

GALLERY

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MALIBU COAST, 18" x 50", oil on canvas, collection of Mr. Bart Ulansey, Malibu, CA



# John Comer on Surfing and Painting

BY ELIAS CHIACOS

John Comer stands in the Santa Barbara studio he shares with Ray Strong, 90-year-old grandfather of Santa Barbara's Oak Group of extraordinary landscape painters. Comer is adding layers of oil paint to a canvas on his easel. A large north facing window frames the peaks of the Santa Ynez Mountains, a sandstone sedimentary rock range pushed up out of the Pacific millions of years ago. In the corner among stacks of stretched canvases in various states of painting are several different sized and shaped surfboards.

"Surfing and painting both begin with the earth's movement in geological time. Water moves in relationship to what is underneath it. I paint not to make a picture, but to get to what the thing is really about.

"I am constantly observing and learning, and I try to paint these elements that are in motion. The trouble is that when you paint, you stop the motion. The trick is to paint it to make it look like it is in motion so the forms are not static. Surfing is about movement and action and the patterns of water and weather, and so is painting."

Comer grew up in Southern California where he surfed Trestles, Dana Point, Huntington Beach and made early excursions into Baja. He has been painting since he was a boy. He has painted and surfed his way through the world most of his 47 years. Comer's dedication to painting and surfing has been the driving passion of his life. A true waterman, he also sails and fishes extensively. He recalls his early surfing memories.

"In the sixties, Salt Creek had only a shack on the bluff where two crusty old guys named Young had a locked gate that led to the surf break. They held a long stick with a clothespin attached to it down to your car and opened the gate after you put fifty cents in the clothespin."

Comer nearly drowned surfing at Dana Point when he was 13. It was his first year surfing and it was big. He got caught inside in the impact zone, was tossed around in the kelp and held under long enough to teach him respect for the ocean. He remembers, "It was a beautiful place to surf with clear, deep water and majestic cliffs." Now with the harbor and breakwater at Dana Point and the huge hotel at Salt Creek, his old haunts have changed dramatically.

He reminded me of the first time we went surfing together in 1961. Our friend John Potter's dad took us to Huntington Beach in February. We had no wetsuits, (no one had wetsuits or leashes) and we surfed all day on a grey, cold day. John rode a wide balsa pintail Velzy-Jacobs "pig board." I had a well used orange foam Jacobs board. We had a fire on the beach and we would surf until we were numb, then stand by the fire until

we warmed up enough to go back out. It was just a thrilling adventure to be out in the ocean on these funky boards.

He recalled how we young gremmies would comb the "polio pond," a remnant of the once large estuary at Doheny State Beach, for bottles that had refund value. We used the money to buy Mexican food at Henry's across the highway. Our friend Denny Gregory, who is now a newspaperman on the Big Island of Hawaii, used to bypass the bottle stage and eat day old donuts right out of the trash. We did our part to give young surfers a bad image.

Greg Nichols, master surfboard builder from Laguna Beach, had a girl friend named Patty McMichaels who lived in San Clemente. Her father was an ex-marine and she had a card that got her and her friends into San Onofre. She drove a little red, rear-engine Corvair. John rode in the trunk, which was in the front of the car. Nichols thought it was funny to honk the horn next to John's ear all the way down the dirt road to the beach.

Comer also made a trip to the Hawaiian Islands in the late 1960s where he became especially fond of Kauai and the breaks at Hanalei. He lived in a Volkswagen bus, and later in an A-frame house overlooking the wide bay. In 1969, Comer surfed Hanalei on a 16" wide gun all through the fall, then got back to Santa Barbara in time for an epic winter at Rincon.

John showed me a lightweight 7'11" balsa board Nichols made for him recently. It is made from rare 25-year-old balsa wood Nichols had been saving for something special all these years. Ray looked at the sleek board and declared, "It looks like a Turkish sword to tame the waves." At my request, John pulled out each board in his quiver, affectionately recalling the waves he has ridden on them and remarked how he tries to match the right board to the waves and conditions.

