NEW ERA

SC 2019

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QUARANTINE EVENTS EBOOKS

FREE EBOOK

SEAN CHEETHAM

By CARLES GOMILA

QUARANTINE EVENTS



It's owl good!

This book is free.

Give it away to an Art Geek.

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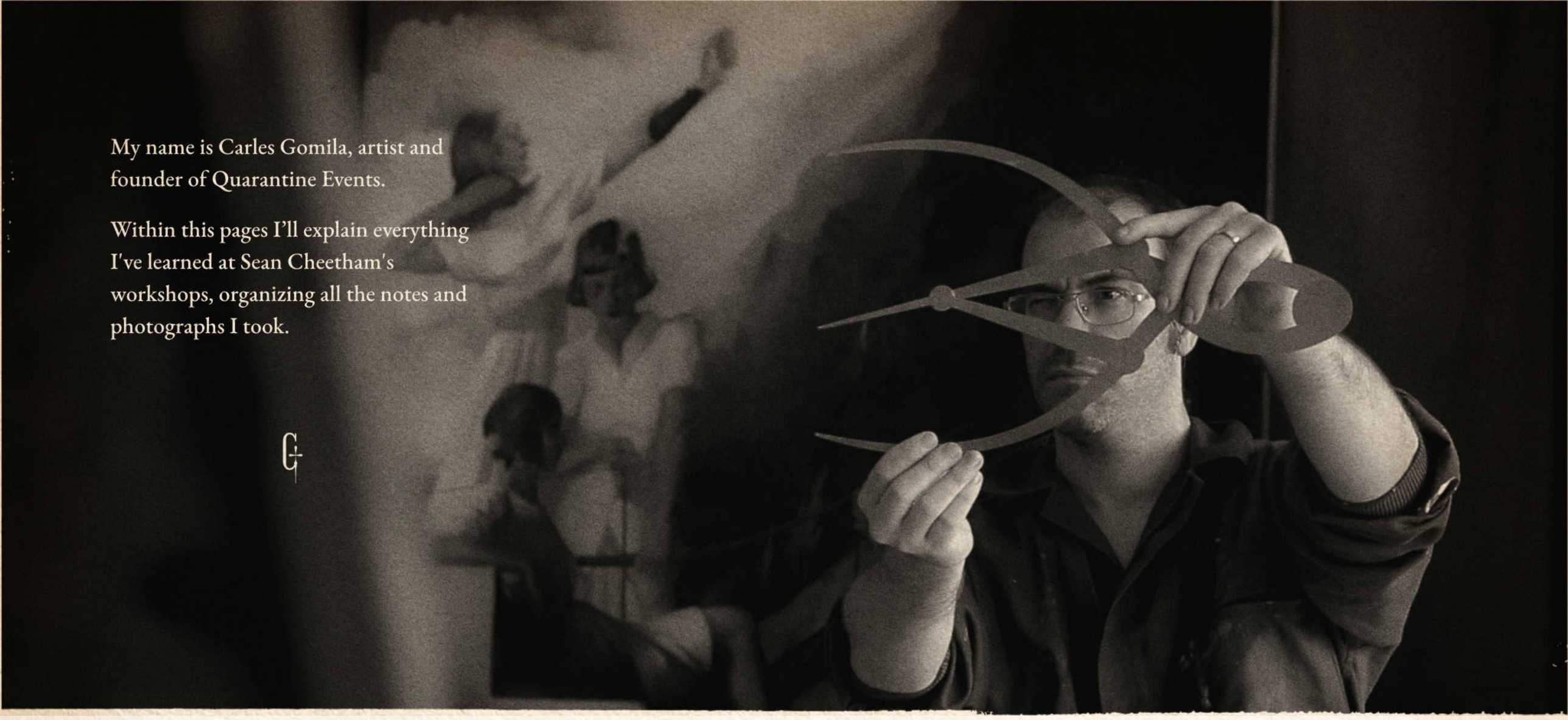
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Why have I writtem this book?

I admit that I may be giving you the perfect excuse not to travel to a lost island in the midst of the Mediterranean Sea to study with Sean Cheetham in person. But you have no excuse for not learning: here I explain everything, and for free†.

This is the book I wish I came across when I started painting, in the hard times when I was disoriented and without a penny in my pocket. I know now a book like this would have helped. .. It arrived late for me, but maybe not for you.

We may not get to know each other personally, but at least I want to give myself the pleasure of putting this knowledge in your hand. I hope you find it useful and share it with others you know who will take advantage of it. Cheers!

---

† We try to produce a book a year, in addition to several interviews and resources. **We do it this way because we don't like advertising and we believe that this way you'll get the good vibes we put into this project**. We think it's better to focus our resources on making good books rather than swimming in the sea of social media and Google for your attention.



Who are we?

Hi.

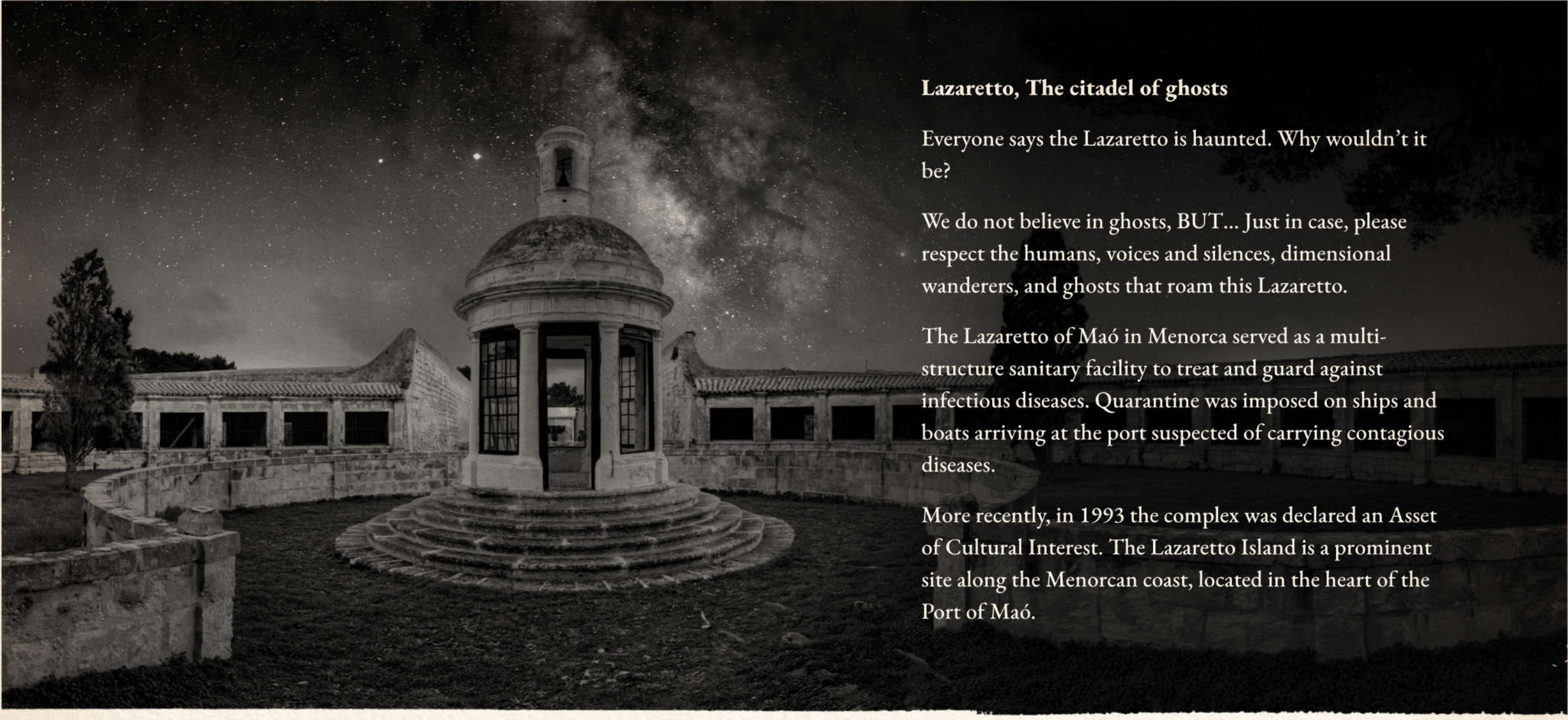
We are an indie organization mentoring artists on a real quarantine island in Menorca. We're a small company and we think being small is a good thing.

We are neither venerable nor respectable, but we do believe in what we do. Quarantine is not just another formula for filling seats and milking money. We are here to enjoy the experience WITH you, not AT you.

On Lazaretto, an 18th-century quarantine island in the middle of Maó port, we provide a challenging and thought-provoking environment for artists to ponder their next pieces and find refuge and direction.

We believe in core principles and ethical values like peace, love, respect, freedom, harmony and diversity, but also hedonism.

Learn more about us here.



Lazaretto, The citadel of ghosts

Everyone says the Lazaretto is haunted. Why wouldn't it be?

We do not believe in ghosts, BUT... Just in case, please respect the humans, voices and silences, dimensional wanderers, and ghosts that roam this Lazaretto.

The Lazaretto of Maó in Menorca served as a multi-structure sanitary facility to treat and guard against infectious diseases. Quarantine was imposed on ships and boats arriving at the port suspected of carrying contagious diseases.

More recently, in 1993 the complex was declared an Asset of Cultural Interest. The Lazaretto Island is a prominent site along the Menorcan coast, located in the heart of the Port of Maó.

Quaramtime

Purgatory for Artists.

What if I told you there was a private island, led by artists, in the very heart of the Mediterranean? With no cell phones whatsoever and even a bit of free beer?

Quarantine is an Art experiment run by leading artists in Menorca, Spain. We are a community of artists, art lovers, and open-minded humans.

We offer what the academic education, due to its very nature and purpose, cannot provide: progress as an artist, not as an art student.

Art, not unlike any intimate pursuit, must be experienced to be understood.

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† If you want to learn more about Quarantine, check out our website: quarantinementorca.events

† You can also download a PDF manual with all the information about **Quarantine Events** by clicking here.

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY OF MENORCA

EYES ONLY
TOP SECRET

Dr. C. Gomila
Dra. I. Lecea

11 Aug 1977

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QUARANTINE

MENORCA SECRET RESEARCH

Spanish Department of Art

SUBJECT

MASTER #19
SEAN THOMAS CHEETHAM
>FASTEST ARTIST ON EARTH
>GOD LEVEL TEACHER
>KNIFE MASTER

QUARANTINE

CONFIDENTIAL

CLASSIFIED INFORMATION
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OCCUPATION:
Painter.
Illustrator
Teacher.
Knifemaker.
Tattoo artist.

ABILITIES:
Hockey.
Electric guitar.
Whip.

OTHER INTERESTS:
Magnum PI.
Star Wars.
Cowboy wannabe.
[redacted]

. . . . . .

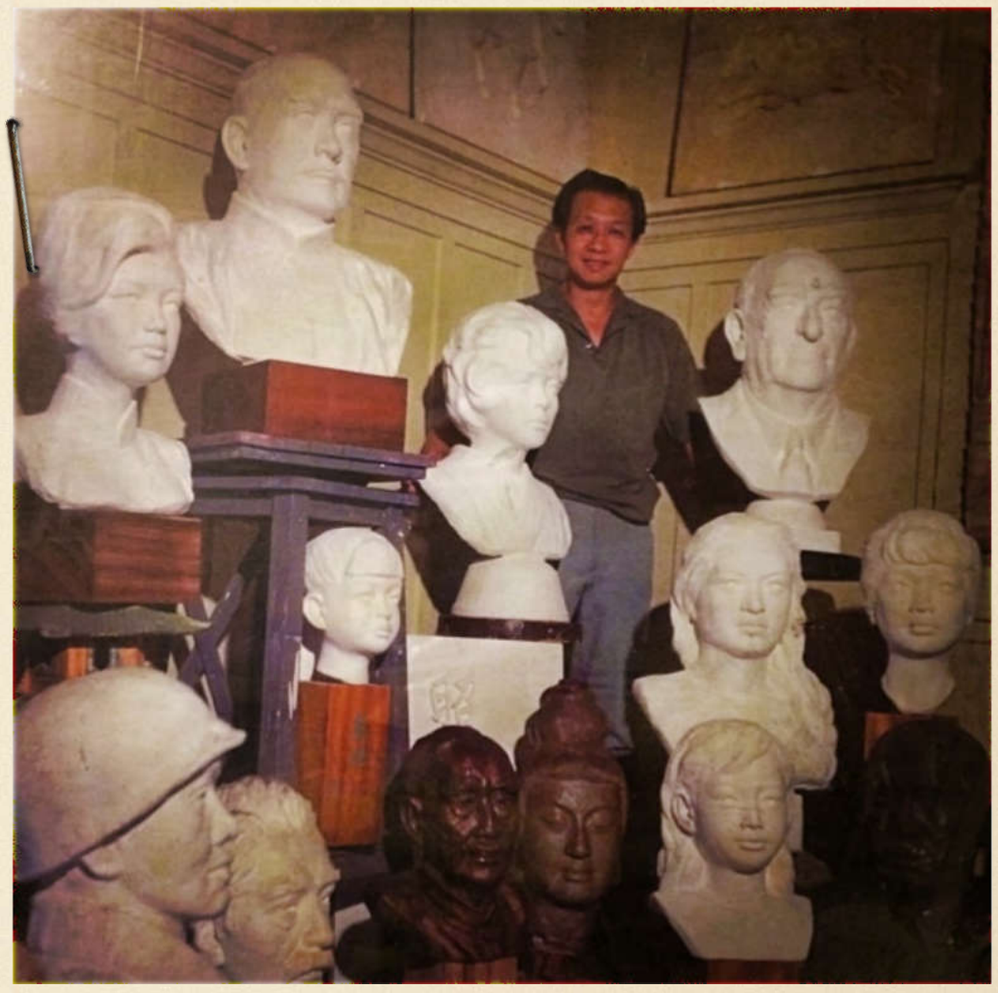
Unlike most "paint bosses" who taught at Menorca Pulsar, Sean Cheetham does not paint every day. For him, it works better to alternate between different activities, creating great stuff at each of them.

Sean Cheetham is a simple guy who likes to play hockey, Magnum PI, Star Wars, playing guitar, shaking whips and forging knives. By the way, he can paint an entire exhibition as well as illustrate a publication, or make a tattoo... And the damn bastard (no offense, we love you, Sean, though we're green with envy) can overcome the "unfocused syndrome" and do it all reasonably well, or very well, even incredibly well.

As he says -and he doesn't joke- "...it seems that resting makes me no good."

And, what's best for us: to top it all, he's an amazing teacher. One who works his ass off because he loves what he does, who is generous and has no secrets for anyone. One of those formidable creatures in danger of extinction. A teacher with whom you want to have a beer after washing the brushes.

4.8.15.16.23.42
SEAN THOMAS CHEETHAM
PERSONAL ARCHIVE
>ORIGINS



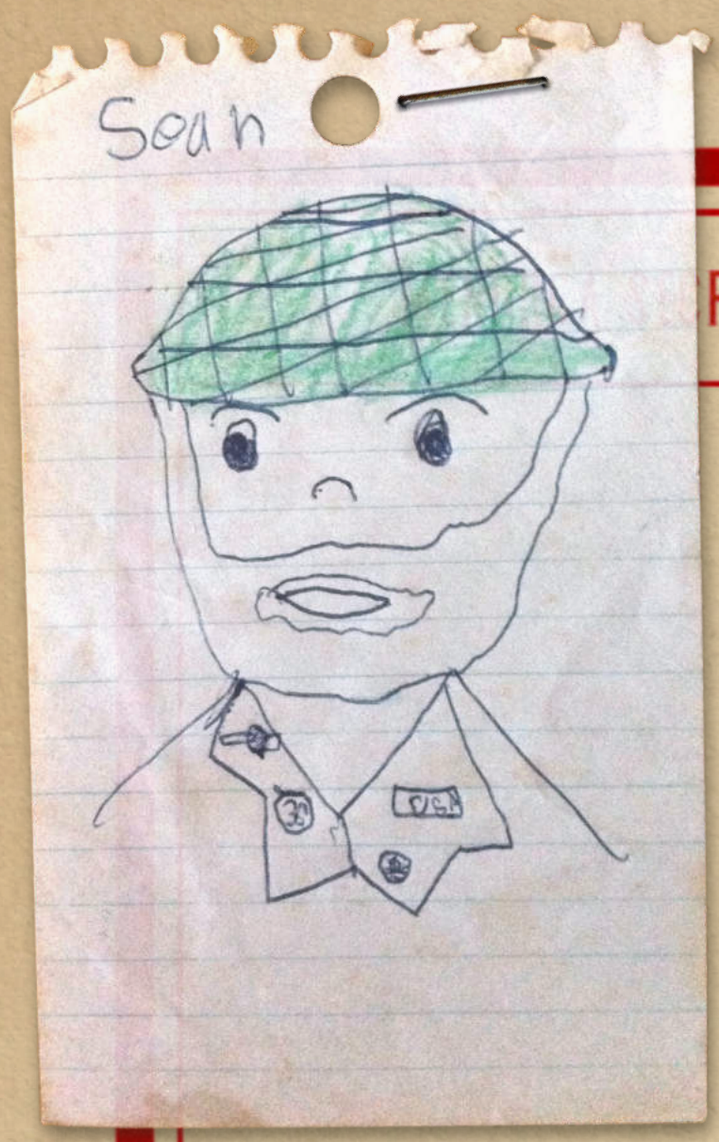
This is Sean Cheetham's grandfather, who was a sculptor, surrounded by sculptures for the Chinese government.

Sean believes that he has a certain natural inclination towards Art, although he admits that natural talent is only a seed that we must look after so that something can sprout from it.

He believes, above it all, in hard work.



His grandmother also had a clear inclination towards Art. As you can see by this self-portrait.





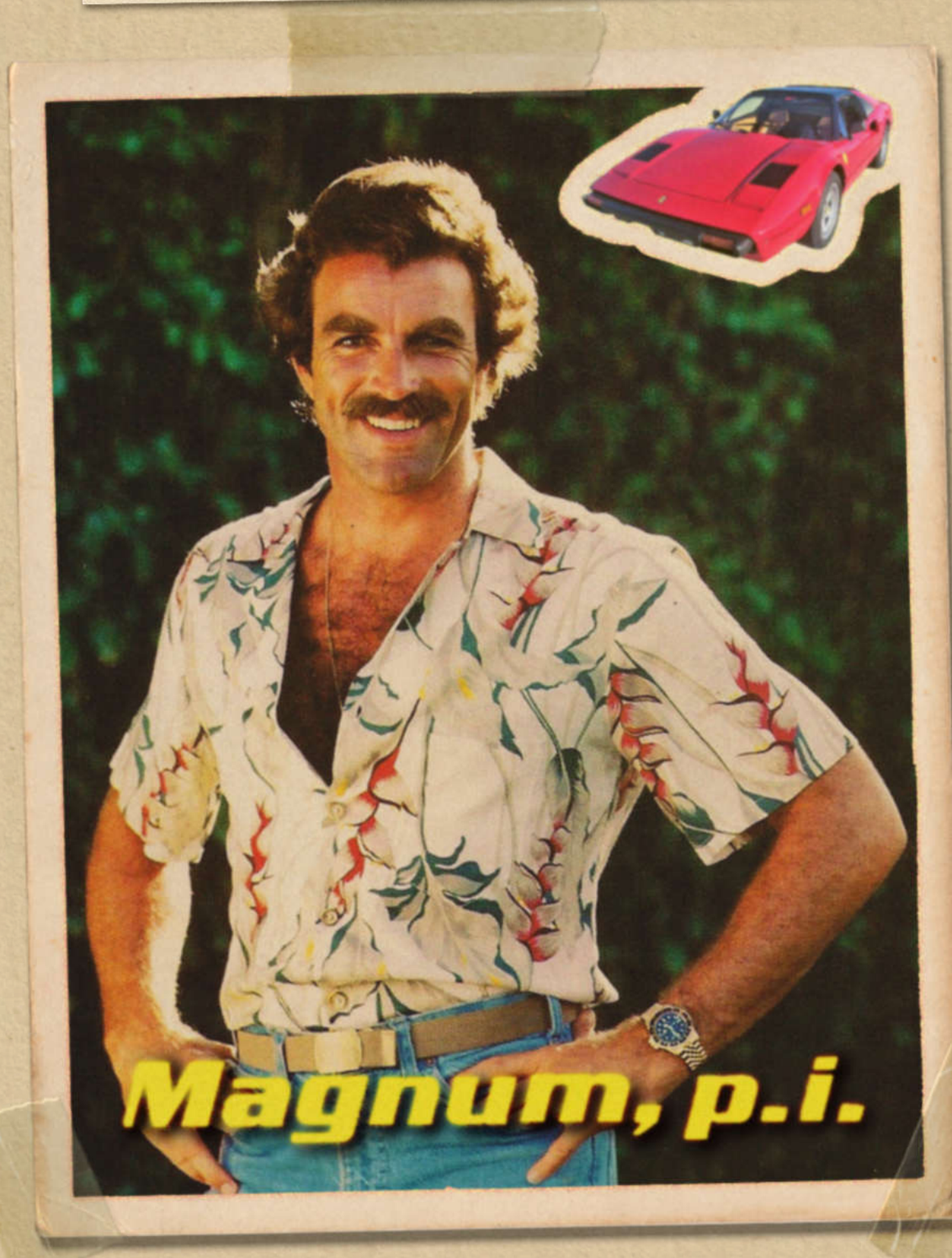
SPANISH DEPARTMENT OF ART

When he was a kid he didn't think of Art as a professional career, and he dreamed about being an astronaut or a cowboy. Something that sounded cool.

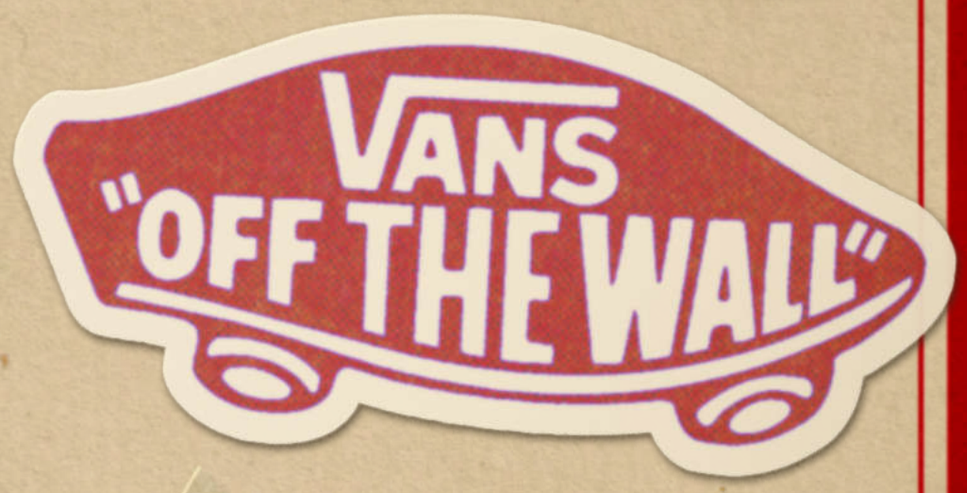
One of his dreams was being a firefighter; it's weird, all the firemen he drew always smoked.

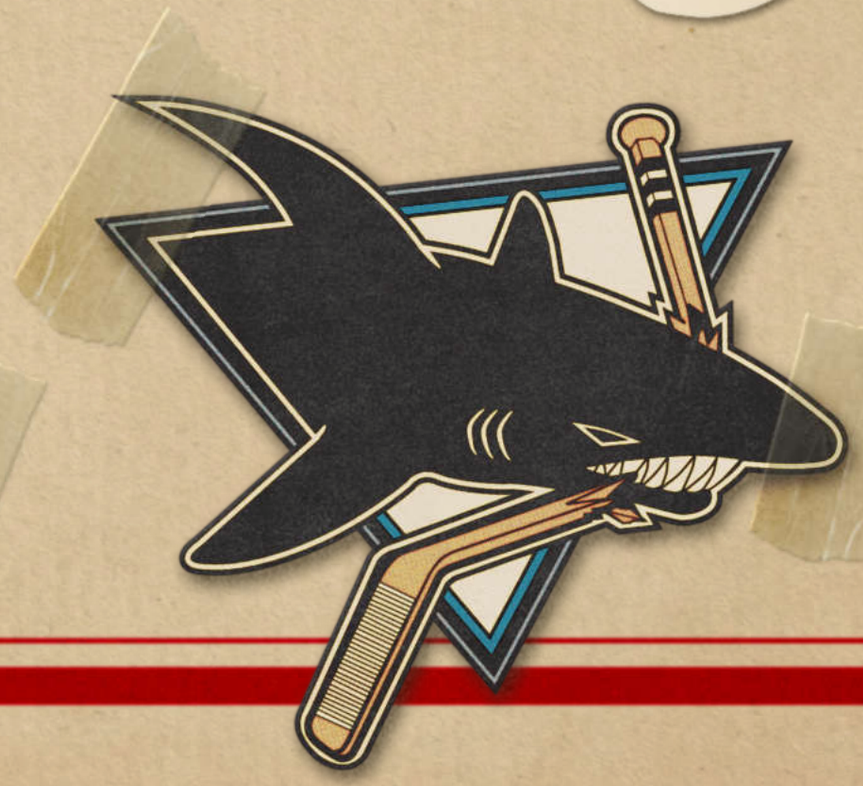
He was about four or five years old when he made these drawings.

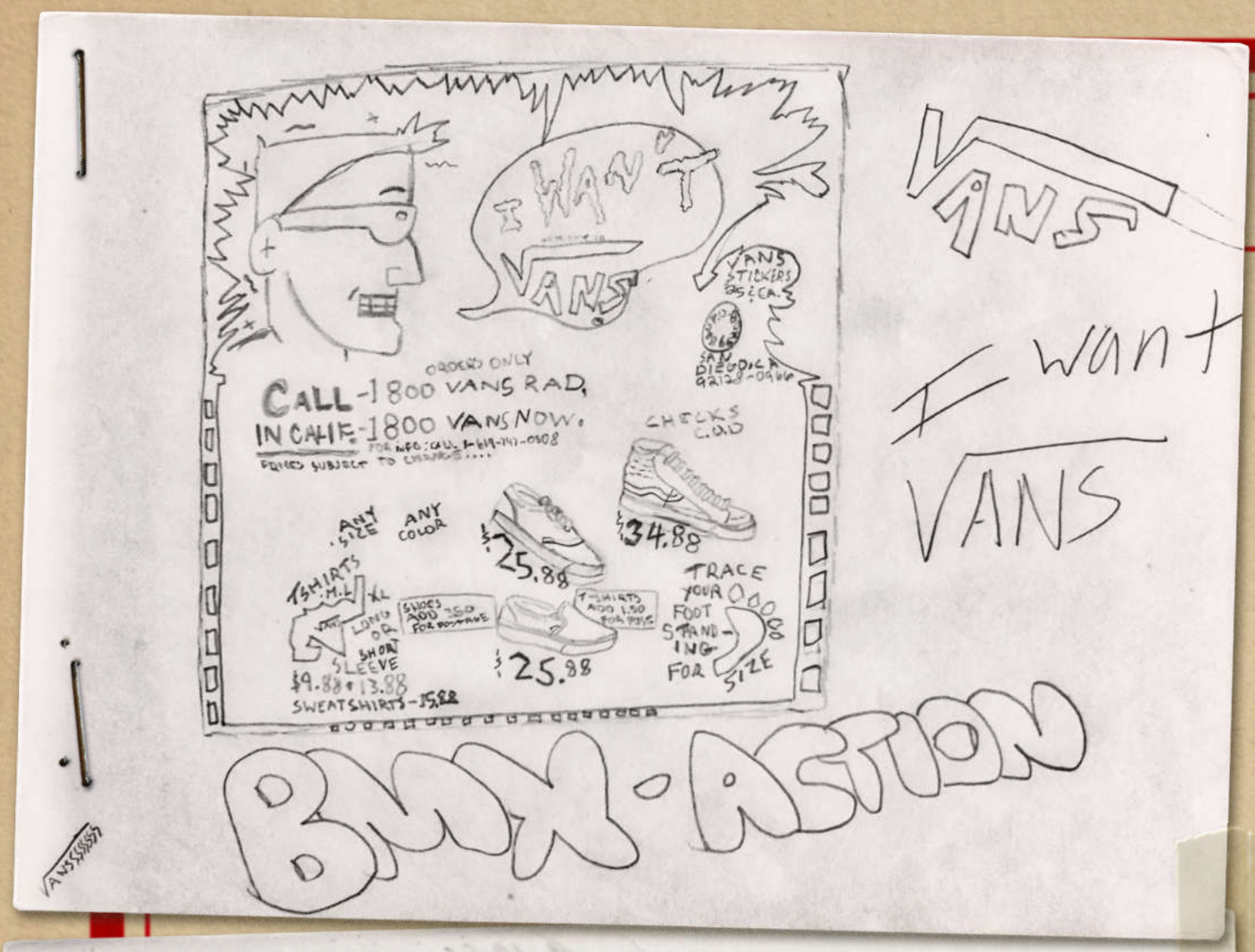
SEAN THOMAS CHEETHAM
PERSONAL ARCHIVE
>EARLY DRAWINGS
>INFLUENCES











VANS
I want
VANS





SPANISH DEPARTMENT OF ART

As a child, he copied the ads from skate magazines.

Today he still wears Vans and remembers with nostalgia when they only cost $25.

He also loved motorcycles. Same as now.

Things have not changed much ever since, and he still works on the same things that fascinated him as a kid.

He also did many drawings related to surfing.

He was about seven years old when he did this drawing.

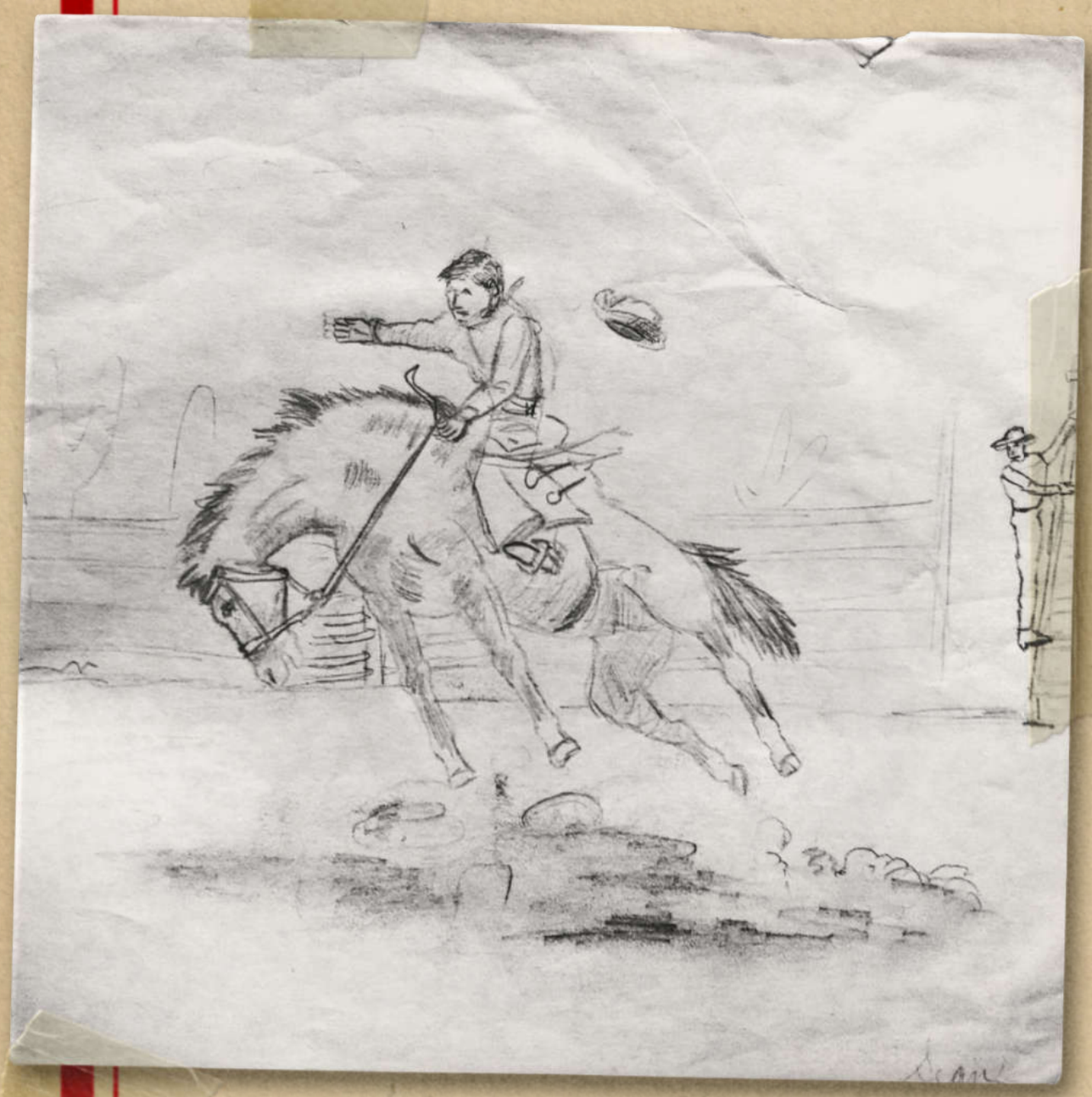


SPANISH DEPARTMENT OF ART

These are his parents lying in bed.

Here he was already trying to be realistic and introduced foreshortening. He didn't learn perspective in school, but he drew in perspective naturally from a very young age.

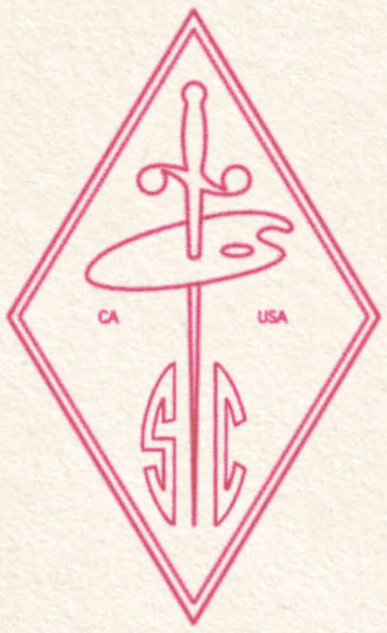
His love for cowboys was very premature, and his entire artistic career is imbued with a fascination with Western motifs. Something that has not changed over time.



This drawing is a testimony of when the 'Sharks' came to town. It's a good attempt at drawing realistically, but the legs fell short when trying to fit them on the page. "The usual mistake," Sean jokes.



Sean Cheetham



Training and illustration

Sean grew up in a family of artists of Chinese origin, and his youth was impregnated with the Art craft. His main goal was to work in Star Wars, a desire that grew bigger when, as a teenager, he crossed paths with Erik Tiemens. Although he says he did not understand very well what he was doing at that time.

In 1998 he began studying in San Francisco, where he came into contact with some incredible professors, both from the publishing and illustration fields, as well as from realism. Every kid is wowed by realism, and at that moment he began to draw and paint the human figure.

He considered illustration as a professional career, but when he finished his studies he decided that he preferred to alternate teaching with art galleries. Sean admits he was lucky, since he was in the right place, at the right time and with the right portfolio.

He spent a few years teaching full time. But recently he has decreased his classes to focus on short intense workshops, collectors' commissions and galleries. In addition to developing his hobbies, which are not few: forging knives, tattoo, guitar, and hockey.

His influences were what you would expect from any kid interested in painting: Sargent, Zorn, Sorolla, Velázquez, Rembrandt, etc. But also the classic American illustration: Dean Cornwell, Harvey Dunn, Howard Pyle, NC Wyeth, Leyendecker, etc.

His evolution has been more thematic than technical. Nowadays he's interested in the Western scene, and how to integrate his main activity outside of painting, which is forging knives.



This was his first serious attempt to gain a portfolio that would help him to enter the illustration sector.

«You can tell here that I was starting to party too much», Sean jokes.

The portfolio was inspired by the aesthetics of tattoos and the rockabilly genre. Although he had no goal at this point, the urban club culture was very inspiring.

The illustration is made in acrylic and he managed to sell it, which gave him some hope and expectations of being able to work in the sector.



When he was at Community College, he still did not think about devoting himself to art, at that age he didn't care very much about anything.

He was seventeen or eighteen when he did this watercolor, during the first semester. His teacher was an old glory coming from the photo-realistic 70's generation, James Torlakson.



Sean loved working on the details of complicated scenes, with buildings and cars. This is a watercolor of the neighborhood where he grew up. Although it was only a plotting exercise from photographs, Sean admits that it was very inspiring and a very useful exercise to learn illustration techniques and getting a steady hand.

This is a current photograph of the location from where Sean got the inspiration to paint the previous watercolor.

Jonny Nipon's is gone, but it hasn't changed that much, right?



Life study made with a ballpoint pen and white chalk.

He made this drawing during the first semester of human figure drawing at the Art Center.

Sean remembers this model with love.



1.



2.



1. Another illustration made at the Art Center. Sean remembers that computers were not used then and that everything was analog. He says sorry for the proportions.

2. Illustration of Judge Judy (*Judge Judy*, American television series that debuted in 1997 and is still ongoing). He does not remember what project this illustration was part of, nor the reason he did it. He never sold it and gave it to his grandmother, who loved the series.

One day, Sean saw his mother's cousin's boyfriend painting a *Plein-air* landscape. That guy was none other than Erik Tiemens, the famous illustrator. He loved the job he did, although at the time he admits that he still didn't quite understand how he did it.

His biggest dream at twenty was to participate in the production of Star Wars, and at that time Tiemens was working there. Seeing him paint inspired him to study art because he also wanted to be an artist and work in the entertainment sector. The proximity of that possibility fascinated him during his adolescence and was his main inspiration.

Then he decided that he wanted to devote himself to illustration to have the opportunity to work on Star Wars, or similar projects. He wanted to be part of an illustration department for some cool projects.

