

# Watercolor Still Life

## Session 3: Chiaroscuro - Rich Darks and Bright Lights, Lifting and Masking



Michael James, "Bottom Line", watercolor, 28x20 inches. This is a perfect example of a very simple value pattern with strong dark/light contrast.



Lucy Willis, Kitchen Window (detail), watercolor, 26.5 x 20 inches, 1998. Ms. Willis takes full advantage of the translucent and granulating properties of her pigments. Would this generally high key painting make the cut in today's watercolor competitions?

### Dramatic Paintings Need Strong Value Contrasts

We've talked about the trend in watercolor painting today, which has paintings moving toward more saturated color (due to changes in the manufacture of paints), and toward simpler, stronger value patterns (due to jurying of competitive exhibitions by slide or digital image rather than from the actual works). Though I remain a fan of the delicate watercolor that takes advantage of the glazing properties of transparent pigments and the granulating properties of pigments that can activate the thinner wash of color (see Lucy Willis' painting above), I acknowledge that one ought to know how to create stronger paintings if that's their cup of tea.

The paintings shown above left and below both exhibit very strong and generally simple value structures. Both have a dark "U" shape enclosing a lighter area. The U shape is laying on its side in Maczko's painting, and she uses other shapes (clothes, toys, shoes) to break into the light area, and break up the edges of the dark U shape. James does this only at the bottom edge of his light shape with the bouquet of flowers.

### Assignment 1:

Redo an existing painting, or start a new one where your value pattern is based on a U, L or Z. You can use a dark frame with a light center, or reverse. You can turn the letter on its side or at an angle. Think about how to break up the edges in places to make the composition more interesting and control its rhythm as the eye moves through it.



Sharon Maczko, "Mind at Play #1", watercolor, 20 x 30 inches



## Holding onto Whites and Lights

If you want the full range of values from darkest dark to white paper, sometimes that can present a real challenge to keeping the whites and light areas, particularly if they are small complex shapes surrounded by juicy rich darks that need to be painted quickly and just once (not glazed). **Lifting** wet color with a tissue, paper towel or even a thirsty brush is one solution, but you have to remember to do it while the paint is wet. You can also lift some color after the paint has dried by rewetting it with a damp brush, then blotting.

*Shown at right, top to bottom: Lifting wet paint with a crimped tissue or paper towel; Lifting wet paint with a piece of tightly twisted tissue or paper towel; Lifting dry paint by alternately dampening an area with a clean, damp brush, then blotting with a tissue or paper towel - repeating the process will lift more or less color, depending on how staining the pigment is.*

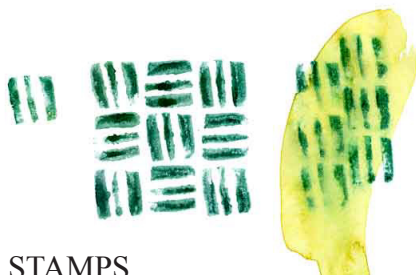


**Masking** is another solution. A mask is any material that can protect unpainted white paper or completely dry painted areas. Masking materials include liquid mask (my favorite is Pebeo Drawing Gum, a gray easily

removable product), clear wax or crayons, self-adhesive tapes, removable clear contact paper, wax paper and stencils. The latter not only mask but because of the openings, allow you to create patterns. I don't always like the starkly defined shapes that liquid masking fluid creates, and often soften the edges after the masking is removed, or paint it with a thin wash of color.

*Shown above, left to right: Liquid masking fluid applied with a brush, allowed to dry, painted over, allowed to dry, then removed, leaving white paper; Rubber cement applied with its own applicator, loosely, allowed to dry, painted over, allowed to dry, then removed, leaving white paper.*

Tapes can also be used to protect whites/lights, although they are limited to straight or torn edged shapes. Clear contact paper or friskit paper is another way to protect much larger areas. Test on your paper - you may have to seal the edges of the contact paper with liquid masking fluid to keep paint from creeping under the edges, particularly if you are using a rough surfaced paper.



STAMPS

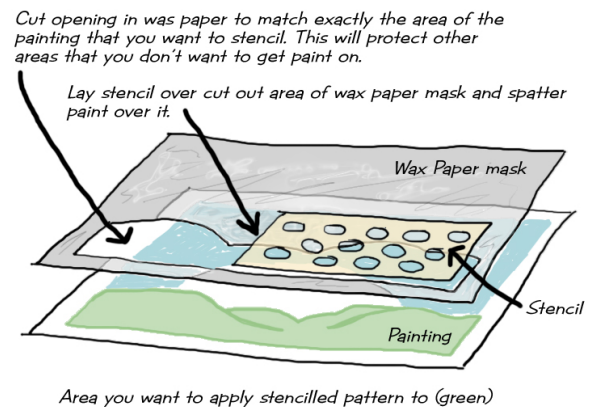


STENCILS

## Patterning

While you can certainly create patterns with a brush, I also like making them with **stencils and stamps**. I have hand-cut hundreds of stencils for use in my work. I've also cut stamps from a pink or white chunky eraser with an x-acto knife. Many of these stamps can create a variety of patterns depending on how you stamp them. Stamping can be done on dry or damp paper; stamping can also be glazed over with another color or clear water when dry, softening the effect of the stamp.

With stencils, you also need wax paper to protect areas of the painting where you don't want the stencil design to appear (or any random splattering from the technique used to apply paint over the stencil openings). I use a soft toothbrush and the handle end of a paintbrush to spatter paint over the stencil openings. If you are using a one-time stencil made from wax paper or other lightweight paper, you may need to weight it down to keep the cut edges in contact with your paper. I use nuts, washers and some old Mexican pesos for this purpose.



Masking

Stamping and Stencilling

Stencilling

Stamping

Masking and Glazing

Stencilling

Masking



*"Threading Through the Patterns", watercolor on paper, 28 x 19 inches, ©Ellen Fountain*

This painting utilizes masking, stencilling and stamping to create the patterns on the fabrics. Washes with some scratching in them while wet create the illusion of individual threads on the spools.

Masked areas: the white thread that loops throughout the painting; the small white stripes in the purple striped fabric; the two needles that extend into the brown wash at the top and the multi-colored batik-like pattern in the black fabric (masking in between successive glazes of color from light to dark).

Stencilled areas: the red pattern on the black/white checked foreground fabric, the pattern on the turquoise fabric, and the the green leaves/stems in the white fabric.

Stamped areas: the flowers on the white fabric and the green pattern on the stripes of the purple fabric.

**Assignment 2:** Do a painting that includes some stencilling, stamping or masking.