

# Dialogue Bill Hosner

Some artists enjoy the challenges of painting the figure from life. Others test their metal by painting *en plein air*. This artist takes on both.

By Anne Hevener

**B**ill Hosner is admired today as a masterful pastel artist best known for his figure paintings achieved exclusively outdoors. But not long ago, Hosner was working as an illustrator in the advertising industry. Though highly successful in the business, the artist decided, after 17 years on the job, to pursue instead a life as a full-time fine artist. With pastel as his medium, the figure as his subject, the outdoors as his studio, and the energy of life as his inspiration, Hosner has quickly demonstrated a tremendous ability and creative power—and his work has been recognized accordingly.

In this Dialogue, Hosner shares his thoughts about the artist's journey, the challenges of painting the figure *en plein air*, and how an artist can turn those challenges into advantages.

**AH:** Who has been most influential in your development as an artist?

**BH:** I have a friend, Max Altekruise, who studied at the Art Students League in New York City just after World War II—alongside artists like James Bama and Clark Hulings. They were all students of Frank Reilly, who was himself a student of the great illustrator Dean Cornwell. Max and I worked together in the advertising business in Detroit back in the '80s, and when I decided to become a "fine artist" as opposed to a "commercial artist," it was

Max's voice that resonated in my memory. He was the one artist that I remembered as being a "painter" and so, 10 years later, I went to him to discuss the craft of painting, because I consider myself first a painter and then a pastelist—a painter who chooses pastel.

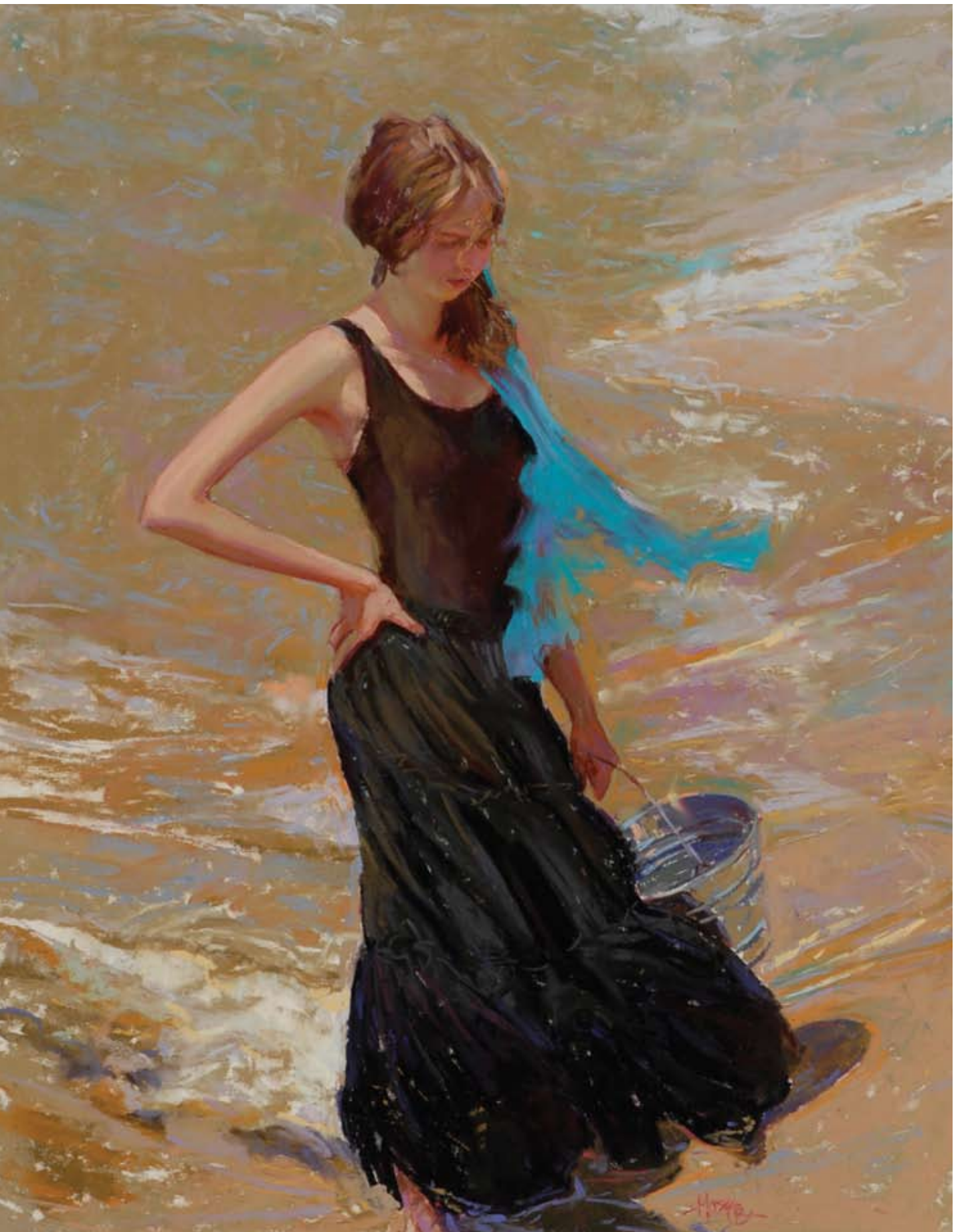
Once a month, I would take a meal to Max and his wife, Kathy, who was ill at the time. After Kathy fell asleep, Max and I would spend the evening talking, moving from art to opera to politics to religion and back to art again.

