



1.

## The Plein Air Friends

**T**here were once two friends who liked to go out painting together. Actually, one liked it better than the other one did, because this one seemed to get good results- great little color sketches that stood on their own or helped in the making of longer studies in the studio.

The other had just enough success to keep trying, but it was all rather hit and miss. She liked painting with her friend because someone had said it was like tennis, you improved when you played with someone better than yourself. On this particular morning, the friends arrived at their painting location and were unpacking their gear. Fran, who had driven and was the less successful painter, noticed that Jennifer seemed quiet, had been actually, since she picked her up at her house. Well, they would chat later. Fran had come to paint wild flowers and already seen some growing not too far from the car park, so she hastily strapped her pack, easel, paint box, umbrella, camera bag, phone, and iPod, into her squeaky luggage carrier and headed off in that direction. "See you there?" she called.

"Maybe," said Jennifer. She left her stuff in the car and walked around for a good twenty minutes, even though she and Fran had come here before, a place known for Fran's flowers. When she came to a fallen tree, she hooked her thumbs through her belt loops and looked at it. It was shady there now, but in an hour or so, the sun would be washing over its forms, its funky bark, and its upended roots. Amazingly, the tree had not died, but was sending up new branches from its side. Jennifer smiled at this. Then she hiked back to Fran's car and got her stuff. Fran was already at her easel, hurling paint and cursing under her breath. Jennifer thought of going over to talk to her for a second but saw she had her ear buds in and decided not to. Instead, she grabbed her old fashioned French easel and a back pack and went back to the tree.

There, she sat for a moment and then pulled out a sketch pad. On it, she made three quick thumbnails and then underneath, she wrote a little one-line poem- about the tree and its life before it fell over and what it was like now. If she hadn't done the little drawings, she wouldn't have learned that even though it was on its side, the good painting of the tree was up and down- portrait oriented. She began to set up the easel where it would stay in the shade even after the sun got higher, thinking about the colors she might use today. Even when she was waiting for Fran to pick her up, she had been thinking about blues and violets, so she knew she wanted lots of that somehow. And there was something new she wanted to try, something a painter in a magazine was doing. She thought she knew how it had been done and the tree would work perfectly as a subject. A good hour went by before Jennifer even started putting paint to canvas.

When the two friends quit for lunch a while later, Fran let out an audible groan at what Jennifer had done. Her own painting was a train wreck of abandoned ideas and strategies while Jennifer's study,

even in this early stage, said everything that needed to be said. It also had that other thing that always made Fran feel like crawling back into bed with a box of crackers and a big jar of peanut butter; her picture made Fran feel something. There was the tree on its side yes, knocked over in a wind storm or something, but still growing, sending new branches right up from its knocked down side- what a tiny miracle that it had found a way to live, even thrive.

“How do you do that?” Fran asked.

“Do what?”

The difference in these two friends is not their commitment to their art, or even their level of talent. They both carved out the time and got themselves to a predetermined location so that they could have a morning of painting. The difference between them is that Jennifer was in the zone, almost from the time she got out of bed. In Fran’s case the activity of painting, (and the results,) were something that simply happened to her like falling through a layer of thin ice on a lake or being squashed by a piano sliding off the back of a truck. When you have decided to make art, good intentions alone will not carry the day, in fact, they will do their level best to destroy you. Good painting is what happens when your receptors are open, when you are intellectually curious, and most important, when you take the time to listen to what the art gods might be trying to whisper into your fevered brain. If I were writing a book on the subject, (which I kind of am,) this would be my first chapter. And so if you care to read along with me, we are going to follow these two ladies over the course of the next few newsletters, examining their approaches, and hopefully revealing the techniques of painting actively and cognitively. Techniques that once adopted, become a part of your artistic process and, like moss growing on the north side of a tree, will always lead you back to where you parked your car, or in this case you’re potential.

## The Plein Air Friends Continued-

**W**e left Fran and Jennifer having their lunch and looking at their morning’s output, with Fran wondering anew at the mysterious differences which seemed to place herself and her friend on opposite sides of a wide crevasse. The fact is that the crevasse isn’t that wide. Over time, Fran has simply picked up some bad painting habits while Jennifer has developed

some really good ones. Let's look at some of these, not to make Fran feel any worse than she already does, but to demystify things a bit.

Jennifer was 'in the zone.' I cannot underline this enough. She was thinking about painting when she was brushing her teeth. She had looked through some magazines and found something another painter was doing that she wanted to try herself. This is huge. First of all, if you have no magazines coming into your house with other people's art in them you are cheating yourself culturally. Beyond that, an art magazine is a book of free lessons; with just a little deconstructive staring, you can almost always tell how a painting was put together, and someone is always trying something new that you can steal. (Yes, I said steal. Why should dead artists be the only ones students try to copy?) Plus, there is the added benefit of seeing how you stack up in the pecking order; who is better, and who is not quite as good as you. If everyone is better, this alone may be worthwhile to consider.

So getting back to Jennifer, she was ready to paint when her boots hit the ground. And when they did, arriving at the painting destination they had agreed upon, she stayed open as to just what she would pick. While Fran made a bee line for the wildflowers, practically seeing the finished painting that would result, Jennifer walked around quietly, letting her eye rest on this or that. It was in that way that she found the fallen tree, or some might say, the fallen tree found *her*. There are some things in the life artistic that have no easy explanations and as painters we must occasionally entertain the idea that the art spirits use us like a dowser uses a stick. There is some push pull going on with the eternal. So, while everyone else is packed around the old lighthouse, practically cheek to jowl trying to find space to set up, you, Dear Reader may stumble across the little known grotto *behind the lighthouse*, the one with the fountain of St. Clement, the patron saint of mariners, and have him all to yourself. When this happens, take it as a sign.

Then there was the pregame silence. As Fran sensed, Jennifer was not interested in a bunch of idyll chit chat before, or during the time she had carved out to make her art. She understood that she was making a purchase, in this case spending Time instead of Money. And do any of us have either of these things to waste? I sure don't. When I am making art, I don't take calls. I don't engage passersby with a hearty 'Good morning! What's your dog's name?' Anyone passing me when I am trying to get my paint on would think I was kind of a grump. Which is fine.

Most importantly, Jennifer invested in twenty minutes of what I call Focused Thinking. This is where you are completely concentrated on making the big decisions upon which the rest of the artwork will rest, or branch out from. Let me say this in a short sentence which should fit neatly on the insides of your eyelids: **Everything that can go wrong will happen in the first twenty minutes.** You can take that to the bank. If you blunder forward without a strategy or plan you are certain to find at some point that one or more of the following things has occurred;

1. Your drawing is bad. It has not improved with layers of paint.
2. Your composition is not quite right and has likely managed to conceal the breadth of its inadequacy until you are almost ready to quit for the day. You will be standing there with a frozen expression of bewilderment on your face as this fact settles over you, like a bride on the altar finally asking herself if the groom has ever once made her laugh.
3. You didn't pick anything to paint that spoke to you. The poem that Jennifer wrote about her subject, while only two or three lines, gave her efforts a *context*. Things that reinforce this sentiment are included, even exaggerated. Things that oppose it are edited or removed all together. (Just because someone left a boat trailer on the beach doesn't mean it has to be in your picture.) And as if this realization couldn't get any worse, the really good painting was not what you chose to paint, but was in fact the thing right behind you, had you only turned around and looked.
4. You brought an enormous canvas which pulled you under the waves like a drowning sumo wrestler when a small surface would have been much easier to handle.
5. You set up next to Fran and she never once paused or slowed in her endless stream of chatter.

Twenty minutes of Focused Thinking. And the truly remarkable thing about this exercise is that at its end, your painting is 95% done. Everything you do beyond this point will be in support of the good decisions you have already made, or if you have begun to paint without thinking, the mistakes that will gradually drag you into a pit of despair and self-loathing.

