



How master New Zealand artist
Susan Harrison-Tustain uses multilayer
washes to give her subjects substance.

The multilayering technique revealed!

At the ripe old age of 35 I discovered watercolour, and a passion for painting that has enriched every aspect of my life since. Painting is not only about the finished work but it's also about fulfilment and excitement as each brushstroke creates and immortalises a subject that has moved us to preserve it for posterity.

As I have taught myself about art through reading and observation, art has taught me a great deal about myself too!

I love to see my subject emerging from the paper and becoming real. I've had the odd occasion where my peripheral vision has detected a little companion alongside me — while being so involved with the piece of work I have inadvertently gone to brush aside a *painted* ladybug such as the one scampering around the rim of the Royal Worcester bowl in my painting "**Luminous Tapestry**"!





"Old Rambling Rose", 300gsm, 36 x 51cm (14 x 20")

When I look at this painting I feel transported back to my previous garden with the rose Adélaïde d'Orléans draped beautifully over our rather rustic fence. Once a year we were rewarded with the most glorious two or three weeks of exquisite blooms. These were accentuated by a carpet of fresh, crisp, sap green foliage.

The success of this painting is mostly due to the use of light and shade and a full range of tone values. Notice how the leaves act as a perfect foil for the delicate blooms. The highlights on the leaves give a realism that evokes a feeling of warmth.

I chose to use a luminous dark background at the base of the study, which pushes the sunlit leaves and delicately coloured blooms out into the room. Phthalo Blue, Phthalo Green and Alizarin Crimson are my favourite colours for this type of background.

Remember to allow your mix to favour Alizarin Crimson when painting near a green leaf, then push the mix to favour Phthalo Green when working near the pink rose. This technique gives a striking effect. By juxtaposing complementary colours in this way, you push the foreground forward giving the greatest impact of all.



"Josephine Bruce", 300gsm, 41 x 34cm (16 x 13")

This painting posed a bit of a problem. I felt driven to paint this lovely rose, but the multilayering technique I generally use (see demonstration) doesn't work well when using opaque, non-staining colours. Cadmium Red Deep was the ideal colour for this study but its nature doesn't allow successful wash upon wash (Cadmium Red Deep is an opaque pigment therefore it tends to sit on the surface and is easily disturbed when subsequent washes are used). After a bit of research I found Bright Red, an almost transparent red, ideal for the task in hand. With an underpainting wash of Indian Yellow on the blooms (avoiding the highlights), I gradually built up depth with Bright Red until I was satisfied with the colour saturation. I then introduced Alizarin Crimson and Phthalo Green mixed with a touch of Phthalo Blue and applied this to the shadow areas. The velvety appearance of the roses is mostly evident because of the treatment of the highlights. Instead of portraying clear, clean highlights, I saved my white paper until I had finished painting the reds. Then I applied a wash of Phthalo Blue mixed with a touch of French Ultramarine to the white paper and allowed this to gently flare into the red — almost scrubbing slightly at the merging point to give a soft, slightly unclean blend just as you would find on velvet. Voilà! There you have it — soft, rich velvet — and it's all a trick of the eye.

