

Desert Textures

A plein air painting workshop
presented by Sheila Kollasch

for

Arizona Art Educators Association
A Brush with the West

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...Once in his life a man ought to concentrate his mind upon the remembered earth, I believe. He ought to give himself up to a particular landscape in this experience, to look at it from as many angles as he can, to wonder about it, to dwell upon it. He ought to imagine that he touches it with his hands at every season and listens to the sounds that are made upon it. He ought to imagine the creatures there and all the faintest motions of the wind. He ought to recollect the glare of noon and all the colors of the dawn and dusk.

N. Scott Momaday, *The Way to Rainy Mountain*

General Information:

Every one of my canvases has a goal before I put the brush to it. I rarely start painting without a pretty well defined idea. However, I don't always end up where I think I will when the piece is finished and this is very good. Sounds strange, doesn't it? Getting to this point in my career has been my longest, hardest and most successful accomplishment. It is called, "Learning to get out of my own way." I have been thirty years on this journey. I first learned this concept and understood it intellectually about fifteen years into my painting career. It took another ten years to make it reality through conscious practice.

As an art student I learned the useful tools of composition and color theory. I apply these rules as I paint. My goal is not to paint photo realism, but to capture the subjects I love in a beautiful and pleasing manner. Thus, the colors of my trees and rocks may not be ones that you actually see in nature, but they do not bowl you over with discordant unreality. You accept what you see as Palo Verde trees, granite, river rock and sand.

The steps I take to make each canvas vary only somewhat from the following sequence:

While out hiking in the desert I see a tree with a graceful draping of decayed branches or a grouping of boulders and either sketch it or take a photograph. On occasion I can come back to the studio and sketch out what I saw from memory and then paint it. I use the field sketch or photograph to draft the idea in pencil, watercolor or pastels. When I refine the original idea into a composition that I like, I draw it onto a canvas.

I start each canvas by staining it and draw the outlines first in pencil, then draw with an earth colored oil paint. Some paintings are painted with only one layer of opaque oil and considered finished. But most of the time my works have up to six alternating transparent and/or opaque layers applied before they are deemed finished.

I always take liberties with color and composition in order to get a piece that pleases me. I believe in painting to please myself. And what pleases me is to end up with a work that joyfully reminds me of some time or place I have hiked in the desert. I can tell you where each of my trees or boulder piles exist in the real world. When hiking with friends I often point out the features I have painted as we pass by them on the trail.

Example No. 1: *Inside the Old Palo Verde*, altered photo, 2001, 10" x 7"



This is a portion of a digital image of an old, gnarled Palo Verde tree near Wickenburg that is beginning to lose branches. I chose to work with this one because of the variety of branch textures and colors. In some ways it is like the filigree of a stained glass window.

I began blocking out portions I did not want to use. Here I am changing the composition to suit me. You can see opaque watercolor, or tempera paint, blocking out one large and several smaller branches in the top third of the image.

Example No.1: *Inside the Old Palo Verde*, sketch, 2001, 12" x 9"



This is a pencil and watercolor sketch I made to help me decide just what parts I liked best about the photo. I did this because I found the photo too restricting. Starting with a blank sheet of paper and blocking in some colored areas helped me make the composition decision for the final painting.

Example No. 1: *Inside the Old Palo Verde*, oil sketch, 2001, 7" x 5"



This is a 7" x 5" canvas panel that I painted to further refine my final composition. It was painted in oil. Also, this proportion is close to the 30" x 40" canvas on which I painted the actual work. I also came closer to the actual background colors I used for the final piece.

Example No. 1: *Inside the Old Palo Verde*, sketch, 2001, 10" x 8"



