

# On Painting in Series

By M.E. "Mike" Bailey, NWS

*Someone looked at me with a strange expression on their face as though I was some sort of freak*

"You must have ideas come to you as fast as leaves falling from a tree in Autumn," she accused. No matter what explanation I gave, she would not believe me. She also said, "I could never come up with the ideas you do, I am not creative at all." This woman was an accomplished painter. But she, has not developed a process where the creative muscles are exercised and built to strength. Other than to paint what she sees, and very elaborately sometimes, there is little creative effort to move away from the painting approaches that have been done tens of thousands of times before.

"You may not believe it, but it took over 30 paintings in order for me to develop this one piece," I said. "In fact, I had no idea that I was even capable of doing something like this until it actually showed up on the canvas. You see, I paint about one subject in series. Sometimes I may hang on to that series over a year or more. Sometimes it is for only weeks, or a few months. I revise and change an idea until it is absolutely nothing like when I first began it." "That is where I get my creative ideas and approaches."

Of course, she didn't believe me, but was at least interested in finding out just what I actually meant by 'painting in series' and how one might go about it.

## Picking An Idea

Selecting an idea, has, for me, been often an accident. That is to say, I may begin to paint something as a trial or experiment just to see what I can do with it. Rather than painting landscapes, as I have for years, I am now choosing more seemingly mundane subjects. The intent is to do something uncommon or extraordinary with the common or the mundane things in our lives. Most recently, a simple still

life came up as a classroom challenge. After 35 paintings of that same still life set up, I am still making new ones and the paintings are nothing like I imagined they might be at the beginning. In truth, I had absolutely no idea where this might lead.

I used to think painting in series meant to come up with a different idea for every new painting. I also thought that changing the set up, or the configuration of the still life, was the answer. In other words, I was tied to thinking about the subject only. Adding or subtracting items in or out of the picture plane was a way I thought would produce great results. Well, that is partially true, but that kind of design thought process is still limited to the manipulation of the subject itself. I came to realize that a shift in thinking was what was needed more than a quest for astonishing results with every new attempt.

## Seek Incremental Changes

After painting the first painting of the subject, the next step is to begin another painting to provide modifications to the last painting in very specific "categories." Those "categories" are called the elements of design;



**"Still Life 1" This is the first painting in a long series developed over several months.**

Line, Size, Shape, Direction, Color, Value and Texture. By confining thoughts about changes to one or two of these elements, the painting may remain nearly unchanged or just modified by an incremental difference in, say, value or color. It is these fundamental changes that can affect a singular subject in profound ways. How many possible value patterns could there be?

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*"Still Life 4"* In this piece the artist simply changed the pattern of darks to set off the still life configuration.

With how many different distributions of color or schemes of color could one make of the same subject? In how many different ways can the shapes be changed or revised to become more alluring? And what of texture or pattern? Could pattern or texture be emphasized or made more quiet? How many different ways can size or proportion be expressed? So, you see, there are literally thousands of possible paintings waiting to be made by just modifying the elements of design.



*"Still Life 5"* Here the dark value pattern is changed to more organic 'shadow shapes' and the color scheme is changed.

In Still Life 5 and 6, one can immediately see the the addition of a geometric shape against the contrasting organic shape of the bonsai tree. Line was introduced in the "Still Life 5" to provide a different interest in the vase than the ornate pattern which had been in the previous few paintings. A painter need only to confine herself (or himself) to attempting to uncover some of the possibilities that lie beneath these seemingly benign titles of Line, Size, Shape,



*"Still Life 6"*

Direction, Color, Value and Texture.

Once into that vein of thought, then the artist will realize there is another part of the design thinking process: that the artist examine the relationships between the parts of the painting. For example, the artist may wish to have a vase in the foreground space relate to some part of negative space. This can most easily be accomplished with the ideas of repetition and variation. Repeat a color or a value or texture from one space to another. By making the negative space and the red sake' pitcher in "Still Life 5" be of related color, the two parts relate and become part of a 'whole.'

