

Studio Craft: Vigorous, Fast Techniques



Vasily Kandinsky, Composition 7, 1913, showing energetic, controlled application of paint

Ask the Experts: “When I’m really excited about my art, I tend to work furiously, long and fast.

Unfortunately, my enthusiasm sometimes gets the better of me and I overwork or ruin a piece. It’s not that I don’t enjoy it, but I would occasionally like to have something to show for my more furious sessions!”

A: Artists who employ forceful techniques can get impressive results, but sometimes the materials (especially the supports) can take a beating in the process. There are lots of ways to use energetic techniques without consuming the art object in the process.

Warm up with sketches: If you are concerned about being too energetic on your painting, try burning off some of that energy on some rapid sketches. Charcoal on rough paper is a great

combination for high-action, rapid drawing. Try not to worry about whether the sketches are resolved or pretty, as long as they serve the purpose of warming you up for more significant work.



“Self Portrait” by Kathe Kollwitz, 1933. Rapid, vigorous application punctuated by more gradual passages

Keep Moving: When working intensely and rapidly, don’t neglect to move around the whole work. Often, when artists feel they have overworked a piece, it’s not the overall object, but rather one passage that received excessive focus. Make sure to “touch base” around the entire work of art systematically to ensure that no passages are neglected or overworked.

Work on several at once: Artists who work in a flurry of activity often work on several items at once, moving from easel to easel. This helps prevent overworking or applying too much paint in a single session. Have extra materials ready to preserve momentum when you’re in a creative sprint.

Pair the materials with your pace: Some materials and processes can sustain fast, vigorous application, and others force a slow, gradual pace. Fast-drying acrylic paint, paired with a rigid panel material like hardboard, is a great choice for working fast. The rapid drying rate of acrylic supports immediate overpainting, while a rigid panel can withstand pressure, scraping and sgraffito (scratching and incising paint) without sagging, tearing or puncturing like a stretched canvas.

Take breaks. Just like an intense sport, breaks and timed periods of activity can be beneficial in studio art. Pick a session duration that makes sense for your process, and use a timer if necessary to enforce breaks. This allows you to periodically review your progress and stay on track with the pictorial objective.

Use music to moderate your pace: Most people like to listen to music while they work, but it's easy to forget the effect ambient sounds can have on mood and emotion. If you enjoy music while you work, look at your playlist and see if you are choosing titles that support your natural pace.

Use a painting knife to remove excess: When working rapidly in paint, the surface tends to become saturated with an accumulation of wet paint, sometimes limiting further work. If wet paint is building up heavily because of rapid application, use a palette knife to scrape away excess. This helps extend the amount of time the painting surface is workable, and reduces surface relief. Instead of scraping down to the bare priming, try skimming and lifting the bulk without totally exposing the first layer. If you want to save still-wet paint that has been scraped away, deposit it onto a palette or blotter for later use as a neutral toning mixture.

Get a fresh perspective: Ask a trusted peer to look at your progress and tell you if it might be a good time to wrap it up. There's a fine line between heavily worked and overworked, and sometimes the momentum of the session can make it difficult to downshift.

Have a plan: To balance rapid, aggressive processes with productive output, it helps to have a planned strategy for ending a session before the quality of the work itself is affected negatively. Choose a "cool down" activity as something that puts you in a more relaxed, contemplative frame of mind, one which helps transition to a relaxed exit. Have a cup of tea, text a friend, or make a ritual of cleaning brushes and palette. That way, when you come back to the studio, you'll be recharged for the next high-intensity burst.

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