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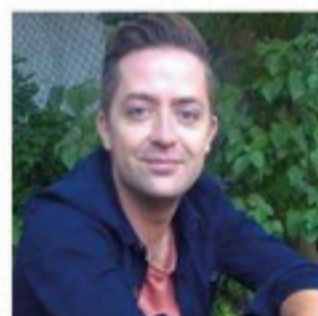
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DAVID SHEVLINO

Welcome

A NEW ART CLASS CAN BE A DAUNTING CHALLENGE



I still remember the start of my first life-drawing class very vividly. The charcoal laid out, the butterflies in the stomach, the cartridge paper bulldog-clipped to the drawing boards in anticipation. The model assuming a pose that I was convinced no sane human could hold for longer than a few seconds. All I needed was the tutor to tell me how he wanted me to draw this and I'd be good, I thought.

Except it doesn't work like that, does it? With hindsight it seems obvious: these classes are designed to be free spaces where all abilities are welcome and subjects can be tackled however you see fit; where sympathetic tutors will offer gentle encouragement and guidance, not a fully formed brief. If you've only studied art on a prescriptive school curriculum, this freedom can be daunting. Beginning on page 22, our art courses special was designed to prepare you for just such occasions. Coinciding with the new September term, it offers advice and insight from a host of great tutors from around the UK.

I am also very pleased to introduce David Shevlino in this issue, the American artist behind our beautiful cover image. David is an inspiring painting tutor who has taught a few select classes in London and his feature on alla prima painting is something of a treat.

Steve Pill, Editor

Write to us!

Are you beginning a new art class this term? Share your thoughts, fears and artworks...



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TECHNIQUE

ALLA PRIMA

American figurative master **DAVID SHEVLINO** reveals how he gets stunning results while painting wet-in-wet – and shows you how to avoid your bright colours getting muddy

WHAT IS ALLA PRIMA?

Alla prima is also known as “direct” painting and refers to a wet-into-wet method of using oils and acrylics in which the picture is basically completed in one sitting while entirely wet. It is the opposite of “indirect” painting, whereby the paint surface is built up in layers with each layer being allowed to dry before the subsequent one is applied.

Alla prima is a more modern way of working, whereas most of the painting done before the 17th century could be described as indirect.

WHY PAINT DIRECT?

My direct painting method first developed when I left art school in 1984. After graduation, I no longer had access to live models – and was too poor to hire them. Although I liked working from still life subjects in the studio, I also began exploring painting en plein air. This is how I began painting wet into wet. Although I no longer paint outdoors, the experience taught me a lot about spontaneity and capturing a fleeting moment in a limited amount of time. As anyone who has painted *en plein air* knows,

you can't be too precious or fussy about your subject and light changing by the minute. As far as I was concerned, I had a limited window in which I could get down the essential elements of colour, forms, light and shadow to capture the specific quality of a given scene.

Not only did I adapt my painting style to the demands of working outdoors, but I began to embrace it as a way of painting with spontaneity and freshness. I didn't paint this way exclusively, but it became one of several tools in my toolbox. >







LEFT *Nikki in Red*,
oil on panel,
30x23cm

Eventually I stopped plein air painting and began to work exclusively in the studio. However, my direct painting skills remained in my toolbox.

Over the course of my career I've experimented with many different painting styles and approaches. My larger paintings are typically indirect, but many of my smaller pieces are direct. Both ways of painting have their advantages. What I like about painting directly is the immediacy. It's very spontaneous and the paint moves around easily, so it's very manipulatable (ironically though, it's that very quality which makes it challenging for many students).

THE CHALLENGES

There are several aspects of direct painting which present different

challenges to the indirect method. One of the most common questions I get from students is, "How do you apply wet paint over existing wet paint and not turn the whole thing into mud?" I usually respond by explaining some basic principles about developing good painting habits.

Keeping the colours on your palette clean is essential for good painting, but especially so when painting directly. If you mix with your brush and use the same few brushes for all of your tones, as I do, it's critical to keep them clean in between mixing. I clean my brush in mineral spirits (or white spirit as you call it in the UK) and wipe it on a rag whenever I begin mixing a new colour.

Another issue I see with students is not using enough paint. In order to

lay paint over wet paint you must have enough of it on your brush. A good habit to develop is to put a generous amount of paint on your palette – please, no pea-sized dabs! Your palette itself should be a good size, too: at least 40cm by 50cm.