He never worked on Star Wars[1]. But, years later, he painted a commission for Carrie Fisher's daughter. When he went to meet her she welcomed him with a lightsaber, and that was the most surreal situation he has seen in his artistic career: Princess Leia welcoming him at home, waving a lightsaber. It was worth studying art just to see that.

---

1. He might not get to work directly on Star Wars, but he managed to get George Lucas himself to choose him to participate in his Star Wars Visions book.





This is one of his first designs, after finishing his studies, for some t-shirts.

He barely had any knowledge of Photoshop (he had only attended one class), and he managed to find out how it worked how it is used to work on the finishes.

Already in his beginnings, he decided to develop an artistic career working with art galleries, while teaching at the LA Academy of Figurative Arts.



Another illustration from the same time, of which he only keeps an old print in his studio. Those stains you see are *Gamsol*.

He did it with red and black ballpoint pens on white bristol paper. Then he fixed the drawing and painted on it. What he did with the red ballpoint pen is what also looks blue now, because he covered it with electric blue.

It took him a week to do it and he was paid $250, so it didn't go very well. But he learned to handle the tools and the damn Photoshop.

Michael Hussar

At school, he met Michael Hussar as a teacher, who taught him the basics of painting and opened his eyes and heart to oil painting.

Sean learned his system from Michael, with subtle variations. It’s a very common procedure in the world of illustration: fast, efficient and straight to the point.

On the right you can see a fragment of an *alla prima* portrait by Michael Hussar, that looks amazing.



In 2007, he played hockey on Thursday nights with a handful of guys who worked at the animation departments of Dreamworks, Disney, and The Simpsons. A colleague from Dreamworks moved to Canada to work at a video game company, and from there Sean got some character illustration commissions for Final Fantasy.

The guys from Final Fantasy had seen his paintings and wanted to try more naturalistic illustrations, away from the Japanese style; in fact, it was the first time they designed something for this game outside of Japan.

So through hockey, he got the first jobs for the video game industry. He started working on it in Los Angeles under NDA contracts, designing characters at the art department.



To make this illustration, Sean dressed a model in a cape made from a piece of imitation leather, which he shaped with cardboard.

They needed it super fast and in high resolution, so he worked small size to go fast and fit in his scanner. Its size allowed it to retain the boldness of the brushstroke, something that would have been lost in a larger size.

Execution sequence:

1. Photographic session and composition in Photoshop.
2. Pencil tracing and acrylic pre-paint (gentle washes).
3. He painted his face in an hour, in a class demonstration.
4. He painted the rest in one session of about 3 hours.

He executed this painting in one session but worked for days in photo shoots with armor made of paper and costumes. In order for something to look real, Sean needs references that contain the information necessary to create the illusion that it is real.

He worked with a model from the school, who he wrapped up in a red velvet drapery and an armored arm that he got at a cheap costume store. The neck of the armor is nothing but a piece of chrome duct tape on cardboard.



Another illustration from the Final Fantasy collection where Sean used huge amounts of chrome duct tape on corrugated cardboard, which he cut to the shape of the armor pieces.

He complemented all this with vinyl tapes and a French braid that he learned to do by watching tutorials on YouTube. For the upper half of the sword, he used an ancient Chinese sword from 1700, from his collection, as a reference.

This is the third of four characters that were commissioned to him, but they canceled the delivery date, they paid him for the job, and they were never heard from again. Anyway, the project was canceled, but fortunately, he got paid for the job.



Galleries

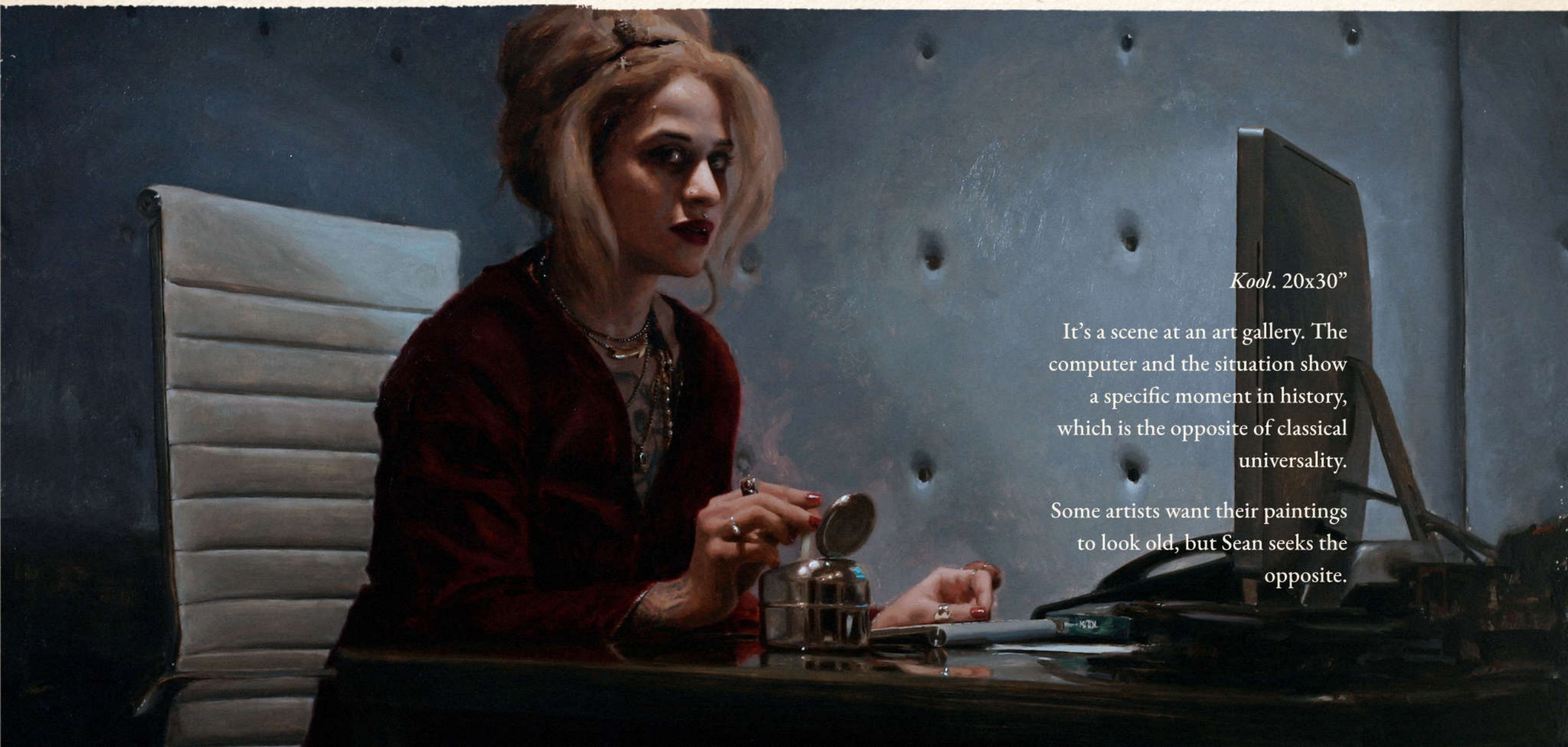
Sean has a love-hate relationship with Art galleries. There is a part of his production that sells very well, but he refuses to produce more tattooed girls for money. Thinking about money is unavoidable and that conditions his painting, so he’s burnt out with the sector.

Art is the artist's vision, but sometimes galleries want to impose theirs, trying to implant themes that sell more and thereby sterilize creativity.

Sean is now dedicated to painting his personal work, whether the galleries like it or not. It’s not the artist's job to give the audience what they ask for. If the public knew what they want, they would be artists themselves. The artist's job is to give the public what they need, not what they want. And at this point, the gallery owners have great confusion, caused by their ambition and their aversion to accepting challenges.

When his gallerists see work that they don't like, they tell him that those will be difficult to sell and that he should change them. But Sean doesn't give a damn if they like it or not, because he understands that gallerists work for him, and not the other way around. Selling is their job, and painting is his job. But they usually stick to the idea that the artist's work is double: to produce and to sell. But it's not like that.

Currently, he continues working with galleries and collectors, but he keeps his distance when they tell him what he should do. All the paintings you see below were painted for art galleries. They’re made from photographs and do not have much to do with the demonstrations that Sean makes in class.



Kool. 20x30”

It’s a scene at an art gallery. The computer and the situation show a specific moment in history, which is the opposite of classical universality.

Some artists want their paintings to look old, but Sean seeks the opposite.

Chantal portrait.

This is a small 5x7” drawing of Chantal Menard that he decided not to sell.

It’s drawn with one of those yellow school pencils on crappy paper.



He liked the previous drawing and photocopied it large (8x10 ”) so he could transfer it to a board and paint it in oil. He worked in it for two days, wet on wet.

It was around 2004 when he submitted this portrait to the BP award, spending $800 on shipping, and did not win. He decided to keep the painting and not sell it, even though Michelle Pfeiffer insisted on buying it.

«I am pretty good about losing», he jokes. It was at this point that he decided to put aside teaching and focus more on painting for art galleries.

Pelt. 10x8”, 2005

He started working with art galleries in 2002 when the economy was in quite good health. He even sold many of the paintings he made at school.

Little by little, his reputation grew and he was able to work with more prestigious galleries, where he used to sell 90% of his works. His artistic career was going very well from the very first moment.

Erin. 8x10”, 2005.

This work is part of a series of 8x10 ”paintings that sold fantastically well in art galleries.

Sean painted them in one sitting. He worked about five hours with some alkyd, allowed the paint to settle while he rested, and finished it in a second session the same day.

Evil twin. 8x10”, 2005.

Another one from the same series. He painted it in one sitting: he started it at night and it was done in the morning.

He worked from photographs. Sean only paints from life to practice and do teaching demonstrations, but he doesn't want the limitations of working from life in his personal work.

Diana. 8x10”, 2005.

He first takes reference photos and then processes them with Photoshop. Then he transfers the drawing, combining fidelity with interpretation. Finally, he paints over in oil, wet on wet.

Spoonful of Sugar. 45x30”, 2005.

This work is larger than the ones he was used to paint, and he didn't feel very comfortable. It’s part of a series for his first solo exhibition.

He wanted to explore those foggy days in his neighborhood back then, when he lived in Northern California, working on softer, more subdued paintings.

He took several reference photographs of his ex-wife in black jackets, strongly contrasting against the white atmosphere as if it were a French painting.

People pay a lot of attention to the broken umbrella rod. Maybe they think it's some kind of metaphor.



Moraga Heights. 45x30”, 2005.

The same series: textures, umbrellas, black jackets, soft and faded colors, light backgrounds, etc.

The paint is thin and smooth, and he used acrylic washes first.

Turtle Hill. 45x30”, 2005.

More from the same series at Turtle Hill. The poor dog died, after twenty years of company. His name was Roscoe and he appears in many of his works.

Chantal in profile. 16x20", 2006.

This portrait of Chantal is somewhat larger. He painted her head in one sitting, but her arm took a long time.

For painting the tattoos he first mixes all the flesh tones since they are still under the tattoo. The color of the tattoo necessarily participates in the color of the skin.

Then he paints the contour lines of the tattoos, as he would if he really tattooed them, and finally works with the color on top.

It's the way everything seems more natural. Then he goes back to the general lights and shadows to reinforce the coherence of the set since the specular lights are above the tattoo.

Bone Amie.

This is a large 36x60" work of Chantal Menard, painted in 2006. It's a contemporary interpretation of those classic works of semi-nude and reclining odalisques.

All the work that goes to the galleries is on board, he rarely works on canvas. This work is painted on a primed wood board, with about three or four layers of gesso. The preparation is golden, as you can see.

Most of the work is done very thin. For example, the pink cushion, which is a scrub with dots on top. Many of the sofa's textures are scrubbed and scratched to bring out the golden priming.

The background is painted in a very economical way but with a very convincing effect; the fact that it is painted looser than the figure reinforces its focal point.

Sean did not have the background painted until the night before the exhibition opened. When he saw the work on the wall of the gallery it seemed to him that it was not finished, so he took it home to paint the background in one night. The next day they hung it up again for the opening and it was sold right away.





Black Lamb. 20x15”, 2007.

Tattoos and dark jackets on a light background. Nothing is clipped and everything blends into a subdued atmosphere, turning the shape into the shadows. He was looking for a feeling of cold naturalism.



Golden shower. 12x16”, 2007

This series is a head turn sequence: left profile, front profile, right profile. He was trying to experimenting.



In use. 12x16”, 2007



Stationary. 12x16”, 2007


IN
USE

Self-portrait. 10x8”, 2011

This self-portrait was part of a demonstration where he taught his students to start a painting with acrylic and to finish with oil in a single sitting, and how to work with textures.

It was painted in four hours on watercolor paper primed with gesso. He started with acrylic and ended with oil.



Champagne wishes and caviar dreams is a small 10x8" self-portrait, painted in oil in 2011 on paper, from a photographic reference.

He did this in a five-hour demonstration for his students. He painted it over a pre-paint made with a very soft acrylic wash.

«It was an accident playing Hockey, but it wasn't with a stick. I had a fight and I lost», he says, asking about the black eye.

Here you can perfectly see the relations and transitions between cold and warm.

Is it clear which is the dominant eye in this portrait?



Crossroads is a large, 10x5 feet diptych.

He started it with black gesso on white gesso, using water for the grays. Sean uses rulers, tapes and any tools or tricks that exist to paint.

Then he applied a turquoise glaze over the work done with black gesso. A little alla prima work for the grass and so forth, and that's it. There is very little painting in this work.

He painted *alla prima*, with impasto, the focal points in more detail, and the rest is transparent paint on black gesso. There are areas where there is a lot of thick paint and areas where there is hardly a light wash of paint. The whites are also painted with impasto, to regain luminosity after cold washing.

In this painting, his dog was very sick and was dying. The painting immortalizes a moment where it is about to transfer from one painting to another (*crossroads*). He used some traditional clothes from his wardrobe for western themes. This work is part of his personal diary, capturing that precise moment in his life.



This is a portrait of his deceased dog Roscoe. It is part of the personal works that he does only for fun, as a personal diary. He loved painting it.

It’s an oil from 2011 on watercolor paper, 5x5”.

Selfish. 12x9", 2013



New Era. 10x8", 2019

"New Era" is the brand of clothing he wears in the portrait, which he uses as a metaphor for his moment in 2019.

He used this self-portrait to demonstrate at Quarantine Events on how to use glazes.

Western

Sean is passionate about western. But not the modern western, but the classic one, like the one he saw when he was a child. His most recent work is 100% focused on a personal and contemporary interpretation of this genre.

From the Western Scene, he's interested in aesthetics, themes and why not say it, the gangsters and violence just because.



Modelo Especial. 21x14”, 2013

Boss of the planes.

Western-inspired self-portrait. Based on a photoshoot, he worked on this painting as two classroom demonstrations: head and hands.

Although he liked the unfinished work better, a collector asked Sean to finish it for him. Sean thinks he did a good job with this painting, although he's not sure it got better by finishing it. He just tried to keep the freshness of the unfinished painting.

Coach Robbers.

This work is 100% Sean as if it were his signature. It's unique and unmistakable and with a clear reference to John Wayne.

The work was painted after a photoshoot by Sean with his colleagues. He was on the roof of his truck, and with Photoshop he added the weapon, photographed in the same light. The two colleagues were photographed holding a gun and pulling ropes. Then he put it all together and it worked.

The austere and subdued color is a reference to the golden age of American illustration. The illustrators, in order to save printing resources, were limited to working with white, black and a color. Usually, the color was red, yellow, or blue. Harvey Dunn and Howard Pyle, among others, worked with this super-limited palette.

Above is a good example of how Howard Pyle limited his palette in book illustrations.

Lion. 10x8”, 2013

This is a good example of his modernization of the western, where the horses become motorcycles.

He gathered some colleagues to go on motorcycles and do some shots: «It seems that everything fun is always illegal», he jokes. The session in the camp served as a reference, although he knew that because it was not about tattooed girls it would not sell well. But this is what he does now.

Above you have the work started with black gesso on white gesso, which he used to set the value composition.

This small piece belongs to an exhibition on tattoos. Sean painted a severed head because, again, he knew they expected him to paint a tattooed girl. However, here he tried to explore the most violent facet of the *eastern*, as opposed to the western.



This composition was made with digital paint, using Procreate for iPad and an Apple pencil.

It's a test for a large composition that he wants to paint in oil. The references are reduced to two people: Sean and a colleague, who pretended to fight. Each guy in red is Sean, and the rest are his colleagues, both with variations on their faces.

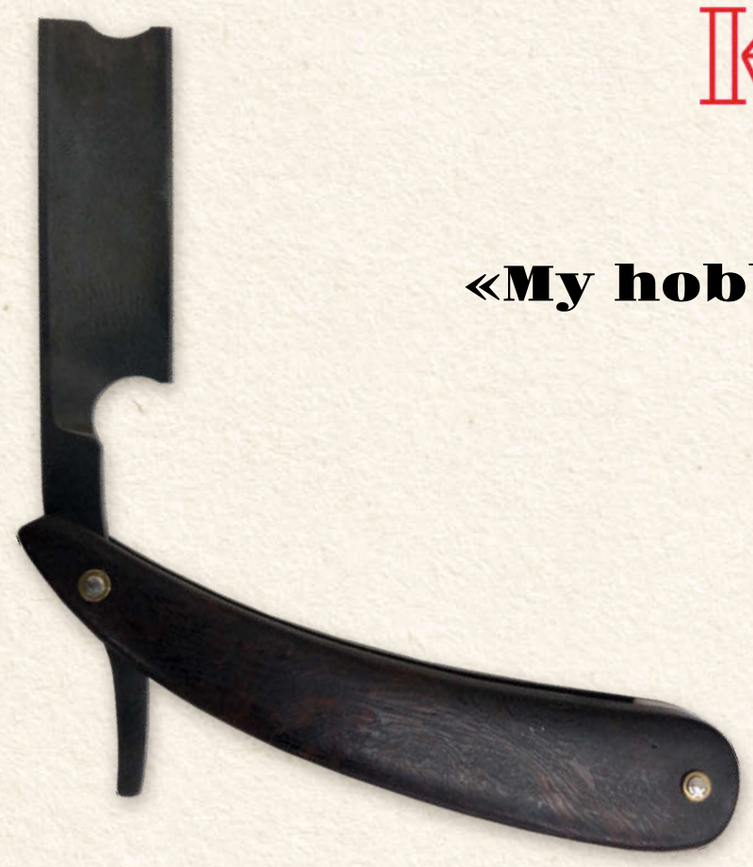
References are not photographic. He recorded a video with his phone in slow motion and made screenshots of the moments he liked the most.

He used those captures to work the composition and then made the necessary touches to create unity of value, color coherence and variety in faces, hats, clothing, etc.

Then he may project it, he may reinterpret everything, he may draw it from scratch on the panel ...

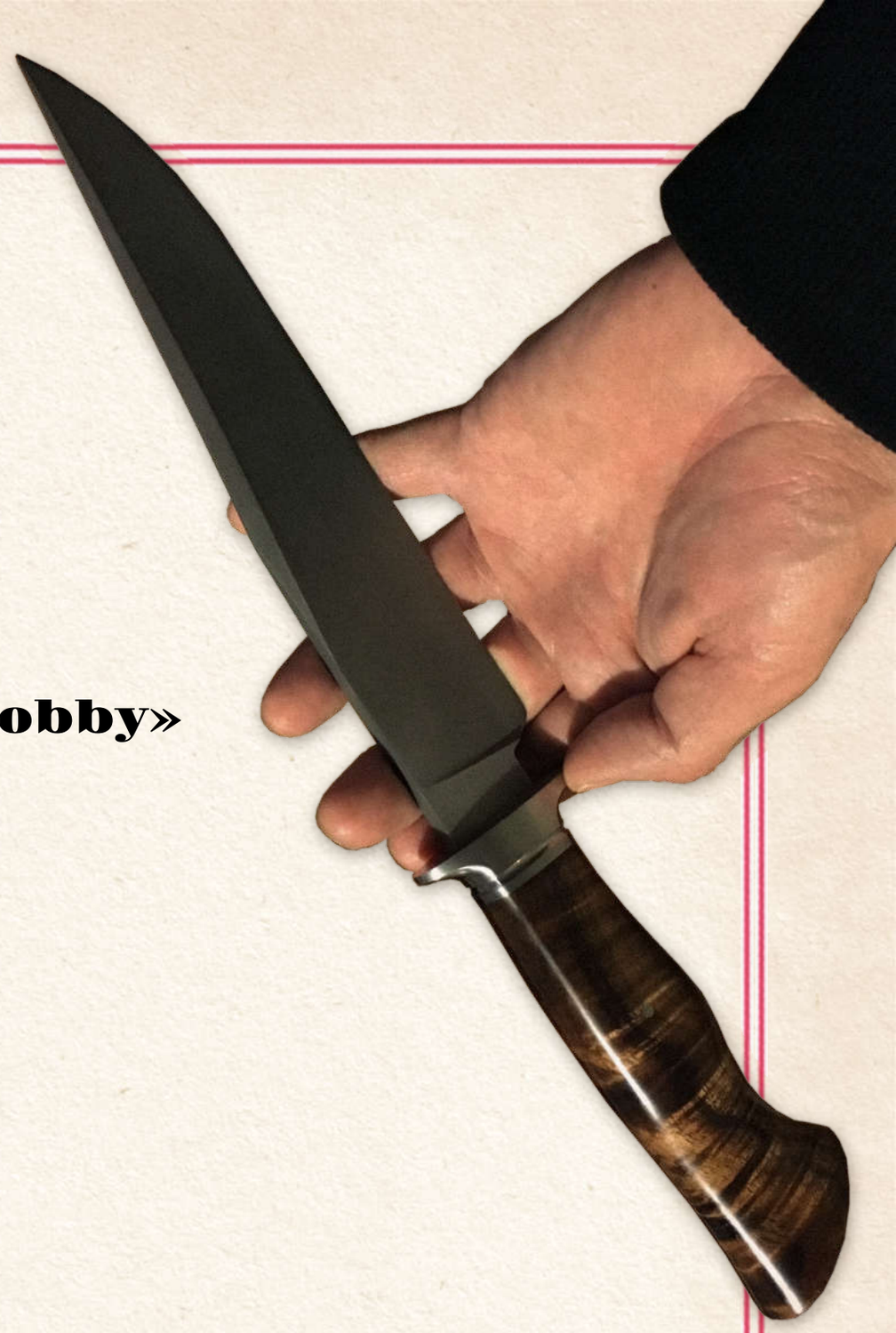
Sean does not have a fixed process and each work has its own needs.





Knives

«My hobby is not my jobby»



What would Sean do if he didn't paint? Rest assured that he would dedicate himself to the ancient art of making knives, an art perhaps older and more delicate than that of painting. Sean is passionate about knives and, as a good fetishist, collects antique knives, daggers, and swords that he acquires at auctions.

When he wants to relax, Sean goes to the forge and makes knives, designing the blade, the handle and the sheath from scratch, with the humility of a goldsmith but with the ambition of an artist.

He never sells his knives because he wants to keep his hobby as a legitimate recess, like a real escape valve where there is no money at stake, no customers, no delivery dates. He already has that pressure in the painting, and he does not want to contaminate the purity of his hobby. On the other hand, a knife takes so much work that putting a price on it would be crazy.

Sean would like to somehow integrate knife forging and painting. Combine the two activities in some way. He still doesn't know how, but maybe the western theme is a good way to do it.

We'll be on alert!

Sean has made himself a pair of specific knives to sharpen his pencils: a classic scissor razor blade, and a mini kitchen knife. To the dozens of requests from his students, he says that he does not sell his knives because «my hobby is not my jobby». They are for him and his friends, and he makes them for pleasure.



Interview

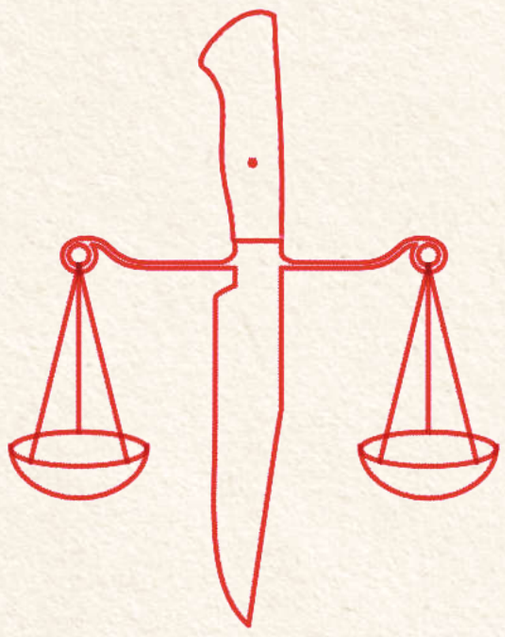
100% Noir Interviews



To get to know Sean better we recommend the interview that we did posted at Quarantine Events Podcast.

You can view it by clicking here.

Philosophy



Learn to learn

What works and what does not work

The problem with art schools.

Within the academic bubble there is no difference between academia and the real world; although, in the real world, that difference exists.

Schools transmit knowledge that makes sense within schools but is hardly appropriate outside them. By doing this, they feed the vicious circle of students who, in turn, become new generations of teachers who perpetuate instructions without practical scope outside the classroom.

«**Schools are factories of teachers, not artists**», says Sean forcefully. And he's not far from being right. A statement very similar to the one made by the philosopher and essayist Nassim Taleb, when he states that «a teacher teaches you above all to be a teacher».

Problem # 1: «we do not study for life, but for the classroom»[1].

Due to a mistake in the historical interpretation of traditional methods, art schools ended up becoming a set of standards of convenience. Consequently, the way in which painting is taught was bureaucratized, anesthetizing the students' instincts to solve unknown problems.

An artist with an academic training tends to look for themes and situations that allow him to exhibit what he has been taught to do well. Thus, in his fear of facing new problems that arise while painting, he prefers to take shelter inside self-satisfying.

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1. Lucio Anneo Seneca (4 B.C.—65 A.D.) expressed this problem this way: *Non vitae, sed scolae discimus*, «we do not study for life, but for the classroom.»
This question is dealt with extensively within the book on Costa Dvorezky.



Problem # 2: sophistication sells, but it doesn't work.

Sean claims that the solution to this unnecessary ideological sophistication is for students —and teachers— to forget ceremonies and get to the point, as they focus too much on the more romantic and impractical aspects of painting, neglecting efficiency in obtaining results.

On the other hand, sometimes schools are focused on outdated moral values: that if painting from nature is better than painting from photographs, that if a digital painting cannot compete with analog, etc. All of them are obsessions that block the creative potential of the students, fitting them into an ideology.

Programs designed by teachers who have never put their skin in the game out there tend to be overly complex theoretically and fall short in practice. But if what you want is to paint, start to **mistrust the excessive refinement** proposed by teachers who are not really dedicated to painting. It's just an excuse, so you think that in order to improve you need more classes.

Every method is questionable.

When you paint, you are not really looking for a *result*; you are looking for the most reasonable approach to an emotion. And you do whatever it takes to achieve it by giving structure to that emotion. To do this, in Sean's words, «**There is no method. Period**». Each teacher has a different creative process because —fortunately— he interprets the world in a unique way. And this is good.

Recipes are shortcuts that release the concentration ability necessary to achieve a higher purpose. These shortcuts are fine as long as you are aware of the fact that they’re not a target. They’re a reference, yes, but not a home.

You don't want to underestimate techniques but do never give them power. Empowering them is the mark of an insecure artist. A book can teach you very useful technical things and solve specific doubts, but after all, your process is your art, not the execution of a handful of rules.

Techniques can be taught and there is nothing wrong with it; But if you want to learn how to *really* paint, you must find your own solutions. Borrowing other artists’ resources —like the ones I show you within this book— is good if you don't get caught up in them.

When you are painting you must keep your process open in order to make adjustments that you had not anticipated. When something unexpected shows up on the scene, you have an opportunity to add unique value to your painting. An unplanned, organic, natural, special value.

You must use these opportunities so you can take advantage of the spark of an unexpected moment, a gesture, a gaze, a mistake, a reaction... *that* is really painting: **the perfect combination of planning and instinct**. The accent that makes everything make sense.



There are no rules. Just Art.

Learn to make art by making art

Books.

You've already seen it: everything is in the books, there are no secrets. Any manual explains the basics for progress, but at this point, you know that studying art is easier than making it.

Take a look at those books, they are useful but get to work and work hard. Do bad art at first, and then it will get better with time. But don't expect to read up on how to make art first and then sit back and wait for it all to happen. No, don't do that with this book either.

Schools.

In the past, there were no schools like there are now, and you can't say that you didn't learn to paint... you learned indeed! There were barely a handful of hard-to-get books, and the apprentices were prepared without the need for programs or graduations.

Now you can enroll in expensive schools, be a formidable student and graduate, but that does not guarantee a good training. After all, **you end up making good art when you assume you have to sink into the mud and fight to get out of it**[2].

A good teacher should give you the first push, resources, inspiration, and confidence. Take the opportunity to start in a school, but then teach yourself by making paintings. First badly and then better.

Studying something implies living it from the inside, not peeping from the outside. If you're just curious about painting it's difficult for you to get anywhere; on the other hand, **if you feel the need to put your skin in the game, there is hope**.

Do what you have to do beyond studying what you are supposed to study. Sometimes you feel you can't get a good structure with that head? Ok, draw a hundred skulls and then try again, I can guarantee that this time the head will have a good structure.

The paper that certifies your aptitude is not that of the diploma, but that of your sketchpad.

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2. In the words of Sean Cheetham:

«It doesn't matter how you look at it, painting is hard. And all those great artists you admire have bad days like you do, and things don't come easily for them either. In this art world nobody gets it easily and, whoever says the opposite, lies. Even Sargent had bad days».



Creativity is extremely counterintuitive. We generally think that our potential is reinforced if we have more resources; However, the opposite happens: the more resources and eases you have, the more you relax. **Art needs pressure and limitation in order to make solid decisions,** finding new ways to avoid limitations that do not exist in an environment without limitations.

Film director Aki Kaurismäki says that young filmmakers do not know how to use film cameras because they no longer feel the cost of the material on their shoulders[4]. Also, you don't make the same decisions with an analog camera, when you have a 36 film roll and developing cost, as you do with a digital camera. The limitation and the risk associated with the cost of error sharpens your inventiveness.

Bringing these reflections to the world of the 'plastic' arts leads us to speculations of the most disturbing nature. When you risk everything and you only have ten seconds to act, making an optimal decision as quickly as possible, your brain becomes inflamed and uprooted from the ramblings and inflamed, making an optimal decision as quickly as possible. And those decisions are, according to Cheetham, the best decisions.

What if you only had one paper available per day? What if you did not know how long each exercise will last? What if you could only spend ten seconds looking at the model every 30 minutes? Try and be convinced: **there is no learning without pressure.**

Copying.

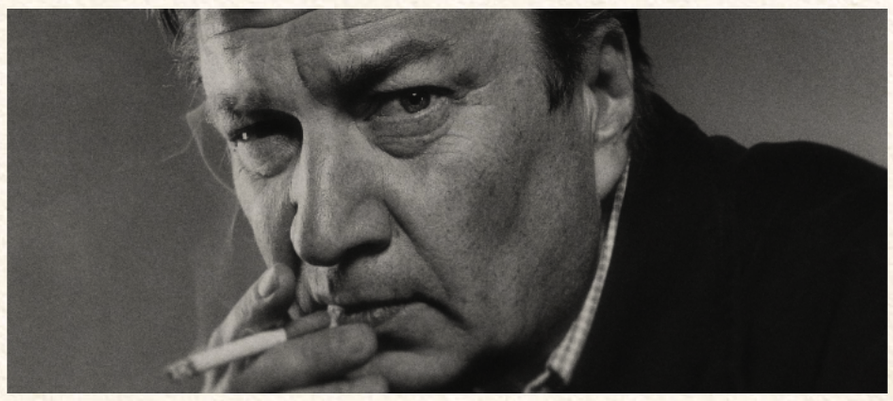
If anything went well for Sean in learning to paint it was copying masterpieces. At first, it felt like a bummer and he didn't want to, but fortunately, he was forced to do it at school. And it went so well that, even today, he says «copying is essential».

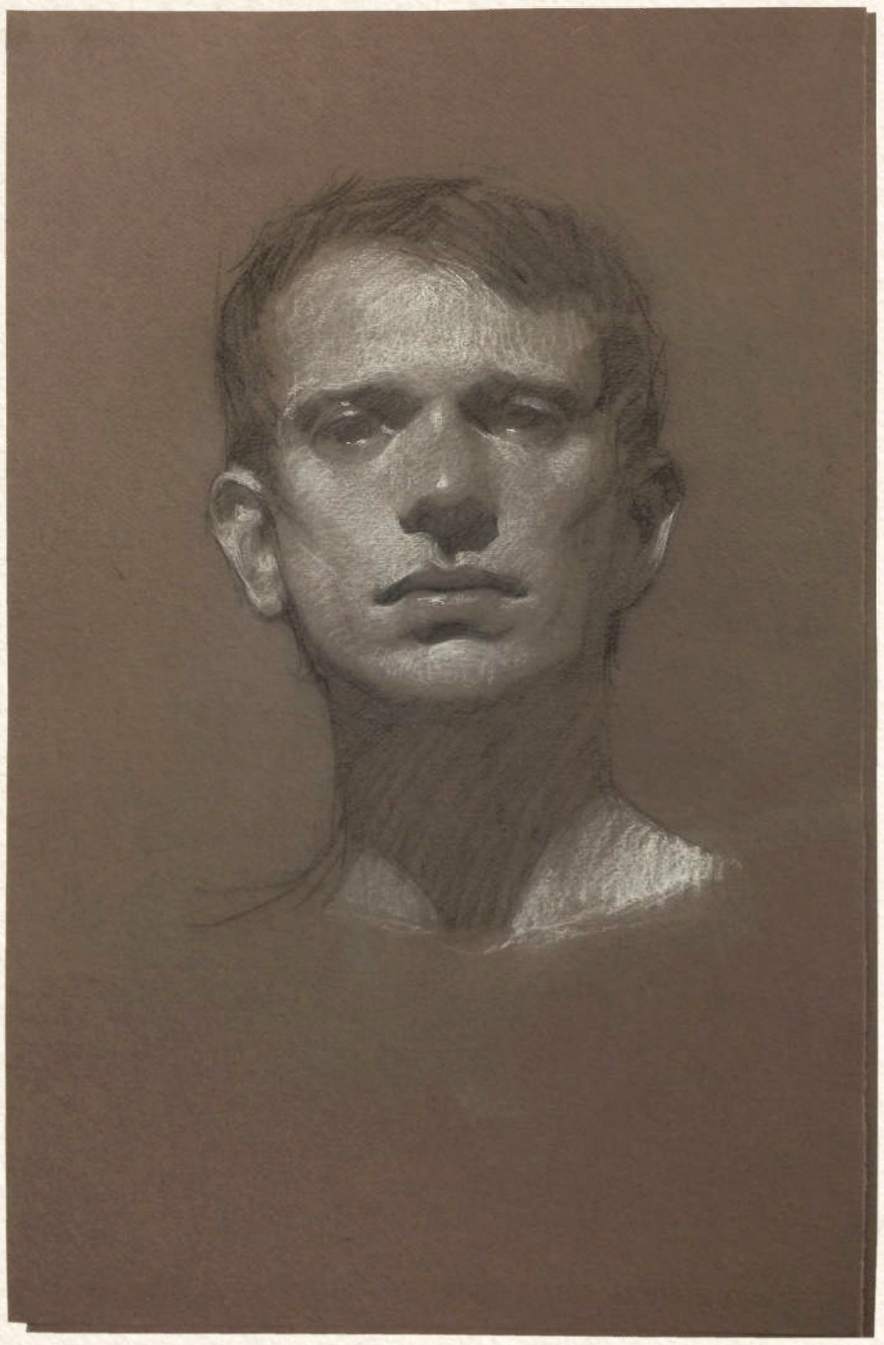
We are all more or less influenced by the great masters and only if you copy their work, can you you can understand how they did it. This copying takes you beyond the hypnotic effect that occurs from the result the great masters create. You only think you know how Sargent painted until you copy his work and you discover that in the lights there is more pink than you remembered, or that the brushstroke is much longer than you thought.

You don't have to go to a museum and copy a masterpiece for weeks, you can make several quick copies in an hour and get the same useful knowledge. One of the exercises Sean proposes in his workshop is to make master copies in ten minutes so that the time limitation does not allow you to get lost in the details and get obsessed over the fidelity of a beautiful result. Only the essence, what really counts for learning.

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4. «Young people no longer know how to use film cameras, (...) because they could no longer feel the weight of the cost of the material on their shoulders. And that's why digital cinema will take us to hell. Because if the material is worth nothing, nobody cares. (...) because **if you can film everything, then nothing matters**».





Twenty-minute live demonstration. The drawing is made with 2B charcoal pencil and white highlights, both by General's, on Canson paper.

He likes to use General's charcoal pencil for this kind of drawings because they're dry and, since they do not contain wax or greases that adhere to the fibers of the paper, they do not permanently stain the drawing.

Repeating.

In addition to limitation and pressure, there is the third ingredient in Sean's recipe: repetition. Assume as soon as possible that you need to practice many hours.

Practice is everything; good practice, which is accompanied by breaks for digestion. The good old habits.

Sean is capable of an excellent head drawing in twenty minutes, or a portrait painting of an hour-long sitting. Seeing is believing.

And when Sean nails it at a demonstration it's because he's done hundreds of them. **That twenty-minute demonstration draws energy and confidence from thousands of hours of practice**. It's not a superpower, it's repetition.

Painting is very difficult and it will be easier the more practice you accumulate. And if Sean himself has needed thousands of hours of practice... what makes you think that you will need less than him?

Internalizing for unlocking potential.

