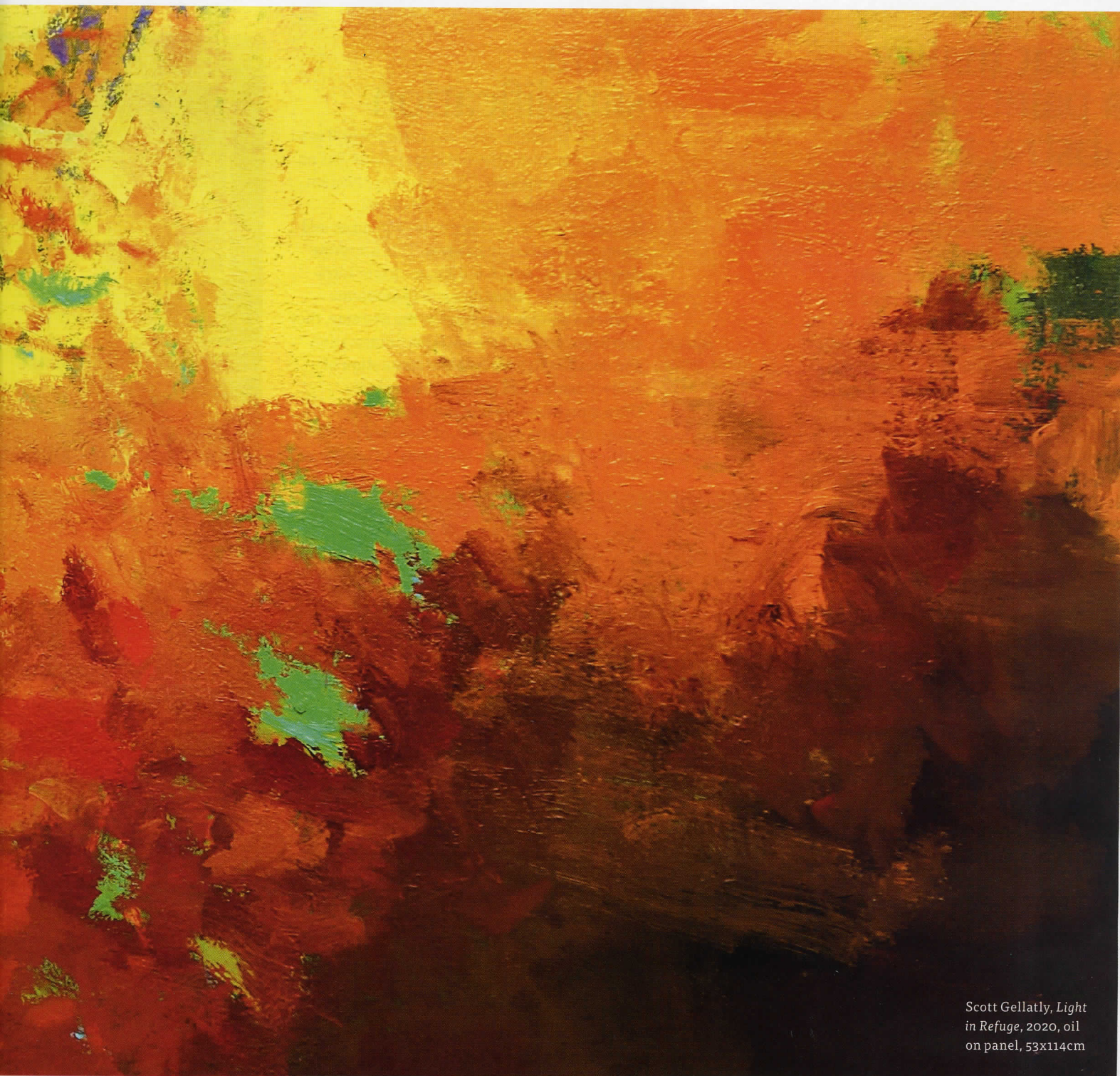


Inducing abstraction



Scott Gellatly, *Light in Refuge*, 2020, oil on panel, 53x114cm

Landscape painter and author **MITCHELL ALBALA** explores one of the most intriguing aspects of landscape painting: abstraction. In what specific ways can we generate an abstract aesthetic in our own work?

