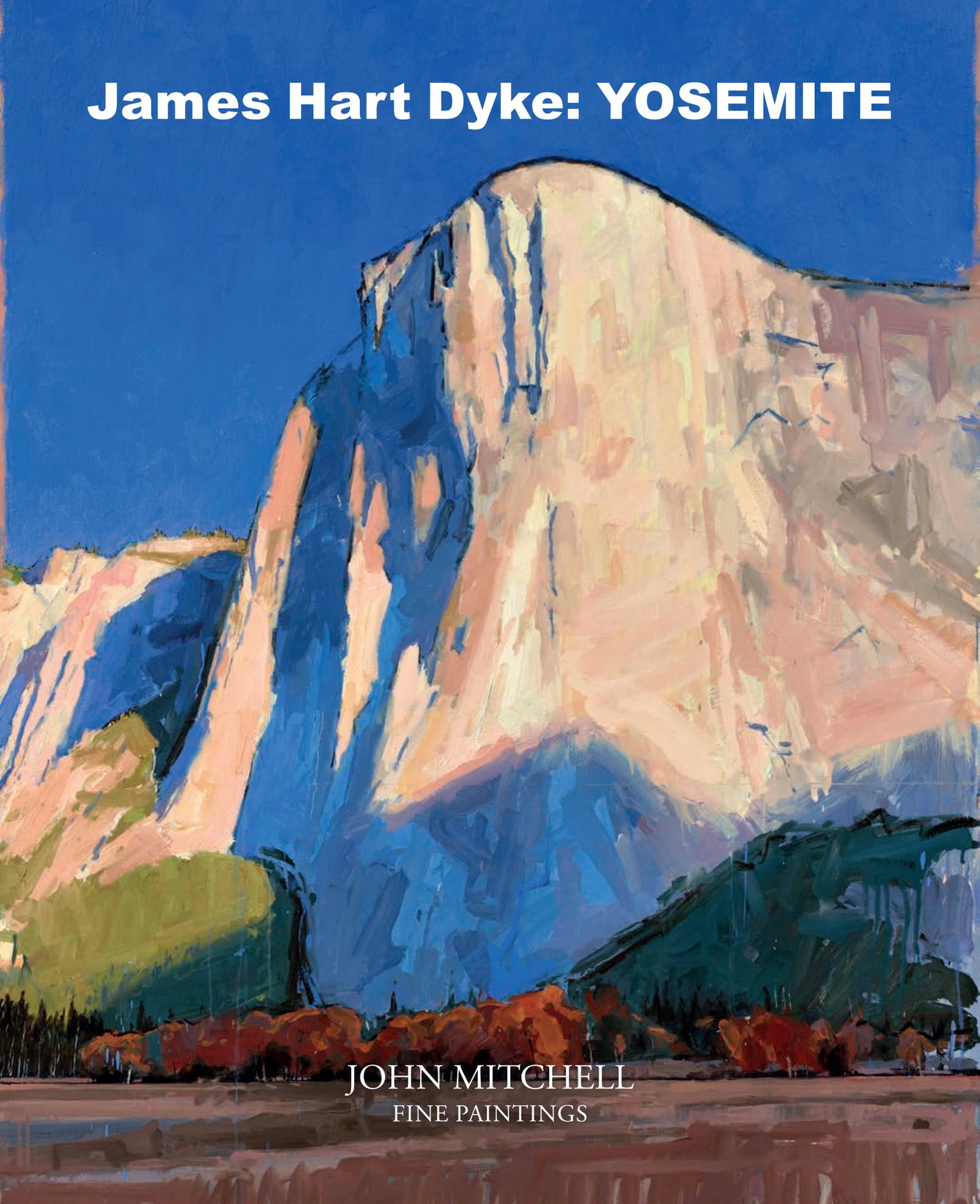


# James Hart Dyke: YOSEMITE



JOHN MITCHELL  
FINE PAINTINGS



## **James Hart Dyke: YOSEMITE**

**21st November - 12th December 2024**

Catalogue compiled and written by  
William Mitchell

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**John Mitchell Fine Paintings** have represented the landscape painter **James Hart Dyke** for over twenty-five years and hold exhibitions of his work nearly every year.

James Hart Dyke's work is centred on landscape painting, from the domesticity of paintings of country houses to paintings generated from physically demanding expeditions over remote mountains. James has also undertaken a series of projects including accompanying the then Prince of Wales as the official artist on royal tours, as 'artist in residence' for The British Secret Intelligence Service, as an artist embedded with the British Forces in war zones, working for the producers of the James Bond films and as 'artist in residence' for Aston Martin. These projects required him to respond in many ways and have allowed him to experiment with more graphic forms of painting influenced by his studies as an architect at the Royal College of Art. His portraits have been shown at the National Portrait Gallery and at the Royal Society of Portrait Painters exhibitions.

Aside from his many commissioned projects, James has focussed increasingly over the last decade on working in mountainous terrain and wildernesses. With painting expeditions to such places as the less frequented valleys in the Himalaya, Patagonia, Morocco and - nearer to home - in the Alps, James now enjoys a worldwide reputation as one of the leading mountain and wilderness painters of his generation. The search for sublime landscape has led to James becoming an experienced mountaineer in his own right. This has enabled him to trace some of Edward Whymper's first ascents in the Alps for an exhibition to commemorate the 150th anniversary of Whymper's conquest of the Matterhorn. Indeed, in July 2022 he accompanied William Mitchell and fellow climbers in a remarkable ascent of the north face of Mont Blanc in order to paint the setting sun from the summit. The expedition was a re-enactment of a climb made in 1873 by the first true mountain painter and climber, the *peintre-alpiniste* Gabriel Loppé. Loppé was accompanied by the writer and mountaineer Leslie Stephen, whose subsequent account of the feat remains one of the finest mountaineering tales to date. Working for over an hour-and-a-half, James became the first artist to paint from the top of Mont Blanc since Loppé's day.



Fig 1. Autumnal colours in Yosemite

## INTRODUCTION

In early November 2023, James Hart Dyke and I went to San Francisco. The highly rewarding exhibition *MONT BLANC: The Summit Paintings* had ended less than a few days earlier but to catch the last of the autumn weather window in Yosemite National Park we made haste and set off to California.

In just under a week, James covered many miles and vertical feet to capture some of Yosemite's magic *en plein air*. He managed to produce enough oil sketches from many vantage points on and above the valley floor to return with a body of work destined for an exhibition dedicated to Yosemite, a place which, in spite of its worldwide fame, has hardly changed since the great glaciologist and naturalist, John Muir, first visited the valley in 1868. Back then California had less than half a million residents and only 6 million of its 100 million acres were improved farmland. The Sierra Nevada Mountain range and Yosemite were wild country full of prowling grizzly bears and magnificent unlogged forests. [Fig 1]

We were lucky to be accompanied by a renowned Californian mountain guide, Armin Fisher, [Fig 2] with whom I have made many climbs in the Alps too including our 'sunset on Mont Blanc' ascent.

