

The background of the entire page is a detailed oil painting of a rural landscape. In the foreground, a dirt road leads from the bottom left towards the center. To the right of the road is a lush green vineyard with rows of grapevines. In the middle ground, a weathered barn with a rusted roof sits behind a line of trees. The background features rolling hills with more vineyards and a large, dense tree on the left side. The sky is a soft, hazy mix of yellow and blue, suggesting a late afternoon or early morning setting.

Fine Art of Today's West

# Southwest Art

## West Coast Artists

Painting the scenes that surround them

**Plus:**

The **Oil Painters of America** show

**Kim English's** paintings of everyday life

# Capturing the Mist & the Magic

Jim Lamb's plein-air landscapes convey  
the sense of being there

BY BONNIE GANGELHOFF



VALLEY FARM, OIL, 14 X 40.

WASHINGTON PLEIN-AIR painter Jim Lamb grew up in the Seattle suburbs, but it was the Bitterroot Valley in western Montana that spoke to his soul early in life. During his childhood, long before he dreamed of making a living as an artist, young Jim and his family journeyed to the scenic Big Sky country every summer to visit relatives. “My cousins had a rural lifestyle that appealed to me—cows, chickens, gathering eggs. And we went fishing in the rivers and creeks,” he explains. “It all had an impact on me.”

He says in some ways it was a “fantasy” lifestyle because he didn’t live that way year round. But those summers were a special time. Lamb has fond memories of his father, who had a great appreciation for the natural world, regularly calling attention to picturesque, painterly scenes as they drove to Montana. “He would point out the wonderful light on the mountains or how a ribbon of water dissolved into the distance. He always described things with an artist’s eye,” Lamb recalls.



