

DAVID ROHN

Retrospective

April 3-June 7, 2026

Remembrances

We wrote to several of David Rohn's friends and neighbors, hoping to collect and post personal anecdotes or reflections, alongside our own sundry artist statements and quotes. Anything was fair game—we simply asked if they would be interested in writing and sharing a short note or remembrance.

Herewithin and posted throughout the gallery are the heartfelt messages we received. We are thankful for these reflections as we celebrate David Rohn's life and work and appreciate how he influenced our lives.



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My Dad

“What color do you think that is?”

I was in the backseat of our Subaru wagon on the way to school, and my dad had caught me doing what I always did: leaning my head against the window, staring out at the scenery, pretending my view was the opening sequence of some moody coming-of-age movie of which I was the star. It was serious work, this mental moviemaking, and I was annoyed to be ripped away from it by anything, especially by my dad pointing at the mountain out the window and asking what I thought was probably the most obvious question I’d ever heard.

“...the mountain?”

“The mountain,” my dad replied with absolute seriousness. “What color do you think the mountain is?”

Stupid question. Color wasn’t something you got to have an opinion on. Color just was. The sky was *blue*. The trees were *green*. We were passing a mountain in the *Green Mountain State*.

“*Green*,” I said. Test passed.

“Are you sure?” my dad asked me. “If you had to paint that color, how would you do it?”

This wasn’t a rhetorical question; none of his questions were. I wasn’t getting out of this easily, and so, reluctantly, I focused my eyes on the mountain. I tried to imagine it: my dad’s palette of smeared paints in front of me, and a blank sheet of paper on an easel, and the task of doing justice to what I saw out the car window every day.

Immediately, I knew my answer had been wrong. I thought of the tubes of green in my dad’s studio, and none of them looked anything like the mountain did today. They were so saturated, so bold, so unreal. Maybe the mountain wasn’t green at all. Maybe it was *blue*. I imagined the blues, the greens, a blend of them all. But none of that would give the mountain its earthiness, none would capture the ruddy brown of what lay underneath all those tree trunks. Would I have to add *red*? *Yellow*? This was getting out of control.

By the time our drive to school was over, I was frustrated, stressed, and seeing the mountain above my town more clearly and deeply than I’d ever seen it before. I would never see it the same way again.

This is what it is to grow up David Rohn’s child: it is learning early on that everything is worth a deeper look. It is being unable to look at a color as just a color, an object as just an object. The green mountain outside the studio doors is a cacophony of layered hues and tones, changing every moment—never boring, always new. The dirty coffee up and half-squeezed lemon left on the counter mean something: that a life is being lived, and that life is worthy of record. Every question is worth examining, every sight and sense worth preserving.

What a privilege, to grow up this way, and to learn to study the world so deeply. May we all take my father’s perceptiveness, his curiosity and wonder and reverence, far beyond these rooms and into our own futures.

~ Cleo Rohn

Fond Memories

David Rohn was an integral part of my childhood. I remember going over to the Rohn house to play with Jenny, Chris, Lisa and Andrew. Chris could draw so well I was jealous. Their house seemed very full. There were always mattresses all over the floors in different sleeping positions. Lots of toys, and a general feeling of abundant love. David's studio was in the barn and had that same feeling, minus the mattresses. His still life watercolors were of tables holding bouquets and other objects of his daily life. No People though.

When we would go over as a family for dinner, there would be nothing prepared until the last minute. But then, seemingly out of nowhere, and in between sips of wine, David would concoct a wonderful meal for all of us. Smiling gregariously the whole time. It was always wonderfully chaotic.

Later, when I had my own family, David was part of that too. He set up a puppet show for our daughter Millie's first birthday party in 1989. Half of the downtown artists—anyone with a one-year-old, was there. About half way through. Miss Tulip started to cry after losing her keys. At that the toddlers started to bawl as well, and the whole thing melted down.

Of course, the adults all thought this was hilarious. As was David.

~ Cecily Kahn

David's Gift

I went to high school with David's son Chris, we were good friends. That was during the seventies.

One day while bopping around the house in Putney I happened to pass through the barn while David was there, painting a watercolor of a split cantaloupe. I could feel the powerful energy surrounding his concentration and I quickly left the aura so as not to interrupt.

