

# The Power of “Negative” Thinking

By Maria Field

**P**lease don't get me wrong. I don't mean that you should go around with a “glass-half-empty” kind of mentality. I am talking about positive and negative shapes. So what is a negative shape? Usually it is the shape behind or around an object while the object itself is positive.

## Why do it?

As watercolourists we generally work from light to dark, which means that on many occasions, in order to keep our light shapes, we need to paint the dark shapes around/ between them. I just love painting negative shapes. The mere thought of it makes my fingers itchy!

Painting negatively may feel a bit strange at first because, let's face it, it is much easier to paint a positive shape than a negative one. However, as with all our paintings, variation makes for excitement. Just as we usually aim for variation in our paintings with light/dark, wet/dry, big/small shapes, warm/cool colours, soft/hard edges etc, some variation in positive/negative shapes can create excitement and dynamism and can take your paintings to the next level. It can be easy to lose your way sometimes with negative shapes, so I suggest that you draw in the positive shapes so that you can see where you need to paint around.

## Masking out lights

Sometimes it is easier to mask out areas to keep them white/light so that we can build up tones and still have the lighter forms saved for later. This is particularly true for tricky shapes, say the difficult form of a flower with lots of little petals. However for larger shapes, it is relatively easy to paint around them.

## Morphing shapes

A positive shape can evolve into a negative one and vice versa. Think in terms of counterchange. A dark positive shape against a light area can evolve into a light shape on a dark area. It is amazing how our human eye will “read” the shape as continuous, even



**Ekka by Night, 37 x 27cm**

After a first wash of the bright, light colours (yellows, reds and blues) I then carefully painted around these areas with thick, dark pigment onto damp paper so that I had control but retained soft edges. The hard edged dark shapes showing the form for the carousel were painted onto dry paper. All the people are positive shapes painted last of all.





**Have You Heard?, 37 x 27cm**

This was really an exercise in painting white, so although there are some very colourful shadows on the ladies themselves, their overall shape and that of the seat were created by painting the dark background around them. There is very little detail in these ladies' faces. It is all about their gestures and body language.

though there can be a considerable change in value.

### The negative and the focal point

It is also useful to negatively paint around objects to hone the focal point. Throw in some controlled soft and hard edges and we can really make a painting sing! If we want the focal point to stand out we can work onto dry paper and have a really nice hard edge. If we want to lose an edge or play down another element, then painting negatively onto damp

paper with thick pigment will still give us control but the focus will be diffused.

### Designing with negative shapes

I find particularly with still life and nude paintings the negative spaces between the elements are just as important as the objects themselves. They can form a dramatic part of any composition and should be carefully considered. Sometimes turning the reference photo upside down will help you to see the shapes instead of just seeing the objects.

Of course this is a little hard to do if you are working from life! So think about taking a photo or view the set up in a mirror.

I don't always use negative painting, just as I don't always use a bead, glaze or do an underwash when painting. Each painting has its own needs and I tend to vary my methods depending on the subject. I find negative painting works exceptionally well with florals. So give it a try. Consider it a good workout for your creative muscle!

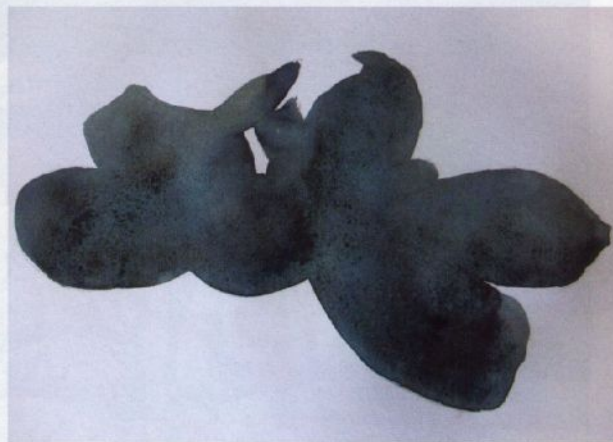
### TOP TIPS

- A tonal thumbnail can greatly aid your planning of negative/positive and light/dark areas.
- Draw lightly in pencil to show the negative/positive shapes to avoid confusion.
- Step back from painting regularly to avoid "tunnel vision". Alternatively, if you paint sitting down, simply drop the painting on the ground beside you to view at a distance.
- Mix more paint than you think you need.
- Take more time to plan and then paint with confidence.
- Play your favourite music, wear your favourite hat, use your best brush, dance, eat chocolate, drink a glass of wine....anything that will boost your happiness, mood and confidence may just affect your work in a good way.





