

Winter Field

2016, oil, 9 x 12 in.

Private collection

Plein air



PEGGY IMMEL

PATH TO SUCCESS

Faced with an abundance of visual stimuli and a world of opportunity on the canvas, New Mexico artist Peggy Immel stays true to her vision by identifying the story of her painting at the start.

— BY ROBERT K. CARSTEN —

I've always loved painting," says Peggy Immel. Beginning in oils, she later switched to acrylics, appreciating their transparent quality. "I was using a grisaille method, glazing colors over grays, partly because I didn't know how to mix colors then."

In the 1980s, Immel took a watercolor class, where she first experienced plein air painting. "I loved both watercolor and painting in nature and did that for many years," she says. "But when we moved to Taos in 2002, I wanted to go back to oils. I took a couple of workshops to relearn how to handle them and now I'm hooked. I used to travel the United States and Europe to rock and ice climb, but I don't do that much anymore. Instead, plein air painting allows me to follow my muse — nature. The scenery here is so beautiful and inspiring."

INVOKING HER MUSE

"I believe it's most important to discern what a painting is about — to know what it is I want to convey," says Immel. "Is it the light,



Peggy Immel, shown here painting in Orilla Verde, finds endless inspiration in Taos, New Mexico, where she's lived for over 15 years.

peggyimmel.com



(CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE) Flower Dance, 2018, oil, 16 x 20 in., private collection, plein air • **Fireweed**, 2018, oil, 12 x 12 in., private collection, plein air • **Breezing Up at the Hacienda**, 2018, oil, 9 x 12 in., private collection, plein air



something about the subject matter, a color combination, or color temperature gradation? Maybe it's just a feeling I have. Whatever it is, I need to define it early on because once I know and lock that in my mind, I keep revisiting that idea as I'm working, and this gives my painting process clear direction. Otherwise, the painting can be like that story that goes around a big circle and when it gets back to the beginning, it's not at all the same story. We have an idea, then lose it and go off following another trail, and another. Staying focused and true to the original idea is key."

To discover her main point of interest, Immel begins by designing three small notans, using an Ebony pencil. "I make myself compose the value pattern of the picture differently in each notan," she says. "I might try the design in three different keys — low, middle, and high. It's 15 minutes well spent." She also makes written notes about what attracts her to a scene, sometimes even writing a haiku. Once she's finalized her idea, she may create a small, detailed value sketch from the selected notan. She then marks each of the four intersection points that correspond to the golden section on the canvas and proceeds by loosely brushing in the main forms of her subject. "I usually try to place my focal point on one of those intersections and maybe a secondary area of interest on another one," she says. "The thing is, though, this can get very predictable. Sometimes paintings are more exciting when you break a rule a little bit. I have no qualms about moving things around, emphasizing a light or dark, or shifting a color to highlight something. I'll even play with the location of my center of interest."

ARTISTIC CONCERNS

Winter Field splendidly utilizes an alternate placement of the center of interest. "I stood in my front yard and painted the little house across a field of melting snow," says Immel. "I planned the pattern of the snow, working out the use of diagonals and plotting ways to keep the eye from



racing off the edges of the canvas." To move her center of interest a little further up and to the right of a golden intersection point, she pushed the yellow of the sunlit adobe against the dark windows and adjacent lit trunks. "I didn't make the sunlit part brighter than it was as much as I made it warmer," she says. "I think that color temperature is one of the most underrated opportunities artists have. It's a great way to keep value patterns cohesive. If you just change the color temperature, it can do so much, like on that little house."

ARTIST'S TOOLKIT

Brushes: Silver Brush Limited's Grand Prix Series 1001 flats in sizes 6 through 12; Rosemary & Co Series 279 Masters Choice long flats in sizes 4 through 12; Winsor & Newton Sceptre round, size 4, and rigger, size 0 or 1

Palette: alizarin crimson permanent, cadmium red medium, cadmiums lemon and yellow medium, cobalt and ultramarine blues, and titanium white. Depending on her subject, she uses several supplementary colors, including yellow ochre, cadmium orange, and transparent red oxide.