KIT FOR PURPOSE

There are no such things as magic brushes, but without the right ones, you'll be fighting against yourself. I prefer long brushes, such as flats and filberts, because they have some spring to them. When you load them up, you can lay paint over paint because they have some give to them.

Flats and filberts also make it easier to apply large swathes of paint that lend themselves to an economical paint application. Shorter brushes tend not to have the same feel, so they end up sweeping the paint away, instead of laying it on.

I like to use stiff synthetic fibres that mimic natural bristles, as opposed to soft bristles, which are more like fine animal hair. The synthetics tend to hold their shape longer than natural bristles. I like a size 8, 10 and 12 from either Rosemary & Co.'s Ivory series or Silver Brush's Bristlon range.

For me, alla prima is a very economical way of working and you can imply a lot with minimal brushwork. There is a looseness and spontaneity to working direct that is also particularly well suited to subjects that are in motion. Most of the students I teach are trying to achieve a looser style where the brushwork is more evident.

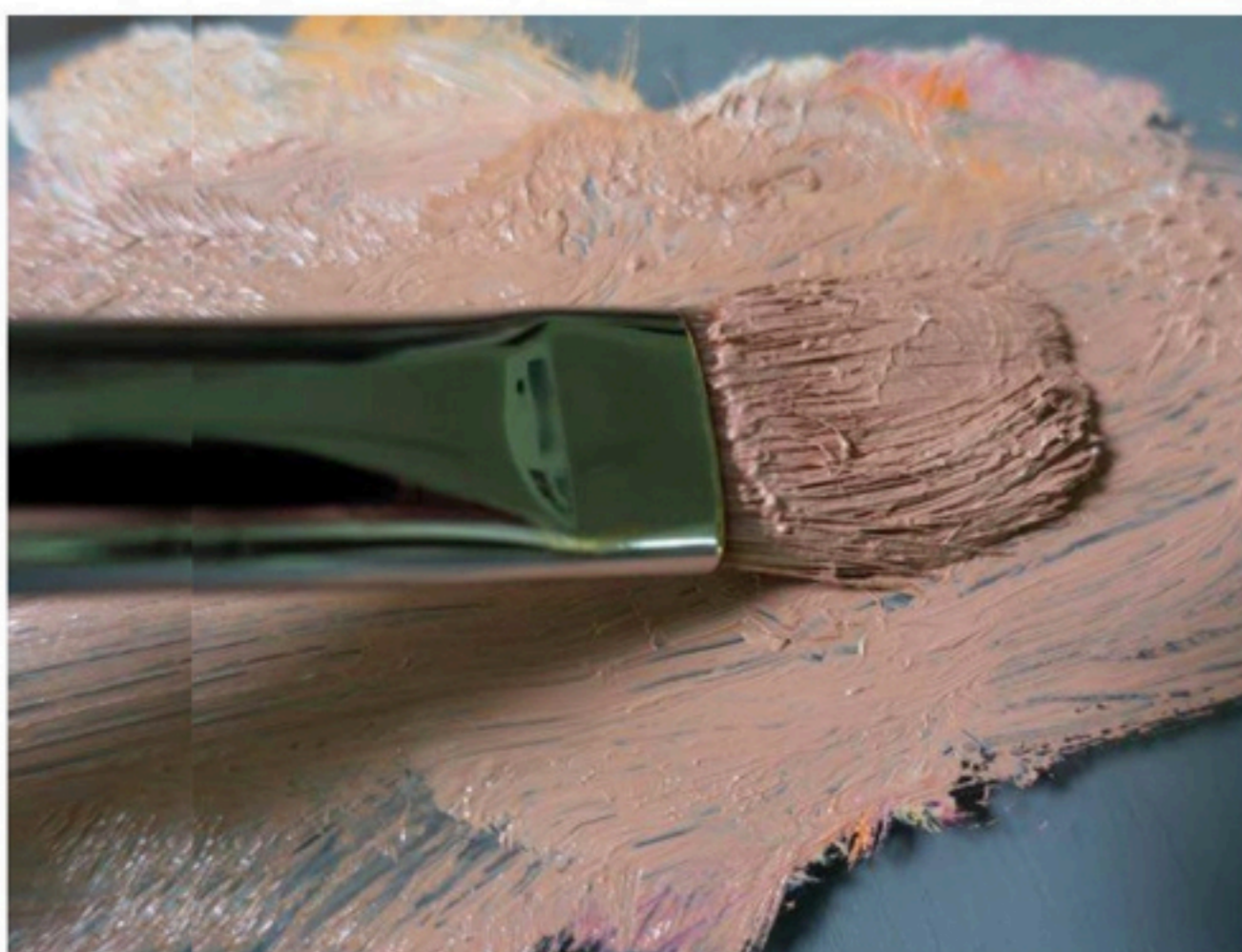
For that reason, I suggest using large brushes. Sizes 10 and 12 are favourites of mine. The larger brushes can be helpful for keeping students from getting too fussy about their paint application. The idea is to go for large, broad strokes.

