

## PLEIN AIR PAINTER SERGIO LOPEZ

SOME TAKE THEIR TIME STROLLING THROUGH Healdsburg Ridge Open Space Preserve, stopping at Fox Pond to take in the peninsulas of green lily pads bobbing on its surface, or admiring the way the sunlight dapples the path in the oak woodlands. Not painter Sergio Lopez. He strides purposefully up the trail, clad in a T-shirt, jeans, and sun hat, taking several turns and making a beeline through a meadow before stopping on a rise beneath a leafy black oak. Lopez smiles broadly. He's arrived.

Before him, the trees open up to a panorama of oak-dotted hills, with bluer peaks fading behind them. A patchwork of fields and vineyards unfolds in the foreground, with the clear-blue Russian River snaking alongside. It looks like something out of a painting. And, soon, it will be.

"This spot has a lot of what I like," Lopez explains, as he adjusts his paint-spattered tripod. "It's a vista with a lot of layers; every grouping of hills has its own way of being depicted in paint." He opens his homemade field box, grabs tubes of gouache, and unzips a case of brushes, laid out with surgical precision. "I like the shapes the trees make, and I kind of like the vineyards, too, the geometry of them. Then, of course, the river's right there. It's got a little bit of everything."

Lopez came to this work after a career as a professional illustrator. "Plein air painting has given me a reason to explore the world," Lopez says. "Not only the whole world, but the world around me here, that I live in and interact with all the time." Though he's painted all over the country, Lopez, who was born in Santa Rosa, often gravitates toward home, particularly the west county. "I don't think I'll ever get tired of painting the coast. It's just ever-changing. You could go to the same place every day of the week, and it'll have a different feeling to it."

This sunny afternoon has an easygoing feeling to it. A lone hawk circles below; to the left, three butterflies flutter among the shrubs. On Lopez's sketchpad, the scene has begun to emerge: first in ghostly outlines, then in blocky shapes. He remains focused on the landscape, playing out a rhythm of his own: wetting his brush, tapping it dry, painting, mixing, painting, mixing, eyes flicking between landscape and painting.

As a breeze rustles the leaves overhead, Lopez squints into the distance, then puts the final touches on the

painting: a set of tiny barns at the juncture between a green field and geometric rows of vines. The result is breathtaking, conveying a rainbow of colors bursting from the hills and the drama of the river as it emerges. "Art gets people to look at the world differently," Lopez says. "A good artist can change your perception of things, get you to look at the subject in a more appreciative way."

And so he has.

~ MEGAN MCCREA

KENT PORTER

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## HEADING OUT

### WHAT TO USE:

Lopez says gouache is a good medium for beginners because it's easy to set up and use, with a quicker learning curve than other types of media. Once you feel confident about working with your materials, he says, "find something you feel like you can tackle in a small, simple way. Find a quiet park or a tree to sketch. You don't have to go out to the coast and try to paint waves."

### CLASSES:

Lopez, who exhibits his work at Christopher Queen Galleries in Duncans Mills, teaches an 8-week online course for beginning gouache painters. \$130, [sergiolopezfineart.com](https://sergiolopezfineart.com).

### GROUPS:

The Sonoma Plein Air Foundation sponsors a plein air painting festival in September. [sonomapleinair.com](https://sonomapleinair.com)

› Plein air painter Sergio Lopez often paints solo, with the local wildlife as company. He works in gouache, which is similar to watercolor, but more opaque.