

John Beerman: Light, Restraint, and Clarity

This Hudson River Valley artist uses a limited palette to create landscapes drenched in an evocative and transporting light.

—
by **John A. Parks**

John Beerman has discovered the realms of magic and delight available to the artist who dares to say less, creating strangely evocative and thoughtful pictures bathed in a rich and tranquil light. “I’d like to think my paintings take viewers somewhere new and transcendent,” the artist says of his work. “I’d like them to feel that they are seeing the world in an entirely new way.” The artist achieves this vision through simplifying the painting process and by yielding to the influence of the artists who have painted before him in his native Hudson River Valley. “My strongest influence has been the American Luminist School,” the artist admits. “I discovered these artists while I was a student, and I was very much drawn to the sense of quietness and contemplation in their work.”

Beerman arrives at the luminosity and almost religious quietude in his

LEFT
Hook Mountain, Nyack, New York
2006, oil on linen, 36 x 60. Private collection. All images this article courtesy Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York, New York.

landscapes through a process in which he carefully and systematically limits his palette while artfully editing out almost all descriptive detail. This two-

pronged strategy is evident in his painting *Hook Mountain, Nyack, New York*, in which a vast, limpid expanse of the Hudson River is shown in the glow of a spectacularly luminous sunset. The promontory of *Hook Mountain, Nyack, New York* is reduced to a stark and simplified triplet of hummocks while a spit of darkly forested land creeps in at the left side. On the horizon sits the low eastern bank of the river shown as nothing more than a violet-and-orange strip. The only other feature in the painting is a patch of reeds suggested on the lower right. It is extraordinary that the ravishing color of this work is achieved with just three colors and white. “I make all my paintings based on color triads,” says Beerman. “In this case I used phthalo blue, transparent orange, and alizarin crimson along with titanium white. There is also a magenta underpainting beneath it all.”

Beerman finds that by restricting his color he achieves a much more powerful sense of identity and atmosphere in each painting. And although he has discovered a number of combinations of pigments that work well for him he is always experimenting with new groupings. “I look at a scene and



Beerman's Materials

Easel

- pochade painting box for outdoor work

Palette

- Winsor & Newton traditional oil paints and water-soluble oil paints, augmented by various colors, including Gamblin transparent orange and alizarin permanent

Medium

- water-soluble oil medium to add to traditional oil paints

Brushes

- bristle brushes-usually filberts that aren't too fat



ABOVE

The artist's studio, showing the sketches, notes, and value studies that go into preparing a finished work.

RIGHT

Field Near Camp Towanda, II

2006, oil on linen, 30 x 40. Collection the artist.

OPPOSITE PAGE

Hudson River View Looking East

2004, oil on linen, 12 x 18. Private collection.



sense which colors will get the most from it," he says. "However, I'm always willing to change my approach, even in the middle of a painting. Often I find that I can't get quite dark enough with the colors I've been working with, so I'll add an umber to go a little darker. In the end the important thing is the picture-what it does or says."

As for his underpaintings, Beerman has experimented with many different combinations. "I first learned about transparent magenta while printmaking with my mother-in-law, Sylvia Roth, who is a wonderfully gifted master printmaker and painter," says the artist. "She showed me how magenta can give a warm glow to a piece, and she showed me various ways of building on top of it. Sometimes I work on a painting so long I end up covering the underpainting altogether. I suppose you could say at that point the underpainting was a waste of time, but I've come

to realize that a perfectly executed technical painting isn't what I'm interested in. You always want to push yourself into new areas if you can, and so every painting becomes a journey to somewhere new and undiscovered. Theories and techniques can only take you so far-you have to know when to leave them behind and when to keep going without them."

Beerman begins his paintings with a half-hour on-site study, quickly sketching the scene he has in mind and reducing it to a few simple shapes. The sketch for *Hook Mountain, Nyack, New York*, for instance, was achieved while sitting out on the Hudson River in a boat, rushing to capture the light as the sun sank below the horizon. Already evident at this stage was the immense simplification in which the artist revels; he has cut away all extraneous matter to reveal the bones of his scene. The artist also makes notes on the sketch, sometimes

