

Oil Paints

Holding on to Greater Days

By Michael Hodgkins

This house oozes character and often caught Michael Hodgkins' eye as he drove past. Years earlier he had made detailed sketches, but it wasn't until he was asked to do this demonstration that he felt it was an ideal subject to show off his architectural painting style.



Armed with my trusty digital camera and mini DV camcorder, I visited the house on a day when the weather was just as I wanted it and at the right time of the afternoon to get that magical light that I love.

I chose two different suitable viewpoints from which to develop a composition – one towards the front and the other more towards the side of the house. I took photographs and then videotaped while slowly wandering around the building narrating notes on colour and details.

STEP ONE

The digital photographs and video were transferred to my computer. The best photograph from each viewpoint was selected for development and loaded into Photoshop. I flipped the images to

MATERIALS

- Polyester/cotton blend canvas on stretcher
- Art Spectrum Artists' Acrylic Gesso
- Art Spectrum: Cerulean Blue Hue, Ultramarine Blue, Crimson (Alizarin Hue), Burnt Sienna, Cadmium Yellow, Lemon Yellow, Yellow Ochre, Titanium White
- Winsor & Newton: Cadmium Red, Burnt Umber
- Chalk pastel: Burnt Sienna Tint
- Long flat synthetic sable brushes: 4mm, 6mm, 10mm
- Long flat bristle brushes: Nos 2, 6 and 10
- Filbert bristle brush: No 2
- Synthetic sable rigger brush: No 0
- Synthetic sable round brushes: Nos 1 and 2
- Pure gum turpentine
- White spirit
- Refined linseed oil
- Art Spectrum No 2 painting medium
- Kneadable eraser
- Spray fixative

mirror-view so that when the time came to do a critical evaluation later, I could flip them back for a fresh perspective – and avoid the visual fatigue of continuously looking at the same image.

I experimented with different aspect ratios and compositional balances, airbrushed out elements and added others, such as clouds. Tonal sketches were made in the digital realm by converting a copy of each composition into greyscale and then manipulating those. Changes in value made in the greyscale photos were then applied to the colour versions.

Part of the process included placing the two viewpoints on each of my two computer monitors and sticky-taping cardboard to create borders. I find this a quick, simple and effective way of playing around with images.

After a break, I flipped the images back to the correct view and judged with fresh eyes which was the stronger design. It was obvious straightaway that the view towards the side of the building engaged the viewer well and had much more impact.

STEP TWO

I cut a piece of polyester/cotton canvas a few inches bigger than the stretcher size of 51cm x 76cm (20in x 30in). I use polyester blend because research suggests that it is stronger and more reliable than pure cotton of the same weight.

The loose canvas was pinned to a board and given a generous coat of acrylic gesso with a large spatula. I didn't want to risk leaving any improperly primed dead spots in the canvas, which suck the medium out of the paint and leave dull spots on the surface of the finished work.

To transfer the design from the computer to canvas, I used a variation of the carbon-paper technique. First I converted my digital design to a clear contour drawing in the computer and then printed it out to the actual size of the painting. I then coated the back of the printout liberally with a Burnt Sienna tint chalk pastel. The printout was stapled over the canvas with the chalked side in contact. The contour lines were drawn



over carefully to transfer the pastel from the sheet onto the canvas, just like carbon paper. I removed the printout, tidied up any of the smudges with a kneadable eraser and then sprayed the drawing with fixative. Once the canvas was stretched, I was ready to paint.

STEP THREE

My goal now is to cover the entire canvas with paint – a relatively quick and easy process. I start with my basic palette – Burnt Sienna, Ultramarine Blue, Lemon Yellow, Crimson (Alizarin Hue) and Titanium White.

**STEP 2**

This is a very safe palette, allowing a full range of hues based on low-saturation mixes. Apart from Titanium, the pigments are all transparent which preserves the reflected light from the canvas and except for the Alizarin, they are all relatively quick-drying which is preferable in the initial stages of a painting.

My medium at this stage consisted of a mix containing five per cent linseed oil, 90 per cent white spirit and five per cent gum turpentine. Most areas were washed in very thinly so a lean medium was required.

White spirit and gum turpentine are both efficient solvents for oil paint but with two distinct differences. White spirit evaporates slowly and does not accelerate drying. Gum turpentine accelerates drying but the fumes are very strong if used in copious amounts. So I used a lot of white spirit for lung-friendly thinning and a splash of gum turpentine to accelerate the drying time. I placed the lot into one of my palette dippers and gave it a good stir with a brush handle.

The first additions to my basic palette were the Burnt Umber and Cerulean Blue Hue. These two paints along with Yellow Ochre are the second tier of my basic palette.

Between cool Cerulean Blue hue and Warm Ultramarine Blue I can mix any blue I want. Rich turquoises only need the addition of Viridian to the two blues. In this case Cerulean Blue was required for the lower areas of the

**STEP 3**

sky and the Ultramarine, Titanium White and a little Burnt Sienna along with the Cerulean were used to lay in the rest of.

