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July–August, 2023



Old Dog ~ New Trick

The Subtractive Painting Technique of Dennis Sheehan

During the opening of the American Tonalist Society's show, *Shades of Gray II*, at the Salma-gundi Club in New York, the American Tonalist painter **Dennis Sheehan** presented a demonstration of his painting technique. With his usual skill, grace, and humor, he created two beautiful paintings during the two hour demo, both in the classical style of the Tonalists. Like every master, he made working with the subtractive technique look easy. (I should mention that in the headline, the "old dog" who is trying to learn a new technique refers to me, *not* Dennis!)

Dennis's demo was an eye-opener. Before seeing his technique, I was already using the subtractive technique (first applying a dark tone to a canvas and then removing paint to create lighter values) but only when painting monochromatic underpaintings. Seeing Dennis work directly in color was a revelation. Since his demo, I've been using his technique—exploring its unique qualities, trying to fit it into my painting process, and rediscovering the joy of trying something new. All of which proves that old dogs *can* learn new tricks and serves as a reminder there is always something new to learn—it never ends. *Thank you, Dennis!*



OPEN STUDIO

Sat., July 15 & Sun., July 16.

The weekend of July 15–16, I'm one of five Williamstown area artists participating in an open studio event. If you're in the area, please stop by and say hello. I'll have many of the newest paintings on display and even some small plein air and studio studies for sale.

The address: **1021 Hancock Road, Williamstown, MA.**

Hope to see you during the event!

The Subtractive Technique

Removing paint from a single, overall, dark tone.

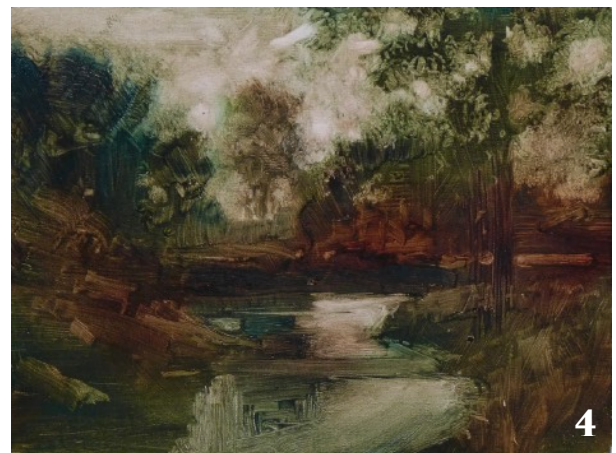
If I remember correctly, Dennis mentioned that he developed this method while studying the Tonalists and trying to replicate their method of painting. Below is a brief summary of the technique. The demo used here was painted on a 9" x 12" panel.

Following Dennis's technique, only Transparent Red Oxide, Viridian Green, and Gamblin's Solvent-Free Gel were used. Dennis, I believe, uses Liquin. (More about mediums later.)



1. Working on a white panel with the two pigments and about 25% gel medium, a thin layer is applied over the entire canvas. Some areas consist of just one pigment and other areas are various mixtures of the two. **It's important to avoid over-mixing the two pigments into a single, monochromatic layer.** Even at this stage, it's possible to create color temperature variations. For example, by adding more Viridian to the sky area, it can be an overall cooler tone; by adding more Red Oxide, the ground can be warmer. Another approach is to vary the amounts randomly, which can create unexpected and interesting color contrasts throughout the painting.

