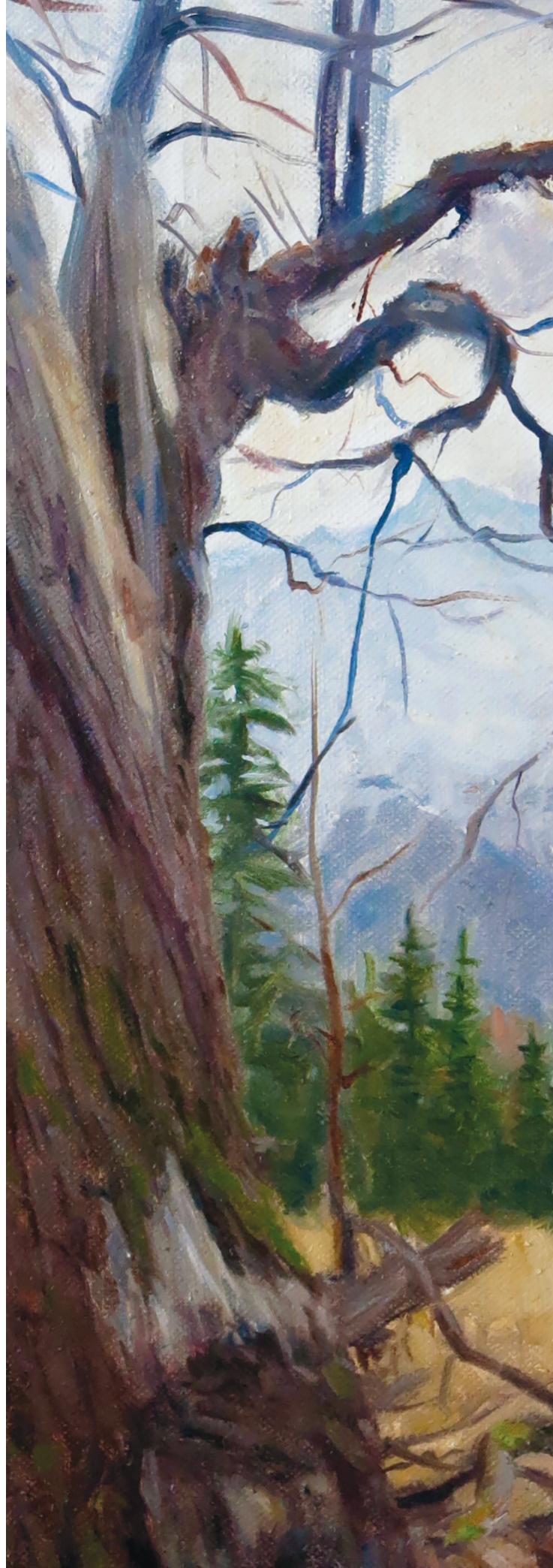




THE STILL LIFE OF DAVID PETTIBONE





Artist David Pettibone's work enacts a unity of humanity, nature, and art

Text and photographs by Joe Yelverton

**A** **SMALL FIGURE** on a large landscape, David Pettibone ascends a windswept mountainside formed of titanic landforms, contoured by glaciers, sculpted by the powerful forces of nature. He nears the top of a 2,000-foot slope, his journey taking him through boulder fields interspersed with alpine tundra, past diminutive lichens, modest yet powerful enough to break rocks. His path weaves between tiny islands of alpine sedges and mountain avens, creating habitat for denizens of the alpine. Everything he passes, living and dying, shaped by the world it occupies.

Wiping sweat from his forehead, he balances at the angle of repose, a physical place on the mountain where eventually, most everything seems to lose a foothold, giving up space for something else.

As an artist, Pettibone thrives in environments where metaphor runs deep, where decay and renewal are ever-present, part of a constant cycle.

As a witness to change, he explores these ideas in his work, resulting in themes that arise in his larger studies. Like, "A Year With a Tree," when he literally spent an entire year with a large cottonwood in Eagle River Valley, Alaska. Painting through all four seasons, Pettibone immersed himself, struggling through severe weather, endeavoring to experience the same elements as his subject. Two years after he completed his project, in November of 2019, a windstorm took this old matriarch down, now destined to become part of the same forest floor that once supported her stately presence.

"It was around for hundreds of years," Pettibone lamented. "My year was a blip in its existence."

Back in the mountains, high above the forested valleys, the artist scrambles to a rocky outcrop and steadies himself. After catching his breath he turns around, captivated by a scene that awaits him. A nearly 360 degree view of seemingly endless topography. Mountain faces overlap each other, casting monumental shadows, each one imparting a sense of mystery. The farther Pettibone sees, the deeper the intrigue. And even farther in the distance, myriad ridge lines crisscross the sky like an array of gigantic saw-blades.

Despite the obvious rewards for such an intense effort, climbing to rarified places, Pettibone seeks insight more than just great views.

The mountains are his muse.