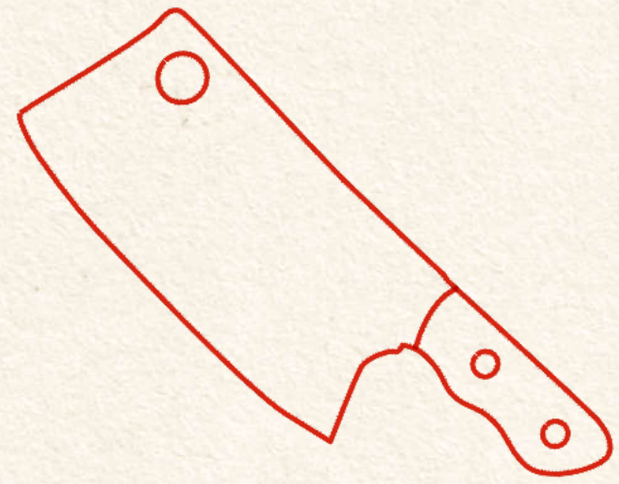
Ernesto Sábato says that «an educated person is someone who has already forgotten scholarship». Similarly, a good painter is one who has already forgotten to apply the techniques.

Only when you internalize methods can you afford to focus on higher matters.

Repetition: That is the overwhelming *secret* of the superhuman abilities of the artists we admire.

Summary:

Learn to learn



The problem of art schools:

† They are factories of teachers, not factories of artists..

† They promote comfort and lack risk, repressing learning.

† Teachers are focused on romantic stuff and do not get to the point.

Question the methods:

† Do not underestimate the techniques, but do never give them power.

† Develop your own solutions, don't get caught up in others'.

† Combine planning and instinct.

How to learn:

† Put your skin in the game when making your decisions, limit your resources, and put yourself under pressure.

† Copy the great masters.

† Practice a lot and internalize techniques in order to unleash potential.



Efficiency

Haste makes waste

Sean was trained as an illustrator and practiced for a time. This experience led him to understand the keys to working fast because, the faster he was, keeping the same level of quality, the more money he could earn. So he had, in addition to urgent delivery dates, a good incentive to improve the efficiency of his painting.

Paradoxically, Sean knows perfectly that the slower you go, the faster you finish: *festina lente*[1], «hurry up slowly». This means that your execution will be faster the longer you take to observe the model and organize your palette. Good organization prevents mistakes from appearing, saving you a lot of time on corrections, while avoiding wasting time wandering around the palette like a headless chicken.

1. The Latin phrase *festina lente* translates as «hurry up slowly»; in Spanish, it can be translated as «dress me slowly I'm in a hurry». And in English as «Haste makes waste». It's usually represented by this anagram, where the anchor symbolizes safety and the dolphin symbolizes speed. Diligence and tenacity.



« Take your time on everything if you want to paint fast. »

Drawing efficiency.

The trick to drawing more efficiently is to work the line and the area at the same time. In this way, if the drawing is wrong, the correction takes less time to arrive than when you separate the two phases. If you notice that the drawing is wrong when you are already setting the values, you are less efficient because you notice the error late.

The *secret* to working fast is to notice mistakes as soon as possible, so you don't waste time getting back on track. On the other hand, the panic of losing the drawing that has cost you so much to build triggers a psychological resistance to rectifying the mistake at the root and trying to save the work you already made by making fixes that make everything worse.

Overworking, overthinking.

Sean observed his students for many years and concluded that most of them have the same problems. No matter how much time they have to paint, almost everyone works the same way, to Sean this is very suspicious. If they are given little time, they stay halfway; And if they are given a lot, they finish earlier and ruin their work accumulating unnecessary touch-ups, with the ambition of showing off a neater finishing. Very few people understand that they must adjust their decisions to the time they have.

Sean is convinced that most bad paintings accumulate too many decisions and the painting would improve a lot if the artist limited the execution time. Almost always, you can say more with less and, in painting, **everything that is not essential is not necessary. And it detracts from what's important**.

Seriously, you don't need thirty hours to finish a portrait. You need to learn to prioritize the decisions that really count when giving structure to an emotion. You also need to learn when to leave the painting alone. Time limiting, while it may seem like a terrible idea, tests your ability to limit and prioritize the decisions you can make.

Fortunately, Sean has also observed that this criterion can be educated with training designed specifically for this purpose, which I will talk about later. You learn a lot knowing how to manage decisions at a certain time, and the improvement is noticeable in just five days of the workshop. In this sense, **the goal of Sean's workshop is clear: he forces you to change your mindset, pull up your socks, and start moving on.**

Sean Cheetham says about *the need for spells*:

«Sometimes students get caught up in the notion that painting is like magic, and that they need rare spells and recipes. And when people ask me how to mix a red, I just tell them to grab a red. There is no magic».



Most common mistakes.

These are the most common mistakes that Sean has observed at his workshops:

1. ***Neglecting the drawing***— Most artists are so eager to paint that they start without having the previous drawing well resolved, which ruins the work from the beginning. Painting on a bad drawing is a guaranteed failure.

2. ***Not setting the value keys*** — Many painters fail by not darkening the shadows enough, and then they must step back and rectify them, making everything dirty. You have to set the key for the dark values on the palette from the very beginning.

3. ***Neglecting transitions*** — Normally transitions between values, especially between dark and mid-tones, are too abrupt. The halftone should blend with the correct value and in a subtle way. This is usually the most difficult thing to learn.

4. ***Not trusting the palette*** — A big mistake is to use a disorganized palette. The artist ends up guessing the mixtures rather than rationally consulting them on the color management map that his palette is.

5. ***Not painting enough*** — Do not underestimate repetition. The urge to paint usually consolidates what is learned. There is no other way of progressing.

6. ***Painting without an emotional goal*** — The irrepressible anxiety for trying to paint something *beautiful* monopolizes the ability to focus, preventing the mental disposition necessary to make decisions based on the way things feel.

Sean makes clear that there is nothing wrong with making mistakes, as long as we identify them and work hard to overcome them by exercising, if possible, painting from life.

The four challenges of exercising from life.

1. ***Practice*** — we must exercise daily in order to be skilled in execution and analysis. More repetition leads to more internalization, which frees up resources to deal with more complex issues.

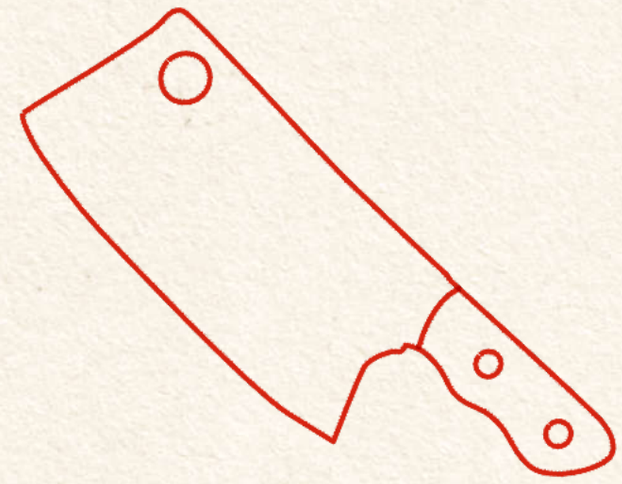
2. ***Limited time*** — we must distill the complexity of the model with a synthetic reading that adapts to the time we have for working. The stopwatch pressure is good for learning at a good pace.

3. ***Limited values*** — we cannot work all the variety of values that we perceive, we must edit that number very low, and have them well organized on the palette.

4. ***Perception*** — we must simplify diversity. That means that instead of exaggerating detail, it's always better to exaggerate the basic structure.

Summary:

Efficiency



How to be more efficient:

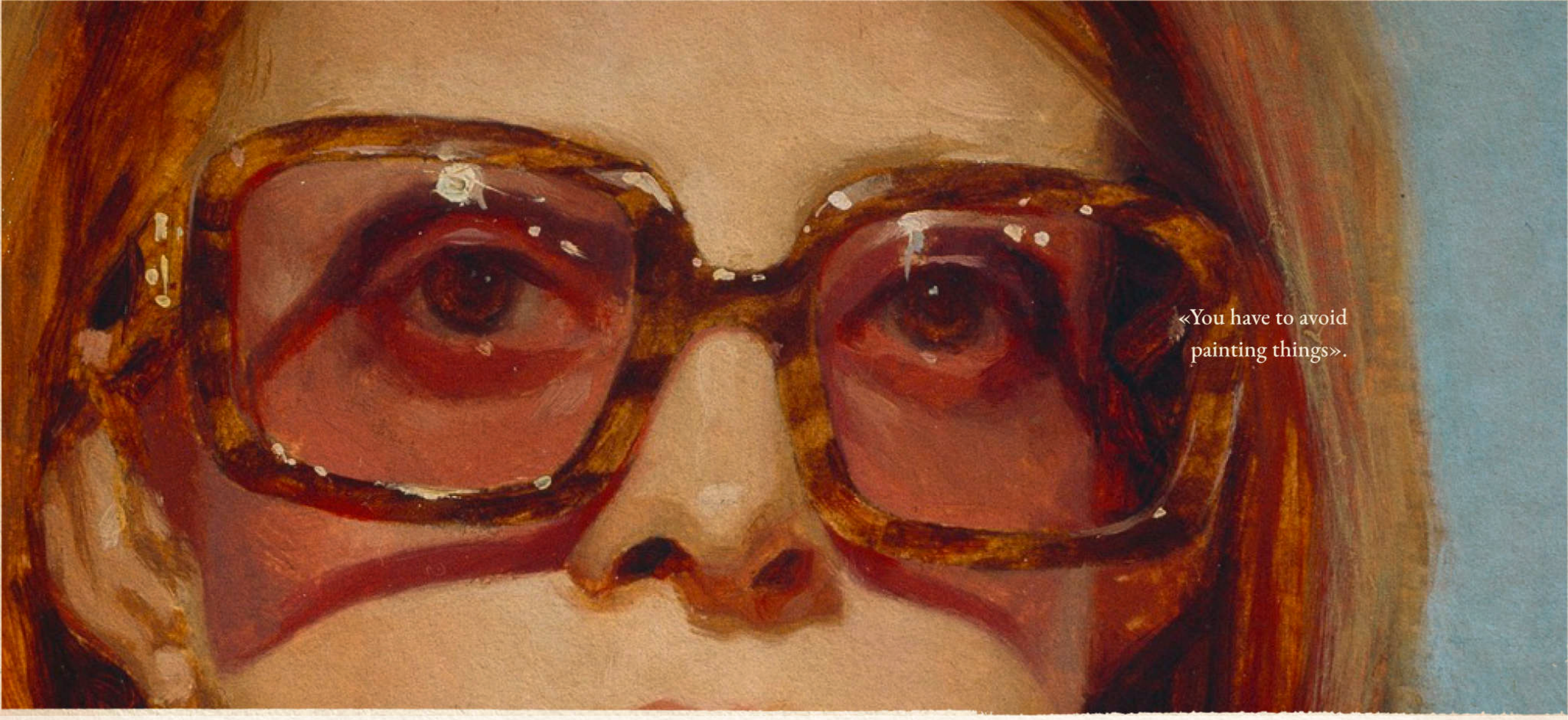
- Take your time to observe the model and organize your palette.
- Detect the error as soon as possible.
- Everything that is not essential is unnecessary.

Main mistakes:

- Neglecting drawing and transitions.
- Not trusting the palette.
- Painting without an emotional goal.

Exercises:

- Practice a lot in order to free up resources.
- Limit values and execution time.
- Focus on the structure, not the details.



«Don't paint things...

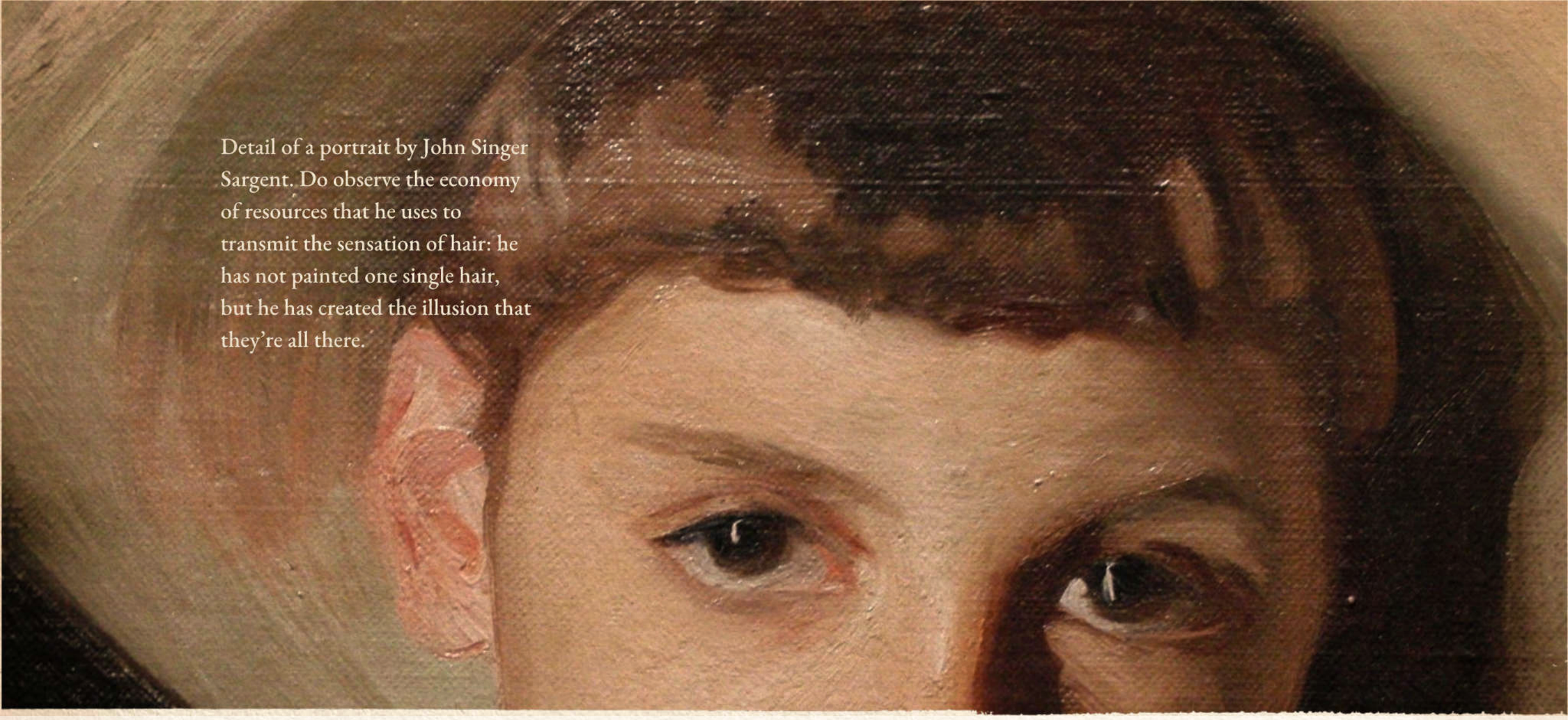
...just paint»

When H.P. Lovecraft describes a monstrosity, he first recounts the sensation his vision produces, and after the reader has experienced it in his flesh and bones, he validates it by giving a few words on its tentacular appearance. Do you think his stories would arouse the same dread at having described the monster's appearance in the first place? Why should this principle be different in painting?

In any of the arts, **the illusion of things is better than their description**. So Sean Cheetham says that «you have to avoid painting things», leaving the door open for people to get emotionally involved in the work. If you just describe what you see, that door is closed.

A face is not made of shapes, but of the light that builds them. If you create the illusion of light by revealing its shapes, instead of reproducing them, you will get the portrait of a *living* person. Instead, the mere description produces an inert mask, the simulacrum of a face. **Your purpose as an artist is to create the illusion of life, not its simulacrum**.


« None of this is real.
It’s an illusion. »



Detail of a portrait by John Singer Sargent. Do observe the economy of resources that he uses to transmit the sensation of hair: he has not painted one single hair, but he has created the illusion that they're all there.

Create the illusion that information exists.

Sean says he loves it when «you don't have to paint everything», and uses hair as an example. Obviously, to create the illusion of hair you're forced not to incur its literal description, that is, to try to paint thousands of hairs. That would be crazy, right?

The key is painting the light that reveals the general shape while suggesting its properties with the brush. The brushstroke that transmits the sensation of hair symbolizes the hair, since the drag of the brush evokes by analogy its soft and wavy fall, expressing its very nature. In other words, the brush behaves and feels like hair. It is not magic, but it's the closest thing to magic.

It is clear that the sum of hairs cannot match that feeling since **description is the opposite of a metaphor**. Sean says that beauty is in the communication of emotions, not in the transmission of information and that the challenge is in **creating the illusion that such information exists through emotion**.

Why don't you paint eyes the same way you paint hair? Could you paint an eye ignoring its parts, just as you paint hair avoiding its countless single units? Could you paint the illusion of *a gaze* rather than report the parts that build *an eye*?

When we paint we are reinterpreting and editing what we see in order to create an illusion. Sean is not talking about a technique, but about the intention of sparking a sensitive response. This involves knowing how to interpret the emotional facet you see in the model, as well as knowing how to hit a nerve using plastic language. The technique is only the means used to achieve the emotional response, but it is not the engine. The engine goes further: it is Art.

Farma. 10x8", 2012

If you paint each pearl equally, with its highlight, it will look flat. Defining a few highlights is enough for everything to look good.

Sean painted the largest, brightest, sharpest pearls in the center, and graded towards blurring, reducing the highlights, for creating the illusion of the shape's turn.

Fishing in murky water.

I will tell you a brief personal story that opened my eyes to the importance of illusion:

When I was little I liked to go fishing and I preferred murky water. When I fished in crystal clear water I could see the bottom and the fish, which was disappointing: there was no surprise when the fish bit the bait and it frustrated me when it didn't; also, it was hopeless when there were no fish in sight.

Instead, murky water was exciting because in its unfathomable depth it was impossible to know how many fish might be at the bottom, nor when they were going to bite the bait. Anything could happen at any time.

This memory was left forgotten at some corner of my mind for decades until it revived when reading this aphorism by Nicolás Gómez Dávila: «Confused ideas and murky ponds seem deep». Soon after I saw a video by Drew Struzan in which he talked about how he used the same phenomenon in his art.

And then I understood that only murky water harbors the possibility of depth and that **an open possibility is much more powerful than a certainty**.

In a world where schools devote much of their programs to teaching detail-focused techniques, it may seem strange that Sean recommends the exact opposite. Where to start, then? There are two clear strategies:

1. **Do not paint things, but the feeling that things cause.**
2. **Add variety, not more information, to create a sense of detail.**





Illustrator Drew Struzan explains that **adding variety creates the illusion that there is more detail than there really is**.

In this example, he uses the splatter paint resource in order to create noise, and with it, the illusion of more detail. Had more detail been painted rather than added variety, the painting would have lost its vitality.

Compare the illusion of realism in a poster when it's enlarged. There is no detail on the cheek, but a *vibration* that conveys the feeling of detail.

Of course, we couldn't go further without talking, as an example, about the absolute master of illusion: Diego Velázquez.



The trick.

«My painting is very simple, but it looks complex; there is no real definition, it’s all tricks»— Says Sean in a talk, while projecting this illustration.

The deal is knowing how to create the illusion that something is there, without the need for it to actually be there. The trick, not necessarily in this order, is like this:

- Sean sets the points of interest in the object and paints them thoroughly.
- Then he fills in the rest with chaotic, undefined information.

The eye reads the chaos as having the same level of finish as the focal point, due to the effect of logical continuity. The eye sees that there’s detail in there, and assumes that the rest is the same. In other words, **a few finished visual anchors induce the eye, by context, to assume that the rest is also finished** since the focal point acts as the center of interpretation of its immediate environment.

«A little information here and there... but you don't need to deliver information everywhere», says Sean, as he projects an enlargement of the illustration you see above, where you can see that he has hardly painted anything. Don’t you believe it? Go ahead and take a good look: it's a trick.



*Natalia and Tolouse. 1*3.5x9”, 2011

In this work, there is not as much detail as it seems. Take a look at, for example, the belt.

Actually, the belt is very simple, but it looks complex: it’s a grid of black brushstrokes, a warm reflection, and a few highlights. He changes the size, brightness, temperature, transparency, and complexity of the studs, so you only need to finish a few so that the brain understands that the rest is the same.

It is not necessary to paint each stud but to paint the overall impression of a studded belt.

«Make it work.»

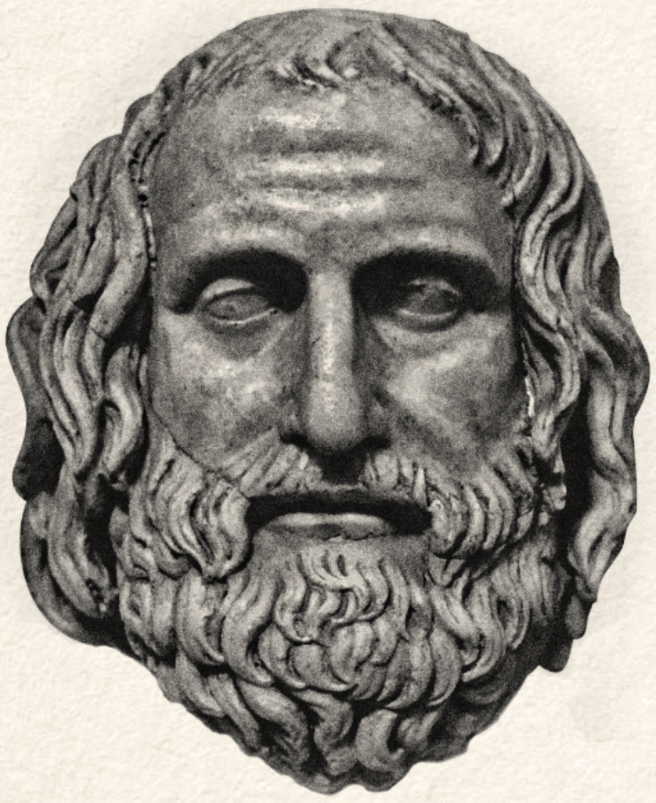
Sean doesn't care about correction; his goal is to make the painting work, *to make it look good*. Sean, when painting a portrait in a demonstration, points to the nose and mouth saying «look, this is wrong and this too... but it looks good because they work well together. It doesn't matter if something is wrong or seems not to work, you can make it work».

This doesn't have much to do with what you observe, but with your narrative intention. It's your personal choice, and the relationships between values are part of your story: contrast, drama, hyperbole, information filtering, etc. **There is no objective correction with such parameters, but rather the success or failure of your narrative intention when you play with them.**

Every portrait has a light and shadow configuration with a clear hierarchy. You have to be clear about that, and decide which one you're going to set as the protagonist: will you keep lights simplified and enrich the shadows, or will you do the opposite? There must be a dominant one so that light and shadow work well and do not compete with each other, setting your priorities and making your decisions beyond optical fidelity.

We all have personal tastes, and decisions are made based on our preferences. Follow your path and make it work, you only need intuition, coherence, and the tenacity necessary to correct your mistakes. «It's my painting, and I do what I want», says Sean, exaggerating a highlight during his demonstration.

If some completely unnecessary, high-risk movement pops into your head, go ahead and try to see what happens. This kind of call to action does not always lead to success but sometimes they give you priceless opportunities. **There is nothing wrong with making mistakes and aiming to correct them, feeling your limits and your abilities.**



According to Sean's approach, there are as many realities as there are observers. An idea that is more than two thousand years old.

Man is the measure of all things is an affirmation by Protagoras, the famous Greek sophist (485–411 BC). It's a philosophical principle with a great anthropocentric load, which implies recognizing that the truth is relative to everyone.

For this reason, Aristotle interpreted that what Protagoras meant was that the same thing could be both correct and incorrect, in relation to each individual.

Protagoras would agree with Sean Cheetham when he says that **«you don't need a plumb line to know if a line is straight»**. If it looks straight, it is straight. The eye commands because we see through it, not through the instrument.

In fact, the proportions of Greek art and architecture were arranged to look good from the viewer's point of view, which, if we think about it, is the only possible point of view.

If it looks fine, it's fine

Paint the singular.

There are artists who put what they know before what they see and vice versa. There is no right way to do it and it’s a choice of style that concerns the personality of each artist. Cheetham's case is curious because he does not disregard what he knows, but he has it so internalized that he does not misrepresent what he sees. In music, it would be similar to playing without a score.

This way he unlocks the potential of his intuition and focuses on communicating the uniqueness of the model. When you paint a nose, you paint the model's nose as you see it, without going into generalizations about how it *should be*. The scaffold is inside his head and he does not allow it to interfere with his painting, where only the organic variety of the particular fits.

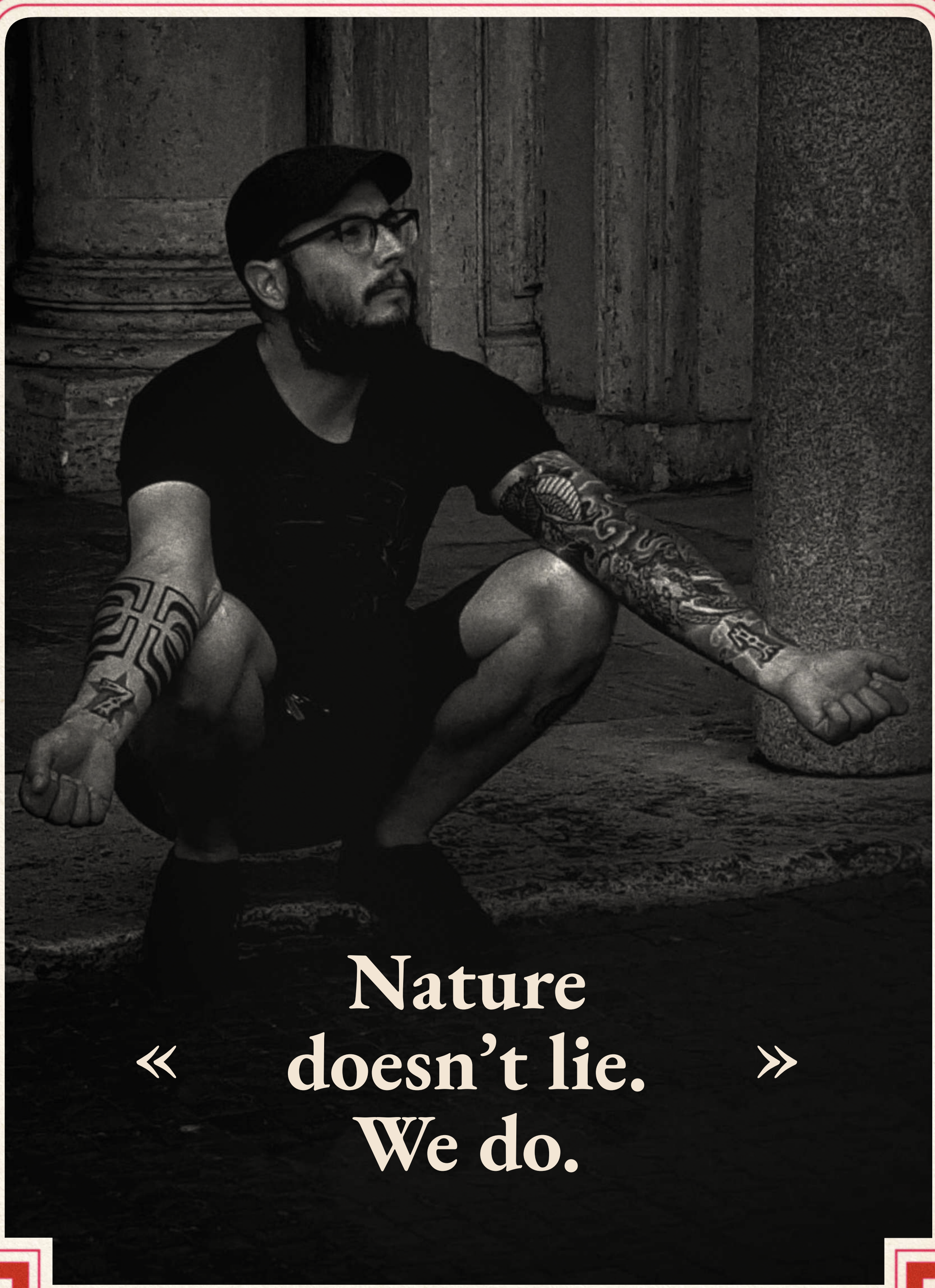
«Don't trust your mind.»

We have previously seen that variety, by itself, suggests an open emotional response where the viewer actively participates. While pouring information only provides a rational reading, closing any other possibility than the one imposed by the description. When Sean talks about painting what he sees, **he is not referring to creating a blueprint of reality, but to create an illusion based on what we observe about it**.

Sean relies more on the eye than the head, so his basic rule is simple: **«If it looks wrong, it's wrong»**. When there is something that seems wrong, it needs to be fixed before it affects the rest of your decisions. Correction is not an objective, measurable and tangible asset. **Correction is a sensation that is perceived through the eye, intuitively**. If you measure and it’s fine according to your instruments and you still see it wrong, rest assured that it’s wrong.

A straight line, even if you have checked it with a plumb line, *is* not straight if you don't see it straight. It all depends on the sensation that the observer has, not on the imposition of the tool. The goal of your painting is to be appreciated through the eyes, and no sane person will audit your painting with precision instruments: if it looks good, it is good, and if it looks bad, it is bad. Period.

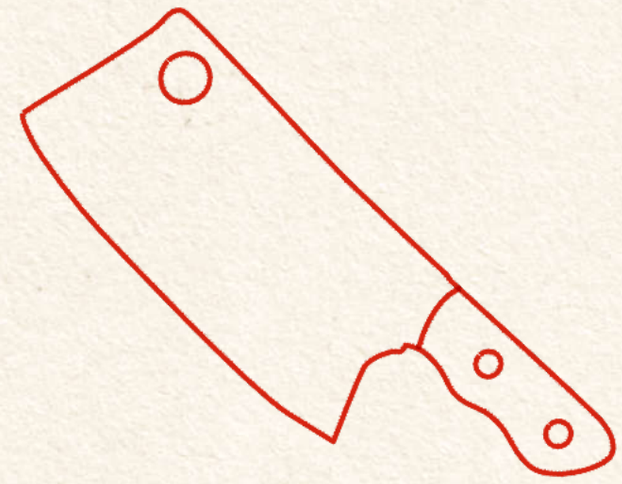
According to this principle, if we do not see an eye, although we know perfectly well that it is there, there is no need to paint it. In Sean's words, **«If you see it lost, you can paint it lost».** Vagueness is an asset that communicates naturalness, not imprecision, challenging our internal logic about how things *should be*, rather than humbly accepting how they actually look.



« Nature doesn’t lie. We do. »

Summary:

Don't paint things



Basic principles:

† The variety provokes an open emotional response.

† The description imposes a closed rational reading.

† Your work should have an emotional intention.

How not to paint things:

† The brushstroke does not describe the shape but is its metaphor.

† Do not paint the shape; paint the light that reveals the shape.

Create an illusion:

† Do not paint things, but the feeling that things cause.

† Add more variety, not more information.

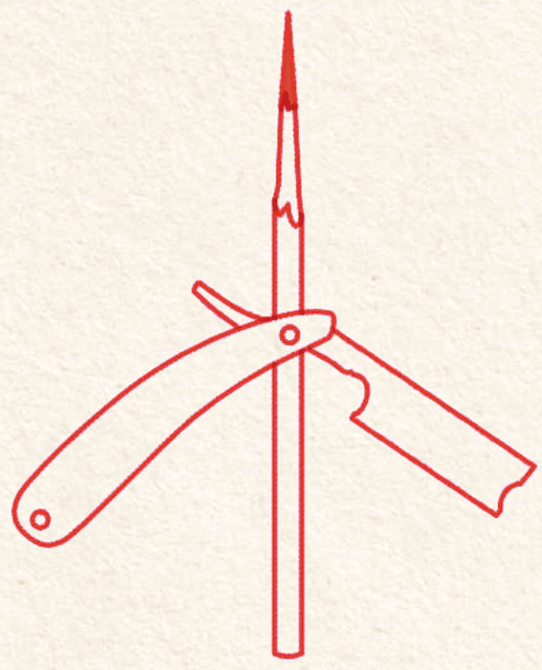
† The focal point conditions the reading of its context.

Make it work:

† Trust the criteria of your eye, not that of your brain: if it looks bad, it's wrong.

† Paint things as they are, not as they *should be*.

Drawing



Materials

Everything you will need

Pencils and eraser.

† Sean uses *General's* black and white charcoal pencils, both 2B, and a kneaded eraser.

Paper.

† Neutral gray or tobacco-colored *mi-teintes* paper. Sean recommends using the soft side of the paper.

† Fine-grain white watercolor paper. Nothing special.

Other materials.

† A blade for uncovering the lead and sandpaper for sharpening the point.

† You will also need brushes, white gesso, black gesso, and some paper towel on hand.



There are no lines, only shapes, and sensations.

What differentiates a drawing from a photograph? To create a character you prefer an illustration rather than a photograph because you feel the drawing as you feel the character. Visual language, because emotion is involved in formal construction, carries a human footprint that the mechanical image does not have.

The drawing simultaneously transmits what you know and what you see, using emotion as a score. Through a good drawing you do not limit yourself to describing things, but also transmit feelings. It's emotionally drawn. The decisions you make are for emotional reasons: rhythms before proportions, weights before anatomy. That is principles before rules.

When Sean draws, he doesn't just explain the shape; he performs a movement with the arm and the hand, as if it surrounded the shape in three dimensions, feeling it. When drawing, he acts like he's in real contact with the object, which causes that illusion to be transmitted plastically through the intention of the stroke. If when drawing you feel that you are surrounding the shape, that is exactly what you transmit in your drawing: the sensation of touch and volume.

It's that simple: **if you want to convey a feeling, you must feel it first**. You have to feel and understand at the same level and, only then, can you interpret the way to communicate it full of intention and feeling.

Do you want to draw something hard? Draw it hardly. Do you want to express softness on a face? Draw it smoothly. You must participate in the experience in order to be able to transmit it. **You simply cannot transmit something separated from the way you transmit it.**



Sean recommends holding the pencil like this so you can squeeze out all its possibilities: sideways and perpendicular, taking advantage of it when it's blunt and when it's sharp.

1'

1-minute sketches

Do you remember when I said that you need limitations and pressure in order to really learn? This is the first exercise Sean proposes, consisting of one minute, two minutes, five minutes, and twenty minute rounds of short poses. The exercise is very intense, with hardly any breaks and throughout the whole day.

«This exercise sounds scary because it's scary», Sean jokes. But there is something very certain in that: **if you do not fear an exercise, it's not an exercise**. There is no other way to learn, and Sean wants you to learn whether you like it or not. Especially if you don't like it.

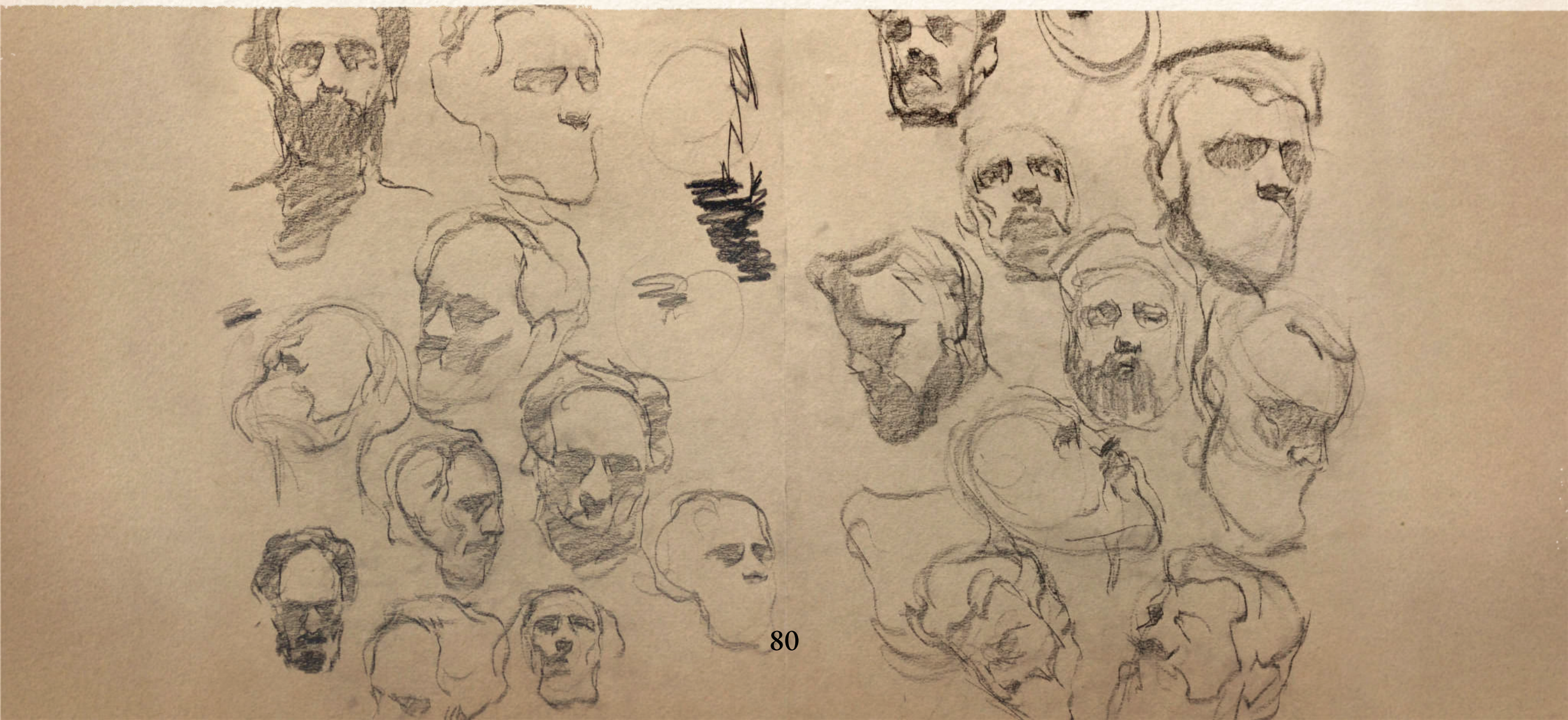
This exercise is not constructive but focuses on capturing the fundamental, as is done in cartoons. Only line and value based on the most characteristic features, and nothing else.

