

10

year anniversary

Artist Interview Series

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a touch of *magic*

Albert Handell shares his secrets for handling pastel with sensitivity and confidence.

BY ANNE E. HEVENER

ALBERT HANDELL'S PORTRAYALS OF THE landscape are distinguished by a certain quality of mark-making—a characteristic that seems best described as a magic touch. But Handell doesn't think of "the touch" as a magical property dispensed at birth to a few lucky artists. Rather, he considers it a technique that can be practiced and learned.

It's this firm belief in the power of teaching that has perhaps done the most to shape Handell's career, so that even today, after more than four decades as a celebrated artist, the artist still devotes extensive time each year to teaching, offering regular workshops and mentoring opportunities in a variety of locations.

Handell enjoys the distinction of being among the artists featured in the very first issue of *The Pastel Journal*, in 1999, and he has since appeared periodically in the magazine. In this article—the fourth in our 10th anniversary artist interview

series—the conversation focuses specifically on Handell's technique. The goal was to capture some of the sage advice that the artist seems only too happy to share with others who would aspire to become masters of "the touch."

AEH: When you talk about "the touch," you're talking about a specific way of applying pastel to paper?

AH: Yes, and the special magic of "the touch" is probably the most elusive idea to teach, but it



L'arbre, The Tree (pastel, 12x18)

For this pastel, I chose a blue as the general sky color and a muted, warm mauve of the same value to vary with the blue as I painted. For the tree, I picked a rich, darker-value mauve as the general color, varied with a muted brown and muted green of the same value. I used a dark green Nupastel (No. 298-P) for the initial drawing and in combination with other colors to establish the trunk. I worked on the sky and tree simultaneously, establishing colors lightly at first. Then, as I decided where

to put the darker greens, I used a heavier touch for emphasis. Throughout the painting, I constantly varied the pressure of application to get the maximum effect from the few colors I was using. To paint the lower trunk and lighter branches, I added an off-white pastel, again using a light or heavier touch to vary the lights. Once I felt I had a close-to-finished painting, I used a feathering technique to soften parts of the tree, creating more atmosphere, so the tree feels like it's sitting in space.

“With a few bright colors and with lots of variation of the touch, you can paint a field of wildflowers without it looking stiff or over-worked.”

isn't a situation in which you either have it or you don't. It's a mixture of feeling and understanding and sensitivity; it's the feeling part that's so elusive. One must feel the pastel itself and think about how it's applied to the surface.

I heard a surprising comment from one of my workshop students who was painting near me one afternoon. She said, "Albert, when I apply my pastels, I hear noise and scratching. When I watch you

use your pastels, I hear silence." The difference is the touch. It's about changing one established color by applying another color on top of it, but very lightly, and it gives the colors in a painting a vibrancy that's especially beautiful.

