For a number of years, my wife, Ann, and I maintained a studio only a few yards from the banks of the Hudson River in the picturesque hamlet of Garrison, New York. Because of that beautiful location and our concerns about the fragile environment, we became deeply involved in efforts to raise the public's level of consciousness about vital conservation issues. As I painted the river and the surrounding landscape in watercolor and pastel, I began to feel it was time for me to follow in the tradition of the writers and artists who had come before me: Henry James, Walt Whitman, Thomas Moran, and Karl Bodmer. In their travels, these artists had used their talents to describe the evolving life of this country. I began to think that, perhaps, it was my job in life to go out into the countryside, in all kinds of weather, and bring back nature's message as interpreted in my paintings.

I've seen nature display combinations of light and color that were beyond my imagination. In my paintings, it is all I can do to try to create a shadow of the experience that I have outdoors, or a kind of condensation, compressing two or three hours of time, experience, and emotion into a painting that appears to be an expression of a single moment. Not all days are peak experiences, of course: often, I must translate what I am feeling and seeing into what I would like to see, exaggerating, heightening, or deleting various elements in order to express something sublime.

In August 1989, my wife and I decided to close our studio and move back to

TRAVELING CROSS-COUN

Above: A photo of my French easel and painting supplies set up along the River Road in Lawrence, Kansas.

Right: *When God Softly Speaks*, 1990, watercolor, 23 1/2 x 41 1/2.

BY JOHN HULSEY

the Midwest, from where we could travel in all directions, especially to the southwestern states where we had previously found such visual excitement. We sold our car and bought a used VW camper equipped with a refrigerator, stove, and lots of storage space and sleeping area—a kind of rolling studio—so we could be self-reliant, going anywhere we chose.

A few months later, we held a final studio sale and the proceeds helped us finance the move and the first few weeks of our travel to Lawrence, Kansas.

In my paintings, I try to convey the sublime beauty of our American landscape.

MY WORKING PROCEDURES

Before I describe how our journey progressed, it might be helpful to explain how I have, through a process of trial and error, established a quick and efficient method of painting outdoors. I use two basic sizes of Arches watercolor blocks, 10" x 14" and 4" x 6", depending on whether the light conditions are stable or quickly moving. When painting a sunset or a storm, I obviously work on a smaller scale than when painting rows of corn.

Sometimes I stand while painting at my French easel, using a full John Pike palette. When I hike to the site, however, I take a fold-

TRY WITH WATERCOLORS

ing stool, lap desk, and my Winsor & Newton half-pan set of paints.

I don't concern myself with a lot of detail when I am working outdoors, preferring to add those later when I am back in my studio. On location, I focus on basic masses of color, shape, and light. I am interested in conveying my emotional response to the light and landscape around me, and that is something that cannot be easily captured on photographic film. I do take photos for detail reference, but I have to be mindful of the fact that photographs flatten the perspective and generalize the pattern of light and dark.

Sometimes I develop large, finished paintings from my color sketches but, lately, I find I prefer the looseness and suggestive quality of my original sketches rather than the controlled studio pieces.

I feel that I must paint outdoors where the real learning takes place. I believe that it is better to let the imagination of the viewer interact with the picture and fill in details. That way, the art can be participatory rather than passive. It is difficult to balance the need for detail with suggestiveness, and this is a major challenge for me. Although I have failed in some of my attempts to paint directly from nature, I paint outdoors primarily to enjoy the experience. When teaching, I work outdoors with my students as often as possible and stress these principles to them.

MY TRAVELS WITH WATERCOLORS

From November through February 1990, my wife and I spent time exploring and painting the local landscape of Kansas and getting settled in our new home. By March, we were ready to head south to New Mexico, where we first spent a week in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains high above Santa Fe. We camped in the snow in Hyde State Park at 9,000-feet elevation, where it was bitter cold at night. The light from that vantage point was brilliant, and the days were warm enough for me to paint the landscape.

As often happens when I'm outdoors, the worst weather—cold winds pushing a sudden snowstorm across the desert plateau

Our VW camper parked at Foss Lake, Oklahoma.

Above: *Prairie Light*, 1990, watercolor, 14 x 30½. Collection the artist.

Below: *After the Tornado*, 1990, watercolor, 24½ x 41¼. Collection Willis C. Theis, Jr.

from the Jemez Mountains right into my face—brought the most spectacular light and cloud formations one could ever hope to see. With my nose dripping and hands numb, I painted two quick 10"-x-14" watercolors in the light that remained, capturing the magnificent sunset that unfolded before me. Then I packed up my supplies in the dusky light and returned to our camper to discover that Ann had fixed a good, hot dinner complete with candlelight. What could be better?

