

# Anthropomorphic Landscape [I & II]

*oil on canvas*



**1988**  
**67" x 42"**  
- and -



**1999**  
40" x 28"

These spine paintings were inspired by two primary influences: Anatomy class at the Academy of Art, and hiking in Marin County and Yosemite during the college years of the 80's.

The anatomical is easy to see. I was thoroughly enjoying Anatomy classes taught by Thomas Marsh, at the Academy of Art in San Francisco in the fall of '87 and spring of '88. We learned the human skeleton and muscular systems, their medical terminology, and drawing them accurately.

I ate it up! Drawing bones more precisely, getting the epicondyles right and proportionate amounts of vertebrae, and all. \*

### **Concerning mountain hikes,**

I had been fortunate to access some incredibly technical trails on Mt Tamalpais in Marin, and in magnificently epic Yosemite National Park!

One of the many phenomenal discoveries on the trails were the detailed roots and rocks underfoot, that resemble biological anatomic parts. Sinewy tendons of roots and branches, to bone-like stone formations. Many of its details polished by decades of hiking boots. Spending several hours hiking these high wilderness zones takes over the mind, in that the details speak to you in their own language. In this inspiration, it was of endlessly anthropomorphic forms mesmerizing me along the way.

After a glorious summer of fantastic mountain hikes of 1988, back in the city I couldn't wait to begin the fall semester with a worthy painting! The large canvas stretcher (around 5 x 3 feet) already built



in brother Brian's garage. I secured a prime studio space on the third floor of the Academy (had to arrive early on day one to nab that) and hit the canvas ground running!

This is a rare one, when the composition was almost completely formed in a sketch before painting. The result was a quick finish ; done in just a week, the majority of it down before the semesters first painting class. The paint work was aided by my excellent painting teacher, Wade Hoefer, who suggested the impasto white on the foreground vertebrae, the way the top of the spine blends with the bright foggy sky, and the touch of light green. Wade is a master painter who knows his stuff. He was impressed by this piece, and I knew that I was finally making quality work, for a student.

This surrealist spine-scape looked good for one of mine. For the past year my output was mostly experimental trash, but not as much now. Part of it may have been the fresh, secure feeling of working in my new studio spot in the corner near the window, where you could hear the Powell Street cable cars clang and whirr all day into the night. [I was in the Sutter Street building, then the fine arts centre of the Academy.] It was a good community of around 8 art students who set up studio spaces in that third floor room. Good, progressive semesters, with a shared tape player boombox, and there was often only a few of us working at a time, often I would be alone, painting late until closing time by midnight. Basically, I was there every day, from around 1pm to midnight, taking breaks in the downtown, North

Beach and Chinatown neighbourhoods. This was the life! Also a great weekly activity after class at night, was joining a few faculty and students for pints at the neighbouring White Horse pub. Informally hosted by our generous director of fine arts, brilliant teacher and all around great and interested fellow, Ralph Reed, hailing from Sheffield, England. Those were always engaging conversations in a British pub environment!

### **Back to the painting.**

While finishing this by the end of week one, it got compliments from fellow students ; even Richard Stevens, who owned the Academy, popped his head in to give a thumbs up. [too funny. The telltale sign that he was around was the scent of cigar smoke!]

Soon afterwards, it was suggested that the work goes on display in the front window, so I was on it with the coordinator! ! It was great to have artwork displayed for the public to see. It looked good at night, all lit up on Sutter Street. Then the unexpected happened ; someone wanted to buy it! A chiropractor was passing by and loved it, wanting to hang in his office in Pleasanton in the southeast bay. I made up the arbitrary price of \$823. Which seemed a lot to me at the time. [rent for my Mission room was only \$160 per month]

Brian drove me and the painting in his white construction van to the chiropractors house. *Sold!* His name is easy to remember; Dale Cooper. He mentioned something about the neural tube in the

painting. Interesting. Nice guy. As he handed the check, mentioned that he normally wouldn't pay this much for students work, but had to have it. Whatever, he got a good deal.

News spread in the fine arts department of fellow students; *Dean sold a painting from the window display, for nearly a thousand bucks!* It turns out that sales through the front window are relatively rare. The adjacent Academy gallery sure, but rarely from the window. Some of my colleagues suggested that beers should be on me! Nope...Except for a few friends. I did enjoy a few good dinners on the town, more paint, and Grateful Dead shows that season.

Between that and more better paintings, I became one of the heavyweight artists of the department. Exhibitions in the front window became frequent for me in 1989, though no more sales. That one time proved to be a good fluke for me.

Regrettably I never had a good, high-res reproduction of this, only a small snapshot photo. I didn't yet get the hang of taking good slides, being the required format of presentation and preserving images of artwork at the time. Fortunately digital photos followed in years ahead, supplanting the tricky unwieldy world of finicky slides.

I made attempts to continue with a spine series unsuccessfully. One smaller spine painting was made against a dark background, but didn't seem to hold up. [**\*\*I found a jpg, its at the end of this essay.**] Another try was on a larger canvas, 7 x 5 feet, with the goal to paint a

bigger better version. Launching into it on a warm sunny spring day up in the third floor studio, laying down the atmosphere first, with high energy scrubbing a large brush with muted colours until the stark white gesso'd canvas was completely covered. Then Wade walks in to say “*stop right there!*” The painting is finished. I couldn't see this at first, but he saw fresh, energetic brushwork, not overly rendered. A work of modern art, worthy of a series. [I'll add it here when I find the pic] The piece was preserved as is, and I learned something about painting, but I didn't take that path further. Guess I'm just a glaze and layers kind of painter.

### **Flash forward to 1999**

The spinal landscape returns! Quite like the first anthropomorphic landscape, with compositional reversal, and a bit smaller in canvas size. Not necessarily an improvement over the first version, but I was glad to revisit. [ amazingly titled *Anthropomorphic Landscape II* ]

Soon after a photo of it was posted on my website gallery, I was contacted by a German chiropractor/yoga instructor, who didn't want to buy the painting, but wished to pay me for use in a poster representing a yoga event he was having in Munich. He wanted my signature on the digital image, with the caption *Ladder to the Heavens*. So with Alisa's help using Exploratorium cameras (where she worked), a large format hi-res file was made. A unique project. He mailed some of the finished posters which came out good.

**If there's anything to say about the source of these paintings,** is that when you're out hiking the wild mountain trails, you may not come across fully formed spines emerging from the ground,... yet look around to see *dem bones, dem bones, dem bones.*

~~~ Dean Gustafson, March 2021

\* see my amusing story *A Trip to The Morgue*

<https://dean-gustafson.com/autobiographical/TRIP%20TO%20THE%20MORGUE.pdf>





(\*\*smaller attempt from 1989)