

Notes on Color by Ken Kewley

It is all about having a passion for color. This passion gives one an unlimited vocabulary. Color is use to create steps to direct the eye around the painting parallel to the vision of the artist. Along the way, like a song writer, rhyming words that do not really rhyme, we invent color relationships to get at the surprising juxtapositions that are found in nature. It is a way of staying excited, staying in love.

Color, like drawing, is an abstraction. One color, just as one word in poetry, needs to be found to stand in for several colors. Each color needs to be chosen in consideration of the whole. Color does not become itself until the whole work is completed. A painting that earlier in its making resembled a poem, as it gets filled in, cluttered with too much color that changes or dilutes what was there, loses its poetry. If a painting isn't working I find it is not because something is missing but that there is something that is not needed and therefore hurtful. This brings us back to love. Love colors as writers love words. It is the love that comes through when the mind gets out of the way. Don't think too much. Trust your instincts. I try not to worry about what I do not know, what I have been unable to teach myself. My inabilities serve me better than my abilities. That art is not something that is learned and then practiced, it is a form of communication and one is always trying to say something clearer. To love and to be honest, maybe one does not exist without the other and a desire to communicate that, this is what it takes to make art.

Start by putting down the one color that excites you the most, then the next, relating it to the first. This is the relationship that excites you the most. Then the third color, relating it always to the whole. You are emphasizing what interests you and minimizing other things by putting them in the service of your true passion and leaving out altogether what distracts. Keep it simple.

Each color plays its part. Less is more. Each element is made to do more. I often look at paintings, good well observed paintings, and I wonder why they are not more exciting. There is an exciting color relationship in there somewhere but it is being drowned out by dozens of other colors. Take a random paragraph from the newspaper, remove the right words and you have a poem.

As far as keeping a painting fresh to the end, you cannot lose site of the reason for starting the painting in the first place.

That first excitement, that one big relationship, if the details slowly obscure that relationship the painting becomes dull, then it is necessary to dig back in and pull it out even if it means upturning days of work. In the end nothing is lost and it will be more exciting for being harder found and deeper felt.

Within ourselves we all have great paintings, we all have the colors needed to make these works, and we just need to dig them out.

Try not to dilute the paint (there is a time for thick and a time for thin). Since I use one brush, one might think that I must be always rinsing the brush but I am not. Instead I am always mixing on the palette and on the painting; going up and down the value scale, from light to dark, from dark to light. Just paint. If it works out well, that is good, if it does not, that is good. You have the perfect surface for another painting and it solves the problem of starting with an empty canvas.

I tend to like paintings where the abstraction is strong. By this I mean that the paint, the colors and shapes, are distinct, like strong actors in a play. Going towards abstraction does not mean going away from representation. It is more like describing something real my other means than illustration. It is like describing an apple with your hands, forming the shape in the air with your hands, by enclosing an imaginary object with two hands. You do not try to make your hand look like an apple. Paint takes over the role of the hands and does not hide the fact that it is paint. Painting is talking with the hands made permanent.

When color and shapes are emphasized it is the artist that is directing the viewer. "Look at this and then look at that and see how this relates to that", the artist is saying, "This is what I want you to see."

In painting you never do what you set out to do. Something else happens. If it always turns out right you are probably doing something wrong. Do not try to make a picture of something. Make something. When painting the model, treat each part (do not name the parts) as something separate and then compose the parts into a whole, into a composition. Use as few shapes as possible, do not think human. You are making a painting. Keep the foreignness of the parts and use them to make up the whole. I love the human figure, I do not negate it, but I trust that this love will come through in the process, through my love of painting.

No color theory. Only love of color. Have all your colors ready at hand. When painting the model do not think flesh color. When painting grass do not think green. This will take nothing away from your love of the human body or the landscape.

One false mark (dishonesty) destroys the whole.

Do not allow the illustration or the details to carry the whole. If you are painting a landscape and there is a lettered sign, do not depend on what the sign says for interest. It has to be the abstract shapes of the letters and their placement in the composition that creates the interest.

