

Exploring BY KELLY KANE the Possibilities

From the root cellar of an old Montana farmhouse to the heights of American landscape painting, Clyde Aspevig traces his path to success and gives us a hint at what's next.



CLYDE
ASPEVIG

Growing up on a dryland wheat farm in an isolated part of northern Montana, Clyde Aspevig learned early on the power of setting. “We would get out for Sunday drives to ‘watch the wheat grow,’ as they say up in the Hi-Line,” he says. “Both my mother and my father were musical, and I would listen to them sing duets as I looked out the window at the landscape — the distant mountain ranges and the clouds. My mother would point out things that ordinarily one wouldn’t notice. So from a very early age I was instilled with a love of land and music.”

Aspevig put in countless miles behind the wheel of a tractor on the family farm, particularly after his father died of stomach cancer at the age of 36. “I grew up on a tractor,” he says. “That’s where I started looking at landscape, because that’s all there was to look at. My favorite thing was getting off and going down into the coulees, where it wasn’t a monoculture. And that’s where I got the attachment to looking closer at things.”

That kind of keen, patient observation continues to inform his process today. Combining terms borrowed from his wife, the artist Carol Guzman, and friend neuroscientist David Eagleman, Aspevig calls himself a “landscape-snorkeling possibilianist.”

“My wife, Carol, came up with the term ‘land snorkeling’ years ago,” he says. “We were in Sedona, Arizona, bushwhacking across the countryside, looking down at all the flora and fauna, and she said, ‘You know, this is like snorkeling, only we’re on land.’ You can apply the term to any time you’re looking at something with no ideas in mind, but eventually they begin to come — for me, it could be in the desert or the mountains, out on the prairie, or even in my library.”

In *Sum: Forty Tales from the Afterlives*, Eagleman defines the term *possibilianism* as “an emphasis on the exploration of new, unconsidered possibilities — a philosophy comfortable with holding multiple ideas in mind.” For Aspevig, that openness aptly describes the immense potential for discovery when land snorkeling.



(LEFT) Plein air oil painting demo (2022) ● The artist painting on location

WORDS TO PAINT BY

"In the morning, before I start painting, I like to pour some gasoline on the fire by going through my journals and quote books," says Aspevig. "Sometimes I'll take one quote and that will be my focus for the day; I'll think, 'How can I integrate this idea in my painting?' Here are a few you might want to consider."

"We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time." — T.S. Eliot

"I've actually done a painting to this quote; it relates directly to the idea of land snorkeling — going out to wander and to wonder with no destination in mind. It inspires us to think more deeply about the things we see and how they're interconnected to how we're going to develop our ideas in a painting."

"We abuse land because we see it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect."
— Aldo Leopold

