

CHRIS MOREL

# WHAT YOU OWE THE PAINTING AND YOURSELF

This Taos oil painter believes you should always paint for yourself — while conducting a friendly dialogue with the developing painting, of course.

— BY BOB BAHR —

If you hit upon a formula that dependably resulted in steady sales, would you keep making the same type of painting, over and over? If so, how many do you imagine you could do before you would feel compelled to stop?

Some of us may hope to face such a conundrum. But artistic growth means challenging oneself, and it's not hard to find successful artists who have worked through such questions and vowed to paint for themselves. Chris Morel is one.

"When you get to know a group of painters like I have, you are constantly inspired and trying to continue to learn, to up your game," Morel says. "Everybody is working hard. The pros I've met in this business are really dedicated to their craft. My advice to you? Embrace the challenge and push yourself in the direction that you need to go. Follow your gut, and honesty will get you where you need to be."

## THE BEST OPPORTUNITY

Morel has been blessed to live in three places that are target-rich environments for painters looking for strong subject



Supplied by his father, an X-ray tech, with sheets of yellow paper used to separate X-ray film, **CHRIS MOREL** started his artistic journey in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. Today, he makes his home and paints primarily outdoors in the New Mexico high desert. [morelart.com](http://morelart.com)





**Berkshire White Barn**  
2020, oil, 9 x 12 in.  
Collection the artist  
*Plein air*



**Red, White and Grey**

2020, oil, 8 x 16 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air

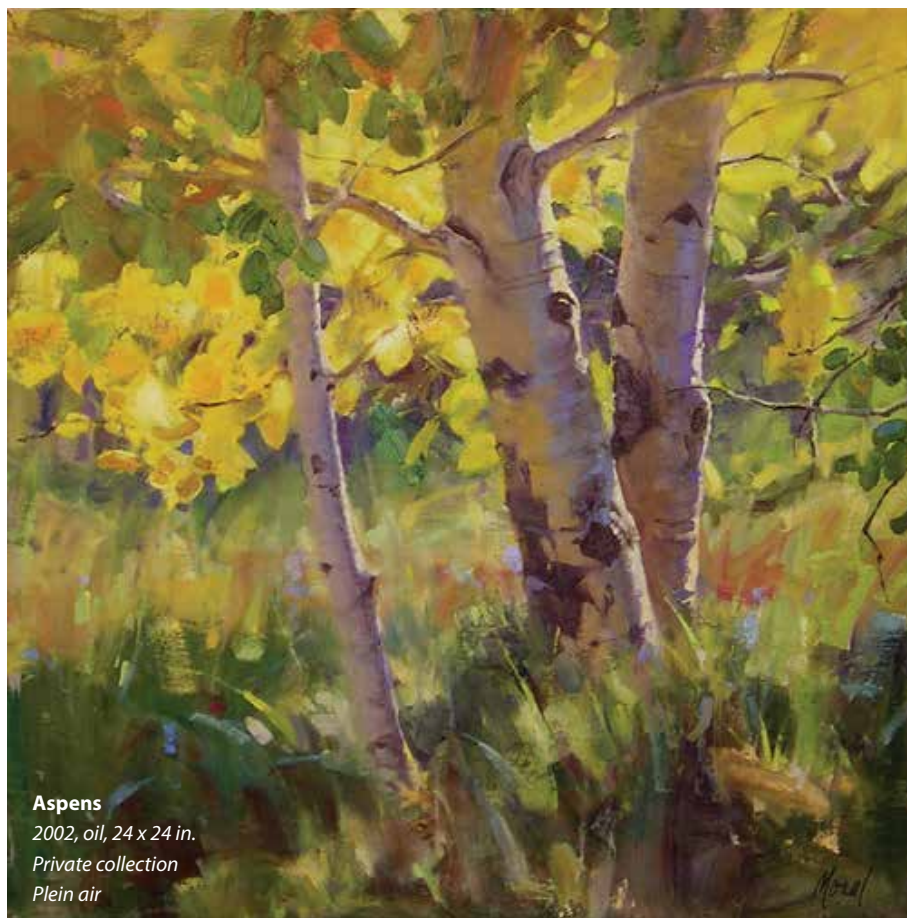


**Couse House Poppies**

2021, oil, 11 x 14 in.

