



Prayers and Warnings—  
A Conversation with  
Chester Arnold



“Art gave me an opportunity to experience something that had a kind of phenomenology to it. There was so much inexplicable feeling surrounding it, that it allowed me to sort of worship at the altar of nature in that Emersonian way. I sense a power. I don’t want to give the power a name. I’m just here to witness it and be a part of it and try to help it sustain itself somehow. That’s an agenda, I think, in all of these paintings one way or another.”

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*My introduction to the work of Chester Arnold came in 2001, thanks to an exhibit at the San Jose Museum of Art pairing his work with that of the Los Angeles-based painter, James Doolin. It was one of the most compelling exhibits I’d seen and made art critic Kenneth Baker’s list of the Bay Area’s ten best shows of the year. Although born in Santa Monica, Arnold spent most of his childhood in Munich, Germany. In those years, not only was he exposed to a European sensibility toward the arts, but he absorbed the deep questioning—“noble questions” as he described them—and self-examination that pervaded German culture during those years. Perhaps this, in part, accounts for the profound*

*themes one feels so frequently in his paintings. Returning to the U.S. to finish his last year of high school, he found himself feeling like something of an outsider—a perspective that has its advantages, he’s quick to point out.*

*Talking with Arnold, a cordial man at ease with conversation about his work, was not only a pleasure, but fascinating. Not all artists are as articulate or as aware of their work on different levels. And to be one of his students in his university art classes must be a special pleasure.*

*In one of our early issues [#4], we published three of his paintings. Several years have passed since then, but his work has continued to evolve and challenge viewers to ponder some of the central issues we face, existentially and environmentally.*

*Arnold sent me a beautiful catalog of a recent show of his work at the Nevada Museum of Art, On Earth as It Is in Heaven. Looking at one startling painting after another, I thought it was time to sit down and talk with this remarkable artist. We met at his home in Sonoma on one of our famous sunny California winter days. Before setting up for the interview, Chester was talking about his long-time friend, Henry Corning, one of the founders of the artist collective Meadow Sweet Dairy. For a couple of years, they’d painted outdoors together, but then Corning moved away from art making to a more direct form of social action, helping to found greenmuseum.org, among other things. During those years, said Arnold, an earlier marriage had fallen apart and he’d found some solace in nature. Nature, he observed was a great retreat in a time of inner disorder. I asked him to say more about his relationship with nature.—Richard Whittaker*

**Chester Arnold:** The origins of my interest in art, I think, came from the reflection of the natural world I saw, primarily in northern European art. And I grew up in an area that was close to nature. I lived in an apartment right on the edge of the forest in southern Germany and I spent a lot of time playing in the forest.

**works:** Are you German?

**CA:** No. My father was a spy working for the U.S. government in the 50s and 60s. He was a linguist. He would go undercover and do things that seemed very exciting at the time. But towards the end of his life, when he started to open up, he revealed that it was a tremendous waste of time for the most part—waiting with bags of money to give to people who mostly didn’t show up, things like that [laughs].

But it gave me the opportunity to grow up in a

different place. Except for my last year of high school I was in Germany. I'd already pretty much decided to be an artist by that time. I came back here when I was seventeen, eighteen—and I felt like I was someone on the outside looking in. That gave me a slightly more philosophical attitude about everything, I think.

**works:** That might be an advantage for an artist.

**CA:** But I say outsider only in a social sense because—well, maybe there was a cultural sense, too—the culture is so different. Everything in Europe was so rich. With the access I had to the culture of art and painting and music, coming here I felt a little bit deprived. I wanted to go back and see things I really liked. I think I went back three times to see things like that.

**works:** You felt there just wasn't the same level of appreciation for the arts here?

**CA:** Right. And I think that was part of the outsidership. It actually served me well in the end because in the modernist and postmodernist times we were living through in the 70s and 80s, the fact that I was coming from somewhere else and was a little bit eccentric helped me stand out from my peers.

**works:** What do you think it was that moved you toward doing art?

**CA:** It's difficult to identify a point. I start to think I'm fabricating a fiction.

**works:** Even if there isn't a clear point, I bet you can remember moments where you were engaged very deeply by certain things.

**CA:** Well, I remember even in fifth and sixth grade making drawings in class and passing them around and watching people's responses. I remember distinctly in sixth grade making a drawing of a person in a window, lit from within, with a man pointing a gun into that window. I don't know where that came from or what inspired that composition, but it was a narrative. And I think a real part of all of the work I've done is a narrative drive and wanting to tell a story.

