

Painting on location in the Southwest and the Canadian Maritimes, Michael Chesley Johnson manifests a lyrical spirit: how a scientist, writer, student of literature, and lover of Nature became a painter of landscapes *en plein air*.

BY MAUREEN BLOOMFIELD

POETRY OF earth

CONTRIBUTING EDITOR Michael Chesley Johnson is a mainstay to our magazine. Over the years he has written many engaging and informative articles on a range of topics—lighting the studio, creating underpaintings for pastel, working directly or indirectly in oil, choosing pastel surfaces, and, most often, painting *en plein air*. All the time he was writing, he was also painting.

Johnson hails from the era of Jon Gnagy's TV program *You Are an Artist*, which was first broadcast from the Empire State Building in 1946 and would later become the syndicated show *Learn to Draw*, televised from the early 1950s through the 1960s: One Christmas Johnson's parents gave him Gnagy's "Learn to Draw" kit. "I spent hours diligently practicing the exercises in charcoal," says Johnson. "When in high school, I drew 'Winky,' the little deer from a Famous Artists School ad. I believe the ad said no salesman would call, but one did, and he informed me I was too young. Nonetheless, he offered a helpful critique." Johnson's parents were scientists (his father, a biochemist; his mother, a bacteriologist), but his house was filled with art as well as books, and his grandparents had, in their living room, a print of one of Robert W. Wood's marvelous California scene paintings, which Johnson spent hours looking at and copying.

Coinciding with his love of art was a love of literature. "When I discovered the Transcendentalists," he recalls, "I wrote to the

LEFT: Johnson takes part in many juried plein air events. He painted *Rivordance* (oil, 9x12) at Zion National Park for an "In the Footsteps of Thomas Moran" event in 2012. "This is a backlit scene," he says, "and though painting with the light behind you is hard on the eyes, I enjoy and paint many such scenes."





head librarian at the University of Georgia to ask if the library had the entire set of Thoreau's journals. She replied that it did, and I pledged to read all 14 of them when I got there." At the same time, Johnson was painting. "Painting helped me connect with the French Impressionists, especially Monet, whom I worshipped. I was prone to taking long hikes by myself, and painting was another way of exploring and connecting to the world."

English and American Romantics

Nonetheless he started college as a biochemistry major. He discovered that although he had an aptitude for science, he didn't have the temperament. Accordingly, he changed his major to English literature. "I also made some new friends who were art majors," he says. "They

were much, much more interesting than the science majors!" Foreshadowing his future by melding his love of image and word, he copied Joseph Severn's deathbed portrait of Keats in pencil and gave it to his Keats professor. As a graduate student at Middlebury College in Vermont, he chose W.H. Auden's use of landscape in verse as the subject of his thesis.

Like the English Romantics that Auden and the American Transcendentalists descended from, Johnson loves being alone in nature. "When I was young," he says, "I believed that all the answers lay within Nature (with a capital 'N'). Today, I'm not so naïve—I do see the value of society—but for me, Nature is still the fountainhead."

For Ralph Waldo Emerson, the universe was composed of two parts: Nature and the

ABOVE: A Grand Calm (oil, 16x20) was painted in the studio for the Grand Canyon's "Celebration of Art" event. "Working in the studio allowed me to focus on design and color issues more carefully," Johnson says. "I wanted the snow to convey a warm feeling, so I played with color harmonies."



ABOVE: Painted *en plein air* on Campobello Island (New Brunswick, Canada), **Liberty Point at Noon** (oil, 12x24) shows one of Johnson's favorite locations. "I call it 'a rich painting spot,'" he says, "where you can stand and paint several pieces without changing location." This is Sugar Loaf Rock.

Soul. Being in Nature, accordingly, was an interactive experience: "Nature always wears the colors of the spirit," Emerson says. In other words, when we look at a landscape what we see is a reflection of who and what we are. By extension, a landscape painting shows not only the spirit of the place, but the soul of the painter.