Together with some down jackets, James prepared his travelling paint box cum easel as meticulously as ever and the three of us arrived in the Valley one weekday evening long after sunset. Neither James nor I had ever set foot there. The first thing we did was to wander out on to the wide meadows opposite the 3,000-foot granite wall of El Capitan. Lying down on the grass, we waited for our eyes to adjust to the dark. Far above, one star after another came out of the cold velveteen heavens and then, as if by magic, some tiny lights emerged from El Capitan's vertical face. Armin, no stranger by any means to that monolith himself, counted what must have been at least five separate hanging tents, or climbers' portaledge and it was only then that I could really begin to gauge and appreciate the sheer scale of the Yosemite Valley. [Fig 4]

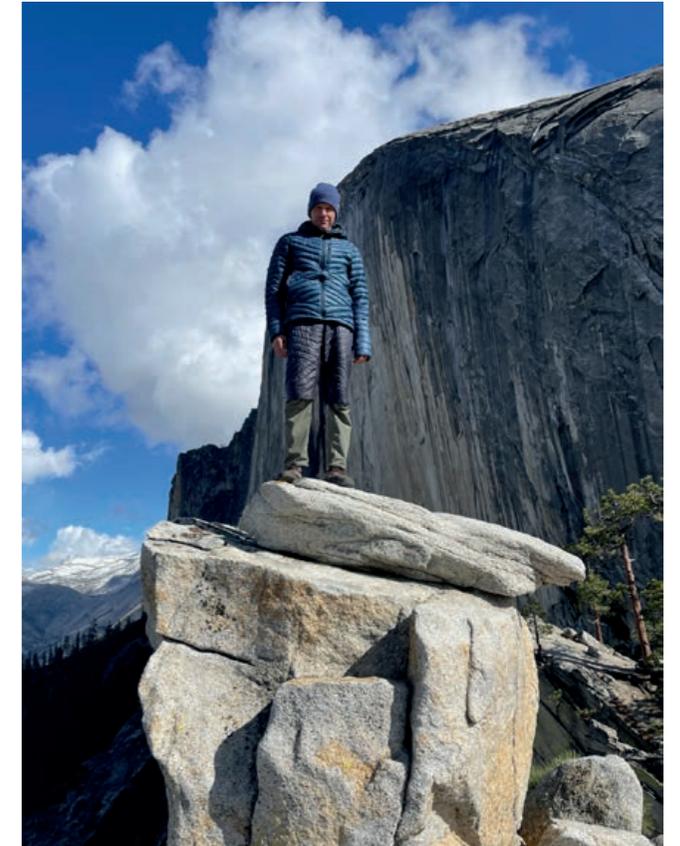


Fig 2. Armin Fisher at Half Dome

'No amount of word-making will ever make a single soul to 'know' these mountains. One day's exposure to mountains is better than a cartload of books.' John Muir.

Without the briefest of explanations as to its formation, it is hard to explain away or, more accurately, assume that a reader who has yet to experience Yosemite will readily grasp its proportions.

Situated in east-central California, Yosemite National Park covers a gigantic area on the central western slopes of the Sierra Nevada mountains. It stretches over nearly 800,000 acres, about two thirds the size of England's Norfolk.



Fig 3. The Grizzly Giant in Mariposa Grove

Now filled with sunshine, it was once filled with ice and walking both along and above the U-shaped valley floor beside the placid Merced River, it becomes increasingly apparent that glaciers must have once covered most areas in and around the park which lies at 4,000 feet above sea level. The Yosemite Valley with its granite flanks is itself about seven miles long half a mile to a mile wide, and nearly a mile deep in some places. Indeed, during the most recent glacial period, around 20,000 years ago, the Tioga glaciation as it is referred to, filled the valley to a staggering elevation of nearly 9,000 feet. Simply put, Yosemite's most famous features are the result of glaciers grinding away at the bedrock and 90% of the landscape is composed of Cretaceous granite rocks. From a scale perspective, the largest glacier from the Tioga period, the Tuolumne, stretched for nearly fifty miles.

In 1906, in an historic endeavour, President Theodore Roosevelt incorporated the Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove (the surviving stands of giant sequoia trees,



Fig 4. Portaledges on El Capitan

including the famous Grizzly Giant) [Fig 3] into the Yosemite National Park which had been established in 1890.

The story of how the president of the United States of America a few years earlier had ended up sleeping open under the boughs of that same Grizzly Giant, a 210-foot giant sequoia nearing 3,000 years old, is as remarkable as any other feat of conservation and it is all down to one man, deservedly known as the 'Father of the National Park System', John Muir (1838-1914).

Through a series of articles written for *Century* magazine in 1890 the Scottish-born American John Muir had drawn attention to the destruction of mountain meadows and forests by cattle and sheep, the latter he considered as 'hoofed locusts.' With the help of *Century's* editor, Robert Johnson, Muir worked to remedy this destruction, most visible in the depletion of the pristine groves of trees. Johnson and others suggested to Muir that an association be formed to protect the newly created Yosemite National



Fig 5. 'One must labor for beauty' Approaching the Diving Board

Park and its boundaries. In 1892, Muir and several of his supporters founded the Sierra Club to, in Muir's words, 'do something for wildness and make the mountains glad.' Muir served as the Club's president until his death in 1914.

However, it was Muir's *Our National Parks* published in 1901 which brought him to the attention of President Theodore Roosevelt. Reading about how the wild forests were vanishing as ranchers and developers destroyed the wilderness for their own uses and to make money, on March 14th 1903, the President wrote a personal letter to Muir. He asked him to take him through the Yosemite. Roosevelt noted, 'I do not want anyone with me but you, and I want to drop politics absolutely for four days and just be out in the open with you.' While most of Roosevelt's advisors thought that America's wilderness was too large to ever be depleted, Roosevelt insisted on seeing for himself.

There, together, beneath the trees, they laid the foundation of Roosevelt's innovative and notable conservation programs. Roosevelt referred to the landscape as 'a place of worship' and recalled: 'When I first visited California, it was my good fortune to see the "big trees," the Sequoias, and then to travel down into the Yosemite, with John Muir. Of course, of all people in the world he was the one with whom it was best worthwhile thus to see the Yosemite.'

Their camping trip became stuff of legend and although Muir boasted: 'I stuffed him pretty well regarding the timber thieves, and the destructive work of lumbermen and other spoilers of the forest', he too cherished the moment and wrote: 'Camping with the President was a remarkable experience. I fairly fell in love with him.'

Much has been written about John Muir by biographers and conservationists alike focussing on the role he played in protecting these wildernesses and there are many dozens of monuments, trails and woods dedicated to him throughout the United States. Born into a strict Christian household in East Lothian, Muir's vision to protect these spaces which he considered sacred came from a combination of his deep faith and crucially, a lifetime spent out in the open often in all seasons.

In 1912, in his seventy-fourth year, John Muir published an account of the many years he had spent in Yosemite. For somewhere considered by its author as his 'paradise', the writing in *The Yosemite* is clumsy in parts and the fifteen chapters are laid out in a guidebook fashion. However, wordsmith or not, the stories of the canyons and peaks he climbed, the avalanches and earthquakes and his numerous encounters with indigenous people sometimes in the depths of winter with twenty feet of snow underfoot are quite remarkable. Muir's communion with the forests, for example, and some of the trees he picks out to write about are still standing today over one hundred years later. And it is this level of detail, the powers of his observation which pique the reader's interest and yearning to visit Yosemite oneself.

There are far too many revelatory statements in *The Yosemite*, but this specific line seems most appropriate for what James Hart Dyke set out to achieve.

'But all this is invisible from the bottom of the Valley, like a thousand other interesting things. One must labor for beauty as for bread, here as elsewhere.' [Fig 5]

### James Hart Dyke in Yosemite

Pandemics and lockdowns aside, approximately four million people visit Yosemite every year. With that mind, and albeit going in early November, both James and I had firmly dispelled any notion that we were entering a latter-day Garden of Eden. Nonetheless, we were determined to glean as much knowledge as possible from Armin Fisher who has spent months in Yosemite every year since the 1990s and we too were prepared to 'labor for beauty.'

As the temperatures fell away in the dark meadow and we retreated to our tented village on our first night, I could not help thinking of how the first painters and photographers to enter Yosemite would have reacted. With little time to spare we were up before sunrise and using headlamps, we set off to go up towards the Yosemite Falls, one of the tallest waterfalls in the world.

Within half an hour of leaving the valley floor, and getting above the tree line, we seemed to have gone back into John Muir's world. The trails were well worn but devoid of any signage and we saw nobody. An hour or so after daybreak, once James was happy that there was enough light, he set up his easel and began to paint.