Private collection

Plein air



**Aspens**  
2002, oil, 24 x 24 in.  
Private collection  
Plein air

matter: rural Maryland in the Appalachian foothills, the Texas Hill Country, and Taos, New Mexico. Toward the end of his period in the Austin area, Morel tapped into a market that appreciated depictions of Spanish and Mexican courtyard scenes from his travels. He sold many paintings of such scenes, as well as a print series that earned him substantial royalties.

“My family and I were relying on me selling paintings, but one day, when I went out to the Rio Grande Gorge, I found myself saying, ‘OK, I’ve done this and I’m not seeing it in a new way.’ Then I saw some juniper bushes with an interesting snow pattern, and they were backlit. Will that sell? I had to try it because I thought I could pull it off, and man, I was really charged up about the scene. You gotta paint what strikes you on a visceral level. I was really happy with that decision, one based on gut reaction rather than anything else. That is the key; that is the most important thing.”

Once he moved to Taos, Morel couldn’t resist the traditional adobe buildings and dramatic landscapes around his new home. “I was making good money off the royalties from the prints, but

I couldn’t paint those scenes anymore. People would say, ‘I really like what you used to do.’ But my vision or my direction was to learn how to paint from life outside and capture the beauty of this area — the West, the mountains, the Taos area, not the old subject matter. You have to paint your paintings and bring the market to you. I did a couple of pieces featuring the old subject matter, and even though I didn’t have my heart in it, they still sold. I just couldn’t keep doing it.” He believes an artist has an obligation to paint what inspires, then figure out how to take the viewer to the same spot in his or her head so viewers can appreciate the beauty as well.

The painter says another entity that artists must acknowledge, respect, and collaborate with is the painting itself. For Morel, this means not hesitating to go back into a plein air painting in the studio to adjust it. “It’s important to have a good painting, even if it was not completed all on location,” he says. “In the studio, I can slow down, look, and observe. I may go another six hours with little notes, with lots of stopping and starting, to edge the painting forward. This way, I get both

the spontaneity of working from life and the accuracy of studio work. I owe that painting the best opportunity. If that means time in the studio working on it further, then I do it.”

#### **A COLLABORATIVE EFFORT**

Morel is also a working musician and sees parallels between playing in a group and working on (and with) a painting. “If you get with a group of musicians who know how to improvise and know the basic structure of popular music, then you can follow each other, unscripted, and it becomes magic,” he says. “In that case, it’s a group of people putting something together, but if you allow the painting to be part of the painting process, then it’s kind of like the two of you are collaborating. You are working together and maybe battling each other a little bit. If you can stop fighting the painting, that can make things work better. I let the painting tell me where to go. I am directing it sometimes, but my painting is the teacher and it is leading me and letting me make mistakes. It is also crying out to make corrections in order to learn.”

**February Mist**  
2014, oil, 16 x 20 in.  
Private collection  
Plein air

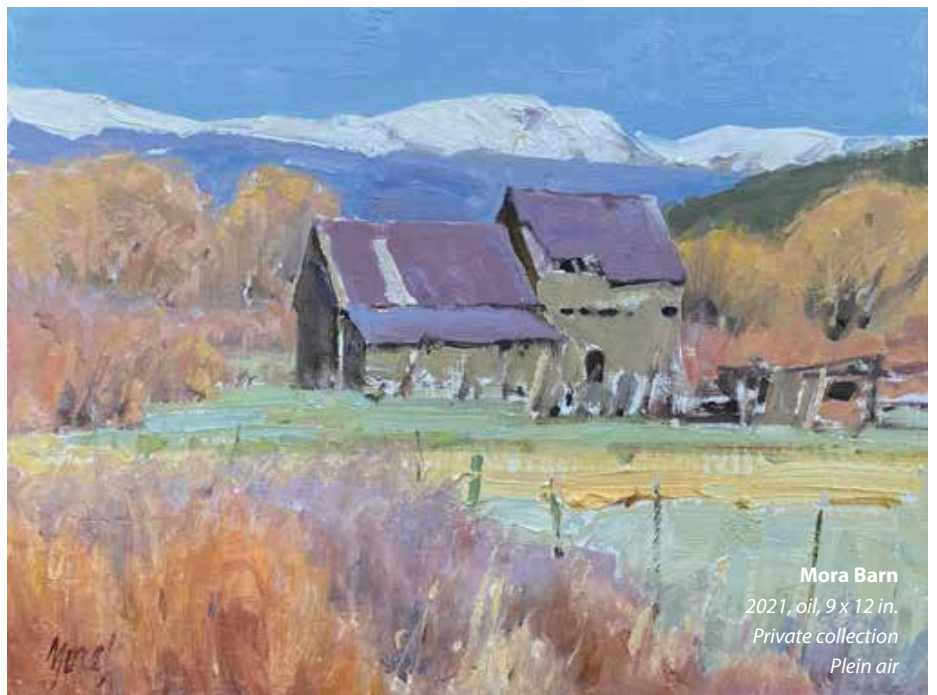
Morel is not afraid to scrape down areas of a piece, or even take a palm sander to an entire painting if it looks unsalvageable. “I am the conductor trying to orchestrate this thing, but it is also talking, telling me where I am going wrong and what I need to leave alone. You have to listen and let that beautiful passage stay. You may want to make that passage even better, but that never happens. Try to support it instead.”

