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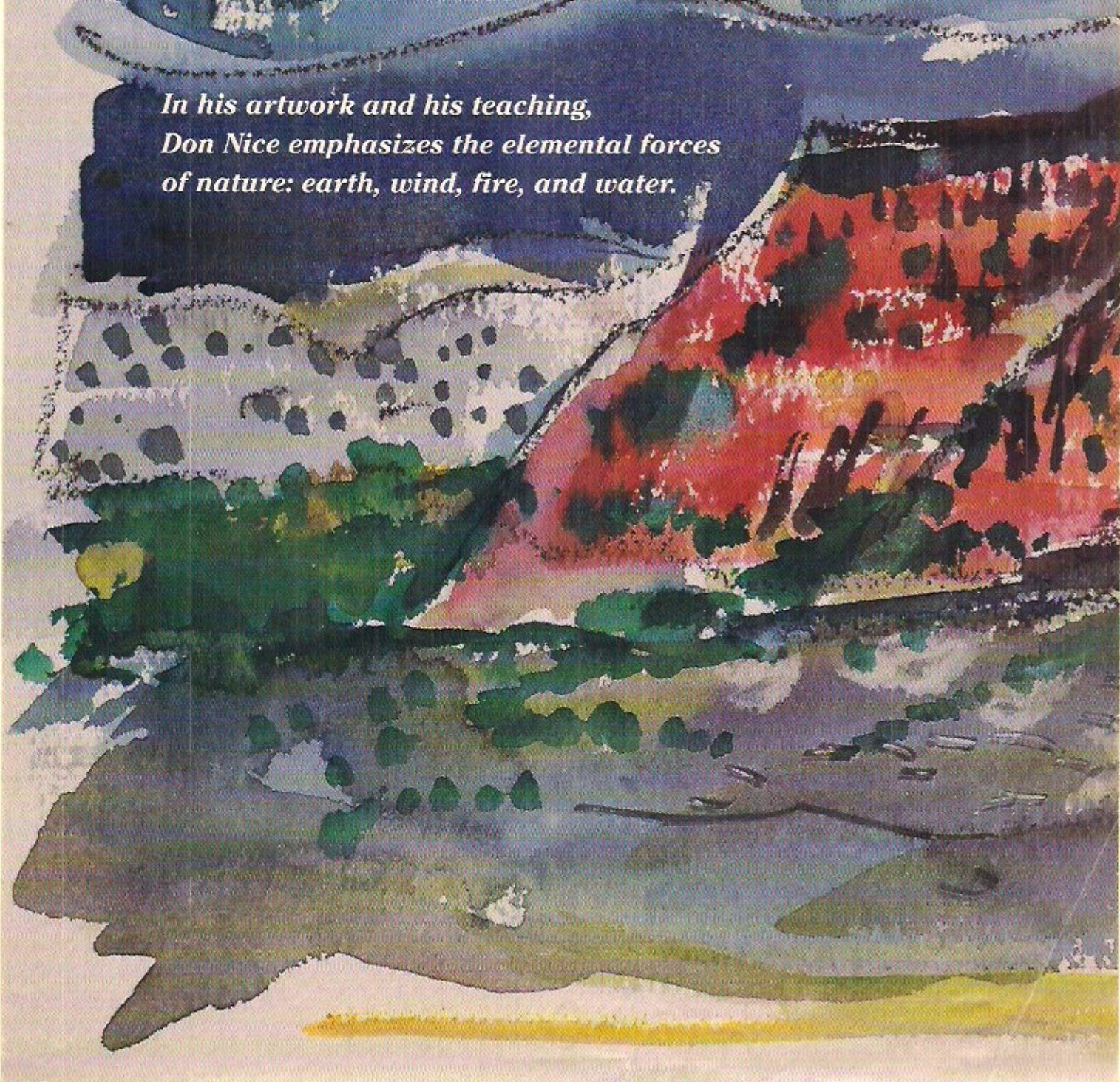
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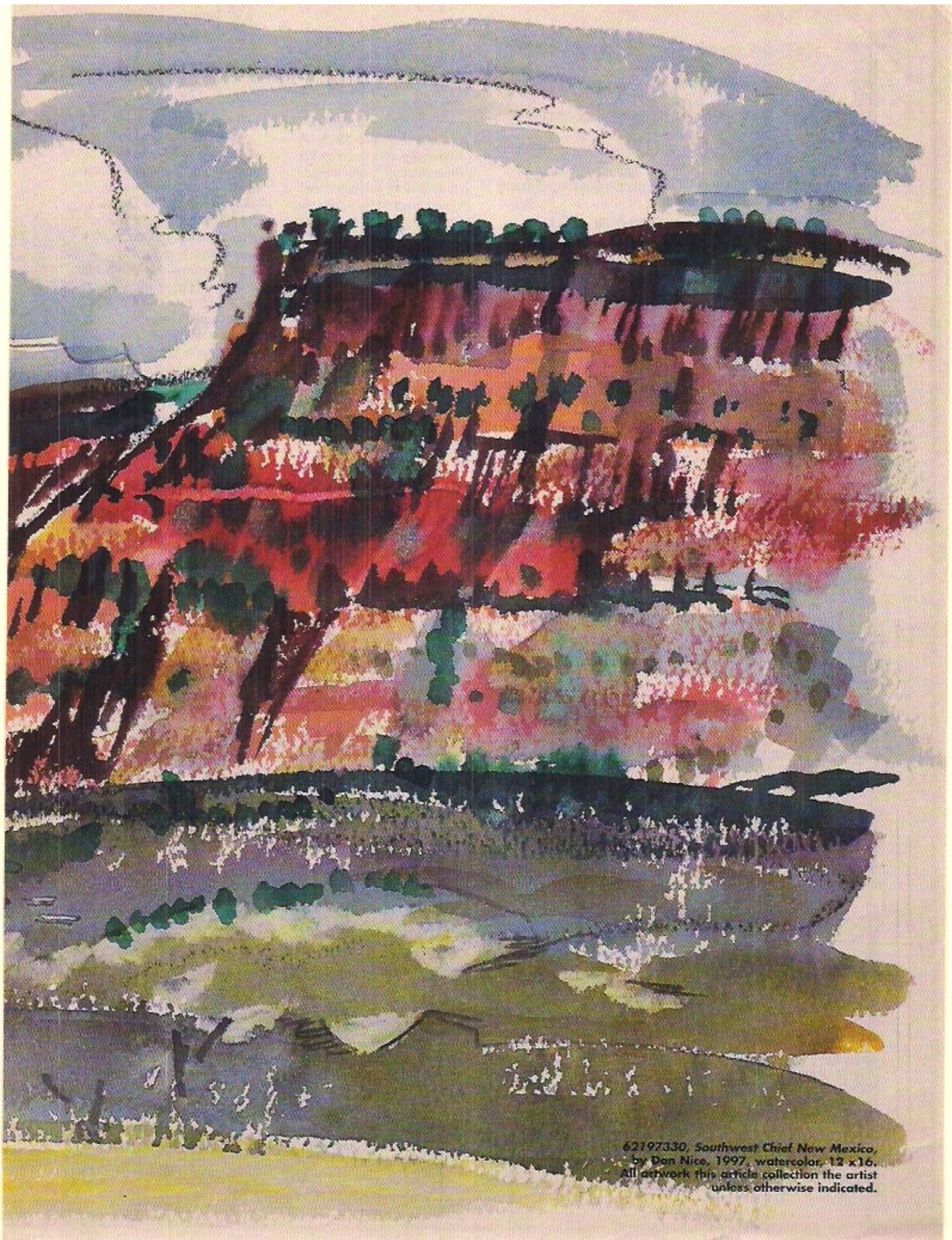


