

Dialogues

Talking Shop with Maddine Insalaco

BY HELEN DWORK | JANUARY 20, 2015

[Print](#)Maddine Insalaco, *Castelnovo Tancredi*, 2014. Oil on panel, 5 1/2 x 15 in.

Maddine Insalaco has studied painting in both Rome and New York, and holds an MFA Columbia University. Together with her husband, Joe Vinson, she leads landscape painting workshops, mostly in Italy. The couple have written and lectured extensively on Italian landscape painting traditions, and are active advocates of the preservation of historic sites of early open air painting in the Roman Campagna. Maddine has participated in numerous solo and group exhibitions in the United States and Italy. More information is available at www.maddineinsalaco.com and www.landscapepainting.com.

Helen Dwork: How did you transition to landscape painting from a career in International Banking and Finance?

Maddine Insalaco: I majored in international relations in college and started taking art history during a semester in Florence. I had always painted on my own and had a strong appreciation for natural beauty; travelling around Italy gave me a strong desire to paint its spaces. Despite my artistic inclinations, my early career choices were based on practical considerations: how could I best make a living and see the world in the process? Italy became a goal for me. I was lucky to return to Rome, first for an internship and then when I was hired by the United Nations. It was that experience of living in Rome for ten years that made the transition possible. I was able to travel out into the landscape regularly and paint there. At a certain point I started going to art school at night in Rome and realized that what I really wanted to do with my life was paint. The practical thing to do then was to get an MFA, so I moved back to New York and did that. All the relationships that were necessary for me to start a school of landscape painting had been established during my years in Italy, so when it came to setting up the program it was pretty simple.

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We all know that Art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth.

— Pablo Picasso

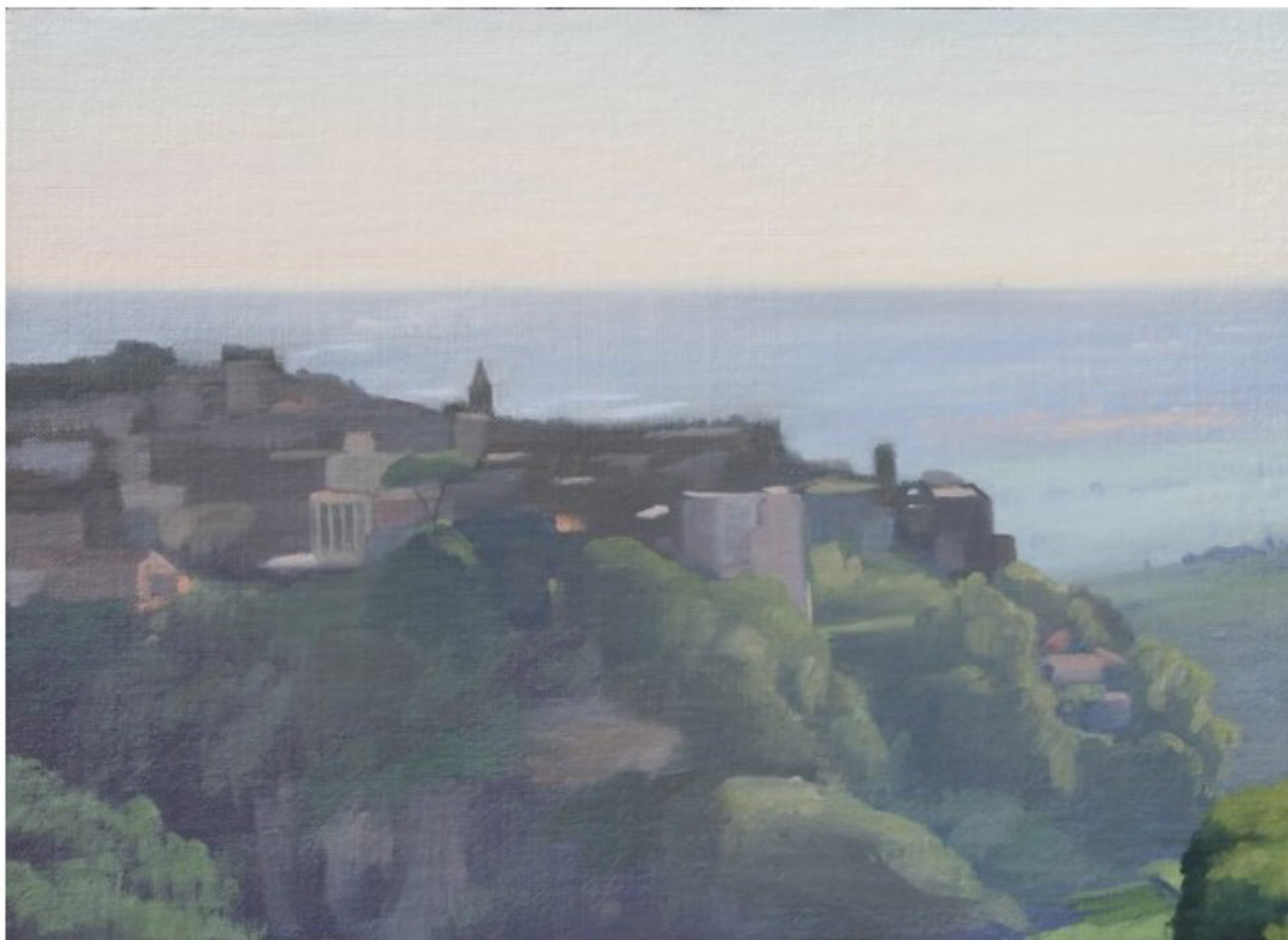
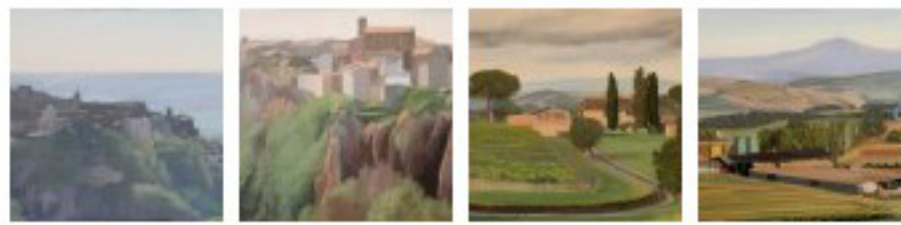
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Maddine Insalaco, *Tivoli*, 2014. Oil on linen, 8 x 12 in.