Perched a thousand feet up, we had a spectacular view of the waterfall and everywhere we looked there were the famous mountains and canyons. Opposite us and further into the valley was the appropriately named Half Dome, then Liberty Cap, Nevada Fall, Glacier Point and Sentinel Rock - all giants in Yosemite's iconography. To our far right and on the same side of the valley was the east buttress of El Capitan.

With a seemingly inexhaustible source of visual imagery, I was both anxious and excited to see how James, this veteran of so many 'wilderness' painting trips, would respond. In many ways his challenge was no different to the one faced by the first Yosemite pioneers who made their way on foot and mules, armed with brushes and tripods.

In one long sweep from left to right, all those dozens of paintings by Albert Bierstadt, William Keith and Thomas Hill that I had studied for years came alive. Indeed, when the clouds scudded in later that morning, the sepia autumnal colours mimicked the photographs made by Carleton Watkins (1829-1916).

Abandoning the Gold Rush a decade earlier, this early photographer first visited the Yosemite Valley in 1861. He brought with him nearly a ton of equipment: tripods, tents, 2-foot glass negatives, known as 'mammoth plates' and all the paraphernalia required to capture this kingdom of granite, waterfalls and trees. Watkins's photographs

were shown in a gallery in New York in 1862 and it is hard to imagine the impact of those first vivid pictures. *The Times* reported on an awe-struck public: 'The views of lofty mountains, of gigantic trees, of falls of water ... are indescribably unique and beautiful.'

One visitor, the famous painter of the American West, Albert Bierstadt (1830-1902), was particularly entranced and within a year, he too had made his way to Yosemite travelling across a nation in the throes of a civil war. Bierstadt's paintings of the Yosemite Valley resonated with many war-weary Americans as an untouched paradise. More importantly, these enormous paintings on canvases



Fig 6. James and Armin by Nevada Fall

over 8 feet wide incited people to protect America's natural landscape and with public support, in 1864 President Lincoln signed a bill entitled the Yosemite Grant. The bill declared the Valley inviolable, preserving it as a park for the public to enjoy. This was a preternaturally visionary move and well over a century ahead of any concept of environmentalism which remains such a contentious force in American politics today. Less than a decade later, for example, Yellowstone National Park was created.

Back up on our rocky lookout point with one eye on our watches and another on the incoming rain, we decided to head back down and visit the incomparable Mariposa Grove - one of the most visited places in the whole of Yosemite. And understandably so. Several hundred giant sequoia, annexed from the lumberman's reach by the 1864 Yosemite Grant, grow at an altitude of between 5,500 and 7,000 feet. The size and beauty of these colossal trees are unlike anything seen in Europe and many of them are at least a few thousand years old. Some of the best-known specimens such as the Bachelor, the Three Graces, and the Grizzly Giant look the same as they did in Bierstadt's pictures.

Wandering along the trails laid out to protect the trees' root systems, one notices the gigantic trunks of all the dead trees lying on the forest floor. It is quite sobering to think that those trees were once alive many centuries ago and will continue to decay slowly but surely for centuries to come. The biggest of them all at Mariposa Grove is the Grizzly Giant. It is the height of a twenty-storey building and half-way up its trunk, a branch extends out and straight up like a bent arm. This bough alone has a 7-foot diameter. Standing underneath this ancient tree where Muir and Roosevelt, united by their love of the outdoors, had once bedded down for the night, is a humbling experience.

As I watched James craning and straining obliquely with his sketchbook, I thought of the 'see the wood for the trees' expression and felt a pang of guilt for assuming he could somehow capture it all. Nonetheless, over the next few days, as we continued to explore the Yosemite Valley, the turpentine bottles grew lighter, and his paint box began to fill up with some beautiful oil sketches.



Fig 7. Half Dome from the south



Fig 8. James below Half Dome



Fig 9. Studio beside the Diving Board

On our penultimate day in Yosemite, we were blessed with clear skies and got up beyond the Vernal and Nevada Fall [Fig 6] before breakfast. Our goal was to reach the prominent ridge of rock which juts out about 30 feet over the valley on the west side of Half Dome. The sheer drop off below is spectacular and measures 1,400 feet and it promised to be a fantastic location with great views of Half Dome on the walk in. For me this was the highlight. We went through a sun dappled and silent forest before reaching a wide marsh and lake in front of Half Dome's rounded south face. An eagle rode the thermals high up on the mountain. At this point we were about halfway on our walk and climb which took several hours and we had not seen a soul since we left our tent cabin in the dark. [Figs 7,8,9]

Following Armin, we made our way along the steep and exposed final ridge known as the Diving Board, and then we were there at the foot of Half Dome. This was the most spectacular location we had been in so far as well as the highest and James was quick to set up his easel and get to work.

A day later, on our last evening, we were back on the opposite side up towards the Yosemite Falls to capture the sun setting along the face of Half Dome before it sank into the valley. James was working as fast as he could. That same morning, he had got up -again before dawn -to get in situ to record the sun rising on El Capitan from the meadows, the same ones we had laid down in on our arrival. [Figs 10,11]



**Fig 11. El Capitan at dawn**

We had come full circle and seen just enough of Yosemite to understand why it ranks as one of the most beautiful, well-preserved and most visited national parks on the planet.

Standing or sitting beside James as he painted in California was a great privilege and all in a sublime location which I sincerely hope these pictures will do justice to on every level.

**Fig 10. Sunset on Half Dome**



## CATALOGUE

All paintings were made using oil paint on acrylic ground. The support is indicated as well as the dimensions in inches followed by centimetres.



