



TODAY'S  
MASTERS

BY JAMES LANCEL MCELHINNEY

# GOING TO EXTREMES

## EXPEDITIONARY ARTIST TONY FOSTER

Thinking he had misplaced his gloves, the British watercolorist Tony Foster (b. 1946) rummaged through his kit but did not find a pair large enough to fit. Painting high in the Himalayas for several weeks, he was unaware that his hands had become swollen, a condition compounded by the growing confusion that heralds the onset of cerebral edema. After being diagnosed with altitude sickness by a doctor on the scene, Foster was ordered off the mountain.

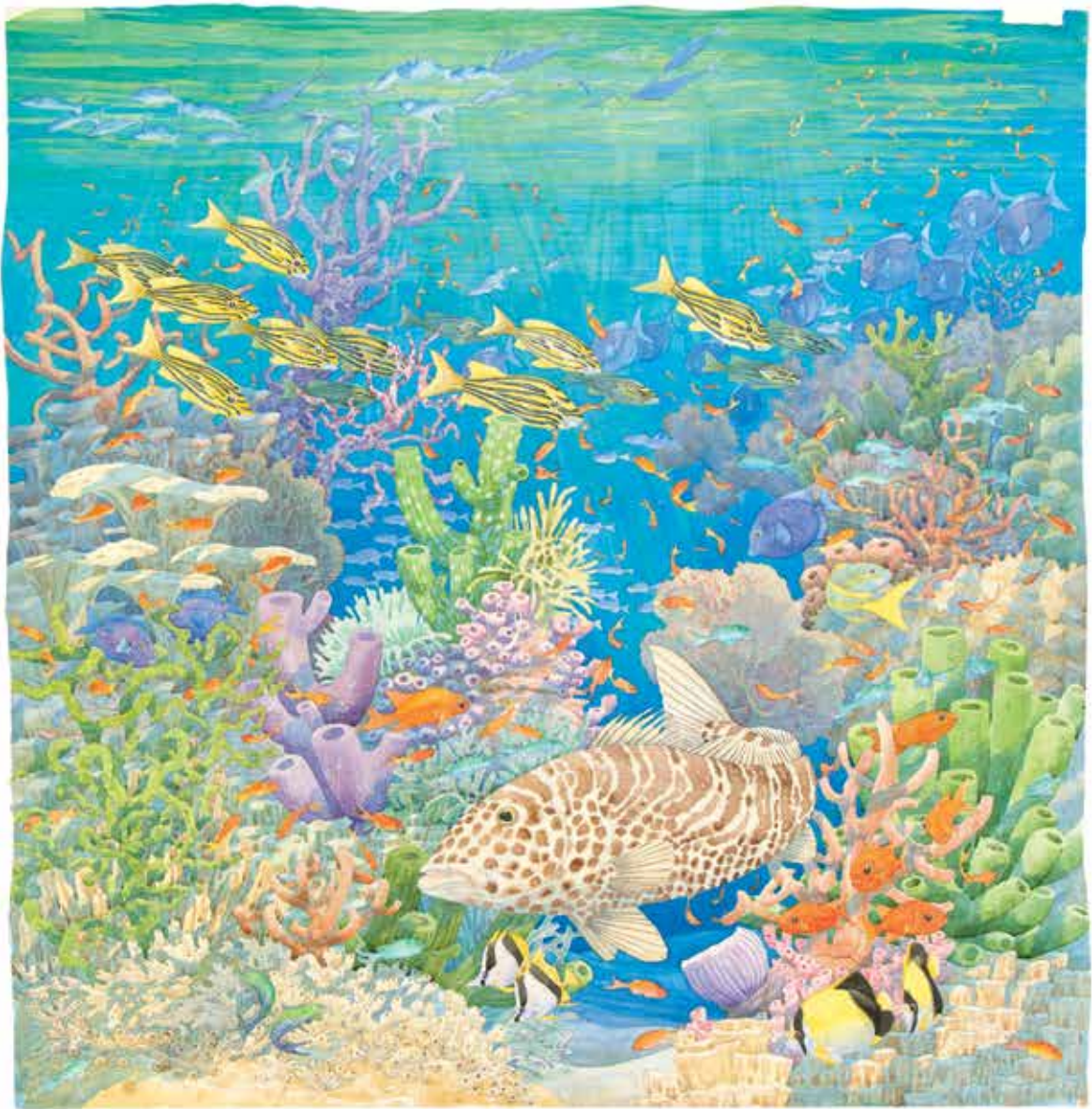
This was not his only brush with death. Apart from being charged by cattle in England's Dartmoor National Park and dodging rattlesnakes and black widow spiders across the American West, Foster has been attacked in the Costa Rican rainforest by a pack of peccaries (skunk pigs). Charging right back at them with his drawing board, he managed to drive them off. Painting one day near the Cabezon Peak in northeastern New Mexico, bullets whizzed past Foster's head, kicking up the earth around him. Fearing to present the shooter with a bigger target, the artist hunkered down and stayed put. "Had he really wanted to kill me," Foster muses, "he could easily have done so." Eventually, the marksman grew bored and moved on.

