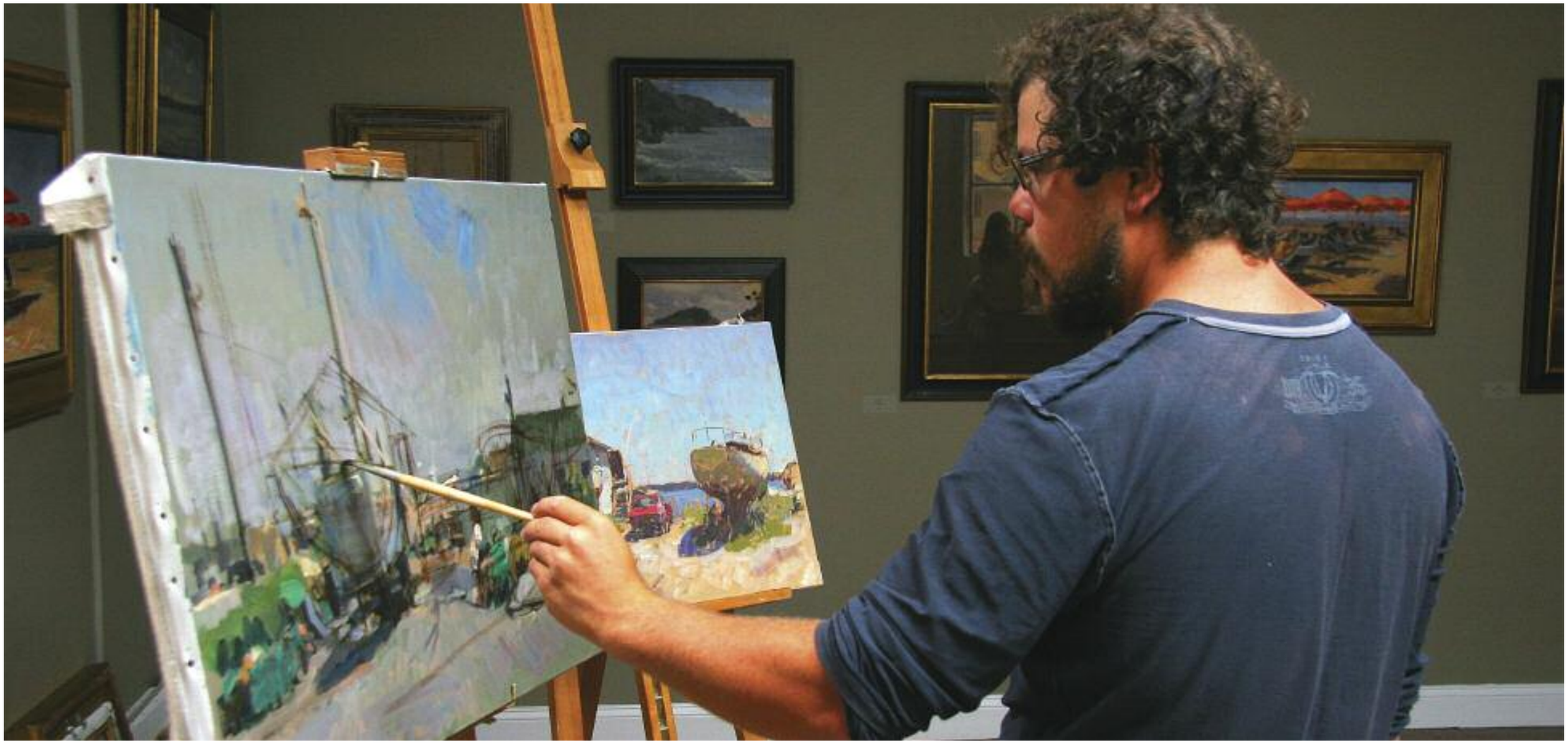


On the second day of the workshop, Ben Fenske showed students how to create studio paintings from their plein air sketches.

Photos: Steve Smith

BEN FENSKE

6 Basics of Landscape Painting

During visits back to the United States from his home in Italy, Ben Fenske teaches fundamental concepts and skills that can help landscape painters make progress.

