

# John MacDonald: *news from the studio*



## UPCOMING WORKSHOPS

2013 • JULY 15–19

### THE BASCOM CENTER

Highlands, North Carolina  
[www.thebascom.org](http://www.thebascom.org)

2013 • AUGUST 1–2

### THE BERKSHIRE BOTANICAL GARDEN

Stockbridge, Mass.  
[www.berkshirebotanical.org](http://www.berkshirebotanical.org)

2013 • AUGUST 19–21

### PENINSULA SCHOOL OF ART

Fish Creek, Wisconsin  
[www.peninsulaartschool.com](http://www.peninsulaartschool.com)

2013 • OCTOBER 4–6

### MENAGGIO YOUTH HOSTEL

Menaggio, Lake Como, Italy  
[www.lakecomohostel.com](http://www.lakecomohostel.com)

“The value of art often has more to do with artist, dealer, or auction-house branding, and with collector ego, than it does with art.”

–Don Thompson, author of  
“*The \$12 Million Stuffed Shark.*”

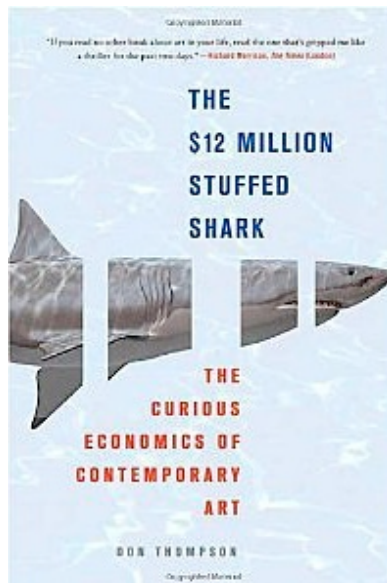
## News from the studio. . .

Despite weather that was ideal for plein air painting, I did much less of it last month than I would have liked. A nasty cold and a major construction project on the house kept me in the studio painting from photos. I was again reminded that working from photographs presents its own set of challenges, which I’ll address in a future newsletter.

## Resources . . .

### Recommended Reading

A good follow-up to last month’s recommendation, *The Painted Word* by Tom Wolfe, is this month’s book: “*The Twelve Million Dollar Stuffed Shark, The Curious Economics of Contemporary Art*” by Don Thompson. It’s a fascinating and entertaining analysis of the artists, galleries, collectors, and auction houses which inhabit the art world’s stratosphere. This month’s quote (in the sidebar at left) is taken from the book. It’s worth the reading.



## Artist Watch:

The Impressionists were masters at capturing the color of rivers, lakes, and seas. But Frits Thaulow (1847–1906) was unequaled in his ability to capture the *form* of water: the way water swirls, ripples and pools. He has much to teach us about how to see, simplify, and portray water. No one did it better than Frits.



An image search on Google will turn up many fine examples of his work. The book with the best reproductions is a catalog printed by the Hirschl & Adler Galleries for a 1985 gallery show. It’s worth buying if you can track down a copy.

## Tips & Techniques

### The Limited Palette

Last week, being in the mood to play with the limited palette which I’ve been using: white, Cad Yellow



Light, Prussian Blue, and Alizarin Crimson— I replaced Prussia Blue with Raw Umber. This pushes the palette entirely into the warm part of the color spectrum. Raw Umber, when mixed with white, can appear quite cool, even blue, when surrounded by warm colors. For subject matter, I chose a photograph of the sun setting on Mt. Greylock, a scene a few miles from home. The result of the first session—about 3 hours—is above. The size is 12” x 24.” It’s not yet finished but even at this stage it shows how well Raw Umber can provide cool hues in a warm landscape. Mixing Raw Umber with white and yellow creates greenish hues; mix white and Alizarin Crimson to create purplish hues, and Raw Umber mixed only with white will appear quite blue. The sky in this painting is Raw Umber, white, and a touch of orange (Cad Yellow with Alizarin Crimson.) I’ll probably work in some more intense blues later by using only white and Raw Umber. If you want to try this palette, I should point out that the brand of Raw Umber that you buy is crucial. Some brands are not pure umber and result in very dull and grayish tones. I use Vasari brand Raw Umber. Mixed with white, the result is a beautiful silver gray. Their web address is [www.shopvasaricolors.com/](http://www.shopvasaricolors.com/)

After working on the painting above, I did a quick study on an 8” x 10” panel (below), pushing the saturation of the yellows and oranges as far as I could to create the illusion of stronger blues with the umber. Whenever I could, I used pure Cad Yellow to lighten colors rather than white, which kept the mixture rich in saturation and warm in temperature. Working in various limited palettes is a wonderful way to explore color.



