



TODAY'S  
MASTERS

BY DAVID MASELLO

# SITES SPECIFIC

**P**amela Talese was outdoors painting a graffiti-covered wall and a giant gas tank in Rome's Testaccio neighborhood when some gypsy children bicycled up to watch her work. So curious were they about her — and about why she wasn't rendering iconic landmarks like the Coliseum, as so many other artists do — that they wouldn't stop asking questions. Finally, Talese recounts in her diary, she had to tell them politely that she needed to work *con calma* (in quiet), and that she would talk to them later — though they returned every 20 minutes. In other Roman locales, be it a traffic circle or a Fascist-era waterworks, "I barely apply a brushstroke to the canvas before someone says, 'Brava, brava,'" she laughs. She is grateful for the praise, of course, but distracted by it, too.

When Joseph Paquet focused his painterly attention on a lift-bridge in a ruinous industrial landscape of Gary, Indiana, he was wary of the gang members who might appear. Recalling that as "the most dangerous place I have ever seen," he is certain, at least, that



**PAMELA TALESE** (b. 1964), *The Barbican of the Kill van Kull*, 2015, oil on panel, 30 x 20 in., on view at the Noble Maritime Collection (Staten Island, NY) in the exhibition *Robbins Reef Lighthouse: A Home in the Harbor* ■ Pamela Talese at work; photo: Ellen Finn





KATHLEEN DUNPHY (b. 1963), *Study for Silver Morning*, 2014, oil on linen, 9 x 12 in., private collection

no one would have “confused someone staring at an easel on an abandoned lot with someone selling drugs.” And when Kathleen Dunphy sets up her easel in an empty field surrounded by dense Northern California forestland, she sometimes admits to “getting a bogey-man kind of fear,” though she brings her big dogs to ward off such interlopers, real or imagined. “My dogs are good protectors, and they’ve seen me painting outdoors since they were puppies,” she explains.

What these three artists — indeed, all serious plein air painters — routinely encounter are the natural elements: rain, wind, cold, heat, blinding sunlight, approaching darkness. “It’s about being uncomfortable.” That’s how Paquet sums up the experience of painting outdoors. After 30 years, this St. Paul-based artist has become philosophical — and embracing — of the discipline: “By the time most people reach mid-life, they just want to be comfortable. But plein air painting, or what I call painting from life, affords you the discomfort of living on the edge, which allows you to feel things differently.



JOSEPH PAQUET (b. 1962), *Blue Collar*, 2015, oil on linen, 28 x 40 in., available from the artist



**MADDINE INSALACO** (b. 1957), *Civita Castellana, View from Vignale*, 2016, oil on linen, 8 x 10 in., available from the artist

There's something about the magic of discomfort that wakes you up." Teaching a workshop in upstate New York, he once turned to his students, all soaked with rain, and declared, "This is what plein air painting is all about. You're alive now."

### A BREATH OF FRESH AIR

Plein air artists are hardly a new breed, though interest in their discipline has grown dramatically in the last two decades, along with the breadth of their subject matter. Pastoral scenes were once their principal focus, but now abandoned factories, ruinous farm buildings, prowling wildlife, and silent small-town streets have also become typical. Leonardo, Corot, Van Gogh, Turner, Lorrain, Constable, the Barbizon School, and the Impressionists all worked outdoors — recording, analyzing, and, most importantly, interpreting the life of nature happening around them. That tradition continues today, perhaps more robustly than ever. Plein air has virtually become a brand, with juried competitions that resemble a kind of aesthetic sport. At such annual gatherings as Plein Air Easton (Maryland), the

Laguna Beach Plein Air Painting Invitational (California), the Door County Plein Air Festival (Wisconsin), PleinAir Moab (Utah), and many others nationwide and abroad, it is not uncommon to find hundreds of artists competing, practically blowing on their paint to dry it faster.

There is even an organization that monitors and gives credence to the genre. The 31-year-old Plein Air Painters of America (PAPA) is a by-invitation fellowship of like-minded artists working to ensure that quality prevails and that expertise is shared with the public and others who want to paint this way. (Paquet and Dunphy are among its members.) "Through [the] approach of first-hand observation, our members strive to more fully explore and respond to the timeless beauty that surrounds us all," reads PAPA's mission statement. According to Susan McGarry, who served as its director for 14 years, PAPA has fewer than 40 "Signature" members: "Periodically, the membership is polled for potential new members," she explains. "From the names suggested, a vote is taken and the top vote-getters are sent an invitation." The organization hosts approximately four annual exhibitions of members' works and conducts workshops for both aspiring and seasoned artists.

