
Watercolor Quilting with Ashley Nickels

Chapter 1 - Watercolor Quilting

Overview

(bright music) ^- Hi, I'm Ashley Nickels, I'm a modern quilter. I've always been into a lot of different creative pursuits. And one of my favorite things to do is to watercolor on paper, and then once the paint is dried, use a black Micron pen to outline the shapes that are created by the watercolor. It was always a really nice way to unwind after quilting, and then it occurred to me that the black outlines with the pen that I was creating looked a lot like stitched lines. And so I thought, is there a way I can recreate the watercolor paint on fabric, and then use black thread to outline the painted designs? I'm gonna show you my painting technique using a liquid acrylic fabric paint. We'll be working on swatches of cotton muslin or 100% cotton fabric. We'll talk about ways to recreate the watercolor effect on fabric. And finally, we'll use free-motion quilting to highlight our painted designs. (bright music)

Materials

- We're gonna be using small swatch sizes of fabric, 12 inch squares. And I have experimented with a lot of different types of fabrics and the two that I really like to use for this technique are either a cotton muslin or this 100% cotton quilting fabric that is a Kona Natural. And if you're gonna be making a quilt sandwich to complete the technique you'll need backing fabric and batting squares. I've also used a lot of different paints and what I've found to be my favorite is this liquid acrylic fabric paint. And it's by the brand Jacquard and it's called Dye-Na-Flow. There are 30 different colors available in this paint. And I've chosen a few here that are the palette that I wanna use today. You'll need a variety of paintbrushes. I like to use a bunch, so that's up to you. You'll need water. You'll need paper towel for blotting. And a palette if you're interested in mixing any paints. For our quilting, for our free motion quilting, I'm gonna show you how to use this high contrast black thread. My favorite thread is this Aurifil 50 weight. I'm also gonna show you how to do a background filler with an invisible thread. And my favorite invisible thread is the YLI brand. For the quilt sandwich basting, you'll need safety pins. You can either use curved tip or straight pins is fine. You'll need a pair of scissors or snips. I prefer to use these curved tip snips. You'll need a darning foot attachment for your sewing machine. And I prefer the open-toe darning foot. And finally, for grip while I'm free motion quilting, I like to cut off the tips of some rubber gloves from the super market. Don't forget your sewing machine. I'll be using my BERNINA 560. You'll also need an iron and an ironing surface.

Fabric Painting

Painting fabric in watercolor style

- Before we start painting, I wanted to show a few examples of how this paint reacts with certain fabrics. One of the reasons that I really like the Muslin and the Kona Natural is because it kinda mimics what the effect created is on a cold press watercolor paper. You can see that the brushstrokes are more apparent and also my favorite effect here is that there's this really crisp edge on the paint. And with these two here, we've got a regular Kona and a PFD, a prepared for dye Kona. What happens with these is that they soak up the paint really quickly and so you have a lot

