

John MacDonald

September–October 2017



WORKSHOPS

2017

OCT 25–27, 2017

THE LANDGROVE INN

Landgrove, VT

www.landgroveinn.com

****Waiting list only****

2018

I'm taking off 2018 from all teaching in order to re-write workshop handouts, concentrate on my own painting, and to take a workshop or two myself.

Workshops are currently being scheduled for 2019.

See the [Workshop page](#) on my website for information.

2019

FEB 2–8, 2019

CASA DE LOS ARTISTAS

Boca de Tomatlan, Mexico

[Casa de los Artistas](#)

TBA, 2019

WETHERSFIELD ACADEMY

Wethersfield, Conn.

www.wethersfieldarts.org

SEPT 22–28, 2019

HUDSON RIVER VALLEY ART WORKSHOPS

Greenville, New York

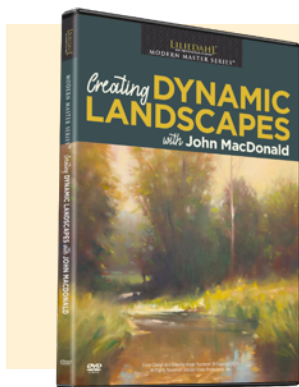
www.artworkshops.com

Lessons Learned

Passing the torch.

Rarely have I experienced a day like Saturday, Oct 14. I'd returned from teaching a workshop the day before and was catching up on emails. I read two that affected me greatly—the first brought a sense of relief and celebration, the other of great loss. The former was an announcement that the instructional video filmed by Streamline Publishing and offered through Liliedahl had been released. The latter informed me of the death of my friend and mentor, Curt Hanson. Grief and happiness were two poles pulling on me throughout the day. As I now write this, two weeks later, there's some comfort in knowing that through the two disparate events runs a single luminous thread: the joy of sharing one's knowledge with fellow artists.

Curt Hanson was as generous as he was talented. In the twelve years I knew and painted with him, he was endlessly willing to share his knowledge of painting. He lived the belief that the art of painting is greater than any single painter. He saw all artists, regardless of their talent, as colleagues, engaged in a communal effort of becoming more skilled, knowledgeable, and authentic artists. I learned much from Curt, including the satisfaction that arises from sharing one's knowledge. And so within a single day, one source of information was silenced while another source—the video—was born. But just as Curt learned his art from others, so the Liliedahl video isn't about me nor is the information it offers uniquely mine. It's a distillation of all the generous teachings that I've received from instructors, friends, family, and especially painters such as Curt. I feel lucky and honored to be passing along their wisdom. In this newsletter, I'll use Curt's work and words to illustrate some of the knowledge he so freely shared with me and so many other artists. He'll be greatly missed.



Liliedahl Video now available.

The Liliedahl instructional video is now available [here](#). It's a mini-workshop in a box, five hours of exposition, and demonstration. Streaming is available.

Deconstructing one of Curt's paintings.

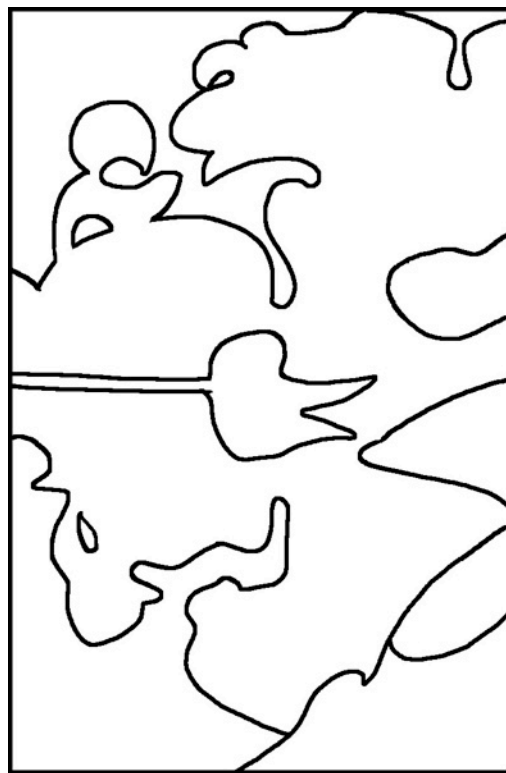
One of Curt's typical gems, *Pondside*, 18" x 12," linen on panel. (And yes, it's already been sold.)

