

GOLDEN STATE ARTISTS: 8 TALENTED CALIFORNIA PAINTERS

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NOVEMBER 2019

A Broader FIELD of VIEW

WITH DEEP ROOTS IN THE PAST,
WEST FRASER PAINTS THE
PRESENT-DAY COASTAL SOUTHEAST

BY GUSSIE FAUNTLEROY



representation

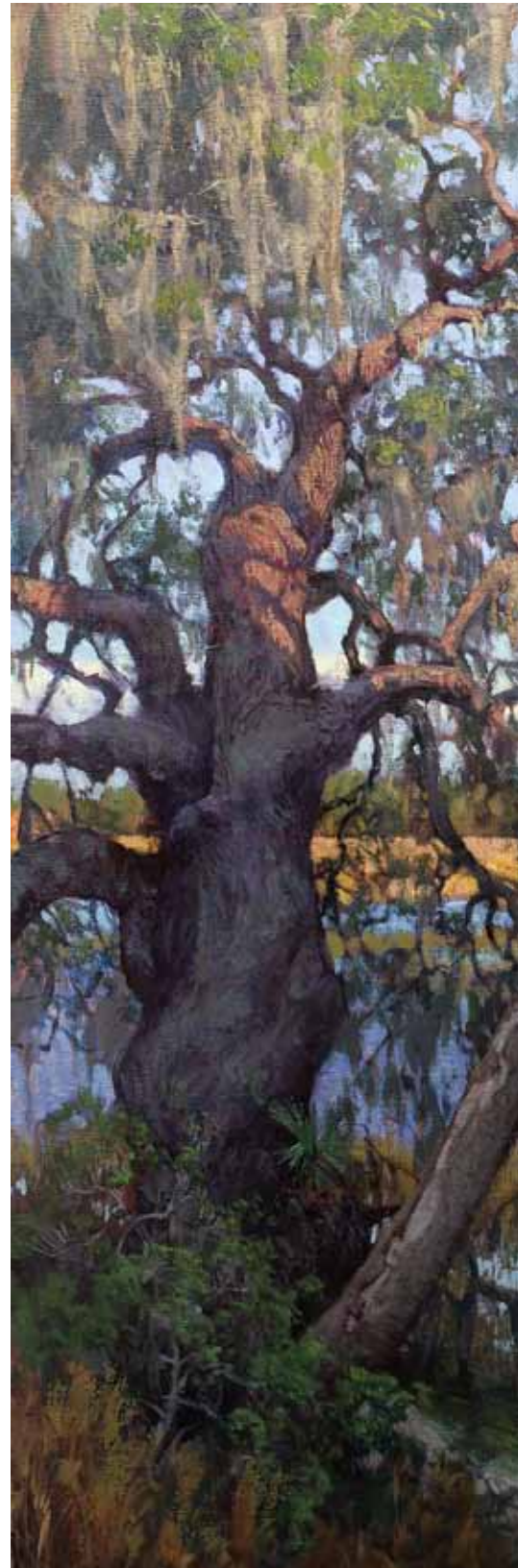
Helena Fox Fine Art, Charleston, SC.

upcoming show

15th Anniversary Gallery Show, **Helena
Fox Fine Art**, May 2020.

WHEN WEST FRASER lifted his paintbrush to render *SPOONBILLS*, he painted what he saw in front of him: a jungly foreground of palms, pines, and oaks draped with Spanish moss; a marsh-lined river lit by late-afternoon sun; the large pink birds of the painting's title. At the same time, though, the artist also saw, in his mind, the familiar South Carolina coastal landscape as he had known it many years before. "This setting has significance from my childhood. I plied these waters in a 12-foot wooden bateau with a six-horse Evinrude," he says of the flat-bottomed boat traditionally used in waterways along the Southeastern coast and the small outboard motor that propelled it.

As he painted, Fraser was also looking still further back in time. Throughout art history, and in particular among early American Impressionists, painters have represented wild riverscapes as seen through a curtain of trees. For Fraser, honoring the legacy of artists he admires while recalling this beloved coastal



Spoonbills, oil, 40 x 50.





