

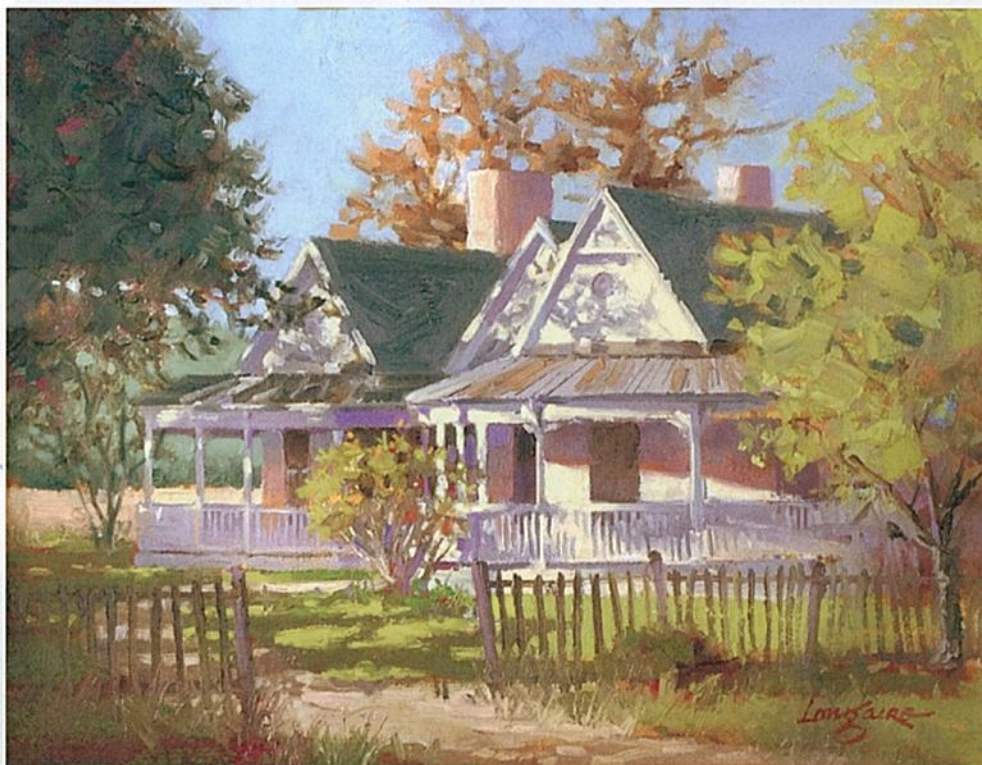
JIMMY LONGACRE

# 'Fun Factor' Tools for Plein Air

This Texas artist can be as serious about the painting process as any, but he is primarily motivated by the joy that comes from creating his own interpretation of the landscape. He offers students a set of tools for gaining skills that help make painting fun.

At the end of a long day of painting in the rain, heat, humidity, and bugs, very few artists at a plein air event will say they are filled with joy. At that moment, they are likely feeling exhausted from the physical strain and the stress of working against a deadline. But give them a couple of hours to clean up and join other participating artists for dinner, and you'll witness a very joyous celebration. Every artist at the table will tell you they feel quite fortunate to have spent their day doing what they love in the company of observers, collectors, and friends.

Texan Jimmy Longacre believes that learning to paint one's personal interpretations of the landscape is what leads to that sense of



**Hill Country Pride**

2014, oil, 11 x 14 in.

Private collection

Plein air

accomplishment and fun; that's what will motivate artists to persist in the challenge of painting outdoors. "Of course, skill, experience, and effort are important to being successful at plein air painting," he says, "but these are the byproducts of discovering how to sustain your personal 'fun factor.' Interpreting what we find in nature through selection, arrangement, emphasis, and design is the game, and that game should be fun no matter what our level of accomplishment."

