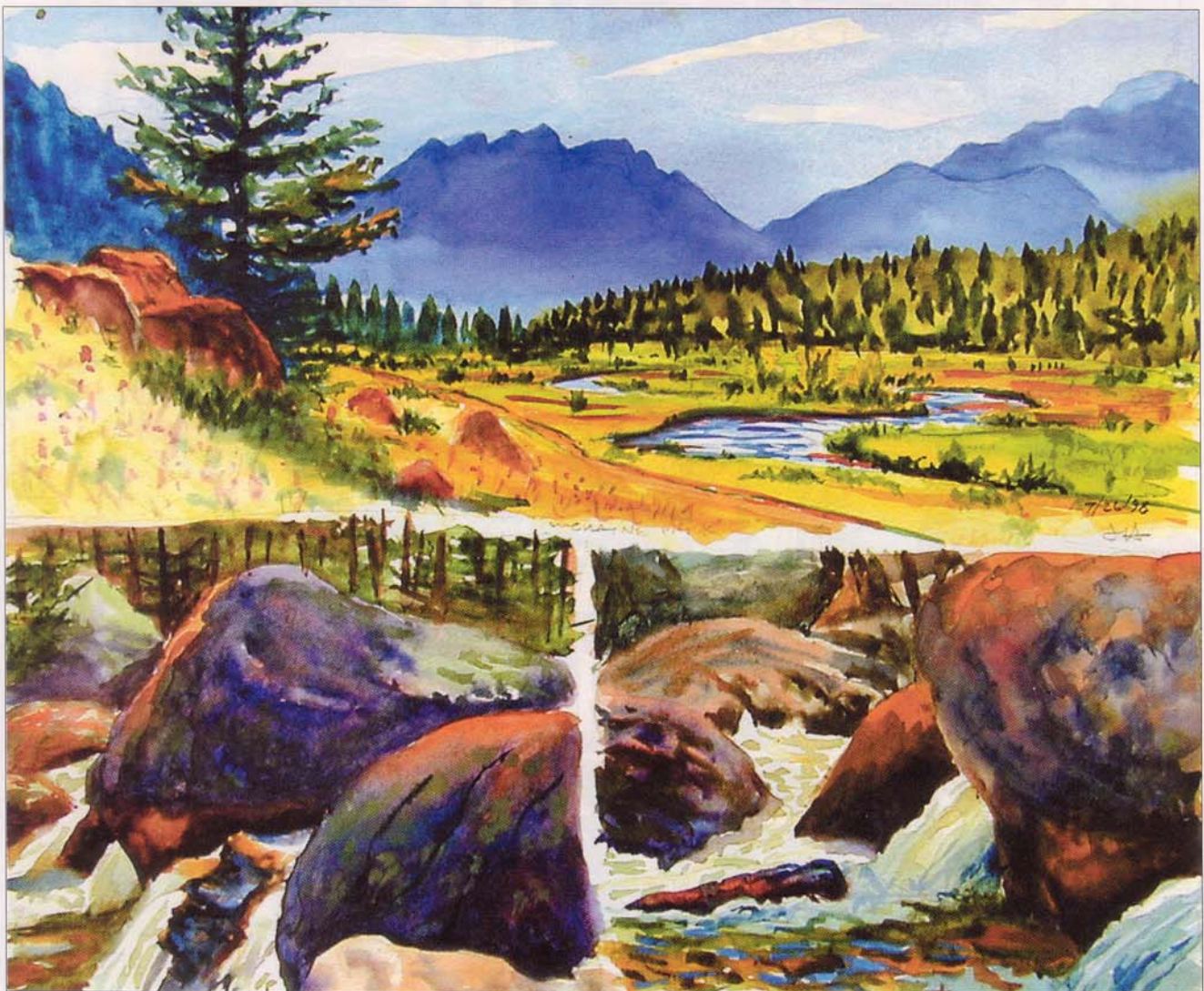


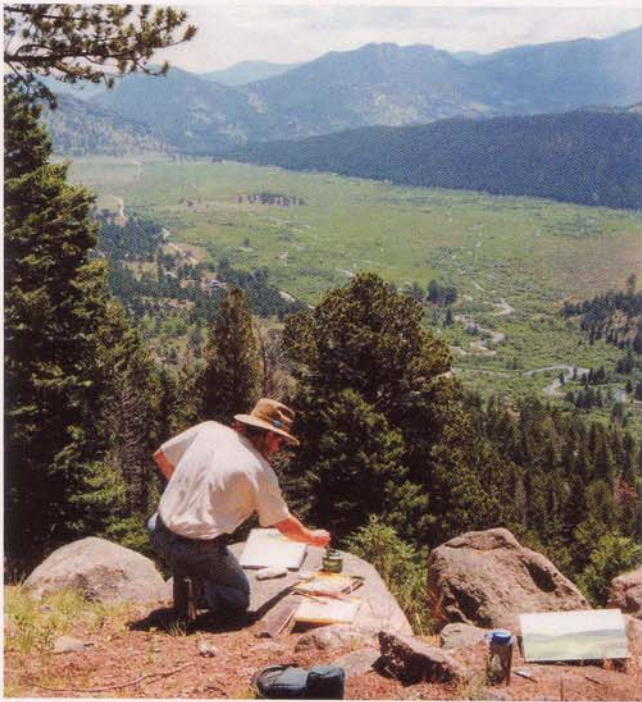
# THE **Power** OF THE **Sketchbook**

## PART I: CAPTURING INSPIRATION

*My sketchbook paintings serve many functions, but the most important is to transport me to the moment of inspiration, so I can re-create