

BEHIND THE EASEL

F I L M S

EXPRESSIVE STILL LIFE | DANIEL SHADBOLT

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FLOWER ARRANGING	So they're auditioning, the subject matter has to audition. Don't like the colour – it's got to come out. Scared to touch it because these roses are just hanging in there, they're about to fall off. Don't like the colour – it's got to come out haha.
INTRO	My name's Daniel Shadbolt. I'm a painter and I studied at the Chelsea College of Art and Design and then at the Royal Drawing School.
DRAWING	I'm just trying to make contact with the closest part of the setup to me, which is the rose from the doorstep. The use of the drawing is to find your natural interest in your subject. For me the function of a line drawing before painting, it's mainly about organisation and it's a helpful...dress rehearsal.

	I really admire Alberto Giacometti's drawings and when you look closely at his quality of line, the mark is continuous. The implement for drawing doesn't really leave the page, it's trying to trace the movement of the eye. Which can almost be sort of involuntary or not willed, it just responds to what's in front of it. The line is a question actually rather than an instruction. It asks you what's happening on either side of that line and you have to make a decision in painting: what colour goes where. The importance of drawing can't be overestimated, it's always going to feed back into your painting and deepen your connection with your experience of the world through your observation.
PLEIN AIR LEARNINGS	What I learned from working outside was that everything was in motion continually. I knew that that tree branch wouldn't be where it was five minutes later. Rather than painting a specific branch I looked at the relationship between the colour of the branch and something else. Hopefully that would make a picture through colour relationships rather than linear description.
CANVAS	So, this canvas was a still life. Wildflowers in two different vessels. Even when I was painting it, I had the feeling that it wasn't going to result in a painting. Didn't stop me painting. Often, I'll sand back painting if it's dry and reprime with oil primer.
BASE	I want to establish the surface to help the subject rest. If the table is only seen or observed later then it can feel like an afterthought. So, I'm thinking about the tilt because whenever you're looking below eye level there's always some tilt. You'd have to be completely straight to trust a horizontal. So, I'm going to start painting
PALETTE	This is quite an extensive palette, titanium white, genuine naples yellow light, cadmium yellow pale, aureolin yellow, indian yellow, cadmium red, alizarin crimson, cobalt blue, cobalt green deep.
GROUND	I'm going to put a colour across the canvas to make it all a colour rather than working on the white. Colour harmony is what I'm striving for. Painting flowers from life offers up contrast of colour and variety of form unlike any other subject. Can hopefully lift off some of the light area.

COLOUR RELATIONSHIPS	Thinking about the greens and what I can do to create a variety of green structure within the composition. So, the green of the leaves, napkin taped to the wall. And the jug is also a blue-green. So rather than thinking about the objects and the shapes, thinking in terms of colour relationships throughout the composition. It's probably what I enjoy the most when painting - absorption in colour relationship, which is endless. Looking across the image and thinking abstractly about the shape and the colour and putting it on as simply as I can to try to organise the colour composition. Ultimately, it's trying to find the drawing through colour, which is what Cezanne talked about. He said that colour is drawing because it creates a sense of space when you observe it. Years ago, I went to see a Cezanne still life in New York. There was a way in the technique for a vividness to surface. It gave me the sense that I was seeing through Cézanne's eyes in a sort of literal way, which was quite eerie.
COLOUR CONTRAST	I'm trying to think in terms of colour contrast as much as I can, knowing that the colour contrast has a tonal implication. Approach the saturation gradually so that the pink isn't the pinkest pink at the beginning but becomes pinker as the painting goes on. Sometimes I would use the complementary green to make the pink less pink. On here I'm using the red yellow and blue to control the colour. Colour observation is best out of the corner of your eye, so if you're looking directly at something it's never going to show the colour as clearly as if you look at something and try to notice the colour beside it or a little bit away from that.
FORE, MID, BACKGROUND	Trying to think about layers, so a foreground and a mid-ground and the background. If the picture has no foreground then your viewer arrives at the subject or the mid-ground straight away. Often in classical still lifes you'll see some objects placed at the base of a composition. They might be an embellishment or a decoration but they're serving a function to slow the eye down and build up to the main subject. Going back to the 18th century, Chardin is the painter that really raised still life. The idea of a foreground is a way for the eye to accept the illusion of the space of the rest of the picture.