But I exited the barn changed. That moment was the beginning of my mind's life as an artist which persists today after fifty years of studying painting.

I recounted this story to David more than once and he consistently took an interest in my work.

I'll always remember what he gave to my life and miss talking with him. I also remember Chris fondly.

Those were the days!

~ Scot Borofsky

A Year in France

In 1970 David and I, along with Christopher and Lisa Rohn, lived for a year in an unremarkable house in Puyricard, outside of Aix en Provence, France.

At the time David was painting large abstractions, using oil paints. He worked in an unheated back space as a studio, where we also kept escargots. Occasionally the snails escaped and ate his sketches.

Later back in Putney, VT it was Gandy Brody, artist living in Newfane, VT who told David that his representational watercolors were his best work.

~ Nancy Storrow

From David's Daughter-in-Law

In the early 1990s, I fell in love with Andrew Rohn, who had relocated from Vermont, Portland, Oregon, and other locations to Madison, Wisconsin. I can't remember the first time I met David, but visits to Vermont have punctuated and enriched my life in the decades since. He and Miss Tulip toasted us at our farm wedding in 1994. Whenever David would visit us in Wisconsin, he would tromp off into the yard or fields with his portable easel and stained canvas bag—and return with a small masterclass in plein air painting. The living shadows, the unusual perspective, the mundane somehow transformed and made magical. Through all the decades he remained curious and always strived to capture the shapes and colors he saw in front of him. Those who have had the privilege of visiting the turpentine- and woodstove-scented studio know about the handwritten note: "Do not use imitative color." As I began my own painting exploration in my 50s, I try to never forget that advice. And when I get caught in a spiral and wonder "What is the point?" I only need to look at a David Rohn painting—or reflect on his life—to know that art doesn't need a reason to exist. When I paint, I sometimes feel the vibration of some unknown force that propels me. I hope David will visit sometime because I'd very much like to see the world through his eye.

~ Catherine Capellaro

Remembering David Rohn

David and Miss Tulip will surely be missed.
They were probably the biggest and most supportive fans of my work.

The five years I lived and worked in his Quarry Road studio space
was pivotal in my development as an artist.
And. Seeing the Milky Way and finding my place in the universe.

David was and will always be a guiding light.
A beacon and an inspiration.

~ Frank Sansone

Remembering David Rohn

David and I met later in our lives at a show of his work. He made some compliments about something I'd written, always a boost, and I thanked him and returned his good thoughts. I'd looked at his paintings and realized at once that he had a gift, how my eye roamed around the images and was drawn to a center but still kept roaming. I asked myself how he did it, the colors, the pears, the cups and cushions and cat food cans and landscapes lifted from the ordinary to the sublime.

And so we hit it off, such things happen, we saw something in each other, had our lunches and dinners, made trips to plays and art shows. David was up for anything creative and when looking at art he was attentive and giving to what was before him. While my brain wearied before walls of images his active mind always enriched the experience, and showed me more than I'd seen. David knew art and artists and I never heard him say anything unfair about what was before him, and I believe he was completely without envy, such was his confidence in himself. So this I learned from David, to be proud of oneself, to accept oneself and others.

What was not seen behind those rich images, for David disguised it so well, was his struggle with cancer and the consequences from years of treatment. From my own experience with friends and family I knew the ups and downs, the oncologist visits and scans and probes and IV's and devices that would have prompted a lesser person to slow down or even give up. David never complained and could even joke about the card he'd been dealt. He never suffered limitation, whether this applied to his painting or to the physical challenges of living alone in the Vermont countryside. Even as age slowed him down David remained proudly self-sufficient.

In the course of our friendship I learned that he attended a military high school, flew airplanes, rode jumping horses, put on puppet shows, built a mini-home for his daughter Cleo down to the chairs and pots and pans, had sailed around the Greek Islands, owned a New York loft, taught art in many places, and settled in Vermont, where we met.

So over the years we ate together, drank together, cut firewood in the woods near his home; together we read *The Magic Mountain* and had long conversations about the characters. He was a good story teller but you didn't want to interrupt him mid-narrative. David was driven and singular, he drove fast, was undeterred by age or physical inconvenience, had many friends, a loving and extended family, and he never missed an opportunity to hear music, or lectures, to look at art about which he knew so much. His inspiration swept away my gloomier moments as I took what he freely offered.

