

TABITHA SOREN

Panic Beach (1576-21), 2010
Archival Print, 30 x 30 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

FRANCES LEFKOWITZ

Double Overhead

Learning to
Listen to Fear

The surfing you see in magazines is not the kind of surfing I do. I have neither the skills nor the guts nor even the desire to paddle into double-overhead waves, no matter how perfect their shape, and swish back and forth on them like a skier getting air on a slalom course. I learned how to surf at the age of thirty-six, and I ride a longboard built for meandering down waves with the mild inclines of bunny slopes—knee-high, thigh-high, waist-high. What I do is go for a ride, wherever the wave wants to take me. It can be a slow ride, but it makes my body so satisfied to work hard to catch a wave, then get rewarded with that glide when the wave takes over and starts doing the work for me. Riding this liquid curl is the best thing I know how to do, one of the few things that makes me feel—sometimes only for seconds at a time—like I am right inside the swirling center of the beginning of everything.

Once upon a time, I did have the desire, the guts, and perhaps even the skills, to try for waves twice my size, waves that could beat you up and hold you under. Back then, I could not tell the difference between the after-the-fact rush of doing something that scares you and the feeling of pure pleasure in the moment of doing something that delights you.

Eleanor Roosevelt and the stern-smiled motivationalists who quote her tell us to *Do one thing every day that scares you*. The implication is that you have to climb Everest—or tackle Everestesque waves—in order to fully occupy your life. In surf culture there is a belief that the adrenaline triggered by fear is simply an internal obstacle we must shoulder past if we want to live up to our potential bliss. But adrenaline is also a warning, and it just might save your life if you listen to it. Most animals do not seek out opportunities to frighten themselves; they respect their fear, as it is generally alerting them to danger. So when we human animals follow our fear, why do we have to justify, even apologize for it?

* * *

Not that I was reckless. At a new beach, I'd stand on shore and watch the wave for a long while looking for rocks hiding below the surface, and the best place to enter the water, and the impact zone, where the waves were crashing down. But with challenging waves, I was never going to feel fully