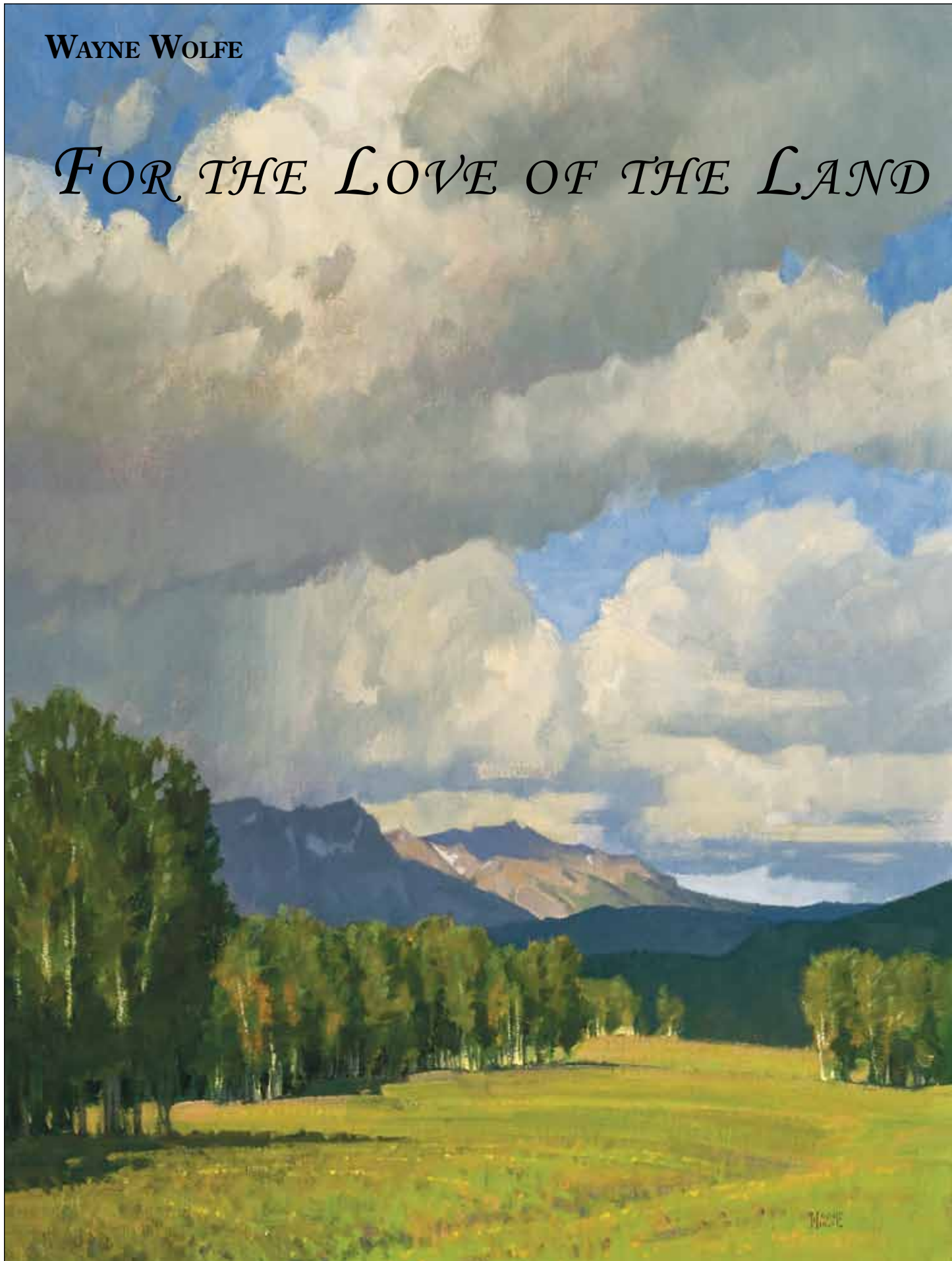


WAYNE WOLFE

FOR THE LOVE OF THE LAND



Veracity and clarity are the hallmarks of any Wayne Wolfe painting. Those qualities are especially apparent in his magnificent landscapes. The Colorado-based artist freely admits to being an emotional painter. “I love nature, beautiful things, and the effects of light,” he says. Indeed, it is doing justice to nature that is most satisfying to him.