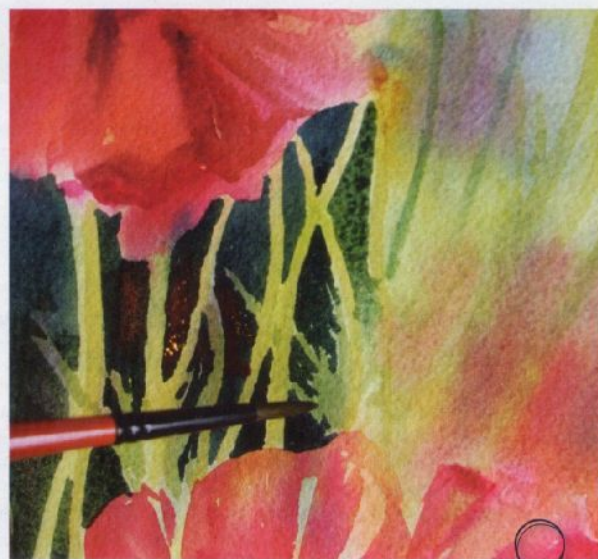
So what is a negative shape? Usually it is the shape behind or around an object.



So what is a positive shape? The object itself is positive.



A positive shape can evolve into a negative one and vice versa. Think in terms of counterchange. A dark positive shape against a light area can evolve into a light shape on a dark area. It is amazing how our human eye will "read" the shape as continuous, even though there can be a considerable change in value.



Detail



Detail

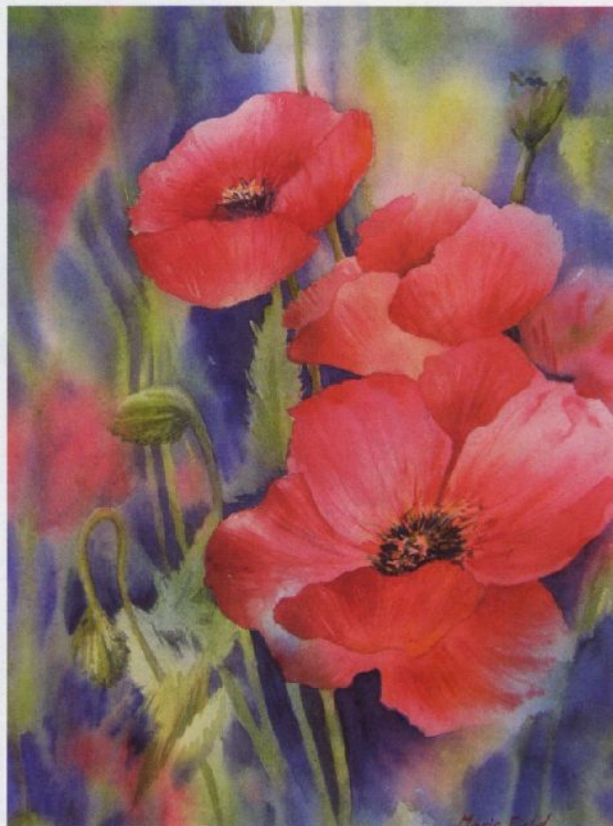
As watercolourists we generally work from light to dark, which means that on many occasions, in order to keep our light shapes, we need to paint the dark shapes around/ between them.