Always Something There to Remind Me, oil, 30 x 36.

region has been central to his career of almost 40 years. Inevitably, his paintings document environmental and cultural changes that have transformed many of the settings he loves. Yet, in the 64-year-old artist's skillful hands, these scenes continue to radiate the luminous beauty that is the essence of this place.

FRASER'S FAMILY connection to the coastal Southeast reaches back to early Colonial times. Born in Savannah, GA, he spent his first decade in a nearby town before the family moved to Hilton Head Island, SC, just off the coast and just north of the Georgia border. There his grandfather and father had a timber

business, providing giant beams that helped rebuild European cities after World War II. Later his father and uncle built one of the island's first residential and resort developments.

Fraser describes his boyhood on Hilton Head as idyllic: riding horses on empty beaches, exploring woods and waterways, building treehouses, finding solitude amid thousands of acres of marsh and forest. Early on, some of his family members noticed and encouraged his interest in art. His grandmother, who had painted in her younger years, kept a drawer full of paper, crayons, and pencils for him to use. By age 13, already sketching the landscape in watercolor, West announced to an aunt that

his future career would be in art.

Then high school—and high-school sports, especially football—put a temporary hold on his interest in drawing and painting. At the same time, a dawning environmental awareness turned the teen's attention to the natural sciences. He read everything he could about the marine environment and the changes that threatened it. His first two years of college were focused on such studies. Soon, however, he realized that science left him unsatisfied, and memories of an earlier passion began to bubble up. "I remembered that art brought me joy and peace," he says.

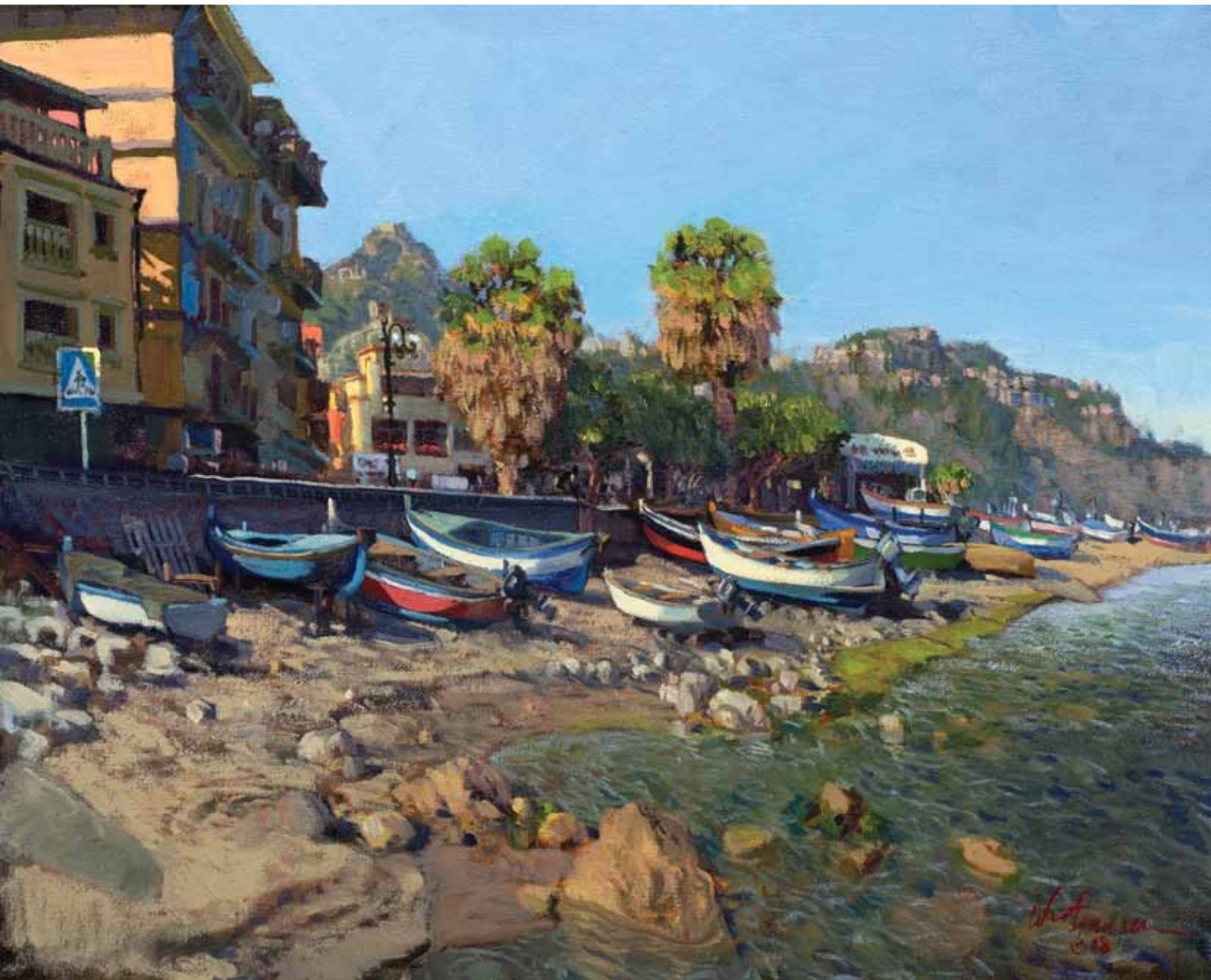
Disregarding the voices that attempted to dissuade him from a vocation in art,

