

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 year.
- 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.

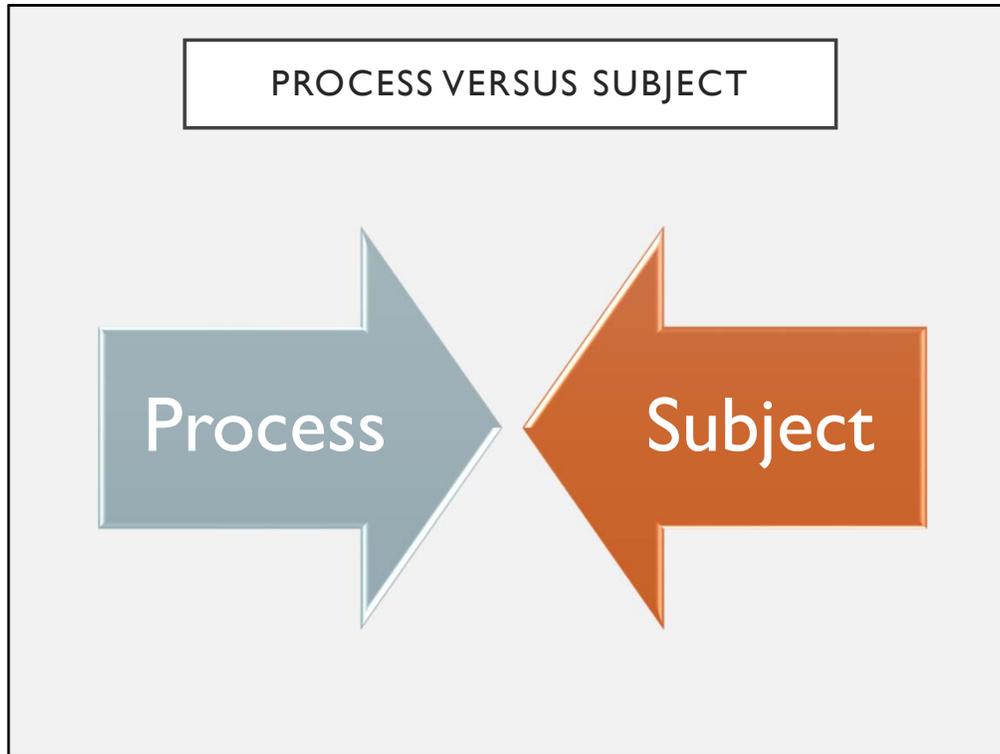
For many years, I was happy if the painting resembled the subject.

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 as important or 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.

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.

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 be.

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.

SNOWBERRY SWIRL



Here I used quinacridone gold, transparent red iron oxide, quinacridone magenta, 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. Once the paint has “set up” or dried around the water droplets, I will run a dry, soft brush over the area or pat the area with a paper towel. 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 blades of grass, twigs and leaves created by the texture.

SNOWBERRY SWIRL



Once I have a direction created by the underpainting, I start to build depth and pattern, using both negative transparent painting and positive opaque painting. 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 this way would be impossible to create directly with a brush.

SNOWBERRY SWIRL



At one point in the process, I felt the top right corner had gone astray. It felt overworked and out of place in the rest of the painting.

So I covered it with a mixture of Titanium white and gesso.

Once that had dried, I applied a new “underpainting” to that area, using the same colours and methods I used in the original underpainting.

SNOWBERRY SWIRL



As I built up a few more layers, it blended in with the rest of the painting.

Here I have added more transparent, negative painting as well as some opaque, positive painting of the leaves and berries.

SNOWBERRY SWIRL



You can see some changes in the upper right corner as I went darker -

SNOWBERRY SWIRL



- then lighter.

Corrections are easy to make. If an area gets too dark, lighten it. If it gets too large, trim it down. Make whatever corrections you require.

