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Mid Day Winter, oil, 12" by 16"

"This is a mid-day winter sun on the Gros Ventre River in Jackson, Wyoming. This time of day washes everything in flat light with hard highlights. You can almost see the frost of my breath in the air. I love bright, cold winter days."

PUSHING THE ENVELOPE

By Myrna Zanetell

A certain magical quality finds its way onto the canvas when a painter's artistic soul and subject matter are so intimately interwoven that they become indistinguishable. And so it is with Wyoming painter Phillip Nethercott. Being born and raised in Jackson Hole provided him with the innate perspective to render the region's majestic landscapes with a veracity attained only through first-hand knowledge.

That legacy, however, runs even deeper, for Nethercott's grandparents were among the first

pioneers to settle in the magnificent Teton Valley more than a century ago, carving out a 160-acre ranch in an area dubbed Mormon Row. "Theirs was a tough existence," he says. "They didn't listen very carefully to good advice, so they picked cobble rocks most of their lives." Nethercott's own roots are as deeply anchored in the region's rocky soil as those of the quaking aspen trees and towering cottonwoods that frequently grace his tranquil landscapes.

Nethercott traveled many roads before those memories would

be put to canvas, however. They included marriage to his high school sweetheart, Susie, a move to Utah, where he studied art at Brigham Young University, and then the return to the family homestead in Jackson Hole. "Although I might have been born with a 'silver spoon' because my family owned land in Jackson Hole, I refer back to my grandfather who sold his ranch about this time and being of sound mind, he spent it all, not leaving me anything," he says with a laugh.

In reality, Nethercott is an enterprising individual who has



Mt. Moran, oil, 16" by 12"

"The Tetons are, of course, among my favorite subjects to paint. This mountain is named after one of my favorite artists: Thomas Moran. The Teton Range changes mood every minute of the day. This is a mid-day painting, which is not the typical time of day an artist looks to paint."



Summer Creek, oil, 16" by 20"

"I was raised on the banks of the Snake River. Huckleberry Finn didn't have anything on me. This is a small tributary that caught the beautiful reflected light of a brooding storm."

always managed to find creative ways to combine his artistic interests with supporting his family, which includes his wife Susie and five children. During what he refers to as his formative years, the artist owned and displayed his work in two galleries: the Four Seasons and West Wind. He also designed and built high-end custom homes, which he describes as "works of art" in themselves.

Primarily self-taught, Nethercott also used these early years to experiment with a variety of techniques and mediums, ultimately finding that he excelled in what he refers to as the king of media—oil paint. Although his flare for

