



CALIFORNIA *Dreamin'*

Michael Obermeyer chases the light to capture sea, sand, and sky

BY BONNIE GANGELHOFF



▲ Opening Day, 1958, oil, 10 x 20.

◀ Grand Laguna, oil, 12 x 16.



EARLY IN THE 20th century, distinguished landscape painters began pouring into Laguna Beach, CA, to capture its seven-mile coastline, turquoise-blue water, and pounding surf. Artists such as Edgar Payne and William Wendt were drawn to the area's abundant natural wonders; many others followed in their footsteps, forming the movement we now refer to as early California Impressionism. In 1918 Payne and Wendt were among a group of artists who opened one of the first galleries in town.

Now, fast-forward 100 years: In 2018 a visitor to Laguna Beach finds a thriving art scene with dozens of galleries, studios, and artists carrying on the traditions of the pioneers who painted outdoors to capture the fleeting light. One of these accomplished contemporary impressionists is Michael Obermeyer.

Obermeyer's studio is tucked inside

a low-slung complex that is the creative home to an array of local artists. The lush Laguna Coast Wilderness Park is just across the street, and not far away are sunny beaches full of swimmers, surfers, and snorkelers. Obermeyer and his modern-day cohorts plant their easels in the sand, just like their artistic forebears.

Unlike many of the early California Impressionists, who came to Southern California from other places, Obermeyer is a native son. As a youngster he visited art festivals with his family, including the famous annual Festival of Arts. It featured a kids' area, where Obermeyer recalls drawing one of his early masterpieces—a wolf's head in pastel.

This year the artist celebrates his 21st anniversary of participating in the show as a professional artist. He is known among colleagues and collectors

representation

James J. Rieser Fine Art, Carmel, CA;
Hillside Fine Art, Claremont, CA;
Fairmont Gallery, Sonoma, CA.

upcoming shows

Signs of Spring, California Art Club Gallery at the Old Mill, San Marino, CA, through May 20.

On Location in Malibu, Frederick R. Weisman Museum of Art, Pepperdine University, Malibu, CA, May 19-July 29.

California Art Club Gold Medal Exhibition, National History Museum of Los Angeles, June 10-July 1.

Festival of Arts, Laguna Beach, CA, July 5-September 1.

Laguna Beach Plein Air Painting Invitational, Laguna Beach, CA, October 6-14.

