

Nansi & David Gallup



P O R T F O L I O

portfolio

American collaborative artists David Gallup and Nansi Bielanski Gallup create dynamic, compelling and atmospheric paintings of marine life and underwater scenes, rich with color, texture and light, inspired by their adventures under the waves. Well-traveled divers, the husband-and-wife team have dedicated their artistic endeavors to raising awareness and understanding of coral reef and ocean ecosystems. *X-Ray Mag* interviewed the artists to learn more about their artwork, creative process and conservation perspectives.



Jubilation, French grunts off West Caicos Island, by Nansi and David C. Gallup. Oil on wood, 24 x 20in

Eruption of Life, spawning red snappers in Rangiroa (right), 60 x 60in; and *Great White Shark Cage Dive*, 16 x 20in (previous page), oil paintings on wood, by Nansi and David C. Gallup.

Interview by G. Symes
Artworks by David C. Gallup
& Nansi Bielanski Gallup

X-RAY MAG: Tell us about yourselves, your backgrounds and how you became artists.

DG: I think all children love to paint and draw. I simply never stopped, and I never intend to. I grew up in a large family, with four brothers. As much as I love them all, it could be a lot. You know how some kids have imaginary friends? I had imaginary privacy. I would pretend people were not there who really were. Drawing and painting became a way to be alone, to have some space to think, to learn something that was just mine. I continued painting through high school, then went on to graduate from Otis Art Institute in 1990. At this time, there was a resurgence in plein air painting happening here, and I got swept up in it. I was a coastal landscape painter who became frustrated with the lack of originality in the genre... There are only so many scenes of eucalyptus trees on ocean-facing cliffs one can look at before losing interest. By 2005, I was a successful plein air painter who was desperately looking for something else... something bigger and more profound.

NBG: I grew up on the beaches of southern California where I bodysurfed at Encinitas, or surfed at Huntington, and swam at Belmont Shore. It was here that I found a love for the ocean as a California girl. I would spend a long day boogie boarding at Silver Strand, which was followed by a bonfire on the sand, and this was heaven for me, and still is.

A lucky kid who got too much sun and ate too many strips with cheese at Lifeguard station 11, (or Zacks, as it was called by the locals), I was the kid whose bikini was stolen one summer, while



camping at McGrath's State Beach. I wanted to capture these moments, as I grew up, by photographing and painting the majestic seascapes and beaches. In fact, in third grade, I painted my first award-winning beach scene. I still have the prize ribbon hanging up at home.

X-RAY MAG: Why marine life and how did you develop your style of painting?

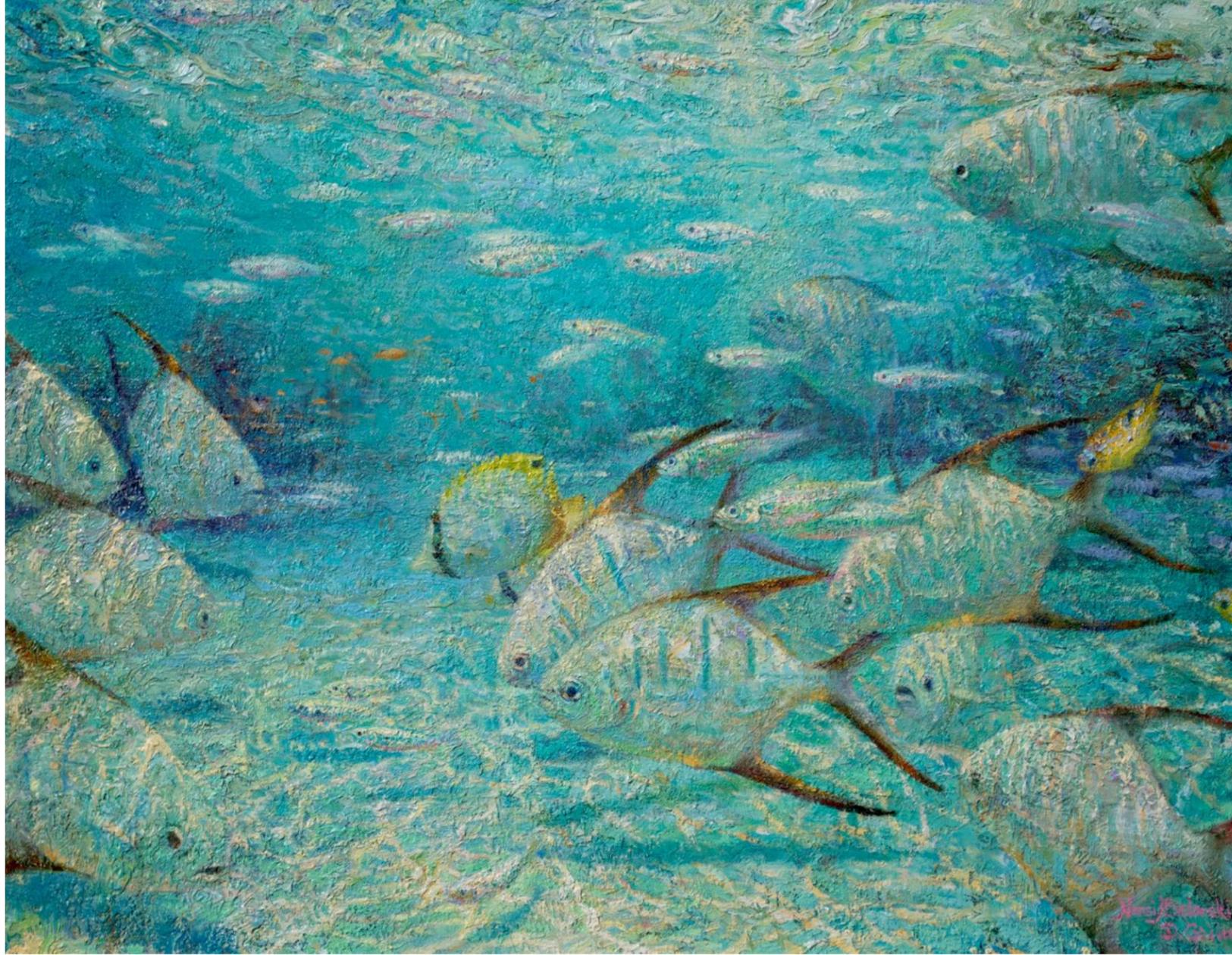
DG: I was given my first solo museum exhibition in 2011 for a series of paintings of Channel Islands National Park and Marine Sanctuary in California, which I was producing with the assistance of the National Park Service. It occurred to me that to paint this park, which is two-thirds under-