—

by M. Stephen Doherty

“Practice, practice, practice” may be the advice given to musicians who aspire to perform in New York’s Carnegie Hall, and it is also good advice for landscape painters.

The more one works at composing pictures, mixing colors, building up the surface of a canvas, and looking critically at one’s paintings, the more likely it is that real progress will be made. But what should one be practicing? Certainly not repeating bad habits.

If these well-intentioned artists participated in one of Ben Fenske’s workshops, they would leave with the understanding of some basic concepts, sound techniques, and dependable procedures they could practice. As a young artist, Fenske clearly recalls the advice that helped him develop solid skills and broad understanding, and now he passes that information on to people who participate in his workshops or attend his regularly scheduled classes. He teaches short-term workshops when he returns annually to the United States from his home in Italy, and he frequently serves as an adjunct instructor at art schools in Europe and the United States.

Fenske grew up in Minnesota’s Twin Cities and was fortunate to study with Joseph Paquet in Minneapolis. He later moved to Florence, Italy, and participated in the rigorous academic program offered at The Florence Academy of Art. He now maintains a studio in a historic studio building on Piazzale Donatello in Florence, where other professional artists have similarly large work spaces.

Last summer Fenske was invited to teach a two-day workshop in Sag Harbor, New York, where he is represented by Grenning Gallery (www.grenninggallery.com). A group of local artists joined him on the beach for the first day for a painting demonstration and individual critiques, and the same participants convened in the spacious Grenning Gallery on the second day when Fenske offered a demonstration on how to develop large studio paintings from plein air sketches. Members of the *Workshop* magazine staff observed both days of instruction and invited photographer Steve Smith to document the gallery demonstration.

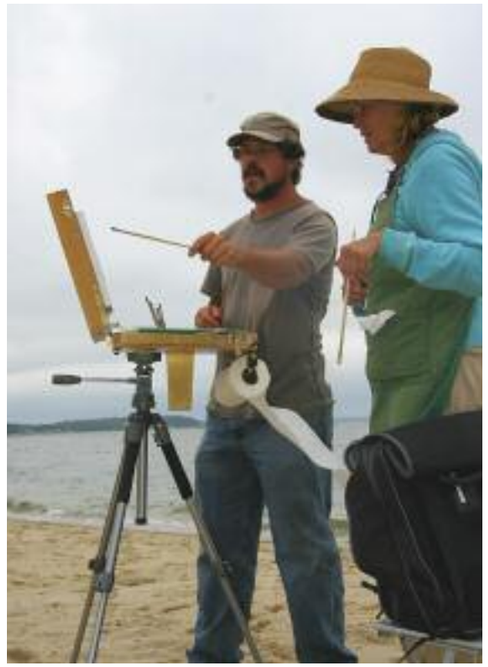
As Fenske began a presentation to the assembled students on the first day of the workshop, he explained that he would be discussing six basic concepts that can be applied to almost any landscape-painting situation. “These are simple ways of thinking about what you observe in nature,” he said. “Some of what I’ll describe has to do with the physics of light, and some of it concerns the way pigments can be used to record our observations. That is, I will talk about why the landscape appears a certain way and how oil paint can be used to emulate its appearance.” Here are Fenske’s explanations of the six concepts he discussed during his workshop.

Concept 1: Form

Every landscape, figure, and object can be considered as a collection of forms made up of planes of space. At the beginning of the painting process, it helps to just consider the largest and most dominant of those forms and indicate them on a piece of paper or canvas in the simplest way possible. For example, a building is made up of squares, rectangles, circles, and triangles, and a figure is composed of cylinders, cones, and cubes. Even though you will want to paint them as real, natural objects, it is their overall form that matters. If you keep those forms simple, it is easier to judge their relative scale, the distances between them, and the way they align in perspective. And once you have them accurately indicated, you can start to break them into smaller and smaller forms.