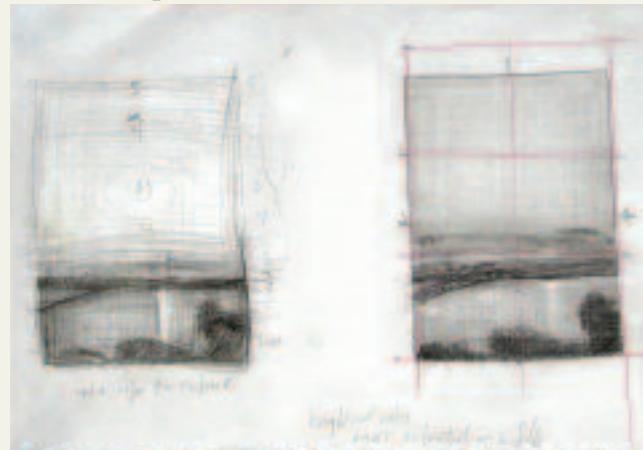
using numbers to denote tonal values. Back in the studio Beerman uses these studies to do small color sketches, trying out a variety of color triads to arrive at an appropriate color world for his image. At this stage he will also refine his composition and come up with a size and proportion that work. "I used to use more photographic references," admits the artist, "although I was never really interested in a highly finished kind of realism. These days, even though I take a photograph of the subject matter, I tend not to look at it very much. I find that it is too distracting and too likely to tempt me to include elements that I don't need in the painting."

After this preliminary preparation, usually Beerman begins the final painting with a magenta-wash underpainting. Next, he builds the surface with broad brushstrokes, gradually massing his forms. He uses a variety



Step 1– Plein Air Studies

Beerman first sketched his subject on-site in oil on 6"-x-8" panels.

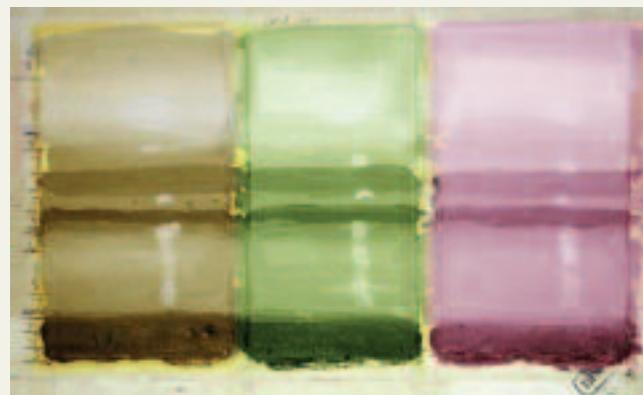
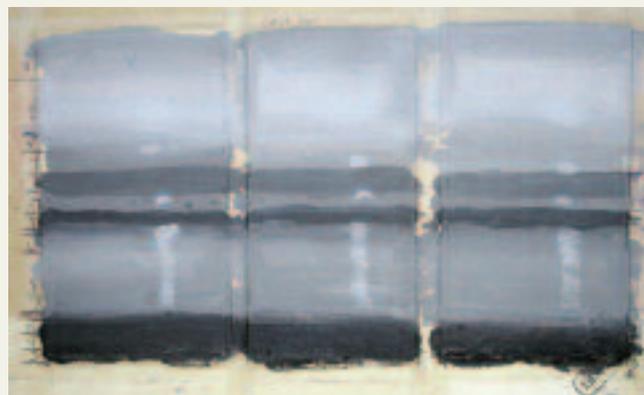


Step 2– Graphite Sketch For the Bridge

He went back to his studio a few days later and began fleshing out ideas for his composition in graphite. In this sketch, the

Step 3– Graphite Compositional Sketch

Beerman next decided on the broad organization of his composition, refining how he wanted the painting to emerge. At this stage, he began melding what he actually saw on-site with his own



Step 4– Value Studies

The artist considers this stage of his process as the most instrumental in establishing the correct balance of light in the final painting. "Values are so important," Beerman says. "They really make the color and light come alive in the work and set up the overall tone of the piece." Typically, the artist's value studies have a little more variety than what is

Step 5– Underpainting Color Studies

The artist next puts down three underpainting colors, on top of which he will later test various combinations of colors. Studying the work of past masters has helped Beerman arrive at these particular colors. "The brown underpainting color on the left is something I picked up from Caspar David