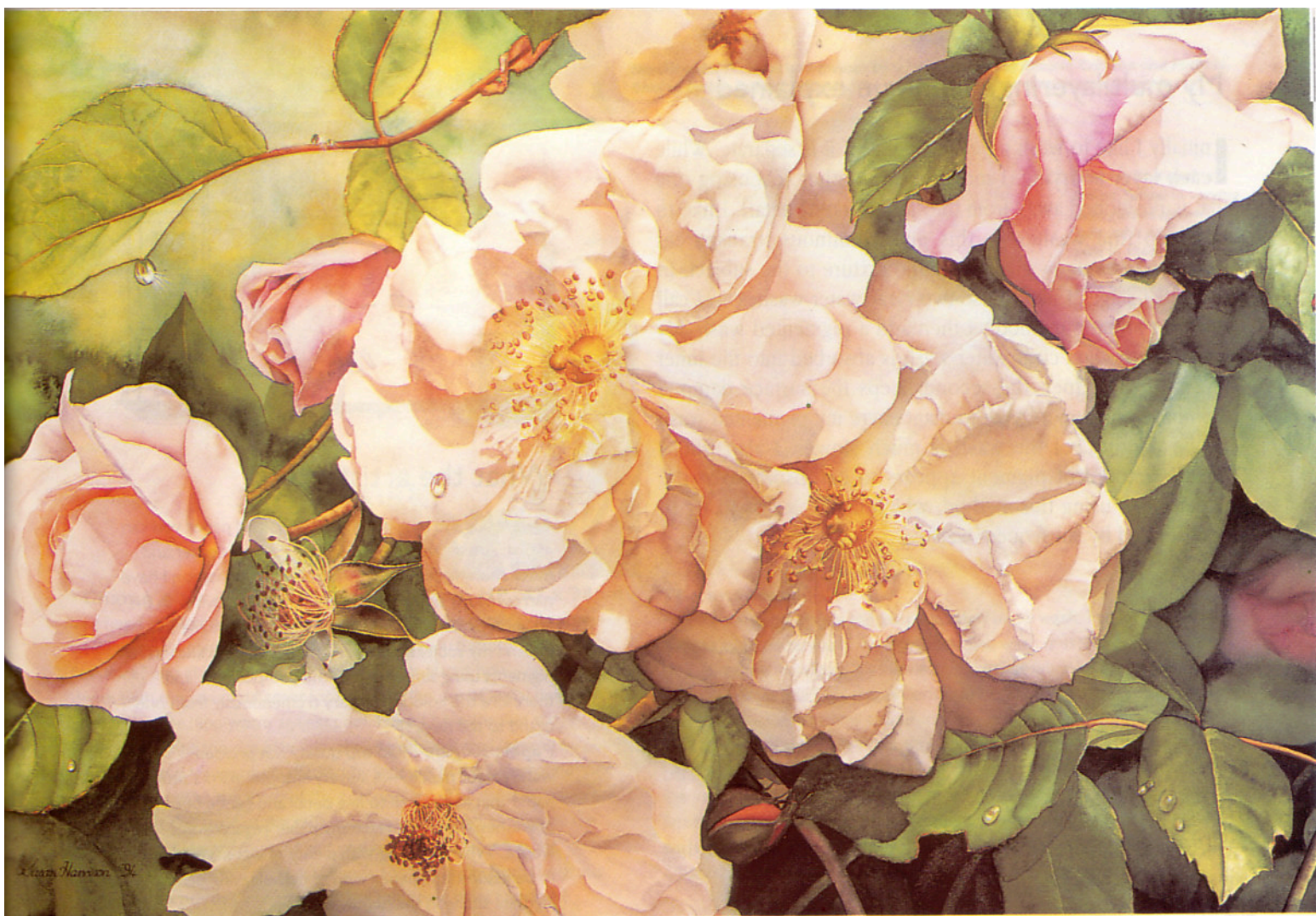
All my senses are stirred when I'm painting and I'm transported back to the place where I first discovered and experienced my passion for the subject. It's as if I can feel the warmth of a gentle breeze as it floats among the petals.

My goal is for viewers of my work to experience this passion also — to feel the painting has a "presence" and that they, too, are part of the reality which is the true essence of the painting.

Without any formal training I was fortunate to have little knowledge of the rules generally associated with watercolour. I was therefore able to explore watercolour and push it past all the usual boundaries, of which I was blissfully unaware. I not only discovered a love for the delicacy of hue that watercolour can achieve, but the greatest revelation was the beauty in transparent depth of hue achieved by many fine consecutive washes. I have always painted instinctively. It wasn't until I started tutoring in watercolour and even more so when I first began to write my book, *Glorious Garden Flowers in Watercolor*, that I had to analyse and put into words what had been second nature to me. I had to move out of my comfort zone — for which I am eternally grateful! In the seven years I have been exploring watercolour I have developed a style of work that can be adapted to every subject; I'm told it is a style that breathes life into a subject and gives it substance — a true sense of reality.