water, I should learn to dive. On my first dive after certification, I had a sea lion come and play with me... shadowing me, zipping around like a rocket, and showing off. My world had changed, just like that—I had found the "something bigger," which I had been looking for. I painted that encounter from memory, and it still hangs in our house today. A year later, the Carnegie Museum gave me my second solo museum exhibition, "Beneath the Surface—A Closer Look at our Oceans." I have been painting mostly underwater scenes ever since.

NBG: After getting my Master of Fine Arts degree at Loyola Marymount University, I became a producer of television



Life Opalescent, 22 x 28in, oil on linen (left); and *Coral Garden with Grouper*, 16 x 16in, oil on panel (below) by Nansi and David C. Gallup



the regional voices of southern California's rich artistic heritage: Edgar Payne, William Wendt and Maurice Braun. I also studied contemporary academia, like the works of Alex Kanevsky and contemporary impressionism like that of Fred Cuming. All of these works were very representational or impressionist. And then I met Nansi.

Nansi had a passion for contemporary figurative work and abstraction, a deep understanding of the unseen psychologi-

cal power of the spiritual and conceptual aspects of painting... less technique and training, more raw emotion and animalistic pleasure in moving paint across canvas. She taught me to appreciate modernism and postmodernism, all the way through to the present: Pablo Picasso, Georgia O'Keeffe, Damien Hirst, Franz Kline and Jasper Johns. I am even trying to like Cezanne.

Anyway, I had been working so hard at getting things to look "right," as if



commercials. This job took me around the world, including living in Budapest, Hungary, for three years. I have seen firsthand entire populations suffering under poverty, lack of education, corruption and greed. I have also seen the human spirit shining through all of it, acts of faith, courage and kindness, which prevailed even in the darkest situations. By the late '90s, I returned to my first love of being an artist full-time. I wanted to do work that mattered.

What could matter more than trying to save our oceans? Most urgently, perhaps, our coral reefs. While they vanish at a ter-

rifying rate, they provide food and income for a billion of the world's poorest inhabitants. There is a humanitarian crisis coming that is being overshadowed by the many urgent crises that already exist. Of course, we care about saving the beauty of the coral reefs, saving the sharks, fish and turtles, but ultimately, our real work is to prevent the human suffering and conflict that will happen if we cannot find a way to live in harmony with our oceans. Why paint the ocean? What else would I paint?

X-RAY MAG: Who has inspired you and your artwork and why?

DG: As a child, all I wanted to do was paint animals. As I matured and headed to art school, I became interested in classical and impressionist work, like the paintings of John Singer Sargent and Claude Monet. My major was illustration, so I was also exposed to the work of people like William Stout, Frank Frazetta and N. C. Wyeth. I had the good fortune to meet William Stout about 20 years ago, and we became friends. He showed me the work of the great underwater illustrator and artist Stanley Meltzoff and helped me write my museum exhibition proposals.

Also, I became well versed in

portfolio

such a thing existed. My work was a triumph of patience... accurate, but often forgettable. Nansi brought Fire. Rebellion. Lust. Passion. Boldness. Courage. Purpose. She paints like life is short. I met Nansi when she took a class from me. Now, I am her humble student, so lucky to be able to work with her and learn from her every day.

When we share a canvas, something happens where one plus one does not just equal two, it is more like one plus one equals a hundred. The collaborative paintings we have done together are some of my favorite paintings ever created. Like a wildfire that chooses to

carefully burn around all of the houses on its own terms, they contain the illusion of accidental precision. She is by far my greatest influence.

NBG: As a teenager, I traveled to the Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco. I remember being captivated by Matisse, especially the colors! In my early twenties, I went to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. That is when it really clicked... Sargent, Cezanne, Monet, Gauguin! Gauguin is perhaps one of the reasons we are so interested in painting the reefs of Tahiti. The more I studied and the more I traveled,

the more I was exposed to new and exciting influences, while never losing my inspiration from the original ones. I found Frida Kahlo, Georgia O'Keeffe and Joan Mitchell. I fell in love with sculpture too, by Niki de Saint Phalle, Rodin, Camille Claudel and all of the beautiful Italian marble figures from Michelangelo and Da Vinci.

I did my undergraduate work in communications, painting and sculpting all the while. Later, I got my Master of Fine Arts degree from Loyola Marymount University and was really moved by the work of Gustav Klimt and the Symbolist movement in general. The spirituality of Chagall's bold visions, the sensuality of Egon Schiele, and the eroticism of Balthus all became powerful influences in my work and are still there today, if you know where to look.

