

**Emerald Waters**  
2000, oil, 18 x 24.  
Private collection.



Get Pure Colors From  
a Palette Knife, With

# Carol Swinney

BY LINDA MORTON

CAROL SWINNEY, OF CASPER, WYOMING, proclaims that the most significant advantages to painting with a palette knife are the integrity of the strokes and the purity of the colors. "Palette-knife painting offers so much more in terms of texture and vividness of color, since I am constantly using pure color. I wipe the knife clean with a paper towel, so there is no residue, as there oftentimes is with a brush," she points out. "Also, with brushes you can always see marks that the fibers of the brush leave, but the palette knife produces a pure stroke that has wonderful edges and points. I can get an immense amount of depth—my paintings look three-dimensional because of the degree of impasto I can create."

The artist first tried the technique when she was a student at the University of Wyoming in the late 1960s, resulting in bafflement bordering on angst. She says bluntly, "I did part of a painting with it, was frustrated, and didn't like it at all. Nobody showed me how to use it properly. Like other new students, I didn't know how to handle the knife—I had a tendency to dab or scrape. It was like being an accomplished pianist who plays beautifully and can read music, but then someone hands you a guitar and you don't know what to do with it. That is how different a knife is from a brush."

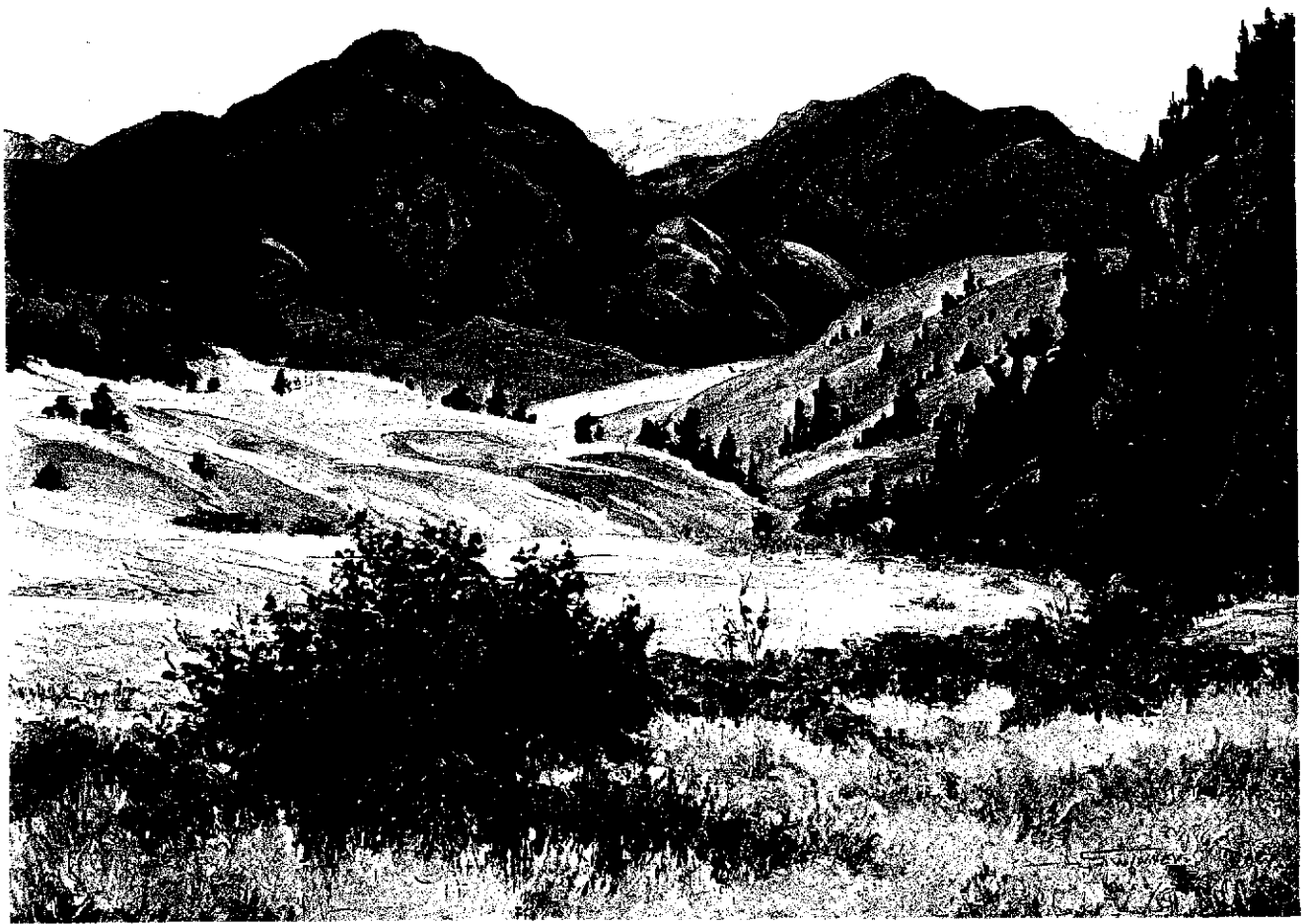
In the early 1980s, Swinney happened to visit a gallery displaying work by Bill Freeman, a well-known Western, wildlife,

and landscape artist. Although she had followed his career, she detected something different in these pieces. She asked the gallery staff and discovered that Freeman had done the paintings with a palette knife. Conscious that classroom instruction hadn't worked for her, Swinney opted to learn directly from a proven artist. She looked up Freeman's phone number and called to inquire if she could study with him. Freeman agreed and invited her to paint with him on location at his homes in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, and Scottsdale, Arizona.

