



With spare, spontaneous brushwork and a bold technique, David Shevlino places figures in the landscape.

painterly economy

BY MEREDITH E. LEWIS

IN A STYLE BOTH loose and direct, Delaware artist David Shevlino unites masterly landscape painting with the psychological complexity of figurative work. Many of his recent paintings depict the figure in the landscape in a style that's almost California-esque, and perhaps reminiscent of early work by David Park (1911–1960) and Richard Diebenkorn (1922–1993). Colors are bright in Shevlino's world and seem to vibrate in the raking sun, while figures take on classical poses in contemporary scenes. "I've always had a love of figure painting," the artist says, "yet after art school, I started painting landscapes for practical reasons—sales. I've gone back to figure painting these last few years by inserting figures into the landscape. I can't quite say why, but on a psychological and emotional level, I like seeing the figure surrounded by open space."

LEFT: As he did in *Full Sun* (page 22), Shevlino had a model pose in his backyard while he took photographs for *Sunbather* (oil, 42x42). The houses in the background are from other pictures he found of houses in Maine.

Early Discoveries

Born to a working-class family in an industrial area of New Jersey, Shevlino wasn't exposed to art early in childhood, and yet by age 14, he had established a strong interest in painting and drawing. At that age, he determined to be an artist and was already taking solo trips to New York City museums and galleries.

BELOW: While concentrating on the sense of movement between the figures in *Sumos* (oil, 15x16), a small, *alla prima* (painted wet-into-wet) piece from a series of sumo paintings, Shevlino concentrated on keeping his brushwork painterly. The artist suggests that the emotional struggle of art-making itself is somehow replayed in the contrasting energies of this picture.

Visits to the Metropolitan Museum of Art proved to be especially influential, and figurative art interested the young Shevlino most. "I had an innate fascination with the skill and mastery of craft that I saw in Renaissance and Baroque paintings," he explains. "That level of virtuosity resonated with me, and I began to consider it an important component to making art, at least the art I would begin making. That traditional aspect is still a thread in my work, though today I adapt it to a more contemporary application."

Thus by the time Shevlino landed in art school, he'd absorbed many lessons of craft

and was familiar with art history. Most important, he'd already discovered what kind of painting he liked. Art school gave the young artist a solid foundation in drawing and painting, which would later enable him to break from tradition and establish his own style.

