

An abstract painting with a rich blue background. It features various elements: a purple scribble in the upper left, a yellow and green vertical strip on the right containing a small tree-like form, a grid of colorful dots on the left, a central square with a pattern of small triangles, and a row of three arched shapes at the bottom right. The overall style is expressive and layered.

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A Beginner's Guide to Making

ABSTRACT ART

How do you begin?

If a painting is to be successful, the viewer must understand exactly what the artist has tried to say. For some artists, it is important to describe, in detail, all the contents of a painting, so if it is a still life, all the objects will appear as realistic as possible. However, do remember that since this is a painting of the objects and not the objects themselves, we are already one step away from reality.

Even in this scenario, the artist will have decided such things as which object is the most significant, or if the relationship between two of the objects is paramount. This will become the focal point of the painting, and the artist will set about making it more important by, say, making it central in the picture, or having other objects 'pointing' towards it. To create a picture that is more to do with the essence of the subject, the artist then may begin to eliminate details and emphasize aspects such as colour or pattern. Now the artist is beginning to abstract.

What elements define an abstract painting?

Contrary to public opinion, it is possible to go a little bit abstract, or a bit more abstract or, indeed, go the whole way and be completely abstract.

What this chapter will explore is how, when and why you might decide to create an abstract picture, be it very much or only a little bit. A painting that has been abstracted in some way, or which is a completely abstract creation, is, like all other paintings, an object or entity in itself – only more so.



A realistic interpretation of a still life set-up with a sunflower, pots and pear, using watercolour.

Degrees of Abstraction

Abstract paintings can be approached from two opposite ends. The first derives from recognizable subject matter, simplifying the subject or creating motifs from it. This approach has a huge range of possibilities, ranging from simplifying shapes by removing detail, to extracting so much detail that only a tiny element of the recognizable remains.

The other end of this spectrum of abstraction is when an artist starts the painting without any visible subject in front of him, but begins by exploring the qualities of line, colour, form and texture. Sometimes the end result is as abstract as it was at the beginning, leaving responses entirely up to the viewer. As the artist proceeds, a subject may emerge – for example, if the colours are, say, ranges of blues, a watery subject may push its way forward. At other times, an artist may paint instinctively, finishing the painting when it feels right. This kind of abstract artist may be happy to let the viewers decide for themselves what they see in the picture and how they interpret it using their own experiences. The *Sunflower* (see opposite and pages 12–13) and *In a Moroccan Garden* (see page 14) sequences featured in this chapter are examples of the first option. Examples of the second appear later in this book (for example, see page 94).

Materials and their contribution

If paint alone is used as a material, brush marks will make an important contribution to the overall look of the painting. In other words, lively, thick, energetic marks will give the impression of movement and energy. If the surface is smooth, a quieter ambience is created. The same is true if soft or oil pastels are used exclusively.

The objects are still recognizable, but all the shapes, including the shadows and pattern, are simplified. Colours remain essentially true to the objects. There is still a sense of space and three dimensions on the picture plane. Watercolour has been painted as a base, and then pen, oil and soft pastels have been applied on top.

However, using mixed media and changing the surface of the painting in some way will enhance the picture, encouraging it to take on a more independent self and become an object in itself. But, in the same way as when we use paint alone, the way in which the collage is applied – using tissue, coloured paper, texture gels or other materials – will also have something to say about the subject. If the subject or focal point of the painting is treated differently in some way – for example, if a bottle shape is shown as particularly textured or smooth compared to the rest of the painting – the eye will be drawn to this shape, making it clearer that the picture is about this bottle, and it is therefore the most important element in the painting.