Fraser sought out whatever foundational training the University of Georgia had to offer. At the time, the options were limited—it was the artistically anarchic era of “Do it the way it feels good, baby,” he recalls. Even though he was pursuing a degree in illustration and graphic design, there was little fundamental instruction aside from one week of figure drawing and some basic color theory.

But he found an illustration instructor named Larry Gerber who imparted an important but less concrete skill. “What I learned from him was how to see and how to analyze the visual picture plane,” he says. “Larry taught me how to create a discerning eye.”

After working in illustration for a year in Savannah, Fraser turned his sights to New York City in 1981, obtain-

ing an illustration rep on Madison Avenue. For the next four years he did illustration work while living on a farm in Bucks County, PA, and commuting into New York a couple of times a week. His need for an affordable living situation outside the city had an unexpected benefit: Bucks County just happened to be the historical center of the Pennsylvania Impressionists, an early 20th-



Lido Maraone, oil, 16 x 20.



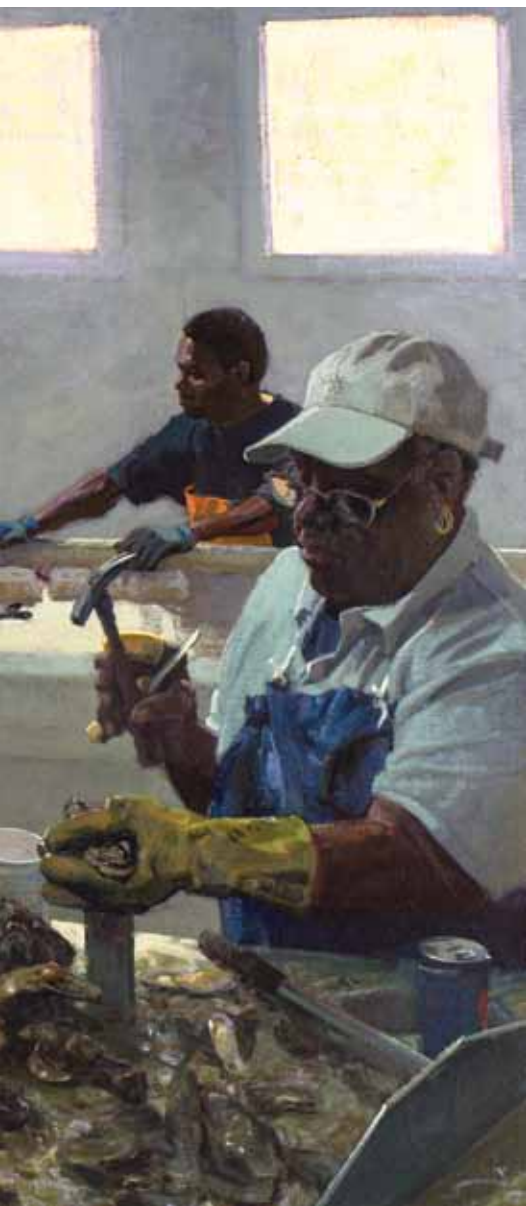
century movement and artists' colony never mentioned in Fraser's formal art-history education. Local residents directed him to sites where the work of these painters could be seen, introducing him to another realm of visual possibility.

