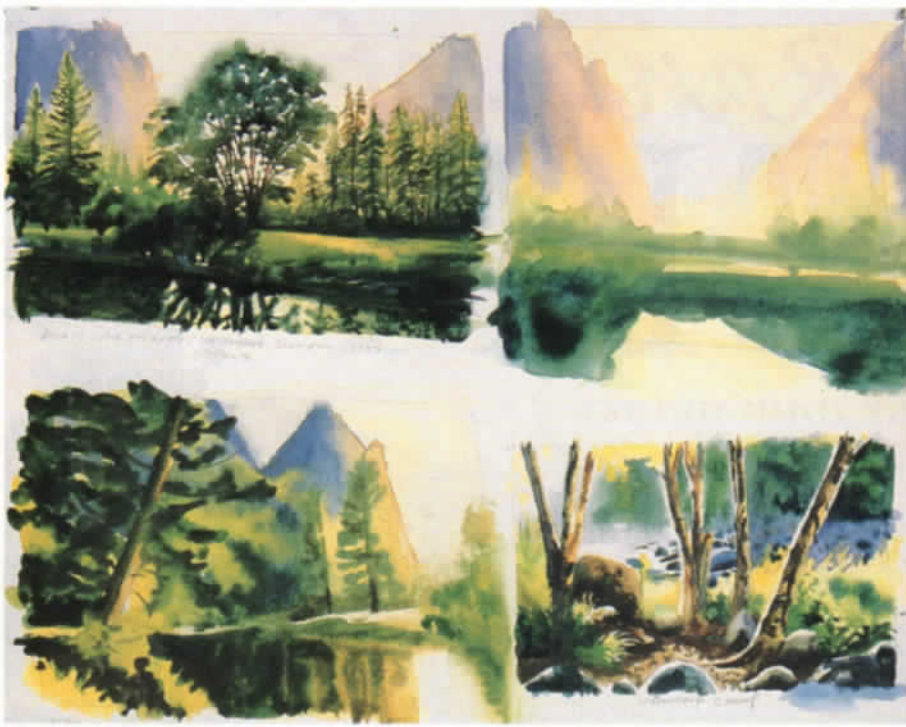




The Range of
LIGHT

BY JOHN HULSEY

The artist painting
Yosemite Valley in the
warm light at sunset.



All photos © Ann Turley 1987

After a year of planning and nearly four days on the road

in our overloaded Volkswagen camper, we slowly climbed to Tioga Pass. Uncertain whether our sluggish camper would crest the 9,450-foot summit to Yosemite National Park, where I had won a month-long residency to paint, my wife, Ann, and I were filled with an almost electric anticipation of the adventure to come. As we climbed higher, it began to rain, and I remember thinking dejectedly that the clouds would obscure the fabulous sunset views of the Yosemite Valley. Mountain weather is nothing if not mercurial, and soon an incredible display of light and mist danced over the alpine landscape. Suddenly I was sure there would be no moments wasted here. We had embarked on a journey of the spirit as much as of the body, in a place known as the Range of Light.



Opposite page, above:
A page from the artist's sketchbook.

Opposite page, below: The artist painting a watercolor along the Merced River.

Above: Wawona Camp, 1997, watercolor, 12 x 16.
All artwork this article collection the artist.

Although I went to Yosemite prepared to work in both watercolor and oil, I am primarily a watercolor painter. The astounding scale of the landscape and trees, combined with the unfamiliar and spectacular light, so impressed me, however, I was forced to work only in oil for the first few days. Once I regained my artistic equilibrium, I could begin to paint with the kind of spontaneity that makes for successful watercolor work.

With more than 700,000 acres, Yosemite is a place of unlimited painting opportunities: The emerald-colored Merced River flows placidly through the middle of Yosemite Valley, tremendous waterfalls thunder into turbulent pools, and enormous rock domes dot the landscape. Knowing this in advance, Ann and I brought backpacking equipment and portable painting gear for the 800 miles of trails around the valley and the High Sierra backcountry. A hike of only five miles from the trailhead can reward one with an alpine scene of unparalleled sublimity. Within the boundaries of the park there are also groves of giant sequoia redwood trees, trees so immense and ancient, to stand in their cathedral-like presence induces an almost



reverential silence. I found it difficult to paint among these giants, and it may be that the experience cannot be conveyed very well through direct painting. I think it must be absorbed, breathed in, and allowed to emerge in later work; the scale of the experience is just too immense.

