

Capturing Local Color

Artist Ed Penniman's ideal Santa Cruz

By Stacey Vreeken

Santa Cruz native Ed Penniman has traveled to some of the most celebrated locations in the world to paint in places where his favorite artists were inspired to do their best work. As a graphic artist for top companies in Los Angeles, he lived a life like "Mad Men" times two. But Santa Cruz – family, beaches, redwoods – remains his ideal, the spot where he now paints contemporary traditional landscapes in watercolor and oil.

"I call them sweet spots," he said. Penniman has been painting since age 6, mentored by his grandmother Leonora Naylor Penniman, an established watercolor artist and co-founder of the Santa Cruz Art League.

Lighthouse Point, Cowell's Beach, Big Basin, Twin Lakes, the San Lorenzo River, Elkhorn Slough, and Mount Madonna are some of the sweet spots depicted in his paintings. He has designed the roller coaster building, the Giant Dipper sign, and the candy building at the Boardwalk.

"I have sacred spots, but I'm not going to paint or share them, because I'm a Santa Cruzan," said the 73-year-old artist, whose large-scale oils are on display May 29 through August 7 at the Santa Cruz County Governmental building.

His sister, Cynthia Penniman Lenz, has an art store, his brother Warren is in the title insurance and escrow business, and younger brother Marc Penniman is an IT specialist for UC Santa Cruz. His two sons and grandson live outside the area, but Penniman remains active

here in the Santa Cruz arts community, participating in Open Studios for 23 years. Coming full circle, he was president of the Art League last year.

Penniman first paints outdoors on location, or in plein air, with watercolors. He also takes photos for reference later in the studio. Once there, the scenes are more carefully painted in oils.

"When the artist goes into nature to paint, it's a multi-pronged intention: to do art and appreciate beauty," Penniman said. "The result is joy, satisfaction, and release of worldly concerns in the process. From that foundation, it becomes a process of meditation."

When he paints like that, he said, nature responds.

"You set up the easel and sit with nature, then nature starts to speak to you," the artist

(Right) A view of Schwan Lagoon highlights Loma Prieta in the distance.



Painting: Ed Penniman 2015

{view}





Painting: ©Ed Penniman 2015

(Above) Arroyo de Los Frijoles, or Bean Hollow, is located just north of Santa Cruz County.

said. "Little creatures come up, birds start to sing, cows wander over, because you're sitting quietly doing something. Whether it's a cow, or a Parisian with a baguette under his arm, art is interesting."

Penniman subtly alters the actual scene in his paintings, removing power lines or harkening back to how things looked during his boyhood.

"The nostalgic, golden moments I had as a boy, at the beach, playing in a lagoon, on a boat in the creek," he said. He doesn't think his approach is romanticizing; he prefers to think of it as idealizing or honoring the landscape.

"Romanticizing brings preconceived visual cues to the image to tap into pre-established neuro pathways that tap certain emotions," Penniman said. It's like a Thomas Kincaid painting with dappled light, backlit images, and glowing, radiant sunsets. On the contrary, Penniman believes his work speaks openly and

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honestly of the landscape, as if he were seeing it for the first time in his mind's eye.

"It's like a marriage of 30 years, you see the beauty that's always there," he said. "I'm amping up the awareness level and awakening to what we have here."

Penniman ranks Santa Cruz among such legendary landscapes as the West Indies, Hawaii, Paraguay, Mexico, Tahiti, France, and Italy — all places he's painted,

tracing the artistic journeys of Paul Gauguin and Winslow Homer.

Santa Cruz even has its own color palette of cerulean blue, light yellow, ochre, pale olive, ultramarine blue with accents of fuchsia and bits of spring green, Penniman said, laughing at his own prediction that his artist friends would debate his choices.

"My work is still evolving," he said. "I started to see better, more accurately, and my drawings and paintings improved."

He's learned to slow down, be less deadline-focused, and enjoy the journey. He didn't have much choice in the matter. His life was upended when Guillaine-Barré Syndrome struck him in 1984. He was working at National Semiconductor Corporation as the graphics manager at the time. One day he was sick, the next paralyzed.

"I went from high-tech to a hospital

room," he said. It was three months before the artist could shrug his shoulders. With rehabilitation, he gradually regained his mobility, but he is still paralyzed from the knees down and has lost muscle strength in his hands.

