



# REVELATION IN THE LIGHT

Like clockwork, seven days a week, at 5 p.m., the Cal-Train goes through this crossing heading north to San Francisco. While painting **Waiting the 5 O'Clock Cal-Train** (pastel, 16x20), I had the feeling that everything in the scene was waiting for the train to come by: the crossing gates, the barn, as well as myself, all in anticipation.

A plein air devotee offers insight into his poetic approach to painting the landscape—one marked by intuition and introspection as well as obedience to the light.

BY W. Truman Hosner

**AS AN OUTDOOR PAINTER**, I'm absolutely married to the light—its effects and how they play out in concept and composition. I never tire of the continuous movement and varying distributions of light. These changing situations create an atmospheric sparkle with repose that I find terribly exciting to articulate with my pastels.

## THE EVOLUTION OF AN IDEA

I work alla prima, very directly. I don't make preliminary sketches to plan a composition. Rather, I just have at it and let the painting rise from passages, much as a poem rises from words. I allow the thinking behind what I'm experiencing to develop organically and reveal itself while in the act of painting. In this way, the idea for the painting becomes a birthing process more than a preconceived notion. What has caught my eye in the landscape only initiates the creative process.

I can't go through Monument Valley, on the Arizona-Utah border, without paying homage to one of these great monuments. The little village in the mid-ground stirred a feeling of humility by adding scale to the scene. While I was painting **Monument Valley** (pastel, 16x20), a father and daughter from the Navajo community stopped to talk and watch. I've met many wonderful people by painting on site.



I ask myself how I might express what I'm experiencing in the moment and how I might access it from somewhere inside myself rather than by copying directly what it is I see. I'm actually aided by nature in that goal, because—when painting outdoors—things are in a constant state of flux. I don't fight the continuous change; I use it. During a painting session (typically 2½ to 3 hours), I'm continuously incorporating these changes of movement, shifting light, weather conditions and the responses they evoke in me.

I painted **The Sea Tossed and Turned** (pastel, 16x20) while on a 17-mile drive along the California coast near Carmel. It was one of those afternoons when the wind off the sea was so strong I had to ask myself whether I should even attempt to paint, but what a great challenge it was to express all of that movement. After all, if it were easy, it wouldn't be any fun.

## PEAK PERFORMANCE

The process of painting has become almost like a performance in which I try to come into full possession of my artistic abilities for a fixed span of time—within a window of light, in fact.

In this pursuit, I've learned that the best way I know of getting feeling into the painting is to work from my subconscious, intuitively. Although I'm reacting to the scene before me, I'm doing so with a storehouse of acquired knowledge of what can be done in pastel.

Painting en plein air brings out the best in me as it puts me in direct contact with the most intimate aspects of my own nature—love, passion, fear, courage, joy, even anger. I have to face myself when I paint—for better, or for worse.



“You have the sky overhead giving one light; then the reflected light from whatever reflects; then the direct light of the sun; so that, in the blending and suffusing of these several illuminations, there is no such thing as a line to be seen anywhere.”

—WINSLOW HOMER

I worked very hard on **Salinas River at Day Break** (pastel, 16x20) because the light was so delicate. The narrow value range helped me express the quietness of the early morning as little streams of fog drifted through. I was fascinated by the way the rising sun began to highlight them.

### Winter's Eve

(pastel, 16x20) is one of my "steering wheel" paintings, created on a panel strapped to the car's steering wheel. I secure a drawing-table light to the back of my car seat and—with my pastel box positioned on the front passenger seat—I have a go at a painting. I used to stand on the outside of the car to do this, but I've suffered frostbite three times, and—on this particular evening—it was only eight degrees outside. Plus, my coffee stays warmer inside the car!

