

PAINTING LOOSELY IS A STATE OF MIND

6 Strategies to Free Yourself
When Painting Abstracts

by Dick Richards



The Rain Has Gone
Painting by Dick Richards
Acrylic on Canvas, 24" x 24"

I hear this often from fellow artists: “I wish I could loosen up when I paint.” It is usually said while the artist and I are looking at one of my paintings. I paint very loosely and abstractly. Some artists who make that comment paint realistically and simply want a looser way of working realistically. It may be that the suggestions here will be helpful to those artists. But I am writing specifically for painters who wish to paint abstractly, as I do. The painting on the left is an example.



Melody
Acrylic on Canvas, 30" x 30"

Certain tools encourage a loose style. Larger canvases offer invitations to be loose. Bigger brushes inhibit the urge to be overly detailed. I buy three and four inch house painting brushes. I often use a ten inch baker’s cake icing spatula. Generous use of paint helps. Although such tools do encourage looseness, in the end, painting loosely is a state of mind.

The desire for control – a controlling mindset – inhibits painting loosely. In order to shift from a controlling mindset to a loose mindset, one needs to quiet the controlling mind and create mental space for the loose mindset to emerge and develop. In that loose mindset, your training in color, composition, and technique can take over.

Here are six strategies that I have found useful to encourage a loose mindset. You may find them strange and uncomfortable to do. They will, however, help you get out of the comfort zone that your controlling mindset provides. Getting out of your comfort zone will require doing things that make you uncomfortable.

REPEAT A MANTRA

A mantra is a statement, sound, word, or phrase that is repeated, usually by someone who is praying or meditating. It is meant to quiet the mind. The mantra that I use when I paint is, “Be present. Let go. Disappear.” That statement not only quiets my mind, it also reminds me of how I want to approach a painting. I repeat it several times before beginning and often during the painting process.

What is it that I want to let go of, to make disappear? Thought. Attachment to a particular outcome. Concern about how the work will appear to others. Fear of making a mistake. An appetite for control. Planning. Ambition to have the painting represent some reality. All of that disappears. “I” disappears.

Jazz musician Steven Nachmanovitch expresses the sense of disappearing this way:

When the self-clinging personality somehow drops away, we are both entranced and alert at the same time. This lively and vigorous state of mind is the most favorable to the germination of original work of any kind.

“Be present. Let go. Disappear,” works for me. You must choose a mantra that works for you.

PAINT TO MUSIC

It is hard to paint in a controlled way while listening to Janis Joplin sing “Cry Baby.”



Welcome Back Home
Acrylic on Canvas, 24" x 24"

*So come on, come on, come on,
come on, come on,
And cry, cry baby, cry baby, cry baby.*

Can you imagine it now? Can you imagine applying a stroke of paint to a canvas with each *come on*? And then a set of bolder strokes to each *cry baby*? The painting on the left was done to that song. Joplin’s freedom of expression is infectious and infected the work.

I prefer music that is boisterous. Certain songs from artists such as Joplin, Springsteen, and Clapton work well for me. Leon Russell and Fleetwood Mac. I use a small MP3 player with a set of headphones to cancel out any surrounding noise.

Find music that resonates for you. Sing along if that helps keep your controlling mind quiet. Get into the music and allow its rhythm to guide you. Let each brushstroke begin at your feet, rise up through your

body into your shoulders and along your arm. Roll your hips and shoulders. Sway. Bounce. Dance to the music as you paint.

To paint loose, get loose.

ASK THE WORK WHAT IT WANTS

Painting from a controlling mindset means painting as if I am in control and the painting is a mere recipient of my work. Turn that around. Imagine that the painting is in control. I often

paint in a studio in which other artists are also at work. They chuckle when they see me sitting in front of a canvas, and hear me say to it, "Speak to me. Tell me what you want." But there is method to my seeming madness. I want to give up control to something other than myself, to shatter the sense that I am in charge.

