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FRANCIS BOAG 'Work Small, Learn Big'

Tools



For the sake of my sanity and my bank balance, I have taught myself to strictly ration the time I spend in my local art supplier. The tools of our trade, pens, pencils, brushes, sketchpads, paints etc. have always been a source of fascination to me and I could happily spend hours browsing through the delights on offer. I have even been known to pore over art catalogues and brochures looking for the magic ingredient that will solve all my artistic problems and change my life. Like the golfing 'rabbit' who is convinced he can get round in par if he could only find the right putter or new driver, I am always looking for the ideal pen or perfect paper. One of

the 'perks' in my post as Head of Art was the requirement to purchase materials for the department and so I could indulge my passion for art products with a clear conscience.

It was during this time I discovered that there was no substitute for quality and I have carried this lesson with me into my career as a professional artist. I remember many years ago reading an article by David Hockney where he explained that when his work began to sell for quite large sums he realised that he should stop using the cheaper paints and boards he was accustomed to as a student and use only quality materials which would stand the test of time. Work offered for sale should only be produced using materials tested for reliability and quality. On the other hand, work produced as preparatory studies, or for your own use can include any media you like. One of the homework tasks I set as a teacher asked the students to make a self-portrait with anything they could normally find around the home. One drawing I particularly remember was made with lipstick, rouge, shoe polish and mascara on a piece of fine grade glass paper. It had a unique quality which made it look as if it could have been found in Tutenkamen's tomb! Items like lipstick and eye pencils make very expressive lines and anything that stains i.e. red wine, coffee, turmeric, food colouring and so on will make a colour wash. You can also, for

instance, make a lovely, subtle 'drawing ink' by diluting a carton of cold water dye in a jar. Try it and see...there are no rules.

Pens

Many years ago I worked as a freelance cartoonist. I was never very good. The humour was ok but the drawings were terrible! Yet I had spent countless hours trying to create a 'line' that was uniquely mine. I tried dozens of pens and used acres of paper looking for that elusive quality that is the stamp of a good cartoonist and although I was having my work published, I was never really happy with what I was creating. But I did learn an awful lot about what makes a line 'alive'...how did the ink flow? How thick should the line be? Was board or paper best, did the ink sit on the surface or was it absorbed into the paper, was a fast line better than a slow line etc. etc. The variables of pen and paper are infinite and often produce miniscule changes of which only the artist is aware. Don't be afraid to look for inspiration in the 'Funnies'... these are professionals working at the top of their trade, and they can teach you a lot if you open your mind. I eventually decided that I didn't have what it takes to be a good cartoonist and stopped trying but the lessons I learned during that time have since proved invaluable. Time spent with a pen or pencil in your hand should never be wasted. You can even make writing your grocery list a learning experience by experimenting with different pens and paper!



Drawing Paper and Sketchpads

While I have a love; hate relationship with pens, which can be so temperamental and unhelpful sometimes, I am completely in love with paper – truly, madly, deeply! Paper is a tactile, responsive medium which can give even the crudest drawing instrument the appearance of bespoke artist quality. I am always on the lookout for different types of paper and have sourced some unusual suppliers. I buy handmade papers from a small shop selling Indonesian crafts. This is a rag paper which can take heavy use and also comes with tie-dye effects which can be interesting if used sparingly. I also buy

off-cuts of very good quality paper from Peacock Printmakers in Aberdeen, who make prints with many of Scotland's top artists. I worked with them recently making two screen-prints and learned a great deal about specialist papers. If you are fortunate to have a printmakers workshop near you, go along and have a chat with them. They work with paper all day and have a great reverence and appreciation of its qualities, which they will be happy to share with you. In my studio paintings I use these and other papers to create a collaged surface as the first stage of creating a new painting.

Everything I have said about paper obviously applies equally to sketchpads. I have dozens of pads of every conceivable size, shape and type of paper and style of binding. When I had a little more time, I would sometimes make my own sketch books. The simplest way is to fill a ring binder with a personal selection of your favourite papers, but when my children were younger I would occasionally use the covers of one of their discarded books, as a hard-back binder for assorted sheets of paper. I used children's book covers because they can come in unusual formats e.g. square or landscape, which are not always readily available to buy as readymade sketchpads, and also because the kids had often already done the hard work of removing the printed pages!

