

THE SPLENDOR OF YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK

This fall, Ellen Howard, Paul Kratter, James McGrew, Michael Obermeyer, and Chuck Kovacic took a group of artists to paint one of the most beautiful and pristine wildernesses in California. Find out what the landscape means to them and get their best advice for how you can make the most of your experience if you visit the area.

— BY KELLY KANE —

In October, Paul Kratter and I invited California Art Club (CAC) members to join us for a two-night, three-day retreat in Yosemite, an opportunity for artists to get together and continue the tradition of painting in this pristine landscape,” says Ellen Howard. “This year, attendees received a wonderful presentation by artist James McGrew, who also serves as a seasonal Yosemite ranger and naturalist every summer, about the history of the park and the artists who originally painted there. They were also treated to a demo by CAC signature member and president Michael Obermeyer, in which he interpreted one of his favorite views in the park. On the last day, they had the opportunity to receive a critique of their work from CAC signature member Chuck Kovacic. The best part of the retreat was the ability to paint with our peers and appreciate the beauty of Yosemite National Park.”



JAMES MCGREW

Endless Inspiration

Just 4 months old when I was taken backpacking in Yosemite for the first time, I would come to fall in love with the park over numerous hiking and camping trips while growing up. I made my first pastel and watercolor paintings of the landscape at 8 or 9 years old, and my first oils as a young teenager. Although I paint many western national parks today, Yosemite has been my primary subject throughout my 25-year career. In return for the endless inspiration, I feel like it's my responsibility to encourage others through my paintings to appreciate and protect this amazing place.

Indeed, no other spot in the world boasts the unique combination and concentration of sculpted granite features, domes, sheer hanging-valley



waterfalls, alpine lakes, meadows, peaks, and diverse forests, including three giant sequoia groves. Yosemite is also home to hundreds of varieties of birds and wildlife, including bears, deer, marmots, squirrels, and bobcats. But my favorite inhabitant is the incredible peregrine falcon, which thrives in the habitat of Yosemite's sheer vertical cliffs and can attain speeds exceeding

240 mph, making it the world's fastest creature.

In addition to the visual scenery and wildlife, each season in Yosemite offers a unique experience. In general, winter-takes me to the floor of Yosemite Valley with the magic of a clearing snowstorm. Snowshoeing or



Afternoon on the Rim

James McGrew

2020, oil, 8 x 10 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air

cross-country skiing, I can reach more remote locations along the valley rim. In spring, when the snow melts, rivers flood and waterfalls thunder in all their glory. I especially love to paint off the trails, hiking to major sites like Upper Yosemite Falls, Vernal Fall, and Nevada Falls. Summer offers the opportunity to backpack deeper into the wilderness and paint my favorite places in the high country among the towering cliffs, sweeping views, summer thunderstorms, glistening alpine peaks, streams, jewel-like lakes, and splashes of color from the wildflowers. From late spring through mid-summer, I typically focus on painting near peregrine falcon eyries and other favorite wildlife habitats. Finally, autumn brings rich colors and lengthening shadows, and with fewer visitors, the quiet atmosphere of an Albert Bierstadt painting.

BEATING — OR MEETING — THE CROWDS

Of course, there are some challenges with painting Yosemite. First of all, the park's incredible beauty draws about 5 million annual visitors, which can create logistical challenges and necessitates advance planning to get away from crowds. With the COVID-19 reservation system the past two summers, however, getting around the park has been a joy, without any of the usual traffic jams. But even during a normal summer, simply getting an early start or hiking a short distance will get me away from crowds and loud noises. If I must paint near a road, I've discovered that noise-canceling earbuds are essential to reducing the stress of vehicle sounds. Typically, I get permits to backpack and paint in the wilderness, which are some of my most cherished painting experiences. If I'm just out for a day hike, I often

paint at sunset, which means hiking back in the dark. I actually love that because I frequently see wildlife, rarely run into other people, and it's easier to carry a lot of gear up high-elevation hills in the coolness of night.

Still, there are times when I like to be around other people. As part of my painting goal is to inspire others to care for the landscape as much as I do, it's important to connect park visitors with my artwork. Painting where I'm visible generates conversations, connections, and subsequent sales. Although it's illegal to sell directly to visitors in any national park, when people want to buy a painting, I send them to my galleries. The Ansel Adams Gallery actually sits inside the park and does a great job representing my work. And I feel good knowing that a portion of every sale through the gallery goes directly back into funding the park.

