



CONNECTING WITH Nature

Adair Payne channels the soul of the landscape

BY ELIZABETH L. DELANEY

CONNECTIONS—visceral, emotional, historical, and occasionally ineffable—define the art of Adair Payne. Payne’s personal experiences and his passion for the land manifest themselves on his canvases as glimpses into places that seem at once far-off and intimately accessible. “I have little interest in painting what I don’t know firsthand or otherwise feel some deep connection to,” says the artist, who maintains that it is not simply the aesthetic intrigue of a composition but also its soulfulness that makes it valid and engaging for painter and viewers alike.

Payne most often paints the woodlands and vistas of his native Northern California, which remains a wellspring of artistic inspiration for him. Though he now makes his home in Utah, the art-

ist frequently returns to his birthplace to reconnect and recharge. “My favorite places to paint will always be the hills, forests, and streams of Northern California,” he says. “It’s where I first learned to see nature, and it’s where so many memories and feelings are based.”

Such subject matter accounts for at least half of Payne’s artistic output. However, he has recently broadened his scope to include the rich landscapes of New England and Brazil—geographic areas that he has always felt drawn to and recently bonded with after visiting in person. By harnessing these very personal connections, the artist is able to channel his provocations and passions to his audience. “My painting must first satisfy my own creative need—that ensures that it has life,” says Payne. “But more



representation

Sugarman-Peterson Gallery, Santa Fe, NM; **Settlers West Galleries**, Tucson, AZ.

upcoming shows

American Miniatures, **Settlers West Galleries**, February 13.

Summer Show, **Settlers West Galleries**, May.

Solo show, **Sugarman-Peterson Gallery**, August.



▲ **Rancho Miguel**, oil, 24 x 42.

◀ **The Approach of Autumn**, oil, 24 x 36.



Madrone Mist, oil, 36 x 24.



Low Tide, oil, 24 x 42.

importantly, it needs to really move the viewer, hopefully in a deep way.”

Payne’s zeal for nature and art emerged during his childhood, when he spent many days exploring the forests, fields, and streams around his rural Northern California home. “The landscape was what surrounded me early in life, and that’s where I’m most comfortable,” Payne says of his deep connection to his first home. “I enjoyed the smells and tactile feel of nature, along with the sense of calm. It was natural to combine my explorations of nature with the in-born drive to create.”

“My goal is to find a fleeting spectacle of beauty in the mundane and simple landscape.”

PAYNE BEGAN painting landscapes in earnest while in high school. Support came from his art teacher, as well as his mother. An avid painter in her own right, she fostered her son’s artistic explorations from the outset. Payne went on to attend Brigham Young University, earning a bachelor’s degree in graphic design. After graduation, he entered the corporate world as a graphic designer and then as a commercial illustrator, boasting a long list of notable clients, including Chrysler, Delta Airlines, Honda, Intel, Motorola, and Visa.

Twelve years ago, Payne made the decision to leave the corporate world and focus exclusively on his landscape painting. He describes this move as a vastly rewarding paradigm shift, wherein he was able to hone his craft while also fulfilling his artistic and emotional needs as both painter and nature enthusiast.

Payne’s love of the land emerges in his crystalline portrayals of various natural

