

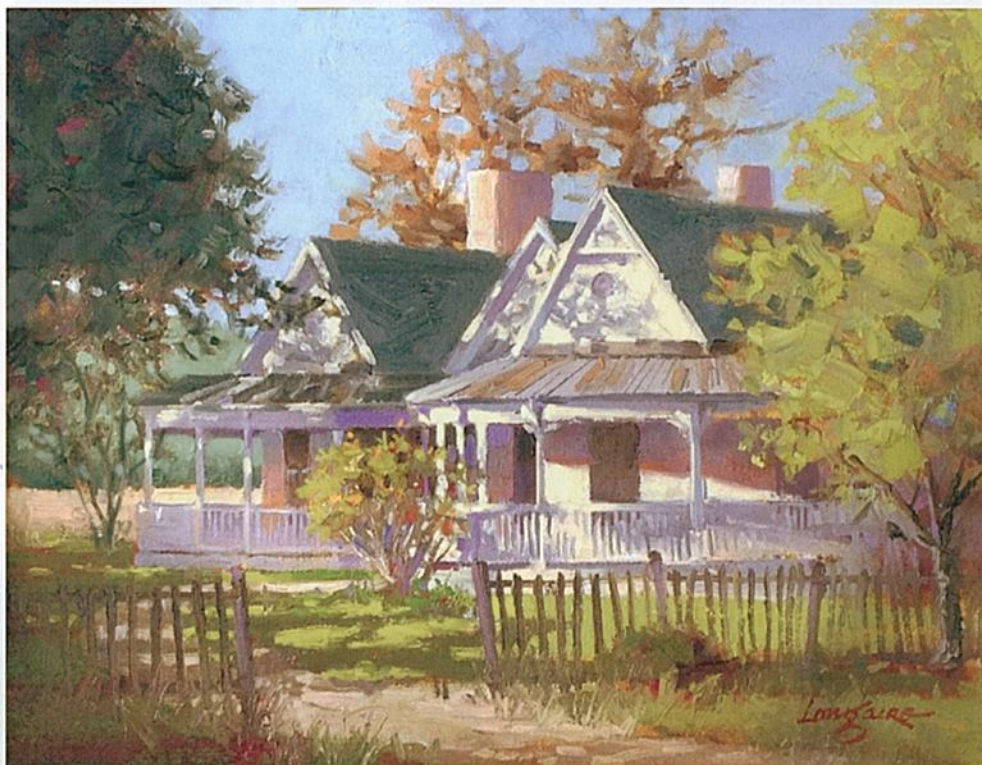
JIMMY LONGACRE

'Fun Factor' Tools for Plein Air

This Texas artist can be as serious about the painting process as any, but he is primarily motivated by the joy that comes from creating his own interpretation of the landscape. He offers students a set of tools for gaining skills that help make painting fun.

At the end of a long day of painting in the rain, heat, humidity, and bugs, very few artists at a plein air event will say they are filled with joy. At that moment, they are likely feeling exhausted from the physical strain and the stress of working against a deadline. But give them a couple of hours to clean up and join other participating artists for dinner, and you'll witness a very joyous celebration. Every artist at the table will tell you they feel quite fortunate to have spent their day doing what they love in the company of observers, collectors, and friends.

Texan Jimmy Longacre believes that learning to paint one's personal interpretations of the landscape is what leads to that sense of



Hill Country Pride

2014, oil, 11 x 14 in.

Private collection

Plein air

accomplishment and fun; that's what will motivate artists to persist in the challenge of painting outdoors. "Of course, skill, experience, and effort are important to being successful at plein air painting," he says, "but these are the byproducts of discovering how to sustain your personal 'fun factor.' Interpreting what we find in nature through selection, arrangement, emphasis, and design is the game, and that game should be fun no matter what our level of accomplishment."

Longacre goes on, "While painting skill is mainly increased through doing lots of painting,