There's plenty to say about David's art but I'll leave that to others. As for my empty spot, he's gone but not gone.

~ Vincent Panella

Words for David Rohn

I can remember exactly the first time I met David Rohn, I was nine and sick at home from school with the mumps, lying in bed. David came over for a visit with my mom. Toward the end of their visit he ventured into my bedroom and found a board game with lots of green on it. I thought what the heck is he doing? I have no interest in playing board games, especially with a stranger. Then he pulled out of his bag the puppet pewter, the horse, to eat the grass on the board game and say funny things. I laughed and was bedazzled by his entertainment. Our friendship has gone on from there.

For many years in between David was very close to my parents; traveling together here in there, trading dogs, David was mom's teacher. There was a joint trip to Turkey where they got about in motor scooters or more maybe motor cycles and due to the largess of my father, David and my mother rode together. How incredibly Preposterous?

Both my parents died many years ago and since then David and I enjoyed sharing (as like most of you) his paintings, he was always eager to show me what he was working on, his recent take on the news, his homemade bread, fish cooked in his woodstove, a glass of wine, but most particularly a deep, caring friendship. When he had not heard from me in a while I got a note in the mail that said DON'T FORGET ME! which I have kept on my desk ever since!

A few years ago, David, maybe age 89, we parked in the Brat Parking Garage on the top floor and had to descend many flights to the ground level. I had a bad knee and could barely keep up with him. David skipped his way down and when I got to the bottom I named David my spry guy. What I want to say is, yes, David could be very stubborn in his opinions but he had a very spry mind. When visiting with him over and over again I never knew where the conversation might end up; a new point of view, a giggle, a poem, a commentary on a new painting... Thank you David for being such a vibrant part of my life and gifting us with such delightful, light filled, sumptuous paintings.

~ Andy Wasserman

The Art Class — July 2009

I walked in. I sat at my drawing bench, with my drawing board, my special paper, my charcoal sticks, my kneaded eraser ... and I stared at the still-life on the green, single-drawn table at the front of the room. We were/I was to begin ... and I wanted to ... but I was paralyzed. I thought about the shape of the room, the position of the windows behind me set into the dormers; I thought about the light passing through the glass, and the stillness that surrounded me in that 4:00 hour. I watched the particles of dust as they passed through the panel of sunlight that shone in the space between my art partner and me. I saw the planks of wood that made the floor, and the knotty pine patterns on the walls. The air smelled like hot summer wind, but the only signs of life in the silent, airless room were the sounds of charred wood against parchment, and the tangential glimpse of hands sketching the outlines of a stationary arrangement of oddly-shaped multi-textured objects ... and a guitar.

"I'm so hot. I'm so uncomfortable."

The edges of my hair were saturated with perspiration. A narrow tributary flowed across my spine from its source to the base. I couldn't move. I didn't know what I was doing ... Just sitting ... and staring ... breathing in ... breathing out...

My teacher was walking around the exterior rim of the semi-circle formed by the sketching-benches. He would stand close to the students, lean in. and then comment on what he saw. He was able to see through only one eye. He wore a black patch on the other. He was moving closer ... and closer. When he was standing to the right of the student on my right, I tried to pick up the charcoal and force my hand to make a mark on the empty, shell-toned sheet in front of me ... but nothing happened. Except for my thoughts, I was frozen in the hot, dry air.

Too soon, but not soon enough, my teacher straightened from his bent position and began to step to the viewing spot next to me. He stood on my left. His right eye could see me peripherally as his head stopped, level with and parallel to mine. I expected to be criticized. I looked at the ceiling and kept my arms close to my body. (why ?) He looked at my empty sheet. He looked. He looked. He looked ... and then he said, "Wow, you must be seeing an awful lot." And then he walked away. I picked up my charcoal stick, and started to draw.

~ Robin Jones

“Ineluctable Modality of the Visible” or “The Secret of Durable Pigments”

Such were the two titles I debated using in preparing these remarks. Both are appropriate for the matter at hand, and I think I hear David saying “why not use both.” And so, my dear friend, I have.

