

STEP 1

I start with an image. This can be a memory or an image on a computer screen. I have a collection of about 40,000 images catalogued on my laptop which goes with me everywhere, as does my Canon EOS 20D digital camera..



For this painting I choose one of a vineyard in the Swan Valley near Perth.

Using the computer, I crop the image to improve the design and brighten it increasing contrast so I can see the detail better. I don't try to make it a good photograph but a good starting point for a painting.



I always do a quick thumbnail sketch before I start. This simplifies the image and usually improves the design. I use the sketch as the basis of the painting design rather than the original image. The thumbnail is done in a sketch book using an Artline 220 fibre tipped pen. I just scribble it and sometimes spit on it to smudge the ink to create a general sense of light and shade. I have noticed that when you do a small sketch you tend to unconsciously change the design often enlarging and repositioning features. This could just be bad draftsmanship but I suspect that it is your mind already beginning to discover the painting.

In his book 'On writing: a memoir of the craft' Stephen King describes the process of writing as unearthing a fossil. The story is already there, he just has to find it. For me painting is much the same, I just keep working and let the image develop. I don't have a lot of control over this, the painting itself determines what I do. I just have to feel my way and keep on working, hoping for the best. It doesn't always work

STEP 2

Using a sheet of Arches 300gsm Satine (smooth) paper I scribble the image using the sketch for the design and the photo for detail. I want to stay loose and not worry about accuracy. There is no such thing as accuracy. This is a painting, I could draw the house upside down and it would still be valid.

When I start doing the left hand vines I realise that there is no path into the picture. I didn't want the top half of the painting to be separated from the bottom so I change

the right hand vine to lead in to the house and put in another row of vines at the extreme right. I draw lines to indicate the general direction of the rows of vines.

I am a bit worried that the gap between the vine rows in the foreground is too empty so I want to put some more vine branches going into it. I move the right hand post a bit, bringing it forward so that the vines show more in the foreground. Enlarging the vines and bringing them closer to the viewer will give me opportunities to create patterns in the tangle of stems and leaves, at the same time enhancing the sense of depth in the painting between the vines and the house.

I like to fill my canvas with marks so, still worried about the empty spaces; I put some roses in at the end of one row, sketch in some grass and shadows.

I check it again and then satisfied that I cannot take the scribble any further I take the board off the easel for inking.

STEP 3



In this technique I always draw with a reed pen made out of a piece of bamboo sharpened at one end dipped in ink. I use this for two reasons:

- as I cannot produce a controlled line with the pen it forces me to stay loose and not get precious;
- the pen produces a crude but interesting line



I sit with the board on my knee and tilt it slightly towards me. The ink I use is Art Spectrum burnt sienna pigmented ink. As you can see from the photo, I just go over the pencil scribble with an ink scribble. I take a break while the ink dries and then rub out the pencil marks.

STEP 4



I sort through my sticks of oil pastel and select a palette to work with. I choose mainly yellows, oranges and reds with some complimentary violets. I always have the colour wheel in the back of my mind when I chose colours and I recommend that

you use a palette from one area of the wheel with a small amount of the complimentary colour.