**Red, White and Blue, 37 x 27cm**

The lace in this painting was all conveyed by painting negatively. The lace itself is merely the white of the paper with darker "holes" painted in the lace and a darker background to show its shape. The "shine" on the chillies and teapot have been achieved not by masking, but by retaining patches of the untouched paper when painting the red. It is always essential to work out how you intend to retain white areas in your painting prior to adding paint to your paper.



**Precious Poppies, 37 x 27cm**

The leaves, stems, poppy buds and main flowers have all had their edges enhanced by painting negatively and darker around them. There are lots of lost and found edges in this painting.



**Lovely Lilies, 37 x 27cm**

Most of the stems, leaves and flowers have been brought out by painting the areas behind them and the shapes between them. The underwash really gets a chance to glow through in the background.



# my art in the making *Mave's Hydrangeas*

## What the Artist Used

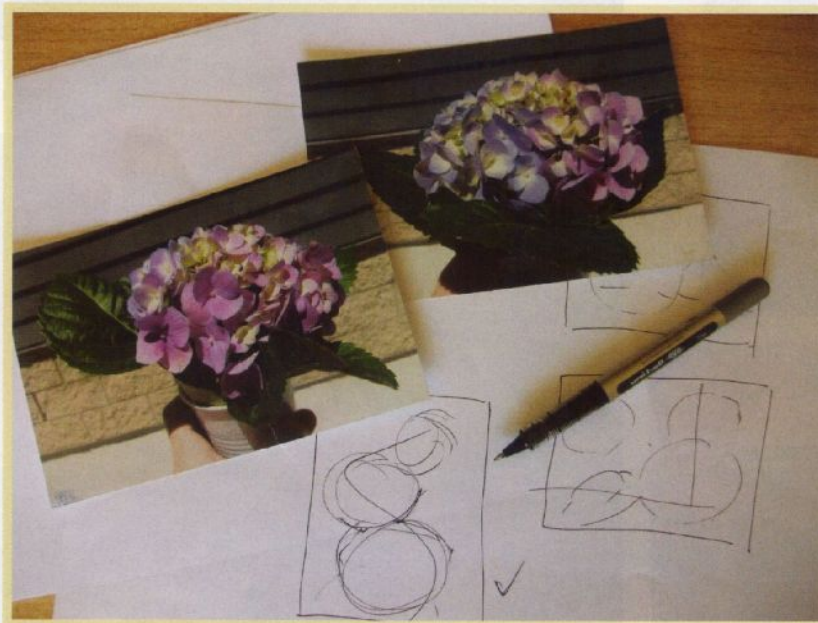
300gsm Rough Arches paper ¼ sheet.

## Brushes

Large wash brush, Neef Mop #2, Round #6, Filbert #6.

## Colours

Permanent Rose, Violet, Viridian, French Ultramarine, Cobalt, Raw Sienna, Burnt Sienna, Sap Green (even though I use Viridian and Sap Green, I never use them straight from the tube, always mixing them with something else).



## STAGE 1

### Photos and planning

A friend gave me this lovely bloom from her garden, so taking it out into the sunlight, I turned it around at different angles to be photographed. One bloom became a whole bunch! I settled on an "S" shape composition with the closest flower being the focal point. I also wanted to capture the light/shade on the petals.



*"Painting negatively may feel a bit strange at first because, let's face it, it is much easier to paint a positive shape than a negative one."*

## STAGE 2

### Underwash

Wetting the paper both sides really slows down the drying time if it is a really hot day. I dropped in colours roughly where they should go, but let the watercolour blend by itself. At this stage I let the watercolour have free reign.





### STAGE 3

#### Starting the negative washes

It was necessary with so many fiddly shapes to lightly pencil them in. I did a fairly detailed drawing, more than I would normally do. I started on the negative areas between petals, but also had fun painting some positive petals. I get bored easily!