Neither of these phrases are my own, though I wish I had said them. Rather, they are borrowed from the longer sentences in which they were respectively embedded. The first is that of Stephan Daedalus’s stream-of-consciousness that begins chapter three of *Ulysses*: “Ineluctable modality of the visible: at least that if no more, thought through my eyes.” The novel goes on: “Signatures of all things that I am here to read”

And the second comes from Humbert-Humbert’s farewell to Lolita in his diary, otherwise known as Nabokov’s novel, *Lolita*: “I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art. And this is the only immortality you and I may share”

Both references are inseparably about art and about being an artist. And this is why they are appropriate here.

I quoted the first of these to David, but never the second. Not because it didn’t apply but because I never did. I wonder today what he would have thought about “durable pigments.”

I believe our friendship really began with my quoting Joyce’s line on the “ineluctable modality.” This was our first conversation, which began inside Next Stage Arts (an exhibition of his oils), then outside of it. We were talking about art, and I suppose, the philosophy behind what, or better, which sorts of items are selected in a composition of art. And it was then, at some point, I am not sure why, that I said, “well, there it is, isn’t it: the ‘Ineluctable modality of the visible’.” As I think on it now, Daedalus’s walking along Sandymount Strand is about the mysteries of time, nature, sentient thought, mortality, and art. More specific, how an artist takes all these elements and combines them into paintings, sculpture, and words. I would like to remember that I detected his interest in me as someone who was attentive to art, and given the quote, attentive to his art.

I think the “philosophy of art” is something that we always seemed to come around to in one way or another. In recounting something of his aesthetic development, I recall his saying that he had failed at becoming an abstract artist despite his efforts. I differed in this view and contended that his work was replete with very carefully juxtaposed items—plates, funnels, fans, conches, pencils, cloths, cups, oranges, bowls, glasses—that peeped out of shadows, served as background, blurred adjacent items, or in a glint, reflected a larger world beyond the painting. It was all very ordered to speak something to the viewer.

Indeed, he spoke of how the items in his paintings spoke to him; how these items had to position themselves just right before he could capture their arrangement in color and light; before they could become a definitive painting. And there was always a continuous dialogue with the things and people of the world. I would say that conversations with David always seemed to go in many directions. One could speak widely with him. His sailing in the Mediterranean. Meyer Abrams had suggested a way of teaching a course on Romanesque Art one summer that had succeeded marvelously.

(continued)

Walking into his house was unforgettable. There were all the tools of his trade! The countless drafts of ideas as well as the items that had gone into particular paintings. The three rectangular bay windows; the round wooden table with the paisley cloth; the little black vase; the yellow bowl; the red piano; the veranda after rain; the daffodil in his yard. Two items in his house that never made it into his paintings as far as I know were especially endearing. One was the little tin kettle that rocked and rolled as the water reached boiling point—its tiny, little lid lifting and falling. The second was a tawny colored, cedar-top guitar hanging on the wall in the living room.

The guitar came to represent a special bond for us. It was still hanging there during my last visit. I had been the last person to string that guitar. Red nylgut strings—Rubino by Aquila. He loved classical guitar, and when he learned that I played guitar as a hobby, he invited me to play for him while he painted. The first of several visits resulted in a charcoal drawing and several paintings. That I would come and play for him as he painted became *de rigueur* whenever I was in Vermont. I always looked forward to it, and in-between visits I would devise programs of things he might like. Renaissance, Baroque, Classical, and Modern. He was always generous in his praise no matter how badly I played. I played for him on my last visit as he rested on his couch, eyes closed. I had a presentiment that this would be the last time, as indeed it was. Well, I want to say, David, that I am still playing for you.

I would never have met David if not for Robin Jones, my wife, and one of David's Studio Art students at Windham. It was through her that I became David's friend. I remember that first invitation to his home. For me, it was the first visit. He had invited us to lunch, and because neither Robin nor I cared much for fish, David said,

"Well, this will be an *hommage*," he said it in French, "to the chicken" as we helped him lay out a lunch of bread, chicken salad, hard-boiled eggs, and tea.

"I think, David, we have before us the age-old paradox of which came first, the chicken or the egg?"

