

Urban landscape painter **Scott Prior** proves that a contemporary, "punk-rock" alternative to classical California subject matter can still produce moving and thought-provoking imagery.

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by James A. Metcalfe

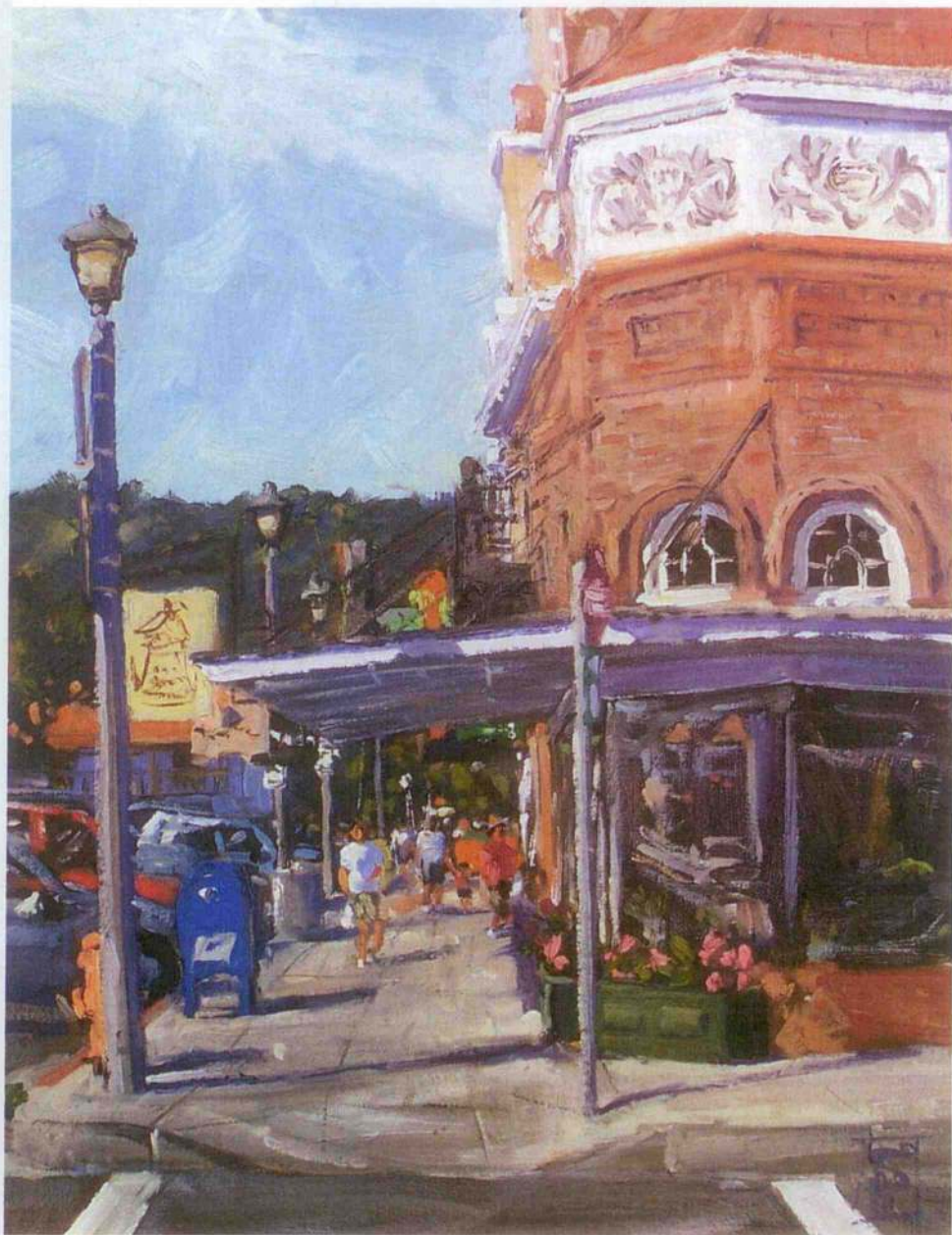
Scott Prior is often classified as a California impressionist, and given that he was born and raised in Southern California and that the majority of his subject matter is rooted in California settings, this label suits him just fine. However, the artist takes this one step further and actually prefers to define himself as "a classical impressionist with a contemporary, punk-rock edge," which not only classifies his approach to painting but also reflects his own personal style.