There just seems to be a creative mojo behind that, to want to do that. And then in school, plugging that into an approval network where you had skills that

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were actually appreciated by somebody, that kind of cinched the deal.

When I was a freshman in high school, I had a really terrific art teacher, who is still alive. He visited us a couple of years ago. He's in his nineties now.

**works:** You had a natural bent for drawing?

**CA:** I think I did. I was always encouraged by my sisters and my parents, too. It was a matter of having the imagination to produce an internal image that then could be mapped out as a drawing. That was a source of the endless fascination of image making for me.

**works:** And you could do that before you had gotten any formal training?



**CA:** I could and, in retrospect, the drawings were probably quite crude. But by the time I was a freshman I'd been doing this. I was really attracted to northern Renaissance artists, especially Albrecht Durer, from early on—I'd say from the eighth grade. I'd already seen the great Durers in Munich's Alte Pinakothek and, once I saw them, I thought—as many people still think when they see them—how could any human being do that? They kind of bristled with life.

There's one room at the Alte Pinakothek. I think it's still there and, in that room, there was the famous Durer self-portrait, the sort of Christ-like self-portrait he painted in 1500. Then across the room from that is Durer's painting, *The Battle of Issus*, in which Darius III is defeated by Alexander the Great in 333 BC. It's a painting which, to a very young person,

is extraordinarily exciting. There are thousands of individuals on the battlefield, every one of them completely articulated down to the jewels on the hilts of their swords—meticulousness to a pathological degree. That room was so captivating to me. I'd seen movies and there are amazing things that happen in cinema, but this was a different kind of amazement.

I heard a lecture in New York once at a College Art Association conference. Leon Golub was talking about the difference between painting and moving media like television and movies. In this gravelly voice he said, "The difference between a painting and video is that with a video you sit there in one place and the video goes by you. In the case of a painting, the painting stays there forever, and you go by it."

He said a painting can activate you in a way that

video doesn't—at least if a person is inspired visually to engage with it. That's the big issue. One is always trying to encourage this as a kind of evangelist, the possibility of visual excitement and intellectual engagement with painting as a form. Because, as simple as it is, it still has so many possibilities for vitality.

That's where I think teaching has come into it for me. I'm a big believer in the possibility of painting for everybody. It's not just the realm of great masters only. Every person has some kind of a story to tell and can tell it in their own way, can engage with it and find revelations. I see this happening a lot in classes. People might have taken an art class decades ago and the teacher told them they had no talent. So they dropped out and never went back. Now they've had their careers and they come back in their sixties. All of a sudden they're in a class where there's a tremendous amount of excitement and support for the idea of making an image of almost any kind and shaping that in a way, artfully, you know, with technique and so forth, like in a poetry class learning about the elements of writing.

**works:** You're a strong believer in something being available to everyone, through making art, through finding their own story—is that how you put it?

**CA:** I've forgotten who said this, I think it was in Suzi Gablik's book, *Conversations before the End of Time*. There was a guy who said something like the artist was not a very special kind of person, but that everyone was a special kind of artist.

**works:** That's A. K. Coomaswamy. I love that quote.

**CA:** I think that's been my approach as a teacher even though I'm extremely critical of what I do myself. That's because those glowing examples from the past are my models. They stand as examples of the levels of achievement that are possible, not because they were so masterfully executed, but because they seem to embody such an intensity of energy in so many different forms.

**works:** These are the northern Renaissance works that made such a deep impression on you as a young person. You mentioned Durer.

**CA:** Right. And I'll tell you some others that came in



succession. When puberty came in, I became interested in Expressionism [laughs]. I found myself encountering Vincent Van Gogh and Max Beckman, who were just colossal influences at the time. The energy, the expressive possibility of seeing and experiencing the world and pouring that into an image that had all these surprising and new dynamics struck me, compared to those stale old paintings. I went through this rejection period, but in my career and my life I've sort of come around full circle and now embrace everything.

**works:** There's something about being in front of a Van Gogh, especially with the work from that period where he turned out those intense masterpieces. I was in the Met maybe fifteen years ago and I found myself standing in front of a number of these paintings—and they really got to me.

