

## FRANK GALUSZKA

*Hyacinth (29 Palms), 2004*  
Oil on canvas, 8 x 10 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## CHRISTINA WATERS

# Desert Queen

### My Mojave Desert

**S**omewhere buried in our personal mythology lies a half-joking, half-serious anecdote about where we'd like to spend our sunset years. Mine was always a one-liner about someday retiring to the Mojave, where I'd live in a silver Airstream trailer, tending my cactus garden and writing my memoirs. Of course the fantasy also included winning the Pulitzer Prize and attracting flocks of graduate student acolytes who would archive my collected works for posterity. But that's a different story.

Over recent years, that joke about the Mojave has become more than virtual reality as I've spent more time in the desert. The Mojave Desert. Vast as an ocean—the desert is really just an ocean that's matured beyond the liquid state—exotic as a Cairo bazaar, and so complex that it would take a lifetime to explore, the Mojave has done a number on my soul. Scanning its elegant ochre horizons, I thoroughly expect to find John the Baptist foraging among the snakeweed and cholla, preparing the way for his messiah.

Next to its stark majesty, forests and fields seem overwrought, a little silly. The desert needs no adornment to dazzle. Wearing a sky lavish with stars and carpeted by those craftiest of botanicals—the sages and the cacti—the desert defies us to find comfort within its mineral heart. That's a challenge I'll take I decided after that first trip one June, when the morning temperatures shot past the 90-degree mark and proceeded to burn 115-degree holes in my brain. Such intensity. Such heart-stopping beauty.

#### Dry Heat

Be patient and the intricate details will emerge, details often lost in more temperate, water-rich regions. Shadows contract and expand—the rabbits and lizards are of no particular color, yet always the exact color of the shifting sand. A tinder-dry thatch of Apache plume forms a shady retreat for a chipmunk. Coyotes lounge in the sanctuary of tamarisk trees, soothing gray green against the sizzling rocks.

Mirages mambo crazily in the distance across mountain ranges whose subtle colors acquire increasing density and hue as your eyes grow accustomed to a world without leaves. Sagebrush and mesquite—stately, evenly spaced groves of mesquite—echo the locations of broad root