

# a practical approach to creativity

## Part 3

### give up control to your creative assistant: watercolour

Let go! In this instalment you'll find out that watercolour seems to enjoy working with you, provided you accept this unpredictability as a part of its personality and an asset.

BY TONY SMIBERT



**I** began this series by stating (bravely or foolishly) that creativity opportunities abound within the way you think about your subject matter, your medium, the work of other painters, the way each painting evolves and your own interests and talents.

Watercolour always conforms to natural processes. This opens the door to creativity — a way of working where these processes will assist the artist all the way. Because watercolour is actually coloured mud settling in a pond, you always have to consider the time it takes for your pigments to settle and for washes to dry. Once you see that natural principles underlie everything, watercolour is not half as complex as many people imagine. Then when you make your methods those that the medium can and will respond to it will do what you want it to.

### **two different approaches**

Broadly speaking, there are two fundamentally different approaches to watercolour.

1. The first is to try to plan and control everything. Some people seem to succeed at this — but their watercolours always look a little dead to me.
2. The better approach is to accept that watercolour is not always going to exactly what you want it to because there are so many things that can go awry. What makes the process creative is the fact that watercolour seems to enjoy working with you if you accept this unpredictability as a part of its personality and an asset. For instance, watercolour skies often seem to paint themselves because watercolour is ideally suited to skies.

You only have to learn watercolour's own system. Then, once you discover the secrets for creating sky effects, the possibilities before you are endless. Have a look at the best exponents — those whose watercolours are fresh and delightful as well as skilful. I think you'll find that they are people who have accepted that watercolour sometimes trips you up — in order to give you a chance to view the world from an exciting new perspective — and who have been excited by the possibilities that this presents for picture making.

To paint exceptional skies, for example, requires not only keen observation, but lots of sketches and studies in watercolour. You can't help experiencing joy when beautiful clouds appear on your page and frustration when they run or smudge or dry badly; but the effort applied to learning how the medium works pays off and the end knowledge gained by sketching and experimenting will be of both skies AND the medium. Finally, you start to find that you and watercolour have reached an amiable understanding and that those beautiful skies you've admired in other people's work do start to paint themselves in yours — seeming to emerge from the wash as if painted by an artist dwelling in your subconscious. (Painted wet-into-wet, dark passages of wash create spectacular clouds. This creative process can seem almost mystical because instead of merely using watercolour you have become one with it.)

### **but, it gets better**

My personal belief is that, if I can successfully lay a wash out from which a sky emerges then I also can be confident that that sky will then help me to visualise appropriate →