their spontaneity and freshness in my larger, more finished studio pieces.*

**BY JOHN HULSEY**





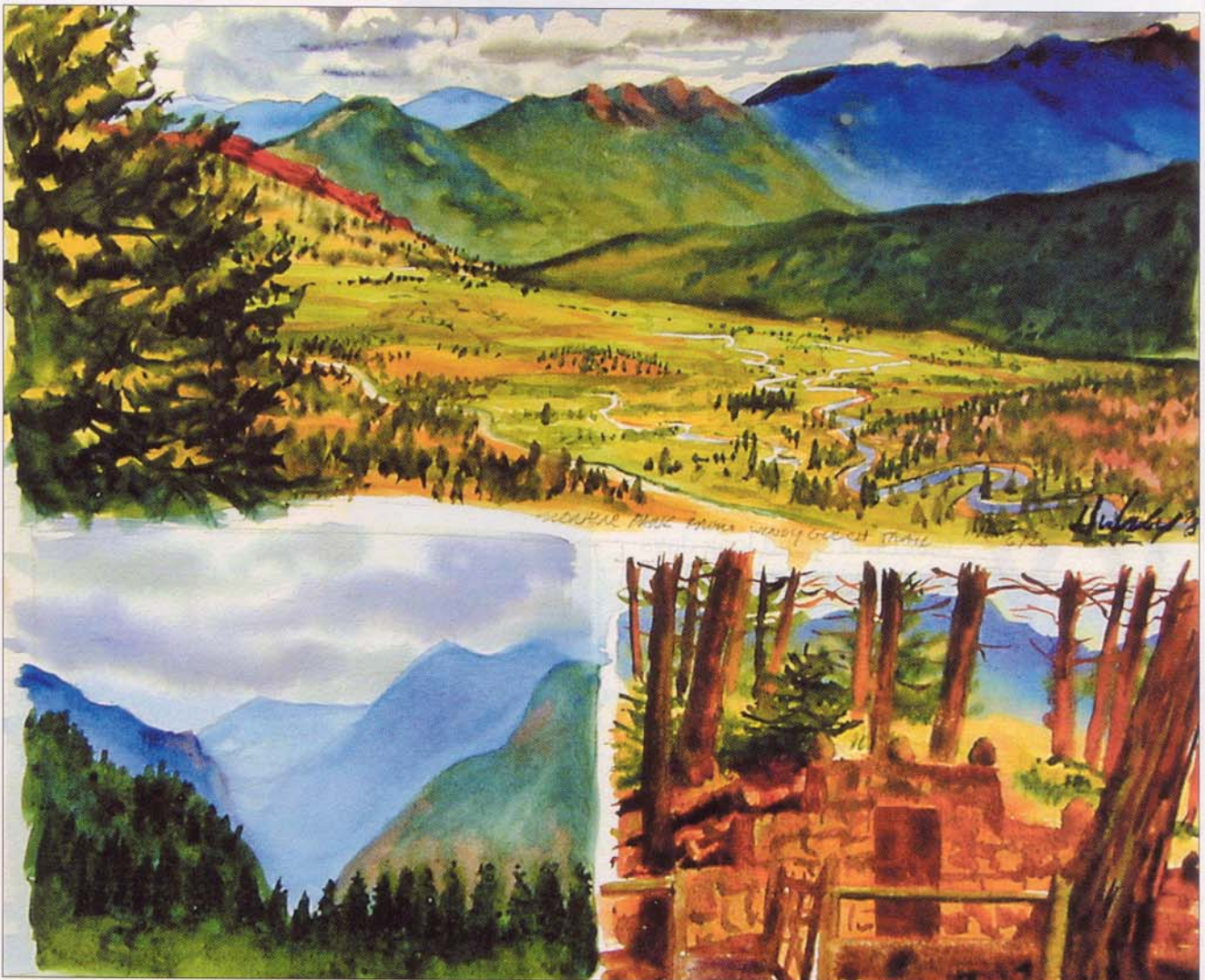
**Left:** My wife, Ann Trusty, took this photograph of me painting above Moraine Park in Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado.

