



L. McNeer

CREATING A TRIBE, *Reaping the Benefits*

This summer, five top-notch painters gathered in an Idaho campground to create, learn, and enjoy the camaraderie of like-minded professionals.

BY BOB BAHR

The five painters — Suzie Baker, Shanna Kunz, Stephanie Marzella, Lori McNee, and Elizabeth Robbins — say they are in similar stations in life in terms of their professional and personal lives. All are empty-nesters and established, successful artists with upper-tier gallery representation. Not much is terribly similar about them otherwise.

“Our styles are quite different,” Kunz says. “Suzie is an amazingly solid plein air painter. Lori is more contemporary in style, while Liz [Robbins] is very traditional. Stephanie is a tonalist and



Front to back: Stephanie Marzella, Lori McNee,
Suzie Baker, Elizabeth Robbins, Shanna Kunz

Evening Song
Lori McNee
2024, oil, 20 x 20 in.
Collection the artist
Studio from plein air study



A typical scene encountered by the group of artists on their visit to Idaho

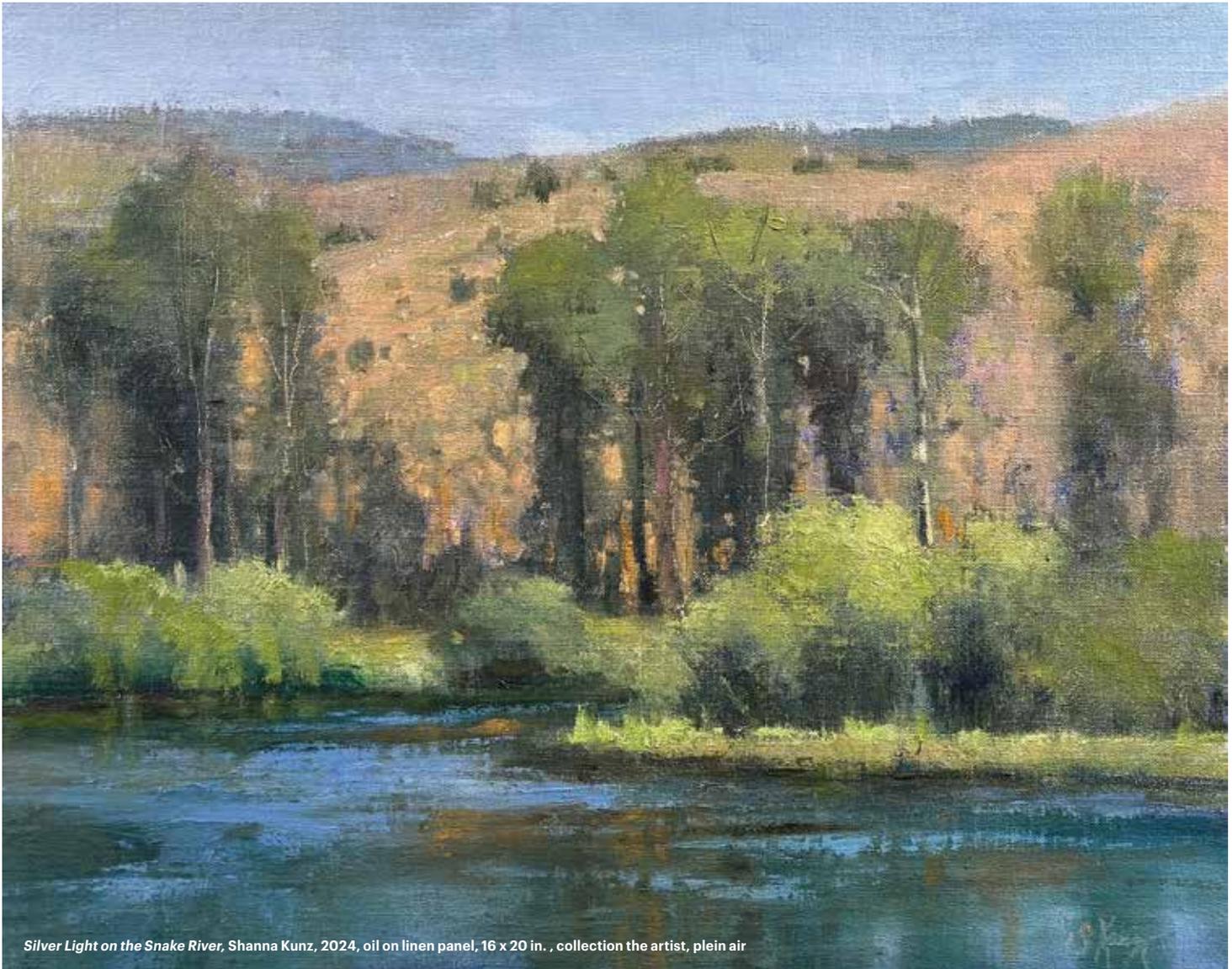
uses more color than I could ever imagine using. And I have my own thing. But we are all easygoing and easy to travel with. We're all friends now."

