



The Shades of Night

AS DARKNESS FALLS, **STAN SPERLAK** RELISHES SKIES AND SITUATIONS THAT HE FINDS MUCH MORE INTRIGUING TO PAINT THAN WHAT HE SEES DURING THE DAY.

By Stefanie Laufersweiler



ABOVE
**Alone With the
Night** (12x12)

OPPOSITE
**Sometimes the
Dawn** (30x24)

Painting a location at night provides an opportunity to open up the possibilities with a more daring palette and to see a darkening scene in a new light. “If you’re willing to be a bit more risky with some of your colors,” says New Jersey artist Stan Sperlak, “staying close to a logical arrangement of values and tones while slipping in some unexpected choices—that’s what makes it art.”

ADJUSTING TO THE DARK

Sperlak used to do almost all of his work en plein air, heading out in the dark to observe or capture evening scenes or

to set up for predawn painting, working in a 5x7 or 8x10 format. “I would go out with a headlamp, like a coal miner, or a hard hat with LED lights on it,” he says.

Once you switch off any lights you’ve brought, Sperlak suggests giving yourself about half an hour to adjust to the level of darkness and to pick up on the light that’s still present. “There’s a certain amount



LEFT
Tanner's Moon
(12x8)

BELOW
Maxfield's Evening
(30x24)



of ambient light from cities nearby. They tend not to cast a lot, mainly just creating glows in the distance," he says. "What many people don't realize is that a lot of the ambient light is starlight. When you see a shadow directly under you, there must be light coming from something

above you, and on a clear night with no moon visible, what's above you are stars."

That starlight is part of the indirect light affecting the colors the artist sees, which changes the pastel colors he selects. "You learn about the palette at night," Sperlak says, "because with no direct lighting on subjects, the colors aren't obvious. There's a range of colors appearing at night that you need to pay attention to."

Putting together a slideshow for a class a few years ago featuring his "heroes" who painted the night—including George Sotter, among the Pennsylvania Impressionists who've heavily influenced Sperlak—made him appreciate the full range of color in a night sky. "A typical blue sky during the day is maybe an ultramarine hue or a cobalt, and some of the darker versions of those can work for night, but there are so many more blues that you could use," Sperlak says. "If you have a nice selection of pastels, the night skies are much more interesting to build."

The artist was so impressed by a particular blue that he saw in several of Henry Ossawa Tanner's night scenes that he created *Tanner's Moon* (opposite) in response. Tanner (1859–1937) was the first black student attending the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, where Sperlak also studied. "He painted in my area of southern New Jersey," Sperlak says. "I've seen that color but I've never really tried to push a color that way. I was deeply affected by his work—the moody sentiment and simple nature of his landscapes."

It was another American artist, Maxfield Parrish (1870–1966), whose command of greenish hues inspired Sperlak as he painted *Maxfield's Evening* (left). "I connected on his level on how to pull off that immense luminosity," Sperlak says. The Old West evening skies in the paintings of Frederic Remington (1861–1909) also enlightened Sperlak on how colorful the night can be. "His exhibition in the National Gallery in Washington really got me thinking," he says. "He used yellow for nighttime, and green and orange. It worked. You understand that it's nighttime when you look at his scenes."

CONTRAST AND REFLECTIONS

Getting the degree of contrast correct between the sky and the land, through the appropriate values, is crucial for a nighttime scene to look convincing. "You have to make people believe that it's night and not just a painting where you used a lot of dark colors," Sperlak says. "There will be a luminosity in the sky, a range of shadows and darkness and reflection in the land."

Sperlak suggests squinting if you need help determining that degree of difference. "When you really look at it and you're squinting and you make a decision—once you've got the basis of that in your painting—you've created something that's recognizable as nighttime," he says.

Understanding the reflections happening in a scene will also help direct the contrast and color. The dunes shown in *The Moon in the Earth's Shadow* (page 54) are white, but they mirror all of the sky colors because of the reflective properties of the sand—hues that become more vivid the closer the sun is to the horizon. "Sand is made of

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quartz, and when you pick up grains of it, they’re almost clear,” Sperlak says. “They don’t have any inherent color themselves, but pick up and reflect everything around them. When they’re lying mostly flat, they’re going to pick up mostly sky.”

