

CHARLIE HUNTER

# Taking 30 Years to Become an Overnight Success

Although he has been a painter and graphic designer since he graduated from Yale University in 1981, Vermont artist Charlie Hunter's exceptional talent and individual style of painting have only recently attracted widespread recognition

When artists and collectors rushed to buy Charlie Hunter's paintings during the 2011 PleinAir *Publisher's Invitational*, the eager purchasers assumed the artist was a very young man just starting his career. That was the only plausible explanation as to why so few people knew anything about this gifted painter. When they later found out Hunter is a 51-year-old artist, graphic designer, and music manager, they were just as impressed with his talent, but even more curious about his professional background.

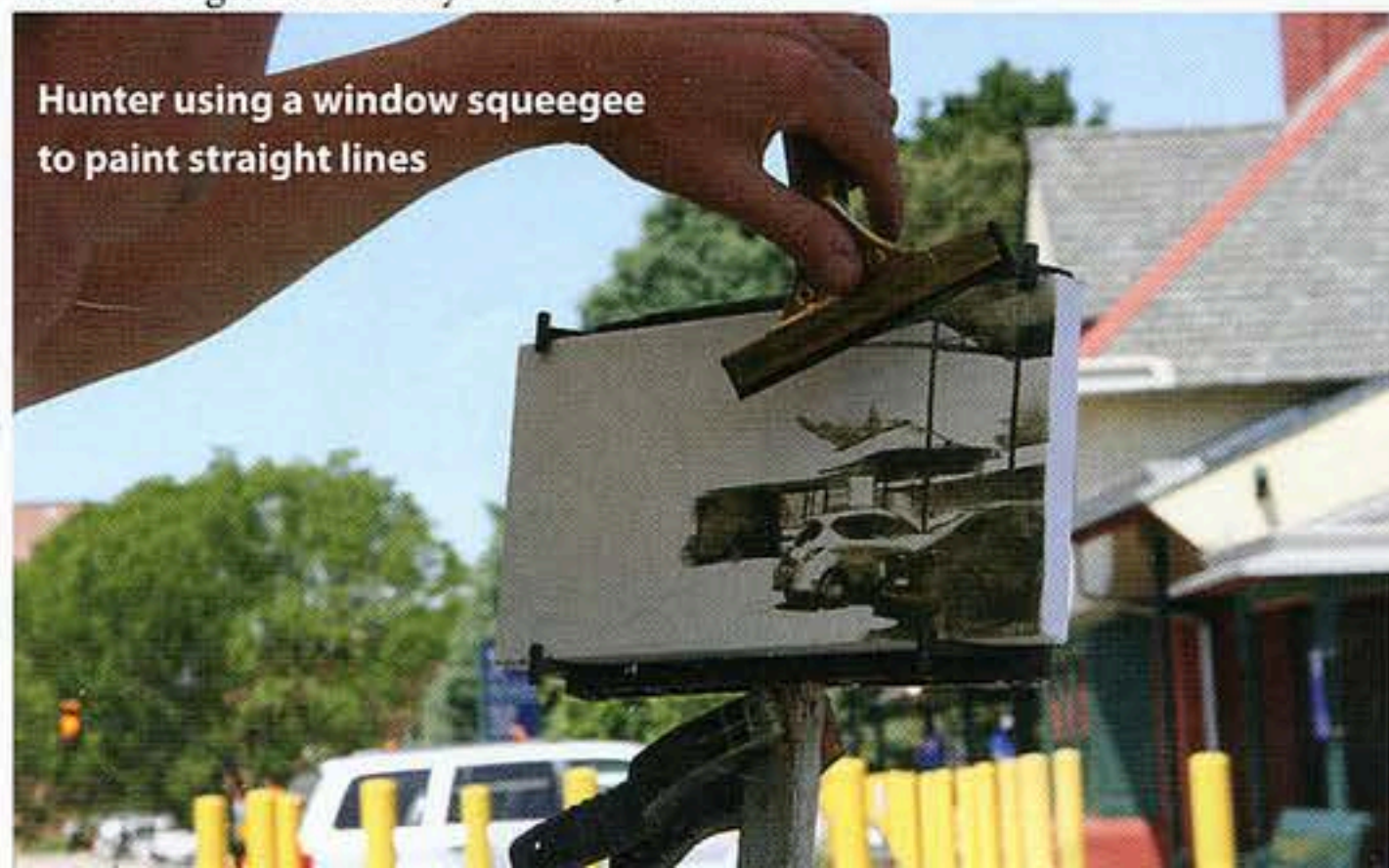
Fortunately for everyone, Hunter is an extremely bright, articulate, and amusing fellow who can explain everything one might want to know about his background and creative process. After being home-schooled while growing up in Vermont, he majored in art at Yale University and connected with what he now recognizes as the three strongest influences on his painting.

"Although the Yale art department had a strong footing in abstract and conceptual art, the professor who headed the undergraduate program, William Bailey, worshiped at the feet of Ingres, and he insisted that students draw from the figure three days a week," Hunter

Charlie Hunter working out of the back of his van during a recent plein air event



Hunter using a window squeegee to paint straight lines



recalls. "He believed artists had to learn how to put down information by drawing the human form.