NATURAL CHALLENGES

Not all of the problems of painting the area are manmade, however. In the spring, you'll face variable weather and flooding streams. In addition to the crowds, summer brings heat, mosquitoes, and smoky air that gets worse each year from runaway California wildfires. With autumn, the variable weather returns along with rapidly changing light and fleeting color. But winter brings the most challenging weather conditions, with hit-or-miss gray days, spectacular storms, and snow. Last winter I backpacked about 20 miles in the snow and camped out a couple of nights on the south rim of the valley. In addition to the usual challenges associated with plein air

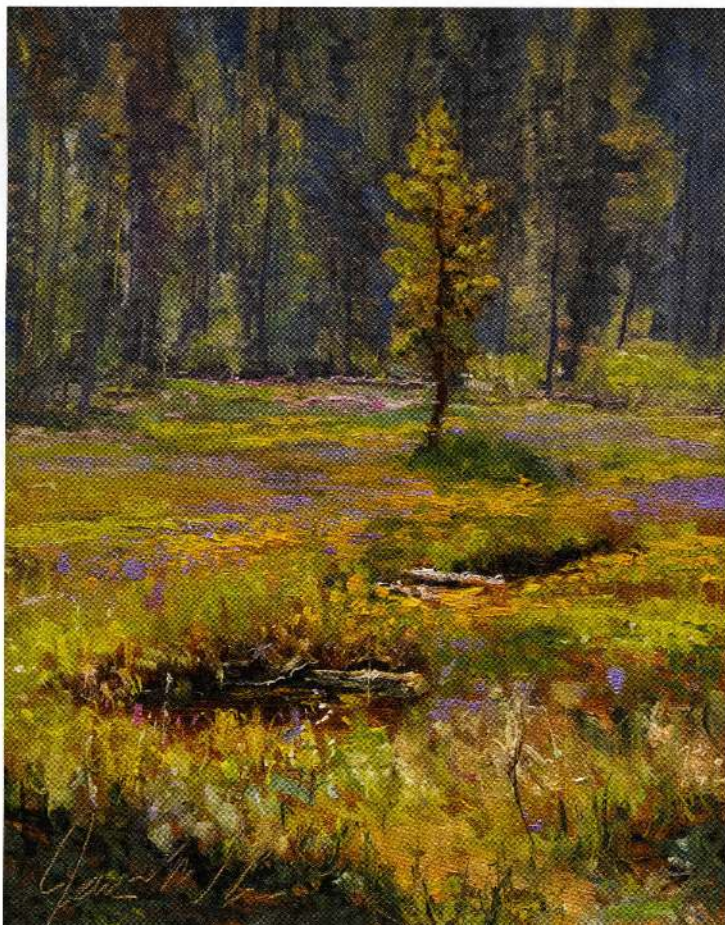
painting and backpacking, I spent a good deal of time melting snow and trying to keep it from refreezing, not to mention keeping my fingers working. But the solitude and incredible beauty were well worth it.

The sheer scale of Yosemite presents its own challenges as well. The cliffs, trees, and waterfalls are unbelievably large, so creating a proper sense of scale is difficult for many artists. I find that understanding how our visual processing system works and how it differs from that of a camera is key to conveying the grandeur. Subtle adjustments of foreground relative to the focal point mountain features are required. Painting Half Dome or any other iconic feature is like painting a person's portrait.

With normal landscape painting, an artist can take a lot of liberties to manipulate their scene to fit the textbook elements of a good landscape composition. However, if he or she fails to convey any aspect of Yosemite's best-known features, people will instantly recognize the mistake — a risk even for the masters. Despite his many excellent landscape paintings of Yosemite, William Keith ultimately declared that capturing the true qualities of the place was an impossible task. To get around the problem, Bierstadt and Thomas Moran resorted to dramatic distortions, and many modern artists have pushed Yosemite's qualities to the extreme through abstract methods.

