



ABOVE
57 Airstream Caravanner
 (watercolor on paper,
 20½x28)

ABOVE RIGHT
Industry, Labyrinth
 (watercolor and graphite
 on paper, 40½x61¼)

A Sense of the Truth

A MODERN-DAY MASTER, **DONALD K. LAKE** REFLECTS ON HIS WORK AND THE KNOWLEDGE GAINED FROM FIVE DECADES OF PAINTING.

By Robert K. Carsten



“A great painting opens a window into the space and world within its borders and gives voice to the viewer’s experience to what he or she is seeing,”

says Donald K. Lake. “A great watercolor also demonstrates something unique to the medium. Knowing your medium and always searching it for new ways is, I believe, fundamental to any artist.”

Lake, who has been painting for more than half a century and is the 2018 recipient of the Watercolor USA Honor Society Lifetime Achievement Award, knows of what he speaks. “Transparent watercolor invites a slow building of layers to reveal depth and a resonant quality of color,” he says, “but it also offers a bold and dynamic immediacy that’s both historic and of this moment.

“I think of this medium as operating in a triangle, with controlled layering at one vertex, wet-into-wet dynamics at another, and textural and active brushwork at the third,” he continues. “Most great watercolors use some amount of each of these aspects, but each painter finds a comfort zone somewhere in the middle. To set out without a good understanding of each of those separate aspects soon reveals one’s limits. To know when and how to deploy the medium in a given subject or moment is the mark of a skilled watercolorist.”

Making a Start

Lake, who was born and raised in Wichita, Kansas, was excited by Abstract Expressionism in high school and later concentrated on its pursuit during his undergraduate and graduate work at Wichita State University. Afterward, Lake became a professor of art at Parkland College, in Champaign, Ill., where he taught watercolor, drawing and color theory for 35 years.

“Although my art gradually became representational,” says Lake, “making abstract art formed a foundation for thinking that continues in my realist

work. Painting is painting. The idea of abstract and realist painting being opposite poles is a common misconception, in my opinion. Thinking about the abstract realities of marks and shapes on a piece of paper is fundamental to making a painting, whatever role you may be giving those shapes. Realistic paintings are dependent on the abstract elements that form them, so thinking about those aspects when building a painting is essential. One is inextricably interwoven with the other.”

While he typically works from several reference photos and sometimes

UNDERPAINTING METHODS

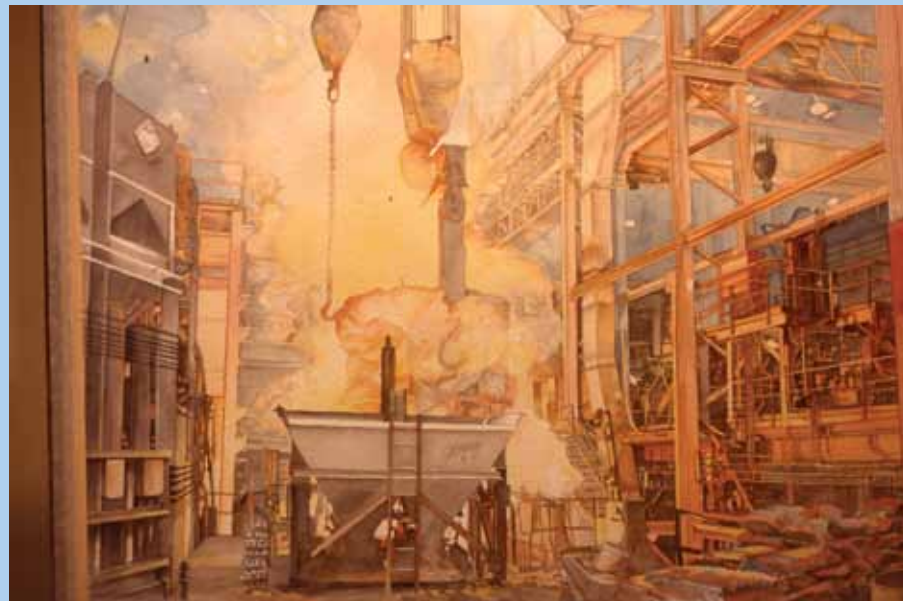
Lake employed three different underpainting applications for three of the paintings in his “Industry” series: a pure water over the drawn graphite for the underpainting of *Backstage*; a neutral color “dirty water” wash for *Industry: Steel*; and a weak-colored wash for the initial design of *Industry: Chamber*.



For the underpainting (above left), Lake lightly drew the graphite line drawing using an HB pencil, shaded in the forms and then brushed over it with water to prevent the graphite from washing into subsequent layers of color in *Backstage* (above right; watercolor on paper, 36¼x25).



