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MAIN FEATURE

The Benefits of Leaving Your Comfort Zone

By Myriam Tillson



Eternal

My work is very surreal. My subjects are so dark, strange, and ethereal that I often get asked how I learned how to paint them because they do not seem to lend themselves to being referenced from life. People are curious about how I practice and how I have learned to work from my imagination to the extent I do. My answer, in all honesty, is rather simple. Everything we need to know to create anything already exists. There is no better source of knowledge and learning than the world we live in and experience every day. I have learned everything I know from looking at and studying the things around me and how they interact both with me and with each other. The key to any effective figurative art, surrealism included, is to create a link between the real and the imagined. That connection allows the viewer to relate to the image and anchors their attention by creating recognizable and familiar details they can focus on. Then it reels them deeper into the piece by sparking their curiosity with the elements that don't fit into that everyday world. That connection between the real and the surreal is obtained by studying the real. The more recognizable the real elements in the artwork are, and the more familiar they seem to the viewer, the more successful the piece becomes. Being able to understand a subject enough to make it easily recognizable by the viewer is a skill that is best learned by studying reality.

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That is where effective practice comes into play. I have never been to art school, so most of my practice has been in my own time. It has taken me a while to understand how to study effectively to get where I want to go. One thing I can say for sure is studying the real world is invaluable. Working from real-life is ideal, but if, and when, that is

not possible, then working from photographs is also a good way to practice. To be completely honest, it took me years to see how important doing studies was. As a hobbyist artist, I was more attracted to creating the things I saw in my mind's eye rather than struggle through the challenges of recreating a photograph or an object in front of me. I did some drawings from references, usually reproducing photos of my favorite celebrities and animals or whatever held my fancy at that young age, but that practice was never targeted or thought out. I learned from doing them because the more you do, the more you'll learn, but it wasn't productive learning. It wasn't as efficient as if I had consciously sought the knowledge in a deliberate and structured way. It is only once I started analyzing my strengths and weaknesses and choose exercises to

target the latter that I began to notice consistent improvement.

Now I make a point of regularly doing studies and exercises as much from life as I can. Failing that, I use pictures or videos. I try to be as honest with myself as I can when I



Bloom

"It is only once I started analyzing my strengths and weaknesses and choose exercises to target the latter that I began to notice consistent improvement."



Kindling



Wanning

continued



Unravelling

analyze my work and my process to assess what areas I need to improve next. I create various exercises for myself to evolve in the subjects I feel most lost within. One of the first exercises I set my mind to and one I had been very intimidated by for a long time, was life-drawing. Nowadays, life-drawing sessions are one of my favorite exercises, and I try to attend some whenever I have the time. Each one teaches me new things every time, but that wasn't the case when I first started. Getting into the right mindset to learn as much as possible from the sessions was difficult, and I wasn't sure what kind of knowledge I was going to glean

more I realized that it was about so much more than that. Not only was I learning about how to draw human beings, but I also started to learn more about how to see. How to analyze volumes, light, and color, how to work fast, how to synthesize information to create the most beneficial sketches I could. I began to reprogram my brain to truly look at what I was recreating instead of assuming I already knew. Now I go to sessions whenever I can. When I am unable, I work from videos and the occasional photograph. I almost always learn something new or understand a concept I was aware of but didn't fully grasp yet. Every time I have a small epiphany or learning moment, I make sure to write it down. Writing things down has always been a good way for me to commit something to memory, so it's a practice I try to maintain. Even if I never read those notes back, the simple effort of writing helps me remember the new knowledge I have gained.

When I realized how much I had benefitted from those life-drawing sessions, I began looking into other subjects I had previously not been interested in. I began to see just how incredibly beneficial to my growth going



from the exercises. Initially, I thought life-drawing would mainly help me learn more about human anatomy, and it did, of course. However, the more I attended sessions, the

out of my comfort zone was. I felt excited at the prospect of discovering even more about how to take my art further. That is when I turned to landscapes, and I opened up a

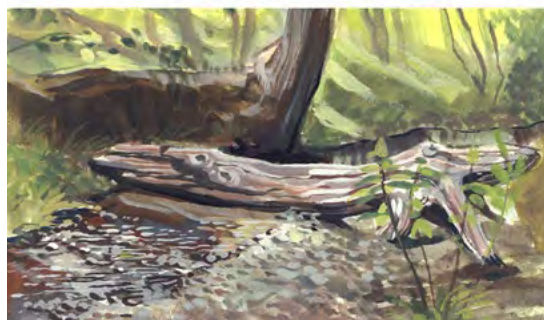
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whole new world, I didn't realize I needed as much as I did.