# DON NICE: Painting the Forces of Nature

BY M. STEPHEN DOHERTY

*In his artwork and his teaching,  
Don Nice emphasizes the elemental forces  
of nature: earth, wind, fire, and water.*





62197330, Southwest Chief New Mexico,  
by Don Nice, 1997, watercolor, 12 x 16.  
All artwork this article collection the artist  
unless otherwise indicated.

Last spring, Don Nice conducted a watercolor workshop for the Santa Fe Institute of Fine Arts. In a conversation about the project, he revealed his strongest opinions about watercolor. Artists such as Nice often define the most important aspects of their medium of choice by describing the way they teach others. Their demonstrations, lectures, and exercises emphasize what they want students to understand and remember. When Nice also mentioned a series of drawings and paintings he created during the train ride from Santa Fe to his home in New York, I recognized an opportunity to learn how his strong opinions affected the development of his work.

Don Nice, who paints recognizable objects and landscapes, is considered one of the most important contemporary artists. His watercolors are strongly influenced by the work of pioneering artists from his home state of California, artists like Phil Dike, Rex Brandt, and Millard Sheets. But Nice also owes a debt to painters like Oscar Kokoschka (with whom he studied briefly in 1958), Willem de Kooning, and Marsden Hartley.

During the past ten years, Nice served as artist in residence at a number of colleges and universities, and besides teaching in Santa Fe, he also led short-term workshops at the Anderson Ranch Arts Center in Snowmass Village, Colorado, and the Huntington Museum of Art in Huntington, West Virginia. He says the intent of the Santa Fe workshop was to "open the door of opportunity to people by

having them look at contemporary art and at nature, and from that experience to find ways of doing something original in their watercolors."

