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# A PAINTER'S JOURNEY

## PART 2

### *Painting Knives at Work*

*In this seven-part series, artist John Hulsey takes you on a visual journey through his outdoor and studio painting processes.*

Once I got comfortable with the kinds of marks my knives would make, my education began in earnest. I quickly realized that my deep experience with watercolors would serve me well with these new tools. Representational watercolor painting is all about planning and layering up the image in a series of transparent washes until the last stroke is applied. I thought that the same approach could be very effective with knife painting. I gradually learned to create a hybrid of watercolor and oil techniques.

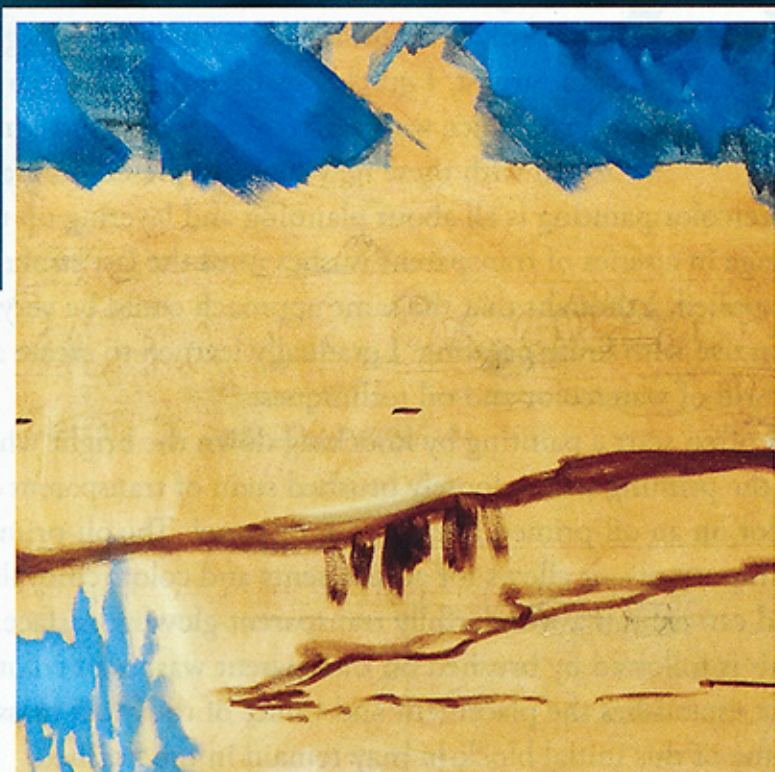
