

BRIAN KEELER

# Branding the Use of Colors & Forms

Graphic patterns and high-key colors give Brian Keeler's plein air paintings a distinctive look that has become his well recognized brand.

Some artists promote their names, faces, signatures, or stylistic labels as a “brand” that will bring them recognition in the crowded market for plein air paintings. They make sure that their logo, signature, or photograph is included in all their postings on Facebook, Twitter, Google+, or Pinterest. But Brian Keeler has built a national reputation by other means. He relies on a distinctively colorful, flat-patterned style of painting to make his plein air and studio paintings easy to identify from a distance. He arrived at his signature style of oil painting quite naturally as a way of communicating what he saw and felt when working on location.

Many plein air artists dramatize their paintings by exaggerating the density of atmosphere, the color and angle of the light, the balance of sunlight and shadow, or the arrangement of shapes. Keeler chooses to amplify the colors and flatten the planes of space. “As I see it, plein air artists have two choices,” he says. “They can either match the colors they see in nature, or they can exaggerate those colors while maintaining the relationship between value and temperature. Obviously, I prefer the latter. I try to augment the chroma, intensify it a bit, and augment the scene with high-key colors. That helps to bring out my feelings about a place and time, and it makes the creative process fun and enjoyable. Simply put, it is a liberating way of approaching outdoor painting.

“The emphasis on pattern instead of naturalistic modeling is an aspect of my painting that happens as I develop each image. I compose an arrangement of pleasing shapes, carefully considering the placement and balance of patterns, shapes, and forms. As I progress through the stages of a painting, I distill shapes



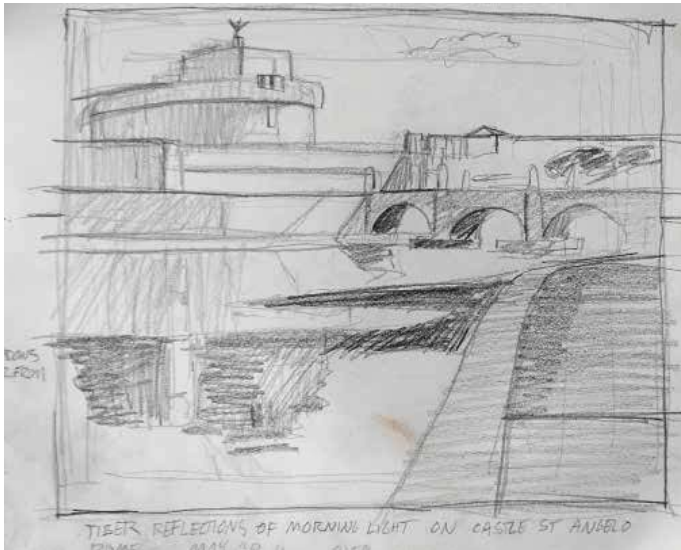
**Cayuga Lake Summer Clouds**  
2014, oil, 26 x 30 in.  
Collection the artist



**Brian Keeler**



**Keeler painting the Castel Sant'Angelo in Rome alongside the Tiber River**



**A compositional sketch of the scene**

**Tiber Morning**  
2011, oil, 24 x 26 in.  
Collection the artist  
Plein air

down to their simplest forms and allow them to remain as flat planes of space rather than modeled forms turning in space. I think about the position of the view relative to the buildings, trees, roads, and rivers, and I avoid putting them at eye level in the middle of the rectangular space. I use the color shapes to push things back and create the illusion of space while adding a level of intrigue to a painting. I credit Jack Beal for helping me think differently about the space within a picture and to consider various ways to effectively compose paintings.”

### Considering Composition

“Another early consideration in my painting process is how I can break down the composition of shapes so there is one main center of interest and several secondary points of reference,” adds Keeler. “The focus can be on a house, a barn, or quality of light. Once I have composed the picture with the viewer in mind, I think a great deal about color because

in the end that is what will give my work an identity in the crowded, competitive field of plein air painters. People often remark on the way I handle color, and that has become a kind of trademark. Quite a few people have said my work reminds them of Maxfield Parrish, and I take that as a compliment. I love his paintings and accept the comparison.

“I also use other formal compositional ideas to organize the elements in my paintings, such as the ones explained in Charles Bouleau’s classic book *The Painter’s Secret Geometry*. He advances the idea that historical painters designed their paintings so that the lines implied by figures, buildings, and objects were deliberately placed along lines that divide the space diagonally, vertically, and horizontally. He also wrote about *rabatment*, or establishing a major division in a painting at the point established by rotating the short side of a rectangle 90 degrees onto the long side to construct a square within the plane of the rectangle.