Because in order to draw something convincing in a minute, you cannot expect a usual formal construction, you have to go for the concrete character, for the specific. **You should not think about the result, but about the process, reaching the essential**:

† What's in the light and what is in the shadow? Where is the dominant stuff, in the light or in the shadow?

† What's most important?

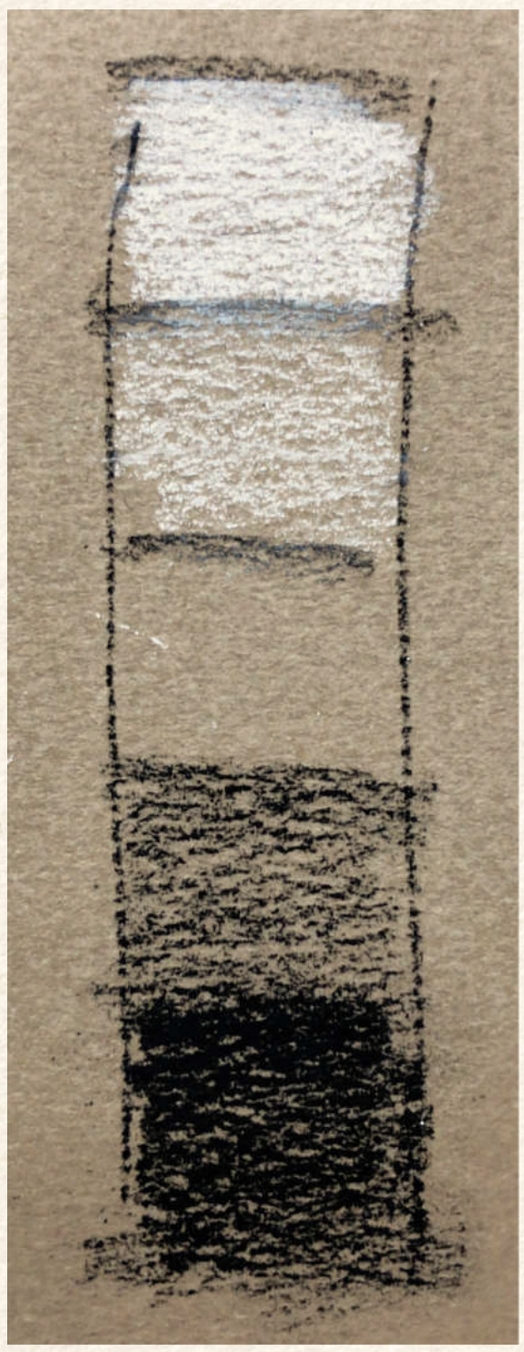
† What's the most characteristic?





5'

5-minute sketches



This exercise is designed to learn how to organize values in a simple and intuitive way. To do this, you will use a charcoal pencil and a white chalk pencil on colored paper.

This is the value structure proposed by Sean:

- Two light values (average light and maximum light).
- The tone of the paper acts as a medium tone.
- Two shadow values (medium and black shadow).

For this to work you must understand **that families of light and shadow must always remain separate**, such as Capulets and Montagues. That's why we physically isolate them from each other by setting the tone of the paper in the middle, which remains neutral in this war.

So **don't put white in the shadows or black in the lights**, *capicci*?

In order to facilitate the work of synthesis, Sean recommends thinking in terms of stencils. That is, in a pure separation, clipped and without gradations, between light and shadow.

Putting your skin in the game.

The difference between studying painting and learning by making mistakes with paint-stained hands is the same as between a war video game and a real battle.

Deep learning of something occurs when we get involved and develop a certain instinct to discover how things are applied incorrectly. Sean is very clear about this: «**You learn more by making mistakes**».

To advance at a good pace you must make decisions that will be very expensive if you fail because for learning it's mandatory to put your skin in the game. No sane painter makes banal decisions about his/her work when there is no undo button, and the risk of destroying his/her work if it fails. This forces him/her to think more competently.

Limitation as a creative engine.

Parkinson's Law[3] consists of three sentences:

1. The work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion.
2. Expenditures rise to meet income.
3. The time spent on any topic is inversely proportional to its importance.

As we will see, these principles can also be applied to artists and art schools, where every exercise expands to fill the available time.

When we have all the time in the world to make a decision, we relax and spend eternity pondering, because there is nothing to lose. **The security of having time available is a powerful narcotic for our resolving instinct**, and we end up confusing visuals with intellectual thinking.

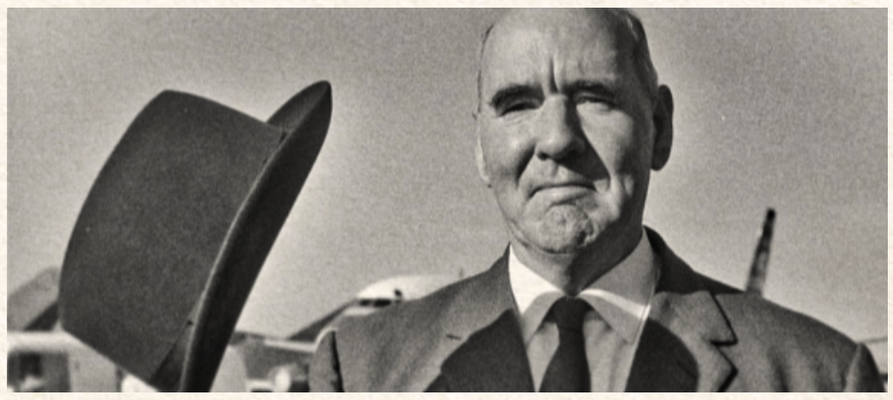
The most bitter part of all this is that the decisions are dispersed, but do not improve, wasting valuable time —and very expensive— in an exercise that does not give us a greater benefit than a well-planned short exercise.

Sean says that much more can be learned, and in much less time, by proposing exercises designed to force reactive decision-making. The reduction of resources, the suppression of comfort, and the limitation of time are key to accelerate learning exponentially. Briefly: **you don't need more time, but more risk and more pressure**.

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3. The Parkinson's Law, enunciated by the British Cyril Northcote Parkinson in 1957, formulates these three laws based on daily experience, denouncing the inefficiency of administrative work

   Read more on Wikipedia.



A tip



The light that defines the nasal bridge usually has the characteristic shape of an exclamation point.

20'

20-minute sketches

To measure, or not to measure, that is the question.

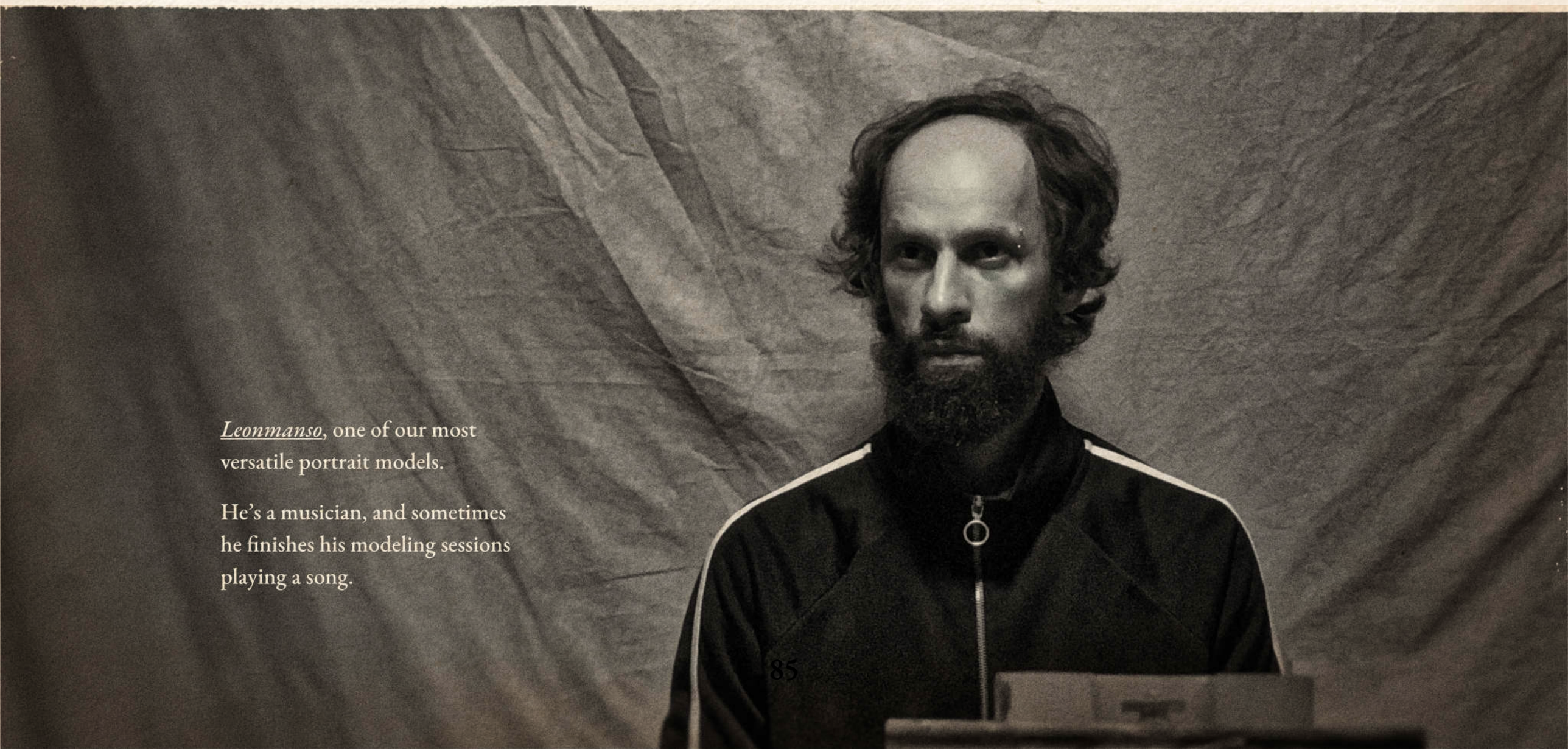
Sean does not block in, he prefers to measure with his naked eye so as not to limit the approach from the beginning. «I take the measures from my imagination», he says, as his arm keeps moving.

«...although I know that my intuition is wrong most of the time», he explains; so when in doubt, he checks the measurements. Sean recommends taking measurements after using the eye to avoid obstructing the pace. He prefers to rectify a mistake rather than limiting the possibilities.

«The nose may not be that long, but it feels that long, and that's why it looks good even if it's not right», he says during the demonstration. If you make a line that looks straight, you don't need a plumb line that tells you it's straight; it is obvious that it is straight because it looks straight. «Sometimes you need a curved line to make it look straight», he says. Checking a line that looks straight with a plumb line is like trying to give birds flight lessons!

«Don’t trust your mind.»

You do not need to know the anatomy of the eye for drawing it, in fact, it’s even unfavorable because the anxiety to show off your knowledge spoils the illusion. Remember that illusion is a speculative phenomenon, not didactic. So it doesn’t matter how much you know about eyes in general; you must draw that particular eye, that of your model.



Leonmanso, one of our most versatile portrait models.

He’s a musician, and sometimes he finishes his modeling sessions playing a song.



Shadows.

† He starts at the forehead, intending to go down. He could do it the other way around because there are no rules for starting a drawing.

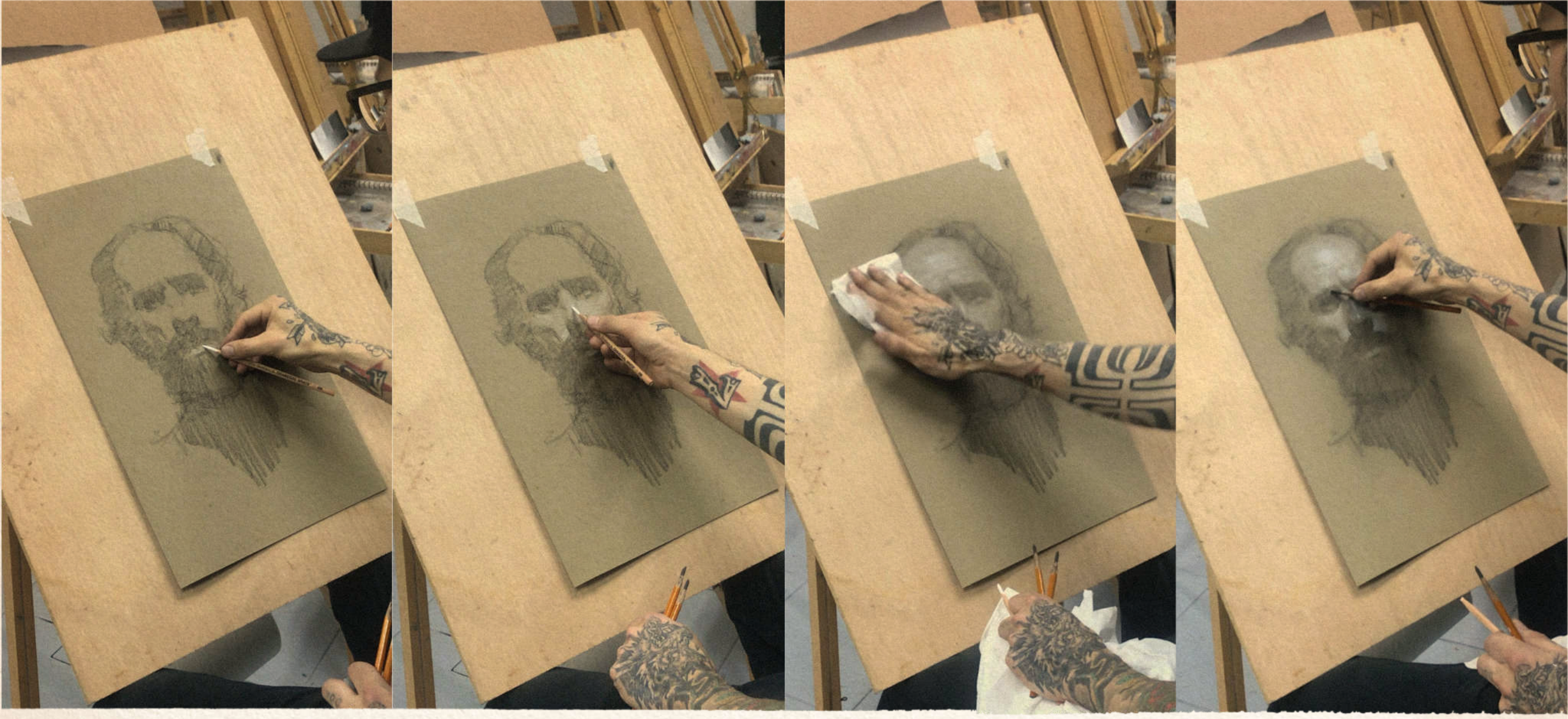
† Sean explains that he learned from Howard Pyle and Harvey Dunn that **the shapes of the shadows define the drawing**, so he goes for them from the beginning.

† At this stage, there is still no ambition for details, and he looks for the abstract shape of the blocks of light and shadow. When he draws the shadow shapes, he *fills* them in immediately to make them look like masses, because the contrast between positive and negative shapes visually helps him link processes together and makes it easier for him to understand relationships.

† Also, by working on line and value at the same time, he’s more efficient at detecting errors prematurely. In a line drawing everything is less obvious than when it is shaded. **When the masses of light and shadow are visually confronted, it’s easier to judge their relationships** (positive shape compared to negative shape) than when we only work on the line (positive shape compared to other positive shape).

† When he fills in the hair shapes, he puts the pencil sideways to make it smoother, less linear. He tries to differentiate the strokes of the face from those of the hair because something so different cannot be drawn in the same way. The stroke should feel different.

† The larger shapes are also treated differently, with much broader strokes that dramatize their heaviness and relevance beyond the shape of their outline.



Lights.

† Because the light comes from above, he begins to light from the bottom up. His intention is to increase the intensity of the white until reaching the highlight on the forehead.

† He keeps a reasonable distance between light and shadow. Otherwise, there would be no point in using colored paper, the purpose of the color paper is to act as a halftone.

† He starts smearing the large mid-tone masses of white, but he doesn’t go for the highlights yet.

† Now he starts to place the higher lights at the closest planes, at the nose bridge, and at the central forehead area. This accentuates the roundness of the face and the feeling of depth.

† The time comes when, in order to move forward, he takes a step back. Once the large masses of light and shadow are drawn, he drags a piece of paper towel over it and sweeps everything away, blending the overall tone. With this, he achieves unity, coherence, and atmosphere, by consolidating the chalk and carbon particles, which are fixed into the paper fibers.

† This overall smoothing lowers the intensity of darks, as well as lowering the brightness of lights, and integrates the mid-tone of the paper into a smooth fade. Now it’s time to add details and accents, sculpting the light and organizing values in the Sargent way. I’ll explain this in detail later when talking about painting.

† Finally, he distributes accents and details asymmetrically in order to break the monotony, creating a “dominant eye”. We will also talk about this later.

20’



15'

15-minute value sketches

Process

The concept of this exercise is the same as that of the previous ones, but changing the medium. Here you will use white gesso and black gesso, on a white watercolor paper. In this way:

- Use black gesso and water to create a general wash, a medium gray.
- Then, when dry, draw a few simple lines with a charcoal pencil.
- Paint the dark areas with black gesso and the gray areas thinning it with water.
- Paint the lights with white gesso, and the middle lights thinning it with water.

The mid-tone of the wash works the same as the medium tone of the paper in the previous drawings. It serves to create clean transitions between black and white, keeping them physically and conceptually separated.

You must group lights and shadows in a structured way: they are separate ideas and must be kept separate. Do it also on your palette: black and white, each with its own space.

Sean got used to using gesso, not acrylic, at school to save students money. You can use black and white acrylics if you prefer, it's almost the same. It's highly recommended that you exercise from life, but you can also work from photographs. Or better yet, from stills of movies that have good photography work.



We introduce you to *Geliah*.
Although she's very still here, she is a professional dancer.

So she's our specialist for movement drawing classes.

15’

Create your visual narrative.

This exercise serves to learn to interpret and reorganize the values that we see in the model, based on personal criteria, with the purpose of creating a visual narrative. Bit by bit:

† **The visual narrative is the way you adapt what you see, at your discretion.**

† **Your criteria is how you are going to tell things. It refers to the HOW, not the what.**

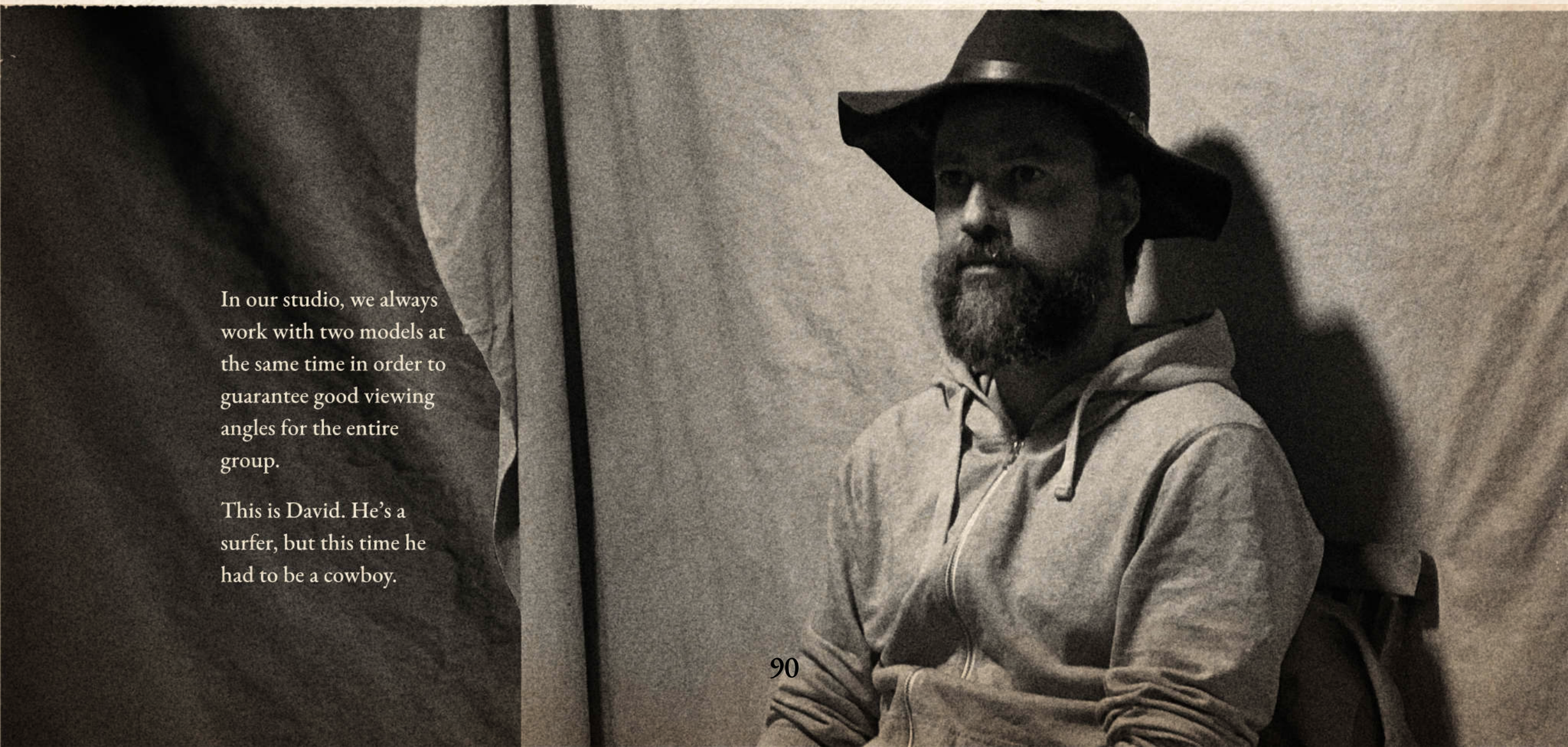
For example, in his demos, Sean exaggerates drama to enhance the excitement of his visual story. As you will see in the following pages, he does not seek fidelity or details, but rather the relationships between values, the very essence of the composition.

Sean prefers to work on the most obvious, safest things at the beginning and try the most daring at the end. He says it's better that way because you can move slowly, without wasting time on big corrections. The correction sequence must be efficient so that you do not have to retrace large sections, only small steps.

The teacher says that you should understand this exercise as *storytelling of value*. How does that feel? Sean wants you to design your composition based on what you observe and interpret from the model, with an emotional intention. **Your painting, your decisions, your values**.

The important thing is not that you get the exact values right, but that you transform them creatively: combine, group, contrast, compress, attenuate and enhance the values in your favor, in order to enrich what you see with your personal story.

By the way... don't forget about the cast shadow! The cast shadow talks about how and where the form ends and, in a studio set, it’s the only testimony you have to create a spatial narrative of the subject in relation to its environment.





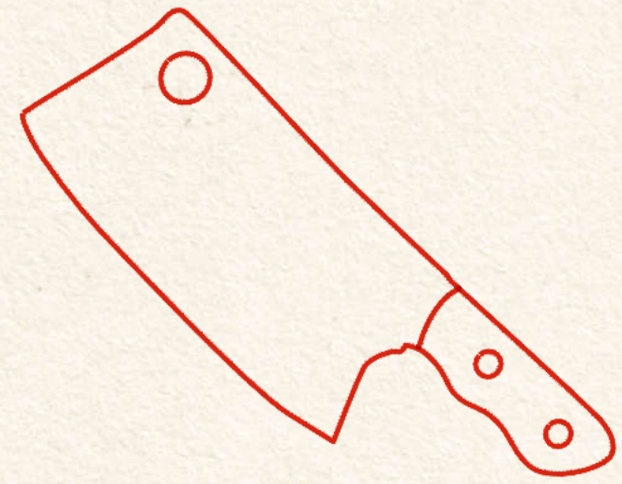
«Black and white photographs look real... because they are! After all, color is not that important», says Sean.





Summary:

Drawing



Drawing:

† Your drawing must have an emotional intention, not descriptive.

† In order to transmit a sensation, you must experience it first.

† You cannot transmit something separated from the way you transmit it.

Value:

† The shadow defines the drawing.

† The light and shadow families are physically and conceptually separated.

† Approach visually the masses of light and shadow in order to judge their relationships.

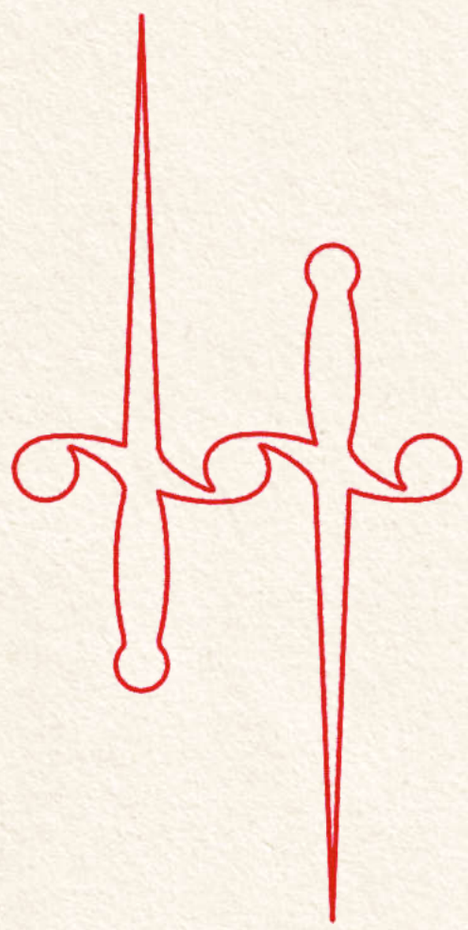
Storytelling:

† The visual narrative is the way you adapt what you see, at your discretion.

† Your criteria is HOW you are going to tell things.

† Creatively rearrange the values you see in order to build your visual story.

Painting



Principles

Variety and contrast

Before starting to talk about principles, I want to clarify that Sean does not admit that there are rules in art: «there are no real rules. It's just art», he says. Sean admits that there are only a couple of principles, but that they are not rules themselves.

A rule is a resource, a recommendation about something that works and that can serve as a starting point when you don't know what to do. A net that saves you from falling, such as anatomy, focal point, perspective, temperature changes, etc. There are a lot of rules that you should know in order to have resources. In general, they are fine if you understand the principle that rules them, and they are an oracle to consult when you are lost.

However, Sean only admits two principles: variety, and its youngest daughter, contrast. They are complex ideas that cannot be reduced to formulas and require greater participation of intuition.

† Variety.

Variety, whatever the kind, is what expresses life.

But variety does not express life by itself. For magic to occur there **must be a certain unity in variety, a sense of order that we can call harmony**. Accuracy is a secondary asset compared to harmony.

† Contrast.

Contrast, whatever the kind, is what makes you feel.

Contrast is nothing other than the dramatization of variety, a way of presenting variety that sparks our hearts. **The less contrast there is, the more tasteless everything looks**. But if we go too far, we run the risk of being too ordinary, and it’s not about increasing contrast just because.

How to look

Looking without seeing.

Sean paints “without painting things”, and also looks “without seeing things”. The idea is similar to feeling the rhythm without using a metronome. **It’s not reliable to judge values looking at isolated areas because the eye balances luminosity**, turning everything into a medium gray that confuses us. This is because, when you fix your eyes on a point, it automatically darkens whatever is too light and lightens whatever is very dark.

Sean does not focus his eyes on any specific place so as not to lose the comparative notion with the other parts. He uses a trick that consists of two steps:

1. He walks his eye up and down several times, like a fast scanner. He just wants to know what’s the most different thing compared to the whole. How fast do you have to scan? Enough so that the eye does not adapt.
2. Then look closely at what makes it different, and think why.

He also does the same quick “walk” to detect if something is wrong in the value relationships between the model and his painting. If the impression is the same, it means that things are going well.

Don't look in the model for what you know, neither with the intention of using the model as an excuse to show off. **Just get the mid-tone of the light and the mid-tone of the shadow. The rest is about adjusting this fundamental relationship**. That relationship should be perfectly readable on your palette; if it is not clearly seen there, something is wrong.

When you make decisions about what you observe, you are not really faithful to reality, but to your criteria about reality. You can train yourself to better see the grays or the warm tones, or whatever you please. The vision is always personal, you can design an illusion that conveys the same thing that reality conveys and perhaps add a touch of extra drama that humanizes it. **The personal design of the illusion underlines what is observed in reality**.

Take advantage of myopia.

The trick doesn't work if you have a decent eyesight, but if you're nearsighted, you can take advantage of your myopia as an instant abstraction tool.

Sean resorts to looking at the model above the glasses in order to simplify the shapes. When you squint you discriminate a lot of information, but there is a drawback: you also alter it. A nearsighted person can see colors and values as they are, without getting lost into details.

How to detect the error

There are only three possible errors.

Fortunately, an error is something that does not *look good* in our painting, so it should be easily detectable with the naked eye. In fact, it would not make much sense to correct errors that cannot be detected by eye, since a painting must be painted to be seen, not to be measured.

And any error that appears or is intuited in our painting is necessarily located in one or more of these things, and in this order of importance:

1. **Drawing:** the right shape in the right place.
2. **Value:** the correct degree of light.
3. **Temperature:** warm or cool.

So when something *doesn't look right*, ask yourself these questions:

1. **Is it correct in size, shape, and position?**
2. **Is it too light or too dark?**
3. **Is it too cool or warm?**

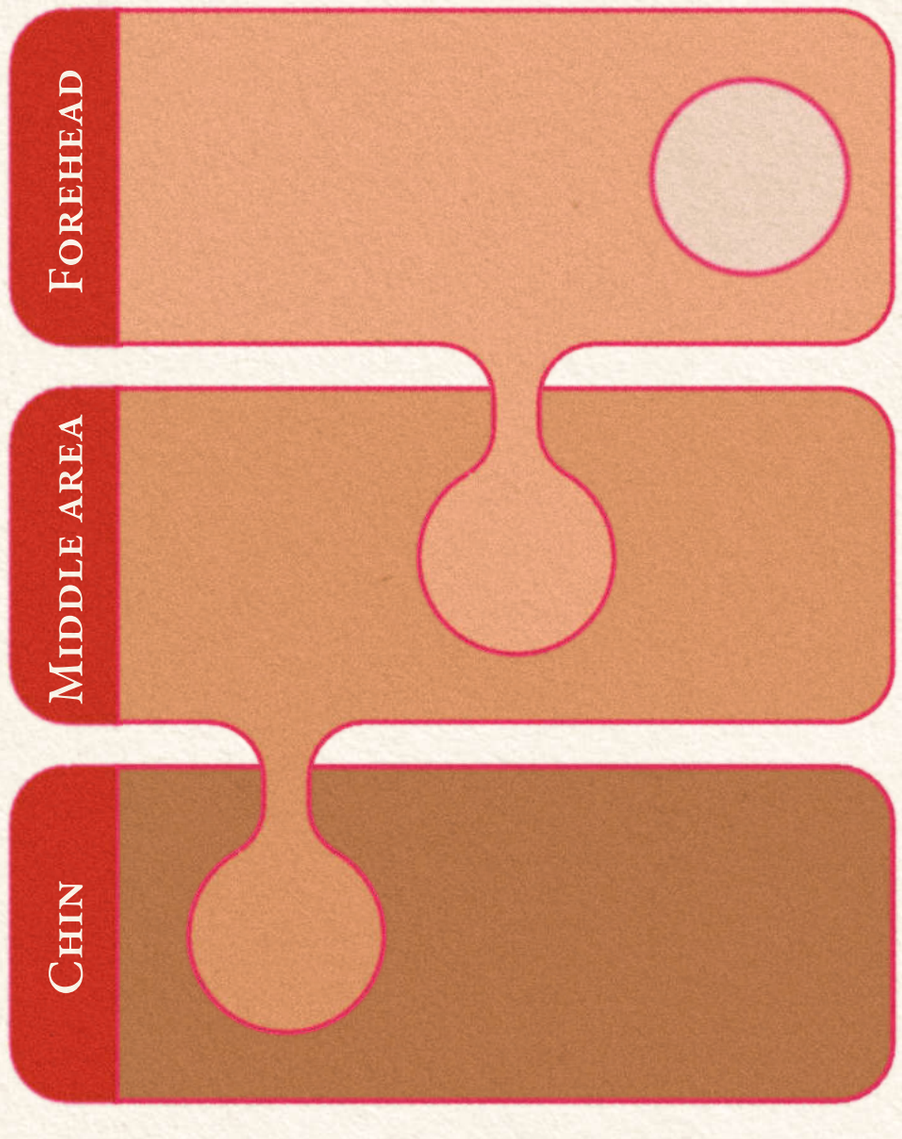
Whenever there is a problem, think about three things; **drawing, value, temperature.** In each brushstroke, decisions are made based on three things and in this order. In fact, it's most likely a drawing or value error, rather than a problem with temperatures.

Drawing is the most basic thing and if the drawing is wrong, everything is wrong. Value is the most important thing to transmit life and the color is the most important thing to transmit emotion to the image.

Although Sean does not seem to give capital importance to the temperature when he affirms that «my process focuses on solving the drawing first, then the values, and then the temperature. In that order. If the drawing and the values are correct, the paint will work well in any color».

Organization of values





Look at the great masters.

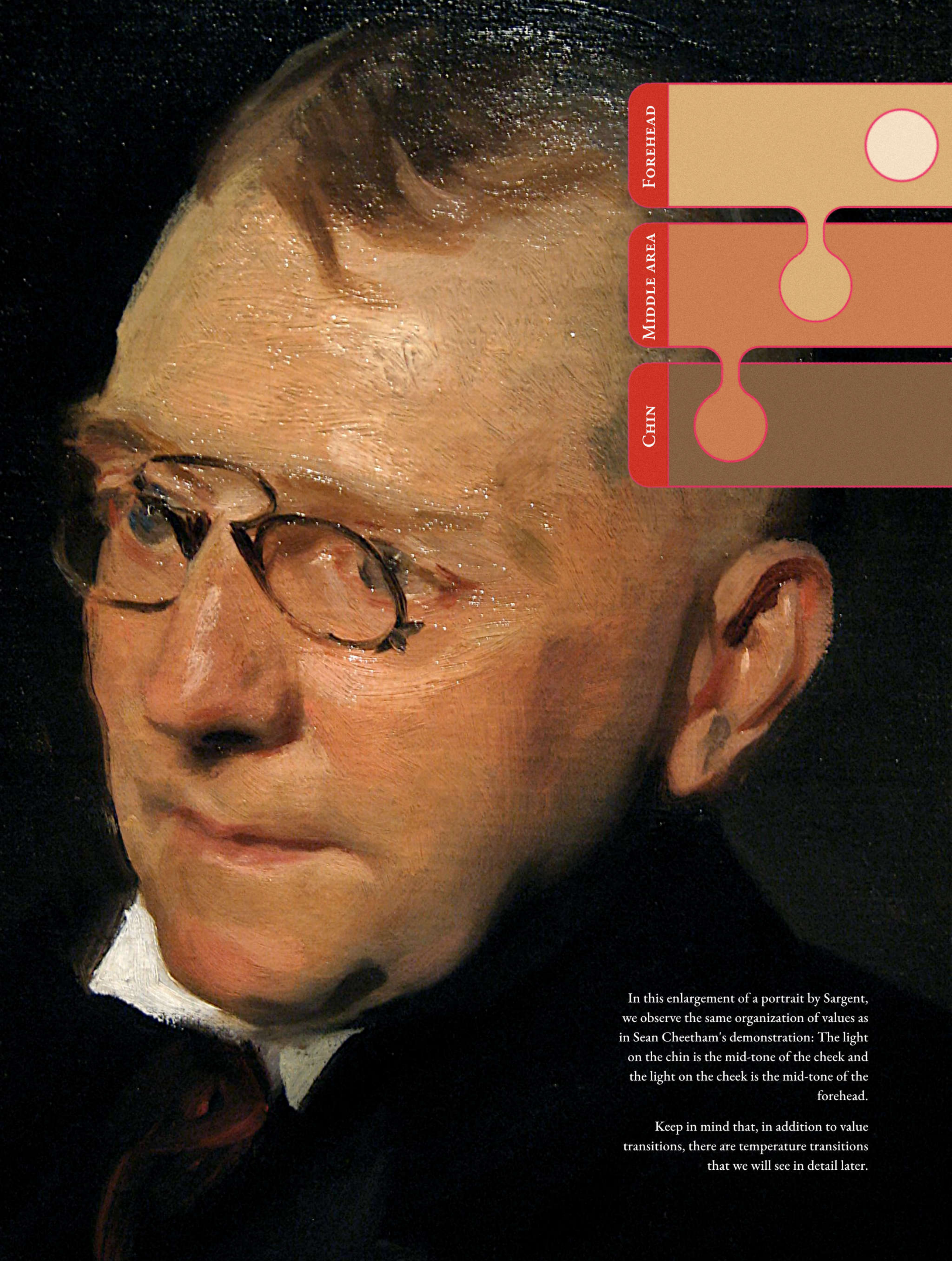
Sean says he learned from Sargent, Rembrandt, and Van Dyck how to organize values so that they are grouped into three large blocks.

It is a very simple approach: the light on the chin is the mid-tone of the middle area and the light on the middle area is the mid-tone of the forehead, where there's also the highest light.

- The lights on the chin are the mid-tones of the middle area of the face.
- The lights on the middle area are the mid-tones of the forehead.
- The highest lights are only on the forehead and the forehead average value is the lights on the middle area.

It makes sense, right?

Sean constantly makes value and temperature adjustments and always within the large families of value and temperature arranged on the palette, so as not to lose the feeling of unity. When the palette is well organized, it's not difficult to deduce how and where to mix the colors to organize the values of our portrait.



