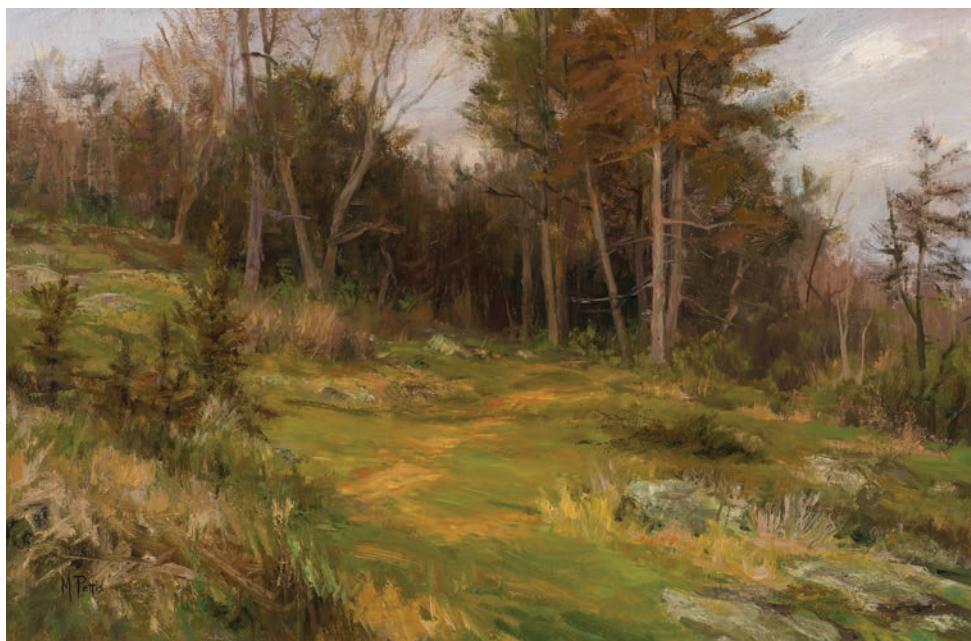


MARY PETTIS

The Next Level Is Having Something to Say

Trained by one of the most vigorous realist painters of our time, Mary Pettis now concentrates on what moves her when she picks up a brush.

By Bob Bahr



The classical realism approach of Richard F. Lack shaped Mary Pettis — winner of the *PleinAir Magazine* Award in the Art Renewal Center's 2016 ARC Salon — in her formative years as an artist, and she is still a staunch advocate of rigorous technical training. But her emphasis now is on what touches her heart. "I decided 20 years ago that in my life, it doesn't matter how well I paint if I don't have anything to say," Pettis says. "When I started asking deeper questions, I got deeper answers. I don't have all the answers, but it's a beautiful unfolding."

Studying under Lack put Pettis in a lineage that goes through R.H. Ives Gammell and back to the *Academie* approach of Jean-Léon Gérôme and Jacques-Louis David, and Pettis

wouldn't jettison her training. She would just expand it to allow more expressive and holistic art-making.

"I believe in technical study, and I think it is really important to learn the language of paint," says Pettis. "Rendering what's in front of us is a very important skill to develop. But that's not the end, at least for me. Everyone has a different path, and I applaud that. But to be authentic, we must be open to changing our goals regardless of what other people or teachers in our head may be saying. Each of us is driven to do different things with what we are given. We need to honor that."

Pettis was painting merrily along in a tighter style until she saw an exhibition of Russian Impressionism several years ago at the Fleischer

Cedars in Springtime

2016, oil, 16 x 24 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air



Mary Pettis painting during the 2016 Maui Plein Air Invitational

Museum of California and Russian Impressionism. "It knocked me off course," the Minnesota artist recalls. "It was a visceral reaction; that had never happened to me. I knew it was going to change how I paint. I knew I wanted to access emotion on a deeper level. So I looked at all the Russian work I could get my hands on to figure