#### DOSSIER

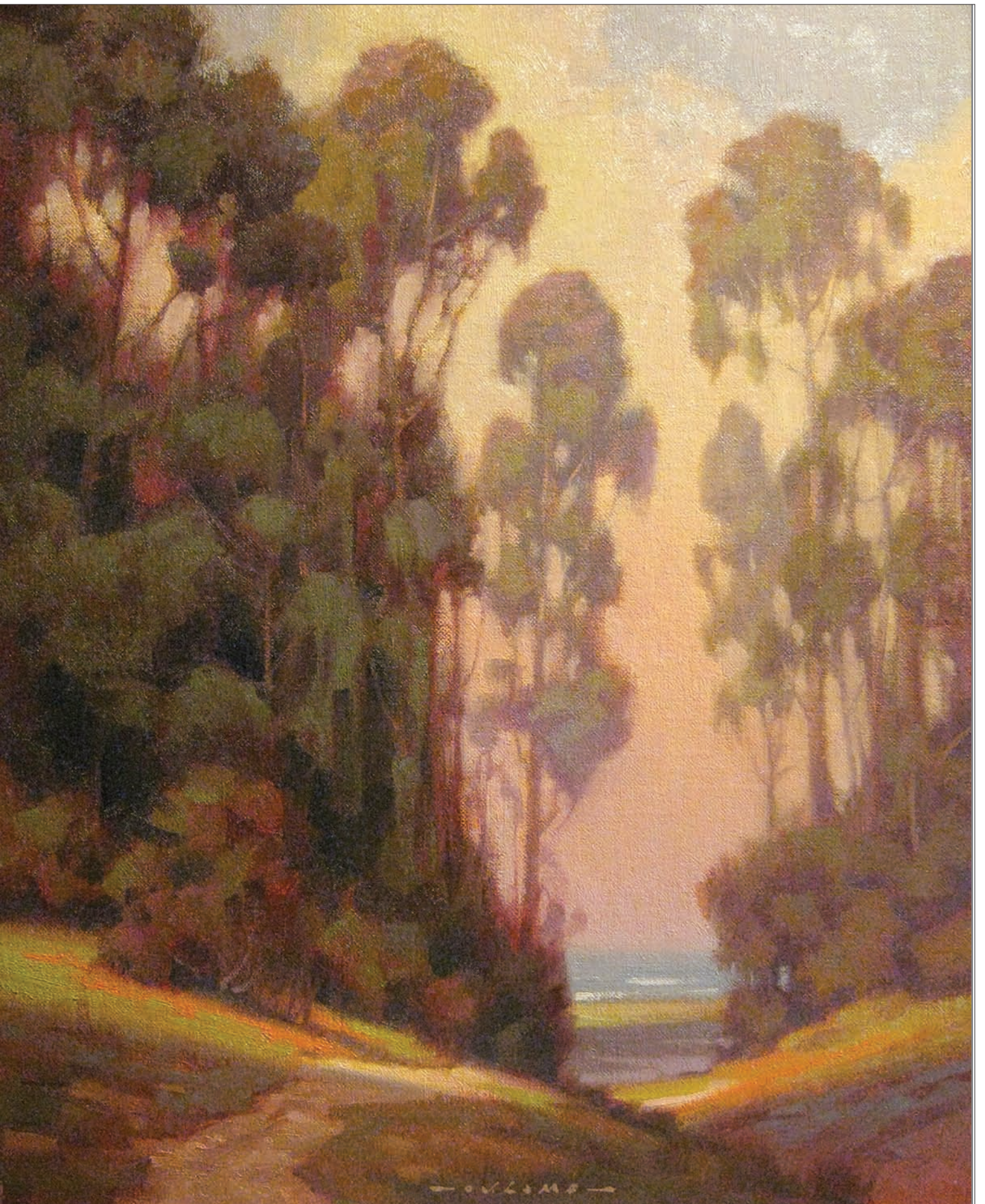
##### REPRESENTATION

Howard/Mandville Gallery, Kirkland, WA; Dawson Cole Fine Art, Laguna Beach, CA; Zantman Art Galleries, Carmel and Palm Desert, CA; Morris & Whiteside Galleries, Hilton Head, SC; [www.jimlambstudio.com](http://www.jimlambstudio.com).

##### UPCOMING SHOW

Northwest Rendezvous, Helena, MT, August 19-22.

PATHWAY TO  
THE SEA, OIL,  
20 X 16. ▶





SUNRISE ON WHITE RIVER, OIL, 20 X 26.

Today, immersing himself in majestic surroundings is part of Lamb's daily routine, whether it's Washington's Cascade Mountains or California's Pacific Coast beaches. Capturing the beauty of the natural world is his every day reality. Lamb is an award-winning participant in the selective Northwest Rendezvous Group of painters, who meet in Helena, MT, each August. He is also a regular participant in a number of well-known California shows, including the Laguna Beach Plein Air Painting Invitational and Sonoma Plein Air.

Like many artists, Lamb took a circuitous route to his career in fine art, stopping first for a number of years in the world of commercial illustration. After graduating

from high school, he entered the Navy in 1968, serving for four years. When his stint was over, he packed up his Datsun 240Z with all his belongings and moved to the Los Angeles area to pursue a career in illustration. Teachers and various mentors had always encouraged him to pursue art as a career, and he decided to follow their advice, signing up for several courses at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena.

Because he had been drawing and painting on his own since childhood, he soon discovered he already knew a lot more than he realized. After a few courses, he plunged headlong into the field of illustration by pulling out a phone book and making cold calls



SEA CLIFFS & SUNLIGHT, OIL, 30 X 40.

to potential clients. “I had to make money because I was living in a travel trailer in a friend’s driveway,” Lamb recalls.

For his first job he created covers for recordings of bible stories on cassette tapes. When he didn’t receive payment for the job, he called the client to inquire about it. “They told me I needed to invoice them first. I didn’t even know what an invoice was,” Lamb says. He eventually learned the business side of illustration work, and after some experience as a freelancer, he joined an Orange County design firm and began building an impressive portfolio. Over the course of the next few years, his list of clients grew to include major accounts such as McDonald’s, Coca-Cola, and the National Football League.

In 1984, after 12 years in Southern California, he and his wife, Cathy, who is also an artist, decided to leave Los Angeles. Lamb wanted to return to his roots in the Seattle area. “I wanted my kids to know what horses and cows were,” says the artist. He continued working as an illustrator and eventually began producing limited-edition prints. In his free hours he started painting landscapes, using photographs as ref-

erence material. That, however, would soon change.

