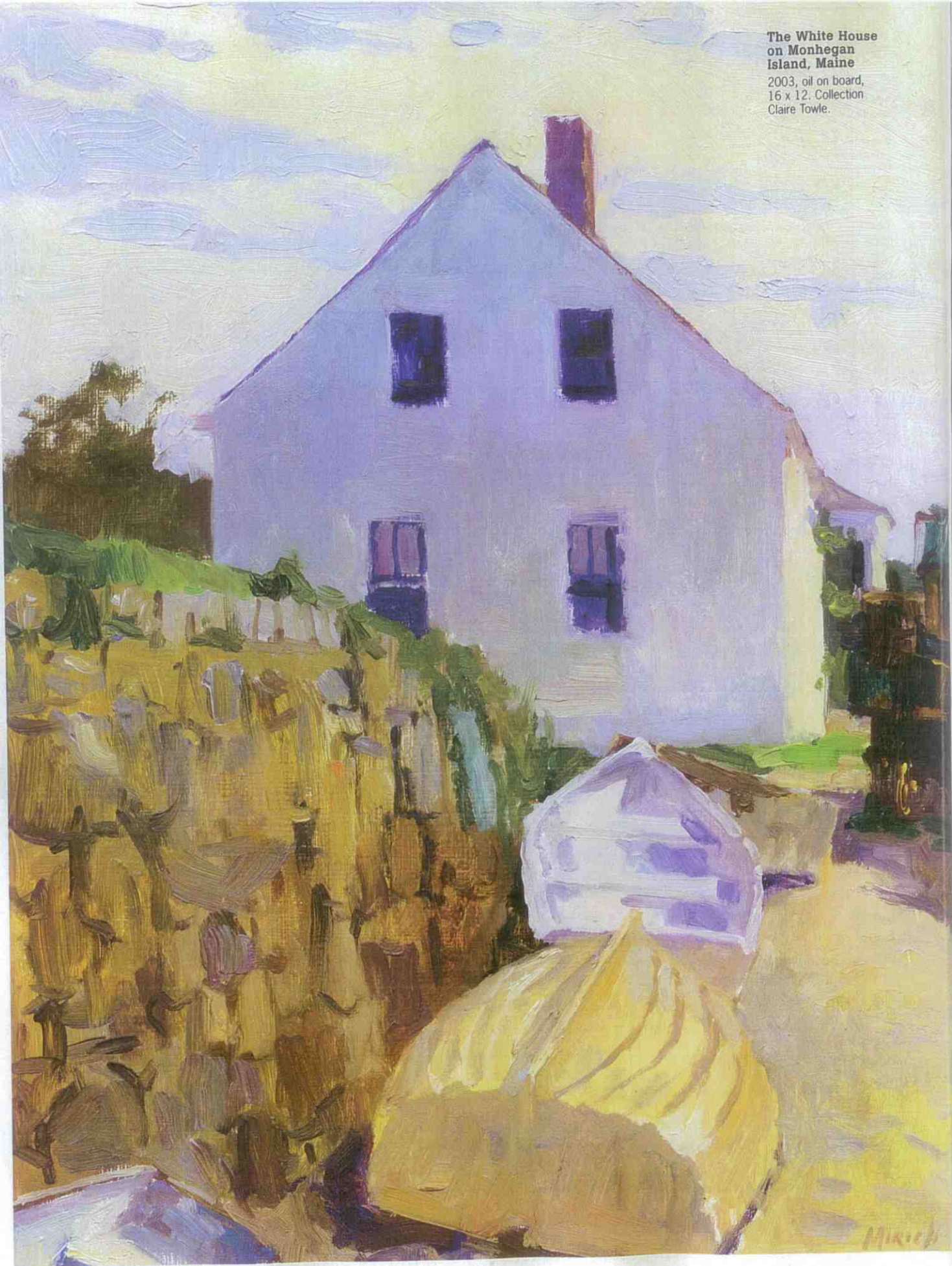


**The White House
on Monhegan
Island, Maine**

2003, oil on board,
16 x 12. Collection
Claire Towle.



Drawing Upon & Local Community Landscape

Fellowship with other artists and strong ties to the land and sea in his area have strengthened the artwork of Southern California artist **Stephen Eugene Mirich**. | **by Molly Siple**

Oil painter Stephen Eugene Mirich has always lived close to the sea. He was raised in San Pedro, California, an active fishing port that is part of the Port of Los Angeles. "This huge port is a unique inspiration for my work, as are the boats and all the activities associated with the fishing industry," he says. Mirich drew as a child, assembled a good number of model ships, found high-school art classes lacking, and enrolled in architecture at the local city college because this was the only program he could find that offered classes in structural drawing. But he soon realized that his fascination with painting would not wait for retirement.