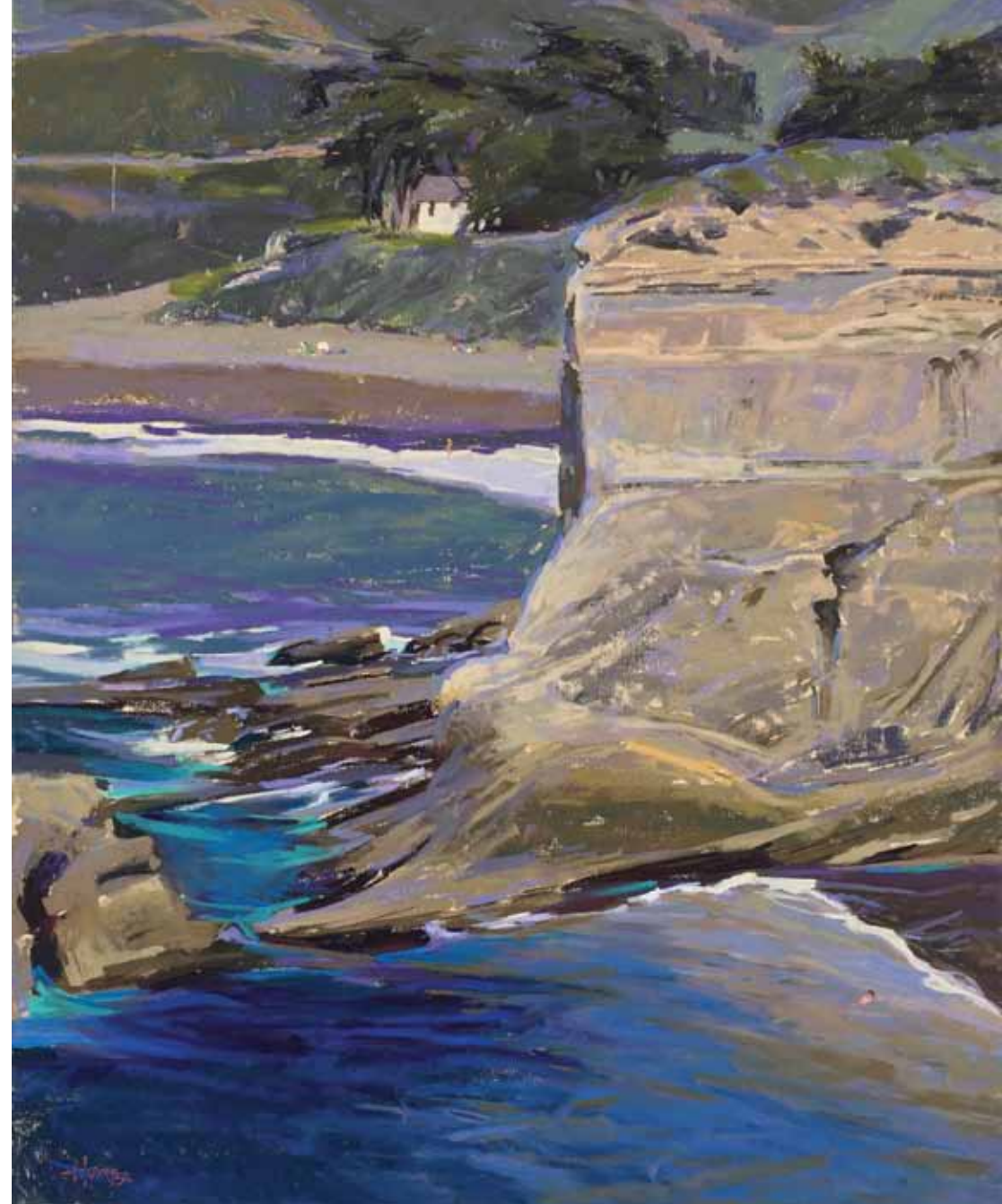
## TRUTH IN THE LIGHT

When I first started painting en plein air, it didn't take too long to discover that the academic part of that manner of painting was the task of shape-making—placing one shape against another and knowing how to blend them. As Winslow Homer observed, there are no lines in nature, only shapes of varying size, form, color and value. Determining what to do with these shapes is crucial, and the key to the whole shebang is the light—and learning to read the light. If, for example, I fail to convey correctly the relationship between the light and shadow that define an object, I camouflage its shape, and it becomes difficult to recognize.

