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BY NORMAN KOLPAS

vision quest

Painter **Rocky Hawkins** invites viewers along on his spiritual journeys

YOU COULD justifiably say that Rocky Hawkins' painting **BLUE FEATHER** depicts an Indian brave on horseback. After all, the rider's features and the form of the war-paint-decorated horse he sits astride are boldly rendered. But, in Hawkins' world, that overt subject matter is almost beside the point; instead it serves as a point of departure for a shared spiritual exploration. "Experiencing the painting is not about recognizing the subject," he explains. "It's about a feeling. It's about being moved."

Indeed, this particular work, like many of his paintings, began as an abstract composition. "I'm an action painter," Hawkins says, referring to the spontaneous, highly kinetic splashing, smearing, and splattering pioneered in the 1940s by such icons of modern art as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, and Franz Kline—all heroes of the Montana-based painter. "I paint with gestures. I just pick up colors, rely on my intuition, and fill the canvas with abstract shapes and colors. I'm not thinking. The job is to get that canvas covered, just get rid of all the white."

Only then, Hawkins continues, does he "sit back and do some editing. I'll find a part of the painting that becomes significantly interesting to me, or I'll be drawn to a shape or a color. Then, I'll go back and maybe start taking details away, even

though I'm still adding paint. I'll get a glimpse of something that connects with me emotionally. At that point, I may start to see a body or where a head could be."

In the case of **BLUE FEATHER**, what caught Hawkins' eye was "a terrific vertical stripe of blue" just to the right of center at the top of the canvas. He imagined it could be a feather. "That gave me a connection for a man's head. Once I'd found an image to go with, I thought, wow, this'll be a cool horse and rider. I've got to go with it. There wasn't enough room to allow for the reality of the horse's four legs, hooves, and a tail, but at that point it didn't matter."

The lack of detail, in fact, is the point of the painting, as is the emotional turmoil expressed by the bold strokes of red, black, blue, yellow, and purple paint. "You're experiencing my process of getting lost and digging out," says Hawkins, referring not only to his physical approach to painting but also to the phantasmagoria of feelings with which he imbues each work. "A lot of people don't allow themselves to go that deep down the rabbit hole."

In many ways, Hawkins' life possesses a quality akin to a sometimes delightful, sometimes daunting journey into Wonderland. In his 59 years, the artist has experienced exhilarating highs as lofty as the Tobacco Root Mountains he gazes



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◀ **BLUE FEATHER, ACRYLIC, 48 X 36.**



STANDS BESIDE HER, OIL, 10 X 8.

“I’m an action painter. I paint with gestures.”

upon from his home and studio on the 80-acre Ghost Wolf Ranch near the town of Harrison, MT, midway between Butte and Bozeman. He has also experienced the depths of personal tragedy.

HAWKINS WAS born in Seattle, and a fascination with art was a constant throughout his 1950s childhood. “I’d get up on Saturday mornings to watch John Gnagy’s ‘Learn to Draw’ TV show, and I had the kit and used to follow him drawing trees or an old wagon in charcoal,” he recalls. He also loved to copy the drawings in the mail-order ads he found for the Famous Artists School in the back of his Batman and Green Lantern comic books. “I also remember getting ahold of some trac-

ing paper, and I found myself tracing everything. In school I could draw airplanes and horses better than the other kids.”

Native Americans were another favorite subject of his. “I’ve always had a love of Indian themes,” says Hawkins, who quickly adds that he has no Indian heritage himself, though some relatives claim there is Shawnee blood in the family’s past. “I have never proved it or played on that. I’ve just always felt a spiritual wonderment for Native American culture.”

At high school in the Seattle suburb of Issaquah, he excelled in art and also in sports. He continued both pursuits in the local junior college, but soon found that sports took up too much time and the academic training was insufficient for the commercial art career he envisioned. So he enrolled in the three-year program at the Burnley School for Professional Art (which in 1982 became the Art Institute of Seattle), training as an illustrator. After graduation he landed a job as a graphic artist for Washington Transit.

