

Daniel W. Pinkham

Relaying the “Inner Poetry” of Landscape, and of Himself

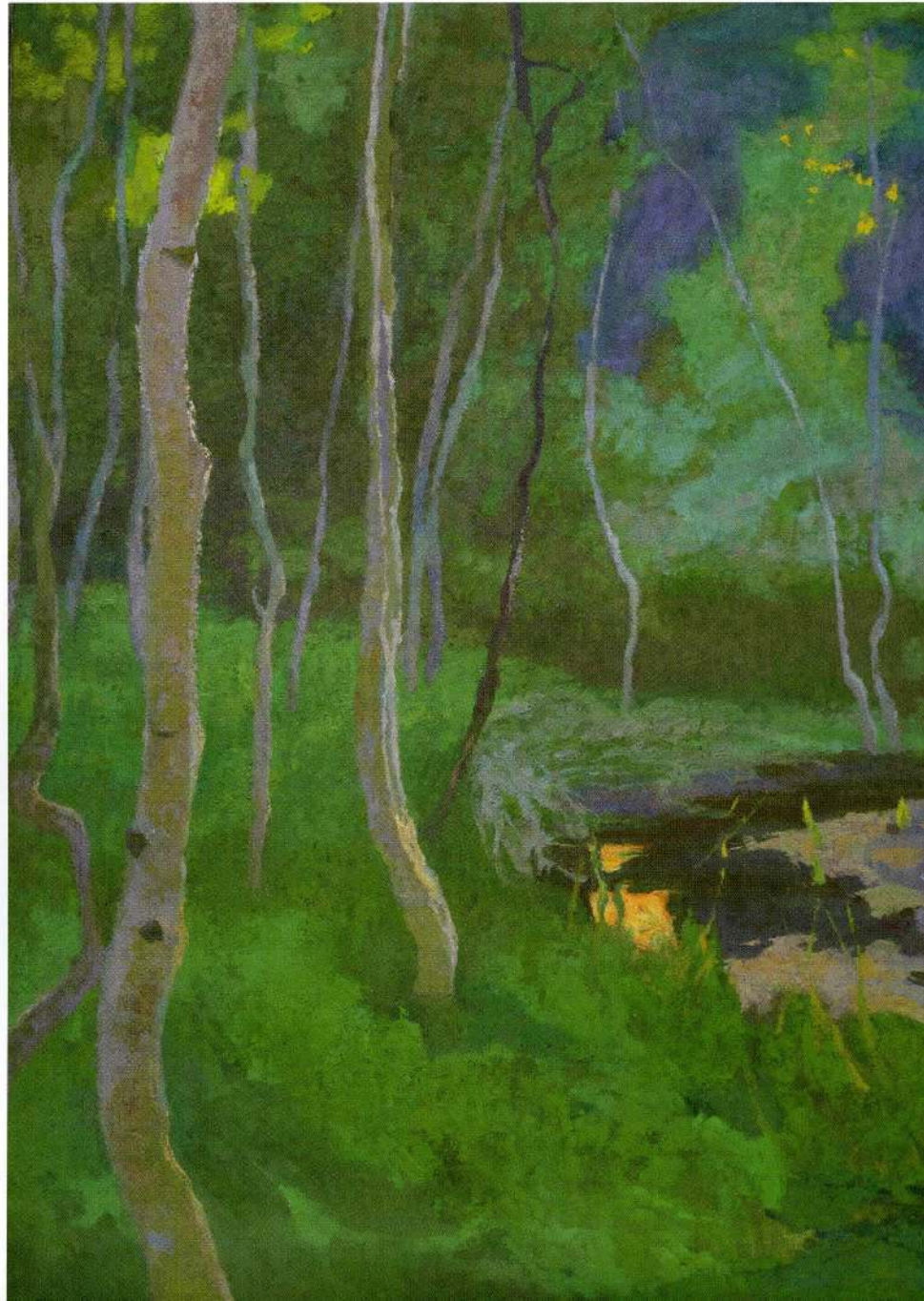
BY PETER TRIPPI



“Our culture and society have chosen entertainment over enlightenment, but we are still hungry for a sincere, honest, and soulful exchange through man’s best efforts. Painting is the perfect medium for this exchange.” Wow. Such words are not heard often in contemporary art, and it is characteristic of the landscape painter Daniel W. Pinkham (b. 1952) to utter them with neither pride nor malice. The triumph of mediocrity and falseness in mainstream American life is universally acknowledged, epitomized most crassly by television’s “reality shows,” which could hardly be more un-real. Sincerity, then, is in short supply, and doing one’s best, rather than one’s speediest, is oft discussed but seldom delivered.

