

John MacDonald

Newsletter: June 2013



UPCOMING WORKSHOPS

2013 • JULY 15–19

THE BASCOM 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

MENAGGIO YOUTH HOSTEL
Menaggio, Lake Como, Italy
www.lakecomohostel.com

“Some books are written in anguish, others just write themselves and those are jolly to write.”
-Somerset Maugham

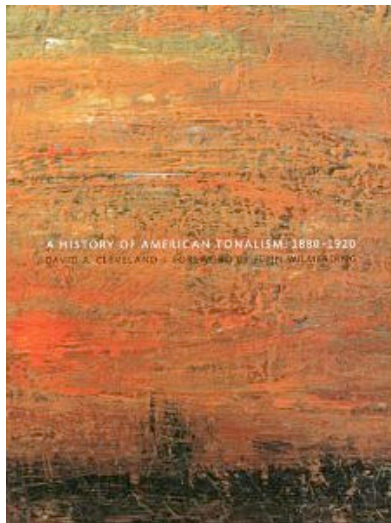
News from the studio. . .

Whew! Several long trips, a major construction project on the house, and a flurry of painting have put me at least a month behind on getting out the next newsletter. Ideally, I'd like to send them out every six weeks or so but reality rarely accommodates our ideals. We have to roll with it. . .

Resources . . .

Recommended Reading

Curt Hanson, one of the two artists I featured in the February newsletter, recommended this book to me and I'd like to pass along the recommendation. [The History of American Tonalism: 1880–1920](#). The book is large (9.25" x 12.5"), thorough (600+ pages), and expensive



(search for a used copy). The reproductions are of high quality and the text interesting and exhaustive. Some of the featured artists include: George Inness, Alexander Wyant, Charles Warren Eaton, John Twachtman, James McNeill Whistler, and many lesser known painters. It's a wonderful book for discovering

new artists, seeing old artists in a new light, and understanding how influential the great early American landscapes painters were on the direction taken by art in America at the turn of the 20th century.

Artist Watch:

If you subscribe to *Plein Air Magazine*, you may notice that many of the featured painters list Isaak Levitan as an influence. Levitan was a Russian landscape painter. He was born in 1860 and died from tuberculosis at the age of forty. His landscapes have a simplicity, honesty, and freshness to them that make them worth studying. His compositions are always interesting and his ability to capture light rivals that of the impressionists. A fairly large selection of his work can be found on the internet. Unfortunately, I've found only one, readily available book of his work: [Isaak Levitan, Lyrical Landscape](#) by Averil King, published by Philip Wilson Publishers, 2004.



Coaching Ourselves **Using a larger label.**

In the early 1900s, the railroads were king and when the automobile appeared, they were unconcerned. They saw themselves as being in the railroad business. They were wrong. They were in the *transportation* business and soon the growth of the automobile industry and highway system nearly destroyed them.



Are you hurting your creative self by blindly adhering to self-images and labels? Are you ignoring a bigger and better picture of yourself?

Everyone creates self-labels—it's normal. They give us security, shape our identity, and place us in society. Nearly everyone uses self-labels to describe what they do. But far too often labels can become inflexible boundaries that determine the *content* of what we do. They can limit our ability to discover new ways of working, scare us away from exploring something new and unknown, and blind us to a larger, more creative worldview. An artist wedded to the concept of herself as an "oil portrait painter" may be reluctant to move beyond that media and subject matter simply because she has invested so much of her sense of identity in that fixed label.

For labels to serve rather than limit us, it's vital that we come to know which ones we use and then expand them. For instance, if you're a "traditional oil landscape painter," can you begin thinking of yourself as an "oil painter," or just a "painter?"

If you can enlarge your self-image perhaps you'll be open to painting abstractly, or working in acrylics or even nontraditional materials. Then imagine how much more your world could open up if you settled on simply "artist" as your label!

How large can you make your labels? How far can you stretch the boundary of your identity? Imagine saying simply, "I'm someone who creates." Wouldn't that be freeing?

