

ART BIZ



SKETCH TO SUCCESS

WRITTEN BY **DARRIN LITTLE** PHOTOGRAPHED BY **HARTONO TAI**

"I TRUST THE OCEAN."

In his captain's-view condominium with broad windows that overlook the subject of this trust, this unshakable faith, artist Robert Senske throws out such epiphanies, like life preservers cast to the drowning, in the course of our conversations about his painting career. Many examples of his work engulf us: panoramic harbor scenes, lonely restaurant umbrellas perched near coastal views and one deviant painting of multiple rowing oars—a heraldic gesture—hang on walls or rest in a seller's holding pattern on the office floor—another sale anchored.

The irony here (yes, like the eternal churning of the ocean or artist's brush in paint, ironic punctuation continues to color man's ebb and flow) is that Senske left his childhood home in the Alamitos Bay Peninsula on

a journalism scholarship to UC Berkeley, the would-be artist's pen and ink sketching gone verbal. Senske went on to graduate with a political science degree and harbored himself in the Bay Area in the late 80s as a sales manager for a successful software company. The painter was lost at sea.

Or was he? Something inside Senske wouldn't rest. There was a secret travel agent inside his head that kept pitching the same holiday at home. "A holiday at home", you say? He'd punch in and out of his weekday corporate salaried position and then burn through the weekends painting flashbacks from his boyhood beach and sailboat experiences. Precedents were revisited: days as a teenager in Long Beach, when he would sketch houses for real estate companies at \$40 bucks a pop; private commissions from friends and neighbors; cute girls exchanging beer money and phone numbers for renderings of their sorority houses at Berkeley.

Let's say these early tastes of artistic success, coupled with his incessant urge to paint and a return to the provenance of that painting, finally coalesced in the form of a submarine, which surfaced and torpedoed his software company career around 1990. His golden boat sank amidst the coup de grâce explosion of a sold-out exhibition hosted at his parent's home in The Peninsula, a series of paintings inspired from photographs of sailboats, harbors, sand, water, mast rigging and beachfront peninsula homes. In two days he'd managed to exchange over a dozen paintings for cold cash and a fresh stack of private commissions to feed him for a year. Robert relates, "If it was a gloomy day, I could make it sunny in my painting." Determined optimism met capital opportunity.

"I loved painting, but the idea of having a monthly income with the art really turned me on, to run it as a business..."

The re-validated artist took a deep breath and then jettisoned a successful marketing career, returning to his native waters of Long Beach to send up the coveted, if not elusive, flag of artistic freedom. That didn't happen overnight; he bounced around little apartments along Ocean Boulevard for years, counting pennies and struggling to keep the power turned on. But the sails of commerce eventually filled and his career began to move.

In the mid-to-late 90s he was designing the annual holiday card for former Long Beach Mayor Beverly O'Neill, which led to painting commissions from City Hall. Recurring shows at Nona's Gallery on Second Street helped build awareness and a rising price tag. Senske's cards, editions and one-of-a-kind original paintings can be viewed and ordered at his website (www.senskeart.com).

This collection, in addition to a vast queue of private commissions, is testament to one man's accomplished love affair with art and a daring idea; "I loved painting, but the idea of having a monthly income with the art really turned me on, to run it as a business..."

Today, Robert Senske is living every artist's aspired dream; he paints exactly the kind of pictures he wants to paint, sells the work to happy clients, pays his bills and then reflects again on the ocean for new ideas. ■



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