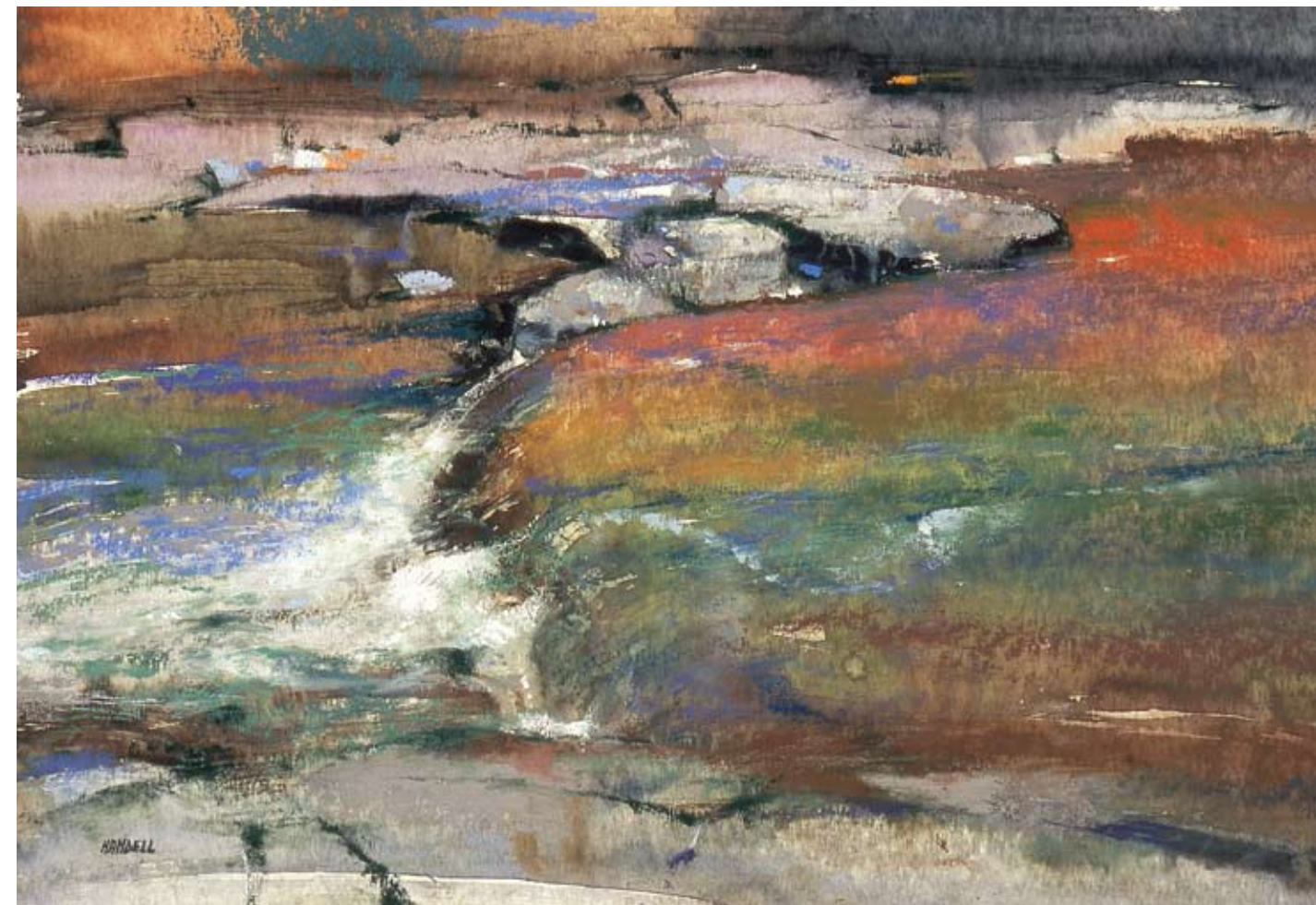
It's important to think about how the pastel is applied and how the color is modified. There are basically two ways that one can apply pastel to paper. Most artists apply their pastels to the surface with a mono-intensity of application—usually, it's full intensity. They either "hit" and the color is right or they "don't hit" and the color is wrong.

Let's say the value is correct but the color needs adjustment—a bit more blue or green or a reddish brown, or whatever, in order to bring that color closer to what you want. What you can do is find a blue or green or reddish brown at the exact same value as the established color, and add a bit of this color to change what you already have. I often modify color this way, and I recommend it and teach it.



The Cascade, Rio Hondo (pastel, 18x12)

This pastel was painted somewhere on a beautiful winding road that runs along the Rio Hondo slightly north of Taos, N.M. It was morning light, and the dark patterns and beautiful grays of these rocks caught my attention. After the initial drawing, I realized the dark patterns that made up the shadows would change the quickest, so I established these using a cool, dark bluish-gray. Then I chose about six or seven pastels—grays, tans, and warm and cool, muted mauves. In this type of lighting, when the rocks are fully illuminated from the front, the subtle colors can be painted with fewer pastels if I'm varying the pressure of each color as I go along. In this case, the initial grays of the boulders were modified by the tans and muted mauves. The final touches, what I like to refer to as "orchestrating," were applied by feathering with soft vine charcoal: in this instance, very little, here and there.