For *Industry: Steel* (at left; watercolor on paper, 26¼x18¼), Lake started with a graphite line drawing in HB pencil and then applied a “dirty water” neutral color underpainting, typically a sepia/umber or raw sienna/ burnt umber mix (far left).



The artist added very diluted versions of paint (above) that approximated the eventual colors he used in *Industry: Chamber* (bottom; watercolor on paper, 21¼x 29).

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Alumapalooza Icons
(watercolor on paper, 28¼x21½)



from on-location sketches, Lake doesn’t create complete preliminary studies. Instead, he begins drawing directly onto the sheet, using a rudimentary grid system—marking off the photos and edges of the paper horizontally and vertically in halves and quarters.

Although he has projected an image on some occasions, he much prefers hand rendering. “A projection usually results in a mindless copying of edges in a complex set of chaotic marks devoid of emotional response,” Lake says. “My view is that the photo is just an aid to getting something on the sheet. In a freehand drawing, a lot of the image is altered, and forms are rearranged and edited. This way, the photo doesn’t impersonally dictate everything to the artist. The artwork becomes something that’s truly yours.”

Serious Series

Teaching realistic drawing, in part, encouraged Lake in the direction of representational work. His initial exploration began with paintings of shiny man-made objects—fire trucks and World War II airplanes—before an extensive series on industry and another on Airstream trailers preoccupied his interest. His tour de force *Industry: Labyrinth* (on page 45), as well as *Backstage*, *Industry: Steel* and *Industry: Chamber* (all at left), are stunning examples that emerged from this 15-year-long series on American industry.

To begin *Industry: Labyrinth*, Lake first rubbed graphite powder over the entire paper. “I drew into the graphite using a pencil eraser to create the major lines and shapes. Then, to lift more or less of the graphite, I used practically every eraser known to man to develop most of the imagery before starting to paint. Because the erasers somewhat abraded the sheet, the watercolor soaked in and required a lot of layers to build up the color.”

Painted with fervent attention to detail, the reflections in both 57 *Airstream Caravanner* (on pages 44-45) and *Alumapalooza Icons* (on page 47) are impressive. Having relied upon photos he’d taken at Airstream rallies, Lake says, “I wanted these trailers to be pretty factual, but as usual, I got

off into my own little world making those reflections. I enjoyed wiggling them along, making some darker and others lighter or putting things in that weren’t really there.” In the former work, the artist added trees to enhance the idea of camping. In the latter, playful reflections appear to multiply exponentially as other shiny trailers are reflected, as seen in the window of the main subject.

