

ERIN C. O'CONNOR

The Nourishing Effects of Plein Air Painting

She's lived in her car, in a hunting lodge with no plumbing, and now in a one-room log cabin at the base of Teton Pass, but Erin C. O'Connor believes the benefits of being a plein air painter far outweigh the challenges.

"There is something luxurious about watching the morning light expand and the shadows move across the land, and having the opportunity to paint all of that and more," says O'Connor. An increasing number of collectors and artists are paying attention to this extraordinarily dedicated artist, and her oil paintings are being acquired by discerning collections.

In the early 1980s, O'Connor's well-meaning parents persuaded her to major in anthropology in college. But after spending summers working in Yellowstone National Park, she took a job in Jackson, Wyoming, working for a professional artist. "I was interested in art from the time I was a child and I always painted, but it wasn't until I took that job that I became aware of all the great



1. The artist inside her one-room log cabin home and studio.

2. O'Connor's home and studio in the middle of winter.



artists who painted the places I love," she remembers. "He introduced me to the work of historic artists like the Taos 10, and suddenly I became aware that there were so many Western artists who painted outdoors, directly from nature. I became hooked on plein air painting. There was no reason to pursue anything else."

To improve her skills and broaden her understanding, O'Connor participated in workshops at the Fechin Institute in Taos, New Mexico, and at the Scottsdale Artists School in Scottsdale, Arizona. "I was fortunate to study with some of the best artists," she explains. "I was thinking that the next step was go to an art school to earn a degree.



Refuge

2007, oil, 14 x 18 in.

Collection the artist

Fortunately, Greg McHuron, one of my teachers, advised me that I would be much better off drawing and painting every day and also looking at the work of great artists. That was such valuable advice; I avoided going into debt to pay for art school, and in part because of that I was able to concentrate fully on plein air work.”

When she first moved to Jackson, O’Connor lived in her car until she could afford to rent a small hunting cabin at the base of Wyoming’s Teton Pass. “I lived in that cabin for six years without running water, but I was young, hardy, and totally dedicated to being an artist,” she says. “Eventually another log cabin in the complex be-

came available, and I moved into that one because it had plumbing. The advantage of living in a small house-studio is that my paintings are always front and center. I have my tea in the morning while I look at my canvases, and I can start painting while I’m still in my pajamas. Friends joke that I can cook breakfast with one hand and paint with the other, and they know that if they want to see my latest painting, they have to open the oven. Yes, I use my oven as a drying rack.”

O’Connor goes on, “My other studio is in the back of my truck. All my painting gear is in there, along with my sleeping bag, camp stove, water, clothes, and food. I love driving off to participate in long plein air events. There is a certain Zen to living within the environment I’m painting. The solitary, meditative aspects only enhance the experience. The magnetic frequency of the earth’s surface

is roughly 7.5 hertz, which corresponds to the theta and alpha brain waves that occur during meditative and creative states. I find that compelling. Painting and living out of my truck is when I’m happiest.”

Most of the subjects O’Connor paints are ones that capture her attention at the moment she sees them. “I do take note of places I might want to return to at a particular time of the day, when the pattern of sunlight and shadow might be most appealing, but in general I make the decision to paint a subject on the spot,” she explains. “I could be intrigued by the juxtaposition of positive and negative spaces, the sweep of space from the foreground to the background, the balance of warm and cool colors, the color of the sky in the early morning, or any momentary experience I can capture on canvas. I make a quick thumbnail sketch in graphite on paper to evaluate the com-



17 Mile Cypress
2005, oil, 14 x 18 in.
Private collection

Ascension
2008, oil, 8 x 10 in.
Private collection

position, and if the arrangement of shapes and values works, I set up to paint.

“I edit what I see while I am painting, trying to emphasize the design qualities in the shapes, edges, colors, and patterns. I really admire artists like William Wendt, E. Martin Hennings, Franz Bischoff, and Maynard Dixon, who made bold graphic statements in their paintings, and to a certain extent I strive for the same presentation. I don't take a lot of photographs of a subject while I'm on location because I'm not interested in adding a lot of details to my paintings. In fact, when I do take photographs I'm often surprised to discover there were objects within my field of vision that I overlooked. I'll look at the snapshot and think,





3. The artist participating in a quick draw event in Winter Park, Colorado, in 2008.

4. A springtime exterior of Eric C. O'Connor's log cabin home and studio at the base of Teton Pass in Wyoming.

‘Gee, was that car right in front of me?’”

O'Connor sometimes tones the surfaces of her painting panels, but more often than not she works on white, oil-primed linen-covered panels with a palette of colors that includes titanium white, cadmium yellow, cadmium red, sap green, alizarin crimson, viridian, ultramarine blue, burnt sienna, quinacridone orange, and occasionally some phthalocyanine colors. Her only painting medium is the paint thinner she also uses to clean brushes. 🖼️

ERIN C. O'CONNOR studied painting in workshops with Matt Smith, Bill Gallen, Kathryn Stats, J. Chris Morel, and Greg McHuron. She has participated in a number of invitational plein air events, including the Carmel Plein Air Festival, the Sonoma Plein Air Art Festival, the Rocky Mountain Plein Air Painters National Shows, and the San Luis Obispo Plein Air Festival. She was invited to participate in the Out of the Box Show & Auction at the National Museum of Wildlife Art in 2007, and was Artist-in-Residence at Joshua Tree National Park in 2009. She is a member of the Rocky Mountain Plein Air Painters and is represented by galleries in Wyoming and Colorado. For more information, visit her website at www.oconnorscapes.com.

From Out of the Blue

2009, oil, 24 x 18 in.

Permanent collection of the National Park Service

