

NEW ORLEANS

IMPRESSIONIST CITYSCAPES



HOUSE AT THE INTERSECTION OF ARABELLA AND LAUREL STREETS 12" X 24"

PREFACE

When I moved to New Orleans in 1984 I was drawn to its eclectic old architecture, its lush tropical foliage, its dense atmosphere, and not least of all its rich culture. I've never since wanted to live anywhere else. As beautiful as I find New Orleans, though, I've never quibbled too much over the subject matter of my paintings. I'm more interested in the bigger issue of vision, making people appreciate what and how they see. Practically any subject is good for this. But because New Orleans is where I live and considering that I work only from life, *New Orleans* must provide my subject matter. And because I prefer to be outside like a lot of people, such as roofers and students doing their homework in the park, I am predominantly a *plein air landscape painter* by default. Furthermore, I select *where* to paint often for ancillary reasons: perhaps I have to stay close to home because of an appointment later, or maybe a vantage point from under the overhang of a corner storehouse provides convenient shelter from the rain. I might set up somewhere just because it's quiet and contemplative when I'm feeling edgy, or gravitate to busy crowded environs when I'm more sociable. I'm a little ashamed to admit that occasionally I've even chosen locations because of their proximity to little neighborhood joints where I'd like to have lunch. The steering currents that guide me to my painting destinations seem to be driven less often by subject matter, because I've come to realize that there is great potential hidden in every subject. I can't say that I'm not occasionally attracted by grand, iconic New Orleans views, but by and large, I have made an inadvertent portrait of this region with my life's work rather than one by design. I believe that such a treatment that focuses more on the ordinary can be more insightful and probing than the more common approach that emphasizes the extraordinary quintessential aspects of a subject, such as what might be shown on post cards.

In this book, as in my first book *New Orleans en Plein Air*, I have chosen a cross section of my work that makes a sweeping

portrait of New Orleans as seen from out of doors. It will pick up where my last New Orleans book, *Painting Katrina* left off (about Fall 2006) and capture post-Katrina New Orleans to present. There will be a few paintings of post-Katrina rebuilding and blight, including some blight that predated Katrina, but most of the work will capture views of New Orleans that were either never significantly affected by Katrina or those that have been restored to their pre-Katrina state. Specifically, this subject matter will be different from *New Orleans en Plein Air* in the following ways: although there will be about as many paintings of Uptown and the Garden District, there will be fewer paintings of City Park and Audubon Park, none of the cemeteries, and fewer of the Mississippi River. Instead there will be more paintings of the Central Business District and many paintings of outlying areas such as Abita Springs, Fontainebleau Park, and the fishing communities of lower St. Bernard Parish—Violet, Yscloskey, and Delacroix. Instead of having quite as many paintings of the French Quarter, there will be a great many more of the Faubourg Marigny and Bywater neighborhoods. There will also be more paintings from the Esplanade Ridge, including a few of Bayou St. John, and there will be a few industrial scenes in the metropolitan area, an aspect explored only incidentally in my first book.

In *New Orleans en Plein Air* paintings were sampled over a fifteen-year period during which my style was changing. About half of the paintings in that book were executed in an earlier more fauvist style that I used to dispel a tight academic approach with which I had become fed up. The later paintings in that book are of the same academic-impressionistic style of painting that I presently employ but may *seem* different stylistically to the paintings reproduced in this and the last two books because of the way that they were photographed. Prior to converting to digital imaging in 2005, I photographed my paintings with 35mm tungsten film in warm incandescent light. Accordingly, the reproductions in the first book



INTERSECTION OF ADAMS AND HAMPSON STREETS 18" x 24"

have a softer, warmer cast than those in my later books.

As for the text, in my books I have tried to enlighten the reader about often-overlooked aspects of art important not only to my artistic style but to representational painting in general. For the benefit of those who have collected all of my books, I have broached a unique topic each time, though the text of each book must stand alone for the benefit of those who might collect only a single book. Accordingly, there must be fibers common to each of my art book essays woven into the broader topic that bridge the text to my paintings, explaining my personal philosophy and specific style, making a succinct statement from the live subject. I hope that the quality of my paintings will lend some extra weight to my voice, where the norm seems to have always been that most people who write about art are not artists themselves.