Solvent and medium: Gamsol; Winsor & Newton Liquin

Palette knife: Richeson Che Son 806

Surfaces: oil-primed Claessens #13 Linen Canvas; MDF board prepared with Gamblin Oil Primer; Sourcetek or Raymar panels

Varnishes: Damar Retouch Varnish when a painting is less than two months old; Liquitex Soluvar after two months

Easels: Strada Mark II; Open Box M with tripod

Apparel: Turn your jacket inside out while painting to avoid staining. Clean paint from clothing with Murphy's Oil Soap.



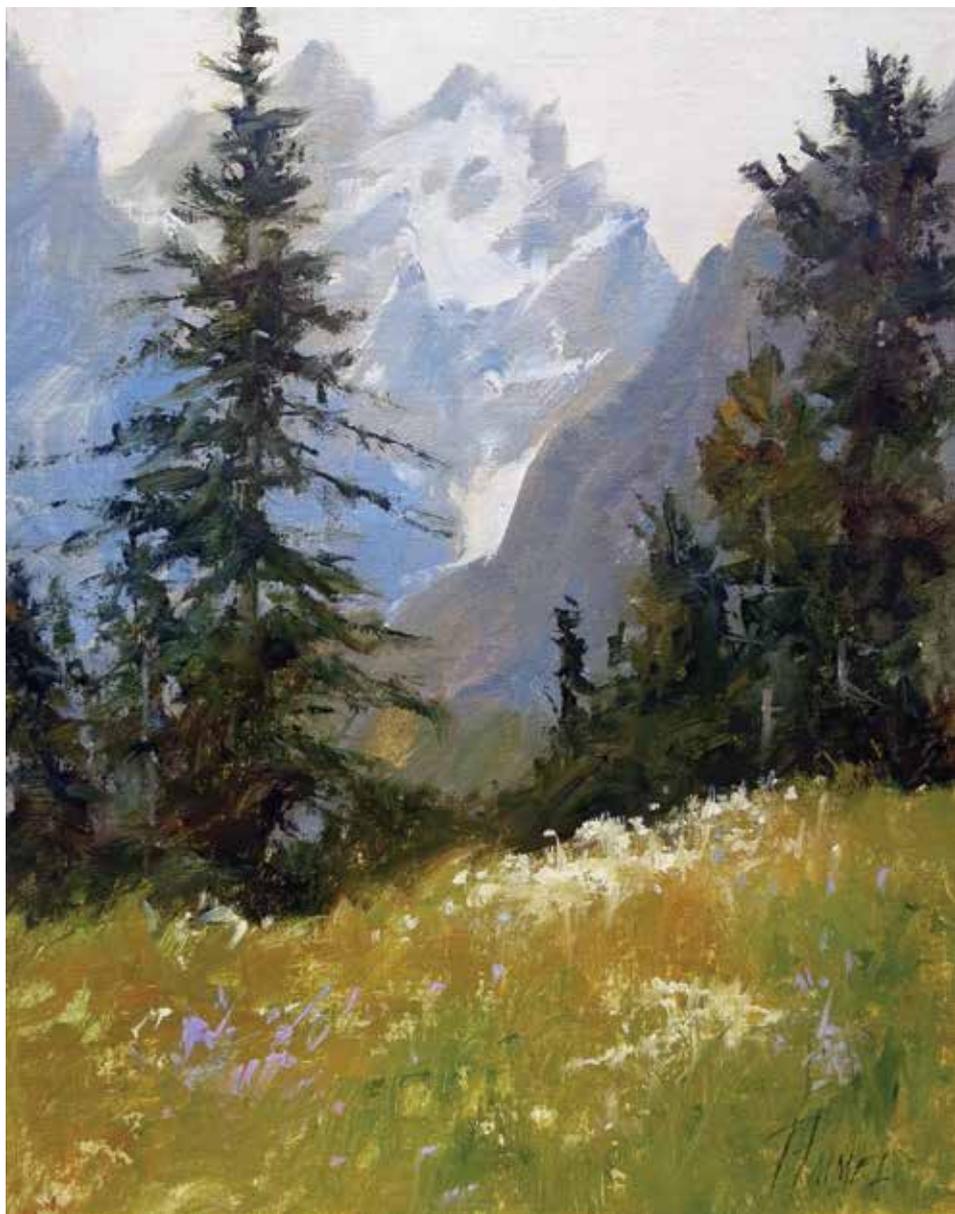
(TOP RIGHT) *Knee Deep in Wildflowers*, 2016, oil, 16 x 20 in., public collection, Jackson Hole Airport, plein air • (RIGHT) *Sublime Vista*, 2017, oil, 14 x 11 in., private collection, plein air