The essence of my style and philosophy is "truth, passion and pleasure". I paint my subjects as they are in nature — the occasional leaf that has been chewed as in most of my florals; the heavy-laden dew-drop about to roll off the petal just like the one in **"Constance Spry"** (see page 124); a hovering bumblebee laden with pollen, and the back-view of a honeybee scurrying over an apple as if, the viewer has disturbed it's foraging, see **"Pommes Sur Bois"** (see page 124). These details all add movement, life and authenticity to our subjects.

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"Adélaïde d'Orléans"

"Luminous Tapestry"

My multilayering technique explained

Initially I like to work on each petal as if it is separate. While each layer is drying, I move on to another (choosing one that is positioned away from the "just worked" petal). I like to build up fine washes — this gives luminous, transparent depth and colour — giving feel and texture to the subject. In the initial stages I like to use two clear water washes — I call this my "priming method". I then add a pigmented wash. My theory is: the first clear water wash is absorbed into the inner layers of the paper, the second keeps the surface damp. I then have much more time to manoeuvre my pigmented wash as the "setting" of the wash is much slower. I also find a greater amount of pigment appears to be absorbed by the paper when using this method, which makes it less likely to be disturbed by subsequent washes.

Technique tip

Look what happens when you work with multilayered washes instead of heavily pigmented layers.

Problems caused by working thickly

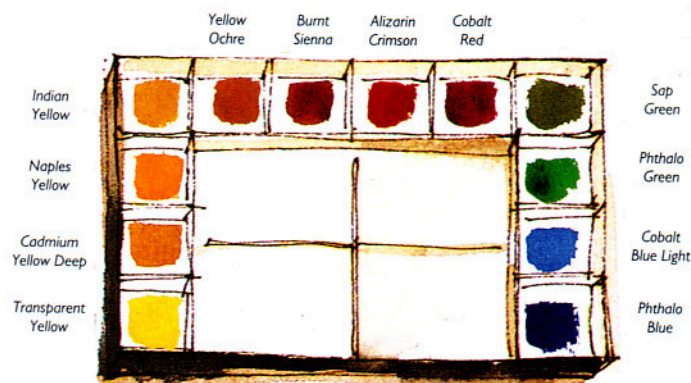
Applying watercolour very thickly can cause these problems:

- ☒ Reduced transparency.
- ☒ Paint will sit predominantly on the surface.
- ☒ Subsequent layers will lift excess paint sitting on the surface.
- ☒ The gum arabic binder used in the production of watercolour will be concentrated, causing haphazard shiny patches.

Benefits of using multiple layers

Instead, working with finely pigmented multilayered washes will give these benefits:

- ☒ The paper absorbs a greater amount of pigment.
- ☒ Subsequent layers cause minimal disturbance.
- ☒ Translucent, clean colour is achieved.



What the artist used

Always buy the best quality pigments and paper you can afford. Artists' quality pigment is generally denser and much more lightfast. After much experimentation I have narrowed my basic palette down to the above with the addition of just a few more hues which allow me to expand my subject matter. Although many brands have pigments using similar names the composition, and therefore the colour, can vary tremendously from one brand to the next.

Paper: 300gsm/140lb top quality hot pressed watercolour paper — a velvety smooth, hard sized paper that lends itself to fine detail and gentle build-up of washes. I always stretch my paper regardless of weight. When working with plenty of water you need to be assured the paper won't buckle leaving denser pigment sitting in the hollows.

Brushes: Sable No. 6 and No. 12. (Synthetic brushes are also very good.)

My priming method

1. Wet the paper and allow the water to evaporate just enough for the sheen to be absorbed.
2. Now lay in a further clear water wash — don't make it too wet. Your paper is now "primed" and ready for your pigmented wash.
3. Float in your pigmented wash. This method can be used over entire petals or just on sections where you require a soft edge or gentle blending.

Describe the shadows and creases by adding a touch of Alizarin Crimson and Phthalo Blue to Indian Yellow, softening the edge of the shadow lines as you progress.