**CA:** There's something about the energy of it. I've had that experience, too.

**works:** You feel it. It's amazing.

**CA:** Yes. I had a student who put together an art



CHESTER ARNOLD *THY KINGDOM COME II*, 1999, OIL ON CANVAS, 72" X 94"

and architecture business after going to the Legion of Honor. He asked me if I would be willing to do some lectures if he put together a tour to Europe. I said, sure. I thought he was joking. A week later he came with this proposal to go to Paris for a week and we ended up doing it! But, related to what you were just saying, we toured the Louvre and then we walked across the river to the Orsay, where there's this one room of Van Gogh's work. And after seeing all those old, glazed masterpieces in the Louvre, standing in front of the Van Goghs, I almost felt like I should have had a lead vest on [laughs]. It's just paint on a canvas! How can it have that power?

I think it says something about the ability of the human eye and brain to process the impulse that is

imbued in the gesture of the brush. It's a remarkable power. I think that's one of the great reasons for attempting to continue the tradition of making images, that simple process of paint, surface, brush—whatever. There's only one Van Gogh, but there are a lot of other tiers and directions of work where people can share human experiences that are extremely valuable.

**works:** Yes. But I want to bring up an experience that must be pretty common among those of us who see a lot of art. More and more it seems that a painting or sculpture or installation doesn't move me much. I know that, for the artist, it can be a very meaningful experience to make something. But then most often what I feel looking at it is *not much*. Maybe partly it's

a function of having seen so much work, but it's also incredibly difficult to make a powerful piece of art. And also we're just awash with media imagery. I wonder about the need for new kinds of modalities. Have you thought about this?

**CA:** Absolutely. For instance, in jurying exhibits, student exhibits. You can't look at work like that as critically as you would with professional artists who are competing for some kind of higher level of achievement.

I'm always looking for some evidence of sensitivity, of thoughtfulness. I don't want to say the word originality, but there is something to that because in every individual there's an authentic core that could be shaped, given the right circumstances and training—or just by complete happenstance, like a Grandma Moses kind of thing.

I think that if I've erred, I've erred on the side of generosity, because I think it's better to have an open-ended framework to work in rather than one that is so critical that it would close that creative window.

I had an English teacher in high school who wrote, on one of my papers, why are you so lazily content with mediocrity? Over the years, that's the one thing I remember of all the things that were written to me on high school papers. It said not only that what I was doing was mediocre, but that I had the capacity to be excellent—and I was avoiding it. That was actually very encouraging, and I started to really apply myself. And I started associating with the kids who were doing that, the honor society kids rather than the kids who would smoke cigarettes during the lunch break [laughs]. It changed my perspective. I discovered that there was a real pleasure in exercising the capacity of the brain.

I curated a show at the Sonoma Museum here called *Artist, Teacher, Artist*. I asked Squeak Carnwath, Chris Brown, Richard Shaw and Maria Porges who their influences were. We had a panel discussion and everybody talked about their earliest influences. It usually went back to the pivotal moments—usually in high school.

**works:** It must be true right across the board—the great gift of running into a real teacher.

**CA:** In a strange way, I think the art market in the last fifty years has been more generous to the artists who didn't have the traditional skills that would have

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distinguished a great artist in, say, 19<sup>th</sup>-century France. It took me a while to understand that this isn't what it was all about. What it was all about was the individual's quest, wherever it took them—the dedication and intensity of that quest, which is palpable in works of all kinds, even in works that I don't like now.

**works:** Earlier you were talking about looking at student work, or at any work, really. You were cautious about using the word originality, but you could feel an authentic quality sometimes, and be touched by that. I know what you're talking about, and it's always a surprise when I see that. I forget that it's possible.

**CA:** And I've seen this as a teacher. I saw this as a peer when I was in art school. There are definitely quotients of imagination at work. Some people are aiming to mimic something because they think that's what should be done. I suppose I did plenty of that as I was developing, too. But you can usually feel when a





CHESTER ARNOLD *FATE OF DURABLE GOODS*, 1999, OIL ON CANVAS, 42" X 50"

work is avoiding its own original potential and when it's mimicking something the individual thinks is better than what they're capable of doing. That's very common.

At any graduate school you'll find that there are legions of painters trying to paint like someone else because that's where the current market value is, or the professors are sometimes the latest incarnation of what's being shown. As a result, you have art that is not really coming from the individual. That special painting is often one where something unique and personal is

woven in. That's where folk art and outsider art is so beautiful.

**works:** I like the way you connect it with coming from something authentically one's own. But I don't think this has to mean the work will point the way to some new style.

**CA:** I talk a lot about Rembrandt. It seems to me that Rembrandt was one of those artists who had that

intense feeling for what he was doing. But he was out of favor in the generations that came after because he didn't paint as meticulously and realistically as some of his students ended up painting. But that energy and that originality and sensitivity was still woven into the work. It's unavoidable. It doesn't matter what the styles are! Eventually people, some people, will see. My God!

