

BIG SKY JOURNAL

FLY-FISHING 2002



THE RIPPLES BEYOND ANSEL ADAMS

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FLY-FISHING THE WYOMING BACKCOUNTRY BY JON BILLMAN

WESTERN TAILWATER FISHERIES

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Dix Baines: Chasing the Light

DIX BAINES WALKS ALONG the Gallatin River looking for light. It's December. There is snow in the mountains. Ice sparkles on rocks at the river's edge. When he stops and sets up his easel, you think you see what Dix sees: the Spanish Peaks in the background and below them a bend in the river swinging around, straightening out and rippling toward you.

That is not what has caught Dix Baines' eye. He is looking at a splash of meadow grass that appears radiant behind the trunks of cottonwood trees and above the deep shadow of the riverbank.

"As a painter, I'm always chasing the light, trying to cap-

ture those nuances of light," Dix points at the golden hue of the grass flanked by dark shadows. It reminds him of another light on a different river.

"I was on the Green River before a March storm. There was a complete mist-out. Light was coming through the fog, and everything was radiant. All the fishermen were silhouettes that had orange glows around them. And then the snow came in, and there was a midge hatch. First, the fish came up in slow rises. And then you looked across the river and saw hundreds of frantic heads and tails. The fishing was great, but I couldn't wait to paint the light."

Dix Baines is forty. He has been a career artist for only five years. He was detoured by another career before settling into his passions. But art and fishing ran in his blood at an early age.

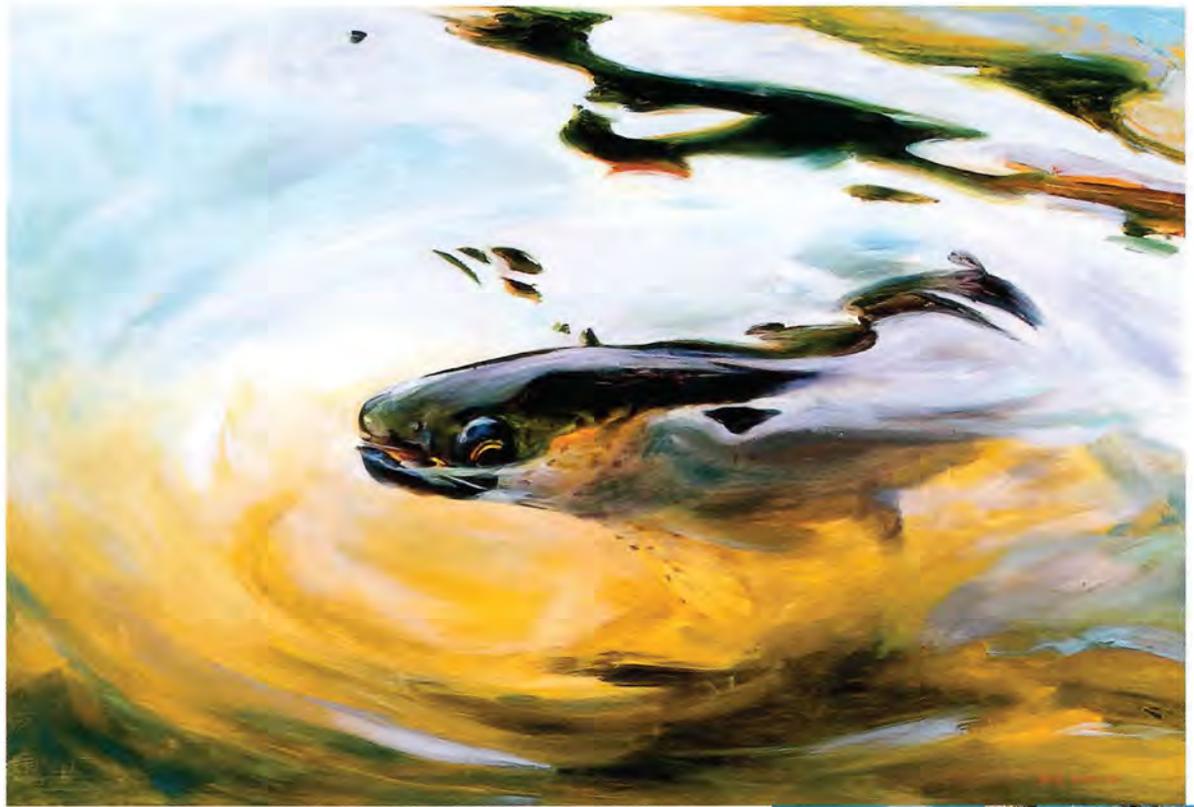
The Baines family photo album is packed with pictures of a young Dix in Yellowstone Park and in the Colorado mountains. He always has a rod in his hand. By high school he was fishing with flies, and later fly-fishing was an obsession.

