

John MacDonald

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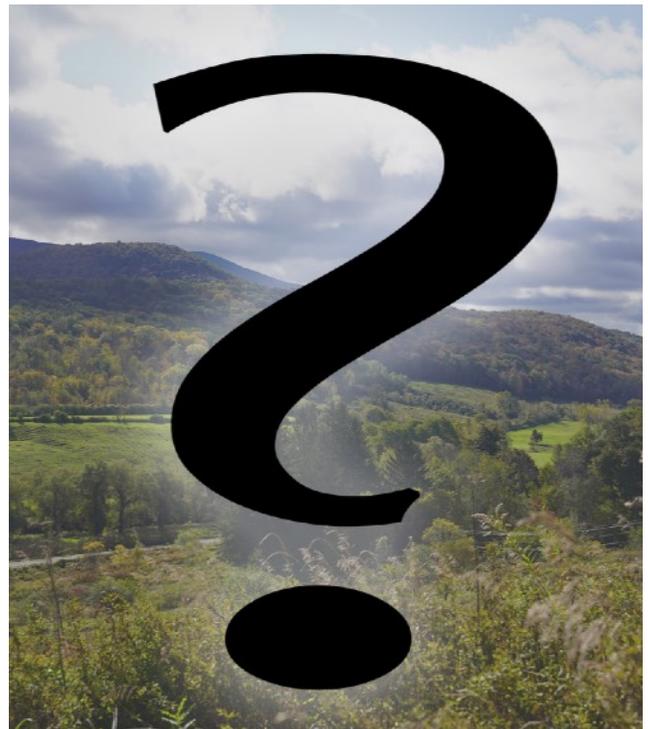
COMPOSITION II

In the previous newsletter, I introduced the acronym AID: Ask, Identify, and Design to help us (“aid” us) when composing a painting. It’s a bit corny but it reminds us of the importance of approaching the process of composing a painting systematically and thoughtfully.

As described in the previous newsletter, the first step of “Ask” requires us to clarify our overall intention and the specific message we’ll have for the painting. In this newsletter, we’ll look at the second step of Asking. We may be feeling deeply inspired by a scene but we still must first decide if it will work *as a painting*.

The question we must ask ourselves is simple:

Is this scene paintable?



PaintTube Videos

Interested in my paintings process? In “*Dynamic Landscapes*” and “*Poetic Landscapes*” I describe it in detail. If you’re interested in learning more about values—what they are, how to identify them, and how to use them in your paintings, check out the video, “*Mastering Values*.”

For more information and to order the videos, click [HERE](#).

If you’ve been enjoying these newsletters and are able and willing to make a donation, any contribution would be appreciated. If you’ve just begun receiving them, feel free to peruse them first.

To make a donation, click [HERE](#).

To the many of you who’ve already contributed~ *Thank you!*



It's pretty, but . . .

Every successful landscape painting is a translation from nature into paint. In the process, we will always need to make some changes. Nature frequently gives us inspiring and beautiful scenes but it *never* gives us a scene in which every element is so perfectly situated that there's nothing to change, nothing to do but just copy what we see. Even the most beautiful scene won't necessarily lead to a beautiful painting. Sometimes our enthusiasm and inspiration can blind us, driving us to attempt to paint the unpaintable. When feeling the fires of inspiration, rather than mindlessly jumping into the painting process, we must stop and ask ourselves . .

Is this scene truly paintable?



This is an inspiring scene, but will it work as a *painting*?

“Fine painting is a matter of proper taste and judgment in choosing the motive, accepting some parts, discarding others, and making changes or alterations through the procedure.”