Landscape painting is a process I find incredibly challenging and pushes me out

landscapes, paintings, and photographs. Since I started doing landscape studies, I have improved my handle on light, values, composition, color, and perspective, amongst many other things. The most

valuable thing it has taught me and still teaches me is to see rather than assume. These exercises showed me one of the keys to drawing or painting pretty much anything is to remain open-minded and analyze the subject matter in terms of relationships, rather than objects. In our everyday life, we are naturally inclined to look at what is around us in an organized way. We need to recognize objects, and people, to know how to interact with them. When it comes to recreating the environment we live in, seeing things as independent entities can be hindering rather than helpful. It can lead us to assume we know everything about what we are drawing. Painting landscapes is all about understanding



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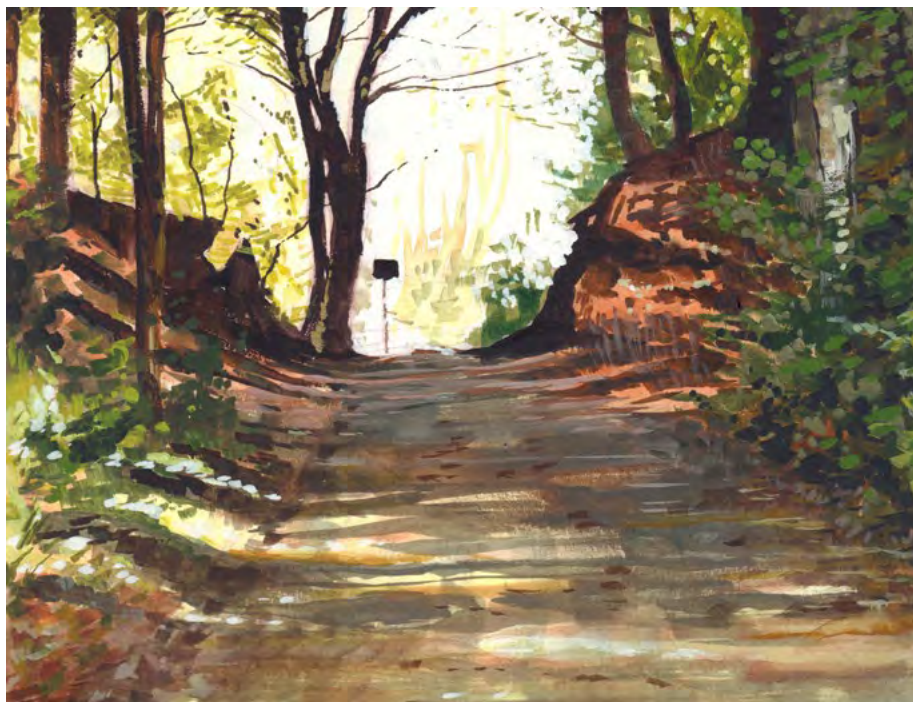
of what I am most comfortable doing. There is so much to learn to paint landscapes and scenery in a way that is realistic, yet full of emotion and atmosphere. In my opinion, landscape painting encompasses all the essential skills a painter needs in a practice to evolve and grow, regardless of the type of art the artist wants to pursue. I create dark, surreal works, with little to no landscape elements or even background a lot of the time. I gleaned most of the knowledge I have needed for my piece this far from studying

how all the elements in one scene affect each other and influence how each detail looks. We might know that leaves are green, but knowing the type of light they are in will inform what shade of green we need to use to recreate that feeling of light in an artwork. We might be sure that those blossoms are white, but they might be lit by a campfire and, therefore, actually be orange in the context they are being presented to us in. This is a way of understanding our environment and all its subtle intricacies best learned by

continued

studying the world around us. Everything affects everything. The nature of an object might stay the same, but how the viewer perceives it and what kind of story it tells will vary depending on the context.

painting landscapes, it opened up so many incredible teaching moments and learning opportunities, and I became so much more connected to the world around me. It contributed to enriching my personal work.



