Poetry Outdoors:

The Paintings of Daniel W. Pinkham

This California painter elicits a spirit of calm from the landscape by maintaining a flexible technique—and following the lead of the subject matter.

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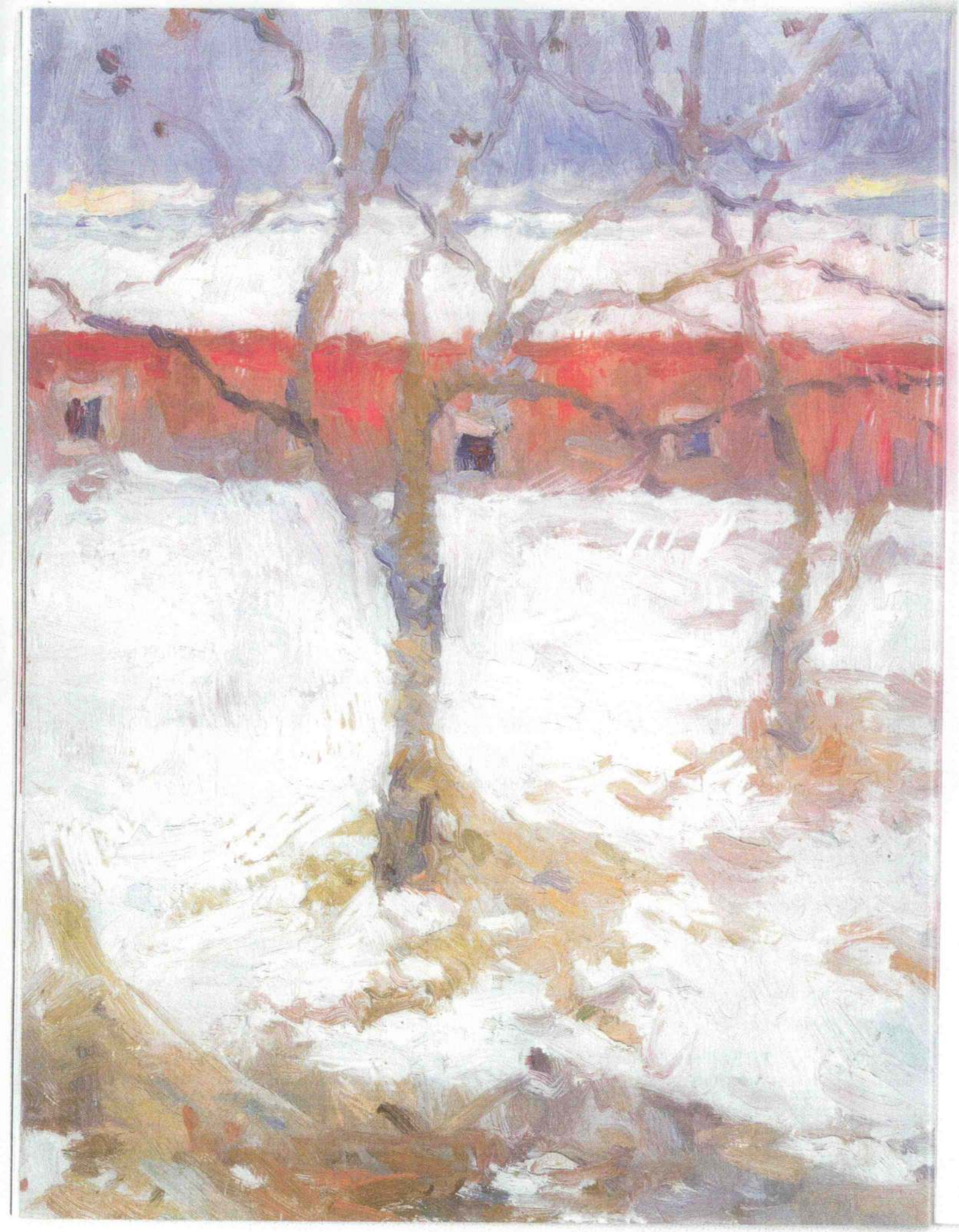
by John A. Parks

