

The Delights of Using Oil

The sheer intensity of light in the Red Centre threw John Wilson for a loop, until he spent time working out the logic of colour, light, atmosphere and terrain. Then he looked beyond the visual to feel as well as see.

BY JOHN WILSON

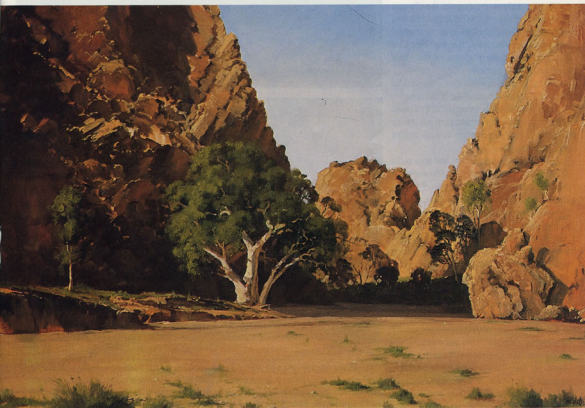
It was a beautiful clear autumn morning when I boarded Flight 86-Sydney to Alice Springs. Already stowed in the cargo hold were three drying boxes filled with fifty or so blank canvases. Hand luggage was my old French box easel, bulging with extra paint and brushes. I was embarking on a painting trip to the Macdonnell Ranges of Central Australia.



"Sunrise Ormiston Gorge"

One of only a few paintings from this trip showing the moist atmosphere of early morning. This was painted in the upper reaches of Ormiston Gorge in the western Macdonnells over a three day period, as the early morning atmosphere would quickly evaporate as the sun rose. It was difficult to convey the feeling of being totally surrounded by the towering bluffs.

Colour on the Hot Side!



"Emily Gap from the North"

Emily Gap is usually filled with water. This painting is from the north on the Undoolya station side during the Dry. It was painted from the shade of an old ghost gum, but even so it was like working in a blast furnace. A good supply of water is an important part of your painting kit in this country. Note the glow of the reflected light in the shadow areas of the left hand rock face.

I am sure some people think professional artists just sit down and paint brilliant pictures. Of course this is not so. A successful painting is directly related to the amount of thought before and during the painting. Each new subject or area has its own set of problems that have to be placed into an understandable order.

So on arrival the following day, my first task was to logically sort out the physics of the light, atmosphere and terrain of the area.

I believe that if you are to paint a good picture you must have sufficient understanding of the subject.

It took me at least three days of painting and studying before the penny dropped—being closer to the sun, in an atmosphere totally free of water particles and pollution, the intensity of light was much stronger than I had encountered before.

My other main observation was the vibrance and warmth of the reflected light that bounced everywhere. All the shadow areas were lit up with tremendous intensity. This was magnified by the complementary greens of the ghost gums and local vegetation.

Vibrant blue skies were also enhanced by being next to the oranges of the landscape.

After analysing this information I decided that the painting trip would certainly be an exercise in complementaries! Greens against reds; oranges against blues.

Armed with this information and after some deliberation I chose a palette I felt would be the closest to what I was seeing and feeling. Those colours were: Cerulean Blue, French Ultramarine Blue, Indian Yellow, Cadmium Yellow Pale, Cadmium Yellow Deep, Mars Yellow, Scarlet, Vermilion, Cadmium Red, Indian Red, Mars Red, Viridian, Burnt Sienna and Titanium White. Definitely a palette on the hot side.

Having dealt with the practicalities of the craft side of painting, it was now time to move to the more important intangibles.

Sometimes our visualisations are totally surprised by unknown forms and views.

The next time you are preparing to paint or sketch try this. Take a moment to unclutter your mind. Lay back as it were and let your eyes wander over the scene without any verbiage—without any notions. Humming a non-verbal tune is a good way to quieten the talkative left brain so you can let the right hemisphere work without interference. Allow

A thin start

The main shapes were sketched in using a transparent mix of French Ultramarine Blue and Indian Red. The rock faces were then blocked in with semi-transparent washes of Indian Red, Mars Red, Cadmium Red, Rose Madder and French Ultramarine Blue. The shadow areas of foliage were painted using Burnt Sienna and Viridian. I deliberately kept the paint very thin at this early stage so that alterations could be made easily, without the risk of making mud. Notice the strong but simple abstract composition using three interlocking triangles and a rectangular foreground.



