

HARMONY IN LANDSCAPE PAINTING

3: The Harmony of Neutrals

In this final article of the series, noted author and landscape painter *Mitchell Albala* continues his exploration of harmony and reveals how neutral colours can be an effective strategy for combining disparate colours and suggesting unified light within your painting

In the first two parts of this series, we saw that the use of a structured colour plan or strategy could help build greater colour harmony and suggest a unified light. We found that analogous colours, because they are so closely allied on the colour wheel, form very close-knit harmonies. With complementary colours, we see harmony through opposition (radiant complements) and harmony through their mixture, which form neutrals. In this final article, we will look more closely at neutral colours and see how they may be considered a colour strategy in their own right.

If we asked several painters to name a few colour strategies, it is unlikely they would name “low-intensity” or “neutral”. However, the paintings featured in this article will demonstrate that when paintings are composed primarily of neutral tones, relationships are formed between the colours. And, as we have seen throughout this series, where we find connections among colours, we find harmony.

A Relationship Among Neutrals

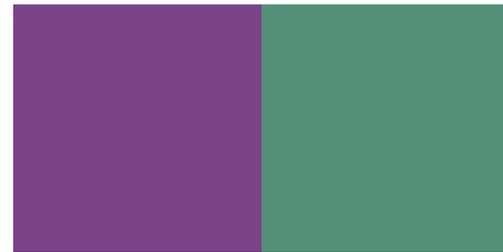
Any individual colour or mixture has a relative intensity, ranging from very bright to very dull and neutral. Strictly defined, “neutral” means the absence of colour. In the context of this article, however, I use the word neutral more generally to mean any colour that is less than fully saturated. Only an absolute neutral would have no colour bias at all; it would be a

perfect grey. The key point for the neutral strategy is this: as colours become increasingly neutral, they begin to harmonise through a common association to that absolute neutral baseline. Thus, colours that might be dissimilar or discordant in a more saturated colour field are toned down and better able to agree with each other.

This is demonstrated in the three colour swatches on the right. Each pair is comprised of the same two hues — red-violet and green.



In this first pairing, above, the colours are pure and saturated. They have little in common and do not form a particularly unified pairing. They even vibrate a bit from some complementary action.



In the second pairing, above, the colours are more desaturated and less contrasting. In the final pair, below, the colours are very desaturated and only retain a hint of their original hue, yet they are considerably more harmonious and unified than the saturated pair.



Because we have such a positive emotional response to colour, there is a bias towards brighter, more saturated colour. As a result, the neutral strategy is often under-appreciated. The three contemporary painters on the following pages show that paintings employing the neutral strategy possess emotional depth and a contemplative quality.

We will also see that the neutral strategy does not mean the absence of colour. Although neutrals do not shout as loudly as bright colours, they are just as capable of expressing effective colour relationships with a whisper. >

CREATING NEUTRALS

There is never just one way to mix a colour and that is certainly the case with neutrals. We can create neutral colours in several ways. Firstly, by mixing two complementary colours (see *The Harmony of Complements* in the last issue). This approach builds neutral mixtures with colour so they retain some colour bias, which adds delicate colour nuance to the neutrals. Secondly, mixtures can be started with neutral pigments such as earth tones (such as Burnt Umber, Yellow Ochre or Burnt Sienna). The third approach is to use black or white pigment. Black, of course, darkens a mixture, but in lesser amounts it can effectively neutralise colours. White is used most often to lighten, but when a lot of white is added to a mixture it can produce a paling effect. Alternatively, any or all of these methods can be used in combination.



Renato Muccillo, *Upward Push*, oil on panel, 96x71cm

Muccillo is one of many painters working in the contemporary tonalist tradition. Tonalist painters rarely dip into highly saturated colours; instead, their palettes are laden with earth tones and subdued mixtures that help establish a harmony of neutrals. This neutral tonality, in combination with strong value contrasts, helps convey the deep sense of mood these paintings are known for.

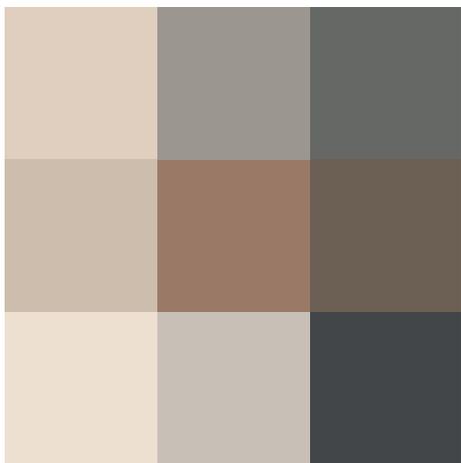
Remarkably, in *The Upward Push*, Muccillo uses just five colours: Titanium White, Ivory Black, Transparent Earth Yellow, Viridian Green and Dioxazine Purple. Such a limited palette helps ensure that the colour mixtures remain simple and more closely related. As Solmssen does with *Snow on 7th Street* (see over page), Muccillo pays close attention to the temperature differences – a largely cool sky poised over a largely warm ground.

Andrzej Skorut, *Last Light on the River*, oil on canvas, 127x152cm

Like Muccillo, Skorut also works in the contemporary tonalist tradition. His palette includes many earth tones — pigments like Burnt Umber, Yellow Ochre, Naples Yellow and Raw Sienna. In this piece, however, he expands beyond the earth tones to include more saturated colours in the sky. This demonstrates a very important lesson: a neutral harmony does not prohibit the use of more saturated colours. In fact, when poised against neutral colours, brighter areas of colour will appear much stronger and neutral areas much more neutral.

Also note the complementary relationship struck between the orange and blue bands of sky. We see two strategies working in tandem: complementary and neutral. Colour strategies don't necessarily work in isolation; they often combine to make a stronger statement than if one strategy were working alone. Here, the combination of strategies is an effective choice for capturing the mood and drama of sunset.





Kurt Solmssen, *Snow on 7th Street*, oil on canvas, 66x91cm

Kurt Solmssen typically works with much brighter colours than we see in *Snow on 7th Street*, but neutral colours were a fitting choice for this wintery scene. The colour swatch on the left isolates nine representative colours from the major areas of the painting. Although the colours are significantly desaturated, we can see that a neutral-based strategy does not mean the absence of colour, but a more subtle range of colour. Solmssen strikes a clear temperature shift between the lights and darks: the lightest tones in the snow and sky, along with the terracotta-coloured houses, are warm, while the distant shore and large tree are relatively cooler. In the grey water there is a delicate commingling of the pale blue and pale orange.

In all seasons and weather, Solmssen maintains a fairly open palette that includes both earthy and more intense colours. But in a painting that relies on a neutral strategy, he uses greater amounts of low-key pigments: Terre Verte, Ivory Black, Yellow Ochre and Burnt Sienna.

Mitchell Albala is the author of *Landscape Painting: Essential Concepts and Techniques for Plein Air and Studio Practice*. A respected teaching artist for more than 25 years, he currently teaches at Gage Academy of Art in Seattle. Mitchell is represented by Lisa Harris Gallery, Seattle.

To find out more about the painters featured in this article, please visit: www.kurtsolmssen.com www.renatomuccillo.com www.skorut.com