

More on Paul Arsenault

Brigadoon's mapmaker

For his book, Naples artist Paul Arsenault assembled stories, art of disappearing treasures



PHOTO BY DAVID ALBERS / BUY THIS PHOTO

David Albers/Staff Local artist Paul Arsenault paints a picture of the pond in front of the Naples Zoo at Caribbean Gardens during a protest on Saturday, June 9, 2012, in Naples. He led a successful public drive for alternatives to save the pond, which was going to be paved over as part of a county project.

A look, even from across the room, at a painting in "Paul Arsenault: My Journey as a Painter," suggests this artist has a special relationship with sunlight.

A glance inside its table of contents says the Naples painter is a passionate traveler as well.

But Arsenault's relationship with light isn't the spray-butter gold lesser painters specialize in; it's a distillation of whites and pearls, in luminous play against shadows, that characterize his work.

And the travels? There's no hotel-brochure gloss, even though Arsenault painted romantic destinations from St. Barts to Tahiti. Arsenault, 60, has been capturing authentic claimants to title of the mythical Brigadoon: places in a window of time that were about to close forever.



Arsenault's book arrived in Naples Thursday, and is for sale at his gallery. While he candidly calls it his "vanity" book, it brims with a thousand good stories — some of them explicit, some of them tucked into the heady hints of his captions.

"I think a lot of people don't know about my travels," he mused, leafing through its pages Wednesday. "They know me as someone who paints Naples."

That's a logical label. Arsenault has been painting in Naples since he gravitated to it as a folksier, smaller — and blessedly warm — home base in the 1970s. His paintings have captured the backsides of bungalows long gone, carriage houses leveled by wrecking balls, verdant streets untouched by parking meters, at-risk landmarks. An exclamationpoint on his commitment to Naples is the first painting in Chapter One: the lily pond at the Naples Zoo, which he led a successful campaign to protect early this year.

But Arsenault has been capturing similar scenes around the world for decades, scampering ahead of history books.

Meet the author

Naples artist Paul Arsenault will be signing his book, "Paul Arsenault: My Journey as a Painter," (2012; Banyan Arts Social and Pleasure Club; \$65) at these places:

Arsenault Gallery, 764 12th Ave. S., Naples, 2-6 p.m. Dec. 14 and 15

Naples Depot, 1051 Fifth Ave. S., 11 a.m.-1 p.m. Jan 7

Naples Historical Society, 137 12th Ave. S., Naples, 12:30-2 p.m. Jan. 18

The book is also available at the Arsenault Gallery; call 239-263-1214 for hours.

"I had gone to Papeete, Tahiti," he recalls, to paint the famous harbor that painter William Gauguin immortalized in "Tahiti Revisited" and Captain James Cook charted in the 1700s. "No sooner did I get there then the bulldozers started. They were damming up the rivers that flowed into it to build a hotel and resort. If I had been a half-hour later ..."

CRAZY. BUT DEDICATED.

These days Arsenault travels by the traditional mode of airplane, often with his wife, Eileen. But at one time, his tickets to these untouched spots were nearly as colorful as the geography. Arsenault recalls hitching a ride on a produce boat in the Caribbean in the 1970s, unloading bananas at one spot to take on peppers and tomatoes at another. He recalls a storm so bad the boat's captain was "screaming at the crew to throw things overboard."

But, he adds — in a tone of perfect acceptance — "that boat had had a curse placed on it, and the curse wasn't going to be lifted until the boat got back to St. Bart's."

It was only little more foolhardy to be on that boat than to try to find the Boiling Lake in Dominica, the island Arsenault had gone to paint because it was totally off tourist maps. Arsenault survived amid the island

economy, a fishing and farming existence pockmarked with hurricane hits, by teaching art to local Rastafarians.

"People give the Rastas a bum rap. They were sort of people on the edge of society, anyway, and they had a curiosity and a willingness to try new things," he explained sincerely.

Everyone on Dominica kept a respectful distance from Boiling Lake, in what is now Morne Trois Pitons National Park, a World Heritage site. Not Arsenault, who, with a French tourist and a curious scientist, picked his way through what is called the Valley of Desolation to the lake. Without the strongly recommended guide.