After Nice talked to the workshop participants about early twentieth-century artists such as Charles Burchfield, Arthur Dove, and Marsden Hartley, whose paintings deal with nature and express the artist's unique point of view, he invited the students to make separate studies of the four elements: earth, wind, fire, and water. "I wanted them to consider the earth forces represented by each element," Nice explains. "Instead of focusing on a specific cloud, mountain, river, or fire, I wanted them to come up with colors, brush marks, patterns, and shapes that reflect the elements. Air might be expressed with wet-in-wet washes of various blue pigments, while earth might be encapsulated in hard-





**Above: *Mountains*, by John Cutruzzola, 1997, watercolor, 12 x 16.**

**Opposite page, above left: *Earth & Air*, by Carol Sarkisian, 1997, watercolor, 10 x 12.**

**Opposite page, above right: *Wind*, by Carol Sarkisian, 1997, watercolor, 10 x 12.**

**Opposite page, below left: *Water*, by Jane Shea, 1997, watercolor, 10 x 12.**

**Opposite page, below right: *Wind*, by Jane Shea, 1997, watercolor, 10 x 12.**

edged strokes of umbers and siennas.

"I see these experiences as a means of extracting images from nature," Nice goes on to say. "They also help in understanding the capacity of the paint and of the artists themselves. Once the students released themselves from the pressure to make a finished product, they could explore all the possibilities of their relationship with the earth."

The experience of making these separate studies helped the students paint representations of the New Mexico landscape. Instead of trying to record exactly what they saw, the artists focused on what Nice calls a "total empathetic experience in watercolor with the planet earth." Carol Sarkisian, a participant from Santa Fe,

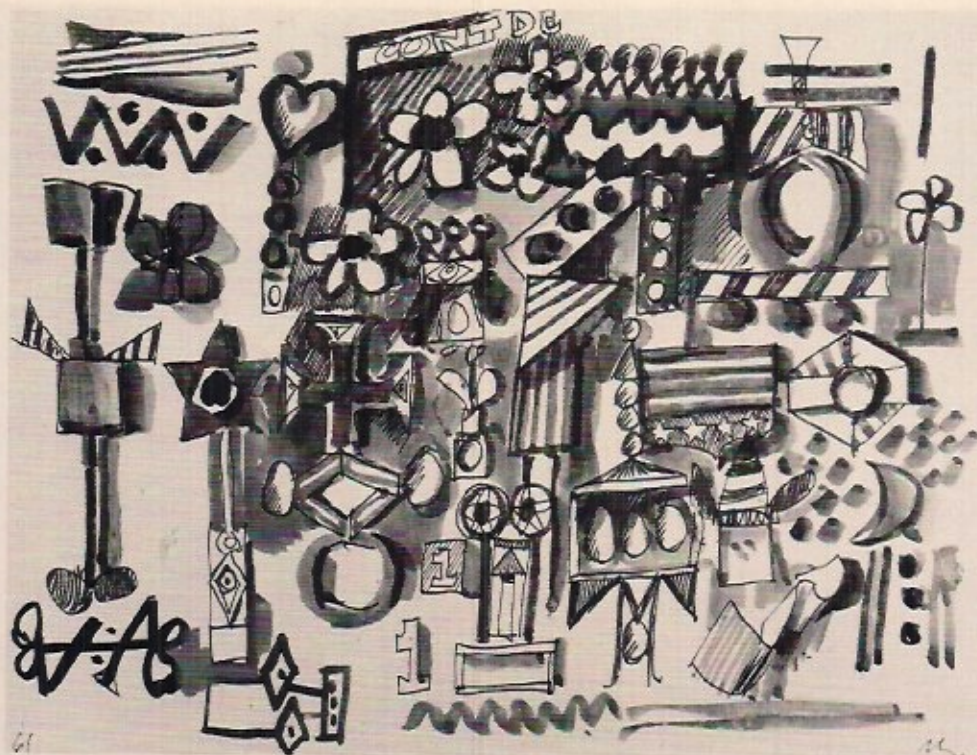
says: "It was a fantastic class."

The exercises undertaken during the workshop are similar to Nice's own process of responding to the fleeting landscape he observed from the compartment of an Amtrak train as he traveled from New Mexico through Colorado, Kansas, Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, and Pennsylvania back to New York. Sitting at a small table by the window, Nice made watercolor sketches with a limited palette of twelve colors on the pages of a 12"-x-16" spiral-bound book. He used one Aquarelle natural-hair brush for all the painting because that wide, flat brush allowed him to paint both broad washes and thin lines. He also created black-and-white drawings in the

sketchbook using soft-tipped ink pens (either a Sakura Pigma brush or a Tombo ABT brush/pen).

