

GREG LAROCK

# Ideas for Better Paintings

Californian Greg LaRock has specific suggestions for harnessing the excitement of outdoor painting to achieve significant growth.

Just look how clean Greg LaRock's clothes are as he stands next to other plein air painters who have oil colors spread from head to toe, and you'll agree this guy is in control. The sloppy artists (of whom I am one) get so lost in the painting process they don't notice the cadmium orange on their nose, the Prussian blue on their shirt, or the alizarin crimson on their sneakers. But more importantly, sloppier painters may have lost control of the value pattern, color temperature, edges, and center of interest in their painting.

Not so with LaRock. He is always clear about what he needs to do to elevate his painting above the average level of observation and expression. Once he frames a subject in his field of vision, draws the basic outlines of the shapes with a thin mixture of oil color, and lays out his palette, he moves from one area of the canvas to another with a consciousness of how he wants the painting to be resolved.



## TAKING NOTE

To find out for yourself just how deliberate and controlled LaRock is while painting outdoors, ask him a couple of questions about his creative process. Chances are your first question will elicit a 15-minute review of the key points of outdoor painting. "The first thing I did was to break down the distance into three sections: foreground, mid-ground, and background," he said, answering a question about a painting he was creating in Callaway Gardens during a recent plein air event.

"I then determined where each object was located and how to force it into one of the three depths," he continued. "That made the painting much simpler to decipher when it came to

**1. Greg LaRock painting in Callaway Gardens in Georgia**

**2. LaRock in his California studio working on *Gimme a Break*, 2011, oil, 15 x 30 in.**







**A Day in the Desert, 7:00am**

2009, oil, 6 x 8 in.

Private collection

*The three paintings shown here were created from the same location at different times of one day.*

*(Plein air)*



**A Day in the Desert, Noon**

2009, oil, 6 x 8 in.

Private collection

*(Plein air)*



**A Day in the Desert, 4:00pm**

2009, oil, 6 x 8 in.

Private collection

*(Plein air)*





### **Azaleas on the Side**

2011, oil, 9 x 12 in.

Callaway Gardens Purchase Prize

(Plein air)

the relationships correct between each part of the painting. I continue working from the general to the specific until I have filled the canvas with large, simplified, massed sections, and I can then modify those base colors, values, and temperatures. At that point I may warm or cool the temperature of certain colors, flesh out the representation of objects to make them more believable, or model the form to emphasize the three-dimensional quality."

### **A CLEAR STORY**

"Paintings are like novels, plays, or movies in that they often tell stories in the way the artists move viewers' attention from one place to another across the canvas," LaRock adds. "The most effective way to do that is to have a clear center of interest in one quadrant of the painting (not the dead center), and to have secondary, supportive areas that bring the viewer back to the place the artist thinks is most important. Those controlled shapes, values, and colors say to the viewer, 'This is what my painting is about.'"

"Quite often human figures will tell that intended story, as in the case of my Callaway Gardens painting. I didn't plan for them initially, but there are some scenes — beaches, walkways, city streets, playgrounds — where it would seem odd not to have people, and in this case it occurred to me that figures would be a logical focal point for the composition."

The artist confesses, "You may think of me as being determined and controlling, but the truth is, I welcome new discoveries while I am painting. Sometimes the best parts of a painting are added once I'm well underway, I step back, and an idea occurs to me about a change or addition that might improve the painting. In those situations, I let the scene speak to me and let it tell me what I believe viewers would really appreciate seeing."

Some of the painting locations LaRock finds are so intriguing he paints in the same spot on different days or at three different times of the same day. "Every once in a while, I put a flag in the ground to mark the placement of my easel and I'll paint in the exact same location in the morning, at

establishing my values and intensities. I sketched the scene in pencil and made notes about where I wanted the shadows and lights on the pathway. Next, I started painting the foreground bushes and found a value and color note for the in-shadow greens. Once I had a note I liked, I expanded on the area by shifting the colors and temperatures, but not value. That held those shadowed green masses forward and created the feeling of 'foreground.' The tree off to the right was also painted in that same value range, as were the two larger tree trunks on the left."

