



Trent River No. 7

2009, graphite, 11 x 14.

All artwork this article collection the artist. Paintings courtesy The Mahler Fine Art, Raleigh, North Carolina.

Drawn From Nature

Marvin Saltzman paints in his North Carolina studio, but for inspiration, he travels—and draws—all around the world.

BY KENNETH J. PROCTER

Marvin Saltzman travels for inspiration and sketches on-site. “I would rent a Gîte de France—an apartment or house in the region—or in the case of Glacier Bay, a cruise ship,” he says. “My son and daughter-in-law live on the Trent River. They would take me up-river in a pontoon boat, and I would see a configuration to which I had a visual response. I would say ‘stop’ and do a sketch—some tone and some lines. Then further on, stop again.”

Sketching en plein air is inspiring, exhilarating, and exasperating. Nature is a shape-shifter. Trees sway in the breeze. Streams roil and foam. Clouds transmogrify. Light changes by the hour, sometimes by the minute; color changes with the light. In response to the moment, each of Saltzman’s sketches is a compositional note, a basic structure, a plan for further development. Editing a drawing is a painstaking process,



**Trent River
Winter No. 8**
2011-2012, oil,
40 x 50.

which Saltzman completes in the studio, wherever that happens to be at the moment—a cabin on a cruise ship, a hotel room, or back in Chapel Hill.

To be practical, Saltzman travels light. “I must travel with the material as hand luggage,” he says. “I can’t lose supplies going or sketches coming home.” His system is simple: half sheets of Rives BFK buff paper and 2B solid graphite pencils. “I consider myself a mark maker,” Saltzman says. “I can draw for only about four to five minutes before needing a new point, so I travel with an electric pencil sharpener and 120 pencils. I re-sharpen them all at one time.” That’s it for the field. No lugging an easel and umbrella. No oils or watercolor pans. No color—that comes later.

In the 19th century, Frederic Church went west, north, and south to bring remote and exotic scenes to a curious public back east. Now, we know these places. The Grand Canyon is a car trip; Glacier Bay is a cruise. Tourism liberates art. “The great American masters painted the glaciers and icebergs so magnificently,” says Saltzman. “I knew I could not compete. So I paint Saltzman’s Glacier Bay.”

A Saltzman painting isn’t a travelogue. “My education was painting from the model and drawing from the model,” he says. “All those years, no one would look at landscape—too 19th-century. Then I painted figures in landscapes, and finally in the

1980s I got rid of the figure for good and have no need to go back.” And without the psychological dimension of the figure, landscape translates readily to abstraction.

Although pattern starts with place, Saltzman begins with the landscape and systematically draws away from it. His compositions are abstract by design, conceptual maps built of line, pattern, and tone—art isn’t nature. Natural textures translate into scrubs and hatches, squiggles, dashes, and dots—clean, fresh, and precise, responsive to the soft tooth of the buff paper. Rocks and clouds, outlined and shaded—the forms are similar, but the substance apart. Tree lines rise and branch to define, divide, and energize the space. Invented patterns multiply across the page.

Saltzman’s compositions respond to the rectangular format of the paper. Nature isn’t flat, framed, and squared-off. Art is. Margins all around, grounded by gravity—nature’s baseline. The patterns define their own off-kilter perimeters, activating the sheet of paper all the way to its edge and alerting the eye to the fundamental abstraction and convention of the rectangle. Layers of the landscape overlap to suggest depth, but the geometric language of perspective is largely absent. Fundamentally, the drawings are flat. Much of the pictorial space is Oriental—open and empty.

Half name, half number, Saltzman’s titles reinforce the dual nature of his art. The suite names recall the place of origin; the numbers order the series and point to the abstract, pictorial structures.

Back in Chapel Hill with sheaves of drawings, Saltzman prepares the painting campaign. He works two weeks to stretch and size 60 canvases. He does it the old way: two coats of rabbit skin glue and two coats of primer. Always practical, he paints easel-scale, no larger than his car can carry.

Drawings inspire the paintings. Saltzman plans 10 to 12 canvases at a time. As I write, he has finished a series of San Juan drawings and is now painting the waterfalls of the National Forest. “The finished drawings are hung in my studio next to the canvases,” he says. “I do not copy the drawings, but they tie in, some more closely than others. I lay on a composition in



Grand Canyon
1999, graphite, 14 x 11.



Trent River (Winter)
2009, graphite,
11 x 14.

yellow ochre, reinforce the composition with a mixed dark—a linear action—and then fill the white canvas with color.”

Saltzman’s approach to color—sketching form on location and creating color in the studio—was rejected in the late-19th century by the Barbizon and Impressionist painters. To suggest light and shadow, studio artists relied on value contrasts. To suggest the vividness of light as it is perceived, the Impressionists created vibrant optical mixtures with relatively pure hues. The Impressionist palette and technique inspired the broken and flattened color of the Post-Impressionists, which

influenced the wild outbursts of color in early-20th-century art. An heir to these and later color revolutions, Saltzman paints a spectrum of saturated hues. No need for color studies from the field or in the studio: Color is conceived in his mind and developed on his canvas. He follows advice that for years he gave his students. Mix a color. Apply it to the canvas. Mix another color. Create a relationship. Build the color scheme from the first brushstroke. “The rest is difficult, because every time you put one color on, you’re affecting every other color,” he says. “And it gets harder and harder as you put more and more into the painting.”

SALTZMAN’S COMPOSITIONS ARE ABSTRACT BY DESIGN, CONCEPTUAL MAPS BUILT OF LINE, PATTERN, AND TONE.

In the drawings, warm light emanates from the buff paper and soft graphite tones. The effect is like the hazy focus and fading contrasts of traditional atmospheric perspective. Re-envisioned in paint, the color is bold and vibrant. One graphite tone might inspire several different colors, but drawings cue a sense of place. Saltzman sketched the Trent River in summer and winter. “The color is based on remembering a place,” he says. “Of course the paintings are not literal color, but I want a sense of place.” The summer paintings, he continues, are “very green. They are about heat and humidity and green. The winter is very yellow, orange, and gray, because that’s what it’s like looking at the side of a river.” Saltzman’s brighter hues have plenty of white mixed in, but they never dull or gray. Earth tones and black are banished from the artist’s palette. Admixtures of ultramarine blue or viridian with alizarin crimson create darks with depth and complexity.

Throughout the year or two that it takes Saltzman to create a suite of paintings, dozens of drawings cover his studio walls. They serve as

his reference for structure, place, memory, and color. Drawings are the constant. Form becomes abstract color laid flat and thick. Patterns thicken into impasto, but each composition remains as it began, its core structure unchanged. Bits and flecks of early color pop through the changing layers. In the end, each canvas is “a history of layers, a palimpsest,” Saltzman says. “When I can see no more to paint, I’m finished. The painting will tell me when it is done.” ❖

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Marvin Saltzman’s distinguished career spans more than 50 years. Among his accolades is a North Carolina Award in the fine arts, which he received in 1998. From 1967 to 1996, he was a member of the faculty of the University of North Carolina, at Chapel Hill. He is represented by several galleries, including The Mahler, in Raleigh, North Carolina. For more information, visit www.marvinsaltzman.com.



Trent River Summer No. 2
2009-2010, oil,
33 x 46.