

# The Veneer of a Deeper Narrative

WILDLIFE ARTIST OBI KAUFMANN STRIPS  
AWAY THE MODERN WORLD TO REIMAGINE  
CALIFORNIA'S WILD FUTURE



BY JUSTIN HOUSMAN







## What if John Muir was a tattooed hipster barista?

The man with the long beard and tattooed forearms was squatting beside the trail and apparently trying to speak with a butterfly. By now, this was not surprising.

I'd been hiking with Obi Kaufmann all afternoon, and every few minutes he would stop walking, let the conversation trail off, then stare into the distance at what I couldn't quite see, muttering under his breath about something that appeared mundane to me but seemed to fill him with wonder. "Flock of birds over there," he'd point out, gesturing toward barely perceptible specks in the distance. More than once, he tailed zigzagging dragonflies until he could identify their species. He perched low on his haunches to investigate native plants or closely observe columns of marching ants. After the first mile or so, talking to butterflies just seemed normal.

I was intrigued from the start.

Kaufmann is a wildlife artist, poet, and amateur naturalist/conservationist based in Northern California. The day we met, he was days away from releasing his opus, *The California Field Atlas*, a 600-page, hand-painted love letter to the Golden State's wild places. This is how I'd come to watch Kaufmann communicate with wildlife: He'd sent me an advance copy and I was completely floored by it. It was bursting with gorgeous wilderness art, strange hand-drawn maps of not just places but also, somehow, of time—geologic events told as graphic stories. Wanting to know more, I followed him on Instagram and was struck by the thought, "What if John Muir was a tattooed hipster barista?"

I had to meet him.

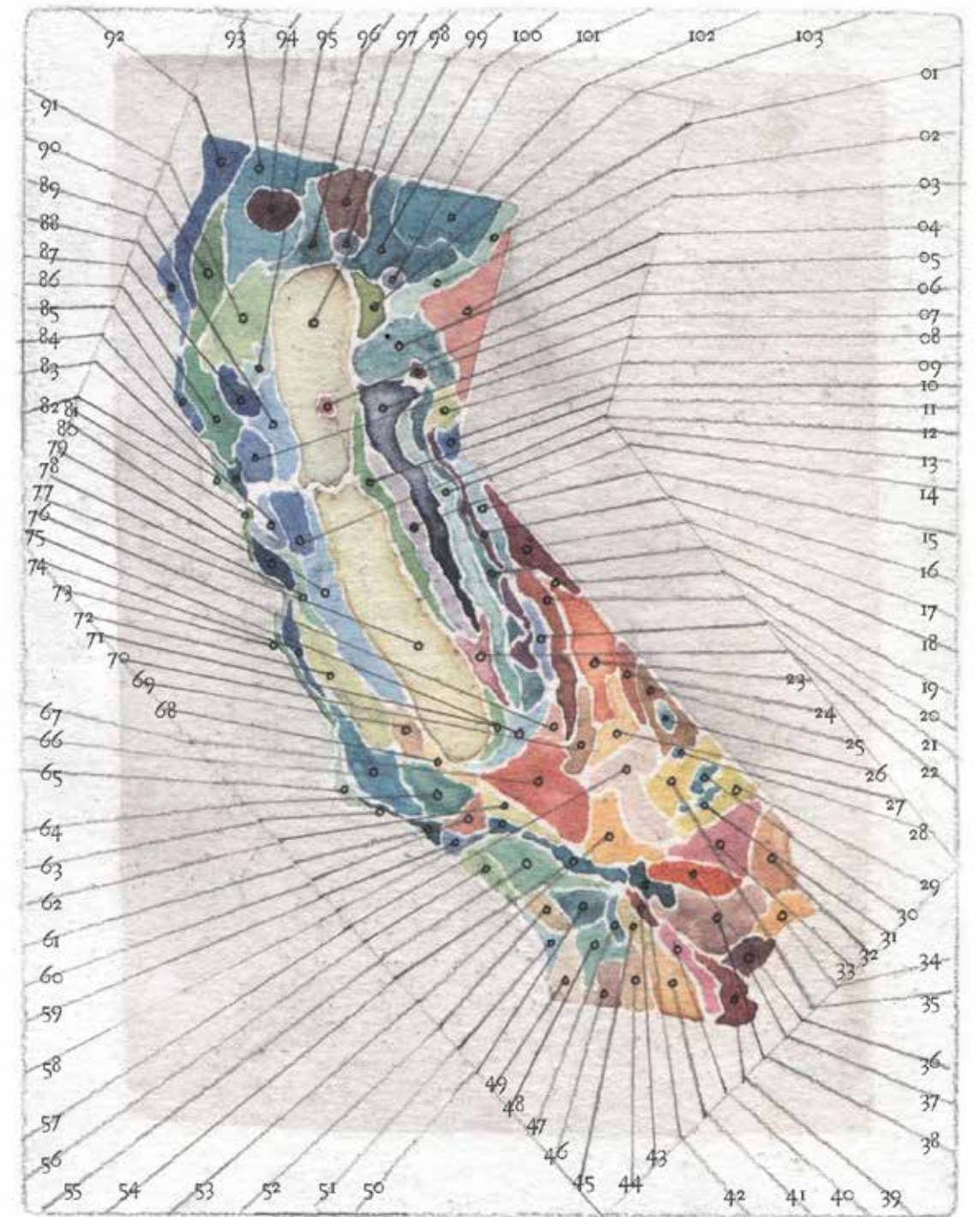
Kaufmann, who lives in Oakland, suggested we go for a hike through Coyote Hills Regional Park, along San Francisco Bay's mostly forgotten southeastern shore. I drove down from San Francisco and pulled my pickup into a gravel lot fronting the park's oak-shrouded visitor center. It was

