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# Patrick Saunders | Plein Air Streaming

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## Patrick Saunders slows down to really see—one place and painting at a time

By Gussie Fauntleroy

Patrick Saunders, *Bambi & the Barn*, oil, 12 x 16.

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Standing in the backyard of a friend’s home in Richmond, VA, Patrick Saunders was partway through a plein-air painting of the home’s lovely red-brick exterior, prominent window, and stately white staircase when Dudley the dog plopped down beside him and fell asleep. Dudley was one of the homeowner’s two dogs. A third, the alpha of the group, had recently died, and the other dog, Bentley, was transitioning into the alpha role. With Dudley lying beside the artist and his easel, Bentley positioned himself to watch over the sleeping dog. And stayed there.

“It was a complicated painting. The focus had changed, but I really liked the way the meaning evolved and turned into something else,” Saunders says. At the time he wasn’t sure how successful A WINDOW ONTO BENTLEY’S BACKYARD was as a painting, but his wife encouraged him to submit it in competition for Plein Air Richmond 2017, the event in which he was taking part. The painting won Best of Show.



Patrick Saunders, *A Welcoming Table*, oil, 24 x 18.



Patrick Saunders, *A Window Onto Bentley’s Backyard*, oil, 24 x 18.



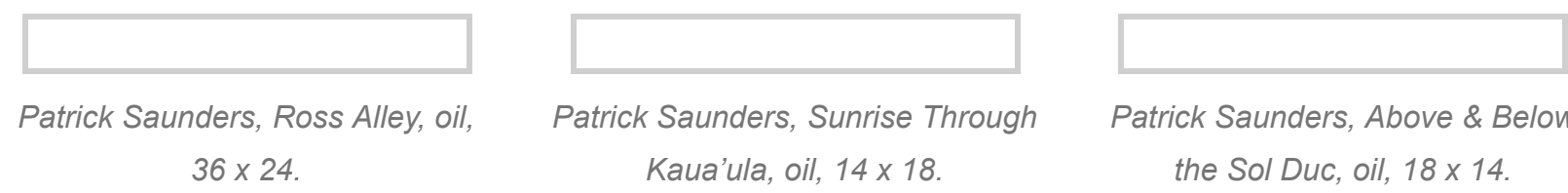
Patrick Saunders, *Crystal Cove Morning*, oil, 18 x 14.

Like this piece, much of Saunders’ work these days seems connected to personal stories, either his own experiences with his subjects or memories and anecdotes that others share with him. That’s what happens when he focuses on smaller, more intimate scenes, rather than spectacular vistas and landmarks, he says. Locals stop and talk, intrigued and delighted that he’s painting something they know and care about. Once, in Jupiter, FL, it was a large banyan tree with thick roots spreading above ground. As Saunders wielded his paintbrush, passersby related how old the tree was and how they’d played on it as kids.

This kind of amiable connection is undoubtedly a response to Saunders’ own friendly curiosity and willingness

to slow down and really listen and look. And that frame of mind is encouraged by the way that he and his wife, Kimberly, live and work: For the past three years, the couple’s full-time home has been an Airstream trailer in which they go from place to beautiful place, from one plein-air event to another and to painting workshops the 48-year-old artist teaches. Kimberly, a photographer and videographer, takes advantage of the photogenic locations for her work. The arrangement suits them both very well. “Some of this we planned for, but a lot of it just evolved,” Saunders says.

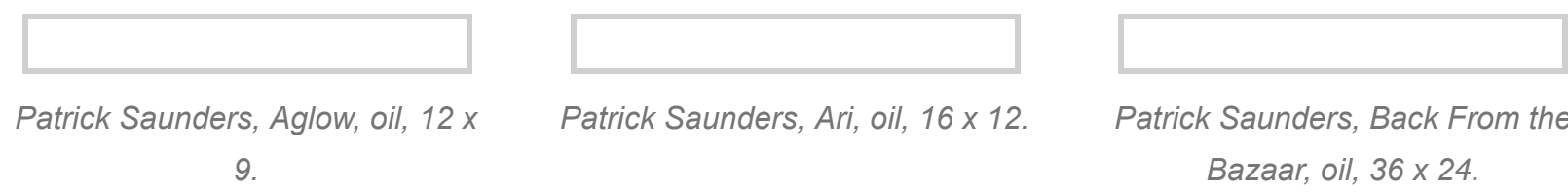
Travel wasn’t part of Saunders’ boyhood, but even at a very early age, drawing from life was. The middle of five children of a mail carrier and a grade-school teacher in St. Louis, he watched his older brother and sister drawing and wanted to do it, too. At age 4 he used crayons to draw his Goofy Grape cup. His mother taped the picture to the living-room window. When he drew more, she hung those up as well, until the window was covered with his pictures. “So I figured I was good at something,” he says with a smile.



