



View From the Porch

2015, pastel, 18 x 24 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air

But like many plein air painters, Monk will photograph a scene as a backup in case bad weather forces her to complete the work in the studio. Still, photographs are a poor substitute for the actual scene, she says. “The effects of light are nearly impossible to capture with a camera as they truly appear in reality,” she says. “There is too much change from reality to the printer. The human eye is much more able to discern the nuances that get discarded in the translation from reality to print. The camera can’t pick up all the colors that are there.”

A great plein air experience, she continues, is “a balance of one’s observations of nature and a clear translation of one’s own emotional response to the subject.” She says, “It is a luxury to have this time to yourself to study your subject matter and figure out why you react to it the way you do.” Artists must ask themselves *why* they have chosen to paint a particular

scene. “I believe this is the most critical step in making sure the painting has sincerity,” says Monk. As Auseklis Ozols, an artist and founder of the New Orleans Academy of Fine Art, once told Monk, “First you look, then you paint.”

When painting on location, Monk uses various brands of soft pastels and white museum or professional grade Wallis Sanded Pastel Paper vacuum-mounted on Gator Board. She doesn’t tone it, fearing an undertone might affect the layers of soft pastel she applies to the paper. Whether she completes the painting on location and in one sitting depends upon the size and complexity of the painting. She usually completes 18 x 24-inch or smaller landscapes in one session. Anything larger usually requires two visits, but rarely three. In building the painting, she applies layers of pastel from darks to lights and then works in details. Unlike many pastel painters, Monk does not spray the completed painting to fix the colors. “I feel spraying changes the luminosity of the painting and makes it flat,” she says. “When you fix it, the colors seem to melt together.”

Aside from changing light and weather, painting on location in south Louisiana also

comes with many distractions and nuisances. “I have plenty of stories of scary bugs, stray dogs, snakes, alligators, sunburn, ruined shoes, flat tires, and the most dangerous of all to the pastelist — the sideways rain that frequents Louisiana and melts pastels like cotton candy,” she says. “Despite these things, your consciousness of nature overrides the inconveniences of external conditions. You become more aware of subtle nuances in nature that reflect that stronger sense of mood and reality. Plein air caused me to continue to grow in my art and face the challenges with the knowledge that my art is better for the adversity.” 📷

JOHN R. KEMP is the author of the forthcoming book *Expressions of Place: The Contemporary Louisiana Landscape*. He writes about Southern Louisiana artists and lives with his wife on the Mississippi Gulf Coast.



See more of Mary Monk’s pastel paintings in the expanded digital edition of *PleinAir*.