It's like the feeling of encountering Van Gogh. There's something in that work we can feel because the work was practiced with such devotion and intensity. And that's what you can often feel from outsider art done by an artist who may be completely unplugged from his own time. There may be more people like that than we realize, and I know some of them. I'll have to take you in the house and show you some of my friend Pierre's work.

**works:** I'd love to get you to talk about some of your paintings. Do you have a catalog nearby? [hands me a catalog from a recent Nevada Museum of Art show] I remember that great show at the San Jose Museum of Art—you and James Doolin. Did you get to know him at all?

**CA:** I did, just a little. Talking with him and looking at his work, I really regretted not having met him twenty years earlier. I could have learned so much from him, and our interests were so similar even though our styles were different.

**works:** He was special, and a beautiful painter. I point to an image in the catalog. Tell me about this one.

**CA:** *The Great Piece of Turf*. This gets right back to the Albrecht Durer connection I was describing earlier. They reproduced Durer's *Piece of Turf*, too.

**works:** His shows nature viewed lovingly and with reverence.

**CA:** Absolutely! And, in some ways, I think it's the ultimate environmental art. It's raising the visual observation to the highest level. Anyway I don't know why, but ever since I can remember, that particular image has been circulating in my mind. And at the time, in 1989, when I did my painting, I was at the point of digging up pieces of turf from my yard. It was the first house we'd ever owned, and I'd bring a piece of turf into my studio and try drawing it.



I learned something really important at that time. I could do that like an illustrator would, because I'd done illustration when I was younger, but I found it wasn't where the excitement was. Somehow the image had to go inside and then boil up and come out from imagination. It had to be done from memory rather than from any kind of image.

I consider it one of the pivotal moments of my life, when I realized I had enough memory capacity and skill that I could weave together a fiction of believable enough proportion it could actually tell the story I wanted to tell. That painting was the first of those.

**works:** I'm remembering that last night I got to listen to a wonderful meditation teacher. After his talk someone asked, what if I can't find a guru? He said there's more than one kind of guru. The first one is *conscience*. The second one, he said, is *nature*. Do you think we city-dwelling, postmodernists need to learn something about nature?

**CA:** I think the Bay Area is a great place for that because of its natural beauty. I've compared New York and California a lot over the years. New York is like a

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hothouse full of strange orchids and California is a field of weeds. The weeds have very deep roots and they survive all kinds of droughts and floods. And they're always going to be there, whereas, in the New York artworld, people appear and disappear.

There's something about the natural world here that is so captivating. It's also easy, as an artist, to become a little bit separated from that. Okay, art is one thing and the Sierra Club and hiking is another thing. We can appreciate them in separate ways, and I think people do. But the separation may be because of the breakdown in the awareness of what's possible in representation, and also because of the lack of belief that art training can lead to anything meaningful in the postmodern world.

There are people who do *plein-air* paintings, a lot of them, but very rarely do I feel they do more than a snapshot. And they can't do more in an afternoon. It's a wonderful thing that the best of them do, but I think there's the possibility of engaging much more deeply, of making an art that is reverential in the way that Durer is, and at the same time, woven with the creativity in the individual. That's where I'm aiming—at the story I have to tell as an individual from my own experience. And I have an enormous capacity to take pleasure in visual experience, and all kinds of experience.

I find that when I talk about those things, when I'm doing classes and showing people techniques, say, for

mixing particular colors, I find them lighting up in the same way.

**works:** And you said you have an enormous capacity for experiencing pleasure. If I suggested the word joy, how would that be?

**CA:** Sure!

**works:** Joy! And beauty? I don't want to get too far off on this difficult word. You don't shy away from this word?

**CA:** Not at all. The late Ira Wolf, a wonderful guy, had a gallery in Saint Helena. He had a show entitled *On Beauty*. He asked people to submit a painting and then a little piece of writing on what they thought beauty was. I think I always come to the conclusion that people's relationship to their visual life is determined by their experiences and their capacity to extract some kind of nutrition from them. Beauty is something you can be taught. I've seen this in students who study painting. They come in and say, "After that class last week and your lecture on greens, I almost drove off the road because I saw all these greens I'd never seen before!"