Meanwhile he continued to paint on his own in watercolor, and he soon began exploring and painting the New England coast; he found himself magnetically drawn to the region's maritime scenes. "I was enthralled with New England's harbors and beautiful

sailboats," he says. In 1984 he was given his first two-artist exhibition at Grand Central Art Galleries in New York, at the time the city's oldest gallery for representational art.

BUT THE SOUTHERN marshes and forests were calling Fraser home. He was aware that almost no one at the time was painting the Southeast coast, and he moved to Charleston in 1984. The land of wild beauty that he wanted to

share through his art is a "pretty rough environment," he says. "But I knew how to drive boats and get to places only accessible that way. I knew how to get to the places I'd explored with hip waders." He also made another major turn in his career, which up until then had focused on studio painting based on sketches and photo references. Wanting to spend more time outdoors, he took along his watercolors when a friend invited him on a sailboat trip down the coast. He was ready to find out whether



“ WITH ALL MY PAINTINGS,
I’M TRYING TO GIVE A
STRONG SENSE OF PLACE.



▲ Corley Creek Spring, oil, 50 x 56.

◀ The Last Shucking House, oil, 30 x 50.

it was viable to paint strictly on location and sell that work.

It was. He soon met plein-air artists from around the country and immersed himself in the land, water, towns, and architecture of the place he loved. “It was totally rejuvenating, a freeing experience,” he says of his exit from the studio. Each excursion into the coastal hinterlands was also an adventure—planning, packing the boat, and often taking artist friends along. But the adventure of watercolors on location in a humid climate

had downsides as well. Fraser remembers holding his paper over a fire to let it dry enough to continue painting, resulting in “a few scorched watercolors.” He also realized that, as a colorist, he had pushed the medium as far as he could. He was eager to work with a richer palette in order to capture the region’s singular atmosphere and quality of light.

In 1990 Fraser began working in oils, teaching himself, as he had in every earlier phase of his art. Today he often starts a canvas on location, takes photographs

and makes notes for reference, and then finishes it in the studio. For the past 20 years his studio has been a quiet space in a post-Civil War building in downtown Charleston called the Confederate Home for Widows and Orphans. From there the artist ventures into the city, the surrounding region, and on painting trips that have taken him to Maine, California, Italy, Latin America, and Scandinavia. He has been honored with nine solo museum shows around the country, and his award-winning work is featured in



I'm Waiting for the Day, oil, 40 x 36.



Whitewashed, oil, 28 x 34.

two monographs from the University of South Carolina Press.

Over the decades of living in and painting Charleston, Fraser has witnessed its transformation from a sleepy Southern town to a vibrant city where older neighborhoods have been gentrified and a slower lifestyle has been replaced by aspects of contemporary American life. “I’m not sentimentalizing, I’m painting it just as it is,” he says. “It’s significant culturally because I’m documenting the changes I’ve seen. You need to know Charleston neighborhoods, but to me it’s a clear story.” One page in this story is revealed in *WHITEWASHED*. In what was once a rundown neighborhood where the artist might not have felt comfort-

able setting up his easel, a new demographic has moved in. A young woman, likely a university student, stands on the front porch of an aging yellow clapboard house, talking with a young man walking his dog. A bicycle is chained to a stop sign, while a Vespa scooter and a Range Rover are parked nearby.

Stretching into an even more urban setting, Fraser recently has painted New York City scenes, delighting in the challenge of rendering electric billboards, lights, traffic, and sidewalks full of people. Regardless of the subject, though, his initial and most important focus is always composition and color. These are the starting points for creating an image that, he hopes, viewers feel they could

step right into. “When I paint, it’s not through a viewfinder, it’s a broader field of view. I’m looking up at the tops of the trees, down the road, and to the left and right, so you feel enveloped in the setting,” he says. “With all my paintings, I’m trying to give a strong sense of place.” ♦

Colorado-based Gussie Fauntleroy writes for a variety of art publications and is the author of three books on visual artists. Learn more at www.gussiefauntleroy.com.

See more of Fraser’s work at
[www.southwestart.com/featured/
 fraser-w-nov2019](http://www.southwestart.com/featured/fraser-w-nov2019).