"Champ d'Or — Field of Gold", 300gsm HP, 47 x 38cm

We need to emphasise the crisp freshness of these heralds of spring — while a certain gentleness needs to be portrayed to capture the true "essence" and character of the daffodil. Think about how you can create depth with the use of different focal planes, the use of aerial perspective, light and shade, and warm against cool. Here I have thrown the background into the distance with the use of suggested leaves and petals. The heads and leaves most affected by light are in the foreground — adding strength to the front of the composition. The most effective tool I have used is the angle of the blooms. The foreground head gives the impression of leaning forward out of the picture. This is further emphasised by the leaf that lazily bends and falls away from the group.

Now let's put this into practice and put some paint to paper!

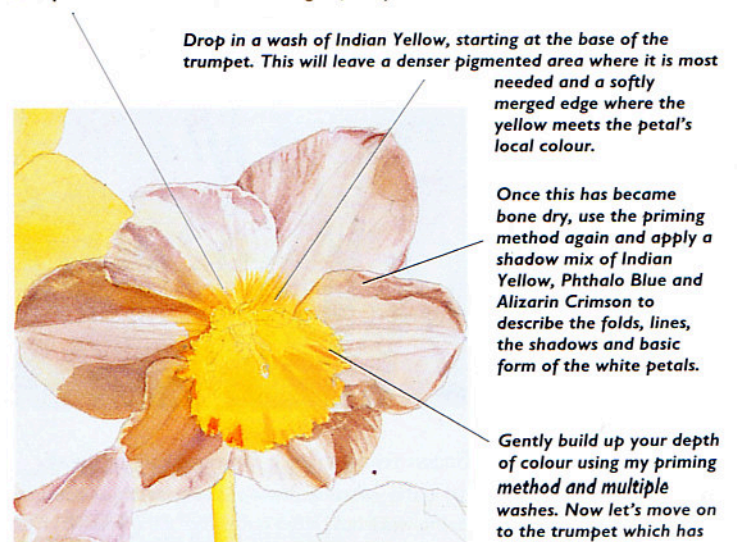


Now lay in a wash of Indian Yellow in varying strengths as shown, keeping it extremely pale in those areas which are to be white or pale blue. Vary the density of pigment allowing for highlights and veins, and so on. Allow the paper to become bone dry. Prime the paper again, this time using less water and allowing the second wash of clear water to only dampen the paper.

The underwash

Prime your paper ready for the pigmented underwash. I generally use Indian Yellow as an underwash. An extremely fine wash is used when I want to take away the "rawness" of the white paper, or when I plan to use a very light blue — as in a highlight. A denser underwash of yellow would have too great an effect on the final colour in these instances. As you will see in this demonstration there are other times where my underwash is more densely pigmented — particularly in areas which are to be as dark or darker than the yellow itself. This denser underwash gives a wonderful glow to the finished hue, especially if the subsequent washes are of transparent pigment such as Phthalo Blue, Phthalo Green, and Alizarin Crimson. Try it, you'll be amazed at the impression of extra body and substance you can create.

This soft blended petal is achieved by carefully monitoring the moisture on your paper and brush. Keep the paper moist, so the pigment will gently blend without leaving a hard edge. To have more control over how far the pigment is dispersed use a clear water wash over most of the inner petals. Allow to evaporate — just enough for the sheen to be absorbed — then dampen the area at the base of the trumpet and out to the intended edge of the yellow.



Drop in a wash of Indian Yellow, starting at the base of the trumpet. This will leave a denser pigmented area where it is most needed and a softly merged edge where the yellow meets the petal's local colour.

Once this has become bone dry, use the priming method again and apply a shadow mix of Indian Yellow, Phthalo Blue and Alizarin Crimson to describe the folds, lines, the shadows and basic form of the white petals.

Gently build up your depth of colour using my priming method and multiple washes. Now let's move on to the trumpet which has previously had an underwash of Indian Yellow. Start to give definition to the trumpet and its folds with a predominantly Alizarin Crimson blend of the three-colour mix.

Detail

The majority of this study is painted with these three hues, favouring one or other as shown. Once I have built up my colour to the depth I require using my priming method, then pigmented washes, I like to "fine tune" the last of the details with a dry-brush method.



Apply the deeper shadows by priming sections of the petal, then gently float your shadow mix into the damp areas. Then allow the paper to become bone dry.