One of the joys of Morel’s paintings is how the restful areas of his compositions have subtle shifts in value and color temperature, creating additional interest. This can be difficult to do while still keeping the appropriate hierarchy of elements in a painting. The artist runs the risk of distracting from the main statement.

Morel makes the point that the human eye is like a camera with a wide aperture, with limited focus. In other words, when we look at an object that’s near to us, the background goes blurry. Conversely, when looking at elements in the distance, objects that are close get blurry in our peripheral vision. Painters use this effect to put more emphasis on the focal point or points. Keeping this in mind when painting restful areas, which are always distinct from the focal points, helps an artist add interest to secondary elements while keeping the spotlight where it belongs.

“It’s like a lead character in a play, with a secondary cast that works around him and supports him,” Morel says. “When you open your eyes and see what’s the most important thing in the scene, you next ask yourself how to minimize the rest of the elements in a way that supports what you want to say. Those areas become less evolved. You have to keep your main point of interest dominant and then have everything else around it depicted in various degrees of resolution. You approach those areas by generalizing them through big areas of local color and attention to light, shadow, and light source, but you don’t put as much effort into those areas because you don’t want the viewer to go where you don’t want them to go.”

An example of this is *Red, White and Grey*, which Morel painted in New England’s Berkshire Mountains “on a nasty, cold, wet, drizzly day.” The artist says a big part of the success of this painting came down to getting the accuracy of the architecture right, so he spent some time on placing and drawing those elements. “The background was supportive,