At One With Nature

Johnson works whenever he can from life. His impetus, which he calls by an active, rather than passive, name is "an excursion into the field." He likes to hike; he says, "I observe the way light and shadow interact, and then I take creative control over design while trying to remain true to color, since I feel that color best illustrates the moment."

Saying that he's not a "self-starter," he points out that he needs "a point of departure." If he's stuck in the studio, he'll work from a photograph. "I try then to remember what it was like being at the spot where I snapped the button," he says. "This is essential to bringing a true feeling to the work."

"True feeling" is an apprehension of Nature, an understanding that reveals nature's essence when it's experienced with patience,

over time. It was Emerson who distinguished between the too-ready, facile, or sentimental response to Nature, which seeks a one-to-one correspondence with what we're feeling, and a truer response, which is less dramatic and longer lasting.

In his essay "Nature," Emerson observes: "But this beauty of Nature, which is seen and felt as beauty, is the least part. The shows of day, the dewy morning, the rainbow, mountains, orchards in blossom, stars, moonlight, shadows in still water, and the like, if too eagerly hunted, become shows merely, and mock us with their unreality. Go out of the house to see the moon, and 'tis mere tinsel; it will not please as when its light shines upon your necessary journey."

Johnson's landscapes are of the second order. They are not showy. Instead, Johnson's pictures reveal a well-observed aspect of a familiar, unfolding terrain. In *Path to the Patriarchs* (page 27), for instance, the viewer sees the path the artist was walking; the painting is indeed an imagistic example of Emerson's "necessary journey." In contrast to the dramatic views of the Hudson River School or the tempestuous weather of Samuel Palmer and the English Symbolists, Johnson's landscapes record the quiet beauty that's all around us; they reflect the aesthetic of one who has walked in Nature and thus knows the landscape well—one who has not been taken by surprise.

Wide, Open Spaces

After Johnson completed his master's degree

"The poetry of earth is never dead ...
the poetry of earth is ceasing never ... "
"On the Grasshopper and the Cricket"
by John Keats

at Middlebury and he and his wife spent 15 years in Vermont, they quit their day jobs in 1999 and moved to New Mexico; at that time, Johnson was working on a novel. “But several months later,” he says, “I saw that a one-day pastel workshop was being offered at the local arts center, so I signed up. When I picked up that first pastel, it was like a door opening. I knew then that I wanted to leave writing and paint instead.”

The Johnsons ended up with a house in New Brunswick, Canada, as well as one in New Mexico first and then in Arizona, near Sedona. What do such dissimilar locales share? Wide, open spaces. “In New Brunswick, on Campobello Island, we have the broad ocean, and I can almost imagine its being a flat desert,” says Johnson. “In Arizona, we have the desert and the long views to distant mountain ranges—I can almost imagine its being an ocean. In both places, views are everywhere; we aren’t closed in by trees. The result of this is that most of my paintings tend to have views. Unlike the intimate close-up, these paintings give the viewer some room to walk around in.”

Does painting in locales that are so different require two palettes? Johnson’s answer is simple: It does not. He uses the same six oil colors and the same 200 pastel sticks. “I just make different color mixtures and choices. As one would expect, my Maritime paintings tend to have more blues, greens, and grays; my Southwest paintings, more earth colors.”

“First, Best-Guess” Color

The joy of a plein air excursion argues against too much calculation. “I find that many oil artists try to mix the exact color they need before placing it on the canvas,” Johnson says. “For plein air painting, I find this laborious and time-consuming. Instead, I mix my ‘first, best guess’ at the color and brush it on. Once the block-in is complete, I go through a phase I call ‘adjusting shape relationships,’ in which I compare each large, adjacent shape with respect to hue, chroma, temperature, and value and then make adjustments. I’m asking myself, for example: Should this shape be bluer, cooler, richer, and darker than the shape next to it? Sometimes, this process takes several passes.” A somewhat absorbent surface like Ampersand Gessobord helps the first layers of paint stay in place so the artist can build the surface with strokes of broken color. “I work naturally this

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Materials

BY MICHAEL CHESLEY JOHNSON

Pastels: mostly **Faber-Castell** Polychromos and **Mount Vision**, but also a few **Terry Ludwig**, **Diane Townsend**, **Winsor & Newton**, **Grumbacher**, **Nupastel**, **Great American Artworks**