ARTIST DATA

NAME: Mary Pettis

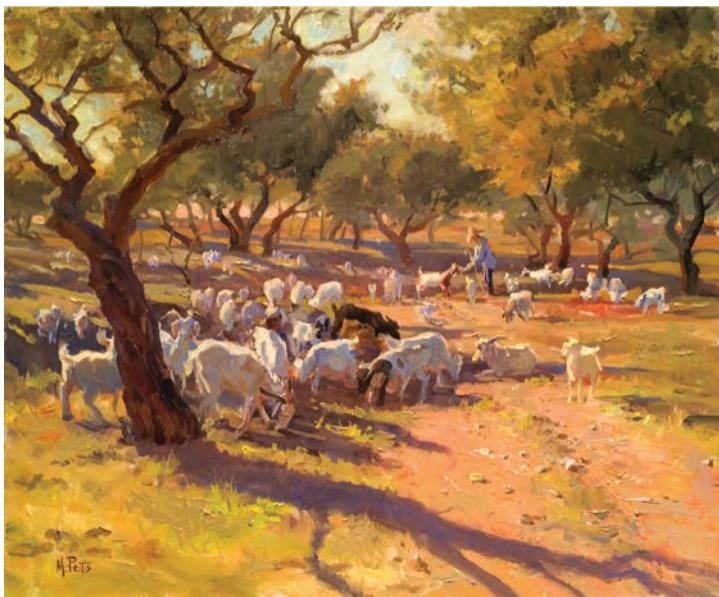
BIRTH YEAR: 1953

LOCATION: Taylors Falls, MN

INFLUENCES: "Alexi Gritsai, Ilya Repin, Zhang Wen Xin, Vasily Polenov, Nicolai Fechin."

WEBSITE: www.marypettis.com

ARTIST PROFILE



Breakfast at Trevas

2015, oil, 20 x 24 in.

Private collection

Plein air

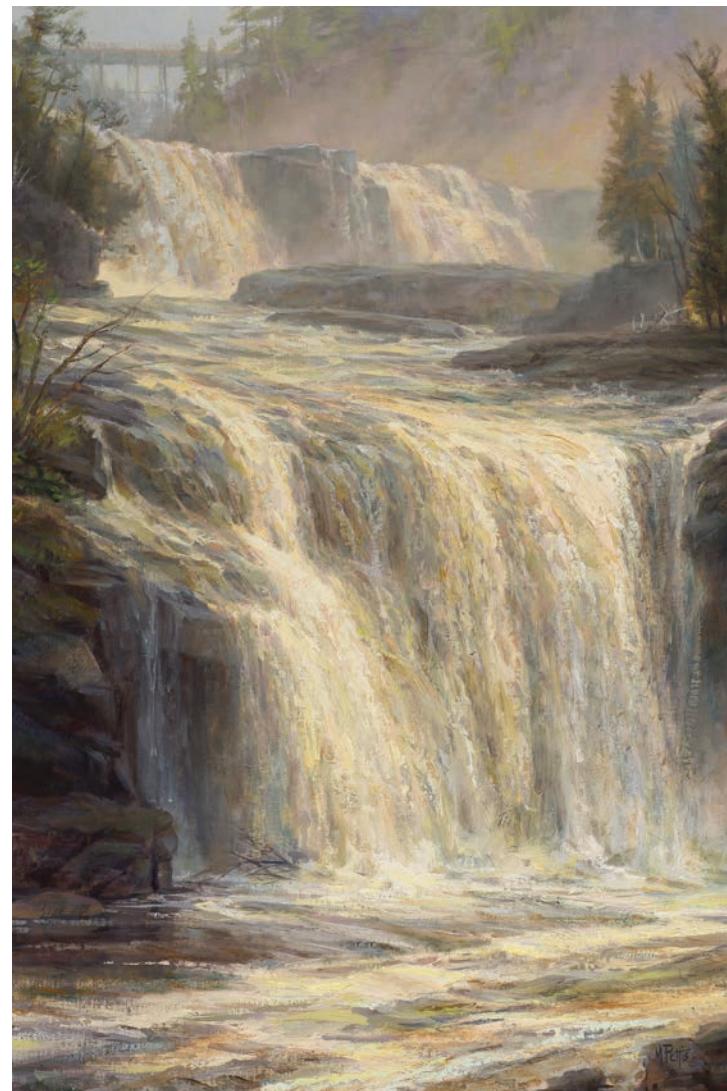
out why it was appealing to me. It looked trained and accomplished to my technical mind, but I saw something more. I saw what they were doing and how it was different from what I'd seen before — and different from nature.

