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Natural Revelations: Springville Museum of Fine Arts

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susan swartz
natural revelations

springville museum of fine arts

Foreword

Impressions of the sublime—a celebration of nature and the seasonal changes we experience in Utah have inspired countless artists for over a hundred and fifty years. In and beyond this span, artists have emerged who have offered lasting images that provide testimony to a remarkable landscape and favorite venues.

It is widely accepted that art is and always has been a primal, fundamental and cultural human endeavor. Many early Utah artists left Utah for European salons or respected schools in the east to refine their talents before their return. Several well-known California artists followed the creative call to paint Utah in the 1920's and 1930's. Many of these artist works can be seen hanging extensively throughout the Springville Museum of Art today. Since then, and especially in the second half of the twentieth century, skilled artists have been coming to Utah to practice both a traditional and contemporary approach to Utah landscapes. What separates these talented individuals from each other is their distinctive styles, manifested by their own personal inspiration. It is fortunate when an artist can connect the beauty that surrounds us with an environmental imperative and a spiritual influence. Susan Swartz is an artist who can provoke such passion.

Like the early Utah artists, Susan started as a traditionalist, painting portraits and still life. Later on Susan painted landscapes from her travels in New England, California, France and Africa. In present years Susan has concentrated on western landscapes and her style has developed toward the abstract. Her work has been described as "A contemporary prayer to future generations that will inherit the world in which we live." Perhaps her friend and environmentalist, Dr. Jane Goodall says it best, "Susan shares my concern for the future of life on this planet." Susan Swartz's environmental message is clear through her contemporary paintings and the thoughtful approach to each piece. The Springville Museum of Art is pleased to share with you a Utah artist who is in touch with nature and reveals Utah in it's best light, and as always she gives "...the glory to God."

Vern Swanson, Ph.D.

Director,
Springville Museum of Art



Biography

Susan Swartz

For 40 years my painting has been inspired by nature. My paintings of landscapes and nature are imagined and abstract. They are a direct result of my life experience.

I used to close my eyes and paint what God created in my head. It was a way to find peace and comfort in a fast and disconcerting world. I wanted to preserve these blessings of abundance and beauty for my grandchildren. Creating these images is my way of giving thanks.

Now I close my eyes and see chaos, swirling colors, and a collision of ideas. Some days I paint with a siren. Other days I paint from a softer place in my soul that has seen the harm we have done to our natural world.

Where I used to paint in the hope that people would stop and look at the beauty around us, now I want to wake up my audience with my imagination.

The consequences of progress affect us all. My personal experience with mercury poisoning leaves me conflicted about how to paint the ocean's awesomeness knowing that the ocean and the fish are faced with toxins. I can no longer paint aspen and birch in their fall splendor without wondering what has happened to our animal habitat that unleashed the Lyme Disease epidemic many of us deal with daily. Our environment and we are all connected.

My experiences have taught me to change everything—from what I eat, how I understand medicine and healing, to how we care for our scarce resources.

I paint completely from my imagination. I start with an idea, allow it to grow and then let my creativity and heart lead me. Color and layers inspire me. My paintings take on a different meaning when they are close than when they are 15 feet away. I create this effect by continually challenging myself with new ideas and new materials.

My goal is to elicit emotion. I want people to get lost in my art by finding a new interpretation of the natural world and their part in it.

I paint what God has given and align my work with others who show us how fragile our world has become. A portion of my art sales supports activists who are restoring the commons and addressing the balance between man-made and God given.

Born in Pittsburgh, Susan Swartz inherited her creative gene from a family of artists and musicians. She has been painting for 40 years, has three children and nine grandchildren. Since 1998, she has devoted herself to painting full time from studios in Park City, Utah and Martha's Vineyard. For exhibitions, galleries and affiliations, log on to www.susanswartz.com.

"Susan Swartz's paintings capture nature and all the mystery and beauty that is to be revealed to us if we take the time to look and listen. She also reminds us it is up to us to be stewards of these gifts, as they are precious and diminishing resources, needed for generations to come. In Genesis, I am photographing those places in the world as they were when the world began. My hope, like Susan's is that we will wake up and remember why we must take care of all creations and make room for one another."

Sebastião Salgado, photographer, Amazonas Images
GENESIS, EXODUS, and WORKERS

"Essence is the word that comes to mind with Susan Swartz's paintings. Nature is not replicated but associated with color, light, and form. The textures created from her palette knife and brushstrokes are energetic pulse points reminding us that life is a shimmering process, mysterious and unpredictable. It is beauty that brings us back home—be it an aspen grove, a water lily, or marsh."

Terry Tempest Williams, author of *Finding Beauty In A Broken World*

"Inspired by the natural world, Susan Swartz' artwork is a window into her deep commitment to nature, preservation and environmental health. Her paintings reflect her passion for our natural surroundings which none of us should take for granted. Her tireless dedication to protecting and healing the earth is greatly appreciated by us all."

Dave Livermore, Utah State Director, The Nature Conservancy

"In *Natural Revelations* Susan Swartz, the artist, captures what is both sacred and divine in nature. She shows the perfection—and the mystery of nature—be it an explosion of fall colors, or the stillness of the water's edge. But there is a story behind *Natural Revelations*, that is worth acknowledging and that is the story of Susan Swartz the activist, who after years of being sick and finally diagnosed with both mercury poisoning and Lyme Disease decided it was no longer enough to paint for the glory of what God had created but in defiance on what no man shall but has put asunder. John Muir, the Father of our Conservation movement and National Parks once said, God has cared for these trees, saved them from drought, disease, avalanches, and a thousand tempests and floods. But he cannot save them from fools. As I look at these paintings and I know we must save not only what God has given us, we must also save ourselves from the environmental health problems we have created for our children. As reflect on the policies and politics of "the commons"—I am humbled and proud to call Susan an artist, activist and friend. In her work I find refuge and inspiration."

