



▲ MORNING SHADOWS, JEROME, OIL, 12 X 20.
◀ FENCELINE, OIL, 16 X 20.

In Pursuit of PAINTING

BY NORMAN KOLPAS

Plein-air artist **Jill Carver** searches for images that inspire her

WATCH JILL CARVER get ready to create a painting, and you might be forgiven for thinking at first that she is what she herself calls “a hunter-gatherer” rather than an artist. In the countryside beyond her Austin, TX, home, or farther afield in Colorado, Utah, Arizona, or other points west or north, she begins her process by walking around with her two dogs, Tess and Mungo. “With the dogs, by necessity I have to do a lot of walking,” she says in her soft English accent, tempered only slightly by eight years of Texas twang. “I spend as much time walking and observing and sketching as I do painting. It tunes me into

the landscape. My first step is exploring and absorbing and just looking. I do hours of that, and I find a lot of paintings as a result. You pay attention to what your mind keeps wandering back to.”

Only then will Carver actually paint, setting up her easel and canvas to capture whatever image persistently demands her attention. It might be the rambling line of a wooden fence or a ramshackle barn, a small stand of trees or a sun-speckled bend in a creek. “I think the strongest paintings are the ones that have the simplest ideas behind them,” she notes. “It’s too easy to be dazzled by a vista, and then you wind up doing six paintings in one. To me, it’s more important to keep the idea as simple as possible, to make the message clear. Each piece should be an iconic celebration of its subject.”

That sense of celebration is evident in every brush stroke of a Carver painting. After blocking in her basic pattern, she lays on the oils in fearless, sensuous strokes, applied thin and translucent in some areas, very thick in others. “The surface quality of the paint excites me big time,” says Carver. The results are paintings that, when viewed from a distance, convey the essence



DOSSIER

REPRESENTATION

InSight Gallery, Fredericksburg, TX; South Street Art Gallery, Easton, MD; Wally Workman Gallery, Austin, TX; Windrush Gallery, Sedona, AZ; www.jillcarver.com.

UPCOMING SHOWS

Telluride Plein Air, Telluride, CO, June 28-July 4.
Plein Air Easton, Easton, MD, July 19-25.
Group show, Wally Workman Gallery, August 7-31.
Maynard Dixon Country Invitational, Mt. Carmel, UT, August 27-29.
Laguna Beach Plein Air Painting Invitational, Laguna Art Museum, Laguna Beach, CA, October 10-17.



EMPTY BOAT STANDS, OIL, 20 X 24.

of their subjects with vivid realism. Up close, they challenge the viewer anew with a sense of bold abstraction. The works display a true measure of mastery, so it's all the more surprising to learn that the 41-year-old artist has had no formal art training.

Carver remembers being enthralled by art from the moment she was old enough to grasp a crayon in her hand. "I was very shy as a child," she says. "I found people complex and draining and stressful to be around. Drawing was a way to center myself and calm myself down. It was like magic for me to get something to look lifelike and three-dimensional on paper." In school, her talent became "a way to be a cool person without having to speak and perform," as she drew or painted everything from theater programs to the murals on the library wall. "I always knew that art was a part of me, something I enjoyed doing the most," she says. "It gave me a spiritual compass."

Even then, young Jill's powers of observation fed her aesthetic sensibility, storing away knowledge that would later come into

play in her future career. On a visit to the National Gallery in London, she saw the famous painting *THE HAY WAIN*, created in 1821 by the great 19th-century romantic landscape painter John Constable. "I'd seen it in print, where it looked highly realistic," she says. "Seeing it in person, I discovered it was 6 feet long. And when I got up close and saw the surface texture, I realized [Constable] was really expressive, painting from the gut."

While she was an astute observer of art, Carver thought the possibility of her making a living as an artist inconceivable. So she pursued another passion, British history, at the University of Sheffield in south Yorkshire. In her spare time, she would draw with charcoal and paint in watercolors, and after graduating she actually worked as an art teacher at a secondary school while sending out job applications.