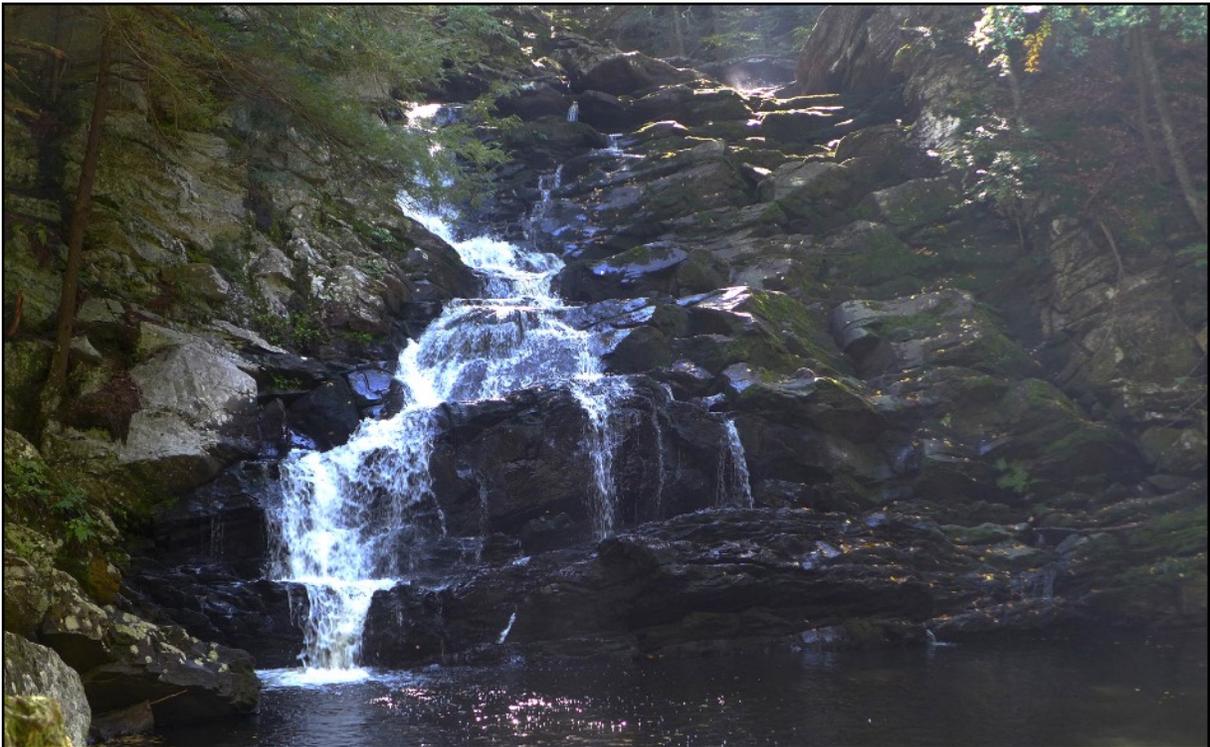
– Edgar Payne, *Composition of Outdoor Painting*

Red Flag Landscapes

In theory, any topic or scene should be paintable. But for most representational painters, it's some form of beauty in a landscape that we want to capture in paint. But just because a scene appears beautiful and inspiring doesn't necessarily mean it can be made into a beautiful and successful painting. Nature and a painting are two different things. Here are four instances in which seemingly attractive scenes can seduce us into reaching for the unattainable.

The scene is beyond our ability.

Trying to translate into paint the beauty we see in a scene sometimes requires a level of skill that we simply don't have. It may be the rendering of a complex object for which we lack adequate drawing skills (the most common problem), an illusion of light and atmosphere that requires an understanding of values and gradients that we lack, or a subtle color palette that requires skills in color mixing that are beyond us. It's important to have an honest awareness of our strengths and weaknesses. If our gut feeling is that a scene is beautiful but beyond us, we can often save time and frustration by simply choosing a more manageable subject.



Of the four red flags raised here, painting a subject that pushes us to our edge of understanding and ability is how we learn. It is often to be embraced rather than avoided. Yet we must approach it wisely. For it to be a learning experience rather than a lesson in frustration, we should go into the painting acknowledging that we'll often feel lost, confused, and will inevitably make mistakes. The key is to drop expectations and thoughts of success or failure and instead focus on learning from the painting. Much more than our successes, our failures show us in the most concrete terms possible exactly what we need to work on to improve our skills. Our failures are our best teachers.

The scene is beyond *anyone's* ability.

Nature's range of values and colors is magnitudes greater than the range of values and colors that can be rendered in pigment or captured by the camera. When viewing a scene on location, it can be beyond the skills of even the most experienced painters to capture what is there: the intense glare of sunlight on water, the iridescence of flowers, or the variety of colors seen in a clear shallow stream. Rather than trying the impossible—to capture *exactly* what they see—experienced painters will know how to “dumb down” the effects and create an adequate, if less accurate, illusion. Or sometimes they simply choose to move on and select a different scene. Beginning painters, unaware that an effect they wish to capture is beyond the capabilities of paint, will spend great effort trying to attain an effect that is unattainable. Fortunately, as we continue to paint, we slowly learn what effects can and cannot be realized in pigments.



