

RANDALL SEXTON

Scrape It Back, Keep It Abstract, Discover

This San Francisco artist finds representational art is best created from a more abstract mindset attuned to experimentation and excitement.

By Bob Bahr



The Boulder Backyards
2013, oil on panel, 12 x 16 in.
Collection the artist
Plein air



Randall
Sexton

ARTIST DATA

NAME: Randall Sexton
BIRTHDATE: 1958
LOCATION: Crockett, CA
INFLUENCES: "Al Blanchard (high school art teacher), Bob Gerbracht (teacher and mentor, portrait/figure painting), Paul Stempen, Michael Lynch."
WEBSITE: www.rcsexton.com

Randall Sexton allows his paintings to go in any number of directions, from loose and abstract to quite representational, and featuring anything from motorcycles to mountains to musicians. One thing he will not allow is for any piece to bore him.

Many artists around Sexton's age will be familiar with his experience of going to art school when only abstract painting, conceptualism, and minimalist work were valued, only to find after art school that traditional training in drawing and painting was needed. But when Sexton took classes some years later to round out his education, he encountered a surprise.

"It turned out to be more like the classes I had taken in the '70s," Sexton recalls. "It was more conceptual, with a focus on creative thinking. This teacher brought up something that continues to resonate for me. Instead of working with a linear process, the goal was to discover something within the lifespan of each painting. It's a way to work, a way to think, a way to see things in less of a rigid way.

"That notion of discovery in the process is something I have internalized. That discovery keeps things from being too predictable, which is important to me. I have to keep things interesting to keep motivated. So I'll scrape paint around, move paint in a more random fashion, just scrape into it with a palette knife. I'll try to mess up a painting intentionally to 'deconstruct it,' as I've heard some other artists describe it. If I see too much of my own hand in a piece — perhaps looking too repetitive, the way some strokes look — I will take some paint off with the palette knife. That allows me to see it a little bit differently and put some new paint down."

Sexton teaches workshops, but he doesn't push this aspect of his process in his instruction. "It may not be the most efficient way to do it," he says. "But for me it makes painting more fun and more right. It can make things a little harder because you don't know where you're going. You can ruin a painting this way. But I feel like I have to keep things exciting. It's not for everybody. It can sometimes feel like you have lost your way."

It's clear the San Francisco artist is a bit of a risk-taker and a thrill-seeker. In the mid-1980s, he discovered plein air painting, and it's no wonder the genre appeals to him. "Once I started painting outdoors, I just fell in love with it, with the whole nature of it forcing me to paint quickly," says Sexton. "It created a style for me, with a bolder, broader brush, and lots of brushwork and paint visible. I like moving the paint around, and having gesture be a part of it. Plein air allowed me to do this because you have to move quickly."



Tufa Towers

2012, oil, 24 x 30 in.

Courtesy John Pence Gallery,
San Francisco, CA
Studio

Sexton's ability to remain spontaneous in the process of a painting, while dramatic, is dwarfed in comparison to the artist's ingrained, essential devotion to a satisfying and effective use of abstract shapes. "Abstract" is a word that means different things to different people; even among artists, the word takes on different casts. Temporarily sidestepping any definitions employed in an art theory class, we can say that "abstract" means the immaterial essence of something rather than the literal, specific material object itself.

For an artist, it is something like, Don't paint things, but focus on seeing things as purely shapes — for example, not dwelling on trying to define a tree but rather seeing the abstract shape, color, and value as they relate to other shapes. Of course, if the general shapes of things are suggested honestly, the mass of colors start to look like things in the real



