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EVAN WILSON EXPLAINS HIS "SIGHT-SIZE" PAINTING PROCESS



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Oliver Kohls

Painting Water

Oliver Kohls demonstrates how to capture the dynamics of the sea using soft pastels

It was a coincidence that I stumbled upon pastels. A couple of years ago I did not have my own studio and I was looking for some sort of medium that I could safely work with inside my house with four children around. I became addicted to it very quickly as it really supports my artistic intentions. Moreover, I love to work with both hands and rub the pigments onto the paper. I love the way a painting evolves and the constant dialogue between intention and pigments applied. For me a picture has turned out really well when there is a certain glow to it and when I capture the mood that light has created at that moment. I want to capture the dynamics of the sea, the play of light and I try to develop ways of preserving the mood and sensitivity of it.

Having spent many years at sea as a naval officer I am still inspired by the endless

impressions the sea has to offer. So the sea is my main subject although I am not restricted to it. In retrospect, sailing and windsurfing from early childhood plus my experience at sea gave me a strong foundation for painting the sea: I had looked at it endlessly. This has helped me figure out if something looks right or not.

When I started painting the sea I took numerous photographs of the shore, single waves and the sky. My first painted waves looked more like beached whales but I carried on. I found out that one of the most important skills an artist should have is to be able to criticize his own work of art. It is the process of stepping out of the creative doing and looking at your work with fresh eyes. I even walk out of my studio to look back at my work through the window to get a fresh view.

Many beginners think painting water is quite a difficult task, but I think it is more a problem of the mind rather than a problem of doing. It is the movement of the sea, the reflections or the transparency of the surface that confuses beginning painters. But it is the same as with any other subject, one needs to carefully observe and simplify.

In the demonstration painting I have chosen a coastal scene with ground swell running toward a rocky shore on a sunny day. A lot of foam creates a symphony of motion and light all due to the energy of the waves. I always look out for subjects and scenes to paint. Once I see something interesting I carefully observe the scene, sucking in as many impressions I can. I very often rest at the scene and simply enjoy nature. Then I start doing some sketches and taking a lot of photographs. Back in the studio I view my material and select the ones that might be suitable as a reference for a painting. I think about the pros and cons of each of them and try to recall the impressions I had when being at the scene. Sometimes I even do a watercolor to approach a particular subject; this gives me a good idea about problems that might arise and how to circumnavigate them. Then I put everything aside and carry on with preparing the next exhibition, doing some much beloved administrative work or finishing another work in progress. This is very important to me. It gives me time to think about it and let the painting mature in my head.

So what does the actual painting process look like? I have attached wooden boards to my studio walls. They are used as the foundation for the paper, which I stick down to it. I work standing, allowing me the chance





Boats at the Lake Plön, pastel, 40 x 69 cm (16 x 27")

I was fascinated by the special quality of light when I observed the scene. The light was bouncing everywhere which amazed me. It was my objective in this painting to capture the reflections and the play off light and shadow. The contrast between the dark and light sails balanced the composition, the disposition of the boats supports the illusion of depth. I wanted the viewer's eye to be lead to the boat with the light spritsail.



Buoy in the Sun and *Buoy at Dusk*, pastel, 64 x 30 cm each (25 x 12" each)

A very simple motif painted in different lighting conditions. I know I am not the first one to do it. I really experienced a lot by painting this buoy twice. The reflections lead the viewer's eyes into the painting. I wanted to express the serenity and peacefulness of a trivial motif.



Seagull at the Beach, pastel, 51 x 71 cm (20 x 28") My objective in this painting was to capture the sunlight shining onto the beach. To create depth in this close-up I utilized the linear foam patterns and arranged them as an oval around the seagull. The small wave and the foam in the background were kept simple and slightly blurred to enhance the illusion of depth.



The Wave II (triptych), 51 x 191 cm (20 x 75") This painting is all about the dynamic and beauty of a single wave. It is the mixture of transparency and reflections that appealed to me. The composition had to be balanced carefully without too much repetition or symmetry.


to alter my viewing distance. Squinting my eyes is a method I utilize continuously to check whether the values are correct or not. When I use a photograph as a reference I hold it at arm's length so that it fits "visually" onto the painting surface. I then start with a drawing of my composition. Afterward I take my time to judge the drawing and to

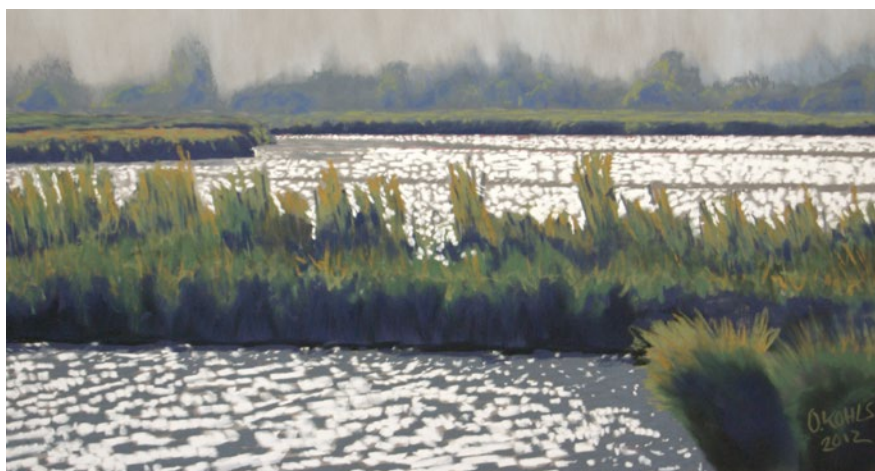
see whether the composition feels right to me.

