



First Snow

A step-by-step painting guide by Richard Robinson

Watch the full lesson at <https://mypaintingclub.com/lessons/70-First-Snow>

MY PAINTING CLUB

Introduction

As we embark on this painting journey together, I am thrilled to introduce you to our first workshop, aptly named 'First Snow.' This lesson is inspired by a photograph I captured during one of my painting adventures in the stunning Crown Range above Queenstown, in New Zealand's South Island. This scene, with its dramatic interplay of light and shadow, offers a perfect opportunity to explore the beauty of snow-covered landscapes. In this chapter, we'll dive into the art of balancing warm and cool color variations, and the expressive brushwork that brings a painting to life. You'll learn how to simplify complex scenes by joining dark shapes, creating a strong, cohesive design that avoids clutter and maintains balance. As you paint, feel free to exercise your artistic license—move elements, alter colors, and make the scene your own. This is your chance to create a captivating piece of art that invites viewers into its serene, wintry embrace. Let's get started and enjoy the process of bringing this beautiful snow scene to life on canvas.



"First Snow" by Richard Robinson.



REFERENCE PHOTO

The scene as Richard found it.

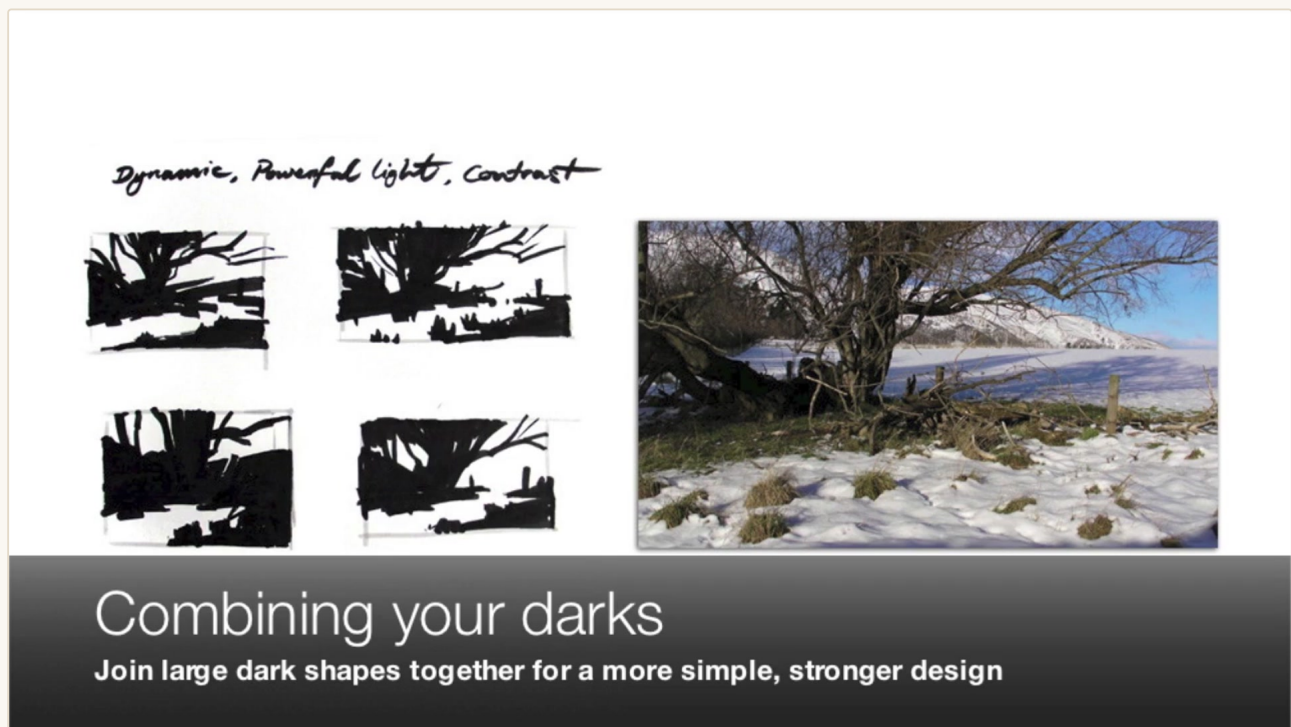
Materials

Gather these materials before you start. If you don't have the exact same supplies, use what you have and substitute freely.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- M. Graham & Co. Oil Paints
- Alizarine Crimson
- Ultramarine Blue
- Burnt Sienna
