

# UNDER TROPICAL SKIES

GALEN MERCER FRAMES THE VASTNESS OF THE KEYS THROUGH HIS PAINTINGS OF TOWERING CLOUDS AND LIMITLESS FLATS  
BY JEFFREY CARDENAS

Pilots refer to flying into a cloud as IMC, or instrument meteorological conditions. It is the moment when land, sky and horizon disappear into a blank nothingness. A gray cocoon. Aloft in these conditions, body and mind send contradictory messages to the central nervous system. Weather takes control of even the most basic human instincts; up is down, right is left. Inadvertent flight into IMC can result in spatial disorientation, and disoriented pilots sometimes fly directly into the sea.

For a waterman, situational awareness in a whiteout is no less severe. Wind drives rain in horizontal sheets. Seas flatten from the force of the wind, and reading the water becomes impossible. Light is diffused as vision is obscured. The horizon is shrouded in a curtain of gauze, a reminder that we can never fully trust what our eyes tell us.

“It is only with the heart that one can see rightly,” wrote Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. “What is essential is invisible to the eye.”

Aloft or on the water, this is the dy-







namic of a squall in the tropics. In more temperate regions weather and reduced visibility often seem to approach with less intensity. In other seascapes fog creeps in; mist forms over the water. But in the tropics, convective weather explodes like timpani in a philharmonic orchestra. Towering cumulonimbus clouds rise as high as 65,000 feet. In an open skiff there is no place to hide from its wrath.

The squall takes command of the moment. Electrical discharge illuminates the cocoon of cloud, and in this expansion of rapidly heated air the convulsion of thunder is visceral. The intense power of the squall rips air molecules apart and rearranges them, leaving a hint of the sulphuric smell of ozone. For those caught without cover there is an acute sense of vulnerability.

But because this is a squall in the tropics, the intensity of the weather

can be as ephemeral as the cloud itself. One moment it is blind hell. In the next moment, shafts of light penetrate the gloom, and the world slowly reappears like an image developing in a darkroom. What was foreign to the senses is now familiar. Breathing slows, and heart rate moderates. In the blink of an eye the squall has passed.

There is a crisp quality of light after a tropical downpour. The brilliant optics of nature are enhanced by sunlight passing through individual drops of water. It is reflection and refraction in a supersaturated atmosphere. Contrast and clarity now define the visual world. There is dimension in the distant clouds. Shadow and light define the texture of the water. For anglers, and the fish they pursue, this light defines a life cycle.

Few other natural environments change their entire landscape with



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the regularity of a tidal flat. There may be only 18 inches of fluctuation on a tropical flat, but in this range of tide what is obscured and then revealed gives purpose to predators and prey.

A tropical flat at the beginning of the incoming tide is the vision of a living organic entity. The environment is raw and exposed. Flood tide fills the arterial pathways that are etched into the bay

bottom. The incoming water is a beautiful dynamic. With each moment of tide, the landscape changes. Depressions in the marl and grass bottom saturate and then fill. Crustaceans and other invertebrates exposed on the flat now feel the threat that comes with the flooding tide.

For predators the flood signals potential and opportunity. Bonefish, in particular, press up against the edges of a flat as the

water level increases. The first fish to gain access to the flat will have the best seat at the banquet table. Knowing this, bonefish feed on the incoming water with eagerness and enthusiasm; dorsal fins flare, tails quiver, and there is a subtle barring of stripes that radiate with each uncovering of a crab or a shrimp.

The predatory chain extends as the water depth increases. The bonefish that first

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arrived on the flat are now themselves vulnerable as prey. Fish that feed in tropical shallow water have evolved with an ability to adjust their colors to camouflage themselves from specific predators. Their scales not only reflect light in this tropical hall of mirrors, but new oceanographic research shows that fish have also developed a tissue structure that can scramble the polarization that many predators, including man, depend upon to isolate prey. Biology and evolution meet in the most unlikely places. And it gives anglers another excuse when they “can’t see the damn fish.”

To even those who have lived under tropical skies their entire lives, this urgency of change in weather and tide can still seem startling. As the incoming water approaches peak flood, the flat can become unrecognizable from what it was a mere six hours earlier. The fish are more dispersed as they deviate from following the established game trails imprinted into the flats at low tide. The sheen of high water becomes more of a quilted patchwork with softer edges. The turtle grass is still an olive green, a pallet of blues identifies deeper channels, and the light patches of sand and marl remain almost translucent.

If there is urgency at low incoming tide, there is almost a Zen calmness that one feels at the top of the flood. Everything stops. It is as if even gravity itself takes a breath.

More than 300 years ago, Isaac Newton explained that the rising and falling of ocean water was celestial attraction. Newton said of himself: “I seem to have been like a boy playing on the seashore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me.”

Newton’s “great ocean of truth” included mapping the paths of planets, the tides of the sea, the dissimilarities in rays of light and the properties of the colors they produced. These are all the qualities of our tropical environment. We are now the children playing on the seashore. It is where science is art.



# Conversation With the Artist

By Galen Mercer

For 30 years I’ve painted in the environs of mountains. Mountain weather, mountain colors, mountain light. As a painter, even a fully abstract one, it takes years to come to terms with locality, so it was a pleasurable shock when, something over a decade ago, I first encountered the expansive, sun-drunk space known as the Florida Keys.

Initially, my reaction was bafflement. Where I knew contours, shadows and substance, this was planes, radiance and quicksilver essences. Everything was quantum-different and in vastly higher register. How to enter such a landscape and make sense of things? It was unbalancing.

Athwart a gently rocking skiff, awaiting tarpon or seeking permit, my eyes wandered the limitless saltwater flats — whose range and sheer unfencedness recall nothing so much as an oceanic Great Plains — absorbing colors that evoke translucent glazes on some ancient Chinese vase.

There was change afoot every minute and, despite a seeming lack of variables, nothing but variety. Panicked fish exploded from thin water. Marvelous birds wheeled on thermals or grunted, unseen, within mangrove keys. Table-size turtles flipped past. Like microwave popcorn, clouds built steadily upward. Unpredictable storms, with rain veils trailing, afforded interest and occasional menace. The skies changed so rapidly that tracking them became sport in itself. And it gradually dawned on me, perhaps the stuff of paintings ... clouds allowed me to latch on to the Keys.