

Painting still life is a relatively new subject for me. I began about 3 years ago, effectively starting from a blank canvas (couldn't resist the pun), in terms of my know-how. I'm a great believer in working to a process through a series of stages. I do this because I can adjust my approach to any stage of the process, rather than changing the way I do a whole picture where I can't really isolate what has and hasn't worked.

The other advantage of a process is that I can concentrate more on creating the picture I want without having to think too much about how I will paint it.

So how did I go about developing my approach? Firstly I thought about how I had tackled things like cloth, jewellery and wooden chairs in my portraits. I always started with a monotone underpainting and worked the colour over the top and I knew the usefulness of this approach. However I felt I needed to think it through more.

Light and shadow has always been important to me in my work, so I began thinking about how it actually works. My conclusion was as follows: The actual object in its purest form never changes underneath the shadow and light, they each affect the object superficially from the outside. Therefore why not just paint the object without the influence of light and shadow, then add them afterwards, effectively mirroring what happens in reality. I also knew that I wanted to use an underpainting, but a neutral monotone such as paynes grey or raw umber seemed a bit unnecessary. I use those colours for portraits because they occur naturally in a face, but not so in a still life. So I decided to begin the painting with a wash of colour over the drawing, that was the dominant colour in the picture. After these decisions were made, it was just a matter of refining my technique.

Negative space

One of the best ways to manage what you can see is to draw the negative space around an object this stops you from making assumptions about a shape. An easy way to do this is to draw a box around an object that touches it at its extremities. Using a reference photograph with the objects at the same size as you want to draw them on the canvas is ideal.

If you are drawing from life, cutting an aperture in a piece of card to the same ratio as your canvas is a useful tool. You can then position it as close to the objects as you need in order to draw them to the size you want on the canvas. I use a tripod and sellotape to position it. It is a bit Heath Robinson but with a bit of patience it can be done. I throw the card away once I begin painting as it just gets in the way.

Let's take painting a still life from a photograph as an example. If you draw a box around an object on your photograph, and replicate it on your canvas, you will be able to see its real form. Drawing negative shapes rather than the object itself makes it much easier to be accurate because it takes assumption away.

Photography

I use the same camera settings on all of my subjects - 'A' for aperture, usually on the top dial of the camera, ISO 200 / 400, f5.6 and RAW files.

RAW files are the very best quality, TIFF second and j.peg third. You will also need software to view and edit your picture. The best software for this is Adobe Lightroom in my opinion. It costs around £90 and can do a range of things to edit your picture which are really useful. Note: it is best to convert RAW files to either TIFF or J.peg once you have edited your picture. For online use I use 1500 pixel dimensions (over the shortest edge) with a dpi of 120 - online displays images at 72 dpi.

A tripod is essential for getting crisp and clear photographs.

Lighting

I always use a single light source, ideally a daylight bulb, with all other surrounding lights turned off. I also use single source natural daylight in conjunction with this. I block out all other windows. I then take a series

pictures using bracketed settings to vary the light and darkness of shots. It is best to consult your camera manual to learn how to do this, as every camera is different.

I place my objects inside of a dark cardboard box with one side and the bottom cut out. You can then move the box to allow more or less light to penetrate the set up. I also use an aluminium canape tray to reflect light onto the darkest side of objects to add a subtle bit of reflected light onto the darkest side of objects to add a bit of modelling. You will need to experiment with this to get the best results. I know this all sounds complicated but once you have mastered the approach you will get superb pictures to work from.

I use the same set up when painting from life, however you need to remember that as the natural light changes it will affect the composition. I always take a few reference photos to help.

Photographing finished pictures

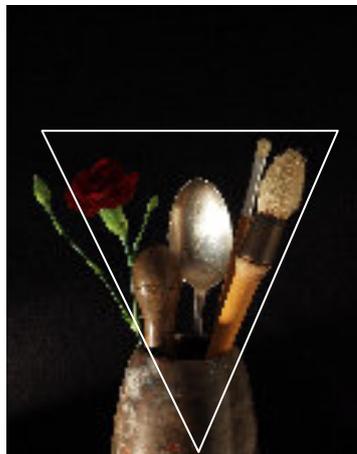
You will read many different approaches to this, all of which vary in success depending upon how glossy the picture is. If the glossiness is patchy I give the picture a single coat of retouching varnish to even it out. Dark colours are particularly difficult. My method is simple and reasonably effective. I sit the picture with the bottom edge sloping away from me. This helps to block out the light from above. I then move the camera up and down until I have eliminated reflections. If too much light is coming in from the side I hold a large piece of board to block it out. Using my camera settings as described above, the camera will automatically adjust the shutter speed to compensate. The end result is a distorted picture, however with Lightroom and Photoshop there are horizontal and vertical plain settings to straighten it up.

