



The Politics of Paint

A David Molesky Sampler

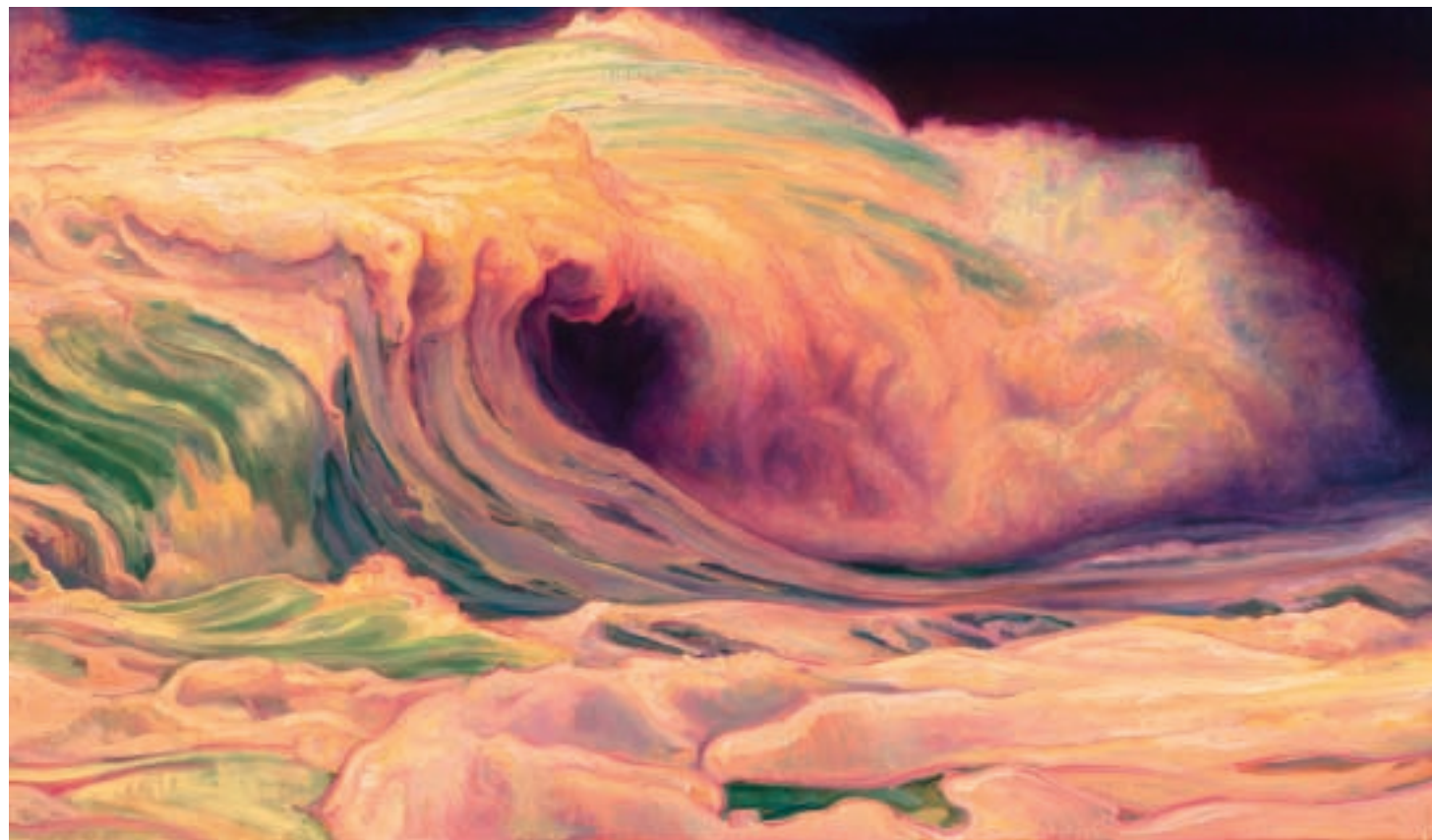
BY NATHAN SPOOR

Whether seeking the right break or chasing an idea onto canvas, we ache for substance—that which will challenge us and transform us while in existence on this dramaspere. Artist and surfer **David Molesky** pairs these activities as being of primal importance, noting his experiences as a surfer giving him the first-hand knowledge of the ways of water, especially its dangerous beauty.