Reflective light at work

Highlights and reflected lights were worked into the rock faces. The tree trunks were roughly positioned and a small amount of colour placed in the foreground, to check the relationships of colours and tones. The sky was also blocked in using Cerulean Blue, with a subtle gradation to the base. This was achieved by progressively adding more Titanium White, Scarlet Vermilion and Indian Yellow. In actual fact, the base of the sky in the painting is a very light orange-blue colour. This was caused by the brightly lit orange ground reflecting its colour back into the dust particles of the lower sky.

Rich colour developing

More refinement now in the shadow areas of the middle distance rocks and erosion. The foreground was blocked in using Mars Red, Mars Yellow and Titanium White.



"Midday at Undoolya Creek"

Highlights were added to the foliage of the ghost gums and the suggestion of branches painted back in. Foreground composition was refined further. The urge to put in more detail had to be restrained. Time to stop and consider. It's so easy to overstate.

yourself the luxury of enjoying mere sensations: the lean of a tree, the turn of a leaf, the colours, the textures, the forms and values as they intermingle with themselves and with you.

More than likely you will have looked and reflected more deeply than you knew was possible. You will have looked beyond the visual and felt as well as seen.

So on to painting. Squinting at the scene eliminates detail so you can see only the tones and shapes. With eyes almost closed, pick out the main shapes and transpose them onto the canvas. Squinting again, with eyes almost closed, try to pick the general tone and colour of the main shapes.

Try to get at least one or two of these correct. If you do, you can use them as references to adjust further tones and colours in the painting. Once the main abstract shapes are blocked in, you can usually tell if your painting is going to work.

This technique was particularly useful for working in the Macdonnells. Many of the rock formations were so complex that if one did not simplify in this way they would be almost impossible to paint. Once the main shapes were blocked in I set about making the subtle adjustments needed to tone and colour within these areas, working in the reflected lights that seemed to be endless. Even the darkest shadow areas were saturated with light. Some highlights were so intense it was often difficult to pick their correct colours.

So far most of this article has been devoted to the practicalities of painting. The making of logical decisions relating to atmosphere, physics of the light and choice of palette. This is only a prelude to the main event—the painting of the picture! If the groundwork is done well, the mind is then free to concentrate totally on the interpretation and feel of the subject.

Some artists can be obsessed by technicalities and craft and they produce slick pictures—sterile statements of their ability. Others may be full of feeling and creativity but fail through lack of technical expertise. Good paintings, whether contemporary or traditional, are the result of creative ideas executed with competence.

So when you are confronted with new and unusual scenes, spend time searching out the physics, but also spend more time becoming involved with your subject. Creative expression ignited by the excitement of a new subject is testimony to our own individuality. □

ABOUT THE ARTIST

John Wilson is a professional artist living at Katoomba in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney. He is an exhibiting member of the Royal Art Society of New South Wales, and a founding member of the Society of Mountain Artists.

His works have been extensively published, including the fine art book "John Wilson Blue Mountains Artist". Today his paintings are represented in collections throughout Australia and overseas. He has had 14 solo exhibitions and over 20 shared exhibitions.

He is presently working on paintings for his 15th major exhibition opening 10th October 1992 at the Resort Hotel Leura.

John's studio-gallery is at 46 Narrow Neck Road, Katoomba. The gallery is open every Sunday where selected works are available to the general public. (047) 823 703.

"Near Corroboree Rock" — Oil sketch

This was a quick forty-minute on-location study. I was taken by the vibrance of the reflected lights that transformed the rock formation into a glowing, ember-like protrusion.

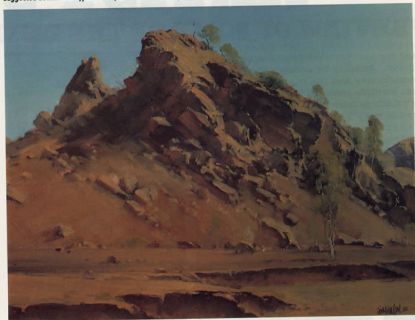


"Afternoon at Emily Gap"

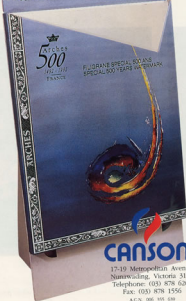
This picture was painted from the south over a three hour period one afternoon. It has a higher degree of finish when compared with the oil sketches.

"Rock Formations-Temple Bar" — Oil sketch

Another on-location oil sketch that is almost a direct light painting. I painted this quickly using large brushes and only suggested detail. This type of study is ideal for development into a larger painting.



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