Painting over previous works promotes the desire to cover quickly what is underneath. The old peeking through will not distract if the new is strong enough to carry the viewer's attention. What would distract is covered up and what is useful can remain. You are unconsciously saving what is useful. Back to talking with hands, if you are describing an apple and right past you there is a murder taking place that would distract. You would probably need to add a little violence to your gesture. The painter needs to take possession of the subject. Painting is building something out of abstract material. A house is built of wood or brick, etc. The material itself does not resemble a house. The human figure in painting is made up of abstract shapes and colors. Take away the face from many a Corot or Courbet portrait and you would be left with an abstract painting.

Painting exercise; paint, cut painting up, and reassemble. It is important to keep things movable, adjustable.

Painting is a language. As thoughts are made up of words, the subject of a painting is made up of shapes and colors.

Painting is and is not like building a house. Sometimes it is good to start with the foundation and sometimes you can change and build a different house half way through.

Quick sketches can be just as finished as paintings. Limits make things otherwise impossible, possible. To restart dead paintings reshape whole by large actions.

Colors create steps that move around, into, and back out of, paintings.
Paint instinctively with joy.

Knowing how to paint may not be good. This is not heart surgery. It is better when things have to be figured out each time. Getting lost is not dangerous in painting.

Paint large areas quickly and unconsciously as much as possible. Never consciously paint them. Let nuances happen.

Emphasis is invention. Look to nature and the unconscious mess of the palette for direction.

The need to find shapes is a need to exaggerate and gives freedom to invent.

Values are more important than color. Strong Fauve paintings reproduced in black and white retain much of their force. Force sometimes comes by supplying little choice.

Black and white can be used to reshape the painting into larger forms. Black and white can be used as extremes. Be aware of the lightest and darkest part of a painting.

Color is used to shape space and build form through relationships.

Paintings are not finished, they are stopped.

When you stop a painting, draw a quick (a few lines) sketch of it, to see ways to simplify next work.

Do not work too hard, but work all the time.

We make sense of our surroundings by ordering in the mind, by painting a picture in our mind. Painting is therefore very natural.

Good painting is natural. Bad painting is unnatural and must be learnt.

When working from life you take a fragment of the world then attempt to make it whole by making sense of the loose ends left when it was torn from the world.

If you cannot find the right color find an equivalent, colors that have a similar relationship. Colors and values need to be kept in reserve for where they are

Some colors must play larger roles just as some actors play larger roles in the theatre. Keep these colors for those roles. A too similar color elsewhere will confuse like a supporting actor who looks too much like the leading actor. Matisse said to start with the most intense color then add another and adjust the first if needed, then add another keeping always in mind the overall effect. This should be what you are most interested in and so this should be natural and easily done. You may sometimes find that your interest lies elsewhere. Then go with that. Relax and the right answer will come to you. Relax and the right color will be found. Relax and any discord will show itself. While working on a collage, when searching for the right color from a box of hundreds of colors I find if I relax, stop thinking, the right color pops out (comes into focus). Intensiveness, temperature, values (light and dark), etc. need to be taken into account. This is a non-theory color theory, a freeing of your natural color sense. It will feel that color is being emphasized over drawing but drawing will take care of itself in the process. It will result in better drawing. Impulse should be stressed. Rejecting should be rejected. Surprising yourself should be encouraged.

Painting runs parallels to music with discords and concordances and musical groupings.
Working in the dark (near dark) to see the simple masses.

Exercise by sorting colors. Cut out colors from magazines for use in collage and sort into color groups.
To get some distance from what you have done take a piece of mat board larger than your work and place the work on it, cover with a piece of Plexiglas of similar size to mat board, in a sense framing your work. This helps to get past the remembrance of the process to see the results.

Editing your work, picking out what you want to represent you is valuable.

Make abstract collages. Without subject matter one can concentrate on finding a composition out of chaos. One does not need to fear losing one's way in art, there is always a way out and often very clever ways that one would never have found without having been lost.

Wipe out and repaint. Sketching the same thing over and over, making a hundred sketches, painting a similar painting over a previous painting, a series of figure paintings where the head is at the top and feet are at the bottom, tweaking the same painting, painting over related paintings; a still life over a

still life, etc. something a kin to animation, with the pose changing ever so slightly. This is not a bad method for drawing the model. A model that moves a bit is not a bad thing. For one thing it means the model is alive and that in itself is exciting. Also one should always be reconsidering the whole and willing to redraw the whole.