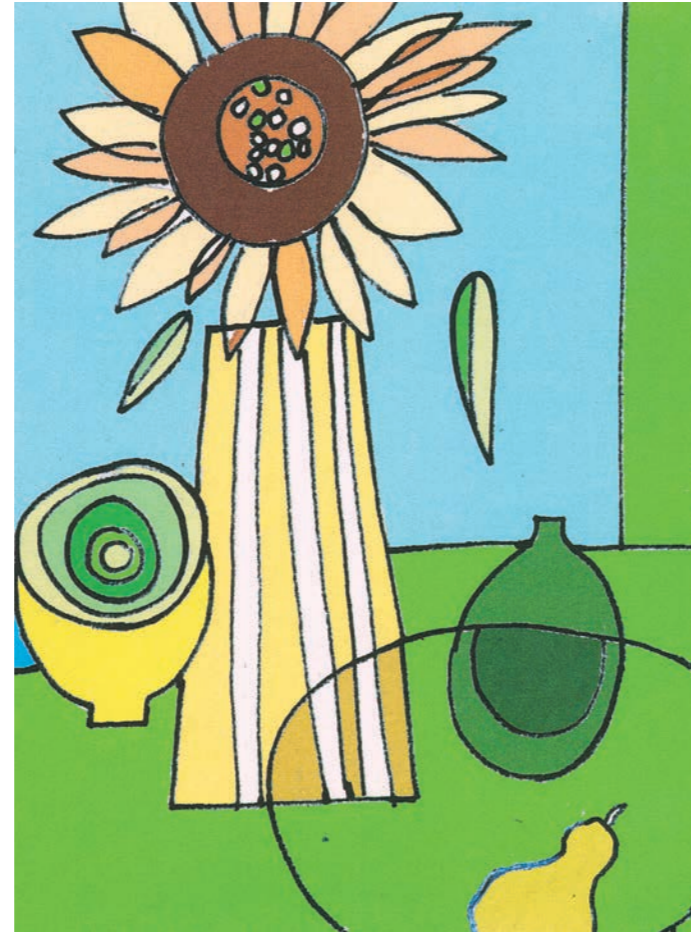
When is your painting finished?

The easiest (and the most difficult) way to know this is by using your instinct. This is the case with any kind of painting, although when you have real things to cling to it is easier to assess when they might look real enough. Even so, with a realistic painting, the considerations for completion are essentially the same:

- Does the design work? Is the eye being led around the painting and back again?
- Is the focal point clear?
- Does anything need to be added or (especially) subtracted to strengthen it? 'Less' is so often 'more'.
- Have you captured what you want to say?



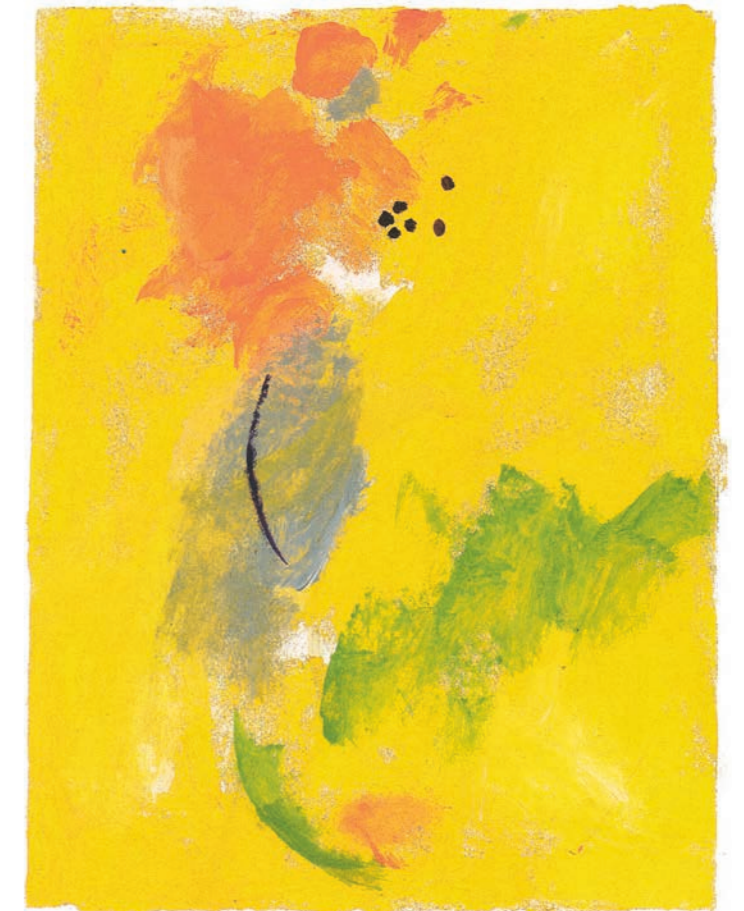
The shapes and forms have been simplified to more basic elements. The sunflower is reduced to three circles – petals and two areas of central seeds. The leaves are reduced to triangles as is the lid of the pot. A sense of space is maintained by keeping the drawing of the vase in perspective and placing dark purple behind the complementary yellow of the sunflower. Candle-wax resisting watercolour and soft pastels have been used.



