

Back to the Farm

BY MARK
MUSSARI

Cheri Christensen's passion for painting returns to her ranching roots

NEW MEXICO painter Cheri Christensen grew up in Washington state, closely tied to farm animals. She fondly recalls the time she spent on her paternal grandfather's ranch in Enumclaw, WA. "My grandfather also had a butcher shop," she adds. "In fact, my father eventually took over the shop—so although I'm an animal painter, I'm the daughter of a butcher!" Nevertheless, Christensen's proximity to farm animals instilled a love for creatures that has carried over into her vibrant artwork.

The animals that grace her canvases illustrate Christensen's agility at depicting these creatures naturally and in their environments. You won't find nostalgia-ridden images of anthropomorphized pups and pigs in Christensen's *oeuvre*. "I think the animals have a dignity of their own," she insists. "I don't have to turn them into people."

As a child, Christensen enjoyed art classes in school, but she was not drawing all the time, like many nascent artists. "The first artistic thing I did that someone recognized was a poster in third grade for a Keep Washington Green campaign," she recalls. "Some students worked on the campaign. My third-grade teacher noticed how much I enjoyed working on it—she was probably the first person who mentored me." When one of her friends who lived in the city took summer art classes, Christensen, who was visiting her, tagged along one day: "I was so envious because, in the country, I didn't have the opportunity to take art classes." Christensen lost touch with that friend for many years—until recently. "She found me on the internet," she notes, "and now she's taking my art classes!"

Even though her father also drew and kept a number of art instruction books in the house, a career in art was not encouraged. "I had to pursue art on my own," she says. "For example, as a cheerleader in high school, we had emblem patches



◀ Luickenbach Regular, oil, 24 x 18.



Make My Day, oil, 40 x 60.

we wore on our uniforms. Because I didn't like the emblem we had—it looked like something from the 1950s—I designed a new one for us." Christensen attended college at both the University of North Carolina in Greensboro and the University of Washington in Seattle. "I finished at Washington with a bachelor of arts in costume design because I was trying to do something artistic," she says.

Determined to make a living in art, she initially turned to fashion retail as a career and became a buyer at a department store. Yet, dismay with her retail experience eventually sent her back to the farmlands of Enumclaw. "I wasn't using my creative side. I had an early midlife crisis," she says. "I went back to having animals around me. I had my own petting zoo."

Inspired by a cousin who lived nearby and was painting for a living, Christensen asked her to teach her how to paint. At first the cousin told her to copy a painting. "I found something by an old master," she says, "depicting a young girl holding a lamb in a field." To her great surprise, Christensen discovered she was able to copy the painting. "When you don't know what you're doing," she says wryly, "you can be braver."

Christensen knew she needed to find a teacher—a mentor who could take her abilities further. At an art show, she dis-



Dynamic Duo, oil, 6 x 12.

covered the works of Ron Lukas, who, at that time, was living in Seattle and teaching in the tradition of the Russian Impressionists.

Christensen took another bold step. "I called Ron and told him I had no experience," she admits. "He said, 'That's even better—I won't have to break you of your habits.'" Ready to commit herself to becoming an artist, she spent three years, from 1989 until 1992, studying with him, driving over an hour each way from Enumclaw to Seattle. Lukas' own mentor had been Russian émigré Sergei Bongart, a master painter in the tradition of Russian Impressionism. Like osmosis,

representation

Scottsdale Fine Art, Scottsdale, AZ; **Eisenhauer Gallery**, Edgartown, MA; **Howard/Mandville Gallery**, Kirkland, WA; **InSight Gallery**, Fredericksburg, TX; **McLarry Fine Art**; Santa Fe, NM; **Ann Korologos Gallery**, Basalt, CO; **Roby King Galleries**, Bainbridge Island, WA; **Whistler Village Art Gallery**, Whistler, BC.

upcoming shows

Three-person show, **InSight Gallery**, May 4-20.

One-person show, **McLarry Fine Art**, September 28-October 31.

Bongart's strong sense of color transferred through Lukas to Christensen. "It was that use of color that truly drew me to the Russian Impressionists," she explains. "Their strong values are much further apart than the French Impressionists—there's just something gutsier about it." She also saw a passion and emotion in the Russian paintings that she found attractive.

"I learned that mostly it involved learning how to see colors," she points out. "It's all relative with color. Which is most intense? Which is most subtle? I learned to make color sing by using complements. Sometimes I push the color and try to see how far I can take it and still have it work. At times I find I even cross the line into expressionism. I'm trying to capture not only what it looks like but also what it *feels* like. I am drawn by the drama of it."