Serious landscape painters are no strangers to the perils and inconveniences of working outdoors. Most of us have been drenched by cloudbursts, pummeled by hailstorms, vexed by insects, or pestered by gawkers. During one of his visits to the Andes, American painter Frederic Edwin Church lost a cache of sketches and notebooks when the burro carrying his luggage



*An Unnamed Rockface Looking West from My Tent above the Kama Valley, 2007, watercolor on paper, 23 x 25 in.*





---

*Dive 132 Little Cayman, 2013,*  
watercolor on paper, 64 x 46 in.

---





From Kangaruma to Kaieteur Falls — 41.7 Miles by Boat and on Foot — Looking SW from Boy Scout Point, 2002, watercolor on paper, 27 1/2 x 40 1/2 in., private collection ■  
 (RIGHT) From near Paku Falls Looking South — 5 Days, 2015, watercolor on paper, 48 1/2 x 47 1/2 in.

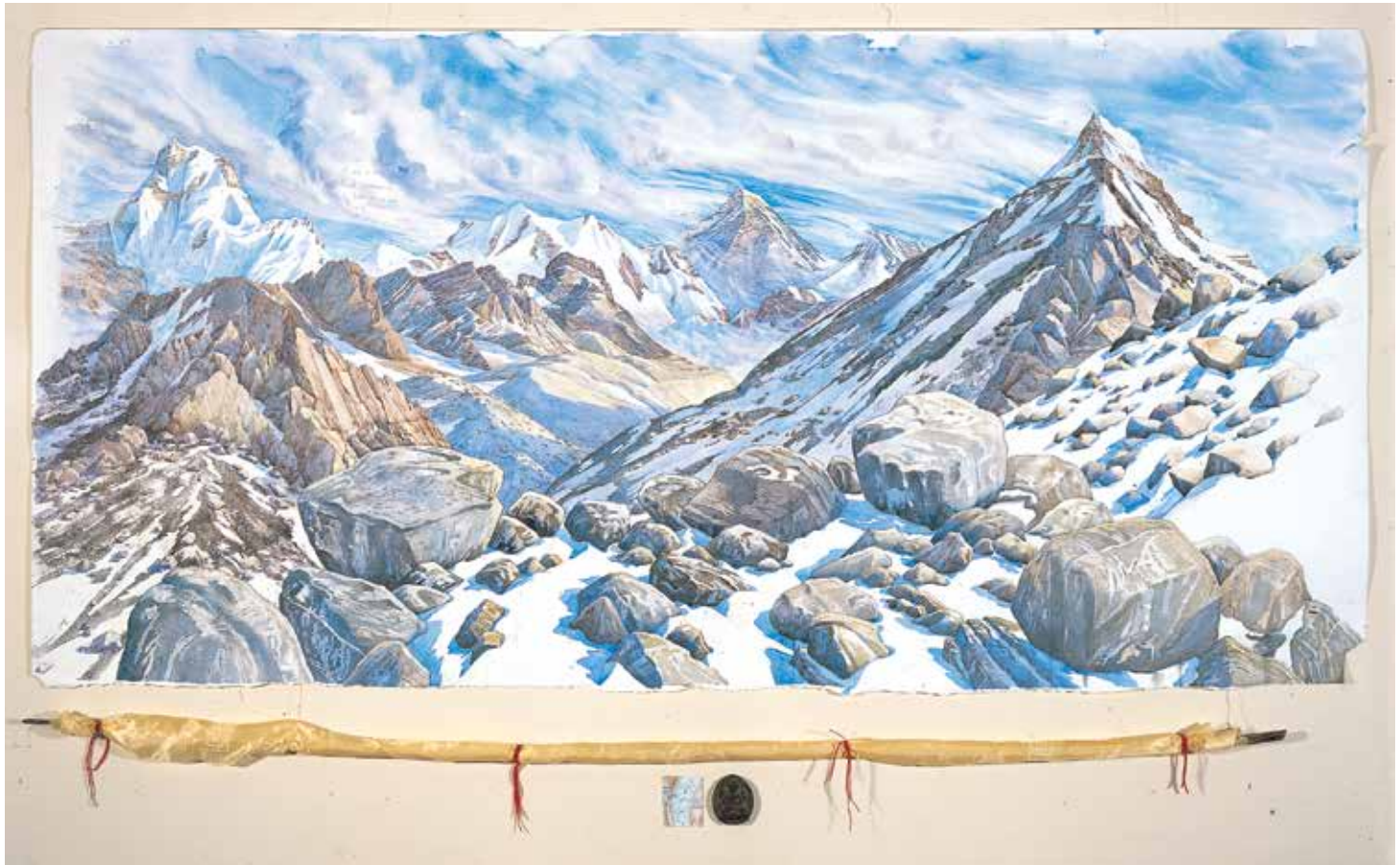


stumbled and plunged off a precipice. Foster belongs to that rare breed of expeditionary artists — from Jacques le Moyne and John White to William Hodges, Marianne North, and Adrian Wilson, who perished with R.F. Scott in the Antarctic, leaving a notebook filled with exquisite watercolors. Like a modern Ulysses, J.M.W. Turner had himself lashed to the mast of a storm-tossed ship to experience the Sublime firsthand.

North American subjects comprise a large share of Foster's oeuvre, from paddling the Merrimack River in the wake of Thoreau to hiking the length of the John Muir Trail and following the route of Lewis & Clark from the Mississippi to the Pacific. I asked him how it all began.

"I like to be outdoors," he replied. "I like to go hiking and traveling ... adventure, being in wild places. I thought, perhaps I can do paintings about that. So, I started off by just doing quite modest journeys across Dartmoor for a few days ... usually with a couple of friends ... got caught in a bog ... rain came pouring down. Somehow, I realized that people were actually more interested in the stories than they were in the paintings. I thought perhaps I should incorporate those stories into the work. So I began to include maps and found objects and notes about other things, as well as the landscape. This gradually developed until it became my absolute way of working."

In this way, Foster embraced the role of visual storyteller. Familiar with the itineraries of the explorers and naturalists who came before him, he devised his own themes and routes into the wild.



*Looking East through Changri La to Everest from Above Ngozumpa — Four Days at 17600' / 5370m, 2005, watercolor on paper, 36 x 72 in., private collection*

In 1984, having decided to produce an exhibition about Thoreau's 1839 excursion down the Concord River and the Middlesex Canal into the Merrimack River, Foster packed his bags, went to Concord, and retraced the journey. He then headed to Maine to canoe the Penobscot and the Allagash, with its circuit of lakes and portages that lead to Mount Katahdin.

