

## These Artists Travel the World to Paint En Plein Air

By Tess Thackara, Artsy's Writer-at-Large.

**“Remember to look up at the stars and not down at your feet,” the late Stephen Hawking famously said.**

When you're hit by a daily wave of images and breaking headlines, it's easy to forget to take heed of those words—to look up at the sky, contemplate the form of a tree branch, or project one's imagination onto the surrounding environment. Yet the ubiquity of photography and the pervasiveness of our digital landscape have helped to renew interest in one of the most traditional forms of art, one that demands looking above all else: plein air painting.

“It's an ancient practice,” said Yvette Deas, an artist who teaches plein air painting to students at Stanford University. Early humans rendered simple representations of their environments onto rocks and the walls of caves long before

Claude Monet

Painted his water lilies. “We're talking about our world, what's around us, and how we feel in that environment,” she continued.



Photograph of Beau Carey by Andrew Ranville.

The rewards of painting outdoors are many, Deas said. It teaches you not only to look and be present, but also to embrace what can be uncomfortable environments or situations. Deas sometimes takes her students to the outdoor deck of a busy dive bar where they are faced with a continuously shifting environment, as well as unpredictable social encounters. “It’s an intense way to learn painting, with all this stimulus coming at you,” she said. “I remind them early: they are now performance artists.”

Across the U.S. and overseas, there are vast communities of Sunday painters that are attracted to this painting method for similar reasons: to better engage with their surroundings, for love of the craft, or to record moments they found beautiful. Santa Fe’s Plein Air Painting Convention and Expo, now in its seventh edition, draws hundreds of enthusiasts each year.

Professional artists are also drawn toward this method of painting in order to free up their hand, advance their understanding of color, ruminate on their place in the world, or connect with a community of like-minded artists—as our snapshot of the following eight artists shows.

## Beau Carey

B. 1980. Plein air painting in Alaska, Colorado, Maine, Michigan, and New Mexico



Beau Carey has a taste for difficult conditions: For 12 years, the artist has painted in all kinds of environments from the Arctic to the desert, and even on a 10-foot raft floating in the middle of Lake Superior. Once he's settled on a spot, he'll work on a composition for anything from two to eight hours. "In the studio I control every variable—the temperature, the light, the music," he said. "When I work in the field, all those variables dramatically assert themselves. You can tell when I'm painting with mittens on. Or when it's really windy out here in the desert, because there are leaves and dust stuck in the painting. And those little interventions in the work tell something about a place that a sketch or photo can't."

Carey got his first introduction to painting on the fly when he took a class at the University of New Mexico called "Wilderness Studio." "It was about making your studio mobile," he recalled. "It was kind of essential when I graduated because I didn't have a studio, and it helped me realize I didn't *need* one." Now, the artist believes he can paint just about anywhere.

He rarely selects his locations for their aesthetic value; rather, he is drawn to environments for their conceptual underpinnings, such as a wildlife refuge outside Denver that was formerly a Superfund site (and one of the most polluted places in the country). Carey is also

drawn to the Arctic for its remote, almost abstract place in the human imagination, despite its very concrete relationship to one of the greatest perils facing our species: climate change.

Among the paintings he created in those sub-zero temperatures is one called *Northern Lights*. “It was 20 or 25 below,” he said. “I mix my paints with walnut oil so they don’t freeze—linseed oil freezes at negative four. That was the coldest painting I think I’ve ever made. It was an amazing experience.”

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