

# Loosen up by simplifying

Advice from **Steve Griggs** on how to evaluate and simplify a scene by making a simple shapes and value diagram from which you can develop a loose watercolour painting



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In my early days as a painter I would often paint full of anticipation, but with less than satisfying results. I would find a beautiful *plein-air* location or a lovely reference photo that held the promise of inspiring artwork but after hours of effort my paintings lacked the looseness, movement, and emotion I had intended. I couldn't understand why, with so much beauty before me, I wasn't able to capture what I wanted. Somehow my paintings kept missing the mark. While I was technically able to capture the scene, my desire was to move the painting further and to infuse it with feeling. But how?

Determined to solve the mystery, I focused my attention on what I was feeling and experiencing when I painted, and then I dug a little deeper to understand how the experience was affecting me physically and emotionally. What I came to realise was that, for my particular style of painting, trying to capture too many elements or too much detail was what often made my paintings lack the looseness I desired.

## Observation

The first thing I learned to do when

developing a painting is to simply stop and observe. Rather than setting up my easel and beginning to paint, I have learned to breathe in and visually experience the entire scene. What feeling do I want to capture? What emotion do I hope to evoke? Imagining the scene as a play, I ask myself what element or elements are the subject or the star of the painting? What are the supporting actors? Important perhaps, but not the focal point. By learning to slow down, observe and feel, over time I have discovered that the challenge is often information overload. Sometimes there is simply too much visual noise. Maybe the trees in the landscape are the subject but there are just too many of them. Perhaps I want fewer people or light poles in a cityscape. Maybe one or two boats in the harbour will make the painting more compelling.

## Shapes

As I am considering the simple shapes, I make note of elements that I can eliminate from the scene. As I mentioned earlier, sometimes there is just too much noise. There may be things that are not essential to the story – not every detail has to be included in the painting. While developing this process, I realised that my frustration often resulted from getting lost in superfluous details that didn't necessarily add to the story my painting would tell.

All the sorting, shape and value analysis work is completed in my sketchbook and I am able to return to the pages at any time, even years later if I choose, to create a painting from the value diagram. I am no longer bogged down by the ever-changing nature of a *plein-air* scene or a detail-laden reference photo because I have captured the important elements and

established a framework for how I want to proceed with the painting.

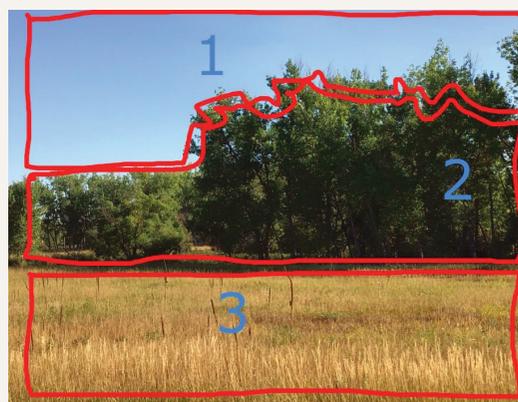
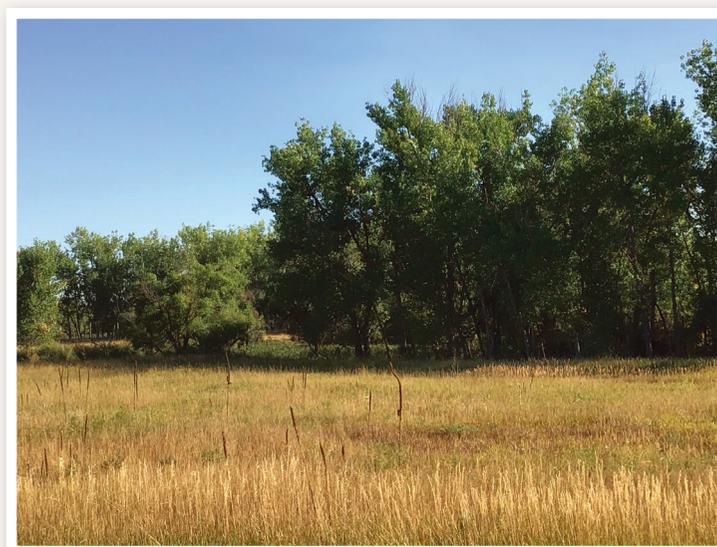
Once I've been able to determine the subject of the scene, I can essentially set it to the side or temporarily ignore it while moving on to the supporting elements. This allows me to create the foundation or backdrop for the painting. Only later, after I've built the foundation, do I go back in and add the subject.

