

Chapter 2

My shoulder is killing me. Sometimes the physical process of working on a painting is painful.

I am straining mentally too, trying to see into the pathways ahead for this painting. What would have satisfied me years ago, I am painting through now, searching for new ground. The painting feels like it is about to collapse under its own weight. But there is something there, embryonic. I think I am going to have to slow down to find it. Less brute force and more discernment. Patience.

The north wind is whistling outside, whipping up whitecaps on the lake. A late-fall cold front is coming in, and behind it, winter. The far shore of the lake is a study in grays. There are a few brave terns flying around, but most other birds are hunkered down. The pelicans are a line of white in the distance where the island rises above the lake. They must be cold.

I go back to building up color fields with phthalo blue, cadmium yellow, and cad red. It's all unformed atmosphere in search of a subject. The original framework of the painting is collapsing, but something is still there. Best to let it rest for a day so that I can keep building up the surface tomorrow. My shoulder is grateful for the break.

I have a small print of Turner's "Peace – Burial at Sea" in my studio. It's an odd painting, a study in extremes. Blazing white and pitch black. Crisp edges and smokey nothingness. Very little color, yet it's a striking painting.

Painful birth and solemn death, the extremes of life are always with us.

Painting

"A painting is not a picture of an experience, but IS the experience."—Mark Rothko

A great painting is an invitation to follow the artist, at least a little of the way, on their search for something beyond themselves, their reach toward the infinite. In his best

paintings, Rothko appears very much in contact with something beyond himself. His soft-edged color fields are radiant and inviting, while his black paintings for the Rothko Chapel in Houston are mysterious and somewhat foreboding.

Rothko's color field paintings offer us an extreme view of drawing. We only see edges at the boundaries of the color fields, and sometimes not at all. The edges correspond most closely to what we often think of as drawing. However, if we use a very broad definition of drawing, then we can say that all of Rothko's color field paintings are drawn meticulously.

This definition of drawing is very simple. Drawing is making a visually discernible change on a surface. With today's technology, we can add that the surface can be real or virtual.

We call paintings like Rothko's color fields abstract when we do not recognize images in the painting that correspond to what we think we see in our daily lives. Conversely, a representational painting tries to create the illusion of objects, locations, and lighting that we might see in the natural world. The appearance of being real, or at least corresponding to something that exists in the physical world, is called verisimilitude. Carried to an extreme, it is called photorealism.

In fact, representational paintings can only approximate the image that the artist was trying to capture. There is always a separation and tension between the observer, the observed, and what happens in the paint. Sometimes, the dissonance between object, perception, and rendering invites us to look deeper into the painting.

Many painters combine abstract and representational elements in their images. My teacher, Louis Sloane, used to say, "Painting is the art of suggestion." By "suggesting" with paint strokes, representational painters give the viewer enough information for them to construct an image in their mind that evokes a recognition of the natural world. Hopefully, that recognition evokes an emotional response in the viewer, and maybe a transcendent experience.

The foundation for painting is drawing, which, in its most basic form, is akin to painting with one color. When we think of drawing, it is easy to imagine making marks with a graphite pencil on a piece of white paper. If we have some skill in

making those marks, the viewer's mind will assemble an image, and that image will convey meaning to the viewer. Therefore, the artist's goal is two-fold: to make marks on the piece of paper that will advance this process, and to not make marks that inhibit this process.

Many non-artists balk at drawing, saying that they can't draw a straight line. In fact, straight lines are nearly impossible to draw unaided, and they rarely exist in nature. An experienced artist will make corrections to their drawn lines by erasing them all or in part and then making another line or line segment in a slightly different location. Thus, we can describe many drawing techniques as being both additive and subtractive. The pencil artist adds graphite to the paper and then uses an eraser to take it away. The incomplete subtraction of graphite from paper leaves us with *pentimento*, or little regrets, the ghost of the original mark. *Pentimento* itself plays a key role in drawing. A Giacometti drawing is a celebration of *pentimento*. The smudges from erased lines add dimension to the drawing, complementing the remaining lines.

