

MATT CHINIAN at VAROSY STUDIOS

The phrase “plein air” painting, which simply means painting outdoors, has roots in the Barbizon School of the 1830s, but it was their Impressionist successors thirty years later who transformed it into a tool for rethinking painting as a language. Armed with easel, stool, oil paints, brushes, turpentine, plenty of all-purpose rags and necessary refreshments, plein air painters typically set off into picturesque settings to capture characteristics of light, form and color that would not, at least in theory, have been possible from the confines of a studio. Plein air isn’t a style or movement, but a technique made possible thanks to breakthroughs in portable art-making (i.e., paint sold in tubes) that became essential to the rise of naturalism in the arts, while feeding the archetype of the artist as one seeking inspiration from direct contact with forces of the natural world.

Matt Chinian practices a form of plein air painting, but his perspective is more that of a sociologist or forensic detective than a seeker of formal or pictorial effects. While he is as appreciative of a beautiful sky or rolling hill as any of us, Chinian’s primary interest is in the environment that human beings change by the mere fact of their presence, and there is no more compelling symbol of that change than a smattering of cars or trucks the middle distance. In his paintings, motor vehicles achieve a Giorgio Morandi-like aura of meaningfulness, cloaked in the lingering presence of their absent owners. While not portraits — he pays no attention to the make or model other than capturing its particulars —, Chinian’s compositions act as proxies for the paths any of us might take as our routines move us through the unassuming spaces of life in a typical Washington County village.

Because in Chinian’s paintings, there’s none of the visual grounding that might have been provided by images of our fellow humans or of unobstructed landscapes, we are left to strike a balance for ourselves between the natural beauty that often plays a minor role as part of the backdrop in his compositions, and the more visible, yet off-handed, evidence of our collective behavior. While his paintings are not ecological statements in any literal sense, the inevitable question of why Chinian focuses so heavily on manmade environments is tied up with the deeper question of what our relationship is to these liminal spaces that are adjacent to nature, yet somehow encapsulate our indifference to it. If his paintings leave us feeling slightly uncomfortable, they do so in service to the act of heightening our awareness of the contradictions that abound when we

declare our love for natural beauty, while failing to accept our concomitant role in ensuring that it will still be available for future generations to contemplate.

DAN CAMERON, June 2025