

## KAREN GALLAGHER IVERSON

*Crest From Below, Tahoe Tree Line 5, 2017*  
Drawn and pochoir-colored pastel on wax on panel, 10 in x 10 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## CHARLES HOOD

### Yosemite in Love and Asphalt

A brief history of  
tourism in Yosemite

If you're coming into Yosemite for the first time, working up Highway 41 through Oakhurst and Coarsegold and Fish Camp, you are driving, driving, thinking to yourself, *Okay, it's all still a forest, what's so special about a forest*, until suddenly the road snatches you out of the piney woods and thrusts you into the greatest Big Reveal in the history of national parks.

It works like this. First there is sky and manzanitas and pines and boulders, so all is normal, then without warning or preamble you leave the scenery and enter darkness. Darkness for a *long* time—Wawona Tunnel is the longest tunnel in California. Turn on your headlights as the road bores straight through the living granite. There is no turning around and no changing your mind. Try not to think about the zillion million metric tons of granite on all sides and try not to worry about the water cutting down through faults in the rock to splatter benthic drops on the windshield and instead just watch in rising excitement as the exit circle grows brighter and larger and brighter and larger, until *shazam*, you come back out into sunlight and you are *THERE*, baby, you are *there*, you come out of the tunnel and what a "there" it is, with a view of El Cap and Half Dome and Bridalveil Fall and Leaning Tower, a view that impresses everybody who sees it and a view that puts you in the collective shoes of David Hockney and Wayne Thiebaud and Ansel Adams, and from there it connects you all the way back to Carleton Watkins and Ralph Waldo Emerson and the very start of the High Sierra Romantic sublime.

Sure, a trillion pictures have been taken here, but go ahead, take yours too, take as many as you want, since in an overheated, oversaturated, overhyped world, some experiences really *are* as good as the ads claim, and your first-ever view of Yosemite Valley from Wawona Tunnel is *OMG*: fabulous.

But wait, it gets better.

From the vista point if you hike up the trail behind you, you'll reach the now overgrown Wawona Road, which was the pre-tunnel, nineteenth-century toll road to get into the park. Big-leaf maple grows here, shading you with leaves bigger than your hands, and black oak and owl's clover and our California state bush (well, it *should* be the state bush), poison oak. The red-barked, flat-leaved conifers that look like sequoias are incense cedar—the wood smells like pencils and hope chests. California bay grows here too. Look

for a slim, willow-shaped leaf that when crushed releases a classic “cooking with bay leaves” aroma. (You can dry it and season with it, but go easy: it’s stronger and harsher than the old-world kind sold in markets.) If you’ve arranged a shuttle, have a chum ferry the car while the rest of you walk the old road downhill to Bridalveil.

Also behind Wawona Tunnel and up the hill is the place where Ansel Adams set up his tripod for the iconic *Clearing Winter Storm* shot—taken not in the parking lot itself, though he did work there sometimes, but from a better vantage point half an hour from the road. Fine if you want to make the pilgrimage to match his frame and fine if not, too, since the truth is that all perspectives work: it’s hard to take a bad picture anywhere on this side of the valley. As the joke goes, if Yosemite Valley didn’t exist, Eastman Kodak would have needed to invent it.

Related question: Are roads bad? Should you feel guilty for driving to Yosemite instead of hiking in via the John Muir Trail, or even skiing cross-country or using a pack mule or at least riding a bike up from Fresno? There are bird-watchers who only keep lists of birds seen on foot or bike, and we admire the balletic precision of their carbon footprints. Roads can be bad if they let people gain access to places they should not investigate unsupervised, and cars speeding on park roads kill two dozen bears a year, but in altering the ecology, a paved road, even in Yosemite, can sometimes be a good thing. Of seven species of oaks in Yosemite, the most visible and photographed is black oak, the kind around the hotels and the one that stands stoic and noble in so many Ansel Adams shots. (Black oaks are trees that *look* like trees.)