"Competitions have certainly raised public awareness of plein air painting, but maybe to a fault," says Dunphy, who feels that the push for

artists to paint fast simply for the sake of speed is not a proper goal. Some artists have likened this obsession to that of the culinary arts: on television, chefs who work quickest with a wok are lauded, while slower ones are left to simmer.

"We've always argued that plein air is a unique kind of painting," says Maddine Insalaco, who, with her husband, Joe Vinson, runs Etruscan Places, the outdoor painting academy they founded more than 20 years ago in Italy. (They also conduct workshops in Ipswich, Massachusetts.) "It requires you to work quickly, with fugitive light conditions. There's both an emotive and physical component to being outside and having to work fast. We feel that the only way to understand the colors of nature derives from the strength of the light as you are experiencing it. It's about observation in the deepest sense." While traditional plein air artists have long depicted the bucolic, as Insalaco and Vinson do, many others are moving beyond that terrain.

Insalaco, who has written much about the history of plein air painting, says the discipline expanded rapidly from the 17th century. But while some scholars cite insufficient interior lighting as one reason many painters headed outdoors, Insalaco feels the boom also stemmed from their wanting to be social, to be among fellow painters — a dynamic that flourishes today. "Moreover, in much of 18th- and 19th-century



(ABOVE) JOE VINSON (b. 1953), *Baroque Church at Tenuta Piana*, 2015, oil on paper, 9 x 12 in., private collection ■ (BELOW) HENRY BUERCKHOLTZ (b. 1954), *Wild Palms*, 2015, oil on canvas, 16 x 12 in., available from the artist

Europe, working outside was potentially dangerous,” Insalaco explains. “There were a lot of criminals, so painting in the company of others was a way to remain safe.” So pronounced was criminal activity that some artists, such as Corot, tried to capture them on canvas; he even hired criminals to pose for him.

Another reason plein air painting has again become a genre as identifiable as, say, still life or abstraction is the aging of the baby boomers. As ever more of them reach retirement age, they have embraced plein air painting as a hobby and avocation. The fact that it can be enjoyed anywhere, alone or in groups, makes it particularly appealing to people who travel. Insalaco notes, “You can make something in the company of other people and be in a beautiful place while doing so.”

#### OUT IN THE OPEN

The French phrase “en plein air” translates as “in the open air,” and that is exactly where plein air artists work, be it in a forest or industrial zone, on a city street, or among animals in a meadow. “For me, plein air has to be about a landscape,” says the New York artist Henry Buerckholtz. “While painting a rural landscape in North Carolina or Florida or Massachusetts, I see color combinations I couldn’t invent on my own if they didn’t exist in nature. There is something outside that always leads to new ways of looking. Reality tells you more than a photograph.”

At first blush, it appears that photographing a landscape and retreating to one’s dry studio would be far more efficient than enduring the elements, making small talk with nosy passersby, or warding off muggers. “I started out working from photographs,” says Dunphy, who is known for her depictions of nature both wild and sedate — ocean waves crashing into cliffs, seemingly silent forests traced by streams, boats moored in still harbors — “but when I was introduced to plein air, I was shocked

at how much more is out there than any photograph could capture. The human eye is infinitely more sensitive to subtle colors and textures than any camera could be.”

Talese agrees, stressing the difference between painting from a photograph and being in the landscapes you’re painting, places she accesses on the bicycle she has customized to carry some 400 pounds of equipment. “You see more in real life. It’s that simple. I do better outside. I see more. I share the energy of the place. I can watch the light move across things. Shapes are revealed by the sun.”

Few plein air artists, however, are able to — or wish to — fully complete their works in the field. Instead, they often return to their studios to apply details and, mostly, ruminate on what they have witnessed. Paquet, who says the “last five percent of a painting” is completed indoors, values this phase highly: “It’s about giving myself the time and the ability to make subjective choices that bring a



picture closer to being a personal statement rather than just a representational image. I am trying to elegantly and subjectively sew the painting together. I am deconstructing nature and clarifying it. It's not about copying nature. That's when the art becomes your own."