*“It can be easy to lose your way sometimes with negative shapes, so I suggest that you draw in the positive shapes so that you can see where you need to paint around.”*



*“I find particularly with still life and nude paintings the negative spaces between the elements are just as important as the objects themselves.”*

### STAGE 4

#### Hardest edge around focal point

I started to cut around the main flower head with a juicy dark, working straight onto dry paper for a hard edge. The dark background colours (French Ultramarine, Viridian, Violet, Burnt Sienna, Permanent Rose) are allowed to merge by themselves on the paper to avoid creating ‘mud’.





## STAGE 5

### Defining shapes

I defined a few more petal shapes but the underwash remained uncovered in many areas. The less layers of paint you have, the fresher your watercolour will be.



## STAGE 6

### Soft edges away from focal point

I didn't want the background flower heads to compete too much with the main one, so I created soft edges by working negatively onto damp paper.



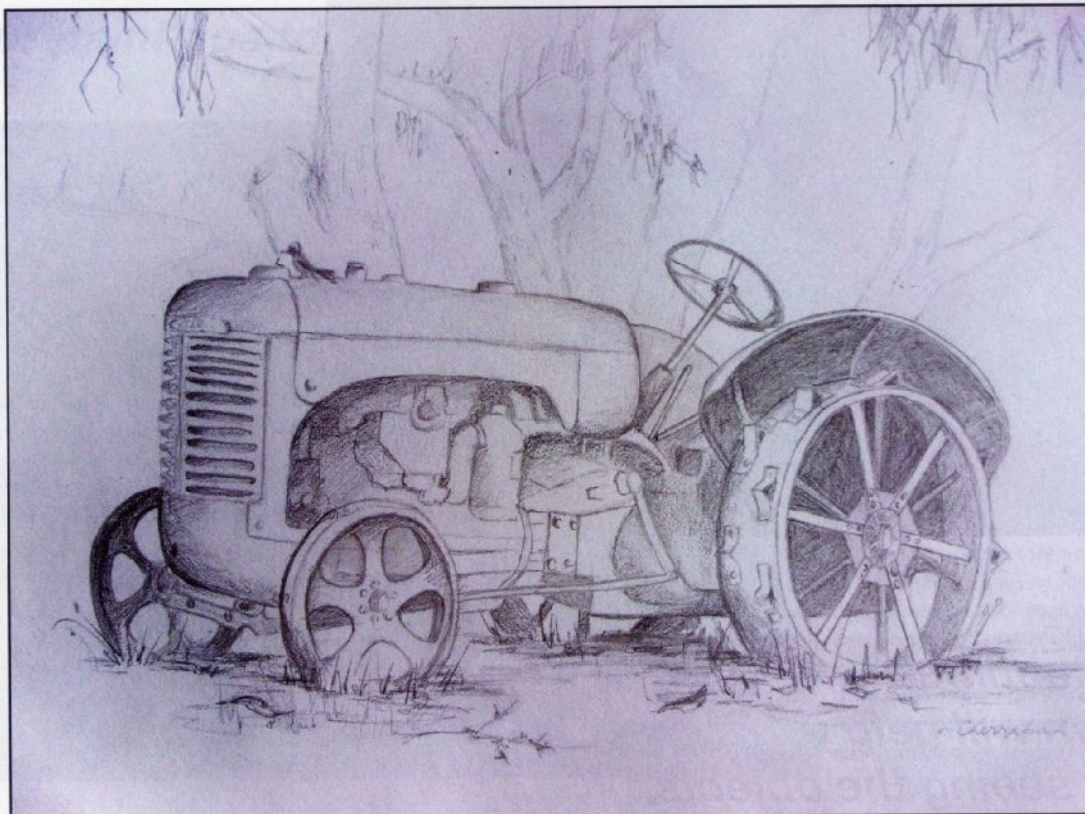
## STAGE 7

### Finished painting

The hardest edges, most detail, warmer colours and greatest tonal variation are all confined to the main focal point. The background flowers are bluer, softer, smaller with less tonal variation. So this painting has variation in negative/positive shapes, warm/cool colours, soft/hard edges, light/dark and round/triangle shapes.



# my art in the making Rusty Red



## STAGE 1

### Drawing

I found this drawing in one of my very, very old sketch books and decided that after 25 years it was about time to bring it to life!

