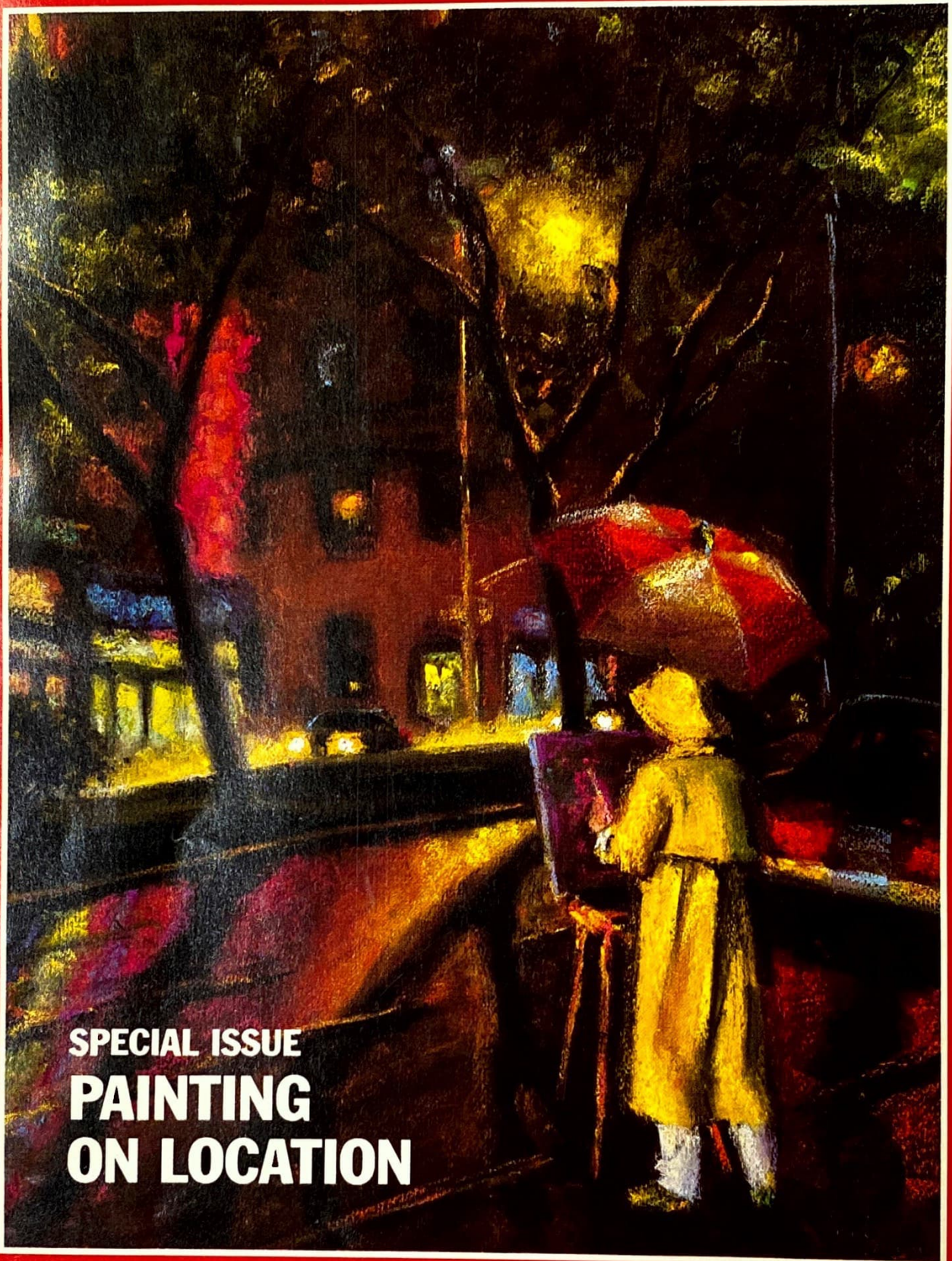


# AMERICAN ARTIST®

OCTOBER 1988 \$2.25



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**ARTICLES ON SOLVING THE PROBLEMS  
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# Painters as Preservationists

*Members of the Open Airing Klub of Santa Barbara, California, organize exhibitions of their paintings in order to raise money and increase public awareness of the endangered land that they depict in their pictures.*

BY THOMAS BOLT

The Open Airing Klub, also known as O.A.K., is a group of painters who have two commitments in common: painting the landscape and preserving the land. Founded in late 1985 by Santa Barbara, California, landscape painters Ray Strong and Arturo Tello, O.A.K. has successfully combined the aesthetics of plein-air painting with the ethos of wilderness conservation.

