



Rose, oil, 12" by 12"

"This is my friend, Sandra's, longhorn, Rose. I feel privileged that she let me use her photo. I know Rose was very close to her. Here I've also mixed palette knife and brush."

CHERI CHRISTENSEN

Painting the Air

By Myrna Zanetell

Cheri Christensen is blessed with the ability to capture the uniquely individual personalities of the animals she lovingly portrays, radiating their charm and joie de vivre as she does so. Her love of animals traces back to her childhood in Enumclaw, Washington, a small farming community, where her family had a butcher shop, and

her grandfather raised Herefords.

"I spent a lot of time at his ranch, and I idolized the lifestyle of being surrounded by animals—sheep, horses, cows, cats, and dogs," Christensen says. After graduating from high school in 1979, she enrolled at the University of Washington in Seattle and took courses in clothing because she wanted to "do something

artsy," she says. "Nobody ever told me I could simply major in art."

A year later, Christensen enrolled at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, where she took classes in costume design. A couple years later, she moved again and enrolled at the University of Washington, where she earned a Bachelor of Arts Degree in costume studies and

(Top right) *Reflection*, oil, 6" by 6"

"Occasionally, I venture away from animals but I'm always looking for color and light. I took the reference image at the Four Swallows Restaurant on Bainbridge Island and wanted to simplify it down to its essence. I love her reflection in the mirror."

(Bottom right) *King of the Coop*, oil, 24" by 24"

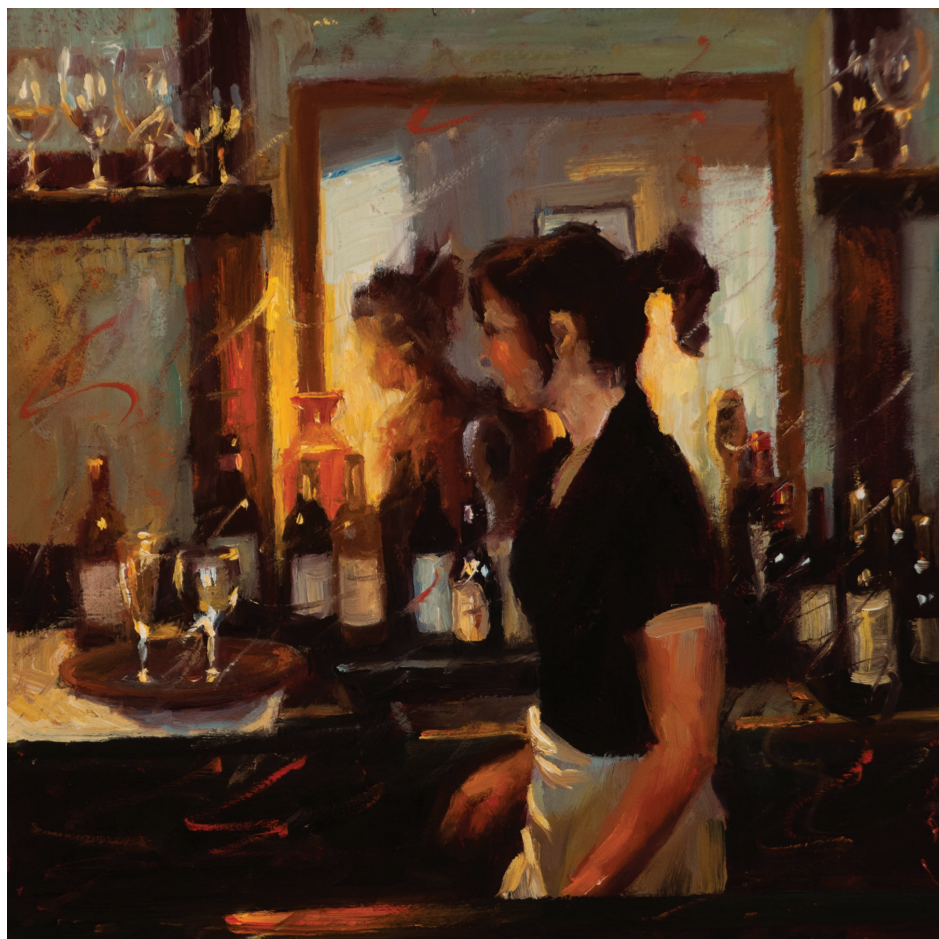
"This painting is totally painted with palette knife; I feel it gives more energy to the rooster. I did a bit of dragging the paint here. I love seeing the different effects I can get with it."

signed on as a buyer for a local department store.

"Even though I wasn't doing art, I eventually realized that my retail experience helped prepare me for my future career as a painter," Christensen says. "Most people don't understand that, as an artist, you are actually running your own business. It was in retail that I learned about marketing a product, meeting deadlines, and general business acumen."

Determined to make better use of her creativity, Christensen returned to Enumclaw and asked her cousin Judy to teach her to paint. "She told me to begin my studies by making copies of a painting, so I picked up a card with an image by one of the Old Masters," she says. "By making reproductions, I soon understood that I loved painting."