Needless to say, it turned out to be neither. Neither the chicken nor the egg. Better yet, we did not resolve the paradox that afternoon. Instead, we talked and ate, had more tea and cookies, and this was followed by a bowl of red, sweet berries that looked like mini-cherry tomatoes that David said grew on the ground around his house. If David said what these little berries were, I don't recall. They were probably "partridge berries," or became "partridge berries" or "ground berries" once I had looked them up.

In recalling this lunch and my little quip about the chicken and the egg, I am reminded of that first meeting, and I want to pose this question. Was there always an unconscious discussion about art and philosophy? About the philosophy underlying art? Not "philosophy" in the formal sense of specific philosophers or their texts, but rather the "philosophy" behind the structures of art. Did our friendship concern this discussion?

Not that the answer matters much. We were friends. That was enough. But many chance events had brought us together. And if our discussions and friendship were about the philosophical structure of art, then we were kindred spirits.

(continued)

Not that the answer matters much. We were friends. That was enough. But many chance events had brought us together. And if our discussions and friendship were about the philosophical structure of art, then we were kindred spirits.

In our penultimate meeting, apropos of something I can't remember, he recalled that there had been a huge red stained glass window on the landing of his grandparents' home in front of which he would spend hours: gazing at the changes in the day—clouds, sun, passing birds. He was telling me one of the earliest memories of how the world had presented itself to his eyes—as an ever-changing form of color, light, and shade transforming objects. The child's fascination for this magic of color and light was still evident in the smile of joy with which he told this memory. I understood now how he had taught himself art. This was his first lesson in art and the magic of art. The self-taught artist! Thereafter, he would go into the world and apply this key to his surroundings. And also encounter all those predecessors, fellow-artists, who had done the same thing. And what a group it was!

In this remembered moment, I could see wherein our bond lay.

In our last conversation, on his birthday, I told him I was sending him a copy of the novel-in-verse on which I was centering a study (Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*) and we said goodbye.

Twelve days after learning of David's death, I was going to New Mexico to spend Christmas with my family. I was full of anxiety about the trip, making connections. I was annoyed that I had not finished all the work I had to do. I was sad at the idea that I would not see David again. In fact, I had just spoken to Jim Giddings, who shared some details of David's death while we also discussed the purchase of two of David's paintings that Robin and I had just made. All these things were going through my mind in hope that my flight would go smoothly. Finally, we took off, and as the plane climbed through a cloudy evening sky, and suddenly broke cloud cover, there was David! He had painted layers of cerulean, mauve, orange, and yellow in the western sky. He had managed to say farewell after all in the only way he knew how.

~ Raúl A. García
Mar. 26, 2026, NYC

Recollections With David Rohn

It is perhaps fitting that my memories of me with David appear as a series of images—each linked to the next, but also suspended in the moment, rarified, precise.

I first met David in 1974, as a freshman at The Putney School, through Lisa, who soon became my best friend. The family had recently returned from Provence, and Lisa and I shared a love of the language, she teaching me such useful phrases as “Il est vachement beau, ce mec.”

Visiting the Blue House on Main Street in Putney became at once a haven and an adventure. David would frequently cook elaborate meals for us hungry teens while sharing colorful stories of his travels, what he had been reading, and musings on life.

One particularly crystalline memory is of standing beside David as he cooked an omelette. He showed me how to lift the edge of the bubbling eggs with a spatula while tipping the pan slightly, to let the liquid settle under the already cooked portion. I can remember with total clarity the brightly-painted kitchen, the retro stove, the smell of fresh coffee, and Robert J Lurtsema on the radio in the background, David’s radio program of choice. This memory, among many others, carries a transcendent quality not because of a special perception on my part, but because everything David did held substance, and a playful lightness of being which made each experience larger than life.

Once Lisa, Kaethe and I spent a few days at David’s flat in Manhattan—the three of us girls crammed into a too-small loft bed while the older generation stayed up very late. I remember feeling safe and protected on that trip in a way which I had rarely felt as a child. And perhaps it was that feeling of safety which allowed us to maximize the thrill of unpredictability and unplanned time that David’s adventures inspired. Driving with David was especially exciting—hair-raising, actually—given that he had no depth perception in the traditional sense. I remember barreling down Columbus Avenue, David weaving in and out of traffic, yet I never felt scared, only reveling in being part of a grand escapade. He made everything fun.

