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JON REDMOND

Capturing Light, Keeping It Unpredictable

This Pennsylvania painter will wipe off some or all of his painting, keeping his work fresh and his layers of paint intriguing — all in an effort to convey his experience.

By Bob Bahr

In Jon Redmond's paintings, the subject matter is nearly surpassed by the artist's process. His experience of a scene and how he represents it — especially regarding the quality of the light — takes precedence. It's a mindset the Pennsylvania painter has had at least since graduate school.

When Redmond was earning his M.F.A. at the University of Delaware, he used the photographic technique of tintype for one of his class projects. The artist was fascinated at how a contemporary landscape looked in an old-fashioned medium. By photographing contact sheets from a regular camera and holding the sheets in a certain way, some areas would fall out of focus, the value range was compressed, and an interesting effect was achieved.

"Losing something enhanced the image, boiled it down into simple shapes that I found very interesting," says Redmond. Not only was the artist reducing a visual down to an essence, but he was very clearly putting the emphasis on the depiction of light — elevating it to the level of the subject matter itself in importance. It's a way of thinking that informs his paintings today.

"I think that a painting is a record of a process," says Redmond. "It is not a copy of a place. It is a physical record of an event. The event is sitting or standing in front of something and looking, and slapping paint on a surface. It is the event of you reacting to things."

Redmond doesn't consider himself a plein air painter, or, at least, he doesn't care much about the designation. He paints outdoors, from life, because that is often the most advantageous path toward his goal. But he has no problem with working from photographs. "Sometimes I start a painting from life and finish from photos," he says. "I tend to focus on the image that I see in my head. Whatever I need to use to get there, I will use. If I have to use a photo reference, that's fine. If I have to go back to the location and paint there again, I'll do it — they both have their benefits and limitations." Still, the reality is that about 75 percent of his work is done outdoors. The draw is often that wonderful late afternoon light.

Mood Lighting

"I am very interested in the conditions of light," says Redmond. "They affect my mood, and I want to share that experience with other people. I do tend to be very drawn toward sunlight and very



Peach

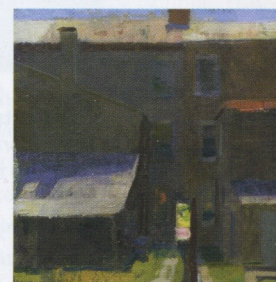
2014, oil on board, 10 x 10 in.
Collection the artist
Plein air

WC Borderline

2013, oil on board, 10 x 10 in.
Collection the artist
Plein air

ARTIST DATA

NAME: Jon Redmond
BIRTHDATE: 1965
LOCATION: Pennsylvania
INFLUENCES: "Everything from American films to Velázquez."
WEBSITE: www.jonredmond.com





Pink Pants

2013, oil on board, 24 x 16 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air



Bayline
2013, oil on board, 10 x 10 in.
Collection the artist
Plein air

Back
2014, oil on board, 10 x 10 in.
Collection the artist
Plein air



'contrast-y' light — bright light and shadows. I don't know why I really like high-contrast light. I find it very stimulating. It's a nice way to create a very graphic image, to have that contrast happening — both value and temperature. Light is one of the most truly universal subjects. A 15th-century artist is reacting to light and a 21st-century artists reacts to it — and an untrained person too, because that's how one interacts with the world. The things depicted — landscapes, buildings, figures — don't have to be quite as important if the light is holding everything together."

As you might expect, Redmond counts Vermeer, Velázquez, and Sargent among his favorite painters because of their treatment of light. And, like many painters, Redmond finds himself in the studio more often in the winter, when the light conditions are less ideal outside.

Redmond is a cyclist, so pleasant weather appeals to that side of his personality, too. He says travel by bicycle results in views one might miss in a car. "Cycling is a great way to see the landscape," he says. "You are not enclosed in a box, like a car. You have a wider range than walking on foot. You don't have the cumbersome nature of a car — no need for parking or permissions. A bicycle greatly opens up the possibilities."

