

Ohio Arts Council's Riffe Gallery

Local artists reveal the beauty of Ohio

By Clint Buhler

It is often difficult to truly appreciate the natural landscape in which we live and work. It seems to be only when we move away that we look back on the beauty so long taken for granted in our homeland. The highly acclaimed early twentieth century American artist (and Columbus native) George Bellows has said, "The artist is the person who makes life more interesting or beautiful, more understandable or mysterious, or probably, in the best sense, more wonderful." What better way to make life more wonderful than to draw our attention to the beauty of nature around us. Asked why he chose to paint the landscape of his native Ohio, local artist Paul J. Reif explained, "Why travel to another country when you have been blessed with what you have? You need to look for the beauty we have here, rather than seek out what you think you do not have."

Viewers at the Ohio Arts Council's Riffe Gallery will have just such a chance to be shown Ohio's landscape at the show "Natural Light: Paintings by Ohio Plein Air Society" running through October 16 and curated by Jane A. Black of the Dayton Visual Arts Center. All 16 of the featured artists in the show are members of the Ohio Plein Air Society (OPAS), an organization

founded in 2002 to "explore the diversity and uniqueness of Ohio's landscapes and beyond."

Featured artists include Nancy Achberger, Jon M. Browning, Martha O'Neil Carmody, Richard Clem, Debra Joyce Dawson, Edie Dean, Mark Gengerich, Jim Glover, Ray Hassard, Mary Holobaugh, Karen LaValley, Jack Irwin Liberman, Paul J. Reif, Mary Ann Sedivy, Lori Smith, and Bridgette Turner.

The tradition of painting *en plein air*, or outdoors, rather than composing works within the confines of the artist's studio, has as its genesis the work of the impressionists in late-nineteenth century France. Despite the many shifting currents in the art world from that time up to the present day, *plein air* has continued to draw its own practitioners. While the majority of landscape painters either create made-up landscapes or compose their works with the help of photographs, the artists of the Ohio Plein Air Society choose to bring their studios out into nature to paint directly from the source, without mediation.

By following this strategy of working out in nature, the artists certainly sacrifice something in terms of accurately painting the subject before them. An artist working



Karen LaValley, *Homestead Rt. 23 North*, 2010.

Painting *en plein air* isn't a style, but an approach - it merely means these artists all paint outdoors, but how they do so can vary drastically.

upper hand on the fog. In order to effectively capture this effect, Liberman had to work very quickly, losing some of the detail and focusing on the scene's most important elements - in particular the light of the sun. Liberman notes that he does not see this as a sacrifice at all: "I believe in painting from life and memory as I believe the camera is the death of painting."

Indeed, in many ways the challenges associated with a limited timeframe enrich the works of *plein air* artists. The objective

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from a photograph has as much time as he or she needs to work-up each individual element from the scene. Artists working outdoors, on the other hand, have a very limited time to complete their work. As the sun passes through the sky, shadows shift position, light refracts and changes the color of certain details, and eventually, the scene goes completely dark.

A good example of the choices that must be made by a *plein air* painter is the work by Jack Irwin Liberman, *Fog Lifting on the Cuyahoga*, (2008), featured in the Riffe Gallery show. The painting captures nicely the brief period when the rising sun begins to burn off the morning fog over the river. Its light dampened by the fog, the sun nonetheless comes through and is shown just at the moment when it begins to get the

Jack Irwin Liberman, *Fog Lifting on the Cuyahoga*, 2008.



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Poetry

I picked up Franz Wright at the airport.
He smoked and said, "I'd forgotten how
Ohio smelled."

We ate stacked pastrami sandwiches
At Katzinger's. He talked sadder than his poems.

When he read at the Settlement House
Most people didn't smile.

"I hurt a lot of people," he told me.
Then I took him back to the airport.

I don't think he'll come back to Ohio soon,
Even though he liked the smell.

I believed what he wrote and said.

— David Hetzler

Plein air cont.



Paul J. Reif's *Mac-a-Cheek Prairie*, 2007, is a good example of how varied the style of the works can be.

Natural Light: Paintings by Ohio Plein Air Society

July 28-October 16, 2011

Ohio Arts Council's Riffe Gallery
77 South High Street, First Floor

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capture of a camera will automatically record every element, making no distinctions in the relative importance of the objects in the scene. An artist working within time restraints, however, will only depict those details that assert their presence to the artist. In other words, working *en plein air* injects an element of the subjective into the finished composition – the work depicts what the artist saw, not necessarily what was actually present before them as they worked.

The subjective impression made on the artist is evident in a work like Ray Hassard's *Betty's Chair*, 2010. In a photograph of the same scene, the old chair would

merely be one amongst a number of objects in the yard. But by removing the details of the grass and whatever other small objects may have been in front of it, and reducing the buildings behind to more or less solid planes of color, the chair is given a place of honor in the work. With the title, we do not merely see an old house and a rusting chair, but we feel the absence of Betty, and understand this chair to be intrinsic to her person.

Curator Jane A. Black explains, "A photograph has already cropped the scene, and I think an imagined landscape is something you see already finished in your mind. But when you are out in the world, there are so many elements to consider; you have to make a lot of choices about what objects to include and how to focus the work."

Walking around the show at the Riffe Gallery, the viewer makes no mistake about who the star is – nature. While many of the artists find remote locations, others choose another path to show nature's beauty, such as Karen LaValley's work *Homestead Rt. 23 North*, 2010. Rather than showing us the creations of nature like a forest or a waterfall, LaValley showcases the ongoing struggle of people who seek to carve a life out of the Ohio landscape for themselves and the inevitable reclaiming of man's creations by nature. The artist draws our attention to the barns and homes sprinkled throughout the state that are deteriorating and succumbing to the will of nature. Such works remind the viewer that man is not separate from nature, but is part of it.

Perhaps one of the most common misconceptions about *plein air* painting is that it is a particular artistic style. This leads one to believe that most all *plein air* works, by possessing the same style and subjects, are roughly the same. In reality, painting *en plein air* isn't a style, but an approach – it merely means these artists all paint outdoors, but how they do so can vary drastically. The variety of the works on display demonstrates the truly individual ways these artists express their own relation to the world around them. Paul J. Reif's work *Mac-a-Cheek Prairie*, (2007) is a good example of how varied the style of the works can be. Rather than working with oil paints to capture the effects of light across the landscape, Reif uses pastels in a flattened, geometric manner that reduces the space but draws out the vivid colors of nature.

Black writes of the exhibition, "Deciding what is important along the path of one's life may be the most longstanding human endeavor. This struggle is also one of the powerful undercurrents in painting from life. The more closely one looks, the greater possibility for utter confusion." By making the world strange again, these artists imbue us with a sense of curiosity that helps reenergize the beauty of nature all around us. □

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Image: Ray Hassard, *Betty's Chair*, 2010, pastel on panel, 18" x 18". Courtesy of the Artist



Natural Light

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