

John MacDonald

July–Aug, 2021



WORKSHOPS

2021

AUGUST 20–22, 2021
FALMOUTH ART CENTER
Falmouth, Mass.
www.falmouthart.org

SEPTEMBER 3–6, 2021
THE LANDGROVE INN
Landgrove, VT.
www.landgroveinn.com

OCT. 9–15, 2021
MASSMOCA
MASSACHUSETTS MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART
North Adams, Mass.

2022

FEB 26–MAR 5, 2022
CASA DE LOS ARTISTAS
Boca de Tomatlan, Mexico
Casa de los Artistas

Getting that *GLOW* ~ Creating Luminosity, Part II

In the popular NPR program, “Car Talk,” Tom Maggliozi once quipped, “*I frequently don’t know what I’m thinking until I hear myself say it.*” Likewise, sometimes only in the process of trying to explain a painting concept do I finally come to understand it. That applied to this aspect of luminosity.

In the previous newsletter, I wrote about creating the illusion of the luminosity of a light source. That type of luminosity is value and edge based and I get that. But in this follow up, I attempt to explain something I find more elusive: the luminosity that appears to emanate from an entire painting regardless of whether or not a light source appears in the scene. Let’s begin with a brief summary of light source luminosity then dig into that mysterious, overall quality that is also labeled “luminosity.”

Paint Camp in the Adirondacks.

Given that Streamline Publishing produced and sells my two videos, I suppose there’s a conflict of interest when I praise any events organized by Eric Rhoads. But I’ve just returned from a wonderful week of painting in the [Adirondacks](#) with 102 fellow painters and simply must recommend it. It was my 7th time there. If you’ve never tried it, consider attending next year. It’s my favorite painting event by far.



And speaking of Streamline videos. . .

This newsletter was late in being finished because of a week spent in Austin filming another video for Streamline, along with the weeks of preparation that preceded it. I’m excited about this one. It’s not about me, it’s all about **values**: what they are, what they do, and how to use them in a painting. It should be released sometime this autumn.



Luminosity ~ a recap

In the previous newsletter, I explained that the illusion of a luminous light source in a painting is created by **values** and **edges**. For example, converting Frederic Church's *The Andes of Ecuador* to black and white still leaves intact the illusion of space, light, atmosphere and form. Even without color, the illusion of a luminous light source remains. This kind of luminosity is all about value relationships, value gradients, and edge contrasts.



Overall Luminosity

The second type of *luminosity*—the appearance of an overall light that shimmers across the entire surface of a painting—is created through **color contrasts**. This was a quality called “vibration” or “opalescence” by painters and critics of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Below is the painting, *Dorset Snow*, by Brian Sweetland. There is a luminosity that shimmers across its entire surface. Removing the color contrasts by converting the painting to black and white diminishes the quality of this kind of luminosity. It needs color contrasts to work.



Let's explore this second, more elusive, type of luminosity in detail, beginning with a review of color temperature contrast and then moving on to specific examples.

Color Luminosity ~ Temperature Contrast

(This topic has been covered in previous issues: [Dec. 2014](#), [Feb. 2015](#), [May-June 2017](#), and [May-June 2019](#). But color contrast is such an important part of any painting that it's worth reviewing again and again. See the above newsletters for more information.)

Color luminosity, traditionally called “vibration” or “opalescence,” is an effect in which two or more colors appear to shimmer in imitation of the sparkling quality of light. Two conditions are needed to create this illusion: **contrasting color temperatures** and **equal or similar values**.

Here are two value scales, one a warm red and the other a cool green.



Below, I've isolated the middle and ends of the two color scales. Notice that at the ends—where a dark color is adjacent to a light color, the eye sees mostly **value** contrast; there is very little contrast between warm and cool. But in the middle, where the values come together, there is a vibration, a flickering, created by contrasting **color temperatures**.



The principle is simple:

To maximize color contrast, minimize value contrast.