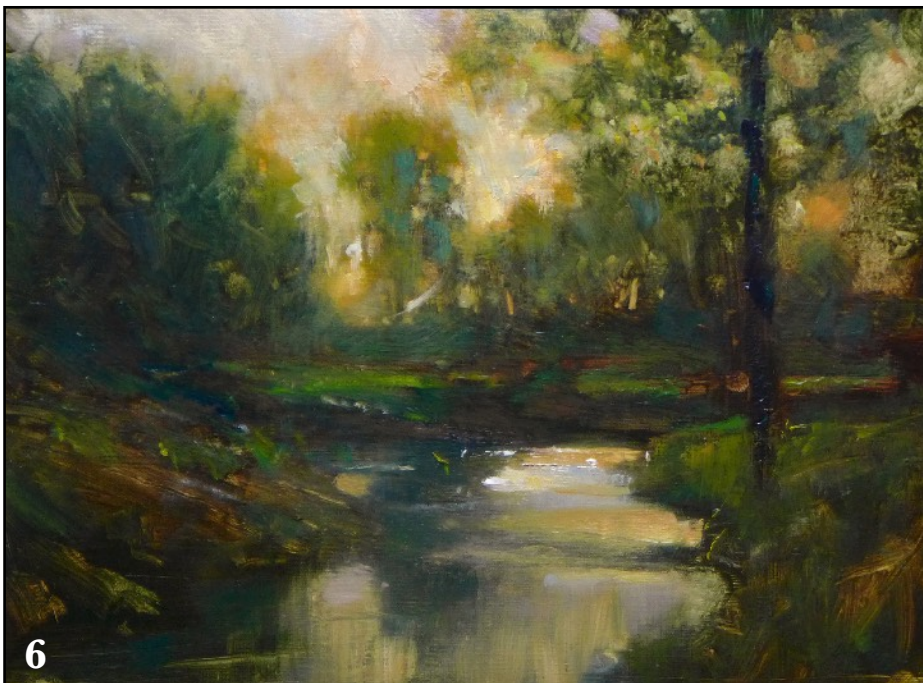
2. Slowly wiping off pigment with a paper towel, the light sky emerges. At this point, the focus is on designing the shapes and creating interesting edges. (I often begin with the lightest, major shape in the composition. It helps me judge future middle values more accurately.)



3. Using brushes, the sky is further developed and mid-values in the ground are suggested.

4. The reflected lights in the water are wiped out. This completes the block-in stage.

5. After the block-in and still working wet-into-wet, variations in hue are created by adding Dioxazine Purple, Cad Yellow Light Hue, and White to the palette. A soft, synthetic brush is used with a light touch to avoid mixing the new layer of pigment into the underlying block-in. Wherever possible, and especially in the darks, the underlying layer is allowed to remain. Too many opaque layers will kill the rich color and the suggestive drawing of the block-in. (More on that later.)



6. After the block-in dried, more cool colors were added. Details in the water and the tree edges were developed further. In its current state, there are some areas I see as more successful in the new version but in others, I liked better the original block-in. I'm discovering how easy it is to lose the life of the loose painting of the block-in by adding too many details or opaque brushstrokes. Be careful when finishing the painting.

The Pigments

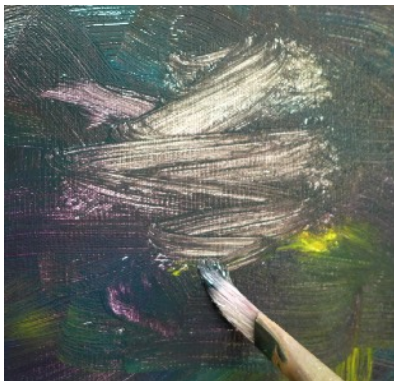
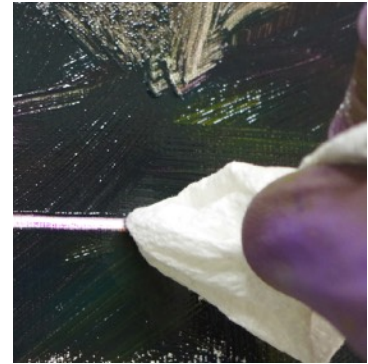
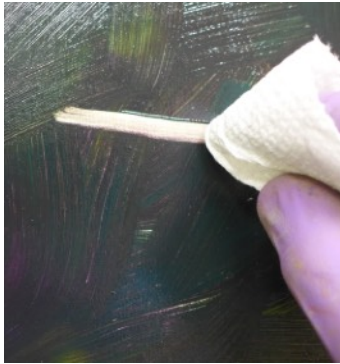
In theory, any dark pigment can be used to create the initial dark tone, but in practice, only transparent pigments work well. For cool pigments, try Viridian Green, Thalo Green, Prussian Blue, Ultramarine Blue, or (getting warmer) Dioxazine Purple. For warm pigments, try Transparent Red Oxide, Burnt Sienna (when red oxide is the primary pigment), or Permanent Alizarin Crimson. Experiment with different pairings of warm and cool. The specific pigments used is less important than having two of opposite color temperature.