- Cadmium Red
- Cadmium Orange
- Yellow Ochre
- Cadmium Yellow Light
- Titanium White
- Painting medium
- M. Graham & Co. Walnut Alkyd Medium
- Solvent
- Gamsol
- Panel
- I made my own by giving MDF board 3 coats of acrylic primer.
- You could use a canvas panel or anything you prefer.
- Brushes
- Rosemary & Co. Richard Robinson Brush Set
- Palette Knife
- Paper Towels
- Container for solvent
- Container for painting medium

1 Common mistakes in No Tan designs



Combine Dark Shapes

Join dark shapes together to create a simpler, stronger design. This helps in avoiding clutter and enhances the overall composition.

Avoid Cutting Elements

Ensure that major elements like trees are not cut off by the edge of the painting. This prevents awkward composition and maintains balance.

Create Interest in Minimal Designs

In minimalistic designs, add interest by using intriguing paintwork or colors. This keeps the viewer engaged and prevents the painting from feeling empty.

Avoid Foreground Barriers

Be cautious of strong dark lines across the foreground that can stop the viewer's eye. Consider creating a gap to invite the viewer into the painting.

Balance Light and Dark

Ensure there is enough interest in the balance of light and dark areas. A single element like a tree may not be sufficient to hold the viewer's attention.

PRO TIP

Join dark shapes together to simplify and strengthen your design.

2 Successful No Tan designs



Evaluate Student Designs

Examine various student No Tan designs to understand what makes them successful. Notice the abstract design quality and the balance in bold designs.