Translating a painting into a collage calls for new rules; a divergence from the original by having to limit colors, shapes, and details.

There is sometimes a place for straight out of the tube colors. At other times they are a bit like a naked person in public. One sometimes needs to dress properly to fit in (to the larger picture). Sometimes the one object or color that attracts is the one thing that distracts from the whole. In this case a support needs to be found to anchor the color to the whole.

The painting is the result of the process of painting. Do not anticipate this. Forget that you are painting a painting, and even more, that it is a picture.

Give up control to let things happen in painting.

Knowledge increases options.

Even though I am aware that there is a book called Yellow and Blue don't make Green and it is true that pigment acts differently than light, let us agree that yellow and blue makes something that resemble green. It depends a lot on what yellow and what blue. The same goes for yellow and red making orange and also red and blue making purple. The truth is that it doesn't matter all that much what color they make but only that you are aware of what colors they tend to make. If you need an orange color use orange. The main thing is be aware of how little it takes to change a color. Start with a very little dab and then only use a fraction of that to begin with. More important is the value. To go lighter use a color of a lighter value all the way to a little white, to go darker use a color of a darker value all the way to black. This probably sounds too simple. Good.

Think of colors becoming stained. Light colors are easier stained than dark colors. Red wine on a white or any light colored shirt. Yellow will be altered more dramatically by another color than a green or blue. Beware of this value range from light to dark and back. With the same brush, work from dark

to lighter, putting in darks while your brush is loaded with that value. Rinse only when you need to go quickly from one extreme to another.

When painting from life, before you use any color for a particular object, compare the color of the object to any similarly colored object. Ask; which is more or less intense, lighter or darker, etc. Reserve the most intense, darkest or lightest, to where it is really needed. Don't think rules. Don't think what colors come forward and which go back. Think about the relative difference between colors. Pure colors are rare. Look at great paintings. Look for primary colors, colors that can be easily named, i.e. green, orange, etc. Usually they are not found. Most colors are without names. Most colors are adjusted and fine tuned. Colors found by a need to compose the whole, each color playing a role. Color changes depending on the size of the form and its neighbors.

The secret (your methods) to painting needs to be discovered everyday. This is necessary because these secrets only work for a little while.

Having painted awhile there is more to unlearn than to learn.

Some colors are warm and some are cool. Colors like yellow, orange and red associated with fire are considered warm and colors like green, blue and purple associated with water are considered cool. I do not spend much time thinking about this, especially whether or not they are advancing or going back into space. Just be aware of the relative difference. A bigger jump can be made between colors if a warm is opposed to a cool. Paint instinctively, not by rules. Adjust each color to best play their role. Group colors into larger masses that work with and against other masses. A group of similar darks opposed to a group of close value lights. There can be lights within the dark masses and darks within the light masses. These masses must form shapes that play their parts in making up a composition. Leading roles and supporting roles as in a play, a balance of unbalanced elements, controlled chaos.

Look at your palette after a bout of painting. There will be colors you would never have consciously placed next to each other, but this is similar to nature. It is what makes nature so visually exciting. If there is a higher being it is an unconscious being. A tree never worries about the house it blocks from view. Our viewpoint is always shifting and creating new juxtapositions. The thrill never stops. Whatever the subject the shapes and colors that make up this subject must also make up an abstract design (composition).

Instinctively adjusting color for your own entertainment (excitement). Done by adding, taking away, moving to new locations. Making a color stronger by removing a color else where. Becoming aware of a color when a similar color is added else where. Knowing instinctively when this requires removing one of the colors or at least knowing to question that color. Making colors do more adds excitement. Remove lazy (less useful) colors.

From the beginning relate colors to find order within disorder. Push colors toward an unpleasant result to test extremes and to find ways to contain them within the whole. A composition of unpleasant even jarring color relationships can be very exciting and pleasing.

You speak. Some will listen others will not. You cannot choose who will and will not. Do not concern yourself, do not adjust to please. Those you please will find you.

The observable world and painting are two separate things. Your love of the visual world naturally comes through in your work. If you try too hard it will show up in the work as an unpleasant element. I do not like to see artist suffering.

The most uninteresting life is made up of amazing details, amazing subtleties.