Floating shadows

This "white" bloom has a very pale underwash of Indian Yellow in all areas other than the highlights. This is painted using the same "priming" method previously described. As before allow the second clear water wash to only dampen the paper (using less water will allow you more control over the pigment). Apply pigment to the areas required.

Section off and prime the shadow areas. Mix the purple shadow as we have done previously by using equal amounts of Phthalo Blue and Alizarin Crimson with just a touch of Indian Yellow.

The white daffodil has a very yellow throat. But it's not just Indian Yellow is it? Lay in an initial wash of Indian Yellow on its own. The subsequent washes have a mix of our three pigments — Alizarin Crimson and Phthalo Blue and Indian Yellow — sometimes favouring yellow and other times favouring Alizarin Crimson. Continue applying washes until you're happy with the depth of hue.



Describe the darkest leaves with an additional wash of Sap Green, Phthalo Blue and Alizarin Crimson. Use Burnt Sienna, Naples Yellow and Yellow Ochre to create the calyx.



Finish by describing the basic flowers, stems and leaves, then prime the entire background using plenty of water in the second clear water wash.

Remember to keep the highlights pale

Using my priming method as previously described, work your way around the composition remembering any pigmented wash MUST be bone dry before adding another. Become familiar with your pigment behaviour through experimentation — learn to recognise which pigment needs to be increased in the mix to give the effect you're after. REMEMBER TO KEEP THE HIGHLIGHTS PALE.

Treatment for the leaves and stems

Study how the light and shadows fall on the leaves. To portray a crisp early spring light, prime the leaves and stems, then use a light wash of Phthalo Blue on the highlighted leaves and stems. Once this has dried, wet the rest of the stems and leaves and apply a wash of Transparent Yellow (a cooler yellow than Indian Yellow). Allow this to dry and lay in a wash of Sap Green mixed with Phthalo Blue, varying the mix as before.



Background

Apply a very fine wash of Indian Yellow to the background keeping the sky area very pale. (When I did it, the yellow at the top left sky area was too strong so using a damp cotton wool ball I lifted out some of the yellow. I had to move fast — yellow isn't easy to lift — believe me! A good lesson learnt!)

Prime again, this time add more depth to the Indian Yellow wash as shown, remembering to avoid the sky altogether this time.



Vary background colours

Work up from the bottom using my priming method. This time really wet the paper. Vary the background colours so they are straight colours and mixes of Sap Green, Phthalo Blue, Indian Yellow and Alizarin Crimson as shown. Watercolour often dries in such a way that it "suggests" background features and I expand on these. Be flexible with your vision of how the background should be.

Prime, then drop in Cobalt Blue Light, starting at the top and allowing the blue to gently flare down to create a softness suggesting a different focal plane. AT THE SAME TIME weave the sky around the yellow "suggested" daffodils. Once this is dry, prime the suggested daffodils again and lay in a fine wash of Cobalt Blue Light. Dry.

Describe the lower background by priming the area, then paint washes over the yellow underpainting using varying mixes of Sap Green, Phthalo Blue, and in some areas, Cobalt Blue and Alizarin Crimson as shown. Allow to dry. Suggest some silhouetted leaves in the background to give added depth.