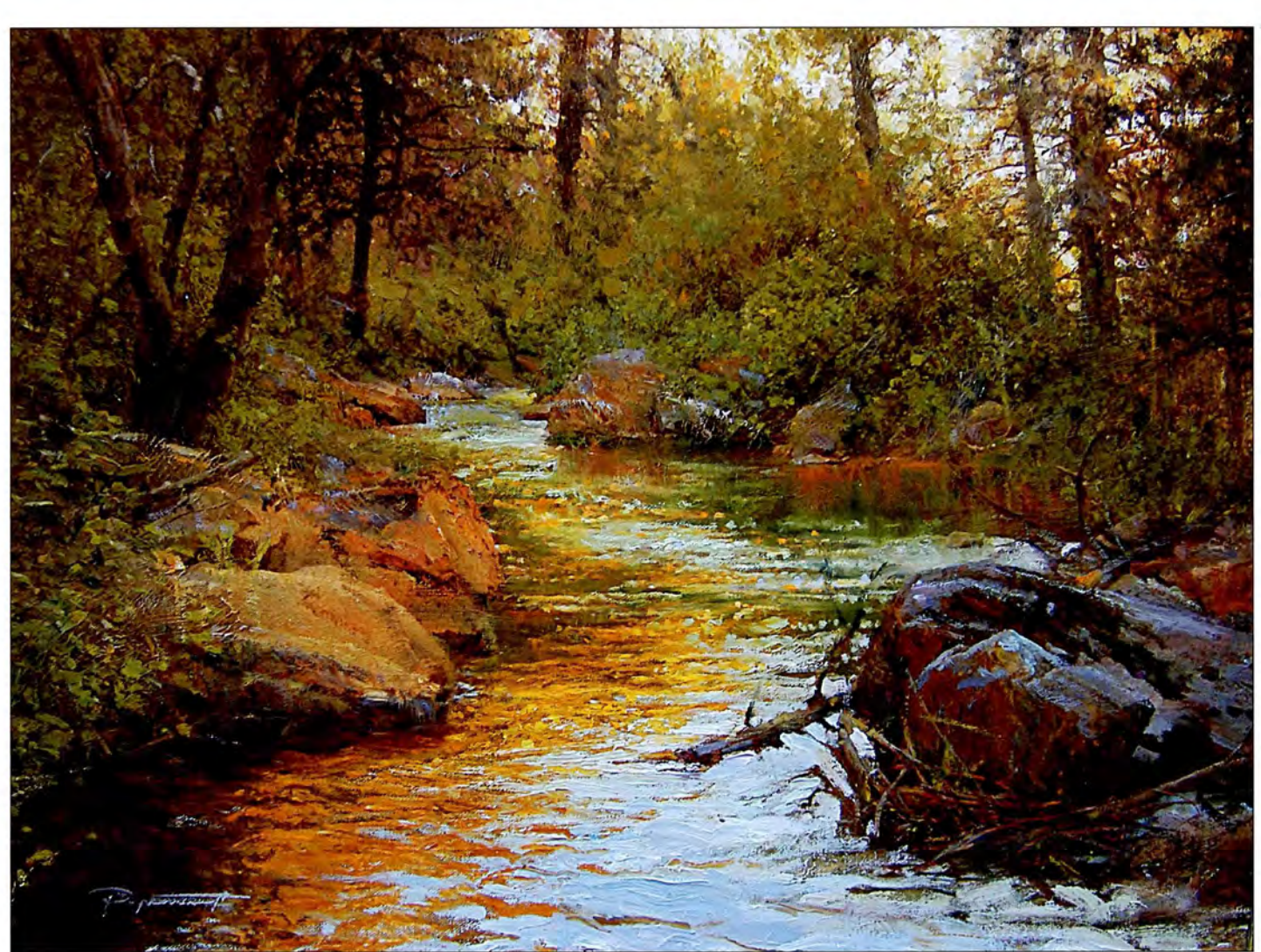
impressionism was first sparked by Claude Monet's paintings and the historical art of Thomas Moran, it was observing the success of acclaimed Jackson artists such as Conrad Scherwing, John Clymer, and Jim Wilcox that finally convinced him that he could make a living as a painter.

Although he confides that he would love to use the designation plein air painter, most of Nethercott's canvases are done in the studio. Work outside on frosty days is primarily relegated to taking color notes. "Using the small watercolor kit from my backpack and 3" by 5" pieces of paper, I splash in color and contrast as quickly as possible

because a specific light quality lasts for only 10 to 15 minutes and then you are looking at an entirely different scene," he says.

While most landscape artists prefer to paint in early morning and late evening, because that light creates the most contrasts, Nethercott says he sometimes enjoys the light of mid-day, what he refers to as flat light. "I find this quality exudes a feeling of cold, so I create some of the most interesting winter scenes in this type of light," he says.

While Nethercott never fails to be inspired by the majesty of the Tetons and the lure of ice-locked streams, he says that, when it comes



Pine Creek, oil, 18" by 24"

"Quiet, intimate places bring me peace and appreciation for all that I have. The light dancing on this small stream demanded my attention with a paintbrush. Earth colors create a wonderful harmony in nature."



to choosing subject matter, he has a special affinity for painting aspen trees. "I love the variety of colors from one season to the next," he says. "In the spring the leaves are almost a yellow-green, getting darker with the summer and then turning a brilliant gold in the fall. I was raised in river bottoms filled with tall cottonwoods, so they are a favorite as well."