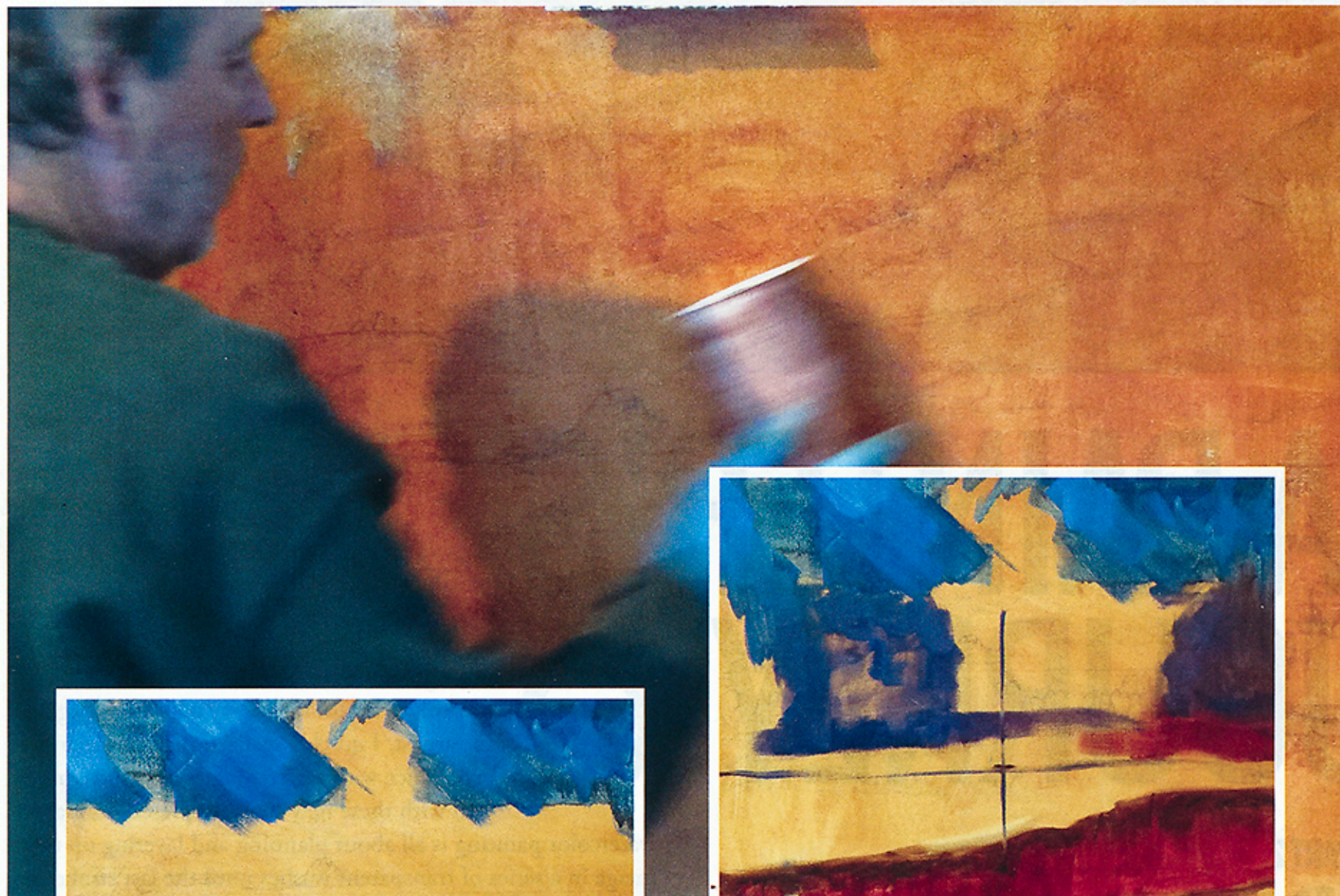
I often start a painting by knocking down the bright white of the priming with a loosely brushed stain of transparent oil color on an oil-primed linen canvas or panel. The oil-priming is important—it allows for adjustments and color removals and can exhibit a wonderfully transparent glowing surface. This is followed by brushed on transparent washes of color that establishes the placement and values of the main masses. Some of this initial block-in may remain in the finished painting as a visible “imprimatura” layer. The Old Masters often used a monochromatic imprimatura in their glowing, highly glazed works. I have also observed this technique in the paintings of one of my artistic heroes, Joaquin Sorolla. I liked that tie to the old ways.



