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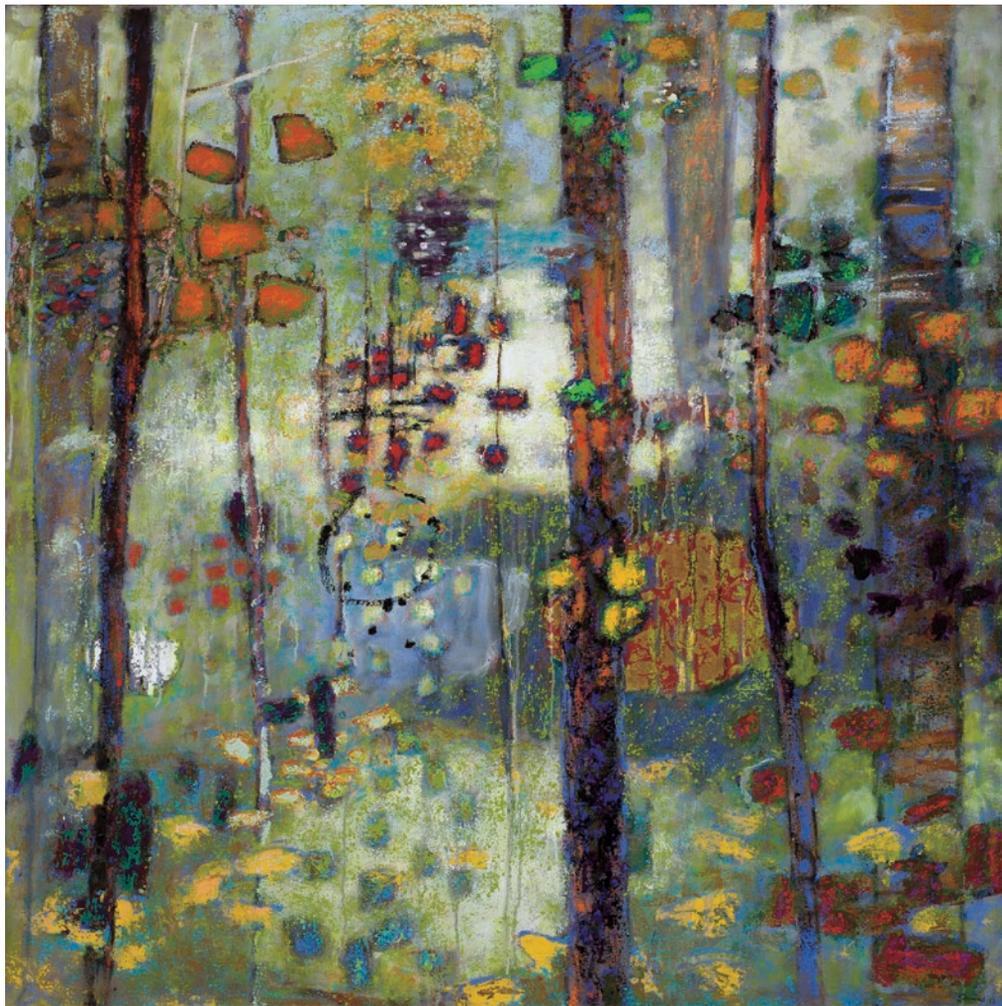
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Endless Possibilities

THE VARIETY OF NATURE IS THE MUSE FOR
RICK STEVENS' IMAGINATIVE SCENES.

BY JOHN O'HERN



2

The Japanese poet Matsuo Basho (ca. 1644-1694) wrote, “Do not seek to follow in the footsteps of the masters. Seek what they sought.”

Rick Stevens reveres the masters, but says, “You may copy them at first, but eventually you embody the principles and then improvise with endless variation.” He likens the process to tai chi, the ancient Chinese martial art, which he practices every day, mastering its forms and movements.

Stevens says, “It is natural to look for repeatable methods, and there is a mastery that naturally develops when one does something over and over again. In painting, there’s always a danger of the work getting formulaic. I want to get to fresh territory, even if it

gets uncomfortable there. It’s part of what makes it engaging. I like the element of surprise—something that looks right once it’s been integrated into a piece, but something that takes it beyond the predictable. I want to make sure that I’m doing something that has endless variety, like nature itself.”

As a boy, Stevens would sit and watch his father as he painted in plein air and would spend hours hiking and canoeing. “I dropped out for a while,” he explains. “My parents had some property, and it was an opportunity to get away from everything.”

Today he hikes in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains in northern New Mexico, sometimes setting up camp, and always sketching and painting.

1 Rick Stevens painting.

2 *Interactions Between Us*, oil on canvas, 48 x 48”. Courtesy the artist.

He responds first to the light and “how it falls on forms. Different kinds of light change the visual experience.” Then sound. “You can’t deny how rich the sounds are away from human activity.”

“My work may be seen as an open window to other realms,” Stevens says. “Its visual vocabulary has evolved from years of painting the landscape. Although I no longer consider myself a landscape painter, nature continues to be my muse. I think of nature as a continuous flow of shapes and patterns of energy that has,

or more precisely is, an intelligent force. Most modern-day physicists will tell us that all the forces and particles in nature are one, just different ripples on the ocean of consciousness: a Unified Field.”

An awareness of oneness is evident in his paintings as well as in his life. “A sense of structure is important to me, but I avoid strong divisions,” he shares. “I require a certain ‘fluidity’ where everything is flowing into the next thing. My compositions are infused with an overall light that is all-inclusive. This

doesn’t allow anything to be read as separate from the whole. There is diversity, just like in the natural world, but there is an underlying unity that is apparent.”