This, too, was a stunning and inspiring scene. But this photograph is a poor substitute for what I saw standing on a beach on Cape Cod: the blinding light, the thousand variations of silver and gray in the water, and the subtle shifts of color in the wet sand as it alternated between showing the sand underneath and reflecting the sky. No camera, brand of paints, or even painter could begin to capture what I saw in person. I was content to just enjoy what I was seeing.

Both Turner and Inness endlessly fought with the physical limitations of paint, trying to capture in pigment effects of light, atmosphere, and *emotion* that they could see in their minds and feel in their souls, but struggled to translate into pigment. It can take years to finally find and master a technique that allows us to paint what we envision. It's a lesson in patience.

The scene offers poor raw material.

Illustrators have a saying, “The better the reference, the better the illustration.” Whether working from photos or life, everything we see in a landscape is only visual raw material to be selected and shaped into a successful painting. (I use the word “visual” deliberately. Only the mind labels what is seen in the landscape as *things*. To the eye, the world is only a collection of *shapes* of value and color. Learn to see shapes and not things!)

It’s not unusual to be initially inspired by a landscape only to realize that the shapes, objects, details, values, colors, etc. of the scene will not translate into an adequate composition. There may be too many or too few elements, too much uniformity or a bewildering variety, too few values or too many, or, as often happens, a scene in which the values are so fractured and scattered that massing them into large shapes becomes impossible.

A scene may require us to edit and invent so much in the painting that it is easier to simply move on to a different scene. As a general rule, if I have to invent 30% or more of the contents of a painting, I find it better to choose another scene.

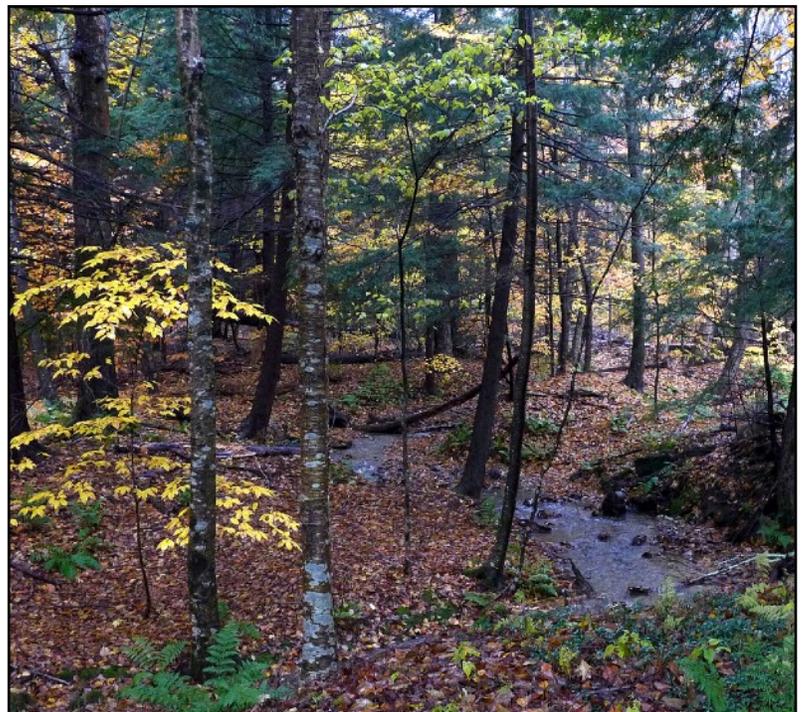


This scene offers little of interest—it’s boring. The three major shapes of sky, trees /hill, and foreground grass are of uniform size and are placed horizontally; each is parallel to the picture plane. The three trees are equally sized and spaced. The greens are fairly monochromatic and there’s little value contrast in the entire image. It also lacks a natural focal point. Rather than struggling to find remedies for those problems, in this case it would be much better to move on to find a different scene.



Sometimes a scene is too much: too much detail, too many values, too many areas that attract the eye equally, etc. And while it's possible to zoom in to a less busy section of a scene or to deliberately simplify some areas, if the scene feels overwhelming, it may be better to choose something else.