Removing Paint

Several materials can be used to wipe off the pigment. Each material creates slightly different effects. The most important point to remember is this: unless a brush that is fully loaded with paint is used, **any time the canvas is touched it pulls off paint, revealing more of the white canvas beneath and *lightening* values.** Sometimes it takes a very soft touch. If too much paint is removed, creating inappropriately light values, it can be corrected easily. (See the next page.)

Rags / Paper Towels

Cotton rags and/or paper towels are perfect tools for removing paint. A clean towel tends to wipe off paint completely, revealing the canvas underneath and often a value that's too light. As paint builds up in the towel, less pigment is removed. With practice, an amazing range of subtle values can be created. It's the perfect tool to use to avoid fussy, tight drawing. In the image below far right, a towel is wrapped around the end of a brush to create a thin line, a highlight.

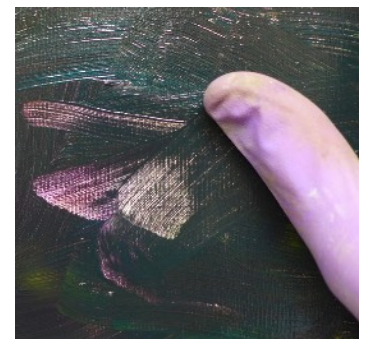
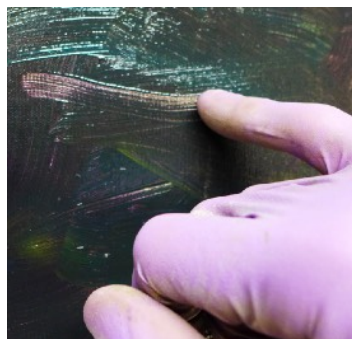


The Brush

A clean brush will also remove pigment easily but, as with a paper towel, as paint builds up in the brush less pigment is removed, creating values closer to the mid range on the value scale. Because the brush is easier to control than a paper towel it's ideal to use in areas where well-drawn forms are important. A large brush can make a variety of shapes. Especially at the beginning, don't get fussy with small brushes. Work large and keep it loose and fluid.

The Finger

A finger tip removes less pigment than a towel or brush, which is perfect for creating slightly lighter values and for blending edges. I've found wiping with the edge of the thumb creates large areas of lighter values, helps blend bigger areas of the canvas, and quickly softens edges.



Specialized / Generic Tools

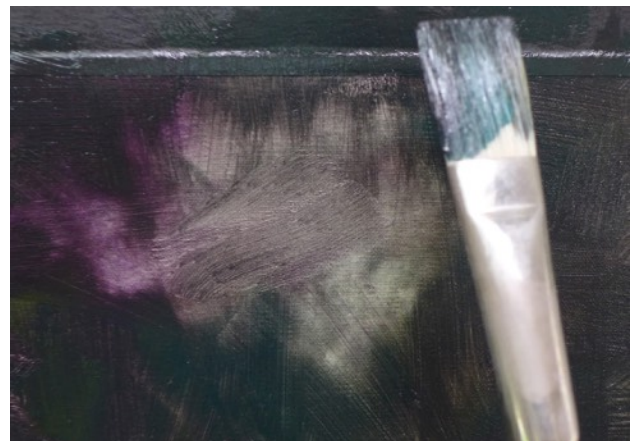
There are several brands of scraping tools on the market specifically designed to manipulate paint on canvas. Although I've purchased a variety of shapes and sizes, I tend to use only those tools which create uniform, thin, and sharp lines. For larger effects, I use paper towels, brushes, and a finger.

Almost *any* material will pick up pigment, so experiment with various household items.



Removing too much paint

When a clean paper towel or brush removes paint, it's common for nearly all of the pigment to be picked up, resulting in values that are too light and shapes that are too hard-edged. It's easily corrected: simply load a brush with a moderate amount of the dark paint used for the block in and a then *lightly* brush over the area. The values will darken and the edges will soften.



The Better the Beginning, the Better the End

Don't worry about immediately getting the values, shapes, and edges correct. This is a very forgiving technique. It allows the repeated application and removal of paint, the sharpening and softening of edges, and the manipulation of shapes. But painting loosely doesn't mean painting carelessly and mindlessly. Be patient and keep working until the entire painting works, until the block-in is nearly as perfect as possible.

