



"Aspen Valley Winter," oil, 12" × 16"

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## THE ARTS

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# THE LURE OF THE LANDSCAPE

*For David Ballew, art is a constant search  
and a healthy appreciation for the mysterious.*

*By Gussie Fauntleroy*

Fifty million years ago an iridescent-winged dragonfly alighted, for the final time in its short life, on a mud flat beside a prehistoric stream. The mud hardened to stone and one wing remained there, over the eons. The fossil ended up on David Ballew's living room table, the ancient insect's wing pattern still visible.

More recently, Ballew was walking through the aspens above Santa Fe when the quality of light through the shimmering leaves made him stop short. While the moment of exquisite beauty was fresh, he opened his easel and began to paint. The

artist, who has loved rocks and drawing all his life, sees a link between the two events.

"What's fascinating is that these are things that usually last a few hours or a few weeks, and here they are 50 or 100 million years later," he says, setting the fossilized dragonfly wing down beside a set of 300 million year old lizard footprints in sandstone. "For me, paintings are fossils too—they're the traces left from the interaction of an artist with his subject."

Responding to the feeling of awe that stirs at the sight of something mysterious or even mundanely beautiful, and catching

the freshness of that moment in paint, is what great artists do, Ballew asserts. Thoughtful and unpretentious, the artist won't include himself in that category, although his striking, often intimate oil on canvas landscapes attest to a level of mastery beyond what he may acknowledge.

Instead, Ballew places himself in the position of perpetual student. An attitude of always being open to learning and change is necessary, he believes, if one is to unfold one's potential as an artist.

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*"Summer Evening Badlands", oil, 22" x 28"*

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*"Winter Morning Moon", oil, 14" x 18"*

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"I could spend the next 40 years at it and not achieve anywhere near what I see is possible," Ballew remarks of his painting. "A Sufi teacher once said that the purpose of life is like the horizon: when you reach the point you've been aiming for, a whole new vista opens up."

Ballew constantly refines his skills through disciplined dedication, generally spending six days a week at the easel. For small paintings he works plein-air, aiming for the vitality and authenticity that comes with being on location. On larger pieces he works in the studio, but quickly. Otherwise, he notes, the clear energy of the initial gesture gets bogged down in the reworking of details.

As he talks, Ballew sprinkles his conversation liberally with the words of other artists, poets, philosophers, and spiritual teachers. Many have walked the path on which he finds himself, and spoken of what they've learned in ways that resonate deeply with his own experience.

"If you want to know the road up the mountain, you must ask the man who goes back and forth on it," he offers, smiling, quoting a Buddhist text.

For the same reasons, Ballew spends as much time as possible with artists whose work he greatly admires, including Irby Brown, George Carlson, Michael Lynch, Mark Daily, and Ned Jacob. His teachers stretch back in time as well, through a long lineage of painters whose works fill the books on his shelves.

One of the most important things he can learn from other artists, he believes, is not a formula for putting down paint, but a way of seeing. His goal is a deeper, clearer vision, which he conceives as the first and most important step toward true artistic expression.

Clear vision in life is also a personal goal of the artist, who has spent many years studying a variety of



*"Autumn Reflections", oil, 30" x 40"*

spiritual traditions, and who practices meditation and contemplation. And while these activities may seem far removed from brush strokes on canvas, Ballew is constantly intrigued and inspired by parallels between the two.

"Painting is very much a language, in the same way that poetry and music are. And you can't expect to speak eloquently unless you know the language. The intuitive aspect of art is wide open, but the grammar, the vocabulary, is something that has to be studied and acquired over time," he professes.

"I find more and more that my meditation and art teachers are all using the same language. I feel like the years I've put into opening to that language through meditation are serving me in very profound ways as a painter. Not on the practical side, but in the way I approach painting."

That approach includes humility, study and the attention focused in the moment of creation. It also means constant searching, a belief in the importance of process over product, and a healthy appreciation for the mysterious.