In this enlargement of a portrait by Sargent, we observe the same organization of values as in Sean Cheetham's demonstration: The light on the chin is the mid-tone of the cheek and the light on the cheek is the mid-tone of the forehead.

Keep in mind that, in addition to value transitions, there are temperature transitions that we will see in detail later.

Organization of temperatures



The three-color dominants

These are the three great blocks of dominant temperatures of the head:

1. Yellow on the forehead.
2. Red on the cheeks, eyes, ears and nose.
3. Blue, green, or gray on the chin.

Tips for working temperatures.

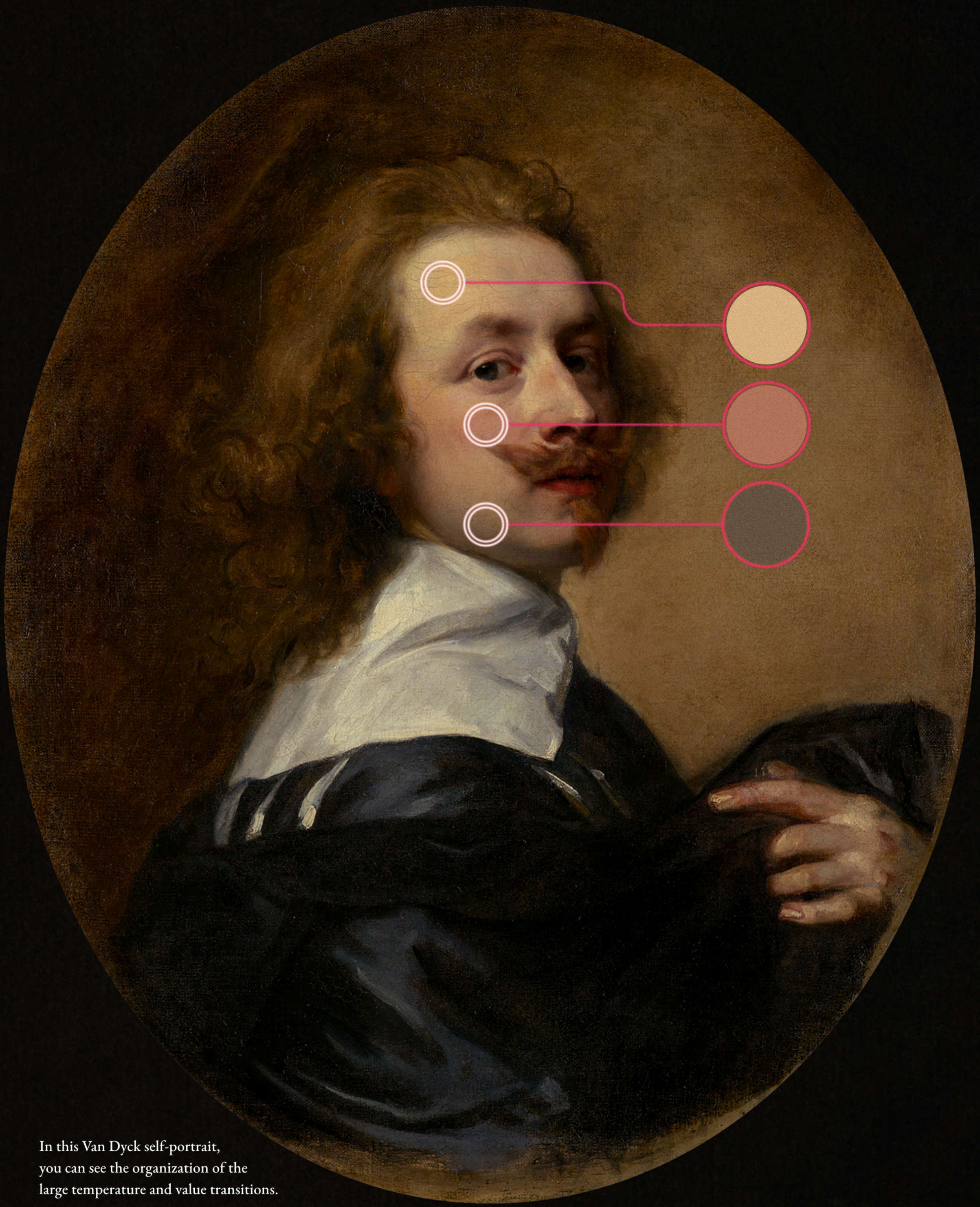
† The three dominants serve as an orientation to add variety, but they are not a rule. These are very subtle changes and sometimes you will not see them in the model. It's your personal decision to dramatize the three temperature changes or ignore them.

† In each strip, is a secondary variation of minor temperature changes —warm, cool, warm, cool... They are not, strictly speaking, "cool" or "warm" colors in absolute terms, but cooler or warmer colors in relation to its immediate surroundings: for example, a red admits variations of cooler red, without red being a properly cool color. We will see an example of this later in a work by Rubens.

† Be careful not to go overly blue when you set the highlights. Remember that you can also use purple, which is a cool color and continues to be reddish, which will allow you more versatility to nuance it, as we will see later.

† The skin is always within the range of oranges, and it's recommended that temperature changes respect this background harmony.

† In women, it is not advisable to abuse the cool temperature on the chin, since it may seem like a trace of a beard.



In this Van Dyck self-portrait,
you can see the organization of the
large temperature and value transitions.

Rubens temperature changes

In this detail of a work by Rubens, you can see how changes in temperature occur without resorting to properly *cool* or *warm* colors:

† Color temperatures are relative to their immediate surroundings, so orange looks cooler in the light and warmer in the shadow.

† Gray is more bluish due to its proximity to orange.

The variation on Velázquez

Velázquez can paint a portrait in two warm colors, alternating cooler versions of the warm colors.

You don't need literally cool colors to create the illusion, but relatively cooler. The important thing is that **there is variety in the temperature**.

Create variety in temperatures and forget whether those color versions are “cool” or “warm”; you don't need a red to express warmth —it can be a relatively warm blue!

Organization of the brushstroke

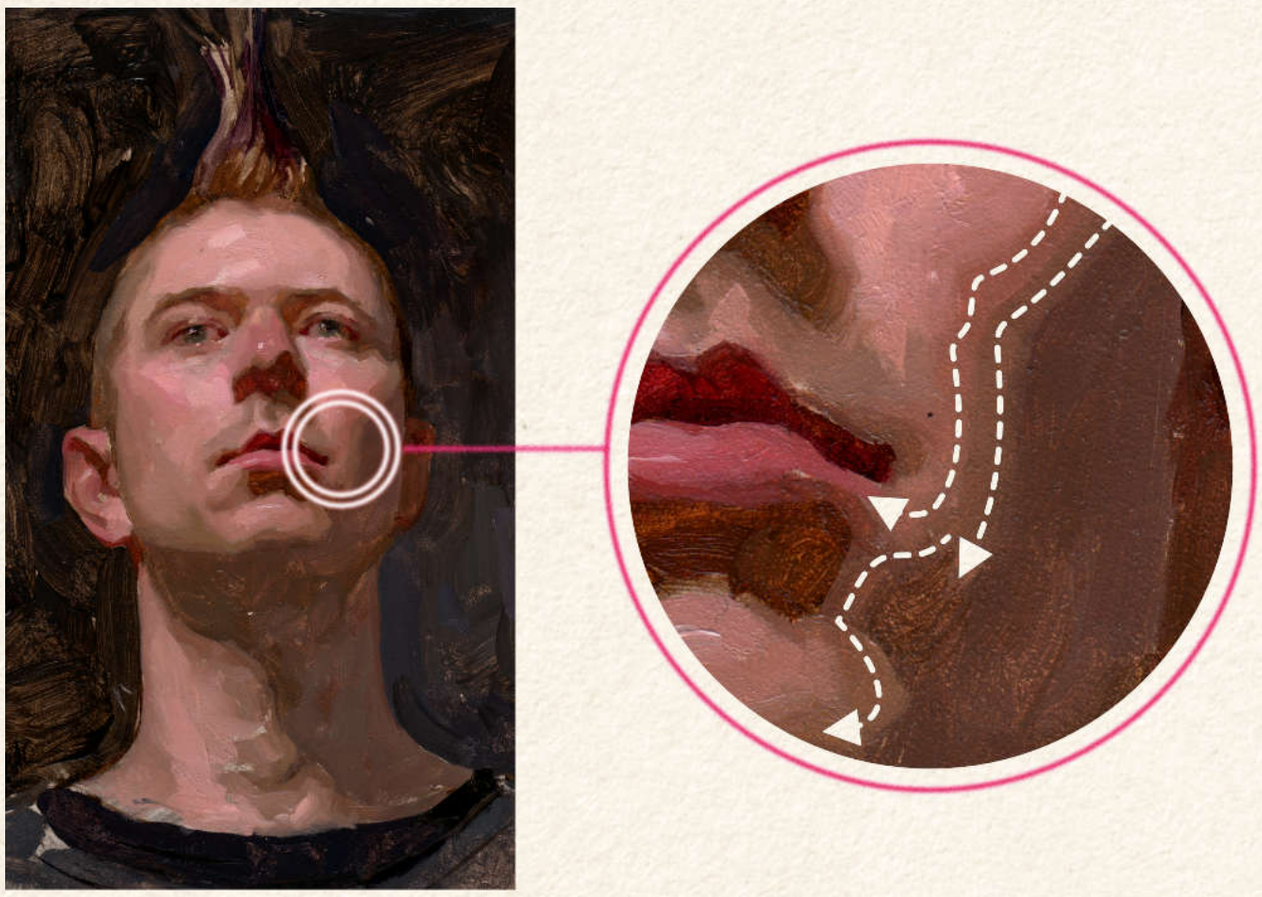
A change of plane involves a change of value, in addition to a change of direction and treatment of the brushstroke. Assuming that any portrait can be synthesized into spheres and cylinders, ask yourself; is it part of a sphere, a cylinder, or an intersection? The answer will determine the direction and intention of your brush stroke.

The brushstroke «along the form».

Traditionally it's recommended to model the shape with "enveloping" brushstrokes, through the shape, such as surrounding it. However, Sean tends to direct the course of his brushstrokes along the shape, reinforcing its long axis. He learned this resource from his mentor, Michael Hussar, who in turn observed it in Sargent's work, as we will see in the following pages.

Sargent's brushstroke is long, full of paint, calligraphic, and usually occupies the halftone located between the light and shadow areas. He also uses it to define the closest things using the background color.

This is a resource that works well when working in combination with crisscross, electric and zigzagging brush strokes. They are specially indicated to *fill* and consolidate the flattest surfaces, such as the forehead and cheeks. Combining both treatments, solidity, contrast and variety are achieved, which are the key to expressing life.



In this 90-minute demo by Sean Cheetham, we observe an organization of brushstrokes very similar to that practiced by John Singer Sargent.

Sean uses long brushstrokes, «along the form», which enclose the planes worked with short and interwoven brushstrokes, as well as scrubbing.

By doing this he gets variety and contrast in the brushstroke, avoiding monotony, which is responsible for ruining so many portraits.



Sargent's brushstroke

Notice the behavior of the rhythms and directions in Sargent's brushstroke, flowing along the shape in contrast to the zig-zag brushstroke:

† Long and enveloping brushstroke in the mid-tones. It is sinuous and suggestive.

† Short, crisscrossed brushstroke on the forehead and cheeks. It is more repetitive and electric.

Sargent's brushstroke

In this example, the phenomenon of contrast and variety between brush strokes is observed much more clearly:

† Long brush strokes define and contain the shape in a matrix of uninterrupted calligraphic rhythms.

† While the zigzagging brushstroke, short and broken, reaffirms the intersection of the planes inside.

Variety in the brushstroke.

Each brushstroke communicates something, and its meaning and conceptual scope is the key to reading your painting. As with writing, **we always communicate something to the viewer through the variety and calligraphy of our brush**. The important thing is to transmit life consciously, instead of communicating insecurity and confusion unconsciously.

These are some examples of unconscious communication with the brush that you should avoid:

† Every time you put static information you transmit statism; that is, the opposite of movement, which is the metaphor of life.

† Every time you put the same information without variation, your visual language communicates that what you're painting is flat, inert, and dull.

† If you only worry about being *beautiful*, you convey that your artistic purpose is frivolous and superficial, and your portrait will look hollow and stiff, like a mask.

† If your color falls short in temperature variation, you convey that you fear to communicate strong emotions and that you prefer to take shelter in the comfort of apathy.

† If there is not much difference between your strokes, you communicate that there are monotony and poverty of ideas in the universe of your painting.

† If your line is hesitant, you communicate confusion and not being sure of what you are saying.

† If you insist on overworking the same area over and over again with the same brushstroke, you communicate graphic laconism; that is, something akin to the verbiage of an undocumented politician.





Velázquez's Christ is one of those formidable paintings where not even two brush strokes are alike, but neither does he fall into the exaggeration of variety. Everything is at the service of naturalism.

The variation of the brushstroke is delicate but effective. The temperature changes are subtle but powerful. The variety in the consistency of the painting is of a symphonic complexity...

Flesh feels like real flesh but when we get closer we see that it's an illusion.

Coll's line

In this illustration by Joseph Clement Coll, we see how the calligraphic variety, the diversity of the caliber, flow, speed and direction of the stroke, without the need for color, have enough strength to create an illusion.

Engravers and graphic artists are an invaluable source of inspiration for painters. You can learn almost everything about brush handling from them.

Materials

Everything you will need

Easel.

Sean always paints using his inseparable *pochade box* made by Ben Haggett, because it's much more manageable than a French easel. He likes its built-in wooden palette because he travels a lot and doesn't want to carry glass.

Inside his travel pack, he carries a document, always visible, which tames those customs agents who are fearful of oil colors. It's worn due to so many trips, but he says it still works well for him. We designed a document with the necessary warnings for customs agents, which you can download for free here. We recommend it to avoid any annoyance.

Tripod.

He uses a lightweight folding tripod. Specifically, the *A1350 MeFoto Travel Tripod* model.





Brushes.

He rejects exotic hair and prefers inexpensive nylon brushes. He uses Trekell's, and he even has his own set. «They are totally black, so they match my clothes», he jokes.

For small brushes, he prefers round ones with a short handle, because he can create new registers by modeling the tip.

For large brushes, he prefers filberts. They allow him a great variety of calligraphic strokes with a twist of the wrist; you use it flat, edged, and scrubbed.

He never uses flat brushes, they don't work well for him.

He recommends soft brushes for painting on panel and bristle brushes for painting on canvas. The bristles, on a panel, drag the paint to such a point that he uses them as erasers.

Painting knives.

Sean does not use painting knives for painting. He likes the flexible wedge-shaped knives, which he uses to clean the palette and to make mixtures, avoiding damaging the brushes.

The Damascus knife was forged by himself using a cutout he had leftover when making a chef's knife. He says he never uses it, but he always carries it with him because Damascus knives with coffin-shaped handles are cool.

Support.

He uses *Ampersand Gessobord* panels, usually 9x12 ”.

He never uses canvas because the texture bothers him. The rigid and flat support allows him to better control the texture in all its range of transparency and softness, something that the fabric’s own texture conditions too much.

Other materials.

† He uses *Gamsol* as a solvent.

† He always has paper towels on hand.



1



Cadmium Green Pale serves to cool down mixtures and to neutralize a red that gets out of control. You can also use it as a cool yellow.

It's the most expensive and toxic color on the palette, and one of those you will use little. You don't need a lot on the palette, but you need to have it on hand.

2



W&N **Burnt Sienna** is very transparent and orange. It's not real Burnt Sienna, but a transparent iron oxide. In fact, you could replace it with transparent iron oxide.

It's a very important color on the palette since it serves as the basis for skin colors. Really get a good amount of it.

3



This red, called **Scarlet Lake**, is made with Naphthol, a pigment that is used to avoid Cadmium Red, which is very expensive and toxic.

It is used to adjust the temperature of the mixtures in the skin tones, especially in combination with yellow ocher and white.

4



Yellow Ocher is one of the most versatile colors on the palette. Although it's opaque, you will use it in both light and shadow mixtures.

On the other hand, it's a key color for the basic palette of every painter, and essential for doing the limited palette exercise that Sean proposes.

5



The **Indian Yellow** is totally transparent and with an orange dominant. You won't use it much, but it's very versatile because it stains the white without making it chalky.

Mixed with white you get a tint that can compete with Lemon Yellow or Light Cadmium Yellow. It also helps you adjust shadows.

6



Titanium White is a cool, opaque, non-toxic color. Sean prefers *Gamblin's Radiant White* because it's made with safflower oil, so it yellows less over time.

Of course, prepare a generous amount of it in the center of your palette.

7



Manganese Blue has a shade similar to Cerulean but it's transparent. It's a must-have on Sean's palette, and you can prepare a fair amount.

The one by W&N is not a real Manganese Blue, and it's obtained with Phthalocyanine Blue. Substitute colors achieved by mixing, are called *hue*.

8



Cobalt Blue is a semi-opaque color with medium toxicity. It has a reddish dominant and you will use it a lot in combination with the Burnt Sienna to paint the shadows. Prepare a good amount.

9



Like Indian Yellow, **Dioxazine Purple** is a color that you won't use much, but it comes in handy when you need a powerful purple.

Sean generally uses it to tint the highlights, as it can turn blue or red, creating a prismatic effect. Put just a little on the palette, but make sure it's there.

10



There are many kinds of Alizarin, and Sean recommends Old Holland's **Alizarin Crimson Lake Extra** because of its tone and permanence (quinacridone).

It's red with high dyeing power, transparent and deep, which feels like blood. You will use it to indicate blood flowing underneath the skin and, in greater quantity, to make chromatic black and make temperature adjustments.

11



Olive Green is a shade obtained by mixing transparent pigments. Gamblin's is too light and Old Holland's is too opaque. The one by W&N is perfect, and the one by Rembrandt works similarly.

You are going to use it in great quantity, almost exclusively as a base to make chromatic black.

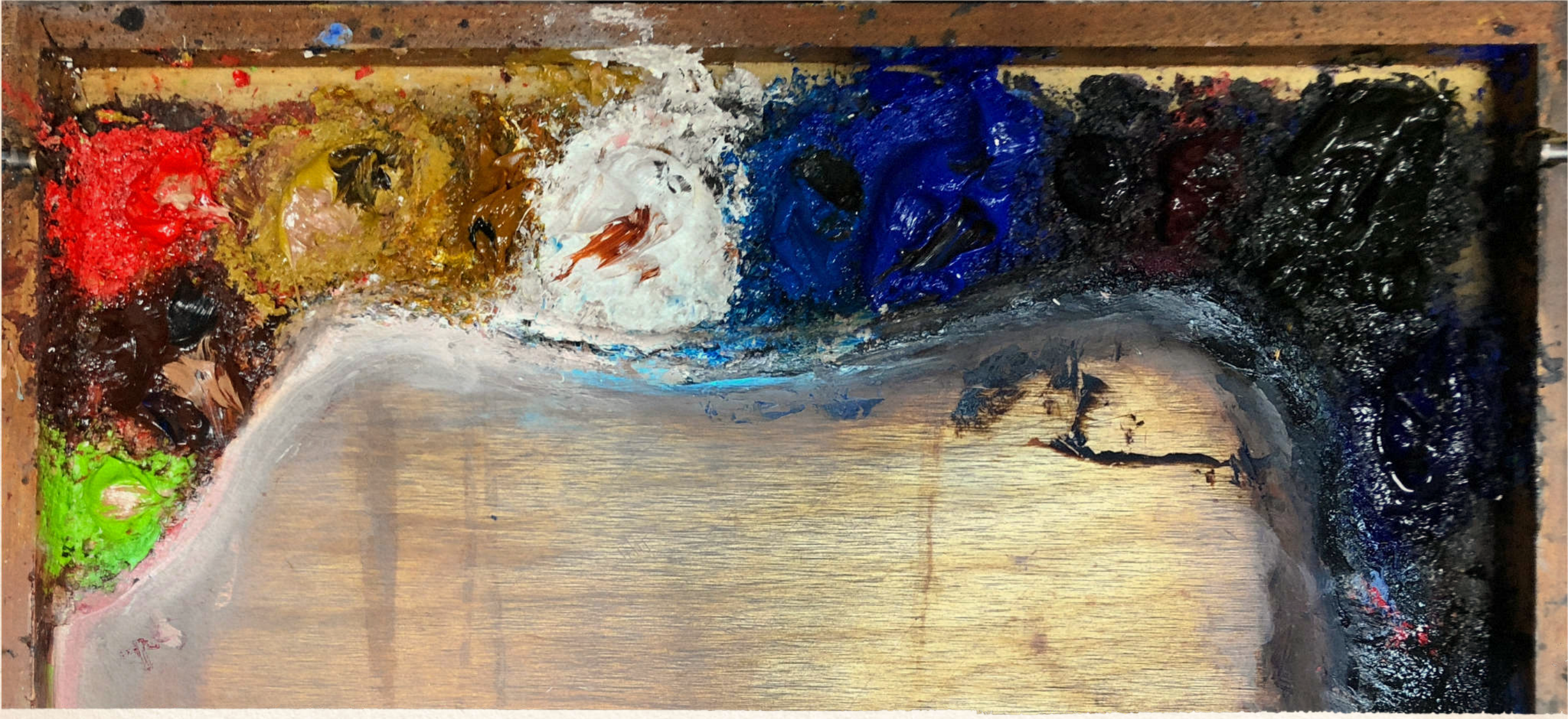
12



Ultramarine Blue is the most versatile blue and cannot be missing from any palette. Here you will mainly use it to make chromatic black and adjust shadows.

Mud Palette©





Palette

You must have noticed that the colors transform as soon as they touch your painting. This phenomenon is because you judge the colors compared to the background. You must distrust the feelings that your painting transmits and entrust yourself to your palette, because when you see that soulless color on your work you venture to rectify it and... well, you already know the end of the story. Everything is ruined in a blink.

In Sean's words, «remixing things is a real bummer», but it's always better not to have to constantly rectify the colors we put on our work, spoiling everything. Of course, we all would like to nail it at the first attempt, alla prima. But is that possible? Can it be learned or is it pure virtuosity?

Good and bad news: yes, you can learn and yes, it will take a lot of work.

It’s not something you didn't know before you started reading. If you are willing to work hard, here you will find everything you need to know, and where to start. And for free.



Michael Hussar's palette has an organization very similar to Sean's. Here he replaces the Cadmium Green Pale with what seems to be a Magenta.

The image comes from a demonstration at the London Tattoo Convention in 2012. See the video on Youtube.

Mud Palette.

Sean Cheetham's palette, nicknamed *Mud Palette*, is a variation of Michael Hussar's palette. Michael was his mentor at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California. The palette has great versatility and is designed to paint almost anything with it.

Many artists use limited palettes because limitations benefit harmony control. In fact, Sean teaches his students to work with Zorn's limited palette[1] first before introducing the full palette. **So limited palettes are fine for learning, and Sean doesn't stick with them**, he prefers the power of a well-equipped palette for his personal work.

Winsor & Newton is the most consistent brand for its color chart. Sean confesses not to be a fan of the brand but acknowledges that they produce formidable colors with ideal consistency. Those are the ones he uses since school days and he feels comfortable with them.

The palette that I will explain is designed for studio lighting. Its organization is very flexible since it is **based on adjustments of halftone mixes**. If, for example, you were in a moonlight situation, all your mid-tones would have a cool dominant.

«Trust your palette».

The palette not the painting, is the place where you have to understand colors, make decisions without the distractions of drawing and the characteristic aspects of your work. You wouldn't even think of drawing on your palette, so you shouldn't mix colors on your painting, either.

For Sean, who spends most of his time checking values on the palette, **applying the color to the support is a conclusion, not a trial and error**. The palette is actually your painting, and the support is where you put it in its place. Stick with this idea: **«If it looks good on your palette it will be good on your painting»**.

Sean has a habit inherited from Michael Hussar: he places a brushstroke and takes his time to look at it closely. If it fits in its place, he goes on. If it doesn't fit, he keeps looking for the right color on the palette. This simple habit is the key to avoid carrying mistakes.

Execution is the least important thing in the entire process. When the mix reaches the panel, it's executed with the speed and security of someone who is confident, who knows what he's doing because he has tried it on the palette before and already knows that it will work.

Organization.



1. Anders Zorn was a Swedish painter of the late 19th century. In this detail from a self-portrait of his, you can see his famous palette of four colors: Yellow Ocher, Vermillion Red, Ivory Black, and Lead White. And with that, he managed perfectly for almost everything.

The key to this process is the division into three phases: drawing, shadows, and lights, where each section gradually adds value until it reaches its completion without surprises, alla prima. The structure of the palette is 100% rational and is based on the interaction of two basic ideas:

† **The physical and conceptual division between light and shadow.**

† **Light and shadow mid-tones adjusting.**

The palette is a structured system of light and shadow mid-tone adjustments, distinguished in two large blocks:

† In the left half, there are light and opaque colors.

† In the right half, there are dark and transparent colors.

Two large families of values on the palette, perfectly differentiated, which are adjusted in both value and chroma. Transparent pigments for shadows, opaque for lights. Thin, transparent and dimmed shadows; thick lights with a variety of temperatures and high chroma.

Harmony.

All the palette work comes down to **how similar the colors are while contemplating their differences**. So the palette is organized in the same way that families of color differ and interact.

In order to achieve precision and harmony, Sean underlines the importance of a solid drawing and a system of pre-mixes based on halftones, «dirty» or «muddy» (as he calls them) colors that match all mixes. In this way, the relationship between light and shadow is like a ying-yang; separate but with a little bit of the opposite.

These mid-tone premixes work very well to achieve a perfectly harmonic approach. Pre-mixing is understood as a kind of «primal clay» that, through successive adjustments, produces several «stem mixtures». However, you must keep in mind that these premixes are not used for direct painting, they are a means of obtaining secondary mixtures from them.

This eliminates the need to readjust the relationships between value and chroma when the painting is already too advanced, preventing it from getting dirty. The dark key is set at the beginning, and harmony is maintained as long as our palette is kept tidy.

By involving all the colors in a common premix it’s easier to achieve coherence, unity, and harmony. This occurs especially in the transition areas between values with different color temperatures which tend to get dirty easily.



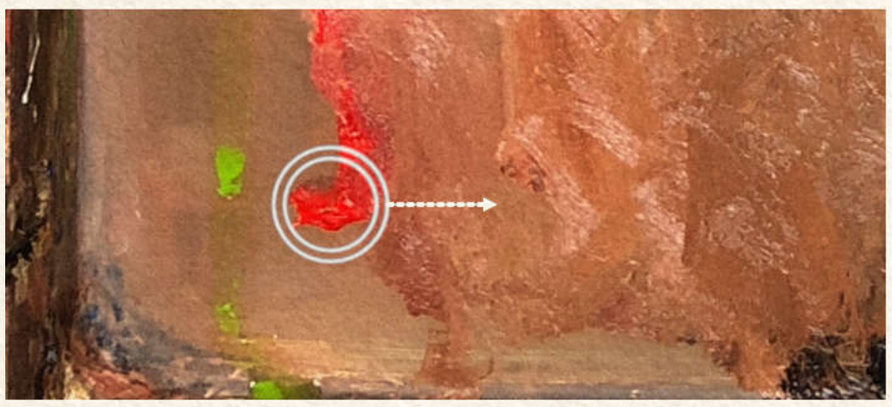
Brushes.

Having the palette organized also involves organizing brushes. **There is no point in isolating mixes without white on the palette if you use a white contaminated brush.**

To avoid this, Sean uses four brushes, which he keeps separate:

- A large brush for the background.
- A brush for the darkest shadows.
- A brush for the shadows.
- A brush for the lights.

You do not need a set of brushes with various shapes. Most of the time **it's not necessary to change the brush, it is enough to model its shape**. With a round brush, Sean's favorite, you already have many options; if you crush it against the palette it will take the shape of a fan, and if you twist it, it will sharpen. The shape of the brush is flexible and you can adjust it to your needs without the hassle of having several different versions of the same brush.



Tip: When introducing a very powerful color into a mix, especially a mix that has a lot of white, the wisest thing to do is placing a small amount on one side.

Then the pigment is gradually incorporated, dosing its incorporation by dragging it into the mixture.

Organization

Tidy palette, tidy mind.

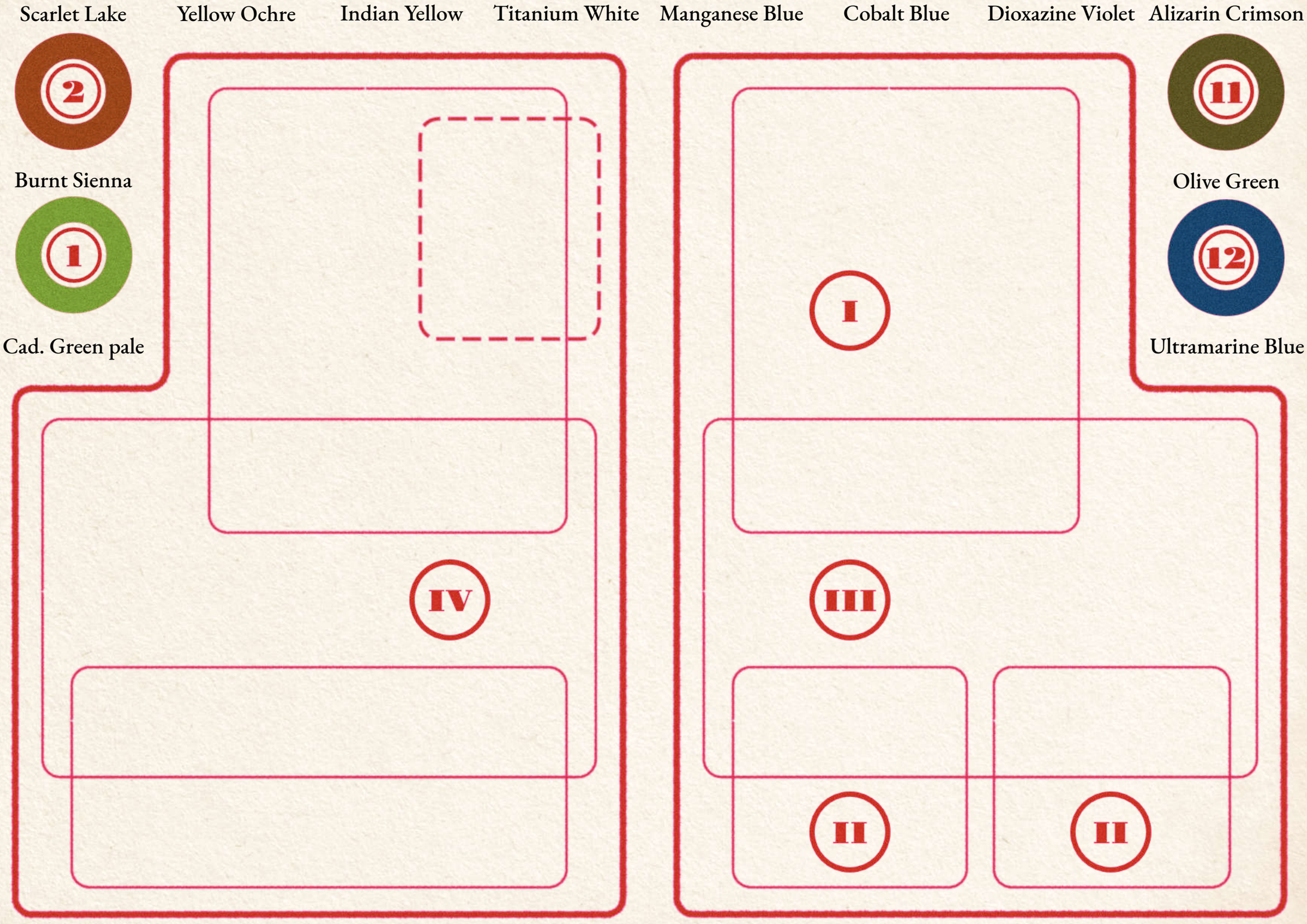
Mixes WITH white

Meixes WITHOUT white

3 Scarlet Lake
4 Yellow Ochre
5 Indian Yellow
6 Titanium White
7 Manganese Blue
8 Cobalt Blue
9 Dioxazine Violet
10 Alizarin Crimson

2 Burnt Sienna
1 Cad. Green pale

11 Olive Green
12 Ultramarine Blue



Pre-mixes

Quick Guide



I

I. Chromatic black:

It's obtained with Olive Green, Alizarin Crimson and Ultramarine Blue. This mixture is diluted with *Gamsol* and used to tone the support. You will also use it for drawing and for darkest darks.

II. Clothing and background:

You will prepare two pre-mixes with the mid color of the clothes and the background. They will serve as the basis for harmonizing the palette.

II





III

III. Mid-shadows:

It's made with Burnt Sienna and Cobalt Blue. This mixture gets cooler or warmer, creating variety. It's darkened with Chromatic Black and interacts with premixes for the mid color of the background and clothing.

IV. Mid-light — «band-aid» color:

It's made with Burnt Sienna, Titanium White, and Manganese Blue. It's darkened with a premix of Dark Light and lightened with a premix of Titanium White and Manganese Blue. Temperature changes are mostly adjusted with Yellow Ocher, Cadmium Green and Scarlet Lake.

