

NEAL HUGHES

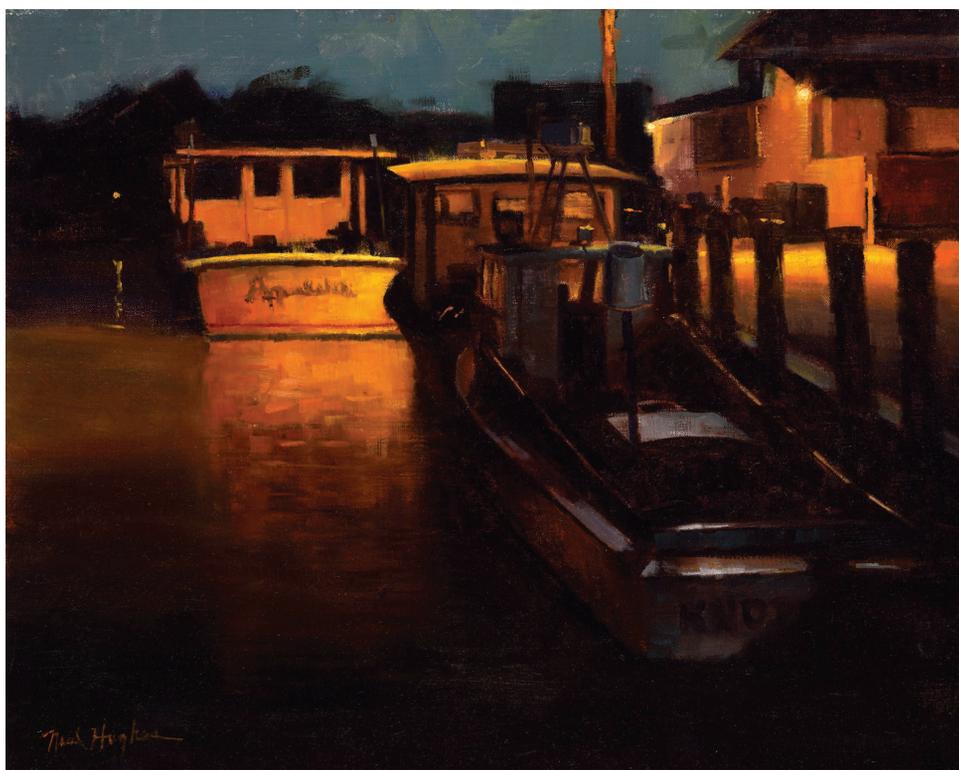
# Plein Air for Varied Subjects & Markets

New Jersey artist Neal Hughes paints directly from life, whether the subject is a posed figure, a boating scene, a regional farm, a coastal view, or a quick-draw village setting. He paints what he loves, but sometimes the subjects help him sell work in particular markets.



