

PENINSULA

July 2020

Artist of the West Coast

Stephen Mirich



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Mirich*



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Gathering Seashells. By Stephen Mirra

LIVING AND PAINTING *down by* THE SEA



Abalone Cove.
By Stephen Mirich

by Bondo Wyszpolski

Stephen Mirich is a prominent member of the Portuguese Bend Artists Colony, whose primary focus has been landscapes and seascapes. He's also been a South Bay resident his entire life, born in San Pedro in 1954, living in Portuguese Bend from 1986 to 2010, and now back in San Pedro. In other words, he's always lived within the call of the cliffs and the sea.

For Mirich, art was always in the cards.

"I knew that I wanted to be an artist when I was four. My Mother had a talent in art and would dabble. She also saw to it that I had art supplies. Her father was an engineer and draftsman and would also spend time on art projects. He lived some distance away so I only met him a couple of times before he passed away. But on my last visit with him when I was about seven, he showed me how to put perspective into my drawings, which was a game-changer for me."

It began early. When Mirich was seven, his mother set him up with an artist who taught watercolors to both children and adults.

"A few lessons from her started me out in watercolors, which became my main medium for many years. I can't say I really had any other instruction in art through school. I would scour the San Pedro Library for books on artists and 'How To' books. I was mostly self taught, although I did have a seascape painting workshop with Violet Parkhurst when I was 15, and was invited by her at 18 to show in her

gallery.

"When attending Dana Junior High school in San Pedro, I also had Mr. Neighbor for drafting. I was able to make that my homeroom to spend even more time on drafting projects. Architecture was starting to interest me. During that time I was introduced by one of the fathers in my Boy Scout troop to his brother, Raymond E. Wallace, who was nationally known for his designs, like the ships at Disneyland (Columbia and Mark Twain), the Ports O' Call Village, and the replica of the brig, Pilgrim, made famous from the novel, 'Two Years Before The Mast,' by Richard Henry Dana. Wallace was also known internationally for his expertise in the sailing world of Tall Ships. Wallace would let me come down to his office in San Pedro after school and let me look over drawings of projects that they were working on. He also gave me a few small projects, which was just his way of being kind and mentoring a young boy who was exploring art and architecture. I would also take in artists giving demonstrations at the local art associations. If I saw an artist painting I would quietly become their shadow and watch them paint."

Have you been able to earn a living exclusively from your artwork, or were there other jobs along the way to support yourself?

"Art has always been my main interest and passion, but I often needed a little extra job on the side. That's led to some interesting jobs: construction, boat deliveries, light diving work, commercial fishing, tugboat cook, and of course, teaching art."

On your website, one is confronted with this quote, which I presume is yours: "To paint from a photo and not go to the place is like a fisherman buying his fish from the market." That's a strong statement. Is all of your work done onsite, plein air, or do you sometimes make stretches and then finish up the work in your studio?

"I've always loved the out of doors. Even as a young boy learning from books on painting, they would point me to study directly from nature. At 19, I began to specialize in a subject which I loved as long as I can remember, which was historic sailing ships and maritime scenes. I still made color sketches from nature to understand atmosphere, and combined it with my compositions and work done in the studio. I was pretty successful with this genre and was exhibiting in galleries across the country. In 1986 I rented a house in Portuguese Bend which I also made as my studio. It looked out to the sea and was surrounded by fields. I began asking myself, 'Why am I indoors in the studio and not out there?'"

"I had also recently joined the California Art Club, founded in 1909, which has a long history of great California impressionist artists. I soon met other local and regional 'plein air artists.' I decided at that time to pick up my French easel and go out and paint in en plein air (out of doors) in earnest. I made Portuguese Bend available for other artists to come and paint. I often hosted paint-outs and spaghetti dinners for artists to get together. Soon too, I met the artists who formed the Portuguese Bend Artists Colony: Richard Humphrey, Daniel and Vicky Pinkham, Amy Sicrane, Kevin Prince and Tom



San Pedro Fishing Boats. By Stephen Mirich

Redfield. Together, the Colony has had numerous exhibitions and fundraisers for the Palos Verdes Land Conservancy and a collection of our work is the base for the art at Terra-neia Resort.”

One of the locales you’re especially drawn to is the shoreline. It’s easy to guess why: It’s a place of great, ever-changing dynamism with its waves, rocks, the clouds in the sky and so on. But can you tell me specifically what the attraction is?