Using the Photoshop program on the computer, outlines of the objects are drawn, again in a symbolic way, and then scanned. The shapes are coloured using the 'filler' tool. Colours still refer to reality but outlining is dominant.



The objects have been reduced and simplified to dominant shapes and colours. The striped vase is just that – stripes – and the petals and seeds of the sunflower are presented as symbols, using teardrop shapes, zigzags and circles. The pots and pear are flattened, although it is still possible to have an idea of what the original objects were. This painting has been made in acrylic paint.



Finally, using acrylic paint and direct and lively brush marks, the favourite elements of each object and the overall appearance and appeal of the still life have been portrayed. Yellow still suggests the sunflower, together with some green. The vase is grey with a suggestive curve superimposed on top, and the forms of the pots (and vase) have disappeared altogether. The sunflower seeds are strong, dark dots – the only real reference to reality. Being darker, stronger and smaller than any other part of the painting, these dots are the selected, most important element of the set-up. The objects and their surroundings have been reduced to show the artist's favourite area of response.

Dry materials

Dry materials range from pencils to soft and oil pastels. They are mainly used for linear work, but some, such as water-soluble pencils and pastels, can be diluted with water to create areas of colour and tone.

Pencils

You will need pencils of all types from H pencils, which are hard, to B pencils, which are soft. The higher the H or B number, the harder or softer respectively the pencil is. H pencils make hard-light lines, whereas softer B pencils make darker, more smudgy lines. Pencils are also available in a water-soluble variety, and these can be smudged using a brush.



Coloured pencils

These come in all shapes and sizes and, like lead pencils, some are softer than others. There are also water-soluble varieties, some of which are richer and make stronger, brighter marks than others.



Fibre or drawing pens

The designer brands are usually more vibrant than other varieties. They make smooth marks and have wide, narrow and different-shaped nibs, which make accordingly sized and shaped marks.



Oil pastels

These resist watercolour and, to some extent, watery acrylics. They can also be found in a water-soluble format, but these will always dissolve with water and are therefore difficult to layer as they lift off. Exciting marks can be made with both.



Charcoal and conté crayons

These make smudgy marks, which need fixing with fixative to prevent them lifting off. They also come in pencil form, enabling smaller, more delicate marks, which are easier to control.



Soft pastels

Soft pastels are delicious and can be purchased in many different varieties and makes with varying strengths of pigment. Some are softer and smudgier than others. They also need fixing with special fixative to prevent them rubbing away. If you wet soft pastel marks, they turn into painterly marks, which do not rub out.



Wet materials

These include a wide range of paints and inks, from watercolours and acrylics to inks and textile paints. Their effects can be transparent, as with watercolours and thin acrylics, or opaque, and they can be layered one on top of another, either individually or with other materials.

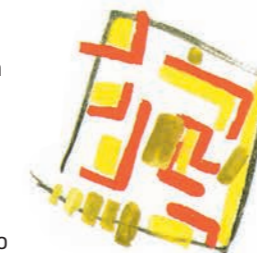
Watercolours

These come in two containers – tubes and pans. Again, there are many different brands and these vary considerably in quality as well as price. However, they all act in a similar way in so far as they are meant to be painted transparently, always allowing the white of the paper to be evident – they should not be completely opaque or sit on the surface like acrylics or oils. Watercolours stain the surface and so, as a rule, they are relatively permanent, although they can be reduced to a pale stain using a sponge.



