

C.W. MUNDY

# The Power of the Suggestive

This Indiana painter avoids the predictable, using a number of techniques and mental approaches in order to paint much more than the way the scene actually appears.

By Bob Bahr

C.W. Mundy has been around. He has done his fair share of studio and plein air painting. He had an illustration career for more than 20 years. And now, he wants to be entertained.

“The more literal you are, the less opportunity there is for interpretation,” says the Indiana oil painter. “I’m not wired that way — I need to be entertained. I don’t want to make a painting look too close to reality. We see reality every day.” Instead, Mundy wants to *imply* what a scene looks like. “The power of the suggestive is much greater than the

statement of reality,” he says. “I adhere to that philosophy for the most part, but sometimes I don’t. Formula painting is the death of a painter.”

And that is another important truth about C.W. Mundy: He is a restless soul, ever expanding or evolving. Take a look at his archive of paintings on his website ([www.cwmundy.com](http://www.cwmundy.com)) and you’ll see that he goes through minor but significant changes in his painting approach the way Miles Davis went through changes in his music. “It seems like lately I’m constantly reinventing myself

and trying different things all the time,” says Mundy.

A few years ago, artists were talking about how Mundy would turn his canvas upside down at a certain point in the painting process and work with that orientation for a while. This went beyond turning the piece upside down for appraisal. He *Painted on* the piece while it was upside down. The objective was understandable; He was strengthening the composition and painting abstract shapes instead of the symbols with which our brains distract us. When this era was mentioned to Mundy, he seemed bored by it. “If you have to paint from a photograph, turn it upside down, and turn the painting upside down after you’ve done the drawing,” he says. “It’s more fun. And like [Montana



## Adirondack Mountains, St. Regis Falls

2013, oil, 16 x 20 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air

## ARTIST DATA

**NAME:** C.W. Mundy

**BIRTHDATE:** 1945

**LOCATION:** Indianapolis

**INFLUENCES:** “Among many, here are some of my biggest contemporary influences: Donald ‘Putt’ Putman, Trevor Chamberlain, Dan McCaw, Carolyn Anderson, Quang Ho, Dan Gerhartz, Scott Christensen, Sherrie McGraw. Historical influences include: Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Rembrandt, Rubens, Titian, Turner, Seago, Monet, Degas, Pissaro, Cassatt, Sargent, Zorn, Sorolla.”

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



**High Falls**  
2013, oil, 20 x 16 in.  
Collection the artist  
Plein air

artist] Carolyn Anderson says, “To be poetic and expressionistic, you can’t paint *things*.” That’s the problem of painting from a photograph.”

### An Active Approach

Mundy’s current working process takes an active approach to avoiding an unduly literal

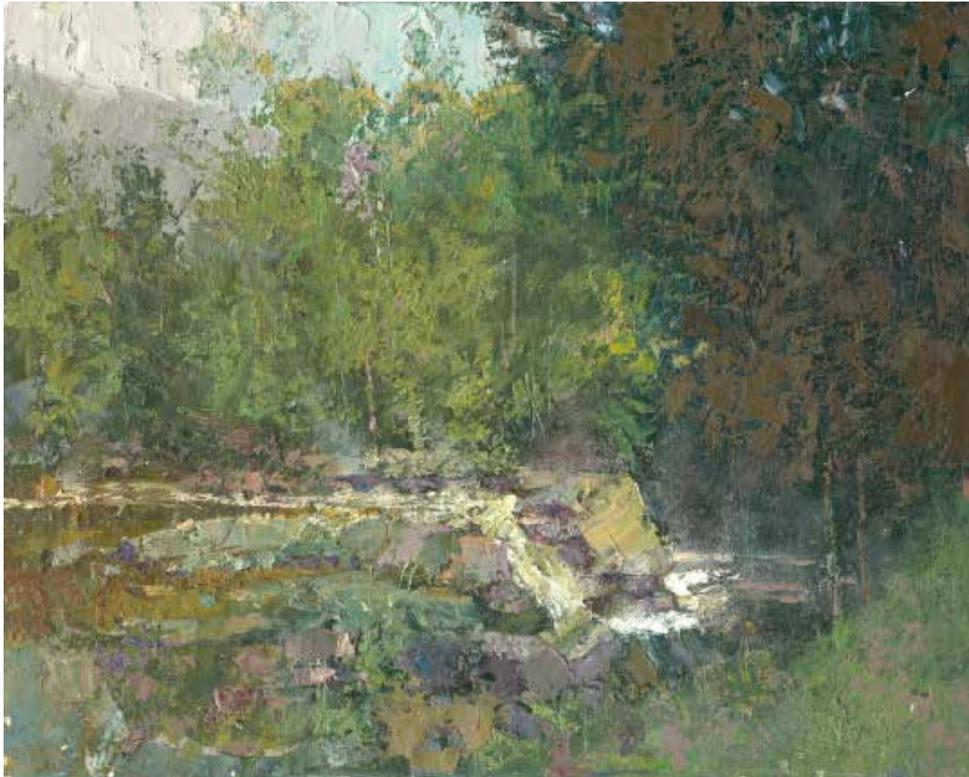
depiction of the subject matter. His method also prevents him from getting too attached to any certain brushstroke he may lay down early on, allowing Mundy to continually redefine his vision.