The set of twelve pan colors that Nice travels with is one of dozens of sets in his collection. Over the years he has acquired watercolor paint sets dating from the mid-nineteenth century to the present day. A selection of them was organized into an exhibition several years ago at the Century Association in New York City.

Since Nice was passing quickly through the landscape during his train ride, there was only enough time to record an impression of the shapes, colors, lines, and patterns that caught his attention. He considered them the only important elements of the scene, how-



Above: A page of totem drawings from a sketchbook, by Don Nice, 1961, watercolor and ink, 11 x 14.

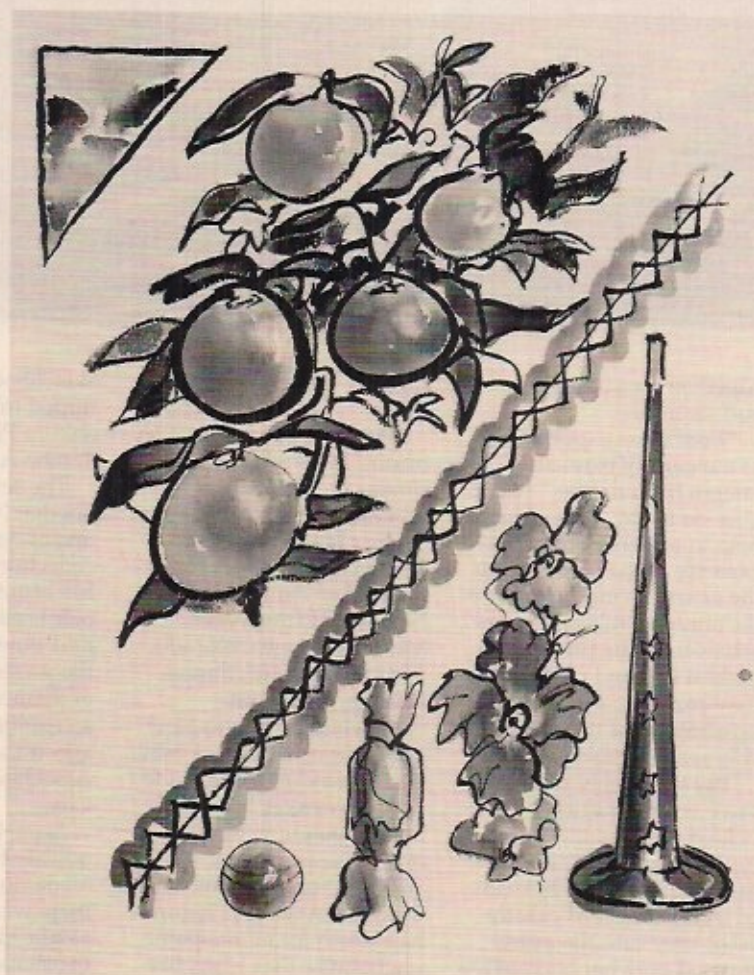
Right: *Orange Page Study*, by Don Nice, 1980, watercolor, 14 x 10½.

Opposite page, above left: *Predella Studies*, by Don Nice, 1971, watercolor and collage, 12¼ x 9¼.

Opposite page, above right: *New Guinea*, by Don Nice, 1972, watercolor, 11 x 8.

Opposite page, below left: *Luxembourg, France*, by Don Nice, 1973, watercolor 24¼ x 9¼.

Opposite page, below right: *Bison—North Dakota*, by Don Nice, 1976, watercolor, 15 x 10¼. Private collection.