By the time I returned to painting full-time, I was lucky to work with some of the regional masters of the late '90s. I studied the figure with Jove Wang, Jeremy Lipking and Aaron Westerberg. I sculpted the figure at every opportunity, learning to work in clay and cast in bronze. One day, I walked down to the Weisman Museum in Malibu and saw David's exhibition on the Channel Islands. I was blown away at the work and signed up for his upcoming workshop: plein air painting from a chartered live-a-board dive boat, with a group of 30 artists. I watched David go for a

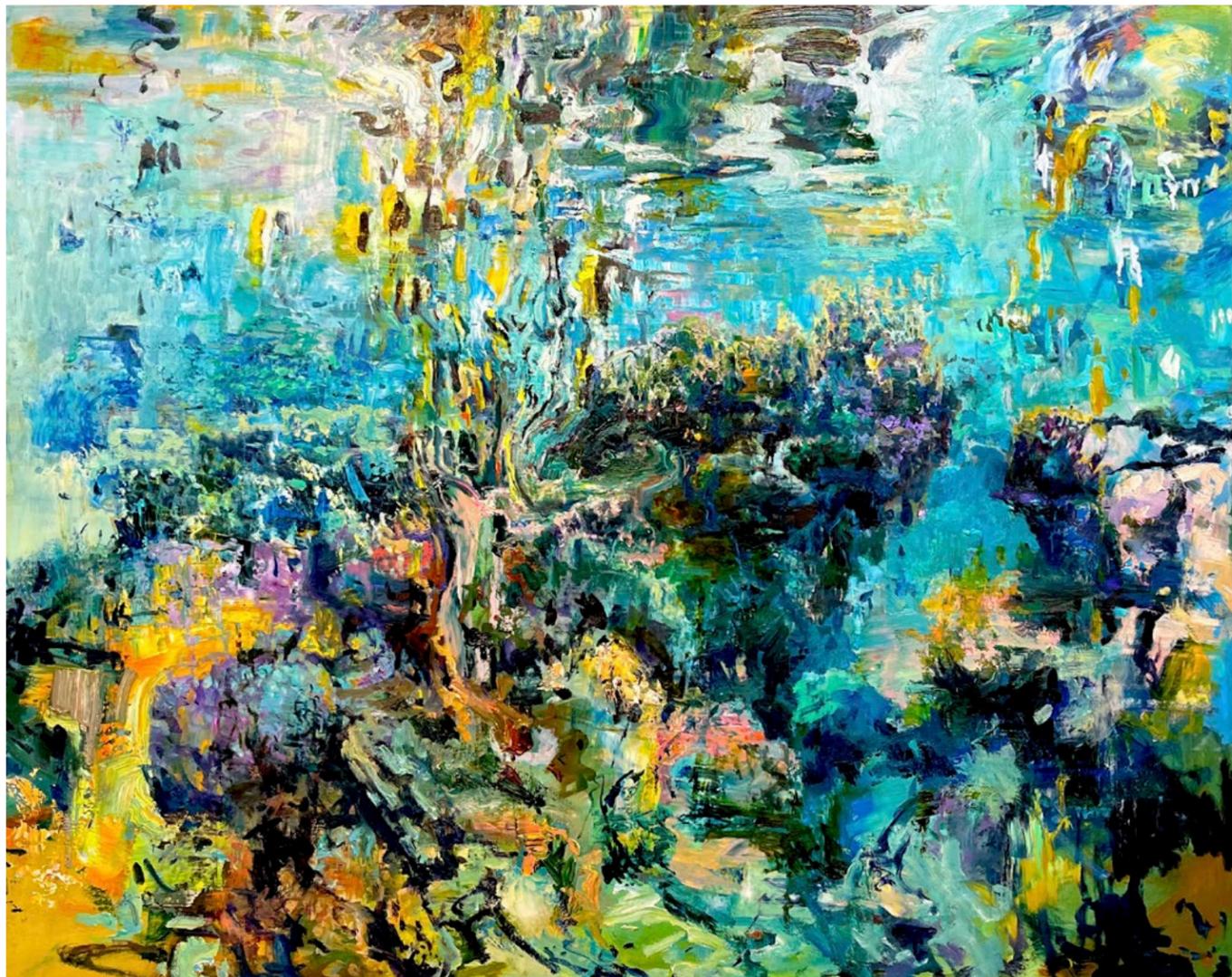
dive, come back up, and paint the kelp forest from memory. It was one of the most impressive artistic acts I had ever witnessed. Five years later, we were married, and we paint together nearly every day. What influence could ever be bigger than that?

X-RAY MAG: *What is your artistic method or creative process?*

DG & NBG: We work the same way, so we can answer this together. While

there are no "rules" for us, we typically have an experience from a shared dive, which interests us visually, conceptually or spiritually. These seeds sit in our heads until the shells cannot hold them any longer, and they burst onto the canvas of their own will, trampling their way into life, oblivious to the upheaval they might be causing to our schedules and plans. Often, we will be near the end of one painting when a new one barges in and turns the studio upside-down.

A Deeper Love, 38 x 32in, oil on mounted canvas (right); and *Guernica Reef*, 60 x 60in, oil on wood (bottom left), by Nansi and David C. Gallup



Fiji Shark Diver (Nansi's Dive), 34 x 40in, oil on wood (left), by Nansi Bielanski Gallup; Shark Feeder, 10 x 10in, oil on copper, by David C. Gallup (below)



the friendliest wild dolphin pod in the world, sharks everywhere—and that is just in one dive alone! The next dive might be oceanic manta rays, hammerhead sharks, tiger sharks and clouds of damselfish so thick you cannot see your own flippers. The next dive might be with a whale, a school of tuna, or just about any creature you can think of.