What sets Prior apart from so many other Golden State artists is the focus of his subject matter. Avoiding the sun, surf, and Hollywood glitz that many envision when they think of California, Prior finds more joy in painting the simple, everyday scenes of urban life in California. "So often it is the simple aspects of life that tell the best story," the artist states. When choosing a story to convey through his paintings, Prior draws from either past memories or current observations of his surroundings. Other times, he says, the subject matter chooses him.

When the artist does consciously choose a subject, it is often one close to his heart and from deep in his mind.

Scott Prior:

A Contemporary Approach to California Impressionism



LEFT

Sonoma Day Trippers

2007, oil, 20 x 16.

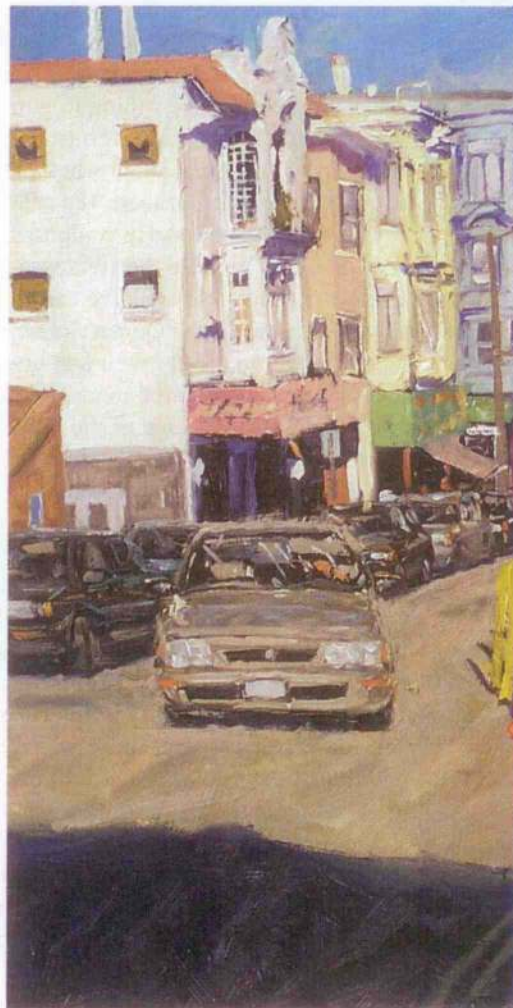
Courtesy Lee Youngman Art Galleries, Calistoga, California.

BELOW

A San Francisco Treat

2007, oil, 24 x 30.

Private collection.



RIGHT

Bush & Powell Street at High Noon

2007, oil, 30 x 24.

Courtesy Lee Youngman Art Galleries, Calistoga, California.

FAR RIGHT

Sand Crab Hunters

2007, oil, 24 x 30.

Collection the artist.



For instance, in *Island Life* the artist attempts to relate a fond childhood memory. "I was raised close to Newport Beach, near Balboa Island," Prior says. "As children, we would hang out there, eat chocolate-covered frozen bananas, ride our skateboards around the island, go swimming, and watch the boats go by. In this painting, I wanted to capture a moment similar to those I experienced as a kid near Balboa Island. It was a simple time in my life but a most memorable one."

Powell Street, another work derived from recollections of the artist's youth, depicts the neighborhood where Prior attended art school. "I used to walk up and down Powell Street to get to school," he remembers. "I love the energy of that street—the hustle and bustle of the people, the shopping, the sound of the cable car as it passes by. Even when the weather is bad, the street has a positive vibe, and I wanted to convey that energy and movement." *Powell Street* also presented a unique challenge for Prior in terms of its size. "I felt the image needed to be large enough to properly capture all that was going on in the scene," he explains. "Actually, it's my largest painting to date, and I loved the process of planning it and seeing it come together."

Sometimes it's a comparison of the past with the present that Prior chooses to explore in his work, as is the case in *Old Truck, Old Barn*. "My aunt lives in Paso Robles, in Central California, and I did this painting from a photo I took while driving home from visiting her," the artist explains. "This, to me, is what old California would have been like. With

California's constant growth, and open spaces disappearing daily, I really wanted to capture that old California feeling, and the old truck and barn spoke volumes. The late-morning light aptly set the mood, and I tried to push the warm light and cool shadows to fully capture the atmosphere of the scene."