Study the model without drawing for the entire twenty minute pose then when she takes a break draw everything you can recall.

Give up the desire to be there when it happens. Do not think about it that much. Get away from the self. Reject consciousness. Make it child's work. What is created is the real thing. The rest is the world. What is a picture of the world? Nothing. The closer one tries for correctness usually the further one moves away from it. Three elements in the right relationship get much closer to feeling real and often are enough to carry the whole. Do as little as possible. What makes a painting great is not correct anatomy. More important is truth, humanness, the whole person undivided. This is what makes it universal. That speaks through the ages (over the centuries).

Emphasize one thing over another. It is saying; this is what I want you to look at.

"A work of art which did not begin in emotion is not art." - Cezanne

Passion, excitement needs to be there at the beginning to have it there at the end.

If you have a circle in your mind you will not make a square. If you try to draw the perfect circle you fail and the result is your own circle.

Many things are invented when one tries to repeat the past and fails or through misunderstanding.

Some of the best t-shirt slogans come from misreading.

Good things come when one no longer cares about pleasing anyone else.

We do the paintings we want to see.

The same lessons need to be learnt over and over.

Paint itself is beautiful. It amazes me how someone can make something so ugly with it.

Mastering paint is the ability to move from the large things to the small things and back again, always within the whole.

Composing has to do with setting up rhymes and rhythms between forms. "Visual art is the intuitively ordered play of forms and sometimes colors within a contain arena". - J. Goodrich. Keep things in flux. You must be willing to get rid of anything.

Painting is visual poetry. Take a page of descriptive writing, remove enough words and you have a poem. As has been said about sculpture; remove everything from the block of marble that is not the subject.

The artist must show the viewer exactly what they want the viewer to see, in what order and at what speed. Show me more forcefully what I should be looking at. Forms must be described by drawing enclosing lines at the same time. Do not spend a lot of time on one side of a form. You got to enclose that form quickly. It is hard to describe something with one hand.

The live model is capable of infinite number of abstract forms that do not read quickly as human.

Setting up a still life is like sculpting.

Sometimes there is no painting there. It is not the subject but the abstraction that must carry the painting.

Colors and forms are forces. Painting is using these forces.

Illustration is relying on descriptive details.

Love of color makes a colorist.

Painting can surpass nature by the nature of composing into a visual poetry. Think music; sounds composed into otherworldly passages.

I love messy precision, very loose and very specific at the same

time, wildly using a straight edge, the straight line drawn by hand and the messy mark drawn with the use of a straight edge.

Get back to the joy of painting and trust that all you need to know is within you.

My daughter's elementary school art room has a wall of windows. From the projects they do in this room there is nothing that shows that they ever look out the window. The art teacher according to what I hear from my daughter has never said "look out the window and draw". What they do are projects. Project implies an already known result. It is something like a safety net. It removes some of the excitement or the chance of what the teacher might think is failure, but this is not a trapeze. The freedom to look and draw does not put the child in danger. Looking and drawing does not kill creativity, teachers do. It begins with the first word spoken in reaction to the child's work. What if the parent responded by drawing? Painting is a language that is easier learnt when young. Artists dealing with ideas (conceptual artists) who use paint to illustrate ideas (jokes) are illustrators more than painters. Using paint does not make one a painter. Paint can do so much more. The life of a painter is a life of exploring

Color not based on theory but on the artist's love of color. This will be in the work if the mind does not get in the way. Be aware of the whole painting. Look at no color without looking at another. Every color needs to relate to every other color. Which one is darker, which lighter. Keep in the mind the colors most nameable. Keep the number of these small; yellow, orange, red, purple, blue, green, white and black. Be aware of going towards or away from these. OK, one minute color theory; draw a circle and evenly place those colors around the circle, often called a wheel. On my color wheel white goes between green and yellow and black between red and purple. Colors on the opposite side of the circle are opposite colors; yellow and purple, orange and blue, red and green, white and black. To quickly get away from a color mix it with the opposite color. Think value from white to black. Yellow would be closer to white. A dark green or alizarin crimson would be closer to black. Think in this wide range. Transparent colors may need to be mixed with other darks and even black. These dark colors, used as a tint with white, create a color closer to white. Travel between these two extremes. Instead of always cleaning the brush transform whatever is on the brush toward a nameable color by adding that color or the color that when mixed becomes that color or away from that color by mixing that color's opposite. And at the same time be aware

