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First Light at Yellow
Banks, Santa Cruz Island
(detail)

by David C. Gallup

Nature's Masterpieces:

AN ARTIST CAPTURES THE UNCHARTED BEAUTY OF CALIFORNIA'S CHANNEL ISLANDS

Over the course of five years, I've been able to turn my love for the Channel Islands into a series of paintings that has resulted in a national museum tour, a 160-page book, and a documentary film of the project. Here are the conceptual, creative, and business strategies I employed to make this vision a reality.

—
by David C. Gallup

OPPOSITE PAGE

Twice Humbled

2009, oil, 80 x 48. Collection John and Susan Sanders. Recipient of 2010 Gold Medal Award at the California Art Club's 99th Annual Gold Medal Exhibition.

All artwork this article is part of "Nature's Masterpiece" national museum tour.

I consider this work the cornerstone of the entire Channel Islands collection. It was the first painting I did completely from memory, and Monet's Cathedral at Rouen series was a huge inspiration. For the whales, I watched hours and hours of footage of these animals until I could visualize and draw them accurately from any angle imaginable.

I have been living and painting in Southern California my entire adult life, and each year as development encroaches upon the open landscape, I find fewer and fewer untouched spaces of natural beauty to inspire my work. Southern California has its fair share of inspiring scenes, but I reached a point early in my career when the prospect of stepping over hundreds of other plein air painters capturing the same view of Keyhole Rock in Laguna Beach or Elephant Rock at El Matador Beach lost its luster. I longed for an obscure, largely unknown space that I could explore with my paintbrush in almost complete solitude, and I always believed that paintings could say more as a cohesive group than as just a parade of random images.

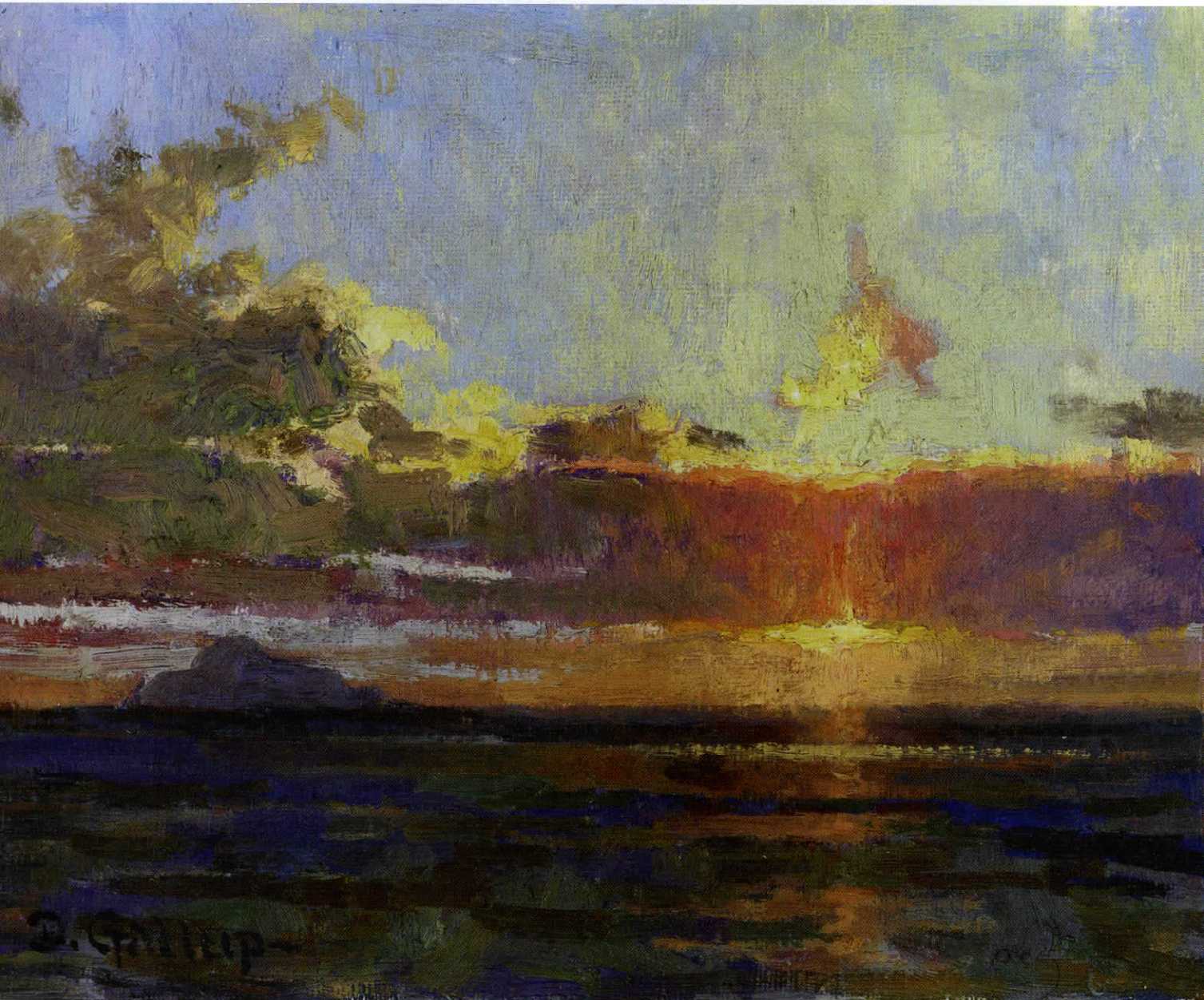
With the desire of finding a place all my own to explore and the thought of creating a meaningful series of work always at the forefront of my mind, you can imagine my excitement when, in 2005, I was one of 26 artists invited by the Museum of Ventura County to the Channel Islands National Park and Marine Sanctuary—a local island chain just off the coast of Southern California—to create work in celebration of the park's 25th anniversary. This was my first visit to the Channel Islands, and from that first boat trip around Santa Barbara Island, I knew I was

