting on location with pastels because the normal routine is for artists to have hundreds of pastels laid out next to their working area, along with solvents, ventilators, brushes, rags, fixative, and source materials. "I first started

working out of the back of my pickup truck because I couldn't think of any other way to paint outdoors with all the pastels I thought I needed," says Gil Dellinger. "Eventually I realized I could be just as creative with three cardboard boxes filled with pastels, a few sheets of Art Spectrum paper, and a Soltek easel.

"I start by blocking in the basic shapes of the subject with hard Nupastels without any compositional studies of color sketches, focusing only on the arrangement of values, shapes, sizes, color temperatures, and spatial relationships," Dellinger explains. "I dive right in without preliminary studies because I can make significant changes if I'm not pleased with the way the image is developing. I like to have a touchstone shape in the foreground to bring viewers into the picture, and then I lead them into a deep space so that there is a sense of mystery and wonder about the location I am presenting. Most of the painting is done with Nupastels, but I do build up layers of color with Great American Art Works and Sennelier pastels, and after those initial layers of color are applied I only touch the paper once more. Any further rubbing would destroy the freshness of the strokes." For more information on Dellinger, visit his website at www.gildellinger.com.

M. Stephen Doherty is the editor-in-chief of American Artist.

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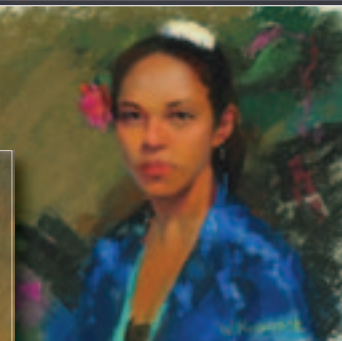
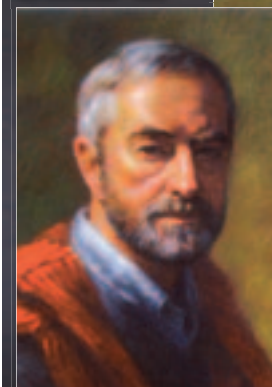
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