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# A PAINTER'S JOURNEY

PART 4

## *Diamonds in Your Own Backyard*

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

I love to travel around the U.S. and Europe to paint. I have been honored to have been selected to work as an artist in residence in numerous national parks. There is something very freeing about being in a beautiful environment, far from our day-to-day concerns with nothing else to think about but inspiration and painting. Our hearts and spirits soar in those moments, but they are generally relatively rare in our everyday art lives. The remainder of our art-making hours are spent at home, in our studios and communities. Except for those who live in wonderfully scenic locations, most of us live in ordinary places, like the Midwest, where I live. Can beauty and inspiration also be found there? Of course! However, it can take some extra effort to find the diamonds in our own backyards.

Everyone has either a backyard or a neighborhood in which to find interesting painting subjects, but often, we don't consider what is near and very familiar to us as worthwhile. Why? It may be,

Where my ideas often get started is in my sketchbooks. Here I am studying water reflections and lilies in my little water feature on the patio. Keeping a regular sketching practice is essential to my art process.



A page from my watercolor sketchbook. I now have a shelf of these books filled with ideas and inspiration from which I can make larger paintings.

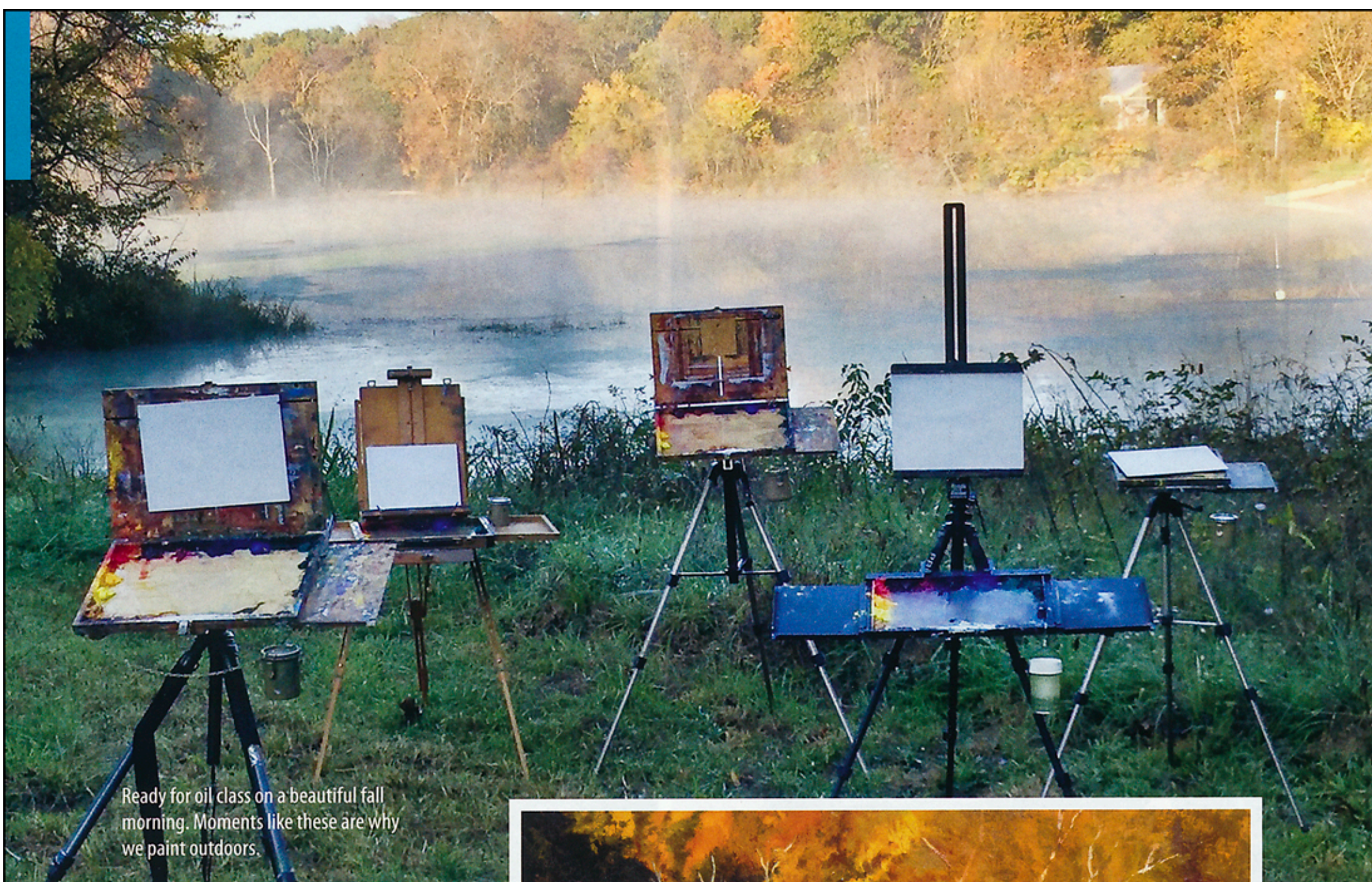


Clockwise from left: Painting a watercolor study on the driveway. When the light is just right, there's not a moment to lose.; Working sight-size on the driveway in oil that measures 9 by 12 inches.; In the middle of my students painting on the pond next door. An umbrella is often very useful for plein air work.