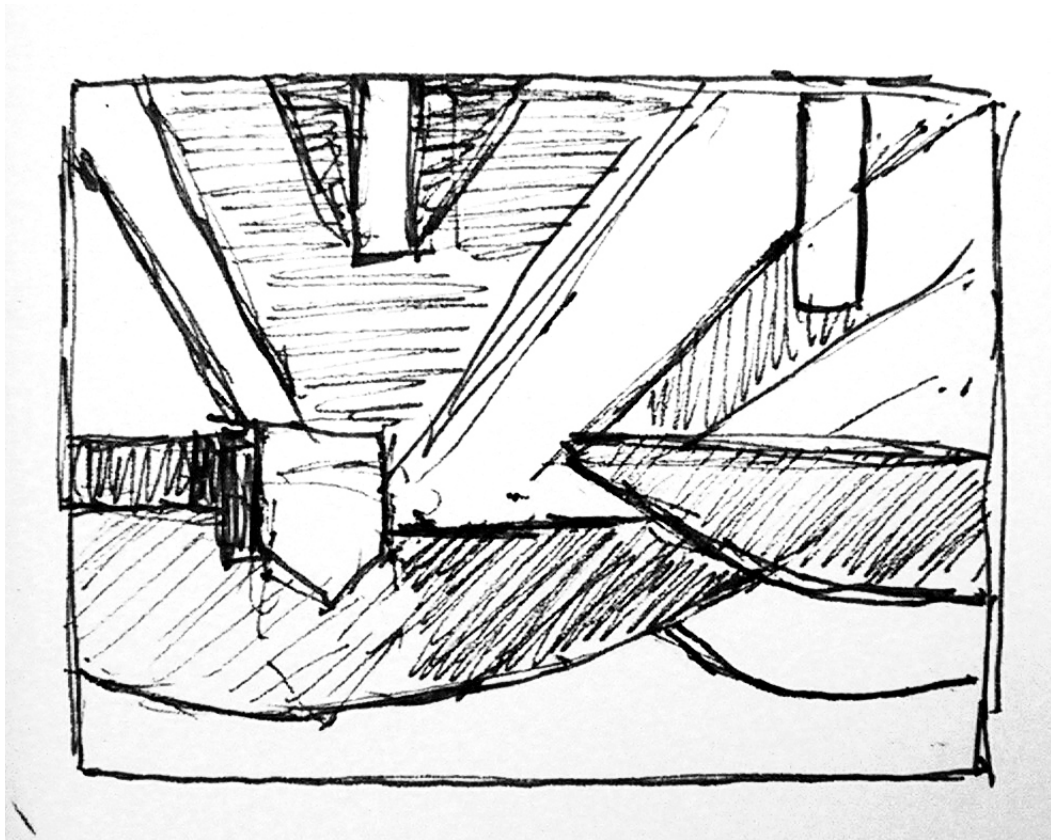
The oil pastels I have used for many years are the Van Gogh brand made by Talens. They are a of medium hardness pastel with a high density of artist quality pigments. I like their strong colouring combined with translucency when applied thinly.

In oil pastels I work from light to dark, which usually means starting with yellows. As the oil pastels I use are translucent it is impossible to cover dark colours. I occasionally use a soft opaque oil pastel such as Holbein Artist's oil pastel to cover up a mistake, but generally it is better to let the error show through. This adds interest and complexity to the work. It is similar to drawing where you retain your early lines in the finished work which create a feeling for the image rather than a precise rendition.



Looking at the painting I feel that the white of the building is too strong. The building is already a very strong focal point for the painting so I either have to tone it down or strengthen other areas. I decide to make the posts in the foreground white to counterbalance the house. This set up an interesting set of triangles and I begin to think of the painting as triangles. I am still concerned that the viewer's eye will be so strongly drawn to the house that the top left hand side of the work will get lost. To compensate I have unconsciously darkened the hill in the foreground to give the eye a path away from the house. Now I realise that this is creating another triangle. Having identified the triangles I set about trying to enhance them.

After a while I put the painting upside down so that I can see the patterns more clearly.



As I am not sure what was going on in the painting, I do another thumbnail sketch of the work, this time upside down and showing the main linear and tonal features. I work on this to enhance the abstract design foundation of the work and then try to work this into the painting itself.

When I work on the painting, I look for the overall pattern and feel of the work not the detail. With my oil pastel technique the detail will be obliterated in any case.

Painting is like a conjuring trick, as long as it appears to be logical you can get away with all sorts of lies

STEP 5



The technique I am about to apply is one I started doing in art school over a decade ago. It's very dramatic and risky. I place the painting on the ground and obliterate it by brushing over with pigmented ink. I find it is useful to do this late in the afternoon after a couple of glasses of red wine, as frequently the work is almost totally lost.

I let it dry a bit so some of the brush marks become permanent, then I wash it with water and lift off some of the ink with tissues. This leaves the painting coated with an uneven layer of ink, in some areas the brushwork shows as dark marks and in others there is just a thin veneer of ink. Any gaps in the pastel allow the ink through to the paper creating dark patches. At this stage it looks better than it ever will as the wetness brings out the colours and patterns like a wet stone in a stream. That's why I like to varnish my oil pastels.