Composition

The simplest way to achieve a good composition is to create a triangle with the objects. You can also divide the picture into two or three horizontal / vertical segments and place the composition within them - the result works well. There are a number of other compositional theories that you can read online.



A reference photograph taken using the settings described earlier

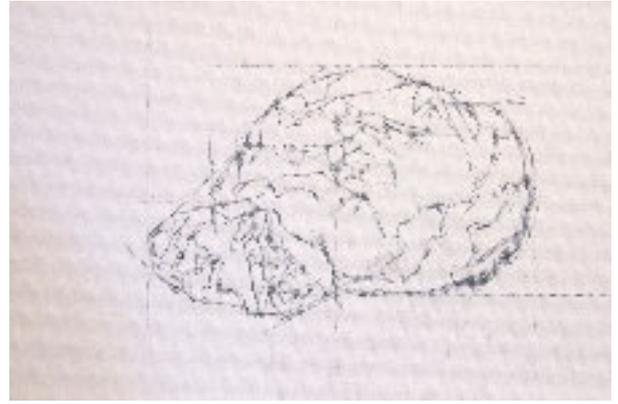
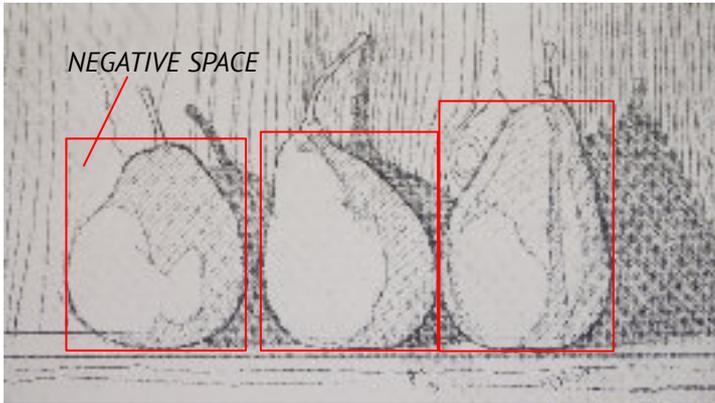


Using a triangle composition

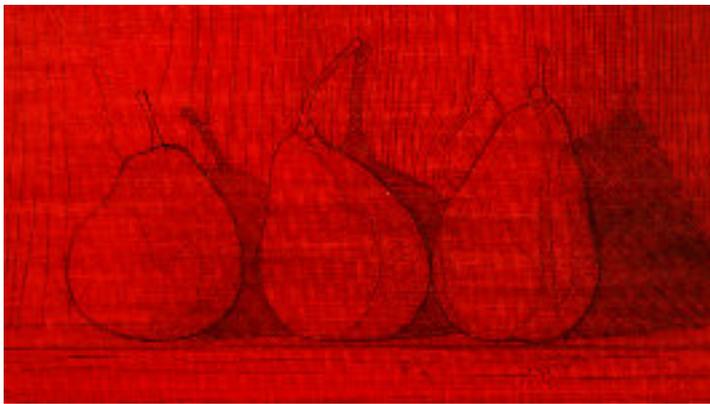
Below left: photographed with the base of the picture sloping back.

Below: The picture vertically aligned in Lightroom with the darks and lights corrected.





I use a 2b pencil for the drawing direct onto the canvas. I then draw boxes around the objects in my reference picture and replicate them on the drawing. This allows me to draw the negative space to get the right shapes. The drawing is effectively a blueprint for the painting, much like an architect's plan and as such what I am interested in are the shapes and planes that make up the structure. I don't need a lot of detail at this point. One of the great things about still life is that it isn't necessary to produce a 'perfect' likeness, and I will often change the outline shapes as I see fit, once I have the basic drawing completed.



Being a warm picture I painted a wash of cadmium red over the whole canvas in acrylic. I tend to wash the canvas with the dominant colour / hue within any painting. The acrylic seals the pencil in place. For the rock and roll I used a thin raw umber.



Continuing with the acrylics I paint the shapes and planes in flat colour. For the pears I painted the woodgrain in lines using raw umber and then washed the background with burnt sienna. For the green I used sap green, cad yellow and white. For the red on the pears I added a touch of white and cad yellow to red in order to create a semi opaque colour. The shadows behind the pears were painted using raw umber, and black. It was applied dark enough to create depth and let the red underneath show through a little. The shadows on the pears themselves were a thin coat of raw umber.

The rock and roll were painted using burnt sienna, cadmium red, yellow ochre, white, paynes grey, black and raw umber.