if you are going darker or lighter. To go lighter and keep the color add white, to go lighter while changing colors add whichever color is lighter and takes you closer to the desired color. To make a bigger jump between colors, as you go lighter or darker mix in a color that goes away from the adjacent nameable color. Keep away from just adding white or black to make more surprising color. Do not think too much. Better just to enjoy the color. Do whatever you need to do to keep excited. Play, do not work. Play is the most productive work. Buying any color that excites is not a bad idea but a pretty color in itself is only a pretty color. With some basic colors you can get an unlimited amount of exciting colors when they are mixed and juxtaposed. Work in a close range then work the colors away and back again. Be aware of the dark and light masses. Group both lights and darks to make a light complex and both darks and lights to make a dark complex within the composition. Paint parallel to nature. Be natural. Do not try too hard to match colors. This takes your eye off the larger picture.

Paint with color-shapes. One color-shape followed by another. Paint instinctively, reacting without rejecting. If not looking at nature then having looked at nature. Do not fall in love with any part. Always think of the whole. Stop at the thought of stopping.

Use a straight edge to make an unconscious line appear conscious. Nature is beautiful because it is not self-conscious. The beauty of things comes greatly from never having become accustomed to that thing, that relationship. It is what keeps things always fresh, always surprising, it is that the mind has never been able to completely name the thing.

Do not make a picture of a landscape, create a landscape.

Describe form with at least two lines in drawing, and with two colors in painting. It is placing forms in space by defining limits. A third color to describe the journey between these. Every color needs to correspond to another to build form.

Painting is very simple. Anyone can fill an area with paint but to relate everything in a complex journey without resulting in chaos takes a lifetime to master. It is amazing how unpleasant paint can become, just as some sound can be painful but this usually takes a lot of conscious thinking which we are not going to do. Similar to how sound can be noise or music the same sounds, the same paint, can be pleasurable in the right context.

Composition = a composite.

Overlapping is a large tool. Overlapping colors hold down other colors. They become steps, little and big, into and out of space.

One day I will give up talking and writing, no other form of communication except for painting.

Most things cannot be separated. This includes color, form and composition.

Observe nature well and at the same time push the colors and shapes to emphasize what you loved about the thing you are painting. Push the abstraction to the point where you will lose something of the naturalness but will gain control over every part and where it will then be possible to adjust things further. Leave out the details altogether for awhile. The danger of details are that they can be use to tie everything together and to finish the painting too quickly. In the beginning try to limit the number of shapes you are working with. At this stage you are making an abstract painting using the elements in front of you. The idea is to go towards a stronger abstraction without going away from reality. The more exciting the abstraction the more exciting the painting and it then follows that the whole will be closer to the excitement of reality. The important part is translating the painting into a pure painting language, into an abstraction, strengthening that abstraction, without losing touch with the observable world.

Strengthen your sense of the abstraction to be better equipped not to be overwhelmed by the motif.

When painting abstractly try to come across forms and colors as naturally as possible, as if you were discovering them by walking through a landscape looking for a motif to paint. Except by the time you find something you would like to paint you have already painted it, and having done these abstract paintings more likely to find these things in the landscape.

Get outside soon and do some real, perceptual painting if that really exists or maybe more precisely some abstract painting from life

Consider everything equally then use them unequally. Make background details strong, distinct, shapes, then tie or cluster parts to form the larger interest or subject and to take its starring role without diminishing the other parts but letting

them support without giving up their character or identity. Bring up the shapes in the background and then deal with them. In abstract work the subject is the abstraction itself. In working instead of focusing on the subject and less on the background stress the background. This will be the strong support for the main subject and will supply parts that when clustered becomes the main subject.

Remember everything in the arena of the work plays a part. Unlike a play the lights can not be adjusted from moment to moment. Everything is in focus and controlled. Everything can be viewed at once but the artist can guide the viewer by emphasis, relating and by making steps that direct the eye this way and that.