Some areas of the canvas were left bare to represent my highest value white areas in the finished painting. So now, every element in the painting had been laid in loosely but with no development of form.

STEP FOUR

Now, I started to apply my golden rule. After each passage of a painting is complete, I simply ask myself, 'what is the biggest difference between what I have and what I want?' It's a simple question and the answer is my instruction for what to do next. It never fails and means that a clear path is laid out for me as I go. When the answer is 'my signature', I know I'm finished!

At this point the answer directed that I needed to place the extreme ranges of the tonal-value scale into the painting so that I could pitch all other values against them. I already had the top, being bare white canvas, so the low-end darks were needed.

The darkest elements in the painting were the shadowed windowpanes so it was the walls, windows and doors that I tackled first. This is where technology comes in handy again. I went back to my video on the computer and extracted about 40 still frames – close-up as well as wider views.

I have another computer in my studio with a monitor beside the easel making it

easy to flip between any shots I need to refer to. It's a sort of digital sketchbook that I can zoom in on to extract any structural information I may need.

Being the second layer of paint, I strengthened up my medium, but still maintained the 'fat over lean' principle. This time I filled my dipper with equal parts of Art Spectrum No 2 Medium and gum turpentine – a good mix for glazing and early development work.

My priority was the windowpanes, so I started with a small square sable, glazing in mixes of Burnt Sienna and Ultramarine Blue drowned in medium. These areas will read as black in the finished work, although they will be nowhere near it.

The dark recesses in shaded windows are not black holes. It is important that the illusion of space behind the glass is maintained. This can be done by applying transparent paint in glazes to these areas so that light will always reflect back through the paint layers off the white of the canvas. The glazing medium used contains both oil and dammar varnish, which allows the light through and creates a sense of rich depth in the paint film.

Next I created the shaded areas of the brick walls with mixes of Burnt Sienna, Ultramarine Blue and Alizarin.

For the brighter, sunlit areas of the walls, I used an opaque application by including Titanium White with mixes of Burnt Sienna, Lemon Yellow and Alizarin. The walls are brick, neatly

tuck-pointed – but at no stage did I ever try to paint bricks. My aim was to suggest a generic red stone texture that would read as a brick wall without me ever having to paint one line of mortar. This was done with little random dabs using a small square sable brush.

The shaded areas of the woodwork under the veranda, the sills, doors and mortar dados were all placed with various opaque mixes of Lemon Yellow, Alizarin, Ultramarine Blue, Burnt Sienna and Titanium White.

Now, I introduced the last pigment of my extended basic palette, Yellow Ochre. I wanted a warm white for the sunlit whites along the walls and mixing the tiniest dab of opaque Yellow Ochre into Titanium White is best to achieve this.

Once the walls were all defined, I began working on the roof. Cadmium Red was introduced into the palette as I needed an opaque red that would extend the colour intensity in the red spectrum of my basic palette.

Using mixes of Cadmium Red, Alizarin, Burnt Sienna, Lemon Yellow and Titanium White, I worked my way through the various areas of the red painted roof. In order to give each plane of the corrugated iron sheeting its own position in space, I was careful to adjust the colour temperature and value of each plane so that they related to each other in the correct alignment.

This is where I paint purely with theory, placing dark against light and warm against cool. Higher contrasts and warmer colour temperatures come forward, lesser contrasts and cooler colour temperatures recede. It may not look that way in reality, but I'm trying to trick the eye in two dimensions, and that is how it's done.

Thick paint was liberally dragged with the brush, following the form of the roof. The resultant brush marks read as corrugated sheeting.

A little Cerulean Blue hue was added to the red mixes to create mauve grey for the sheeting at the rear right side of the roof. This pushed it way back in space and correctly read as the blue sky reflecting off the roof.



Similarly, the far left section of roof was placed with a cooler red/mauve mix and reduced contrast within the brush mark variations. This pushed that unimportant area back in space too.

The highest value, warmest mixes leaning towards yellow were used on the two planes facing forward under the white peaks.

In order to preserve the lighter areas of the capping, a small stiff bristle brush dipped in white spirit was used to wipe out the wet paint from these areas. The chimney whites in shadow are mixes of Ultramarine Blue, Burnt Sienna and Titanium White. The sunlit sides are my trusty warm white mix.

From the roof I worked my way through the guttering and verandah woodwork, downpipes and posts. A small rigger brush is invaluable for this type of linear work. The colour mixes are those described earlier for whites in light and shade. Some of the defined linear shadow lines are deeper mixes of Ultramarine Blue and Burnt Sienna or straight Burnt Umber.

For the concrete porch, I needed an opaque yellow mixer to create an orange that would cover some of the under drawing that was stubbornly showing through and dulling what should have been a bright light area. Art Spectrum Cadmium Yellow, a high-

value, moderately intense middle yellow was used and substituted in mixes for the Lemon Yellow. Its opacity gave me the covering power I needed as the other pigments were all transparent.

