

Stuart Shils

THREE
PINES
STUDIO

SUMMER
SESSION

JUNE

12,13,
14,15

FALL

SESSION

SEPTEMBER

11,12,
13,14
2011



Stuart Shils Workshop Description Essay and Materials List

The Structure of the Visual Moment

A 3-day outdoor painting intensive with Stuart Shils

General Orientation:

During these three days we'll focus on cultivating perceptual discrimination and visual clarity by engaging in close, critical looking out at nature and the relation of that to constructing a drawing or painting. We're asking ourselves exactly what we are seeing, how we are

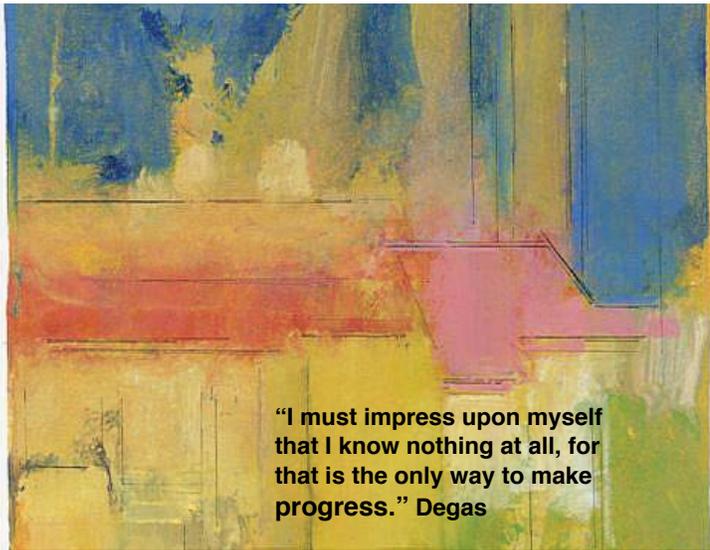
seeing, and then what to make of it on paper, panel or canvas.

The class is designed to push the mid range to advanced painter (alas, not for beginners) further into a kind of visual boot camp, each day a concentrated and comprehensive work schedule, but also fun and productive. Outside, not because there is any virtue necessarily to the outdoors in terms of "subject matter", but rather, with light and time moving, there is a heightened sense of urgency, a parenthetical compression between beginning and end that forces a kind of attack or posture of alertness within our state of mind.

In the tradition/spirit of "first strike" or alla prima, emphasis will be placed on 1) examining the processes of perceptual discrimination in front of nature; 2) the editorial response that follows in the head of the painter and how that takes form graphically; and perhaps most importantly, 3) on shaking up and/or questioning what is meant by "finish". We are more concerned here with conceptual clarity - using the brush and pencil - than with making anything "pretty", sale - able or "trophy" like. With painting, one never really gets a trophy anyway, it's always a work in progress.



Shils has been painting out of doors for 28 years including 13 summers on the Irish west coast and two in Umbria. Reviews have appeared in *The NY Times*, *The NY Sun*, *The Irish Times*, *Ha'aretz*, *The New Yorker*, *Art in America* and *American Artist*, among many others. He has been a visiting artist at VSC since 1999, artist in residence for the Landscapae Marathon at JSS and conducts workshops around this country including at Three Pines Studio in Michigan. His paintings are represented by steven harvey fine art projects in New York and the monotypes by Davis and Langdale in New York.



“I must impress upon myself that I know nothing at all, for that is the only way to make progress.” Degas

The Perceptual Moment: The Nature of Perception and The Perception of Nature

In addition to the daily outdoor sessions (8:30 – 5:00ish), on the evening before the first day there will be a 90-minute slide talk presenting paintings and drawings made by past and modern masters, to lay out a foundation of visual themes for the next three days. **(All participants should please attend, as it will be impossible to go over the same ground the next morning.)** Within those slides I'll discuss how, via graphic organization, how we look at/and or make sense of construction, how we develop paint and drawing language, and how different artists have used the processes of working outside (both directly and in the studio) to achieve *visual unity* in their responses.

