



Gallery

THE BONES OF THE COUNTRY

BY MICHAEL HAMER

"To paint the earth a man must know the earth."

—Don Perceval from *Maynard Dixon Sketch Book*

Michael Drury is troubling over a painting

he's working on of Point Reyes, which, to the Philistine low-life, is perplexing. Namely because the canvas is perfectly stunning. The colors and shapes of the broad bay, sudden bluffs and foreground fields flow with the instinct of a river, an absolute ecosystem of efficiency. But Drury's unsatisfied. "It hasn't yet cooperated," he says, intrigued rather than frustrated.

The painting, one of eight he's finishing for a show in San Francisco later in the week, taunts him from its spot on a large, black easel inside his garage-studio, the place he comes to lay on a painting's last vital brush strokes before it can coax his signature. He studies the work from every possible angle, moving in then back, over and around, inside then outside, knowing the answer lies in the looking.

Watching him maneuver, the impression is of a mad scientist at work. He's got on a dingy paint-stained lab coat

right from Dr. Frankenstein's closet. His hair is a brown, cropped hedge that appears groomed by a ShopVac. Ezra Pound has nothing on his goatee. And, when he talks, which is often, he's direct, opinionated but not a pundit, flavoring his speech with fresh metaphors, the occasional cuss word, and a science book of references connected to his painting. In a 30-second span he alludes to pthalo blue and cadmium red, the intersecting of planes on a one-dimensional surface, the importance of cloud volume, qualities of tints and values, and how a high-keyed, yellow-orange lifted with green creates a shimmering corona on a hill. But he does all this with a smile on his face, and the broader impression is that here is a man who is happy and hungry for life, a man who's heard his calling and knows exactly how to answer it.

"A painting is not about how it looks," he says, gesturing with a bouquet of paintbrushes that blooms wildly in his left

hand. "It's about who you are and where you are and how it feels to be alive in your time."

Drury shifts his thick horn-rimmed glasses to the top of his head, backs away from the easel to gather yet another viewpoint and explains that for him the where, at least, has been about the deserts of northern Nevada, to some extent Ireland, but mostly about living and surfing in and around Santa Barbara. "I've been blessed here," he says. "It's all such a visual inspiration."

So much so, that after four decades of applying these inspirations to canvas, he's become one of the West's most articulate plein air painters, maintaining a tradition started by George Catlin, Rockwell Kent, Maynard Dixon and Drury's close friend and mentor, Ray Strong, who predicts, "The days will come when museums will want Drury paintings."

Such accolades flatter and perhaps even motivate the 53-year-old Drury, but at this time are inconsequential. Success

WINTER AFTERNOON
30" X 60",
OIL ON CANVAS



BIG THURSDAY
20" X 50",
OIL ON CANVAS

and its spoils are secondary. Right now, he's more concerned with solving the mystery of the Point Reyes painting.

"It's not about financial remuneration," he says, emphatically. "It's about making the best painting you can make, each and every time you go out. Do that for 50 years or so and hopefully someday you'll make a good painting."

This thought triggers something and sends Drury to his palette where he dabs here and mixes there in controlled excitement. Then, with several measured passes across the tiniest portion of the canvas, the mad scientist brings to life a farmer's field that seconds prior didn't exist. The painting gains another dimension. The result is an epiphany.

"I try to paint enough of a feeling so that when people look at it they know exactly why I painted it," he says. "And that's because it's too fucking beautiful not to paint."

Born and raised in Santa Barbara, Drury grew up steeped in beauty. The town, known for its architectural adherence to its Spanish ancestry, is an idyllic segue between mountain and sea. Queen palms define its skyline. Sandstone boulders armor its hills like ancient castles. The Channel Islands loom off its coast.

And Drury's lived embedded in this beauty, either charging its points, reefs and beach breaks on his Bradbury bellyboards or callousing his hands working and living on a cattle ranch in a remote part of the county. He's tilled fields, repaired fences, crossed creeks and explored canyons. He's been in the barrel, over the falls and dumped onto the reefs. As Strong says, "Michael's a blood brother to the land."

Drury's paintings reveal his intimate knowledge of the earth, the forces that create it and his compulsive need to show it off. "It's what I live for," he says. And he does. His life is dictated by painting. He travels nowhere without his easel and brushes. On a whim, he'll pack his truck and drive hundreds of miles to Big Sur or into the isolated arena of the Nevada desert to capture the play of light upon a headland or a range of hills. Just yesterday, he and fellow painter Hank Pitcher, another highly regarded plein airist, completed their third consecutive day in 20 knot headwinds trying to get on canvas the blooms of a Tree Aloe at a point in northern Santa Barbara County. Three days of predawn arousals, four hours of driving, and then a return drive home in the dark—to paint some flowers.



ALOE BLOOM, POINT CONCEPTION
30" X 40",
OIL ON CANVAS



AFTER A RAIN
24" X 40",
OIL ON CANVAS



CENTRAL COAST POINT
34" X 70",
OIL ON CANVAS

“There’s nothing like painting all day,” Drury says. “Starting with a morning paint, then lunch and a nap, followed by an evening paint, then go home at dark with a couple of paintings. I’m just as tired and content as if I surfed all day. The brain waves are flat, quiet, nothing more you could do to make it better.”