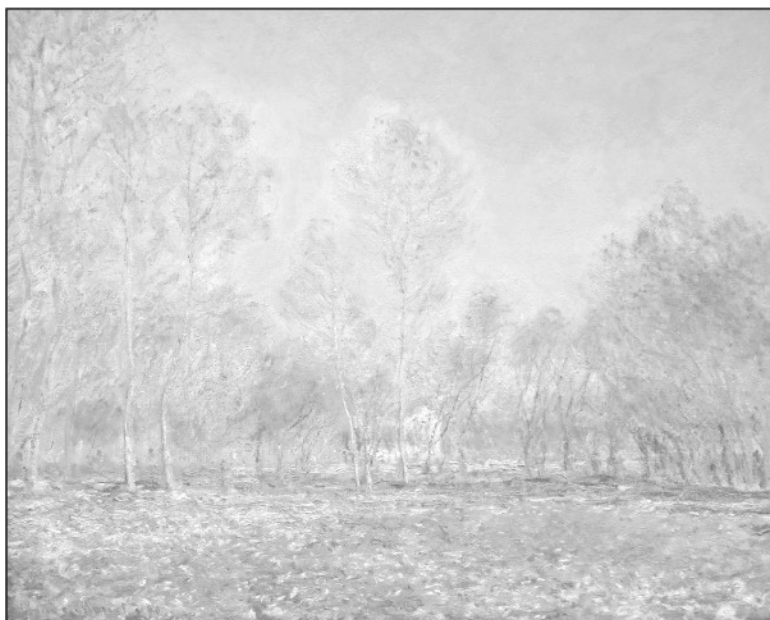
Wherever you want to push the color in your paintings, bring the values close together!

In this detail from a Brian Sweetland painting of snow, he creates a luminous shimmer in his snow not based on value differences but by contrasting a multitude of warm and cool hues **of similar or equal values**. Let's look at two paintings to see how this works. . . .



Getting that Overall Glow . . .

How does Monet create the intense glow that permeates this entire painting? The answer is found not in the color image below but in the black and white image to the right. The colors glow because the values throughout the entire painting are so compressed. There is very little value contrast, which leaves only color contrast! Most of the colors in this painting are of similar or equal value. Without value contrast, *there is nothing left but color contrast, warm against cool.*



