

Exploring your dark side

Dianna Ponting explains how to use the new crop of deepest dark pastels — not to mention black — to create dramatic show-stoppers.

My ultimate goal is to produce a painting with impact — first through the use of contrast, second, with composition and last but definitely not least, with the addition of strong colour. I find the starkness that I can achieve by making use of both ends of the light spectrum while utilizing very little of the middle, is fundamental to creating this pizzazz.

Not all of my paintings look like they were painted by the light of the moon but when I reflect on some of my strongest pieces — the ones that garnered awards and accolades or simply generated the most controversy — these works seem to lean heavily toward the dark side. I used to have to rely on the careful use of black to get these results but now that most of the

manufactures are making dark-dark colours, finding the dark side of pastel has never been easier.

Making things picture-perfect

When arranging a static painting, I find myself more interested in the play of the light sources and patterns within the elements than actual placement of the objects. I typically arrange set-ups (be they still lifes or models) under lighting that is natural but forced through small openings which allows me to highlight selected objects while subduing most of the surroundings. To put more punch in the shadows, I make use of reflected light by bouncing white and/or selected colours back onto my subject's dark side.

It has taken many years and tons of discarded photos to get the knack of seeing the overall pattern of light while also checking for potential trouble areas within each quadrant before I shoot a single photo. Mirrored surfaces, for example, are something I used to plunk down in the middle of a pleasing arrangement without really considering their effect. Their added reflected patterns now become objects within objects and, having taken on a life of their own have to be accounted for in a composition. The simple act of altering the source of these influences can be as paramount to the outcome of a painting as the placement of any article.

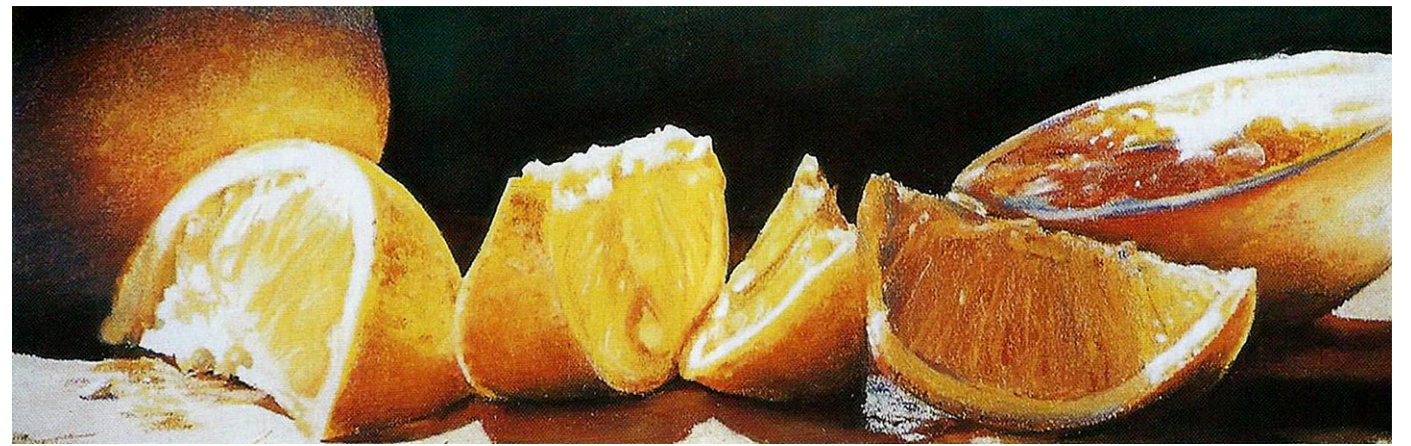
Maggie's Lily, pastel, 18 x 26 cm (7½ X 10")



Girl Untitled, pastel
54 x 71 cm (21 x 28")

I love to paint children and had done a number of "cutesy" works where the whole story was laid out on the canvas. I then went looking for something a little more serious — a painting with gestalt. One that would require the viewer's participation to complete the circle. I have been treated to many wonderful suppositions over this piece's content and even a few tears have been shed. The saga will culminate with the owner choosing the title.





Striving to 'tune in' to small nuances like these has improved my compositions immensely.