ART AND YOSEMITE

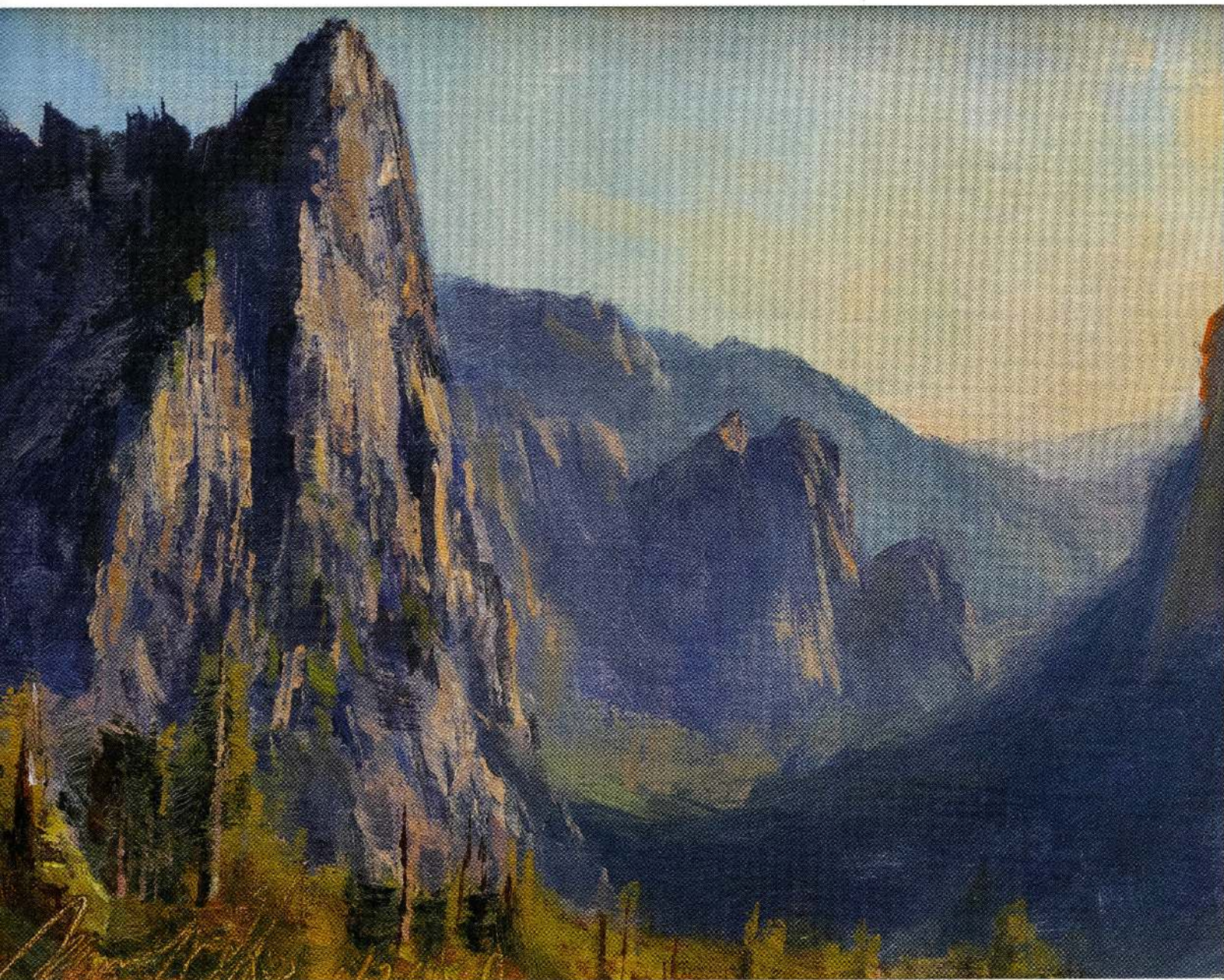
No matter how they approach the landscape, artists have long had a role to play in Yosemite's history. In fact, artists were largely responsible for



Summit Meadow, James McGrew, 2016, oil, 10 x 8 in., collection the artist, plein air



Vernal Fall Spring Flood Waters in Morning Light, James McGrew, 2019, oil, 14 x 11 in., collection the artist, plein air



Union Point Sunset, James McGrew, 2020, oil, 8 x 10 in., collection the artist, plein air

spreading awareness of the area's unique beauty, which ultimately helped persuade presidents and congress to enact legislation to protect the area — first through the preservation order of the Yosemite Grant in 1864, making it the first natural land ever set aside by a government for the public enjoyment of nature, to the establishment of the national park in 1890. Over time, paintings and photography have also contributed to the understanding and management of Yosemite's ecosystems. Today's artists have the opportunity to continue the legacy of inspiring preservation of this cornerstone of the National Park Service and of environmental preservation as a whole.

