



"Housekeeping," oil, 30" × 30"

THE ARTS

FUR, FLEECE, AND FEATHERS

Cheri Christensen's delight in her animal subjects translates into high art.

By Charlotte Berney

Afternoon light plays on the ivory faces of two dairy cows as they stand deep in purple shadows, looking directly at the viewer. A rooster turns to survey his domain, making sure all is well, his amber plumage bathed in luminous color.

The animals that Cheri Christensen renders in oils captivate the viewer with color and light and an essential beauty. They are elevated beyond the farm to the realm of nature where everything speaks of a

miracle. These creatures whom many take for granted have become art objects, painted by a skilled artist working at the top of her form.

"I paint animals the way I would any other subject matter," says Christensen, who began her career depicting still lifes, landscapes, and figures. "I give them dignity. The painting is about the animal."

For Christensen, her art takes on dimensions larger than pure aesthetics. "People

have been connected to animals throughout history," she explains, "but today, farm land is disappearing. There are lots of kids who've never seen farm animals."

The artist's own love of animals began during her childhood in the small farming town of Enumclaw in Washington State. Her grandfather had a cattle ranch, and she was frequently around farm animals. Her career path led her to clothing design and a degree from the University of Washington



"Banty in the Haystack," oil, 16" × 20"



"Winter Light," oil, 24" × 36"



"On to Evening," oil, 24" × 18"



"The Great Chicken Drive," oil, 24" × 30"

in Seattle. At one point she discovered oil painting and never looked back.

Cheri Christensen admired the work of an artist she saw in an exhibition and sought him out for instruction. She became a student of Ron Lukas, who had himself studied with the celebrated Russian painter Sergei Bongart. She worked with Lukas for the next three years.

During Christensen's study with Lukas and in subsequent workshops with other instructors, she painted subjects other than animals. "I didn't have the confidence at first," she confides, "but I started painting animals because that's what I really wanted to paint."

Christensen's dedication to painting and her love of animals came together in an inspired joining that continues today.

"I love feathers and the way the light plays through them. Roosters hold themselves so beautifully, and chickens have a whole interesting society of their own. I like grouping them in a painting to show how they move and how they relate to one another," she points out.

Christensen and her husband lived on Bainbridge Island, Washington, for a time, and had their own menagerie of sheep, goats, geese, and a miniature donkey. She had a "studio rabbit," that kept her company, two dogs, a cat, and over 20 chickens. She spun hair from her angora goats and sheep and was a weaver.

Once Christensen began painting animals in earnest, she started searching out small farms, both at home and abroad, where she could find new subjects. On trips to Mexico and Italy, she and her husband often stayed on working farms. At home, the artist takes to the back roads with her camera. She photographs on location with her digital camera so she can capture the motion of the animal, then sketches directly onto her canvas.

Her work is known for its spare, elegant brushstrokes that capture essence in a gesture. Christensen observes, "I believe that less is more. I want my painting to be loose and spontaneous, not overworked. I want it to be fresh." She finds herself using her painting knife more these days and feels she is getting more action and movement into her pieces.

When asked which painters she admires, she replies, "the Russian Impressionists. Their work is about color. It's also about everyday life."

Regarding her own deft use of color, Christensen comments, "We've forgotten how to see color. I don't have to invent the color—it's already there. Rather than toning it down, I let it be. I study color relationships. I love painting white because of



"On Thin Ice," oil, 24" × 36"

the colors reflected on it."

Established as a successful painter, Cheri Christensen made a move last year that would have profound effects on her life and art—she and her husband moved to Santa Fe. "It made sense to me," she says. "Color and light are everything for me, and we have those in abundance here. It's easier to capture the light. When you have weeks and months without light, such as happens in the northwest, it's difficult. A day without sun in New Mexico is unusual."

Christensen paints in her spacious studio overlooking the Sangres, while her husband Homer, a writer whose work is also portable, has made the transition with ease. The two go out together on Cheri's scouting trips, and she notes, "We're outside a lot more here. It's just so gorgeous and inspiring."

Understandably, her palette has changed since she's been in New Mexico. "I use a lot less green," she acknowledges, laughing. The backgrounds in her paintings, whether winter browns or summer greens, are "suggested" rather than defined.

Christensen also enjoys the larger artistic community in Santa Fe. "It's so special and so supportive, she says. "I like the contact with other artists and I like not having to be



the strange one on the block."

An interesting facet of Christensen's work is her titles. She likes them to be imaginative and enjoys plays on words. "Sometimes, the animal's personality suggests the name," she relates, "and some are taken from mythology." Two enchantingly painted and named geese, "Tristan and Isolde," are examples.

Cheri Christensen's work has been

recognized with awards, and she has been honored by membership in prestigious organizations. She is a member of Oil Painters of America, National Oil and Acrylic Painters, and the American Academy of Women Artists. Her work has been exhibited widely and nationally in galleries and museums.

Meanwhile, Christensen has the satisfaction of seeing her work win enthusiastic acceptance from collectors and continue to evolve. She also is enjoying her new home and lifestyle. She eyes the yard behind her studio and says, her eyes sparkling, "We have an acre here and I'm thinking of getting a few chickens..."

Collectors can be thankful that Cheri Christensen delights in the animal world and chooses it as a subject for her splendid works of art.



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