

Remembered Landscapes

Mark Leach looks to his memories of the land
to unearth the essence of a scene.

By Ken Gofton

Opposite page (clockwise):

La Mancha IX (30x28)

Lido II (30x28)

West Side (30x28)

Lagoon Sunset (30x28)

Although galleries may categorize English artist Mark Leach as a pastelist (and the bulk of his work *is* in pastels), Leach defines himself first and foremost as a colorist. He simply sees pastels as the most efficient and rewarding medium for satisfying his color needs. Thus armed, the artist aims to communicate his love of landscape to as many people as possible—not exclusively to fellow artists or critics. These two basic connections—to color and to the land—have determined the way his work has evolved.

“I have intellectualized so much over the years,” he says. “I used to write reams of notes. Now there’s no need for that—I just paint. But it has taken 20 years to be confident that I can transfer to the board what I have in my head.”

A self-taught artist, Leach quit a successful career in computers and management consultancy

in his early 30s to become a full-time painter. And fortune smiled, it seemed, when a newly opened gallery in the prosperous residential town of Sevenoaks was willing to take his work.

“Like most young artists, I wanted to do something that had never been done before,” he says of his early work. “I worked in acrylics, incorporating some of the actual soil or sand from the landscapes into the paint. Looking back now, I cringe. Those pictures were so heavy.”

Reacting against that weighty approach, Leach began looking for the essence and spiritual elements in his subjects. This led him into the abstract realm where he began using pastel to get down his thoughts quickly. But the desire to communicate with a wider audience has since taken Leach’s work into a more representational direction.

“To an extent I still veer between the two,



St. Mary in the Marsh (22x28)



Chichester Cathedral
From Hoe Farm (30x37)

Using Color to Create Mood

Four similar compositions from the more abstract end of Mark Leach's work illustrate how dramatically color choice can convey a mood or atmosphere. While they weren't painted as a series, side by side these very simplified images (on page 36) succeed in conveying the intense heat of Spain in summer (*La Mancha IX*), the calm of the Venetian lagoon at sunset and by moonlight (*Lagoon Sunset* and *Lido II*), and the dazzle of Manhattan from across the Hudson River (*West Side*).

"I do not use color to reflect what I see, but to express how I feel, or want to feel," Leach writes in his new book, *Raw Colour With Pastels* (Anova Books, 2006). "In the everyday world we constantly take in a myriad of colors of all shapes and hues, so much so

that we have little time to absorb and reflect. We are affected physiologically and psychologically by these colors, but because things change so rapidly, they rarely bring about one particular emotion or mood.

"Through painting, we can seek out the essentials of what we see, eliminate the confusion of too much color, and reveal underlying ideas and emotions."

Although artists should avoid the formulaic, he adds, it's broadly accepted that red conveys a sense of energy, passion and excitement; yellow optimism and joy; while blue speaks of hope, peace and calm. Of the secondaries, orange denotes warmth and honesty; green is the color of youth, energy and nature; and purple or violet can be both feminine and erotic, religious or spiritual.

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sometimes going more abstract and sometimes more representational,” he says. “Ultimately, the intention is to get some spiritual and emotional contact with the landscape, rather than just recall what it looks like. And color is vital to expressing that.”

Memory Holds the Essence

An important aspect of Leach’s art is that he creates mainly *remembered* landscapes, a departure from the dominant fashion for painting *en plein air*, popular since the Impressionists. His argument is that while it’s a perfectly valid approach to take an easel and painting materials out of doors and attempt to capture the view, it just isn’t his way of working. Instead, he points to a different tradition developed over centuries, that of the Chinese landscape masters, who were content to recall in their studios their memories of mountains and lakes visited years earlier.

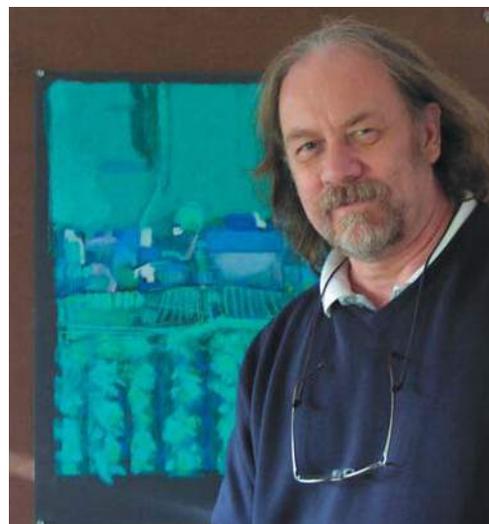
To Leach, the attraction of this reminiscing approach is that the memory holds the essence—not the detail—of the scene, and it’s this essence he wants to communicate. The importance of deliberately steering well away from photorealistic reproduction is that it leaves room for viewers to fill in the gaps from their own memories, to use their imaginations, to make their own emotional bonds with what’s depicted. If a painting includes major landmarks, such as the famous buildings of Paris or Venice, then—quite late in the process—Leach will turn to field sketches or photographs for architectural details.