Longacre goes on, "While painting skill is mainly increased through doing lots of painting,

**Early October**

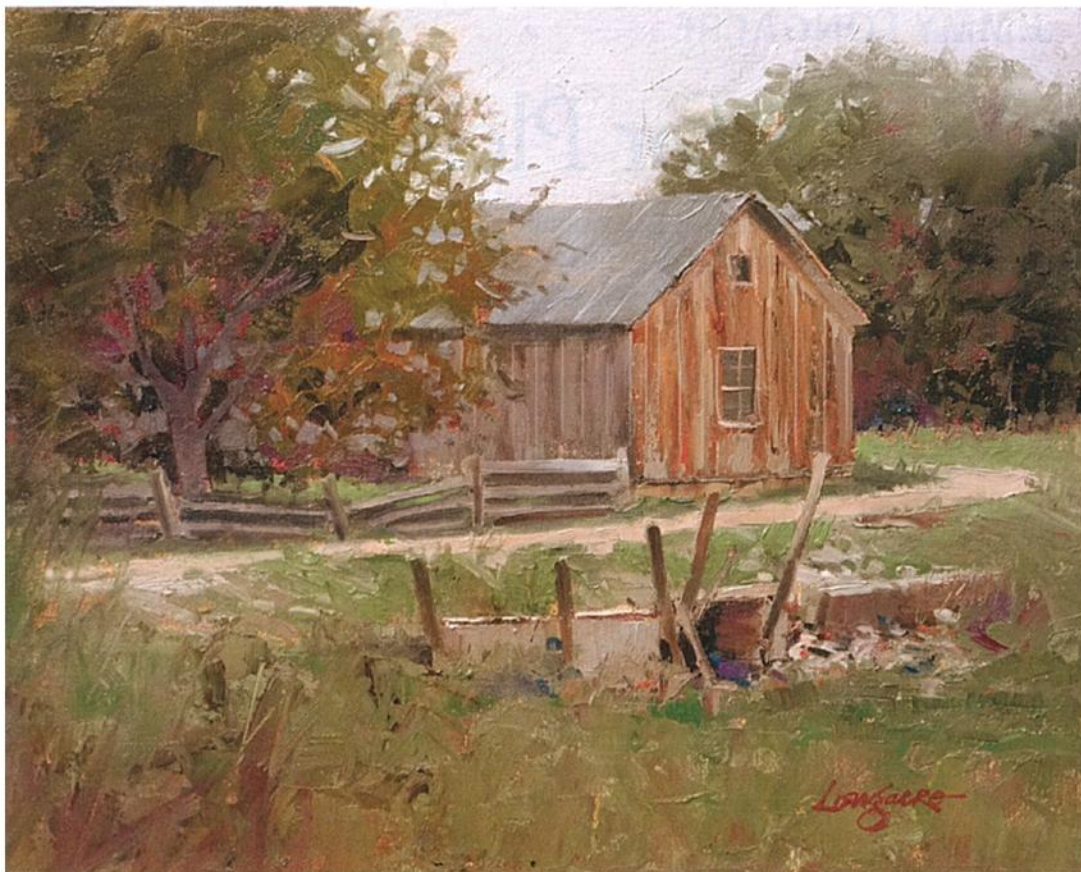
2014, oil, 14 x 11 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air

learning what makes the process fun is what keeps artists doing the work. My objective as a teacher is to pass on some powerful thinking tools that help to simplify planning, composition, and color so those are not overwhelming. No matter what the skill levels of the students may be, awareness of these simple tools can be of immediate help when they go outside to paint. These things are not a matter of technical dexterity or good drawing. The thinking tools can lead to spontaneity and improvisation, and that's where the fun is. When we're having fun





**Change of Season**

2014, oil, 11 x 14 in.

Private collection

Plein air

painting, we're making progress, and as a result of purposeful fun, we improve in drawing and paint-handling."

Longacre describes these "thinking tools" as ways to personally interpret a subject, as opposed to transcribing it. "The tools help us to shift into a different mode of seeing before beginning to paint," he explains. "What we see is rarely ready to be translated to canvas. Inexperienced artists look for nice 'things' to paint, but once we get past the frustration and disappointment of that literal, detail-oriented mode of seeing, we learn to soften our gaze and take in the whole scene in terms of shapes, value, color, and edge relationships.

"Those are the design elements we can manipulate with contrast, dominance, repetition, and gradation. Deciding on meaningful manipulations is where the fun of painting really begins, and it's how we end up discovering what we have to say. Besides, it's a lot more fun than the wearisome task of copying literal facts. That's what cameras are good for."

The artist continues, "We have more confidence when we understand and feel what we're trying to accomplish. Nothing improves spontaneity and improvisation like careful planning.

**Home Memories**

2013, oil, 12 x 16 in.

