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with Kelli Folsom



# A PAINTER'S JOURNEY

PART 5

## *Creating a Vision*

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

**I**t seems to me that I have spent my life learning to see, both as an individual and an artist. I have found that the process is much more complicated, nuanced and individualistic than simply looking at the world around me. It takes focused attention to really see anything in any meaningful way, and that takes time. However, our modern lives don't encourage us to spend time just observing the world around us, and this can lead to a kind of myopia. The biological foundations of our visual system evolved in forests and then on the savannas of Africa when our primary attention was either finding food or avoiding becoming it. This is still how most of us process the world—either for danger or for survival success, or because we are personally interested in something particular around us. In the mental hierarchy of attention, all other visual material takes second or third priority or is just ignored. It is why eye witnesses often provide unreliable information to the police. It really depends on the individual. I learned how important this fact is while teaching art students to paint plein air in my Aix-en-Provence workshop more than a decade ago.

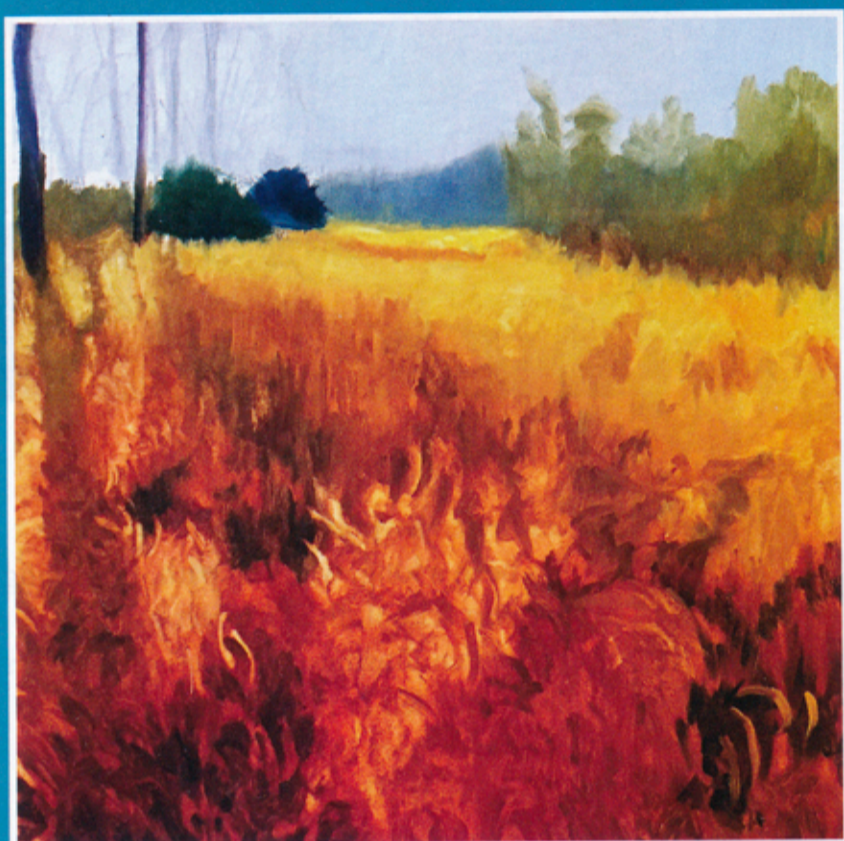
In order to teach someone to create an effective composition, especially a plein air one, the teacher must understand what the student sees and doesn't see. However, students can't tell you what they don't notice! So I devised a little visual test for my students. I had them sit quietly and intently observe the same street scene in Aix for a full 5 minutes. For anyone not used to it, 5 minutes is a long time to sit and just look. Then I called time, and had them turn their backs on the subject and draw from memory what they had just observed. When I called time again, everyone turned around and compared what they had drawn with the subject. This is a real eye-opening moment for most people. Each person drew in detail those parts of the subject that they found most interesting and left other important things out. Some left out entire buildings, or the

# MY ART IN THE MAKING

## SEA OATS AND BLUESTEM



This “filmstrip” of images illustrates the many different angles of view I explore when I am considering a subject to paint. I’ve learned that most good subjects contain multiple painting opportunities, but I can only paint one at a time. Therefore, I always invest some time discovering all the potential views of a given subject. This builds confidence in my final choice.



