

# John MacDonald

Newsletter: September 2013



## 2014 WORKSHOPS

FEBRUARY 1-8

### CASA DE LOS ARTISTAS

Boca de Tomatlan, Mexico  
[www.ArtWorkshopVacations.com](http://www.ArtWorkshopVacations.com)

SEPTEMBER 21-27

### HUDSON RIVER VALLEY ART WORKSHOPS

Greenville, New York  
[www.artworkshops.com](http://www.artworkshops.com)



I've finally surrendered to the necessity of having a page on Facebook. You can find it at:

[John MacDonald Paintings](http://JohnMacDonaldPaintings.com).

I'll be posting recent work and will be happy to respond to any comments or questions you have. In fact, why not post your work and I can offer feedback, if you'd like it.

## News from the studio. . .

Whew. What a summer. Never again will I plan to teach three workshops and have a one-man show, all within two months. But like an old soldier looking back on a battle, I'm already reminiscing about the craziness of it. And a heartfelt "thank you" to those of you who attended the workshops. It was a pleasure working and painting with you.

The one-man show I allude to is currently at the Harrison Gallery until the first weekend of October: [www.theharrisingallery.com](http://www.theharrisingallery.com)

Coming up is a group show with Curt Hanson, Eleinne Basa, Isabel Forbes, and Sweed Ahstrom. A fundraiser for a center for non-violence in Connecticut, it will take place October 7th at Curt's studio in Cornwall Hollow, CT. If you would like to attend the opening, drop me an email and I'll send directions and all the details. We'd love to see you there.

### *Artist Watch:* Gregory Manchess

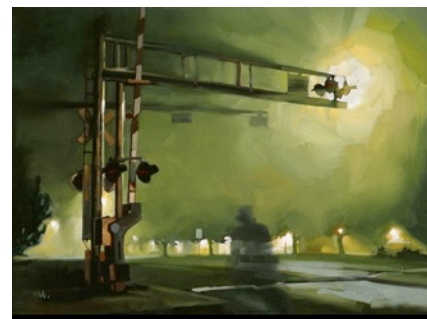
I'm moving out of the familiar territory of plein air oil landscape painters with this, but as a former illustrator, I've always admired the work of Gregory Manchess.



I was lucky enough to have attended two of his workshops at the



Norman Rockwell Museum, not far from my home. Greg paints in oils and is one of the top illustrators in the country. He's currently having a show at the Society of Illustrators in New York which will be on view until October 23rd. Check it out! You can see more of his work by visiting his website at [www.manchess.com](http://www.manchess.com)



I've learned a lot from Greg. His sense of composition, handling of values, and use of color contrast are absolutely superb. His work proves how arbitrary is the line between commercial and gallery work.

## **Tips & Techniques**

### **Using an Underpainting**

Rather than deconstructing a painting in this newsletter, I'd like to write at length about the advantages of using underpaintings, a traditional technique that was widely used by landscape painters for nearly two centuries. I'll get back to deconstructing a painting in the next newsletter.

It's an old adage, that we learn the most about a subject when we try to teach it to others. During the three workshops I taught this summer, I often brought up the advantages of beginning a painting with a monochromatic underpainting. Well, I must have been convincing in my arguments because I'm more than ever a true believer in using them! They offer many advantages:

### **Benefits of using an Underpainting**

#### **1. We are forced to slow down.**

When a scene inspires us and we feel the urge to paint it, too often we jump directly into the execution without taking adequate time to analyze what lies before us. Creating an underpainting requires us to stop and think. We pause, we look at the scene in it's entirety, and we warm up our eyes and minds. This moment of stopping keeps the fires of inspiration from burning out of control. Spending this extra time looking at the landscape, before we even touch a brush, allows us see it more broadly and deeply. We become more informed about it and therefore able to make more skillful choices when painting.

#### **2. We are forced to simplify.**

In every landscape there is always more visual information than we could possibly use. Our eyes are most often attracted to information that is superficial: details, color relationships, or patterns and textures. Because underpaintings work best when kept simple, we begin by identifying and then painting the basic structure of the scene. We are forced to identify what is truly essential and what is not.