Of course, they got lost.

"There were these spewing vents crusted with sulfur. There was no path and no way to show us how to get out of there," he said. One misstep after dark would have been fatal.

The trio clawed their way out by pulling themselves up the portal crater hanging onto grasses, Arsenault recalled.

"To spend a night in the Valley of Desolation would not have been my favorite thing," he admitted soberly, with a face that registers: Arsenault, you idiot. What were you thinking?

He also recalls being trailed by local officials, who wondered what this cornstarch of a white guy, complete with a tassel of golden hair, was actually hunting on their island. It ended when they came upon him in a woodland, canvas spread out among the trees and paints flowing onto the canvas in that quick, confident Arsenault style.

"They decided I was crazy, but dedicated," he recalled.

There were other trips, other adventures, including talking his way onto puddle-jumper flights with a soaked, nearly expired ticket bestowed on him by a boat captain and issued to someone named Smith.

"You can't do things like that any more," he concluded. "I was not only seeing places that aren't any more, but I was traveling in a time that is gone now, too."

As he turns the pages slowly, watercolors and acrylics beam him back to glorious — and terrifying — moments. "Things just come out of the woodwork," he said, smiling.



Arsenault relied on the business sense of his wife as one of the local team to distill the coffee table-size book. "Eileen weeded and edited a lot of the stories down. She reminded me that this is about the visuals more than the text," he said.

Still, Eileen Arsenault added, she learned some stories about her husband's travels in process: "I thought I'd heard them all," she said.

Culling the works to put in the 156-page book was difficult enough. But tracing some works that were sold but desirable for the book, was a nightmare, Arsenault said, thanks to his casual methods of record-keeping before he met Eileen. That's why there are no dates on the paintings, either. "I don't even want to go there," he sighed.



His paintings, and their buyers, are spread among the geography and culture Arsenault interpreted on canvas and paper: New England, Florida, the Caribbean and Bahamas, Central and South America, Europe, Hawaii, Asia and Indonesia.

In one case, teased by the experience, he recalled he still had one of his favorite paintings because he bought it back from the purchaser. The man was a dealer in what may be delicately called exotic crops, and he liked

Arsenault's work.

"I needed the money and he bought the painting," he recalled. Years later, when the man's business was gone and he was destitute, Arsenault bought the painting back. "And I paid a lot more for it than he paid me at the time," he conceded.

Because Paul and Eileen Arsenault were committed to using a U.S. printer for its high-quality satin stock, they ended up — in a reprise of his adventure travel years — driving through Hurricane Sandy to reach Capital Offset in Concord, N.H.

Arsenault emphasizes this book, like everything else in he recalls as "a Forrest Gump kind of career," has been the result of applying ingenuity instead of cash to the situation. He published his book by asking a circle of clients and friends to invest time or funding.

"I never had money. I just loved to travel," said Arsenault, who still is determined to reach North Africa with his canvas and brushes.

"When I started out, I didn't even have money for a bus ticket. And what a bore."

He has been fortunate enough to be commissioned to create art for clients from distant places such as the "Tonkin Alps" of Vietnam and Phnom Penh, Cambodia. But Arsenault has also sold paintings to pay for boat fare and managed rental cottages — including one in Western Samoa that had the redoubtable chanteuse Nina Simone as a tenant.



"The success of a good traveler is to be alert and have a healthy curiosity. And sometimes there's an edge you have to balance," he said.

His closest brushes with mortality, he said, have been natural, not human, threats.

"If you can think faster than someone who wants to harm you, you can guide the situation."

As these chapters of his life roll off printing presses, Arsenault is contemplative about its message and his future.

"I want the person (who reads this book) to know that I have been working very steadily at what develops my art ... and that in my travels I have tried to call attention to things that are important about our world and our lives."

Arsenault said he is hoping to bring his talent to bear on more causes such as the zoo's lily pond. Eileen and he still operate his gallery in Crayton Cove. Eventually teaching art he calls "inevitable."

But Arsenault the Gypsy Artist has not been able to put his foot over that threshold yet.

"As soon as I put out my schedule I'll be offered a trip on a clipper ship and I won't be able to go."