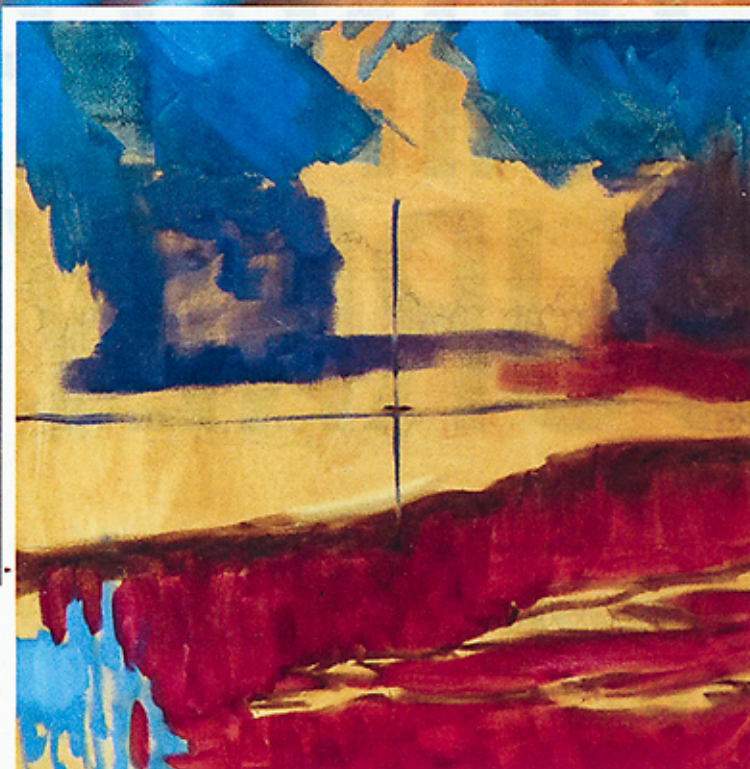
## MY ART IN THE MAKING Morning Pond I

**T**he subject of this knife demonstration was a wonderful reflection of fall colors on the still pond nearby to my studio. I have painted from this area many times over the years and it is always interesting. I loved the way the reflections, drifting duckweed, rising mist and transparencies in the clear water confused the eye and distorted the sense of space.

**Stage 1:** My first step was to tone the stretched linen using a mixture of Rembrandt Transparent Oxide Red, Gamblin NeoMegilp and thinner. Then I rolled the surface to create a texture and pick up part of the dripping stain. I let that dry overnight.



**Stage 2:** After I drew on a quick pencil cartoon, I divided the canvas into four equal sections and indicated in blue where my main masses would be. Working out from the center, I began to apply big color masses with a large teardrop shaped painting knife. This type of knife allows for a variety of strokes, from fine to broad, to be applied.



**Stage 3:** I have always preferred to work wet into wet in watercolor, so working wet, or "alla prima", in oil feels right to me. I go right into the imprimatura with thick marks of mixed oil color.

The need at this stage is to get the paint out of the palette and onto the canvas. I layer it on, like frosting a cake. Sometimes random shapes happen simply by the mechanical action of the blade on the surface. Occasionally, those are wonderful and left alone. At other times they are simply and quickly scraped off.

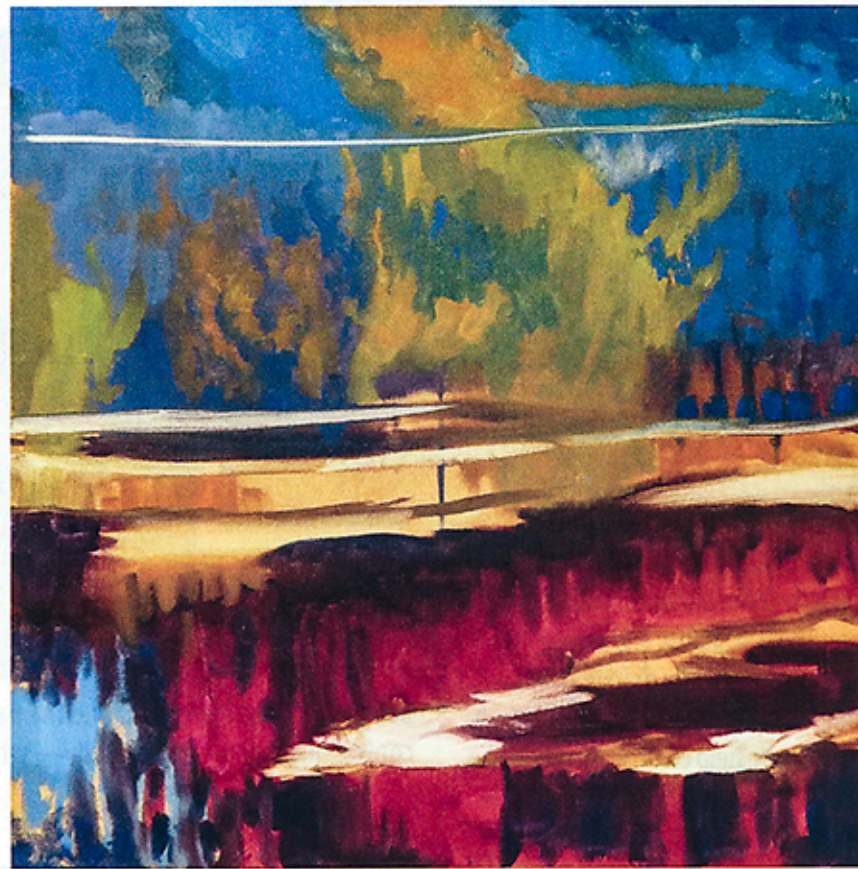
What is required of the painter is a willingness to be very generous with paint and an adventurous and curious spirit. One must also have a loose vision of where the painting is headed. In other words, a vision as to how and when the succeeding layers can be added and built up.