### ARTIST DATA

**NAME:** Brian Keeler  
**BIRTHDATE:** 1953  
**LOCATION:** Sayre, PA  
**INFLUENCES:** “John Singer Sargent, Jean Baptiste Camille Corot, N.C. Wyeth, William Haseltine, Joaquin Sorolla.”  
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**Umbria Field Hands**  
2015, oil, 35 x 40 in.  
Collection the artist  
Studio

“Others have written about the ‘sweet zones’ within the four quadrants of a picture where one can place key elements to create a dynamic flow of shapes and add interest to the overall picture. All of these are formulas I consider when I am deciding where to place the focal point and the secondary elements within a painting, but I am not rigid about drawing guidelines and forcing every element of a landscape to land at the intersection of those lines.”

### Prime Palette

The palette of colors Keeler uses is based on his studies with Daniel Greene and Nelson Shanks and includes about 30 colors he premixes for studio work and mixes on location when he does plein air painting. He adds oil of cloves to the premixed studio colors to keep them wet longer,

but when working outdoors he uses an alkyd white paint or adds Utrecht glazing medium to the oils so the paints will dry faster and the painting can more easily be transported back to his studio in Wyalusing, Pennsylvania.

“I first get an initial statement down on a panel that is an impression of the scene, and then, when the structure is established, I can push the color relationships and break apart the planes of space,” the artist says. “I used Maroger medium when I was in art school, but a lot of conservators question the longevity of that medium, so I stopped using it.”

After graduating from the York School in Pennsylvania in 1975, Keeler began his career as a fine artist, and he soon won awards and was invited to exhibit throughout the Northeast. Portrait painting was the mainstay of his career at the beginning, with landscape and other explorations taking precedence later. He recently moved to Ithaca, New York,



**August Morning,  
Glenwood Road, Ithaca**  
*Oil on linen, 30 x 34 in.*  
*Private collection*  
*Plein air*



**Cayuga Golden Clouds**  
*2014, oil, 26 x 30 in.*  
*Collection the artist*  
*Plein air*



**Roman Sky**  
*2013, oil, 24 x 26 in.*  
*Private collection*  
*Plein air*

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## OIL PAINTING DEMONSTRATION

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**July Clouds,  
Glenwood Road Ithaca**  
2008, oil on canvas on  
panel, 26 x 30 in.  
Private collection  
Plein air

**Late July, Standing  
Stone Vineyard,  
Hector, NY**  
2012, oil on linen 26 x 30 in.  
Private collection  
Plein air



but maintains a studio in his hometown of Wyalusing. He devotes his time to painting landscapes, still lifes, figures, and portraits in oil, pastel and watercolor, as well as teaching workshops at various schools and art associations and courses at Keystone College. He has also been a rostered artist with the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts and conducts residencies at high schools under the aegis of this state arts organization.

In recent years, Keeler has organized two-week painting workshops in Italy that include instruction and tours of great collections of art. “We usually spend one week in northern Tuscany and a second week in Umbria, with side trips to see paintings, frescoes, and sculpture by the great Renaissance masters,” he explains. “There are about a dozen students each year who enjoy the food, landscape, architecture, and art of Italy while they improve their own paintings.”

Keeler has recently begun participating in plein air festivals and finds that he enjoys the camaraderie with other artists and collectors. “Plein Air Easton was my first festival experience, in 2014, and I learned a lot and enjoyed being with the other participating artists,” he says. “I was impressed with the level of ambition in the work created during the week, and the next time I am juried into such an event I will consider spending more time on each of my paintings, perhaps going back to the same locations over several days so I can also exhibit larger and more complicated plein air pieces.”

**M. STEPHEN DOHERTY** is editor-in-chief of *PleinAir* magazine.



See more of Brian Keeler's plein air and studio paintings in the expanded digital edition of *PleinAir*.

OIL PAINTING DEMONSTRATION



**Over Orvieto**  
2013, oil on linen, 24 x 26 in.  
Collection the artist  
*Plein air*

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OIL PAINTING DEMONSTRATION



**Keuka Autumn — Coryell Road**  
2011, oil, 26 x 30 in.  
Private collection  
Plein air

**(Below) Glenwood Road**  
2007, oil on linen, 10 x 36 in.  
Collection the artist  
Plein air





**Keuka Lake from the West**  
2014 oil on linen, 26 x 30 in.  
Private collection  
Plein air



OIL PAINTING DEMONSTRATION



**Morning Light on the Grand Canal — Venice**  
 2001, oil, 18 x 20 in.  
 Collection the artist  
 Plein air

**Vineyard Evening Light**  
 2012, oil on linen, 10 x 32 in.  
 Private collection  
 Plein air



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OIL PAINTING DEMONSTRATION



**Keuka Night of the Peepers**  
2014, oil on linen, 26 x 30 in.  
Collection the artist  
*Plein air*

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OIL PAINTING DEMONSTRATION



**Ponte Vecchio Morning, Florence**

2013, oil, 18 x 24 in.

Collection the artist

*Plein air*