Daniel W. Pinkham is a plein air painter who responds to the spirit of a place by varying his technique and approach. The results are paintings of great sensitivity and authority that seem to convey the very essence of each subject. The sheer seductiveness of his touch can be seen in a painting such as *Bearing Good Fruit in the Face of Adversity*, where a brilliant flat light falls on a field of snow behind which stands a red barn. Two fruit trees emerge from the snow, alive with movement in spite of their bare branches. Slender strokes of browns and blues quickly and surely delineate their form, while broad and generous helpings of paint heap the snow on the canvas. The barn is achieved in a flurry of vertical brushstrokes, while more delicate touches patch in the blue sky. In fact, the entire scene has been reinvented in a play of widely varied brushing and handling. This layering of active and open brushstrokes also allows the artist to secure subtle color changes within areas of the painting without sacrificing the liveliness of his attack and the delicious feel of fresh paint.

Pinkham regards the whole process of making the painting as one in which he opens himself up to a particular scene. "I don't always begin by painting," he says. "The first thing I do is sit and write a little about the place, thinking about why I stopped there, what it is exactly that interests me, how I feel about it, and what I want to expose with it. Only then do I begin sketching." He starts with a graphite drawing, laying out the elements of the composition—or he may just start sketching with wash on his canvas. "I don't have an inflexible approach as to how I go about it," says the artist. "I vary what I do depending on what the place is suggesting to me. Sometimes I might just start painting, piling on the color, and establishing everything very quickly. Other times I'll start slowly, building up a wash underpainting before beginning to work the color." By allowing the subject to dictate the technique, Pinkham manages to produce work that varies in weight, density, and palette. He challenges himself to be alive to

Bearing Good Fruit in the Face of Adversity
1990, oil on board, 14 x 11. All artwork this article private collection unless otherwise indicated.



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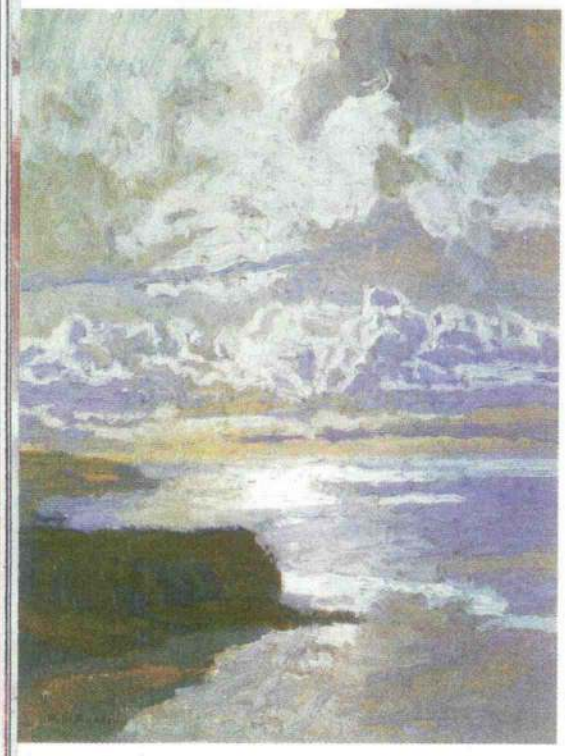


ABOVE
A Moment to Shine
2002, oil on board, 48 x 40.

