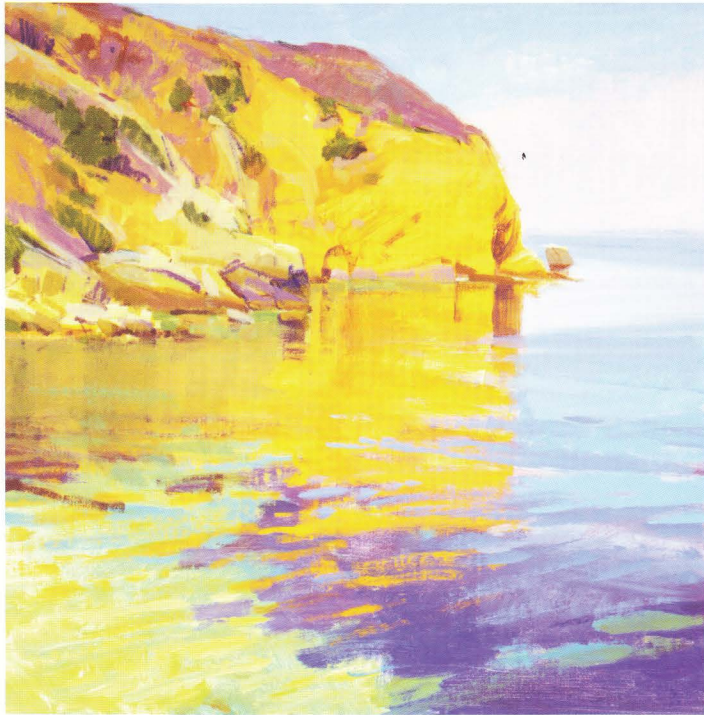


Marcia Burttt—An Original

by Molly Siple



Red Cliff, Morning Light, Johnson's Cove

Acrylic 20" × 20"

Private Collection

IT'S NOT DIFFICULT TO IDENTIFY A CANVAS BY **Marcia Burttt**. Her paintings stand apart from those of most other plein air painters, thanks to Burttt's ability to combine a contemporary sensibility with a traditional plein-air approach to portraying light and colour. Her work features arresting shapes and bold composition, minus cluttering details. Burttt's paintings owe a debt to abstract art but at the same time tell of a specific time and place, a hallmark of Impressionist-inspired outdoor painting. A fine example is *Red Cliff, Morning Light, Johnson's Cove*, painted on Catalina Island, the flat water in the foreground offering a grand opportunity to emphasize the abstract patterns actually seen in nature.

Such a fresh and individual approach might well be expected given how Burttt began her painting life, with the blessings of her father, an idea man in advertising. "Our house was full of art supplies and on my eleventh birthday my father gave me my first set of oil paints, a palette knife, and brushes," she says. "This was his way of encouraging me to become an artist, but that's where he stopped. His philosophy was that you should only pursue something if it's important to you. He thought getting a pat on the head was a phony reason to do well. He'd say, 'That's fine, now just keep going.' He wanted me to think for myself as an artist."

Early on, charting her own course became the norm, by

nurture, and likely also by nature.

Having a bright mind, but no family funds, she still set her sights

on attending the prestigious **University of Chicago**. She passed the demanding entrance exams and earned a full academic scholarship. Later she transferred to the **University of California at Berkeley** with the aim of becoming a psychiatrist, taking three years of psychology classes as well as pre-med. The path was tough, but with resolve and an independent spirit, post-divorce and self-supporting, she continued her studies while holding down a job as a typesetter in San Francisco and raising a young son.

Then something unexpected happened. As Burttt recalls, "At the beginning of my fourth year, my academic advisor called me into his office and pointed out that so far I had only taken psychology, science, and math classes. In order to graduate I needed some liberal arts courses to fulfill the breadth requirements of the UC system. He suggested drama, literature, or, maybe . . . painting. Since I painted as a kid and teenager and loved it, I thought, why not try it again? One week later I knew I had found what I wanted to do for the rest of my life." Burttt bravely quit pre-med and plunged into art classes, taking sufficient art history and painting courses in one year to graduate with a double major in psychology and in art.

