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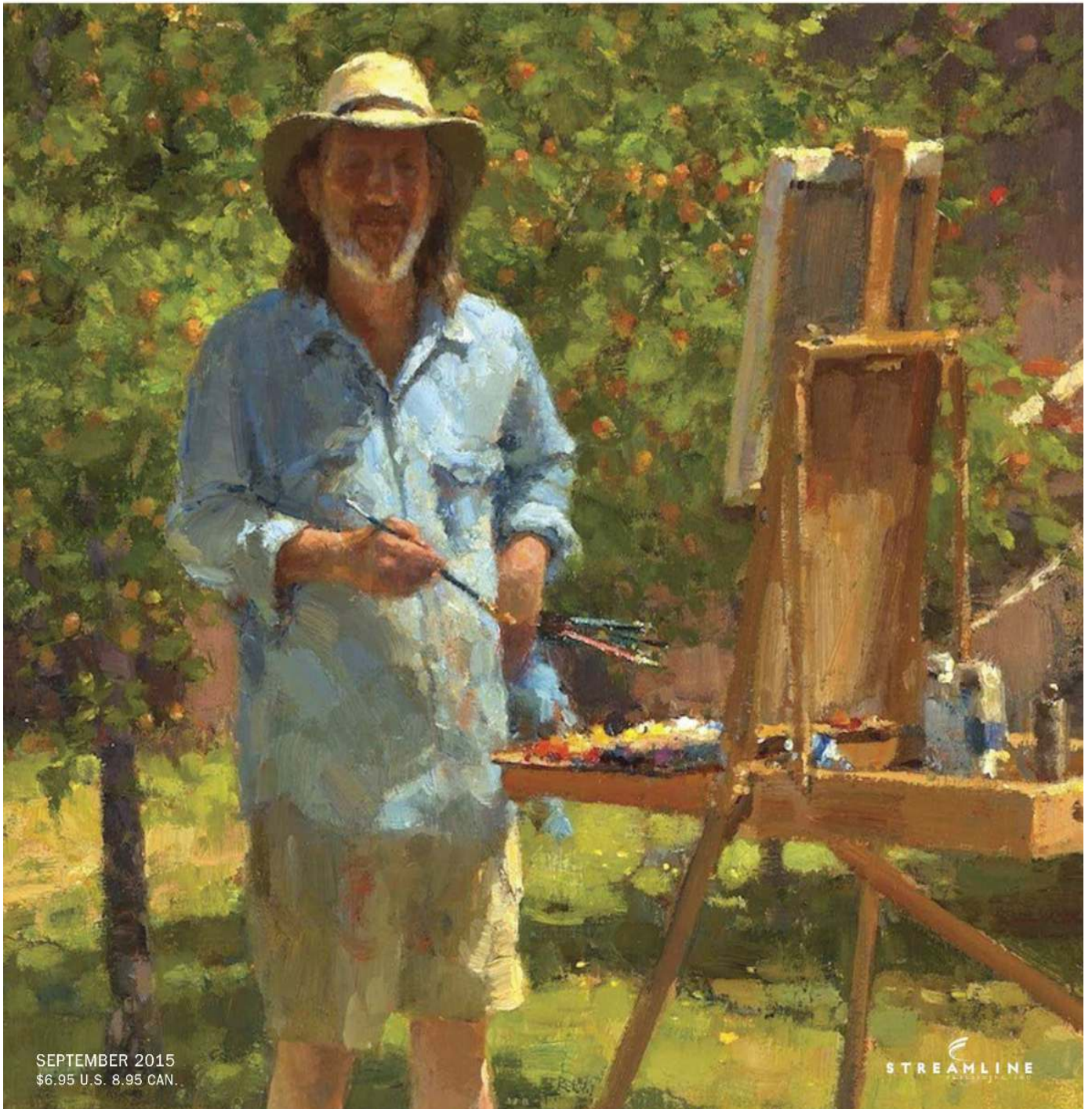
MAGAZINE

INSIDE

COVER: \$15K WINNER JIM MCVICKER

STEP-BY-STEP
WATERCOLORS, OILS, PASTELS

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 **STREAMLINE**
ARTS & CRAFTS

JIM MCVICKER

Self-Portrait Wins \$15K Prize After Four Rejections

Californian Jim McVicker challenges himself by being critical of his paintings, but when he feels confident about a particular work, he keeps putting it forward. And that confidence was rewarded when his plein air self-portrait won an award in a bimonthly *PleinAir* Salon competition and, ultimately, in the final awards program.