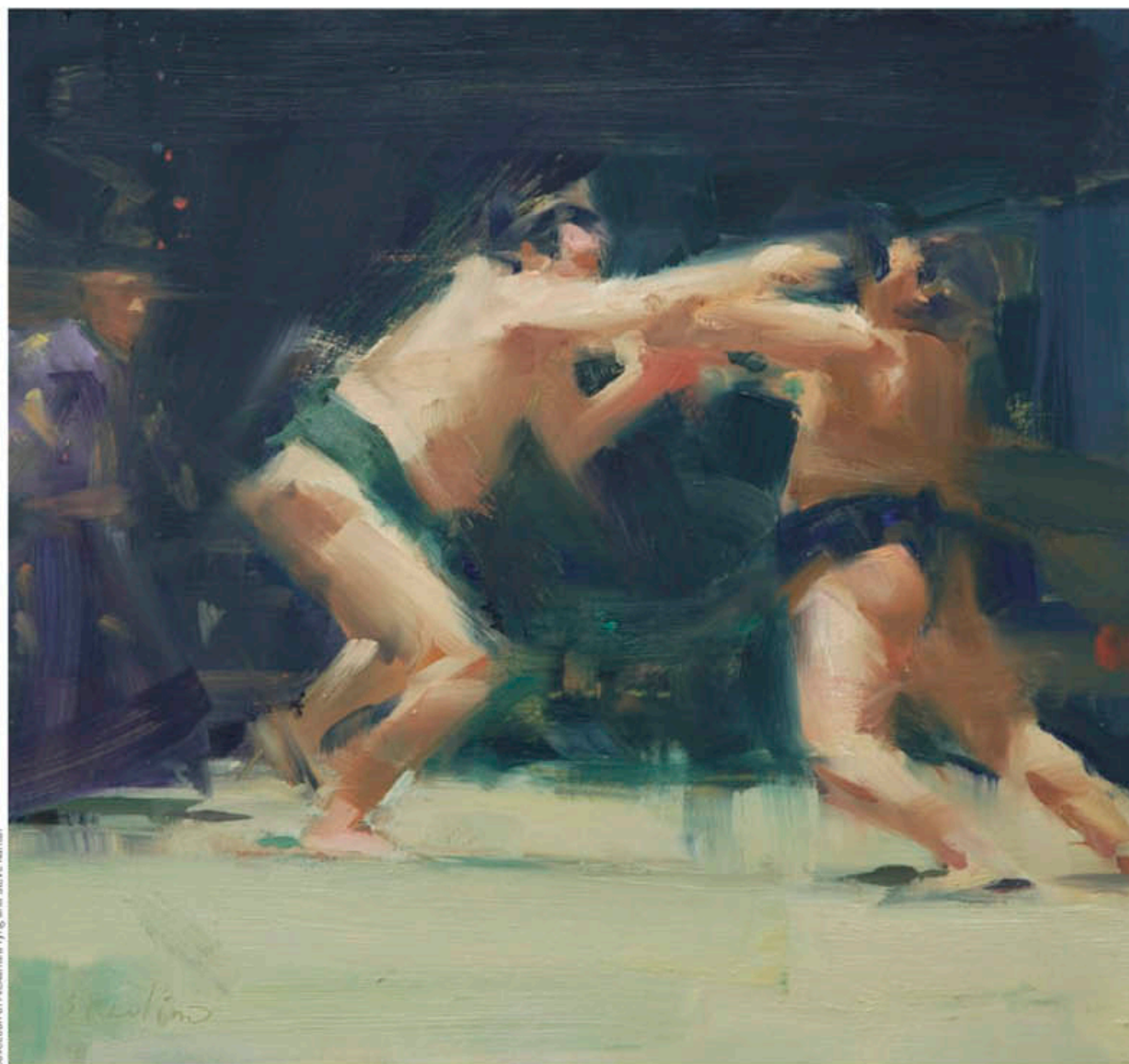
Combining Realism and Abstraction

In the early 1990s, Shevlino decided he wanted to get away from the traditional paintings he'd been doing and try something more experimental. "I didn't know what that would be," he says, "but I knew it would be quite different. I spent a couple of years trying more expressive

