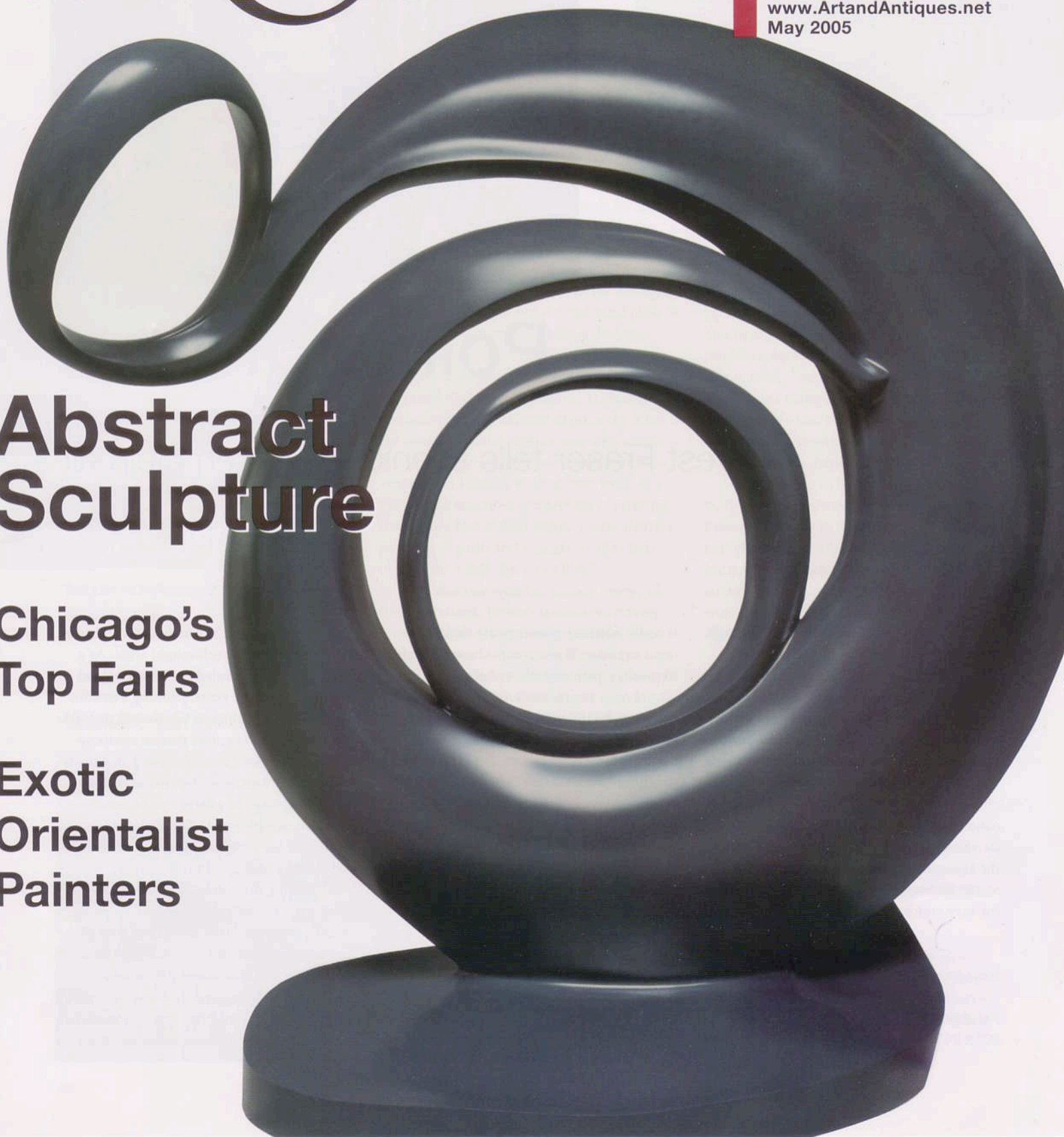


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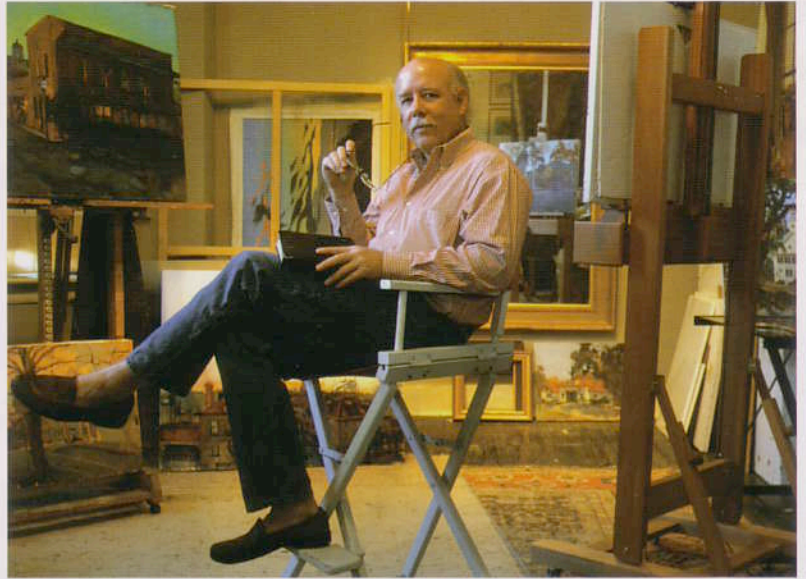
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Points of View

West Fraser tells scenic stories en plein air.

