

ODE TO PLEIN AIR PAINTING

by Susie Y. Anderson

Painting "en plein air" (a French expression meaning in the open air) can be an amazing experience, and it is very different from studio work. For me, it breathes extra life into everything I paint, heightens my senses, and creates lasting memories. I love being outdoors, one-on-one with nature and also painting with other friends likewise smitten. I love the characters I frequently meet who tell me stories about my subject matter, often sharing personal history I never would have known otherwise. I can tell you a story about every plein air painting I've ever done; the memory stays long after the painting is finished. Painting en plein air has also opened many doors to private and unique places I could never in my life imagined visiting, and it has created lasting friendships with other artists across the islands and the mainland.



I especially love the challenge of trying to bring home a “keeper” and always rolling with the punches. Strong trades and flipped easel? No problem; dust off the sand from the paint and begin again! Forgot my brushes? No problem; sticks will do! Paper Towels streaming down a windy beach? No problem; get some exercise, run after and re-roll! And where the heck did that rain squall come from anyway and where is the nearest shelter? Oh yes, and I almost forgot about the joys of lugging all my gear (with a backpack, 9 lb easel, panel drying box, umbrella, paints, brushes, medium, paper towels, etc.) like a Sherpa guide through hill and dale. This endeavor is not for the feint of heart.

The sun travels so fast in Hawaii that I have a maximum of 2-3 hours to paint at one location. Speed and a clear focus are really important. That means everything has to be clicking and in sync from the start. Finishing a painting on site is not necessarily my goal, and rarely happens, but getting to the 80%-completed stage and finishing up in the studio are what I'm after. It's critical to commit to a composition early and stick with it. Chasing the sun's shadow and remaining indecisive an hour later is not a good thing. Nor is "licking it to death" which, as my Alabama artist friend once told me, is the sure kiss of death.

Frequent practice is rewarded by a greater success rate but there are no guarantees. It's similar to going on a fishing trip and hoping to come home with the "big one." Sometimes the fish just leap into your boat and it's crazy-easy and you wonder how they got there; other times you can't hook a fish to save your life, come home empty-handed, and wonder if it's worth all the effort. It's not for everyone. But neither is golf for that matter.

Plein air painting for me is pure magic! I hope you enjoy seeing some of my recent paintings from life and reading their stories.

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