If I were to give a story of a particular interaction with marine life, I would have to mention a dolphin encounter at Tiputa Pass.

Nansi and I were diving with a small group at about 15m. One of the divers was brand new and was struggling a bit with control and buoyancy. Twice, she had drifted into me, once pulling my regulator out of my mouth with her wild hand movements as she tried to keep her position.

So, it was with a subtle eye roll that I felt her sinking onto my head while we were in the blue, looking for dolphins. I put my hand up over my head to protect myself from the



We know a lot of artists, and occasionally one will confide that they do not know what to paint. We cannot understand this feeling. We live with piles of seeds in our heads, trying to keep them contained until we can finish raising the seedlings already climbing out of their pots and spilling out into the garden. These ideas push us around mercilessly, and painting is the only way we have found to deal with them.

X-RAY MAG: How have your experiences underwater influ-

enced your art? Where have you had your favorite experiences?

DG: The kelp forests of southern California are so beautiful, and I have a real connection with them. California's waters are where I learned to surf, sail, kayak and snorkel. My brother taught me how to spearfish there, I got my dive certification there, and you could even say that Nansi and I fell in love diving the kelp forests together, searching for inspiration for our paintings, and finding a different kind of inspi-

ration entirely. But here is my confession: I like to dive in warm water. I mean, really warm, like a beautiful bath! Plus, in the tropics, you get the visibility, the corals and sponges, and those really, really beautiful fish and sharks... it's the best!

I think rather than giving a specific dive, which was the best, I would give a place: Tiputa Pass, on the Atoll of Rangiroa in French Polynesia. Barracuda in numbers that overwhelm the senses, spawning fish on the outgoing tide at sunset on a full moon,



Rhythm of Life, sea lions at Anacapa's kelp forest, 60 x 48in, oil on canvas (left); and *Tiputa Pass Snorkel*, 48 x 48in, oil on wood (bottom right), by David C. Gallup

coral reefs to explore, learn and find new inspiration. The visual opportunities for an artist on a coral reef are beyond inspirational, of course, but the opportunities run much deeper than colors and textures.

It is easy to find meaning in the oblique confrontation with the circle of life... spawning groupers, hunting predators, symbiotic shrimp/fish partnerships, and languid turtles are powerful and charismatic characters that all have roles to play in our painted novels. And sharks! What a grasp sharks have on the subconscious of even the most landlocked humans. If art is a vehicle for using images to create emotion in the viewer, what could be more powerful than a shark?

Like most of us, I grew up fearing sharks and hoping never to meet one. We still see it everywhere, the image of the bloodthirsty man-eater, stalking us in the shadows. The reality could not be more different. While the media is fixated on sensationalizing the seven to 10 fatal shark attacks globally per year, it has remained utterly silent about the fact that we are quietly and rapidly erasing sharks from our entire planet at a staggering rate of one hundred million per year in an unsustainable and sometimes legal act of ignorance and greed.

So why are my paintings of sharks so hopeful? Because now, I LOVE swimming with sharks. Because if I can overcome fear with understanding, so can others. We can

educate ourselves and others, we can embrace knowledge over cultural programming and overcome fear with love. My portraits of divers with sharks are my testimony to that basic human ability, and that is a cause for hope.

X-RAY MAG: What are your thoughts on ocean conservation and how does your artwork relate to these issues?

DG & NBG: It would be nice to think

that a painting can change the world. Something should. The two of us have been changed by paintings to be sure, and what else does changing the world mean other than changing each person a tiny bit?

Before the onset of commercial whaling in the 1600s, humans and the ocean lived in a sustainable (if tenuous) harmony. The sea was the master, and the human, the insignificant mortal who marveled at the power