## ***Coaching Ourselves*** **The importance of Play.**

*[This was first posted on the website of the Creativity Coaches Association.]*

Most of us have had the experience of struggling with a problem and being told by a fellow artist to “just play with it.” That simple expression hides a profound truth about the importance of play.

Creativity and learning flourish when we’re on our edge, out of our comfort zone and out of our spheres of knowledge. We can only learn when we’re in the unknown. But the unknown is often terrifying

Normally, we react to fear by identifying with it and then freezing or fleeing. Instead, with practice, we can learn to accept our emotional discomfort and yet stay on our edge anyway. The easiest way to learn this is by adopting an attitude of play. Why? Because play takes us out of ourselves, out of our habitual patterns of judging ourselves and our work, and out of our automatically triggered scripts of negative thinking. When we’re truly playing, we tend to be oblivious of ourselves and the results of our work. We’re in a space where right and wrong, good and bad, simply don’t exist. There is a lightness and a joy in our activity.

Which brings us to the most important reason for play—joy. If we scratch the surface of any of our creative blocks, we’ll find fear. Fear is the foundation of all of the ways in which we resist creating to our potential. But play is rooted in joy and joy and fear are incompatible. When we’re filled with the joy of playing, there’s no room for fear. It is in the state of play that we learn the truth about fear and discover that we can live with it and manage it. And as we become more accustomed to playing fearlessly, we can relax, open up, and begin working fearlessly.

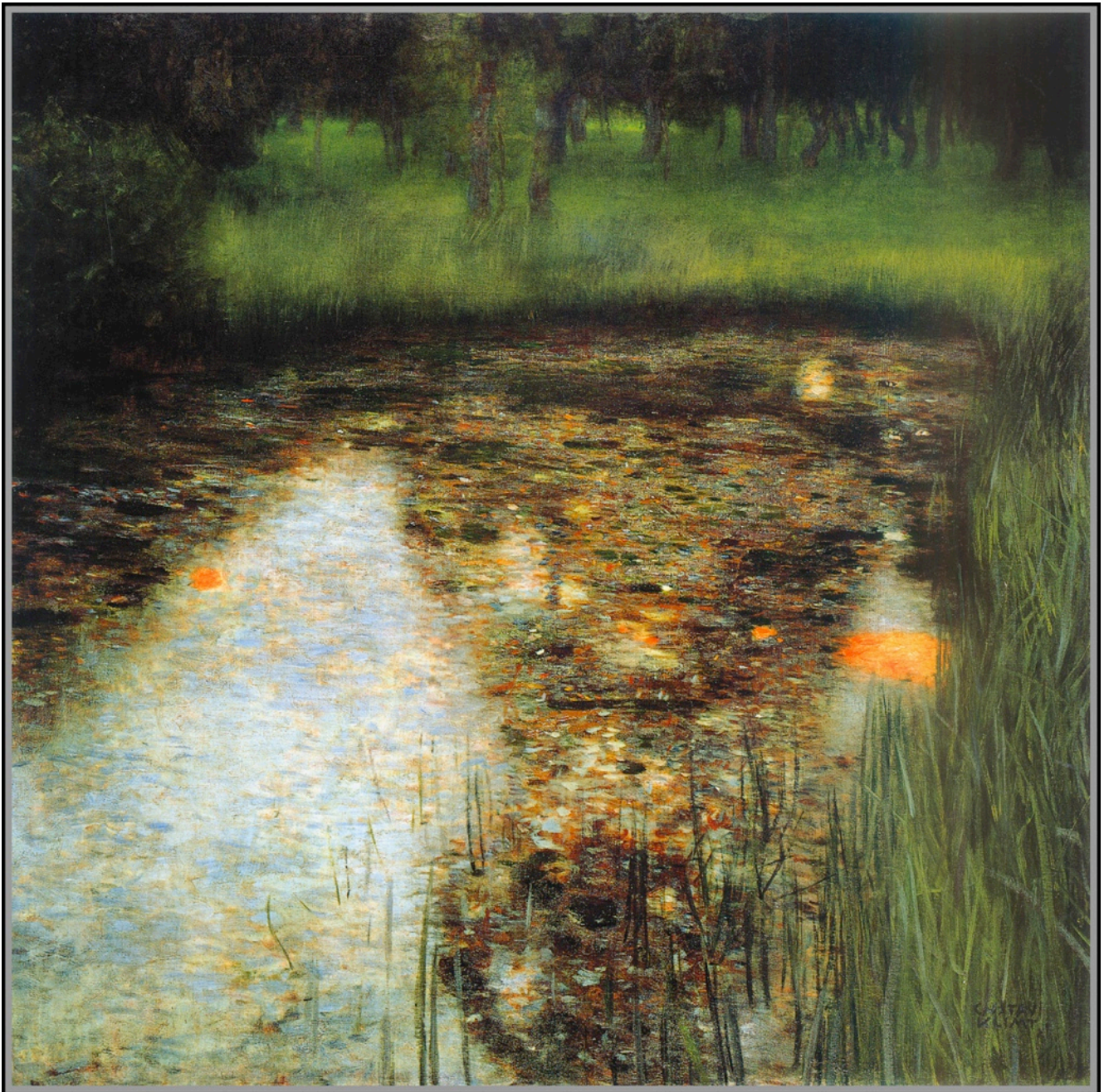
## Deconstructing a Painting.