A recent useful addition to my paper armoury have been custom made sets of blank notelets, postcards and greetings cards made from good quality water colour paper which are perfect for making a very personal card for a special occasion. Without wishing to seem immodest, I know that the 'thank you' or birthday cards I've sent to friends are much sought after and appreciated.



Notelets – before!



Notelets - after!

On Site

When working with pen and wash, I am always faced with the same dilemma. I prefer to draw with quite a fast rhythm with the pen moving easily across the paper, and a smooth board suits this best. But when applying the wash, I use lots of water and like it to puddle, leaving tide marks and this requires a soft absorbent water colour paper. My solution is usually to compromise with the paper, using either a lightly textured water colour paper or a heavy duty cartridge. Whichever paper I decide to use I always stretch it beforehand. If I am working with pen and wash on site, I use watercolour board, cut to size or a pre-glued watercolour pad, as I hate working on 'bubbled' paper. I also ensure that I have at least four different pieces on which to work to make sure I am not wasting too much time waiting for the washes to dry.



Micro kit

My travelling kit for working outdoors is a bit like a Russian doll, with a range of increasingly bigger sets of tools and materials. I have a 'microkit' which is the absolute minimum I can get away with and can be carried easily in a pocket.

Pouch

But my standard kit is carried in a custom made pouch or wallet. This is exactly like a gent's toilet bag and contains everything I need to work outdoors. When not in use, this pouch lives in an old nylon school-bag with lots of pockets which can (and does) hold a mini studio. In here you will find a small set of acrylics, large brushes, pre-prepared boards or small canvasses, inks, mediums and a variety of sketch pads. This bag usually stays in the car and goes with me on holidays and so on. Sometimes it comes back unused but I feel much happier knowing that if the opportunity presents itself, I'll have all I need to make a painting or two.



In my studio I also have a few self-contained, easily transportable sets – one each for gouache, pastels and colour pencils/pens. You can probably guess by now I was a boy scout and took our motto (Be Prepared), very much to heart.

I regard working with pen and wash on site mostly as something to be done for fun and relaxation, more a holiday activity than part of my day to day activity as a working artist. For this reason, most of my work in this media is done during the summer months when working outdoors in Scotland can be done in comparative comfort. I have spent some wonderful summer mornings with Bobby, an architect friend who has a holiday caravan beside ours. We will often rise before the rest of our families and set off on our bikes, looking for a suitable spot to stop. When we find somewhere interesting we will set up our gear, share a flask of coffee and spend a thoroughly pleasant couple of hours drawing and enjoying ‘the craic’, before heading back home for breakfast. I enjoy the activity in the same way as someone else might enjoy a game of golf or a days’ fishing. I rarely if ever exhibit any of the work produced on these outings as that would, I feel, make it something of a ‘busman’s holiday’ for me, but Bobby regularly exhibits and sells his days’ work in the local hotel!



However, it would be wrong to think that working outdoors in pen and wash, is only a leisure activity for me. As well as the topography of the area which I may be observing and recording and which I will later refer to in the studio, I am soaking in the total experience of the day, refuelling the memory bank on which I rely so heavily to make my easel paintings. With the way I work now, I don’t always necessarily need to make a drawing to gather the information I require for my studio paintings. Being very aware of your surroundings, even when travelling in a car or a train, can bring you ideas and inspiration. During the last year or two, while on holiday with my family, I have drawn a little and observed a lot in

France, Ireland, California, Italy and Spain and I know that my studio work has become enriched by these experiences. I am not suggesting that working mostly from memory as I do is suitable for

