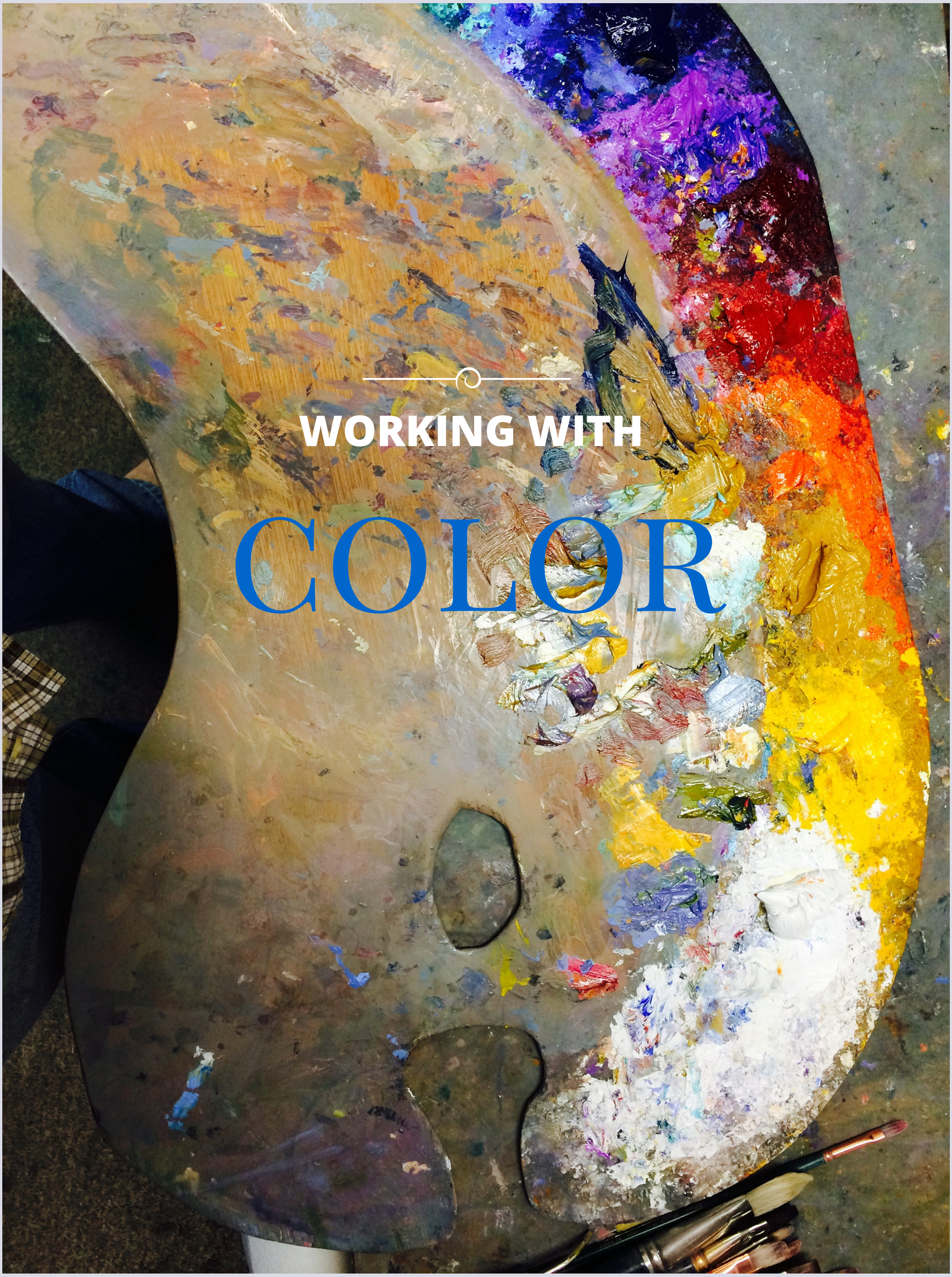

Let's Keep It Clean Out There!

