

Painting Without Brushes, Rick Nelms, Artist in Residence, Under the Thinking Tree
<https://underthethinkingtree.com/who-we-are/>

Rick's painting equipment, part of Sue's contribution to my painting

hardware:

Fully Adjustable Wheelchair Desk – height adjustable main desktop angle adjusts and has lip and rail to secure objects like computers, side desktops lock in place and are flat for items like hard drives, cups of drink, mouse use. Has lockable castors to help manoeuvrability and no centre rail so I can drive my wheelchair right under it and raise my feet behind the computer monitor so I don't get lymphedema (swollen legs). Painting of my set-up on next page.



Large keyboard to facilitate hitting the right key at least some of the time. has large keys and high-contrast lettering, models available for PC and Mac. Mine was developed in conjunction with RNIB. Keyboards with larger keys (like BigKeys and Jumbo Keyboards) make it easier to locate keys and provide a bigger 'target area'. e.g Jumbo XL/Monster II Keyboard and Keyguard



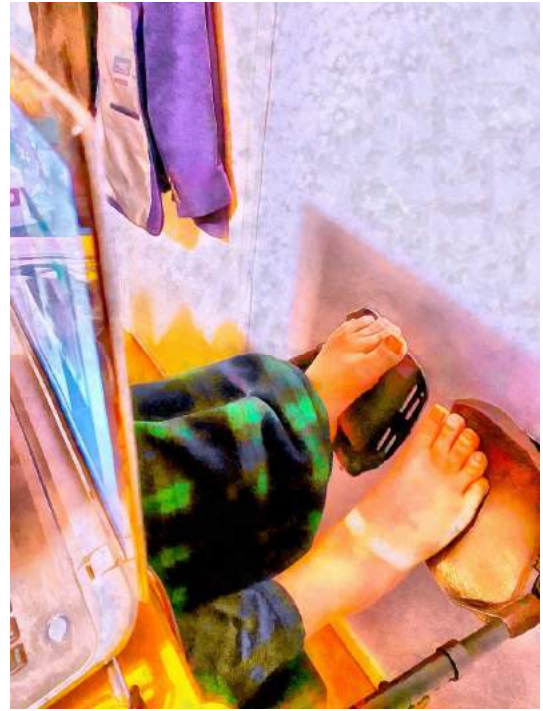
Keyguard - Keyguards are rigid plates with holes designed to work with specific keyboards. The holes are positioned over each key and significantly reduce the chance of accidental keypresses. The guard also allows you to rest your hands and arms on the guard without pressing any of the keys. Guards can be removed and fitted for use only when required. It is usually easier to purchase a keyboard and guard together rather than trying to get a guard to fit a specific keyboard.



n-abler pro trackball giant mouse (which we call 'the rat'). Unique anti-tremor facility which filters out the tremors, leaving the underlying movement of the joystick or trackball. There are four selectable levels of anti-tremor filtering. Can have trackball like mine or joystick. left and right mouse buttons widely separated so I can't click both at the same time by mistake. Mouse button lock so I don't have to hold down the mouse button.



This page is taken up with three paintings showing two rather odd selfies of my workstation, showing me painting at two in the morning, sat in my powerchair with my feet up behind my laptop, and an iPad on my lap on a little metal adjustable laptop stand (photo at bottom of page). The second painting shows my feet looking suitably embarrassed up behind my laptop; I had removed the blanket that normally covers them which is why they look a bit surprised.



The third painting is cropped from a photo of me at Anglesey Abbey taken by Sue before lockdown, called 'Another day... Another garden...' It shows my powerchair with leg lifters. You can also get leg lifters on a manual chair like the one in the photo.



Software for image manipulation **before painting** I use:

GIMP – free and very powerful graphics program for photo alteration and making photomontages – I use this a lot. It is available for Windows, Mac and other operating systems. It allows you to save images in the lossless PNG format I prefer to use (I do not like JPEG images and generally change them to PNG files as soon as possible; each time you save a JPEG the quality gets worse).

Corel Paintshop Pro – the best thing about this is the JPEG artefact removal tool, which I use on nearly every public domain picture I get from the internet at the same time as changing to PNG format. It is worth buying it once in one of their regular sales, but I have stopped buying the new version they produce every year because they never fix the things I don't like e.g. docks that are easily dragged across the screen by mistake.