Sparks Fly

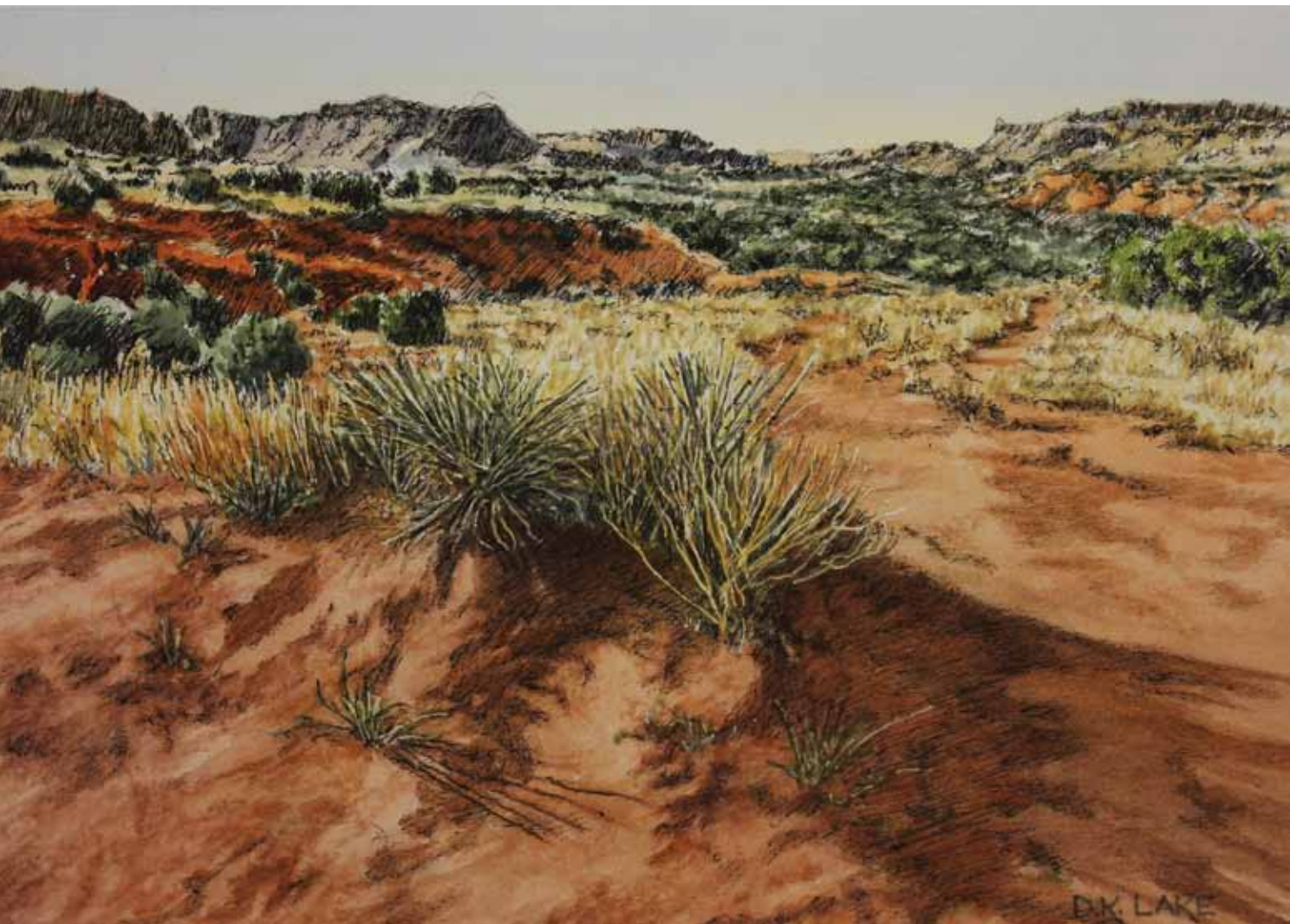
“I usually start thinking about new work long before I start a painting,” Lake says. “I sometimes think in terms of the type of subject, but only in the broadest terms. When it’s specific, it’s because I’ve been looking at something for a while and have begun to think it’s wanting more attention. More often, a subject finds me. I just know when something feels special—the light, the color. Something is talking to me below the conscious level. That’s when I draw or paint some direct work or shoot photos with my phone or take some notes. Those sources then allow me to carry

CLOCKWISE FROM
BOTTOM

Graze Land No. 2
(watercolor and ink
on paper, 8½x12)

Winter Sticks
(watercolor on
paper, 28½x40½)

Burnpile (watercolor
on paper, 28½x40½)



Color Considerations

- Remember that value takes precedence over the color palette.
- Think about which colors offer brilliant light values, not just any color with a lot of water added to it.
- Keep in mind that colors are inherently light, medium and dark and should be used as strong color at the value range natural to them.
- Consider how you can deploy layers to create a color instead of just mixing it up in the pan.
- Break out from the expected. Why are you using the local color of a subject? Are there other sets of colors you could use to offer another version of that subject?
- Show the forms that are in a dark shadow before actually laying that shadow down. Something was there before that shadow occurred; it wasn't just a dark void.
- Go darker. Even when you think you've gone dark enough, you probably haven't. Squint to check the value contrast and keep building.
- Strive for intense color, but avoid opacity as you build.

—Donald K. Lake



OPPOSITE
Bonfire (watercolor on paper, 58¼x 39½)

BELOW
Late Afternoon, Winter, Fall River (watercolor on paper, 21x28¾)

the painted edge. He then pushes the heel of the brush on the paper, picking up some of the paint. “Sometimes I have to fiddle with it a bit,” says Lake, “but usually with just one stroke, I can create a buffer of water that’s just right to leave that edge where it is but fuzz it up a bit.”

If there’s a dry edge that’s too crisp or flat, he takes the point of a brush and works along the edge with water using one or two strokes. He then uses a rag or paper towel and quickly rubs along that edge. He lets the water dry before repeating the process, sometimes two or three times, to obtain the desired softness.

Expressive Effects

For more than a decade, Lake and his wife owned land in the Flint Hills of Kansas that they’d visit during semester breaks. The beauty of that landscape inspired a wealth of plein air paintings and studio work. There, he particularly enjoyed the barren times of the year. “Without foliage, I could see

through to other layers in the landscape, which fascinated me,” he says.

Late Afternoon, Winter, Fall River (below) depicts the site where they’d planned to build a house and studio. “I used color to express the orange raking light of the evening sun,” the artist says. “I like to use a sense of local color sometimes, but I often use colors for expressive effect that are imposed upon the forms to describe them in a more fanciful or expressive way. I particularly like the secondary colors—orange, green and purple—as a palette rich in contrasts and the full value range, but that don’t have a fixed or symbolic role.