“Again, as early as I can remember, I have been in love with the sea. Perhaps it’s from growing up in the port town of San Pedro or that my Croatia genes come from the Island of Brac on the Dalmation Coast. Almost everything I’ve pursued has been about or around the sea. Everything you’ve stated is also why. And that I am lucky to be living here, by the sea, and sharing that passion for it through my paintings.”

Do you have favorite sites where you return often? Favorite locations that you can’t get to as often as you’d like? And, are there places, a so-called bucket list of distant lands, where you hope to one day go and paint?

“Really, being outdoors, painting on location is what I love. It just so happens that we live along a beautiful coast and a very special harbor. So, I paint what I know and love and what is right here in front of me. But if I could, I would want to live in many parts of the world and soak them up. Carmel, Monterey Coast is a favorite. And so are the Sierras and our deserts in winter. That’s why California has always been a magnet for artists who love painting en plein air. We have so much here to choose from and weather that lets you paint outdoors all year long.”

You’ve done some fine imagery of ships, from tugboats to 19th century sailing vessels. How did your interest in sea-going craft develop? Are these also done from life, and if so, how do you portray the ships at sea?

“I began building models of sailing ships as a boy which gave me an understanding of the complexity and rigging of ships that would later become the subjects for many of my paintings. I also love history and I’ve been able to merge it into my paintings. Many years of sailing, surfing, and just spending my time at the water and taking it in.”

As for individuality, people have been painting landscapes and seascapes for centuries. What is there that differentiates you from, let’s say, California Impres-

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Mirich on the job.

sionist masters like William Wendt, Edgar Payne, or Franz Bischoff?

"I don't try to be different. I just paint the way I would like to see something painted and put myself into it. It's also about being there and coming away with a moment in time. As for the California Impressionists? I believe they've been some of the greatest impressionists ever and certainly an inspiration. I grew up looking at the Edgar Payne seascape in the San Pedro Library and I still gaze at it every time I am there."

There's a bit of George Inness (in my opinion) in a couple of your nocturnal paintings. Has his work had any influence on yours? Also, I know that you have devised a portable lighting system so that you can paint outdoors in diminished light. Is this entirely effective, or do you need to retouch the night works back in the daylight of your studio?

"I will certainly say that George Inness, Frank Tenney Johnson, Charles Rollo Peters and many others who painted diminished light have led the way. When you are outdoors you experience the beauty and mood of the low-lit times of day. Usually we will paint small paintings that can be used as sketches for larger works to be executed in the studio. The first time that I tried painting on location at night, I leaned into the trunk of my car using the light of the trunk to paint from. Over the years I've experimented with several kinds of lights. Right now I am using small LED book reading lights that pack up small and are easy to carry out onto location. They give me an adequate light to paint from and long battery life."

I assume there are local artists whom you admire, your fellow painters in the Portuguese Bend Artists Colony among them, which I believe goes back a couple of decades now, to 1997. Do all of you paint together on occasion, or do you mostly meet up from time to time to show and discuss your work?

"We enjoy our friendship so much. But we've also gone in different directions. Once in a while we have painted together but it's really about sharing time together. I often tell others that the Beatles were only together for nine years. Still, we talk about showing together again."

To bring us up to date, how is the self-isolation and social distancing affecting you and your work? As an artist, I imagine that self-isolation presents little problem, but are you constrained in any way right now about going outdoors and painting in the usual way?

"I don't know of any of my artist friends or myself who is having much of a problem with self-isolation right now. I can say for myself that being an artist is often self-isolating. I am enjoying not having to be anywhere else and being taken away from my painting."

What new challenges and endeavors do you see in front of you? Any new directions that seem to be calling? And, for that matter, how would you like to be remembered? In 50 years, when people bring up the subject of Stephen Mirich, what would you hope they might say?

"I'll keep painting what inspires me at the moment. Hopefully, it will show some beauty. As for the future? People will judge for themselves. Sometimes art is a wacky world. Who knows if in the future when they look at my work they say: 'There are no buttons or it doesn't move or light up.' Or it just lives and gives enjoyment."

The artist can be reached at Stephenmirich@aol.com, stephenmirich.com, or at (310) 832-1859. PEN



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