

LANDSCAPE THAT CHARMS THE MIND TO QUIET

Bill Gallen's paintings express the transcendent beauty of New Mexico.

BY GUSSIE FAUNTLEROY



"Evening Light," oil on mounted linen, 9" × 12"

Landscape painter Bill Gallen relates this story as he settles into a chair in the uncluttered calm of his Santa Fe studio and home: A Tibetan Buddhist monk asks his spiritual teacher what is most noticeable about the modern world. The teacher responds, "People in the modern world waste time."

"But how can they be wasting time when they're always so busy?" the young monk inquires.

"That's exactly how they are wasting

time: By all manner of busyness and distraction, there is never the slightest chance to look into their deeper selves," the teacher answers. Then he adds, "We need to slow down."

Gallen saw his share of the rat race in the years he owned a busy house painting business in Milwaukee. Now, as a full-time fine artist, he sees the process of painting on canvas as a way of slowing down. It's a way of entering the quiet space of creative possibility—both within himself and in the

natural world he passionately loves. And as he stops and lingers long enough to absorb deeply what the landscape has to offer, he finds there is more than the obvious magnificence of crystalline blue skies, breathtaking views, and the folds and ridges of mesas and mountains in golden light.

All these are contained in what Gallen paints. Yet as essayist Barry Lopez points out, these qualities may simply be the outward expression of another kind of magic we are sometimes privileged to glimpse:

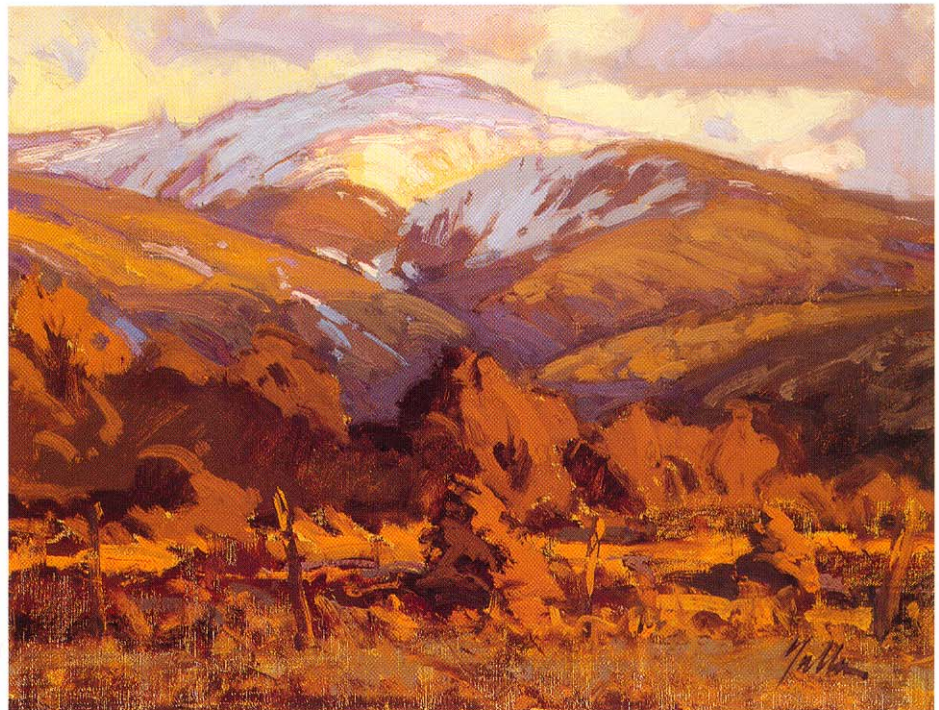


"Vermilion Cliffs," oil on mounted linen, 8" × 10"

"Occasionally," Lopez writes in *Arctic Dreams*, "one sees something fleeting in the land, a moment when line, color, and movement intensify and something sacred is revealed, leading one to believe that there is another realm of reality corresponding to the physical one but different."

When Gallen is out on the land with his paints and in a receptive spirit, it is this heightened sense of nature's transcendent beauty that he seeks to experience and express in his work. He explains: "As landscape painters, we wander far and wide searching for that spot where we sense resonance—a communion with what's going on. It could be a tree or a hillside; essentially the subject doesn't matter. But the response is all-important. By sitting with the subject, by being quiet, we can open to the invisible realm, that ineffable, indescribable space."