IV



Mixes without white

Right Half



Manganese Blue



Cobalt Blue



Dioxazine Violet



Alizarine Crimson



Olive Green



Ultramarine Blue

Pre-Mix Guide

#I

Darkest darks

Chromatic black:

1. Support toning
2. Drawing
3. Darkest darks

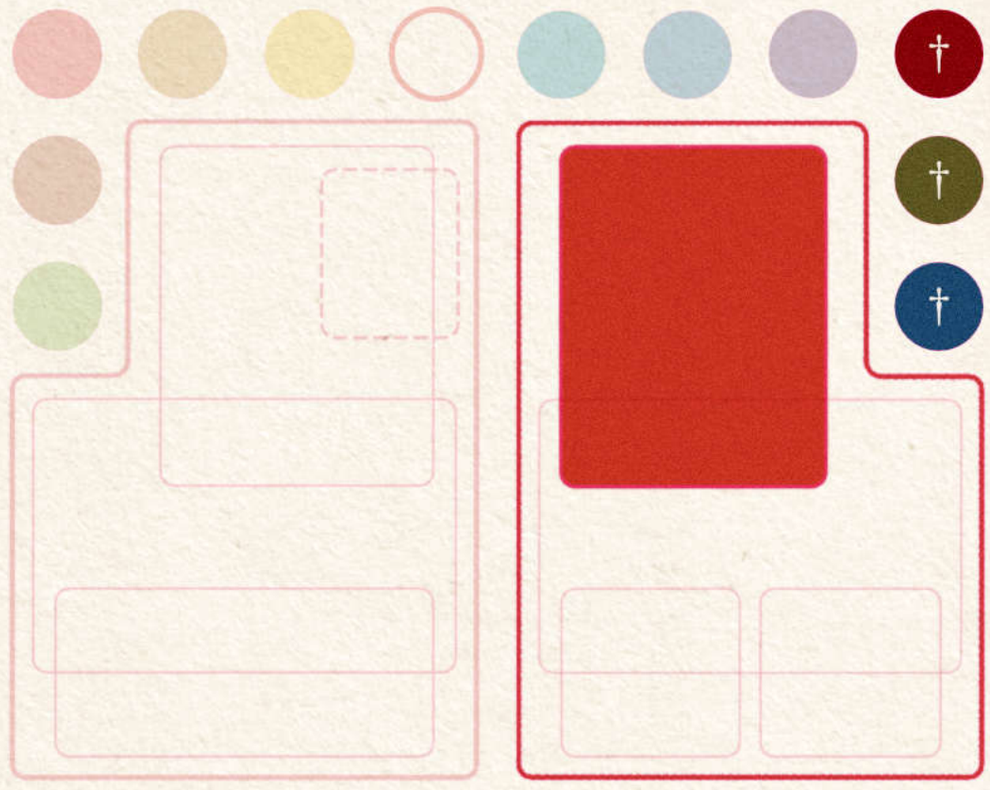


Colors:

† Alizarin Crimson

† Olive green

† Ultramarine Blue



#II

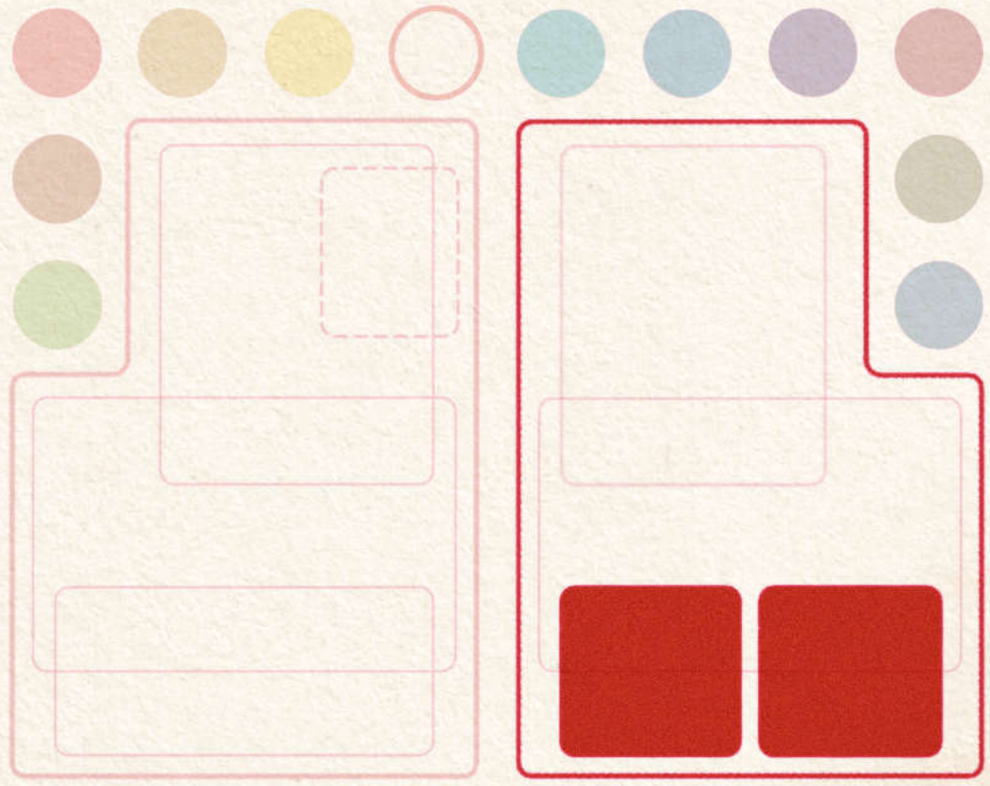
Clothing and background

Pre-mix # 1:
Clothing mid-tone



Pre-mix #2:
Background mid-tone





#III

Mid-Shadows

Shadows:

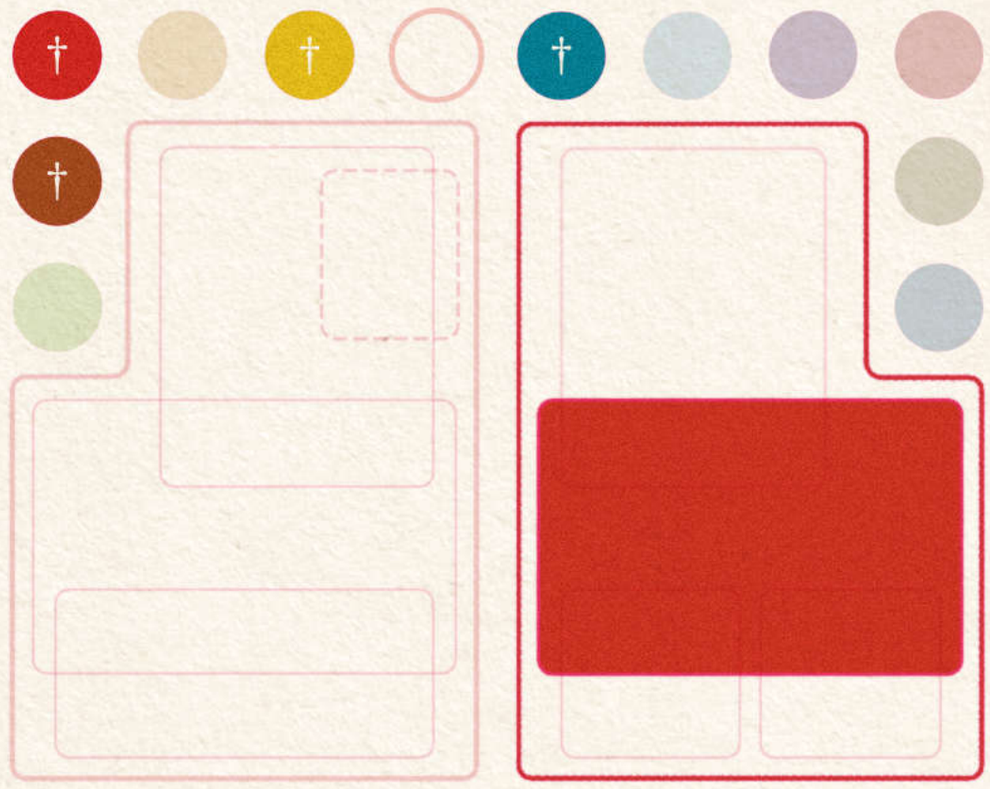
1. Dark
2. Mid
3. Light

Mid-shadow premix:

† Burnt Sienna (main)

† Manganese Blue (main)

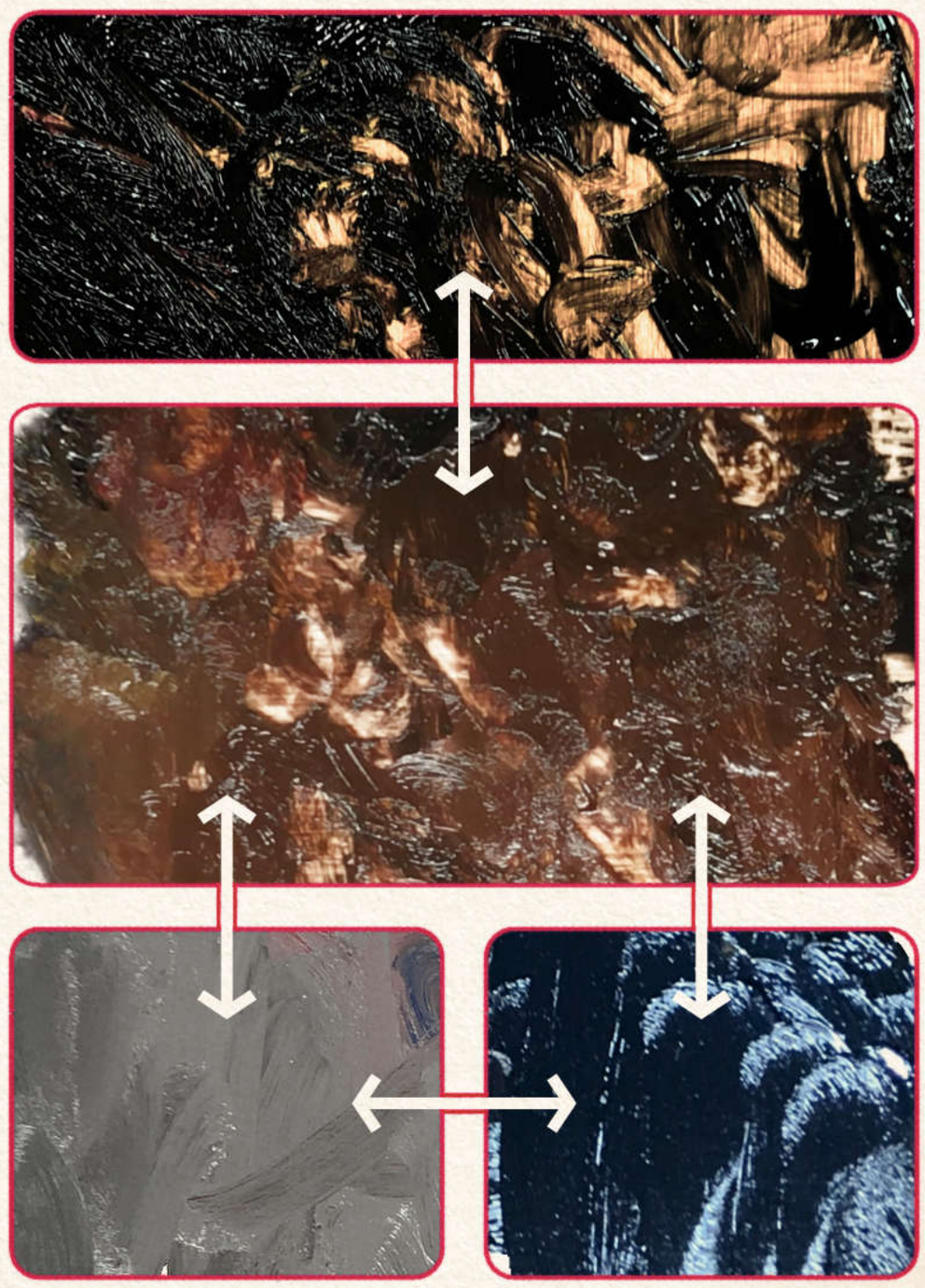
† Yellow Ocher, Scarlet Lake (adjustments)



Mid-shadow interactions:

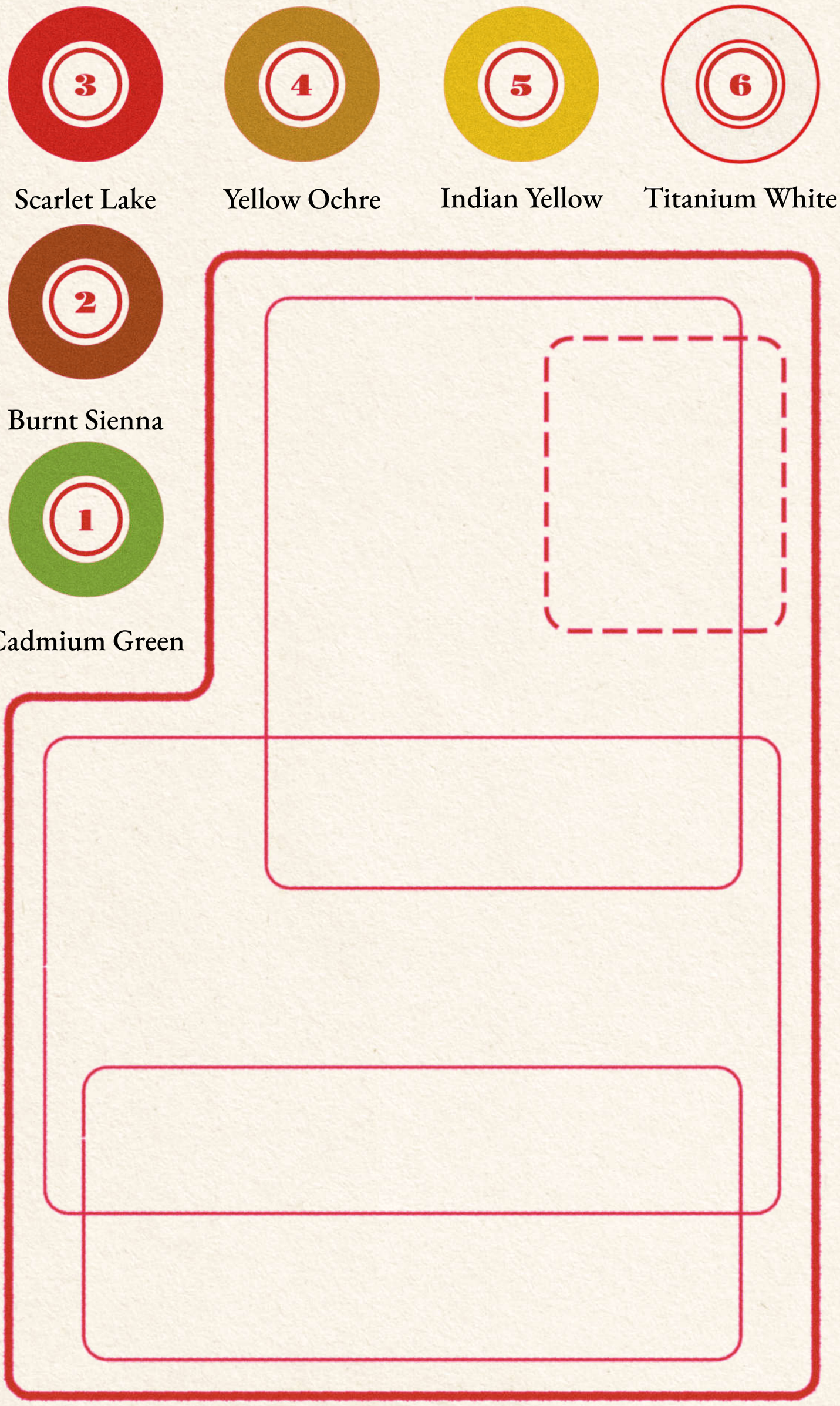
- Chromatic black
- Clothing color pre-mix
- Background color pre-mix





Mixes with white

Left Half

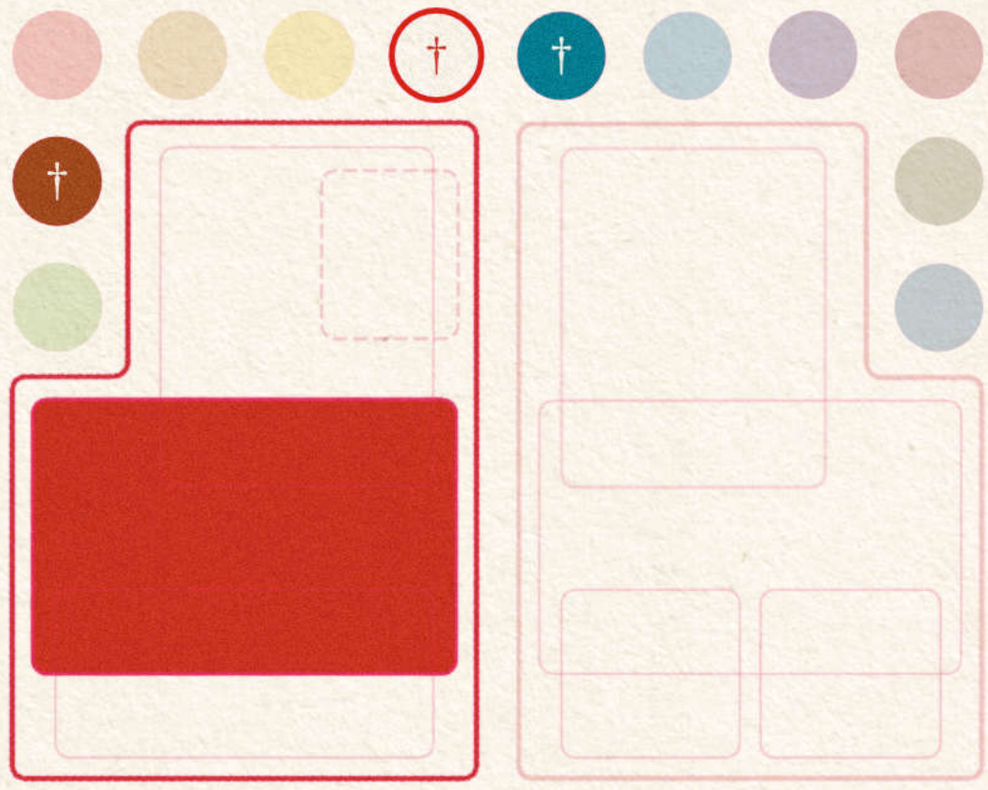


#IV

Mid-Lights

Lights:

1. Dark
2. Mid
3. Highlights



Mid light premix — «band-aid» color:

† Burnt Sienna

† Titanium White

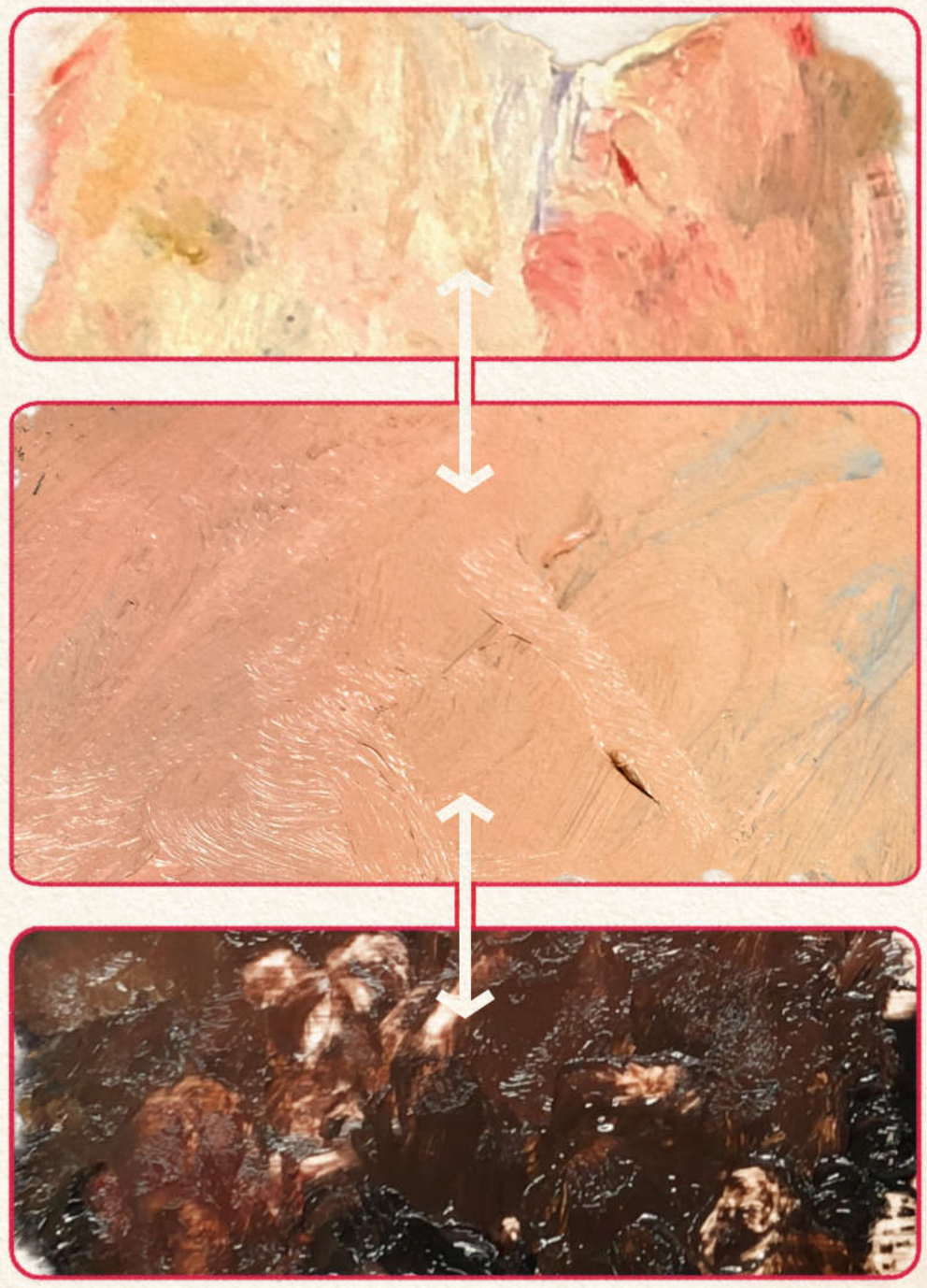
† Manganese Blue

Mid light interactions:

► Dark light (pre-mix of Burnt Sienna and Cobalt Blue + temperature changes).

► Cool highlights (pre-mix of Titanium White and Manganese Blue).





MENORCA PULSAR

ART FARM

Ultra HQ HIGH GRADE



ALLA PRIMA DEMOS

by SEAN CHEETHAM



SCH

OIL COLOR/90 min.

ADVENTURE

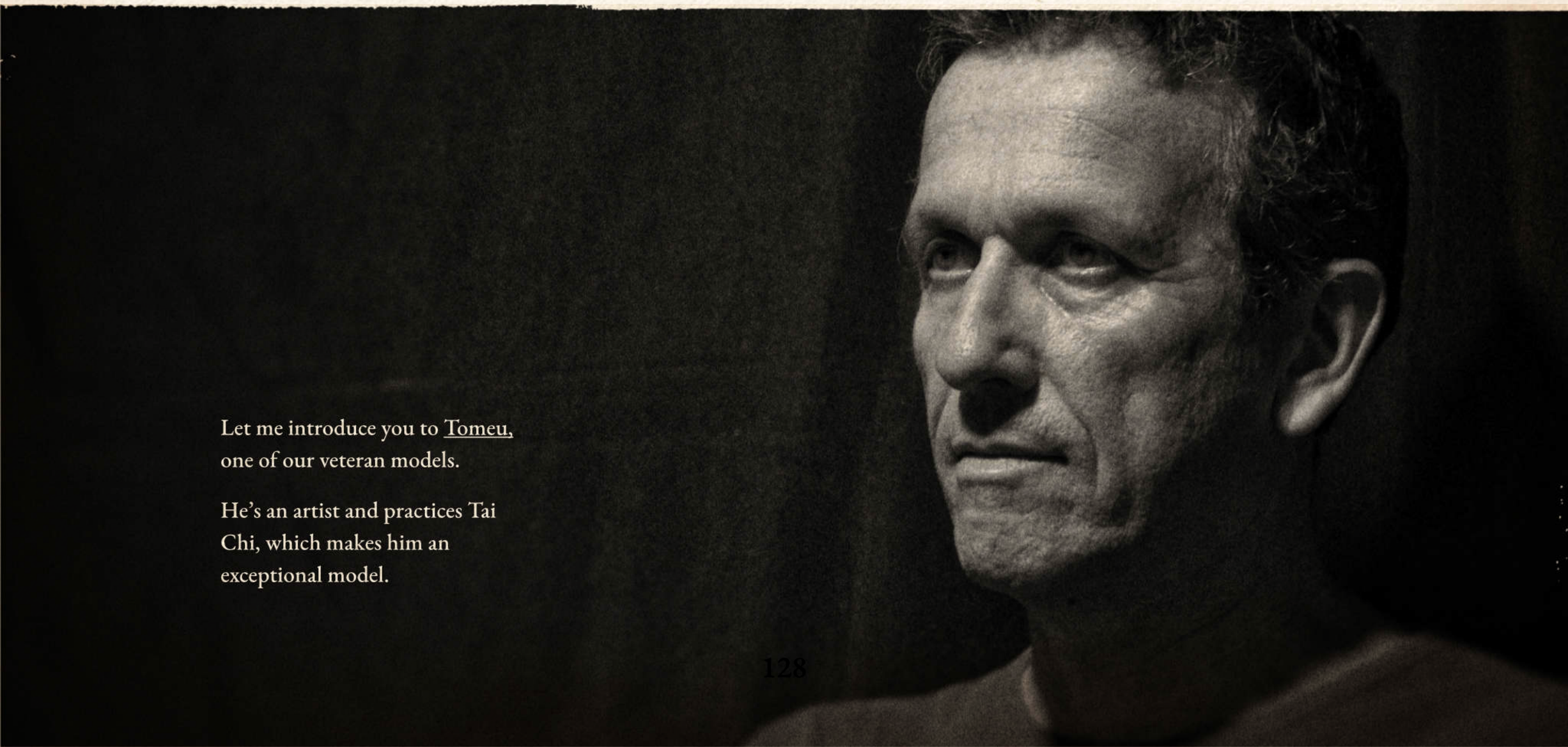
90'

Demonstration

Well, now that you know his life, his philosophy, how he draws, and how he organizes his palette, the time has come. We'll show you how Sean manages to paint an alla prima portrait in just 90 minutes. To keep things simple, in the follow-up to this demo, three 6-minute breaks for the model were omitted.

Surely the quick guide to pre-mixes was a bit confusing for you, coming so suddenly and before you start. It's normal, I have only advanced these details in order to make you familiar with the structure of the palette. We'll immediately begin to see it step by step:

1. Chromatic black
2. Toning
3. Drawing
4. Background and clothing
5. Mid-shadow
6. Mid-light (band-aid color)
7. Dark light and transition
8. Highlights, prismatic light, and specular light
9. Tips for finishes



Let me introduce you to Tomeu, one of our veteran models.

He's an artist and practices Tai Chi, which makes him an exceptional model.



Chromatic black.

Sean's order of execution is dark to light, so the first step is to create a very dark premix, a *chromatic black*. This premix is not for direct painting but is the core from where Sean gets warm and cool versions of the darkest darks.

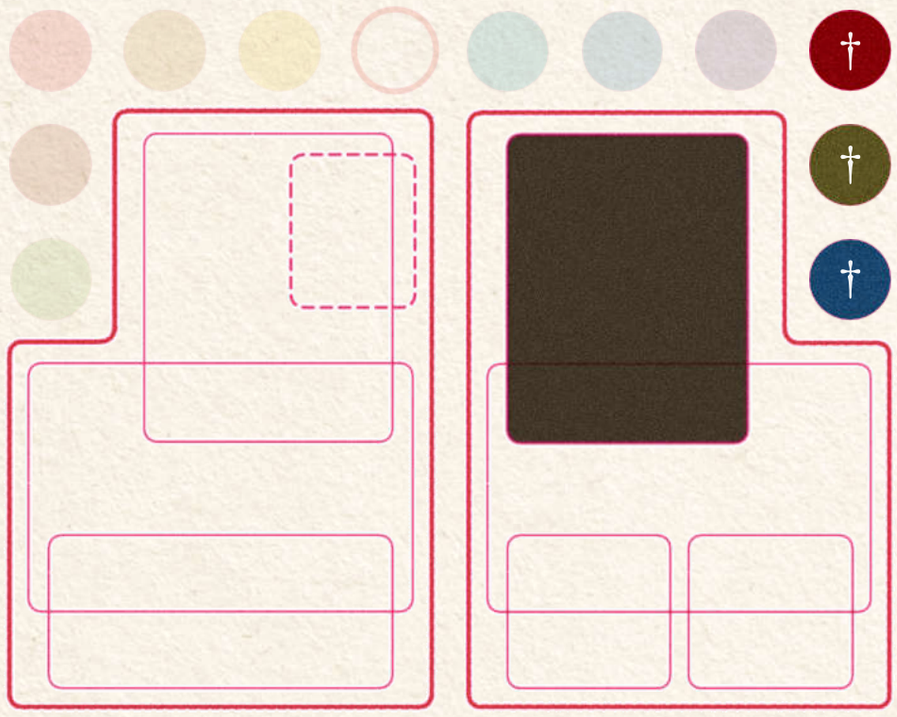
Unless you know what you are doing, it's better to use a chromatic black before a usual black pigment since it's more versatile to produce temperature changes. In addition, being transparent, it reinforces the illusion of volume in contrast to opaque lights. If it were the case that you needed a very deep and intense black, it's enough to paint thicker which also contributes to adding variety and vibration to the brushstroke.

It's better to mix this black with a knife and not with a brush, so as not to destroy its fibers. This is a practice that Sean admits he never respects but says that, as a teacher, he cannot recommend his flaws to students.

To make his chromatic black, Sean begins by mixing a lot of Olive Green with some Alizarin Crimson, obtaining a dark mud of neutral temperature. This mix is then adjusted with a pinch of Ultramarine Blue. If you incorporate the colors in this order it will be easier for you to control the mixture than putting all the ingredients together. Sean's favorite shade and the one he recommends for its greater versatility, is that of a dark Bistre like the one you see in the photograph.

As we will see, Sean adjusts the temperature of this chromatic black constantly and from the beginning. For example, he adds Alizarin Crimson when painting the eyes, nose, ears and mout, adds Ultramarine Blue on the chin, and he adds Olive Green on the temples.

With this black you will get all kinds of grays, controlling the temperature adjustments by adding Alizarin Crimson to warm it up or Ultramarine Blue to cool it down. Of course, value control is obtained by adding white.



Chromatic black:

1. Toning
2. Drawing
3. Darkest darks

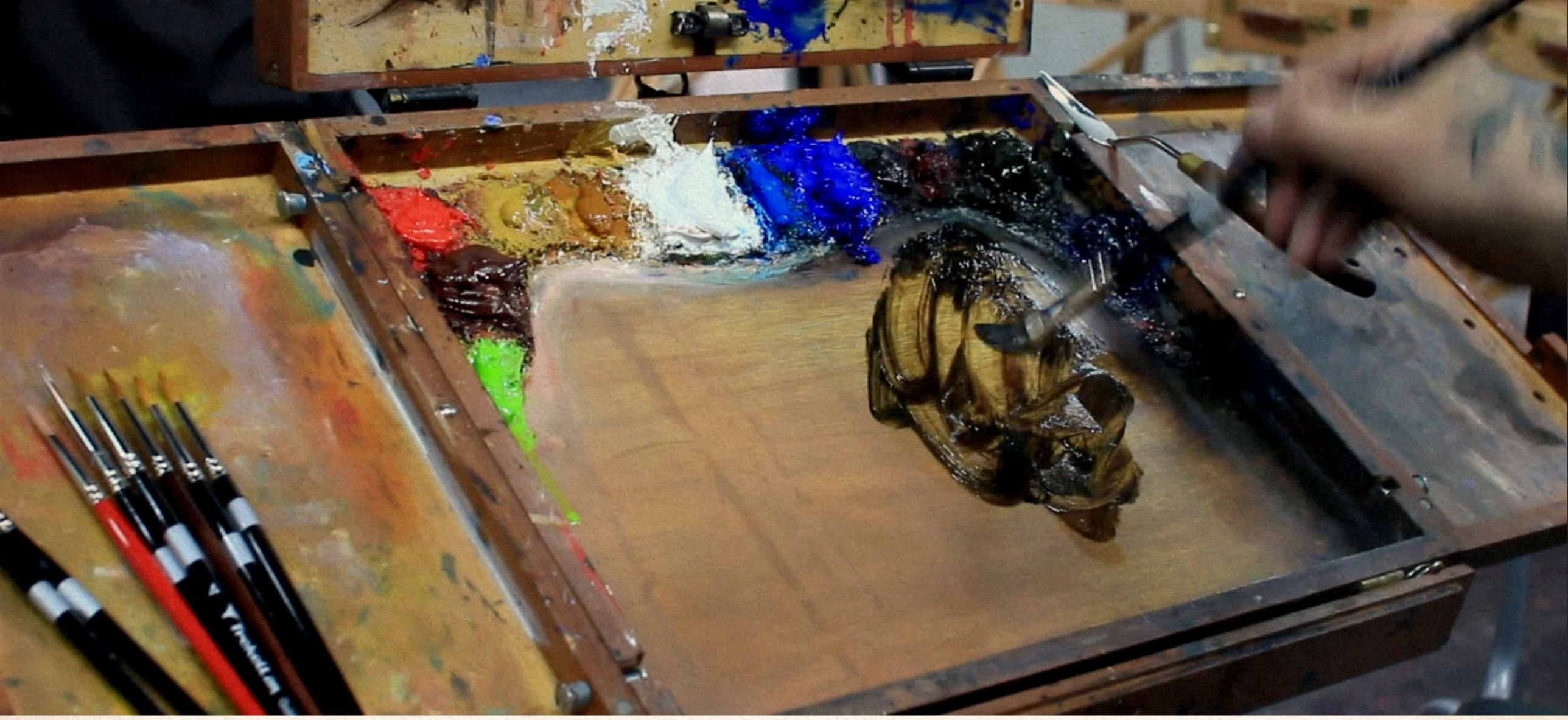
Composition:

† ± 20% Alizarin Crimson

† ± 70% Olive Green

† ± 10% Ultramarine Blue





11’

Tip



It’s difficult to judge the temperature of an opaque chromatic black. In order to see it better, moisten the brush with a little *Gamsol* and spread the mixture on the palette, scrubbing it.

Transparency will clearly show you the dominant temperature of your chromatic black.



In this image you can see the versatility of chromatic black, allowing green, red, and blue dominants with a simple adjustment. This variety would be impossible to obtain with a Mars Black, or an Ivory Black since dirty and opaque grays would be obtained.

#1 Darkest Darks
Chromatic Black

Alizarin Crimson



±20%

Olive Green



±70%

Ultramarine Blue



±10%

Neutral Brown

Chromatic Black
Neutral basis

Chromatic Black
+ Alizarin Crimson
Red Hue

Chromatic Black
+ Olive Green
Green Hue

Chromatic Black
+ Ultramarine Blue
Blue Hue



2’

Toning.

Before starting to paint, Sean scrubs a very thin layer of chromatic black with a warm dominant dark Bistre color, diluted with *Gamsol*. He likes to put a lot of solvent in the beginning so that it’s absorbed and the paint then settles better. After drawing, he stops diluting the paint.

If it’s too wet, the excess solvent can be removed with paper. You can also wait a bit for the excess *Gamsol* to evaporate and the paint to settle.

First, he tests the tone on one side, if the temperature is correct, he proceeds to cover the entire panel from the sides to the center. He does it this way because he doesn't want much paint in the center –softening the brushstroke in the area where the face will be placed, creating a vignette.

Already in this general mid-tone, Sean tries to break the monotony by introducing movement, vibration in the brushstroke, differences in transparency, and variation in temperatures. He makes constant mid-tone adjustments, creating temperature dominants based on proximity to central areas of the face.

Sean says that if there is something to be wrong in this phase, it’s better to exceed lightness rather than heaviness in the general mid-tone.





«I love using a new brush every time I start something».

3'

Do not block in or take any measure.

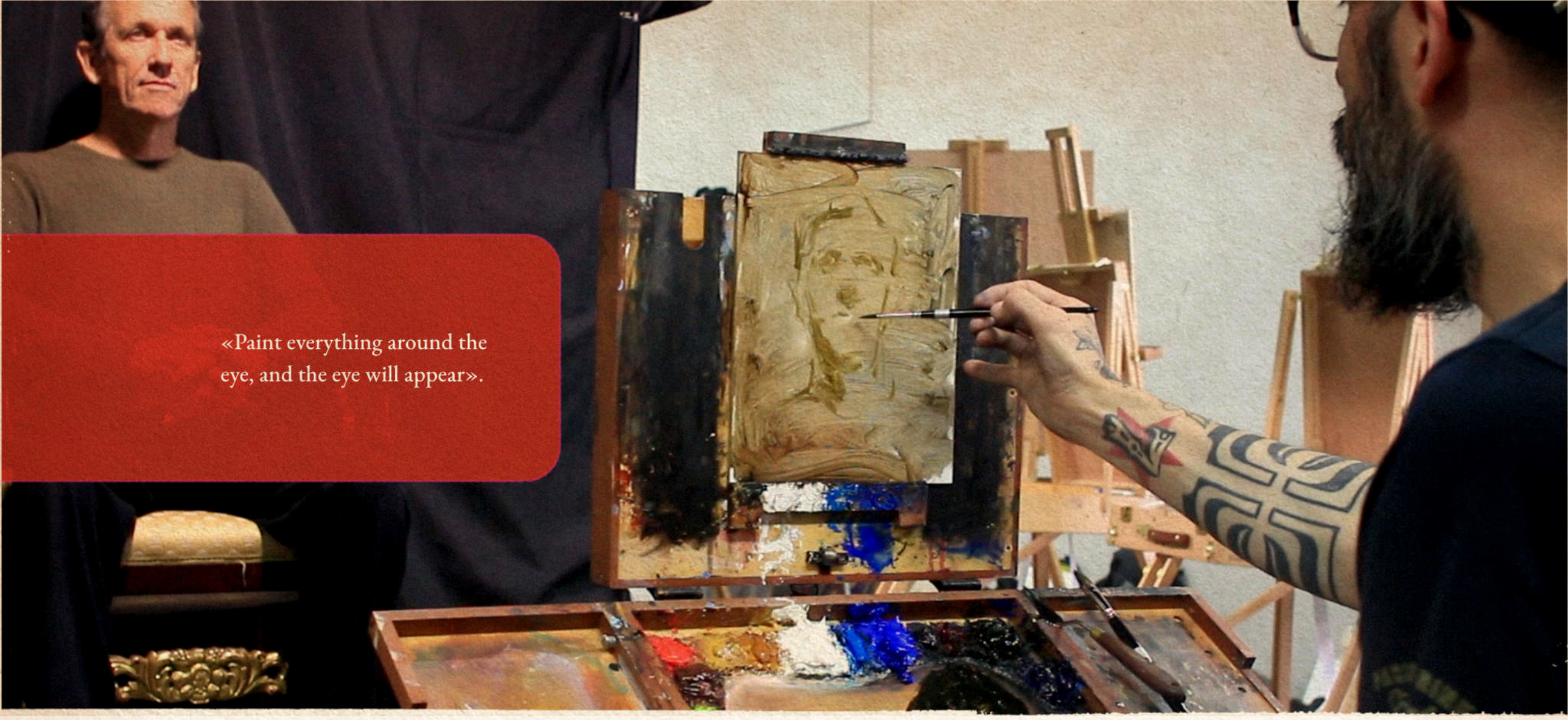
Sean never makes a general block in for later fitting the head parts inside of it like playing *Tetris*. The block-in, the container that is recommended in the academic field, is for Sean the equivalent of a straitjacket.

In his drawing the movements are linked with each other, they flow from the beginning without being conditioned by any constraint. Each new line is an opportunity to make a new decision accordingly. A block-in would spoil all that potential, diluting the creative scope.

Nor does he measure with the brush, but with the eye, because when you physically measure with the brush to obtain the proportions you run the risk of losing the whole gesture. To maintain proportions **compares the gaps between the shadow shapes**. And if he fails, there's always time for measuring and correcting, but it's his last resource.

So the general advice is to take measurements with your naked eye without physical instruments, and use the hand gesture to work the general rhythms. Then you can apply proportions to those gestures and it doesn't work the other way around; **you can't add gestures to something that was born from instrumental rigidity**. Instead, you can correct a gesture that has gotten out of hand.





4'

Drawing is painting.

If you draw first and then paint on top, you lose the drawing. You must keep in mind that **your painting must add decisions, not overlap them**. The drawing is not a tracing that you are going to cover when you start painting over it, but it is part of the painting itself and it must be working all the time, not only as a poor “background”.

Think of stencil.

You must draw with the understanding that **light and shadow are different ideas, and that they do not mix even on the palette**. Think in terms of blocks of light and shadow, without any halftones and you'll understand how positive and negative spaces relate to each other.

Draw the shadows you see, not the things you know.

You should not paint things, but instead paint the light that reveals them, understanding the light observing the shape of the shadows. Sean learned this principle from Harvey Dunn, who said that shadows are thought in terms of drawing and lights in terms of color.

You don't need to know how to draw *an eye* by studying its anatomy. It's all simpler: *an eye* is a pattern of abstract shapes and values, not *an actual eye*. When you think that you are painting an eye, you are daunted by the responsibility of *making a good eye*. Keep the scaffold in mind... but don't paint the scaffolding! The illusion of the eye is created the moment you stop thinking of the eye as an entity and start using only visual language.



6'

Draw the characteristic things.

Sean does not seek resemblance through fidelity, but through an emphasis on the characteristic things and enhancing the features that convey character without losing sight of naturalness. In other words, **he prefers to resort to caricature rather than proportion**.

According to Tom Richmond, "...a caricature is a portrait at high volume". The caricature recognizes and amplifies everything that reaffirms a person's identity, underlining the features that define the resemblance, describing the person's personality, attitude, and intangible essence.

Drawing, step by step.

1. Sean begins the drawing with the chromatic black premix, using a round, pointed brush, slightly moistened with *Gamsol*.

2. The first indications are a rough starting point, then he'll go back to them to adjust them. Sometimes he makes a mark with the brush handle before setting the brush stroke.

3. He suggests the general shape of the head and continues with the superciliary arch. Then he draws the shape of the shadows of the eye sockets but not *the eyes*. He continues drawing the cast shadows below the nose and links to the chin. Finally, the mouth is the last thing.

