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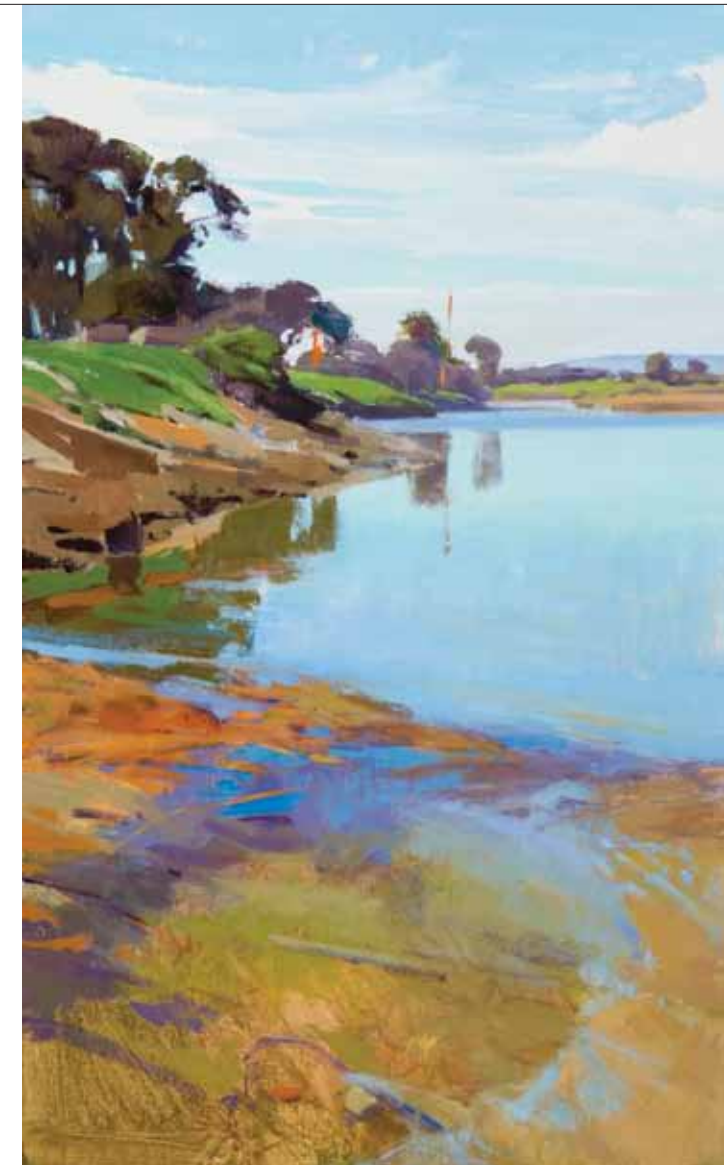
Oil Painters of
America Show Preview

Southwest Art

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MAY 2015



▲ **Low Tide, Spring, Goleta Beach**, acrylic, 30 x 18.
 ◀ **Midday on the Slough**, acrylic, 20 x 30.

NATURAL RHYTHMS

Marcia Burtt uncovers the world's hidden patterns in vibrant canvases

BY NORMAN KOLPAS

ONE AFTERNOON LAST autumn, Marcia Burtt set up her portable easel on a spit of land that forms the seaward edge of the Goleta Slough, an estuary just north of Santa Barbara, where fresh-water creeks trickling down from the Santa Ynez Mountains meet tidal waters from the Pacific to form a broad, brackish lagoon. Instead of looking out to the ocean, as she's likely to do from that vantage point, she faced inland, across the water toward a gap in the headlands that revealed the California coastal range beyond.

"The sun was overhead and shining into the shallow water, which was pret-

ty still that day," she recalls. "It hit the sand about a foot below the surface and reflected upward, radiating its bright yellow color." Other details called out to her as well: some terns in the water; a stand of eucalyptus on one side of the gap, a cliff on the other; and, as she so poetically describes, "the runnels of water, wetting the sands." She set up a 20-by-30-inch canvas, opened her box of more than a dozen acrylic colors that enable her to mix a rainbow of hues, took out her brushes, and began to paint.

Thus began the first of three separate plein-air sessions, each lasting two to three hours at approximately the same



representation

Marcia Burtt Studio, Santa Barbara, CA; **Santa Barbara Frame Shop**, Santa Barbara, CA; **Tree's Place**, Orleans, MA; **Primavera Art Gallery**, Ojai, CA; **Devon House Gallery**, Stonington, CT; **Young's Gallery**, Los Olivos, CA; **Ipu Hale Gallery**, Holualoa, HI.



Silvery Light (Butterfly Beach), acrylic, 36 x 40.

time of day, during which Burttt completed MIDDAY ON THE SLOUGH [see page 98], a work she enthusiastically says is “probably my favorite painting at the moment.” And that’s saying quite a bit, considering that she’s “probably painted a hundred paintings there,” Burttt says. “It’s the kind of place you go to and it’s always different. There are so many variables: the time of day, the

season, the weather, what’s flowering or not, the birds that visit there, the tides and the conformation of the water.” Indeed, the water itself especially fascinated her, she explains, because it posed the complex challenge of “representing on the canvas’ two-dimensional surface a three-dimensional scene that itself featured its own reflection on a two-dimensional surface.”

