



Paul deMarrais Pastels

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✕ Mixing it Up ✕

A grey underpainting in acrylic sets the stage for dazzling color. Plus, recipes for a sanded ground and for a texture medium that simulates impasto effects.

You can create a wonderful painting entirely with pastel; however, I've found multiple benefits of experimenting with other media. Pastel, after all, is

pure pigment; theoretically, it should be compatible with any non-oily or matte finish medium. Why not take advantage of what the other

media have to offer? You can add to your vocabulary of marks and textures by taking a few risks. The marks left by pastels are opaque.

Creating Contrast

I wanted to make the red poppies as bright as possible. My first step was to create a three-value underpainting in ivory white and black acrylic. I left the red poppy areas unpainted in order to keep the pure white of the board so that the scarlet reds would be bright over a white ground. I limited my selection of reds to three scarlets of slightly different values -- too many tints weaken color intensity. Bits of the warm gray underpainting show through -- warming the cool landscape greens. Finally, I tightened some details with acrylic and a liner brush to complete Red Poppies (mixed media, 16x20).





Achieving Harmony

Reflections of an Old Barn (mixed media, 16x20) has the distinctive, soft quality of winter colors. Nearly all of the colors are close in value. I began with an underpainting of ivory white and black acrylic. That initial warm gray tone worked well with the golds, olives and lavenders I applied later. To balance the many cool tones in the painting I used a deep maroon for all the dark values and exaggerated the warm pinks in the barn. For the finishing details in the barn and grasses, I used walnut drawing ink and a liner brush.

Very dark pastels, made with a large percentage of black pigment, absorb light and have, therefore, a harsh quality. We all know that transparency is a hallmark of watercolor and acrylic. By starting with deep, transparent washes of acrylic or watercolor and then applying layers of purple, green and blue pastels, you can achieve subtle effects that alternate between transparent and opaque. The practice of starting with thin, transparent washes and then applying layers of opaque pigment is similar to the time-honored practice of fat-over-lean, in which oil painters keep shadows thin while making light areas thicker and more opaque. It's a trick that works equally well in pastel.

Another benefit to starting with watercolor or acrylic washes is that the application of water-based paint conserves and preserves the tooth of the paper. This allows you, subsequently, to apply more layers of pastel. Another plus is that starting with a watercolor wash, brushed in with big, simple shapes, lays a strong foundation at the start

of the painting process where problems in composition can be exposed and addressed before too much damage is done.

MAKING YOUR OWN SURFACES

I've long been fascinated by trying pastels on different surfaces, and in doing so have discovered a wide-range of new effects and textures. I've found that making my own sanded surface is easy and the advantages of doing so are many: First, I get a tough, durable and archival surface to work on. Second, the surface can be any size I want, up to 40x60. And finally, by preparing my own surface, I can adjust the amount of tooth on the board to accommodate the subject or the style. These sanded boards are also easy to frame and store.

My recipe for sanded surfaces is easy to follow and requires a minimum of ingredients (see list below).

What you need to make your own sanded surface:

- A plastic box (shoe box sized)
- A 3-inch house-painting brush
- Fine mesh No. 240 white aluminum oxide grit
- Acrylic matte medium
- Acid-free Fome-Cor board, museum board or other archival surface.

Note: Fine mesh No. 240 white aluminum oxide grit is available from Bob Scheer - (516) 671-1040 - rtscheer@unibrite.com

1. Pour approximately one cup of acrylic matte medium into your plastic box.
2. Add a heaping tablespoon of white aluminum oxide grit and a splash of water. Stir well. (The mixture should be runny, like house paint. If your mixture is too thick it won't brush on well, and the resulting surface will be too raised and uneven).
3. Load the 3-inch brush heavily and tap it lightly on the inside edge of your box. Begin applying the mixture to the surface with broad horizontal strokes; be aggressive. Be sure to get your arm and shoulders moving as you work. Without reloading the brush, go back over the surface with vertical strokes to even out the surface.
4. With your brush nearly dry, feather horizontally back over the board.

It only takes a few dips of the brush to coat a 32x40-inch board. When the board dries you'll have an even surface with a subtle brushed texture in the ground. Now turn the board over and coat the other side to prevent warping. This coating dries rapidly. I usually coat several boards at one time and cut them to desired sizes when they're dry.

I've found I can apply this sanded-surface mix to Masonite or any solid substrate, and it didn't take me long to master the process.

DISCOVERING A NEW SURFACE

I've worked on a number of different surfaces, but have always dreamed I'd find the perfect surface, ideally suited to the way I use pastel. A few months ago I discovered that very thing at my local craft supply store. The surface is a 2mm-thick foam sheet called Foamies (manufactured by Darice, a supplier of arts and crafts products) which I bond to acid-free board with 3M 77 multipurpose spray adhesive. The resulting surface is ideal for mixed-media work and lends itself beautifully to broad, painterly effects. Foamies come in many colors in a small 9x12 size, but I prefer the white sheet that I buy in 36x60 rolls.

Finding Foamies

I buy Foamies rolls from Schrock's International, a wholesale distributor of Darice arts and crafts products (the company also sells to individuals). I use item # 003-1022-71, which runs about \$5 per roll. Rolls are available in black and white only. Contact Schrock's by calling 1-800-426-4659. You'll be charged a \$5 shipping fee for orders less than \$100; shipping is free on orders of more than \$100.

