

## Douceur de Vivre: Chasing Paint at La Maison de Beaumont

*“Only the present moment contains life”*  
- *Thich Nhat Hahn*

Everyone knows what to do when life hands us lemons, but do we know what to do when life hands us the opportunity to spend 2 months in France exploring your newfound vocation of abstract painting? To the casual observer, living in the theoretical, the answer is easy; but for the one faced with the realities of the logistical challenges, family, and an otherwise busy life, things are a little more complicated. Easy it is to say the words, more difficult is it to perform the action. That said, there’s a reason moving to Southern France as an artist to paint is a cliché—and I decided to find out exactly why.

There is something ineffably wholesome about the rolling hills, azure skies, and stunning lavender fields that makes the Provence region what it is. For thousands of years, humanity has reposed itself here in the unique climate and geography of the region. Mary Magdalen, as many are well aware, is said to have journeyed here after the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ—landing in a coastal town now known as Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, or Saints Mary of the Sea. A nearby mountain grotto, accessible to motivated visitors with appropriate footwear, is believed to be where Mary spent her final years, dedicated to prayer and solitude. Whether that is all actually true or not, is probably impossible to know for sure. The mountains like to keep their secrets.

The quaint inauspiciousness of the region, however, contrasts wildly with its biblical significance. Nevertheless, the site and its history impart a degree of gravitas upon the area regardless of the legend’s veracity—even for the uninitiated. Perhaps it’s this history that contributes to the region’s unique *terroir*; perhaps it’s also what gives the local temperament its charming equanimity. Out here, life just is—people don’t overcomplicate it. It’s a sentiment that boasts a whisper of an echo from those who might have walked with Christ himself so very long ago. It’s not the slowness of a sleepy town, nor the quite coziness of a small one; it’s something entirely different. The culture here is not slow, it is *present*; and it seems to recognize that it’s history, fascinating though it may be, is still history, and it’s future—well, the future is not today. It’s not the crassness of ‘live for today,’ but rather a refined nuance of living today. Because, after all, what else do we ever really have?

It was against this backdrop, that I set to work in the modest atelier de Beaumont. Struggling, as usual, to capture some ethereal essence of humanity. Fighting, layer after layer, that nuanced recalcitrance of the oil. But, as I’ve slowly learned, there is always an end that eventually comes, bringing with it closure to a singularly unique journey of artistic exploration. It is this end that I too often seek and, in so doing, overlook the essence of the experience—the process. There is certainly no end without process, but there is also no process without end. Or, to put it more metaphysically, life, and all its constituent components, is an endless cycle of process transmuted to end, and back to process again. It is precisely this endless cycle of beginnings and ends that surreptitiously steals us away from the moment at hand. In executing the process, almost by

definition, we seek the end; and in achieving the end, we realize that we must once again begin the process. Yin and Yang. Energy and matter. Back and forth, back and forth.

What became abundantly clear to me at Beaumont de Pertuis, however, was not just that this process exists in perpetuity, but that quite often, my emotional and intellectual condition existed out of sync with the cycle. In the midst of process, I craved the end, and at the end I once again craved the process. In so doing, I not only lost focus, but, more importantly, became the very object which I myself sought to overcome. My favorite place to stand as it were, seemed to be right in my own way.

But life in Provence was nothing if not patient; and its calm insistence gently helped me to realize that we all have at our disposal, the necessary tools to claim, if not a mastery of the present, than at least a short apprenticeship. There will always be places to go, things to do, and tasks to accomplish, but we don't need to hold ourselves hostage in the moment to ideations of future endeavors. In protecting that mental space, we can carve out for ourselves a moment of pure presence, in which we exist only within that singular moment without carrying the burden of the past or the anxiety of infinite futures—living instead, moment-to-moment, on that knife edge of existence that is the now.

Working at Beaumont, time morphed from a broad landscape of past, present, and future, into a simple existence balanced on that infinitesimally small boundary between past and future. It was in those moments that I achieved for myself most of what I really set out to do—that is, an experience of the process decoupled from its end, and an end decoupled from its process. In so doing, productivity and output became essentially meaningless—replaced instead by the simple experience of the now.

Ultimately, that now is all we ever really have to work with. We can ply it in service of the future, enslave it in the past, or liberate it altogether. In either case however, its fundamental essence remains the same; only our relationship to it changes. Further, it is only within the narrow realm of rote consciousness that we apply layer upon layer of extraneous meaning to the simple concept of now. Realizing all of this is not necessarily difficult per se, but it does help to have a contextual shift that allows one to reframe the quotidian outside of the latent human inclination for grandiosity. We don't always need to be working towards or away from something, sometimes we can just work—whatever that 'work' might be. La Maison de Beaumont offered me beautiful a chance to do just that.

