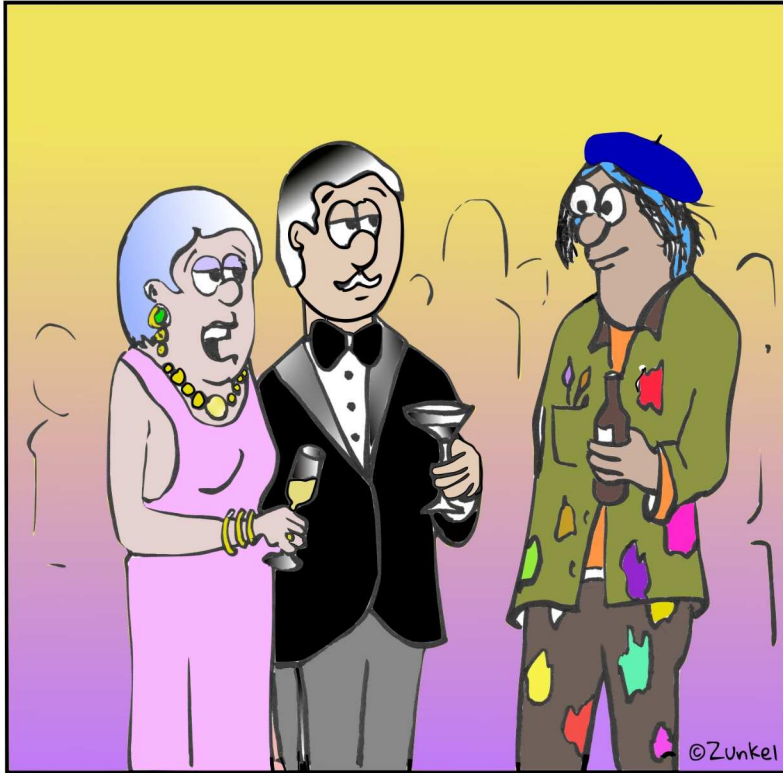


Plain Air



"I see by your clothing that you are an artist."

Idea Drawings About Art and Artists by Richard Zunkel

2018 Richard Lee Zunkel

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Artist's note

This book was originally published in 2018. Since then, *Inkscape* vector graphics editor has had many upgrades as has my knowledge about the advanced functions the software offers. As a result, some of the comments that refer to *Inkscape* are obsolete.

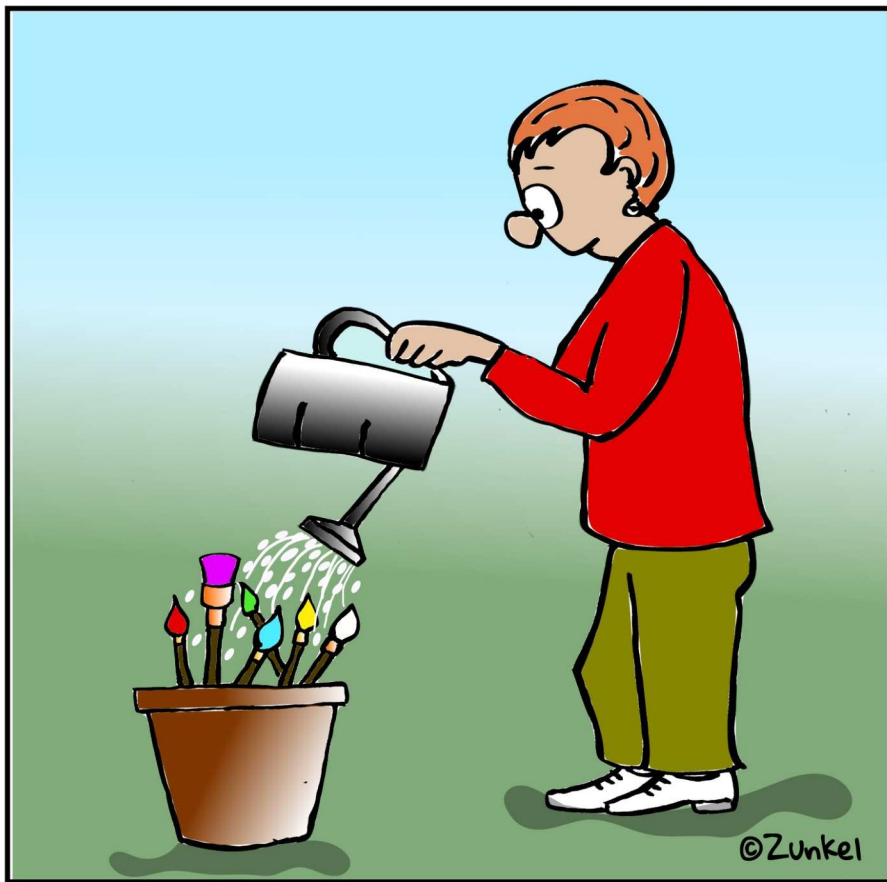
The dreaded COVID pandemic also had an effect on "Plain Air." When the art workshop where I was working closed, I came home to draw. However, I don't like the ink mess in our house, so I went 100% digital for about two years. I have since returned to ink for projects I am working on. I like the look of hand drawn lines.

The majority of the cartoons in this book were published in the newsletter and website of the Santa Clara Valley Watercolor Society. After a five year run, I chose to retire "Plain Air" cartoons and work on other projects that I have postponed..

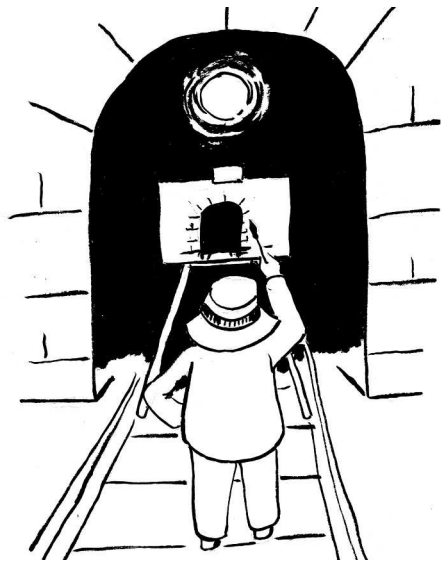
I have made no other editorial changes in this version. However, some of the techniques I used with *Inkscape* were so outdated that I made notations with a footnote where appropriate. Some of the graphics and text are changed to accommodate the printed version of "Plain Air." Otherwise, I have left the narrative "as is."

Dick Zunkel

Plain Air



To those who nurture art.



The Plain Air series began at Stanford University. No, I am not a Stanford graduate, but I spent time there drawing and painting images of the university's architecture and gardens.

A group of plein air artists were having lunch at a Stanford dining hall after a morning of painting. It was a cold and rainy classic Northern California mid-winter day. We sat around a table showing each other sketches made that day. One sketch caught my attention. It was by Uma Kelkar, a bright and talented local artist. I inquired about the pen she used for her sketch.

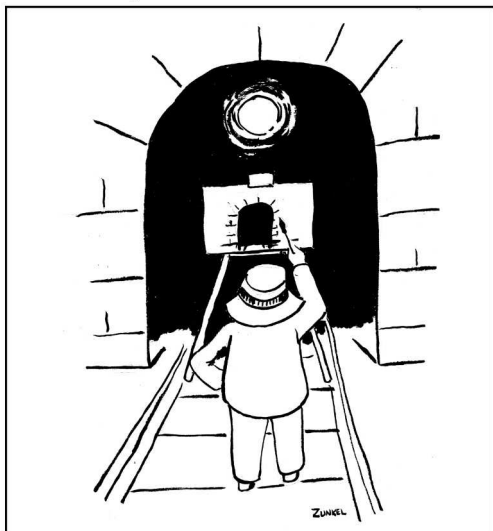
"It's a brush pen," she replied. "Here, try it." I was impressed. The instrument let me draw a hair thin line that broadened into a graceful calligraphy stroke by only varying the force of the brush against the paper. I bought one the next day and began to use it for pen and ink with watercolor wash paintings.

Almost four years later, I was sitting in an open studio workshop with no project planned. I pulled out a sheet of paper, my brush pen, and drew an arc. Beneath it I drew a circle, with no particular design in mind. My sketch reminded me of a train in a tunnel. I completed the sketch with a figure standing on the tracks painting the tunnel, oblivious of the approaching train. I had drawn my first cartoon in years.

I was thrilled with the results. The following week I drew another cartoon, and another a week later. But what should I do with them? I had the beginning of a series. I toyed with the idea of drawing a three-panel cartoon strip. The little man in front of the tunnel could be my character, "The Artist of Disaster." I made some preliminary drawings. Even using some of the copy and paste techniques employed by the pros, it was simply too much time consuming. I decided to stay with the single panel format.

I scanned my drawings with a flatbed scanner just to experiment with scale and text with a simple graphics program. I had learned hand lettering in college, but a keyboard and a menu of fonts is so much easier. Published single-panel cartoons usually have a border drawn around them, but not always. I like the look of a bordered cartoon, so I searched my computer for a program that would let me draw a box around the scanned image. There were several. I tried all of them with varying results. I didn't realize the importance of a border until later in the series.