PAINT A STUNNING SKY



Step 1: Put Down the Underpainting

After a loose drawing in vine charcoal, I complete an underpainting of ivory white and black acrylic. I simplify my composition into three values of gray and let the thinned acrylic flow like watercolor.



Step 2: Employ a Strong Design

The underpainting is clear and effective and provides a sturdy foundation for the rest of the painting. As I add side strokes of soft pastel, the painting immediately takes shape. The colors conform to the gray values underneath.



Step 3: Adjust the Value

The value range is too narrow so I increase the contrast by lightening the lightest whites and darkening the sky with rich, deep blues. I add touches of gold pastel to bring warmth to the predominately cool painting and *Towering Cloud* (mixed media, 24x30) is complete.

A chemist friend tested the Foamies sheets for me and found that they're acid-free. The soft surface is wonderfully sensuous, but I must use the softest pastels on it. (I make my own very soft pastels out of pigments from Daniel Smith, they're ideal for the Foamies boards). One of the benefits of using the Foamies surface is that I can easily achieve soft, blended effects that don't have the blurry look you get when using velour surfaces. The sanded surface allows me to paint fine details with liner brushes and acrylic, as well as providing plenty of tooth for multiple layers of pastel. I can even wash off an entire painting and start over, or paint over the original with matte medium and use that as an underpainting for a new piece.



Balancing Hot and Cold

The mixed media strategies I used in Bays Mountain View (mixed media, 24x30) helped me to develop effective contrasts in my painting. The hot underpainting balances the dominant cool palette while the textural effects provide relief for the many smooth areas in the water, sky and reflections. Contrasts are an important way for the artist to draw the viewer into the painting. The human eye is wonderfully sophisticated at perceiving color and spatial relationships. A good painting actively engages the viewer's visual perceptions and challenges his / her senses.

CREATING *IMPASTO* EFFECTS

I've always loved the *impasto* effects Claude Monet (1840-1926) achieved in his oil paintings, and while experimenting with sanded boards I found I could easily make a texture medium that simulated *impasto* effects in my pastel paintings. I combine acrylic matte medium, white aluminum oxide grit and acrylic paints to make a paste that I apply using a brush or palette knife.

If the mixture is too wet, I dip my brush directly into the aluminum oxide grit powder. If the mixture becomes too dry to apply easily, I add additional acrylic paint or matte medium (although I often leave the texture that results from applying pastel to the medium as it is). The addition of the aluminum oxide adds tooth to the surface so I can go over my made-up medium with pastel to create textures that appear to sparkle.

I don't use this method in every painting, but there are subjects where a bit of texture adds a valuable dimension. I want my paintings to be interesting to the viewer at close range as well as from a distance. Adding texture in certain areas allows me to create a unique look to my finished paintings.

Keep in mind that if you paint over the texture medium with additional pastel you may need to use fixative to ensure a good bond. A tried-and-true method to check the bond is to tap the back of the surface. The tap will dislodge any loose pastel dust, and it's possible then to go back in and restate areas where necessary.

USING A BRUSH FOR TEXTURE

While the texture medium builds an *impasto* layer that's raised on the surface, I also create texture that's smooth yet interesting by using a liner brush dipped in water. I often add loose hatch marks directly into the pastel pigment with the liner brush. When these lines dry they're lighter in value, and although subtle, they add detail and create a contrast to pastel strokes, especially in areas such as foreground grasses. (See Detail 2 that follows).

I also like to use a liner brush with Daniel Smith walnut drawing ink, which has a lovely sepia tone and flows beautifully from the liner brush. It's an added bonus - a mini-vacation from the usual pastel process -- to use a brush rather than just my hand and pastel sticks.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Step 1: Start with Acrylic Washes

After completing a loose drawing in vine charcoal, I apply washes of ivory white and black acrylic. I prefer to use decorative acrylics like Delta Ceramcoat because of their fluidity and matte finish. I begin my composition by creating big value shapes.



Step 2: Broad Strokes of Pastel

I begin laying in pastel with broad side strokes. The Foamies board covers quickly with little resistance. The gray underpainting jump-starts my painting process. I have a clear idea of where I'm headed and apply many neutral colors of similar value to the large field area of the painting. My style is to exaggerate the colors I see in nature.



Step 3: Touches of Texture

The creek area leading to the lone tree in the field provides an opportunity to add some texture to contrast with the large smooth areas of the painting. The added emphasis reinforces the focal point. (See Details 1 and 2 on next page).





Detail 1: I stir up a mixture of aluminum oxide grit and olive green acrylic and apply the mixture with a stiff brush and a palette knife. As I work I keep the rhythm of the vegetation in mind.



Detail 2: Using a small liner brush dipped in water, I work into the pastel in the foreground grasses. The liner makes long graceful strokes that add detail and contrast with the pastel strokes.



Step 4: Finishing *Bloom Along the Creek* (mixed media, 30x38)

In a large composition each area needs something to interest the viewer. Detail in the creek area is critical in leading the eye into the background landscape. The ironweeds growing in the right foreground push the viewer's eye diagonally into the creek and toward the focal point. In landscape painting it's essential to keep aerial perspective in mind. Objects in the distance are less distinct and cooler in temperature. Accordingly, I exaggerate the blue and purple tones in the distant mountains and blend the strokes more there than in the warmer foreground.