Even when the artist begins with a preconceived idea for a painting, he is sometimes led in a different direction. "I'll plan my subject, and inevitably I find something else to paint," he says. "A dilapidated barn dwarfed by a younger, more modern structure or an old tractor resting motionless in the morning light behind the hustle of a busy garage suddenly beckons to be

painted." Generally with cars, buildings, and dwellings, Prior feels compelled to not only preserve their character but also to relate the story behind them.

"Certainly, a painter can fudge a tree or a rock," the artist notes, "but if a building is not painted properly, the viewer will instantly know something isn't right, and that will detract from his or her understanding of the story."

Despite the artist's personal connection to much of his subject matter, Prior insists that he's not an intentionally emotional painter. "I just love to paint what's in front of me, editing as I go to ensure the story is told," he explains. "The character, feelings, color, and dramatic effects just seem to happen as I work. For me, creating the mood is extremely important, and capturing the right light is crucial. Whether it's an interior scene with a really warm feeling or a crisp morning light with the coastal haze in the background, it really is all about

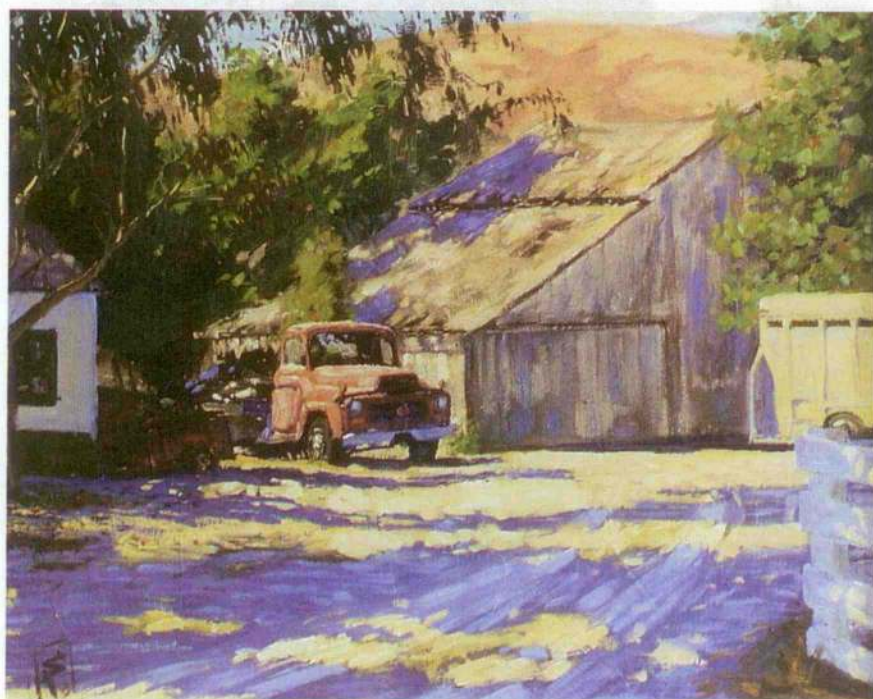
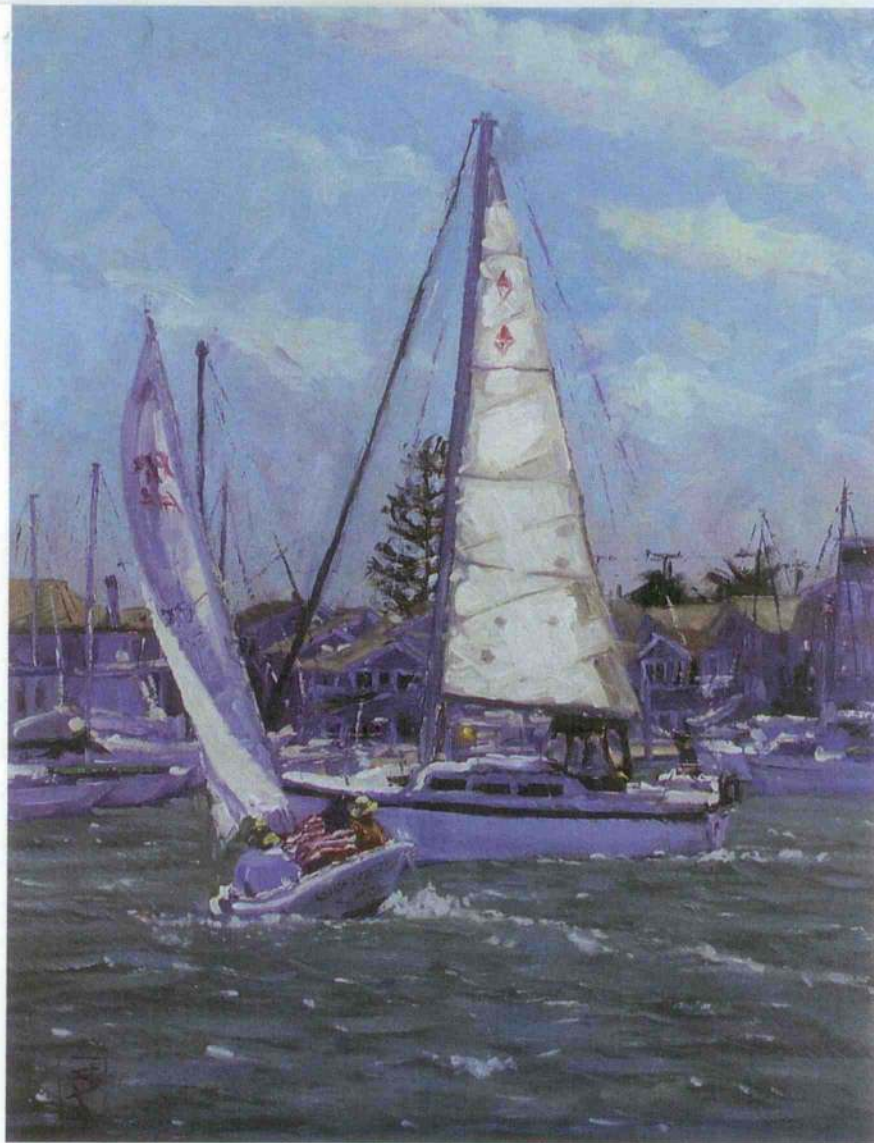
ONLINE GALLERY
www.myAmericanArtist.com