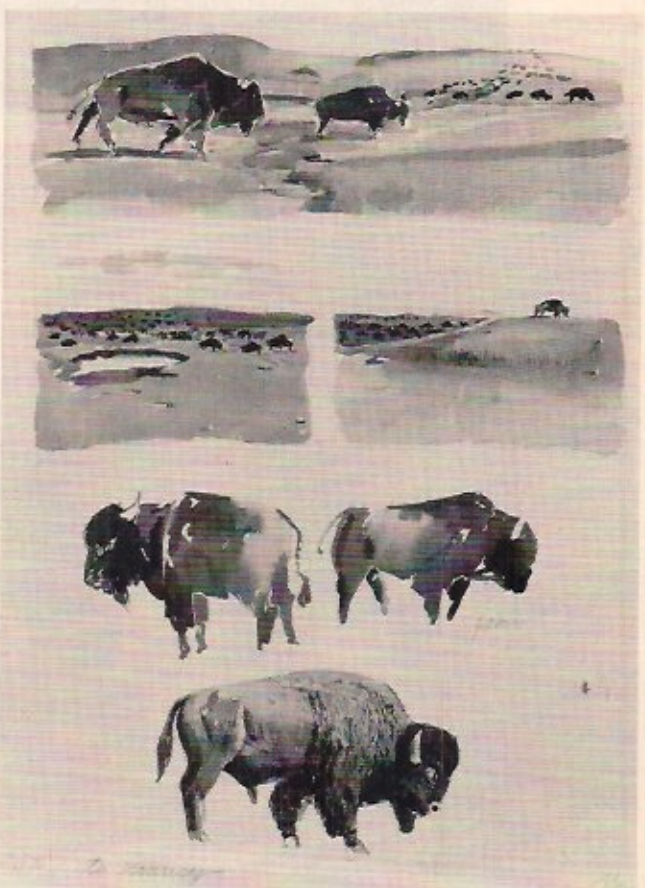
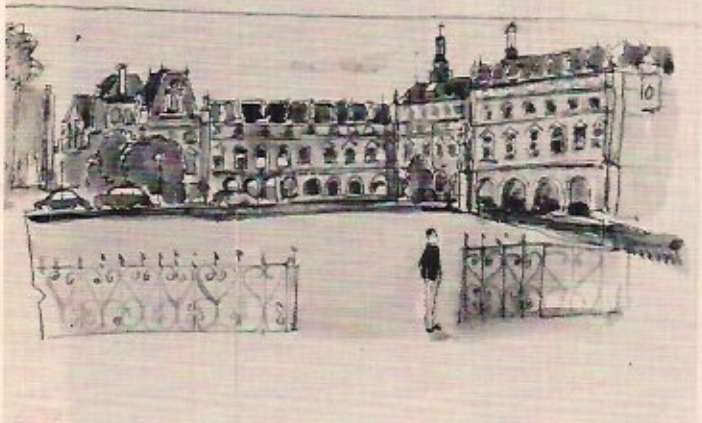
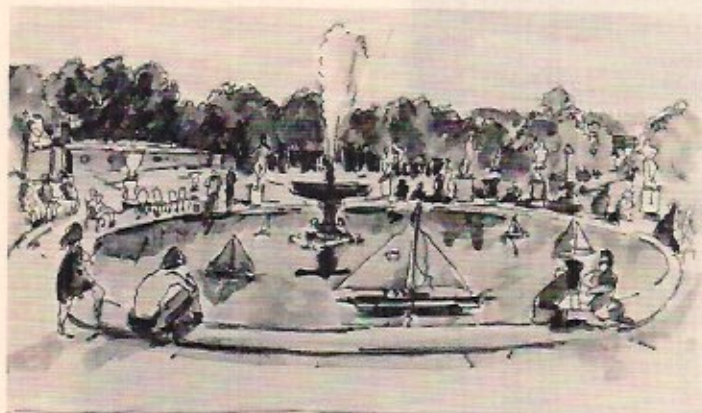
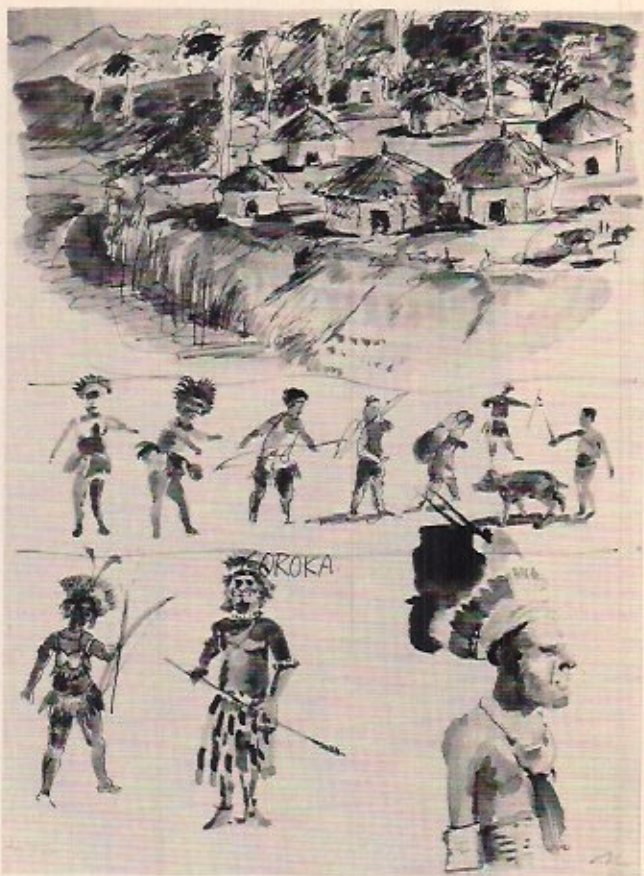