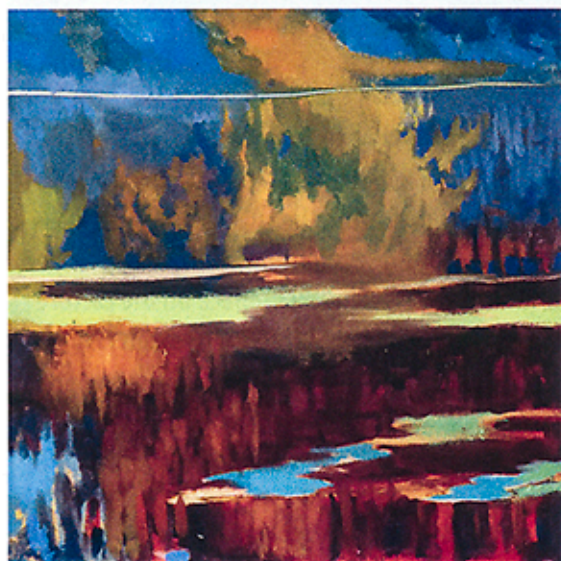


**Stage 4:** At times I use a large flat bristle to draw a line or smooth out and blend an area in preparation for the next layers.

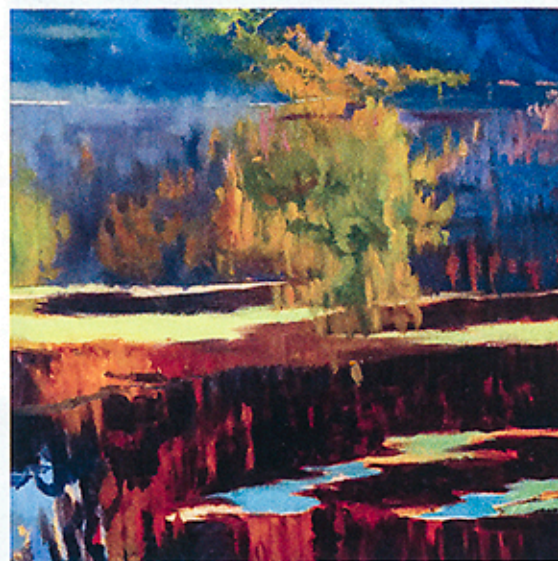
My painting process involves working all over the canvas in each session. Some painters like to finish a section before they move on, but that is not feasible with this kind of abstraction. The image develops as I paint it, changing all the while. As with all other painting, adjacent colors and values influence each other.



**Stage 5:** Once I had the "background" reflection loosely established, I wanted to get the very important light green horizontals on before I went any further. The value and color temperature of these shapes would form a major design across the entire painting. As with all the other elements, I did not attempt to finish these shapes until much later.

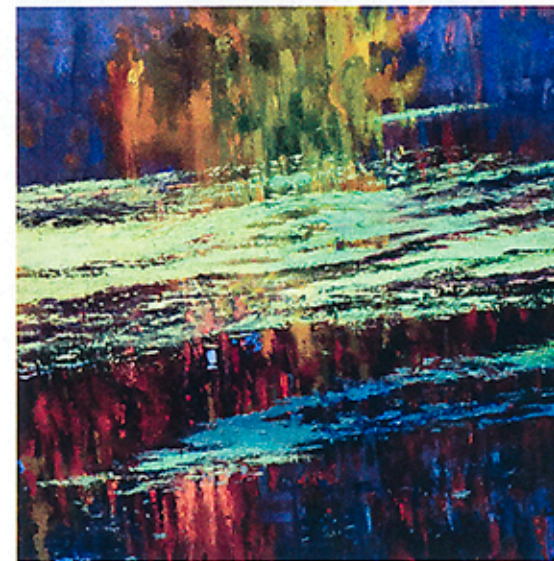


**Stage 6:** As important as putting lots of paint on is during the early stages of a painting, removing paint is also a valuable, if under-appreciated technique. When the paint is still wet, a quick knife scrape or wipe with a towel gets me back to clean canvas. In this step, I am preparing clean canvas for the light green shapes of the pond weeds to come.



