

SCOTT L. CHRISTENSEN

The “Minor Details” and “Major Decisions” of Painting

For Scott L. Christensen, plein air painting is a one-shot effort to understand what happens in nature. As vital as that process may be, the more daunting challenge is to use that understanding to create well orchestrated studio paintings.

By M. Stephen Doherty

“Art isn’t easy. Every minor detail is a major decision,” wrote Stephen Sondheim for a song performed in his Broadway musical *Sunday in the Park With George*. And although he was referring to the artist George Seurat in the lyrics, Sondheim identified the struggle every artist faces when he or she paints. That struggle is further explored in the lyrics that follow: “Bit by bit, putting it together/ Piece by piece, only way to make a work of art/ Every moment makes a contribution/ Every little detail plays a part/ Having just a vision’s no solution/ Everything depends on execution/ Putting it together, that’s what counts.”

Scott L. Christensen can identify with the George Seurat character, and with painters like Anders Zorn (1860-1920), John Carlson (1875-1947), Joaquín Sorolla (1863-1923), John Singer Sargent (1856-1925), and Otto Strutzel (1855-1930). “I’ve traveled to see exhibitions of great paintings so I might gain a better understanding of how they were executed,” Christensen explains. “I walk back and forth from the canvases, studying the brushwork, speculating on what changes might have been made, evaluating how images come together from a distance, and comparing one canvas with another. Doing that helps me understand how the artists struggled, and what part of their decision-making process might be applicable to my painting.”

The evaluations of other artists’ work doesn’t necessarily lead Christensen to firm conclusions. Indeed, just the opposite is likely to result. “I don’t look at the paintings to replicate



This page:
Grindelwald, Switzerland
 2008, oil, 10 x 12 in.
 Collection the artist

Opposite page:
Santa Marie della Salute
 2008, oil, 10 x 8 in.
 Collection the artist





Ocean Study
2010, oil, 24 x 96 in.
Private collection







April Greys
2010, oil, 14 x 20 in.
Private collection



Oxbow Autumn
2010, oil, 30 x 40 in.
Private collection



Summer Greens
2010, oil, 10 x 12 in.
Private collection

Sunset on the Marsh
2010, oil, 30" x 96"
Private collection





California Coast
2010, oil, 25 x 38 in.
Private collection

what I see,” the artist says. “I’m trying to relate to the artists’ efforts to come up with well-orchestrated paintings. I think about the fact that Sargent and Whistler often scraped paint off the canvas until they found the most economical and effective way of representing something, or about John William Waterhouse’s (1849-1917) brilliant judgment in placing objects within his complicated pictures. It’s the decision-making process and the standards of excellence I want to understand, because those things relate to all painting.”

Christensen is concerned about both the physical aspects of creating and about intellectual considerations. “Someone diagrammed

a collection of my paintings to show that I organize them according to the principles of dynamic symmetry, and I had to explain it was not my most immediate concern,” he says. “I am guided by what I see in nature and the visual judgments I make about a painting in progress. I’m not saying other approaches aren’t valid. I’m just pointing out that the biggest challenges for me are understanding what exists in nature; remembering the key aspects of color, shape, value, and pattern; and using my reference material, memory, and knowledge to create a well-orchestrated studio painting.”

Christensen is widely admired for painting a variety of landscape subjects, from the historic waterside villas of Venice to the bridges of Paris, from the towering Alps of Switzerland to the rugged mountains of Wyoming, and from the vineyards of Tuscany to the prairies of Montana.

“Although I may be best known for large oil paintings of vast expanses of atmospheric landscape, I also paint a lot of small studies of rocks, trees, streams, and woodlands as a way of understanding the landscape,” Christensen explains. “Those small pieces are rather gestured, almost abstract paintings that are intended as studies to use when I’m painting the large canvases. I recently had a conversation with Daniel F. Gerhartz about the fact that we both make quick, one-shot studies that mean something to us and have tremendous value in developing our ambitious studio paintings.”

Making studies to explore aspects of a landscape is nothing new for Christensen. “When I first started painting, I did five or more studies every day to understand what happens in nature and to sharpen my ability to remember what I see,” he says. “I didn’t use a camera for five years because I wanted to learn directly from nature. I



Coastal Humidity

2010, oil, 40 x 48 in.