**AH:** What was his best advice?

**BH:** Max once said to me that a photo freezes a moment in time, while life is in constant motion (the earth itself is revolving), and the artist and his subject are changing continually. "Painting over a session," he would say, "can be a journey of continual discovery." This was somewhat of an epiphany for me when I heard it. And I started to ask myself: Could I take what I had always seen as handicaps and challenges when painting outdoors, and turn them into assets? I soon observed that a painting is revealed not at the beginning or at the end, but continually over the time span of the entire painting session.

Artists constantly observe everything that their eyes fall on. It's a never-resting, never-ending process. Outdoors, everything is living and breathing,

*Gatherings (20x16)*



moving—trees, plants, water, sky. To me, even buildings are evolving. But these living things are, for the most part, stationary—only people and animals move freely about their environment. It seemed to me, if I was going to paint a motion-filled, living thing—such as a person—in a stationary position, it would best be expressed outdoors with the changing light and the movement of the wind and model.

**AH:** What’s most exciting about working outside?

**BH:** Color has always felt to me most vibrant and diverse outdoors. I remember, as a child, how I was excited about Winslow Homer’s watercolor

painting—particularly his Caribbean subjects. They’re light-filled with brilliant and clean color. The Impressionists and the work of Charlie Russell, from the American West, also excited me. The atmospheric effects captured by Russell completely captivated me. Of the artists I admired—most worked *en plein air*.

I’ve told people that color is the one thing that has been instinctual to me. I’ve had to work hard on design, composition and draftsmanship, but color I feel I have known from before I was born. I feel it with my senses—and not just sight, but taste, texture, sound and aroma. So, naturally, because I feel these things are most accentuated outdoors, that’s where I want to paint.

## Demonstration: *Dreaming*

**MY SETUP** I keep everything—paper towels, mirror, trash bag—readily available. The tray at the easel acts as my “holding” palette as I pull colors from my “big box.” Just about anywhere, and particularly at the beach, the wind is a challenge. Be prepared to tie down your easel; your panel will act like a sail. I use clothesline and tent stakes (the table and pastel box seem to be OK). One time in Arizona when I was standing at the top of an 80-mile-long canyon, there were such strong gusts of wind that I seriously considered tying myself down.

**MY MODEL** Mark your model’s feet with tape, twigs, a tent stake—whatever. Then, have the model choose a point at which to look. With these two points of reference, and with a little direction from you, the model should be able to return to his or her spot and pose after each break.

It’s hard to hold a pose for a long period of time (a bit of sketching at the beach will reveal how fidgety people are in normal circumstances), so treat your model with patience. Challenge yourself, not the model, to learn to paint in a manner that accommodates movement.

**TO BEGIN** I start with a proportionately correct but generic drawing to determine the placement and size of the figure in the painting and I indicate a few lines of the background to begin to feel out the entire composition. I only do this in the first of typically four 20-minute sessions. Then, starting with the head or another area that can give me a full range of values, I paint directly—making things as complete as possible. I seldom go back to an area except to perhaps add color that will tie it in to other areas. If I stick to a two-and-half-hour session, the light in the work will be consistent.



*Dreaming* (20x16)



**DETAIL** It's important to keep everything in shadow separate in value from everything in light, so I'm working to separate the face shape (in shadow) from the shoulder shape (in light). Changes within these two realms become mostly about temperature changes rather than value changes. I also note the source of the light: Under the lip, nose and eyebrow, the light is bouncing up from the sand and surf—and is warm. On the forehead, bridge of the nose and top of the cheeks, there's influence from the blue sky—so it's cooler. Note the sharp edge where the shoulder strap passes over the shoulder. This gives me a parameter very early in the painting from which to measure the softness or crispness of all the other edges.

