

Patterns and texture in the landscape

Caroline Saunders talks to colourist **Nick Andrew** about his use of bold, vigorous brushstrokes and vibrant colours to express atmosphere, motion, vitality and freshness in his acrylic landscapes

Drawn to secret and secluded places, Nick Andrew finds the constantly changing life, light and weather captivating and exhilarating. From his studio close to the banks of the River Wylye in south Wiltshire, he explores the nearby water meadows, lakes, forest and especially the river, in all seasons and at all times of day.

'My paintings are as much about the physicality of the paint and surface as they are about the subject. I love looking for textures and repeat patterns, which often become included and defined in the painting.' By translating the subject into physical movements or gestures that leave their

evidence as marks and strokes of paint, Nick aims to portray an idea of the place rather than an accurate representation.

Preparation

To familiarise himself with a location he takes a sketchbook, a black biro or Uni-ball pen, white correction fluid pen, Neocolor crayons and watercolours. 'My favourite time of year is October to May, a time of transitions and visual drama. Early mornings or evenings, when the sun is low and the light has a golden tint with deepened contrasts, are most stimulating.' In the studio Nick works from a scribbled design sketch

based on references taken from sketchbooks, photographs and previous paintings along with his own visual memories of the subject. 'Working in this way allows me much more freedom in putting together an idea and capturing transitory effects.'

Nick enjoys the process of stretching his own canvases. He applies about three coats of acrylic primer, sanding in between coats. 'This produces a smoother and, for me, a more exciting surface, where the fluid paint will flow, diffuse and flocculate.' With the canvas flat on the studio floor Nick starts by wetting with a water spray and then floods fluid acrylic paint onto the surface using an old decorating brush. 'I allow the colour to move and diffuse and dry before rewetting the surface and laying in further layers. The result is a surface of built-up stained colour. The canvas is then hung on the wall, where I can start to build it up with broad marks; I use movements from my shoulder and whole arm. An unpredictable and natural-looking broken mark is achieved using a partially worn, one to three inch decorator's brush. 'Sometimes I scratch a pattern, texture or shape into the wet

▲ *Nettle Patch Shear Join*, acrylic on canvas, 26×26in (66×66cm).

'I love the way the movement and textures of the river are overlaid by the shapes of plant stems and foliage, creating an even more complex abstract pattern. This design was laid out on a wet canvas with thin red and yellow-browns. Broad strokes of heavier paint established the blocks of trees, riverbank and reflections. Leaf shapes in pale green and yellow tints were swiftly applied with a medium decorator's brush and fingers. I also scratched into the surface with the end of the brush. Finer watercolour brushes were used for the stem, reed and twig lines.'

paint. At a later stage I build textures and make specific marks and lines with heavier, more opaque paint, using a range of bristle and watercolour brushes. I allow the brushmarks to follow the directions of movement in the painting.' At the outset Nick is never really sure how a painting will evolve. 'The process is largely intuitive and involves a large amount of standing back from the canvas—analysing, correcting, despairing and reworking!'

'For my smaller studies I make up marouflage boards: coating 8mm plywood or MDF with acrylic primer, then applying canvas so that it sticks to the primer, stretching it around and stapling at the back. I then prime over

the top. This gives a good firm surface for painting on, but also it can be drawn or scratched into. When I work on paper, it is usually on sheets of Khadi paper (Indian cotton rag) which I do not prime as I love the uncertainty of the surface.'

Interest and design

Often Nick's design pivots around a tiny moment of light and contrast which can only be recorded with a camera. The quality of the picture is not important as he does not work slavishly from photographs; they just act as a reminder of patterns, textures and colours. Sometimes he plays around with the image in Photoshop,

experimenting with colour and composition.

The point of entry into the painting is often an element that caught Nick's eye, possibly a transitory play of light on riverbank reeds, or a strong shadow on a woodland path. 'I might accentuate the contrast at the point of entry to attract the eye but then also heighten colours and contrasts in other aspects around the painting to unsettle the eye and keep it moving. Square formats present an interesting abstract challenge. They have to work as a surface arrangement of shapes, marks and colour, which guide the eye around the space. I look for ways of creating receding planes and softening colours to imply depth.' Nick also enjoys working on landscape-format pieces (often close to a double-square proportion). 'The eye has a tendency to swing side to side in this format, so to interrupt this I use vertical marks, or exaggerate close and distant features. It is interesting how the image

compresses more acutely when it is viewed progressively from the side.' As well as the overall impact of the piece, Nick likes to have enough interest for the viewer, so that there is always something new to discover.

Colour themes

The exploration of colour is a main preoccupation. Every painting has a colour theme, so that he can play with the relationship between those colours. The pigments he uses are found from a range of primaries and secondaries (no tertiaries, earths or black). 'I usually use warm colours – anything from cadmium yellow through to crimson in my underpainting and to block in the composition. This is especially valuable when the subject is fairly cool, involving predominantly blues and greens because an undercurrent of warmth filters through.'

As a painting begins to take off, he gravitates towards limited colour themes, based on the subject, time of

day and the mood he wants to convey. 'I might work predominantly with a combination of violets and green yellow, which can be used next to each other to create contrast and attract the eye. I mix them in varying proportions and with white to create coloured neutrals and tints. Of course, I bring other colours in too, but always with hints of yellow or violet added.'

Nick uses Spectrum acrylics, which he says are the best colours he's found. 'They permit a range of working methods from fluid and wet-into-wet, through to moderate body.' His colour palette consists of titanium white, alizarin crimson, cadmium red, cadmium yellow deep, Spectrum lemon yellow, Spectrum phthalo green, cerulean blue, ultramarine and Spectrum violet (dioxazine). Nick uses oils from time to time, sometimes on their own or laid over acrylics if he wants that particular brightness and inner luminescence that can only be achieved using oil paint.



▲ *Clover, Buttercup and Horse Straw Burning*, acrylic on canvas, 24×24in (61×61cm). 'Sunlight filters through and illuminates the column of smoke, the diffusion of which gives a sense of the slightest summer breeze. A wet underpainting of pinks and yellow-orange was swiftly worked into with broad brushmarks of violet and violet-green mixes. This established the pattern of darks leading across this undulating meadow towards the dark tree masses. Brush flicks of pale green tints were used for the grasses and brush, stick or finger stabs of pure yellow and violet were used for the flowers. A light blue tint was lightly scumbled and rubbed with my fingertips.'



▲ *August Thistle Bank*, acrylic on canvas, 26×26in (66×66cm). 'I wanted to describe the contrasts between the sharpness of thistle and leaf patterning and the textural softness of the seed heads. The design was worked out in a tonal sketch, then mapped out with broad washes of dilute red and orange acrylic mixes on a wet canvas. The painting was developed using large, worn decorator's brushes. The red-violet and green colour scheme expresses the mood of late summer, with warmer colours worked into the background and foliage. The purple taken from thistles into the water and distant trees help to direct the viewer's eye around the image.'



Nick Andrew

Since graduating in Fine Art at Gloucestershire College of Art Nick Andrew has exhibited widely, in galleries and at events throughout the UK, mainland Europe and the USA. He has paintings in a range of public and private collections including many hospitals, Scottish Equitable, Shell UK, Lloyd's Bank, Weetabix, North Sea Ferries, Cable and Wireless, Hilton International, Texaco, Hampshire County Council, Houses of Parliament, Longleat Estate, Sainsbury's and Prudential. Nick is the founder of, and a former co-ordinator, for the Wylye Valley Art Trail. For more information, see www.nickandrew.co.uk and <https://nickandrewblog.wordpress.com>