

WATERCOLOUR

We feature a demonstration, two tutorials and a pictorial from the brush of gifted watercolourist, Chan Dissanayake who was a popular demonstration artist at the Combined Art Societies of Sydney, Art at the Tops workshops held in late May this year

Paint Misty for Me

By Chan Dissanayake

Wet Day at Kingsford Smith, Sydney, watercolour

This painting was declared the Best in Show at the Artists Society of Canberra, 2013 exhibition. It's a challenging and an unusual subject for me. Doing a full sheet painting involving man-made structures and objects involves careful drawing. I was drawn to the reflection of the red Qantas tails on the tarmac. As I didn't have my painting gear that day I was peeping over a security fence to take this photo to only realise a line of police cars had assembled behind me. I guess they suspected me of being a terrorist and I was naïve to think there was no problem taking a photograph. After politely explaining my situation I was set free, but always check with authorities before taking photographs in secured areas, as sadly this is the world we live in now.

Tutorial #1 Streetscape demonstration painting

I'm always searching for subjects that bring out the best qualities in watercolour. On a rainy day the wet streets with their reflections provide me with much inspiration and ample opportunities to utilise watercolour, showing off its magic.

This photo was taken on such a day on Spencer Street, in Melbourne next to Southern Cross Station. It's a difficult and challenging subject. The difficulty mainly lies in the fact that most objects are man-made and sizes and proportions needs to be observed well. However, the main reason for choosing a subject such as this is to teach my students a lesson in linear perspective. After establishing the horizon, we located the vanishing point and drew light convergent lines in pencil to help guide us through the painting.

On a rainy day with heavy atmosphere, the colours become muted with cooler colours receding and warmer colours coming forward. After analysing the reference photograph, we made the following observations to simplify the subject.



Reference photo: Southern Cross station, Spencer Street, Melbourne

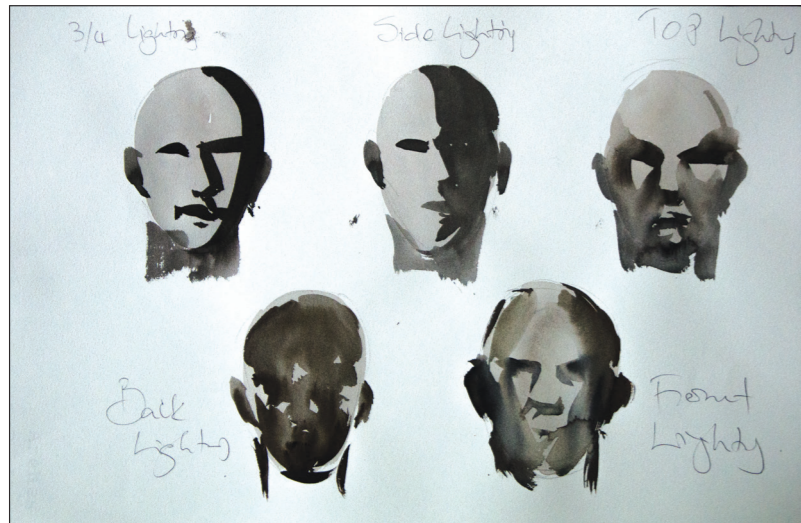
The reflections were put in wet-into-wet, with my board rested at a steep angle so that gravity pulls the paint down. The buildings were fused into a larger shape by joining the edges of the surrounding buildings with lost and found edges. Overall, it's a pleasing result; we simplified the subject but still managed to capture the essence of the place.