"It was at that point I realized that wilderness existed. Up until then, I didn't. You know ... wilderness isn't really a European concept ... all of Europe has been trampled over, and fought over, and owned by people for thousands of years really. In a sense, I know that America has, too. Nonetheless, it seemed to me that these vast areas ... appeared to be almost completely untouched. I know that some of it was second growth, but to European eyes, it had that appearance of being wild country. I sort of fell in love with the idea ... these wild places that appeared untouched, and so that became my guiding principle ... working in these extraordinary places which had the appearance of nature being completely predominant." Foster's journeys are thus like pilgrimages to pay homage to unsullied nature.

Foster says his painting gear consists mostly of a Winsor & Newton pocket-sized bijou box, a Tupperware-lid palette, sheets of paper carried in a waterproof aluminum tube, a large drawing board, and a collapsible camp stool. He spends considerable time planning the route, calculating the quantity of supplies required to traverse any given distance, and setting resupply points along the way.

When he is not away on a journey, Foster lives with his wife in the village of Tywardreath on the southern coast of Cornwall. Pinned to the back wall of his studio are row upon row of small plastic bags containing "souvenirs": specimens of leaves and rocks that appear like altarpieces' *predelle* in the margins of his

watercolors. The genesis of this concept was reinforced by an incident in Tibet.

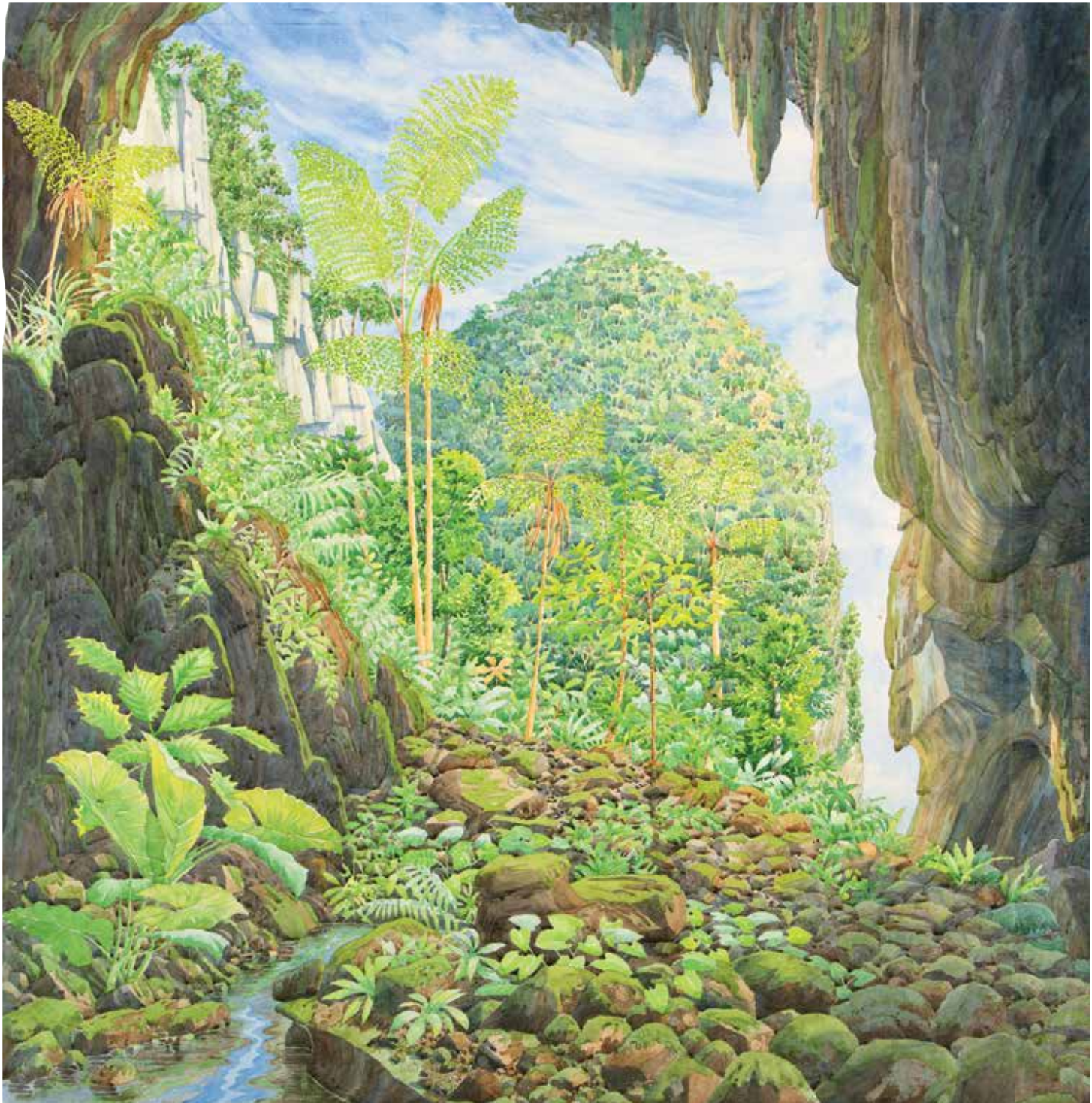
"I was painting the North Face of Everest, just above Rongbuk Monastery, a couple of hundred feet below the base camp. The monks could see me sitting there day after day ... I obviously wasn't a climber. So, what the heck was I doing there ... sheltering behind a boulder, making this four-foot-square painting? So, they sent somebody to invite me for tea.... I went two or three times during the process of making this painting.... On the third visit, a monk opened his hand. In it was a tiny ammonite fossil.... He pointed at Everest and said that it came from high up on the mountain, and I thought, 'Wow! How the hell long did it take to get from the ocean floor up to 26,000 feet? I looked into it and the answer was almost 50 million years. I took this fossil home, and I did a little painting of the North Face.... I put this fossil underneath it as the souvenir symbolic object and called it *From the Ocean Floor to the Roof of the World in 48 Million Years*. On a tiny painting like this, that's just an extraordinary idea."

