

JOHN COSBY

Painting What Is Overlooked

John Cosby has developed an amazingly effective method of plein air painting, but his most significant gift may be his ability to bring our attention to locations we had ignored

By M. Stephen Doherty

Although step-by-step plein air painting demonstrations may be helpful when they're featured in magazines, books, DVDs, or YouTube videos, they sometimes leave us wondering how the artists decided to paint particular locations in the first place. That is, how did the artists get to step one? We want to know because it helps us better understand the artists' creative process and guides us toward finding our own best painting locations.

For John Cosby, the answer to that critical question is determined by his experience as an artist; after decades of painting, he clearly knows the types of subjects and visual arrangements that prompt him to a strong emotional and intellectual response. For example, because he has spent most of his life near the shores of California and Hawaii, he has a deep personal connection to coastal and harbor scenes viewed from a distance and conveying the vastness of the space and the monumentality of the forms. He also responds to farmlands, meandering roads, and people socializing in restaurants and bars — all subjects he enjoys and that connect to his personal experience.

Dignity & Beauty

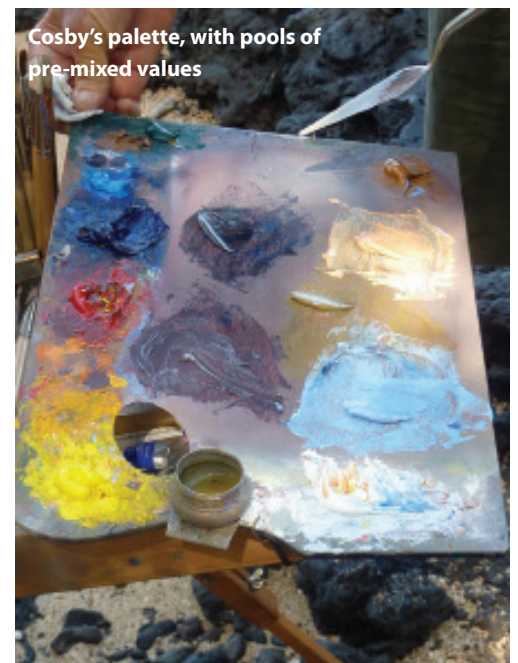
It is also revealing to assess what Cosby does *not* include in his paintings. He has little interest in modern structures, people in formal attire, sterile urban environments, or abstract compositions that fail to make direct connections to real places. There is no feeling of gloom, despair, or decay in Cosby's paintings, even when he is painting abandoned barns or buildings wrapped in scaffolding. He finds dignity and beauty in every subject, in much the same way he finds things to enjoy in the people and events of his daily life.

So what is the lesson in this that might help another painter find his or her voice as an artist? In his workshops, Cosby advises participants that they should pay attention to the things that excite them about living. "It's like picking out a shirt to wear, a drink to have with dinner, or a location for your next vacation," he says. "If you think it relates well to your personality and experience, then it's a choice worth considering. If it turns out not to be as good as you hoped, then pick another subject to paint. Eventually you will find a good location.

"If you relate to the mystery of the night, then paint nocturnes. If you are fascinated by the human form, then paint portraits of figures in the landscape. If you prefer intimate spaces more than towering mountains, then set up your easel where you can paint that. And if you don't know for sure, paint a lot of different subjects and think about the ones you feel are your best. The only mistake you could make is to pick a painting subject to please someone else. You stopped dressing to please your mother a long time ago, and you don't have to paint to please a gallery owner, collector, or teacher. If you do paint for others, your paintings will lack the emotional connection you must have with them to make a work of art."



John Cosby finishing a demonstration during a recent workshop in Hawaii



Cosby's palette, with pools of pre-mixed values



Morning Commute

2012, oil, 16 x 20 in.

Private collection

Plein air



One of Cosby's workshop demonstrations, showing how he blocks in the major value shapes of a landscape

ARTIST DATA

NAME: John Cosby

BIRTHDATE: 1955

LOCATION: Paso Robles, CA, and Laguna Beach, CA

INFLUENCES: "Besides a mixed bag of well-known deceased artists, my greatest influences today come from my peers. A few, but not all, are Joseph Paquet, Donald Demers, Gil Dellinger, Matt Smith, Kenn Backhaus, West Frasier, Kevin Macpherson, and John Budicin. By seeing how these painters solve the same problems I am faced with in my paintings, I am enlightened and informed by my own generation."

