



**Santa Catalina Arch**  
2021, oil, 11 x 14 in.  
Private collection  
Plein air



*In this piece, I wanted to key the entire painting off the shadow being cast onto the yellow arch. The darks provided enough contrast that I was able to keep my shadow values light, maintain chroma in the lights, and move the viewer's eye around the painting.*

# THE KEYS TO PAINTING IN HIGH KEY

Punctuate paintings that lean heavily to the light end of the value scale with a few darks and more intense colors for work that feels luminous and joyful.

— BY LORI PUTNAM —

Everyone can agree that plein air is the most difficult of the painting sports. Wind, rain, snow, mosquitos, bears, passersby — if an artist hasn't experienced most if not all, they're probably new to the game. In the face of these challenges, beginners must also learn to identify values properly. That's especially hard to do in areas with

a lot of bounced light — the desert, for example — where it's often hard to see past the harsh effects and take measure of what's truly happening.

As the light is reflected off the pale sand, it reflects, or bounces, into the surrounding objects in shadow. Think of it like a still life setup on a pale tablecloth, except in this case your light source, and consequently your shadow shapes, continue to change as you paint. Artists can choose to increase the contrast, or, as I'm going to illustrate in the demonstration here, respond to what they're actually seeing in nature.



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## DEMONSTRATION: Sticking with the Plan

When I approach a subject with strong bounced light, I strategically place small darks in my work, allowing me to compress the value difference between the light shapes and the shadow shapes. On my value scale, 1 represents white and 10 represents black. If I have a value range of 3 to 5, these darker accent shapes are essential, and the result is a painting that is very high-key in value.

Key can also refer to color. On my color scale, 1 represents neutral or almost no color, and 10 represents full strength or intensity of color. If I have color in the 4 to 6 range, I can use small shapes of slightly more intense color in places to make the painting feel luminous and joyful.



### The Artist's View (FAR LEFT)

*I found this scene just outside of Scottsdale, Arizona. I used an umbrella and set up at an angle to the scene to help prevent glare on my canvas and on my mixing surface.*

### Preliminary Sketch (LEFT)

*I then made a thumbnail sketch indicating the division of light and shadow, so I could relax as the sun moved while I painted, and made notes about my values. It helps to make those decisions when your eyes and mind are fresh.*



### Step 1

*Rather than pre-staining my surface, I chose a color based on my response to the scene itself. In this case, I could see red violet running throughout, a thread that tied the scene together.*



### Step 2

*Using my No. 10 Series 2045 brush, I darkened the parts of the painting that would remain in shadow, then used a paper towel and some Gamsol to wipe away the light pattern. Although I wasn't aiming for perfection, I did mark my darkest dark before it escaped me. Note: This is also the stage where I would have done some drawing, if any had been needed, with an Ivory filbert size 0.*



### Step 3

*Now I was ready to move on to the color I saw in different parts of the shadow. This neutral green mixture — slightly darker than mid-value — was made with Payne's gray, India yellow, cadmium yellow medium, and a touch of white. I judged the value by comparing it to my mixing area, which is also slightly darker than mid-value.*



#### Step 4

Notice how dark the green looks on the canvas. This told me that my stain was exactly mid-value — a measure that would come in handy as I moved through the painting, so I noted it on my thumbnail sketch. A No. 4 Evergreen egypt naturally created more organic shapes than would have been possible with a flat. I used this same brush for most of the painting.



#### Step 5

Painting in large masses at this stage kept me on track with my light and shadow design. I resisted the temptation to refine my shapes too much; it was okay if they looked cut out and clunky.



#### Step 6

Mixing a value slightly lighter than my shadow color, I began to add depth to the palo verde shrub.



#### Step 7

Switching to a No. 4 Evergreen X-Long flat, I painted the “flatter” surfaces, giving the ground plane a totally different shape. Notice how dark the shadows appear with the addition of the lightest lights. I wanted to cover the entire surface with one coat of paint before I began breaking up the large shapes into slightly smaller ones.



#### Step 8

Back to the egypt brush. I began adding warmer and cooler colors to the palo verde to create volume. I also cut background shapes into the edges of the main bush.



#### Step 9

Staying true to the original division of light and shadow, I continued “bending” colors that were slightly warmer or cooler, slightly more neutral or chromatic, and slightly darker or lighter to create a variety of transitional shapes. “Bending” simply means adding a touch of another color into a pile of paint that is already mixed in order to change it in some way.