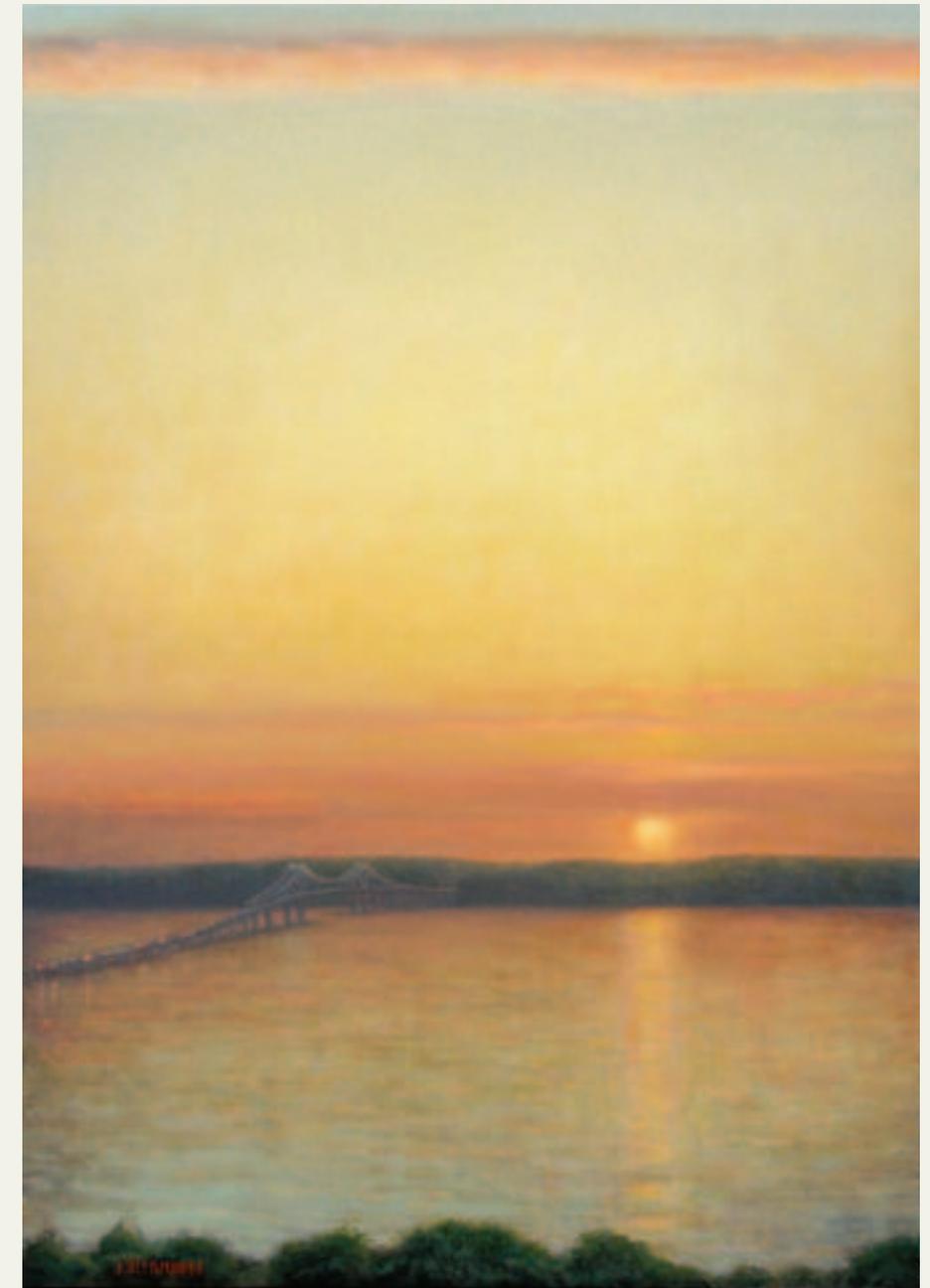
Step 6– Color Triads

At this stage, Beerman began testing various color triads over the underpainting colors until he arrived at the right luminosity and mood for his painting. In the first study he used phthalo blue (red shade) and transparent yellow orange (Gamblin) and alizarin



Step 7– Sketch For the Client

Since this painting was a commission, the artist provided a 7"-x-11" finished sketch for approval to the client before proceeding to the final painting. "I don't do many commissions," the artist admits, "but I've found that even if it's a subject I wouldn't normally take on, I always learn something from the



THE COMPLETED PAINTING:
Sunrise Over the Hudson River
2006, oil on linen, 24 x 34. Private collection.



LEFT
Lake 7 a.m.
 2004, oil and acrylic
 on linen, 28 x 40.
 Private collection.