Composition

The hallmarks of a great composition are its simplicity, clarity, balance, and harmony. Curt was a master composer. One aspect of his genius was his ability to simplify a complex object to its essentials without the painted object ever looking stylized or over-conceptualized. He painted reality, not our *ideas* of reality.



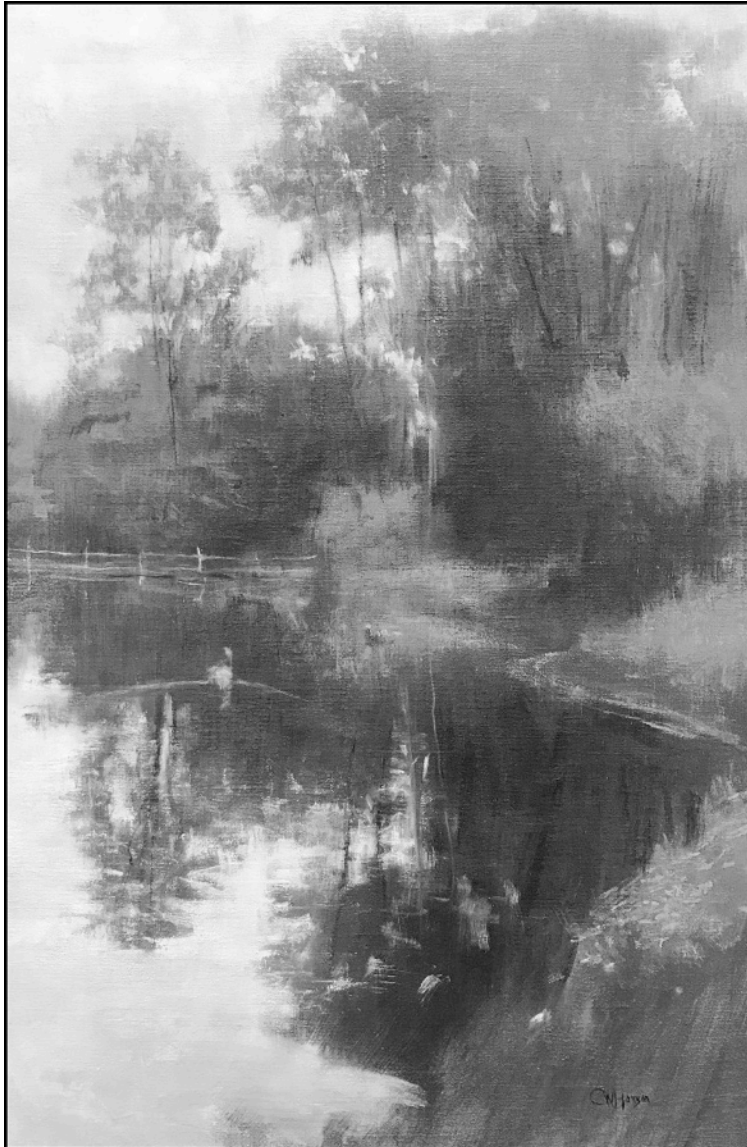
Trees, flowers, water, grass, buildings, etc., all appeared perfectly natural and uniquely individual. But beneath this apparent easy naturalness was a focused, intelligent design. In this painting, there is a lyrical quality to the composition that reflects an intense looking for curves, lines, and shapes that will simplify and harmonize the composition. The eye is first attracted to the yellow notes in the lower right, then moves to the curved shore and up into the trees. There is a play of horizontals against vertical (fence and shoreline vs. trunks and sky holes.) There's no simple focal point but instead a hierarchy of notes that attract and lead the eye. It seems so simple and natural and yet everything is balanced. As with all masters, he makes it look so easy.



Like his favorite painter, George Inness, Curt didn't hesitate to break the rules for the sake of the painting. The mid-ground green bush is nearly dead center. The three green shapes on the right are nearly equal in size, value, and color and their left edges align. Those yellow flowers(?) are right on the edge of the frame! Yet the composition still works. Despite the broken rules, there is a feeling of perfectly poised balance.

