

BIG SKY JOURNAL

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RICK BASS SEARCHES FOR THE OLD FIRE OF THE HUNT

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Carol Guzman: Still life traditions laid bare

Emulating European masters through her own experiences in nature.



CAROL GUZMAN SOMETIMES MAKES a painting that leaves a viewer a little unnerved.

She doesn't mind a bit.

If somebody is disturbed by her portrait of a dead rabbit suspended against a barn wall by a bit of twine, its eye as dead as dead can be, Guzman explains her motivation.

MONTY'S KILL
2003
OIL ON LINEN
12" X 20"





RED OCHRE BLACKFEET SHIRT

2004
OIL ON LINEN
50" x 60"

"Lots of people were really turned off by me painting a dead rabbit," she said. "But they haven't studied the European masters."

Europe has a long tradition of portraying the fruits of the hunt: Game animals are classic subjects of still life paintings. And like the old masters, Guzman employs tenacity, talent

and time. Art, for her, is hard work. It doesn't just happen. You have to make it happen.

In the painting "Monty's Kill," Guzman gives us not a European hare but a Montana cottontail, a prize she seized from one of her dogs so she could study—and portray—the amazing subtleties of the little corpse: the musculature, the

Guzman likes to take her time with a painting, spending a month or more studying a subject.



MANY MOCCASINS
2004
OIL ON LINEN
22" X 40"

almost feline front paws, the way the pelt shifts its colors from old snow to storm cloud to rust.

"You get to examine nature from a microscopic view," she said of that painting, and the process of making it. "I'm not trying to emulate nature. I'm trying to see nature, through my experiences."

Guzman likes to take her time with a painting, spending a month or more studying a subject, learning its anatomy and exploring its heart, whether it's a stone tower overlooking a French orchard or a pair of brilliant blue moccasins created by a Blackfeet Indian to occupy a Montana winter.

Some subjects, of course, don't lend themselves to lengthy study.

"Flowers I have to do a little faster," she said with a laugh. "They change constantly."

But with most of her subjects, she can take the time

she needs to sate her curiosity, to understand fully, or at least better.

Now 54, her style has evolved since she took up painting shortly after graduating from a Catholic high school in St. Louis, where she was the second of five daughters.

"I went to church as a child," she said. "I didn't do art. I never was encouraged to do art."

She discovered pen and brush at a community college in Missouri, then got more serious after moving to New York, where she studied at the Art Students League and the Parsons School of Design.

That was in the 1970s, and abstract art ruled Gotham's roost. Almost everything else was discouraged.

"Everybody wanted you to do abstract art, where everything you do is art. If you say it's art, it's art."

But Guzman would have none of it. She was more interested in representational art, the hard labor of understanding



COWBOY PUPPET
2004
OIL ON LINEN
24" x 18"



WILSALL MONTANA ELEVATORS

2003

OIL ON LINEN

30" x 40"

your subject, and therefore something about the world.

"I never know something until I draw it. That's what I live by. I'm a perennial student of the arts."

She rented a downtown studio near the World Trade Center, where she focused on commercial illustrations for a while, did commissioned portraits and honed her techniques, mastering the depiction of falling light and cast shadows, working with watercolor for a while before making the shift to oil, which she uses exclusively today.

Then, as the 1980s waned, Guzman's world took new directions. She and her husband, a Wall Street man, were divorced, and Guzman moved to New York's Hudson Valley for a couple years, where she liked the famous climbing at New Paltz. But that lost its shine as well.

In 1990, she rented out her house, loaded a Chevy van with paint, canvas and a Jack Russell terrier and pointed the mobile studio to the West.

She laughs about it now. "It was well past the hippie era," she said, and she was a grown woman, nearing 40. The van carried her around the nation and she eventually drifted to Montana, "where it rained for two solid weeks. Buckets of rain."

She turned north, into the Canadian Rockies, and that's where life got really interesting.

In Jasper National Park, she saw a car loaded with paintings. Somebody, it seemed, was on a mission similar to her own. She looked in the window and saw a credit card receipt with a name on it: Clyde Aspevig. She knew that name, knew

Her paintings incorporate layers of color and texture,
and her topics come from nature and history.

the remarkable work associated with it.

Aspevig is one of the nation's top landscape painters and she wanted to meet this man.

"So I waited around," she recalled, laughter in her blue eyes. When Aspevig arrived, she had a question for him.

"Will you critique my work?" she asked. "He said 'Absolutely not.'"

And that brief discourse lead to great things.

The conversation continued, obviously, and it's now lasted 15 years.

"That was the beginning of the love of my life," she said.

The two eventually married, spent some years in Colorado, and they now live in Montana's Shields Valley, where they built a small compound of stone and timber buildings that include separate studios where each of them produces their noteworthy work.

Guzman's studio is a tidy place, reflecting an orderliness of mind, an attitude that embraces the cerebral, not the spontaneous. You find no random splashes of color in her

work, experiments are tested and retested. She focuses on still lifes, and while she paints "found objects," she selects them carefully.

"I'm not into the happy accident," she said. "I'm a control freak."

Her paintings incorporate layers of color and texture, and her topics come from nature and history. Of late, she has focused on Native American artifacts, particularly the intricately beaded and quilled garments of western tribes.

"I am not interested in painting an era from the past, but prefer looking at these beautiful objects from a textural, visual perspective."

"Red Ochre Blackfeet Shirt" is a prime example. This is a big painting, 50 inches by 60, big enough to dominate a large room, and despite its size it implies more than it states. Impeccably captured, you can almost feel the weight of leather on your back, hear the rustle of the long fringe on the sleeves, taste the anticipation of some special event, some celebration that merited the wearing of this shirt. This gar-

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