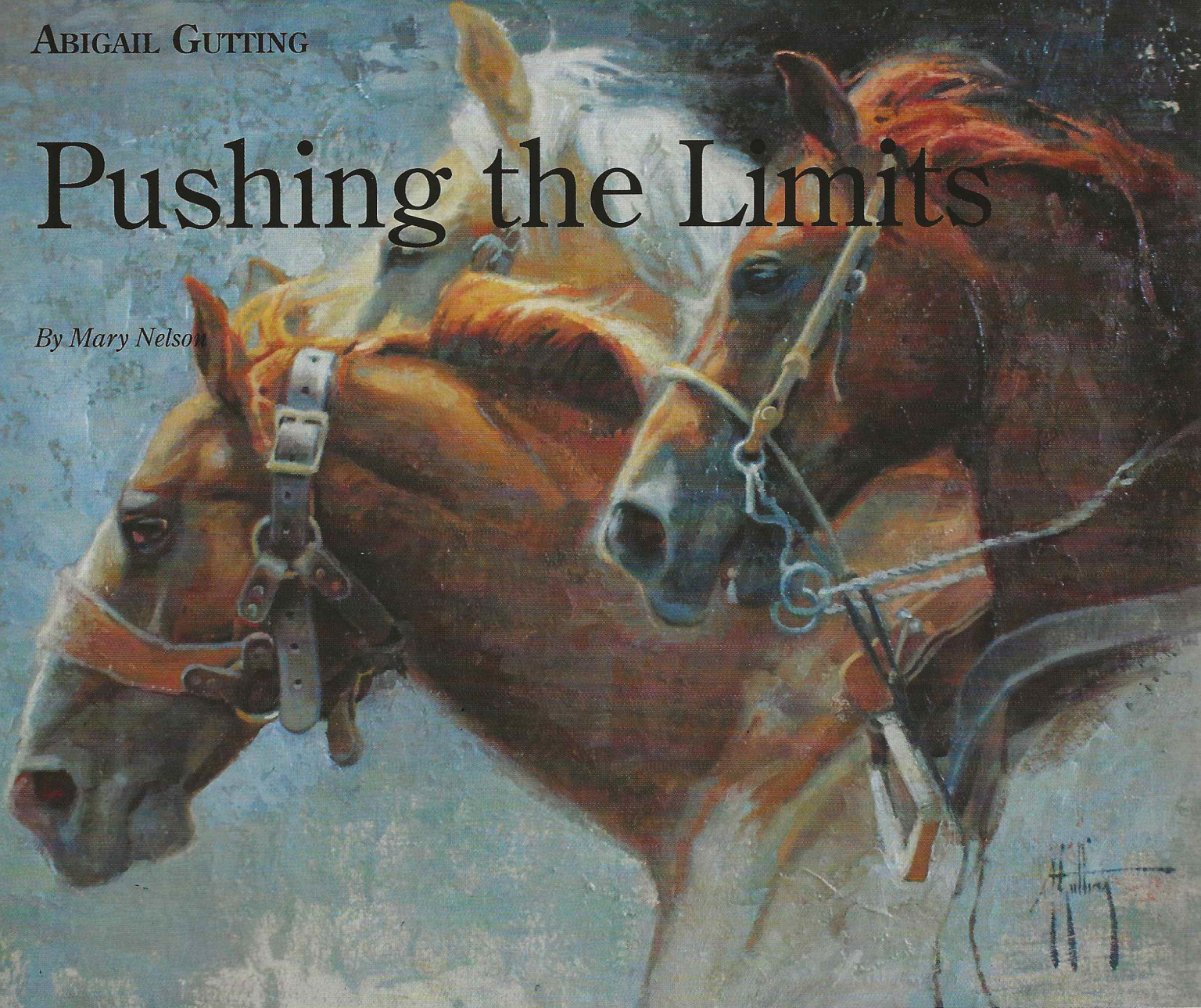


# Pushing the Limits

By Mary Nelson



In today's high-tech environment, people might have a difficult time imagining a life without television. But 35-year-old Idaho artist Abigail Gutting can't imagine having had a childhood that included it. When her parents married, they chose to remove TV from their lifestyle and instead read aloud to each other. As a result, Gutting says her childhood gave her the flexibility and space to explore multiple creative outlets.

"It was really the best thing that could have happened to me because of all the creativity it stimulated," she says. "Saturday nights we'd read

out loud. The environment was really ripe to use my imagination."

Gutting's mother Susan, also an artist, had studied for a year at the American Academy of Art in Chicago, Illinois. Instead of completing a fine art degree, however, she went on to earn a teaching degree in art education.

