

Where Freedom Reigns

From his ranch in
Santa Ynez,
artist COLE
STERNBERG
envisions
a new destiny for
California

WRITTEN BY L.D. PORTER

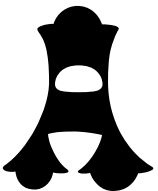
PHOTOGRAPHS BY SAM FROST

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The artist in his studio surrounded by his paintings (from left): *the douglas is nearly allied to the red squirrel*, 2019, mixed media on linen, 68 x 48 in.; *but what may we say of ourselves and the flock?*, 2019, mixed media on linen, 88 x 72 in.; and *follow him for days, without disturbing him, to learn something*, 2019, mixed media on linen, 70 x 62 in.



The path leading to the Sternberg family's hilltop home bears the title of the artist's latest project, The Free Republic of California. OPPOSITE, TOP TO BOTTOM: A new piece entitled *a caged bird meant to fly*, 2020, various woods, thermal transfer, and acrylic on finished wood panel, steel, brass, ink on paper, serpentine rocks, internal speaker system, 57 in. high x 31.5 in. wide x 23.25 in. deep; the interior of Sternberg's studio and his piece, *and flock to the headwaters of the Merced and Tuolumne*, 2019, mixed media on linen, 74 x 144 in.



large, weather-beaten tractor sits in front of the metal-clad barn that serves as Cole Sternberg's art studio in Santa Ynez. It's an oversize symbol of how the artist's life has changed since he and his wife, Kelsey Lee Offield, relocated here almost four years ago from Los Angeles. The couple now has a two-year-old daughter and an animal menagerie featuring chickens, pigs, a rescued mini horse, and a very friendly Saint Bernard. The entire homestead (residence, guesthouse, and studio) is solar powered. They're even growing their own wheat to make flour.

But don't let the bucolic scene fool you; in addition to the barn/studio, there's a photography darkroom, a silk-screening room, and a kiln for ceramics. It's really an art-making compound that just happens to be in the country. As the artist happily admits, having a ranch has "allowed me to think a little differently and create things with more flexibility. Now I can drag paintings in the dirt, leave them out in the wind or on a tree for weeks."

As an internationally acclaimed artist whose works reside in major collections, Sternberg is



Artist Cole Sternberg outside the metal-clad barn he uses for his art studio in Santa Ynez.



Photographer Sam Frost's portrait of Sternberg, superimposed with a work by the artist. Beginning October 16, in partnership with the Ojai Institute, an initiative of the Carolyn Glasoe Bailey Foundation (carolynglasoebaileyfoundation.org), Sternberg is slated to take the Free Republic of California beyond the exhibition arena with a digital event program and outdoor installations throughout the Ojai Valley. OPPOSITE: Nature exists just outside the artist's studio. Pictured is his work, *but what may we say of ourselves and the flock?*, 2019, mixed media on linen, 88 x 72 in.



known for exposing his art to the environment—especially ocean water—and goes to great lengths to obtain his desired artistic effects. In 2015, during a dramatic 22-day voyage on a shipping vessel from Japan to Portland, Oregon, he threw one of his paintings into the water and watched it drag alongside the ship. After retrieving it, “it felt like this miracle,” he says, “because you really felt the water in the work. So that started me off exploring creating environmental patterns [on paintings]; whether it’s the movement of the water, or light through a forest, or rings of a tree. All those things come out when you expose them to the elements.”

Born in Richmond, Virginia, Sternberg had a peripatetic childhood that stretched from Saratoga, California, to Stuttgart, Germany, during his middle school years. By the time his family returned to California, “I’d seen 30 countries and fell in the fountain at the Louvre,” he says. Pennsylvania’s Villanova University followed, coupled with a return to Germany for a study-abroad year, culminating with a B.A. degree in fine arts and business.

His next step was highly unusual—at least for a future artist: He earned a law degree from American University in Washington, D.C. “I was always drawing or painting, but I didn’t think [making art] would be a viable way to buy food or

have a roof over my head,” he explains. (Even so, he mounted his first art show at a bar during law school.) An entertainment law internship brought Sternberg to Los Angeles, where he finally ditched his day job to become a full-time artist.