"What I saw was the expressive nature of these technical tools of painting. Each can be a strong technical tool, but also an expressive tool. So I studied the way the Russian painters used each of the tools of painting in depth. Then all the puzzle pieces started falling in place. I'm just at the start of this thing. I know we do all this — learning, reading, re-reading, discovering — in a spiral. We revisit things, and they mean something different to us each time."

This awakening of a sort marks another era in Pettis' career. "Along the way I had taken workshops from many wonderful *alla prima* and plein air artists, including Zhang Wen Xin, Jim Wilcox, and Jove Wang," she says. "I learned to paint what I saw and matched the color. But in the last several years I'm learning the difference between describing and expressing. There is an inner life in our subjects, deeper than what we see on the surface. It's no longer 'Look what I can do.' It's not showing off how I can make colors recede in the distance or match two hues exactly.

"I've been painting for 45 years, but the first half of my career was spent just putting one foot in front of the other, trying to make a living and sort it out. My ideas on how to distill what is in front of me have changed over the years, and it is now getting really exciting. I feel that I am finally speaking the language and not trying to write a novel but, rather, poetry. My poetry. I didn't even know that possibility existed in paint."

From literature to music, Pettis finds analogies in what she is pursuing in paint in other art forms. "I tell students to be attentive and spend more time quietly contemplating what it is that stirs them, that thing Emerson described as 'that gleam of light which flashes across [one's]



Fog Lifting Over Gooseberry Falls

2016, oil on linen, 30 x 20 in.

Collection the artist

Studio

mind from within, more than the luster of the firmament of bards and sages.' Most of us have experienced that inner voice, but we often shut it out, thinking we need to paint like our teachers, like famous people, like the artists who make the most money. But that can interfere with being receptive to our function, our purpose, why we are put on this planet.

"We need to be open and attentive to what we are sensing on a primordial level, what sparks us. We need to bring that forward and learn how to express it. This inner significance is different for every person, so each interpretation can be unique, which is awesome."

Balance & Harmony

"There is a flow to a visual impression, a cadence that leads us almost musically from one aspect to the next, and the more logical and



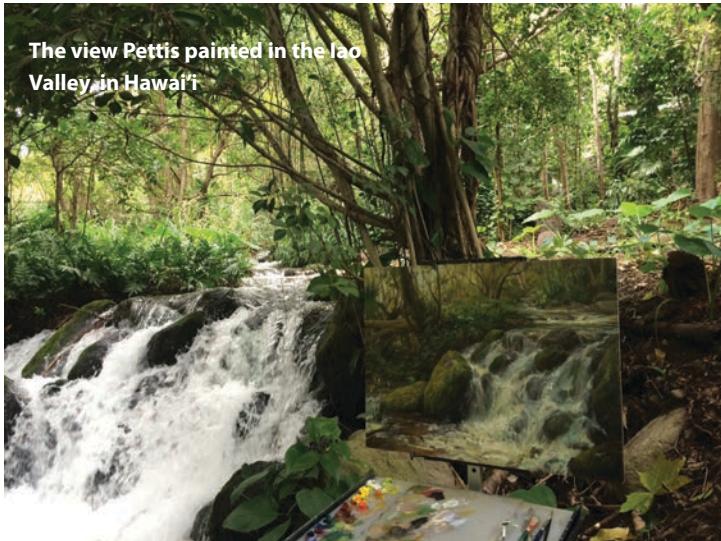
Solitary

2015, oil on linen, 16 x 20 in.

Private collection

Studio

ARTIST PROFILE



connected it is, the more exciting and beautiful it is for me," says Pettis. "I am compelled to paint it. Surface appearance is like individual musical notes in a composition, but I am looking for the melody instead. For me, it's a different way of looking; it's not the parts, but the relationship of all the elements that contribute to the balance, rhythm, and harmony in my subject. It's not just describing a focal point, learning to only use the colors, shapes, and movement that are sympathetic to the whole impression or story I am trying to convey."