Passages of light and shadow are carefully constructed in the same painting to create the impression of dusk. “The only place that’s darker in *The Moon in the Earth’s Shadow* is to the left, because that area is in shadow from another dune,” says Sperlak. “As the sand curves around on the right, that little dune is casting a shadow down, and there’s light hitting the dune just under the moon.” Getting the general level of darkness correct on the sand

is important, too. “You want to avoid making that passage too dark, with that light sky above it,” Sperlak says, “and you can’t make it any lighter than the sky.”

TEXTURAL DECISIONS

Sperlak almost always blends the sky but only very lightly with the side of his little finger. He may or may not lightly “touch” the background masses, but he never blends the foreground. “The texture will thicken as you work your way from the background to the foreground,” he says.

Some of the surfaces Sperlak uses lend themselves to blending, and others don’t. “My handmade surfaces have to be blended very lightly, otherwise the color of the

textured board underneath shows through,” he says. “I like the underlying texture to show, but not the color.”

Sometimes he spends more time preparing the surface than painting it. *In the Beginning* (below, left) was painted on Masonite coated with three layers of gesso toned with burnt umber pigment, with pumice added in the final coat. “It’s subtle when people look at it,” Sperlak says of his textured surfaces. “It takes a while for people to see all those gesso paintbrush marks in the scene.”

The artist adjusts his mark-making when using smoother papers. “If I’m working on Wallis paper or other papers that don’t have an impasto feel to them, I’ll probably do the foreground with much more lushness in my strokes,” Sperlak says. This can be seen in *The Moon in the Earth’s Shadow* (opposite) and also *Turner’s Woods* (below, right), which reveals a view of the distant woods from the front porch of his studio.

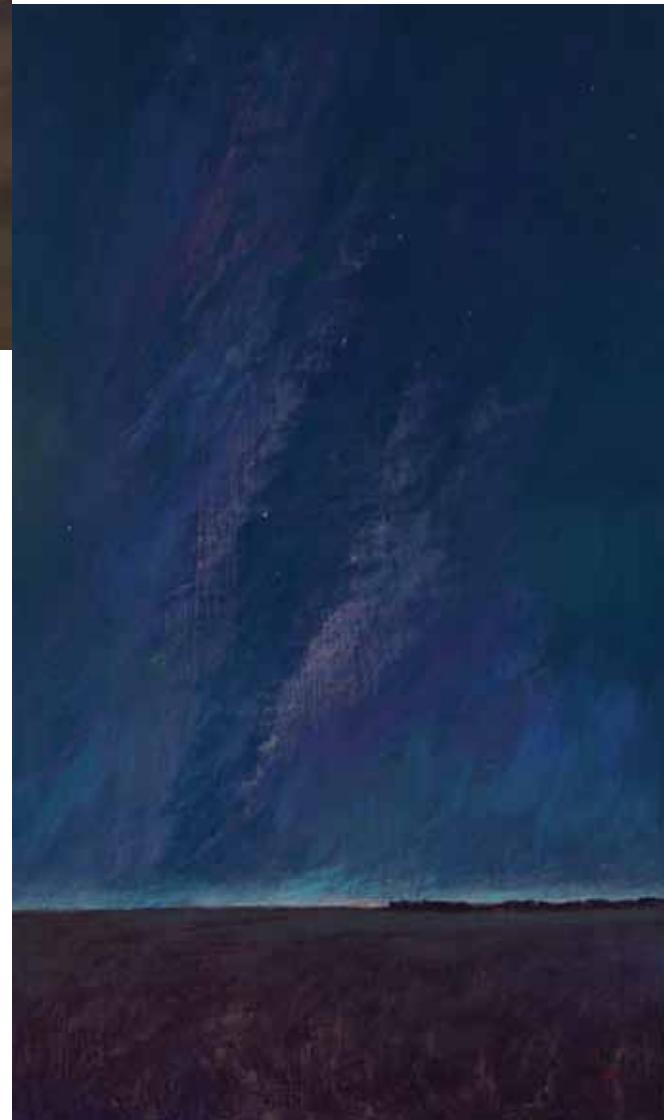
“Many times the sun sets into a turbulent mess of clouds racing back and forth and, by chance, small sections of sky open up, and layers of yellows, pinks and violets dance in those last few moments,” Sperlak says. “In *Turner’s Woods* for example, which was inspired by the choreographed atmospheres in watercolorist J.M.W. Turner’s paintings, I exaggerated the colors and really layered on the softest pastels to get a dimensional feel.”