Robert F. Kennedy, Jr, President, Waterkeeper Alliance and Environmental Attorney

"Susan Swartz shares my concern for the future of life on this planet. Each of her paintings richly illustrates the beauty of our world—from snow-covered slopes to rustic vineyards and country gardens. This exquisite art will appeal to everyone who loves nature and will bring the beauty into the homes of those who live in the city.

Susan encourages us not only to experience and savor these images of nature, but also to do what we can to save nature itself. How tragic it would be if people living in the future were to look at these paintings and know that the settings that inspired them were no more. How they might yearn to experience, for themselves, the richness of sound and scent and color. We, who live today, must not allow such a future to come to pass. No, we must roll up our sleeves, and each do our part to save the beauty of nature for those who follow. And we must act now—before it is too late."

Dr. Jane Goodall, DBE
Founder, The Jane Goodall Institute
UN Messenger of Peace
www.janegoodall.org

Toward Nonobjective Abstraction

Essay by Donna L. Poulton, Ph.D.

For the many public and private art collectors acquainted with Susan Swartz's career—and in particular with her popular "Aspen Series"—only a few canvases in this exhibition will be familiar. The large-scale works, *Forest Glow*, *Indian Corn* and the triptych, *Autumn's Bounty*, are reminiscent of her signature work. These paintings are interpretive representations of the high desert landscape of the West in which Swartz resides and from which she draws strength, solace and inspiration.

In these paintings, the transient treatment of the aspen and the lyrical play of light and space are evocative of woodland scenes that refer beyond the canvas, conjuring the larger settings that comprise these extraordinary colonies of trees. For many collectors these works act as both an exterior and an interior view, tapping into the collective history of our emotional responses to such western alpine settings.

The aspen groves and forests in the narrative of these paintings are impenetrable, mysterious bastions of nature. Not allowing entrance, they demand attention as a unit, a community. In the painting *Amethyst Grove*, Swartz offers a portal through the dense forest of aspen. An aperture in the composition leads the eye to a vanishing point allowing rare depth and access to the unfolding scene. Swartz is taking the viewer on a journey with her. It is an unspoken invitation to surround oneself with the restorative power of nature.

The large canvas, *Soldier's Hollow* (60 x 60 inches), is perhaps Swartz's most widely recognized work. Painted as part of a series of interpretive landscapes for a commission for the 2002 Winter Olympics, the work depicts a cluster of dark willows silhouetted against a deep winter base of snow in the shadow of Mt. Timpanogos. The cool palette saturates the canvas, underscoring at once the bitter cold and beauty of the extraordinary setting. This series is singular in the course of her forty-year career. The work does not fit easily into Swartz's oeuvre, but it does highlight the ease with which she can step out of the range of her work.

Other paintings such as *Amazing Grace* suggest a transition from objective work toward the appeal of the non-objective. The substance—sky, trees and foreground—is less articulated, but still evident. The painting is clearly a landscape, but it has also become a conduit for emotional expression through the use of large fields of color. Like many noted artists who work with large canvases, Susan responds to the immediacy and plasticity of acrylic. In *Amazing Grace*, she demonstrates a confident use of the bold primary colors of red and yellow. The color expanse has the emotional push and pull of pigment applied directly from the tube, but clearly has been shaded. The resulting effect is an amplification of the receding sky and the aggressive forward reaching of red trees, creating a jarring but familiar scene in the Wasatch in the autumn. The composition is scarcely recognizable as a landscape. The discernable has been eliminated and only three planes remain.

The Lily series, *Iridescent Reflections*, *Lilies Unveiled* and *Serenade of Lilies*, reveals an urge toward the representational that is partially overcome by a multiplicity of overlapping and subsuming lines that concentrate movement and depth toward the interior. Swartz has replaced the visual perception of classical perspective for depth and layering within the plasticity of the medium itself. The patterns in her Lily series do not take the eye outward, but rather into a repetition of line and plane. There is texture in the strata of color and light; a depth that is captured by the many glazes built upon her canvas. The viewer is drawn into the complexity and stratum of nature and by extension, the inner world of the artist.

Swartz has exchanged the challenge of *en plein air* painting for the indomitable work of the imagination: "In my studio I paint from memories and impressions of color, light and feelings, inspired by what I have seen." She observes that she is not "conscious of creating a pattern...I do strive always to draw the eye into the painting...I also do this with layering—my paintings have many layers...ten to fifteen feet away people see one thing and two feet away people see something else."

Swartz's more recent canvases, *After Glow*, *Crimson Reflections* and *Gentle Morning*, reveal a surprising shift in her interpretative expression of the natural environment. The identifiable landscapes and seascapes that characterized her earlier work are now largely veiled. The underlying veracity is profoundly abstracted, located in a large-scale tumult of color and expression.

The progression of her compositions is toward an unreserved nonobjective abstraction where a work might be derived from the subject but does not replicate it. Although nature always remains her source of inspiration, her work is now essentially freed from objective content; interpretation is evident in more formal terms such as color and texture, and her subjects are now liberated of the line. The expressiveness of Swartz's work is articulated foremost through the dramatic juxtapositions of color. In *After Glow* there are large expanses of warm and cool colors, blues and yellows and split complementarities of yellow: yellow oranges and yellow greens. It is essentially liberated of reference. Only the title *After Glow* remains referential.

In *Crimson Reflections* the paintbrush has usurped the palette knife. The sky is boiling and very painterly. Of her decisions around the palette and fearless use of color, Swartz remarks that she is "inspired by color combinations that I see and constantly push the color contrast in my painting."

The canvases in this exhibition are retrospective in content. The range of work reveals the job of a dedicated artist—not to become complacent, but to continue to search for new interpretive media and content. Susan Swartz is not only conscious of this requirement, but challenges it every day: "I try to grow and experiment and stay fresh... I try to create an emotion, to evoke a feeling in someone else who observes my work. I want him or her to get lost in it and seek something for themselves."