**John Hulsey, *On the Spring Pond*, oil, 12 x 12"**  
This one was painted from my boat studio.

as Chaucer wrote in the *Tale of Melibee*, a case of "familiarity breeds contempt"; that is, we tend to develop a blindness to what we so easily have at hand. We quit looking and seeing. It is a natural thing to do when our eyes are on the horizon and our minds are full of other things, but I believe that it is a risky thing to do for our development as artists. After all, we are the experts of our home location. We understand the light there, and that is no small thing. Unfamiliarity with the local light is what always confounds me when I travel to paint. It takes time to understand the movement and path of sunlight in a new location. At home, we know just when the light will be best. If we stop and look deeply at what it touches, we will soon find something to delight the eye. If you don't have a backyard, city parks are another place which can hold treasures. Or perhaps your town, like mine, was built on a river. Go down there and spend time poking around and just looking with a creative eye. By using a viewfinder, you will quickly begin to discover interesting subjects. Best of all, what you do find will be unique to your vision. Realize that you can make these ordinary subjects into your own personal expression of



Ready for oil class on a beautiful fall morning. Moments like these are why we paint outdoors.

that vision. Apply enough enthusiasm and passion, and you will be on your way to making great art. Great art can result from a rock-steady personal belief in your vision, regardless of what may or may not be going on in the art world out there. The key is to believe in it, come hell or high water!