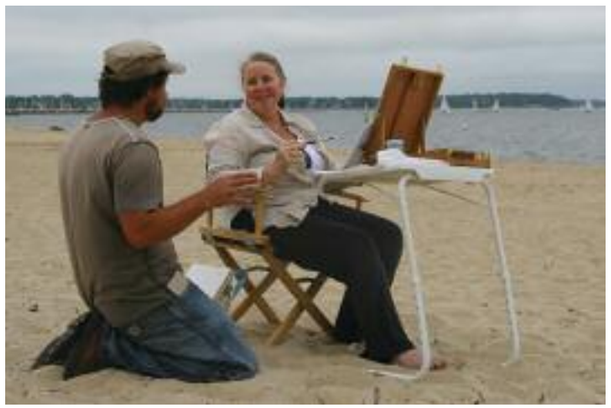
Concept 2: Light and Shadow

We see objects because of the way they reflect light and cast shadows. We know a piece of fur is soft because the pattern of light over it has soft edges and subtle transitions of value, and we know something is far away because there is less contrast than there is between the pattern of light and shadow in the foreground. And whether we recognize it or not, light also affects our perceptions of color. A white wall



LEFT
Fenske painted on a student’s canvas to demonstrate the key points he wanted her to understand.

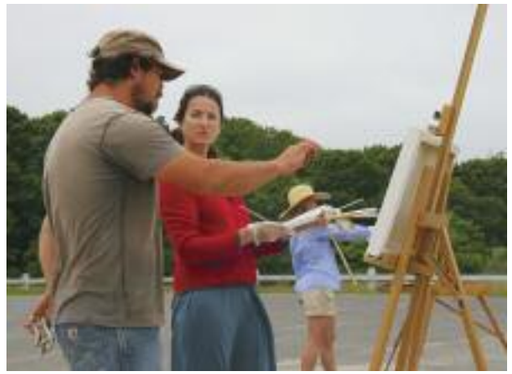
BELOW
The instructor offered individual critiques of the students’ paintings.

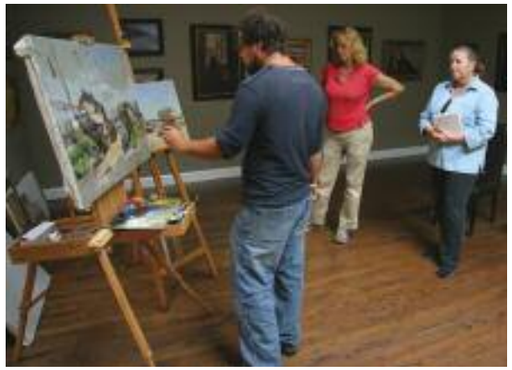


BELOW
The instructor offered advice to one of the students in the workshop.

BOTTOM
Lecturing inside Grenning Gallery, the instructor pointed to his own paintings to make significant points.

OPPOSITE PAGE
The first day of the workshop was held on the beach in Sag Harbor, New York.



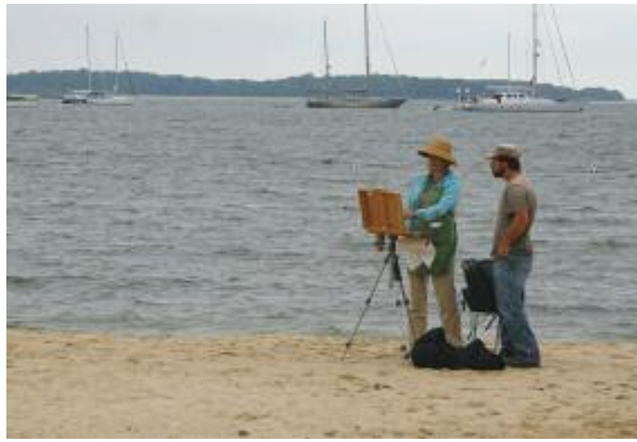


looks gray in low light, and green leaves look yellow when they are under direct sunlight.

It makes sense to think of painting both as a process of recording the range of values established by the amounts of light that the surfaces reflect and also as a system of using the light to direct the viewer's attention within the confines of the picture. During the workshop, I talked to the students about analyzing the pattern of light and shadow at the very beginning of the painting process so that they would immediately begin to think about compositing the picture, separating the forms, and directing the viewer's attention by controlling that pattern.

