

Art

Adventure Painters of the Southwest

The maddening fun of plein air painting still tempts artists to test the rules of outdoor artmaking.

Susannah Abbey November 10, 2022



Aaron Zulpo and Will Bruno near Ghost Ranch (courtesy the artists)

Here in New Mexico we have a joke: Don't like the weather? Wait ten minutes. Nearly everyone who has lived here for a while has been caught in a sudden hailstorm in August, or had to run for cover during an early monsoon. The rule of the

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outdoors is that it changes constantly and consistently: sun angles, wind direction and speed, cloud formations, humidity. It is what makes painting outside, *en plein air*, so maddening and fun.

Johnny DeFeo, co-founder of the Guild of Adventure Painters, has been painting outside since he was a teenager. The challenge of rendering color and light often determines his subjects when he is on the road with his partner in painting, Brooklyn-based artist Aaron Zulpo. Since 2018 they have taken friends on mobile “Residency Programs” and shorter “Excursions”— driving DeFeo’s box truck to Banff, Yosemite, even Brooklyn’s Green-Wood Cemetery, where they led a community painting day.



Raychael Stine, “Bandelier, upper falls trail” (2021), acrylic on paper, 11 x 7 1/2 inches

Landscape painting has gone through different iterations in Western art since Claude Lorrain began painting the Italian countryside in the 17th century, yet has remained popular. It inspired Humphry Repton’s “Red Books,” an ideation tool of early landscape architecture that is still used today (albeit by means of Photoshop), John Constable’s Barbizon School, the Impressionists, and Thomas Cole, founder of the Hudson River School. Maybe due to COVID lockdowns, or perhaps to a

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growing fear of losing the natural world, *plein air* (like other outdoor activities) is enjoying a small resurgence. Being outside, whether in an urban or wild landscape affords benefits; it's a way to be fully immersed in and aware of the world.



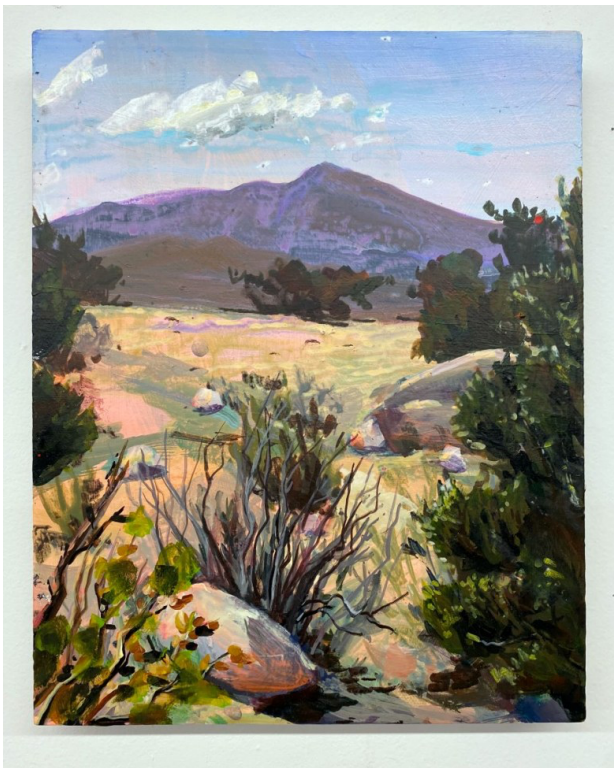
Johnny Defeo, "Takakkaw Falls afternoon rainbow, Yoho National Park" (2022), acrylic on panel, 16 x 20 inches

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While its attractions transcend intellectualizing, at the end of a long day on a residency, the Adventure Painters convene to discuss process. “We’ll talk about, say, a waterfall — why is a waterfall so hard to paint?” says DeFeo.

DeFeo and Zulpo invite a rotating party of like-minded artists to accompany them. In January 2021, they organized a two-week excursion with [Raychael Stine](#), [Beau Carey](#), and [Sean Hudson](#), then followed it up with a group exhibition at [The Valley gallery in Taos, New Mexico](#).

Stine teaches, among other courses, Wilderness Studio at the University of New Mexico, an art class in which students make their own pochade boxes and then go camping for two weeks to experiment with working beyond the confines of the Fine Art Department. Painting outside allows her to distill her outdoor observations into new and sometimes surprising palettes.



Raychael Stine, “La Cueva Albuquerque 2 may 2022” (2022), acrylic on panel, 8 x 10 inches

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For Sean Hudson, a former student of Stine's, the attraction to *plein air* started with the New Mexico sky.

"I found these ethereal, transcendent spaces for my work in the bright sunsets, gradients, landscape as this whole idea of change, beauty, origin," he says.



Sean Hudson, "Value Study at Elena Gallegos" (2021), watercolor on paper, 6 x 8 inches

Beau Carey, also a Wilderness Studio alum, sometimes joins them. "Wilderness Studio changed the direction of my practice," he says. Carey favors remote, icy corners of the world: the mountains of Longervin, Norway, and Denali National Park. He believes that working in the field is a great way to engage with a space, to record a subject with as much accuracy as possible under changing conditions before reinterpreting it in the controlled conditions of the studio. Stine, in fact, calls her outdoor studies "recordings." DeFeo calls his "snapshots" or "souvenirs."

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Beau Carey, "Magdalenfjorden" (2012), oil on paper, 15 x 22 inches

This transformation of total immersion into a two-dimensional picture is rooted in paradox. The word "landscape" in Western culture has been informed by the traditions of painting. It has come to connote, for instance, a sweeping seascape or desert vista, whose details are carefully curated or embellished by the artist's perceiving eye. But landscapes are complex systems that resist the framing and blocking of two-dimensional composition. We understand them not only through our five basic senses but also our proprioception, intuition, memory, fear and expectation. We appreciate them for what they afford us; safety and adventure, food and water, legibility and mystery. In any given prospect we may choose to interpret on paper, thousands of creatures are born, live and die, rocks and mountains are eroding, forests growing and dying and rotting, rivers meandering, springs drying up. Every moment subtly changes the reality before, behind, above and below us.

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(Left to right)

Sean Hudson, Aaron Zulpo, and Johnny DeFeo at Bandelier National Monument, January 2021
(courtesy the artists)

The impossible charge of a *plein air* painter is to distill this sensory and intuitive knowledge into a single snapshot. The Adventure Painters all mention the fast pace of the adjustments they must choose to make or reject when a landscape transforms into another before their eyes and the picture on the canvas must evolve with it. Balancing accuracy of vision with a protean environment is an adventure in itself.

“I love it because it’s a game you can’t win,” says DeFeo. “You get locked on a perfect shadow. A few minutes later you turn your brain into recorder mode and [because the light has changed] paint right through that shadow. It’s right on the edge of glory and annihilation.