



DAN PINKHAM

High on the Hill, oil, 36" by 48"

"Big sky, big dreams, big humility."

A VISUAL POET

By Mary Nelson

California artist Dan Pinkham wants to leave behind a legacy. Yes, his paintings will continue to be his spiritual voice into perpetuity, but he wants there to be more. His studio, a 16th century replica of the Italian Chapel that Michelangelo used as a studio when he painted the Sistine Chapel, will be that legacy. Pinkham and his wife Vicki, along with a nephew and fellow artists, have spent years refurbishing this relic. In fact, when they first saw the property, slated for demolition, it presented a daunting undertaking that neither Pinkham nor his wife felt inclined to tackle.

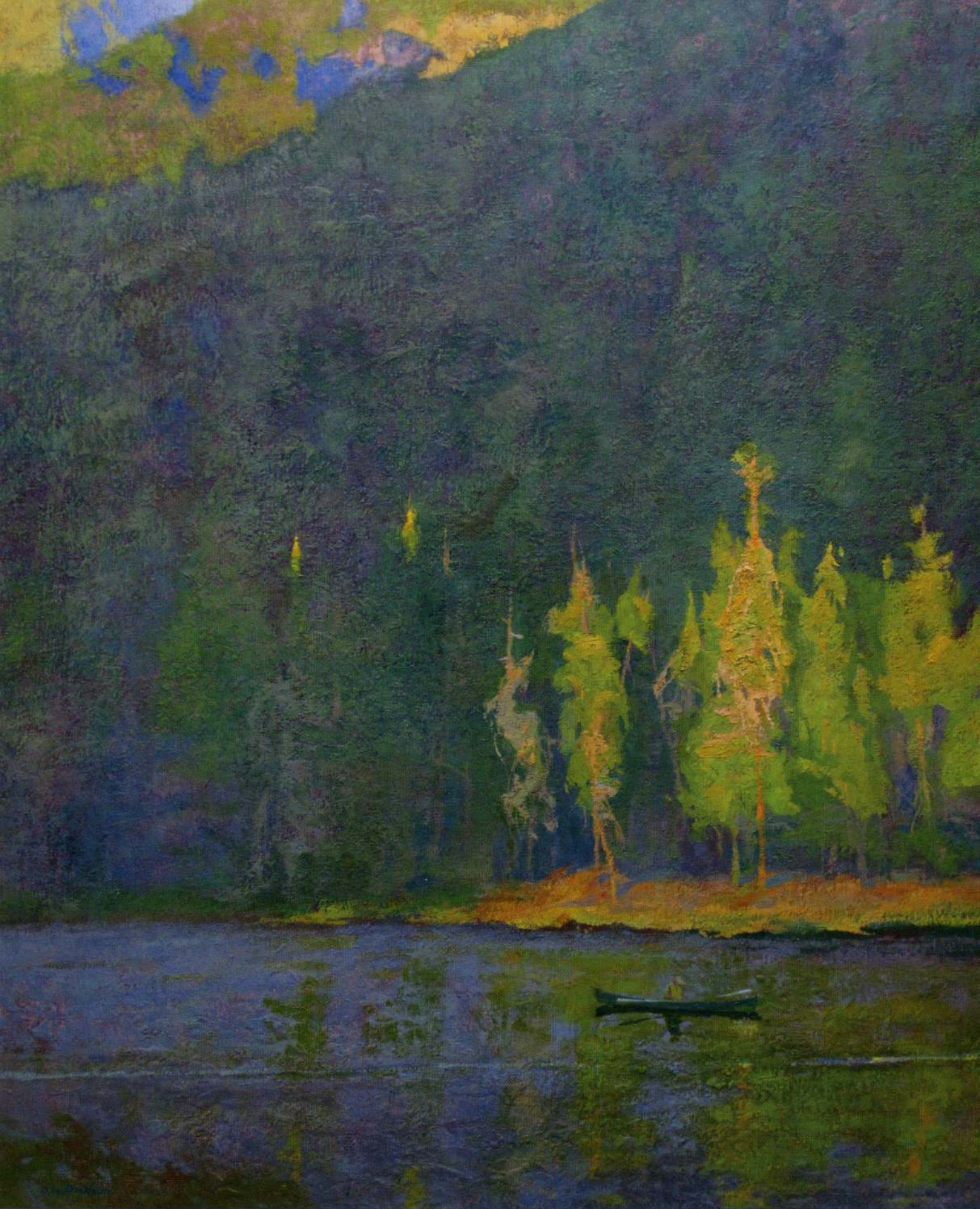
Besides, he already had a lovely studio that he was sure would be his last. So, just like the city of Palos Verdes, California, which was ready