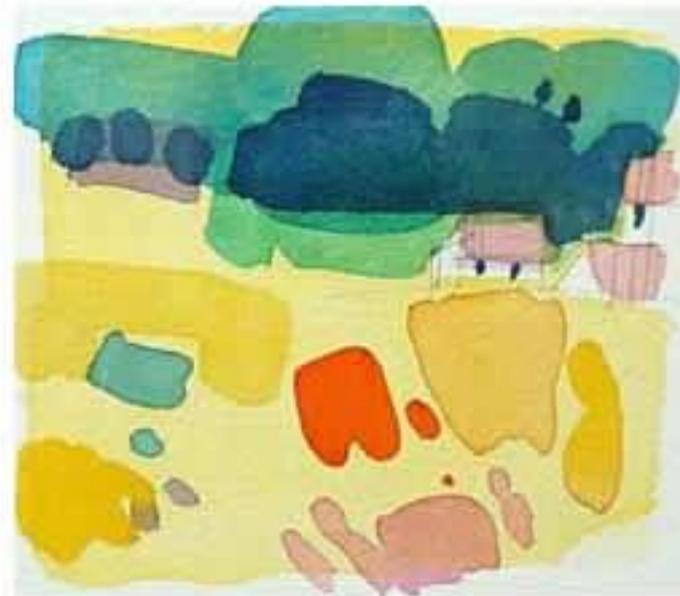
everyone. Certainly, before I was able to devote every day to painting, I needed the starting point of one or more reference drawings or even a photograph before I felt confident enough to begin a painting.

Drawing Series 1 - Watercolour paper

This first series of paintings are very traditional in planning and execution;

Each painting followed the same basic process.

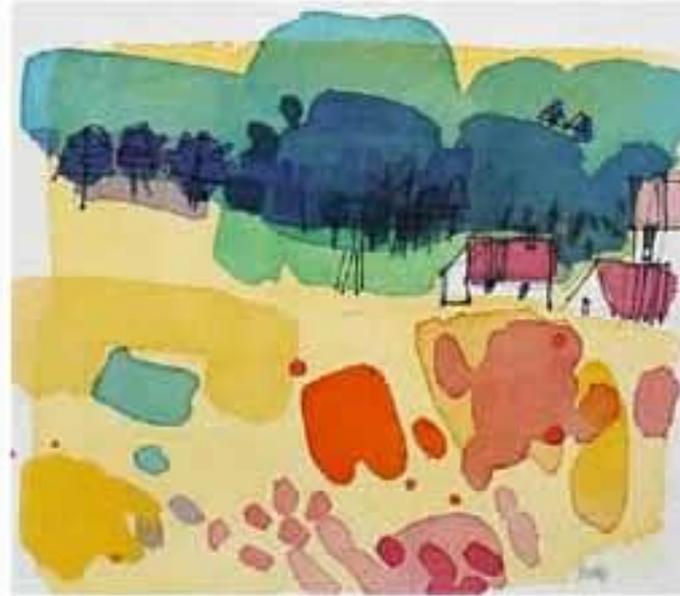
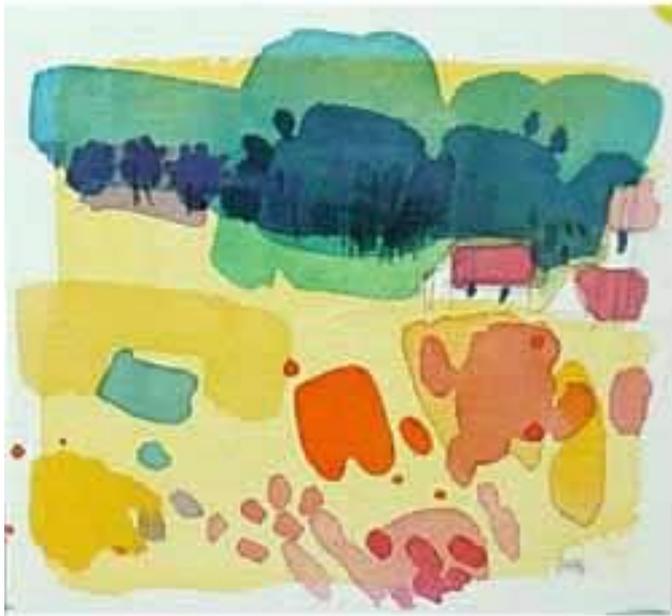
1. a quick pencil drawing indicating the composition.
2. an overall wash of yellow ochre, leaving the houses unpainted.
3. block in large areas of warm colour to indicate fields, flowers etc.



4 block in large areas of cool colour to indicate tree areas

5 introduce smaller areas of heightened colour increasing tonal contrast

6. finish with black pen line adding detail and definition.



