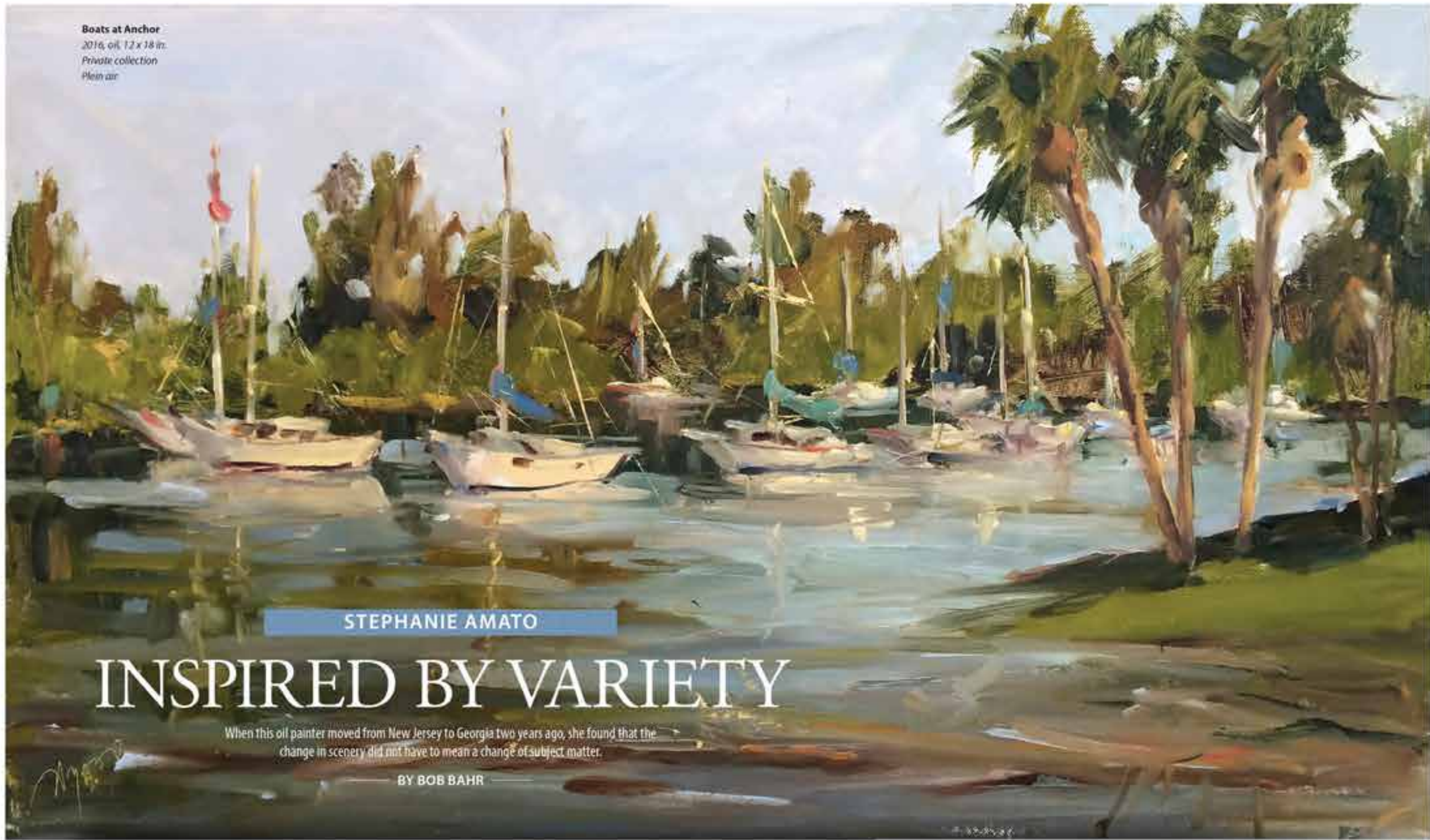


Boats at Anchor
2016, oil, 12 x 18 in.
Private collection
Plein air



STEPHANIE AMATO

INSPIRED BY VARIETY

When this oil painter moved from New Jersey to Georgia two years ago, she found that the change in scenery did not have to mean a change of subject matter.