It may not make sense, but roads help oaks, at least in Yosemite. Right now the mule deer population is high—perhaps too high, since we don’t hunt much in California and mountain lions can only eat so many per week—so big deer herds mean many hungry mouths to feed. Deer browse oak saplings, reducing plant survival rates. . . . except not along roadsides. You can see deer by the roads, sure, but on average, the immediate side of the road (a) gets a bit of extra water from runoff, (b) has a touch more sunlight than a closed canopy, and (c) has less wildlife overall and so has fewer deer browsing saplings to nubs. Counterintuitive I know, but there are more young oaks along roadsides than there are in nearby meadows.

Roads always were how Anglo-Europeans got here, at least after the initial explorations and exterminations. The original toll roads were steep—literally and financially. They had 16 percent grades and charged two dollars for a buggy and two-horse team. Modern highways follow some of the same routes. If you don’t come in through Wawona Tunnel on 41, you can make your way via 140 from Merced—the name means “mercy” in Spanish—and once close to Yosemite, this route parallels the Merced River. Watch for a black, pot-bellied bird called the dipper or ouzel; John Muir’s favorite bird bobs on rocks and can walk underwater. The slabs of gunmetal granite are darker and rougher here because glaciers didn’t scrub these canyons clean. Good climbing, even so, and many of the cliffs along 140 have their own histories and legends, as the grand masters of American climbing invented new kinds of pitons or did bold first ascents up routes that now sound like the titles of punk rock songs: The Enema, Outer Limits, Meat Grinder, Butterfingers, Crack-A-Go-Go.

At night on 140 wildlife takes over. Just as you pass the park entrance sign in El Portal, start studying the retaining wall along the cliff edge on the right. If you drive slowly, you can spot the regularly spaced pyramids of animal poo, like the mile markers of a secret wildlife highway. These are all from *Bassariscus astutus*, sometimes called cacomistle or ringtail cat, though plain ringtail works for most field guides. With this one, we’re talking about a sort of weasel-lemur hybrid, with white face goggles, a gray, slinky body, and a black-and-white tail that shimmers behind like a parade flag. Ringtails love cliffs, and there are so many here that they communicate in a Morse code of droppings, posting personal ads (if looking for love) or else just saying, “Hey, suckers, back off: this guardrail is *mine*.”

A third way is Highway 120. West to east this goes from San Francisco to Mono Lake, and you could turn that drive into a lesson in morbid, black site (“blue site”?) tourism, since you cross the California Aqueduct at right angles, the open canal that redistributes water from Northern California to Southern California. Without that simple concrete ditch, California would not be California. The aqueduct is paralleled by two 500-kilovolt power lines, plain and anonymous, part of the network that carries electricity from Columbia River dams down to 40 percent of America. Red-tailed hawks perch on the crossties. All

along the horizon, what is nature and what is non-nature dance a complicated dance.

Meanwhile, a detour off 120 on a pleasant side road takes you to Hetch Hetchy. San Francisco gets all its drinking water from Hetch Hetchy Reservoir, which covers what would have been a second, even-better Yosemite Valley, except it now is hidden beneath a third-of-a-million-acre feet of water backed up behind O’Shaughnessy Dam. The dam was built from cement brought by train and turned into concrete with aggregate dredged on-site, so to look at the dam is to look at a pearl that has been ground up to make its own coffin. Good-quality water, though: drink some, next time you are in San Francisco, and flick the light switch off and on a few times, too—electricity flows steadily out of the dam’s turbines, pumped by water as clean and fresh today as the day the floodgates closed and began to flood a now-lost wonder. Hetch Hetchy dam and the Wawona Tunnel are the same age: welcome echoes of the Great Depression, America’s era of cheap labor and grand infrastructure.

Water tourism carries us over the mountains to a final stop, since if you stay on 120 through the park and cross over Tioga Pass heading toward 395 and the town of Lee Vining, you then drop down into the Owens Valley, aka the watershed for all of the city of Los Angeles. The Tioga Pass Road has had several routes over the past 120 years. In 1958, widening and straightening caused some of the best sections of glacier-polished granite to be dynamited away next to Tenaya Lake. Ansel Adams tried to stop this, just as John Muir had tried to stop Hetch Hetchy from being flooded by a dam. Neither man was successful, though the Tioga Pass Road did not lead to as much harm as some feared, and Tuolumne Meadows so far has survived being loved to death better than the city of Venice has, or even the General Sherman tree in Sequoia National Park.