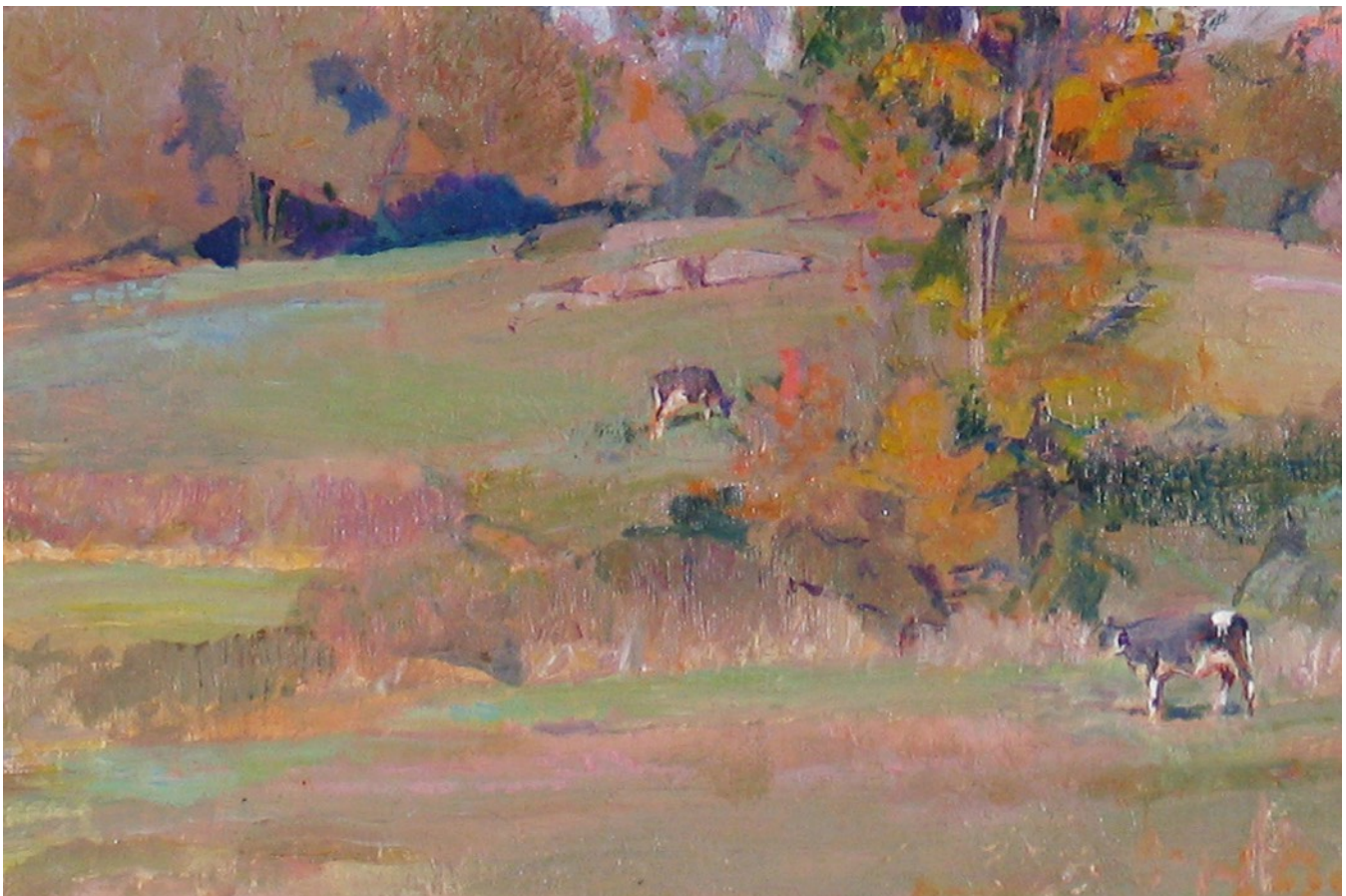
Monet, *Spring in Giverny*



In this Brian Sweetland painting, he masses all the values into two foundation values: mid value ground and slightly lighter sky, and fills each with cool and warm color contrasts. This, too, glows.



Brian often kept the majority of his values in the mid range, in a middle key. It's in this middle range where colors, without needing the addition of much white or darker pigments to adjust their values, are at their richest. Here, even muted colors, when of the same value, vibrate.

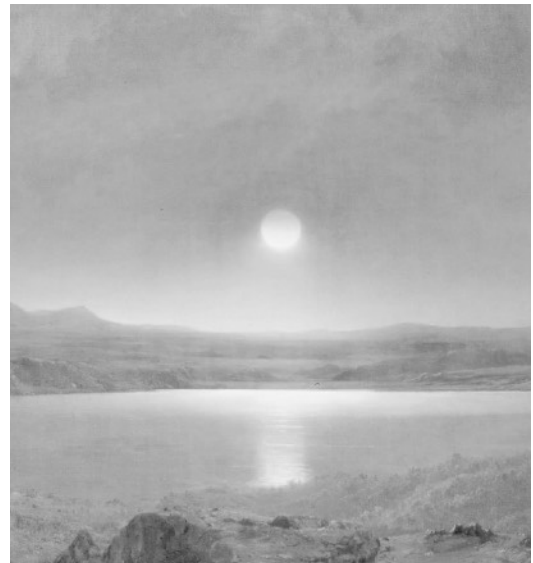


Light Source Luminosity *and* Color Luminosity

In this painting by Church, he relies on values and gradients to create the illusion of a light source but then brings values together in the foreground to create a glow using color contrast.



