Negative Painting

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Agenda

Positive versus Negative Painting

My Artistic Journey

How I Use Negative Painting

Demonstration

Positive versus Negative

Positive Painting:
- ◦ The leaves of the bushes in the foreground.
- ◦ Painted overtop the background.

Negative Painting:
- ◦ The trees in the background
- ◦ Green underpainting
- ◦ The mountain was painted negatively to make the individual trees stand out.

My Background

Painting on and off all my life

Attended the Ottawa School of Art for 2 years

Work primarily in acrylic but also in
- Watercolour
- Pastel
- Graphite
- Mixed media

My Artistic Journey

Initially just 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.

Initially I was just happy if the painting resembled the actual scene or photo and if someone said "That looks just like a photograph", I took it as a compliment.

Over time, I got pickier about my subject matter. I worked with reality to improve the composition. I tinkered with design. If someone said "that looks just like a photo", I would say "oh, its much better than the photo!"

Experimenting with Colour

I also started to experiment with colour. I started working with predetermined colour schemes rather than the "actual" colour. I discovered I really liked triadic colour schemes and split complementary. I wanted to use colour to invoke mood.

Experimented with Marks

I started to experiment with more expressive brushwork – using all parts of the flat brush to add its own character. I use flat brushes almost exclusively – using the belly, the corner and the edge. I began to understand that what I was doing with my brush wasn't just painting, it was **making marks**.

I had heard that in workshops and artist's talks – making marks. But, literally, one day when I was painting, I caught myself thinking "… and now another mark here". And I sat up and said out loud, "I'm making marks!" Fortunately, I was alone at the time.

Transparent Versus Opaque

As I moved further away from "accuracy" and more toward "creativity", I started to play with transparent passages in my paintings. I wanted to allow the transparent underpainting I use to play a larger role in the finished work.

Process Versus Subject
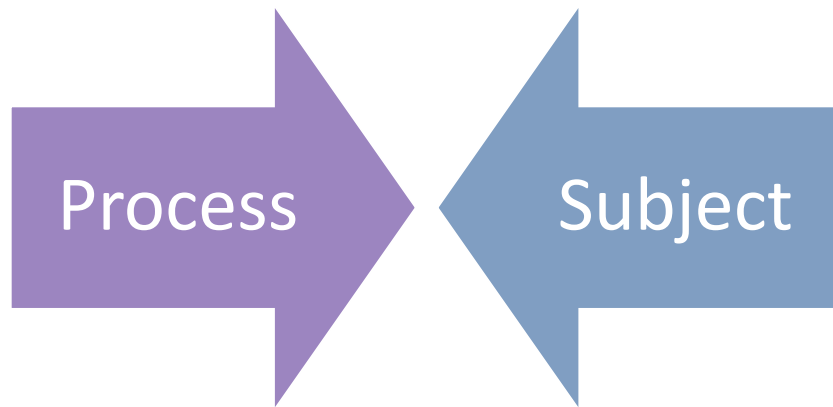
Gradually the **process** of painting and creating became as important or more important to me than the **subject** of the painting.

And I came around full circle back to the actual place but instead of working to accurately represent it, it became more important to me to accurately recreate the feeling invoked by **being there**.

Negative Painting

Discovered negative painting

Focus more on shapes – both positive and negative

Improves composition

Very meditative – "the zone"

Somewhere along this journey, I discovered the beauty of negative painting.

I found how concentrating on the negative shapes gave me more control over the design and composition.

I found that painting negatively put me into a different mental state – the right brain effect – into the **zone**.

What is Negative Painting?

Negative painting is the creation of an object by painting the background behind the object rather than by painting the object itself.

This is an experiment I did to explore just how far I could take negative painting. It was done on a cradled panel – not a surface I normally work on but one I wanted to try.

What is Negative Painting?

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I started with an underpainting and then deepened the colour of the underpainting.

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My next layer was to negatively paint the area behind the trees to make them "emerge". I painted on either side of thin shapes that became branches.

What is Negative Painting?

Negative painting is the creation of an object by painting the background behind the object rather than by painting the object itself.

In the final layer of this experiment, I added some brighter, lighter colours in the background and used some positive painting in the foreground to imply grasses.