Presently, the members of O.A.K. are Meredith B. Abbott, Donald Archer, Joseph R. Areno, Marcia Burt, Patricia Chidlaw, Hillary De Fay, Michael Drury, Erika Edwards, Karen Foster, Bubba Geiger, Carol Gray, Glenna Hartman, Lauren Hawksworth, Edward H. Hammerberg, John Iwerks, Larry Iwerks, Manny Lopez, Nancy Noble, Eric G. Parfit, Hank Pitcher, Richard Schloss, Skip Smith, Tom Stein, Ray Strong, Arturo Tello, Sarah Vedder, and Jon Wilsher.

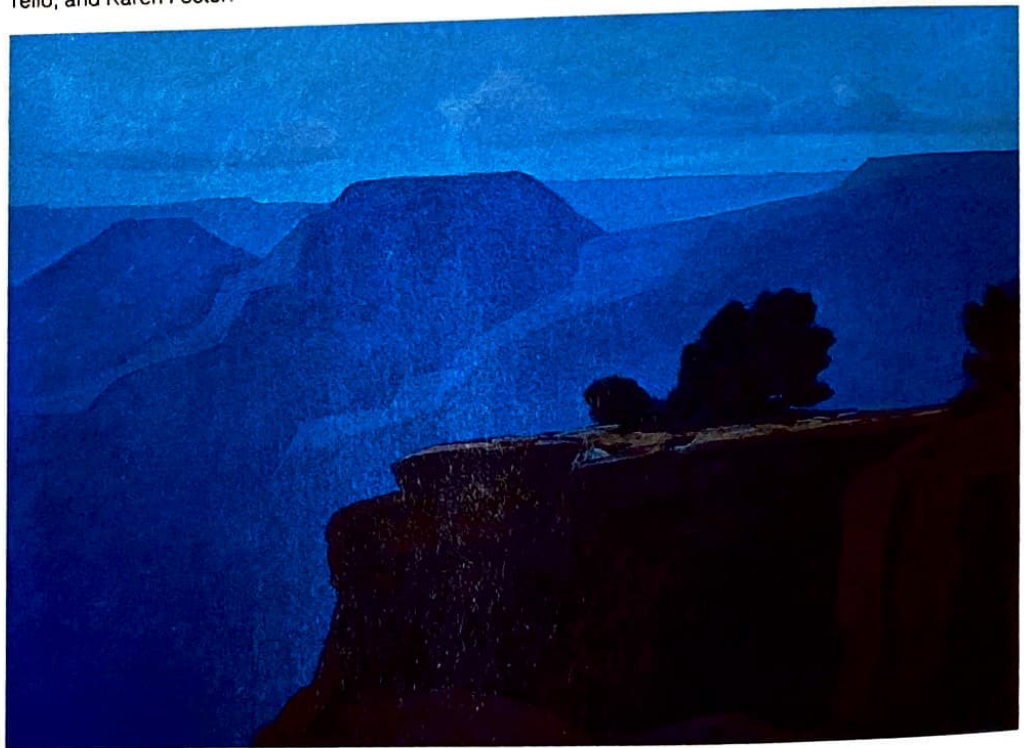
They are painters with a compelling mission: to preserve the area's undeveloped coasts and valleys, both in their paintings and through the fund- and consciousness-raising efforts of their frequent group shows. Since its founding, O.A.K. has raised many thousands of dollars for local conservancy causes, from the educational fund of the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History to the Nature Conservancy's project for the protection of Santa Cruz Island.

O.A.K. is characterized by

*Thomas Bolt is a practicing artist and writer living in New York City.*



Part of the group at the Guadalupe Dunes. Left to right, standing, are Jon Wilsher, Donald Archer, Ray Strong, Manny Lopez, Marcia Burt, and Nancy Noble. Kneeling, left to right, are Erika Edwards, Arturo Tello, and Karen Foster.



