

M. SHAWN CORNELL

# Limits That Open Possibilities

Missouri artist M. Shawn Cornell often imposes parameters on where and what he will paint in order to force himself to look more carefully and think creatively about his plein air paintings. He is currently working toward an exhibition of 125 paintings of the sparse Missouri prairie landscape.



**Thursday, January 21, 2010 (10:15-12:00)**  
 Location: Shaw Nature Reserve, Gray Summit, MO  
 2010, oil, 12 x 12 in.  
 Private collection  
 Plein air

“Setting boundaries has always motivated me to work harder and more creatively,” says M. Shawn Cornell. “For example, I never work on my plein air paintings once I’ve left a location and removed myself from all the sensory aspects of the landscape. And I often commit to exploring a narrowly defined location, so I really have to know it well and search for paintable material I might have overlooked. All that makes the process more challenging, and I believe it has helped my paintings get progressively better because I avoided the easy and the obvious.”

Cornell continues, “Most every aspect of my plein air painting is a result of solving problems, some that are imposed on me, like changing light and weather, and others that I set for myself. I once created a solo exhibition titled *500 Foot Radius* where I only permitted myself a 500-foot radius from which to paint all of my images. It was an exercise in what I termed ‘micro-regionalism.’ I discovered that the more familiar I became with the area, the more I noticed its uniqueness and beauty. Ironically, it was the gallery’s wall space and the show’s deadline that were the true limiting factors. Another show I created, for the Honeywell Center in Wabash, Indiana, was called *A Week in Wabash*, where I only allowed myself one week to create all of the oil paintings. Talk about pressure! But what I discovered was — I could do it! Boundaries — we are constantly pushing them. It’s always enlightening to have self-imposed boundaries push me.”

The selection of materials and techniques Cornell uses on location is also a result of his setting parameters, valuing simplicity, and working efficiently. “I first picked up the paintbrush in October 1999 and took a workshop with Billyo O’Donnell, who works with a rainbow of color, so that’s what I used,”

## HISTORIC INFLUENCES

Thursday, October 13, 2011 (10:00-1:00)

Location: Cliff Cave Park, St. Louis, MO

2011, oil, 12 x 12 in.

Private collection

Plein air

### ARTIST DATA

**NAME:** M. Shawn Cornell

**BIRTH YEAR:** 1963

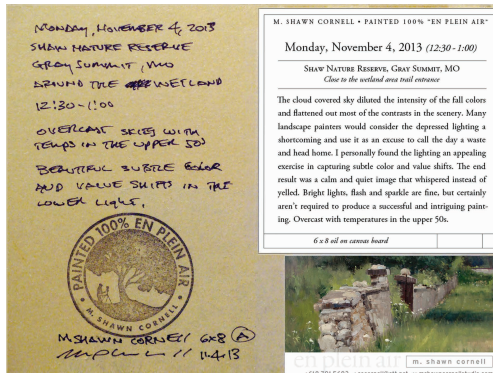
**LOCATION:** St. Louis, MO

**INFLUENCES:** "Andrew Wyeth, Joaquin

Sorolla, Winslow Homer, Edgar Payne,

Richard Schmid, Scott L. Christensen."

**WEBSITE:** [www.mshawncornellstudio.com](http://www.mshawncornellstudio.com)



The back of a painting shows its "birth certificate."

he says. "Then I read Kevin Macpherson's book *Fill Your Oil Paintings With Light & Color*, in which he shows how to use a limited palette of tube colors, and that made even more sense to me, as a graphic designer accustomed to seeing printed colors in terms of cyan, magenta, yellow, and black (CMYK). Those transparent primaries don't correspond to artists' paints, so I picked ultramarine blue, cadmium red deep, cadmium yellow, and titanium white. Since then I have switched from cadmium red deep to straight cadmium red, but otherwise I'm still working with the same colors.

"I like to paint wet-into-wet, so I prefer using Signet flat brushes with long bristles because they don't dig into the surface of the oil colors. I am very aggressive in pushing paint around so the flat ends of the bristles quickly become filberts. The only solvent I use is odorless mineral spirits, although I sometimes add alkyd medium to the paint toward the end of the painting process."