“Another palette I’ve used often is yellow/orange vs. blue/purple for



that subject back to my studio where, usually, nothing comes of them. Sometimes, though, that idea continues to nag me and those sources remind me of what I know about the subject, what its details were like, or they put me back in that moment as bits of that memory.

“Those materials, plus all the memories and imagination they prompt,” Lake continues, “are my raw material guides as I start a painting. While I’m painting, the sparks of a new idea often start to fire off. I make a note of them, usually on the tape that surrounds the sheet.”

Burnpile (on page 49) belongs to a recent series that features piles of

branches that captivated Lake’s imagination. From the woodlands of his Mahomet, Ill., property, Lake periodically places fallen sticks and branches into a pile, visible from his studio window, to burn later. “I don’t arrange them carefully,” he says. “Their organic structures fascinate me as they haphazardly grow throughout the season.”

Contemporary in design, *Winter Sticks* (on page 49) and *Burnpile* silhouette natural forms against snow, affording a great deal of negative white space. “I had to give myself permission to leave that much white paper showing,” Lake says. “For *Bonfire* [above], I created an elaborate mask with paper

and tape and used liquid frisket around the edges to preserve the flame area before painting the treeline, which is buried under umpteen washes of blue to achieve that deep sky color. I then initially painted with ‘dirty water’ neutrals to establish the sticks, fire and debris. Though convincing, that lower section is really a collection of shapes that are quite abstract and have a variety of edges.”

To create a sense of volume and atmosphere, Lake meticulously softens edges in several ways. If the paint is still damp, he rinses his brush, blots it on a rag and then carefully adds water using the tip of the brush along



ABOVE
**Fall River, North
(October)** (watercolor
on paper, 14x29)

LEFT
Contrapose
(watercolor on paper,
8½x12)

warm light/cool shadow to model subject forms. I think of color as something I build with layers of transparency, and I’m building atmosphere, detail and the expressive aspects of the painting as those layers build.”

Fall River, North (October) (above) depicts a site higher up on the grassland. “I used frisket for some of the small twig areas, as well as an electric eraser to grind some painted areas down to nearly white paper, like at the bottom right,” Lake says.

“Although this depicts a remote location with personal meaning, I positioned a telephone pole nearby because I liked having a 20th-century detail amid that timeless landscape.”

Contrapose (opposite), accomplished years later in the studio from photos, details big bluestem grass, one of the dominant species of prairie tallgrass still thriving in the Flint Hills. “I love the colors and scale changes of those grasses,” the artist says. “Once started though, there’s a lot of invention in something like this, and I realized it could become a big tangle. I needed some bigger issue, so I created the structural element of brackets—those reddish stems acting like parentheses—and once I had that armature, I could create however much tangle I wanted, yet it would still make sense. In all of

my paintings, the underpainting that determines the armature of important shapes and large areas of light and dark is essential because I’m always looking to first establish the overall structure,” says Lake.

“I need to comprehend what the whole painting is going to be about before I begin to concentrate on small areas—usually just a few square inches in a day’s work,” he says. “Although my process seems like putting together a puzzle, within that overall structure, there’s a lot of elaboration. What I find endlessly fascinating is not painting the truth exactly, but a sense of the truth.” **WA**

Author of numerous articles on art and artists, Robert K. Carsten (robertcarsten.com) teaches workshops and paints in the studio and on location.

Toolkit

PAPER:

- Arches 300-lb., up to 60x40-inch for studio work; Arches 11x14-inch watercolor block for travel

PALETTE:

- Daniel Smith, Winsor & Newton, M. Graham

BRUSHES:

- Series 785 Robert Simmons white sable brushes, mainly sizes 6 and 8 rounds; No. 12 for plein air work; No. 2 rigger for detail; 2-inch hake for washes

MISCELLANEOUS:

- HB pencil, erasers, electric eraser, liquid frisket, John Pike palette



Meet the Artist

Donald K. Lake (donlakeart.com) served as program director of art and design at Parkland College, in Champaign, Ill., where he’s now a professor emeritus. He’s also an adjunct faculty member in the graduate school of Eastern Illinois University, in Charleston, Ill. He’s the recipient of the 2018 Watercolor USA Honor Society Lifetime Achievement Award and the Champaign County Arts Council’s Lifetime ACE Award. His work has appeared in numerous publications and twice has graced the cover of *Airstream Life* magazine. Avidly collected, his award-winning watercolors have been shown in numerous gallery and museum exhibitions.