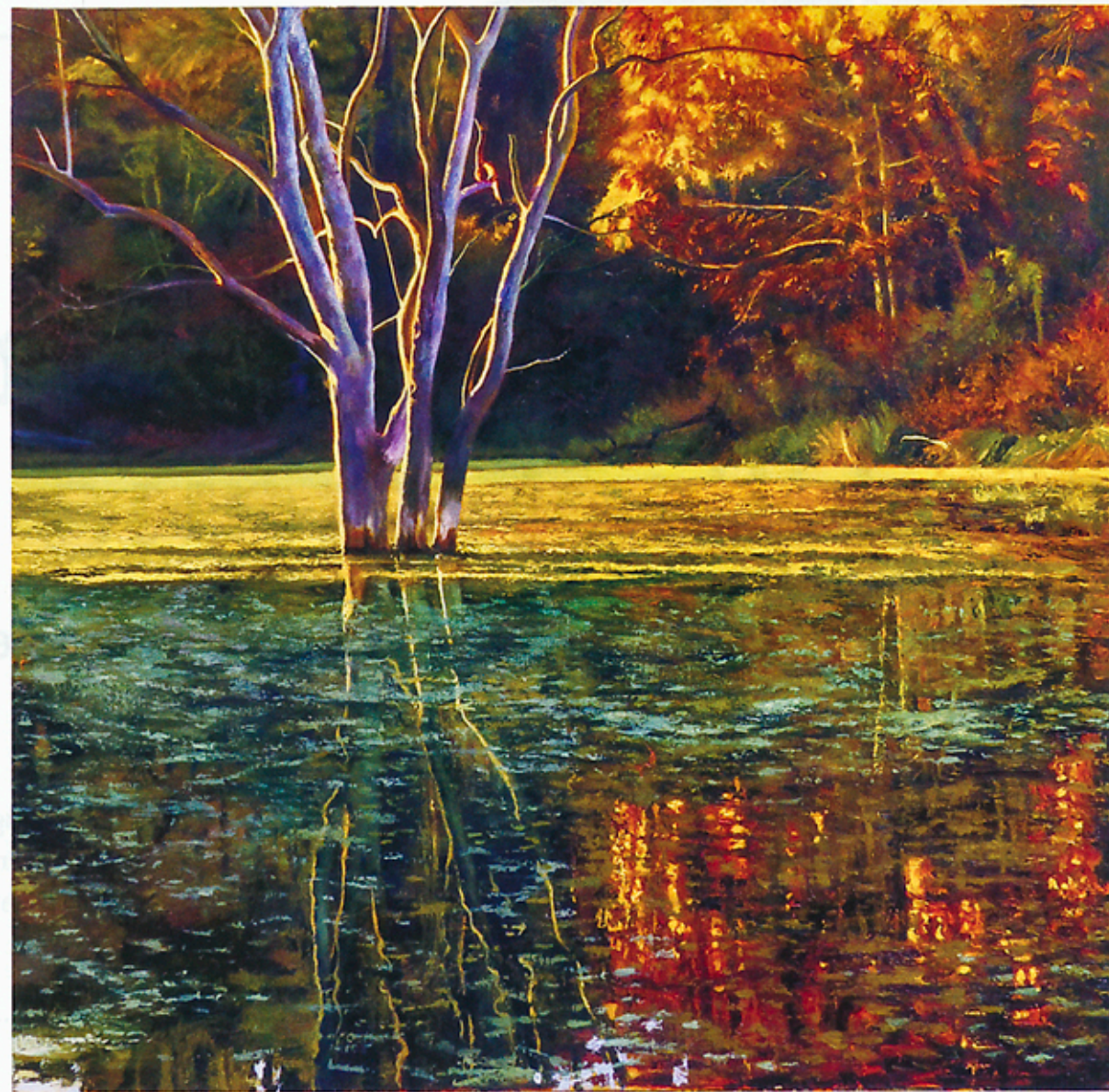
I am particularly fortunate to have my home and studio in the countryside. Like the farmers who live nearby, I am constantly aware of the light and the seasons. I began seriously painting outside in 1980, when my wife, Ann, and I moved to the beautiful rural landscape of Putnam County in the Hudson River Valley of New York. Everywhere I looked, I saw paintings, no doubt helped by my familiarity with the famous works of the great artists who painted there before me. After 10 lovely years of painting there, we decided to relocate to the Midwest where we could buy land and build our home and studios.



**John Hulsey, *Before the Fall*, oil, 12 x 12"**

Painting a subject nearby means I can learn the light and know just when to show up for an early morning scene like this.

Our new landscape, though, is not like the Hudson Valley. It is not pictorially entertaining in the grand sense. Its visual charms are very subtle and therefore require extra effort and a more contemplative mindset to uncover the diamonds strewn about. I had to spend lots of time walking around—not painting—just looking. I had to understand the light, how it moved across the landscape and what it touched along the way in every hour and season. I realized that what this Midwestern wood and pond was about was intimacy, not vast grandeur. I developed a new appreciation for everything, large and small. Once I accepted that there was incredible beauty hiding right in front of me, I began once again, to see paintings everywhere. My backyard lawn acted as a visual counterpoint to the rough wildness of the woods just beyond the gate. The woods themselves offered countless opportunities for good paintings. We planted our yard to create painting subjects, and manage our woods and meadow for the same purpose. Nearby, my neighbor's pond was a revelation of picture possibilities. Eventually, by changing my attitudes toward my "plain" Midwestern landscape, I realized that I was surrounded by all the subject material I might ever need. I think that the poet William Blake said it best in *Auguries of Innocence*, "To see a world in a grain



**John Hulsey, *On the Pond II*, 36 x 36"**

A large studio knife painting created from a smaller boat study. This shows how beautiful art can be inspired by a simple subject when we look deeply enough.

of sand and a heaven in a wild flower, hold infinity in the palm of your hand and Eternity in an hour." The universal also exists in the particular, the commonplace, the details. So look around your home, your yard and your neighborhood for the potential to create wonderful art lies strewn around us like diamonds just waiting to be discovered.

A selection of the best paintings I have been creating from the land around my studio will be premiered at *Transcendence—Truth in Nature*, an exhibition scheduled to open at the Albrecht-Kemper Museum in St. Joseph, Missouri in December 2020. This exhibition will present 40 paintings created over a four-year span. [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.

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