

DENISE LARUE MAHLKE

Techniques in Response to Landscape

Texan Denise LaRue Mahlke uses a variety of materials and procedures to paint the landscape with pastels, with her choices dependent on the light, color, atmosphere, and mood at a location

The humidity, land formations, vegetation, light, atmosphere, and coloration at outdoor painting locations are vastly different in each region of the country. To interpret those variations, Denise LaRue Mahlke uses several different techniques for toning the surface of her UART or Wallis paper and building up layers of hard and soft pastel. "It's a process of observing what I see and responding to what I feel," she explains. "The choices I make

are aimed at balancing both of those aspects of the landscape."

One key to achieving that balance is making preliminary compositional sketches before beginning work with the medium. "I began working with pastels in 1990, and for the first few years of using them outdoors, I would set up and immediately start painting," Mahlke says. "I was anxious to capture the fleeting pattern of light and shadow and knew my time was

limited, so I didn't want to waste time making several preliminary studies. Then in 2004 I participated in a workshop with T. Allen Lawson, and he showed me how the few minutes one spends thinking, planning, and sketching can be

Redwing Sanctuary*2010, pastel, 7 x 9 in.**Private collection**Plein air*

Demonstration: Malibu Lagoon *Photos: Gayle Uyehara*



STEP 1: Working on a sheet of UART 500-grit paper mounted to Gatorboard, Mahlke sketches in the scene with a hard Nupastel stick.



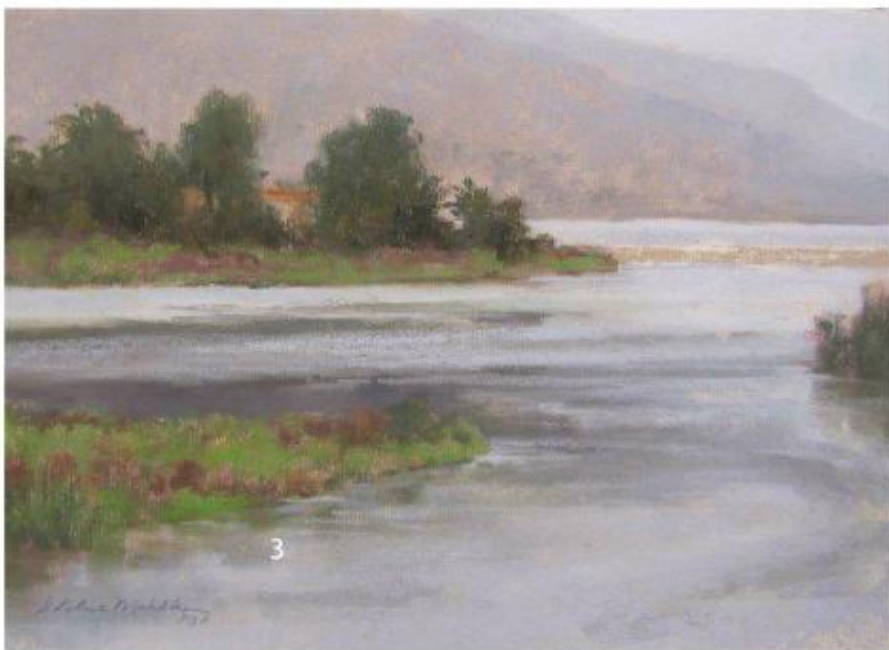
STEP 2: The artist continues to work with hard pastels to block in the major shapes, then gently rubs the surface with Viva paper towels to fill in and soften the underpainting, being careful to keep each shape's color clean.