**Stage 7:** At this point, I am thinking about the succeeding layers and what kinds of marks I can employ to create the illusion of water. Sometimes I use a big soft brush pulled downward over the wet paint to blur edges.

What I concentrate on is the evolving expression of color and shape. Realism is low on the list—this is about feeling and the action of painting. I think about layers that I want to build. My experiment with knives became a method of working where I could present a complete abstraction and simultaneously, a reference to the natural world.



**Stage 8:** As the paint gets thicker, it becomes harder to make precise small shapes. I have discovered that the previous paint textures allow me to create very random and naturalistic marks if I drag my knife-load of paint over the surfaces. They look much better than anything I could make with a brush.

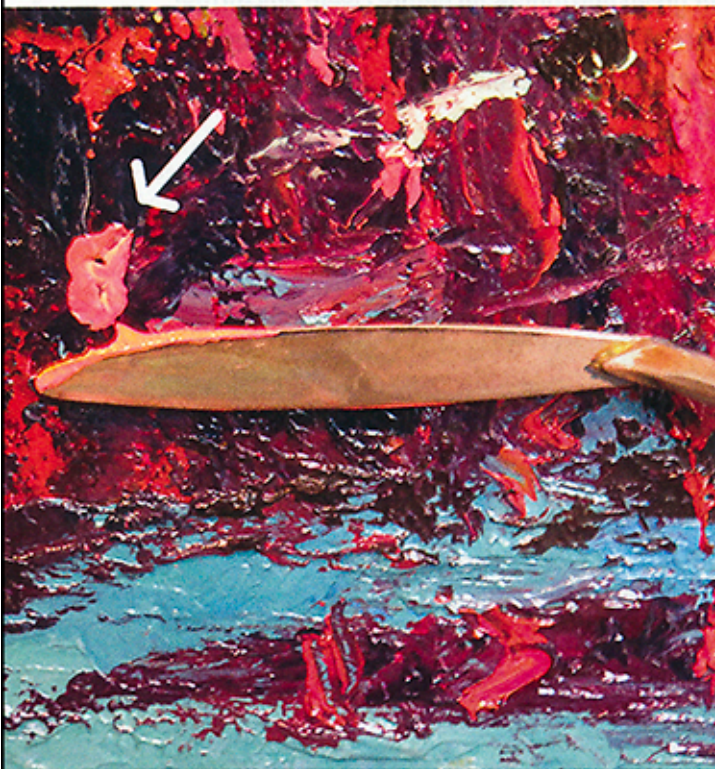




**Stage 9:** Returning again to the light green duckweed shapes, I began to refine their shapes and create additional shapes by dragging and skimming over the dry under-layers. A good way to help control the marks the knife makes is to turn the loaded knife over and carefully wipe away excess paint before making a stroke.



**Stage 10:** Once I felt that I had the painting mostly established, I began to make little additions of contrasting color—spots really—which would activate the surface and the colors around them.



**Stage 11:** I finally decided that, although I was happy with my efforts, the painting needed something more. Over the decades I have spent on this pond, I have often seen Great Blue Herons fishing and skimming low over the water. They are an integral part of the experience of this environment, and as such, belonged in my painting. The problem was that I would have to switch to a more representational technique to put one in. Could I blend brushwork with knife work in painting it?



**Stage 12:** To test the look, I drew a heron in oil crayon which could be easily removed if need be. I decided to accept the challenge and paint the heron in, first with a brush followed by some texturing with a knife.

