



5-1-1977

Subdued Imagery of Watercolor and Oils Through Experimentation of Technique

Dona D. Erickson

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.und.edu/theses>

Recommended Citation

Erickson, Dona D., "Subdued Imagery of Watercolor and Oils Through Experimentation of Technique" (1977). *Theses and Dissertations*. 2911.
<https://commons.und.edu/theses/2911>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, and Senior Projects at UND Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of UND Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact und.common@library.und.edu.

SUBDUE IMAGERY OF WATERCOLOR AND OILS THROUGH
EXPERIMENTATION OF TECHNIQUE

by

Dona D. Erickson

Bachelor of Arts, University of North Dakota, 1970

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

Grand Forks, North Dakota

May
1977

T1977
E244

This thesis submitted by Dona D. Erickson in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts from the University of North Dakota is hereby approved by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done.

ROMAN SCHAFER
(Chairman)

Paul F. Anderson

Stanley Johnson

Alice J. Clark
Dean of the Graduate School

Permission

Title SUBDUED IMAGERY OF WATERCOLOR AND OILS THROUGH
EXPERIMENTATION OF TECHNIQUE

Department Visual Arts

Degree Master of Arts

In presenting this thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a graduate degree from the University of North Dakota, I agree that the Library of this University shall make it freely available for inspection. I further agree that permission for extensive copying for scholarly purposes may be granted by the professor who supervised my thesis work or, in his absence, by the Chairman of the Department or the Dean of the Graduate School. It is understood that any copying or publication or other use of this thesis or part thereof for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission. It is also understood that due recognition shall be given to me and to the University of North Dakota in any scholarly use which may be made of any material in my thesis.

Signature *Jana Erickson*

Date *April 27, 1977*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS	v
ABSTRACT	vi
INTRODUCTION	1
SECTION I: PAINTING WITH OIL	2
SECTION II: PAINTING WITH WATERCOLOR	10
CONCLUSION	19

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Illustration	Page
1. The Home Place	3
2. The Reservoir	5
3. Rural North Dakota	7
4. Transparent Thoughts of an Austere Generation	8
5. November	12
6. Spring Thaw	13
7. Snowfall in the Park	13
8. Dusk and Rain	14
9. Bunk House Guest	15
10. Reflections	16
11. Prairie Grass	17
12. Approaching Storm	18

ABSTRACT

This thesis is primarily concerned with the techniques used in experimentation by the artist over the past two years, as a graduate student in painting. Attention is paid to the techniques developed through the media of painting with watercolor and oils.

INTRODUCTION

As a graduate student I chose to develop myself as a painter. My undergraduate work included painting with oils. Many effects were not possible with oil painting so I began experimenting with watercolor. In my first graduate painting class the use of the medium fascinated me. Watercolor and oil are direct opposites but possess similarities in the overall effect. I was challenged to experiment with techniques of both media to obtain the subdued imagery each medium would allow.

My paintings will be discussed in relationship to technique, palette and subject matter. I prefer to discuss painting with oil separately from watercolor because these media are dissimilar.

SECTION I: PAINTING WITH OIL

My painting experiments began in the summer of 1975. My intentions were to capture scenes I was most familiar with using an abstract approach. The brushes I used most often included number two, six and ten flats, a number ten long; my favorite brushes, the ones I use for most of my work are number four and eight Filberts. I have both flat and oval edge Filberts. I do occasionally use other tools--painting knife, sponges and rags.

The palette I use, grouped by color--White, Ivory Black, Naples Yellow, Yellow Ochre, Raw Sienna, Burnt Sienna, the Umbers, Hooker's Green, Ultra Marine Blue, Prussian Blue, Alizarin Crimson, and Cadmium Red. This is the palette I used for my experiments in oil. I prefer to paint on good quality canvas which I stretch myself.

Throughout the summer I painted outdoors. I carried my equipment in a fishing tackle box and usually painted as much as possible on location. Trial runs were done on canvas board or canvas paper. A painter of the North Dakota prairie learns about the things that exist there in all seasons. I wanted to learn their relationship to each other. About the clarity of a summer day, the reflections of light on water or trees, and the intense heat of mid-August. The stubble and rich black earth that shows beneath the cover of a first snowfall, to know the division of land only a fence or furrow intimately touches with patterns of tawny yellow or umber. The visual

characteristics of the weeds and grass that flourish under skies of many seasons or a hundred other things that exist on the flat, majestic prairie. Because these are the things that help a person to understand and feel life and to make life more human or worth living, I chose to paint them and they made me realize a little of my own potential.

