THE POWER OF THE UNDERPAINTING

By Kit Bell

Agenda

- Purposes of Underpainting
- Types of Underpainting
- Underpaintings for Expression
- Demonstrations

Purposes of Underpainting

- Provide a strong structure for your painting
- Establish the values
- Tone the paper or canvas
- If the underpainting isn't working, it is unlikely your painting will

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- The most important purpose for your underpainting is to establish the structure of the composition.
- Establishing the correct values will allow you to continue your painting knowing that the values will work
- Working on white paper or canvas can be difficult, so an underpainting will help to "get rid of the white"
- Most importantly, it lets you evaluate the composition at the very early stages of the painting. Making sure it works here will save you a lot of time and frustration in the later stages.

Types of Underpainting

- Monochromatic – Grisaille
  - Focuses primarily on establishing values
- Local Colour
  - Basically a first pass
  - Keep the shapes simple
  - Leave details to subsequent layers
- Complimentary Colour
  - Provides colour interest in the final painting

- The monochromatic underpainting, where the values are established in one colour, has been used for centuries. Many of the Renaissance masters used a Grisaille – a grey scale underpainting. Once this had dried, they glazed it in many layers with thin colour.
- Using local colour is a favourite amongst artists. Once the major shapes are in place, subsequent layers can build depth and texture.
- Complementary colour underpainting can add a sparkle to the finished painting when allowed to peek through the subsequent layers.
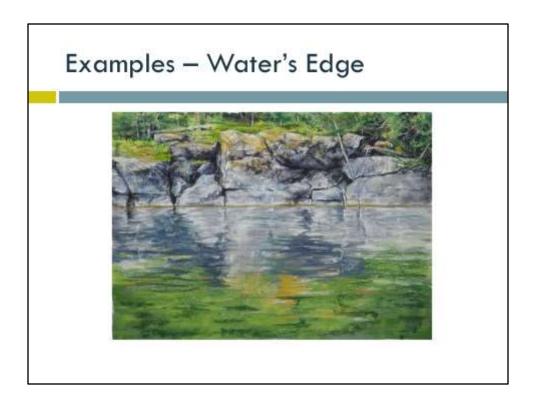
Underpainting in Pastel

- What do you paint pastels on?
- White paper?
- Coloured papers?
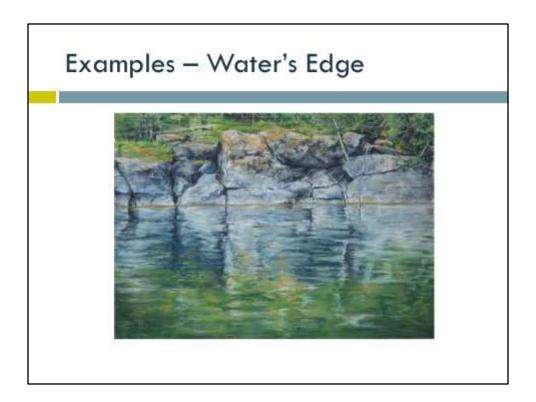- Colour the paper yourself to suit painting!

- What you choose to paint your pastel on is sometimes a tough decision.
- White paper doesn't show the vibrancy of pastel
- Coloured paper may be good for one area of the painting but not for another.
- Underpainting on white paper with watercolour allows you to make each part of the paper the right colour for that part of the image
- Underpainting on coloured paper with harder pastel established the structure of the painting without losing the cohesiveness of the coloured ground.
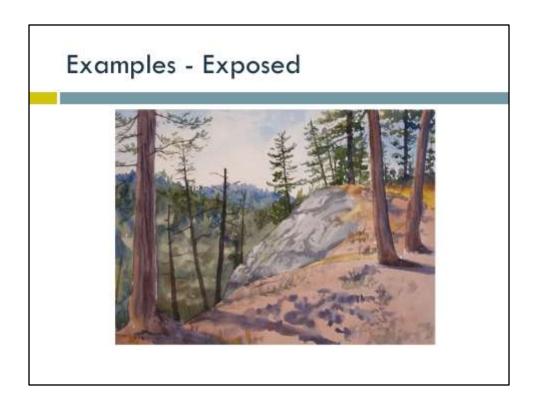
Examples – Water's Edge

I started this painting with a loose watercolour. I dry brushed in the orangey lichen on the rocks and established the value structure in the rocks, water and background.