Concept 3: Values

Although light and shadow are concrete, physical phenomena, value is completely relative. Something can be described as having a light or dark value in relationship to everything around it. I recommended that students in the workshop observe the subject they intended to paint before they even lifted a brush. I wanted them to ask themselves what were the lightest and darkest shapes and to then determine how everything else fit into that order. Because things change all the time in nature, I suggested that people take a few minutes to mark their observations on the canvas by indicating the specific pattern of light, middle, and dark values. They wouldn't necessarily have to stay with that over the course of the next two or three hours, but at least they would have a logical starting point for their paintings. Even if they decided to change things around, they would have a reference point.



I recommended that students in the workshop observe the subject they intended to paint before they even lifted a brush.

FAR RIGHT
Fenske worked on a large canvas outdoors to show students how he paints a coastal landscape.

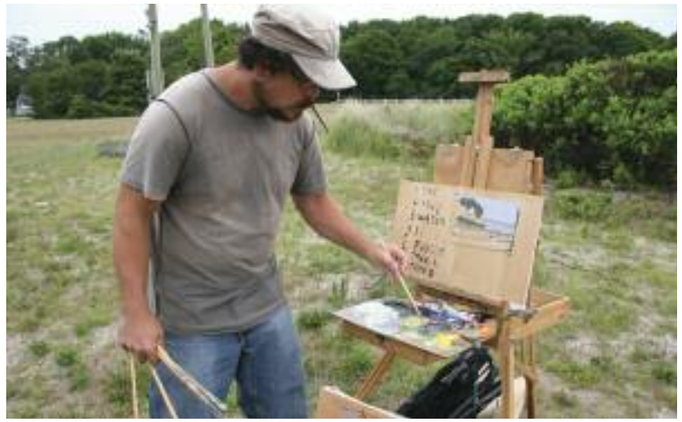
BELOW
Fenske offered a basic demonstration of the six important concepts of landscape painting.

Atmospheric perspective is a term that identifies the fact that colors shift as they go back in space, eventually taking on a decidedly violet hue.

During my first demonstration, I broke up the landscape into six masses and ordered those from the lightest to the darkest, and I wrote the list of those masses on the left side of the panel. While I was painting, I made sure that all the values fit into that hierarchy of values as they were listed on the panel. No. 1 had to be lighter than No. 2, No. 2 had to be lighter than No. 3, and so forth.

Concept 4: Atmosphere

Atmospheric perspective is a term that identifies the fact that colors shift as they go back in space, eventually taking on a decidedly violet hue. The exact degree and hue vary depending on the amount of moisture in the air and the distance between the painter and the landscape elements, but there are some general concepts one can consider when evaluating those particular conditions. I demonstrated the basic principles by mixing a starting-point green with half cadmium yellow light and half ultramarine blue, and I used that to paint the tree closest to me. Then I added a small amount of cadmium orange and titanium white to the starting-point green to paint the trees just behind the foreground shape, added some cadmium red and more titanium white to the mixture to paint the shape behind that, and painted the most distant trees with a mixture that included more white and violet. That sequence created the illusion of things going back in space with the cooling of colors and the lightening of the values.



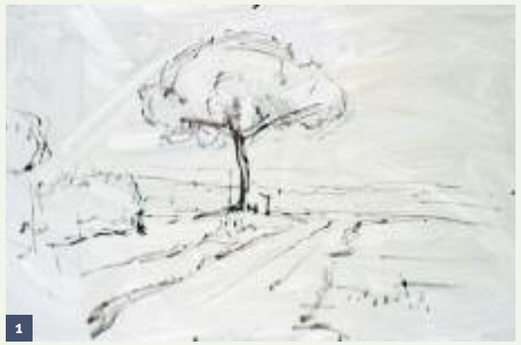
OPPOSITE PAGE
Fenske offered a basic demonstration of the six important concepts of landscape painting.

RIGHT
The instructor worked on a large canvas outdoors to show students how he paints a coastal landscape.