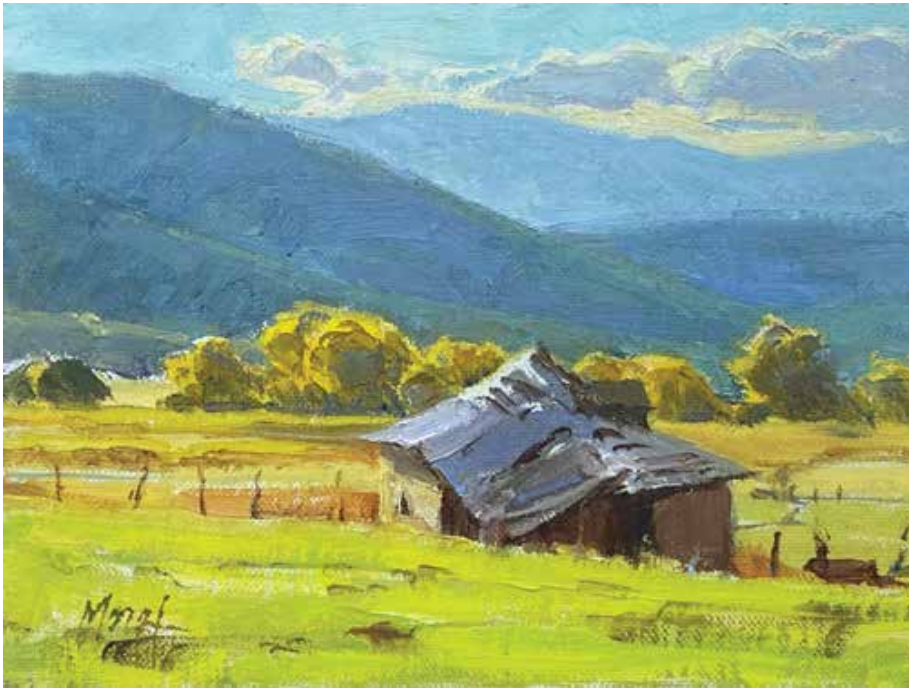


**Mora Barn**  
2021, oil, 9 x 12 in.  
Private collection  
Plein air

with the warmer treeline behind the barns that had a lot of interest,” he says. “I had to knock them down with grays. I also put cool colors in the background, and spots of green to show the mix of conifer and hardwood trees. I reduced the resolution in the trees to keep the focus where I wanted it to be. I wanted to sell that beautiful, rich color of the barns. That nice pop of spatial distance and contrast helps to make it work.”

## NO NOODLING

Morel’s teaching palette is a modified version of the ubiquitous split-primary palette. He uses cadmium yellow light, alizarin crimson, cobalt blue, cadmium yellow medium, ultramarine blue, and cadmium orange — a divergence from most artists’ split-primary palette. His regular palette sometimes expands to include Indian yellow, yellow ochre, phthalo blue, burnt sienna, transparent red oxide, viridian



**Mora Valley Ruins**

2021, oil, 6 x 8 in.  
Collection the artist  
Plein air

is about the largest panel he will use, opting for canvas stretched on a frame for larger pieces.

He will work from reference photos on his studio monitor, but Morel understands the strengths of painting in the field. “It’s so exciting when I’m working on location because there is a higher possibility of failure,” says the artist. “Sometimes when I get a plein air piece back in the studio, the composition is really not that interesting, but when I do hit one just right on location, I think it’s some of the best work in comparison with studio pieces, which can be overthought. Maybe I noodle too much in the studio. I can’t do that outside. Standing on the side of the road, editing the scene on the go and knowing I’m on the line and on the clock, dissecting the view and choosing what I think is important, I can’t noodle. One big stroke must say what I want it to.”



**Walt's Gate**  
2021, oil, 9 x 12 in.  
Available from Nedra Matteucci Galleries, Santa Fe  
Plein air

**BEAUTIFUL UNCERTAINTY**

Whether depicting a view of the rural Northeast or a scene from the West, Morel is pulled in by the combination of landscape and architecture. “Taos is interesting to me because the old adobe buildings are disappearing,” says Morel. “Weather and time are taking the traditional buildings away. Adobe buildings are so beautiful, but no one’s making them anymore. I think art should be a document, a record of the artist’s lifetime. It should document what’s disappearing and reflect the history of one’s journey more than trends. By painting what I see, with that goal in mind, I feel like I’m doing the right thing.”

Morel continues, “We are all trying to communicate our own vision, our own life, but we don’t always hit it. We try and try, and we compare ourselves to the very best of who came before us. It’s a pleasure to be able to do this, to support myself, to wake up every day knowing I can do what I want to do. And I don’t know what my next piece will be, which is exciting. A photo from 20 years ago suddenly strikes me as a painting, when it hadn’t before. Creativity is my job, and it’s a new journey every time. It’s a beautiful uncertainty.”

green, sap green, cadmium green, and a violet. “I’ve found that cadmium orange and alizarin crimson can get me as close to a ‘stop sign red’ as I need,” he says. “And in workshops, the limited palette helps me explain to students how to shift relationships between areas using color temperature. It’s especially evident when mixing a green.

“There’s a difference between the green of a cool blue spruce and a warmer cedar. It’s important to mix and learn how to influence the green to cool it down, or warm it with

alizarin crimson or orange, or lighten it with yellow. It helps you understand colors on a basic level. Once you understand the chemistry and relationship between colors, then you can venture out and expand the palette. But a limited palette gives you so much harmony.”

The artist favors filberts and flat brushes. A size 6 brush can carry Morel through an entire painting, but he also will block in a composition with a size 8 or 10, then go down to as small as a 2 for details. He works on panels unless he’s going bigger in format; 16 x 20 inches



**BOB BAHR** has written about visual art for various books and publications for 18 years. He lives and works in the Kansas City area.



