Dynamics in Watercolour Painting

Fascination takes hold

I am often asked why I started painting with watercolour. It was nothing to do with school; in my day the standard issue was a box of poster paints or those tins of powdered paint you mixed with water. I am sure many of us can remember both of these paint types provided plenty of challenges at the time. However it was as a teenager I began painting landscapes outside and somehow stumbled into using watercolour. I think I was drawn to certain colours that suited my subjects and there was something exciting about the way the paint reacted with water and moved around on the paper. Thirty years on and I am addicted to watercolour for the same reasons. There is something that happens when your painting with the stuff that is both fascinating and gripping.

Getting to grips with the medium

I think about watercolour painting as having two basic variables. The first is the density or thickness of the paint, which is determined by how much water you add to it. The second is the wetness/dryness of the paper you are painting on. You can use these two factors to control the painting effects you create. "Control," now there is an interesting word in the context of watercolour. Part of my journey into watercolour was naively trying to control a medium that remained determined to undermine me at every brush stroke. I now understand that it was this defiance that made the medium so exciting because try as I might the paint would do its own thing. Perhaps this is why the medium has a reputation for being so difficult to master.

Then I realised it was the dynamic nature of watercolour that makes it so special. At last I decided I needed to embrace this dynamic quality that left my nerves in tatters during the painting process. I found watercolour painting was both an intense and dynamic experience: the pigment was always on the move when wet, and it was only when a painting was completely dry I could judge the success of my work.

So for me it became a question of working with the dynamic and allowing the paint and water to determine the effect. This means enabling these reactions to happen on the paper whilst ensuring it will take the subject where I want it to go. To a degree I surrender control of the work to the medium. It is a question of how and, more importantly, when and where.

Timing the process

Timing is an important part of the watercolour painting process. I choose to complete nearly all my watercolour paintings in single sessions. I rarely return and rework any watercolour after the paint is dry. I need to be able to compare the tones of paint with one another whilst the paint is still wet and it is only in this way that I can create the range of tones that I want. I also feel like the

painting itself remains in a kind motion whilst the painting process is taking place and during this period I am connected with the work. Once it is dry it becomes a picture with its own identity and my role is over.

Wet into wet

The above landscape is called, “A Place to Talk,” and is inspired by Otterspool Promenade in Liverpool. This walkway leads out of the city and along the River Mersey. The painting includes a combination of effects some being carefully controlled and others determined by the paint and the water reacting after being applied to the paper. My role was to establish where and how this would happen, whilst knowing the final outcome would be beyond my control. The detail below shows how the foreground shadows were painted over dry washes and the colours were left wet allowing the pigments to mix on the paper creating coloured shadows with more depth and giving the picture a loose and painterly feel.

This is called “wet into wet”, and mixing colours in this way plus keeping your brush strokes to a minimum can help enliven your painting and keep them looking fresh. You will notice that I used this wet into wet technique in the foreground near the base of the picture. This limited any potential damage by the wet mix to other washes that were in place that I did not want to disturb. This application of paint was also one of the final stages of the painting as it was very important the underlying and adjoining washes were completely dry.

The painting below is of Dale Street in the heart of Liverpool’s business quarter. The picture was completed in a single session and parts of it are quite detailed.

However certain sections are loosely painted with minimal detail using wet into wet techniques giving an impression of the subject. These sections, particularly the buildings on the left of the picture, were again painted in the final stages. They aim to draw the eyes of the viewer into the painting and the loose finish contrasts with the more detailed buildings on the opposite side of the street. This creates a more varied composition and freshens up the style of the picture.

Letting go

I think by starting to see my watercolours as a painting partner rather than just another medium I began to find ways of enabling water and paint to get together on the paper with minimum disturbance, allowing them to do more of the work. Yes it’s risky and sometimes things go wrong but with courage and faith you will

be amazed how often it works out well for your painting. It is true that I have to recognise the opportunities and do much more planning beforehand to enable this to happen, and I am always aware that the dynamics will take over: that is when the fun starts!!!!

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