Choosing to teach students how to paint a landscape with gouache in my Strathmore® Gouache Workshop was not innocent or random. I feel strongly about the benefits of landscape painting, and I was keen to share that philosophy as part of my workshop.

If you had told me five years ago that I would develop a vibrant passion for landscape painting, I would have laughed and shrugged it off. Now there is little that brings me as much joy as the prospect of packing up a few supplies and setting off for an outdoor painting session, or finding an inspiring photograph I have no idea how to paint yet. Recently, I have fallen in love with Strathmore Heavyweight Mixed Media paper. It's thick and sturdy so I can pack a few sheets easily without the need to carry a full sketchbook, and it eliminates the need to tape it down to prevent buckling. I have a ready-to-go painting kit that includes a few sheets as well as a few of the Strathmore cold press

Life-drawing was my first step in understanding this process, but what really took my practice further, was painting landscapes. Landscape painting was never something I was attracted to. I work so much from my mind,

and I have such a vivid inner world that the real-world never felt quite as compelling to study. Life-drawing was becoming more and more fascinating to me. The more I was uncovering how incredibly helpful and multi-layered it was, the more motivated I became to find out how other subjects I wasn't previously attracted to might help me push my work further. When I finally started

"Learning has to be a flexible process, one where we lean into what makes us uncomfortable and actively seek out what challenges us. ."

watercolor paper. All I need to add is some tubes of gouache and I am ready to start learning something new, because I always do.

I always try to remember, one of the keys to effective practice is to

keep ourselves open to learning. To assume we don't know and take steps to find the knowledge we need. Learning has to be a flexible process, one where we lean into what makes us uncomfortable and actively seek out what challenges us. In the process, we make ourselves even more adaptable and versatile and ultimately give ourselves the tools to grow into the potential we each have.

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ABOUT THE ARTIST

Myriam Tillson is a French artist living and working in London, in the UK. She is mostly self and peer-taught, and after working in the film and entertainment industry as a

prosthetic make-up artist, and using her overactive imagination to fuel her career, she decided to turn her attention more fully to creating her own work, and became a freelance illustrator and painter.

She works mainly traditionally, with gouache and watercolor as her primary mediums, and focuses on a figurative but stylized aesthetic, with a fair share of dark and fantastical elements. Her pieces relate heavily to mental health, psychology, the natural world and the human condition, and explore those themes in depth, with an often strange and surreal twist. Despite her slightly eerie visuals, she is a naturally joyful and enthusiastic person, and enjoys sharing her experiences and knowledge as a freelance artist online, mainly on her YouTube channel.

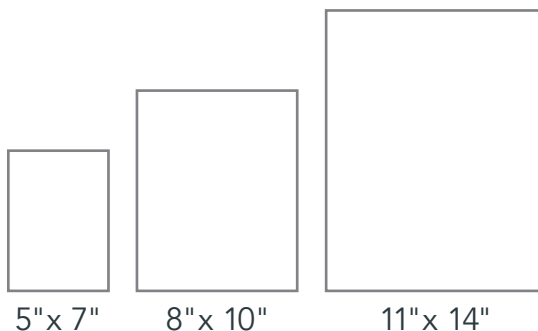
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Join artist Myriam Tillson as she guides you through free video lessons in this four-part painting with gouache course. Learn the properties of the medium, how it compares to other similar

FREE Online Workshop: Intro to Painting with Gouache

properties of the medium, how it compares to other similar paints such as watercolor and acrylic, what materials work best with it, and how to use it to make the most of it.



Lesson 1: Gouache 101



Lesson 2: Basic Gouache Techniques



Lesson 3: Landscape Painting Demo



Lesson 4: Eye Painting Demo



About our Online Workshops

Strathmore's Online Workshops feature free video lessons and downloadable instructions created by experienced artists. Follow along in the online

classroom as instructors guide you through various topics and demonstrate useful tips, techniques, ideas, and inspirations to get you creating and

learning even more about art. Share all the fun on **Instagram** and **Facebook** using **#StrathmoreWorkshops**

About Instructor Myriam Tillson

Myriam Tillson is a mostly self and peer-taught artist. She worked in the film and entertainment industry as a prosthetic make-up artist before becoming a freelance illustrator and painter.