**BREAK TIME** You can see from this photo that we were working on a fairly chilly day. My model, Chelsea, did a marvelous job toughing it out. I always stress to the people I paint how important it is, once we've started a painting, to carry it through to a finish. That's why the model is such an important part of the equation. A model's mood will always come across in your work; and that's a good thing.

**FINAL** When I was finished and stepped back for a final look, I liked how Chelsea's shadow cast onto the surf was picked up by the white cloth and her hair blowing in the wind, and even the surf itself. It seemed to me to give the whole painting an organic feel.



For more of Hosner's tips for painting a figure outdoors, go to [www.pasteljournal.com/hosner](http://www.pasteljournal.com/hosner)



*Her Face to the Wind (20x16)*



*Watching the Sails (16x20)*

**AH:** Do you think it takes a certain personality to do this kind of painting?

**BH:** Painting the figure outdoors requires me to be quick and decisive. Some painters are best suited for continued contemplation—changing a painting back and forth. And the end results are often stunning. But that's not for everyone.

I prefer the initial discovery. Painting the figure outdoors requires me to make clear and firm decisions and, in the end, it brings out more of the truth of who I am, because I don't have time to think about what another artist might do or how he might have handled things. That's why I finish my work entirely on site. Any work I might do back in the studio, I feel, endangers my individualism.

**AH:** Are there important things you've learned from working outside?

**BH:** I've learned that there are two basic light-effect scenarios outdoors—direct sun is one, and the overcast day the other. The key to these two scenarios is what happens to white. Take a woman's white blouse in direct sunlight. Naturally, we would paint it with our lightest, warmest whites. On an overcast day, however, the whole earth is under the influence of cast shadow from the clouds above. In this

circumstance, white drops down one or two values, and becomes cool.

On a sunny day, shadows are cast crisp and colors are vibrant. As a cast shadow travels away from its source, the further it travels, the more cool influence it receives from the blue sky above. But, this is mostly a temperature change and not a value change. Also, in the direct sun, the deep dark recesses from which a cast shadow emanates, and the crevices in a form that escape the blue sky influence, are very hot. Dark, yes, but very hot—hotter than I ever realized.

On a sunny day, the difference between a form shadow and a cast shadow must remain distinct: A form shadow is soft and a cast shadow is crisp. Then, on an overcast day, everything is muted—softer and under a cool influence. There are no cast shadows. But, just like in direct sunlight, on a cloudy day, any form that turns away from that cool influence becomes warm, even hot. I return to these principles over and over again and realize their validity the more I observe and paint.

**AH:** How do you address the challenge of the constantly changing conditions?

**BH:** Think about this. The sun travels about 15



*Coming Into Her Own* (20x16)



*Gail at the Beach* (20x16)


degrees every hour. So, at the end of three hours, it has moved 45 degrees. That's a lot. Even on overcast days, one observes light change. On a sunny day, shadows at noon are, naturally, dramatically different than they were at 9 a.m. So how do I deal with that? For me, the answer is in painting very direct, *alla prima*, and in not chasing the shadows.

I start with a gesture drawing of the figure. That gives me its placement on the surface and the action of the figure. None of what I put down at this stage is meant to be anything other than a mapping out of things. Everything is going to change anyway—even the model's pose will vary over the painting session as gravity takes its toll.

Then I choose one area that's easy to solve; for me, this is often the head and shoulder area. I paint it as completely as possible, putting down parts of any form—sky, trees, wall, etc.—that might touch it. Then I begin to move out from there. Some people refer to this as “puzzle making,” but for me it's much, much more. It has taken me a long time to be able to recognize abstract shapes—their value, hue, chroma and edges—and to separate them out mentally from their surroundings.

My models work in 20 minute poses with a 5-minute rest in between, but I don't rest. When the

model breaks, I work on the background. I try to never, ever work on any area of the figure when the model's not in front of me. I observe, I paint. This is how I can best tell the truth of what I see.

By not partially painting an area until I'm ready to make a firm commitment, I'm able to avoid chasing after the things that are changing. In fact, I'm often able to do just the opposite and take advantage of a new fold or movement of fabric that excites me, because the wind has picked up or shifted. During the entire painting session, I'm subconsciously aware of the entire composition and looking for things I can jump on to make it work. I choose to embrace the changes, knowing that this is all part of the life force I hope to capture in my painting. 



*Her Tender Days Go On* (14x11)

*Anne Hevener*, editor of *The Pastel Journal*, has been a writer and editor for a variety of magazines for creative enthusiasts.