At Water's Edge, Selma (watercolor, pastel and charcoal; 12x18)

I began this pastel as a demonstration at a workshop in Selma, Ala. I started with a 5-minute pencil drawing using first a light touch and then heavier to strengthen my lines. I don't mind if some pencil lines show at the end. In fact, I actually like it; it adds to the complexity of media that make up the finished work.

Next, I added the watercolor washes, letting one color flow into the other to create very soft edges. Then I moved to pastels, focusing on one area of the rocks and working from dark to light. I varied the touch as I painted, and I didn't cover every area with pastel. This way, some of

the transparent watercolor washes show through. In other areas, the washes blend in perfectly with the opaque pastels, adding variety.

Next, I was ready to start the whitewater. I used one white pastel only, applying it softly, on its side, which allowed some of the watercolor beneath to show through. This gave beautiful semi-transparent variety to my whitewater. Where the water was whitest, I applied the white more heavily.

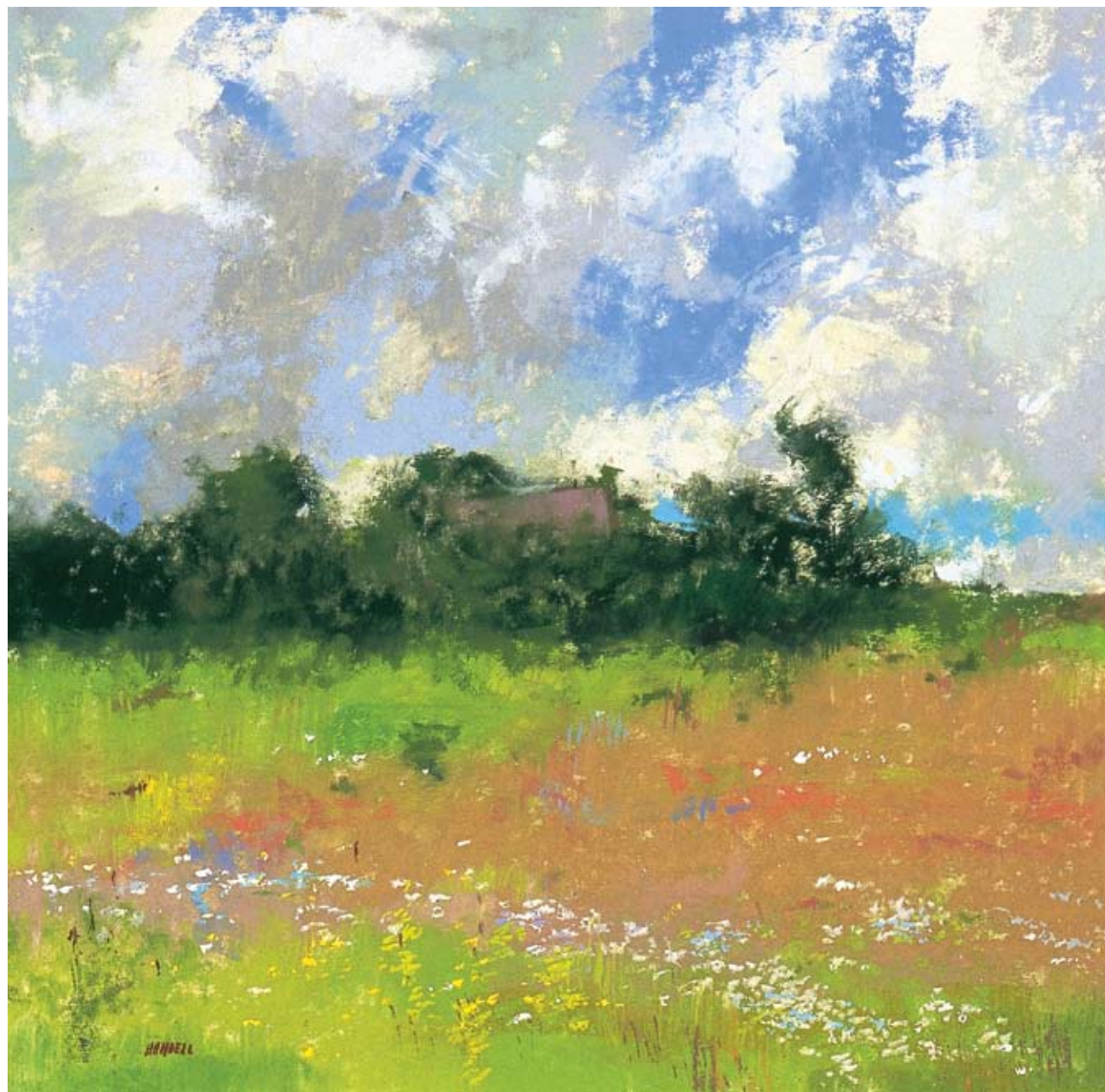
Later, in the studio, to bring it all to a finish, I gently used the feathering technique, quietly harmonizing the pastel still more.