The first painting (Figure 1) completed that summer was done on location near my in-law's farmstead. The area was an artist's dream-- trees were growing everywhere, green fields and foliage abounded. My first impression was to capture the intense color and shapes before me.



Fig. 1. The Home Place

Because the growth around the buildings was all bright green, the house and barn red, I was challenged to paint them in their original complement. After quickly recording the values before me, I painted in shapes of trees, buildings and other landmarks. I wanted the painting

to hold interest for those who lived here during the early 1900's. The country church in the distance and the tire swing still moving with the breeze were part of these people. Because I was painting with complementary colors, my goal was to use them, subduing the colors to be acceptable or pleasing to the eye. The trees were also a problem because of their abnormal growth pattern. I decided to leave them in my painting because they had character I personally liked and the texture each tree offered was something I wanted to develop through technique experimentation. I used thick applications of paint on the images showing textural qualities and less paint on other areas. This seemed to capture the mood necessary for this painting. I tried to stay away from too much detail that would weaken the first impression of vivid color and pleasing shapes. But the values were so much alike that it was difficult to distinguish them. I discovered by leaving some of them alike I simplified the masses, and therefore kept my painting in the original state I had planned. I first tried a knife on textured areas but it did not lend itself to this particular painting. Rather I painted a heavy application in various directions until I was satisfied with the results. I did finish the painting at home, adding some trim to the house, grass in the foreground and other highlights necessary in the water and on trees. Because I was working with color schemes of nature, I found I often produced discords of hue. Nature's colors are living colors bathed in brilliant light, they are difficult to paint with pigments. The colors I used (green and red) are in most respects as unlike as any two colors could possibly be. They are nevertheless subtly related, as the word complement implies. My

goal was to properly subdue these colors with good results. Because the green areas were large and the red small, I could use this as well as the large light area (sky) to an advantage. My goal was to properly subdue the green and red as much as needed. After the painting was completed I was fairly satisfied; I think that within the harmonies of contrast it was successful.

My next painting created on location (Figure 2) was partially from my childhood memory and what I found when I returned to the scene. During my growing up years I lived in a small town, our only swimming was done in a reservoir of water within clay formed cliffs. On returning I found these cliffs were in reality much smaller than I remembered. The murky water was still there, very stagnant and in need of rain. I decided to paint the scene as I remembered it, using the shapes, values and colors I saw that day when I returned to paint. Because it was



Fig. 2. The Reservoir.

partially envisioned I used a foggy atmosphere over the painted cliffs. I used mixed greys for the fog, this made the painting more alive. The earth colors I used for the cliffs were mixed with blue for the foggy grey. I used a partial fog in my technique because it allowed some of the cliff to show, in varied values. Adding green created strong color unity and freshness. Fog behaves like a filter on a camera. Values jump and the three dimensional feeling becomes very obvious. I left some reflection in the stagnant water but kept the area dark to give the water the murky appearance it had during dog days when we invariably got the itch if rain did not freshen the water. This painting actually presented few problems and I felt it was the most successful from start to finish.

About six miles south of my home we often picked plums and other wild berries within a shelter belt close to the Sampson farm. The leaves on the bushes were vivid with warm fall colors. This area is popular in the hunting season and very picturesque. I decided to paint this scene on a small canvas. I wanted to capture the color and light reflecting on color. The house in the distance was the interest I needed to complete the composition. I began the painting with a wash of grey blue to represent the sky. I established the values and then began dabbing on paint with a sponge. I quickly changed this technique and switched to a small Filbert. The brush left a softer line without a rigid pattern the sponge produced. I put in dominant shapes and colors avoiding detail. I wanted the earth colors to speak for my feelings. Even though the painting is small (14x18 inches) I felt it an effective composition. An overall unity is maintained with the use of warm tones, and subtle accents (Figure 3).



Fig. 3. Rural North Dakota.

