

# Review: Open Air, Seriously

Carr Gottstein and Grant Hall galleries, Alaska Pacific University (APU)  
January 6-29, 2006

(A version of this review appeared in the *Anchorage Daily News*, January 2006)

“Plein Air,” a French term meaning “open air,” is an art movement popularized by some of the French Impressionists in the mid-1800s. Painting outdoors, the artists sought to emphasize the true colors of fleeting sun and shadow-- distant mountains that seem soft blue or a clear horizon paler than sky overhead. These French Impressionists preferred drawing from the actual landscape instead of relying on sketches or photographs for reference. Today, Plein Air is popular among Alaska artists, and there are national societies dedicated to this artistic approach.

## **Greg Bombeck, Plein Air Painter**

In Grant Hall Gallery, Gary Bombeck’s refreshingly brief artist’s statement says that he paints Plein Air “as chronicler and interpreter” of the landscape, and that he tries to avoid clichés or over romanticizing. His paintings are all small, no larger than 11 x 14 inches. With formal framing added, Bombeck seems to present the images to the viewer as intimate icons of classic scenery.

Despite the obvious talent of this artist, there is an anomaly here to Plein Air. The paintings are of both Alaska and Montana landscapes, and yet the colors do not differ. I cannot believe that Montana pines and soil are exactly the same color as Alaska spruce and soil, or that sunlight is the same color even when at lower latitude. Bombeck has a favorite palette that is repeated in all the paintings, and this palette is essentially holding him captive to repetition.

Despite Bombeck’s determination to avoid clichéd scenery, most paintings are of a singular majestic mountain. Still, within this group of paintings are a few that come much closer to the artist’s goal of Plein Air. His strongest works are “Castle Rock” and “RR Cliffs,” both presenting dramatic landscape likely to be overlooked by a casual observer. These two paintings speak strongly of a specific site and successfully act as chronicles of the landscape.

## **Alaska Plein Air Painters**

The second exhibition of landscapes is in the Grant Hall Gallery with works by the twelve member artists of The Alaska Plein Air Painters and guest artist Jim Dault. In an accompanying statement, APU curator Jannah Atkins gives the viewers a short, informative history of Plein Air and additional information on each artist.

These paintings vary greatly in artistic approach as well as artistic experience. Some works are by emerging artists. Others are by more established artists working outside the medium for which they are best known, such as watercolorist Christine Fortner and printmakers Marianne Wieland and Teri Jo Hedman. One painting, although done well, breaks a classic rule of Plein Air; Joe Nedland’s detailed painting of rafters enjoying a float trip has obviously used sketches or photos as reference materials.

Ruth Britch shows the color interpretation of classic Plein Air painting in both of her works, with “Palmer Shadows,” emphasizing the shadows of the foreground trees over the dramatic background. Judith Hoersting’s “Yukon Island from Homer, Alaska,” heavily scraped with a palette knife and simple in composition, is a successful portrait of light on a particular day.

It would be unfair to fault this exhibition for not having more strong works, however. This month, Atkins was facing a curator's nightmare (a gallery without art on the walls) when the scheduled artists found themselves unable to exhibit. The Alaska Plein Air Painters were graciously filling in on short notice, a situation that often means that the artists' best paintings are not available because of other exhibition commitments.

### **More than Painting Outside**

Both exhibitions portray homage to and enthusiasm for Plein Air, but Plein Air is more than merely painting outside the studio. A Plein Air artist is devoted to recording the accurate light, atmosphere, and colors of a time and place without benefit of reference materials. In the most intensive pursuit of these goals, the created images are instilled with emotional content beyond the moment.

The Alaska landscape, with additional assistance from mosquito netting, presents a wonderful diversity to Plein Air artists. Although I liked several of the paintings from both of these exhibitions, I cannot help comparing them to my favorite Plein Air paintings, which are owned by the Anchorage Museum. These oils by George Browne were completed on Mt. McKinley and carried down in a special case to hold the wet images. That's taking Plein Air to a totally serious altitude.

Wanda Seamster is an Anchorage artist and art activist.