

What Are You Trying To Say?

By M.E. "Mike" Bailey, NWS

For some reason I awaken too late. Or, I come around so darned late that it seems like I have been doing the Rip Van Winkle nap for a long time.

That is to say that something so stinking obvious has been staring me in the face for nearly 15 years and suddenly it all makes sense. Why am I so dense? What has been holding up the alarm bell to come awake?

Here is the reality of this, oh so silly, sudden spate of consciousness. I just figured out what my mentors, the authors and teachers have meant when they ask "Why are you painting what you are painting?" Or, "What is the reason for doing this painting?" Or, "What are you trying to say?"

Uh huh! Yup! I know. Pass my brushes, please. I just want to paint. I'll get to that later. Let's see . . . shall I start with a nice yellow or should it be blue?

It has passed over my sleepy head for YEARS . . . and I thought I knew what they meant. In fact, it *seemed* to be so blatantly apparent that I just kept looking at other stuff.

When my paintings began to consistently turn out acceptably well, I thought it was because I had practiced so much. Then I looked back at my process and saw it. It had snuck up on me, very quietly, and came to rest in my habit bag. (That is the bag which we all carry our repetitive acts (habits) around in.)

Yup! "The Secret" had finally come to live in my studio. And it took up permanent residence in my class lectures. But no one picked up on it as being "The Secret."

Knowing that you are painting a landscape because you think it is beautiful does not answer the question of "WHY?" It just makes the statement that you like to look at the landscape.

Over the last ten years, I have gone to Yosemite Valley multiple times to paint. Usually, the time of year is early November, when the leaves have changed color and the waterfalls have ceased to run. The air is crisp and the weather clear as winter hides just behind next week. I usually go with other painters to attend a mass 'teach in' by four or five of the country's best watercolor painters. And, I have to say that every trip has scrambled every intention of making great paintings, save one trip.

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There is such grandeur and astounding scenery there that it never fails to cause involuntary, loud exclamations and sudden gasps for breath. The granite walls rise straight up from the floor for (sometimes) a thousand feet, or more. And they do so with little, or no, growth of any vegetation. These cliffs are so smooth and barren that they literally

shine in certain light. The granite faces turn colors and go in and out of shadow as the sun moves. One can stand in virtually any fifty cent sized circle and turn 360 degrees to see many, many painting subjects. Plein Aire painting is bad enough that one needn't raise the amount of visually surprising information to cause one's mental circuits to short out. The amount of stuff to paint in Yosemite is beyond description and always leads to my walking off the painting site with my tail drooping and my frustration index at maximum. The next problem, I think, is that virtually every painter has tried to paint Half Dome or El Capitan *at least* a million times. For me, that is a signal to NOT paint that specific subject. Why? Well, who needs another one when they are so common? (Now, there is one of the reasons of "Why" of which I write . . .but not yet specific enough.)

For me, that is a signal to NOT paint that specific subject. Why? Well, who needs another one when they are so common?

I need to mention another painting subject here, too, to insure that the flavor of my explanation doesn't fade. Two years ago, I began a series of paintings in my studio of a woman in a hat. I set out to use her face / portrait / hat as a simple subject to illustrate some points about design in my lectures. That series led to thirty something images, a few of which deviated far from the original purpose of making visual aids. In fact, I had become so enthralled with the design aspects, one of the completed

paintings won a very large award and helped me reach a new, much higher bar. In looking back at that series and how it all materialized, and the final results, it became instantly clear what I had done without realizing it.

(Okay, Everyone, this is where the meat is. Don't miss it!)

Ready?

I had fallen into the habit of doing studies. A lot of them.

What kind of studies?

Well, this kind: Studies of abstract value patterns in order to lead the eye around through the painting and, at the same time, set up the composition of the painting. Some instructors call them "value patterns." They are really nothing more than 'abstract chunks' of light, medium and dark that are tantalizing to look at. Without going into a lesson here, the trick for these is to tie the sides of the painting together with either a band of lights or a band of darks. This can be two, three or four sides. Additionally, the three classes of value absolutely cannot be the same size. They have to be unequal in size.

Next, I had realized that in conducting these studies, I was looking for an interesting 'pattern of light' and not a rendition of a hat, or a tree, or how the nose shadow fell across a cheek. My purpose (notice that word again!) was to make a visually interesting pattern of light that seemed to move with a rhythm.