A conversation with Pettis tends to go in this direction, with references to other kinds of art, matters of the heart, philosophy, and topics that in general go to the center of what it means to live. She strikes one as a voracious reader, and one might suspect an academic background. "No, my sister

Living Waters—Iao Valley

2016, oil, 16 x 20 in.

Private collection

Plein air





was the smart one," Pettis says. "I was the one who always wanted to be outside. I was part of a large farming family here in Minnesota, the second of eight children. We were kept busy working — pulling weeds in bean fields, baling hay, taking care of animals. But I was a daydreamer, and I always thought that was a great flaw, an opinion that was reinforced by my family.

"Education was valued, but it was being out in nature, often from sunrise to sunset, that lightened the burden and sparked the curiosity that informs my art today. Curiosity is what now drives me to want to understand what makes a thing look like it does. As I ask 'Why?' I am pulled to the intellectual side of my nature. This has led me to the somewhat academic study of old authors and philosophers who have written about such things. I am particularly interested in theories about the two opposing forces, instinct and intellect. They are the two ways that knowledge comes to us — inner and outer vision. I have come to believe that they form a dance. Both are important, and each should be honored."

Pettis continues, "The second part of my art career, I have been thinking about what's missing. What didn't I get from training alone? Why wasn't that enough? I realized I needed to work on having something to say, something to express. There is a flaw in learning just the craft. The truth is, we never stop learning the craft of painting. It is a spiral that never ends. I think it is leading people astray to say you master it, then you pursue the creative expression."

"Once I figured that out, I had to think how to take what I learned and relate it to my life. I decided in my life, 15 years ago, it doesn't matter how well I paint if I don't have anything to say. So I started cross-pollinating, I went deeper, spiritually and intellectually, to understand connections. I read more poetry and literature. I learned that the message is the most important thing; the technical must serve the message."

And what is this message? Examining this part of the equation brings us to plein air painting. Pettis says that the message can be as simple as loving one color next to another, but it's never just that color relationship. It goes further, and pulls the innate nature of the subject matter into the piece. It's not just what you might learn about a particular mountain in a book. It's the experience of the mountain. And for Pettis, it means going to a place beyond technical painting, and beyond intellectualizing the scene.

"In connecting to my subject on a deeper level, when I look deeply enough, painting becomes a meditation," Pettis says. "When we meditate, tension and thought is gradually released and we slip deeper into that zone, and that is where we become more sensitive to the connection to that subject. All of the senses come into play when we paint *en plein air* — the smells, sights, all. When I stand outside in nature, I feel the growth of the tree, and when I am standing on the same ground, I sense the sap running through the trees, as the

Spring Path

2016, oil, 16 x 24 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air

blood runs through my veins, and I don't know how that happens. Maybe it's my background growing up in the country and working on the land through all the changing seasons. I just know that seeing beyond the surface appearance of things connects me to that inner life. I feel oneness with that subject, and hopefully the resonance of that shows up in my work.

"Take a tree. There is the part of the tree that we see, but when we walk along the rainforested Na Pali Coast of Kauai, for example, we sense the nourishment we get from that tree. There's a palpable sense of this symbiosis, between us and the trees. My ninth-grade teacher comes to mind, pointing out that we are breathing in oxygen and exhaling carbon dioxide. The tree is doing the opposite, so there is a relationship."

Emotional Nature

Many plein air painters will talk about how they feel connected with nature when they are out there painting. Pettis is saying that this connection is a key component in imbuing a piece with meaning and emotion.

So when is the right time for a painter to move into the next stage, to stand on the foundation of learned fundamentals and paint something expressive and from the heart? "If you are bored, it's time to start asking different questions," Pettis says. "I think it is all wonderful. No matter what our goal is, it's wonderful to be out painting. The more we understand about ourselves, the more we understand what the goals are for our painting, then the more easily that crazy and brave part of us will break through and scratch that itch — figure out and isolate exactly what it is that makes us feel the way we do." ■

BOB BAHR has been writing and editing articles about art instruction for more than 12 years. He lives with his wife and two young sons at the northern tip of Manhattan.



See more of Mary Pettis' plein air and studio paintings in the expanded digital edition of *PleinAir*.