IN THE SUMMER OF 2019 I joined the Homer-based artist for an exploratory trip into the Alaskan backcountry. With heavy packs and many thousands of feet of climbing and descending, we both enjoyed the solace and the inspiration of the Chugach Mountains.

At the final reaches of the last big climb, the 39-year-old artist stood silent, deeply immersed in analysis, his enigmatic gaze drawn into the depths of the terrain around him, terrain poetically reflected in his physical nature, his full beard, wild red hair, and cerulean eyes.

Often wearing his trademark, tattered and paint covered Carhartts, Pettibone embodies an unpretentious old soul. Humble and intensely stoic, he's a true man of the mountains.

When he speaks he carefully measures his words, as if he's painting sentences on a canvas, leaving just enough space for your imagination. He's articulate, but a man of few words. Understatement speaks volumes.

During our time in the mountains we shared few light-hearted conversations. Between long periods of exertion, and at times while he was painting, we talked about the artistic process, the value of art to society, and the meaning of wilderness.

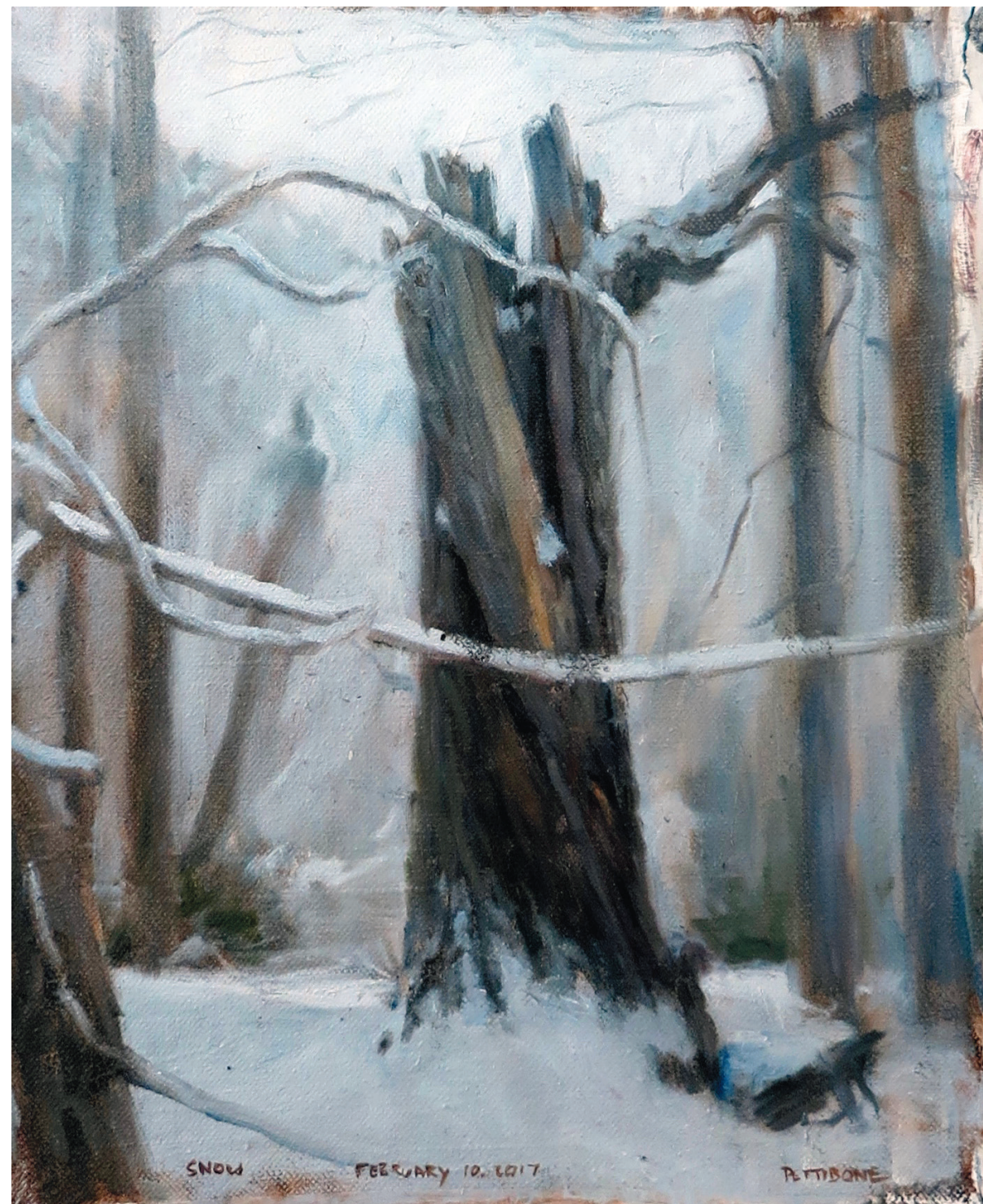
Pettibone contends that our reverence for wilderness is in some ways a misguided notion.

"It's not that wild places aren't sacred," he said. "It's more that we are all a part of the same living organism. When we separate ourselves as distinct from the natural world we fail to realize that we share the same fate as it."