Every part needs to be abstracted in order for it to be adjustable. Everything strong and then placed under control. Try something other than muting. While speaking you would not say clearly what you want to say and mumble the rest. Remove in the work what is not important. I do not know if I could have figured out yesterday what is clear today. What I do today is different than what I would have done yesterday. In this way slowness has a large impact. Slow looking, working quickly, day after day.

In an abstract work there is a better chance that each color shape is given full consideration. Some of these will combine to make larger, more dominant, complex shapes. This shape will likely contain a portion of the subject of the work. In a figurative work an abstract shape may be taken in by the eye before the subject is recognized. It might be an important part of the subject but likely not the entire subject. The subject cannot be separated entirely from the whole. This abstract shape must be interesting in itself. One problem, and a big one, in a figurative work could be that a prominent shape is not interesting abstractly. For example a prominent dark shape might make up a part of the model's clothing and start the journey to explore the other forms that make up the model with all this anchored within the shapes that make up the space around the model. The dominant abstract shape will start the journey that will explore the rest of the painting.

Take a painting done from life and do a collage after it. While doing this make several quick drawings of the painting. Let these be like quick notes. A few lines, just enough where if you were drawing from several different paintings you would be able to tell which drawing is of which painting but no more than that; so only what is necessary to identify which painting it was of. Starting with the blank canvas you start with one shape with four edges. The first mark transforms this shape and makes

things more complex. In collage you are actually cutting the forms that make up the edges of the work and therefore you are more likely to be aware of them and their importance.

Attraction to a subject needs to be of the entire space that holds the subject, not just the subject. It cannot be one object. Just as one must treat the painting as a whole one needs to be attracted to the whole. Make sure there is a painting there. The relationships together will determine the skin of the work, its overall color/light/atmosphere. The artist may not be aware of this until afterwards and when seeing the work again after some time has passed and viewing it in a different environment and in a different light. It is very hard for the artist to judge the work with a wet brush in the hand and a remembrance of all the stages the work has gone through. The painting must be seen away from where it was made. The teacher coming upon the students work still before the motif can only wonder how the student saw what he painted. Away from the motif the artist should never defend the painting by saying that was the way it was. If it was and is not working then it had to be reinvented.

Instead of presenting a still life in a gentle way; front of table, edge, flat plane with objects, and wall, throw the viewer into the objects. Instead of being frozen to one spot try moving around your subject little a sculptor would. This is different to what the Renaissance did with perspective where the line of perspective put the viewer in a stationary spot. The objects disappear into space instead of coming forward. Braque said it better - "The viewer can back away or come forward as with real objects."

Move around in the painting while you move from one color/value to another on the palette.

Pick three spots where a plane of color moves through the painting. Take for example a wall behind and between objects on a table. Let us say that the wall turns. Pick out one spot on the wall and compare it to another spot on the same wall, same plane and then another spot on the wall that has turned. The former spots will likely be in a closer range and where the wall has turned will be more of a jump in value. This will depend greatly on the lighting. If the painting demands it you will need to adjust the lights or invent what is necessary to create the turn. Likewise if painting a house or any cube shape, the light needs to strike one side more than the other or you will

not have the allusion of going around the corner but instead the form will be flattened out unless other means are applied.

The one brush method enables you to do the constant adjusting as opposed to making up a new color each time.

You can not make something out of nothing and you can not just go out and copy the landscape. Perception and invention must work together. On the radio the other day I heard Stephen Sondheim talking about his lyrics and was surprised that he uses a rhyming dictionary, but then it makes sense, like the artist who has things before him to pick and choose from and then to construct his invention.

Nuance is what happens while working on the large things in the painting.

Do not fall in love with parts. They amount to little on their own. It is only how they make up the whole.

Painting is like I am locked out and I am trying every door, looking through windows, trying to find a way in.

You can try as hard as you want, trouble is, what you are trying to do has little to do with what you will do. But if you fail you will possibly get something far more surprising, something you just invented.

Look at as much great art as you can. Still better find an artist whose work speaks to you and spend a long time looking. This may happen with different artist at different times.

Look at paintings that give permission to go where you were cautious.

There are many abstract painters who claim that their work is derived from life and many figurative painters who claim to be abstract. Of course they are both right.

To sit among the frescoes of Lorenzetti in the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena and paint abstractly is not a contradiction.