Gavin Rain

More about my technique

Voice

I'm always asked about technique. Always. It's usually the first thing people ask me. Artists go on a lot about what their work means. This isn't as interesting to everyone else as they think. So in this essay I'll talk about how I do what I do. Please – feel free to wander off at any point: The process is a long one, with many steps. It's probably easier to handle over a period of days (such as it takes me) rather than to get through it all in one go. I mean, I hope you don't wander off.

I just won't blame you if you do.This method of working took me a year or two to develop. It then took me another year or two to improve. In fact I'm still working on it. Most of the art, at least for me, is in the preparation. The decisions I make before I even go near a paintbrush. In fact, by the time I DO go near one the painting is already done in my mind. Well, not in my mind – that sounds like I'm some sort of mad genius. I'm not. But what I'm trying to say is that it's all planned out.

I guess what I'm getting at here is that I have used many methods in the past. The one I'm about to take you through is representative of my thinking. Here and there some of the steps change from time to time. But here I'm taking you through the mathematics. Through the art. Well they're the same thing. Basically: through the hidden detail. That's the part of my art where I live anyway.

Body

It all starts with a photograph, or a sketch. I don't paint out of my head – I need an initial form to start with.
In the broadest sense I'm going to take that form and break it down into its simplest parts – a set of dots to represent it. I'm mimicking how a digital image looks close up here.
For better or worse. But I won't dwell on why here – that's another discussion entirely.
So it all starts with a photo. We're only getting to the technique now and I've already made you read four paragraphs. I'll try be more concise. So, that photo: usually colour, and any size, just to get an idea of the form.

I might as well take you through an actual painting as opposed to a theoretical one. So here's a painting I'm working on at the moment (my moment, not yours). As I said this takes a lot of time (which is edited out here like a cooking show) so this might be a bit disjointed. So this is a crop of Marilyn Monroe. Okay in truth this isn't a photograph – it's a composite of a number of different photographs and a little bit of sketching. I'm going to break this photograph into dots, so firstly I have to divide it up.

So this is me gridding things. This is one of many pages. In this part of the technique I'm only after working out the size of each dot, so I've dispensed with the colour for the time being. Images are complex things. I'm going to simplify this one a little so I can make some decisions. I'm going to break the image up into blocks then blur each one. I don't blur the entire image in one go because I've come to discover that the result isn't as good. So imagine that each block is photographed out of focus, and then pasted back into a big blocked image.

So armed with my blocked image I need to now know how light or dark each block is. I've created a set of cards ranging from black to white to discover this.
Each block then gets a numerical rating on how light or dark it is. Okay, obviously this isn't all that accurate, and often the tone falls between two of my cards.
In this case I'll write down something like: 5+ instead of 5. The bigger the value, the bigger the dot. Here's the same block image expressed as numbers.

Now I express each of these numbers as a circle.

Think of these numbers as the diameter of each circle. In reality it's not quite this simple because I have to adjust each number for the size of the canvas, and I also have to apply a little scaling – white (number = 1) would be too small, so I adjust everything so that the lighter colours aren't as small as the numbers reported.

This is called adjusting the gamut: The dynamic range. Fancy terms for saying: I mess with the sizes a bit. It starts with something temporary like pencil, so I can make corrections.

And then I black these out so that I can get a sense of the result. There's quite a lot of adjusting happening at this point. I'm never happy with that range. I adjust it over and over. After all this though, I have the body of the work. This process is called half-toning apparently: representing shades as single colours. I never knew this when I started, which is a pity, because a little research could have saved me a lot of time in the early days.

So the smaller the dots are, the more of the white background is visible around them, the larger, the less so. Manipulating these sizes creates the image. If you've ever done any art classes, you've come across a woodcut. This is the same idea.
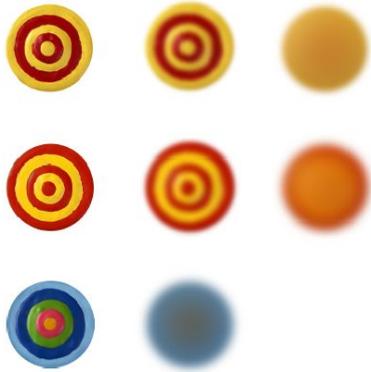
Skin

With the form of the work complete, I now turn to the colour.

This part took me a while to figure out. There's probably an easier method, but you go with what you know.

How the colour works is quite simple – from a distance our eyes can no longer distinguish between the circles of colour – they all get blurred together. The result? Well if we have circles of red and yellow:

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showing the lens out of focus – so you can see that it's a case of blurring the camera lens to achieve this result).
The result is orange. Obviously. But the result of both of these is orange.