"The second key that helped unlock the system I now employ was given to me during a workshop with Stuart Shils, an artist whose paintings come as close to pure abstraction as any representational paintings can. About the same time that I studied with Shils, I was also introduced to the work of Dennis Sheehan, a tonalist painter who creates romantic landscapes by lifting shapes out of a slurry of oil colors. Seeing those two technical and aesthetic possibilities was a very fortunate experience for me because they suggested a methodology that might give voice to my own expressions."





**Grocery Warehouse, Clifton Forge**

2012, oil on panel, 16 x 8 in.

Collection Clifton Forge (VA) School of the Arts

Photo: Fire & Light Photography

Plein air

The third key to Hunter's captivating style of painting was given to him in 2009, when he was accepted by the Putney Painters, a group of artists who paint weekly with Richard Schmid and Nancy Guzik in Putney, Vermont. "It's a wonderful group of distinctive personalities and painting styles," Hunter says. "Then there are the pearls of wisdom about art that Richard or Nancy hand us when they paint, offer a critique, or moderate a discussion. For example, Schmid often states that artists don't paint objects, but the shape of the light hitting the object. That made a huge difference in my understanding of what I could be doing as a painter."

**'Panic Born Of Ineptitude'**

When Hunter gets more specific about how he actually executes a painting, he offers a standard response: His style is "panic born out of ineptitude." By that he means he didn't start out intending to paint in an almost monochromatic manner, but it happened naturally as he began to respond to subjects that interested him. "Given my background in graphic design, I'm inclined to start with a layout or what I call a mosaic of patterns," he explains. "I do a graphite notebook sketch to figure out how to compose the picture so that it conveys the story I have in mind, and then, after about 20 minutes of sketching, I start working on the painting through the placement of lights and darks on a very smooth canvas covered with multiple layers of acrylic gesso tinted with transparent yellow oxide. I continue without much concern for color, because that just isn't integral to my thought process.

Hunter notes that, for health reasons, he switched to water-soluble oils about eight years ago. "Sometimes I will slather a lot of