Remarkably, LaRock offered that 175-word response while he continued to study the garden scene to determine how he would add notes of color and relate one to another. "I actually think

about a more complicated arrangement of spatial depths than just foreground, middle ground, background, but it is easier for students to analyze spatial relationships when they break a landscape down into those three levels," the artist explained after he completed his painting. "The key to dealing with any aspect of painting is judging one thing against another, so I start by painting the parts of the landscape that are most likely to change as the light shifts, usually in the middle ground of the space, and then I test every other color and value against that. I often call that first part the 'buy-in' section of the painting, or the place where I make a commitment that influences every other decision."

He goes on, "I may later go back and adjust the original marks, but the key is to get



### **Along the Path**

2011, oil, 11 x 14 in.

Collection the artist

Included in the 2011 Oil Painters of America exhibition

(Plein air)

midday, and in the evening,” he explains. “Once I finish one, I put it away and don’t look at it again until the third one is completed, then I view them all together. It’s fascinating to note the similarities and differences in my responses. I learn that I do some things exactly the same every time I paint, and also that I unconsciously adjust colors, values, and shapes depending on how the light changes my perception and emotional response to the location.”

## SERIOUS BUSINESS

“Plein air painting is the core of my business as an artist, so I take it seriously and evaluate my work and the events in which I participate in terms of both the personal and the financial rewards,” says LaRock. “For example, I accepted the invitation to participate in the Callaway Gardens event because I thought it might potentially expand my market in the Southeastern part of the country and give me the opportunity to paint a different range of subjects than I do during the many events in the Western states.

“With respect to that particular piece in that azalea garden, I chose the location because it seemed to be one where I would likely wind up with a painting that satisfied me and appealed to collectors.” When Irvine Museum Executive Director Jean Stern judged the entries to the second annual plein air event, he awarded LaRock the top Callaway Gardens Purchase Award for one of his other Callaway Gardens painting. 🖼️

M. Stephen Doherty is Editor of *PleinAir* magazine.



See more work by Greg LaRock and a video demonstration in the digital edition of *PleinAir*.

## ARTIST DATA

**NAME:** Greg LaRock  
**BIRTHDATE:** 1965  
**BIRTHPLACE:** Alhambra, CA  
**RESIDENCE:** Newport Beach, CA  
**INFLUENCES:** Too many to name, from Bill Anton to Anders Zorn  
**PALETTE:** Alizarin crimson, cadmium orange, cadmium red light, cadmium yellow medium, cobalt blue, Naples yellow, permanent green light, titanium white, transparent red oxide, ultramarine blue, viridian, yellow ochre  
**WEBSITE:** [www.greglarock.com](http://www.greglarock.com)

## Demonstration:



**STEP 1:** LaRock sets up his easel on the beach near his home in Newport Beach, California.



**STEP 2:** The artist draws the outline of the major shapes in graphite on a white panel.



**STEP 3:** Focusing on the strong background masses, LaRock blocks in the darkest values in the scene.



**STEP 4:** Moving forward in space to the waves and water, the artist blends a variety of greens and blues to capture the sense of motion.