As it turned out, his legal background provided the impetus for Sternberg’s most ambitious and far-reaching project yet: an exhibition documenting the infrastructure for a new country known as The Free Republic of California (thefreerepublicofcalifornia.com). Although the premise of the work assumes California has seceded from the United States, secession is not the primary focus. “It’s more about what a more enlightened nation could look like,” says the artist, who wrote a 54-page budget for the new country, recasting funds California currently sends the federal government for income taxes and directing those funds to uses he considers more effective: universal health care, free higher education, low-income housing, and more.

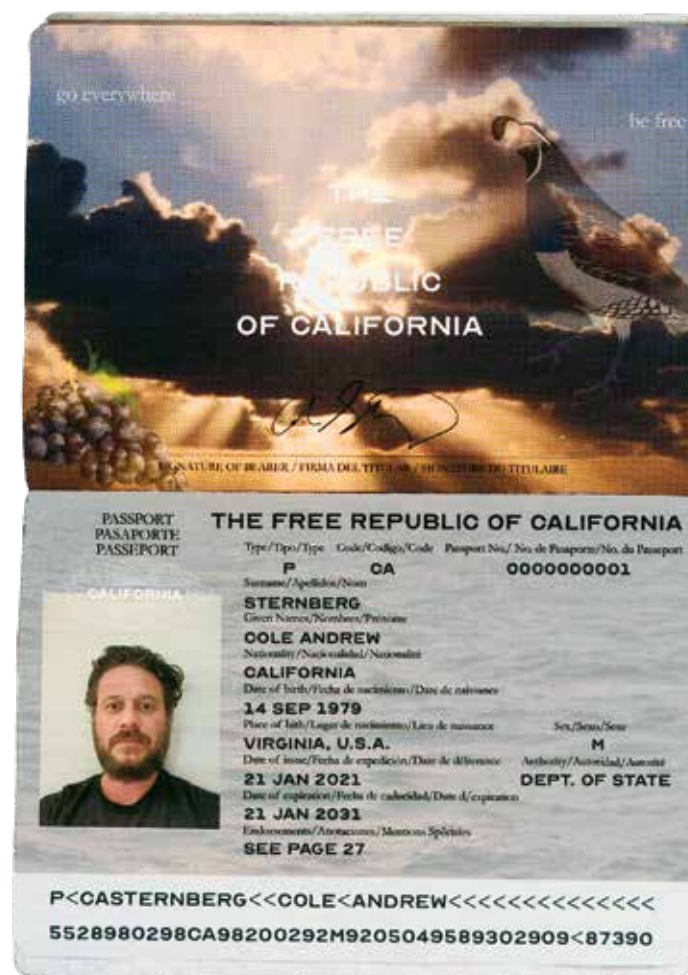
Sternberg also drafted a new constitution addressing many issues currently confronting America—a document that “redefines a constitution for modern times with dreams of peace and environmental stability at the forefront.” There’s no electoral college, the death penalty and torture are outlawed, weapons are strictly regulated, and



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THE FREE REPUBLIC OF CALIFORNIA

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Of course, Sternberg’s art figures prominently in the exhibition, including a new hand-stitched California flag, official seal, and letterhead. He designed campaign-like propaganda posters, lawn signs, and buttons. He even created a clothing line, and silkscreened 500 items by hand. (The first batch of custom clothing was stolen from a warehouse, but the artist—true to the cause—hopes he’ll see protestors at future demonstrations wearing contraband Free Republic of California T-shirts.) Works on paper blending his painting practice with vintage photographs of Yosemite National Park are also part of the show. The exhibition, “Freestate: The Free Republic of California,” opens October 8—virtually and by appointment—at ESMoA in El Segundo (esmoa.org). •

A series of pieces from The Free Republic of California collection of work. OPPOSITE, TOP TO BOTTOM: Sternberg’s latest project, The Free Republic of California, includes a clothing line with silkscreened slogans; a “passport” entitled *go everywhere, be free*, 2020, ink and acrylic on paper, 11 x 8.5 in.