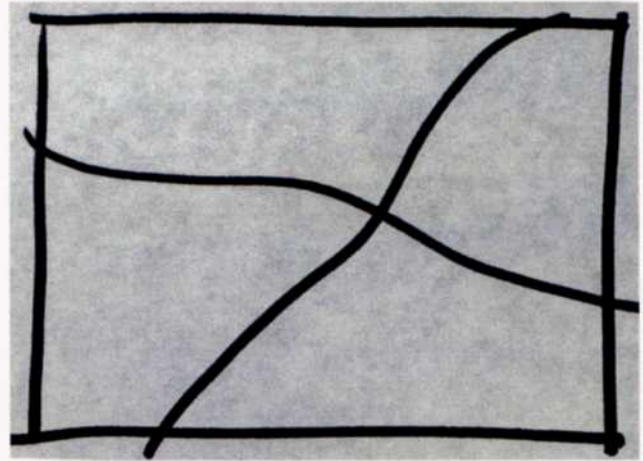
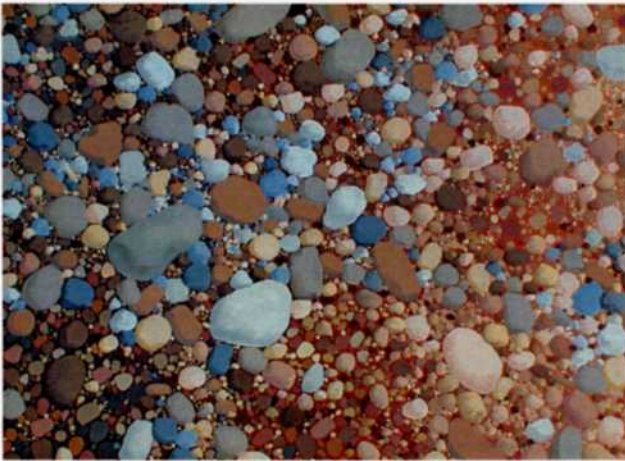
When the 40" x 30" painting was almost finished I took a digital image of it and used oil pastels to decide what the background colors would be. The branches were pretty much finished at this point.

Example No. 1: *Inside the Old Palo Verde*, oil, 2001, 40" x 30"



The finished painting.

Example No. 2: *Pebbles*, oil, 1983, 24" x 30"



This painting was the first one I painted in my career where I had no specific drawing or photograph as my inspiration. It is a pure exercise in methodology. I used the cobbled desert floor as my inspiration, having walked many miles of such landscape carrying a backpack while watching my step.

The first task was to paint the background. In this instance, if you look closely, you can see that the value of the under-painting changes from the left half of the canvas to the right by going from a dark brown to a light russet. I chose the basic color palette of my favorite grays, blues and browns and premixed most of the colors in oil.

I chose an 'X'-based composition for placing the colors. It is not a hard 'X' visually, but a design concept that dictated the basis of my color and shape placement for the remainder of the painting.

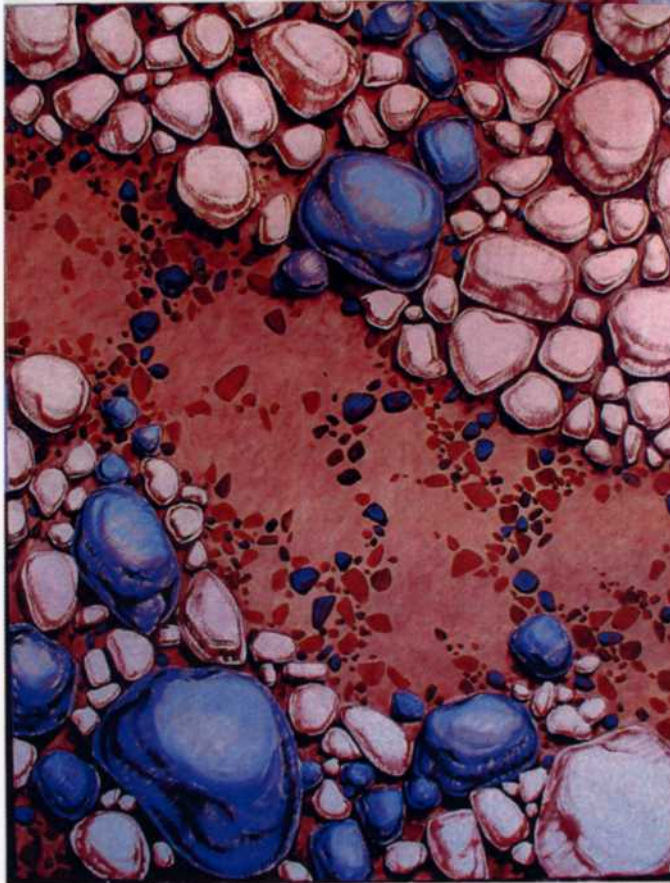
The painting process was very meditative in that I stepped back often to visualize where each brushfull of color should be placed. Blur your vision at the canvas to reveal a light blue 'X' of rocks set slightly askew across the whole canvas. It looks something like this the image on the right.

Example No. 3: *Javelina Wash*, sketch, 2002, 6" x 4"



This painting was inspired by the poem written by Kathleen Aviña entitled, *Javelina Wash*. I started by making a couple of small watercolor sketches in order to work out both a color combination and a composition. I then drew the canvas and began painting, first with a stain and then painted the outlines of the rocks.