What to Know if You Go: The park is so huge (the size of the entire state of Rhode Island, and ranging from 2,000 to over 13,000 feet elevation) that traveling from one place to the next can take hours by car

or days by hiking trail. Knowing when and where to go is paramount. Plan your trip well and research the weather, trail conditions, and snow pack, and make use of the park webcams. My best advice is to get a wilderness permit and go backpacking with your painting gear for a few days. Only then will you truly connect with the place, experience a lot of wildlife encounters and storms, and begin to pour that energy into your paintings.

Yosemite is a protected natural place, encompassing 95 percent wilderness, so be aware of your impact. Avoid disturbing wildlife, making noise, trampling vegetation, and use only non-toxic paints while you're out there. Practice the ethic of Leave No Trace. Also, be mindful of other visitors and avoid blocking popular perspectives for views and photographs.

ELLEN HOWARD

Unique Perspective

I've been painting in Yosemite for the past four years. I especially like to go in the fall, when the colors are changing and I can feel the crispness in the air and observe the different light effects. The golden hour, in particular, is spectacular in Tuolumne Meadows, where the light sheds a warm golden tone across the fields.

Some of my other favorite places to paint include Tenaya Lake, the bridge by Housekeeping Camp, and Sentinel Bridge. I tend to gravitate toward scenes with water. I love seeing the reflections of the trees and mountains in the waterways, and hearing the rush of the water go by as I paint.

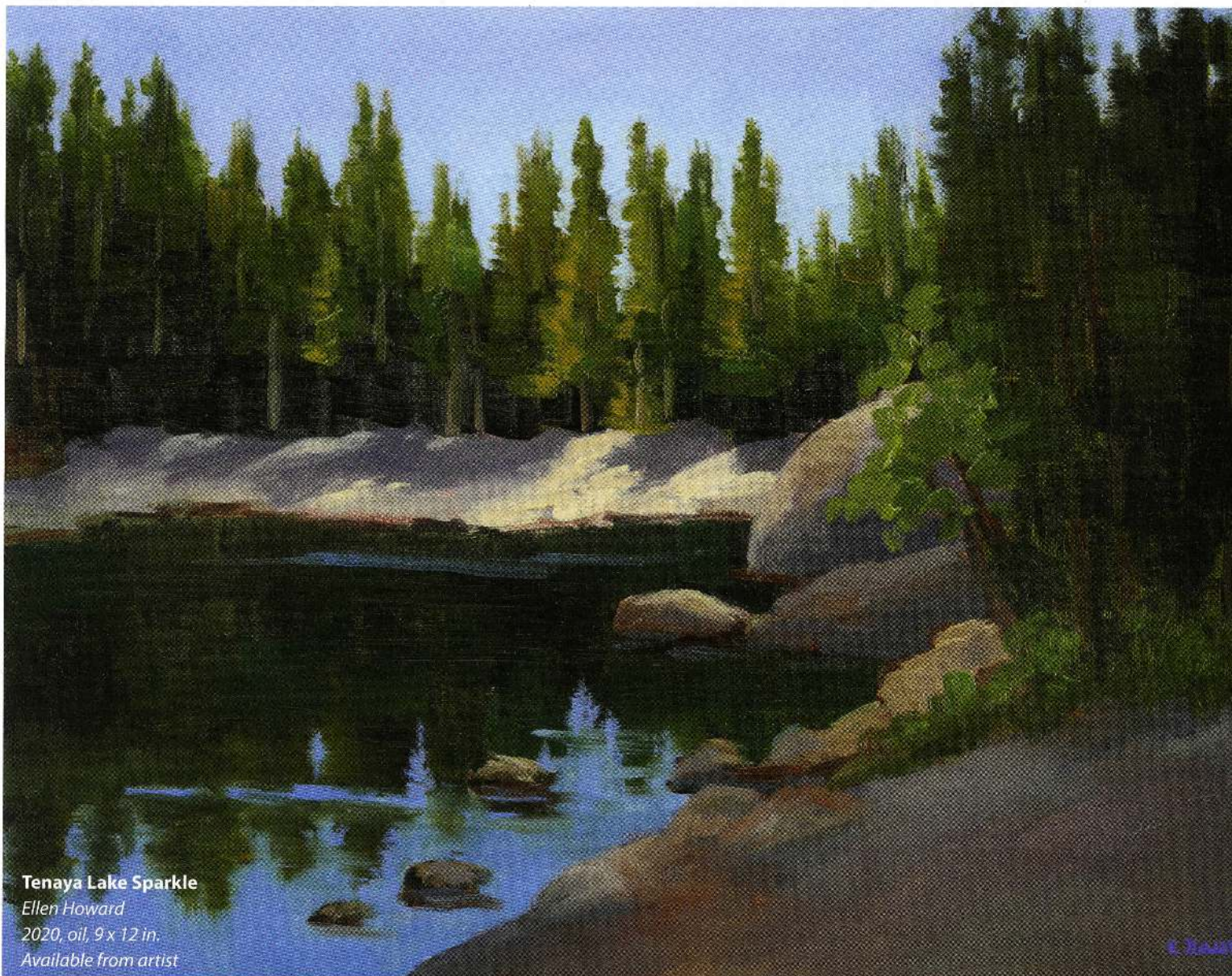
One of the biggest challenges of painting in Yosemite is the desire to paint everything you see. The expanse and beauty of the landscape can be



