

THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF
MARINE ARTISTS

Art We Love III: Don Demers, F/ASMA
“Noon’s Purple Might” by Arthur Streeton



Bill Davis, Joe McGurl and I have been dear friends and painting buddies for years, and we went on a lot of painting trips in the late '90's and early 2000's. We were all pretty focused on the Hudson River School at the time. We drove around New England, going to the spots where a lot of these Luminist or Hudson River paintings had been created, and would compare the setting then to the setting now. So we were on one of those junkets, but it was raining like hell, so no painting. We'd heard that there was an exhibition of Hudson River School paintings at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, CT. We did not know that it was in conjunction with an exhibition of Australian landscape paintings. So it was mid-day on a rainy Thursday or something, and we walk in there with these sort of stale Hudson River paintings, pictures "of this," or "of that," highly motified, highly articulated. And then I turned a corner and I saw that [Streton's "The Purple Noon's Transparent Might"].

And for a moment, I couldn't even breathe. It was one of the most impactful paintings I've ever seen. It was no longer a painting "of something," it was the thing itself. It was not a simile. It wasn't a painting "of" a river valley. It "was" the river valley.

And the difference in the way that Arthur Streton applied the paint--how, or whatever he did--in his immersion in that process, created a new entity. An entity that was truly--I don't even want to use the word "representative," it was there. It is a transporting painting. I was not looking at a picture like you would a Bierstadt or a Frederick Church, or one of these grandiose paintings that almost come with their own soundtrack--where you are a passive witness to "a" magnificent thing.

Arthur Streton took me to Australia in that painting. And what an impact--I couldn't take my eyes off it. And I'll never forget it. It was so modern, too. It was painted in 1896, and is in square format, which was very unusual for a landscape painting. But he was truly a modernist, in the way that he designed and the perspective from which he saw the world. And when I saw his point of view (and there were others, John Roberts, and McCubbins, in the show) I was just dumbfounded by Streton's point of view--the unique way he saw the world, unlike anyone else.

And then I learned the story, how it was a 107 or 108 degrees. It's a 4 foot square painting and he painted it in two days in 107 degree weather. Painting outdoors is so dependent on where you are on earth. We have to be dedicated to meteorology, the barometer, humidity, the quality of the air. And Sorolla had this vibrance, but because it's in such a distinct geographical place. I've never been to Australia, but it can be so arid that on a brightly lit day color gets utterly washed out. And that's one of the keys to this painting. The Ultramarine Blue water that inhabits a good portion of the lower third of the painting--look at the rich chromatic intensity of that. Now if you cover that section up, the whole rest of that painting is neutrals, with the exception of a few high intense blue punctuation marks that wander through the painting. So there's a great asymmetry in the way this painting is constructed. And what it does is just show you the depth and coolness of the blue and clearly that's being reflected off the zenith of the sky. As we go across the depth of field in this painting we're scooting across this dry earth where there's hardly any moisture, and the sun is

just bleaching out all of the rich color in that entire landscape. But if he hadn't keyed it off that rich ultramarine blue, the thing wouldn't have nearly the atmospheric impact that it has.

He was clearly dedicated to that landscape. "Fire's On" is also dumbfoundingly good. He was not a painter of preconceived notions. I've taught a lot in Arizona, which is probably one of the closest things I could say was a comparison to Streton's climate--because I've painted in 105 degree weather--In the Superstition mountains. Students will relate bright color to heat, but that's not the way it works. The desert is very bleached out in tone, because the sun's at the zenith in the middle of the day, it's shooting straight down on the earth, there's not a lot of atmosphere for the light to refract, so you don't get rich pinks or rich oranges that you get at sunrise or sunset. And when you're out in the desert in the middle of the day, there's not a whole hell of a lot of color out there.