#### **3. We identify the composition and basic values.**

And so creating an underpainting demands that we shift our focus, at the very beginning of the process, from all the seductive glitter of details and color relationships to the essentials of composition and values. We identify the three to five most important value masses in the painting and see them as interconnected flat shapes. Many artists work the composition of a scene with line, drawing in a sketchbook or directly on the canvas. However, it's much more effective and helpful to explore the composition by using shapes of value. A composition that works in line may not necessarily work in value. Using a few flat shapes of value to determine the composition, we establish the two most important elements in the painting simultaneously.

#### **4. We establish the focal point.**

Having identified the essential shapes of the landscape, we can use them to establish a focal point. It's much easier to see and create a focal point when we're not distracted by

extraneous visual information. The focal point becomes part of the basic structure of the painting and is reinforced by the composition and value structure rather than being simply a collection of minor details or color or value contrasts that try to grab the eye.

#### **5. We invent, manipulate, and change.**

It's much easier and more effective to change or invent elements in the landscape when we're working with basic, large shapes of value. We can discover at the very beginning what needs to be changed or invented and what can be left alone.

#### **6. It simplifies working in color.**

Color consists of three elements: hue, saturation, and value. When working in color *without* an underpainting, we need to correctly identify each of those three elements every time we mix a color. It's challenging, to say the least. By establishing a value structure in the underpainting we take value out of the equation. It's much easier to juggle two balls than three! And for those of us who feel challenged by color, it allows us to approach the challenge of color step by step. We can feel secure about the values of our color and then worry about saturation and hue.

#### **7. It keeps us grounded.**

There are few highs as enjoyable as the joy of watching a painting come together and work well. The pleasure and energy can become so overwhelming that we forget to think, forget to see, and forget to *stop*. We ride the train through the station, off the tracks, and over the cliff, waking up in a daze hours later only to realize, too late, that the painting is now falling apart and we haven't the foggiest idea how it happened. It's so easy to overwork a painting when we're lost in the pleasurable Trance of manipulating color and paint and details! But if we've spent time creating an underpainting, we're much more likely to be aware of and remember the importance of the essential structure of the painting as we approach the finish. It provides us with a touchstone that we can come back to again and again as we near completion of the painting.

#### **8. It's great training.**

To create a successful underpainting we need three skills: the ability to see the "big picture," to see value shapes, and to simplify. Of course, all three of these skills are necessary to painting anything! That's the point. Spending time creating underpaintings is time spent exercising and strengthening our ability to see shape and value and our ability to discern the essential elements of the landscape. I like to think of the underpainting as construction work: a time to think, analyze, plan, and *work*. Then it's Party Time: time to play with color! It's a division of labor that fits well with the creative process.

#### **8. It balances deep space.**

This is something I've become more aware of only lately: that much of what I love in the work of great landscape painters comes from a tension between flat pattern and shape (established by the basic compositional and value

structure of the painting) and the convincing illusion of three-dimensional space (that comes from the manipulation of the subtle half-tones, the well-drawn details, and all those tricks and techniques of creating the illusion of spatial distance). I'm particularly fond of and amazed by how masterfully George Inness and Gustave Klimt balanced these two elements: strong, simple value shapes arranged in an interesting pattern and overlaid with touches of deep space, each complimenting the other. It makes for subtle, sophisticated, and beautiful paintings.

### **Creating an Underpainting • Plein Air**

There are as many ways to create an underpainting as there are ways to paint. I give the following descriptions of how to create an underpainting with the caveat that there's nothing particularly special about this approach. It works for me—that's all. It's not magic. If you decide to make underpainting part of your painting process, experiment with other approaches. Find what works best for you and your way of making paintings.

I use underpaintings much less often when painting plein air than I once did. However, I'll still create an underpainting in those situations in which the scene is so complex that I'm having trouble identifying basic shapes or seeing the value structure. Sometimes there can be so many details or minor color or value contrasts in a scene that they overwhelm the basic structure of the scene.

When creating an underpainting outdoors, I use acrylic paints—but only on non-oil grounds, of course. I apply the acrylics using discarded oil brushes. Taking advantage of the quick drying time, I will work and rework the underpainting with brushes and rags until I'm satisfied with the result. By the time I've cleaned up the acrylics and prepared the oils, I find that the underpainting has usually dried sufficiently to work directly in oil. However, the drying time will depend on the temperature and the ambient humidity. It **must** be dry before applying oils!