This experiment is fairly extreme in that the underpainting was all tree colour.
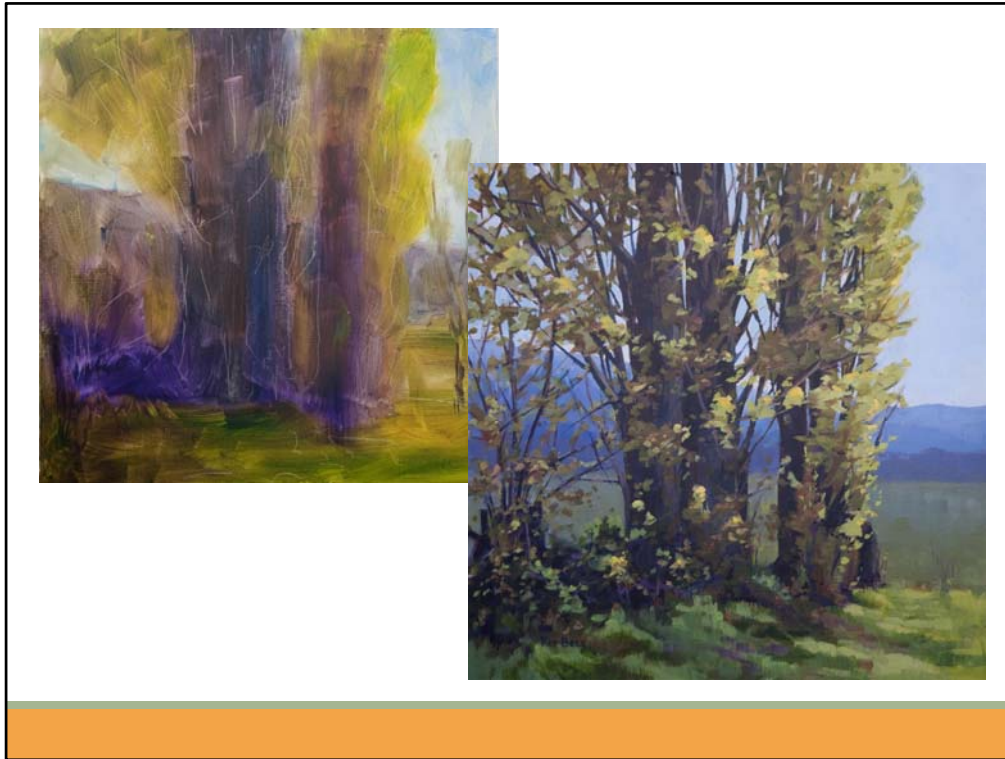
This is more typically how I start a painting and how I incorporate negative painting into my work:

I love to start with an underpainting that suggests the subject loosely in colours that are more clear than the final work will contain. Underpaintings also get me started with a specific colour scheme. This painting uses a triadic colour scheme of blue violet, red orange (muted) and yellow green. At this point it is easy to evaluate composition and how the major shapes will work.