But no car means no extra storage for painting supplies. Redmond has accordingly developed a very small oil painting kit. His easel consists of two hinged panels, one a palette and another that holds his painting surface. He paints in his lap, so there's no need for a tripod. Redmond only uses about eight colors, which he squirts onto his palette before leaving home. The artist has five brushes, and he's cut the handles down to shorten them. He likes to work on quarter-inch birch plywood panels that are about 10 x 10 inches. "I pared down the paint kit to three pounds or less," Redmond says. "It fits in a bag that attaches to my bicycle, and it fits in a backpack, too." A small folding stool slides snugly into his pack.

Redmond enjoys travel, and he rode his bike across the United States in the 1980s. But he mostly paints local scenes: "I paint wherever I travel around the world, but the paintings that interest me the most are the ones that I have done around my home. They feel more intimate and important to me. They are dealing with who I am, rather than a place I am visiting. I don't try to seek out the most beautiful place in the world. Paintings for me record my perceptions of where I am. I tend to just paint wherever I am. I just react to what is around me. I look at it and try to capture my perceptions of what I'm seeing."



Cup and Glass

2013, oil on board, 10 x 10 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air

Deliberate Disruption

Into this set of circumstances, Redmond purposefully introduces disruption. Painting locally, in a landscape of familiar light conditions and colors, with a kit he knows and a color palette he has settled on, the artist introduces a touch of chaos. "If I find the painting is getting too realized, I destroy it; I wipe out the image and then refine and define what I think needs to be brought back. I lay things in and find them, then destroy them and re-find them again. The question is, What needs to be in the image? The constant shift of lost and found hopefully gives me the right balance."

To accomplish this, Redmond will pull a "soft, muppy watercolor brush" across the entire painting, knocking back highlights and details. Or he will drag a rubber spatula across an area in one direction, creating a new set of challenges. "Predictability is really boring," he asserts. "I destroy somewhat randomly to throw some randomness into the process. You shouldn't always know what is going to happen. Throwing a wrench

into the system every once in a while keeps things happening, keeps things unpredictable. It can create beautiful subtleties or utter failure."

Redmond also introduces somewhat incongruous elements into a painting by working over a used surface. "More than half of my pieces are on top of failed paintings," he says. "I don't re-gesso them; I just give them a light sanding. I like this quite a bit because it forces more texture and unexpected colors into the new painting. One of my biggest fears is to have one painting looking like another painting. Working on top of an old painting forces you to deal with a different surface. Sometimes it can be very beautiful and enhance the new image, and sometimes it fails. It's definitely a lot more hit-and-miss than painting a cool painting over a warm tone, but I find it very fascinating and exciting."

The artist has used essentially the same palette for 20 years, and he arranges his colors from warm to cool. The colors are cadmium yellow, transparent earth yellow, cadmium red, transparent earth red, alizarin



Chanterelles


2013, oil on board, 10 x 10 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air

crimson, sap green, phthalo green, ultramarine blue, and lead white. Redmond says the transparent colors are very important to his way of depicting light conditions, and the preponderance of dark colors give him a wide range with the fewest colors. "All fairly dark colors have more range," he says. "I can use the dark colors in their pure state or lighten them with very light colors."

Redmond mixes colors on the palette because he likes his brushstrokes to be fresh. "When I am putting a brushstroke down, I am trying to record a specific sensation for that spot," he says. "When it goes on the painting, it stays where I need it to be — I don't tend to fuss with a brushstroke that much once it's on there." Redmond says he prefers a brush to a palette knife because he can get five or six strokes out of a loaded brush, more than he could with a loaded knife. And when he makes a mark, he tries to limit the amount of time the brush is on the canvas: "This is important to keep the color clean."

Like one of his favorite painters, Richard Diebenkorn, Redmond likes to have layers of paint hint at the process that created the piece. "I tend to work in pretty thin layers in a way that doesn't completely obscure the layers underneath it," he says. "Broken or transparent layers give a complex history to the surface. For me, it's much more interesting than one layer." This aspect of his process is one of the reasons Redmond is not strictly a plein air painter, in spite of his dedication to working from life. "Painting in one session limits the painting in a way that I don't always find interesting." 

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.