



5 O'Clock Shadows

2019, watercolor, 14 x 20 in.

Available from artist

Plein air

Here, a gradated sky creates a glowing background for the backlit, silhouetted shapes in front of it.



DAVID SAVELLANO

WATERCOLOR WISDOM

Painting outdoors with watercolor requires adaptability, speed, and, above all, devotion.

— BY DAVID SAVELLANO —

From the start, watercolor and plein air have gone together for me.

I got my first real instruction in the medium through a community college course in Berkeley, California, years ago. For just \$5 per semester, we'd meet every Saturday from 9 to 1, studying in the studio for the first two hours, then practicing what we learned outdoors for the remaining two.

Although I'd played with the medium before, watercolor requires dedication. If you're just dabbling,

you may not get to the point where you really understand it. I retired two years ago, so I paint full time now, learning something new every day. To this point, most of the work I've done since that first class has been en plein air, but now that we can't go many places, I've been disciplining myself to be in the studio rather than getting on my bike and going out to paint somewhere.

On location, I react minute to minute, painting fast before the light changes, so there's a certain amount of freshness to the work. A danger in the studio is to overthink a painting and lose the sense of spontaneity that I really like. Indeed, I do think more about my strokes now; they've become a lot more deliberate rather than loose, but I've discovered that's not a bad thing. I'm learning to slow down and concentrate where it counts, spending time on those passages where I really want to focus on the brushwork and get those elements right.

WATERCOLOR EN PLEIN AIR

When I paint outdoors, I like to finish the work 100 percent on site. I rarely tweak the paintings afterwards. Of course, there are times when the light has dramatically changed or I need to catch a ferry boat and I have to leave, but I know exactly what I need to do once I get home. For the most part, though, I'm able to complete paintings relatively quickly on location — one and half to three hours maximum.

A native Californian, DAVID SAVELLANO lives in the Bay Area, where the sun-dappled streets and waterfront imagery inspire his work.

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DEMONSTRATION: Getting a Glow

View of the Scene

At this year's Maui Plein Air Painting Invitational, I set up to paint this view of Front Street in Lahaina at 9 a.m. The buildings and trees were backlit by the early morning light, which produced a warm glow with cool shadows. The West Maui Mountains can't be seen in the photo, but I decided to move them into the painting. The low angle of the sun created interesting shadow patterns.



Step 1

I started with a two-minute notan sketch, which included the distant mountains and the main shapes of the sky and earth. I also established the horizon line about a quarter of the way up from the bottom edge of the paper. The horizon line also marked my eye level, so the heads of the figures that come later will be on that line. For the initial drawing, I intentionally did not overdraw the building details, trees, or street entourage. My main goal was to establish the vanishing point on the horizon line and a few guidelines for achieving convincing one- or two-point perspective. I used a loose sketch to describe where things go, not what they are. Because there is no white paint in transparent watercolor, I had to place a few small pieces of masking tape to save the white of the paper for figures in the street that I wanted to be white or a light color. In plein air, time is of the essence; I focus on painting rather than drawing.



Step 3

I applied a light-middle value for the distant mountains. While the paint was still moist, I used a paper towel to lift color and create texture and variation. With watercolor, it's important to remember that the paint will dry up to 30 percent lighter.



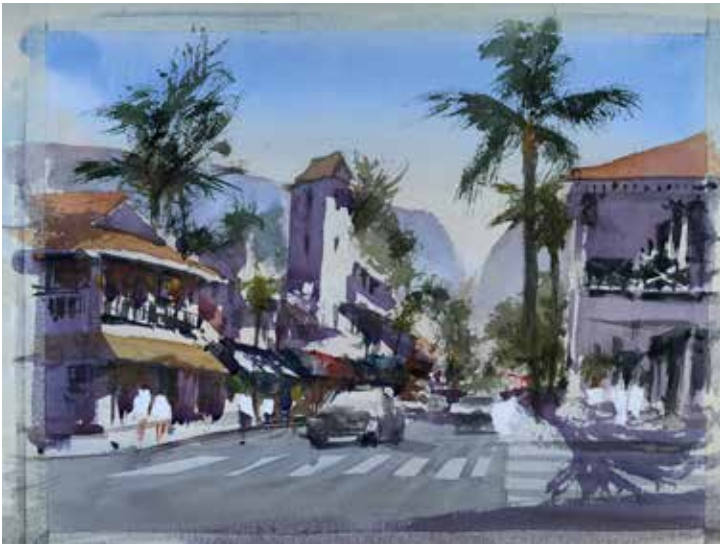
Step 2

I made sure my palette had plenty of pre-mixed paint ready for quick application. For the underpainting, I laid in a graded wash that goes from cool at the top to warm at the bottom using two large squirrel mop brushes, each loaded with a different color. In general, the underpainting serves as a unifying color and is either dominant warm or dominant cool. In this piece, it's dominant warm.



