

DEVIN MICHAEL ROBERTS

Getting Ahead of the Learning Curve

Although he is relatively new to plein air events, Devin Michael Roberts has achieved remarkable success by taking full advantage of educational tools, interactions with other artists, and online opportunities for promotion and sales.

By M. Stephen Doherty

"I am conscious of being in the early stages of my art career," says this artist who divides his time between Missouri and Washington. This "early stage" didn't begin until Roberts was 27 years old (he is now 33), when he took time away from his career as a professional pianist to study drawing and painting.

Among the obvious influences on Roberts are painters of the late 19th century, most especially George Inness, Thomas Moran, Albert Bierstadt, Isaac Levitan, and James Abbot McNeill Whistler. He has been especially interested in artists who use veils of color and the layering of their physical



Devin Michael Roberts

paint surface in order to symbolize the hidden spiritual aspects of the natural world.

These veils suggest subjects emerging from the painter's heart and mind as much as from direct observations of the landscape. In particular, comments by Inness resonate with Roberts. One statement explains that Inness thought "painters should not glorify nature but, rather, express its hidden spirit and underlying character." Inness further stated that the purpose of art was "not to imitate, not to edify, but to awaken an emotion."

In his effort to "awaken an emotion," Roberts does exercise to improve his memory of what he sees and feels, and he strives to paint quickly enough to "capture something unique about a moment in time, to capture the emotion of life, and to call on my memory later on in the studio."

He adds, "That's why most of my plein air paintings are not finished works of art (except those created during organized events); rather, they are intimate studies of clouds, foreground

Beauty in the Abandoned

2016, oil, 11 x 14 in.

Private collection

Plein air

ARTIST DATA

NAME: Devin Michael Roberts
 BIRTH YEAR: 1984
 LOCATION: Washington State and Missouri
 INFLUENCES: Isaac Levitan, George Inness, Edward Cuchoud, Herman Herzog, Jeremy Mann.
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Fint Hills Trail
2015, oil, 8 x 10 in.
Private collection
Plein air

elements, water, skies, and other elements of nature. I use them to trigger my memory of an experience rather than to give me a precise record of a location."

Roberts arrived at this approach to painting by watching DVDs by Richard Schmid and C.W. Mundy, studying in classes and workshops offered at Gage Academy of Art in Seattle, participating in workshops in the Pacific Northwest with artists such as Jim Lamb and friend Robin Paul Weiss, reading magazines and books, and looking at a lot of original paintings in museums. "In particular, I was strongly influenced by the Hudson River School paintings included in an exhibition titled Beauty & Beauty at the Seattle Art Museum," Roberts recalls. "Those paintings helped me focus my plein air and studio work on a Tomlinst approach to painting, similar to George Inness."

"When I first started painting, I made careful studies, enlarged those onto canvas using grids, and then faithfully painted the subject as best I could. But Robin Paul Weiss got me to look at the value masses and paint those. Eventually, I learned to emphasize the selection process of

painting together shapes, values, and colors in a painting. I now begin with washes of the big value patterns, then I apply opaque colors using one of two brushes. I paint fast, then lay in thick paint with a palette knife toward the end of the process."

The Gleaning
2017, oil, 8 x 10 in.
Private collection
Plein air

"The most important consideration in selecting a subject for a painting is that I must respond to it emotionally," says Roberts. "I hit a

DEMONSTRATION: Tree Study

Step 1

"I begin by toning the surface and ghosting in an image," Roberts explains. "Ghosting is a term I use to describe creating a bluish-light version of the general placement of the main interest, in this case the tree trunk. The benefit here is that I can push around the design and keep it blurry until I commit to where I want everything placed."



Step 2

Once Roberts commits to the placement of shapes, he draws the essential parts of the design in oil paint using a small round bristle brush. He pays close attention to the natural rhythm of the tree and makes sure the lines have movement.



Step 3

This is the stage in which Roberts switches to layers of opaque paint. His plan is to complete the painting without adding any medium to the oil colors, the one exception being that he dips the brushes into odorless mineral spirits to clean them and to apply washes. "I generally scrub in the opaque paint during the first few minutes in order to keep it thin until I commit," says the artist. "Once I commit to the specific color and value of that area, I apply the paint more thickly. Over the next 30 minutes, I apply paint, wipe the oils back, and apply more, all the while using paper towels instead of a brush to wipe out the surface and blend the paint."



Step 4

This final stage shows how the artist approaches a quick field study. Roberts's purpose here is not to create a painting, but rather to make a quick color notes and study the drawing and form of the actual tree. He stores that knowledge and uses the memory of that experience when he is in the studio.

The completed paintings:

Tree Study
2017, oil, 8 x 10 in.
Collection the artist
Plein air

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Along the Edge of the World
2017, oil, 24 x 36 in.
Collection the artist
Studio

"Based on my conversations with other artists, I think I am doing better than most in building a career and in using social media and a website. I have been supporting myself by playing in piano bars, and I understand how hard one has to work to make a living from one's talents. For decades, I have been promoting myself in order to get more and better bookings. Selling plein air events is not so different in terms of what artists must do to be successful." ■

M. STEPHEN DOHERTY is editor-in-chief of PleinAir.

See more paintings by Devin Michael Roberts in the expanded digital edition of *PleinAir*.

strike me as beautiful from the very beginning. I always begin by painting directly from life, both in the studio and outdoors. In the studio I use my plein air sketches as direct evidence of what I observed in nature. My studio paintings combine multiple references, including memory and imagination. The goal is to elicit an emotional experience within the viewer.

"I employ many different techniques I have picked up from books, online publications, other painters, etc. I may utilize any of those materials and procedures at any given point, and I sometimes choose to blend techniques together. I may begin with a block-in of the big shapes using transparent color washes, or I may begin with an even more direct technique. Once I get to the finishing stage, my technique becomes more concerned with color, texture, and edges. I use a mixture of brushwork and texture manipulation using traditional tools such as brushes and palette knives, as well as fingers, credit cards, paper towels, and whatever I may have on hand."

Because he recognizes that he is still growing and changing as an artist, Roberts is patient in dealing with the vicissitudes of the plein air field. "If I am fortunate enough to be invited or juried into an event," he says, "my

goal is to learn from the experience and the other participating artists and not necessarily to win awards or sell paintings. It can be expensive to take a week off, travel, buy painting supplies and frames, and buy food, so sales and award prizes do help, but I don't stress out and I try to enjoy my time with other professional artists.



Provenance
2017, oil, 16 x 20 in.
Private collection
Studio



Placid Water Under a Warm Light
2017, oil, 11 x 14 in.
Collection the artist
Plein air



The Dark River
2015, oil, 20 x 30 in.
Private collection
Studio



OIL PAINTING DEMONSTRATION



A Whisper, Some Heart at the End of a Long Day
2017, oil, 16 x 20 in.
Private collection
Studio

An Exquisite Brilliance
2017, oil, 8 x 24 in.
Collection the artist
Studio