Morning Calm

Acrylic on Linen

20" x 20"

2003



Amethyst Grove

Acrylic on Linen

48" x 72"

2008

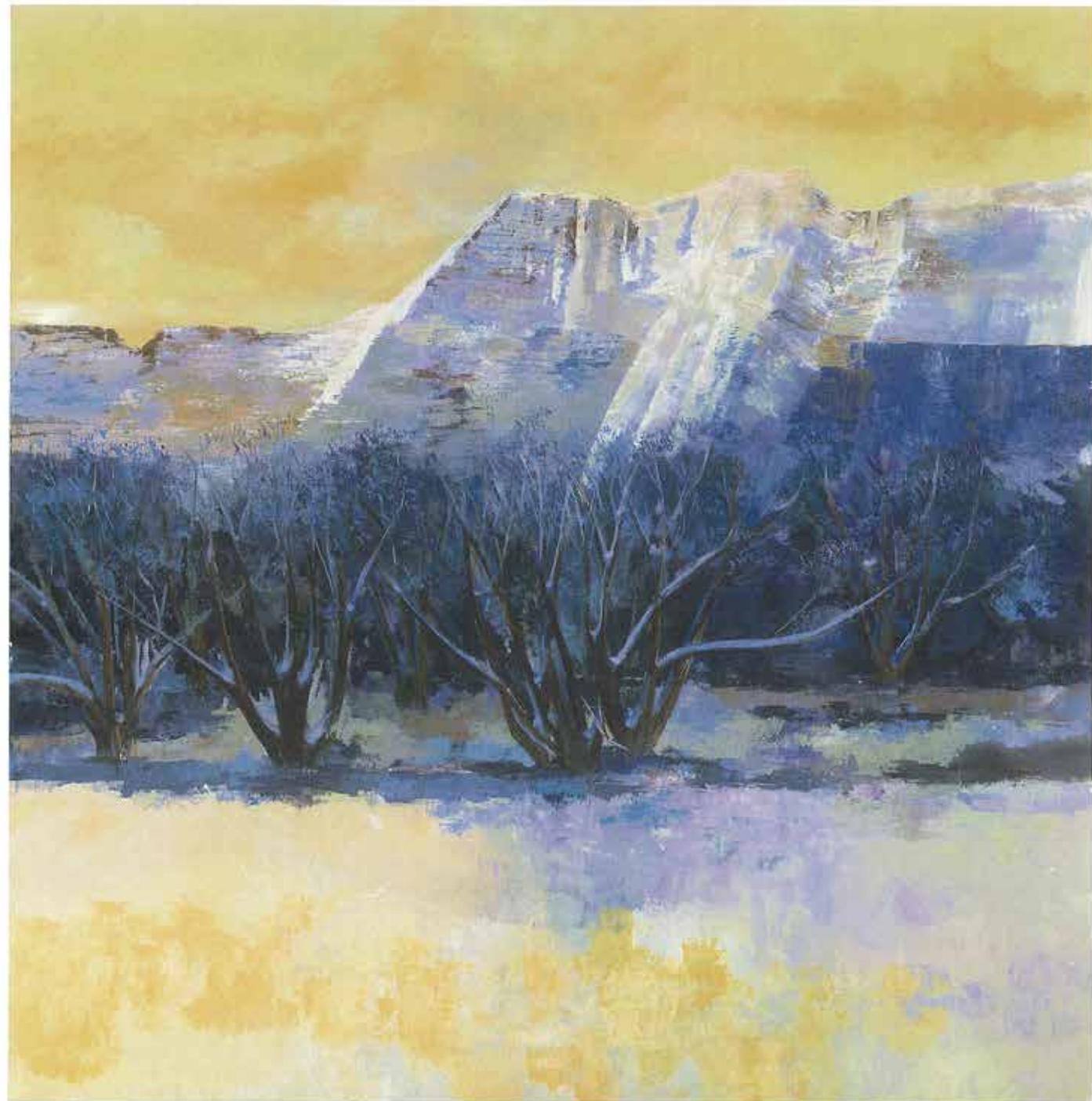


Soldier Hollow

Acrylic on Linen

60" x 60"

2002



Turquoise Spontaneity

Acrylic on Linen

36" x 60"

2009



Cascade Springs

Acrylic on Linen

36" x 60"

2002



Crimson Reflections

Acrylic on Linen

36" x 36"

2007



After Glow

Acrylic on Canvas

36" x 36"

2007



Winter's Bounty

Acrylic on Linen

40" x 30"

