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BILL ANTON

IN PRAISE OF THE COWBOY

By Vicki Stavig

Bill Anton traces his fascination with the West back to a trip he took, when he was just 7, with his family to Glacier National Park and the West Coast. “The mountains, the air, the weather were profoundly different from anything I’d known,” says the artist, who grew up in Chicago, Illinois. “I’d never seen anything that was like the American West, and the impression it made on my mind and heart was unmistakable. I’d find a way to be back to stay the minute I was old enough—and I did.”

Now living in Prescott, Arizona, Anton has been sharing his love of the West and honoring the spirit, pride, integrity, and work ethic of the cowboy for more than three decades. He considers it an honor to do so through his paintings, which have garnered a myriad of prestigious awards and are included in the permanent collection of the Gilcrease Museum, as well as in public and private collections throughout the country.

Following his graduation from high school, Anton enrolled at Loyola University in Chicago, where he studied for two years before heading to North Arizona University in Flagstaff, where he earned a degree in English. English?

“I think my practical mind just gravitated toward a degree I knew I wouldn’t struggle with just to get a degree,” he says. “Very little traditional art training was being presented in the universities at the time, and art



River Canyon Gather, oil, 28 by 40"

Water is the life blood of the West whether caught and held in dirt tanks or running in streams and canyons. Sunlit figures in bold relief against dramatic canyon walls and receding ridges affords the opportunity to explore atmospheric perspective."



was just a dream and a hobby for me back then. I had no idea how quickly I'd be presented with an opportunity to paint and draw for a living."

After earning his degree, Anton returned to Chicago, where he worked in the family business—his father was a food broker—but lasted a mere eight months, before returning to Arizona. He had to get back to that land, that lifestyle—and a pretty young lady named Peggy.

"I was attracted to her beauty and innate sweetness," he says. "I had dated a few flakes, and Peggy was very different. She was just so good to me, and there was no question God brought her into my life. He had hand picked her for me, and I've been grateful for 37 years that I recognized her when she came along. Support emotionally for what you're trying to do is too valuable to overstate, and she gave me that in spades. Peggy is an optimist, and we balance each other."

The couple married in 1982, settling in Flagstaff, where Anton sold adver-

tising for a radio station, while Peggy managed an art supply store and, later, a stereo shop. When he wasn't pounding the streets, trying to make a sale, Anton was drawing and eventually decided that a sales career wasn't for him; he had to become an artist. He began to hustle commissions and was soon making enough money to support himself and Peggy. Sales of his paintings increased each year, and he began to enter shows and win awards.

Initially working in pencil, Anton began using pastels in 1980 as a bridge to oils, to get used to working with color. "It didn't work out too well," he says. "I had no knack for that medium, so I got an outdoor easel and began painting landscapes from life and, much later, horses from life. The early efforts weren't good, but it did teach me how much I didn't know. You simply cannot over-emphasize how important that realization is. Willingness to honestly self-evaluate is critical to artistic

Morning Glory, oil, 32" by 48"

"Polarized color temperature here, we see it five minutes after dawn and five minutes before sunset. I still can't believe I get to paint beautiful horses and real cowpunchers in these dramatic settings. I never get tired of looking at it or painting it."

growth. We just don't have that institutionally today. Everything anyone does is deemed valid; nonsense!"

Recognizing that he needed some help, Anton took classes at the Scottsdale Artists School and continued to paint outdoors. "It was extremely difficult, which is why I stuck with it," he says of painting on location. "At some point, a dedicated painter has to ask himself, 'What's it going to take to make me better?' If working outdoors had come easy to me, I think I would've diminished its importance. But it kicked my butt! So I determined that was where I needed to be to get to a place where I began to turn the tide and get results.

"It took a long time, but it was worth the wait. Outdoor problem

solving helped me out in the studio, as well. I got myself into constant messes outside, so I was forced to step back and rely on the fundamentals to bring the painting home. Sometimes it worked; often it didn't, and I learned from those failures, though I found them frustrating and, at the time, considered them a waste of time. They weren't."

Asked who has influenced him as an artist, Anton cites, among others, Jim Reynolds, Ned Jacob, and Michael Lynch, "none of whom depended heavily on photographic reference. Ned and Mike particularly stressed the importance of working directly from life, but not in the 'plein aire' cult we see today. They used it as a way to learn and gain your chops. If you got good enough, then and only then should those efforts be seen. Hard work behind the scenes was stressed, the idea that only a small fraction of your output should be seen by the public."