Out of doors, there isn't an answer I need as a painter that isn't sitting right there in front of me, in nature, in the effects of light. I just need to look and look again and then once more, and trust my intuition (backed up by experience). Why bother to suffer the indignities of painting outdoors if I'm not going to try to express some truth about an effect of the light, movement or the change I'm witnessing? After all, light never lies; it reveals.



Painting on location sustains my interest in capturing the truth in the light. In this pursuit, I've taken my easel all over my home state of Michigan and across the country, as seen in this photo of me painting at Montaña de Oro in California.



I've made a number of paintings in Montaña de Oro and, for **Ranger Station at Montaña de Oro** (pastel, 20x16), I wanted to say something different than I had in the past. Being from Michigan, I love the expansiveness of the California landscape and wanted to capture that quality. I chose a vertical format which allowed for a more open relationship between the middle-background and the middle-foreground.



**"If I could say  
it with words,  
I wouldn't need  
to paint."**

—EDWARD HOPPER

The sky is a dome and that dome (and its nature at the moment of observation) has an impact. If I were an oil painter and could roll my canvas down upon itself, some of the sky color would touch everything else in the painting. Conversely, some of the direct sunlit passages might touch into shadow areas and, yes, even the sky. That explains why one can see warm pieces of color next to cool ones in the skies of Impressionist paintings. Putting opposing colors of paint next to one another simulates vibrating light.

I see light vibrating everywhere. Sometimes, I'll try to emulate this effect by intentionally allowing the white of my sanded pastel surface to show through in the painting. Also, I never see objects as one local color. I'm always exploring the properties of my medium to reveal the nature of the effects of light.

Imagine, for example, a meadow in sunlight. There are certain grasses that naturally catch the warm direct sun. Then there are others that turn