Not quite the same orange though, as there are different amounts of each colour.
Think: area of colour. It's not always easy to work out what the resulting colour will be...
But here's the thing: I don't really have to. I've got a long list of all the dots and what the resulting colours are. So I started by planning a lot of dots, blurring them, adding them to a chart, ordered by colour. Was this boring? Yes. But I've found ways to speed this process up a bit.
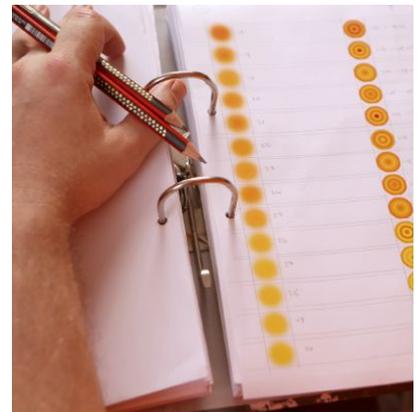
Anyway, what this means is, I can work backwards. So if I need a dot to be orange (from a distance), I go look up orange in my chart and I pick one of the dots.
So my next step is to work out which colours need to go where. This is pretty much the same technique as I used in the black and white version earlier: blur each area individually. Nowadays I have numerous choices per each colour so I can play around and decide which dot works best in representing the colour I need. With this done it's just a game of matchup now...

Again, it's not as simple as this – The colours are never quite right – so I spend quite a lot of time balancing this out. Depending on how far away from the painting you are, your eyes will blur neighbouring dots together into one colour, just as they will do between the circles of each dot.

So if one dot ends up looking a bit too red, I can place a dot next to it that's a bit greener... and the result will balance out. There's a lot of labour in doing this. It's very time consuming. But it's fun. It's always fun.

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Sometimes I will play little games – I will pick a dot that's got a naturalistic progression of colours and I'll place it next to a dot that's got a weird mix of colours. It's a little statement. I realise I'm probably only amusing myself. However, there's something quite rewarding about being lost in the details. Art often takes place in those hidden spaces. So does life actually.

Painting

I'm now armed with all the calculations I need to begin the painting. Now I need to get the placement of the dots onto the canvas. I've tried a lot of methods here: creating a stencil and then pencilling where the dots will go… Using spray-paint to do this… placing pins in the side of the canvas and tying thin cotton into a grid…using an old overhead projector with a grid stamped onto a transparency… all of these methods work – the basic idea is just to work out where on the canvas the dots need to go. Projectors and the like tend to be the least accurate here – as the projected image tends to bloat and distort. Probably the most reliable method I've ever used is the string.
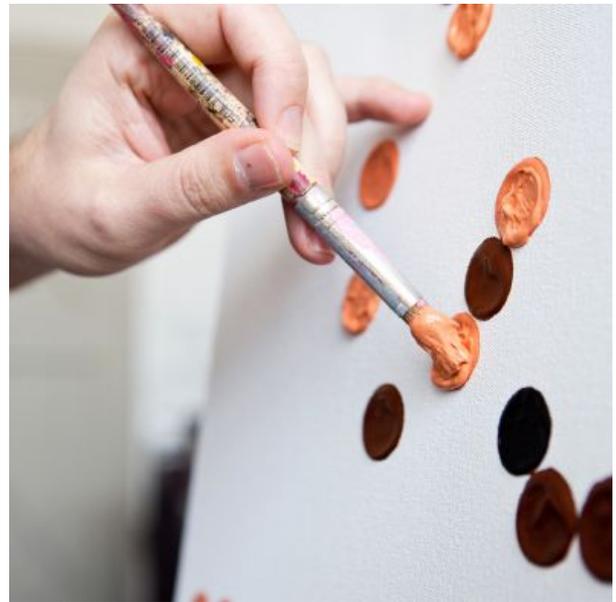
Once I know where they need to go I refer to my calculations about how big each one needs to be. Sure, this is labour intensive again, but once the first layer is done, all the others are proportional so it gets easier as I continue. Fast forward a week or two and the painting is done. Fast forward some more time with touch-ups etc. and the painting is complete. The painting has to work from close up as well as from a distance. Oh, the other thing I always end up talking about (I might as well get into it here), is around hanging the painting on a wall. I'm always hearing "my place isn't big enough". I like this. I like it when my work hangs in a space that prevents the full resolve of the image. It's hidden in plain sight.

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That's kind of the whole point. That's the message: that we need to step back to understand it all. I force the viewer to go on this journey with me. At least I used to, until I noticed someone using a phone camera to achieve the same result. Anyway, all of this planning is to arrive at the beginning of that journey. What happens next is pretty much out of my control. I guess that's how it should be.

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