DIRECTNESS OF OBSERVATION	The thing to do is to draw what you're seeing without the filter of your knowledge or understanding. You know, you get the mark down as a response without the deliberation and cunning of thinking. And that directness, that search for getting that directness into a picture is something that interests me.
BACKSTORY	I don't think I decided "this is what I want to do." I just enjoyed doing it and kept doing it. I'm glad that I studied photography at A-level because it brought me to Francis Bacon at the Hayward Gallery in 1998. So we travelled to London to see a Henri Cartier-Bresson exhibition of photographs and there was a Francis Bacon exhibition on at the same time, and I was pulled across the room by these powerful canvases with their big gold frames that were sort of glinting across the gallery.
FREEDOM	When I was younger, I probably was a bit more chained to some sense of responsibility to an image, maybe tradition even. But now, I'm just wanting to feel free, free in terms of colour application.
DECISIONS	There are so many decisions from start to finish. It's necessary. It's continual. My question to myself is about shape and colour, and how can it work? It's composition. I know there's a very high key red rose which at the moment is coming so far to one side of the composition that it's got me reluctant to put it in. That's the continual search and audition. You know, everything that I'm seeing... wondering about including or resisting. Painting is a series of expressed preferences. So this colour rather than that, or this shape or mark. And ultimately the chief skill in painting is the editing process and decisions that you make. And it's all based on feeling.
WHOLE SURFACE	When I'm painting I'm thinking about the whole surface. It was Auerbach, he said that when he painted, he would attempt to get through the whole surface each session. If I get bound up in one area, the feeling of movement within the painting, it can suffer. Rotating the canvas makes you more aware of your choices, your distribution of colour within the composition.

	This looks very under visited. I thought I'd been there more than I had just because of the placement of a couple of colours and now I'm seeing that it doesn't feel involved with the rest of the composition so that's helpful to give me direction. Trying to steer things back towards the greens which I've not been so attentive to.
SKEWING RELATIONSHIPS	Subjects are connected to each other but even so you can do all sorts of things with placement and structure and sort of relationship between the various shapes and colours. I mean, the obvious example is Cezanne's painting with the boy in a red waistcoat. The boy's arm, which is in the foreground, it appears to us like an elephant's trunk. It's that elongated and swooping. Every painter can paint how they like.
MOVEMENT OF EYE	I feel when I'm painting that I am following a movement, at least possibility for movement and that's how you conduct the eye around the picture. I'm gonna add some fruit. I mean that's really doing something to the whole range of the tone. And that's a totally different colour note to anything else. It's not ideal, but it will do. If you bring a new colour into a composition then it creates a new problem haha. Adding to my problems with another problem. But when I turned the picture upside down, I thought that this area needed something to direct my eye there for long enough to observe some colour relationship that adds to the arrangement. I don't know if that plum challenges the greens or if it enriches them. But I generally will, more times than not, involve additions throughout to the point where then I remove and edit and paint over elements and simplify. Simplification is the target really to get to that. It's hard to start with something simple and for it to remain simple throughout. I like a lot of abstract painters because the courage to follow the paint and be intuitive with their mark making it can give you so much. Movement, colour, vivacity.
CANAL WALK BREAK	If I had to answer what was the best thing about painting. I would say it's the absorption in the activity.

	It's not that it's the only thing you're thinking about while you're working but it becomes the main problem. I say to people that if painting is their biggest problem, then life must be good.
CRITIQUE	So now I want to be critical and say what isn't working. The lack of drawing in the painting is what is giving me a shock. I shall try to think better about the shape and composition. Rather than panic, I just want to acknowledge the impact of the shapes and colours that aren't yet included.
PUZZLE	It's a kind of puzzle - not only have you got to solve the puzzle by developing the painting - you're creating the puzzle. Sometimes I do get stumped by knowing what to do and it's okay to just wait. I think Cezanne wrote about spending 20 minutes between brushstrokes, which is extreme. Too pale. So I know that Viridian is livelier than Cobalt Green Deep and sometimes the liveliness is what you want, sometimes it isn't.
MARK MAKING AND DISRUPTION	I'm trying to use a mark to remove the paint because the paint's quite thick and wet and the drawing is an attempt to hold on to the position of something. The lovely thing about oil paint is the surface is malleable and it leaves every trace. Seven times out of ten, I think, after applying paint, I would probably disrupt that mark in some way, whether it's using kitchen towel or a piece of cotton pressing lightly or the more dramatic sort of pushing of paint, perhaps corduroy or something with a bit more tooth. Some element of disruption of the mark keeps the surface of the picture alive in a different way to accumulation of steady intended marks. More brushes. These are my holy sables. I like sable brushes I use them for watercolor more, but I quite like to paint in oil with them. The flick and the handling, you can vary the pressure. If I switch to a hog - try to paint a similar... then the mark is less responsive. So the importance of varied mark and application of paint is the cumulative effect that hopefully gives that sort of flicker of colour and movement.