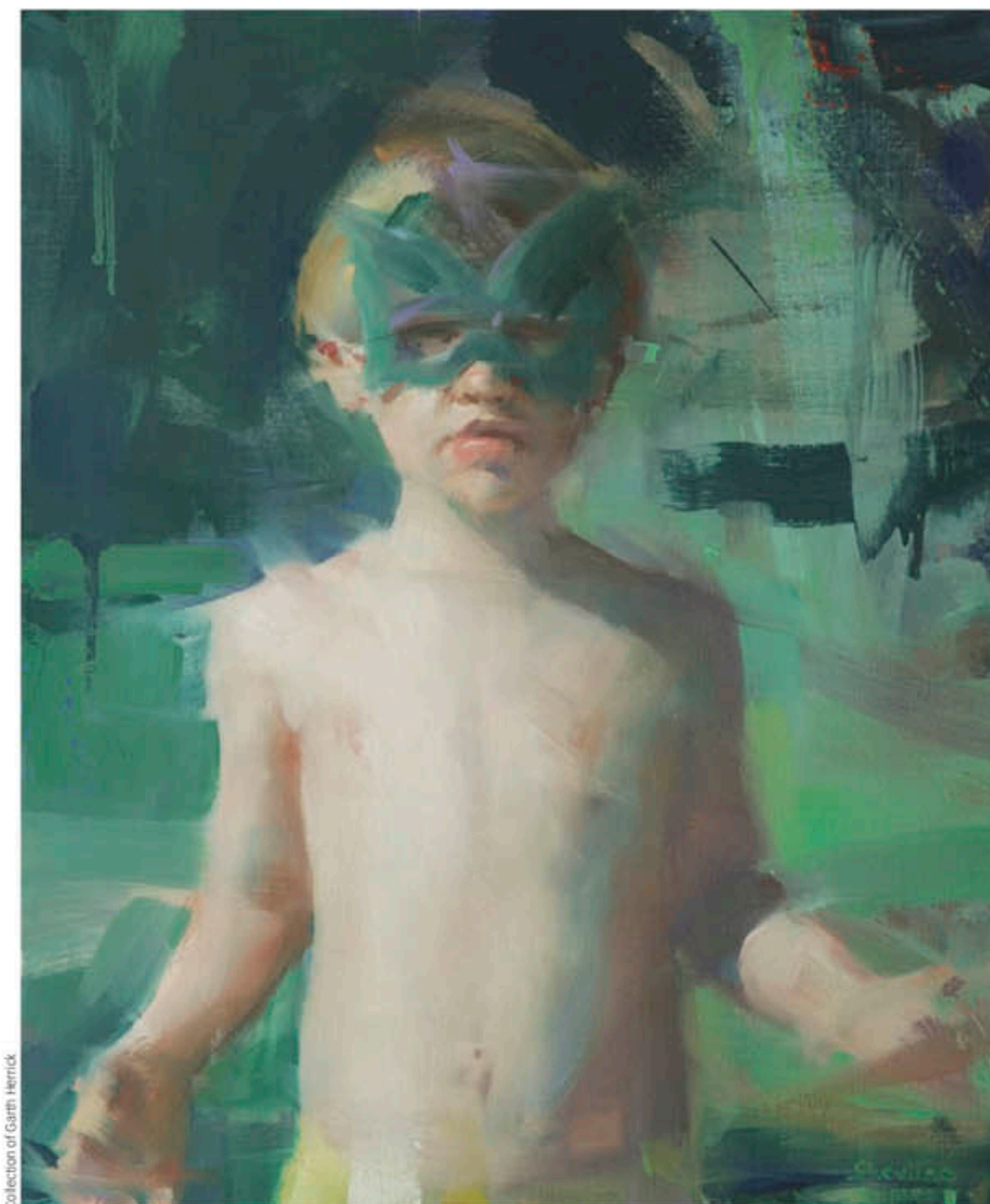
and surreal subject matter. I also began applying paint differently—with large brushes. This forced me to consider yet more ways of applying paint. I began thinking of the paint surface more abstractly and became more confident about breaking with convention. That experimental period had a lot of impact on how I paint now."

Shevlino is always looking for ways to blur the boundaries between realism and abstraction. Brushstrokes bleed through implied edges, clouds mimic the figures over which they hover, and colors take on a surreal

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Collection of Alexandra Tying and Steve Kambor



Collection of Garth Henrick

LEFT: Shevlino's inspiration for *Adam in a Mask* (oil, 24x20) was a favorite old photograph of his son. The artist chose to crop out the swimming pool that might explain why his son was wearing a mask—a swimming mask. The result is a narrative without easy answers, an interplay between the finite boy and the energy of an unknown background. "I left the background fairly unresolved," Shevlino says, "because I liked the abstract quality. I like to blur the line between where the realism ends and the abstraction begins."

Demonstration: Free Brushwork With Finesse

The actual rendering of *American Landscape* (opposite, at bottom) was originally recorded in full for the DVD production: *In the Studio: The Artwork and Painting Methods of David Shevlino* (2010). While Shevlino emphasizes that his process cannot easily be divided into steps, for the purposes of this article, parts of his process have been broken down into the four stages described below. For more information or to purchase the DVD, please visit the artist's website: mysite.verizon.net/david_shevlino.

Stage 1. Shevlino loosely sketched the drawing over the gridded support. The houses in the background are derived from photographs. The artist first transferred inkjet prints of the photos onto transparency film. Then he laid the film facedown on the painting surface, which had been coated with matte medium. After a couple of minutes, he lifted off the film, leaving the image adhered in the matte medium on the painting surface, similar to a decal.

