



Marsh Tracks
(18x12)

Windy Day on Lake Pontchartrain
(center; 18x18)

On previous pages:

Dusk, Early Spring
(12x18)

"I PAINT WHAT'S TRUE AND WHAT'S THERE," says Louisiana-based Mary Monk. "I don't tweak things. What I love is what I see, and I enjoy being able to get that on paper."

Monk's principle subject matter is the marshland to the northeast of Lake Pontchartrain in her native state. It's a vast stretch of flats, outcroppings and muddy pools textured with a rich variety of reeds, grasses, and the occasional low tree. The horizon drops away into the far distance, leaving the skies entirely open. Lacking the drama of hills and valleys, it's an environment that encourages a sensitivity to subtle relationships of color and texture, and a delight in skies reflected in rivulets and shallow pools.

As she builds her account of the landscape, Monk's paintings take on a quiet, open stillness infused with the soft watery light of the marshes. It's the sort of attention and grasp that only



comes from deep familiarity with a landscape and delight in eliciting the truth from a subject.

Ready for Anything

To achieve her direct and responsive pastels, Monk sets herself up for success by ensuring that she's fully prepared for all of the eventualities of her days of plein air painting.

The first step in her preparation is selecting the time of day for painting. "I paint mostly in the evening, but sometimes at dawn," she says. "The drama of the light at evening makes it the most beautiful time of day. Also, there's a little more slowness in the way the light changes. Painting at dawn is more challenging, and I usually set up in the dark and wait for the light."

To ensure that she's able to make a quick getaway for her painting forays, Monk keeps her car packed at all times, which is the second part of

her preparation. "It's stocked with extra pastels and extra paper; empty boxes for my ongoing work; wipes; rain gear; a wagon; and umbrellas for bad weather and for sun," she says. "I have bug spray, Benadryl and Band-Aids. I have boots to wear when there's a little water and boots appropriate for navigating a lot of water. I have several hats for all kinds of weather. And, I have an ice chest filled with drinks and snacks."

Monk's careful preparation naturally extends to her painting equipment and materials. "I use a full-sized Julian French easel, because I've found that metal easels don't work in wetlands," she explains. "I have two large Heilman pastel boxes. In one, I have all of the colors I use all of the time—and every value I can find for each color. The second contains specialty colors that complement my environment, but to a lesser degree." She places the first box in front of her when painting;

WORTH THE STRUGGLE



Almost all of Monk's work is done en plein air, an approach that originally came to her as something of a revelation. "A few years ago, a colleague invited me to participate in a plein air exhibition with some really amazing artists," she says. "I had never painted en plein air before, so I packed my easel and paints and went out to work."

"It was an awful experience that included extremely determined bugs, several alligators and myriad other distractions. I came home at the end of that very difficult day and thought, 'I'll never do this again.'" Exhausted, she leaned the painting against her bedroom wall.

"The next morning, that painting was the first thing I saw when I woke," she continues. "I was shocked. Seeing it with fresh eyes, I realized something that would forever change my method of work: I saw that my worst painting done en plein air is still better than my best painting done in my studio. I decided immediately it was worth the struggle."

Monk became a committed plein air painter and found that it began to get easier. "I learned what works and what doesn't," she says. "It's extremely peaceful to work out in nature. The peace and solitude become as much of a need as the act of painting itself."