The next painting is perhaps the least interesting for the viewer but the one I enjoyed painting the most. When I visited my home, my grandmother's wedding gown was among other things I left behind. After much thought I decided to paint the french doors of the music room in her home and have my daughter who most resembled my grandmother model the dress. I began the painting by texturing the canvas with gesso--about 3 layers, painting both directions. This would give the curtains some textural qualities. I under-painted the dark values that I wanted to subtly come through the window. When this dried I began painting the grey white curtains, using Flake White, very sparingly in places, then I used Zinc White

to give a semi-transparent look, using Flake White in streaks for a draped appearance here and there. I used yellow and ochre for the carpet which was actually a close color to the existing carpet of the room. After several weeks I attempted the figure which I wanted to do in an austere position, revealing the rigidity of that generation. I mixed a grey white for the dress; it was very old and had a stiff under skirt which made the lower skirt have a starched appearance. This is typical of that era so I tried to capture this in my painting (Figure 4). Perhaps the lesson I learned in this experiment was getting a somewhat relaxed appearance to the figure even though it demanded some rigidity to carry through my intentions. A remembrance



Fig. 4. Transparent Thoughts of an Austere Generation.

of a time, a place and a human being close to me, was my goal. This painting is two feet by three feet. All the oil paintings were given several coats of glaze when thoroughly dried. I used a mixture of one-third Stark oil, one-third turpentine and one-third Damar varnish. This glaze brings out colors not normally seen as well as protecting the painting surface.

I have discussed the techniques used in experimenting with oil. Because I paint to express my feelings for the concept in the first place, what moves me to paint and why is an important tool in itself. My personal feelings motivate me to experiment with techniques that allow things to happen in a creative natural way. The correct way does not always appeal to me, but effects my judgment. This is what led me to experiment with oil, as a result of two years of experimentation. I have found nature holds my interest and offers me years of exploration. I have only begun to touch the surface. I value I think, a kind of intuitive filtering of influences on me from other artists or elsewhere, but I am always searching for something I have not seen before. Here is where I am strongly motivated to explore and try techniques for different effects. It is like floating in that free creative feeling. To me a painting should show the sweep of your hand with visual brush strokes but softened somewhat or subdued. A brush produces strokes, lines and tones that are unique. I feel the artist's image should dictate the choice of the medium.

SECTION II: PAINTING WITH WATERCOLOR

Water is life.

It feeds.

It cleanses.

It warms.

It cools.

It protects.

Without it, the earth would go barren and the artist would not be able to mix color with it to create watercolor paintings. This spontaneous medium is ideal for capturing effects of color and light, water is as important to watercolor as turpentine is to oil. You can flood the water on the paper or use it sparingly in combination with color, but water is a vital part of the watercolor technique.

Your watercolor painting will be as permanent and as good as the paint and paper you use. I found this to be true in my watercolor experiments. Good paper is usually from Europe. I prefer 140 lb. (medium) and 300 lb. (stiff). I try to find D'Arches, otherwise I use another good quality 100% rag paper. The 300 lb. paper is heavy, stretching is not necessary, but the others will buckle when wet and should be stretched. I usually wet the entire paper. I tape the edges on all sides to a board that is somewhat larger than the paper. The brown glue tape works very well for me. The brushes I use are the usual soft watercolor brushes (round) both large (#7) and small (3). I use several soft flat brushes (sable) 1 1/2 inch to 5/8 inch

for small areas of work. For special effects I use a number six Badger hair fan brush. I also use a sponge on occasion, exato knife and other sharp tools when needed to take out bits of color, paper towels for textural qualities and special effects. I have a butcher's porcelain tray containing these colors: Cadmium Yellow, Yellow Ochre, Raw and Burnt Sienna, Cadmium Red, Alizarin Crimson, Burnt Umber and Thalo Blue. I sometimes use Thalo Green mixed with Alizarin Crimson for deep accents. Whenever possible I leave the white of the paper instead of using white watercolor. I have used white acrylic or tempera for special effects. The palette is a personal thing one learns to modify at times.

For subject matter I paint whatever moves me. It may be the subject matter itself, the contrast of textures, the way the light reflects on an object, or a memory that keeps coming back. If I see something that makes my spine tingle I want to paint whatever it might be.

As with oils, I am highly motivated to experiment and explore many techniques until the colors, textures and content pull together in a pleasing way. Basic techniques I worked with at first were the washes. A flat wash using one color over the entire area, a graded wash, dark to light and vice versa. I painted as many types of skies as I could dream up using various papers to get different effects. I also used wet-in-wet washes here. After experimenting with wet-in-wet, I became familiar with three degrees of wetness in paper; saturated, moist; and damp. When the paper is saturated it is the most temperamental. I used this technique for soft hints of form in the painting November (Figure 5). The background was made with this technique.



