

DON OELZE

The Studio

By Mark Wilcox



Some days, Don Oelze's studio, tucked into a ponderosa forest under a mound of artistic boulders, resembles a movie studio as much as a painting studio. "I have a couple of really big photo shoots at my house every year," Oelze says, adding that other artists join him for those shoots, which include models in authentic costumes and horses and a wagon outside on a hill.

Oelze's studio is divided into two halves in a 1,400-square-foot outbuilding that is just feet from his house. He currently paints in what he calls Studio B, while most of the props, costumes, and even a cutaway teepee set reside in Studio A. The latter becomes a gathering place where everyone hangs out and changes, browsing through racks of authentic costumes, donning head-dresses and otherwise transporting themselves back in time amongst prized split-horn bonnets and authentic McClellan cavalry saddles.

"With the work I do, I have to

have this stuff," Oelze says. "I have enough to outfit a small tribe of men, women, and children." Beyond that, he also has five Spanish Barb mustangs, the kind of horses that Native Americans actually used.

"I see a lot of Western art, and I see a lot of paintings of Native Americans especially, where the horses just look like larger modern-day horses," he says. "And I get that, because that's what they have to use as models mostly, so I decided to try to do a little bit better."

A lack of authenticity in art is a pet peeve for Oelze, who is a devoted fan and student of the American West. He lived in New Zealand with his American parents until he was 10 and never missed an episode of "Daniel Boone" on TV; it was his window to the West.

Today, he's bringing the West to life. His elaborate shoots might vibe

with Hollywood, but his studio is about as different from Hollywood as a place can get. It's located in Clancy, Montana, an unincorporated town of roughly 1,600 residents in the Elkhorn Mountains about 15 miles south of the state capital of Helena.

Oelze's paintings feed off the remoteness and wildness of Montana.

They're narrative-driven, often inspired by the stories he unearths in his extensive research. He avoids

depicting major historical events, preferring to focus on the smaller, more personal stories that bring the past to life. "It's the little portions of someone's individual story that I

"I'm really obsessed with light."



find most compelling," he says. "I try to paint for the 7 percent or less who really know their history."

Balancing accuracy while driving creation with artistic license is a highwire act, but being surrounded with history certainly helps. "You just cannot not get inspired to do this kind of work when you're sitting in here," he says of his studios. The Hollywood-like Studio A and Studio B monikers came about because they were built at separate times and are connected by a door. Studio A sprang to life in 2018, but it never felt like Oelze's painting space, so he mostly ignored it for the following five years. He used it primarily to offload costumes and props that were crowding his in-home studio and spent time in his research library there.

In 2023, Oelze realized that his studio deserved more action than he gave it and decided to have another go at making his dream studio space. So, he added Studio B and packed it with everything he knew he'd need to use the space. He even shaped the studio like an artist who is well



aware of his methodology.

Because he usually paints while sitting in a chair, he made the studio long so he could change his perspective on the fly with a single boyish motion. "I just like to kick the chair back and roll across the floor way back, just for fun, but also because then I can look at the painting pretty far back, and that's always a good

idea," he says.

Studio B has been Oelze's working studio ever since. "It's a great place," he says. The door to Studio B leads right onto the deck behind his house, making for an easy commute. His wife Utako even bought him snow mats that keep him from needing to sweep away the five feet of snow standing between him and



Mountain Jig, oil, 44" by 46"



Winter Silence, oil, 30" by 36"

work during the winter. Still, he often brings visitors around the long way because he gets a kick out of seeing them experience the more movie-studio-like Studio A before segueing into the Studio B working space to finish off the tour.

Oelze chose the studio's rustic exterior to blend in with the landscape, but walking in reveals a modern studio with diffused skylights that provide ample north light. The shades usually remain drawn on a single aesthetic window. If the skylights aren't doing enough, however, he can also ignite two rows of overhead fluorescents and dim them to varying degrees of warm and cool light to give him the mood he wants. Two daylight lamps stand sentinel behind his easel to flood his works in progress with pure light. Some might think the setup is overkill, but Oelze has a simple explanation for it.

"I'm really obsessed with light," he says, which is apparent in his works. From dappled forests spilling fairy lights across his subjects to light and shadows highlighting the drama of the stories Oelze tells through art, light is a constant.

He doesn't confine the vestiges of Western history to Studio A. Artifacts ring the walls in Studio B, which also includes a mini-library of works on Western history and a fully dressed mannequin complete with headdress and buckskin pants. The humanoid shape might be enough to freak out unsuspecting guests, but the cacophony of Western paraphernalia is all a reflection of Oelze.

"It has everything that I love," he says of his studio. "It's my space. The walls are filled with things I care about, and the bookshelves are filled with the books that I care about. It's a combination of history, art, and literature." It all ties to his romance with the West.

For someone so dedicated to art and history, an art degree or history degree would make sense, but Oelze attended only one year of school at the Memphis College of Art, hated it, and left it behind. He went on to earn a degree in general studies from Franklin Pierce College in New Hampshire.



The Robe Hunters, oil, 42" by 50"


After graduating, while working as a concierge in Seattle, Washington, Oelze developed an interest in Japanese culture. He traveled to Tokyo, ran out of money, taught English, and then found a lucrative job translating financial documents into English, but the high-pressure role pushed him back toward art as a stress valve.

"I got obsessed with it," he says. A family friend, sculptor Daniel Parker, offered to take two of his early paintings to the C.M. Russell

show, which included spaces for artists to rent space and show and sell their artwork. Both sold. That feat was repeated for several years before Oelze became convinced that he should focus on art.

It didn't hurt that his Japanese wife was also an artist who freelanced her illustrations to Japanese video game companies. Oelze credits her with being a better illustrator that he is and having a great eye for art.

"She's saved so many of my

paintings from the trash," Oelze says, adding that their partnership also saves him countless hours. It's a connection he craves and seeks out often when she visits the studio space that defines his art and reflects his personality. It's an inspiring space that spurs Oelze's creativity. The studio is, in every sense of the word, his own. 

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