HD: Your workshops offer a solid curriculum for learning to paint en plein air. Can you explain how this developed and how it diverges from how you learned?

MI: I received my MFA from the [New York Academy of Art](#). Of the four programs we offer in Italy, the first three are sequential. We synthesize aspects of the Open Air Fundamentals program for the Art Students League workshop in Central Park. The way these programs are structured comes directly out of my MFA program; I just adapted it for landscape. Joe went to the Museum School of Fine Art in Boston after the Ringling College of Art and Design in Sarasota, and the emphasis on formalism we bring to classes derives from that experience.

The historical context is something we developed ourselves. Both Joe and I are really interested in art history and in 1999 we started a project following the historic routes of open air painting in Italy. We were aware that open air painting began in the Roman countryside and flourished in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but we did not have a genuine appreciation of the tradition and why it was valuable to contemporary artists. After years of travelling to paint historic motifs and studying early plein air sketches directly in museums, we became experts on the subject and were able to incorporate our discoveries and insights into all of our painting programs.

HD: What are the values of co-teaching and how does it affect the student experience?

MI: Because we are an artist couple and we share our lives 24/7, ideas about art are a constant part of our dialogue. It was not that we formally said, “You do that and I do this”; our approach has evolved over time. Our thoughts have really coalesced even though I am a representational painter and Joe’s work is abstract. We warn the students that, because artists tend to think independently, one of us might say one thing and the other might say something else, but we usually end up saying the same thing. We are able to give students multiple versions of a message by teaching together. This reinforces the concepts we try to impart, enhances their credibility, and ultimately facilitates the learning process.

While we share the same ideas about teaching painting, our personalities are very different—some would even say opposite—so our respective teaching styles and the ways we deliver our messages vary. Some students respond more positively to my approach while others respond better to Joe’s. As I see it, we achieve a wider appeal to students this way.



A student painting in Tuscany

HD: How does teaching plein-air painting vary in different locations?