**Dreamworld, Yosemite Valley,**  
canvas, 63 x 94½ ins.  
(160 x 240cm.)



**Orange and green, Half Dome,**  
canvas, 34 x 22 ins. (86 x 56 cm.)

**Creeping shadow across  
valley, Half Dome,**  
canvas, 22 x 34 ins.  
(56 x 86 cm.)

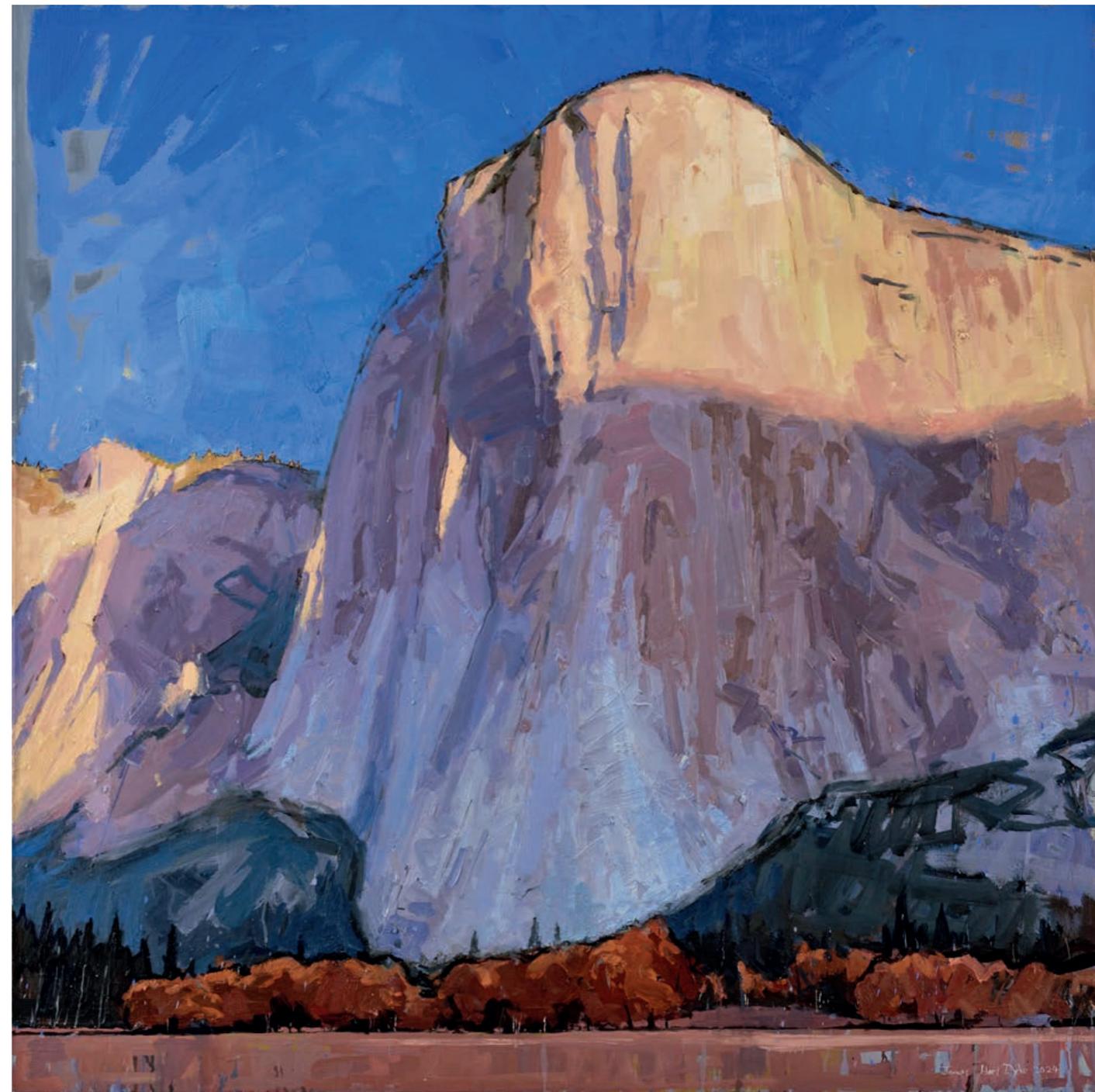


**Dreamworld on orange,  
Yosemite Valley,**  
canvas, 22 x 34 ins.  
(56 x 86 cm.)





**Pink and blue, Last light on Half Dome,**  
canvas, 44 x 44 ins. (112 x 112 cm.)



**Touching the Light, El Capitan,**  
canvas, 44 x 44 ins. (112 x 112 cm.)

To Infinity, Half Dome,  
canvas, 44 x 60 ins. (112 x 152 cm.)

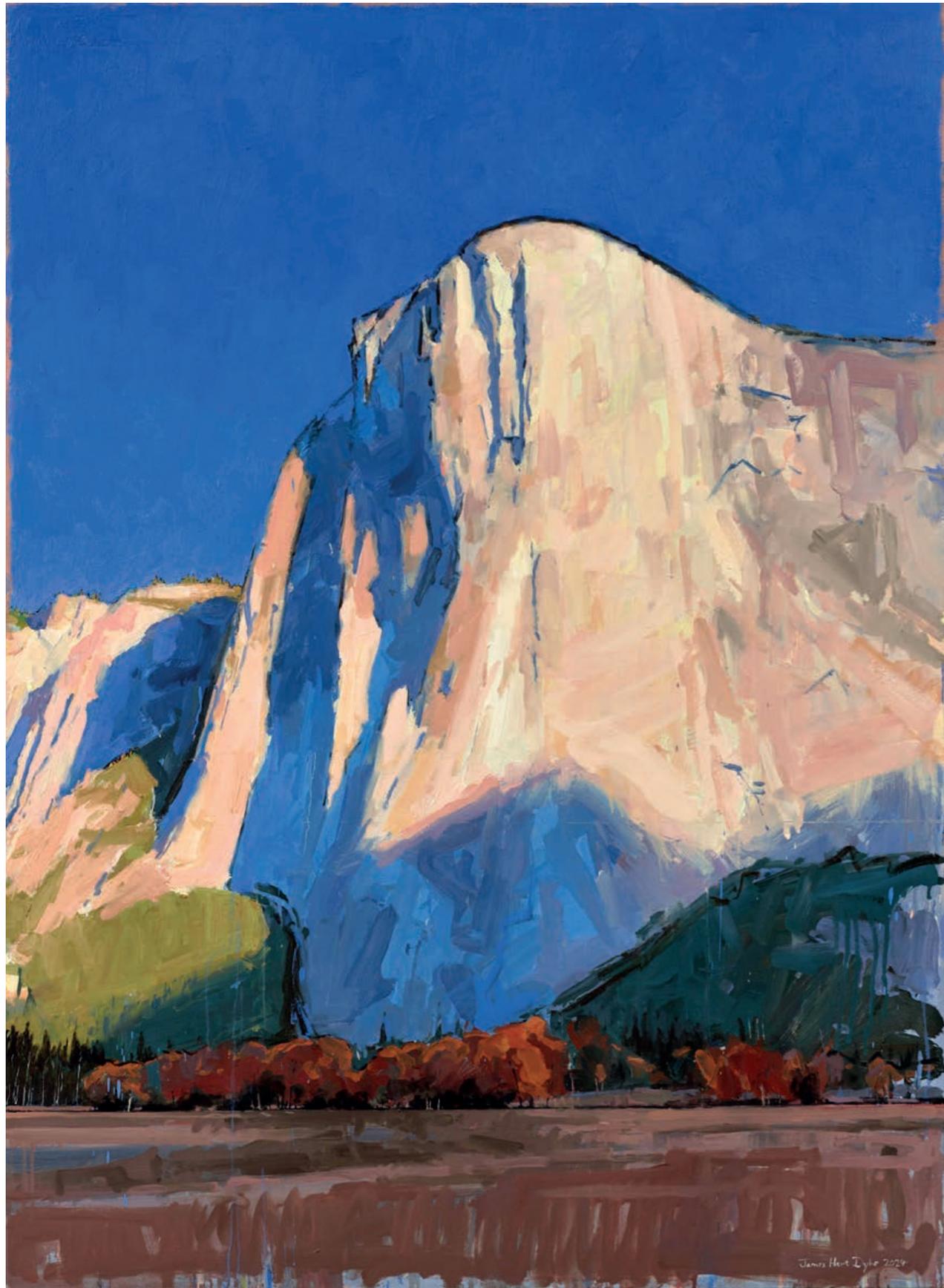




**Creeping shadow, Half Dome,**  
canvas, 44 x 44 ins. (112 x 112 cm.)



**Blue void, first light, El Capitan,**  
canvas, 34 x 22 ins. (86 x 56 cm.)



**To Infinity, Half Dome study,**  
panel, 11¾ x 16½ ins. (30 x 42 cm.)

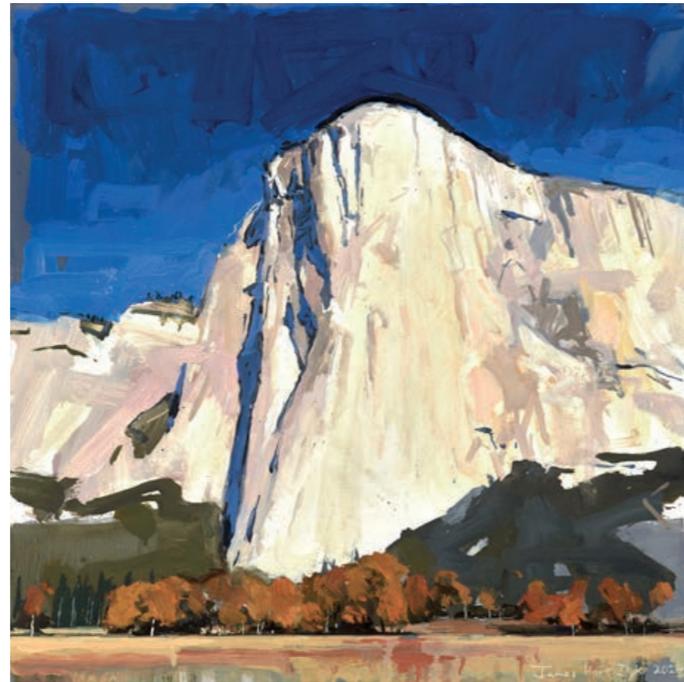
**Void, El Capitan,**  
canvas, 60 x 44 ins. (152 x 112 cm.)