Still more startling to some may be Pinkham’s assertion that it is a painter — rather than, say, a filmmaker — who is ideally positioned to establish a direct and profound line of communication between himself and the viewer. His pictures, he goes on to explain, deal not only with beauty and emotion, but also “with rest, peace, and a quietness of spirit. The landscapes themselves become a springboard to induce this sense, which is almost a state of mind. This is something I have experienced out in the field, and my work is my way of bringing it back and giving it to others.” In this scenario, intermediaries just get in the way: there is no need for a wall label or docent to convey the essence of Pinkham’s landscapes, what he calls their “inner poetry.” Seasoned as he is, the artist claims that each painting reveals to him something new about himself. This is not a production line, but a lifelong series of journeys: “The aims of my paintings are the same as of my life: to create a visible line of emotion that exposes my divine nature and reinforces the existence of that relationship.”

This evoking of divinity is even more unusual in the context of contemporary art, though of course it



Dusk's Prelude
2009, Oil on canvas, 60 x 46 in.
Private collection



Sublime Order 1

2005, Oil on canvas, 40 x 48 in.

Private collection

would have made perfect sense to members of the Hudson River School such as Thomas Cole and Frederic Church, whose piety has long been highlighted in scholarship. Were this article not illustrated, readers might fairly imagine Pinkham to paint detailed scenes that emphasize every aspect of God's accomplishment, but in fact they are powerfully influenced by modernist ideas about big shapes and bold colors not necessarily seen in nature. This is a refreshing contradiction, and just one reason Pinkham has emerged as a unique and important voice in the renaissance of American *plein air* painting.

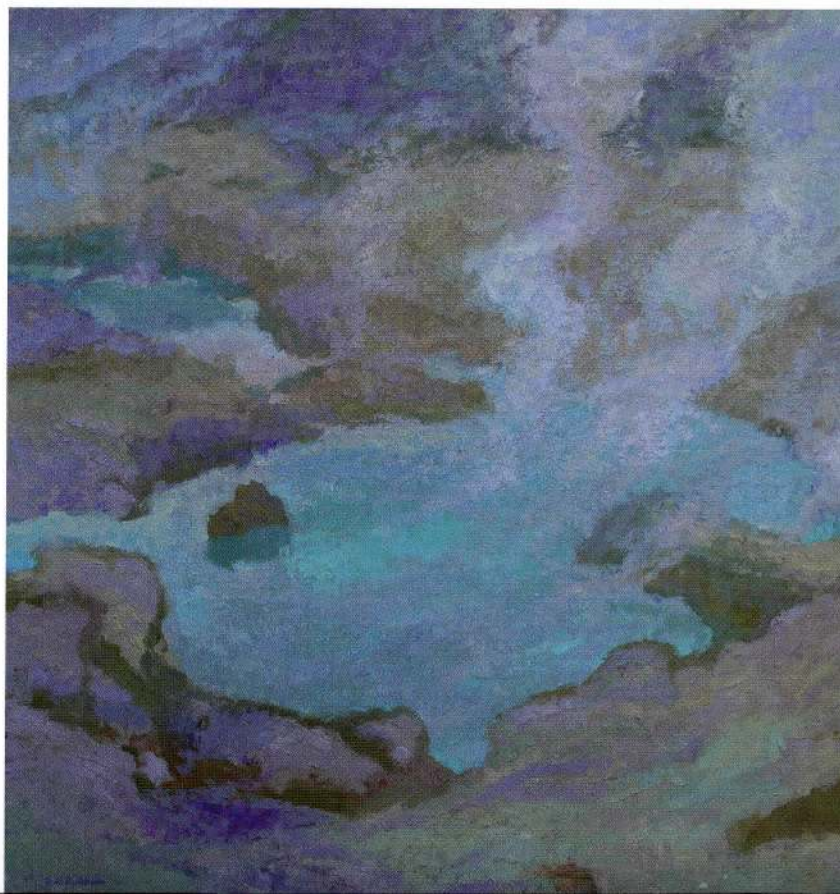
THE JOURNEY FROM, AND BACK TO, PALOS VERDES

Raised in Palos Verdes, a comparatively undeveloped area of southwestern Los Angeles County, Pinkham has always loved making art, and indeed his parents organized private instruction for him from age 9 to age 12. This led him to attend Pasadena's Art Center College of Design, from which he withdrew after two years to run the family plumbing business for eight years after his father became

Mammoth Hot Springs

2012, Oil on canvas, 40 x 40 in.

Available from the artist





Looking Beyond

2010, Oil on canvas, 40 x 48 in.