In 1990, an illustrator friend introduced Lamb to Dan Pinkham, a Southern California-based plein-air painter. Pinkham suggested that Lamb try painting *en plein air*. At first he thought the idea of painting on location was the silliest thing he’d ever heard. “Why would anyone paint outdoors when you can just take a photograph?” he wondered.

Nonetheless, when he returned to Washington, he headed to Lake Sammamish to give this novel way of painting a try. Sitting on a rock with painting implements on his lap, he felt uncomfortable, even “goofy,” he recalls. At first he didn’t concern himself with color, instead creating small black-and-white sketches. He was hooked. “That was the beginning of getting the bug for the whole plein-air painting process, though it was a long time before any of my paintings were any good,” he says. “It’s a long road. I’m farther down that road now, but there’s no real end.”

To whet his appetite for more instruction in this newfound pursuit, he signed up for workshops with Wayne Wolfe, Jim Wilcox, and Michael J. Lynch, and he also studied early California Impressionists such



JUNE SKIES, OIL, 36 X 36.

as Edgar Payne and William Wendt.

"Painting outdoors is invigorating. I enjoy the solitude, the sights and sounds of being out in nature," Lamb says. Like his father, who enjoyed pointing out how light reflected on the landscape, Lamb, too, is sensitive to the impact of light on the land. He approaches each painting with a vision of what he wants the piece to be—although sometimes a painting ends up surprisingly different than what he intended. Once in a while, when these "happy accidents" occur, it results in a work even better than he had planned.

In the California seascape *PATHWAY TO THE SEA*, for example, Lamb found himself overworking a section of the canvas. "It was busy and fussy. I was immersed in detail. So I took a big brush and smushed the paint all around. That added more color. Then I went back in with some simple defining shapes, and everything worked much better," he explains. He thinks of these "happy accidents" as gifts, and he is fond of quoting Dean Cornwell [1892-1960], a prominent American illustrator who once said that when "happy accidents" emerge in a painting, the artist should "get down on your knees and thank God for it."

The painting *CALIFORNIA VINEYARD* was also born in an unexpected fashion. When Lamb began the painting, a fog hovered over the Sonoma Valley vineyard, casting a mystical light on the scene. He had captured this moody quality on canvas when the sun broke through the mist and the rolling hills behind the vineyard came into view. While it wasn't the painting he set out to create, *CALIFORNIA VINEYARD* has become as one of his favorites.

On that particular day, Lamb was also collaborating with Tom Martin, a friend from his Navy days who is also a poet. They are working together on a book, *Visions of California*, scheduled for publication this summer. Once Lamb has completed a painting, Martin pens a poem to capture the scene, like the shadowed coastal formations in *SEA CLIFFS AND SUNLIGHT*. In his poem of the same name, Martin begins:

*"I came to this beach after thirty years gone  
to gauge what is real, just to be in the sun  
and to feel if the stone at the base of the cliffs  
still stays cool to the touch until noon,  
when the shadows that fall on the sand in the morning  
run up the steep stairs and disappear, there in the ice-plant  
that grows on the shoulders to slow the erosion."*

Lamb feels the verbal complements the visual, expressing in words what he experiences on location. He's come a long way down the road from feeling goofy sitting on a rock painting.

"The time Jim spends on location brings authenticity to his work. You know when you see one of his pieces that he was there, he experienced that mo-



**CALIFORNIA VINEYARD, OIL, 40 X 50.**



**MENDOCINO COAST, OIL, 24 X 36.**

ment and translated those feelings and observations to canvas," says Pat Howard. Pat and Dan Howard, owners of Howard/Mandville Gallery in Kirkland, WA, have represented Lamb for about 20 years. "Jim's work is steeped in tradition, reminiscent of many of the early California Impressionists," Pat continues. "It is quality work with great light and atmosphere, masterfully capturing those fleeting moments of magic in the landscape." ❖

Bonnie Gangelhoff is the senior editor at *Southwest Art*.