



Sunburst, 18×12in. (45.7×30.3cm)

LIQUID WATERCOLOUR

American artist *Stephen Blackburn* describes his technique of pouring colours, allowing them to mix on the paper

MATERIALS

Winsor & Newton Artists' Watercolours
 Watercolour board or 300lb (640) HP watercolour paper
 Spray bottle
 Containers with lids (eg baby food jars, Tupperware)
 Plenty of paper towels and tissues
 Masking fluid
 Brushes: 1in. flat; ¾in. flat; No.10 round; No. 6 round

I have always been fascinated by the flow of a watercolour wash, whether it is a glaze of pure colour or a wet-in-wet mix of different pigments. It is this interest that led me to a more experimental approach in my work, and now most of my paintings incorporate some poured washes that help me tap into my creative side. Pouring pigments is a great way to keep colours pure, although it does take some planning to achieve the right effect.

The trick is to make sure your poured colours mix in just the right way, and still allow for some surprises on the paper. As a watercolourist I've always found it a good idea to let the colours mix on the paper and not in the palette, but this can be dangerous in pouring paint if you're not careful. Some painters address this problem by using the same colours to pour at the beginning stages of a painting (usually the staining, more transparent pigments) and turn to the more opaque colours later with the brush. This allows for better control of the colour mixing. However, when I started pouring I wanted to really let loose and experiment, so I decided that I would not be restricted to a rigid formula of pigments, but would try to develop a system that would let me use any

colours that I wanted to. Eventually I developed a system that works for me.

I use an enamel butcher's tray palette, and squeeze out the colours for my painting on to it after doing colour studies to determine which colours I will be using. My colour studies show me how the colours will look together and, more importantly, how they will mix when poured. I try to stay mostly with analogous colours on each painting, with one or two complementary colours. Working primarily from photographs, I concentrate on close-focus subjects such as florals, still lifes, leaves and rocks. That allows me to concentrate on the shapes after I've poured the brighter colours.

Once I have thought carefully about my colour mixes, the pouring is lots of fun. I mix together three or four pure colours by squirting paint into a small plastic container and spraying the resulting mix with water from a spray bottle. The proper consistency for the pouring solution is similar to skimmed milk. Be sure to not get the mix too heavy with pigment, especially with the staining colours. The surface I use is either HP watercolour board or 300lb (640gsm) watercolour paper taped to a lightweight drawing board.

Masking fluid

After sketching my composition, I prepare the surface using masking fluid. This is poured on the dry surface in a small puddle and then I move it around by touching the edge of the fluid with sprayed water and guiding it around the rectangle to create movement in the painting. I am always careful to avoid spraying the water into the middle of the puddle of masking fluid, because this will create a real mess.

I tilt and turn the paper so that I can bring the masking fluid towards me with water from the spray bottle. I try to achieve a spidery patchwork with the masking fluid, usually in a diagonal movement that begins at the focal point and branches out from there. The masking fluid will be removed later, to reveal a pattern of protected whites.

After the masking fluid has dried, I begin pouring the



Kelp Forest, 12×18in. (30.3×45.7cm)



colours. At first I limit my colour palette to one or two analogous colours. When pouring the paint, the paper is wetted first in a specific area, the excess colour poured off into a separate container, and then one colour is poured into the moist area. I have always loved the play of colours in a wet-in-wet mixture, so I add

another poured colour before the first one has dried. Then I tilt the paper to let the colours mingle on the paper.

Sometimes I add a third colour to the poured mix, but I am careful to not add too many colours as the mix may get muddy. I use water from the spray bottle to move the colours around if needed and I



▲ Poinsettia, 12×12in. (30.3×30.3cm)

◀ "We'll Get 'em Next Time", 14×10in. (35.5×25.3cm)

pour off the excess colour into a water dish or mop up the puddles of colour where they run into the dried masking fluid. The secret to using the spray bottle at this stage is to turn the paper and 'pull' the colour towards you by creating a river that the colour flows through. If at all possible, avoid pushing the pigment away,

since this tends to dilute the colour and make a mess.

