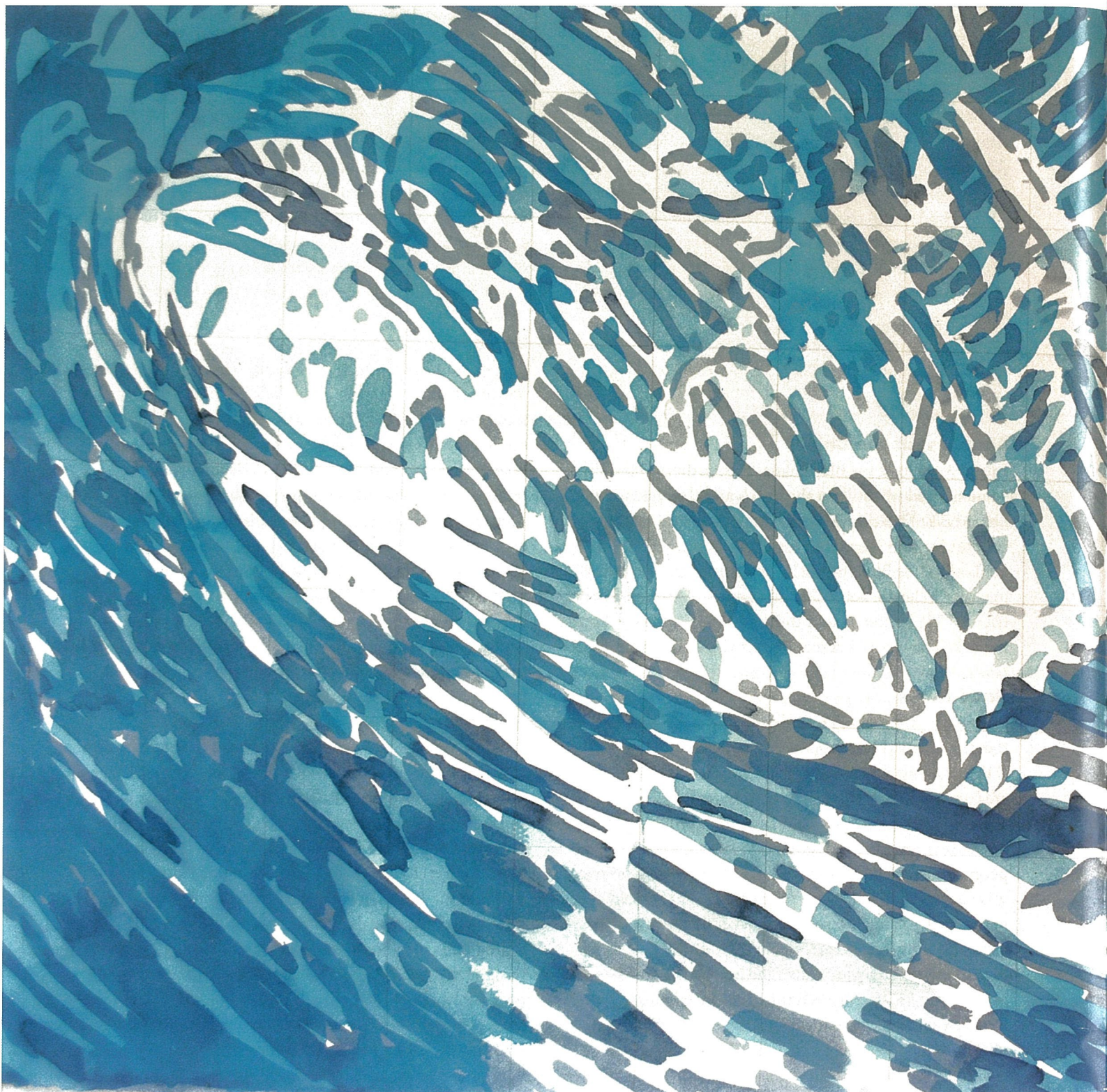


# **FORT GANSEVOORT**

**The Surfer's Journal**

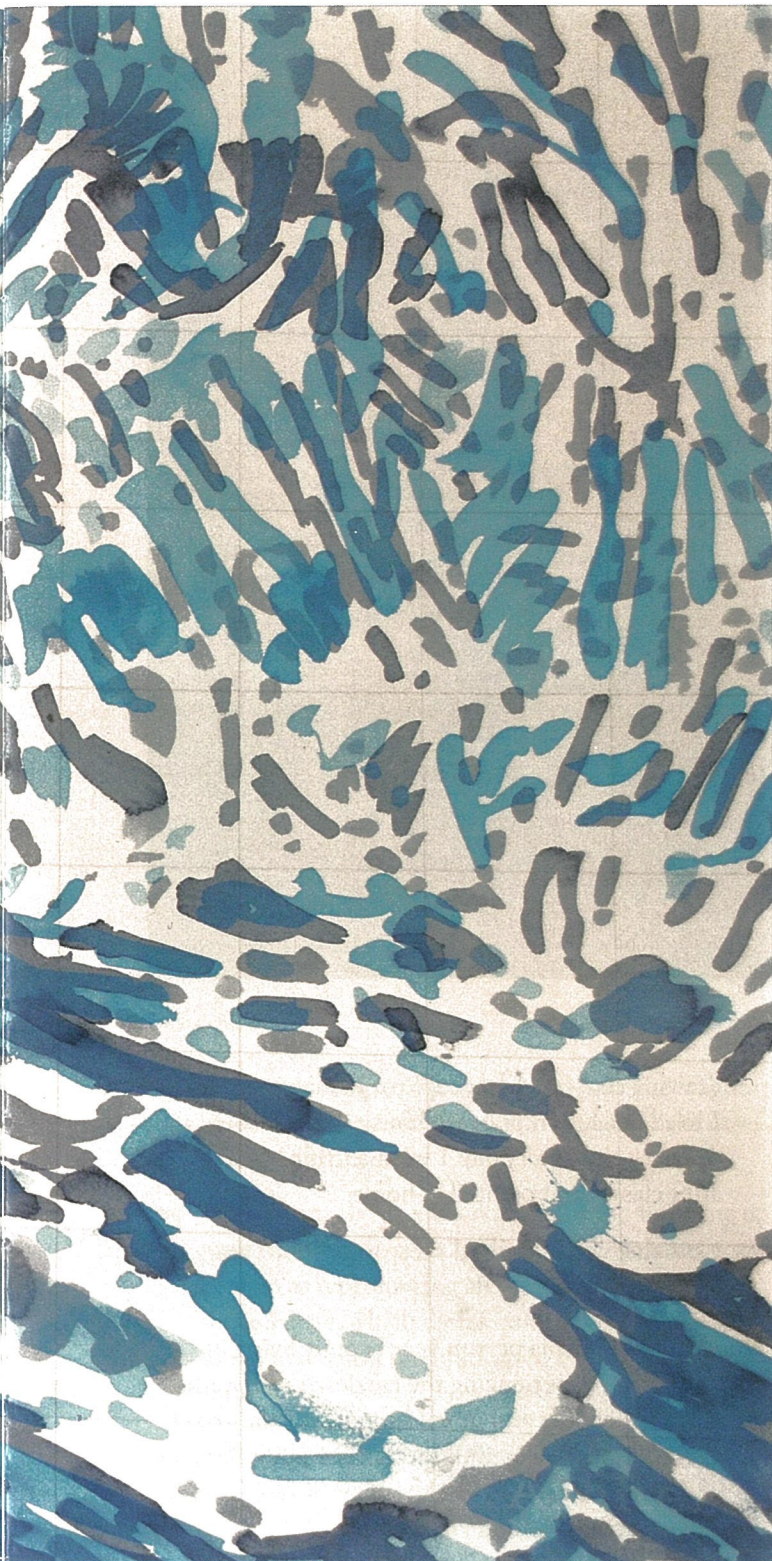
**A Few Minutes with Roy**



**Gallery**

# A Few Minutes with Roy

BY HANK PITCHER



Untitled, 2009, Watercolor, 22" x 30"

STAR BLACK

# Fowler

Surfers surf, painters paint. The best ones usually start young. Back in the early 1960s they called Roy Fowler "Young Roy" because he was the youngest surfer in the lineup. He was lucky enough to grow up with a surf spot in his backyard. His mom could watch him playing in the waves while she was making breakfast in the kitchen. One of his elementary school friends is still jealous because Roy would come to class with wet hair from surfing before school.

One of the differences between painting and surfing is that sooner or later a surfer hits a wall where no amount of experience can compensate for old age. It is a sobering surfing moment when you realize that you just can't do what you used to do. On the other hand, painters do not have that physical limitation, and, in an interesting way, a painter's mature work can be very youthful. Looking at the range of Roy's paintings is like watching someone who can paddle out in anything: massive tubes or little peelers, a busy beachbreak or a lonesome reef: You want to see what he's doing, and it is not just virtuoso technique. Roy says, "Everyone has childhood memories of being at the beach, and I'm interested in the colors and abstraction that trigger the feelings those memories produce." Art dealer Patty Look Lewis exhibits Roy's paintings in her Santa Barbara Gallery. She told me that many of the collectors who buy Roy's paintings say his work reminds them of their youth.

These days, Roy lives in a loft in lower Manhattan near Chinatown. The narrow street in this commercial district is crowded with traffic. The noise and fumes of delivery trucks fill the air, but inside the heavy front door and up several steep flights of old wood stairs is the clean, spare, high-ceiling studio with a bank of windows and enough light-filled wall space to hang four or five truck-sized canvases at a time. Roy often develops his ideas in series, working from watercolor sketches or the small oil paintings he makes whenever he travels. The latest wave paintings are more abstract, especially the black-and-white ones where the image weaves in and out of an all-over grid of horizontal rectangles.