A year later, her efforts paid off with a "dream job" that combined her two passions: history and art. She went to work as a historical researcher at London's National Portrait Gallery. "My



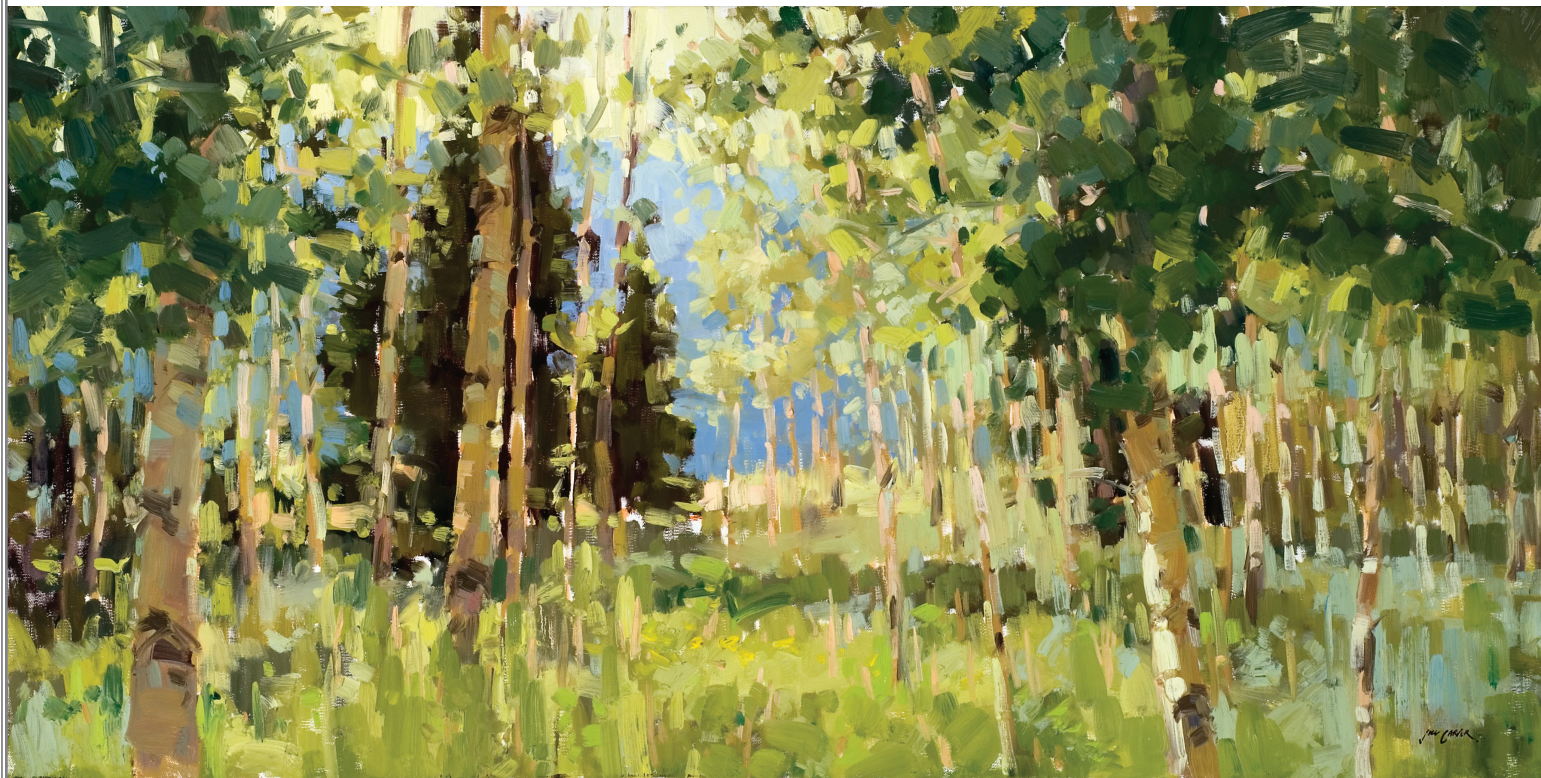
SLUMPED, OIL, 16 X 20.

knowledge of British historical figures was really important, more than any knowledge of painting techniques and materials," she says. For 12 years, Carver worked in the archives there, providing background research for the curators. "I was an art handler, too. I got to handle Holbein miniatures and the unframed coronation portrait of Elizabeth I. That was really magical."