Each painting then proceeds with the taking of many photographs. I bracket exposures and depth of focus while varying angles, arrangements, backgrounds and light sources. I am striving at this point to capture on film many variations of the exact scene I am looking to portray under dramatic lighting conditions. Changing the structure of a painting at a later date is only an inconvenience, but light and shadows invented as afterthoughts leave me forever second guessing my decisions. Alternatively, having numerous extra photos with slight deviations allows me to study, at length, how these two elements interrelate and how vastly they are altered as the increments change, even minutely, and this can assist me in expanding or pushing possibilities with confidence.

Applying those ultra-dark colours

Naturally, the key to the intense contrast I want to achieve is incorporating tonal values from both ends of the spectrum.

Special moments, pastel, 79 x 54 cm (31 x 21")

My friend agreed to do a photo shoot with her daughter and I ended up with more than 50 pictures to choose from. Still I ended up splicing two of them together to get this result. I wanted to give the impression of an intimate moment shared by this mother and child and felt I had to maintain some distance from the two in order to create that sense of privacy. At the same time, I didn't want this necessary space filled with distractions. I darkened the room and set up a white bounce board behind the mother to create dramatic light filling the space. This meant I needed only a hint of detail to complete the story of where this event was taking place while the direct and reflected light enhanced the details I felt were relevant to the moment.

Citrus, pastel, 14 x 35 cm (5 ½ x 13½)

This painting became a major breakthrough for me while I fought with it against something I didn't recognize as a problem. I knew some paintings seemed much more difficult for me than others and while I chalked it up to the probability of it being the difference in surfaces I was trying to portray, it took a whole year of staring at this unfinished piece before the bell finally rang. I was convinced it was the texture of the peel that was exasperating me as I poked at it off and on, always approaching it already feeling agitated. One fine day, the sun came through the skylight and lit up the paper as it sat on the far side of the room. It was white! Thinking back to various difficultie pieces it was like a series of lightbulbs coming on. Light papers frustrate me! Henceforth nothing lighter than a mid-tone was ever made it to my easel and my tension meter has never again registered higher than a four...well, not for that reason anyway.

If I had to compare pastel to a "food group" it could be none other than chocolate and then it would have to be decadently dark chocolate! Close your eyes and allow your senses to conger up pure rich darks and sensuously buttery smooth textures that produce immediate and eminently satisfying results. Depending on your passion, you can't help but envision chocolate, pastels or perhaps both. Like dark chocolate, I've added a delicious collection of those deep greens, blues and purples — some of which are so dark as to be almost indistinguishable from black — to my palette of every conceivable color. The manufacturers are striving to please us and are constantly delving just a little further into that dark void, so I continue experimenting with the latest product.

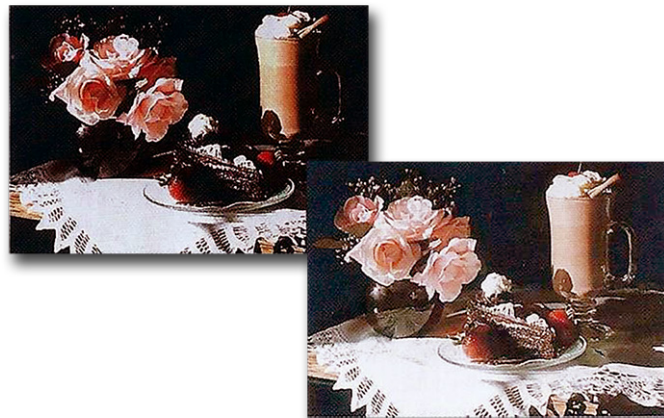
Let's talk here about applying some of those delicious colours. My methods here are quite simple. I block in all of the colour within each element, blend them to completion and go on to the next component. Because darks and reds are so "contagious" when in contact with other colours, they take a little more forethought but the initial process remains the same. The best course of action is to leave them out until the last possible moment when you will have the least chance of contaminating the surrounding areas while blending. I have a few blending tools but they are used so seldom it is almost misleading to even mention them. My fingers do the job better than any other tool. Color shapers, such as the small chisel point and the two smallest cup rounds, are in my toolbox along with my toothbrush and erasers of all shapes but nothing works like the magic touch of fingers

Finding an ally in black

Despite these new darks "coming to light" I am seldom able to find the exact color I'm looking for. Additionally, ►

Art in the making Going over to the dark side

I did a great deal of searching (and sampling) to find just the right slice of cake with enough reflective qualities in the icing to give me something to work with. It was heavy research and my hips still feel the weight of it. The roses and hot chocolate are an extension of the same colour family.