Getting back to old times, John related this tale: He used to sneak into Trestles to surf when the marines kept everyone out, but never had an incident. Then one day a friend whose father was a marine took them to Baja. On the way back they stopped at Camp Pendleton intending to go in legally to surf. John was 18, and a young marine about his age decided the long blond haired suntanned surfer was a public enemy. The marine was determined to bust him. He searched the car for dope and even took off the hubcaps. Getting frustrated at not finding anything, he screamed at John that if they were in Viet Nam he would just kill him. Then he called a colonel to come to the gate. The colonel brought an official paper stating that the young men would be fined \$25,000 and be imprisoned six months if they were ever caught on Camp Pendleton property. He wanted John to sign it. After he read it, John made it into a paper airplane and sailed it at the colonel. They finally got out of there and Comer never surfed Trestles again until it was opened to the public a few years later.

The next year he and his friend Pete Taylor traveled north to surf in Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties. His friend sold some of John's paintings that they had along with them to the Sheinbaum Gallery in Montecito. John was totally broke and the \$800 he made from the sale seemed like a fortune. He decided to move to Santa Barbara and enroll in its city college.





JEFFREY'S BAY, 21" x 51", oil on canvas,  
collection of Mr. and Mrs. Danny Wise, Scottsdale, AZ

Rode an early morning wave way down the beach, straightened off, came in and picked up a Venus ear (abalone) from the sand and there was the pattern of waves refracting around a point—Jeffrey's, Rincon, Malibu, all of them. Walked to Chris and Madeline's and painted.

PALOS VERDES COVE, 22" x 36", oil on canvas,  
courtesy George Stern Fine Arts



DANA POINT, 32" x 54", oil on canvas, private collection

A part of my childhood. Rolling down that steep road in afternoon shadow into an aquarium with soft, clean waves bending slowly in the reflections. Where I learned to surf.

I hadn't been there for twenty-five years. Stopping at the lookout one day, the sandstone cliffs and plants were still there and the red cobblestone melange at the head of the point and even the pier, or some part of it, but the surf was gone. I looked and mentally sketched, remembering how it was. Where was the path, the beach, the picnic table...the takeoff? I drew it in my mind all night. Made a diagram the next morning. I went back at 5:30 p.m. in summer light and photographed the cliffs. Did a small oil sketch. Took all this to Baja with other old photographs and books about the place. I showed the sketch to Pat and Rennie, what did they remember? Little bits emerged. Back to California for a business trip and stayed with Greg Nichols—showed him the sketch and talked over what we remembered. Called Mickey Muñoz who said he was too young then to recall much detail. Back to Baja and painted it under the palapa, after all, it existed in the memory now more than the place. A ghost.







PT. DUME COVE, 22" x 36", oil on canvas, collection of Mr. Frank Capra III, Los Angeles, CA

CALIFORNIA INCLINE WITH ALOES, 36" x 60", oil on canvas, courtesy George Stern Fine Arts







MALIBU, 24" x 36", oil on canvas, courtesy George Stern Fine Arts

Never surfed there myself, just looked at it like it was an old battlefield, a piece of history, a shrine, polluted but still beautiful. When Bart took me up on the hill and I could see the S-curve of the cove, the highway and lagoon, it all came together. Later, I went up with Steve to another unoccupied hill and painted through a Santa Ana. The second handshake.

CURRENTS CONCEPTION, 30" x 48", oil on canvas, courtesy George Stern Fine Arts





One day, while walking on the campus, he saw the very same marine who had hassled him at Camp Pendleton. He was carrying books as he climbed an outdoor stairway. Comer circled around the back of a nearby building and ran to the top of the hill to greet him—adrenaline pumping.

“Come on mother-----, it’s just you and me now,” he screamed at the startled ex-marine. Then he read him the riot act spilling an antiwar tirade and threatening him at the same time. The young man, recently returned from Viet Nam, just



MORNING WAVE, 18" x 24", oil on canvas, courtesy George Stern Fine Arts

(facing page) At Ray’s place—I painted with Ray in his studio for almost four years. What a gift. Here we’re surrounded by some of our paintings, my boards, a sign painted by Maynard Dixon for the 1934 Art Student’s League in San Francisco which Ray, Maynard and Frank Von Sloan started. This led to Ray starting the Oak Group with Michael Drury, Arturo Tello, Hank Pitcher, the Iwerks brothers and others. I am one of the twenty-odd members. We donate half the money from group shows to environmental organizations such as The Nature Conservancy. The big painting on the right is Ray’s 1934 WPA mural representing the period of time between the two World Wars. I have some of my African paintings here from my ’92 trip with Lesley. Reef was born during that trip. I was at Jeffrey’s and she called me back. I flew to Durban and finished the elephant paintings while waiting for our third family member to arrive.

stared at John in disbelief, then broke down and cried. John ended up taking him out for lunch and they had a heart-to-heart talk about war and peace.

Comer lived in an old adobe-style house in the hills above Santa Barbara and painted and surfed. In 1971 after some success selling his paintings, he bought his first boat. He learned to sail the 25-foot wooden boat out to the Channel Islands where he surfed, fished and painted, often alone. Rincon was crowded even then, but the islands were isolated, wild, and the swordfishing was good. He moved up higher into the mountains where he shared a cabin with two other men. From the outside shower they had a view of Campus Point, the Channel Islands and the ocean five miles away and twelve hundred feet below.

In 1978 John took a trip to the East Coast where he bought the 33 foot *Aurette*, a Spanish-built sloop. He sailed down to the Caribbean where he stayed for two-and-a-half years, painting, cruising and occasionally surfing. He spent

four or five months sailing through the Panama Canal and up through Central America and Mexico, surfing Costa Rica and El Salvador on the way.

Comer describes the time he drifted off of Michoacan on a dark, still night when he could see the lights of homes on the hillside overlooking the ocean. The boat swayed gently and a large hammerhead shark circled the boat illuminated by phosphorescence. The magic of that moment almost twenty years ago still inspires him.

John came back to Santa Barbara eventually and resumed his painting on land. The call of the sea came again in the late 1980s when he took a trip to South Africa. This was shortly after he met the beautiful Lesley, a South African blond. They were married in Santa Barbara in 1988.

For nine months he painted and surfed Jeffrey’s Bay which he describes as fast and hollow. “There is not much time for cutbacks on that wave.”

Comer and Lesley came back to Santa Barbara and they began living on their boat in the harbor. Their son, Reef, was born in 1992 and has clearly captured John’s heart. They spend summers in Baja surfing with Reynolds Yater, Pat Curren, Steve Farbus and Janet McPherson, Skip and Sally Saenger, and their many other friends—and of course, painting. Surfing and painting always go together for John. “Being in the energy out in the water is a big part of the rhythm in painting; for me it is the essence. I especially like to be in wild places, jungles full of animals and mountains that border the ocean. Surfing is more than a sport. It is an adventure, otherwise you are just surfing the crowd.”

Lesley has taken up surfing in the warm waters of Baja as well. Fear of sharks kept her out of the water in South Africa, but she finds Baja inviting. Young Reef is showing interest in the ocean, too. Comer teaches him to swim and to paint. He paints with watercolors next to his dad on the shore. He’s had his first ride on a surfboard already, too, standing up with John’s friend Ian McGonagill behind him holding on.

Comer has a system of setting up his easel with c-clamps and wood-backed canvas so he can paint in the wind, capturing all the motion that make his paintings alive. “Unlike in the studio where you remember and distill experience, painting outside you learn about color in a different way. The current lines, kelp beds and surface add dimension. The waves are only part of the movement in water. Out there it’s like surfing—you’re really doing it. It’s all just snapping off—like right now.”

Comer’s adventures have been an antidote to a lifetime of watching California endure a constant onslaught of bulldozing and paving.

“Place after place after place has been flattened and paved. Our challenge now is to learn how to live without destroying the land. Otherwise there is not going to be anything for the next generation.”

Comer adds that even though the damage done to the land and its life forms has been heavy, he says, “Geology is still the bottom line. The earth will continue to turn, to heal its scars and more life will grow, with us or without us.” ♦