All the while, Carver continued to draw and paint, finally delving into oils at the age of 26. Twice a week she attended life-drawing classes, and on weekends she joined other artists to paint in the countryside outside of London. "In England, the term 'plein air' isn't really used. That's just how all the decent landscape painters work," she notes. "For me, painting is almost a means to the end of being outdoors in the first place."

As her passion for painting outdoors grew, she had the fortuitous timing of reaching the ten-year mark in her job. "As a civil servant, you could take a sabbatical after ten years, so I decided to take eight months off and paint full time."

"I think the strongest paintings are the ones that have the simplest ideas behind them."



ASPEN GROVE, OIL, 20 X 40.



EVENING LIGHT, TERLINGUA, OIL, 36 X 48.

IN 2001, she went to New Zealand, rented a van, and lived in it for four months, traveling the countryside and painting. She returned to England later that year with a slew of canvases and was given a show at the New Zealand Embassy in London. “I sold about 14 pieces, over half of those on the opening weekend,” says the artist.

Momentous as that was, still more big changes were afoot. At the National Portrait Gallery she had met and started dating Larry Carver, an American professor of English literature from the University of Texas at Austin. They fell in love. In 2002, they married, and Jill moved to Texas.

Her first inclination was to seek curatorial work at the university. But, flush with her first big painting success, she received an irresistible offer from her new husband to launch a career as a painter. “He said, ‘I’ll support you for three years, and we’ll see how that turns out.’ That was my first sense that maybe I could do what I really wanted to do. After six months, I was turning a profit.”

Such quick success came despite what Carver found to be major new challenges as a painter. “The English landscape is full of readymade paintings,” she explains. “Texas is vast and flat. It has a softer beauty. And the standard English colors—Constable’s palette—didn’t work here. It really knocked me sideways. It took me a while to tune in.”

Helping that tuning process was a workshop she took with landscape painter Scott Christensen. He taught her, literally, to get back to the basics, working with a palette of just the three primary colors—red, yellow, and blue—plus a tube of white. “His idea is that with just the primary colors you can mix any



FIRST LIGHT TELLURIDE, OIL, 20 X 24.

color out there. So there was no need to find what palette works in Texas.”

Thus freed of past encumbrances, Carver’s career took flight. Soon she was finding enthusiastic gallery representation as well as winning Artists’ Choice awards at plein-air events from Texas to California, including the prestigious Laguna Beach Plein Air Painting Invitational, which she won last year. “Those are the awards I value most,” she says. “To get a sense of validation like that from your peers is huge. It has been a tremendous confidence booster and has spurred me on to improve my work even more to justify their faith in me as an artist.” This summer, like last, she has been invited to participate in Maynard Dixon Country in Mt. Carmel, UT, a weeklong event that draws top plein-air artists. “I am really proud of that. I think it is the premier landscape show in the West,” she notes. “The very best painters are there, and it is just a wonderful, magical time.”

Eight years from the official start of her career as a full-time artist, Carver feels content in her pursuit of painting. When she’s not participating in plein-air events, or painting in her garden-

view studio, or out in the Austin environs or the surrounding Hill Country, she’ll likely be found in an old miner’s cabin she bought and is restoring in the southwestern Colorado town of Rico. “I can get around Colorado and into Utah and Arizona really easily from there,” she says. “My intention is to get the cabin into good functioning order so that fellow artists can use it as a retreat, too.”

Wherever she may be, Carver will no doubt be working on a painting, whether she actually has a brush in hand or is simply in the midst of “hunting and gathering” while out walking the dogs. Continually improving remains foremost on her mind. “I think I’ve found who I am stylistically,” she observes. “I just want to get better as a painter. In my head, I’m six months in advance of what’s coming out at the end of the paintbrush. There’s always a sense of chasing to catch up. That’s what gets me up every day: I think my next painting could be better.” ♦

Norman Kolpas is a Los Angeles-based freelancer who writes for *Mountain Living* and *Colorado Homes & Lifestyles* as well as *Southwest Art*.