"Tell me what you want."

A broad stroke of black.

Done. Then, "Tell me what you want."

Orange. Lots of orange.

Then a desire for control enters my mind. "Good grief. This is going to be a Halloween painting." I ignore it. Have a dialogue with the work and learn to hear and dismiss the voice of your controlling mindset. Mine tends to show up in two ways. Sometimes it is very critical of what is happening on the canvas in the early stages of work, and sometimes it shows up as fear, as in, "This is going to be a Halloween painting."

So I obey. Orange it is. Lots of orange. Done. Then, "Tell me what you want."

And so it goes.

What is it that speaks to me? Some muse? My own intuition? It doesn't matter.

WORK FAST

Give yourself a time limit to complete a piece. Allow no distractions. Work quickly. Don't overthink; in fact, don't think at all. Act impulsively. Trust your training.



Listen to the Music
Acrylic on Canvas, 30" x 30"

Many of my best paintings were done in less than an hour. But don't expect that every painting done quickly will be a masterpiece. I like to create a painting quickly and then leave it alone for a week or so. I put it in a place where I will see it often in order to decide whether it is finished, or needs more work, or is irredeemable. This is when I allow my controlling mindset to have its say.

Sometimes a painting needs only a bit of color here and there to create balance. Sometimes I do not like it at all and simply start over on the same canvas or coat it with gesso to create a new blank surface. I have some finished pieces that hide two or three first tries. So did many of the old masters. No big deal.

Working fast will facilitate entering into a state of mind referred to as *Mushin*. A Wikipedia entry reveals that *Mushin* is a Japanese term, translating to English as *no mind*. It refers primarily to a mental state which martial artists enter into during combat. The term is a shortened version of *Mushin no shin*, a Zen term meaning “the mind without a mind.” The entry goes on:

Mushin is achieved when a person’s mind is free from thoughts of anger, fear, or ego during combat or everyday life. There is an absence of discursive thought and judgment, so the person is totally free to act and react towards an opponent without hesitation and without disturbance from such thoughts. At this point, a person relies not on what they *think* should be the next move, but what is their trained natural reaction (or instinct) or what is *felt* intuitively.

While the quote above refers to attaining *Mushin* in the martial arts, it can be accomplished through other arts as well. Painting, for example. And while I do not experience a blank canvas as an opponent, I must admit that sometimes, not often, the work does take on characteristics of a battle.



Rebirth
Acrylic on Canvas, 30" x 30"

DON'T GET ATTACHED TO AN OUTCOME

I once worked on a painting that I intended to do very loosely. Blues and greens, dark at the bottom, lighter at the top. I stood back to look at it and saw that it was beginning to look like surf breaking over rocks. My controlling mindset took over. I tried to make it look more like surf breaking over rocks. The result was a dud.

Today I avoid trying to make an abstract painting look like anything except a vehicle for contrast, movement, and depth; a painting that stirs some idea or emotion in a viewer.

I normally begin painting with only a few colors in mind along with a few tools; brushes and palette knives. When the painting begins to “look like something” I banish the thought.

An abstract painting is a reflection of who the artist was during the process of creating it. I do not try to make it anything but that.

DON'T GIVE UP; GIVE IN

The idea of “giving up control” is scary for many people. Don't worry about it. If your ability to control your materials is important to you, and you have been working that way for some time before you try to paint more loosely, you will be able to regain control if you wish. That controlling mindset won't go away.

Still, the prospect of “giving up control” can be daunting. The very phrase suggests a kind of defeat or loss. So do not use that term to describe what you are trying to do. Instead of “giving up control” think of “giving in to spontaneity.” That is a much more appealing notion.

Most importantly, enjoy the process of painting loosely. I am convinced that the more I enjoy the process, the greater is the chance that a viewer will enjoy the result. I am pleased when someone encounters one of my paintings and says, “Wow.” That is enough for me.

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No Mind #6
Acrylic on Canvas, 30" x 40"