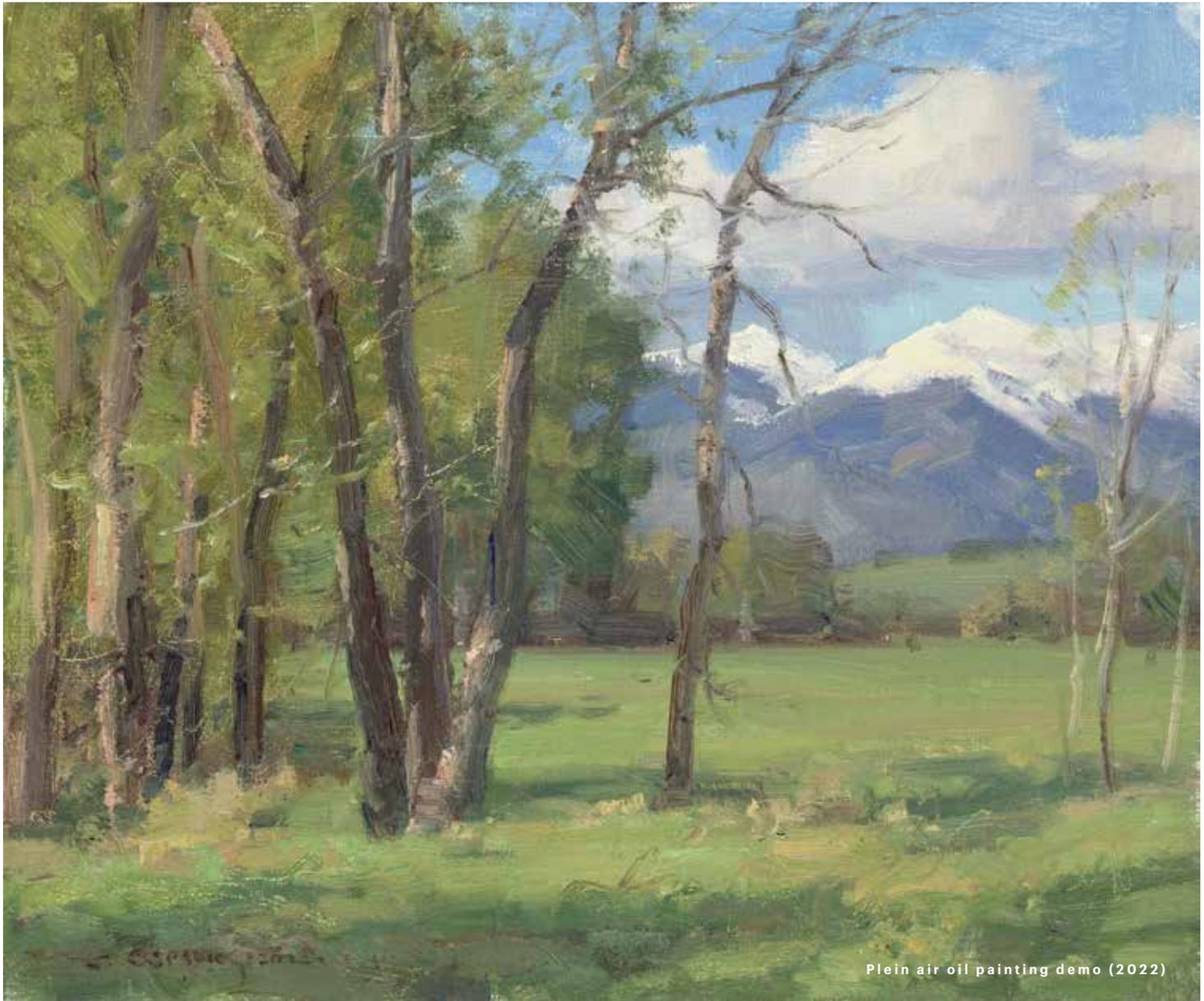
"I've been involved in conservation all my life, and I find this quote really pertinent, particularly to the world we live in now."

"It's a good thing that I remember everything, whether it happened or not." — Mark Twain

"As an artist, when we use our imaginations, we're inventing all kinds of things that may not be 'true,' but we're creating a narrative, an idea, a story, and stories are fun. That quote gives us the freedom to go wherever we want."



THE ARTIST'S PROCESS: With no particular idea in mind, Clyde Aspevig begins land snorkeling. When he finds an aspect of the scene he likes, he narrows his focus to find an interesting composition, then sets up his easel and gets to work.



Plein air oil painting demo (2022)

EARLY AHA MOMENTS

While the Montana Hi-Line may seem an unlikely launchpad for one of America's preeminent landscape painters, Aspevig found fertile underpinnings for his artistic aspirations both in the landscape and at home. "We can all come up with these certain moments in our lives that are really powerful," he says. "My first one took place early on in 1963. It was a tragic year for my family; my father was ill with cancer and later that fall he died. During that time, I had been bucked off my horse when I was out fixing a fence and shattered my ankle.

