

# Negative Painting

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# Agenda

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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 ocean was painted negatively to make the individual trees stand out.



# My Background

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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 – specifically Ink Resist

# My Artistic Journey

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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.

## Composition

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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

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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.

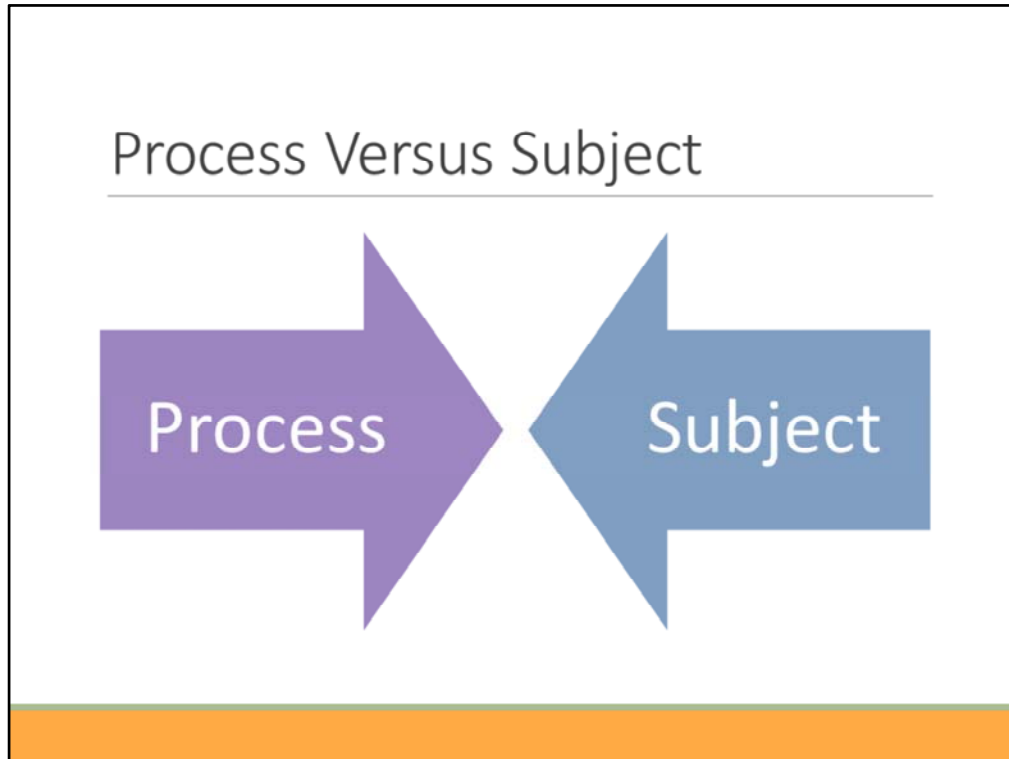


## Transparent Versus Opaque

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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.



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

Then 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

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Discovered negative painting

Focus more on shapes – both positive and negative

Aids in establishing a mood or colour scheme

The painting takes on a life of its own

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?

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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.

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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?