Expanded Digital Edition Content

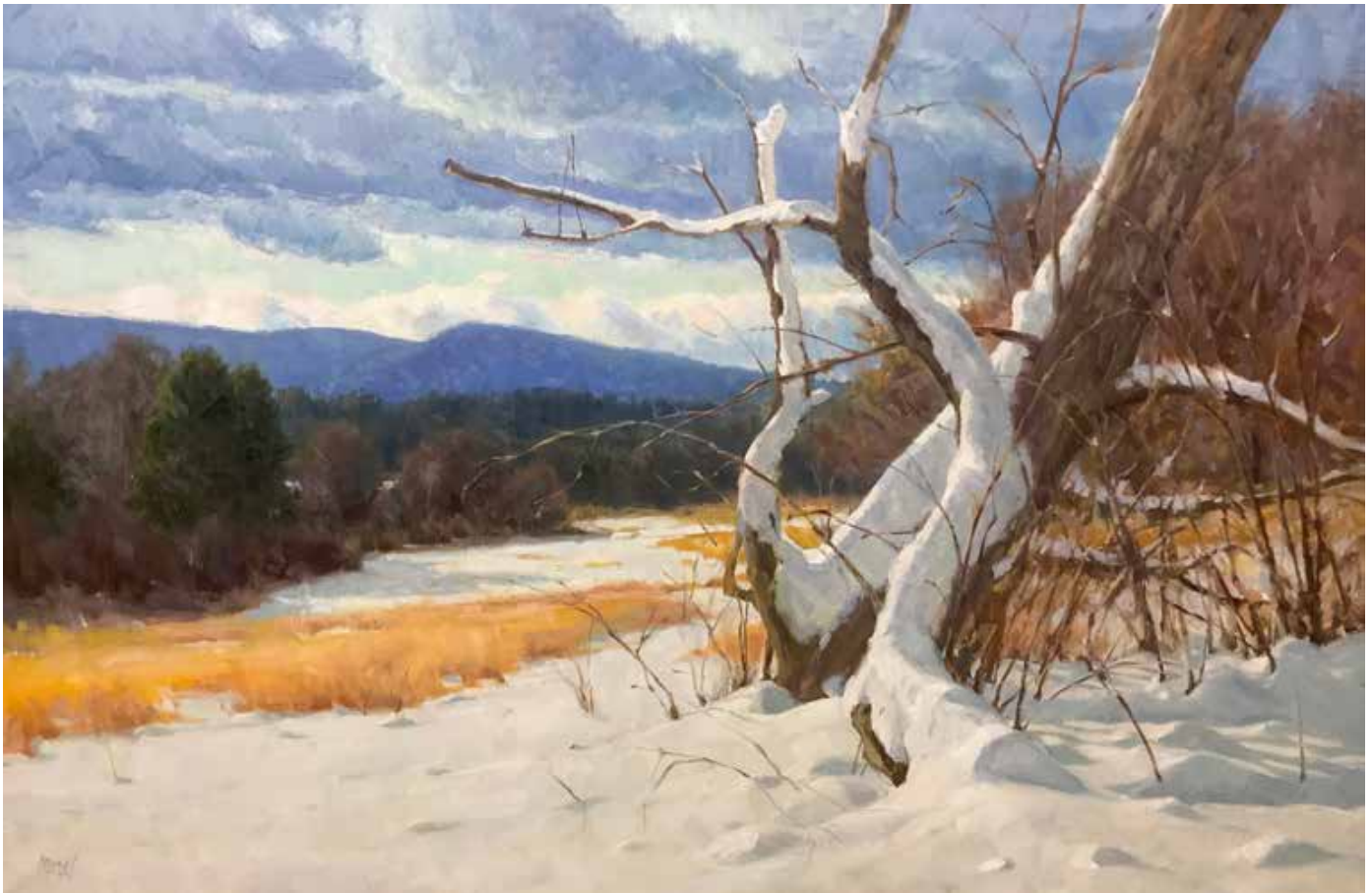
**Hillsdale Farm**  
2020, oil, 12 x 24 in.  
Private collection  
Studio



**Santa Barbara Valley**  
2014, oil, 16 x 32 in.  
Private collection  
Studio



Expanded Digital Edition Content



**(TOP LEFT)** *Autumn Walk*, 2013, oil, 24 x 38 in., private collection, studio • **(TOP RIGHT)** *Spring Hills*, 2007, oil, 12 x 16 in., private collection, studio • **(ABOVE)** *Leaning Tree Undermountain Road*, 2020, oil, 24 x 36 in., available from Nedra Matteucci Galleries, Santa Fe, studio