



Night Brings Good Counsel, oil, 16" by 20"

"This is another composition made up from plein air drawings in my sketchbook. The title comes from an old saying that speaks to the fact that sleep can often clear one's mind and bring solution by morning."

ERIC BOWMAN

TRUTH, BEAUTY, AND HAPPY ACCIDENTS

By Clover Neiberg

Ask Eric Bowman what he does for fun, when he isn't painting and you might get a long, slightly self-conscious silence, followed by this sheepish admission: "When I'm not painting, I'm thinking about painting."

Bowman spends long days in his backyard studio in north-west Oregon, patiently creating richly textured oil paintings in a style he describes as "not as tight as realism, but not as abstract as impressionism." Sometimes he paints figures, sometimes he paints landscapes, and occasionally he does a still life.

On the rare days Bowman feels uninspired, he attends to the busywork that goes along with being an in-demand artist. "Sometimes the juices just aren't flowing," he says. "I'll find other things to occupy my time: billing and paperwork, running errands and purchasing supplies, talking with clients or collectors. I've learned that I can't force it, if it's not working. I need to take my time and let it happen naturally."

Travel and family time also factor into Bowman's creative rhythms. He's looking forward to a trip to Europe with his wife Debbie in honor of a milestone anniversary, and he's keenly aware of his 11-year-old daughter's swiftly advancing childhood. "They grow so fast," he says with a sigh, "and she's going to be gone so soon. I'm really happy that I'm able to be here, accessible for her and for my wife. It's a big blessing."

Although he's only been a full-time painter for the past decade or so, art has always informed Bowman's life path. He describes his younger self as "that kid, the class artist. Everybody around me said, 'Oh, you're going to be a famous artist someday,' which they tell anybody who likes to draw as a kid."

Despite Bowman's clear artistic bent, he did not pursue a formal art education. "When it came time to go off to college or art school, it just didn't happen for me," he says. "But I was always drawing. I always had a portfolio of drawings, and the first job I got was working in a surfboard factory down in Southern California, airbrushing surfboards. I went from there to a T-shirt factory, designing silk-screened T-shirts. I just sort of fell into freelancing as an artist, doing whatever I could get."

A family connection led Bowman to Portland, Oregon, where he quickly found a place in an illustration studio, and he considers that period of his professional life key to his development as an artist. "I was looking over the shoulders of established artists who knew what they were doing," he says. "I just watched and learned and practiced. It's all mileage; you learn by just doing it."



Although he enjoyed his work as an illustrator, Bowman began to spend more and more time developing his own style of painting. "Everything I did as an illustrator was really, really tight—lots of highly detailed stuff," he says. "About 25 years ago, I started painting in oils, but I didn't begin doing it professionally until maybe 2005, when I got into my first gallery. I transitioned from a totally different style into what I'm doing now. It took 10 or 12 years to make that transition."

During the years Bowman worked as both an illustrator and freelancer, he chafed at the dichotomy between the types of work he was producing. "It was frustrating, switching back and forth from doing the really

highly detailed commercial work to doing the painting I'm doing now for galleries," he says.

With a wry laugh, he recalls that the poor state of the economy at the time forced his hand. "The recession kind of helped in 2009, because art got hit in all categories, even in the commercial world, and my work fell off until I got to the point where I figured, if I'm going to be poor, I'm going to be poor doing it the way I want to do it," he says, so he left the world of illustration behind and began to devote himself full-time to fine art.

Bowman prides himself on being an adventurous and wide-ranging painter, a painter who can't be easily pigeonholed. "What I don't like

Autumn Veil, oil, 24" by 30"

"This painting personifies the changing of the seasons. I chose to keep the rider anonymous, as he emerges from the shadows, creating a sense of mystery, moving beneath the canopy of fall foliage."

are safe paintings," he says. "A safe painting would be something that's really well thought out, plotted and pre-planned and carefully rendered. What I like are happy accidents; I like surprises. I like to go out painting outdoors, taking my gear with me and just driving down the road looking for something that sparks my interest.

"I never paint exactly what I'm seeing, either. I like to move things around, use some imagination. Again, the safe painting I think is



Ethereal Light, oil, 20" by 20"

"This studio painting was executed from a smaller plein air sketch done in the spring, along Sandy River near Troutdale, Oregon."

the one that doesn't have any input from the artist; they're just copying exactly what they're looking at. Nature isn't ever perfect. It always needs some help to make a pleasing picture. You've got to move some things around, be creative and inventive. I like to take the painting where it wants to go, and not be heavy-handed with it."