On the second day, either at lunch or in the evening, there will be another slide talk describing the evolution of my own work and influences over the last 28 years. Please note: it is not my work per se that I'm interested in you seeing with any thought of “how to”. But, by describing a progression or sequence of experience, I'll discuss what I've done, what has been on my mind and how this relates to what we are doing outside, with the hope that it has some relevance to or resonance with your own questions and inquiry.

Also each day there will be a demonstration, and again, the point of those will not be to teach you how to make a painting that looks like a Stuart Shिल्s – that is hardly my intention and I discourage that approach. But rather, to discuss via demonstration, a cluster of concerns: 1) how to enter into the work and establish an immediate formal direction; 2) to suggest what is *perceptual unity* (as opposed to an inventory like description of objects) and to examine what is *editorial discrimination*; and last but not least, 3) to lay out an approach to the development of color on the palette and its relationship to the painting. Also, there will be two short chapter-like focuses on, 1) methods of and purposes of drawing in the sketch book in preparation for painting; and 2) color unity within the painting.

seeing and inventing structure. The division of the sketchbook page graphically is the foundation of the painting to follow. Strength of composition is always the bottom line.

Regardless of what we think we “know”, before nature each one of us is reminded how much there is still to do and how substantial one's muscles need to be in order to contend with the complexity of what we see and then with what we invent. of the perceptual moment.

Innovations:

Drawing and compositional strategy will be our focus for several hours on the morning of the first day, reinforcing and strengthening drawing skills, which are really perceptual motor skills. Without drawing there can be no painting - how the hand holds a pencil or crayon is how the hand holds the brush. And, the energy of drawing informs the energy of painting. Where and how the eye travels, both through nature and through and around the work being produced is dependent on a process of seeing and inventing structure. The division of the sketchbook page graphically is the foundation of the painting to follow. Strength of composition is always the bottom line.

During the morning of the second day we'll address the issue of color unity/color complexion as the other critical component of composition. Color is not a matter of just putting down colors. More important is nailing down a distinct chromatic mood, recognizing at once what a particular place consists of in terms of the large color chord. We'll make 15, 20 and 30 minute color studies directly from nature to understand what is out there in that moment and then how to hold that relationship together in the painting.

Regardless of what we think we “know”, before nature each one of us is reminded how much there is still to do and how substantial one's muscles need to be in order to contend with the complexity of what we see and then with what we invent. This class is designed to rationally/verbally examine a sensory read of the material world, the structure of the perceptual moment.

**Notes for participants in the
Shils Landscape
Master Class,
Three Pines, 2011**

Each morning I'll talk for a bit, examining major visual themes in relation to paintings and drawings and each day there will be a painting demonstration usually right after lunch. The point of the demonstrations will NOT be to teach you how to make a painting from start to finish (which you can get from any number of "how to" books, but not from me), nor to make one that looks like a Stuart Shils. But rather, to discuss and demonstrate perceptual craft as it relates to painting: 1) how to eliminate irrelevant distractions and think clearly about our approach to the visual encounter out of doors; 2) how to think conceptually, perceptually and technically about establishing a firm foundation and sense of order in the earliest stage of the painting; and 3) to consider the importance and place of drawing within the overall process of work. PLEASE be on time each morning (if not even a bit early) so that we can get started right away.

The evening before the first day I will offer a 90 minute slide talk (The Perceptual Moment: The Nature of Perception and the Perception of Nature), examining the work of other painters (both past and present), to establish a foundation of visual concerns with which we will be dealing over the next days.

With regard to specific individual needs, I will always do what I can – but obviously, this is a class, not a private tutorial. For individuals whose needs are enormous and deviate radically from the group, please remember the context, there is just not enough time, and this is a group project. However, I am there to work with each of you, and will ALWAYS respond to each participant in personal, particularized ways and address relevant issues as the work unfolds.

Paint Surfaces: what to paint on?

During the three days we'll paint on small ish to medium size panels, canvases, panels or prepared (gessoed) paper, trying to achieve some sort of *perceptual resolution* (resolution, as opposed to FINISH) in each sitting. We'll start a new painting each morning and each afternoon, pushing as far as possible for a "*premier coup*" as Edwin Dickinson called it (from the French), a "first strike" approach, or in Italian, *alla prima* (all at once). Maybe you will do more than one on some mornings/afternoons so please!, bring enough surfaces so as not to run out – better to have too many than too few. My own preference for working small and quickly is for a relatively smooth surface so that everything sits with clarity on the surface and the brush can move with ease. On the other hand, some people work beautifully on rough canvas – so ultimately it's very personal, and rough may have its own opportunities. (I love rough linen but one has to be able to load a mass of paint quickly to overcome the texture.) Bring a variety of sizes and shapes (both square and rectangular. *Not* just rectangular! A strong canvas bag with handles (like the sort available from LL Bean) is perfect for hauling panels and other material.