LEFT
Powell Street
2007, oil, 36 x 48.
Private collection.

OPPOSITE PAGE, ABOVE
Island Life
2007, oil, 24 x 18.
Courtesy Timmons
Gallery, Rancho Santa
Fe, California.

OPPOSITE PAGE, BELOW
**Old Truck,
Old Barn**
2005, oil, 24 x 30.
Private collection.



Prior's Materials

Palette

Prior doesn't have allegiance to a specific brand of paint—he simply finds what is on sale—except for his use of higher-quality red and yellow cadmiums (Winsor & Newton Series 4 is very good). "You can't substitute those colors for hue," he says. Although he once used 12 to 15 colors, he now relies on only eight:

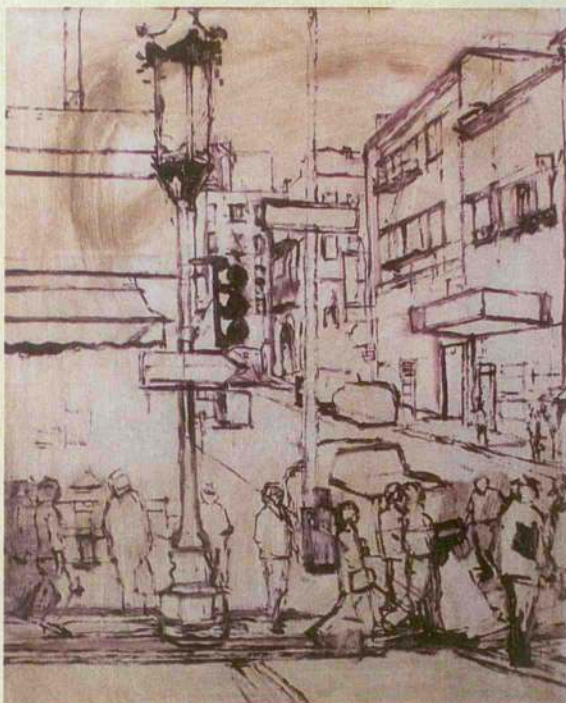
- burnt umber
- French ultramarine
- alizarin crimson
- viridian hue
- cadmium red medium
- cadmium yellow medium
- cerulean hue
- titanium white

By limiting his palette, Prior says he is forced to mix the colors he sees and not rely on a color straight from the tube.