"I was an impatient person before my disability, but when you're vulnerable, you need to be kind. And also release judgment ... You have to get over stuff," he said.

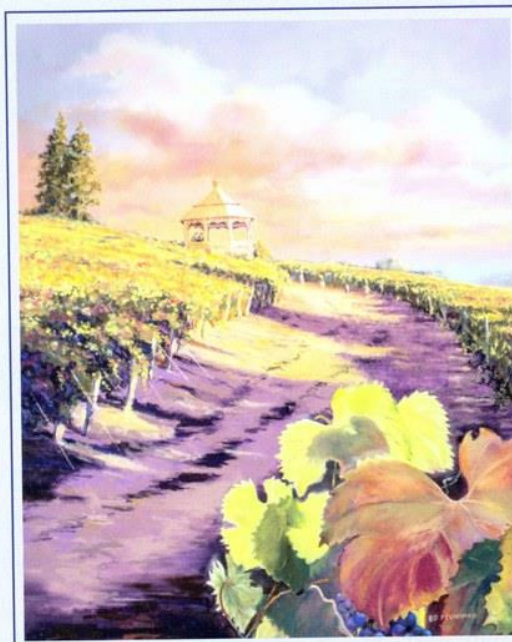
Penniman held the paintbrush with his teeth as part of his determination to recover and was an early adopter of computers, using a Macintosh.

"Every day I'm living a miracle in this beautiful area we're in," he said. More than 20 years after his recovery, he's stepping back from his career in graphic arts to paint full-time.

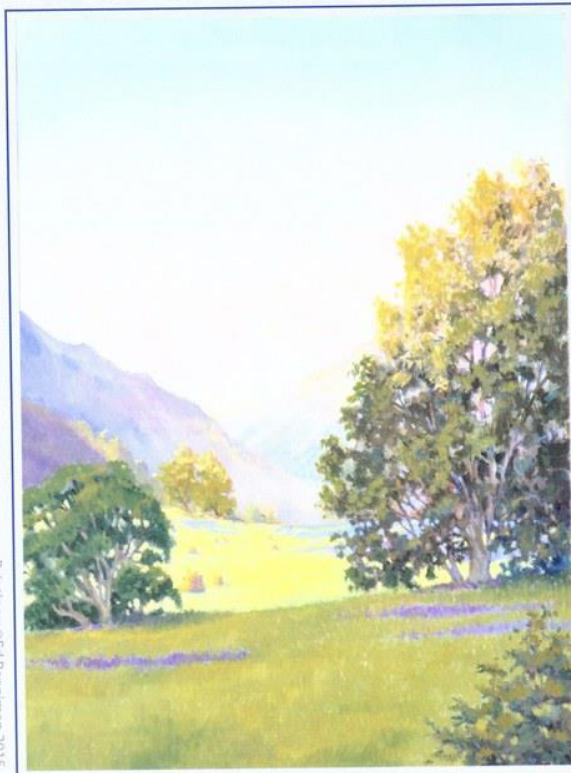
"I'm putting what time I have left on the planet redeeming and fulfilling my soul," Penniman said. At this point in his artistic journey, he's bringing all of his experiences to bear.

"I can be really loose (creative) and tight," he said. "I use all the tools in my life. I'm a guy who spent 40 years as a commercial artist creating symbols for businesses — logos, trademarks. I bring to my art a pretty clear vision of where I want to go."

That vision: "To give form to my feelings about my home town." ❖



(Above) Bargetto Winery's Regan Estate Vineyards is located in the Santa Cruz Mountains.



Paintings: ©Ed Penniman 2015

(Left) A meadow at Fort Hunter Liggett located in southern Monterey County.

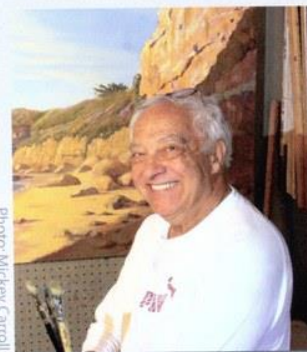


Photo: Mickey Carroll

Find the Sweet Spots

What: Ed Penniman's Paintings

When: May 29 to August 7
Monday–Friday
8 a.m. – 5 p.m.

Where: Santa Cruz County
Government Center
401 Ocean Street
Santa Cruz