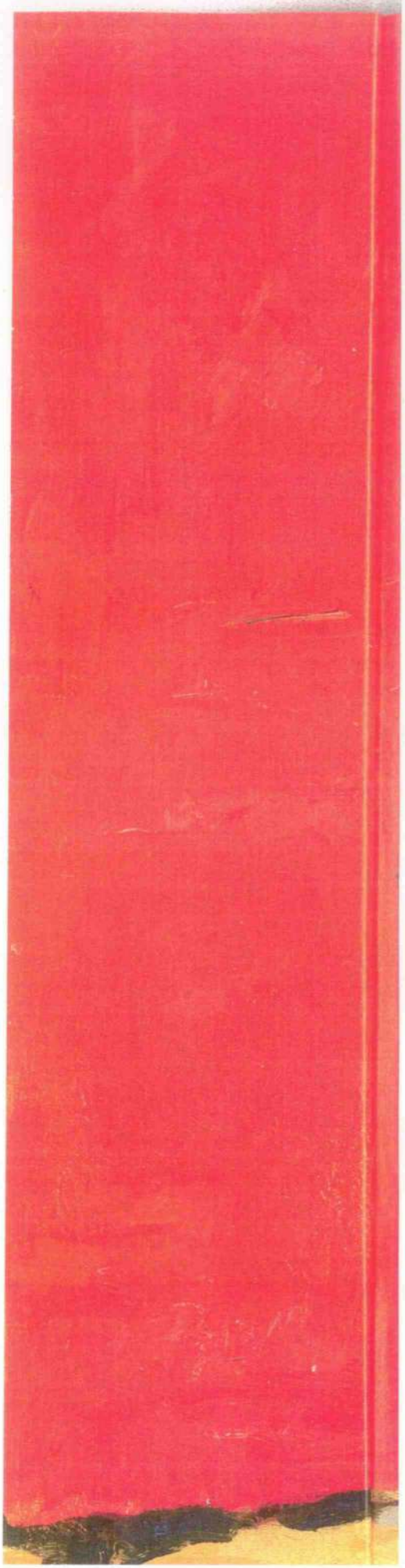
RIGHT
Looking Within
1995, oil on board, 16 x 16.

