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Creatures Great and Small

Farm animals come to life on Cheri Christensen's canvases

By Mary N. Balcomb

This past fall I visited painter Cheri Christensen at her studio in Washington, and she told me a story that demonstrated her artistic zeal. Christensen and her husband Homer were in Tuscany earlier this year to celebrate their 10th wedding anniversary. They found a villa in the country northwest of Florence where Christensen could seek out new subject matter and take advantage of the extraordinary light. Homer, a writer, was planning to work on his latest book. It was a near-perfect spot for them both.

One day they engaged a driver named Luigi to show them the countryside. Not far into their journey, Christensen spotted two sheep with long, white, silky coats grazing in a tranquil meadow. To her artistic eye they were spectacular under the clear Tuscan sky, and she just had to capture the moment. It wasn't until Christensen had jumped over the fence, camera in hand, that she saw a ram coming toward her. But she managed to shoot a few frames before jumping back over the fence. Though Homer was

familiar with such behavior, the driver was definitely unnerved. But for Christensen, such scenes have always been irresistible.

Born in Enumclaw, WA, in 1961, Christensen grew up near farms and animals and developed an early appreciation for nature. She dreamed of one day having her own property and animals. As a child she took the usual art classes

in school and then majored in costume and fashion design at the University of Washington, Seattle, but never considered becoming a painter. "No one in my family painted," she says. "It wasn't considered serious work. 'What will you do for money?' they asked me."

After graduation, to appease her own doubts and ease the concerns of her family, Christensen



WALT'S GIRLS, OIL, 24 x 24.

became a retail-clothing buyer. She was successful but yearned for something more. Finally she asked a cousin who was learning how to paint to teach her. "I loved the smell and feel of oil paints," she says. "Almost immediately a voice inside of me said, 'I want to do this forever.' It was the first thing I had ever felt passionate about. I realized then that I had no choice in the matter—I had to paint."

Christensen began going to art shows, and it soon became clear that she would have to find an instructor if she was ever to become a serious painter. At one exhibit she saw a particularly appealing painting and sought out the artist, who then gave her the name of a teacher—Ron Lukas—who would ultimately change her life. "I told Ron that I really didn't know anything about painting and he said, 'Good. Not knowing anything, it might be easier for you to learn.'"

By this time Christensen had married, and her husband was



highly supportive of her decision. Together made the lengthy commute from Enumclaw to Lukas' studio in Seattle, after which Homer continued on to his own job. The pattern continued for more than three years: classes with Lukas, painting sessions with other groups, and painting at home. "I took every workshop Ron gave," she says. "Many times my friend Pam and I spent all day going from

one painting session to another—there wasn't even time for lunch!"

A former student of Russian master Sergei Bongart, Lukas was an excellent but tough teacher, says Christensen. She had a difficult time because she lacked drawing experience and an art background, but Lukas kept encouraging her. "Pam started with Ron at about the same time I did, and it was good to have someone to share my frustrations with," she says. "We spent practically every waking hour either painting or drawing. And everything we did went to Ron for a critique." When Lukas saw how serious they were about learning, he pushed them even harder. And when he began praising Christensen's work, she knew that all of her efforts had finally paid off.

Christensen's paintings have a controlled looseness and simplicity that comes from

ABOVE: A WINTER MORNING,
OIL, 20 x 30.

LEFT: HENNY PENNY, OIL, 24 x 30.

RIGHT: A DRINK AT THE
FOUNTAIN AT VILLA RUCCELLAI,
OIL, 30 x 15.