discovering a virtually unknown world of infinite visual inspiration. The fact that these rugged islands are located just miles away from one of the most populated places on earth also held great appeal to me, as in many ways life seemed to be carrying on here exactly as it had before the coming of man. During the boat ride, I learned that the Channel Islands are an immensely valuable living laboratory, known among scientists as the Galápagos of North America, and I became intrigued not only by the islands' topographical beauty but also by the rare and unique species of wildlife and marine life that make their home here.

The Enchanting Beauty of the Channel Islands

Upon my arrival on Santa Barbara Island—just one of eight islands that make up the channel—I was greeted by temperatures in the low 70s, picturesque rolling hills covered in wildflowers, 360-degree views of the sea with spouting whales in all directions, and a coastline of jagged cliffs, rock arches, and spires with nesting falcons, gulls, pelicans, and cormorants. I had never seen anything so beautiful. On the ride home, when they cut the engines to drift alongside a gray whale mother and calf





ABOVE

**First Light at
Yellow Banks,
Santa Cruz Island**

2010, oil, 8 x 10.
Private collection.

who spouted so close to the boat we got wet from the spray, I had what can only be described as an epiphany. At that moment I decided to dedicate the coming year to painting this magical island chain and the rich waters surrounding it. I felt like I was in an artist's paradise, and when I learned that no one had ever made a project of painting these islands—photographs and books on their history, geology, and biology, yes, but no paintings—my vision began to take shape. The idea grew into a gallery show, then a museum show, and finally the national museum tour of paintings that it is today. After that, all I had to do was produce the work and figure out how to make it all happen!

Making a Vision a Reality

After seeing the annual exhibition of the Portuguese Bend Artist Colony—a phenomenal local group of artists who paint their beautiful coastline in Palos Verdes, California—my respect for using art to bring awareness to conserving nature's open spaces was cemented. By putting together a collection of art in a museum setting that was about something significant, they did more than create beautiful souvenirs for people's walls. They created a powerful immersion in the poetry of a particular landscape, which in turn inspired viewers to work toward conserving the beauty depicted. This new discovery of mine, these rugged islands, would be my chance to produce an

exhibition that could hopefully have a similar impact on viewers.

