

Connecting With Beauty

Plein-air scenes by **John P. Lasater IV** reveal innate harmony



BY NORMAN KOLPAS



▲ **County Barn**, oil, 14 x 18.

◀ **Generations of Frederick**, oil, 14 x 18.

LAST JUNE, John P. Lasater IV and painter Jason Sacran, a good friend, were both participating in Easels in Frederick, a juried six-day plein-air event that attracts top artists to historic Frederick County, MD. Though the setting offers a wealth of idyllic rural scenes, the two men had decided to set themselves a different challenge.

“We were looking for the grunge of the town,” Lasater says, describing their search for uncommon locations. First, Sacran laid claim to a “nasty alleyway.” Soon after, Lasater himself came upon the backs of some row houses, “each from a different era and all crammed together. I decided that the hodgepodge would be a good subject,” he says.

Over the course of two three-hour painting sessions, Lasater completed a 14-by-18-inch oil he titled GENERATIONS OF FREDERICK. In a richly varied range of mostly browns and grays, rather than the usual palette associated with the term “plein air,” he dynamically captured the jumble of structures in bold, square-cornered forms.

The painting was later selected as the show’s Grand Prize winner. Discuss-

ing the philosophy behind his choice of subjects, Lasater says simply, “Beauty is everywhere. Life itself is beauty. Even the most boring rectilinear building or road, anything a human creates by hand, is beautiful because of the human effort that went into it. I just have to open my eyes and see it. Any limitation is in myself, not in the subject.”

It’s a highly thoughtful approach born in part from Lasater’s long-gestating career, in which he didn’t take a serious fine-art class until he was in his late 20s and finally launched himself as a full-time painter a mere six years ago. The philosophy also owes much to his deeply held religious faith, which guides the 44-year-old artist and inspires him to celebrate creation in all its manifestations.

IN HIS EARLIEST memory of creating art, Lasater associates the act with expressing love. “I was maybe 7 years old,” he recalls, thinking back to his happy, secure youth as the middle child between two sisters in “a good family that stood pretty tight” in a suburb of Houston, TX. “And I’d done something that



representation

Cherry’s Art Gallery, Carthage, MO; **Bay Art Gallery**, Sister Bay, WI; **Davis & Blevins Gallery**, St. Jo, TX; **The Rice Gallery of Fine Art**, Kansas City, MO; **Augusta Wood, Ltd.**, Augusta, MO.

upcoming shows

Easels in Frederick, Frederick, MD, June 14-21.

Telluride Plein Air, Telluride, CO, June 29-July 5.

Door County Plein Air Festival, Fish Creek, WI, July 19-25.

Plein Air Rockies, Estes Park, CO, August 9-22.

Sonoma Plein Air, Sonoma, CA, September 14-19.

Sedona Plein Air Festival, Sedona, AZ, October 17-24.

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South and Carroll, oil, 14 x 18.

made my mother really mad at me. She cried, I cried, and I went to my room. To make sure everything was okay between us, I took a pencil and a piece of paper, and I wrote some words and drew a picture for her that showed our love, that showed how I felt about her.” He doesn’t quite remember what the picture was, but “it felt like a gift to be able to do that,” he says.

That gift stayed with him, even

though it didn’t particularly elicit any attention from his schoolteachers. Instead it emerged from time to time in singular creative acts. In 1982, for example, after seeing the blockbuster movie *E.T. the Extra Terrestrial*, the industrious 12-year-old melted a candle and shaped the warm wax into an accurate rendition of the cute alien’s head. A year later, noting that their son had some talent, his parents arranged for an artist they

knew to give him drawing lessons. “But she sent me home with a figure-drawing book that had some nude photos in it,” he says. “So the lessons stopped there.” Lasater, who is now the father of three daughters and a son ranging in age from 10 to 20 years, pauses and then adds, “I would have been just as concerned for my own 13-year-old.”