She works in gouache and watercolor with a focus on a figurative but stylized aesthetic, with a fair share of dark and fantastical elements. Her pieces relate heavily to mental health, psychology, the

natural world and the human condition. Despite her slightly eerie visuals, she is a naturally joyful and enthusiastic person, and enjoys sharing her experiences and knowledge as a freelance artist.

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Premium Aquafine Gouache colors are made from a selection of modern high-quality pigments milled to perfection to offer optimal performance, control, and opacity. Colors have been formulated with the same pigments as Aquafine Watercolor and Aquafine Ink, allowing the possibility of working both watercolor and gouache ranges together. Aquafine Gouache bridges modernity and tradition with an innovative range ideal for mixed media as well as traditional techniques.

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- lightfast pigments
- opaque color
- available in individual 15ml tubes as well as 6 and 12 tube sets
- Titanium White & Zinc White also available in 38ml tubes



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3 DIY Holiday Cards by Jess Park

Card 1: Wreath



MATERIALS:

- **Strathmore Watercolor Cards:** 140lb (300gsm), cold press surface, 5 x 6.875"
- **Watercolor Paint:** various shades of green, red, and metallic gold.
- **Princeton Heritage Round Brushes:** 2 & 6

PROCESS:

1. Select your watercolor. Jess uses a light and dark blue/green and a warm green for the leaves and stems. She uses red for the berries and gold metallic paint for the lettering and shimmering details.
2. Practice some leaves and berries on a scratch piece of watercolor paper before starting your card piece.
3. With the light blue/green color, space out a ring of leaves. LET IT DRY BETWEEN LAYERS OR COLORS WILL RUN TOGETHER.
4. Create some darker values with the dark blue/green over the initial light leaves you painted. LET IT DRY.
5. Add some clusters of red berries throughout the wreath. Vary the values of the berries to keep the painting from looking flat. LET IT DRY.
6. Add final leaf shapes in the warm green color. You guessed it... LET IT DRY.
7. Add some darker details to your leaves and berries.
8. Use the metallic gold paint to hand letter a phrase in the middle of your leaf. For the modern calligraphy look, add a little pressure to your downstrokes and release pressure on your upstrokes.
9. Finish the card with some small gold details to add a little twinkle.

Card 2: Christmas Lights



MATERIALS:

- **Strathmore Watercolor Cards:** 140lb (300gsm), cold press surface, 5 x 6.875"
- **Watercolor Paint:** various shades of green, red, and metallic gold.
- **Princeton Heritage Round Brushes:** 2 & 6
- **Black Marker or Black Permanent Ink Pen**

PROCESS:

1. Choose your favorite colors and start by painting a row of bulbs. If you're having trouble with the shape, think of painting upside-down eggs. Continue painting a couple more rows of bulbs and allow the colors to touch and bleed into one another.
2. LET THE BULBS DRY.
3. Use a permanent black pen or marker to letter a message over the top of the bulbs.
4. Add in some black details to the bulbs themselves.

Card 3: Gingerbread House



MATERIALS:

- **Strathmore Mixed Media Postcards:** 184lb (300gsm), vellum surface, 4 x 6", printed with postcard markings on the back.

- Gouache paint
- Princeton Heritage Round Brushes: 2 & 6
- Princeton Velvetouch: 1/2" Wash Brush
- Optional: Low Tack Tape

PROCESS:

1. Tape your paper to a board to hold it in place and create a thin white border
2. Start by painting a background with the wash brush. Leave some white at the bottom to depict fresh snow on the ground. LET IT DRY (it will be important to let each layer dry before continuing to add paint to your piece).
3. Paint the house base of the house. Add a chimney and allow the paint to dry.
4. Add a door and windows.
5. Now you're ready to decorate the house with candy and frosting! Add a gumdrop path leading to the front door.
6. When you've completed decorating and the paint is dry, use a thin brush to add details in white to make the piece pop.
7. Gently peel the tape off.

You can watch the tutorial video of all these projects on our [YouTube Channel](#)