Roy's paintings are like music; the rhythmic patterns in his paintings produce feelings directly. At a recent exhibition of Roy's paintings, I noticed that I felt refreshed standing in the gallery. It was like being near the impact zone when really good waves are breaking.

I first met Roy in 1972 when he applied to be an art major at UCSB's College of Creative Studies, where I had just started teaching. We became and remain good friends.



Walker Street Studio, 2009.

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**HANK** What is surfing like for you now compared to when you were living in Santa Barbara and Hawaii? Do the crowds bother you, or were they just as bad at Rincon when your mom used to drop you off there for the day with a bag lunch?

**ROY** In 1963, a crowded day at Rincon had maybe 75 people in the water; it's always been popular. I've always surfed OK in crowds, but now I'd rather find places in the lineup that are overlooked, where waves from a certain direction appear and are available. It's always great to be in the ocean, although there are spots where I can no longer get a wave.

**HANK** Tell me something about that semester in Hawaii. Who did you study with? How much did surfing and painting overlap?

**ROY** I went to Oahu in the fall, early enough to watch the finals of the '74 Smirnoff at Waimea from the channel and follow Ricky Grigg into the lineup to catch a couple. When the spring semester started, I took Asian Art History, studio painting and

drawing classes, and a couple of humanities courses. I lived in a low-rent beach house at Log Cabins and drove to class every day. I went surfing before or after classes and painted at home.

**HANK** Now that you have lived there for over 30 years, are you a New Yorker?

**ROY** I am a California person very happily living in New York, experiencing the crazies as well as the cultural benefits and moral support for the arts. I visit California a lot and run trails in Santa Barbara with my friends. I go to Hawaii every year or so to make watercolors and go surfing.

**HANK** How many brothers and sisters did you grow up with? Did all of them surf?

**ROY** I have five brothers and two sisters. I started surfing standing on a mat, and on my older brother's hand-me-downs: a Styrofoam board, a homemade balsa, and a custom Yater. All my brothers surfed. Growing up on the beach was a gift. I could wake up



Roy Fowler, NYC, 2009.

at sunrise, jump in the water, and hear the laughter of my grade-school friends surfing across the cove at Miramar Point.

**HANK** What about the grid in your paintings? Breaking up your paintings, especially the waves, into units could be read as representing an underlying structure to the universe, which seems connected in some way to mandalas and meditation. What do you think about that?

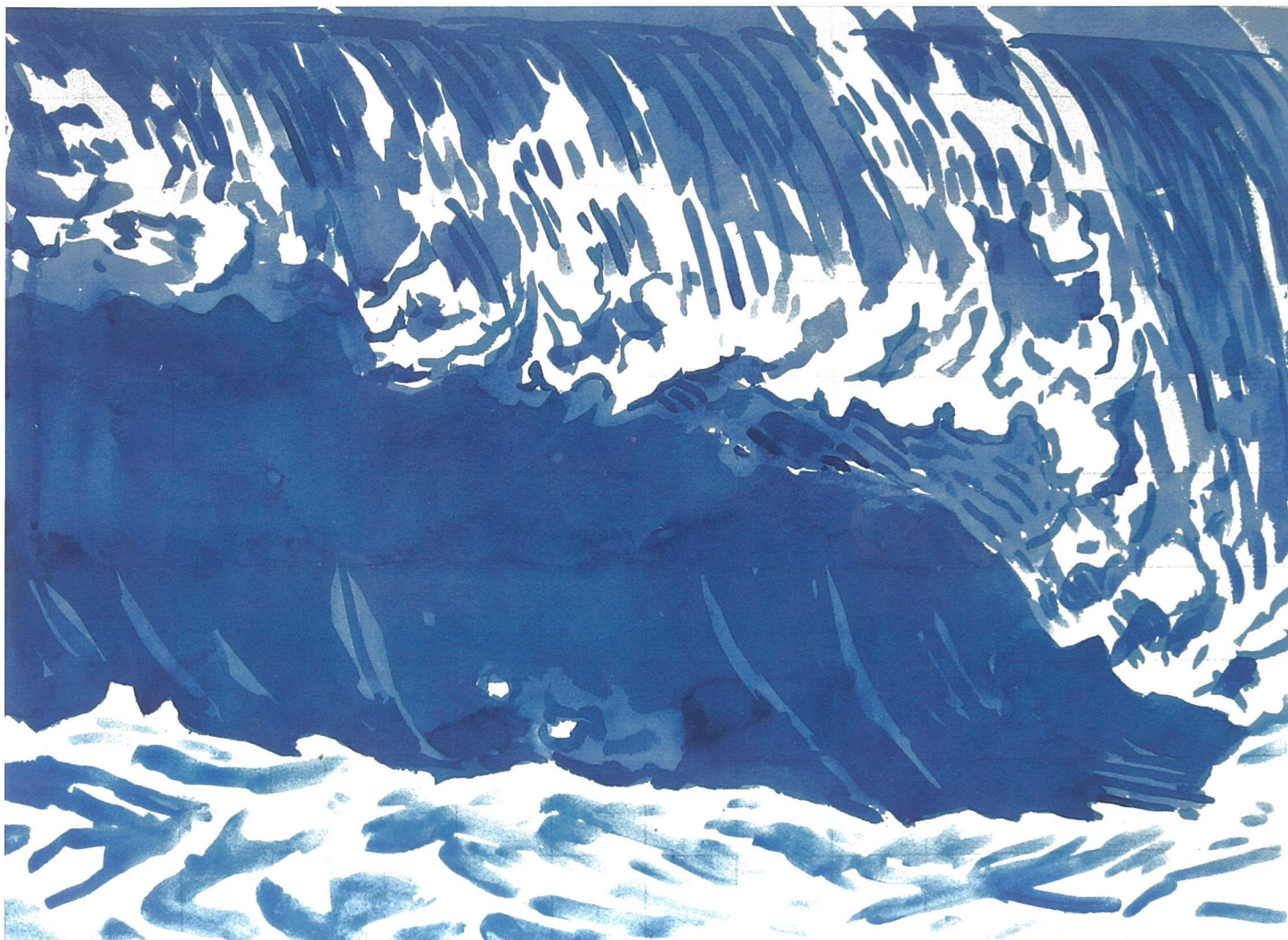
**ROY** The grid in these paintings is a reflection of and response to the character of the city of New York, an urban rhythm rather than a meditation. It meets the gesture or wave. Each element, grid, and gesture exerts equal pressure on the other.

