

How to create an overall mood in your work, by designing with colour and texture, whilst being true to your intent

Communicating the Mood

An Atmospheric Process

by Georgia Mansur

Painting has always been about communicating for me. I want to express what I felt when I viewed a particular scene, at the exact time of day, and in the specific kind of light. I want the viewer to feel what I felt, standing there in nature's beauty.

The most powerful art touches people on an emotional level. Being fully engaged with all senses active when you paint, ensures dynamic results that transfer your enthusiasm and energy into the work. Capturing the raw essence of your subject comes from careful observation and 'being there'; smelling the pungent scent of the eucalyptus and listening to the creek babbling down through the rocks. A photograph is a useful resource but it cannot convey the artist's impression or interpret how it makes them feel. It can only record what is there in a limited capacity.

Every production of an artist should be the expression of an adventure of his soul. ~ W. Somerset Maugham

'Painting from Nature is not copying the object; it is realizing one's sensations.' ~ Paul Cezanne

'The way to learn to do things is to do things. The way to learn a trade is to work at it. Success teaches how to succeed. Begin with the determination to succeed, and the work is half done already.'

~ Henry Ford

It is imperative to try to understand what it is about the scene that you find so intriguing. This will be your 'statement' or message conveyed in your finished piece. What is the compelling reason that stopped you in your tracks and took your breath away, knowing you MUST paint this?

Use whatever imagery works for you, and what makes sense to you. For example, my statement might be 'the golden liquid light that pours out over the landscape as the last bit of sun kisses the hills goodbye'. That is the message I will hang onto and recall when I am painting the scene later. I need to keep that statement in my mind throughout the process, to express my feelings and emotions as I lay down the paint. It will be the narrative that underpins my 'story' or message. Write it down if you don't think you can remember it!

Painting with your heart to recreate the mood of your first impression in nature is more important than slavishly copying the scene in front of you. I believe that it is more important to capture the essence of your subject, rather than try to make a photographic reproduction of the scene, painting every single leaf on each tree. Paintings that speak to me tell as much about the sensitivity of the artist that made it, as the actual image portrayed.

I cannot stress enough how important it is to be out in nature, collecting the sensory information and impressions necessary to make your paintings really sing with life and energy. You will learn more from Mother Nature than any other way possible. □

An Atmospheric Process

Making small plein air sketches on site help to capture colour notes and light/ shadow patterns that will inform your work back in the studio. These studies are more valuable resources than a photograph will ever be.



I generally make some simple two value sketches that capture the light to dark ratio and patterns, take several reference photos and determine which format or perspective I find most appealing. These can be made using a black felt pen, ink, pencil or charcoal, to get the value pattern that is most pleasing. Use a viewfinder or an old slide with the film cut out to frame the scene you want to depict.

I do a quick small on-site study in watercolour or acrylic to give me the bones that I will flesh out in the painting later. Often, it is such a fleeting moment of changing light that captures my attention and there is not enough time to do all of this, but I make notes that help me to sear that 'feeling' or impression into my brain to be recalled later.

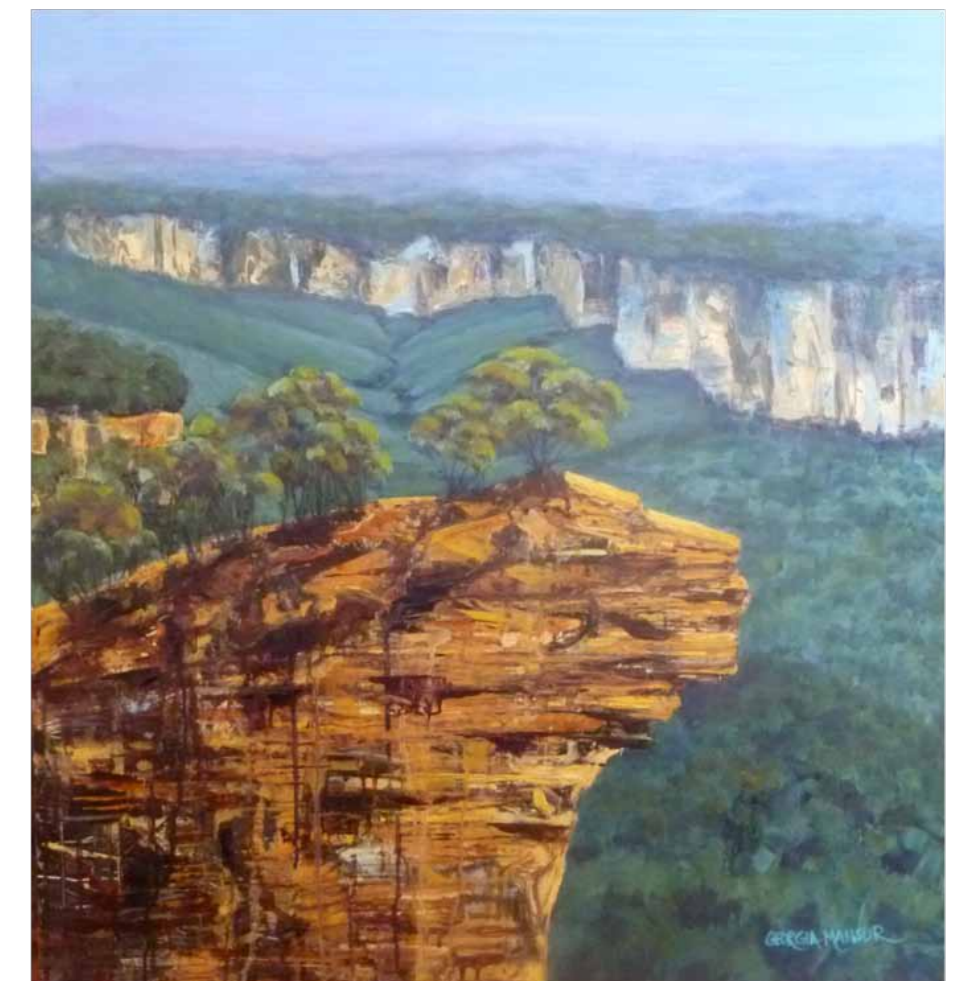
Sometimes I am satisfied with the raw plein air sketch and leave it as is. Other times, I want to explore the subject further and develop it into a larger format back in the studio. If there are any design problems in the study, I try to resolve them in the larger studio work-up, or sometimes just try something different. I don't like painting two paintings exactly alike, or just reproducing the exact image again without the work evolving.