Three roads only, so choose wisely. No private airfields get you into Yosemite, no heli-skiing experiences, no legal way to parachute in, though BASE jumpers take the usual risks with the usual consequences. Yosemite and one airplane in particular do provide one good story, more famous in climbing circles perhaps than with the general public. It seems that in the winter of 1976, a Lockheed Lodestar coming from Mexico crashed in an alpine lake, killing the pilots and leaving a mess of ice, hydraulic fluid,

aviation fuel, torn-up fuselage, and all of the cargo—six thousand pounds (some say ten thousand) of high-grade dope wrapped in burlap sacks marked *frijoles*.

The DEA got called in but overtime was short and winter snows were bad, so the DEA and the Park Service agreed to leave it all until spring. Word spread, perhaps via a dispatcher who was dating a climber, perhaps via the dead pilot’s lawyer, and within weeks the inhabitants of the climbers’ campground, Camp 4, had emptied out the wreck, cutting forty-pound bales free with chainsaws, lashing them to Kelly packs, and snowshoeing heavy loads out by moonlight. If you were around Haight-Ashbury in the spring of 1977 and happened to score premium weed, you may have inadvertently funded an expedition to K2, or at least helped to put new tires on a climber’s Econoline van.

Times change, tools evolve, and more climbers work out on the color-coded holds of indoor climbing gyms than you’ll spot on a given day trying El Capitan. Sure, go ahead, ask the question: “How do they go to the bathroom?” Answer: very carefully. Compared to the early days, climbers now have better ropes, better carabiners, better cam nuts, and yet they also have more rules: some of the big walls are seasonally closed to protect nesting falcons, and when you go to the bathroom, all number two is supposed to be done in a paper bag and carried out in a Ziploc, not bomb-bayed directly onto the scree below. Does everybody follow this? Well, you’re not supposed to text and drive, but people still do that too. *Watch out below*.

What does not change is the will to change, as Heraclitus reminded us. Instead of mammoth, glass-plate cameras, artists in Yosemite now use iPads and smartphones. Another truism: the best camera is the one you have with you. That may be an iPhone or it might be a \$60,000 Hasselblad. A camera is just another tool and what matters is what you do with the tools. Mark Klett and Byron Wolfe have matched nineteenth-century photos with then-and-now views from modern sheet-film cameras, sometimes blending the old and the new into collaged panoramas. The results stun: it is like taking part in a century-long time-lapse movie. William Fox: “Artists deeply schooled in the meaning of land, not just its appearance, finesse image-making into acts of addition.”

Other Yosemite artists you already know, like Albert Bierstadt, a painter who never saw a sunset he didn’t want

to crank to eleven, or the contemporary trickster, Jerry Uelsmann. He had fun in the darkroom replacing the profile of Native American maiden Tis-se'-yak, the one whose tears stain the face of Half Dome, with a smiling Ansel Adams, the new god of Yosemite Valley. In another whimsical shot, Uelsmann inserted a flock of flamingos into the Merced River. As a student, I had a chance to buy that print. It was \$600, which was \$563 more than I had to my name, so that became a reluctant no. Fine art photography since then has been discovered by collectors and prices rise by the hour. I later saw the same print for sale at a photo festival for \$22,000.

Not enough people remember that Georgia O'Keeffe is a Yosemite artist, visiting in 1938 and 1952, hosted by Ansel Adams, who had met her at Ghost Ranch in New Mexico. He came away inspired by her, and Georgia O'Keeffe created strong work inspired by the landscape in turn. Now owned by the Baltimore Museum of Art, her painting *Waterfall I* abstracts Yosemite Falls into a blaze of white lava hourglassed through a diamond of white spray. Painted with thinned liquid oils, the grays, blacks, and greens of the cliffs hold the water in, but only barely—the rock flows down vertically like the reversed black water of a giant photographic negative. If anybody reading this is on the board of directors of the de Young Museum, surely there is something in San Francisco's collection that Baltimore covets in trade? This painting deserves to be loved closer to its point of origin. It can even be a two-for-one: two of our East Coast subjects for one of Baltimore's Yosemite.

