

Four Directions-Common Paths: Oberg, Smith, Whitcomb, Young
Friendship, Inspiration, and Craft - A Thirty Year Connection
December 4, 2020 – April 10, 2021 at the Steamboat Art Museum

Skip Whitcomb, Ralph Oberg, Dan Young and Matt Smith certainly need no introduction to those who have followed the Steamboat Art Museum exhibition program over the past decade. All have been featured at least once, and some multiple times. Most recently all four were included in the 2016 showcase for the Plein Air Painters of America (PAPA). These four accomplished artists are recognized as being among the preeminent practitioners of plein air painting in America. They produce exquisite “on the spotters” that capture the light, feeling and drama of a landscape that is rapidly changing before their eyes. However, they also use their trips outdoors with their kit as fact finding missions that will lead to the next great studio paintings.

Continuing with the SAM connections, all four share admiration for and influence from Clyde Aspevig and Len Chmiel who were honored with retrospectives here in 2008-09 and 2015-16 respectively. So it is purely natural that an exhibition honoring the kinship and cross pollination of these four remarkable artists should hang at SAM. Ralph met Matt in 1987, and they met the other two artists just a couple years later. Since then they have traveled thousands of miles together visiting great painting locations throughout the West. Many places they visited were only accessible by horseback, adding an adventure element to those trips. The time spent in isolation from the real world, focused on painting during the days and talking art (with a little wine) around a campfire in the evenings, has forged an incredibly strong comradery among the four men. Along the way they would also visit museums together discussing what they saw and always challenging themselves to grow and improve, always aiming to make the next painting their best.

While the popularity of plein air painting has risen tremendously, with hobbyists embracing it as “the new golf,” these artists don’t necessarily see that as the end game. Instead, more often they see it as a means to an end. Matt Smith says, “You develop passion for a location when you are there painting, but when you get back to the studio, in a controlled environment, you can combine that passion with intellect, and that’s when the best paintings result.” While all four artists have a certain similarity in their work, that would be natural for landscape artists working in the genre of realism, they each have unique elements that make them quite different. This allows them to stand side by side by side on a ridgeline looking at the same mountain vista at the same time and end the day with an astonishing variety of completed or even abandoned works. Looking over each other’s work, they may needle one another, telling one to “loosen up” or another that he better “get tighter.”

Three of the four artists live in Colorado, taking advantage of their surroundings to explore varied terrain, abundant wildlife and tap into the natural Rocky Mountain High made famous in the vintage song. Matt Smith, the token artist “from away” lives in the Arizona desert but frequently visits his brothers in paint in the Centennial State for a literal change of scenery. The Colorado boys also just happen to find it convenient to visit Matt in the middle of winter, as they did in February this year. Each artist is fiercely loyal to “his country,” the area around his home base, and paints it with pride and reverence, but also embraces new challenges at less familiar locales.

In 2018, these four artists participated in a week-long intensive boot camp for plein air painters at the Booth Western Art Museum in Cartersville, Georgia, presented in cooperation with PAPA. Over the week, they were all in agreement on their advice: The elements of art are still the same, whether indoors or out. Do not expect to paint a masterpiece every time out. Learning something about light that helps improve studio work can be a great plein air accomplishment. If you are painting plein air work ready to hang every time out, you are not pushing yourself hard enough.

Friends for 30 years these four amigos treasure their time together, whether it is in the field sharing a ridgeline, critiquing each other's handiwork at the end of an outing, or catching up at a major art show somewhere around the country. All believe their friendship and light sibling-like rivalry has made their work better and spurred them to continue to grow over that 30+ year period. And these four gentlemen proved nice guys can finish first – in art, friendship and life.

Seth Hopkins-- Executive Director, Booth Western Art Museum