"It was a rough summer, but the silver lining was that I had a wonderful uncle named Roald Haaland, who was a really good amateur painter and also a musician. He was the type of guy who'd be sitting on a tractor, no one around, and you would know he was smiling. He just had that attitude. It was a great healing power to pick up oil paints at age 11, and he taught me some great things that I still use today."

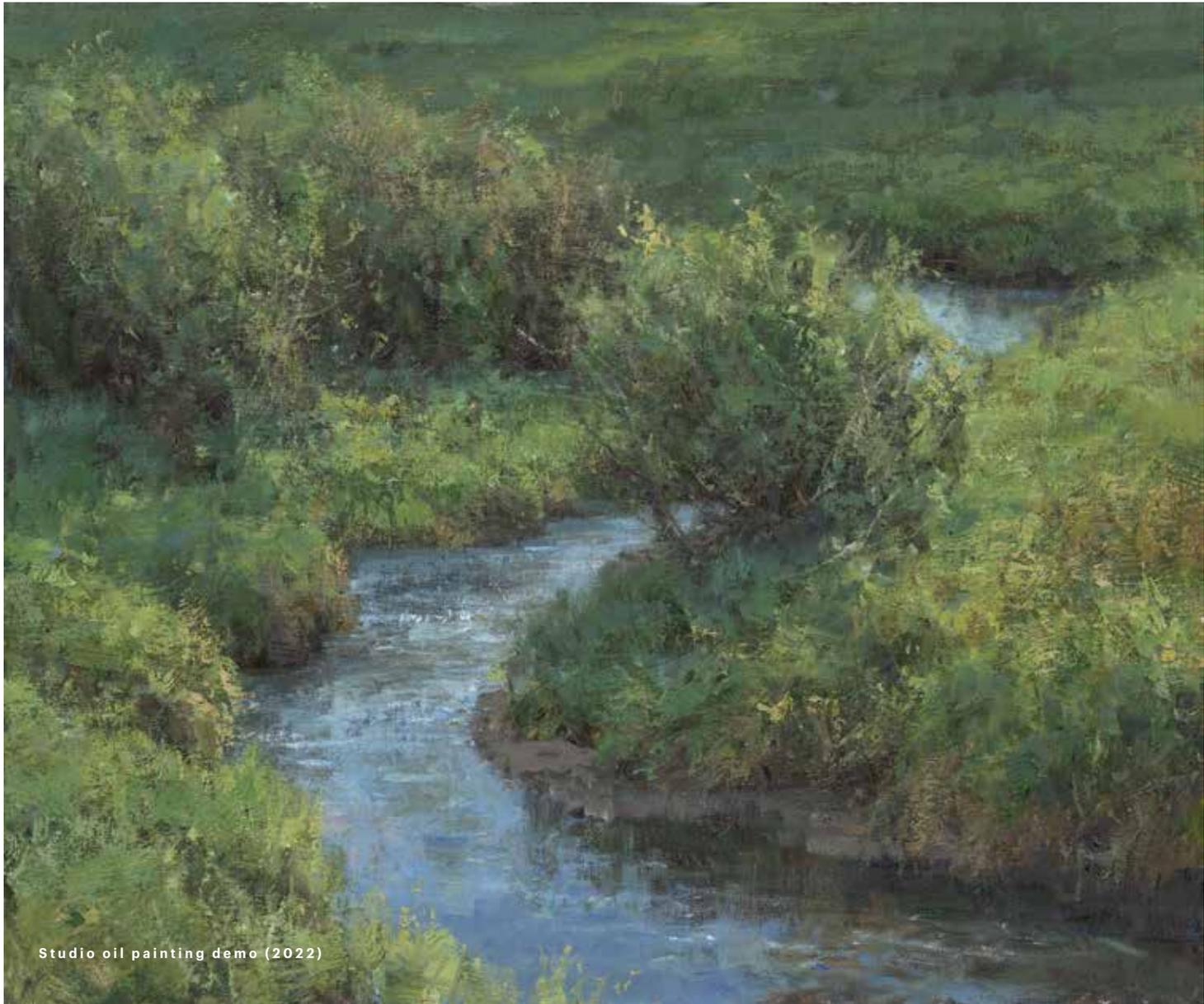
Before he died, Aspevig's father gave him some unexpected advice and the go-ahead to pursue his dreams. "I had set up my easel in the root cellar under the single 100-watt lightbulb," says the artist. "It was my place to think and my place to paint. One night I was painting an old cabin in the woods, with smoke coming out the chimney, from memory. I'd just gotten a new fan brush, and I was really blending that smoke. It was coming out like the best smoke that had ever been painted.