Having established the foundation for the painting, I am free to explore creative approaches to the scene. I might develop any number of paintings from this one foundational base, by simply changing elements. Do I want to manipulate the slope of a hill, angle of a tree, or height of a building? What do I want to eliminate or add? Maybe the photo doesn't show a walker and a dog, but I might choose to add them. Perhaps there is a garbage can in the actual scene, but I decide not to include it. Because I am not attempting to replicate the scene detail for detail, I put myself on a pathway to explore what I'm really looking at. What do I want to highlight? What technique do I want to use to express motion or feeling?

Still working in my sketchbook, I experiment with how to translate the scene into the language of watercolour. Will I be using dry brush? Wet-in-wet? A combination of both? What if I try a patchwork method? What effect is created by using a scratching-in technique? Only after these decisions are made do I begin to think about colour. Do I want to stay with the native colour palette or venture into unexpected colours? Typically, I try both!

Now try your hand at loose, moving, and evocative watercolour painting. Using a reference photograph of your own, follow the steps in the demonstration painting *Arwin's Call* (right).

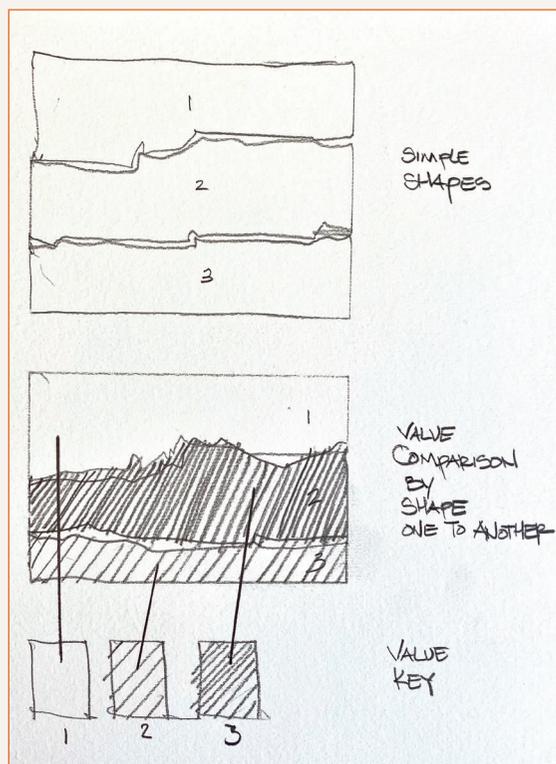
**EXAMPLE A DEMONSTRATION** *Arwin's Call*



▲ My reference photo This is the scene I want to simplify

▲ Simple shape analysis

In order to build the foundation of the painting, my first step is to break the scene down into simple shapes such as the outline of the sky, foreground, or tree line. I use this step because it allows me to become comfortable and familiar with the scene. I try to include no more than five or six simple shapes – with the key word being simple. The goal is to simplify. In order to show clearly how to identify the simple shapes, in this example photo I do not identify a subject



▲ Value diagram

After I have broken the scene down into simple shapes, I compare the values, one shape relative to the others. At this point I am not creating a value drawing; I'm looking at the shapes by value, relative to one another. What is the lightest shape? Conversely, what is the darkest shape? Using my sketchbook, I draw the shapes and number them with the lightest shape as No. 1, moving up in value to the darkest shape. I now have a visual diagram of the scene. Continuing in my sketchbook, I create a values key from lightest to darkest using diagonal hatch marks. Using the key as a reference and my previous sketch in which I numbered the shapes, I darken the shapes with hatch marks. Again, this is not a value sketch but a value diagram of shapes, relative to one another



▲ Experimenting with the language of watercolour

I work out all the details before ever starting my painting on watercolour paper. Because the preliminary work is done in my sketchbook, I don't do any drawing on my watercolour paper to guide the painting. Every painting starts on a clean, blank sheet of paper. This approach allows me to make free and emotional strokes to capture the mood and feeling of the scene or, in a fairly staid scene, to create a mood or feeling that isn't necessarily there. This process allows me to take loose watercolour painting to a new level. There are no marks to constrain me, no lines to stay within



## FINISHED PAINTING

▲ *Arwin's Call*, watercolour, 11×14in (28×35.5cm).

The goal of my painting is not to replicate a scene exactly. I don't paint static scenes. My desire is to paint in such a way that the viewer

is drawn into the scene, never looking at it from the outside but experiencing what is happening.