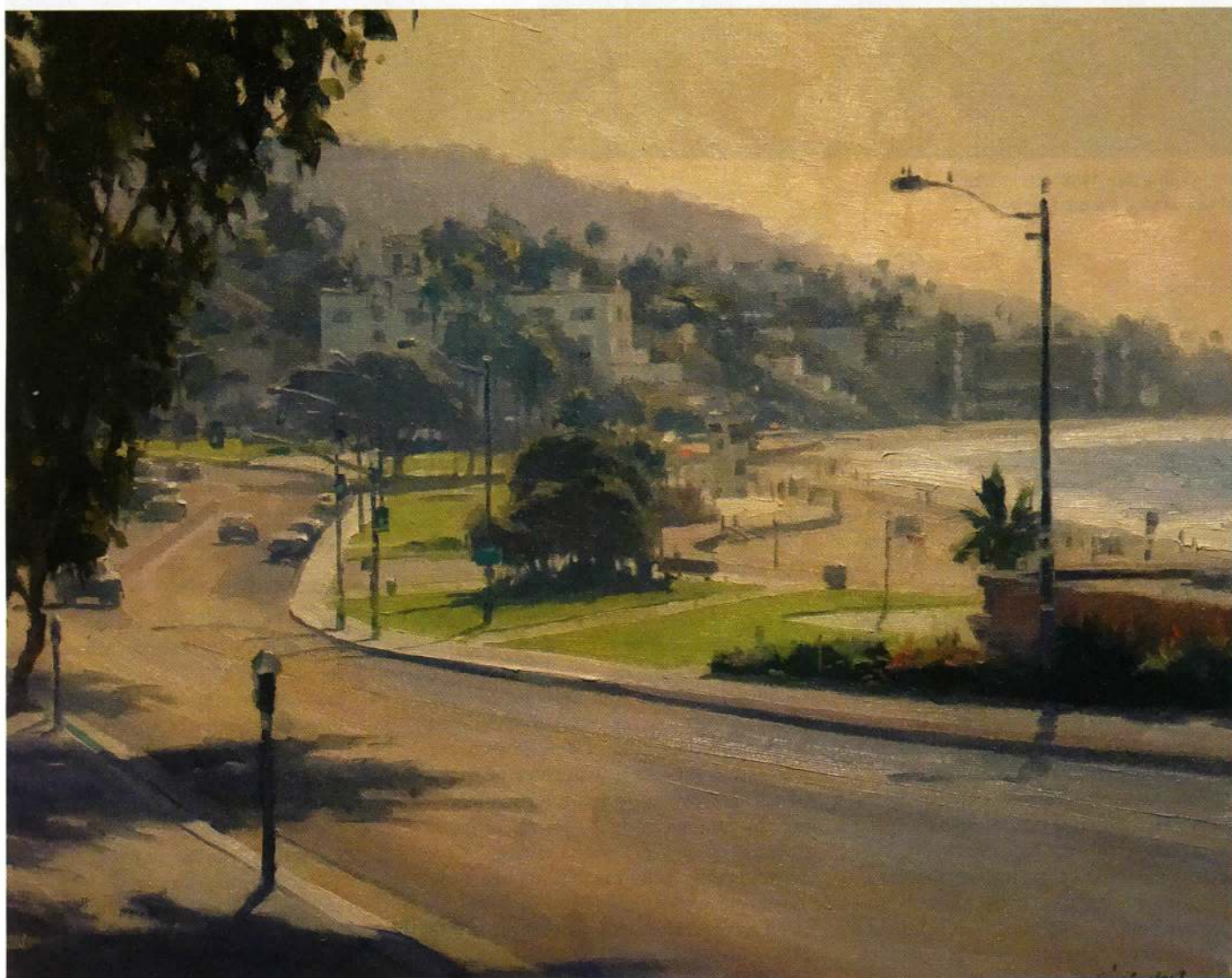
Catalina: The Wild Side, Newport Beach, CA, October 21.

for oil paintings that capture a sense of place and the unique Golden State light with a fresh, spontaneous sensibility. "I love trying to convey the atmospheric light here," Obermeyer says. "There is a warmth to it, especially in the morning. The haze and light along our coast is caused by vapor in the air along with the strong sunlight we get." In both CANYON HAZE [see page 64] and GRAND LAGUNA [see page 60], the artist depicts the moody mist that hangs over the coastal city just after daybreak. To paint these pieces, Obermeyer looked directly into the sun—he tends to favor backlit scenes.