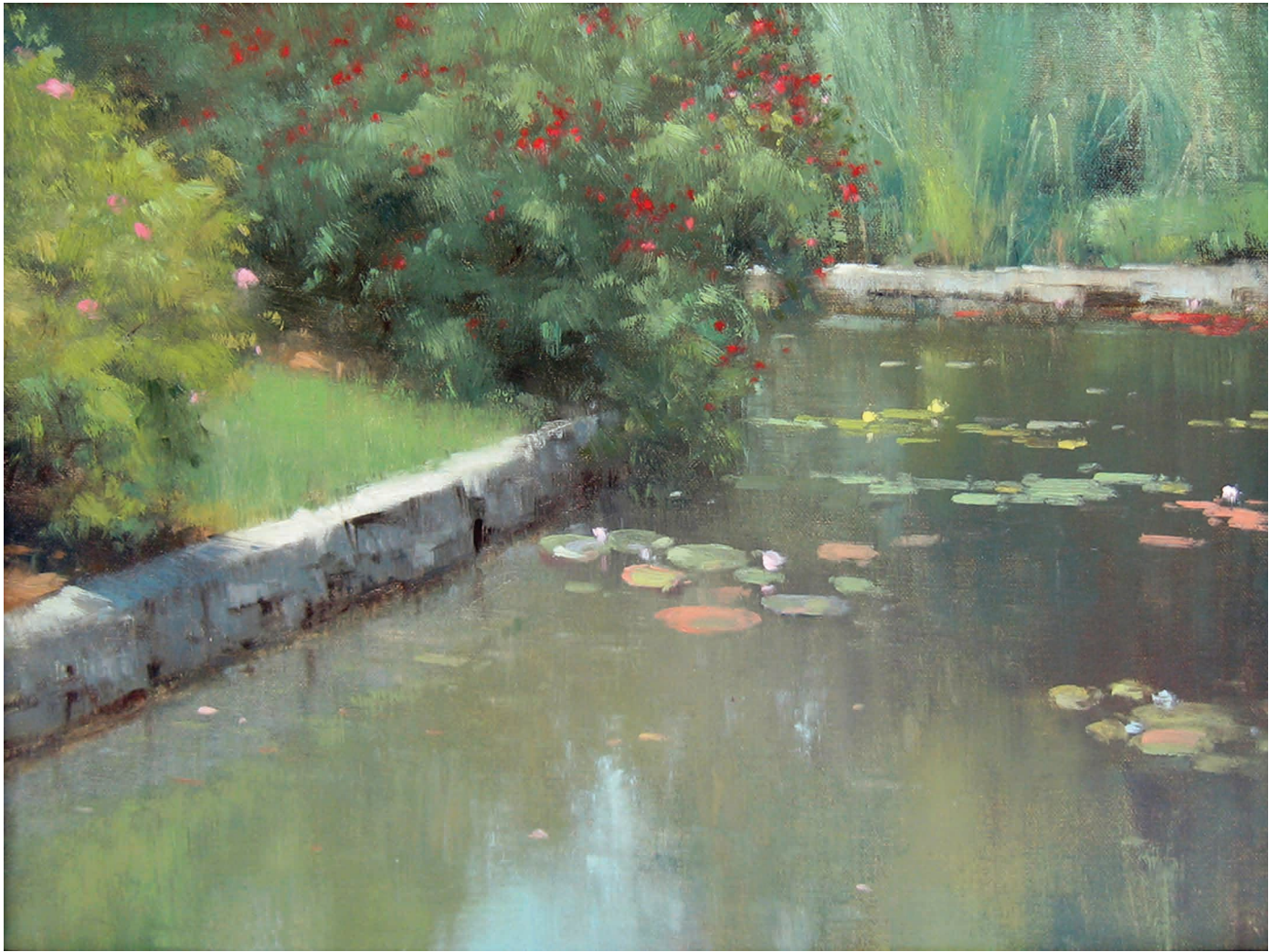
When developing small paintings on location (from 5 x 5 up to 18 x 24 inches), Cornell paints on sheets of Pintura composite board covered with canvas. For anything larger, he works on stretched canvas. "I change the sizes in an effort to avoid getting into a rut," he says. "I spend anywhere from 15 minutes to five hours on each painting, depending on the size, complexity, and weather. In addition to using the brushes, I scrape into the paint, push it