And it mattered not to Burttt that—as a result of the personal commitment she makes not only to start a work on location but also to finish it there rather than in her studio—a subject’s real-world subtleties might change on the canvas as she progresses from one session to the next. “In the studio,” she explains, “it’s all about judgment, what you know, and how you feel about the

painting. But painting on location takes me completely out of myself. My ego just goes out the window with my anxieties. Sometimes it’s better to give the painting what it needs rather than to worry whether it looks exactly like the place.”

Further, she notes that when a painting is going right for her, “it isn’t so much the subject matter that I’m painting as it is the patterns of light and dark, or possibly just the combination of colors.” Meanwhile, the acrylics she favors using enable her, she says, “to change my mind, revise, move something around, or change the emphasis while keeping it looking fresh and unstudied, with no idea it’s been labored over.” As a result of such efforts, you might say she is more interested not in portraying nature itself but rather in representing the kinds of beautiful, orderly, yet abstract patterns to be found in nature.

BURTT HAS LONG been fascinated by the colors and patterns of nature. Indeed, the ways in which she regards the world around her constitute some of her earliest memories—so early, in fact, that she swears they stem from her infancy in southwestern Virginia, back in 1941. “I was sitting on my mother’s lap and looking through a blanket,” she says. “And each little hole in the blanket was like a lens.” She also recalls lying in her crib, regarding her surroundings through half-closed eyes, “and looking at the rainbows that appeared on my eyelashes.”

She continued to view things with a young artist’s eyes, sometimes to her own detriment. “I remember, when I was 5 or 6, being called to dinner and not wanting to eat because I was busy with scissors cutting up cardboard boxes to make buildings out of them,” she says. In first-grade art lessons, she went head-to-head with the teacher by insisting that a tree did not rise straight from the ground like a column. “I wanted to make mine curve where it joined the ground,” she says with a chuckle. “That put me on her bad list.”

Bright girl that she was, other subjects attracted her keen intellect as well. After her family moved to the Los Angeles area, she eventually embarked on a serious academic track at Hollywood



Three Oaks, Looking East, acrylic, 10 x 18.

“Sometimes it’s better to give the painting what it needs rather than to worry whether it looks exactly like the place.”



Summer Afternoon, acrylic, 16 x 24.

High School, taking four solid years of courses for the college-bound, including math, physics, and chemistry. She entered the University of Chicago, then left; got married, had a son in 1963, and eventually divorced; re-enrolled at San Francisco State University with a double major in psychology and pre-med; and finally wound up at the University of California, Berkeley. But, in her final year there, she found she still needed to take a couple of humanities classes to meet her distribution requirements. So she enrolled in one on the works of Russian writer Anton Chekhov and another in studio painting.

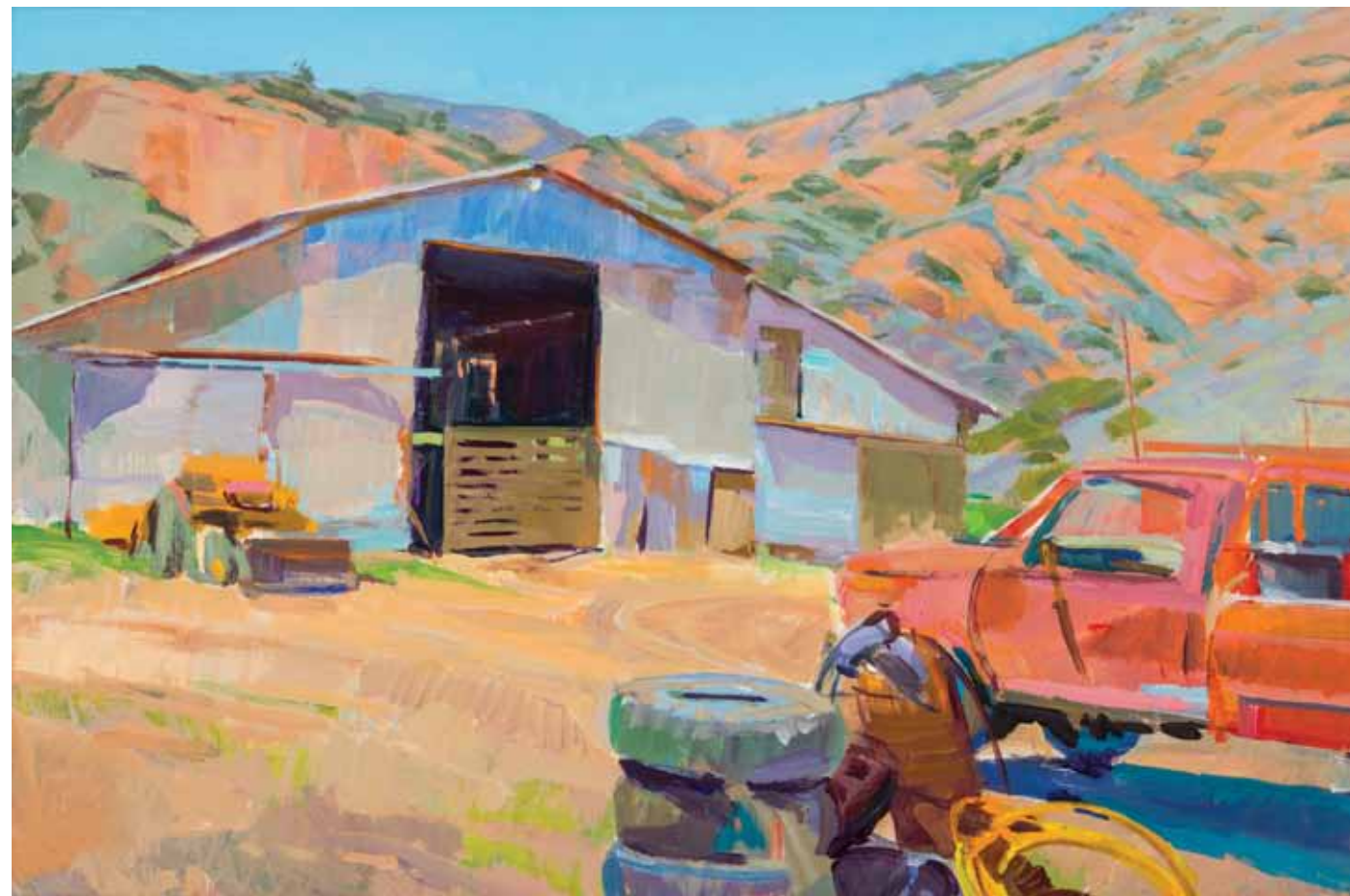
That painting class changed the course of her life—or rather, returned it to its earliest passionate path. “I realized that this was what I always wanted to do,” she says matter-of-factly. In 1971, she finally graduated with dual bachelor’s