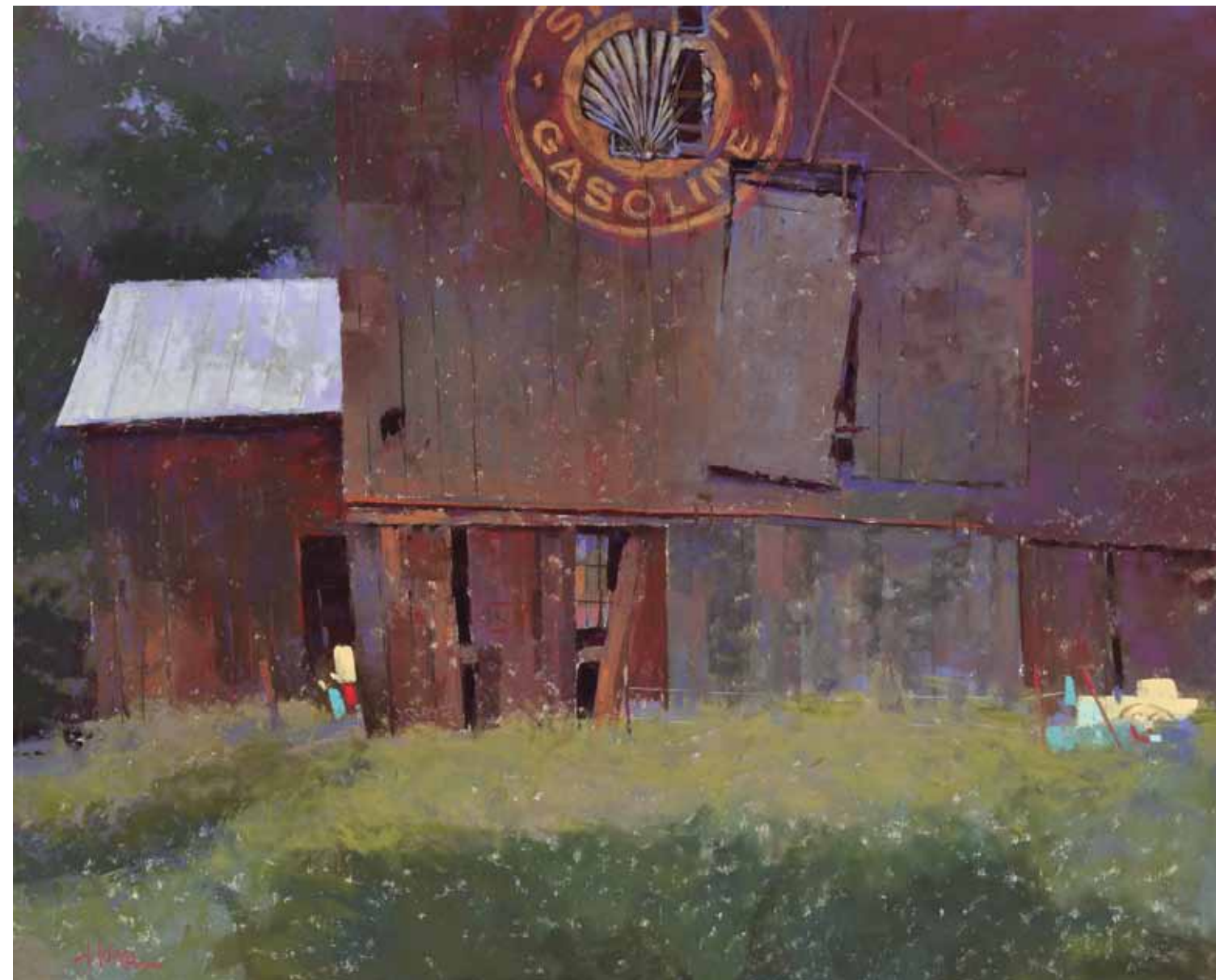
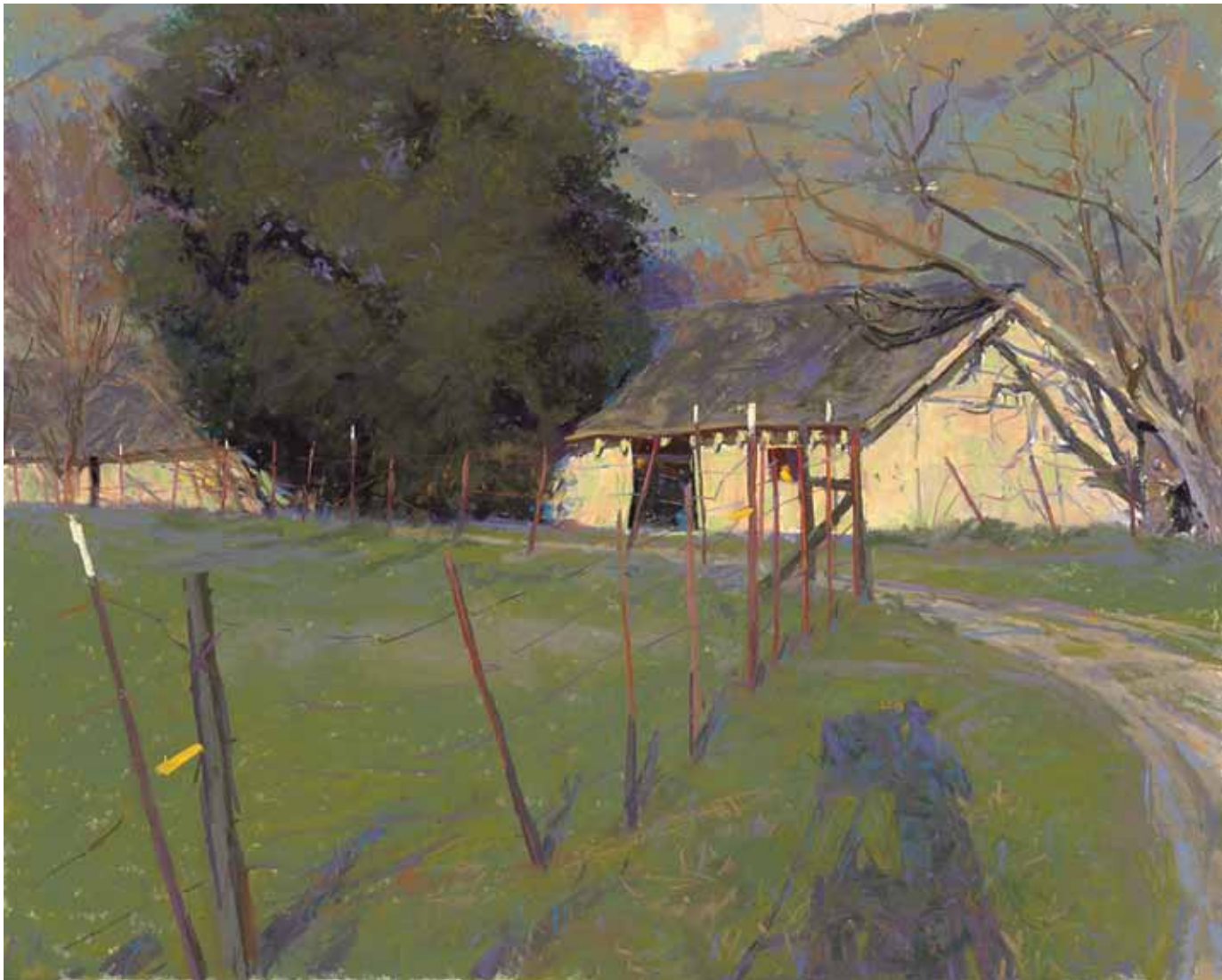
away from the sun and form a shadow with influence from the cooling light of the sky's dome. The grasses creating shadows are influenced by sunlight striking directly on neighboring grasses and the light bouncing back into their shadows. Color evaluation and recognition of color harmony are relative to the surrounding color.