2009

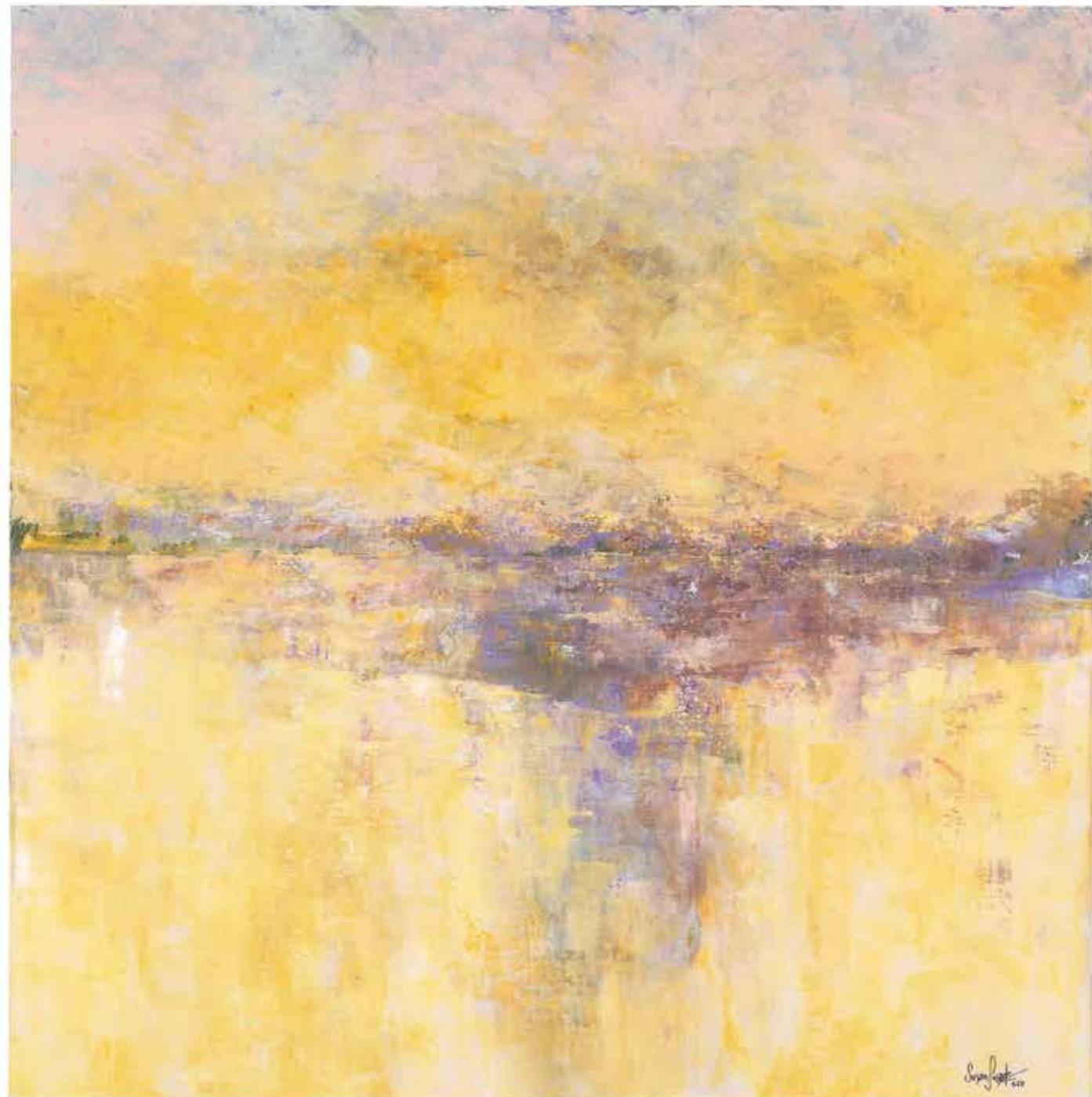


Gentle Morning

Acrylic on Linen

36" x 36"

2006

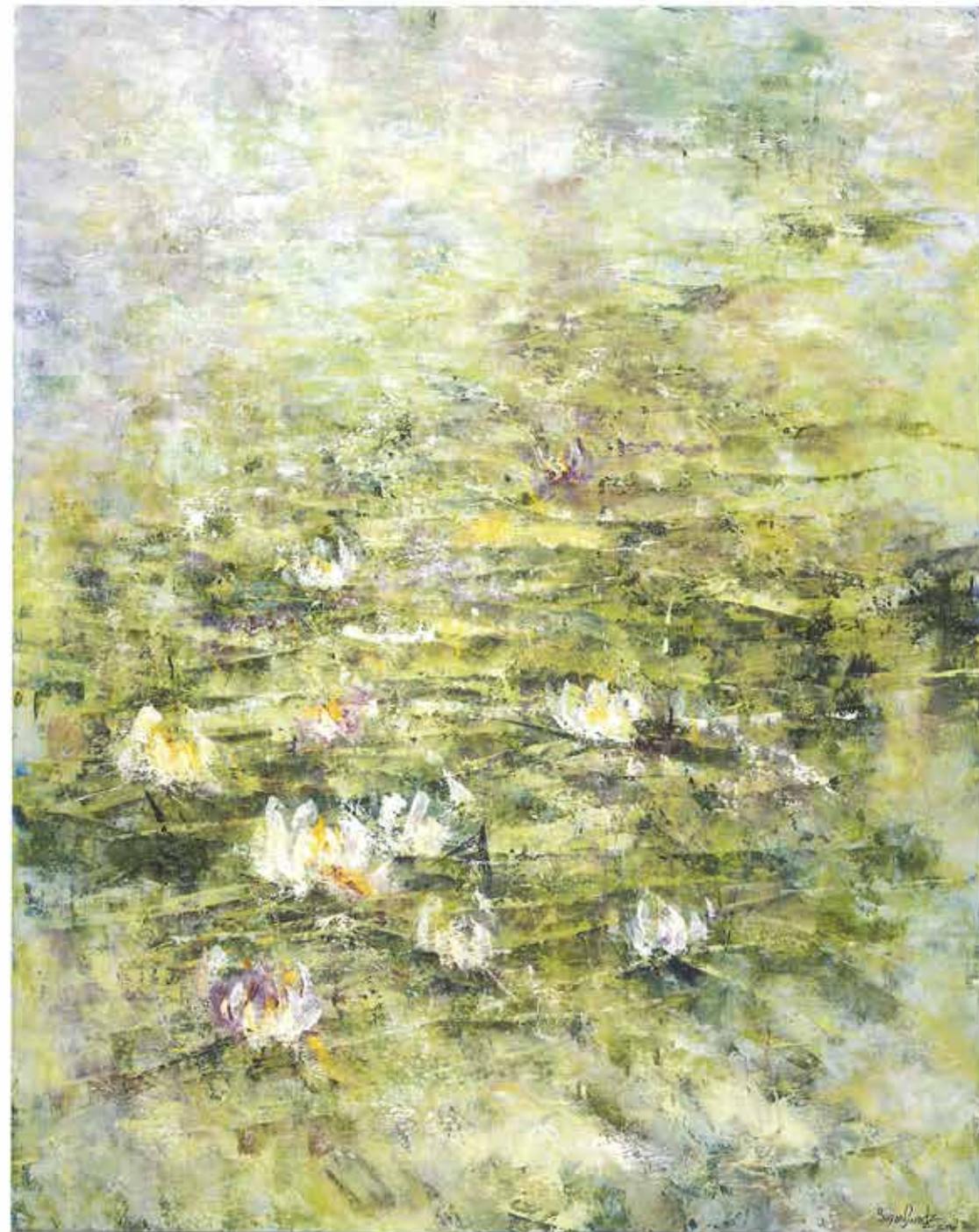


Lilies Unveiled

Acrylic on Linen

48" x 60"