Gouache

Gouache paint is like watercolour and can be painted similarly. It differs from watercolour in that it contains a white filler, such as chalk, which makes it much more opaque, with greater hiding power. It was developed with designers and illustrators in mind, who required coverage and brilliance rather than permanence, so it is not always as lightfast as the equivalent watercolour. It can be used thick for texture or diluted with water.



Acrylics

Acrylics are a fantastic medium. They can be painted like watercolours by mixing them so that they are watery, or they can be applied thickly and opaquely like oils. They are a very versatile medium and invaluable for mixed-media artists as they will paint over practically any kind of surface.



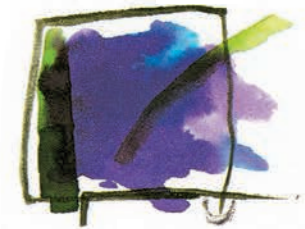
Liquid acrylic inks

These come in little bottles with a pipette lid. They have the same permanence as tube acrylics but are an extremely vibrant version and are available in many colours, which can be layered on top of each other, mixed together, or layered on top of other materials.



Liquid watercolours

Although these look similar to liquid acrylics, they act like watercolours. They are, however, slightly more vibrant than ordinary watercolours as they have a high content of pigment.



Drawing inks

These are similar to the previous two materials and can be applied with a pen or a brush. They are beautifully transparent one over another.



Household paint

This may seem like a surprising choice, but it is relatively cheap, can be bought in little match pots and makes a good contrast to other materials as most household paints tend to be very flat and opaque.



Textile paints

Available in squeeze tubes, these come in many different selections. Once squeezed onto the surface they dry to a three-dimensional line. They can be glittery, pearly or shiny.



Watercolour +

Watercolour will resist certain oil-based materials, including oil pastels and candle wax. The resistance with oil pastels is spectacular, especially with contrasting colours, while candle wax can be used to create lines, shapes and textures.

Masking fluid

You can also create interesting effects with masking fluid, a rubber solution that you can paint onto your paper. Wait for it to dry and then paint over the top. The fluid will protect the paper it is covering, and when the paint is dry, you can rub off the mask to leave the white paper beneath. If you paint a colour first, the masking fluid will protect this, and that colour will be revealed once the fluid is removed. However, a word of warning: if using a brush to apply the masking fluid, make sure you wash it with soap or washing-up liquid straight away as it quickly dries and will ruin your brushes. Try applying it with a cotton bud or use a bottle with its own applicator.

Salt

Some substances, when added to watercolour, will affect their appearance. The most common of these is salt. Experiment with different kinds of salt – table salt, sea salt and even dishwasher salt. Just sprinkle the salt (not too much) onto wet watercolour paint – the paint must be wet or the salt will not work – and then leave it to do its job. When the paint is dry, brush the salt away.

Other effects

Blotting is another way to affect the paint. By using different absorbent materials, such as kitchen paper, cotton wool and tissues, you can create a whole range of lovely textures. Lastly, try pressing some cling film or bubble wrap onto wet paint. Leave to dry naturally. When these are removed, a beautiful and exciting texture will remain.



