

Artists Making Their Mark

There is a *lot* of superb art being made these days; this column shines light on new talents.



MATTHEW HIGGINBOTHAM

(b. 1963) is a Santa Fe-based landscape painter who came to this vocation the long way around. Born in Colorado, he began studying pottery at age 11 and went on to earn an undergraduate degree in elementary art education in rural Illinois. At the age of 30, Higginbotham spent three months contemplating his next step while cycling a thousand miles in the United States and Britain. This inspired him to create a fine art pottery business in Washington state.

It was only after four years of success with ceramics that Higginbotham realized painting directly on canvas and paper satisfied him more: The result is experienced immediately, whereas the glazes painted on pots cannot be enjoyed until the kiln is reopened. Higginbotham promptly sold most of his pottery equipment and relocated to northern New Mexico, which he had long admired for its striking landscapes and large creative community.

For almost a dozen years now, Higginbotham has spent six to eight hours per day in his studio, consulting his memories and photographs of New Mexico's distinctive scenery before picking up his brush and palette knife. Although his large oils on canvas sometimes depict the mountains and canyons celebrated by other artists, Higginbotham is more usually focused on the hardy trees, wildflowers, and grasses one finds in irrigated stretches of this arid landscape. Indeed, during his first year in New Mexico, he regularly opened and closed an ancient *acequia* (water ditch), an ideal way to witness the precariousness and preciousness of life.

Especially prominent are Higginbotham's vast, ever-changing skies, punctuated with fast-moving clouds that might well contain long-hoped-for showers. "There is so much in a landscape like this," he notes with a touch of awe, "so many wonderful opposites: darkness and light, peace and chaos, subtlety and directness, intensity and muteness ... I'm not just looking at a poplar tree, but at an entity full of energy and life."



MATTHEW HIGGINBOTHAM (b. 1963)

CLOUDRISE OVER SIENNA FIELD

2006, OIL ON CANVAS, 40 x 60 IN.

\$5,900 FROM WAXLANDER GALLERY & SCULPTURE GARDEN, SANTA FE

Close inspection of Higginbotham's lively, textured surfaces reminds us of the abstracted marks he once applied to pots, yet these pictures are also emphatically realist: His burning reds and purplish pinks let us know we are in the American Southwest. Appropriately, he is well represented in this region, at Waxlander Gallery & Sculpture Garden, Santa Fe; Lynne Fine Art, Scottsdale; and Firedworks Gallery, Alamosa, Colorado. His prices range from \$675 to \$13,500 per work, including a small group of highly realistic still lifes of fruit, drawn with pastels on paper. Higginbotham's next solo shows open at Lynne on March 15, and at Waxlander on August 28. ■