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 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.

Perhaps this painting, *The Swamp* by Gustav Klimt, isn't a good choice to use as my first painting analysis. It's not a typical landscape and it's astonishingly complex and sophisticated. But let's try it anyway. Begin by simply *looking* at the painting.



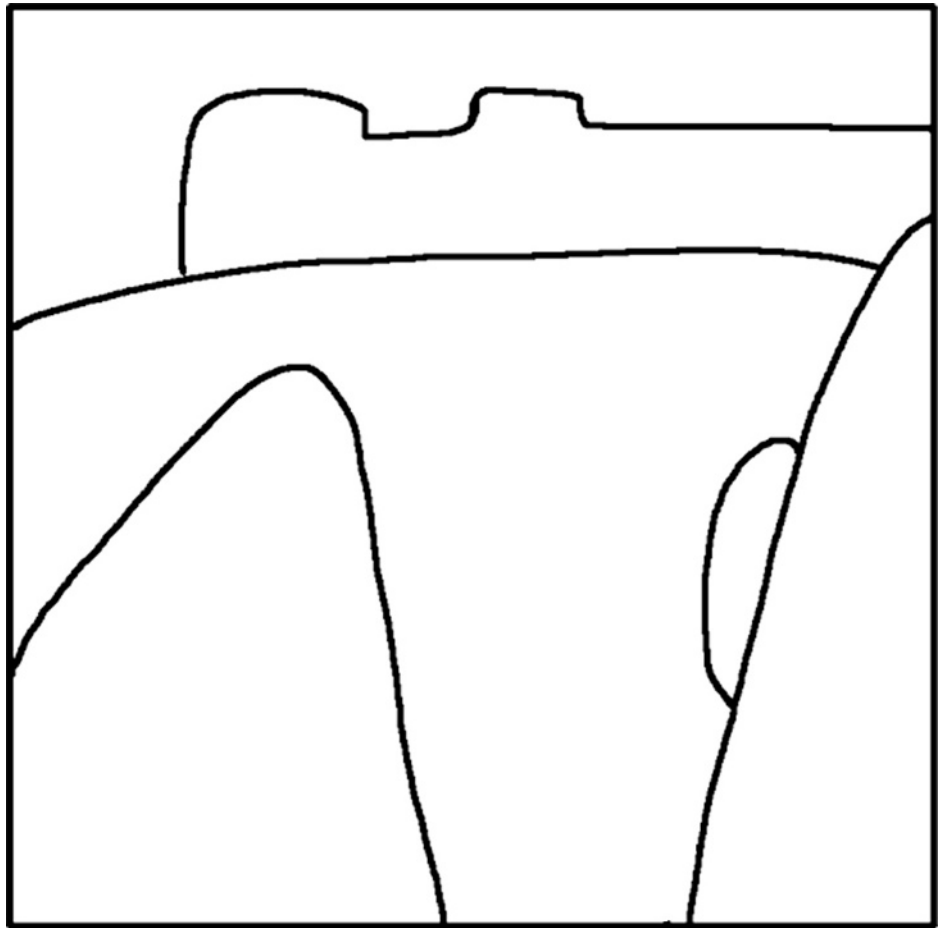
## Composition:

What a complex and unique composition! It's so different from the typical landscape with its three or four horizontal bands of foreground fields, middle ground hills or trees, and distant mountains or cloud bands.