degrees in psychology and art and then went on to two more years of graduate study in painting at the University of Montana, earning her master’s.

And thus began for Burttt a fine-art career that, some four decades later, has earned an adjective that often gets thrown around far too casually: distinguished. Consider just some of the recognition she has earned: more than 15 solo or duo exhibitions and over five dozen group shows since 1983; the position of Artist in Residence at Yosemite National Park in 1992; numerous first-place and artists’-choice awards at events across the West; inclusion in many distinguished museum, public, and private collections; and signature membership in the California Art Club, one of the oldest, largest, most active, and most respected fine-art organizations in the nation, which presented her with its Art

of the West Award of Excellence at its 2011 Gold Medal Exhibition.

Her deepest, most passionate involvement of all may well be with two other organizations. Burttt is one of the seven founding artist members of the Oak Group, which they began in 1986 with the goal of raising funds and public consciousness for preserving endangered landscapes in the Santa Barbara area. And in 2002 she joined with a few other local plein-air artists to form SCAPE, an acronym for Southern California Artists Painting for the Environment, an alliance that today has grown to more than 200 members dedicated to raising money through art to support environmental and conservation issues and protect open spaces while also promoting education for and camaraderie among artists. “Many hundreds of thousands of dollars have been donated through



Barn at Walking R Ranch, acrylic, 20 x 30.



High Tide, Moonrise, acrylic, 7 x 18.

these two groups,” says Burttt. “And I’ve had the chance to visit and paint some fantastic places I couldn’t have gone to otherwise.”

Still other places have become accessible to her through the workshops she regularly teaches. Some are within driving distance of her home—which she shares with David Sowle, her husband of more than 25 years—on a ranch east of Nipomo, about 70 miles northwest of Santa Barbara. Other workshops are in far-flung destinations, such as Hawaii, the Hudson River Valley, Austria, and France. “You don’t know what you think until you try to explain it to somebody else,” she says of one of the primary benefits she gains from such trips.

Closer to home, she continues to paint on an almost daily basis the landscapes and seascapes she now knows so well yet finds ever-changing and always fascinating. Take, for example, HIGH TIDE,

MOONRISE, a view of the Pacific from the same sandbar on which she stands to paint the slough. The small canvas, she says, is “one evening’s painting, just a couple of hours”; and yet, it showcases an intimate knowledge of the setting, a sure handling of her medium, and an exquisite sense of color and composition. Similarly, but on a larger scale, her BARN AT WALKING R RANCH, depicting a property in Santa Barbara Canyon owned by friends Fred and Jean Reyes, expresses her equal self-assurance when portraying rural scenes, buildings, and machinery. “I just love the concatenation of everything,” she says, referring to the pattern she found yet again in the way the corrugated-steel barn combines with the foothills to form a pleasing X shape, and the happy challenge she derived from mixing her paints to “make the red hills look just the right shade of red without being crude or rude.”

In scenes such as these, it’s easy to understand Burttt’s occasional fantasy of someday “painting big, semiabstract works based on the landscape.” And yet, clearly she is not yet done exploring the real world, however much she might change it through her artistic process. “I don’t know,” she adds with a warm laugh, “if I can ever entirely give up my love of the particular.” ❖

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 Burttt’s work at www.southwestart.com/featured/burttt-m-may2015.