

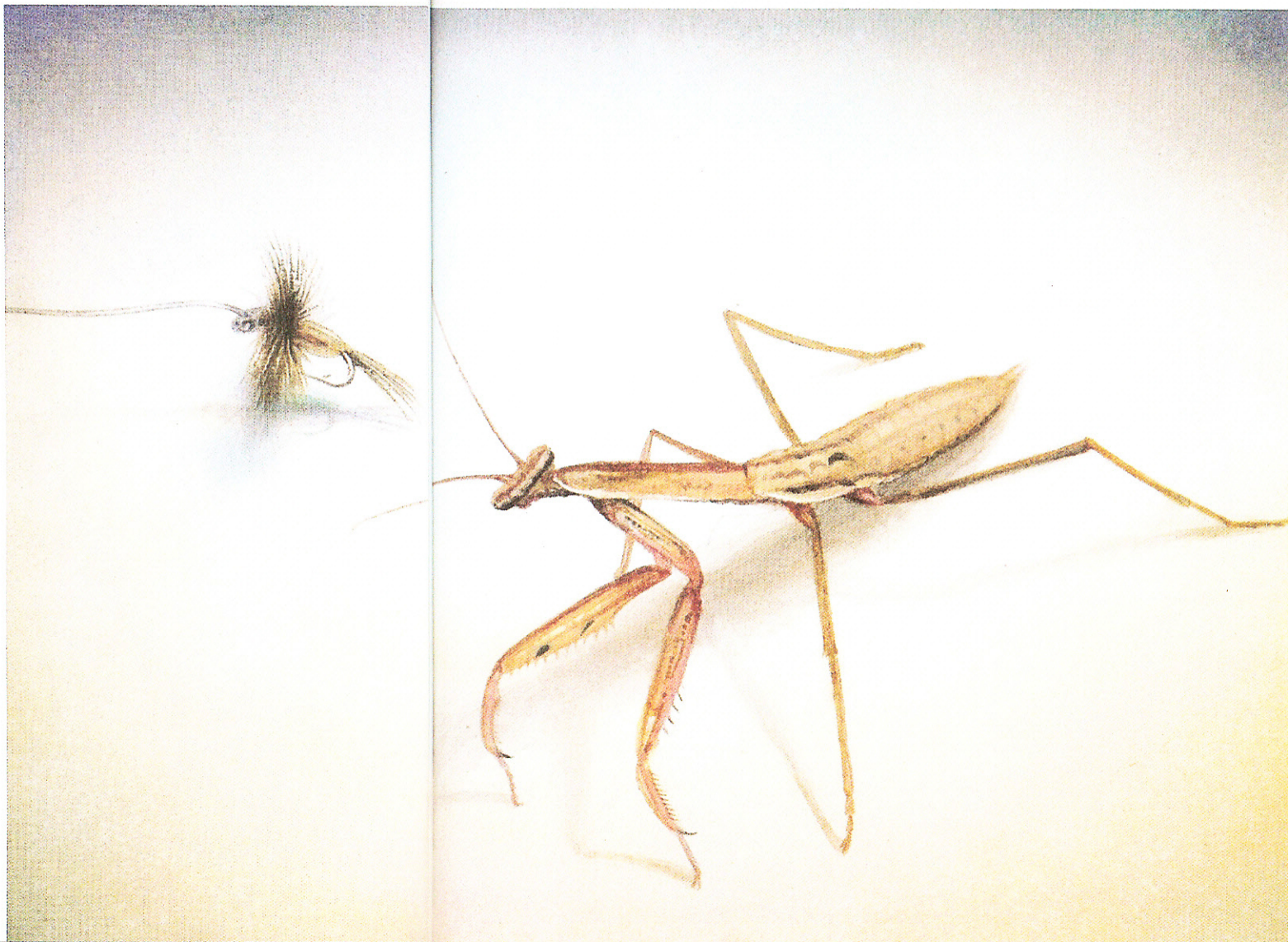
# Photographic Effects, Painterly Vision

Using photos for reference and for their unique visual effects, **Paul Pitsker** depicts life-and-death dramas and impossible scenarios that point to the precariousness of existence. | **by Lynne Bahr**