FINAL STEP

So now we start again. The painting is a real mess, covered with patchy dried ink and somehow we have to try to recover it.

I start by scraping the ink off the oil pastel with a palette knife. In some places this is easy but in others it is impossible. If we work hard we will find our fossil. This should not be mechanistic but a vigorous selective scraping like a paleontologist with an exceptionally large Ammonite. With luck an image will emerge, but more than likely it won't so there is more work to be done.

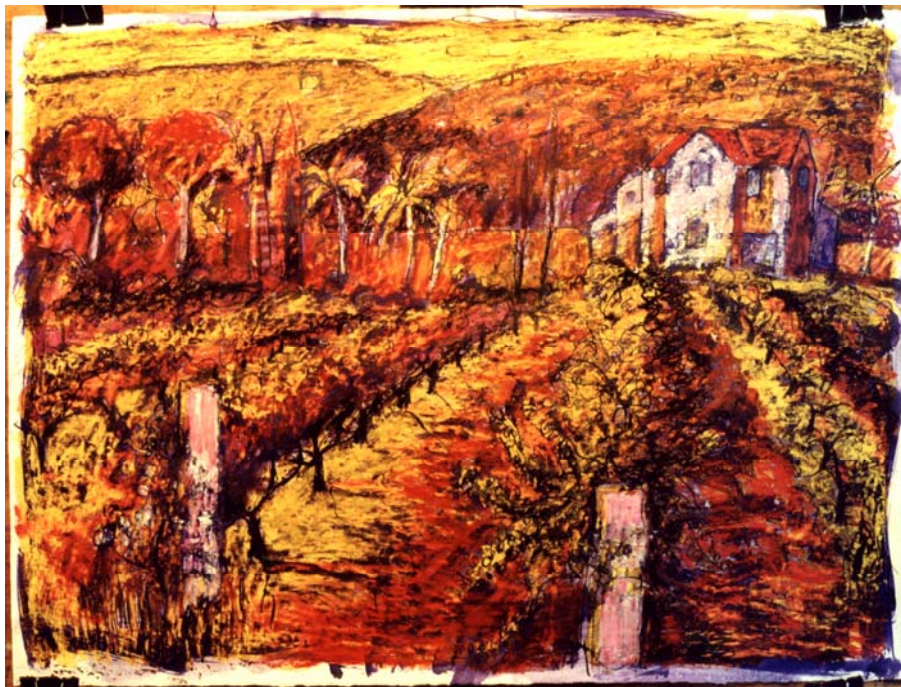
Imagine the image. Help it to find itself. Sometimes I scrape so hard to cut into the surface of the paper. Don't worry the buyer will never notice, just patch it up with a little pastel. I hope none of my collectors read this. I alternate scraping and adding new pastel, sometimes more ink. The effect of the inking is to add complexity and visual interest to the work and to hold it together by providing a uniform treatment and colouring across the paper. IN the demonstration I only used a limited palette but even if I had used a wide range of colours the inking would still bring the work together, it is similar to working with chalk pastels on coloured paper or painting in oils on a coloured ground. The scraping and re-colouring leaves palimpsest or ghost images behind. Not everybody likes this but to me they add to the richness of the painting. I frequently put new layers of oil pastel on top of old then partially scrape back again.

From now I have no clear technique; I just keep working until I feel the painting is complete. While I work:

