



Kristy Gordon

Atmospheric Effects in a Complex Composition

Kristy Gordon shares how juxtaposing elements creates a dynamic and complex painting



In this article I will discuss how to achieve bold, eye-catching atmospheric effects in a complex composition. I carefully orchestrate the painting to have a few select areas of sharp edges amid the softer, hazy ones along with some bright colors and high-contrast areas within the limited tonal range. Juxtaposing these elements with subdued colors gives the painting as much punch as a bold, high-contrast complex painting.

I begin with compositional sketches, selecting a horizontal composition because I like the way the space in front of the figure leaves room for the eye to drift forward. In this way I use the composition and technical aspects of the painting to embody its thematic narrative of going

Descension, oil on linen,
24 x 20" (61 x 51 cm)

Another painting full of questions is *Descension*. Here, I am walking out of the painting with an ambiguous expression. This movement away from the frame leaves space for thought, allowing the observer to build their own idea of my transformation in this moment.


Passing Through II, oil on canvas,
96 x 54" (244 x 137 cm)

Painted soon after I moved to New York, *Passing Through II* represents the beginning of my exploration of the fleeting and transitory. My face is reflected on the glass doorway of my building, blending my concrete, physical self with the ephemeral sensation the city gave me as I questioned my permanence within it.

into the unknown and being pulled toward the next step.

Compositionally I use the arrangement of lights, darks, and mid-tones to express my intentions for the painting. Framed by the darkest values at the right, the lights point the way like an arrow and disappear into the mass of mid-tones at the left—the unknown, which the figure enters.

To achieve the atmospheric effect of fog, I build up passages of brighter colors obscured by subtle layers scumbled on top. Building up layers of paint allows me to create the illusion of peering through the fog. I create what are called "optical cools" by working on a warm base and using opaque, neutral colored paint. I scumble on the neutral colors, dabbing it with my fingers to make it more translucent and creating wonderful, pearlescent optical cools.

To achieve the effect of mist I keep the tonal range more limited in the areas within the fog and keep the edges softer. 



my art in the making **A Forward Pull**

Values and Hues

I create optical cools by working on a warm ground. Using a neutral color of paint that is not mixed with any thinner and applying it by scumbling. The results are magical—beautiful, pearlescent, optically-



created cools perfectly harmonized with the color scheme.

I design a composition that has the darkest values, the mid-tones and the lightest values somewhat grouped together, with the area of highest contrast near the center of interest.

Inside the mist I use softer edges and more subdued tonal range.

I contrast the mist with areas outside the fog that have sharp edges and darker values.

Establishing the brightest hues first allows me to knock them back by subduing them with translucent layers of paint, reproducing the effect of our eyes seeing through the fog.

Compositional Sketch

I begin by doing a few composition sketches with graphite on paper. At this stage I work out the composition, establishing direction and flow with light and diagonals. I tonally compose the picture by having the area of highest contrast frame the figure. Mapping out the lightest, darkest and mid-tone values, I orchestrate the painting to lead the viewer's eyes directly to the figure.

WHAT THE ARTIST USED

Oils

- » Titanium white
- » Yellow ochre
- » Lemon yellow
- » Cadmium yellow
- » Cadmium orange
- » Cadmium red middle
- » Alizarin permanent
- » Transparent red oxide
- » Burnt umber
- » Cadmium green
- » Viridian
- » Phthalo blue (green shade)
- » Cobalt blue
- » Ultramarine blue
- » Mars black

Canvas

- » Primed with several layers of gesso, sanded between layers



STAGE 1 BLOCK IN WITH WHITE CHALK

I prepare the canvas with a warm, mid-toned ground using burnt sienna, yellow ochre, and titanium white then sketch out the rough composition with white chalk. I pay particular attention to the placement of the key areas of interest, such as the figure and the lights, and consider the movement around the canvas. To make corrections I use a wet rag to wipe off the chalk.

STAGE 2 UNDERPAINTING

Next I block in the drawing with transparent red oxide and ultramarine blue, leaving some areas of the white chalk to show through in the brightest lights. This helps me to better visualize the placement of the lightest, darkest and mid-tone values. At this stage I make sure the spacing of the lights is varied and the placement of the figure on the canvas is pleasing. I also work out the perspective at this stage by having the buildings recede toward the two vanishing points to either side of the canvas. If I need to make corrections after the paint dries, I use sandpaper to remove a layer of oil paint and reveal the lighter warm ground beneath.



STAGE 3 BEGIN COLOR BLOCK IN

Moving to color, I block in the brightest lights and the larger color areas, letting much of the underpainting show through. Since I want the lights in this painting to glow through the mist, I begin by overstating the color vibrancy in the lights, knowing that it will get toned down as I scumble layers of mist over it in future stages.

