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HEAVY METTLE

Idaho artist Abigail Gutting's powerful wildlife and high-octane rodeo scenes are turning heads in the art world.

BY GINA TEICHERT

*Runnin' On Empty, oil
on linen, 36 x 44½ in.
Available at the
Prix de West.*







Storm Comin', oil on linen, 20 x 40 in.

To look at an Abigail Gutting painting is to see power. Spring-loaded rough stock. Stoic wildlife. Deft paint handling. Dust, drips, and dynamite compositions. There's a confidence to her work—like an off-the-cuff sketch from a master draftsman—unhurried and unfussy. These are not the marks of a tentative painter. They're direct, packed with energy and ready to burst out of frame.

Her thundering horses and rodeo bulls conjure up visions of Gutting in the studio, cigarette dangling from her lip, music turned up to 11, summoning the swagger of Jackson Pollock, Francis Bacon, and all the bad boys of 20th-century art.

"That doesn't sound like her at all," InSight Gallery owner Elizabeth Harris laughs. "If you meet Abi, I don't think she's into rowdy music," Harris continues, noting the artist's poise and self-assured demeanor. Okay, perhaps the suggestion that these works were born of a frenetic, high-octane studio was a little off base. "Very calm and centered

would be how I would describe Abi," says the Fredericksburg, Texas, gallery owner.

Gutting's work first caught the eye of InSight sales director Adele Wells, who then showed it to Harris. They loved Gutting's Western subjects and contemporary flair, says Harris, noting the artist's ability to convey movement and her design-forward handling of spatial planes. The team decided to keep an eye on Gutting's practice, then a lucky, in-person encounter sealed the deal.

At Briscoe Western Art Museum's *Night of Artists*, Harris was seated next to a woman she describes as lovely, quiet and reserved, but didn't immediately connect the dots that it was the same Abigail whose work she had been admiring. "We absolutely enjoyed talking with her and her mom," she says. "Everything she says is very thoughtful and she's just really salt of the earth.

"We came home after that show and said, OK, not only do we like her work, now we've met her and she's just



really a lovely human being. And we like working with people that we like," says Harris. They asked Gutting to be a guest artist at an invitational show and kept the relationship going from there. "We get to see her a couple times a year and she's absolutely so professional," adds Harris, who will exhibit pieces by Gutting in two shows this fall.

It turns out Harris and Wells weren't the only ones watching the breakout artist gain momentum. "Abigail Gutting has been on our radar as we have watched her hone her current style," *Prix de West* committee chair Susan Roeder tells us. "Her artwork brings the best of both worlds—a command of the anatomical accuracy of her subjects that a traditional Western art painter values, along with a fascinating modernism found in her choices of color palette, brush work, fade-out techniques and edge control into the backgrounds.

"Her art is fresh, yet also instantly recognizable as hers, a sign of a truly original artist," Roeder continues. "We could not be happier that she said yes when we invited her to join this year's *Prix de West* exhibition. Abigail is a wonderful addition to our family of artists."

In preparation for her 2024 debut, Gutting attended last year's *Prix de West*, the artist tells us. She had been to the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum's small works show in support of her mother, Susan Gutting, and remembers being wowed by the Oklahoma institution's permanent collection.

"I was again blown away because it was all my artist heroes in one location," Gutting says of the 2023 *Prix de West*. "It was amazing to walk through and see the incredible caliber...It's too much to experience in one day," she says, citing her three-day deep dive. "I still feel like I did not fully absorb the magnitude of the show. It was incredible."

Seeing those *Prix de West* works in person was a game-changer for Gutting. "I looked through the show online before I went and it was not anything like what I had seen online. It was a completely different entity," she says. Gutting remembers a larger-than-life drawing of a Native American by John Coleman.



A *Certain Flare*, oil on linen, 16 x 12 in. Available at Coeur d'Alene Galleries.

"Six or seven feet tall—and in person, it was very imposing—and you know, you just don't get that online."