By M. Stephen Doherty



June Twilight
2012, oil on linen, 30 x 48 in.
Collection the artist
Plein air and studio

ARTIST DATA

NAME: Jim McVicker
BIRTHDATE: 1951
LOCATION: Loleta, CA
INFLUENCES: "Nature, Pissarro, Monet, Vuillard, Sargent, Homer, Rembrandt, Velazquez, Vermeer, 19th- and 20th-century landscapes, still life and figure paintings by my fellow contemporary artists."
WEBSITE: www.jimmcvickerpaints.com

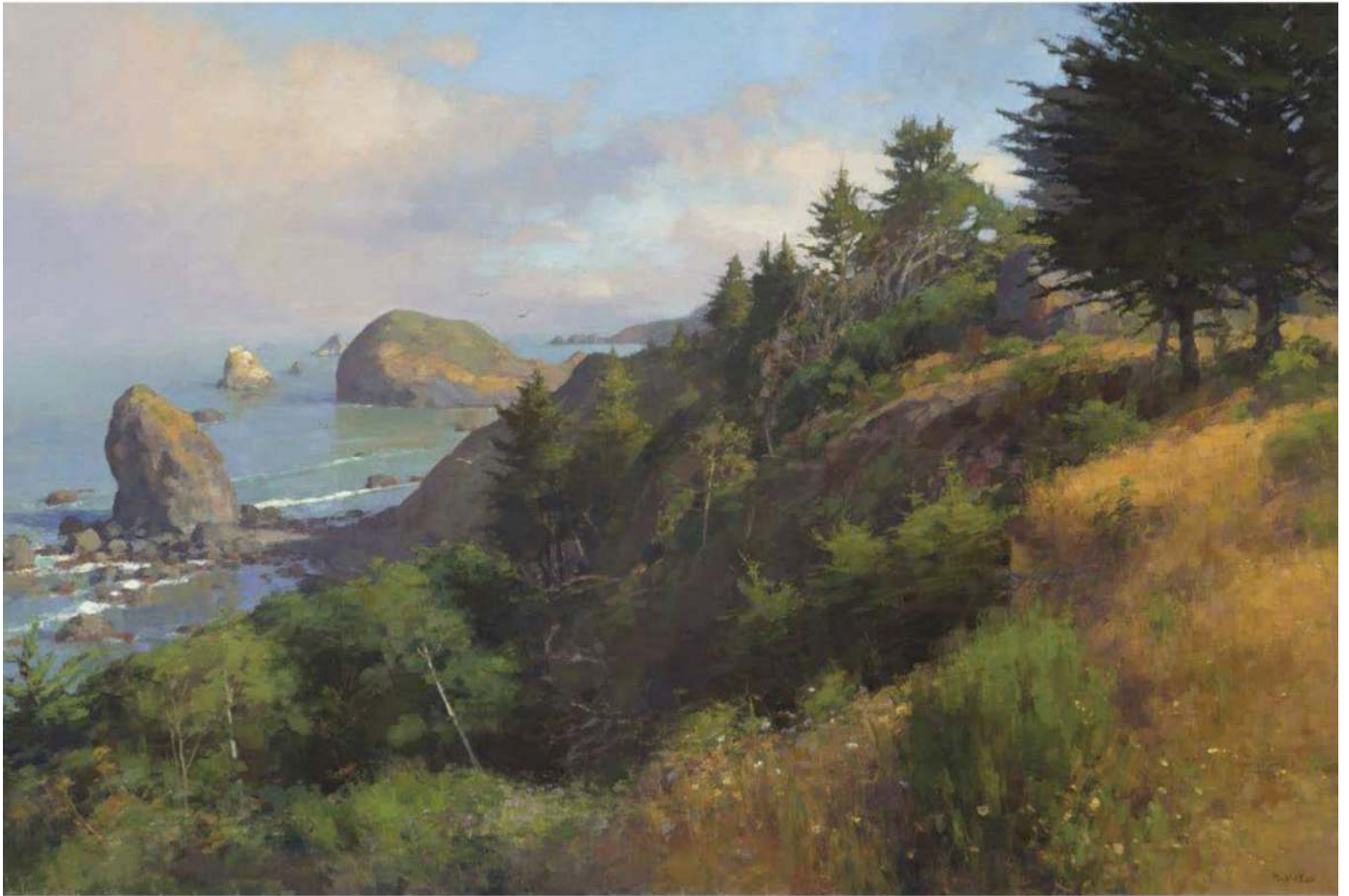
“Normally, if a painting doesn’t get picked, I let it go,” Jim McVicker told *PleinAir Today* Editor Bob Bahr. “But I was convinced that one of these judges was going to see what I saw in it.” (The Grand Prize and other finalists in the *PleinAir* Salon are chosen from among the bimonthly contest winners). Eventually, Joseph McGurl picked *Plein Air Self-Portrait* as a semi-finalist, and then the judges of the final competition designated McVicker the winner of \$15,000 top prize.