Watercolour + salt

Watercolour + candle resist

Watercolour + cling film

Watercolour + oil pastel resist

Watercolour blotted

Watercolour + acrylic

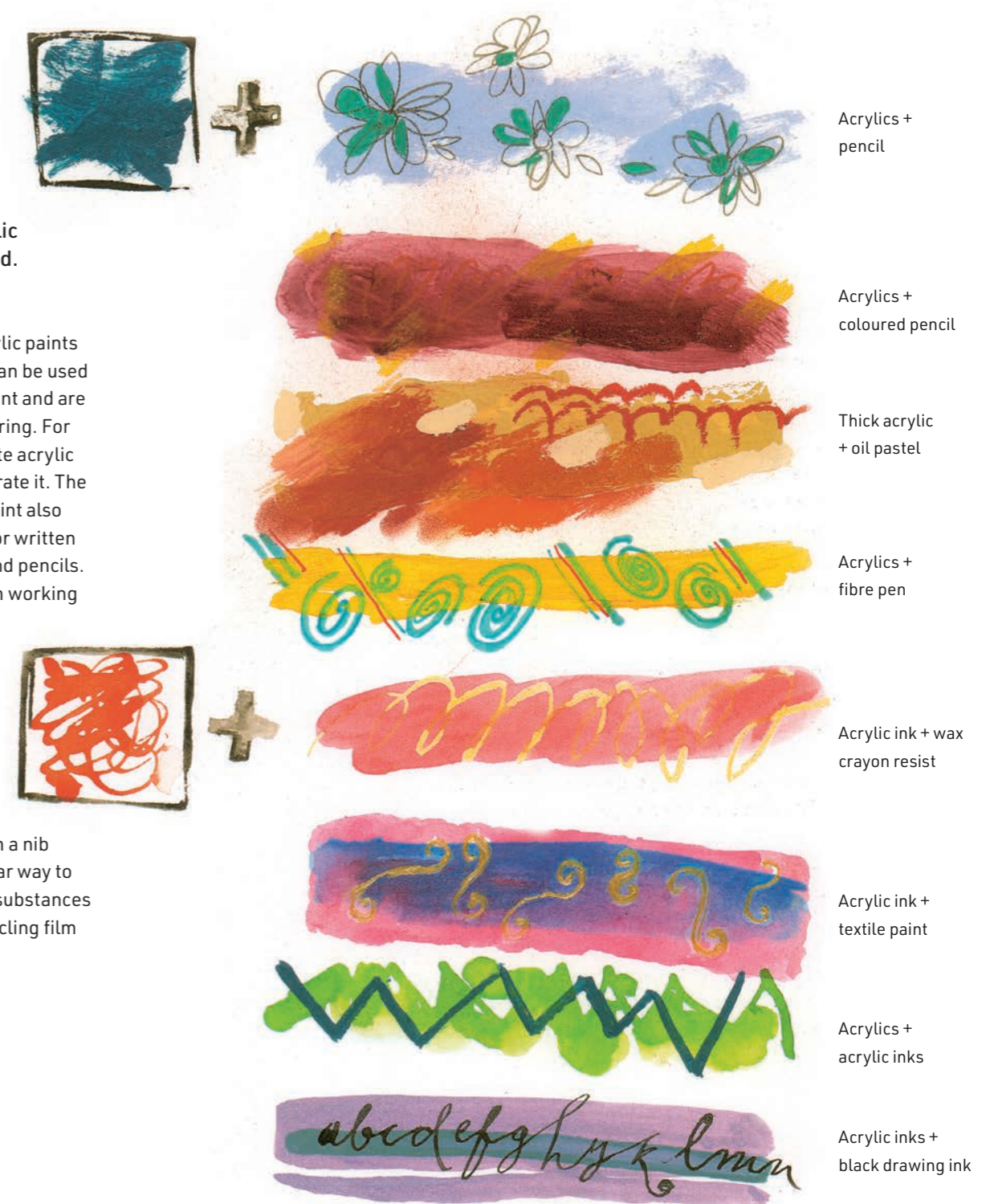
Watercolour layered, using masking fluid to create white lines

Acrylics +

Acrylics can work in a similar way to watercolour, although they may not react so well to the resists described previously. To be really effective, only very watery acrylic paint should be applied.

Versatility

The best thing about acrylic paints is their versatility. They can be used like watercolour or oil paint and are equally, if not more, covering. For instance, by painting white acrylic over black you can obliterate it. The covering quality of the paint also works well when drawn or written over with drawing inks and pencils. It is especially good when working over collage and building up the surface of a painting. Its liquid form – acrylic ink – is available in vibrant and brilliantly transparent colours, which can be painted on with a brush but are equally good applied with a nib pen. They react in a similar way to watercolour when other substances are added or when using cling film or bubble wrap.



