

LYNN MEHTA

Structured ‘Messes’

Lynn Mehta uses stiff bristle brushes and palette knives to apply thick, unblended strokes of oil color to her plein air paintings. She maintains compositional clarity and color intensity by separating mixtures according to their temperature and transparency.

When viewed up close, Lynn Mehta’s plein air paintings seem as though they are made with jumbles of arbitrary color mixtures. Yellow flows into blues and into viridian in active strokes of a bristle brush. They prompt one to remember the work of the Russian-French painter Chaim Soutine (1893-1943), who represented figures, farm animals, and European landscapes with thick oil colors. He captured a sense of life in the subjects without overburdening them with detail. Mehta does much the same thing.

Step back a few feet from one of Mehta’s paintings, and all the marks on the canvas coalesce into what appears to be a detailed representation of a barn, building, animal, landscape,

Frenchman Bay

2016, oil, 9 x 20 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air



or other observed subject. She performs a kind of magic act by suggesting something with her brush marks that is not as clearly evident as we imagine. It’s like squinting so one sees only shapes and then opening one’s eyes to see a clearly defined subject.

The trick behind Mehta’s magic act is to make sure the strokes of oil color are, in fact, controlled, calculated, and balanced. That means Mehta has to carefully select the pigments she wants to mix on the palette and on the canvas. “I’ve always painted with thick paint,” she explains, “and while my palette may seem to be a mess, it is actually well organized and balanced in terms of the temperature and degree of transparency.”

She goes on, “I draw a line down the center of the palette and keep the dark, transparent colors on one side of the line and the opaques on the other side. As I work, I make a point of keeping the darks from going across the line





Fishing at the Sea
 2015, oil, 8 x 16 in.
 Collection the artist
 Plein air

into the lights and, vice versa, the lights into the darks. That helps me maintain the important value and color relationships that will make the painting successful no matter how thick the oils may become.

“I like to say I work with a limited palette of colors, plus some ‘visitors’ who sit on the side. The basic transparent colors are ultrama-

rine blue, manganese blue, alizarin crimson, and transparent orange; and the opaques include cadmium lemon yellow, cadmium yellow medium, cadmium orange, and cadmium red light. The visitors are viridian, cobalt blue, turquoise manganese blue, and viridian. I often try out other visitors, especially colors from Vasari Classic Artists’ Oil Colors, including some new

Fishing Shack on the Chesapeake
 2015, oil, 12 x 16 in.
 Collection the artist
 Plein air

ARTIST DATA

NAME: Lynn Mehta
BIRTH YEAR: 1963
LOCATION: Alexandria, VA
INFLUENCES: “Tom Thomson, Richard Diebenkorn, Vincent Van Gogh, Edgar Payne, Mary Cassatt, George Bellows.
Contemporary: Danil Volkov, Roos Shuring.”
WEBSITE: www.lynnmehta.com





Rainy Day Alleyway

2016, oil, 12 x 12 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air



Rocks and Reef

2015, oil, 12 x 16 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air

visitors such as Vasari's video blue and pale yellow that actually work as warm and cool whites."

Individual strokes of paint are allowed to blend on the painting, but Mehta avoids brushing the paints so much that they lose their natural luminosity and clarity. "I leave the strokes alone unless they are distracting," she says. "I try not to work on top of other strokes and, instead, work around the edges of the painted shapes to avoid making the colors muddy." Once the artist has finished a painting, she scrapes



Maine Coast

2016, oil, 12 x 16 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air

Vernal Pond and Pink Granite

2016, oil, 16 x 8 in.

Collection the artist


Plein air

her palette and saves the piles of opaque colors in one corner of the palette to use as a base of “mud,” while elsewhere on the palette, she piles up scrapings of the dark colors.

In addition to using a metal palette knife, Mehta works with sturdy flat- and filbert-shaped bristle brushes, as well as a rigger, a quarter-inch brush, and a well used half-inch brush. In addition, she sometimes adds alkyd medium to her oil colors to have them set up more quickly.

In terms of Mehta’s process for selecting a subject to paint, she looks for something unusual in terms of the composition of shapes and colors. “I’m not concerned about a ‘thing’ or an identifiable subject,” she says. “Instead, I am more concerned about picking an intriguing pattern of abstract shapes and colors that capture my attention. I walk around an area hoping to find inspiration, especially in locations where I have painted before. As often as not, a familiar place isn’t appealing at a different time of day or season of the year and I have to go in search of other potential spots. Also, if I travel to a spot with the expectation that the actual setting will match the mental image I have been forming, it doesn’t match the actual place. I have to adjust my thinking and keep searching.

“When I do pick a location and begin painting, I make the marks needed to identify the place, but I quickly shift my focus to a concern for the abstract shapes and value relationships. My inspiration ultimately comes from a response to the balance of light and dark value, the variety and directions movement of the shapes, and the atmosphere that unifies things. I work around that to develop an interesting painting out of it. The beauty of painting outside is the opportunity to discover and pursue the adventure. That’s one of the reasons I like to travel — because that expands the painting opportunities.”

The development of Mehta’s approach began when she was a child, a high school and college student, and as a workshop participant in classes taught by Randall Sexton, Maggie Siner, Ray Roberts, Sara Linda Poly, Carolyn Anderson, and Roos Schuring. “I learned some important lessons about the basics of plein air painting from several of those workshop leaders,” she says, “and I received valuable advice from Roos and Carolyn about painting freely while still holding things together.” 

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



See more of Lynn Mehta’s plein air paintings in the expanded digital edition of *PleinAir*.



ARTIST PROFILE



Early Winter Fishing

2016, oil, 26 x 36 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air



Barns

2016, oil, 14 x 18 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air

ARTIST PROFILE

**Lobster Boat**

2016, oil, 12 x 16 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air