

John MacDonald

November–December 2017



WORKSHOPS

2018

I'm taking off 2018 from all teaching in order to re-write workshop handouts, concentrate on my own painting, and to take a workshop or two myself.

Workshops are currently being scheduled for 2019.

See the [Workshop page](#) on my website for information.

2019

FEB 2–8, 2019

CASA DE LOS ARTISTAS

Boca de Tomatlan, Mexico

[Casa de los Artistas](#)

MAY 20–24, 2019

WETHERSFIELD ACADEMY

Wethersfield, Conn.

www.wethersfieldarts.org

SEPT 22–28, 2019

**HUDSON RIVER VALLEY
ART WORKSHOPS**

Greenville, New York

www.artworkshops.com

OCT. 11–17, 2019

**MASTER CLASS AT THE
MASSACHUSETTS MUSEUM
OF CONTEMPORARY ART**

North Adams, Mass.

(limited to 8 participants)

Year's End: Taking Stock

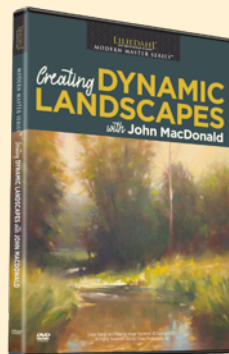
Back in my illustrator days, at the end of each year I would critique the illustrations I'd done for that year. It was a simple exercise that offered rewards far outweighing the meager sacrifice of a few hours.

After reviewing every piece, I placed what I considered to be my ten weakest illustrations on the floor of the studio and studied them. The goal was simple: to identify, in the most concrete terms possible, what made the images fail. With that information in hand, I could then create goals for the upcoming year, goals whose purpose was to improve my skills, turning weaknesses into strengths. Then I would repeat the process with what I considered my ten *best* pieces and identify what made them successful. In the next year, I would try to repeat what I'd done to make those images work so well.

Learning need not be a haphazard activity. Accept the painful inevitability of making mistakes and creating failed paintings and then discover why some paintings succeed while others fail. Learn from those discoveries. You will improve as an artist—it's inevitable.

In this newsletter, I'll explain the self-critique process in detail and offer an outline of questions you can ask yourself as you critique your work. Whether you use the questions to critique a single painting or an entire body of work, it's a process that, when applied correctly, will often uncover a gold mine of valuable information you can use to improve your skills and create better and stronger paintings.

A sincere **Thank You** to those of you who have already purchased the Liliedahl video. I hope you're finding it informative. Feel free to contact me if you have any questions or comments.



Liliedahl Video now available.

The Liliedahl instructional video is now available [here](#). It's a mini-workshop in a box, five hours of exposition, and demonstration. Streaming is available.

The Art of the Self-Critique

In order to effectively self-critique our work, we must be clear about why we're doing it. The goal of a self-critique is not to compare ourselves to other painters nor to beat ourselves up over our repeated mistakes. There is a right way and a wrong way to approach the process. Imagine two painters contemplating some recently completed paintings:

Artist #1: *"Oh heck. These paintings aren't working. The trees are all mess. . . . I never get trees right. . . I **hate** painting trees. [long pause as blood pressure rises.] Hell, I just can't paint landscapes—period!. And I'm even worse with the stupid figure. I'll **never** get this. [sound of breaking brushes.] I'm such a crappy artist I don't know why I even bother doing this I'll never. . . ." etc., etc., etc., ad nauseam.*

Artist #2: *"Oh heck. These paintings aren't working. The trees are all mess. . . . Is it the edges? Or maybe the values are off. [long pause with lots of looking and analysis.] Maybe it's the edges AND the values. . . The shapes look good and their position in the composition work. [silence with more more looking and thinking] Where's my book of Corot's paintings? He handled trees beautifully. So did Sargent and Inness. I wonder how they did it. I think I'll stop now and study how they painted trees. . . ." etc. ad positivum.*

Isn't it obvious who is going to become the better painter? (By the way, it's perfectly normal to have both voices speaking in one's head simultaneously. But as we grow as self-aware artists, we spend more time thinking like artist #2 and less like artist #1.)

In order to effectively critique our work, we need to have a mature understanding of the meaning of failure, clarity in the relationship between our work and our sense of self, and a structured process that consists of asking relevant questions.