THE ALLURE OF THE IMAGE

One of the most common art clichés is the artist with a comical Salvador Dali mustache wearing a beret and a paint-covered smock. He is holding up his thumb at arm's length in the direction of his subject, seemingly looking at it intently through one eye with the other closed, though moving it around frequently as though he is sighting a pistol at a target that is making rapid, jerky movements. This common parody of the artistic process, itself often spoofed by a large painting of a thumb, is derived from a real method that academic artists use to compare the spatial proportions of their drawings to those of the subject. Artists more often use the shaft of their pencil or the handle of their paint brush (considerably more efficient than a thumb) as an improvised measuring device called a sight stick. An artist holds the sight stick up toward the subject at arm's length and adjusts his grip such that the portion of the stick extending beyond the hand corresponds to some smaller dimension of the subject. Then he reorients the sight stick to check how many times this smaller dimension goes into some larger dimension. Next, he uses the sight stick to determine if this same proportion has been accurately rendered in the drawing. This is one of many methods that artists use to check the *accuracy* of their work.

Before photography, the primary function of representational art was documentation. It was the only way that the likenesses of deceased family members could be preserved for their descendents. On the bigger stage, in a largely illiterate world, it was the best way that societal values and historical narratives could be conveyed. The credibility and overall effectiveness of art in its documentation role was dependent not only upon how accurately narratives were conveyed, but also upon how accurately artists rendered natural forms and colors in their artwork. Although one might imagine that there were vast legions of artists who accurately documented over the centuries, the canons of pre-photography art



WEEKEND PROJECT (SEEN FROM ADAMS STREET NEAR FRERET STREET) 16" X 20"



PJ'S COFFEE SHOP ON MAPLE STREET BETWEEN HILLARY AND ADAMS STREETS 11" x 14"

were formed by many hundreds to perhaps a few thousand artists such as Rafael, Rembrandt, Velázquez, Constable, Turner, and Courbet (to name but a few) whose work rose above mere accuracy to accomplish something more. These artists made paintings and drawings that seemed more alive and vibrant than most of their contemporaries. Their work communicated an individual point of view and usually seemed to have more impact as a whole when viewed from a distance, despite often having few details. This intangible high quality of the *crème de la crème* of representational painting we have always intuitively connected to more meaningful aspects of human vision, though we have never been able to quantify it. A mere copy of the physical image whose only purpose is correctness is boring. Dell Weller, an elder statesman of the academic painting community in New Orleans quotes Duke Ellington, “It don’t mean a thing if it ain’t got that swing.”

This intangible higher quality of vision became a lifeboat for visual art as photography commandeered its utilitarian function of documentation. The last great movement of representational art, Impressionism, focused more upon these higher qualities of vision and provided a springboard from which entirely new art forms were launched such as Expressionism, Cubism, and Abstract Expressionism. These new movements attempted to abstract and distill the essence of human vision even further than impressionism but produced greatly generalized statements. For example, an abstraction consisting of dense, numerous streaks of red and yellow color across the canvas may evoke a general feeling of heat and crowdedness, but representational painting was still needed for the *nuance* of a specific experience or type of experience that involves heat and crowdedness. For that purpose, pared-down lineages of representational painting survived on through the twentieth century. But as the survival of representational art was becoming more dependent upon these higher qualities and less upon accuracy, accuracy still played an important role in this new era. Representational artists like Monet, Sargent, Henri, Hopper, and Freud could only deliver



VIEW FROM THE INTERSECTION OF OAK AND BURDETTE STREETS 16" x 20"

these higher qualities with a *convincing* image. They had to learn from the objective image. They used a sight stick at certain times in their career just as did their predecessors who were more concerned with documentation. But just like the higher echelon of their predecessors, they somehow knew when to use the sight stick and when to ditch it. They knew how to walk the fine line between nuance and accuracy. They could not explain why, but they knew that what they saw was different than a photograph. Their paintings seem so accurate and real and yet every pattern, every proportion, and every color is at least a little different than that of a photographic image of the subject. We might rationalize that their paintings are just beautiful lies, but something deep within us tells us that they are the truth. No lie could be so beautiful and seem so truthful as a Lucian Freud nude or an Edward Hopper house.