At the Finish

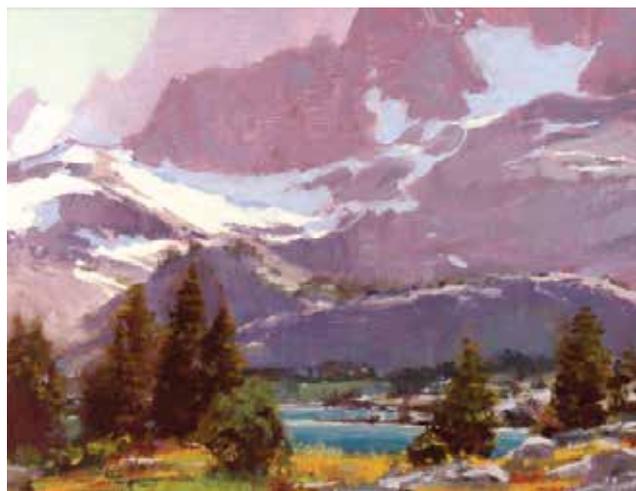
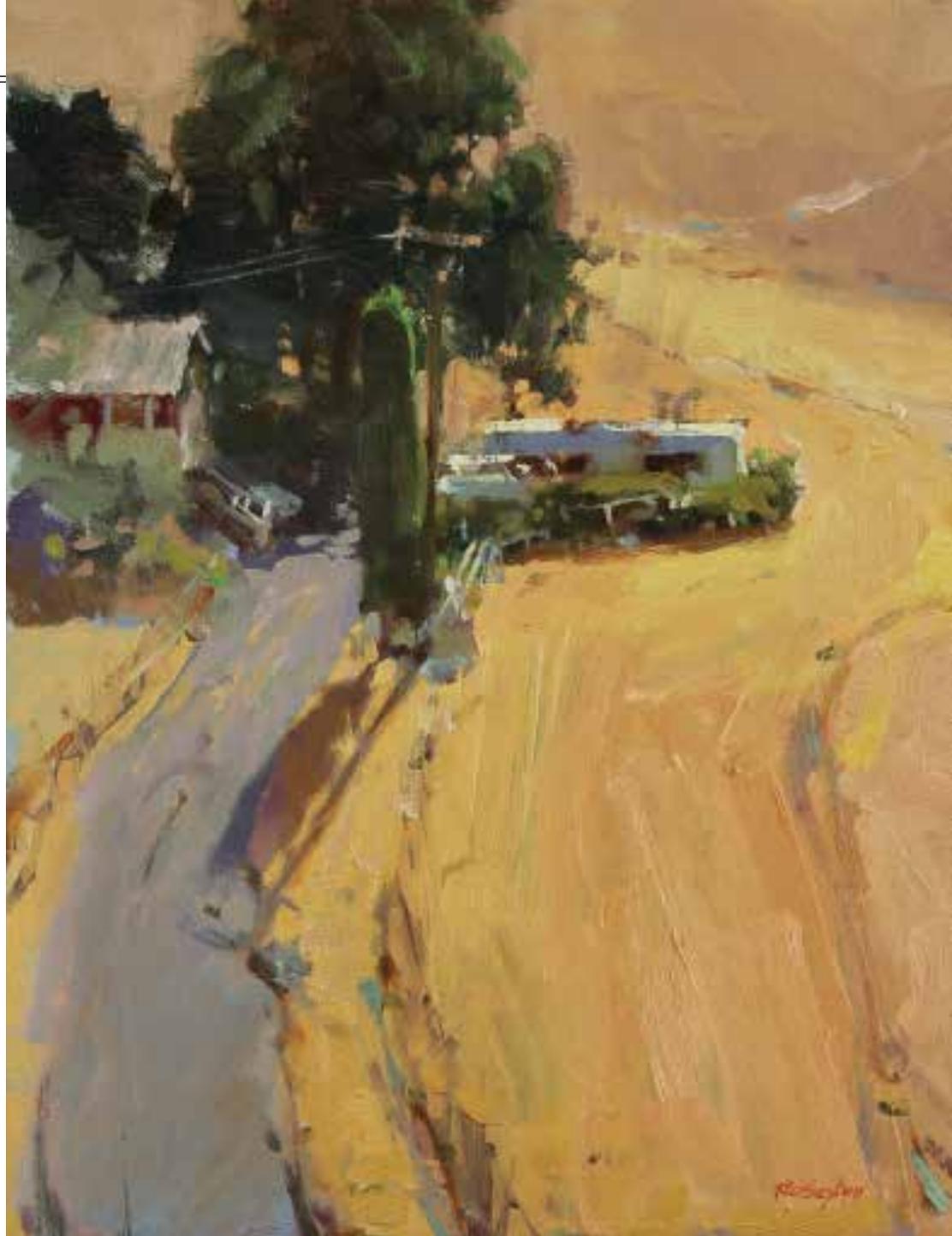
2010, oil, 30 x 40 in.
Collection the artist
Studio

world, and the painting is drifting into the representational realm. And in many of Sexton's paintings, paintings in which he has concentrated on working in his fashion of abstraction, there are definitely representational details.

