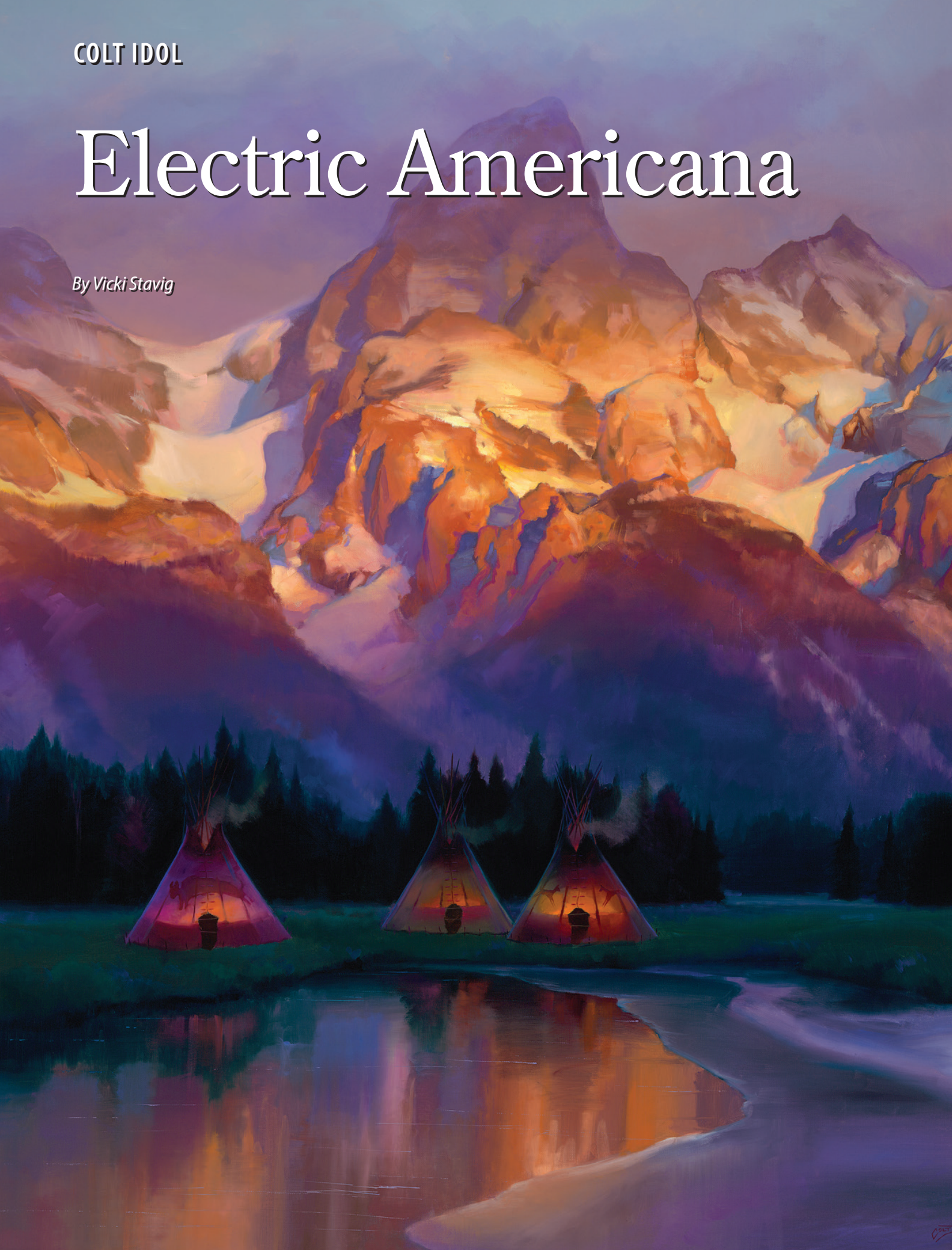


# Electric Americana

By Vicki Stavig



*Feels Like Home, oil, 48" by 60"*

*"There is a vast, extremely large chunk of land near us called the Bob Marshall Wilderness. At more than 1.5 million acres. It's the third largest wilderness in the lower 48 states. There are no motorized vehicles allowed in this wilderness; hunters and riders are typically on horseback. I paint a lot of scenes based off this area, I love the added dynamic of such wild and untouched area for the setting of a painting."*

Colt Idol is hard at work in the studio at his home in Whitefish, Montana. That's not surprising, but what is surprising is that he's surrounded by 21 paintings on

the floor and hanging on the walls in a U-shape around him.