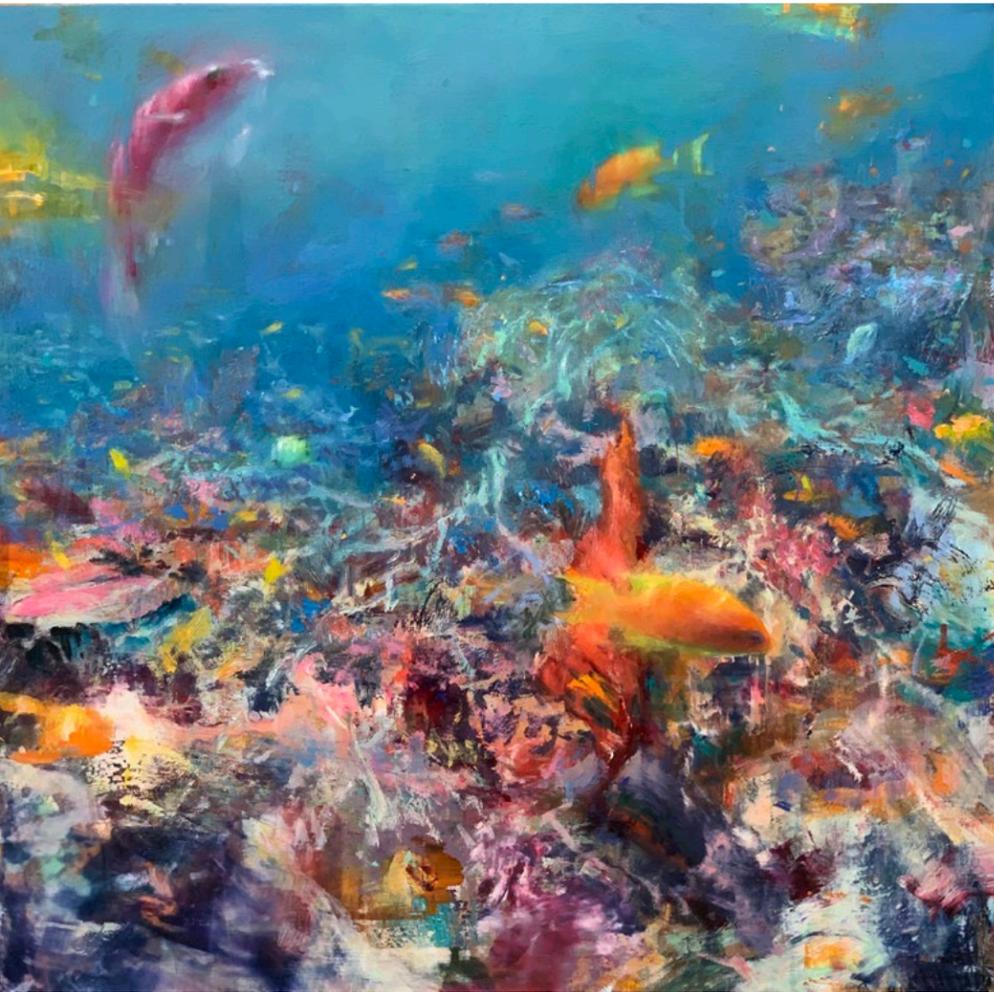


impact, only to find that it was not her at all. My hand was on the rubbery belly of a teenage dolphin who came in for a belly rub!

Of course, I had heard of these local dolphins who crave human contact, but I did not really think it would happen to us. I felt the scars of a propeller along its back, and others from various fights or struggles along its side, and soon it drifted down out of my reach before swimming to another diver and

giving her the chance to have an encounter, which will stay with her forever. If I am lucky enough to meet my grandchildren someday, I will certainly be telling them that story.

NBG: I would describe our relationship with the ocean, and coral reefs in particular, as "profound." Currently, we are raising teenagers in California where we have our home and studio. At every opportunity, we head to the



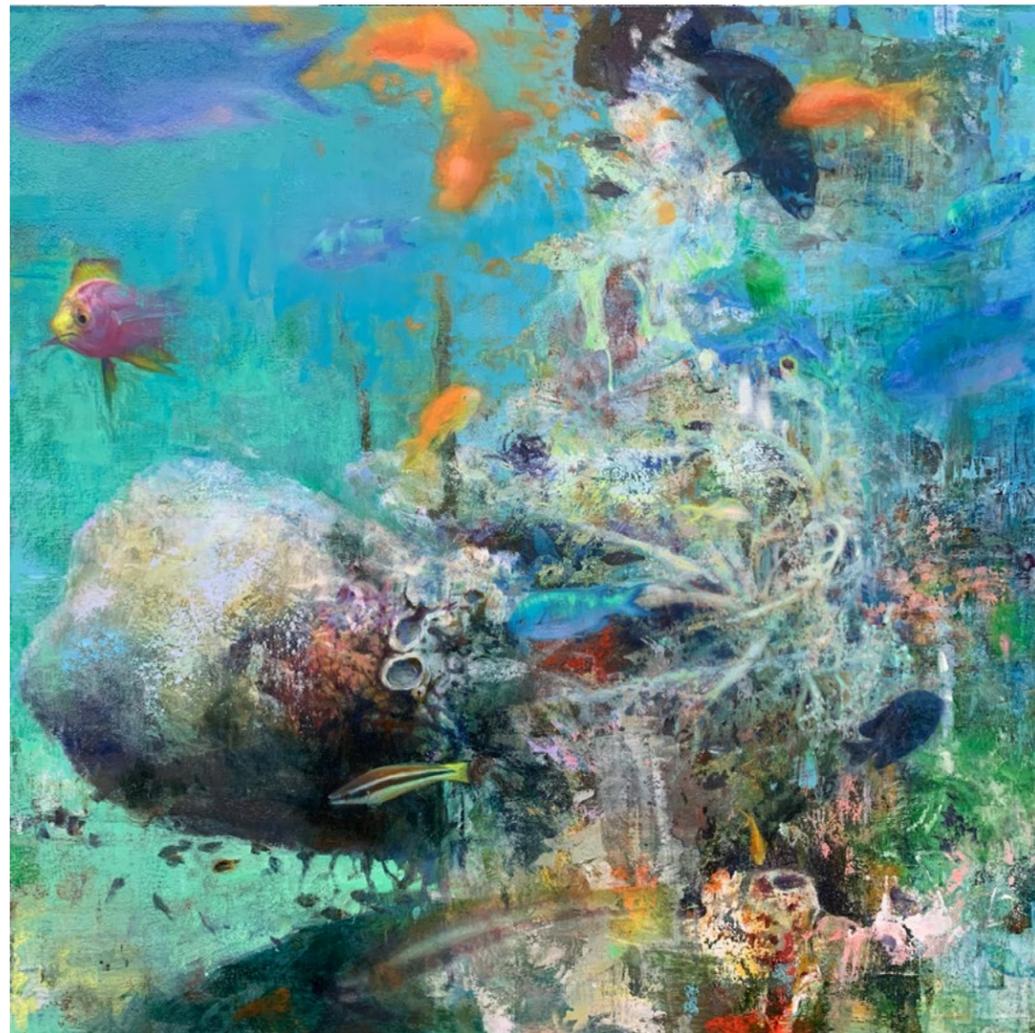
Rainbow Reef Snorkel, Fiji, by David C. Gallup. Oil on panel, 24 x 24in

of the monsters that surely dwelled in her depths. The idea that we, puny humans, should protect the indestructible sea was laughable.