"At that moment, I heard my father come down the creaky cellar steps. He walked up behind me, put his hands on my shoulders and gave me a little squeeze. I was just waiting for this wonderful praise. And he said, 'Son, I think your cabin's on fire,' then turned and walked back upstairs. Sure enough, when I stepped back and looked at the painting, it looked like a factory; there was this tiny little cabin and all this smoke billowing out. The lesson was: pay attention to the whole. Here, I had gotten so engrossed in the technique of making something real I forgot about how it related to the rest of the painting. That was a big lesson."

His father was also his earliest paying customer, buying the first plein air painting Aspevig ever did for \$10. "It was his way of saying, 'Son, go out and become an artist; do whatever you want.' We hear so often about the humanities, 'Oh, that's a hobby; go and find a real job.' But I never looked back and wondered if I could become an artist or make a living at it."

MUSICAL INFLUENCE

Indeed, the support of Aspevig's parents and their musical influence had far-reaching implications for the artist's career and artwork. He started taking piano lessons in first grade and continued all the way through high school, honing his understanding of how music is organized.



Studio oil painting demo (2022)

“Painting is a visual form of silent music,” he says. “So much painting technique can be related to music theory.”

Soft and hard edges are similar to loud and soft notes in music. Harmony, chords, pitch, rhythm, syncopation, and timbre can all be translated to the visual arts. In his work, the artist doesn’t paint every leaf and stem. Rather, he suggests them in such a way as to make them look as though they live in the canvas. Some elements are whole notes; others are half notes or sixteenth notes. “Just as on a piano you hit some notes a little harder,” he explains, “in a painting, some colors stand out.”

HIS TRIBE

Although today you’re most likely to find Aspevig in his studio hard at work on one of his large canvases or poring over well-worn books in his impressive library, featuring titles on everything from art history and technique to ecology, philosophy, music theory, brain chemistry, and anthropology, he spent many years as a dedicated and prolific plein air painter.

Among his most well-known adventures were the weeklong pack trips he organized with wildlife and nature painter Tucker Smith in Wyoming’s Wind River Mountains. “We’d set up camp then go out on horseback or hike every day to paint,” says Aspevig. “We’d have a few

fishermen with the group, too. Our original guide’s name was Irv Lozier. His grandfather took Carl Rungius into the Wind River Mountains, and we had a lot of fun finding the exact spots Rungius had painted.

“More often than not, Irv’s canteen was filled with whiskey. On one trip, we’d run out of our nightly nightcaps, so Irv rode his horse out — we were at close to 11,000 feet, mind you — 30-some miles in one day. He packed up some wine and some booze, got in his airplane, and flew back, which was totally illegal, as this was a wilderness area. But I’ll never forget the sight of that airplane coming in sideways between the trees, making one pass and then dropping the crates into the lake for the fisherman to reel in.”

Aspevig’s journey to success put him in the path of a number of noteworthy Western landscape painters. “Early in my career I met some wonderful artists, including John Clymer, Donald Teague, and Robert Lougheed. At that time, in the ’60s and ’70s, there were very few plein air painters other than these guys and the Denver School, so I was really lucky to come along when I did. I was pretty young when I was doing shows with these guys, and they were so encouraging, such gentlemen. Winning awards at those shows — Northwest Rendezvous, Prix de West, the Autry’s Masters of the American West, and others around the country — was fun and was great for my career,



The artist with his painting *Tumbleweeds* (1999) at the Buffalo Bill Center of the West Museum in Cody, Wyoming

but I never took it too seriously. It was more important for me to get feedback from my peers.”