In the case of Yosemite, my last trip is what cinched the fact that I had indeed arrived at the answer of what I was

trying to say . . .or the “Why.” As I described earlier, the mental confusion and frustration that occurs when going to Yosemite to paint is nearly unavoidable. I can’t possibly explain the angst in deciding ‘what’ to paint, wishing I had chosen something else, fighting the conclusion of the painting and eventually throwing up my hands in disgust. So, knowing this ahead of time. I began to think about what it was that I remembered the most about Yosemite. It was the immensity. It was the Power of those big, horrendous granite cliffs. It was the scale of a big fallen boulder next to a stand of trees that dwarfed the trees (seen all over the valley!) It was the Steepness of the place; straight up and down. Repeat: Power, immense, sheer steepness, scale.

So, I began making studies of big huge gargantuan rocks with different ‘things,’ such as trees, to show the scale. I used jolting, angular shapes to intrude into the picture plane to show steep walls. I show long, tall verticals against small, even tiny, objects. Anything to show the power, immensity, steepness and scale of the place and what was there. I think I ended up with 25 studies, give or take a few. Then, I vowed to use the designs to guide my paintings while in Yosemite.

I had a REASON to paint each and every hat painting and Yosemite painting. There was ‘cause’ behind each piece. Or, should I say ‘purpose?’

In order to steer away from all the distractions in the details, such as noses, eyes, nostrils, hair coifs, well known landmarks or other ‘things,’ I had to ask if those things supported my purpose. If they did not, they were eliminated and

replaced with marks that supported and/or enhanced the purpose.

Let me state an example or two. In the hat paintings, there are no, repeat, NO faces. While we look at women in their hats, we aren’t even conscious of the fact that there are no facial details . . .just a simple shape or two under each hat of color and value. Why make distracting details that didn’t support the rhythm of the hats (light shapes) in the paintings. If facial detail did appear, it was abbreviated and only suggested. The value abstraction *had* to be clear and enticing. I used dark hats, dark silhouettes and dark shapes of (whatever) to get the light shaped idea across.

As for Yosemite, the dynamics of size comparisons and directional contrast and tensions that set the designs of the paintings. Why include a sky if it didn’t support the suggestion of steepness or power? Why use bright, fantasy like, sweet color when that would distract from the impression of power, weight, scale and steepness?

There was ‘cause’ behind each piece. Or, should I say ‘purpose?’

You might be painting a still life or a figure. Do you know WHY you are painting it? And, by the way, ‘I want to show how ‘pretty’ it is’ is not a purpose. You have to be more specific than that. Break down what you are seeing to what it is that moves you to want to paint it. What, exactly, is in this still life that makes you sense beauty? Is it the light and shadow? Is it some contrasting element of the set-up? Is there a

sentimental feeling you get from it? . .
.and if so, what is the cause of that?

Studies, sketches, trials and doodles around a purposeful idea make for a lot of exciting artistic energy. It is these that lead us to more and more ideas and approaches. Different space divisions, shape modifications, value arrangements, directions, tensions and rhythms . . .all of these things set a mood and a feeling in your paintings. Can you set the mood or feeling you want just off the top of your head? Or, do you have to carefully approach and think about what you are doing ahead of time? To that last question, I must answer for myself an enthusiastic YES! This stuff of making art is fraught with variables and traps. Why not avoid 'em, if you can?

I frequently hear from class participants "I just want to paint! I don't want to have to go through all thaaaaaat."

It may seem sarcastic, but avoiding the studies and avoiding the answers to 'WHY' in favor of getting quickly to putting paint down will lead to a much uglier and more difficult demand for answers and solutions while in the painting process. Face it now, or face it later. To make successful paintings the "Why" must be answered and stated in the painting. Why rush to paint when you know you will likely paint yourself into an unsatisfactory corner and not be able to extricate yourself with a well designed solution?

Like every other aspect of painting, this takes practice and lots of trials and errors. The payoff is this: Many, many more successful, compelling paintings rather than that droopy tail and that angst I wrote about earlier. And lastly, there is

a payoff in the personal satisfaction of knowing that you woke up earlier than I did! ☺



"Base of the Wall" 22 x30 Watercolor
By M.E. "Mike" Bailey