Well, why is that? I think this is an old, almost Biblical, primary experience—*naming the beasts*—and, all of a sudden, by naming them, we become conscious of them, taking them from the unconscious to the conscious. I'm continually amazed by how much we do unconsciously all the time that, when any element of it is brought into consciousness, it seems so surprising. I was doing an anatomy lecture—because I teach a life painting class—and was talking about the simple structures in the hand and what the bump is on your wrist. I said to the students, okay, put your hand on your wrist and feel the bone there, that bump—that's the ulner prominence. And all of the sudden it's "Oh, my God! The curtains have been opened!" [laughs] Well, what is that?

**works:** So true. But I didn't want to leave your painting behind, *The Great Piece of Turf*. There's a strong ironic thing going on there.

**CA:** Yes. It's kind of a more humorous work for me. The inspiration was the delight in working with a rolled structure, but it really came from a trip to Stockton. My

daughter was in school in Stockton for a while. We'd drive through the Central Valley past those sod farms.

**works:** I've never been aware of them.

**CA:** Oh my God, there are hundreds of acres of sod farms along the roads. And they'll be farming this stuff, rolling it up and putting it on trucks. Then you see it come to the neighborhoods where the new houses are being built. Inevitably, at the end of construction, a truck would roll up loaded with sod. They'd unload it, roll the pieces out and you'd have instant lawn. I've always thought that was one of the most comical things. It's so typically human. And the thought of Albrecht Durer's piece of turf being rolled up somehow, there was something about it that was irresistible. I make no apologies about the comical irony of it.

And that touches on something else in my work. I tend to follow enthusiasms as they arise because I feel like they usually arise for a reason. So I tend not to edit out much. A lot of paintings end up rolled up in the rafters. But that one came from real experience.

**works:** What comes up for me right now is Thomas Berry's phrase "nature deficit disorder." He sees this as the cause of real problems.

**CA:** It's not surprising. You hear stories about inner city kids in Oakland and San Francisco who have never been to the beach. Can you imagine that? It's hard to believe. I think there are some groups now that are trying to change that.

**works:** Yes, I've read about that. Now what about this painting here? This is a powerful painting.

**CA:** Oh, boy. What can I tell you about that one? This one came from another one of my enthusiasms. It's one of my epics, I guess. At that time I was doing a group of paintings and I had envisioned a trilogy of mountainscapes.

**works:** It's called *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*...

**CA:** It touches on a lot of things. There's the fascination with Peter Breugel's work, which includes the grandeur of his vision in some of his paintings like *The Tower of Babel* they reproduced in the catalog. I'd resisted painting a Tower of Babel for years. I thought,

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why bother? That says it all. But the composition is something that has always appealed to me.

I think that's another thing that has been sort of tattooed in my consciousness. The massive centrality of an object as a compositional element has always fascinated me. How can you make that work? In design classes they say you can't do that. The composition has to lead the eye on this circuitous route from the upper left to lower right. I always thought, that's crap. But some of my favorite paintings seem to do that.

And there's the fall of Icarus, a tried and true piece of mythology. The idea of taking something from mythology and setting it into a new context in which the story could still be portrayed was really captivating to me. Yet I always want a painting to fascinate viewers whether they know the references or not. So those are a couple of things that had to do with it.

**works:** When you finished this painting and stood before it, what was the feeling you had about it?

**CA:** Well with some of the paintings I consider my best, and that's probably one of them, you feel a little giddy. There's a feeling of having created this world. That's a painting where I didn't hold back anything. I put in traffic. There's a mountain climber falling down the side and then there's the little Cessna that's going down, which represents Icarus falling.

I was just reading Michael Krasny's book on his



CHESTER ARNOLD IN HIS STUDIO WITH *CUTTINGS*, 2010, OIL ON CANVAS, 74" X 87"

agnosticism. My father and mother were both raised as Mormons. I was even baptized as a child of ten even though my father had never gone to church. I asked, dad, why are you having me get baptized? You don't even go to church. He said, *just in case*. [laughs] That was typical of his ironic sense of humor.

But I'd always wished, as a child, that I could believe in something beyond this life, that I could believe in this so-called God everybody was talking about. And from the very beginning—maybe because I was exposed to Greek mythology as a child—I thought, these sound like the same stories! They just have different names. Why aren't people worshipping Jupiter now?

Art gave me an opportunity to experience something that had a kind of phenomenology to it. There was so much inexplicable feeling surrounding it, that it allowed me to sort of worship at the altar of nature in that Emersonian way. I sense a power. I don't want to give the power a name. I don't need to give it a name. I'm just here to witness it and be a part of it and try to help it sustain itself somehow. That's an agenda, I think, in all of these paintings one way or another.

