

SUSIEHYER

Employing Several Approaches to Nocturnes

This Colorado oil painter loves the challenge of nocturnes, almost as much as she loves “standing in the woods at night.” In her exploration of the genre, she’s found several ways to paint them.

By Bob Bahr

Nocturne paintings are enjoying a bit of popularity these days, with plein air events adding nocturne paint-outs and awarding prizes designated specifically for paintings of night scenes. In Colorado, one painter has long been exploring various approaches to nocturnes — so much so that some of her friends humorously refer to her as the “Queen of the Night.”

“I am drawn to nocturnes,” says Susiehyer (her first and last name have been conjoined since college). “I don’t know what it is. Maybe it’s the challenge of taking a subject and seeing if you can get it to work as a nighttime painting. It’s also a lot of fun to stand out there at night and try to make something out of it. I love standing in the woods at night. Everybody else that I’ve taken out to paint at night — and I am always doing that, because I don’t want to do it alone — are kind of intimidated at first, and then have said, ‘Oh my gosh, that was so fun. We have to do that again.’”



Cub Lake Trailhead by Starlight

2011, oil on linen, 18 x 24 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air, painted in daylight

Nighttime on the Slate

2011, oil on linen, 22 x 30 in.

Collection the artist

Studio



The artist laughs and acknowledges her ulterior motive, explaining that once she backed up to look at her painting and tripped over a drunk lying down behind her. It’s good (and safer) to paint with friends, especially if you are somewhere bears and mountain lions live.

Susiehyer has a number of tips for those wishing to tackle nocturnes, including the suggestion to avoid black paint, but mostly she recommends choosing the time to paint very carefully. She embraces paintings done at twilight, those done after dark, and even those done during the day. She calls this last category “dayturnes.”

In these, Susiehyer paints a scene during the day *en plein air*, then converts it to a night scene in the studio, using the dark-light pattern suggested by the daylight plein air study as a guide. The daytime painting provides



Lights Above Town #2
2016, oil on wood panel, 24 x 36 in.
Collection the artist
Studio

As Above, So Below
2016, oil on birch, 24 x 24 in.
Collection of Susan Stearns
Studio

the local color, and she'll either transpose those colors down to a lower value key, or mute them with a mother color used for areas in shadow and a mother color used for areas in moonlight.

Painting in twilight offers a particular challenge in terms of a value system. "In daylight, the values are wide," says Susiehyer. "There are light areas and dark shadows. In twilight, the sky starts to get dark, but there is still light. The darker values are on the ground plane. The sky is sometimes a lighter value than the ground. But in full dark, the sky is dark, and the ground plane may end up being lighter than the sky. As darkness comes, the values of the big shapes, the big value groups that design your painting, shift and sometimes completely change. Blocking in and waiting for night doesn't work for me — I draw in a lot more detail, so it's a waste of my time to draw before it's dark. The scene is so changed, even from day to twilight."

She goes on, "For me, a painting is designed around the big value shapes. I don't paint scenes; I paint big shapes. Everyone does that, but I am designing a painting around what the big values shapes are. I want a good range of values, but also make sure that the design of the painting is around three or four big chunks of value. If it is moonlight, then since everything is so dark for the most part, the chunks in the moonlight are going to be super important, because that's how the eye is going to move around a painting.

"Or I could have a painting that is based mostly on the light areas, but if the majority of the real estate on the canvas is going to be in light, then the dark shapes are going to be really important to how your eye



Moondance
2014, oil on Masonite, 12 x 12 in.
Collection the artist
Plein air



Red Lady Dressed in Blue
2014, oil on Masonite, 20 x 16 in.
Collection the artist
Plein air, painted in daylight



Nighttime Towers
2015, oil on Gessoboard, 11 x 14 in.
Collection the artist
Plein air, painted in daylight

moves around the painting. It's hard to do that if you draw everything in before the light changes.

"When it actually gets dark, you might think, 'Oh, the way these big values are arranged is not really that interesting.' If you draw that stuff in, when it actually gets dark you will probably wish you could go back and move your viewfinder around a little bit to find a better composition. You can still paint what you drew out, but it probably won't be as interesting in terms of the big value chunks. Now, I wouldn't put it past Jason Sacran or John Lasater to do that and make a great painting, because they are great painters."

Susiehyer makes another interesting observation: Once the light is fading, vertical planes can be depicted as the darkest element in the painting. And she warns painters new to the genre that, at the painting session's conclusion, they might be shocked by what they see. "It's always a surprise when you bring your nocturne indoors," she says. "It's like opening a present at Christmas time. You can use headlamps, book lights, any kind of portable light sources, but you never know how it's going to turn out. For me, it's always a fun surprise to see what happened on the canvas."

