

DANAE MATTES

Under Blue, 2009

Clay, Paper, and Pigment on Canvas, 64.5 x 90 in



COURTESY DOLBY CHADWICK GALLERY

BARBARA TANNENBAUM

Listening to Whales

Sightings inspired
by *The Log from
the Sea of Cortez*

As a reporter, I've written about whales for several publications without ever seeing one at sea. Years ago, for an article about gray whales' changing migratory patterns near the Bay Area, I found myself at Richmond's Point San Pablo, walking around the abandoned, deteriorating buildings of the Del Monte Fishing Company. This was the last commercial whaling plant in the U.S., shuttered in 1971 by the consequences of overfishing coupled with 1972's passage of the federal Marine Mammal Protection Act. Looking across the bay to the distant outline of Marin County, I couldn't spy anything swimming or at play in the surf—not whales, not even sea lions. Somehow, the absence felt right. Good, I remember thinking. Best that you stay away from us.

Despite my travels to far-flung Pacific islands in the intervening years, I always believed that the closest I'd ever get to seeing a giant cetacean was at the California Academy of Sciences. There, suspended from the ceiling of the East Pavilion, between the Earthquake Exhibit and the cafe, are the stark white bones of an eighty-seven-foot-long blue whale. Its skeleton has been arranged with the skull pointing downwards, as if the specimen were in mid-plunge towards the ocean's depths.

Last year, I often found myself standing beneath this creature's remains. I was a contractor assigned to write profiles and web-based content about Academy researchers and their findings. With my laptop and note-covered yellow legal pad tucked under one arm, I would head to the cafe between meetings, contemplating the giant specimen as I waited in line for coffee.

It hung there, static. Though contained within the building and backlit by floor-to-ceiling walls of clear glass, it invited the imaginative visitor to remember just how large the Earth's single largest animal really was. A creature so large that mythologies across cultures have spun numerous tales of a fish that could swallow a man whole—be it Jonah, Sinbad, Pinocchio, or his father Geppetto—with innards large enough to let a man wander around its innards for anywhere from three days to two years with nary a burp.

In truth, the specimen didn't move me despite my eagerness to feel it. Technology, not experience, brought me closest to an emotional appreciation of nature's charismatic giants. Sure, I've gasped and clung tightly to my

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dog's leash when we were a stone's throw from a bobcat in a distant meadow beyond the hiking trail. Or felt that special catch of adrenaline that comes when we spot a coyote's early morning saunter through the grass of a tawny hillside. But really, it was Ustream's live feed of squawking baby owlets that inspired me to find where a similar nest of barn owls was located in my neighborhood. Museum webcams enabled me to look eye-to-eye with blacktip reef sharks and sea turtles. Digital files by oceanographers allowed me to eavesdrop on an orca's clicks and echolocations. Websites helped me compare the differences between the tail flukes of gray whales, minke, and humpbacks. Most hauntingly, iPhone pictures let me observe a team of scientists conduct a methodical necropsy of a stranded juvenile orca along a hard-to-reach section of Stinson Beach.

Growing up in Los Angeles, I never lacked the opportunity to explore the ocean. As a kid, I remember outings to Will Rogers State Beach and splashing in the rolling lines of crashing waves. There was a big yellow school bus that lumbered down our street that took us for the day to Santa Monica.

I remember those foggy mornings, bracing myself against the dining room table and holding my breath as my mother rubbed cold suntan oil on my back and shoulders. It made my bathing suit, which already cut into my chest, sticky beneath my white T-shirt with its blue emblazoned logo. Maybe that discomfort was the reason that, as a teenager, I'd shrug at seeing my neighbors in their beach

towels and flip-flops board the bus on Ventura Boulevard. They were absorbed in gossip and the pop songs on their transistor radio, and I didn't try to chat with them. The bus drove over the Sepulveda Pass, the majority of its passengers staying in their seats until it reached the Pacific, the end of the line. But I always ducked out at Wilshire Boulevard, happy for the short hike to the bookstores and used-record shops in Westwood Village.