After the underpainting dries, I carve out the "sky holes" in the upper half of the painting using a large flat brush and negative painting.
I like to work back and forth between negative painting and positive painting.
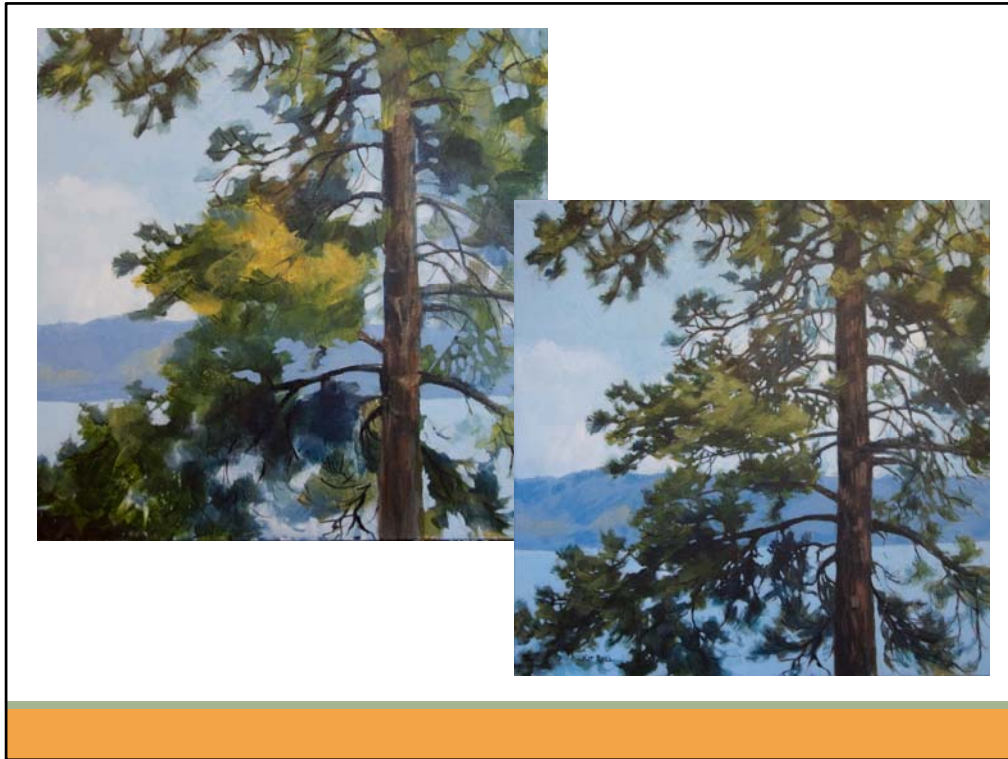
It is hard to suggest the airiness of a pine tree. It easy for the tree to become heavy. In this painting, "Reaching Out", all the lacy small branches were painted negatively.
