

OAKS IN THE SENSES

An essay on new nature painting

In an urban world contact with nature is increasingly important. But what do we see when we are in the natural world? What do we see when we look at an oak tree ? What on Earth is there ?

Nature is unique and unpredictable

From light moving across mountains to the shape of a pebble, the natural environment is visually unpredictable. Nature is unique and, quite literally, unforeseen.

Man made - environments are pre-visualised in the sense that streets, rooms and cars are all artefacts, all designed. Of course design can be surprising and the urban world can be rich and unpredictable. Nevertheless, in visual terms, the large part of the built environment is fore seen in that human minds have accounted for it - you could say it's already been seen for you. This means that it's relatively easy to get your head round much of what you see. The geometry of a house is simple compared to that of flowing water, and it's not hard to describe a pattern of paving stones. But its very hard indeed to describe changing patterns of rain drops as they fall on a pavement.

Because they are so unforeseen, natural environments challenge the senses. And their uniqueness means contact with them is different every time. So you never know what you're going to hear, feel, smell or see :

In a field after sunrise, in a light winter frost, your footsteps pop as they break the frost crust and you feel yourself sink, slightly, into the earth beneath. A degree colder and you might not sink, because the ground would be frozen. You can smell cold in the air mixed with mud like an astringent. The smell of mud in Staffordshire is different from the smell of mud in Essex: bedrock, rainfall and soil are all different. Forty yards from an oak tree you can see grey frost dusting its trunk, but there is dark, oily looking bark on the side where there was less wind chill in the night. This tree is similar to, but has different combinations of shape and colour from any other tree you've ever seen.

Our senses evolved to rise to the challenge of natural environments. Even if you're tired or worried, you will still notice things outdoors : a bird circling, a counter rhythm in long grass that says "animal", a willow tree changing colour in the wind . And you won't be able to stop yourself noticing things like this because your senses will pick them out; they seem to draw attention to things on your behalf. You may even forget credit cards and tomorrow's work and go over to the grass to see what's there...

Just opening your eyes in a natural environment prompts you to attend, to make contact. And if you 're interested and not tired, the effect can be much more than a diversion. Nature can energise people. In it our senses set us - and we set our senses - to work. Not

being able to predict what you are going to see raises your game; whether its hangliding, hill walking or just pottering about the garden.

In a similar spirit, I try to paint from an assumption that I don't know what's there. For me, landscape painting is a form of waking up. A visual contact with a unique environment.

perception is unstable

Even though each painting in this catalogue is of the same tree, it was impossible to guess the colours and patterns I would see beforehand. But not only does the natural scene change, the way you look at it changes too. Each time you look at a scene your senses notice different things in a different sequence, and you'll react and feel differently. Heraclitus said you can't step into the same river twice. But he might also have said that the same person does not step into the same river twice. Perception, our first hand contact with nature, is a two way process, and both parties are always changing.

How does this affect looking at an oak tree?

As the sun rises, the sky behind the top branches shifts orange-grey to a brighter yellow-turquoise. At the same time upper boughs become blacker and faintly crimson against the sky. Now look down to the base of the tree and your eye immediately adjusts to lower light and you start to see tiny green discs mixed with grey frost, which itself gets whiter as you look at it. Then you notice little pink panels scattered around, leaves of rape seedlings not yet turned green. Look back up, and glare makes it momentarily impossible to see frost on the tree. But you notice a faint red line on the horizon cutting behind the main trunk, which helps you see a greenish element in some clouds and, this time, green in the exposed black bark, maybe algae... and so it goes on shifting and changing....

Perception goes on like this because in the dance of the eye with the environment there is constant interaction, adjustment and readjustment. Perception does tells us about what's there but, because it and we are always changing, the process is unstable.

interconnected colours

Complete colour blindness is rare, but people without colour vision lead normal lives. Full colour vision is a fabulous extra, bestowed by evolution to help us distinguish a vast array of things in the environment. Yet at the same time our eyes reveal an infinity of colour perceptions way beyond what we need for survival. Visual art, the art of sight, can feed on this.

It is well known that the way we see individual colours is affected by the colours surrounding them. In perception, colours are relative, not absolute. If you see thin white water next to green moss the water looks pinkish . Each colour is effected by those around it, so you see a colour *in* its colour world, so to speak. Natural colour worlds are unique and are an expression of unique place and time. Surrounded by green leaves in the

sun, a dead oak leaf that didn't fall last autumn will flare an indescribable salmon-violet: unique colours produced by unique leaves on a unique tree.