4. **He does not draw the parts of the face, but the dramatic effect of light on them**. Sean defines light negatively, that is, «drawing everything that is not in the light». He does not establish relationships between the elements of the face but between the shapes of the shadow, which he keeps with sharp edges, as if it was a stencil.



7'

5. Shape is not as important as its position, the dramatic effect of light and the expression of the characteristic. To achieve this, he 'underlines' the particular asymmetry of the head.

6. As he applys paint, he constantly adjusts the temperature of the chromatic black. For example, the areas with more blood supply have a red dominance; lashes, blue; the forehead, yellow; temples, greenish, etc.

7. Shadows are darkened non-linearly; smaller shadows are darker because the reduced spaces convey that the feeling of air and atmosphere is smaller.

You will correct later.

The important thing in this phase, above the correction, is to nail the gesture and the big light and shadow design. Then the corrections will come because **if you correct what is not essential at first, you hinder yourself**. Everything has a place and a moment and the secondary corrections come after the general approach, which is the engine of the portrait.

That's why Sean will wait almost until the end to add variety to the edges, when he has clearer in his mind what to attenuate and what not, if necessary. Nor does he place the darkest darks but reserves that accent for later. Now only the general feeling of darkness works without going into too much detail.

Neither does he close the contour of the head with edges to avoid being trapped in its limitations. **It does not matter if there are inaccuracies at the beginning, they will be fixed**. Sean says he just ignores them until their turn comes.



«There are no rules.
There are possibilities».

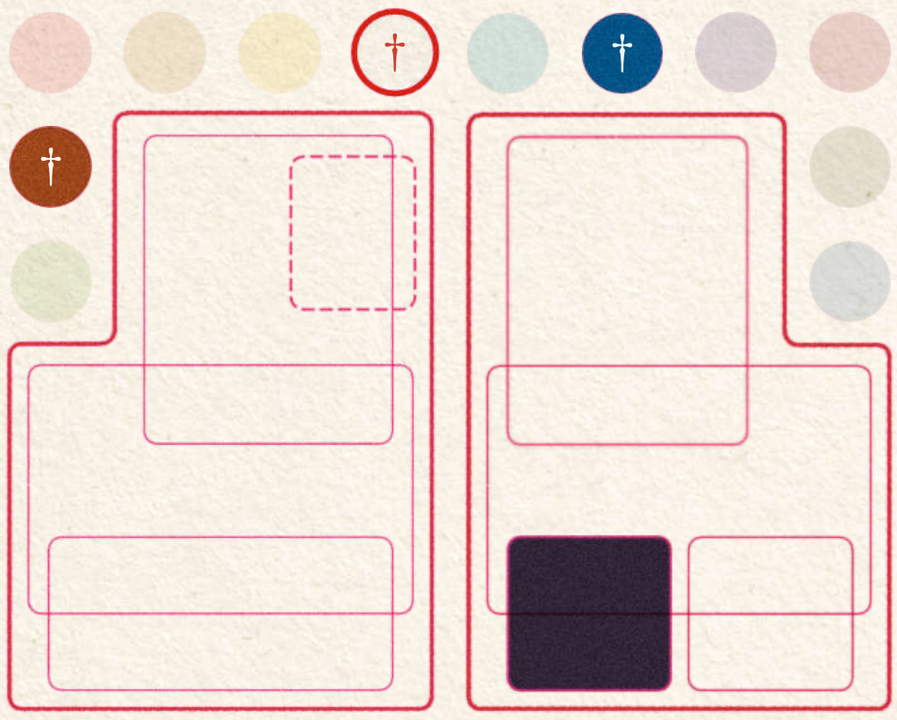
8'

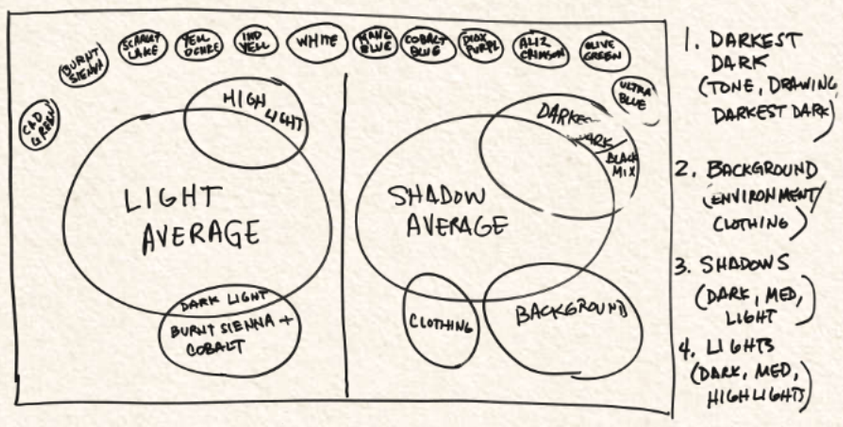
Background.

Sean prepares a pre-mix with Burnt Sienna and Cobalt Blue, which he lightens with a little white. He uses it to paint the background, defining the neck with the negative shape. **This premix will interact with the shadows in the next phase**, favoring general harmony.

The bottom-right corner is reserved for pre-mixing the clothing's mid-tone which will also interact with the background mid-tone and the shadow mid-tone. He usually does the pre-mixes of the background and the clothes in this phase but it wasn't like that in this demo. Sean will pre-mix the mid-tone of the clothes almost an hour later.

This system is a foundation on which Sean works, but it is not an iron rule system. He keeps it flexible and open, making adjustments on the go.





As you can see in this diagram that Sean drew on the studio whiteboard, the forecast for the pre-mix of the clothes mid-tone was done at the same time as the pre-mix of the background mid-tone. Nothing important. But keep that in mind so you don't get mixed up.

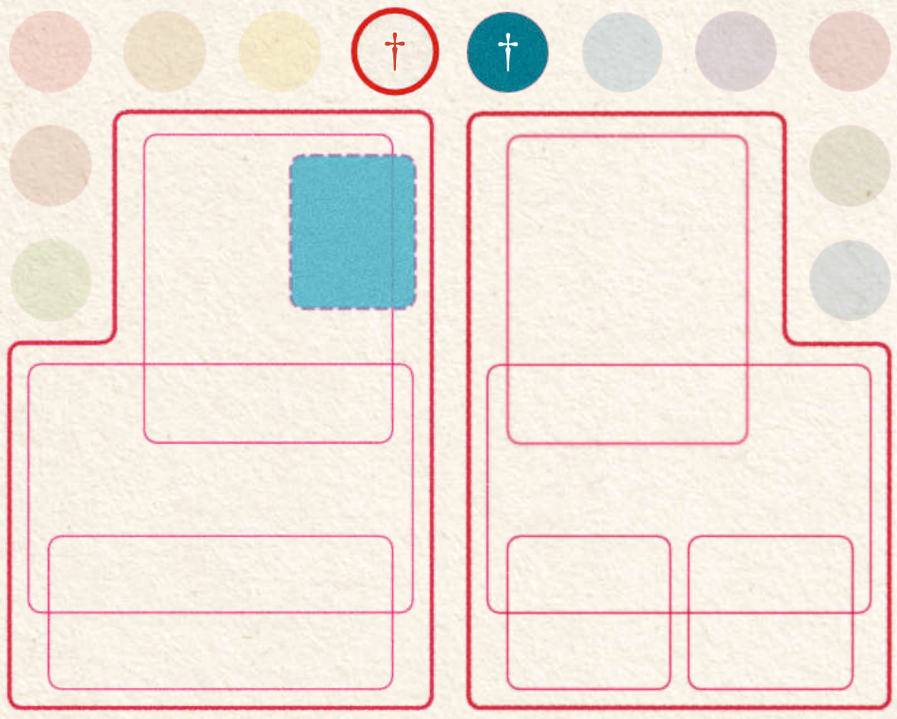


9’

Pre-mix — cool light.

The sun produces cool shadows and warm lights, but the opposite is true inside a studio. Sean is now preparing a pre-mix with Manganese Blue and White, which will determine the cool color of the light. **This premix is placed in the middle of the palette and serves to cool the mid-tones, both light and shadow**.

There is a rule of not putting white in the shadows but it is imprecise. The important thing is to keep the contrast and variety alive rather than blindly following the rule. When you add color to your shadows make sure they are *reasonably* transparent, or they will get dirty. So far so good. But it is also correct to “chalk” the shadows a bit if we indicate a reflection since the bounced light will underline the transparency of the shadow without reflections.





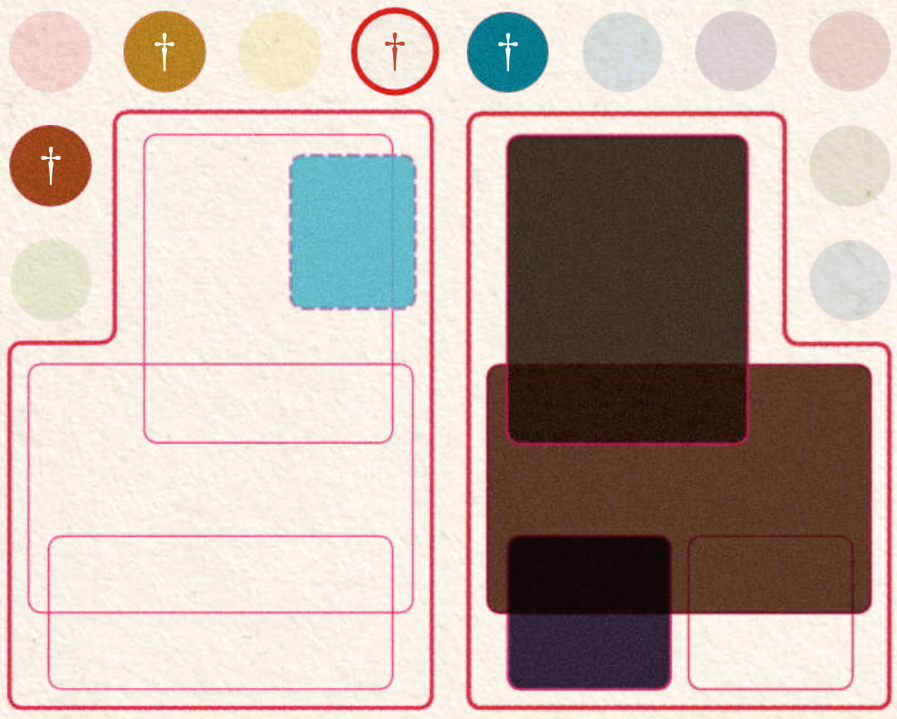


18’

Mid-shadow.

It’s not easy to nail the mid shadow tone because your view adapts to the focus of attention, seeing it clearer than it is in relation to the light. Squinting usually works well, as well as moving the view outside the area that we want to judge, as we explained previously. It’s about seeing color ‘sideways’ without seeing it directly, judging it in relation to light.

Briefly, the mid shadow is a mixture of brown mud that we will adjust with the chromatic black, the cool light premix and the background premix. The mid shadow accepts variety in temperature, but not variety in value; **the whole family of shadows belongs to the same value**.



To prepare the mid shadow premix, Sean places a good amount of Burnt Sienna into the chromatic black mixing zone, so that it participates in it and guarantees harmony with the dark mixes.

Then he cools the mixture down with Manganese Blue and adds some Yellow Ocher, which balances and lightens it without making it chalky. This mud does not have any white since it’s the shadow immediately after the darkest shadow.

The mid shadow is lightened with the premix of cool light, indicating reflections in the shadow. And it’s warmed up with Scarlet Lake to paint the areas with more blood supply.

Unity in variety.

He introduces temperature changes, turning the mixing zone into a mosaic of smaller redder, greener, bluish versions of the shadow.

The organization of the palette responds to a very simple but powerful idea, which **allows adding increasingly complex mixtures without compromising harmony**. Simplicity in organization is what guarantees consistency in all mixtures, whose fundamental pillars are:

1. Unity
2. Variety

A few rules that you should follow.

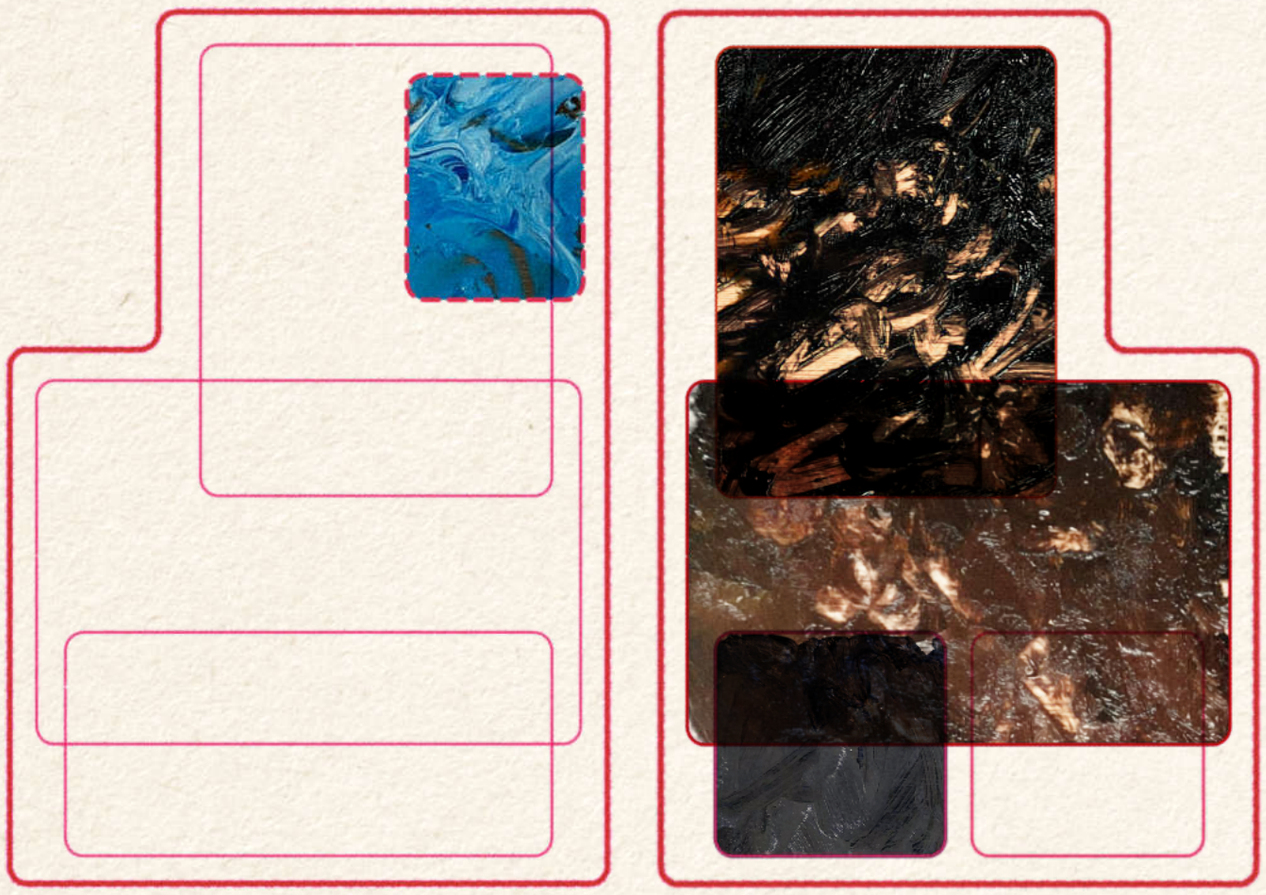
There are no rules, only options... right? Well, just somehow. There are a few rules you should follow when working in the shadows and they are pure common sense:

† The form shadows show intermediate values and have smooth edges.

† Cast shadows do not show intermediate values and have sharp edges.

† The lightest shadow cannot be lighter than the darkest light.

Only three rules, very easy to remember and perfectly reasonable. And yet many students fail at this. Check your shadows!



This is how Sean has the palette organized right now:

† Above: chromatic black

† Center: mid shadow tone

† Bottom: background mid-tone

He darkens the mid shadow with chromatic black when occluded, and harmonizes it with the background using the pre-mix below.

Plus, he gets reflected lights by mixing the mid shadow tone with the cool light premix on the left.

White in the shadows?

The universal advice given to students is never to put white inside the shadows. As a general recommendation, that's fine, but Sean acknowledges that he hardly ever follows that rule. **It makes more sense to censor loss of contrast and variety rather than white itself.**

You can follow this rule if it helps you to curb the urge to contaminate everything with white, but it’s certainly one of those rules that you can skip if you know what you’re doing. **Rules are fine if you understand the principle behind them, and they’re like an oracle to turn to when you are lost.**

However, they are not a reliable guide because they can cause a lot of confusion by colliding with other rules that recommend the exact opposite. It is also very disconcerting to scrupulously follow a rule and then when visiting a museum, find that most great artists did not respect it at all.

If you look at Rembrandt you will see that he keeps the lights opaque and the shadows transparent. Sean says not to argue with a teacher like Rembrandt and to follow his example. Don't go overboard with shadows and keep them thin, then you will have your chance to load the brush well with the lights. That's all: there are enough variety and contrast.

The application of shadow colors determines the variety in the transparency of your painting. If you paint everything with the same thickness the result will look flat and monotonous, even if you don't use white in the shadows. It all depends on the way you do things.

Transparency in shadows is essential to create the illusion of volume in contrast to opaque lights. But if we go too far, it can also look soft and inconsistent. **Ideally, the shadow should be thin enough to reveal the subtle vibration of the background**.

When you add color to your shadow mixes you can use transparent —or reasonably transparent— colors to avoid ruining them. If you want to put yellow in a shadow, use Indian Yellow, not Yellow Ocher. If you want to put red, use Alizarin Crimson, not Scarlet Lake. If you want to use green, use Olive Green, not Cadmium Green.

The lighter shadows usually have a little white —watch out, just a little— to ensure a smooth and natural transition to the light area as well as to indicate reflected light. However: never put white directly. That will not go well. **White can only be used safely when associated with another color**. That’s what you have the cool light premix for, which introduces white into the shadows in a controlled and harmonious way.

Therefore, we are going to reformulate this rule to make it sound much better:

† **Subtle shadows and sculptural lights.**

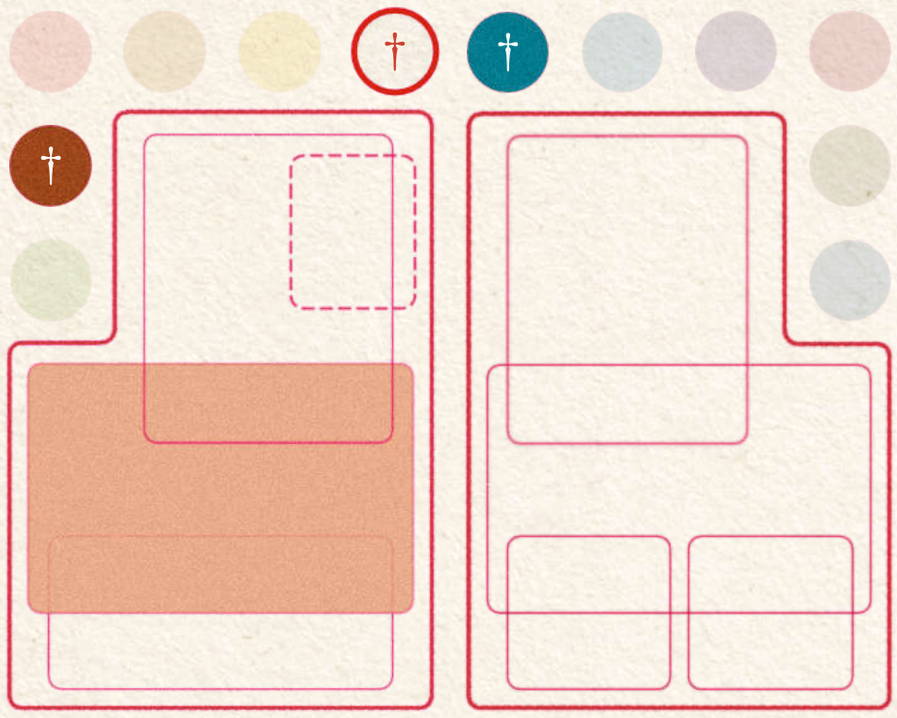


21’

Pre-mix — mid-light (band-aid color).

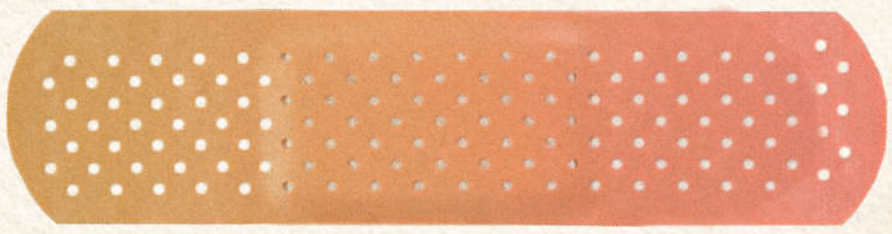
Start by placing a generous amount of Burnt Sienna on the left half of the palette, and mixing it with Titanium White, getting an orange hue. Then, dull and cool this orange with the cool light premix, made with Manganese Blue and white. The result of the light mid-tone is a color very similar to that of the band-aids.

When the skin is very reddish use less blue; when it is paler use more cool light. When the skin is darker use less white... Sean makes small adjustments of this type all the time because this system is not an infallible recipe, nor does it pretend to be. It's a reliable foundation to start working on and it needs tweaking on your side.

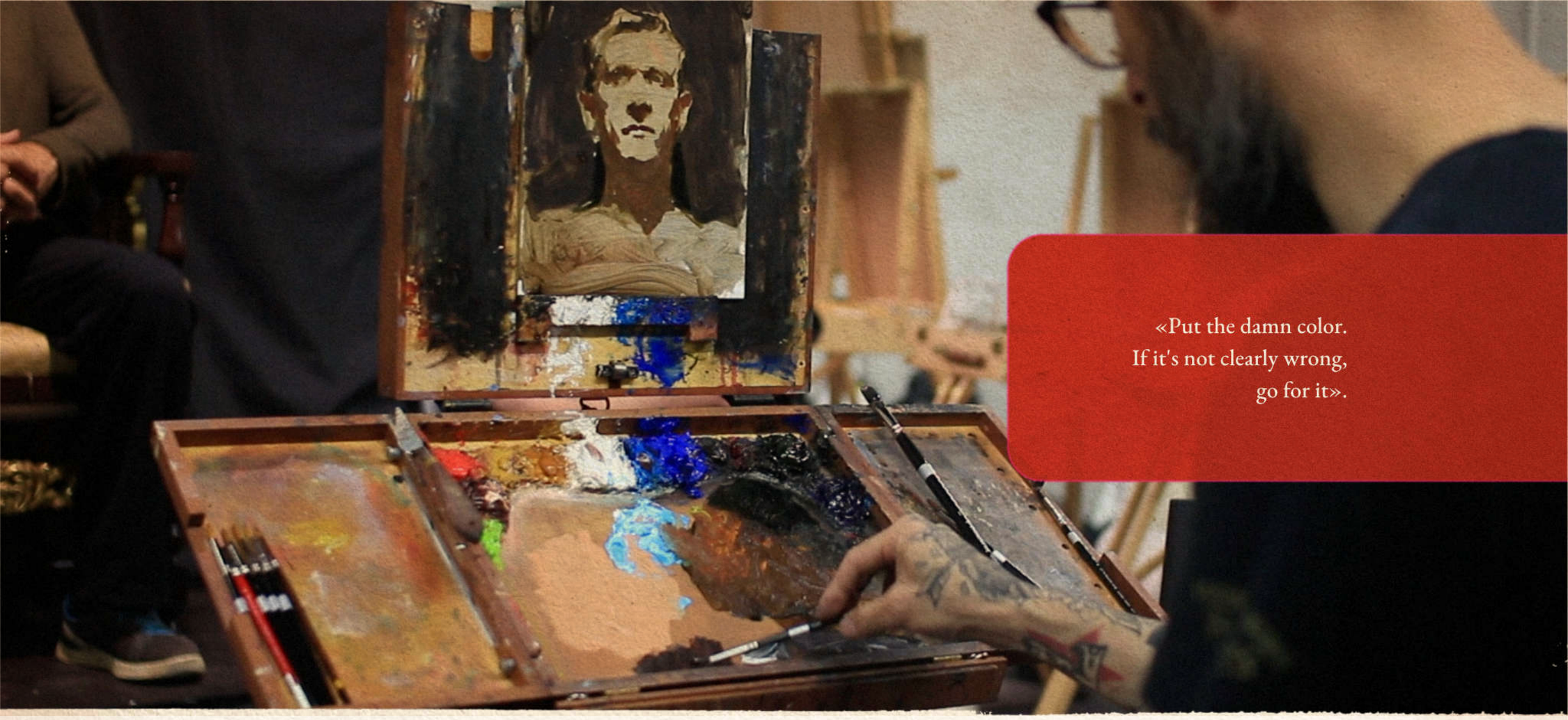


The temperature changes of the mid-light premix are usually adjusted with Yellow Ocher and Scarlet Lake. With those temperature adjustments we can get the entire register of chroma nuances of the model's skin.

Scarlet Lake is a color with high dyeing power and when it’s necessary to neutralize it, Sean uses Cadmium Green, as we will see later.







«Put the damn color.
If it's not clearly wrong,
go for it».

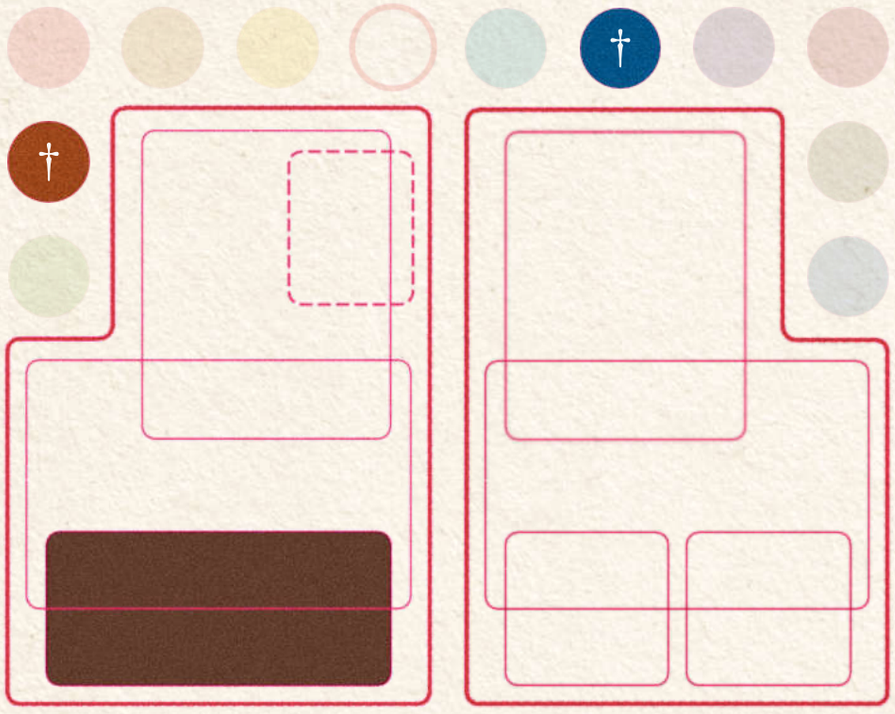
23'

Pre-mix — dark light.

Sean makes a pre-mix with Burnt Sienna and Cobalt Blue, which **serves to create dark versions of the light mid-tone and achieve a smooth transition between light and shadow.** In other words, prepare a mud to darken the band-aid color.

It's a lighter pre-mix than the mud of the shadows and serves to find the tone that will act as a partition between the families of lights and shadows. By participating in both in some way, everything will harmonize well.

This mud closely resembles the mid shadow, with the difference that it's somewhat lighter and Cobalt Blue, which is opaque, is used instead of Manganese Blue, which is transparent.



By mixing Burnt Sienna and Cobalt Blue in equal parts you get a grayish mud that you cool down by adding more Cobalt Blue and warm up by adding more Burnt Sienna. It's used to adjust the value of the band-aid color and thus achieve smooth transitions between shadow and light. Previously, Sean made this mix too cool and needed to make many adjustments on the go. Now he knows that this mix **is much better if it has a warm dominant**, while still respecting reasonable neutrality.

Later we will see how the temperature is adjusted with Scarlet Lake, Yellow Ocher, and Cadmium Green.





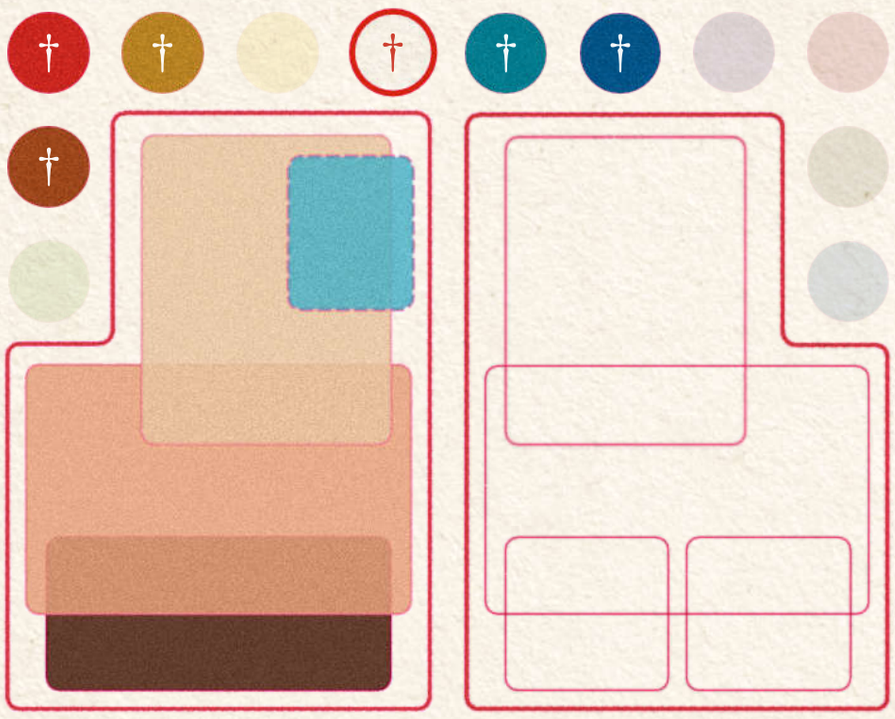


24’ 28’ 32’

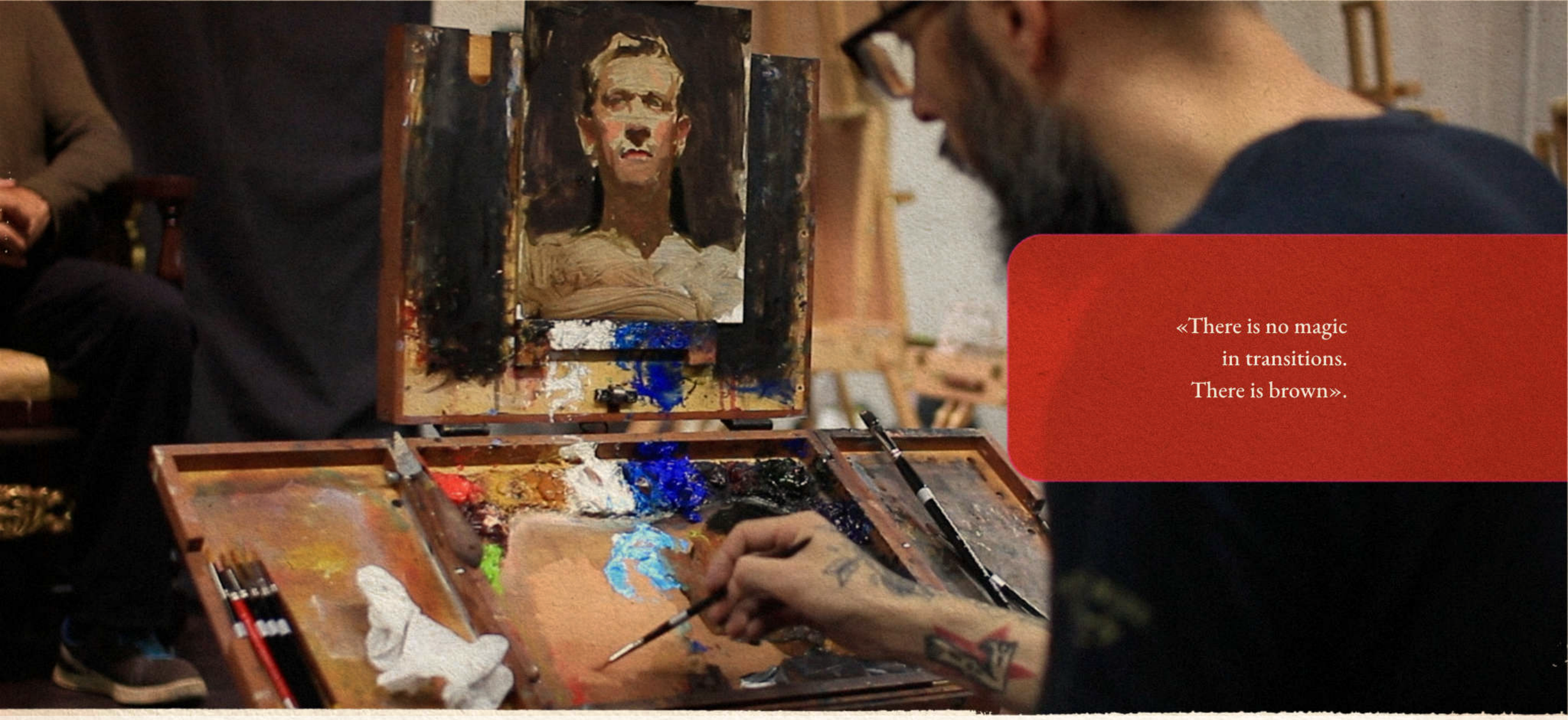
Dark lights — transition.

Now that Sean has the shadows defined he needs **a value that works as a hinge between light and shadow**, a bridge between both worlds. This strip of dark light that comes into physical contact with the edges of the shadows indicates the transition produced by the illusion of optical rotation.

This tone inhabits the limbo, between the lights and the shadows, and constitutes the cornerstone of the entire dramatic effect. Sean acknowledges that this transition is the most difficult one to see and the one that is most difficult for him because he tends to make it too dark. **He finds this intermediate value by mixing the band-aid color with the dark light mud.**







«There is no magic
in transitions.
There is brown».

34'

The transition is a dark version of the band-aid color, without becoming as dark as the lighter version of the shadows. It's mixed on the left half of the palette and is part of the lights, so **it needs white to work**.

Although Sean tends to make it darker, it's never dark enough to belong to shadows. If it were, it would be in the initial shadow stencil from the beginning and would have been mixed on the right half of the palette.

At this time you also decide what temperature the transition will be. But don't think that a dramatic change from warm to cool is necessary, as so many books claim. Everything is always much more subtle. **You must understand the temperature change in relative terms, not absolute**. If your shade is orange, you don't need to put a clear blue transition; just put a cooler orange.

Sean doesn't usually put too much blue in the dark light premix, because if he cools this mud too much he can break the harmony. A warm dominant works because it contrasts sufficiently with the temperature of the band-aid color since this mixture is cooler due to the large amount of white and blue it contains.

When Sean doubts if there is enough contrast between the darkest light and the lightest shadow, he just places a brushstroke on the side to judge if there is a value change big enough to have the contrast he needs. And if it works, he goes for it.

In the transition, you must also think in terms of drawing, value, and temperature, so there must be a variety of temperatures. For example, when getting closer to the eyes Sean adds Scarlet Lake; and on the chin, Cadmium Green. These adjustments are constant.