In the relatively short time since then, we have learned to catch entire shoals of fish, leaving no survivors. We have learned to scrape the ocean floor clean of coral reefs and other habitat in search of shrimp at a rate of miles per hour per boat. We use dynamite and cyanide to bring fish to the surface, destroying their habitat and breeding areas. We kill and consume animals, which provide only a few meals, though they may

not been good roommates. Sadly, when we talk about ocean conservation, some people are still laughing at the idea that humans can kill the ocean. Our primitive minds cannot imagine it until we see it firsthand. People who live close to the sea know what is happening, as does every diver we have ever met.

We believe that saving our oceans, and coral reefs in particular, is one of the most important goals of our generation. Our reliance on oceans, reefs and the life they produce is essential to the survival of nearly every person on the planet. Now, scientists tell us



Bora Bora at Three Meters, by David C. Gallup. Oil on wood, 24 x 24in

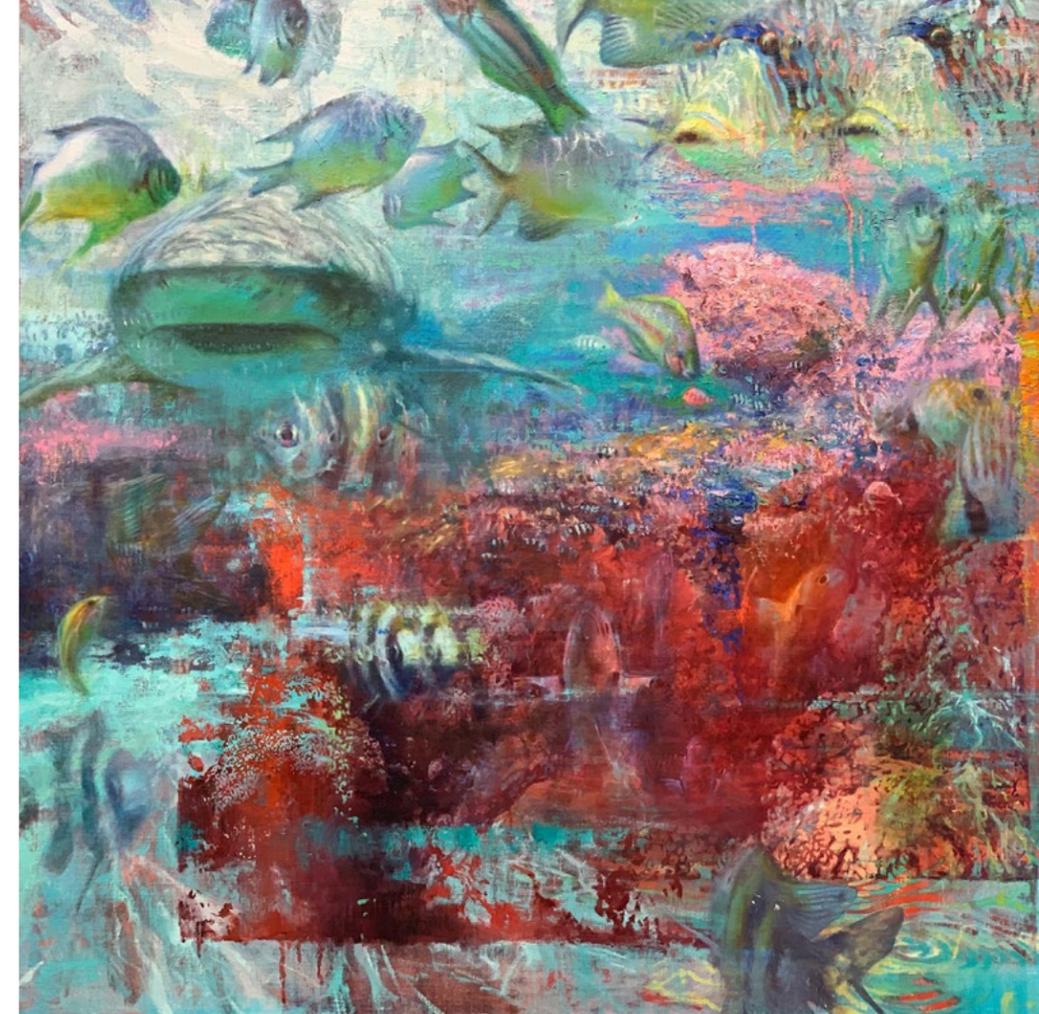
take decades to reproduce.

We have

that without urgent action, coral reefs are likely to be the first entire ecosystem erased by human activity, the effects of which will be felt by every human on the planet.

That is why we have spent the past few years working on paintings of the coral reefs for an international museum exhibition, kicking off a world tour in April of 2024 at Iconic Museum outside of Houston, Texas. We are looking into venues around the globe, trying to raise awareness of the perils facing our planet if we do not act with urgency.

We are putting together a team of nonprofit organizations to help us with research and outreach, and we are currently seeking relationships with museums around the world to bring



The Pink Reef, by David C. Gallup. Oil on mounted linen, 40 x 40in

our message to as many people as possible. That message: "Our reefs are essential to human survival as we know it, they are in peril due to human activity, and all of us must help."