Harrison Gallery in Williamstown had asked that I do several paintings of the Williams College campus here in Williamstown. I balked, never really having had any interest in painting portraits of buildings. After all, I was a "pure" landscape pain-



ter—one who paints natural forms, usually devoid of any buildings of any kind. Nevertheless, I decided to try it. And what I discovered in doing these paintings was that buildings can be seen as just forms in the landscape, no different from a row of trees or the slopes of a hillside. Something I've avoided for years turned out to be interesting, challenging, and a great deal of fun. They've opened up an entirely new world of subject matter. How blind I was!

What are your labels? Are they limiting you? Can you expand them? Can you let go of *every* label?



Deconstructing a Painting.

Richard Schmid, in his book *Alla Prima*, points out that a painting consists of only four elements: drawing (which includes the composition), value, color, and edges. I would add only three additional items: gradients, patterns or textures (which includes details), and the contrast and variation between all areas which gives life to the entire painting.

In deconstructing a painting, I'll do so in terms of those four elements: composition, value, color, edges. I'll also mention gradients and patterns when they are important elements in the painting and will finish by pointing out how the variation and contrast between the large areas of the painting brings the entire work together.

The Painting.

In the last newsletter, I used a painting by Gustav Klimt, *The Swamp*, for this exercise. It may not have been the best choice as it's a complex and unconventional landscape. In this newsletter we'll look at a much more classically constructed landscape: "The Pool, Medfield" by Dennis Miller Bunker, painted in 1889.

Let's begin by simply looking at the image. Allow any critical or analytical thoughts to arise in our minds and then fade away. Focus solely on the image. Let the eyes wander where they will. Notice both the particulars and the whole.

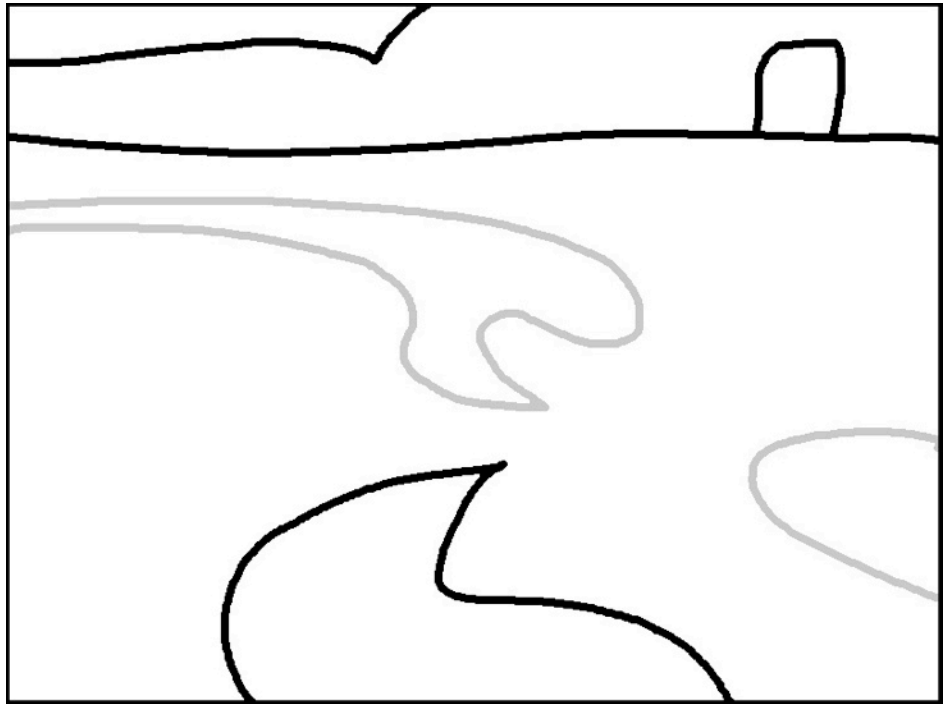


Composition:

A classic landscape composition: the foreground and middle ground taken up by a large, receding plane of a field. In the background lies a row of trees with a hint of sky.

This simple division of the canvas into three unequal parts is very common in landscapes. And he uses an equally common device—a diagonal shape in the immediate foreground—to get the eye quickly beyond the foreground and into the middle of the painting. To keep the upper edges of the field and tree line from becoming boring, he both tapers the tree line (so it runs from right to left, into deeper space) and adds curves to the horizontal lines. The middle bushes become secondary, diagonal shapes that help lead the eye into the space.