Stage 2. Freely blocking in rough tones on the canvas, the artist started off unrestrained and then tightened elements of the painting as he went along. "This is part of my whole thinking process," he says. "I like to see something on the canvas soon so that I can start making decisions about how I want to proceed."

Stage 3. Next he worked on the upper torso and defined the head. There was a lot of loose, messy brushwork around the figure, and, working from the inside out and defining as he went along, the artist picked and chose what to leave loose and what to tighten. He finished the background houses and sky at this stage.

Stage 4. Here parts of all the bold paint application are still evident in places where the artist decided to keep things loose. "Lots of trial and error takes place in a painting like this," Shevlino says. "It's not about going from point A to B to C. I skip around and try to let parts of the underlying process show through as I see fit."



Materials

Support: panels primed with acrylic gesso (for small works); oil-primed linen (for large works)

Brushes: synthetic flats and filberts of various sizes; sometimes chip brushes—inexpensive, natural bristle brushes that come in a variety of widths and are available at hardware stores—for "big, loose paint application" (for large works)

Mediums: Gamblin Galkyd (for a faster drying time); linseed or poppy seed oil (for a slower drying time); Gamblin Gamsol as a clean and odorless solvent

Paints: Gamblin and Rembrandt—titanium white, cadmium orange and red, alizarin, burnt sienna, yellow ochre, ultramarine blue, cadmium yellow, dioxazine purple, olive green, viridian green, Veronese green, raw umber and ivory black

Lighting: Interfit Super Cool-lites (Shevlino says these photography lights give him steady and consistent light useful in figure drawing and painting. The lights are also easier for him to control than natural light.)



American Landscape (oil, 38x50)



To see more of Shevlino's art, go to www.artistsnetwork.com/article/david-shevlino.