2007

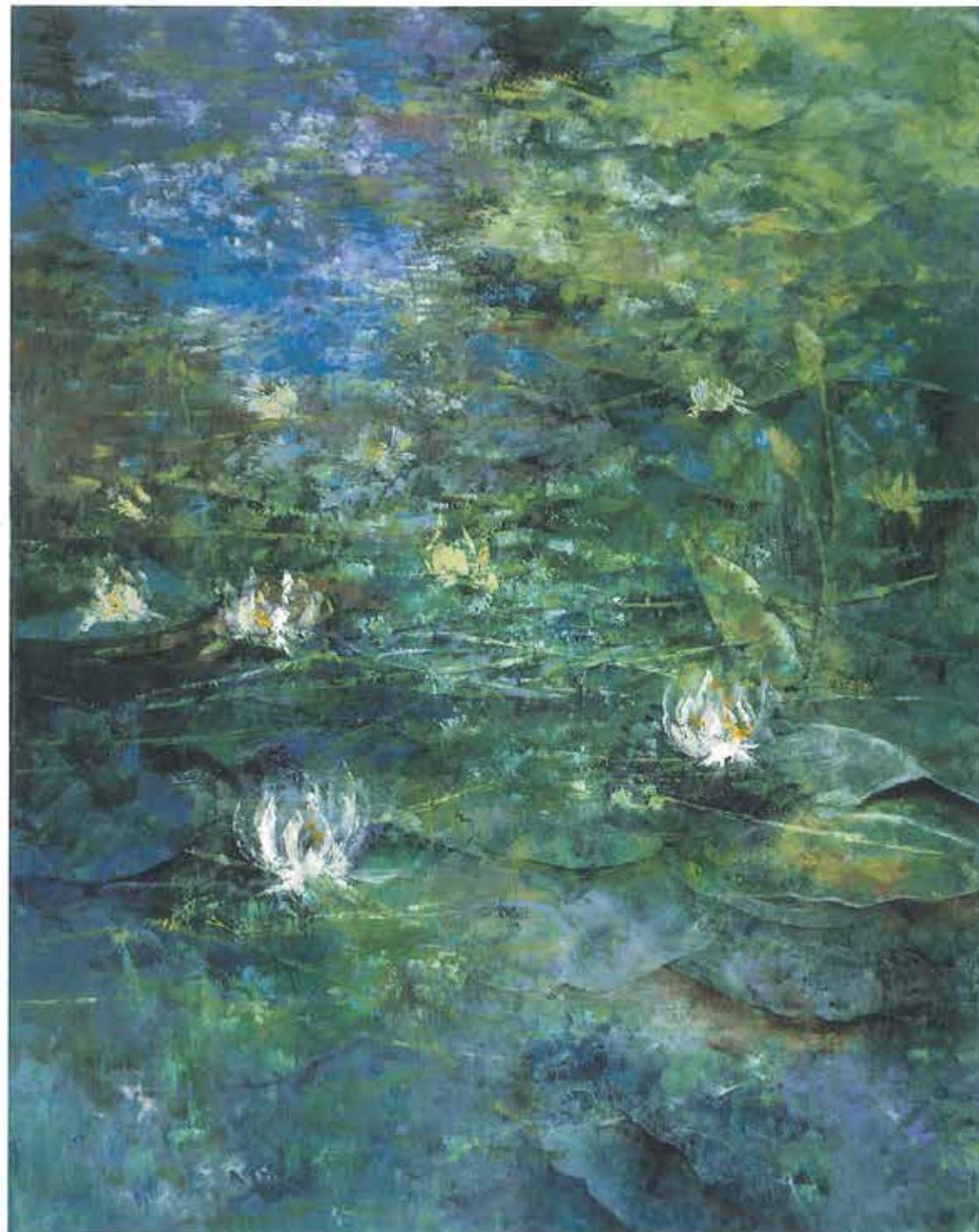


Iridescent Reflections

Acrylic on Linen

48" x 60"