OPPOSITE PAGE
**Late Winter
 Afternoon, Nyack**
 2006, oil on linen,
 18 x 26.
 Private collection.



of bristle brushes from various manufacturers. “I don’t really like flats,” he says, “and lately I’ve been buying filberts that aren’t too fat.” Beerman holds his brush at the back end, working the paint onto the canvas with a delicate lick. As for paint, the artist has recently made some additions to his array of traditional oils. “Lately I’ve been working with Winsor & Newton water-soluble oils,” he says. “I’ve found that with some of the very brilliant colors the water-soluble paints are a little brighter and sharper when they dry than true oil paint.” Beerman finds that he can augment the limited number of water-soluble oil colors available with traditional oils by adding water-soluble oil medium to the paint. “If you use about 50 percent medium to 50 percent oil paint you can then use your old-fashioned oil paint as a water-soluble paint,” he says. The artist does have one or two problems with this new medium however, saying that sometimes the values change as the

color dries, undoing some of the subtlety of the color in a painting.

Beerman will work on a painting over many weeks, building it with small brushstrokes executed in fairly thin paint until the picture attains a sense of extraordinary luminosity. “I’d like to get just a little more sense of the brushing in the work,” says Beerman, “but since I do so much work on the surface, I tend to lose some of that directness.” Indeed the artist works his surfaces with an almost obsessive delicacy. The sky in *Hook Mountain, Nyack, New York*, for instance, is composed of many thousands of touches with the brush, created as the artist moved back and forth across the canvas. This quiet and even compilation of statements, building to the evocation of a subtle light, lends the picture an elegiac quality, a wistfulness that the artist brings to the scene. Only in the extreme foreground, where the water ripples toward the viewer, has Beerman left a few fresh brushstrokes to sit on their own.

In some of Beerman’s pictures, the stripped-down nature of his landscape has been taken to extremes. In *Hudson River View Looking East*, we are presented with river, land, and sky as little more than a group of horizontal strips. Bereft of detail and incident to hang onto, the eye seeks out tiny nuances of drawing, little moves and notches on the horizon line, and the curious stacking of the clouds above. Freed of the conventions of the picturesque we are left to gaze on the stark reality of the scene, bathed in a pink light bestowed by sunset behind us. In some recent paintings, however, Beerman has abandoned this ultrasimplification of landscape in favor of scenes that contain more incident and evidence of human appearance. In *Field Near Camp Towanda II*, for instance, a stretch of barbed-wire fence separates us from the sweep of golden landscape as it stretches away toward the last glow of a sunset. And in *Late Winter Afternoon, Nyack* we look across a group of rooftops to the eastern banks of the

Hudson River. “Actually this was a painting I did from the skylight of my studio,” explains the artist. “I just kept the canvas there and did a little on it now and then when the light was right.”

Only rarely do human figures appear in Beerman’s work. In *Lake 7 a.m.*, a lone boatman rows a small skiff across a wide expanse of water. Trees hover in the background still swathed in a dawn mist while the sky lightens to a golden yellow. The rower leans back over his shoulder as though he has spotted something out of our view. The painting of the figure is quite solid and real while the landscape, dissolving in light and mist, feels more suggestive, the stuff of dreams. It seems clear that the figure is a simple stand-in for ourselves, an improbable traveler in the poetic realms of nature and beauty. ■

John A. Parks is an artist who is represented by Allan Stone Gallery, in New York City. He is also a teacher at the School of Visual Arts, in New York City, and is a frequent contributor to American Artist, Drawing, Watercolor, and Workshop magazines.

About the Artist

John Beerman grew up in North Carolina and studied art at the Rhode Island School of Design, in Providence. In particular he credits his teacher Gerald Immonen with giving him a love of color and a fascination for its workings. Beerman worked briefly as an assistant to Jasper Johns, Cletus Johnson, and Alfonso Ossorio. He launched his career as a painter in the mid-1980s and has mounted numerous exhibitions around the United States. Beerman’s work is in many public collections, including the Walker Art Center, in Minneapolis; the Neuberger Museum of Art, in Purchase, New York; and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, in New York City. The artist lives with his wife, Susie, and their two children in the childhood home of Joseph Cornell, in Nyack, New York. He occasionally teaches at the Rhode Island School of Design, and his work is represented by Tibor de Nagy Gallery, in New York City. Future projects include a mural cycle of Hudson River views for Xavier’s H2O, a new restaurant on the waterfront in Yonkers, New York.