

FRANK GALUSZKA

Hyacinth (29 Palms), 2004
Oil on canvas, 8 x 10 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

CHRISTINA WATERS

Desert Queen

My Mojave Desert

Somewhere buried in our personal mythology lies a half-joking, half-serious anecdote about where we'd like to spend our sunset years. Mine was always a one-liner about someday retiring to the Mojave, where I'd live in a silver Airstream trailer, tending my cactus garden and writing my memoirs. Of course the fantasy also included winning the Pulitzer Prize and attracting flocks of graduate student acolytes who would archive my collected works for posterity. But that's a different story.

Over recent years, that joke about the Mojave has become more than virtual reality as I've spent more time in the desert. The Mojave Desert. Vast as an ocean—the desert is really just an ocean that's matured beyond the liquid state—exotic as a Cairo bazaar, and so complex that it would take a lifetime to explore, the Mojave has done a number on my soul. Scanning its elegant ochre horizons, I thoroughly expect to find John the Baptist foraging among the snakeweed and cholla, preparing the way for his messiah.

Next to its stark majesty, forests and fields seem overwrought, a little silly. The desert needs no adornment to dazzle. Wearing a sky lavish with stars and carpeted by those craftiest of botanicals—the sages and the cacti—the desert defies us to find comfort within its mineral heart. That's a challenge I'll take I decided after that first trip one June, when the morning temperatures shot past the 90-degree mark and proceeded to burn 115-degree holes in my brain. Such intensity. Such heart-stopping beauty.

Dry Heat

Be patient and the intricate details will emerge, details often lost in more temperate, water-rich regions. Shadows contract and expand—the rabbits and lizards are of no particular color, yet always the exact color of the shifting sand. A tinder-dry thatch of Apache plume forms a shady retreat for a chipmunk. Coyotes lounge in the sanctuary of tamarisk trees, soothing gray green against the sizzling rocks.

Mirages mambo crazily in the distance across mountain ranges whose subtle colors acquire increasing density and hue as your eyes grow accustomed to a world without leaves. Sagebrush and mesquite—stately, evenly spaced groves of mesquite—echo the locations of broad root

systems. One imagines an underground conversation of roots whispering to each other in the cool dark away from the merciless heat.

As your eyes acquire a new, more subtle set of calibrations, the true desert begins to appear. Mountains display the very backbone of the continent. Vast sweeps of alluvial fans suggest millennia of rains that moved raspberry iron oxides, turquoise copper deposits, and yellow bands of sulfur and chloride from mountaintops down to soft valley floors. Here in these million undeveloped acres, the desert reveals itself still at play—a Mardi Gras of crystals and rust.

You can read by moonlight at the western edge of the Mojave, where bighorn sheep climb the big rocks and coyotes sing their dreams to sleep. Into the mystic.

What looks from a distance like so much wasteland is transformed, on closer inspection, into an intricate tapestry of washes and canyons bearing surprising juiciness and a wealth of animal tracks. After one spring rain, a sudden colony of flowers perfumes the dusty canyons with color. The rocks each beg for inspection, some bearing the green of copper, others gleaming with mica and pyrite. Formations of iron oxide are the volcanic debris from the Mojave’s most recent eruptions—most notably at saucy little Amboy Crater, just two hours along old Route 66 from Barstow.

On the Road

The mauve horizon begins to unfurl. The orange groves have been left at Bakersfield. It’s desert from now on. Swelling up out of the Tehachapi junipers, dry oceans of creosote and sage added a green patina to the rose-hued arroyos and pale-yellow sand.

Once a queen of truck stops along the mother highway Route 66, Barstow is now a boom settlement of fast food and motel chains grafted on to a debris of tired trailer parks and liquor stores. While it would be counterintuitive to use the expression *poised* of Barstow, let’s be reckless and describe Barstow as poised halfway between Los Angeles and Las Vegas, which is why Arby’s, Denny’s, Chipotle, Del Tacos, and Motel 6s congregate just near the Interstate 15 exit.

At the western edge of town, for over a half century, the quintessential roadside rest El Rancho Motel has held down its patch of faded glory, complete with an aqua

swimming pool no one swims in and a thicket of hand-lettered signs indicating the mileage to cities around the world; according to that sign, Barstow is 12,600 miles from Karachi. I’ve spent several raucous evenings at the El Rancho, using my spartan motel room in the way that God intended. That’s right. You got it. As Roy Orbison would say.

On my last visit, the decor at the El Rancho was exactly what it needed to be, and no more. A framed print of the ocean from Kmart hung over the bed. A lethargic swamp cooler jutted halfway into the room from its window perch. There were three lamps. Two of them worked. Maroon tiles lined a bathroom so small you could bruise your elbows just brushing your teeth. But armed with a bottle of Campari—purchased in Palm Springs, the nearest outpost of exotic liqueurs—a boom box, and our favorite CDs, we managed to exercise our El Rancho Motel privileges to the fullest. By law, all vintage motel rooms have walls the thickness of plastic wrap. As a result, when romping between the sheets, you share your delight with your neighbors on both sides.