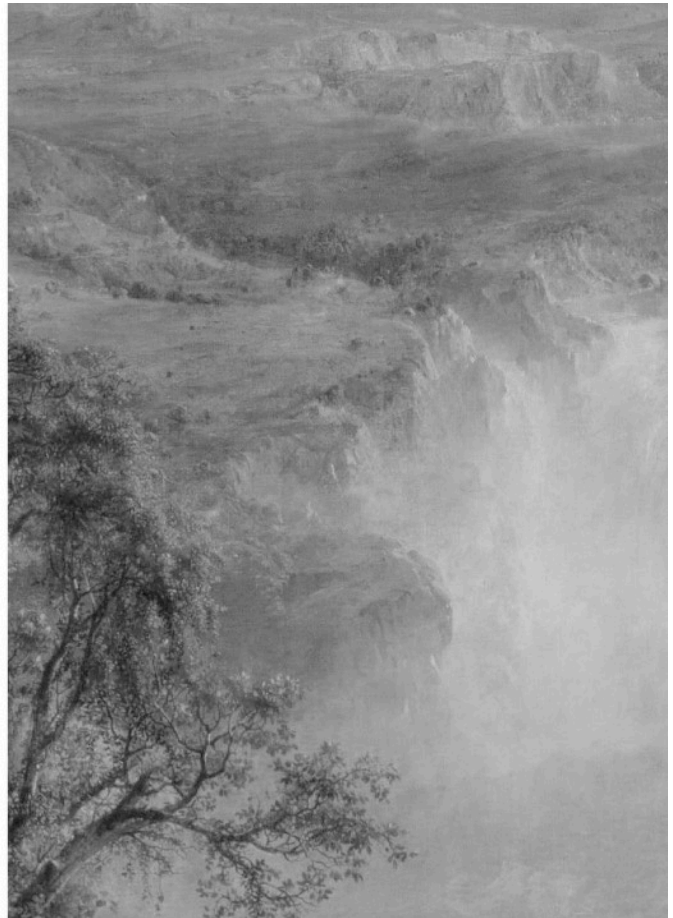
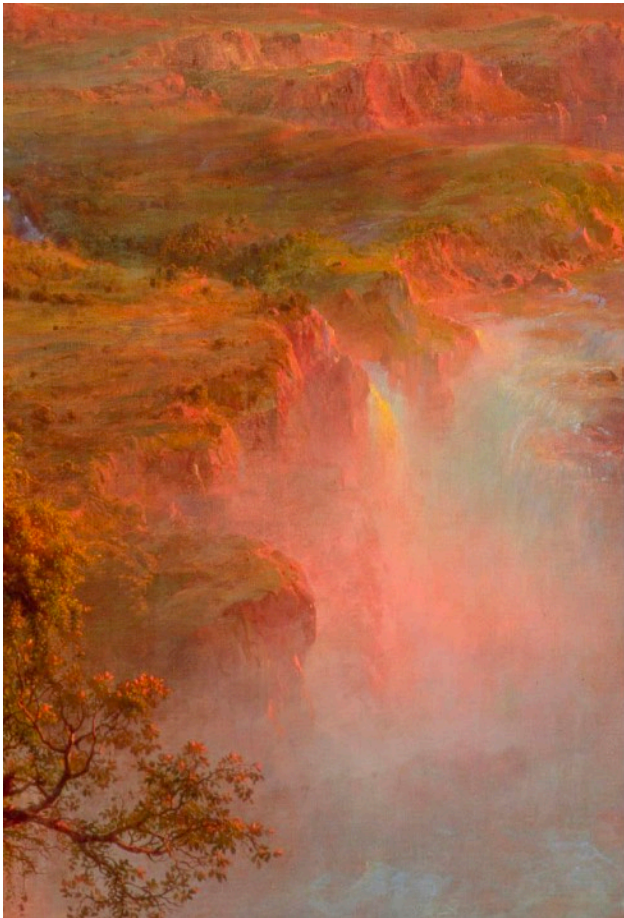
Frederic Church, *Cotopaxi*



This section of the painting is nearly monochromatic. To create the illusion of the light source, he relies on values, value gradients, and edge contrasts.