**works:** Even in reproduction, this painting has an amazing power. It makes me think of the sublime as pertaining to something vast and overwhelming—and

frightening because of that. I get a little feeling of that when I look at this.

**CA:** A lot of my paintings in the last thirty years have touched on the subject of the inconsequentiality of humankind, although humankind has done a lot to damage its own environment or, as my father used to say, has peed in its own chili. We think we're so important, but we're so minute.

I remember this issue of the *National Geographic*. It had a fold-out page showing a photo of just thousands of galaxies in an area of the sky we thought was empty before the Hubble telescope. And what does this mean to me? The idea of perspective has often been mentioned in my work. Sometimes I'm asked where were you when you painted this? Well, I'm always in here when I paint [pointing to his head]. The perspective is coming from an imaginary place. It could be from the perspective of a child, for instance—where the world is enormous. Have you ever had the experience of going back to a childhood place? Everything that seemed so enormous as a child, how could it be so small?

**works:** Yes. I know that experience. It's really a startling impression.

**CA:** This touches on that nature deficit disorder you mentioned. When you become increasingly aware of the detail and structure and complexity of everything around us, it's a feast for all the senses. Although it is overwhelming, it seems like a tragedy not to engage with it, or attempt to, in a meaningful way. It should be an essential part of every human being's education from the very beginning and, if it were, we wouldn't have any of the environmental problems we have.

I often say to my students, if only I'd had George W. Bush as a student in my drawing class.

**works:** [laughs] Now here's *The Bridge at Dover Beach*. You've done more than one version of this one, right?

**CA:** Yes. I've done several incarnations of that.

**works:** This is another powerful and beautiful painting. What is this bridge here? And look at this stark gap between these two white cliffs! See the little figure alone on the beach far below? It's a very dramatic composition. And the rickety bridge that's falling apart. Would I want to try crossing that?

**CA:** Yes. *Cross at your own risk*.

**works:** Exactly. So what is this about? Because you intend your paintings to say something.

**CA:** This one, like a lot of my paintings, represents a conjunction of many different impulses. The primary one maybe was actually experiencing the cliffs of Dover myself years and years ago. There's something phenomenal seeing that much white and the cliffs themselves are so interesting. That lingered in my mind for decades. Then I did a series of smaller studies of just the cliff, imagining it from the water. And I'd done a painting that was an exhibit in 2008 called *Prospector*, which was of a little bridge set in a southwestern landscape. It was also kind of rickety.

Then I found myself drawing the bridge, drawing ladders, not knowing exactly why I was doing them, but trusting—because I've been doing this for so long—trusting that there was something in it impelling me to make the image happen. Then I realized, oh, this has a wonderful possibility for metaphorical interpretation! The bridge is a metaphor for getting from one place to another in whatever way one might interpret it. Or there's also the threat of impossibility of moving from

one place to another. And there's another element, poetry—the poem by Matthew Arnold, “Dover Beach,” which I've always loved.

**works:** It's a very moving poem.

**CA:** Very powerful and it contains the same kind of quasi-religious spirituality, the longing for some absolution in this life, some shaping of life into some meaningful and purposeful form. That really moves me tremendously, some sense of the miraculousness of life. At least, when I feel at my best, I'm trying to experience this for myself—and share it with my children, my peers and whoever looks at it.

**works:** I see both of those things in the painting, the beauty of nature, its vastness emphasized both by the composition and the little figure alone facing the ocean and then in the foreground, the symbol of uncertainty. The journey is fraught with contingency here.

**CA:** Which is life. It could be seen as a construct about the life of the artist or my own life. It could represent the life of any artist attempting to proceed from one point to another following a set of ideas—of formal principles, compositions and colors—onward, not knowing whether the next show is going to be a success or failure, but hoping that you find something along the way that's going to give you meaning irrespective of that.

That's where I have to say that to have lived to be able to have a show like the one at the San Jose Museum or at this one—to have a forum for sharing the dialogue with a bigger audience in a way unrelated to fundraising or sales—I thought, I can die happy now. I could hear conversations, children talking with their teachers and things. This is a dream come true. It's had that effect even though it's on a relatively modest scale. People ask where are you having a show? Reno? But still, it's a venue where things can be shared in a space untenanted by commerce.

**works:** To find spaces like that is important, I agree. It's sorely needed now because nearly everything seems to be compromised by commerce in one way or another.

**CA:** Especially at this time of year [laughs]. ♦

*editor's note. The interview took place near Christmas.*