Fig. 5. November.

After the paper lost its shine I sprinkled salt on the color and allowed the salt to pull the color into little crystal ice formations. When the watercolor dried I painted color into the birch trees, then with a painting knife (edge) I carefully added a few soft lines for twigs. I used D'Arches paper and had little or no trouble controlling the wet-in-wet technique.

I used this same technique for my next two watercolors, altering the procedure slightly. The large (18x24) watercolor was a sheet of cold pressed paper (140 lb.). I wanted the background lighter with a hint of spring in the sky. I added a soft pink to both sky and puddle in the foreground. In this painting (Figure 6) I added more salt to give the picture an icy condition present in the spring when water freezes and thaws at intervals. The fusing of colors is very apparent in this watercolor. The other smaller watercolor (Figure 7) was



Fig. 6. Spring Thaw.



Fig. 7. Snowfall in the Park.

painted with the same approach with only a sprinkle of salt in the background. The snow, however, was done with white acrylic and watercolor; to give an opaque shiny glare apparent at dusk. I prefer to use the white of the paper but I like some qualities of this technique.

I wanted to experiment with starch in some of my work so I chose to use this medium in a setting when the colors could run and bleed together. I decided on a rainy evening, with a figure holding an umbrella. I liked the idea of the wet ruffles running together in color as the rain shower hit the umbrella. At dusk the street is gloomy with accents of light reflecting here and there. By using starch mixed with watercolor and tempera paint I proceeded to wash in colors, dark grey to light blues. I painted in the pastel umbrella, the girl, then the splashes of rain. It was done quickly and deliberately with wet-in-wet. I blotted out areas with paper towels so the face and figure were easier to control (Figure 8).



Fig. 8. Dusk and Rain.

After this dried I was satisfied with many things that happened and others that I was able to control. This led me to try another figure in a painting. I had a picture in my mind of our bunk house on the farm where we once lived and the regular farm hand who usually stood in front of the weathered door. Since I wanted the old wood of the bunk house to be apparent I started painting from dark to light, which I had never done before. I worked quickly flooding blues and greys together in streaks to form the boards. I left the foreground light with a hint of ochre. I then painted in the farm hand (Figure 9).



Fig. 9. Bunk House Guest.

I stopped to take a look at my progress and decided the unfinished foreground was advantageous to the very darkened right hand corner. I did not do anything else to the painting. It looked finished. I did add the bench and door knob later. The painting of the bunk house aroused

my interest in various kinds of wood and I tried another technique in painting the boards in the building of my next watercolor (Figure 10). I painted the building vertically, while the roof was done horizontally. I quickly pressed a paper towel to the roof, taking some color off and leaving impressions to get a textured effect. The trees were very colorful in this setting. I used an abstract approach rather than kill the composition with a lot of detail. I used a Japanese brush to wash in the tree foliage, overlapping washes for the transparency needed here. The wash in the foreground was done wet-in-wet putting the values in to represent the canoe and shadows. Although this watercolor is quite bright with color, the colors chosen give it unity. Because I used subject matter from memory of a place I had visited, it was more difficult to paint this watercolor.

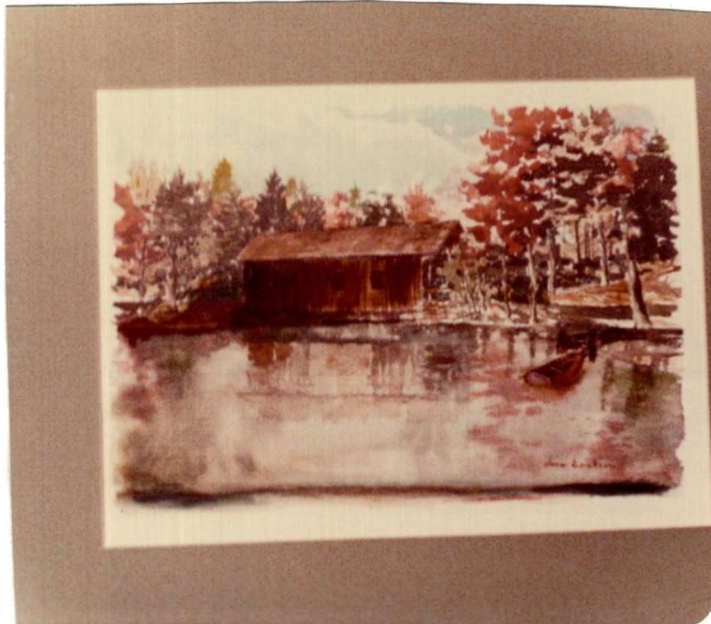


Fig. 10. Reflections.