Concept 5: Skies

Just as the color mixtures and values change on the ground, the same thing happens in the sky. I drew an arc over my demonstration painting to suggest a dome of sky over the field, and I identified the obvious fact that the area at the top of the sky was darker because it was directly over our heads, and the line where the sky met the land formations was the farthest away. Then I mentioned the fact that, in general, the sky will progress in four distinct zones, with the smallest being a band of violet just above the horizon. The next zone above the horizon is a light band of greenish blue, progressing up to a light tint of cobalt, and finally to an ultramarine blue. Of course the mixtures of colors and widths of the bands depend on the time of day, atmosphere, weather, and presence of clouds, but as with any other standard measure,

Demonstration: September Day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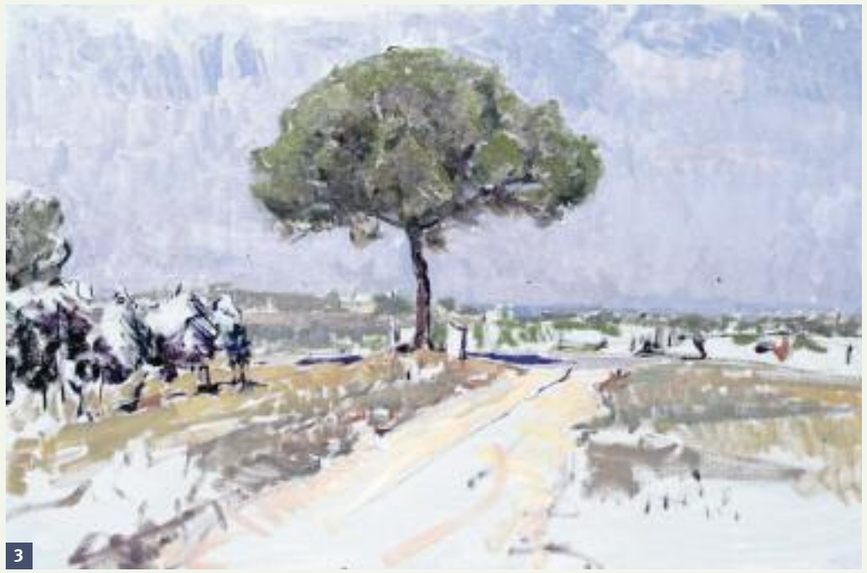
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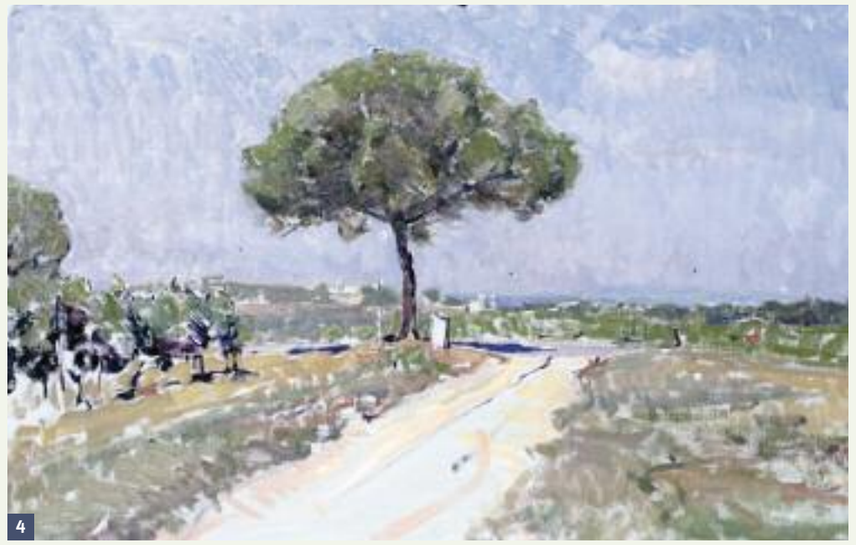
STEP 1
During his two-day workshop, Fenske demonstrated how he uses small plein air paintings to develop larger studio works. In this first stage of the demonstration, he drew the outlines of the major shapes with a thin mixture of oil color.

STEP 2
Using an impressionist technique of applying strokes of broken color on the canvas, the artist established the dark and middle values in the landscape.