In the interest of full disclosure let me assure you; these things have all happened to me, and continue to happen, though not as often as they once might have. The reason they don't is because I use the preventative measures I've outlined here and that I will continue to share as this book takes shape. Bad experiences can't be avoided and they shouldn't be. They truly teach us what we need to

know. No book, no matter how well intentioned can or should keep you from having the failures that will one-day turn into life lessons. As Dan McCaw says, every bad painting gets you closer to the good ones you are going to make. What I hope to give you in these pages are the emergency measures, the 'Phone a Friend' dimes, if you will, that will get you out of trouble when you are overwhelmed, or even scared. Instead of saying, 'I'm doomed,' I'm hoping you will say, 'Well this might be a little tough, but I kind of have an app for this.' Hang with me. I know getting input quarterly instead of monthly is kind of the slow route, but I'm hoping in the end this project will be better for it. In the meantime, go into your studio or your kitchen or your garage and paint for a while. The things I tell you will really resonate when you have rediscovered them for yourselves and made them your own. Working alone is the key to getting better- not hating everything you do, but kind of loving the idea that you are doing it- that you are, for a little while, living the life artistic

## 2.

### The Very Magical and Amazing Painting Demo

**W**hile Fran may have problems focusing on her painting, she never saw an umbrella, or value finder phone app, or any other painting-related gismo she didn't like. Actually, this comes from a deep seeded delusion that artistic enlightenment can be found in a box and you just have to open enough of them before you hit the jackpot. She is not the only one who thinks this. I often wonder how much better we would be at painting if we spent less time looking at this one's DVD and that one's book, (this one included,) and just painted. But that is a discussion for another day. Right now we are talking about Fran, who has tickets to a painting demonstration by Sexton Reinhart, that much vaunted, (and fictitious,) painter of Presidential portraits, fly fishing buddy to Jamie Wyeth, founding member of the Upper Potomac Painters Guild, recipient of the Legion of Varnish, and basically He Who Does Everything Better Than You. Just between us, a creature like this is best observed from the relative safety of a stage, because after five minutes of conversation with him you might feel like you know nothing and perhaps really are nothing.

To her credit, Jennifer could not be dragged to this event though her friend had an extra ticket, so Fran has brought her mother, whose artistic aesthetic is best summed up by her collection of Thomas Kinkaid jigsaw puzzles. But now, in the Pasadena Town Hall Theatre, the lights are dimming and excitement mounts. From the edges of the stage, two very large flat screens which have been flicking through stills of people looking thrilled to be using the sponsor's painting products, now switch to live feed. They show Reinhart the man making his way backstage from his dressing room, shaking a few hands, adjusting his ubiquitous panama, and pausing to sign copies of his latest book, *Methods and Madness; A Painter's Journey Through the Balkans*. A blink later he is onstage, in the flesh. After the applause has died down, he sits upon a stool beside a large canvas. A tabletop palette has been laid out to his exact specifications. Fresh-out-of-the-wrapper brushes lean out of a brown jar, awaiting their destiny. A large still life has been set up on the left: a bouquet of mums in a wide Chinese pot that looks to be on loan from the Getty, with supporting items ranging from a cast iron incense burner to a chubby little terracotta horse. Precisely the kind of thing one sees on the cover of Art Collector Magazine and no doubt will.

"I wish I could paint like him," Fran whispers to her mother, who having forgotten her hearing aids will be asleep within fifteen minutes. Already her eyes are getting that far away cast. What Fran does not know, indeed, what no one in the audience knows, is that while they think they are about to witness a modern master perform the artistic equivalent of tightrope walking Niagara Falls, they are going to see anything but. Mr. Reinhart hasn't so much as tip-toed to the end of a diving board since the late '70's. Though he is going to create a painting from nothing but the materials on his palette and the still life set up before him, he will never once venture beyond an airtight strategy that virtually guarantees a great final painting and a thrilled audience. What strategy is this; you ask? Well, though you may have forked over the \$74.00 U.S.A., \$95.00 Canadian, (plus shipping,) on your copy of *Methods and Madness,* to find out, you won't, because friends, a good magician never reveals his tricks. That's why I'm here.

Let us begin by pointing out that Mr. Reinhart did a painting like this for a group in Toronto just two weeks ago. Not exactly the same as this one, but close enough to be a first cousin. The Notan based armature of the painting is merely flipped from this previous incarnation so that he won't have to completely reinvent the wheel, or in this case the painting. Notan, if you are not familiar, is the ancient Japanese method of divining the strongest possible design when deciding upon a compo-

sition. In it, the subject matter, pattern of light and dark, and overall arrangement of elements is reduced to only two values: black and white. There are no grays. If something leans toward the lighter realm of values, it becomes stark white and vice versa for the darks. What is left is something like poetry- it is either sublime or it is garbage. You will see right away if you have fractured your design by placing areas of black and white all around in equal amounts. You will see if things are stiff and static, providing no interesting routes for the eye to travel. You will see if there is a gesture, a movement that excites the eye so that it no longer cares if the painting is about a pile of dirty diapers or a maiden reading a book beneath a tree- it just clicks. Notan is one of those little secrets that we will file in our back pocket for when things get weird and we are uncomfortable or even afraid while we are painting. It will work for anything; landscape, still life, figure or any combination of the two. It can only fail when we decide not to use it. Remember Jennifer making her thumbnail sketches in the last chapter? One of them was a quick Notan study. If she didn't like the Notan arrangement, she would have immediately moved on to something else. Here, I am showing you a finished painting of mine beside its Notan. I think you will pick up on the idea.



Having locked down a pleasing design, (Successful painting is *all about design*, but then, isn't everything?) we should take another look at Mr. Reinhart's armada for success. Fran's attention has been drawn by the way his canvass has been prepared; it is covered by an overall warm gray tone. I ask all my students to start with this as a means to unify their paintings. You take a long hard stare at what you are going to paint and then select what might be called the middle value. This value is the starch that holds the rice ball together- most of our painting will dwell in a limited value range that is calm and pleasing, (embrace this, don't fight it,) serving to support those smaller 'Notanish' areas of high



key drama, or extreme darkness. The beauty here is that things that match our base gray are thus already halfway painted- you have the value, now determine the color and move on. Less is more: very sexy. Are you with me so far?

The other thing that Fran has noticed about Reinhardt's canvas is that it's not completely blank; there's a grid on it. It is safe to assume that if our painter friend was giving this demo in say, a casino in Monaco, he would at this point be ejected for counting cards. Grids give us a recurring measurement by which to place and scale the things in our pictures so that they are guaranteed to be the same as what we are working from. The ear of our sitter is exactly one and one half squares to the right of his nose, etcetera. I may be in the minority here, but I think grids are for sissies. If you are going to wash your dog because you love him, you don't chain him to the wall so he won't move while you do it. Likewise, it is that difficult to pin down aspect of something that often moves me to try and paint it. Beginning with little squares is not only counter to loving your subject, it's like playing with Legos, which I always despised.

Having said all that, some artists base their compositions upon the four sweet spots, or 'golden areas.' This concept is also based on a grid, albeit a large one; a tic tac toe board taking up most of your surface. It is generally excepted that if you place the focus of your painting on any one of the four corners of that inner square, you will enjoy the safety and comfort of a perfect composition. It does work, I have tried it, but who says I can't put my subject bang in the center of my painting? (I'm thinking here of a little doodle called, "The Last Supper.") This is the thing- rules and guidelines are only helpful until they are not. As sure as someone shows unequivocally that the best way to travel is on Road A, someone will come along and use Road B in a way no one had ever considered.

Before he begins, Mr. Reinhardt has deigned to take a few questions from the audience, still bubbling a bit from his trip to the Balkans, (or is that the last of the parasite he picked up eating rare lamb in Montenegro?)

Q- 'What kind of brush do you prefer to use?'

A- *Plucks a brush out of the brown jug-* 'I use a synthetic filbert, in this case the series 6100 by Princeton. Its flat shape combined with its rounded tip provides me with a stunning range of marks, from wide expressive strokes to using it on its edge to make graceful lines. It can hold a great deal of color but it releases it smoothly and uniformly. Until it

starts to get old, and then of course, I throw it out. But then, the company keeps sending me boxes of the things...'

*(polite chuckles from the gallery.)*

Q- 'Mr. Sexton, I mean, Mr. Reinhart, I'm so nervous. Any thoughts on palette knives?'

A- *Reinhart appears to think about this, though he is not really doing so, and the questioner may not have noticed that his set up is devoid of even one.* 'In the right hands, the palette knife is a wonderful thing. For those who struggle with brushwork it is an accepted way to deliver paint to the canvas. I *do* think however, that too often the mark they make becomes what the painting is about. Like a guitar with one string- you can't make chords, so you just play one note at a time. The palette knife is like that. Brushes are better for talking about lost edges and subtleties of light.'