Example No. 3: *Javelina Wash*, photo, 2002, 10" x 8"

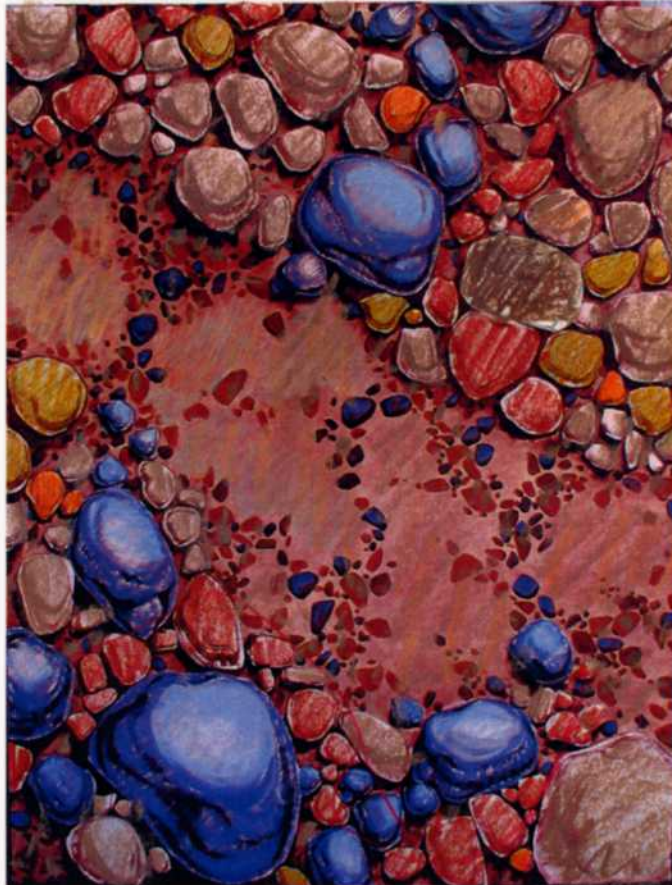


This is a photo of the canvas with the finished underpainting.

After underpainting the next step was to fill in all of the darkest gray rocks by choosing ones that formed a curving flow down the middle of the composition. This is a purely aesthetic decision on my part. Next are the red-ish colored rocks, then the other colors, each being placed in a thoughtful manner. This means that each time before I put my brush to the canvas, I step back and ponder the placement of the next rock.

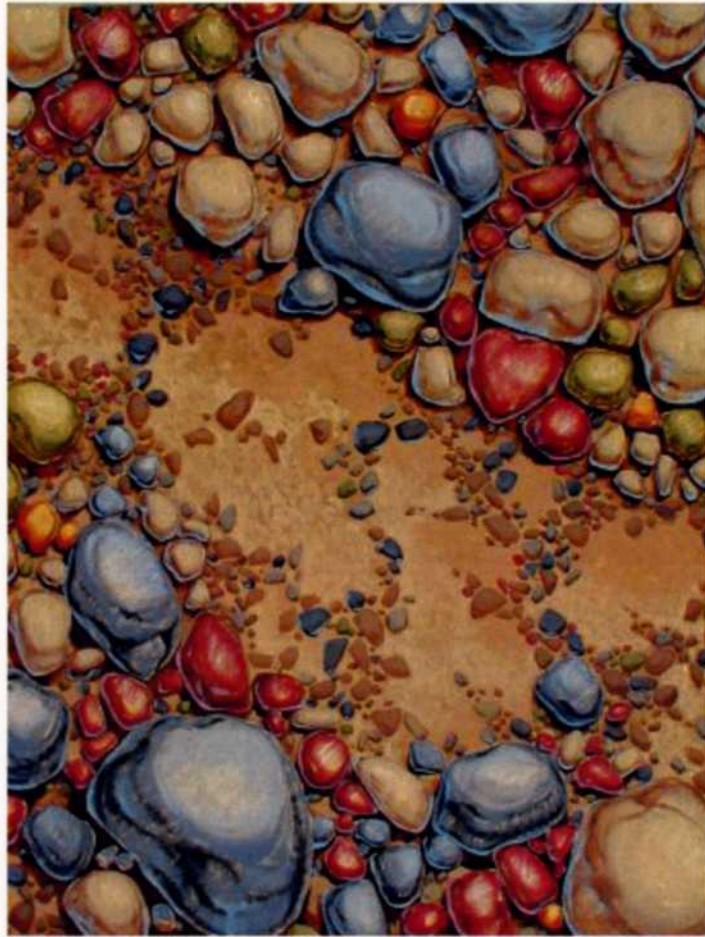
Example No. 3: *Javelina Wash*, sketch, 2002, 10" x 8"

Shown here is a copy of the previous photo but with oil pastel used to help me select the final colors.