My initial concept was to create a series of paintings that would offer an overall impression of the pure beauty and charm of the Channel Islands and Marine Sanctuary. I thought I would finish everything I needed for the show in about a year, and that 50 or so paintings would suffice in capturing the spirit of this unique place. I quickly learned that in addition to the rolling hills of grasses and flowers I encountered on my first visit to Santa Barbara Island, there were rocky caves, vast sandy beaches, inland dune areas, thick forests of pine and hardwood, rivers and waterfalls, and red-rock canyons. Not to mention wildlife, biodiversity, and climates unique to each island—so much more than I could ever convey in just 70 paintings!

So, what started as a plan to spend one year documenting these islands turned into a five-year project that is just now coming to final fruition, during which I have created more than 200 paintings. I have to say, the moment I detached a deadline from this project and envisioned the work as visual evidence of a personal experience rather than as potential saleable gallery-wall hangings, I began to grow profoundly as an artist. Suddenly I became unconventional and more daring in my composition and subject selection, working only to please my own artistic vision. I experimented with grand-scale works of unfamiliar subjects and abstract patterns of light and color.

By the end of my second year, I had outgrown nearly all the work from the first year and had to essentially start over. (Such was the learning curve throughout this five-year process.) In retrospect, I now understand that a project of this nature could never have been easy. If it were, some other artist would have done it long ago, and I would have never had the chance. I soon realized that this kind of endeavor would take preparation, planning, and patience—and a dogged determination to not give up during the challenges and obstacles that were sure to arise from an undertaking of this scope and magnitude.

The Creative Process: Preparation, Planning, & Plein Air Adventures

I have had the privilege to encounter numerous supporters throughout the production of this series who have helped make this project possible. First is one of my wonderful sponsors, Sail Channel Islands, who, through their expert crew led by Captain Dan Ryder, have taken me out by yacht or boat to explore some of the hard-to-navigate, hidden treasures of the island, including Painted Cave, one of the world's largest sea caves. It's stunningly beautiful inside this cave, almost too beautiful to be true, and it gets its name from the multicolored lichen, moss, algae, and mineral deposits that cover the ceiling and walls. One day, about halfway into the cave with Captain Dan in a bathtub-size



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ABOVE
Liquid Light—
Sea Lion Colony
at Santa Barbara
Island

2008, oil, 22 x 28.
 Collection Vieth,
 Miami, Florida.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Painted Cave
Interior

2008, oil, 10 x 10.
 Collection Ryder,
 Ventura, California.

inflatable boat, I gave the order to stop and set to work on my painting. Although the cave gets pretty narrow the farther in you go, the entry is 160 feet high and 100 feet wide, so I was able to paint inside the cave by the natural light streaming in. Still, from a technical point of view, it couldn't have been harder. It was cramped, dark, damp, and I was in constant motion—both up and down and drifting about. Creatively, it was a raft of new challenges and distractions, yet remarkably inspiring.

The unexpected working conditions encountered in attempting to paint inside the cave were just a taste of some of the extreme plein air conditions and challenges I would face throughout this project. On certain islands—San Miguel and Santa Rosa in particular—the wind blows ceaselessly, often more than 60 miles per hour. It's almost always cold, and you're not allowed to take a shower because of water conservation concerns. If you're painting, you will find that all your work is coated in a thick layer of dust, sand, and grass, and needs to be completely

reworked in the studio. It takes a rare, certain type of person to love painting in the extreme scenarios that present themselves on these islands. You never know what awaits you on this unpredictable stretch of land and sea—it's a tough place for most people, but it's paradise to a sea lion, pelican, sardine, or humpback whale. It's paradise to me.