Pastel Paper: **Wallis** sanded paper, **UArt** sanded paper, plus some homemade paper (etching paper coated with pumiced acrylic gesso)

Oil Paints: mostly **Gamblin**, but also **Rembrandt**, **Shiva**, **Daniel Greene**, **Richeson**, **Grumbacher**

Oil Medium: **Gamblin** Galkyd Lite

Thinner/Cleaner: **Gamblin** Gamsol

Brushes: **Silver Brush** Grand Prix line of natural bristle flats

Surface: homemade surfaces (**Gamblin** PVA and acrylic gesso on hardboard), also **Ampersand** Gessobord, **Fredrix** Blue Label Ultra-Smooth Portrait prestretched canvas, unstretched **Claessens** Belgian linen

Oils: a split-primary palette with the following colors: cadmium yellow light, cadmium yellow deep, cadmium red, permanent alizarin crimson, ultramarine blue, phthalo green, chromatic black (Gamblin), titanium-zinc white (Sometimes I may add cadmium orange or dioxazine violet.)

Although I have a studio full of different easels and pochade boxes, for field work I typically use either my **Heilman** “backpack” box for pastels or my 9x12 **Guerrilla Painter** pochade box. I also have a Gloucester-style easel.



ABOVE: “Once in a while, pure color calls me, and that’s what happened here,” says Johnson. “The deep blue-green of Oak Creek in Sedona, edged with warm yellows and oranges, drew my eye. I resisted the impulse to add a couple of ducks that weren’t there anyway. I didn’t want the viewer to be pulled away from the beautiful colors of the water in **Oak Creek Blues** (pastel, 10x13).”

Painting the Grand Canyon (inside)

BY MICHAEL CHESLEY JOHNSON



For my studio painting *Moran Point*, I used a photo and several plein air sketches for color reference. I wanted to re-create the feeling of the Grand Canyon's depth and distance, but I also wanted to anchor the viewer with some solid-looking rocks in the foreground. Additionally, by starting the painting with a monochromatic gray underpainting, I was able to "nail" the lights and darks quickly and easily. Sometimes if I separate the issue of value from the issue of color and handle value first, my paintings seem to go more easily in the early stages.

1. Drawing a grid: After drawing a simple grid on my photograph with a fine-point Sharpie, I drew a similar grid on my surface with a No. 2 graphite pencil in preparation for transferring the design. I used a light touch so the pencil marks would disappear beneath opaque passages of oil paint on my surface, a 12x24 sheet of Ampersand Gessobord.

2. Transferring the design: Continuing with the pencil, I loosely sketched in the major shapes in the design while also paying attention to the forms of the rocks—where plane meets plane or where cracks intrude.

3. Split-primary palette: For my palette, I use a custom-cut sheet of glass with a sheet of white paper beneath it. My colors are by **Gamblin** (left to right): titanium-zinc white, cadmium yellow light, cadmium yellow deep, cadmium red light, permanent alizarin crimson, ultramarine blue, phthalo green, gold ochre, and chromatic black. This is my standard, split-primary palette with gold ochre and chromatic black as supplements. Additionally, I've premixed three values of gray using white and chromatic black.

Above the palette, I have a small container of **Gamblin** Gamsol odorless mineral spirits (OMS) and a container of **Gamblin** Galkyd Lite medium.

4. Initial sketch: Next I redrew my pencil sketch with a thinned, midvalue gray and a No. 4 natural hog bristle flat. For this painting, I used all flats, Nos. 2, 4, 6, 8 (all Grand Prix brushes from Silver Brush Ltd).

5. Shapes and values: Then, starting with my three values of gray and a No. 8 flat, I blocked in my major shapes. I started with the darks first and worked my way up to the lighter values. The paint was thin, but not drippy-wet with thinner. I like to think of what Richard Schmid says in his book, *Alla Prima*: "Thin paint doesn't necessarily mean thinned paint." I use just enough odorless mineral spirits (OMS) to thin the paint so it flows easily across the surface.