A giant was sleeping in my computer, a program so powerful that it would bring life to my cartoons, though I didn't know it at the time. *Inkscape* is an open source vector graphics editor. I had experimented with it before attempting to draw freehand using a mouse and a pen/tablet with unacceptable results. However, with *Inkscape*, I could easily draw a border around my scanned image, add text in a variety of fonts, and scale the cartoons up or down to fit in a magazine or newspaper column space. I mostly used it for borders and text. I later learned how to control the *Inkscape* drawing tools and often use them to add details the jpg scanned images.



Now I had the tools to draw professional quality cartoons. I made a commitment to myself. I would draw a cartoon a week for a year. I was locked in on a theme, art and artists, and felt the series should have a name. After several trials I came up with *Plain Air*. It is a mild "poke" at my fellow artists who have adopted the French term, "En Plein Air," loosely translated, "in open air," or "outdoors." As another artist told me, "You just sit back and laugh at us with your cartoons."

Every cartoon begins with an idea. It often comes from actual events that I experience or observe. Some ideas drop out of the sky, a gift, an inspiration. I like these because they are easy. Sometimes I use classic cartoon themes, such as unexpected disaster or exaggeration. Like any artist or writer, I occasionally suffer from "writers' block." To get through this, I sometimes use an online random word generator. It displays a list of words that prompt creative thinking. Word mapping works too. Some of my best ideas come like a ghost in the night when I am asleep.

My method is "old school." I make a light sketch with a 0.7 mm mechanical pencil with HB lead on 110 lb. white card stock. It accepts pencil lines and ink very well and the hard finish allows erasure of pencil lines without damaging the ink.



I ink over the sketch with a Pentel® GFKP brush pen. When the ink is dry, I erase any visible pencil lines with a kneaded eraser. I look for any obvious errors such as ink blots and repair them with white correction fluid.

I scan the image at 600 dpi in black and white mode. The result is high contrast black and white image as shown (left). In my early work, I scanned my drawings in gray-scale format thinking the lines were black enough. The gray lines lack contrast and sharpness. Gray-scale scanning also picks up a shadow of the paper. I have had to re-scan many of them.

I create a folder for each cartoon and save the scanned jpg image file in the folder. I save the file again with a different name, which becomes my working file. This is important because in the process of creating a finished cartoon, bad things can happen, and often do. I can always go back to the original scanned image and start over.

Now I move the project to my computer and open *Inkscape*. I set the page size to 16" x 20," import the scanned image, and enlarge it to fit the page. With the *grid* tool as a guide, I draw a border around the image with the *straight line* tool and complete the drawing. If needed, I adjust the page size to leave room for a caption and logo. I add a caption with the *text* tool in italics between quotation marks and end the text with an exclamation point or question mark. Finally, I finish the cartoon with a copyright mark and my graphic signature.



I composed the original *Plain Air* logo with my name in standard sans serif font but later changed to a funky logo with my 1958 Remington "Travel-Riter" typewriter.

Inkscape's default *fill* color is black. I found that by moving the slider, which changes transparency, I could fill with almost infinite shades of gray. The cartoon at left was one of the early cartoons I rendered in gray-scale. The concept of creating color cartoons had not even crossed my mind.

I learned an important lesson about filling cartoon details. The area to be filled must have a complete boundary, a perimeter line that totally encircles the area. Otherwise, it will not fill, and a message appears telling the user, "Area is not bounded, cannot be filled." This is easily remedied with the *pencil* or *straight line* tool to fill in the gaps and complete the perimeter. It is better to fill the gaps in the original drawing.

My goal of creating a cartoon a week became a reality. I wonder how professional cartoonists are able to do this every day. I realize it is their job, no different then when I was a product development engineer. But my projects sometimes took over three years to complete. A daily single-panel cartoon, or a strip? That's a lot of work, and the demand for creativity? I don't even want to think about that.



"Do you mind?"

In this book I will take you through the series of cartoons that I created over a three-year span. I still draw a cartoon a week, usually in an open studio. I don't like to draw at home, but I maintain an office for adding color to my drawings and running the business. I hate commuting.

The art shown here is not in strict chronological order, though you may see a gradual change in my drawing style, and ability to manage *Inkscape's* features as you look through the pages. Please keep in mind, this is not an *Inkscape* tech manual. I'm still learning.

Bear is about plein-air artists' intolerance for interruptions. The drawing required me to research photos of standing bears. I left the face white as if reflecting sunlight so that I could draw facial features.

I used the same character as in the Tunnel cartoon. He will show up in various cartoons throughout this series, though I have never given him a name or plan to feature him in a three-panel strip.

You may notice that the background does not extend to the border. I rendered my drawings in 8-1/2 x 11 format and made no attempt fill the space on a wider page. Later, when I started drawing my cartoons in color, I was forced to consider the border so I could fill the background to the edges. It takes a bit of planning to do this.

Plain Air by Dick Zunkel



Plain Air by Dick Zunkel



The idea for Polar Bear came from watching a TV special about the Arctic. I based the cartoon on a classic theme, an unsuspecting character about to be surprised by an unpleasant event. I had to do research to draw this cartoon. What do natives of the far north wear? Where are the polar bear's ears and mouth compared to its eyes?

The idea for Golf was from an actual incident. A senior family member retired and took up golf as a hobby. Regretfully, he injured his shoulder and had to give up the game. His wife suggested he take up another hobby. I was still using the a sans serif font for the Plain Air logo.

Plain Air by Dick Zunkel



Plain Air by Dick Zunkel



Desert is a classic cartoon theme, the disheveled survivor crawling across the desert only to be denied rescue. This was my first use of the *linear gradient* and *gradient edit* tools. You can see it on the artist's hat and water cup. They are remarkable features of the software. The gradient is fully adjustable in direction and intensity.

Actual incidents are the source of many cartoons in this series. Rain is one of them. I drew a diagonal line and distributed it throughout the cartoon with the *spray* tool. I added the cloud above using the *pencil* tool, then deleted the perimeter line. I created the reflections in the puddles by simply filling areas between the sprayed rain lines.

Plain Air

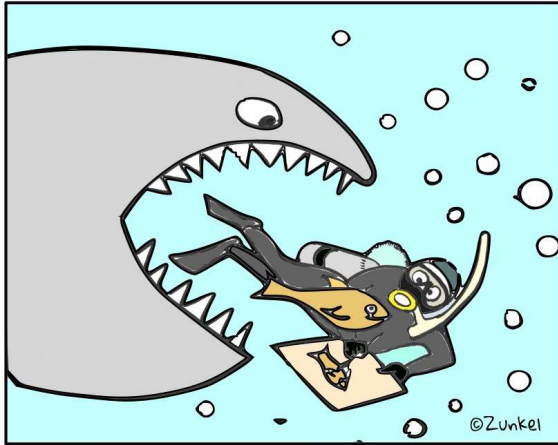


Plain Air



Captain (left) is the first of a series of three with this theme. The cartoons are about dreaming of a bigger and better craft. I re-scanning the original drawings and rendered them in 16" x 20" format for higher resolution. Late in this series I discovered that I could enlarge the scanned .jpg image on the *Inkscape* page to fit a larger format without distortion or pixelation. When enlarged to 8-1/2" or greater for framing, the image remains clear when the printer is set to 300 dpi or higher.

Plain Air



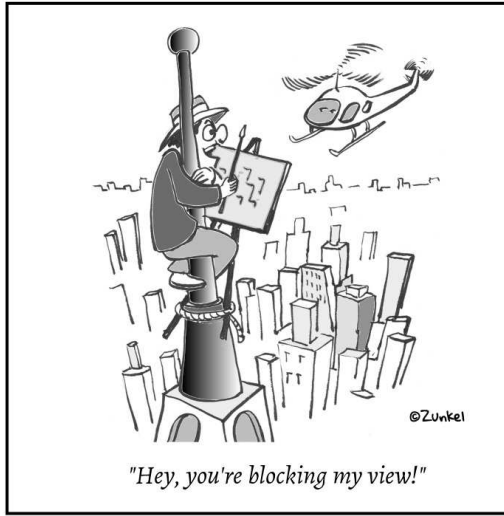
Plain Air



Shark is a classic version of "end of the food chain," a theme commonly used by cartoon artists. It was a milestone because it was my first use of color in the *Plain Air* series. Working in color changed my drawing method. Now I had to plan the cartoon layout to allow filling with color to the border.

The idea for Abstract Artist and Model came from attending a local art exhibit. I overheard someone use the term "abstract artist." I thought, what is an abstract artist, and what about the model? I used many colors to produce this cartoon, including a pattern on the model's hip. I no longer use patterns because they are unpredictable when I save the file in jpg format. However, saving in pdf format preserves patterns.

Plain Air by Dick Zunkel



"Hey, you're blocking my view!"

