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Process Points: Lehi**Give a Farmer a Brush****The Rural Landscape According to Ron Russon**

by Sue Martin

Give a farmer academic art training and watch what happens. Color theory, composition, drawing, and all the principles and elements of design are learned and practiced until they are intuitive. Then, just as the farmer responds to the environment each and every day, the farmer-turned-artist responds, wash-by-wash, stroke-by-stroke, to the way the paint behaves on the canvas.

Ron Russon's abstracted, expressive landscapes may be a little bit "out there" for those who want to see in a painting exactly what they see in nature. But look a little longer and you'll feel the textures of the land; you'll see patterns of fields and fence posts; and you'll recognize the animals that inhabit farm and prairie.

Over the past 10 years, Russon has developed his signature style, characterized by his use of texture and contrast. As he prepared for his July 2 opening at Gallery MAR in Park City, he took time out to talk about his creative process.

Russon paints on canvas or masonite. He starts most paintings by building up the surface texture with thick gesso. Sometimes he applies it with a thick bristle brush that leaves tracks in the surface; at other times, he carves into the wet gesso to create random patterns. At this stage, he has no idea what the subject of the painting will be.

When the gesso is dry, Russon starts his underpainting. Working at an easel, he allows gravity to partner with him as he applies a wash of oil paint thinned with turpentine so that it runs through the crevices in the gesso-coated surface. Sometimes he paints horizontal bands of color through which the turpentine can run and form patterns.

Leaving the underpainting to dry overnight, he returns the next morning to see what kinds of colors and patterns have developed. Often he will turn the painting 90 degrees so that the vertical patterns coaxed by gravity are now horizontal. This is when he begins to imagine what this painting wants to be.

From reference photos and sketches, Russon may select a tractor, bison, bull, or horse. These are images of rural life that are authentic and appealing to Russon, who grew up on a dairy farm near Lehi. "With animals, what you see is what you get," he says. "A cow can't fake being a chicken. With people, sometimes they have shells they hide under. That's why I'm drawn to animals."

He might sketch in the subject with paint and a brush, but most of his painting is done with a palette knife. Dragging the paint over the textured underpainting creates more texture. He covers some parts of the underpainting and allows other parts to remain visible.

Russon's paintings are filled with contrasts: thin, lacy patterns created by the turpentine-thinned paint, next to thick, opaque passages; strong vertical blocks of paint balanced by horizontal bands; warm sienna colors next to cool blues. Russon says all of this is intuitive, rather than planned, but his BYU degree in fine art no doubt fueled this sophisticated intuitive response. "When I get logical and plan, the painting dies," he says. "When I get out of my own way, better stuff happens."

Unlike some artists who work on multiple paintings at the same time, Russon works one at a time, start to finish. The hardest part, he says, is knowing when it's finished. Unlike a highly realistic painter who glazes many layers to create the illusion of reality, Russon doesn't like to over-work. Instead, he juxtaposes areas of more paint and detail with areas that are sketchy. The complete process may take several hours or several days as he feels his way through to a satisfying vision.

Some unexpected events helped Russon start his journey from illustrator-designer to fine artist. When the development of digital technology drastically reduced what a designer could charge for previously lucrative work, Russon knew it was time to switch to fine art. Then, after 9/11, when the art market took a dive, Russon decided he might as well spend his time exploring what he wanted to do. He turned toward abstraction and his own expression of reality, and he hasn't looked back.

Russon's work is featured this month, along with Colorado artist Maura Allen, in an exhibit titled *Spirit of the West*, at Gallery MAR in Park City. You can also find Russon's work at Utah Artist Hands and on his web site www.ronrussonstudio.com.

