

SMALL ARTWORKS
FOR THE HOLIDAYS

Southwest Art

FINE ART OF TODAY'S WEST

PAINTING THE FIGURE

ARTISTS BOTH
WESTERN &
CONTEMPORARY
CAPTURE
THE HUMAN
CHARACTER

DESTINATION
OKLAHOMA

CELEBRATING
ART AT THE STATE'S
CENTENNIAL

VIVID PAINTINGS OF
THE **NEW MEXICO**
LANDSCAPE

BY WILLIAM HASKELL





In Reality

Working in drybrush watercolor,
William Haskell creates vivid images
of New Mexico By Wolf Schneider



ABOVE: AFTERNOON SIESTA, DRYBRUSH WATERCOLOR, 15 X 22.
ABOVE, RIGHT: WATCHING, DRYBRUSH WATERCOLOR, 22 X 30.



REALISM IS A COMPLICATED TOPIC for William Haskell. “Realism—or paintings that people think are realistically done—can be very abstract,” contends the artist, who paints earth-toned watercolors of northern New Mexican landscapes, animals, and architecture. His paintings accentuate sun and shadow in compositions that usually involve horizontal, vertical, and diagonal planes. An adobe church in a mountain village is comprised of blocks of color; a plowed field appears geometric and abstract. And perspective changes in the foreground, middle ground, and background. The foreground is where Haskell concentrates on detailed realism.

“People think that my work is very detailed and that I sit and agonize and paint every blade of grass. In the foreground of the picture it is detailed, and I do paint a lot of single-bladed grass. But actually I call what I do ‘implied detail’—it looks detailed, but it isn’t really,” Haskell explains. “I use a lot of different brushes.”

While many would consider Haskell’s work realism, he demurs and says that it borders more on magic realism. Usually he emphasizes a single element and then alters aspects of reality with a modernist bent. “I want to simplify rather than make the composition complex. That to me is a modernist standpoint,” he says. “I draw on what gives me a feeling of peace. That’s what I like about the New Mexico landscape—the rolling hills and grassy plains and trees.”

Haskell, 44, lives in Galisteo, NM, just south of Santa Fe, and often paints scenes of the surrounding landscape. Other favorite locations are north of Las Vegas, NM, along the High Road to Taos, and in the small village of Rancho de Las Golondrinas. In his watercolors, real-life images often shape-shift. Take *ALONG THE RIO GRANDE*, for example, a painting of a church in Velarde, NM. The copper-toned church has windows and a wooden door. In reality, says Haskell, “The church doesn’t have windows. But I like to put windows in because they symbolize a sense of life. And the



door is actually made of metal, but why would I want to paint a metal security door on an old building like that? There are a bunch of trailers attached to the church—why would I want to paint them? Then all around the building for half a mile there's a big dirt parking lot with telephone poles. So I edit. I give them back their church the way it should be."

Haskell confesses that he sometimes makes the landscape more lush than it actually is, a nod to the grassy prairies of the Midwest where he grew up. And though he strives to avoid clichés in his western landscapes, there's a feeling of Americana in Haskell's work, along with the modernism. Haskell's technique of using altered perspectives results in a contemporary feel.

"I really like working with perspective," he says. "I usually put something right up in the foreground and give it almost a surrealistic quality, make it very detailed and in your face, and then gradually bring everything back to where there's not much detail at all in the background. But there's still a crispness to it because that's how it is in reality."

Haskell's biggest influence was another realist—Andrew Wyeth, of whom he comments, "I like the mood of his work. It's thoughtful. I personally think art should be thoughtful." He admires Grant Wood and Thomas Hart Benton for their narrative qualities, and his earliest inspiration was John James Audubon, whose detailed renderings of wildlife spurred him to do likewise. Salvador Dali impressed Haskell for his creativity in surrealism. But it was Georgia O'Keeffe's modernist paintings of the Southwest that ultimately caused Haskell to move to the high desert of New Mexico.