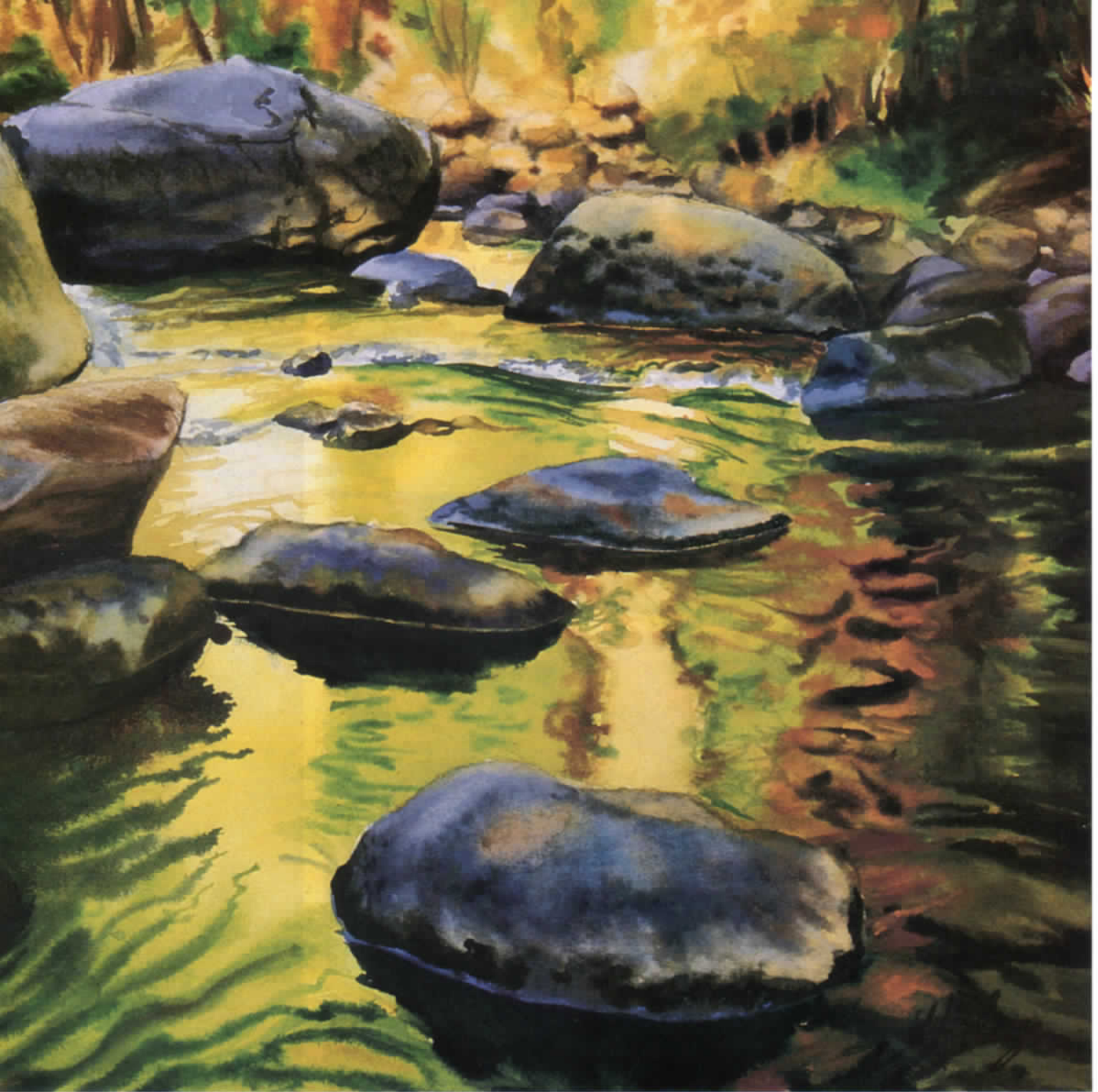
As much as it is a place of jagged rock cliffs, Yosemite is also a place of flowing water. Water slips over the cliffs, creating towering waterfalls. At peak runoff season in the spring, 11 of these waterfalls crash into the valley floor, and at 2,425 feet, Yosemite Falls is the fifth highest in the world. Unfailingly, I am drawn to moving water as a subject again and again.

I have come to understand that my work is more about the solitary effort of pouring the evidence of all my senses and struggles onto a temperamental two-dimen-

Top, left: A page from the artist's sketchbook, including a sunset en route to Yosemite and three images from Yosemite National Park.