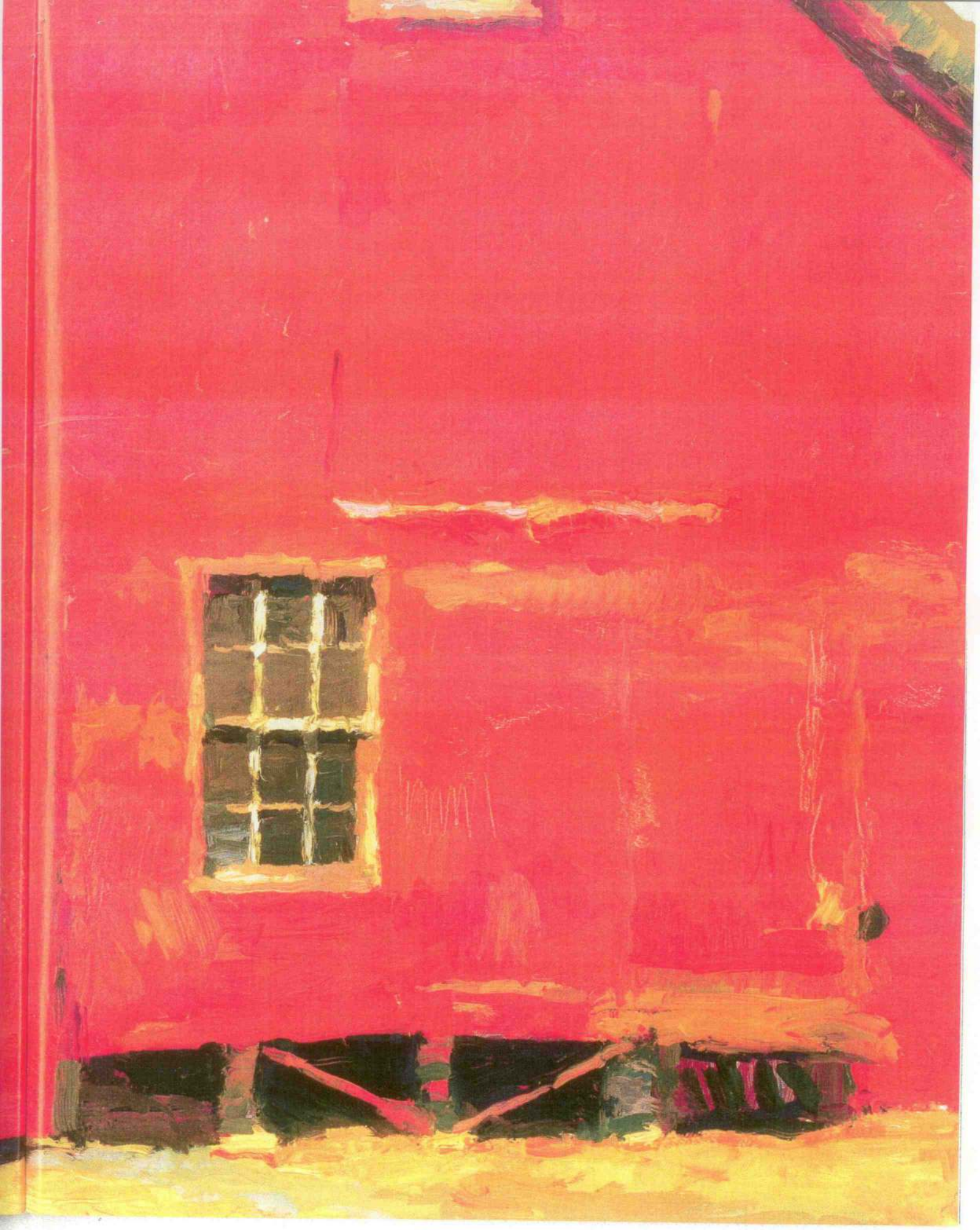
the subject by taking away any reliance on a repetitive and preconceived method. "I also think about surface texture," says Pinkham, "even before I begin painting. Some places just seem to demand a thicker, heavier surface, while others seem to call for quieter handling. Surface is another part of the painter's voice. The touch of the artist—his brushing, handling, and paint building—can convey an awful lot about his state of mind; it provides a kind of intimacy with the artist that you just can't get any other way."

Although a great deal of Pinkham's work is done on the spot, he also works up some of his images to larger paintings back in the studio. Here again he is flexible in his approach, generally beginning with a broad sketch of the composition. "I would never square up a drawing mechanically," he says. "It's important that the larger work has the same sense of organic response that the small pieces do. Sometimes I'll sit for a while and imagine the entire painting being done before I even put a brush on the canvas. I go through everything in my head, the whole process of making the picture, start to finish, so that I have it all visualized. Then I start."

Pinkham's work also demonstrates some variation in finish. "You know you have finished when the painting is making the statement you wanted it to make," he says. Sometimes this happens quickly, and other times it has to be worked over for a longer period. Again, Pinkham is concerned with allowing the painting to dictate its own needs rather than imposing a uniform degree of finish on all his pictures. He is very thoughtful about the actual accomplishment of each painting. "I hope that the paintings suggest a certain state of mind," he says. "Often they have to do with rest, peace, and a quietness of spirit. The landscapes themselves become a springboard to induce this sense. This is something I have experienced out in the field, and my work is my way of bringing it back and giving it to others."

