



Painting Clear Reflective and Refractive Water / Painting Clouds



Workshop Overview: Painting Clear, Reflective & Refractive Water

3-Day Intensive Workshop

Instructor: Sabine Baeckmann-Murray

Water is never just water. It is a living mirror—responding to everything above, below, and around it. In this immersive two-day workshop, artists will learn how to truly see water in all its complexity and translate that understanding into convincing, luminous paintings.

Participants will discover why painting clear water is less about the water itself and more about interpreting the elements that define it—light, depth, color, surface movement, and reflection. Reference photos become starting points rather than strict instructions; artists will learn how to make intentional creative adjustments to strengthen their compositions and achieve greater realism or expressive effect.

PRE-WORKSHOP CANVAS PREP (18"X24" MIN)

Please prepare your canvas with a light burnt sienna wash BEFORE coming to the workshop. Mix some burnt sienna paint with enough mineral spirits, or a 50/ 50 medium/ water mix for acrylics, to make a thin wash. Cover the front and all sides of the canvas, then use a rag to rub the wash into the canvas and wipe off any excess wash. Canvas should be dry to the touch within an hour or so.



DAY ONE – What's Beneath: Topography, Color & Refraction

Stage 1: Topography – The Underwater Landscape

We begin by examining what sits *beneath* the surface: rocks, sand, vegetation, and their shapes, textures, and values—what you would see if the water were drained away.

Color Through Water

Participants will learn how submerged elements shift when water is added back in—how sky color, depth, angle, and clarity transform the true colors beneath.

Refraction & the Body of Water

Using the mental exercise of “pouring the water into a glass,” we explore:

- What is the actual color of the water?
- How does refractive index (≈ 1.33 and variable with temperature) affect what we see?
- How do objects bend, distort, or shift under the surface?

This day builds the essential foundation: what's under the water determines much of what appears above it.

DAY TWO – What’s Above: Reflection & Surface Behavior

Stage 2: Reflection – Sky, Light & Overhead Elements

We explore how the world above the water influences what’s seen on its surface:

- How reflections form
- How moving vs. still water alters shapes
- How to interpret angles, lighting, distortions, and shadowing

Atmospheric Note: Clouds in Reflection (Brief Introduction)

Because clouds affect water’s reflected color and value, we introduce:

- Recognizing distant vs. close clouds
- Simple cloud shapes and light direction
- How cloud color is determined by atmosphere, humidity, and sun angle
- Translating cloud shapes and colors into believable water reflections

(This is only a preview—full cloud instruction happens on Day Three.)

Stage 3: The Water’s Surface – Texture, Motion & Tonal Strength

Artists learn to paint:

- Smooth/glassy water
- Ripples, waves, and subtle motion
- How surface texture affects what is visible below or reflected above
- How to intensify saturation, deepen shadows, and heighten highlights as elements move into the foreground

DAY THREE – The Sky Above: Clouds, Weather & Atmospheric Color

This day is dedicated entirely to painting clouds and atmospheric conditions — one of the *most* important influences on the look of water. Here are some topics we will touch on:

Cloud Structure & Anatomy

We break clouds down into clear, paintable components:

- Light source and highlight planes
- Core shadows
- Soft vs. hard edges
- Depth, layering, and vapor density
- When clouds “sit on” the horizon vs. float overhead

Distance, Scale & Perspective

Artists learn to determine — and paint — cloud distance using:

- Edge sharpness
- Color shifts
- Value compression
- Overlapping forms
- Atmospheric perspective



Cloud Color & Light Behavior

We explore why clouds are never simply “white”:

- How atmosphere scatters color
- Temperature and humidity effects
- Sun angle and time-of-day influence
- Painting warm, cool, luminous, or muted clouds
- Translating cloud color into water reflection accurately

Weather & Special Atmospheric Conditions

We cover how to paint:

- **Sunset and sunrise clouds** (warm glow, reflective color bands, transitional gradients)
- **Storm clouds** (density, darkness, active edges, dramatic contrast)
- **Rain clouds** (soft bases, curtain effects, haze)
- **Fog and mist** (diffusion, lost edges, reduced contrast)
- **Post-storm light** (silver linings, broken light shafts, vivid reflections)

Clouds + Water: Putting It All Together

We finish by combining atmospheric concepts with reflection logic to create paintings that feel cohesive, luminous, and believable.

