

ALBERT HANDELL

Use Pastels to Define and Suggest Responses to Nature

This New Mexico artist uses pastels to respond to both the specifics of what he observes and his emotional response to the locations; he says, "I will eventually frame the painting, not the location I observe, so the image has to be more than an exact replica of the landscape"

Albert Handell compares painting to dancing. "I've been swing dancing for many years, and when I have a partner who is inexperienced, she usually stumbles around trying to remember all the steps she learned," he explains. "I show her the basic rock step and encourage her to just feel the beat of the music and trust that she will know how to move her feet. In many ways, painting is a similar kind of experience. It's important to know the basics, but if you think about all the techniques you learned and don't let yourself respond emotionally and physically to the subject, you'll stumble around the picture."

The point of Handell's analogy is that while technique is important, it needs to be at the service of expression. "If I'm captivated by a fallen tree, I become obsessed with trying to respond to what I see and want to know about it," he says. "But once I've done justice to that subject, I am free to create a space around it that celebrates but doesn't distract attention from the center of interest. The peripheral areas of the painting can be gestured, suggestive, or specific. That all depends on what the painting tells me it needs."

Handell continues, "This metamorphosis takes place when I am painting. I begin by focusing in on one area of the landscape and paint it close to completion. Then the light changes, and the shapes, shadows, and rhythms evolve. As the scene changes, I hold on to the memory of what first inspired me, but I also consider the new options that have been revealed to me. If I am successful in conveying my feelings about that central image, then the painting becomes a personal expression, not an objective report."

"Rhythm has become very important to me as an artist. A stationary tree or a moving



Handell works on a painting during a "Come paint along with me"-style workshop.



Handell teaching a workshop in Taos, NM, in 2011



The Dry Season

2001, mixed media, 18 x 17 in.

Private collection

Plein air

searching around for the perfect spot wastes time and leads to indecision.”

Describing his initial painting steps, Handell says, “I apply a light application of pastel describing the local colors, then I gently wipe the surface down so the pastel floats over the paper. My concern then is about the placement and proportion of the shapes on the toned surface, and about painting from dark values to light ones.

“I also use strong cast shadows to frame the focal point of the picture, and softer shadows to suggest the distant shapes. I continue working for about three hours on location and bring the painting to a satisfying resolution. I then take photographs of what I’ve been painting and of the surrounding areas. Those photographs can be useful in the studio for creating larger oil paintings of related subjects.”

During the winter months, Handell prefers to work in his studio on larger oil paintings. He usually takes a break after 90 minutes of painting and leaves the studio to answer phone calls, check e-mail messages, and do other chores so

stream turns and twists and gives evidence of an inner life. Those repetitive patterns are often subtle rather than dramatic. I capture the moments in time that suggest change.”

Although Handell has traveled all over the world, painting and teaching, he prefers to work near his home in Santa Fe, New Mexico. “I seldom drive more than 20 minutes away from my studio,” he says, “and I take sheets of Kitty Wallis paper or U-Art art papers, 500 or 600 grade, mounted on museum rag board — up to size 16 x 20 — sticks of pastel broken to about one half or one third their original size, with the numbered label left in the studio; and at times some watercolor paints to lay in an underpainting when I am working in mixed media. I often return to favorite painting locations, but even when I’m exploring a new area, I don’t spend more than five minutes looking around for a subject to paint that’s better. I have found that

A Quiet Moment

2009, pastel, 18 x 17 in.

Private collection

Plein air





La Hacienda De Los Martinez, Taos

2009, pastel, 12 x 18 in.

Capital Art Collection, State Capital, Santa Fe, NM

Plein air

he can return to the studio refreshed, with a clear vision. "I will spend most of one entire day taking a painting through its initial stages of development," he says. "Then I put it away and will start another painting the next day. That way, when I return to the first painting, I can see it more objectively and know what specific adjustments need to be made."

Handell also takes a break when he teaches workshops. He doesn't offer as many lecture and demonstration programs as he did in former years, preferring to schedule what he calls "Come paint along with me" mentoring programs. He explains, "It's more of a small gathering of artists who have some sense of what they are doing. I do one painting in the morning and one in the afternoon, and then we all get together in the evening for individual help, to talk about painting, the business of art, or any other topic of interest to the 10 or 12 people who join me."

"I make it clear that we are on a painting trip together, and while I am painting I have difficulty answering questions or engaging in conversation. Artists come because they are serious about painting and believe they can gain something and go to the next step by watching me paint or by sitting behind me and painting the same subject."

"On the other hand, there's nothing wrong with a more hands-on kind of workshop, but at this point in my career, I think I have more to offer to painters who are ready to make more significant advances in their pursuit of artistic expression."

The Upstairs Window

1999, pastel, 18 x 17 in.

Private collection

Plein air



ARTIST DATA

NAME: Albert Handell

BIRTHDATE: 1937

BIRTHPLACE: Brooklyn, NY

LOCATION: Santa Fe, NM

INFLUENCES: Louis Priscilla, Robert

Ward Johnson, Frank Mason at the ASL.

Inspired by friend Richard Schmid.

WEBSITE: www.alberthandell.com



En El Bosque

2010, mixed media, 16 x 20 in.

Courtesy Ventana Fine Art Gallery, Santa Fe, NM

Studio




Roman Ruins in France

2005, pastel, 12 x 18 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air

Although Handell is best known for his landscape paintings, he is equally adept at painting the human form in pastel or oil. In fact, he started his career focusing on portraits, but became more involved in landscape painting after he moved to New Mexico 28 years ago. “I bought back a portrait I painted in the early 1960s,” he says, “and it inspired me to work with the figure again.”

Handell has written or co-written five books on oil and pastel painting, four of which are now out of print but are available through his website and online retailers. He has produced three instructional DVDs, two on pastel painting and one on oils, has lent his name to a set of 72 Unison pastels well suited to landscape painting, and offers a blog documenting the painting procedures he covers in workshops. All these products and services are also available on Handell’s website and through online retailers. 



Taos Mountain

2009, pastel, 10 x 12 in.

Private collection

Plein air

M. Stephen Doherty is Editor of *PleinAir* magazine.



See more of Albert Handell’s pastel paintings and a video of the artist teaching at the Tuscan Art Academy in the expanded digital edition of *PleinAir*.

PASTEL PAINTING DEMONSTRATION



Sycamore Tree
2009, pastel, 14 x 18 in.
Private collection
Plein air



The Essence of Palms
2011, mixed media, 18 x 17 in.
Courtesy Ventana Fine Art
Gallery, Santa Fe, NM
Plein air



Smokey Valley

2010, pastel, 14 x 14 in.

Private collection