more of a bleeding effect which is great for different purposes. It's just not my favorite effect which is I use the Muslin and the Kona Natural. Now depending on your space, you're gonna wanna make sure that you either put down a plastic drop cloth or you put down paper 'cause sometimes the paint can soak through the fabric. And then I also like to put on an apron. I'm gonna take a piece of Muslin and I'm gonna start painting. Starting with a big paintbrush, I'm gonna start with my hot pink which is my favorite color of the Dye-Na-Flows. And I'm just gonna go for it. And I'm just going to keep re-dipping. You'll notice that the fabric soaks up a little bit of the paint so you can feel free to add a little water. And I'm gonna go right into this darker magenta and you'll see how the paints can start to combine in that very classic watercolor style. Keeping in mind that this will start to dry relatively soon so we wanna keep going. Now I'm gonna change brushes because I'm gonna absolutely change color to yellow and then keep going. Now I'm doing these sorta blot designs just sorta in an abstract way. Adding a little bit of the darker yellow. Simply because it's one of my favorite ways to show the technique. And I'm gonna add a little water. Of the combining. Now I'm gonna change brushes. And this time I'm gonna go to turquoise. And you see how the paint really does bleed just like watercolor. I just love the effect that it's created with the bleeding. And what I'm gonna do in a minute, I'm gonna add one more little bit of turquoise and then I'm gonna go back with a smaller brush and I'm gonna add in with this claret color which is another one of my favorites. I'm just gonna start adding some darker blotches throughout. And you can see how it's starting to look a lot like tie-dye because of the palette I've chosen but you can see how cool that is with all of those darker blotches. And then I'm even gonna take some black to make it even darker in some of these areas. And as long the paint is wet, you'll still be able to do this. Once it starts to dry, obviously you'll not get this bleeding effect. It can be as simple as that. So you'll set this aside and then you'll heat set it. And let's do another example. For this one, I'm gonna use a medium size brush and we're going to use our Kona Natural and we're going to make some rings. And I'm gonna use my palette for this because I'm actually make some navy which is one of my favorite colors. And to do that I'm gonna take the cerulean blue, pour a little bit in my palette. I'm not actually going to pour the black. I'm just going to dip a little bit 'cause we don't need very much. And now I have some cool navy. I'm really drawn to making these rings. It's one of my favorite things to do with watercolor too. So I started to do it with this technique. And I'm kinda noticing that my navy, maybe I wanna change the color a little. I'm gonna add a little bit of ochre to it which is another great blending color. Just to change it up a little. So you can really create a lot of different colors with these paints. It's really not that different. Maybe I'll add a little bit more. Okay, and then I think I'll change colors, grab a new brush. Again, I'll use my palette. Maybe I will use my golden yellow, add some ochre. Okay, I like that. I like using rings to create texture in the background of my pieces. And then once this dries, you can actually go in and add more. Unless of course, you want it to bleed which would be this effect. Which you, of course, wanna sure you're doing while the paint is still wet. Maybe I wanna do some of that darker color. It's a nice way to combine those two rings. Okay. This is a nice example of that bleeding effect because this yellow ring wasn't quite dry and I put this purple over it, it bled through which I kinda like. With my big brush, I think the last thing this needs is some hot pink. I feel like everything needs some hot pink. So I'm just gonna go for it. And keeping in line with my ring theme here. Now depending on how saturated you want the color to be, you might need to add more paint. Keeping in mind that the more paint you add, the more chances there are for it to bleed. So keep that in mind. And now I'm gonna break this hot pink up with some darker color. And again just like watercolor, it won't go past that outline that you've already created which is super cool. And then maybe some of this medium tone. And finally, I'm gonna add some

blue from the blue I created before. And I think we'll call this done. For our last swatch, why don't I show you how to create softer effect by adding some water to your designs. I think I will take my big brush again. I love this chartreuse color so I'm gonna use that. And what'll happen is I'll run out of paint pretty quickly so I'm gonna add some water. Now keep in mind what I said before about it'll start to bleed more which is fine but you'll see how we're sorta diluting the color. Which is a really fun watercolor effect. And then I can add a little bit more in if I'm wanting to break up that. Because you're adding water, this is gonna get a lot more damp. So make sure that you have a surface behind it because you're definitely gonna soak through to the back. Now I'm gonna keep going. I'm gonna use some turquoise. I'm not even going to wash my brush out because I kinda like the fact that we're gonna mix these. And see how I'm out of paint on my brush but if I add water, it's going to still show up. And you'll definitely notice the bleed is different when you add a lot more water. When it's dry though, it will create a really soft effect. I'm gonna use some of this navy I used before. This is a really nice effect for a first layer and then once it's dry, you can go back through and do some more fine designs. Change brushes and do some yellow. And then again, we're going to get to see this cool bleeding effect if I add, let's say, some swatches of this purple. Because this has so much water in it, it's going to stay wet for awhile which is another advantage. You can go back and add things as you want. And maybe I'll finish off with some of that black. Okay, you could be painting like this all day. I encourage you to just play around with different fabrics and different designs until you figure out what you like the best. And before we start quilting, you're gonna need to heat set everything so let it dry completely and then follow the manufactures instructions on the bottle on how to heat set.

