

The Liberating Power of Abstract Art

a guide to painting abstract art to release
the artist within



Dr Michael Tremblay

Journey to Abstraction: Introduction

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The Liberating Power of Abstract Art: A guide to painting abstract art to release the artist within

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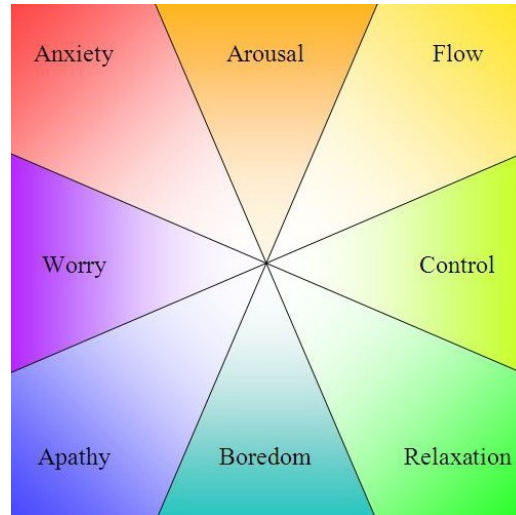
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Cover art: "Optimisme", by Michael Tremblay

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The Journey to Abstraction

Look at the colour diagram. Do the colours reflect a mood for you?
And having chosen a colour ...



What colour are you right now? tomorrow?
yesterday?

... we begin ...

On not being able to draw

You do not need to be able to draw to be creative. This is one of the great lies of art, that it begins with drawing, sketching, being accurate.

Paint 'in the moment', simply see what would happen if..., if you did this and then that. That does not necessarily mean being careless, it means interpreting how you feel, what you are thinking, at a particular moment. Abstract expressionists feared the label decorative, as they didn't want to paint anything recognisable. They also used big brushes, to avoid detail.

Many people take life classes, drawing the human form, or still life classes, bowls of fruit or a vase of flowers. What they produce is probably OK, but the most expressive artists were often very poor at drawing (Henry Peacock wrote this in his book, **Art as Expression**)

Scribbling, doodling are the most natural things in the world. What is unnatural is trying to copy the world on a piece of paper. This is not as exciting as seeing what you see and feeling the freedom to explore the shapes and forms anyway you like. When we look at the world, we immediately want to interpret it. But not being able to draw accurately what we see is not a barrier to creativity.

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Pilgrim's Journey, Tremblay

Sometimes, all you need to do is make a few marks with black ink on paper.

From boredom to insight

Creativity is neither right nor wrong, it just is, and the beginning of your own journey to painting begins with the realisation that your creativity can find productive expression.

Many, most of us perhaps, have wanted to develop our creativity and it often finds an outlet in our work regardless of what we do.

As adults we take up various projects to express our creative interests, which become a journey for discovery and personal development.

Time really doesn't exist. Think of the different stages of a plant/flower by combining its growth in some imaginative way. Thinking like this led Picasso to Cubism via Einstein's theory of relativity. He came to understand that objects could be seen from a variety of perspectives.

For example, some of us write, others make films or take photographs, and many explore painting, sculpture, pottery, jewellery, textiles and so on.

Perhaps like many others, you had rotten experiences of art in school, especially if you were deemed "not very good" (whatever that might mean...). Instead of drawing a vase, getting the face just right, being unable to get the apple to look like something that one could eat, you became frustrated and took typing or

bookkeeping instead. Faced with these barriers and early frustrations, many people abandon art.

Pointillism is built on how we put together pictures from dots (look closely at a colour picture in a magazine -- it is made of little dots -- make the dots big, and you have Roy Lichtenstein.

At a later point in life, many people would like to come back to art, but this experience can be mind-numbing as few courses meet the desire for creative accomplishment by an adult learner. It is worth noting that many art classes focus on learning techniques not creativity itself. These courses often have a bias toward art-speak, the technologies of painting (brushes, canvas). Despite all the modern world can provide in resources, and cheap art classes in the local

town hall, many people, perhaps most, feel deeply unhappy.

By the end of the art class, the painting is done, but it isn't quite right -- the door is a bit wonky, the trees not quite the right shade of green, the skin a bit too mauve, whatever. Like the hamster on the wheel, some people keep taking more classes, but fail to unleash their creative energies; the paintings feel lifeless, seem mute, say nothing about the passion for colour or the heady fragrance -- the flower in

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the vase died as soon as it was painted, and lives only in the painter.

Perhaps we try to have creative days and go to art galleries, roaming around murmuring about different works, while feeling that there must be something more to art than this. We see the students with their sketch pads copying some piece of art, but why? What has that got to do with artistic expression? Do I need formal qualifications from an art school to be an artist, we ask.

We may subscribe to an 'art' magazine, which arrives with breathless articles on how to paint the sky, getting the grass to look like grass; we wonder if we will enter next month's competition. We go the art store and buy another colour of paint to try. We may have a box full of colours yet remain afraid of colour.

We may find an *avant-garde* gallery and look at the shark in aspic or the box of rocks on a stove, and stare hoping that something will speak to us, but such works remain less than inscrutable -- they are mute.

