

a practical approach to creativity

part 4

enthusiasm is the first step to creativity

ONE OF THE KEYS TO CREATIVITY IS TO RECOGNISE
AND HARNESS THE POWER OF YOUR OWN ENTHUSIASM.

BY TONY SMIBERT



The other week I listened to my sister-in-law, Catherine, enthusing about the trip she had just made to Central Australia. She told me about the intensity of colour, about vast, glowing plains stretching away towards blue horizons. She painted a word-picture of clear, night skies, of sunsets that were so spectacular she had decided to mark a cross on the sand and return to the same spot every ten minutes in order to record a photo series showing the colour variations during sunset. She enthused about the intense blue of the sky and how it had contrasted with the fiery ochres of the land below. And she did all this with great sweeping gestures of her arm — so it seemed to me that if she'd had a brush in her hand and a large sheet of paper she'd have encapsulated her vision with one or two decisive strokes.

Then she recounted how, when she returned home, to her dismay she found that her camera had failed and the result was NO PHOTOS!

Well, it seemed to me that I was better off without the photos. I've seldom enjoyed a description of someone else's trip more than I enjoyed that one. And I have already seen lots of photos of Central Australia. So I said, "Katie, why don't you let me show you how to use watercolour? Forget the photos — let's give you a brush and you'll have it all!"

I couldn't persuade her — after all not everyone wants to paint — and Catherine is already one of the busiest schoolteachers and parents that I know. She had, however, reminded me that enthusiasm lies at the heart of any creative endeavour. Her words had taken me back to my own impressions of Central Australia — how the ranges outside Alice Springs seem to roll across the landscape like great waves and how the sun goes down blood-red beneath a curtain of indigo.

That led me to revisit one of creativity's keys

I thought about the words of David Cox in the early 19th century, "If no excitement is felt when you paint, don't expect to see any in the painting!" (Or words to that effect.)

Absolutely. One of the keys to creativity is to recognise and harness the power of your own enthusiasm. I've met countless painters who never even touch the level of enthusiasm for subjects that my sister-in-law demonstrated — because they treat each painting as a chore. Art becomes labour rather than love when you set yourself goals to do with, for example, impressing others (your tutor, husband, partner, kids, fellow painters — even yourself). I see it all the time, and I'm sure that you do too — enthusiasts who come into art in order to experience magic, but who end up wasting their time in an ongoing struggle with disappointment.

Art is not about setting material goals. Success is not measured in fame or financial success. It's not about

try this exercise in landscape thinking

- 1** Ask yourself, "Of all the wonderful places I have ever seen or been, which two or three did I find most impressive or thrilling?" Or perhaps, "Where did I feel happiest, or most at peace?"

Write them down:

- 2** Pick one, then ask yourself, "Which three or four visual elements of that particular landscape were most memorable/exciting?"

- 3** Now say, "If I wanted to communicate **ONLY** three of those elements in paint, how might I go about it?"

What you've just done is apply a process of **SELECTION** and then **REFINING** towards identifying a subject (or elements of a subject) that you really feel positive about. The next step is most fun of all.

- 4** Plan your paintings with the same enthusiasm by asking yourself these types of questions:

- How might I best portray those exciting elements in paint?

- Given the above, what can I leave out?

- How can I best accentuate/exaggerate the passion I feel for the elements I want to show?

It's that simple!



**“Art is about the things
that light you up, and
make you want to
express yourself.”**

becoming a famous, writing books, being hung in galleries or admired by other painters. Art is all about what Catherine expressed. It’s about the things that light you up and make you want to express yourself.

So what does all this have to do with creativity?

Thinking back to Catherine’s description I’m sure she was, in fact, using words with as much power and creativity as any landscape painter. She was painting. She was selecting colours from a sky she could still see in her mind’s eye. If she’d been waving a brush in her hand we’d have been looking at marks that perfectly showed her response to nature and the moment. The point is there was no separation between her enthusiasm and her expression in words and body language.

Creativity is energised by enthusiasm. We can all identify things that excite us and find ways to express that. Then, suddenly, ideas WILL start to appear. If you’re enthusiastic and want to tell others about it, if you are excited and can’t wait to paint then this can be a vital part of the broader picture that is creativity.

