Relate to Something:

In most landscapes the most important element is the sky because it is the source of light. The sky is the lightest area. Exceptions may be reflections off snow and water. In most cases the sky will be the lightest light shape.

All other objects must relate to that. Therefore the land will be darker than the sky even though it is hit by direct light.

Upright shapes in shadow will be the darkest darks such as trees.

The foreground and middle ground will be mid values of varying temperature.

Distant land, hills and so on will be a middle value color somehwere between the dark and light. But usually cooler and more diffuse than the foreground and middle ground mid-values.

All these areas must be related to the sky. That is, darker than the sky. Often skies are painted a deep blue which is darker in value than the land. This will not read correctly.

Example:

A basic four value landscape: Lightest sky, darkest trees, two middle value land shapes.
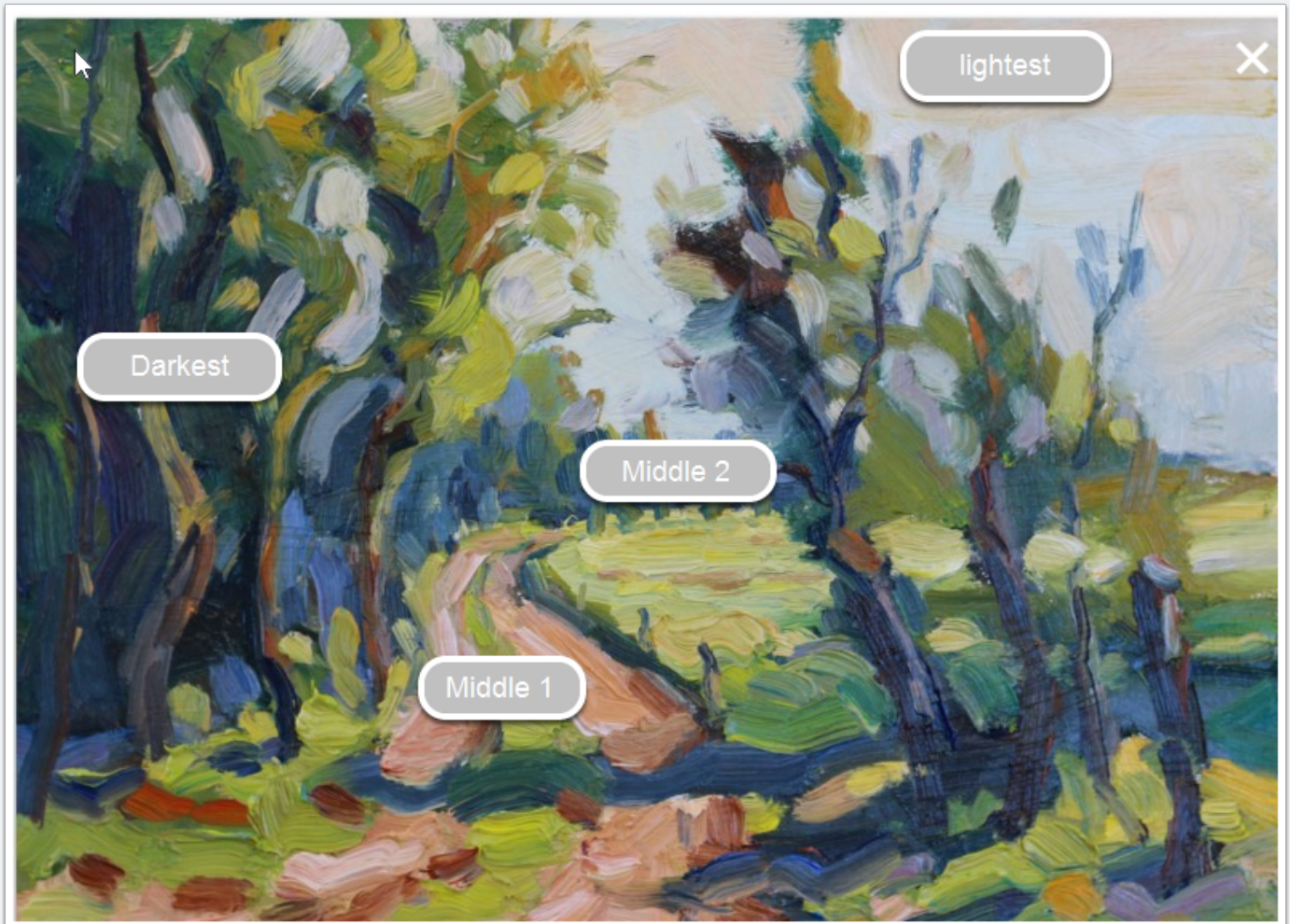
Simplfication:

Values ans Shapes.

This should be the mantra of every artist. As with the example above there are no leaves, no grass and practically no twigs in the trees. But they are all suggested and you know what it all means. The interplay betweeen warm and cool, light and dark adds the visual interest.

Value Before Color

Use value to make the most out of color. Since nature is mostly made up of warm and cool grays you can use this approach in your painting. To make a color stand out you do not need a fully saturated hue. Rather see where you can place a pure color note alongside a gray color to make the pure color stand out.

The idea is not to have all color shouting out at the same time. Rather few colors used to full advantage.

In the example below, artist Ken Howard has used mostly grays to paint this scene against the light. The little bit of color that stands out is the dusky red. In itself that red is desaturated, but because it is placed next to neutral grays the red sticks out just enough.

Aerial Perspective

Another important concept of color, values and grays is found in aerial perspective. This concept together with linear perspective is critial to create the illusion of depth.

For aerial perspective to work you need to use values, color and grays carefully.

1. Values become lighter over distance.
2. Colors desaturate
3. Colors cool down
4. Details disappear

Look at Ken Howard's painting above and note the diminishing detail as you move into the distance. In effect the values become softer until all that is left is a haze.

Secondly colors change as the visible spectrum changes. Yellow is the first to go and finally red disappears into the blue haze. Remember to reduce the use of these colors to create the illusion of distance and space.

In the painting below, also by Ken Howard, all the colors are desaturated under an overcast sky. This results in less distinction between color and value. All values and color are very close in degree of light/dark, saturation and temperature. But even so the aerial perspective must still be indicated with softer values, details and color (temperature and saturation)

Exercise:

1. Choose a low light subject like an overcast or hazy day. Try to mix color notes for the foreground, middle gound and distant colors. Adjust temperature and saturation accordingly. Use Ken Howard's approach as a guide if you are stuck.

2. Do the same exercise, but under sunny conditions. Here the value transition are not as close ranged, values are stronger and range of color is wider. Colors are also more saturated. Yet there must still be the effect of aerial perspective. How does this approach differ to the more close range of values in overcast conditions?

Work with a color value study in mind - not trying to complete a painting. However if you fee confident in increaing the shapes to create a sense of more detail then try that. As you will notice with Howard's loose painting style there is very little actual detail, but much that is suggested.