Seeing Shapes Instead of Detail

by Phil Starke • www.PhilStarkeStudio.com

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Seeing Shapes Instead of Detail

On a painting trip to Teton National Park in Wyoming I spent about 12 days painting. It's very easy to get caught up trying to paint details of subtle stuff, especially if it's a new area. The details catch our eye and we become enamored with small things that seem different and interesting to paint. I think we're naturally drawn to detail so we have to train ourselves to think abstractly in terms of shapes. Below is a 16 x 20 that I did in the park. It's a little larger than I usually paint outside, so I went back for a second sitting to finish.

SUMMER IN THE TETONS
16X20

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When I look for subject matter, I'm trying to find something that can be reduced to simple shapes. That doesn't mean I'm looking for something with no detail. I want to be able to see past the detail and see the subject in terms of big shapes and big values. This is how I'm trying to see the subject, void of detail, a bit more on the abstract side, trees and rocks become a flat shape, it’s easier to simplify this way. Squinting your eyes when looking at the subject helps to eliminate detail.

I don’t block in the painting with these hard edges (just trying to show how I’m seeing the subject) but I do want to keep the shapes SIMPLE and BIG.

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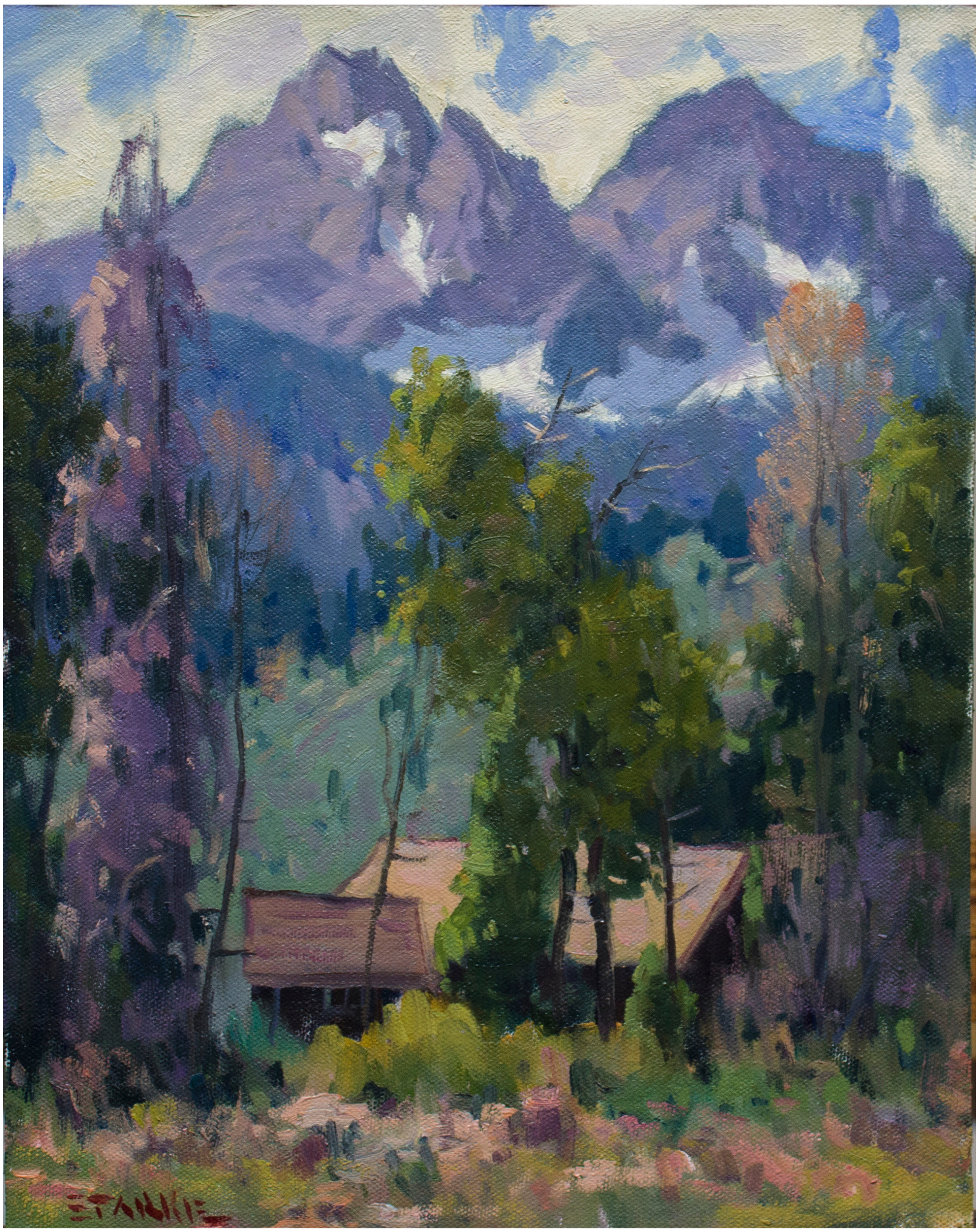
Here is another Teton painting, 11x14. The mountains, trees and foreground were full of detail and I had to see past that for three quarters of the painting. Most of the painting is spent trying to get the value and color relationships right between the large dark and light shapes.