COMMUNITY GARDEN ON DANTE STREET NEAR BURTHE STREET 16" X 20"

It is clear that in this modern era representational artists are having greater difficulty jettisoning from the objective image. This has not been the case for caricaturists and cartoonists like Reginald Marsh and Dr. Seuss who blast away from objectivity with multistage rockets. But we in low earth orbit who split out the sharpest truth about what we see, we academic realists, among whom impressionists such as myself are included, are having much more difficulty than our forbearers breaking free of the objective image to make a statement that gets to the deeper truth about what we see. Allowing that all representational artists, in order to evoke a sense of what they see, must design an image at least somewhat similar to the objective image emanating from their subject, our predecessors were only *further* tethered to the objective image by a few little nick knacks like sight sticks, view finders, and the rare camera obscura. Unobtrusively, throughout the last century, the objective image has been gaining more allies and more gravity. Academic artists are now caught in a whirlpool of such ingredients as fine art photography, photographic references, high quality digital imaging, and less rigorous academic training. As a result there is a battle being fought in artists' minds between what they see and the cold physical image of light that focuses on the retina of the eye. The objective image, with the aid of all its new allies, is prevailing more often over vision in this era and the art world is paying a price. My goal is to make clear the measure of this price and to plot a course back to vision.

Instead of having a distinct protagonist in vision, as you might imagine, and a distinct antagonist in the image as black and white as an old fashioned Saturday afternoon matinee, in this conflict there are shades of gray more like those in the complex character developments of art films. Our first and most difficult task will be to extract and separate these two intangible combatants that are tangled up in the mind. Many academic realists understand that there is a difference between vision and the image, using terminology like “the



CONFEDERATE JASMINE SEEN FROM THE INTERSECTION OF FERN AND PEARL STREETS 11" X 14"

mind's eye” to make the distinction, but their understanding is only intuitive and too vague to effectively argue their point in the face of the objective image's increasing influence. A great many academic realists make no distinction between the image and what is seen, considering them in effect to be synonyms. Some hold that the image is better than vision, but as vision becomes more perfect, it converges upon the image. I heard an account of a teacher of academic realism giving a final exam consisting solely of having each student *verbally* recount everything that they saw outside of the classroom in minute detail. One prominent academic realist that I know vehemently insists that what he sees is not *inside* of



INTERSECTION OF FRERET AND DUBLIN STREETS 15" X 30"

his head but rather *outside* of it. Contrary to this popular misconception that vision is an imperfect image, vision is actually our response to the stimulus of the image, and some other stimuli as well, but very different from the image.

When I'm painting outdoors a compliment frequently paid to me by onlookers is that my picture looks as good as a photograph. I know that a layman means well by this, having no point of reference to understand as most artists do that a really fine painting transcends the objective physical image typically reproduced by a camera to further communicate a point of view, a poetry, a higher meaning, or in essence, *what is seen*. (This is not to demean photography as an art form. Photographers also communicate a point of view, though historically they were limited to making a statement only through composition and selection of subject matter and vantage point. Recently, with new imaging techniques, Photoshop, and Photorealist painting, the boundary between painting and photography has become a bit blurred.) In this age more than ever we are inundated with two-dimensional images in all aspects of our lives: in magazines, smart-phones, TVs, the internet, signage, etc. A non-artist's favorable comparison of a painting to a photograph is understandable given that photography is by far the most common vehicle for 2D images, and that the average photograph is generally considered to be more perfect in the more common and *tangible* purpose of documentation than the average painting. Even before the industrial revolution and the advent of photography our ancestors' conceptualization of vision must have been shaped by paintings, drawings, and etchings, the primary purpose of which was also documentation. Though their experiences of 2D images were rarer than ours, the cumulative effect of images upon them was likely as great as it is with us. Then and now our visual experiences of historical events and the present world outside of our own close environs are provided more by second-hand flat images than by direct experience. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, photographic images have become so much a part of our life that most of us likely conceptualize what we see, our



MUSTANG ON PEARL STREET BETWEEN BURDETTE AND FERN STREETS 18" X 18"

vision and visual memories, in terms of them. Because they are infinitesimally thin, we can imagine that there could be billions of them stored away in our mind.

Though we will see that this idea of vision as being like photographs is a fallacy, the photographic image has been so ingrained into our way of thinking that it must be properly contextualized as a starting point for our discussion. The image



CONSTRUCTION AT THE INTERSECTION OF BURDETTE AND DOMINICAN STREETS 16" X 20"

that enters our eye at any given time usually has much more data than a photograph, in the form of smaller details, more subtle variations in color, and *much* greater contrast. Parts of the image can be as bright as the sun causing the iris of our eye to constrict and causing us to squint or shield our eyes with our hands, and parts of it can be so dark as to be almost void of light. Conversely, the contrast within the photo has a limited range. If we were to illuminate a photograph with a very bright light both the lights and darks in the photograph would become lighter, but with no increase in contrast. A photograph usually enters our eyes as *part* of an overall image that is caused not only by light reflecting off of the photo but also off of the objects around it, such as our hands that are clasping it and objects in the background. Where a photograph

has crisp edges and usually occupies only a small part of our field of vision, we are not aware of the edges of the total image that enters our eye. Every time we try to look over to see where it ends, our whole field of vision shifts. Yet, if we allow for these discrepancies, we can think of the objective image that enters our eye as being like a photograph (or perhaps two slightly different photographs if we consider our stereovision).