Plain Air

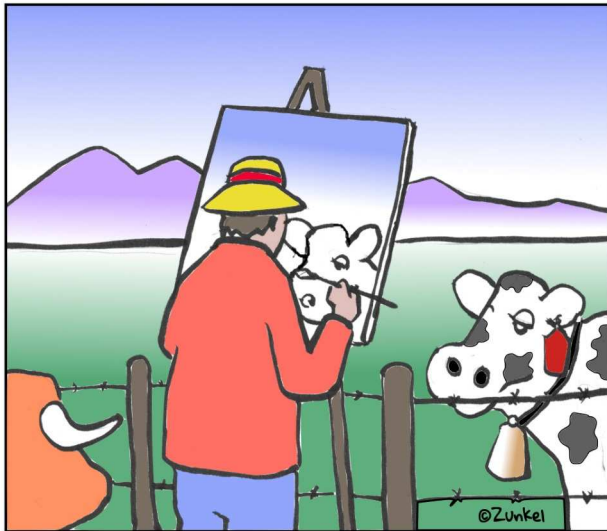


"Hey, you're blocking my view!"

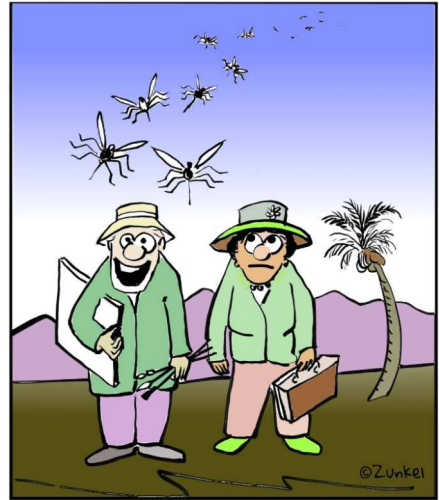
I got the idea for Helicopter after seeing a clip from the classic movie *King Kong*. It is another example of the intolerance plain-air artists have for interruptions.

I made the first version in gray-scale and later re-formatted it in color. The drawing was complex, with forced perspective of the buildings below the flagpole. When I made the color version, I had to add lines to the buildings in the distance to form a boundary to fill. The sky gradient is directly from "Watercolor 101," with an orange sky at the horizon. The purple skyline mimics late afternoon haze above a big city. I left most of the buildings in gray-scale shades.

Plain Air



Plain Air



"At last, the perfect paintsite!"

I was painting with a plein air group in the Coyote Valley near San Jose, California when a curious cow came over to see what I was doing. That prompted a cartoon idea for Cow. Adding the bull made it one of my favorite idea drawings.

I try to use fine art principles, complementary colors, gradient backgrounds and foregrounds. In the cow cartoon, I faded the foreground to the base of the mountains, then added a gradient white at the base of the mountains to suggest California morning fog. The sky fades from blue to white over the mountain tops.

The idea for Mosquito was from actual event. We went to an "ideal" paint site only to be attacked by a swarm of mosquitoes.

Plain Air



L'Artiste

L' Artiste is workshop inspired cartoon. A woman came in late with a fine set of new brushes and a set of never-opened paint tubes in a designer bag. She wore a traditional artist's smock with no paint stains and a large scarf. She apparently had no previous art training or experience but was enthused to get started with the finest materials. Expensive materials in the hands of the inexperienced seldom result in great paintings.

Travel is about the difficulty of flying on commercial airlines today. The seats are too close together, and many parents let their kids do anything they feel like including irritating other passengers.

Plain Air



The joy of painting while you travel.

Plain Air



Plain Air



There are times when an artist cannot help but yield to his or her true feelings. Such is the case with Big-shot. This cartoon suggests a political theme, but that was not my intent. I met many people industrial days and most were warm, sincere, and helpful. But there were a few...

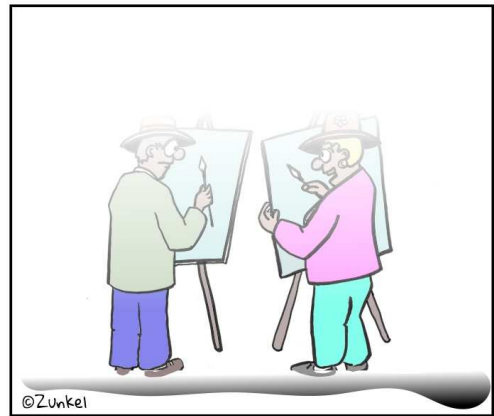
I created the third version of Captain, then reread Herman Melville's classic novel *Moby Dick*. I dreaded it as a high school assignment but found it a fascinating and lively comic tragedy today. In the original cartoon I colored Ahab's prosthetic leg brown. The novel said it was made of whale bone. After reading the book, I changed it to white.

Plain Air



"Why are you stopping me? I'm not texting!"

Plain Air



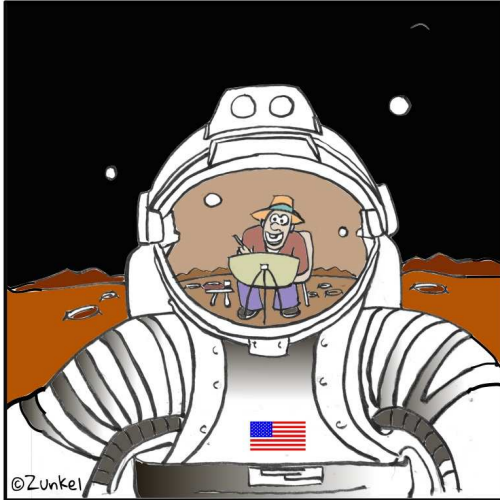
"Are you sure we're painting the coast?"

Police is a comment on distracted driving. The orange paint on the car is personal. My sister-in-law and I owned the same orange MGB roadster. She bought it new in 1976. I bought it from her in 1986 and sold it back to her years later. It is still in her garage.

Fog is based on an actual event. A group of us went to a beach south of Half Moon Bay, CA for a day of painting. When we arrived, the ocean was nowhere in sight due to fog.

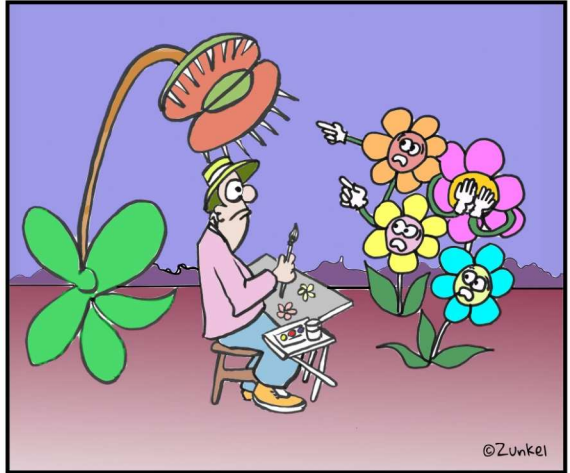
This cartoon was my first use of a transparent gradient overlay. I tried shades of gray and blue-gray to get the fog effect. The pure white gradient turned out to be the best choice. The *edit gradient* tool allowed me to stretch the transparent layer evenly for the low hanging fog effect. Now I use this technique to draw clouds.

Plain Air



"Hi! What are you doing here?"

Plain Air



A magazine photo inspired Space. Using a classic cartoon theme, I combined two unrelated subjects in the same illustration, the astronaut and the artist.

The reflection in the astronaut's face shield was difficult to achieve. I had to make it spherical and color it with a peculiar shade of bronze. I drew the two moons in the background with the *circle* tool. The reflected moons in the face shield were in the original ink drawing.

The idea for Flowers came from a sign on a Half Moon Bay, CA nursery that advertised, "Carnivorous Plants." The illustration above is a reformatted version using a gradient foreground. I drew the mountains in the background with the *pencil* tool.

Plain Air



"Remember, darkest darks by your lightest lights!"

Plain Air



"Oh....."

The idea for Bigfoot came from an art demonstration. The demonstrator made strong comments about contrast in a painting. She kept repeating, "Darkest darks by your lightest lights!" Hence, two unrelated concepts in a single theme for humor.

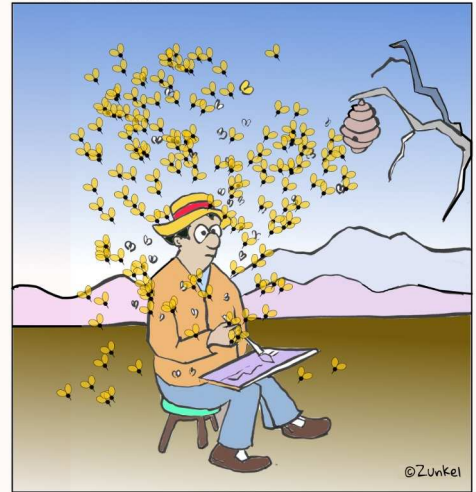
A news item about the famous chapel and Michaelangelo's fresco inspired Sistine. This cartoon could be subtitled with the old military phrase, "It never fails, somebody doesn't get the word."

Plain Air



Ye Arte Faire

Plain Air



*Advice to artists:
"Check your surroundings before you paint."*

Art Faire is a reality for many artists. In late summer many communities host art and wine festivals. Fine arts tend to be in the minority. I visited one of these affairs and found a fellow artist sitting in her booth surrounded by crafts makers. I harbor no ill will for craft makers, but the organizers would be more correct calling these events *craft and wine festivals*.