CONFRONTING CHALLENGES

Marzella was the only artist from the East Coast, and her learning curve was unique. She took the trip as an opportunity to not only shore up her plein air skills, but to try out a new painting surface: birchwood panels sealed with four layers of clear gesso. She also confronted new subject matter. "I was facing different materials, color palette, and terrain," says Marzella. "Those gals know how to paint mountains, and I was the only one from the East, so I was out of my comfort zone. My palette in the studio has like 60 colors on it, and now I was stripping down to a limited palette of only 13 colors and what I can carry on my back. I'm not sure that's the palette I'll use in the future, but my suitcase needed to be 50 pounds or less!"

Robbins was also dealing with a dramatic change in subject matter. A soup-to-nuts floral painter, she plants flower seeds, nurtures them in her garden, picks the blossoms, then paints them. "The trip worked out well because each of us have such different styles," Robbins says. "We are all on a professional level, but our looks are so different, so there's no competition." All five of the painters mentioned the relative lack of competition among the participants, in part because events in the plein air world encourage such competitive thinking about art, and in part because artists undeniably compete against one another for gallery space and collector dollars.

But Robbins' immediate concern was embracing the challenge of seeing the subject matter differently. "With still life, I am dealing with a depth of field of two or three feet," she says. "There, I was dealing with a quite different distance. So it's a different mindset because I'm dealing with



Silver Light on the Snake River, Shanna Kunz, 2024, oil on linen panel, 16 x 20 in. , collection the artist, plein air