It takes a fair degree of confidence in your own ability not to overwork these paintings, but this would be fatal when working on such a small scale. Give your painting some breathing space before adding the final pen line – Put it aside and look at it in a day or two and if you are still happy, that's the time to add the final definitive line. But once that line is there, don't be tempted to make any further additions or alterations.

This is a very safe, straightforward way to make pen and wash drawings. Risk of complete failure is kept to a minimum and working at the same time on a series of small paintings allows a more relaxed, spontaneous approach to develop. This sort of sketch should be like a soufflé – light, airy and hopefully delicious!

Technical info

Pencil - Pentel p209 propelling pencil 0.9 B lead

Paints - Winsor & Newton artist watercolour set 12 half pans

Paper - Saunders Waterford series 140lb not 300g/m stretched on board and divided into 12cm squares.

Pen - Staedler pigment liner 0.3 technical drawing pen

Drawing Series 2 - Watercolour board

This next series of sketches require a positive approach at the outset. Drawing directly with a spirit marker leaves little room for error. I chose the grey or ochre marker as I wanted to contrast the 'softness' of the thicker marker line with the finer crisper black line made by the technical pen. I use a spirit marker and pigment pen because I don't want the line to bleed when I add the colour washes. I kept the colour more muted in these drawings as I was trying to keep a fine balance where the line was the predominant feature.





These works are more obviously drawings, unlike the first series which are really small paintings.

Technical info

Pen - Berol Karisma spirit- based markers. Pilot DR pigment drawing pen

Paints - Reeves artist watercolour tubes. Winsor & Newton artist watercolour set 12 half pans

Paper - Langton watercolour board cut into 4 pieces @ 20x25cms

Drawing Series 3 - Cartridge paper

This series is possibly more idiosyncratic and personal. The pen work was produced directly on site in the same fashion as the previous series but once I was satisfied with the drawing I put it aside. Back in the studio I gave the paper a coating of dilute Marvin medium before considering the application of the colour washes.



I wanted to use acrylic paints to achieve some particular effects I had observed while making my studio paintings.



The dilute acrylics allowed me to create textural effects to the colour washes and I was able to concentrate on achieving maximum impact with minimal brush work. I used a 2" flat bristle brush to apply the washes and although these works have the appearance of being very loosely painted, they are, in fact, the most controlled. While the technique used was one I hadn't tried before, I was reasonably sure of the effect I wanted and the results were pretty much as expected..

This series of drawings were intended to be the starting point for larger acrylic paintings I was preparing for an exhibition.

Technical info

Pen - Berol Karisma spirit- based markers. Pilot DR pigment drawing pen

Paints - Daler Rowney System 3 acrylics

Paper - Daler Rowney 'A' series sketch pad 70 gsm stretched on board and primed with pva medium

Studio



Workstation



My workstation for pen and wash work is completely mobile and can be set up quickly in most locations. The photograph shows it set up in the kitchen at home, but it has also seen action this year in a holiday apartment, a caravan awning, the trunk of our car as well, as 'al fresco' of course.

Preparation - As a full time working artist I have binding commitments to provide my Galleries with an agreed body of work at a specified time and I have to make sure I can meet these commitments. It is essential in these circumstances that my working methods are effective. My current work uses many layers of very liquid paint, and this involves long drying periods between layers. To enable me to work continuously I now work on as many boards as I can squeeze into my studio preparation area and always have to hand, a range of painting surfaces in differing stages of completion. This enables me to work as efficiently as possible and ensures that I always have something to be working on at any time during my working day. One side benefit of this working practice is that I am never intimidated by a blank

canvas or worry about 'spoiling' a new sheet of virgin paper. This is a common problem with many artists, causing them to freeze and tighten up when faced with starting a new painting.

Final thoughts - I hope my ramblings will provide you with encouragement and stimulation. If I've given you a little inspiration and made even one of you reach for the paint-box, then all this work and head-scratching will have been worthwhile. I know I am so lucky to be able to make a living through my painting but don't forget I did it for most of my life for nothing but the pleasure of creating. And if I stop having fun doing it I'll stop doing it. Keep the fun in your work, not only will you feel better about it, but so will everyone else!