*(our questioner didn't like that answer, she sniffs and sits back down. One less copy of the great man's book out the door tonight.)*

Q- 'Mr. Reinhart, do you ever work from photos?'

A- *Reinhart has just decided not to have any more of these Q & A's. He just got the same question in Toronto and God, what a can of worms that opened.* 'No, I don't,' he lies. 'Course, if it's a portrait of George W., well, he's a busy man. But I don't even own a camera. Generally, I'll do a quick sketch in the field and make some notes for when I get back to the studio. Working from life- that's the ticket. Anything else before we get started?'

Since the next and final question for Mr. Reinhart will be, 'briefs or boxers, Sir?' this might be a good time to leave. In fact, as far as this email goes, we should probably wind it up for this quarter. The habits that we've discussed here, doing a sketch, a notan, covering my surface with a middle gray- *all prior to actually beginning to paint*- only take me a second and help me gather the threads of my idea and summon my creative spirit. This does not guarantee that the muse will appear; it just means that by starting out with good work habits, I am giving Her an opening.

## The Demo, cont.

A hush falls over the audience as Sexton Reinhart gets down to cases, turning away from his audience and summoning the painting gods. Fran is surprised that his first move is to unsheathe a brush that is at least a foot long and two inches wide. To her, it looks like something she would use to beat the dust out of a rug. But in Reinhart's grip, (and it should be noted here that said grip is loose and down at the very end of the handle,) it is charged with paint and brought to bear with aplomb. In fact, some of its wide, juicy expressions will survive subsequent applications of paint and declare their casual genius. For now, however, the brush is making big decisions that by virtue of its scale, simply cannot be too fussy. In surprisingly short order the large masses of the still life have been sorted out; the big vase and the bunched arrangement of mums, as well as the supporting shapes of the horse and the incense burner. Reinhart is buoyant with confidence as he works, explaining that at this point in the process, he is only concerned with whether or not he has the big shapes looking right, and in their correct size and placement. He also explains that while it may seem boring for us, his viewers, he will dwell here the longest, working the big shapes until they ring true.

It soon becomes evident that for now, Reinhart intends to work monochromatically, which if you think about it makes sense. He has already covered the surface with a neutral ground which will act as the middle value of the painting. Making a bunch of color choices this early would only complicate the business of capturing the other two most important values; the darker darks and the lighter lights. They will be determined and rendered in thinner applications of paint which will soon dry to a leathers haze which can be painted over. The terms, '*highlights*' and '*darkest darks*,' do not exist at this point- such things are as yet only a gleam in the painter's eye and putting them down too soon will most likely only mean undoing them later, or protecting them as areas nearby are worked on. I hesitate to use the word, NEVER, but in this case I will: NEVER rush ahead to complete something before its time. You will only be scared of ruining it and painting scared is death. Think of your painting as something which must be built, moving forward with the speed and determination of a street sweeper, which is to say, a pace at which one can think and plan but not have to go back and fix something which should *never* have been done so early. Capisce? But let us listen to the folksy patter of our master painter as he outlines this concept. "Starting a painting's like building the foundation of a house; bad foundation, bad house."

Fran is scrambling to write this down, immortalizing it on a list that now contains the following:

1. Find a Panama hat.

2. Get a big brown jug for my brushes.
3. Paintings are houses.

Now that the composition has been locked in, Reinhart sets his brush down and wipes his hands. As we suspected he might, he has used the 'golden area' technique by placing the mums in the top left-hand corner of that interior tic tac toe diagram. Interestingly, the little terracotta horse occupies a second corner diagonally across from this. The effect, should little else happen here, is arresting. As he is fond of pointing out to neophytes like us, Reinhart believes that if a painting doesn't grab the viewer from thirty feet, it may just as well be turned to the wall. I love small, mousy things that charm me into taking a closer look, but to the degree that my work hangs alongside other paintings in a gallery situation, I heartily agree. This is war.

It may be informative at this point to spend a moment studying our maestro's palette. If it appears that the colors have been arranged in an intentional way that is because they have been. Since time began painters have laid out their colors by habits that even they only understand half the time. If you ever enquire as to this and get a response like, 'I don't know,' or, 'it's just how it came out,' know you are in the presence of someone who is letting the fate of their artwork be determined by luck rather than by design. We must never at any point let the art gods think that we are simply letting the painting happen to us. Shingles happen to us. Paintings are things that must be nurtured every step of the way and this includes everything; the condition of our brushes, the kind of wipes we buy, the kind of paper towels we use, the brand of paint we prefer, (not just what was on sale, two for one,) the frames we think look best, etcetera, etcetera. Laying out our palette is an important way of saying, 'I do it the same, each time, because of A, B, or C.' In Reinhart's case, he has squeezed out warm and cool versions of yellow, (thinking of Cad yellow as the warm one and Cad Lemon as the cool,) red, (thinking of Cad red as the warm one and Alizarin Crimson as the cool,) and blue, (thinking of Cerulean as the warm one and Ultra Marine as the cool.) Other colors fill out this arrangement with the basic logic being that opposite colors should be kept as far away from each other as possible. Finally, not one pile of white is on hand but two; one for all the warm colors that will be made and another for all the cool ones. All of this sits on a large, glass surface which can be easily scraped with a razor blade and which protects a clean, white table top underneath which will never influence the color we are making.

Ah, Reinhart has been busy while we were talking; he now has a wonderful underpainting of the still life set up, where the composition and the shapes and the values are all looking good. Like it or not,

the maligned grid pattern we made fun of earlier has done its bit- like a card counter at a blackjack table it has ensured that the big vase does not lean, that the little clay horse stands upon all fours in a jaunty pose, and so forth. In short, people, the tightrope walker is better than three fourths across the falls and has yet to break a sweat. He has also yet to do anything that would make this particular spectator sit up and take notice. I, like you, am waiting for something truly daring to happen. And then it does. The camera mounted over the palette shows a brush mixing three colors side by side on the glass. They are kissing cousins in *value*, but they all describe different *temperatures*; a violet, a sea foam green, and a rich ochre. Reinhart then cleans and wipes his brush thoroughly before running the bristles through all three piles like a tiny snow shovel. This mess is then delivered into the shadow area of the mums in a whopping stroke that beguiles the eye with mystery and satisfaction. A collective moan of pleasure goes up from the audience. This is Reinhart at his best. Having navigated his street sweeping vehicle safely onto center stage, he will coax it into balletic maneuvers that the manufacturer never intended. This is where we want our painting strategy to ultimately deliver us: to the place where we can be fearless, because there is just not a whole lot that can go wrong.

The gasps and whistles of the crowd have roused Fran's mother from her torpor and she is a long moment in remembering that she came to some painting thing with her daughter, (missing her favorite program so she could watch God knows what,) but within a few moments of watching Reinhart go through his artistic paces she is nearly as breathless as the other onlookers. The paint is really flying now- all the values have been determined, the foundation of the house, secure. What is happening now is simply someone who paints every day and for a lot of money, having a good time. He is alternately telling stories about his Presidential sitters and whistling 'The Tennessee Waltz' with a dazzling range and vibrato. Anyone in the hall tonight will come away with the feeling that Sexton Reinhart loves being who he is and that they have seen something exciting and dangerous performed just for them. They will be right on the first score, but less than a hundred percent on the second. It was only in the last thirty minutes of the demonstration that there was even a slight risk of accident, but by and large, the hour and a half which preceded it ensured that that would never happen. However, in the foyer later, holding a seven-dollar glass of wine in one hand and a copy of 'Methods and Madness' in the other to be personally signed by the author, just try and peddle that notion and see how far you get. Just remember it is all in the planning, or as Fran will say tomorrow when she meets Jennifer for coffee, 'a painting is a house.'