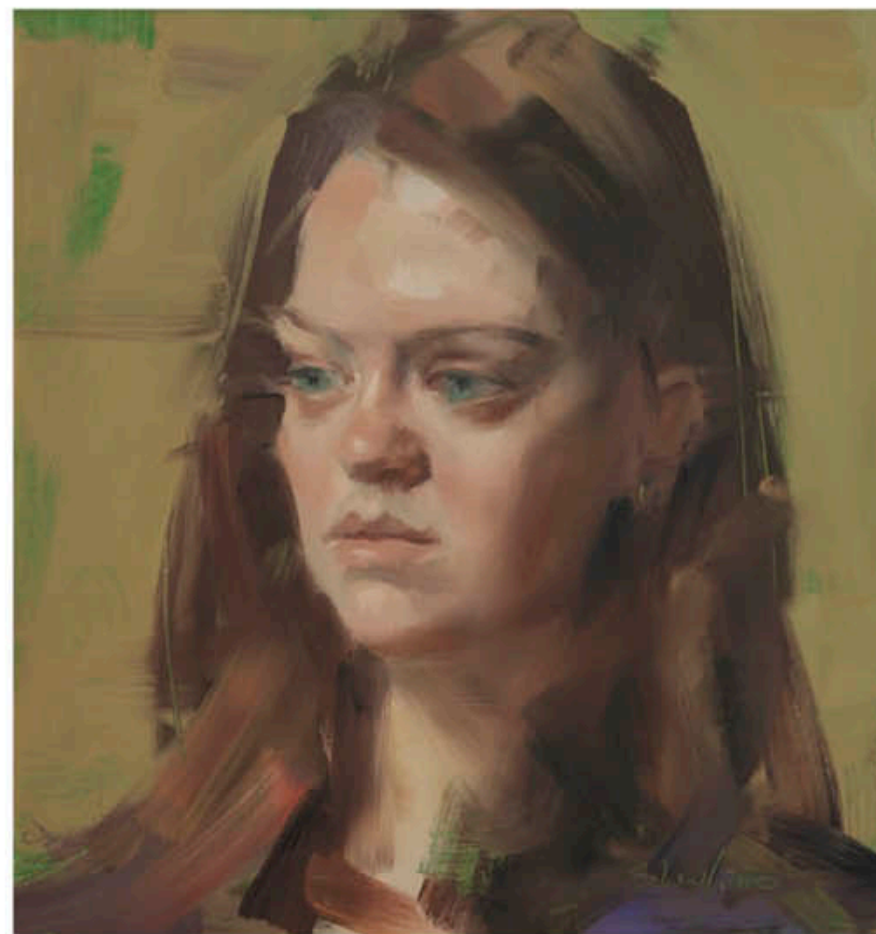
SHARING KNOWLEDGE

Shevlino has published a number of technical films and demonstrations on "YouTube." More recently, the artist produced a full-length film titled *In the Studio: The Artwork and Painting Methods of David Shevlino* (2010). The 55-minute DVD includes two full-length oil painting demonstrations. The first, *Still Life with Orange*, was painted quickly *alla prima*, wet-into-wet; the second, *American Landscape* (page ••), took shape over the course of several weeks (see Demonstration: Free Brushwork With Finesse, page ••).

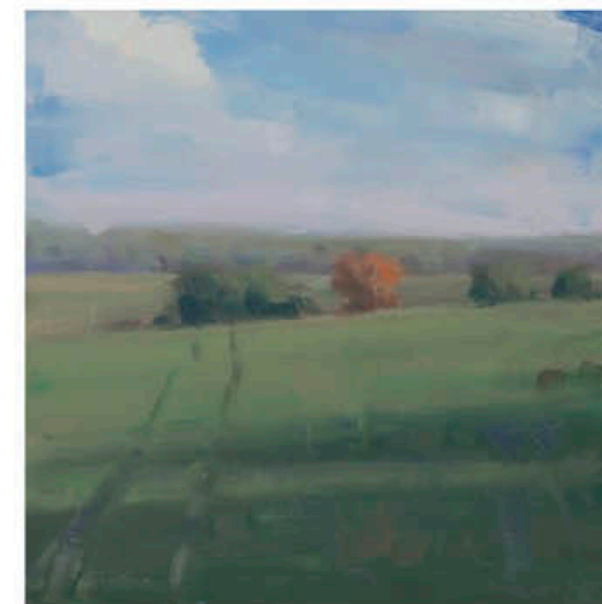


LEFT: From Shevlino's Rebecca series, *Rebecca 2* (charcoal, 19x15) illustrates Shevlino's interest in classical positioning and drawing from life.

BELOW: The artist completed the portrait *Rebecca M* (oil, 16x15) in two sittings, working *alla prima*.



"There's a spontaneity that I like in a painting, something that only seems achievable in a loose application. It requires leaving a painting in that 'loose' state when it feels right. It's about economy, about saying only what's necessary."
David Shevlino



ABOVE: *Orange Tree* (oil, 18x18) is an *alla prima* landscape derived from a photo Shevlino took many years ago. He has reworked this favorite image more than once and has several versions of it.

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quality. The artist takes great pains to remain free of any constraints imposed by his references and works hard to break down the components of his composition into abstract forms described in a few well-placed brushstrokes. "The actual paint," he says, "is as important as what it depicts on the canvas."

Telling Stories

Recently Shevlino has been adding explicit narrative to some of his work, partly as homage to the thematic paintings common to the whole of Western art history, and also as a means of conveying his viewpoint to the world. For *American Landscape* (page ••), he transferred actual photographs of suburban homes

to the canvas before painting the large semi-nude figure in the foreground. By juxtaposing the main female figure against the landscape and yet at the same time including her in it, the artist throws into relief an internal struggle staged within the composition itself, as the woman in the background reacts negatively, shielding her child's eyes.

Thus the main figure belongs, and yet she doesn't. Is she posing, objectifying herself—yet another manifestation of material culture in a material scene? Or is she the only organic truth in a parade of homes and cars and crass consumerism? "This is more a social commentary," Shevlino says of the painting, "specifically about American society and the very low status that the arts have in our culture. The figure

doesn't quite belong; she sticks out and serves as a metaphor for the artist in modern society."

A Messy Process

While his smaller works are mostly painted *alla prima*, or wet-into-wet, Shevlino's larger paintings are built up in stages with a great deal of trial and error. "My approach to painting," he explains, "is a bit idiosyncratic. I don't build up my paintings methodically over a conventional underpainting. My painting process is deliberately messy involving elements of experimentation and spontaneity.