Although his paintings present an exquisite sensitivity to the world, Pinkham's process is both professional and extremely well organized. He paints on canvas glued to luan board that he prepares at home. He is also equipped with a good Russian easel, along with an umbrella, a stool, and foul-weather gear. Years ago he converted a U-Haul truck into a traveling studio, complete with a shower stall, so that he and his wife, Vicky, also an artist, could make months-long trips





OPPOSITE PAGE

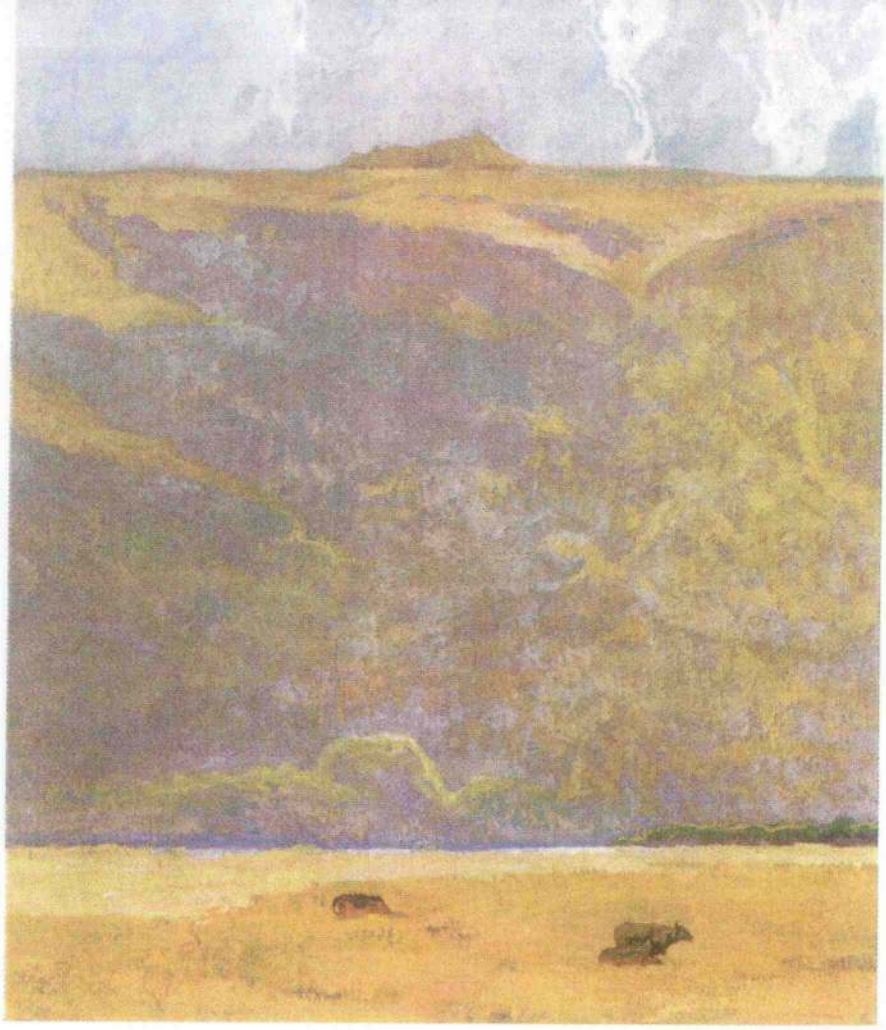
Stillness

2001, oil on board, 36 x 30. Collection American Legacy Fine Arts, Pasadena, California.

RIGHT

Rest

2002, oil on board, 40 x 32.



out into the wilderness areas of the American West and work on views in the most remote locations. "I just love being on the road," he says, "staying out there and getting close to the land, painting for days until you can't even remember what day of the week it is."

The success of a painting by Pinkham is built on his sure grasp of the basic elements of painting: tone, color, and drawing. This can be seen in *Rest*, a large picture showing a huge expanse of meadow, backed by a hill shrouded in a vast, luminous shadow. In this highly complex subject the artist has managed to simplify things into several broad areas of lights and darks, making clear shapes and strong contrasts. He has placed the paint with sensitive, lively brushing, leaving the surface a little open so that the paint can be built up in scumbled layers. In this brushy layering the artist enriches the color and explores its subtleties, often moving the color and tonal value in infinitesimal steps to achieve the effect of light playing on a surface. In *Stillness* the artist has simplified the trees into very clear shapes and built the surfaces with lively, open brushing, playing warm and cool color together in order to create the delicate but active temperatures of light on a snowy day. In both paintings, however, the finished product is more than the sum of its parts. Something in the sustained value judgments and pure touch of the artist contrives to build a sensation of restfulness and peace in a way that is quite impossible to analyze.