ABSTRACTION ISN'T UNIQUE to landscape painting, but the natural world does wonderfully lend itself to the approach. When we consider nature's range of light and her many atmospheric personalities, or her variety of colours, shapes, and textures, we realise how much of nature is inherently abstract.

Many painters – even those who work representationally – are drawn to the abstract. An abstract aesthetic can imbue a painting with an extra dimension that transcends representation. For many artists, however, shifting toward the abstract can be elusive.

Abstraction is never an arbitrary act. It requires a visual orientation that prioritises aesthetics such as colour, shape, or movement over the representational story. Scott Gellatly says, "In these wetland scenes, I am particularly drawn to the way the richly textured landscape is reflected in the adjacent waters, distorting form into pure shape and colour. I use colour to depict luminosity, which elevates the light in the scene as the central subject matter." ▶

What makes a painting abstract?

We all know an abstract painting when we see it, but why do we experience it that way?

Every painting – whether strictly representational, fully abstract, or somewhere in between – is built with certain aesthetic devices, such as value, colour, composition, shape, form, and so on. In a representational work, these aesthetic devices are firmly attached to the subject, giving the picture the descriptive structure necessary for it to be recognised as what it is: a house, a tree, a mountain, and so forth.

However, when the narrative becomes less obvious and the visual experience shifts more toward the aesthetic devices themselves, the painting becomes increasingly abstract. The fewer cues to objective reality there are, the more abstract we say it is.

“Abstraction generally involves implication, suggestion and mystery rather than obvious description,” said Canadian artist and writer Robert Genn (1936–2014). “Like a good poem, a good abstraction attacks your feelings before your understanding.”

The paintings featured in this article are semi-abstract. They still retain a foothold in the representational world. Experiencing representation and abstraction in the same painting allows us to better understand where one leaves off and the other begins

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There are three common ways painters can generate an abstract aesthetic in their work.

- ultra-simplification and reduction of detail
- expressive and/or textural mark-making
- colour alteration

Applying any one of these can put us on a path toward abstraction, but more times than not, several are at play at the same time, as we will see in the paintings shown here.

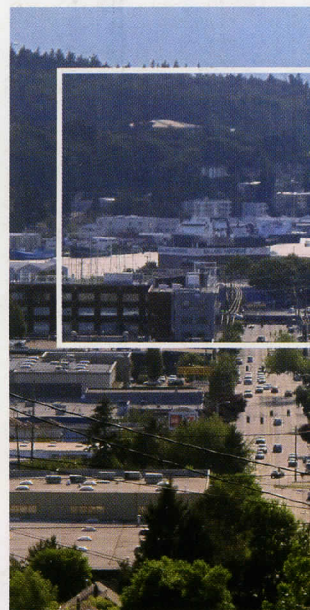
Ultra-simplification

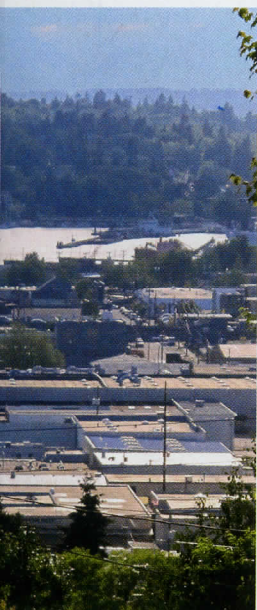
In its raw, unedited state, the natural world is so vast and complex, the landscape painter has no choice but to simplify. Through simplification, the detailed and complex world can be translated into something more organized and comprehensible to the viewer. This is routine simplification, which is different from “ultra-simplification:” simplifying in the extreme.

When a painter simplifies in the extreme, they also begin to eliminate narrative information and detail, which leads to the dissolution of subject matter, and greater abstraction.

Ultra-simplification is highly effective at inducing abstraction and, of the three methods outlined here, perhaps the easiest to implement.

Mitchell Albala, *Salmon Bay Under a Pink and Turquoise Light*, 2022, pastel on paper, 14x18cm





To interpret such a sprawling and complex urban landscape in a semi-abstract way, I first imposed a very limited focus, which eliminated all but the most essential compositional elements. Then I downplayed nearly all detail, leaving just enough to imply an urban setting, but not so much that attention was drawn away from the primary visual intent: bold, simplified shapes of colour and light.