An actual event inspired Bees. A group of artists arrived at our painting location early on a cool morning. As the sun rose a dormant beehive became quite active.

I drew a bee with body and wings and added color. I distributed the image with the *spray* tool, made a mirror image, and repeated the spray pattern with the reversed image.

Plain Air



Plain Air



A climber finding a guru on a high mountain is a common theme used by cartoonists. In my Climber cartoon, the guru is a woman calmly painting plein-air.

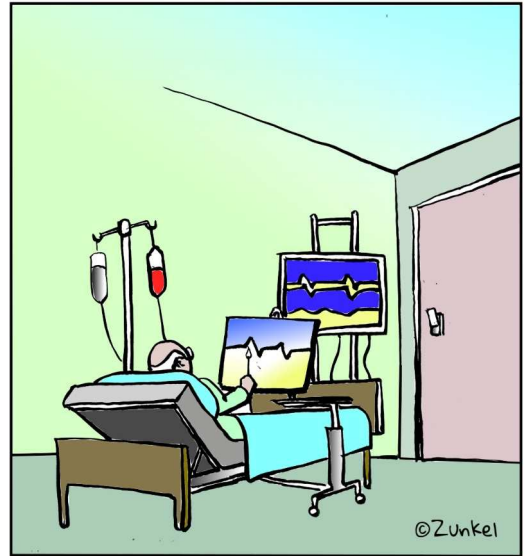
The drawing and rendering of this cartoon were complex. I wanted to give the impression of a high mountain range, so I drew many peaks and adjusted the brightness for distance. The gradient sky fading to near white at the horizon suggests clean and cold mountain air.

Boat is another example of the preoccupied artist surrounded by danger. The water spout is a *radial gradient* in transparent white. I used the *linear gradient* tool for the shark fins to give the impression of motion. For contrast, I used warm colors in the boat and the artist's clothing for warm-cool balance.

Plain Air



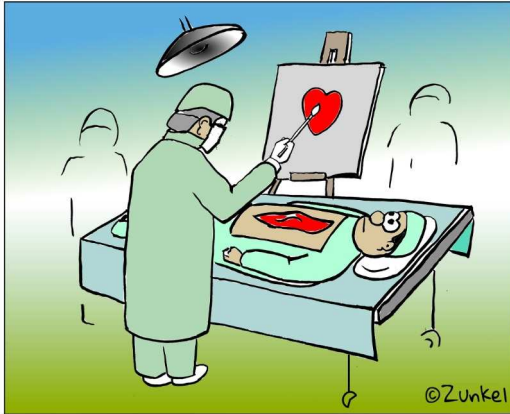
Plain Air



During my second year drawing the *Plain Air* series I was hospitalized... more than once. I was thinking about one of my procedures, a total hip replacement. Hip, hip, hip... what does it mean? Ah, HIP! So I drew Hip Replacement. In a follow up visit I gave my surgeon a t-shirt with the image on it. I think he liked it.

Hospital was the result of a visit to the emergency room and overnight stay with pneumonia months later. I made several versions of this cartoon experimenting with the linear gradient and editor tools. I made a tight two-color gradation for the wall and ceiling. The door hardware is authentic, a reminiscent of my years in the industry.

Plain Air



"How those anatomy drawings on your doctor's office wall are made."

Plain Air



"Listen, Michaelangelo, the answer is still NO!"

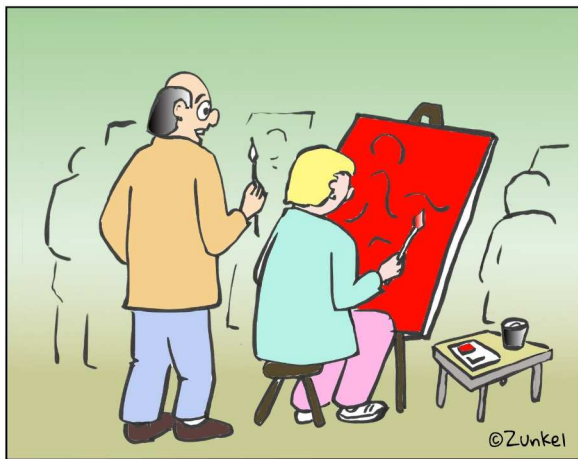
The idea for Surgeon came to me in a doctor's office. The walls were plastered with anatomy posters. I noticed that these were artworks, not photographs. How did they come to be? So I drew a possible scenario.

In this cartoon, I drew abstract line drawing figures in the background to suggest a surgical staff. The background and foreground are a single three-color gradient. I used the *radial gradient* tool for the overhead lamp.

I drew the cartoon Cat-Scan after a visit to such a machine. It didn't take a lot of research to remember what a cat-scan machine looked like. However, the technician's uniform required a bit of online searching. My technician wore street clothes, so I had to find a combination of clothing that looked more professional.

I used the *linear gradient* and *gradient edit* tools extensively to give the machine the circular look.

Plain Air



"I think she said to put a LITTLE red in each painting!"

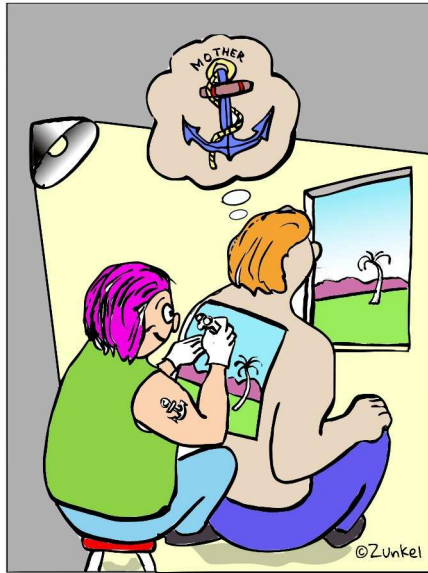
Plain Air



Workshops are continuing education for artists. The really good ones are expensive but artists can find free workshops and demos with a little research. The cartoon Workshop is about an artist who concentrates on a new skill, but goes overboard. I drew abstract figures in the background to give the impression of several attending artists.

Prodigy is about the artist that is far ahead of everyone in training and talent. I drew the cartoon with a blank canvas in front of the little girl. Then I carefully cut around her arm and hair with a clip-art knife. I slid a miniature print of Mona Lisa under the cutouts and scanned the image. With learned knowledge of *layers*, I no longer use this technique except in large, complex cartoons with imported graphics.

Plain Air



Plain Air



*Advice to artists:
Ignore onlookers and concentrate on painting!*

Onlookers is about every kind of personality that looks over my shoulder when I am painting. I don't mind people looking or even taking photos. But the smoker, the boom-box, and the barking dog will bring a response from me. The "expert" on the right side occasionally shows up. Did I miss anybody?

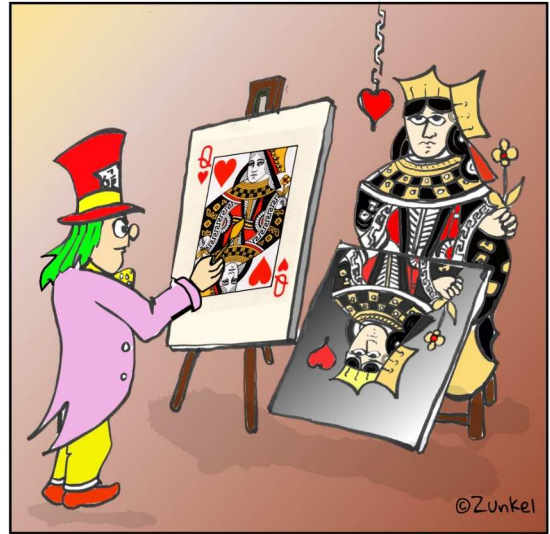
Tattoo is about a popular trend among today's men and women. In my version, the tattoo artist is dedicated to plain-air. The multiple angles, rounded shapes, and contrasting colors made it a difficult and time consuming project.

Plain Air



"I see by your clothing that you are an artist."

Plain Air



How playing cards are made.

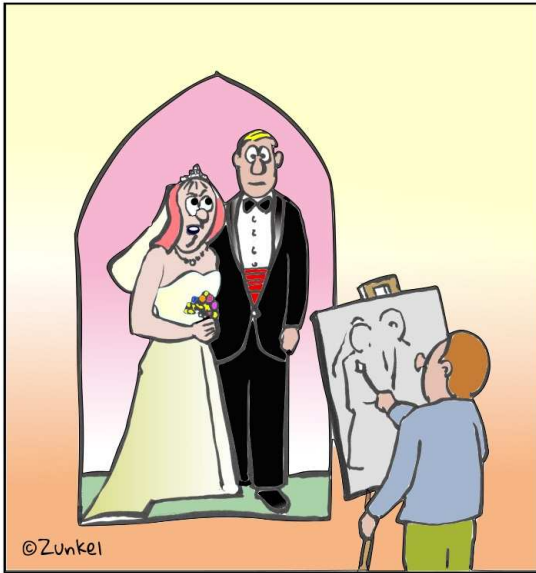
Clothing is my personal favorite cartoon of this series. My inspiration came from the famous line, "I see by your outfit that you are a cowboy." In fact, I had such an experience in my professional life. A couple at a company Christmas party saw my pocket protector full of pencils and pens and remarked, "I see you are an engineer."