By Susan Sully
Portrait by Paula Illingworth

The bright noonday light cuts through an aquamarine pool. Its dawn warmth settles softly on the gnarled branches of a live oak tree. Afternoon rays weave through the thicket of swamp grass and palmetto scrub. West Fraser is a master at depicting this evanescent quality.

Established as Charleston, South Carolina's best-known, most widely collected contemporary artist, Fraser is an impressionist who captures the magic of place. From the Lowcountry vistas he loves to exotic scenes in faraway lands, his paintings exude the very atmosphere of their setting. "Light

is really what my paintings are about," the artist explains. "I use compositions from life to produce paintings about light."

Fraser began his study of light at an early age. By the time he was 12, the young artist was toting paint and paper into the maritime forests and marshes of Hilton Head, South Carolina. For the last three years, Fraser has worked on 20 paintings of scenes found in the unspoiled landscape of Palmetto Bluff in Bluffton, an area just south of his childhood stomping grounds. Now, at the age of 50, he is exploring the barrier islands of South Carolina, as well as other locales. "What I'm doing right now is what I've always said was my goal, even years ago when I was a child," he says. "In a sense, I'm painting the joys of my youth."

Although Fraser received formal art training with a focus on illustration and

graphic arts at the University of Georgia, he considers himself a self-taught artist. As a young man, he traveled the New England coastline for three years, painting maritime scenes before settling in Charleston in 1984. He continued to explore marine compositions several years more, working in a realistic, detailed watercolor technique that won him recognition in gallery and museum exhibitions nationwide. But the artist considers the oil painting he began practicing in 1989 as the root of his mature work.

During this time, Fraser discovered plein-air oil painting's potential to capture the atmospheric effects of light as well as the immediacy of his own experience as an artist perceiving and translating the world around him. He also discovered the places and times of day that intrigued him most as a painter—particularly nocturnes depicting street scenes

West Fraser (top) in his studio.

FACING: "Manarola," 2001, oil on linen, 20" x 24".

TODAY'S MASTERS

and luminous panoramic landscapes. Citing the influence of John Twachtman, Childe Hassam and William Merritt Chase, Fraser says his works fall into the American impressionism tradition.

This intersection of time and place, of light and architecture, of land, water and sky is the true region that has captured and held Fraser's imagination for nearly four decades. His pursuit of this subject matter has taken him to California, where he worked with prominent plein-air painting associations in Santa Catalina Island and Laguna; Tuscany's

hill towns; Central America's Pacific Coast; and the Bahamas. The universal language of his brush has won him exhibitions across the country, including the comprehensive one-man show, "The Color of Light," organized in 1995 by Ohio's Springfield Museum of Art.

During the last decade of the 20th century, Fraser created many paintings depicting local scenes that are featured in *Charleston in My Time*. "Naturally I paint a lot in Charleston, my home for more than 20 years," he says. These include the Charleston nocturnes that range in mood from the haunting melancholy of Edward Hopper to the carnivalesque, as the hot light of illuminated signs and the radiating glow of street lamps dance in the falling darkness. Fraser says that each nocturne captures not just the actual images he perceives but also the mood the moment evokes. At their most poignant, these nocturnes express the inherent isolation of the artist as one who stands on the outside watching—an isolation most viewers can identify in their own lives. But Fraser also describes the process of creating that allows him to blur edges, create abstract passages of paint and exaggerate the effects of light as "a hell of a lot of fun."

In contrast with the moody energy of these paintings, Fraser's landscapes convey serenity. They depict remote marshes where briny rivers and tidal creeks wander through plains of grass that spread beneath primordial oaks. The artist often spends days hunting for the perfect spot where nature



"Support American Fishermen," 2005, oil on linen, 30" x 36".

provides a composition or watching for the moment when the weather colludes, providing ideal light and cloud formations. When this happens, Fraser starts sketching or sets up his easel and becomes one, both literally and figuratively, with his surroundings. "I'm outdoors, up to my knees in mud and the tide is rising," he says. "I capture my experience of just being outdoors, where there is not a sound other than the crackling of the marshes and the wind in the trees. I'm a storyteller of chance, happenstance and time."

In addition to building a substantial body of work showing the southern coast, Fraser continues to travel in search of fresh experiences and subject matter. "I'm really excited about spending time in Sweden this summer, painting the midnight sun. This work will form the basis of an exhibition this fall in the gallery."

The Charleston gallery he refers to is his own, opened with partner Helena Fox. Fraser Fox Fine Art features not only Fraser's work, but also paintings, sculpture and prints by a national group of representational artists who share Fraser's dedication to authentic, immediate artistic expression. "I see myself as more than just a painter," Fraser explains. "I am a participant in a community. I have to create works that speak universally. It's not about what I paint but how I paint. It's my honest interpretation of beauty and simple truths." ♦

Susan Sully is a fine-arts writer who lectures on regional architecture and design at museums such as the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Her most recent book is *New Orleans Style: Past and Present*.



"Still Life With Azaleas," 2002, oil on linen panel, 16" x 20".

"Sea Breeze," 2001, oil on linen, 32" x 64".





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