THE EYE

Just as we have used the photograph as a familiar point of reference to conceptualize the image that enters our eye, a digital camera will provide a good starting point to discuss the function of our eye. Because light incidental to the eye or a camera comes from all directions, it does not become an image until it is focused by a lens. Instead of light being focused through the camera's lens onto a segment of film, as in old fashioned cameras, in digital cameras the image is focused onto a sensor. There are millions of small photoreceptors called photosites evenly distributed across the camera's sensor in a perfect grid. In effect, each photosite records an average color for a very small part of the overall image. The data from all photosites is captured when a photograph is taken. Later, this information is transferred as individual pixels of color onto a computer monitor or a hardcopy print arranged in exactly the same grid as the photosites were arranged on the sensor. Each photosite on the sensor directly corresponds to a pixel in the same relative location on the print or monitor. This is illustrated in the top of figure 1 (see page 18).

To a certain point, the eye is similar to a digital camera. The image from the lens of our eye is focused onto the retina, located on the inside back of the eyeball. Similar to the sensor of a digital camera, the retina contains photoreceptors called cones. Just as the density of photosites on the camera's sensor correlates to the sharpness of the print, the density of the cones on the retina correlates to our visual acuity, or



I STUMBLED ACROSS THIS AMAZING VIEW OF A BACKHOE SITTING ATOP THE WRECKAGE OF A HOUSE ON HILLARY STREET CLOSE TO HURST STREET WHILE WALKING MY DOGS ONE MORNING. I HURRIED BACK WITH MY GEAR TO QUICKLY CAPTURE IT ON THIS 16" X 20" CANVAS BEFORE THE DEMOLITION WORK RESUMED.



VIEW DOWN DOMINICAN STREET NEAR BURDETTE STREET LOOKING TOWARD THE LEVY 16" X 20"

our ability to discern small details. The greater the density of cones, the greater is our visual acuity. It is the variation in the density of cones across the retina that provides our point of departure from the photograph-like image that has surreptitiously come to symbolize what we see.

Cones are not evenly distributed as are the photosites on the camera's sensor. Cones are densely concentrated in a small place in the center of the retina called the macula, outside of which they are more sparsely dispersed. To give you a better idea of how cone density and acuity decreases away from the macula, focus on your thumbnail when held at arm's length. The area that corresponds to your thumbnail has an average cone density that is ten times as great as the area outside of your thumbnail.