The time was the early 1970s. "It was an era of little practical



Morning Light, Alamo Canyon

Acrylic 18" × 20"

Private Collection

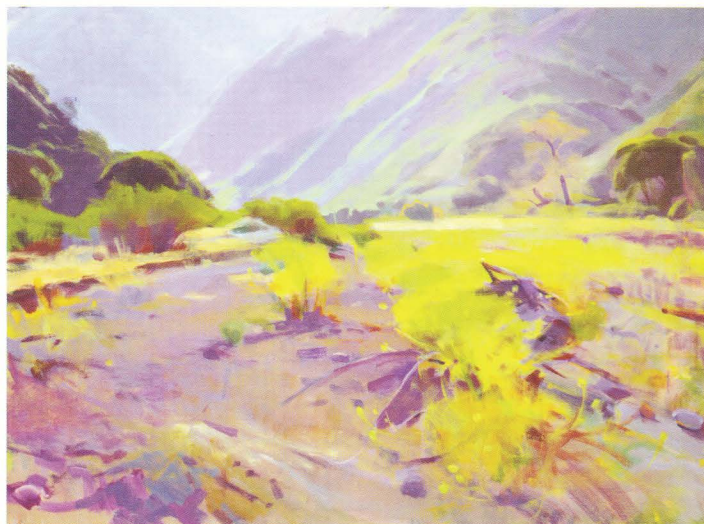
art instruction," she recalls. "There were figure-drawing classes, but students were primarily encouraged to paint from ideas or self-referentially. I had a class with **Elmer Bischoff** who would walk behind my easel, say 'unh-huh,' and walk away." Consequently, once more Burtt had the freedom to go her own way with her art.

She then moved on to the **University of Montana** for graduate work, 1971–1973, earning an MA in studio art. Again, she was pretty much on her own artistically. As Burtt explains, "In graduate school, I ran head-on into conceptual art and teachers who embraced this movement, which was at the forefront of the art world at the time. The premise was that art could be reduced to just an idea and that the art object itself had no importance."

She continues, "I remember one painting I did for a guy who taught conceptual art; it was a hybrid between a landscape and a map. I was interested in my approach to this imaginative subject and felt for the first time I'd used a full range of colour. The teacher was interested only that I had painted a border on the painting in lieu of a frame. He had no interest in the painting itself."

Remarkably at this time Burtt had been working under several artistic handicaps because of the anything-goes atmosphere of art education at the time. These went unnoticed by her instructors. Since she had entered Berkeley's art program in her fourth year, as she says, "I had never taken any basic art classes, no classes in composition, colour, or even how to stretch a canvas." Burtt confided in our interview that her understanding of composition was developed when she was a young teen. In comic books and *The Saturday Evening Post* there was often an advertisement called "You Can Be an Artist" that included a multiple-choice test on composition. She would always take the test and then check her answer.

All the while at university she was working with a very limited colour palette, one she had acquired at sixteen when she was chosen to participate in a summer class at **Otis Art Institute**. The teacher was **Joe Mugnaini (1912–1992)**, a distinguished draftsman known for his illustrations of **Ray Bradbury's** books. Mugnaini's palette for the class consisted of cobalt blue, cadmium yellow medium, cadmium red medium, and black and white. "I used this palette for fifteen years," says Burtt, shaking her head in disbelief. "It was the only palette I'd ever been given. The bad news was I couldn't make purple, violets, lavenders, magentas, pinks, or lemon yellow. The good news was that with such a limited palette, I was forced to think in terms of value."



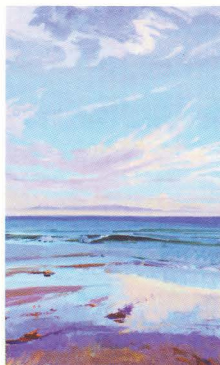
Canada del Puerto, Late Light

Acrylic 24" × 30"

Private Collection

IN GRADUATE SCHOOL, BURTT WAS ASKED TO BUY A full range of hues in acrylic, a modern medium that contemporaneous colour field painters were exploring. For Burtt, it was love at first sight. She immediately began to see and explore colour as she hadn't been able to do with the limited palette. And, since acrylic dries so quickly, she could finally rework shapes immediately without creating mud. She'd been looking for the qualities of acrylic since age eleven. "Acrylic is the perfect medium for an impatient painter!"

These days Burtt has evolved into one of the premier artists in the plein air art world, widely collected and with large commissioned works in a number of healthcare facilities famous for their art collections, such as **Cedars-Sinai Medical Center** in **Los Angeles** and **The University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center** in **Houston**. Her special turf is **Santa Barbara** and environs. She moved to the area in 1973. In 1996 she and her husband **Dave Sowle** moved to a 1200-acre cattle ranch near **Santa Maria**, on California's Central Coast. They lease the grazing rights to a genuine cowboy who rounds up on horseback in early May. They also lease a few acres to organic farmers, and Marcia Burtt oversees two acres around the house comprising a native plant garden, as well as a feral vegetable garden and orchard that produce food for their own table. The day we met for this interview, Burtt had enjoyed



Fog, Sun and Tides

Acrylic 24" × 36" and 36" × 24"

Collection Santa Barbara Cottage Hospital



The Old Mower
Acrylic 28" × 20"
Private Collection

a tasty breakfast omelette of fresh-picked tomatoes and basil coupled with eggs from their own chickens.