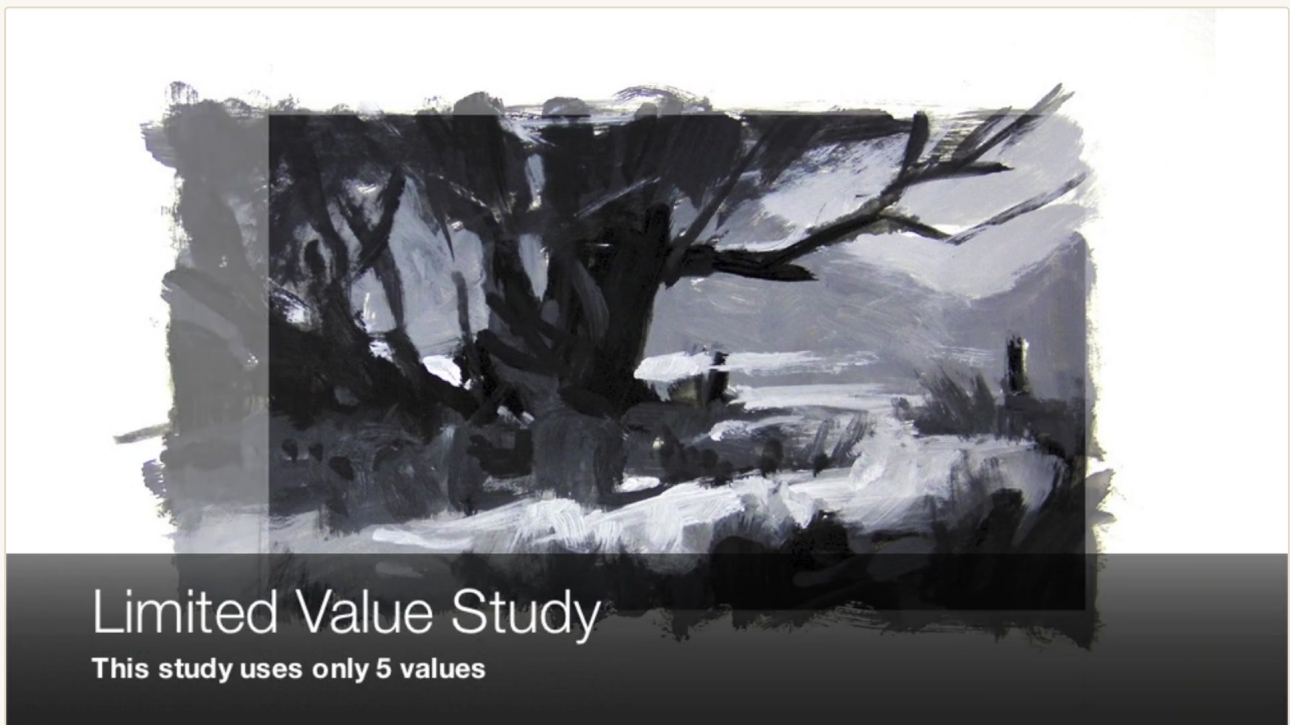
Identify Areas for Improvement

Observe the design with four clumps of grass in the foreground. Recognize that the regularity in size and placement can be improved for a more dynamic composition.

PRO TIP

Look for interesting patterns and balance in No Tan designs to enhance their visual impact.

3 Limited value study



Create a Limited Value Study

Focus on maintaining the integrity of your No Tan design. Observe the dark shapes in the foreground, such as the grasses, and keep them consistent with the No Tan design even if you know light will eventually fall on them. This helps preserve the overall balance and design of your composition.

PRO TIP

Keep dark shapes consistent with your No Tan design to maintain balance in your composition.

4 Painting technique suggestions

Try this thin vs thick painting technique (for oils or acrylics):



Use Thin to Thick Technique

Apply the thin to thick painting technique. Start with thinner layers of paint and gradually build up to thicker layers. This approach adds depth and texture to your painting.