- Firstly, it was agreed that the portrait format would best suit this subject.
- The roof line of Southern Cross Station on the top left was an important and interesting shape. The darkness under the roof adds tonal depth by pushing the building back into the background. However the roofline has interesting patterns exposing the sky and this attracts too much attention towards the edge of the painting. We decided to simplify this and paint it as a large, dark shape.
- Similarly, on the top right a patch of sky is exposed on top of the yellow building. This also distracts the viewer's eye from leading into the lighter sky area towards the middle of the painting. To overcome this we decided to raise the yellow building slightly higher so the exposure of the sky in this area is kept to a minimum.
- We decided to simplify the arrangement of the cars and added a few figures to make the painting more interesting. It was important to place the cars in such a way to show their reflections, with smaller cars receding into the background.
- A few red tail lights and traffic lights were dabbed to add more interest and life to the painting.
- It was equally important to observe the negative shapes created by the positive shapes i.e. the sky area created by the shapes of the buildings.
- A two way street, was simplified to a one way street to keep the details to a minimum.



**Wet Streetscape in Melbourne,
(opposite right)**

Tutorial #2 Capturing the gesture of the figure in watercolour



These are some examples of 3 to 5 minute studies of the gesture of the figure in watercolour. They are done only using brushes with no outlined pencil lines. Capture the essence of the figure as quickly as possible. It's important to use a combination of cool and warm colours and to leave the white of the paper for the lightest tones. It's amazing how sometimes these quick studies will have more energy and freshness than more planned, longer paintings.

Still Morning in Uriarra ACT, watercolour, 53 x 72cm, (opposite top)

This was one of the paintings from my last exhibition "Mistique", where the theme was mist and mystery. The silhouettes of the background trees created by the pre-dawn light were done using the wet-into-wet technique. The darker and more prominent trees were added to create depth into the painting. Again, I was careful not to over-work these foreground trees as it would attract too much attention. When painting subjects looking into the light the details are suppressed and the silhouettes of their shapes are exposed.



Boats in Mist, Moruya, watercolour, 25 x 34cm, (opposite bottom)

Boats and mist must be two of the most favourite subjects of watercolourists. I visited the country town of Moruya in the south coast of NSW. This subject presented itself after a foggy day. As the sun broke through, the layers of fog began to lift and revealed this beautiful subject. I did a quick sketch on the spot and it was enough to produce this back in the studio.



my art in the making

Water Lillies



Reference photos

The composition was created from these two reference photos to make the subject more interesting.

The main reference photo was taken in the historic city of "Anurada Pura" in Sri Lanka, the country where I was born. The photo was taken early morning before sunrise; the water was still and calm and the colours were muted, setting the stage for this appealing subject. I often get up in the early morning in search of subjects such as this; before the hustle and bustle of daily life begins you can finish off a painting without attracting an audience. Even the wind and flies are still asleep!



STAGE 1

Drawing

I drew the subject lightly using a 2B pencil. After establishing the horizon, I indicated the placement of the biggest shapes; namely, the background tree lines, and the waterlilies as a mass. No details are necessary but perspective and proportions has to be observed. I use these as guides only, and take freedom with paint to change them later.

Design Decisions

A good design is paramount to the success of a painting. It's very rare that you get a subject that is perfect for a painting. Often, it involves decisions to exclude or include objects, ruthless simplifications and re-arrangement of shapes within the subject. Yet I believe it's important to capture the mood of the place that attracted you to it in the first place. The following decisions were discussed and explained to the class at the CASS workshop for this particular subject.

- The main reference photo lacks an interesting foreground; hence we decided to include a clump of water lilies from another reference photo. By including these it adds to the visual balance and interest, and also introduces a darker tonal range to the painting, adding depth. These shapes also connect and guide your eye into the painting.
- Another important decision was to make the sky slightly darker than the water; to stop the eye leading out of the painting. My main interest was the calm, still water and its reflections, so the lightest area of the painting is the water near the horizon.
- The middle and background trees meet at an ugly tangent line at the bottom or base of the trees. We decided to lower the middle ground trees to overcome this problem.
- The horizon was strategically placed above halfway, as the water was our main area of interest and less of the sky.
- In the photograph, the mass of trees in the middle-ground meets halfway, cutting the painting into two equal halves. It was decided to shorten the length of this to fix this design flaw.
- The background tree lines in the photo were too dark, so we decided to tonally lighten these and make them slightly cooler to push them into the background.
- A flat wash for the sky and a graded wash for the water were identified as initial washes.

