

Nature in detail

Build confidence and celebrate the natural world around you as you paint big and bold paintings with oils and acrylics, by Natalie Toplass

Learning objectives

- An introduction to a mixed-media approach
- How to work from photographic references
- Understand your materials

I had a love of drawing from an early age. When my parents opened a florist shop, any unsold flowers were taken home and that's when I started to draw them – mostly to scale and in coloured pencil – but that was the moment! Now when I paint elements of nature, I see it as a challenge to capture a particular aspect;

it could be the colours, the structure or the drama that interests me. The scale is also important, as I want the viewer to feel surrounded by the loveliness of such an everyday thing.

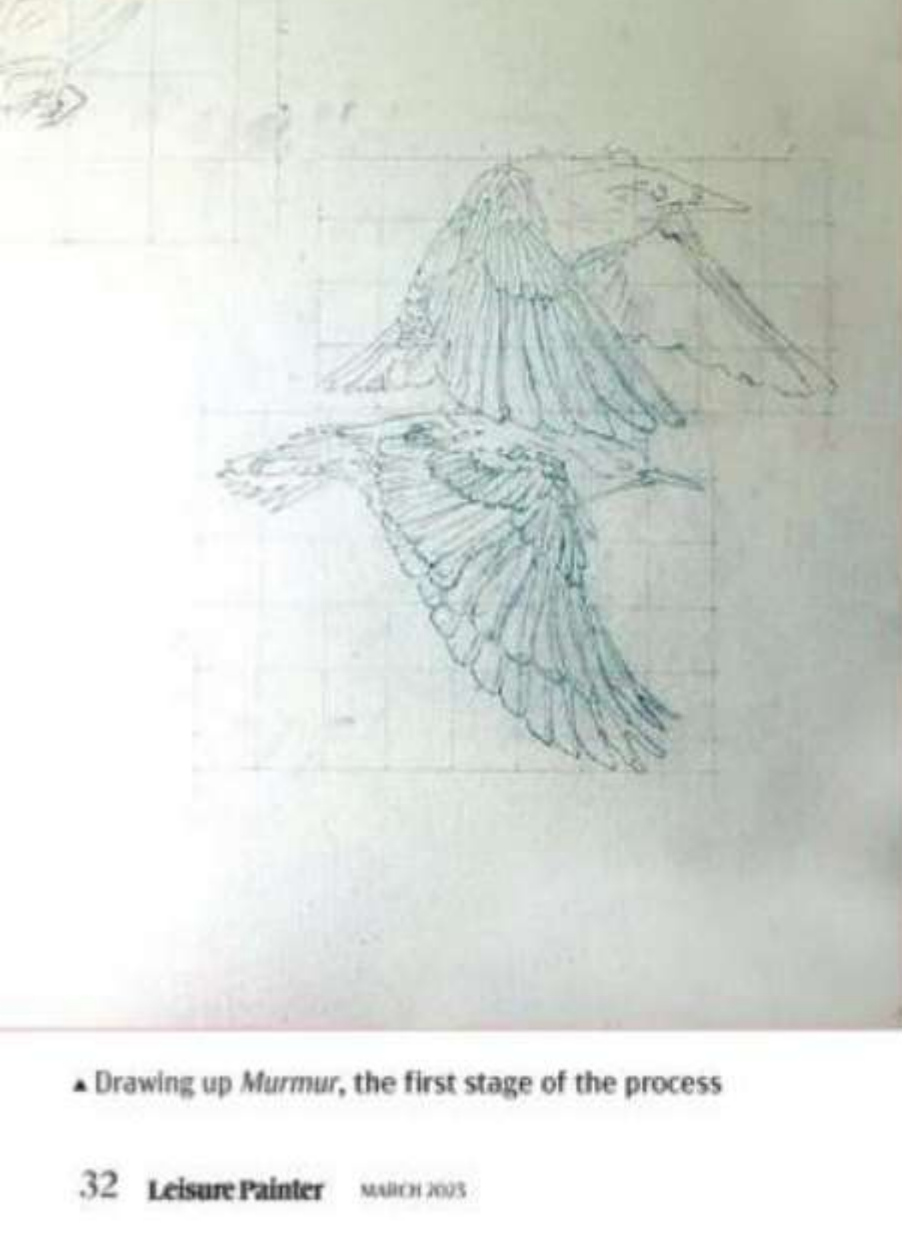
In my painting *Chiaroscuro* (below) it was the quality of light coming through the petals that particularly appealed.