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Pinkham's passion for the land, particularly in his native California, has led him to become involved in land conservation. "It seemed a natural outgrowth of my work as a painter," he says. "If you value something, then you want other people to be able to share it." The artist estimates that he currently spends about two days a week working for the preservation of open land in his hometown of Palos Verdes. "In my case it's very rewarding because we've been able to accomplish a great deal, and we've actually raised several million dollars to purchase large tracts of land and put them beyond development forever," he says. "In this area we are actually at the point where we can see the light at the end of the tunnel." Pinkham thinks of both his painting and his conservation work as a way of giving back to others, a theme that constantly comes up in conversation with him. He is also the head of the mentoring program of the California Art Club, in which young artists are taken under the wing of older professionals. "It's been one of the most rewarding experiences in my professional life," he says.

Certainly Pinkham's enthusiasm for such initiatives stems from his own long journey to becoming a professional painter. Raised in a family with strong

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LEFT
The Peace of God That Passes All Understanding
1991, oil on board, 18 x 22.

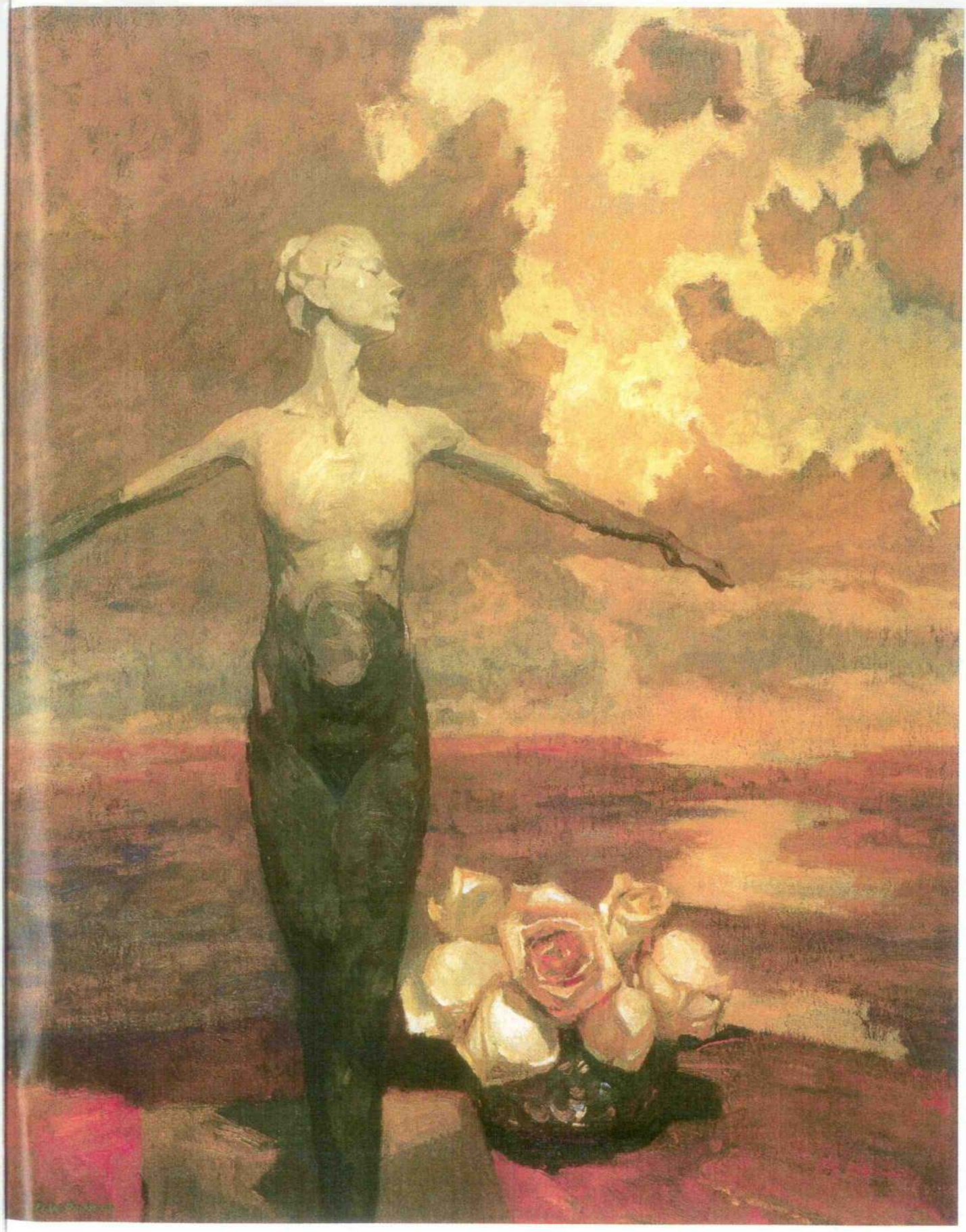
OPPOSITE PAGE
The Pursuit
2000, oil on board, 30 x 24.

