

Experimenting and letting go are the keys to Abstract Art

Ali Cockrean is a successful abstract artist. Here she shares her approach to one of the scariest challenges for any traditional painter – learning how to make the transition to abstracted work.

My first attempts at abstract art were a mess. But I was rebelling. Tired of the rigors and disciplines of traditional painting I found that my instincts were to indulge. Indulge in the sensuous qualities of the paint itself and to explore colours and textures. Truthfully, I had no idea where I was going. All I knew was that I had to do something different and break away from the constraints of life study, still life and landscape, so that meant being radical.

For any traditional painter it is a scary thing to do. There you are suddenly faced with a new reality. There's a white canvas in front of you - but no rules. And no visual props to offer focus and direction. It's a guaranteed recipe for a total mind freeze. Too many options, too much space! Panic!

So what's going on? Why is it that so many artists experience the same thing? That sheer raw fear that blocks an artists' progression into the uncertain world of abstraction. True abstract painting is not simply about throwing paint randomly at a canvas. It is about the challenge of accessing feelings and emotions. It takes you into uncharted, unpredictable territory, testing both your visual and emotive responses. When you are used to the careful, deliberate skills of traditional art, parking your inhibitions and exposing your soul to the world is truly daunting.

It is not too great an exaggeration to say it is akin to a spiritual experience as you reach into your subconscious and unconscious mind, reawakening memories or activating responses that you may not even be aware are lurking there.

So where does one start? Well, my conversion began with experimentation, approaching painting like a child, allowing myself the freedom to make marks without any conscious decision making. There were experiments with palette knives, sponges, cling film, wood, anything that might create an interesting effect. Acrylic paints were appealing too, because they offer the flexibility to work thick or thin and the practicality of fast drying times.

Despite the mixed results, the process allowed me to discover new techniques and explore painting in a totally different and uninhibited way. Most importantly, as I progressed I stopped worrying about what other people thought. At that stage I wasn't even trying to produce finished paintings. I was simply breaking down my own barriers. It was the most powerfully liberating thing I have ever done.

This experimental phase is crucial to bridging the gap between the traditional and abstract approach. As you develop your new techniques these naturally trigger ideas about what the marks' shapes and forms mean to you and how you interpret them. The key is not to try too hard. The more relaxed you are, the easier the thoughts will flow. It is not a rapid transformation. It takes time. This is not a process you can rush.

Eventually you will find yourself applying marks in a more thoughtful and planned way. That's when you have started to crack it. Once you are comfortable and relaxed with this approach your inspiration and instincts will dictate how you construct your work. This can come from a whole host of different directions; your emotive responses to people, places or events; films you have seen; books you have read; music you have heard. Take inspiration too, from looking at the work of other abstract artists, both past and present. It's important when you are working alone not to fall in to a cultural vacuum. Your ideas may also come directly from the marks you have made while experimenting. Remember, it is not necessary for you to justify what you produce. I don't always understand where my pictures come from myself and that is part of the magic and mystery.

Abstract painting can offer a genuine freedom and escapism from rules and traditions - an opportunity to liberate your mind and follow a fascinating journey of discovery about who you are and the complexity of your mind. Whether you ultimately decide to share that with the rest of the world is a very personal choice. However, there is no doubt that it will alter your attitude to art forever.

Ali's Tips for Getting Started

1. Paint for yourself, not for others. This will allow you to experiment without the pressure of having to please anyone else.
2. Start with student quality acrylic paint. This will allow you the most flexibility.
3. Experiment, experiment, experiment. Try mark making with different tools including palette knives or household objects such as toothbrushes, pastry brushes, sponges, cling film, tin foil, netting bags, plastic bottle tops etc. The only limitation is your imagination.
4. If you find you get an overwhelming desire to paint a certain way or in a particular colour do it. This is all about following your gut instincts.
5. Don't expect remarkable results immediately. The first paintings you do should be a scramble of new ideas. Refinement comes later.
6. If you feel you are in need of inspiration, try listening to music while you paint. Or take it from emotions you feel to different events, situations or people. Remember a poem or film that is particularly meaningful to you. Or visit a gallery to excite your senses and motivate you.
7. If you are still struggling to know what to paint, wait until you are really angry or upset about something then have a go. Use the paint and canvas as a way of releasing the tension.
8. Choose a time when you aren't going to be interrupted or distracted by other things going on.
9. Give yourself time to let the process develop. Don't try and force it, let things happen naturally.
10. Most importantly let your self go and enjoy the journey. It's your decision where that journey takes you.

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