▲ *Chiaroscuro*, oil and acrylic on box canvas, 50-50in. (127-127cm)



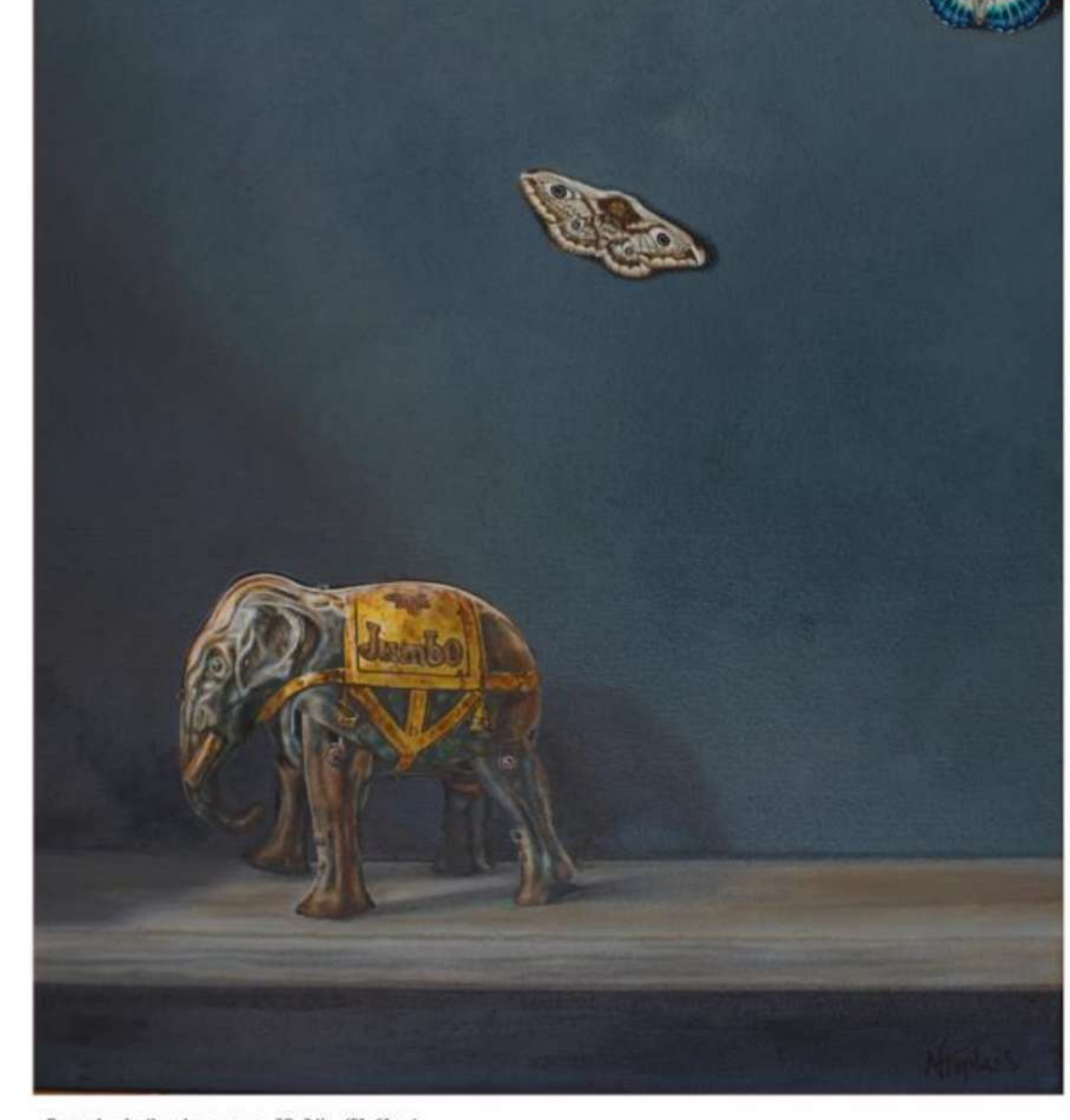
▲ The finished painting *Murmur*, oil and acrylic on box canvas, 28-43in. (71-109cm)



▲ Drawing up *Murmur*, the first stage of the process



▲ Here you can see how I begin blocking in the colours



▲ *Dreamland*, oil on box canvas, 20-24in. (51-61cm)

There is such subtlety and softness there. It is amazing what nature gives us; we just have to take the time to see it. Which is why the scale is so important; it shouts, 'look at me'.