The next day we visited Bandelier National Monument, located about an hour from Santa Fe, near Los Alamos. Bandelier is the ancient cliff-dwelling home of the early Anasazi inhabitants of New Mexico. There is a clear stream running through the canyon that forms Bandelier, fenced in by wonderful, eroded cliffs. We followed the stream's path through the woods for several miles until, all of a sudden, the canyon opened up to an immense light-filled canyon vista, revealing a precarious trail alongside the cliff which overlooked a double waterfall in one direction, and miles of wandering canyons in the other. After hiking and painting all day, we returned to Hyde State Park in the evening. We never had to worry about a campsite; we were alone except for a woman and her two dogs in a trailer nearby who, the ranger told us, carried a pistol. At week's end, we returned home, having traveled through Texas and Oklahoma with a memorable sunset-timed camping stop at Foss Lake, Oklahoma.

We spent April and most of May working in our new studios in Lawrence, but by the end of May we were ready to head east. We made stops at a state park in Indiana and went on to Ohio's Pymatuning State Park on the Pymatuning Reservoir, which is bisected by the Ohio and Pennsylvania borders. After another week or so of travel, we found ourselves camping beside Lake Erie, in time to paint the magnificent sunset at Geneva State Park in Ohio.

Near Ogden, Illinois, we almost ran straight into a killer tornado but didn't realize it until Ann turned on the radio in time to hear the warnings to take shel-

Far left: The sun setting over Lake Erie.

Left: Capturing the sunset along Lake Erie with my portable equipment.

Below: *Sunset Over Clinton*, 1990, watercolor, 5¼ x 14. Collection Mr. and Mrs. Jack Holland.

ter. We came to the frightening realization that we were at ground zero! After seeking refuge and sustenance at a nearby fast-food restaurant, we went out to photograph the incredible after-storm cloud formations. I made a small color sketch and later used that, along with my photographs, to create a more finished painting in my studio.

In August, we headed back to New Mexico, this time taking a different route through Colorado, stopping overnight at the John Martin Reservoir State Park. Then we drove through the immense Comanche National Grassland, where we were nearly blown off the road by military jets on extremely low-level "top gun" flight maneuvers. The "air show" was very exciting!

We headed across the vast tablelands of New Mexico, which are hemmed on the north by low mountains. We gradually entered the Sangre de Cristo Mountains through Cimarron Canyon. We followed the narrow two-lane road that owes its existence to the pass carved by the trout stream feeder of the Canadian River. We drove up to spectacular Eagle Nest Lake and on through scenic high country, and then on to Taos.

A couple of days later, we discovered that our propane fill-valve had malfunctioned and dumped all our gas for cooking and refrigeration, so we bought a cooler, ice, and a park map which gave us the route up the Pecos River and the way to our campground at Jack's Creek, situated about 9,000 feet in elevation. That turned out to be a perfect artist's location, for there the air was crystal-clear and the sky was filled with brilliant stars. Here, hummingbirds joined us for breakfast. The hillsides were dotted with

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Clockwise, from upper left: On the road to Jack's Creek.

The photo shows me painting at our campsite at Jack's Creek, located near Pecos, New Mexico.

This hummingbird joined us for breakfast one morning.

***Afternoon Shower on the Pecos*, 1990, watercolor, 10 x 14. Collection the artist.**

aspen, fir, spruce, and piñon trees. Panoramic mountain vistas opened up between the huge boulders along the trails. The peaks in front of me were all scoured naked at the top, and the entire range changed color from charcoal through indigo, blue-green, chrome oxide green, and back to a pale, misty blue as the clouds moved over swiftly, arbitrarily depositing rain, shadow, and light in their movement across the sky.

Nature continually challenged me with breathtaking subject matter and almost impossible painting conditions. On sunny days in these spectacular mountains, I had to apply liberal doses of sunblock on every exposed part of my hands and face. The next day, however, could present a completely different situation in which I had to brace myself against an intense hailstorm. I did my best to work quickly, to paint as long as I could, and to improvise when circumstances were not ideal. I took the total experience back to my studio where I tried to capture all of it in my paintings.

The American landscape offers a tremendous variety of breathtaking vistas. If I can convey some sense of the beauty and power of those natural resources in my paintings, perhaps more people will understand the importance of conservation and preservation. The link between artists of the past and future will continue, provided we do not destroy the magnificent source of our inspiration. ■

John Hulsey conducts workshops in the Hudson Valley. Hulsey's workshops will be held in Santa Fe in the near future. He is represented by Francesca Anderson Fine Art in Lexington, Massachusetts and by L'Atelier, Inc.,in Piermont, New York.

Clockwise, from upper left: Painting along the Beaverkill River in upstate New York.

***Rio Grande, South of Taos,* 1990, watercolor, 8 1/2 x 9. Collection the artist.**

Painting in a boulder field above Jack's Creek in New Mexico.

***Bandelier,* 1990, watercolor, 10 x 14. Collection the artist.**