

# George Gallo: PAINTING BIG—REALISM AND REVOLUTION

by Molly Siple

**G**EORGE GALLO IS THE WRITER/DIRECTOR OF THE THREE-TIME AWARD WINNING MOVIE, *Local Color*, the first film to portray modern-day artists dedicated to painting realistically. Gallo, a landscape artist himself, also painted all the canvases that appear in the movie, some 300 in total. Few creative souls have the range of talents that Gallo enjoys and fewer still would have the determination and savvy to conjure up a project that incorporates them all, but this is exactly what Gallo accomplished with this award-winning movie.

Originally from New York, Gallo moved to Los Angeles in 1982 with \$800 in his pocket and a script he had written that after five years of persistence was produced as the movie, *Wise Guys*. Next came *Midnight Run*, a classic buddy/cops and robbers picture, with **Robert De Niro** and **Charles Grodin** in the starring roles. However, Gallo began his creative life as a painter and, alongside his successes in Hollywood, painting remains his passion to this day.

The script of *Local Color* is a semi-autobiographical story of Gallo's early years as a representational artist in New York and Pennsylvania striving to fit into the contemporary art scene. It is also about mentoring, seasoned artists passing on their wisdom to the next generation of artists, which in the case of representational art made it possible for time-honoured techniques to survive the disregard for these during much of the past century. Gallo himself was first mentored by a little-known artist, **Aurelio Yammerino (1912–2000)**, a modernist painter, classically trained, who ran a frame shop in a small town on the Long Island shore and befriended a young George. Gallo credits “Yammi” with teaching him the importance of design—finding the big shapes and using these to communicate what you want to say, a precept that is still central to Gallo's art.

In turn, Yammerino introduced Gallo to the internationally renowned artist **George Cherepov (1909–1987)** of Russian origin. Gallo soon apprenticed himself to Cherepov, studying with him in Connecticut for three years. He also enjoyed many a painting trip to Cherepov's house in Vermont, and under this master, was schooled in seeing things not as objects, but as abstract shapes with their own unique value, colour, and temperature. Cherepov



George Gallo, creating his painting, McClure Pass, en plein air in McClure Pass, Colorado.

was known for his use of colour and Gallo began a lifelong fascination with the dynamics of how we see hue.

About this time, as an art student making the rounds of Manhattan galleries, Gallo happened upon an exhibit of the works of the Pennsylvania Impressionists, the artists of the first half of the twentieth century who were painting in and around Pennsylvania's Bucks County, particularly around the town of

New Hope. “These were the most amazing canvases I had ever seen, so energetic and spontaneous, and large,” recalls Gallo, “On view were landscapes by **Edward Redfield (1869–1965)**, **Daniel Garber (1880–1958)**, and **Walter Elmer Schofield (1867–1944)**—huge canvases that these artists had completed, in one take, on location, outdoors! I couldn't get over Redfield's dynamic snow scenes, filled with these huge smacks of paint!”

**G**ALLO TELLS OF TRYING HIS HAND AT DOING THE SAME and freely admits to producing some disasters. But, eventually he improved and now is well-known for painting large scale *en plein air*. About the physicality of working large Gallo says, “Now instead of just moving your wrist, you have to move your body and paint with your whole arm. And as the light changes, to fill a big canvas you have to work especially quick, thinking fast, putting the paint down, not second-guessing what you've just done, and moving on.” For Gallo, this sort of accelerated painting offers some great advantages. “You don't have time to be precious. In fact you begin to develop a shorthand for imagery that is totally unique to you. I find my unconscious mind takes over and I begin to paint without judgment.”

He continues, “This act of surrendering to the act of

painting, instead of just trying to control it, will be one of the best things you will ever do for yourself as an artist. Surrendering to the process of painting will take you places you never dreamed existed, I promise you. Letting go of some idea of what you plan to paint, you'll start to see more options and begin a sort of dialogue with a given painting in progress. You will become far more interested in the act of painting than simply rendering the scene in front of you. And doing so, you're more likely to find your own artistic voice."

As Gallo talks about his painting, he comes across as having a fairly straight-forward approach to his art, one that seems neither arrogant nor filled with self-doubt. It's easy to imagine him standing before a scene he is about to paint, drinking it in, and then engaging with the subject in a way that leads to something more. As he says, "I'm not making nature. I'm making paintings. I'm using nature to try to say something about being alive. When I see a painting that seems to just copy a view, I want to ask the artist, 'Where are you in all this?' The historic plein air painters, like **William Wendt (1865–1946)** and **Hanson Puthuff (1875–1972)**, didn't just paint from nature. They carefully designed their paintings, and I think these days a lot of interest in design has been thrown out the window."