Colours don't really exist independently of how we see them. Infra-red colour film records colours in a different part of the light spectrum, which our eye can't see (snakes see the world like this. Translated into painting lets the sky be green and fields blue. You know that morning colours are different from evening colours and the sky still has light in it hours after the sun has gone down – purples, magentas.

So we think that must be the way it is, go back to our art classes, and continue to produce lifeless works of increasing technical mastery, but of decreasing importance to us. It becomes more important to get the painting right; it is finished when the painting looks like the object. We forget what we are doing, and why.

Many of us will also live in fear of showing others our work. Polite comments are common, as family and friends encourage us to continue. We may post our paintings to some social networking art community, where we receive comments like, "really like the reds", "great!", and the ever tiresome, "more, please". We really want some decent criticism, but cringe at the possibility that it will devastate us.

The art teachers in our classes seem to give feedback that is banal -- they may even be honest enough to tell you that the course that you are taking so seriously is from their perspective just recreational art, not a real art class, just something to do on Tuesday's. You may be dismayed at learning this.

Fear and art go together: "provocative art challenges not only the viewer but also the maker", (Bayles and Orland wrote this in their book, **Art and Fear**).

If you are not surprising yourself with your work, you are not creating, as creativity is a powerful force that does not enjoy being contained. For many of us, that creativity has been contained by too many

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commutes on the train, too many office meetings, exhausting days on the job. Fearing what others may think of our work also means that we are afraid of what we may create.

In the end, the feeling lingers of an inability to paint.

Start by seeing the world in a new way, unearth the long-buried imagination. Picasso said: "It took me four years to paint like Raphael, but a lifetime to paint like a child".



Five-a-day, Tremblay

Developing your vision through abstraction

Not everything we want to paint needs to look like something, such as a bowl of fruit, a tree or a landscape. We may instead want to capture the smell of a flower, the feelings we have looking at a sunset. Steven Spurrier, the wine expert, calls wine 'bottled sunshine' – what does that look like?

These experiences of our senses and of our thoughts are all quite real, just as real as the flower in the vase. The key is know how to make

Change your perspective on the world. Lie on the ground, float above, be inside it; not everything needs to be seen from ground level. Shifting perspective alone can open new ways of looking at familiar objects. Shrink the relationship between objects, ignore perspective, alter relationships. Literally alter space. Picasso did this.

creative sense of them – that we all lead successful lives full of smells and sounds is evidence it can be done!

The challenge, then, is to translate this internal understanding of the world, the one you don't get to play with in ordinary art classes, into something that can appear 'out there' on a piece of paper or canvas.

We may be drawn to a simple bowl of fruit; we may like its shapes, contours, colours and less interested in painting the fruits accurately. We

want to convey the feelings about the colours themselves, so that the fruits merge into a feeling for the bowl of fruit, and a sense of enjoyment.

We may see the fruit, and think of 'five a day' for instance, and the health benefits of the fruit, and seek to capture that notion in a painting.

You are already here!

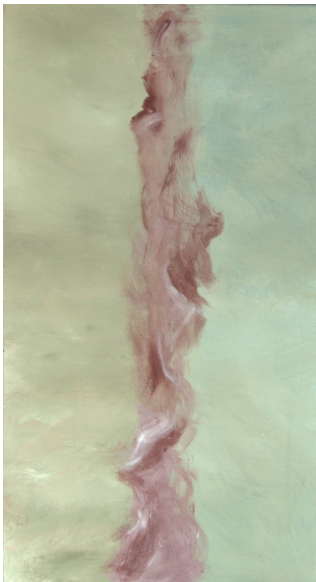
You can approach abstract art from familiar territory – it is not an undiscovered country, but the natural way of seeing the world. It is the world you live in.

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For people interested in new forms of expression, abstract painting can be liberating. Freed of the strictures of the still life class, the life study class, the art history class, the tools and techniques class.

Much guidance on abstract art focuses on what I call 'the inner game of art', that abstraction is done through internal reflection alone. That is, though, as true as using the external world of our senses as a bridge to stimulate that inner game.

If I am on the right track, abstract art is the natural way for our minds to construct the external reality we call the world. So, by starting there we are actually starting inside; it is a little trick with ourselves. I use photographs in the various PDF sections as stimulus to help you feel at home in both the external world and your own inner world. It is all a matter of perspective. You can also read and use the PDF sections in any order you like, too.



All that is melts into nothingness, Tremblay

People who comment on abstract paintings often describe them as paintings of 'nothing', as abstract art is non-representational, not actually depicting anything. This is not quite right, as once you have produced an abstract painting, it now becomes a thing in the world which has an existence all of its own. It actually depicts itself, in almost the same way as a picture of you depicts you. Hang one in your living room and note the impact its presence has – it is almost impossible to ignore.

Some have even gone so far as to describe abstract paintings as 'quasi persons' because of the impact they can have on people simply in virtue of the emotions and feelings they create. Indeed, the Rothko room at the Tate Modern in London brought tears to my eyes and others have had a similar experience.

This painting is called "All that is melts into nothingness". It is the post-modern angst which abstraction will allow you to avoid.

Off you go!

Mike

By the way, the material I've prepared is always work in progress, so from time to time I'll revise and expand the text, change images as new ideas emerge.