

The Outdoor Scene

Plein-air painting continues to breathe life into the art world

BY JOHN ZEAMAN

Kullaf



"Summer Morning, Tewksbury, NJ" by Anne Kullaf.



"Iron Truss Bridge, Clinton, NJ" by Anne Kullaf.

AN ARTIST HAS LOTS OF REASONS NOT TO do "plein-air" painting. It's old-fashioned. It means hauling a lot of materials and equipment outdoors. And it exposes the artist to all sorts of nuisances — gawkers, abrupt changes of light and weather, even trespassing charges.

Nowadays, if you want to paint landscapes, it's a lot easier to take photographs of the location and do the actual painting in the studio. So why do I regularly run into artists — especially New Jersey artists — who are still doing this old-fashioned thing?

I can provide one answer: Something is always lacking in paintings done from photographs. Everything is in its proper place, but these paintings

can come across as arid, flat and lifeless.

In contrast, pictures painted en plein air (French for "in the open air") communicate the artist's experience, which includes smells, sounds, weather, human activity and the artist's own sense of urgency about getting it down.

Plus, the plein-air painters who I admire bring something new and modern to the experience.

A COUNTRY AFFAIR

First, a brief history. In the beginning, seventeenth-century artists such as Salvator Rosa made outdoor oil sketches as studies for studio paintings. The practice took off in the 1800s with the invention of paint



"New York Skyline from Hoboken" by Chris Kappmeier.



"Central Park West, New York City" by Chris Kappmeier.

Kappmeier



"Sphere Tanks, Bayonne" by Valerie Larko.



"Industrial Robots" by Valerie Larko.

Valerie Larko

in tubes and portable easels. The French Barbizon school painters trooped out to the countryside to reconnect with nature. Outdoor painting led the artists to other ideas having to do with immediacy, color and sparkle. This became impressionism, the ultimate plein-air school. A parallel history saw Hudson River School artists hiking into the wilderness to portray what they saw as a North American Eden.

Fast forward into the twenty-first century and consider the plein-air work of an artist such as Valerie Larko. She goes in the opposite direction of the Barbizon and Hudson River schools, instead prowling around what she calls the "urban fringe" for subjects

such as industrial ruins, burned-out cars and junkyards.

She was raised in Lake Parsippany, went to art school in Plainfield, then moved to Jersey City, where she was drawn to urban scenery. Today she lives in New Rochelle, New York. Her paintings of spherical tanks in Bayonne, as white as baseballs, bring out something scary and awesome in their swollen form — the kind of taut roundness that a past artist might have found in a ripe melon. Her precise renderings of junk and crumbling structures have parallels in 1920s Art Deco paintings that romanticized shiny new machinery and building projects, except she captures these machines and structures on their way down.

Anne Kullaf, a Garfield native who now lives in rural Hunterdon County, also paints outdoors. Like Larko she teaches at the Summit Art Center and eschews the rural picturesque in favor of something funkier. She likes, as she puts it, dumpy towns and city neighborhoods “that have a little grit” in them.

The two artists have very different plein-air methods, however. Most outdoor painters will finish a painting in a single session, but Larko returns again and again. A big painting can take her three months. “Being there day after day I get fully immersed in the place,” she says. “I even get to know the people.”

Kullaf harks back to the practice of using outdoor sketches primarily as studies. Unlike Larko—who hauls easel, oil paints, brushes and mediums to the site—Kullaf likes to travel light. In a recent blog post, she shared her technique of using pastels and paper for outdoor work, materials that allow her to work while sitting in a coffee shop or in her car. “Given the subjects I like, it isn’t logistically possible to set up an easel in a busy downtown,” she tells me. Her goal is to capture the big shapes and the play of light and shadow. Beyond that, she tries to find a sense of gesture or movement in a place. “Everything in a painting is static, but you can create a sense of movement by making the viewer’s eye move around a lot.”

Works such as “Iron Truss Bridge, Clinton, NJ” or “Summer Morning, Tewksbury, NJ” show her penchant for scenes with strong one-point perspective where something like a succession of telephone poles leads the viewer into the deep space of the painting.

For many people, Vincent van Gogh was the ultimate plein-air painter. Few artists have been able to convey such a passionate response to nature. He is also a legend for the lengths to which he reportedly went to paint outside—such as strapping his painting to the easel in a windstorm or putting candles on the brim of his hat to paint a night scene.

Chris Kappmeier is a New Jersey artist who fits into the Van Gogh school of plein-air expressionism. The Lyndhurst artist paints on the streets of Hoboken, Bayonne and Manhattan. He not only uses oils, but he does it impasto—about as thick as you can and still have the paint adhere to the surface.

The impressionists pioneered the technique of using discrete

dabs of pure pigment, allowing the eye to create an optical blend. Kappmeier does something similar by painting wet on wet, piling strokes of different colors on top of each other so they marleize. His paintings can look pretty chaotic up close, but they come together at a distance. His rapid execution and tactile response to things draws the viewer into the act of painting.

THE STORY CONTINUES

Seeing the work of these three painters leaves no doubt about the continued relevance of plein-art painting, even in an age of mechanical and electronic imagery.

In fact, the enthusiasm for the plein-air experience led Larko to organize excursions for her students. She has taken groups of about a dozen students to France, Italy, Spain and Mexico as well as to Cape Cod. There they paint the kinds of picturesque scenes that have inspired generations of artists.

The class painted the Italian landscape that Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot made famous in his painting “The Bridge at Narni.” They even painted on the grounds of the asylum at Saint-Rémy where van Gogh painted such famous works as “Starry Night.”

Of course, the picture-perfect motifs don’t always match Larko’s sensibilities, but sometimes they do. Her love of ruins was satisfied by the Pont du Gard, an ancient Roman aqueduct bridge that crosses the Gard River in southern France. In Narni, she found a local factory to paint, and in another Italian landscape, she was pleased to spot a cell tower looming above a graveyard. In Spain, she painted the construction cranes that were in the background of a picturesque landscape.

Did her students include the cranes too?

“No,” she says. “They left them out.” ■

Columnist John Zeaman is a freelance art critic who writes regularly for The Record and Star-Ledger newspapers. His reviews of exhibits in New Jersey have garnered awards from the New Jersey Press Association, the Society of Professional Journalists (New Jersey Chapter), and the Manhattan-based Society of Silurians, the nation’s oldest press club. He is the author of “Dog Walks Man,” (Lyons Press, September 2010) about art, landscape and dog walking.

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