For my next watercolor I searched for an interesting view of prairie grass (Figure 11). I painted on location. This was a quick but well thought out watercolor. I wet the paper and stapled it down to a board after a quick wash. I stroked in the grass in weak colors, let it dry, this weakened the color more. Then wet it again and stroked in more grass with stronger color. The weakened colors seemed to go back into the distance as the stronger values appeared. I used a fan brush and a very small (5/8 inch) brush to do the thin brush lines that give the painting the simplicity that makes it unique.

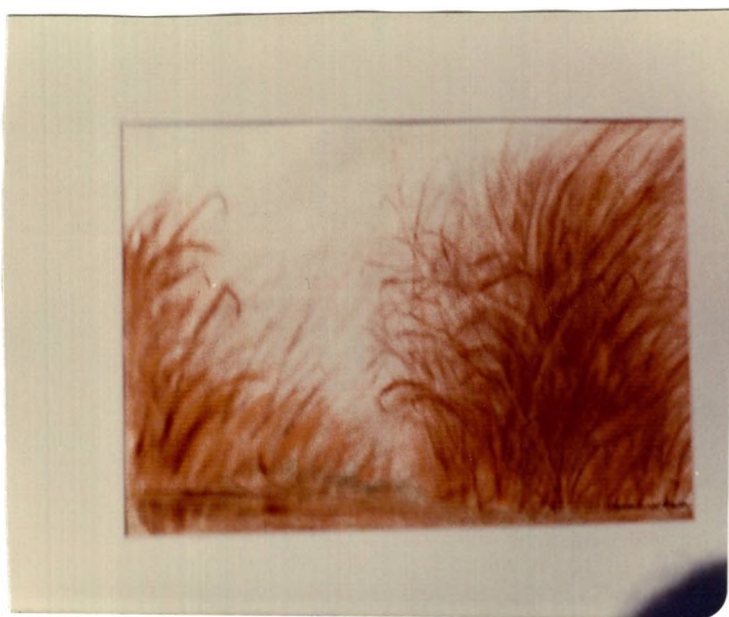


Fig. 11. Prairie Grass.

In Figure 12, the last watercolor I painted, I also used the fan brush for the grass and weed formations. I first sprayed the entire watercolor paper with liquid starch. I spread it evenly with a wide brush, then I soaked the brush with a lot of paint, a mixture

of blue grey, brushing in the cloud formation. With a smaller brush I developed the hills, letting the wet paper form growth on the hills. When the paper was drying I brushed in the long grass. After the paper lost its shine I scraped out the lightning with a pocket knife. I added the color to the weed formation last. The starch makes it possible to work the sky over many times to get the stormy atmosphere needed. This technique requires rapid movements and a great deal of control. The starch also gives a semi-opaque quality to the paint. The combination of transparency and opaqueness was an advantage to this painting because of the message I wanted to carry through, of a storm overtaking an otherwise peaceful setting.



Fig. 12. Approaching Storm.

CONCLUSION

My watercolors are concerned with richness of tone and atmosphere, and the recording of a stroke and the sweep of my hand. I spent several years working in other media but I was drawn to painting because of the color and depth I could achieve through this medium. Reproducing detail has never appealed to me, rather the quality of the image that is possible through painting, using various techniques.

When I see a beautiful North Dakota sky with a barn in the distance, I grasp the whole at once in a grand sweep of the sky and a broad mass of dark building. I do not see detail and draw in all the nails in the wood, by then my sky would be gone. My rule for painting is to represent the color at once. In my work the simplest of strokes is the basis for my image. The simplest of line or brush stroke gives me pleasure. Just as a sentient being observes and appreciates nature; I enjoy the look and feel of a stroke. However, I understand that finite examples of form and color make visible the infinite. A simple note can make us aware of silence. When strokes of color are drawn through space the finite meets the infinite, to me that is what art is about.