**Last light on orange, Half Dome,**  
panel, 14¾ x 25½ ins. (37.5 x 65 cm.)



**Pluming cloud to horizontal, Half Dome,**  
panel, 16½ x 16½ ins. (42 x 42 cm.)



**Blast light 1, El Capitan,**  
panel, 16½ x 16½ ins. (42 x 42 cm.)



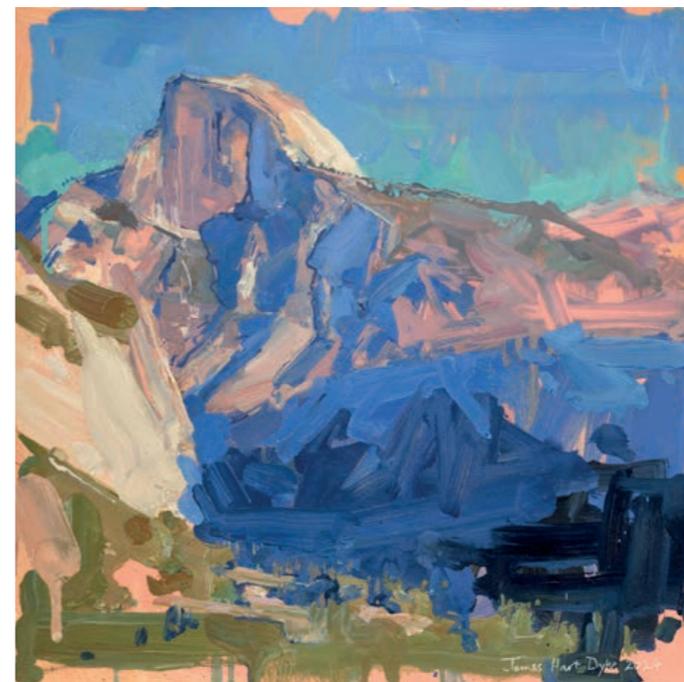
**Cloud to Rock, Half Dome,**  
panel, 16½ x 16½ ins. (42 x 42 cm.)



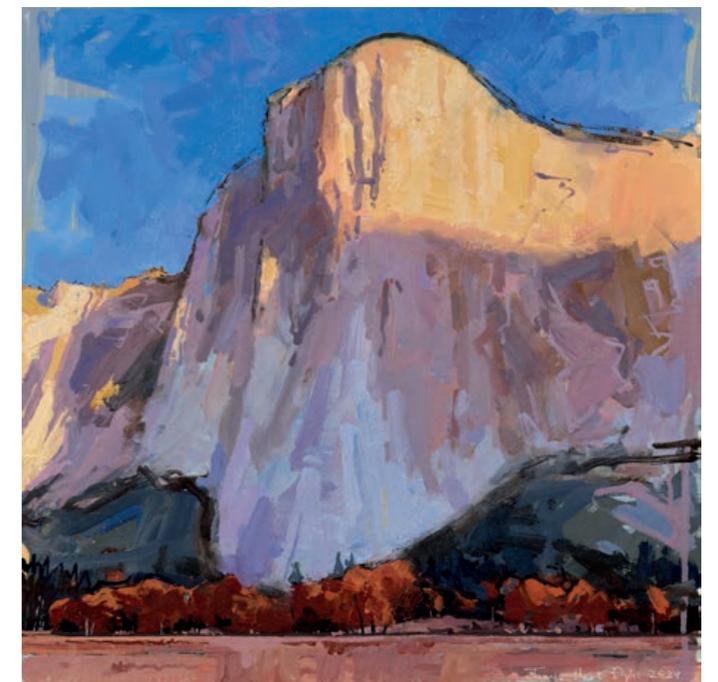
**Storm. Towards El Capitan from Diving Board,**  
panel, 16½ x 16½ ins. (42 x 42 cm.)



**Pink and blue 2, last light on Half Dome,**  
panel, 16½ x 16½ ins. (42 x 42 cm.)



**Pink and green, evening, Half Dome,**  
panel, 16½ x 16½ ins. (42 x 42 cm.)



**Touching the Light, El Capitan study,**  
panel, 16½ x 16½ ins. (42 x 42 cm.)



**Puffy clouds over  
El Capitan,**  
panel, 11¾ x 16½ ins.  
(30 x 42 cm.)

**To Infinity, Half Dome  
study 2,**  
panel, 11¾ x 16½ ins.  
(30 x 42 cm.)



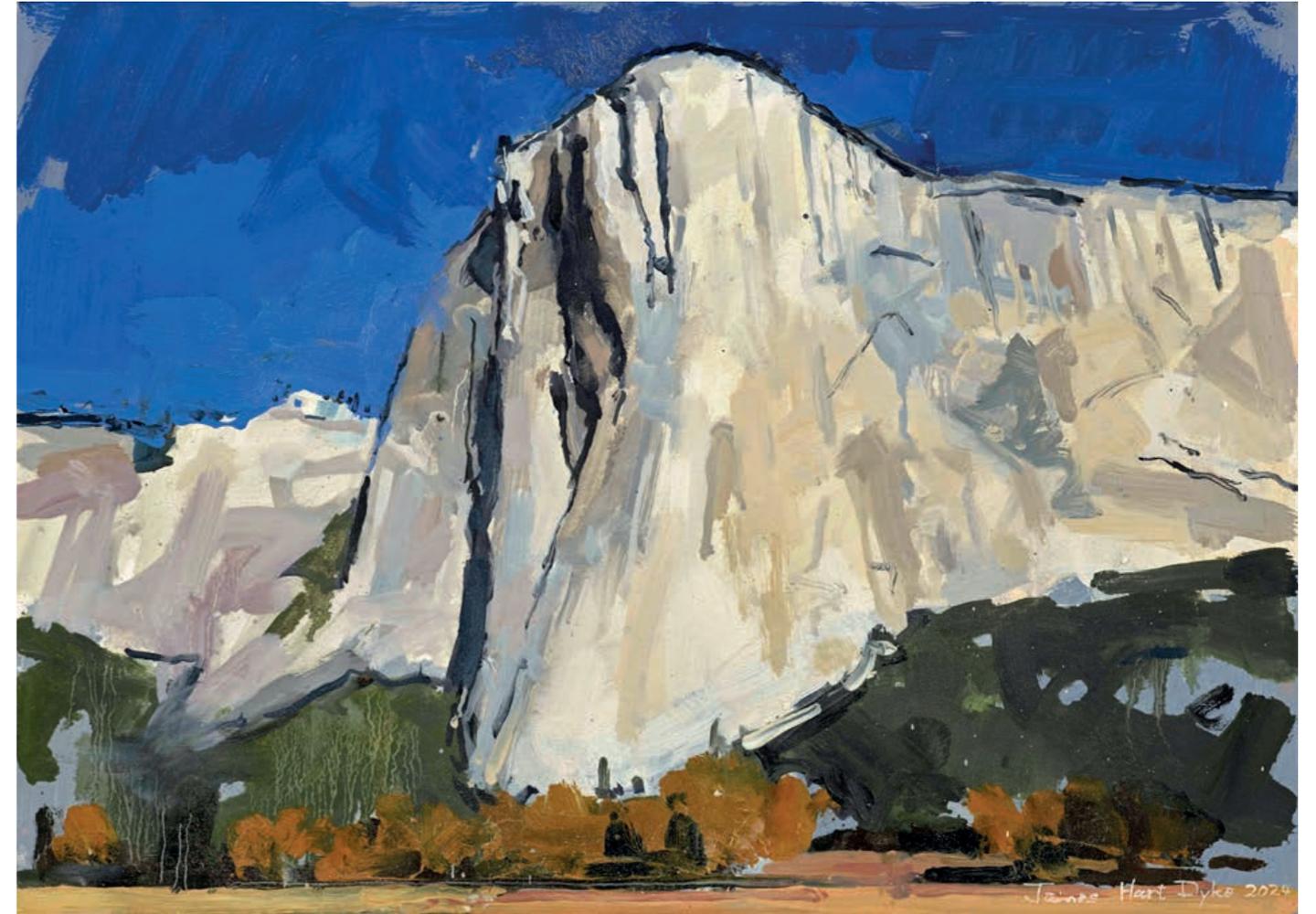
**Dreamworld, Yosemite  
Valley -study,**  
panel, 11¾ x 16½ ins.  
(30 x 42 cm.)