In the process of becoming a professional, all artists strive to develop a trademark look. Nethercott creates texture by using a light coat of gesso on the canvas. He then does a detailed, transparent to semi-transparent underpainting in full color, using water-soluble oil paints or acrylics. He follows that by splashing the surface with dribbles and splatters, creating "controlled accidents," but at the same time drawing in details of elements such

as trees, flowers, or mountains. Next comes the watercolor masking technique. A good example of this process is found in the areas of trunks and branches of trees such as the aspen. This stage can take several days, as Nethercott applies the paint one layer at a time, allowing it to dry between applications.

"What I have up to this point is a flat, rather uninteresting piece," he says. "The groundwork is done, and all the elements are in place, but it lacks the richness of a finished oil. Here is where I may be a little unorthodox. I like to take advantage of surface textures and create richer vibrancies in the underpainting transparencies, so here's my little secret: At this stage I apply a coat of transparent texture gel to the surface with a paintbrush. After it is thoroughly dry, I begin applying



South Park Horses, oil, 8" by 32"

"I found these horses enjoying the early fall sun. The bright green, yellow, and orange colors of the season in muted, flat light composed itself. Some paintings you have to work at to bring them together. This one just happened without effort."



Winter Highlights, oil, 30" by 40"

"Warm evening sun crashing into frosty, winter cottonwoods is a painter's delight. Light against dark, warm against cool—all the elements are here for dramatic contrasts. This creek is just blocks away from my home and shows that you don't have to travel far to find great landscapes to paint."



Shanty Spring, oil, 20" by 40"

"These old shacks have seen a lot better days. They typify how early ranchers added buildings as needed. You can see they don't have many springs left. I enjoyed painting the play of snow patterns of early spring."

the final paint. Depending on the subject and my determination of the appropriate handling, the final coat can vary from thin to a thick pasto."


Nethercott's youngest son, Steve, is an aspiring artist. "Working with him has been a learning process for both of us," he says. "He shows real promise, but I am encouraging him to go slow and perfect his style before pushing for the commercial aspect of the business."

Although many collectors are familiar with Nethercott's evocative landscapes, few are aware that he was one of the co-founders of the prestigious Art for the Parks competition. "In the mid-eighties, Patty Boyd and I began talking about the needs of the art community as a whole," he says. "We realized that large-scale museum shows were run almost exclusively for the benefit of the high-end professionals, so we talked about creating a venue where emerging artists would have a chance to compete alongside more established artists."

The two artists eventually conceived an exhibition based on the

country's national parks, which would offer a top prize of \$100,000. "By the deadline, we had over 10,000 entries, so the plan worked," he says. That first year, the top 100 paintings were displayed at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D. C. where Nethercott was commended by then vice president George Bush for his part in creating the unusual competition. Art for the Parks is now celebrating its eighteenth year, and the irony is that, although Nethercott designed the competition with himself in mind, he has never entered a single painting. "If one of my paintings were to place in the top 100, people might think it was rigged," he says with a chuckle.

Meanwhile, Nethercott happily creates landscape paintings that earn kudos from art aficionados far and wide. "Phill has taken a traditional subject matter and then set himself aside with his distinctive technique," says gallery owner Chris McLarry. "He's really pushing the envelope—splattering paint, smearing paint, and at the same time getting a sharpness and definition to the work."

Nethercott admits that getting away from this traditional focus to paint desert scenes has been an enjoyable change of pace and says his best work is yet to come. "Art is my passion," he says. "My most fervent desire is that my paintings will leave a lasting impression on people that will uplift and encourage them for generations to come." 

Myrna Zanetell is a writer living in El Paso, Texas.