BORN IN MADISON, WI, in 1963, Haskell grew up in Wisconsin, Oregon, Alabama, Louisiana, and Ohio, as his father, a salesman, moved around the country to sell chemical products to paper mills and wood-processing plants. "A lot of paper mills are in beautiful places—that's where the trees are that they cut down," Haskell remarks ironically. An observant boy, he began drawing at age 4, and by 11 he'd sold his first painting.

In 1980, when Haskell was 16, his father retired and moved the family back to Wisconsin, to a property on the Lac du Flambeau Ojibwe Indian reservation. "It was a log cabin by a lake. It was gorgeous," Haskell remembers. After high school, he enrolled at the University of Wisconsin in Stout, obtaining a bachelor's degree in graphic design. With college loans to pay off, he headed to Minneapolis, MN, the nearest hub for graphics jobs, where he signed on with a design firm and

eventually became director of sales and marketing. The paintings he did as a sideline got into galleries in Minnesota and Wisconsin. Fifteen years went by. Haskell might still be there today if it weren't for his fascination with the southwestern landscapes of Georgia O'Keeffe and a trip to Mexico that never happened.

He and his wife, Amber, had planned on taking a vacation to Puerto Vallarta. But then Amber suggested that they change their plans and go to Santa Fe instead. "It sounds hokey," Haskell admits sheepishly, "but it was kind of like a past-life thing. There was a definite connection when we arrived in Santa Fe. I didn't know what it was, but either you get it or you don't, and I did. I said, 'This is the place where eventually we have to live.' Amber felt the same way."

They saved their money and moved to New Mexico in 2001. Two years later they bought property in the old Spanish village of Galisteo. "Amber found a piece of unimproved land that we could afford and had views that I liked," he says. Set among eight acres of natural grasses, their home is a Pueblo-style adobe with a flat roof and a portal running along the front.

OPPOSITE PAGE: FARMSTEAD, DRYBRUSH WATERCOLOR, 10 X 14.
BELOW: NOVEMBER SHADOWS, DRYBRUSH WATERCOLOR, 22 X 15.





Next to the house is Haskell's 500-square-foot studio. Also adobe, it has a fireplace, antique wainscoting, and double doors that open up to views of the spacious Galisteo Basin.

Haskell uses a watercolor technique in which each layer of paint dries before the next is applied. And there are many layers. ("It's not the easiest or the quickest way to paint," he admits.) The end result is a crisp, vivid watercolor, over which the artist mists six to eight coats of an archival varnish. His paintings range from 22 by 30 inches down to just 9 by 11. "You can make a huge painting in a small size," he contends. And his work proves it.

Haskell is a practical man and likes to have a deadline. "It definitely gets me to set regular hours," he says. He admits the hardest part of a painting is when he's in the middle of it. "That's when I think, 'What a disaster!'" And he can worry. "Pretty much everything I've painted has sold. But at the same time, you never know what's coming. Would I go back? No, I went into

graphic design because that's what you do to make money as an artist in the Midwest. But what I have now is what is supposed to be. Since I was a young kid, I've wanted to be an artist."

In Santa Fe, reality can take on a positive perspective. "When you get here," says Haskell, "you feel like you can succeed as an artist." A plaque his wife gave him hangs on the wall of his studio. It says: "What would you attempt to do if you knew you could not fail?" For Haskell, this reality is not complicated at all. The answer is self-evident; he would paint. □

Santa Fe-based Wolf Schneider has been editor in chief of the *Santa Fean*, editor of *Living West*, and consulting editor of *Southwest Art*.

Haskell is represented by Manitou Galleries, Santa Fe, NM; Mountain Trails Galleries, Palm Desert, CA, and Park City, UT; Rain Dance Gallery, Durango, CO; Weems Art Gallery, Albuquerque, NM; and www.williamhaskell.com.

WILLIAM HASKELL



Photo: John Overmeyer

Afternoon Graze drybrush watercolor 22"x 15"

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