2006

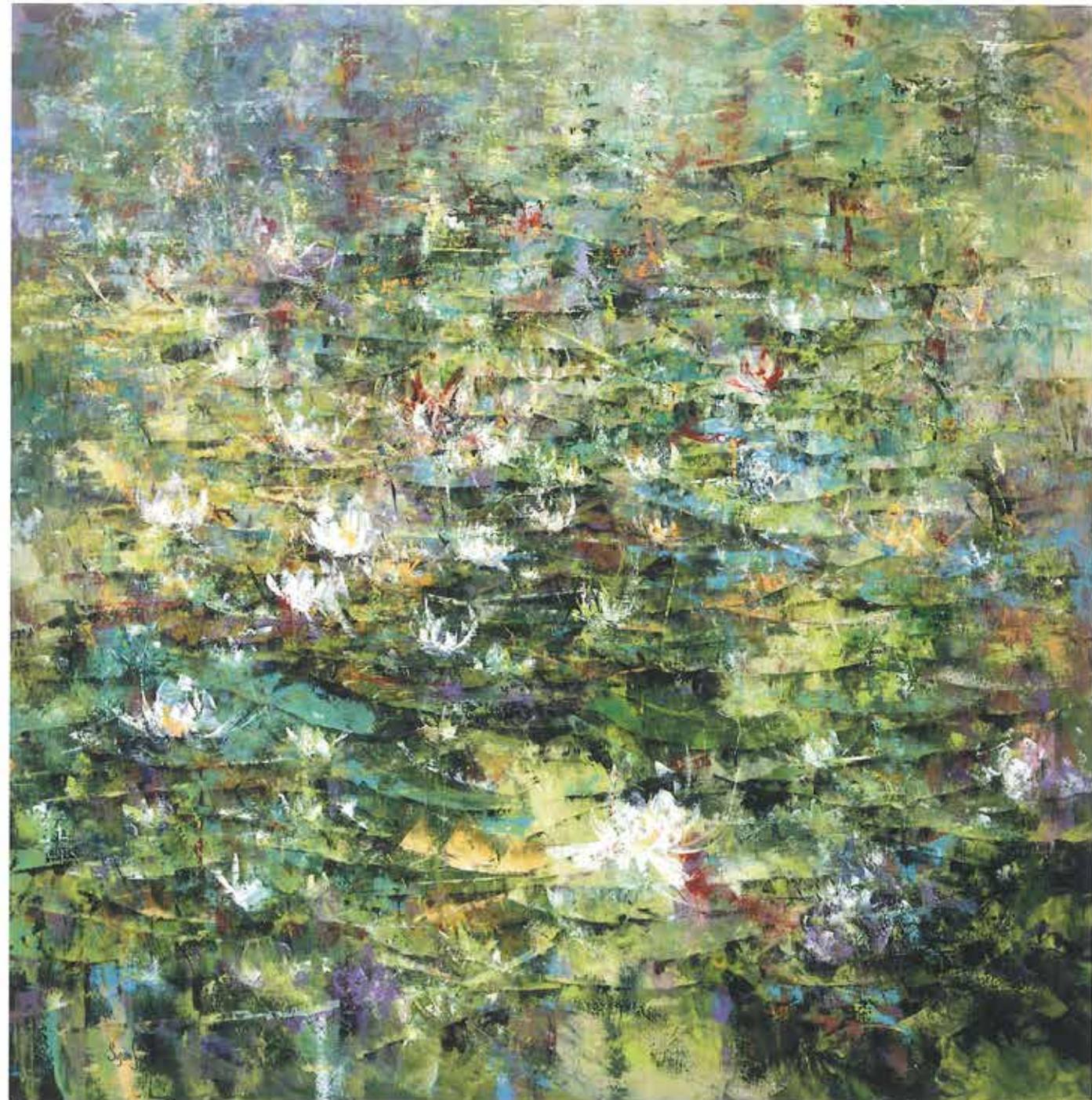


Serenade of Lilies

Acrylic on Linen

72" x 72"

2006



Autumn's Bounty (triptych)

Acrylic on Linen

48" x 72" each

2007



Amazing Grace

Acrylic on Linen

72" x 72"

2006



Indian Corn

Acrylic on Linen

48" x 72"

2009



Winter Solstice

Acrylic on Linen

40" x 30"