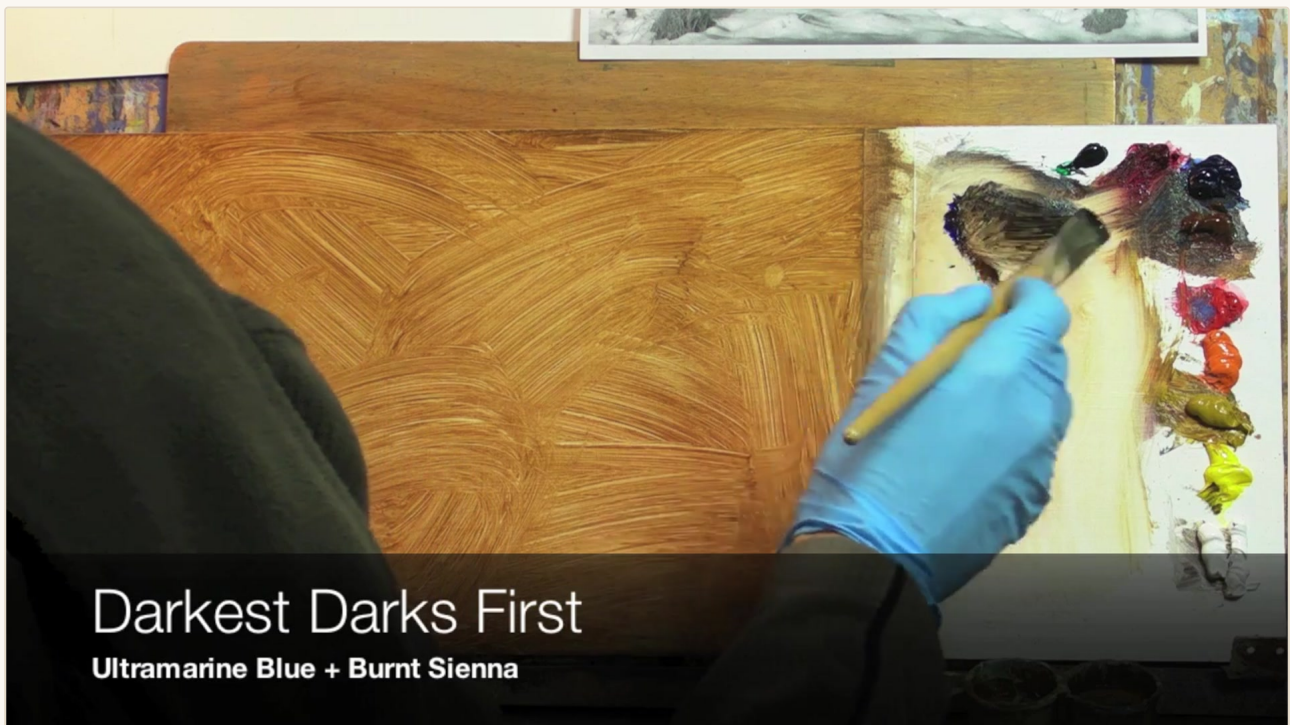
Consider Warm and Cool Relationships

Evaluate the warm and cool relationships in your painting. Use warm colors next to cool colors to create contrast and vibrancy. This variation makes your colors more dynamic and engaging.

PRO TIP

Use warm and cool color variations to enhance the vibrancy of your painting.

5 Advice on starting over



Recognize Fundamental Issues

Identify if your painting has fundamental issues such as problems with the drawing or the base coat. Acknowledge that these issues cannot be fixed by simply painting over them.

Be Bold and Start Over

If you recognize these fundamental problems, don't hesitate to scrape off the paint or start a new canvas. This approach prevents you from wasting time trying to fix something that can't be easily corrected.

PRO TIP

Don't be afraid to start over if the foundation of your painting is flawed.

6 Mixing darkest darks and drawing



Mix the Darkest Dark

Use a little bit of painting medium to mix with your darkest dark. Ensure the mixture is thick enough so the canvas doesn't show through.

Draw the Tree

Make the drawing of the tree bold, similar to your initial value study. Carefully replicate the study to maintain consistency.

Enlarge the Drawing

If enlarging the drawing is challenging, consider using a grid to transfer your drawing accurately.

PRO TIP

Use a grid to easily transfer and enlarge your drawing accurately.

7 Blocking in lightest values



Block in Lightest Values

Use fairly dark and warm colours to block in the next lightest values. Brush upwards into the darks to create a soft edge at the top of the grasses. This technique will help blend the colours smoothly and add depth to your painting.

PRO TIP

Try working from a black and white reference to gain more freedom with your colour choices.

8 Adding warm and cool colors



Warm Up Cool Colors

Add warm colors like orange and brown to your blues to create a warm gray instead of a cool gray. This will give your painting an overall warm feeling.

Modify Gray Areas

Introduce cooler grays and warmer grays into the existing gray areas. This adds variation and a shimmering effect to your painting. Ensure these modifying colors maintain the same value as the areas you're painting into.

PRO TIP

Keep modifying colors the same value as the areas you're painting into for consistency.

9 Creating texture and depth



Carve Out Branches

Carve out some of the branches delicately, especially as you move up into the finer branches at the top. This will help define the structure of the tree.

Mix and Apply Darker Color

Mix a darker color and work it lightly into the area with the fine branches. This helps create a smooth transition and prevents the colors from turning muddy.

Darken the Left Side

Make the mixture even darker as you move to the left side. This will create a dark area that pushes the eye towards the center of focus, enhancing the contrast and light in the focal area.

Add Random Texture

Use the clean flat of your palette knife to smush the paint around, adding randomness to the texture. This will give the painting a more natural and dynamic appearance.

PRO TIP

Use a palette knife to add random texture and avoid uniformity.