- I switch my brain modes. I assume that this is from working left-hand brain to right-hand brain. All I know is I look at the painting and just feel what I have to do. Perhaps its divine inspiration. It took me a long time to develop this facility but now I can do it at will. I have this feeling of what I should do and I just go and do it without further thought or questioning. Sometimes I make major changes without having a clue of what I am doing. Then I switch back and look at the painting and say to myself "Ah, I know why I did that."
- I get incredibly bored painting so I listen to talking books most of the time. I can listen and paint simultaneously without any problems. In fact the stories get associated with the paintings so when I see them again I remember the story. The interesting thing is that I also use the computer frequently, but I cannot listen to books when I am working on the computer, either I am unable to do the work or I just don't hear the story. This proves to me that the part of my brain I use to paint is quite different from the part I use for listening to books or working on the computer, I think that when I am painting I am really working very hard but not aware of it while at the same time the aware part of my brain gets bored.
- I walk backwards and forwards between my easel and a large mirror at the other side of my studio the whole time Viewing it from a distance and in a mirror helps me see the work as an abstract design.. Sometimes I take the painting outside to view it from a distance of perhaps 100 metres. Often I work with the painting upside-down. All of these techniques help you to get away from the image and see the design of the work.
- I ask anybody who happens to be around to comment on the work and I listen carefully. Few people can pin point a problem with the painting but most can indicate an area of unease. When you are working your eye becomes so accustomed to the work that you can no longer see it clearly. Often when I listen to people I suddenly realise that they are troubled by a glaring problem that I was simply unable to see. Once I know what the problem is I can usually fix it but its difficult to see with fresh eyes. I subscribe to the theory that paintings hide themselves from the artist. When I first walk into the room with the painting, or look at it out of the corner of my eye, I see it clearly for a few moments before it has time to conceal itself behind its mask of familiarity.

I have to confess that while I am working I usually hate the painting. I go on from painting to painting desperately hoping that something will work. I have observed that most artists suffer from this malady. At art school everybody felt that the other students work was wonderful and their own terrible. I suspect that it is an important part of being an artist. If you are too self satisfied you will not go on experimenting and developing your work. You see this in some artists and their work becomes static and boring. On the other hand many talented people give up altogether as they feel that they are too incompetent. So an artist needs to be both sensitive and thick skinned at the same time. The important thing is to carry on painting regardless. I have seen some of my biggest disasters framed and hanging on a collector's wall and have had to agree with them that they look great.

FINAL STEP



The work is not finished until it is framed and well hung on a well lit wall. Good framing can greatly enhance a painting. The only time I really like my work is when it's hanging on a gallery wall and lots of people holding glasses of wine are telling me how much they like. Then for a brief moment I think well maybe it's not so bad, but the illusion does not last for long.

Materials

- Arches cotton rag watercolour paper 300 gsm Satine (smooth) 56 by 76 cms
- Pencil. Anything will do but probably a B which rubs out more easily and doesn't leave indentations on the paper.
- Reed pen made out of bamboo.
- Art Spectrum pigmented ink for drawing with reed pen, probably burnt sienna.

- A soft crumbly rubber which does not smear too much when you rub out the pencil lines, although this doesn't matter too much as it will be covered up late.
- Talens Van Gogh oil pastels. Precise colours unimportant but a variety selected on basis of colour wheel and what happens to by lying around.
- Art Spectrum pigmented ink for covering painting. I used a violet colour but any dark colour will work,
- A palette knife for scraping. The ones with a cranked shaft and a small 15 mm long blade seem to work best.

Master Hints and Tips

- Never give up. Remember that there is value in everybody's work. When I taught art I never came across any work without some element of beauty. The wonderful thing was that the student's work was so varied and different. It's normal not to like your own work. Look for the beauty in it, treasure it and make it even better next time.
- Experiment with different techniques and styles. See if you can work out how your favourite artists have achieved their results. It's OK to copy for practice but better to try using the same technique and style on your own subject matter. If you keep working at it eventually your own style will emerge naturally.
- Experiment with using tools that force you to be loose. An author who had a great influence on me, David Millard in his 'Joy of Watercolour' books, said that for a long time he forced himself to only use a very large broad brush , Personally, I dislike drawing a finished work in pencil as it makes my drawing tight. I prefer to use ink where you have less control and you cannot rub out your errors but have to incorporate them into the work.
- If your style is figurative, start with a photo or the actual scene, but then let the painting take over and develop in its own right. You are designing a painting, not trying to exactly copy reality. If something needs to be taken out or moved do it. If you have a colour in your palette which is nicer than that boring green, use it. You will be amazed at what you can get away with. The viewer will happily accept all sorts of distortion provided that the work generally holds together; People look at my paintings and say "Oh I know where that is!" I always agree, far be it for me to contradict a potential client.
- Learn to listen to your 'inner voice' and just follow its dictates blindly. Children have an innate grasp of colour and form. So do you. You just have to learn to listen to it again.