In this section of the painting, he creates the glow—the intense luminosity—by placing warm and cool hues of similar values against each other. In the black and white version, it still reads as a representational landscape but the luminosity—that beautiful glow—is gone.

By the way, notice how soft the glow appears despite his using relatively sharp edges. This works because of how values affect edges: the closer two shapes are in value, the softer will appear the edge even if they're physically sharp. By bringing the values together, he creates color or luminosity *and* visually softens their edges—creating two light effects with a single technique.



The green–red temperature contrast here is so strong, it's easy to forget that its intensity depends on their *value* relationships. If they differed more in value, the vibration would be lost.



Church's values—nearly identical.



Same hues but greater value contrast.

Luminosity and Value Keys

When painting in a value key, we deliberately limit the range of values we use. There will always be less value contrast when working in a value key. And because color contrast is dependent on a lack of value contrast, we can work in value keys to create stronger color contrast and enhance the illusion of luminosity in our paintings. Monet's painting, *Spring in Giverny*, shown above, was painted in a high value key. Sweetland's painting, as already mentioned, was painted in a middle value key. Below are other examples.



Another middle-key painting by Brian Sweetland. In each area of the painting, he keeps secondary values close to maximize color contrast.

Brian Sweetland
South Bay, Champlaine

Here's one of mine, also in a middle key. It was from Brian that I learned how to use the middle key for strong color contrast: keep 90% of the values in the middle range and then punch in a few darks and a few highlights.

Last Ice on the Hudson



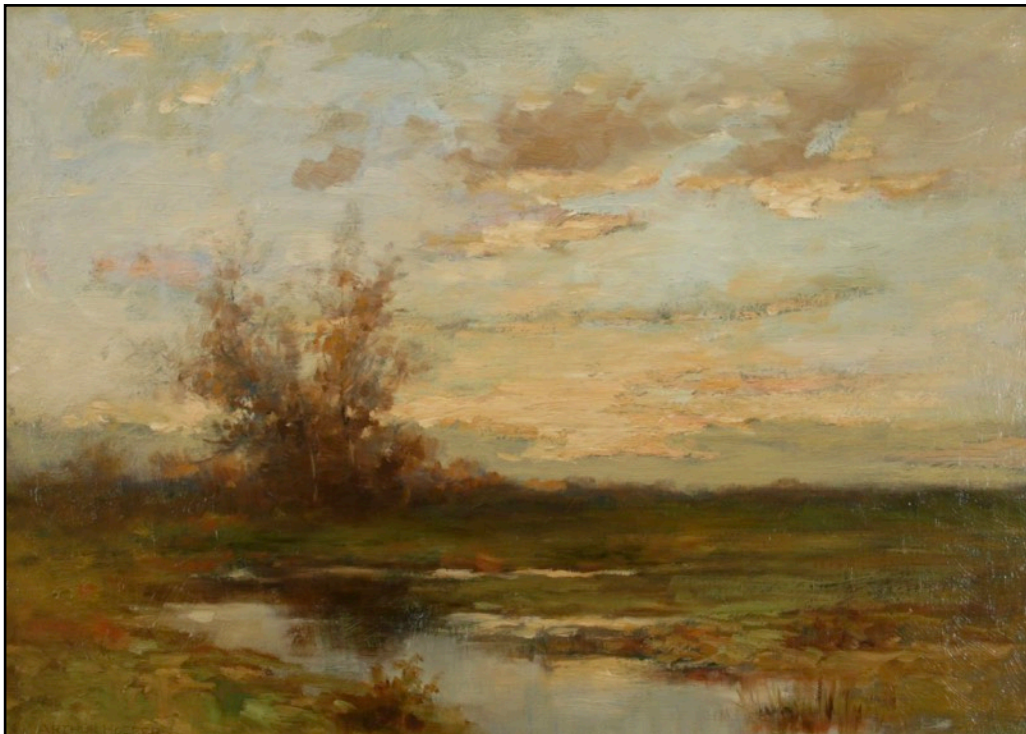
A few Tonalist examples.

