



**Canciones de Arroyo**, 2013, 30" x 48", oil on canvas

# En Baja

Examples from a recent John Comer show  
in San Jose del Cabo, Baja Sur, Mexico

“Back home”, John Comer says,  
“I’d never paint at noon. But here  
the vocabulary changes.”

For plein air master Comer, “back home” summons the suede-napped Mediterranean light of Alta California. The sandstone bluffs, the coastal ranchlands, the offshore islands. Contrasted with his current billet in Baja Sur, the northern territory is abundant with wind-brushed grasses, the coast live oaks providing green relief. Golden hour illuminates the region with a viscous, honied density. The nearshore Pacific works as nature’s ultimate complement, amplifying the values of the foliage in these vaquero pastorals. Alta California is where Comer made his bones.

As an outstanding member of the Oak Group, a Santa Barbara-based clutch of painting preservationists, it has been Comer’s privilege to channel pure visions of the landscape to those who might benefit from well-crafted reminders. The Group has charged themselves with recording the baseline value of that region: the headlands, the uplifted coastal ranges, the chapparalled hills.

**FACING Home, subjects, studio, empty desert, colonial town, open ocean, and dependable reef—all within a two-mile radius. John Comer, Baja Sur, January 2015.**

The desired result can’t be affected by mincing, merely decorative examples of living room expressionism. What is needed are works eliciting a response, a call to action. What is needed, if we might dip into the vulgar Latin, are works with *cojones*.

In John’s experience, painting isn’t an occupation, let alone a dalliance. Indeed, even naming it as a calling falls short. “Read Pablo Neruda’s ‘The Poet’s Obligation,’ Comer says. It’s a trick of fortune to have Neruda speak for you. Viewing Comer’s collected works, you find that the reference does not overreach. The poem by the canonic Chilean speaks to providing a service. To offering visions of the sea to those far from its influence, both literally and metaphorically.

Now living in the Cape Region of southern Baja, Comer takes the obligation as seriously as ever.

Here, along with the other desert creatures, John is active in *la madrugada*, the grey light before the dawn. A time to slow-troll up the dirt road to a dependable reef. The morning’s prospects resolve as his truck settles on the beach berm, a 200-degree view of the cobbled almost-point commanding his attention. A handful of others pull up at various favored parking spots, eyes trained as the rays finally pour over the mountains behind, front-lighting the ocean and snapping it to attention. Looking south, you can follow the windswell’s passage down-coast, folding raggedly past sandbars, stacking up against rocky points, and rushing up into channeled guzzles, some sort of sense memory aiming the rushing water toward estuarine *huertas*.

It’s springtime, and the reef is off its feed. This time of year, it’s more expected than deflating. The ritual surf check complete, he is freed to loose himself in the studio. Returning up the dirt road to his handmade, humbly

artisanal casita, Comer leaves his sandals at the door and walks into the cool, plastered interior.

In the studio easels hold works-in-progress. The space begs study, overfilled with elements of the working artist’s kit. A stack of sketched renderings cover a surface, minimal marks capturing the skeletal structure of the land. Remarking on their starkness, Comer notes that simplicity is crucial, and, perhaps referencing some old Blues homily, that sometimes one note is all you need.

“Drawing,” says Comer, “is the key. Without that key, you don’t get to come in.”

Moving on to a stack of completed recent work, the finished paintings show that drafting skills are just the beginning. The finished works are layered with interest and information far, far beyond the simple blocking of the drawn composition. They show nothing less than the land come alive, the ocean throbbing then laying back.

As they have in California, Comer’s desert works have found a serious following in Baja. He’s represented by two Mexican galleries: the long-established, artist-owned Galeria Logan, and the site of his recent powerhouse show, “En Baja,” Galeria de Ida Victoria.

The collected works seen in the “En Baja” show are, in the literal sense of the word, essential. As a visual textbook regarding the truths of the country, they speak for the non-human fabric of the land. The overall impact hits with the weight of a deer slug, but isn’t always pretty in the traditional sense. The work documents a hard place seen in hard light, but with priceless, timeless rewards hidden in the decomposed granite.

John has pointed views on it all.

“The light here is different. We’re on the Tropic of Cancer. At midday, there is nowhere I’ve seen that is more shadow-less. But there is illumination. I’m exercising new ways, for me, of conveying information. There’s a desert brilliance. That’s what I embrace, because it’s something that is representative of the place. One thing I’ve always adhered to: painting *must* be regional. It *must* be specific. That’s what makes it universal.”

If you have spent time at the Cape poking around the backcountry at different times of days and in different seasons, surfing the feathering point waves of the Sea, feeling the more direct, unrefracted energy of the Pacific side, you’ll relate to Comer’s work. If you’ve walked the arroyos, boots crunching over the alluvia, smelling the herbal *gobernadora* and *jojoba*, the work might awaken in you a sort of homing instinct. The vultures in the dawn light warming their joints on the arm of a cardon. the laced interplay of sizzling foam and clear water in the wake of a wave, conjuring Spanish master Sorolla. the poignancy of a trio of palms scratching out a existence in salted soil.. Comer gets beyond aesthetics and into the soul of the Cape.

It’s an obligational burden he’s happy to take up. Spend any time with him and you find that he has no choice in the matter. —SCOTT HULET



PHOTOS: KATE TURNING



**Sweep of the Point**, 2015, 24" x 36", oil on canvas

“Viridian waves breaking on clean sandy beaches,  
the sound booming up the arroyos, the sheer scope  
of the Sierra de la Laguna towering above the rolling  
desert, and the small pueblos kept luring me back.”

—John Comer



HOWARD EKMAN

At his Pacific Sur home break, the 60-something Comer is known for being patient, sitting deep, and snaring the bombs.



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**Pangas at San Juanico**, 2014, 20" x 36", oil on canvas



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**Moonrise in December**,  
2014, 36" x 72",  
oil on canvas



**Green Waves in the  
Morning**,  
2014, 16" x 24",  
oil on canvas



**Cerritos Antes**, 2014, 24" x 36", oil on canvas

JOSMER