Map sketches and field notes might also grace Foster's margins, penned in his elegant hand. He describes these inscriptions as extracts, or *précis*, of nightly diary entries, written in his tent. This Foster does faithfully, regardless of weather conditions. Like the paintings themselves, these writings help to convey a sense of being outdoors.

#### KINDRED SPIRITS

Foster's adventures are seldom solitary endeavors. Apart from his interactions with wary Greenlanders or trigger-happy Southwesterners, he travels with his own entourage. One imagines the party scaling mountains or snaking across plains, in spaces vast and wild. The reality is a bit more practical.

Foster explains: "I accumulated a bunch of fellow adventurers who would come with me just for the fun of it ... because they liked creative adventures, and so they would come and help carry the stuff, sometimes cook the dinner, and cheer me up when I got depressed.... They accepted that the purpose of the journey was to make art. They weren't



artists themselves. They might go fishing at the local lake, or ... there were birdwatchers, geologists ... they had their own interests.... The idea of joining in on a creative adventure was very attractive to some of my friends ... some of them took a huge responsibility for it.”

In fact, some of those traveling companions were his financial backers, like Jane Woodward, who recalls that Foster has benefited from “a series of fortunate events” such as having the billionaire philanthropist Paul Mellon buy some of his paintings, a connection that helped to underwrite some of his journeys. Foster had also become acquainted with William F. Brace, former chair of MIT’s Department of Earth, Atmospheric & Planetary Sciences. Having seen Foster’s Thoreau project about paddling the Merrimack River, Brace encouraged him to embark on a trek along the John Muir Trail, which is 211 miles long and rises to

---

*Looking Out from Deer Cave, Mulu — Six Days, 2015, watercolor on paper, 49 1/2 x 47 in.*

---

elevations of 13,000 feet. According to Woodward, Brace later brought a reluctant Foster to the Grand Canyon, where he has now trekked and painted for 40 years. These journeys established a pattern in Foster’s field practice that combines self-actualization with the influence of friends who accompany him.

