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A PAINTER'S JOURNEY

PART 6

A Year of Light

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



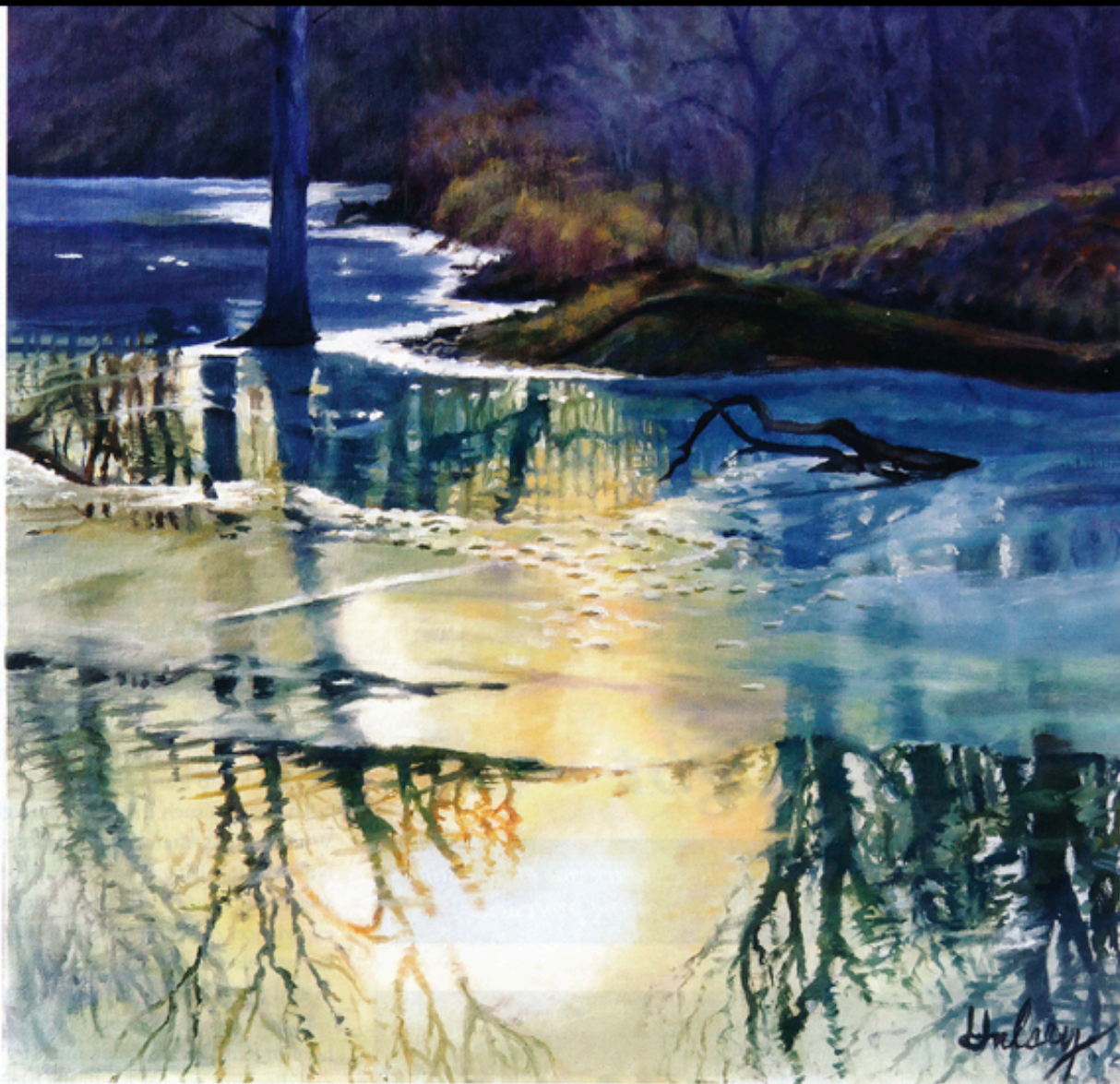
If I were to design a curriculum for the aspiring painter, "Understanding Light" would be the first course of study, before color theory and well before any actual painting classes. This was the way of the old European academic courses, but somewhere along the line, the study of light itself got lost at many American art schools. My own education in art schools in the early '70s paid scant attention to this most important of subjects. I had no real education in how light worked until I took a black-and-white photography class. That began my lifelong journey of studying the sun and moon as they move around the seasons, and trying to put those impressions down on canvas and paper. There was a lot I needed to learn.

There is no such thing as "bad light." Without light, there is only darkness. Not very inspiring. I have always been aware that light can be an emotional experience. Anyone sensitive to daylight knows this when clouds suddenly move in and the mood seems to darken.