### 3.

## Less is More

**W**hen I was a kid, there was a guy on the Ed Sullivan show named Erich Brenn. His act involved spinning plates on the tips of these long, tall sticks. Over the course of his gig, he would keep adding more plates, until he had something like a dozen going at once, with the first ones wobbling badly as they started to wind down, and him giving them a fresh spin before racing off to tend to the others. It was a spectacle of the, ‘how does someone get good at this?’ kind. I think the reason this act and others like it have disappeared is that now when we want our fix of artificially manufactured anxiety, we tune in to housewives screaming at each other in nice restaurants. Anyway, the spinning plate analogy is a good one when we talk about managing several different painting concerns simultaneously- things that naturally go together if we set our mind to seeing them side by side or even in the same stroke. I would list them in the following order:

1. Value- the relative light or dark of something compared with what is next to it.
2. Size- small vs. large, active vs. passive
3. Design- is this serving a good visual purpose? Making a good shape? Supporting the composition?
4. Temperature- the ‘light logic’ of the painting- warm light/cool shadows or cool light/warm shadows.
5. Local Color- is this the actual color of the thing as I am seeing it? (It’s okay if it isn’t, but did I mean to take liberty or did I just mix on autopilot?)
6. Viscosity- is this the proper ratio of paint to thinner so that it will dry fast so that I can work over it, or is this a fat layer of paint that should go on at the very end?

That may seem like a lot of plates to have spinning at once, but a Richard Schmidt or a Quang Ho can keep them all going very nicely, I have witnessed it. The rest of us may struggle just to handle two or three of these things at once, and that is perfectly okay. It doesn’t mean they don’t all get

done eventually, it only means that because they get done separately, the painting will bear the blows that come from extra handling and decision making. I just don't care to leave my thought prints so visible anymore. Spinning two or three plates at once cuts down on the sawdust that piles up and makes me look like a better painter. The practice of doing this has a name; it is called, 'Economy of Means,' and it means saying the most with the least effort.

Most of us have felt this groove at least once; when you choose the exact right color, a color which has factored in the right value and temperature, and you have mixed it to just the right consistency, placing it to describe not just an area of tone, but also the physical shape of the subject. When those things all happen at once, you can feel yourself cruising the jet stream. That mark will require no adjusting or correction; it is pure and divine just as it is, and you will leave it because nothing more needs to be said. Or you might not. I wish I had a dime for every perfect stroke I screwed up because I just couldn't leave it alone. This is not an easy skill to master but it has several benefits. For one, it shortens the gap between idea and finished creation, losing less in translation. Also, a piece that looks fresher, cleaner, and more spontaneous is more professional. And if these are not sufficient inducements, consider how much time and material you currently waste working the same area multiple times to say what might have been said just once.

If Chapter One dealt with getting your head into an art making space and Chapter Two served as a guide to minimizing the risks of getting good results, then think of this section as the self-editing process in which only the most vital part of your idea is communicated. Detail is minimized, fussiness is banished, and ego, (that part of ourselves so concerned with looking competent in front of our viewing public,) is asked to wait in the car. In their place will be something that looks to our startled eyes almost too dashed off to be left as it is. And therein lies the struggle. Like the Grinch who didn't understand a Christmas without all the trimmings, (until he did,) it may take us a long time to understand that the information contained in a few well-constructed brushstrokes is more than just sufficient, it is sublime. And that endorsement from your viewer? They will get what you are telling them, and your investment of trust in them will be returned to you a hundred fold. If you don't agree, then just ask yourself which painters you love and why. For that matter, do the same thing with your favorite musicians and writers. Creativity, like mayonnaise, doesn't do well over long periods in the sun. An idea may have already journeyed across the universe just to reach you; you must try to bring it into the world as intact and whole as you can. Less is always more.

## 4.

### Color: The Thing You Don't Know You Don't Know

**F**or most of us, our experience of color started with a box of crayons at the coloring book stage with our favorites soon becoming waxy nubs in shredded wrappers. But even as they shrank from use we realized something was off. Red and green and blue just didn't describe everything. What did the other, hardly used crayons do? If you were like me, you never deigned to find out and the olive green and brown selections rolled under beds or found their way to the backs of drawers. Years passed and then maybe we got an eight-pan watercolor set. Fun, but again, all too easy to get purple in my yellow leaving my artistic aspirations in ruins. Sometime later, maybe an Aunt or a friend of the family gave us a set of pastels. A hundred of them. We opened the box and removed the tissue. The names, (things like mauve or puce,) were intriguing. We investigated a little, but avoided the 'ugly colors' like a hot stove. Then for some of us, along came art school. The irony of that is that such a great learning opportunity came along at the exact moment when we became unteachable. We were just a bunch of surly, slouching teenagers with raging hormones. Oh, we picked up the vintage-clothing-look of artists, and the suffering-for-my-art-attitude of artists, but anybody that tried to teach us un-fun stuff like color theory just wasn't cool. We either stayed away completely or took incompletes. We were doing a lot of life drawing and pot smoking and wine drinking, and getting ideas for paintings at odd times and places that were more party talk than serious artistic exercises. 'Rockin' color' was often still a tube of something we got a good deal on and didn't have the faintest idea of how to make from scratch. We didn't think too much about what we were saying with our art let alone how best to say it. And maybe this is where we came to rest,...for years and years. Only after the onset of adulthood, and trips to the Frick, the Tate, and the Uffizi, did we begin to see that there was something about color we had never guessed- something really big. But be warned: this way be Illustrators. If even a whiff of commercial art leaves you holding your nose, read no further.

**Color can cause a psychological change in the viewer.**



In people who see color, it can cause changes by creating a mood, tapping into a memory, or generating a new experience. Illustrators are expert at staging their subjects for maximum emotional and dramatic effect. Keying an entire painting to a cool color like dark blue creates results that are restful, hushed, and introspective. No one selling you a sleep aid puts bright yellow sheets on the bed. Likewise, energy drink companies rely on red to grab customers by the throat. Anything with babies is of course rendered in pastels, and Gramma's kitchen is always sepia-toned. Green is an oxygen rich pine forest or a sprawling lawn where a high summer wine tasting is under way. You get the idea. When one color dominates the painting, color is serving an idea or it is the idea. Inserting other color ideas into this model dilutes the effect and quickly. (In fact, it is contrary to human nature to work this way, try it and you will see how quickly the hand reaches for colors that will 'balance out' the work and thus drain out the power you momentarily discovered.)

**Color wants you to think it is always local.**

When is color lying to you? When it is disguised by temperature. An orange is always orange, or so we are led to think. Not true. Colors can change depending on the quality of light. Take said orange outside, where the light is usually warm and yellowish, and really look at the color you see on its shadow side – you will probably determine that it is a purpley-grey patch of a certain darkness or lightness with some orange lurking deep inside it. Your goal is to mix this unattractive glop. Faithfully. Mixing color is often like setting sail for an island you can't see. Intellectually, you know it's there, but until you cruise into safe harbor you just have to take it on faith. Use your eyes and believe what they tell you- that dull, uninteresting color is the right one. If you want to take the experiment further, take the orange back into the kitchen under the bluish fluorescents and see how the shadow side is now the same familiar orange you always knew. Why? It's axiomatic: warm light casts cool shadows. Cool light casts warm shadows. Use a temperature-based palette and see how much better your work starts to look.

**Color is activated by other colors.**

A king pledged his daughter's hand in marriage to any artist in the land who could capture the color of his beloved 'Sunset Falls.' Only one suitor was smart enough to ask a wise man on a mountaintop why so many over the years had tried and failed. The wise man said to him- 'It is not the color of the thing you seek, but the color of the thing next to the thing.' Our man was halfway down the mountain, still chewing on this, when the truth hit him squarely between the eyes. Everyone thought the

answer to the King's request was in the churning water. What made the scene so beautiful was the water at sunset surrounded by the ochre-colored stones. The King soon had an artist for a son in law, but that's another story.

**Color is not always appropriate.**

Just because one can do a thing, does not mean one should. We mentioned our colorblind friends at the beginning of this section and it might serve us well to remember that they get along just fine in the everyday world. All too often we think of color the way little kids pick out a sweet at the bakery- the brightest thing usually earns the smelly, pointing finger. This is where artistic maturity and sophistication come in and whisper that less might be more. Illustrators understand how to 'stage' a subject so that the most important thing uses the richest color while supporting elements are more subdued. This makes perfect sense when we are just talking about it, but again, resisting the temptation to add color to subtle areas is no small thing and can only be accomplished through a conscious effort of will. When your painting looks rudderless and uninteresting, chances are you have salted too much color everywhere and lost your focus.