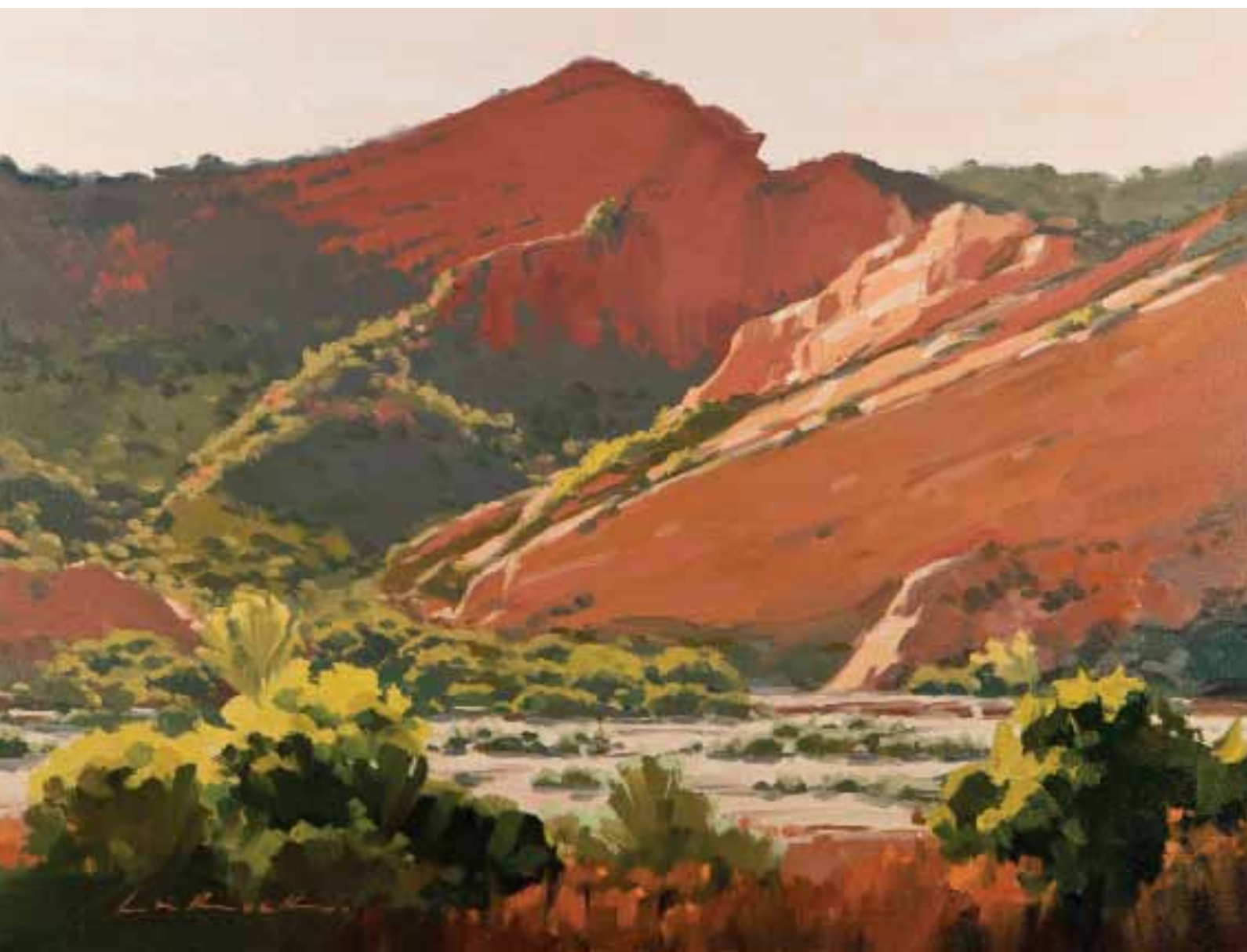
**STEP 5:** The dark brown of the sand establishes an important contrast between the water and beach and anchors the foreground space.

**STEP 6:** LaRock adds details to the pier and crashing waves to complete the plein air painting.





## ARTIST PROFILE



### **Big Red**

2010, oil, 18 x 24 in.