To illustrate the dark pull of the wave from a unique survival story, David tells us of how he and a buddy escaped being held on a pirate vessel while hunting surf in Indonesia. While studying at UC Berkeley in 1997, David and a friend took the Education Abroad Program, heading to Indonesia to study Contemporary Anthropology at Universitas Gadjah Madas on the island of Java with about a dozen other UC students. David had read about the Nias people in a guidebook and became fascinated with their culture. The first major assignment of the class was a week's travel and writing project, providing David and his friend John the unique opportunity to visit the culture firsthand—as well as seek out the famous right on the island of Nias in Sibolga.

From the start, the two found that the trip was going to be more challenging than expected. Major forest fires had ravaged Sumatra in 1997 (which became quickly known as the Southeast Asian haze—a massive air quality and health disaster in Indonesia), and thus most airports there had been closed. This meant taking the ferry, which had become the major means of travel between cities that their guidebook highly recommended avoiding after dark. They caught a quick night's sleep and jumped on the main transport for the island, a school bus helmed by a maniac driver that proceeded to plow over any livestock and canine that dared cross its path. With passengers vomiting in the aisles, David thought it couldn't get any worse—until they hit a local schoolgirl. The local children forced the bus to stop and everyone on board was committed to ride with her to the

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hospital, where the driver was forced to settle up with the girl's parents. During this brief pause in the trip, David managed to buy a bundle of hairy red fruit, rambutans, from a guy emerging from a field just behind the family of four on a bicycle that had caught his eye. This would prove to be his only meal for the day.

On arrival in the port where they would catch the ferry, David and John realized why they shouldn't be there at night. Immediately on arrival, they had to chase down their luggage as grabbing hands attempted to cart their few bags and boards into escaping bike taxis. Being that it was then night-time proper, David decided that it was a good time to check in to a hotel for a bit of shut eye, but John had already met a local and made other arrangements with a boat mate and captain. David overheard the captain and the local talking and understood part of the conversation, in which the captain said he would gladly "take care of them."

With a good inclination as to what that meant, he tried to explain to John that this was certainly not the right way to get to the surf spot, but their fates were sealed. The two adventurers were quickly escorted onto the rusty ship by a scruffy bunch of Indonesians that were offered words from the captain about the hospitality which the tourists would be shown, which included brandishing their knives and walking an actual plank. David, trying to keep his cool and doing a valiant job, kept calm as they were shown into a closet-sized room with a small bunk bed. The air was dank; the sort of humidity that comes from mixing odorous years together within the steamy metal hull's layers of resident charm and cramped armpit moisture. As they attempted to settle in, David hoped they might be forgotten from the crew but a knock on the door dispersed those thoughts with a ringing hollow tone. John being closest to the door, answered without pause. There David's wide-eyed gaze fastened upon a young crewman asking if they wanted some pot—a death penalty offense being as close to Singapore as they were. Saying no quickly and authoritatively, David reached quickly for the portal and shut the door and not a minute later the captain arrived and wanted to speak to John. Alone.

David insisted that John wasn't feeling well and that he could pass along any message, and the captain began to push his way into the tiny room. At this, John got up and went with the captain leaving David to sit for what seemed eternal moments with the now looming silence of the once noisy vessel—his heart pounding loudly at his ears. Just as he thought his chest would explode, John burst into the room. He didn't say a word, but hastily rushed to find a Ziploc bag and put the entirety of his emergency supplies, passport, and some money in and duct taped it to his thigh. "What the fuck is going on?" David exclaimed, as John silently but hastily made sure his board fit through the portal window. Shaking, John explained that he had to give the 40,000 rupiah or they would be chopped up and thrown overboard.