## **how to extend your creative options**

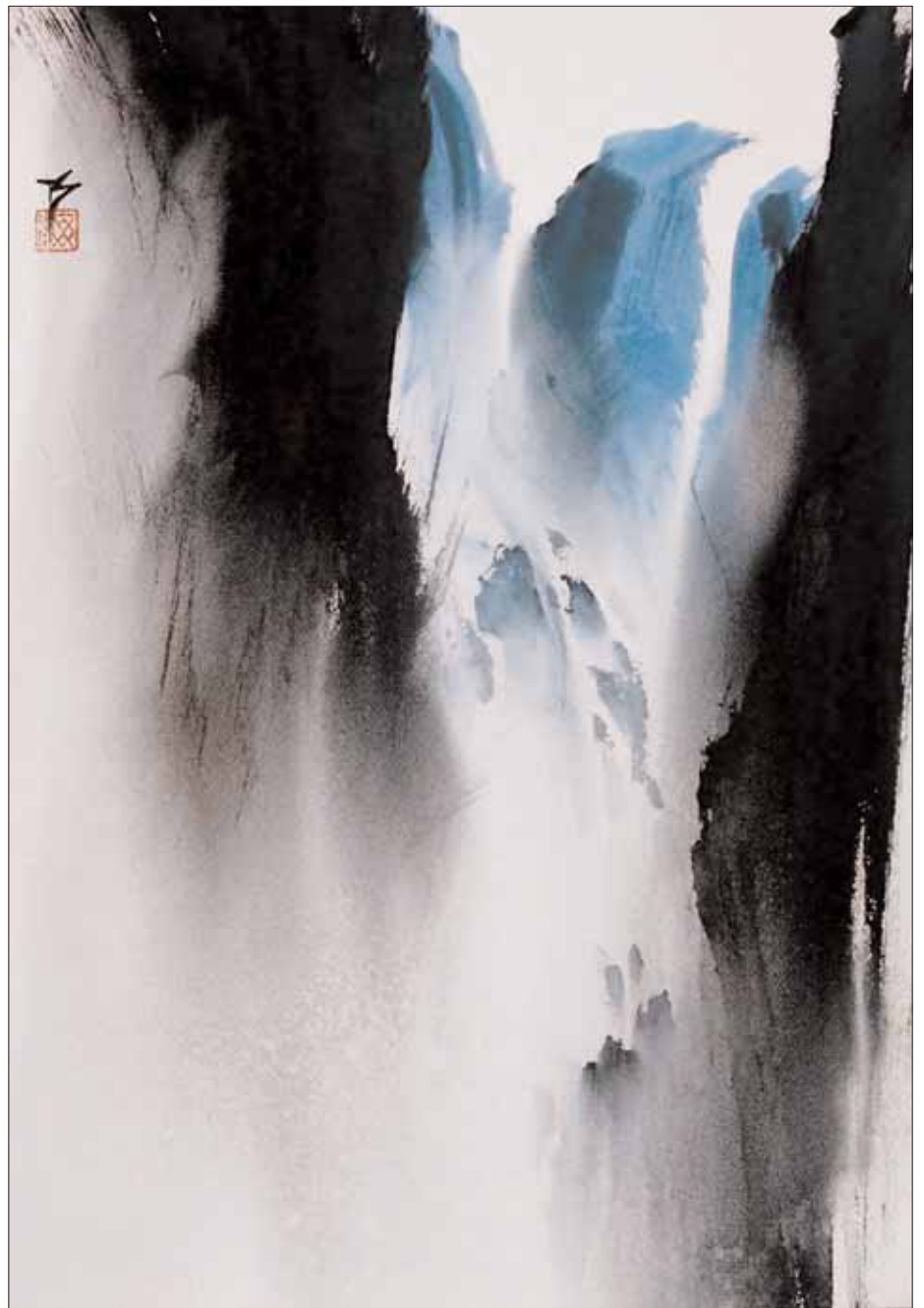
- 1 Carefully observe your subject and medium.
- 2 Be prepared to manipulate both, in order to go where no one has gone before.
- 3 Think about the options and limitations of your medium.
- 4 Try thinking of your medium as a person. How would you describe its personality, likes and dislikes? (Keep it happy, become excited about what it is excited by and listen to its suggestions.)
- 5 Let your prior experience of your medium guide your conscious and unconscious mind..
- 6 Don't always look for certainty — sometimes you have to take chances and go with your gut feeling. Go on. Take a few chances!
- 7 Make lots of (quick/small) sketches and studies before beginning on the "big-one". This has long been the MOST tried and true method for developing ideas for paintings.
- 8 Work with your medium. Don't try to push it where it doesn't want to go and, suddenly, you'll find it supporting your endeavours.
- 9 Within this companionship you will find a new sort of creative confidence: soundly based on the solid foundation of your methods of analysis, your understanding of the medium, your application of traditional techniques like sketching and your sense of adventure.