Color temperature plays a significant role in *Breezing Up at the Hacienda*. It was painted on location at Taos's historic Martinez Hacienda, and Immel used cadmium orange to accentuate the adobe color, which complements the blue of the sky. "Although it may seem minor, I became intensely focused on the cast shadows of the *canales* — the drain spouts on Southwestern adobe buildings," the artist recalls. "I was thinking about how color temperature changes within the body of a shadow. It was cooler in the darkest part against and near the beam and warmer as it moved away, picking up more ambient light. As a painter, that's the kind of thing that really interests me."

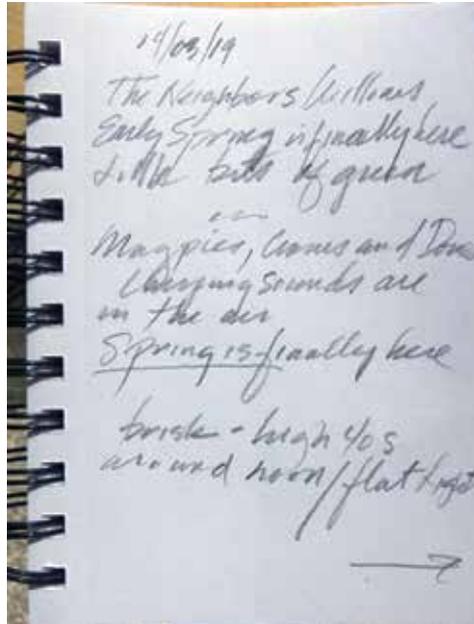
NATURAL BEAUTY

A subject in which Immel creates a special kind of painterly magic is wildflowers. Of the enchanting *Fireweed*, she says, "Sometimes there's just one of those paintings that really works, and this was one. It was a natural — the red of the fireweed against the green. I first created an underpainting of variegated greens and browns and then painted over it with opaque, lighter greens. Often, I'll put thick paint on with a Richeson Che Son 806 offset painting knife, then brush into it."

In addition to *Fireweed*, Immel also painted *Flower Dance*, *Knee Deep in Wildflowers*, and *Sublime Vista* during the Rocky Mountain Plein Air Painters' invitational event at Grand Teton Park. "I like to always have at least one key painting to show that's larger, so I went back twice to the site of *Flower Dance*, despite an abundance of horseflies," she recalls. "I was interested in having a lot of contrast and not having things identical in shape, value, or color in this painting. I also wanted the flowers to have that dance-like look."



DEMONSTRATION: Plotting Points of Interest



Step 1

Immel sets up with her subject in view.

Step 2

She starts by documenting her thoughts about the subject she's chosen to paint. "Things that might be included in my notes are the date, time of day, temperature, sounds, and possible color schemes," she says. "Sometimes I write a haiku (not meant to be great poetry!) to try to capture my feelings about the subject. Then, using a soft pencil, I do a series of small thumbnails with three values to indicate possible approaches to shapes and composition."



Step 3

The artist lightly tones her canvas and completes a rough sketch with the same color, indicating the placement of shapes. "I mark the thirds of the canvas and put a small dot in each of the four points where the thirds intersect," she says. "These are my sweet spots for interest points. I often use cadmium orange for this stage, and I don't bother to let it dry before continuing with the painting."

Step 4

She then establishes the darks and undertones with a thin wash that will show through in various places in the finished piece. "At this stage, I begin asking myself if the paint is 1) light or dark enough 2) warm or cool enough and 3) bright or dull enough relative to the paint it borders on the canvas," she says. "From this point forward, everything on the canvas needs to be considered within the context of its relativity to the rest of the painting."



Step 5

Once the canvas is covered with a thin block-in, she applies thicker paint over the top, using both a palette knife and a brush. "I continue to evaluate the value, temperature, and intensity of my colors as I go," she says. "At this stage, I also consider paint quality and edge work. I'll often use a brush to rework an area of paint applied with the palette knife to achieve a more painterly effect."