STEP 3
Paying attention to the divisions of space in the land and sky, Fenske continued to develop the entire canvas.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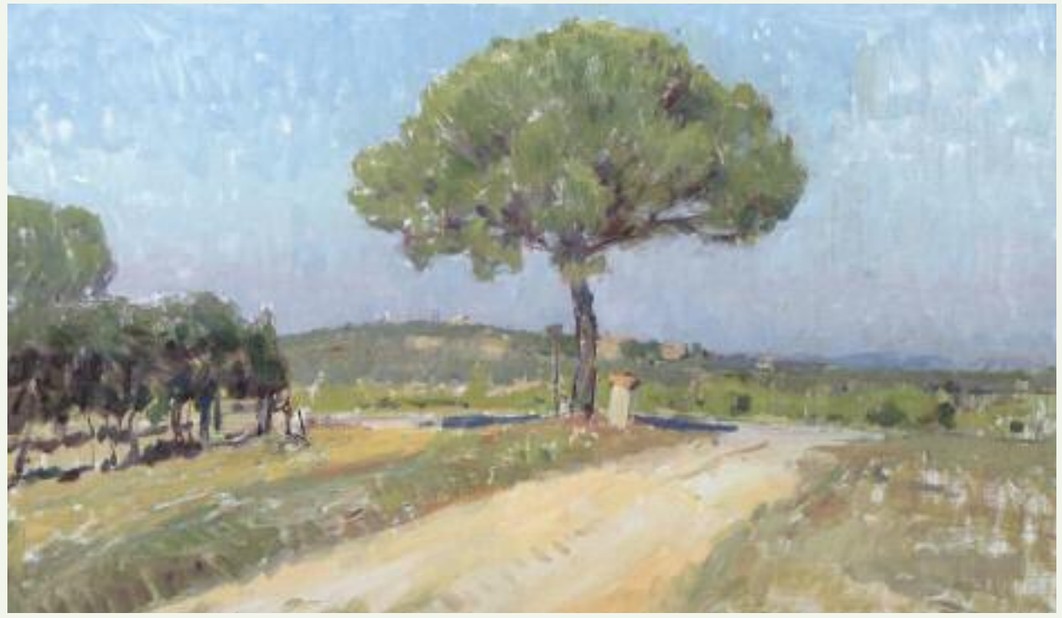
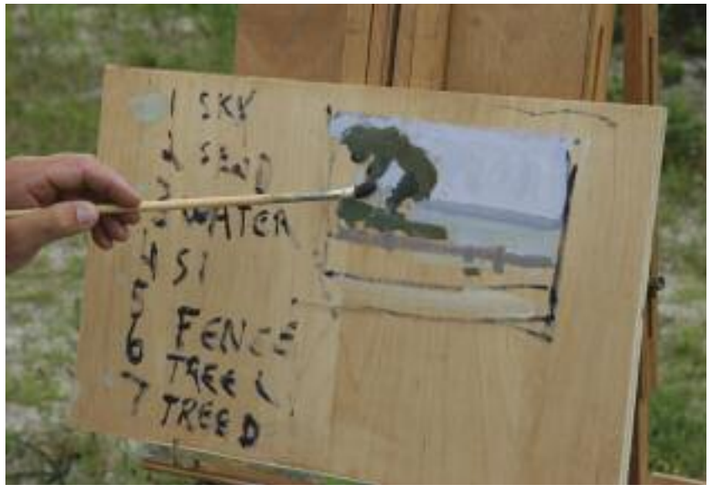
STEP 4
Fenske finished his demonstration by enriching the painting with a broad range of colors applied with quick gestures of a bristle brush.

BELOW
September Day
2009, oil, 22 x 35.
The painting Fenske copied while doing his demonstration.



On the left side of Fenske's demonstration he listed the seven basic spatial divisions in his landscape painting.



this one can help artists judge how the sky on a particular day differs from the standard relationship.

Concept 6: Greens

The color that most people have trouble with in landscape painting is green—the hue that dominates most scenes and separates an evergreen from a maple tree; a mowed lawn from an open pasture; or a shaded palm leaf from a sunlit petal. There are a number of tube greens one can buy, such as permanent green light, viridian, phthalocyanine green, and green umber, and there are any number of ways to combine yellows, blues, and blacks to make greens.

