

Content Contrasts

Color and value contrasts are two possibilities for compositional consideration, as are some that are influenced by other artists and art styles. What also needs to be considered is the content of your work, and how what you choose to paint says as much about your "style" as how you paint it.

You will hear teachers/mentors and certainly other artists say to "paint what you know" or "paint your passion" etc. It's good advice. If we are painting our lives, as we are living them, the things we care about will be reflected in our work in some way.



New Moon Rising, watercolor, 15x22
Ellen Fountain, 1974

I have been an environmentalist for most of my adult life. It was interesting to go back and look at some of my work from college, and see that reflected in what I was doing then. The painting above with all its faults (and there are many), at least was acknowledging that no matter where we go, the western landscape has been altered by human beings. It's difficult to get to places where you don't see some evidence of that - power lines, cell phone towers, litter, billboards, signs and so forth.



When our home was being built, I had real moments of angst when the bulldozer began scraping and leveling the area where the house would be. Even though it was making a home for *us*, it was destroying what was home to plants and small burrowing animals.



I took these photos to make a point about the contrast between the natural and the man made.

Some contemporary artists are also working in this same vein. Dale Laitinen says of his work: *"We see the interaction between the manmade and the natural all the time. I seek out subject matter that shows the tension between the present and the past, between the original landscape and man's transformation of it. I suppose my paintings ask questions about the nature of civilization and progress, but I try not to make judgements or suggest answers. For me it's pointless to show the beauty of the landscape without also showing that it's been altered."*



Of this painting (left), Dale says:

"Grand Coulee Dam serves as a backdrop to this portrayal of displacement. I used the white lines of the crosswalk to lead the eye toward the triangles (the teepee, it's top and the shadows) The teepee is actually a sign pointing to a gift shop, but I avoided any reference to actual commerce. I preferred to let the starkness of the scene present the idea of the loss of a homeland. An almost monochromatic color scheme suited the mood, so I limited the color to mostly neutral grays."

Even if you don't want to make a social comment, contrasts in content make interesting and thought-provoking paintings. In his painting, *Pop-Top, Blue Flags, Reflection Pak*, artist Miles G. Batt, Sr. has

used symbolism (the road, the iris, or blue flags), commonalities of substance (metal in the aluminum foil, rear view mirror and pop-top) and surface properties (reflective), as well as shape repetition (the ovals of the iris petals, pop-top and mirror, and the rectangles of the opened up box and corporate seal) to help create a painting that makes us stop and consider the relationship between these seemingly unrelated items.

There is historical precedent for odd juxtapositions in the work of the Surrealists. Rene Magritte (1868-1967) often combined unlikely objects into strange and compelling paintings. *The Oasis*, shown below, is an example. What is a table doing in this barren land, and why are trees growing out of it? The placement of the clouds (some in front of and some behind the trees) create an odd and "out of balance" sense of scale.



Exercise:

Do a new version of one of your existing landscape paintings, and choose one of these approaches:

- (1) place an unlikely object or objects in your landscape
- (2) contrast something natural with something manmade

The latter approach gives you the additional opportunity to contrast geometric with organic shapes/lines, and the former offers the opportunity for narrative and/or metaphor.