*Edge of the Canyon, by Skip Smith, 1985, oil, 18 x 24.*

**SKIP SMITH**, a former student of both Ray Strong and Larry Iwerks, is a painter deeply concerned about wilderness areas that are endangered by uncontrolled expansion. In addition to painting the shores and valleys near Santa Barbara, Smith has painted extensively in the Mojave Desert and lobbied for the California Desert Protection Act, which would preserve the endangered wilderness areas of the eastern Mojave Desert and create a fiftieth national park.

a camaraderie inspired by the regularly shared experience of art and nature. Its members have also produced some wonderful paintings.

Although close-knit in terms of friendships, members of O.A.K. have a diversity of styles and approaches, ranging from Ray Strong's abstracted topographical views to Arturo Tello's anecdotal pictures of the painters themselves painting in the landscape. Larry Iwerks conceives of painting from nature as an adventure, something akin to the explorations of such pioneers of the American wilderness as Lewis and Clark. Meredith Abbott finds her challenge in a complete immersion in the scene at hand and in expressing her feelings of connection and reaction to it. Michael Drury intends to express in paint not only volume, texture, and light, but the sensual experience of nature. Erika Edwards communicates joy for the wild and expresses concerns about its endangerment. Skip Smith favors the sense of light and space in the Mojave Desert landscape.

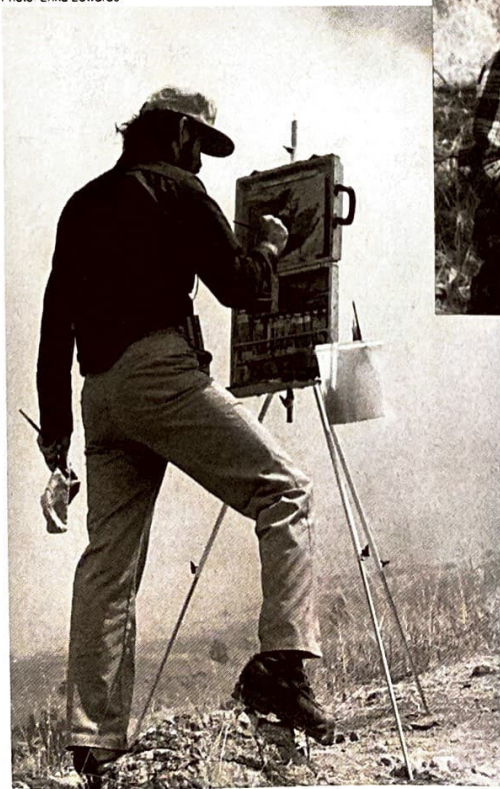
Arturo Tello writes movingly about his reasons for painting the landscape and working hard to preserve its beauty: "I've found that the true landscape painter's relationship with nature is deep and sustaining, that the landscape slowly reveals itself (takes off its veil) to the painter who is willing to go humbly into nature to look, to feel, to think, to learn, to work, and to worship." This religious sense of nature is echoed in what member Tom Stein calls his feeling of "spontaneous attunement" with nature while painting or in the sense of nature's power that member John Iwerks finds in studying weather and geology.

The crusade to save the beloved subjects of these paintings informs Marcia Burr's conception of the usefulness of her work. And usefulness—a real-world



*Painter at 80 Acres,*  
by Arturo Tello,  
1985, acrylic, 24 x 30.