**Slab towards Glacier Point,**  
panel, 11¾ x 16½ ins.  
(30 x 42 cm.)

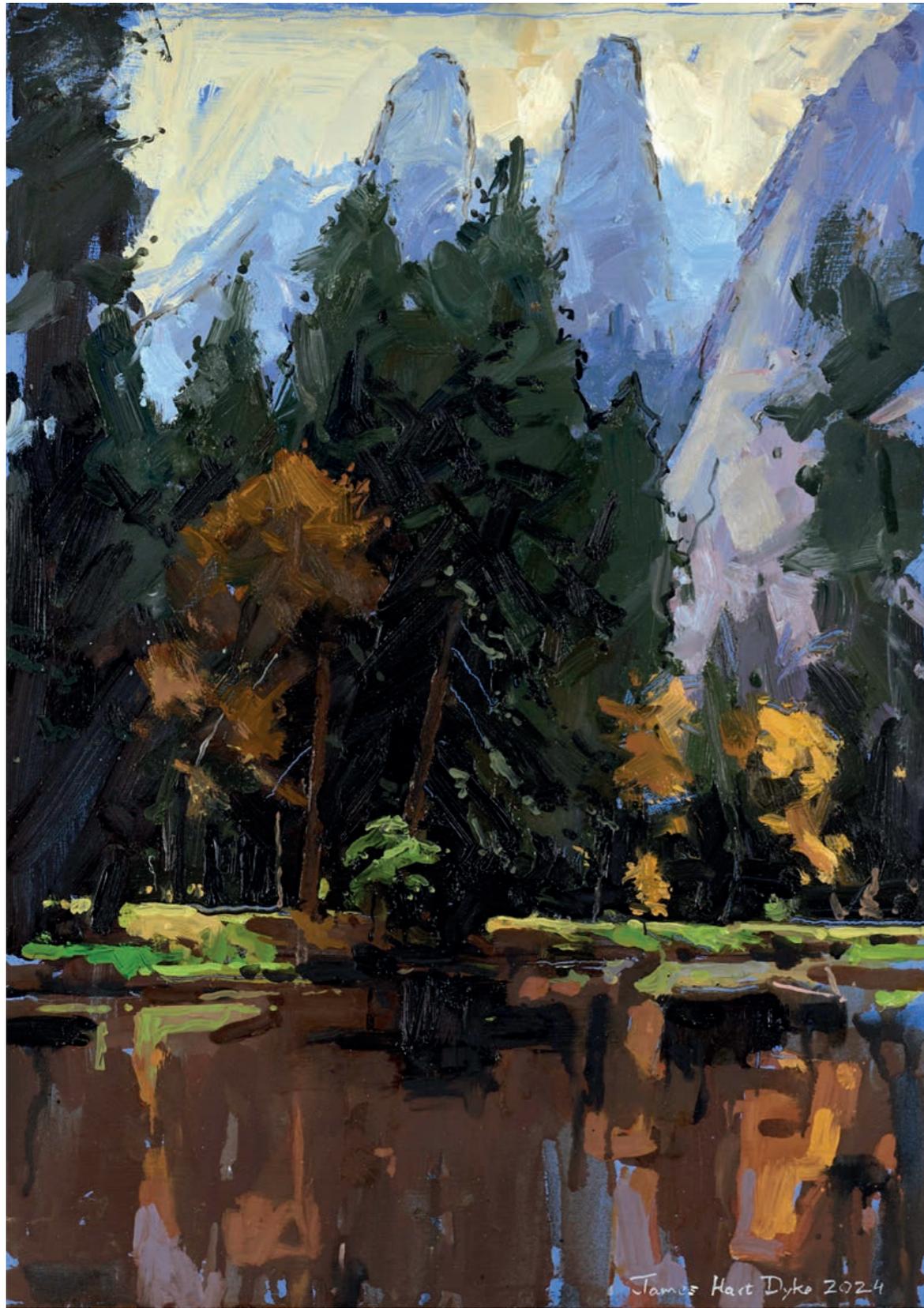




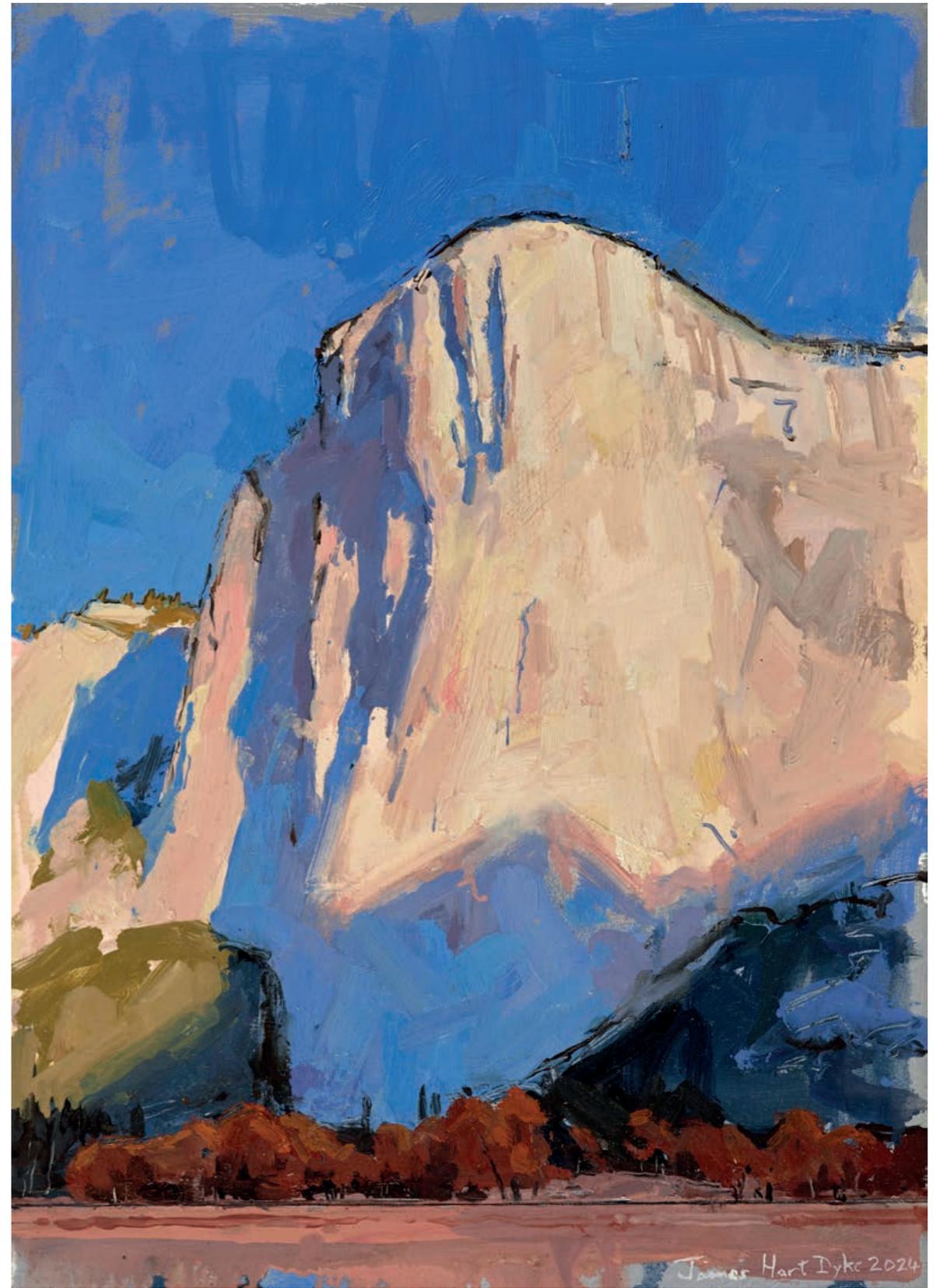
**Mariposa Grove 2, 'The clearest way into the Universe is through a forest wilderness.' John Muir,**  
panel, 11 3/4 x 16 1/2 ins. (30 x 42 cm.)