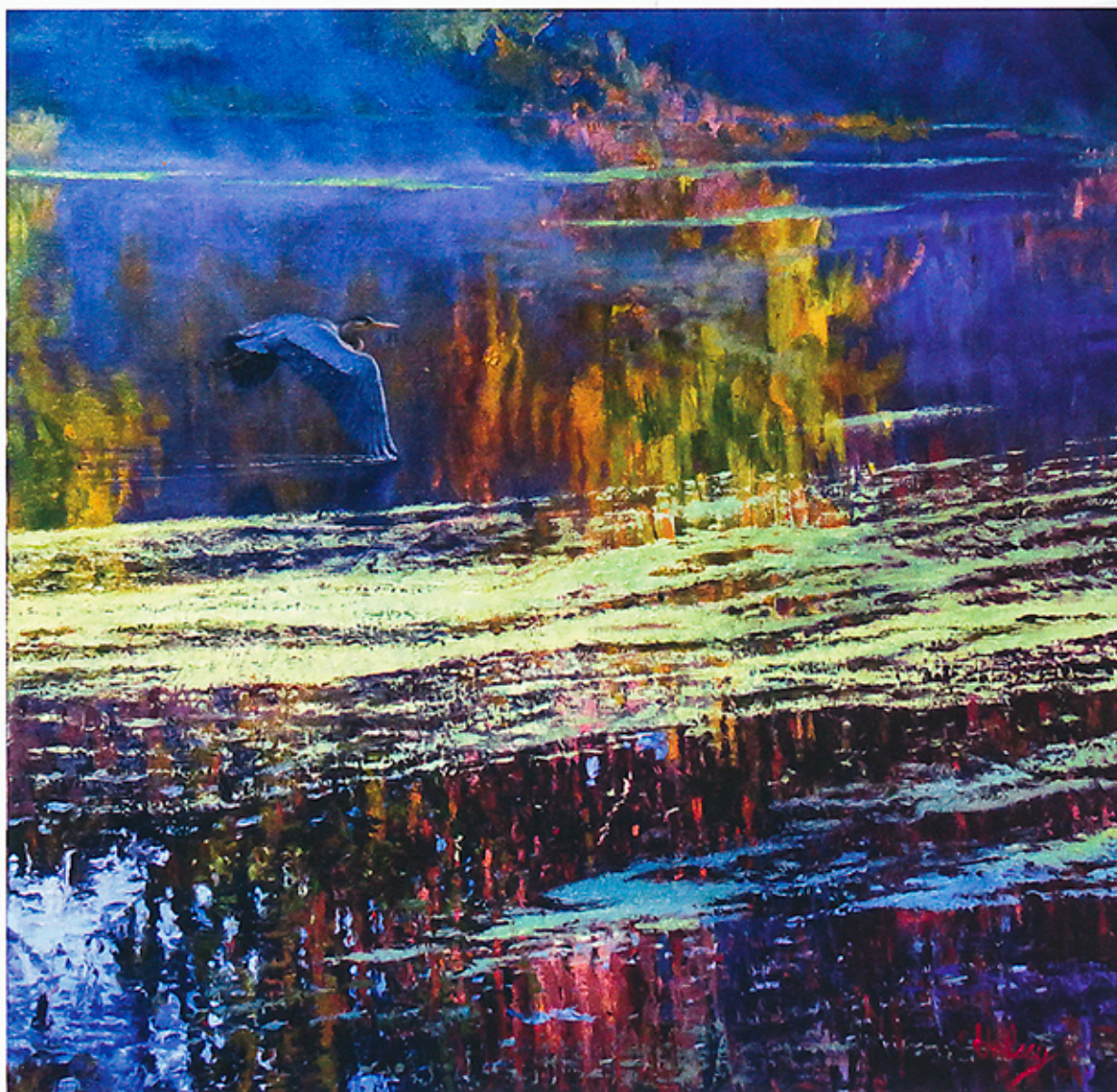


**Stage 13:** To add drama and action, I painted one wing just grazing the surface of the water—something I had seen once. This highlight helped to place the heron firmly in space on the picture plane, just above the surface of the water.