Farther down Route 66 is the metropolis of Amboy, famous for its middle-of-nowhere ambiance, its 250-foot-high crater, and the semidefunct Roy’s Motel and Cafe. Once a landmark on Route 66, Roy’s was the pipe dream of two LA entrepreneurs who bought up the town’s twelve lonely buildings and pitched the town to filmmakers as a vintage Western backdrop for commercials and other cinematic ventures.

Among my rules of the road is always to travel with pretzels. They’re light and full of salt and don’t require the application of heat. Just tear open the bag and consume. Especially appropriate with red wine, they formed our pre-dawn breakfast before we hit the trailhead at Amboy Crater.

Figuring that a mere 250-foot crater would be a piece of cake to climb, we set off along the trail. Magenta clouds rose in the sky as we meandered our way around huge encrustations of lava that had last spewed from this tiny cinder cone 6,500 years ago. The crater seemed much larger by the time we reached its smooth, rocky slope. Determined, we managed the serpentine switchbacks, pausing every few steps to catch our breath on air dry as champagne and to gasp at the view. Visible fifty miles in every direction, the desert arranged itself in receding layers of mountain and valley, mountain and valley, around the cinder cone.

Finally at the rim, we half climbed, half slid onto the hard-baked crater, an eerie sulfuric green surrounded by the deep oxblood caldera. Amboy Crater, beloved of UCLA petrology students, is a perfect trainer hike for those who want to feel that they’ve roughed it without days of trekking or the hassle of tents and sleeping bags.

In less than an hour, we were back in the car and cruising through the lunar landscape toward Twentynine Palms.

Sunrise at the Oasis

A Native American power spot and a metaphor for frontier culture, the stretch of the desert wedged between Palm Springs and Indio hosts artists, celebrities, cowboys, felons, and top guns from the world’s largest U.S. Marine Corps base just a few clicks down the road. Anyone can get lost for a few days here, a mere three hours from LA.

Dynasties of ravens patrol the desert by day, and the owls and coyotes by night. Mesquite groves and tamarisks pulsate in the heat. Long-eared jackrabbits pant in the creosote. The hum of insects echoes the throb of the desert floor, vibrating in the dry, mineral heat—everything suspended in an arid freeze-frame until the hour before sunset, when life can continue.

The mountains that hug the Oasis of Mara lie within the mighty Joshua Tree National Park, a psychedelic jumble of boulders the size of office buildings where every Western movie you ever saw as a kid was filmed. When we pay our respects to these 800,000 sacred acres, we rise well before dawn, walk or drive to any one of a million panoramic spots—like the enchanted climb to Fortynine Palms Canyon—and hit the trail before the sun comes up. The summer heat here is climate turned pathological. Deep purples shape-shift into magenta and then orange. Barrel cacti glow neon in the gathering day. The rocks reveal their secret identities as living creatures tuned to a mineral, rather than biological, genetic code.

The lure of the desert is fed by extremes of temperature and supernatural clarity of light. From searing heat to bracing cold. No softening, no gradual transitions. All sharp edges and jagged contours. The Mojave is not an easy place. The desert moods don’t so much change as rupture.

Here and there a saucy barrel cactus announces itself, crown of thorns tinged deeply with bloody crimson.

The datura is already forming its fruit, the gourds that will burst from the waxy white blossoms and provide moist feasts for tiny creatures. The chipmunks, the lizards, and the huge tortoises, the coyotes. The brittle rocks underfoot sound like ceramic bowls thrown against a glass wall. Shattering shards.

We take the switchbacks high enough to catch a glimpse of the palms deep in the crotch of the canyons. That glimpse of the Fortynine Palm Oasis is all we’re allowed before the sun reaches us and begins to burn our necks, eyes, and hands. Back we go, past the rattlesnake, who is now awake, along the steep slopes dotted with the hallucinogenic gumdrops of barrel cacti. Pink-and-red surrealistic pillows whose thorns are long and hard enough to penetrate a grown man’s thigh.

Once the sun is up, the spell is broken until sunset, and we head either for the nearby Denny’s, where a full breakfast of eggs, potatoes, bacon, and pancakes still runs around ten dollars, or the Jelly Donut, where two generations of retired warriors refight either the Vietnam war or tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan—sometimes all three—while comparing their latest surgeries.

A sere warp of both time and space, the desert is addictive. Heroin for the soul. Long may it elude developers, tourists, and film crews. With any luck, the Mojave will outlive us all.

Christina Waters is a fifth-generation Californian with a PhD in Philosophy. In addition to teaching at the University of California, Santa Cruz she is a journalist with Bay Area publications, specializing in art, food, wine, and books. She sings with the UCSC Concert Choir and Cabrillo Symphonic Choir. Author of the memoir *Inside the Flame*, Waters is currently writing an action thriller set in the opera festival at Bayreuth, Germany.