In high school Saunders still enjoyed art and was encouraged by his teachers, but the route from there to a profession was unclear. He considered architecture until he realized that, although he did fine in advanced math classes, he wasn’t geeking out on it like some of the other kids. If he didn’t love it the way they obviously did, he thought, then it probably wasn’t his thing. So he enrolled at the Kansas City Art Institute, where he studied illustration with a focus on painting. His most influential instructor there was painter Wilbur Niewald, who stressed the importance of working from life.

Almost immediately after graduating in 1992, Saunders began making good money in commercial illustration, creating drawings for newspapers and magazines. Within a few months, however, that market dried up virtually overnight, replaced by the use of stock imagery at a fraction of the cost. So the young artist applied for a job at the Kansas City headquarters of Hallmark Cards. They asked if he could do digital art. He knew nothing about it but said yes, got the job, and went out and bought a book on Photoshop. He read a chapter, produced a cool design, and showed it to his bosses. Then he read another chapter and produced more designs. “They never knew,” he says.

At Hallmark, Saunders was taken under the wing of a longtime employee and watercolor painter named Gail Flores, who emphasized the need for continual practice and was adept at explaining what makes a painting work. In contrast, the committee of executives who appraised Saunders’ assignments had no ability to talk about art. “The first time, they looked at my painting and said, ‘Make it special.’ It made me furious,” he remembers. When Flores retired in 2002, Saunders left the company as well. He was hired by the Kansas City Art Institute and taught painting, illustration, design, animation, and web design. The latter he learned on the fly, staying one step ahead of his students in teaching himself to code.



From there Saunders was hired by a local web design group that was part of a global advertising firm. He was quickly promoted and sent to New York City to serve as creative director for international digital advertising for all Colgate-Palmolive products. For the next eight years he worked with designers around the world, living in New York, San Francisco, and then back in Kansas City. The pace was fast, the stress level was high, and he had no time to paint. Seeing his frustration, one day Kimberly suggested he quit his job. He took her advice. “I had no plan, just to paint,” he says.

A few months later Saunders tried plein-air painting for the first time and discovered he loved it. He began taking part in local and regional events and doing well. At some point he and Kimberly considered downsizing into a “tiny house” on wheels and hitting the plein-air circuit. They decided on an Airstream instead. In 2015 they sold their Kansas City home and almost all their possessions and moved into a 16-foot Airstream—dubbed The Baked Potato after someone at a Texas campground likened it to a foil-wrapped spud. They traveled and worked in The Baked Potato for two years before upsizing to a 25-foot version they call The Sweet Potato. “‘Sweet’ because it’s bigger. It feels like a mansion,” the artist says. He now has room to work at his easel inside, but he generally doesn’t. When not painting *en plein air*, he sets up a 10-by-10-foot white translucent canopy with side panels that attaches to the side of the Airstream. The outdoor “room” creates a comfortable space with good indirect light for painting commissions from photographs. All of his painting paraphernalia, along with Kimberly’s photographic equipment, is stored under a custom-made shell on the back of their pickup truck.



Aside from commissions, Saunders always completes his paintings on location, immersing himself in the experience of being in a particular place with a certain feeling of light. A WELCOMING TABLE was created in a friend’s guesthouse where he and Kimberly stayed for a few days. The artist was struck by the difference in the quality of light from two windows in the same room. Through one it was warm and bright, reflected off another building, while the other let in light that was indirect and cool. The contrast allowed for a play in color temperatures while combining to create a welcoming atmosphere.

In the past three years the Saunders’ Airstream travels have taken them from coast to coast and border to border through 41 states. In July, The Sweet Potato was parked five feet from the water on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, not far from where he would take part in the Plein Air Easton event for the third time. (In 2016 he won three awards at the event.) From Maryland the couple planned to drive to Dallas, then Michigan, then Santa Fe and Taos, and in early October they will be at the Laguna Beach Plein Air Painting Invitational in Southern California.



Patrick Saunders, Jungle Sharp, oil, 12 x 12.



Patrick Saunders, Kobe, oil, 16 x 12.



Patrick Saunders, Nyes Place, oil, 24 x 18.

Driving across the country while towing a trailer means watching the landscape change slowly, Saunders says. Almost always, he and Kimberly spend the first few days in a new place just exploring, talking with locals and getting a sense of the landscape and light at different times of the day. It’s a civilized pace of life—which the couple hopes to continue indefinitely—that contrasts strongly with stressing out all week and relaxing only at night and on weekends.

“We’ll go out together and Kimberly will photograph a scene while I’m painting it. She’ll see things that I don’t, and vice versa, and we inspire each other,” Saunders says. “For me now, painting is not about the finished product, it’s about the act of painting. That’s the fun part.” It’s also a way of noticing and appreciating what is always there but missed when we move too fast, he says. “Painting puts me in the exact moment, and traveling in the Airstream is similar—we’re not looking forward, we’re just experiencing the trip itself. We’re living every day, and that’s the beauty of it.”

representation

Eva Reynolds Fine Art Gallery, Overland Park, KS.



Patrick Saunders, Ready for Dawn, oil, 16 x 20.



Patrick Saunders, Riverbend Breeze, oil, 18 x 14.



Patrick Saunders, Webster, oil, 24 x 18.

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