Notice that there's not a single straight line in the entire painting! All the lines of the composition flow, like the foreground stream.

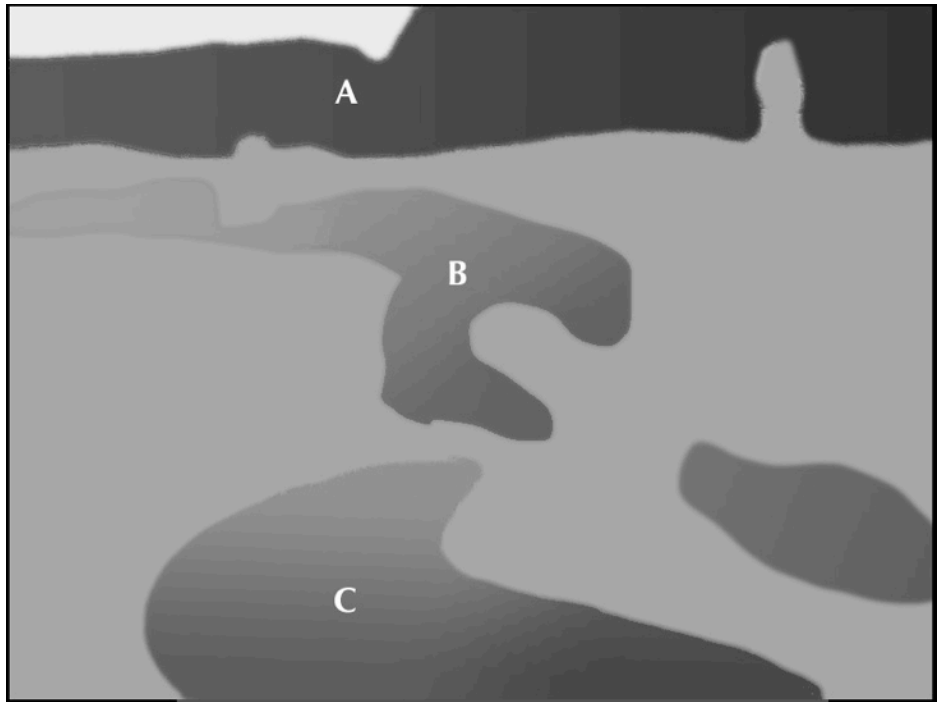


Value Structure:

This value structure is right out of Carlson's *Guide to Landscape Painting*: a middle value fore/midground with the darkest value in background trees and the lightest value in the sky. The strongest value contrast is between the trees and sky, which is guaranteed to draw the eye through the painting and to the background.

Bunker uses gradients in the trees (A), middle bushes (B), and stream (C) to both draw the eye into the space and to create the illusion of depth. Strongly defined shapes of value will often appear flat and perpendicular to the picture plane. Introducing a subtle gradient and varying the edges will help create a greater illusion of depth.

We often think of composition in terms of line, as in the example above. But I often find it more helpful to think of composition in terms of interlocking shapes of the three to five most important value areas in the scene. If a painting works at this stage, it's much likely to work as a finished painting.



