



OIL PAINTER JUSTIN T. WORRELL

Setting the Tone

EMBRACING A MYSTERIOUS ATMOSPHERE
BY KATHRYN MCKAY



Justin T. Worrell

“The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science.”

—Albert Einstein

The art and science that Justin T. Worrell brings to his oil paintings sets the tone for the mysterious. Even if the scenes in his art seem somewhat familiar, look again. You’ve never visited these places. They’re not even technically landscapes. This Springfield-based artist’s paintings don’t depict reality. The only way to visit the places in Justin’s paintings is to spend time with the paintings—and see where they take you.

Justin paints in a style known as Tonalism, which originated in the United States and was popular in the late 1800s and early 1900s and is beginning to experience a resurgence. “We are seeing a renewed

interest with the founding of the American Tonalist Society in 2016, as well as strong showings online across various social media,” he says. Tonalism tends to embrace a mysterious atmosphere or mist and often employs neutral hues, such as grays, browns or blues.

Justin didn’t plan to become a Tonalist. His first exposure to art came from his grandmother, who painted in her garage. Even as a young child, Justin could sit still for hours. He was and is the kind of person that the term “still waters run deep” is often applied.

Even though Justin rarely painted when he was growing up, art was never far from his mind, and he took a few art history classes in college. Having been born and raised in Washington state, Justin was thrilled to secure a job on Capitol Hill after college. “I didn’t intend to stay out here, but I just



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fell in love with the area,” he explains.

One day when he was living on Capitol Hill, thoughts of his grandmother prompted him to visit the local art supply store. He said, “I’ll just buy some stuff and see what happens.” The result he says, was “terrible.”

But what may have been initially terrible, was also “an amusement.” Justin enjoyed trying different painting styles and copying the works of masters such as Monet. He even painted some still lifes, like his wife’s flower bouquet when they got married in 2013.

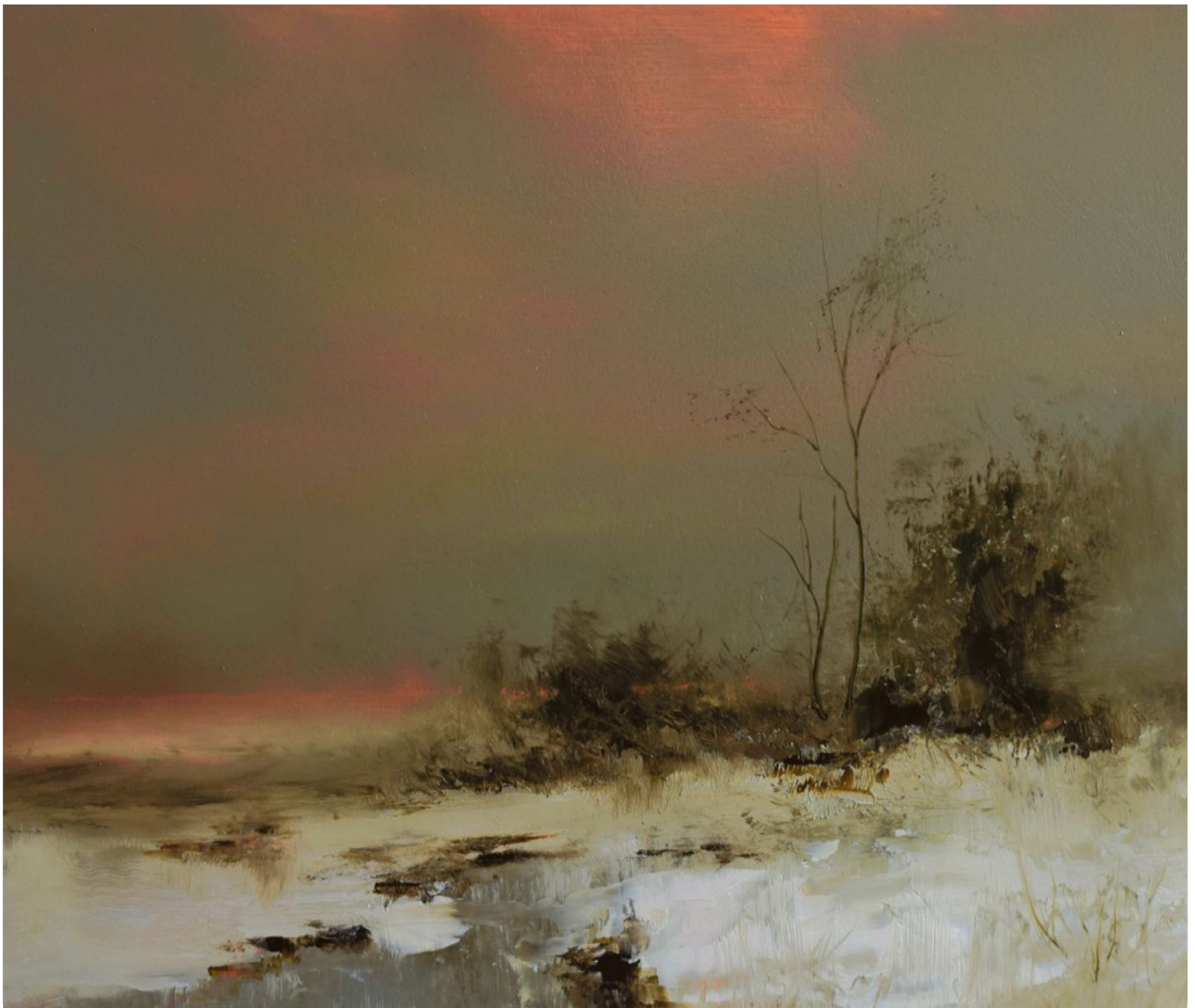
He started with acrylics. “I wanted something that was no fuss, no muss, easy clean up and would dry fast,” Justin says.