Light is always changing hour to hour in temperature, color, intensity and direction. Monet heroically tried to capture this in his haystack paintings. They are an artistic monument to light in all its particulars and the act of plein air painting, which brings me round to painting outdoors and my education in light. It wasn't until I began painting outside in the early 1970s that I began to understand that I had to educate my eyes to see light in the world. Theories are not enough. I had to grow a bigger visual cortex. That just takes time and intense focus. Fast forward 40 years later, and I'm

The Last Light of Day

This is an unusual winter composition, perhaps. The strength of this painting is in the color and value structure, both of which I changed to enhance the drama I envisioned in this ordinary scene. The textural contrasts between the water and forest also play a big role here.



Climate Change

I really love painting warm/cool contrasts like this, even though I get frozen stiff doing it. Reflections on water are a challenge to paint by themselves, but on this day, a sheet of radiant ice made this an irresistible invitation.

still doing the same thing, but with a difference. With thousands of paintings under my brush, painting fundamentals are largely subconscious now. I focus on the feeling and how I can use those skills to elevate my subject up to a higher aesthetic level. Let me show you what I mean by taking a yearlong tour through our remarkable local landscape here in northeastern Kansas.

Because I have been painting these 140 acres of woods and ponds for 27 years now, I have had the privilege of getting to know most of it intimately in all its moods and seasons. I know when to be in particular places at particular moments to catch a special quality of light and architecture of the land. This is an incredibly useful advantage for painting, where we often have to use precious time to scout these things in advance.

Even after all these years, there is still no end to the variety of possible subjects to explore. So, I decided to follow Monet's example and focus down on just a few favorite spots in every mood and season of light. In this way, the art of painting can become as prominent as the subject itself.

Winter

Winter is my favorite painting season around here. The light is clear, often, and the angle is lower and seems to flatter everything it touches. The deciduous forest is bare, and the trunks and branches cast long shadows while filtering and directing the light in interesting ways. The architectures, elevations and declivities of the land are revealed and enhanced. The water of the pond clears and turns blue. The coldness of the earth and water are counterpointed by the late afternoon warmth of light. Warmth without heat. Clear contrasts in color and value are at maximum intensity. My palette is filled with siennas, umbers, ochres, oranges, violets and gray-blues.



The Greenhouse

Of course this painting is about a lot more than a greenhouse. It really is about the feeling of light at a moment in spring, which would not last. The picture relies on careful value and color temperature management to create the luminous depth of space. I want you to be able to stand there beside me and feel the peace of the moment.

Spring

Spring painting is a close second to winter. Warming air causes beautiful mists and fogs as the palest light greens emerge. The views through the trees are still open while the meadow grasses and flowers begin to shed their winter clothes for spring. I look for these fleeting combinations of winter/spring colors within pale blue visions of distant hillsides on hazy mornings filled with birdsong. Viridian and lemon yellow enter my palette again.



Moonrise September

There are few moments more pleasant and peaceful than painting at night, in fine weather, under a full moon. With a palette restricted to ultramarine and prussian blue, yellow ochre, black and white, the real job is in getting the values right. When you do, magic can happen.

Summer

Slowly through the month of May, the colors of summer press forward while the trees and shrubby plants expand to transform the open forest into a dense green wall. Big mounds of cadmium yellow medium and lemon, cobalt and ultramarine blue find their way onto my palette. Most reds are banished along with the viridian green. The light that filters down in the forest is now tinged with green as it passes through the translucent leaves. On the summer pond, the water turns green also and wears wandering necklaces of duckweed, decorated in places by waterlilies, water iris and American lotus. Early morning light creates vibrant contrasting areas of warm light and cool shadows. My studio boat is pressed into service regularly to help me capture the new compositions being created moment to moment. Now the forest only serves as a backdrop for the action on the water. Maybe a sea-eagle will drop by.



Summer

While neighbors used my boat, I painted this moment from shore. I used my painting knives and impasto paint to suggest the exploding exuberance of the green hillside which contrasted with the smoothly brushed water surface. Cool greens appear warm against the blue of the water. Picture yourself here.



A Moment of Light

At the end of the path, there is a big view out toward the main body of the pond. This painting is a composition of one small part of that subject, one that I frequently paint. Late afternoon light creates the drama here, and I set the stage to reveal beauty in the ordinary by my vision and color choices.

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.

Fall

Fall is filled with bright contrasts of colors, and often lasts deep into November. The light really begins to slip lower in the sky each day as the forest opens again revealing its colorful carpet of buckbrush filled with red berries. I roam around examining summer subjects in the new light. My palette changes again, gradually the greens are removed for Indian yellows and cadmium reds. Violets enter my mixes again. The morning fog returns creating evanescent painting opportunities. While everyone else sleeps, a full moon in a clear, cold sky demands to be painted. The drier air pulls colors and backgrounds forward and the reflections on the pond take on an important abstract role. Once again, the open forest welcomes the artist's eye, enticing me with all manner of compositional variety laced with the lingering, dancing colors of autumn leaves yet to drop. So the cycle continues, and we artists are meant to be witnesses to this annual passage of light through the darkness of space. How lucky we are!



Contact at

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If you would like to paint with John, join in on one of his live, online painting workshops. Reserve your place at theartistsroadstore.com/workshops