Quilting

Quilting watercolor design

- Here I have two very similar swatches, and I'm just gonna decide which one to quilt with today. I think I'm gonna go with this one, and now we are ready to make our quilt sandwich. A quilt sandwich is made from a piece of backing fabric, that is cut a little bit bigger than our top swatch, and I've put it down with the printed side out, or down, followed by a piece of batting, cut to about the same size as the backing fabric, and then we place our top piece centered nicely here. Now basting a quilt sandwich is a very important step if you're making a quilt that's any bigger than this really, any bigger than 12 inches square, and my mom actually has a really lovely class here on creativebug that will talk you through that process. For today, because this is so small, I'm just gonna put a bunch of safety pins in and call it basted. So I'm gonna take a bunch of pins, I have a bunch of different sizes, and I'm gonna start in the corner here, and I just leave them open, until I've put all of my pins in. You don't need to do too many, I'm probably gonna do about nine total, but don't worry too much since this is such a small quilt, but you do wanna make sure it's sandwiched nicely. Our last step for this is to close the pins. I usually do that in the order that I put them in. This is just to prevent any distortions in the three layers. We're ready to start free motion quilting. I've got my darning foot on and my machine is loaded with my black thread in both top and bobbin. I just want to point out that I also use a straight stitched throat plate. What that means is that normally a traditional throat plate has a very wide opening, so that your needle can go in a zig zag or whatever. This is a throat plate that has a single hole, and what that does is it creates better stitch quality when you're doing free motion. If you have one of those I highly recommend using it.

The other thing you need to make sure you do before you start, is drop your feed dogs. I'm gonna put on my rubber glove fingertips. I put them on my first two fingers, my index and my middle finger, or the peace sign. Ready to start quilting. I'm gonna bring my sandwich over, and I'm gonna start, it doesn't really matter where you start with this technique. I'm gonna start up here at this purple. The first thing that you do with free motion quilting, is bring your bobbin thread up to the top. You can do that by just needle down, needle up, and then pull on that top thread, and it pulls your thread through. I'll stick my needle down, right where I came up. My next move is going to be to make some very short security stitches. Now don't sew in place. Your sewing machine won't like that. Your back threads will knot. If you sew very close together, it will secure your stitches just like this. Three or four is fine. My next move is going to be to take my snips, and I'm actually going to cut these threads. I've already secured them down, so I'm just gonna get rid of them so that they don't get in the way. Now I'm ready to continue sewing. The key with free motion quilting is to find the balance between how fast you're moving your quilt top, and how much you're pressing on the presser foot pedal. Okay, so it's gonna take a minute to figure out that balance for yourself. Now I'm gonna continue sewing and I'm gonna follow this dark edge of my purple paint as a guide. (sewing machine clicking) Any time I stop, I wanna make sure I have my needle down, and that way I can pivot if I need to. Now I'm gonna keep going, and I also am about to run into this safety pin, so I wanna take that out. Okay, and keep going. I'm gonna continue down this dark line. (sewing machine clicking) Stopping if I need to. (sewing machine clicking) Here comes another safety pin. (sewing machine clicking) Okay and now I get to decide which direction to go. Just a reminder that because you have your feed dogs dropped, you actually have to move the quilt, okay, the machine is not doing that for you. Now I have the luxury because I have a small piece, where I can just pivot in any direction. I'm gonna turn it sideways like this, and I'm actually gonna continue down on the periphery of my whole painted design. (sewing machine clicking) Stopping to pause if I need to. (sewing machine clicking) Now here I'm trying to figure out do I deal with this green spot now or do I leave it for later. I'm just gonna kind of. I'm improvising here. I'm gonna do a little circle, (sewing machine clicking) and then keep going. Then I kind of have a little mixed paint here right. I have some blue and it's mixed with the yellow to make some green. I think I'm gonna deal with that for a minute. (sewing machine clicking) I like this green. Now you can see I've kinda totally changed direction, I kinda do that. I like the improvisational nature of this technique. (sewing machine clicking) I kind of missed the edge of that paint there. Some might consider that messy, I don't really care, but here's how I will kind of cover that up so to speak. I'm gonna come back. (sewing machine clicking) So I created kind of a double edge there, and then I also see this little lighter piece of blue, and I might wanna deal with that as well. (sewing machine clicking) So you can see I kind of created a little feathery design in there. Which is something I like to do in these areas where there's lighter brush strokes. I'm gonna continue following the patterns created by my brush strokes with my black thread. (sewing machine clicking) Okay here, I am gonna fill in this area where there's not a lot of brush strokes. In these areas I like to create a little bit of texture by doing a little repeat pattern. Here I'm gonna just fill in this white area. (sewing machine clicking) You can see that I kind of went across the lines there. It's part of one of the reasons I like to do that is to kind of break up the monotony of it, and now I'm gonna continue on. (sewing machine clicking) Here I'm kind of following the texture created by the blue and the yellow paint mixing. Kind of going over those lines a little bit. (sewing machine clicking) I'm gonna pivot just so I can go down in this direction now. (sewing machine clicking) Sometimes going up, meaning quilting in this direction is difficult because you can't see where you're going. In that case, because I have this freedom, my piece is so small, I'll