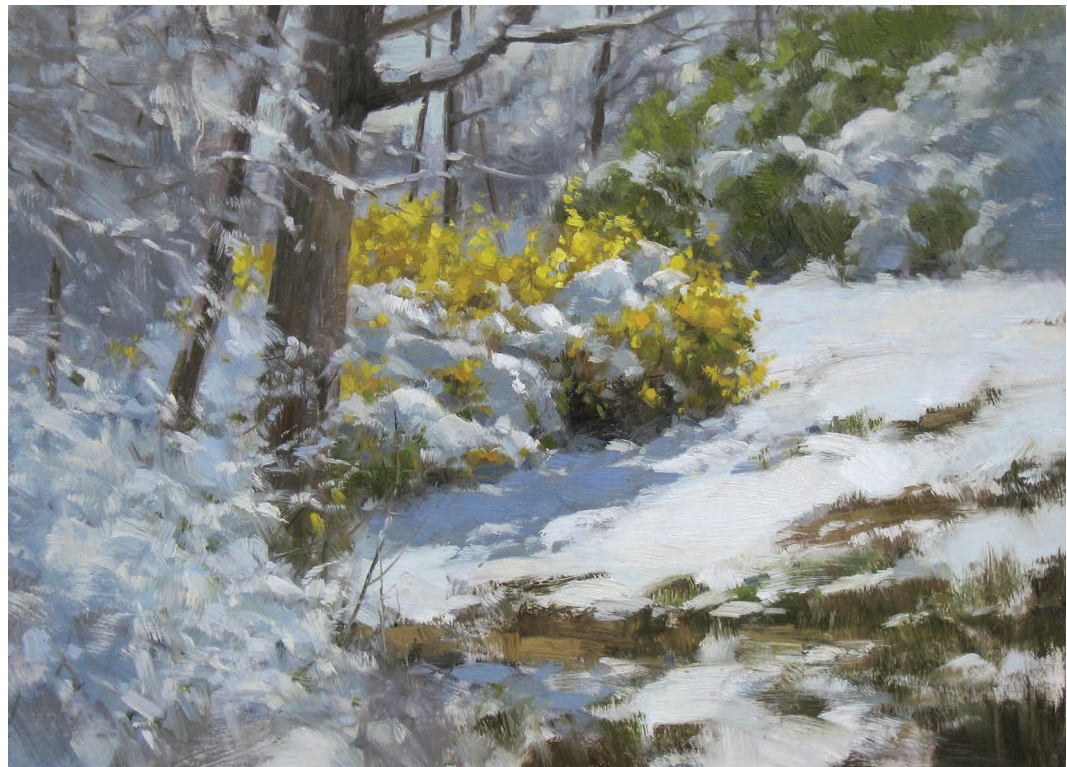
around with a paper towel, and work textures into the oils that blend edges, unify colors, or create the illusion of great detail. I don't go back to the same location a second day because I like to follow through with an idea until it is fully resolved. I make it a practice not to touch a plein air painting after I leave a location because I want every aspect of the picture to be an immediate response to my observations."

Cornell makes a point of writing a brief story about each painting created *en plein air* that includes a mention of the day, time, location, weather conditions, and any information he might have about the subject. "I like to refer to these documents as the birth certificates for my paintings," he says. "I include that one- or two-paragraph story on the back of the panels and canvases so people can learn how it came into being. If I'm exhibiting at an outdoor fair, as I often do, I try to engage people by telling them the story about the pictures that attract their attention. That helps me sell the pictures because the stories give them another way of enjoying the painting and describing it to their friends."

Cornell adds, "I can create the illusion of dimension in a painting, but to acquire true depth, it needs that story behind it."



**Saturday, September 11,  
2010 (9:30-11:45)**  
*Location: Tower Grove Park,  
St. Louis, MO*  
2010, oil, 12 x 16 in.  
*Private collection*  
*Plein air*



**Sunday, March 27,  
2011 (11:00-2:15)**  
*Location: Bee Tree Park,  
St. Louis, MO*  
2011, oil, 12 x 16 in.  
*Private collection*  
*Plein air*



**Sunday, April 1, 2012 (10:15-1:00)**  
 Location: Demenil Place, St. Louis, MO  
 2012, oil, 12 x 12 in.  
 Private collection  
 Plein air

(Below) **Tuesday, February 8, 2011 (10:00-3:00)**  
 Location: Castlewood Park, Ballwin, MO  
 2011, oil, 24 x 18 in.  
 Private collection, Plein air



**Ten Dragonfly**  
 2013, pottery,  
 3 1/2 x 6 in.  
 Collection  
 the artist

Shortly after getting involved in plein air painting, Cornell, his father, and several friends formed a plein air group, the Missouri Plein Air Association, which now includes about a dozen members who organize paint-outs every Sunday in the region. Cornell says the best part about each Sunday's outing is getting to paint with his dad, Dave Cornell, who has also become an accomplished plein air painter.