Gutting equates analog art with live music. "If you're listening to digital cello music, it creates a different kind of sound than if you're sitting in a room listening to someone play the cello. It reaches your ear differently, so there's a different kind of perception, even if it's subconscious," she explains. "And so I believe the same is true for painting versus digital imagery.

"I mean, we have it pretty good right

now," she says of our ability to freeze the action and review it on the spot. "I don't know, I think some schools of thought think maybe it's cut down on some observation skills artistically." While she's grateful for the convenience and cost effectiveness of digital photography (she had a film camera when she first started painting), Gutting is not a fan of Photoshop or AI tools. "For being a millennial, I'm really low-tech," she laughs.

"I'm not an archaeologist in any sense of the word, but I wonder sometimes

what will be left over from the 21st century. Five-hundred years ago, we were recovering these incredible relics of art and sculpture and architecture. And what will we have now? What will be left over?" she wonders. "So I really think there should never be a substitute for real, physical, three-dimensional art. Painting will always be three dimensional. Even if you're working on a flat surface, on some level there will be surface texture. It will always be something you can reach out and touch."

Lifelike, yet far from photorealistic, Gutting's animals feel as though they might reach out and touch you back. The Arizona-born, Idaho-based artist spends her summers gathering reference at rodeos in Montana and Wyoming—camera cocked and at the ready.

When she's back in her Coeur d'Alene studio, Gutting reviews her rapid-fire action shots and selects frames to use as reference, often combining photos of several animals to create a layered composition. She spends the first days drawing and refining the design before painting—giving thought to the precise musculature and moody shadow patterns that have come to define her work.

"Especially with the horses, it tends to take me a little bit longer because I have to be really careful with the anatomy," says Gutting. "You know, if one thing deviates just a little bit from accurate anatomy, then it throws everything else off, and so it just takes a lot of time and patience."

For Gutting, the road to success has been paved by a solid work ethic—she paints six days a week—and by support from her artist mother and many in the Western and wildlife art communities. When we asked Gutting about young artists who have caught her eye, she mentioned Nate Closson. Two years ago, when we asked fellow Briscoe alum



Low Rumble, oil on linen, 20 x 16 in. Sold at the 2024 Night of Artists.



Four Minus One Equals Three on the Run, oil on linen, 20 x 30 in. Available at the Prix de West.



Of Ballads and Fables, oil linen, 30 x 48 in. Sold at the 2024 Night of Artists.

Shawn Cameron the same question, she said Gutting.

Coming off *March in Montana* and her seventh year at the Briscoe, Gutting is beaming from the “reunion environment” of these events and busy making work for new shows. “It’s a dream career and sometimes I just pinch myself that it is what it is,” she says. “It’s an incredible thing to be a part of.”

Gutting will be joining the 2024 *Prix de West* freshman class in June as a guest artist along with Tony Abeyta, Dan Friday, Brett Allen Johnson, Jerry Jordan, Mary Whyte and Kim Wiggins—an honor Gutting gets to celebrate just as she turns 40.

“Each year, the members of the *Prix de West* committee have an enormous responsibility to select a small number of guest artists from a long list



of noteworthy painters and sculptors whose work is garnering our attention,” Roeder says. “We often refer to a mantra espoused by Ed Muno, who hung the *Prix de West* show for its first

45 years—that atmosphere, feeling and mood are what connect a viewer to a piece of art. Consistent quality of creative thought and execution are also critical components that we consider. We seek artists with a track record and staying power, especially as they evolve within their styles and careers.”

With a breakneck show schedule and a bright career already behind her, it’s clear Gutting has staying power. Even if you don’t yet know her face, you know her work the moment you see it. And for a mild-mannered painter who packs a big punch, she probably prefers it that way.

You can find Gutting’s work at InSight Gallery, Coeur d’Alene Galleries, McLarry Fine Art, Bozeman Trail Gallery, and the 2024 *Prix de West*. 🐾