Adobe Photoshop is now available only on subscription costing £20 to £40 per month (which is out of my price range) and does nothing that GIMP does not do for free. I bought the last version that they sold but rarely use it.

BenVista PhotoZoom 8 is designed for just one purpose, to make small images larger. You cannot do this successfully without degrading the image quality, except that there have always been some neat work-arounds that enable you to make a reasonable attempt, and these are collected together in this product. It is quite expensive considering that it is used for just one job, but I use it every day and would not be able to do some of the work that I do without it.

For **painting on the PC computer** I use:



Dynamic Auto Painter 6 Pro – works on Windows and Mac and is \$89. Comes with a lot of configurations that claim to emulate specific painters such as Monet and Van Gogh. You can download lots of additional configurations from the internet for free. I like the fact that it uses brush strokes to make up the painting (from a photograph or photomontage). If you right-click on the standard configurations you can change every decision that it makes and save your new configuration for future use, which I have been doing for the last few years. In the brushstroke painting modes I do not like the mathematical 'dry reveal' step they include to speed up painting because it makes all the paintings look the same. In all my current configurations I have set dry reveal to 1 (maximum 255) so that only brush strokes are used in making the painting. I sometimes set the configuration to do about 100000 brushstrokes which takes 20 minutes to an hour to paint, or a million, which I usually leave to paint overnight. The painting is of a scene from Anglesey Abbey, from a photo taken by my wonderful wife Sue. It is painted using a modified Neo-Raphaelites

configuration and a palette from one of Monet's paintings of the South of France.



Although I don't like the dry reveal step in brushstrokes painting, it can be used on its own and produces results very quickly, in a minute or two. So there are also some configurations that I use a lot which use only the mathematical dry reveal step so they work like the many iPad apps that I use. These are quick and easy to modify to make them do what you want. I use Azo for watercolours but have removed the 'outline' step, I use Golden Age for the interesting colour effects and the way it renders foliage, but have removed the vignette step as I did not like the edges of the painting to be dark. I also use Re-Acrylic and have made a bunch of versions of that which simulate acrylic painting and produce results quickly. The painting is based very loosely on a classic photo of Jim Clark's Lotus at Spa in the rain in 1965 and is my first successful watercolour painting, using a modified Azo configuration with my preferred intense and surreal palette.

The cheap 'home' version of Dynamic Auto Painter cannot be changed and I do not recommend or use it.



Corel Painter 2021 – works on Windows and Mac. I like the fact that this uses brush strokes to make up the painting (from a photograph or photomontage). With this, you change all the decisions it makes in placing the brushstrokes on the screen at the time you are painting. This means that you can see the effect immediately but it is a pain to change every setting if you want it to paint very differently. I love using this for pointillistic impressionist paintings. Corel produce a new version every year, and every year I decide I'm not going to buy it and then end up buying it anyway! They do make changes and improvements every year and it is cheaper to upgrade it than to buy it outright for the first time. It is cheaper if you catch one of their regular sales (it is cheapest each year in the 'black Friday' sale) and is cheaper to buy an upgrade if you start the upgrade from within the program's welcome screen. They do a cheap 'Corel Painter Essentials' but that cannot be changed and I don't recommend or use it.



Fotosketcher – free and has some really good features including several different brushstrokes modes. I often put a photo in and use oil pastel sketch or painting 10 (brushstrokes) as the first step. I then save the result and use F12 or the menu to move the painting to the left screen, repeating using painting modes 2, 4, 7, 8 and 10 all of which use different brushes to do the painting. It is not as controllable or easy to learn as the others, but it is free!

for painting using the iPad I use a variety of different apps. Some work on the iPhone too which is great because I can paint in the van.

The apps I use and can recommend are:

ViewExif – the apple photos app does not show you how big the pictures are, so I use this app to find out and for adding titles and other metadata to the images.

Cropsize – I use this to change the size of images. It seems to be quite good at making picture bigger without introducing too much blurring. I also use it for increasing the contrast and for making colours brighter. It is the only iPad/iPhone app I use for preparing images for painting. It allows you to save images in the lossless PNG format I prefer to use (I do not like JPEG images and generally change them to PNG files as soon as possible; each time you save a JPEG the quality gets worse).