Private collection

is that everything hinges on relationships, and when you want one thing to appear brighter, another has to be subdued, when one shape has to stand out more distinctly, another may have to drop back into the shadows.”

During a recent workshop, Christensen was discussing his limited palette and the eight neutral grays he employs when one of the students speculated that all 20 members of the group could paint similar landscapes if they used the same mixtures of paint and the same compositional sketch. “The idea was intriguing enough that I decided to test it by having everyone in the workshop use the same palette of colors and plein air sketch,” Christensen explains. “Of course, at the end of the hour there were 20 completely different interpretations of the landscape subject. Each person managed the paint differently and applied it to the canvas in a unique way.”

The exercise effectively demonstrated that what happens in an artist’s mind matters more than what is on the palette or positioned in front of him. “Painting is all about placement — what one shape, color, or value looks like next to another, how each new element contributes to the success of the picture, and what parts need to be changed or taken out,” Christensen says. “After years of painting, I can make those judgments intuitively. Other people might look at one of my paintings in progress and think it’s finished, then the next day they come into the studio and see that I’ve revised big sections. In order to work to the highest level, I have to be willing to make those hard decisions and do whatever is required to make the painting successful.”

used to start all my paintings outdoors, even the large canvases, but now I can work from field studies, photographs, and my memory because I have a better sense of what I need to do.”

Christensen says the beginning stages of the painting process are the most intense because he has to judge overall relationships, not individual sections or specific details. “I’m not the kind of painter who can start working around the center of interest and then radiate out from there,” he says. “Instead, I walk back and forth from the canvas to judge the important relationships between shapes, values, edges, and colors across the canvas; or I take a break and return to the studio when I can see the painting with a fresh eye.”

The procedures Christensen follows will vary depending on the subject he is painting and his evaluation of the impending challenges. He begins by making compositional sketches before picking up a brush, then pre-mixing a lot of paint so he can work without being side-tracked. He says, “I use a thin mixture of a light color to draw the outlines of the major shapes on the white canvas. Sometimes I start painting with primary colors and other times I block in

the important shapes with neutral colors that have been made for me by Vasari Paints. In either case, I quickly get involved in adjusting the relative values and color temperatures and orchestrating the entire painting.”

Relying heavily on the neutral color mixtures that can shift toward a warm or cool temperature depending on how they are used, Christensen explains that the neutrals help him “play down certain passages so that others will appear brighter, stronger, or more reflective of the sunlight.” He continues, “One of the hardest things to learn about painting



Trees of England

n.d., oil, 24 x 48 in.

Private collection



The artist using a plein air sketch on a nearby easel as reference as he begins to create *Warm Pacific*, a 20 x 62 oil painting now in a private collection.





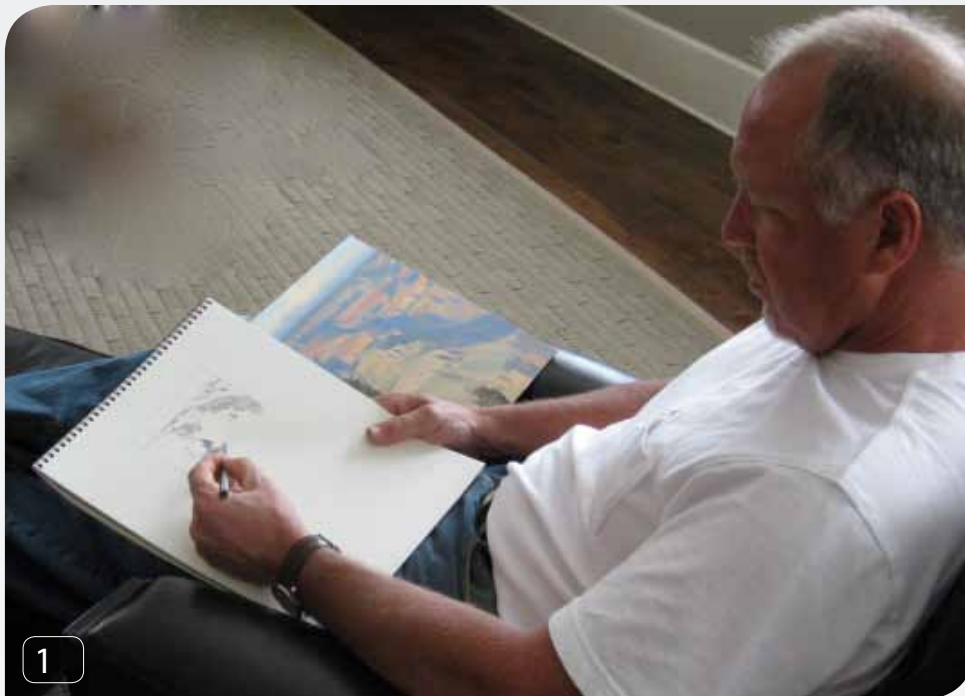
A group of artists gathered for a Bird and Brush sporting event at Lazy Triple Creek Lodge in Newdale, Idaho, including (clockwise from back row, left) an unidentified lodge guest, Lars Holtz, Christensen, Mark & Noeleen Bristow, Alexey Steele, Daniel F. Gerhartz, Nick Gerhartz, Dirk Walker, *Robb Report* writer Bruce Leonard, Jennifer Holtz, Tony Pro, Scott Tallman Powers, Kristie Grigg, Bark Walker, Olya Vlasova, Dr. Phil Lowe, Gene Costanza, and PleinAir Publisher B. Eric Rhoads.