### ARTIST'S TOOLKIT

**PAINTS:** Gamblin Artist Colors — cadmium yellow light, cadmium yellow medium, India yellow, cadmium orange deep, naphthol red, brown pink, asphaltum, dioxazine purple, ultramarine blue, phthalo green, permanent green light, cadmium green, Payne's gray, titanium white

**BRUSHES:** Rosemary & Co brushes — No. 10 Series 2045, No. 4 Ivory Filbert, No. 4 Evergreen Egypt, No. 4 Evergreen X-Long Flat, 1/4-inch Shiraz Sword, and 1/4-inch Series 7320 Pure Sable

**SURFACE:** RayMar Art Panel C15DP linen, 11 x 14 inches

**SETUP:** EdgeProGear Medium Putnam Signature Palette with Gitzo Carbon Fiber tripod, side trays, and medium cup

**SKETCHING MATERIALS:** Putnam Proportional Sketchbook and ZIG duo-tipped Brushable Markers in black and platinum

**MISC.:** Gamsol, palette knife, Viva paper towels



### Step 10

Here you can see up close how I loaded the egypt with paint, placed the brush horizontal to the surface, and, using lighter pressure, rolled it across the surface to deposit thicker paint on top of the layers beneath.



### Step 11

The form of the shrub really began to take shape at this stage. Just like painting sky holes, I broke up the thickness of the palo verde by cutting in pieces of the background hillside. With my 1/4-inch Shiraz sword brush, I added the small shapes, including textural elements and small branches. I used different sides and angles of my brush, and experimented with unique ways of pulling the brush off the surface.



### Step 12

Using my soft Series 7320 pure sable brush, I lightly layered more neutralized colors over the original violet. I didn't want to lose all the original color, though, so I stood back as often as the wind allowed in order to make clear choices. At this stage, my aim was to "think twice and paint once," because my eyes and mind were exhausted. I didn't want to start darkening values and gray-ing colors too much. I had to trust my notes and stick with the plan.

## The Artist's Palette



Because I continually mixed piles of paint next to one another, I could judge their colors and values more easily. This method of mixing also helped to neutralize each new bend, creating a more natural look than I would have gotten by simply mixing in a color's complement.

### Finished Painting

I photographed the finished painting under controlled lighting. As you can see, the colors appear much more natural-looking here, something I keep in mind when I'm painting en plein air.

#### Palo Verde

2022, oil, 11 x 14 in.  
Available from artist  
Plein air





**Iceberg Lake**

2020, oil, 8 x 10 in.

Available from FoR Fine Art Gallery  
Studio

*Using a slight value gradation on the shadows of the rocks, I was able to maintain an overall mid-value. Placing one very dark shape in the water under the frontmost rock reinforced the relationship between the lightest shadow and the darkest light, which are only one step apart.*



**Hearts and Bunnies**

2020, oil, 9 x 12 in.

Private collection

Plein air

*This little piece has several darker shapes. The value of the cast shadows on the desert floor gave me room to keep the body shadow of the blue paddle prickly pear lighter in value. The violets, blues, and greens appear more intense than the paint mixtures actually looked on their own. This is because of the beautiful complementary neutrals for each in yellow, orange, and red.*



### Harbor

2019, oil, 6 x 9 in.

Private collection

Plein air

*I'm particularly drawn to scenes that are front-lit or nearly front-lit. In Harbor, I needed the dark accents beneath the dock to set the key. Look how close in value the shadow side and the light side of the buildings in the upper left-hand corner are. Compare that to the shadow and light side of the building just below them. These relationships are important to maintaining a high value key.*



### WHAT TO DO IF YOUR PAINTING ...

**IS TOO DARK.** Be sure you are measuring values with your canvas and your mixing area in the shade. If light is hitting either surface, you are making assumptions based on puddles of paint that are being lightened by the sun.

**IS TOO LIGHT.** Make a note of your darkest value when you create your thumbnail sketch, and assign a number to it. Stand back often and refresh your eyes by closing them for a few minutes.

**LOOKS ALL THE SAME VALUE.** Measure the values in your scene against your mixing area value. Assign a number to your lightest dark and your darkest light. They should be no less than a step apart and could be several steps apart.

**LOOKS MUSHY.** Chances are you did not stick to your original light and shadow plan, and instead chased the light.

**LOOKS MUDDY.** If you are layering, use thicker paint, brush horizontal to the surface, and employ a lighter touch as you go. Ideally, you should not feel the brush touch the surface at all. Instead, the paint will pull off the brush for you.

**IS TOO COLORFUL.** Neutrals are your friend. Use color more sparingly and it will be luminous, not gaudy.

**HAS NO COLOR.** Same advice as above.

### Chicken Scratch

2021, oil, 9 x 6 in.

Private collection

Studio

*Here, the overall shadow value is a 5, and the overall light value is a 3. The only real darks are in the black feathers in shadow. A touch of intense red on the rooster's beak and comb adds other dark notes. The reflected light from the ground plane and from the blue sky produced some lovely colors in the shadows.*