Most beginners focus on lines when they draw. The nuance of line can beguile and challenge even master artists for their entire careers. Leonardo accomplished so much with simple, graceful lines. His lines can carry the entire range of human emotion.

Despite our fascination with lines, the foundation of sight is value, or light and dark shapes. The reason we can perceive a pencil line is that it is darker than the piece of paper it is drawn on. When we first open our eyes, we do not see the world as a web of lines, like a Euclidean dream. We see the world as blobs of light and dark, or fields of value, more like a Helen Frankenthaler painting than a mechanical blueprint. Our ability to perceive, organize, and infer meaning in value fields is the foundation of our sense of sight, and so it is the foundation for painting.

It is a useful exercise for the beginning artist to learn how to draw in values. I often ask students to make 5 little half-inch squares in a row along the edge of their drawing paper. On one end of the row of squares, leave the square unfilled. That square represents the lightest value that you can achieve in your pencil drawing. You can't get lighter than the paper itself by using just a pencil. Then make the square at the other end of the row as dark as you can with the pencil. You will see that you cannot make

the square black since the filled-in graphite tends toward a silvery gray. That filled-in silvery gray square represents the darkest value that you can make on the paper with your pencil. Then fill in the middle square of the row of five squares with a middle value between the darkest dark on one end of your scale and the lightest light on the other end. With the remaining two squares, fill them in with values halfway between their two adjacent squares. Thus, you have made a simple five-square value scale.

Now, see if you can make a simple drawing, say, of an apple, just using values, incorporating all the 5 values that you defined on your value scale. The darkest part of the apple, perhaps the stem or the shadow below the apple, corresponds to the darkest dark on your value scale. Perhaps there is a highlight on the apple that corresponds to the lightest light in your value scale. As you draw in values, you create the illusion of the apple's curved surface by transitioning from value to value. Of course, the world we see has many more than just 5 values, but 5 values will suffice for this basic drawing and show you that value is the foundation of visual perception.

Another useful basic concept in drawing is the understanding of positive and negative space. The distinction between a positive shape and a negative shape is arbitrary, but it helps us to see complex shapes more clearly. For a basic drawing of positive and negative shapes, place a coffee mug on a flat surface in front of you with the handle clearly visible. We will call the body of the mug itself a positive shape. We will call the space between the body of the mug and the curve of the handle a negative space. In a two-dimensional artwork, the negative shapes are just as important as the positive shapes. Indeed, you can make a complete drawing just based on negative shapes. Think of a tree with many branches. You can make an accurate representation of the tree just by drawing the negative shapes between and around the branches. In the end, what we label as a positive shape and what we label as a negative shape doesn't really matter. The important thing is that you learn to recognize the shapes around the thing that you think you are looking at. Hopefully, you also realize that there is a big difference between what your brain defines as a thing and how it really looks.

You can see an emphasis on negative shapes in the paintings of Paul Gauguin, where the landscape flattens out and patterns become more important than the illusion of depth. Gauguin was a key figure among post-Impressionist French painters. His work represents a bridge in art history, linking nineteenth-century Impressionists to early

20th-century modernists like Matisse and Picasso. Gauguin was especially influential among a group of French artists called the Nabis at the beginning of the 20th century. The Nabis were fascinated by patterns created by positive and negative shapes.

The understanding of value and of positive and negative shapes will give you a good start on your goal of drawing landscape scenes. Later you can add lines as a form of elegant and lyrical shorthand in your drawing. You will not find many straight lines in nature, but they can be used as approximations of complex edges. Lines add movement and grace. They can be magical.

It is a quick step from value drawing with pencil and paper to painting. A value drawing is simply a painting done with a pencil instead of a paintbrush. If we use a paintbrush, every touch on the canvas is an act of drawing. We are just making marks on a flat surface.

So, let's think about how to make marks with paint. When we step into painting, we need to think a little about the materials we will need to make an image. Most beginner painters will gravitate toward oils paints, acrylics or watercolors. Each painting medium has its unique characteristics, but they all allow the artist to smear pigment onto a two-dimensional surface.