Raised near San Francisco, Jane Woodward was drawn to geology because it is interdisciplinary and offered her a way to combine chemistry, mathematics, and biology with working outdoors. (She went on to found MAP, a natural gas and renewable energy investment firm.)



Every other year, she and her brother would spend a week in Manhattan with their grandmother, whose Park Avenue apartment was decorated with works of art, including prints by Hokusai and Hiroshige.

"I want to live at the Metropolitan Museum of Art," Woodward declared once — like the fictitious siblings in E.L. Konigsburg's 1967 novel *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*. Art and science were fully in her blood by 1989, when Woodward first encountered Foster's artworks: 33 large watercolors of the John Muir Trail, hanging on loan to the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History.

"I was completely ambushed," Woodward recalls. "They knocked me flat. I wasn't expecting it ... I just sat there with those paintings." Unable to glean much about Foster from the museum, she called her "only friend in the art world," a woman who worked at Montgomery Gallery in San Francisco, amazed to learn that the gallery happened to represent Foster. Woodward describes her own "series of fortunate events" as a trail of "karmic breadcrumbs." She had fallen in love with Foster's work, "drawn to the roughness of the edges [of the page]." She loved the watercolors, and the notes, maps, souvenirs, and marginalia were wildly relatable to the practice of a field geologist. She and the artist met two months later.

By 2011 Woodward had amassed the world's largest collection of Foster's art. She also became his thought partner in brainstorming projects such as *Sacred Places: Watercolour Diaries from the American Southwest*. Foster first envisioned this as global in scope but was persuaded to zero in on the Four Corners region where Utah, Colorado, Arizona, and New Mexico meet. Woodward offered to fund a 10-day trip down the San Juan River, provided she could bring along eight of her friends. The women would hike while Tony painted.

One day, Woodward decided to remain in camp. Watching from afar, she observed Foster at work, sitting on a rock midstream. The business model Foster had developed was to attract funding by offering first dibs to

*Twenty-Three Days Painting the Canyon — From West of Navajo Point, 2013, watercolor on paper, 66 x 92 1/2 in.*

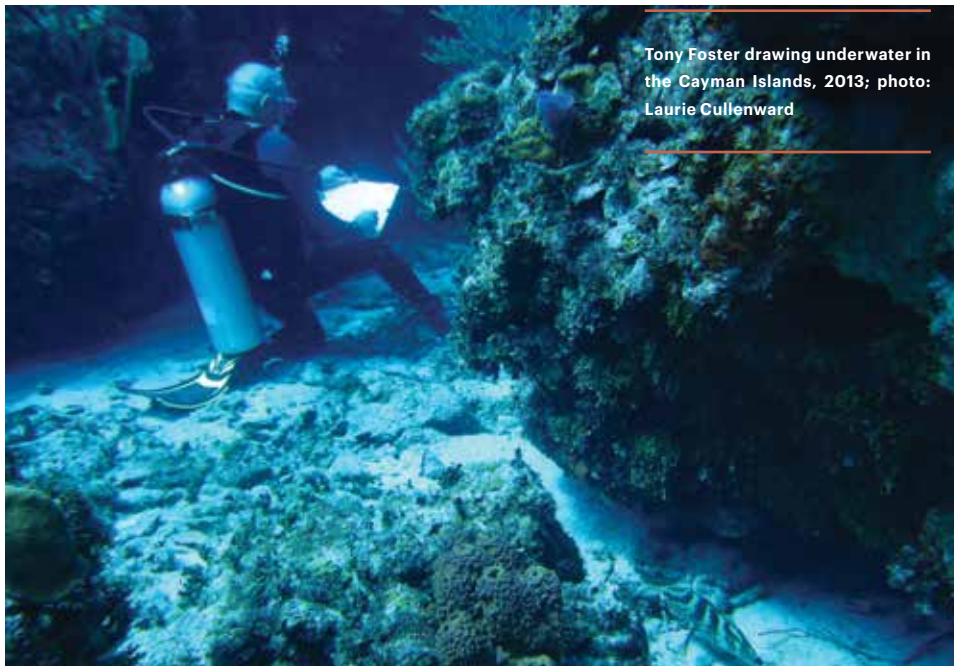
investors on works created during a particular journey. Having a single backer for the San Juan expedition was a new twist. Knowing that the San Juan River paintings were only a portion of the larger *Sacred Places* journey, Woodward pondered what to do about "the piñata model" of art marketing, in which a single body of work is broken up and dispersed among multiple buyers. What a pity, she thought: "It's a crime to break it up," likening that prospect to publishing chapters instead of the whole book.