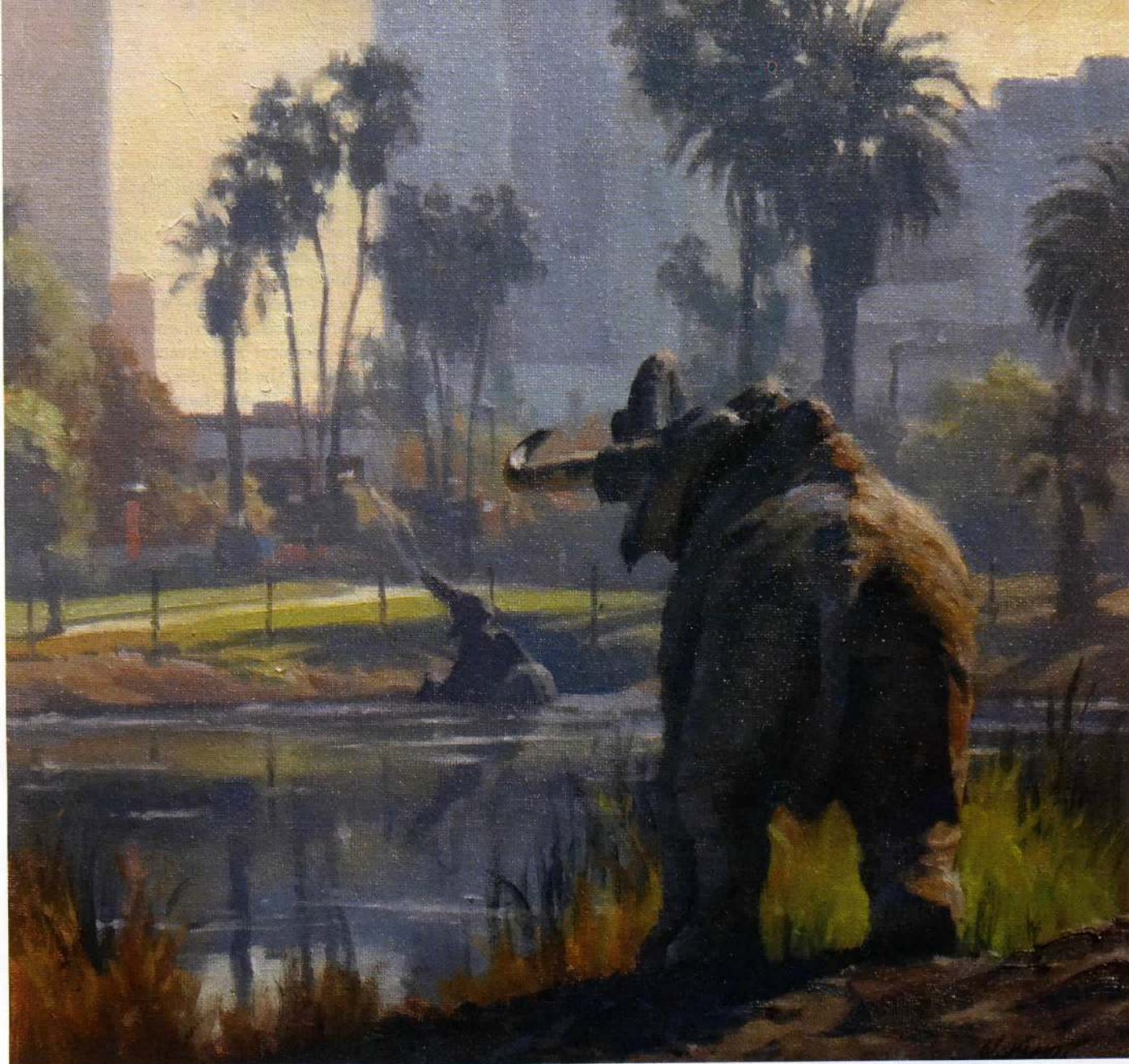
While many plein-air painters are highly skilled at portraying light and atmosphere, Obermeyer brings an unusual perspective on these elements to the canvas: The painter is also a pilot, having held a license for nearly 30 years. "When I began flying, I had a lot to learn about weather patterns so that I could make smart decisions about when and where to fly," he says. "I discovered that in certain inversion layers, the haze would sometimes extend from the surface up to 500 feet. I could climb to altitude, and suddenly the visibility changed from five miles to unlimited."

There are, of course, exceptions to Obermeyer's preference for backlit scenes. For example, he has portrayed the vintage beach cottages at Crystal Cove State Park with the sun behind his back. "That way I am using the shadows of trees and clouds to help create lights and darks, as well as atmosphere in the background cliffs," he says. "The coastal light is still present, but I feel more movement because of the clouds and changing shadows. In all my plein-air paintings, it's about light and how it falls on my scene."

As this story was going to press, Ober-



Welcome to Laguna, oil, 16 x 20.



La Brea Locals, oil, 12 x 12.

meyer's works were on view in a solo show at Debra Huse Gallery on nearby Balboa Island. Five other prestigious shows are on his calendar for later in the year, including the annual Laguna Beach Plein Air Painting Invitational in October, where he has garnered numerous awards in years past. In 2016 he received the Collector's Choice award, an honor he considers special. "It means my paintings, and therefore my vision, are appreciated and accepted by people who may not be artists but still see things the way I do," Obermeyer says. "I am communi-

cating something that is understood by them, maybe something they feel in my paintings, and there is great satisfaction for me in that."