**Blast light 2, El Capitan,**  
panel, 11 3/4 x 16 1/2 ins. (30 x 42 cm.)



**Cathedral Spires on blue,**  
panel, 16½ x 11¾ ins. (42 x 30 cm.)



**Blue Void, El Capitan 2,**  
panel, 16½ x 11¾ ins. (42 x 30 cm.)



**Sentinel Rock, last light on orange,**  
card, 7¾ x 12 ins. (20 x 31 cm.)



**Blue and purple on orange, Half Dome,**  
card, 7¾ x 12 ins. (20 x 31 cm.)



**Trees below Cathedral Rocks,**  
card, 7¾ x 12 ins. (20 x 31 cm.)



**El Capitan on ochre,**  
card, 7¾ x 12 ins. (20 x 31 cm.)



**Orange and green, Half Dome - study,**  
card, 12 x 7<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> ins. (31 x 20 cm.)



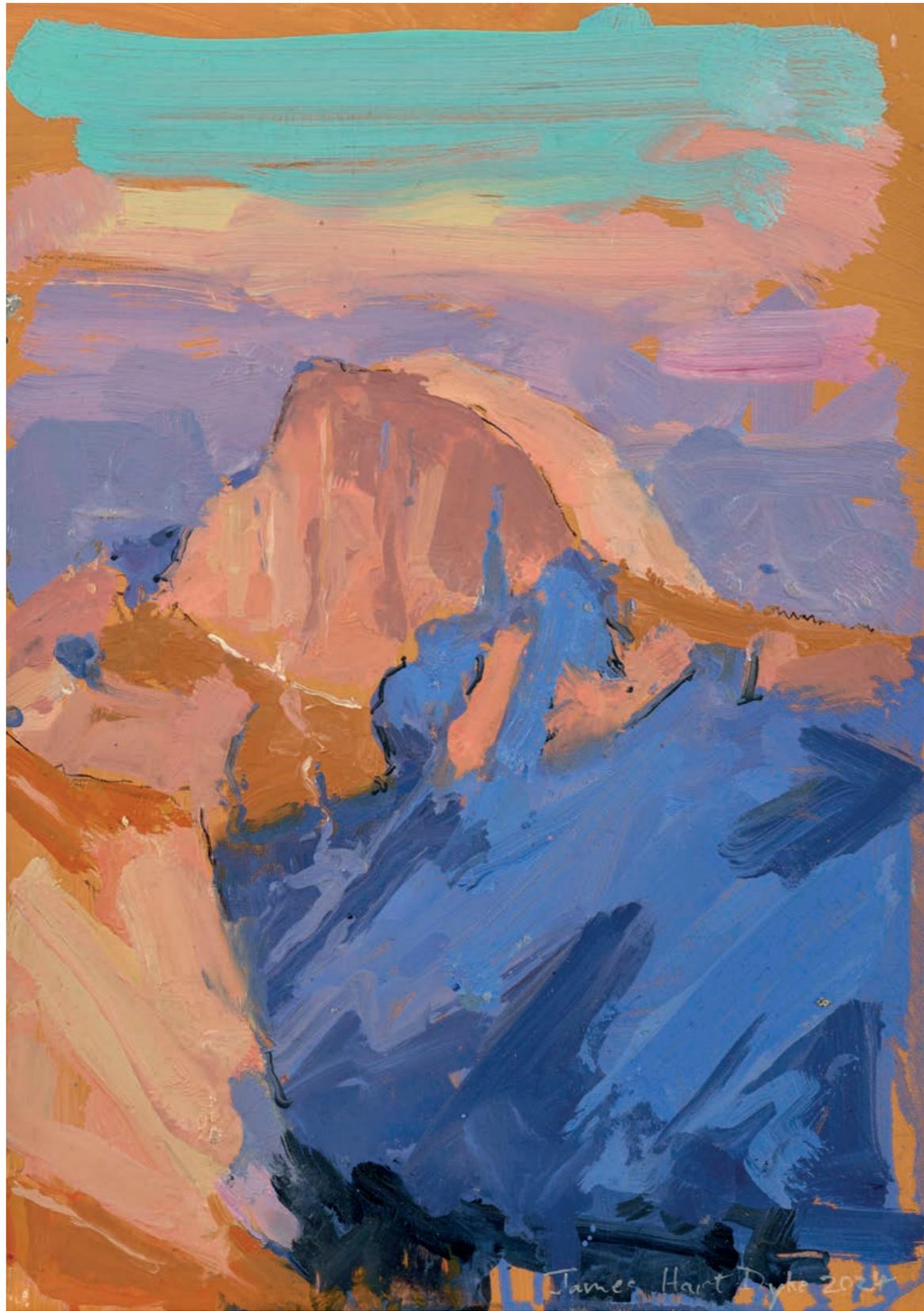
**Half Dome on orange,**  
card, 7<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 12 ins. (20 x 31 cm.)



**River to Rock,**  
card, 7¾ x 12 ins. (20 x 31 cm.)



**El Capitan from Diving Board,**  
card, 7¾ x 12 ins. (20 x 31 cm.)



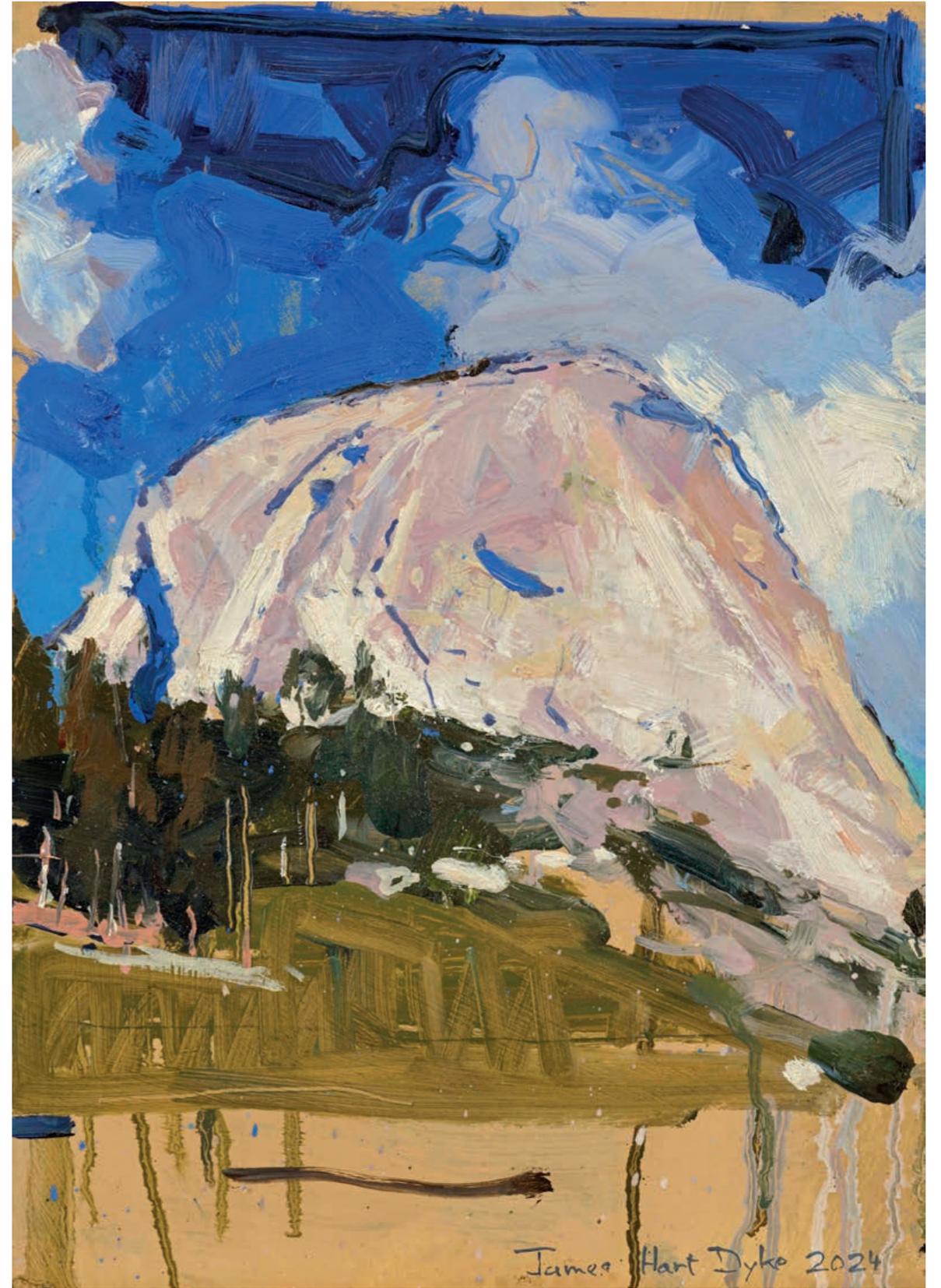
**Orange and blue, Half Dome - study,**  
card, 12 x 7<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> ins. (31 x 20 cm.)