In addition to adapting to the conditions described, I also had to change just about everything else about the way I work. Time on the islands is limited and must be planned far in advance. When I'm there, I have to work quickly. I've adjusted my equipment to comply with the fierce wind conditions by using a sturdy French easel rather than a lightweight pochade box. I carry tent stakes so I can attach my easel to the ground, and I've learned to work small—sometimes from a lap box when necessary—such as when in a raft or a sailboat. Because of the strong winds, I've also had to learn to work without an umbrella, which often requires working into the light to avoid direct sunlight on the canvas, or even

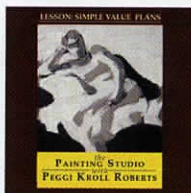
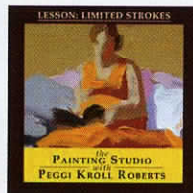
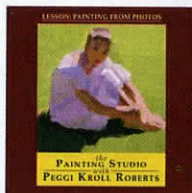
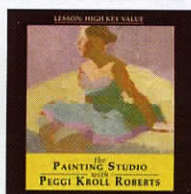
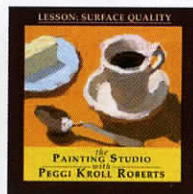
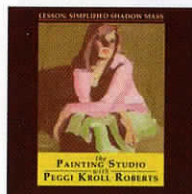


over my shoulder rather than facing my subject.

Most of the on-location work can't be larger than 12" x 16", or else I'd quickly turn into a windsurfer—plus it's hard to fit large, wet paintings on the boat. A lot of my plein air paintings were used to work up larger studio paintings incorporating wildlife or more imaginative elements of what I observed on-site. That being said, sometimes a plein air painting became a finished work just by putting a frame on it, because in many cases those direct works captured just the right balance of intimacy and spontaneity I was after. In the end, about two-thirds of the final paintings for the exhibition have been created in the studio. To accommodate the range of sizes necessary for a museum tour, one-third of the paintings are small on-location works, one-third are mid-sized studio paintings, and one-third are large-scale studio works about 30" x 40" to 60" x 80".

One of my largest works in the show, *Twice Humbled*, is possibly my favorite piece in the collection to date and is one of several paintings I did entirely from memory. I began this painting during my second year into the Channel Islands project. My friend took me in his boat for a tour around Anacapa Island, and needless to say I found plenty to inspire me artistically. In particular, there were these hazy cliffs towering over us in the noon light that reminded of Monet's Rouen Cathedral series. I've long loved those paintings, as I think they're some of the most important work ever produced. When I saw that same quality of light and beauty in the cliff face of Anacapa that day, I knew I had to paint it. I sat on the boat taking hundreds of photos and contemplating how I could do justice to the beauty of the light while conveying the sense of how small one feels at the base of them. That's when we noticed a small pod of whales just ahead. If the towering cliffs were humbling, the presence

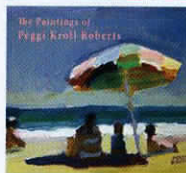
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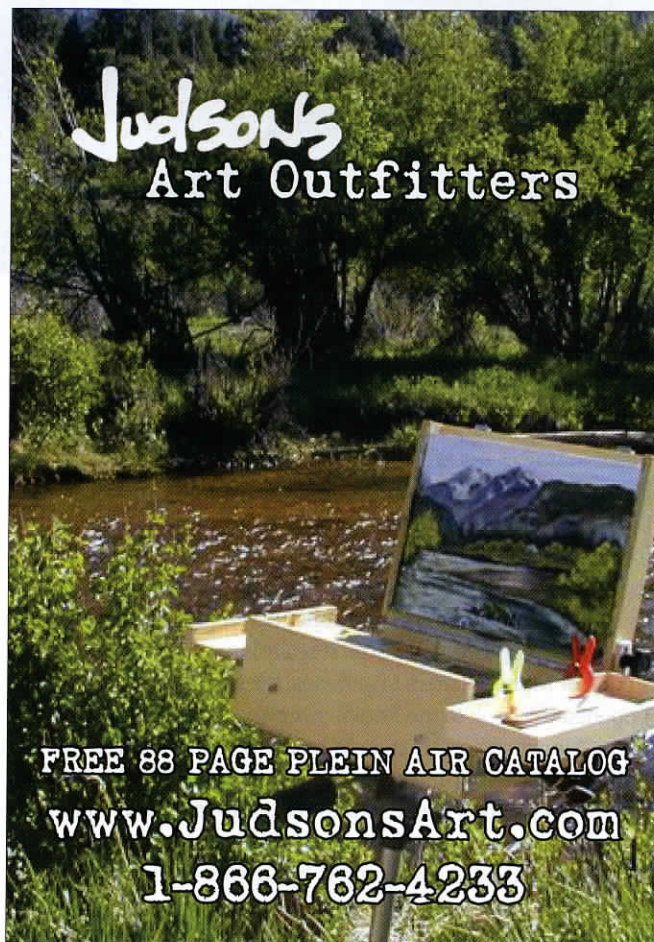