The takeaway, according to McVicker? “Never give up. Never give up on a painting that you think is good. Keep focused. Keep working. I’ve always done that with my painting, but it was interesting to see it work that way with the Salon.”

McVicker’s confidence depended, in part, on the long and critical process by which he conceived and executed his outdoor self-portrait. “I started the painting three different times before I was satisfied with the design,” he recalls. “Each time I blocked in a pose and background I thought would work — and then I rubbed it out, until I finally had a composition that felt right. The background was one of the hardest parts to make work because I wanted the tree to feel full and light-filled without it distracting attention from the figure. It was a typical situation of trying various ways to solve painting issues, something I often do while working outdoors or in the studio.”

Tipping Point

“I often reach a point in the painting process at which I am on the edge of a cliff about to fall,” McVicker confesses, “and through persistence and critical evaluations, I find my footing. When I start, I can almost see the finished painting in my mind,



North Coast, Morning Light
2011, oil on linen, 36 x 60 in.
Courtesy Fairmont Gallery,
Sonoma CA
Plein air



Low Tide, Houda Beach
2014, watercolor, 10 x 14 in.
Private
Collection
Plein air



Summer Garden
2013, oil on linen, 36 x 54 in.
Collection the artist
Plein air

but the process of transferring that mental image to a canvas is never quite as fluid as I think it should be. Having a general conception is one thing, but it is hard work to fully realize it in terms of color choices, value relationships, and overall harmonies. I just have to keep solving problems and reconsidering the progress of the work until the image comes together.”

McVicker’s painting process begins with a No. 4 flat bristle brush, to outline the major shapes of the composition on a canvas toned with a warm wash of cadmium red, transparent oxide red, or a warm gray. “I tend to see things in warm tones, so most of the initial design is blocked in with warm colors,” he explains. “I make an effort to connect all those shapes so they aren’t isolated, and I move from one object to another using overlapping lines and curves that are likely to disappear once I paint individual objects. Later, I go in with a mid-tone dark and rough in the landscape scene, leaving the lighter shapes defined by the initial thin wash. I make a point of keeping the painting simplified during these initial stages, working for only about 10 to 30 minutes on the block-in phase of the process.”

