

THE Spiritual Side OF Painting

New Jersey artist **Neal Hughes** uses his considerable artistic skills as an act of celebration and testament, and he is rewarded with inspiration that helps him make creative decisions that elevate his oil landscapes. | **by M. Stephen Doherty**

Neal Hughes recently won the grand prize of \$3,000 in the Utrecht 60th Anniversary contest, and the three judges had no trouble selecting his sunlit winter scene from among the more than 12,000 entries. That's because Hughes makes every effort to instill a sense of drama and beauty in his oil paintings while keeping his focus on scenes that every viewer can appreciate and enjoy. Quite often the paintings capture a fleeting moment when sunlight glances across a blanket of snow, against the clapboard side of a building, or through the mast of a sailboat. The actual breathtaking moments on which the paintings are based only last long enough for Hughes to record them in a plein air sketch or to record them in photographs he takes back to his New Jersey studio.

"Sometimes I just happen to see a great scene and quickly take a lot of photographs so that I can recall it later," Hughes explains. "At other times, I'm out painting in the landscape, and I have to spend time thinking about what I can do with the material I'm looking at in order to make a good painting. And then there are those special moments when I'm praying or sitting quietly, and suddenly I visualize a composition in

RIGHT
Winter Glow
2008, oil, 16 x 20.
Collection Dr. Pat White.

Winner of the grand prize in the Utrecht 60th Anniversary contest.





my mind that would make a good painting using the sketches and photographs. I can't really explain or predict how ideas and inspiration occur, but I do believe it has a divine origin. There is a relationship between nature and the divine. I really believe that, so when I'm painting outdoors I have the opportunity to experience the divine."

Hughes mentions that he is a member of a plein air painting group that paints locally in his native New Jersey, and he also makes painting trips to nearby Pennsylvania and to distant places such as Monhegan Island and Kennebunkport, both in Maine. "I usually participate in the weeklong plein air event organized by the Mystic Seaport museum, in Connecticut, as well as in others that happen in the warm months," he says.

Whether working outdoors or in his studio, Hughes is always thinking about what will make his paintings better. "I try to be very aware of values and color scheme, and I don't necessarily paint the colors I see in nature or in the photographs," he explains. "First of all, it is the relationship

between colors and values that matters more than matching the exact hue of what I observe. I try to develop a hierarchy of values and colors within the composition that leads the viewer's eye and helps the observers experience the scene in an orderly way.

"One of my main concerns is usually the light and the mood created by the light," Hughes continues. "Instead of just saying the grass in the painting *The Back Way, Monhegan* was a blue-green, I observed the relationship between the ochre-colored grass that is illuminated by the setting sun and the grass in the shadow areas, which contains a lot of reflected light. This relationship not only allowed me to use differing and scintillating hues but also defined the angle and intensity of the sunlight, which helps to lead the viewer's eye around the composition. Similarly, the gray-blue color of the island behind the schooner creates the sense of light penetrating the masts, and it also shifts toward a golden color on the left, where the light of dusk is bleaching out the contrast. The change in color and value not only allows me the use of



OPPOSITE PAGE

The Back Way, Monhegan

2009, oil, 16 x 20.
Private collection.

ABOVE

Morning Chore

2009, oil, 24 x 30.
Collection Maine Art Gallery, Kennebunkport, Maine.

LEFT

Monhegan Sunrise

2005, oil, 22 x 28.
Private collection.



RIGHT

The Boy

2009, oil, 40 x 24.
Collection Kevin and
Beth Hughes.

OPPOSITE PAGE

Harbor View

2009, oil, 24 x 30.
Collection the artist.



varying hues but also helps to describe the time of day and creates movement, which makes the composition more interesting. The point is that recognizing the hue is only one part of the process. I also have to consider how that hue works in relationship to the other hues around it and to the overall composition.”

Hughes also points out that the correct color mixture is often not just one color laid down on the canvas in a uniform application but rather is often several layers of color, each mixed and applied to add depth and richness to the representation of the subject. “The light in part of the distant sky in the painting *Winter Glow* is essentially the same color as the light hitting the side of Roberts Hall near my home in Moorestown, New Jersey,” the artist explains. “These warm areas add contrast to the cool colors of the snow, and the viewer’s eye is immediately pulled into the composition by this contrast. It also helps to differentiate between the sky and the walls of the historic building. Similarly, the same basic blue is used to represent the blanket of snow in shadow, but the difference in the brushstrokes and the subtle color shifts tells viewers the snow is piled up along the fence and has a glasslike surface in the field.”

Hughes points out that he sometimes adjusts colors by adding varying amounts of Gamblin’s Portland gray to his colors to reduce the chroma of the color mixtures. “Gamblin makes three different Portland grays, and they are very use-

ful in neutralizing colors that are too brilliant,” he explains. “For example, the intensity of a color in a shadow will probably need to be reduced by adding a complementary color or one of the Portland grays.”

Hughes also explains that he has to rely on his knowledge of the way light creates a sense of form. “One of the important things I learned as a student at the Philadelphia College of Art was to consider the three-dimensional form of what I was painting, whether it was a building or a posed model,” he says. “Sometimes it isn’t enough to just paint the flat surfaces of the subject because you won’t see how the form turns in space. That training allows me to change what I see in a photograph, in a sketch, or in a quick plein air study. Understanding how to express the form with consistent lighting, reducing objects to their most basic geometric components—such as a cube, cylinder, or cone—and thinking in terms of a series of simple planes can make the subject more three dimensional and believable, even when nature is not cooperating, such as on a cloudy day or when objects are in shadow.”