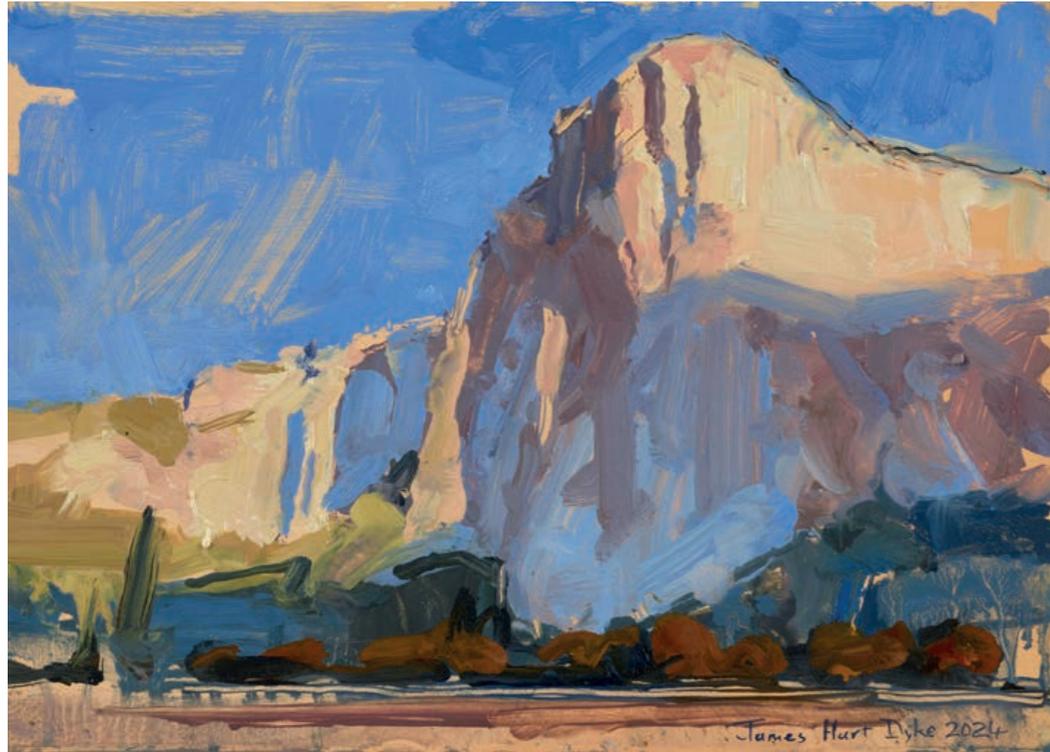
**First Light, El Capitan - study,**  
card, 7<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 12 ins. (20 x 31 cm.)



**First light on tree below Cathedral Rock,**  
card, 7 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 12 ins. (20 x 31 cm.)



**Half Dome and cloud study,**  
card, 12 x 7 $\frac{3}{4}$  ins. (31 x 20 cm.)



**El Capitan study 1,**  
panel, 8¼ x 11¾ ins.  
(21 x 30 cm.)



**El Capitan study 3,**  
panel, 8¼ x 11¾ ins.  
(21 x 30 cm.)



**El Capitan study 2,**  
panel, 8¼ x 11¾ ins.  
(21 x 30 cm.)



**El Capitan study 4,**  
panel, 8¼ x 11¾ ins.  
(21 x 30 cm.)

Mariposa Grove 1, 'The clearest way into the Universe is through a forest wilderness.' John Muir, canvas, 44 x 60 ins. (112 x 152 cm.)



# JAMES HART DYKE EXHIBITION CHRONOLOGY

## SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2023 **MONT BLANC: The Summit Paintings** John Mitchell Fine Paintings at Cromwell Place, London.
- 2022 **Recent Paintings** John Mitchell Fine Paintings, London.
- 2021 **South Downs** John Mitchell Fine Paintings, London.
- 2020 **North Norfolk** John Mitchell Fine Paintings, London.
- 2019 **From the studio** John Mitchell Fine Paintings, London.
- 2017 **Patagonia** John Mitchell Fine Paintings, London.
- 2015 **Whymper's Alps 150 years on** John Mitchell Fine Paintings, London.
- 2014 **Hong Kong Beijing** Delahunty Fine Art, London.
- 2013 **Aston Martin Centenary** Aston Martin Hyde Park Show Room, London.
- 2012 **Landscapes: James Hart Dyke** John Mitchell Fine Paintings, London.
- 2012 **Everything or Nothing/ James Bond 007** Mount Street Galleries, London.
- 2011 **A year with MI6** Mount Street Galleries, London.
- 2009 **War and cake** Beaux Arts, Bath.
- 2007 **Royal Tours** John Mitchell Fine Paintings, London.
- 2006 **Hidden Himalaya** John Mitchell Fine Paintings, London.
- 2004 **Everest Painting Expedition** John Mitchell and Son, London.
- 2003 **Painting in the Hidden Himalayas** WH Patterson Fine Art, London.
- 2002 **Visions of a Travelling Artist** John Mitchell and Son, London.
- 2001 **Paintings from the Alps** WH Patterson Fine, London.
- 1999 **Paintings from Nepal** WH Patterson Fine Art, London.

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2017 **Nature Mortem** Guildhall, London
- 2011 **Kibera, Soho House** Mount Street Galleries, London
- 2007 **Discerning Eye** Mall Galleries
- 2006 **Postcard Portraits** National Portrait Gallery
- 2006 **Summer Show** Beaux Arts, Bath
- 2005 **BP Portrait Award** National Portrait Gallery
- 2005 **Summer Show** Beaux Arts, Bath
- 2001 **Discerning Eye** Mall Galleries
- 2000 **BP Portrait Award** National Portrait Gallery
- 2000 **Painting and Patronage** The Banqueting House, London.
- 1998 **Travels with the Prince: A Fiftieth Birthday Exhibition Selected by HRH The Prince of Wales.** Hampton Court Palace
- 1997 **BP Portrait Award** National Portrait Gallery
- 1997 **The Artist and The Country House from the 15th Century to the Present-Day** Sotheby's, London



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