"In simple terms," he added, "we share the same fate as an alder leaf. If we deem the natural world as sacred, but fail to protect it, in the end we are killing ourselves."

After we settled into our new camp, Pettibone began his work at 8 p.m., about three hours before sunset. With the sun dipping down in the western sky, he prepared to capture the anticipated alpenglow, soon casting its light on the mountains all around us.

After erecting his easel, he arranged his paints and began a meditative process. As the night progressed, the sun slowly rested into a low valley, running uninterrupted



"Snow, February 10, 2017." David Pettibone.

Page 5: "November 13, 2016." David Pettibone.

"My year was a blip  
in its existence."



to the west. An ephemeral light formed, a crimson but transient glow on the mountaintops and the surrounding clouds. As he painted the dynamic light, he also tried to keep up with the constraint of time.

All the while, mosquitoes began to antagonize him. And yet, he was so focused, he barely noticed the distraction, occasionally swatting at them as he worked.

The irony is, when a winged intruder lands on his painting, getting stuck in wet paint, it becomes a permanent part of the work, integral to the story.

In the world of David Pettibone, honesty is an inextricable part of the process. His work captures accidents as much as manifesting his intentions. Failure and success are interchangeable. Perfection, measured only against the imperfections.

Observing him work left me convinced that his focus could easily be construed for obsession. He was seemingly oblivious to everything but his subject, as if he was part of an elaborate and living diorama. Watching him became an intimate experience, seeing inside the world of the painter, as he explored the different landscapes—the immediate, the emotional internal, and the surrounding environment. In the end, a mood unfolded, reflecting the interplay of all three environments.

Pettibone appeared uniquely vulnerable to the world around him, to the extent that he seemed unaware of my presence. I wondered if that's what art is all about, moments when artists are no longer aware of anything outside the scope of their work, maybe even unaware of their own presence. Self, dissolving into the environment.

On the mountains, an orange and red glow intensified, becoming more magical, and more brilliant, especially in its transience. In contrast, I realized that the actual painting Pettibone was creating seemed secondary to his overall experience, perhaps also because of its transience, illustrating the paradox of preservation and the fluidity of his documentation as an artist.

Despite that he was deeply immersed, I asked him to describe the essence of his experience.

"A series of decisions in an environment where change is constant," he replied, all the while keeping his eyes fixed on his subject, applying brush strokes at the same time.

It was around 11 p.m. when Pettibone finally finished, the lazy sun resting behind the horizon on an Alaska night when it never gets completely dark. I resisted look-



ing at his painting until he was completely done. And it was then when it all made sense, connecting a magnificent impression with the actual artist, a portrait of place as much as the man who created it.

Just like his process of painting, Pettibone methodically broke down his work, first collapsing the legs on his easel. Using a small spatula, he scraped unused paint from his palette and placed it back into compact containers. Next, he carefully cleaned his brushes and his palette. Then he packaged everything in his backpacking kit that he made especially for his plein air sessions.

Everything has its place, and everything he does expresses a level of discipline you'd expect to see with a similar kind of craftsman, such as a woodworker caring for tools.

AFTER PETTIBONE wrapped up, we sat outside next to our tent as twilight continued to deepen the sky above us. The warm night welcomed us and thankfully the bugs moved on. We discussed the broader philosophy of plein air painting, and art in general. Unlike his other work that's more socially influenced, he describes his plein air painting as "more of a recording of the passage of time."

"An accumulation of moments, weaving them all together," he said, "like making a time capsule."

"When life is complicated, it's nice to be able to go out into the mountains with nothing between you and your subject."

"There's something pure about that," he said, "it's all for the sake of documentation."

The discussion evolved into the value of art to society. The role of artists in influencing thought. How the world perceives art, whether it's appreciated, and how it's valued.

Our discussion made me wonder about the role of artists as vicarious stewards, literally providing the op-



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portunity for others—to experience in the imagination through feelings and actions of another person.

It occurred to me that now maybe more than ever before, we need artists. Perhaps even more than they need us. We especially need artists like David Pettibone, someone who passionately works behind the scenes. A storyteller, telling important stories.

As a full-time professional artist he seems to have made peace with the practical realities of his craft, dedicating himself to a noble but sometimes thankless pursuit that not only includes working on his projects, but also frequently teaching art as well.

As our evening wound down I was left thinking about all of our conversations, when suddenly I remembered an apt phrase by Oscar Wilde. The famous playwright may not have intended it this way, but his words certainly relate to an unfortunate if not uncommon perspective on artists and their craft, an outlook that seems more prevalent in today's society.

When Wilde said, "Knowing the price of everything and the value of nothing," I wonder if he embedded a paradox in his words, describing the sentiment that the things of greatest value to society are actually priceless. Like the experience provided by artists such as David Pettibone. ■

*Joe Yelverton is an Anchorage based writer and photographer. [www.joeyelverton.com](http://www.joeyelverton.com)*