

Southwest Art Magazine Show Preview Total Arts Gallery, Taos, NM, May 2015 By Gussie Fautleroy

There is paradox in Ken Elliott's landscapes: They pulse with powerful color, and yet collectors speak of his paintings as exuding a sense of calm. They contain choreographed rhythm and order, even within the seeming disorder of winter trees along a creek. "I'm trying to give the paintings muscle, poetry, power, and gentleness. I'm screaming—but in a civilized way," the artist jokes, speaking of his recent works in a two-artist show (with David Hettinger) opening May 5 and running through May 28 at Total Arts Gallery in Taos, NM.

Elliott's offerings in the show include oils, pastels, and hand-colored etchings. (He also creates monotypes and collages.) They are vibrant, often large-scale images based on the natural world, in particular trees, creeks, lakes, and skies like those in the mountains not far from his Colorado home. Yet the artist's intent is not to re-create what he sees. Instead, everything he does is designed to take his art "beyond making pictures," as he puts it, adding, "What I'm trying to do is thrill myself."

Elliott had ample opportunity to experience the thrill of extraordinary art before he began creating it himself. Just out of high school in Houston, he took a job at a high-end frame shop, where fine art from the city's best galleries was coming through. A few years later he himself was a gallery director. By the time he began to teach himself to draw and paint, he notes, "the bar was set pretty high."

This month's show reveals the artist's striking response to that bar. Although his landscapes are initially inspired by ideas, photos, or experiences in nature, as soon as he begins a piece, the original concept flies out the window, he says. Instead, he pushes color and pulls away details, winnowing each image to its essential, simplified state.

In **YELLOW WALL**, for example, Elliott expresses his response to autumn aspens. "I kept stripping it down to yellow and verticals," he explains. "It's the effect of looking into that full yellow and being thrilled by it."

ENVELOPED IN RED takes the process even further, as the painter



indulges in the sensuous qualities of red paint. Although the image of trees contains many hues, each one is intentionally chosen to “make the red redder; everything is subservient to that,” the artist notes. Even the concept of trees is reduced to its core in the service of red. “These trees don’t exist in nature,” he acknowledges. “They’re what I want them to be. It’s more powerful that way.”

Elliott’s earliest landscapes included figures, but he quickly found himself painting them out. Any figure brought with it questions about an imagined narrative, he explains. This interfered with his primary interest in the landscape as a springboard for the art-making process itself. When he’s not

creating art, Elliott gives much of his time to charitable causes, including volunteer hospice work and donating website services to nonprofit organizations. “It fills my cup,” he explains. “I’ve got to give something back.” —Gussie Fauntleroy

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