Focal point

I usually begin with the brightest colours in the focal point area, and branch out from there. I may do three or

Sunflowers, 20×30in. (50.7×76cm)

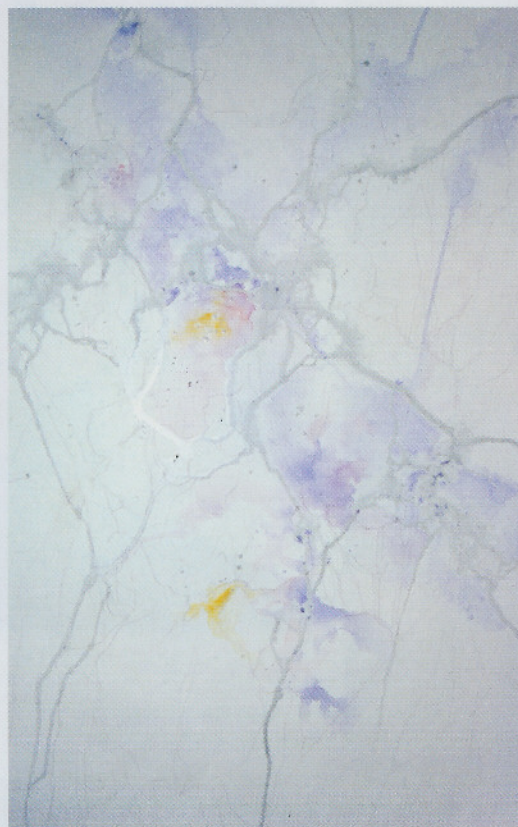


four different pours, or as many as ten, before removing the mask. I let each session dry well before pouring again. It is sometimes hard to determine when to remove the mask, but once I get some bright colours on the painting and cover most of the rectangle it is probably time to remove it.

Then it's a matter of tightening up the drawing and deciding about the next step. I have learnt to not go overboard on my initial drawing, since most of the pencil lines disappear when I remove the mask. For this reason I never do more than a quick sketch at first to get down my basic shapes and relationships. After I have made sure all the masking fluid is lifted, I spend time on the drawing, often moving items and changing the composition to suit the results of the pouring. This technique is supposed to be creative and experimental!

Once the piece is redrawn I add some more poured colours, applying more colour to some areas and setting back some parts of the painting, especially areas left white by the masking fluid. I pour more colour to brighten up areas, perhaps around the focal point, and then darker, often greyed-down colours are poured into other areas to make them recede. I stay with the same colour family in each area, so if I began with warm red tones, I would pour the same colours later in that area. The more I depart from this way of thinking the more the area will be greyed down.

At some point I begin the brushwork, which varies with each painting. Sometimes I begin it before I have finished all the pouring, especially on a larger painting. This process can actually be easier to do with a larger painting, because on a smaller painting the poured colour can take over the piece fast, whereas on a large painting I can work on other parts of the piece while some of the poured areas are drying. I apply colour with a brush directly from the pouring containers to keep colours from getting muddy, although the diluted mixtures will not get really dark. I begin by brushing on colours in any large areas that may need it, and then swing into the negative painting. This is where the fun really begins for me!



STEP ONE



STEP TWO

“Dark passages are applied with a brush”

STEP THREE

Negative painting

With negative painting the colours that were first applied, especially the bright, poured colours, will become the objects in front, such as a flower or an apple. All the darker passages are painted 'behind' the poured colours. It is important to think about these objects as shapes, not things, in order to paint an exciting piece.

At this point I look at my



Stephen Blackburn

is a watercolourist from Mishawaka, Indiana, USA. He has a degree in architectural engineering, and worked in the construction industry as a draughtsman. He has been painting professionally for almost 20 years, the last eight as a fulltime artist, and his work has been exhibited in many national and regional exhibitions, including the Kentucky Watercolour Society and the Louisiana Watercolour Society. His website address is www.learnwatercolors.com.



FINISHED PAINTING *Iris*, 30×20in. (76×50.5cm)

working the entire painting from light to dark, but I feel that completely developing an area gives me a visual grasp of my entire tonal value scale and keeps the painting from becoming too dark.

Then I finish the rest of painting by brushing round the shapes with clean colour, until I've fully developed all the areas. I work on several paintings at one time, and often leave a painting and come back to take another look before I decide it is finished.

This method of painting has allowed me to loosen up and really let the colour flow. It has also helped me break out of the mould of being too concerned with how every passage is going to turn out. By letting things happen on their own, I am able to stretch my limitations. Careful planning on a painting, with sketches, colour studies and tonal value studies, also helps me paint freely once the pouring process begins. A successful watercolour still takes planning, whether you pour or brush the paint on. □

Tulips, 10×23in. (25.3×58.3cm)

composition and decide what is in front and what is behind. I usually try for a strong tonal value contrast in my paintings for impact, and all the dark passages are applied with a brush after the poured colours have dried. I work from light to dark to develop depth in different areas of the painting, and then at some point finish one particular area, usually around the focal point. This is a departure from the typical watercolour procedure of