Neal  
Hughes

**Tilghman Island Nocturne**  
2015, oil, 16 x 20 in.  
Private collection  
Plein air

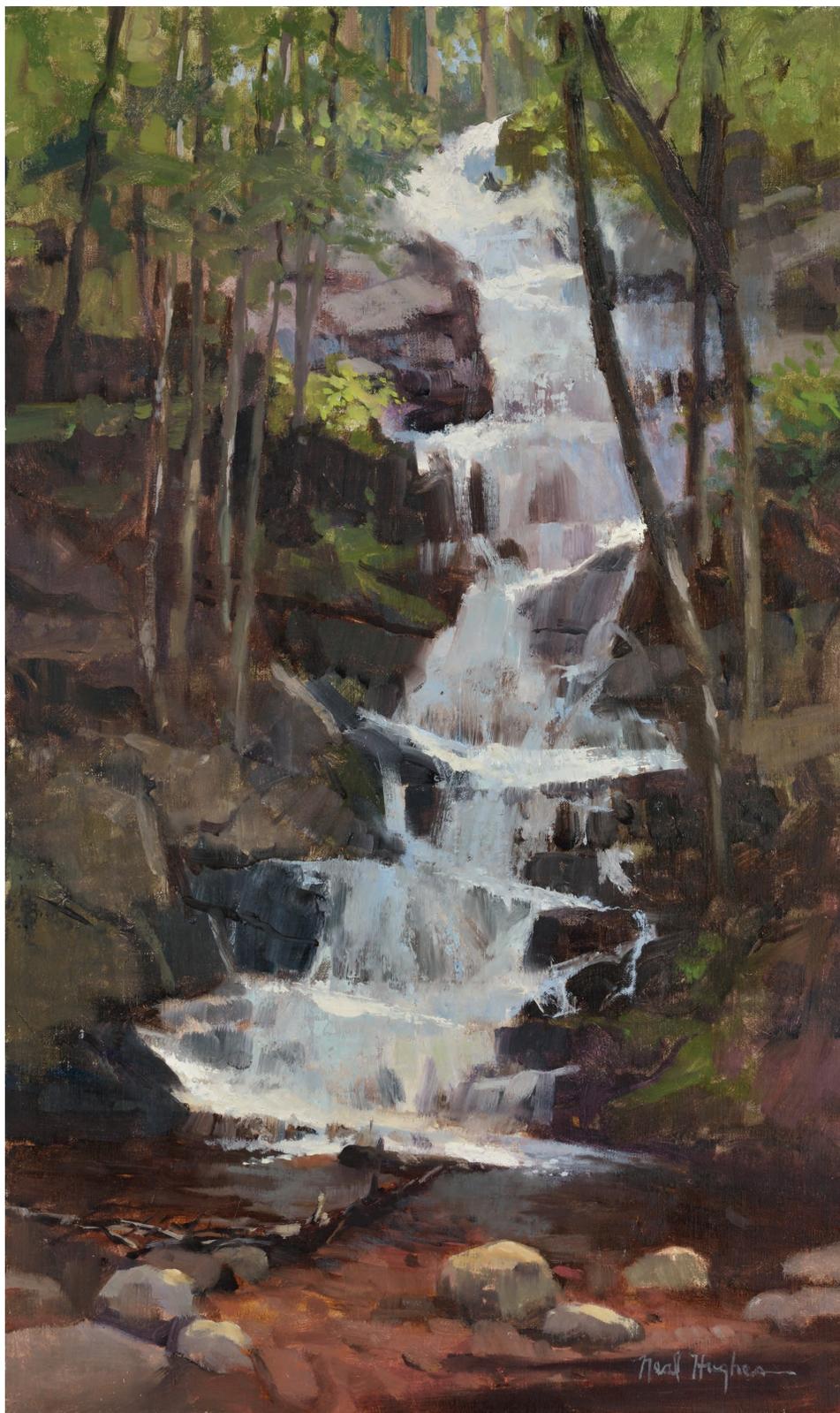


## ARTIST DATA

**NAME:** Neal Hughes  
**BIRTHDATE:** 1952  
**LOCATION:** Moorestown, NJ  
**WEBSITE:** [www.nealhughes.com](http://www.nealhughes.com)

Artists trying to paint what they think collectors want to buy are setting themselves up on a blind date with someone they hope might like them. But no amount of objective analysis can pinpoint exactly what will satisfy someone else. The best an artist can do is get an overall sense of a particular market for marine art, commissioned portraits, wildlife, still lifes, or landscapes, and then paint his or her best and most satisfying work. If the painting doesn't sell, then at least the artist has a picture worth saving.

Neal Hughes has been quite successful, winning awards and selling paintings in a wide variety of markets, including marine art shows, portraiture competitions, plein air festivals, and art societies. In every case, he aims to create his best response to a subject that might be of interest to people who have "pre-qualified" themselves by viewing a landscape show, a society's competition of marine art, or a gallery specializing in regional subject matter. He has won awards in competitions organized by the Oil Painters of America, the Maritime Gallery at



**The Falls**  
2015, 20 x 12 in.  
Collection the artist  
Plein air

Mystic Seaport, the Portrait Society of America, and several plein air organizations, including the most recent Easels in Frederick in Maryland.