Similarly, in "Still Life 6" the bright blue line used around the shapes relates those shapes instantly with the large, teal blue, negative background shape. It is through relating the parts that the artist can decide on other directions to follow after making color or value changes. That artist may make a whole series of different relationship decisions which lead the painting in completely different directions.



*"Still Life 7"*

It may be in the development of these relationships that new ideas are suggested in the course of that painting. Something as simple as

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flattening the image space, or just adding texture or pattern to the negative space can relate one area to another.



"Still Life 11"

Modifying shape might be a wonderful way to play with a design. Look at the next few paintings and how space and subject was flattened while color schemes became the emphasis.



"Still Life 10"



"Still Life 12"

Notice how the Line and edge has become an emphasis in the painting. What were once rounded shapes have become angular.



"Still Life 14"

In "Still Life 14," reality seems to have completely disappeared. Now, we are fascinated by the color contrasts and the liveliness of the shape of the sake' pitcher. The tree shape has taken a less emphasized role with a value change.

Compare these pieces to the very first piece in the series and one can see how much things have changed. To this point, all that has been done is to modify what was in progressive steps.

Notice that the configuration remains largely the same with very minor shifts in position of the key players. Shape is actively changing with every painting.

## What If I Run Out of Ideas?

If an artist is making complete, rearrangements in every painting, then he or she will find after a dozen paintings, or so, that the ideas slow down. Boredom appears for lack of ideas. This is precisely the mental state that leads to the artist making a conscious choice to access his or her own creativity. The artist must resist the temptation to quit. This is where breakthroughs happen. It isn't easy, but dig deeper!

A very wise and successful artist pointed out that it isn't the picture that matters. It is in entering the creative state that one gains access to their own artistic voice. Soon, notions come to mind that most artists would dismiss as 'ridiculous notions.' Don't dismiss unusual ideas because you have never seen it done before. Let those notions come to life. They are completely yours! This is the state where you see yourself face to face. If the idea isn't very good, make modifications to it. Remember Line, Size, Shape, Direction, Color, Value and Texture are all candidates for the artist's attention. Modify relationships such as contrast and harmony. Look for things to repeat, such as a simple



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directional stroke or line. Find something that you like in the painting and multiply it. Go back to the beginning and lay the paintings out on the floor in the order you painted them. Stare at them. Think about what trends are appearing as the changes were made. If you are out of ideas, look for the series to suggest a new direction. But what ever you do, DON'T WALK AWAY.

Staying close to the project and remaining connected to it, without taking a mental vacation from it, will keep you processing ideas. You may even find yourself dreaming about the process and about new possibilities. Showing up at the studio daily, even if for a short visit, will keep the muse coming around. It is in this mental state that the artist reaches beyond what is seen and begins to conjure up new, original possibilities.

## How Many Shall I Do?

How far is up? There really is no answer to the question of how many. There does seem to be some kind of magic that begins to happen after 20 paintings are made. Personally, I begin to reach my most creative state after 25 pieces. After several series projects, I am beginning to see a pattern. It seems to me that a



"Still 17"

painter must first exhaust himself of all ideas that come from obvious outside influence. Most notably, breaking through "rules" taught in some previous workshop. That shift occurs as the number of paintings progresses into the teens and twenties. Then, the often bizarre thoughts show up that earlier might have been thought of as goofy or ridiculous. This is the number when significant things happen. That number is different for everyone.



"Still 17"

As the series progresses, the artist will find spurts of creative energy. Each painting becomes just another experiment, just another piece of canvas or paper. Each one is expendable as the process pushes forward and the ideas are everywhere.