Now I was encountering scientists who were creating bridges between realms that I thought were resolutely separate—wilderness and versus technology, human population and biological diversity. Within the Academy's walls, it was commonly understood that we are living in the Anthropocene era, a period of geologic time characterized by mankind's impact on the planet's environment. So, on the one hand, researchers focus on the broad view, continuing the traditional work of organizing the richness of living forms into evolutionary histories and relationships. But they also care about sustaining this biological diversity. And so the question arises of how to accomplish this: Should people keep their distance? Or should we draw close and, if need be, intervene?

People working in the basement labs or addressing visitors on the public floor had different answers. There was the Whale Entanglement Team (W.E.T.), a West Coast group of thirty volunteers regulated by NOAA Fisheries' (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Fisheries) Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Program. Kathi Koontz, whose day job is as a program manager at the Academy's Morrison Planetarium, explains that her team needs the public to report sightings of distressed whales to a 24/7 hotline (1-877-SOS-WHALE) or to the U.S. Coast Guard on VHF Channel 16. Then the team springs into action, sailing out to assess the entanglements of life-threatening fishing lines, crab pots, and other debris.

"Often, we only get one chance to make one cut," Koontz says. The team places a telemetry device on the whale and tracks its movements. Sometimes they must follow the creature for days until weather and location enable them to move the whale into position for a single, freeing cut. "We even take videos underwater to look at the entanglement," she adds. "We model the potential cut using string we carry in the boat."

Unfortunately, for every whale they do find, Koontz

explains, there are another ten assumed to be entangled and traveling in the vastness of the ocean, away from human eyes. This statistic was enough to make me wish, short of a technical revolution in the fishing industry, that we could use drones to patrol the seas and perhaps fix our mistakes.

Or take Michael Carver, NOAA's Deputy Superintendent of Cordell Bank National Marine Sanctuary, who works out of Point Reyes. He and Jaime Jahncke, group director of Point Blue (formerly the Point Reyes Bird Observatory, or PRBO), developed an iPhone app called "Whale Spotter" that enables boat captains, ferry operators, maritime industry officials, even folks on sailboats and whale watching tours to report to NOAA when they sight pods of migrating whales in the Pacific.

NOAA, trying to reduce the incidents of whale mortality from ship strikes, has already reduced the dimensions of three shipping lanes leading to the ports of Oakland and San Francisco. In some places, these routes overlap with biologically rich, federally protected National Marine Sanctuaries. The islands and underwater seamounts in the Gulf of the Farallones, Cordell Bank, and Monterey Bay are so rich in krill and other food sources that they attract several whale species.

Beefing up their monitoring with crowd-sourced data will soon enable NOAA and the Coast Guard's Vessel Traffic Service to redirect ship traffic and, perhaps in some cases, slow it down. This technique is already working on the East Coast, where NOAA installed sonic buoys near the Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary as part of its "Listening for Whales" program. The soundings trigger vessels to reduce their speed when approaching prime whale feeding areas.

So much information. Yet, in the midst of these interviews, a personal question kept nagging: When would I ever get myself in the water and go exploring? That was another gap difficult to bridge. With so much reporting to do, it would be better to head back to my desk. There were e-mails and phone calls to make, documents to read.

Then, while I was standing underneath the Academy's blue whale specimen, a new thought arose. A colleague and I were talking about literature and John Steinbeck, California's only Nobel Prize laureate.

"You know," my friend said, "there are labels in

the Academy's ichthyology collection written by John Steinbeck."

I must have given him a blank look. "His book, *Sea of Cortez: A Leisurely Journal of Travel and Research*," he continued. "About the specimens he collected in 1940 with his friend, Ed Ricketts?" he added helpfully.

Ricketts, he explained, worked at the Hopkins Marine Station in Monterey under the auspices of Stanford University. In the mid-1960s, when the lab changed its focus from collections to molecular biology, the Academy acquired the specimens collected by Steinbeck and Ricketts on the journey made famous in their 1941 book.

It was enough of an inspiration that I booked the plane tickets. I brought along Steinbeck's *The Log from the Sea of Cortez* (an excerpt from the original, published in 1951 after Ricketts's death), hoping to see how the novelist made literature out of the scientific expedition. I didn't see how the two could be reconciled. As the poet and editor John Crowe Ransom wrote in *The World's Body*, "Science gratifies a rational or practical impulse and exhibits the minimum of perception. Art gratifies a perceptual impulse and exhibits the minimum of reason."

