

## TINA NEWBERRY

*Covert Operations, 2007*  
oil on masonite, 18 x 20 in.



COURTESY HEMPHILL FINE ARTS GALLERY

## MAGGIE PAUL

# The Poet's Lyre

An interview with  
Joseph Stroud

**Maggie Paul:** Do you think there is a distinct type of poetry that can be called “California poetry”?

**Joseph Stroud:** I'm not sure if there's a distinct kind of “California poetry” that if you hear or read a poem you can say, “Oh, that's a California poem.” But I do think that California, or I should say, Northern California, is part of a larger region called the Pacific Northwest that does exhibit a few shared qualities, primarily a strong influence from Asia, particularly China and Japan. Much of the arts in America draw from the historical, literary, religious, and philosophical traditions of Europe, but because of our unique geographic location, the Pacific Northwest poets and painters look across the Pacific, not the Atlantic, for models and inspiration. Chinese scroll paintings and Japanese ukiyo-e artists have exerted a huge influence on the major Northwest painters, such as Morris Graves, Mark Tobey, Leo Kenney, and others. And the great Chinese poets, such as Li Bo, Du Fu, Wang Wei, Su Tung-po, and the haiku masters from Japan—Bashō, Issa, Buson—have infused much of the poetry of Northwest poets: Kenneth Rexroth, Gary Snyder, Carolyn Kizer, Robert Sund, to name a few, who in turn have influenced others through their own poems, a ripple effect of ever-enlarging circles. And Asian Buddhism, especially Zen Buddhism, has had a deep impact not only on our artists but on the culture of the Pacific Northwest.

The result is poems that tend to be more rural than urban, poems that derive inspiration from the natural world, the physical landscape of the Northwest with its forests and mountains and rivers and coasts. And a poetry that adopts a perspective of the Chinese poets, as David Hinton describes it: “a secular poetry having a direct personal voice speaking of immediate and concrete experience, and a poetry that functions as a window onto the inner life of a person.” And in terms of tone, a quieter kind of poetry, not bardic with great rhetorical flourishes, instead a poetry more modulated, unafraid of silence. But having said all this, I should add that this Pacific Northwest school, if we can call it that, is rapidly thinning out, losing its edges in a society that has become increasingly mobile and diffuse. Though there are still a few strong pockets: Robert Sund's Ish River poets in Puget Sound and the Olympic Peninsula would be an example. And I suppose there are