OBERMEYER GREW up in the San Fernando Valley, the second of four children. His father worked in the aerospace division of McDonnell Douglas. As a youngster he wasn't the best student in the room; he much preferred drawing dinosaurs and airplanes to studying. Fortunately his parents recognized

his interests, and in second grade they enrolled him in after-school art classes. Obermeyer says he is grateful to them as well as to the nuns at St. Joseph the Worker School, who encouraged him. For some kids it might have been a jolt to go from classrooms run by nuns to art studios where images of "naked ladies" hung on the walls. Obermeyer says he didn't have much difficulty with the transition, though. "That's probably where I got my inspiration to draw some naked women on the back of a math test I did poorly on," he jokes.



Wings Over the Canyon, oil, 11 x 14.



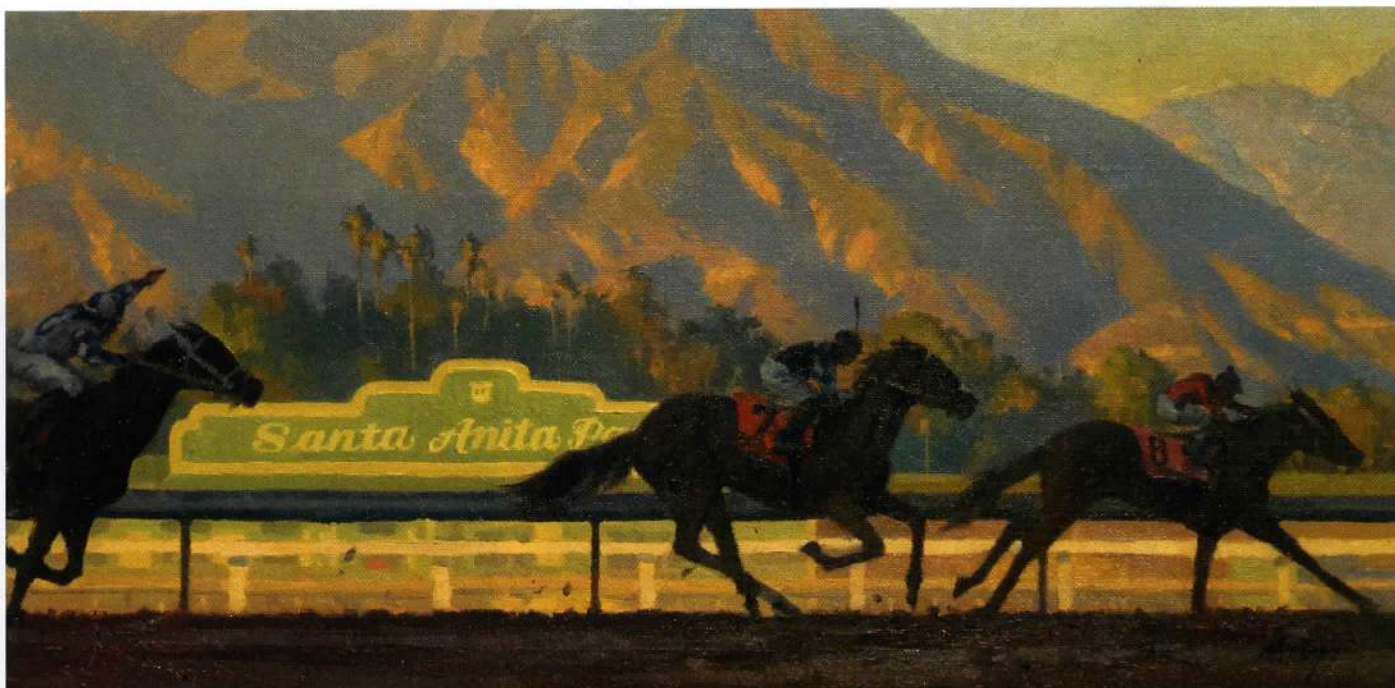
Canyon Haze, oil, 11 x 12.

Growing up he sometimes felt like an outlier because he didn't think anyone in his family was artistic. Eventually Obermeyer came to appreciate that, in fact, famous creative folks did swing from his family tree—they just weren't painters. Obermeyer's great-grandfather, Fred Niblo, was a prominent Hollywood movie producer and director in the nascent days of the film industry. Niblo worked on more than 40 movies and, in 1927, was one of the founders, along with actors Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford, of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Today he has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. Obermeyer's grandfather, Fred Niblo Jr., was a Hollywood screenwriter who was nominated for an Academy Award and had more than 50 screen credits to his name.