I used the yellow/purple gradient for the interior party atmosphere and drew abstract characters in the background. I added the artist's beret with the *pencil* tool.

Queen of Hearts is a behind the scenes look at how playing cards are made with an "Alice in Wonderland" theme. It was difficult to produce the skewed image on the canvas and mirror reflection. Using *layers*^{*}, I was able to place the artist's arm over the playing card image.

^{*}Drawing in layers was a breakthrough. Now I use it extensively.

Plain Air



"Tell your artist-uncle to use his goddamn smart phone!"

Plain Air



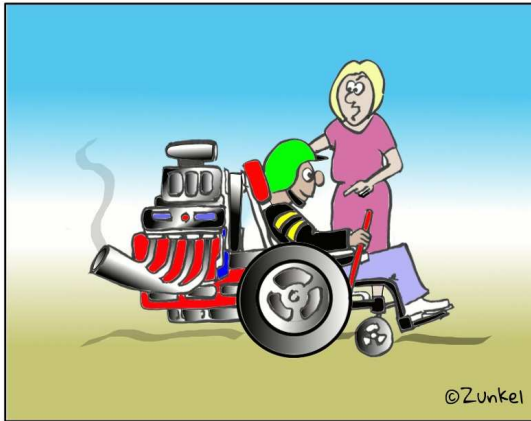
Plein-air painting at Bridal Veil Falls is a challenge!

Bride is a result of attending weddings where the bride becomes impatient when things don't go her way.

I used the linear gradient and gradient edit tools to create the two background images. The pink represents peace and harmony. The yellow to orange contributes to the stress of this cartoon.

A visit to Yosemite National Park inspired Bridal Veil. I wanted to paint a watercolor plein-air near Bridal Veil Falls, but the mist made it impossible. The mist in the drawing is a transparent gradient gray.

Plain Air



"They won't let in the Special Olympics with that!"

Plain Air



"There he goes again, making those wacky drawings!"

In my industrial days I worked with colleges and universities to help make their facilities accessible to disabled staff and students. As a result, I often ran workshops and demonstrations on the technology. Wheelchair is an adaptation of a cartoon I used during my presentations to demonstrate that disability doesn't mean helpless.

The cartoon is mostly hand-drawn except the wheels. Circles are difficult to draw freehand with a brush pen, so I used the *circle* and *linear gradient* tools to create the wheels. I used the *calligraphic brush* tool to make the wisp of smoke.

Caveman is a classic cartoon theme. A day after I drew this cartoon, a similar comic strip appeared in the morning newspaper. I drew the main character's hair and clothing in bright colors to set him apart as a non-conforming artist.

Plain Air



"Inspecteur, l'infâme Watercolour Fantôme has struck again!"

Plain Air



"We broke up, OK?"

Popular movies about jewel and art thefts inspired Thief. I made two versions of this cartoon, one with a French caption, the other (above) in broken French. The authentic French version proved to be less popular.

The linear gradients on the inspector's hat, the hand prints, and the puddles were accents to the overall flat drawing.

The inspiration for Removal came from a newspaper article about how reformed gang-bangers and ex-lovers are having their tattoos removed to erase ties to their former lives.

Plain Air



Plain Air



Vampire is a take on a cartoon classic. The mirror has a shadow under it, but the character does not. I filled his face and hand with a pale blue. I used the *circle/ellipse* and *radial gradient* tools to make the candle flames, and then I set the *stroke width* to zero to make the perimeter lines disappear.

Drone was based on an actual event. I was relaxing by the beach when I heard an annoying buzz. Some fool was flying a drone just a few feet above the sand, to the irritation of everyone.

I had to research several drone designs to come up with one in the cartoon. It is a composite two or three designs. I chose a mountain scene for interest.

Plain Air



Plain Air



Never turn your back on the sea!

I drew Cliff during the time Pacifica, California was falling into the ocean. Perhaps I shouldn't make light of this dreadful occurrence, but we who live in California are accustomed to disaster.

It is a deceptively simple cartoon. Rendering it required layers of color, and my inexperience with *Inkscape* fought me all the way.

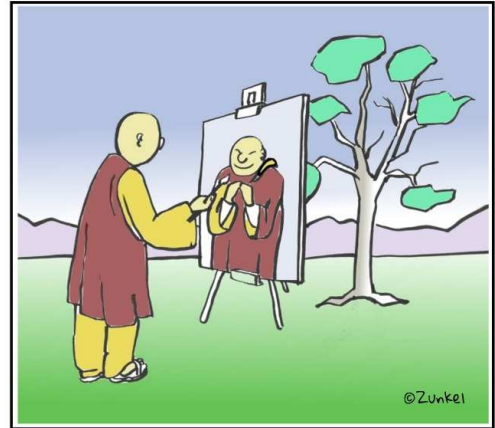
Wave is about the warning that California residents hear constantly. Regretfully, this advice is unheeded, and every year people are claimed by the Pacific.

This cartoon also contains layers of color and gradients. It took several versions to finally complete the illustration above.

Plain Air



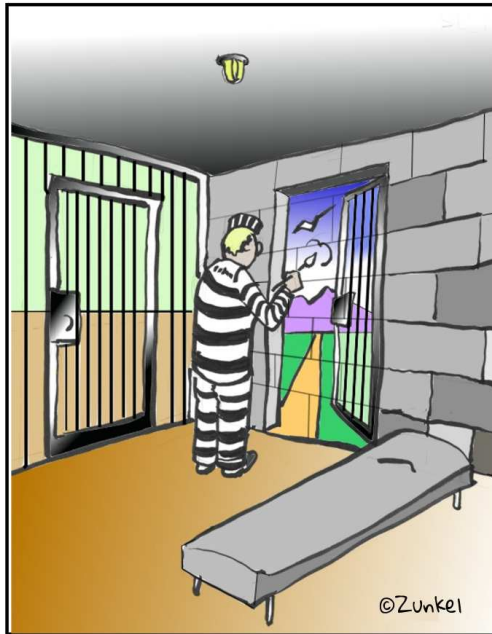
"Halftime at the College of the Arts"



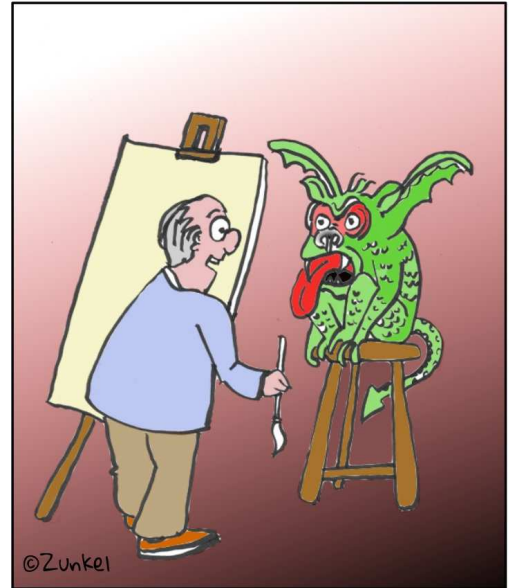
Do art schools have athletic programs? If they do, then their games must have a Halftime. I made several versions of this cartoon before deciding which to publish. Each player has a characteristic unique to a famous artist.

Monk is what I called "a stretch" when I first sent it for newsletter publication. The editor "got" my point, but she was at the same event that inspired this cartoon. A group of us were painting in a Buddhist Monastery when a candidate monk came to our group to explain her philosophy. She said she was reincarnated from a tree. OK, each to his or her own, but her remarks planted an idea in my mind. If a holy man was painting plein-air, would he render the man or the tree? Sounds like a "tree in the forest" kind of question.

Plain Air



Plain Air



"Smile!"

In my industrial days I was in and around detention facilities as part of my work. Some of the enlightened facilities have an art program for inmates, which was the inspiration for [Jail](#). I drew part of this cartoon with brush pen and part with the *straight line/bezier* tool.

[Smile](#) is a result of travel with my wife who takes many photos. I am her readily accessible model, which requires me to put on a smile face, sometimes not sincere.

I used complimentary colors with the green gargoyle set against a red background.

Plain Air



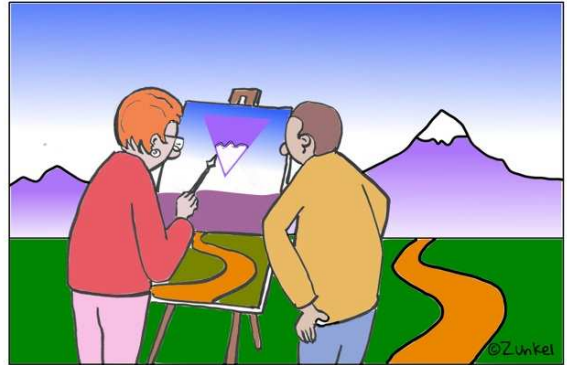
"Is the drought over?"