overwhelming, so simplification is key. You need to take your time to really observe the landscape and ask yourself what areas draw you in; then you can focus on painting a more intimate scene.

A favorite of many early California painters, Yosemite is a widely painted park. I suggest looking at the work of these historical painters before you go, then identifying the areas in the park that most resonate with you. Think about how you (with your own unique perspective) would paint the scene, and what the reasons or emotions are behind your choices.

What to Know If You Go: Be prepared for changing temperatures. Remember to bring layers of clothes, plus water and a snack.

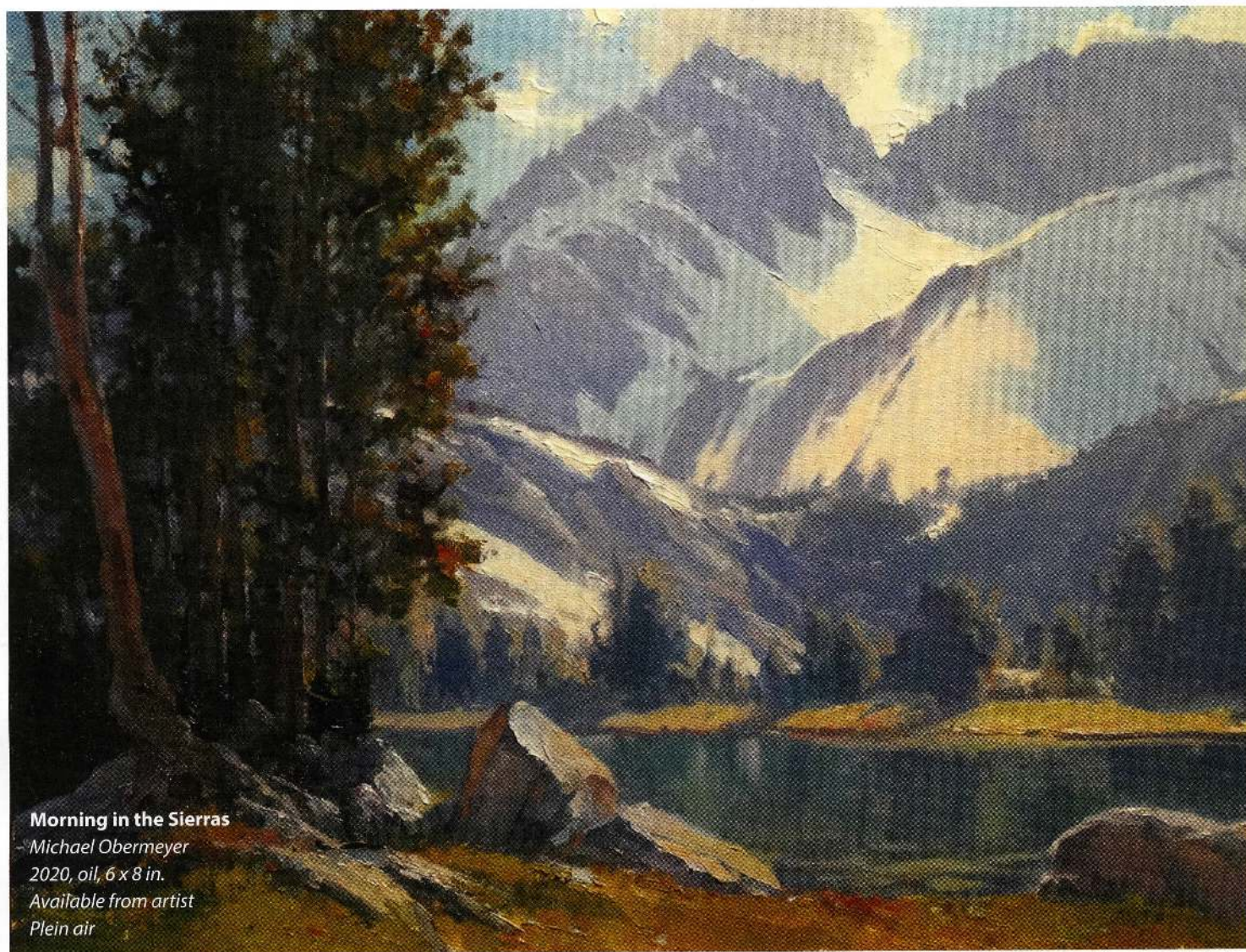


Tenaya Lake Sparkle

Ellen Howard

2020, oil, 9 x 12 in.

Available from artist



Morning in the Sierras

— Michael Obermeyer

2020, oil, 6 x 8 in.

Available from artist

Plein air

MICHAEL OBERMEYER

Full of Wonders

Yosemite's grandeur is different from any other national park I've visited, from the magnificent scale of the cliffs and domes to the quality of light from deep inside the valley looking up and out. My favorite time of year to go is the fall, when the crowds have gone, the quiet settles in, the shadows lengthen, and the colors of the trees change.

The challenge of painting Yosemite is choosing just one view or scene and sticking to it. I find that if I try to read the light and weather conditions, and do a little research on the area, I can get a better idea of what to paint and when to paint it. While I'm working, I also make some mental notes of the light on views around me for possible future paintings.

I've been coming to the park for over 35 years to backpack, camp, and paint. Every time I return, it feels like the first time all over again. Yosemite is full of so many natural wonders that as much as I've painted it, there are many more paintings left to do.

