Community Outreach — Oakland Veterans

Glazed Landscapes and Wild Geese by Sheila Cain



The migrating birds may have flown south, but the Oakland vets gathered to paint landscapes with geese. We drew inspiration from Wild Goose Qi Gong, a traditional Chinese practice that combines movement, breathing, and focused attention, inspired in part by the natural movements of wild geese. We wondered: Could we bring that same energy to our painting?

Michael Friedland led the class, demonstrating the art of glazing in several carefully sequenced steps. Our only pencil line was the horizon. Using a mop or other large brush, we mixed a generous puddle of watery lemon yellow and painted overlapping strokes from the top of the paper downward in a graded wash.

Then came a lesson in patience: letting the paper dry. For a successful glaze, the previous layer must be thoroughly dry before you apply the next. A shiny surface is a sure sign that the paper is still wet; even without a sheen, it may need more time. Rushing this step can cause the colors to mix rather than form the transparent layers we wanted.

Once the yellow wash was dry, we repeated the process with watery yellow ochre. After drying the paper again, we brushed on a transparent glaze of water and a touch of alizarin crimson. And there it was—our luminous sky, built layer by transparent layer. Time to let it dry once more!

Next came the foreground fields. Michael showed us how to mix green from ultramarine blue and yellow ochre. We painted diagonal strokes across the lower portion of the paper, adding splatters of water and pigment for texture. While the paint was still slightly damp, we introduced earth tones. Finally, we painted the mountains rising toward the sky.

Michael had guided us through the glazes, and apparently, as far as he was concerned, his job was done.

"What comes next?" we asked.

"Just add the geese," he replied.

We looked at one another. "Just add the geese?"

Michael's goal had been to teach us glazing, and we were thrilled with the results. But the geese were the focal point of the composition. We certainly didn't want our carefully glazed landscapes to end up with a gaggle of misshapen birds that no one could identify.

We consulted our handout and began practicing. Peering over Michael's shoulder, we noticed that his geese were arranged in the familiar V-shaped flying formation—but they were tiny. Very tiny. We could barely see them!

We practiced on a test sheet, took a deep breath, and launched our geese into the sky—some more successfully than others.

Looking at all our paintings together, I was struck by the variety of landscapes, particularly the skies. We had followed Michael's glazing instructions and achieved luminous colors that seemed to glow from within. Painting the geese loosely while keeping them anatomically convincing, however, was asking a lot. We did the best we could.

Perhaps our paintings revealed something about who we are: our individual ways of seeing, the rhythm of our brushstrokes, and even our own chi—the vital energy we had set out to explore through painting, much as we might through Qi Gong.

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