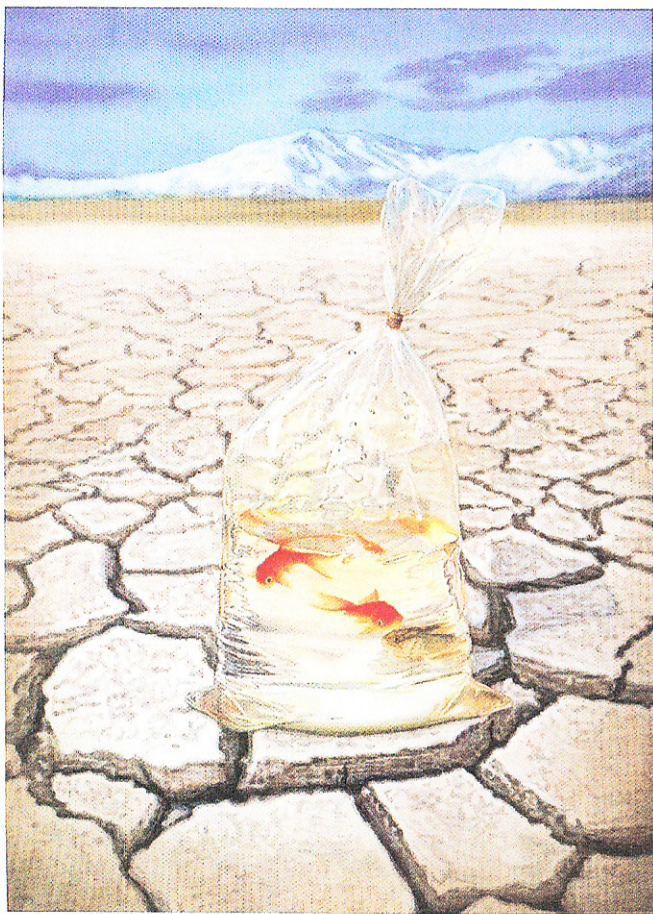
A recent series for Paul Pitsker has evolved into what he calls a "perfect storm" bringing together past experiences, artistic influences, and current interests. Although he had not recently worked in watercolor, he decided after years of painting the figure in oil to give it a try, attracted to the immediacy and spontaneity of the medium. He also thought the medium was an appropriate choice for the subject matter he was considering: moths and butterflies. "The perishability and delicacy of the subject, and the way moths and butterflies are collected and kept under glass, seemed to connect with the medium," the artist explains. He was also attracted to the idea that he would not be able to make extensive adjustments as the work developed, as he could in oil. "Watercolor is more or less indelible," he says. "It reveals all the marks that have been made, so it's almost like the recording of a performance. I find the performance pressure strangely liberating."

**Allure**  
2008, watercolor,  
7 x 10. Courtesy Left  
Coast Galleries, Studio  
City, California.

The subject of insects had taken hold of Pitsker's imagination several years before, when he was struck by a photograph by Mike and Doug Starn of a moth taken at close range. "It had an owl-like face," Pitsker recalls, "and it made me think about the strangeness of the world that is all around us on a small scale." He became interested in other photographs that showed various kinds of distortions and blurring, as the subject was staged for certain effects. At the same time, the work of photographer Robert Parke-Harrison, in which the artist depicts himself as an everyman character engaged in all manner of ludicrous scenarios, such as tying ropes to clouds, intrigued him. Pitsker began to take photographs himself, collecting images of insects and other subjects, but for some time he was unsure what to do with them. "The big problem I had was that of many







LEFT  
**Dryer**  
2007, watercolor, 25 x 18.  
Private collection.

OPPOSITE PAGE  
**Chill**  
2008, watercolor, 25 x 18.  
Private collection.

## Pitsker's Materials

### PALETTE

- quinacridone magenta
- Winsor blue (green shade)
- Winsor green (yellow shade)
- Winsor yellow
- Payne's gray
- lunar black

### BRUSHES

- a variety of student-grade and squirrel-hair quill brushes
- small red sable brush for details
- nylon bristle brush for scrubbing out or softening edges

### SURFACE

- Arches 140-lb hot-pressed watercolor paper

artists," he explains. "You start out painting the world as you see it, but then you need to paint it as you know it and as you want others to know it. At the highest level I want to inspire reflection on the uncanny beauty and strangeness of the world. People become accustomed to the way things are, and they sometimes need a jolt to be reminded just how fragile and weird it all is."