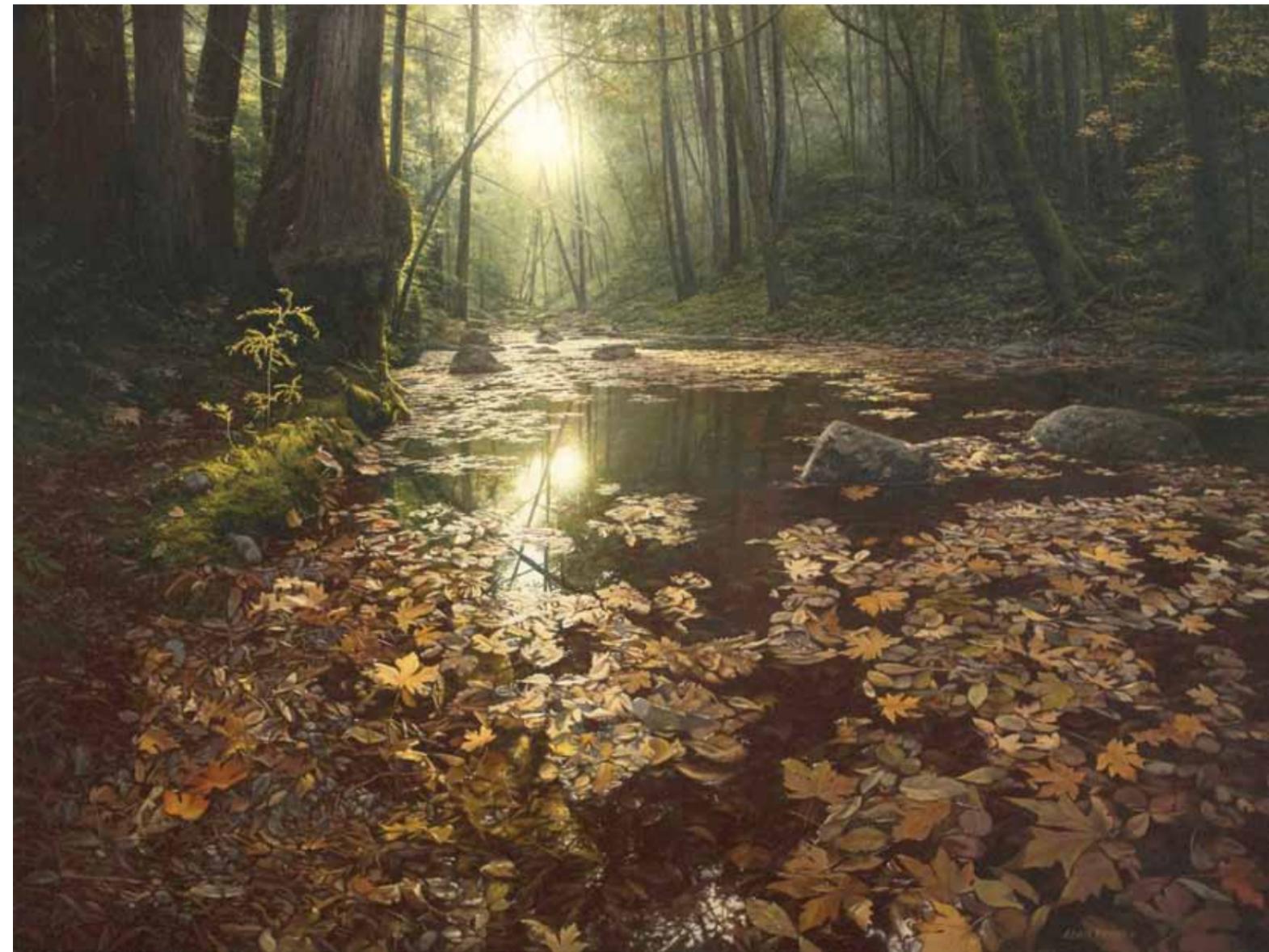
elements in pristine condition. Recently, though, he has begun to experience the effects of habitation and exploitation by humans within the landscape. And while his paintings do not overtly speak to an environmental agenda, they serve as reminders of the resources and strength forever contained in land that is left unspoiled. “It’s painful to see particular areas of nature lost forever,” says Payne. “Since my homeland has become a high-growth area during

my adult life, I’ve lost a good deal of artist habitat and have to keep pushing farther to find untouched land to paint. While movement forward is inevitable, it’s imperative that we are careful where we allow development to occur, and about what we put into our waterways in particular.”

By and large, Payne has developed his painting style on his own, never aspiring to reflect any specific school of work. His style has evolved through

keen adaptations of light effects and lush hues with a distinct awareness of design principles, as utilized in his days as a graphic designer and illustrator. He remarks, “In the commercial or corporate world, art must necessarily communicate a message quickly and do it well. As much as possible, I try to follow that same guideline as a fine artist.”

