

Q&A



DAVID
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"Untitled (Woman on Man's Shoulders)", 2005

When did you first use watercolour?
Probably like most people: six years old, a cheap little set with six round bright colours, paint by numbers, a grey wet summer's day with my brothers around a fold-up table in a caravan in Great Yarmouth.

What qualities does watercolour offer that you don't find in other paint media?

Watercolour is simply "coloured water". Pigment held in water. If you change the words around it says everything.

What are the particular effects it brings to your work?

Watercolour is so uniquely itself, in some ways it is also an idea, closer to photography than oil or gouache. It is about light and lightness. It has liquidity, imbued with time, a moment caught.

How central is it to your work?

It is the closest art I make to myself. The art I make in other media is more like building work. Watercolour is like a breath. It is the most intimate of mediums.

What kind of work do you use it for? Do you use it for sketches or to map out ideas, rather than for finished compositions?

Most of my watercolours are of figures. Often single, isolated on the page. They work for me when the figure appears to be alive, both ephemeral and bound by gravity. A luminous fragile figure that also has weight, that feels that it is standing in a space, that has an "unbearable lightness of being" if you like. I have observed over the years that the figures are getting stranger and more exaggerated; protruding alien breasts, odd flower-like colours, stamen-like limbs. I think watercolour has a life of its own, quicker than a thought. If I try to question, go back or correct, it always ends in failure. The ones that work best are those that have nothing to do with me.

What is your favourite way of using it? Do you always use a brush? A sponge? Do you prefer its transparent qualities, or does it have colour properties that you enjoy?

I usually stand. I work flat using a brush and gravity. I sometimes blow on them. I have collected loads of brushes but often use the same one. I use tubes of watercolour and mix my colours in glass bowls; it is more liquid and generous that way. I have a set of large glass jars and will have one filled with clean water and the others left over time with sediment at the bottom. I will often mix this into the intense colours, making them a bit dirty.

Do you find it difficult to use? Did it take you a long time to master it?

There is no right or wrong way, but there is logic to its material. I find the "why" of art really difficult – ideas are hard to find and slippery to hold. The "how", the doing, is often the easiest bit.

Have there been particular periods in your work when you used watercolour, and if so, when were they and why?

I tend to spend one day a month making watercolours. I lay out the materials, fold and tear paper until I have a thick block, mix the colours in bowls. I then work through the paper, laying the wet drawings side by side to dry. The figures lead on to each other rather like a Muybridge sequence [the human locomotion photographs by Eadweard Muybridge]. Many days later, I go through them and dispose of the ones that won't do. Watercolour is a brutal business.

Do you think it has been superseded by acrylic, or does it have a distinct quality all its own?

I have never used acrylic. It's pretty nasty stuff.

Who are your favourite watercolour artists and why?

There are some artists I think of as having a watercolourist sensibility, even though they really work in other media, such as Cy Twombly or Tacita Dean. Certain poets, too. Writers like [Yukio] Mishima. Rodin, Blake and Beuys. Blinky Palermo is another.



'Watercolour has a life of its own, quicker than a thought. If I try to question, go back or correct, it ends in failure'
David Austen

'I like it now because I can have a "puddle" of colour and it gives you many different weights of that colour'
Howard Hodgkin



HOWARD
HODGKIN

"A Storm", 1977

When did you first use watercolour?
Probably at the age of six.

What qualities does watercolour offer that you don't find in other paint media?
Transparency and immersion.

What are the particular effects it brings to your work?