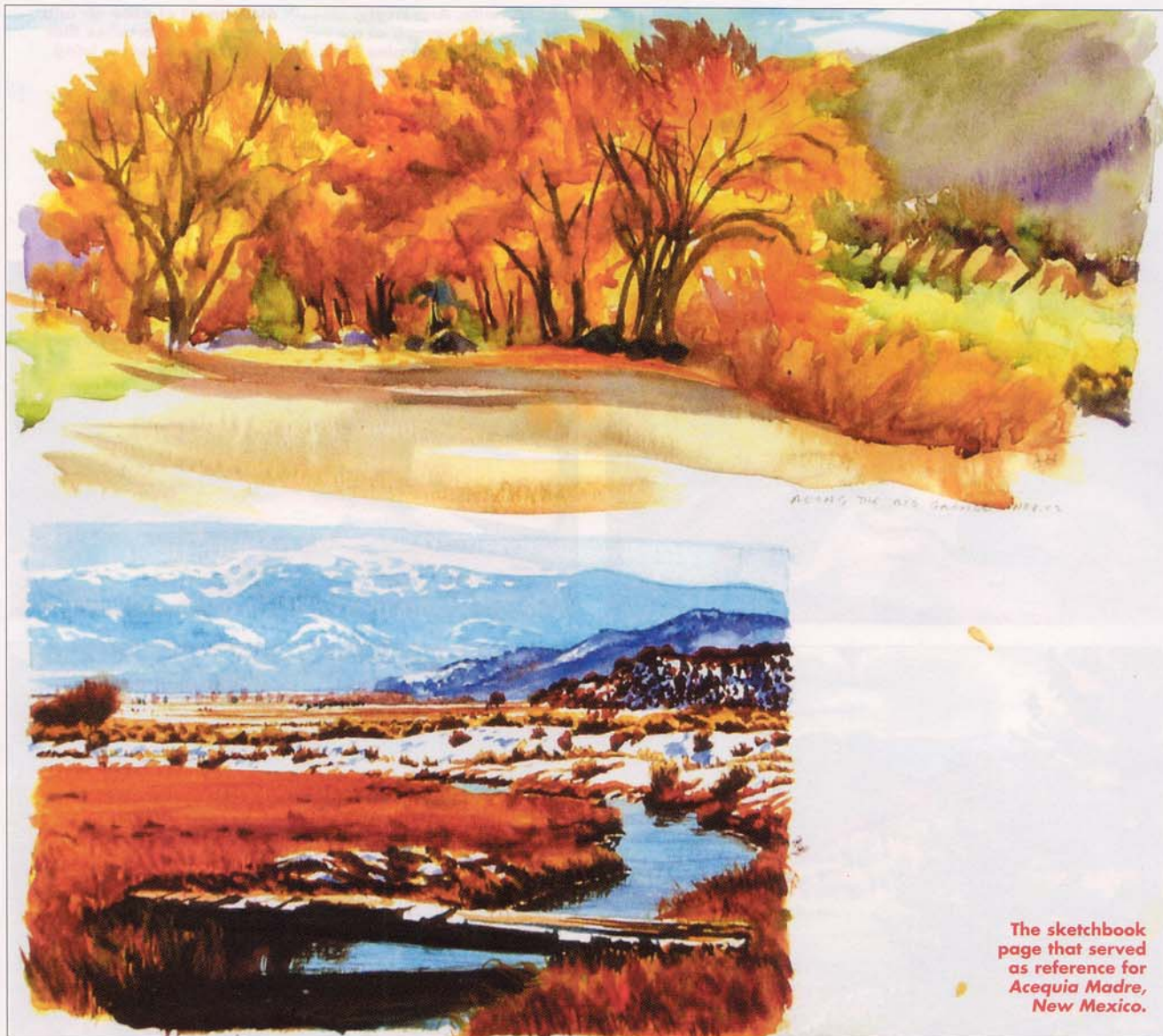
**Below:** These are my basic supplies for painting on location: an 11"-x-14" Canson cold-pressed watercolor sketchbook, a collapsible container for water, a John Pike Palette and lid, and an