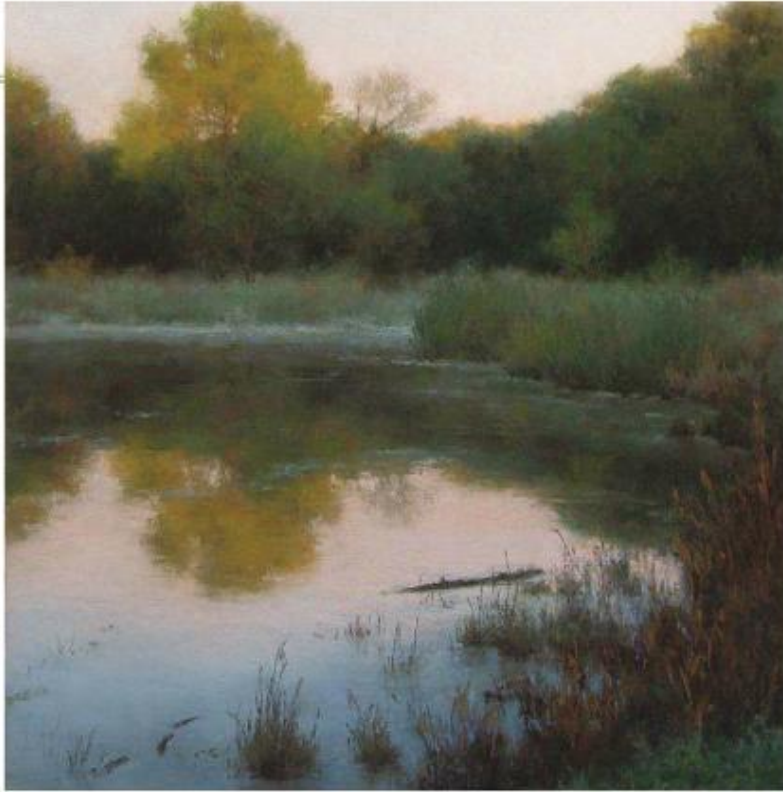
STEP 3: Mahlke builds up the painting surface with softer Sennelier, Terry Ludwig, and Unison pastels.



STEP 4: The artist uses her fingers and a clean brush to remove loose pastel, soften edges, and blend tones.



The completed painting:
Malibu Lagoon
2011, pastel, 8 x 12 in.
Private collection



Morning Song

2010, pastel, 12 x 12 in.

This studio painting is based on the plein air painting titled *Redwing Sanctuary*.

Private collection

Studio

tremendously valuable. That planning can help an artist focus on the most important aspects of a scene and compose a painting effectively.”

Lawson was able to show students the difference between a quickly executed painting and a well composed picture that conveys the painter’s ideas and emotions. “I’ve learned a great deal from both Tim Lawson and Dan Pinkham, two masterful painters who write down their thoughts and paint their observations,” Mahlke says. “They’ve proven to me that the technique is less important than the way an artist visualizes a scene. If artists can convey a visual concept and not just detailed pieces of information, then they have made the scene their own.”

After Mahlke spends time visualizing a painting, she decides whether she wants to develop it on a sheet of Kitty Wallis Belgian

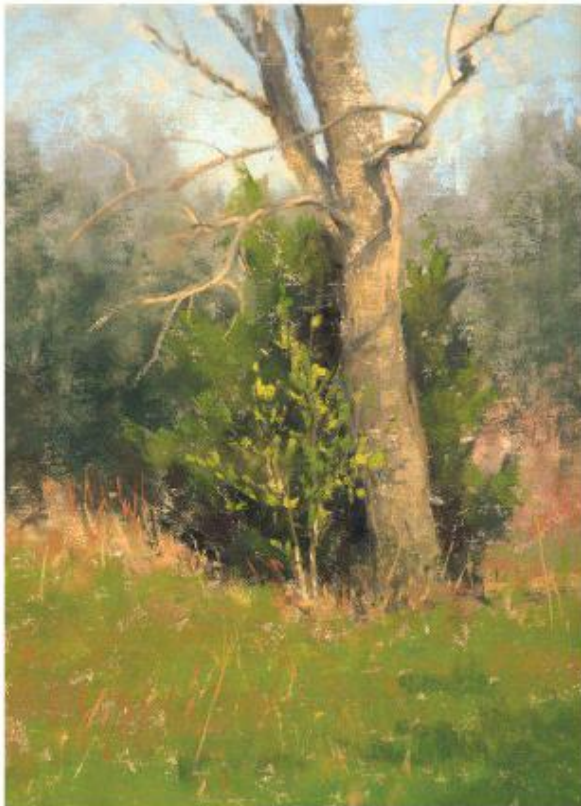
Mist paper to take advantage of the paper’s existing tone, or if she needs to establish an underpainting that will contrast with the greens of the plant material, the soft blues in the sky, or the reddish colors in the rocks. “Frequently I block in the big shapes with hard Nupastels in shades of red and reddish purple, and then I dissolve the pastel with a wash of mineral purple,” Mahlke says. “When it is dry, the base color allows me to build up layers of complementary greens and ochres for a rich surface of color.