The Brooklyn-based artist Daniel Heidkamp, who works in several genres including plein air, often completes his industrial-scapes on site within a few hours. "I'm not completely comfortable with the term 'plein air,'" he admits. "I say I'm a painter from life, an observational painter." For his 2015 series *Barbizon Beauty School*, Heidkamp spent two weeks in France exploring locales once haunted by Corot, Sisley, Pissarro, and Millet. There he captured some of the giant boulders in this region's forests, its waterfalls, and other pastoral elements, as well as scenes in Paris. "I didn't touch those paintings after I returned to New York," he emphasizes. "Whatever happened in France, where I was painting on site, was special enough."

While most serious artists are insightful philosophers about their disciplines, plein air artists are particularly gifted at articulating their thoughts. Perhaps this stems from being outdoors — exposed in ways that indoor artists are not. Art is ultimately, of course, a solitary endeavor, even when you work in a group, but to paint outside is to become more vulnerable than you would be in a warm studio. When Talese bicycles to less-than-pastoral locales around New York City and Rome, she is keenly aware of traversing the land she is about to interpret: "I am in my own topography," she says. "Being on the bike means getting a 360-degree feeling of everything. I know all that I have passed through getting to this spot where I set up the easel. I am really attached to a place that way, embedded in the story I'm telling with my paint."

Sometimes when Dunphy is out in the cold, she feels the seductive allure of being inside with a cup of coffee. "But if I'm really excited about something I am painting outdoors," she says, "nothing bothers me. It doesn't matter if it is cold or hot, or if I have some halting fears running through me. All of what I am feeling comes out on canvas. A canvas might be blowing away in the wind, so all of that drama comes out. Plein air painting is really about emotion."

Then there are artists like Heidkamp who, while studying a tree in detail, prefers to do so



DANIEL HEIDKAMP (b. 1980), *Entrez-vous*, 2015, oil on linen, 24 x 18 in., Half Gallery, New York City

in some degree of comfort. "I try to create an outdoor studio for myself," he says. By minimizing the materials he brings, he feels more able to experience "the epic feel of the outdoors — the sky, the clouds, the sun." Heidkamp does not even bring an easel, preferring to put his canvas on the ground or on a folding table: "Painting outside, from observation, requires hunting down the subject, thinking about it, studying it so that you can paint something poignant."

Insalaco notes that the plein air experience can, literally, color even the canvases of painters not working in a representational mode. Her husband, Joe Vinson, makes hauntingly minimalist compositions that involve hypnotic repetitions of colors in what he calls a "cross hatching" technique. Although he paints many classic plein air landscapes, his abstractions could never be confused with them. But, he explains, "I paint

landscapes outside, from direct observation. Producing paintings that depict the kind of light that our eyes were formed to see has proved the best way to learn color. It has laid the foundation for my abstract studio work." Insalaco adds, "The only way to capture color is to be outdoors. The curator of a 2008 Georgia show of our plein air works insisted on including some of Joe's abstractions. He felt strongly about showing the public that Joe's insights into color, derived from working outdoors, enabled him to create elegant, successful abstract works."

Paquet echoes this idea by citing the influence of natural colors in some of Willem De Kooning's canvases: "He rode his bike back and forth from Long Island Sound to his studio, so his abstract paintings are informed greatly by the nature and colors he saw along the way."

#### LOOKING WITHOUT POSSESSING

In the catalogue accompanying their 2012 exhibition of plein air works inspired by the Civita Castellana landscape outside Rome, Insalaco and Vinson emphasized the valuable role that plein air artists play in society: "Artists are people who notice things and bring them to public attention. Open-air painters

are accustomed to looking at nature for long periods of time, and notice changes in the landscape even more."

Though plein air artists paint different subjects and work differently — some striving to finish a canvas in situ, others taking it home to touch up or brush away some grit — what they share is a reverence for being outdoors, as life happens and as the wind blows. The studio they occupy is dimension-less, though what they seek to capture is just a portion of the life occurring within it. No matter where Talese pedals — be it Rome, Ireland's County Kerry, or the Brooklyn Navy Yard — she knows she does not own that space. She is there merely to interpret it. "I am a guest on the site, wherever that is," she insists, "and I have a reverence for it while I occupy it."

**David Masello** writes about art and culture. His new one-act drama, *The Middle Distance*, was performed by the Manhattan Repertory Theatre last winter.

**Information:** For details, visit [pleinairmagazine.com](http://pleinairmagazine.com).