Private collection

Plein air



**ARTIST DATA**

**NAME:** Jimmy Longacre

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**LOCATION:** Dripping Springs, TX

**INFLUENCES:** "Daniel Volkov, Peter Bezrukov, Bato Dugarzhapov, Daniel Viktorovich, Timothy Horn, Michael J. Lynch, Len Chmiel, Jill Carver, Calvin Liang, Ray Roberts, James Reynolds."

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**Santa Elena Canyon**

2014, oil, 8 x 10 in.

Private collection

Plein air

“The rough thumbnail value paintings allow me to try out ideas in a couple of minutes, and they make all the difference in the painting process. Accuracy of contour is not important here. I work with the arrangement of three to five rough shape-silhouettes. Thinking beforehand will uncover both design opportunities and problems you may encounter. I explore a few painting ideas while thinking about interlocking shapes, shape variety, and balance. I decide whether the picture will be predominantly light or dark, where the horizon will be, and the placement of my focal area.

“Playing with the three simple value groups informs my decisions about what will be useful, and what I will leave out. Strong paintings have big, simple value structures. By playing with the abstract arrangement of masses, the focal area,

That may sound contradictory, but I’ve found that by applying a few simple tools, most students can begin immediately having more fun and painting better with the technical skills they already have. Playing with these ‘tools’ leads to increased confidence and understanding of how we can personally interpret what we see.”

**The Power Of Visualization**

“For instance, learning to pre-visualize how your finished painting will look is one very powerful tool,” says Longacre. “After focusing on something I may want to paint, I create simple thumbnails about the size of a business card in my 4 x 6-inch sketchbook, using a mid-gray and a dark gray brush-tipped marker. But, rather than sketches, these are more like very quick little paintings, using only flat shapes to compose three value groups — white paper, mid-gray, and dark gray. In this way, I can consider various ways I might use the landscape elements to emphasize my selection.

**Real Good Barns**

2013, oil, 11 x 14 in.

Collection the artist

Studio







**Fire on the Creek**  
2014, oil, 14 x 18 in.  
Private collection  
Studio





### On a Broken Ledge

2014, oil, 24 x 30 in.

Private collection

Studio

and editing, I can emphasize my own interest in the subject and get a clear sense of where I want the painting to go.

"If I'm not getting excited about painting by this point, I'll look for another subject. It's discouraging to spend two or three hours working on a painting not knowing where it's going. The game is about arranging and balancing the shapes in some way that excites my interest and instills the confidence that I'm going to have fun painting. Without that feeling, I would end up doing a lot of dull, unsatisfying work and having very little fun. The insects and weather can start to get the upper hand."

### The Best Of Intentions

"I start paintings in different ways depending upon my intentions," Longacre explains. "Generally speaking, I want to cover the canvas as quickly as possible, because it can be difficult to judge value relationships against a stark white

canvas. Working from the three-value painting I designed earlier, I paint broadly at first, using thin, transparent paint to lay in the big value groups. Being able to rely on that thumbnail allows me to paint with confidence right from the outset. I begin with only two or three colors, selected for their temperature and not necessarily their relationship to local colors. I hold off using white because I want to be able to easily wipe things out, change edges, or reposition shapes.

"I try to keep things fuzzy at this stage as I lock in the big light and dark shapes that will remain constant as the painting progresses. I reserve the darkest darks, lightest lights, and brightest color for the focal area. From this beginning, I have a foundation for developing the major shapes with opaque paint that approximates local colors while still avoiding details. From then on, it's a process of adjusting values, color relationships, and edges, applying thicker paint, and making the most of the focal area."

Like many contemporary plein air painters, Longacre trained and worked as an illustrator before establishing himself as a full-time professional artist. He brought a strong work ethic, a skillful approach to drawing and painting, and

an instinctive sense of design to his painting career. Even as he appreciates the training he received at the University of Texas and Syracuse University, he says he now enjoys the freedom from an illustrator's tendency to render "things."

"When I was struggling through the process of switching from illustration to painting, I found a little quote by Camille Corot [1796-1875] that really helped me," he says. "Corot said 'It is the interpretation that makes the work.' That convinced me that facile rendering is not the key to strong paintings. Rather, learning to interpret what I find in nature through personal selection, arrangement, emphasis, and design are the essentials for having fun at every level of painting."

**M. STEPHEN DOHERTY** is editor-in-chief of *PleinAir* magazine.



See more paintings by Jimmy Longacre in the expanded digital edition of *PleinAir*.