by Phil Starke
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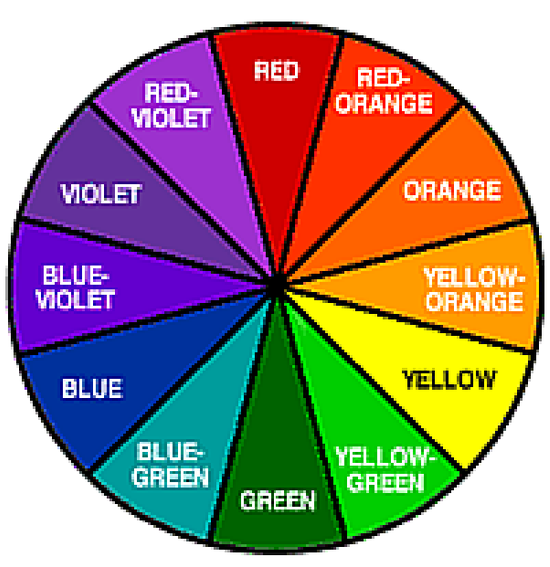
SEEING COLOR

When we look at a landscape, whether it's outside or from a photograph, we naturally tend to isolate an area and try to mix a color that matches what we see.

It's much more effective to compare colors that are next to each other, then think in terms of the colors on the color wheel.

First, when we look at an area in a landscape, then look away to another area we get a fresher view. For example, a distant group of trees may look green, but when we compare them to trees in the foreground the background trees will appear a lot bluer.

Or, if I'm looking at a sunlit road, it may appear to have a blueish color, but if I look away to the shadow on the road, then the sunlit area looks a lot warmer or more orange.



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When we try to get an accurate color by staring at an area, our eyes can get fatigued.

Second, when trying to decide how to mix a color, we will see it's more effective to start with a color from the color wheel. Our eyes see through red, yellow and blue cones. So we identify with colors composed from the primaries or from the color wheel. Our eyes can't break down black or earth colors so we don't identify with them as quickly as colors from the color wheel.

If I make a decision to start with a color from the color wheel, make it the right value, and modify it with the compliment, I will get a more natural looking color.

I'm not saying you shouldn't use earth colors, a lot of artists use them very effectively. But when we think of the color wheel as pure colors that the eye can process better and are cleaner, then we can be better equipped to use earth colors as modifiers instead of local color.

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The Value of Color

As much as we love color, it's the values that make a painting work. That's why pencil drawings, pen and ink drawings and black and white photography are effective.

Color might create more emotion, but values are the foundation for composition, weight and mass.

The key to values in a landscape are to create depth. Our canvas is flat, a two- dimensional surface, and we want the illusion of depth and volume in our paintings.

The first aspect of values is the shadow pattern. The large shape of dark that runs throughout the scene. It sets up the composition, simplifies shapes, and makes the painting easier to read. It's here where we can make changes to what we see. The shadow pattern is the meat of the composition.

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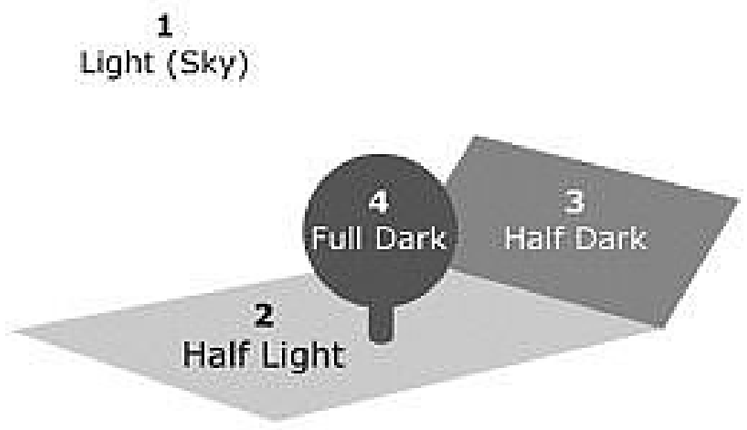
The second aspect of value are the planes of a landscape.

