

**The Disturbing Impossibilities and Terrifying Truths of Water
and How it Can be Painted.**

Gregory Evans

Sheesh and sweet Jesus – for crying out loud! What is it about water that sends an ordinarily burly man running for the toilet at its mere mention? Its as if painting water and washing the dishes are the same thing, and to actually talk about it – to talk about the painting of water (or the washing of dishes) – well, that's something we best not do. Its bad enough to try and paint the stuff, so ferget about it – we ain't gunna be talkin' about paintin' it. Nope. Nuh-uh. No way!

Well, yes, we are, in fact, going to talk about it, and as needs must be done, we're gonna even bust a few myths about it (at least one, that is). Besides addressing what is essentially fake-news regarding water, you'll also find within this essay moments ranging from playful to threatening, even all the way on over to cryptic (which is much scarier than threatening, wouldn't you say?). Bear in mind all this is done in the spirit of water itself and I mean no harm by any of it.

So here it is - I was once told that if you want to paint something, you have to know it intimately. Taking this to be true, I had spent a good lifetime drawing, and around 10 additional years painting essentially one thing, and that's because there was only one thing I knew intimately, or so I thought. Suiting myself to the intimacy issue as if it were axiom and even undeniable and ultimate truth, I could only have chosen to pursue this subject to the point that my subject became muse, and my muse subject. If not evident up to now, that subject was water, and undeniably a water of a very particular and specific type. It was saltwater that compelled me through the decades and across the wastelands of life itself, and being like Nanook, water would have me go trudging across the tundra, mile after mile to pursue the fruits of both public shorelines and private ranchlands and military bases - it was those waters which drove me to wake up each and every morning and exhausted me to sleep each night - it was that salty water that drove me to live and eat, and this obsession left so little in the way of time for other things, I never even considered having children, let alone pursue a proper, substantial career, even though I was good in all things in school (except calculus, chemistry, autoshop, political science and

team sports). Water was my *raison d'etre* - this saltwater that colored itself like various flavors of Jello at the setting of the sun each day gave me all I needed – the sea was my purpose and sustenance. It was this fascinating, colored waterworld that had me hooked good and proper.

The question then is, could I have been painting water if I hadn't known it so intimately?

I'd have to say yes, at least to some minuscule degree.

With all that being said, its my goal here to help you become intimate with water, if not in some odd and skewed sort of way, though be it not superficial or artificial, so you can decide for yourself if its at all necessary for you to be more intimate with your subject to paint it with an simple drip of need, a passionate desire or complete and out-of-control compulsion. I promise you I'll give you enough confidence (be it possibly false) and understanding of the subject here to at least get you started.

So what is water, anyway? Its a binder, a cleanser, a lubricant, a catalyst, a thinner, a coolant, a corrosive, a hydrant. Water assimilates, absorbs, reflects - it carries and transfers, dissolves and transforms. It polishes, erodes and destroys. It provides life and it kills. It creates and destroys. There is no other inorganic substance like water. Its is soft, wispy and heavy, and powerful.

We have backwaters, ballast waters, bloodwaters and floodwater, bodies of water, compressed waters, carbonated water , distilled water, feedwater, headwaters, heavy waters, groundwaters, freshwaters, saltwaters, hot waters, cold waters, melt waters, mineral waters, potable waters, rainwaters and greywaters - and all this is only the beginning.

There is an exact and specific amount of water on this planet - we never gain any, we never lose any. What was here yesterday is here today and will be here tomorrow. Water cycles itself within its system, being heated and cooled incessantly, liquefying, solidifying, vaporizing, though never disappearing. It travels underground, in the air, and in the glaciers, rivers and streams, filling and emptying the standing coffer and cisterns of our planet - water changes even as it rests in the aquifers, lakes, puddles, ponds and oceans until it moves on in its never-ending story.

Water is within you. It brings with it a sense of harmony, joy, danger or foreboding. Its colors vary as the colors of the sky, though its colors are such a small part of the message that it carries. Water is kind and aggressive and never judges, never discriminates – we are all equal to the indifference of water. It needs us not, but we need it. It embraces us and it terrifies us. We always get more from water than we bring to it. Our bad days turn good, our good days turn bad. Water turns to wine and turns back again. Like looking into the eyes of a lover, water will suck you in to those wily wellsprings of life itself - one can drown in its existence and its reflections of all that was, is, and will ever be. Water inspires in ways that little else can.

