



Kate Wilson

Drawing and Painting

Materials and Techniques
for Contemporary Artists

Thames & Hudson

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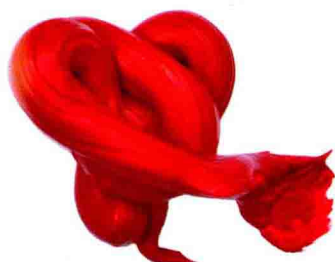
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FOREWORD

WITH THE ADVENT OF POSTMODERNISM in the 1960s, the preciousness of the artist's hand – their mark (that modernist proof of authenticity) – was disputed.

Artists quoted their predecessors in playful riffs on the original. For a while, concept predominated; art historians looked to the 'frame', the context – sometimes at the expense of discussing the materiality of the work itself. The challenge of the information age has since been embraced, evidenced by a plethora of works inspired by social networking, internet searches, pixellation, even Second Life; some existing solely online. Manfred Mohr was one of the digital art pioneers, shifting from Abstract Expressionism to computer-generated algorithmic geometry.

As I write, we are still witnessing the consequences of the collapse of neo-liberal economics on art practice. The ensuing 'recessional aesthetics' are manifested in the proliferation of community-driven models and art activism (see artist James Bridle, who creates installations comprising computer-generated outlines of drones and who also self-identifies as an activist). These encouraged a reinterpretation of the definition of 'materials' and a re-examination of their potential for social change. Given the nature of much contemporary practice, then, what is the role of a book on materials?

On a purely practical level, it facilitates knowledge sharing around working with both traditional (pencil, oil, acrylic, watercolour, canvas, paper, board, wax) and non-traditional materials. The emphasis on critical theory in art schools has sometimes overshadowed the acquisition of what were once considered fundamental skills like life-drawing or colour mixing. (Jonathan Delafield Cook's detailed charcoal drawings could be read as a renewed celebration of technique.) This knowledge-sharing is timely: a further consequence of recessional aesthetics was the 'return to craft', and hence 'making', often through labour-intensive processes, with materials sometimes chosen for their availability or, as in the case of Jen Stark's innovations with paper, their affordability. It also comes at a time when art historians are re-evaluating the object once more.

Secondly, despite the tedious rehearsal of the 'Painting is dead, long live painting' routine, painting is popular again. Whether an artist working with traditional materials in a traditional way – Jan De Vlieghe's illusionistic plates, painterly blossoms, gardens and chandeliers – can still be considered contemporary is contentious. But contemporary artists have clearly not stopped experimenting, often deploying materials for their connotations: note the fur and glitter and magazine clippings of Wangechi Mutu's collages, or the plasticine, coconut oil and rubber of Ellen Gallagher's; Raqib Shaw's embossed gold outlines recall techniques used in early Asian pottery; Diane Victor's portraits in smoke emphasise the ephemeral nature and vulnerability of the depicted disappeared; Zheng Chongbin manipulates ink in a traditional and radical way, referencing late fifth-century Chinese artist-theorist Xie He; Wendy Elia deliberately makes portraits in oil paint rather than acrylic to query the genre's traditional association with the white upper classes.

If all these artists teach us anything, it is that ultimately, base material is there to be transformed, made to resonate. Whether this happens by chance or after decades of concerted experiments, there is nothing mundane about this process. For, as romantic as it sounds, isn't the artist also always the alchemist?

MARIE-ANNE MANCIO



INTRODUCTION

I'VE LONG BEEN INTERESTED in how art materials work. I remember a project at school where we were asked to make a painting, experimenting with food found in the kitchen cupboard and earth from the garden to mix up paint. I also fell in love with that delightful fifteenth-century manual, *Il Libro dell'Arte* by Cennino Cennini, who talks of going out with his father, digging yellow ochre out of the ground, grinding it up and mixing it with egg yolk.

Mastery of the craft will not make you into a great artist, but having a feel for materials does seem to be part of the creative process. The artists featured in this book often talk about the appropriateness of the chosen medium to their idea. Many, when questioned, reveal a personal affinity with the material, and clearly enjoy its physical and tactile qualities. Some would even argue that it is the material that helps them to think in new ways.

In Cennino's world, painting is a craft – a series of recipes and instructions that, if followed, will give a perfect result. I now realise that no book can really teach you how to make art. But I, and the many contributors to this publication, do hope that this one offers some clues to the work you might make, and encourages you to experiment with a variety of media and try out a range of approaches to your subject matter. We aim to give you technical information and inspiration related to current fine art practice and, because many artists now use iPads alongside traditional media, have inserted Digital Options boxes to introduce you to digital drawing and painting tools and the ways in which they can be used.

As an artist and teacher, I have read quite a bit of conflicting information about which materials are and are not intrinsically unstable, and which ways of working will promote longevity. Generally, artists and buyers expect that their paintings will outlast them, and some may hope that they will still exist in a few

hundred years' time. We also know that that nothing lasts forever. Even if we keep rigidly to all the rules – and conservators say that artists are very likely to break them – every type of paint and surface has some drawback. Oil and alkyd paint and resins become yellow and brittle; acrylic and wax are difficult to clean and may attract dirt; works on paper fade in daylight and are very susceptible to wear and tear. All deteriorate in damp conditions, extremes of temperature and with severe handling.

So while it is sensible to be aware that some materials are unstable, the pursuit of longevity is not this book's main aim. Indeed, too much emphasis on safe methods could mar the work. In this matter, I take courage from the words of Anselm Kiefer, whose monumental multimedia paintings are deliberately made to be vulnerable, and to decay and change over time.

Maybe a work is only finished when it's ruined, no?

KATE WILSON

*Right: Sprache der Vogel.
Oil, acrylic, salt, brick, mortar,
aluminium and steel on canvas,
by Anselm Kiefer.*



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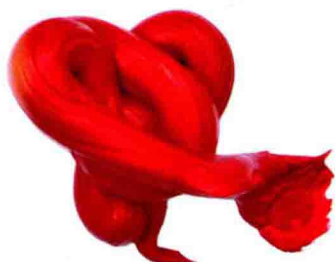
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MARIE-ANNE MANCIO