assortment of natural- and synthetic-hair brushes that I wrap in the quiver lying on the rock.

**Bottom:** The completed sketch I did overlooking Moraine Park.

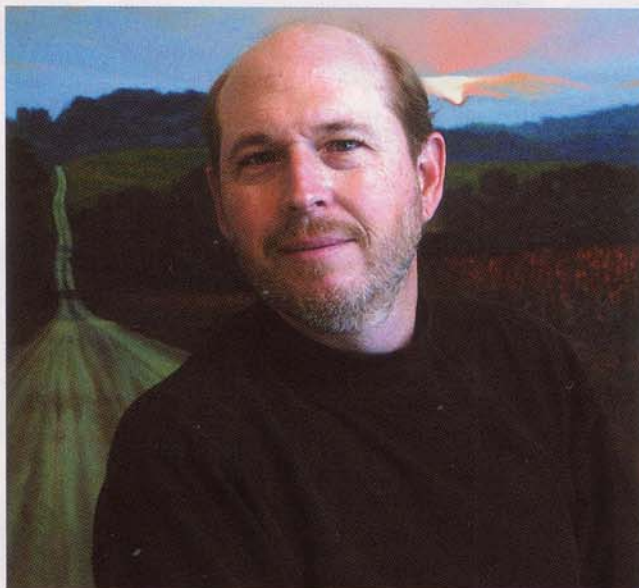
**Opposite page:** A typical page from my sketchbook. All artwork this article collection the artist.





The sketchbook page that served as reference for *Acequia Madre, New Mexico*.