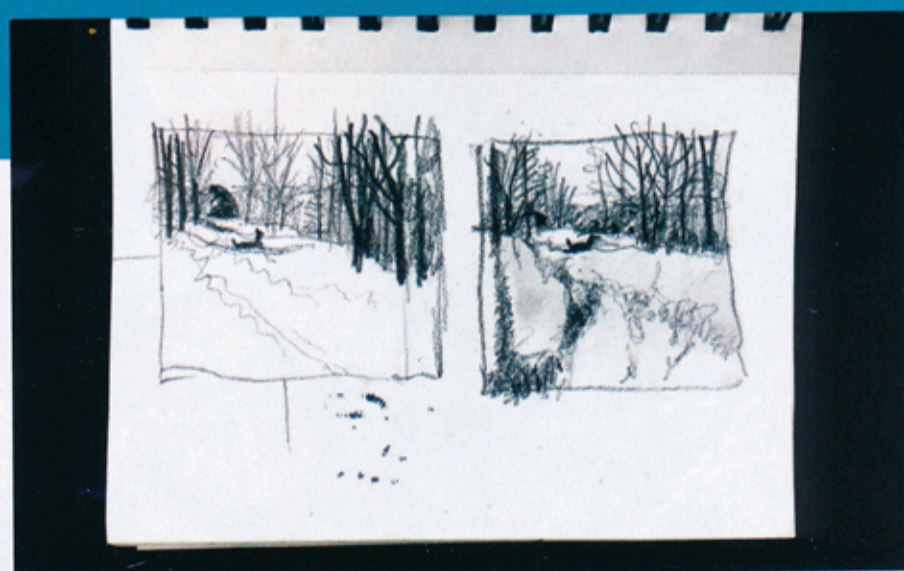
This is the view I subsequently chose to paint. Three deer ran through the field just as I arrived. I was thinking that I might use that. To begin, I applied a deep wash of transparent oxide red and then wiped out the lights and cools with a towel. The main objective in a block-in is to establish the largest mass-shapes in the right values and color temperatures quickly. Mixes of yellow ochre, orange and Prussian blue followed.



Working the shapes largest to smallest with bristle and sable brushes, I established the architecture of the trees and undergrowth.

length/shape of the street, shadow masses, cars and so on. But each had detailed something that they were attracted to. I stressed that there is no right or wrong to the test, only a result, which helped me to understand what they paid attention to or didn't. With that, I could begin to help them improve their compositions.

This test also illustrates that education in art and design doesn't necessarily teach us to see as artists. Those tools and theories are necessary and valuable, of course, but they are merely a starting point. What must follow is years of concentrated seeing. Artistic vision is a combination of intensive individualistic observation and an evolving



Thumbnail drawings help to simplify the main masses, determine the focal point and establish the movement of the eye through the picture plane. One can also “try out” different compositional ideas very quickly and eliminate dumb mistakes on canvas later.



Switching here to painting knives, I worked the texture, colors and temperature changes in the grasses from dark to light and back again.



I used different knife shapes to make unique, impasto marks and even razor-thin strokes of grass.



Returning to the field the next day, I continued to work with narrow knives to finesse the colors and textures in the painting. Working from a photograph in the studio is just no substitute for the real thing.


aesthetic viewpoint. My own evolution has been a long, winding path, beginning with art school, then a career in New York as an illustrator and designer, which eventually led to teaching myself how to paint outdoors in the beautiful Hudson River Valley. That experience opened my eyes, literally, to the boundless complexity and intricacies of the natural world. It remains my primary interest today, 30-plus years later and 1,200 miles further west. The difference now is that my Midwestern subjects are not inherently dramatic or even obviously beautiful. Those qualities come from the way I look at nature—with an experienced eye and a conscious artistic purpose. Let me show you what I mean.

When I roam the woods and pond near my studio, I am always looking for paintings. This is an important attitude for any landscape painter to adopt. It can also help if one knows something of the biology of the forest and marine worlds, I think. It is not only my experiences which are enriched by knowing the plants around me, but my ability to know when to be somewhere interesting



I checked my composition again with a viewfinder for adjustments as I worked toward the finish.

helps to make my paintings more interesting as well. When I find a subject or condition of light/ climate, which looks promising, I examine it from all angles. Using a plastic viewfinder or my phone camera, I move in close, then stand off to one side and then the other. I'll zoom in or out, or stoop down to examine the microcosm on the ground. Maybe the best angle is sitting on the ground or looking down on it from a nearby rise. I'll walk through the subject and look back at it from the other side. Looking around behind me as I search is a view that very few people think to try but often yields surprising results. I will also sit for a long time, if need be, just looking.

This is perhaps the best investment a landscape painter can make—the gift of unhurried observation. Yes, the sun is moving those shadows along, but when there is a subtly beautiful subject at hand, rushing into a composition without completely knowing where to focus attention can devolve into a mere display of painting skill, not artistic vision. What is wanted is to take it all in, and then select the most important parts to paint. Of course, what constitutes “important” is an individual aesthetic choice, and part of that choice might be an emotional response or even a subconscious one. All good. Seeing, fully, leads to deep appreciation, understanding and gratitude. And those qualities can make the ordinary subject into extraordinarily beautiful art. It is always there before us, waiting for our attention. 



*Sea Oats and Bluestem*, oil on linen panel, 12 x 12"

## 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.

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