“I’m laying in the masses of the shapes with the paintbrush and then getting rid of most of those brushstrokes with two-ply Kleenex,” he explains. “Then I come in and build it up with a palette knife. I tell my students that personally I think too many artists fall too in love with the brushstrokes that they lay down in the beginning — where can they go from there? The only logical path is then to go from important-looking brushwork — broad brush bravura — to rendering in the centrality of focus. I don’t really want to render; I did that for 30 years as an illustrator. I nuke the palette knife stuff as well, because I start refining the shapes and make value statements on top of that. Eventually the decision-making becomes so crucial, and I will want to make those palette knife statements stand up and sing.”

Mundy is skilled with a palette knife, but it’s still unpredictable enough for him to be goosed by it. “I think the best thing about the palette knife is there’s only a certain amount of control over how the paint is going to come off the knife and go on the surface, or onto the paint that’s already dried,” he says. “That’s a good thing — if we would admit it, we are all control freaks. The beauty of it is you can only calculate and control a palette knife so much. It gives the painting the breathing room and excitement that you need. I guess you could do it with a brush, but it would not be nearly as bold and expressive as with a knife.”

He uses the palette knife to scrape off paint in places, too, but Mundy often uses a squeegee for this instead of a knife. “I really like the possibilities of what a squeegee can do,” says the artist. “It’s not as rigid; the soft rubber has a totally different feel, which gives me the ability to go back into painted areas and push down, getting closer to the light value of the linen that you are painting on.”

But what is he pushing around, with brushes, with palette knives, with Kleenex, with a squeegee? Mundy stresses design — and value. He promotes a nine-value scale, so there is one middle value and an equal number of shades on either side, as they lighten or darken to pure



**Adirondack Mountains, Ausable River,  
The Flume**

2013, oil, 16 x 20 in.  
Collection the artist  
Plein air

with middle values. It's easier on the soul, easier on the eyes. I have tweaked paintings when I got home to make them go in that arena of peacefulness. I'd bring a painting home and put it under a bright light with a dimmer switch. I'd start turning the light down a little and then I could see the inappropriate painting — the spottiness and fracturing of values. That will detract from your painting and keep atmosphere out of it."

### Rods & Cones

Don't make the mistake of thinking that Mundy is a colorist along the lines of Hensche. He doesn't discount the importance of hue when choosing or mixing a color. Value is imperative, but it's not enough. "There's a reason why God gave us rods and cones," he says.

white or pure black. He starts a painting by determining the predominant values of the big shapes — call them "local values," if you will — and then modifying these shapes with accents of lighter (and sometimes darker) passages.

"Squint down a scene, and it's all pretty much one particular value except for the lit side with different colors," he avers. "It would be more advantageous and smarter to lay down that whole mass, then come back and find your primary and secondary areas and lay down paint on top of that. It keeps you from drawing out the subject for the most part — that would be like painting inside the lines — constricting, controlling, and maybe even the death of a good painting."

Mundy is fairly adamant about compressing values somewhat, saying he finds extremes of value in a painting unpleasant. "Having all the values present in a painting makes it a confrontational painting," he says. "It's much more enjoyable for the viewer to look at a painting



**Adirondack Mountains,  
Barnum Brook Overlook**

2013, oil, 16 x 20 in.  
Private collection  
Plein air



**Adirondack Mountains, Barnum Brook**

2013, oil, 16 x 20 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air

Mundy, perhaps not surprisingly, likes to play with color. Some passages in his paintings have unexpected color choices in them. He calls this “marbleizing.”