Surface

Prior prefers to work on gessoed birch or luan board. "I then tone down the white of the gesso with a mud wash created with scrapings from my palette mixed with Turpenoid," he says. "I like the hard surface with a medium to coarse texture under the painting."

DEMONSTRATION: CHINATOWN DAY TRIPPERS



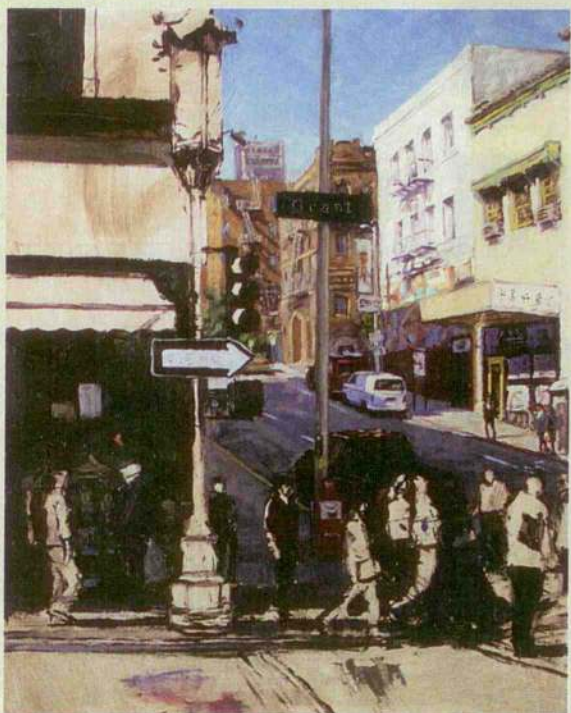
Step 1

Prior began this painting of a crowded urban street scene by first drawing in the basic perspective of the cityscape using one of his darkest-dark oil colors. Once he established a convincing perspective, he added the basic shapes of the buildings, cars, and figures, paying close attention to proportion.



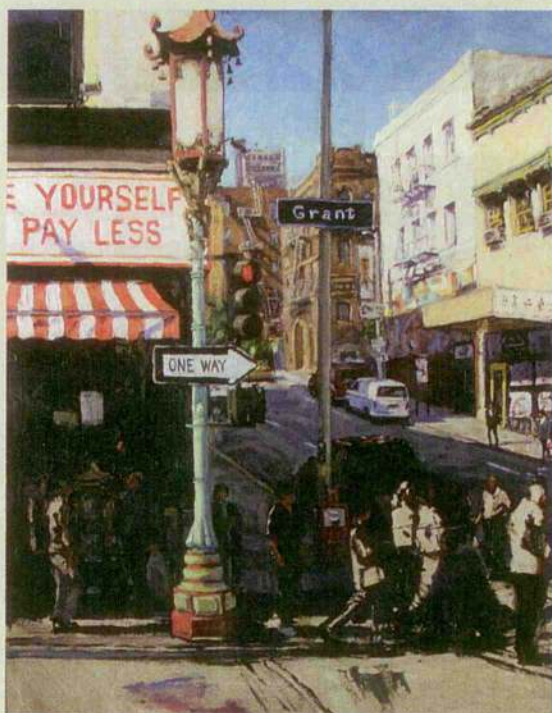
Step 2

Next the artist laid in his darkest darks, which created a parameter from which to judge the middle and light values. As he worked, he added any information he thought was necessary to achieve an accurate balance of values.



