



Eric Whitten lacquers a redwood frame for his oil paintings, which will be on display at the Claudia Chapline Gallery in Stinson Beach. Photo by Jacoba Charles.

## Painter evokes raw, rough West

by Jacoba Charles

The imposing parapet of a treeless, gray-green California hillside fills a large canvas in Eric Whitten's garage. Standing before it is like standing at the foot of such a mountain, complete with the swooping vertigo that our bare-bones coastal range can inspire.

Beside it, a black wall of forest rises behind pale, skeletal trees as sunny ridge tops show in the distance. On another canvas, a rolling landscape of brush and golden grass stretches away to the blue horizon. In a third, the mirrored expanse of Schooner creek meanders through a hummocky marsh, just before it opens into Abbott's Lagoon.

"I'm trying to address the West as how it really is, but also how we look at it through the lens of culture," Whitten said. "Wilderness is powerful in our minds because it resonates with our myths and who we are; the culture is inside the viewer, not in the painting."

Whitten's work will be displayed at the Claudia Chapline Gallery in Stinson

Beach, as one of several art shows to run concurrently with the Geography of Hope: Celebrating Wallace Stegner conference. He seems slightly baffled at his good fortune to be part of an art show that so closely matches the content of his work.

"It is just such an amazing coincidence," he said. "It's not just an art show; it's a scholarly event where all of these ideas that I've spent so much time thinking about are going to be the focus of an entire conference."

He began creating the eight-painting series in 2000, exploring his Californian identity, the ideas of Wallace Stegner and the history of the American West.

Whitten is a sixth-generation Californian. His triple-great grandparents arrived Angels Camp in the 1830s, and his family has lived locally ever since. He had left the West Coast once before he went to college, earning a degree in American studies from Yale.

"I was just homesick all the time," he said. Though he remained on the East Coast for graduate school, he never

settled in. When he picked up Stegner's book of essays, "When the bluebird sings by the lemonade springs", he said a lightbulb went on.

"It really hit home that made a big deal about where he was from," Whitten said. "I realized my problem was that I'm from the West, and I was so homesick because I didn't belong where I was."

As Whitten evolved as an artist, returning to Marin County and earning an MFA from the Academy of Art College in San Francisco, he found himself guided by the ideas of Stegner, Shcama and Leopold as well as his passion for history and his relationship to the West. He said that Stegner's thoughts on scale, color and landscape are directly reflected in his paintings.

"You have to get over the color green," Stegner wrote of the American West in what Whitten cites as one of his favorite passages. "You have to quit associating beauty with gardens and lawns; you have to get used to an inhuman scale."

All the paintings on display at the Claudia Chapline Gallery were painted

on-site, and took between three months and a year to complete. He can point to some canvases and trace the progression from winter to spring; in others, the seasons mingle.

"They are composites of the place within time, not snapshots," Whitten said. "It's sort of a sense of what the place is like to live in."

Whitten's chunky brushstrokes and gaps in color where the canvas shows through emphasize that this is not a replication of reality, but a rawer, rougher version that delivers both detail and emotion.

His message comes through at the gut level. It is a feeling of familiarity. There, in a cluttered Terra Linda garage, I unexpectedly recognized my California on the canvases of a stranger.

*The show runs March 2-30, 2008 with a reception on March 9 from 3-5 p.m. at the Claudia Chapline Gallery in Stinson Beach. Regular hours are from 12-5 p.m. on Saturday and Sunday, and by appointment.*