

THE POWER OF UNDERPAINTING

By Kit Bell

OUTLINE

- My Artistic Journey
- What do I use Underpainting for?
- Demonstration

- I have always used an underpainting in my work but how I use it and what place it holds in my process has changed radically over the years.
- I am going to tell you a bit about my artistic journey to put this in perspective.
- Then I am going to share with you how my underpainting allows me to get a vibrant and expressive start to my work.
- And, of course, I am going to demonstrate some of my favourite techniques for you.

MY BACKGROUND

- Painting on and off all my life
- Attended the Ottawa School of Art
- Work primarily in acrylic but also in
 - Watercolour
 - Pastel
 - Graphite
 - Gouache and Ink Resist

- Although I work primarily in acrylic, I feel that my previous experience with oil painting and my use of other media has greatly influenced my art. Trying out different media and techniques adds to the pool of information that feeds your creativity.

MY ARTISTIC JOURNEY

- Happy to reproduce the scene



I view creating art as a journey rather than a destination and each artwork is just a step on the journey. My work has progressed through many phases and is continuing to develop and change.

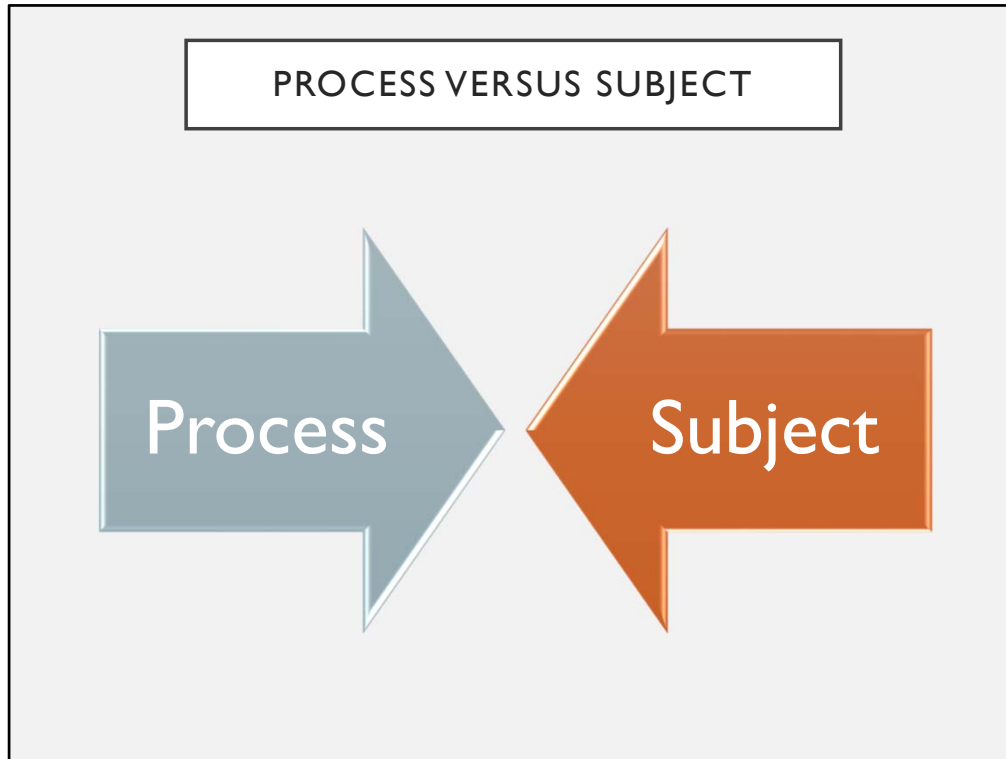
For many years, I was happy if the painting resembled the subject.

OPEN ROAD



I have always started a painting with an underpainting of local colour, using thin paint to cover the canvas, get rid of the white, provide a strong structure and establish the values. It was a first pass with not much detail. I used to call it a “tea stain”. After the underpainting, I would build up the thickness of the paint, refining and adding detail.

Then I began to experiment with composition, colour, mark making and the use of transparent versus opaque paint.



Gradually the process of painting and creating became more important to me than the subject of the painting. I wanted to enjoy the act of creation. I started to choose subject matter that would allow me to experiment with specific techniques.

It became important to me to recreate the feeling invoked by being there at the actual place rather than to accurately reproduce the subject.

PALISADE OF COLOUR



I started to explore more in the underpainting phase. I started to work without the safety net of a good reference photo, using, instead, an impression remembered – perhaps reinforced with a few images of the area where I got my inspiration. For example, this glimpse of a group of trees with the sky showing through.

I found that this allowed me to get more to the feeling of the place rather than an “accurate” representation of it. It allowed me to disconnect from the photo reference and instead use it as a point of departure.

PALISADE OF COLOUR



And I found I was having fun! Taking an idea and running with it unleashed my creativity. And this was mainly occurring in the **underpainting stage**.

INTO THE UNKNOWN



Welcome to my world!

I see things not as they are but as they could be. For example:

While wandering around in the woods, I got an idea for a painting. In my mind I was seeing swirls of autumn leaves with a strong sense of the vertical trunks, patterns and vibrant colours. Although my idea did not really resemble the area, I took a photo to remind myself.