Final Step

Immel adds the fine details and highlights at the end. To create the tree trunks, she uses a palette knife together with a rigger brush.

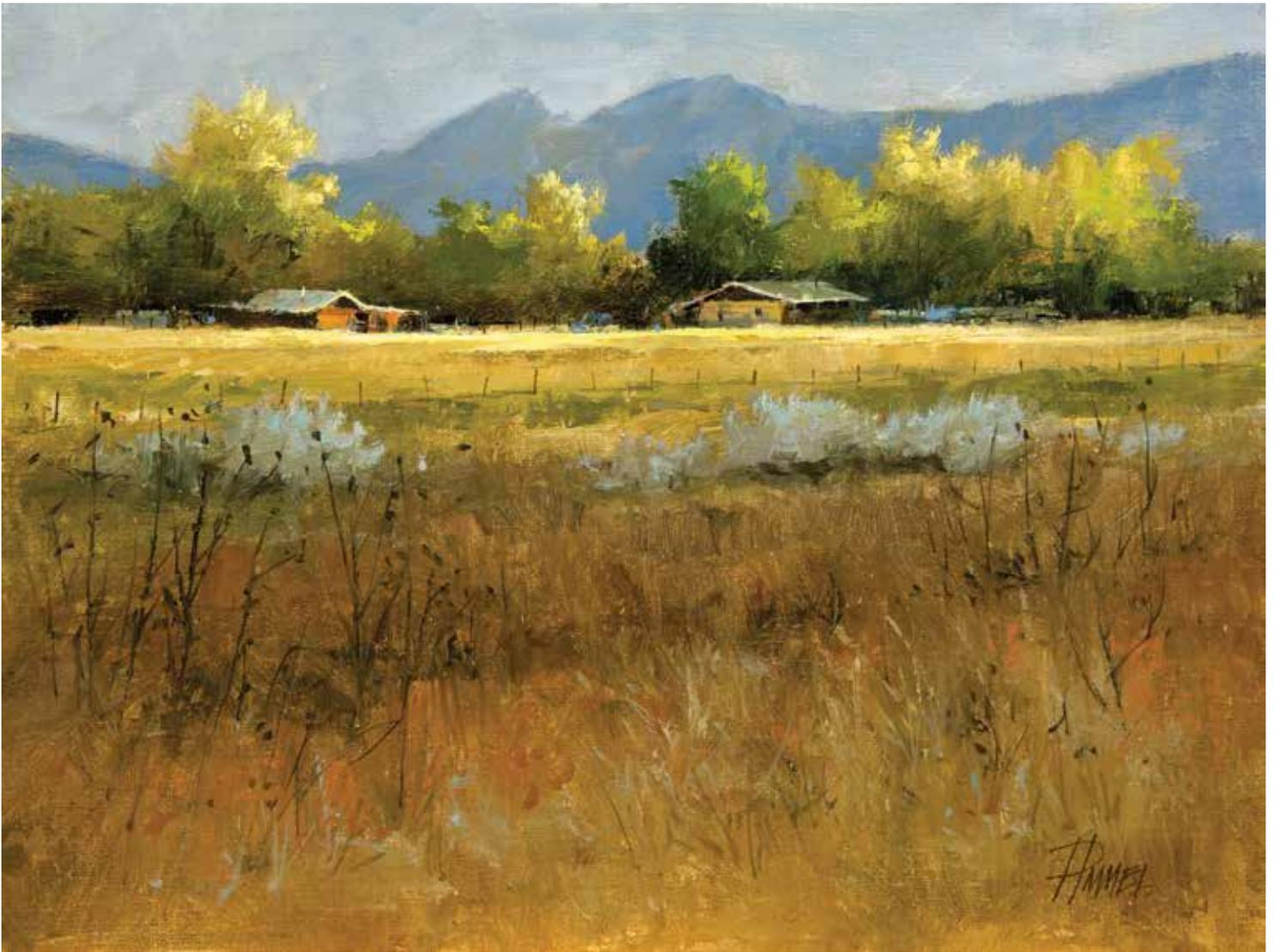
Spring Willows

2019, oil, 9 x 12 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air





(ABOVE) McGivern's Field, 2018, oil, 12 x 16 in., collection the artist, *plein air* • **(LEFT) October Parade**, 2018, oil, 12 x 16 in., private collection, *plein air*