So how does this artist work abstractly? By paying attention, he says, to how the abstract shapes relate to each other in the painting from beginning to end. Those details you see in one corner of the painting? They are working to balance and contrast with other elements in that corner, in that shape. "Imagine that the painting is like a puzzle, with individual pieces fitting inside the shapes of the bigger pieces to form the whole," says Sexton. "I try to keep those big pieces really clear so the total design works. Then, within each piece, I add energy, variety, and nuance to enliven each part enough to keep the eye moving through the whole painting, while keeping it consistent to create a world all its own. Whether a puzzle piece remains understated or whether I work back into an area and activate it, the piece still remains a shape within a larger picture while keeping a strong sense of the whole design."

As developing painters often hear, the key is seeing the big shapes from the very beginning, and composing a strong design based on them. The rest is refining. "I try to compose and approach the painting from the beginning with a very abstract, totally visual framework," Sexton relates. "I start off really looking at bigger shapes in the composition and trying to compose and fit to that. It's more looking at the real world in terms of design instead of labels, identifying objects. I start off trying to glean what I can from what's in front of me in an abstract way. I am always trying to present something truly visual and abstract, although that leads people to think about artists like de Kooning. I am thinking more simply than that. I'm attempting not to identify or to label things as things." It's not a tree or group of trees, it's a unique shape that has a particular impact on the scene based on its color and proportions.

And yet, Sexton is concerned with the fact that the blue-gray triangle in the background of his painting is a mountain. He is trying to communicate using symbols. Sexton went to the University of Connecticut, where his teachers in the 1970s stressed abstraction. Immediately after college, he moved to San Francisco, and he stuck with the abstract direction. "But after five years in that genre, I felt I needed to sneak some representational or symbolic imagery into



Steep Drive

2012, oil on panel, 18 x 14 in.
Courtesy Nancy Dodds Gallery,
Carmel, CA
Plein air

Garnet Lake

2010, oil on linen, 18 x 24 in.
Collection of Sharon Calahan
Studio



Garnet Lake
2009, oil on linen, 14 x 18 in.
Private collection
Plein air

Curb Italia
2011, oil, 20 x 20 in.
Courtesy John Pence Gallery,
San Francisco, CA
Studio





Off the Top

2013, oil, 18 x 24 in.

Courtesy Knowlton Gallery, Lodi, CA
Studio

(Below) **A #2 Blend**

2013, oil on linen, 16 x 20 in.

Courtesy Knowlton Gallery, Lodi, CA
Studio



my work,” he says. “I experimented with a lot of types of abstract painting, floundering around, trying to find myself. They were fun to do, but they didn’t mean anything after I did them. I shrugged as to what they meant. They lost their meaning over time.”

He began taking figure drawing classes and started incorporating symbols and representational elements into his paintings. This is how Sexton reconciled his past and his present: Abstraction plays a large role in his process, but the end product — the painting — has representational elements that say something. Sexton wants to tell the viewer about a train, or a tower of rocks. But he wants to get to his statement through a fun, exciting, unpredictable, abstract process. “It harks back to abstract concerns as a painter,” Sexton says. “Painting abstractly was about the juicy and visceral nature of paint, the physical action of the way I moved the paint around, the gesture, the movement expressing the pulse of the rhythms, and the variety found in nature. This still carries into what I do now, even in the studio, but my paintings are inspired by the world around me — and I in turn, am truly connected to that world.”

BOB BAHR is a painter and writer who has been developing articles about art instruction for more than nine years. He lives with his wife and two sons at the northern tip of Manhattan.