10 Importance of gradients



Understand the Role of Gradients

Recognize that gradients create a sense of light and depth in your painting. A gradient from left to right in value can enhance the appearance of light through a subject. Avoid painting large areas in a single value to prevent a flat and uninteresting look.

Evaluate Use of Gradients

Look at your painting and identify areas where gradients are lacking. Notice how a lack of variation, especially in large areas of color, can make the painting appear flat, similar to paper cutouts.

PRO TIP

Use gradients to add depth and interest to your painting, avoiding flat, uniform areas.

11 Painting snow shadows and edges



Adjust Snow Shadow Colors

Use the warm grey background color for the shadows on the snow. Since snow reflects the sky color, adjust the shadow color to match the altered background. This will ensure the shadows appear natural and cohesive with the rest of the painting.

Determine Edge Softness

Decide where to place soft and hard edges in your painting. For example, as you add lighter blue-grey to delineate mountains, keep those edges soft. This contrast with the sharp edges of tree branches will enhance the depth of your painting.

PRO TIP

Use soft edges for distant elements like mountains to create depth.

12 Adding variety and avoiding oversimplification



Create Variation with Edges

Incorporate both soft and sharp edges to add variation and interest to your painting. This contrast helps to create a more dynamic and engaging composition.

Warm Up Grey for Snow

Use the same grey value from the sky but warm it up slightly. Apply this to the half tone value planes in the snow, which are the areas not catching direct sunlight.

Use Palette Knife for Texture

Smooth paint flatly onto the palette knife and lightly graze over the snow's surface. This technique adds interesting texture and allows for crisp, sharp edges and details.

Add Variation with Trees

Introduce a slightly warmer dark grey in the background to suggest distant trees. This warmth indicates they are closer than the distant mountains, which appear cooler due to atmospheric perspective.

Avoid Oversimplification

Identify large plain areas that could benefit from variation. Consider adding elements like trees, but rely on practice and understanding to make these decisions effectively.

PRO TIP

Use the edge or point of the palette knife for crisp, sharp details.

13 Painting snow highlights and texture



Prepare Paint for Snow Highlights

Mix two large, juicy piles of paint for the snow highlights. Create one pile that is slightly darker and cooler, and another that is lighter and warmer. Use the lighter color for areas where you want the most intense light.

Apply Thick Paint

Pick up the lighter paint with a brush and apply it thickly to the canvas. Use a palette knife to smear the paint on, creating a thick, textured layer.

Add Texture Variety

Use the palette knife to introduce variety in texture. This adds interest and enhances the viewer's experience by breaking the natural tendency to oversimplify shapes.

PRO TIP

Use a palette knife to create texture variety, adding interest to your painting.

14 Adding details and avoiding mud



Add Cast Shadows

Identify the trunk where the branches on the left cast shadows. Carefully paint these shadows with a gentle curve to suggest a curving trunk. This detail adds depth and realism to the scene.

Apply Lighter Values

Use a few deliberate strokes to apply lighter values on top of the dark wet paint. Be cautious to avoid overworking the paint, as this can blend the colors and create a muddy appearance, losing the desired contrast.

PRO TIP

Use minimal strokes when adding lighter values to prevent creating a muddy look.

15 Enhancing background and depth



Add Reflected Light

Use a warmer grey to add a touch of reflected light to the scene. This will help create a sense of depth and atmosphere.

Strengthen Background Trees

Apply the same grey to enhance the trees in the background. This strengthens their presence and adds depth to the painting.

Introduce Warm and Cool Variations

Add warm variations to the trees, then place cooler notes next to them. This contrast enhances the visual interest and depth.

Soften Edges

Soften the edges of the trees and mountains to create a more natural transition. This helps integrate elements smoothly into the background.

Add Snow to Mountains

Apply a subdued snow color to the mountains, ensuring it is less bright than the foreground snow. This creates a sense of distance and perspective.

Incorporate Distant Details

Add subtle details like small shapes or hints of structures to suggest houses or other elements. This draws the viewer's eye into the distance.