**Color is personal.**

I put this last because it is the most wonderful part of this discussion. To wit: If I say the lemon is purple, then by God, it is and the heck with you. The greatest power of color is to express our ideas, and they obviously do not always depend upon reality. Stepping through the doorway that leads to paintings about how we feel or how we feel about something will make use of syntax and visual rhymes that dwell in a land of their own. It is safe to say however, that an informed choice will always trump an uninformed one. A whole painting based on a tube of some wild color you have no idea how to make will come off like a monkey driving a car- it can be done but it's not really going anywhere. As we said at the top of the chapter, color in the service of an idea is power. When people look at your work they may first be searching for a resonating logic in your color choices, which as visual creatures will hit them before they see anything else. If there is neither plot nor plan, the painting will just lay there and they will move on. This is easily avoided. We need only think about what we are trying to say and let the power of color, (in whatever amounts; miserly or generous, whatever hues; quiet or thunderous, whatever moods; brooding or radiant,) come to our aid, and then have the good sense to get out of the way.

## 5.

### The Brush

If I just had a new easel, then my paintings would be better. If I just had one of those little white umbrella things, I know I would be better. If I bought a bunch of those little clips to roll the paint out of the tube uniformly, that would get me going. These and countless other gizmos are readily available to us by companies anxious to move them off their shelves. But I've been working with others just long enough to notice that in all the marketing and buying that goes on, the single most important tool is often completely forgotten: the brush. When you get right down to it, this is literally *the* tool we use. Maybe 'tool' is too pedestrian a term- what it really is, is the delivery system for our ideas. And the mark it leaves is no less important in its weight, movement, purity, attitude, personality, wisdom, and correctness than a word in a sonnet. And so it is continually strange to me that an otherwise rational person trying to make art will pick up a thing that looks like it was used to clean grout. This just doesn't make sense.

I think the main reason this happens is because good brushes, (not sable, but good, *new* brushes,) can be expensive. It is human nature, especially among impoverished artists, to use a thing until it's really, truly dead. Unfortunately, that grizzled stump will be affecting the results of our valuable painting time long before we give it the final sacrament. After the burial we break out a new brush. OMG! We feel again that indescribable translation of thought into action as it glides across the work, delivering the medium as God intended, in bright, clear strokes of color. Until, once more, the old campaigner is fit for little more than using its stick end to check our oil, leaving us to suffer its inadequacies until we get rid of it.

If I may, let me give you some hard-learned advice: use the *right* brush, and use a *good* brush. First of all, open your paint box and pitch anything that is not a filbert. There, I said it. Square brushes are for painting houses, not pictures. Likewise round brushes are great for water color, lousy for oils and really lousy for landscape. Likewise anything with bristles longer than one and a half times their width and especially bristles that are shorter than that. Don't ask a tiny brush to make, or at least begin, a large painting. Likewise, don't use an elephant gun to shoot grouse. Equally important,

*dispose of any filbert that can no longer make a line if used on its edge; paint has gotten down into the ferrel and spread the bristles- the brush is no longer usable for art. Most important of all, buy some brush cleaner/conditioner and start using it after you have rinsed with thinner, making it the last thing you do every time you are finished working. If you do not currently do this little ritual, all I can tell you is that you will be amazed. Your brushes will last longer and be capable of a much wider range of marks for a much longer time.*

Life is simply too short and painting time too scarce to work against yourself. Forget the new easel: winnow out your bad brushes, buy some new ones, (2", 1", .5" and .25" filberts, green handled Princetons are nice,) and buy enough of them at a time that you have replacements when they wear out. And by 'when,' I mean start being the dead brush police. Your life will not be instantly fixed forever, it will just seem that way.

## 6.

### Releasing the Buddha

I'm not a Buddhist, but I borrow from various ideas and traditions. I collect metaphysical tidbits, devotional stories, and burn the occasional stick of incense. While this might not make me devoutly religious, it adds a spiritual component to my life which helps to make me a more rounded person. In the day to day it aids in mitigating some of the stuff I have trouble with; the negativity, injustices, hurts, and caveman emotions I can fall victim to. It takes me out of the relentless drum beat of 'me, me, me,' and keeps me grateful. But as an *artist*, spirituality engages a paradox whereby I, the creator, marketer, and editor-in-charge of MY BRAND, surrenders that responsibility and trusts instead in something that I cannot touch or prove; something that takes up where the baggage leaves off.

What do I mean by 'baggage'? Ego is baggage. Fear is baggage. What-Other-People-Think is baggage. I think sometimes we might actually wreck an artwork on purpose. Maybe we don't think we

deserve to do something good. If we made a truly great painting, then we would have to live up to it, and what would come after that? We don't want to rock the boat, or cause the people who expect one kind of artwork to suddenly have to adjust to another, even if it's better. They might begin to think that they misplaced their confidence in us. Thoughts like these are like the dead man switch on a train engine, they put the brakes on whether we want them to or not. Beginning an artwork with the faith that you are on a path, and not a tightrope, can make all the difference.

I don't mean to imply here that the painting process can become a nonchalant thing you're supposed to do wearing a blindfold. Anything but; it is informed by hard learned lessons and a plan of action- a get in, get it on, and get out strategy. But without faith that something good might happen, then what's the point of even beginning? So let us build on that. I would like to put forward to you that in our best creative moments something profoundly spiritual is happening; a surrender of self and a casting of consequences to the wind. For today, I'll call it releasing the Buddha but I am sure it has been known by many names over many centuries. Like meditation, this state of mind can be honed and ultimately summoned at will. Everything we have talked about in this book so far, whether it was technique, or personal style, or picking the right colors and elements as we prepare to make art, has been underpinned by the idea of finding and occupying a zone that allows for the arrival of the transcendent. William Joyce thought of it this way:

*'The way to success, as vouched by innumerable authentic personal narrations, is by surrender. Passivity, not activity; relaxation, not intentness.... let go your hold, resign the care of your destiny to higher powers, be genuinely indifferent as to what becomes of it all, and you will find not only that you gain a perfect inward relief, but often the particular goods you sincerely thought you were renouncing...'*

Ironic, no? But think about it. What if there were no mistakes? What if there were no bad strokes? What if every color you mixed was downright pure in its own perfection? What if as you stood before the easel you felt only one sensation; an extended low voltage hum as you responded to your subject? The work you make is informed, yet open to any changes that may arise. Your attention does not over-celebrate the good nor over-concern itself with the less good. You are watching everything happen not quite from outside yourself, (because that would be hypnosis and we're not doing that,) but with all the governors turned off. The caution, the courtesy, the common sense we employ when we are say, pushing a shopping cart down a crowded aisle are not engaged as they usually are. There is nothing to bump into, no one to apologize to, and nothing to avoid; only the gentle coaxing of two or three visual ideas that might congeal into a nice interconnected whole or might

not. We are dropping the judgment and any and all expectations, even the expectation that all this letting go will actually result in something. We become like water wheels or wind mills, simple devices run by the energies flowing past them. We abandon the idea of what we are painting; boat, house, niece, sunrise, looking only for the right color and where that blob of color belongs. Then the one next to it, and the one next to that, and on and on.

The important thing is that as you go along in this way you are not asleep, far from it. Your steady calm is just the result of a surety that it is all leading somewhere, and that we will find out what that is when we get there. After all, what have you got to lose? It's not like you're one of the first Aboriginal settlers who set sail for Australia from thousands of miles away with no proof that the new land even existed. What is your little painting experiment compared to that? Drop the baggage and engage the spiritual paradox: that when you don't give a damn, things have a way of coming to you.

## 7.

### Staying Teachable

**S**ometimes it might be easier if we were two people. Manning her booth in Litchfield Connecticut, where she was trying to sell the plein air paintings she'd done at a five-day competition, Jennifer was beginning to see that her skill set had been seriously tested. Possessed of a strong work ethic, (nobody ever had to coax her into her studio,) and a magician's love of secret techniques, she had won a slot in the contest on her ability. But she was sorely missing Fran, who had not been accepted, and who at this very moment would be chatting up interested passersby, not to mention her talented competitors; trading business cards and web addresses like it was just a big outdoor Tupperware party. Jen almost hadn't gone, dreading all the socializing she would have to do, but Fran had told her that she had to if only so she could tell her everything that happened. (With Fran this meant who had gotten tipsy at Orientation.) Without realizing it, the painting friends had long ago adopted roles that accentuated the other's strengths and lessened the other's liabilities.