There it was. This was their greatest fear realized and how they were being held for ransom on a pirate ship—and no one knew that the boys were even there. David counted out their money and they had enough to buy their freedom. There was a booming knock and the door was pushed open. David handed them the money and the captain slammed the door with an air of annoyance. Turning to John, David said, "What happened out there?" But John swore he would never tell him. Even with the money in the pirate's possession, John was convinced that they would be killed in their sleep. With that in mind, they took turns leaning against the door while the other napped restlessly.



As the boat arrived in Nias' port, our travelers waited with muscles tensed to spring to action as the ropes were thrown ashore and the ship was close enough to land. Then they bolted from their tiny prison and sprinted directly for shore, making no eye contact and barely touching the floor as they ran. It took nearly a day to regain their composure, but with the surf so close and the famous right in sight, the fellows rehydrated and made it out for the breaks that the locals knew well. John recommended a longboard, and David paddled out to a spot where it walled up steeply and caught a couple unchallenged waves that seemed endless, perfect. It was worth it, he thought, and pirates or no, Nias was truly one of the most amazing spots on earth.

David Molesky the adventurer had been tested and come through with flying colors, a testament to the person he would become as an artist as well. This was a coming-of-age moment in the artist's life, much akin to the ceremony that young boys go through to become a man on the island. When a boy reaches the age of 14, he is brought before the village men and has to run and jump over a stone taller than his head. David reflected on this story and thought about how much strength it must take—and how much of that power the young Nias surfers used to tear up the waves on boards that the Westerners left behind. From these moments, David would embark on

a new body of work: A series of wave paintings that would eventually lead him on his next great adventure, again out of the country and into unknown territory, though not quite as sinister as before.

As the son of a financier with a secret proclivity for making youthful comic-style drawings (the finding of which would change David forever from a young age), David had always had an affinity for being visually innovative. He had friends who shared his love for painting in high school, often taking off-campus trips to paint in nature as well as offering homeless persons a sandwich and a couple bucks to sit for a portrait session.



Caption

At the age of 17, David had become immersed in a love for painting and had his first solo exhibition. The show did well, so well, in fact, that most of the work sold and the aspiring painter used his earnings to visit Europe for a museum tour. This would transition David into the halls of higher learning, and being accustomed to having a full-time studio he quickly set one up in his room. He enjoyed the expansion that university courses offered but always wanted for more. And on graduating with a BA in Art Practice from Berkeley, he moved from Seattle to Carmel and eventually Los Angeles, where he was presented with just such an opportunity for further evolution.

David was in need of an inspirational change of scenery to jumpstart his growing artistic appetite. While furthering the study of his wave paintings as well as some anthropomorphic narratives in which he portrayed himself as Pan in *Big Sur*, a friend came to him for advice on how to get back into painting. David thought that the famous modern painter and champion of contemporary Kitsch, Odd Nerdrum, would be an appropriate master for him to study with and suggested asking Forum gallery to forward his letter. It's appropriate to note that Nerdrum is a fairly reclusive and prolific artist, accepting very few students and fewer curious visitors to his Norway studio. But these fellows were not going to let that dissuade them in their pursuit for knowledge and above all, art.

David's friend was readily accepted into Nerdrum's inner circle and made the trek to begin his studies; soon strongly recommending that David seek Odd out as well. David mailed the Kitsch master some photos of some of the waves he was painting and a few figurative works. An invitation came back quickly, and within a month he wiggled out of his lease, relieved himself of car and cell phone, and off he went to Norway.

On reaching the south of Oslo, he did not find any surf, though there were some brave souls that would venture into the frigid reality in search of a wave now and then. Instead, he busied himself learning techniques to apply to the wave paintings that had captured his fascinations. He wanted to get the luster and volumes that Odd had managed to wrestle onto canvas and pursued both wave and figurative elements under Nerdrum's gifted tutelage.