### What the Artist Used

300gsm Rough Arches paper  
¼ sheet.

### Brushes

Large Wash brush, #6 Filbert, #6  
and #8 Rounds.

### Colours

Burnt Sienna, Light Red, French  
Ultramarine, Raw Sienna, Violet,  
Sap Green, Cobalt.

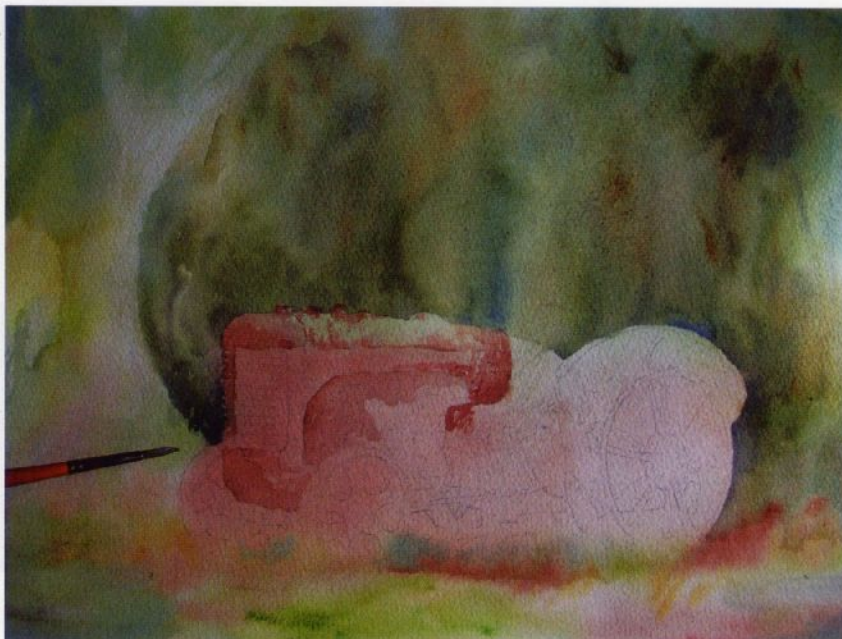
## STAGE 2

### Underwash

Although I don't always do this, I think it creates a lovely glow and unity to a painting, especially if you leave a lot of it showing through in the final painting. Wetting the paper and just dropping colours on wet in wet also helps you overcome the "white paper syndrome."







### STAGE 3

#### Negative and positive

Some of the tractor is painted with dry brush for texture. Light Red is great for portraying rust. The background is darker and cuts negatively around both the tree and the tractor. The foliage in the background is suggested by painting with thicker pigment onto a damp wash so that suggestive marks still retain some shape.

*“Sometimes turning the reference photo upside down will help you to see the shapes instead of just seeing the objects.”*



### STAGE 4

#### Defining shapes and form

The internal parts of the tractor and the inside of the back wheel are painted negatively.



*“Some variation in positive/negative shapes can create excitement and dynamism and can take your paintings to the next level.”*



#### **STAGE 5**

##### **Background trees and more details**

The background trees were hinted at by painting negatively and then some edges were softened with a damp brush and spatter added over the top. More details were defined on the tractor. Remember you can't get form if you don't have enough tonal variation.