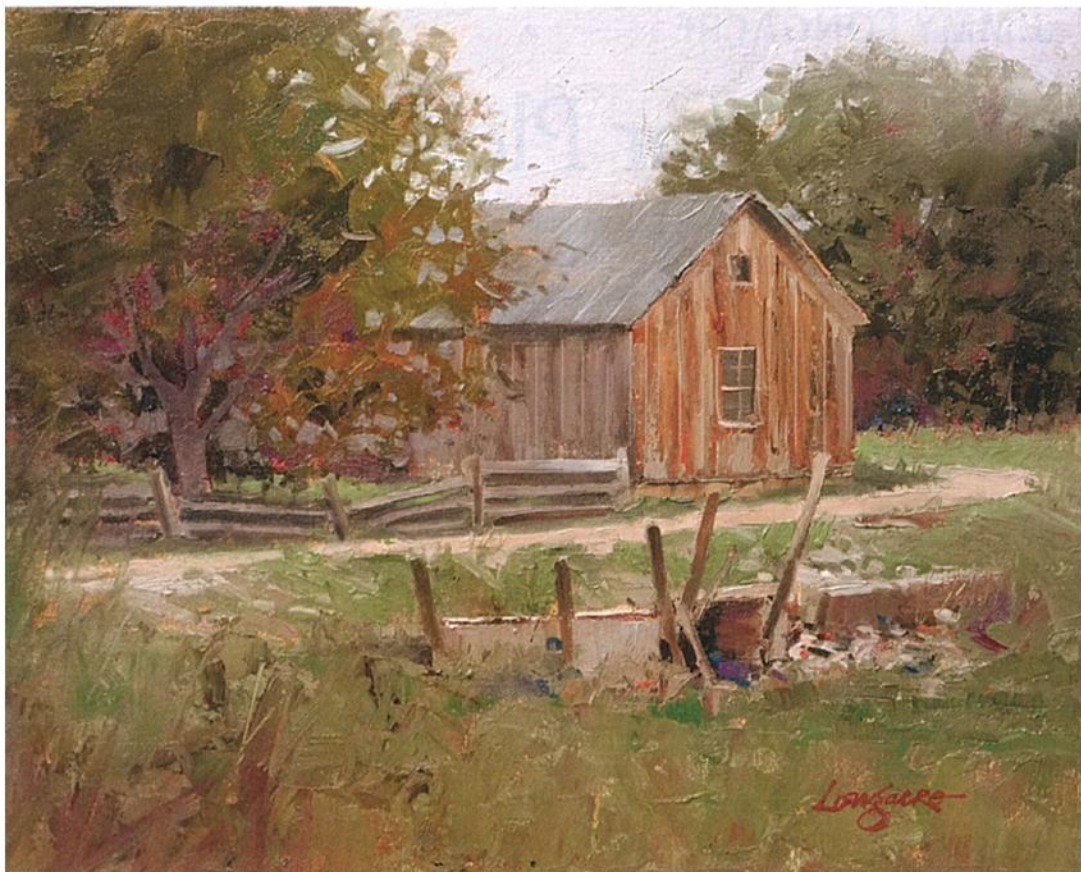
Early October

2014, oil, 14 x 11 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air

learning what makes the process fun is what keeps artists doing the work. My objective as a teacher is to pass on some powerful thinking tools that help to simplify planning, composition, and color so those are not overwhelming. No matter what the skill levels of the students may be, awareness of these simple tools can be of immediate help when they go outside to paint. These things are not a matter of technical dexterity or good drawing. The thinking tools can lead to spontaneity and improvisation, and that's where the fun is. When we're having fun



Change of Season

2014, oil, 11 x 14 in.

Private collection

Plein air

painting, we're making progress, and as a result of purposeful fun, we improve in drawing and paint-handling."

Longacre describes these "thinking tools" as ways to personally interpret a subject, as opposed to transcribing it. "The tools help us to shift into a different mode of seeing before beginning to paint," he explains. "What we see is rarely ready to be translated to canvas. Inexperienced artists look for nice 'things' to paint, but once we get past the frustration and disappointment of that literal, detail-oriented mode of seeing, we learn to soften our gaze and take in the whole scene in terms of shapes, value, color, and edge relationships.

"Those are the design elements we can manipulate with contrast, dominance, repetition, and gradation. Deciding on meaningful manipulations is where the fun of painting really begins, and it's how we end up discovering what we have to say. Besides, it's a lot more fun than the wearisome task of copying literal facts. That's what cameras are good for."

The artist continues, "We have more confidence when we understand and feel what we're trying to accomplish. Nothing improves spontaneity and improvisation like careful planning.

Home Memories

2013, oil, 12 x 16 in.

Private collection

Plein air



ARTIST DATA

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Santa Elena Canyon

2014, oil, 8 x 10 in.

Private collection

Plein air

“The rough thumbnail value paintings allow me to try out ideas in a couple of minutes, and they make all the difference in the painting process. Accuracy of contour is not important here. I work with the arrangement of three to five rough shape-silhouettes. Thinking beforehand will uncover both design opportunities and problems you may encounter. I explore a few painting ideas while thinking about interlocking shapes, shape variety, and balance. I decide whether the picture will be predominantly light or dark, where the horizon will be, and the placement of my focal area.

“Playing with the three simple value groups informs my decisions about what will be useful, and what I will leave out. Strong paintings have big, simple value structures. By playing with the abstract arrangement of masses, the focal area,

That may sound contradictory, but I’ve found that by applying a few simple tools, most students can begin immediately having more fun and painting better with the technical skills they already have. Playing with these ‘tools’ leads to increased confidence and understanding of how we can personally interpret what we see.”

The Power Of Visualization

“For instance, learning to pre-visualize how your finished painting will look is one very powerful tool,” says Longacre. “After focusing on something I may want to paint, I create simple thumbnails about the size of a business card in my 4 x 6-inch sketchbook, using a mid-gray and a dark gray brush-tipped marker. But, rather than sketches, these are more like very quick little paintings, using only flat shapes to compose three value groups — white paper, mid-gray, and dark gray. In this way, I can consider various ways I might use the landscape elements to emphasize my selection.

Real Good Barns

2013, oil, 11 x 14 in.

Collection the artist

Studio