However, the constraints of his assignments—drawing pictures for ads to go on the sides of busses—frustrated him. “People didn’t want to see expressionist work, or the detail of all the hair on the dog a man was holding,” he says. So Hawkins left the commercial art world, eventually working as a logger for Weyerhaeuser. “I lived a pretty primitive life in a log home on five acres. I used that time to rediscover myself as an artist,” he says. “I always had a sketchbook with me, and at lunchtime I would draw tree stumps or my logging boots. On weekends I painted, experimenting with the freedom to do whatever I wanted.”

Gradually, he says, “I had enough confidence to put my paintings out in the public eye.” He began entering weekend art shows in small northwestern communities, gaining a following among local collectors and galleries. He also developed supportive friendships with other artists, most notably Santa Fe-based Oleg Stavrowsky, whose western-themed paintings share a similar combination of abstract and realist elements. “We have souls of the same brotherhood,” says Hawkins.

In short, it was a simple, contented life for Hawkins, his wife, Fanny, and their two small daughters. That contentment,



BLACKFOOT HILL DETOUR, OIL, 20 X 20.



RED WOOD, ACRYLIC, 40 X 40.

however, was suddenly shattered in 1986. Fanny was diagnosed with an especially aggressive form of breast cancer, and, despite heroic efforts to save her, she died at the age of 36, leaving the grieving Rocky alone to care for 6-year-old Cody and 4-year-old Cheyenne.

He found himself facing a crucial decision. "I could continue working in the woods," he remembers thinking. "Or I could work at home and be more involved with my two daughters. That was the point at which I decided to push myself even harder to become the professional artist I'm still trying to be today."

Reflecting back on that momentous choice, Hawkins finds a philosophical side to the tragedy. "You can stand on the dock your whole life and touch the water with your toe," he quietly offers. "And then someone comes and shoves you into the water, and you have to swim or you drown." Hawkins swam, painting with more dedication and passion than ever. And he participated in more art shows, attracting attention to his bold, emotionally charged paintings.

Several years after Fanny's passing, Hawkins found new representation while at the exhibitors' show connected to the C.M. Russell Art Auction held each March in Great Falls, MT. Kat, who worked for the Hole in the Wall Gallery in the town of Ennis, MT, showed an interest in his paintings. When he got back to Washington, Hawkins sent her a few pieces. Gradually, over the phone, he and Kat "developed a real spiritual relationship," eventually falling in love. Hawkins decided to move to Montana; Kat became his wife and a loving mother to Cody, then 10, and Cheyenne, 8. "And we've been together ever since," says Hawkins with a sigh of contentment. "Kat understands my unusual needs and desires as an artist, and she looks out for my interests."

With such solid support, Hawkins continues to develop his particular approach to his art. He paints in a studio built off the garage and shop, where he keeps and works on a collection of hot rods and motorcycles. It's just a short stroll from their 1950s ranch house, filled with Indian artifacts he and Kat have collected. Once in the studio, Hawkins closes blackout curtains to keep out distracting views



BLACK RIVER, OIL, 11 X 14.

and block the sunlight, he turns on the overhead halogen bulbs that clearly illuminate his paints, and he gets to work. "I've always had a tendency to paint in privacy," he says, reflecting on how much the act of painting feels like a deeply personal journey without a map.

"I don't like to walk the same path as everyone else," Hawkins continues. "I find that the moment I'm lost is when I really discover the enjoyment of the painting. That's when the discoveries are made. When you get lost is when you really experience life. I'm always searching for that."

What emerges are works that, through the emotions they convey—sometimes bold and powerful, sometimes soft and reflective—irresistibly invite the viewer along with Hawkins on his journeys. "A good artist makes human contact," he says. "I hope my paintings reach down inside you and allure your senses, bring up feelings from deep in your gut that maybe you haven't felt some other way. I want you to feel that rush of adrenaline as you come along with me on that journey." ❖

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



RED EYE, ACRYLIC, 48 X 36.