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## A Day's Work: Painting with Tom Sarrantonio

by [Rich Corozine](#) / August 18, 2016 / 2 comments



Untitled (Wetlands) by Thomas Sarrantonio.



In the summer of 1978, an art-school friend of Tom Sarrantonio suggested they go out to the Badlands in South Dakota to paint the landscape. They drove out, camped and painted every day from sunrise to noon, rested out of the hot sun, and then painted again in until evening.

The journey was a revelation for Sarrantonio, who was “learning how to paint” at the Art Institute of Philadelphia. He was more used to still-life painting, where the light was always the same. “Painting outdoors was disorienting,” Sarrantonio recalls. “Outside, everything was different, the light constantly shifting and changing. I couldn’t handle the distractions in nature – the 360-degrees of birds, bugs, sun, noise. It wasn’t controlled. I did terrible paintings.”

But the young Sarrantonio was so stimulated that he wanted to do more, despite his difficulties in adapting to plein-air painting. “I focused on my subject outdoors intuitively, not thinking about what I was doing with the work,” he says. “I had a sense of urgency to make fast, hard decisions as I worked, looking for immediate results, and not be cognizant of anything else around me. I liked the little dramas I was starting to create. Like I was the only one witnessing them; they were events unfolding just for my benefit. It was a constant stimulation and challenge to keep adjusting as I worked.”



Even many years later, Sarrantonio hasn't lost that initial burst of enthusiasm. "I think I stay much more productive by not having preconceptions about what I'll see on a particular day outside," he explains. "I learned to go with nature's changes and look at it through color and light, not the specific subject matter. It's a moment-to-moment thing."

In the end, Sarrantonio views each of his paintings as a failure. "I'm always trying to capture something that is uncapturable, trying to get it right. But light changes constantly, and there's no way to convey that experience."

The Rosendale-based artist is frustrated by being considered a landscape painter. What he does, he says, is more of a meditation than a recollection of what he's seeing. His super-close-ups of small patches of the landscape do lend themselves more toward abstraction than toward realism.

His paintings of a chicory plant could be seen as a series painted over several hours, but for him it's about the light changing on them, around them, behind them, as they quickly fade away. For those moments, he says, there is nothing else but that chicory plant. "It, and what happens with and to it, is my total world."

In order to simplify his format, Sarrantonio works primarily on one-foot-square wooden surfaces. He wants to get away from the usual horizontal landscape canvas. He cites early-Renaissance painter Giotto, the precursor of shallow-space painting. "It's a kind of game. How much space can you generate with no horizon line? So I try to create an illusion of that space, but call attention to the illusion. It's like a stage set in a way: squared-off space with the illusion of space within."

He feels he'll never get it quite right. Accepting failure is important for what he's learning each time he paints. His choice of humble subject matter – "I paint weeds," he laughs – gives Sarrantonio's meditations on nature their poignancy

Sarrantonio's hundreds of failures are things of beauty. He is showing at the Greene Art Gallery in Guilford, Connecticut through August 28. His work will be on view at the North River Gallery in Chatham from August 27 through September 21. The opening reception is Saturday, August 27 from 4 to 7 p.m.

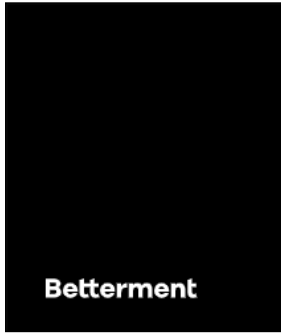


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