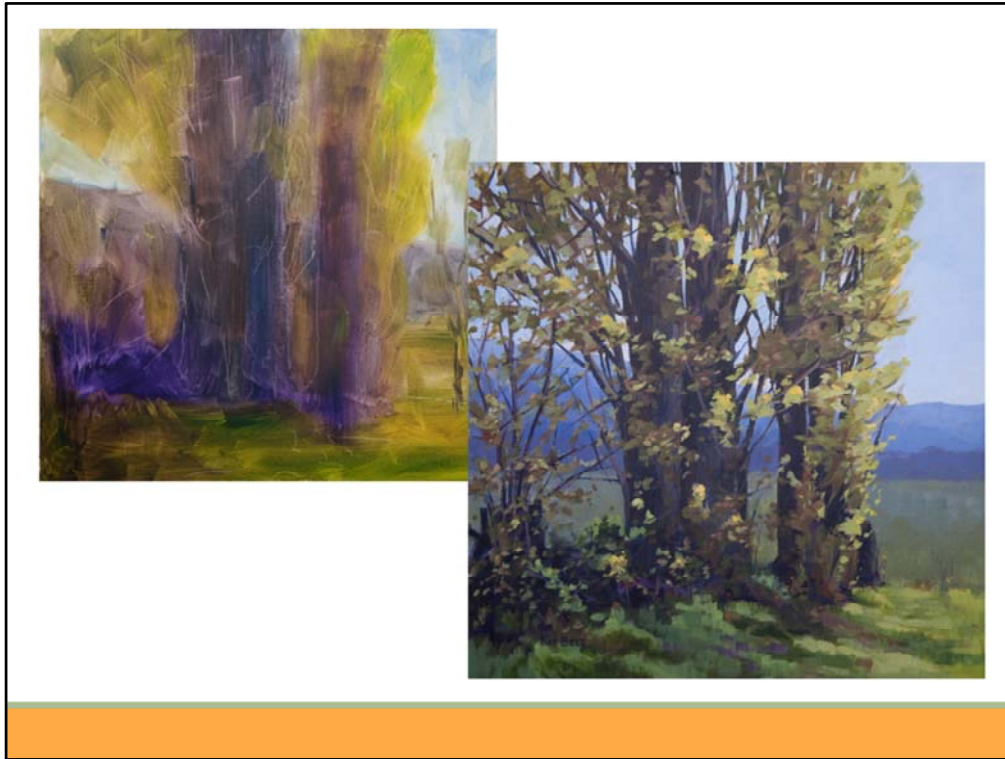
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Negative painting is the creation of an object by painting the background behind the object rather than by painting the object itself.



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.

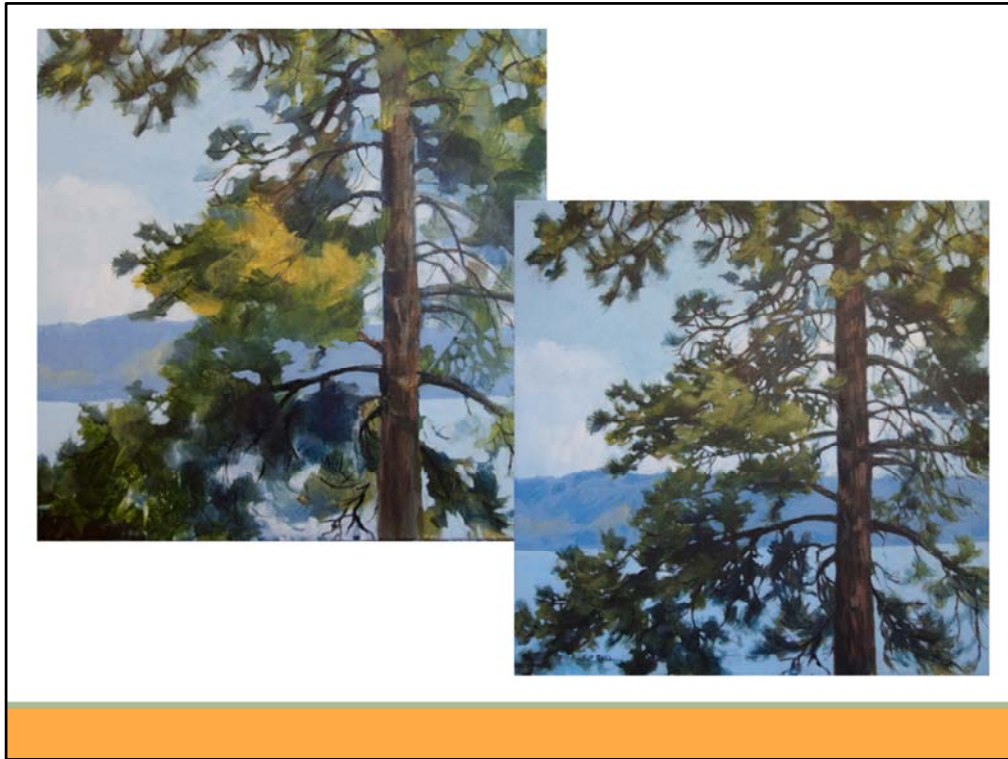
I like to work back and forth between negative painting and positive painting.



