

Refresh your style with pastels

Completing a body of work in one medium often provides the stimulus to change technique says **Lucy Willis**, who recently decided to switch from watercolour to another favourite medium: pastels

The images here are mostly based on a combination of remembered subjects and reference material and were produced in the studio rather than in front of the subject. I prefer to work with pastels indoors on a table because the results are so easily smudged. I often work on the pictures over a number of days or weeks and I spray them with fixative only when they are nearing completion. Once they are fixed it is difficult to blend the colours, should I want to carry on working.

Paper

The first consideration is the type of paper to use. I try to find something that has a fairly smooth surface as too

much tooth and texture makes the application of pastel much harder work. For *Getting Down at Mega Spilleion* (below) I worked on white paper and left all the foreground and some of the white foreground patterns clean, just as I would do if I were using watercolour. The other examples here were mostly worked on a variety of off-white papers: Saunders Waterford, Basik, Fabriano.

However, there are great advantages to using a dark or toned surface. If the paper is not already coloured I often like to tone it a little before starting, and have come up with two easy ways of doing this. I have developed the habit of working flat, and then shaking the accumulated pastel dust onto the

next clean sheet of off-white paper. When I have accumulated a fair amount of dust I rub it in with my fingers to create an overall tone but one that can have variation and nuance. I have recently produced a series of yellow sofa studies employing this approach – see *Letter from Barcelona* (above right). I would draw a bit then hold my first drawing up and tap it sharply onto the next white sheet, and so on. With the heavy use of yellows in the composition my next sheet started off with a yellow glow already on the surface in preparation for the subsequent image in the series. In this way nothing is wasted and my lungs are spared the hazard of inhaling pastel dust, which can happen if you blow away the dust and breathe in by mistake.

However, working flat means you cannot step back from your work very far so I make sure to prop it up on an easel at regular intervals so I can stand back and really see what I am doing.

Watercolour as a base

I have also developed a method using watercolour washes as a base to tone the paper before drawing with pastel. I do not cover the whole surface and came up with this method because I wanted to have white spaces that can become part of the image. It involves planning ahead and identifying the rough shapes that I wish to reserve as white. The results of this method can be seen in the small *Jacob Sheep* (top right).

I had a series of small pen sketches to work from and divided my watercolour paper into 9x9in (23x23cm) pieces. I then mixed various small amounts of watercolour wash and loosely applied it to each piece of paper in a rough square but made sure to leave a space for any parts that I wanted to remain



▲ *Getting Down at Mega Spilleion*, pastel, 8½x12½in (22x32cm). The dark clothing of these four figures unite them against a background of rich colour. An essential addition to the greys and blacks is the white of the paper

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▲ *Letter from Barcelona*, pastel, 19½x27½in (50x70cm). Inspired by the lamp-light on this yellow sofa I used a limited palette of soft pinks, greys and black to create a contrast with the richness of the yellows, varied in both hue and tone



▲ *Jacob Sheep*, pastel with watercolour underpainting, 5½x5½in (13x13cm). Here I used a mix of yellow watercolour as my underpainting onto which I could draw the sheep in greys and blacks, with my reserved white shape forming the forehead

white. Once thoroughly dry I could work on top of the watercolour with my pastels to create the image in just a few colours. The combination of crisp white edges created by the watercolour base and the soft smudged marks of the pastel on top is something I particularly enjoyed exploring as the series grew bigger and bigger. This method can also be seen in *Woman Waiting, India* (right), which I based on one of my photographs.

Another example of working in pastel on top of colours laid down in a different medium can be seen in *Hot Night, Senegal* (page 39). I had a number of large monoprints, printed in oil-based inks, which I wasn't happy with. Rather than scrap the prints and waste the sheets of beautiful Fabriano paper, I decided to ignore the content of the image and use the colour as underpainting for a pastel of a completely different subject. In places the old image and colours can add richness and mystery.