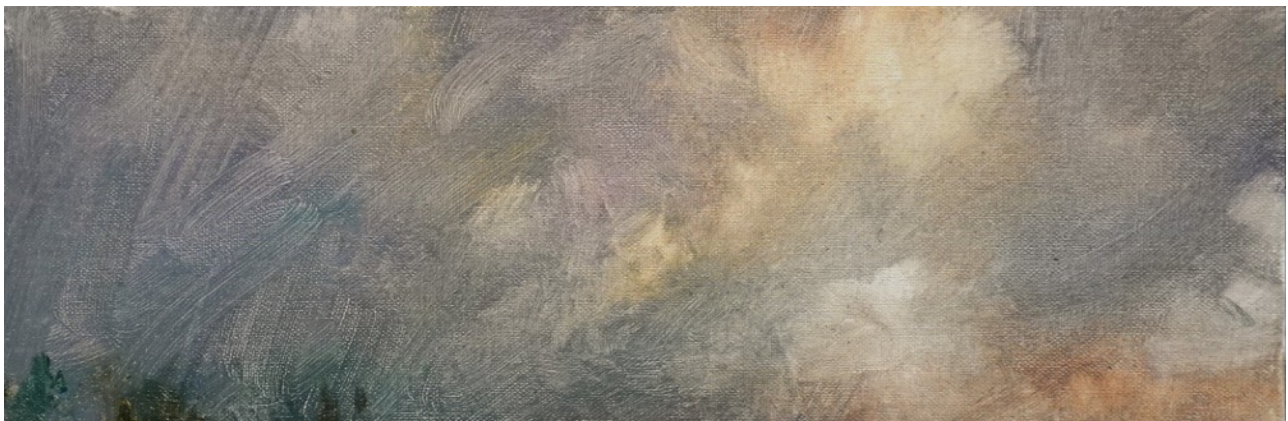
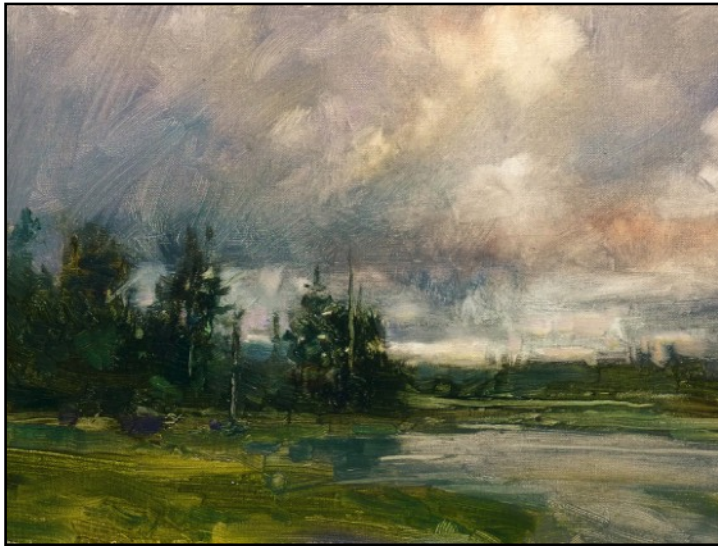
With this technique, much of the life of the painting comes from the loose, energetic, block-in. Leave as much of it as possible in the final painting. If the block-in works well—especially the value relationships and drawing—the painting can often be finished by merely adding a few notes of carefully chosen color contrasts and a few suggestive details. The better the block-in, the less likely will be the need or temptation to overwork it.

The Undercolor

Much of the beauty in a subtractive painting comes from the rich undercolors that appear when transparent pigments are wiped off from a white canvas. Surprisingly, the undercolor can be noticeably different in hue from its opaque application. So when first applying the initial dark tone, don't over mix the pigments. Preserving different mixtures of pigments allows different undercolors to show through in the wiping process.



In the painting below, the color contrasts in the sky were created by the undercolors rather than by opaque pigment. The richly colored, warm yellow-green highlights appeared as the darker and cooler olive green was wiped off. There was no need to mix a separate color. A single mixture of paint can give us several variations in hue. If the undercolor works, use it.