Acrylics + pencil

Acrylics + coloured pencil

Thick acrylic + oil pastel

Acrylics + fibre pen

Acrylic ink + wax crayon resist

Acrylic ink + textile paint

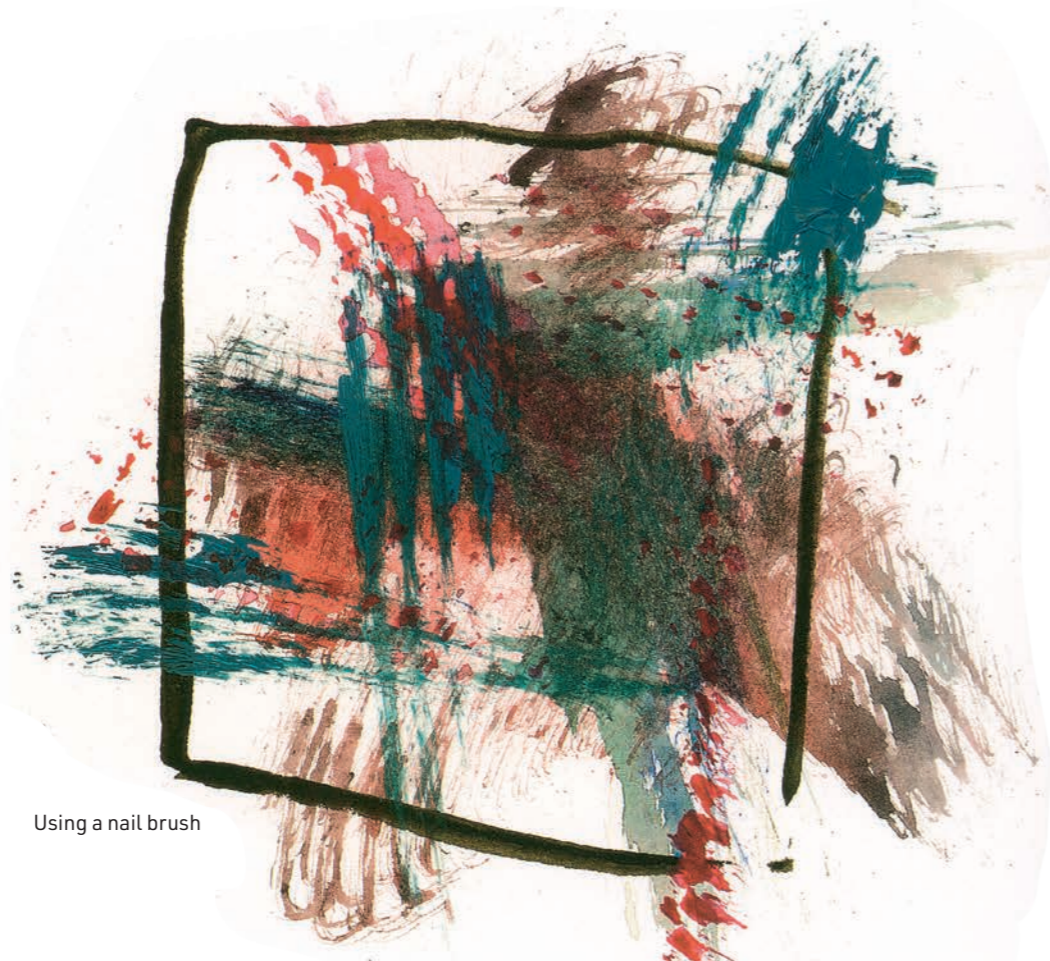
Acrylics + acrylic inks

Acrylic inks + black drawing ink

Applying your materials

There are many ways of applying materials, and the only general rule is that if it works, it's OK. You don't have to use a brush and you can have fun experimenting with different applicators. For example, try scratching out with the other end of the brush or just a twig from the garden. You can also draw using a twig as a pen or, finally, when all else fails, use your fingers.