X-RAY MAG: *What is the message or experience you want viewers to get?*

DG & NBG: Being underwater in a coral reef environment is one of the most thrilling experiences a person can have. One is immediately imbued with the desire to share the marvel, to learn more, and to make sure nothing ever happens to prevent future generations from being able to have that experience.

The great California painter Daniel Pinkham once told us that it is the abstract shapes, colors and patterns

that speak to the subconscious of the viewer. We believe that. Paintings, it would follow, show not only what a camera can show, but by combining realism with the power of the abstract, paintings can drive the emotional and spiritual experience of the viewer in ways that would be very difficult to arrange in a camera. It would be tough to get a fish, for example, to move two feet to the left into better light while the mantis shrimp in the foreground cocks its head. As painters, we are free to create whatever shapes and textures and colors we choose, and then use that to create an emotional context in an abstract painting, before turning those shapes and colors into any of the reef life we choose. This is a difficult task, but together, we have had some success.

Our hope is that viewers will enjoy



the colors of the coral reef... they are so profoundly beautiful and different from anything else we are likely to see on land. The purples of corals and anemones; the yellows and iridescent blues of the fish; the deep, rich reds of sponges and echinoderms; the magical blue of the ocean from below... These colors profoundly affect mood and set up the viewer for the experience we choose to present. If we really do our jobs well, each painting is intended to affect the viewer in a different way, so there will not be an answer that fits all paintings. Some emotional reactions we commonly strive for would be peace, danger, excitement, awe, surprise and curiosity.

X-RAY MAG: What are the challenges or benefits of being an artist today? Any advice for aspiring artists?

DG: I suppose the challenges for ocean artists today are completely up to the artist... I am not sure what else they could be. Am I challenging myself to paint a convincing shark? To sell a painting for a certain price? To create a particular emotion in the viewer? To change or expand someone else's mind about conservation? To invent a new technique or accomplish something artistically, which has eluded me? The wonderful thing about being an artist of any kind during any time period seems to be that we create our own challenges, goals, even problems to solve.

Regeneration, giant clam with bubble-tip anemone, 36 x 36in (left); and Schooling Butterflyfish, Raja Ampat, 24 x 30in (below), oil paintings on wood, by David C. Gallup

My advice to aspiring or emerging ocean artists would be to remember that you are an artist first, and the subject is secondary to the message of your painting. Study all styles and periods of art, for they all have much to teach us... abstraction, expressionism, you name it. Keep changing, be ruthless with yourself, regarding quality of work. Remember you are not a painter of things; you are a poet expressing your thoughts and emotions through paint.

NBG: One of the benefits of being an artist is that we have a voice. This has been true for me as a filmmaker, as a writer, as a sculptor, and as a painter. Of course, we all have voices... but it is the arts that let us use them as a force for change. My advice to emerging ocean artists would be to stick with it; do not judge your work too much but just keep getting better. Like a shark, you have to keep moving forward to survive.

X-RAY MAG: How do people respond to your works?

DG: There has been such a variety of responses to my work, this is difficult for me to answer. I try to keep as much mystery in a painting as possible, letting the viewer give meaning to the marks. This may sound strange, but

it honestly replicates the way we experience the world. Most of what we "see" happens in the mind, not the eye.

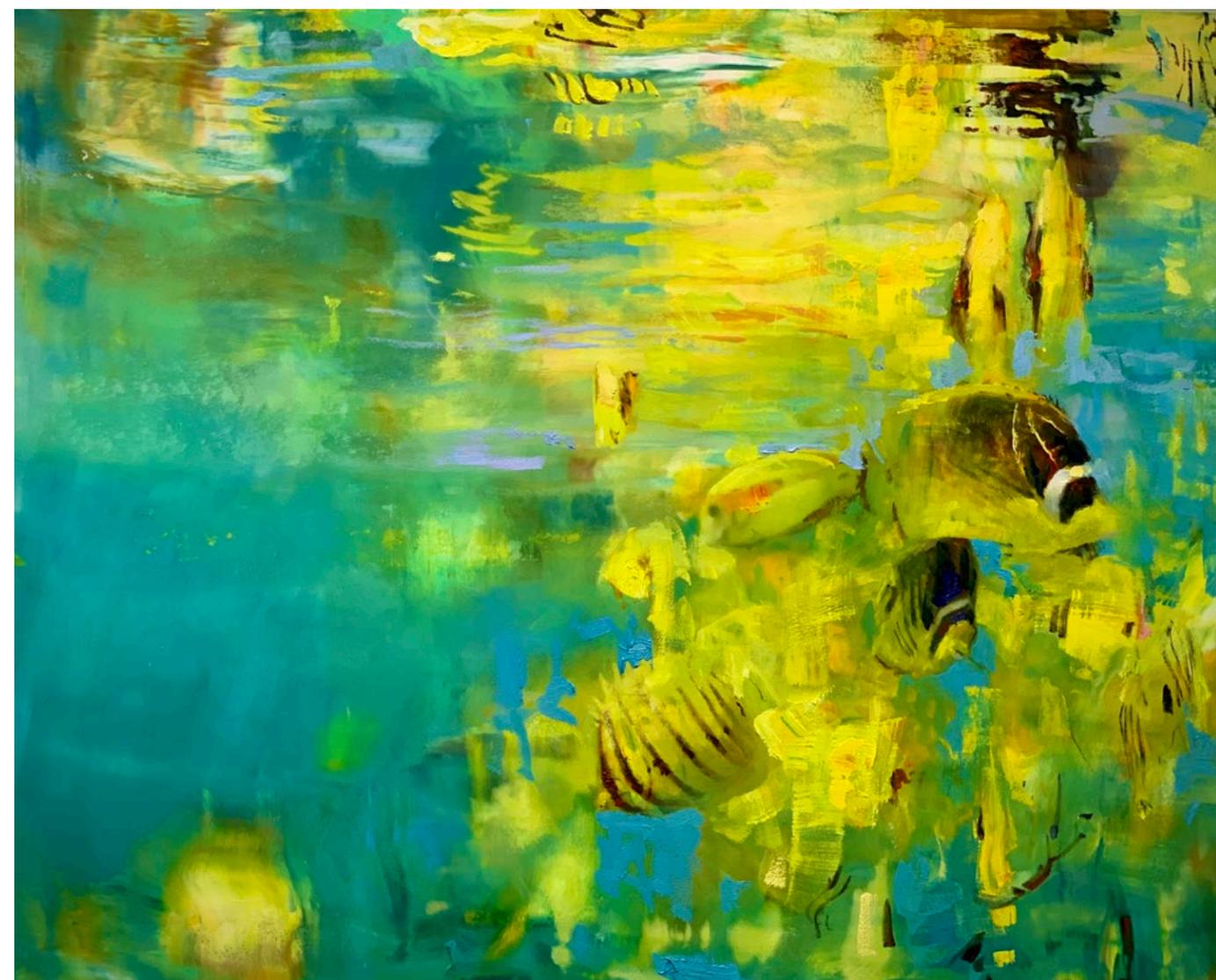
As I look out my window now, in just a quick glance, I see mountains, trees, my backyard and furniture there. But I do not really see all of that with my eyes. I do not have time to study every tree, every leg on a patio chair. Most of what I see is an interpretation of out-of-focus objects, color blobs and shadows, which my brain fills in based on my many years of personal experience.