I usually start my paintings from the top. This avoids smearing painted parts with my hands. If necessary I use a mahl stick to keep my hands off the paper. Not to be confused with values and color temperature, I generally use neutral mid-value paper. When I am not sure about the right values

or color on one part of the painting I move to other parts of the painting to see whether it fits together. This is an advantage of pastels. There is room to rework parts that do not satisfy the artist.

In the demonstration painting a strong s-curved composition is used to express the dynamic of the waves running ashore. It is supported by the contrast of light and shadow and leads to the center of interest. The eye level is well above the horizon line, which is not even included. When painting the sea, the same compositional thoughts need to be applied as in any other subject. I find it advantageous that the sea can be utilized to the compositional needs of the artist. You can use linear foam patterns the way you want it and thus support your compositional needs. Bend nature in your paintings to get the third dimension onto a two-dimensional surface, if that is what you want to express.

Once a painting is finished I let it hang in my studio and watch it every other day. This refreshes my view and gives me enough mental distance to judge it and add some finishing touches if necessary. 



Marsh, pastel, 30 x 61 cm (12 x 24") I came across this unique scenery in the Netherlands. To create the illusion of light I downplayed the reed and the sky. I disregarded details and tried to give it some rhythm by applying painterly marks.

My Art in the Making Breaking Waves Cote Bleu



Reference
photograph

WHAT THE ARTIST USED

Materials

- » Pastel paper
- » Wooden boards attached to studio wall as easel
- » Tape to fix the paper onto wooden board

Artist Quality Pastels

- » Burnt umber
- » Cobalt blue
- » Grey blue
- » Grey green
- » Neutral grey
- » Reddish grey
- » Sepia brown
- » Ultramarine light
- » White



**STAGE 1
TRANSFER
TO PAPER**

Holding my photographic reference at arm's length is a method I use for my first drawing. It is sufficient enough to get the elements down on paper.



STAGE 2 THE DRAWING

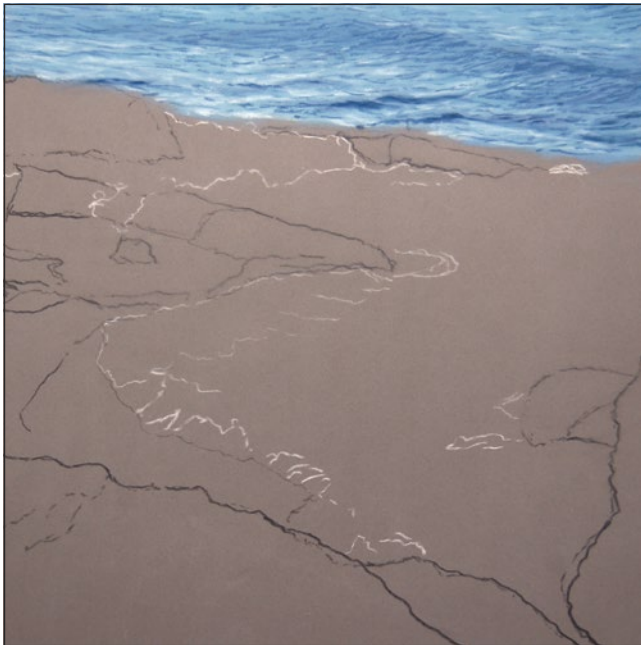
This drawing is only a rough outline of the important lines and elements. Details are not necessary. It is important for me to be able to judge the composition and to see whether I need to change anything.



STAGE 3 THE BACKGROUND

The background is blocked in using only one tint of greyish blue. I rub the pigments in so the paper is completely covered.

Continued ▶



STAGE 4 CREATING BACKGROUND DETAILS

To create the illusion of open sea swell I lighten up the trough of the wave using a light cobalt blue. The leading edge of the waves are painted by suggesting small choppy waves created by the wind with a darker greyish blue. Up until now I used three different pastels.



STAGE 5 COLORS

The first rocks are painted using a dark neutral grey for the shady areas and lighter browns for the areas in the sun. A deep orange is used to suggest wet areas in the sun. The foam of the breaking waves is painted from dark to light. I started with a light neutral grey and light cobalt blue ending up with areas of white where the foam is lit by the sun. Do not start the foam with pure white, it will look dull and by no way realistic.



STAGE 6 SHADOWS AND CENTER OF INTEREST

I started with the shadow area to the left. I used again the greyish blue from the background and added some cold grey for the darker areas in the shadow. With a greenish grey and a reddish grey I set the first marks for the huge area of breaking waves and foam, working from dark to light.



STAGE 7 FOREGROUND

I blocked in the shadow area of the foreground with a dark neutral grey. The shadow will become lively by suggesting the structure of the rocks. The dark underpainting marks of the foam area are rubbed to soften the edges. I then started with the first marks of light cobalt blue, light grey and white to suggest foam patterns.



STAGE 8 THE FINISHED PAINTING *Breaking Waves Cote Bleu*, pastel, 41 x 41 cm (16 x 16")

I set many more lines to suggest the foam patterns. This process is very intuitive. I put lines of pastel down and see whether it looks right. From my point of view the finished painting shows a strong s-curved composition with a strong contrast of light and shadow and depicting the dynamics of breaking waves on a rocky coast.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Oliver Kohls was born near Kiel, Germany, in 1969. He learned to sail at an early age and consequently joined the German Navy. He lives with his family in the North of Germany in Neustadtgödens, a small historic village. Kohls is completely self-taught. Painting all his life with differing intensity, he started painting with pastels in 2009 to relax from his demanding job as a naval officer and pulsating family life with his wife and four kids.

Very quickly painting gained prominence and became a passion for Kohls. He started exhibiting and selling his work. Kohls is about to become a full-time professional artist and he teaches in workshops and private lessons at his studio. He is a member of the Pastel Guild of Europe and the Pastel Society of America.

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