

Seven on Site

by Martha Hoppin

To say someone paints *en plein air*, a French term for “in the open air,” is to conjure up an artist seated at an easel outdoors, under an umbrella, depicting specific landscape features more or less faithfully. This held true for much of the 19th century, when the practice originated, but today’s artists have expanded the concept. The range of contemporary approaches to plein air painting can be seen in the exhibition *Seven on Site*, on view until the end of June at the Oxbow Gallery in Northampton, Massachusetts.

Seven on Site features an informal association of landscape painters who live and paint across the country. The seven—Martha Armstrong (Hatfield, MA); Sasha Chermayeff (Hudson Valley); Jane Culp (California); Judy Koon (Chicago); Ro Lohin (Long Island); Lynette Lombard (Galesburg, IL); and Megan Williamson (Chicago)—joined forces to show together out of a shared commitment to painting on site. Their unconventional works emphasize expressive form and brushwork over changes in light effects, weather, and time of day, the more traditional concerns of plein air painting. These seven artists may paint some or most or all of a landscape outdoors, but none produces a direct transcription of nature. While grounded in reality, each interprets distinctively.



Megan Williamson, *Landscape with Fences*

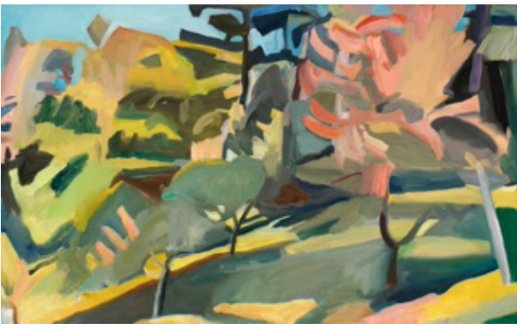
The seven make an ideal grouping, similar in inspiration yet different in style. Both Judy Koon and Megan Williamson depict recognizable sites. Koon's deep vistas, seen in *The Hudson From Olana*, are obscured by misty gray skies and her color range restricted for a tranquil, poetic mood. Williamson, on the other hand, pulls her forms to the picture surface, like the other artists in the exhibition. Her buildings and trees make a foreground screen, as in *Landscape with Fences*. Bright colors create a sense of movement, as does varied and lively brushwork.



Lynette Lombard, *Lake Chautauqua*

Where Williamson casually combines man and nature, Jane Culp turns to wilderness. Using rough brushstrokes, thinly applied paint and angular forms, she seizes onto the rugged western terrain of rocks and mountains. More expressionistic still are Lynette Lombard's tortured forms and thick, swirling paint. Paint is palpable in *Lake Chautauqua*; in *Burnt Brown Black Field*, heavy black outlines, bold blue central forms, and unsettling reds create a visually exciting, even visceral violence.

Sasha Chermayeff's paintings are dark in color and mood. These small yet ominous paintings rely on writhing black lines that represent trees. In contrast, Ro Lohin's semi-abstract landscapes are ephemeral and dense at the same time. In both *Rhododendron* and *White Lilac*, a centrally placed tree is enmeshed in a colorful web of curving and vertical brushstrokes. While light is a vital element for any plein air painter, sunlight, either raking across or dappling forms, is absent from all but Martha Armstrong's paintings. Armstrong's *First Shadows of Morning* represents the patterns of sun and shadow as they play across a hillside. Reducing trees and paths of sunlight to broad shapes of green and yellow, she constructs a puzzle of interlocking pieces. This is nature distilled.



Martha Armstrong, *First Shadows of Morning*

Painting in the open air is popular now (just google the term to find numerous groups and workshops), but it is a demanding practice requiring stamina and perseverance. Koon normally finishes a painting in one very long day outdoors. Culp travels by jeep to remote locations. For *Swimming: Toward Raven's Nest Peak*, she stood at a 45 degree angle with her easel roped to her jeep, and along with easel and painting gear always carries a knife and bear spray.



Jane Culp, *Swimming: Toward Raven's Nest Peak*

Practical considerations aside, it is more difficult to develop the personal vision presented in this exhibition than to risk a potentially dangerous environment. It is well worth making an effort to see it before its close.

Martha Hoppin is an independent curator of American art.