Here are some of the alternatives to a brush.

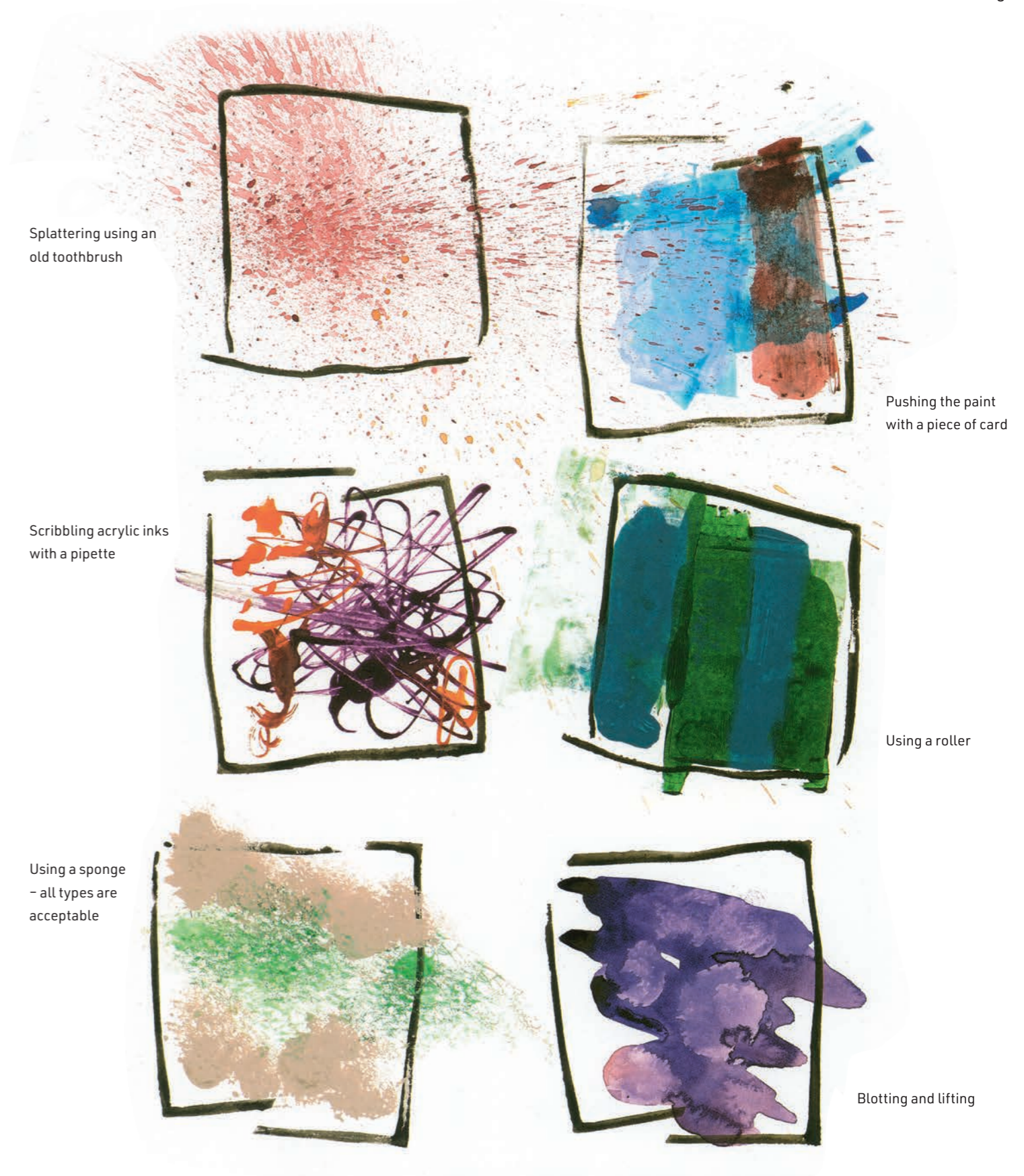


Using a nail brush



Using your fingers

Using the edge of a piece of card



Splattering using an old toothbrush

Pushing the paint with a piece of card

Scribbling acrylic inks with a pipette

Using a roller

Using a sponge - all types are acceptable

Blotting and lifting



Creating circles with the rim of a cup or jar



Scratching out



Using string dipped in acrylic inks

Keep experimenting

The main thing to take away with you from this chapter is that it is important to keep on experimenting with materials. Don't be afraid to try things out, and learn to play. In this way, you will have a world of marks at your fingertips waiting to be used for wonderful paintings.

STAINED GLASS

Mixed media, 25 x 35cm (10 x 14in)

A stained glass interior is captured here by experimenting with different methods of mark making.



Project SHAPES

Now you have tried out materials both familiar and unfamiliar, you can apply these techniques to a painting.

Draw some shapes

First, take a fresh piece of paper. With a pencil, draw some simple shapes, such as squares, circles and triangles as well as some 'free-form' shapes, taking up the whole sheet, and allowing some of these to overlap others to create other shapes.

Divisional lines

Next, take a coloured pencil or pen and draw two divisional lines: one vertical and one horizontal from one side of the paper to the other. This will help to make balanced divisions of your rectangle (the sheet of paper).

Colour the shapes

Now, using any of your materials, begin to colour in different areas. Take one colour, fill in a shape, and then use the same colour in two other places to guide the eye around the composition. Continue to do this with other colours until all your shapes are filled in. Sometimes, shapes will each have several colours in them, depending on how they are overlapping.

Don't forget the background areas

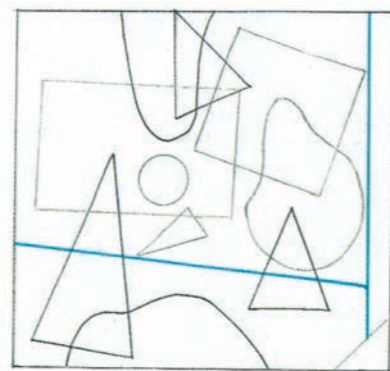