Photo: Erika Edwards



Arturo Tello painting on Santa Cruz Island

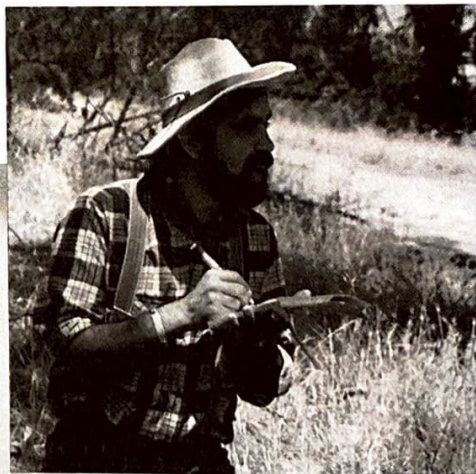


Photo: Ray Strong

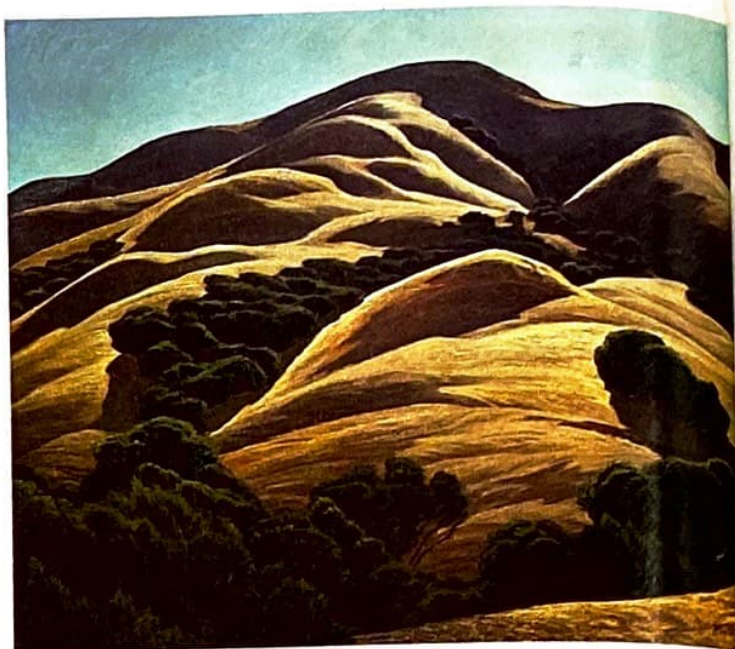
Arturo Tello at Wilcox

**ARTURO TELLO**, a founding member of O.A.K., paints the landscape he is most familiar with, from the Santa Ynez Mountains to the Santa Barbara Channel near his home in Carpenteria. In addition to painting pure landscapes, Tello has painted almost every member of O.A.K. at work during various outings. These portraits appear alongside the artists' own paintings throughout the article.



*Ray Strong Painting*, by Arturo Tello, 1985, oil, 8 x 14.

**RAY STRONG**'s painting recalls the solid, massive landscapes of Grant Wood and the American Scene painters. There is a precise, almost designed unreality to his paintings that is muted and transformed by observation, giving them the strength of constructed compositions and the freshness of newly observed plein-air paintings. In *California Hills*, a roughly Z-shaped composition, with a single, strong diagonal, gives the painting's structure its simple force.



*California Hills*, by Ray Strong, 1980, oil, 24 x 36.



*Western Landscape*,  
by John Iwerks, 1987,  
watercolor, 20 x 24.

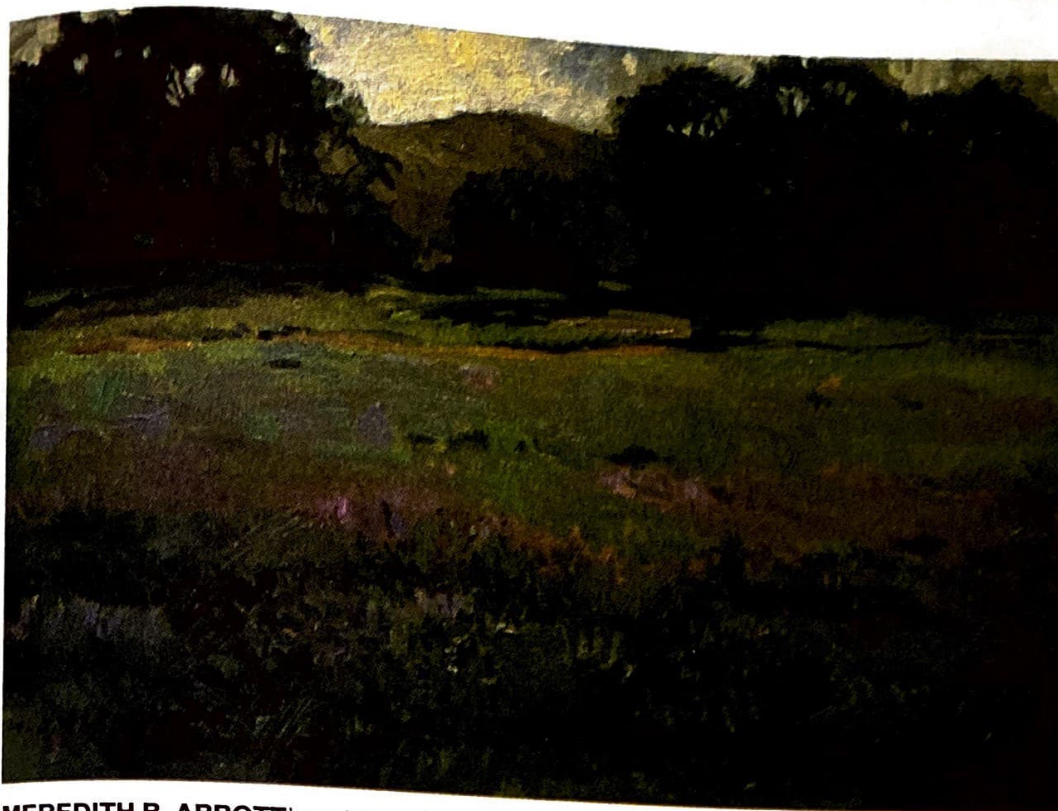
*John Iwerks and Friends*,  
by Arturo Tello,  
1986, oil, 24 x 14.



