

Wai Art Column, by Anna-Marie Kingsley (August 2008)

You can always spot an artist who is about to varnish their artwork; the chain smoking, nervous twittering, and wild eyes of a terrified artisan about to subject their precious artwork to a trial by fire. You wouldn't think slapping a couple of coats of varnish on a piece of canvas would be such a big deal, but it really is quite frightening. Several weeks work, if not months can disappear down the toilet in a horrifying bubbling disaster or even worse you can watch your artwork cloud and disappear before your very eyes. And then most artists have no idea of why it happened or how to avoid it happening next time.

After listening to several horror stories and becoming more and more nervous of what should be a very routine practice I decided to do a spot of research. Having failed chemistry and physics dismally at uni I thought I was eminently qualified to swot up on the science behind it all and report back with an informative little guide on what not to do.

This is a very basic guide for the majority of beginning artists out there who are using acrylics. Oh it can get so much more complicated with different varnishing systems so I'll just stick to the simple stuff. Apologies, but I won't even go into the options for oil painters for fear of confusing everyone, including myself.

If in doubt read the instructions (or as the Small has renamed them "Destructions"). Without giving the impression that I support a particular brand, I must say that the Matisse technical guide is really good. Yes, it is a technical manual and it's automatically going to be boring, so read it in the bath or at night to put you to sleep. Matisse also have an excellent website with all the information from the technical guide on it and a question and answer section, so you can ask the helpful chappie in the white coat who is busy making the stuff the pertinent questions, sometimes answered with the teeth grindingly obvious "Well, if you used our products, that disaster wouldn't have happened."

If the whole process is so flaming fraught, why do we bother with the stress of varnishing our artworks? Couple of jolly good reasons are that it makes cleaning artworks later on a lot easier; the flyspots, the grease (you hung it above the deep fryer in your kitchen because...?) and the general dust that just lurks about settling on things. Varnishing also adds a bit more fade protection from UV light. Lastly varnishing smooths out the differences in shine levels of different pigments; not something you would generally notice standing front on to an artwork but sneak in sideways on an unvarnished painting and you can often see the differences.

One of the big problems is it is really daunting knowing which is the right varnish to use. Do you spray, do you brush it on, which brand? Water based, turps based? What sort of finish? Gloss, satin, or matt?

Firstly, the sheen decision; it's a personal decision, some artworks look better with a gloss finish, some look better with a satin finish. Matt varnish is best used if artwork is to be used for photography purposes. Always take photos before you varnish if you are going to use a gloss or satin varnish, as the shiny spots from lights or the camera flash are difficult to avoid.

Several thin layers are better than one thick layer. Always allow the varnish to dry thoroughly between coats. A day drying between coats is recommended.

The sheer volume of different varnishes you can choose from is quite daunting. Matisse, bless their little cotton socks, haven't made it any easier by not having their numbers in succession. You start to feel like you are driving down London's motorways with the different numbers you can choose from.

The Matisse varnish most most suitable for putting over acrylic paintings on boxed canvases is MM6 polymer matt varnish, MM7 polymer gloss varnish or MM28 polymer satin varnish. All these are water based and quite thick, it is recommended that they should be watered down 1 part water to 1 to 2 parts varnish. The Atelier varnishes generally don't require (and don't recommend) adding water, as they are already pretty fluid. The Atelier satin or gloss varnishes are probably the most suitable in that range. If you are going to use the Atelier matt varnish, then do a test run first.

Clouding can be caused by several different mistakes. Sometimes because you have over brushed the varnish and trapped moisture underneath. Sometimes because you haven't let the initial varnish layers dry – if possible leave a day between each coat. Sometimes because the underneath paint isn't dry, especially in the case of very thick paint layers. And very occasionally it's a horrifying "batch" problem with the varnish. After much wailing and gnashing of teeth, if you think you have done everything right

and you suspect it's the varnish, then call the manufacturers and tell them what happened, otherwise they won't know. They might even have a solution. If you are nervous do a test run first on a scrap of painted canvas.