Joe Paquet recommended that his students start with a basic green made from half ultramarine blue and half cadmium yellow light and then modify that to create warmer, cooler, lighter, or darker greens. For example, he suggested making a yellow green by adding manganese blue to the base color; a violet green by adding more ultramarine blue; or a more subtle green by adding cobalt blue. Once he worked with those to establish the big shapes in his landscape paintings, he would adjust the base color again by adding an orange red, alizarin crimson, or more cadmium yellow light. As he worked with the greens, he reduced the intensity of the mixtures to suggest forms farther back in space.

About the Artist

Ben Fenske grew up in Minnesota and studied there with Joseph Paquet (www.joepaquet.com) and at the Bougie Studio. He then moved to Italy to study at The Florence Academy of Art and continues to maintain a studio in Florence. He frequently travels back to the United States to teach workshops and exhibit at Grenning Gallery, in Sag Harbor, New York. His work has also been included in exhibitions at Ann Long Fine Art, in Charleston, South Carolina; Eleanor Ettinger Gallery, in New York City; and Solomon Gallery, in Dublin, Ireland.

Formulas, rules, and concepts should never be a substitute for keen observation, but they can serve as measures against which to evaluate what one sees in nature.

How to Apply These Concepts

Formulas, rules, and concepts should never be a substitute for keen observation, but they can serve as measures against which to evaluate what one sees in nature. What I've offered here is a general way of analyzing what one sees. The challenge and the joy of landscape painting is to respond with skill and understanding to the unique conditions that exist at the moment you begin painting. ■

M. Stephen Doherty is the editor-in-chief of Workshop.

Fenske's Work

LEFT

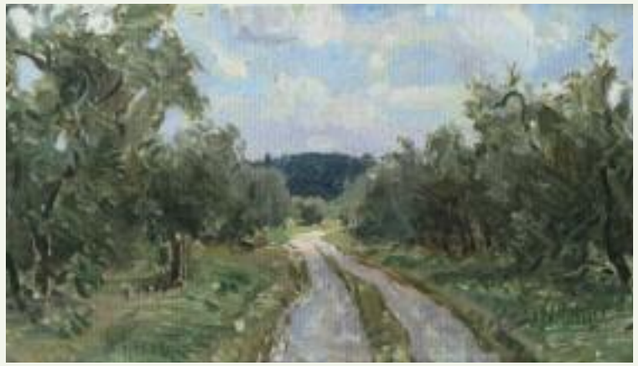
Self-Portrait With White Ground
2008, oil, 24 x 18. All artwork this article courtesy Grenning Gallery, Sag Harbor, New York, unless otherwise indicated.