What to Know if You Go: Drive and walk around the park to get an idea of what attracts your eye the most. Once you settle on a scene, don't get distracted



by the other fine views around you. Make notes about when to return to the site so you can capture a different aspect of the landscape in the best light another time. Also, check out some of the history of Yosemite paintings and photography, especially the paintings of Thomas Hill. Seeing their work inspires me and gets my painting engine running!

Also, enjoy the quiet and solitude, the history and the wildlife. Slow down. There is so much to appreciate; don't try to get it all in one visit. Revel in every moment, and when you get home, you'll definitely look forward to returning.

PAUL KRATTER

A Twist on Iconic Views

With the iconic granite monoliths Half Dome and El Capitan, Yosemite Valley is spectacular. One of my favorite views of Half Dome is along the Merced River, just north of the Swinging Bridge. And I love the view of Yosemite Falls, another visitor favorite, from the bridge next to Housekeeping Camp. But there are some lesser formations that are wonderful to paint too.

The weather in the fall and winter can change rapidly, which can be challenging, but thrilling at the same time. That was the case when I painted *Almost Obscured*. I started with Half Dome just as the first clouds were swirling around it. By the time I finished the rest of the painting, it was completely engulfed.

What to Know if You Go: Winter in the park is fantastic, but carry chains and dress appropriately. The sun doesn't warm up the valley because the steep walls keep the sun out early and late in the day.

Almost Obscured

Paul Kratter
2020, oil, 12 x 12 in.
Available from artist
Plein air