Private collection

sick. In Pasadena, however, he had learned what he needed to know about draftsmanship and composition, which led ultimately to an intensive five-year apprenticeship in the small school run by the Russian-born artist Sergei Bongart (1918-1985) in California and Idaho. Critiqued regularly by the master himself, Pinkham recalls that his first year was devoted entirely to painting in black and white, an experience that led to his now-superb management of lights and darks, of masses and vacuums. But Bongart offered the young man much more than technique. "As soon as I saw his work," Pinkham recalls, "I felt he was more me than I was. Bongart created a form of expression, and a vocabulary, that spoke to a spirit of mine."

Transformed by this immersion, Pinkham returned to Los Angeles to run his own art school. Although he loved teaching, after five years he was ready to travel, to "listen to myself more," and so he headed to Europe,

where he reveled in close study of museum masterworks. Fortunately, his wife, Vicki, is also an artist and inveterate traveler, first professionally as an airline attendant, and then with her husband, driving around half the year in a converted U-Haul truck. Although the truck has been retired, the couple still travels extensively, not only around the American West and Southwest, but also in Europe and New England.

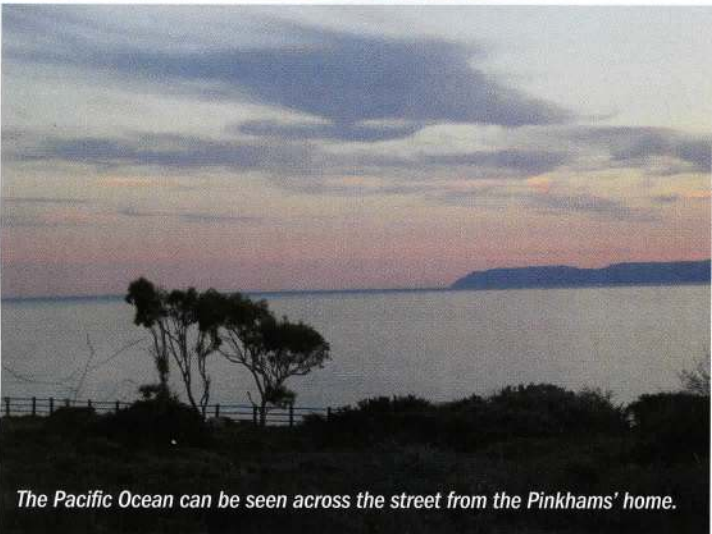
The duration of their trips shrank in 1998, when the Pinkhams bought a property in Rancho Palos Verdes. In 1913, the New York financier Frank Vanderlip purchased 16,000 acres in this scenic area overlooking the Pacific Ocean, where he commissioned the famous Olmsted brothers to design an Italianate residential community. The Pinkhams bought one of the 20 structures that Vanderlip built, a former gatehouse based on the designs of a roadside chapel that Michelangelo occupied while he painted the Vatican's Sistine Chapel. All that remained of the gatehouse in 1998, however, were its thick plaster walls and a floor; scheduled for demolition, it appealed to the Pinkhams not only for its 19-foot ceilings, but also for its position across a narrow road from Por-



The Pinkhams' home seen from their citrus garden



The Pinkhams' living room



The Pacific Ocean can be seen across the street from the Pinkhams' home.

tuguese Point, where 250-foot cliffs drop precipitously into the sea.

They have been restoring the property ever since. Fortunately, Dan Pinkham worked in construction as a young man, and his nephew is a professional builder. Today the house, though still not finished, transports visitors to Italy with its layers of painted plaster, generous light, garden with citrus trees and fountain, and even Renaissance Revival furniture acquired from the Vanderlip family. Listening to classical music piped in throughout the house, Pinkham makes his own frames downstairs and stores his artworks upstairs. "It feels like a sanctuary," he explains. "It just has a presence about it." Ultimately, the Pinkhams plan to bequeath the property to the community to use as an art museum.

For now, however, the couple crosses the road daily with their paint-



A Prayerful Mind

2012, Oil on canvas, 48 x 40 in.

Available from the artist

ing equipment to admire the Pacific sparkling in the sunshine, and to look back toward the villa-dotted hills above their house. A year before the Pinkhams settled here, they established the Portuguese Bend Artist Colony with five childhood friends who are also artists working in the region: Rick Humphry, Stephen Mirich, Kevin Prince, Thomas Redfield, and Amy Sidrane. Together this energetic group has mounted a series of successful selling exhibitions to raise funds for the local conservancy, which buys unspoiled properties along the local coastline that are eagerly coveted by developers and speculators. Pinkham's protective instinct for this terrain goes deeper than the usual factors of "not in my backyard" or "let's preserve it for the next generation." "It's a natural response," he observes, "to have your soul fed by nature and then, in return, to find a way to give back through preservation."