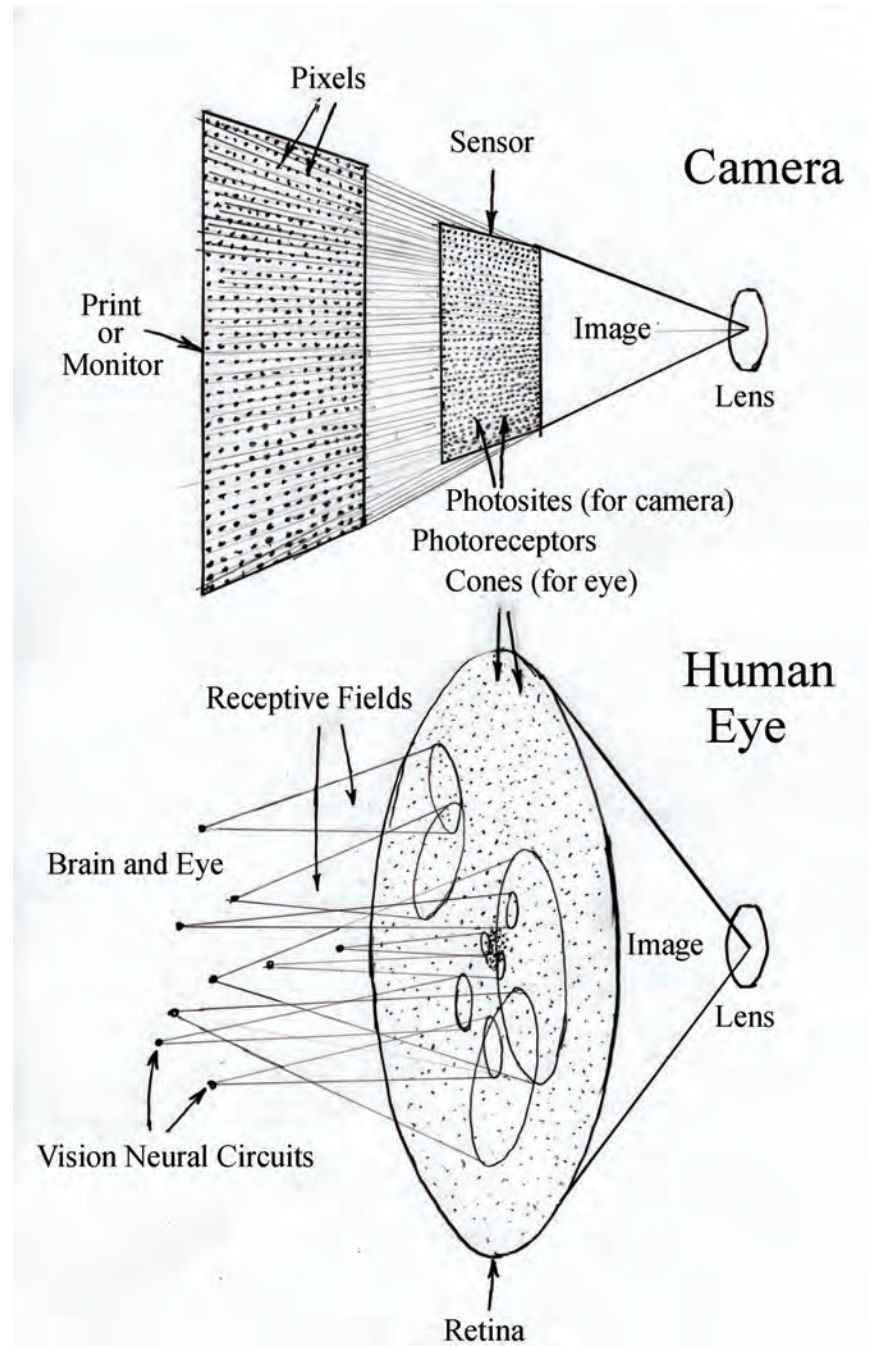


FIGURE 1: CAMERA AND EYE ILLUSTRATION



AFTERMATH OF THE GREAT F2 TORNADO OF 2007 SEEN FROM THE INTERSECTION OF HURST AND CHEROKEE STREETS 15" X 30"



VIEW FROM HAMPSON STREET NEAR HILLARY STREET 16" X 20"

When focusing on the spine of a book on the book shelf, it should not be possible to read the title of a book next to it. The visual patterns in the periphery are indistinct. It only seems that you see so much more than this in any given moment because you gather visual information over time by unconsciously glancing from one place to another so that the high acuity center of vision can move all around the view. There are two significant points that can be taken from this. First, the photograph-like image that enters our eye and focuses onto the retina has been immediately truncated by the distribution of cones. It can only have the potential to exist a few microns below the surface of the retina as an image that is highly detailed only in a small area in the middle and very indistinct everywhere else. This is in sharp contrast with the objective image, which has a close analogy in a photographic print, every part of which is equally distinct. Second, we have seen the first evidence that our vision of an unchanging scene happens in time. An unchanging image of light reflected from physical objects exists in its entirety at one instant. It exists only in space, having no time dependency. However, given that our high acuity center of vision must move around a view, as our eye moves, and sample over time, our vision of an unchanging view must have *at least* some time dependency. With these two bits of insight we have just begun a journey into a psychophysical labyrinth. Along the way we will acquire tools that we will need to understand at its center vexing-but-enlightening truths about vision.

Our eye is not only different from the camera with respect to the distribution of photoreceptors but also, and even more importantly, in how information is gathered and reported from those photoreceptors. In this respect the function of our eye is not even remotely similar to the camera. Data from the camera sensor is simply and directly transposed from the grid on the sensor to exactly the same grid on the print or monitor. For human vision, there are a huge number of little mechanisms in the eye and brain called vision neural circuits that each process information from groups of cones on the retina called



CATHY'S GARDEN 20" X 20"

receptive fields. Some receptive fields are very small with only a few cones and some are large with multitudes of cones spanning a large area of the retina. Receptive fields overlap and share cones with each other, but any given receptive field provides input to a single neural circuit that is looking for a specific feature. This is shown in the bottom section of figure 1. Vision neural circuits test not only for color but also for different forms, shapes, textures, and other visual qualities within their receptive fields. There are circuits that test for