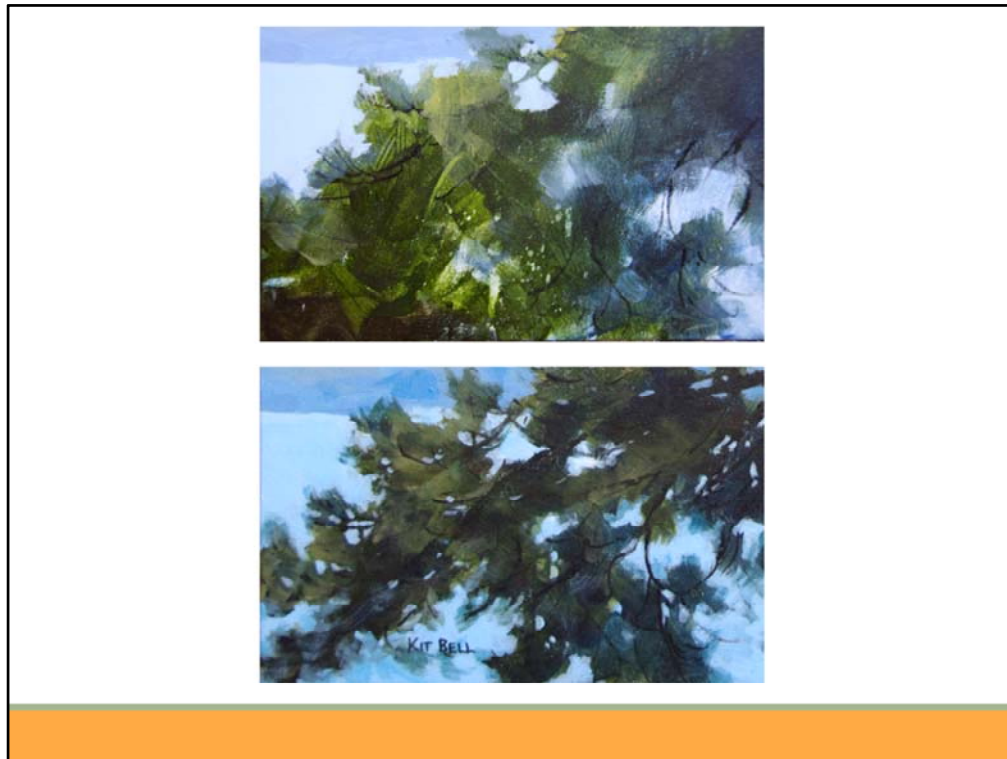


For this painting, I used a reference photo showing a stand of trees with light coming through them. I started by putting down warm and cool colours in the value pattern that was suggested by the photograph.

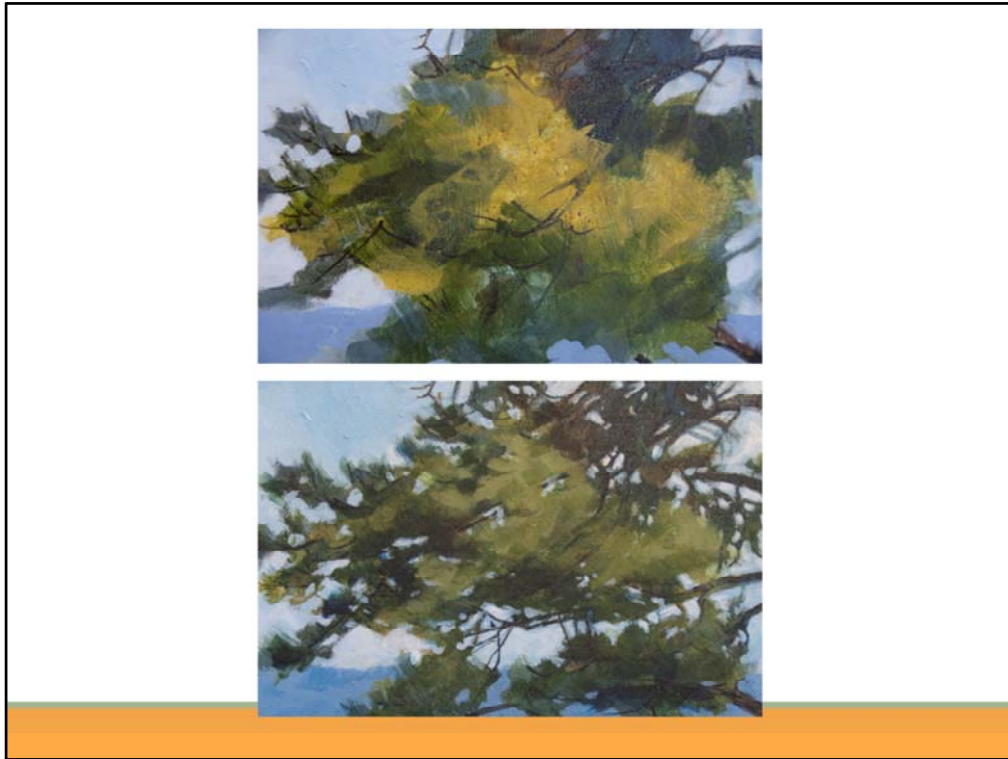
I built up the background by painting lighter and lighter as I moved into the distance. I built up the foreground with brighter and warmer paint.