In addition to marketing his paintings through outdoor fairs, Cornell co-owns OA Gallery in Kirkwood, Missouri, where he displays his own work along with paintings by four other artists: Lisa Ober, Steve Morris, Bob Bertram, and Bryan Haynes. "We take turns working in the gallery and we plan monthly exhibitions," Cornell explains. "We also rent out the gallery space for fashion shows, bridal showers, and other social events that help us pay the rent and give us exposure to people who might not otherwise come to the gallery."

Cornell and his wife became interested in making ceramics several years ago, and now they spend every Thursday night, their date night, engaging that interest and creating unique pieces. Cornell has also revived his graphic design interests and produces poster-size, vector-based images inspired by his paintings. "My brother-in-law asked me to make a sign for him," he says, "so I went back to Adobe Illustrator graphic software and created an image that had the look of a serigraph or block print. That got me started making editions of 12 large, poster-size, limited-edition reproductions and 50 smaller prints. That has become a good way to use my time during the winter, when it is harder to get outdoors to paint."

The most exciting recent development in Cornell's career: He has been invited to exhibit at the Albrecht-Kemper Museum of Art in St. Joseph, Missouri. "Terry Oldham, the director of the museum, saw my work and asked me to make a proposal, so I outlined a plan to fill 300 linear feet of wall space with paintings of the Missouri prairie," says the artist. "That was accepted, and now I am in the process of creating 125 paintings for the exhibition, which will open in November 2015. It's an opportunity to explore the prairie during different seasons, times of day, controlled burns, and vantage points. The paintings will range in size from 6 x 8 up to 40 x 60 inches.

"I'm so glad I made the decision to become a full-time artist in 2007. Plein air painting and the related festivals are great. In fact, I met my wife at one of our MOPAPA outings, and now I don't want to travel to an event unless it is close enough for both of us to travel together with all my supplies in the van. I feel blessed to be able to spend my time doing something I really love with people who are special to me." 📷

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

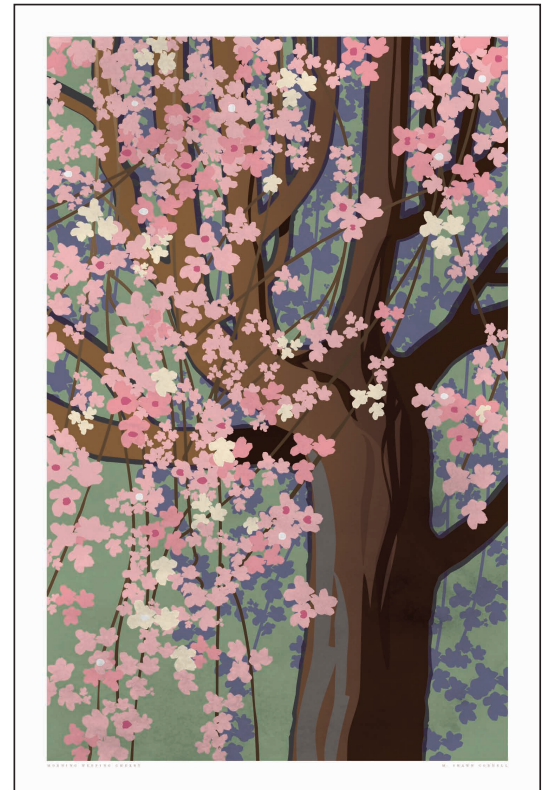


See more of **M. Shawn Cornell's** artwork  
 in the expanded digital edition of *PleinAir*.

## ARTIST PROFILE



*M. Shawn Cornell painting Thursday, July 26, 2012 (9:45-12:15), Horseshoe Bay Farms, Door County, WI, during the 2012 Door County Plein Air Festival.*



**Morning Weeping Cherry**  
2013, print, 36 x 24 in.  
Collection the artist

**Sunday, April 1, 2012**  
(10:15-1:00)  
Location: Demenil Place, St.  
Louis, MO  
2012, oil, 12 x 12 in.  
Private collection  
Plein air



**Sunday, March 11, 2012**  
(11:45-1:45)  
Location: Eckert's Farm,  
Belleville, IL  
2012, oil, 12 x 24 in.  
Private collection  
Plein air