For the actual paintings on the iPad

Jixipix products – they make a whole lot of apps, most of which you can get for Android tablets and phones. They make some for iPad only. You can get some for the PC and Mac, though they are more expensive and I have not tried any of the computer-based ones. The many iPad/iPhone Jixipix apps I have and use are:

- **Portrait Painter** – I use this for landscapes! The painting shown was the very first one I did using this app. It was the first iPad app I got that was any use and I use it a lot. It has two settings, one for realistic paintings and the other for expressionistic paintings, which I love. It works on the iPhone too. There is an android version. I think I paid £2.99 for it. I've had a lot of fun with it, and so has Sue, my lovely wife, who likes the fact that you don't need 30 years of experience of doing computer graphics to make a really exciting painting.
- **Impresso** and **Artista Oil** are oil painting apps for iPad/iPhone and android, offering a simple



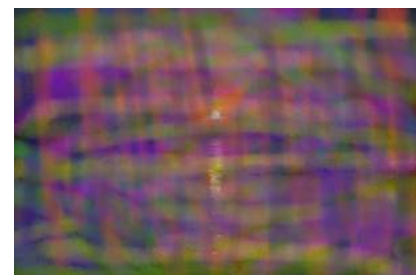
and straightforward but limited range of settings. They are easy to use and I recommend them both. I also have **Impresso Pro** for iPad only, which is much more powerful and includes pointillistic and impressionistic brush strokes which I absolutely love, as shown in the image from Anglesey Abbey. I usually make the picture bigger before doing the painting using these as otherwise you end up with a rather small painting. I usually make the image at least 8000 pixels along its longest side. The apps cost from £4.99 to £9.99. I use them all a lot.

- **Aquarella** for iPad/iPhone/ Android and **Watercolour Studio Pro** for iPad are watercolour apps and I am now getting to grips with them. I never did watercolour for real and so I found them a bit difficult to learn, but I have done some good paintings with them. Often watercolour artists use ink or other media to increase the definition of their paintings. I have never been comfortable doing this, so I am learning how to create sufficient definition using colour and shape. It is a work in progress as the Aquarella painting shows.
- **Pastello Pro** is only available for iPad and includes pastels, conte, pencils and crayons. I love the pastels and crayons and have done some of my best pictures with these media, mainly because oil pastels were my medium of choice in solid medium painting. I like the way that you can create blended colour in Pastello Pro, as shown in the painting of a Cambridgeshire hedgerow, but have yet to persuade it to produce pointillistic artwork. Conte and some of the other modes are taking longer to understand and use effectively. It was £9.99.



Other apps not made by Jixipix:

- **Brushstroke** app was £3:99 and I use it a lot, and I bought the expansion pack in app (£1:99). It does a better job of simulating real brushstrokes in iPhone/iPad apps than almost all the others. It allows you to define the brushstroke shape and style and then makes a realistic simulation of a painting. It is a lot of fun and I recommend it. I recently bought an app (Inspire Pro) which turned out not to be able to turn a photo into a painting and the software developer, in agreeing a refund, suggested Brushstroke as the most suitable app to make photos into paintings.
- **MobileMonet** app was also cheap. I have found it a bit more difficult to navigate around than the Jixipix apps, but it does do things a bit differently from any of the other apps and occasionally produces a painting that has a unique style, so I usually try it at least once during each cycle of painting an image and sometimes it turns out a useful painting. Some of the slider controls in it don't seem to make much difference and it is pretty limited in its capabilities. I only paid £1.99 for it.
- **iPastels** is unique among these apps in that it allows you to simulate using oil pastels, for example smearing them with your fingers on the screen. I used it to make the medieval glass in the "Through a glass darkly" painting. It is the only app that I can still use to simulate real painting and I anticipate that I will still be able to use it for as long as I can slide my fingers across the iPad screen. It works on the iPhone but the small screen size makes it much less easy to do. You can do a painting in another app and then add to it using this app which is fun. It is free, and there is a Pro update in the app which is £4:99 which is supposed to stop ads from appearing. I have not yet bought the upgrade and have not yet seen an advert.