The Tonalists often worked in middle or low value keys. They also used muted color yet achieved a richness of color in their paintings despite its lack of saturation.

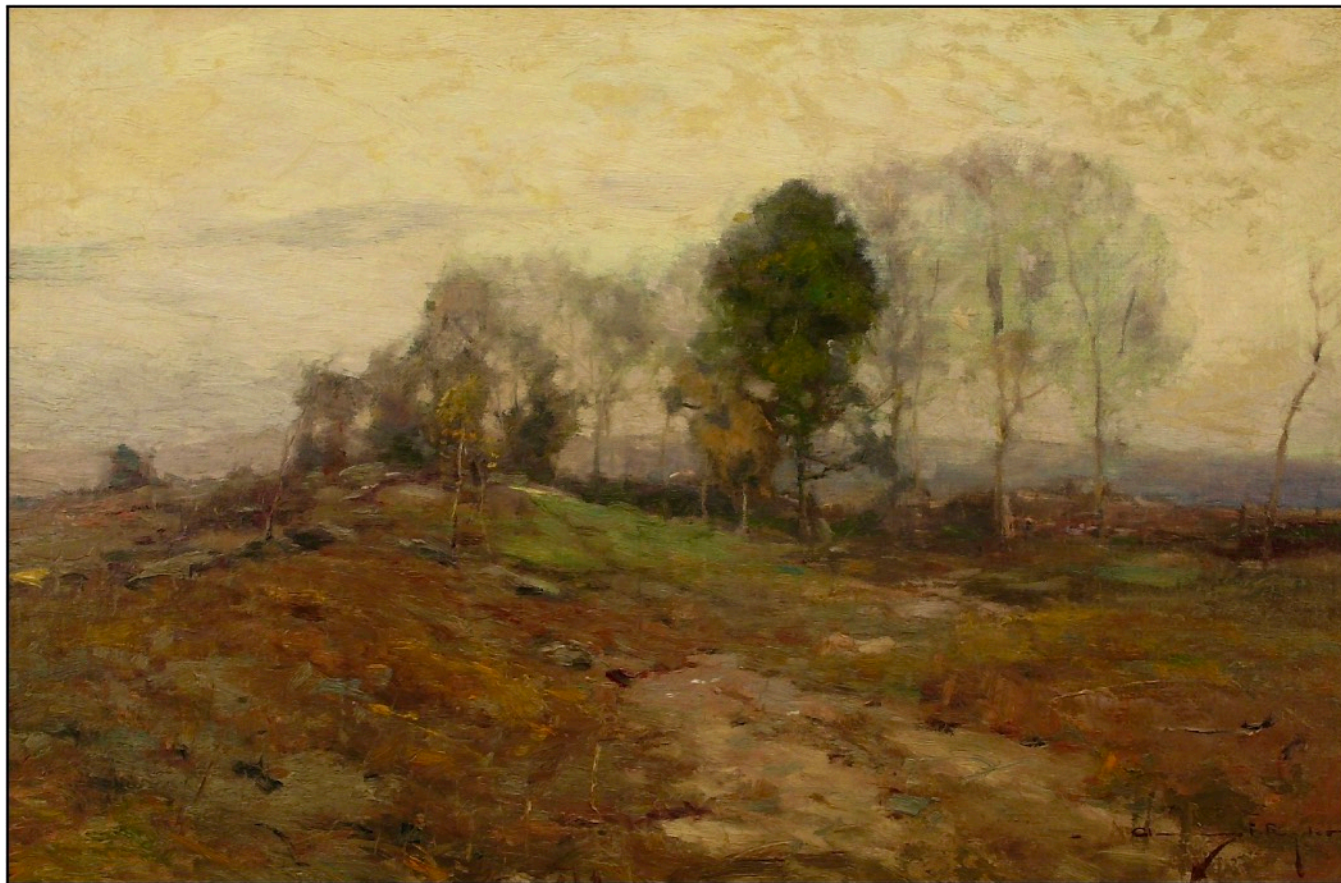
right:
Charles Eaton
Autumnal



below:
Arthur Hoeber
Marsh Sunset

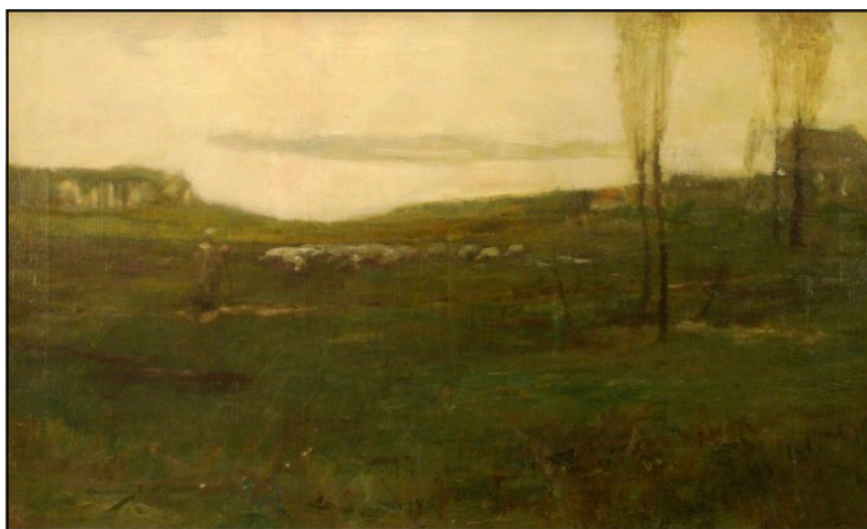


And lastly, two by Chauncey Ryder: *Road to Francistown* (top) and *French Landscape* (bottom).



So many of the Tonalist paintings are beautifully luminous, a result of keeping the value structure simple (two or three foundation values) and limiting the range of their secondary values, which enabled them to push color contrast and create the vibration that imitated the glow, the opalescence, of a subtle but shimmering light.

I'll be mentioning more of this in the next newsletter. . .



Words of Wisdom

When you take a flower in your hand and really look at it, it's your world for the moment. I want to give that world to someone else. Most people in the city rush around so, they have no time to look at a flower. I want them to see it whether they want to or not.

I've been absolutely terrified every moment of my life—and I've never let it keep me from doing a single thing I wanted to do.

To create one's world in any of the arts takes courage.

– Georgia O'Keeffe

Coming up in the next Newsletter:

I'll explain what I'm beginning to believe is THE most important painting principle. Until then,

–*Happy Painting!*