Unlike the abstract expressionists, his abstract paintings suggest space and landscape. As he navigates the line between representation and abstraction, he is completely at ease. “I don’t fight it, I play with it. It brings a sense of mystery,” Stevens says. When asked what “mystery” means to him, he replies, “It’s something that inspires us. It awakens something



3



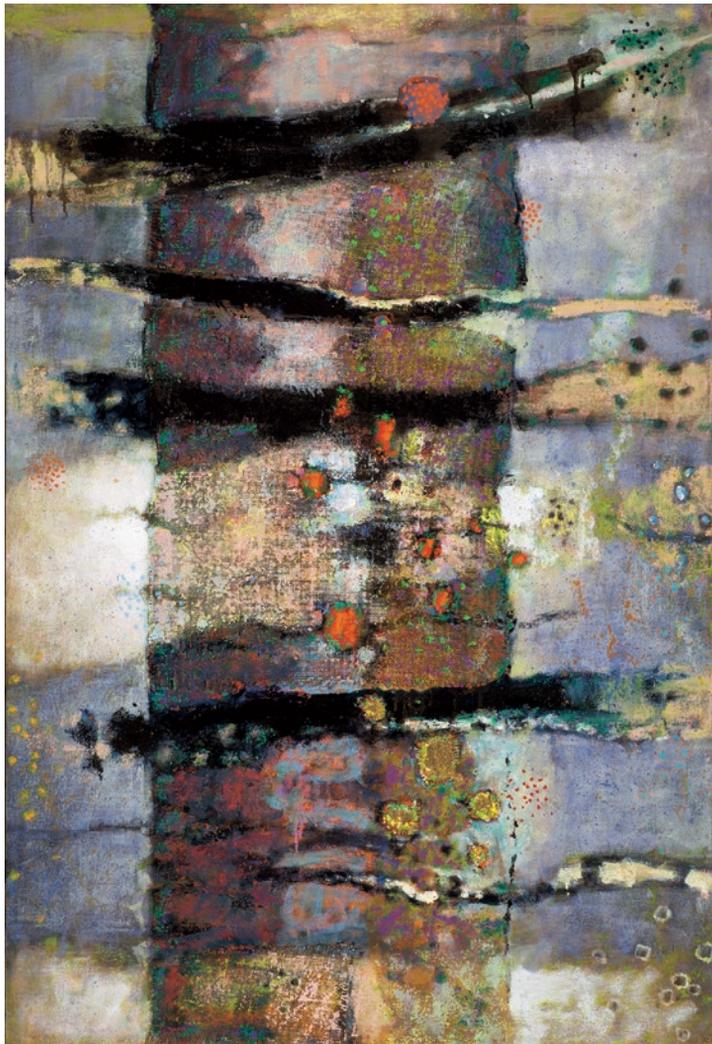
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Unfolding Force, oil on canvas, 48 x 96". Courtesy the artist and Hunter Kirkland Contemporary Gallery, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

4
Somewhere in May, oil on canvas, 36 x 72". Private collection, courtesy Hunter Kirkland Contemporary Gallery, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

5
55-14 Hyper Bole II, oil, burlap, gold leaf, wax on canvas, 47 x 32". Private collection

6
Rick Stevens in his studio.



5

inside us that we may not understand, but that harkens to a greater reality. Some call it a spiritual experience. Others experience a sense of awe in nature or listening to a piece of music and don't know why, but they may not call it spiritual. Art awakens something within us."

He expands on "mystery" recalling his readings about consciousness. "When we talk about consciousness, we don't know where it comes from. Materialists say it's in the brain. Others see consciousness as universal, non-local," he says. "Eastern

philosophy and science are teaching us that there is no separation between subject and object. I feel there is an all-pervading intelligence in the forest that I'm not separate from."

He admires the work of George Inness (1825-1894), "who was very traditional but took his painting into a spiritual place." Inness wrote, "The purpose of the painter is simply to reproduce in other minds the impression which a scene has made upon him. A work of art does not appeal to the intellect. It does not appeal to the moral



6

sense. Its aim is not to instruct, not to edify, but to awaken an emotion."

In paintings such as *Interactions Between Us*, 2013, Stevens brings all his influences to bear. His impressions of light in the landscape, rhythms in music and the fluidity he mentioned earlier suggest nature, but leave the viewer free to imagine a scene in the forest, or the abstractions of a jazz improvisation.

Material was important to the abstract expressionists, and Stevens pushes paint to create not only the illusion of depth but actual, if almost imperceptible, depth in his paintings. "I like to use different materials and techniques and things that add texture, like gauze that I adhere with wax. I like how the brush will scumble over it. You start to get a push-pull of space." He creates forms by controlling the application of paint, and he allows the paint to express itself by thinning it down and letting it drip.

Stevens admires Pierre Bonnard "in a coloristic way." Bonnard (1867-1947) was known for his intense and idiosyncratic use of color. He also admires the "passion" of Joan Mitchell (1925-1992) in her gestural abstractions. The art historian Klaus Kertess wrote, "Her ability to reflect the flow of her consciousness in that of nature, and in paint, is all but unparalleled."

Stevens has sought what the masters sought, experiencing and expressing a universal consciousness that he expresses through his paintings. The visual experience of his paintings stimulates imaginative interpretation and the urge to unravel their mysteries, which, ultimately, cannot be unraveled. He opens a door to the intangible with just enough references to the tangible to make us feel safe as we realize that we, too, are part of the mystery. ●