PRO TIP

Soften edges to create natural transitions and integrate elements into the background.

16 Final touches and signing



Add Highlights to the Tree

Lighten the branches of the tree by adding a few highlights. This will enhance the light on the tree and create a more dynamic contrast with the surrounding darkness.

Add Snow Highlights

Use a palette knife to add small patches of snow on the branches. This will provide a crisp, light highlight that stands out against the dark areas.

Create Fence Posts

Paint a couple of small fence posts leading off into the distance. This adds depth and interest to the composition.

Sign Your Painting

Finish by signing your painting. This personal touch completes your artwork and marks it as your own.

PRO TIP

Use a palette knife for crisp edges when adding snow highlights.

Summary & Key Takeaways

Embark on your painting journey by focusing on a strong No Tan design. Simplify your composition by joining dark shapes and ensuring that major elements are well-placed within the frame. As you progress, maintain the integrity of your design by keeping dark shapes consistent, even as you introduce light and color.

Develop your painting with a thoughtful approach to color and texture. Use the thin to thick painting technique to add depth, and explore warm and cool color relationships to create vibrancy. Don't hesitate to start over if foundational issues arise, as a strong base is crucial for a successful painting.

As you add details, focus on creating texture and depth through gradients and varied edges. Use a palette knife to introduce randomness and avoid uniformity, ensuring your painting remains dynamic and engaging. Finally, enhance the background and add final touches to bring your scene to life, culminating in a personal signature that marks your work as complete.

LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Join dark shapes to simplify and strengthen your design.
- Maintain consistency in dark shapes to preserve balance.
- Use warm and cool color variations for vibrancy.
- Don't be afraid to start over if the foundation is flawed.
- Use a grid to accurately transfer and enlarge your drawing.
- Use gradients to add depth and avoid flat areas.
- Use a palette knife to add random texture and avoid uniformity.
- Use minimal strokes when adding lighter values to prevent mud.



"First Snow" by Richard Robinson.

Student Critiques

Club members painted their own versions of this scene and I critiqued each one. Their paintings — and my feedback — are a wonderful way to see this lesson's ideas in action.

Winter Tree by Mike Oliver 16" x 12" Oil on Canvasboard



Winter Tree by Mike Oliver 16" x 12" Oil on Canvasboard

Hi Mike thanks for your painting. Here's a wee critique for you:

Design

It's a good solid design, not much different from the photograph itself which is already a fairly nice design. In my opinion the photo is a bit better balanced with the dark mass on the left being a counterpoint to the long branches stretching out to the right. Three things that might improve your design a little is to mix up the spacing and size of your foreground grasses to add more variety, increase the size of your fenceposts a bit and stop that big wedge of a hill from pointing out of the picture.

Illusion of Realism

All those fine branches are a very tricky thing to paint and you've done a valiant job with a small brush trying to get them all in one by one. Nice to see that sort of dedication to doing a good job. I can tell you would be a carpenter who sands the underneath of the drawers too. All that hard work has paid off in a way because it's created a tapestry of texture which from a distance gives the illusion of fine branches. On closer inspection though the fine branches appear a bit too ordered " which demonstrates the gap between your understanding of the tree structure and the actual tree structure. It's not a big gap, but to me it's plain you had trouble seeing the tree clearly and relied a lot on your "symbol" of a tree rather than spending more time really looking and coming to grips with it. All artists are guilty of that to some degree and it's just where you are at the moment. With all that patience at your disposal I thought it was interesting you didn't put the same detail into the depiction of the trees shadows on the

snow, but it is good to contrast detail with obscurity. Throughout the painting you've kept a keen eye on the direction of the light source which is good to see and adds to the illusion of depth.

Colors

Nice to see you playing with warm and cool colors like this and pushing the warms as many of us like to do. It looks like an intense warm light on the trees but that hasn't followed through into the green grasses. Put an orange light on green and it turns quite ruddy. See in the photo how the color of the grass and tree are really quite close? When you change the light in the scene you need to keep that same close relationship. You've done that with the snow a little by adding yellow into the lights which is good to see. You might have grayed down the distant oranges and lightened them too to allow for atmospheric perspective. Keeping them high chroma like that brings them forward – see how they are the same color as the oranges in your foreground? Not so good.