dead silent as I stepped out of the truck. A solitary retiree in high-waist shorts and white tube socks eating a bagged lunch looked up from a nearby picnic bench, squinted into the hot afternoon sun, and gave a little wave. "Couple ospreys just floated above across the way over there," he said, pointing to a little rise beside the parking lot. "Stand still a minute and maybe they'll come back by." We both craned our necks into the bright sky, but all I could see was the black silhouette of a turkey vulture circling a patch of reeds. Then, seemingly from nowhere, this bearded vision was striding toward me, one big hand outstretched.

Kaufmann, who is in his early 40s, was dressed in denim jeans, leather boots, and a white button-down long-sleeve shirt under a thick cotton vest, despite the hot day. He keeps his gray-flecked beard long. The tattoos run the length of his arms, all the way to the backs of his fingers. His right fist reads "Wild" and his left "Life." He wore a round-brim ranger-style hat and had tied a kerchief around his neck. In real life, as in his social media presence, Kaufmann very much resembles the man who might have mixed your house-smoked bourbon cocktail at the old timey saloon last night.

Kaufmann immediately gushed about how much he adores the Coyote Hills. It occurred to me that he had merely invited me on a hike he'd already been planning to take, even though he must have hiked the place a thousand times before. Kaufmann is a big advocate for the sacred importance of small wild landscapes anywhere you can find them, especially places like the Coyote Hills, which are near urban hellscape. "My love of California and of the natural world is not simply focused on getting up into the High Sierra," he said, "but on finding wildflowers and hidden waterfalls in reclaimed spaces like this."

At first, I didn't know what to make of Kaufmann. I'd



COURTESY OF SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION (2)



never hiked with anybody so hyperaware of their natural surroundings. He was part wandering troubadour—describing everything he could see with carefully chosen words, as if he was imagining how what he was saying would look written down in calligraphic script. He was also part interpretive trail guide, explaining the geologic and natural history of the area we hiked through. And there was no bullshit about him. No pretending. He knew the name of every bird, tree, plant, rock, rodent, root, bug, and wildflower we saw.

This is the job Kaufmann has created for himself. With little formal training, he's become a dedicated wilderness expert, learning about watersheds, seasonal cycles, animal behavior, and geography as he put together *The California Field Atlas*. To do that, he's crawled over nearly every part of California, fallen in love with it all, and mapped everything in watercolors.

His paintings are at once shimmering with life but also inexact and haunting, like a wolf, or ponderosa pine, or granite cirque that's emerging from the paper rather than being painted onto it. Often the figure he's painting is outlined in dark, suggestive lines, with the color bleeding across those lines, barely contained. His subjects are wide-ranging, from Pleistocene creatures like mammoths and the short-faced bear to threatened coho salmon, plus natural wonders like Mt. Whitney and the Tuolumne River. Even extinct waterways like Tulare Lake, unassuming hills and

ranges, lesser known plant species, and bugs and lizards throughout the state get the Kaufmann treatment. He even makes strangely compelling paintings of geologic timelines and units of measurement.

When Kaufmann works plein-air in the backcountry, he carts his watercolors around in a large wooden case that looks like a heavy, ornate tackle box—not something you'd think would be pleasant to lug during long, high-elevation hikes. He favors thick paper and brushes, and his camping gear is just as heavy. On the trail, he huffs under the weight of an external-frame backpack, always in rich cottons and luxurious wools (he shuns high-tech clothing). An image of a modern-day Ansel Adams takes shape: a solitary artist, burdened by cumbersome equipment as if in penance, wandering the mountains, sitting cross-legged in meadows, painting alpine peaks or Joshua trees, whatever is in front of him at the moment, until something else catches his eye.