TEA BREAK	The colours in an arrangement of flowers are so varied. Inside that peony - there's no colour like that, it's absolutely phenomenal, that intensity. It's like a drug, this continual bounce between the colour and their relationship. The job of referencing that into my picture is never ending. The hope is that something of the variety and richness can be approached.
SMALL BRUSH	So I often come back to the small brush, which is a bit of a crutch for me. Because it's a smaller note of colour so I somehow believe that the mark I make will be more, will appear more accurate. So it gives me some sort of confidence, strangely.
RED ROSE	Most of the time if I put a colour down I will then probably remove a bit of colour, because the amount of a colour has as much importance as the actual colour. I like to vary the consistency of colour with the use of a medium, so if I'm wanting to make an intense colour something like that sort of flaming quality of the rose. If the colour is more transparent, some of the light from underneath can come through it. So this is stand oil which is quite thick, it's like a honey. It's not as fluid as linseed oil. It gives you great control to get just the right transparency because if the colour is heavy and neat it's going to be darker. It's having control with colour and if you're going to try and paint a red rose then you need all the help you can get.
TRUST THE PAINT	You have to doubt your handling, your choices about the subject and everything about your process but if there's one thing maybe you can trust, it's the paint itself and your manipulation of the stuff of paint. Painters I think have a vocabulary of marks. For a certain amount it's intuitive because it's so much of chance. For me, it's not the case of making a mark and the mark being beautiful. I don't think that ever happens because it's always the chaotic connection of applications So much of the facility that a painter might have is taken from the time spent painting, the experimentation, the memory of combination of pigment, brush, consistency. And it's probably like working with actors you know something might happen that wasn't in the script. Happy accidents are at the root of a lot of art innovation. This is your cast and you might know who the star is! For me this is my star: Cobalt Blue. So's the genuine Naples yellow light perhaps every director would have three primary actors that they can make combinations from.

COHESION	There's no one piece of the mosaic, if you like, of colour that is more important than another - even if it's loud or saturated or high key. The function is the cohesion and unity and impact.
MANAGING YOURSELF	Making a painting, yes, you're balancing the job of arranging colour, applying colour, taking colour off but you're also managing yourself and your own thoughts to some degree. I'm reluctant to admit pleasure. If it's pleasure, or like self-satisfaction because that's... You know you just got to be wary of any... I mean, I'm vain enough, I'm vain enough to keep painting haha. This is going a funny way!
RED ROSE PROBLEM	Okay, so coming back to the picture. The red is a strong statement. I know from experience the pull towards the edge of a canvas can be problematic. So, the red rose that's taking away from the overall composition. So, another way to balance is to find equivalent strength in the composition. Something like the forms of these definite flowers, it would feel a shame not to acknowledge them further in the description. A clean brush and clean colour should make the impact that I'm after for this rose that's about to fall. A warm light. Cadmium red, genuine Naples yellow light and titanium white. Because I reduce contrast consciously usually at the outset of the painting working with mid-tones. I almost have to remind myself to push the contrast and to give it a lift sometimes.
DAHLIA	I'm wanting the inside of this dahlia to get greener and yellower so I'm using the lemon yellow. I want this green to relate to but be different to the leaf of the hydrangea.
DEPTH	The colour contrasts in this area in between the delicate reflective forms is intended to appear as depth. The colour contrast reminds me of visiting the Grand Canyon. The strata all appears horizontal but it's, in space visually, it's several kilometres I think receding in front of you so all you see is a slight shift in the sort of quality of the colour of the strata. So I've got my marble canyon here between this rose and those peonies. That's got to be bordering on pretension doesn't it? "Bordering" that's like way into pretension isn't it? Sort of three miles into the zone.
PALETTE KNIFE	So when the layers build up in the picture, the brush as a tool is always melding with what's underneath. So the palette knife after a time can be useful because your colour application is cleaner.