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STAGE 4 ESTABLISH VALUES AND HUES

I complete the block in of the main overall colors, leaving the details for later. By establishing the values and hues for painting, I begin to see the overall composition and effect emerge from the canvas.

Jellyfish, oil on canvas, 48 x 60" (122 x 152 cm)

Many of my paintings investigate the sensation of moving through the unknown, such as this painting *Jellyfish*. It explores the idea of remaining buoyant through transitional periods and depicts creatures that create their own light. It embodies the idea that one must create their own light to stay positive through these in limbo periods.



STAGE 5 DEVELOP THE EDGES

With the brightest lights of the signs and windows blocked in, I begin refining them by softening their edges in places and sharpening in others. Keeping the edges softer toward the left where the mist is thick, and contrasting that with sharper edges to the right and around the figure enhances the atmospheric effect. I also begin blocking in details such as the metal grate at the bottom right.



STAGE 6 BRINGING OUT THE LIGHTS

The lights are refined by brightening them in the center and dappling the color out to blend into the mist. I also fine-tune the shape of the mist, paying attention to the varying colors it takes on in different areas. To further the impression of light coming through the fog I add a translucent blue glow around the white windows. I bring out a bit more contrast around the figure to ensure that the eye is still primarily drawn to her and refine the details like the signs and the grate.

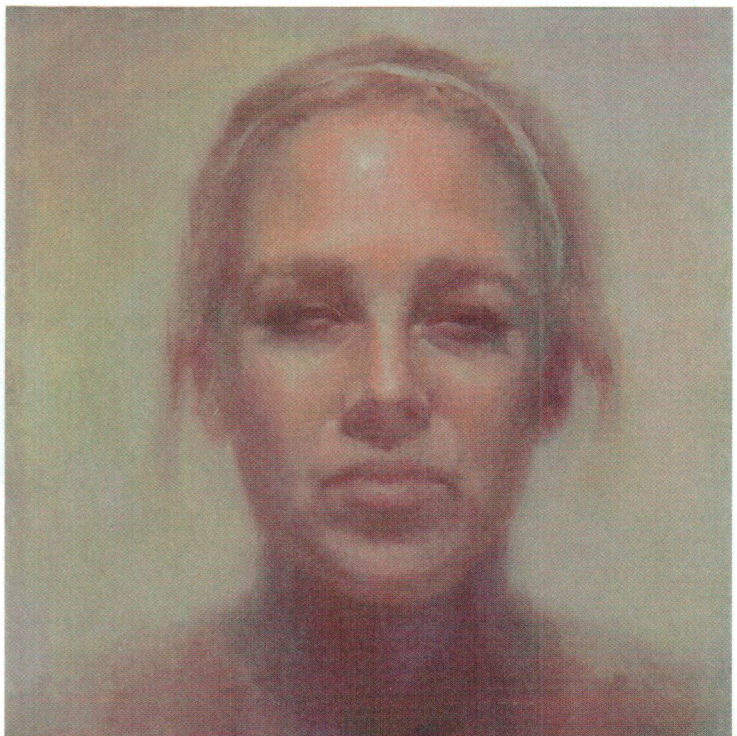
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STAGE 7 THE FINAL PAINTING
A Forward Pull, oil on canvas, 45 x 65" (114 x 165 cm)

Seeing Myself Through the Fog of Misperception,
oil on linen, 12 x 12" (30 x 30 cm)

This self-portrait, which was a finalist for the \$20,000 Kingston Prize for Canadian Portraiture, was done in a mirror using an extremely limited palette consisting of only titanium white, yellow ochre, cadmium red middle, and Mars black. I premixed these colors to provide a full range of color, but I kept them all in a lighter tonal range. The darkest thing on my palette was red and gray, which I used sparingly, mostly around the eyes, to achieve the impression of seeing through fog.



*Collective
Consciousness,*
oil on panel, 20 x 20"
(51 x 51 cm)

This painting was inspired by regular walks in Central Park and the sense of community I feel with those around me. In this painting I move my focus from the individual to the collective, utilizing water to symbolize the subconscious and interconnectedness.



ABOUT THE ARTIST

Kristy Gordon's work is a frank and intimate reflection of her curiosity about other people, transformations and self-discovery. She has been a full-time, professional painter since 2004, exhibiting her work internationally and earning numerous awards including the Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation Grant, an Award of Excellence from the Portrait Society of America, and being a finalist for the 2013 Kingston Prize for Canadian portraiture. She has been widely featured in numerous magazines,

art publications, and radio and television shows. Her paintings hang in more than 500 collections worldwide including the Government of Ontario Art Collection.

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Represented by:

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