What started as a way to reduce the noise that was prohibiting me from painting in a satisfying way, has developed into my

signature strategy for consistently creating loose, moving, and evocative watercolour paintings. It requires time and focus up front, but the resulting energy and looseness is truly what causes me to love watercolour painting

## EXAMPLE B

From one reference photo I am able to paint an infinite number of different loose, moving, and evocative paintings



### ◀ STAGE ONE

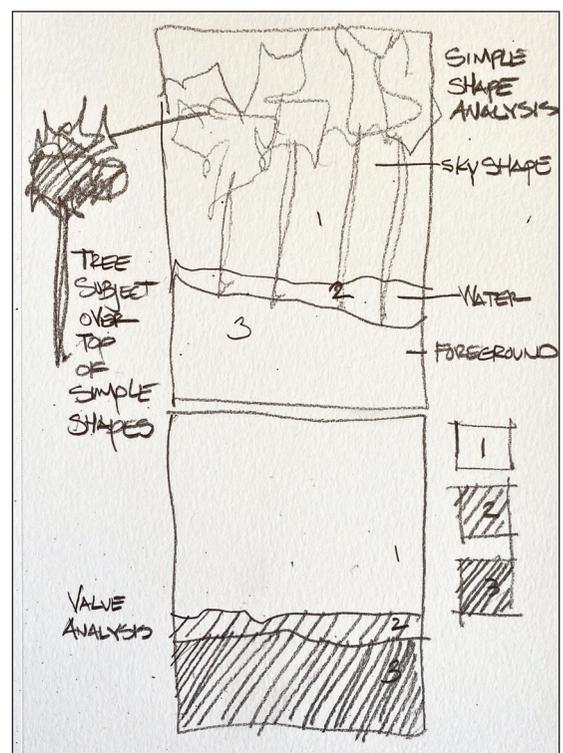
#### Determine the subject

In this example the trees are my subject

### ▶ STAGE TWO

#### Simple shapes and value diagram

When I created the value analysis in my sketchbook, I drew the subject, the trees, but they weren't assigned a value





▲ **STAGE THREE**

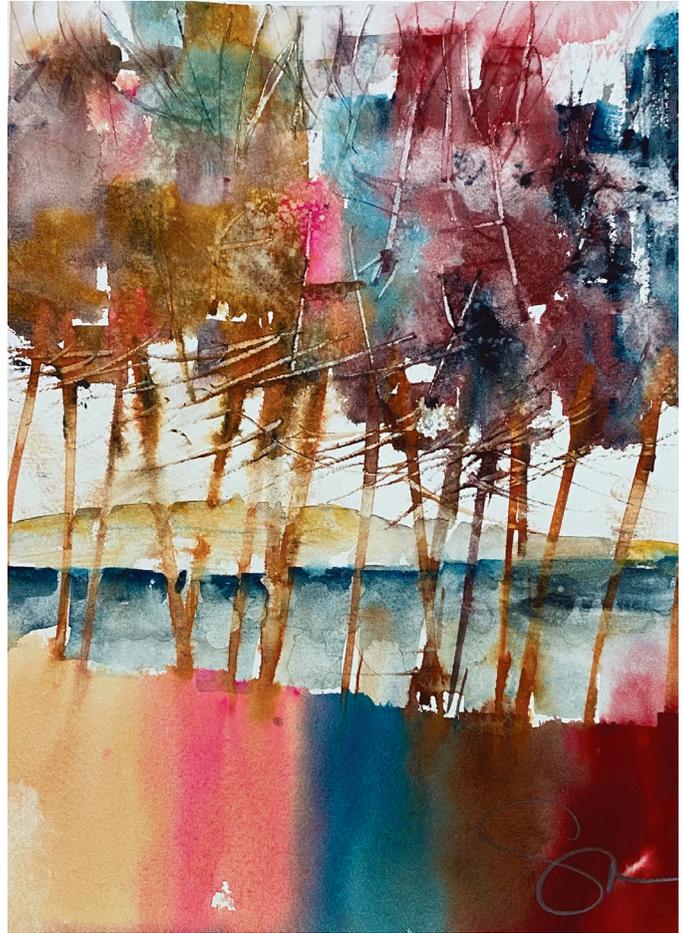
Creative experimentation

Here I have altered the slope of the rock wall, removed the water in the foreground, and experimented with colour