Color

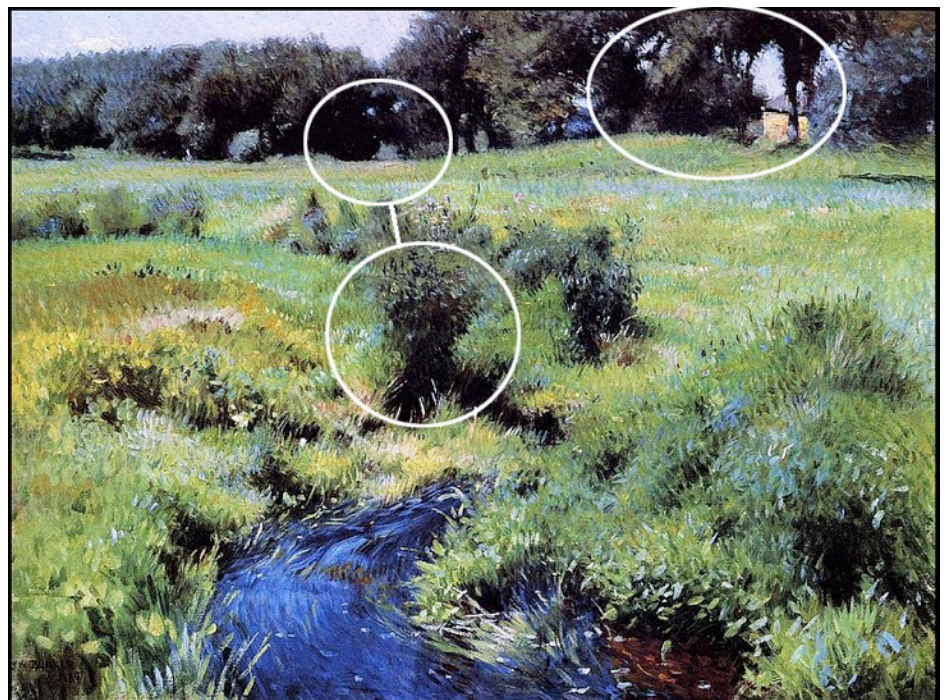
Notice how easy it is to simplify this painting into four basic hues: light purplish sky, dark greenish-bluish trees, greens in the field, and blues in the foreground water. In the trees, there is a marked gradient from olive greens (B) to bluish greens (A) and in the field a gradient from more cool greens in the rear (A) to more yellow and “grass” greens in the foreground (B).

The most saturated colors are found in the foreground water, followed by the middle ground grasses and ending with more muted tree and sky colors. This gradation of saturation heightens the sense of space in the painting. Likewise, the contrast between cool and warm tones is the least in the sky, followed by the trees. Only in the middle and foreground meadow and stream are there extremes of warm and cool hues. Notice especially the very effective play of warm and cool greens in the field (circled areas) and how he enhances these temperature contrasts by keeping the values within those areas extremely close.



Edges

Bunker uses an impressionistic brushwork throughout the painting, giving it a surface uniformity. Where he creates a more hard edge, he does so less by creating a physically hard edge between two paint areas as he does by pushing the value contrast. Most of the hard edges are in the background trees (circled). Notice the difference between the small circled area in the trees and the circled foreground bush. The value contrasts within each area is similar but the edges of the bush are softer because of the more broken up application of paint—a looser painting of the boundary between bush and background grasses. The edge between the trees and field in the background is much harder by comparison. In a painting of mostly soft edges, these few hard edges will draw our eye, in this case across the field and into deeper space.



Contrast/Variation

Comparing this painting to that of Gustave Klimt (see the previous newsletter), it's interesting to see how much more variety in brushwork, edges, and shape and pattern Klimt used than Bunker. And yet this painting doesn't suffer from the lack of it. Why?

In the Klimt painting, we looked at variety and contrast in terms of drawing, value, and color. Let's look at the contrast and variety in this painting in terms of areas that are busy versus those that are quiet. I've chosen some of the more easily identifiable areas of each. Those circled red are busy: there are a multitude of different shapes, marks, and value and color contrasts within

them. Those circled yellow are much more quiet: value contrasts are minimal, the brushwork is more uniform, and there are fewer forms depicted.

In this painting, and in all successful paintings, the quiet areas will usually outnumber the busy ones. More importantly, those areas with a lot of visual activity are almost always surrounded by quieter areas. If an area features a lot of detail or value contrast, then that area needs to be surrounded by areas in which little is happening. For example, look at the area with the small yellow building hidden among the dramatic sky holes in the trees. Notice how it's surrounded by a simple bluish bush on the right, a uniform area of green grass

below, and a simple olive green tree on the left. If you wish some areas of your painting to grab the viewer, then surround them with areas in which very little is occurring. Giving the viewer all the detail and texture and contrast in every area of the painting will be confusing, deadening, and ultimately boring.

Despite all those wonderful temperature contrasts in the green grass, Bunker puts the punch in this painting in the background trees, mid-ground bushes, and foreground stream. He lets those areas lead our eye into the painting. But without those quiet spots, our eye wouldn't know where to go and the painting wouldn't be nearly as interesting nor as masterful.