As of May 1, 2021, all of the above workshops are expected to be conducted in person at the venue, depending on the state of the pandemic Any changes will be here as soon as received.

2021–2022 Workshops



August 20–22 Falmouth Art Center www.falmouthart.org

This three-day workshop will focus on painting in the studio while using photographs, sketches, and/or plein air studies as reference. We will explore the limitations of the camera and ways to compensate for them. Open to painters of all levels of experience. **FULL ~ WAITING LIST ONLY**



October 6–12 Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art; North Adams, Mass. MASSMoCA

A studio workshop for advanced painters. This workshop will be limited to eight participants. We will focus on creating a large studio painting based on plein air studies and sketches. Each participant will have a large, private studio. More details to follow. **FULL ~ WAITING LIST ONLY**



Sept. 3–6 The Landgrove Inn; Landgrove, Vermont

www.landgroveinn.com

A studio workshop, we will be painting from photographs, sketches, and/or plein air studies as reference while staying at a cozy Vermont Inn—wonderful food, intimate atmosphere and working in a large, well-lit studio building.



February 26 – March 5 Casa de los Artista, Boca de Tomatlan, Mexico

artworkshopvacations.com

This will be my sixth trip to this venue. The studio is perfect, the food delicious, and the scenery exquisite. It's a week of serious plein air and studio painting paired with a varied and fun-filled exposure to the delicious food, kind people, and deep culture of Mexico.