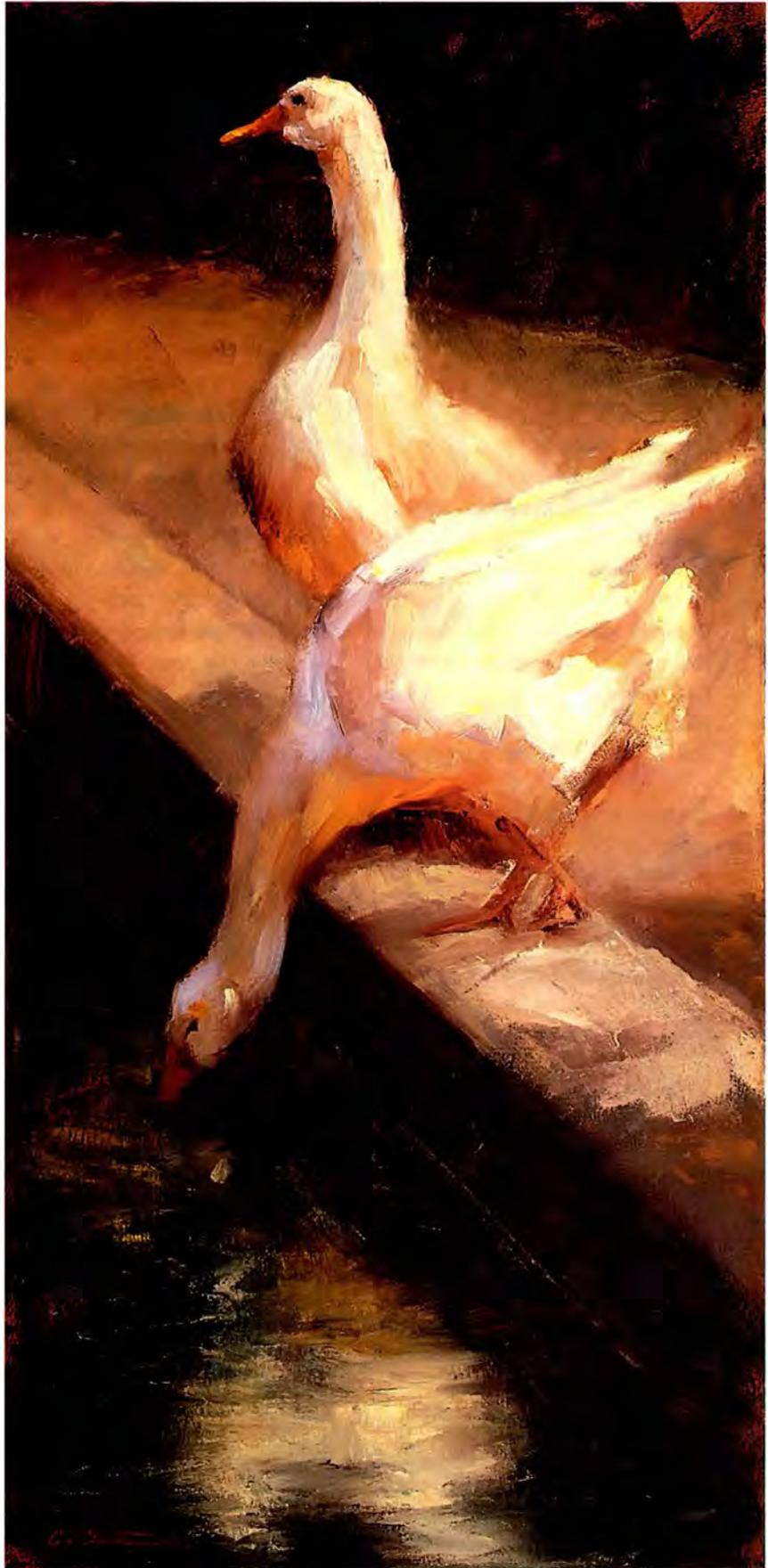


much practice. She loves the contrast of early-morning or late-afternoon light and backlighting with luxuriously deep colors. “I try to start with the color I know best, the one I know I can carry on through the entire painting. I then gear all the others to it. And rather than focusing on the cow or sheep itself, I look for shapes, starting with the shapes of the shadows.”

During a recent demonstration in which she painted a chicken, Christensen used a canvas that had been prepared with a ground of fast-drying acrylic gesso mixed with Venetian red that she allowed to show through the painting for warmth. She made some quick compositional strokes, covering the canvas with thin layers of mid-value colors and blocking in the basic shapes. Moments later the form of a chicken emerged. Starting within this middle range enables her to work toward the darkest darks and lightest lights as she progresses.

“Once I have the large shapes blocked in, it’s easier to see the mistakes, and I can make whatever color adjustments are necessary—always with an eye on their relationships and the overall composition,” she says. “Then I start placing color within those shapes. Most of the work is done in this first part. I’m not concerned about edges at this point.”

As Christensen moves back and forth in front of her easel—squinting, scrutinizing, and making decisions—her actions are quick and confident. One can sense the excitement and passion surrounding the artist and see them transferred onto the canvas. “Things have different rhythms or movements—chickens have a different rhythm than cows, and I want to move with those rhythms mentally.



I want spontaneity. If I feel labored, then the painting will look labored, and the chicken will come out looking like a stuffed chicken!”

Christensen mixes her colors minimally, allowing two or more colors to mingle in the applied brush stroke. As the painting progresses, the colors become more subtle and thicker, layer upon layer in some areas, with nuances of red filtering through. She continues to refine and define color, shape, and value with the fewest possible strokes. In the final stages of the painting, Christensen makes last-minute corrections to the drawing and places dark accents and highlights. The finished work has the sureness of stroke and simplicity that comes from considerable practice. Whether a landscape,

still life, or gentle creature, the work expresses a passion that appeals to viewers.

After her work met with some local success, Homer encouraged Christensen to show her paintings to a larger audience. “That’s a very difficult thing to do, because no one tells you how to market your work,” she says. “There’s this great myth that somebody is going to discover you out there in the woods, but that just isn’t so. Homer believed in my work and kept after me.”

Christensen and her husband now have a new home that they share with two large dogs, a cat, six chickens (all named), two newly

arrived pygmy goats, and a miniature donkey named Don Quixote. Christensen uses all of them as models. Neighboring cows, peacocks, and wild pheasants complete the picture.

It was raining when I left the Christensens after the painting demonstration. Contented clucking sounds emanated from the dryness under the large front porch—Christensen’s models were under there, waiting out the rain.

Mary N. Balcomb is an artist and writer living in Seattle, WA.

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JANE LINDLEY

ABOVE: CHERI CHRISTENSEN.

BELOW: COMING HOME, OIL, 24 x 36.