"Right now, I have 21 pieces in the works," he says. "Some artists work in a more linear fashion, but I like to spend about three hours on a piece and then go on to another. I work on four or five pieces each day; it helps me get a stronger end piece by spending time with it. I might see something new, see what the paintings need."

Those paintings represent an eclectic mix of contemporary subjects, including cattle, landscapes, wildlife, Native Americans, figures,

and still lifes. While Idol's subjects vary, they all have something in common: a magnificent combination of light and color.

"I paint in oils; everything is under a Western umbrella," he says. "There is a lot of color and a strong light source and contrast. My paintings aren't as light as you would think; there are a lot of darks, so the light just pops. If you want to show off a strong light source, you need strong darks."

He comes by his artistic bent somewhat naturally. His father, Dick, an outdoorsman and brand

*(Left) Grand Finale, oil, 60" by 50"*

*"This is my painting for the upcoming Fall Arts Festival poster. If you've seen the Tetons in Jackson, Wyoming, you know how impressive and imposing they are. I wanted to create a scene with moody coloring that helped to illustrate the scale of the mountains."*





*You Lookin' At Me?, oil, 40" by 60"*

*"I love painting cows. Our neighbor has cows, and we're able to walk up to the fence with kids and interact with them. Their faces have such expression. In this painting, I want most of the faces to be looking at the viewer with an inquisitive look."*



*Pick Your Poison, oil, 36" by 60"*

*"This is an earnest attempt at realism for me. I found all of these old bottles on eBay or at local antique stores and put together this still life. It was interesting to portray the bottles at about twice life-sized; I figured, if I were going to go for it, I might as well go big!"*

personality, creates bronze sculptures, wildlife monuments, furniture, Western art, and paintings. "He always encouraged me in art," Idol says. "As a kid, I drew all the time. I had a 500-page drawing book and took it everywhere I went, including out for dinner. I'd come home from school and sit in my dad's studio for a few hours while he was sculpting. It was a fantastic environment."

Before he focused on art, Idol focused on athletics. He played basketball in high school and was a walk-on for the basketball team at Montana State, before transferring to Carroll College in Helena, Montana, where he had been awarded a basketball and track scholarship. A knee injury sidelined him and got him to wondering what he would do next.

"It hit me; I had to think about my life," he says. "What's in my future? My dad had always encouraged me in my art, 'Most artists who can draw can paint,' he said. 'You've got structure and values; add color. Learn what you can and can't do in the medium.'"

"He was the loudest voice and said, 'Take a break and focus on art.'" Idol took that advice, worked in his father's studio, studied DVDs, and took workshops conducted by other artists, including Dan Mieduch, a representational painter of the people and history of the West.

"I was fascinated with his coloring," Idol says. "There is hardly a dull area in his paintings. He had studied with James Reynolds, who is one of my favorite artists, so I was able to get some of Reynolds' knowledge through Dan."

Idol considered going back to college to study art, but a gallery began to carry—and sell—his paintings. "I was 21," Idol says. "I did some construction work so I could get a few bucks to buy paint. I was fortunate, because I lived with my family and didn't have obligations, so I had to give it a go, and I started to build a network of collectors."

Idol was also working with his father for a company that needed



*Heart and Soul, oil, 60" by 48"*

*"This painting was a breakthrough in many ways for me. I wanted to achieve a sense of realism while pushing the contemporary aspects as much as possible. I experimented with non-typical color usage along with many different painting applications such as brush, palette knife, sanding blocks, splatter, and paint squeezed straight from the tube. It was challenging but rewarding to have the juxtaposition of tighter, anatomical realism with pure creative abstraction."*

images for a home décor print line. "Dad said he needed help creating that imagery," Idol says. "I would start a painting and he would finish it—and vice versa. The Idol Line was contemporary Western and non-Western art. It was a great opportunity for me, but I didn't want to be a print or commercial artist."