Moving off to London for a spell, Claude Monet discovered a watery-like fog - an eternal urban mist, the city's riverside fogs. He became infatuated with the grey of his new, airy-wet environment. Monet said that without fog, London would not be beautiful, and as far as those city greys themselves, well, the greys of the London fog were just captivating to Monet. He said he'd never seen grey as the London fog displayed, for a grey London fog is forever changing and never the same - it's a grey shrouded in mystery and revealing in its backlights. This otherwise bland and lifeless grey was enchanting and enthralling to Monet. It was a color so filled with constant change, with transparencies and opaques, that Monet's portrayals and love for these dismal misty waters above the Thames made any true Londoner beam with pride, for here was a foreigner from warmer, southern lands eating up those London greys like a glutton.

Monet would return to Europe's mainland where without the London fog, he would move on to an driven compulsion to address steam, an artificial fog created by the steam-engines down at the local train-station. Foggy or not, there would always be the industrial uses of water to entice and excite. His was a wild and childlike thrill when he suddenly had his eyes opened to grey – he couldn't get enough. It's said his passion for grey was only equaled in degree by his distaste for stupid people and late dinners. Water would never leave Monet and his palette – he'd spend the rest of his life painting over 250 watery paintings which would include countless thousands of water-lilies and all the water they grew in. Lilies were an simply an accessory to Monet's water paintings.

Water is revealed to us by all our senses. We can touch it, we can taste it, we can hear it, see it, and yes, we can sometimes smell it. Water reveals itself to us by all our senses, its from there we interpret what

we will paint, what in result is ultimately only seen, but we try to convey more. In that, water can be approached like any other subject, but contrary to that, a brown tweed coat changes little in its days except in slow wear and changing lights, but water, oh water, forever please, in your infinite being reveal yourself more to me - water forever changes.

With all its expressions, moods and displays, its no wonder water is equated with the gamut of human emotion. There's an unbreakable and tenuous connection that we share with water by our feelings and our emotions. Water expresses feelings not as we do, it's simply emoto-morphic. It allows us to describe itself in our own human, emotional terms, be it angry, serene, tempestuous, sedate, content, or melancholic. Water embodies all that we embody, though its language is truly different than our own. Its this reflective quality of water that binds us, captures us, enralls us and even terrifies us.

Painting water can be as near difficult as painting one's own soul. Its shadows as important as its highlights, all resting not only upon its surface, but down into its depths. Water, after all, can only, whether by abstraction or realism, be portrayed as water, so really, there can be no wrong way of painting it.

Consider the soft, glassy kindness of Ruysdael's wet planes, the versatility and oscillating savagery of Turner's turmoil, the cold poolside artificiality of Hockney's hunger, the wild restlessness of Griffin's exuberance and the pensive richness of Whistler's melancholy. Its all water. There are infinite ways of representing water – to each their own.

So you see, its not that painting water is difficult, one can paint it any way they wish. What is so difficult about painting water is our own expectations of it and our ideas of correctness about it. Ultimately, in water's reflective qualities, its just showing us how simple or complex we are ourselves. Water turns itself on us, and then it turns ourselves upon ourselves, eventually reflecting exactly what we think of it. It shows us what we are willing to see of ourselves, and in that, when we paint water, we are painting our own self-portraits.

To paint water, be like water - be completely and utterly non-discriminatory towards it so its essence, your own essence, shows itself to you. Its only that that can be difficult - to paint things honestly and

candidly, and in all our weaknesses and strengths, to paint ourselves into the water we see...

In closing, and to reinforce the fact that painting water is indeed easy and should be easy if you make it so, I share the words of Victorian artist and art critic John Ruskin from his controversial and sometimes sadly discounted magnum opus *Modern Painters*. In the paragraph below, Ruskin addresses just one aspect of water - when shadow falls upon water, and what water does to shadow.

“I have not stated one-half of the circumstances which produce or influence effects of shadow on water; but lest I should confuse or weary the reader, I leave him to pursue the subject for himself; enough having been stated to establish this general principle, that whenever shadow is seen on clear water, and, in a measure, even on foul water, it is not, as on land, a dark shade subduing where it falls the sunny general hue to a lower tone; but it is a space of an entirely different color, subject itself, by its susceptibility of reflection, to infinite varieties of depth and hue, and liable, under certain circumstances, to disappear altogether; and that, therefore, whenever we have to paint such shadows, it is not only the hue of the water itself that we have to consider, but all the circumstances by which in the position attributed to them such shaded spaces could be affected.”

So there you have it - nothing so difficult now, is it? It is my belief, as one who has represented tonnes and tonnes and hundreds of thousands of cubic meters of water in two dimensions on various supports from paper to floorboard to MDF to plywood and canvas, that if this isn't enough to convince you that when painting water, anything goes, then you must avail yourself to Ruskin's work (noted above) where he invests around 60 pages of paper to his truth of water in its liquid state. This should have you in complete understanding of the simplicity of this subject and fully convinced that you can paint water, and you can paint it any way you like. Its really no easier or more difficult that washing dishes or pulling teeth.

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