Step 4

I added dark details for the windows and storefronts in the middle ground area, careful not to paint too many dark shapes in the background plane as it would diminish the atmospheric perspective. At this point, I drew the details with a brush, not a pencil. I like how a simple brushstroke can convey detail or a gesture; I save those for where they count the most. This is the stage where I start to slow down and tighten up.



Step 5

It was time to paint the shadows. For me, this is the point where the whole piece would come together. Of course, by the time I got to this stage, the light had changed; it was completely different from where I started. I had to decide if I wanted the scene to portray sunlight with shadows or show everything backlit. In this case, I decided to go with shadows. I popped cool shadows on the warm-colored buildings, and boom, the middle value of the shadows unified the painting and dramatized the sunlit portions of the buildings and the street.

ARTIST'S TOOLKIT

Brushes: Escoda Perla synthetic rounds, sizes 16, 12, 10; Escoda Aquario, DaVinci, and Rekab squirrel mops, sizes 18, 14, 12, 10; inexpensive wood-glue bristle brush (for tree foliage); and a fine line rigger

Paints: Daniel Smith and Holbein artists' grade watercolors in standard colors along with cobalt turquoise, Vandyke brown, Juane brilliant #1 and #2, warm gray, and deep ultramarine

Paper: Saunders Waterford and Fabriano 140-lb. rough

Plein Air Easel: SLIK Sprint Pro EZ metal tripod with plywood folding shelf to hold palette, brushes, and water container

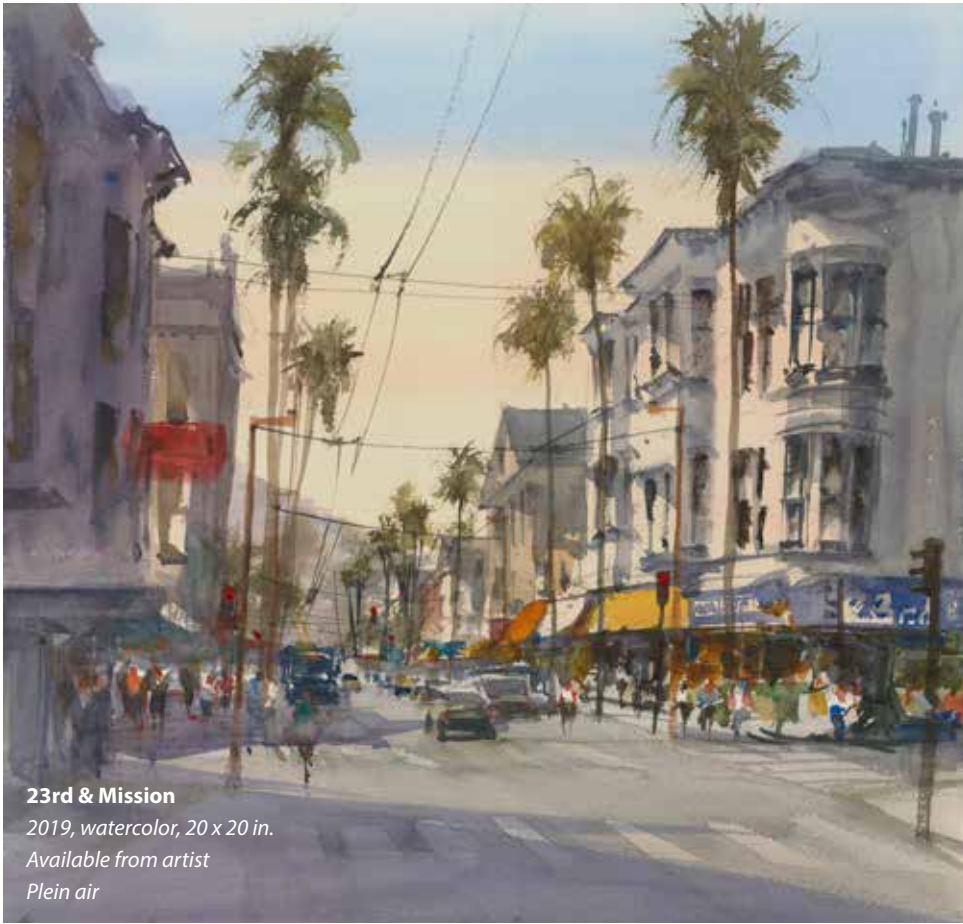
Umbrella: EASyL with multi-purpose mount

