

Drawing with Only Three Primary Colors

Mike Pease, CPSA (OR)

When, long ago, I began teaching drawing to architecture students, I wanted them to learn to think in color, not just black and white, which was then the norm.

That meant finding a medium that would encourage the students not only to see in color, but also to design in color.

Because of its flexibility, colored pencils seemed the way to go; and as I began developing exercises, I decided that the best way to help students understand the fundamentals of color was to have them draw with primary colors.

The course turned out well—students did learn to see, and draw, in color. And as my own comfort in drawing with primary colors increased, my understanding of and fascination with the world of color deepened.

Now, a decade later, drawing with primaries only (I use Prismacolor True Blue, Magenta, and Canary Yellow), has become automatic, intuitive. I can't imagine any other way. The whole spectrum with just three pencils...what's not to like?!

Try it Yourself

If you're interested in exploring the notion of drawing with primaries, here's a simple exercise that will get you started:

- Begin by drawing a 1" diameter circle; use a light line.
- Using True Blue with a sharp point, fill the circle with a uniform, smooth light layer.
- Add a new smooth layer over the blue, using Magenta, to make a light purple.



1-True Blue



2 - add Magenta



3 - add Canary Yellow



4 - neutralize



Cox Butte Farm (25 x 37) by Mike Pease, CPSA, was created using just three primary pencil colors.

- Now add a smooth layer of Canary Yellow, giving you some kind of gray, possibly a pure, neutral gray, but more likely a gray with a bias toward one, or two (orange/purple/green) of the primaries.
- If it's not perfectly neutral, see if you can make it go there, by adding very light amounts of the complementary colors (e.g., if it's biased toward orange, i.e., too much magenta and yellow, as it is in this illustration, add blue).
- Once you have a "perfect" gray, you can continue adding layers, in whatever order you want, and watch the circle change color (and get darker, of course).

Reminder: It's not really just three colors, it's four, because the white of the paper is an essential part of the mix. The

lighter the pencil layers, the more the paper's white is there lightening the color; when the pencil layers get heavy the white disappears, and the color darkens. The yellow has little darkening effect; it's mostly the magenta and blue that make the darks.

Sketching with a Time Limit

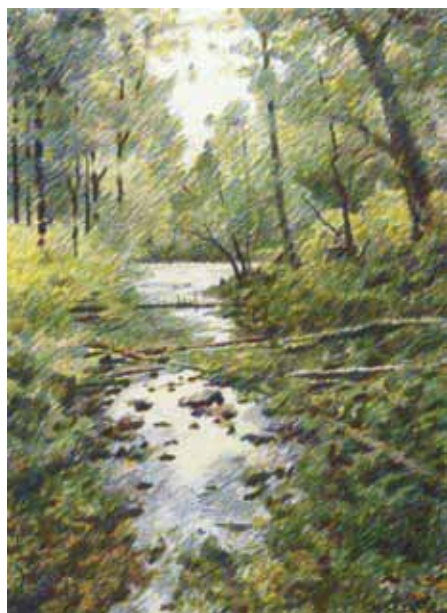
There was another thing about those courses for architecture students that turned out to be important for me as an artist. I knew that if they were going to be able to think in color during the early stages of designing, students would need to be able to sketch in color, to make quick drawings in which the aspect of color could be included.

So, once the students had begun to understand the basics of color and color mixing working in the traditional colored pencil way—sharp points, small strokes, attention to detail, I developed a new set of exercises: working from a given image (a photo), complete this drawing in a certain size frame (4" x 6"; 6" x 9"; 8" x 12"), in a certain amount of time (60 minutes; 30 minutes; 10 minutes).

We began doing these exercises in black and white (using the Prismacolor black),

then moved on to full color, using primaries. Of course, I had to test all these exercises myself, and it turned out that I loved the results. Something about those faster, broader strokes that were needed in order to fill space in a hurry created a more impressionistic feeling that I really liked.

But also, I realized that if I could do a 6" x 9" drawing in ten minutes, that meant I could do a 20" x 30" drawing in just a couple of hours!

