Color vs. Value

Week 6
Local Color vs. Arbitrary Color

We've been focusing on **value contrasts and color contrasts** in this class, and both of those can be used to create dominance.

Dominance contributes to overall unity by ordering, in a heirarchal way, all the components in a work of art. As the artist, you must decide which elements in your painting will be the "stars" and which will be the supporting cast, taking subordinate roles. Depending on your intent, you will organize these elements differently, but the dominance will be created

In this violet/yellow color scheme, I used size, shape and strong value contrasts to create a dominant area.

through use of contrasts. These contrasts include line, size, shape, color, value, movement/direction, position/placement, texture, and rhythm/repetition/pattern.

Sometimes dominance creates a focal point, and sometimes it is used as a unifying force, particularly in the case of very complex images. In the painting at the left, I unified the piece with an overall texture, then manipulated color intensities and value contrasts to provide a focal area in the cactus flowers.

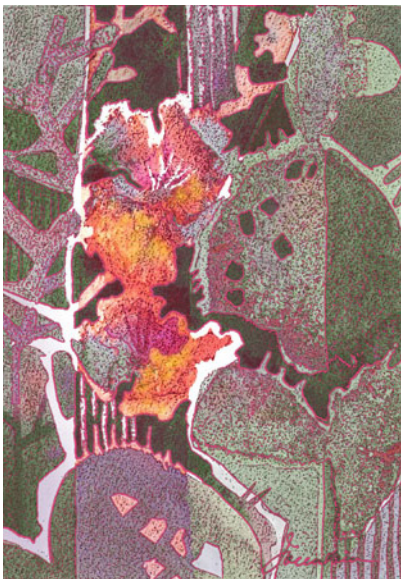We have been focusing on the difference between a value approach to painting and a color approach.

If you are emphasizing a value approach, you will look for ways to get contrasts in values, from a small dark among mostly light values to a small light among mostly dark values. You could have a very "visually complex" painting dominated and unified by an overall light color scheme, or an overall dark one.

If you are emphasizing a color approach to structure your painting, you manipulate your color contrasts. This can range from one area of high intensity pure color surrounded by mostly unsaturated, duller hues, to having a single color dominate the work (a monochromatic painting) or having a single hue unify parts of a painting that have too much color or intensity contrast.

In this watercolor by Carolyn Brady, she uses a variety of reds (even in the greens and blues) to give the work an overall unity.

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When we describe an object, we usually describe it in terms of its local color or hue (a red apple, or a white shirt). And when we go to paint objects, many of us never get beyond painting objects with their local color. There are lots of other choices! Many "colorists" use arbitrary color. Arbitrary color means that the artist paints things according to his or her feelings about the subject, or to convey a specific meaning or mood. Arbitrary colors were often used by Expressionist painters, including Franz Marc and Wassily Kandinsky, and many more contemporary artists followed in their footsteps.

Color doesn't have to be completely arbitrary. It may be the local color, but exaggerated or "pushed". Milton Avery frequently used this "pushed" color in his work, either making his colored shapes either pastel or intensely saturated versions of the local color.

"The Baby", by Milton Avery. In this piece, Avery exaggerates or "pushes" the local color of his subject matter.

Exercise 1:

Work from a black and white photo that contains recognizable objects that have a "given" local color (yellow bananas, for example). Make a painting using arbitrary color instead of the "right" local color(s) of the objects.

Exercise 2:

As you look at the work you are currently doing in watercolor, think in terms of dominance. Could you do something to either your color or your value contrasts to create a dominant area? Could you use a single, dominant color or value to unify an otherwise too busy area? Instead of reworking and existing piece, redo an old painting, making one element (value or color) dominant.

"Red Rock Falls", by Milton Avery. This American colorist painter reduced his subject matter to simple shapes of color that were organized for color interaction -- how one color was affected by what was next to or near it.

While he took his cue from the local color of his subjects, he was never bound by it, freely exaggerating or tinting the colors as he saw fit.