



Designing Nature

John Cosby's paintings uncover subtle patterns in the landscape

BY NORMAN KOLPAS



▲ **Afternoon Break**, oil, 24 x 36.

◀ **Safe Water**, oil, 16 x 24.

NOT LONG AGO, John Cosby set up his easel on a rocky rise gazing southward across a cove in Laguna Beach, CA, half an hour up the coast from his home and studio in San Clemente. It's a setting that's been depicted countless times before by both professionals and amateurs, and Cosby regarded his prospect with a full awareness of that fact.

"One of the big challenges," he recalls, "was not painting a cliché." But he had a well-practiced, discerning strategy that would help him avoid that, by focusing on the shapes before his eyes rather than the subject matter itself. "I looked for design elements and found a big, beautiful 'S' shape flowing through the rocks and waves and carrying your eye toward the sunset," he says. He toned down other features in the landscape "to allow the turquoise wave to come alive." And, along the distant shore in a painting that

he titled **AFTERNOON BREAK**, he dotted the sand with swimsuit-clad grown-ups and children. "I like to use people or buildings in my landscapes as a reference of scale," he says. "It somehow makes the scene even more interesting than just nature alone."

Such an approach, and the refreshingly original artworks that result, have made Cosby one of today's premier plein-air painters of the West Coast, as well as farther-flung places. He's a signature member of both the California Art Club and the Plein Air Painters of America, as well as a founding board member of the Laguna Plein Air Painters Association. His works can be found in top public, corporate, and private collections.

Yet, despite his renown, Cosby has been painting seriously for barely two decades in the style for which he is now respected. This latest stage in his life



representation

Carmel Fine Art, Carmel, CA; **Helena Fox Fine Art**, Charleston, SC; **Redfern Gallery**, Laguna Beach, CA.

upcoming shows

Sunlight and Shadow group show, **The Irvine Museum**, Irvine, CA, through September 28.

Catalina group show, **Newport Harbor Yacht Club**, Newport Beach, CA, October 25.

Solo show, **Redfern Gallery**, December 3.



Morning's Glow, oil, 16 x 20.

and career follows other significant life callings, and other successes, stretching back to a childhood that began in Hollywood in 1955.

COSBY GREW UP amidst the lush orange groves, majestic mountains, and starkly beautiful deserts of a largely unspoiled Southern California and Nevada. "My father," he says, "was a small-retail turnaround specialist who would buy ailing businesses, fix them up, and resell them," which led the family to move throughout the region every two years or so.

Cosby doesn't recall being singled out for any particular early aesthetic talent

in school. But that didn't really matter because his earliest art training came from a far better source: his paternal grandmother, Mary Cosby, an amateur painter who had studied with Sam Hyde Harris, one of the great California Impressionists of the early to mid-20th century. "She was a pretty good hobbyist, painting three or four days a week in her home studio. She loved to paint, and she got me doing it. I have photos of me as a young boy with her, out painting in the desert," Cosby says.

A solid student who enjoyed drawing motorcycles and women "more than I enjoyed math or English," Cosby graduated at the age of 17 from Alta Loma High

School in Rancho Cucamonga, about 40 miles east of Los Angeles, and decided to head out to Palm Springs and try to become a professional artist. The notion proved far more romantic than realistic. About six months later, "I joined the U.S. Army because I was starving to death," he says with just a touch of jocularly.

During basic training in Fort Worth, Cosby's life took a dramatic turn. "They saw something they liked in my aptitude tests," he says, that led to a plain-clothes position with the Defense Intelligence Agency and a posting to the White House during the Nixon administration. "We ran all of the secure communications between the White House, the CIA, and

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Dead End, oil, 12 x 16.



Way South BBQ, oil, 12 x 16.

the military, and I traveled 300 days a year for that job," he says. He stayed in that role for four years.

Along with a wealth of rare life experiences, two particular aspects of those years stayed with him. He fell in love with travel. And he came to realize that drawing was one of his greatest pleasures, as he "doodled" a series of cartoons for a newsletter published in the Old Executive Office Building in DC.

After he left the Washington world, Cosby and a buddy spent six months restoring a beautiful old 26-foot wooden boat on Buzzards Bay in Mattapoisett, MA, followed by three and a half years sailing up and down the Atlantic Coast. Along the way, he got regular gigs tending bar and drawing a series of cartoons for *Chesapeake Boatman* magazine. And often, he'd sit on the deck of his boat while anchored in harbors and draw or paint watercolors of other nearby craft. "The people on those boats would want to buy or trade for my works," he says. "And I realized there was some value in what I was doing."