But this wasn't all. When she got the acceptance letter, Jennifer had thought she stood a good chance of winning some prize money or being included in an article one of the good art magazines was going to publish on the event. When she realized who she was up against, she knew that wasn't going to happen. Worse, she got rattled. She slept badly all week, and second guessed all of her creative decisions. Everyone else seemed calm, relaxed, and barely breaking a sweat.

Walking around the show grounds, she couldn't believe the results. People were showing paintings that were 18 x 24" or bigger. How had they done that? Answer: They had returned to the same place every day for an hour or so before moving on to the next location. Strategy- she had given it virtually zero thought. Her own smallish paintings had been done in one mad rush from start to finish. No wonder she was exhausted. Also, she saw a lot of miniatures, 4 x 4" or so, that only took a moment to do when one was warmed up. With a public that seemed to be balking at parting with more than \$500.00, these little guys could be sold for peanuts and still make everyone involved feel good. And they *were* selling, the small numbers totaling up to some pretty big ones. Plus, they really filled out your booth design, which with only six paintings on display, looked about as festive as Mother's day at an orphanage.

And there was something she'd seen in some of the work that had really knocked her out- Paint handling, brushwork, whatever you wanted to call it. There was a freshness to it that was like a hit of pure oxygen. Even when describing big passages of quiet space, the paint had been *actively* applied, so that it needed nothing other than itself. The fact that it wasn't abstraction per se, but integrated into a solid representational piece just made it more clever and beautiful. Not everyone was doing this, but when Jennifer saw it, she was covetous. *Even when I'm not on location, I need to get this into my studio painting*, she thought to herself. And then a fresh wave of unworthiness: *when am I going to start figuring this stuff out for myself?*

The art sale had begun right after the awards were handed out at 10:00 that morning, (Our girl got skunked on the prizes *and* being picked for the article,) and it was just going on 4:00. One more hour until take-down. While many folks had passed by her booth, nodding knowingly and pointing encouragingly, no one had yet said, "Yep, this one's for me. Where do I pay?" Jennifer was tired of standing and even more tired of asking if anyone needed her to explain anything. They gave you a little orange ticket you could pin up where your painting had hung before purchase. Her neighbor for the day, a guy named Joe, had three such tickets on display. He was now relaxing in his folding chair and sipping a glass of chardonnay, any concern of missing a big fish lifted from his brow. All

Jennifer wanted to do was pack up her things and get to some place, (preferably air-conditioned,) where she could peel off her jeans and kick off her boots. The day, no, the *entire week*, had been one long disaster. She figured it was just after noon back home and decided to call Fran. “I am *so* out of here,” she told her.

“I’m sorry, Jen,” Fran said. “I was so jealous when you got in. Now I’m relieved. Be sure and,” Jennifer looked up as a silver-haired woman approached her. “I’ll call you later,” she said and hung up.

“Are you Jennifer?” the woman asked.

“Yes,” Jen replied.

“Hello Jennifer, I’m Kate. My booth is over there, on the other side of the park. Your paintings are really good.” Jennifer thanked her. Kate was from Mendocino California, and ran an art center there. She was currently looking for artists to give demonstrations at an upcoming workshop. It didn’t pay much, but they covered food and lodgings. Plus, they printed up a nice little catalogue. Would Jennifer be interested in helping out?

“I have some info over at my booth,” Kate said.

“I’m definitely interested,” Jennifer said. “Let’s go.”

Her neighbor looked up from his wine and said he would watch her booth for a minute or two.

“Thanks, Joe,” she said.

The women crossed the park to a booth with about a dozen people standing around it chatting. A couple of them saw Kate and started waving her over.

I will let you ponder the moral of this story if there is one, but something very like this happened to me and it kind of rescued my week. It’s an old saw; you go looking for one thing and find out that the plan has something different in mind. Enjoy The Ride? Maybe, maybe not. Stay Teachable? Yeah, I think I can do that. See you in the trenches.



## 8.

### Studio Lighting

I waited several years before installing lighting in my studio and once it was done, I could only wonder why I waited so long. Probably, because the cost of changing it out for two tracks of halogen spots and floods chimed in at about \$1500.00. While it wasn't cheap, making this investment in my art was part of the deal when I decided to get really serious. I may not be able control the quality of my painting from day to day like some obsessive micro-brewer, but I can take steps to insure that my tools are the best they can be, and the lighting in your workspace is just another of these; a tool.

If you are laboring under lousy lighting conditions you are fighting a battle for success on two fronts: One, the clear ability to see what you are doing, and two, having some idea of how the painting will look when it is observed away from your studio; say, at a nice gallery. Under the white light of halogens, (an industry standard for displaying art commercially and in the homes of collectors who care,) art made under the blue glare of fluorescents will look saturated by warm colors in ways you never intended. Likewise art made in conditions of changing light, (like mine was,) lack cohesion and consistency and again may result in nasty surprises when it hangs under good light; flat zones and muddy passages for instance.

The third great thing about totally controlled lighting is something I never even knew I wanted until I actually had it; the ability to work all night if I choose. This is slightly embarrassing to admit, but when the sun went down, I generally clocked out; day done, on to some T.V. or reading and then bed. It should probably go without mention here that getting serious about one's art is going to entail some long hours and crazy work schedules. Now in my studio it is always ten in the morning. What a concept. Plus, why wouldn't we do everything we could do to just have our stuff look better for *us*! In the midst of such a thankless, luckless, masochistic pursuit as making art to elevate the day to day consciousness of a society that is emotionally and aesthetically bankrupt at its very *core*, why wouldn't we want to treat ourselves a little? I'm sorry, did I just say that out loud?

## 9.

### A Few Words on Scale

Okay, you have just gotten a commission to do a painting and it's going to pay some pretty good money because it's for the client's business, say a restaurant, and they really like what you do. Great right? There's just one thing- your paintings average around the 9 x 12, or 11 x 14-inch size and this has to be big; like fit-over-the-back-wall-five-feet-by-six-feet big. While negotiating with your client, you kept your mouth shut about the fact that you had never made a piece this large and just nodded helpfully until the meeting was over. But now in the cold hard reality of your studio, you are staring at about an acre and a half of blank surface and wondering what the heck comes next. We will talk a little bit about the things that you can do to make the process easier, even fun, because if you've never tried it, painting big is just cool. Flinging the paint around as images of the Sistine Chapel or Jackson Pollack run through your mind is just great roll playing if nothing else. But there is money on the line here, so let's get down to it.

First let's talk about the thing that you will not do, or at least will keep to a minimum: second guessing. This little voice is going to be very noisy if you have never painted large before, telling you all kinds of unhelpful things, but what it will be saying mostly is that what you are doing is not good enough. Tell this voice to shut up and remember this simple truth; a big painting is really just a small one with different outside measurements. Yes, the bigger one will require more materials; paints, medium, rags, etc., and you may be sore in places that painting small never left you before, but it should require no more inspiration or 'artistic juice,' from you than usual if you work smart.

The most common mistake people make when they go big is the idea that they must fill every square inch of the surface with little surprises of color and brush work that will delight the eye. In fact, this is death, because it takes your focus off the big picture, which at least in my case involves a 70/30% ratio of opposing forces; dark against light, color against grey, active against quiet with one dominating over the other. When you 'jazz up' quiet passages that are meant to anchor busier elements, your

painting starts to exhibit an all-over sameness, something your little canvases probably never struggle with. Your tools in this job are critical; if you use a small brush to do a big job not only will you be at it forever, but you will lose the decisiveness the client saw in your work to begin with. Scale up those marks by using big brushes from the hardware store and keep using them until the painting is almost complete. Switch to a smaller brush only at the end and then only if absolutely necessary. Use anything at hand to transfer the energy of your sketch. For example, if the drawing is somewhat complicated, try projecting it onto the canvas. And don't commit resources until it is time to do so. Work with a dry brush or washes until you have everything in place, then start creating those thicker, (and more expensive,) passages of paint. And though it sounds obvious, back up and take a good look every few minutes. You cannot work large with any guarantee that it's all on track when you are standing a mere arm's length away.