After having experimented over the years with various paints, I now use only one hue: Burnt Umber, which allows me to create very dark values. I found that, for my tastes, Raw Umber was too greenish/yellowish and Burnt Sienna was too saturated with red and too light in value. But again, this is a personal choice. Use whichever colors you prefer.

### **Creating an Underpainting • Studio**

While I've tended to use underpaintings less and less outdoors, I'm now using underpaintings much more often in the studio; in fact, I'm now using it for every large studio painting. The reason is simple: I'm much more likely to create a successful, gallery quality painting when I begin with an underpainting. And, frankly, I love the underpainting stage. I can paint loosely and quickly and focus on only two things: composition and values. It's great fun!

Because I use oil-primed panels for my studio paintings, I must use oils in the underpainting stage. As with the acrylics, I usually use Burnt Umber but will occasionally mix it with Burnt Sienna and/or Raw Umber or even a touch of Lamp Black. With the slow drying time of oils, and being in the comfort of my studio working from photos and plein air oil sketches, I can relax and take my time, applying the oils with brushes and rags, wiping off and adding on, changing this and that. . . focusing intently on the composition and basic value structure but also having fun and enjoying the whole process.

Using oils, the drying time is measured in hours rather than minutes. Typically, the underpainting will be ready for the application of color in one to three days.

### **Underpainting guidelines:**

Here are some guidelines, in no particularly order of importance; but first, to repeat myself, this is the approach that works for me, so these are hardly rules written in stone. You should experiment and find a process that pleases you and fits your way of working.

#### **1. Keep it warm**

There's a reason that all those 18th-century underpaintings were created in hues resembling the rich color of varnished mahogany: landscapes are predominantly cool. Think of all those blues and greens. The warm hue of an underpainting, when allowed to show through, can give added punch to even the most muted greens and blues. But beware: it will shift all the neutrals to the cool side.

#### **2. Keep it simple**

The entire point of creating an underpainting is to identify and establish the basic, essential structure of the painting. Ignore all details, minor value contrasts, and all color information. Much of what we see is irrelevant!

#### **3. Keep it soft**

There are three good reasons to avoid hard edges in an underpainting. First, by keeping all edges extremely soft, it's easier to make changes later; to redraw elements as you develop the painting. Secondly, many oil colors are at least slightly semi-transparent. A hard edge in an underpainting is likely to show through, becoming a distraction if you've decided to redraw the edges of forms. Thirdly, where two colors meet in a hard edge, there's likely to be a slightly raised edge in the paint film. This will catch the light and, once again, can become a distracting element in a finished painting if the edges of the forms have been changed.

#### **4. Keep it thin**

I like to paint thinly and save the thick brushstrokes for selected areas as the painting nears completion. But there are more practical reasons to keep the paint film thin: it dries more quickly and is less likely to create problems for any later, and thicker, applications of overlaid paint.

## Underpainting: step by step

Below is a recent underpainting from the studio. It's representative of how I create an underpainting:



### 1. Original photo

When working from photos, I always begin by manipulating the photo in Photoshop. I play around with cropping, values, color saturation, etc. It allows me to experiment with different compositions, values, and colors but also to spend time with the scene and to get to know it better. Once I've found a version that inspires me, I paste a value scale next to it and pull out swatches of color to help identify and understand the values and colors in the image.



### 2. Study

An oil study, 12" x 16", based on the photo. I nearly always create a study as the first step, for a variety of reasons. Doing a study allows me to see if there really is something in the scene that interests me, that is challenging, and that will inspire me. It allows me to better judge whether or not a small scene will translate well into a large painting. It allows me to experiment and play with the composition, values, and colors; to make changes from what I see in the photo. Finally, it's one more opportunity to engage the im-

agery in the scene. After manipulating the photo, creating a study, and then an underpainting, I will have spent three intense sessions studying and working with the scene. By the time I pick up a brush to begin painting on a large canvas, I should know the landscape very well!



### 3. The studio setup.

On the left, on a computer monitor, is the photo of the landscape. On the right, on a portable easel, is the small oil study. Below the monitor is the final compositional sketch which is transferred to the large panel by using a grid drawn on the sketch and the panel. (I included this only to show how I transfer the final composition to the panel. I dispose of the sketch after transferring it to the panel.)

In this instance, I began the underpainting on the original white ground of the oil-primed panel. However, I usually work on a toned ground, which I find allows me to judge values more easily.