In 1974, when Obermeyer was 14, his father accepted a short-term assignment in Germany. For the budding artist it turned out to be a life-changing event. The family spent three weeks touring Italy, France, and Switzerland in a Volkswagen van. "I was affected by the history of each city, the great cathedrals and buildings, the church history, and the art," he says. "Seeing so much beautiful art in person—the paintings, sculptures, and architecture—I wanted to be a painter during the Renaissance. I returned home to California wanting to paint and draw more. Europe is where I found my calling as a representational artist."

When it came time for college, he enrolled in the fine-arts program at California State University, Long Beach. Armed with his degree in illustration, he began working as a full-time illustrator in 1982. In 1986 he was delivering architectural renderings to a client when a second pivotal moment on his artistic journey happened quite by chance: "I saw plein-air paintings for the first time. A hallway in the company's office was lined with paintings by William Wendt and Edgar Payne," Obermeyer says. "I saw the way they captured the Southern California light. As an outdoor person, I could feel the coolness of the canyons and smell the oak trees and sage in their work. I had never experienced that while looking at landscape paintings before."

The successful stint as an architect-



The Home Stretch, oil, 10 x 20.

tural illustrator was eventually followed by a position at a design firm with high-profile clients such as Disney and the Anaheim Angels baseball team. In 1997, still fascinated by the early California Impressionists, he signed up for painting classes with the celebrated artist Sebastian Capella, who taught him everything he knows about atmosphere and values, he says. That same year Obermeyer was juried into the Festival of Arts for the first time. And within a few years he was selling 35 to 40 paintings at the event each year. In 1998 he jumped into the life of a full-time fine artist.

STEP INSIDE Obermeyer's Laguna Beach studio today, and one of the first things you notice is a poster for the 1925 silent film *Ben-Hur*, a nod to his great-grandfather, who directed it. On the easel rests a work in progress depicting the Malibu coast, destined for the California Art Club's upcoming Gold Medal Exhibition. There also is evidence of Obermeyer's other passions—signed baseballs and small metal airplanes from the World War II era, which his wife, Lori, prefers he keep in his “man cave.”

Those familiar with Obermeyer's work know that occasionally aircraft streak across his landscapes, as in *WINGS OVER THE CANYON*. He created the painting by working on location, but from two separate vantage points. “I painted the sightseeing plane on the tarmac of the Grand Canyon airport,” he says. “I made a sketch of how I wanted the aircraft to look in flight. After that, I headed to the South Rim, found a view looking in the same direction, and filled in the backdrop with the distant canyon. It's completely plein-air, hand-drawn, and finished in two hours.”

Gallery owner James J. Rieser met Obermeyer in 1999 at the Carmel Arts Festival. Obermeyer won first prize that year; Rieser bought the award-winning painting and signed up to represent the artist. He was impressed with his ability to convey the moods and light of the Central Coast. “Michael has some of the best drawing skills I've seen in a contemporary artist,” Rieser adds. “He can paint street scenes and harbor scenes quickly on location, yet they read realistically because the eye believes what it sees and fills in the missing details. I'm always amazed that his paintings look

almost photographic from 10 feet away, but when you get up close to the canvas, they are loosely painted.”

In mid-February Obermeyer traveled to Catalina Island with artist friends Jeff Horn and Jesse Powell to create reference material for an upcoming show. As usual, his artistic mission was to capture the beauty that surrounded him, whether it was a quiet meadow, a crowded beach, a cityscape, a face, or a figure. “Sometimes I realize that there's no way I can compete with what God has presented to me, but what a pure joy to attempt to do just that, over and over. Sometimes I feel like I got off easy because this doesn't seem like work to me. Certainly there have been roadblocks and transitions in my career, but I'm still here, painting, traveling, and meeting wonderful people along the way.” ♦

Bonnie Gangelhoff is a contributing editor at *Southwest Art*.

See more of Obermeyer's work at
www.southwestart.com/featured/obermeyer-m-apr2018.