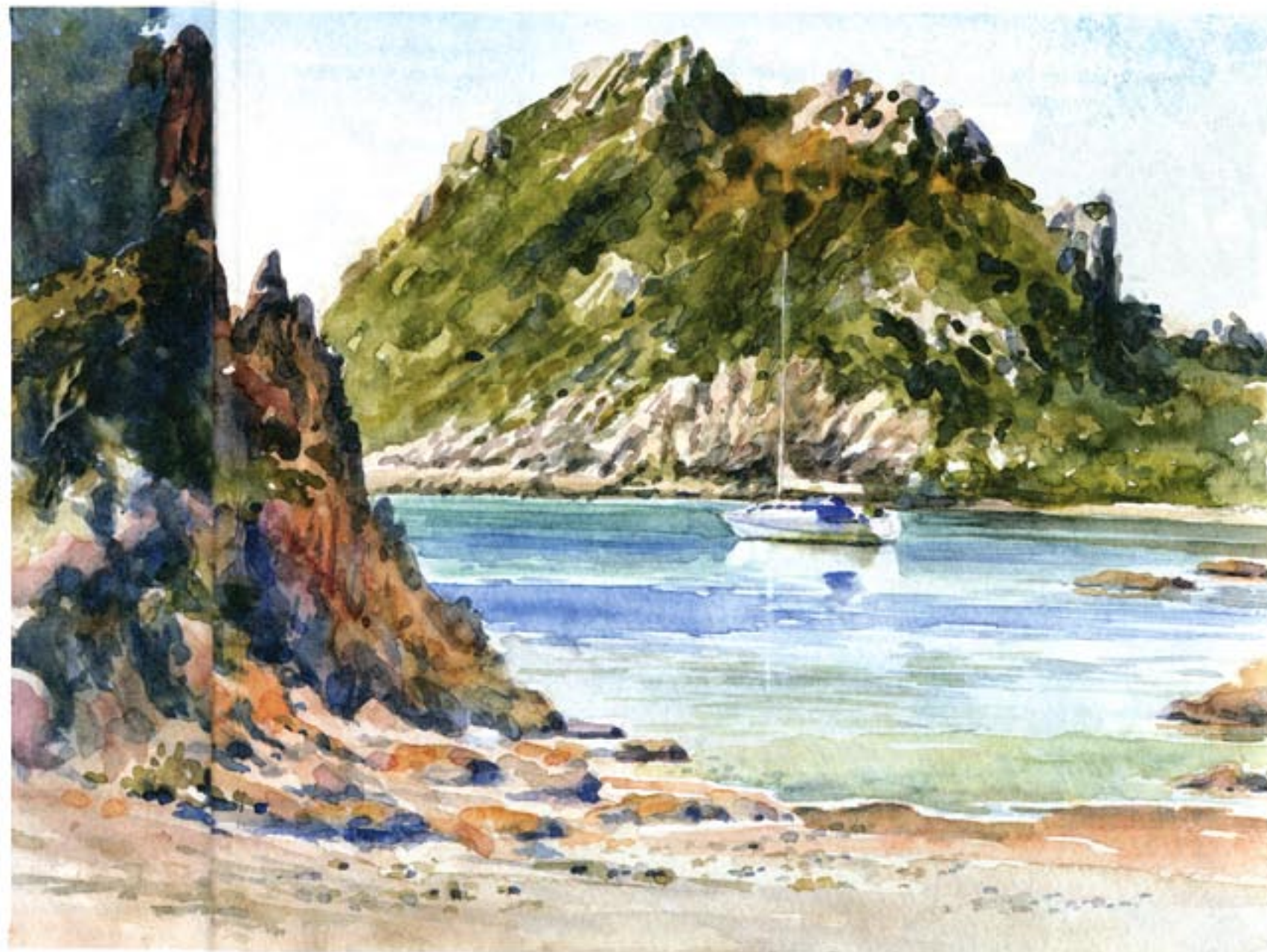


PAINTING *Off the Beaten Path*



ABOVE
**Isola Spargi
Anchorage**
2008, watercolor, 9 x 12.
All artwork this article
collection the artist unless
otherwise indicated.

LEFT
Fiji Coconut Palms
2008, watercolor, 9 x 12.



A love of travel has taken **Michael Killelea** all over the world. A passion for watercolor has ensured that he'll never forget it.

by **Naomi Ekperigin**

Setting up an interview with Buffalo artist Michael Killelea was no easy feat. After our initial meeting at the Burchfield Penney Art Center's Watermedia Weekend this past spring—during which we swapped travel stories and discussed the growing popularity of watermedia—a series of emails finally led to an appointment to speak over the phone. "I'll be in and out much of September, and traveling to Africa in October," he wrote in July. "Let me know



when you're available and we'll work it out." Killelea's upbeat and adventurous approach to both his life and his art has only grown since he began painting full-time. The artist recently added teaching to his resume, which has given him an opportunity to share his infectious enthusiasm for exploration and self-discovery with painters of all levels.

"I just like the way it works," Killelea says when asked why he paints in watercolor. He sighs, seemingly at a loss for words, but is not frustrated. "It's just like breathing to me. I don't really analyze it. Painting is instinctive at this point." It seems that Killelea was destined to become a watercolorist. And although he may have taken a somewhat circuitous path to get there, that's just fine for this avid traveler and outdoorsman who admits to feeling chronic wanderlust. After serving in the U.S. Navy in the

OPPOSITE PAGE, ABOVE
Remarkables in the Morning
2008, watercolor, 9 x 12.