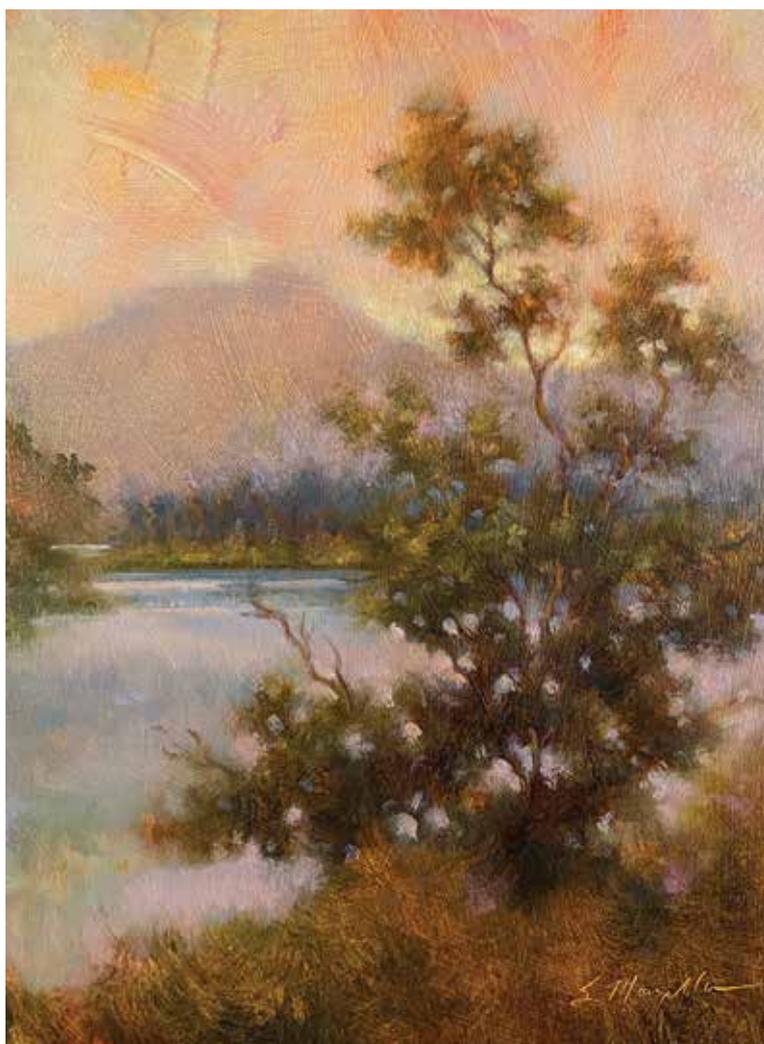
Hazy Day on the Snake, Lori McNee, 2024, oil on linen, 8 x 8 in., collection the artist, plein air

such depth in a painting. I also needed to switch my brain around because in the studio I have 5000 Kelvin light, which means cool light with warm shadows. In the mornings in the Idaho landscape, it was flipped around, with warm light and cool shadows. It required me to do some mental gymnastics.” She may have felt stretched, but it had its clear benefits.

“Painting the landscape forces me to simplify the value patterns,” says Robbins. “I have a lot of detail in my still lifes, so when I come back from painting en plein air, it makes me simplify my still lifes a bit.” The shifting light didn’t pose a problem for her, though. “I paint very fast, so the time constraint of changing light conditions didn’t affect me that much.”

The quintet encountered the usual hazards of plein air painting, including the summer heat that baked most of the country this past year. They also dealt with the smoke from wildfires. “I paint outside year-round, but all the plein air events are in the summer months, and in recent years, it seems like we’ve had a lot more fires,” says McNee. “It’s not fun to breathe all that smoke, but it works to my advantage because I like atmosphere. Idaho doesn’t have a lot of atmospheric perspective because it’s so clear, so I enjoyed having that smoke to push the mountains back some. It made for amazing sunsets. I’ve been working on my studio pieces based on the trip, and they are set at transitional times of day to capture that feeling.”

Crimson Twilight
 Shanna Kunz
 2024, oil on linen,
 24 x 30 in.
 Collection the artist
 Studio from plein air study



(ABOVE) Smoke from forest fires in the greater area caused significant atmospheric perspective, influencing the depiction of painted scenes. ● (LEFT) *Little Tree, Snake River*, Stephanie Marzella, 2024, oil, 8 x 6 in. , collection the artist, plein air

Marzella was pleased by the effect of the smoke as well. “I like to take my work almost to color-field painting, pushing toward the abstract,” she says. “It still will be a landscape, but it will be mine. My favorite time of day was when the mountains looked like a completely flat blue. But I never paint the color that is in front of me anyway. I’m not a blue-sky person very often; I sort of Stephanie-ize it. I’m amazed at people who can match the landscape so perfectly on location. In contrast, people walk up to my easel and say things like, ‘There are no clouds in the sky right now.’ But I have clouds in the painting, and I just say, ‘Yeah, I know.’”