A little rhyme I learned is sometimes helpful to remember; when in doubt, leave it out. Resist the temptation to make the job more complicated than it is. If you can look at it and say, 'I love this area' you have already to some extent wandered into the weeds. Wipe it out, retrace your steps, and continue working on the *whole* painting. And last of all, give yourself a break. Just because someone paid for a big piece does not make you responsible for delivering 'Guernica.' The expectations should be the same as usual; to arrive at something your smaller work does all the time, just with bigger outside measurements.

## 10.

### Viscosity; A Layered Approach

**V**iscosity is one of those terms that either throws people for a loop or makes them think you're trying to impress them; like the next thing you might say is that you grind your own pigments. Strange sounding or not, all oil painters have experience with this principal; if you

know it, then the trains in your studio are probably running pretty much on time. If you don't, then we'll talk about it now. Understanding viscosity allows your painting to move toward completion in order of what comes first and what should come last. In other words, it dictates your plan.

Viscosity hinges upon the adding of mediums to paint, and students new to oil painting often express their confusion about what to use and how much. It's rather seductive, the selection of ingredients out there that come in cute little jars from faraway lands. Without the inclusion of varnishes, or oils of walnuts and sunflowers, or additives and extenders that make things dry quicker or slower, your supply shelf can look uniformed. Well, not to sound like a curmudgeon, but I don't use any of this stuff; just Gamsol which I switched to from Turpinoid about a year ago. A simple solvent like this will affect the thinness or thickness of the paint so that you can build your painting in layers.

A thick layer of paint will cover a layer that has a lot of thinner in it, because the thinner quickly evaporates and leaves the paint leathery. The stuff out of the tube is just pigment and linseed oil and will 'float' on top. Purposely altering the ratio of thinner to oil paint, (its viscosity,) allows you to move forward while preserving a degree of freshness. The shorthand term for this strategy is, 'thin to thick.' Laying out and organizing a painting using this technique will bring the work along at a pace that is quick and comfortable. But 'thin to thick' seldom rides alone. He is often in the company of, 'dark to light.' This technique calls for the identification of the darkest values in the painting and indicating them first, figuring out their exact shape and size before moving on to the next-darkest thing. Doing so in thin to thick layers feels natural and builds up the solidity of the forms in a step by step way. When you arrive at the lightest lights, (most likely using your thickest strokes,) you can worry less about the colors becoming muddy.

Working with an understanding of viscosity; going from thin to thick and dark to light, forces us to plan, which gives us a greater margin for success, but here is the disclaimer: it's just mechanics.

Work habit disciplines like these sound very logical and sage, but tend to vanish the moment an inspired idea streaks across our canvas. Then we're off chasing it like some kind of crazed hunting dog and the plan goes out the window. Every time I work, I break one rule or another and really, it's those moments of creative insanity that can take the work to a completely new level. My only hard, fast rule is to always try to be the one in charge. If the technique, (or the lack of one,) is doing too much of the quarterbacking then I need to get back to basics, or mechanics, or just my idea, whatever that was.

## 11.

### Let's Talk About Framing

Suppose that we've killed ourselves midwifing a glorious piece of art into the world, or simply gotten lucky and had a beauty drop into our lap. We look at it and, barring a strange decision to bury it in the stacks, start to think about putting it out there for other people to see. Yes, we will document it, and digitize it so that we can feature it on our website which is the greatest forum ever, but after that we are hoping it will have another life as a painting hanging on someone's wall. will mean adding the final touch, a lovely border to contain the colors and movement that make this particular painting so, . . . *frameworthy*. I've been in this game long enough to know that it is at this point that things can get weird if not downright inexplicable, depending on some very understandable circumstances, and it is all too easy to reach for one of the following solutions before we have really considered the best options.

First up is the small boneyard of frames that we have amassed from garage sales, (or even the trash,) that sits in a corner of our studio and which may or may not have termites living in it, and which contains at least one scabby offering which previously graced the portrait of a clown. In addition to marred finishes, funky hobby touches, (that crackle finish that comes in jars,) or garish scrollwork that was ugly when it was new, all of these will have a saw-tooth hanger instead of wire and eyelets, and really, the eyelets would simply poke through the front if we tried to use them because this is a photo frame, never intended to accommodate a stretched canvas. We keep adding to this pile because retail framing is so outrageously expensive, and we pride ourselves that we might one day 'recycle' these horrors into something useful and maybe even get a commendation from the Department of Interior.

But wait- they decided at Vatican Two that we didn't need frames anymore; that it was suddenly entirely acceptable to continue whatever image occupied the front of the canvass around the sides, thus eliminating the need for framing and giving the viewer, (wait for it,) extra artistic wonder to

marvel over, even if they are sitting at a forty-five-degree angle. The art supply companies quickly picked up on this trend, providing two and three inch stretchers with the canvas discreetly pulled and stapled into the back, but not before generations of paintings had their stapled sides smeared with paint in a, *what the hell*, kind of mania.

Next is the chop saw you ran out and bought when you decided you would do an end run around the whole framing racket and ‘make you own.’ Unfortunately, you never entirely got over your fear of losing a finger in the thing when it was doing its ear piercing slicing and dicing, nor did you ever master the compound cuts you would need so that the finished product flared as handsomely as its store-bought cousins. Also, you tried several finishes that looked promising, (that jar of crackle glaze again,) and all of them ended up getting painted black. The molding you bought is now either leaning in a corner of the garage, or is being used to steak up some bougainvillea in the yard.

While each of these solutions has the chance to work wonderfully, it is my opinion that when they do not, the results are disastrous. Getting someone to buy a painting is hard enough, making their first thoughts be about reframing it is kind of a buzz-kill. Kidding yourself that it is ‘good enough,’ makes you look like you don’t care. You do care- you just need another expense like you need a frontal lobotomy. Here are the things I am doing that, while not giving you extra magic money to spend, or an arrangement with the Getty to take their cast offs, might get your work hung in the manner it deserves. (And call me old school, but going frameless is not an acceptable option.)

1. I do use old frames when possible; just good ones.
2. There is no conceit in planning for good luck; when I am imagining the measurements of a painting, I keep to a few select sizes for which I always have a good, old, frame available.
3. I resist the occasional, (and strong,) impulse to do a 15” x 40” piece for over the bed. This will most assuredly become tomorrow’s white elephant and I will be stuck with a clinker frame for life.
4. I have a generous framer who will put clips in the back of my frames instead of staples so that I can easily swap out one image for another.
5. I buy two styles of frames to use for various amounts of time, a dark and a light, and rely on my framer to tell me when these have gone out of style, (because they *do* go out of style, and if you aren’t looking at the house magazines you should be.)

6. I drive two hours to go to my framer, a lovely soul who gives me a great product at a rocking price, and based upon our simple two frame agreement, knows just what I am talking about if I have to phone in an order which he will send by UPS.

I hope these suggestions help. You may have to make some of these changes over time, but trust me, you deserve it. A painting you are proud enough of to display deserves a thoughtful presentation, and being an artist is hard enough without getting in our own way.

## 12

### One Still Life a Month

I refer to Still Life as the I Ching of Painting. Lessons of composition, learning to see and not just look, mixing color, and brush handling are all brought to bear when you apply yourself to this timeless study. When you paint a still life, you are confronted with the challenges present in every other form of painting.

- 1) You must draw your forms with surety and correctness.
- 2) You must identify the relationships between the set-up's elements; the way a red thing will bounce its color into the shadows of a white thing sitting next to it.
- 3) A shadow will not only define the shape of object A, but also the shape of the next object it touches or does not touch.
- 4) You must find a way to unify and harmonize all the elements to create a cohesive whole. This is sometimes referred to as mood.