As the son of Byron Wolfe, a commercial artist who also was an early member of the Cowboy Artists of America, a latent talent for art lay in the younger Wolfe’s genes, and many might have expected the son to follow the father as a professional artist. However, when it came time to choose a career, the younger Wolfe rebelled, telling his father that he was not at all interested in doing Western historical or any other type of painting. “Dad didn’t encourage me to change my mind, because at that point, making a living as an

Above: Clueless, oil, 15" by 30"

“This is a respectful tip of the hat to the great Bob Kuhn, whose droll humor in his titles was often a perfect complement to some of his masterful paintings.”

Opposite Page: Summer, oil, 32" by 24"

“By noon, the sun has sufficiently heated the ground and its available moisture to form some colorful Colorado cumulus.”

By Myrna Zanetell

artist was very difficult,” he says.

In lieu of art, Wolfe earned a degree in journalism at the University of Kansas in Lawrence, jokingly explaining that he chose that major because it didn’t have a mathematics requirement. After his graduation, he worked as a reporter at the Kansas City Star and at a radio station, before taking a position as an advertising account executive and copywriter. “I had six jobs in six years before finally deciding it was time to find something I was serious about,” he says.

In 1973, Wolfe began painting part-time in order to create some gifts for Christmas. As if predestined, he also chanced upon Robert Lougheed’s paintings in a Kansas City gallery. “I saw his work and observed the drawing and wonderful, juicy paint,” he says. “But, more importantly, it was like looking out a window; I never saw such clean, perfect color and light.”

For the next two years, Wolfe corresponded with Lougheed on a frequent basis. “I wrote him 10-page letters, asking him questions and driving him nuts,” he says. Admiring Wolfe’s persistence, Lougheed

invited the young artist to come to New Mexico to join an excursion to paint a church just west of Albuquerque. “This was my first experience painting outdoors with ‘the gang,’ professionals such as Joe Bohler, Wilson Hurley, Morris Ripple, and Clark Hulings, and I just kept pinching myself, wondering if this was a dream.”

Seeing the rapport Wolfe had with those artists, Lougheed encouraged him to move to Santa Fe, saying, “There’s an artist colony here, and you’ll find it very productive to learn from others who speak your language.” In September 1976, Wolfe, his wife (they have since divorced), and 8-month-old son, Tyler, moved to Santa Fe, eventually settling in Lougheed’s guesthouse. Little did he realize that his introduction to the “land of enchantment” would become such a memorable experience. It seems that workers failed to turn off the pilot light on the water heater while installing new indoor/outdoor carpet in the kitchen. Meanwhile, spilled glue caught fire, and the guesthouse burned to the ground. Graciously, the Lougheeds rebuilt it, even adding an additional room for Tyler.

“A motel room was home until rebuilding was completed, so the out-of-doors became my studio for



the next six months,” Wolfe says. “Each day I would paint three to four small plein air studies and then, when the light had faded, I went over to Bob’s, and he would critique what I had done.”

Wolfe apprenticed under Lougheed for the next six years, with Lougheed

insisting that he paint only en plein air. “What I learned from Bob was to see the effects of light in nature,” he says. “When you are on the spot, you are seeing the best values and real edges. Colors are clear, not muddied.”

Ironically, Lougheed passed away

in May 1982, just a month before his protégé experienced one of the highlights of his career. In only his second year as a member of the National Academy of Western Artists (NAWA), one of Wolfe’s paintings won the coveted museum purchase award.