In both of these photos, every area is full of detail with similar, full-contrast value ranges. Unless we're willing to make many changes, a painting based on either of these photos is likely to be too busy.





There are several problems with this scene, the alignment of the edges of the major shapes of dune, beach, sky, and water being the most significant. And notice the split color - the scene is nearly one half warm sand and dunes and and one half cool water and sky. In this case, it would be better to choose a different point of view, one that would break up the alignment of shapes and allow one color temperature to dominate.



This is a beautiful scene from the Adirondacks but notice how everything of interest is largely concentrated on the right side of the scene. Without making changes, a painting based on this would be imbalanced, with all the visual weight gathered on the right edge.

Frequently, cropping a scene can eliminate compositional problems but, when a scene is imbalanced as this, it rarely helps. Choose a different point of view or be willing to edit the scene—add some visual weight to the left side—to bring more balance to the composition.



We thoughtlessly copy.

The problem of using inadequate raw material is compounded if we tend to copy what we see. Nature *never* gives us an already perfectly composed and structured scene. A misplaced tree, an awkward alignment of edges, confusing value relationships, an imbalance in details—the list of problematic elements in a scene can be endless. If we simply copy what we see, we copy the flaws in the scene into our painting and a perfectly copied flaw is still a flaw. A mediocre scene, if only copied, can never result in anything more than a mediocre painting.



This is a pretty scene but it won't work as a painting if simply copied. Like the previous image, it's imbalanced to the right. The dark tree trunks are uniformly scattered across the image with several in the immediate foreground awkwardly breaking into the frame. If copied exactly as this photo portrays it, the weaknesses in the scene become weaknesses in the painting.

The Commission Trap

Be careful when accepting a commission to paint a specific view. Understandably, a buyer will want the scene to be recognizable and as true to reality as possible. But that prohibits us from making any changes that would lead to a better *painting*. The result is often an accurate portrayal of a scene but a mediocre painting. When painting on commission, focus on pleasing the buyer and then doing one's best within the given limitations.

Green Light Landscapes

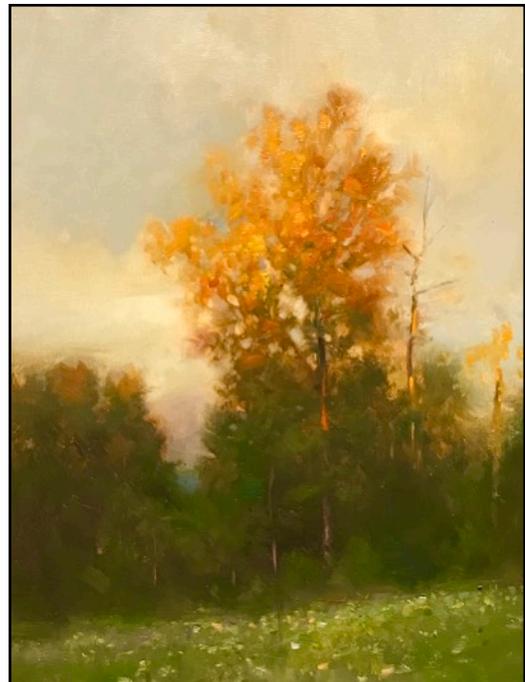
Feeling inspired is wonderful but paintings aren't built out of inspiration – they require adequate raw material. Luckily, as our compositional skills improve, the range of scenes that we can translate into successful paintings grows. But for many painters it's easier, and usually more successful, to begin with scenes that give us good raw material.

I look for landscapes that have “good bones,” that feature some or all of the following, in the order of what I consider most important:

- Large shapes of easily identifiable values that vary in size and feature interesting outlines.
- Light, as either interesting and varied shapes of light and shadow or as an effect of atmosphere and deep space.
- A choice of natural focal points - some areas which draw the eye.
- A balance of horizontal, vertical, and diagonal lines or forms.
- Details that provide scale– small features that help convey the illusion of space.

It's important to stress again that I'm not looking for a perfect scene, just good material with which to work. And notice that color is missing from the list. Color rarely has anything to do with composition—it's values. Once I've nailed the values, the colors can be of almost any hue.