Collection the artist

Included in the 2011 Oil Painters  
of America exhibition

(Plein air)



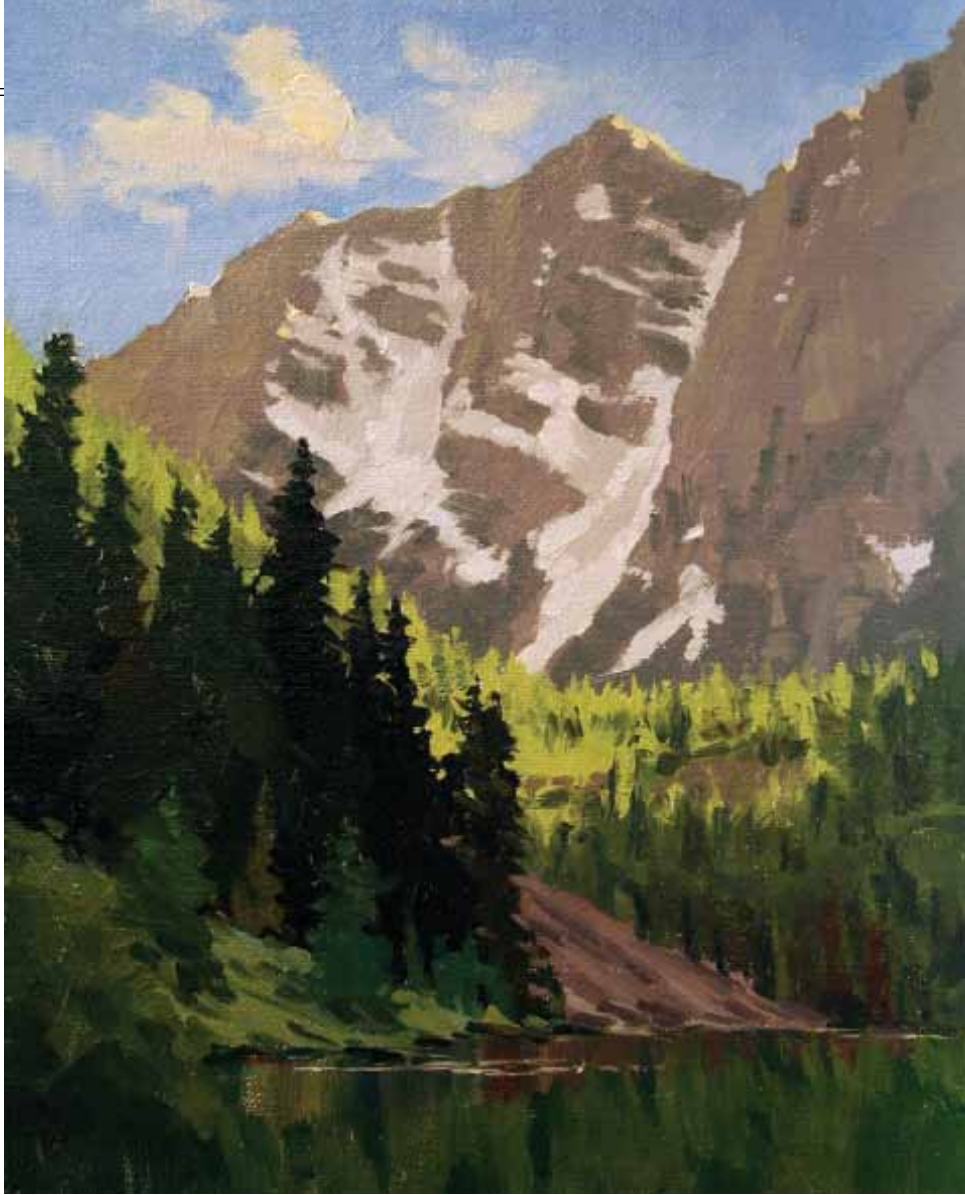
### **Pearl Stop**

2009, oil, 12 x 20 in.

Private collection

(Plein air)





**Evening Grandeur**

2010, oil, 10 x 8 in.

Private collection

(Plein air)

# VIDEO



Greg LaRock filmed his demonstration while painting on the beach in California.



**Under the Arch**

2010, oil, 9 x 12 in.

Private collection

(Plein air)