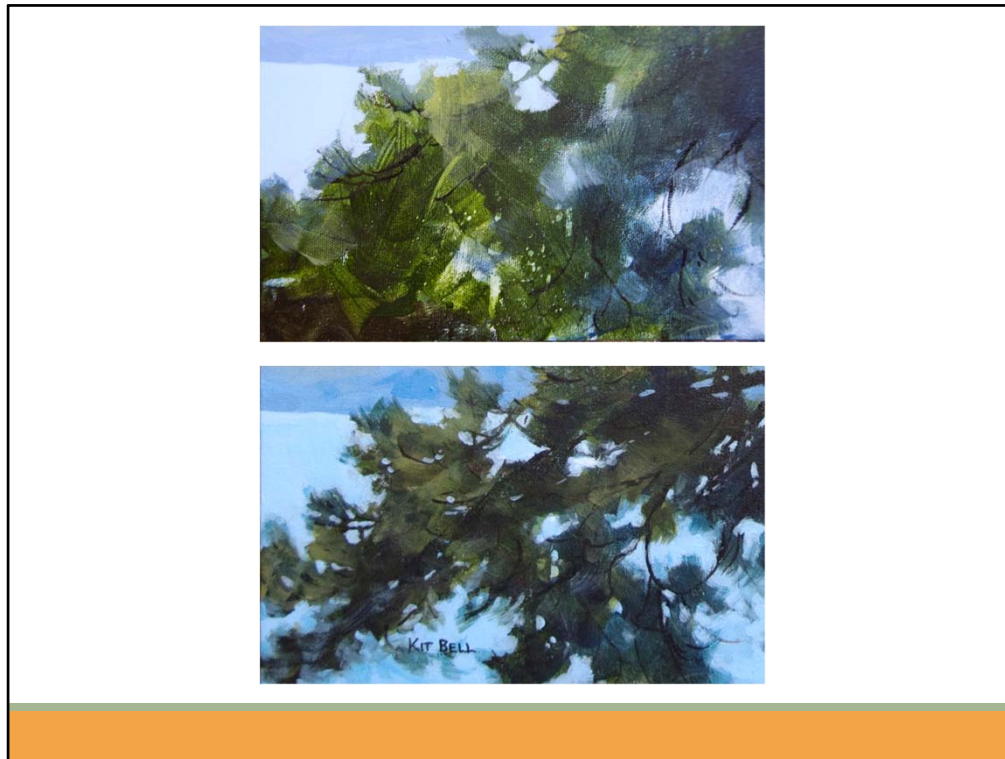
Detail of "Reaching Out" showing the lower left corner of the painting in the underpainting stage and in the finished painting.
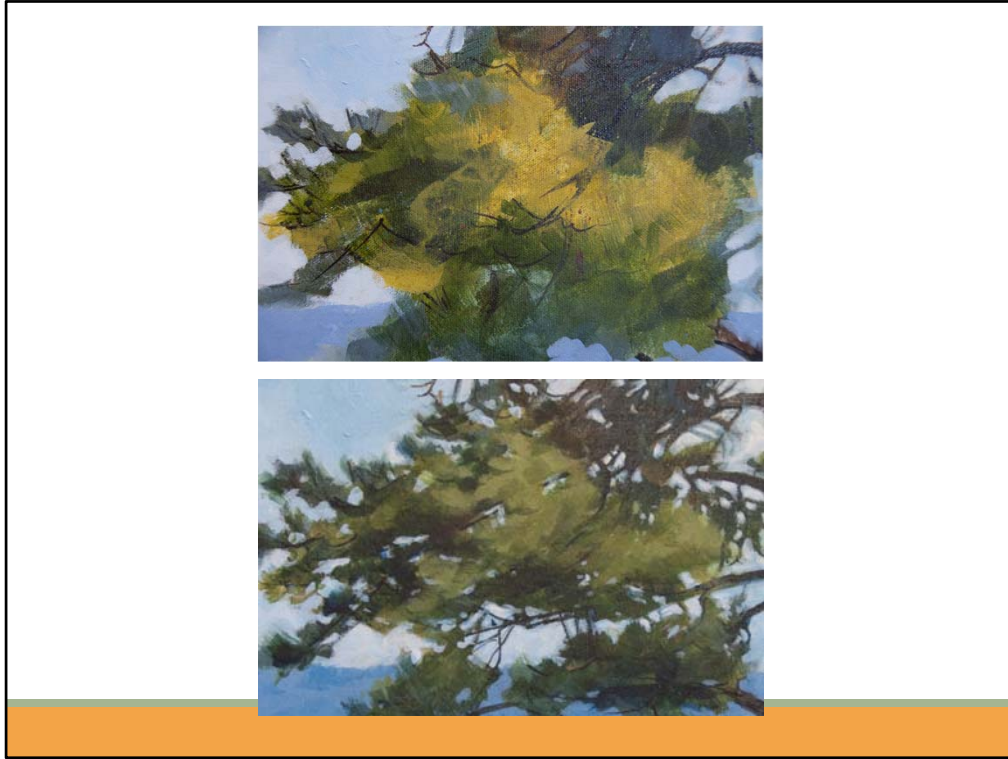
Detail of "Reaching Out" showing the middle left of the painting in the underpainting stage and in the finished painting.