The colony's members have bonded intimately with another coastal area, too. It happens that member Tom Redfield is the grandson of Edward Willis Redfield (1869-1965), the impressionist painter most closely associated with the artist colony he co-founded at New Hope, in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Almost every October, the younger Redfield invites his fellow colony members to stay in his family's longtime

Be Still My Soul
2000, Oil on canvas, 48 x 40 in.
Collection of the artist

home in Boothbay, Maine, where his ancestor once spent time with such giants as Robert Henri, George Bellows, and William Glackens. Not surprisingly, the seven artists have applied their conservation fundraising strategy to the Maine coast; one of Dan Pinkham's many views of this scenic region appears on the cover of this magazine.

INSPIRATIONS AND PROCESS

Other than Bongart, Pinkham's key artistic mentor has been the sculptor and painter George Carlson (b. 1940), who, coincidentally, will be profiled in the next issue of *Fine Art Connoisseur*. Based in Harrison, Idaho, Carlson is revered by fellow artists nationally not only for his talent but also for his collegiality. He and Pinkham are close friends, share similar philosophies, and enjoying working in scenic Ojai, California, every year with their artist friends Clyde Aspevig, Len Chmiel, and T. Allen Lawson.

Looking backward for inspiration, it makes sense that Pinkham admires the eccentric visionary painter Albert Pinkham Ryder (1847-1917), a distant ancestor of his father. Long collected by museums, Ryder's landscapes are proto-modernist in their ethereality, informed by France's Barbizon School and American tonalism, and also by his own interest in mysticism, poetry, and enigmatic allegories drawn from Romantic narratives. Equally appealing to Pinkham are the moody tonalist landscapes of the Danish-American master Emil Carlsen (1853-1932), better known to museumgoers for his luminous still lifes. Pinkham says that he admires the sincerity in Carlsen's pictures, something he also perceives in Abbott H. Thayer and Andrew Wyeth.

For all of these artists, nature has served as a crucial source of inspiration, yet none are what we might call a human camera, detailing exactly what they see. Rather, their paintings are as inward as they are external, plumbed from the artists' own psyches. Pinkham points out that he does not "always begin by painting." He says, "The first thing I do is sit and write a little about the place, thinking about why I stopped there, what it is exactly that interests me, how I feel about it, and what I want to expose with it. Only then do I begin sketching." He departs the site carrying small sketches made in oil on canvas, all stored in a huge archive for easy reference later. Back in the studio tackling a large canvas, Pinkham consults these sketches, of course, but he also paints from memory.

Immediately evident in Pinkham's finished works are his flair for non-conventional colors and his variations in brushwork and paint layering across the canvas. Unfortunately, techniques such as scumbling are difficult to capture in photographs, which is why Pinkham's works, more than many plein-airists', are best experienced in person. As noted earlier, particularly remarkable is his command of large shapes within the composition, which entails not only the balancing of positives and negatives, but also the avoidance of predictable masses such as mountains in favor of less sensational ones like tree trunks, clouds, and meadows. In the spirit of such modernists as Milton Avery, Pinkham knows the brain speaks two languages simultaneously: its intellectual aspect craves

details, while its primitive, subconscious side prioritizes masses. Pleasing as the former is, it is the latter that keeps us safe: when a car comes barreling toward us, we see its darkened mass first, not the intricacy of its radiator grillwork. That mass prompts us to run for safety, and thus will always compel us more forcefully, even in art. Like Avery, Pinkham has found a way to bridge these opposites, and thus his work suggests a viable way forward for contemporary realist painting, some of which is stuck in a rut of needless detail.

Pinkham continues to play a leading role in the ongoing resurgence of *plein air* painting, which he considers not only a career, but also a lifestyle. In 1982, he founded Plein Air Artists of California, and he was later a founding member of Plein Air Painters of America. Today he enjoys mentoring younger artists through the California Art Club, and he is looking forward to joining colleagues this summer at two popular events. On August 9-11, he will participate in the second edition of Artistic Vision at the Center for the Arts in Jackson, Wyoming (see the February 2012 issue of *Fine Art Connoisseur*), and then on August 24-26 in the Thunderbird Foundation for the Arts' *Maynard Dixon Country* event in Mount Carmel, Utah (see page 91 in this issue).

Pinkham is represented by American Legacy Fine Arts in Pasadena, which is right not to pigeonhole him as a *plein air* painter, but as the non-categorizable master artist he truly is. ■

PETER TRIPPI is editor of *Fine Art Connoisseur*.