Watercolors are often favored by beginning painters because it is easy to buy a basic watercolor set, some brushes and some paper and then you are off to the races. Unfortunately, for many beginners, the race often ends in frustration, as watercolors are the least forgiving of the three major painting mediums. What starts an exciting dab of vibrant color can easily end in a disappointing mud puddle. However, when it all works, the spontaneity and unpredictability of aqueous media is exciting.

Oil paints are more forgiving and correctable than watercolors. With oil paints, you can scrape paint off before it dries and put something back on that is more to your liking. They can produce lustrous colors with interesting textures. However, oil painting requires the use of solvents and oils that some beginners find objectionable because of the strong odors they emit. Beginners can also find the technical requirements of oil paints intimidating.

Acrylics are sometimes a happy middle ground between watercolor and oil paints. Like watercolors, acrylic paint is soluble in water, so you don't have to use smelly solvents. They can be scraped off if done quickly, before they dry, or they can be painted over easily once they are dry. On the downside, acrylic paint must be kept moist on the palette and the brush, or it becomes unworkable. The colors can still be lustrous, although they are sometimes not as lustrous as oil paints.

The painter's challenge is to create the illusion of a three-dimensional visual experience for the viewer on a two-dimensional plane. Photography and cinematography do that through mechanical, chemical, and electronic processes.

Unlike most electronic media, paint itself has three dimensions. Imagine looking at a heavily textured oil painting through a powerful magnifying lens. Elements in the painting will look like mountain ranges or canyons. The dimensional, or plastic, quality of paint has always been attractive to me. Sometimes the texture of an oil painting directly results from the representational brush stroke; sometimes not. Texture can create beauty and interest in a painting even if it does not directly correspond to a representational image.

Most artists primarily use brushes to manipulate the paint, but there are no rules to say you cannot use fingers and other body parts, knives, pieces of fabric, and so on. The process of developing an image works both additively and subtractively, so have a good supply of clean rags or paper towels to wipe paint off and blot with when you paint.

Titian was one of the first artists to beautifully exploit the plastic qualities of oil paint, departing from the very thin layer-upon-layer technique that grew out of fresco painting. Oil paint was much more costly back in Titian's 16th century because it was not mass-produced in factories and stuffed into ready-made metal tubes. Artists had to grind and mix their own pigments into paint. Or, if they were commercially successful, their assistants ground pigments and mixed paint for them.

Rembrandt pushed deeper into the plasticity of paint, using everything but the kitchen sink to manipulate the paint. He left lots of fingerprints and other wonderful marks in his paintings. Claude Monet incorporated heavy texture into landscape paintings.

Later, Willem de Kooning slashed and beat his highly plastic paint surfaces into figurative and abstract elements.

Some artists seek to reduce or eliminate “the hand of the artist” from their paintings by leaving no visible brushstrokes. Some artists like to splatter paint onto canvas in a very messy and obvious way. Jackson Pollock, aka Jack the Dripper, was famous for devising ways to drip paint onto canvas. He was influenced by Native American sand paintings, where colored sand is poured from the artist's hand to form an image on the floor. The native artist can make a sand painting without ever touching the floor that they are painting on, and Jack thought that was compelling.

Other artists like to use the beauty of the paint marks themselves as an element of their painting. Dutch painter Frans Hals was a master at using abstract, slashing brushstrokes to evoke the fine, ruffled collars that were worn by the subjects of his portraits. When there is a balance between the evocative use of brushstroke and texture and the demands of verisimilitude in a representational painting, that is often called painterly realism.

Sometimes artists make visible brushstrokes that are independent of the image. Seurat's technique of painting with small dots became known as Pointillism. In Pointillist painting, small dots of color are juxtaposed to create a harmonious visual effect. Like many other very precise techniques, Pointillism was an interesting tool in the painter's tool bag, but as a goal by itself, it was a dead end. As dabs of color are divided finer and finer, the eventual result is that the reflected light off the painting diffuses into a pearlescent gray. Painterly delight was sacrificed for an exercise in optics.

The surface, or support, on which I paint large paintings is heavyweight linen. Painting on fabric keeps a large painting lighter in weight compared with painting on a wood board, and this allows the painting to be moved more easily. These are two distinct advantages over fresco painting, where water-based pigment is painted into absorbent plaster that is part of a wall, making the painting a permanent part of the plaster wall.

