

## PEP VENTOSA

*Santa Cruz Sea Swings, from the series  
In The Round—Carousels, 2009*  
Archival Print, 30 x 40 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## JOHN CHANDLER

# The Santa Cruz Experience

Milton had been even more remote since his return from the latest sales conference. Was he about to say something terrible? Did he want them to be over? Against that fear Vera had been trying to invoke her mother's three angels, Faith, Hope, and Charity, to lift up into the space between herself and despair. And here it came. He called her from the kitchen, told her to sit down. She sat. And squeezed her hands together as the words came, words so different from the dark words she'd feared. She concentrated on his mouth, lifted into a smile, the tone of his voice, gentle, melodic. "I think we deserve a vacation, don't you?" he said, and she couldn't trust her voice, could only nod and push back tears of joy: Yes, yes, oh thank you. "It's been a little tough, hasn't it?" he asked. "Time for a change of pace." He reached across and settled his palm gently on her shoulder, and she nodded and pushed away a suspicion that he had rehearsed these words, this gesture. Accept the angels. She straightened and looked into his eyes and gave him a more emphatic nod. "Where?"

"How about," he said, "California?"

She blinked in surprise. California was a constant source for him of jokes—Why wasn't Jesus born in California? Because they couldn't find three wise men or a virgin. What do Californians and bottles of beer have in common? They're both empty from the neck up. You know you're in California if the guy next to you has eight body piercings and none are visible. Each year when the San Jose conference approached, he'd shaken his head and said something about another visit to the land of earthquakes, of fruits and nuts. But even as she blinked, as her mouth gaped, Milton reached into his breast pocket and produced two airline tickets, and when she asked where to, he chuckled and said, "San Jose and bring some good walking shoes," and winked and added, when she said, "But I thought you said . . .", "From here on no questions answered, the mystery will unfold."

And now they were here. Not in San Jose. San Jose had been only where he had picked up the rental car; they had immediately gotten on a packed six-lane highway that narrowed to four as it wound over a mountain's tight, narrow curves, cars inches from them, back, side, and front, faces not three feet away but funneled into their private worlds, eyes forward, mouths moving, nobody in the seat beside,