"The big takeaway in working

with Dad was years of learning in about a 10-month window—experimenting and finding a look. You can't force it to happen. You kind of stumble upon it—a look, a signature, that you can build from."

Idol found his signature look and today is happy to be creating paintings that he describes as "electric Americana." Although he has painted in watercolors, gouache, and acrylics, today his medium of choice is oils. "It allows me a maxi-





*First Light Flight, oil, 16" by 20"*

*"There is a little dirt road near my house that I often take early in the morning. The road starts in the forest and ends in farmland. I often see pheasants out there, many times at first light. One time I saw a pheasant and just pulled over. I got out and walked towards him, and he took off flying right in front of some backlit trees. I immediately thought, 'That has to become a painting!'"*

mum richness factor," he says. "It's a patient and forgiving medium, and it gives me the largest range in what I can do. I paint just about anything. I went on a tangent for a while and painted a lot of cattle and barns. Now I want to improve on the human figure."

Idol does much of his reference work at two nearby reservations and visits and takes photos at a ranch in

South Dakota. He also visits the National Bison Range, Glacier National Park, and other beautiful areas in northwestern Montana.

But there's more. Idol also paints still lifes. "I did them to see how tight and realistic I could be," he says. "One of my paintings, *Pick Your Poison*, is a still life of liquor bottles. I woke up in the middle of the night, excited and inspired, and

went out to the studio to get started."

Idol spends 50 to 60 hours a week working in his studio, carefully balancing those hours with family time. He and his wife Jennifer have two children: a son, Wells, who is 7, and a daughter, Phoenix, who is 3. "The morning and evening hours are very sacred," he says. "Wells has a little easel set up next to mine and paints with me three days a week."



Jennifer runs the Dick Idol Gallery, which Idol's father opened in 2012 and Idol and Jennifer bought in 2017. "She has a great eye for art," Idol says of Jennifer. "She comes into my studio often and isn't afraid to tell me what she thinks—what is working and what isn't. She knows that the shared objective is to put out the best piece possible. Sometimes you can get caught in your own bubble, so you have to put your ego aside. At the end of the day, you want to stand behind your work and say, 'This is the best I can do.'"

Idol's goal with his art is to ask himself these questions—and then answer them: How can I add more beauty and excitement to it? How can I paint a feeling? How can I convey the beauty and grandness of nature?

Idol will be showing his wonderful works at several shows during the next five months. He'll have a one-man show at Coeur d'Alene Gallery June 20 and will participate in the Coeur d'Alene Art Auction in July. He also will also exhibit his works at the Jackson Hole Art Auction in Jackson, Wyoming, in September. He's particularly proud that he also will exhibit his paintings at the Fall Arts Festival in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, in September and that he is the poster artist for that event.

Asked to share his thoughts on the elements that make for a good painting, Idol says, "There are two




*Smooth Operator, oil, 48" by 40"*

*"If you haven't seen a mountain lion, you might be shocked at how large they are. They're also extremely elusive and quiet in the woods for such a large animal. I was hoping to get some of those attitudes in the face of this big cat."*

spheres that go into a good painting—art principles, which are values, edges, composition, and brush strokes—and the creative sphere. You have to have a vision and say what you want to say. You need to find the sweet spot in the middle, have a balance between the two spheres."

Idol says he has been the beneficiary of some great advice from other artists over the years and shares it here. "Find your voice within the art," he says. "What are you trying to say? How do you want people to feel about it? How can you do that?

Search for your unique vision. What are the paintings that only you can paint, and how do you build off that?"

Idol, who is just 34 years old, has been painting and selling his work for 13 years and is grateful for those who have encouraged him and supported him. "The fact that I am able to pursue my truest passion on a daily basis is more than I could have ever asked for," he says. 

*Vicki Stavig is editor of Art of the West.*