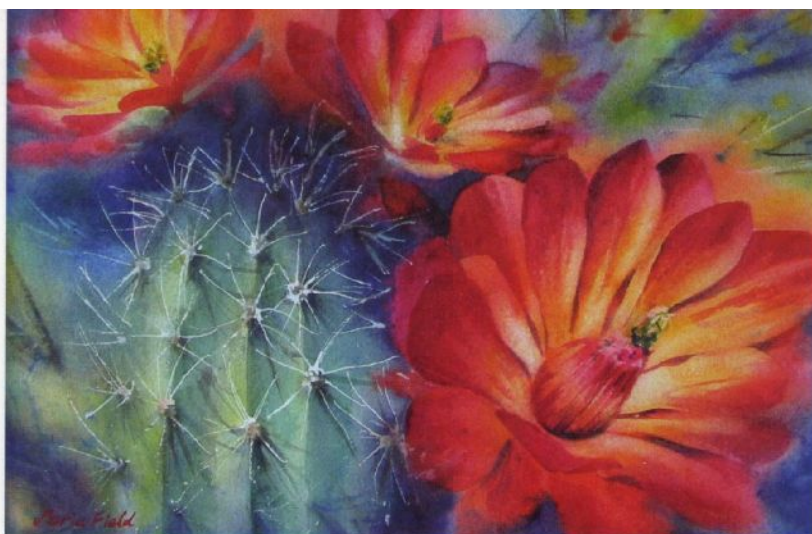
#### **STAGE 6**

##### **Final painting**

A simple subject but the painting has lots of variation – warm/cool colours, soft/hard edges, light/dark, negative/positive shapes, dry brush/wet washes and horizontals/verticals. It can be a lot to think about at the time of painting so that is why it is so important to plan.



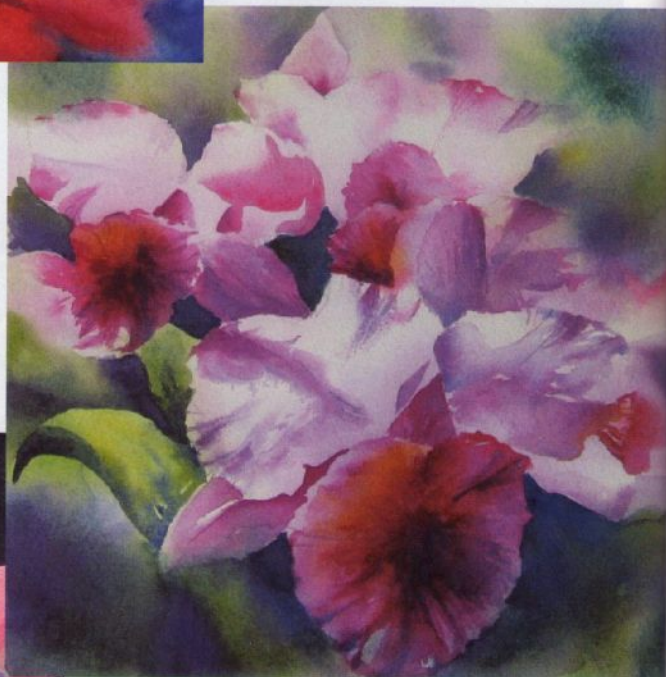




**Crimson Cactus, 37 x 27cm**

The background has been kept soft and blurry by painting wet in wet and flicking in pigment while still damp. The darker areas beneath the flower heads and the dark spaces painted between the petals help to bring out the forms. The cactus spines were either masked out or scratched out with a craft knife.