to walk away from this forlorn scrap of an edifice by razing it, if it could not be sold, the Pinkhams were ready to leave it behind. But they didn't. It was almost as though the building had touched something deep inside the husband and wife, eroding the resolve to turn their backs on it.

Positioned directly across a narrow road from Portuguese Point, which drops 250 feet to the Pacific Ocean, it was like a siren song. Together the couple was drawn into the spirit of the land, the view, and the structure. They acquiesced to its lure, against the better judgment of many of their friends. Renovating the studio became a labor of love—and headquarters for the Portuguese Bend Artist Colony.

Herein lies the key to Pinkham's legacy. He, Vicki, and the seven artists who make up the colony have a vision. "We've taken our studio and home, and we've turned it into the Pinkham Foundation for the Arts, a nonprofit," he explains. "When we pass, we will leave this home to be an artist residence, a classroom for teaching. I just want that up and running, make sure it's on sound footing." The nonprofit will display and preserve Pinkham's art, as well as that of the other artists in the colony. It will be a legacy to their devotion to the land and to mentoring aspiring artists. There's a reason for this dream.

You see, Pinkham is no stranger to mentorship, nor is he a stranger to struggling to give voice to his



Soul Rise, oil, 36" by 30"

"A glorious morning released from the past through painting."



artistic passion. But, let's go back to the beginning.

As a general rule, you put a Crayon in a child's hand and he or she will begin to test the boundaries of art. No guarantees. Pinkham was no different; well except for the fact that Pinkham in Scottish means painter for the village, but I digress. No, Pinkham did what any other kid would do; he colored. But his scribbles didn't morph into artistry, not until a fateful encounter with an artistic nun.

As any 4-year-old will do, Pinkham had befriended neighbors he would visit daily for his ration of cookies and milk. But, the day he met Sister Camille, the neighbors' house-guest, the die was cast. Charlotte, his neighbor, took the lad to meet Sister Camille and, "When I walked into the room and smelled what turned out to be Grumbacher Oil Painting Medium III, it just filled my senses," he says. "[I was] looking at

the colors, seeing her painting, and smelling that medium and those turp[entine]s; I was hooked."

Even though he had been surrounded by a musical and artistic family all his young life, this was the moment that an inner visual poet proclaimed its ascendancy. That poetic voice grew throughout elementary and high school, carrying him on to major in illustration at Art Center College of Design in Los Angeles from 1972 to 1974, where his visual poetry really began to take shape. And, he had the renowned Russian artist Sergei Bongart as his mentor. He was in the fourth quarter at the center, and he was feeling good.

"I was full on in art, and then my dad got sick," Pinkham says. A freak infection had put his father on dialysis, and he could no longer run the family plumbing business. To Pinkham it was a no-brainer; quit school and go home to run the business. Sergei didn't see it

the same way. "Sergei said 'This is ridiculous; you are an artist not a plumber,'" Pinkham recalls, "I told him I needed to do this, and Sergei didn't speak to me for eight years."