**ARTIST DATA**

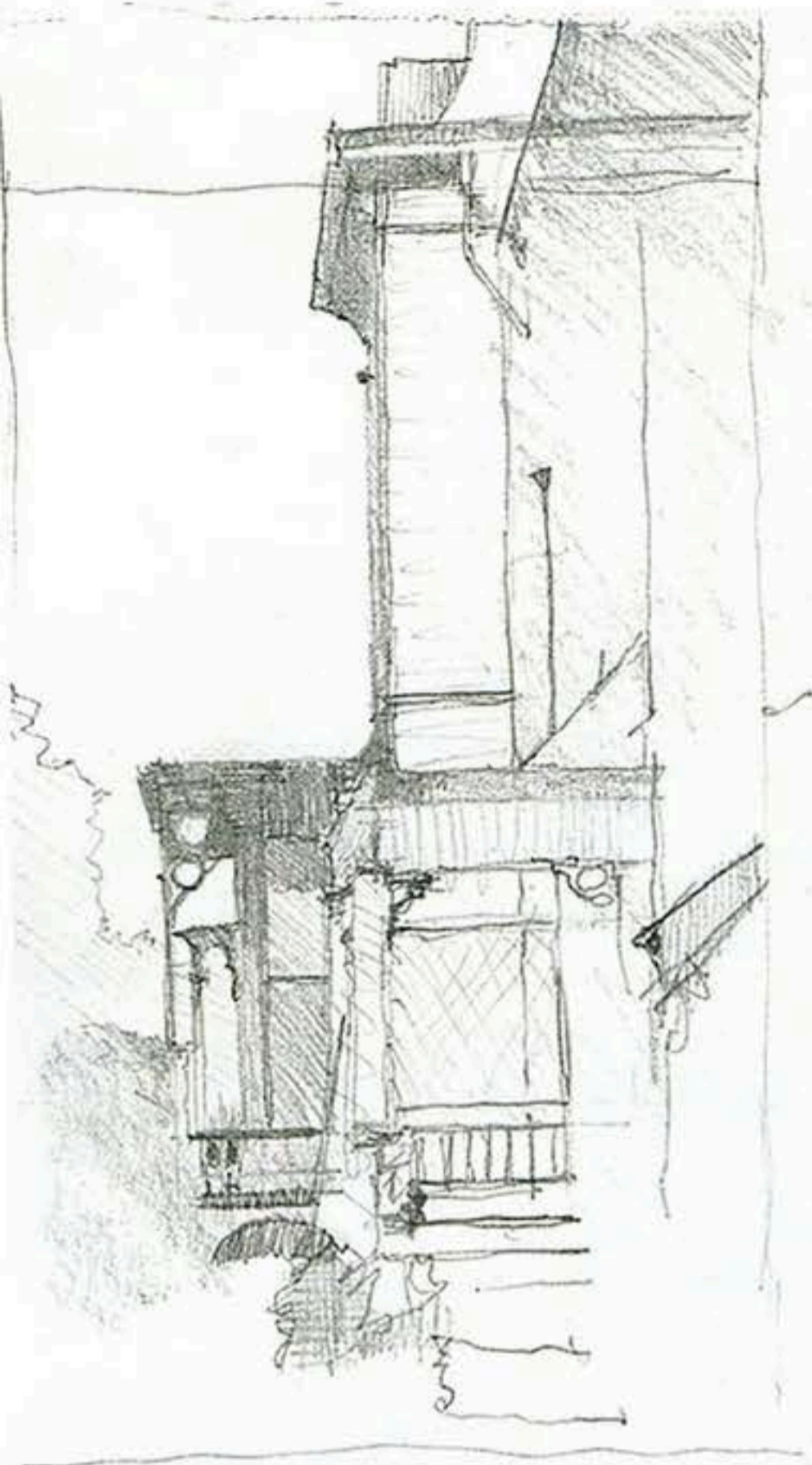
**NAME:** Charlie Hunter

**BIRTHDATE:** 1960

**LOCATION:** Bellows Falls, VT

**WEBSITE:** [www.hunter-studio.com](http://www.hunter-studio.com)





**Victorian Sketch**

2011, graphite, 6 x 3 in.

dark-colored wet paint on the surface of the canvas and lift out the important shapes, somewhat the way Dennis Sheehan does," he says. "I pull out highlights and create large areas of negative space by removing the paint with paper towels — I'm a Bounty man, myself — Q-tips, and Stim-U-Dents, which I chew more or less constantly while painting. At other times, I start by blocking in positive shapes rather than negative ones. The choice is somewhat dictated by the overall plan I established in the compositional sketches.

"In either case, I am as conscious of the balance of values because I want the lighter, negative spaces to be more than the random real estate left between defined objects. I want them

**Green Mountain Coach, Afternoon**

2011, oil on canvas, 40 x 20 in.

Collection Rick & Alicia Tabb  
studio







**Rainy Afternoon, Grafton**

2012, oil on panel, 16 x 32 in.

Collection of Thomas R. Enders & Elise Thoron

Photo: David Putnam

Plein air

to be as important to understanding the painting as the positive, painted areas of the canvas.”

One of the other balances important to Hunter is that which can exist between broadly painted, gestured brush marks and tightly painted details. “The human brain wants to focus on one important thing in a story, whether it is told with spoken words, written accounts, or painted images,” he says. “Obsessive detail in any form of storytelling creates confusion and leads to only one possible conclusion. That’s why I leave dripped paint in the peripheral areas of a painting, allow a shape to disappear into an unpainted area, or prompt the colors to blend on the surface of the canvas and dry into random patterns.

“I’m attracted to paintings that look like they simply *had* to be made, and I like to see the evidence of the awesome struggle — awesome to us painters, anyway — between the painter and the essence of the subject. That’s what I tell my prospective buyers when they look curiously at the drips, fingerprints, dead bugs, dirt, and twigs that seem to fling themselves onto the surfaces of my paintings.”

Most of Hunter’s paintings are created on location, although he does a fair amount of

studio work through the winter months. He outfitted his Honda Element so he has a larger protected area in which to work, under the protection of the automobile’s rear hatch. “I used a sheet of some of the Coroplast corrugated plastic sheeting available at sign shops, two bungee cords, and a dowel to expand the protected area to about 5 x 4 feet,” he says. “I can stand under that and be somewhat protected from the wind, rain, and snow.”

### The Shape Of Light

Because Hunter’s fine art paintings are created with a limited number of relatively dark colors, the implied light in his landscapes takes on a starkness that suggests black-and-white photography. That technique can bring the focus of a painting to a street lamp that illuminates a sidewalk, the incandescent lights inside a darkened building, or the reflections waving across a wet surface. These aspects of Hunter’s paintings relate to Schmid’s idea that paintings are about the shape of light. Hunter currently works with three brands of water-soluble oil colors: Winsor & Newton Artisan paints, Holbein Duo colors, and Royal Talens Cobra paints.

When creating posters for nonprofit organizations, Hunter works with a full-color palette. “I sometimes create posters that nonprofit groups can sell to raise money, and those need to include multi-colored images related to the group’s charitable activities,”

he says. “I’ve done several for a group in Virginia that celebrates the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad, and I do a commemorative painting each year for the Preservation Trust of Vermont. I enjoy supporting groups like that, and the shift back to commercial work is like having a sorbet course between my drippy monochrome dishes.”

The increasing interest in Hunter’s paintings has brought invitations to conduct workshops, and he will be teaching at the Scottsdale Artist’s School next year and offering a plein air workshop through the Grafton Inn in Grafton, Vermont. He exhibits his paintings in galleries throughout the United States, and his works are in numerous private collections.

When not painting, Hunter runs occasional transcontinental music and art trains and live music events, and he’s active in local farmers’ markets. He lives with two cats, who are utterly unimpressed with his distinctive painting techniques. “If he is going to become a famous artist, can you make sure to tell him we like the food that comes in cans?” says the cat named Silas. 🐱

M. Stephen Doherty is Editor of *PleinAir* magazine.



See more of Charlie Hunter’s work in the expanded digital edition of *PleinAir*.