MAKING IT HAPPEN

Robbins and Kunz are essentially neighbors in Utah, and McNee hails from Idaho. Marzella calls South Carolina home. And Baker is a Texan who is a devoted traveler. She participates in a number



(ABOVE) *Mountainside Harvest*, Stephanie Marzella, 2024, oil on panel, 6 x 12 in., collection the artist, studio from plein air study ● (LEFT) *Along the Snake River*, Suzie Baker, 2024, oil on linen, 12 x 16 in., collection the artist, plein air



of painting events and has a well-equipped trailer to transport her art materials and some creature comforts. She and Kunz enjoyed painting together in Bozeman last year at Plein Air Montana and dreamed up this year's trip. Robbins and Kunz had similarly been talking about a painting trip with like-minded friends for a few years. Baker and Kunz started the process of checking everyone's schedules and choosing possible dates, well in advance. "At least once a year I like to plan trips where the purpose is not to compete but to just be with other artists," Baker says. "Whether it's hiking, going to Paris, or going on a camper trip, I think every artist should do something similar."

Kunz was the one who found their destination this past summer. She suggested the Heise Hot Springs campground, located on the Snake River roughly halfway between Idaho Falls and Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Baker was judging the competition at Driggs Plein Air Festival

around the same time, so she would be in the area. "I knew about this place from my family trips there, and I think it turned out perfect," Kunz says. "My dad worked for the Forest Service up until I was in my 30s, then he worked at the nuclear site at Idaho Falls for 10 years. Growing up, we lived from San Francisco to Philadelphia and about 10 places in between. And that is what we did — we camped."

The campground had ample facilities for the artists and their campers and trailers, but most important, it was in a landscape with many potential subjects. "Any way you turned, you could find a painting," says Robbins. "We drove around the first night and scoped out places to paint, and that was great. I don't like to spend a lot of time hunting for subjects. I want to get painting." The whole endeavor worked for a simple reason: The artists were serious about painting. They shared meals and laughter and conversation, but all of them

were intent on getting work done.

"We are not just getting together and having fun ... although we are," says Baker. "A trip like this is akin to giving yourself a weeklong workshop, but instead of having a teacher, you are learning from the easel next to you. When you get together with other artists — peers — for the purpose of just painting alongside other excellent painters, you can't help but grow. In a competition setting, it's a masterclass, seeing the other work after you've turned in your painting. Here, it's shoulder to shoulder."

"For instance, Shanna chose a subject, and I was going to watch her, but her painting ended up being very different, in her voice, and in her way. She had a tool that she uses pretty regularly — a squeegee — and I used it on my painting. Now, I'm going to order one. When you paint in isolation in your studio or at an event, you definitely don't get that kind



Cottonwood Study, Suzie Baker, 2024, oil on panel, 6 x 8 in., collection the artist, plein air

of benefit. On these trips, you get a fresh perspective that you could be blind to because you're looking at your painting too much. It's a pretty delightful experience."