Regardless of what he painted or how he painted, Justin found “There’s something in the creative process that took my mind to a whole different place.” Taking his paintings to a “whole different place,” took time spent in personal study and reflection and in art classes.

He delved into reading about the tonalists George Inness, Frances Murphy and Bruce Crane, among others. One of his favorite books became “A History of American Tonalism: Crucible of American Modernism” by David Cleveland, which is considered the bible of tonalism.

For help learning techniques to paint in a tonalist style, Justin turned to YouTube and took classes at the Art League in Alexandria, where he studied under Michael Francis (élan, January 2021). Later, he would study with Dennis Sheehan, one of the most famous tonalists in the United States, at his studio in Manchester, New Hampshire.

Justin applies paint in thin layers over a toned panel. Then, using a completely dry, ordinary hardware store paint brush he expands upon the thinness of the paint layer by pushing the paint to its limits to cover the surface. Each subsequent layer creates subtle variance



Page 14: "Moon Fall," 16" x 20"

Page 15: "Third Movement," 12" x 12"

Opposite: "Evening Promise," 12" x 16"

Above: "Winter Evening," 14" x 18"
All are oils.

in values and tones and produces atmosphere. The "super thin" layers dry quickly, a technique that works well for his art and his lifestyle. Justin has a day job and two small children, a dog and a cat.

As he developed his style in tonalism, Justin discovered something deeper. "In tonalism, I found something that merged the temporal and the eternal," he says. "It was like something spiritual missing in my life." It was also something that he could share.

The first person to purchase one of his paintings had never bought a painting before. As she gazed at his painting, tears fell down her cheeks. The painting featured the moon, which made her think of her mother, who loved the moon and had recently passed away.

As Justin started selling more paintings and his work was being accepted into more shows, he joined the Oil Painters of America and was juried into their

Eastern regional show in 2019, which was held in Birmingham, Alabama. At the show, he saw his own work on the same walls as many painters whom he admired. "This reinforced what I was doing," Justin says. And from there, things started picking up even more including when, between 2018 and 2019, his work received four honorable mentions and a best in show for a landscape at the Art League gallery in Alexandria.

At the easel, Justin works from a quiet, reflective place. "I paint compromise between the temporal and eternal. I work to this effect through atmospheric, moody and sublime images that are typically derived from my imagination," he explains. "The viewers will bring their own narratives." But Justin sets the tone. é

Justin T. Worrell | www.justintworrell.com