



David Frederick Riley

A Commanding Presence



Elegant Power, oil, 60 x 48 in.

This May, David Frederick Riley is the featured artist at a weekend-long event at Manitou Galleries in Santa Fe, New Mexico, where the public will have the opportunity to meet the artist in an intimate setting and watch him paint.

Riley's massive portraits—whether animal or human—have an arresting presence, precisely the artist's desired effect on the viewer.

"When you're in front of my work on a wall it's hard to walk by it and not stop," he says. "It's 5 feet tall and it's staring right at you, and if it's done right, will follow you around the room. They're great for above a fireplace—they can anchor a whole room, just because of the presence they have."

Beyond scale and subject, Riley's work is compelling because of the artist's ability to strike a perfect balance between the traditional and contemporary, and



Tread Lightly, oil, 48 x 48 in.

the representational and the abstract, which the artist attributes to his background in illustration and intensive classical, atelier-style training.

When he moved to Utah around a decade ago, Riley got the idea to do a series of large portraits of the wildlife he was encountering for the first time—moose, elk, black bears, even bison.

"At that time, I really wanted an outlet to be more expressive and have a bigger range of style," he says. "Having put so much time into learning the classical

painting and drawing techniques, I was starting to miss the expressiveness of doing illustration...to get to combine those two loves [is very satisfying]. The animal portraits allowed me to take a break from being so tight and gave me an excuse to loosen up and have a little fun."

He applied the same painting methods he had learned in the academy environment to his new subject matter, so the process of creating the painting was the same, but he started experimenting with how he was laying paint down,



Sitting Bear,
Arikara, oil,
48 x 60 in.



The Artisan, oil, 46 x 40 in.

incorporating “drips, splatters and happy accidents.”

One happy accident resulted in one of the artist’s signature stylistic elements. He splattered mineral spirits on one of his paintings, which resulted in the diaphanous orbs that float around his canvases. He decided to explore creating that effect on purpose.

“For me, it adds an ethereal or weathered feel to the painting,” Riley says. “It gives the paintings a more spiritual feeling—it doesn’t feel like you’re walking up to an elk in a field; it feels like you’re walking up to the elk in more of a spiritual realm than a physical one.”

A portraitist at heart, Riley is still captivated by the complexity of emotion that can be carried in a human face. He bases his portraits on historic photographs of Western figures. “There’s nothing more fun than painting faces that are dynamic and hold multiple emotions at the same time,” he says. “Whether a rodeo scene or a chief from a specific tribe, it presents a really welcome challenge. You want it to look like the person but beyond the likeness, are you able to capture the different emotions? You see this pride and then you see this obvious turmoil they’ve been through. You don’t see emotions like that on people’s faces today, and getting to capture some of that is a lot of fun to do. It’s not easy, but when you get it right, it’s pretty rewarding.” 🐾