6. Perfecting the monochrome: Here is the completed monochromatic gray block-in. As I was evaluating my value choices, I decided that my light gray wasn't quite light enough for the sky, so I used a paper towel to remove some paint and lighten it. I made similar adjustments with a paper towel here and there as needed. It's important to have the painting "read" well in this monochromatic stage.

7. Drawing the rocks: After I'd established my darks with the grays, I wanted to focus on the light shapes first and add some real color. A mixture of gold ochre and white, with perhaps a touch of permanent alizarin crimson, gave me the sunlit tones of the rocks.



By the way, when painting rocks, I always draw them first as very angular shapes. I draw the outlines, even if the rocks seem round in real life, as a series of interconnected straight lines. As I continue to paint the rocks, these straight lines will get softer and rounder. If you start “round,” things will only get worse, and you’ll end up with a painting full of “baked potatoes.” I would rather exaggerate the angularity—and also the darkness and thickness of cracks and crevices—than be too subtle. I can always make things subtler later.

8. Starting thin: In this step I applied the first pass of color. You’ll note the paint in the sky is so thin you can see brush marks and some of the white Gessobord showing through. For the greens of the bushes and other vegetation, I used only gold ochre and chromatic black, which gave me exactly the kind of dull green I’ve seen at the Grand Canyon (beginners often go too vivid with the greens).

By the way, I used very little blue in this painting. Ultramarine blue appears only in the sky, in the distant canyon, and in the shadows of the cliff in the middle ground; most of what is perceived as blue is actually chromatic black plus white.

One of the benefits in painting wet into wet on a gray underpainting is that some of the gray will stir up and mix softly with the colors added later, graying them slightly. I find that many

beginning painters have a hard time controlling chroma with my split-primary palette, and starting with gray is a good way to keep colors somewhat muted. If I want a spectacularly rich passage of color, I can always slather on some good, rich paint with a thickly-loaded brush or knife at the end.

9a. Noting the darks and highlights: This is the point where I needed to mark my extremes of value. First, I noted the darkest darks. I also wanted to make the rocks look even craggier, so I punched up the darks by taking my darkest gray and adding a bit more chromatic black to it, plus a little cadmium red light to warm up the mixture slightly. My darkest darks are in the most recessed shadows in the rocks.

Next, I noted my lightest lights, which are the tops and edges of the rocks that receive the sunlight most directly. I used white plus a dab of gold ochre and cadmium yellow light for these accents. You’ll see that I go even a little lighter toward the edges of the painting in a few spots.

9b. Palette in process: Here’s my palette as I neared the end of the painting. I tried to keep the palette organized so I could find my mixtures easily. Also, as I adjusted paint mixtures, I tried to keep some of the original paint mixture

Demonstration continued on the next page

untouched so I could refer to it if I needed to. Beneath my original row of split-primary colors, I had a series of blue-grays that I mixed for the sky and distant canyon walls. Beneath that was a series of warm colors for sunlit rocks. Below that was what's left of my original three piles of gray.

By the way, I used a little **Gamblin** Galkyd Lite in these later mixtures to help the paint flow better and dry faster. I find that mixtures with a lot of white, such as the light sky colors, require more medium for better flow.

9c. Applying thicker paint: Here I applied thicker paint to the sky, deepened some of the darks in the distant canyon wall, added a touch of blue, and refined the shadow passages

in the middle-ground cliff. In the foreground area, I warmed up some of the bounced light areas in the rock shadows, reddened the sunlit areas of flat ground, and adjusted the shapes of the vegetation. Additionally, I added a little light blue-gray to key shadow areas among the rocks. These passages indicate where some of the sky light diffuses down into the shadows.

9d. Increasing the light: To finish *Moran Point* (oil, 12x24), I applied thicker, lighter paint where light highlights were required and softened some of the dark accents on the rocks. I also increased the light in the distant canyon wall and, finally, improved the sky with some subtle clouds.



9d

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way in pastel,” he says, “and the method carries over nicely to oil, too.”

