

# Exploring a New Direction

IT'S IMPORTANT TO STRETCH OURSELVES AS ARTISTS IF WE WANT TO GROW ARTISTICALLY AND DISCOVER NEW CREATIVE PATHWAYS. EXPLORATIONS IN ABSTRACTION CAN PROVIDE JUST SUCH AN OPPORTUNITY FOR A REPRESENTATIONAL PAINTER.

By Desmond O'Hagan



Abstraction can be defined as the process of taking away or removing characteristics from something in order to reduce it to a set of essential characteristics. I've been painting professionally for 36 years and, even though I'd describe my art as representational, I've always thought of the imagery as a combination of abstract shapes. At the start of a painting, I look for the important dark shapes with which to begin, and this becomes my road map for the shapes that follow.

Whether the subject is an urban scene, still life, figure, landscape or interior, within my interpretation is an element of an abstraction. So, I'm familiar with thinking abstractly. Recently, though, I've been exploring abstraction in ways that are pushing the work further away from representational imagery. It's a period of evolution that excites me, because it's important—as artists—that we never stand still.

## Making Discoveries

I first recognized this connection between representational art and abstraction years ago. As a developing artist, thirsty for knowledge, I spent hours in the used bookstores of Denver, going through the stacks of art books. In this way, I was exposed to a wide variety of art—especially in the shops that were haphazardly organized.

It was a tremendous learning experience at a time when you couldn't simply use Google to search for information. I happily came across books on Sargent, Sorolla, Whistler and the French Impressionists, but I also discovered work by American Expressionists—several of whom intrigued me. I may not have delved into the work of Franz Kline, Edvard Munch, Willem de Kooning or Mary Abbott as deeply had I not happened upon them in this way.

It was a love of 19th-century representational and Impressionist painters that sparked my interest in becoming an artist, but this short list of Expressionist painters also influenced the evolution of my painting style.

In *Koi Pond #2* (pastel on paper, 11x18), O'Hagan uses a combination of expressive strokes and shapes to hint at recognizable imagery, such as the suggestion of swimming fish.





In *Street Light* (pastel on paper, 11x18), the artist's quick, broad strokes evolved into an abstracted urban scene.

### Taking Risks

Throughout my life as an artist, I've had periods of plateau and periods of growth. One of those moments of breakthrough occurred years ago when I was painting a scene of New York City that included doors and windows of a classic brownstone. I was about three-quarters of the way through the painting when I realized it was lifeless, mundane. Every artist has paintings that don't turn out, but sometimes there's a spark of interest somewhere that can be explored. In this case, there was nothing salvageable, so I just started experimenting.

My general approach to painting is to work with shapes throughout, slowly refining the most important ones as I move through the process. My experimentation with this painting, however, led to a new direction. I started

to explore shapes in a more expressive, abstract way that allowed room for the viewer to discern details that were only applied loosely.

I learned that this sort of free and unrestricted exploration is essential to artistic growth. If I want to move my work forward, I have to be willing to risk that a painting might fail. The cost of growth, I realized, is some paper and pigment.

### Seeing Things Anew

As I continued to explore and hone my approach, I eventually came to understand that how I see is just as important as how I lay color down. In my paintings, I try to simplify shapes and edges to portray only the essential characteristics ... like abstraction.

In the last few years, I've carried this approach a step further with my more direct experiments with abstraction,

in which I retain only a slight representational element.

For this work, I don't start with a subject; I start with shapes and edges. I'm still thinking about values, composition, color, edges and detail. In these more abstract pastels, however, representational imagery may or may not appear. If a subject does start to emerge from my mark-making, and I feel the imagery is pertinent to the painting, I may develop the subject a bit more while continuing the abstract theme. What's most important, however, is that the painting process challenges me and pushes me toward experimentation.

In 2021, I had a show at the Sugarman Peterson Gallery, in Santa Fe, N.M., titled "The Contemporary New Mexico Landscape," which consisted of oils and pastels depicting this Southwestern scenery

## CROSS-TRAINING

Often, when we try out new ideas, there are unexpected outcomes. I've found, for example, that the time I've spent working more abstractly has also enhanced the work I do in a representational style. If I feel a painting has become overly detailed, I start to imagine the abstract shapes, and it tends to loosen my strokes.

**RIGHT**  
A combination of abstract shapes with both strong and muted colors captured a busy street scene in *New York Taxis* (pastel on paper, 9x12).