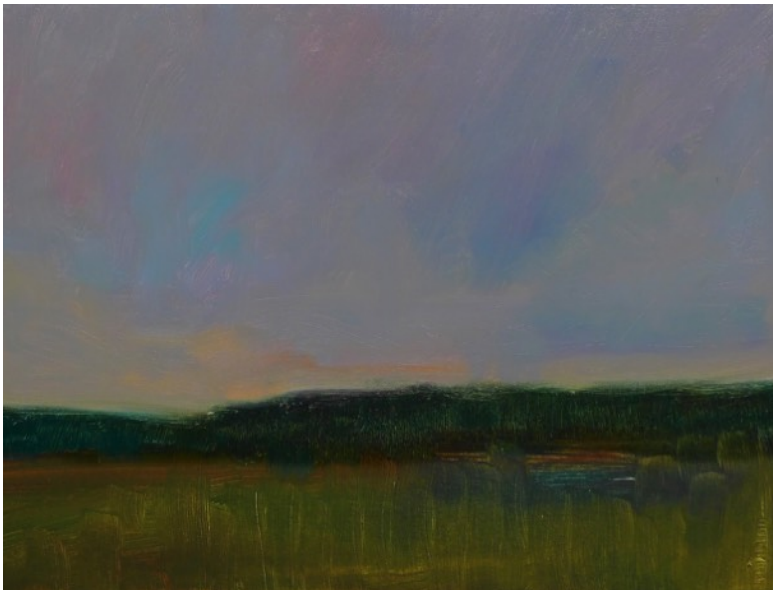


Variations on a Theme

The traditional technique consists of using two dark, transparent pigments of opposite color temperature for the block-in. It works beautifully. But there are other approaches. Here are three variations that I've been experimenting with. No doubt there are others.

Blocking in Foundation Values

In the traditional method, the foundation values are created by removing pigment from a single dark tone. For instance, in the earlier demo I first wiped out the light sky.) In this method, begin the painting by determining and mixing the two to five foundation values first. The value of each is determined by the **darkest** (secondary) value found within each foundation shape.



In the painting below, the foundation value of the sky was determined by the dark shadow in the cloud that lies right of center. In the finished painting, all other values in the sky which are lighter than the shadow were created by wiping off pigment. The foundation value of the meadow was likewise the darkest secondary value in the meadow. The same applies to the band of trees. Remember, light values are established by removing paint to reveal the canvas beneath, not by adding white to the paint mixtures.

The finished painting. A few opaque highlights and details added the finishing touches.

Generally, wiping off paint to make light values also keeps the color fairly saturated (high in chroma). When adding an opaque layer or brushstroke, the color of the paint often needs to be at least as high in saturation to compensate for the richness of the subtracted color.



Pushing the Color in the Block-In

Working in the traditional method with Viridian and Red Oxide, the colors are rich (because of the transparency) but usually slightly muted (because of working with complementary hues).

In this variation on the foundation value method, pure dark pigments straight out of the tube were applied using Viridian, Prussian Blue, Dioxazine Purple, and Red Oxide, sometimes using white and Cad Yellow Hue to lighten the foundation areas. When wiped off, the lighter values were vivid in hue, almost *too* saturated. But that being the intention in the painting, they were left as is. To finish the painting, some opaque passages, also high in saturation, were added to the foreground and to the lights in the sky.

Notice that the colors in the sky in the block-in were slightly more muted. The most saturated colors were limited to the ground. Uniform saturation can be visually boring.



Using a Color Gradient

This block-in began as a single, very dark layer of one value but which varied in hue, from a warm top to cool a bottom. Beginning at the top of the canvas, I painted in Red Oxide with some Yellow, then Red Oxide moving into Dioxazine Purple, and finally nearly pure Prussian Blue. The transition between the colors was blended to make the gradient as smooth as possible. When the pigments were wiped off to create lighter values, the undercolors remained as a color gradient. To finish this painting, I'll add more opaque colors (or glazes) of varying hues to distinguish the river banks from the water and the trees and hills from the sky. But the underlying color gradient will be allowed to show through as much as possible.

