

Keeping your Options Open



Former SAA President Michael Sanders puts the new Interactive Acrylics to the test

During the research and planning for my latest book I spoke to a wide range of artists of all abilities, in order to find out what people thought of acrylics. Many thought that acrylic paints have an advantage, because 'they dry quickly'. Others thought they were difficult to use, because 'they dry quickly'. However you use the paint, and whatever your style, it seems that speed of drying is a factor in how difficult or adaptable they can be. There have always been some means of slowing the paint, usually by adding retarding mediums, but, as any watercolourist will agree, it's nice to be able to get soft edges, and to be able to soften and re-work areas if you want to. This has never been possible with acrylics; once they are dry, that's it. Nothing can move a dry acrylic layer, until now.

Jim Cobb of Chroma, an Australian company, has developed an acrylic paint, Atelier Interactive, that dries as quickly or as slowly as you want, but that can be 're-opened' so that edges can be feathered, or blending can be achieved, even if the paint layer is touch dry. Watching Jim on the CD-Rom, (which comes

with the starter set), as he explained the theory and practice of working with this innovative new product, I couldn't help but be enthused. I watched and made notes, so that, when I came to use the paint in the studio, I would have a bit of background knowledge to give me a start. The main problem with 'traditional' acrylics is, even if a retarding medium is used, once the paint starts to dry, that's it. It's impossible to continue. As Jim describes it, you're 'locked out' of the process. The only option, if you want to change something, is to over-paint it, which means trying to match colours, keeping the same style, etc.

With Interactive Acrylics the painting process is kept 'open'. The timetable is up to the artist, not the paint! It means that the procedure of making a painting is a lot less fraught and you can sit back and consider how to continue an image without worrying about the time. In other words, it means that the whole thing is more enjoyable. The trick is to judge when the paint is becoming 'sticky', and then use the fine sprayer supplied, to apply a fine mist of water over the area that you want to keep working on (or over the whole painting if you want), then wait a short time, and carry on painting wet on wet.

When using a product that's new to me I always like to make some little samples of blended colours, to both see how they dry and also how they feel to apply. Often this takes the form of a



Atelier[®]
Interactive[™]
ARTISTS' ACRYLIC

very simple colour wheel, so I also get an idea of how the colours available to me will interact with each other. In this case I also wanted to see how well they could be blended, especially after being allowed to dry for a short time. I painted an inner circle which was kept workable with a fine mist of water; the paint handled well and was easy to blend. I then surrounded this ring of colour with an outer ring of white, and left both to dry. I then sprayed the wheel with a fine spray of a medium called 'unlocking formula', which, impressively, allowed me to blend each colour into the white, even though the paint had previously dried. Very impressive!

I wanted to see how this new acrylic enabled me to blend wet on wet using an oils technique, how well pigmented it was, and if layers could be glazed, then carefully removed to show soft graduations of colour that had previously been applied. I chose an image that I've struggled with in acrylics in the past, one where the distant, warm, Venetian skyline is blurred and





the background is indistinct but shows a hint of architecture, and strong dark verticals are put on top to pull the image together. I wanted to see if the lifting out method described in the CD-Rom would work in this case. Mainly though, I wanted to try out the claim that you can carry on, making changes and adjustments, for as long as required, without the paint drying. I chose a canvas board to work on.

1 I started by applying a fairly thick layer of white mixed with tiny touches of yellow and red, for the sky area, using a large (size 12) bristle brush. I then used the same brush to paint in the silhouette of the buildings in an orange red colour, allowing plenty of texture and streaks. The idea being to over paint this when it was dry, with a blue-violet, then remove parts of that paint layer with a rag to show this warm colour here and there. The water was implied with a blue colour.

2 Next, I added some slightly darker blue tones on top of the orange layer, working

quite boldly. I gently sprayed some water at this point to keep everything workable. When I was happy with the blue area I let the image dry, and then worked a thin blue-violet glaze layer on top using paint added to clear painting medium, putting in some strong diagonals and verticals. The plan was to work back through this layer later to show the original orange colour here and there.

3 I glazed some soft orange/yellows in the sky area, and using a damp rag, blended the edges of the silhouette to soften it, removing some of the violet glaze to show the original orange-red here and there to give the effect of light catching part of the buildings. I re-applied some of the blue-violet in places, to enhance the impression of buildings, without being too detailed. I used a blue-grey to add the basic colour for the water, putting in some violets and oranges here and there. When I was happy with the background I started to put in the vertical poles; dark at the front and paler (wiped out) further away.

4 When everything was dry I added the gondola and plenty of opaque pale highlights in the water. I rubbed in a weak yellow-orange glaze to the foreground water area with a rag, to warm it up. All of the painting apart from the figure was completed with two bristle brushes; a no.12 flat and a no.6 long flat. The acrylic remained workable for as long as I needed it to, and I was able to carefully lift it out even after several hours. To keep everything workable I found that the trick was being able to sense when the paint was just becoming sticky, then to stop work and add a fine spray of water from a distance, before continuing. When the whole image was dry I carefully added the figure with a no.2 round bristle brush.

5 Here is an acrylic version of one of my favourite scenes; the original was initially painted in oils. The 'blendability' of the acrylic makes the soft, blurred distance easy to do. I like the workability of this paint; with more control over the drying time it becomes more relaxing to sit back and make decisions rather than being forced to work at too fast a pace. Definitely a fascinating product!



Michael is available to demonstrate Interactive Acrylics to art societies in the South West, or further afield if there are several societies in one area on subsequent days. If you would like to try the acrylics, why not have a workshop? Contact Michael on 01822 834799 or email him on artistmjsanders@tiscali.co.uk

Michael's new book and tie-in DVD 'Quick & Clever Acrylics' are available through SAA Home Shop.