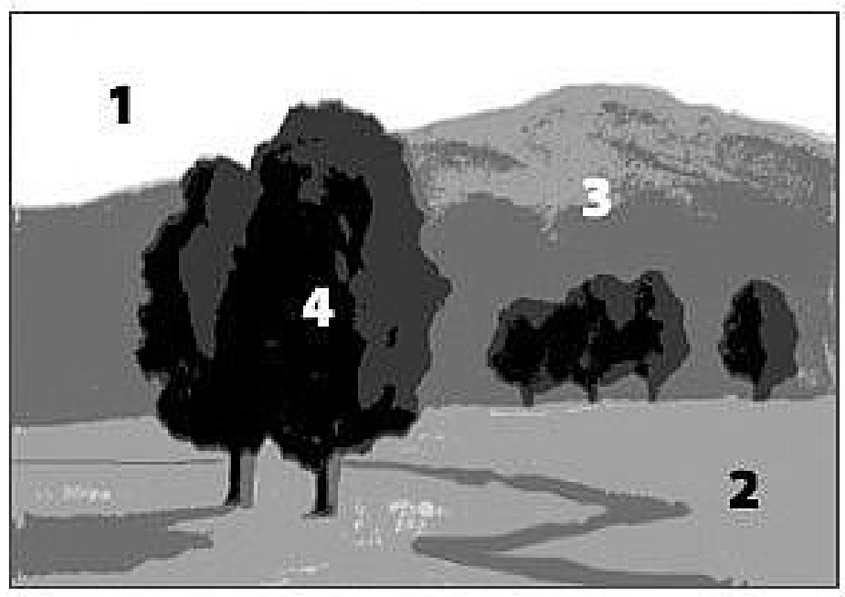
To create depth on a flat surface we have to have value changes every time the form changes, and if we can create large planes that are different values, our painting will have a sense of depth.

The 4 large planes of a landscape are:

1. sky plane
2. flat plane
3. slanted plane
4. upright plane.

When any of these 4 planes are the same value, it flattens out the painting.





The third aspect of value is the effect of atmosphere, objects get lighter as they recede into the distance.

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The Color of Light and Shadow

All the objects in a landscape have a local color to them, blue sky, green tree, red barn, yellow field. But local color isn't the color we're after.

If my goal in painting is always to suggest the light and atmosphere, then I want to paint the color of the light and shadow, not local color.

Sunlight has a warmer color to it, like yellow, yellow-orange, orange, red-orange.

The shadow color is cooler compared to the sunlight and picks up more of the sky color, so the shadow color is more blue, blue-violet, blue-green.

When sunlight hits an object the local color changes to the warmer version on the color wheel.

For example a red barn in the sunlight will turn to a red-orange and the shadow side of the barn will be more red-violet. The local color of the barn can be seen better on a cloudy day when there isn't the effect of sunlight and shadow.

A green tree turns to more of a yellow-green in the sunlight and blue-green in the shadow.

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The Color of Distance

Just like the values get lighter as object and planes recede into the distance, color also changes as it recedes. The color gets cooler as it goes into the distance.

It remains the same color. A red barn is still red when it recedes in the distance, but is more affected by the color of the atmosphere between the viewer and the object in the distance.

If we could give depth or distance a color, it would be blue, blue-violet, blue-green. Warmer colors fade faster in the distance. Yellow is the first to fade, then disappear, then red fades until all you're left with is a muted blue.

So it helps to be aware of the color of depth and be able to push it to create more depth in your painting.

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About The Author

Phil Starke is an accomplished artist. He also enjoys teaching and sharing his knowledge of painting. You can see more of his work at his gallery website: www.philstarke.com.

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