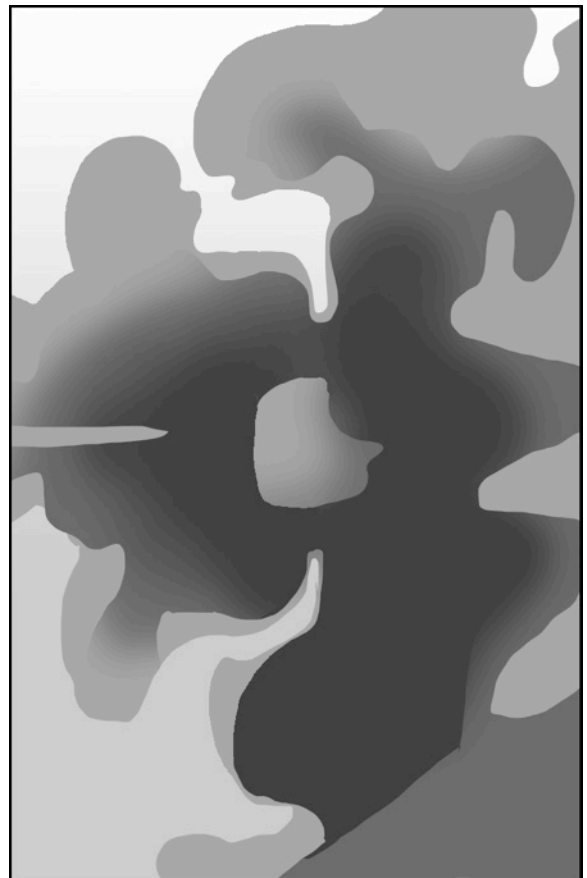
Value Structure

When I first chose this painting to deconstruct for the newsletter, I saw three values defining a simple value structure. It wasn't until I began to analyze it that I realized how complex it is. Yes, there are only three primary values in this painting but Curt has used value gradients and edge contrasts in each of the



the primary values to soften the transitions from one to another, at the same time creating the illusion of space and light. The value scheme I've sketched out below is only one way to represent the value structure of the painting. Rather than three values, it could be broken down into four or even five values. What makes the structure work and makes it difficult to reduce to a simple schematic diagram, are his use of lost edges and gradients.

Squint at the image on the left and see if you agree with how I've simplified the value scheme shown below. It seems so simple and yet hidden beneath the apparent simplicity is a sophisticated structure that holds the painting together and simultaneously directs the eye exactly where Curt wanted it to go. It's a complex scene reduced to its essentials.



Gradients

Looking at each of the three primary value shapes—the sky and its reflection, the light foliage and its reflection, and the shadows and their reflections—notice the subtle gradients within each. In the foliage, the lights and darks subtly move toward a middle value as they recede in the distance. In the sky reflection, the gradient moves from a dark foreground to a lighter background. Yet in the sky, it's reversed! The lightest lights in the sky are at the top.

Color Relationships

The deceptive simplicity of the value structure is echoed in the limited color palette. At first glance, this painting seems to consist of only a few greens and a cool and warm gray. It seems so simple! But it's the simplicity of the palette that allows the slightest difference between warm and cool tones within each hue to stand out. There are no strident notes of saturated warm or cool colors, no brilliant reds or blues. It's the overall similarity in hue and saturation that creates the color harmony. Notice the play of the subtle warm and cool greens in the trees, shadows, and grass, and the equally refined warm and cool tones in the sky and water. The restrained use of color contrasts reinforces the quiet, contemplative mood of the painting.



Gradients

In each area of the painting, Curt uses gradients in hue and saturation (and value) to enhance the illusion of light and atmosphere. Colors shift as they recede in space, some becoming warmer, some cooler, some more saturated, some more muted. Below are color samples taken from various areas of the painting, moving from foreground to background. Noticed how the changes in hue and saturation affect the illusion of space and light.



Light grass/foilage areas.



Highlights on the grass/foilage.



Shadow colors.



Sky colors.



Reflected sky.