### 4. Adding the darks.

I usually begin by painting in the dark masses first, keeping the paint film thin, edges soft, and forms drawn loosely but as accurately as possible.



### 5. Continuing with the darks. . .

An underpainting can consist of absolutely flat values, but nearly every landscape contains some gradients and some can be very important to the image. In this dawn scene, capturing the gradient from dark foreground to light sun was essential to the mood and life of the scene. I know that as I work my dark up the canvas, and towards the distant horizon, it will need to lighten slightly. Rather than adding white to my paint to lighten it, which will cool and desaturate the color, I use scumbling. This allows the white of the canvas to show through, preserving the rich, warm tone of the pigment.



### 6. Finishing the darks.

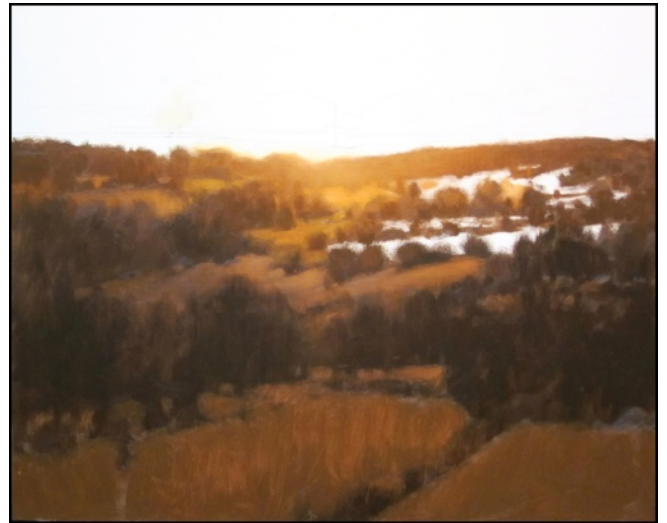
Although this dark has a range of values, I'm still thinking in terms of three to four overall values in the entire painting. This is just one—the darkest. I keep the gradient smooth and know that the lighter value at the top will still be the darkest dark in that area of the painting.



### 7. Wiping out.

The light of the sun bleeds into the darks around it. I create this by wiping off pigment with a rag.

As I paint in the forms, I am NOT thinking of trees and fields but only **shapes**, trying to keep each shape and the relationships between them visually appealing.



### 8. Adding the middle value.

From working with the photo and painting the study, I have identified three or four values in the scene: dark trees, slightly less dark fields, and a light sky with slightly darker clouds. Complicating things is the gradient that is found in both the values of the trees and the fields, so as I work the middle value, it needs to lighten at the same rate that the trees lighten as they both approach area in the painting with the lightest lights: the sun. (I use the terms “trees,” “fields,” and “sun” to describe it here but while painting, I'm thinking only in terms of shape and value.)



### 9. Working the skies.

The ground has been blocked in. Now I'm painting the darks of the clouds and background hills.



### The finished underpainting.



### 10. Washing in the sky.

Using a rag dampened with turps and dipped in pigment, the sky is quickly rubbed in. It's easily lightened or darkened by wiping pigment out or in.

### 11. Finishing.

With brush and rag, the final touches are applied. Since much of the underpainting will be painted over, there's no need to get any more detailed than this.

When an underpainting really works, color is hardly missed. And when the underpainting is particularly successful, you may want to add as little color as possible—just enough to add a few contrasts between cool and warm.



### The finished painting with color

Applying color to an underpainting is another topic which, for the sake of space, I'll leave for a later newsletter. But suffice it to say that there's only one rule to remember when adding the first application of color: **don't change the values!** Having worked so hard to create a value structure that works, why destroy it? Respect the basic value structure of the underpainting and relax and play with color. It's easier and a lot more enjoyable to work with the saturation and temperature of a color knowing that its value has been determined and is already working.

When the value structure of an underpainting works and you respect it as you apply color, the odds of creating a successful painting are entirely in your favor. It's often said that value does the work and color gets the credit. So get the values right and then have fun with the color. If it leads to a successful painting, who cares who gets the credit?

## Examples of underpaintings

Below are some underpaintings from the last several years. Some are more developed than others. (The color differences are more a result of the lighting under which the photos were taken than any differences in paint.) More recently, I've tried to keep an underpainting simple, loose, and fresh. Yes, it is possible to overwork an underpainting!