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of whales seen up close in a small boat left me twice humbled. When I got home and started analyzing the photo reference, I found that the magic had been lost to digital reproduction. I turned off the computer and began to work from memory for the first time in my life. Inspired by the Monet light and facade-like cliffs, I put together a vertical composition reminiscent of the series from Rouen. Then I added some orcas at the bottom for scale and awe. I loved it, signed it, and moved on.

For years, I kept going back to the painting—reworking it in my head and wishing I had done it even bigger. I had pretty much made up my mind to do it really large when I was given a book of Monet's letters to galleries, friends, and loved ones. I opened the book to the Rouen years and was astounded by his passionate determination to hold himself to the highest standards of beauty and vision for this series. Newly inspired, I steeled myself for a deeper commitment to my work, and then went home and stretched out a 48"-x-80" canvas for the remake of *Twice Humbled*. It was going to be an even stronger vertical

than the study and emulated the unusual 3:5 ratio of Monet's cathedral series. After five weeks the painting was finished, and upon completion I knew it was my personal Cathedral of Rouen. The painting is actually rich with subtext and references to Monet's paintings and, if you look closely, you can see the essence of the cathedral sculpted within the cliff walls, as well as domed arches and bas-relief. By making a deliberate reference to the cathedral paintings, there is a message that the park itself can be seen as a divine place of worship. It sums up all of my feelings about myself as an artist and what nature means to me.

The Business of Art: Networking, Marketing, & Promoting

One of the facts of the Channel Islands that I quickly learned at the beginning of the process is that two-thirds of the park is underwater, and I desperately wanted to find a way to explore and paint the rich biodiversity of the undersea kelp forests and marine life. Around this time, I attended the screening of The

OPPOSITE PAGE

**The Garden Below,
Kelp Forest Off
Santa Cruz Island**

2006, oil, 28 x 28.
Collection Cabral, Port
Hueneme, California.

Essential Image Source Foundation's (EISF) latest IMAX-quality HD documentary film on the Channel Islands. I learned in the presentation from Susan Sember, the film's director and producer, that the foundation had been using a fantastic prototype submarine to get some of their undersea footage of whales, great white sharks, and bait-balls. She also explained that thousands of hours of footage went into making this one-hour film, and that all of the "cutting-room-floor" material was made into a digital, searchable database.

I ended up inviting Susan to see the Channel Islands paintings I had been working on and explained to her my goals and vision for this project. At the end of our conversation, she not only told me that I could have access to any of the footage she had shot for the film but also that she wanted to make a documentary about my project. And, as an aside, she thought a shot of me working from the submarine would be great in the documentary. I now had the solution to my underwater plein air-painting plight—I would work from the HD-quality video footage taken from the submarine, rather than use photographs—and I had my second major sponsor for the show. I then decided to get my SCUBA certification to do some cold-water diving throughout the islands to see this stunning underwater world first-hand, and was put in touch with Scubahaus, in Santa Monica, who became another important sponsor of the series. For diving the islands, I'm supported by Truth Aquatics and their fleet of dive boats. This show has truly become a community project and is richer for it.

With a documentary film on the way, a book already in the works, and several sponsors secured who helped greatly in the funding and equipment needs for this project, I needed to start approaching museums and finalizing exhibition dates. I put together a photo album of some of the work from the show, wrote up a two-page artists' vision statement, and started pitching the concept to venues I thought would be a natural fit. I started with museums where I already had a foot in the door, such as places where I had shown my work as part of a group exhibition. I am currently working with two major institutions for the East Coast portion of the tour, and I already have California exhibitions scheduled at the Frederick R. Weisman Museum of Art and the Museum of Ventura for the summer of 2011 and the spring of 2012, respectively. One piece of marketing advice I can offer artists is to understand the needs of the organization you're approaching and figure out how your concept can complement what they already have in place. And don't be shy. You need to seize opportunities for what they are and believe enough in your own vision to make others see its potential.