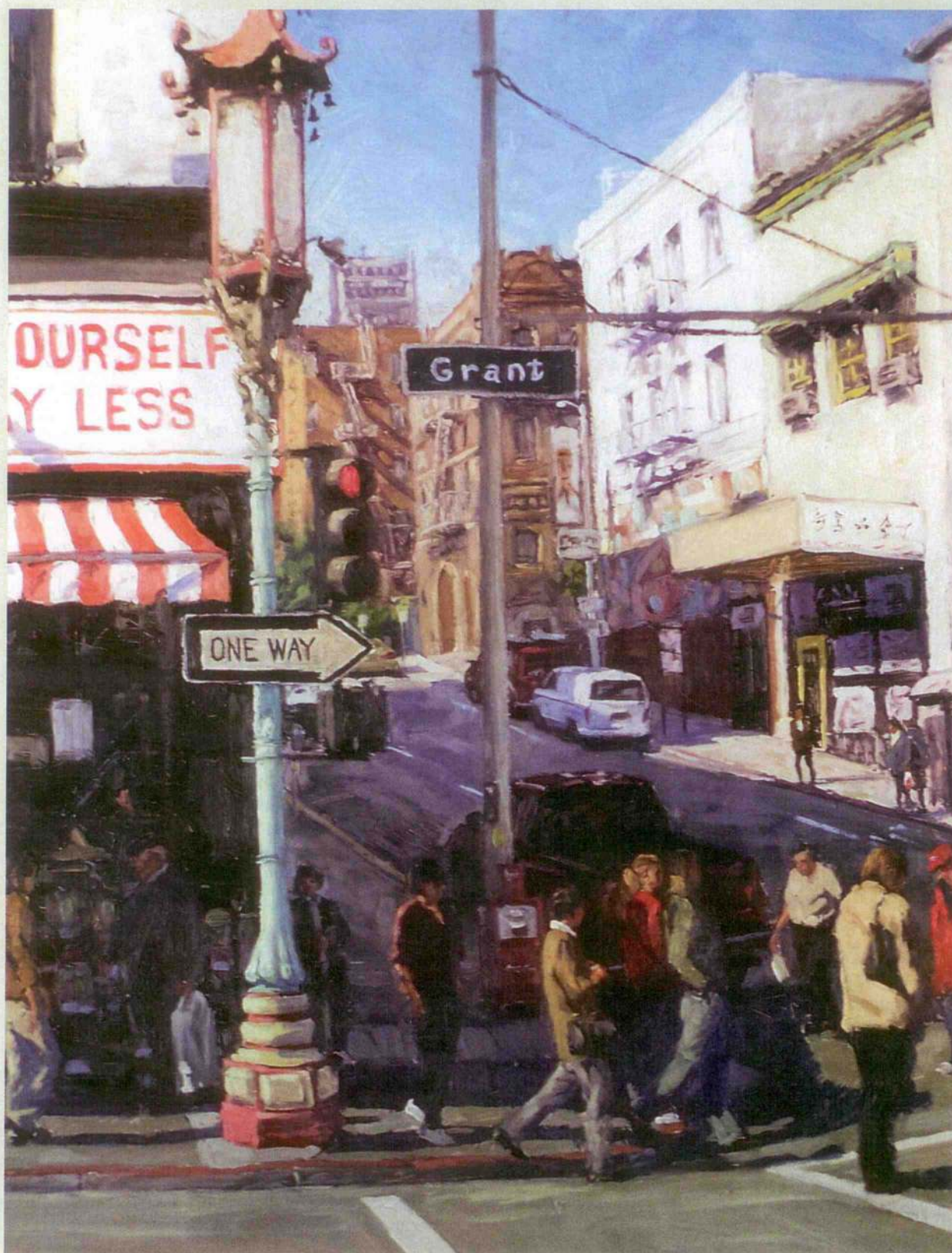
Step 3

Once his basic darks were laid in, Prior began working from background to foreground, adding details and adjusting values and the temperature of the shadows as needed.



Step 4

At this stage the artist started working on the foreground elements, adding detail to the building, street lamp, and figures while concentrating on shapes, edge control, and values.



Step 5

Bringing the painting to completion, Prior added the final details to the figures and finished the color of the street and sidewalk, paying close attention to the temperature and value variations in the sidewalk and street.

THE COMPLETED PAINTING:

Chinatown Day Trippers

2006, oil, 30 x 24. Private collection.



LEFT
Santa Monica Bus Stop

2006, oil, 24 x 30.
Courtesy Vail International Gallery,
Vail, Colorado.

OPPOSITE PAGE

The 'Bu'

2006, oil, 24 x 48.
Collection the artist.

the light. To do that, I pay particular attention to how the color temperature changes while sticking to warm light with cool shadows and cool light with warm shadows."