As the idea for the series began to take form, Pittsker realized that insects might be able to illuminate something of the human condition by standing in for human beings in the dramas the artist would stage. The choice of insects is natural considering Pittsker was raised in a bird sanctuary in Massachusetts, and "the bugs were in charge," he says, "especially in the spring. I've been haunted by insects my whole life." As a child, Pittsker spent hours drawing birds and insects—the subjects populating his daily life—and even today he is struck by the number of insects that fly through his open

studio door in the evenings. "The insects have been presenting themselves to me for decades," Pittsker adds. "Eventually I realized they were the ideal candidates for the roles I needed to fill in my work. I wanted a kind of existential fall guy, someone who is always in danger but not aware of it—like us, although we don't like to think about life like that."

In Pittsker's compositions, the insects, fish, or birds are typically in life-and-death situations. The goldfish in *Dryer*, for instance, have a finite amount of time to live in the plastic bag and no prospects for survival, given their surroundings. *Chill* presents the impossible scenario of a butterfly within an icy scene. The subjects are blissfully unaware of their perilous situations, a condition the artist emphasizes with the addition of words to some of his paintings, an idea inspired by seeing an ant traverse a page out of *Moby Dick*. "I became intrigued by the notion that the world around us might be encoded with messages that we don't notice, because we're too distracted or





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myopic or small-minded," he says. In other instances the artist uses the words as clues to the viewer or like thought balloons in a cartoon. At times this helps to lighten the mood of a piece, whose humor can be dark.

Pitsker relies on photography for his compositions, both because he desires certain photographic effects—such as distortions, shallow space, and blurred edges—and because the moths and butterflies are never still. "I can also achieve a level of detail through the lens that I cannot achieve with

the naked eye," he adds. First, he sets up the scene with the objects on a tabletop and takes photographs. He then chooses one of his insect photos and combines it with those of the setup to design the composition. Referring to the photos, he makes a detailed compositional drawing.

Then, using homemade transfer paper—made by blackening one side of the paper with graphite and wiping it lightly with a bestine-soaked paper towel—he traces the compositional drawing onto the watercolor paper. He makes some final adjustments at this point, erasing and redrawing as gently as possible. Before he transfers the drawing, Pitsker soaks the Arches 140-lb hot-pressed paper in the shower, then tapes it to a board to prevent it from buckling.

Pitsker's painting approach is traditional, working from low-contrast washes to deep color saturation as the painting progresses. A dark background, however, he generally establishes in one pass at the outset because one of the paints he normally uses, lunar black, is so granular that additional washes create a muddy effect. "First I get the overall composition down in broad washes of low contrast," the artist describes, "then I mask off anything white that I might lose later. I mix up the dark with lunar black, Winsor blue, and quinacridone magenta and put it on alla prima." He works on dry paper, moistening edges where necessary to soften them.

Choosing a limited palette of six colors has helped the artist to know his paints well and avoid surprises. He uses quinacridone magenta, Winsor blue (green shade), Winsor green (yellow shade), Winsor yellow, Payne's gray, and lunar