The winter of 2016-2017 was a very wet year in California. Governor Brown declared the drought was over, though he did not lift all water conservation measures. We who live in California know the drought is never over.

Drought combined a black to gray gradient with sprayed slanted black and gray lines to give the effect of falling rain. I drew one flower, copied it to make a yellow bloom and a red one. Then I sprayed them over the grass, which is also a series of copy and paste images.

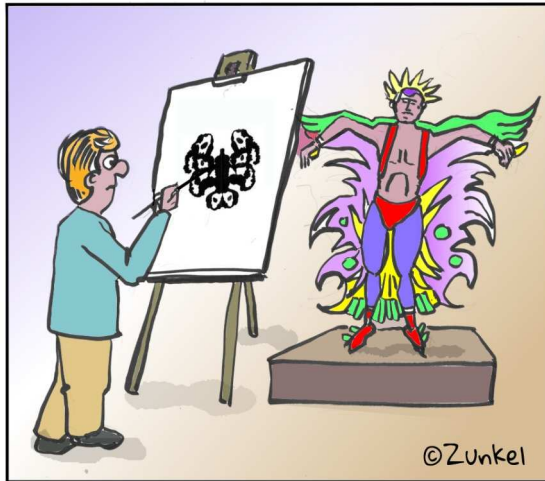
A friend told me his wife was having difficulty adjusting to new Bifocals. Ah, inspiration! The white gradient at the base of the mountains suggests distant fog.

Plain Air



"New Bifocals?"

Plain Air

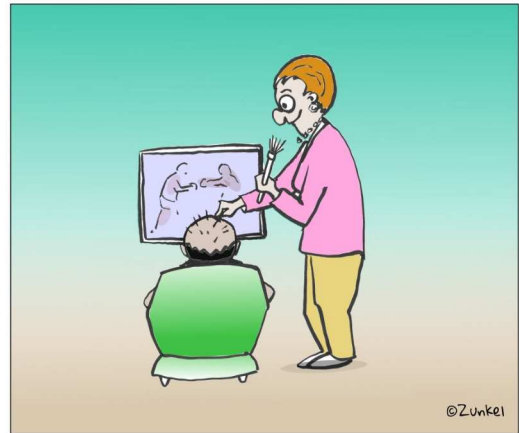


Rorschach paints his brother-in-law, Icarus

The idea for Rorschach came from a source I often use, an on-line random word generator. By clicking the prompt, it displays a list of words. "Inkblot" appeared and got me thinking about butterfly patterns, and Icarus winging his way to the sun. Every family has at least one weird character in it, so I chose Icarus. The cartoon was actually quite difficult to create the inkblot and Icarus's costume.

Brush is about women who take on ambitious hobbies (like painting) while their husbands sit and watch TV. I tried several pattern designs in the back of the chair. They were all distracting and did not add to the humor. Instead, I chose to make the chair green with a light gradient at the top. It is in harmony with the blue green wall, foreground, and the pink in the woman's blouse.

Plain Air



"Hey!"

Plain Air



"Just wait 'til I'm finished, OKAY?"

Plain Air



"I hear he gets his inspiration from above!"

Guillotine is another example of artists' intolerance for interruptions. A newsletter editor rejected this cartoon, suggesting it was a bit "grim" for a mainly positive organization.

I shaded the blade in black and added the metallic reflection with the *linear gradient* and *editor* tools. The red background adds stress to the image.

An inquiry about the creative process for Plain Air inspired Mr. Binky. I explained that I get many of my ideas "from above."

Plain Air



"I see you're licking your brushes again!"

Plain Air

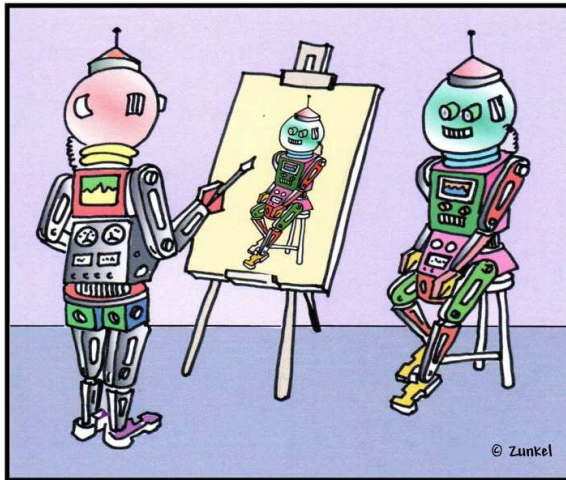


"Smile!"

I saw a woman licking her brushes in open studio to make a fine point at the end, a very bad practice. Exaggeration is a basic concept of cartoon humor, so I picture the worst case scenario for the cartoon X-ray.

The Invisible Man idea was a gift from the internet. I arrived at open studio without a clue of what the day's cartoon would be. I sat staring into space for a few minutes, then turned to one of my reliable idea starters, the random word generator. The first word that appeared was "invisible." I immediately thought of H.G Wells' famous novel, *The Invisible Man*. I have since re-read the book.

Plain Air



Plain Air



Memories of art school

"Look at the model!"

Robot artist and model is a comment on robotics and artificial intelligence. Who needs people?

Model is not about art school; it's about living in California. I used the red gradient sky against the green foreground for contrast and color harmony. .

Plain Air



Plain Air

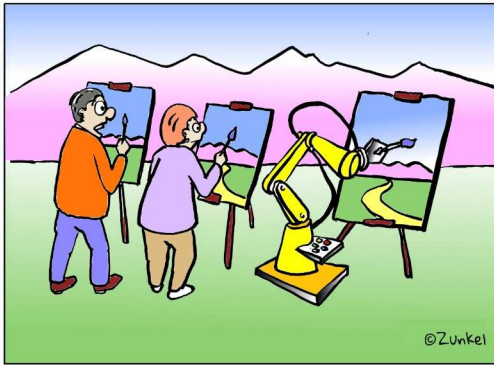


"Are we licking our brushes again, Mrs. Philpott?"

An article about Wagner's "Ring Series" inspired the cartoon Opera. I used a two-color cool/warm gradient for the background and foreground. (Stage lighting 101) Brünnhilde's gown took a lot of time to draw and render in color.

Teeth is the second cartoon about dentists and patients in this series. An incident told to me by a dentist friend was the inspiration for this cartoon. He related that he sometimes finds strange objects among his patients' teeth.

Plain Air



"I have a bad feeling about this!"

Plain Air



"Why can't we go to a paintout in a car like normal people?"

Robotics is a "sign of the times" cartoon about the fear of artificial intelligence and robotics displacing humans.

I researched robotic devices for this cartoon. They vary greatly from humanoid 60's TV varieties to the industrial models shown here. I used gradients for the mountains, foreground to background, and the sky, then repeated the sky gradient in the robot's painting.

I designed Sidecar for a vintage motorcycle newsletter with a different theme and caption. The newsletter editor rejected it, so I redesigned it for use in *Plain Air*. The original cartoon was about riding in fog along the California coast. The revised version is a desert/mountain scene. I drew the mountain background with the Inkscape *straight line-bezier** tool and drew the canvas and brushes in the sidecar with the *pencil* tool.

*Now I used the straight line-bezier tool extensively and bend lines into curves with the node editor.

Plain Air



Plain Air



"It says not to go there. The natives are hostile!"

The idea for Rip Van Winkle came to me from the random word generator. The word "sleeping" appeared, which was enough to lead me to this cartoon. I filled the tree trunk with color, and then sprayed yellow and green leaves.

Hostile is variation of a classic cartoon theme. In fact, the week after I prepared this drawing, a similar cartoon appeared in the political section of my local newspaper.

I drew the cartoon in entirety and filled the cockpit windows with solid black. I sprayed tiny white dots in the black field, but they didn't look right. I deleted them and drew a tiny pointed star, which I sprayed in the field. A few landed inside the cockpit, and I deleted them. The *spray* tool is not precise.

Plain Air



"It says he gave up a TV career to be an artist!"

Plain Air



"Mind if I have a look?"

Weather is a result of reading the forecast in the daily newspaper. An artist drew the national weather map, either by hand or by computer. Perhaps this artist applied his or her talent to fine arts.

I wasn't sure if this cartoon needed a sign to orient the reader that the scene is an art gallery, but why take the chance? The adjacent abstract paintings are my artwork drawn for this cartoon. No such paintings exist.

Look is based on an actual incident. I was painting in an urban environment when I heard a voice say, "Mind if I have a look?" When I turned, I saw nothing but skin.

Plain Air



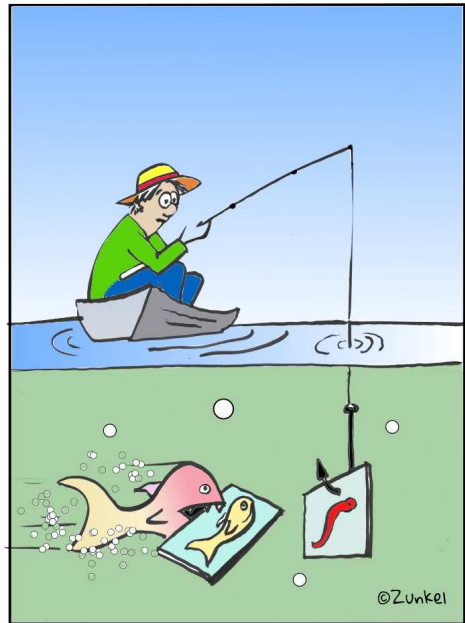
The idea for Werewolf came in the night while I was sleeping. I simply woke up one morning and there it was.