His bond with art developed on a parallel trajectory. When Dix was in fourth grade, his father, a Denver physician, sat him down and said his grades were horrible. He looked at the pages of his son's school books, and they were covered with drawings and sketches. "He got really upset," Dix recalls. "He said, 'You can't



AUTUMN RUN
OIL
24" x 24"

SLOW RISES
OIL
16" x 22"



be doing this.” But when Dix was in seventh grade, his grandmother gave him his first oil paints, even though the rest of the family thought they were too messy. He remembers painting with those oils and loving the smell of turpentine and linseed oil. “Anybody who loves that smell, look out. It can reach up and bite you,” Dix says. But he wasn’t bitten hard enough to draw blood until he was older.

Dix went to BYU and took art classes, although he sensed being an artist would never provide him with a viable livelihood. His art teacher suggested he might enjoy doing renderings—architectural illustrations. He joined the design department where he majored in interior design and later took a job

in the field. “I had a very commercial background where my forte as an interior designer was my ability to visualize and illustrate what hotel properties would look like. I was good at showing companies that invest in hotels what their millions of dollars would look like after renovations were completed.”

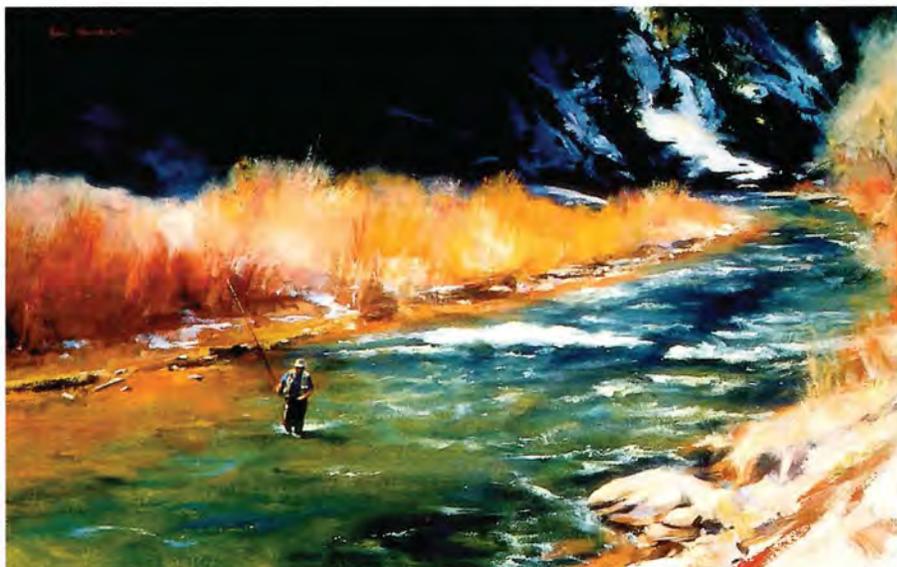
One morning, after ten

years of interior design, Dix woke up and said, “I’m not happy getting up and doing what I do.” He felt stifled creatively, driven by compromise and time constraints. But he wasn’t quite ready to quit a regular paycheck. Instead, after work, he went to the Art Students League of Denver where he painted under the eyes of artists Quang Ho and Kim English. He entered a painting in the Arts for the Parks competition,

HINT OF SPRING
ON THE FRYING PAN
OIL
12" x 18"



A dry December on the Gallatin River finds Dix Baines with paint brush in hand, fly rod nearby.





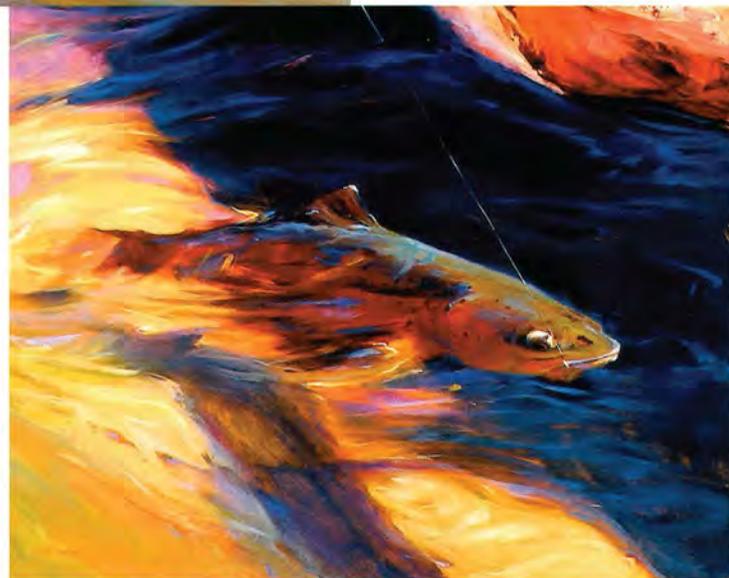
SUMMER RUN
OIL
24" x 30"