Somebody who never visited: Joseph Stalin. Cedric Wright was a Berkeley-based musician, poet, photographer, and mentor to Ansel Adams. He also was a quirky visionary. In 1933 he suggested that to help civilize the out-of-control Stalin, Iron Joe should be invited to come to Yosemite and not allowed to go home until he gained humility and inner peace. It might have been a long visit.

Things people take pictures of in Yosemite: flowers, coyotes, waterfalls, Half Dome, trash cans that look like Half Dome, trees, lakes, naked women in lakes, naked women in tents, naked women leaning on trees, pine cones, meadows, trail signs, squirrels.

I once took a picture of myself climbing naked, Pentax balanced on a rock, just to prove to a girlfriend that I too had a cute ass. That was in a country long ago and far away.

Things people do not take pictures of in Yosemite: the old-school bathrooms in campgrounds, the jail, the sewage treatment plant (downstream from the park in El Portal), grizzly bears (extirpated), black bears feeding on garbage at night and surrounded by tourists in cars who turn on headlights on the ranger's command, puddles of horse urine on trails near Mirror Lake left behind by the riding concession, locked and abandoned bikes that nobody can find the key to unlock, flat tires, pin scars from too many pitons going into the same cracks over and over, e.g., the clean vertical wall on the left just past the end of the Yosemite Creek Bridge, newspaper racks, fire hydrants, the beauty parlor, the bank, all the food thrown out in the cafeteria each and every day, and all of the rest of the rock formations that are not Half Dome, El Capitan, Middle Cathedral, or Royal Arches.

Things you can smell in Yosemite: bay leaves, wood smoke, fabric softener when you pull on the first clean T-shirt after three days on the trail.

Things you can hear in Yosemite: cars, car alarms, car stereos, car doors closing, guitars, river water running over stones, crying children, laughing children, axes and mauls splitting wood, Steller's jays screeching over french fries, climbers high up on walls yelling something about belays (the belay is on? off? it's never clear), dogs barking, coyotes yodeling, acorn woodpeckers going *yakity-yakity*, and the booming echo of rockfall if sheets the size of boxcars peel off Glacier Point Apron and crash into the pines below in a slowly rising cloud of dust and pulverized granite. Was anybody injured? Pause and listen for the sirens.

Things you cannot hear in Yosemite. There are so many. Try standing on the bridge at the base of Yosemite Falls on a cold, clear, midwinter night. Go late, after all the traffic is off the roads. In midwinter, even the owls will be silent. If the water is flowing just right and the temp drops low enough, droplets of spray freeze in midair and float down in scintillating crystals.

Do they make a sound, sparkling and turning in the moonlight? Maybe so, if only in our minds. Jill Osier suggests listening to nature like a lover. She means when you finally know somebody deeply and truly, even the silences thrum with joy.

Drive to Yosemite, yes, of course. Park at the tunnel vista. Take selfies. Go ice skating at Curry Village. Have

Easter dinner in the Ahwahnee. Visit all the seasons of the year. But at some point—not in summer, never in summer—you need to spend time with the real Yosemite, older even than John Muir, older than glaciers, older than Polaroids and rotary-dial phones and flavored vitamin water and all the Miwok baskets and arrowheads in the natural history museum. That Yosemite is the deep one, the true one, the one that talks to you in the middle of a winter night and never needs language.

How do you find it?

The same way John Muir did.

The same way David Hockney did.

Pack a bag, find the car keys, ghost everybody at work, and just get on the road and go. The water and the bedrock have been waiting a long time for you—millions of years, in fact.

Show some respect. Don't ask them to wait very much longer.

**Charles Hood** has been visiting Yosemite since he was five years old but is equally in love with Sequoia, where he used to wash dishes, and the Eastern Sierra, where he has kayaked, skied, ice climbed, and led birding tours. He has seen forty-seven black bears in the wild and once helped rangers dart and tag a problem bear that wouldn't leave his dumpster alone. His most recent book is *A Californian's Guide to the Mammals among Us* (Heyday Books, 2019).