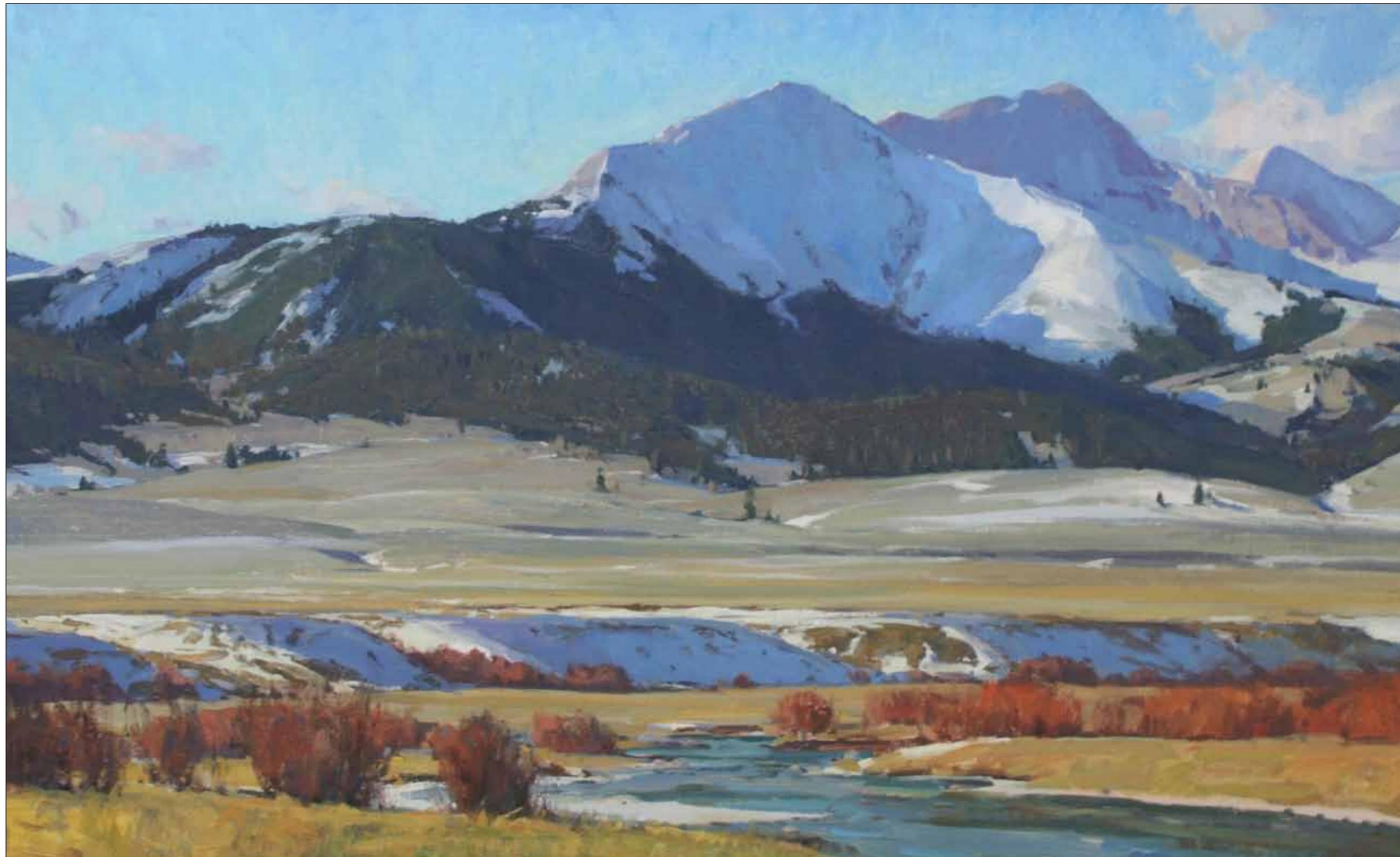


BALANCING ART AND LIFE

By Mary Nelson



Along the Red Rock, oil, 18" by 30"

"One winter, coming back from a hunting trip in Montana, I saw this along the Red Rock River outside Dillon, Montana. I was captivated by the green-gray mountains complemented by the red dogwood willows."

"I'm interested in expressive direct painting, going after something that's spontaneous and fleeting in the subject."

Unlike most artists, who claim to have been born with a Crayon in hand, Utah artist G. Russell Case came to his avocation a bit later, even though he was surrounded by art from a young age. His father, Garry Case, a watercolor artist of some renown, was also an illustrator. He had a studio in the family home and his young son, seemingly impervious to art, was just a normal kid with interests any young boy would have. Sure, he might have dabbled in drawing and coloring, but what child doesn't?

Things changed for Case, when he was a junior in high school. His art teacher, Lynn Hone, made a decision that proved fateful for him. At her invitation, a graduate student from Utah State University visited the class to discuss art. During that discussion, Case asked many questions, and his interest was piqued. Something about the interaction spawned a desire to look at art a bit more seriously.

Case, with the help of his father, took over a section of the studio and began to paint—a lot. His father also helped him frame his art and apply for exhibitions and shows. Young Case even won some art awards, further spurring his interest in pursuing art. It wasn't long before art became his all-consuming focus, and the natural next step was to earn a degree.

