

John MacDonald

Newsletter: February 2013



UPCOMING WORKSHOPS

2013 • JULY 15–19

THE BOSCOM CENTER

Highlands, North Carolina
www.thebascom.org

2013 • AUGUST 1–2

THE BERKSHIRE BOTANICAL GARDEN

Stockbridge, Mass.
www.berkshirebotanical.org

2013 • AUGUST 19–21

PENINSULA SCHOOL OF ART

Fish Creek, Wisconsin
www.peninsulaartschool.com

2013 • OCTOBER 4–6

MENNAGGIO YOUTH HOSTEL

Menaggio, Lake Como, Italy
www.lakecomohostel.com

“In order to be able to paint a few great paintings, we must be willing to paint a lot of bad paintings.”

-unknown

News from the studio. . .

Here, as finally promised—if a little late—is my foray into producing a newsletter. As I’ve mentioned to many of you before, like you I’d rather spend my time in front of an easel painting than in front of a computer typing. But this is an easy and effective way for me to pass along information, tips, techniques, news, etc. that you may find helpful as you continue to find and develop your voice as a painter. This newsletter, like a painting, will continue to evolve. I welcome your comments, criticism, and suggestions!

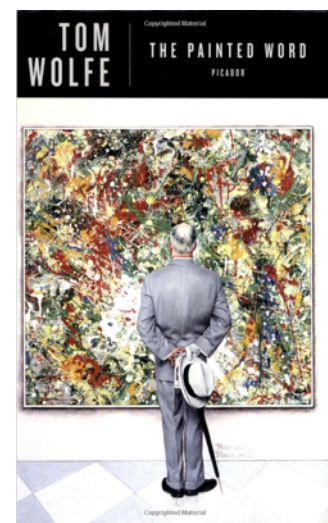
As a fine art major in school in the late 1970’s, abstraction was all the rage. Consequently, I was taught little about traditional painting techniques. In fact, nothing! What I’ve learned since has come from trial and error and focusing on what I wanted to accomplish in my painting. In other words, the painting approach and techniques that I teach are those that have *worked for me*. There’s nothing special about them and they certainly aren’t the only way to paint. I’m thrilled if you enjoy my painting and wish to learn from me; however, your job isn’t to learn how to paint as I do. Your job is to learn what it means to paint like **you**. So if what I teach helps you paint more effectively, beautifully, and happily, that’s wonderful. If not, that’s wonderful, too. Try something new. Keep learning and keep growing.

Resources . . .

Recommended Reading

If you’re a realist who has ever experienced the frustration of trying to explain to your abstract painter friends why you paint as you do, read

Tom Wolfe’s, *The Painted Word*. It’s a very short, pithy and funny criticism of the development of modern art that will confirm your belief that painting what one sees isn’t a sin.



Artist Watch:

For many years, I rarely looked at the work of contemporary landscape painters. I was focused solely on learning from the old masters and assumed that there were few living new masters who could paint like them or teach me something that I couldn’t learn more easily from those dead old guys. Boy, was I wrong. There are so many terrific landscape painters working in this country and I’ve had a great deal of fun discovering more and more of them, studying their work, and learning from them. Two painters whose work I’ve recently discovered and greatly admire are Curt Hansen and Marc Dalessio. Both combine a crisp, confident painterly style, dynamic compositions, and such intelligent choices



Marc Dalessio
www.marcdallessio.com



Curt Hansen
www.curthansonpaintings.com

in deciding what to include and what not to include that they take my breath away. Like all all great painters, they make it look so easy.

Tips & Techniques **The Limited Palette**

As most of you already know, last year I switched from a palette comprising 14 paints to a limited palette of only four: white, Prussian Blue, Cadmium Yellow Light, and Alizarin Crimson. It's said (in a religious context) that the greatest fanatics are always those who've most recently converted. Well, count me as fanatic of limited palettes! Before making the change, I'd often heard that a limited palette makes it easier to create a painting with clean color harmonies. So I wasn't surprised to find that, yes, that's true—it *is* easier to create color harmonies. However, what I did not expect and what has come as a great and pleasant surprise was the extent of the range of colors that were available within a limited palette. I'm finding that nearly every color I could once produce with my 14 tubes of paint can be produced with only four tubes. And, being basically a lazy person, forcing myself to mix nearly every color is now training my eye to distinguish and work with colors with a much deeper sensitivity and skill than ever before. If you haven't worked in a limited palette, do try it! Below are two re-

cent paintings, one exploring cool tones and the other warm, which are the result of the limited palette.



Coaching Ourselves **Learning from our work**

Here's a simple practice that can help you learn from your successes (and by contrast, your failures). Once a year, or more often if you wish, gather every painting you've done

within that time period. (Photos will have to do if a painting has been sold.) Identify the 10–12 most successful paintings from that period. Then, taking the attitude of a scientist analyzing data, study them. Ask yourself what made the paintings so successful. Was it the composition, your handling of values, how you manipulated colors or edges or details? What made these paintings work so well? If you don't know your strengths as a painter you won't be able to take advantage of them when you're painting! Whatever it is that makes your best paintings the successes they are, see if you can't bring more of that into all your work.

Likewise, analyze your most recent failures. Do so gently and with compassion for yourself and with respect for the effort that went into them. Disidentify from them and then discover what went wrong. If you don't know your weaknesses as a painter you won't know what you need to work on in order to improve.

There are few exercises that can bring such immediate improvement to your painting than this. Your paintings are your best teachers, the failures *and* the successes. All of your strengths and weaknesses are right there, in front of you! They are telling you exactly what you do well and where you need to improve. It's vital information and it's waiting for you—listen to it and learn from it!