AEH: You mentioned a second application?

AH: The second aspect of the "touch" is to vary the pressure of application as you paint, which allows for more color variety. When the pressure on the pastel is continuously adjusted, each color has more flexibility and variation to it. In pastel, there's a breathing quality to each color. I refer to this variation in appearance as "bloom." And there is a lot of variety and beauty to the bloom of each and every color.

White, when applied lightly to a middle-tone gray piece of paper, for example, becomes a weak white. It appears grayish and not as strong as white when it's applied full-strength. This is

true with any light-value color that is lighter in value than the ground color of the paper. If a light color is also an intense light color, such as cadmium yellow, it will also appear duller, weaker and slightly darker. Similarly, a change in pressure affects the color; white applied lightly, for example, is slightly darker than white applied heavily. On the other hand, a darker color such as black, when applied lightly to the surface, is thereby "diluted," becoming weaker and not as strong as when it's applied full strength (see "Nuance of Color," on page 63, for an illustration of these effects).



The Sky Above (pastel, 16x17)

This hillside was right outside the door of the studio where I was teaching a workshop in the Rochester, N.Y., area. The wildflowers were the initial impetus, but weather conditions took over and I was, in the end, more inspired by the cloud formations. I decided to emphasize the sky and play down the hillside.

I chose two or three grays and a rich ultramarine blue for the sky. The blue related in value to the darkest gray in the clouds, which caused soft edges if and when they touched.

I painted feverishly to catch the fleeting clouds as they drifted along. If I had needed to search around for a new pastel for every nuance of color, it would have been a far more difficult quest. The only way I could deal with this type of subject spontaneously was to pick out a few pertinent colors and vary the pressure, or “touch,” of each of them as I painted.

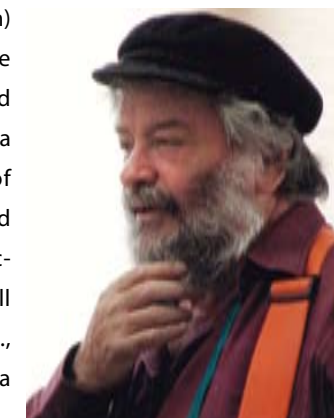
I applied the final notes of emphasis using strong white accents, which stood out beautifully in contrast to the soft grays.

When I realized this, I experimented with every color and established a bloom for each and every color. This was very important in developing control of my pastels. Every artist should practice this, experimenting to see how a color’s bloom looks on different background colors. With this understanding, and by varying the touch, you can get more out of each color, thereby using fewer pastels—a great benefit when working in the field, in particular.

AEH: Are there other techniques you use to bring a painting to a finish?