"Still Life 20"

The trick to finding one's artistic voice is in the multiples. It lies with doing the not so obvious stuff, such as shapes merging with one another. Negative spaces can combine with positive shapes which give birth to new, unconsidered shape possibilities. Repeating positive shapes can lead to some other new options and might provide a new degree of unity or harmony. Develop rhythms and variations around a single theme.

Fracturing the picture plane, then restoring it out of order, or distorting the restoration, may lead to unusual and fascinating solutions. The important thing that comes out of series painting is that one idea chains to the next and the next and the next. It becomes an endless progression of thoughts and marks that are recorded as one paints. The series will take odd, unexpected turns. Paintings will not be seen as successes at first, only to realize later that they are indeed breakthrough pieces. For that reason, discarding paintings, in any fashion, is not an option. They all count!

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"Still Life 21"

*The important thing that comes out of series painting is that one idea chains to the next and the next and the next. It becomes an endless progression of thoughts and marks that are recorded as one paints.*

Series painting is a time honored and respected method among artists. It is this method that opens the artist to new untried avenues one might not have considered. Personally, as I progress deep into a series, I look at the most recent pieces and wonder to myself how I could have ever come up with such ideas. Had I not followed a progression of modifications and changes I never would have dreamt them!



"Still Life 22"

As you read through this essay and peruse the paintings, you might be able to see how one led to the other or you might even wonder how the painter leaped from one version to the last piece.

Then, as you look at these, maybe there are some hints for what you might consider in your own work. These last paintings reflect a degree of seriousness where I reduced the rush in which I

Painted the others. The following paintings were more carefully thought out.



"Still Life 28"



"Still Life 29"

All the energy of ridding myself of the extraneous ideas and cleaning out other influences may not have yielded competitive quality or gallery quality paintings. Each painting served a purpose of finding great shapes, colors, line work, value arrangements and all sorts of textures, patterns and gradations that would never have appeared by following the 'influences.'

There is another very mentionable benefit of this process. Even though many, or most, of the paintings that are in a series may never be seen in public, they become a record of techniques, compositional strategies and unusual ideas that can be used in future pieces. They are a bank account from which to create in future pieces.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the artist can line up all the paintings in one room and look for trends that are unconsciously used repeatedly. These trends are telling of the artist's underlying habits and thought patterns. For example, one might witness that line is used



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much more than he realized. Or, as in my own case, I tend often toward sharp, flat and



"Still Life 30"

angular shapes as I move quickly through sketches and series experiments. One can see that in the examples in this article. Recognizing these trends and habits is sometimes a subtle thing to discern. Therein lies the answer to the question "what is my style?"



"Still Life 31"

## Tips for Series Work

**One.** Leave behind all notions of drudgery or boredom. It just isn't that way.

**Two.** Develop an attitude that each piece is a trial or an experiment. This will free you to take chances you would not otherwise take

**Three.** Work small and work fast. When you hit one that you really like, you can enlarge it.

**Four.** Carry a sketch book where ever you go and record ideas as they come to you. They vanish fast. Keep your ideas like your money, in a place like a checkbook, where they are reachable when you need them

**Five.** When you are brimming with ideas, execute them as fast as you can paint. Better,

record those ideas in one sketchbook. It will later be a source of reference for you.

**Six.** Show up daily to the studio. Even if it is for a few minutes

**Seven.** Force yourself to paint. The ideas will come once you start putting the brush to canvas or paper

**Eight.** Set small goals, e.g., "I will create six pieces using this idea." Then don't stop till they are finished.



"Still Life 32"

**Nine.** Lay the finished pieces out in the order they were painted, on the floor so you can see the progression. Do this every few weeks. It stimulates ideas and progress. And you will feel like you have accomplished something big.

**Ten.** Every painting counts! The failures are more instructive than the successful attempts.

**Eleven.** Study design and all the ways the elements can be used. Learn to seek and paint relationships.



"Still Life 33"

**Twelve.** Above all, Make it fun !! Looking back at "Still Life 1," isn't it boring compared to all the rest of these?