**JOHN IWERKS** is most at home with large geological and geographical masses; his solid shapes have a real physical presence on the paper. He is a painter of mountains and rocks, of the backbone of the landscape rather than its vegetation. Iwerks has written about his work: "I appreciate a sense of geology . . . and am attracted to landscapes where I can feel the thrust and character of the mountain's resistance to erosion, the subtle strength in the rock, or the inevitable power

of erosion on land forms."

Iwerks's favorite times to paint are, he says, "the intervals between squalls of a storm, when I have to . . . catch a scene while the wind blows hard and clouds bluster by." For him, painting en plein air is "an attempt to grab hold of the very air and light with full senses and loaded brush, arrange it on the canvas as best I can, and recreate the scene with my feelings and vision thrown in."



*Vanishing View,*  
by Meredith Abbott,  
1987, oil, 36 x 36.

Meredith Abbott  
on Santa Cruz Island



**MEREDITH B. ABBOTT**'s paintings have the even density that comes from careful rendering and suggestion of texture. The sense of place and sure handling of space in her work make her landscapes convincing and compelling. She achieves her high level of accomplishment by space she is standing in, its weather, and its terrain. She writes, "When I am painting out of the doors, if I am able to truly concentrate and respond to that scene, I am in a space that cannot be captured in any other way."



*Fishing for Color (Marcia Burtt at Hammond's Beach),*  
by Arturo Tello, 1986, oil, 14 x 24.

**MARCIA BURTT** is a painter at ease with fluidity—when she paints water, the fluidity of water and paint are one. Her painterly style is reminiscent of Fairfield Porter's best work. Painting reflective and liquid surfaces is one of her strengths, but she successfully paints dry landscapes as well.

For Burtt, painting with the O.A.K. group on their regular outings is a great encouragement in the ongoing process of painting. She says, "It's great to meet with my friends on a foggy morning at some out-of-the-way crossroads to set up our gear, exchange news, and gain the inspiration that always comes from seeing other committed artists at work."



*Misty Morning,* by Marcia Burtt, 1987, acrylic, 32 x 36.

function as well as an aesthetic function for all of these painters—does not fail to communicate to the growing audience for the shows of the O.A.K. group. Even when they have been narrowly unsuccessful in saving a piece of land, the members of the group have

not failed to gain wide and sympathetic support from their community. A 1987 exhibition that was part of an effort to encourage the city of Santa Barbara to buy and preserve a tract of land called the Wilcox Property, the last undeveloped coastal area of any size within the city limits,

included some ninety paintings, raised money, and stirred the awareness of the local population.

A branch of O.A.K., led by painter Skip Smith, has adopted a 250,000-acre wilderness-study area in the Mojave Desert south of Death Valley. This interdisciplinary

group, called J.O.S.H.U.A. (Journal of Studies Honoring Undeveloped Areas), is preparing a pamphlet about the area in question in support of proposed legislation that would save up to 7.5 million acres of wilderness. In addition to painters, J.O.S.H.U.A. includes geologists, biolo-



*Michael Drury and Marcia Burttt at Hammond's Beach*, by Arturo Tello, 1986, oil, 6 x 14.