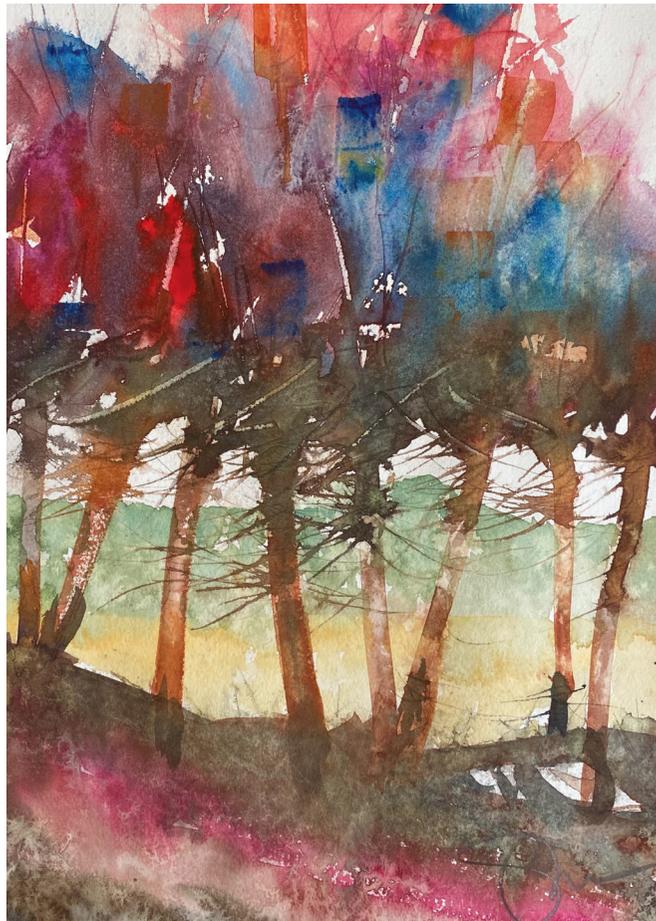
RIGHT AND BELOW, LEFT AND RIGHT

**STAGE FOUR** Loose watercolour painting

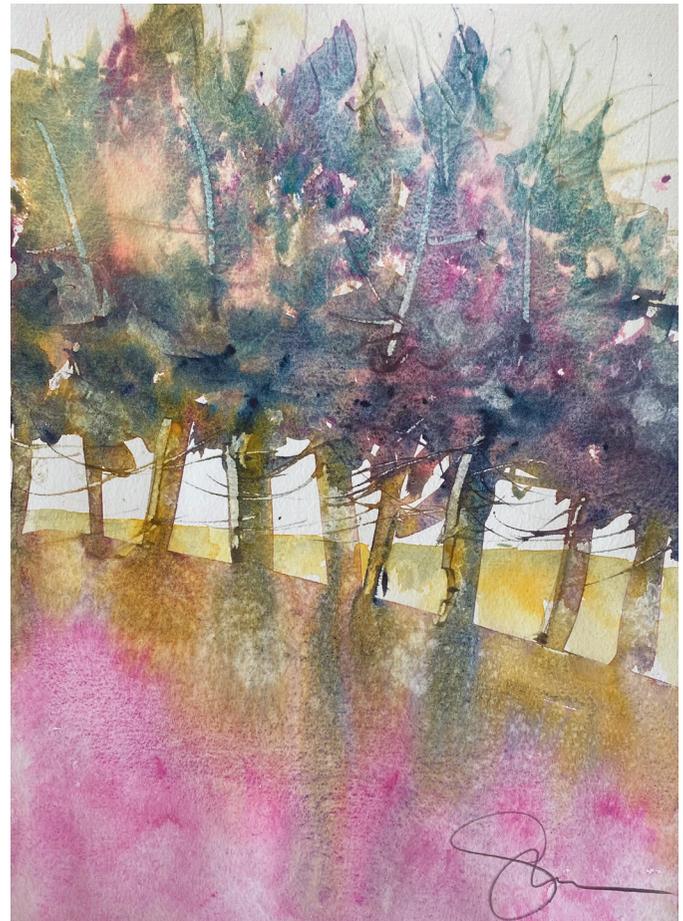
I tried out several different sketches in which I altered elements, used different painting techniques and experimented with colour



▲ *Lakeshore*, watercolour, 14×11in (35.5×28cm)



▲ *On the Breeze*, watercolour, 14×11in (35.5×28cm)



▲ *Shout it Out*, watercolour, 14×11in (35.5×28cm)