“Painting has always been a passion of mine, but for the first few years of my professional career I created illustrations for magazines and corporate clients,” Hughes explains. “When computers pretty much destroyed the market for original illustrations, I made an easy transition to painting for galleries, art competitions, clients, and buyers in plein air events. I’m happiest when I am painting outdoors in Maine, Connecticut, Maryland, Rhode Island, or wherever I travel with painting buddies or fellow juried artists. Any day in which I can paint is a good day.”

When Hughes goes out to work on location, he begins his creative process by looking through a viewfinder to determine the best subject and most effective arrangement of shapes and values. Unless he’s absolutely certain about how he can develop a strong painting, he then makes a thumbnail or compositional sketch.

“It helps me to first think about values, major masses, and compositional arrangements of those elements,” he says. “I know from experience that if I rush into a painting, I will wind up regretting my impatience. Sometimes I find it so important to have a solid plan that I spend the better part of a day doing sketches. Obviously, those days of drawing do not occur during plein air competitions because I’m not likely to have enough time.”

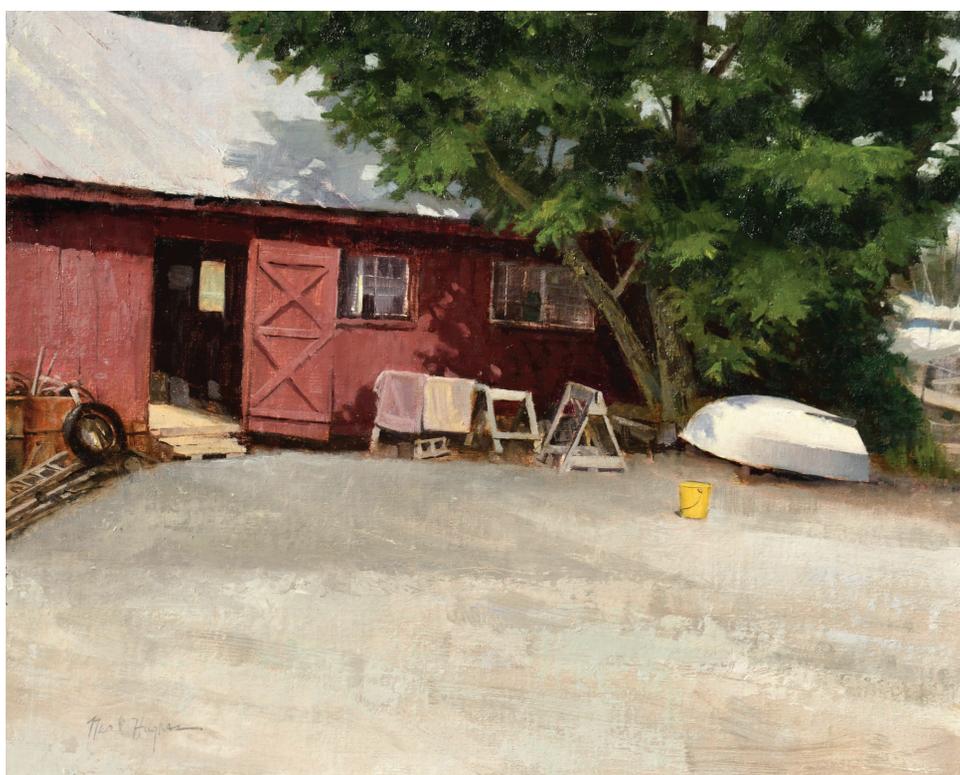
Like most artists, Hughes is always evaluating what he sees in terms of its potential as a painting subject. When he arrives in a town where he will be competing in a plein air festival, he tries to arrive early enough to check out the area and come up with ideas so he isn’t left driving around on the first day of painting. As he scouts potential sites, he takes photographs and does sketches to remind himself of what is available at each location, but he never looks at those references once he begins painting during the competition.

Hughes thinks of his plein air paintings as both sketches and finished works of art, in that he refines them enough to exhibit them by themselves but also uses them as reference material when creating larger paintings in his New Jersey studio. “Lately, about 90 percent of my work is done on site,” he says. “I really enjoy being outdoors and having the experience of creating an image directly from nature. Sometimes as I am working, I ponder the scene before me and feel a great sense of gratitude, not only that I am able to enjoy my surroundings at that moment, but also



**Barbara's Porch**  
2015, oil, 14 x 18 in.  
Private collection  
Plein air

**Boatyard**  
2015, oil, 16 x 20 in.  
Collection the artist  
Plein air



that I am able to make a living doing something that I truly love.”