During my occasional art demonstrations I tell people that a perfect circle exists only in mathematics. I considered drawing the moon behind the werewolf with the *circle tool*, but instead found a large paper cup in open studio and pulled the brush pen around it.

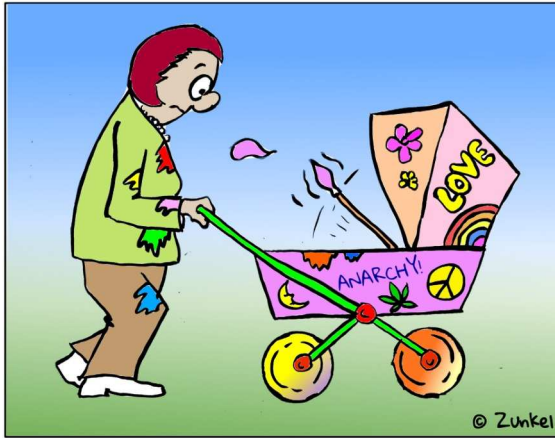
Bait is from the old joke, "I didn't have bait for a mousetrap, so I used a picture of cheese instead. The next morning I found a picture of a mouse in the trap."

Gradations and colors were difficult to produce. I used the *spray* function to make the bubbles behind the fish.

Plain Air



Plain Air



"Mamas, don't let your babies grow up to be artists!"

Plain Air



Listening to internet radio delivered the idea for Mamas. The station played the Waylon Jennings - Willie Nelson tune, "Mamas don't let your children grow up to be cowboys."

Kitten is a composite work. I drew the cat the same size as the artist in the original drawing, then cut and pasted it onto the *Inkscape* page at a reduced scale.

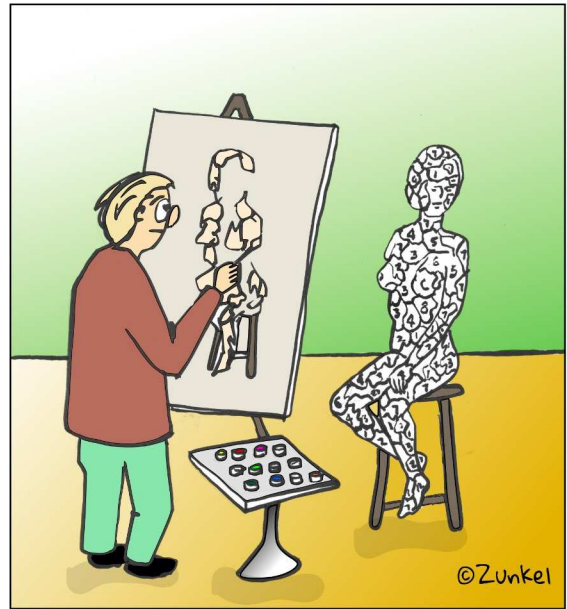
I led a seniors' art workshop a few years ago. The participants worked on the projects of their choosing. Cats and grandchildren were popular subjects. Both are difficult subjects for the amateur artist. I was not "Mr. Popularity" when I suggested they avoid painting cats and grandchildren. Now I know they were painting love.

Plain Air



Phantom of the optical illusion

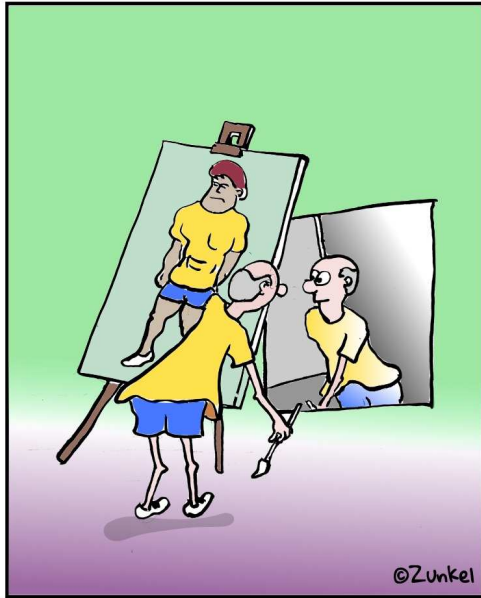
Plain Air



Phantom is a parody on the famous story and musical. The object on the table and the table legs are from classic optical illusion drawings. I left the lower third of the background white because the shape would not allow me to *fill* the table legs with color. They are not *bound* by a continuous perimeter line.

Paint by number is based on the popular home hobby kits. I encourage people looking for a fun way to create art to consider the kit. In the hands of a creative artist, they can be quite attractive. Conversely, I have seen paintings where the artist painted the spaces, but not the lines. Interesting....

Plain Air



Plain Air



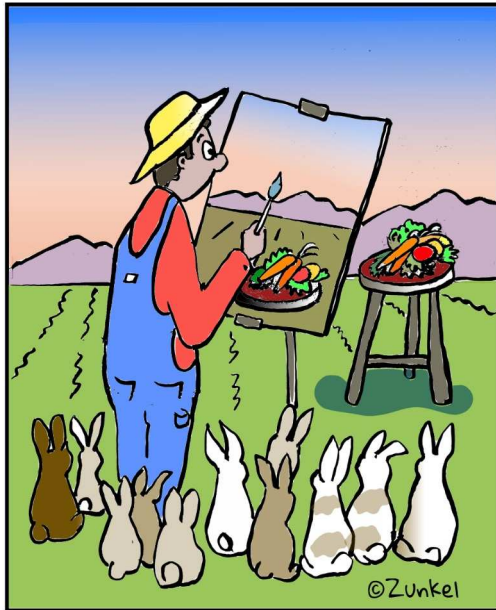
"Maybe we should call his wife!"

Selfie is a concept that has been repeated in many cartoons. The idea came from Norman Rockwell's famous self-portrait. In my version, I pictured the "90 pound weakling" of pulp comic book advertisement fame, now an aging adult. Perhaps he is preparing his online portrait.

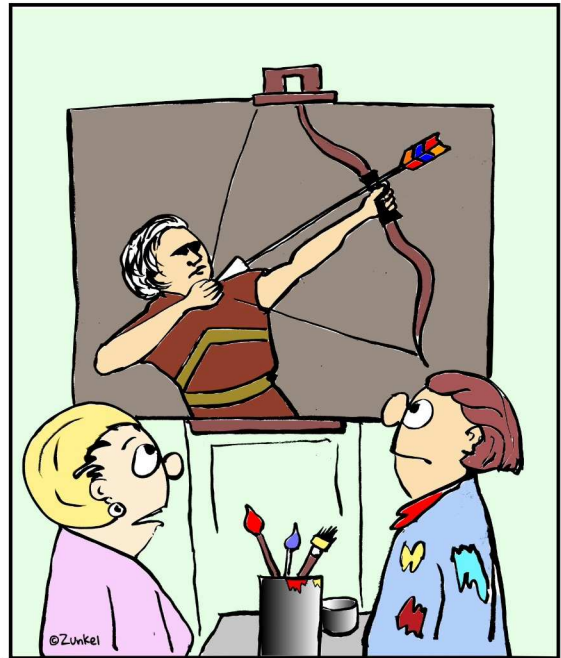
Frozen was the result of being in a spring Sierra Nevada mountain snowstorm. The area is a favorite location for California artists, but snowstorms can occur at any time up to mid-summer.

I used ultramarine and cobalt blue hues to give this art a cold feeling. I drew two different size snowflakes, then distributed them with the *spray* tool.

Plain Air



Plain Air

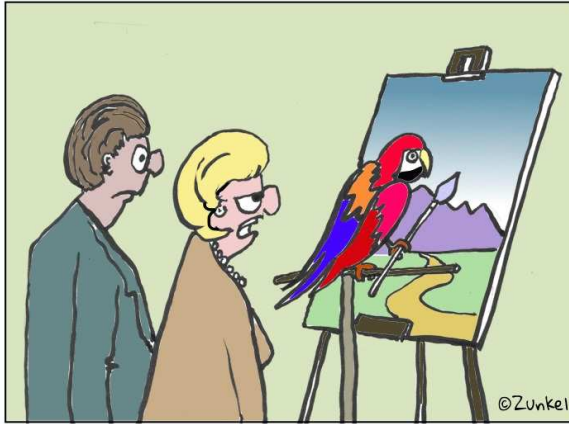


"Mind if I make a tiny criticism?"

Farmer is an Easter inspired work. I did some rabbit research to come up with the color variations. The scene suggests California's San Joaquin Valley.

The idea for Arrow came to me from a website editor. I sent her a cartoon for publication. She saw an error replied, "May I make a tiny criticism?" and I had my idea. I thought about situations that would make an error obvious, yet subtle. In viewing photo websites, I came across archery photos. Perfect!