2009

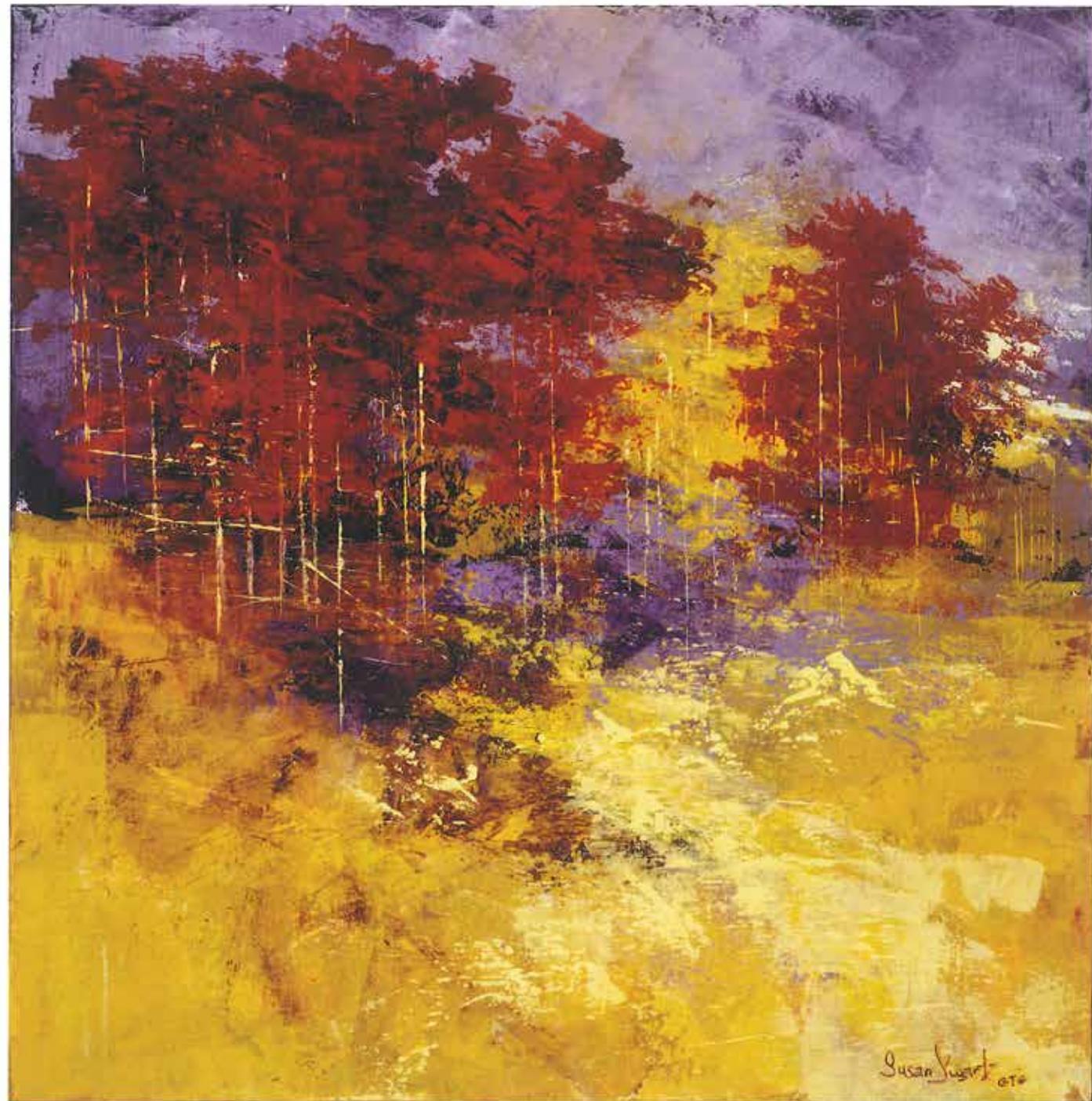


Autumn Song

Acrylic on Linen

20" x 20"

2008



Serenade

Acrylic on Linen

96" x 72"

2009

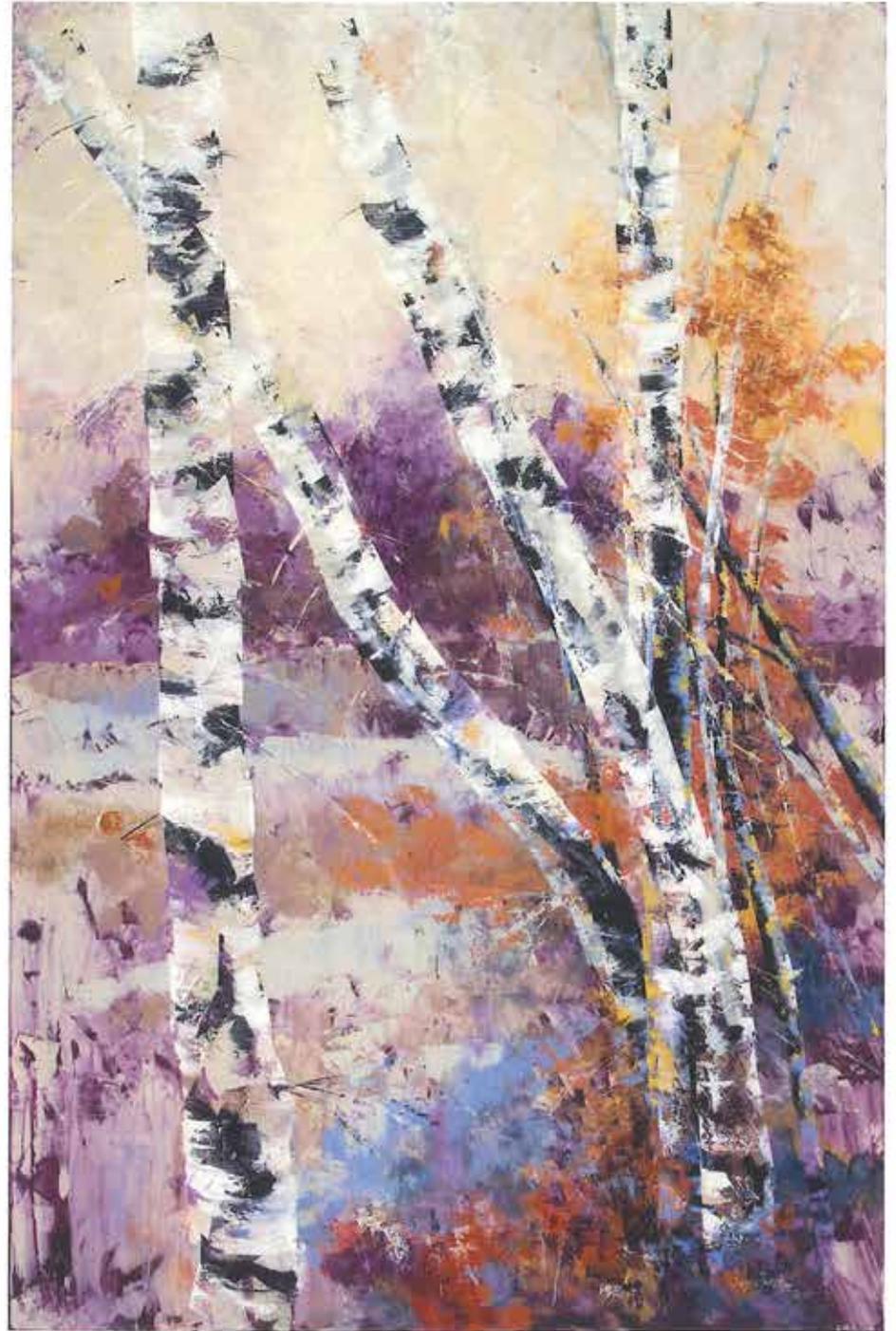


The Awakening

Acrylic on Linen

48" x 72"