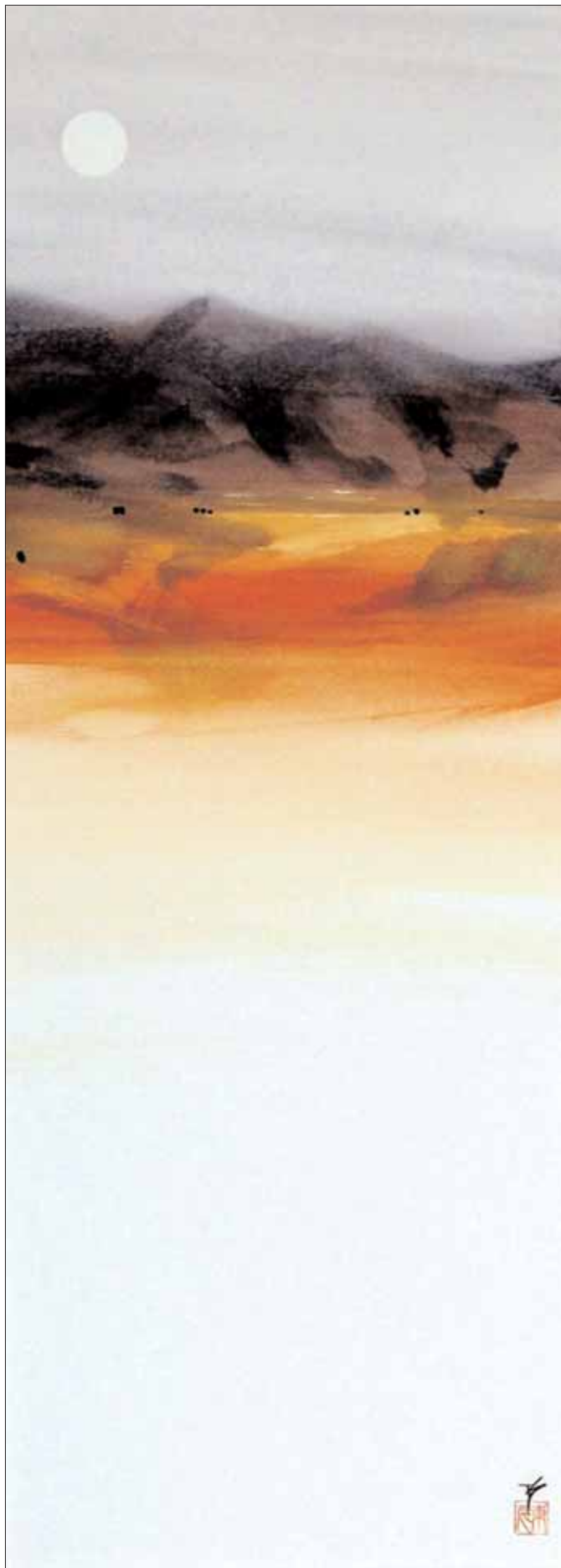


**M**y own creative method seldom starts with having a clear idea of what I'm going to paint before I start. I rarely have a specific image, place or idea in mind.

I'm excited by not knowing exactly where the painting will take me. Certainly I have an interest in the methods of 19th century English watercolour, in the inner-art principles of traditional Japanese art and in the exciting ways in which people such as the American abstract expressionists have worked. But actually painting is more about becoming one with the medium, the moment, nature and your own energy. Anyone with an interest in the Eastern approach understands this. It's not about what you paint or even how well you paint it. It's about meeting yourself face-to-face in the process — about overcoming issues to do with ego and attachment. Personal creativity is much more than painting something new — it's about going somewhere fresh within yourself. That's why no one enjoys painting more than a keen beginner — it's all discovery at that stage.

In Zen, they talk about "beginner's mind" — a mind that greets each moment as an fresh opportunity to learn something new. That's where true creativity is found; and it explains why, in my own case, I'm happy to explore a wide range of watercolour languages or styles. If you pursue this sort approach then, ultimately, you will end up in your own space — a place that reflects your personal journey. I'm often surprised by what I've painted — and never more pleasantly than when the painting works because it came from somewhere inside rather than from my head.





## **Let's go!** **Grab your brush, paints and paper and try this little experiment in creative watercolour**

- 1** On a very small sheet use broad washes to create a wet-into-wet sky. Let this establish the drama and lighting.
- 2** Look into, through and under this sky with your mind's-eye until you sense the type of landform that might belong to it.
- 3** Sketch this with light pencil or, start painting straight away.
- 4** Start with the larger landforms and evolve a foreground as well.
- 5** Charge the foreground with colours that granulate; let them mingle, push them around coaxing rock shapes and foliage wherever you want them.
- 6** If the process surprises you with cauliflower explosions of pigment then help such accidental shapes to suggest trees or plants by adding more pigment.
- 7** When you establish these, they may speak to your imagination; so then add any more middle and foreground details that seem appropriate. It's enough.
- 8** Now the most important step: put the first picture aside and try another! See where that leads you then try another. (Don't follow me, find your own path. It's like the proverbial journey of 1000 miles that begins with a single step – remember that with each successive step you add further value to the first one you took . . .)



**“... you start to find that you and watercolour have reached an amiable understanding and that beautiful skies seem to emerge from the wash as if painted by an artist dwelling in your subconscious.”**

→ landforms. Then I paint these. How does this work? Well, mountains help clouds to form in the real world so why shouldn't the presence of a cloud mass in a half-formed painting suggest what type of land might be below it (or hidden within its mists), as well as the sorts of light-play (cloud shadows, and so on) that will play across them?

The artistic part lies in laying those first washes in a way that establishes not only clouds, but drama and interest too. The early washes establish the composition. (In my own art this has also led me towards a whole world of possibilities for abstract, non-figurative composition.) You just have to find the landscape that lies within. Once you discover that, the

details start take care of themselves. I can refer to sketches, photos, or work from imagination alone in order to make mountain shapes, buildings or people look as realistic as I wish. In the same way that Michelangelo released figures from the stone in which they were held, any watercolourist can release such landscapes from the wash within which they are hidden.

Every medium has its creative potential. The trick is to recognise the way that yours works. This is integral to your personal, creative opportunity as a painter.