SURROUNDED BY GIANTS
11X14

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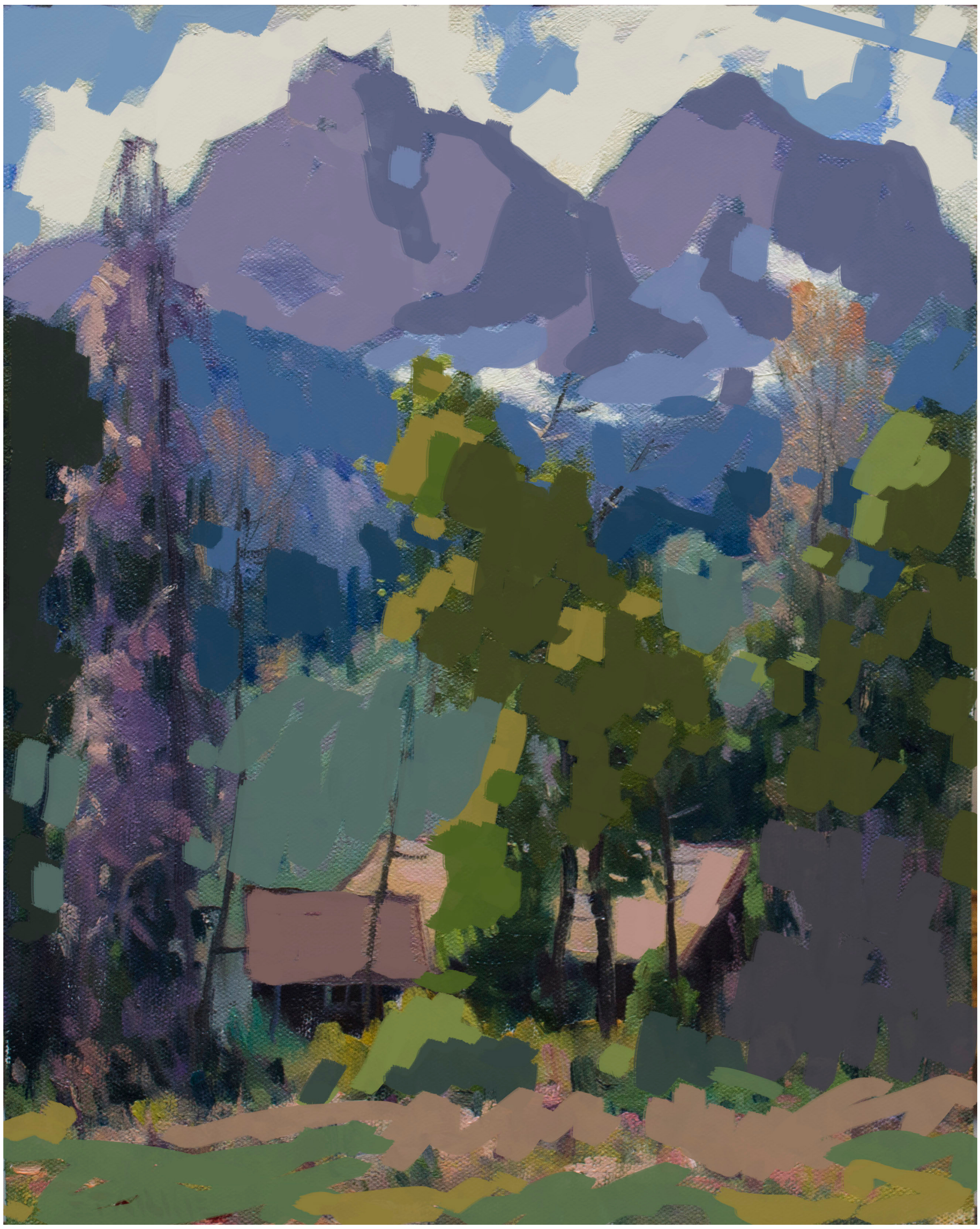
So the image below shows how I'm trying to see the landscape, simplified shape and value. It takes an effort to see past the unimportant stuff, but after a while it becomes second nature to visualize the shapes minus the detail.