Attention: in addition, for the color exercises on the second day I want you to bring 10 - 15 pieces of gessoed paper between 8x 8 and 8 x 10 inches, roughly the size of a piece of copy paper so that we can work rapidly without feeling precious. Several coats of gesso on print or water color paper is fine. And, PUSH PINS or tape to attach them to a board of some kind while working.

Otherwise, your working surfaces must always be generous in size so that your brush has room to move rather than being miniaturized and cramped. For your standard surfaces, in size, *absolutely no less* than a sheet of copy paper and that's the smallest. But preferably slightly larger, so you have space to see what you're doing. I DON'T mean 30x 40 inches, which is really macho (unless you are very developed and can do that in one sitting) - but maybe things like (and they *certainly* do not have to be these sizes exactly): 11x13 or 14, 10x14, that sort of thing – whatever YOU can cover and work up comfortably in one session. But NOT tiny and precious.

If you want to work on smooth gessoed linen (which I highly recommend), the canvas need NOT be formally stretched. Stapled or tacked to plywood or homosote is just fine. If it's plywood you're tacking to, a coat of shellac (that has had plenty of time to dry) keeps the wood well sealed.

Brushes: Please *DO NOT* bring *TINY LITTLE* brushes. In order to load paint generously you need good sized, strong tools, capable of moving the stuff around – *not* the kind of brush a Chinese drawing master in the 18th century would have used to paint a mouse whisker. *Always think about your brush size in relation to the paint surface size.* Whatever kind of brush you are comfortable with (hog hair, nylon bristle, filbert, round, etc.), bring them, but please make sure they are not all #4's. I like the relatively cheap white nylon rounds with longish hairs, they load paint much differently than flats or filberts, but for large areas hog hair flats and filberts work well. Get to know what each brush will do.

If you are using smooth surfaces, the blonde hog hair stiff brushes do not work well, they are for canvas. Try instead cheap white nylon hairs, available almost everywhere. Rounds are very diverse in how they can be used to draw, much more so than square heads.

Paint: I'm NOT concerned with particular brands (you do *NOT* need Williamsburg or Old Holland to paint well), but you may want to have a useful selection/range of earth colors and prismatic: an Earth Red (that could be Venetian Red, Indian Red, Pozzuoli Earth); a Quinacridone Red; and maybe a Permanent Red; Raw Sienna; Yellow Ochre; Yellow Ochre Pale, Indian Yellow (preferably Winsor and Newton); Permanent Yellow; Hansa Yellow medium and Hansa Yellow light; Viridian; Cobalt Blue; Ultramarine; Cerulean Blue (*not* Cerulean Blue Hue which is a cheap version of real Cerulean); and Ivory Black. I always prefer *not* too many greens already in the tube – better to follow Cezanne's example – several yellows and several blues and learn to mix them up on the battlefield of the palette. Right now, I use Viridian only in the summer, and generally no other greens.

Please, absolutely, no Burnt Umber or Raw Umber – they are both mixed from processed dog turd. (In watercolor however, Raw Umber is a beautiful color.)

As for White, we all may have our favorites and preferences, and please bring them if you do. I recommend *Permalba White* (made by Weber and Co., and available from every catalog nationally) – a superb white – flexible, non-yellowing, and non-toxic. It can also be mixed effectively with other things like Gamblin's Flake White Replacement White (FWR), also HIGHLY recommended. Mix it with Permalba and that should go a long way.

The Palette:

I suggest the largest palette possible because you need room to make a mess and mix paint. At any hardware store you can buy ¼ inch plexiglass, in opaque white or put two coats of gesso on the underside and paint on the top. Have it cut so that it fills the drawer of your easel from top to bottom and the plexi usually come 23 or 24 inches wide, which is a good size. Bring a c clamp in case there is wind.