The sea and land that speak to him are now right outside his studio. In 1986 he settled in Portuguese Bend on the Palos Verdes Peninsula, just south of Los Angeles, where the view from his back porch includes hillsides dotted with eucalyptus and chaparral, unspoiled coves, and a swath of blue Pacific with Catalina Island on the horizon. He needs only to step out the door to have his pick of subject matter to hone his painting skills.

Over the years this setting has also become a gathering place and urban oasis for artist friends. Visitors sense the natural peace of the place as soon as they open their car door. They might even be greeted by the screech of one of the peacocks

that perch in the trees, imported long ago by affluent residents. Mirich is known as a welcoming and generous host with a reputation for good food—his résumé includes various stints as a cook on tugboats. "Being part of a community of artists and sharing ideas around a dinner table are essential parts of my lifestyle as an artist—another good reason, along with living in a beautiful setting, to follow a career in painting," he says.

Mirich's art training included formal instruction coupled with practice and more practice—"putting in the miles," as he says. Theodore Lukits (1897–1992) was an important teacher. "Lukits insisted that the ability to draw was not just a gift for the chosen few but could be learned by following an exacting procedure that starts with reference points and finishes with defining contour lines," Mirich says. "He gave us a way to 'prove' our drawings that I rely on to this day.

"You need a strong grounding in drawing for hand-eye coordination," Mirich continues. "It's drawing that controls where you want your brush to go. Skilled drawing is especially important when you're painting a very well-known locale that the viewer will be familiar with. The scene you paint must appear accurate, but an artist has to walk a tightrope between what a place actually looks like and what works artistically."

Drawing is Mirich's first step when starting a painting.



"The area where the land meets sea and sky is the most important design element in a composition because of the high value contrast you usually find there."

He makes a simple sketch using vine charcoal on his canvas and then lightly traces the desired lines with a graphite pencil for the basic composition and brushes away the softer charcoal. Such a sketch can give you more confidence as you begin a picture. Mirich also decides on the focal point of the composition in advance. "Your focal point may be just a small detail, but it's still a key spot you're moving toward as you build the painting," he says.

When painting coastlines, Mirich first designs the rock formations, carefully considering how these will meet the other major component of the scene: the water-and-sky section, which the artist considers a single unit. "The area where the land meets sea and sky is the most important design element in a composition because of the high value contrast you usually find there," says Mirich. "Even though the appeal of a coastline may be the waves moving into shore—this may attract you to painting the scene in the first place—in terms of the painting, waves are usually less dominant visually, with their soft edges and curving shapes. It's best to place waves after you've established your rock positions and to place them where you feel they should be for the

composition and the spirit of the picture."

Painting moonlight is one of Mirich's specialties. Keeping track of the phases of the moon is as normal for Mirich as remembering what day of the week it is. And the special event he waits for is twilight on the evening before the full moon, when the moon appears above the horizon while the sun has not yet set in the west. There is still sunlight enough to see canvas and palette, and the moon has a warm glow. Mirich notes, "On these nights, you don't have the contrast of values to create the effect of a glowing moon against a dark sky. Instead, you have to rely on color temperature, painting a pink moon seen against a cool, blue sky." He will also photograph the nocturne locale in daylight for details such as rock formations and then later merge his photo and oil sketch in the studio for the final painting. "I never again touch the plein air sketch, but each stroke in it has its purpose, guiding me as I develop the larger final painting in the studio," he adds. "There, I'll take the outdoor sketch to the size I originally envisioned."

For nocturnes Mirich primes his boards a battleship gray, and for day paintings he uses a mixture of raw umber