In recent years, Hughes has been doing a lot of figure drawing and painting from models. “Even though I continue to paint landscapes, I am especially interested in doing figure paintings and portraits, so I joined a group of artists who share the cost of a model,” he explains. “I did a lot of figure work when I worked as an illustrator doing book covers, magazine covers, and advertising images. I also had an



annual commission to paint a man-of-the-year portrait. I mostly used acrylic in those days because of the tight deadlines, but now I have more time to develop portraits in oil. I also did portraits for another client of retiring employees early in my career. I did these in watercolor, and at one point it seemed I was doing one of those per week.

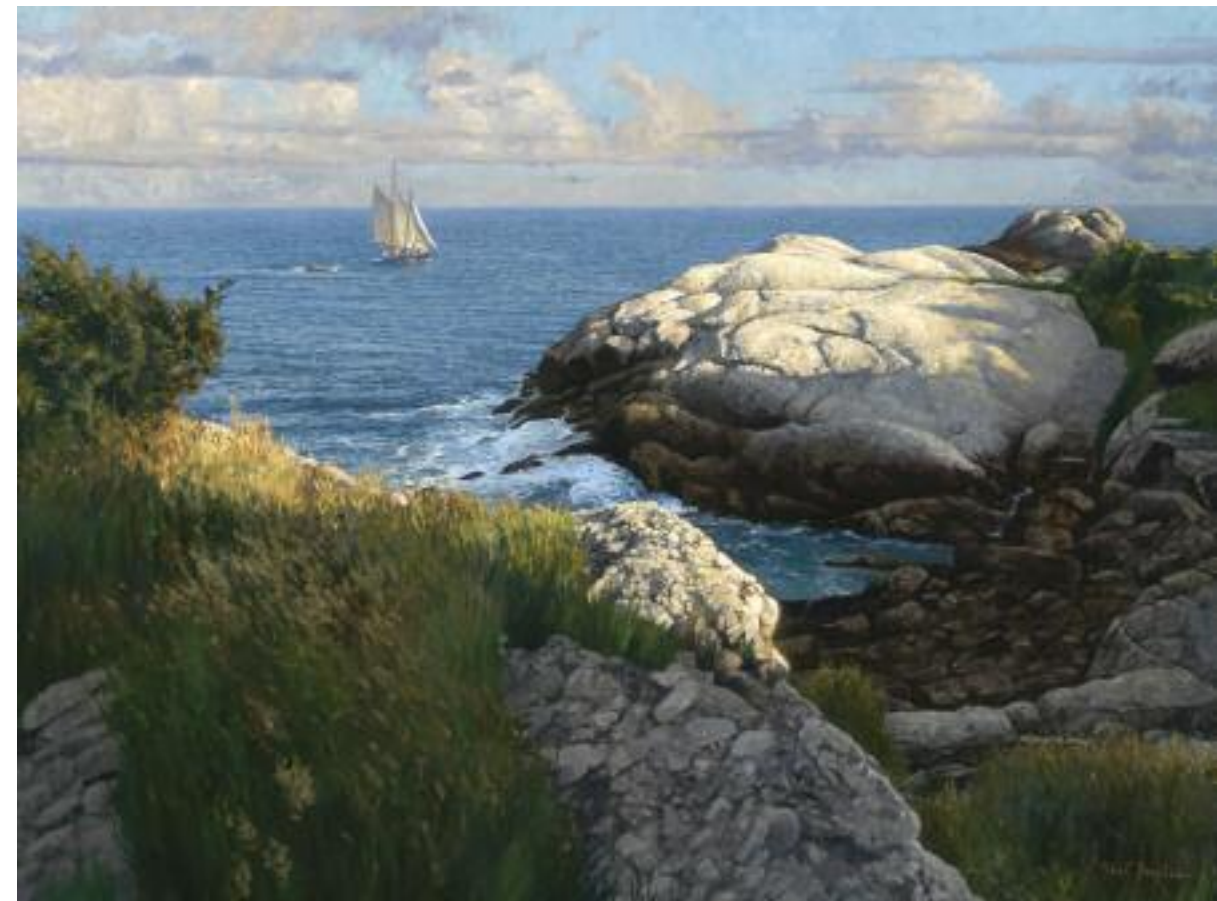
“When I was an illustrator, I was grateful to have steady work from magazine and book publishers, as well as advertising agencies, but the assignments were all about telling a story or making a product look attractive enough to buy,” Hughes concludes. “Now I am happy to be responding to what I observe and feel and celebrating God’s creations. I agree with a statement attributed to the 19th-century painter George Inness that says the purpose of painting goes beyond representing something recognizable and is really about awakening an emotion.” ■

M. Stephen Doherty is the editor-in-chief of American Artist.

About the Artist

Neal Hughes graduated from the Philadelphia College of Art [now The University of the Arts] and was a successful illustrator for many years. He is a member of the American Society of Marine Artists and Oil Painters of America, and his paintings have been included in juried shows including the annual exhibition of the National Society of Painters in Casein and Acrylics, at the Salmagundi Club, in New York City; the International Marine Art Exhibition, at the Maritime Art Gallery, at Mystic Seaport, in Connecticut; the American Society of Marine Artists National Exhibition; and Small Works North America, at The Greenwich Workshop Gallery, in Seymour, Connecticut. For more information, visit his website at www.nealhughes.com.

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ABOVE
Monhegan Light Keeper's House
2008, oil, 9 x 12.
Collection the artist.

ABOVE RIGHT
Afternoon Off Newport
2007, oil, 30 x 40.
Courtesy J. Russell Jinishian Gallery, Fairfield, Connecticut.

RIGHT
French's Avenue Morning
2008, oil, 16 x 20.
Collection the artist.

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