

Chasing the Light

Port Le Fontaine, France Summer 2018



Defining the message by blurring the lines and dismissing reality.

This is simple stuff if you've got the heart for it. The key to working on an abstract platform is to trust your instincts and follow them by applying thought and energy. At the beginning, it's all about the idea and the composition. Put your little bitty brushes and pointy pencils in a drawer and lock it. And the bit I said in the last blog, the part about being misunderstood and having your talent questioned, be prepared; more importantly, be prepared to not care. Water off a duck's back.

The example exercise will be "Walking the Dog" and I'll do my best to describe how such a mundane daily experience can be translated into an abstract painting. The discipline I'm going to focus on is the symbolic, because if you followed my suggestion and looked up Naive Art and decided that was your preferred approach, I'm willing to bet you pulled out a little bitty brush and a pointy pencil and got to work immediately. Artists who are drawn to the narrative style can't help themselves.

Suppose that these are the events that played out when you took the dog for a walk. You whistled up the dog and it charged toward you in a state of elation, so you clipped on its leash and set off. The dog was eager, but obedient, and you felt confident that your dog was well trained enough to follow you into the wooded area of the park and be let off its string for a good run. So you did just that, you unhooked the leash, an act of blind goodwill, and the bloody thing took off, bolted for the horizon and disappeared over the edge of the planet.

You stood there with the leash dangling lifeless in your hand, staring after the conniving miscreant. Feeling, feeling what? Surprise? Shock? Anger? And when it didn't return after several minutes, you probably experienced concern, anxiety,

and even fear. Then, suddenly, it returned; ears flapping, tongue wrapped halfway 'round its head; It came galloping back to your side. You hadn't the strength left for reproach, you felt only relief. The leash was clipped back into place and the dog was circled back home.

How will you express this experience on the canvas? Start by describing the energy of the piece. Pay attention to the emotions: the idea (walk the dog) a *calm* logical idea greeted with *eagerness* and *joy*, followed by *confidence*, *trust*, *betrayal*, *anxiety*, *fear* and *relief*. There are many ways to convey these emotions, a painter can do it through color, shape, texture, composition and scale. Personally, and anyone whose spent time in my studio can vouch for this; I revel in texture and scale. I'm nuts for large abstract pieces, but that's a personal choice and smaller canvases can be just as compelling.

To get things going, let's opt for a smallish rectangular canvas set to landscape proportions, for example 40" wide x 30" high, a fairly common size. I chose landscape as opposed to portrait (which would have been 30" wide x 40"high) because our experience was set in nature which lends itself well to landscape. It invites the viewers eye to move across the piece (as the dog moved across the ground) as opposed to up and down it. Next, decide whether you will express the emotions through shape, color, or texture. Shapes can convey attitudes within them selves and also imply relationships through their placement around or on top of other shapes. For example, shapes painted close to each other, but not quite touching can create a sense of isolation, tension, or anxiety, shapes arranged in an overlapping manner might convey comfort, familiarity, or confusion or even domination depending upon how they are set out. The shape of the shape also speaks volumes. Rigid straight edged planes are just that, rigid and correct. Softer more organic shapes suggest movement, playfulness and possibility.

Creating connection between the shapes by drawing or painting a connecting path is a good way to guide the viewer through the experience as the painting

describes the tale. Lack of a path will suggest to the viewer that the interpretive process is being left to him. Don't be too literal when including a path, unless you are intending to create a flow-chart experience, which is also valid, but there should be a reason for it. Dog's don't do well with flow charts, they are wired differently...scientific analytics, or control vs chaos theories do well with flow-charts, but we're dealing with a dog here, so probably no flow-charts. You could use an arrow though, perhaps indicating which direction the dog went... that is the artist's choice.

Next comes color. Individual colors conjure up all sorts of feelings and emotions, and if that weren't enough in itself, color combinations and partnerships open another Pandora's Box of expression. Don't over think it at this point though, get a base color down, something you can live with, then step back and consider. Worst case scenario, you scrape it off and choose a different color. It's only paint and there's no prize for thrift or precision; not right now anyway.

Below is a basic line of progression: The base (grey and mottled), definition of events/emotions through colored shapes, suggestion of action through line and feature colors.

This little piece, and the smallness of it caused me large amounts of grief, underwent a number of scapes, rubs, glazes and finally the last dash of color. As is plain to see, abstract expressionism is about personal interpretation. Each viewer will gain their own personal insight into the piece, but for me, it will always be about walking that bloody dog. And for my landlady who watched me don my heavy metal paint hazmat gear and go after this piece with a set of palette knives and turps in her pretty little french cottage, it will always be about terror and regret.

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