WHERE LEARNING HAPPENS

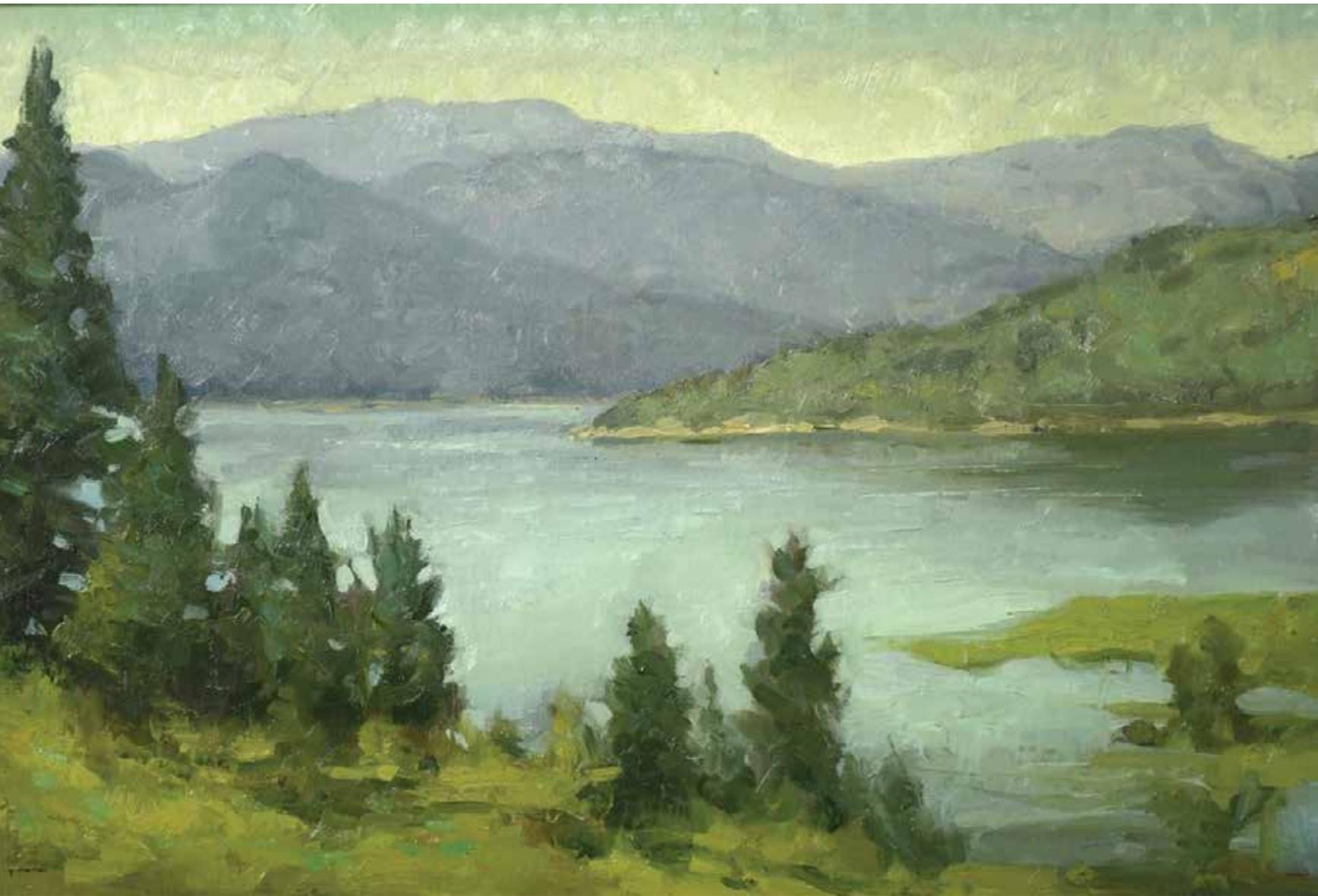
"There's always more to learn," Baker continues. We don't have enough life in us to learn it all. But learning keeps us young and keeps our minds growing."

Kunz concurs: "The best learning curves have been spending time with artists who are better than me. Try to find people who are better than you and have conversations to see how their mind operates. That gives you an opportunity to be yourself and find yourself; you get permission to be your best self."

"It's not about copying any aspect of what the others are doing. Each one of us has been painting for almost 30 years, so it's rarely about technical things. It's more about art philosophy and how we see things. Every one of us is as insecure as the day

Tony Grove, Elizabeth Robbins, 2024, oil on linen, 9 x 12 in., collection the artist, plein air





Palisades, Elizabeth Robbins, 2024, oil, 8 x 16 in. , collection the artist, studio from plein air study

we started painting, too. When you achieve a certain level, it's a different kind of confidence that allows us to struggle through. But we all want to up our game because we respect each other's work and approach so much. When we are painting, we walk around and look at each other's paintings, but most of the art talk starts from dinner on."

DOS AND DON'TS

Say you want to do something similar with your art friends. What do these five recommend as dos and don'ts?