INTO THE UNKNOWN



I used the underpainting stage of the process to put down warm and cool colours in the design and value pattern that I had thought of.

Big brushes, limited colours, lots of medium to thin out the paint and let it flow around the canvas.

INTO THE UNKNOWN



Working from the underpainting and not the reference photograph, I built up additional layers. I used

- Transparent glazes to deepen and enrich colour
- Opaque, negative painting to add depth in the forest and sky
- Opaque, positive painting to add highlights to the trees and foliage

INTO THE UNKNOWN



As I am working on the image, I will either go back to a photo of the original underpainting or to the thumbnail sketch that I did. That will tell me more than the reference photo; it will tell me the feeling that I had when I stood there and what it was about the design that got me excited.

I use the reference photo for information about trunk texture, branches and leaf patterns.

INTO THE UNKNOWN



Every painting you do is built on all the ones that come before. Allow your imagination to take you to where you need to go.

UNDERPAINTING FOR EXPRESSION

- A way of “getting looser”
- Vibrant colour
- Spontaneous “happenings”
- Visual depth and rich texture

- A reference photo will often be used as a leaping off point but my goal is not to recreate it
- I want to start with vibrant colour – I can always tone it down with glazes later
- I want to create things in the underpainting that cannot be painted directly – the “happenings”
- The underpainting will serve to provide a path for the painting to develop

TECHNIQUES

- Apply Paint
 - Large Brushes 1" or 2"
 - Lots of medium (with a bit of water)
- Move Paint
 - Catalyst wedges
 - Spatulas

I use large wash brushes (1 or 2 inch)

I use a lot of medium (gloss medium with a bit of water to help the flow or glazing medium if I want more time to work with the underpainting), using more medium where I want the value to be lighter.

I like the catalyst wedge tools and Colorshapers to push the colour around and to make marks in the wet paint.

TECHNIQUES

- Remove Paint
 - Scraping
 - Damp brush
 - Rags
- Texture with water
 - Holbein Watercolour Spray bottle
 - Splatter with brush

I use a variety of tools to scrape marks into the wet paint. I will also use a damp brush or a rag to remove paint.

I particularly enjoy creating texture by using water. I use water sprayed from the Holbein Watercolour spray bottle for fine marks or splatted on with a brush for larger marks. Removing the water after the surrounding paint has “set” gives you some very interesting textures.

Once this is done, I allow the paint to dry and look for interesting things that have “happened”.

I will often build up the paint thinly by doing another layer or so using the same techniques.

THE PROCESS



Here I used Quinacridone Gold, Yellow Oxide, Transparent Red Iron Oxide, Dioxazine purple and WN Sap Green.

I used water both sprayed from the Holbein Watercolour spray bottle for fine marks or splatted on with a wet brush for larger marks – swinging the brush in a direction that will work with the design. I scrapped some branches and stalks with a color shaper. Once the paint has “set up” or dried around the water droplets, I run a dry, soft brush over the area or pat the area with a rag. This removes the paint under the water droplets. You have to practice to get the timing right.

I will look at the resulting marks and start to see weeds, twigs and leaves created by the texture.

THE PROCESS



Once I have a direction created by the underpainting, I start to build depth and pattern, using mostly negative transparent painting. I use the Stabilo ALL pencils to “find” some of the leaf shapes. I am not concerned with the smoothness of my brushwork. The “messiness” of my brushwork will offer shapes of underlying foliage for the next layer. I continued to scrape and spritz and wipe.

Often, what happens accidentally or indirectly will be far more beautiful than something that is created intentionally or directly. Many of the marks I create in this way would be impossible to create directly with a brush.

THE PROCESS



I wanted a more interesting surface, particularly in the background areas, so I collaged some torn up tissue paper to those areas. I let the paper wrinkle while applying it to create some random texture. I also added some molding paste with my finger where the weed heads will be.

Then I continued to add more negative transparent paint to create more shapes and darken some areas.

THE PROCESS



I added some opaque white and some transparent white to make some changes and to lighten some of the foliage – refining the shapes of the lighter values.

THE PROCESS



I am working with the notan and darkening areas with glazes. I am creating yet another layer of foliage in the background as I go darker still in the shadows.

THE PROCESS



I add colour to the leaves and glaze some areas. I introduce the blue violet part of the colour scheme.

THE PROCESS



I start painting detail on the leaves plus add another layer in the darks. The blue violet is starting to bother me. I make some decisions about how to integrate it.

THE PROCESS



This is the finished painting. I glazed some of the leaves with the blue violet, integrating that colour in a subtle way. I have added detail to the leaves and weeds and balanced the composition.

BRIGHT SPOTS



Example of another painting created in this way.

TURNING



Example of another painting created in this way.

This one also features collage papers.

CREATING INTERESTING BACKGROUNDS



These underpainting techniques may also be used to create an interesting background for objects. Leaving the background less specific, to me, makes it more interesting and open to the viewer's interpretation.

DEMONSTRATION