Final Step

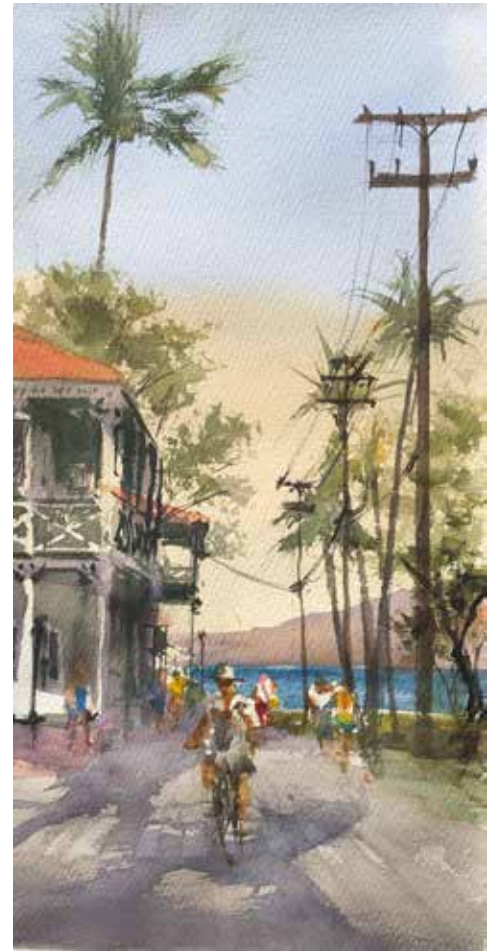
I added the finishing touches of Lahaina Morning Glow, including the clothing on the figures, the street entourage, and the power lines and poles, to complete the look of a lively street scene. The glow was achieved by the contrast of the middle-ground dark tree details against the lighter-value background mountains and sky.



Lahaina Morning Glow
2020, watercolor, 12 x 18 in.
Private collection
Plein air



23rd & Mission
 2019, watercolor, 20 x 20 in.
 Available from artist
 Plein air



Cruising Front Street
 2019, watercolor, 20 x 10 in.
 Private collection
 Plein air

DIFFERENT BUT THE SAME

One of the most important undertakings for artists is developing their drawing skills. I've been doing figure drawing and painting every Tuesday evening for a long time, which has really built up my confidence when I'm on location. I'll spend 10 to 20 minutes on each sketch and put three or four on a page. For me, it's a time to improve my brushstrokes and increase my understanding of watercolor application, edges, shape, and shadow. It's all there; the forms in the human figure are the same ones I find in the landscape.



As with any medium, it was a matter of trial and error to understand the properties of watercolor and learn from my mistakes. I also needed to figure out how to adjust to the environmental conditions that can affect paint application en plein air — sun, wind, rain. I had to develop a technique that would allow me to get the paint down quickly, confident that I knew what it was going to do on the surface. Once I understood how to do that, painting outdoors with watercolor became a lot easier and I didn't have to think about it as much.

So much of mastering watercolor is about timing, knowing when the paper is wet enough but not too wet, when it's the right moment to add the next wash. I like mixing my colors directly on the paper so that they blend or melt into one another. To achieve soft edges, you have to know when to apply the paint based on how much water you've mixed with it. For hard edges, you have to let your surface dry completely. The ability to figure out that timing and understand these

Makawao Crossroads
 2019, watercolor, 12 x 18 in.
 Private collection
 Plein air



Ka Opala
 2019, watercolor, 10 x 10 in.
 Available from The Village Gallery, Lahaina, HI
 Plein air

properties of watercolor develop over time, if you stick with it.

PAINTING IN ISOLATION

To keep my skill sharp, I joined a group that paints together every Saturday morning. Since we're no longer allowed to meet because of stay-at-home orders, we've been sharing a "photo reference for the day." Someone sends out a photo from their vacation in Venice, for example, and we all paint from it. In the evening, we post our results. Even though we're not physically painting together, we are painting the same thing, each with our own unique interpretation. Through this exercise, I've found myself spending a lot more time studying the other artists' styles, rather than just glancing at their work while we're painting outdoors. It's been interesting to compare the decisions the others make with my own.

In general, I'm painting a lot more during this time. Usually, if I'm painting outdoors, I'm happy to fit in one piece a day because I have to factor in travel time. But now, I can knock out a couple of paintings in my studio in the same amount of time. Slowing down in places, studying the work of others, and putting in the time and mileage on the paper have really been helping me grow during this period of social isolation. 📺



Lahaina Glow
 2019, watercolor, 20 x 10 in.
 Private collection
 Plein air



Stop Wishin' Start Fishin'
 2019, watercolor, 20 x 10 in.
 Private collection
 Plein air