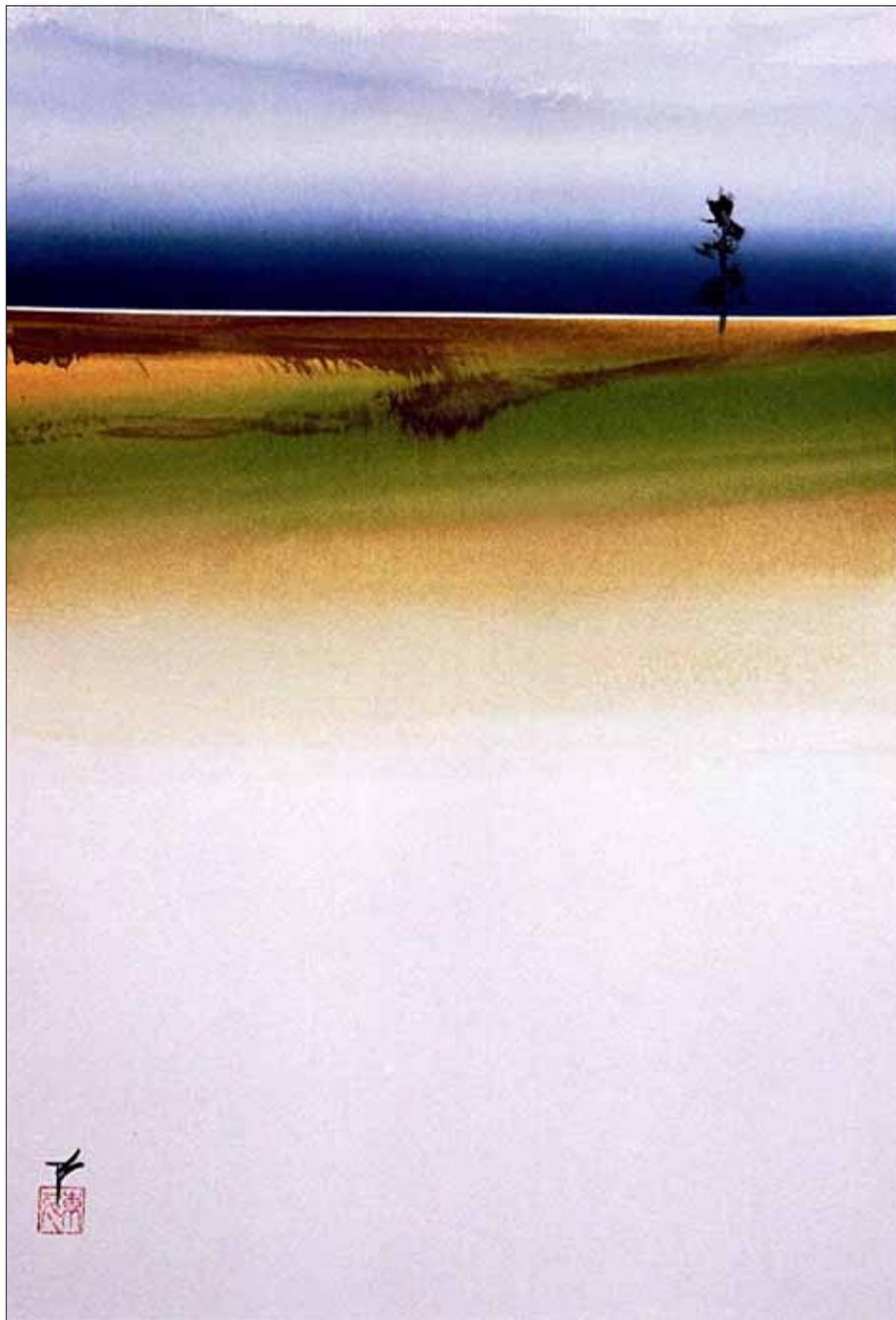
how it works

As soon as you’ve done the sidebar exercise, you’ll understand my own subject interests:

I’m fascinated by the ways in which I can use watercolour to express the interaction of the elemental opposites in Nature and Life — rock and water, hard and soft, life and death. A great bluff, for example, silhouetted against incoming clouds seems symbolic of the eternal interchange between earth and sky — and is most perfectly suited to an endless variety of dramatic expression in watercolour. With those two elements alone, I can express my enjoyment of early dawn, the last colour-notes of evening, the solitary nature of all human endeavour and so on. A third element, a bird of prey,

riding the winds above the cliff-face of a bluff, or swooping down into a valley below then becomes a perfect representation of what in Zen might be called “the fleeting nature of each moment and opportunity” — for they never return. Earth and sky interact over billions of years but our brief experience of it is as fleeting as the momentary passage of the bird.

So, even within the parameters of such own personal interests, I can find enough subject matter for a thousand works of art in watercolour! Although I am passionate about lots of other subjects, I choose to focus on the things that best marry my interests with my medium. Then, bearing in mind that excitement (as Cox suggests) is a critical element in the creative process, no matter what other reasons I might have for choosing my subject and approach to it I look for those parts of the task that make me feel excited to be painting. Pictures painted with enthusiasm almost paint themselves.



about the artist

Tony Smibert's landscapes are imbued with the spirit of Japanese art. He has held over 40 solo exhibitions around the world and won 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 opened in Singapore in December. He is having an exhibition with his wife and partner, printmaker Carmel Burns, at the Smibert Gallery, Evelyn County Estate, Main Road, Kangaroo Ground 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

STOP PRESS! Tony Smibert and Mountford Granary are giving away a Watercolour Course subscriber prize next issue.