

# Pasadena Star-News

## Eric Merrell paints the West

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Eric Merrell paints on location in the desert. (Courtesy photo)

If you have traveled through our deserts, then you will recognize the hazy skies of the Salton Sea and the crisp heat of Joshua Tree as captured in Eric Merrell's paintings.

Forty of the San Gabriel artist's landscapes and still lifes will be exhibited during "Eric Merrell: Romance of the West - and the Western Spirit,"

beginning Saturday at American Legacy Fine Arts in Pasadena.

Merrell is a true plein air artist, toting his portable easel, umbrella, oil paints and more to locations throughout the deserts of California.

"I spend a lot of time on location because of the color and light going on," Merrell said. "And I can record it that way."

After selecting a site, Merrell walks around the area making thumbnail sketches along with notes in his sketchbook.

"There's something that stops you that you're interested in, so the sketchbook notes are to try and figure that out a little bit more," he said.

He will also jot down his feelings driving to and arriving at the site. With this attention to detail, the preparations for painting can take Merrell as long as two hours. When he finally puts the brush to canvas, Merrell refers to his notes, aiming to share his emotions along with the scene. He likes to create large paintings on location and will return to the site several times if needed.

Merrell usually goes to Salton Sea each fall to paint, often accompanied by fellow artist Andrew Dickson, who is an art professor at Cal State

Fullerton. Merrell says the widely-discussed ruination of the area is overrated and is limited to small parts of the big sea.

"It's interesting to paint some of the ruined areas along the beaches, but if you turned around and looked the other direction at the hills just across the street, you'd see it's really beautiful," Merrell said. "I could spend the rest of my life painting out there. There's so much to see, old adobes and hidden oases and canyons."

The desert can be desolate and harsh, yet it has many aspects that draw a painter's eye. Merrell especially likes the brightness and purity of light. The Salton Sea is extra interesting, as the salt from the water works its way into the atmosphere.

"One of the things that was intriguing to me is that there was always a haze hanging over the sea and it would change colors throughout the day as the clouds shifted or the sun moved," Merrell said. "There would be this interesting band of color above the surface of the water."

The Salton Sea is in the low desert, 226 feet below sea level, and has sparse vegetation with small bushes and trees. Merrell's other favorite painting spot is Joshua Tree Forest. Joshua Tree is in the high desert (elevation of 2,000 feet and higher) and it has much more life, with cacti, bushes and its famous trees, as well as colorful seasonal blooms. The two spots serve as a nice contrast for Merrell's work.

Merrell adds to his pieces by making frames for them.

"It's much more laborious, but it's fun because I like the end result," Merrell said. "I'll come up with carvings that I think are suitable for the piece and that way they're really unique."

Today Merrell is a full-time artist and recently married. He also teaches at area art schools.

Merrell is interested in incorporating the traditions developed by California artists during the past 100 years.

"There's been a lot of popularity with painting again and plein air work and the California Art Club has helped to really get that going again," he said. "I think there are a lot of new ways of seeing that are pretty exciting. I'm trying to work along those lines.

"Maybe it's a way of composing a scene or trying to see something a little bit differently, and somehow make that piece of the landscape more personal, make the painting a little more mine. It might be a recognizable place, where people have been there before, but maybe there's something about the color or the way it's presented that there's something different. What I'm hoping to do is just make my own commentary on it."