Immel rolled on a coat of Gamblin Oil Primer to recondition the previously used canvas used for *Knee Deep in Wildflowers*. "I first sanded down any high points, then applied the primer and took an old house-painting brush to make marks in it, then let it dry. The beauty of this is that a thin wash of color over that surface glows. I try to always use translucence in darks and washes and make sure I allow this to show. A lot of the detailed marking in the foreground was done by lifting and marking the wet wash, willy-nilly, with a paper towel. I then applied thicker paint over it, here and there, for grass and wildflowers."

The painterly effect in the foreground of *McGivern's Field* was created using the same technique. "I scratched and scrubbed into the wash and made up the shadow in the



Snow Capped
 2017, oil, 11 x 14 in.
 Private collection
 Plein air

foreground for contrast,” Immel says. “I pushed up the directional sunlight effect on the trees, field, and building at left, because it seemed too flat.” Immel’s stunning *Sublime Vista* was painted at a favorite location in the northern part of the park, String Lake. “I thought a lot about atmospheric perspective — color saturation and the dropout sequence of color going into distance,” she says. “I especially like the warmth of the greens in this painting and the difference in the shapes of the flowers — they’re not just round blobs. An important thing I’ve learned in my plein air experience is that nature is kind of random. One of the problems in painting landscapes is that it’s almost impossible to intentionally plan and paint that randomness. One has to just let it happen. When I painted those flowers, I put the color on with

my knife and wasn’t satisfied until I ran a scraggly brush through them, making them appear more natural.

Snow Capped was inspired by another enchanted place Immel is fond of painting — the public lands of the Rio Grande del Norte National Monument in Taos County, New Mexico. “I painted it on a lovely winter’s day, focusing on how snow changes warmth in shadows. I also paid close attention to varying my edges, not only the soft or hard physical quality of the edge itself, but the similarity or difference in values of adjacent forms as well.”

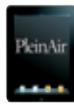
A PEARL OF WISDOM

Undoubtedly, Immel’s impressive success in painting and teaching comes from decades of hard work. Perhaps what has facilitated this is her dedicated commitment to lifelong learning. She views every painting as a new challenge and an opportunity to improve. “I think we learn better if we’re not trying to do too many

things at once. We all have some things we’re not very good at. It could be drawing or composition, color values, or edges. Think about the thing that’s most difficult, the technical thing that you’re struggling with the most,” advises Immel, “then try to develop some drills or exercises and focus on that for some time, perhaps a year. It’s important to get critiques on your improvement, maybe by another painter, spouse, or teacher, because it’s difficult to see progress when we’re working on something we don’t do well. Recognizing patterns — the big and small value shapes so important in designing compositions — was always difficult for me. Several years ago I started the practice of making notans before every painting — and what a difference that’s made!” 📷



Plein air and studio painter **ROBERT K. CARSTEN** (robertcarsten.com) teaches workshops and enjoys writing about art and artists.



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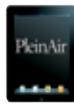
Leaving Ocate
2016, oil, 16 x 20 in.
Private collection
Studio

Racing Clouds
2018, oil, 10 x 12 in.
Private collection
Studio



New Mexico Color
2017, oil, 10 x 12 in.
Private collection
Plein air





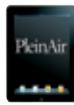
Expanded Digital Edition Content



Under a Great Big Sky
2019, oil, 30 x 40 in.
Collection the artist
Studio



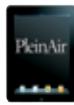
Furrows
2018, oil, 11 x 14 in.
Private collection
Plein air



Expanded Digital Edition Content



(CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) *Bathed in Sunlight*, 2018, oil, 16 x 20 in., private collection, studio • *Hillside Bouquet*, 2018, oil, 12 x 9 in., collection the artist, plein air • *East of Cimarron*, 2018, oil, 11 x 14 in., collection the artist, studio



Expanded Digital Edition Content



December Light Show

2018, oil, 10 x 12 in.

Private collection

Studio