**Stage 14:** I think it worked—the heron is often the thing that strikes people the most about the painting. The lesson learned here is that adding a suggestion of life to a landscape painting can sometimes give it a feeling of life, as you can see in the final version.





**Stage 15: Morning Pond I**, oil on linen, 36 x 36"

Painting allows me to interject my feelings, memories, hopes and dreams into my version of nature in a way that has the potential to capture the imagination of others. Painting knives opened this door for me and I simply stepped through it onto a new path of expression. Exactly what I was searching for. [la](#)

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

John Hulsey is a nationally recognized artist and accomplished master painter in watercolor, oil and pastel. A sought-after teacher who has been teaching painting for more than 35 years, Hulsey maintains an active studio practice along with his international and domestic teaching commitments. The recipient of numerous art awards and art grants, his work has been exhibited in group and solo exhibitions in galleries across the United States, from New York to California. During the 10 years Hulsey worked in New York, his paintings were featured on the cover of *Time* magazine and most of the major book and magazine publishers. His paintings are included in a number of private collections.

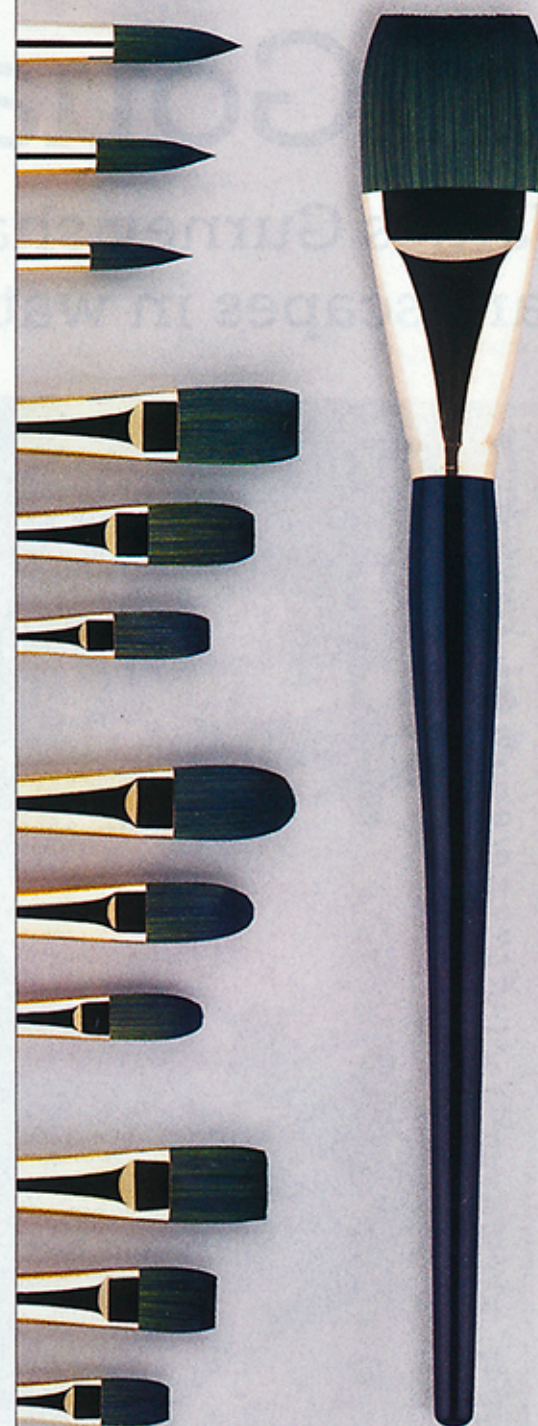
He has been awarded residencies by the National Park Service at Glacier National Park, Montana; Yosemite National Park, California; and Rocky Mountain National Park, Colorado. Hulsey and his painter-wife, Ann Trusty, founded The Artist's Road teaching site in 2010 to share their lifetime of experience in art to an international audience. To date, they have created over 750 articles and interviews on art for the site. Some of his teaching videos can be found on YouTube at John Hulsey Fine Art.

**Contact at** [www.johnhulsey.com](http://www.johnhulsey.com) | [www.theartistsroad.net](http://www.theartistsroad.net)

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