Bowman's openness to experimentation has led him to embrace

multiple genres. "I'm fifty-fifty on figures and landscapes," he says. "It can be tough. A lot of galleries want one or the other. I like the galleries that are open to taking whatever I produce."

Bowman finds that the four-season climate of Oregon helps him set his creative calendar. "If it's summertime, with favorable weather, I'm usually outdoors painting more," he says. "In the wintertime, especially when I'm snowed in, I'm painting more figures in the studio. It kind of helps, living in the climate we do up here in the Northwest, to have diver-

sity in subject so I can take advantage of the seasons."

Although Bowman has come to love the landscapes of the Pacific Northwest, in particular the coastal areas, he remains drawn to the landscapes of his youth. "I get accused of looking like a Southern California painter," he says with a laugh. "I have an affinity for the desert and the coast. Growing up in Southern California, that's where we spent a lot of time, so my color palette kind of comes from down there. I miss the trees. I miss eucalyptus trees and sycamore trees."



Nostalgia is a theme to which Bowman often returns, and he notes that a sense of nostalgia is part of what drew him to Western art. His tone grows dreamy as he says, “My taste for the Western genre stems from the first half of the twentieth century. In the 1940s when they used to do the old Western serials, there’s a certain style of Stetson cowboy hat they wore—kind of tall, broad brim. The whole vibe of that time period was cool. I’m a very nostalgic person; I like old things. I like the romantic version of the cowboy. It feeds into my aesthetic, my design sense.”

Bowman’s attraction to Western art also has received a boost from the increasingly inclusive nature of the genre. “Years ago, I thought I’d never get into Western art,” he says.

“The emphasis was really on a lot of high detail and historical accuracy. You’re familiar with the Cowboy Artists of America? A lot of those guys were former illustrators back in the ‘40s, ‘50s, and ‘60s. When that group was formed in the 1970s, they brought that aesthetic with them. They did a lot of historical research, a lot of accuracy to detail.

“That’s fine, but my style of painting is looser. I’m interested in the Impressionists, the people who paint bolder and looser, with more emphasis on design and less emphasis on detail. So I was thinking the direction I’m going won’t work with the cowboy scene. But tastes and times have changed, and there’s a more open, more welcoming audience for Western genre paintings that have more of a contemporary feel to them,

Drifting, oil, 20" by 24"

“This painting was composed from drawings in my sketchbook. I always take my sketchbook with me, when painting outdoors, to design compositions, and sometimes I’ll combine different drawings to create an imagined scene in the studio.”

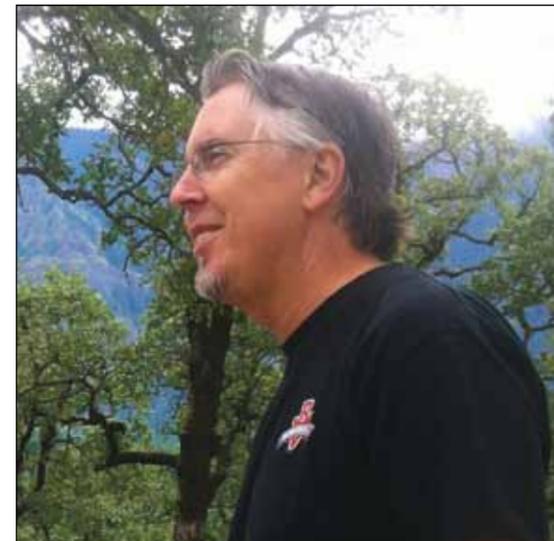
so I don’t have to go out to the local historical society and track down the exact kind of tack that was on this horse in a scene from the 1880s. I can put the emphasis on a bolder painting that has simpler shapes and less detail but still be in the Western category, which I’m really enjoying doing. It’s kind of a new subject matter for me, but I’m really loving it. It’s something I think I’ll do a lot of in the coming years. It’s been getting quite favorable reception from buyers and galleries, and that makes me happy.”



Desert Sentinel, oil, 16" by 20"

“My parents live in Mexico, where my grandparents often traveled, and I have always had an affinity for that area and its colorful past. This painting depicts a lone guard keeping watch during the time of the Mexican Revolution 100 years ago.”

Asked to reflect on his career as a whole and his sense of his place in the world as an artist, Bowman grows quiet and philosophical. “I’m a big believer in truth and beauty,” he finally says. “There’s ugliness and controversy and angst in the world, even in the world of art. I want to promote things that are beautiful. I’m drawn to landscapes that are beautiful, people doing positive things, the iconography of the hero, wild nature, the beauty that I see out there. That’s what I like to personify in painting.”



Clover Neiberg is a writer living in Portland, Oregon.