Later, at the Westbury Christian School, his artistry received some

encouragement from teacher Beverly Arnold. “We worked with easy-to-clean mediums,” he says, “and I remember one or two pieces I did with pen and ink.” But when the time came to apply to college, his math skills and level head led him to pursue studies in business administration at John Brown University, a small, private, Christian college in Siloam Springs, AR. Little did he know at the time that the thoroughly practical degree he earned there in 1992 would lead indirectly to his true calling.

Soon after graduating, and already married for a year to his college sweetheart, Kara, he accepted a marketing position at DaySpring, a local greeting-card company specializing in the Christian market. His position involved him directly in the idea-generating process for new products, which got him excited about sketching out ideas he came up with. That interest led him to make more friends with the artists, most of them in their 20s, who worked in the illustration and graphic-design departments, than he did with the older marketing staff. “I would show my friends there some of my drawings and ideas,” he says, “and they’d say, ‘Man, you’ve got talent. You should be here with us.’”

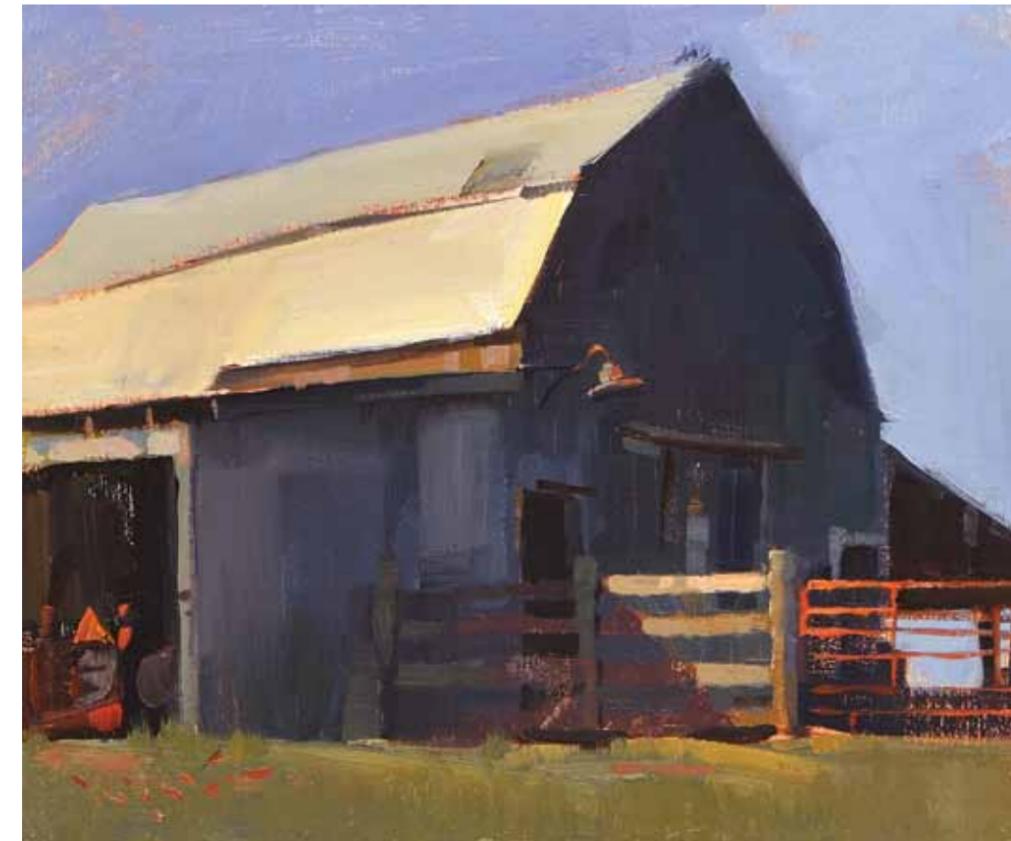
Still, it would take him a while to get there. In 1997, he moved to an administrative position in the company’s concept-design department, where his relentless urge to create led his boss to give him “an insignificant line” of boxed greeting cards to design—a tantalizing taste of creativity before he was laid off when the company streamlined its staff before being sold.