OPPOSITE PAGE, BELOW
Pt. Vicente Light, California
2011, watercolor, 9 x 12.
Private collection.

BELOW
Piraeus Harbor
2007, watercolor, 7 x 10.

mid-1960s, the artist took advantage of the GI Bill and studied advertising art at Farmingdale State College, in New York. From there, he went on to work in the newspaper industry, serving as the photo editor and then art director at *Newsday*. He then worked as the art director for the *New York Daily News* and the *Boston Herald*. Although he enjoyed the fast-paced environment, fine art was always Killelea's true calling, and he supplemented his practical education with evening classes at Pratt Institute and the School of Visual Arts, in New York City. "Your own personal sense of worth can't come from your job," the artist says. "It has to come from inside. When I realized that, that's when I started painting seriously."

"Painting seriously" has meant that Killelea takes his paints wherever he goes, be it China, India, Holland, or



Bar Harbor, Maine. Although he has worked in other media, Killelea finds watercolor to be the best fit for his spontaneous, direct, and decisive approach to capturing inspiring vistas. "When you're painting en plein air, you've got to get it done," the artist says. "The limited amount of time makes you a stronger painter because you have to just keep going."

Years of on-site painting has helped Killelea develop a streamlined process that enables him to make the most of even the shortest painting sessions. "I often travel with my wife, and we go on tours," the artist explains. "We have a set schedule, and sometimes it could just be half an hour at a location. When I was in Cairo, I was determined to paint the pyramids, but I only had 20 minutes. Luckily, I'm a fast painter. I don't want to finish something in less than an hour, but if I have to, I will." To facilitate this process, the artist travels

OPPOSITE PAGE
John Harvey,
NYFD Fireboat
1998, watercolor,
12 x 9.

BELOW
Loading Ganges
Firewood
2011, watercolor,
9 x 12.

with a utilitarian set of materials, including 7"-x-10" and 9"-x-12" watercolor pads; a folding palette that he hooks onto his thumb; four brushes; and an empty water bottle that he fills on location. Packing light enables him to keep moving—and painting—for as long as he can.

Killelea has visited six continents and seen many of the world's greatest natural wonders, yet when he chooses a spot to paint, it's usually an unassuming street corner or a hilltop frequented more by locals than visitors. "When we were in Agra, India, I didn't want to paint the Taj Mahal," the artist remarks. "Not only is it a mob scene but there's no way I could begin to do it justice—why would I bother? I chose to paint a street scene, so I set up my easel in a shaded area off to the side of the crowd."

The artist also notes that working in these less popular areas usually allows for longer stretches of



painting time and can offer insight into the culture and the people that can't be learned in a guidebook. Recalling his trip to India, he shares a story of a "local admirer" of his work. "About 45 minutes into my painting session, I had attracted a small crowd of people who were watching me work," he says. "Suddenly, a cow walked over and joined the group. Cows are sacred in India, so no one was going to hit it or anything to get it to leave. One man shoos it away with some loud noises, and a few minutes later, it comes back. He shoos it away again, and within minutes, it's back. One of the men said to me, 'Sir, the cow appreciates your painting.' So, sometimes I get to connect with more than just the people."

Tom Boyle's Proclamation
2007, watercolor,
20 x 28.

In addition to preserving images of far-off lands, Killelea also enjoys painting maritime scenes, both historical and contemporary. "I've always had a connection to the sea," says the native of Long Island, New York. "I grew up by the beach, and I knew that I wanted to join the Navy when I was in high school because I wanted to travel by water." He's been a member of the American Society of Marine Artists for more than 20 years and currently serves as the secretary of the group's board of directors. In his maritime paintings, he works from life as much as possible, even enlisting family members as models. "For the painting *Tom Boyle's Proclamation*, I had my son pose for each of the men in the row boat," he explains. "I had him sit on a can with a bowl in his hand that he held like an oar. He was a good sport about it." This piece was inspired by the story of the famed American privateer who proclaimed a blockade on the United Kingdom during the War of 1812. "He was just one guy, and he managed to put the entire country under blockade," Killelea says of the source material. "The idea of one man having that kind of confidence and influence was very inspiring to me."

Perhaps the artist can relate to Boyle's boldness, as Killelea, too, ventures out on his own to navigate and commemorate unknown countrysides and harbor views. For Killelea, *en plein air* is the only way to paint. On his website, he writes, "There is an immediacy there that

encourages an honesty in the work of any artist willing to put themselves at the mercy of the elements." This experience is also somewhat humbling for a painter who works against the clock, rapidly changing light, large crowds, and inclement weather, all in the hopes of recording his experiences outside of his comfort zone. "I've never really painted to be 'in business,'" the artist says. "I paint because I can't help myself. I get such a rush when I see a finished painting that captures what I wanted." ■



About the Artist

Artist and instructor **Michael Killelea** was born on Long Island and now lives outside of Buffalo, New York. He is a signature member of the American Society of Marine Artists and serves as the group's secretary and a member of its board of directors. He is also a member of the Niagara Frontier Watercolor Society and sits on the board of the Niagara Arts & Cultural Center, in Niagara Falls, New York. His work has been exhibited at such institutions as the Frye Art Museum, in Seattle; the Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens, in Jacksonville, Florida; the Riverfront Art Center in Wilmington, Delaware; the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum, in St. Michael's, Maryland; the Vero Beach Museum of Art, in Florida; and many others. For more information, visit www.killelear.com.