

## The Soft Approach – A.J. Edwards



Johnny Romeo, Number Two Hands, 2013, acrylic and oil on canvas, 150 x 150cm

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For many visual artists there are particular mediums, materials and approaches to working are familiar with and employ regularly. Whether it's different types of paint-like oils, watercolours, acrylics or drawing materials such as inks, charcoal, pencils or gouache, artists can get very comfortable with a medium and stick with it. One interesting medium that's often underrated are oil pastels, oil bars or oil crayons – some are soluble and come close to the qualities of paint (dependant on whether they are used with turpentine or are watersoluble brands). Oil bars and oil pastels are increasingly becoming an interesting medium of choice in contemporary works. There has been a long history of great artists that have incorporated this into their working methods – including Picasso, Giacometti, Auerbach and Leon Kossoff. The medium itself has a difficult resistance to its supports when used dry, but used effectively this medium has the ability to cross over somewhere between paint and the drawing medium which explains why its qualities are hard to define in character. It is an inquisitive and experimental material. We thought it would be useful and interesting in a sense to look at some contemporary practices that modern day artists use to tackle this medium with a different approach. Degas was known for his wonderful use of pastel and wax based mediums, one of the first to implement a modern approach. The traditional pastel is something we all know and are used to but used in the wrong hands it can have a light or 'twee' feel to it. Degas would often work over a heated plate or warm plate to get a 'melt' into the medium – which slurs the pigment into a painterly effect. Contemporary works have a similar effect by using solvents or soluble mediums that emulates a similar surface quality. By also incorporating a range of different mediums such as ink or charcoal in conjunction

with the pastel there is an ability to reach a more contemporary visual with more bite to the ensuing image. Notable greats such as Picasso and Giacometti employed this mixed media approach to stunning effects. Giacometti was a leading light with his pastel and drawing combinations. His use of the overworked and reduced style- wiping back and churning over the surface, creating dark foreboding messy works that really drew the viewer in. These weren't just works on paper but major works in their own right.

Closer to home, Australian artist Euan Macleod adopts a similar method on painting trips outdoors or when travelling. He has evolved a particularly efficient way of working minimally, scraping the image back and wiping medium away as he works. Peter Booth uses the pastel in an originally raw and rough-hewn way. His approach for works on paper are surprisingly aggressive and direct, the bold linear mark making although scrappy, are later honed down to allow for the image to maintain a more gestural and painterly effect.



Danie Mellor, A man of high degree, 2011, pastel, pencil, glitter, Swarovski crystal and wash on Saunders Waterford paper, 89 x 59cm



Leon Kossoff, From Veronese: Allegory of Love, IV ('Happy Union'), mixed media on paper, 57.2 x 56cm

Leon Kossoff the London-based expressive artist has a wild stroke making approach and gestural abandon in his art, which has become renowned. Some of his studies and works on paper are done with a combination of charcoal, oil pastel and wax pencil. One of the biggest brands in Europe are Caran D'Ache from Switzerland who import into Australia. They generally term all their ranges of pastels, wax pencils and drawing materials under the 'Colourbar' moniker.

Even though there are endless arrays of combinations to utilise, artists choose the simplest way forward. Danie Mellor for example uses just the one colour a Prussian blue neo pastel and buys them in the hundreds and then has his own particular method to construct his images, which includes scratching out, and using negative spaces to his own advantage.



Peter Booth, Drawing, 1984, coloured pastels, 66.4 x 104.4cm Courtesy the artists, the University of Queensland Gallery and the National Gallery of Victoria

Another Australian practitioner Johnny Romeo utilises these materials regularly in his work “I use oil sticks as drawing implements on my canvases. I use them much the same way one would use a pencil or an oil pastel but with far more frenetic pressure. I like the creamy texture and the expressive, gestural lines created. I also find them richly pigmented. They allow me the freedom to express with the type of spontaneity my work requires. I peel back the skin with a cotton rag and the solid stick allows me much more fluidity, sensitivity and robustness.”

The medium allows for reinvention and displays a contemporary directness. There are so many combinations and options available that make the ‘Colourbar’ option an interesting choice for contemporary practice.



Picasso using Colourbars in his studio