

PATRICK SAUNDERS

TAKING TO THE ROAD

It's been three years since Patrick Saunders and his wife packed their life into an Airstream trailer and set out for a little adventure and a whole lot of painting.

— BY STEFANIE LAUFERSWEILER —

There's a familiar warmth in the paintings of Patrick Saunders that you wouldn't expect from an artist just passing through a place. He stays somewhere long enough to make a connection, and leaves viewers of his work longing to return.

LEAVING ADVERTISING BEHIND

Saunders, a St. Louis native, worked as a painter for Hallmark Cards after earning his B.F.A. at the Kansas City Art Institute. After 10 years at Hallmark, he returned to his alma mater to teach animation, illustration, design and web design before landing in advertising. He quickly ascended to an executive role that kept him and his wife, Kimberly, a photographer, on the go for the next decade, preparing them for the nomadic life that lay ahead. He continued painting whenever possible, mainly portraits.

"The company I worked for moved us from Kansas City to New York, which led us to downsize quite a bit," Saunders says. "Then they moved us to San Francisco, which led to an even leaner lifestyle. We both found that we enjoyed changing up our environment." After



Patrick Saunders names Helen Frankenthaler, Abram Arkhipov, and Lovis Corinth as painting influences. Here, he can be seen painting on location at the 2017 Laguna Beach Plein Air Invitational. patricksaunders.com



All Photos by Saunders Fine Arts

Oasis
2017, oil, 18 x 24 in.
Private collection
Plein air





SAUNDERS' TOP 5 PLACES TO TRAVEL TO PAINT (SO FAR...)

1. **The Olympic Peninsula in western Washington:** "The most beautiful forests I have ever experienced. The hike to Cape Flattery is like walking through the land that time forgot."
2. **Sedona, Arizona:** "The colors and rock formations in the area are stunning and border on unreal."
3. **New York City:** "If you want to paint architecture, you can't beat the variety."
4. **San Francisco:** "Great architecture like New York, but due to the hills, you can get big buildings and distant views in a single scene."
5. **Easton, Maryland:** "Beautiful forests, marinas, small-town charm. You can find almost anything here, and the community is so supportive of the arts."

Hillside History, Jerome

2016, oil, 16 x 20 in.

Private collection

Plein air

Jerome, Arizona, was built in 1899 on the side of a mountain to support copper mines in the area. "I found the cascading structures of the town fascinating, but struggled to find a composition that didn't become a mass of tangled structures," says Saunders. "This bright blue house stood out among all the others, and brought order to the painting. It told a story of the old and the new."

Warm Chairs, Wet Patio

2015, oil, 12 x 9 in.

Private collection

Plein air

"I painted this piece on a dark, rainy day at a small floral shop in Overland Park, Kansas," says Saunders. "It's always difficult to find a subject in such dim light conditions where forms are not clearly defined by the cast shadows. I took shelter from the rain under a group of trees on the side of the floral shop and came across this lovely scene. The sky reflecting in the wet patio stones added value contrast and tied the two chairs together in the composition, creating an inviting space for the viewer."





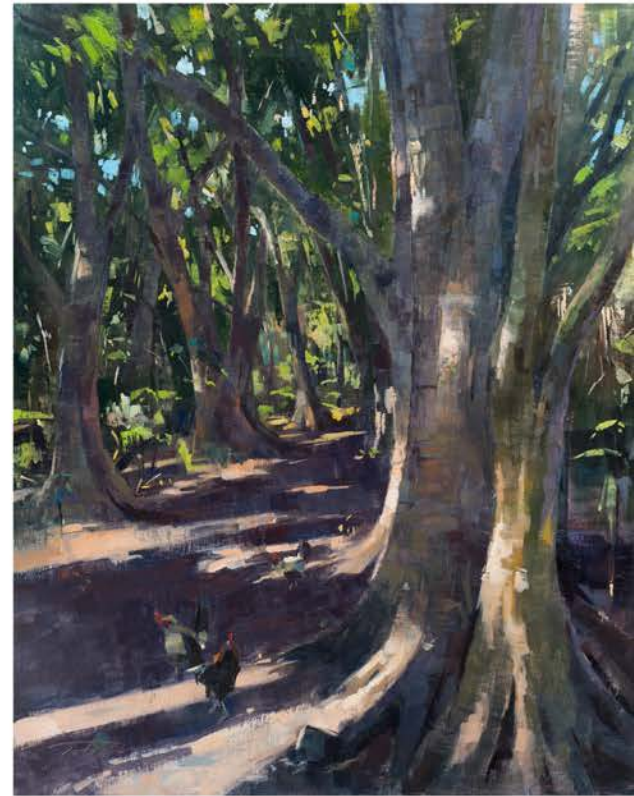
A Window on Bentley's Backyard

2017, oil, 24 x 18 in.