Examples – Water's Edge

This is after I had started adding pastel. Pastel is a great medium to get texture. A lot of the original underpainting survives.
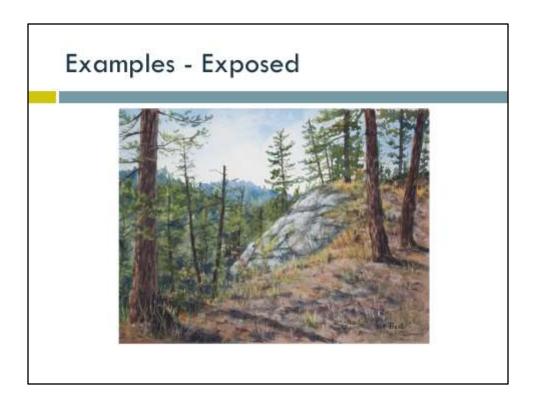
Examples – Water's Edge

This is the final painting. The reflections have been developed further but the background and the rocks are basically the same.

As I continued to work with watercolour underpaintings, I found myself "finishing" more of the painting with the watercolour. The result is a mixed media painting.

Here the upper half of the painting has been completed in the watercolour phase. The watercolour serves as an underpainting in the lower half of the picture.

Examples - Exposed

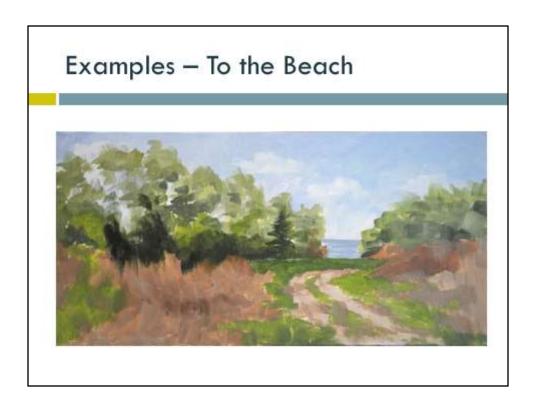Watercolour is a great medium for soft effects such as skies and hazy background trees.

Pastel is a great tool for developing texture in rocks and foreground elements.

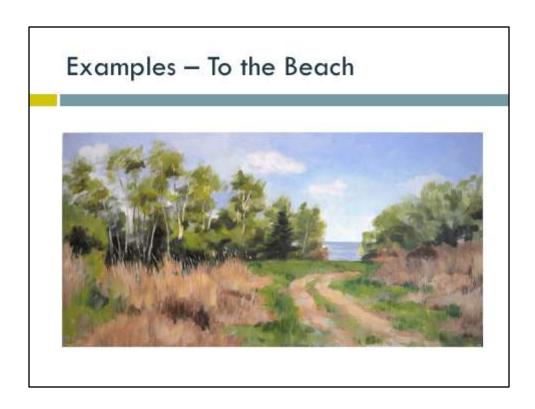They work very beautifully together.

Underpainting in Acrylics

- Gets rid of the white
- Established structure and values
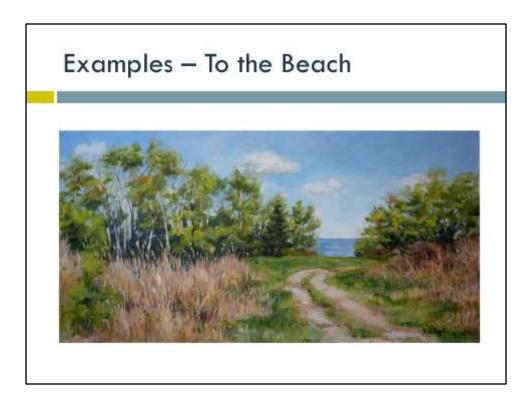- Allows subsequent layers to develop depth and texture

- The white speck problem
- Quick way to establish the composition
- Following layers can be thick or thin, glazed or scumbled – allows many techniques for building up texture.
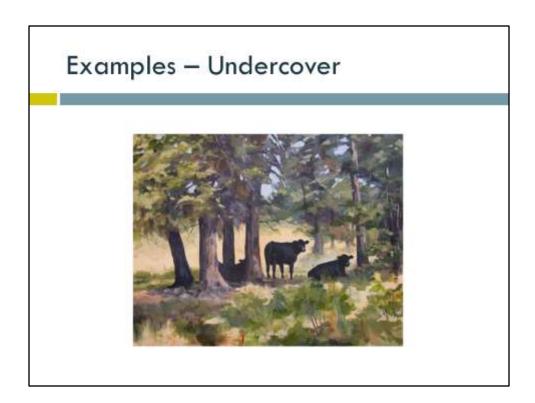
Examples – To the Beach

In this first pass, I established the values and the larger shapes. It also gave me a base layer to build texture.