And if it is a disaster? "You don't have to be satisfied with it the way that it is when you first get it indoors," says the artist. "My goal is to get a good painting. I'm not interested in putting a bad painting out there. I will



ARTIST DATA

NAME: Susiehyer
BIRTH YEAR: 1954
LOCATION: Evergreen, CO
INFLUENCES: "Pretty much every good painter, dead or alive, but I have to give most credit to Quang Ho and Kevin Weckbach."
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Moonlight and Golden Banner

2014, oil, 12 x 16 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air, painted in daylight

you don't have to. We are not obligated to paint what's there. It's all a fantasy. We are the designers here. We get to do what we want."

In fact, artists who want to actually sell nocturnes would perhaps be wise to get expressive in their execution. "We have to portray the illusion that we are looking at something at night, because the reality at night is not much light or color. People want some magic; really dark ones might not sell as well."

The artist gets commissions to paint night scenes, and her pieces sell, but she admits that nocturnes can be a harder sell than day paintings. "I personally love looking at other people's nocturnes, but they are more difficult to move," says Susiehyer. "The collector must have some sort of emotional bent toward them. So why do nocturnes? Because I just love it."

Perhaps she enjoys nocturnes so much because she thinks more about design than representational composition. "With any painting, what turns my crank the most is the design of the big value shapes," she says. "I am intent on keeping the design of those value shapes. It is a question of how I can design this so these value shapes make a strong abstract design. That abstract design is the thing that interests me the most. In fact, it astonishes me that I'm not an abstract painter. But that desire for the abstract is met a lot by the underpainting, in the block-in, in the design, in the thumbnail sketch. That abstract design as bones and structure is what interests me the most. What I am working toward is to be able to leave some of my paintings more abstract so it is about the big shapes, and not get so caught up in the breakdown into small shapes." 📖

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See more of Susiehyer's nocturnes and other paintings in the expanded digital edition of *PleinAir*.



tweak it back in the studio. I don't want to put a crappy piece up on the wall, and if I'm really not happy with it, I'm not going to hang it at all. Just don't worry too much about what you put down on location. The good news is you can always do something else to it in the studio. You can rely on your memory and work on it, push values lighter or darker, or break down a shape."

Susiehyer loves to play with the value key in a painting, but the value system she settles on is of the utmost concern to her. It has to be strong. She wonders aloud if she has the heart of a designer, not just a painter. In terms of color, she finds that the way the human eye works allows a remarkable degree of flexibility. Our eyes have two kinds of photoreceptors, rods and cones. Rods pick up contrast; cones focus on color. We have many more rods than cones, and our rods are more sensitive than our cones. In low light, the rods work much better than the cones.

"If you are painting *en plein air* at night, there really isn't any color that you can see, unless you are painting in the city or someplace with artificial light," says Susiehyer. "So you have to assign colors to mix with the local color of things in shadow and things in moonlight. Look at the sky; determine if it is a cool dark or a warm dark and decide what color you will use for that area. If you see that the sky is a dark mixture of Prussian blue and burnt sienna, for example, some of that mixture is going to be in every shape in the shadow.

"In contrast, I tend to modify the color of any shape that is receiving moonlight with whatever color the moon is. The sun is not just yellow, and moon is not just white. If you use just white, you can get a chalky mixture. I find that the moon tends to be white with a cool yellow tending toward green, like a cadmium yellow light or lemon yellow, and I put some of that in all mixtures used for moonlit areas."

Susiehyer also recommends that beginner nocturne painters stay away from phthalo green and phthalo blue. "Unless you know how to kill it with cadmium red, burnt sienna, or cadmium orange, don't try it," she says. "But one of the most common problems I see from beginners is using phthalo blue, Prussian blue, cobalt, or ultramarine blue right out of the tube. Mix those darks! Gray them down."

But before you start painting, look. "If you really sit and look at the scene before you turn on any lights, before you start, you will probably be able to see three or four or even five different values of dark in the scene," says Susiehyer. "All you need is three. Then you can compare those values to each other and see what is relatively warmer and cooler. Then, using warmer and cooler shades, you can put atmospheric perspective in nocturnes. Sometimes you see mountains as lighter, cooler, and grayer during the day, and this does sometimes hold at night. You can paint what you see — although



Moraine Park Nocturne

2010, oil on linen, 16 x 20 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air

**Cub Lake Trailhead Nocturne
in Purple With Greys**

2010, oil, 16 x 20 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air, painted in daylight



ARTIST PROFILE



The Twilight Zone (Peanut Lake in Purples)

2011, oil on linen, 20 x 16 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air, painted in daylight



Evening at the Maroon Bells

2015, oil on linen, 16 x 12 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air