There are many compositions artists use in their abstract paintings. A great way to practice your abstract art is to pick a composition style and then work through studies.

Composition Studies: The Grid

with Jane Davies
What is a study?
I use the grid and the abstract landscape as formats for making small collage-paint studies. What do I mean by “studies”? Think of them as little warm-up exercises. They can be used to explore specific elements or principles of composition, for example color, value, proportion, etc. Or you can simply use them as formats for playing with your collage papers and paints. Choosing a format is a way of narrowing down your choices: if you decided to just play with pattern and color, for example, where would you begin? The options would be overwhelming. Grids and abstract landscapes are two of the simpler and, to me, more accessible and universal of traditional compositional formats. They also allow lots of room for interpretation and personal expression. Remember that these are studies, not finished masterpieces, so it is OK to leave them unresolved. Think of them as visual inquiries rather than declarative statements.
The Grid

What is a grid?
The grid is a universal compositional format characterized by square or rectangular components arranged horizontally and vertically. A grid can be a strict checkerboard (left) or can be more loosely configured.

How Do I Use Studies?
I create series of studies to experiment with compositional components:

- Color
- Value
- Edge
- Proportion
- Pattern
- Relationship of Elements

I also create studies to explore particular combinations of materials or techniques.

Any compositional study will embody many elements – if you are doing a study to explore color, it will also have the elements of value, proportion, edge, line, etc. So even if you are focusing on one aspect, you are training your eye in all aspects of composition.

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EXERCISE: Using the Grid as a Color Study

I love to explore specific color combinations, or, as in the following exercise, the variety within one narrow color range.

1. For a monochromatic color study using paint and collage, start by gathering papers that are predominantly one color. I chose red and gathered some of my hand painted papers. They range from orange-red to magenta and maroon. You could include bits of papers from other sources as well: magazines, gift-wrap, junk mail, etc.

2. Paint your background using various versions of your chosen color. I used a 7”x7” substrate of printmaking paper. My paints include Alizarin Crimson, Napthol Red Light, Quinacridone Magenta, Qinacridone Red, and Iron Oxide, plus a little white and a little black. My background follows a grid structure loosely, and I worked quickly to blend paint colors while they were wet.

   [In my video I show you how to paint a background like this].

3. Cut and tear your papers into squares and rectangles and arrange them on the background in more-or-less vertical and horizontal orientations. See how much variety you can get in terms of value, texture, pattern, and proportion.
EXAMPLES OF COLOR STUDIES DONE IN A GRID FORMAT
This is a study in the complimentary colors blue and orange. I was trying to see if I could create an interesting composition using about equal amounts of each color. This one is in my sketchbook, 9”x11”.

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In the left piece, which is 7”x7”, I am also using complimentary colors: gold and turquoise. I am playing with revealing and obscuring edges.

In the little color study (5”x7”) to the right, I explore the complimentary colors purple and yellow, including various neutrals that result from mixing the two.
Exploring the Structure of the Grid

For this project I set myself the task of creating a grid composition with lots of open space, that “hangs together” as a unified composition. I started with a 10”x10” paper substrate and chose a few colors: orange-to-yellow and green-to-blue, plus a few bits of black. I used my hand-painted papers as well as some solid color Color-aid papers. Here is my beginning:

And here is where I ended up.
CROPPING

I scanned this grid study and made a few cropped versions of it. These two were my favorites. I think they are stronger than the original because some of the elements bleed off the edges of the page, anchoring the image and giving it strength.

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Of course, when doing grid studies, you don’t necessarily need a goal or a specific topic to explore. You can simply play with paint and collage, using the grid as a format.

Here are a few more small grid studies, 5”x5”, which I did just to play with papers. When working on multiple pieces at once, you tend to use some elements repeatedly, and the group hangs together as a series. I strongly recommend working in groups of at least three pieces at once, especially when creating small studies.
These next two were done as part of a different group: