



Pitcher Perfect

People often view Santa Barbara as paradise, the California dream — palm-framed vistas, glistening surf, the golden Santa Ynez Mountains, beauty as stunning and transcendent as a rainbow.

“Almost everyone who has been to Santa Barbara understands that there’s something special about it — the quality of light, the Mediterranean climate, the biodiversity, the lifestyle,” says artist Hank Pitcher, who is also a teacher and a surfer. His iconic portraits of surfboards, today’s tribal shields, symbolize California beach culture.

For nearly 40 years, Pitcher has captured Santa Barbara’s subtle and complex sense of place in his poetic paintings of its magnificent, unspoiled open spaces. His work together with that of other

local plein air painters has inspired the preservation of the landscape.

“I’ve had this incredibly privileged experience,” says Pitcher, a faculty member in the College of Creative Studies. “I’ve lived almost my entire life within about a half-mile radius — growing up in Isla Vista, graduating from the college, and teaching at UCSB. Unintentionally, my paintings have become historical documents.”

Although Isla Vista’s lemon groves and pastures have been replaced by apartments, the dunes on



“Coal Oil Point Reserve,” 2011, oil on canvas, 24 x 48 in.

Coal Oil Point have been restored by the campus, along with other locations where Pitcher teaches with botanists and biologists.

“At most universities you can’t paint and learn about the natural world,” he says. “There is something worthwhile about going out and standing in the weather to really look at something. The Greeks have a word for it that means wisdom of the flesh. You learn by being there.”

“Forbidden,” his upcoming exhibition at Sullivan Goss downtown, opens June 2. It will focus on places in Santa Barbara that are off-limits for reasons real and imagined, including the mysterious Clark Estate, the Coral Casino, and working cattle ranches.

What is the test of a good painting? “You have to live with a painting, and if the painting, like a poem and like a song, has some sort of integrity, it gets better over time,” says Pitcher. “It becomes more instead of less.” ■

— Eileen Conrad



Hank Pitcher



“Lincoln’s Board,” 2006, oil on canvas, 26 x 16 in.