

# THE SURFER'S JOURNAL

## Unmediated Connections

The enchanting work of surfer and artist Daisy Sheff.



[Feature Image: LISTENING FOREST (DEAR MATEY), 2022, oil on canvas, 60 × 72 inches]

By Quinn Frankel

Undercurrents

Born and raised on the tree-laden coastline of Inverness, California, Daisy Sheff has been making art for as long as she can remember. Her abstract paintings combine natural elements reminiscent of her Northern California home with a spirited use of contrasting colors, invoking a playful transcendence from the material world for the viewer. Since childhood, Sheff's artistic practice has only grown: After receiving her BFA from UCLA in 2018, she held solo exhibitions at prominent galleries across the United States, from Ratio 3 in San Francisco to White Columns in New York. More recently, she was featured in group exhibitions at Clearing Los Angeles and Grimm Gallery New York.

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When I first speak with Sheff, she's just come back from a surf at her home break with her father, David Sheff, a longtime surfer well steeped in the NorCal scene. Sheff and I quickly bond over our mutual love of Quentin Tarantino's films and that infamous scene in John Carpenter's *Dark Star* where Lt. Doolittle nostalgically recalls those perfect Malibu waves while adrift in space.

"Even as a little kid, I was constantly making things," Sheff says. "I remember always making these sci-fi books that followed the lives of characters I drew from my imagination. I was always someone who had a practice and identified as an artist."

Alongside making art, surfing colored Sheff's California upbringing. She was taught to surf at a young age by her father and by her brother, Nic. Drawing inspiration from her love of surfing, reading, movies, and the work of her mother, Karen Barbour—a distinguished painter in her own right—Sheff's paintings reveal a desire to locate a sense of immediacy and enchantment in the world around us. She found this sort of unmediated connection to her surroundings in both surfing and art.

"For me," she says, "surfing and art are about playing, making mistakes, taking risks, and failing. When I start to have fun is when I stop thinking about what I'm doing and whether the result is good or bad. The beauty comes from the experience of being in the moment that these two activities provide."

Surfers lust after that ephemeral state of symbiosis. Even non-surfers recognize this desire as part of surfing's lore. An example of how Sheff explores these transitory states of being can be found in her painting *Chambers of the Sea (Mermaids)*, where two separate worlds become one. Through a contrast of green and yellow and a distinct use of line, the viewer is introduced to a divided image—an overworld and an underworld. These separate planes quickly begin to seep into one another, aided by the warmth of the applied colors: pink flowers grow from the depths of the underworld while, in the center of the image, a fish is held in a transitory state, fracturing the curved dividing line and signaling the dissolution of boundaries between two separate spheres of existence.

By combining these opposing spheres, Sheff posits an alternative set of human-to-nature relationships founded upon the possibility of togetherness, fantasy, and intimate connection. There is little blue to be found in the painting, and Sheff's deviation from any conventional form of oceanic signification points further to a world resting upon playful possibility.

Her work demands a reconsideration of the real and shows us that the world doesn't have to be the way it is. It offers, like surfing, a form of intimacy with and connection to our surroundings outside of society itself and in opposition to stagnant forms of human-to-nature and even human-to-human relationships. Sheff shows viewers the possibility of finding magic in the everyday, and her work creates a foundation for bringing surfing and art-making into productive conversation with one another as valuable tools for exploring alternative modes of being in the world.