A wanderer and impromptu mapmaker since he was a kid, Kaufmann has been collecting data and inspiration for his naturalist art his whole life. He grew up in Danville, California, a leafy suburb east of Oakland, and spent his childhood clambering around 2,848-foot Mt. Diablo, one of the Bay Area's prominent peaks and a rare scrap of mostly unblemished wilderness. Diablo also boasts one of the best viewsheds anywhere in California: On a clear day, you can see the Sierra Nevada, Mt. Shasta, and the coast range as far as





the Trinity Mountains, 200 miles distant.

“I grew up learning the names of trees, mapping sagebrush mazes, and discovering fossils all over Mt. Diablo,” Kaufmann told me as the mountain’s yellow bulk loomed east of us in the distant haze. He stopped to look at it, staring in silence for maybe 30 seconds. “My whole life I’ve filled sketchbooks with drawings of animals and trees—it’s all thanks to that mountain over there.”

As a biology major at UC Santa Barbara, Kaufmann grew bored with lab work and took to wandering the hills outside of campus. There, he encountered the ancient rock art of the Chumash, the native Indian population of the Santa Barbara area. The faint paintings of mandala-like celestial circles and grids, the eerie depictions of humans and animals—which he describes as “abstract designs speaking to dreamlike connections to nature”—proved an inescapable draw. He returned again and again to the rock art sites, wandering far off trail, climbing over boulders and through thorn bushes, to reach spots not known to the masses. “Discovering those paintings is what made me want to explore a more natural world,” he says. “This art left behind by the Chumash hundreds of years ago made me want to make my own art rather than spend all my time in a lab; I wanted to live as my most imaginative self.”

After college, Kaufmann moved to Oakland and began life as an artist. At first he went through a phase creating moody, distressing human figures painted in dark,

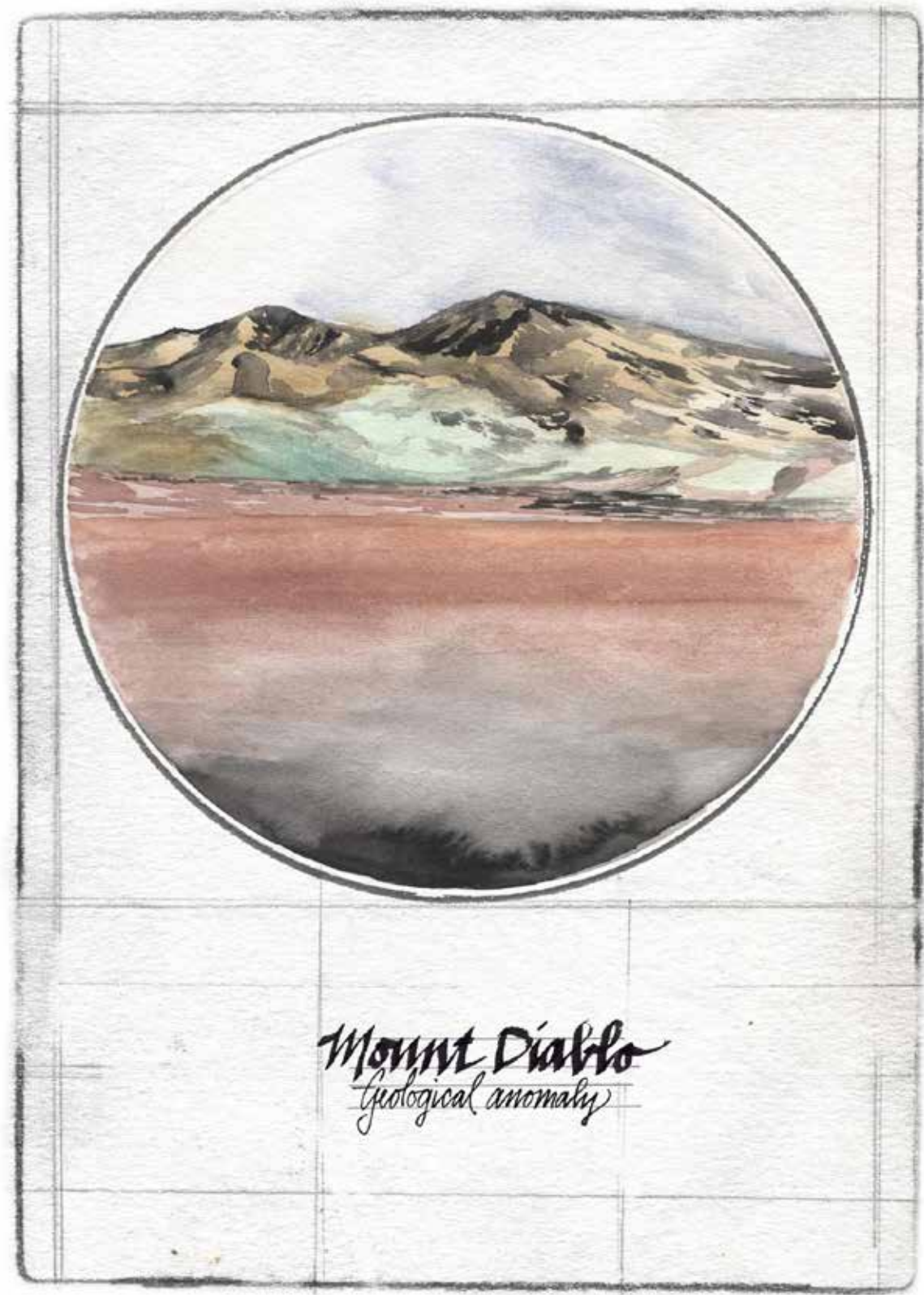
heavy oils and black charcoals. The Chumash’s spaced-out dreaminess showed its influence, but not yet the near-religious appreciation of nature. The wild world crept into his work around 2006, when Kaufmann began working with Juniper Ridge, a boutique line of naturally derived fragrances and soaps. The work put Kaufmann into the field, literally, as the company forages ingredients trailside in meadows, alongside riverbanks, under forest canopies, in California’s most wild places. While hunting for scents, Kaufmann began backpacking again, a practice he’d dropped after college. He put down the oil paints and brought watercolors—less fussy, easier to transport—into the backcountry to make art as he hiked. Kaufmann was a kid again, back wandering the slopes of Mt. Diablo. “Immersing myself in nature absolutely opened my mind and my palette,” he says.

