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Interview by Allison Malafronte

American Artist: You are best known in the art world for your figurative work, but you are also an avid plein air painter. What is it about landscape painting that you find fulfilling?

Jacob Collins: I spend so much of my time cooped up in a dark studio, and some of the most enjoyable times I have spent in the last 20 years have been trips I've made with my friends painting outside.

AA: Is there anything about figurative studio work that lends itself to outdoor landscape painting, or vice versa?

JC: About 20 years ago, when I was trying to learn to paint the figure, I began to understand that I'd need to learn a lot about not only the physical appearance of the figure but also the inner structure. My original approach had been a purely optical one. I was in the habit, from my own instincts and also from my Impressionist-derived teachers, of trying to get the gist of the model or the scene by squinting to see patterns of light and dark and warm and cool and looking for salient edges. At a certain point I realized that because I wanted to make more classical, pre-Impressionist paintings, I needed to undertake a study of the figure more along the lines of a classical, pre-Impressionist painter. In this spirit, I studied a great deal of anatomy, and I did a lot of cast drawing and careful, patient study of the figure in graphite. Gradually, I learned enough about the figure to begin to paint it with some amount of knowledge and insight beyond its optical appearance.

About two years ago I recognized that I was still, 20 years later, painting my landscapes in a fundamentally Impressionist mode. I'm very fond of a great deal of Impressionism, but it isn't how I want to paint. I have aspired for many years to paint landscapes in the style of the American landscape painters before me, such as Frederic Edwin Church, Sanford R. Gifford, and Albert Bierstadt. It struck me that I needed to investigate the landscape just as I had investigated the figure 20 years ago. I needed to learn the anatomy of the landscape by drawing from nature and learning more about its constituent parts. This is the sort of investigation through drawing that I undertook to transform my figure painting years ago, and I feel as though this is an excellent model for me as I am trying to transform my landscape drawing and painting.

AA: Which do you find harder, figurative work or plein air painting?

JC: Figurative is the hardest because if the drawing is off, it looks absurd.

AA: Why do you feel painting in nature is important for landscape painters?

JC: I love the connection between painting outside—scrupulously observing the details and nuances of nature—and painting in the studio, remembering, inventing, and conceptualizing the landscape. Each time I paint outside, I'm desperately trying to record all that I can, to organize the infinite complexity of nature, but sometimes it is hard to know what to look for and pay attention to. Once I'm back in the studio, I find myself asking a million questions—such as whether the horizon could conceivably be pink at this time of day or the surface of the water could ever be lighter than the sky in a certain context—and wishing that I had noticed more when I was outside. At these moments I vow that I will pay more attention when I'm outdoors, and when I go outside, I end up working with a renewed intensity because I have so many questions in my mind.

AA: What is your opinion on using on-site photographs to help remember the physical appearance of a landscape subject?

JC: I don't paint from photographs. I find that when I paint in the studio, from studies and memory, I can gradually recover a tremendous amount of visual memory, far more than I might have imagined. Sometimes I wonder whether relying on photography makes you distrust your mind and eye. Painting landscapes in the studio from my sketches, drawings, and conceptions feels a little like hypnotizing myself and drawing out of the deepest corners of my mind's eye, my memories, and my feelings for the land. I'm confident that copying photographs would short circuit this process.

AA: If you could offer an aspiring landscape painter one piece of advice, what would it be?



Autumn Landscape
1998, oil, 32 x 60.
Private collection.



Vermont Sugar Maple, October
2003, oil, 13 x 11 3/4.
Private collection.



Fire Island Sunset
2004, oil, 24 x 38.
Private collection.

JC: Last year I read Asher B. Durand's "Letters on Landscape Painting," and I was struck by the advice he gave to aspiring landscape artists to draw the individual pieces of the landscape for as long as it takes to understand them before putting it all together. He recommended perhaps even years of drawing branches of trees and rocks, outcroppings, and clusters of trees with a sharp pencil, seeing them as the alphabet of the landscape. I was impressed with his analogy that trying to paint a landscape without learning this alphabet was like trying to write a novel without learning the letters and words of language.

AA: You recently opened the Hudson River School for Landscape, in the Catskills, in an effort to revive the classical Hudson River School landscape-painting tradition. You state on your website that the school models itself after the values of these past masters. Can you explain what those values were?

JC: The Hudson River painters saw the beauty of nature as a deeply important part of our world, and they believed their job was to faithfully represent that beauty. In their tradition, the beauty of the land was revelation. This deep reverence for the land and idealism is sometimes missing in the contemporary art world. Those painters also laid the groundwork for what became the American Conservation Movement. My hope is that reuniting the kind of idealism that these artists brought to their art with the reverence for the land that they helped introduce to American culture will make a small contribution to solving current problems.



Trequanda Hillside, Tuscany
2000, oil, 38 x 50.
Private collection.

AA: What does the actual curriculum at the Hudson River School for Landscape consist of?

JC: The curriculum involves a great deal of graphite drawing, compositional value studies, and plein air studies. The goal of each of these is not necessarily to make works of art but to observe and investigate, and then use that information in future studio paintings. In the evenings there are a series of lectures by faculty and guest speakers in the fields of art history, botany, and geology, as well as evening demonstrations in studio landscape practice.

AA: Studying the science of nature plays a big role in The Hudson River School for Landscape's curriculum. Why do you feel this knowledge is important to a plein air painter?

JC: When an artist makes the decision not to rely on photography, they are forced to undertake extensive investigations into the nature of the landscape. Over the last few years I have wrestled with such complicated problems as painting the water or grasping the nature and appearance of atmosphere. These problems have required delving into subjects such as physics, which, although beyond my usual educational reach, have nonetheless been fascinating and rewarding forays, and I'm sure my work has benefited from the amount of scientific study that I undertook.



Burma Road Fire Island
2004, oil, 30 x 54.
Courtesy John Pence Gallery, San Francisco, California.

AA: What is required of an artist interested in taking courses/workshop at the Hudson River School of Landscape?

JC: Right now we are planning our 2008 five-week fellowship program. We will be accepting applicants online for this intense, and hopefully successful, summer. We are also developing a series of workshops that we will be offering next year and in the future. These workshops will be modeled on the same curriculum as the fellowship program.

For more information on Jacob Collins, visit his website at www.jacobcollinspaintings.com. For more information on the Hudson River School for Landscape, visit www.hudsonriverlandscape.com.

To read more about Jacob Collins and the workshop he conducted at The Hudson River School for Landscape, see M. Stephen Doherty's article in the winter 2007 issue of Workshop titled "Reviving an American Tradition."

About American Artist

American Artist is an essential link between artists and the people who organize competitions, provide instruction, discuss professional issues, sell original works, publish prints and reproductions, research historical movements, and who use the same medium.

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