It’s not that the artist never paints *en plein air*. His painting, *St. Mary in the Marsh* (on page 37), was produced on location. It was a bright sunny day, and the temptation was to go out with his pastels and explore the isolated countryside of Romney Marsh, close to his home. The bright yellow foreground, he explains, is a field of flowering oilseed rape, a crop grown in the United Kingdom. Though widely unpopular because of its cabbage-like smell, the plant’s striking color can provide fresh challenges to the artist, Leach says.

Most of his paintings, however, aren’t actual landscapes, but rather composites based on memories drawn from repeated visits to major cities, villages, vineyards and hillsides in Europe. As Leach wryly explains, “I think I can just about walk around Venice in my head.” *Paris Park in Winter* (on page 41) is thus not a portrait of the actual trees as they looked on a specific day. It was inspired by a visit to a particular park, according to Leach, and the strong patterns made by the trees and their shadows. “It came from up here,” he says, pointing to his head. “It was just about capturing something of the space and emptiness that I felt in seeing just a few people sitting alone. I like to do city parks. There can be a terrific atmosphere, such a feeling of quiet, and the balance of nature and mankind is something I find very appealing.”

Similarly, his painting *Cafe Life III* (on page 40) is another imagined scene. “It’s France, really,” Leach explains. “That’s what was in my mind. It’s man’s urban environment, and in all such scenes, what appeals to me is the presence of trees. I’ve used strong primaries in the shop blinds. I love all that—the contrast of the man-made with the natural colors.”

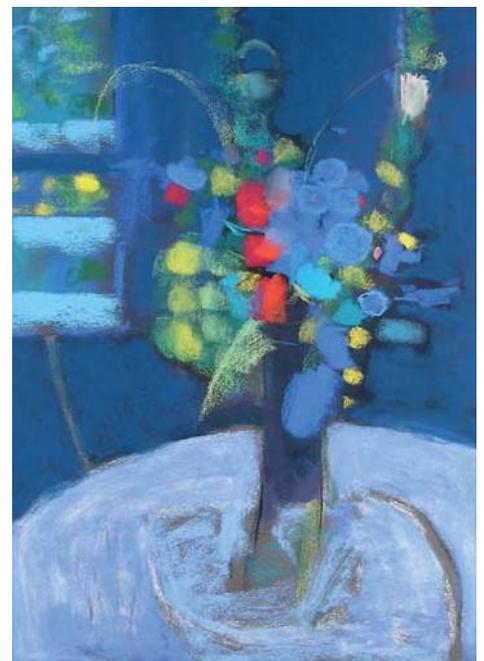
Given his consciousness of man-made vs. natural elements, the color of the ground on which he paints is an especially critical consideration. And because he’s rarely happy with the colors of commercial papers, his normal method of working is to prepare mountboard with a mixture of acrylic gesso and pumice dust, then paint it with acrylic mixed with yet more pumice to ensure a good tooth.



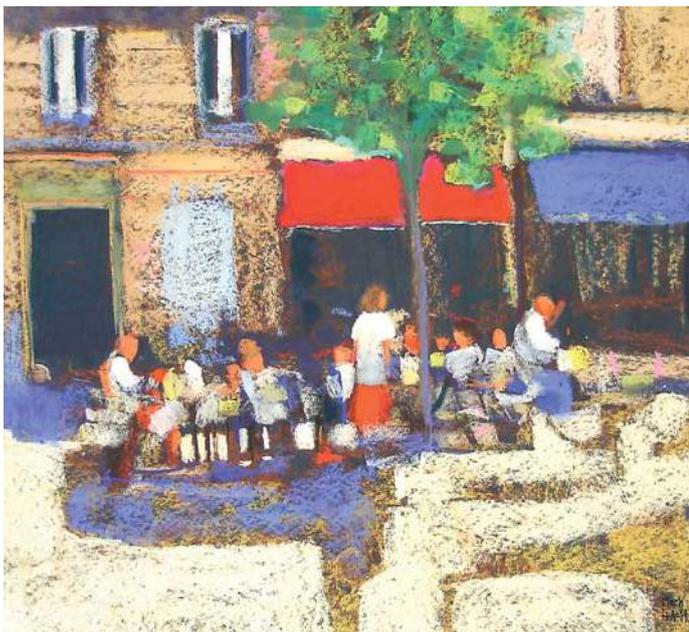
Mark Leach in his Sussex studio. For more information on the artist, visit www.markleach.net.