The artist’s standard palette of Winsor & Newton and Rembrandt colors includes a warm and a cool of the primaries, plus titanium white. The specific tube colors are titanium white (lead white when painting portraits), cadmium red light, alizarin crimson, cadmium yellow medium, cadmium lemon, Naples yellow (to lighten a green), yellow ochre (a recent addition), transparent red oxide, ultramarine blue, cerulean blue, and

cobalt blue. Sometimes he adds viridian, cobalt violet light, or Kings blue (to make a gray or to lighten a mixture without adding too much white). McVicker has experimented with other brands of the same colors, such as Michael Harding, Williamsburg, Old Holland, Holbein, and Rublev, but still depends mostly on Winsor & Newton and Rembrandt.

McVicker thins his oil colors with odorless mineral spirits during the initial painting process, then continues using colors directly from the tube or modified with walnut alkyd medium. While he is painting on location, he constantly walks back and forth from his easel to evaluate the overall development before he allows himself to become involved in details.

“I don’t use a true sight-size approach of measuring everything from a precise distance away from the painting, but I do make judgments while standing away from the painting surface,” he says. “Generally speaking, if the overall design, the drawing, and the aerial perspective feel right, then I can proceed with confidence. Along the way I often make changes to the composition, shifting things around from what I actually see and heightening the expressiveness of the colors. “However, I don’t completely make things up because I want to be guided by nature. I start with an image of the completed painting in my mind, but the painting process never flows smoothly toward the realization of that exact image. I have to work at the color harmonies, and levels of interest across the canvas, and the focus that pulls the composition together.”



Loleta Street
 2014, oil on linen, 12 x 16 in.
 Collection the artist
 Plein air

Spring Showers
 2010, oil on linen, 30 x 40 in.
 Collection the artist
 Plein air and studio

Taking The Time

“When I work on a large plein air painting, I return to the same location at the same time over several days,” says McVicker. “I may work on the canvas for 15 days or more, depending on the size and complexity of the image. I’ve also worked on smaller 9 x 12-inch paintings during several sittings in order to make them work effectively. While in progress, I keep the painting in my studio, where I might make adjustments and fine-tune the colors and values, because it is always helpful to see how a painting holds up away from the landscape and beyond the immediate experience of being at the site — and also what time does, and how I perceive the painting at a later date.

“It’s rare for me not to touch up a work back in the studio, even if only for a few minutes, because I have to feel that I was really ‘on’ to be completely satisfied. I make changes or adjustments and fine-tune the picture after I stop painting on location. I don’t think of my small paintings as studies because to me they are finished works of art.”





Plein Air Self-Portrait
2013, oil on linen, 18 x 14 in.
Collection of the artist
Plein air



Spring Pond
2013, oil on linen, 24 x 40 in.
Collection the artist
Plein air

He continues, "A large plein air painting like *North Coast, Morning Light* might take a couple of years to actually complete because it depends on painting under very specific atmospheric conditions, when there wasn't any fog and the skies were clear. I develop that particular painting in two weeks of work over two summers, when the morning fog was similar to what initially motivated me. I needed the early-morning sun piercing through the dense atmosphere. With that particular painting, I mounted the canvas to a mid-sized studio easel rather than my precarious French easel."

Hanging Out & Painting

McVicker has a gregarious personality and enjoys the company of other artists when he is out on location. "I enjoy hanging out with old friends and new acquaintances because I always learn something valuable," he says. "Of course my best painting companion is my wife, Terry, because she is great to be with and always has insightful things to say about art. I never copy another artist's work, but I benefit from seeing something new. That's what I hope for when I wander through the galleries of a museum or

through a gallery. I truly love looking at paintings by other artists, past and present."

One of the judges of the 2015 *PleinAir* Salon Grand Prize was the 2012 winner, Shelby Keefe. "It was exceedingly difficult to choose the winners," she says. "There were so many beautiful paintings that it was hard to pick one over the others. At a certain point, it just got to where I had to pick what spoke to me, what my heart was telling me."

Clearly, McVicker's self-portrait spoke to the hearts of many people who attended the 2015 Plein Air Convention & Expo, and they cheered as his name was announced as the winner of the \$15,000 top prize. 🎉

M. STEPHEN DOHERTY is editor-in-chief of *PleinAir* magazine.



See more of Jim McVicker's paintings in the expanded digital edition of *PleinAir*.