

## Litchfield County Times

Published: Wednesday, March 27, 2013

By Alice Tessier

### Norfolk Plein Air Painter Reaches Out to Form Group With Like-Minded Artists

An artist with an easel set up in a scenic location is an iconic image—with nature cast as the muse inspiring an act of creativity. It also means an artist is at work, honing skills along with exploring and expressing a perspective.

A new painters' group is being formed—NWCT-Berkshire Plein Air Painting—that will give area artists, including serious and occasional painters as well as students, an opportunity to paint outdoors in good company with perhaps exhibition possibilities.

"I think it will meet the needs of artists, whether they are serious or occasional painters, and students who want to paint outdoors and share the experience with others," said Leslie Watkins of Norfolk, an established artist and the group's founder.

"Paint-outs are a lot of fun, and they are a way to get motivated and obtain support. They generate camaraderie and provide a positive environment for critiquing.

"Criticism is an important thing, and the key thing is sharing the growth," she said.

Ms. Watkins anticipates that the group will hold its first painting session sometime in June. The group will paint in Norfolk at the outset and then later at scenic locations in the Litchfield Hills and the Berkshires to be determined.

"I live in Norfolk and think it is the best possible place to paint outdoors," said Ms. Watkins. "There are rural hilly areas, mountains, water, woods, fields and other open spaces. Spots like these make it easy to find a place to paint in any season. I often paint downtown—just step out of National Iron Bank and look north to Haystack Mountain [State Park]. It's a wonderful view. And the time of day transforms a spot; the same spot can be spectacular at one time of day but not another."

She continued, "We have the four seasons here in Norfolk, and I think it's the ideal place for the plein air group. I would like to see it be a mecca for plein air painters. You don't have to go too far afield to get a good spot. It can be the side of the road or the state park or even private property, with the owner's permission of course."

Painting on location, the members of the group will be working on small canvas boards, gesso panels or prepared paper, "say 9 by 12 [inches] or rarely bigger than 12 by 16," said Ms. Watkins. "You can get a lot of information on a small panel in a few hours and then during the winter you can develop it on a larger canvas."

Anyone can join the group, and there is no fee to participate in the paint-outs at this time.

“Since I put the word out, I’ve had a big response,” Ms. Watkins said. “Initially, I just want to get anyone who wants to paint together. Then we’ll see how it develops. I hope there will be exhibition and educational opportunities, but it’s not designed just to sell art—it’s a chance to get together and improve. I learn from my students, just as I did studying the great artists of the Lyme Art Colony, Hudson River School and Barbizon school” art movements.

Ms. Watkins, an established landscape artist, has been painting and exhibiting for a long time. She had a studio in Greenwich Village for more than 30 years before moving to Norfolk, where she maintains a studio in her home, Dandelion Cottage. She will be available to instruct beginners and others who want to improve their technique. They may arrange for private or semi-private lessons with her before the paint-outs start or any other time.

“I came from a classical atelier background,” said Ms. Watkins. She had an early interest in art growing up in upstate New York and later studied at The Art Students League of New York, where Frank Mason was among her instructors.

“He taught me the Prismatic Palette, which he learned from Frank DuMond, the [American] Impressionist painter who developed it, and the plein air class he taught in June 1982 was life-changing for me as an artist,” Ms. Watkins said.

The Prismatic Palette, she explained, is “not a technique or a method or a formula. It is various strings of color, light to dark—or, if you think of it as a musical instrument, like high to low notes.”

On her Web site ([lesliewatkins.com](http://lesliewatkins.com)), she elaborates on it further: “It clarifies several strings of colors into even steps, with the lightest or highest values descending to the lowest or darkest tones. The steps are based on pure colors from cadmium lemon yellow to alizarin crimson. The different strings of colors consist of grays, violets, blues and greens.”

Ms. Watkins said in the interview the Prismatic Palette facilitated teaching the principle of “atmospheric perspective” that Mr. Mason taught, as she now teaches, in plein air painting lessons.

“Light moves very quickly, and you have only about two hours to capture it,” she said. “Once you are familiar with the palette, your hand goes to the [color, or tonal] values almost automatically, so that even if you can’t see your subject clearly in all its dimensions you can still paint it, you know where you are. It’s as simple and as complicated as you make it.

“Once you get the concept—and it really is a way of thinking, you grow wings,” she continued. “Or, as Frank used to say, it’s like hanging on to the tail of a comet. If you tap into this understanding and discipline yourself and humble yourself, you do sprout wings. I want to share this before it disappears.”

Ms. Watkins said that it does not matter whether the artist wants to paint something realistically or more abstractly.

“You can be abstract,” she said. “Frank distilled it down to the very essentials, and it is all built on the phenomena of nature. You’re training your eye to see the subtleties of tone. Without an understanding of it, she said, “you could still go out and paint a lovely picture, but you’re all over the place. With the palette, you always know where you are.”

Artists who are well accustomed to the Prismatic Palette sometimes pre-mix their color strings, according to Ms. Watkins, but she has her students prepare a fresh palette.

“A key part of the experience is taking the time to get the palette prepared,” she said. “It’s part of my meditation of sorts—going through the motions so that you are freeing yourself to explore and express yourself. It also facilitates the language between the master and the student—it gives you a concrete thing to talk about, a way to deliver constructive criticism. It helps the artist place tones of light and shade and dark accurately without having to constantly test the painting’s ‘pitch’ or ‘key,’ meaning its tonal value.

“This ritual is what gets me in the zone to paint,” Ms. Watkins said. “And I know that now that I’m tapped in, I’m just doing it—and like with Michael Jordan, when you get into the zone, the magic just starts to happen!”

For more information about Ms. Watkins’ art, her classes and workshops, and information about NWCT-Berkshire Plein Air Painters, call her studio at 860-542-3920, send an e-mail [tolesliewatkins@lesliewatkins.com](mailto:tolesliewatkins@lesliewatkins.com) or visit her Web site, [www.lesliewatkins.com](http://www.lesliewatkins.com).