When all the larger rocks are finished I get looser and more playful with my placement of the small pebbles of color. These are painted more spontaneously. This is the most fun.

Example No. 3: *Javelina Wash*, oil, 2002, 40" x 30"



The last part to be painted is the sand in the wash bottom and the reflected light highlights around the edges of the rocks. This is the finished painting.

Example No. 4: *Past Splendor*, photo, 2001, 10" x 8"



This is a digital photo of an old decaying Palo Verde tree in the Phoenix Mountains Preserve. I chose to frame it as you see here because the balance of this composition was pleasing to my eye. I also wanted to work with the challenge presented by the massive pile of fallen branches around it.

Example No. 4: *Past Splendor*, sketch on photo, 2001, 10" x 8"



This is a second copy of the same digital image where I have used colored pencils and oil pastels to alter the photo to simplify the features. I blocked out most of the little branches, much of the background and added a few branches to the dark areas at the bottom. Also, I find the digital images lacking in color and depth so I used this second print to help me decide what colors I might use in the finished painting—yellows, aquas, pinks. Now I go to the canvas and with pencil draw the tree and all the fallen branches as completely as possible in preparation for the oil paint. I kept this image handy the entire time I painted the large canvas.

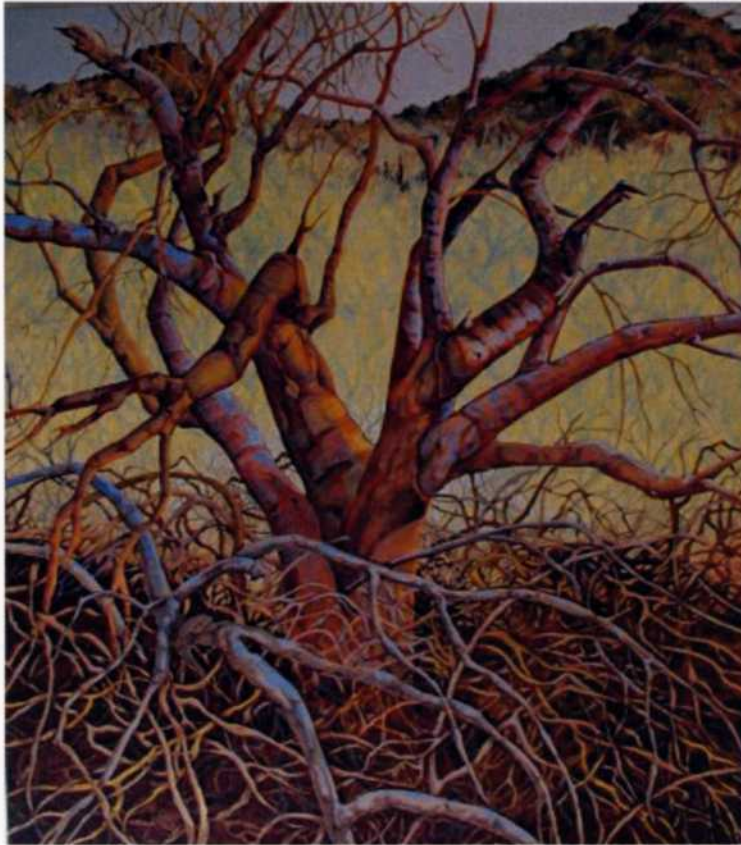
Example No. 4: *Past Splendor*, sketch, 2001, 10" x 8"



After drawing in pencil, I used raw umber oil paint to 'flesh-out' the tree, fallen branches and background. I added the blue color and lightly defined some aqua background foliage. Then I decided that I needed to take a new digital image in order to figure out my background colors before I add more paint to the canvas.

I used this image to play with colors before proceeding.

Example No. 4: *Past Splendor*, oil, 2001, 60" x 52"



This is the final painting. It is the portrait of a once grand tree that, even in decay, poses an incredible beauty and strong symmetry. I find these bare tree branches lyrical—much like dancers striking poses.

A brief bibliography relevant to *Desert Textures*:

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