For heavier tones, Sperlak will build up layers of pastel that he’ll sometimes liquefy and “fix” with water, alcohol and turpentine applied with brushes, razors, spoons and rags. “Sometimes I’ll burnish things with a spoon, or in the early stage of a painting, I’ll hit the foreground with a rag just to make the pastel bounce a bit,” he says. “When I finish painting, I’ll take a razor blade and I’ll run it across the surface—especially the foreground—in three broad swoops. This blends the pastel but also creates

ABOVE
The Moon in the Earth’s Shadow
(18x24)

OPPOSITE
LEFT TO RIGHT
In the Beginning
(40x24)

Turner’s Woods
(24x18)



accidental marks, and that irreverent application makes things like grass look more believable.”

FIREFLIES AND STARS

“Even though one of the principles of painting is suggesting something so that it looks real,” Sperlak says, “when you’re suggesting elements at night, it involves a lot less detail.” The details he does add, such as the stars in *Over Oahu* (below), are a testament to Sperlak’s keen observation of the skies. He approaches stars and fireflies the same way. “When fireflies pulse on and off, it’s not uniform. Some are closer than others. Some are turned a little. Some are flying at you. Some are above you, and others are below you,” he says. “You can’t just go across your surface making a bunch of same-size specks, because that won’t look realistic.”

They’re not all white, either. “I’ll use four or five different sticks of a gold-yellow, and then I’ll add a few sleeper marks in greenish yellow, or bluish, or some other color that adds a lot of animation or movement to it,” Sperlak says.

When making stars, he’ll tap a couple onto the surface, using the lightest blue color he has, then follow that with a light-valued warm red as well as oranges, yellow or even greens. “I’ll pick maybe nine different sticks. When you stand back from the painting, you can’t see them that well, but they make it look three-dimensional,” says Sperlak. “Then, when people look closer, they’ll realize that a blue star looks very far away, and a red star looks closer.”

Placement also gives a sense of perspective. “The stars that are farther away appear closer together,” Sperlak says. “So, the brightest ones that are in the foreground are much farther apart because they’re really close to you.”

OPPOSITE
Silence of the Evening (24x30)

BELOW
Over Oahu (12x16)



SEEING IS BELIEVING

Sperlak understands why some who see his work don’t believe the views he paints truly exist until they stand where he stands, on his 37-acre property in Goshen, New Jersey—the picturesque place where he paints and teaches. “*Silence of the Evening* (above) carries the vantage point one would have in a nearby marsh at twilight as the sun sets and a thin, nearly invisible new moon joins Venus above the shadow of the earth,” he says. Views like this one reveal the beauty of a place where the artist says he has spent his entire life exploring, kayaking, crabbing and “hiding from reality” while watching sunsets.

“I’ve had people come here and tell me that they weren’t always convinced about my work because there’s a lot of horizontality to it—an upper field (the sky) and a lower field (the land), without many trees or other vertical elements,” he says. “But once they’re here, they say they feel like they’re standing in one of my paintings.” **PJ**

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Stan Sperlak (thesperlakgallery.com) is a regional landscape painter originally from Denver, Colo., who has been showing his work since 1998. He owned and operated a landscape design and construction company for 33 years. He attended The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and has studied with noted landscape architect William Frederick and Patricia Vanaman Witt, founder

of the Barn Studio of Art in Millville, N.J. In 1997, Sperlak bought 37 acres of farmland, forest and marsh in Goshen, N.J., and started work on a studio, teaching facility and future sculpture garden that is now The Goshen School of Art/Crow Creek Farm, where he currently runs seasonal workshops. He’s a Signature Member of the Pastel Society of America, a Master Circle Artist of the International Association of Pastel Societies, and a past director of the Mid-Atlantic Plein Air Painters Association.

More Online!

See Stan’s advice for avoiding a predictable palette at artistsnetwork.com/go/sperlak-palette.