- **Oilist** app is completely mad and I love it. You insert your photo, chose a mode and it just sets off madly painting. When you see a painting you like you hit pause and save it. I don't have the coordination to pause it quickly enough, so I used to quite often miss the picture I wanted. Now I sit with my finger over the save button and just stab at it when the painting looks good and so now I get it right often enough to keep me happy. Because it works in a unique way it produces paintings that are quite unlike any others that I can make, so it is an app I recommend for fun. To make the painting I set it on a fine brush setting and then pressed on the explode button until it was complete chaos and then waited while it sorted itself out and made a flurry of saves when it started to look good. It is £2.99.
- I do have a copy of Procreate, which came strongly recommended, but I have not managed to work out how to use it and have only actually successfully used it once, to blur out a bit of a picture I did not like. I think that it is supposed to have some kind of clone mode but I don't understand it and so I can't recommend it.
- **Pastiche** (free, and its expansion pack (99p I think) I have only had a few days but although it refuses to paint very large pictures, reducing the size of everything down to about 2500 pixels across, it does seem to be fun and I have done some interesting paintings on the iPhone. I had a play with it on the iPad today and it is able to produce a good range of interesting paintings, offering good controllability for colour and contrast. I am very pleased with the painting of a waterdrop on an anemone flower in Sue's clever photograph.
- Recently I found some apps I had never tried before (as a result of following up a lead for an app which used to be available for the iPad but is not any longer). This threw up some interesting looking cheap or free iPad apps, which I have only tested very briefly.



- **Artomaton** appears genuinely interesting because it does actually use an artificial intelligence engine to make a real effort to put brushstrokes on the canvas to make an actual painting. For £2:99 you can hide ads and unlock all brush types including useful things like pastels and watercolours. I think that this and the next app, are currently the nearest thing to the programs I use of the PC and will be spending quite a lot of effort trying to get the most out of them. I am very glad that I found this one, with the facility to use oils, pencils, watercolour, pastels, crayons, pointillistic style and more . The more I use it, the better I like it. I used the pointillistic setting, maximum fineness setting to make the painting.
- **iC Painter** also makes actual brushstrokes that assemble a painting in the way that I want it to. It had a glitch in it that threw me out of the painting when I tried to use the angle function, but the developer seems to have fixed it today. It does one clever thing which I like, which is to let you click on the painting to keep on adding brushstrokes until you are happy with the painting. it has several different brushes and the facility to import more. I successfully made several paintings with it today without any hiccups, so it is actually going to be a really useful app, again allowing real painting with brushstrokes. I can't remember how much it was, but the developer's other apps are all under £5. It appears to be linked to a much more powerful app called **icolorama** (£6 I think) which is clearly going to take a while to get to grips with. There are lots of support materials for **icolorama** online, but I find learning new and complex software very difficult now, so I'm not sure how much I will use it.
- I cannot recommend I either of the two apps called Impressionism, nor Oil Paint My Photo, Pixelmator Pro as I have but do not use them. Easy Oil Painter Free simply does not work on my iPad, so that one is worth a miss at the moment.



- **Brushworks**, I got just a few hours ago. It is another one that is completely mad and another one that I love! I'm going to use it a lot, even though it takes a ridiculous amount of time to make its paintings. It puts on brushstrokes one at a time and fiddles around with each one until it is satisfied. It is a completely original approach and looks as though it is one that has the potential to produce excellent paintings, at the cost of tying up your iPad for some time while it does its thing. How long? No idea, the painting is literally the first one I have made with the app. I randomly guessed at some settings and pressed the go button and then sat back open mouthed as it set off brushstroke by brushstroke. After about five minutes it announced that it was satisfied and I saved the picture. So, some way to go on the learning curve on this app, but successfully produced a nice picture at the first attempt, which is hopeful. I believe that it was 99p!



The most important lesson that I have learned from all this is that painting without brushes is a lot of fun and anyone can do it. You can take a photo with your phone or camera and ten minutes later be sharing a wonderful painting of the photo with your friends and family. Or you can do what I am doing at the moment, which is to work on an absolutely enormous epic photomontage of a coral reef (unfinished), a beach and a rainforest, made up from items cut from more than 1000 photos. The photomontage itself is not finished so I can't show you a painting of it, but this is it in its present state, miniaturised to fit in here. My computer screen is 1366 pixels wide and the picture is 28888 pixels wide... It was inspired by my daughter's passionate defence of the environment, by thinking about the end of lockdown and the pandemic, and by Canaletto and Hockney's use of perspective.