Now it's going to get a bit technical. If you want a matt or satin effect, and you are planning on using lots of layers, then do the initial layers with a gloss varnish and then the last two coats with the desired matt or satin. What happens is that the refraction particles in the satin or matt varnish that stop the light from being reflected eventually build up under lots of layers and it starts stopping light from hitting the painting so it gives a cloudy appearance. Yawn, I know your eyelids are drooping and you are in serious danger of falling face first into your marmite toast.

I would not recommend using different brands over the top of each other. Even if they are made by the same manufacture, don't use the expensive range and the cheap range together. I also wouldn't recommend using a spray and a brush varnish together, unless you practice on a scrap piece first. You might want to do this though if you have used pastel or charcoal on your artwork and you want to spray first then brush varnish over the top of the spray. Just practice lots first.

Over brushing can be a major problem too. Once the varnish has started to dry if you give it a quick brush to just "sort that little area over there out", it can pull the top dried skin so you end up with little bits of drying varnish spread dragged across your artwork. This can be avoided by working quickly with a big brush and being careful to work from one side to the other without sneaking back for touch ups; in theory the next coat will fix it. Check for bristles falling out of your brush as you work.

Spray varnish is not usually recommended for artworks unless you absolutely have to. For example using pastel over your artwork will require a spray varnish. Unfortunately spray varnishes are not deemed to be particularly stable or long lasting.

Mediums are used to dilute paint when not using water. Water can be used, but if more than 30-50% water is added the colour strength will be reduced and also the "binding" capacity of the paint (binders are what makes the pigment in the paint hold together). This may lead to the colour becoming water sensitive, meaning that when you clean the painting with water or varnish it, the paint might move and streak. If thinning paint down it is always best to use a medium.

Lastly, don't use a pen to sign your name on the front of your artwork – no matter what it says on the pen, most ink used in "household" pens is not light stable and will fade before your artwork deteriorates. (Another good reason to write your name on the back of the frame.) Also the varnish will often dissolve even so called permanent ink. The best solution is to use paint thinned down with medium and a script paintbrush. Then practice lots.

I'm impressed if you have read this far without dropping the newspaper in the bath, or falling asleep and ending up with marmite on your nose.

Wairarapa Art Scene

Firstly congratulations to Mandy Emerson and Caitlin Bauer for their enormously successful sales in the Affordable Arts Show in Wellington, we are very proud of you and your success is extremely well deserved.

Carterton Exhibition Center

Anna-Marie Kingsley, Paulette Harris, Linda Dennes and Faye Portman's exhibition continues till 5 September.

The Big Wai Art Sale is coming up in early September. Entry forms can be downloaded from www.waiart.org.nz or you can pick one up from Carterton Information Center, Colours for Art in Masterton, or The Village Art Shop in Greytown.

The Wai Art Portrait Awards are coming up in February 2009. There is prize money up for grabs so get painting. An entry form can be downloaded from www.waiart.org.nz

Katz Gallery's winter opening hours are Saturday and Sunday 10 – 2pm. Exhibit 9 is a group exhibition running till the 31 August. Artists featured are Sean Crawford, Bev Cameron, Max Baylis, Carol Ann Bauer, Mary de Shot and Lynne McMEnamin.

The following exhibition is titled "The edge of time" by photographer AJ Hunter. Running from 6 September to 2 November

River East Gallery

New works from Jane Kellahan, John Casey and Annette Dunnage Roy and Kate Mackenzie.

Aratoi

Paintings from the Wairarapa and Taranaki, by Noah Landau till 31 August.

Martin Poppelwell's ceramic works from 1993 to 2007 till 7 September.

Breadcraft Wairarapa Schools Art opens 30 August.

Expressions

Okay it's Upper Hutt, but hey it's got Carterton artists in it and is well worth making the trip down to see. The sculpture exhibition is titled Men at Work and features Sean Crawford, Trevor Lamb, Campbell Maud, Bruce Winter and Jeff Thompson.