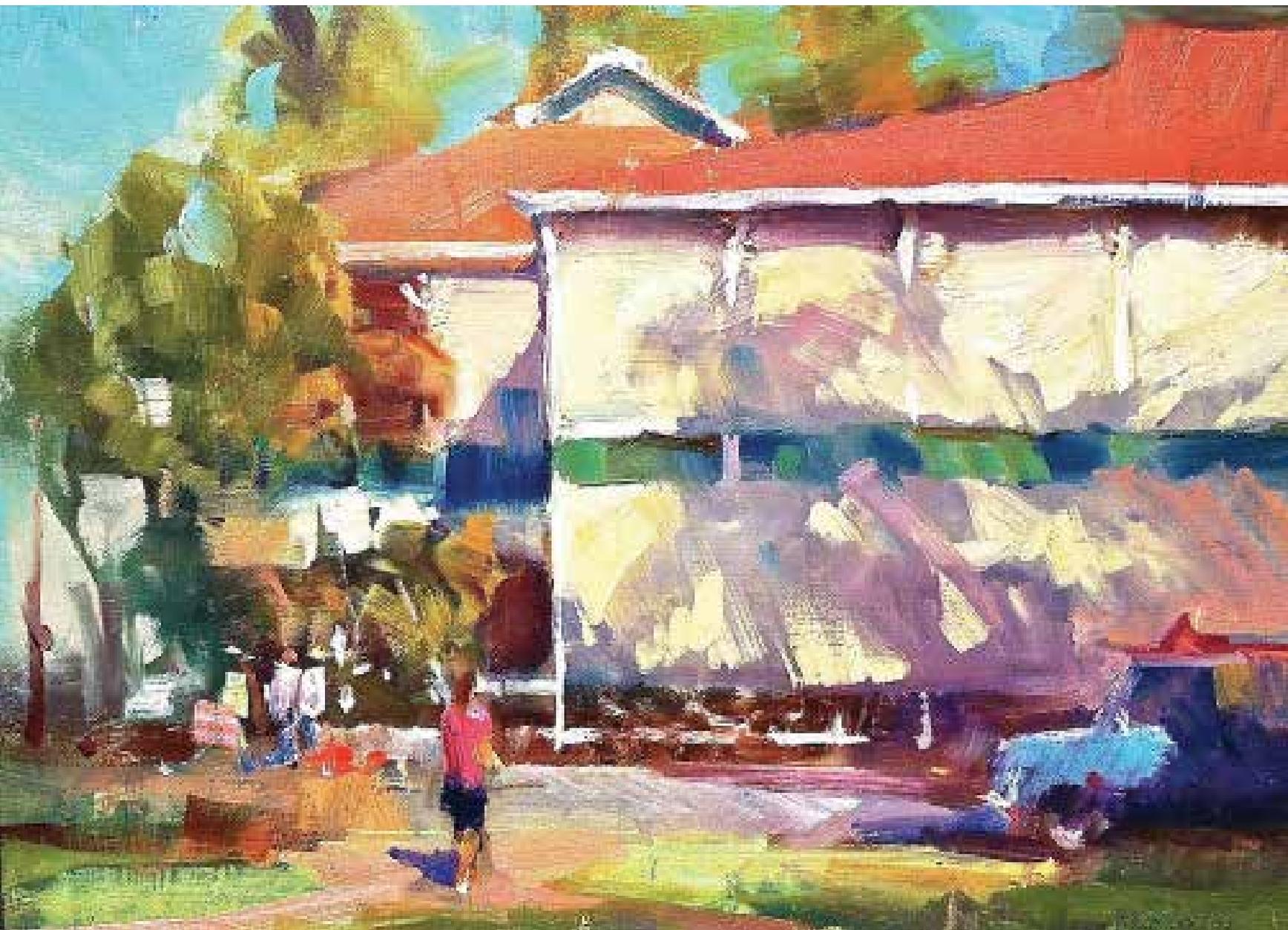
See more of Randall Sexton’s paintings in the expanded digital edition of *PleinAir*.

ARTIST PROFILE



Echo and the Cave Walls
2013, oil on panel
Collection the artist
Studio

ARTIST PROFILE

**Palm Shadows on the Pioneer**

2014, oil on panel, 12 x 16 in.