I repeat the last stage using oils with a few amendments. With the wood background I glaze over the whole area with raw umber to temper the red,. I use a cotton bud to wipe out areas in the grain. I then paint in more wood details using raw umber with a touch of black.. I strengthen the shadows and add the speckles to the pears using raw umber and black. I let the painting dry before adding another dark glaze to the shadows and painting in the final highlights. To begin the highlights I add a small dot of white and lemon yellow then blend it outwards to create a soft edge. I then add another dot of pure white and soften the edges, keeping this area well within the previous layer.

As often happens with paintings I decided I didn't like the wood background so decided to change the colour and knock back the grain. To do this I painted a semi opaque layer of alizarin red, ultramarine and raw umber to stop the colour being too strong. I made the paint thick enough to just see the wood grain underneath.. I then tinted the dark background shadow with the same mix plus black. I put this final glaze on much thinner as the shadow only needed tinting. For the lighter ledge I used the same mix with the addition of white. I then felt I needed to boost the colours on the pears so painted a very thin glaze of cadmium red over the warmer areas and lemon yellow over the green. Finally I added a touch more white into the centre of the highlights.



With the rock and roll picture I glaze the rock with raw umber and black before adding the speckles with white and a touch of raw umber to take the starkness out. I then glaze the roll with burnt sienna and raw umber. once again using a cotton bud to take out the highlights. For the darker area on the roll (burnt top and shadows) I add more raw sienna and black to the glaze. I then paint in the detail using the same colours as the acrylic stage. Finally I add white highlights to the fluffy white of the bread and paint a flat white and raw umber over the background.



PAINTING 'INCIDER' REFLECTIONS

I took three photographs to work from on this painting, and put the picture together as I painted. The bottle on it's own for the outer highlights, the apples inside a spaghetti jar, and a few apples on their own.

The picture was painted using the same process as previous. The background acrylic wash was paynes grey to give the bottle a darker area to paint over.



I decided to use natural daylight, without placing the objects inside a box, as I didn't want strong darks. Adding these later was the plan as I knew I would have to make a lot of this picture up.



I felt the highlights on this picture were too busy and so decided to simplify them.



At the acrylic stage I added the highlights using thin transparent colours of white, raw umber, yellow ochre and burnt sienna.



With the oils I strengthened the shadows using black and raw umber, whilst also simplifying the highlights. I then painted the highlights and halos back in using light glazes, let the paint dry and then restated the highlights with thicker paint



Unlike the neck of the bottle, the base highlights were not strong enough.



I painted the acrylics in the same way as described earlier. The wood grain was painted in a flat raw umber / burnt sienna acrylic with the grain and shadows added on top.



As above I glazed the shadows with black and raw umber, working it lightly over the apples. I then painted the highlights stronger and crisper than the original photograph.

PAINTING REFLECTIVE SURFACES

I often hear people say that glass and metal must be very hard to do. They aren't as long as you follow a few simple guidelines.

Firstly, don't try to replicate in great detail what you see on the reference photo. As long as the surface looks reflective and the light is coming from the right direction it will look great. Secondly, edit what you see. I often find that photos have too many highlights and so take out some to stop the 'busyness'. Thirdly think about the way highlights actually appear on the surface. They have dispersed edge looking up at the stars you will see a bright point of light and a halo around it. When light hits a reflective surface the same occurs. However the halo may be

subtle or extreme depending upon how close the light source is to the surface. A light really close to the surface will appear sharper and more defined. Finally, don't be in a hurry to paint the full highlight build up to it over a series of layers. Patience is key!



The photograph above was taken using the settings described earlier. The painting on the right was done from this.

I painted this in acrylics first using the same process described, however I completely ignored the highlights until the very end of the acrylics. I put them on in a transparent white acrylic just to be sure about where I wanted them.

Using oils I completed the painting making a few artistic decisions along the way. In particular I wanted to strengthen the vibrancy of the colours.

I then repainted the highlights in a semi opaque white oil, softening the edges before letting the picture dry.

Once dry I painted thin glazes of colour over the different reflections, using the white underneath to keep them bright - ultramarine blue, burnt sienna for the warmer highlights and raw umber and white for the lightest highlights. Once again I 'haloed' the edges using a soft sable. I then added thicker paint into the centre of each highlight to create a bright centre. The blue glaze was still wet so I used pure white which when softly spread out picked up the blue tint. On top of the burnt sienna I used cad yellow and white, and the brightest highlights were pure white softened into the raw umber.



The tankard below was painted slightly differently from the glass. I used a raw umber / burnt sienna mix for the acrylic wash, in order to capture the warmer reflections in the metal.

The tankard was then painted to a more finished state in acrylics. I used raw umber, paynes grey and white to do this. The lighter reflections were painted with thicker paint.

Over the top of this I just used oil glazes over the acrylics to add the colours in the reflections. I then used a raw umber and black glaze to strengthen the shadows before painting in the final lightest highlights