**I**N HIS QUEST FOR FRESH IMAGERY, GALLO DOESN'T MIND breaking some cherished plein air rules. He liberally uses black (actually, mixes of the darkest pigments), normally not part of the Impressionist palette. "Not using black is one of those crazy ideas again. Henri, Bellows, and Sargent painted with blacks and it's dopey for us not to." And although there are theoretically no lines in nature, he happily makes the most of linear elements, adding to what a given scene supplies. For Gallo, foreground grasses and autumn scenes filled with bare branches are opportunities for rich texture and lively visual rhythms. "I catch some heat in plein air circles for talking this way," says Gallo. "Some people think I'm wacky. I hear them talking about the 'representational art revolution,' and that the day for this will finally arrive. I tell them revolution is bloody. To make this revolution happen, your paintings need to be revolutionary!"

Gallo gravitated to landscape painting from the start, enthralled by the beauty in the natural world, and thanks to his particular involvement in the film industry, landscape scenes began to have special appeal. As a screenwriter, Gallo found he was always writing about the human drama and people living compromised lives. As he says, "Painting nature



*Reflections; New Hope, Pennsylvania*

Oil on canvas 20" × 30"

Courtesy of American Legacy Fine Arts

allows me to disengage from all this. Mountains aren't greedy and trees don't lie. Everything in nature naturally co-exists. Everything grows together and lives in peace, side by side." His "day job" of being a screen writer also benefited his art career in another way. As he says, "Because they paid me to write scripts, this gave me enormous financial freedom to paint whatever I wanted, from plein air to studio work and abstraction, a chance to explore techniques and subject matter in any way I chose."

**P**AINTING THE CALIFORNIA LANDSCAPE OVER THE YEARS, Gallo has witnessed the eclipsing of special views by development. "One of my favourite places to paint has long been Malibu Canyon, but the remaining untouched land is shrinking pretty rapidly with more and more houses and condos being built," says Gallo. He takes a pragmatic approach to these changes, including these intrusions such as structures, street lights, and road signs in some of his recent landscapes. As he asks, "We don't know if in a hundred years, a street light will look quaint and intriguing, and I question, if you eliminate all the buildings, will your painting look like it's from another time and lack a certain truth?"

Gallo also frequently travels to the East Coast and continues to paint in the countryside where he first learned his craft. "My current work is more personally expressive," says Gallo.



*Detail of movie poster promoting Local Color*



*Actors in Local Color, Trevor Morgan (Left) and Armin Mueller-Stahl (Right)*



*Route 40, Evening Light*  
Oil on canvas 36" × 60"

"Now, I find I am more interested in getting underneath what I am seeing and having more of an internal dialogue with the landscape. I recently painted in upstate New York where my parents would take me on trips to apple farms in the fall, and being there again brought back those memories, how it felt to be there in my youth, the chill in the air, and some melancholy I feel now. I tried to communicate these feelings in my recent paintings of this area and people who see these pick up on this." Gallo's *Route 40, Evening Light*, is part of this series.

**G**ALLO'S TALENTS AS A PAINTER HAVE EARNED HIM numerous honours. In 1991 Gallo won the coveted Top 100 "Arts for the Parks" award. His landscapes have been featured in several solo exhibitions including three at the **Grand Central Art Galleries** in New York City and one at the **Salmagundi Club** in New York. In May of 2016 the **Butler Museum of American Art** in Youngstown, Ohio installed a retrospective exhibition of his work, featuring seventy examples, with an accompanying coffee-table-book catalogue. In addition, the museum now includes



*Malibu State Park, Late Afternoon*  
Oil on linen 16" × 24"  
Courtesy of American Legacy Fine Arts

a George Gallo canvas, *Phillip's Mill Creek in Winter*, in its permanent collection.

Over the years, Gallo has also found the time to hold painting workshops and taking on the role as a mentor to others. The art book publisher, **Northlight Books**, in 2014 chose to publish his teachings on landscape in a volume titled *Impressionist Painting for the Landscape: Secrets for Successful Oil Painting*, an invaluable how-to guide which Gallo co-authored. Gallo also taught landscape painting four years in a row at *American Artist's Weekend with the Masters Workshop and Conference* and, more recently, has been part of the teaching team at **PleinAir Magazine's** various Plein Air Conventions. Watching Gallo paint large and quick is such entertaining stuff that last year, at the Plein Air Convention in Carmel (2016), for

the hundreds assembled at the introductory evening event, Gallo's speedy painting was the opening act.

The evocative subtitle that Gallo wrote for *Local Color* is *One Master. One Student. One Summer to Dream*, conjuring a vision of a seminal experience that any artist will understand. Gallo himself dreams of beauty, as he says, "In a world where art aficionados embrace ugliness and cynicism, I'll always choose beauty and hope instead." 🍷

#### Notes:

*About the Author: Senior Editor Molly Siple studied painting and art history at the University of California at Berkeley and is an Artist Member of the California Art Club. She has also taken formal training from master artists Shuqiao Zhou, and Jove Wang, and Ian Roberts. Siple is a frequent contributor to numerous national art publications, and co-author of Enchanted Isle, A History of Plein Air Painting in Santa Catalina Island as well as California Light, A Century of Landscapes: Paintings of the California Art Club.*



*Phillip's Mill Creek in Winter*  
Oil on canvas 36" × 48"  
Collection of Butler Museum of American Art, Youngstown, Ohio