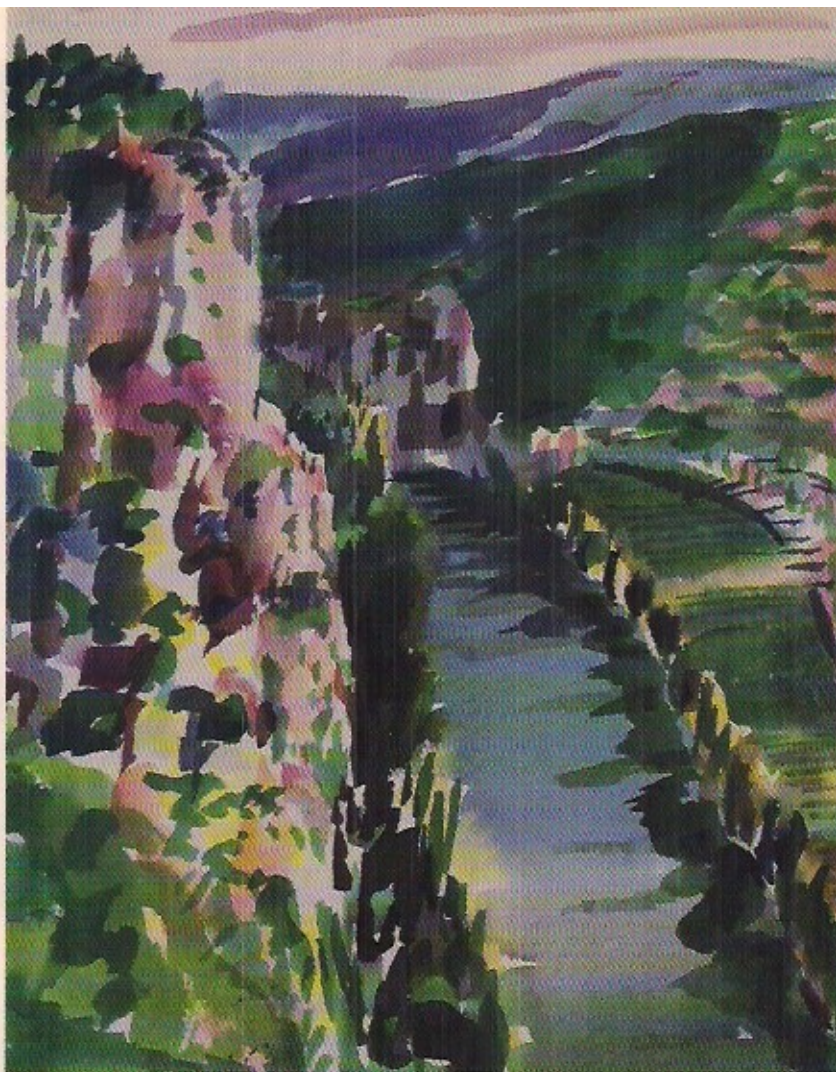
ever, even if he had been sitting in front of the landscape for hours. The value of a sketch or painting done on location is it reminds the artist of the complete experience of a place while providing a few notations about its physical appearance, which is sufficient to stimulate more expansive studio paintings.

Nice has been filling sketchbooks with these kinds of ink and watercolor sketches for many years. Shelves lining the walls of his newly remodeled studio in his eighteenth-century home overlooking the Hudson River are filled with more than a hundred sketchbooks from Africa, Australia, Honduras, Spain, France, Alaska, California, Idaho, Arizona, Colorado, New York, and other locations. Each page is marked with the month, day, year, and time the sketch was made.

Nice's sketches frequently become refined as sections of his large watercolors in which small landscapes are bordered by abstract patterns, garlands of plants, or assortments of found objects. The artist refers to the series of pictures in which the elements are stacked on top of each other as "earth totems," borrowing the structural organization of the pictures from Native-American cultures and the decorative elements from American folk art. The large watercolors are typically rendered on 40"-x-60" sheets of 300-lb Arches paper using a palette of the following colors: Winsor yellow, yellow ochre, burnt sienna, raw sienna, raw umber, French ultramarine blue, Winsor red, alizarin crimson, Winsor violet, Winsor green, cerulean blue, and Payne's gray.

Two art historians discuss the relationship between Nice's sketches and his large studio paintings in essays included in a catalog for his current exhibition at Babcock Galleries in New York City ("Don Nice Earth Totems, 1985-





Left: *La Cirq la Popie li*,  
France, by Don Nice, 1986,  
watercolor, 14 x 10.

Below: *Pointe al la Hache*,  
Louisiana, by Don Nice,  
1982, watercolor, 10 x 14.