The fabric support for a painting is often stretched to a taut surface over a wooden framework of stretcher bars, just like an animal skin might be stretched over a circular frame to make a drum. The stretching can be done before the painting is started, or after it is already in process. I often start a large painting on fabric tacked to a wall. Once I have a good sense of the dimensions of the final image, I then stretch the fabric over a rectangle formed by wooden stretcher bars.

The downside of painting in oils on fabric is that both the oil paint and the fabric can become brittle over time. The fabric support for the painting can move underneath the brittle paint, causing cracks in the painting. The fabric itself can also tear if mishandled, so there are risks with moving and caring for an old and brittle oil painting on fabric.

The choice of fabric to paint on is a major factor in the final look of the painting. There is a big difference between painting on linen and on cotton. Linen fibers are oval in cross section, and the fibers can twist back and forth, making an irregular surface. For me, linen is simply a more interesting surface than the uniformity of cotton duck. However, cotton duck is much cheaper than linen, so it is a good surface for students to paint on.

Both linen and cotton must be protected from acidic oil paint, or the fabric will eventually weaken and become susceptible to damage. Rabbit skin glue can provide a protective barrier between fabric support and the oil paint. So can acrylic paint, often called acrylic gesso when used in preparation of a painting surface. True gesso is a mixture of chalk and a binder, such as glue. Materials and techniques matter, especially if you would like your painting to endure through decades and perhaps centuries.

Painting on a rigid support has fewer long-term risks for the survivability of the painting. For small plein air oil paintings, I make panels out of cabinet-grade plywood and acrylic gesso. Smooth and rigid supports feel very different from fabric supports when you paint. Brush strokes, imperfections in the paint, dust, hair, and bugs all show up more on smooth, rigid supports.

The tools and techniques of painting are many and varied. Some ways work better than others. Some are founded in physics and chemistry, while others are based on

more fanciful notions. The successful artist uses an assortment of tools and techniques to reach deep and build a pathway in paint for the viewer to follow. Unless you are a historian, there is not much point in following a technique for its own sake. Use what gets you to where you want to go, and to where you want the viewer to go.

I think that all great painting is a reach toward something beyond simply the recognition of the subject of the painting. They are a reach toward the divine. The painting is a crystallized record of the artist's struggle to produce something evocative and rich with meaning.

The painting is also a pathway for the viewer to follow, if they are able, towards something meaningful. But the viewer needs “legs.” They need to follow the artist, at least a little way. Great art requires a great audience.

Part of that reach for the divine in painting is a rejection of the barriers that separate the artist and the viewer from the divine. Certainly, a misplaced brushstroke is a distracting barrier to the viewer. As the painting moves toward completion, it is important for the artist to look for barriers to remove.

In many mythic stories, the quest for communion with the divine is blocked by an adversary. The hero must engage in hand-to-hand combat with the monster in order to survive. It is by wrestling with our internal adversaries that paintings come to life as new passages, colors, and textures are explored. Failure by the artist to engage with the creative struggle may lead to dull paintings that work in terms of imagery, but do not lift the viewer beyond mere recognition of the image.

Painting is both an additive and a subtractive process. Extreme subtraction can lead to minimalism. So, there is a point of balance between removing barriers and removing everything, leaving the viewer with no obstacles, but also no guideposts. This is why Rothko's black color fields are so daunting. He gives the viewer no support. To view them openly is truly a journey into darkness.

The manipulation of paint requires both intention from the artist and the allowance of chance or happy accidents. The key is to recognize what moves the painting forward. This recognition can happen quickly, or sometimes it can take years.

When beginning artists feel uncomfortable and frustrated about their work, that is usually a sign that they are learning. They are struggling, whether or not they know it, to add additional elements or processes to their artistic toolkit. It may take a few paintings before they fully understand what they are adding, and they can see a successful integration of a fresh approach to painting.

Rothko painted and wrestled. As with all innovative artists, many of his paintings were successful, and some were not. The Tate Modern in London is a wonderful place to see some of the successful ones. They can pull us into a wonderfully meditative place where he arrived only after a great deal of work.