Values

You are seeing values quite well except for those distant trees and have attempted some 3 value structure (dark, middle, light) in the foreground snow which is nice to see although again you haven't quite seen the shapes as clearly as you could have.

Brushwork

There are some nice areas of interesting brushwork, but you have painted with a small brush the whole time which, without seriously thick paint or serious skill, tends to a labored look in paintings in my opinion. I'd personally like to see you get some big brushes out and use your patience skills to figure out how you can say more with one bold stroke than what you have tried here to say with 20. It's nice to see you using some quite thick paint in your lights however.

Snow in the Fields by Dirk Rampling 24"–36" Oil on Canvas



Snow in the Fields by Dirk Rampling 24"–36" Oil on Canvas

Hi Dirk, thank you for your painting. I think you've done a great job. You've demonstrated really good drawing skills in being able to state the complex tree clearly. Your values are excellent – I especially admire the subtle 3 value structure you implied in the foreground snow to portray the bumps and hollows there. Regarding values, you might have thrown a little more light into the big black tree shadow to stop it becoming a hole in the painting. (Perhaps your photo has lost some color detail there though). Your brushwork is confident and appealing – from broad and brisk to fine and careful. Your treatment of the light against dark areas in the tree are particularly well done showing clear thinking in the most difficult area.

I like your composition – you've cropped to include only the strongest part of the tree and with it have created a nice window through to the background. I have 3 recommendations for altering the design however, the first would be that the 4 clumps of foreground grass need rearranging into a less balanced pattern – they look conspicuously well ordered, and too even in size. My other suggestions are not nearly as obvious as that, and only suggestions, that you might have provided a snowy way through the grass strip which is currently acting as a sort of barrier to the rest of the painting and is not inviting the viewer through, in other words. Perhaps some snow on the fallen branches there? The third thought was that you might have pushed the far-ground trees on the left even further back into space by lightening them a little or cooling them in order to more clearly delineate the main tree from the background, helping with the sense of space and enhancing the star of the show which is the tree.

My final thought was that I would have liked to see more warm/cool variation in your colors â€” a touch of yellow in the light on the snow and some warmer notes of orange and brown in the grasses and tree. Warm/cool variations bring colors to life. I keep reminding myself that the more variation I can inject into my painting the better it will be because our eyes revel in it â€” variations in color, value, texture, shape, line and edges â€” a whole symphony of variation.

Overall itâ€™s a nice piece which shows a lot of skill and Iâ€™d be happy to hang it on my wall. I hope I can do as well in my demo!

“First Snow” by Carla Whelan “Acrylics on canvas panel 12”–10”³



“First Snow” by Carla Whelan “Acrylics on canvas panel 12”–10”³

Hi Carla, thanks for your painting. You’ve made a bold decision in cropping the image down to this segment “ something I would also be inclined to do as well at first because of its elegant graphic simplicity. You’ve painted the tree well with good structure and roundness of form in the main branches, including the shadows it casts upon itself “ not an easy thing to do, especially on the small scale 12”–10”³ canvas. A few more cast shadows would have really solidified the roundness of the branch.

The rest of the painting seems to play only a supporting role to the overhanging branches, but unfortunately there’s not enough interest there to hold my attention for long. Perhaps if the barn had been brought forward that would have given the eye somewhere else to visit. As it is, the long sharp wedge of the hill points like an arrow off the side of the painting, telling the eye where to go and the post on the left makes a similar mistake by bringing attention to the side of the canvas like an actor poking their head out from the side of the stage “ better to leave that one out or move it in further “ one or the other.