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I know there are artists reading this who will misinterpret my devotion to the business side of art as a sell out, and I want to address that. I'm not independently wealthy, and I have no other source of income, so, for me, having a handle on my business is what allows me to do the work I want to do. If I can do a good enough job of marketing and promoting the work I am passionate about, I won't have to do work that meets a specific established market, proven color schemes, price points, or acceptable subjects. My credo is this: If the quality is there and the business is handled, an artist can paint freely and still make a respectable living. I have learned that if I make a painting that I love, someone else will love it too. If we didn't share similar experiences and feelings—even the ones we think are unique to us as individuals—the most personal work would be the least appreciated. I've found in my years as a painter that quite the opposite is also true.

Which I guess brings us back to the beginning of why I wanted to take on this project in the first place. From the moment I laid eyes on the Channel Islands I knew this unique place would be an endless source of artistic inspiration for me, and would be equally inspiring to viewers if I could somehow capture its boundless and infinite beauty through my paintings. My hope is that people will walk away from this show

feeling the way I felt when I first saw the Portuguese Bend Artist Colony's exhibition six years ago. I want them to not only feel my deep reverence for the beauty of the subject but also to have the transformational experience of seeing what art can do. The purpose of art is to make us feel something, but at its best it can inspire us by its very creation. That is the mark of great work, and that is what I humbly hope the public will take away from this exhibition. ■

"Nature's Masterpiece—California's Channel Islands" is scheduled for exhibition in California at both Frederick R. Weisman Museum of Art, and the Museum of Ventura County, starting in the summer of 2011. Gallup's Channel Islands series will also travel to the East Coast for exhibition at two major museum venues. A documentary DVD of the project is being produced by Essential Image Foundation and is scheduled for release in the summer of 2011. For updates on the locations and dates of this national tour, as well as the special projects and educational components surrounding it, visit www.dgallup.com, and subscribe to the artist's monthly Moment of Beauty e-newsletters. Sponsors for this project include the Bill & Marilyn Field Trust, National Park Service, The Nature Conservancy, Susan Sember and The Essential Image Source Foundation, Sony, Sail Channel Islands, Scubahaus, Truth Aquatics, and Frederick R. Weisman Museum of Art.

Storm Petrels With Blue Shark

2009, oil, 18 x 24. Private collection.

In October of 2009, on a short trip to Santa Barbara Island, we saw at least 20 juvenile blue sharks in one day. I decided to juxtapose these deadly predators—which can reach monstrous sizes—with the petite, delicate, and graceful storm petrels. That contrast set up a strong statement that accurately captured both the delicacy and power of this scene.

About the Artist



David C. Gallup has been living and painting in Southern California for more than 25 years. In 1990 he graduated from the Otis Art Institute of Parsons School of Design and immediately began teaching art, which he continues to enjoy to this day. In 1992 Gallup met Japanese artist Hiro Yamagata and soon became the lead staff artist on his Earthly Paradise collection. It was during this time and under this influence that Gallup began to develop his color-harmony theories, using the basic principles of music theory to create color combinations that harmonized rather than contrasted. Throughout 1999, Gallup painted a California sunset every night to document the final year of the 20th century. That body of work resulted in his first solo gallery show in West Los Angeles. In the fall of 2000, Gallup became an artist member of the California Art Club, and has been featured in their prestigious annual Gold Medal show from 2001 through 2010. Gallup is currently the vice president of the California Art Club, a signature member of their board of directors, and has served as the Gold Medal Artist's Chairman since 2008. He is also on the International Advisory Committee for the Natural World Museum, in San Francisco. He is currently represented exclusively by Morseburg Galleries, in West Hollywood, and his work can be seen in private and public collections nationwide. For more information on Gallup, visit his website at www.dgallup.com.

In the Footsteps of Thomas Moran

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