The ground from the horizon to the foreground was then put in quite loosely with bristle brushes. At this point I made a creative decision to do away with the green lawn. But when it came time to paint in the foreground however, a wise little voice in the back of my head was telling me to not do this.

To ensure that the painting was unified and the building belonged to the landscape in which I had now positioned it, every colour on my palette was used in the various mixes for the foreground.

To create a sense of focus I darkened the ground towards the outer edges of the canvas and scumbled in some loose lighter passages towards the centre, diagonally crossing the driveway. This helps draw the eye towards my intended focal point of the painting.

FINAL STEP

This is the part of the painting process that I enjoy the most – the run to the finish line. Everything is pushed and pulled with glazes, details and highlights until all elements sit in exactly the relationship that I want them to.

The roof needed detailing, so all the cappings, edges and shadows were put in using a rigger and small round sables. I used Titanium White tints of the red mixes for the highlights and Burnt Sienna and Alizarin for the shadows.

For this part of the painting I used Art Spectrum No 2 medium almost neat for most things. I thinned it by dipping my brush in white spirit only when I needed to and mostly for glazing. My other dipper contained pure linseed oil, which has a different flow quality off the brush and is useful for detail work.

After the roof was refined, the weakest area was the walls. I stepped the windowpanes down another notch by glazing them with pure Ultramarine Blue. Then I worked the shaded wall areas with glazes of Ultramarine Blue, Burnt Sienna and Alizarin.

There is almost no opaque paint on any area of brickwork in shade. It was all transparent glazes from start to finish except for the white rendered areas of the dado and windowsills, which contain opaque Titanium White. The deep shadows up under the eaves appear dark but there is still plenty of light bouncing around in there.

The full palette was used in the mixes to create the foliage on the trees. Again, I wanted unity and painting green shapes on a predominantly red background was a risky task. My solution was to include hints of every

colour in the foliage mixes so as to harmonise and keep the actual greens muted. Leaves tend to reflect colours from everywhere, especially blues from the sky. A few sky holes were cut into to mesh them into their backgrounds.

At this stage two things became apparent. Neither the red cement porch nor the sunlit wall areas were working as cohesive structures. All the bits were there in the right places but they weren't together as a whole. Luckily this is a really easy problem to fix as I find that nothing brings an area together like a glaze.

A mix of Cadmium Red – the tiniest bit because it is opaque – and Alizarin was glazed over the entire red cement porch area, both sunlit and shaded. This instantly created a whole form out of what had been a lot of disparate bits. I glazed the entire sunlit wall areas with a mix of Alizarin and Lemon Yellow.

I quite happily glaze values up or down. When lightening areas by glazing I use transparent Zinc White either by itself or mixed with other transparent pigments. I find it always a good idea when using glazes for unifying to take some of it back out again with either a stiff brush or a cotton bud dipped in white spirit. Rubbing back at random lets a bit of the original paint show through unaffected and visually beds the glaze in nicely.

In this case the glaze was applied evenly but it was increasingly taken out

towards the left side of the building. The cooler pinks showing through there push the unimportant area on that side of the house back in space.

In contrast, I wanted to bring forward the sunlit areas of the wall towards the right side, so I placed a few very small dabs of pure Cadmium Yellow.

Highlights on the roof capping were reinforced, getting much stronger as they came forward towards the focal point – again bringing that part of the structure forward.

The sunlit whites along the top of the verandah structure and on the roof get progressively warmer and more impasto towards the right, and cooler and thinner towards the left. Satisfied that the house was in perfect balance, I completed the tree trunks and ran out a few shadows across the ground.

The tree on the far right was linked to the house by overlapping all the trees to the verandah. I even had to put in a little bush at the base of the big tree trunk to complete the chain. That way there were no orphans standing on my stage alone.

Time to return to my golden rule and I found that the answer was that all the work needed was my signature! And, just to show that the design process is still open even at this late stage of the painting, I decided that my signature would work a lot better on the right-hand side, opposite to where I had initially placed it.

MASTER HINTS AND TIPS

- Use the least amount of basic tube colours you can get away with and stretch them to the limits. You will create much more harmonised paintings as a result and will learn your mixing craft intimately through the challenge of trying to create the required colours as you paint. It's a lot more economical too.
- Before tackling a passage, always restate your drawing either literally with a small brush or with a clear

mental picture of how you are going to proceed. That way the integrity of your original drafting is maintained and further developed, no matter how loosely you may have treated the area previously.

- If you are using a tube of black with your oils, throw it out unless you like making mud.
- As my father, George Hodgkins, said when he first started teaching me, "don't be scared of it. It's only

paint". You can take it back off just as easily as you can put it on. In fact unpainting is a great way of controlling edge quality which I use all the time.

- Windows in darkness must always have the suggestion of light passing through them and reflecting off them to suggest mystery and interaction with the world. Avoid creating dead black holes in your canvas.