Your painting surface is also a factor. The weave of canvas tends to give a little more texture onto which the paint can adhere. On the other hand, a panel can make for a very smooth surface. Gesso-primed

LEFT *Race Horse*, oil on panel, 35x38cm



“There is a looseness to working direct that is well suited to subjects in motion”



panels aren't to everyone's taste, but I like that the paint moves around so fluidly on them, so much so that when I feel like painting on a smooth surface, I use a gesso panel and then seal the surface with a mixture of oil paint and Gamblin's Galkyd painting medium. This makes the surface non-absorbent and very slick. When it comes to canvas, I use both canvas boards and stretched canvas. I'm not particular about whether it is oil- or acrylic-primed canvas though.

For panels, I use either MDF or aluminium composite board – when primed with acrylic gesso, both surfaces have a similar feel. The advantage to using aluminium is that it's lightweight and doesn't warp much.

Paint medium is a subject which can be very confusing. When it comes to alla prima painting, it helps to think of medium in two categories: liquid and gelatinous. Liquid mediums would be oils (such as linseed) or alkyd mediums such as Galkyd, which feel like oil, but speed up drying times. Adding a liquid medium to your paint will extend it and give it a creamy, buttery texture. This buttery consistency is what I prefer when

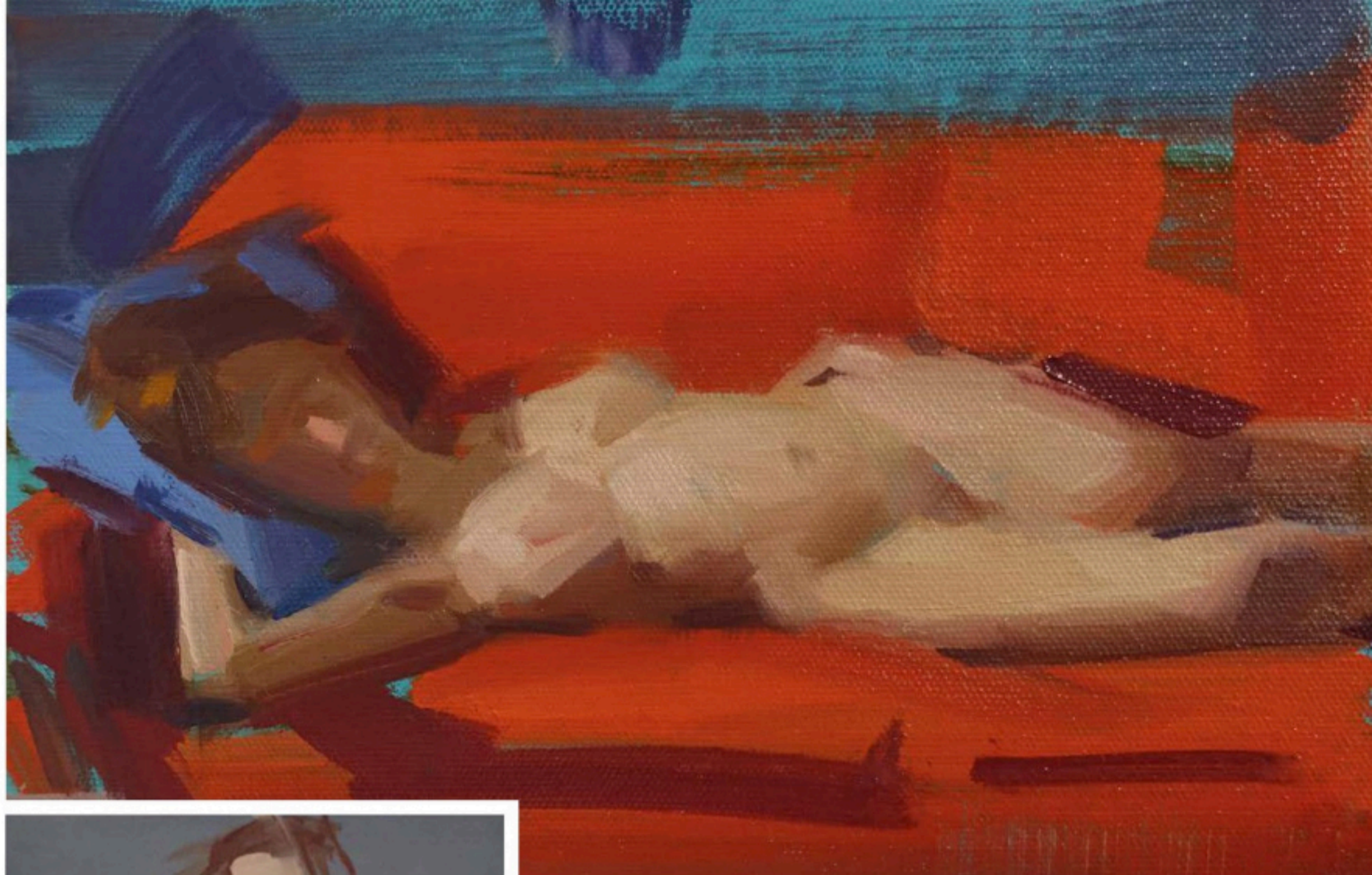
painting directly because it's better suited to laying the paint on and moving it around.