Anton got his first gallery representation, when the owners of a start-up gallery in Tucson saw his work at the Peppertree Art Show in Santa Ynez, California. "They must have liked what they saw of my work—and it didn't hurt that I looked like I was about 18; I wasn't," he says. "I think they figured this kid might do something when he grows up."

Initially, Anton was uncomfortable when standing near his art at a show, although his confidence in his work has increased over the years. "But," he adds, "remember, as the years have gone by, the ante has been upped! It is still pretty intimidating to be hanging alongside George Carlson, Len Chmeil, Dean Mitchell, Tim Lawson, and Michael Lynch, and about 25 others I could name. I don't think you ever get over feeling you are not up to snuff, unless you're either ignorant or full of yourself, which are really the same thing."

Anton is as honest about his work as he is about everything else in his life. Asked about a comment he made during an interview for *Art of the West* in 1997 in which he said he had to "address his weaknesses," he responds, "My guess is 21 years ago my weaknesses included, among other things, a lack of



Firestorm, oil, 28" by 40"

"This is a very personal statement, a metaphor for my life June 18, 2013. The Doce Fire ravaged Granite Mountain, as we evacuated livestock and belongings, literally running for our lives. The Granite Mountain Hotshots, killed in Yarnell just a few days later, were the first responders to the fire. More than 700 firefighters, heroes all, saved every single one of the 450 properties evacuated that day."





complexity in the paintings. I had been painting probably about 10 years by that time, and getting comfortable with my tools took longer than that. So I tended to keep things relatively simple in composition so as not to get over my head too quickly. I think I was trying to keep myself within a certain comfort zone early on, because I realized I needed some early successes, even if they were fairly simple and straightforward scenes.

"The more confident I became in my abilities, the more I began to stretch a little. I began to paint more out of my head, using all the experience I had gained outside on indoor studio paintings. How good my reference material was began to take a back seat to giving full expression to a practiced brush. I never wanted to be married to my reference; I wanted a career not centered on the camera or the computer."

The Search For a Crossing, oil, 50" by 50"

"This was a chance to paint raging mountain runoff, largely in shadow, with just a thin band of light streaming along the top of the painting. Giving texture and movement to the water and still having the figures dominate was the challenge, so I invented a scenario in which I could play to each element's strength. I like to conjure up scenes, rather than paint from a photo; where's the fun in that?"



Winter Palette, oil, 30" by 24"

"Warm and cool, sun-struck and shadow, and the added interest of multi-level figure placement made for a fun composition. I am always interested in that very warm, low light that creeps beneath cloud cover and momentarily lights up figures."



Heading in a different conversational direction, we ask Anton what people would be surprised to know about him. “That I’m actually Dennis Rodman,” he says. “Sorry; I couldn’t resist! I’m pretty transparent; there isn’t much people don’t know. I make up songs and sing them to my dog, does that count? Actually, people often see me as very serious and sober-minded about the art market and painting in general, but I have a goofy side that comes out at home and particularly with Mike Lynch; we really shouldn’t be in the same room together. My wife has been tempted to separate us on occasion.

I think we all have the certain other person, who just makes us drop our guard and double over laughing at stupid stuff.”

What does the future hold for this extraordinarily talented artist and wonderfully witty man? Are there any changes coming? “I certainly hope so,” Anton says. “I don’t plan change in advance, but I do have a unique opportunity I don’t want to let get away—to explore new subjects within the framework of Western art, and I want to surprise people with new ways of seeing. And what is weighing on me now is making sure I bring everything I’ve learned to a

Once in a Blue Moon, oil, 30" by 36"

“I thought long and hard, before painting the ocean for a major show. When you are hanging alongside the great Chris Blossom, you think about stuff like that! But there is a fair amount of ranching right up to the ocean’s edge in this country, and exploring that in a nocturne that was 98 percent seascape was intriguing.”

new level and chart some new territory—more risks, more passion. I have, Lord willing, another 15 good years to paint; I’d like to see what I can do uninhibited by practicality.”

Vicki Stavig is editor of Art of the West.