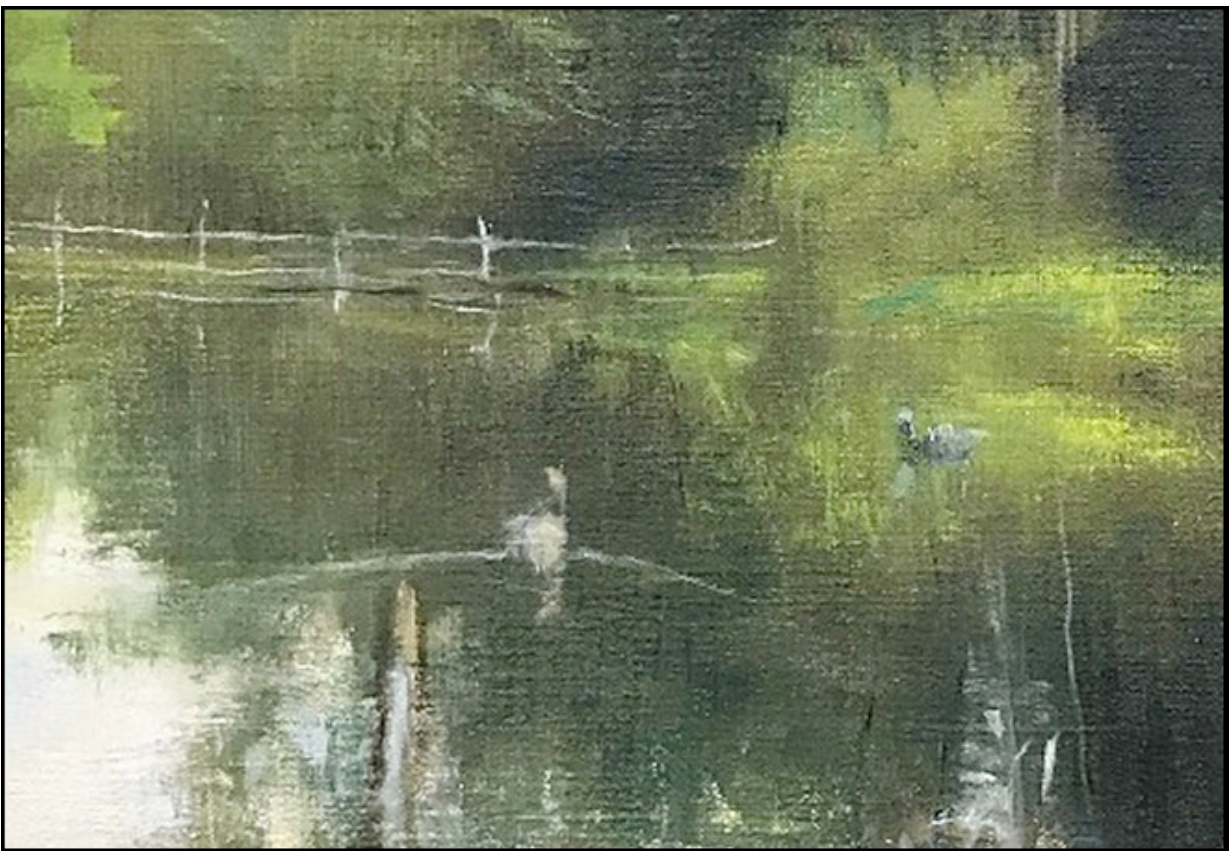
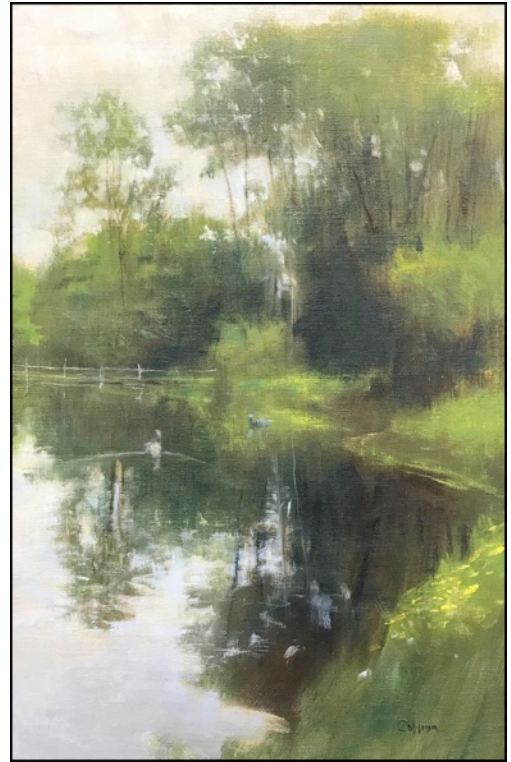
Edge Contrasts