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.

## Negative Space

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Negative painting has made me more aware of negative space. This in turn has helped me develop my design skills and improve composition.

Although there is no negative painting in this picture, the negative spaces of bright green are key in its design.

## Adjusting My Thinking

Losing the transparent painting

Glazing – Darker

Opaque – Heavy

Veil - Lighten

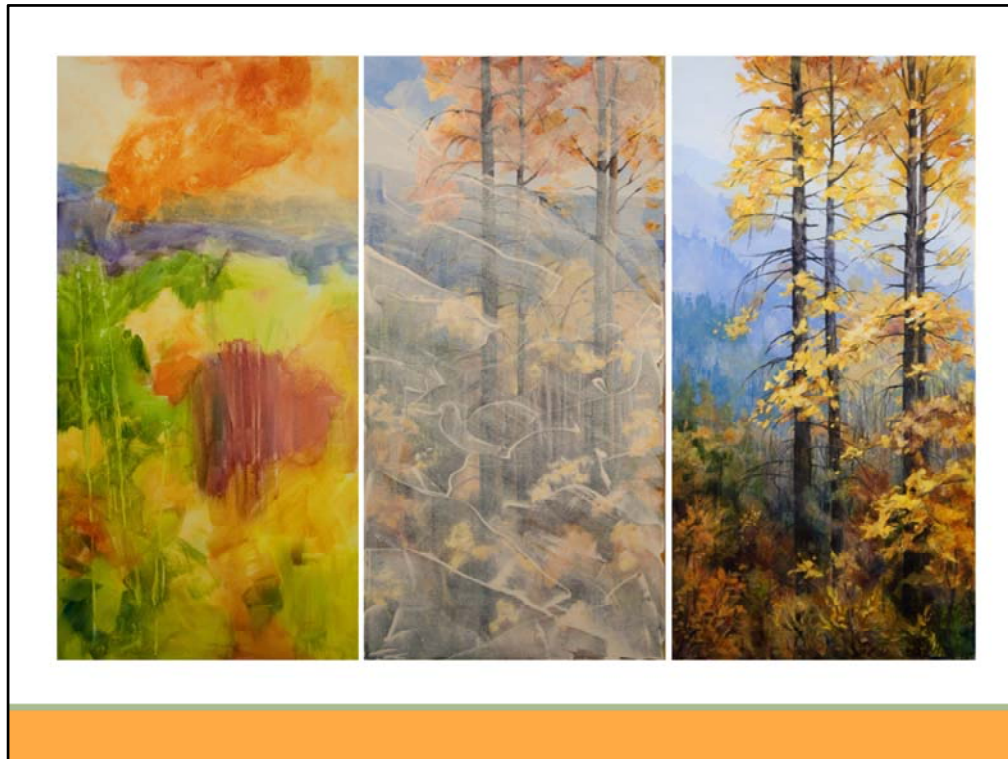


Along my journey I found that I was losing too much of the transparent part of my painting. A lot of the negative painting is with glazing (which makes the area darker) or with opaque paint (to make the area lighter). (A glaze is a thin mixture of transparent paint and gloss medium.)