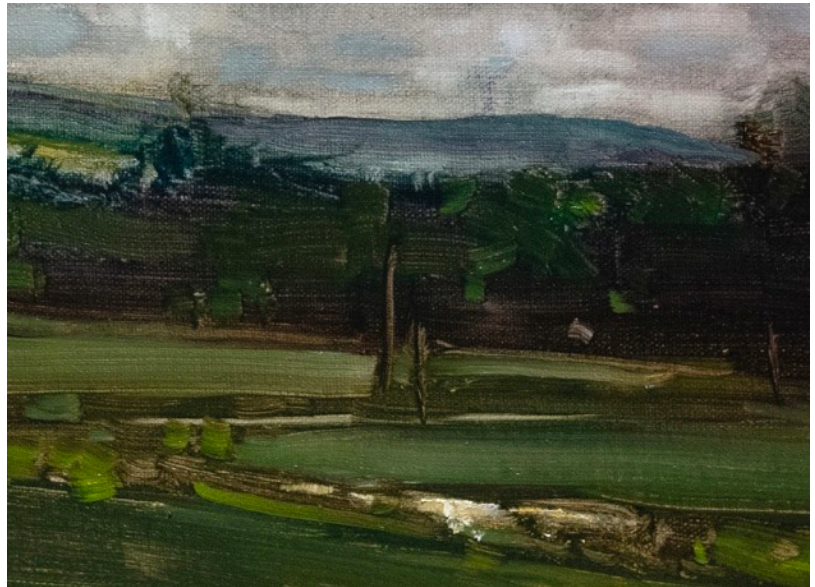


The Medium

Dennis uses **Liquin** (which contains solvents, so ventilate the studio.) I first used **Gamblin Solvent-Free Gel**. It works well but remains tacky for several weeks. To speed up drying, I've been adding (10% to 50%) **C.A.S. AlkydPro gel**. I've also worked using only **Linseed Oil** but it, too, results in moderately long drying times. I've yet to use the medium that I mix (linseed and stand oils, Dorland's Wax, and Cobalt Drier) but it should also work well. Be careful not to use a higher percentage of medium than is recommended on the label.

Adding Opaque Passages

This is where it gets tricky. So much of the beauty of this technique comes from the transparency of the paint. During his demo, Dennis warned that adding too many opaque passages can kill the life of the painting. One secret is to **keep the darkest areas transparent to preserve the color** and to confine the more opaque pigments to the middle and lighter values, and even then, use them sparingly. There's a beautifully energetic life to the marks, textures, and hues of the block-in and that's what makes this technique challenging: the least bit of fussiness that appears as overworking kills these paintings. It's not uncommon to overwork the focal point by fussing with overly descriptive and opaque details, leaving a dead focal area surrounded by passages in the painting that are more lively and interesting but are essentially irrelevant.



Advantages and Challenges of the Subtractive Technique.

ADVANTAGES

Rich color. When a dark transparent pigment, even applied directly out of the tube, is painted onto a white canvas, light will filter through, hit the canvas, and be reflected back to our eyes. Transparent dark pigments lightened optically by light will *always* appear more saturated and richer than the same pigments whose values have been lightened by adding white paint. Let the white of the canvas do the work for you and keep the lid on that tube of titanium.

Suggestion rather than description. The paper towel, finger, and brush all create textures in the paint that often suggest details in the landscape. The textures can be smoothed out with a brush if too sharp or eliminated if unnecessary. But if they work as is, leave them. Don't get fussy.

Forgiveness. Unlike watercolor, the liquid quality of the oils can be reworked for hours. Too light? Add some darks and blend. Too dark? Pull off more paint. Too sharp an edge? Blend it. Too many details? Lightly drag a brush across them to blur them into a background. This method allows almost endless adjustments and editing. It's perfect for experimentation.

CHALLENGES

More challenges are listed than advantages but if this method of painting fits your intention, inclination, and skills, that means nothing. None of the challenges is insurmountable.

Composition. With a single dark tone applied over the entire canvas, the composition is created *as you paint*—no sketching or underpainting. You’d best have a very good idea of the composition before you start and the skills to transfer it adequately as you paint. So do a tonal study—it’ll provide a visual reference as you begin wiping away paint to reveal the major shapes.

Drawing. Your drawing skills will determine the quality of the design of the shapes of the composition as well as the depiction of individual details. You’re moving around slippery masses of paint and every mark creates a texture. If you lack adequate drawing skills, try concentrating on the block-in (composition) and then leave the details for later sessions after the block-in is dry. (This is another reason to work continually on our drawing!)