When I look at the nearby chair, the hills in the distance are blobs of dark

and light green. I do not even need to look at them to "see" the trees covering a hillside because we experience the world as our minds believe it to be.

If you think about it, that is the only way vision could possibly work, or else we would never be able to safely run upstairs or jog down the street... We would be stuck carefully observing every step, crawling slowly to really know what is beneath our feet. This shorthand, our true perception, is what gives viewers the chance to see their world in my painting.

I have had marine biologists approach my paintings and be



portfolio

thrilled to recognize a species of seagrass in what, to me, was just a spot of green, which I invented to set off the orange of a fish nearby. They could go on and on sometimes, talking about how perfectly it is situated in the scene to replicate the true behavior of the species. They are seeing their world in my painting.

A child might think that a

fish is smiling or frowning, projecting human mannerisms onto the fixed mouth of a fish. Again, they are projecting their world onto my painting.

Even my most intentional marks—light coming down from the surface, for example—is really just light paint streaked on canvas... It is the viewer who must make it into a scene. Because I take such



pleasure in letting paintings be mysterious, pulling the viewer in and out of focus through the piece, it is truly a pleasure to see the stories and subjects that come to life in the minds of the viewers.

NBG: I love emotional reactions the best. One of my favorite reactions is “wonder.” Not everybody is able to dive or snorkel, and I like to use my work to share the genuine emotions I felt during a moment of a dive with those who have not had that experience.

No matter how much I dive or snorkel the coral reefs of the world, I never stop being surprised—surprised by the myriad shapes, colors and habits of fish and corals; surprised by behavior and symbiosis; surprised at the alien designs of the creatures I see. I think adults are surprised at what we show them of the reef, where children experience wonder. One of my greatest goals is to make an adult feel wonder.

One of my favorite encounters with the public happened at a show I had in Laguna, where an older woman was looking at a coral reef painting with a freediver in it. She bought the painting, and while it was being wrapped, we had a brief conversation. It turns out that as a child, she had been an avid snorkeler, and throughout her adult life had moved away from the ocean, had a career, and raised a family. She told me that she

Blue Octopus, 30 x 24in, oil on wood (right); and *Union of Seahorses*, 8 x 10in, oil on wood (bottom left), by David C. Gallup

needed to have this painting because it reminded her of the sense of wonder she felt as a child, snorkeling the local reefs of California. It was the greatest compliment she could have given me.

X-RAY MAG: What are your upcoming projects, art courses or events?

DG & NBG: For the past few years, the two of us have been conceptualizing and creating paintings of the world's coral reefs with the goal of a traveling museum exhibition. We want to use our work not to generate gallery sales, but to show the world the beauty and mystery of the ecosystem we, as a species, are poised to destroy.

We are also planning to release a hardcover catalog of the work to accompany the exhibit. We have just set opening dates for the tour at Iconic Museum in Texas in April of 2024, and we are in the process of lining up dates at more museum venues around the world. We plan to use approximately 50 paintings of various sizes to give just a taste of the variety and beauty of the world's coral reefs.

X-RAY MAG: Lastly, is there anything else you would like to tell our readers about yourself and your artwork?



DG & NBG: We know that we have been incredibly fortunate to travel the world in search of nature's most spectacular beauty. It has been equally wonderful to meet the warm and generous people who inhabit the ocean nations. These people live simple lives, mostly as fishermen, farmers, or in the tourist-service industry.

They are only now beginning to confront the challenges of population density, overfishing

and global climate change, which are now almost certain to increase poverty, hunger and displacement over the next few generations. We want people to know that we are not prioritizing fish over people, or sharks over people, as is sometimes said of ocean activists. We are prioritizing people over greed, love over fear, and truth over fiction. ■

Please visit: artofthedive.com.