

EXPLORING MIXED MEDIA ABSTRACTION WITH SUE COWAN, SFCA

Sue A Cowan, SFCA, has been painting professionally for over 40 years, and has garnered sales and multiple awards for a wide variety of painting styles. Sue is currently painting mixed media abstraction, and is teaching a workshop on it for the Federation in December. Here, we talk to Sue about her transition from painting realism to abstraction, and how you can gain the same confidence in creating abstract art no matter what your current style..

By Carol Crenna

AA: You are as well-recognized for your realistic still lifes and impressionistic landscapes as abstract art. Why did you switch your focus? And was this transition challenging?



Sue Cowan, *SELF PORTRAIT, On Turning 70* oil, 40" x 30"

SUE: Over my lifetime as an artist, my move toward abstraction has been a gradual evolution. I'm not intrigued anymore by painting a traditional representation of a scene, but rather to interpret it intuitively. This includes pushing my perception of "space" and "time." This means wherever I am, whether in a plain air location that inspires me or in my studio, and depending on

whether I paint right here-and-now or tomorrow, it will result in a different painting. Since abstraction is created through making dozens of choices, which are never right or wrong, these choices will change depending on how I feel. This results in revealing something deeper and more personal. Working abstractly with mixed media is an exciting challenge. Building shapes, textures and colours into a composition is an unpredictable process, and a creative journey where my memory of a location and my experience as an artist interact with my materials.

AA: You are teaching an In-Person Workshop "Exploring Mixed Media Abstraction" in December, and you mentioned that participants will



Sue Cowan, *Dreaming of Sockeye* mixed media, 16" x 12"

learn different approaches to starting an abstract painting. Why is having different ways to begin beneficial?

SUE: When participants learn different approaches, they discover what suits them best so they can apply that to their work when they return to their studios. Also, different choices, even for how to begin, add variety and fun to the process. One way to start might be to adhere collage papers to the substrate, while another might begin by making gestural marks with drawing tools. The substrate may be paper (then often mounted to a wood panel later), a cradled board or larger canvas. I like working on paper because I do a lot of cropping, depending on the visual result of the evolving work, and may also cut the artwork up and then reassemble it into a different layout to create more pleasing focal points, for example.

AA: How does exploring different techniques spark ideas? Because what evolves will be "lucky happenstance" rather than having a set idea of what is wanted beforehand?

SUE: As an artist, you are continually responding to the layer that's already painted. You create the next layer that follows either intuitively or analytically, or often, a combination of both. Some artists respond more to the "happenstance" while others like to have a plan. One isn't better than the other, but with practice, each artist can find their own interplay of spontaneity and planning.

It doesn't have to be a quick journey. Favourite paintings I have completed are ones that led me in several directions before reaching a satisfying resolution. Layering is a very important part of this process. Each layer suggests new possibilities. When you work in multiple layers, you achieve depth and subtleties that couldn't be done in a single layer. I find approximately five layers often works well, but I may add up to 20 different layers, depending on the effect wanted. Using contrast (design principle), extends your range of possibilities within a painting.

AA: Will you offer a couple of specific techniques in your toolkit?

SUE: Here are couple of techniques to try:

1. Rubbing a textured surface with black or blue "open" (slower-drying) acrylic adds a rich subtlety to the colour and texture, and can simply be wiped off before it dries if too much has been added.
2. Lightening a certain area of the art with translucent paper instead of glazing with paint adds a muted appearance if colour is beneath, and

potentially more intriguing texture by collaging (with more crinkled paper). It may be added to just one area or the entire surface using acrylic medium as a glue substance.

Playing with materials is creative and fun, but so often artists don't have the understanding of how to use these techniques to create a finished painting. Therefore, it isn't just about seeing what techniques are possible, but successful application. To begin, I suggest adding a variety of types of marks with paint/ink and then collaging with paper/other materials overtop, and then doing the opposite, adhering collage and then painting overtop, and examine the differing effects. You may also try only two colours added with black and white, to keep it simpler. My goal for every workshop participant is to leave confident that they have specific tools and methodology to continue working independently.

AA: *How do you know when to layer and when to add more texture without "destroying" by overworking it?*

SUE: I believe the most important part of the practice is the dance between the colours, textures and marks with the understanding and application of design fundamentals. This is what being an artist means. Every time you make a mark, add a new colour or a layer of collage—or add anything—you are making a choice. And if you decide something is complete, that, too, is a choice.

I encourage those just beginning abstraction to make many small paintings rather than large pieces. The more you practice making choices, the more confident you become, including knowing when to stop. Working in a series provides a valuable bank of reference, and is an excellent way to explore multiple options. It also makes you less hesitant about potentially destroying something that is already "just right."

AA: *Is it quite easy to go in and edit particular areas afterwards?*

SUE: My methods make it easy to edit or change areas at any time. I use acrylic and compatible materials rather than oil. If you enjoy an oil finish, it can work well as a final layer to an acrylic painting, but there's no going back. Acrylic won't stick to an oil surface.

AA: *You described a recent project on your website that might inspire others artists, showing different creative applications that abstraction can offer.*

SUE: It was my dream commission. Seven paintings were completed for a homeowner on Salt Spring Island. And, unlike any other commission I've done, the subject and style were left entirely up to me! The paintings were mixed media on watercolour paper, mounted onto high kitchen cupboard doors and then

individually protected by plexiglass. Salt Spring is home to many arbutus trees, which thrive in the Gulf Islands. Their colours, gestures, and energy made a perfect subject for this natural-styled kitchen overlooking a wild Garry Oak meadow. All offer lots of movement in lines that suggest arbutus branches with bark and leaf colours. (ED. And the result offered a contemporary upgrade to their kitchen décor.)

Website: <https://suecowan.com/>

Sue A Cowan, SFCA, will be teaching "Exploring Mixed Media Abstraction" December 13 – 14, 10:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m. at Federation Academy, Granville Island, 1310 Johnston St, Vancouver. Open to All Levels. Register at: federationacademy.ca or call us at 604-681-2744.



Sue Cowan, *Kelp*
mixed media, 16" x 12"