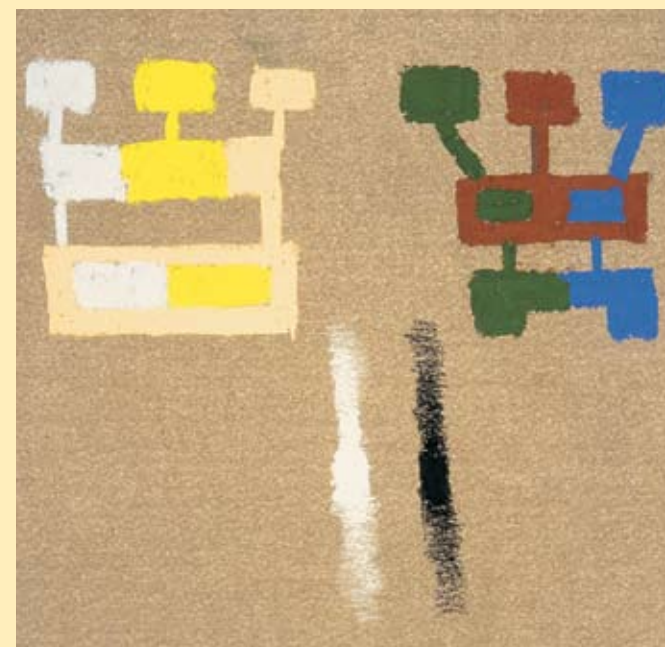
AH: In the later stages of a painting, I use a light touch I call feathering—this is the lightest of touches, as if I’m actually using a feather. I use this for

Albert Handell (www.alberthandell.com) has been a professional artist for more than 40 years. His career has included more than 30 solo shows, including a retrospective at The Butler Institute of American Art in 2007. He has received many awards and honors, including election to the Pastel Society of America’s Hall of Fame. The artist lives in Santa Fe, N.M., where his work is represented by Ventana Fine Art Gallery.



The Nuance of Color

In the lower portion of this diagram, you can see the bloom created with both a white pastel and a dark green pastel when used on a piece of Wallis Belgian Mist paper. Notice how the white appears darker when applied lightly, but the dark green, when applied lightly, is less intense and appears lighter.



The top of the diagram demonstrates the relationships of different colors of pastel that are similar in value. On the left, I’ve included three distinct light-value colors. On the right, I’ve placed three different dark-value colors. Notice that where these colors touch (as shown in the second and third bars), the edges of the colors nearly disappear, because the colors, though they’re different, share the same value.

By using different colors of the same value, you can modify an established color and create beautiful subtleties without muddying the color.



Wildflowers, Garrapata State Park, California
(pastel, 16x17)

finishing steps, when I wish to “orchestrate” the entire pastel. By *orchestration*, I mean that I gently play down certain areas, and, by contrast, emphasize other areas.


For feathering, I usually use a piece of soft vine charcoal, sharpened with a sanding block to a tapered point. The ash color of the charcoal acts as a harmonizer to all those rich, beautiful pastel colors. You can also use the harder pastels, such as Prismacolor’s Nupastels, Holbeins or Faber-Castells, or a pastel pencil, such as CarbOthello, for the feathering technique.

AEH: Do your application methods change at all, depending on the subject matter?

AH: I vary the pressure of application of my pastels from beginning to finish regardless, but the “touch” technique is especially effective for certain subjects—for capturing the ethereal quality of fields and meadows, for instance, as in *Wildflowers, Garrapata State Park, California*, above (See a close-up of the painting in our new column, “In Detail,” on page 12). With a few bright colors, and with lots of variation of the touch, you can paint a field of wildflowers without it looking stiff or over-worked.

Another example is moving water with its rich dark colors and contrasting whitewater. It’s easy to observe

that the whites of the whitewater are not always pure white—at times far from it. These “whites,” though they do stand out, vary in tone and intensity. When the whitewater is duller in color or intensity, you either have to pick and change colors or—as I do—simply lift the pressure of application of the white pastel I’m using. When whitewater is a stronger, pure white, then I’ll press down fully to get that intensity (see *At Water’s Edge, Selma*, on page 61).

The selection of pastel paintings on these pages are all good examples of subjects that I feel benefited from this particular technique. In each case, I applied the pastel color with varying degrees of pressure and emphasis. Of course, while I was working, I was also comparing edges and color relationships, keeping or modifying my proportions, and building the painting while always staying aware of the effect of light—all of these things contribute to the overall effect and vitality of the scene. 

Anne Hevener, the editor of *The Pastel Journal*, has been writing and editing for arts publications for 18 years.

 **GoOnline:** Albert Handell talks about his pastel practices in videos on our website: www.artistsnetwork.com/online-video.