Searching

Search for subject matter

Found vegetation

I began to search for subject matter that would allow me to experiment further with negative painting and particularly the use of transparent paint.

I started to experiment with vegetation, initially as a larger part of a landscape painting, then as the whole painting

I found that the possibilities for negative painting were endless!
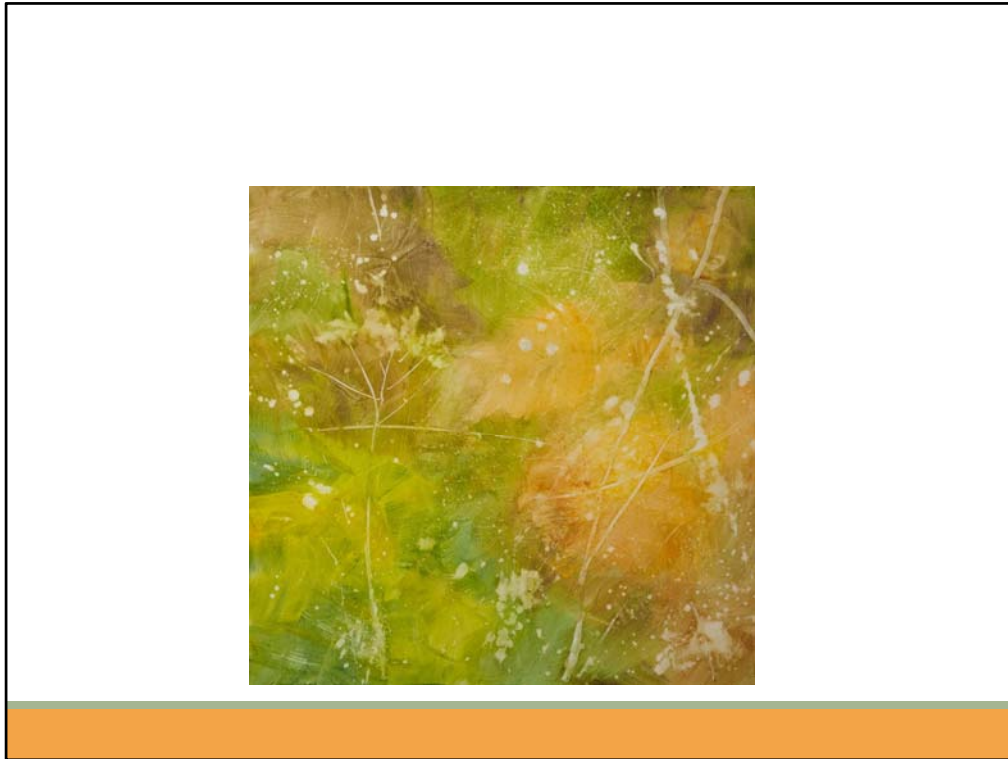
Here I used Quinacridone Gold, Yellow Oxide, Transparent Red Iron Oxide, Dioxazine purple and WN Sap Green.