Understanding Failure ~ Embracing Mistakes

Sadly for us artists, we live in a culture that tends to value shallow successes over authentic failures. Each of us is inculcated with a fear of failure that is poison to the living, chaotic process that is art making. Making art means making mistakes. Mistakes are not only unavoidable, they're *necessary*. Our greatest lessons and our best work are born out of the ruin of our mistakes. A failed painting give us concrete, objective information that tells us precisely where we need to improve our skills. They're our best teachers. And when we're making mistakes, it's a clear sign that we're on the edge of our comfort zone and at the limit of our abilities. We're exactly in the place we need to be in order to learn. If you wish to grow as an artist, strive to become comfortable with, or at least tolerate, making mistakes and creating failed paintings. It's never a tragedy to make bad paintings. They're unavoidable. It's only a tragedy when our fear of failure and our rampant self-criticism prevent us from learning from our mistakes, or confine us to making only safe, meaningless paintings, or much worse, discourage us from painting entirely.

Our Paintings Are Not Us.

Too often we believe a painting fails as a result of a lack of general artistic *ability* rather than a series of inappropriate, specific *decisions*. In order to prevent our high-strung emotional reactions from killing the possibility of our learning from the painting, we need to dis-identify from the work and approach it with calm, objective curiosity.

Dis-identify from the work. This isn't easy. Our work comes from our deepest part, our souls; it's meaningful to us precisely because it's so *personal*. And yet we must be able to separate our sense of self—and our sense of self-worth—from our paintings. Every mistake is simply a result that occurred in *this* particular painting at *this* particular time as a result of *this* particular decision. A mistake is not a blanket condemnation of us as humans nor as artists. A painting isn't a mirror: we must avoid seeing a flaw in the painting as a flaw in ourselves. When we've truly separated our sense of self from our paintings, when the internal noise of self-criticism abates and the emotional storm subsides, we can create a quiet center within from which we can see our work with fresh, calm, and clear eyes.

Consider this: If a dear friend and fellow painter asked for honest feedback on a lousy painting, would we respond with harsh comments? Would we trash them as artists? Or wouldn't be more inclined to give them specific information they can use to become better painters? We should treat ourselves in a similar manner.

Approach the painting with curiosity. Now we set aside our personas as artists and become scientists. In science, researchers run experiments for the purpose of gathering information. They understand that a failed experiment gives them just as much information as a successful experiment. And when an experiment fails, as it often does, they don't waste valuable time and energy wallowing in feelings of inadequacy or self-pity. They know that the experiment *isn't about them*. As artists, we need to do the same with these experiments we call paintings. The inevitable feelings of frustration, fear, or inadequacy that arise when we look at our failed paintings can be soothed and stilled by the intense, intellectual curiosity of the scientist. It's from that point that learning begins.



A few of the eighty-plus paintings that I have in the studio waiting to be either altered or completely re-painted. Most will be painted over. There's little sense holding onto a mediocre painting.

The Critique Process

Knowing the importance of making mistakes and adopting the attitude of a scientist, we're now ready to mine our painting for *information*. At the heart of an effective critique process lies a set of questions that will fuel curiosity and interest and that will result in answers that give us concrete and specific information. Ambiguous questions that simply trigger negative or positive emotions are worthless. Ban them from the critique process!

A painting consists of five elements: the composition, the overall value structure, the color relationships, the edge contrasts, and the handling of details. **A problem in a painting *must* be a problem with one or more of these elements.** Our questions should be based on these five components of a painting. But it's worth remembering that they are not of equal importance. The composition is by far the single most important part of a painting, followed by the overall value structure, color relationships, etc. Our process of questioning is most effective when we follow this hierarchy, beginning with the composition:

Is the COMPOSITION working?

This is the most important question to ask. If the composition isn't working, the painting won't work. If it isn't working, find the reason, learn from it, then move on.

- Am I saying one thing with the painting or giving multiple messages by drawing equal emphasis to the sky, trees, ground, etc.?
- Are any of the major shapes of equal size on the canvas?
- Are the major shapes varied and balanced?
- Is there only one, dominant focal point or many focal points of equal intensity?
- Does the eye remain within the painting or does it fly away off an edge?
- Are there shapes that align along the edges of the canvas or with each other?
- Are the major shapes drawn with appropriate accuracy?
- Is there an important element dead center or on the edge of the painting?