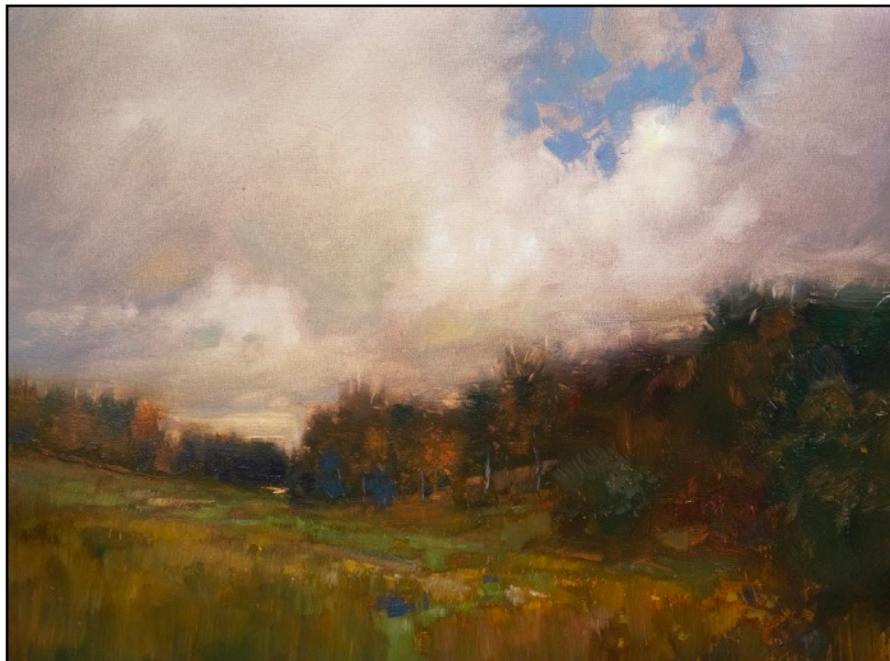
Below are a few examples of scenes that feature the characteristics listed above and which I've used as reference, with the resulting painting. In no case did I simply copy the photo.





When a landscape features a dark ground against a light sky, the line describing the boundary where the two shapes meet must be varied and interesting. Here, the line of the trees and background hills against the sky offered plenty of variety from which to choose when composing the scene. The vertical shapes of the trees and their reflections balance the shallow diagonals of the stream bank and highlights in the water. There was plenty to work with in this scene.



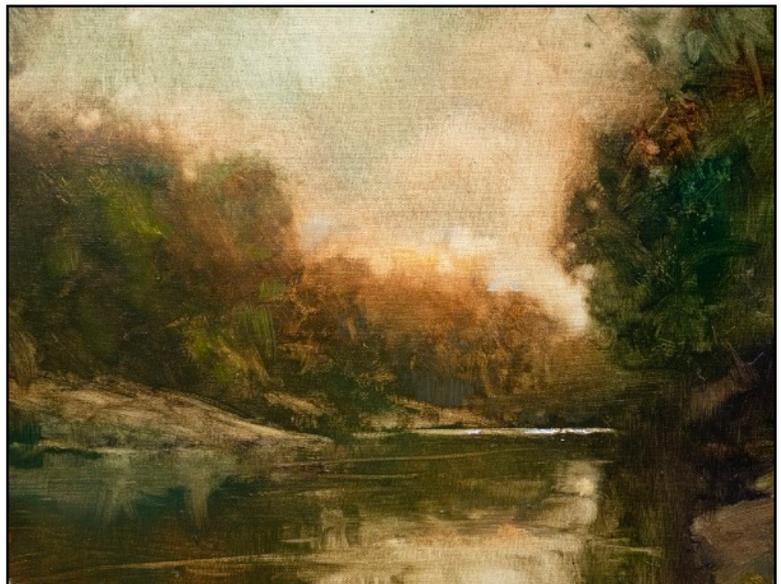


This scene, too, offered a variety of shapes within a strong value structure. I liked the areas of simplicity and complexity that balance each other. Because the patch of blue sky on the top right draws the eye, the tree coming into the frame from the left was eliminated to prevent “bookending” the composition.” (More on that in another newsletter.)



Whether working plein air or from photos, I first look for shapes of various sizes with varied edges that can be simplified into a single value. If the scene offers that, I know there's a good painting waiting to be drawn from it.