2009

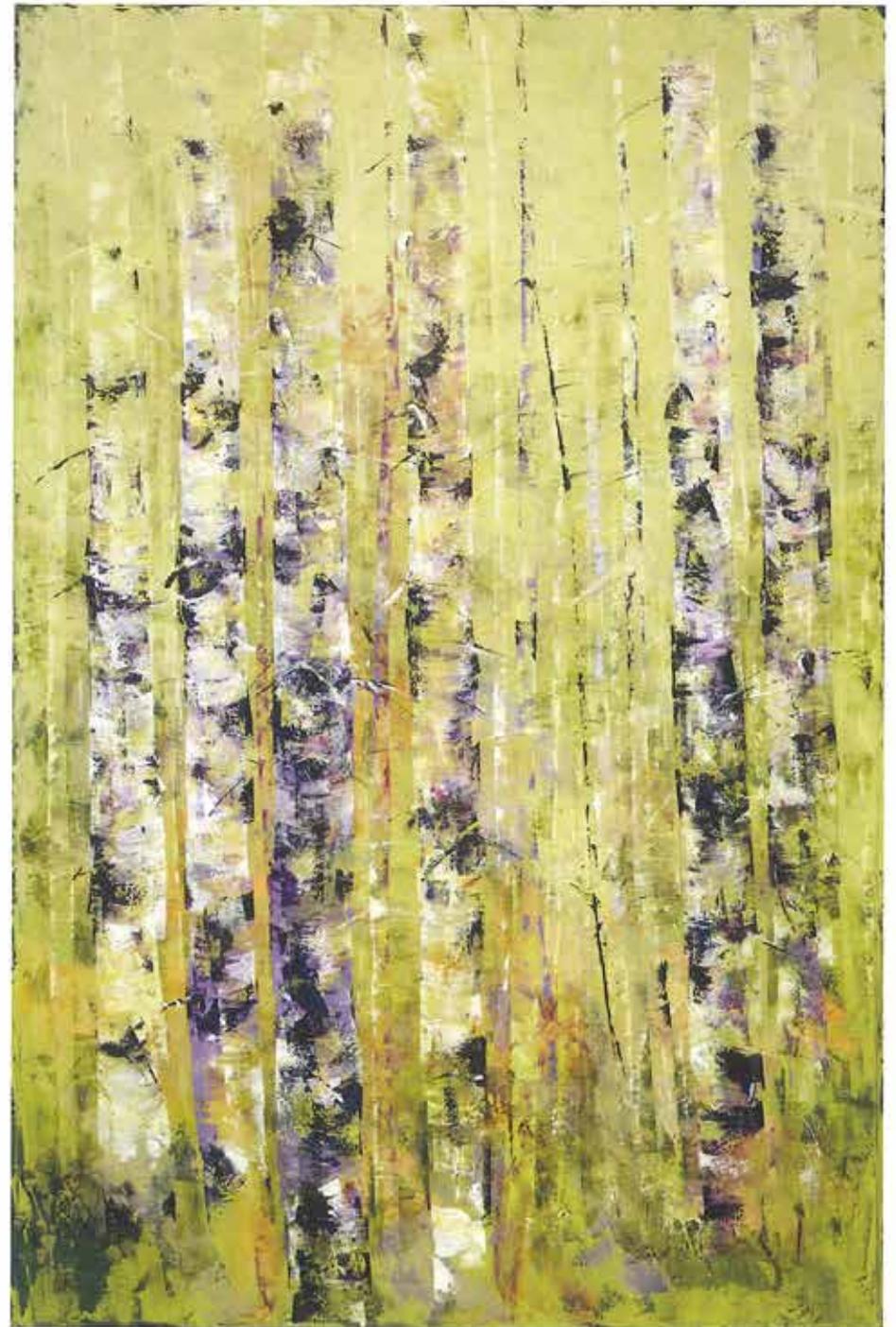


Forest Glow

Acrylic on Linen

48" x 72"

2007



Endless Glow

Acrylic on Linen

20" x 20"

2009



Tranquil Waters

Acrylic on Linen

20" x 20"

2009





Springville Museum of Art

Utah's first museum for the visual arts, this beautiful Spanish Moroccan Style building would be worth visiting even if there were no art. Dedicated as a "Sanctuary of Beauty and a Temple of Contemplation" by David O. McKay, the Museum houses over 2,000 works; 1,500 of which are Utah art. The impressive collection of 150 years of Utah fine art, twentieth century Soviet Socialist Realism and American art, and 15 exhibitions per year are displayed throughout 29 galleries.

The Museum recognizes the seed of potential within each individual and seeks to nurture growth through the creative process, positive cultural values, and a belief in the beauty of life. Through the vision and generosity of Museum donors, visitors, members and volunteers, the Museum is able to fulfill the mission of its founders, John Hafen and Cyrus Dallin in refining minds and building character through fine art. The Museum is a non-profit fine arts institution, and has provided cultural and educational opportunities to residents and visitors of Utah for nearly 100 years.

The history of the Museum began in 1903, with the donation of two works of art to Springville High School by Cyrus E. Dallin and John Hafen. Dallin became famous for his heroic depictions of the American Indian, and Hafen for his sensitively rendered impressionistic landscapes. In 1907 a number of Utah artists agreed to donate paintings to the school, including: James T. Harwood, John B. Fairbanks and Mahonri M. Young. The students became interested in art and collecting, and began purchasing paintings and sculpture through an "Art Queen" program. Each student paid a penny-per-vote. The girl with the most votes was named queen, and the funds were used to purchase artwork for the Museum's collection.

Cultural and educational offerings at the Museum have expanded over time in response to community desire and need. A Paris Salon style exhibition was put on in 1921 by the High School students, which has continued as the Annual Spring Salon to this day. In 1925 the Museum, then called the High School Art Gallery, became incorporated. Generous donations from the Smart, Steed and Lund-Wassmer Collections have strengthened the Museum's permanent collection. By 1935 the collection had grown so much that the students and townspeople raised \$100,000 during the Great Depression to construct the present facility. The Museum has since been expanded and modernized with the addition of the Clyde Wing in 1965, and the George S. and Delores Dore Eccles Wing in 2004. The latest addition doubled the size of the facility, adding 20,000 square feet to the Museum.