	You know if I slide this onto the canvas it's not going to pull up what's already on the canvas. Only in the last couple of years have I started to enjoy having the variety of palette knives can do for the painting. I think when I rotated the picture earlier, I thought this brown was a bit too much so I'm just reducing the size, the area of it.
TIP	Not coming from an art background, when I was at art school, I was in awe of the other artists. I would wander around the Chelsea painting studios, it was very inspiring. If there was something that I could have known sooner. It's not having any fear about reaching out to other artists who are usually the most generous help. I was helped by people with their time and ideas.
TEAL	There is yet another colour that I'm starting to think about, cobalt teal for this jug. I never regretted spending money on flowers or art materials
BIG BRUSH	If I start making too many small touches pick up a big brush and find an area where I can make a difference of colour. And it becomes your responsibility to upset something within the arrangement.
LOOKING IN MIRROR	Yeah, I think the right-hand side, the side with the red rose is confused. Or different at least to the other side, so I think I'm going to simplify the composition and unify the background colour. The idea now is, if I took a strip of the green and placed it further to the right. I'll go to a restaurant for the serviette, the colour of their serviette. Really, it's just changing the colour of this area. It might work, it might not. So, I'll be prepared to do it and then undo it.
FAN BRUSH	Where is it? Here it is. Ha. I only learned the use of this last year. You use the fan brush to soften the appearance of the brush mark. A couple more touches of this on the other side.
LIGHTENING THE DAHLIA	Ok, trying to come back to the centre of the picture remembering the intention from earlier to develop the description of the various flowers. So, pelargonium, rose, dahlia. I love cobalt yellow, aureolin yellow and it's transparent. There's no pigment like it, just the way it moves and to combine it with lemon yellow, touch of viridian green light.

	Remembering the contrast, the light of the dahlia had been missing.
FINISHING PROCESS	I usually judge the progress of the picture by the variety of colour on the palette, the mixtures and I think it's going ok. Over time your stopping process becomes calmer and slower. It's more like slowing down, because you're judging the impact of the additional brush marks. Question the application of paint to the point where you are thinking "was that necessary? Was that really necessary?" You can try photographing a picture as you're going along and then you look back and you might think "oh yeah, I liked that painting before I did this to it, or before I did that to it." And that's one way to try to have a hunch about what you're going to think about the image in the future. The difficulty of finishing a picture is just being predictive. You're predicting: "oh yeah in the future I think I'm going to look at this and not think, oh I should have done this or should have done that or..." so you're trying to think ahead.
ADDING DRIED DAHLIA	This isn't as developed as I would like it to be. There's no form here, this dried dahlia. It's not doing much - maybe I'll take one of these ones. That's a better colour. That now is relating to some of the main arrangement.
PUSHING THE TONAL STRUCTURE	Having a tonal structure for the picture you know this sense of the light inside here and then the light here and here. I'm just going to take away the bowl and see the space behind it. So now I think if I can describe the light here, it would help a sense of space in front of this jug. I've seen a couple more things that I can hopefully play around with. Oops. Yes, I'm going to lay that down now.
ADDING A FINAL STRUCTURAL ELEMENT	Um, the front corner of the table I didn't think it was creating enough of the space that I wanted it to. I go through stages of trying out different possible variations so I'm trying out the scissors on the corner of the table. It's enough of a marker to the eye in that part of the picture, hopefully to keep the eye moving around.
FINISHING	Too grey, too...soupy. Yeah, it's all sliding around cos it's all wet in wet. I'll try and get some of this leaf colour in front of the jug. Far too dark.

	It's the old scabia that's dried in the front, has some pink in it that connects to the peonies. It's just enough colour to flick the eye around. I could put more light here. That might be like an area of rest for the eye, since I removed the bowl. Hmm we're not sure about that. Wavering.... Ugh just adding to the mess hahahaha. It doesn't take much to lose any sense of structure. OK I'll stop there. Yeah stop, stop. Stop thinking about it hahaha.
END THOUGHTS	It's always a forward movement, the challenge of painting because every day you have to begin and until you do, you haven't begun. So, it's never ending as a challenge.