That descriptive sense of light that Prior seeks to convey is certainly evident in *A San Francisco Treat*, a painting that depicts a time when the artist and his wife lived in San Francisco. "We loved to go for cable-car rides, and it was always a treat to take one across town to North Beach, one of our favorite neighborhoods," he tells. "Everyone enjoys riding a cable car, but, for us, it was inexpensive entertainment and a way to really feel the city. This was one of those crisp San

Francisco mornings when the light was really clear. Fortunately, I had my camera and took a great shot just before the car turned up the hill. Capturing the morning light was most important in this painting. You can tell exactly how the day will feel just by looking out the window on days like that."

Whether Prior is painting en plein air—his preferred style—or in his studio, he insists that his art is a faithful depiction of the scene, be it a cityscape, a landscape, or a figurative work. "It's not a photographic representation," he notes, "but I do attempt to have the viewer see it as such." The artist works from both outdoor studies and photographs, and although he accentuates or mutes colors to suit the tone or atmosphere of the scene, he generally does not otherwise alter them. As he explains, "I use the studies for color and values and the photographs to help with drawing."

In *Santa Monica Bus Stop*, Prior used a reference photo taken while running errands with his daughter to help him remember not only the appearance of the scene but also the mood. "There was a bus strike going on in Los Angeles at the time, and you could see the people's patience being tested," he remembers. "I've been in their shoes before, waiting and waiting for the bus to show up, so I could relate to their growing impatience. Ironically, this painting

Prior will be having a solo exhibition titled "Urban and Rural Landscapes in the Land of Sunlight" at Timmons Galleries from May 8 through May 29 and will be teaching a workshop in conjunction with the show from May 9 through May 11. For more information, visit www.timmonsgalleries.com.



taught me about patience as well and the importance of taking time to finish a painting. Once I finished the drawing, I put it away for a few months and eventually returned to finish it. It was very challenging with the various values and temperature changes happening on the sidewalk and street, not to mention all the people!"

When Prior begins a painting, he starts by sectioning off the foreground, middle ground, and background and then draws the subject on the canvas, whether it's a street car, building, or a piece of fruit. "I then relate the rest of the scene to the subject so that all of the proportions work," the artist says. "I draw as much information as I need, and then I start working dark to light, background to foreground, all while paying attention to values, edge control, proportions, basic shapes, and the shapes within shapes. It's not always the same—sometimes I begin with what intrigues me most about the scene, and other times I start by drawing the basic perspective of the scene. I make every attempt to stay away from being a method painter, making my approach fresh every time."

Prior—who works primarily *alla prima*, in oil, with some layering and scumbling—feels that if he has established a good drawing, adding color happens almost intuitively. "As I move around the canvas, the colors just seem to evolve," admits the artist. "It's not neat or tidy, or even very pretty at first, but as I manipulate and push things around, the scene usually comes together. I try to capture the energy and movement of the scene through my brushstrokes, which often have a movement and energy all their own." ■

James A. Metcalfe is a freelance writer residing in West Warwick, Rhode Island.

About the Artist

Scott Prior is an active member of the California Art Club and Oil Painters of America. He has exhibited in national shows, juried competitions, and invitational events throughout the country, including the California Art Club's Annual Gold Medal Juried Exhibition at the Pasadena Museum of California Art; exhibitions at the Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum at Pepperdine University, in Malibu, California; the Academy Art Museum, in Easton, Maryland, through the Plein Air Easton! annual event; and in the prestigious Oil Painters of America National Show. He has received awards from Oil Painters of America, Laguna Plein Air Painters Association, the Society of Illustrators of Los Angeles, Carmel Art Festival, and The Bowers Museum Plein Air Show, among others. Prior lives in Oceanside, California, with his wife Wendy and daughters Hannah and Olivia. He is represented by Timmons Galleries, in Rancho Santa Fe, California; Vail International Gallery, in Vail, Colorado; South Street Art Gallery, in Easton, Maryland; Lee Youngman Art Galleries, in Calistoga, California; Sarah Bain Gallery, in Anaheim, California; and El Prado Galleries, in Sedona, Arizona. For more information on Prior, visit his website at www.priorityart.com, or e-mail him at scott@priorityart.com.