Expressive and/or textural mark-making

Whether observing the world directly or in a photograph, we don't see its many colours and shapes as gestural strokes with visible impasto-like relief. Expressive strokes and the tactility of the paint itself are painterly conventions that live exclusively in the flat two-dimensional world of our paintings.

When strokes or marks become highly activated, we are adding a dimension to the painting that doesn't have a correlation with reality. Recognisable elements dissolve as they are replaced by simpler marks. Greater attention is brought to the surface itself, and an abstract experience is induced.

Sandy Ostrau,
Festival of Colour,
oil on panel,
15x15cm



When the paint is applied this liberally, and with such directional energy, the picture becomes less about a landscape and more about the elements of the painting itself. Ostrau's small piece is a beautiful example of how a powerful aesthetic becomes the dominant force of the painting and generates abstraction. ▶



Colour alteration

One way we experience a subject as representational is through a realistic interpretation of colour; that is, the colours in the painting align with how we expect them to appear in reality. All landscape painters modify colours to some degree, but if we deviate enough from the naturalistic colour of elements, we break down representational cues, which can heighten the abstraction.

There are obviously many ways painters can alter colour, but the most common way is with highly saturated colour. Bright, chromatic colour, spread across the entire painting, is not how we experience colour in nature; therefore, a saturated strategy can be a very effective way to push beyond representation and support the abstract aesthetic.

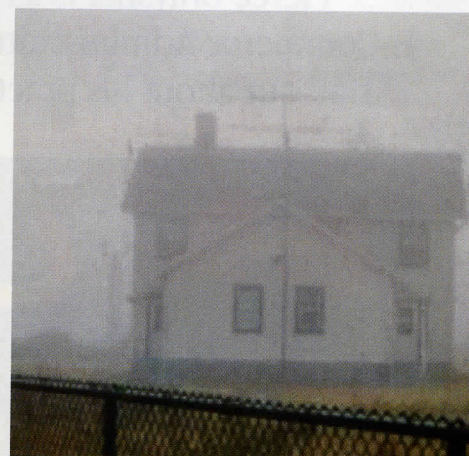
Brian Rutenberg,
Gardenia, 2017, oil on
linen, 152x208cm

Envisioning the Abstract

The modes of abstraction reviewed here can all point us in the right direction. Yet there is another essential ingredient that is perhaps the most important of all—vision.

Abstraction is very much a viewpoint that needs to be envisioned at the outset. What is the abstract idea? Are there abstract qualities in the subject that can be played up? What aesthetics will take precedence over the narrative subject? Will the way in which the paint is handled support the abstraction? This requires a willingness to let go of preconceived notions about what a subject should look like—which is the most difficult perceptual leap a painter can make.

Abstract or semi-abstract paintings are never about nouns, the narrative elements that populate our pictures. They are about verbs and adjectives, in the form of aesthetics such as colour, light, shape, and movement. The initial vision for this painting was a massive rectangular form hovering within an atmospheric veil. This is hinted at in the source image, but to express my vision, I would have to exaggerate that effect. Colour choices, a textural surface and an ultra-simplified composition support the abstraction.



Mitchell Albala,
*The Lighthouse
Keeper's House*,
oil on canvas,
96.5x81cm



Mitchell Albala is a painter based in the US, known for his atmospheric and semi-abstract landscapes. A frequent contributor to *Artists & Illustrators*, he is also the author of two best-selling books: *Landscape Painting: Essential Concepts and Techniques for Plein Air and Studio Practice* (2009), and *The Landscape Painter's Workbook: Essential Studies in Shape, Composition, and Color* (2021).

To find out more about the painters featured in this article, please visit the following websites: mitchalbala.com brianrutenbergart.com sandyostrau.com scottgellatly.com □



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Rutenberg frequently uses chromatic colour to support abstraction. "The last thing the world needs is another painting of a tree," explains Brian. "What it needs is one person's experience warmed up and worn in. Forcing together saturated colours that don't go together creates a transference of energy. Wild colour embodies rage for life. I can't think of a better starting point for abstracting the landscape."