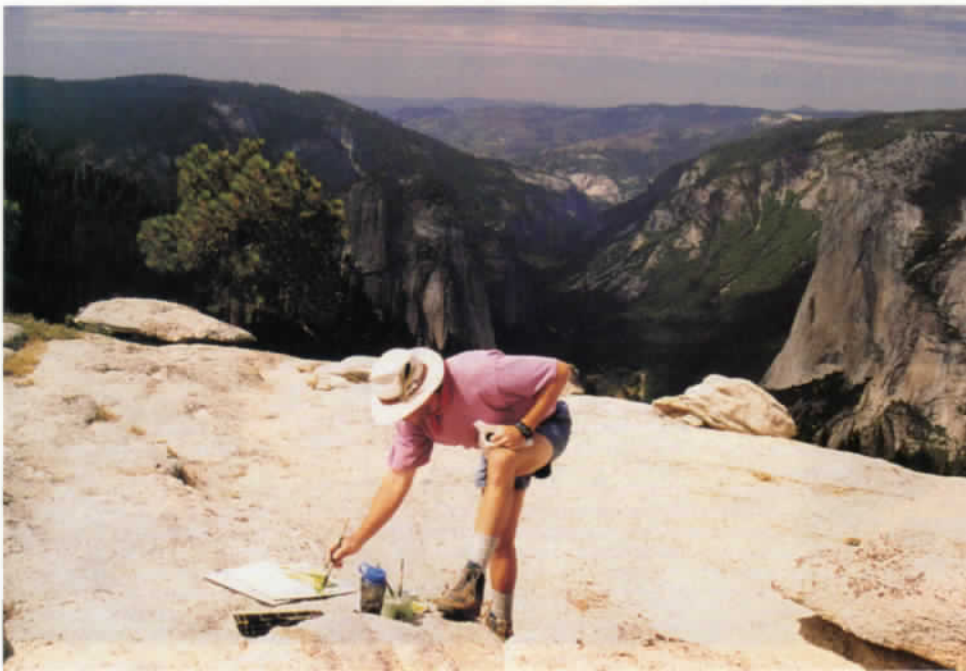
Above, left: The artist painting in a sketchbook with a portable watercolor set in Yosemite Valley.

Above: *Reflections and Rocks in the Merced*, 1997, watercolor, 12 x 16.



sional surface than it is about simple representation. Working this way leads to a lot of deep thinking. It may be impossible for one to be an artist and not be something of a philosopher. To produce art is itself an act of questioning the mysteries of existence. I personally find this process of asking, of questioning through the language of art, to be what holds my interest.

Unless the subject is terribly complex or fleeting, I generally do not prepare a detailed pencil sketch before I paint. I simply try to meditate on the source of my inspiration and consider what I want to communicate. A month spent within a subject is a great benefit. It provides the luxury to wait and watch. To begin, I mentally paint the picture stroke by stroke, and then I sketch the structure of my composition onto a block or canvas.



A real problem for artists working in the mountains is the necessity of carrying a lot of heavy painting gear into high altitude in search of subjects. The effects of altitude sickness can be debilitating, so Ann and I were careful to slowly work to longer and higher hikes over time. Still, the need to carry our painting gear in addition to the normal load of survival equipment and drinking water made even the simplest climb into something of an endurance trial. I took two French easels to Yosemite—a standard-sized easel for oil work and a smaller, lighter easel with backstraps for hiking—along with a completely portable watercolor set. I abandoned the easels entirely on all strenuous hiking trips, preferring to use my watercolor block on the ground and suffer the sore knees instead.

Top, left: A page from the artist's sketchbook, which includes paintings en route from Kansas to California, and in lower left corner, *Moonlight on El Capitan in Yosemite Valley*.

Above, left: The artist painting on top of Sentinel Dome with a portable watercolor set, facing west over the Yosemite Valley.



Above: Ann Along the Lyell, 1997, watercolor, 12 x 16.

Although there is more than a lifetime of subjects in the valley area, we tried to cover as much ground as we could. Early in the second week, we loaded our packs and drove the 55 miles to the Tuolumne Meadows trailhead in the heart of the Sierra high country. Marauding black bears are a problem here so we were careful to move any food from our camper into the steel bear-proof boxes provided by the Park Service at each parking lot and to pull all the curtains over the windows of our rolling studio. Once secured, we shouldered our heavy packs and set off for the Lyell Fork of the Tuolumne River, perhaps the most beautiful and inspiring place in the entire park.

Some experiences so exceed our expectations that words can fail us. Our walk



along the Lyell was one of those rare moments. Autumn was already working its way along the slopes and ridges that banked the gentle, meandering river, washing golden swatches of aspen that stood out like jewels among a crown of conifers. We stopped to rest in the late afternoon light as it poured perfect warmth over the landscape. The air was scented with pine and the sweet, wet smell of clean water. Quietly, we painted, hoping to capture even a small nuance of the panorama. In the waning light, we quickly packed up as we had miles yet to walk before we would reach our campsite. Every bend in the trail was worth painting; every mile brought us farther into the pristine sub-alpine landscape we had journeyed so far to see.

Top, left: The rolling studio near the Merced River.

Above, left: The artist with full pack in the High Sierras.

Above: *Pohono Bridge*, 1997, watercolor, 12 x 16.



Experiences like these take time to process; the images can be too bright, too interesting or complex to be understood at first. Sometimes they must be filtered through the lens of the subconscious for a time and vulcanized by the fires of the imagination before they can emerge as art. No one really knows exactly how this artistic alchemy works, but I suspect it is a kind of dance between the conscious and unconscious, which, when the music is right, produces a work of transcendence.

This excursion was sponsored by Yosemite Renaissance, an organization founded by artists and art supporters to encourage visual artists who wish to work for an extended time in Yosemite National Park. For more information about this organization, write: Yosemite Renaissance, Artist-in-Residence Program, P.O. Box 100, Yosemite National Park, CA 95389. ■