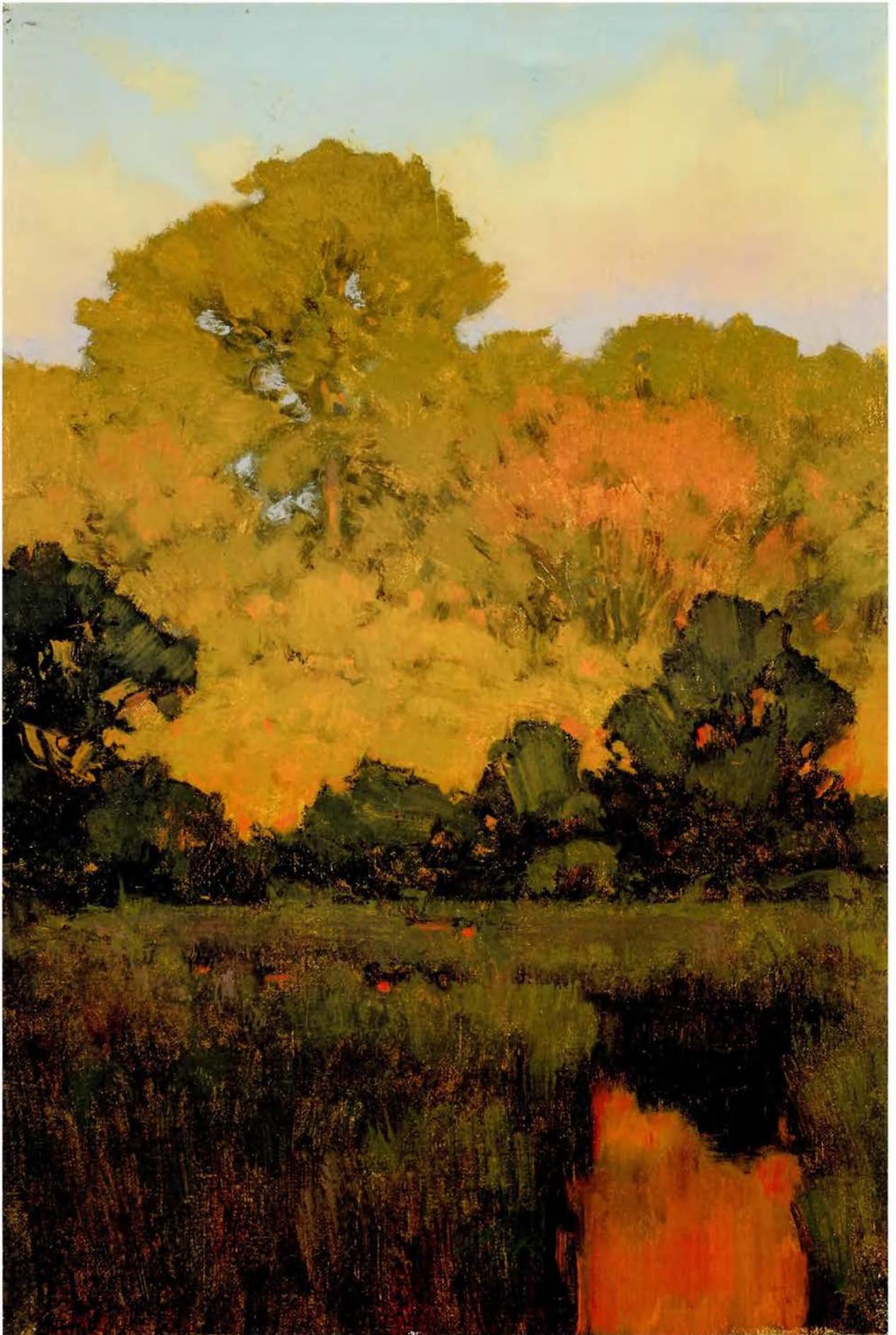
This last quality- as well as a strong



love of nature- Ballew traces back to boyhood fishing trips with his father on the streams and rivers of the Midwest and east coast. One outing in particular made a lasting impression.

As dusk gathered, his father cast a fly rod into a deep pool in a small stream. The rod suddenly bent double, and the fisherman handed it to his son, telling him that the fish was likely to get away. Before it did, however, he wanted the boy to see what it felt like to have a big fish like that on the line.

"My dad said, 'There's something remarkable lurking down there. You can't grab it and take it home, but you can play with it for a while,' " he recalls. "That's what I'd like to be doing for the rest of my life- playing with the mystery. And if I'm hopeful, if I approach it with respect, painting will allow me to do that."



*"Edge of Evening", oil, 12" x 9"*