Notice the high horizon line, which immediately focuses our attention on the foreground and middle ground, exactly where Klimt wants our eyes to go.

The composition is a combination of quiet shapes (the top horizontal bands) and dynamic shapes (the bottom triangular shapes.) It feels balanced.

The "W"-shaped diagonal lines at the bottom lead the eye up to and contrast with the two horizontal lines on top. Those two upper horizontals become a stable cap, resting on the diagonal lines like a tabletop and keeping our eye from flying off the painting.



## Value:

The values have been simplified into three "foundation" values. We can see how, when the values are massed together like this, they form strong, simple shapes. This value structure, coupled with the solid composition, will hold the painting together almost regardless of what Klimt does with color. (By the way, this is exactly what we do when we create an underpainting—and why we do it.)

Notice how he uses a gradient in the sky, the light triangle on the bottom left, to draw the eye up into the painting. Because it's the only strong value gradient in the painting, it stands out.

Often, a focal point is created by placing the darkest dark near the lightest light. That's not the case here. Klimt frames the upper portion of the painting in black and lets the strong light triangle of the sky lead the eye to the middle of the painting. He uses color contrast and pattern to create the focal point rather than values. If it works, why not?



## Color

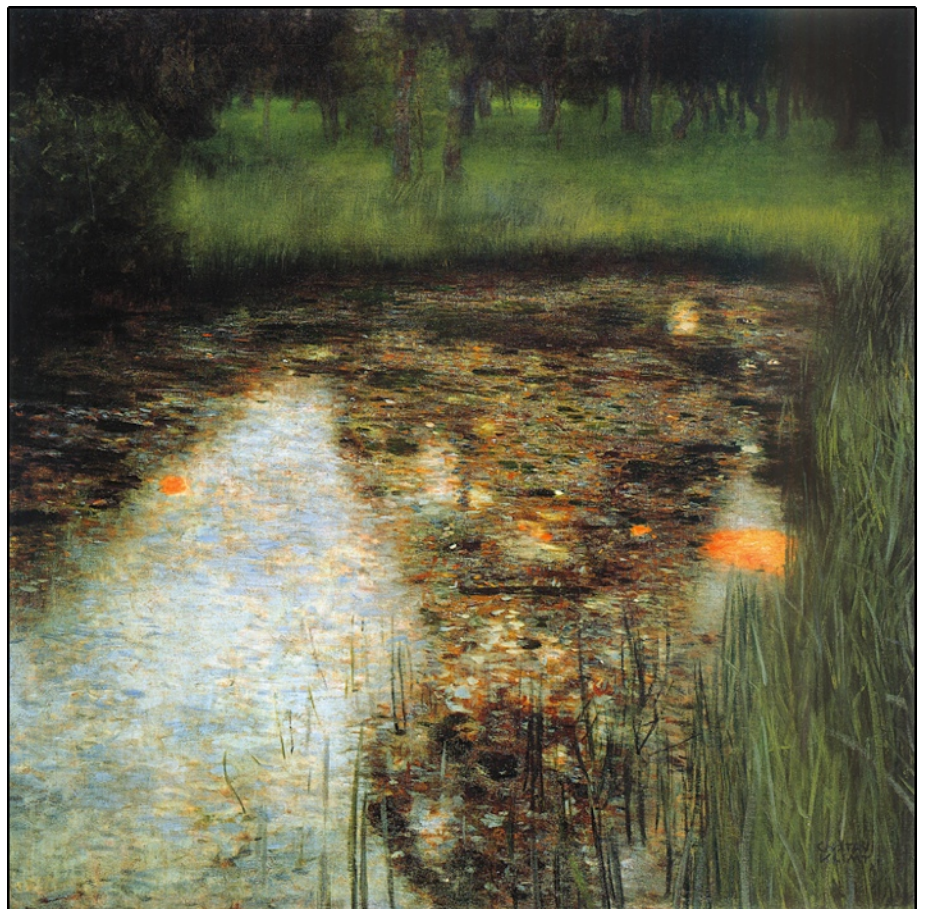
By blurring the image (approximating how we see an image when squinting) we can see the basic warm/cool structure of the painting. The greens in the upper band are relatively warm while the greens in the band running down the right side of the painting are slightly cooler and more muted. But the contrast between these two areas is subtle. Klimt saves the strongest contrasts in temperature for the center of the painting—at the focal point. That's where strong contrasts should be!