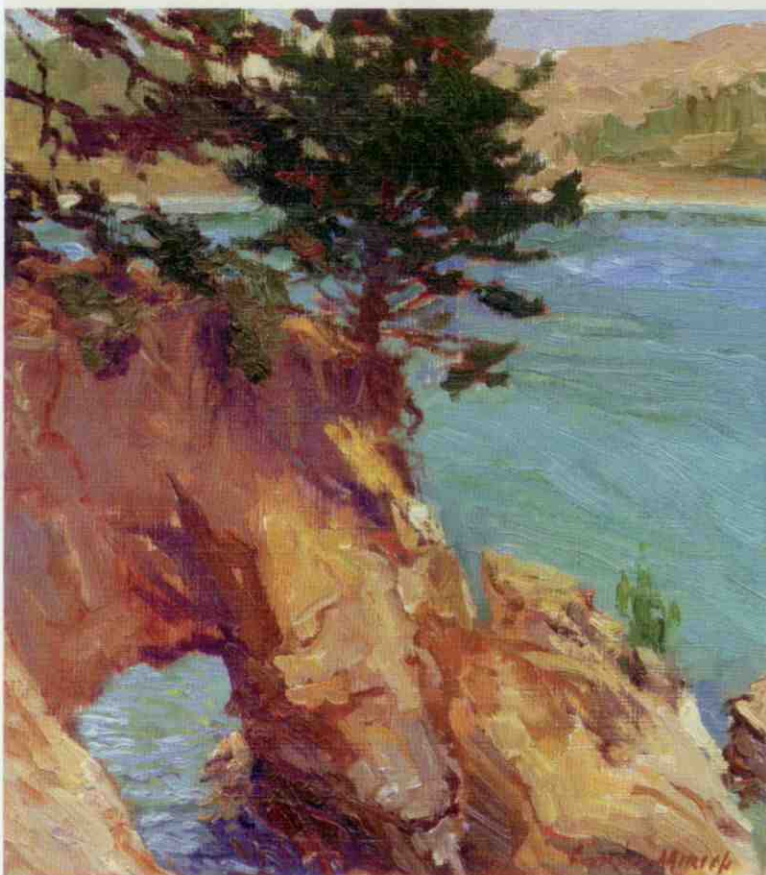


LEFT
**Late in the Day,
 Palos Verdes**
 2008, oil, 12 x 16.
 Private collection.

RIGHT
**San Pedro Fishing
 Boats**
 1997, oil, 12 x 16.
 Collection the artist.

OPPOSITE PAGE
**Field Study for
 Winter Moonlight
 (Leo Carillo State
 Beach)**
 2008, oil on board,
 8 x 10. Collection the
 artist.





ABOVE LEFT
San Simeon Bay
1999, oil on board,
10 x 9. Collection the
artist.



ABOVE RIGHT
**Pilgrim of Dana
Point**
1998, oil, 16 x 20.
Collection Terranea
Resort Hotel, Palos
Verdes, California.

RIGHT
**Mexican Fishing
Boat**
2008, oil, 9 x 12.
Collection the artist.

OPPOSITE PAGE
**Beach Front
Cottages, Crystal
Cove**
2008, oil, 12 x 16.
Private collection.



About the Artist

Stephen Mirich is a signature member and former vice-president of the California Art Club as well as the former president and a life member of the San Pedro Art Association, in California. He is represented in California by American Legacy Fine Arts, in Pasadena, and Joseph Bottoms Fine Arts, in Santa Barbara. For more information, visit www.mirich.net.



and white. But aside from this difference, his basic color palette remains the same: zinc yellow or cadmium lemon yellow, cadmium yellow, cadmium orange, cadmium red light or naphthol red light, quinacridone red, ultramarine blue, phthalocyanine green, and bright green. He also mixes a purple, a combination of ultramarine blue and alizarin crimson; a middle-value color from phthalocyanine blue mixed with a little white; and a yellow-green made by adding lots of yellow to a little bright green.

He's particular about his whites and prefers Permalba white, which behaves like a mix of titanium white and zinc white. "Titanium white is very strong and can gobble up your colors, and zinc white can be too weak," he says. Mirich opts for hues of cadmium colors when painting outdoors to reduce the risk of toxicity from this heavy metal should some land on his skin. And he says, "If I need to, I can always punch up the colors in the final painting in my studio with genuine cadmium colors."

Mirich was an early adapter of the internet, using it to display and promote his artwork. "Today an essential part of doing business as an artist is learning how to use a digital camera to record your artwork and knowing how to use Photoshop to transfer those images to your website. A website lets you be perceived the way you want to be perceived, throughout the world." Mirich sometimes receives e-mails from individuals who purchased his signed works years ago. "PBS's *Antiques Roadshow* has taught people to research the provenance of the things they own," comments Mirich. He

always writes back a personal letter, relishing the personal contact with a collector. "In Paris, in the days when there were salons, collectors had the opportunity to meet artists at these gatherings. Relationships and correspondence began. Artists had the chance to teach potential patrons how to look at their work and not just treat it as decoration."

Participating in art groups is important to Mirich. He is a founding member of the Portuguese Bend Artist Colony, which started in 1998. The group's aim is to document the special landscape of the area and increase public awareness of the urgent need to protect this fragile environment from development. The group holds an annual exhibition in Palos Verdes in partnership with the Palos Verdes Peninsula Land Conservancy, and over the years it has grown from a modest do-it-yourself production to an event with gala status. The art is often assembled around intriguing themes. For example, the theme in 2000 was *Seasons of the Day*, featuring work by Mirich, Richard Humphrey, Daniel W. Pinkham, Victoria Pinkham, Kevin Prince, Thomas Redfield, and Amy Sidrane; paintings were displayed showing the local area in different lights, hour-by-hour, from dawn until the dark of night.

Mirich welcomes strangers who may wander over for a look when he's painting on location. "I love getting the chance to know these people and to teach them something about painting pictures," he says. "I embrace this interaction and make it part of my day."

Molly Siple is an artist and writer residing in Southern California.