For small (up to 16x20) pieces, he tends to work *alla prima*. Larger outdoor pieces usually require two or three sessions on location. “If I want to travel light and not deal with brushes and thinner, I’ll take out a limited palette of pastels; if I want more color choices, I’ll take oil. I don’t believe in having a thousand sticks of pastels since there’s no really quick way of getting exactly the color you need. Even a

thousand isn’t enough! With my six oil colors, however, I can get pretty close to what I want quickly. But I treasure pastel because the colors are so immediate and working with pastel is akin to drawing.”

Against Theatrics

A characteristic of Johnson’s landscapes is serenity; they subvert the terrifying nature of the sublime and evince not awe but simple beauty. How does he choose a location? First he looks for “good contrast, simple design, and rich color.” He uses a viewfinder to isolate the subject from the rest of the environment. Then, he takes a moment “to visualize the end result.”

Studying the scene, he executes a number of short, quick thumbnail value sketches. “The

“In wildness is the preservation of the world.” Henry David Thoreau



ABOVE: Every year Johnson leads a painting retreat for a small group of advanced painters. One year they went to Zion National Park, where he painted *Path to the Patriarchs* (pastel, 12x9).

design is the foundation of the painting,” he says, “and if the design is poor, the painting will fail. The relationship of warm and cool colors is the foundation for creating a sense of light.” With these injunctions in mind, he chooses one design and transfers it to the painting surface. One way he keeps track of his intended effect (what he visualized at the first) is noting the extremes: the lightest light, the darkest dark, the richest color.

A popular teacher, Johnson conducts workshops all around the country and the world. When asked what message he would or does convey to those students, he replied in one word: “Draw.” He explains: “As much as students worry about getting a certain color right, that’s nothing compared to getting the drawing right. Drawing is essential for getting a tree to look like a particular tree and for getting the land to recede properly into the distance. Although one can take drawing lessons and read some good books on the topic, it really comes down to daily practice. And you must practice from life.”

The Nature of Inspiration

As for inspiration, it’s everywhere, discoverable wherever the artist finds himself walking.



Meet Michael Chesley Johnson

Michael Chesley Johnson was awarded Master Pastelist status by Pastel Artists Canada in 2008, and he is a signature member of the Pastel Society of America and a juried member of Oil Painters of America and the American Impressionist Society. His paintings have appeared in *The Artist’s Magazine*, *Pastel Journal*, *American Artist*, and *Fine Art Connoisseur (PleinAir Magazine)* and are part of both corporate and private collections.

He has been an invited artist at the Sedona Plein Air Festival (2006–2011) and in 2011 also participated in the Plein Air Southwest, Grand Canyon National Park “Celebration of Art,” and Zion National Park “In the Footsteps of Thomas Moran” invitationals. In 2012, he was an invited artist in *PleinAir Magazine’s* First Annual Plein Air Convention & Expo and again at the Grand Canyon event.

A contributing editor for *The Artist’s Magazine*, he writes regularly, as well, for *Pastel Journal*. He is the author of several books, including *Through a Painter’s Brush: A Year on Campobello Island*, *Through a Painter’s Brush: The American Southwest*, and *Backpacker Painting: Outdoors with Oil & Pastel* (all available through his website). He has two art instruction videos available through www.ArtistsNetwork.tv and www.NorthlightShop.com as well as an online video course, *Plein Air Essentials*, at www.pleinairessentials.com.

Johnson quotes Wordsworth’s verse:

My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky:
So was it when my life began,
So is it now I am a man,
So be it when I shall grow old
Or let me die!
The child is father of the man:
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.

“Those first two lines are packed with the exact emotion I feel when I’m out hiking and feeling free and easy,” Johnson says. “The poem, “My Heart Leaps Up,” also describes the moment I try to capture: that raw second when both the world and the person hiking in it are not jaded or troubled, but new and fresh.” ■

MAUREEN BLOOMFIELD is the editor in chief of *The Artist’s Magazine*.

Learn More ONLINE

To see Johnson’s step-by-step demonstration of a landscape in pastel, go to www.artistsnetwork.com/learnmore2013.