1 Manipulating my design

The resource photo was one of many taken in a darkened room with morning sun entering through a two foot square opening cut in cardboard. It was altered in Photoshop to cut a few inches out of the tablecloth and heighten the mug. I opted for the height to give the arrangement a more triangular shape and besides, the more chocolate the better. I printed out two versions of my reference photo — one taken at the best setting to see the values and a lighter version to give myself more information for the dark details.



2 Transferring bit by bit

I began with a detailed drawing on cartridge paper, ready to be transferred to a painting surface. I like this method of beginning because I'm often experimenting with new papers and grounds and if, during any part of the process, I suddenly decide I have chosen the wrong surface or even the wrong medium for this particular subject, it leaves the drawing intact for re-use.

After taping my drawing to my large sheet of light grey pastel card, I placed white transfer paper between the two surfaces and traced the roses and vase. Because this was a large painting for which I needed to maintain the correct register, I kept the drawing attached to my painting throughout the entire process transferring small sections as I went



3 Relating objects to the background

I am right-handed and work in any manner that keeps my hand from disturbing the finished work. Thus, I started at the top left corner and worked my way directly across the page, completing everything as I went except the background on this particular piece. The roses were worked to the finished stage and the background might have been left until the end of the entire painting but since the back receding rose is a springboard for the intensity of the others, it seemed prudent at this point to place a small amount of the darkest value behind it in order judge whether the tones were indeed working. I built up layers of my darkest darks, blending to get more solid coverage.



4 Tackling the tough parts first

The order in which I tackled each object within the immediate area is relative only to the ease with which it can be completed. There is no working background to foreground but rather I choose the shape that requires the most blending within it or has the most irregular outline as a starting point. This leaves to the last, the objects with contours or colors that might be worked on in one fell swoop, simplifying the creation of crisper and cleaner edges, as in the vase here.



5 Playing red against black

The wonderfully rich and adaptable reds are easily applied directly over a thin coating of black such as on the vase and in the shadows of the strawberries. The touches of white and off-white really propped against the blacks but I took great care to keep them clean or add them last.



6 Continuing the blocking-in and blending by hand

This step clearly shows the blocking-in method that I use throughout the picture. First, I laid down lots of pastel in colour bands throughout the mug of cocoa.

I then proceeded to get down and dirty using my fingers almost exclusively to blend the colors. More layers and blending, plus some tightening up of edges and additional details, captured the realism of the mug.



7 Making velvety whites

For the tablecloth, I used only white charcoal (yes, that's right) pencil, knowing it would give me a much more even velvety coverage than an actual white pastel. Granted, it took a while and more than one pencil but I was happy with the results. To complete the remainder of the dark background, I rotated the painting while I laid down and blended layers of my deepest pastels.



8 Evaluating the results

Now that I am done with "Dark Chocolate" (44 x 59 cm or 17 x 23"), what would I've done differently? (And it's fair to say that anything could have been changed with a little hard work and a good eraser.) I would have turned the handle of the cup a little more toward the foreground or possibly searched for or depicted a more delicate mug. I might have varied my background from almost 3/4 dark on the left, shifting to a black/red on a 45 degree slant just before the cup to a touch of pure strawberry red at the right top corner behind with cream. I would've put a fork in the painting because of my sense of telling a complete story and because I can't imagine eating cake with these dirty fingers.



About my studio and materials

My home studio gives me a north-facing drawing corner looking out over the fields but still gives me access to both early morning and twilight. I enjoy carpentry so I designed and planned the studio and gallery, then my husband and I built it. Doing it this way made it so much easier to get exactly what I had envisioned for so many years.