He continues, “I’ll never forget one time I stopped in Albuquerque to visit Wilson Hurley in his studio. I took this 40 x 60-inch painting in with me, one of a truckload I was taking to an exhibition at Trail-side Galleries. He looked down at it (he was 6 feet, 6 inches tall) and said, ‘Carl Rungius, huh?’ Sure enough, it was a scene from the Canadian Rockies that Rungius had painted, and I’d had a book of the artist’s work open to that piece as I painted. I took that painting out and sliced it right up. At that time, it was probably a \$40,000 painting, but that was one hell of a lesson.”

NEW CHALLENGES

A closet introvert, Aspevig found those big shows took a lot of energy. About 25 years ago, he left his galleries, and not long after, the shows, too, looking for more time to explore what he wanted to as an artist, on his own terms. “I haven’t painted outside in a long time, simply because I wanted to shift gears,” he says, “and to be frank, there are so many doggone good plein air painters right now, I don’t want to have to compete with them. Seriously. I’ve had my day in the sun and won a lot of awards, but I look at my career now as taking a step in all kinds of different directions.

“I’m putting myself into a spot of having to figure out if I’m really going to solve a problem the same way every time. And even though I try to break out of that, I sometimes find myself in the same spot — trying to do the same thing over and over again, and I’m just not built for that. I need a little bit more risk and excitement.

“I enjoy the luxury of working on something for as long as I want. And I’ve been exploring some more contemporary ideas. I’ve worked with LED lights and designed some furniture and fabrics. I love the decorative arts and have been trying some big paintings in more of a decorative form. I like working big, but that takes time, and big paintings are a lot harder to sell.

“Every morning I wake up with new ideas, and the older I get, the more I realize that I’m running out of time. I’ve become more focused. I don’t text; I don’t Facebook; I don’t Instagram. For me, those things

are just too much noise. My studio is my sanctuary; it’s where I come to focus, to meditate if you will.”

CONSERVATION EFFORTS

The artist has also taken his love of the land to its logical next step: conservation. As a board member of the American Prairie Foundation, he’s working to preserve 3.2 million acres of native prairie in Montana’s Northern Plains.

“The basic idea for the American Prairie Reserve got going in the 1830s, when people from Europe and the eastern part of the United States started to visit and thought the area ought to be protected in some way,” says Sean Gerrity, writer and former president and CEO of American Prairie Reserve for 17 years. “The artist George Catlin was actually the first to articulate the idea of a park and even presented it to the U.S. Congress. Although they didn’t act on it, the artist was effusive in his description of why — the look of it, the scale, and the abundance and diversity of wildlife. He got the ball rolling, and that ball kept moving down the field for the next 160 years.”

Scott McMillion, the artist’s friend and editor of *Montana Quarterly*, says this about Aspevig’s efforts over the past couple of decades: “More and more lately, especially with the prairie work, rather than painting the landscape, he’s painting *for* the landscape. He’s trying to represent it, and make it approachable and understandable for a big audience.”

McMillion continues, “One thing about traveling with [Clyde] is that I’ve learned how to appreciate changing colors. A prairie might look like a mono-scape, a monoculture, to a lot of people, but after a few trips out there with him, I don’t look at it the same way. I’ve learned to appreciate the way the color changes, and the light changes — it’s the ‘artist’s eye.’ If he’s doing that for me, getting me to look more closely, then he’s doing that for a lot of people.

“The sad part is that so few people get to see the actual works, especially the big ones, in person. When people walk into Clyde’s studio, they gasp. Those paintings are so powerful. The experience of spending time with Clyde’s work doesn’t just stick with you; it sticks to you.”