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Before long I found myself on a catamaran with thirty other tourists. We were rounding the southernmost tip of Baja California after a desultory snorkeling expedition at Cabo Pulmo's coral reefs. It was late December and the sky was clouded over. Underwater, the view was dark. Columns of sand had been stirred up by the other snorkelers. Heading back to Cabo San Lucas, the sound system of the catamaran pounded with seventies-era rock music. Sure-footed, the tour operators danced and shimmied over the hull and netting as they passed out bottles of Corona and Tecate to their thirsty clients.

There is an awful lot of human culture amid this natural wonderland, which Jacques Cousteau long ago described as "the world's aquarium." Hotels and restaurants now cover the southern tip, and a thicket of yachts, fishing boats, and pangas crowd the bay. The downtown streets and Médano beachfront marina are filled with hawkers. Standing on corners or manning booths, they'd shout, "Lady! Lady! Lady!" when my wife, Leah, and I walked through the marina. Those shouts were a constant,

unwelcome refrain, an unpleasant side effect of poverty and tourism's hard-edged mix. It took all our patience to decline their constant offers of free or discounted voyages—free or discounted, of course, only if we'd first listen to a half-day presentation on investing in time shares.

But once we are at sea, the colorful surf at the tip of Baja California still inspires awe. Deep ultramarine blues bleed into sparkling turquoise, and long lines of sugar-white foam caps roll toward the arid shore.

Reading about Steinbeck's journey on the *Western Flyer*, I found that the novelist, for the most part, avoided the language of emotion or poetry in favor of an objective, dispassionate tone, as if he were humbled by the rigors of species identification and placement within Linnaean taxonomy. Even so, something about that surf-blasted, rocky archipelago made even Steinbeck turn to fairy tales and myth to help himself imagine how humankind, or perhaps his alter ego, might occupy such a wild and vivid spot.

Seeing the cape's dramatic arches and wind-carved caves, Steinbeck described the site as "a small boy's dream of pirates," complete with "gold bars and jewels and beautiful ladies."

And it's still remarkable to behold, despite the cruise ships towering over the horizon and the water taxis buzzing near the shore. We'd be back there soon enough. Maybe the day could be saved with a little beach swimming. That's when we saw them: three black humps on the horizon, each one spouting a plume of water.

"Whales!" the passengers cried.

"*Las ballenas!*" roared our captain.

The boat turned and gave chase. A school of dolphins appeared starboard, their dorsal fins and glinting, curved backs slicing through the water like paddle wheels. The whales seemed to tease us, letting us gain on them briefly before gliding away to a midpoint on the horizon.

"Maybe if you turned off the music," I lamely suggested, "they'd let us get closer."

Leah was looking in the opposite direction. Suddenly she gasped. A cetacean that seemed close but was probably many boat-lengths away was breaching the water. We saw its enormous gray barnacle-encrusted back as it rose up and fell, slapping its side hard against the dark surface of the surging water. Its tail fluke waved and slapped again.

And then it was gone. God, it was huge. And fast, too. A long moment passed as I tried to grasp what I'd seen. Long enough to see it spout another watery plume of farewell on the distant horizon.

It was only a moment, but I was grateful for the sighting. With it came a potent reminder of shared space and connection between that whale and myself. The largest citizen from the natural world reached out to a boat filled with loud, drunken tourists, and momentarily transported us beyond the limits of both habit and imagination.

We turned back to the cape and the boat picked up speed. We glided over the water, imperfect and unavoidable. The darkening sky made the sea look impenetrable. It was an illusion, I knew: a sensation not merely to be analyzed and understood, but also to be felt as deeply as the catch in my throat. It was more than enough to redeem the day; in fact, it was a worthy encounter that would bridge the gap that had split so many other days.

Barbara Tannenbaum is a journalist and author based in San Rafael. Her work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Salon.com*, and *San Francisco* magazine. She recently finished a novel set in Los Angeles about daughters and mothers transforming their lives during the culturally turbulent 1970s.

MICHAEL MOTE

Vintage Year, 2013
Oil on Canvas, 20 x 30 in



COURTESY SPINDRIFT GALLERY