One of three exhibit spaces in Christensen's Idaho studio.

Scott L. Christensen and Kristie Grigg.







1. Christensen sketching in his studio.

2. Christensen working on a plein air painting in Switzerland in 2008.

Making hard decisions has become more important to Christensen now than it might have been earlier in his career. “I spend less time painting and more time thinking, revising, waiting, looking, reading, revising again, and waiting some more,” he says. “There seems to be a direct correlation between experience and struggle. The more I know, the more critical I become. And the more paintings I create, the more challenging it becomes to paint at a higher level.”

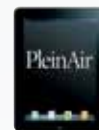
Teaching is an integral factor in Christensen’s professional activities, in part because he believes in sharing his experiences and knowledge, and in part because finding ways to define and articulate what is important about the painting process is a learning experience for him. “It helps me to explain what would otherwise be an instinctive, automatic response to a painting,” he says. “That’s why I divide the workshops into the intensive classes for beginners and intermediate-level painting for experienced artists. I cover the basics of drawing, composition, color mixing, and art history in the intensive workshops, and introduce more complex problems like backlighting, face-lit situations, advanced composition, variety in exterior and interior lines, different motifs, breaking preconceived ideas, and working quickly to capture vital information in the advanced workshops.”

Whether teaching, painting outdoors, or working in his Idaho studio, Scott L. Christensen is engaged in “putting it together,” as Stephen Sondheim describes the artistic process.

That may not be an easy endeavor with a predictable result, but it is a necessary process for a painter like Christensen. 🖌️

SCOTT L. CHRISTENSEN grew up in Wyoming and attended Chadron State College in Nebraska on a football scholarship. He became interested in art through a grandfather who was an amateur painter. Christensen is a full-time artist with a degree in art education whose paintings have been exhibited in private collections and museums and invitational shows, including the Prix de West at the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City; the Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa; the National Museum of Wildlife Art in Jackson, Wyoming; the Denver Art

Museum; and the Salmagundi Club in New York City. He has taught at the Disney Animation Studios, the Scottsdale Artists School, the Fredericksburg Art School, and the Fecchin Institute. His paintings are reproduced in the recently published book *The Nature of Light*, and he explains and demonstrates his creative process in DVDs available on his website. His most recent DVD release, *Scott L. Christensen: Solitary Profession*, includes two hours of instruction and a documentary feature. For more information, contact Kristie Grigg at 208.787.5851 or visit www.christensenstudio.com or www.christensenworkshops.com.



View more of Scott L. Christensen’s oil painting and a short video in the digital edition of PleinAir™.

ARTIST DATA

NAME: Scott L. Christensen

BIRTHDATE: August 20, 1962

BIRTHPLACE: Alliance, Nebraska

HOME: Victor, Idaho

SUPPLIES: Vasari Classic Artists’ Oil Colors; Rosemary & Col bright and flat brushes; Wind River Arts panels; Open Box M, EasyL, and Julian portable easels; AU Frames
PALETTE: Vasari Classic Artists’ Colors, including titanium white, Grey’s ship rock, bluff, adobe, shale, jasper, silver point, cedar, bice, and a series of grays made specifically for the artist and his students.

WEBSITE: www.christensenstudio.com and www.christensenworkshops.com