**W**henever I visit friends in Colorado, it is understood that I will spend long days hiking in the mountains because, as a landscape painter, I have work to do. If my compassionate friends happen to forget, once they see me arriving with my portable painting gear, they remember that I suffer from a glorious obsession. Like most artists who paint en plein air, I live to be outdoors. This passion for nature has led to the formation of societies, the launching of informational Web sites, and the invention of all kinds of ingenious, custom-made, lightweight painting gear.





*Acequia Madre,  
New Mexico, 2002,  
watercolor, 20 x 30.*

One of my indispensable pieces of equipment is a painting sketchbook. Over the years, my sketchbooks have become a diary of my travels, a compact biography of my interests, and a record of my artistic development. Some of the paintings are quick notations of atmosphere and light, while others are finished pieces that could be removed and framed. Perhaps the most important attribute of these images is their ability to transport me to the moment of inspiration. In this sense my sketchbook paintings function as visual mnemonic devices.

The sketches are vital in part because of the conditions under which they are created. When dealing with fleeting atmospheric effects, bad weather, or the constraints of traveling long distances on foot, I am restricted to using only my sketchbook. The compact size and light weight of the sketchbook makes it per-

fect for spontaneous painting along a hiking trail. By working quickly in a small format, I am forced to paint with an economy of strokes and a looseness of style that brings out the essence of my subject, without engaging in a lot of overthinking. This practice is essential to the development of my work. I use my field sketches to create larger, more finished paintings in the controlled environment of my studio, where the challenge is to recreate the spontaneity of the sketches in the face of unlimited time and a dependable environment.

Like most plein air painters, I paint outdoors at home as well as on planned excursions. I cannot allow, nor would I wish to have, an interruption in the constant flow of my work. It is all too easy to lose one's hand by not painting, even for a short while. This happened to me recently after I injured my right



**My sketchbook studies for Waterfall, Colorado.**

shoulder and could not work at an easel for several weeks. The only thing that saved me was painting in my sketchbook. Once I was healed, it took me several more weeks to get enough strength, flow, and rhythm in my strokes to create any larger finished piece. This experience reinforced my commitment to keeping sketchbooks.

### MY PAINTING GEAR

As a direct result of limiting my equipment to the bare essentials, I radically changed the range and scope of my foot-powered painting trips. I used to carry a half-size French easel and a backpack of supplies, but the weight of that equipment limited me to sites within a few hours' walk of my car. To solve the weight problem, I used a bathroom scale to measure the relative weight of each piece of my gear so I could reduce my burden to 25 pounds or less. I replaced heavy equip-

ment with lighter models without sacrificing utility or performance. At that time I had no choice but to design and build my own. Today, the options are vast. There are a few small companies dedicated to developing and manufacturing lightweight painting equipment for the plein air painter. By examining my thinking and approach to painting in the field, I was able to expand the range of painting locations.

I replaced my heavy half-size French easel with a 10"-x-12" Maier pochade box and an 8"-x-12" palm-sized box. Although they are principally for my oil work, both boxes can be configured for watercolor. The Maier boxes are among the best of plein air equipment, and I use nothing else when I work outside in oil. They are composed of two elements: the outer box of black walnut, which holds either canvas or panels in the lid and provides space for brushes, thinner, and



**Waterfall, Colorado,  
2002, watercolor, 12 x 16.**

paints in the base; and the painting palette, which fits inside the box and lifts out and unfolds for use. The palette attaches to a lightweight tripod that is carried separately.

I choose to paint in watercolor when either my time is limited or extreme portability is required, for cross-country hiking, for example. I use a small metal folding palette that fits in my back pocket and holds either 12 full pans or 24 half pans of semimoist color, two small brushes, an 11"-x-14" Canson spiral-bound watercolor sketchbook, a graphite pencil, paper towels, and a small, collapsible plastic water container.