#4 Mid-light

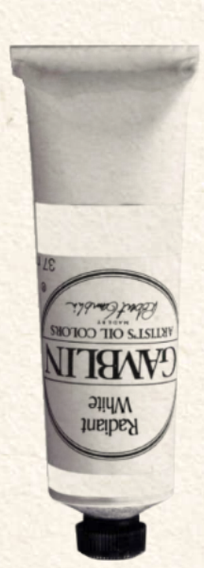
«Band-aid color»

Burnt Sienna

Titanium White

Manganese Blue

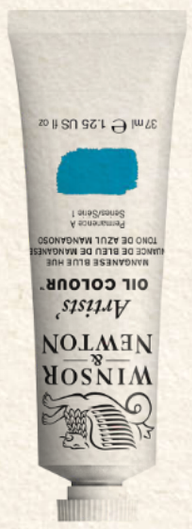






To lighten

Manganese Blue





Titanium White

Cadmium Green Pale





Yellow Ocher

← Temperature adjustments →



Scarlet Lake

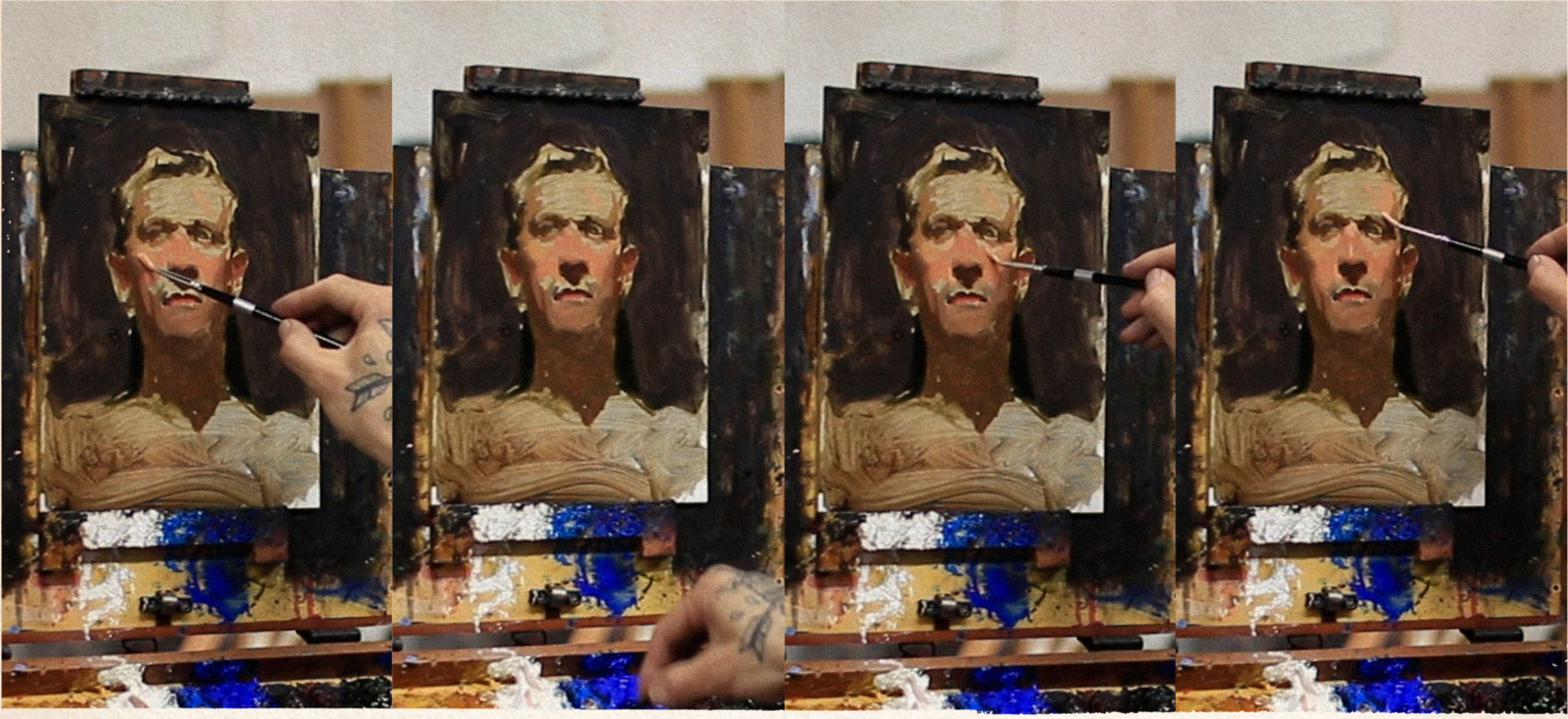
To darken

Burnt Sienna





Cobalt Blue



35’ 36’ 37’ 38’

Mid-lights.

The mix of mid lights should be noticeably lighter compared to the mid shadow mud. Not *a bit lighter*, but *obviously* lighter. The contrast should be obvious between the two halves of the palette, with several values of distance between them. Sean now works in the overall mid-tone in all its rich color. Then comes the lightest light and finally the highlights. In that order.

At this point, Sean's advice is not to rush but to take your time with the mid lights, because the temptation to rush into the highlights is now too big. **Don't look at the lightest lights yet**. Do not be seduced by those precious and shiny objects. Now you don't need them and they will confuse you.

«A good cherry on top of a bad ice cream is not going to improve the ice cream. Not even a good cheese will improve your pizza if the dough is lousy», says Sean. So stop looking at those lights as soon as possible and focus on what's important. The time will come for putting the cherry or the cheese.

Now it's about seeing the general color and which general temperature transitions are there, **mixing warm and cool versions of the band-aid color**. Each version must have an obvious color dominantce where the temperature can be seen with the naked eye, but without being strident.

All these temperature adjustments are subordinate to a general dominance and should not step away from it. Otherwise, the coherence in the chromatic variety is lost if there are discordant notes that do not fit within the general tone. The coherence in the chromatic variety works as



a great matrix of harmonic notes. There must be unity in variety.

The next phase.

Once the mid-tone is resolved, Sean will start painting the lights. The sequence from dark to light is respected until the end to keep control throughout the process.

As with the shadows, there is already a color area on the palette reserved for mixing colors with white. It’s a high-value band-aid color and medium chroma, highly influenced by the interaction with the cool light premix.

Before finishing the mid-light, Sean uses the shadow mixes on the palette for redrawing and adjusting some areas, since it’s the shadows that define the light.

Beware of white.

«**When you use white, use at least one other thing**», Sean recommends. Surely you've seen it before; when you put a lot of white the color becomes chalky, diluting its strength. So as a general recommendation, when you add white, unless your intention is making everything cool and chalky, always add color. Whichever, but add color. **White must be accompanied by a change in temperature or you will spoil everything**.

Always keep in mind that white alters value and chroma. So be careful when you add white because it’s not a neutral color: **white is a cool color, and it will cool your mixes down**.

Remember, just as there is an organization of mixtures on the palette, with the family of light and shadow clearly differentiated and separated, you must do the same with the organization of your brushes. A handful for the shadows and a handful for the lights.





«Don't be crazy, don't
just use white».

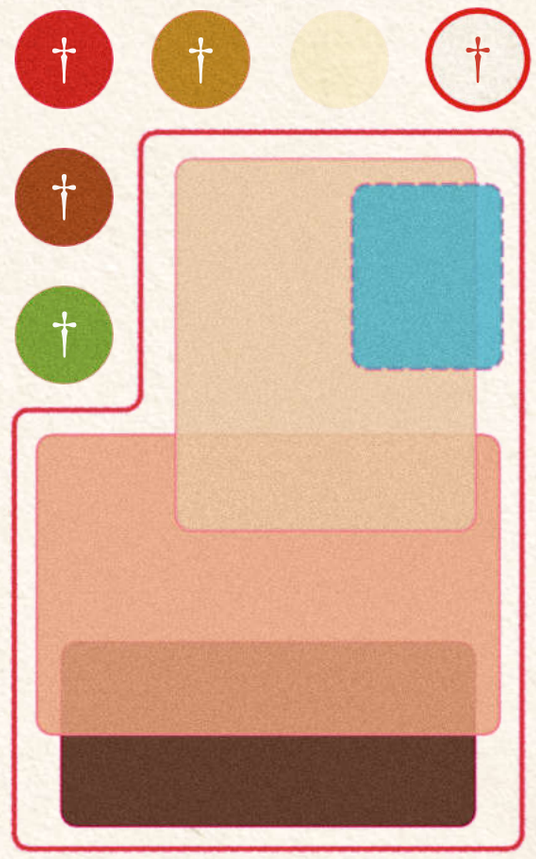
51'

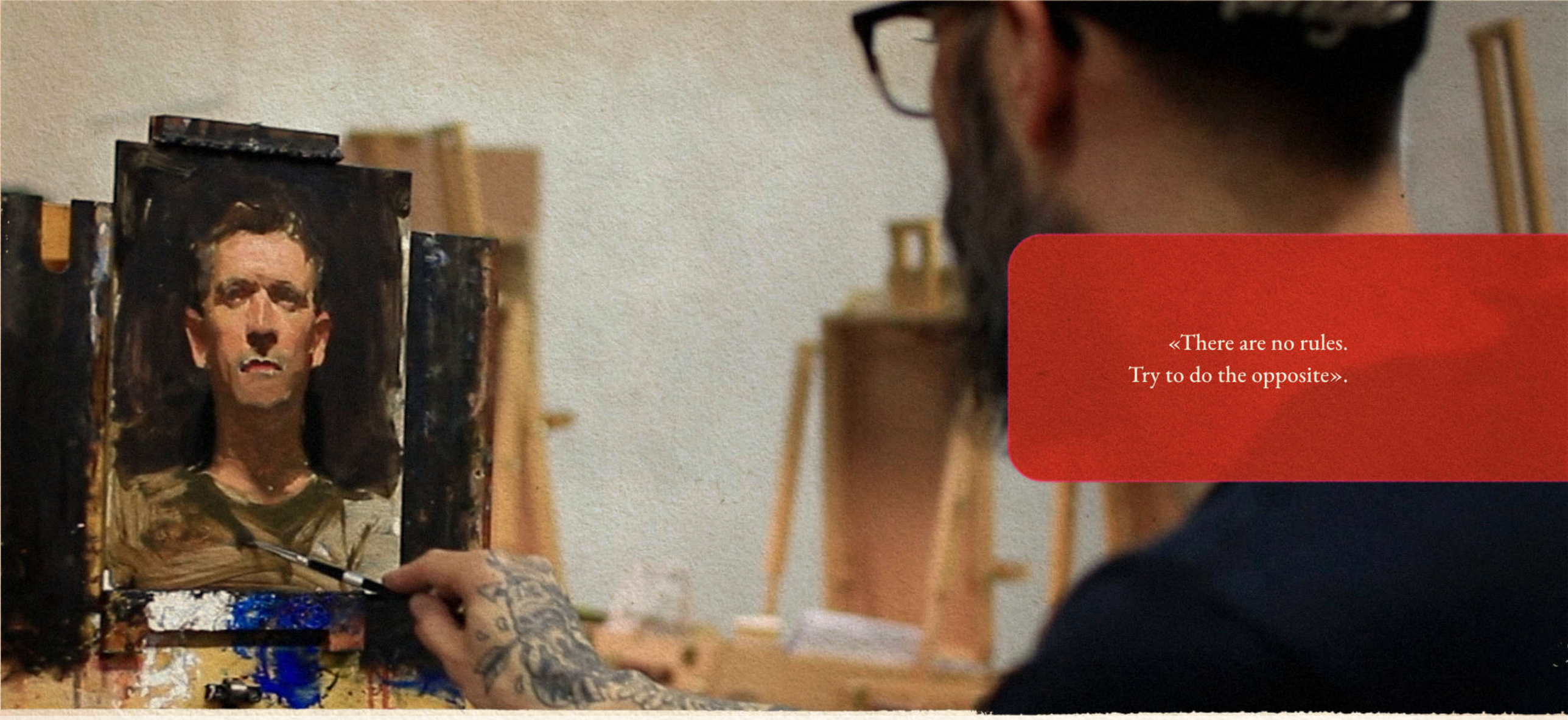


Unity in variety.

In the left half of the palette, we can see how the great variety of versions of the band-aid color respects the identity of the general tone.

You can also see how he uses the simultaneous contrast between Cadmium Green and Scarlet Lake to create chromatic grays.





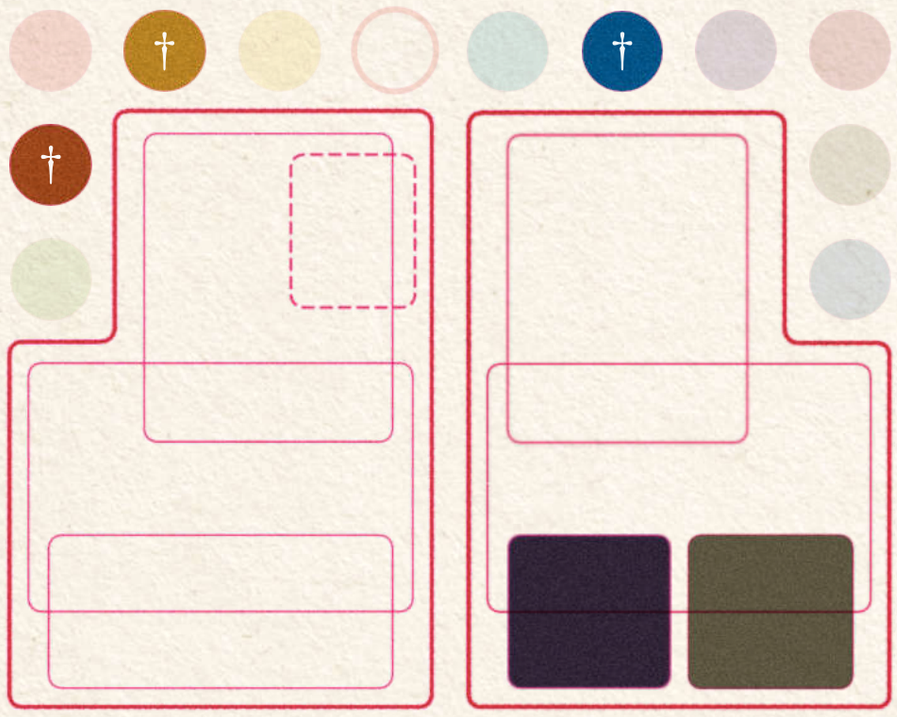
«There are no rules.
Try to do the opposite».

55’

Clothes.

Sean usually does this pre-mix for the mid-tone of the clothes at the same time as the pre-mix for the background mid-tone, but it wasn't like this in this demo. At first, he thought that he would not paint the clothes and that the negative space in the background would be enough. But in the end, he decided to paint it. That’s what comes from painting live.

For the clothes, he adds Yellow Ocher to the background pre-mix, which was a mixture of Burnt Sienna, Cobalt Blue, and white. The background is a shade close to that of the shadow, but more opaque and cold. By using the background as the base, everything harmonizes since the background and the shadow contain Burnt Sienna and Blue (Manganese in the shadow, which is transparent, and Cobalt in the background and clothing, which it is more opaque).







«It won't work better
by adding more values.
Keep it simple».

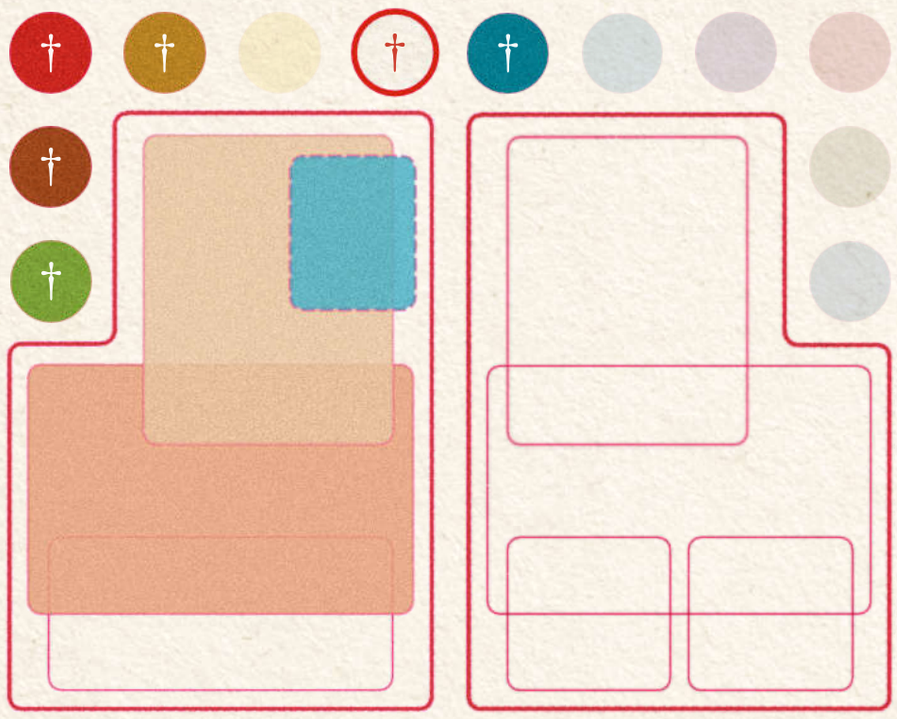
59’

Highlights.

Now that the mid-lights are ready, Sean allows himself to start painting the lightest areas. The most important advice he gives is to keep it simple by adding as few values as possible. In this phase, **the color richness is more important than the variety of values**.

Highlights are obtained by mixing the band-aid color with white, Yellow Ocher, Scarlet Lake and Cadmium Green. And the Yellow Ocher to adjust the final temperature.

Remember that this mixture is combined with the band-aid color, which in turn contains Burnt Sienna, Manganese Blue, and white, so everything harmonizes.







There is a calculated intention that the final brushstrokes should have a vigorous impasto and be executed with an unequivocal gesture and drag, without retouching. In Italian, this style of energetic, loose execution is called *bravura*.

Sean says that highlights are the accents that finish off the painting, but that what's really important happens in the middle. That's why he recommends economizing light accents, preventing them from competing with each other, and distracting the eye.

In this phase he exaggerates the temperature changes, suggesting the vibration and the energy of the light. Sean amplifies the presence of the primary colors —yellow, blue, and red— at the highest point of light so that the colors are not chalky even though they contain a lot of white.

To do this, Sean usually introduces a little Dioxazine Purple into the mix, which he neutralizes with a little Yellow Ocher or Indian Yellow. The virtue of this transparent violet is that it works as a hinge between red and blue, unfolding into warm and cool colors with a simple adjustment.

To bring out the properties of the lights, shadows are intentionally more transparent, *dirty* and sloppier than the lights. This reinforces the feeling that, in the higher lights, there is a greater chromatic vibration caused by the decomposition of the light, **creating the illusion of a twinkle that contrasts with the dim tones of the shadows.**

To reinforce the illusion that light reveals shape and provides it with structure and body, **as you add white to mixes you should increase impasto and color variety**. With this you get more qualities at stake in the transition between light and shadow, creating the illusion of structure and vibration.





Prismatic light.

Carolus-Duran advised Sargent to, when painting the highlights, only go one step up and no more. According to this approach, the sense of light wouldn't come so much from adding more white, but from adding more color vibration. In other words, the feeling of light is achieved with a handful of light colors refreshing each other, creating the vivid illusion of a twinkle.

Exaggerating the chroma of the highlights is an inevitable habit for Sean, who says it will not be seen as exaggerated because of the large amount of white that dims the chroma. To do this, he adds Dioxazine Purple into the highlights, because it can be divided into reddish and bluish versions.

Sean mixes two versions of the highlight: warm and cool, which are optically refreshed creating a prismatic effect. He uses primary colors dominants, creating simultaneous contrasts without altering the consistency of the overall value. **This creates a chromatic *vibrato* that reinforces the feeling of light without resorting to adding more white**.

In the highlights, he likes to add a lot of chromatic variety, crossing brushstrokes made with different versions of the general value, creating a fresh and iridescent effect in the lights, as opposed to the dimmed shadows.

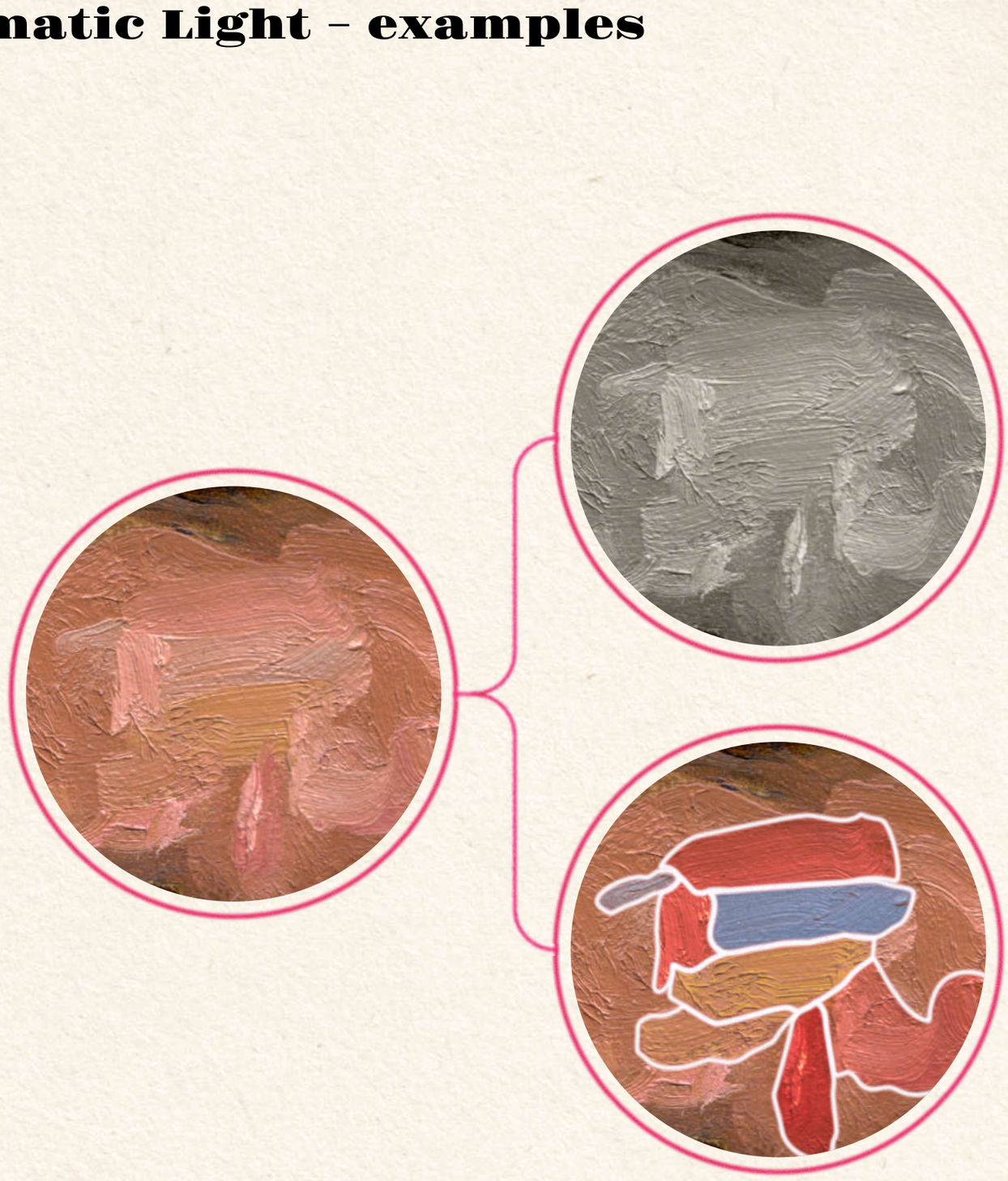


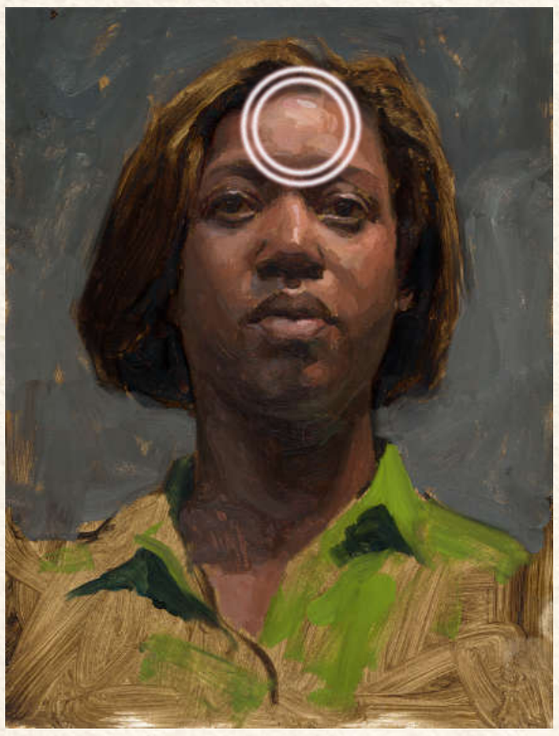
Variety in color and unity in value.

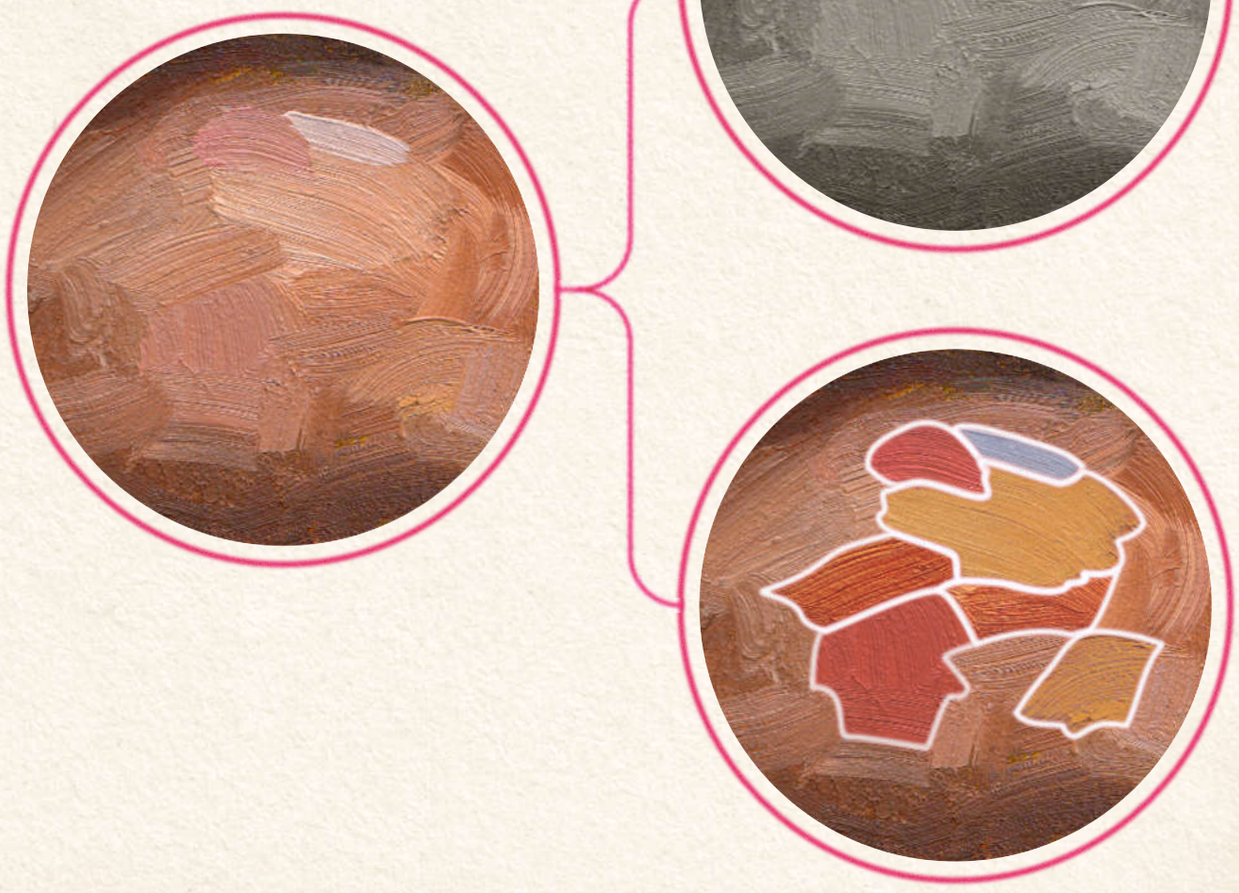
The light on the forehead is a plot of different temperatures that are seen as a single plane because they are part of the same value. The color variation is contained within the value. So **you can put the color you want as long as you respect the value**, as long as you do not repeat the resource and fall into monotony.

Prismatic Light – examples











Specular light.

The specular light is always in the center of the shape, indicating the rotation axis. If you put the highlight arbitrarily or for an aesthetic purpose, without knowing the logic of its position in space, you will ruin all previous modeling work. So be careful with the highlights and ask yourself, how are they going to help close the shape?

A highlight is a different touch, it has a different execution and nature than the underlying constructive brushstroke. It's reflected light and it must be seen and executed uniquely; **specular light *floats* above form**.

This is the best way to indicate its specular nature; a small heap of thick paint, with perfectly sharp corners. If you try to do the same thing with a brushstroke, it will look like one more brushstroke, causing confusion.

When you're going to make the final highlight, twist the brush on the palette and then push it forward. That movement will load the tip with a small ball of paint, so that you can place the highlight downloading the paint, not dragging it. This way of placing the painting suggests that the nature of specular light is not like the others.

Sean is used to using purple in specular light instead of blue, as is usually recommended. Sean noticed in Sargent's painting that even though the highlight contains red, it looks cool because it contains a lot of white. We must not forget that temperatures are relative to the color around them, and when choosing them we cannot think in absolute terms (red, blue), but in relative terms (warmer, cooler).







Tips for finishing

When to finish.

Not knowing when to leave things alone is a problem that haunts both students and veterans alike. Sean believes that it depends on experience, although he admits that it's one of those things that one never ends up knowing how to handle. Sean jokes saying that you have to finish «the sooner the better».

Jokes aside, he also said something that invites deep reflection: **«looking for an end is a distraction»**. There you have it.

Blending.

Sean does not like to blend too much, because the most beautiful thing about the painting is that the painting is visible. Occasionally he lowers the sharpness of some edges in the lights, gently sweeping them with a dry brush, one of those very worn and blunt ones. This establishes a hierarchy between sharp and soft edges in relation to the focal point.

The blending responds to the need to achieve a smooth transition between two values, but without losing the value jump. This type of blending creates a variety of edges that avoids falling into monotony. The problem of blending comes from not having a purpose and looking for the cheap effect of overworking it to make it look "prettier". Transitions should be smooth, not soft.



Blending.

This is a good example to study how you blend: the area on the left is how he paints it, and the area on the right is how he finishes it. **Between the two states, there is only about a five-minute difference**.

Sean likes to see the brushstroke, keep the shapes and tries not to blend too much. In any case, reserve the blending work for the end so as not to lose the structure. The brightest areas are where Sean preserves the structure and thickness of the paint and tends to blend more into the shadows.

He usually leaves the highlights as they were originally placed, without blending them, to ensure their vibration.

Tips for painting the eyes.

† **The white of the eyes is rarely seen white.** It's usually very similar to that of the flesh tone.

† **The naturalness of the eyes requires a certain lack of definition**, and the less they monopolize the focal point the more authentic they seem. Over-defined eyes look like plastic, unreal, dead. Soften them and put little detail in them to preserve their naturalness.

† **Avoid fine lines in your portrait, especially in the eyes.** Every fine line you put in calls for special attention. This makes the rest of your painting look awkward and undefined compared to the precision of a defined stroke.

† In a static pose the only thing that moves is the eyes, so that by blurring them we register the passage of time. **Some movement in the gaze, as well as in the mouth, gives the portrait a liveliness and suggests movement in the painting.** Also, the blur shifts the focal point from the gaze towards the entire head, achieving an *air* impossible to achieve when you define all the parts equally.

† **Paint the eye bags.** This seems very obvious but many students avoid them because they don't want them to look like bags and make the portrait ugly.

† **Don't put anything you don't see to make your portrait look more impressive.** Usually all students go too far in defining the eyes, creating a powerful focus of attention that annuls the naturalness of the gaze. As a general advice, Sean says, «If you don't see it, don't paint it».

† According to the above **you don't need to paint everything you know is there**. A clear example of this is the eyelids; you know that they form a curved fold although it may not look like this in our model. However, the urge to show off everything you know is hard to suppress. If you don't see it, don't paint it; if you see only a piece, paint only a piece.

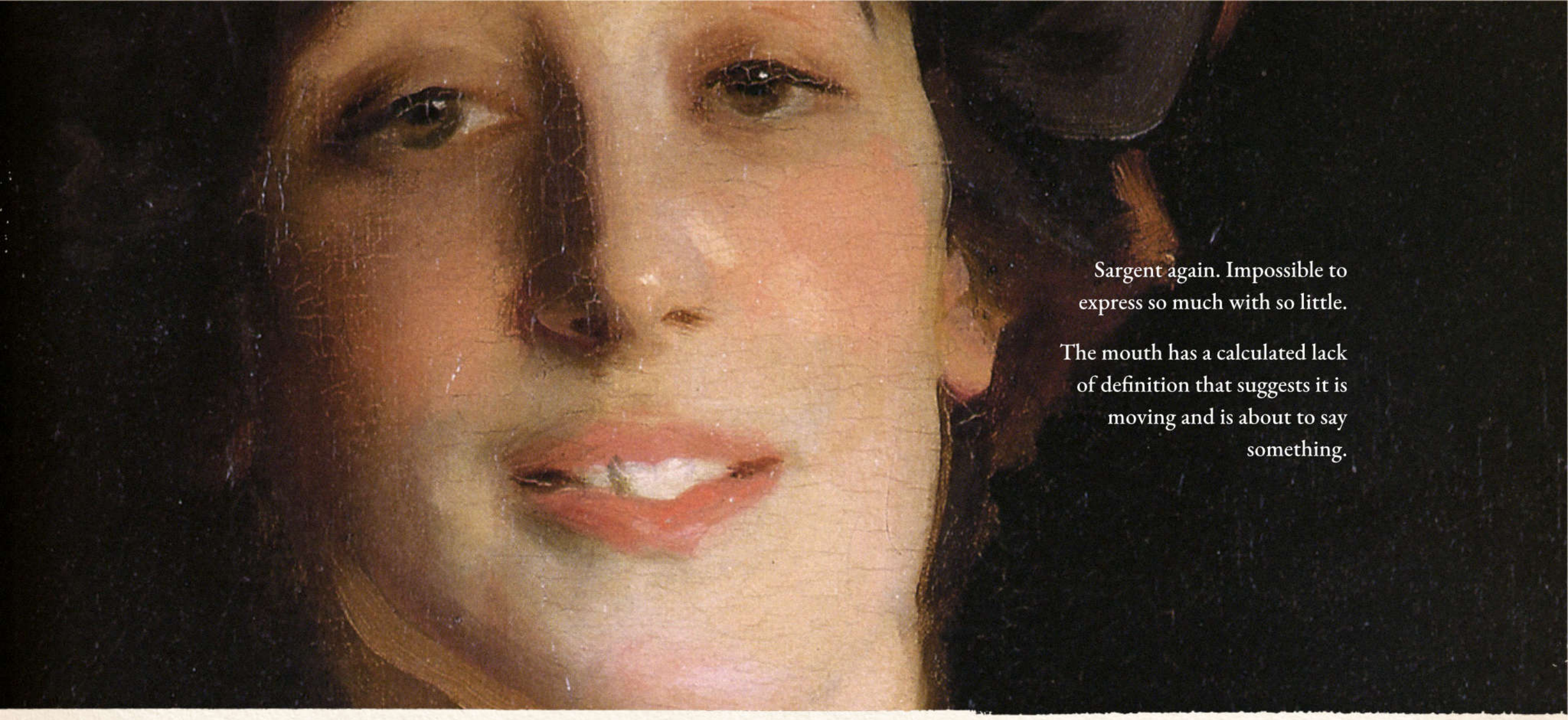
† **Don't put highlights in the eyes just because**. «You really don't need that sparkle in the eye», says Sean. You can put them in the end if you see them clearly; if not, forget it. And if you're going to put a highlight on the lower eyelid, take a good look at the temperature, because it's usually redder than you guess.

† This is a resource that you can see in all Sargent's portraits. To create variety you can accentuate its characteristic asymmetry, where there is always a *dominant eye*. **One dominant eye carries more visual information than the other**; for example more structure, more light, more chroma, more complexity, more tension, more contrast, etc. Briefly, he paints one eye with more visual weight than the other. If the face is not very asymmetrical, dominance must be subtle to preserve naturalness.

In this portrait by Sargent, you can see his famous dominant eye in action, literally forming a straight angle, creating tension and contrast. An impossible resource if he had painted it according to what he knew of an eye, that is, *it's round*.

You can also see how the general blur in the gaze gives it a look of naturalness.

The white of the eyes is not white, there is no highlight or thin lines, and the lower eyelids play a starring role. A whole lesson on how to paint a gaze.



Sargent again. Impossible to express so much with so little.

The mouth has a calculated lack of definition that suggests it is moving and is about to say something.

Mouth.

† A last-minute touch-up that Sean likes is to **leave the mouth a bit open so that it looks like it's about to say something**, giving a feeling of liveliness that is not possible when the mouth is closed.

† As with the eyes, **a certain lack of definition in the mouth has an effect of movement and naturalness**, in addition to suggesting a story.

† **It is better that you paint the lips with the correct color temperature from the beginning**. If you leave them for last, adding red will alter all the temperature relationships that you had previously established, and it will hardly be integrated. If you paint the lips red at the end, you run the risk of it looking like makeup.

† The highlight of the lower lip usually works well mixing red and white, but in the upper one, you can only allow it to be relatively reddish, but not red.

Nose.

† **The highlights are the testimony of the nose structure**. And are elongated or round as they indicated either bone or cartilage.

† Do not underline the shape of the sides of the nostrils. For young people it's preferred not to do it, indicating its shape with the adjacent and reflected lights.

† **The highlight of the nose is sharper than the highlight of the forehead** since the nose has a more closed shape and a little more fat.

In this portrait by Sean Cheetham, blonde hair just needs the transparency of the background and a few brushstrokes to work.

Hair.

† Do not be seduced by the lights of the hair. Try to paint only the great abstract mass and the accents of the darkest darks.

† **Think of hair as a sculptural mass**. Sean advises not to paint the direction of the hair, but its mass.

† Sean likes that the hair has a transparent texture, participating in the color of the background and the skin. That's why he **recommends preserving transparency in light areas** since by putting white you run the risk of painting gray hair instead of shiny hair.

† For a blonde person, the color of the priming may be enough to create the illusion. For a red-haired person, some Indian Yellow can be added to the priming. Indian Yellow has an orange transparent tint and orange is the translucent quality of red.

† For a dark hair person, a warm transparent background always works well with an Alizarin Crimson dominance. For the lights, he usually uses the cool light premix with Yellow Ocher.

Ears.

The ears are a very thin layer of cartilage with a high blood supply, so the light passes through them and turns red. The ears emit light.

Sean says to remember E.T when we paint them, because **«Ears emit light like E.T.'s chest».**





Portrait gallery

































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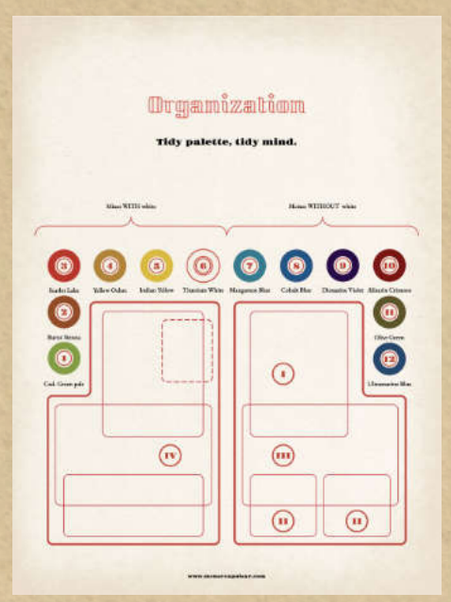
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