"It's nice to have kindred spirits," McNee offers, "so find them. We get up early and stay up late to get a lot of painting done, so you want that kind of warrior attitude in the others. You will be dealing with bugs and weather, so you want people who are self-reliant and not too needy, but who will still be there to support each other. Getting outside to paint and getting that fresh inspiration with friends, photos, and studies to take back to the studio provides new inspiration for your studio work."

It was not terribly important to the quintet that they all were women, but it did make accommodations a lot easier to arrange. Of course, it's good to have safety in numbers when plein air painting — and unfortunately, that's even more true for women. But mostly, this trip was about professionals who know how and when to have fun and when to paint their butts off.

"The purpose is painting, not sleeping in or shopping," Baker points out. "Make sure the group is all artists. We all had the same agenda — to get up, pack lunch, and paint all day. Make time to share meals together. Visit a local museum together, if you can. Keep your group small enough to be manageable — six people, at the most. It's a great tradition. Remember, Sargent painted other painters painting"

Robbins says, "Be comfortable in your own skin so that you can take critiques and appreciate the expertise of your friends who are wonderful painters." To which, McNee adds, "We encourage each other and help each other. It's really a beautiful thing." ✎

BOB BAHR has written about visual art for various books and publications for 18 years. He lives and works in the Kansas City area.



Summer Swallows Study

Lori McNee

2024, gouache on paper, 2 1/2 x 6 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air



Summer Swallows

Lori McNee

2024, oil, 10 x 20 in.

Collection the artist

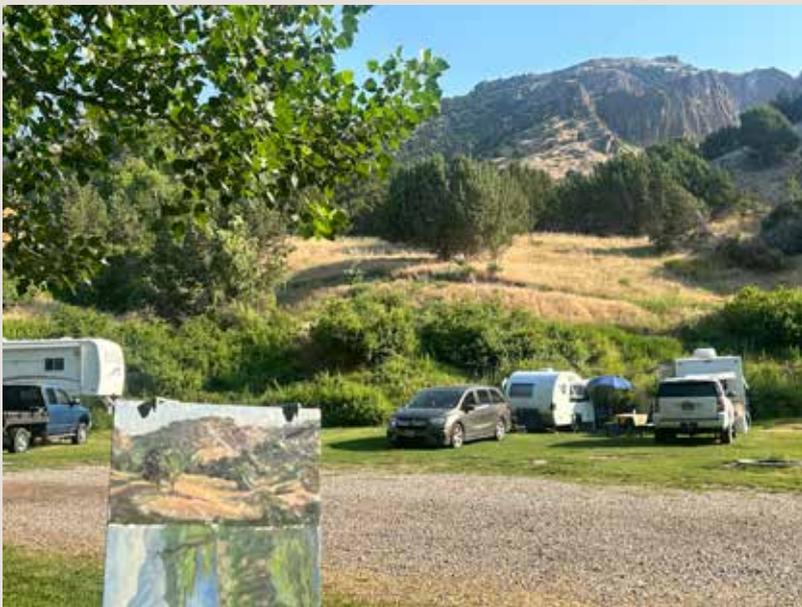
Studio from plein air study



From back: Marzella, Robbins, Kunz,
Baker, and McNee

High Noon
Shanna Kunz
2024, oil on panel, 16 x 20 in.
Collection the artist
Plein air





(CLOCKWISE FROM TOP) *Whispers of Twilight*, Stephanie Marzella, 2024, oil on wood, 6 x 12 in., collection the artist, plein air ● *Standing Tall*, Stephanie Marzella, 2024, oil on wood, 16 x 8 in., collection the artist, plein air and studio ● Elizabeth Robbins's painting in the campground where the artists stayed





Ririe, Idaho, Elizabeth Robbins, 2024, oil, 9 x 12 in., collection the artist, plein air



Stunning Idaho sunsets