It was very important to take as much time as we needed to make these decisions, as famously quoted by American watercolourist Edgar Whitney: "Plan like a turtle and paint like a rabbit". The reason why is planning is analytical and methodical involving the left side of the brain whereas the painting process should take over the creative right side of the brain. I feel it's important to keep the two processes separate.

STAGE 2

Flat wash for the sky

I generally start from the background with the lightest washes. In this case a neutral flat wash was laid for the sky. A conscious effort was made to make the sky slightly darker than the water, so tonally this is slightly darker, but also be mindful that watercolour dries lighter!



STAGE 3

Graded wash for the water

Whilst allowing the sky wash to dry, I started the graded wash of the water. Leaving a small dry line and not touching the previous sky wash, I started with a very light wash of almost clean water and gradually increased tone by reducing the water content and adding more pigment. This is a critical wash; using a large squirrel hair mop brush I worked from left to right, touching the previous stroke as I continued with the next brush stroke. As I had fixed my board at a slight angle, say 30 degrees, gravity does all the work for me. In this painting we are actually seeing the sky through the water, so I added cooler blues and darker tones as I neared the foreground water. It takes years of practice to lay a good graded wash and this creates instant depth in the painting. I allowed this to dry thoroughly.



STAGE 4

Soft background trees

The next phase of the painting was the time to put in the background tree lines. In order to get soft edges, I re-wet the sky area with clean water and waited till the sheen of the paper disappeared.

Then I quickly laid in the tree line in the background. I made sure to break them up by adding a slightly taller mass of trees here and there, just to add interest. The colour used here is not important, as long as it's a muted cooler blue.





STAGE 5

Background trees - reflections

The background tree reflections were put in by re-wetting the edge just below the tree line with clean water and I used the same mixture of colours as the trees, only adding a bit more water to make it tonally slightly lighter. It's important to observe the similar pattern of the trees, with slightly taller trees reflecting longer. But remember this is the background, so keep the details to the minimum!



STAGE 6

Middle-ground trees

The middle ground trees were put in next. In the photograph these look too dark, hence we made a conscious decision to make them lighter. But tonally, they have to be darker than the background tree line.



STAGE 7

Middle-ground tree reflections

Before laying the reflections of the middle-ground trees, I re-wet the bottom area with clean water and waited till the paper was damp! This is to get some soft edges. If the reflections were put in at the wet stage they would spread too far down, resulting in uncontrolled edges. I'm also mindful that the reflection must not dominate the trees themselves, so I used a slightly lighter tone mixture of the trees used previously and laid in the wash quickly over the damp paper. As I had fixed my board at an angle, I allowed gravity to pull down the paint and create an impression of the reflections. It's very important not to fiddle too much here!

STAGE 8

Creating wind patterns on the water

I allowed the reflections to settle, but while the paper is still damp, it gives me the perfect opportunity to create some patterns or lines of wind on the water. Sometimes little bursts of wind create these patterns on the water; although not present in this photograph it is a great way to break up the large reflection shapes. I get a damp brush and drag the brush across the reflection and over the dry paper. This lifts the paint over the damp area of the reflection, creating a lighter line and the paint that's collected on the brush will create a slightly darker line on the dry water area. Technically this is called counter-change, but done well it gives the water and the reflections a much more convincing look.



STAGE 9

Adding the water lilies

Now the stage is set for painting the water lilies. There are few things to note here:

- It would be a grave error to paint each leaf and lily as individual shapes. Instead we must look at the overall pattern and paint them as a mass, adding a few details later to make it look convincing.
- We must be mindful that the shapes of the lilies obey laws of perspective. As evident in the reference photo, when the lily clumps recede into the distance they become more linear and horizontal. Also the clumps in the foreground take on more vertical shapes. The scattering of these shapes is equally important. Larger clumps next to small and directional changes have to be observed carefully. Also the clumps must not conform to any regular geometric shapes.
- The patterns can be used to cleverly lead the viewer's eye into the painting. But more importantly, the later clumps of lilies on the bottom left add visual balance to the middle-ground trees on the top right.