just flip my whole piece around, and so now I can see where I am going. Obviously if you were doing this on a bigger quilt you don't have that luxury. (sewing machine clicking) Okay now I'm kind of in a point where I've already quilted a lot of this area, and I'm thinking I'm going to head down towards the pink. At this point you can either stop and cut your threads, or you could retrace a path down to where you're going, by following some thread lines that you've already made. To cut our threads, we're going to do a few security stitches, similar to the ones we made when we started. Okay, and then we're simply gonna pull the piece out of our machine. Take our snips. We're gonna snip this thread from the top, and then turn over to the back, and snip that thread. Now you're set to start again wherever you want. I'm gonna move over here. If you remember this is where we started. So, I could probably just start right there again. We're gonna do the same thing we did before. Pull your bobbin thread up, and start with those security stitches. Okay and because I'm going back I can snip these. Now we're ready to continue. I'm just gonna go all around the edge here. (sewing machine clicking) One thing to keep in mind in free motion quilting, because you're controlling everything with your hands, is that your stitch length is consistent. With the black thread, it actually hides it quite well. But just have a look every once in awhile to see if your stitches are a consistent length. If your stitches are too long, it means you're either moving your quilt top too fast, or you're not pedaling fast enough. Okay, so play around with that if you're noticing that your stitches are too long. (sewing machine clicking) I'm gonna pivot, have a look. Think I'm I'm gonna head this way now. (sewing machine clicking) If you notice that your quilt is bunching, just fold it over. (sewing machine clicking) Go ahead and continue quilting until you feel that all of your painted designs have been outlined. I find this part to be the best part of the whole process, it's really relaxing. Then go ahead and leave the background cause I'm gonna show you something else for that.