WEBSITE: www.cosbystudio.com



Along the Creek

2011, oil, 30 x 40 in.

Private collection

Studio

A Process That Works

Although Cosby's advice on subject matter is appreciated by his students, what resonates most with workshop participants is the information he imparts about the painting process. Cosby has developed a method for teaching plein air painting that helps virtually all of his students, even those with considerable experience, make significant progress. His system of working with prepared "value pools" is so effective that students are immediately able to make better judgments and more effectively manage the development of their paintings.

Along the Tracks

2012, oil, 18 x 24 in.

Private collection

Plein air





A Quiet Place
2006, oil, 20 x 16 in.
Private collection
Plein air



Glare
2009, oil, 12 x 16 in.
Private collection
Plein air

ARTIST PROFILE

My Driveway
2009, oil, 20 x 24 in.
Private collection
Plein air

“When I began teaching plein air painting, about 10 years ago,” Cosby recalls, “I recognized there were about a half dozen common problems among students of all levels of experience. It wasn’t until I started mentoring one serious painter that I was able to find the best way of helping other artists address those common problems. I had the chance to try every possible demonstration and explain every technique, until the student learned to make better paintings. In going through that process, I was able to develop an effective way of teaching the basics in ways so almost anyone could gain from the instruction.

“I understood that unless someone starts by creating a two-dimensional puzzle of values that reads correctly in terms of pictorial space, they can’t move forward. If you can’t see a landscape as a pattern of relative values and have

In the Trees
2010, oil, 16 x 20 in.
Collection the artist
Plein air





refinements and details are needed, details can be added toward the end of the painting process with a dab of light paint and a dab of dark paint. One of the common mistakes I referred to earlier is to start with the details and then work the big shapes around them. I help students see that the process needs to move from the general to the specific, not the other way around.”

There is a great deal more information Cosby gives to his workshop students, both in a printed syllabus and supply list provided in advance of the

Quiet Harbor

2011, oil, 16 x 20 in.

Courtesy Redfern Gallery, Laguna Beach, CA

Plein air

Light on the Water

2011, oil, 12 x 16 in.

Private collection

Plein air

the ability to mix those values on your palette, it is less likely you will complete a painting successfully. The method I developed is to show students how to identify and describe the big value shapes and then mix three to five related value pools of paint on the palette. I demonstrate how to pick out the biggest, strongest value changes in a scene, mix those values, and then tint and colorize the mixed pools of oil color.”

Cosby continues, “Many other workshop instructors tell their students that relative value is more important than color, but the students don’t necessarily know what that means, or how to actually mix paints to match those values. I do a demonstration on each day of a workshop during which I show students how to pick out the shapes that are big enough to warrant being one of those three to five pools of premixed paint, I apply the paint to the canvas without first drawing lines, and then I show how to tint and colorize the pools as they break up the big shapes.


“I emphasize that the artists need to start a painting on their palette and not on the canvas, by which I mean the important judgments about value relationships should be made before the paint is applied. Once they get the value of each shape correct relative to both the adjacent shapes and the overall canvas, they can begin to refine the big shapes with reflected light and local color accents while simultaneously sculpting the shapes to the correct edges.”

When Cosby refers to drawing, he’s not talking about linear marks on a canvas. “I try to



get people away from drawing on the canvas with charcoal or graphite, because when there are lines on a canvas, painters have an unavoidable need to fill in the defined shapes up to those lines,” he explains. “For the sake of placing shapes in proper relationship, they can put the darkest darks and lightest light immediately onto the canvas using the value pools, always conscious of the focal area.

“It is critically important to have a focal area, not just a focal point. Once that is established, the painting can evolve out of that initial placement. If

first meeting and during demonstrations and individual consultations. For more information, visit the artist’s website at www.cosbystudio.com. 

M. Stephen Doherty is Editor of *PleinAir* magazine.

See more paintings by John Cosby in the expanded digital edition of *PleinAir*.



ARTIST PROFILE

**St. Andrews by the Sea**

2008, oil, 30 x 40 in.

Private collection

Studio

**Mares Tails**

2012, oil, 24 x 36 in.

Private collection

Studio

ARTIST PROFILE



Pebbles, Boulders and Boats

2012, oil, 16 x 20 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air

Maui Waters
2011, oil, 18 x 24 in.
Private collection
Studio