BY BOB BAHR

People seem to like my water paintings," says Stephanie Amato. "I can't paint them fast enough." Although it's rivers, oceans, and lakes she's best known for, she also loves to paint flowers, figures, and landscapes. "A lot of people stay with one subject for 20 years," she says, "but I like painting everything. Right now it's early summer, and I see the flowers around me and I'm drawn to painting them. When I'm in Florida, it's the water that inspires me."

Amato chooses her subjects based on emotion. "I like to capture the feel of a place, and if there is nothing there that suggests something alive, then it feels dead to me," she says. "I like to leave some feeling of human interaction in a landscape — something to give it some interest, so there is more to it than just the land."

On Long Island, New York, where Amato grew up, and later in New Jersey, that human presence often took the form of sailboats. In Georgia, she visits Lake Lanier, where "you see mostly kayaks and some speedboats." If Amato really needs a sailboat fix now, she travels to nearby Florida.

GETTING STARTED

Amato doesn't dally when she's painting. She moves quickly and intuitively, relying on her training for accuracy. "My underpaintings do not feature extensive drawings because I want to catch the light," she says. "I want to get something done in two hours and move on. My plein air alla prima paintings have the most energy; they are truest to what I am seeing and what I feel."

The sky often gets blocked in first. "I lay down the underpainting of the sky early so it can dry and I can go over it with wet paint, keeping the color fresh and clean," says



Whether she's painting seascapes, landscapes, or florals, Milton, Georgia, artist Stephanie Amato works mostly from life. stephanieamato.com



View of scenic mountain park, Georgia



Step 1

Amato first sketches the scene quickly, using a wash of transparent earth red and viridian.

DEMONSTRATION: Painting Reflections in Water

"You get really great reflections early in the morning, when it's overcast," says Amato. "I looked for a scene with some interest or color, and I liked the red cabin in contrast to all that green."



Step 2

She then starts massing in the mid-ground trees using a transparent mixture of viridian, ultramarine blue, transparent earth yellow, and quinacridone magenta. She keeps the mixture transparent and warms it by adding more quinacridone magenta and transparent earth yellow. She begins establishing the dark water reflections using a clean brush, vertical strokes, and a wash of ultramarine blue and transparent earth yellow.



Step 3

The artist then turns to the sky, creating a light underpainting by laying down a thin wash of transparent earth yellow in the sky area, then wiping most of it back off. "I leave this kind of underpainting to tack up, so the layers of paint will sit on top of the color," Amato says.



Step 4

When the sky becomes overcast and the reflections in the water fill the entire pond, Amato adapts. "I added the dark reflection to cover the entire bottom of the canvas," she says. "At this point, using a thin brush with odorless mineral spirits, I wiped out the area for the reflections from the dock."



Step 5

Next come the sky reflections, which she paints in the water area using a mixture of ultramarine blue, transparent earth yellow, chromatic black, and titanium white (approximately an 8 on the value scale). "Continuing to work on the reflections, I wiped out the area in the water for the dock on the left, as well as added some cooler and lighter reds to the reflections for the cabin," says Amato.



Step 6

Amato adds the light on the trees to help establish the necessary values for the reflections.



Step 7

As the painting nears completion, Amato makes the sky reflection in the water work for her, painting it over the foreground of the water in an "S" shape to lead the eye up to the red cabin. "I decreased the value to approximately a 6 and intensified the hue in color and warmth to give a feeling of the ground below," Amato says.

Final Step

"I added the final lights and darks in the water with opaque paint. I was careful not to overwork the water, leaving enough transparent underpainting to give the look of a glasslike reflection," Amato concludes.



The Red Cabin

2018, oil, 12 x 16 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air



PAINTING REFLECTIONS IN WATER

- Use a transparent glaze to create the reflection shape.
- Paint in a downward motion.
- Soften edges in the reflection to eliminate too much detail.
- Drag a dry brush of a grayed-down version of the sky color horizontally over the water to convey the feeling of movement.

Amato. She makes a point of blocking in the darks early, too, with transparent paint. She feels that leaving some of the dark transparent paint passages to show through here and there creates an added sense of depth in the painted scene.