Until recently I did all of my pastel work at my drawing table. I never questioned it — having been a watercolorist for so many years, it was just a continuation of what I had always done. I switched to the easel when I encountered a painting that was too large for me to physically lean over. I purchased my forward-tilting unit and never looked back.

I have an eclectic collection of both pastel sticks and pencils. A small idiosyncrasy with regards to my colors, I like to keep the sticks in my large sets in their original boxes. I recognize it as a phobia surrounding the thought of missing out on the shade that may not be brought to my immediate attention by being misplaced. But no, it doesn't keep me up at night.

► in the process of collecting them, the first thing I find (only after they are purchased, of course) is that they are never as dark as they seemed in the store. If I really must go deeper, I have a choice of three ways to proceed, all of which entail the use of the dreaded black. One option is to get inventive and make my own sticks, whereas the other two involved layering with black. It is interesting to note that though similar, the minute difference in the order one applies the layers can yield quite different results.

I find I have the most control with adding a black over and application of my dark color. This is done gently with the side of a very soft charcoal pencil for the greatest restraint.

I usually take the opposite approach and lay down black first, remove as much as possible while it still leave the surface color, then add the dark over top. The variations in different papers' surface texture and their "griptivity" (or tooth) are quite often the deciding factors for either approach. It is one of those "practice makes perfect" things were experience makes known the most probable choice.

Painting "show-stoppers"

When all is said and done, selling art is all about hype. To keep it going, we must continually draw attention to ourselves. These high-impact paintings do the job. They will reel in that casual observer or stand out in a competition of hundreds. People feel compelled to discuss them with the stranger beside them, and artists and their friends simply must stand and dissect them. Newspapers like them because they print well and television because they are easy to decipher at a glance. Our audience is what makes us and these types of paintings are my calling card. If you're reading this, it worked again. Mission accomplished. □

How to mix the perfect colour

Locating the right color can be difficult so if I am going to be needing a good deal of one particular shade that is actually a combination of two or more sticks, I take those colors and form my own pastel stick. First, I crush portions of the two (or more) colors, mix them well smudge testing on a piece of white paper, then add alcohol and form it into a stick. This is a fairly quick process and not at all that messy if done in a zip-loc bag. I store these in an identifiable box because for some strange reason they appeared lighter in the stick than they are on the paper.



Raspberry Corn, pastel, 32 x 46 cm (12 ½ x 18")

I liked this picture from start to finish. The lighting, not to stark and not too subdued, worked with the off-white of the napkin to introduce a lovely golden cast to the scene. The corn was a challenge and that alone is the best incentive to spur me into painting.



About the artist

Dianna Ponting was born Diane Lloyd in North Battleford, Saskatchewan, Canada. Dianna began her art career in pastel portraits. Due to circumstances, she found herself depicting British Columbia's heritage working in pen-and-ink with watercolor washes. The success of this venture eventually displaced all else for more than 15 years until finally, with some 120 limited editions to support her, she was able to delve full time into watercolor and acrylic. 23 years later she is come full circle and is once again a pastellist.

When time allows, diversions from painting include designing and creating leaded glass windows, carpentry, fishing, archery and fencing.

Dianna is a Senior Signature Member and current Vice President of the Federation of Canadian Artists, and has been designated a Premier Pastellist by the Pastel Society of Canada. She has won many awards through the years including the Silver Medal at the 2002 Federation of Canadian Artists' Medal Show. She has also claimed the Jim Lynch Golden Pastel Palette Award in 2002 and the Herman Margulies Award for Excellence in 2003 in the Pastel Society of America's Pastel Only Show.

An invitation to display her work for the Queen and visiting dignitaries at the 1987 Commonwealth Conference has always been one of the highlights of her career

For 2006, Dianna has been invited to instruct in England as well as to set up a series of pastel workshops throughout the British Isles.

She is currently represented in the United States by the Evalyn Dunn Gallery, Westfield, N.J. and in Canada by the Birthplace of BC Gallery, Fort Langley, B.C., Gallery 223, Nanaimo, B.C., Charisma Gallery, Abbotsford, B.C. and her own studio/gallery, Vanishing Heritage Artworks, in Abbotsford, B.C.

Visit her website at www.ponting.com.