MI: It is always different and really challenging, wherever it is. The choice of painting locations is influenced by a number of factors. Having a water source near the painting site is essential for keeping students hydrated, filling umbrella bases, and cleaning up. You really cannot take a group out into the landscape without sufficient water. Another critical issue is shade. During the hot seasons we have to be sure that any location we chose has a lot of trees to provide cool cover from which to paint. Umbrella shade is really inadequate when the temperatures soar, and we will not risk having students get heat stroke under our watch. Before deciding on any locations we do a site inspection to see what the agricultural patterns are for the season. If something is growing in a field in the spring or summer, the location cannot be used then, but might be perfect after the harvest. For new students especially, access to a bathroom is an important consideration in site selection. This is a limitation because generally the most beautiful locations we paint are isolated and devoid of modern amenities. So we usually take students we already know—or who have spent a few days with us and begun to develop the intrepid spirit of a landscape painters—out to more remote spots.

The landscape is our primary classroom, but it is logistically challenging to make a classroom in the middle of nature. Whether it is the California desert, the Florida Keys, salt marshes in Massachusetts, Central Park, or Italy, we need to work with specific characteristics of the location itself to figure this out. It is never the same anywhere. We tape pictures to our bus or lean them on picnic benches, chairs, or rocks. Weather conditions like wind and rain will also affect our options, but over the years we have mastered this process. There is no question that plein air painting is a class of painting unto itself, and we understood early on that it can be more akin to an extreme sport than a creative activity. But it also offers rewards unlike anything else in the understanding of color and space as well as the effect of light and atmosphere on individual forms in the landscape.



Painting the salt marches of Ipswich

HD: You’ve been active in landscape preservation, can you tell me a little bit about your work in that field and how it connects to the art that you’re making?

MI: Landscape painters have a deep appreciation of nature, and an interest in preservation seems to follow from that. Our involvement has occurred in just about the best way for an artist: curating painting exhibitions. Most recently we organized *Through Foreign Eyes*, a show of twenty-three artists—mostly American, in the Sangallo fortress in Civita Castellana, Italy. Civita is an important place historically, as it was one of the major centers of open air painting north of Rome between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. It is associated with artists like Claude Lorrain, Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes, Turner, and Corot. Its dramatic landscapes were sought out for centuries by artists seeking to find ideal forms in nature. The important transformations in Corot’s work that underlay his influence on modern painting took place in Civita Castellana.

Unfortunately, many of the landscapes surrounding the town have been marred by anonymous development. There was a widespread lack of awareness of the artistic tradition that made Civita such an important destination. The intent of our exhibition was to encourage preservation of the town’s natural patrimony and foster alternative directions for economic development. We argued that the Civita landscape had acquired a cultural value through a long, continuous tradition of artistic interpretation, and as such should be valued as cultural patrimony. Furthermore, we suggested that the relationship between landscape and historic memory in Civita was not just a local phenomenon, but part of the historic memory of painting itself, with as significance far beyond the town.

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Students calmly painting in a rain storm

HD: How would you say the work you are doing fits into the historical narrative of landscape painting?

MI: The historical narrative of landscape painting has technical and philosophical dimensions that are interconnected. In western art, the narrative begins with the Renaissance fascination with the material world, and the insistence on observation. The dominant methods evolved when artists experimented relying on observation as a means of education. In landscape painting the philosophical dimension largely regards the different concepts of man's relationship to nature through the ages, so artists developed new techniques reflecting the philosophical concerns of the specific moment.

Today there is little emphasis on observation in art education; so much artistic production is dependent on photography with no reliance on observation whatsoever. More and more the human relationship to nature is mediated by technology and our disconnection from nature—and consequently the continuum of landscape painting—grows.



Students in Central Park during a previous year's Introduction to Plein-Air Painting workshop

By insisting on working directly from observation in nature, we are upholding historic tradition. However our respective narratives are contemporary, as they can only be. The sophistication of the restrained color relationships displayed in Joe's multi layered abstract paintings is a direct consequence of time spent observing light on form in the open air. My insistence on the fragility of natural beauty reflects the existential dilemma of our time, in which what was once considered to be a timeless and permanent part of human experience can no longer be taken for granted.

Maddine Insalaco will be teaching two workshops in May: Introduction to Plein-Air Painting, May 9–10, and Elements of Landscape, May 11–15. The League holds a number of weekend, evening, and week-long workshops, in which League instructors and prominent visiting artists work with intimate groups of about a dozen students. Workshops focus on a particular aspect of art-making or specific medium or techniques. A current schedule of upcoming workshops can be found [here](#).