

# WILD AT ART

TIM SOLLIDAY  
IS AT HOME IN  
THE 19TH-CENTURY  
WORLD OF FRANK  
TENNEY JOHNSON  
BY BONNIE  
GANGELHOFF

THERE ARE ARTISTS who are quiet and painfully shy. Then there is Tim Solliday—a regular talking tornado, a whirling dervish of a man whom some half-jokingly refer to as Southern California’s answer to Vincent van Gogh. Not that Solliday is ever likely to slice off his ear, but there is a certain untamed quality to his demeanor, coupled with a certain wild energy in his art. His signature eucalyptus trees vibrate with life and appear ready to dash off the canvas into nearby woods, a little like the kinetic man himself.

Now 50 years old, Solliday has seen his career continue on an upward spiral since *Southwest Art* last visited him in 1997. In the past few years he has won top awards at the annual Oil Painters of America and California Art Club Gold Medal shows, as well as the Laguna Beach Plein Air Painting Invitational. But the biggest change in his creative life these days is a

ABOVE: TIM SOLLIDAY IN HIS STUDIO. PHOTO BY MICHAEL GARLAND.

unique inspiration not many artists can boast. For the past five years Solliday has been working in a historic studio once inhabited by legendary western painter Frank Tenney Johnson [1874-1939]. “Every time I walk in here my spirits are lifted, and all of a sudden I am taken back in time,” Solliday says. “The architecture alone makes me feel more serious and solid about what I am doing.”

The 1,000-square-foot bungalow he inhabits is located in Alhambra, CA, on a secluded, wooded lot overlooking a wash. The structure is representative of the Arts and Crafts style popular in Southern California during the 1920s; the movement emphasized simplicity as well as good craftsmanship and design. For Solliday,



ABOVE: PASTORAL SYCAMORES, OIL, 40 X 36.  
BELOW: SAND, SEA, AND ROCKS, OIL, 20 X 24.



the studio is a fortress of solitude, a hideaway from big-city hubbub, tucked away amid a dense grove of 30 eucalyptus trees and one monstrous pine.

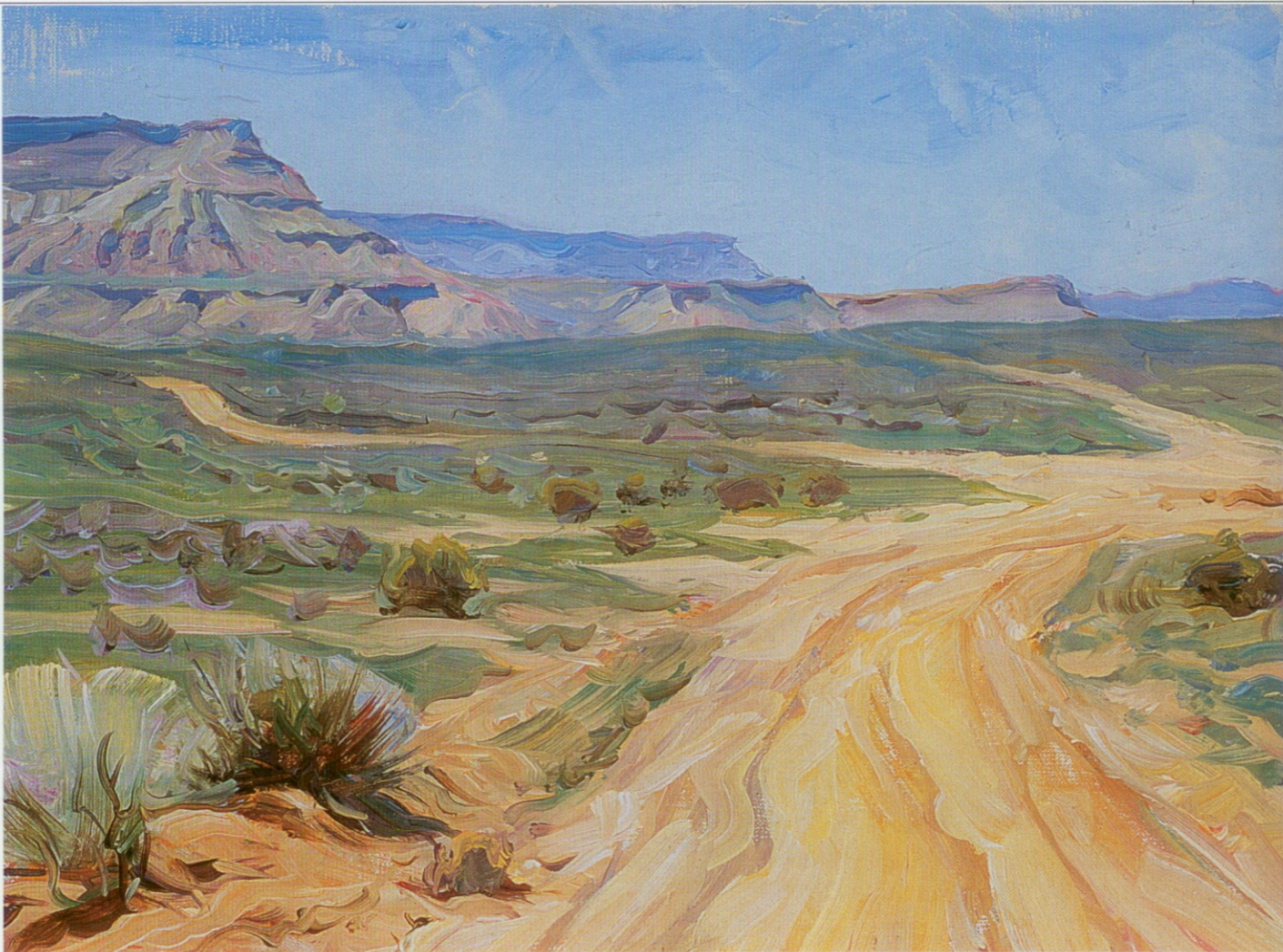
Once inside the studio, the first thing you notice is northern light illuminating aged stucco and wood-paneled walls, pockmarked with dings from the days when Johnson created his moonlit canvases of cowboys. No need for faux distressed walls created by a decorator's trendy touch.