Final washes for the sky

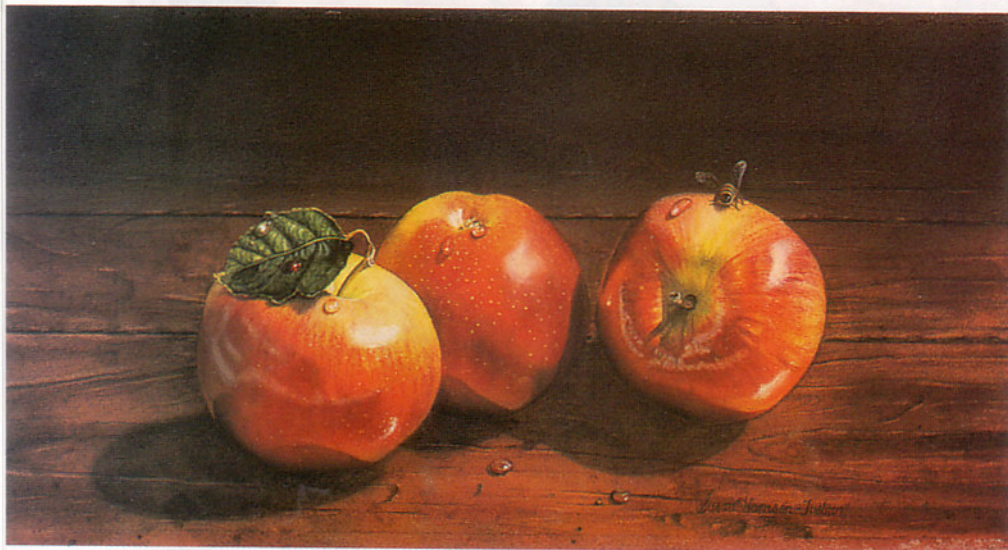
And now for the pièce de résistance — the final touch is the two foraging ladybugs. Before starting your ladybug decide how you want to produce the highlight: you can work around it, use masking fluid, or you can lift it with a knife or an electric eraser when the bug is completed. An opaque glaze of Cadmium Yellow Deep is used for the under glaze on the ladybugs. Once the yellow has dried completely a glaze of Cadmium Red Deep is laid over the yellow. Alizarin Crimson gives extra depth to the darker areas of the ladybug. A mix of Phthalo Green and Alizarin Crimson creates the cool black used for the head, legs and of course, the spots. Lift the highlight with a knife or use an electric eraser if you haven't left the highlight unpainted. There you have it — the epitome of spring!

I wish you much pleasure and fulfillment on your journey of inspiration.

"High Summer"



"Constance Spry — Pink Cabbage Roses"



"Pommes Sur Bois"

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Another great passion is creating still lifes which have atmosphere and mystery (see "**Récolte de Provence**"). I love to place my subjects so they are just emerging from the luminous, transparent background shadows, with just the merest suggestion of other objects in the half-light, and maybe a soft shaft of light gently illuminating the form. Moulding form with light and shadow gives the impression that the object is coming out of the paper.

Have you ever studied Rembrandt's work? His mastery of light and shade has influenced my work greatly. I remember walking into the main hall where "The Queen's Paintings"



"Récolte de Provence"

"Troilus"



exhibition was displayed. Instantly my attention was drawn to Rembrandt's "The Shipbuilder and His Wife". I was mesmerised. His skilful use of chiaroscuro (light and shade) gave this painting such a strong realism. Not only did it give the illusion of the couple having a presence in the room in which I was standing, but it also "carried" well — the Rembrandt was hung the furthest from the entrance but it was the most definable painting from any distance. I now strive to achieve this carrying power, this presence created by light and shade and the emotion which captivates my attention when I first discover a potential subject.

About the artist

Painting professionally since 1992, Susan Harrison-Tustain is recognised as one of New Zealand's leading representational artists. She enjoys a wide variety of subjects, inspiration for which comes from her local surroundings and her travels through the UK, Italy and her greatest passion — the houses, villages and countryside of Provence.

Susan wants the viewers of her work to almost feel they can reach in and touch the flowers, smell the perfume or feel the atmosphere of the timeless world she creates.

She paints instinctively. Largely self-taught she loves to push past the boundaries usually associated with watercolour, exploring the delicacy of hues that watercolour can portray so beautifully. She also loves rich, transparent depth of colour, translucent darks that dance on the paper when gentle, fine washes are applied. The

combined use of these gives a three-dimensional realism to her highly sought after work.

She has recently completed a book on her work and style *Glorious Garden Flowers in Watercolor*. Her work often appears on the cover and within the pages of the *New Zealand Gardener* magazine. She and her paintings have been featured in many other magazines. She has also featured on Television New Zealand.

Her work is represented in collections in New Zealand, Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom, France and Italy.

Susan lives with her husband, Richard and children, Glen and Shelley in the New Zealand countryside overlooking the picturesque coastal town of Tauranga.

For more information on this artist contact our Australian editorial office.