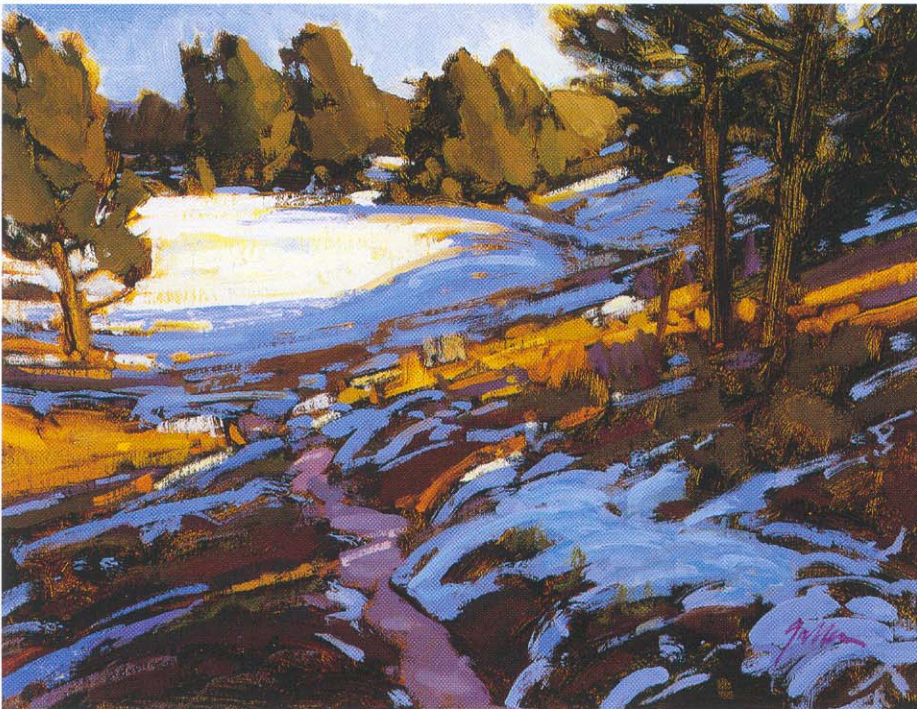
An openness to the subtle radiance of nature—and of life—was among the hard-won lessons Gallen gained some years ago from the illness and untimely death of a



"Last Light, Late Winter," oil on mounted linen, 14" × 18"



"Thunderhead over Santa Fe," oil on mounted linen, 22" × 28"



"Spring Pattern," oil on mounted linen, 8" × 10"

younger brother. The artist, raised in a Milwaukee suburb, was the second-oldest of seven children of a pediatric cardiologist and his wife, both of whom were musically talented and encouraged creativity in their children.

Gallen was an imaginative boy who loved drawing large and intricate historical battle scenes, such as Custer's last stand, on 20-foot-long sheets of X-ray paper his father brought home. He studied piano as a child, and as a young man searched for his creative voice in music, writing, and landscape painting.

At the same time he developed a thriving house painting business with 20 employees, a lifestyle he now sees was poorly suited to his sensibility and the use of his greatest gifts. This mismatch came clearly into focus when Gallen was 38 and his 22-year-old brother, John, was dying of cancer. Gallen spent 50 nights in the hospital with John, and as they talked, the preciousness of life was a recurring theme. John's mantra, his self-reminder of what was most important, was "peace, beauty, love."

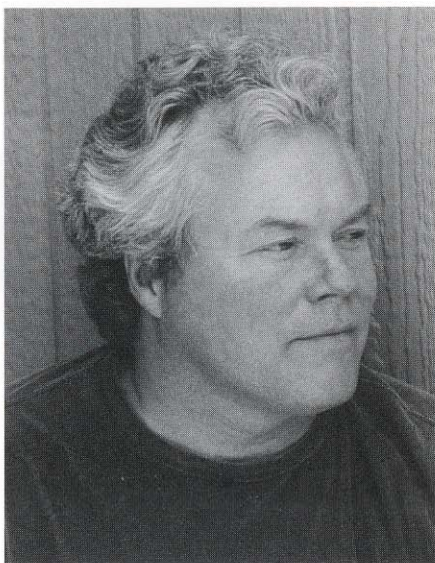
John's lasting gift was also the message that despite suffering, joy is available to us at any moment, Gallen recounts. "I was



"Desert View," oil on mounted linen, 12" × 16"

painting before John died, but after that my attention became galvanized and focused." He closed the business, moved to Santa Fe, and delved into what he now understands was a long-suppressed love affair with both the process of painting and the western landscape itself. "I never was a child of the midwest," he concedes with a smile. "The mountains immediately felt so much like home to me. I'm especially attracted to the more gentle, human, lived-in quality of the mountains of New Mexico."

Yet even slowing to attune to nature's pace won't render great paintings without a strong foundation of training and hard work. For this Gallen acknowledges a debt to master landscape painters of the past such as Maynard Dixon and the Taos founders, as well as living artists with whom he has studied, including Ned Jacob, Michael Lynch, and Dave Ballew.



As a way of carrying on their lineage, Gallen hopes to add the teaching of painting to his current role as a teacher of the Chinese meditative movement practices of t'ai chi and chi gung. He sees the offering of painting instruction, especially on location, as another way of sharing the endless delight he finds in his adopted home.

"This is what coming here has meant," he muses. "An entrance into the magic garden, a foot in an enchanted landscape that will charm the mind to quiet—and from that space, the painter paints."

Bill Gallen is represented by Manitou Galleries, 123 West Palace Avenue, where a show of his plein air and studio paintings opens October 1st. Manitou's hours are 9:30-5:30 Monday-Saturday, Sundays 11:00-5:00. (505) 986-0440, 1-800-283-0440, www.ManitouGalleries.com.