Dark Values. Applying an overall, near-black mixture across the entire canvas means that *any* value first created is going to appear not only lighter than the tone but lighter than it actually is. A middle value can appear nearly white against a nearly black background. Pulling a successful value structure out of a very dark surface can be brutal. Establish the foundation values first and edit them until they work. (And having a good tonal sketch for reference doesn’t hurt.)

High Key. If the initial toned block-in is extremely dark, most of the pigment will need to be removed to create a high key painting, leading to excessive wiping which results in excessive mixing of the pigment, killing the color and saturation and leading to a high key but dull painting. If you want high key, consider blocking in with foundation values. (Described above.)

Values on the fly. Creating values on the fly as you’re painting on the canvas is much more difficult than pre-mixing them on the palette. As with any painting technique, get the foundation values right first and then worry about the secondary values.

Plein air. This method works en plein air but it’s easier when the scene is dark with strong values contrasts. I’ve had little luck painting high key, sunny scenes with this technique.

Thin and liquid. If you’re accustomed to working with piles of opaque paint on the canvas and moving them around with a palette knife, this technique is the opposite, being more akin to watercolor than to palette knife painting. As with any new technique, there’s a learning curve.

Adding opaque pigments. The fewer the better. (See previous page)

But is it Archival?

So long as the layers with the most oil or medium are the top layers, or each layer contains approximately equal amounts of oil or medium, yes, it should be archival. (Alkyds are considered “lean.”) For more information, see page 13, “Later Reworking.”

The Ground and Support

(A thank you to Bob Green, a painter in Anchorage, Alaska for reminding me of the importance of this topic. It was omitted from the first version of this newsletter.)

Stretched Canvases vs Panels

When wiping off pigment, a light, delicate touch is often needed. But sometimes a firm pressure and hard rubbing is required when taking values to nearly white. This pressure can distort a stretched canvas. If painting subtractively, it's best to use **panels**. I prefer Centurion OP DLX Linen Panels or Raphael Premium Archival Oil Primed Linen Panels. For studies and practice, I'll tear off a single sheet from a pad of Centurion oil primed linen and tape it (with Blick's black, 1", artists tape) to a hard surface.

Acrylic vs Oil Grounds/Primers

Transparent pigments often act as dyes. Many of them have extremely strong tinting strengths. (Most of the bristles of my brushes are faintly tinted purple from Dioxazine—it's that strong.) I've painted on some acrylic grounds (and a few oil grounds) that will be stained by these pigments and will not allow the paint to be removed to the white surface. Generally, it's the acrylic grounds that stain but the results can differ from brand to brand. Before buying quantities of panels, buy a single panel and test the ground. The oil ground on the Centurion and Raphaels panels mentioned above work beautifully.)

Smooth vs Coarse Surfaces

If a surface is completely smooth, it's difficult to control the paint. The bristles of a brush will scrape the pigment down to the white ground and layering wet-into-wet is a challenge. It's easier to use a canvas with some texture. But if the texture is too rough, it will rapidly degrade a paper towel and even cotton rags. It's also harder to create lighter values because the dark pigment collects in the recesses of the rough weave of the canvas. I've found the fine texture of a portrait linen, or its equivalent, to work well. The weave in both the Century and Raphael linens are textured enough to catch the paint but fine enough to allow easy removal of the pigment.

The recommendations above are based on my preferences. You may find that you enjoy a rough canvas that stains. If you're not sure, try the experiment described below. . .

Good Advice from Bob

"Here's a suggestion.....I had a great learning experience from buying a Sample Pack of panels from Raymar. I used the same paints and mediums on each so I could precisely experience the differences between them. I painted on all of them the same day and went through a process of elimination to arrive at the texture/primer combination that was best for me. I wish I had done this years ago. It would have saved me many frustrating experiences."

Finishing the Painting ~ Later Reworking

To finish a painting, the process I used for years included scumbling, glazing, or applying thin layers of opaque paint, often mixed with a homemade Oil/ Dorland's Wax medium. To preserve the archival quality of the painting, care was taken to ensure that each additional layer included a similar amount (or more) of oil/medium as the underlying layers. The only problem I would encounter was when an underlying layer dried to a highly smooth, glossy surface. When that happened, subsequent layers of paint sometimes delaminated—they didn't adhere to the underlying layer. The paint easily chipped and flaked off. The problem was finally solved by my first lightly scuffing the surface of the painting with a pot scrubber pad. It's a quick and simple method.