Her palette is set at 12 colors — cadmium yellow pale, cadmium lemon, cadmium orange, cadmium red light, quinacridone magenta, alizarin crimson, transparent earth red, transparent earth yellow, ultramarine blue, viridian, chromatic black, and titanium white. Amato says that transparent earth yellow mixed with viridian creates a beautiful bluish green and can be used as a base for distant trees or early morning reflections in water.

A REVELATION

Amato is a veteran of plein air painting, having worked at it since the early 1990s, before it became more popular, but she's still picking up new tips. During her work as a juror for this year's American Impressionist Society (AIS) show, she made an

Rushing Water

2018, oil on linen, 24 x 18 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air



Waterlily Surprise
2015, oil, 16 x 12 in.
Private collection
Plein air



Garden Fountain
2017, oil, 24 x 20 in.
Collection the artist
Plein air



Sunflowers in the Garden
2017, oil on linen, 20 x 30 in.
Collection the artist
Plein air

observation that is impacting the way she teaches and paints. "We used an online service to jury the 500 images submitted for the AIS show," says Amato. "As I was flipping through the entries, I realized that the ones that really jumped out at me had a big value separation. Even above design or color, this is the key to a successful painting."

Significant light and dark contrast can also be the key to a successful entry in competitions and shows like the AIS event, where the works are juried from photographs. "Why doesn't the photo always look as good as your painting? Because the camera stresses value, but it also shortens the value range," Amato says. "You must have a strong value hierarchy, because if the value system is not strong, you really do lose the impact. Your painting could be overlooked."

KEEPING IT FRESH

Amato will occasionally scale up a plein air study into a larger studio piece, but outdoor painting has her heart. Even when painting a floral, she will set up outside. "I could bring the flowers into the studio, but I would rather be outside painting them in their natural environment," she says.

"You have to keep moving when you work outside. With a still life, you can take your time and work over a few days. If I do that, I lose the energy and freshness of the piece. I love flowers and the changing of the garden. You get two weeks with a certain flower, and then it's gone, so that, too, keeps the painting fresh. Roses and tiger lilies are blooming right now, and I've been trying to get out every day to paint them before they're gone for the season."

She may love her garden and flowers, but Amato is inexorably drawn to water. "I love the colors in the water, especially early in the morning," says the artist. "In fact, 7 a.m. is my favorite time to paint. I love the atmosphere, with the sun coming up, it's cool out, and you get the mist on the water. I love the turquoises, the aquas, the blue-greens. When painting water, I just go right into it. Galkyd mixed with mineral spirits helps to keep the water looking fresh and juicy."

To achieve the realistic reflections for which she's especially known, she follows a few simple rules. "One important rule is to remember that what appears warm on land will reflect as a cool in the water," says Amato. "This is also true for value, where a dark tree line will appear lighter in the water. These rules can be modified, but I generally start with them as a foundation and build on or change them as the painting progresses."

That said, Amato is not really a rule follower. She follows her heart. "I am more of an instinctive painter," she says. "Pretty much everything I do is from life, as I rely on what I see to help guide me to a finished piece. I often come home and put the painting aside rather than making changes to it right away. And, usually, it looks right after a couple of weeks." ■

BOB BAHR has been writing and editing articles about art instruction for more than 12 years. He lives with his wife and two sons at the northern tip of Manhattan.



*Oil, 1 x 12 in.
Collection the artist
Plein air*

Savannah Glow
*Oil, 16 x 12 in.
Collection the artist
Plein air*



Peaceful Afternoon in Savannah
*Oil, 12 x 16 in.
Collection the artist
Plein air*



A Snowy Day in Georgia
*2018, oil on linen, 18 x 24 in.
Collection the artist
Plein air*



Georgia Sunflowers
*Oil, 12 x 12 in.
Private collection
Plein air*



Red, White & Blue
Oil, 30 x 40 in.
Collection the artist
Plein air



Sunflowers in the Afternoon
Oil, 12 x 12 in.
Collection the artist
Plein air

Signs of the Times
Oil, 12 x 16 in.
Collection the artist
Plein air