When she had children, Susan decided to use her teaching degree to homeschool them. By doing so, she essentially gave them free rein to flex their artistic muscles. Abigail did so by drawing and painting the animals and the landscape she saw around her in rural Kendrick, Idaho.

By the time she was 13, Gutting was working with her father, a veterinarian, something she would continue to do for seven years. Serving as her father's small animal surgery assistant, she garnered a wealth of firsthand knowledge of the habits and anatomies of those animals.

"[Dad and I] had adventures that I think contributed to my love of sto-

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(Above) *Three At Work*, oil, 20" by 24"

*"The character of working horses is the emphasis of this piece. Three horses—a bronc and two pickup horses—know their job and do it well."*



rytelling as a painter," Gutting says. "A vet in a farm town has a lot of really neat experiences and stories, special memories that have stayed with me for years."

Even though it's been 15 years since she worked with her father, Gutting still turns to him for advice with her paintings of animals. "I still will ask his advice on a piece," she says. "He can look at my work and nail an anatomy question in 20 seconds."

Before Gutting dove into Western and wildlife art as a career, she had set her sights on becoming a classical pianist. All the while, however, she was drawing animals and Western scenes. Her interest in art suddenly replaced her interest in music, and her career goals changed.

"Looking back, I realized that in all my spare time I was drawing and painting," she says. "The turning point came [in 2002] when I finished up my high school work. I have always loved the illustration form of telling a story, so I decided that I wanted to study art full time."

The thought of going to Chicago or to San Francisco, California, to study at what she describes as "the really good art schools" didn't work for a homebody like Gutting. So her mother resurrected art courses from the American Academy of Art for her daughter "and started being more demanding to give me the skills to move forward," Gutting says.

When Gutting was still an adolescent, her mother had encouraged her to enter a plethora of wildlife art contests, including the duck stamp and National Rifle Association competitions. She placed in some of them, which helped to encourage her artistic pursuits. Once it became clear that Gutting intended to make art her career, her mother insisted that she learn all aspects of drawing, using pen and ink, graphite pencil, watercolors, colored pencil, and scratchboard before she moved on to paints.

Gutting, who is 35, has been painting full time since 2004. Using trial and error, she found that oils worked best for her and gave her



*Settled, oil, 30" by 20"*

*"My mom and I love going into Yellowstone National Park for reference material and plein air painting. On one of our recent trips to the park, we found this mule doe. She was bedded down and didn't seem too bothered by us, so I was able to spend a fair amount of time watching and photographing her."*

what she wanted in a painting. "At age 20, I started oil painting; it was like a whole new world of possibilities opened up artistically because of what I can accomplish with the color and value and texture that you can't with any other medium," she says. "It's unique in a lot of ways."

The following year, Gutting and

her parents moved to Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, where she continues to live and where she shares a studio with her mother. She also often accompanies her mother on plein air expeditions, finding great value in the discipline of painting from life. "There's no substitute for painting on location," she says. "It teaches you color,





*Always, oil, 24" by 30"*

*"Always is about the tradition of the American West brought into the 21st century. Western history is rich, and its traditions live on with much celebration. This painting is anchored in the present by the current American Flag and touches of modern sport."*

value, and drawing like you can't learn in the studio."

Gutting also has found that taking workshops helps her to push her artistic boundaries. As an example, workshops with wildlife artist Greg Beecham have given her new ways to look at using color in her paintings. "While I have been taught color theory from day one, his last few classes have been kind of eye-opening in terms of what can be done with different color harmonies," she says. "You can take a subject and apply a limited palette to it.

You can make it unique by just using a triad, or three colors, to paint an entire painting."

Gutting's love of the Golden Age of Illustration is the foundation of all her art. She describes her style as traditional representational and is surprised when people call it contemporary, although she says she uses a traditional starting point and then tends to "push the limits of traditional compositions. I like to do a vignette...and leave a lot unsaid," she says. "I use a little bit of a mast-to-line approach with a bit more de-

sign, rather than paint everything that I see," (Mast-to-line in a composition means the center of interest, such as the head of a horse, is fully defined as a solid mass, and then a single line moves outward to the rest of the composition and is left that way.)


Growing up in the rural West cemented Gutting's love of nature and wildlife, and she is devoted to capturing the drama and allure of her surroundings. "I've had my love of the American West forever, and I've lived there all my life," she says,





*The Phone Call, oil, 24" by 30"*

*"I like to paint the contemporary American West. The kneeling cowboy in the foreground is talking on his cell phone, an element of 21st century culture. The conversation is left to our imagination as the horse patiently waits behind him."*

adding that she hopes her paintings evoke a nostalgia for a simple way of life that is lived with humor and a hardy work ethic. "I only paint what I see firsthand, so I'm at the point now that no matter where I live, I will still paint what I paint now; I would still go look for it." 

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