After graduating from high school in 1984, Case enrolled in the art program at Utah State University in Logan, Utah, where the art created by one of his professors, Gaell Lindstrom, amazed him. He loved the realistic, sweeping nature of street scenes with real people tending to everyday tasks, with a minimum of distracting details. Although at the time Case wasn't aware that Lindstrom's style was reminiscent of Edward Hopper and Robert Henri, he embraced and began to emulate it. "[Lindstrom] was doing a lot of street scenes and



Canyon Dwellers, oil, 24" by 30"
"I always love the feel of small figures played against the monstrous sandstone walls of the canyon."

"There was a battle going on [among students and professors] that I didn't get too involved in. I knew what I liked and what I was drawn to, and that's what I pursued."

In 1985, Case married Susanne, a high school friend, who also had decided to attend Utah State University. By the time he had earned a Bachelor's Degree in fine arts in 1989, he already had a substantial following, and a gallery in Logan and one in Salt Lake City were selling his work. To be sure he could make a living, Case intended



At Dusk, oil, 11" by 14"
"Some of the most exciting light shows come to life at dusk."

to pursue a Master's Degree that would allow him to teach, but one of his professors questioned the wisdom of that choice, suggesting instead that Case paint for a living.

"That was a new idea for me," Case says. "I'd never even considered it as a possibility. I got to thinking about it, went home and told my wife, 'Hey, I just think I'm going to paint for a living.' She kind of flipped upside down and said, 'Whaaaat?'" But the couple sat down and talked it out and Susanne eventually agreed that it was a fine idea—as long he could make a living.

The year after Case graduated

from college, Susanne earned a degree in fashion merchandise and design and accepted a position that took her to Salt Lake City. Soon after, the couple moved to Farmington, Utah, a move that proved to be a bit of a coup for Case. He had been renting a small studio in Logan and was making a name for himself with his paintings, but exposure to a larger, more urban audience increased his audience and his popularity.

Case continued to work in watercolors for 15 years. "I never thought I would do anything else," he says. "I never thought I'd paint in an opaque medium. That switched, when I was at a show in Arizona, and an older artist introduced me to Maynard Dixon."



Russell and his wife Susanne

isolated house paintings, structures like Hopper would do," Case says. "I thought it was just ingenious. I didn't know where it came from, but I was excited about that style and started doing it."

What he had embraced, but didn't realize it, was a style made notable in the early twentieth century by a group of artists that included Hopper, Ashcan School founder Henri, and others, who sought to depict the real world, not an idyllic one such as the Impressionists of the time were painting. The term Ashcan was initially a derisive term, but the artists came to embrace it as the banner of their foray into realism, which was visceral and gritty.

It wasn't until his final year of college that another professor

introduced Case to the Ashcan School and the artists who formed it. Henri urged his students to paint everyday situations they found in their world and to do so realistically, basically focusing on the reality of what they were looking at, not prettifying it to please viewers. "That premise carried over into my art," Case says. "I'm interested in expressive direct painting, going after something that's spontaneous and fleeting in the subject."

Case continued to expand on the ideas put forth by the Ashcan School artists and to incorporate them into his paintings. Despite the style not being popular during his college tenure, he persevered. "If you were painting representational, you were kind of mocked in a sense," he says.



In the Land of Thrones, oil, 30" by 40"

"This was inspired from a trip to Canyon Lands National Park. I was after the layering and atmospheric perspective that was going on."

Cabin and Clouds, oil, 16" by 20"

"I was drawn by the horizontal banding movement of rich light on the cabin against the vertical feel of background clouds."



Nevada Hills, oil, 12" by 16"

"Nothing can be more exciting to paint, at times, than the simplicity found in the Nevada desert."

Dixon's monumental art spoke to Case. He, too, painted simple, unadulterated scenes with little natural clutter. The introduction to Dixon's work came about the same time Case was feeling a bit burned out on watercolors, so he decided to experiment with oils and see if that would restore his verve for the former medium—which never happened. A year into working with oils, he was hooked.

As began to work with oils, he realized that landscape was the perfect subject matter for his new medium. Oils gave him more ability to represent the land and to preserve the reality of what people see. "Some of the best advice I ever got, when I was getting into oil painting, was from Bill Anton," he says. "We were in Prescott, Arizona, and I said 'Bill, I want to paint landscape,' and he said, 'Just go outside and paint.'"

That was the kind of no-nonsense

advice Case needed. When he was painting en plein air, he really looked at what he was trying to present in his paintings: the atmosphere and the laws of perspective—both linear and atmospheric. "Painting in the field is the most humbling, frustrating, refreshing experience all at the same time," he says. "And you learn. I don't go out to do finished paintings; I go out to refresh my eyes, look at what I'm seeing, learn and struggle through reality and come into the studio to put these together in composition, [in] big paintings." The only way to get that kind of authenticity, he adds, is to paint from life.

Even as public interest in his art grew, Case felt challenged to balance his art with being the provider for his family. Susanne had quit working after their third child, Cooper, was born. Diagnosed with autism, he needed more attention than either of his sisters, Taylee or Morgan.

Suddenly, Case says, he had to figure out "how to balance the honesty of what I want to say with what I know the market demands of me."

He found that balance, when he was in his early forties and realized that art wasn't the center of the universe; it was part of the whole. "My journey, my focus, had to shift, and my priorities changed," he says. "I started seeing my art and my family as part of all one thing. That's when art fell into the right slot of priorities in my life, and it made sense. It gave meaning to what I was doing."

Now, Case is content to hang out in some of the most beautiful places on earth, to meet interesting people, and to enjoy his children and grandchildren in a way that is satisfying on many levels. ❧

Mary Nelson is a writer living in Minneapolis, Minnesota.