Here’s his explanation of how some colors make their way into a grassy passage of a painting: “If you have some dirty greens, you need to find some dirty pinks to make that green look so beautiful. If I’m doing a landscape and have a sky value of 2 or 3, I

may have a landscape green at about a 5 or 6. I’ll mix up these pot colors in value, hue, and low intensity, then load up dirty green and dip in pure chroma — maybe cadmium red light or cadmium yellow light or cerulean or whatever — and smear it on the canvas. That gives you all these other nuances that you wouldn’t get with a wall of that green.

“Just dip the brush in pure color and then dip it in pot color and smear it on.



**Vermont, Pleasant Valley & View  
of Mt. Mansfield**  
 YEAR, oil, 24 x 30 in.  
 Collection the artist  
 Plein air

It's a fun and exciting way to paint. If it's too whacked out, you can neutralize it with the pot color. It's all part of the process, and it's mystifying to some viewers and it gets them excited."

When pushed on just how spontaneous this process is for him, he replies, "I let the spirit move me. I'm pulling out the pure chroma and letting it fly. I don't want to intellectualize it. I really believe that artists need to get that freedom in there."

Mundy may seem like a wild man, and he is indeed a character, but his work is grounded in thought, practice, and experience. "You have to become a painter before you can become an artist," he says. "You have to understand the narrative and the principle of what art is. Drawing, design, values, edges, color, line, paint manipulation — you have to understand all of

**Miz Shirley Shrimper, San Carlos Island**  
 2013, oil, 9 x 12 in. Courtesy Gallery 1261,  
 Denver, Colorado.  
 Plein air



that. Let me put it this way: When you are a painter, you must be able to copy everything. What the subject looks like, the color that you're looking at, and the value relationships — those are the training wheels that you need to have before you graduate to an artist. The painter is a caterpillar. When you morph into a butterfly, that is when things should really start happening. You become an artist. Now you have license and should take liberties with value to make the painting."

### Be A Good Editor

It's not just what you put in a painting, though. It's also what you leave out. "Editing is the entire key to painting poetic pieces — that's my take on it when I look at the greatest pieces of art ever produced," says Mundy. "The artist is an incredible director who really knows how to edit, only putting in what's needed. A lot of what I call 'knick-knack paddy-wack' just clogs up the painting. There's a huge connection to being a good editor. Carolyn Anderson is one of the master editors in the business. She knows how to only put in the bare bones, the bare necessities needed to make a killer painting."

He has strong opinions and a charismatic personality, but Mundy is self-aware and utterly



**Creek South of Story, Indiana**

2012, oil, 18 x 24 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air

in control of his ego. He's a banjo player, and a good one, and when he plays with other musicians, his generous spirit and interest in doing what it takes to make the song work are evident. He knows there are things bigger than himself, including art. He's a seeker. Mundy's pieces sell well, but he is always searching, and always watching.

While attending the Publisher's Invitational Paint Out in the Adirondacks last June, he set up next to a fellow participant, Tarryl Gabel. She was approaching the same subject matter in a different way. Mundy became excited. "I was really taken aback by what she was doing," he recalls. "She really influenced me on how I approached my piece. I want to go back next year and paint it a few different ways, including one the way that she painted it. That's the real excitement of painting. It's a whole mental game, and just being out there is great." 

**BOB BAHR** has been writing and editing articles about art instruction for more than nine years. He lives with his wife and two young sons at the northern tip of Manhattan.



See more of C.W. Mundy's plein air paintings in the expanded digital edition of *PleinAir*.



**Gloucester, View From Rocky Neck Marine Railway**

2012, oil, 16 x 20 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air

ARTIST PROFILE



**Creek South of Story Indiana**

2012, oil, 12 x 9 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air



**Early Afternoon Light, Williams Creek**

2013, oil, 9 x 12 in.

Private collection

Plein air



**Mundy demonstrating for artists attending a workshop in Indiana**



**Mundy's 9 x 12-inch demonstration painting**

ARTIST PROFILE



**Sea Lion Point, Pt. Lobos, California Coast**  
 2013, oil, 9 x 12 in.  
 Collection the artist  
 Plein air



**Bruges Canal at Gouden-Handrei**  
 2011, oil, 16 x 20 in.  
 Private collection  
 Plein air