Burt's ranch studio is an unusual straw-bale structure with a brilliant passive solar design. The insulation is so good that, in a canyon that ranges in temperature from over 100 degrees on summer days to 16 degrees at night in winter, the interior stays between 78 and 62 degrees year-round. If it gets a bit cool in winter she turns on the hot water coils in the floor. A bit stuffy in summer? She opens the windows at night to let in cool air. "The centre of the north side of the building is all windows and the interior has a 16-foot ceiling and great acoustics," says Burt. "My son calls it 'The Church of Painting.'"

THOROUGHLY AT HOME IN THIS REGION OF CALIFORNIA, Burt has painted both countryside and coastal lands for years. *Morning Light, Alamo Canyon* shows cattle grazing at the ranch, while *Fog, Sun, and Tides* shows a three-quarter-mile swath of Santa Barbara coastline. The quarter-scale original maquettes for this work were painted over a period of time in different weather conditions. Burt kept the continuity of the composition in this quintych (or five-panel work) by linking the canvases with a common horizon line. *Fog, Sun and Tides* is one of several prestigious commissions Burt has accepted to create large-scale artworks for American hospitals, this one for the **Santa Barbara Cottage Hospital**.

Preserving open spaces and agricultural land has long been a priority for Burt. In 1986 she joined other local artists to help found the **Oak Group**, its members committed to painting land threatened by development with a portion of sales from exhibitions donated to conservation groups. To date, they have given over \$1.5 million to environmental groups. Ten years ago Burt became the primary founder of a similar group, **SCAPE**,

the acronym for **Southern California Artists Painting for the Environment**. A bonus for members of these groups is that paint-outs are often on magnificent properties not normally accessible to artists. Burt has enjoyed privileged long stays on **Santa Cruz Island** just off Santa Barbara's coastline, creating paintings such as *Canada del Puerto*, *Late Light* and was the guest of former owners of neighbouring **Santa Rosa Island** during the twenty years after it became a national park and before their visitation rights ended. The family wanted visual records of their island that had been claimed by eminent domain. "Sometimes being a plein air painter is like being a cook or a seamstress. People need a product from you," Burt says.

Besides her painting commitments, in January of 2000 Burt opened her own art gallery, **Marcia Burt Studio** in Santa Barbara. She manages a small stable of ten to twelve artists and organizes a new exhibition every few weeks. When she has time she also teaches painting workshops. Asked what key pointers she gives students, she says, "I tell them, first decide what you want to say about the scene you're looking at. That's the way to make a painting that communicates, rather than simply a picture of an object. This is a very important distinction; something I learned from Elmer Bischoff and have never forgotten. A good example is *The Old Mower* painted on a ranch in Lompoc. The structure was resting on an incline and its angled sides seemed to point upward in exaltation. I decided that's what I wanted my painting to express so I developed the composition and angled the shapes of the building and shadows to achieve this." She continues, "But I notice that when painting similar subjects my students often take a dramatic scene and make it dull by straightening the lines to parallel the edges of the canvas. I beg them, 'be willing to believe your eyes.'"

Beyond such advice Burt is reluctant to offer any detailed description of her painting process. She says that she uses a 'fool around until satisfied' approach, and claims that she usually proceeds without a plan, which is easy to do when working in acrylic. Asked about the origins of her colour and value patterns that so accurately describe a given place and time. "Well, that's what I saw, so that's what I put down," she says. "I am a sensually oriented person."

Burt likes the idea that what she experiences while standing in nature for hours somehow ends up in the final work. As she says, "An attentive viewer may be able to unravel what I've painted and have the same extraordinary experience." This of course will depend on the viewer, but at minimum someone looking at one of her paintings will have the chance to make contact with the genuine Marcia Burt. ■

Notes:

Contributing Editor **Molly Siple** studied painting and art history at the **University of California at Berkeley** and is an artist member of the **California Art Club**. She has also taken formal training from master artists **Shuqiao Zhou** and **Jove Wang**. Siple is a frequent contributor to numerous national art publications, and co-author of *Enchanted Isle, A History of Plein Air Painting in Santa Catalina Island as well as California Light, A Century of Landscapes: Painting of the California Art Club*.

To see more works by Marcia Burt, visit marciaburt.com.