In the human eye that perceives them, the visible interconnectedness of colour expresses the physical interconnectedness of nature. And though it may not be easy to describe the relationship between salmon-violet and green, and still less the relationship between these things and ourselves, they can be painted.

the light of nature

A second, often less considered aspect of colour is that the colours we see at any one time are the result of the colour of the objects plus the colour of the illumination falling upon them.

Different kinds of illumination falls on objects : direct light ad an incredibly complicated array of reflected lights from every direction, all with their own distinctive colours. Outdoors there are many kinds of illumination : direct moonlight, reflected light from a rock face, green light under trees ... And in different situations different lights combine differently: for example, green light under a canopy makes green leaves greener but pink bark browner, while direct light passing through the canopy will introduce a yellower light, and there are reflected lights everywhere. If wind moves the leaves, or the sun goes in, everything changes. Illumination, like the rest of nature, is unique in time as well as space.

The colours we see , therefore, carry information about illumination. And, with careful observation, a painter paint both the colour of objects and the illumination falling upon them. By mixing values of local colour carefully you will mix in common colour components caused by the illumination, and so get something of the natural light you see: a unique illumination in a unique environment. Another thing that painting, uniquely, can represent.

digital tools

Often people do not fully appreciate that colour and light in observational painting can be closer to perception than the colour and light in a photograph. Of course photographs capture many aspects of the world and painters use photographs in all sorts of ways. But it's important to realise that both digital and film cameras record colour as millions of single points in the image which take no account of the surrounding field, so the interconnectedness of colour in human vision is lost. Printing the photograph further distorts colour relationships by globally compressing the colour range to the limited range of the print process.

Sensation - colour interaction, adaptation effects, illumination and the dance of the eye with the enviroment – is, I think, better engaged by eye, pigment and brush.

Nevertheless, like a birdwatcher using binoculars or a diver using scuba kit, painters can use cameras to get closer to nature. For example, digital analysis of a photograph can be the difference between seeing and noticing:



The image above is a digital source image for illustration the painting “Flock of Pigeons” (private collection, see www.stephentaylorpaintings.com go to trees) and shows an oak tree seen from below. The image below shows light from a narrow colour range, selected against a black background. The selection brought out a colour distribution pattern I hadn’t noticed when I first saw the view outdoors but, having seen the image, when I went back in similar conditions, I did.



The pattern carries a lot of information. Notice how close the reflected light on the twigs is to the colour of the sky; notice too how many of the strongest reflections lie at right angles to the direction of sunlight, an effect of geometry and light I would never have noticed without breaking down a photograph.

early visual processing and grouping effects

Vision theory has emphasised how much processing takes place early on in the visual pathway from eye to brain. Edge detection, for example, starts in the retina. As data comes together on the way to and in the brain there are a range of processes characterised by the *active grouping* of visual elements that occur spontaneously.

For example, from a certain distance, twigs on a winter oak tree group into clusters forming a pattern of blobs, but as you walk towards the tree, blobs and pattern disappear. It's a strange effect and can render a row of oaks against the sky simultaneously sinister and toy like. When is a pattern a pattern? One answer is: when there is sufficient similarity between visual elements and they are sufficiently regular in their distribution to be recognised as a pattern. In other words patterns appear and disappear in vision without our doing anything about it. In computing terms this activity, is "bottom up" rather than "top down". So you don't have to know anything about what you're looking at for it to happen, it just does.

As a painter, I find it helpful to think of vision like this because it describes perception as a productive activity, prompting us to notice things. These grouping processes evolved to "make sense" of the visually messy natural environments I'm interested in and are there to be discovered. There are many unpredictable colour and texture groupings visible in an oak tree over the seasons.

You also see these affects as you paint. It's hard not to. One difference between ordinary seeing and seeing as you paint is that as you paint you can manipulate and play with grouping processes. You can stop them, take them forward, abandon them, switch elements (for example, look at effects of shapes instead of colour) and so on. Things that take place spontaneously in vision in painting can be manipulated and become part of a picture, transforming events in perception into man made objects.

painting oak trees

If we live in a country where oak trees grow, most of us will have some idea of what an oak tree looks like. But an "idea" of an oak tree is not going to be like an oak tree in the senses. As we've seen, you never quite know what that's going to be, even if you look at it from the same place, at the same time of day and in the same light, two days running!

Being reminded of this fact is not a philosophical game. It's one thing to value nature in your head – and another to experience it. Visual experience, if attended to, tells us that

the things of nature are uncountable but connected; unpredictable but patterned; nothing to do with us and everything to do with us.

Trying to paint what you see is trying to paint perception, and nature is at work within perception. Perception gives us real information about the environment. That's why it's useful. But a realist painting is not a natural object. It's a thing of culture – a cultural thing with a fascinating double life.

You cannot make an oak tree, but an oak tree can help you make a picture of what its like to see one.



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