I've reworked few of these new paintings but I assume that if the surface is smooth and glossy scuffing them in the same manner will prevent any problems. In the coming months, if I find these new paintings have other problems, I'll mention it in the next newsletter.



Tip for Subtractive Newcomers.

If you haven't work subtractively, start with underpaintings. Spend a month or two painting nothing but monochromatic underpaintings using warm earth tones: Burnt Sienna (with bit of Burnt Umber added for the darkest shadows, if necessary). Try both methods of subtractive painting, beginning a painting with a single dark tone and beginning with pre-mixed foundation values. Once comfortable painting warm, monochromatic underpaintings, add cool hues to the initial tone and start thinking of color temperature.

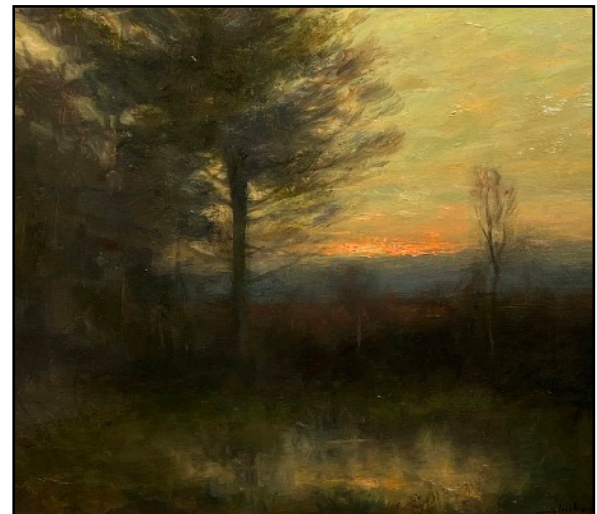
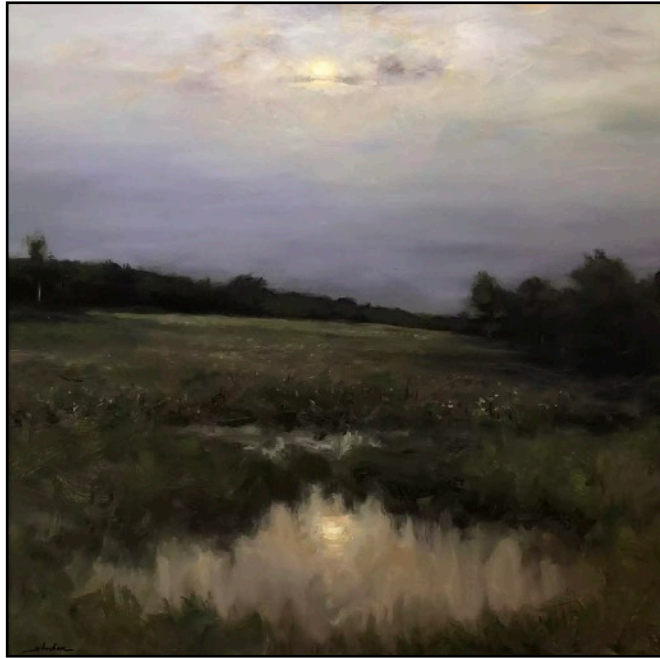
Recent Examples

A few of the recent paintings done using the traditional and altered methods. All were painted in a single session based on photos or tonal sketches, sized 9" x 12" or 12" x 16"



Dennis Sheehan

One of the finest painters in the country currently working in the Tonalist style, Dennis is also responsible for much of the resurgence in interest in traditional tonalism. His work can be found in the following galleries: susanpowellfineart.com, edgewatergallery.co, the [Ceres Gallery](http://CeresGallery), and www.guildofbostonartists.org. Dennis also teaches workshops. If interested, contact him through one of the above galleries.



Clockwise from top left: *New Horizon*, *Winter Glow*, *Pines at Sunset*, *Moon Reflections*.

Words of Wisdom

“The object isn’t to make art, it’s to be in that wonderful state which makes art inevitable.”

– Robert Henri

*Stay well,
Be creative,
and Happy Painting!*