

MICHELLE LARSEN

BY ARLENE DISTLER

Michelle Larsen is living—and painting—her dream. In the past thirty years she has gone from being a sign painter of billboards and trucks to being an artist working on her own terms in her own unique style. After a long spell of leaving the world of art altogether, she has gone back to what she loves, and it shows in the freshness and energy of her work. Her style of painting? It literally came to her in a dream.

Having just graduated from Rocky Mountain College of Art & Design in Denver in 1980, Larsen enlisted in Denver's army of artists working on billboards and trucks, painting letters, logos and images, using quills and writing script with brushes. Larsen's website has a photograph of her, comely in overalls with a bucket and six-inch paintbrush, tools of the trade. "I wore paint covered overalls every day. Once, on Halloween, a man said 'great costume!' Little did he know!" She describes the method of working in those pre-tech days: "The billboards would come down in sections, and the image would get projected. It was so huge you wouldn't know what you were painting until it was finished." She elaborates on how that period has affected her art today: You have to move the brush up and down to paint the letter along with a twisting motion and rolling motion with your fingers. It is difficult to learn these hand movements and it takes many years to master. This technique has taught me how to manipulate a paintbrush and also be more fluent with the brush.

The idea for an associate degree in commercial design was, as her teacher and the "old sign guys" would say: "You'll always have a job." No one imagined the field's demise and the coming of the digital revolution, with all of the industry «going to vinyl» and using computer-generated graphics. Joblessness and picking up odd jobs followed. Larsen moved to Idaho and eventually started an e-commerce business selling Idaho themed gift baskets. She sold the business five years ago.

Today the artist lives in a log-cabin type home in the mountains. "I see Elk everyday," she says with obvious relish. Calling herself "Mountain Woman," Larsen has clearly taken to the rugged Idaho lifestyle. It strongly influences her art.

When she first returned to art-making, Larsen discovered she could still draw realistically. "It was shocking to me. I just remembered!" Thrilled with this renewed ability and encouraged by friends, she embraced realism, painting primarily portraits and



landscapes. But she grew bored and desired to paint in a more "contemporary" style. "When I started out I toyed with a lot of different styles and subjects that suited me," says the artist. In time she discovered a love of working with texture, and sees her style now as "between realistic and contemporary."

Michelle Larsen's current work is a happy meeting ground where technique and subject matter blend seamlessly. Using tissue paper to build up the surface of her pictures, she says of the texture-rich style, "I call what I do 'art with a pulse.' People want to touch it." She found, she says, that the texture lends itself to beards, fur, feathers, aged faces... perfect for the rugged cowboys, the bison, elk and birds that are her calling card. The texture is built up, in some instances, to such a degree that it could be called a relief sculpture. In "Wisdom", a close-up of a Native American warrior, the protruding facial features actually jut out several inches from the canvas' surface.

But Larsen is a true painter, the application of oil paint importantly highlighting details and features, giving the work a vibrancy, the images saturated in rich browns, orange, greens, mauve.

"I go for drama in my art," says Larsen, and confesses to listening to films on the Hallmark channel while she paints. Nevertheless she credits the underlying 3-dimensional effect she achieves, a process that can take weeks of crumpling, twisting, gluing down layer over layer, for stimulating the strong emotional response from the public. "I like for my work to move the viewer," says the artist. "Once a woman stood in front of one of my paintings and tears welled up. That



was an important moment for me."

When I asked Larsen about the primacy of emotion in her painting, she sent me a statement she wrote that brought her a guest appearance on "Jorde The Artists Radio Show" out of Tampa Bay, Florida: Now more than ever, we feel it, we live it, we are it; the essence of emotion. Humanity is trying to sort through this emotional intensity... The artist is the conduit to harness this energy

and make some sense of things, and to connect you to the deepest part of yourself where one finds answers and understanding. The artist is the light that humanity is searching for in 2015.

The paintings, which range in size from the modest ("Birds Nest" 18" square) to many that are over 36" wide, are well structured, graphically. But for Larsen it's the fluid movement, patiently sculpted

with paper, that is essential. "It's really important to get that right," she says. "When it isn't, I burn the piece in my fire pit!" As an example of what she strives for she points to the 30"x 36" oil painting "Western Way." It's a portrait of a flinty old Western farmer. His gray whiskers, leathery skin, the dips and folds of his hat's wide brim and crown blend with the background, emphasizing that he is "an extension of the land." In this and others of Larsen's portraits one can almost smell the rawhide, hear the gravelly voice, and take in the deeply etched, hard-won individualism of her characters.

Larsen's textural approach is effective too, it turns out, for reproducing the look of worn wood. "Old Door" is a close-up of a weather-beaten door, its doorknob, mail slot, and panels dividing the canvas into sections in a bold, almost abstract fashion.

One of the aspects the artist points out that is of particular importance in her work is that the texture of the originals makes it clear they are handmade—a decision thrown into high relief by her past run-in with the tech world.

Despite awards under her belt, including "Artist of the Year" from Twin Cities' Tosca magazine, Larsen says she feels her art is still in its infancy and doesn't know where she will take it in the future. "However," says Larsen, "I have started working on some paintings that celebrate the working person." The first one of the new series will be on her website by the time this issue of ArtVoices goes to press. It surely will build on the qualities that have put her work "on the map" in the contemporary art world: intensity, dramatic flair and technical prowess.

www.poetrypainting.com