

DAVID MOLESKY

Blue Fish Cove, 2011
Oil on canvas, 72 x 72 in



POTTER WICKWARE

On the Navarro

Steelhead fishing is winter fishing. It's difficult. You have to be there when the tide and the river are high, during or just after one of the big rainstorms that drive in from the Pacific, when the fish mobilize themselves for the huge effort to get upstream, to the next shelf, then the next.

The fish are tough and intelligent. They know both sides: the ocean's vast sweep and the river, with its local odors of root and pool, which they know better than any man or woman ever could. A steelhead can take a lure lightly, wind it around tree stumps and rocks until the tackle is hopelessly tangled, then spit it out. Or else take it and run with it so fast that the fisher on the bank has to release the drag completely, at which it suddenly reverses direction and swims back upstream, making everything go limp, and there go fish and tackle both. They're fearless and persistent, holding out against rough water and high tides and people casting lures with treble hooks at them from the shore and from bridges and even in the main channel. Smart, tough fish.

Two fishermen had been standing in the river, just off a little beach, all afternoon. Their feet were wet and they were cold all over. Nothing was happening for them. One of them said, "This reminds me of something." The rain, which had let up for a time, started again. After a drawn-out pause, his partner replied, "They're smarter than we are. They must know more than we do."

"Sure they do. We're here and it's their place. We're outsiders." A steelhead actually swam between his legs as he said this, bumping against his rubber waders, slipping right past him, his tackle strung out uselessly in the river. "Damn me if one of them didn't swim right between my legs, and my lure way out there!"

Just deal with it, said the flat look on the other's face. He looked up the river to where the fish were headed, a gray-green blur of timber and ash-tinted moss. At intervals sheets of rain mixed with ocean spray swept in, diagonally, drumming against the rubber fabric of his rain suit. I'm here to test myself, he'd thought upon setting out, before he'd even departed, and now he was beginning to feel a headache and, worse, a kind of discontented itch in the back of his throat. Before he'd been strong, challenging himself. Show me something real. Push into the core, find what's solid, spread apart the strands or fibers that obscure