Plain Air



"But I still can't get him to talk!"

Plain Air



"I've never seen a flying artist either!"

A visit to a small animal theme park inspired Parrot. A volunteer was demonstrating a talking parrot to a group of children. The parrot was performing perfectly, but I thought, *Can he paint?*

I saw a video clip of parachuting fliers and thought, "I'll jump out of an airplane When Pigs Fly."

The two-color gradient background took some experimenting to get the effect of sky and earth. I settled on the olive green for the earth color. The parachute is white near the top suggesting overhead sunlight. The gray underside gives the illusion of material transparency.

Plain Air



"Hey Rembrandt, over here!"

Plain Air

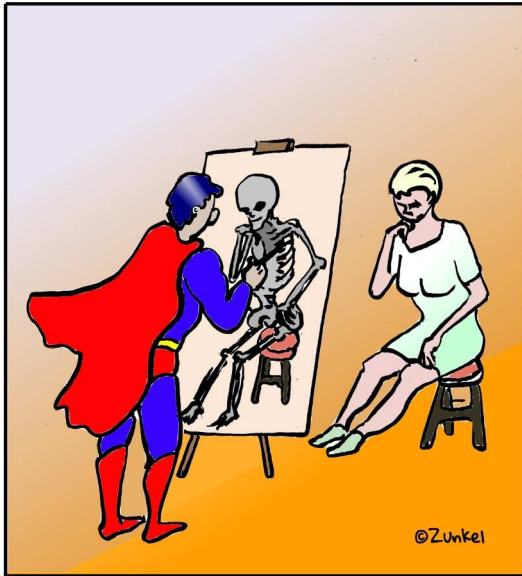


"Could you come back in about an hour?"

Rapunzel came to me from the random word generator. I was having a bout of "writer's block" and resorted to the generator for inspiration. "Rapunzel" appeared in the list. The rest was easy.

Rescue is another example of artists intolerance to interruptions. The scene is classic California. Nearly every week I see a cliff rescue in the news.

Plain Air



Plain Air



"Do you have something to help me with perspective?"

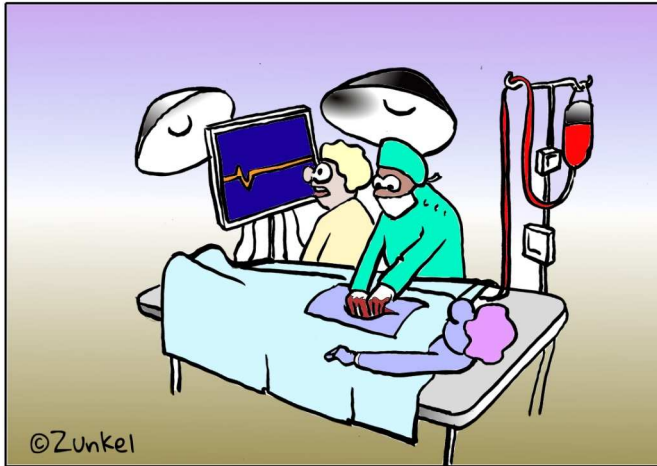
X-Ray Vision speaks for itself. The artist and the model were relatively easy to draw and render. The skeleton on the canvas required research and was more difficult to draw, particularly behind the artist's arm.*

The Witch Doctor idea came to me in the night. Both amateur and professional artists worry about getting correct perspective in their paintings.

The drawing of the witch doctor required research for his costume and hut. I placed the footprints and straw hut behind the doctor to emphasize perspective. To make the clouds, I drew two blobs, set the perimeter lines at zero pixels, and created transparent white gradients with the *edit gradient* tool.

*Layers technology would have made drawing the artist and the skeleton easy.

Plain Air



"Doctor Grumbacher, he's code ultramarine blue!"

Plain Air



"You're making me look fat!"

As I said earlier, I've spent some time in the hospital including the cardiac unit. Being a doctor's son, I inherited a bit of medical humor. An artistic theme in the operating room inspired Surgeon.

On a recent group painting session a large snake made an appearance to one of our painters. The group nearly talked it to death. Being bored with people, it simply slithered away.

I chose a tropical scene for this cartoon, even though the actual event took place in a high desert. The gradient golden horizon breaks up the green, as does the artist's blue trousers.

Plain Air



Plain Air



"He dropped his #12 Winsor & Newton Series 7 watercolor brush!"

California artists love to paint wineries. In the cartoon Winery my character may have been to the sampling room before starting the painting.

I created the double vision image on the artist's canvas in the original ink drawing instead of using computer graphics for the illusion.

Dropped is loosely based on an actual incident. At one of our plein-air paintouts, an artist dropped something into the outdoor facility. I substituted a very expensive watercolor brush to create this cartoon.

Plain Air



"It's not speaking to me"

Plain Air



"We plead guilty to mixing complementary colors!"

A visit to Northern California's Hess Winery and Art Gallery inspired Speak. A woman looking at the outstanding collection of abstract and contemporary art stood before a wall sized portrait and spoke these words.

It seems every art school, method book, and workshop preaches, "DO NOT MIX COMPLEMENTARY COLORS!" So, I ask, how are we to get shades of brown? This mandate (it's not a law, really) inspired the cartoon Judge. I had difficulty with scale in this cartoon. I drew artist figure too small. I went back to the scanned image and using computer graphics, I cut out the figure and pasted it as a larger image. *

*Now I draw figures on a worksheet, copy them to the cartoon panel and scale up or down as needed

Plain Air



"Just take me to your leader, OKAY?"

Plain Air



*"Madam, this is an **artistic license!**"*

Leader is a variation on a popular cartoon theme. In my version, the sketch artist ignores the alien's plea and keeps on sketching.

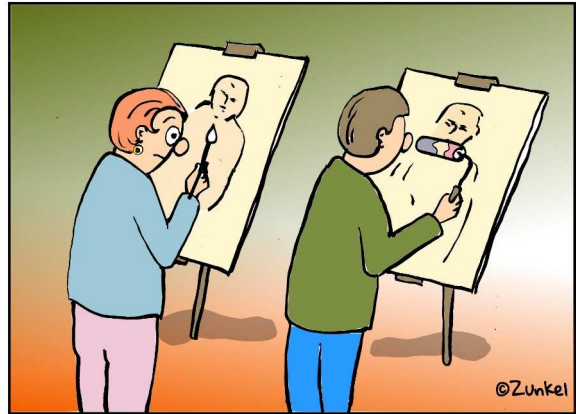
License plays with the popular phrase "artistic license," a term used by artists who vary from the scene or subject for dramatic effect. My original cartoon on this subject featured a woman in a sports car. I changed it to the VW van for greater impact using my artistic license.

Plain Air



"Drawing a blank"?

Plain Air



Drawing a Blank came to me in an open studio workshop session. I was having difficulty getting started when someone noticed that I was staring into space and said, "Drawing a blank?" I often use an expressionless 3/4 rear view of the artist's head to suggest detached concentration.

Roller is a comment on an the all too often advice offered by onlookers when I am painting plein-air. "Why don't you use a roller? It's faster. HAW, HAW, HAW!" OK, I don't give them credit or originality, but at least they are interested in what I am doing.



I am happy to end this book with a drawing of The Art Fairy. At the end of the day painting, drawing, sculpting, or whatever, the artist falls into bed disgusted and discouraged with his or her work vowing to never make art again. During the night, The Art Fairy comes down from the sky and works on the project. In the morning, the artist wakes up, sees the work, and says, "Hey, that's not too bad!"



"Thank you! From the gang at Plain Air."

Biography

Richard Zunkel was born and raised in downstate Illinois. He attended Bradley University in Peoria, Illinois and graduated with a BS degree in Machine Design Technology. During his years at Bradley he enrolled in as many art courses as the university would allow without changing his major. He continued his art studies at Wingate College, (now a university) in North Carolina, and the San Francisco Art Institute. He is a member of the Santa Clara Valley (California) Watercolor Society and exhibits his paintings at local shows and sales. He has taught watercolor painting in a workshop environment.

Richard had a long career in the builders hardware, electronic security, and door automation industries and was awarded several patents. He retired in 2007 to realize his long held dream, to devote his time and energy as an artist. His interest in cartooning goes back to childhood. He was an avid reader of "Mad" magazine and fan of artist Don Martin. He has always been a compulsive "doodler" but only took up drawing cartoons seriously in November of 2015.

Richard and his wife Salinda make their home in Northern California's "Silicon Valley." They travel extensively and paint "plein air" at locations worldwide.

Since the publication of *Plain Air*, I have produced two more books. *Breathing Plain Air* contains many cartoons shown in this book, but enlarged and reformatted for better clarity. It also has cartoons drawn in 2019 and early 2020. The art is shown nearly full page without narrative.

Breathing Out has cartoons from mid-2020 to mid-2022, some never previously published.

As of July, 2022, e-books from Blurb Publishing are no longer available, which is why *Plain Air* is now on paper.



Plain Air is artist Dick Zunkel's cartoon collection drawn for the publications of the Santa Clara Valley Watercolor Society from 2016 to mid-2020. It contains a narrative about creativity and process.