A very, very mature landscape or seascape artist--and I don't differentiate between the two--will see the ever important subtleties of what the landscape offers. I will compare it to still life painting or figure painting, but they don't have to deal with the depth of field, and all of these mutable and evanescent characteristics that the landscape, distance, and humidity offer. So the richness of the fleshtones or of the objects in the still life, they're pretty understandable, because they're within their immediate purview. At the most, they're twenty feet away, so the absolute essence to mature, sophisticated, elegant, accurate, truthful landscape painting is not in the obvious tones--it's in all the connecting tones, and all the neutrals. Those are

the tendons of the painting, those are the elements that hold the painting together. It's easy to see a bright spring green in a tree. Frankly, the easiest color in this whole painting of Streeton's is that blue in the foreground. That's not a hard color to find. But the nuance and the subtlety of those grayed down, neutralized tones, and the very delicate poetry between the warm and the cool shift of those as they get further and further and further veiled, into that dusty distance, that is what makes this painting a masterpiece.

The key to the whole upper half of that painting is color relativity. Color relativity and color temperature are synonymous. The slightest shift toward the blue, the slightest shift toward the warm, because every time a form changes in the landscape, meaning it's topography or its angle to the light source changes, not only does the value necessarily change, but you change the form by changing the color without ever changing the value, because he's got some stuff going on back there where the value shifts are almost indiscernible.

The other thing which is incredible about this painting, and one of the things that excites me the most about this, is the scale of the marks. Again, to key it off that big section of blue in the foreground, just a nice big beautiful abstract shape--that would be like the overture to a piece of music, and then all these delicate notes that are being touched on the piano, or touched on the violin string. All of them across the back of that scene. Just the slightest little shift in a major note or a minor note, there isn't a major note back there, hardly. They're all minor notes. It's that focus, and that ability to see the difference between the major and the minor and to find--Joe McGurl and I have always called them the non-colors--the non-colors

are the things that will elevate a work to a much, much higher work.

The original will knock you on the floor. It changed my view of art and my craft 100%.

I was no stranger to art. I started looking at pictures when I was a kid. Andrew Wyeth was one of the first, because my mother and my aunt used to take me to the Farnsworth museum. And I loved his work, and it is just brilliant. But I admired it from a distance--which is that I loved the subject matter--it resonated with me emotionally, and it was familiar and yet new to me, but it was work that I was looking at as a spectator. And that's how I saw most paintings as I was going through my formation as a young man and then early in my career.

I think there are harmonics in the world that we align with, people you get in line with and people you don't. And you'll feel resonance when you are presented with something that is completely aligned with your frequency. So all of these paintings that I'd been looking at, I loved them, I wanted to learn how to paint them, but none of them ever hit me the way this one did.

When I looked at the way the paint was put on, I said, "That's what I want to do." I could almost see myself in the painting, which was very presumptuous of me, but it made such a connection that in a way, I was seeing myself in the painting. So, those eucalyptus trees in the foreground on the right. Those are painted like watercolor. They're very thin veils of paint. As I was developing as a painter. This painting was the manifestation of the way I wanted to paint--I had just never seen it before. Like it was predetermined, and this was the first evidence, and I said, that's it! That's how I want to paint. Even Tom Hoyne, who was a great mentor of mine, the first time I saw one of his

paintings was pretty damn close to the impact this painting had, and Frederick Waugh--another one of my great heroes--even those paintings didn't quite have the personal attachment/connection that made me say "That's It" That's what I've been looking for.

The technical aspects of that painting and his ability to so truthfully, poetically portray a scene, all of it just whacked me, all at the same time.

I was absolutely, utterly dedicated to narrative marine painting, I spent the first ten years of my career as an illustrator and working as a marine artist at the same time, and then illustration petered out. I was totally immersed in studying the history and the ships and the dates and crafting these narrative pictures together, and then I started to feel unfulfilled. That's when I started going out painting with Joe McGurl, and Bill Davis, and that became a theme, and it was shortly after that that I was presented with this painting and that opened up my world. That's when I started to be a painter. Prior to that I was a picture maker.

- Don Demers, F/ASMA