Before exploring those dawning possibilities further, however, Cosby moved back to California in the early 1980s to help his parents with a western supply store they'd purchased. His role quickly evolved into handling all of the advertising, which included drawing print ads and animating television spots. Soon, he says, "All of their customers would come to me and ask if I would do the same for their businesses, too." In 1985, he became a full-time commercial illustrator working out of a studio in Newport Beach, with a growing list of clients that included the popular Southern California chain In-N-Out Burger. And all the while, he'd spend weekends painting outdoors. "But I didn't know at the time that it was called plein air," he adds with a laugh.

In fact, Cosby regarded his part-time painting so casually that he was shocked one day in 1989 by a visit to his illustration studio from Richard Snyder, then the president of In-N-Out Burger. "I had 10 or 15 of my paintings lying around, and Rich wanted to buy them all. That day, I quit being a commercial illustrator and opened my own art gallery," he says. One key moment stands out from his



Seasonal Reflections, oil, 36 x 48.



The Old Rail, oil, 20 x 30.

first solo show in that new gallery. "My Grandma Mary came," he says. "And in honor of my show, she brought the first painting I ever did, which she'd saved and framed for me, of the house where we'd lived in Riverside." That painting, "pretty dimensional and sophisticated for a kid," he says, now hangs over his desk in his warehouse studio.

His fine-art venture turned out to be what Cosby—a note of disbelief still in his voice—terms "a wild success, with sell-out shows from the beginning. I was doing so well that it blew my mind." He produced mostly large-scale scenes of the harbor and the ocean, which he loosely executed in bright-hued, quick-drying acrylic paints—a style and medium that seemed to fit not only the sunny, breezy setting in which his affluent collectors lived but also the speed with which his canvases flew out of the gallery. He had shows in Hawaii, Santa Fe, and New York, and his works also sold as limited-edition serigraphs.

But around 1992, Cosby suddenly experienced a dark side to that success. "I got poisoned by the solvents in my acrylic paints," he says, detailing a litany of joint, lung, liver, heart, and immune-system ailments that almost led to his death.

After a gradual recovery, he turned to oil paints. Their slow drying time led him, in turn, to work more deliberately and on a somewhat smaller scale, using more natural colors and portraying his subjects more realistically in a style he has come to describe as "somewhere between impressionism and realism." As a result of that change, he says, "A lot of people came to my shows and asked me what had happened to my old style of work. It took me maybe three or four years to find a new audience."

Part of that transition involved learning more about oil painting from some of the modern-day masters. He admired and studied the works of artists including Clyde Aspevig, Albert Handell, and Marco Sassone, and also took a few plein-air workshops along the way. Of the entire self-improvement process, he says, "I realized I was now on a lifelong path."

New milestones began to appear along that path, as they still do to this day. Along with his friend Ken Auster



Canajoharie Creek, oil, 18 x 24.

and three other artists, he formed the Laguna plein-air group in 1995. About a year later, he placed second in Carmel's juried plein-air competition. A few years after that, he himself launched Laguna Beach's own invitational plein-air event, which is still going strong today.

Four years ago, Cosby joined with Joseph Paquet, a fellow artist and friend from St. Paul, MN, to create "Rust & Roadsides." In this collaborative project of painting trips and public exhibitions, the two men aim to "paint our way through the rust belt, documenting the state of our industrial nation today," capturing scenes of "small-town streets, roadside diners, and factories, what's left of what the 'Greatest Generation'

built." The fruit of those efforts shows in such recent works as CANAJOHARIE CREEK, which celebrates the beauty of an upstate New York village on the Erie Canal, complete with the smokestack of its old Beech-Nut chewing-gum factory rising in the distance. "To me," says the artist, "this painting tells a full story. Yet I feel comfortable that the composition and technique make it not just an illustration but a work of art."

Composition and technique continue to grow more important to Cosby. "I'm working constantly toward simplifying each of the masses within the surface of a painting to a point where they read as strong shapes, while not making them so simplified that they no longer feel

real," he says. His travels, and painting his works on-site in the open air, are critical to his success: "I don't think you can bring a subject to life in an honest way unless you actually experience it yourself." ♦

Norman Kolpas is a Los Angeles-based freelancer who writes for *Mountain Living* and *Colorado Homes & Lifestyles* as well as *Southwest Art*.

See more of Cosby's work at
[www.southwestart.com/featured/
cosby-j-sep2015](http://www.southwestart.com/featured/cosby-j-sep2015).