Background filler quilting

- For quilting the background, I like to use invisible thread. And the reason why I like invisible is that it fades into the background depending on what you've used. For example, if you've pieced together your backing, the invisible thread disappears really nicely, yet still creates texture. If you're making a quilt that's gonna be used and washed regularly, you're gonna wanna use 100% cotton thread. Which also can be a really nice background filler as well, if you match your thread color to your background. And you'll notice that I've chosen a different block to work on. I've chosen one where all my black stitching is already done. I've loaded my machine with invisible thread on the top. And you never wanna use invisible thread in the bobbin. Instead I've chosen a cotton thread. And for this one I've chosen white, because it matches my background fabric. One of my favorite things to do to start my background is to do an echo line around the edge of one of my painted designs. So I'll go ahead and show you that. And the same thing for starting and stopping, so you put your needle down and bring it back up. And pull that bobbin thread through to the top. And then you start off by doing a few little security stitches. And then actually snipping those threads. Okay. And by echo, I'm gonna actually follow the edge of all of my designs. (sewing machine humming) Now is a good time to check that my stitch length is consistent and that my tension is looking good. Meaning that I can't see my bobbin thread through the top. And it looks pretty good so far. And you can also flip over to the back to see that my tension is okay. And what I'm looking for is that I can't see that invisible thread through the back and that there are no loops coming to the back. Which it does not look like there are. I'm gonna continue my echo. (sewing machine humming) Don't forget to take pins out as you need to. Don't get too close to them. (sewing machine humming) I'm gonna do a different stitch now. I'm gonna show you a pebble which is one

of my favorite background fillers. So a pebble is just what it sounds like. And I try not to make them perfectly circular. (sewing machine humming) And once I've finished one pebble, I get to decide where I'm gonna go next. (sewing machine humming) And the beauty of the pebble is that there's no right or wrong size or shape. So it's a really fun way to play around with free motion. (sewing machine humming) I've done a few that are smaller and then these two that I just did are a little bit bigger. And I'm basically just following the space. So I'm filling it in as I need to. (sewing machine humming) Sometimes I go counter-clockwise, sometimes I go clockwise. (sewing machine humming) It's also a really good way of filling in a corner, because you can do a tiny little pebble to fill in a corner space. (sewing machine humming) And you can see also, that I'm not crossing over that echo line that I created. And I do that because it lets the painted design kind of pop out. (sewing machine humming) And I also will point out that sometimes you cross over your lines, and that's okay too. You can see how this texture is starting to get created here. Another one of my go-to background fillers is a simple back-and-forth squiggly line. (sewing machine humming) So these swatches are a really good way to practice both your painting techniques and your quilting techniques. And to play around with different background fillers, different background threads. Of course, if you're gonna finish this and make it into a mini quilt you're gonna wanna block and finish it and bind it. Just like you would any other quilt. And if you want some tips on that, you can check out my mom, Sue Nickels' class on quilt finishing. She tells you how to do it. Let me show you some other quilts that I've been working on. Clearly this technique is an obsession of mine. So here's a slightly larger mini quilt where it's a whole cloth, so I've just done one painted design in the middle here. Also, you can see in this background, I did the pebbles that I was talking about and I used white cotton thread. You can see how I finished this quilt. And I always like to use different fabrics in my bindings. I used three different fabrics here. And here is another example. This is one of my favorites. I think it looks a little bit like the Iberian Peninsula, and I used to live in Spain. And I did not plan it that way. The paint just kind of went on the fabric like that. So that's one of the reasons why it's one of my favorites. You'll also see the binding here. And it's just a lot of the same techniques of the watercolor quilting. Here is one that the background is pieced. And I painted a lot of rings. I was kind of inspired by the double wedding ring, which is a traditional quilt block. And I also added applique over top and some hand stitches. So I not only have the black thread and the invisible thread, but I also have added applique and hand stitching. Which I love. And some more here to show you. This one, I actually did not use black thread, I used silver thread, if you can believe it. Which is kind of a cool effect. You can see the stitches more clearly. It's a little bit less like a micron pen. And here is some of my original studies. This one, also I played around with different thread color. And this is another original study when I was first discovering this technique. I love the palette on this one. And then this one is my very first piece. I took the turquoise Dye-Na-Flow and that big paintbrush of mine and I put these four brush strokes on fabric. And that was how this whole technique was born. It's really the combination of two of my passions. Painting and quilting. And one of the things that is so wonderful about this technique is that it's very freeform. This is a great entry into free motion quilting. As you see, there's no pressure. You don't have to go any particular direction. You just follow the painted lines. Think of it like a fabric sketchbook where you're free to play and explore.