



LORI PUTNAM

When Success Is the Only Option

Once she gave up her design business, sold her house, and moved to Italy with her husband, Lori Putnam had no choice but to work hard at achieving her dream of becoming a professional artist and teacher

Iknew after taking my first oil painting class, in 1997, and then participating in several painting workshops a few years later that becoming a full-time painter would be the most fulfilling thing I could do in the next chapter of my life,” says Tennessee artist Lori Putnam. “When my husband, Mark, and I finally decided to begin that new chapter, people thought we were crazy, but we reached a point that many people face in today’s tough economy, when the only viable option was to work hard at achieving our dreams.”

As Putnam points out, many people are being forced to take risks they would never have considered when everything in their lives seemed secure. But once they’ve had to consider such dramatic changes, a lot of those people are realizing they have an opportunity to pursue something they love. “No one who has been through this would tell you it is easy or certain,” Putnam says, “but I’m sure most of them would say they welcome the opportunity to take control of their futures and invest in themselves.”

Putnam’s attitude, and a network of supportive friends, were two important factors in making this decision. “I’m a positive person who has a deep faith,” she says, “and I am blessed to have the support of my family and a community of artists who are generous and supportive. Those have been very important to my ability to stay focused and to appreciate the wonderful opportunities that have come my way.”

Monterey Wharf
2011, oil, 9 x 12 in.
Private collection
Plein air



Lori Putnam painting in Ireland

La Dolce Vita

After studying painting with Scott L. Christensen, Dawn Whitelaw, and Quang Ho, Putnam and her husband moved to Italy for eight months. “We figured, if we have to live on a tight budget, why not do that in one of the most beautiful and art-filled countries on earth?” she says. “We lived as simply as possible, without a car, and I painted every day. Quang Ho released me from a fear of failing, and Dawn helped me understand how to work at the basic principles of painting when I was on my own. I spent the eight months focused on making an investment in my education and self-confidence, and not just in producing a salable body of work.”

Since then, Putnam has continued to make remarkable strides in terms of the quality of her painting, her opportunities for





Cortona Shopping

2011, oil, 10 x 8 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air

for the *Art in the Open* event; and in the fall I participated in the American Impressionist Society event in Carmel, California, which was very exciting. I also taught workshops in which I offered a program I jokingly called ‘Quang Ho for Dummies,’ in that I shared much of what I have learned from him and the other great painters I have been privileged to know.”

The Process

Putnam describes herself as someone who establishes plans in the expectation of achieving goals, and that is evidenced by her career moves and painting methodology. “Like most plein air painters, I remember the good advice offered by others, and by looking critically at my own paintings,” she explains. “Among the people whose voices I hear in my head while I am painting are those of Kevin Macpherson, Quang Ho, Dawn Whitelaw, and Scott L. Christensen.

“Kevin helped me recognize the merits of first looking for the big masses of value and color, and Quang urged me to get over my fear of experimentation and failure to freely adjust my approach depending on the subject

exposure and recognition, invitations to travel and teach, and sales of her artwork. “I’ve met some amazingly interesting, generous, and supportive people in workshops, at plein air events, and in the organizations in which I have become actively involved,” she says. “The very first plein air competition I participated in was *Plein Air Easton*, one of the most important and competitive events in the country. That was challenging, but it was also very good for me because I worked alongside some of the top painters in the country.

“Since then I have become actively involved in plein air events and participate in about seven or eight each year, and I also teach a half-dozen workshops. For example, last summer I joined the *PleinAir Publisher’s Invitational* event in the Adirondack Mountains and I traveled to Ireland

One Great View

2011, oil, 11 x 14 in.

Courtesy Mountainsong Galleries,

Carmel-by-the-Sea, CA

Plein air



ARTIST PROFILE

**Parking in Venice**

2011, oil, 8 x 10 in.

Courtesy Richland Fine Art, Nashville, TN

Plein air

ARTIST DATA

NAME: Lori Putnam

BIRTHDATE: 1962

LOCATION: Nashville, TN

INSPIRATIONS: Joaquin Sorolla, Edgar A. Payne, John Singer Sargent

WEBSITE: www.loriputnam.com

I am painting. I hear Scott urging me to edit a picture down to its essential elements, not overload it with detail, and be critical of my own work. Dawn has become a really good friend and colleague. She pushes me to consider new composition ideas and to concern myself with the impact of hard and soft edges. I've learned something valuable from all these artists about painting and teaching, and that's why I try to help others become informed and confident."

Putnam goes on, "My husband created an application for the iPhone called the Value Viewer that is extremely helpful in composing the value shapes in a painting. Using it helps me decide how to design a painting so it says what it needs to say, even while the light is changing. I refer to the image on the screen as I make a quick thumbnail sketch.

"I'm good at visualizing a completed painting, so once I have the composition worked out, the painting process goes rather quickly. I establish the large masses and then

break them up into smaller shapes consistent with the planned composition, and then, about two-thirds of the way through the painting process, I step back to look critically at the painting from a distance. I often decide the painting is finished, even if I had been thinking I would keep working, because I want to maintain the freshness and immediacy and not overburdened the painting with details.

"On location I might set the timer on my iPod so an alarm sounds to remind me when I've spent enough time on a painting, and in the studio I set a timer to make the computer screen go blank to remind me to stop looking at the image on the screen. The point of doing these things is to help avoid getting caught up in painting an excessive amount of detail. I want to stop before I fall into the trap of decorating a painting and losing the expression."

Whenever possible, Putnam uses her plein air studies as the sole resource for developing larger works in the studio.

Sense Of Success

When teaching workshops, Putnam imparts both information and a great deal of encouragement. "With less experienced painters, for example, I set up painting situations in which the students are less likely to feel they have failed," she explains. "Above all, I want them to have a sense of success because they need that to keep improving. It's a matter of presenting challenges and rewards, and of spending time with each individual to address their needs at the level of their experience and understanding. I try not to teach them how to paint 'things' or use formulas. Instead, I pose questions that prompt them to make decisions for themselves. For example, I might suggest evaluating the rhythms in a painting to see if

Swan-Lake

2011, oil, 6 x 8 in.

Courtesy Corse Gallery, Jacksonville, FL

Plein air



ARTIST PROFILE

**Slight Chance of Sunshine**

2011, oil, 9 x 12 in.

Courtesy LeQuire Gallery, Nashville, TN

Plein air



Lori Putnam painting Shady Azaleas during the Callaway Gardens, GA plein air event in 2011



Shady Azaleas

2011, oil, 8 x 10 in.


Courtesy LeQuire Gallery, Nashville, TN

Plein air

they help unify the composition, or to restate what it was about a scene that convinced them to make it the subject of a painting.”

In addition to offering this kind of support in workshops, Putnam offers a weekly mentoring program in her Tennessee studio and offers online critiques to former students.

“Painting is not a group effort, but being part of a community of painters is healthy,” she says. “Getting feedback from like-minded

people is important, even if it comes via the Internet. We all need people around us we respect, even if you don’t paint the same way. A community refuels us when we are empty. Believe me, I know how important that refueling is to a painter.” 

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