STAGE 10

Mixing paint for the water lilies

As some of the lily clumps will be sitting on the darkest part of the water, you really need to get some thick opaque paint into here. I created the greens for the leaves by mixing varying quantities of **Cerulean**, **Ultramarine** and **Turquoise Blue** with **Cadmium Yellow** and **Raw Sienna**. Just to give a bit more opacity I added some white **Gouache**.

I mix this on a rough piece of paper so I won't ruin my palette. However it's critical that you mix enough for two reasons, one you don't run out of it, secondly and more importantly, you could fully load your brush and create these shapes with only a few brush strokes as possible.





STAGE 11
Painting the lily pads

With a fully loaded large brush, I laid in the masses of lily pads as quickly as possible, breaking the shapes by adding a few lily pads on their own. It's important to observe the angle of the surface of water, so that these masses sit anchored to the surface.

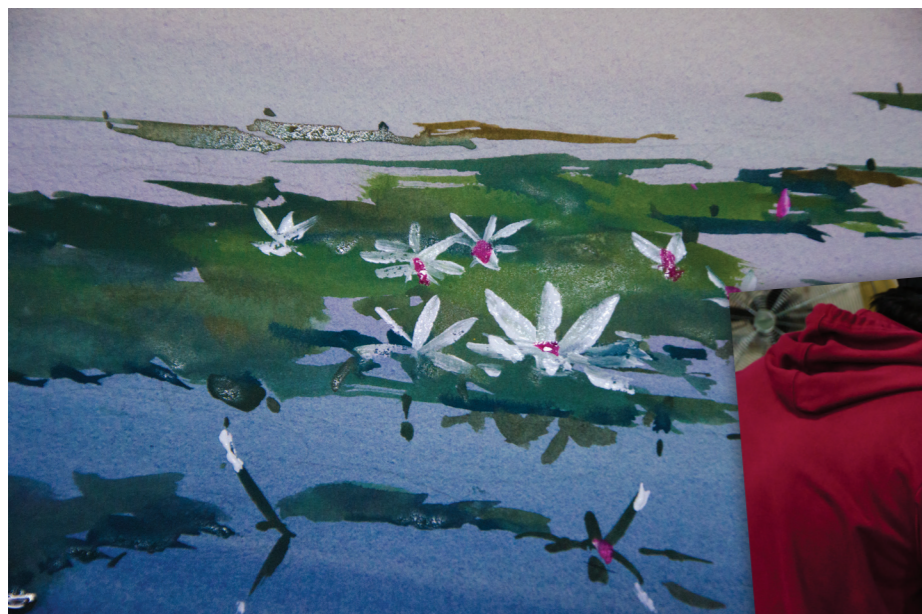


STAGE 12
Painting the lily pads

A large dominant cluster of lily pads is joined by smaller shapes as the lily pads generally spread around in search of sunlight. More importantly look for patterns that balance the painting!

At this stage I'm very conscious not to overwork, but a little bit of touching up and fixing the shapes is necessary to give the painting a convincing look. I used a sharp, synthetic round brush to do these adjustments.

It's time to put in the lilies. The reference photo has red lilies, yet we decided to make the lilies white as it would add a much better tonal contrast against the dark lily pads. I used a bit of white Gouache for adding these. I could have used masking fluid to mask them out, but this way it gives me the freedom to place the lilies on the desired areas to help balance the painting. It's critical when adding these final touches not to get caught with too many details. I used single brush strokes to define petals, again mindful to place a dominant flower and let others play secondary roles. A little purple touch is all it needs at this stage, as we have done all the hard work previously to set the stage!