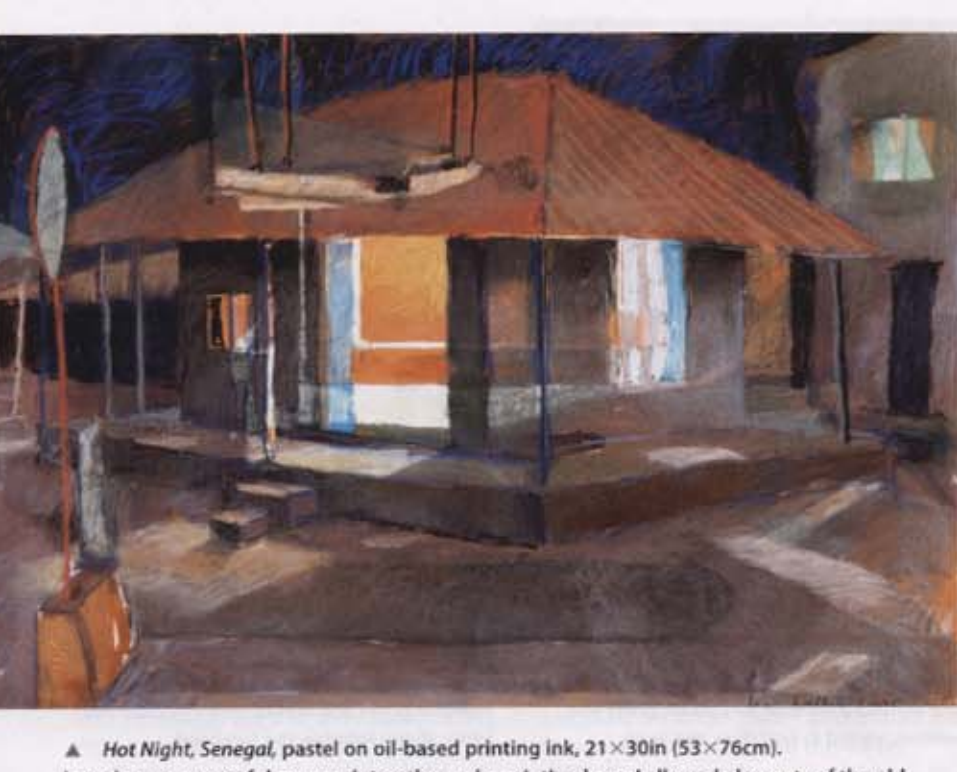
Type of pastels

I have a large selection of pastels, including Caran D'Ache Neopastel, Talens Rembrandt and Daler-Rowney soft pastels for artists. Some are softer than others, some round, some square and of varying thicknesses – but it

► *Woman Waiting, India*, pastel with watercolour underpainting, 15x11in (38x28cm). This is an example of the use of pastel over a watercolour wash. Planned from the outset, I left spaces of white paper for the shirt and hair band



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▲ *Hot Night, Senegal*, pastel on oil-based printing ink, 21x30in (53x76cm). I used an unsuccessful monoprint as the underpainting here. I allowed elements of the old image, turned sideways, to show through in places and become part of the scene

doesn't seem to matter if I mix them together on one picture. I also have a pack of compressed charcoal greys from light to dark – but I still find there are never enough pale, subtle grey colours available so I often have to mix white in. The richness and vibrancy of primary colour is, of course, a major attraction of working in pastel but I also relish the velvety black that can be achieved and I like to juxtapose this with brighter colours, as I have in *Letter from Barcelona* and *Getting Down at Mega Spilleion*.

A working method

I had the idea for *Tea with Tsira* (far right) after visiting an old friend in Tbilisi, Georgia. Her flat was full of collected objects and her living room bathed in the warm light from a number of electric lamps. In order to capture the cosy, cluttered atmosphere I took some photographs, some with a flash and some without. I tried to record as much as I could from different angles but it was impossible to get everything in one view and the photos didn't do justice to the scene.

► *Photo collage study for Tea with Tsira*, pastel and photo printouts, 9½x12½in (24x32cm). I cut and pieced together my photographs in such a way that I could make an image that I could transpose onto a larger scale by 'squaring up'

Wanting to create a single image from all the disparate parts and attempt to capture the atmosphere, I printed the photographs on plain paper then cut them up and collaged the pieces together in such a way that I could make a more-or-less coherent image to work from. I filled in any gaps around the edges with drawn shapes in pastel. I now had a 'sketch' of sorts to work from and had a 'sketch' of sorts to work from and had a 'sketch' of sorts to work from and had a 'sketch' of sorts to work from

I squared up the little collage 'sketch' so I could transpose it to a larger piece of paper. To do this I laid a piece of clear cellophane marked with squares in black felt pen over the collage. I marked my larger paper with the same number of squares in light pencil marks. From then on I started to place the elements of the painting in each of the larger squares. Once the structure of the image was more-or-less in place I removed the cellophane from my 'sketch' and continued work on the larger piece, building up textures and making adjustments as I went along. I was particularly excited by the effect I managed to get when depicting the pattern of the transparent lace curtains. I drew the background door shapes first, smudged the muted greys together a little, then drew the lacy design freely over the top with a mid grey pastel. On the light areas of background the linear pattern appears dark whilst on the darker areas it appears light: a richness and complexity that I could achieve within minutes.

After the strictures of watercolour technique it has been a pleasure to return to pastels. The variety of marks that can be achieved in pastel is considerable – from patches of blended colour, firm lines left untouched, lines that can be rubbed and blurred, areas of soft, smudged colour that can be drawn over with firmer lines. With practice I'm finding that anything goes when working with pastels, and the freedom is refreshing. [A]



▲ *Tea with Tsira*, pastel, 19½x27½in (50x70cm). I tried to keep the marks loose and scribbly to create an impression of detail and atmosphere, whilst avoiding too much fiddliness

PRACTICAL



▲ *Tea with Tsira* detail. Layering with different freely drawn marks gives the impression of intricate lace

'I was particularly excited by the effect I managed to get when depicting the pattern of the transparent lace curtains'

Lucy Willis is exhibiting at the Curwen Gallery, Windmill St, London W1T 2JR from June 2 to 25. www.curwengallery.com Tel: 020 7323 4700. Signed copies of her book, *Sunlight & Shadows in Watercolour*, published by Batsford, will be available at the gallery. www.lucywillis.com.