Signs of Spring

2010, pastel, 8 x 6 in.

Private collection

Plein air



ARTIST DATA

NAME: Denise LaRue Mahlke

BIRTHDATE: February 24, 1957

BIRTHPLACE: Victoria, TX

LOCATION: Georgetown, TX

INFLUENCES: Robert Lougheed, Will James, Norman Rockwell,

Andrew Wyeth, Winslow Homer, Mary Cassatt, Edgar Degas,

William Merritt Chase, Willard Metcalf, John Henry Twachtman,

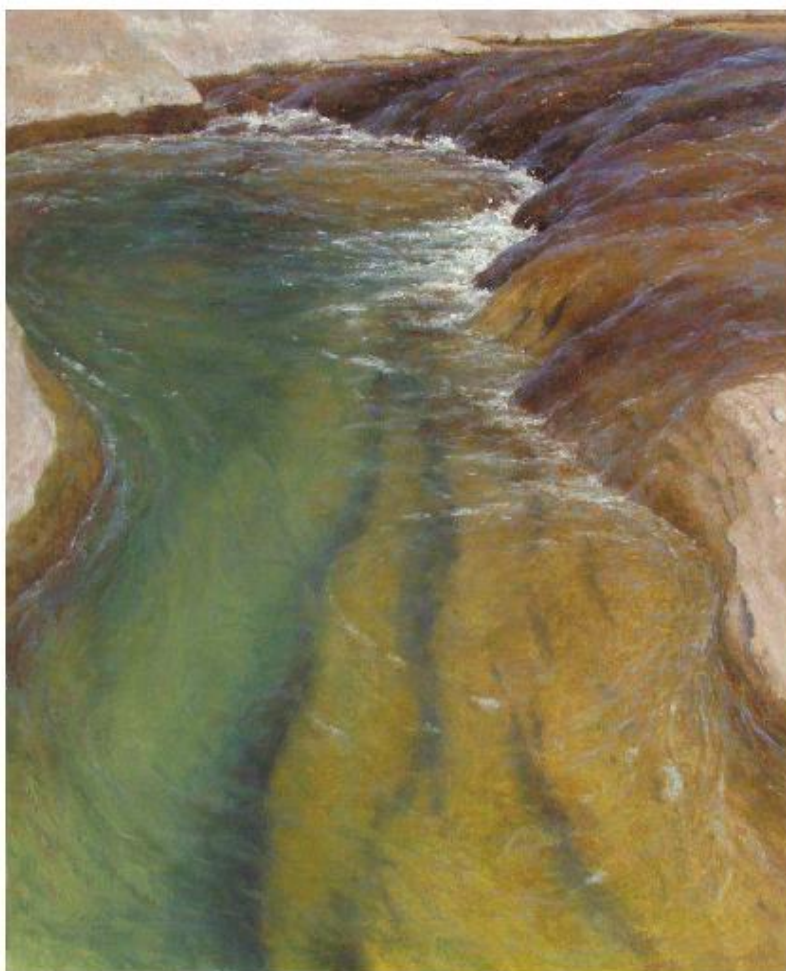
Emil Carlsen, J.M. Whistler, Isaac Levitan, William Langston

Lathrop, John Singer Sargent, Sorolla. Contemporary artists T.