Indeed, the ghosts of artists past live on inside these walls in more ways than one. "You walk in here and you feel the old man," Solliday says. "Buffalo and horse skulls still hang on the walls—ones that I have seen in his paintings. And sometimes it feels as if he just walked out for a cup of coffee and will return any minute." Artist-friendly features created by Johnson, such as drawers for drawings and cabinets for stacking frames, remain from those days in the 1930s.

In Johnson's heyday, the studio was also a salon of sorts—a gathering place for prominent artists of the era, including Charles M. Russell, Jack Wilkinson Smith, Edward Borein, Dean Cornwell, and Norman Rockwell. Many of the artists lived within a two-block radius of Johnson's studio, prompting nicknames for the creative enclave like Artist's Alley and the Greenwich Village of the Southwest.

Living so closely with the spirit of days gone by suits Solliday just fine—he is, by his own admission, a 19th-century man living in a 21st-century art world. He winces at the name Warhol and pooh-poohs Picasso as a charlatan who knew little about drawing. His own artistic heart belongs to the likes of John Singer Sargent, Claude Monet, Vincent van Gogh, and, of course, the early California Impressionists.

**SOLLIDAY WAS BORN IN IOWA** but moved to Redondo Beach, CA, when he was 3. (Interestingly, Frank Tenney Johnson also was born in Iowa.) Solliday's father dreamed of heading



ROAD NEAR TOQUERVILLE, OIL, 11 X 14.

west and becoming a preacher, but he soon settled into a position as a technical illustrator for McDonnell Douglas, where he remained for 40 years. As a youngster, Solliday recalls, his first exposure to art was in the Bible storybooks his

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family kept at home—the beautiful colors captured his budding artistic eye. And it was in those pages that he first saw religious renderings by well-known painters like Tom Lovell, who Solliday would later learn was also a western painter.

When he was 12, Solliday moved to nearby Palos Verdes, where he soon became taken with the beauty of the Southern California landscape—mainly the precipitous cliffs and the exotic eucalyptus trees. At 14, he acquired a horse he named Hayburner, and the two became steady companions, riding through the hills leading down to the ocean and trotting across the beaches

from San Pedro to Portuguese Bend.

It was during Solliday's early teen years when he developed an interest in western art depicting the cowboy life. After high school, he attended several art programs and supported himself as a billboard painter. Through a friend at work, he met prominent artist Theodore Lukits, who introduced him to the works of Frank Tenney Johnson. "Even back then I remember marveling at how Johnson painted realistic work with fresh color but with loose brush strokes that conveyed freedom, movement, and energy," Solliday recalls.

Gradually he began to discover other American artists like Frank Benson as well as prominent illustrators such as Frank Brangwyn, N.C. Wyeth, and Howard Pyle, all of whom would make deep impressions on him. Many of these artists were hidden from the public eye, bemoans Solliday, because the fickle modern art world insisted on looking for the next newest thing. But



AFTERNOON PORTUGUESE BEND, OIL, 14 X 18.

the “shock of the new”—paint drippings on canvas and silk-screened photographs of celebrities—never has impressed Solliday. Instead he is fond of quoting something he read once: In truth and beauty lay all great fine art.