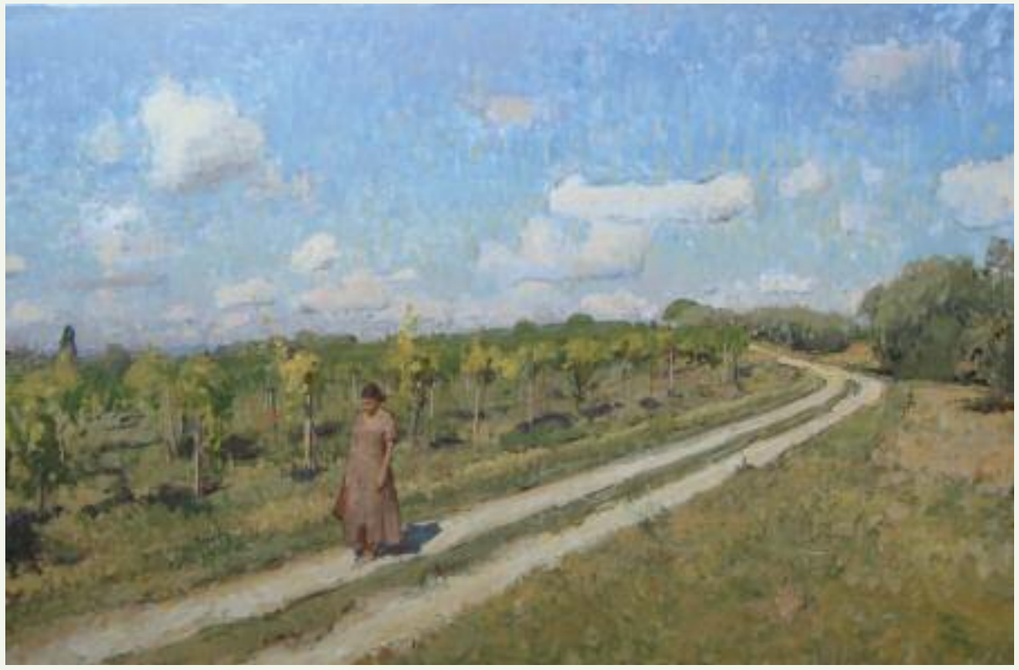
BELOW

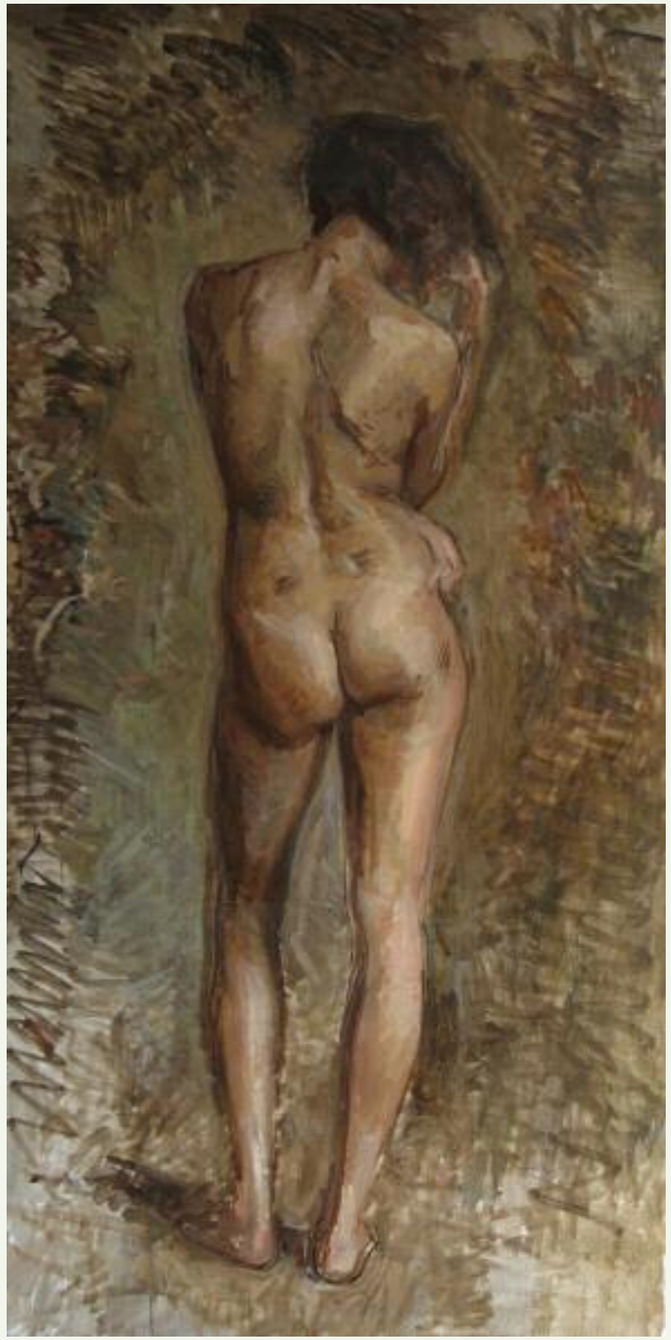
Cloud Shadow
2009, oil, 12 x 20.

BOTTOM

Road
2009, oil, 40 x 59.







LEFT

Nude
2008, oil, 44 x 36.

BELOW, FROM TOP TO BOTTOM

Guitar
2009, oil, 8 x 12. Private collection.

Nude Sketch
2009, oil, 8 x 12. Private collection.

Cary in the Kitchen
2008, oil, 30 x 24. Private collection.