**HANK** Isn't that a meditation in itself? Didn't the grid start out as a way to enlarge the watercolors? The symmetry of a mandala is a reflection/introduction to the order/secrets of the universe, just like the beat of a song or the rhythm of running can be a path to understanding.



COURTESY ROY FOWLER

At home at Nun's in '65.



Untitled, 2009, Watercolor, 22" x 30"

PHOTOS: STAR BLACK



Tide pool, 1999, Oil on Canvas, 78" x 96"

**ROY** You could say it's a meditation, or just looking at painting. The thoughts I get while running are very ordinary. Should I get a drink? Maybe run a little faster?

**HANK** What paintings influenced you when you were young? What about now?

**ROY** When I was a teenager I had a giant poster of Leonardo Da Vinci's drawing "Virgin and Child with St. Ann." And I loved all the concert posters and album covers from Haight-Ashbury. Now, though, I look at Cy Twombly and Robert Ryman, for example, and also Yves Klein, the abstract expressionists, and Agnes Martin; I like the way their paintings are self-evident and how they apply paint. They inspire and, I hope, influence me.

**HANK** Why did you move to New York? Did you think you would still be living there?

**ROY** When I was at UCSB, I saw Robert Frank's movie



Untitled, 2009, Watercolor, 22" x 30"

*Pull My Daisy* with Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, which featured a cockroach dance in a loft kitchen. The idea that New York life takes place in these crazy night spaces was disorienting, but compelling. I was just interested in seeing a bigger community of artists. I didn't know anything about the art world in Los Angeles; I didn't have a plan for the future. It just happened, and is still happening.

**HANK** How often did you take the subway to surf?

**ROY** I didn't take the A train to go surfing at Rockaway until the '90s. I was desperate to be in the ocean after a winter in New York. I realized I could go surfing in the morning for one dollar, and be back in my studio that afternoon. Walking home from the subway with my surfboard I'd hear "Hey, where you going with that boat?"

**HANK** Tell me about the Lightning Bolt of yours that I made a painting of.

**ROY** I had a red 7'6" and a yellow 8' when I was at the University of Honolulu and living on the North Shore in 1973-'74. Gerry Lopez shaped the 7'6" at his house at Pipeline (thank you!); the other was a used Lopez from the shop in Honolulu. They were great boards and had slightly vertical fins, which pivoted sharply out of the bottom turn. I also had a great Sunset board, a swallowtail, shaped by an anonymous backyard shaper. There were lots of talented surfers around who shaped for a living.

**HANK** You said you started running in Japan. Why there?

**ROY** My wife, Molissa Fenley, was in a choreographic residency with the Asian Cultural Council, and I went with her to Tokyo for a month. I had some spare time and was able to get through the difficult initial phase of teaching the legs to run.

**HANK** Want to say anything about the surf band you were in?

**ROY** No, we were terrible. Junior high. ✓