It helps to start small when painting outside, 6x8, 8x10, you don't have a large area to try and cover and in a short amount of time you can quickly fill in the large shapes and spend most of the time getting the value relationships correct. Then at the end, give yourself 15 minutes to suggest some details around the center of interest and break up the edges.



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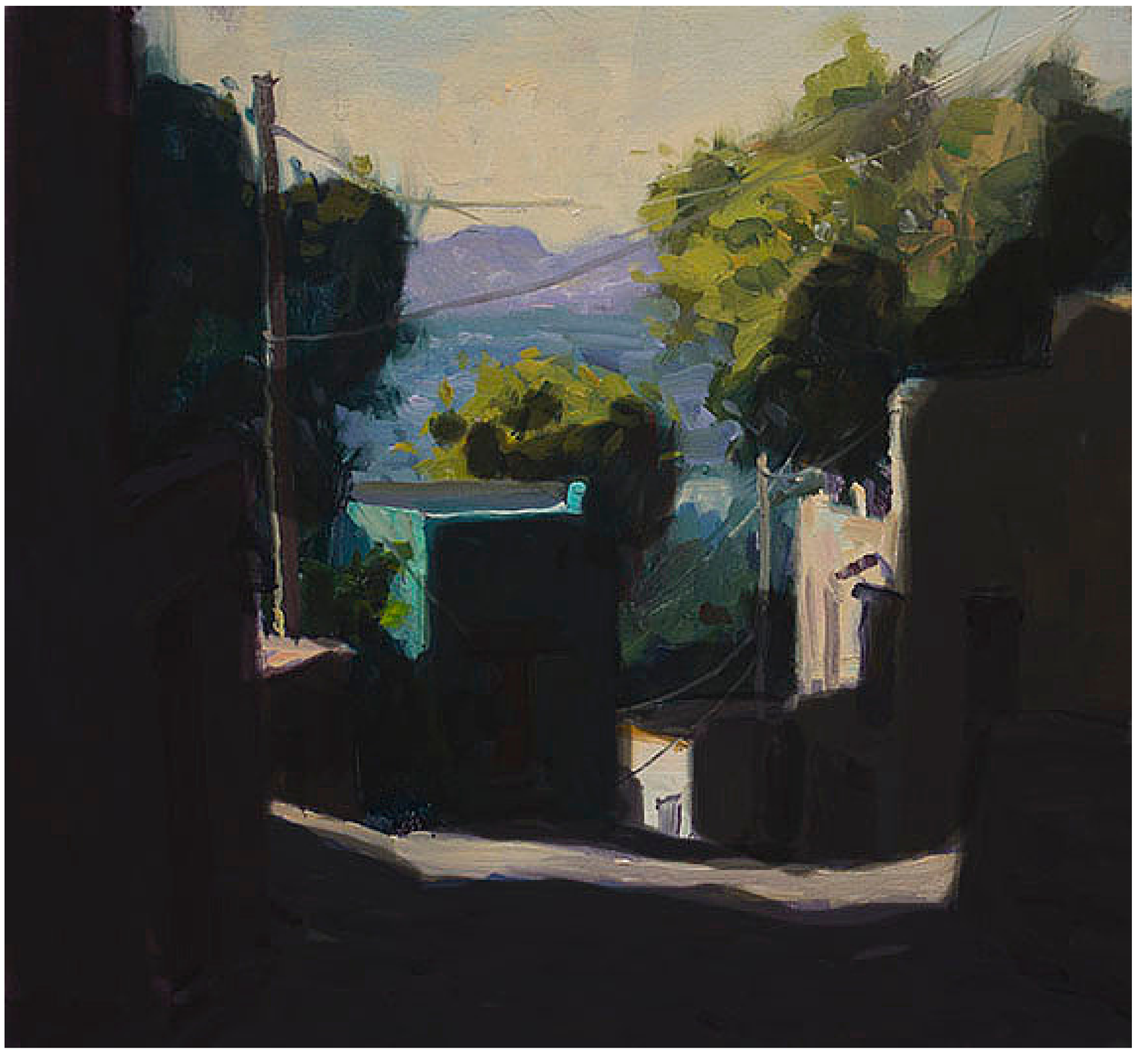
If you're painting a more complicated street scene the thought process is basically the same, always working with large,flat shapes first. This helps with the linear perspective because its easier to see shape instead of outline. Again, spend most of the time getting the right value and color relationships, then working smaller, deciding what details to use and what to leave out.



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The most important part is simplifying the scene. Finding that overall shadow pattern that sets up the larger shapes, makes it easier to paint. It's easier to see the whole composition and set up the drawing with an overall pattern of large shapes instead of contours.

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