

VISUAL ARTS

Painting fast and fierce in the natural world

■ Cami Thompson dives headfirst into her landscapes

By Hilary Stunda
Special to The Aspen Times

"Painting outdoors is invigorating. I've experienced all the elements. It's astounding what can happen to you — bugs, wind, sand, dust. In Alaska, they tagged me 'The Drive By Painter,' because they'd drive by and I'd be doing something else — doing another painting," says Aspen artist Cami Thompson.

Thompson paints in the tradition of plein air, which follows Claude Monet's premise that all painting of nature must be finished on the spot. Thompson's landscapes mirror the very essence of nature. "I paint the scenes around me, concentrating on the atmospheric conditions that make the moment worth capturing. I have to dive into landscape. It's quite different. It's its own genre."

For the plein-air artist, the most subtle natural changes present the most difficult of challenges. A cloud passing over the sun or wind breaking the reflection of water doesn't allow the painter time to mix and match colors. The artist must first get the colors on canvas in rapid strokes, concentrating less on detail and more on the overall effect.

"Garrett's Peak," is an example of the technique. "That painting started on Owl Creek Road.

That's a big piece to stand out there and do. I worked on it about five hours and the temperature dropped to about 10, 20 below, so I got out the gloves and face mask and big tall Sorrels. It's always an adventure," she said.

The thick white paint strokes depict the snow-capped peak. "I use big brushes and at the end I bring in a palette knife," she said. The foreground dotted with blue-green trees is set against a pink-and-yellow-suffused sky. Her masterful use of the color white, normally a difficult and risky color for painters, shaped and filled the essence of the mountain.

"Beginners are usually told to stay away from white because it can be overdone. But white has blue, pink, yellow, and green in it and all sorts of grays, so it's never just white," she said.

Thompson has lived in Colorado for the past 30 years. She also travels to Alaska where she paints, teaches and where 12 of her works are on permanent exhibition at the Baranou Museum on Kodiak Island.

"I moved here in the late '70s. I made a promise when I started painting that I would always follow through with nature and wildlife because I felt so strongly about it."

"Field study is the way to go," she said. "Sometimes it turns out to be perfect outside and sometimes it takes hours afterward in the studio. At least you've established the light of day. Wildlife art has come and gone out of



Cami Thompson's landscapes, on display at the Vectra Bank in Aspen, reveal nature — caught on the fly. James Paussa photo.

fashion. In the '80s and early '90s, it was out. Now, it's coming back strong because we're losing so much of it."

In an artistic climate of digital imaging and computer-enhanced art, it's unusual to find such a prolific and successful landscape and wildlife artist.

"I just got picked up by a major wildlife collector from Texas. He wants me to capture the sense of vastness with the

dawning of a new day."

The painting "Cougar in the Canyonlands," currently on display at the Vectra Bank, certainly captures the reality of the scene. You can feel the soft, layered texture of the cougar's fur. The light and shadow at sunset in the canyon lands shift between burnt ochre and deep red.

Influenced by such landscape masters as Edgar Paine and Charles Movali, Thompson is

also influenced by the color schemes and effects of Monet, van Gogh, Rembrandt and Vermeer, producing works of intense luminosity.

"My impressions of reality come forth in lively brushwork and color. Desert color is different from the mountain color, just as winter skies differ from summer skies. Some days I'm having a van Gogh day. I'll see colors,

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Thompson

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sections of colors. Other days it's a Seurat day. I'll see dots. It's interesting because no two people see colors the same" she said.

But how does the landscape painter avoid being kitsch?

"Well, that's the trick, isn't it?" she said. "You can't teach someone to paint. You can show them technique. They have to learn on their own."

Where landscape painters like Bearstadt and Winslow Homer focused on the grandeur of the landscape and balanced colors, Thompson's vision creates a sensation.

"'Cottonwoods Under Basalt Mountain' is way too loose for most people," she said about an abstract orange and red landscape. The effect of the loose strokes produces the sensation of a crisp, colorful autumn day. The kind of day when colors pop against a cobalt sky.

Thompson's life has been dedicated to art, whether it be teaching or creating and ultimately selling her vision of the West. "I do portraits, figures, still life. I went to school to learn how to be the best artist I could. I majored in fine arts. I went on to commercial arts, graphics, interior design, illustration. But I love this area. I love the mountains. I'll focus on the mountaintops and get myself in the weeds down by the river. I love the water. I love the land."

"Canyonlands II" captures the shimmering heat and dust in orange, yellow and red loose paint strokes.

"I combine what I see with my imagination. I really want the light to come out of a painting, so I'll manipulate the color. On a gray, gloomy day, I'll kick in *some sunshine*. I sketch right on the canvas with a pencil. I do underpainting, which eliminates about five steps of what the old masters do. You do your paintings in a sepia color because oil paint is transparent. Once you have established your painting, you layer over that with thin transparent glazes. That's what I do in the studio."

"There are five components to a good painting. Density, depth, composition, movement and color. Color is the last one. The painting should work if it's done in monochrome."

But for Thompson, it's the varying subtleties and vibrancy of colors that she captures so well. "I like the way canvas bounces. You get a playback on canvas. A lot of people find it difficult to control. I find it exciting because there's a lot going on out there."

Like the ever-shifting clouds over a desert- or mountain-landscape, Thompson's paintings arrest nature in its state of flux.

Currently on display at Vectra Bank, 534 E. Hyman. Thompson's paintings have been discounted and proceeds from their sale go to a nonprofit organization of the buyer's choice.