One truth of modern-day life that concerns and consumes him personally is that the magnificent landscape that has lured so many people to California—the California Impressionists, Johnson, and Solliday’s own family—is vanishing. Last fall’s wildfires, which destroyed millions of acres, came within about 20 miles of his home. And developers continue to devour the land for tacky subdivisions, he says. “It all makes me heartsick,” Solliday

laments, remembering the days of riding Hayburner across barren hillsides.

It is not that Solliday is opposed to chopping down trees to build homes. He’s just opposed to constructing ugly eyesores that don’t mesh with the land. “There is a way to build homes that is in sync with the environment,” he says, sounding like a card-carrying member of the Arts and Crafts movement, which preached the proper marriage of function and aesthetics.

Although Solliday believes in conveying both truth and beauty in his art, he has learned over the years that painting is about more than just pretty pictures. And his best teacher has been Mother Nature herself. Early in his career, he spent about five years painting on location to grasp an

understanding of color and light.

Like his predecessor Johnson, Solliday not only works quickly but also uses brushes, palette knives, and his fingers to achieve a textural effect. His paintings are known to boast bold brush strokes and exaggerated color and form, as in *VALLEY SENTINELS*. These elements often give his works an energetic quality that carries them beyond the standard “pretty pictures” he abhors.

When a scene captures his attention, Solliday is prone to paint at a fevered pitch, spreading pigment all over the canvas in record time. He believes that the essence of a moment in the landscape must be captured within 20 minutes, even if he finishes the painting in his studio later. “It takes a very concentrated effort of painting in the zone. And it isn’t just about painting fast, but about having centered understanding of what’s in front of you, capturing the essence of the light,” Solliday explains. “Then there comes this moment in time when three translucent colors turn the landscape into a jewel. The paint stops being paint and becomes a work of art, a magic moment.”

Although Solliday lives in the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains, he regularly returns to his boyhood stomping grounds in Palos Verdes. One recent painting foray resulted in *AFTERNOON PORTUGUESE BEND*. He recalls that the weather was lousy on that particular day, and he didn’t expect much from the outing. But suddenly the light changed, and he could see the ocean transforming into an alluring shade of green while a golden light began to illuminate the scene. For a second, he debated not staying because he wanted to beat the rush-hour L.A. traffic home. “But the colors demanded to be painted,” he says.

Solliday glanced up to a neighborhood on the cliff above him and saw that it offered the best view. Making a quick decision, he rushed up the cliff with his easel and set up shop in the front yard of a complete stranger. “I looked out over the sea and saw this beautiful yellow light coming over the cliffs, silhouetting the back of the cliffs. The moment I saw it,

I knew it would make a wonderful painting,” he recalls. “I quickly saturated the canvas with paint and worked in a fervor. Good paintings don’t always happen in great canyons but in unexpected places where light and color are profound.”

Such philosophies of art also take a certain amount of patience and persistence. But these are



LAST OF THE LEAVES, OIL, 24 X 30.

