

Creative Creatures

The ideas and the work of the American and European painters, songwriters, photographers, fiction and non-fiction authors, musicians, film makers, architects, designers, poets, and dreamers I met during my 20 years in America.



23 / Zak Barnes, painter, Lawrence, Kansas

The “where” in Zak Barnes’ paintings is usually easy to spot. Born and raised in east-central Kansas, Zak doesn’t deny he draws on his home state for inspiration. His work shows he feels deeply connected with the land, the prairie landscape, and the people of the land. Yet the “when” can be far more ambiguous—by design, not by accident or whim. Timeless, impressionistic landscapes are mostly created on site; his work blends influences and images from different periods. The work encroaches on the borders of what has been termed “Surregionalism”—not a dirty word—while still remaining true to its prairie roots.

The son of a well-respected doctor in Lawrence and the owner of Cottonwood Falls’ Grand Hotel—from where her grill’s fame reaches across state lines—and from which menu I especially recommend the Silver and Blue dinner salad (the Silver being a truly mouthwatering top quality steak; the Blue being blue cheese), Zak has a unique and off-beat sense of humor which really enlivens his work. “Landscape and people are the base and anchor of my work. They set the emotional tone for any narrative that plays itself out. I lived in Chase County for several years and my experiences in the area have given some of my work a sense of nostalgia.”

Zak is less known for his non-objective, fully abstract paintings. After they leave his studio on the old family ranch south-west of Lawrence, they, too, catch the eye as showcases of Zak's creative lightness of being. On the ranch a couple of old Volvo station wagons and motor cycles keep him busy when he isn't attacking any canvas. His was the hide-out of a lone ranger until his girlfriend moved in and created some order. Emily is one of Ann Wilson's daughters—Annie from Elmdale in Chase County, the poet and musician (and rancher and high-school teacher) I wrote about in one of my earliest Creative Creatures. Like her mother, Emily is a performer; her all-female county rock & blues band is aptly called 'The Skirts'.

"I have eliminated subject matter in several series of non-objective paintings. Yet the environment remains of strong influence. I live and work alternatively remote and within more cosmopolitan settings and therefore am able to explore a wide range of physical and emotional experience," says Zak. "Yet, I really find fulfillment in the rhythms of my days out in the open, loading and unloading the truck with equipment, paint, and my dogs, setting up, and working with the elements. I enjoy painting *en plein air* and being all alone. However, competitions and events allow me to interact with others that share the value of expressing an intimate observation of nature." When painting, he takes a couple of days to build, stretch and prime a large number of canvases. "This is the beginning of the creative process. I feel the size and shape of each canvas will play a part in the future composition."

Zak creates all his landscape work on site, with no preparatory drawing or reworking in the studio. He captures fleeting moments in paint texture and color, in mood and measure. The prairie scenery changes with each passing moment, demanding a concentration of attention and quickness of hand. Zak paints with brush and palette knife.

In the studio the landscape becomes secondary, drawn from memory, a setting and backdrop for human action. Zak calls it "a narrative in a loose sense." He references folk art, surrealism and contemporary compositional practices to create ambiguity in both period and environment. Natural and manmade elements are placed in concert, creating a place of pleasant sharing. Parties, picnics, and Sunday outings in the prairie jump from the canvas in a wild yet intuitively well arranged mixture of human figures (especially "skirts"), musical instruments (guitars, fiddles, horns), dogs, parts of trucks and jeeps, bicycles, prairie pastures, summer clouds, old furniture, and corners of barns. Clearly it's a happy, happy hour on Zak's canvas—but it's not a rowdy party with the beer flowing and the voices overly loud and mixed with hysterical laughter. There is a certain stillness noticeable in postures and on faces (and sometimes accentuated by practically expressionless heads). There is dignity--these people, they don't have to scream and howl to express joy; they cherish just being there, out in the country; they play a little music or pet their dogs, sip their drinks. They don't even have to talk to each other, for they know that each of them is aware that the moment itself has momentum.

Funny, Zak's non-objective works, in which he evidently responds to each brush stroke with quick instinct and builds fast movement, endless profundity, and vibrant color interactions, on second glance do not appear to be the wild abstracts I at first thought I was seeing. Here, all elements are also well-balanced, the colors have a variety of intensities, the earth tones dominate and with the shapes settle into threads that connect and integrate—also with a surprising as well as convincing dignity.