and when he placed in the top one hundred, he decided he'd go to Jackson, Wyoming, for the opening. It was his first national art show, and he was surprised when he was one of a handful of artists awarded that evening for his painting of a Yellowstone cutthroat, a painting that became part of Yellowstone National Park's permanent art collection. Still, it wasn't until a year later, when he was making consistent sales to galleries, that he quit the security of his job for the insecurity of an artist.

"It was a roundabout way to become an artist. But I was finally following my passion. I was doing what excited me."

Dix changed from doing very photographic, tight, precise illustrations to learning how to lose edges, capture moods and suggest details. He started letting colors and tones create his images. And he went fishing. "It's the greatest research tool in the world, if you want to paint fish and fishermen," Dix says.

When he first started painting fish, he approached the task the way he might do a Duck Stamp painting. The images were anatomically correct, and they were all about the fish. But the more he lugged his paint box up and down the rivers he fished, the more he became aware of everything around the fish—the rocks, the water, the plants, the movement, the reflections and refractions, the color, the light. "Now when I go to a new river," he says, "I can hardly wait to see what the



JEWEL TONES
OIL
24" x 30"

streambed looks like because it's going to affect what I paint."

What he paints includes fishermen as well as fish. And Dix admits to stalking streams with his camera, on the lookout for people. "I'll come around a bend and say, 'Wow, look at that silhouette; look at the light coming through his line.'



TETON LIGHT

OIL
20" x 24"

Click, click, click. That's what's so great about fishing. I'll catch and release the fish, but I'll keep five or six paintings on canvas, in my head, or on film."

Dix prefers to paint 9" x 12" field sketches on location. He says the sketches record three things his camera, surprisingly, cannot see: light, atmosphere and color. "Sometimes color photos highlight those warm passages between lights and darks that may be difficult for me to make succinct decisions about in the field. So, when I get back to my studio to make larger paintings from my sketches, it's a combination of

relying on what my sketches say was true about the mix of color and light and then filling in the gaps with what the photographs offer." And there is a third element. "The emotional connection you had to the day is invaluable to a painting."

Dix is a high key artist. Most of his paintings show a great deal of contrast—heavy on the light with very strong darks. His talk is peppered with references to the French impressionists, the Taos painters and artists of the Hudson River school. "I guess it's the light. I tend to like the painters who really have depicted it in various manners."



MCPOLLIS FARM

OIL

24" x 36"

his work. Along the way, "through a kind of celebration of paint," he often makes discoveries that surprise him and allow the work to develop into something far better. But the bottom line is being able to see the image before he starts.

"Every time I paint, I strive to paint an image that is completely different from all the other images I've painted. I don't want to be pigeon-holed as a guy who paints girls in pink dresses. I don't want to paint just fish."

But when Dix does paint fish, he is interested in their differences. "A rainbow in the Gallatin is different from a rainbow in the Madison. And that is different from a rainbow in the Green. So I go on quests for different fish. Five years ago I had never caught a green-

back cutthroat trout. It's the Colorado state fish now. Thirty years ago they thought it was extinct. But they brought it back. It's a huge success story. So I hiked up a twelve thousand foot mountain just to catch a greenback cutthroat, because every time I catch a trout in a new place it's like opening a Christmas present. It's like, 'What new image can I paint here?'"

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You set up the light in a painting by the way you handle the darks, Dix says. Generally, he lays in the darks first. But painting *plein air* sometimes forces him to approach things backwards. "You know you're going to lose that wedge of light through the trees. So you go for it, and as soon as you think you've got it right, you leave it alone and resolve everything else around it."

Chasing the light leads Dix to paint everything from fish and fishermen to landscapes and buildings and people at work. But fish have always held a special intrigue for him. "Sometimes I'll start a fish painting right at the eye because the eye is the life of the fish. When I first started painting fish that's where I'd fail was with the eye. It would look like a dead fish. You know how a dead fish eye looks. You know how quickly it changes when someone takes a fish, bonks it on the head and throws it on the bank. It's gone. The light is gone. If you can capture the light in the eye, the rest of the painting paints itself."

In his best paintings, Dix sees the completed image before he starts, and he paints quickly to bring spontaneity and freshness to



LOS PINOS RIVER

OIL

24" x 22"