**let the medium lead occasionally**

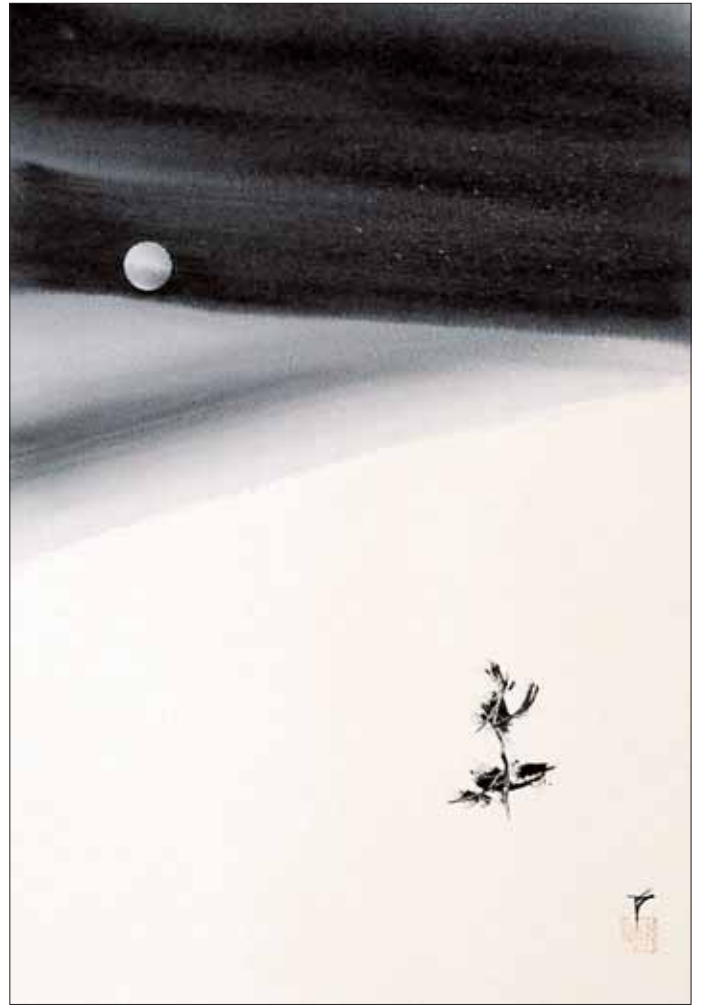
Remember: in watercolour, an accidental effect can sometimes

present you with an opportunity to revolutionise not only the painting you are working on but also your whole approach in future.

Most of us never realise our creative potential. Lots of people who love watercolour seem to be scared to let it off the leash! Like man's best friend, watercolour will take you along the same old paths day in day out if you always make it follow you. (You know the type of person — always on the path, dog at heel.)

But it can become your guide on wonderful adventures — taking you to places you would never normally go — if you allow it to lead occasionally. Some brave souls even let it off the leash completely, never





missing an opportunity to experiment, always climbing higher. They're the folk who have the most fun and make the most discoveries. In watercolour terms, they are most often the people whose paintings sing.

There is, of course, no substitute for experience if you want to understand and apply watercolour. But you can also enjoy it from day one if you let it teach and guide you. It always demonstrates the natural principles that govern what it can and cannot do. These don't



limit either the medium or you. They are the key to the endless possibilities for creativity that it provides. As a surfer might explain such a process: “To learn to surf, listen to the voice of the ocean; become one with the wind and the swells and then one day, the ocean will become your companion as well as your teacher”. This is the Way of Watercolour too. It’s not just a theory, its a fact that can be applied to every painting — especially if you want to extend your creative options. □

## about the artist

Tony Smibert is widely known for landscapes that are also imbued with the spirit of Japanese art. He has held over 40 solo exhibitions around the world and attained a very high level of artistic recognition in Japan where he is one of the few western artists ever invited to design traditional, high-fashion kimonos. Paradoxically, his research into the watercolour methods of JMW Turner and the Golden Age of English Watercolour (1750-1850) is also apparent in many of his watercolours (and led to him being invited to demonstrate Turner’s methods at galleries including the National Gallery of Australia and National Gallery of Victoria during the Turner Exhibition a few years back). Outside Australia, Tony mostly exhibits larger, non-figurative works that reflect his interest in Zen and abstract expressionism.

Tony’s “Landscape Painting from Your Imagination” was an *Australian*

*Artist Magazine* Book of the Year. His “Watercolour Apprentice” video series is a best-seller and he is a highly regarded tutor. Tony teaches intensive watercolour courses at Mountford Granary Art School in Tasmania (03) 6391 1832 in autumn each year, as well as occasional seminars elsewhere within Australia and overseas.

A solo exhibition of his work opens in Singapore this month, followed by an exhibition with his wife and partner, printmaker Carmel Burns, at the recently opened Smibert Gallery, Evelyn County Estate, Main Road, Kangaroo Ground (just outside Melbourne) through January and February 2005. This will be accompanied by a workshop [Phone (03) 9437 2155].

At home, Tony and Carmel’s Smibert Studio Gallery — 179 Mole Ck. Rd. Deloraine, 7304 — is open for viewing year-round. Please phone first on (03) 6362 2474. [www.smibert.com](http://www.smibert.com)