By contrast, gelatinous mediums would be things like Winsor & Newton's Liquin, Gamblin's Solvent-Free Gel or anything that has some body to it. These gel mediums are great for building texture and achieving a thick application of paint.

Finally, in this discussion of how to apply paint over wet paint, there is the actual touch – or how much pressure you should apply to the brush as you add paint to your surface. You want to lay the paint on, not sweep it away. This is something that can be practised in order to develop the right feel for what you want to achieve in your paintings.

TONE AND COLOUR

I always paint on a toned canvas. For a generic, all-purpose tone, a middle grey is nice. At other times I like to play around with different colours. Sometimes I use a bright colour, like red or blue, for the undertone and let part of it show through in the finished painting. This can create a nice abstract effect as you lay paint over >



TOP Katie, oil on board, 16x20cm
ABOVE Note how mid-tones act as lights against a darker ground in this study

the ground. I try to be decisive about making marks on the canvas or panel and avoid noodling around too much with them. This is important for students because the more they play around with the paint, the more likely it turns to mud.

I also discourage students from blending. When I want to create a smooth transition between two bits of paint, I soften the edge between them by dragging my brush over the paint. Sometimes the filberts are well adapted for softening an edge and creating a soft transition.

When laying in my initial tones, I start with the mid-tones. I know many students were taught to block in the darks first, but I like working this way because it seems natural for me to start with mid-tones over the darker ground colour.

As a way of simplifying things at this stage, I try to think of them not as mid- and dark tones, but rather as light and dark instead. Taking this approach means I can work my way in either direction, darker or lighter.

When I start mixing the colours on my palette, the first thing that goes through my head is value (or tone), then colour. Someone once said to me "value does all of the work, but colour gets all the credit". If your values are accurate, you can take some license with the colours, and tweak them to your liking if you wish. I don't worry about colour temperature – whether it is warm or cool – in the initial lay in, I come to that later.

TAKEAWAY TIPS

Before my workshops come to an end, I try to leave students with some practical ideas for how they can practise mark making, applying their paint directly and achieving the looseness and spontaneity they're looking for.

My first bit of advice is more psychological than technical. Give yourself permission to experiment and to make a mess if necessary. This was a major hurdle for me coming from a very classical, traditional background.

When I was finally able to put my inhibition aside and not be too precious about what I was doing, that was the moment I was able to move forward and really start applying paint in a way that was new for me.

As an exercise you can practise applying brushstrokes and mark making by using old boards or canvases. Give yourself a time limit. This is important because we so often start a painting with the best intentions of trying to keep it fresh and spontaneous, but human nature and perfectionism take over and, before we know it, we've overworked the whole thing and lost what we had at the outset of the painting.

If you can train yourself to practise working on small surfaces for a limited time – say 45 minutes or an hour – you can avoid the risk of overworking a painting by stopping and putting it aside, whether you like it or not. If you aren't happy, just get another surface and do it again.
www.davidshevlino.com