### Nighttime Illumination

Nocturnes have been a particular interest for Hughes because the painting situation can be quieter, cooler, and more enjoyable than during the heat of a summer's day. “As I'm driving around during the day, I look for areas where there is likely to be interest at night, then I go back to the location as the sun is beginning to set. I usually start painting at dusk, when I can still see the twilight colors, which are richer, and there is more to see than when it is totally dark. I continue working into the night, when the street lights become the only source of illumination.”

Hughes does wear a headlamp and clamps a set of LED lights to his easel when working on a nocturne. “The headlamp helps illuminate the palette when I am mixing colors, and the LED lights work well to make the painting visible without too much glare on the surface of the oil colors,” says the artist. “I look for street lights when I am picking a painting spot because those usually help provide a softer, broader illumination and reduce glare.”

Hughes begins a painting by drawing the outlines of the major shapes with a thin mixture of burnt umber and oxide red. He then blocks in a monochromatic composition of the masses and adds big blocks of color. He refines those big colored shapes and eventually adds finishing details. “My procedures may change from time to time, but my current preference is to start working on a blank canvas rather than a toned one,” he says. “I move things around until I am satisfied with the overall composition, wiping out sections of the canvas if I am not satisfied with the overall look of the painting. Once I am satisfied with the plan suggested by the monochromatic first layers of paint, I begin to add variations of the local colors.”

Following the generally recommended method for oil painting, Hughes starts with thin, lean paint and works up to thicker, fatter colors. “When I start, it's almost as if I was painting with transparent watercolors,” he says. “I focus on the value relationships that will direct the viewer's attention, and finally, when it all seems to be coming together, I build up thicker brushstrokes.

### Materials

The specific palette of colors that Hughes uses: titanium white, Winsor lemon, cadmium yellow deep, cadmium orange (optional,

## Demonstration: *Uncovered*



**STEP 1:** Using a thin mixture of red iron oxide and burnt umber, Hughes quickly draws the outlines of the objects.



**STEP 2:** The artist blocks in the big shapes using the oil colors, much the way he did when his primary medium was watercolor.



**STEP 3:** As he builds up the layers of paint, Hughes add more detail and brings more attention to the falling tarp that relates to the title of the painting.



### THE COMPLETED PAINTING:

**Uncovered**

2015, oil, 12 x 16 in.

Courtesy of the Maritime Gallery of Mystic Seaport

Plein air



**Beetle Cat Boat**  
 2013, oil, 12 x 16.  
 Private collection  
 Plein air

because it can be made by combining cadmium red with cadmium yellow), Gamblin alizarin crimson, Rembrandt permanent red medium, Winsor & Newton terra rosa, Gamblin transparent earth red, Gamblin yellow ochre, Gamblin burnt umber, Gamblin dioxazine purple, Gamblin viridian, Gamblin chromium oxide green, three or four Gamblin grays, and Charvin's Provence blue.

The brushes Hughes prefers to work with include two Silver Grand Prix bristle brushes (flat and filbert), several nongoose brushes, and a sable liner brush for lines and details. He will normally spend from four to six hours on one plein air painting; if more time is needed, he will return to a location at the same time of day. A painting can take as little as two hours, depending on the subject, but he says the average is in that four- to six-hour range. 🖼️

**NEAL HUGHES** graduated from Philadelphia University of the Arts and worked as an illustrator after graduating. His fine art paintings have been accepted into dozens of local and national juried exhibitions, including those organized by the Oil Painters of America, the Maritime Gallery at Mystic Seaport, the Portrait Society of America, and the American Society of Marine Artists. He has received a number of major awards for his paintings and has been juried into the top plein air festivals. He is a Fellow of the American Society of Marine Artists and a member of the Oil Painters of America.

**M. STEPHEN DOHERTY** is editor-in-chief of PleinAir.



See more of Neal Hughes' plein air and studio paintings in the expanded digital edition of *PleinAir*.