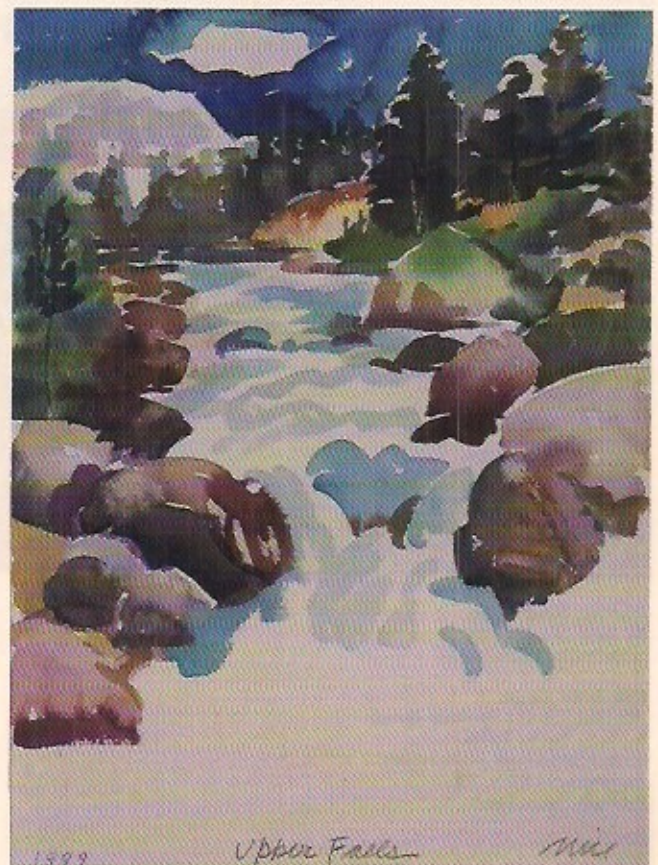
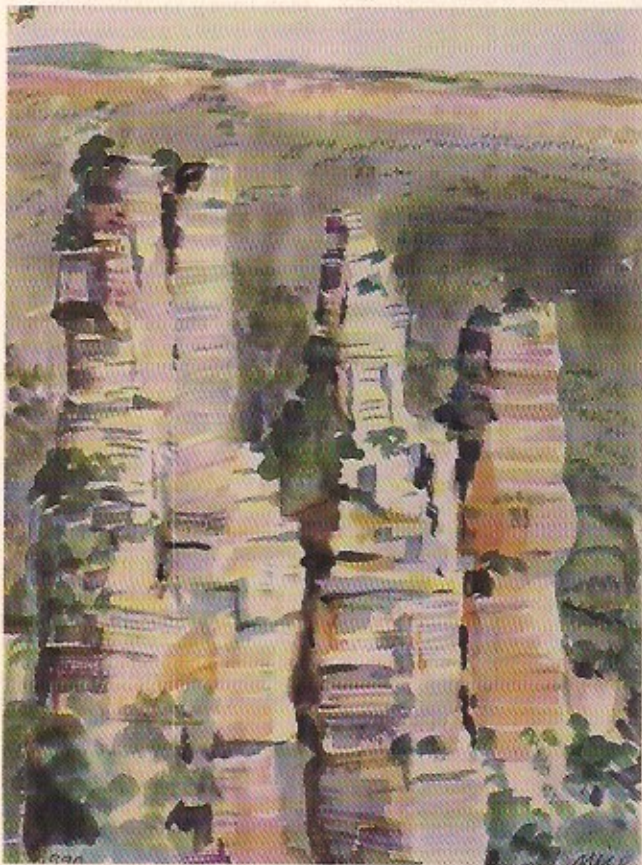
Opposite page, above:  
*Little Islands*, Honduras,  
by Don Nice, 1985,  
watercolor, 9 x 12.