*Light at Point Conception*, by Michael Drury, 1988, oil, 20 x 60.

"Painting," says **MICHAEL DRURY**, "is for me the pure, visceral delight in the handling of inert materials, materials that can be transformed, through some magic conjunction of thought and action, into air, light, and mass." Drury seeks out dramatic masses, shapes, angles, and volumes to cast in "the colors and smells of sun and shadow and the infinite light."

gists, botanists, photographers, and poets, and is an instance of exemplary cooperation between different fields. This kind of involvement is reminiscent of the way the work of nineteenth-century American landscape painters contributed to the establishment of our national

parks.

One inspiration for the formation of O.A.K. came from Irving Stone's historical fiction about the Impressionists Group in his novel *Depths of Glory*. Like those artists, the members of O.A.K. "share ideas and books, and go out painting together."

This simple but powerful basis for a group—the shared experience of nature and art—has attracted visiting artists such as acclaimed New York City landscape painter Marjorie Portnow, who has painted and exhibited with O.A.K. on her trips to the West.

Diverse ideas of landscape seem to come together in Ray Strong's conception of painting: "To paint is to love—to live again and again—fresh into each new motif pursued; for to paint well is to give fully of yourself to each felt subject's moment and movements."●



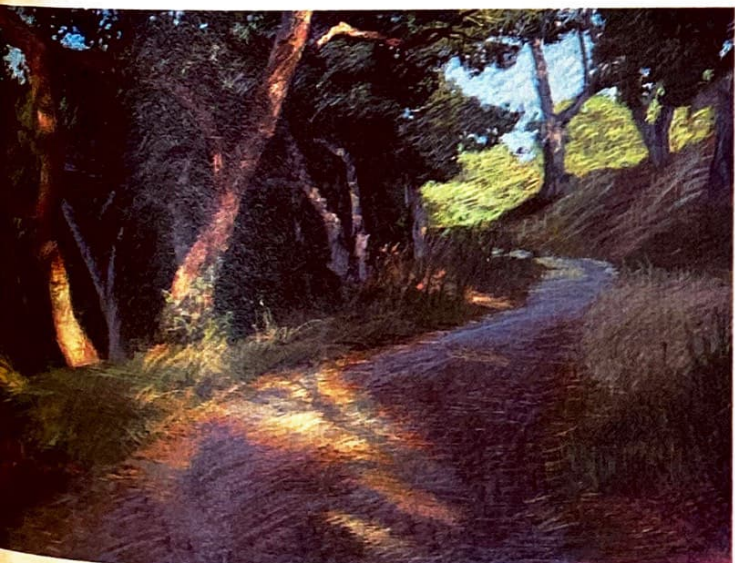
*Looking From Frazier Point (Santa Cruz Island)*, by Erika Edwards, 1986, oil, 24 x 36.

**ERIKA EDWARDS** looks for contrasting textures in unlikely areas—spots in the landscape that other painters might tend to overlook. Edwards feels strongly about the conservationist aspect of the group's work. She says, "What can be more rewarding to a painter than having a part in saving these areas for future generations? An added bonus to this is the great fun we members have in our planned outings together."



*Erika Edwards and Na-Nooke*, by Arturo Tello, 1984, oil, 12 x 18.

She sees the social function of her art as serious work, explaining that "this paradise is in constant jeopardy of being overdeveloped or misused. A few of us landscape painters have felt that we can draw attention to the problems as they come along. We can communicate our joy in these natural areas by painting them. Our endangered-landscape shows have been well received by a concerned public."



*The Oak Path*, by Rick Schloss, 1987, pastel, 11 x 18.



*Rick Schloss at Loon Point*, by Arturo Tello, 1986, oil, 6 x 11.

**RICHARD SCHLOSS** works in pastel as well as in oil and is a master of atmospheric perspective. His drawings are more textured than his fluid oils. In *The Oak Path*, the texture of grasses and the tangle of trees are some of the chief pleasures of the work—along with the strong diagonal of the composition. Schloss also looks carefully at light, and his landscapes are often charged with atmosphere.