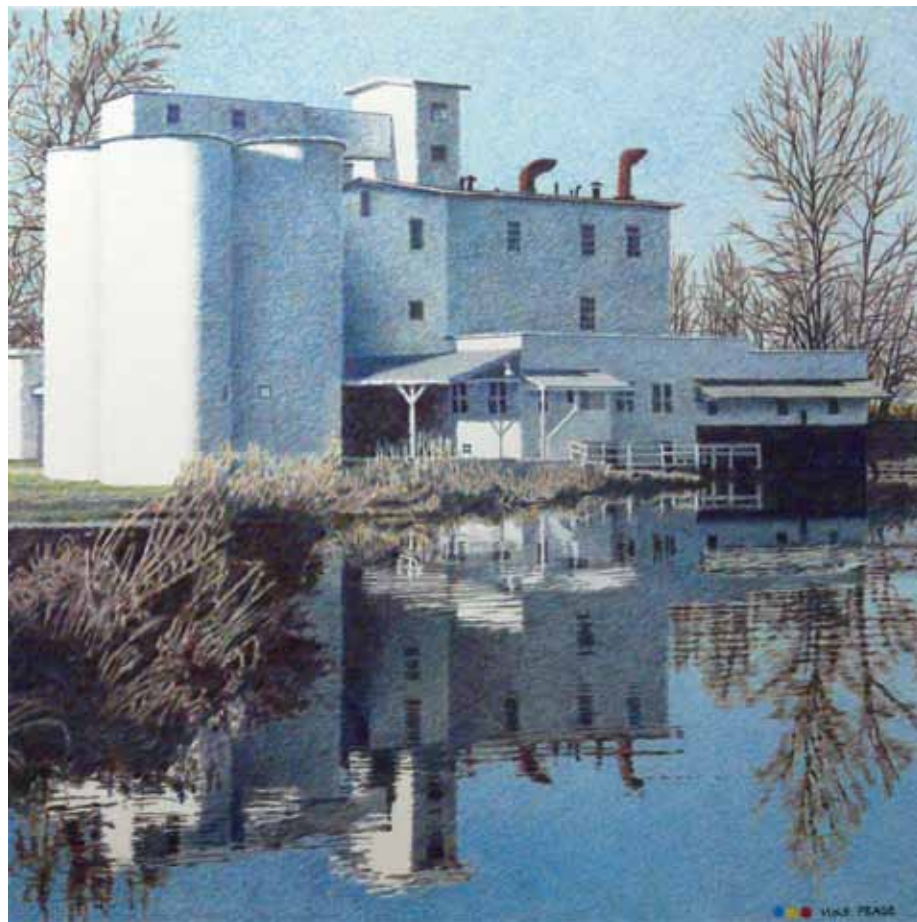


Horse Creek (27 x 20) Mike Pease, CPSA

At that time, my work as an artist was a minor sideline, selling small pencil, pen-and-ink, and watercolor drawings. People liked my work, but I couldn't make a living that way. All that changed with the new insight about working big with colored pencils. I spent a few months experimenting with strokes, sizes, and subjects, then talked to some galleries, and suddenly I had a new career!

Drawing as Exploration

A few years ago, I decided it was time to slow down and I gradually quit doing work for sale, leaving galleries one by one. For a short while I quit drawing altogether, but I soon began to miss it. I realized that drawing, for me, wasn't just a way to make a living—it was an important part of who I am. Especially, I realized that, as someone who has always



Willamette Valley Mill (29 x 29) Mike Pease, CPSA



Riverbank Path, triptych (40 x 90) Mike Pease, CPSA

had strong interest in the visual world around me, I had come to depend on drawing as a way to explore that world. Today, my fascination with my surroundings is as strong as ever, and I still draw a lot, sometimes with watercolors, more often with colored pencils, still using broad strokes and primary colors, mostly exploring aspects of the natural and human-made landscape.

Without a “market” to think about, I choose my subject, technique, and drawing size strictly based on what appeals to me. And I'm still having a great time.

CPSA DC 201 Portland OR will host a weekend workshop led by Mike Pease Nov. 4 and 5, 2017, in Keizer, Oregon, near Salem. For more information, see the prospectus at www.cpsa201.org.