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# SouthwestArt

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# The **BIG** Picture

Canadian painter Paul Van Ginkel puts his own realist brand on the West's most iconographic creature

By Devon Jackson

**BIGGER, BOLDER, RICHER, LOOSER.** Epic. Elegant. Dramatic. All of these terms accurately convey the qualities and the effects of a Paul Van Ginkel painting, be it a squarish portrait of a Native chief from a bygone era or a super-sized canvas of a pack of wild Spanish mustangs pounding across the prairie. Van Ginkel clearly loves the power of the West and its more potent symbols, and he's not at all shy or objective about how he represents them. In fact, he can be downright manipulative. In essence, Paul Van Ginkel may well be the Steven Spielberg of contemporary western artists.

"I spend my time on what's powerful," admits Van Ginkel, ever polite and so Canadian, yet forthright too, in describing his penchant for horses and Native peoples—which account for about 80 percent of what he paints. "I'm drawn to subjects that have an impact on me. Landscapes can be

powerful, but usually not for me. And I rarely do a 20-by-20 painting because my subjects don't work at that size. So it's a natural marriage between

WHITE OUT, OIL, 43 X 65.



PAUL VAN GINKEL











what I want to say and my subject.”

Now 43 and back living in Calgary, Alberta, the town he grew up in, Van Ginkel was born in St. Boniface, Manitoba. His father, who emigrated from Holland in the early 1950s, started his own construction company in Canada. “My dad was driven and ambitious and hardworking,” Van Ginkel says unabashedly of his father’s entrepreneurial legacy. “Like him, I consider myself a small

His *wider-view*, crowded paintings ripple and quiver with a *feeling* of motion.

businessman, only my business is art.”

Artistic as a child but unaware of anything like a career in art, Van Ginkel only found out about Calgary’s Alberta College of Art during his senior year in high school. He did four years there but bolted in 1983 when the *Calgary Herald* offered him a salary as the paper’s graphic artist. He loved it. “It was a great opportunity to do a lot of different assignments, and you’re always problem-solving,” says Van Ginkel, who eventually earned a master’s degree at Syracuse University. “Plus, you’re always dealing with deadlines and working

STICKING TOGETHER, OIL, 40 X 60.

with others. And that’s why I chose to go into the visual communications program and not fine arts. Because of the discipline. In painting class, it was like, the teacher would come in, tell us to do 15 paintings and say, ‘See you in two weeks.’ That was too much flexibility and freedom. That’s what I was after at the *Herald*: discipline.”

Discipline, and the satisfaction too of an immediate response to what he’d made. But in his seven years at the *Herald* he never stopped painting. In 1989, with his former wife in law school and his dad’s risk-taking spirit rising within him, he quit. In January 1990, he started painting full time. Less than two years later, he did his first Calgary Stampede.

Van Ginkel had been going to the 10-day-long rodeo and art show-cum-state fair since he was a kid. But experiencing it as one of its 50 western artists, well, “The Stampede show has been one of the signature events in my career,” states Van Ginkel, who to this day can sell half of his yearly 100-painting output at the show. “The exposure there is staggering.”

When someone at the Stampede asked if he’d



ever been to Santa Fe, NM, Van Ginkel shrugged. Santa Fe? “You have to take your work there,” urged the Stampeder. So he did. In November 1992, Van Ginkel made his first trip to the City Different. What he found was “a gigantic other world down there south of the Canadian border,” he marvels. In 1994, he went back for four months—to paint and soak up as much as he could of the town’s art-as-business atmosphere. “And that,” he says, “really changed my whole career.”

Early on, people mistook his oil paintings for photo-realism. “Then I took liberties, and loosened up,” asserts Van Ginkel of the expressionistically realist paintings he now does. It’s a loose style, but one rooted in pattern and rhythm, and never so loose as to be undisciplined. His wider-view, crowded paintings ripple and quiver with a feeling of motion. In the paintings that hone in on their subjects—tighter shots of horses all massed together or Native portraits seen close-up, usually from below—there’s an enhanced sense of the subject’s inherent grandeur and dignity.

“The challenge is to paint something that looks like what it’s supposed to look like without too much effort, not to give the viewer too much information—not putting in every hair on a horse’s head,” explains Van Ginkel. “As for what sets my paintings apart from others, I like to think it’s my brush stroke, my choice of colors, the mood—my feeling—and the way I apply the stroke. The subject is a close second. I do subjects that are unique. But I’m not inspired by other painters.”

Other contemporary painters, that is. John Singer Sargent always inspires him. “He had a brilliant, confident flair for his subjects,” reflects Van Ginkel. “But it comes down to his technique, the way in which he paints.” Velazquez rates a close second. Then Frans Hals and Caravaggio. But Sargent predominates.