Private collection

Plein air

"Richmond, Virginia, is all about backyards – the centers of both parties and relaxation," says Saunders. "I was attracted to the patterns created by the staircase on the back of the house. As I began to paint, Dudley, one of the two dogs living at the residence, came down the stairs and fell asleep at my feet. Bentley, a larger dog, arrived a short time later. Too nervous to approach me, yet compelled to keep a watchful eye on his companion Dudley, Bentley took up a perfect position within the scene. His presence added a new focal point and organized what might have been an overly complicated painting."



The Path to Honolua Bay

2018, oil, 20 x 16 in.

Private collection

Plein air

On his first visit to Maui, Saunders drove the entire island, and this primordial forest trail leading to Honolua Bay was his favorite spot. "While the shafts of sunlight created a clear temperature contrast to the cool shadows, the tree trunks were filled with colors of varying temperatures as light bounced throughout the scene," he says. "As I painted, the numerous chickens of the forest became more comfortable with my presence, and I was able to capture a few of them in the painting. While the foreground tree remained the focal point, the chickens added interest, inviting the viewer to further explore the image."

returning to the Midwest, Saunders was ready to escape the relentlessly rigorous lifestyle of advertising. "Kimberly came up with the idea of investing in a tiny house, but we couldn't decide where we wanted to settle down," he says. "That evolved into the idea of the Airstream."

After selling their home, they bought a 16-foot Bambi model. "We had never owned a travel trailer of any kind, never towed anything, and never even owned a truck," Saunders says. "Starting out small made it easy for us to go just about anywhere, especially where larger rigs couldn't be accommodated." In 2017, after two years on the road, they upgraded to the 25-foot Flying Cloud. "Now, I actually have enough room to paint indoors if the weather is bad," Saunders says. While he drives the RV, Kimberly follows him in their Smart car.

Saunders never painted outdoors until late 2013, after leaving advertising, and he didn't travel to paint until 2015, when he tried a few events. "Once 2016 rolled around, we were road-ready," Saunders says, and the couple traveled from coast to coast that year to participate in 16 plein air painting events. Exhausted, they scaled back in 2017, and now they travel about once a month.

ARTIST'S TOOLKIT

PAINTS: Saunders doesn't use medium, so he gravitates toward well-blended premium to semi-premium oil paints (Holbein, Richeson, and Rembrandt). "My palette is constantly evolving as I experiment with new colors, but I always keep a consistent set of warms and cools," he says. "My current palette is: titanium white, cadmium yellow medium, cadmium orange, cadmium red light, alizarin crimson, yellow ochre light, burnt sienna, burnt umber, Prussian blue, cobalt blue, and cerulean blue. I can get any color that I want with this setup. When working plein air, I will often add a warm green (permanent green or cadmium green) and a cool green (viridian) to save mixing time."

SURFACE: Pre-primed (oil-primed) boards from Centurian.

BRUSHES: Saunders makes every painting with only one or two flat synthetic brushes.

TUNES: "In almost every picture of me painting, I have my headphones," he says. "It keeps my energy up and adds to the experience."

"We determine a basic route based on the plein air circuit, but we also build on that depending on where we want to go just to create art for us, or wherever we have requests to offer workshops," says Saunders, who teaches frequently and chases warmer weather. "Neither my paint nor I function well below 50 degrees."

THE FREEDOM OF THE PROCESS

When arriving somewhere new, the pair normally spend a day or two scouting locations to determine ideal times for painting in terms of the light, but Saunders realizes it's important to be flexible. "I might turn around and paint something completely different because the conditions have changed."