## GUIDED BY INTUITION

When I see color, my assessment comes from within. I can share how I look at things, but artists must be guided by their own intuition to express their own voice with color. Sometimes, these intuitive choices can be surprising. I've learned, for example, that it can be useful—when I'm in the middle of a painting—to reach for what I call *impulse color*. I literally look at my set of pastels and grab a color that I have no logical reason to use and introduce it into the painting. It's like driving to a destination and impulsively turning off somewhere unexpected.

When I teach, I like to have everyone in the class begin by signing their name on a piece of paper—with eyes closed. I point out that they're in a "zone" when they do

It was early evening, when I painted **California Evening** (pastel, 16x20). I was drawn to the way in which the light played itself out on the long yellow barn. Partway into the painting, I discovered my own shadow, which I put in because it gave the scene a sense of being in first-person.



**Seen Better Days** (pastel, 16x20) is an academically grounded composition. I wanted, however, to treat the scene abstractly and to use impulse color to act in discord to the overall color theme. I just randomly, without thinking, grabbed colors from my pastel box and inserted them into the painting—a bit like a singer changing octaves.

this; they don't need to see what they're doing because they can feel it. Signing our names repetitiously over the years has led to an unconscious and confident movement of thought in hand. Artists are individuals, but they may not always have the confidence to speak in their own voice with their art.

For that, I recommend practice. Practice leads to skill, skill leads to confidence, and confidence to freedom. Then, and only then, will an originality arrive at one's doorstep. I welcome it when it does, but I don't chase it. I'll have earned it if and when it turns up. Perhaps intuition in painting is like luck. The harder you work, the luckier you get. ♣

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*W. Truman Hosner is devoted to painting in the open air, where he paints both the landscape and the figure. His work, which has been featured in national and international museum exhibitions, is part of collections in North America, Europe and Asia. Hosner earned his BFA at Wayne State University, in Michigan, and taught at the College for Creative Studies, in Detroit.*

▶ TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE ARTIST, VISIT ([WTRUMANHOSNER.COM](http://WTRUMANHOSNER.COM)).