

A broad brush no more for this landscape painter

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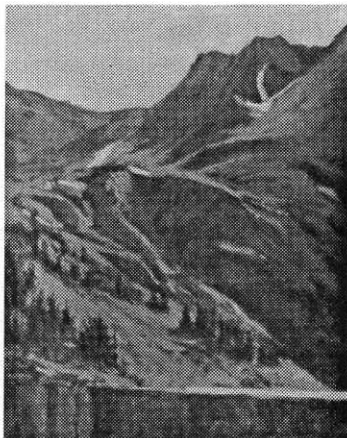
Bill Gallen has "always liked nature." He remembers going to Colorado as a high schooler and climbing to the top of a mountain. It made him aware, he says now, of how much beauty there is in the world.

"I just see wonderful life everywhere," he added, a touch of youthful awe lingering in his adult voice. "So any chance I see to paint it, I'll take it . . ."

Gallen, 38, is giving himself many more opportunities to paint these days. He is gradually separating himself from his Milwaukee based house-painting firm and, setting himself up as a self-employed artist in Santa Fe, N.M.



"Tea Kettle and Onions"
oil 12 x 16



"Snowmass Lake"
acrylic 20 x 16

"I made a drastic career change," he observed during a recent interview at the Katie Gingrass Gallery, where a group of his landscape inspired oil paintings and sketches hangs through March 4.

"I was looking to find peace in life," he said. "That's why I decided to take art classes at MIAD and the Milwaukee Art Museum."

At the time, four years ago, Gallen and his house painting partner had 20-odd employees and were looking at doubling that. After his decision to enter the art field, Gallen downscaled his involvement with the business. "I rented a studio in the Third Ward and painted away."

Fortunately for Gallen, the firm he still partly owns, Painting by the Gallen, has survived and prospered under the supervision of his associates, thus assuring him a continuing income. For his part, the fledgling artist has found self-realization documenting favorite parts of Wisconsin and his beloved Southwest.

"I tell people I've switched from big brushes to little ones," Gallen said, grinning.

Turning himself from a painter of homes into a painter of trees and rocks, mountains and canyons has been an exhilarating experience, Gallen reported. "I'm not a suffering artist. I love doing it. Much as I'm frustrated by it sometimes, I enjoy the process."

Even though he has had considerable formal training, Gallen believes working full-time as an artist, rather than trying to cram his artwork into a few free hours during a busy week, has ripened and deepened his craft.

"Pigments are the best teachers," he said. "I travel a lot and either take the paint box or camera with me, or both."



"Spring Sentinels"
oil 16 x 12



"Sun on the Hilltop"
oil 24 x 30

Despite his frequent absences, Gallen still loves Wisconsin. He particularly enjoys depicting the as-yet unspoiled areas around Lake Mills and the western parts of the state that have, he says, "a rural innocence that is gone now from the Milwaukee area: Richland and Vernon counties."

He is especially fascinated by Wisconsin's unglaciated areas — i.e., those stretches of hill and valley not scoured flat by glaciers.

"I often visit friends who have 80 acres at La Farge. They have turkey and deer. I work at the site, on Belgian linen which has been mounted with archival glue on masonite. In the studio, I use stretched canvas."

In the field, Gallen sketches rapidly in oil paints thinned with mineral spirits.

Working from dark to light, he roughs in the shapes, trying to get the whole image at once. With smaller pieces he may be able to get all the color onto the palette in as little as 90 minutes.

"I look for fugitive lighting effects. In the Southwest colors are saturated. There's more vapor in the air in Wisconsin. I use the basic colors plus black: viridian, sap green, several yellows, ochre and - ultramarine blue. I think less is more in terms of color."

A pivotal if not crucial, experience in Gallen's life was the death last autumn of his brother, John Francis Gallen, who was just 22. "John's death was difficult but beautiful," Gallen said. "We saw how beautiful life is even in the horror of living with cancer."

After John died on Sept. 25, Bill went out into the woods and carved John's mantra, "Peace, Beauty, Love," into a tree.

To this day, Gallen said, the essence of John's mantra is with him: "Finding joy and praising it, and finding beauty and praising it."

Gallen's show confirms that he is putting his brother's gentle philosophy into practice.

His smaller sketches, done on site, are particularly pleasant. Simpler than photographs, less affected than big-scale paintings, they portray nature at its natural best.