Collection Tom Taylor

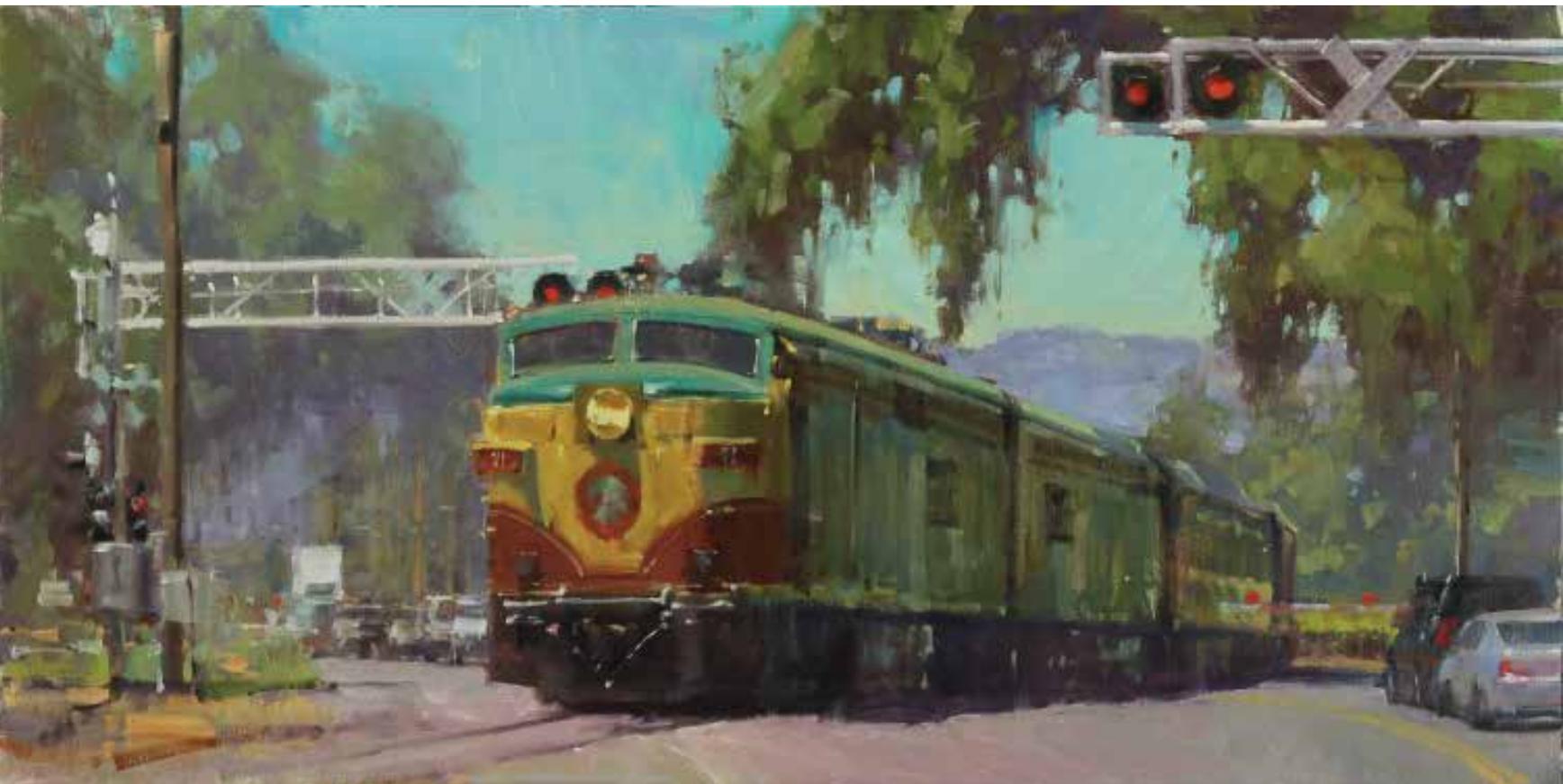
Plein air

ARTIST PROFILE



Potrero Shadows
2012, oil, 20 x 20 in.
Collection the artist
Studio

ARTIST PROFILE



Worth the Wait
2013, oil, 24 x 48 in.
Courtesy John Pence Gallery,
San Francisco, CA
Studio



Ridership
2012, oil on linen, 16 x 20 in.
Courtesy John Pence Gallery,
San Francisco, CA
Plein air