SNOWBERRY SWIRL

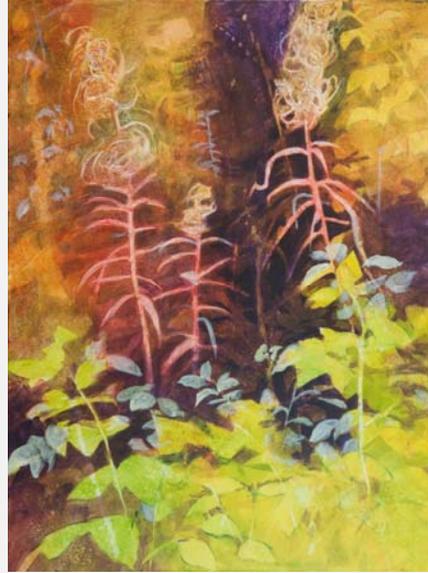


... and its done.

So how do you know when it is done?

As Suzanne Northcott once told me: “when nothing bugs you”.

FIRE DANCERS



“Fire Dancers” – This painting was inspired by a patch of snowberries up against some fireweed in the autumn. The initial underpainting followed a value pattern that I had come up with – the “abstract” within the representational image.

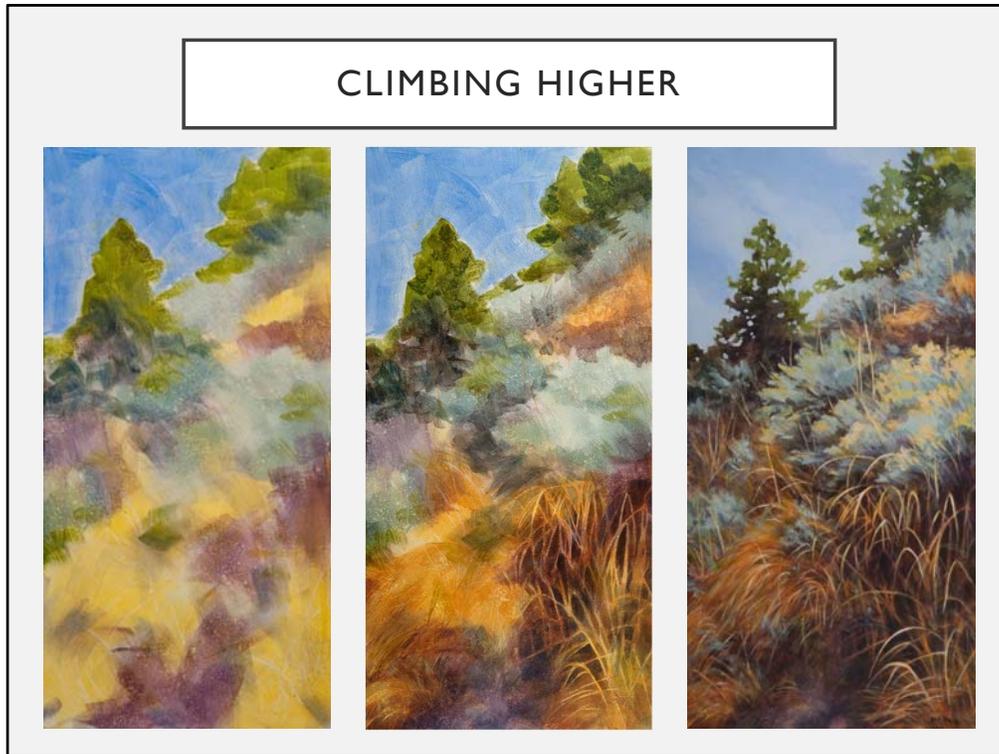
I painted, scraped, sprayed and splattered as I was working on the underpainting. I put on a couple of layers this way, enriching the texture and deepening the colour.

My next stage was to reclaim some of the snowberry leaves from the dark passages. I used Titanium white and medium for this. Where I needed a lighter value, I used more white. Once the light values were retrieved, I went back to glazing colour, and to negative painting to bring out the leaf shapes. The snowberries were painting with white and then modeled.

FIRE DANCERS



“Fire Dancers” – Here is the final painting



When applying this underpainting, I was focusing on the diagonals that form the composition. Large brushes ensure that I don't worry about details – just getting the large shapes and blocks of colour. I used Ultramarine Blue, Dioxazine Purple, WN Sap Green and Quinacridone Gold. A second layer of paint built up some more texture and deepened the colour.

I painted the sky – which created the trees on the ridge. Then I built up the grasses and sage with layers of transparent and opaque paint. The initial colours and shapes from the underpainting form the road map which I followed to find the finish of this painting.

DEMONSTRATION