Anyone who tells you that still life is a drag doesn't know what they're talking about. This is 'Battle Bots' meets three-level chess. And the rewards are the same as the pitfalls: everyone knows if you got it right, everyone will know if you got it wrong. How could anything be more dramatic than that? Plus still life offers something no other form of painting can boast; when your subject is arranged and lit to your satisfaction, it will never change. Yes, in three months it may become enshrouded beneath a layer of dust, but it never gets tired, it never rains, its readiness to model for you

is evergreen. I'm not advocating three month paintings here unless that's your thing. My favorite still lives have a freshness and immediacy to them which probably comes from my landscape work, and I try to do them intermittently throughout the year. My primary reason is because they tell me where I'm at with my art. When I execute the rim of a cup or glass and then hold it up to a mirror, I find out real quick how good my drafting skills are or aren't. When I go to handle a piece of satin, or the pattern on a silver fork, I find out how good my brush handling is or isn't. If I decide to include something alive in the painting, say a bunch of peonies, I may have to invent a completely new kind of stroke to describe it. (Flowers are not evergreen, by the way.) But the rewards are great. When I do go back outside or paint from a model, I know I won't burn as much time on the things which need to come together quickly and righteously so that I can get on with my inspiration thing. Still life is something that costs nothing but pays off in ways you simply cannot imagine. It will make you a better painter if not a better human being, (then again it just might.) Do one next time you're not doing something else and keep it a part of your artistic regimen.

## 13.

### Loving the Palette Knife

**T**here is a tool that might be languishing at the bottom of your supply box, banished because it didn't deliver as advertised. I'm talking about the palette knife. They always look so *necessary* at the art store, hanging from their hooks in varying shapes and lengths; their goose necks disappearing into wooden handles. If there is a gold leafed manufacturer's stamp there saying anything like, 'Made in Italy,' into the basket it goes. But when we go to use them, we find they have inherent drawbacks. They are consumers of great gobs of expensive color and about as subtle as a hammer. That said, if you have had a bad experience with this spatula-like thingee, I would encourage you to dig it out of the box and try again.



Though it is perhaps best known for its signature mark; that shingle of paint that might almost top a cup cake, it is capable of a level of subtlety you might not expect. I place it in the category of rags, squeegees and fingers; a smearer of paint and a great puller-togetherer, and pusher-arounder. Rather than being appropriate for beginning a painting, I believe it is best used once things are well underway. For instance, when too many color ideas are competing at once, it can be used like an artistic Zamboni, mixing and dragging painted areas together to create seductive greys from distracting noise. If used on its edge, it can create lines and slashes of exacting width. And for those who struggle with architecture, right angles can be achieved that practically look like cut-outs. No, I am not trying to sell you a palette knife, and let me say here that I am not a fan of paintings that have used this tool exclusively. To me they seem to interpret everything in a kind of mosaic tile language that makes me nervous. But when combined with the brush, the painter is fully armed with a variety of responses to any subject matter. One helpful thing to bear in mind if you decide to try this tool again is that like most of us, it is best when it's not being asked to do what it isn't good at. Part of the fun is just turning it loose. It may do something wonderful on the first try or, as with a brush, it may involve a certain amount of squinting, standing back, and cursing.

## 14.

### Whatever It Takes

Over my painting life, I've broken almost every hard-fast rule I ever adopted, realizing in the fullness of time that I was being high handed or worse, kind of dumb. Having matured a bit in spite of myself I no longer harbor these prejudices. Instead, I've come to think that whatever trick, tool, or monkeyshine gets my painting over the finish line bearing the closest resemblance to the idea that inspired it is probably okay and definitely beats sending a picture out into the world with a mistake in it. As long as my moral ambiguity stops short of forgery or plagiarism, nothing should seem too remedial or low brow if it prevents the viewer from looking at the work and thinking, "Poor thing, he almost had it." This is my worst nightmare; as artists, we do not wish to be

pitied, ever. And so, for this issue of The Life Artistic, I've compiled a list of work-arounds for the most common problems that can afflict a painting which is inches away from being successful, but may be struggling to meet heightened ambitions. A disclaimer here- I'm not the decider of what is good; I'm merely sharing some things I've learned or heard about from others that may help in a pinch. Do with them what you will.

#### The Mirror Trick-

Holding a painting up to a mirror will give you about twenty seconds of complete clarity and point up all kinds of compositional strangeness. Look quickly and decisively- your brain will soon reprocess the image as flipped and begin overlooking the mistakes it had glossed over previously. This little trick is most helpful with the identification of a left or right-leaning bias. If you're painting a marina of boat masts, don't wait 'till you're done to try this.

#### Stenciling-

A favorite story of mine involves a tall jar in a still life set up. The ellipses at the shoulders and the thing's mouth refused to line up, left to right. In desperation, I finally traced the side I liked onto some onion paper and transferred it onto cardboard. I then cut it out, flipped it over and traced it back onto the canvas. A tad remedial, but I had two matching halves. I kept waiting for my kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Kelly, to come in and replace my scissors with little orange-handled ones with rounded tips.

#### The Plastic Wrap Trick-

You are mid-stream on a painting and considering making a dramatic change; something like swapping out a large tree for a view beyond it. You think you might like it better, but you aren't sure and finding out will mean losing what you already have. Affix a sheet of plastic wrap to the board, (tape it from the back to keep it down and the tape out of the way,) and paint a dry run of your idea. Don't like it? No big deal, repeat and try something else.

#### Rulers, Triangles, and Ellipses-

I always keep a T-square handy at the easel. It is indispensable for making sure horizon lines don't tip up, or down, or do something strange in the middle. (There is no poorer 'Poor Thing,' than a crooked horizon on a painting of the ocean.) I keep a triangle at the ready too. (They're great for those afore mentioned boat masts.) When these things get crusty with paint, it only takes a second to scrape them off with a razor blade or wipe them down with a rag and thinner. I am less enthusiastic about ellipses, tending to think that the angle I need on a circle probably won't be one of three predetermined shapes or sizes on one of those plastic-guide-thingys. For help in this area, refer to the stenciling trick.

### Use of Photos-

For years I resisted the idea of using photos in my fine art. This was kind of schizophrenic, seeing that I had used them daily as a commercial artist. If you do use someone else's photo to make art you will be expected to manipulate it so that it is not a direct copy, most often by flipping it. If you shoot your own scrap, be careful not to follow the picture too closely. Generally speaking, the camera does not see subtleties of dark and light like the human eye, and has a tendency to group neighboring values together. It is up to you to find or even exaggerate those subtleties in your painting. Also, the camera can give you a lousy composition. You may want to make your painting from two or three shots taken of your subject. Work the painting out in sketches that combine reference shots, confident that the result will be unique. Don't be a slave to the photo. Use it as a stepping stone to what you want to talk about as an artist.

### Brights-

Do not select this flat tipped brush to deliver generous passages of paint; its blade-like nature does not hold much color and tends to 'cut into' softer areas. It is perfect for what it does well; making hard, declarative notes without much blending. See how many of these square-jawed ruffians are currently leaning in your jar trying to look like first stringers when actually they should be used as finishing touch brushes or anyplace a straight edge is desired.

The bottom line of all this is that while some people may not agree, I consider all these things to be legitimate art making aids that when used correctly, will pass un-noticed by the viewer and for the right reasons. Unless you tell them.

## 15

### The Value Line

**A** recurring question I hear in my classes is, 'what should I do next?' This is for all of us, I think, a near constant refrain. We have made a choice of what to paint, and then we make the first mark. After that, many of us find ourselves straining to see the way forward with one part intuition and one part luck. If we are working representationally; still life, figure, or landscape, we could really use some kind of through-line; something simple, with a clear beginning and

an identifiable endpoint to provide a reliable armature. For me, that is looking for and recording a complete set of values.

I have come to think of the value scale I see in a given subject as a number line with zero being the lightest light and ten being the darkest dark. In the middle at number five, is the gray we have used to tone the canvas before working. It is key that we get this gray right- we squint at the entire still life, the entire figure or landscape and, regardless of its various parts, we simply look for the one value we see the most of. That is our number five, and we brush it over the entire canvas. The beauty of establishing this middle value is simple: Everything that comes after is going to be either lighter than it or darker than it. Now we begin ticking off the stops on the number line, (or as we are now calling it, the Value Line,) finding the next darkest value from five, and just to keep things balanced, the next lightest value from five- extending out, to our imaginary left and right, from the center.

It may not be your intention to make a painting that has values that extend to ultimate black and ultimate white. You may instead be painting something soft and delicate. This is fine; you can jump off the Value Line anytime, knowing that your work has a solid foundation. BTW, If you are not confident about mixing the colors for these values, try working monochromatically. Once the image is built you can always assign color, but again, a narrow color range, like a narrow value range, has its own kind of beauty and you may be very happy with it. Instead of asking yourself what you should do next, the more likely question might be, am I finished?

**To be continued,...**