Three months later, a friend recommended him for a design job at a small, dynamic new advertising agency in Fayetteville, AR. Suddenly, Lasater had a growing professional portfolio that included such top-notch clients as Procter & Gamble and Coca-Cola. He stayed at that job for a year and a half, through countless all-nighters that kept him away from his young family.

Then in 1999 a call came for him to return to DaySpring, which had been acquired by greeting-card giant Hallmark—this time as a concept designer, responsible for researching and coming up with new ideas daily. “That



Country Road, oil, 24 x 30.



Shade Side, oil, 10 x 12.



Memory Lane, oil, 20 x 24.



Buffalo Bar Sunset, oil, 14 x 18.

was really great training for me in things like composition and color harmonies,” he says.

The following year, as part of employee development, artist Todd Williams was invited to lead an oil-painting workshop in the concept-design department. “That was my first time to work on a canvas with brush and oils,” Lasater says. Williams—whom Lasater had known since his first stint at the company—invited him to go plein-air painting in their spare time. “I went with him weekly, sometimes twice a week,” Lasater says. “At first it was confusing. I didn’t feel like I was successful. But Todd kept telling me I was getting better, and I learned to have more expression and freedom. After every frustrating experience, I would wake up the next day excited to try it again.”

So Lasater started signing up for plein-air workshops taught by well-known artists across the country: first with John Budicin at the Taos Art School, then with C.W. Mundy at the Scottsdale Artists’ School. Still more followed as he continued to develop and refine his techniques under the continuing guidance of Mundy, Carolyn Anderson, and others.

Eventually, he developed his own softly bravura plein-air approach. He begins each painting without any drawing, instead blocking out the composition in big, bold strokes, “making a blurry representation of reality” before he gradually begins to “rein it in with some hard edges that bring the composition together.”

Summing up a style he describes as “a blend of realism and impressionism,” he says his goal is “to make complicated things simple, to look for large design patterns.” That approach is evident in a work like BUFFALO BAR SUNSET, which he completed in just a couple of hours before nightfall while painting last summer on the terrace of the Big Cedar Lodge resort near Branson, MO. Like so many of Lasater’s paintings, the piece possesses an appealing looseness that invites viewers to complete what they see with their own eyes, minds, and hearts. “That’s an intention,” he adds. “I’m really glad when other people tell me that.”



Rural Colors, oil, 11 x 14.

Such positive feedback has kept on coming; from galleries, the first of which signed him up in 2009, the same year he left DaySpring to paint full time; from aspiring painters who now take Lasater’s own workshops; from fellow artists at juried events; and from the many collectors who have been snapping up his paintings not only at gallery shows but also at the plein-air events he frequents.

He has also launched his own such initiatives. He and Williams started the Heart of America Artists’ Association in 2013, which aims to encourage Midwestern fine artists and holds an annual juried exhibition focused on plein-air portrayals of the Illinois River watershed. In addition, at different locations two or three times a year, he holds an event

he calls the 24 Paintings in 24 Hours Tour. In partnership with a local small-town gallery or museum, he pulls an all-nighter, producing two dozen plein-air works in the designated time. “It feels like a stimulus for small towns, where no one has ever seen an artist painting outdoors, let alone looked at art,” he says.

In that regard, Lasater considers himself a down-to-earth populist. He loves being on what he calls “the plein-air circuit,” meeting other artists and connecting with the people who come to watch. He’s especially delighted, in fact, when someone approaches him to paint a particular personal subject. “I can look at a collector’s house or donkey or whatever it is and make an artistic connection with that object or place,” he explains. “It’s not robbing my integrity. I hope to

dispel that mentality. It means so much more to collectors to have a painting of something with a personal connection. And it should!” It seems like the perfect attitude for an artist who, time and again, loves to rise to the challenge of the ordinary. ❖

Norman Kolpas is a Los Angeles-based freelancer who writes for *Mountain Living* and *Colorado Homes & Lifestyles* as well as *Southwest Art*.

See more of Lasater’s work at www.southwestart.com/featured/lasater-j-jun2015.