You’ve divided your canvas cleanly in half with the horizon which is normally condemned as one of the original sins of poor composition so it’s definitely something to watch out for, but in this top heavy composition I don’t think it really matters much, although it would certainly have been nice to break that long straight line up a little with some lost edges, or mid-ground trees, or moving that barn forward “ anything to add variation. Our tendency is to simplify everything we see, but our eyes love variation, relationships and complexity so our job as painters as I see it is to provide those things in a painting.

You've certainly provided that in spades with your tree, but it seems a shame there's not more of that in the bottom foreground which could do with some more detail (and warmth – try adding a little violet) in the shadows on the snow and some more clumps of grass. Maybe a rope swing off the tree would help connect the top and bottom of the painting too?

Another point is the form of the mountain – in the original photo you can see subtle but definite value plains – the light plains on the left hand faces tilted towards the sun. You haven't quite got that in your mountain and it seems a little flat because of it, despite the drawing of the angles and shapes being pretty good. Suggesting a very distant mountain behind this one would also have helped with the sense of depth and added more interest and more story to the piece as well. Overall I think it's a pleasing image at first but is lacking enough interest and variation to withstand the test of time.

“Autumn’s Last Stand” by Lynda Cookson “ Oil on Board 24”–2013



“Autumn’s Last Stand” by Lynda Cookson “ Oil on Board 24”–2013

Hi Lynda, thanks for your painting “ it’s wonderful to see your freedom of expression in this piece and it’s clear that you enjoyed painting it. I like the idea of splattering paint to simulate the complex texture in the tree but perhaps it could have done with a few more thin branches to help with the illusion of detail. I like the idea of exaggerating the green in the sky as a counterpoint to the extra warm notes you’ve introduced but it would have been good to introduce more of that into the snow shadows to help create more unity in the painting. The key there is to get exactly the same value as the base shadow color you’re painting into. It’s good to see you’ve introduced some reflected light into the shadow side of the tree, although you might have used a cooler color there again to contrast the warm light.

It seems to me that the drawing has been sacrificed a little in the rush of creative excitement. There are a few things to look at|

1. the tree branches are conspicuously variable in thickness. Trees are very finely balanced constructions. Taking care and time in describing those fine relationships in thickness pays off in the end.
2. The foreground clumps of grass need to cast shadows which obey the same light source as the tree shadows do.
3. There is no definition in the shape of the snow in the foreground (shadow, halftone, light), which is equally a problem in being able to see and paint subtle value shifts.

When we're enjoying getting the paint on and playing around it's a very tricky thing to suppress that joyful intuitive side and switch on our critical analytical side in order to keep the drawing in check. If you conquer that it's then equally as difficult to switch off that mode and get back into intuitive mode. A good way to do this is to keep stepping back from the work which shrinks it, or viewing it in a mirror which shrinks and flips it, in order to see it from a new viewpoint which encourages us to knuckle down and analyze it with a critical eye. When things really aren't going right I find a checklist helps "how clear is my drawing?, how much variation do I have in my edges, shapes, values, colors, lines, ? etc?

I do like your warm/cool color combinations here. If you had changed the warm color for the tree (grayed it down a little) so that it was different from the grasses this would have helped make the light more believable and added more variety to the color scheme. I love to push the color like this too but in this case the tree color looks a little too bright and warm compared to the grasses, so I would either gray the tree a little or add some purer oranges into the grasses. The shapes, sizes and spacing of your grasses could benefit from some more variation too " they look a little planted in rows. Also, have a closer look at how the edge of the foreground snow line breaks up in the photo " there are clumps leading into it which break it up more than what you have indicated here. Nature is full of variation and every time we simplify that variation in a painting I feel we take away from her, instead of praising her.

The distant trees might do well to be quietened down a bit " lightened in value to add more depth. At the moment it's jumping forward a little and competing with the tree.

The composition is solid although as I mentioned in another critique the dark band of grass does act as something of a barrier to the viewer " it's nice to have ways through to the rest of the painting (an open gate, a break in the mist, a window in a wall, etc.) I love your brushwork, thick paint and color usage and look forward to seeing more of your work.