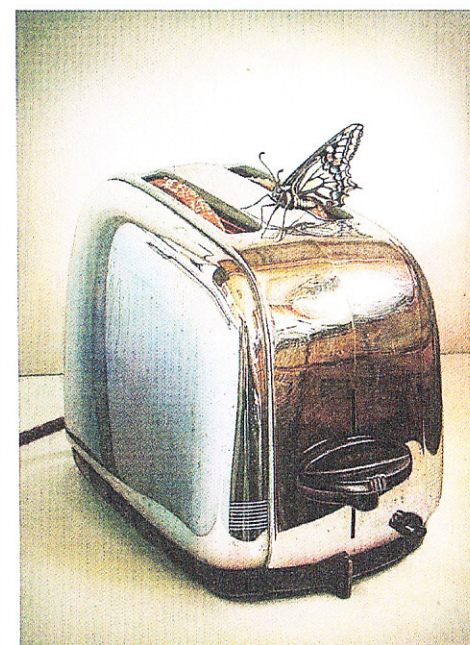
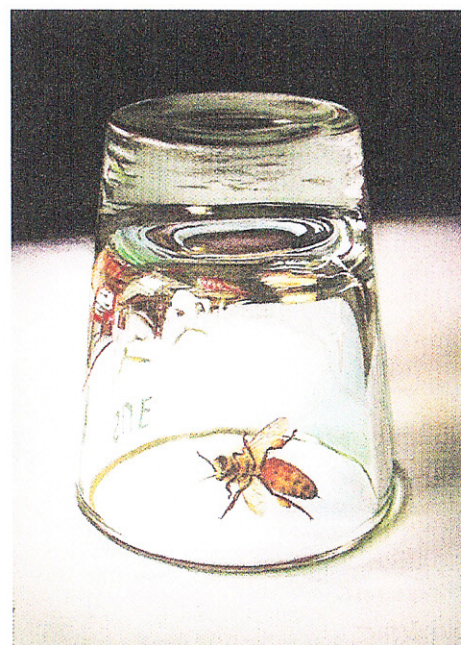
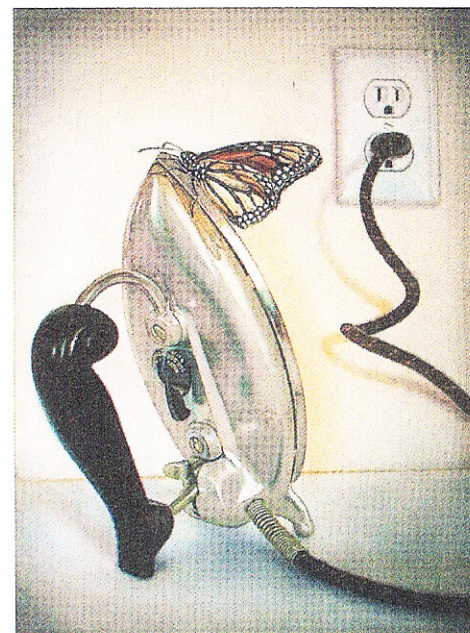
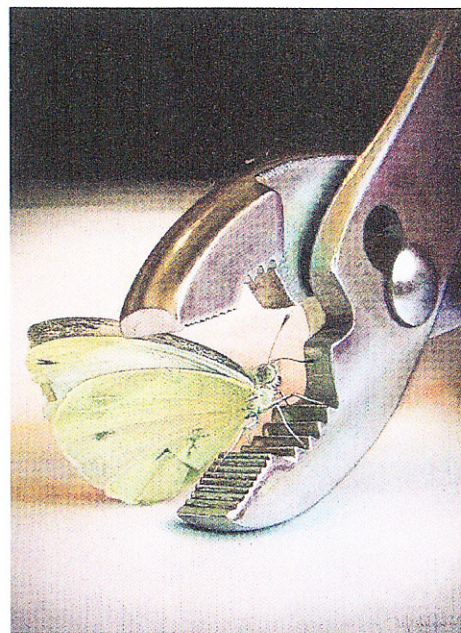
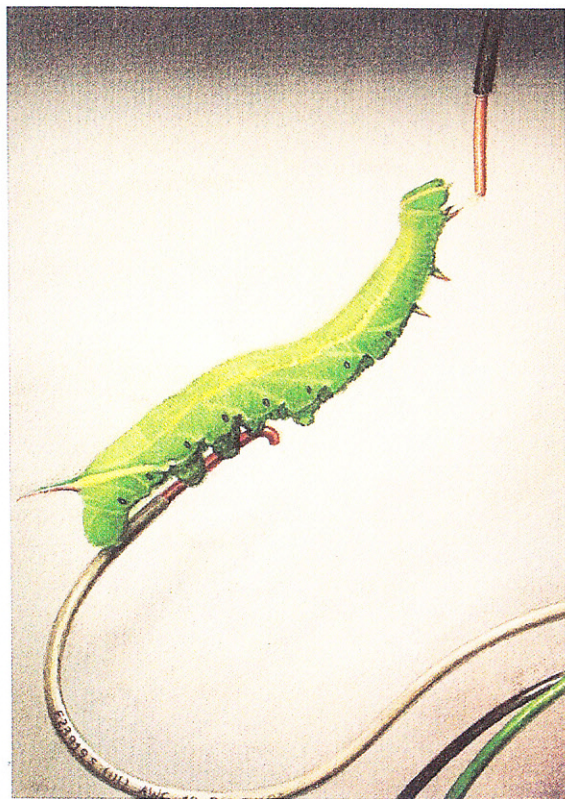
**LEFT**  
**Short**  
2007, watercolor, 10 x 7.  
Private collection.

**OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP LEFT**  
**Pinch**  
2007, watercolor, 20 x 15.  
Private collection.

**OPPOSITE PAGE, BOTTOM LEFT**  
**Stinger**  
2006, watercolor, 10 x 7.  
Private collection.

**OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP RIGHT**  
**Pressing**  
2007, watercolor, 25 x 18.  
Private collection.

**OPPOSITE PAGE, BOTTOM RIGHT**  
**Toast**  
2006, watercolor, 25 x 18.  
Private collection.



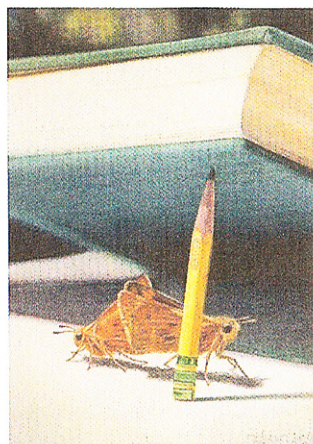




## About the Artist

**Paul Pitsker**, of Santa Monica, California, earned his B.A. with distinction from Pomona College, in Claremont, California. He has participated in numerous group and solo shows; most recently, "Spirits of Los Angeles" at the Los Angeles Municipal Gallery, in Hollywood. He is represented in California by Left Coast Galleries, in Studio City, and Bandini Art, in Culver City. To learn more, visit [www.paulpitsker.com](http://www.paulpitsker.com).

black. "I used to work with a split primary palette, with a warm and cool of each primary, but I encountered a lot of surprises in the way the pigments interacted," the artist recalls. "As an experiment, I started using only intensely staining pigments, and I saw that they penetrated the paper fibers deeply, and I could go over the paint I'd laid down without obliterating the previous washes." For shadows and darks, he uses Payne's gray and lunar black; quinacridone magenta, Winsor blue (green shade), and Winsor green (yellow shade) provide a satisfyingly deep color saturation.



**FAR LEFT**  
**Mixer**  
2008, watercolor,  
25 x 18. Collection the  
artist.

**LEFT**  
**Prop**  
2008, watercolor,  
10 x 7. Private  
collection.

**OPPOSITE PAGE**  
**Remember**  
2008, watercolor,  
20 x 15. Courtesy  
James Gray Gallery,  
Santa Monica,  
California.

The artist favors squirrel quill brushes, adding that they can be played or shaped when wet, but they still come to a fine point. He completes about 80 percent of a painting with these, then uses a small sable for fine detail. "All my brushes are cheap student brushes," he says. "I don't think I have one that costs more than \$20." To make corrections, he uses a nylon bristle brush, which he dampens and gently applies to an area to lift paint or soften an edge. At times he scrapes out a highlight with an X-Acto knife. "Once you start distressing the paper you can't do much more with it, so you have to be careful," the artist cautions.

To Pitsker, the most challenging part of his process is knowing when to stop. "Watercolor has been a boon to me because I don't have the luxury of making a lot of adjustments," he says. "I used to joke to myself that the last brushstroke would be the one that ruins a painting, so I would plan to stop at the second-to-last brushstroke. I just have to figure out when that is."

The artist has a great backlog of ideas for future paintings, but for the moment he is content to continue exploring the current series. "It's hard to say what the next thing will be," he says. "I'm still not done working through all the possibilities at the margins of what I'm doing now." It's possible he may combine the insects with other images from nature, or even create abstract patterns, with the compositions becoming more complex. Or, as the artist puts it, "I may stumble across something unexpected. I'm always delighted when that happens."

[www.aqWatercolor.com](http://www.aqWatercolor.com)