Remember that your background shapes (those created by your divisional lines) also need colouring, as shown right. The background shapes are also called 'negative' shapes and are found between the positive shapes – in this case, the rectangles, triangles, circles and free-forms. I have coloured mine using orange, purple and a blue-grey.

Create patterned areas

Now draw or paint some patterned areas on some of the shapes. Again, try to confine them to a part of the design. This will focus attention and again guide the eye around the picture.

Look at your work

Finally, take a look at your work. Try to see which shapes and colours seem to be in front and which are behind. Which ones are busy and which are quiet? Do the colours 'help' each other or is there one that seems out of keeping with the design? And does the picture look attractive and feel comfortably completed?



Make a line drawing of simple shapes overlapping each other. Add one vertical and one horizontal divisional line.



Now add colour. Here, some shapes are filled in with orange, purple and blue-grey paint and green coloured pencil.



The picture is completed with yellow and green painted onto the remaining shapes and patterns (spots and stripes) added to selected shapes.

Project SIMPLE LANDSCAPES

You may also like to try this exercise, which is similar to the last one, but this time make the shapes on your rectangle look like a simple landscape. Try both these projects a few times with different shapes, colours, patterns and materials. Once you have these 'under your belt' you will be ready to move on, no longer afraid of the 'white'.



Start off by making a line drawing of a simple landscape.



Experiment with colour combinations and try unrealistic colours. Here, bright colours in similar tones are applied with paint, creating a shallow space on the picture plane.



In this second version I have used the same basic landscape painting and scanned it on the computer. I have applied Photoshop colours in more realistic colours and tones. You can see that the darker tones are near the front of the picture and the lighter ones further back, creating a greater sense of space and distance.