

“I LOVE ANIMALS”

*With high-keyed colors and high-tech tools,
Cheri Christensen captures those precious faces.*

By Dottie Indyke



“An Evening with Friends,” oil on board, 64” × 44”

Not too many years ago, Cheri Christensen kept her animal paintings secret, afraid that her teacher, Russian impressionist Ron Lukas, would not approve. But she was accidentally exposed when her husband threw her a surprise birthday party and Lukas was among the guests. Her portraits of cows and chickens hung all over the house, she recalls, and she would have certainly taken them all down had she known he was coming.

She was surprised in more than one way that day. Lukas loved the paintings, which was crucial to the emerging artist. He was her mentor, the man who literally taught her to paint from scratch, and the animal portraits were, in Christensen's own words, "me."

Christensen came to fine art later than many, nearing 30 when she decided that she wanted to learn to paint. Although she'd had artistic experience, studying costume design in college, working in the fashion industry, and even weaving, she had never put a brush to canvas. A friend recommended she find a teacher whose work she liked, and she chose Lukas.

"I didn't go in thinking I wanted to be an artist," she recalls. "Then I got hooked. It was all I wanted to do. Three years later, I was still with him. Then he went to work at Dreamworks, the Hollywood film studio, and stopped teaching. It was good timing. He gave me the boot."

In those three years, Christensen evolved from a complete novice to an accomplished, confident painter. Her achievement flies in the face of the popular notion that one must be born with talent. On the contrary, she insists, anyone can learn as long as they have the drive.

"You have to have enough desire to go through the ugly stages," she maintains. "You have to learn to put up with the frustration when you see something in your head and it doesn't come out the way you want it to look. Every painting starts with abstract shapes and you have to believe that those shapes will become what you want. In the beginning, you get to that stage and you freak out. But the more you paint, you realize it's just a stage that you'll pass through."

Her subject may be unconventional and her tools high-tech, but Christensen's style is the classic looseness and personal interpretation of the impressionist. Using a digital camcorder, she captures free-roaming barnyard animals wherever she goes, whether rural farms in Mexico or her hometown of Santa Fe, then loads the images into her computer and slows them down so she can study the animals' movement and bone structure. Those still-frames become the basis of her paintings.



"Everything is Swine," oil on board, 18" × 24"



"All Down Hill," oil on board, 36" × 36"



"Winter's Past," oil on board, 30" × 40"

color, temperature, and value. If it's wrong, it will shout at you that it's wrong. The good thing about oil is that you can scrape it off ten times and redo it. The artist has to learn what to leave out, how to simplify it down to its essence. And that's hard."

No doubt echoing many of the same tenets she learned from her teacher, Christensen articulates the artist's process with the clarity and ease of a natural instructor. In the past 11 years, in fact, she has absorbed and made the most of her newly acquired skills, applying herself with obsessive zeal.

After a brief stint exhibiting at art fairs, she was accepted into the first gallery she approached, a place that was at the top of her list. She has owned her own gallery on Bainbridge Island, Washington, and tutored many students who had never painted before. Last year, she taught in Italy.

"People have this mistaken idea that artists can sit back after being discovered. That doesn't happen a lot. I've worked."

And still she strives for perfection. The more you know, she's fond of saying, the



more you realize how much you don't know. Now that she's mastered the tools of her trade, a whole new world of possibilities has opened. Her job, as she sees it, is to push herself to make paintings with the undefinable quality that causes people to stop in their tracks. And, surprisingly, given that she is a woman who is serious about her work, she strives to make her viewers happy.

"I love animals," she declares. "I like seeing them in their own environment—they don't mess it up like we do. There's a lot to learn there. I love their colors and movement. When you watch them, you can see where Indian dances come from. Especially when you slow their movement down, you realize we can't really do better than Mother Nature. That moves me to want to create myself."

Cheri Christensen's paintings are shown at McLarry Fine Art, 225 Canyon Road. Hours: 10:00-5:00 Monday-Saturday and 11:00-4:00 Sunday. (505) 988-1161 or 1-877-983-2123. www.mclarryfineart.com.