Often, I'm inspired by color relationships but rarely consider them when evaluating a scene. When choosing a scene, I look for good value shapes. The photo above was taken in 1904. It had everything I needed for a painting. The color was invented.



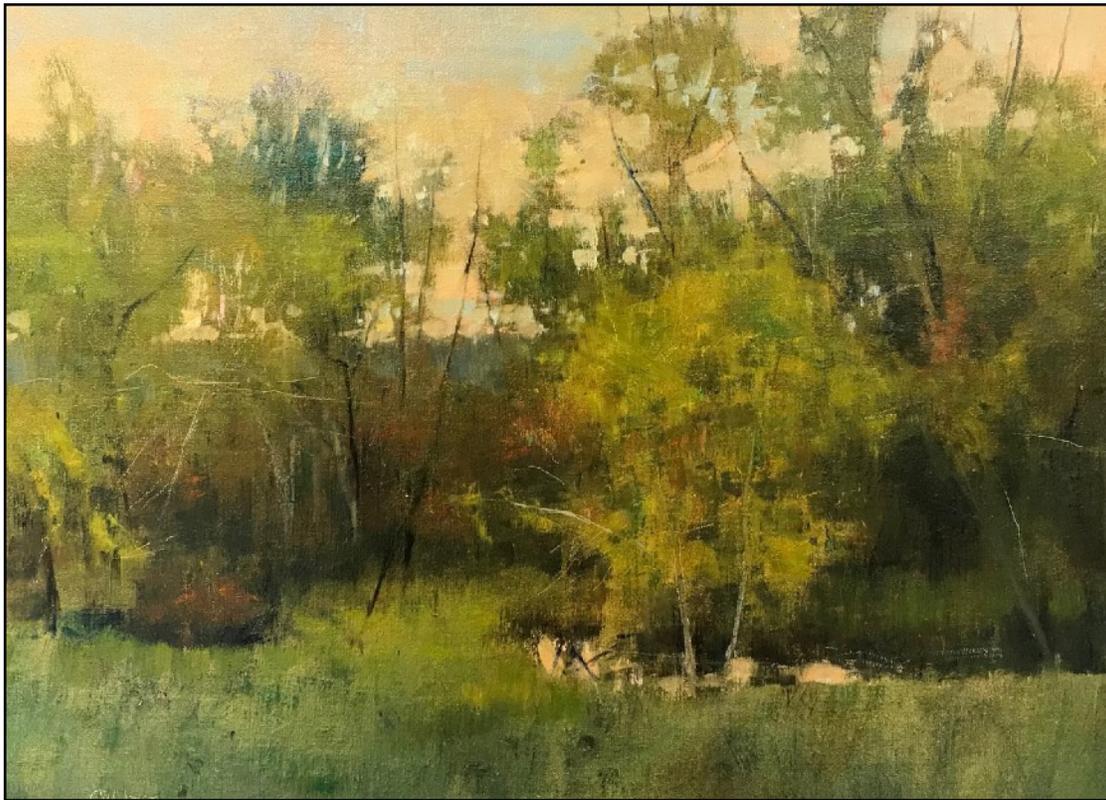
Composing a scene is challenging, but there's good news.

The greater our skills, the greater the range of possibilities we have to create successful paintings. Scenes that can appear unpaintable on first viewing may be salvageable. As with every painting skill, learning to evaluate, choose, and compose a scene are skills that will improve with time and effort. It will become a little easier with practice.

Making the mundane magnificent.

Any painter with good skills should be able to create a beautiful painting from a beautiful scene. Much more challenging is to produce a beautiful painting from poor raw material. Yet the best painters are frequently able to do that.

For nearly 15 years, I had the pleasure of occasionally painting plein air with Curt Hanson. There was no shortage of beautiful scenes surrounding his rural home in western Connecticut. We would walk from his home into meadows and fields and each choose a scene. I was often surprised by the scenes Curt would choose to paint – scenes that I found uninteresting and uninspiring. And yet, almost invariably, he would produce a successful and interesting painting. That's a level of skill beyond the average painter—something to work towards.



Words of Wisdom

“When my daughter was about seven years old, she asked me one day what I did at work. I told her I worked at the college—that my job was to teach people how to draw. She stared back at me, incredulous, and said, ‘You mean they forget!?’”

— Howard Ikemoto

*Stay well,
Be creative,
and Happy Painting!*

Handwritten signature of John.