Examples – To the Beach
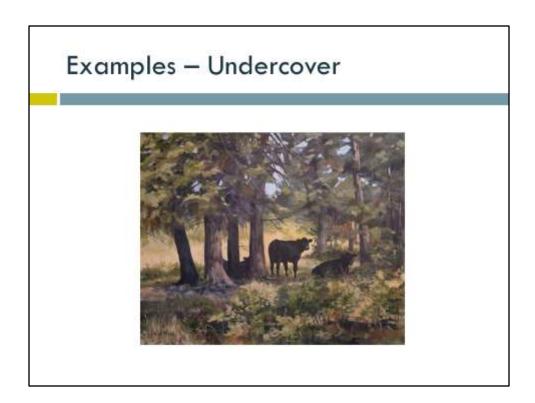
I continued to add layers, pushing and pulling areas of the painting, building depth and texture

Examples – To the Beach

The final painting is very close to the original painting in terms of values and structure.

Examples – Undercover

With this underpainting, the important thing to me was establishing the value pattern – to make sure that would work.

Examples — Undercover

In the finished painting, I adjusted the value behind the cow lying down to ensure the focus was on the standing cow.

Underpainting for Expression

- A way of "getting looser"
- Moving away from the reference material
- Establishing a mood or colour scheme
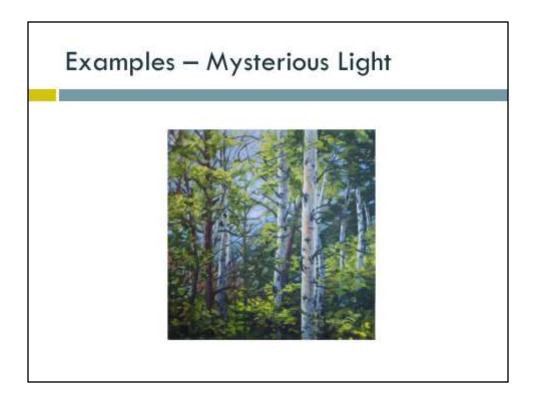- The painting takes on a life of its own

- Sometimes a reference photo can be used as a leaping off point
- The underpainting can help establish a mood or colour scheme that the reference photo lacks
- You can then respond to the underpainting and develop the image with little or no support from the photograph

Examples – Mysterious Light

Using a reference photo showing a stand of trees with light coming through them, I started by putting down warm and cool colours in the value pattern that was suggested by the photograph.
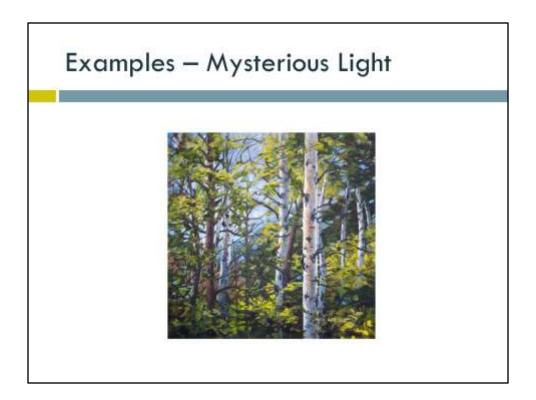
Using negative painting, I built up a network of branches and colour. I evaluated it for some time at this stage.

Examples – Mysterious Light

I decided to add another trunk to balance the composition and adjusted some of the others. I continued to build up depth. I referred to a photo of the original underpainting to keep true to my original value plan.

At this stage the painting was almost finished but it lacked a clear focal point.

Examples – Mysterious Light

I clarified the focal point on the left by increasing the contrast using negative painting to lighten the background.

References

- MASTERING COMPOSITION: Techniques and Principles to Dramatically Improve Your Painting by Ian Roberts
- A Painter's Guide to Design and Composition by Margot Schulzke
- Carlson's Guide to Landscape Painting by John F. Carlson
- Wetcanvas.com