I want my message to be clear and every stroke I make needs to take me closer to that message. I determine what is going to be the star of the show and what will be the supporting players. I ask myself 'where is my focal point' and 'do all the cast support the star?' Anything that detracts from my statement is edited out. Sometimes that means moving trees, re-routing rivers or moving mountains, but all is in the name of artistic expression and creating a clear message.



An example of a plein air study and a larger studio piece, from the Blue Mountains, in NSW. An 8 x 8" plein air study of Balzer Point Lookout, Blue Mountains.

An 25.5 x 27.5" work-up painted from plein air study reference.



An Atmospheric Process (continued)

Once I am back in the studio, I decide which materials will support the statement most effectively. Often, I used mixed media techniques and my own imagination to create the mood and capture the essence of my subject. This means I employ different grounds and surfaces to prepare the foundation and create the best platform to deliver my message. Preparing the support gives me valuable time to analyse and make compositional adjustments, to strengthen my design and to support my overall mood and statement. Here, for this painting of a vineyard, I use molding paste and coarse pumice to create the textural ground.



I often take photos with my iPhone at each stage of the process, because viewing the image in a thumbnail size sometimes points out glaring errors of design that I was unable to see while so close to the work. You can do the same thing by viewing it from a rear view mirror, or even upside down (the painting, not you silly!).



Best pieces of advice from me

- 1** Brush mileage is the only way to improve your work. Do not expect to be an expert without putting in the time to make the discoveries and mistakes you need to make.
- 2** Failures are your friends - use those pieces that you struggled with to learn from them and try something different the next time. Don't be discouraged; it is important to keep painting and growing with your work.
- 3** Don't throw away earlier paintings. It is good to remind yourself how far you have come. We tend to forget where we began when we reach a new level in our work - celebrate your successes!
- 4** Try to study and look carefully at master's work you admire - what is it about their work that intrigues you? Can you guess what their 'statement' might have been while they were painting that piece?
- 5** When you are clear about your intended message, be bold. Don't make tentative little 'cat licks' that muddy your message. Confident strokes make a clear and deliberate message. If you don't know what that is, how can your viewer?! Know your message and deliver it clearly and confidently.

Here is an example of toning the canvas with a thin wash, before drawing out my subject and blocking in my darks. In this way, I can get the transparent glow of the last light of day that would be difficult to achieve with thicker paint. The result is this moody atmospheric finished work.

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my art in the making



STAGE 1 Foundational darks

When my ground is dry, I squint down at my subject and look for all the darks. I think you should roughly lay in your darks, keeping it all quite loose and gestural. Sometimes I tone the canvas completely before this step, depending on what mood I am trying to create. The main thing is to get down the bones of the painting and know where you are headed with it. This framework will help you remain true to your first impression.

I generally use a 'dark' of Burnt Sienna and French Ultramarine, but sometimes I want a more 'greyed off' dark, so I use Cadmium Orange and French Ultramarine. You can bend your darks to be warmer or cooler, by adding another colour. At this stage, the pigment is fairly thin in the dark areas, and I will build up and model shapes and shadow with thicker paint later. Now is a good time to walk back from your painting, (about 3 metres if possible,) to reassess where you are headed.