My primary influences are: the 17th century Dutch master, Ambrosius Bosschaert; the 20th century artist, Georgia O'Keefe; photographer, Karl Blossfeldt; and the contemporary painter, Bridget Riley. Their use of colour and form has

inspired me, and I have developed a love for this detailed way of painting, using oil on canvas to build up layers of colour intensity. My style is a bit quirky and quite dramatic and I love the Dutch masters for that. There's always some element that I'm trying to capture and it's just out of my reach so I keep exploring and refining. I really enjoy this exactness in other artists; it's a kind of allure and a simplicity that's very intriguing.

Approaching the subject

My technique has developed over time through intense observation, and trial and error. There is always room for development, and I enjoy this process of challenging myself.

Scale is important to me as is the story element, which is emphasised by the snapshot feel of the composition. Where have they been? What are they doing? What is their aim? Consider how these

questions may change, depending on the scale of the subject. If there was one large *Murmur* (left) and centre on the canvas of *Murmur* (right), how would this change the narrative? If you are considering a magnified view, try using a viewfinder to move around your reference to find a composition that appeals to you.

I work from photographic reference. As I'm not particularly skilled at photography, I often contact a professional photographer for reference images, but I try to use my own images as much as possible, taking as many as I need to find the right impression and the right feel, then I use a pencil sketch from it (below far left). At this point I work out the composition, moving the sketch physically around the canvas while taking photos to review the arrangement. Reviewing the image from different perspectives, such as using the photos I've taken or holding it up to a mirror, helps to remove me from the process so I become a more detached observer.

As you can see in my pencil sketch, I use a simple grid system to scale an image up or down onto canvas, as precision is key to my work. This is an

important part of the process, as it enables me to understand the physical structure of the image, to make any alterations, and hone the composition.

Materials and set up

For *Murmur* I chose a 28x43in. box canvas in a landscape orientation, giving it a strong physical presence, while highlighting the feel of movement in a linear direction.

I generally use refined linseed oil, which is the thinner for the oil paint that acts like water. You only need a small amount; I use a jar lid to pour it into. I like Winsor & Newton or Jackson's oil paints. I also always have a small jar of Zest-it to keep my brushes and the colours clean. Zest-it is a far safer and more eco-friendly brush cleaner than white spirits. This is an important element as people often say their colours become 'muddy'.

If you clean and wipe your brushes regularly on a cloth, your colours will remain fresh and vibrant.

When starting a painting I try to work from left to right then there is always space for my marl stick to lean on the unpainted canvas. A marl stick looks like

a giant one-ended cotton bud-type stick, which is used to keep your hand steady and off the canvas. I also rotate the canvas as I'm painting, which might sound slightly odd, but is a tried-and-tested technique to help you look at the image without prejudice.

When you turn your painting upside down, for instance, your brain can process that you have been focusing on for a long time and turns it into an image that you're not familiar with. This lets you see it in a different way, which also helps you to spot any mistakes you have made. It really works.

Blocking-in onwards

It's useful to choose a colour palette first by careful observation of my reference then separate these paints to have them handy, as then there is no confusion over which colour I'm working with further on in the painting. I start by pinpointing what colours are underneath (below left). When one layer is dry, usually the next day, I repeat and refine this process, adding in high and low lights. This process usually takes several attempts before I reach the level of colour intensity that I want.

To blend colours I use several small dry brushes, which I keep dry and clean by wiping on my cloth repeatedly.

When I think I'm ready for the details – this is the bit I really love – I use Riggers Nos. 1 to 4 and the same process of careful observation and the building up of colour to create intensity over several sessions.

The final element in the process is the application of the final micro-touches of acrylic white and lamp black where needed (left). On this note, if you want to paint over a section that you're not happy with, let it dry completely then cover with white acrylic. This is a far quicker way to put your canvas back to neutral to start again.

Background

I often use a plain background with my paintings as all the focus is then pinpointed on the subject. When the oil is completely dry, I cut in with my chosen background colour using Daler-Rowney System 3 or Graduate acrylics. This may take several layers, depending on the colours you choose. I tend to mix my own.

I encourage you to try painting with oils. There are many different techniques to practise and enjoy, and the translucent quality of the paint is just incredible. Remember, it's only paint and board so don't be too precious with it; just give it a go! 🎨

Natalie Toplass

Natalie's work has been shown in Tokyo, Singapore, London, New York and Australia, as well as in various galleries around the UK and locally in Shropshire. She has delivered several masterclasses at the prestigious West Dean College in Chichester. Visit www.natalietoplass.com



▲ Just the background and a few details to finish and *Murmur* will be complete

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