"When I first met Bill, he sat me down, gave me one of his paintings, and told me to study it and copy it the best I could," Swinney recalls. "He wanted me to match his colors, to look at his textures, and to try and reproduce some of those strokes with a knife. That's exactly what I did, and I still have that painting today."

"I started taking notes and spending even more time with him," the artist continues. "I'd get so frustrated, and he'd come over with his knife and scrape out big areas and show me how to do it better. Maybe I had been using too much tip or overworking the area, but then I would see what could be achieved with scraping and starting over on an area where just a little bit of color remained. Predominantly I was learning how to apply paint with the knife, but I was also learning composition, how to resolve color and value problems—

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#### Step 4

She added the final highlights to the large red bush, then refined other areas by adding color or changing shapes as needed.

THE COMPLETED PAINTING:

#### Fall Landscape

2002, oil, 16 x 20.  
Private collection.

everything that makes a successful landscape painting.”

Throughout the next 10 years, Swinney continued to paint with a palette knife, and now she uses it exclusively. She has two to three different sizes and styles of knives, but her favorites are CNR 6810-28 and Atrium 9, both of which are made in Italy. The CNR 6810-28 is about two and a half inches long, and she uses it primarily for blending and establishing large areas, such as the sky and water. Because of its longer blade, the knife offers more flexibility, so Swinney can get softer edges. For detail areas, particularly foreground elements such as rocks and foliage, she uses the Atrium 9. Shorter—about one and a half inches long—with a narrower tip, it offers more maneuverability.

For Swinney, the key to mastering the knife was learning how to handle it properly, to build up an arsenal of strokes and manipulations that she could rely on to pro-

duce the desired effect. She knows, for example, that certain elements require a particular approach. “I use an infinite number of strokes,” the artist claims. “From a touch so light and delicate that I often drop my knife, to the point I’m pressing so hard on the canvas that I sometimes knock it over. For the sky, for instance, I use my bigger knife, scrub the paint in hard on the canvas, not paying much attention to detail. I blend the colors with a circular movement; then I take the edge and scrape off most of the color. What that does is eliminate the texture, so it looks like a real sky.” If there are clouds, she uses some of the same circular motions, but won’t scrape away all the paint.

“For foreground,” Swinney goes on to say, “I do a lot of scumbling with raw colors, then add mixed colors so those underneath poke through. For the details, such as a stem or a leaf, I pull just the tip of the knife through the paint so



**ABOVE**  
**Meandering Creek**  
 2002, oil, 14 x 18.  
 Collection Lee  
 Brotherton.

**OPPOSITE PAGE**  
**String Lake—  
 Mount Moran**  
 2002, oil, 16 x 12.  
 Private collection.

it makes a point, extending that out into a fine line that disappears into foliage. It's almost like I've sculpted the painting with my palette knife—I've used the knife to establish the tactile feel of the object on canvas."

Creating textures that mimic her subjects is a defining feature of the artist's technique and, ultimately, the appearance of her completed works.

"A lot of strokes make sense because I've done them in such a way that they resemble the texture I'm trying to create, such as a bush, a log, or a rock," she states. "If viewers actually touched the painting, it would feel like a rock." In fact, several years ago at the Western Spirit Art Show & Sale in Cheyenne, Wyoming, a visitor who was blind asked Swinney if he could touch one of her paintings. She agreed, and as he ran his hand from the sky, along the mountains, and into trees, "he could tell what everything was," Swinney recounts. "That was very rewarding for me. My paintings are meant to be shared with the viewers and reflect my love of wildlife and the beauty of the landscape around me. I believe portraying nature through art is an important way of documenting a vanishing resource for future generations."

Swinney is primarily a plein air painter, and she teaches workshops on-site, encouraging her students to push through the frustration that initially stymied her. She says, "A lot of artists haven't worked with the knife long enough, and they give up too soon. It took a long time for Bill's lessons to sink in for me, but this last decade that I've been painting full time, I appreciate and understand what he was teaching me back then. There's probably a 10-year period in which I did not realize how much I was learning. It's very difficult for artists to step out of a comfortable and accepted style, but it's necessary sometimes if they are going to grow and continue to evolve."

Swinney's growth testifies to her attention to her craft. Among numerous other awards and honors, her work has been selected for the Top 100 and Top 200 in the Arts for the Parks competitions more than a dozen times. She is an artist member of the California Art Club, a founding member of Rocky Mountain Plein Air Painters, a member of Laguna Plein Air Painters Association and Tucson Plein Air Painters' Society, and a signature member of Oil Painters of America. Swinney is represented by Pitzer's of Carmel, in California; Paint Horse Gallery in Breckenridge and Loch Vale Fine Art in Estes Park, both in Colorado; Nichols Taos Fine Art Gallery in New Mexico; and Galleries West in Jackson Hole.