But when an area becomes too dark, is opaque paint the only way to lighten it?

I started to use a veil to lighten a section or even the whole painting. (A veil is a thin mixture of opaque paint – often titanium white – and gloss medium.) Once it was lightened, I could use transparent painting to add the colour I required to the area.

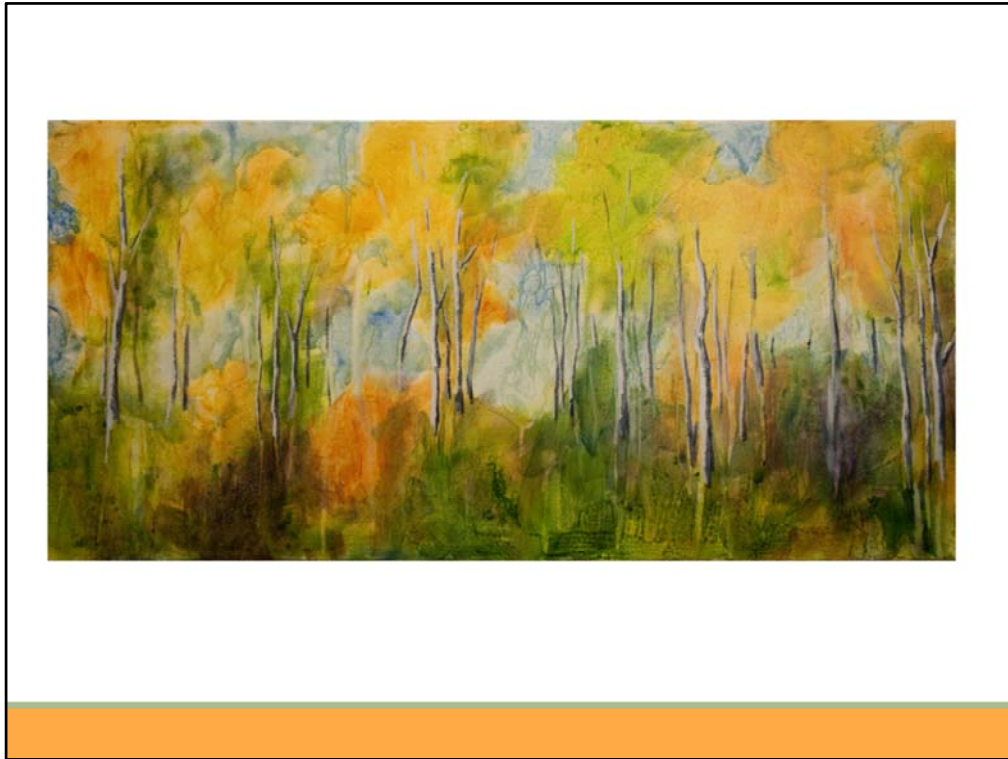




“Twilight Years”: After working out this composition in a thumbnail sketch, I started with my usual fairly bright, transparent underpainting. But as I continued to work for some time on the piece, it got darker and heavier and I lost that sense of atmosphere I was looking for.

So I mixed up a “veil” – titanium white, a hint of yellow ochre and gloss medium. I took the Catalyst wedge and wiped it on. I had a new direction in mind for the background mountains so I used that for the direction of the strokes.

After it dried, I continued on, reminding myself “atmosphere, atmosphere”. I used negative painting both transparently (glazing to enrich and darken behind the foreground) and opaquely in the background. I also used positive painting in the foliage.



“Palisade of Colour”. It started as a glimpse of trees lining up on the top of a ridge. The underpainting established colour and value but left me questioning how I was going to pull it together.





I photographed the underpainting, printed it off and put tracing paper over it. I established both the crucial negative shapes of the sky areas and the direction of the light on that little piece of tracing paper.

With that as my guide, I was able to pull the painting together.



The strong negative shapes of the sky behind the trees combined with the rhythm of the trunks and the direction of the light pulled this painting together.



I used negative painting, positive painting, glazes and veils to create this painting.

## 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 developed 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, transparent and opaque to create paintings that represent unique spaces.

## References

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Simplifying Design & Color for Artists by Linda Kemp

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