



LIVING LANDS

A Santa Fe painter explores the ways water brings life to the Southwest landscape.

BY WOLFGANG MABRY

On a recent visit to the Bosque Del Apache National Wildlife Refuge near Socorro, New Mexico, Matthew Higginbotham found himself at the center of an inspirational universe that was both familiar and completely new to him. Now in his mid forties, Higginbotham, a Colorado native, has been attuned to nature and active in the arts for most of his life. His landscapes proclaim his reverence for the magnificence of elemental forces in nature, sometimes in their most vibrant states, but as often in places where the human spirit works in concert with earth, air, and water, resulting in a sublime synergy that pulsates with aesthetic, spiritual, and emotional resonances.

For the past fourteen years Higginbotham has spent many hours in and outside of the studio getting better and better at perceiving, interpreting, and recording these intangible effects in his landscape paintings. The artist's lifelong thirst for learning and improvement keeps him creatively motivated. His experience with the oil medium translates as stylistic riffs that are completely his own. He breaks up color here, builds it up there, and blends it elsewhere; always with the effect he seeks: to express the essence of the places he paints and the spirit he feels in nature and in the studio. "I feel blessed with the positive response to my paintings," Higginbotham observes. "The challenge of growing demand is one I enjoy. It keeps me energized. The more I paint, the clearer my vision of the landscape becomes. I always want to do more. I want always to become a much better painter."

Indispensable to all life, water is often taken for granted in the rush of modern life, but never in Higginbotham's creative life. Water is a sacred element in this painter's inspirations and his choice of subjects. Water's phenomena and effects on land resonate deeply in this painter's soul. His last name means "Oak at Bottom of Valley." Matthew's earliest artistic expressions were in clay — from earth and water. After a short period of teaching, Matthew embarked on a bicycle trip encompassing a thousand miles in the U.S., England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales, all places where earth, sky, and water collaborate on every scale to make awesome beauty. He then established a pottery business in Spokane, working in a material that combines earth, water, and the human touch, but wanting a deeper artistic experience. He found that in painting and moved to New Mexico in 1995, intent on painting full time. As manager of a Bed and Breakfast in Chimayo, Higginbotham was responsible for the

OPPOSITE PAGE: *New Mexico Grasslands II*, oil on canvas, 54" x 72"

seasonal irrigation of six acres of orchards, alfalfa, and cottonwoods. Acequias are the centuries old irrigation conduits that direct water to the cultivated valleys in semi-arid New Mexico. When Higginbotham opened the acequia gate for the first time, he underwent a profound change in his understanding of water, a change that has influenced his art, indeed his spirit, ever since.

Driven to bring something new to every painting, to keep each piece vibrant and emotionally powerful, Higginbotham derives fresh



enthusiasm from an ever-strengthening inner spiritual awareness. “I am completely immersed in the experience when I am outside. Those feelings, impressions, and ideas only get more intense in the studio. I guess I enjoy the challenge of putting them into visual terms that can convey even a fraction of the magic I experience.”

Higginbotham’s studio is in a home he selected and purchased for its greenbelt location and panoramic views of New Mexico’s undulating terrain and pictorial sky. He converted the garage to a working studio with huge skylights and adequate space. The works he produced there eventually allowed him to build an addition with high ceilings, better natural light, more space, and the welcome luxury of a viewing area for displaying and evaluating completed paintings before taking them to Waxlander. Higginbotham acknowledges another important influence in the continuing growth of his work, his girlfriend, Jen Alexander, a fellow artist with whom he can exchange honest critique.

Matthew engages the viewer’s attention with color, texture, perspective, and pattern. His handling of those elements alone makes for good painting. Higginbotham also finds ways to convey important intangibles in his work. His paintings communicate with viewers in the same way nature communicates with him when he is outside. Warm sun, moving air, nature’s “white noise,” the many intoxicating scents have a nearly hypnotic effect on the artist. He loses himself and something larger comes in. He perceives more than just what he sees, and that perception is what he paints.

Attentive equally to details and to the big picture, Higginbotham takes viewers out into meadows, fields, orchards, wetlands and irrigated farmlands. Wildflowers and grasses light up the plains with color beneath benevolent, moist skies in Higginbotham’s work. Up close or in the distance, Matthew’s paintings share attributes of tone poems, classical and modern music, and yes, prayer. Reverence pervades his interpretations of the endless, always amazing variations of color and form he sees in riparian nature. He gives careful consideration to the balance of accuracy and artistic license in his paintings. “I feel the vastness and the intimacy of the landscape at the same time,” Higginbotham says. “I want my paintings to put the viewer in the midst of all that wonderful, soothing energy. The peace I feel has a strong spiritual component that fuels my artistic drive. I hope people feel some of that coming through in my work.”

Higginbotham has accomplished a great deal in a short time, artistically and commercially. When he pushes his own envelope, people respond. It makes him want to paint more. It drives him to “make it new again” every time. “When I think of having my work in its own room at a great gallery like Waxlander, I know I did the work; it’s my name on the paintings and on the wall, but even that reminds me to get myself out of the way, to allow a bigger power to play a major part. For me, the job of being a painter is a spiritual practice. Feeling connected to nature spiritually amplifies my intention to honor the land, to encourage its protection by sharing the experience of its sacred and profound beauty in my work.” ■



OPPOSITE PAGE: *Bosque First Light*, oil on canvas, 16" × 20"; THIS PAGE, LEFT: *High Desert*, brush oil on canvas, 22" × 28"; RIGHT: *Summer Blossoms*, brush oil on canvas, 30" × 36"

Matthew Higginbotham’s paintings can be seen at Waxlander Gallery and Sculpture Garden, 622 Canyon Road. Hours: 9:30-5:30 daily. (505) 984-2202. www.waxlander.com



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