At that moment, Woodward decided to purchase everything Foster would produce for his *Sacred Places* journey. "Everybody thought I was crazy, including Tony," she recalls. Yet the idea was not without precedent. Several artists such as John James Audubon and Pierre-Joseph Redouté had produced serial bodies of work, preserving them in fine press compendia, while Charles Willson Peale and Marianne North built their own museums. "I wanted people to feel the whole power of the intact journey," Woodward explains, "to feel that sense of being ambushed, which you can only feel in the presence of all the work together."

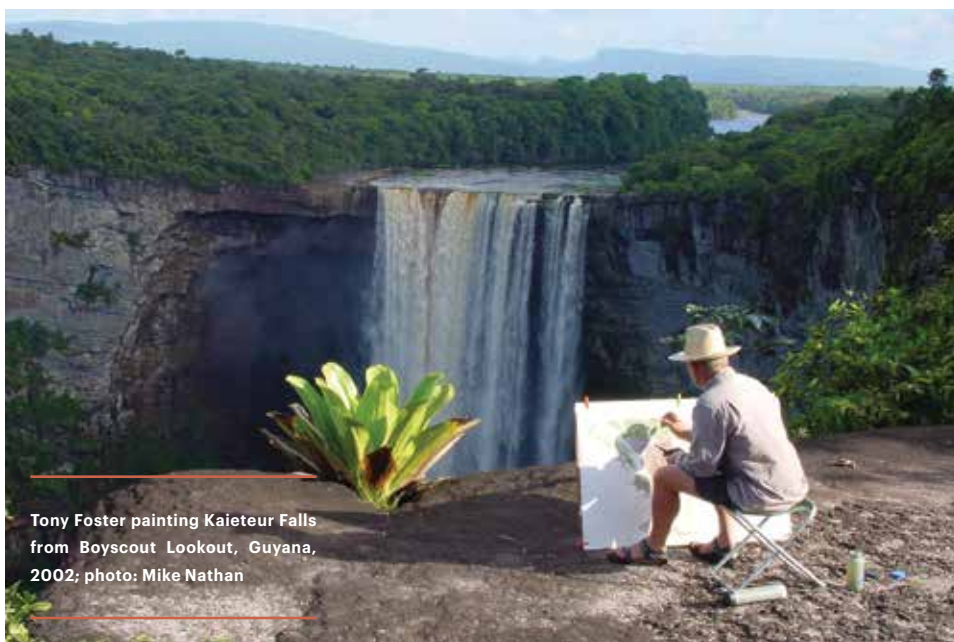
Woodward offered to donate the *Sacred Places* watercolors to a number of Southwestern museums on two conditions. First, the venue had to take everything. Second, it had to be exhibited in its entirety. Every institution demurred, citing lack of space, personnel, and resources to embark on such a mission. Unfazed, Woodward decided to establish her own museum, near her home in Palo Alto.