The reflection of the tree—an upside down triangle—comprises primarily warm hues. The sky—a triangle of approximately the same shape but right-side up—comprises primarily cool hues. The blues of the sky, if seen in isolation, would appear fairly neutral but Klimt adds those marvelous orange spots, which then makes the blues appear much cooler and saturated than they actually are. And it's no accident that the orange spots are nearly the same value as the sky: the closer in value two areas are, the stronger will appear the color contrast. If you want two colors to contrast in temperature, keep them close in value, as Klimt does so masterfully in this part of the painting.

## Edges

The only hard edges in this painting are exactly where Klimt wants to draw your eye—to that astounding pattern and texture within the brown reflection. Notice the contrast between the soft edges in the grass and trees at the top of the painting and the sharp edges in those small shapes in the brown reflection. And he enhances the appearance of those sharp edges by making sure there's plenty of value contrast between those little shapes and the background in which they float.

Notice too that the value and color differences in the sky are minimal—close in value and therefore appearing to have softer edges. Klimt doesn't want the sky detracting from all the activity and contrast in the reflection.



## Contrast/Variation

This is where the genius of Klimt shines. So varied is his handling of each of the foundation areas, which I've outlined in heavy black to isolate them, that they look like different paintings! Normally, a painting with such varied handling of areas wouldn't work. But he uses a strong composition and sticks to his foundation values to ensure that everything holds together.

In **drawing**, notice the range of the handling of forms: on top, the dance of squat, soft tree trunks in a haze of undefined green grass; on the right edge, subtle vertical blades of grass; in the sky, soft, impressionist-like brush strokes; and finally that amazing pattern and texture in the brown reflection. All four areas are very differently handled in terms of drawing and brushwork.

In **value**, the grass areas and sky share a similar, narrow range of values. There's little value contrast within any of those three areas. But the values in the brown reflection range from nearly white to black—they're all over the map! And it's this full value contrast that makes that texture pop out.

Notice how Klimt frames the upper part of the painting with the nearly black area that runs from upper left and across the top. The values within this area are nearly identical. He doesn't want to take the eye's attention to the edge. Instead he wants to frame the activity that is taking place below.

In **color**, the area with the least contrast in color temperature is the right band of grass. It's fairly muted and the entire range of greens is very similar.

The grass at the top of the painting has a slightly larger range in temperature while also being slightly more saturated. And notice the tiny, horizontal line of lighter, yellower green in the back beyond the tree trunks. It's such a



small, seemingly inconsequential spot, but it creates a sense of depth and distance in the background. Cover it with your finger to see how necessary it is to the painting. It also creates a very subtle, secondary focal point—it's centered nearly directly over the brown reflection.

The sky has an even greater range of temperature contrasts than either of the grassy areas—blues shot through with some golds. But the values are nearly identical, so they don't grab one's eye. The sky and the grassy areas are visually quiet; they convey a sense of peace and stillness. And then we're hit with that triangular brown reflection.

It's here, in nearly the center of the painting, where Klimt lets loose: an amazingly complex and visually energetic pattern and texture of blues and greens contrasting against ochres and siennas. And to finish, he adds those

vibrant orange spots. It's those two spots in the reflected sky, and the few smaller ones scattered in the reflection, that make this painting sing. The intense saturation of those oranges will make the greens appear more green, the blues more blue, and the siennas and umbers more neutral. Cover those spots with your fingers and see how the painting dries up—the life goes out of it. What a masterpiece this painting is!

Klimt painted few landscapes during his life, spending most of his time working with the figure. Those he did create are almost all uniformly brilliant. Study his work. He has so much to teach us about how to use color within a narrow value range, how to use pattern and texture, and how to use the abstract qualities of a composition to structure believable space and distance.