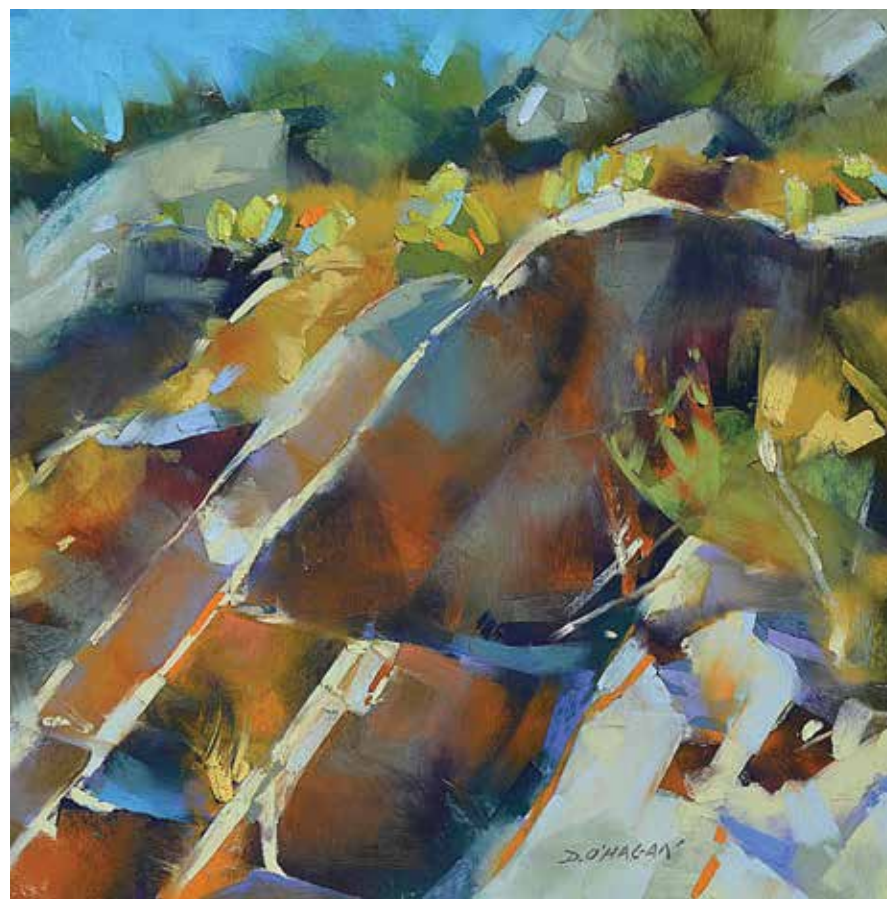
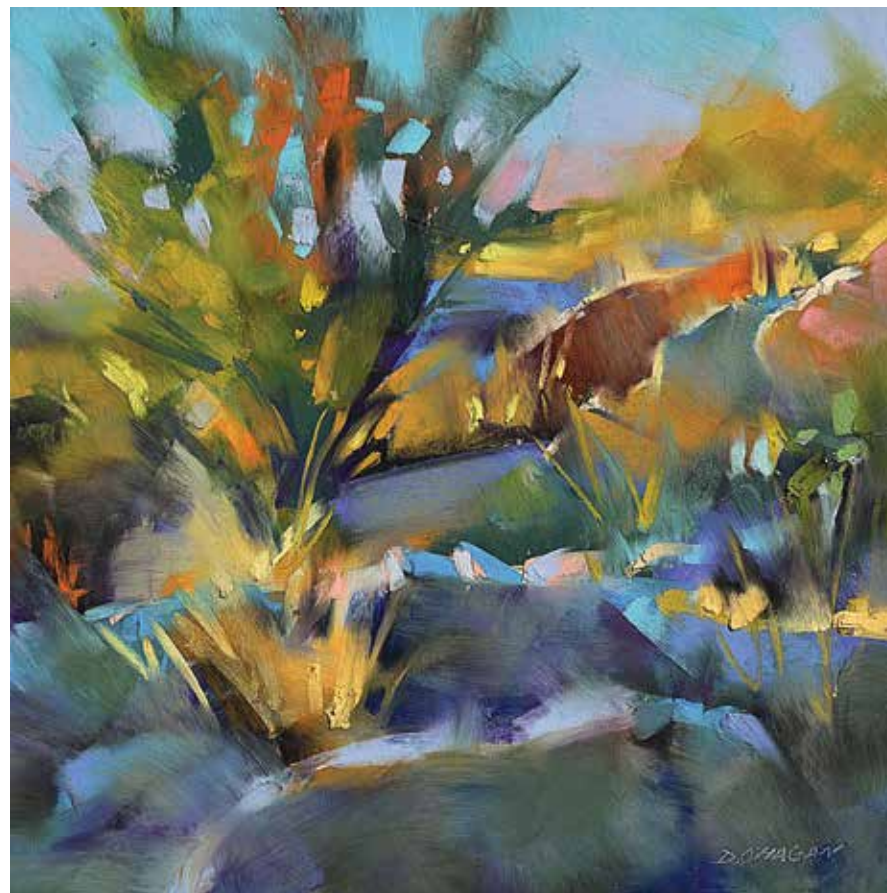
**BELOW**  
The abstracted shapes and edges add expression to the interior, *Pub Light, Dublin* (pastel on paper, 9x12).







By leaning into the natural, abstract patterns of the New Mexico landscape, O'Hagan creates unique interpretations of the desert scenery in these pastels (clockwise from above): **Pink House, New Mexico** (pastel on paper, 12x12), **Foothills** (pastel on paper, 12x12) and **Light and Shadows** (pastel on paper, 12x12).



in a less traditional view. I'm especially fond of this particular landscape, as I lived in Albuquerque for 10 years before moving to Denver for art school. In these semi-representational, expressionist paintings, you can see the more prominent role abstraction is playing.

I hoped to capture a different view of New Mexico that emphasized shapes, color and texture. When I lived there in my youth, I spent a great deal of my time around the Sandia Mountains, climbing boulders and cliffs, and hiking through foothills and arroyos. My memories of the vivid colors at dusk and the various textures of the rocks, trees and shrubs all contributed to my vision for this body of work. I discovered that the New Mexico landscape was perfectly suited to my experiments in abstraction, and my work for this show reflected a period of creative evolution.

### Learning for Life

From the beginning, my artistic career has felt a bit like the flight of the bumblebee—painting a variety of subjects, pursuing different techniques, traveling, teaching, and participating in solo and group shows. In this way, I try to keep myself in an ongoing state of discovery and experimentation while moving my painting process forward. This latest direction is just another step in a lifelong creative education. **PJ**

Award-winning artist **Desmond O'Hagan** ([desmondohagan.com](http://desmondohagan.com)) is celebrated for his portrayal of urban scenes, as well as many other subjects. He's a Master Pastelist in the Pastel Society of America and an Eminent Pastelist in the International Association of Pastel Societies.