Being a Tonalist, Curt used edge contrasts to create a mood and to enhance the illusion of atmosphere, deep space, and light. He softened his edges by blending pigments and/or by using broken color. In nearly all of his paintings, the largest shapes are uniformly soft-edged but with subtle variation. The very sharpest edges are reserved for small notes and details that draw the eye and create variety of line, texture, or form. From within the soft mood and atmosphere of the painting, his edge contrasts ring out like gun shots.

Details

Curt, like George Inness, was a master of detail. He included only those details that were essential, merely suggesting them with loose brushwork rather than tightly rendering them. Notice the sky-holes in the trees, touches of flowers, loose ripples in the water and how he renders them and where he places them. Each area of detailed complexity is surrounded and balanced by an area of luminous simplicity.

In first seeing this painting, I was surprised that Curt included a duck in the image. He never added gratuitous detail. But I realized that without it, the eye would be attracted to the fence in the background and then led directly off the edge of the painting. The duck is note of contrast that brings the eye back into the painting. If a painting needed something in order for it to work, Curt wouldn't hesitate to put it in.



A Gallery of Curt's paintings.

Many of these images are from photos taken in Curt's studio (with his permission). Others were copied from his website. Unfortunately, I rarely made note of the sizes or titles—it was the images that interested me most. He worked in sizes ranging from 4" x 8" up to 4' x 6'. Most of his plein air work within the last 10 years or so were smaller than 16" x 20." He made his own panels and often cut them to non-standard sizes.







Lessons Learned. Sage advice from Curt

A few quotes from Curt, often jotted down during our phone conversations.

"Painters should banish the word 'finished' from their vocabularies." Curt believed the word "finished" implied perfection. He preferred instead to say that a painting was "ready to be shown."

"If you don't know what the painting needs, you need to stop." Curt followed his own advice, often letting a painting sit for a year or more. Consequently, he rarely overworked a painting.

"Let the painting incubate." He would let paintings sit for as long as needed, until he was certain he knew what the painting needed or that it was time to destroy it.

"It's only a painting." Invariably said after an unsuccessful painting session.

"I often don't know what the hell I'm doing. I experience that all the time. Sometimes I paint all day and then wipe it off. Getting attached to the finished product only creates stress."

"I like painting thinly at the beginning because I can wipe it clean more easily. It makes a good tone." Curt saw his failures as just another step towards a future, successful painting.

After any conversation about my having problems with a painting in particular or the challenges of painting in general, he'd say, **"We just need to keep painting. That's what we do."**

Working Method

Curt spent decades painting plein air—in all conditions, seasons, and times of day. He preferred working on location and would begin most paintings outside. But he wasn't averse to working from photographs when conditions were ephemeral or he needed to capture a record of detail. He would often convert the photo to B&W, relying on his memory and experience for the color. Soon, the photo would be entirely forgotten as he responded only to the painting. For him, the painting was the sole point and purpose.

Curt would have been slightly embarrassed and probably mildly amused by the attention given to him in this newsletter. For him, the act of painting was everything and the failure or success of an individual painting meant little. He was a deeply spiritual man with a decades long practice of Buddhist meditation that informed his every act and word. As for his death, he would probably say to all of us: "It's not a big deal. Everything is transient. It was my time to paint and now it's over." And then he'd look us in the eye and grin, pointing to the bright landscape beyond, and add, "Now it's your time. So get painting!"

Words of Wisdom

"There is no time to hesitate when painting a fleeting effect. See it, compose it as best you can and bang it in! In the studio there is time for analysis. Observation and response is the way of plein air painting."

-Curt Hanson