**A STUDIO PAINTER** who lives and works out of his downtown Calgary loft, Van Ginkel’s up at 6:30 a.m. and clocked out by 6 p.m. “I have my routine like anyone else,” he admits. Although, “Once I start laying down a couple of strokes, I’m committed.”

Van Ginkel ventures out of the West sometimes—

to Italy, Morocco, New York. And during his travels it’s not unusual for him to take even more photographs with his camera than he has horses on his canvases. “I use every mechanical means available to me,” he says. His first official photo shoot was in September 1997—1,000 pictures a day of Spanish mustangs in and around Sundance, WY. Then came Mike Hanley’s stagecoach camp, a three-day enterprise in Jordan Valley, OR, with about 15 other photographers and painters. Van Ginkel and his colleagues snapped away at the vintage late-1800s vehicles in water, in canyons, in meadows. Van Ginkel’s haul? About 4,000 slides.



QUIETING RITUAL, OIL, 40 X 50.

But the mother of all photo shoots (for Van Ginkel and many others) remains the Artists’ Ride, the annual and prestigious invitation-only gathering of 50 western painters. The Ride, now over 20 years running and set outside Wall, SD, is a four-day-long schmooze-and-shutter fest wherein 25 or so models and actors reenact various western scenes, from U.S. Cavalry riders rescuing passengers out of a burning stagecoach to bawdy boomtown brothels.

Having such an abundance of documented images at hand has afforded Van Ginkel a certain creative luxury, allowing him to take on bigger subjects, grander compositions, and larger paintings.



He soon outgrew the 24-by-36-inch format he started out with, and now hangs his works mostly in the Big & Tall section, with many paintings measuring 3 feet by 5 feet. And then there's TIDAL WAVE, which augurs in an even bigger, better Van Ginkel. Based in part on a series of photos he took at the Calgary Stampede in 2000, when organizers herded in a mob of horses (as opposed to bringing them in by truck), it's as Spielbergian as any horse painting can get.

When Van Ginkel looked at his pictures from that

South Dakota trips: 15 cowboys on a hill in full cowboy regalia. "Generally, I steer away from all that detail—the bullets on the stirrup, and that sort of thing," balks Van Ginkel. "But that will probably be my next challenge, doing 15 of these cowboy faces, and with all the details, too."

Candid about his artistic abilities, Van Ginkel's as bold a self-promoter as his Canadian courtesy will allow. "It's natural for me to follow up and promote my art," he reasons. "People sense my passion and my commitment. And, quite frankly, my work has value. Plus, businesspeople like to be treated the way they're treated in the business world."

These days, Van Ginkel's nudes and Natives are generating just as much appreciation—and sales—as his signature horses. "Obviously, painting a nude is different from painting a horse," muses Van Ginkel. "But in trying to express how I feel about the subject, it comes down to how that subject is portrayed." As for his Native portraits, Van Ginkel allows, "I've had Native Americans occasionally tell me they're offended for my using their image," but the overall response has been positive. "I've been told,"

he says, "that I portray them in a dignified, proud way."

No matter how much of his own emotions and soul he puts into his paintings, no matter how well he conveys his own feelings (or best intentions) about that horse, or that Native chief, Van Ginkel can only steer people's reactions to his work so far. "It's a big responsibility, to balance being true to yourself and to be respectful of the impact that image can have," admits Van Ginkel. "But I find that the subject always gets more attention than the artist anyway. And besides, when somebody buys a painting it really says more about them than it does about the artist." □

**Devon Jackson also writes for *Outside*, *Glamour*, and *Sports Illustrated*.**

**Van Ginkel is represented by McLarry Fine Art, Santa Fe, NM, and [www.paulvanginkel.com](http://www.paulvanginkel.com).**



FALL REFLECTIONS, OIL, 43 X 65.

OPPOSITE PAGE: STACKING THE DECK, OIL, 65 X 43.

day, he thought to himself, This is a nightmare. I'd never paint this. There are just too many of these horses. But as he's done with other watershed works—"The ones that take me to another level," he says—he thought about the concept for TIDAL WAVE day after day.

"The reason it's so significant to me is that it's courageous in terms of its origins," explains Van Ginkel. "It shows I have the courage and the confidence to do something like this. To take on 80 horses in one painting, that's not easy. And it had to be big—it's 4 feet by 6 feet—because the subject matter almost demands that it be that big. Horses in general lend themselves to that scale. So in my view, it's put me into another category. I've stepped up my ability."

Another step up will come from one of those