#### DO IT YOURSELF

In 2013, Woodward created the nonprofit Foster Art and Wilderness Foundation ("The Foster Museum"). Enlisting family members, friends,



Tony Foster drawing underwater in the Cayman Islands, 2013; photo: Laurie Cullenward



Tony Foster painting Kaieteur Falls from Boy Scout Lookout, Guyana, 2002; photo: Mike Nathan

and associates, she started looking for a space to make her collection available to the public. Bay Area art dealer Anne Baxter and longtime friend Eileen Howard were named co-directors of the museum. Woodward traveled to see Denver's Clyfford Still Museum and the Rothko Chapel at Houston's de Menil Foundation to see how they had successfully achieved their missions.

Today, Kristin Poole wears two hats, as CEO of Idaho's Sun Valley Museum of Art and artistic director of The Foster Museum. She describes the latter's "big vision [as] supporting the exhibition of Tony's work, without promoting it aggressively.... We want visitors to discover it for themselves ... a place to find calm in a stressed world, and, as Jane would say, to 'feel ambushed,' to experience the love and power of art on a rainy day, in a building with a roof. We're using Tony's art to engage people to think about themselves and about nature ... to activate beautiful memories."

As Eileen Howard recalls, it took a big leap of faith for Foster himself to agree to all of this. Despite his dauntless love of nature and total commitment to art, he may have been wary of venturing into a wilderness of business entities, lawyers, and accountants. Woodward

and her team looked at 40 locations before initially renting a space that ultimately failed to meet their needs. Yet another "series of fortunate events" led them to a 14,000-square-foot former ambulance garage, which they rented for 10 years, with an option to buy. The "karmic breadcrumbs" had led them to landlords whose children attended the same elementary school as Woodward's daughters. This impressive space has been open to the public (via free advance reservations made online) since 2016.

Poole, who has organized exhibitions and catalogues for Foster's *After Lewis & Clark: Explorer Artists and the American West* (2000) and *The Whole Salmon* project (2003), describes him as "a skilled traditional artist working in a conceptual way ... looking at landscape and place in a very cartographic way."

While much contemporary landscape painting prioritizes style and form, Foster's art is propelled by the back stories that are rooted in travel, close observation, and hardships contending with the elements. Parallels might be drawn between the journeys of Foster and those of the British land artist Richard Long (b. 1945). Foster's practice of inserting renderings of specimens — plants, rocks, or fossils collected along the way — into the margins resonates with the naturalist *schatzkammern* of Mark Dion (b. 1961). His piercing gaze calls to mind the work of Don Stinson (b. 1956) — closely observed panoramas of car-culture ruins that litter the American West. According to Poole, Tony Foster the artist also functions as a philosopher, storyteller, and scientist: "Ultimately, if his work can serve the purpose of having people look more deeply and just be present, that's a huge, huge piece. Every painting he makes calls you to do that."

Exhibited in 2021 at both the Royal Cornwall Museum and the Robert Cripps Gallery of Magdalene College (Cambridge University), Foster's most recent exhibition, *Fragile Planet: Watercolour Journeys into Wild Places*, is more overtly aligned with environmentalism. He notes, "The whole reason why the environmental movement is getting so strident is because all these places really are under threat. I'm immensely privileged to have spent my life

working and living in these extraordinary places ... but no one can ignore the fact that they are under threat."

In the words of The Foster Museum's co-director Anne Baxter, "Tony not only captures the appearance of a place, but what it was like to be there at that time." ●

**Information:** Go to [thefoster.org](http://thefoster.org) to pre-book your free visit. Unless noted otherwise, all artworks illustrated here are owned by The Foster Museum.

**JAMES LANCEL MCELHINNEY** is a maker, blogger, and author of *Sketchbook Traveler*, a series of books exploring terrain, history, and the environment through drawing and writing. A Yale alumnus, he is a recipient of grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and Pollock-Krasner Foundation. McElhinney divides his time between the Champlain Valley and Manhattan. All quotations here are drawn from the interviews he conducted between January and April 2022.