The Lighthouse at Aldeburgh (28x32)



Giverny (23x18)



Cafe Life III (30x33)

These underpaintings are generally very dark blue, red or orange. Leach prefers to work from dark to light because of the vibrancy it can lend the pastels. His rule of thumb is that the underpainting should be at least as dark as the darkest tone in the final painting.

In his book, *Raw Colors With Pastels*, the artist explains that he regularly exploits color psychology to communicate mood (see “Using Color to Create Mood” on page 38). As a result, many of his paintings are close to monochromes—shades of blue that convey peace and coolness; or reds that speak of heat and excitement. But it’s the image already formed in his mind, not psychological theory, that’s the driver. “I never say, ‘I’m going to paint an optimistic picture,’ and reach for my yellow pastels,” he says.

His distant view of *Chichester Cathedral From Hoe Farm* (on page 38), seen across England’s Sussex countryside, demonstrates the calming effect of a blue and blue-green palette. Cathedrals, to Leach, are the high point of man’s architectural achievements; at one point he produced a series depicting different views of Chartres. But it’s back to the earth, he reminds the viewer, as emphasized in the Chichester painting by the single wildflower in the foreground.

Glorious Pursuits

Leach, a council member of the Pastel Society UK, lives between the seaside towns of Hastings and Rye on England’s

southeast coast. His studio, surrounded by his beloved trees, provides ample room for his easel and extensive collection of pastels, as well as space to put large pieces of mountboard on the floor when preparing surfaces.

Leach's favorite pastels are Unison, partly because he finds the color range more subtle than many others and partly because of their size. Just filling in the skies on a large painting, he says, can take two or three sticks of other brands. He also uses Sennelier quite a lot because some of the colors are really strong—blues, in particular.

What frequently appeals to Leach about a particular scene is the balance in color and form between nature and the influence of mankind. In his painting, *The Lighthouse at Aldeburgh* (opposite page), he points out, he was attracted by the unusual, peppershaker-shaped lighthouse, as well as the contrasting colors of the buildings, land and sea. The town is on the east coast of England, where the light can be both strong and muted—"very pastelly," as he puts it. The semi-abstraction evident in this piece reflects the major influence of artists such as Patrick Heron and other English landscape painters from the St. Ives School. However, Leach also acknowledges his debt to Cézanne, especially for his single-minded determination to pursue his art, and Matisse and van Gogh for their glorious work.

While he's mostly a landscape artist, Leach turns on occasion to still life setups, a contrast in both subject and scale. He favors very simple arrangements—perhaps no more than a single flower in a vase—sometimes as small as 10x12 inches, a quarter of the size or less than his usual landscapes.

What transcends genres, though, is his emphasis on color to engage the emotions of the spectator. The still life, *Giverny* (opposite page), began when he started playing around with atmospheric blue pastels; the shapes evolving into a vase of flowers. "I called it *Giverny* because it brought back memories of a visit I had made to Monet's famous home about a year earlier. There's a terrific atmosphere in the house, looking out onto the garden where he created so many of his late masterpieces," he says. "I just got this strong feeling of how it would be when he brought flowers into the house.

"These things take time to settle with me, but I might do some more with the same inspiration."

Capturing the Significance

Although Leach certainly takes inspiration from English scenery, most of his landscapes are of Continental Europe—a conscious decision based partly on commercial pressure. "If you're making a living as an artist, you have to pay some attention to what the galleries want and what they can sell," he notes. "If it wasn't for that, I would be tempted to do more paintings looking for the beauty in everyday things that other people overlook.

"Fortunately, the places I like to paint, such as Paris and Venice, Provence and Tuscany, are very significant in many people's lives," he continues. "There's an urge to try and identify what that significance is. If I can get it down on paper, I feel I have achieved something."

There's also the fact that distance increases the enchantment. As he points out, "It's that longing to be there. If I went to live in Paris for a year, I'd start to feel homesick; the emotional factors would come to the fore, and I'd start to paint Southern England."

Fortunately, in such a situation, he'd have to look no further than his memory. 

Ken Gofton is a business journalist and regular contributor to *The Pastel Journal*. He lives in Kent, England.

Paris Park in Winter
(31x32)