His images of the natural world are tightly painted and realistic, though not quite photorealistic. They



Sequoia Dawn, oil, 30 x 40.

possess a certain visionary luminosity and color story that transport viewers into their space, transcending the disparity between two and three dimensions. Payne's microenvironments are often tightly cropped, with visual elements seemingly trailing past the edges of the picture plane and alluding to the infinite nature of time and space. The placid settings produce a sensory landscape that invites hushed introspection.

"My goal, generally, is not to portray some spectacular natural wonder, but rather to find a fleeting spectacle of beauty in the more mundane and simple landscape," Payne says. His compositions, then, become portraits of such everyday things as trees, grass, and

moss. He is especially interested in how light transforms objects and remarks, "A visual creation has the power to provoke a great variety of feelings. The phenomenon created by light on a landscape can have a profound effect on the psyche and spirit. It can give hope, invite reflection, it can promote rest, it can define a panorama and give perspective and purpose to the landscape."

PAYNE APPROACHES his paintings methodically from the start and conducts a good deal of research before he begins a new piece. He usually has a location or theme in mind before he embarks on a body of work, and he employs Internet mapping to study the topogra-

phy and sun exposure of the geography he is interested in prior to visiting the site. After choosing a particular place to explore, Payne plans his outings according to the time of day he wants to paint—very early morning or late afternoon are his favorite times for capturing dramatic light. He explains, "The first few moments of sunlight are priceless. Nature comes to a quiet crescendo at that moment: The day is new, crisp, and the first anxious rays of sun play across the landscape. The long shadows define shapes in ways that no other light scenario can. Brief highlights and reflections happen here and there, and the momentary reflected light in a shadow can add so much life to a scene."



Hutchinson Ranch, oil, 24 x 36.



Springtime in Hidden Valley, oil, 24 x 48.

Payne also finds motivation in visually pungent elements of weather. "I enjoy the heaviness of humid air and fog, the muted and dim light," he says. "It can transform a landscape into an entirely different place, both mysterious and calm. Fog tends to absorb sound and things become very, very quiet. One becomes very much alone with one's thoughts in fog. For me, it's great fodder for the soul and the mind."

As a graphic designer, Payne became both proficient and comfortable using technology as a tool and continues to employ it in his fine-art work. He photographs scenes while exploring subject matter, and regularly uses the images as compositional foundations for his oil paintings. Further, he employs digital manipulation to facilitate placement, balance, and other elements of design before he ever puts brush to canvas. He refers to this method, which fuses traditional handiwork with 21st-century technology, as his "natural way to work."

Ultimately, however, Payne says the most important part of his creative process is the experiential phase, when he spends time in nature's elements exploring the landscape and absorbing its physical and spiritual essence. "My greatest motivation for painting is the simple pleasure of mentally staying planted in one fine spot in nature during the long hours that it takes to paint it," he says. "The landscape is where I find calm and where I unwind from the rest of the world. I have a real need to be alone in nature and internalize what it has to offer the soul."

Payne fervently believes in, and in fact relies on, an inextricable connection between the human spirit and the world it inhabits to communicate his passions through art. His work serves to mine that connection and to foster an ongoing conversation among nature, artist, art, and viewer. His verdant, inviting landscapes speak to the transcendental, if not to the divine.

"I'm certain there is a Creator of the universe," he says. "For me, the beauty I see around me is an expression of a tremendous unseen power for the purpose of bringing us pleasure. I'm constantly reminded of how lucky I am to earn a living by helping other people feel what I experience in the natural world. If I can communicate to someone a sense of peace, a sense of reverence and awareness of God's handiwork, I've accomplished everything I set out to do." ❖

Elizabeth L. Delaney is a freelance arts writer and publications editor based in Charlotte, NC.

See more of Payne's work at www.southwestart.com/featured/payne-a-jan2016.