Kaufmann wants to use his art, and especially his atlas, to peel back the layers of modern infrastructure laid down on top of California’s wild places over the past century. That’s why there are few manmade structures visible aside from trails in the ornately painted maps in *The California Field Atlas*. Instead, natural landforms like rivers and valleys are depicted without the roads that often run alongside them. His interest in how humans have reshaped the wilderness is limited to the destructive and hopefully transient nature of that reshaping: “I want to depict what the rivers will look like in 1,000 years, long after the roads surrounding them today have crumbled back into the dust from which they were



CHARLES MELLO







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made.” More than working as simply another wildlife artist, Kaufmann is trying something new here, to use his art as a means to reimagine what could be in California’s wild future. He is fond of the term *rewilding* to create a mental picture of the California he hopes his art can inspire—at least figuratively if not literally—by reminding people of the state’s unique beauty and what it could be if managed for something other than profit and plunder. He wants us to imagine what we’d encounter if wild places were aggressively preserved and, even better, reintroduced in places where they’ve been lost. This is why he loves Coyote Hills—a reclaimed slice of natural beauty, protected and cherished by the local community—so much.

“Every natural feature of California is alive and deserves an emancipated rebirth from old human paradigms of utility and extraction,” Kaufmann writes in his book. *“The California Field Atlas* is ultimately a map to some intrinsic part in the identity of every Californian; an invitation to those from here to understand what ‘here’ actually is.”

By the time we finished our hike and returned to the visitor center, the retiree was long gone. Two scrub jays perched on the empty picnic bench, picking at his crumbs.

I said my goodbye to Kaufmann and lingered awhile, reveling in the quiet before diving back into the chaos of San Francisco. I realized how easy it would be to write Kaufmann off as an urban pretender, a hipster enamored with an old school, naturalist style for the sake of fashion. But that would be wrong. There’s not a shred of irony on the guy, and unlike most people, who spend their days in the outdoors and their nights worrying over what the hypermodern future has in store for them or which new gadget to buy, Kaufmann is running around in the woods, dumbstruck by the beauty of it all, rushing to capture it on canvas to remind us of how much there how much we’ve lost, how much there is still to save, and that we can bring it back. With this guileless, spiritual fervor, he reminds of John Muir in more ways than just looks. As the sun began to set, I heard a piercing sky-borne whistle, looked toward where the old man had pointed, and saw it: the silhouette of an osprey soaring over marshland. It was a sight that once had been all but forgotten in the Bay Area, but here it was again, because the ospreys have made a comeback in this park, patrolling the skies as they had for millennia, before the world of man came. It was a glimpse, perhaps, not just of the past and present, but a long future, too. **A**