After an idea has taken root in the artist's mind, he assembles his props, original photographs and, if needed, a model to "flesh out" the composition in the studio. Pho-

tographs of the locale or landscape can be digitally manipulated in Adobe Photoshop or printed for transfer to the canvas. Shevlino transfers the photos by using an inkjet printer to transfer a photo onto transparency film. Then he applies the transparency film face-down on the painting surface, which has been coated with matte medium. After a couple of minutes, he pulls the film away, leaving the image adhered in the matte medium on the painting surface, similar to a decal.

Then, beginning with a solid drawing, the artist blocks in the basic tones and proceeds to "feel around," trying to achieve the right effect in the paint application. Shevlino confesses that starting a new painting can often present him with a mental hurdle. "I'm very impatient

RIGHT: The landscape in *Full Sun* (oil, 35x48), Shevlino says, is entirely fictitious, taken in borrowed bits and pieces from photographs and paintings he did many years ago in Maine. "I had a model who was posing for me in my backyard under bright sun," he says. "I wanted to put the figure in a context, and I remembered these houses that I'd photographed in Maine because they were in a similar light—a strong raking light—and the architecture and geometry of the houses appealed to me."



and want to see results right away," he explains. "I like to make a mess at first and tighten up forms as I go along, creating more possibilities for accidents to happen—hopefully good ones. On my larger pieces, I tend to do a lot of painting and repainting before I start to see what I want." To that end, the artist finds his working process easier once there's some paint on the canvas, and he'll often paint over old compositions just to have some sort of initial structure to react to—so he can get started.

Palette and Lighting

As the painting comes together, Shevlino selects a palette that's representative of the emotional tenor of the work—and his own feelings about the piece. "For the larger paintings, I like to use primary and complementary colors," he says. "I tend to gravitate toward these because I like their basic intensity and the way they play off one another. I come at it from an emotional point of view." Bright colors can also result from the artist's choice to work with subjects lit by direct sunlight, although many of his urban scenes appear to play out in the dusk.

Shevlino prefers to work with a strong light source so as to define the figure and throw darks and lights into relief. Years ago he made peace with photo lights, which he finds are often more reliable than natural light. He uses daylight-balanced, fluorescent photo lights—Interfit Super Cool-lite photographic lamps.

Spare, Spontaneous Brushwork

Rendered in his bold, painterly style, many of Shevlino's canvases are notable for their exuberant brushwork and also what might almost be called an unfinished aspect. In works such as *Two Sumo Wrestlers* (page 22), the artist has allowed the paint to decide its own end, leaving direct marks on the canvas alone—rather than risking a compromise to their spontaneity through deliberate and calculated reworking. "There's a spontaneity that I like in a painting," he says, "something that only seems achievable in a loose application. It requires leaving a painting in that 'loose' state when it feels right. It's about economy, about saying only what's necessary."

In his narrative landscapes, Shevlino creates a visual shorthand, simplifying reality into the language of abstraction. Paints mix on the support, and edges blur in and out of focus. While large skies are playgrounds for texture, figures represent organic simplicity in the constructed landscape. Brushstrokes push beyond where they should end, testing the boundaries of reality, and revision provides new opportunities for meaning and chance. ■

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Meet David Shevlino

Delaware artist David Shevlino studied painting and drawing at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia and at the Art Students League in New York City. He received a bachelor of fine arts degree from the University of Pennsylvania in 1992. A member of the Philadelphia Sketch Club, Shevlino is represented by the Rosenfeld Gallery in Philadelphia, Gallery 1261 in Denver, and Morpeth Contemporary in Hopewell, New Jersey. His work has been exhibited nationally and is in many corporate collections. For information about his artwork and his workshops, please visit the artist's website: mysite.verizon.net/davidshevlino.



ABOVE: Shevlino's painting *Still Life with Orange* (oil, 13x10) showcases the artist's virtuosity with the *alla prima*, or wet-into-wet, painting technique.