She also realized she didn't want to copy the work of others so she asked Ron Lukas, a Seattle artist who had been mentored by Russian Impressionist Sergei Bongart, if he would teach her to paint. "There was so much emotion and passion in the works of the Russian painters," she says. "It was their strong use of color that really drew me to wanting to perfect their style. Ron taught us to paint, but the thing he did not teach us was how to make a living as an artist; I had to learn that on my own. I started out working with my good friend, Pam Ingalls, by setting up a booth at local fairs and small art shows."





Spring Chick, oil, 6" by 6"

"I love taking a different viewpoint, and this little chick is a great example of that. Why not show the cute, sassy booty of the chick?"

Christensen then went in search of a gallery that would be willing to represent her work and was accepted by the first gallery she approached. "While my imagery is not really Western, it borders on that theme, which gives them something a little different from the cowboys and Indians," she says. That first gallery was in Arizona and was quickly followed by another in Wyoming and a third in New Mexico.

Christensen fell in love with

Santa Fe and moved there in 2000, where she remained until 2012. She later moved to Fredericksburg, Texas, and then to San Antonio. "With Fredericksburg just an hour away, I can still go there to find subject matter," she says.

The fact that Christensen takes all her own research photographs adds to the intimacy and appeal of her paintings. "I love getting out there with the animals either in early morning or late afternoon," she

says. "I call it 'drive-by shooting,' but to me this is half the fun of painting. Being with the animals is so important because that is the only way you really get a feel for them.

"It is like portrait artists who are able to produce better paintings when they get to know their clients on a firsthand basis. I could sit there and watch little chicks or ducklings all day; they are absolutely hilarious. Many times I go to a park and bring treats for the ducks. That way I can



Fredericksburg Influencers, oil, 36" by 60"

"I photographed these calves on my way from New Mexico to Texas. I loved how curious they were. This painting was done with a combo of palette knife and brush. The palette knife works well for the grass upfront, and the brush works best for the cows."

actually round them up. When I am working, I lie down on the ground and let them come to me. That way I am getting an entirely different viewpoint. When you are on their level, you catch a lot more than just standing there and shooting down on them."

Being on site also allows Christensen to photograph an animal in a specific light. "It's really important for me to get good firsthand reference work because the sunlight on the grass yields very different colors from a cloudy day with the subject against the dirt," she says. "You need to figure out what you want before you just go out and start shooting. Do you want the bright sunny day? Or do you want the more subdued light of late afternoon that gives you more shadows?"

Christensen doesn't have a fa-

vorite animal, letting her mood and her reference work lead the way. "I love painting roosters because I do the entire composition in palette knife," she says. "It just fits the animal because I can build up lots of paint; it becomes a very rhythmic process. I have done so many of these that I am now starting to play with the paint a little more, just pushing it a little further.

"When it comes to choosing a subject, I paint what I love. In fact, I have painted an armadillo before just because I liked him. I am also fascinated by the rear ends of most animals. I have painted the backs of chickens, a pig, and even a donkey. Painting them from behind definitely provides a different perspective."

One animal Christensen hasn't painted is Zoey, her 95-pound Bernese Mountain Dog. "The Bernese

are farm dogs that were used to pull milk carts for farmers," she says. "Because they were bred to bond with people, they are very people-oriented dogs so she is the perfect studio companion."

Recently, Christensen has been painting ravens in an expressionistic style. "The ravens are definitely me





Evening Ritual, oil, 24" by 24"

"My friend, Marlene, took the photo I used as reference for this swan. She studies with me so she knew what I was looking for. I loved the swan's calmness and felt we all could use a bit of being in the moment with the swan."

stepping out of the box," she says. "I love mythology. I went to London several years ago, and there is an old legend related to the ravens at the Tower of London." According to that legend, those ravens, which are tended to by an official raven master, protect the tower and the British

crown. Christensen shot videos of the ravens and is using them now as sources for her compositions.

Bold colors and heavy impasto have become the hallmarks of Christensen's paintings. "As for my technique, I paint on museum quality board and gesso them with a Vene-

tian red because I like that warmth to come through," she says. "I keep my darks a little more transparent, and then I start by laying out all my shadow areas because I like them to connect. Then I come in and build up the lights. I like broken color so, when I am putting something down,



Duck Gangs, oil, 8" by 16"

"I had to lie down to get this shot of the ducks running at me right before sundown. They crack me up. You can observe so much from animals when you get on their level. It feels like I entered their world."

Odin's Messengers, oil, 30" by 30"

"Here I combined the background I saw from the Tower of London with the images of the ravens my brother Curt photographed in Alaska. I loved playing with the paint and dragging it across the ravens. My idea was to create a mythological, dream-like feeling while still being representational."


I might mix in other colors but it still fits in that value, and I find that a lot more interesting.

"I feel that moving away from my typical style helps me step away from the 'paint-what-I-see' method that I was taught," she says. "Part of what I am trying is different applications for edges. I call it 'painting the air,' the movement of everything. However, painting with black doing the ravens is more difficult so I need to add some color to get the reflective light and give it a dream-like quality fitting with the mythology of the subject."

No matter the subject or technique, Christensen's purpose is to



draw her viewers into the composition. "Once I get going, I get into the rhythm of the painting and the movement of the animal, and I have a blast," she says. "I love animals. My primary purpose is to help view-

ers experience that same connection to these wonderful beings." 

Myrna Zanetell lives in Pueblo, Colorado.