Saunders searches for the story a subject personally speaks to him, rather than the stories shared by others. "Every place has its own character that initially grabs my attention and sticks with me in my memories. Without that sense of character, paintings are simply snapshots," he says. "I strive to capture something more intimate."

He also seeks out uncharted artistic territory. "I tend to choose compositions that initially scare me from a technical standpoint," says Saunders. These tend to be situations that don't present clearly defined forms. "If I'm not



Good Morning Church Road

2016, oil, 18 x 14 in.

Private collection

Plein air

"My wife and I found this dilapidated barn in Augusta, Missouri, and made plans to paint and photograph it the following morning," says Saunders. "We often scout locations together in advance and decide on the ideal time to return. We arrived here just before dawn so that the sunrise would emphasize the shape of the structure with a strong backlight. Everything in the piece is very loosely painted, and held together by the sharp edges of the upper left roofline and the two windows. The temperature contrast between the sunrise and the foreground adds depth to the scene."

sure that I can pull off a painting, then I am definitely going to paint it." Comfort leads to repetitive, gimmicky artwork, he says. "Painting really is exploring what's in front of you and putting down your experience with it."

The artist avoids drawings and underpaintings because he feels that with them his focus shifts to painting things as his brain believes them to be rather than what his eyes see, which leads to mistakes. "If I rely on that visual shorthand, I'll take shortcuts that are not correct," Saunders says. "I just start putting shapes and

colors on the canvas – dark and light, warm and cool – and if I can get those in the correct layout and design, my 'drawing' comes just by laying shape next to shape in the right proportions and positions."

His approach also means that his plein air paintings, which typically take two to three hours to make, can be finished at any point, because there's no preoccupation with filling in a drawing. "I start with very broad shapes that I can continue to develop and break down into smaller and more accurate shapes, but I don't have to," says

Saunders – a prospect he finds exciting. “At some point the image emerges without you even expecting it, and it says everything you need to say, without the need for detail.”

RISK AND REWARD

Besides getting to explore the country, being a traveling painter has other advantages. “The biggest benefit as a professional is that I always have everything with me – all of my supplies, all of my gear, all of my inventory,” Saunders says. “If there’s a request for more paintings, I have them.

That can work both ways however, as I have to keep a tight control on my inventory for space reasons.” Also, as a painter of portraits of people and pets as well, regular travel has enabled him to reach more clients.

The amount of time he’s now able to devote to painting allows him to take more creative risks, which have improved his ability. “I paint almost every day, so I’m able to try things and take chances,” Saunders says. He photographs his paintings in progress so he can evaluate where they went right or wrong.

“Then I can change bad habits, or make sure I follow up on something that worked.”

Risks of other kinds have led to fuller experiences and unforgettable moments – some mundane, others heart-stopping. “We’ve outrun hailstorms in Texas, dodged roadside deer, sheep, and cattle; been lost on California mountain roads at night; crossed paths with bears in Maryland; driven hundreds of miles out of our way to get around floods in Missouri; sweated out a desert sandstorm; been stopped by a herd of javelinas [hoglike animals] in Sedona; and watched a piece of bridge fall off in Arkansas just as we were going across it,” Saunders says.

The artist finds clear parallels between painting and travel. “In regards to travel, there’s the old adage ‘The journey is the destination,’” says Saunders. Most of your time is spent traveling from one place to another. If you don’t enjoy those journeys, you’ll burn out on travel very quickly.”

He believes that painting is much the same. “If your goal is just to finish a painting, you’ll quickly burn out and find yourself taking shortcuts or relying on gimmicks,” Saunders says. “If you rush, you won’t grow as a painter, because taking risks often takes more time.” Instead, he says, slow down and focus less on racing toward results. “The process of creating a painting is far more important than the finished piece. Paint for the love of painting.”

STEFANIE LAUFERSWEILER is a writer based in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Respite

2016, oil, 24 x 18 in.

Private collection

Plein air

“Painted on a hot, humid day in Easton, Maryland, this 1959 Farmall became more than just a tractor and gave me a sense of the farmer himself taking a mid-afternoon break from the heat,” says Saunders. “I was drawn to the way the front end of the tractor reflected the warmer colors of the sunlit landscape beyond, giving the sense that it’s ready to head back out into the fields.”

