

ANDREW HEM

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Gouache, Oil, and Acrylic on Canvas, 45 x 55 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

TOM BENTLEY

Tripping with Twain and Thompson

Taking Writers
Mark Twain and
Hunter S. Thompson
to Heart

For much of Mark Twain's life, the horizon was what he aimed for. If he hankered to go West today, he'd ditch the wobbly wagon for Hunter Thompson's Great Red Shark, a fire-engine red '71 Chevy convertible. At the end of his Adventures, Huck Finn had to "light out for the Territory"—but he would have deep-sixed the raft and dug the Shark. Twain and Thompson's visions were the same: fuck it, and keep moving, in style, at speed, and with the top down.

Americans have a good-natured restlessness: we come, we look around, we keep going to look some more. That kind of crazylegs imperative runs through our history. For a wide swath of the populace, seeing what is over the next hill—and the next after that—is the thing. Reading the journals of Lewis and Clark, you can hear the yips of discovery and delight behind every dry catalogue of fauna or tilt of topography. They were on a road trip, pure and simple. The siren song of adventure, the new, the unseen pushed them, government commission be damned.

Before I had enough money for a Shark of my own, I used my thumb to make tracks down the road. Ahead of turning twenty, I hitchhiked multiple times between Los Angeles and Seattle and across Canada from Vancouver to Ontario. Sure, I'd been influenced by *On the Road*: Kerouac had the same mad thirst to fill his lungs with highway air and his eyes with the syncopated jazz of road-way improvisation, which is at the heart of travel. He *had* to hit the highway.

Kerouac partnered with Neal Cassady, the legendary jive-talking, womanizing, behind-the-wheel sermonizing magician for many legs of his continental cruises, and despite all the trouble and heartbreak the two caused in their various romantic, financial, and wine-drenched entanglements, they shared another slant that's so very Thompsonian Americana: a kind of deep optimism curled within the cynicism, a feeling that, if curdled, it's still all gonna turn out okay, and what the hell, let's drive as close to that cliff as we can—it's the only way to take in the view. What a terrible twosome Hunter and Neal would have made—a blizzard of mad declarations, a hurricane of motion and tumult, an earthquake of crazed desires and crazier fulfillment.

Of course Neal would've had to drive, but that would've given Hunter a chance to light the pipe.