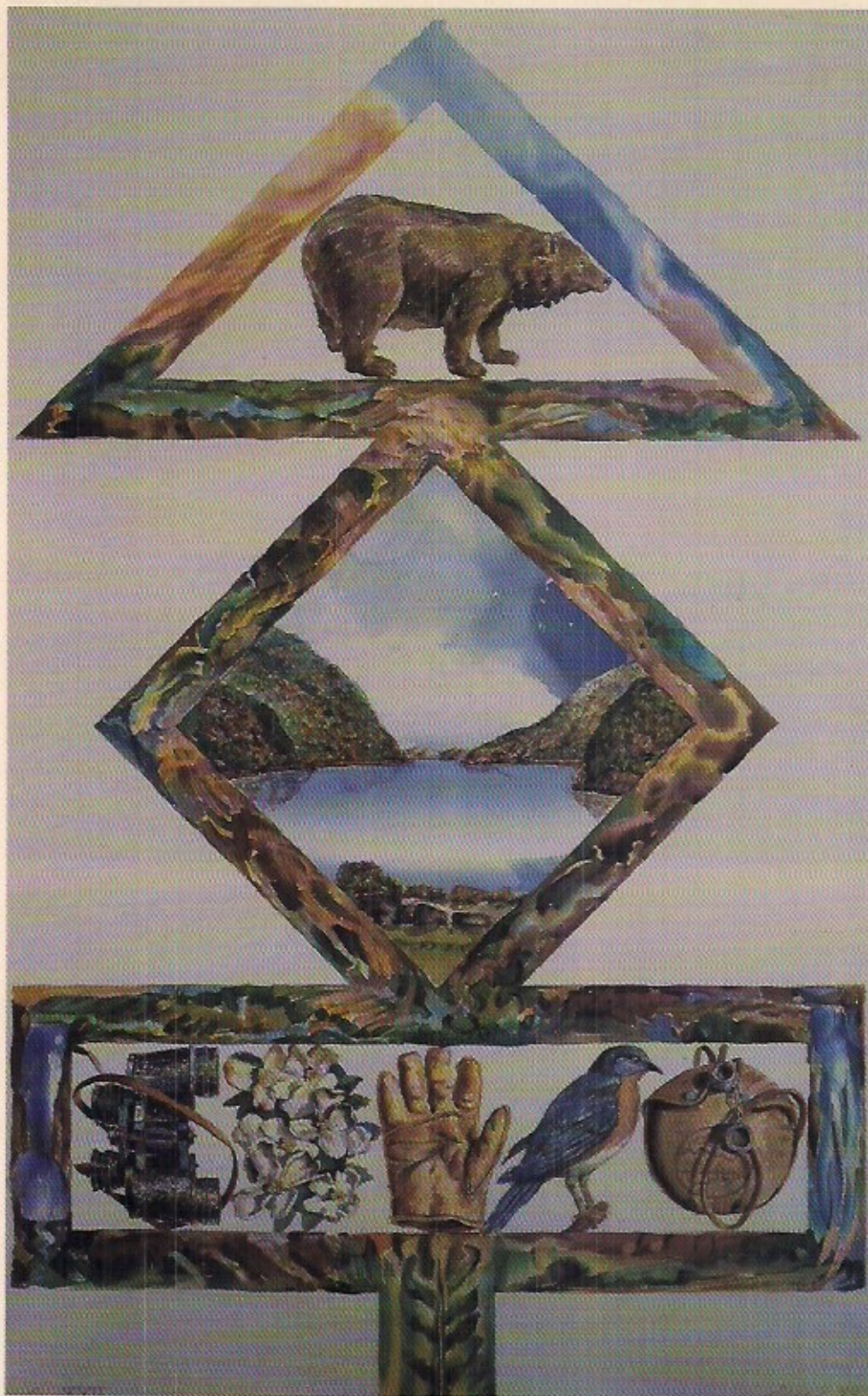
Opposite page, below left:  
*Three Sisters*, Australia,  
by Don Nice, 1990,  
watercolor, 12 x 9.

Opposite page, below right:  
*Upper Falls*, Yosemite,  
California, by Don Nice,  
1989, watercolor, 14½ x 10½.









Above: *Gaia XXII*,  
by Don Nice, 1989,  
watercolor, 60 x 40.

Opposite page:  
*Alaska Totem: Walker Cove*,  
by Don Nice, 1982,  
oil on linen and watercolor  
on paper, 108 x 72.  
Private collection.

1997," on view February 3 through March 27). "Painting from the object is less about the object and more about perception, about the syntax, or formal visual structures (composition, continuity, space, line, color, etc.) that hold the objective elements in view before us," writes Gail R. Scott.

The idea for these totem paintings originated in a series of drawings Nice made in the 1960s. He refers to that series of small drawings as "preconscious." "Like so many other artists of that era who were influenced by the Abstract Expressionists, I became interested in avoiding preconceived notions and entering a childlike state of creativity," Nice explains. "I made hundreds of drawings, one right after another. With pencil and watercolor, I would start on the left-hand side and make marks (in the same way that Franz Kline used discarded telephone books) to try to find out if there wasn't something there that would reveal itself rather than trying to draw something from a preconceived idea." Those drawings led to paintings of single objects, then to predella paintings of still-life items, then to animals taking the place of humans, and finally, to landscapes.

"The evolution we see taking place in the works from the present exhibition is part of the artist's constant effort to find the dissonance that hones a new edge in his art and brings us to a new understanding, not of content, *per se*, but of relationship: the relationship of us to our world, to its spaces, and its inhabitants," writes Scott as a conclusion to her catalog essay. Those relationships hinge on the Nice's interpretations of the forces in nature. ■