For longer excursions, I use a day pack, so I can also include a small quiver of extra brushes, a John Pike Palette, and a 12"-x-16" block of Arches paper. I can also add my rain gear, lunch, camera, water purifier, and water—everything I will need for a full day

of hiking and painting. Overnight camping requires another 30 pounds of survival gear and provisions, but the painting equipment remains essentially the same. I sacrifice the comfort of an easel for the savings in weight. It's rarely a problem to find a flat surface to work on, although as I get older, I am beginning to see the value of having a pair of kneepads!

Compared to painting outdoors, I feel that the studio environment can be dangerously tame and predictable. A few severely inclement days indoors are tolerable, but more than that and I begin to feel like a caged animal. So, I keep my portable kit waiting at all times near the door, ready for any break in the weather. This is the beauty of having a well-equipped and lightweight painting kit. When the sun and the clouds begin their magnificent ballet, I grab my gear and rush out the door. Timing is everything.



### A DAY ON LOCATION

“Let’s go!” I said to my wife, Ann. The sun was starting to come up, and I wanted to be well away from the Upper Beaver Meadows parking area before then. We had spent our first few days in Rocky Mountain National Park getting acclimated to the altitude and were ready for a beautiful walk to our painting site. The Windy Gulch Trail we intended to follow skirts the edge of an escarpment and offers a fabulous aerial view of Moraine Park. Our backpacks contained mostly painting gear, water, and lunch, so our hike would not be very strenuous and we could focus on painting.

Ann and I have spent nearly 30 years traveling and painting together. We are accustomed to the early morning starts required to capture superior light and to avoid the frequent and dangerous afternoon electrical storms that occur in the mountains during summer. We set off in the chilly dawn and hiked until

*My reference sketch for Moonrise Manhattan, Kansas.*

midmorning. As we came around a deeply shaded bend, the trail suddenly opened into the dazzling light at the cliff edge. Below us spread the entire Moraine and a spectacular vista east to the ramparts of the Front Range—a perfect panorama for painting. The weather conditions were ideal, and we arrived with plenty of time to make detailed sketches.

I rapidly deployed my gear on the ground and walked back and forth a few times, framing the scene with my hands while I searched for a challenging composition. I settled on a rock perch to the left, which allowed me a sweeping view and included the suggestion of a nearby spruce tree for scale.

To begin, I sketched a light graphite outline of the major masses in the scene. The challenge was to recreate the illusion of vast distance and aerial perspective on a small piece of paper. I analyzed each set of strokes I would make, the colors I would need to mix,



and the order in which those colors would be applied. In essence, I preainted the entire scene in my mind, visualizing each move and the finished result. Although it takes a few minutes to complete an entire painting in my imagination, the technique saves me from wasting precious painting time. Also, since the strong sunlight and very dry air in the mountains conspire to dry out washes of color and the paints on the palette, I find that working quickly and efficiently is essential to the success of my watercolor painting. Of course, sometimes my imagined painting far outshines my painted results, but that's just part of the fun.

Once I started painting, I worked furiously, laying in washes from light to dark and applying staining colors and sedimentaries one over another until I built up a softly layered image of color and value. The dry air and wind caused some problems when I tried to create any fluidity in my washes, so I shifted to a wet-

***Moonrise Manhattan,  
Kansas, 2002,  
watercolor, 20 x 30.***

on-dry technique. I saved all the details until the last few moments and painted them loosely but decisively. When I looked at my watch, I couldn't believe that nearly an hour had passed since I began. It felt like only moments. Such is the time-altering power of an intense focus! Although I was reasonably happy with my results, I knew that it would take some time before I could accurately assess the success of this painting.

We rewarded our efforts with lunch and stayed to admire the view, only packing up our gear as a storm began to develop on top of us. Our easy walk downhill was filled with the satisfaction of a fine morning spent hiking and painting in a spectacular place and the knowledge that we had preserved that memory forever in our sketchbooks. Perhaps these little paintings will be developed into larger studio pieces, or perhaps they will simply remain as they are—mementos of a specific time and place. ■