STAGE 13
Finishing touches

As finishing touches, I added a few stalks and buds sticking and poking through the water, not forgetting to add their reflections. It's important to vary the angles of these, as often it's these little final touches that make all the difference. Overall a pleasing result but, most importantly it captures the mood of the place.

My Top Tips on Watercolour

- Master the fundamentals of traditional watercolour techniques. The most captivating and intricate watercolour is composed of a few simple techniques.
- Draw and sketch at every opportunity. As your drawing skills improve, so will your watercolours!
- Tone is the key to the success of a watercolour painting. Unfortunately, we pay too much emphasis on colour and become tone blind. The colour gets all the credit, but tone does all the work!
- We can't paint everything we see even though so many interesting things are begging to be included. Be brutal. Simplify the subject matter to the essential elements, and remove the unnecessary.
- Look beyond the obvious shapes of heads, bodies, buildings etc. Try to find interlocking patterns and variety. Change many of the obvious shapes to create new ones. Look for patterns in background and foreground that can tie elements together and add excitement or interest to your composition.
- Look for a good design pattern.
- Start the painting with the largest areas first using the biggest brushes. These are usually the background.
- Begin with the lightest tones first and gradually increase tone.
- Work from general to the specific. Don't get bogged down in the details too early.
- Mix enough paint so you can cover large areas quickly with clean washes. This also allows you to fully load your brushes.
- To avoid overworking, stop before you finish!



Clouds Over Brindabella, watercolour, 32 x 53cm

Sometimes we don't have to travel to the other side of the world to find good subjects. There are scenes in your own backyard that make more pleasing subject matter. This was such a scene; about 10 minutes' drive from where I live. It was a spring morning and the sun was beginning to break through the clouds, presenting me with this view that had to be captured.



about the artist

Chan Dissanayake was born in Sri Lanka to an artistic family - his father is an internationally acclaimed film director and his mother is an art teacher. He migrated with his family to Australia in 1985.

A talent for drawing was recognized in pre-school days and a passion for art, especially for watercolours, kept him actively involved in it. Having studied watercolour painting with renowned Australian artists, he embarked on a journey of self-discovery.

Achieving rapid success and winning many major awards, he has gained a considerable reputation as an outstanding watercolour artist. His solo exhibition 'Cool Waters' held in October 2010 at the Bungendore Woodworks Gallery was a sell-out. Since being invited as a guest tutor at the Summer Art Experience by the Artists Society of Canberra 2011, he now conducts workshops throughout Australia and is a highly sought tutor.

Chan was named the winner of the Agricultural Heritage Prize and the overall Champion Exhibit at the Royal Canberra Show in 2013 as well as Best in Show and People's Choice Award for the same year at the Artists Society of Canberra annual art exhibition.

His works are highly sought in local and regional galleries. Currently his work is represented at the Bungendore Woodworks Gallery, Bungendore, NSW. Chan will be a guest tutor at the Summer Art Experience (5 day workshop) in January 2016 run by the Artists Society of Canberra.

More information is available by visiting Chan's website:

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Warm Morning, watercolour, 33 x 53cm

Studying the works of the great Australian landscape painter, Sir Hans Heysen, inspired me to paint this scene. Heysen was an absolute master of depicting these misty scenes. The biggest challenge here was that the warmest part of the painting was emanating from the background due to sunlight. It's basically the opposite of most situations where the warmer colours are in the foreground and the cooler and lighter colours recede into the background.



Rainy Day in Goulburn, NSW, watercolour

I'm always drawn to atmospheric subjects where I can command watercolour to do its magic. I did a workshop in Goulburn NSW, and visited the main street of this historic town in heavy rain. The locals ran to seek shelter under the shops, whilst I got drenched standing on the middle of the road taking photographs. I have done many paintings from these references; this was one of my favourites. You just have to have an open mind and a camera ready at all times.