To Pinkham, Bongart was the quintessential artist—vital to his own education. Being chastised by his mentor cut deeply, but his family ethic was stronger. Pinkham knew the plumbing business, having grown up in it, and dutifully ran the company for eight years. He kept the business going, wanting to make sure his mother would be taken care of in her old age. Although he didn't paint during that time, he stayed in touch with fellow artists and

Above - Snowday Power, oil, 27" by 32"

"Snow falling silently whispers opportunity to listen deeper."

Opposite Page - Sanctuary, oil, 30" by 24"

"Gliding on the quiet water felt like entering a cathedral."





remained cognizant of the art world through them. Then, in 1980, he was done. It was time to heed the call of his ever-insistent inner voice. He sold the business and set off to rekindle his mentorship with Bongart.

Even though they hadn't spoken in eight years, Bongart embraced Pinkham's return to art, much as a father would the prodigal son, giving him a full-ride, five-year scholarship. To study once again alongside the Russian painter was akin to redemption, and Pinkham threw himself into art like never before.

At the Art Center, Pinkham's medium had been acrylic and gouache. With Bongart, it was oil. "We started with the Russian School of artistic instruction," he says. "It was the old European Italia style, working from plaster casts, drawing, and then black and white," he says.

"Then you graduated from black and white to color to still lifes and on to color figure and portraiture."

It turned out that Pinkham was a natural at color. Value? Not so much. "I was unusual in the group, because I struggled a bit with values," he says. "I would sometimes confuse the value of the color, so I went back to black and white. I loved it and stayed there for the longest time, and I think it really improved my color."

As always, instruction must come to an end, and Bongart let Pinkham know it was time for him to move on. One day he looked at Pinkham and said, "Go paint," Pinkham recalls. "We had a gradual parting, while I developed my own voice."

Now comes the struggling artist part. In the '80s, when Pinkham finally embarked on his career in art, plein air painting had fallen out of

favor. Undeterred, Pinkham would take off in one of the plumbing vans he'd kept, going far afield to paint wherever whim would take him, continuing in this vein for about 15 years. "I love the West, but I spent years painting Maine, as well," he says of his travels. "[Today] I would say I paint the West, and I am more of a Western landscape artist." Backed by his instruction from Bongart, who taught him to paint what he felt, those forays into nature gave Pinkham's spiritual, artistic poet a strong voice that blazed from his core. Even so, those were not easy years.

"I'd hit the road and paint, and I could be in 20-degree-below-zero

Above - Color Poem—Fall Effect, oil, 24" by 24"

"A celebration! Nature feeding me as it has done for everyone before."



Above - *Sublime Order*, oil, 30" by 40"


"I wish everyone could dwell on this moment of convergence. Man is strongest when on his knees in prayer."

weather, in the middle of nowhere painting," he says. "Just trying to get one color next to another that felt in perfect pitch." "You could die out there. And there was no promise you'd ever make a living at it. But you did it because it was a part of you, you had to do it." Some years he lived on a mere \$6,000, but his philosophy has always been that art is a byproduct of who you are, so he had no choice but to heed his calling.

In 1988, a friend introduced Pinkham to Vicki Thorpe, an artist and flight attendant. Often, during their courtship, Pinkham would arrive at a location in his van, Vicki would emerge from a flight, and they'd spend the time together painting and falling in love. Then, he'd take her to the airport to catch her next trip, and they'd do it again, until their common interests and outlooks led to marriage in 1992.

They settled in Palos Verdes,

California, where Pinkham had founded Plein Air Artists of California—reigniting interest in plein air painting—and the Portuguese Bend Arts Colony. "We formed the colony officially so we could partner with the Palos Verdes Land Conservancy to do annual exhibitions to raise funds to save the open spaces along the coast of California," he says. "We did 15 years of annual shows of 80 paintings or more of this area. We were able to help the conservancy save 15,000 acres along the coast that will never be developed."

The purpose of Pinkham's artistic poetry has been to create art that has emotional and spiritual impact. It hasn't been an easy life, but he says it really is the only one he could possibly live. 

Mary Nelson is a writer living in Minneapolis, Minnesota.