About the Artist

Daniel W. Pinkham is a founding member of the Plein Air Artists of California and is a signature member and board member of the California Art Club. Active in land conservation, environmental issues, and the Portuguese Bend Artist Colony, he continues to make paintings that are sensitive to the spirit of the American landscape. He makes his home in Palos Verdes, California, and is represented by American Legacy Fine Arts, in Pasadena, California, and Parkside Gallery, in Carmel, California. He is a signature member of Oil Painters of America. Visit his website at www.danielpinkham.com.

artistic antecedents (Albert Pinkham Ryder was a distant relative of his father), Pinkham grew up drawing and painting. He studied art at the Art Center College of Design, then in Los Angeles [now in Pasadena], but his father fell ill and Pinkham left school to run the family plumbing business for eight years before picking up a brush again. He was then given a "scholarship"—really a free apprenticeship—with Russian-American painter Sergei Bongart. "He really taught me what it is to live as an artist," says Pinkham. "He ran a small art school, and he required that I work nonstop in class, as well as produce several paintings a week for him to critique. He started me off just painting in black and white for more than a year so that I would get secure with the tonal values and the paint handling. Only then did he bring color into the process." After five years of intense training Pinkham felt that it was time to start out on his own. He moved back to Los Angeles and opened his own art school.

"I always felt in high school that the art-appreciation classes were very poor," he says. "I wanted to make a place where kids could really develop an interest in art." Pinkham began by making presentations in local high schools. Sure enough, the kids who were inspired by his talks on paintings sought him out and enrolled at his school. "I built all the easels out of copper pipe that I had left over from the plumbing business," he remembers. "I also had a number of adult students who worked with me. It was a wonderful time. I found that teaching gave me invaluable knowledge about both painting and people." Eventually, though, the call of the wild was too great, and Pinkham closed his school and began to travel far and wide to make the paintings for which he has become known.

Does it concern him that his painting approach might be seen as conservative—that the plein air enterprise has changed little since the late 19th century? "Not at all," says the artist. "Sergei once told me, 'Being different is not necessarily good ... being good is different enough.' It's always going to be fresh because somebody new is painting and bringing new ideas and a different outlook to it all." ■

John A. Parks is an artist who is represented by Allan Stone Gallery, in New York City. He is also a teacher at the School of Visual Arts, in New York City, and is a frequent contributor to American Artist, Drawing, Watercolor, *and* Workshop *magazines.*