STAGE 2 Sky high relationships

Next I lay in the sky, keeping in mind the key of the sky usually sets the tone for relating to everything else.



STAGE 3 Light patterns

I determine where the light will be hitting objects and see if the light pattern is consistent with my message. In this case, there was a distracting tree in the foreground, too close to the edge of the painting, which was pulling the focus away from where I wanted to lead the eye, so I edited it out. I used the curve of the road and the branches of the tree in the middle ground to lead the viewer in and through the painting



STAGE 4 Colour notes

Next I massed in the mid tones and related the colour notes to my dark and light patterns.

STAGE 5 Values, temperature and edges

And finally, I made sure I had the full range of values, (light, mid tone and darks). I added the higher key lights right next to my darkest darks, to provide maximum impact. I checked that the temperature of the foreground was warmer, since it was closer to me. I also went back to soften some of the edges that were further in the distance, to create the perspective and depth I wanted.

What the artist used

Support

Stretched canvas or cradled birch panels

Brushes

3" Hake for washing in

1" hog hair for drawing in paint

2" hog hair for massing in darks

Other materials

Credit card

Gesso

Hard Molding Paste

Pumice Paste

Paint colours

Cadmium Yellow Medium

Indian Yellow

Cadmium Red Medium

Quinacridone Magenta

Burnt Sienna

French Ultramarine

Raw Umber

Dioxazine Purple

Titanium White

my art in the making Send in the Clouds

The most intriguing element of this painting for me, was the presence of warmth and the atmosphere, created by the power and beauty of these amazing clouds.



STAGE 1 Textural ground and first wash

I started this painting with a textural ground using Golden gesso, hard molding paste, and pumice ground, to create the framework for the heavy impasto acrylic I would be using later. After the ground dried, I washed in the background with a thin wash of purple to complement the yellows and oranges that I planned on using in the clouds.



STAGE 2 Underbelly and emphasis

I started washing in the darker underbellies of the clouds and worked out where I wanted to place emphasis.



STAGE 3 Mass and ground

Next, I started massing in the clouds using a credit card and working the paint to echo the rhythms of the billowy clouds, working my way down the painting.

The middle and foreground are here to support the star of the show - the clouds moving and dancing across the sky.



STAGE 4 Finished painting

about the artist

Georgia moved from California to Australia in 1984 with her husband to develop a cotton farm, 72 kms west of Moree, in north-west NSW. Georgia painted as a creative outlet and as a way to cope with the isolation and loneliness of a new lifestyle in a strange, but fascinating new country.

Georgia now resides at Mudgee, NSW. Her work is a reflection of her emotional response to the world - she paints subjects in an expressive manner.

Completing a Bachelor of Arts in Communication at CSU Sacramento, Georgia feels painting is an interesting way to communicate with others on many different levels. Her paintings are diverse in subject matter as well as technique.

Georgia spends one month per year at Hamilton Island, on the Great Barrier Reef as Artist in Residence, where she exhibits and teaches classes. She also travels around Australia teaching workshops in country areas from Katherine, NT to Bathurst, NSW. Georgia loves sharing her passion with others, helping them to discover their own creativity.

You can join Georgia's plein air painting workshops in Cortona, Italy from 17 to 24 September, 2011 or Santorini, Greece, from 28 September to 5 October, 2011.

www.toscanaamericana.com/georgiamansurpleinair.html

She will also be tutoring at Mitchell College of Arts Winter or Summer Schools, Bathurst.

Mitchell@artscene.com.au

Gallery Representation:

RED HILL GALLERY, Brisbane

THE WENTWORTH GALLERIES, Sydney

RANDY HIGBEE GALLERY, Los Angeles, USA

SHARP ART GALLERY, Washington, USA

Awarded the LPAPA (Laguna Plein Air Painters Assoc) Cyndee van de Walker Scholarship for Excellence and Professional development.

Juried into the 'Best of Plein Air' Laguna Beach, California

Selected to paint in San Clemente Plein Air and Quick Draw, San Clemente, California.

Finalist Country Energy

\$35,000 Landscape Prize

“Roughly lay in your darks, keeping it all quite loose and gestural.”

My key Points

- 1 Use your artistic license to create a strong design and convey a powerful statement to help the viewer understand your message.
- 2 Simplify. Edit out anything that takes away from your message.
- 3 Use shape, tonal values, colour and texture to support your ideas in paint, creating a consistent mood and message.
- 4 Put your lightest light against your darkest dark for optimal contrast and impact, leading the eye where you want it to rest.
- 5 Check your tonal values to create a painting that expresses the mood and depth you want to portray.



“You can bend your darks to be warmer or cooler, by adding another colour.”