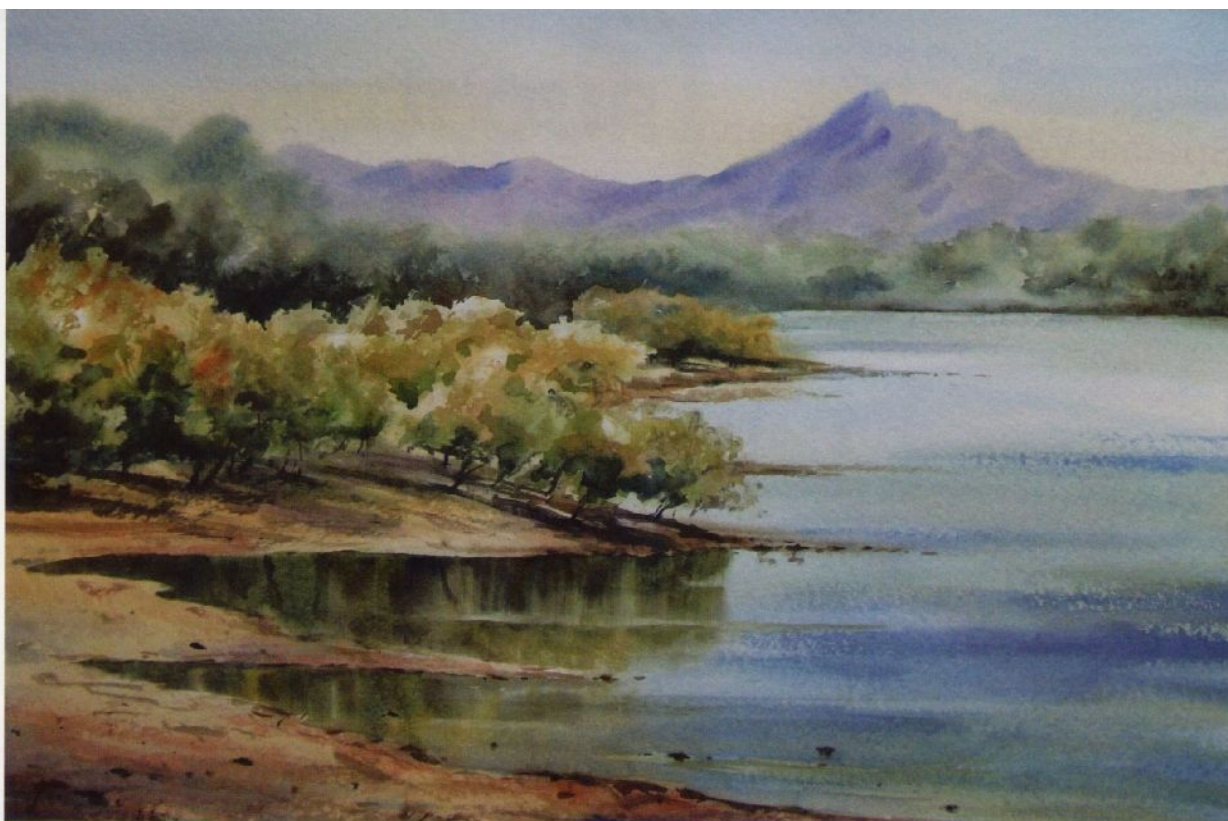
**Orchids, 25 x 25cm**  
The hardest and darkest edges are kept to the focal point. The edges are lost in many areas that are away from the focal point. See also how the leaf to the left has changed from a light shape against the dark background to a positive dark tip against the light background.



**Transparency, 37 x 27cm**

This painting started off as a very loose wet in wet wash. I just let the watercolour weave its magic to create gorgeous transparent, glowing mixes. I then came in with black ink and painted negatively for the majority with just a little extra watercolour definition on some of the flowers.





**Peaceful, 63 x 44cm**

I painted around the foreground trees with a darker bank of trees behind, to create a counterchange. If you want to see an edge you must have a counterchange of tone. The darker reflections in the water also create the shape of the land but note also how this land form changes from light against dark to dark against light.

## about the artist

Maria Field, self-taught Brisbane artist and chocoholic, is constantly inspired by light, shadows, colour and the sheer beauty of the world around her, which she strives to portray in all her work. She delights in creating colourful, clean watercolours, loving the challenge of the spontaneous, fresh and exciting medium, with her work encompassing many subjects.

Maria enjoys sharing her love of art by teaching several weekly art classes and giving demonstrations and workshops, including at the USQ McGregor Summer School.

Since commencing competing in shows in 2003, Maria has won over 51 awards, including 16 Firsts and her works are held in private and corporate collections throughout Australia, England, Canada, South Africa, Italy, Germany and Japan.

Her work has featured in several editions of *Australian Artist* magazine.

Maria's work can be viewed at:

**Gallery Newtown**, 176 Brisbane St, Ipswich QLD  
**Queensland Watercolour Society**, (various venues) QLD  
**Scattered Arts**, 6 Newman Road, Camp Hill QLD



If you have any queries or are interested in class, workshop or demonstration information please do not hesitate to contact Maria Field at:

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