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PAINTING

California Art Club showcases the natural world at Autry Museum exhibition

By [Sandra Barrera](#), *Los Angeles Daily News*

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Richard Humphrey's featured watercolor painting "Morning at Bluff Cove" was selected for the California Art Club's 105th Annual Gold Medal Exhibition. Courtesy of the California Art Club

For [Eric Merrell](#), painting is typically a solitary pursuit. But one night while the 37-year-old Pasadena artist was in the San Gabriel foothills waiting for the full moon to rise, he caught a glimpse of two sets of eyeballs coming down the trail.

“Whatever they were, they were acting curious,” remembers Merrell, who is represented locally by [American Legacy Fine Arts](#) in Pasadena. “They’d stop and just watch, and then they would shuffle down the trail again and stop and look some more. So I put them in my painting.”



In “Mystery Returns,” Eric Merrell has included two pairs of eyes below the moonlit silhouette of yucca blooms.

Courtesy of the California Art Club

Merrell’s painting “Mystery Returns” is one of more than 200 artworks showcased in the [California Art Club’s 105th annual Gold Medal Exhibition](#), from Sunday April 3 through April 24 at the Autry Museum of the American West.

The juried show of works ranging from oil landscapes to bronze figures also includes an array of plein-air (or “open air”) paintings by the organization’s members. Familiar themes represented in the exhibit include desert, coast and mountain landscapes.

“Nature has a healing quality that is second to none, and short of actually going out into nature the paintings can help to bring that out and make you feel better,” says Jean Stern, an expert on the California Impressionist movement who has been waking up to a painting by [Richard Humphrey](#) of Portuguese Bend in Palos Verdes Peninsula for the past 15 years.

“It’s there for a reason,” Stern says of the painting. “It starts my day with a gorgeous view of nature and of light and it does make a difference,” says Stern, who assisted with the selection of the artwork for this year’s exhibition, adding “Rick is a special painter.”

One of Humphrey’s more recent works is the watercolor study “Morning at Bluff Cove,” which was selected for the gold medal exhibition. The painting captures an area on the Peninsula that has been subjected to a series of landslides.

“It’s unique because of all the land movement that’s taken place. But it’s a very beautiful area, and I go there a lot to do studies and paintings,” says Humphrey, whose connection to this part of the South Bay goes back to the 1950s.

It’s hard to imagine now, but when he was growing up in Lunada Bay the Peninsula was mostly agricultural land and fields dotted with trees. In his teens, he began to venture out with his drawing board and paints or pencil and capture what he saw: isolated farm buildings, grassy expanses that turned yellow in the summertime and seaside cliffs.

At 64, Humphrey is still a presence on the Peninsula — he can’t help it. “The only way I can satisfy this restlessness that is created by seeing the place is to do a painting of it, and especially of the places where I grew up,” says Humphrey, who is represented by the [Tirage Art Gallery](#) in Pasadena. “That’s a much deeper emotional connection for me. I step outside of time. I’m in this realm where a lot of the things are past and present to me.”

During the run of the show, the California Art Club will present special gold medal programs, including a tour of the “[California Impressionism: The Gardena High School Collection](#)” exhibition led by Stern, who is also executive director of the [Irvine Museum](#), from 1-3 p.m. April 9.

Student bodies across the country often raised money to buy art that they would then gift to their schools upon graduation. But very few schools stuck with the tradition as long as Gardena High.

Its collection spans from 1919 to 1956 and includes important works by some of the most celebrated plein-air painters of the 20th century who were also members of the California Art Club. They include Franz Bischoff, Edgar Payne and Jack Wilkinson Smith.

As Stern addresses their individual merits, he will also provide insights for art enthusiasts interested in building their own collections of California plein-air painters who are still inspired by the Golden State's natural beauty.

All anyone has to do is take a walk through the Gold Medal exhibition where all work is available for acquisition on a first- come, first-served basis.

California Art Club's 105th Annual Gold Medal Exhibition

When: Opens at 10 a.m. Sunday and continues through April 24, with hours from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Friday and 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday.

Where: Autry Museum of the American West, 4700 Western Heritage Way, Los Angeles.

Admission: \$4-\$10. Free for members and children ages 2 and under.

Information: www.californiaartclub.org.



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