He was introduced to Odd's love of classical music through his extensive collection of records. In this environment of intimately appealing sounds and inspirations, David felt a new kinship pouring into him: "To me, it's like musical coffee or the energy of the universe streaming in." Odd was also nurturing in David a new appreciation for masterworks by Titian (Tiziano Vecellio—an Italian painter of the 15th century renowned for his use of brushwork that resulted in a special luminosity of subtle polychromatic strokes) and the famed Rembrandt (Rembrandt van Rijn—a prolific Dutch painter and etcher from the 17th century known far and wide for portrait work).

David's original plan to stay in Norway for a month turned into an extended education, and as he and then-girlfriend discussed having their freedom Odd said that he should stay on and live in his house in Iceland. With nothing to hold him back, he took the great man's offer and found that Odd's house was filled with all kinds of treasures; like Baroque furniture and Rodin sculptures. They flew out and Odd and his wife showed David around the house and town. On one of the last nights at dinner before they left, Odd's wife said, "David, I have to tell you something; there are ghosts in the house." At this point David stopped chewing and Odd slammed his fist down on the table and said, "It's an old house, it creaks!"

David explains, "It was definitely a very spooky house, and people in Reykjavik thought it was built on a cemetery. In the foyer, Odd had on display the death mask of Edvard Munch and an etching by Käthe Kollwitz that were really spooky. There was one time where I passed out in the living room, and I had a half-awake dream that there were all these ghosts from his paintings in the room. It was pretty common to hear furniture moving in the upstairs or basement. When I was doing study abroad in Indonesia, I remembered that the natives told me that my didgeridoo playing soothed the ghosts. So I explained aloud to the ghosts of the house that I had to be there for a short time and played the didgeridoo once in a while and didn't hear from them any more."



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David can cheerfully recount many life-affirming events from his life, including several encounters with animals willingly approaching him without hesitation or fear. Through the years he has learned to channel these moments into his creative process; his approach to life as it were.

David's first encounter with the life changing forces of nature rising from the ocean occurred at age seven while living in Florida—the year of Hurricane Gloria. His family was told by firefighters to evacuate, and the family packed belongings into trash bags and slept in a gym auditorium as the storm raged against the structures' outer walls. Later, just weeks from his first year of high school, David was living in North Carolina and the surf had gone all but completely flat. He and his buddies wondered what kind of storm or event it would take to summon the waves they needed, and the answer soon arrived in the form of Hurricane Bob.

When David and his friends paddled out, he soon realized that he was outmatched by the torrents of walls crashing fiercely down on him. "I was getting badly caught in the washing machine cycle," he recalls. "As soon as I came up for air, I'd have a second or two to gasp and under I went again." As he popped up and found himself clearing the top of a particularly large wave, David found himself being flung backward in the air. He was slammed hard into the churning forces below and gave in and found himself gasping for air and realizing that it was time to get his ass out of there.

On the way back to shore, he had the feeling that something was looming up and blocking his light. Sure enough the height and speed of the approaching wall gave him one option: "You either ride this or it kills you." As his feet hit the beach, he rolled off his board and lay in the sand gasping in celebratory breaths. Nature had granted the boys' wishes and all made it to shore with their own version of the amazing waves, the pinball machine journey of surviving vortexes and making the realization of what it takes to jump from the five-footers of adolescence into the 20-foot realities of do-or-die manhood.

In the years to come, David would translate many of his experiences and emotions into his love of painting wave pieces. Molesky's wave paintings celebrate not only the seductive muse that is so relentlessly sought, but also nature as an anthropomorphized entity—a concept that suggests that man's personal tragedy is overshadowed by the strength of nature. Over time, humans have created what the artist refers to as "climate chaos." With this in mind, David's main intention is to use the language of painting beautiful imager of frothy aerated water as an emblem to draw the viewer's attention to meditate on overlooked issues. We might call this avenue of discussion "romantic," and, indeed, David considers himself a Romantic painter. "In some regards my decisions to be a Romantic painter is a return to a repressed genre. Since JMW Turner's time, landscape painting has been regarded as irresponsible and insensitive to contemporary life." In his own way, Molesky is using his work as a political act to use beauty as a vehicle to encourage those around into a state of environmental awareness.