Is the overall VALUE STRUCTURE working?

(Using a black and white photo of your painting can help you answer these questions.)

- Is the value structure—the 3-5 major shapes of value—clearly evident? Or . . .
- Do I have equal value contrasts throughout the painting?
- Are there equal divisions of values among the major value shapes?
- Do the secondary values *within* the shapes respect the underlying value?
- Do the values help or hinder the illusion of space? Are some too light or dark?
- Where are the greatest value contrasts? Are they located at or near the focal point?
- Are all the values unintentionally too light, too dark, too mid-toned?

Are the COLOR RELATIONSHIPS working?

- If there's a color key in the painting—warm or cool—do all colors respect the key?
- Are any colors too muted? Too saturated?
- Are the colors following the principle of atmospheric perspective?
- Are the greatest color contrasts at or near the focal point?

Are the EDGES working?

- Is there a variety of edges?
- Are too many hard edges killing the illusion of (deep) space?
- Are the edges appropriately drawn?
- Are the greatest edge contrasts in or near the focal point?

Are the DETAILS working?

- Are the strongest details within the focal area?
- Are there any details outside of the focal area that strongly attract the eye?
- Are any of the details unnecessary to the painting?

These are just suggested questions. You may have better questions to ask of your paintings.

Learning from Success

Just as our failures give us information, so do our successes. When you create a successful painting, spend time with it. Go through this same list of questions. Ask yourself how and why you were able to paint so well. Identify those specific elements—in the painting, in yourself, in your environment—that led to the success. Then try to duplicate them the next time you paint. If it works, do it again, and again, and again.

Seeking a Second Opinion. . .

If you find it difficult to see your work objectively or feel that you may be missing important information, consider asking for a second opinion. Bring to your studio someone whose judgement you trust and ask for his or her opinion. But be sure to first explain that you are looking for concrete, specific information. Warm fuzzy comments may stroke our egos and make us feel good but they give us nothing that will help us improve our skills. Nor will ambiguous, negative statements. A comment such as, “I’m not sure about the sky” triggers our emotions and is ultimately worthless. It would be more much more helpful to hear, “In the sky, the dark values of the shadows in the clouds come forward—they make the sky look flat.” That’s information we can use to improve our skills.

Making it a Group Activity.

If you belong to an artists group, why not have a yearly, group critique? Just remember to review the ground rules before starting. Limit the time for comments and ban the phrases, “I like” or “I don’t like.” Get rid of the “I” in statements and limit it to facts: “X works” or “Y doesn’t work” is much more helpful than “I like this” or “I don’t like that.”

Critiquing our own work need not feel like dental work without novocain. Having the right mindset and asking the right questions can lead to endless artistic growth and more enjoyable painting. Analyze the painting, diagnose the cause, and then find the cure.

Know Thyself

Some artists prefer working on a single painting from start to finish. Others prefer working on multiple paintings simultaneously. I'm certainly in the latter camp. As you can see from the photo of my studio below, at any given moment I have a dozen or more paintings in progress. I keep as many of them as possible in view. This allows me to quickly critique the paintings with fresh eyes each time I enter the studio. Often, I'll suddenly see a problem in a painting that had gone unnoticed. I take as much time as needed to finish a painting. Working slowly on multiple paintings works for me.

How do you prefer to work? Quickly and spontaneously? Slowly and deliberately? Do you prefer finishing one painting at a time or keeping a pile in progress? Understanding your painting process will help you decide when and how often to critique your work. But don't neglect it—it's far too important.



Words of Wisdom

“Go and make interesting mistakes, make amazing mistakes, make glorious and fantastic mistakes. Break rules. Leave the world more interesting for your being here.”

-Neil Gaiman

“Mistakes are the portals of discovery”

-James Joyce

“Life is pretty simple: You do some stuff.
Most fails. Some works.
You do more of what works.”

-Leonardo da Vinci

Happy Holidays!

I wish each of you a wonderful and safe Holiday Season.

May your new year be filled with enriching mistakes, solid successes, good sales, and leaps in understanding and growth.

-*Happy Painting!*

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John".