Tonight I need only look up in our living room to see the watercolor David presented to me with a dedication, a plein air of our family home in Guilford, full of greens and greys and the particular dappled light within which David held such mastery. His artistic achievements have been formidable and are well documented, but it is just as much his offering of friendship in the quietest, unfailingly supportive way which shines on. David could be stirred to passionate resistance in the face of injustice but never allowed himself to fall into pessimism, and shared freely his hopes and his enduring belief in a brighter future for us all.

~ Marguerite Serkin
March 2026

A few images from my last precious visits with David Rohn. I grew to cherish this man over the years: a father to my dear student, Cleo: the embodiment of Pewter, his stoic horse puppet; an inspiration in our medium of choice; his unassuming hospitality; his unwavering love of music. I will miss him so.

~ Finn Campman
March 2026

Still Life

The color is waiting
and the line is finding its way
The objects are there
as if always—perfect

Spring has filled the studio
but David's axe with many winter's patina—
the splintered handle now replaced
has been busy

Now the loaded mop
drenched in Sienna and Gamboge
waits—the line flooded
Now look and see again

Laundry stretches past the wood pile
Briefs and socks spent the night outside
and are shedding the dew
A coffee can holds the extra pins

The paint is down
loose and sure, holding an edge
and bleeding into the body of the jar
the eye falls away to the empty spaces

Lunch on the terrace facing east
Two shining sardines and an egg
a bottle of cider—glasses chipped and cloudy
David keeps looking at the table—itching

(continued)

The painting is dry
the objects unmoving
“the dialogue is continuously going on”
an idea in the stillness—but now the light has changed

In the living room—books and photos,
the winter studio—cups and old garlic
We remember Christmas Eves
waiting for Pewter’s tentative appearance

Sometimes you just have to wait—step away
David in the stacks—color glazing both sides of warped paper
and then answer is there—a wet toothbrush
removes what was in the way

There was a birthday party—90 years
the studio full—a cast from across decades—cake, wine,
We paid attention to the light that crossed his face,
to the giddy introductions, to the sly glee that slid from his smile

The bare flower near the tuna can,
a conch and the woods held in old china,
lemon, onion and old preserves,
the wrinkled folds of everything else

David Rohn Obituary 1934-2025

David Eugene Rohn of Putney, Vermont passed away at his home on Wednesday, December 10th, at age 91. Born in Chicago in 1934 to Robert Eugene Rohn and Dorothy Margaret Mills, David was raised in Ludington, MI, on the shores of Lake Michigan. A passionate artist from a young age, David made a name for himself all over the world as a prolific watercolor and oil painter. When David wasn't painting, he was traveling, sailing, flying small aircraft, playing music, cooking, reading, learning, and enjoying time with his family and friends. David is predeceased by his eldest son, Christopher Rohn, who passed away in 1987. He is survived by his sister, Nancy Gibson; his children, Lisa, Jennifer, Andrew, and Cleo Rohn; and his grandchildren, Leo and Julian Rohn-Capellaro and Anya Edwards.



David Rohn Director's Statement | Retrospective 2026

Mitchell • Giddings Fine Arts gave its first gallery-wide solo exhibit to David Rohn in March, 2017. The gallery was two and a half years old, and showing just one artist was a risky choice. We felt that the clarity and freshness of Rohn's watercolors would energize and transform the space, But he gave us more. He brought insight and humor and a novel way of approaching painting. Rohn lived a simple existence close to the earth and the objects that informed his paintings. Bach, Beethoven and his hand-puppet companion Miss Tulip were as important to this visual artist as Cézanne and Matisse. As long as he could paint he was content—pleasure was found in the act of painting, not artistic invention, and watercolor provided Rohn the "... freedom and liberation from an art world of expectation and judgment." This can be found in multiple stacks of unsigned paintings, most with images on both sides. Often his chosen objects and compositions were delightfully hidden in plain sight, not demanding to be shuffled or rearranged; instead, it was he who would settle in "... looking intently at a visual field ... to organize the percept into patterns, symmetries, geometries." We dearly miss this extraordinary artist and friend.

~ Petria Mitchell and Jim Giddings

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