Allen Lawson, Daniel Pinkham, George Carlson, Len Chmiel, Skip

Whitcomb, and Clyde Aspevig

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Living Waters

2011, pastel, 30 x 24 in.

Courtesy the Thunderbird Foundation for the Arts.

The artist used watercolor to establish the underpainting in this landscape.

Studio

more layers of soft Sennelier, Unison, or Terry Ludwig pastels."

Painting washes of watercolor is another technique Mahlke uses to quickly block in the major shapes of a landscape and establish a base of either complementary or analogous hues. She says, "I often do the underpainting with watercolor when I want there to be luminous, transparent areas of color in the final painting. It creates a completely different surface and look than the dissolved or rubbed pastels. In the painting *Living Waters*, for example, I used the watercolor tone to help create the thin, transparent, glowing appearance of the stream."

While attending the convention of the International Association of Pastel Societies in the spring of 2011, Mahlke bought a Girault pastel set that included a range of gray pastels. She says, "Tim Lawson mentioned in his workshop that grays are the glue that holds everything together. I can do most of the work in my landscape painting with neutral browns, reds, blues, and greens, setting up a contrast with the slightly brighter hues, thereby allowing the intense colors to carry the emotional content of a painting."

Although Mahlke believes it is critically important to work from nature, she frequently

"If I am working under very humid conditions, as was the case when I recently taught a workshop in Southern California, I can't use the mineral spirits wash because it takes too long to dry. In that case, I gently rub the pastel with a sheet of Viva paper towels wrapped around my finger to push the colors into the pastel paper and leave enough tooth to hold the subsequent applications of color. There are occasions when I will combine those two techniques."

Mahlke also works the surface of her paintings differently depending on the degree of subtlety she wants in the final image. "I especially like paintings with subtle shifts in the colors and values, as in the case of *Malibu Lagoon*, with its misty atmosphere, and the best way to achieve that is to blend the pastel with a very light touch of my fingers," she says. "Other times, I just keep applying more and

Winter Hues

2010, pastel, 6 x 8 in.

Courtesy M. Gallery of Fine Art, Charleston, SC

Plein air





Tapestry

2008, pastel, 11 1/2 x 11 1/2 in.

Private collection

Studio

photographs for the same reason. So much of the land around Texas is privately owned. If I see a really beautiful spot that is essentially inaccessible, I take photographs and use those as the basis of studio paintings. Painting outdoors helps inform my indoor painting, so when I do work from photographs I am more aware of what is actually occurring in nature and adjust according to the camera's distortion of values and colors, especially in shadow areas."

Mahlke goes on, "I will always think of myself as a student. I learn something useful every time I attend a plein air event and talk with some of the other participants. They might mention new materials, a book on a great painter, an exhibition, or a location I would never have found on my own. And when I teach a workshop, I get as much back from the students as I offer them, especially if we are working in a part of the country where I have never painted before." 📷

M. Stephen Doherty is Editor of *PleinAir* magazine.

takes her plein air paintings into her studio to use as the basis of larger pastel paintings. "I sell fewer and fewer of my plein air paintings because they are tremendously valuable in recapturing the mood and appearance of a landscape when I develop larger studio paintings," she says. "Living in the Hill Country of Texas near Austin, it's sometimes difficult to work outdoors because the temperature stays above 100 degrees for most of the summer, and lately it has been very dry and dusty. I do as much work as I can outdoors, but most of the time I have to be in my studio, relying on the compositional sketches and pastel paintings I've done on location."

Mahlke paints in oils as well as pastels, usually choosing the oils when circumstances require her to limit her painting gear. "I can create an oil sketch with a very limited palette, whereas I need two boxes of pastels when I'm on location, and that can be difficult in some situations," she says. "I also work from



Summer Idyll

2011, pastel, 9 x 12 in.

Courtesy InSight Gallery, Fredericksburg, TX

Studio