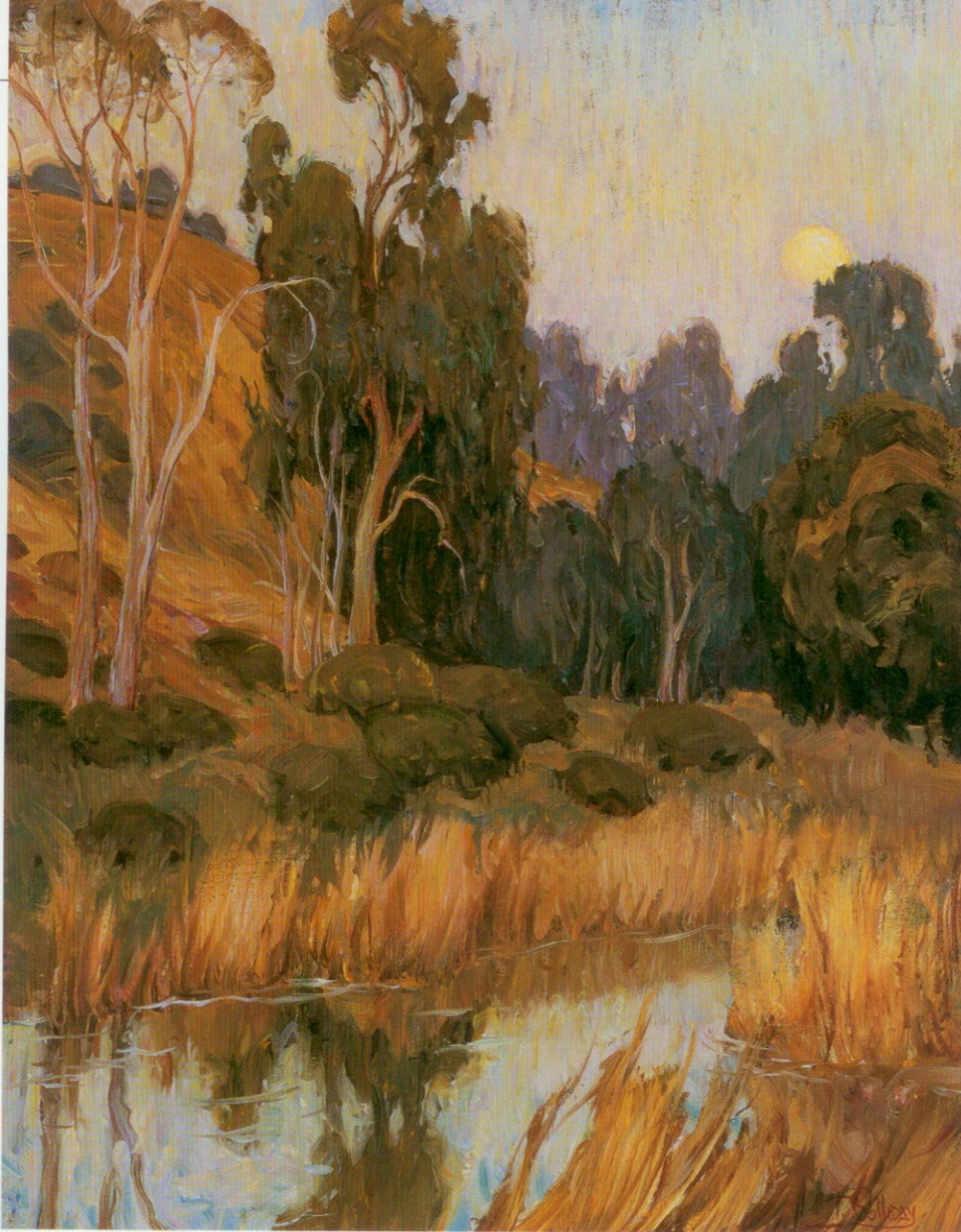
traits that benefit Solliday in more ways than one. If he hadn’t been patient and persistent, he never would have found himself painting in Frank Tenney Johnson’s studio.

**I**N 1990, **SOLLIDAY**, who owned a book that mentioned Johnson’s studio in Artist’s Alley, began to drive through Alhambra to see if he could find it. For several years he kept the book on the passenger seat of his car opened to the picture of the studio as he scoured the neighborhood about every six months. Eventually he suspected the studio must be the one hidden from the road by a forest of trees. “I just couldn’t give up. I had to see that place,” he says.

No one was ever at the home when he tried to confirm it, until one day in 1992 when he spotted an elderly man outside. He approached and asked if



T. S. Collins



CANYON MOONRISE, OIL, 24 X 18.

indeed this was Johnson's home and studio. The man, whose primary residence was in Santa Barbara, CA, replied in the affirmative and invited Solliday back through the tunnel of trees to see it.

Solliday learned that the property had passed to this owner after relatives of Johnson sold it to him. (Frank Tenney Johnson died suddenly in 1939 after attending a party where he gave a kiss to his hostess. Both Johnson and the woman died two weeks later of spinal meningitis. There is debate about where the party took place, and some claim it was actually held in Johnson's studio.)

For the next five years, Solliday made a point of inviting the absentee owner to his gallery shows when he was in town. One day in 1998, the owner, who had become a fan of Solliday's, asked the artist if he wanted to move into the studio to paint. And the rest is Southern California art history.

These days, Solliday finds that his favorite time of day in the studio is at dusk, the magic hour before sunset when the northern light turns bluish. He is fond of watching how this fading light illuminates objects he has scattered around the studio such as his leather saddles and favorite cowboy hats.

Eventually Solliday says goodbye, and as he shuts the door behind him for the day, he often has been heard to say, "Thank God for this. I have the privilege of working in the studio of a great painter for five years, and if I never have more than that, I will have had the privilege of something pretty wonderful." □

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**Solliday is represented by Michael Hollis Fine Art, South Pasadena, CA, and Greenhouse Gallery of Fine Art, San Antonio, TX.**