Drury’s paintings clearly romanticize the land, but they aren’t clichés. There are no light on their loafers pastels or flavor of the month subject matters. No baguette and Merlot picnics or women with parasols and wicker chairs. Nor are there any cheesy airbrushed point breaks or phony flawless A-frames. None of the things that Drury says renders paintings bankrupt.

What they do offer is such a sense of place that it disturbs you into wanting to leave wherever it is you are just so you can go be there. But more significantly, the paintings alter your perception of the landscape, startling you into seeing the rocks, headlands, clouds and even the kelp in a whole new way. One leaves a Drury painting a changed person.

“There’s a mystery deep inside there that I have to nail,” he says. “I try to paint the bones of the country.”

Which is as much metaphorical musing as it is a school of thought. For the key to a successful painting, Drury explains, begins with underpainting or the laying on of the colors of the earth’s core and the ocean floor before stacking on the rest. Though you can’t see those colors, you can sense them, their implication is strong. “Without this, without understanding

how the land came about, and using this knowledge to create a solid understructure, the painting will collapse under its own weight,” he says.

This philosophy is a result of his time spent with Strong, who at 93, is one of the great western landscape painters alive and the reason Drury is where he is today.

An amalgam of John Muir, Robinson Jeffers and Maynard Dixon, Strong was already being labeled a master when Drury sought him out some 25 years ago. His work, uncompromised landscapes of majestic quality, hung in FDR’s White House and the National Museum of American Art. He helped found the Arts Students League of San Francisco, the Mendocino Arts Center and worked as artist in residence at the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History. Today, he’s revered among plein air painters, and he’s chosen Drury’s as his protégé.

“Michael’s just so darn full of life,” Strong says. “He’s so dedicated to the land, so much a part of Santa Barbara and his paintings are heroic, a true affirmation of its landscape.”

Strong illustrates his point with a story about the time he and Drury drove up the coast for a day of painting only to discover the surf had come up and Drury hadn’t brought along a board.

“We painted for a while and Michael just kept watching the waves,” Strong recalls. “Eventually, I guess he just couldn’t stand it, so he stripped down and went bodysurfing. It was beautiful, it was such a metaphor for his connection to the land.”

It was out of desperation that Drury first contacted Strong in 1970. In his own words he had run out of his abilities as a painter. “I needed a mentor,” Drury recalls. “I called Ray completely out of the blue.”

Strong, a man known for his generosity, suggested he and this gregarious kid, who carted around his paints in a cardboard box and didn’t even own an easel, set aside an afternoon to paint together. If it went well, he would give Drury lessons. For Drury, the day was a watershed.

“After the day was done, Ray said to me, ‘Let’s forget this lesson stuff and just paint together,’” he recalls. “The heavens opened, the light streamed down. I almost started crying.”

The day also marked a subtle but significant shift in his priorities. “I went from a surfer who paints to a painter who surfs,” he says. Still, it took Drury a while to realize his commitment to painting, evidenced by the fact that he went to the trouble of earning a Bachelor of Arts in Art Studio and a Masters in Fine Arts from UCSB. His thinking was that he may someday teach.

“I always knew I’d be a painter, I just didn’t know I’d do it for a living,” he says. “Ray just brought it all into focus. He taught me that being a painter was a legitimate and honorable way to live.”

Drury’s relationship with Strong is as much about building character as it is about building a painting. Indeed, through Strong’s guidance, Drury’s craft elevated into another realm.

The torch is being passed. But what has affected Drury most is Strong’s unfaltering, nearly defiant adherence to his style of painting and the spiritual vision behind it.

“He’s lived his life in such an honorable way,” Drury says. “He doesn’t expound a viewpoint, he lives it.”

Core to Strong’s vision is that art serve a purpose other than that of simple adornment. Where plein airists are concerned, it should not only pay homage to the earth, but also act as an alarm warning the populace of what it stands to lose if it fails to protect it. It’s a philosophy Drury wholly embraces.

“I hope my paintings aren’t a documentation of what Santa Barbara looked like in 1998 in the year 2018,” Drury says. “Hopefully when people see them it will maybe make them more cautious over who they elect and who sets policy. There’s no reason that we have to become another Orange County.”

On this course, and naturally under the tutelage of Strong, Drury joined two dozen other Santa Barbara painters to establish the OAK Group, an organization using painting to preserve the environment. The group stages or contributes to exhibits that aid in thwarting development of threatened locations, from the sea to the mountains to the desert. Half of all sales at these exhibits are committed to the cause. Sales of Drury’s Point Reyes paintings, along with the work of several other OAK artists, will benefit the Nature Conservancy.

“It’s a question of responsibility and it honors Ray,” Drury says, of his participation in the OAK’s. “You have to give a little back.”

That he is getting ever more capable of giving “a little back” is a source of great gratification for Drury. Moreover, it’s not lost on him that as his reputation as an artist grows it will only enhance this capability. He acknowledges this, but then, in the selfless mode of Strong, he cautions against being labeled an artist.

“Artist is a term you have to earn,” he says, leaning the Point Reyes painting against a wall. “Right now, I’m just a painter, time will tell if I’m an artist.” ☉



JOHN KIEWIT



BARON SPAFFORD

(TOP) ON LOCATION AT POINT REYES. (ABOVE) SLOTTED AT AN UNIDENTIFIED CENTRAL COAST LOCALE. “IF YOU’RE PART OF THE CLAN, THEN MUM’S THE WORD.”