The Gathering, oil, 30" by 50"

“It’s the start of the mating season for elk, and the herdmaster will add to his harem only as many cows as he can manage with challenges from rival bulls.”

That year also was momentous in that the Wolfe family had moved into a home of their own, close to Tom Lovell, who also agreed to take Wolfe under his wing. “I have been so fortunate to have been mentored by two of the finest artists in the business,” Wolfe says. “The critiques

I received were a perfect balance. Lougheed’s were broad—‘Here’s what you need to do, but have some fun painting’—while Lovell might have dozens of small things for me to work on. Neither was ever wrong in the criticism of my work, so I received the best from both.” In



April 1989, Wolfe marked his maturity as a painter with a one-man exhibition at the Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

The '90s became a time of discovery for Wolfe, both personally and professionally. Returning from a NAWA exhibition, he decided to drive through Colorado Springs, Colorado. Two decades earlier, his mother and father had lived in nearby Woodmoor and, learning that their former home was now vacant, Wolfe leased the property and spent a year there, before moving to Loveland in 1992.

For the next eight years, he enjoyed being part of a vibrant community of artists, but he dreamed of living on the western slope of Colorado. So it was that, in 2000, Wolfe moved to Montrose, where he currently lives in a home on a two-acre tract with a quietude that allows him to enjoy listening to the calls of meadowlark and coyotes. It's a traditional lifestyle he finds more than a

little appealing.

"I still go inside when I go to the bank, because I enjoy talking to the teller, and I've got a great book collection [that] I'm not ready to forego in favor of using an electronic reader," he says. "I guess I'm also a Neanderthal man when it comes to photography. I don't have a computer or fancy flat screen; instead I look through a little viewer at slides, or make hard-copy prints." The use of the latter became preferable three years ago, when he lost sight in one eye due to a vein occlusion in the optic nerve.

Although Wolfe has painted in New England, Canada, Europe, and the British Isles, choosing subjects that range from wildlife to still life to figures, his forte remains his starkly beautiful renditions of the vast, unspoiled wilderness areas of Colorado. His fascination with those locations was the result of spending summer vacations there as a youth, but a more intimate knowledge



Above: *Trout Unlimited*, oil, 24" by 36"

"In this painting, hopefully less is more. The scene once depicted a fly fisherman, his campsite, and canoe. But to simplify, the river trout won the day."



Falling Leaves, oil, 24" by 30"


"A gentle zephyr brings down some floating gold on a hunting camp lane along the famous Divide Road in western Colorado."

developed as, year after year, he recorded sun and shadow in plein air paintings of mountain peaks and valleys, ranging from Rocky Mountain National Park in the north to the San Juans and remote Uncompaghere Range in the southwestern part of the state. It is this love and understanding combined with technical skill that accounts for the way Wolfe's canvases literally radiate life.

In recent years, however, a bad back has required Wolfe to transition from painting on location to

becoming a studio painter working out of a 2,500-square-foot space in downtown Montrose. Looking at his stunning canvases, viewers would never guess that Wolfe is color blind, having difficulty distinguishing hues in the red/green and green/brown spectrum. Loughheed was the first to point this out when he noticed Wolfe using raw sienna to paint the bark on trees.

"I can see color when I'm right on top of it, but distance gives me problems," Wolfe says. "For instance, I only see three colors in the rainbow: yellow, orange, and blue." To compensate, Loughheed helped Wolfe develop a color palette, telling him which would yield what color when mixed together.

Although he makes his living as a fine artist, Wolfe remains a journalist at heart, telling a story with paint and brush rather than pen. Taking his cue from John Ruskin, author of *Stones of Venice*, who maintained that an artist's life should be seeing and feeling, nothing more, Wolfe says, "You can't invent a fictional character as awesome as what surrounds us, whether it is people, animals, or landscape. What I love is to see these things just as they are and then report them to viewers through my paintings." 

Myrna Zanetell is a writer living in El Paso, Texas.