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.
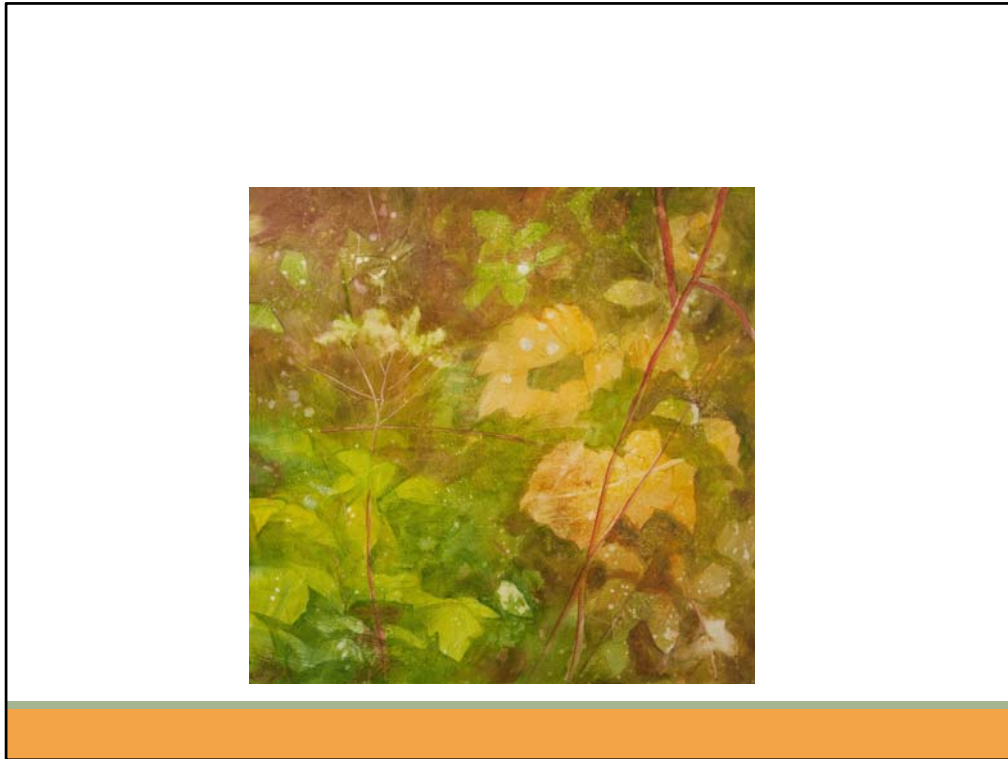
Once I have a direction created by the underpainting, I start to build depth and pattern, using mostly negative transparent painting. I use the Stabilo ALL pencils to "find" some of the leaf shapes. I am not concerned with the smoothness of my brushwork. The "messiness" of my brushwork will offer shapes 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.
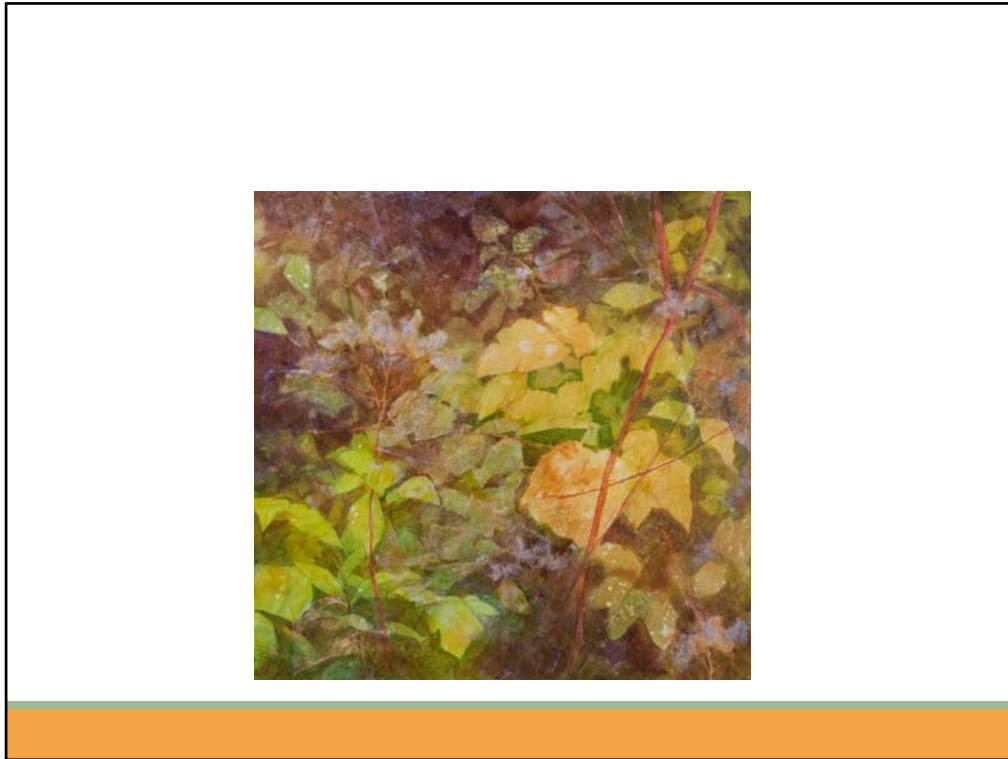
I wanted a more interesting surface, particularly in the background areas, so I collaged some torn up tissue paper to those areas. I let the paper wrinkle while applying it to create some random texture. I also added some molding paste with my finger where the weed heads will be.

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

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.

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.

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

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.

Intimate:

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.

Artistic Vision:

"Into the Unknown":

It was not about what was there – it was about what I saw and what I saw it could be. It captured my attention and my imagination.

Artistic Vision:

The underpainting was about motion and rhythm – about swirls of colour and strong stable verticals. The colour scheme was orange, blue-green and blue-violet – a split complementary colour scheme. It seemed to fit the mood of the place I had been.

Artistic Vision:

I started to paint the light through the trees with negative, opaque paint. I added some more paint to the foreground trees.

Artistic Vision:

More layers of negative paint continue to build depth in the background – each layer indicating another layer of trees in the distance.

Artistic Vision:

I continue to develop the painting by working back and forth between negatively painting the background – each layer getting progressively lighter and giving a sense of depth and distance to the forest - and positive painting in the foreground, getting brighter and adding rhythm.

So this sums up my current artistic practice – combining colour, composition, negative and positive to create paintings that represent unique spaces.

References

Simplifying Design & Color for Artists by Linda Kemp

MASTERING COMPOSITION: Techniques and Principles to Dramatically Improve Your Painting by Ian Roberts