Drawing: I encourage you to bring a sketchbook and some pencils or ink, whatever you are comfortable with for thinking visually on paper. How can the painter think if not graphically? Drawing before painting is a useful way to chart a course, establish a map/plan, plot out direction, intention and possibility. I will talk about drawing each day and show a variety of reproductions. A sketchbook should be part of your luggage or supplies wherever/whenever you go – for making notes, observations and visual ruminations of all sorts. We should learn to think, reflect, dream and travel with pencil, brush, or stick of charcoal or pastel, whatever, in hand. Get some graphite pencils: 3B, 4B, 5B, 7B, 8B and a few erasers, maybe the rectangular pink ones.

On day three we are going to focus on drawing so please bring at least once sketch book, again, the size of a piece of copy paper or slightly larger or smaller is fine as well, not 18 x 24 inches.

Solvent:

For working outside, standard 100% mineral spirits will be fine, odor will not be an issue if we are outside. You can bring a glass bottle (a wine bottle with cork) to

pour it into at the end of each session - the sediment will settle and it can be poured off and used again in a few days. Don't forget a *funnel*.

(For inside, ALWAYS use Gamsol, it really kills your brain less than other stuff.)

Brush cup: You need a decent sized brush cup for cleaning the brushes – not one of those tiny little palette clip on cups. Jerrys or any other distributor carries a silver colored brush cup with the insert that has holes in it so that the sediment goes down to the bottom. You don't need the giant size outside. But get a good one, usually about \$30.00 ish dollars, and they last for many years. Unbreakable.

Gloves: I always carry a box of disposable surgical type gloves (also available at hardware stores) – vinyl NOT latex - latex is permeable when solvent is involved. Protection of the hands and skin (and I'm not thinking cosmetically) is a personal issue, but, I always recommend wearing thin vinyl gloves to paint, no one needs unnecessary exposure to solvents or to the toxicity of some pigments. An invisible glove cream like Winsor and Newton's "Artguard" is also a possibility.

I use a glove available from **Grainger Hardware** (they have a website with an 800 number and you can call them directly, they deliver promptly via UPS. They offer a very fine and tough green glove made of nitrile (will last MUCH longer than what you get in the paint dept of a hardware store). I use a size medium, without powder. If you have small hands get small. You want a tight fit. They are about \$15 or \$17 a box of 100 and well worth it. **Item number: 4GC49.** Touch N Tuff, Powder Free Nitrile Gloves.

Easel: You will of course need some kind of easel to hold your work in place - while a French landscape easel is convenient and practical, whatever you normally use outside will be fine. And remember a folding chair if you sit down to work, which I do.

A FOLDING CHAIR OR STRONG PAINTING STOOL IF YOU LIKE TO SIT.

Paper Towels: Essential to the painter - my long-standing favorite is *Bounty Microwave* – they're 100% cotton and each towel goes a long way. Almost everything else is junk next to Bounty – if

you cannot find the Microwave, anything Bounty makes will be OK, and the price is worth it.

Misc: Don't forget to bring *plastic bags* to put used towels and trash in – I use the ones from the supermarket trips or the sort that the Sunday paper comes in.

A **broad brimmed hat** is desirable to keep the sun out of your eyes and minimize strain; sunscreen!!, and don't forget all the other accouterments of outdoor painting. A fingernail brush or **hand scrubber** is good for washing up.

Mediums: I can talk about oil(s) when we meet. Please bring whatever kind you're most comfortable with – cold pressed linseed, stand oil, etc. There will not really be time for experimentation with mediums, but I can attempt to answer any questions you may have. Basically though, the whole issue may be irrelevant for our purposes. Much of it is hocus focus.

Books: For inspiring reading one cannot go wrong with,

- 1) *The Art Spirit* by Robert Henri,
 - 2) *Van Gogh's Letters* (to his bother),
 - 3) Hawthorne on Painting. All are easily available in paperback and should be part of your essential art library at home and on the road – these are really fine books, like reading poetry.
- Also, 4) Jack Flam's, *Matisse on Art* is very good as well. A collection of Matisse's thoughts, lectures, letters, etc.

Please feel free to contact me if there are any specific questions

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