Christensen observes that one of the most important lessons she took from Lukas was "not to get caught up in the details. He used to quote Bongart, who always said, 'You have to paint the dog before the fleas.'" She also learned to master the technique of working from large shapes to smaller ones and moving from darks to lights. "Patterns of shadows can hold an artwork together," she says.

CHRISTENSEN begins her artistic process with photographs. "I like to take my own photos—to get the feel of the animals. It's a moment in time," she says. Christensen does not invent scenes or poses for her paintings. Instead, she takes hundreds of shots, trying to capture animals at just the right time. "I'll get down on the ground to take pictures of chickens," she says, "to depict them naturally." And while she believes strongly in the importance of learning to paint from life, today she prefers a different approach: "I like to control light and value in the studio."

One is struck immediately by both the bold color and the thickness of the paint on Christensen's canvases. "I paint on gesso," she explains. "I use a deep Venetian red, a darker value, because I want that background to come through. It keeps it warmer." Christensen employs both the brush and the palette knife for depth and effect. She often uses the palette knife on the foreground to add texture and weight, whereas the background might be rendered in softer brush strokes. "Who's my main actor, and who's my supporting cast?" she asks rhetorically of a painting's various elements. The effect can be cinematic, with a background that seems slightly out of focus—as in *THREE'S COMPANY*, depicting three calves in a meadow, staring at the viewer. Palette-knife work on the closest areas of turf, in front of the cows, creates a more detailed plane, while a much softer brush stroke defines the meadow behind them. The red gesso's deep tones surface especially in the dark plane in the remotest areas of the background.

The strong personality of Christensen's subjects comes out in *LUCKENBACH REGULAR*, a palette-knife canvas rendered while she was teaching classes in Fredericksburg, TX. While sitting in an outdoor bar one evening, she discovered that chickens were sauntering at will into the courtyard. One particularly audacious rooster caught her eye. Thanks to some thickly applied paint and strong circular shapes, a kinetic energy emanates from this canvas in which the

pushed the darkness."

For the past seven years, Christensen has lived in Sandia Park, NM, where she maintains a studio in the home she built with her husband, Ron Dobbs. "I came out from Washington to visit a gallery and just fell in love with the light and the color out here," she says. "I paint four to five hours a day. When I'm not painting, I'm thinking about it. As an artist these days, you're running a business. When I go out to take photographs, I have a blast. That's also work, but it doesn't seem like it!" Her two dogs, Elmo and Bentley, also occupy her time—as do her beloved chickens.

"I want people to bring themselves into my paintings," Christensen says. "People connect to them because scenes of animals bring them back to a story in their own lives—to a happier time. And after all, we can all use a little more joy in our lives." In brilliant portraits of her cherished animals, Christensen is spreading a little more of that joy. ❖

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Someone to Look Up To, oil, 12 x 12.

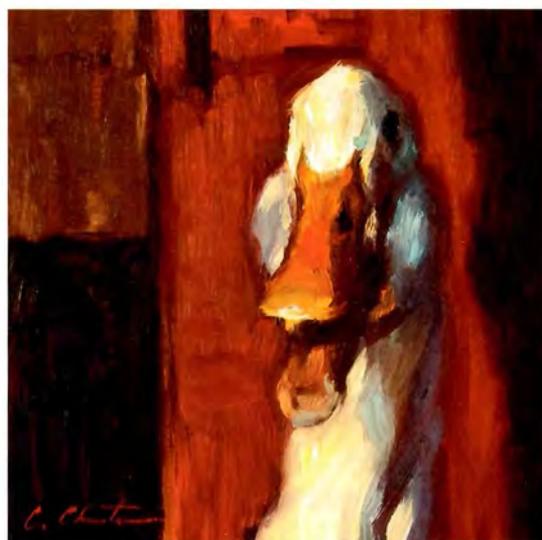
proud rooster struts across a bench in the bar. "Guys can really identify with that rooster," Christensen says with a laugh.

In *MAKE MY DAY*, a long-horn bull, faces off with the viewer. Christensen uses the animal's massive horns as a defining form. "I became enamored of painting horns because of all the reflected light in them," notes the artist. Compositionally, the steer's head—at dead center—triangulates with the horns' far-reaching tips. Chromatically, the canvas offers a complementary study in reds and greens. "The grass is my supporting cast in this picture," she explains. "In the background I applied dark values over that deep red—I

See more of Christensen's paintings at www.southwestart.com/featured/christensen-c-apr2012.



▲ Three's Company, oil, 36 x 60.
◀ Tread Lightly, oil, 36 x 48.



There's a New Duck in Town, oil, 6 x 6.