





Above Monument Cove
2019, oil, 12 x 16 in.
Collection the artist
Plein air

ANTHONY WATKINS

LIVING THROUGH WHAT HE PAINTS

For this Maine oil painter, his experience of the scene and the creative process itself overshadow the final product, with fresh excitement coming from the promise of the next piece to be painted.

— BY BOB BAHR —

Anthony Watkins likes to paint with the full range of values and a prismatic approach to color. The result is a feast for the eyes he enjoys most when it's fresh, and then he's immediately on to the next.

"If I'm painting something, it means I want to make a connection with the subject," Watkins says. "It would be impossible for me to paint without doing that. I'm trying to see rather than just look. I'm trying to immerse myself in something rather than just get an impression down. In Italy, for example, I could close my eyes and know I wasn't in Maine. Not just because of the language, but because of how I felt, the different cooking I smelled — everything was different from the way it was at home, and that energized me. I couldn't get enough of it.



"All of that makes the painting — the experience of doing it — special to me. I'm not one to see the subject as a collection of planes, values, and shapes. Instead, I see a person, a house, a forest. They are more than just elements to be used in service of technique. I paint them because in some ways I am in love

with the landscape or the person, and I'm doing a painting of that feeling. That's how I approach things. I'm living through what I paint. That's the main thing."

A MINIMAL APPROACH

Watkins doesn't concern himself much with the completed painting. He works on standard-sized surfaces so he can drop the pieces into ready-made frames. And then he is ready to paint again. "When the product is done, I

ANTHONY WATKINS was raised on a farm in northern Virginia, where he started drawing at an early age. Before becoming a full-time artist, he enjoyed a successful career as an engineer.

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Café & Seafood

2021, oil, 16 x 12 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air

look around and I get stopped very soon because I've seen something and I want to get started. It doesn't take any time at all." It may be the light conditions or the subject itself, but whatever the enticement, the artist is eager to begin. "I look at the subject and think, this has to be painted," he says. "It calls me. I can't not do it. My excitement's up. I can't wait to get everything unpacked and be ready to paint. It happens every time. I experience heightened feelings and senses. I enjoy that state. There is nothing like it."

Watkins says he embraces a minimal approach to plein air painting, with just a bag for paints and brushes, a French easel, and an umbrella in hand when he goes outside. He favors a split-primary palette (a warm and a cool version of each primary color) and eschews earth tones. "Having a warm and a cool of each speeds up the color-mixing process, but I try to stay away from neutrals and earth tones. I want to paint prismatically and have the primaries, with every mixed color keyed off of that." Prismatic palettes take many forms, depending on whose system an artist is following, but in general the concept means mixing strings of color showing gradations of value, moving along the color spectrum, using a limited number of paints.

He's not fussy about brushes, preferring bristle brushes except when painting fine lines. "Anything serviceable will work," he says. "I've bought out entire lines of brushes in stores to see what I like. But I'm mostly painting tone against tone; I don't often need a sharp line for that."

put it aside and it's like someone else did it," he says. "I'm on to the next thing. It's a process, not a destination. When the other artists and I finish our work for the day at plein air events, we get together and talk, but I'm already thinking about what I'm going to do tomorrow. If I'm quiet, my painting friends say, 'Anthony is thinking about painting something. He is here, but his mind is thinking about what he's going to do in a painting.' And they are right."

That said, Watkins' approach to finding subject matter is not particularly deliberate. "It's very easy for me to find something to paint," says the artist. "I go out to



Acadia Cliffs

2019, oil, 12 x 16 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air



(ABOVE) Eaton's Boatyard, Castine, 2016, oil, 18 x 24 in., collection the artist, *plein air* • **(LEFT) Rocks and Stream,** 2018, oil, 9 1/2 x 18 in., collection the artist, *plein air*



(Above) Downeast Barn, 2021, oil, 12 x 16 in.,
collection the artist, *plein air* • **(LEFT) Wayne**
PA Station, Early Departure, 2017, oil, 16 x
20 in., collection the artist, *plein air*





Summer Rain, Wiscasset

2021, oil, 20 x 16 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air

Watkins is much more discerning in regard to paints, with Winsor & Newton being the baseline for him. “If you try to use cheaper paints to get away with spending less, you end up having to work extra hard to get the colors you see in nature,” he says. “Color mixing is hard enough.”

Watkins will tone his canvas on location based on what he is seeing, with winter scenes getting a tone closer to red “because that creates contrast with every shadow color in a snow scene.” He wipes the tone onto the surface using a paper towel. Or he opts to work on a blank canvas. “Some of my best effects have come from a plain white canvas, using the white of the surface for highlights.”



Middle & Main, Wiscasset

2021, oil, 18 x 24 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air

A JUGGLING ACT SUPREME

As you can see in the images we’re sharing in this story, Watkins has been painting landscapes lately, but this is somewhat misleading. “Some people only see one side of my work, but I’m not solely a landscapist,” he says. “My first love has always been the human figure, and that was what I was trained to paint. But my instructor once said that everything he taught about painting the figure — using tone, color, line, and shade — can be applied to a landscape or whatever the artist is looking at. Here in Maine, I tend to paint more landscapes because the sense of solitude in this area calls for depicting just the land. I occasionally run across people here while I paint, but usually not.”

Watkins says his favorite subject may be the figure in the landscape. He hasn’t been painting a lot of that recently because of the COVID-19 pandemic. “I had to put all my projects involving the figure on hold,” the artist says. “I couldn’t find the people or the right situation to paint them, and a lot of the models left the state or graduated. I’m painting snow scenes now, but I’m counting the days. I’m seriously overdue to get back to the figure outdoors. It has been about two years, and I can’t wait to do it again.”

The artist counts Joaquín Sorolla y Bastida, John Singer Sargent, and Jules Bastien-Lepage as primary influences for painting the figure in the landscape. Bastien-Lepage’s *Joan of Arc* and various pieces by Alfred Munnings are of particular importance to Watkins. “Painting the figure in the landscape is a juggling act supreme,” he says. “You have to do everything, all at once — the light effects, the skin tone, the gesture, the landscape. For me, that is the greatest excitement, to get all these things running at the same time and get a good painting out of it.” 🎨

BOB BAHR has written about visual art for various books and publications for 18 years. He lives and works in the Kansas City area.