

# Southwest Art



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Kevin Courter and  
8 more artists paint the  
landscape

# The Big Picture

Susiehyer takes inspiration

from the natural world she loves, then goes beyond the visible to render it with an abstract sensibility

BY REED GLENN

PERCHED AT nearly 8,000 feet in Evergreen, Colorado, with a view of 14,000-foot Mount Evans, Susiehyer (she spells her name as a single word) lives and works close to one of the things she loves most—the great outdoors. “There are resident deer and elk,” she says. “I’ve had a deer walk into my studio and a fox that almost came in once. There was a moose at our mailbox. Bears and mountain lions are regular visitors.”

As an intrepid plein-air painter, though, the challenges of the great outdoors rarely deter her. She has nearly frozen her fingers and toes in the winter, and she has been baked by the sun and eaten by bugs in the summer. She has painted standing on a piece of cardboard in knee-deep

snow, using a headlamp at night, and on sizzling 90-degree Denver sidewalks.

“Plein-air painting fits really well with the Colorado lifestyle, which is why we moved here in the first place,” she says. “Given my bent to be outdoors, landscape painting is a natural thing. It gives me a chance to be outside and be in nature—I used to be a big backpacker. When you’re painting in the middle of the woods, there’s nobody looking over your shoulder saying, ‘My aunt paints.’ You don’t get hassled. You can kind of get into a zone, a flow. What could be better—the birds are singing, there’s a creek babbling, and it’s just this whole wonderful thing!”

“There’s a different focus when you’re outdoors,” she continues. “I feel like I can try a lot of new things. I’m not so object-oriented as when I paint in the studio. I might have an idea in mind, but I’m also focused on what’s in front of me. I don’t give myself as much license to deviate from the scene I’m painting.”

Hyer’s paintings capture her exuberance at being out in nature with clear, sunny colors as seen in paintings like SEPTEMBER SUNFLOWERS and MOUNTAIN VIEW GERANIUMS. Or they may conjure more meditative moods in a more subdued palette; the moonlit landscape in FULL MOON EARLY SPRING and the misty, dreamlike TAOS WINTERSCAPE are good examples.

Although her main focus is the landscape, Hyer says she’ll paint anything—



◀ Taos Winterscape, oil, 12 x 24.



To Paradise, oil, 11 x 14.

her repertoire includes still lifes and cityscapes as well. Recent painting trips have taken her to Tahiti, Hawaii, Corsica, France, Taos, Rocky Mountain National Park, Portugal, California, and the New Jersey coast.

**ORIGINALLY FROM** New Jersey, Hyer has lived in Pennsylvania, Houston, Pensacola, and New Orleans, moving in 1984 to Evergreen (during a snowstorm, no less). After relocating to Colorado, she took a 15-year hiatus from creating art to raise her two children, who are now in their twenties. Growing up in a traditional family and in a neighborhood where all of the women were homemakers, Hyer remembers sketching some ceramic flamingos at age four. She says



### representation

**Framed Image**, Denver, CO;  
**Oh-Be-Joyful Gallery**, Crested Butte, CO;  
**Mary Williams Fine Arts**, Boulder, CO;  
[www.susiehyerstudio.com](http://www.susiehyerstudio.com).



▲ September Sunflowers, oil, 19 x 17.

◀ Full Moon Early Spring, oil, 24 x 18.

her mom had an artistic bent, too, but never really acknowledged it. “I had an aunt who painted, but she was really horrendous!” Hyer laughs. “In elementary school I had art class once a week, and it was the only thing to live for aside from music and phys ed.”

Her high school offered a variety of art classes and several different teachers, which was somewhat unusual in the late 1960s and early '70s. One teacher collected Chinese artifacts and art, including *bi* discs. “He would take aside a couple of

students who were interested and show us these absolute treasures made of jade and other precious stones. It was really inspiring,” Hyer remembers. A *bi* is a flat disc with a circular hole in the center. The earliest ones date back to 3400 BC and were undecorated. Later ones became increasingly ornate, with motifs representing sky deities, or powers and qualities the wearer wanted to embody. *Bi* were owned mainly by the wealthy and elite.

At Moravian College in Pennsylvania, where she received her bachelor's degree in studio art, Hyer became known as Susiehyer because there were three Susies in her classes. The moniker stuck, and to this day she signs all her paintings that way. “My kids even call me Susiehyer,” she says. Minorng in art history, she found inspiration in all of the classical artists. “Rembrandt stands out in my mind, and Corot, for those dark tunnel landscapes. Almost every movement held some sort of fascination for me, although I have to admit I didn't get the Fauves. We really focused on the contemporary artists. Teachers were encouraging us to kind of experiment and do our own thing—just throw a lot of paint around and see what happens.”

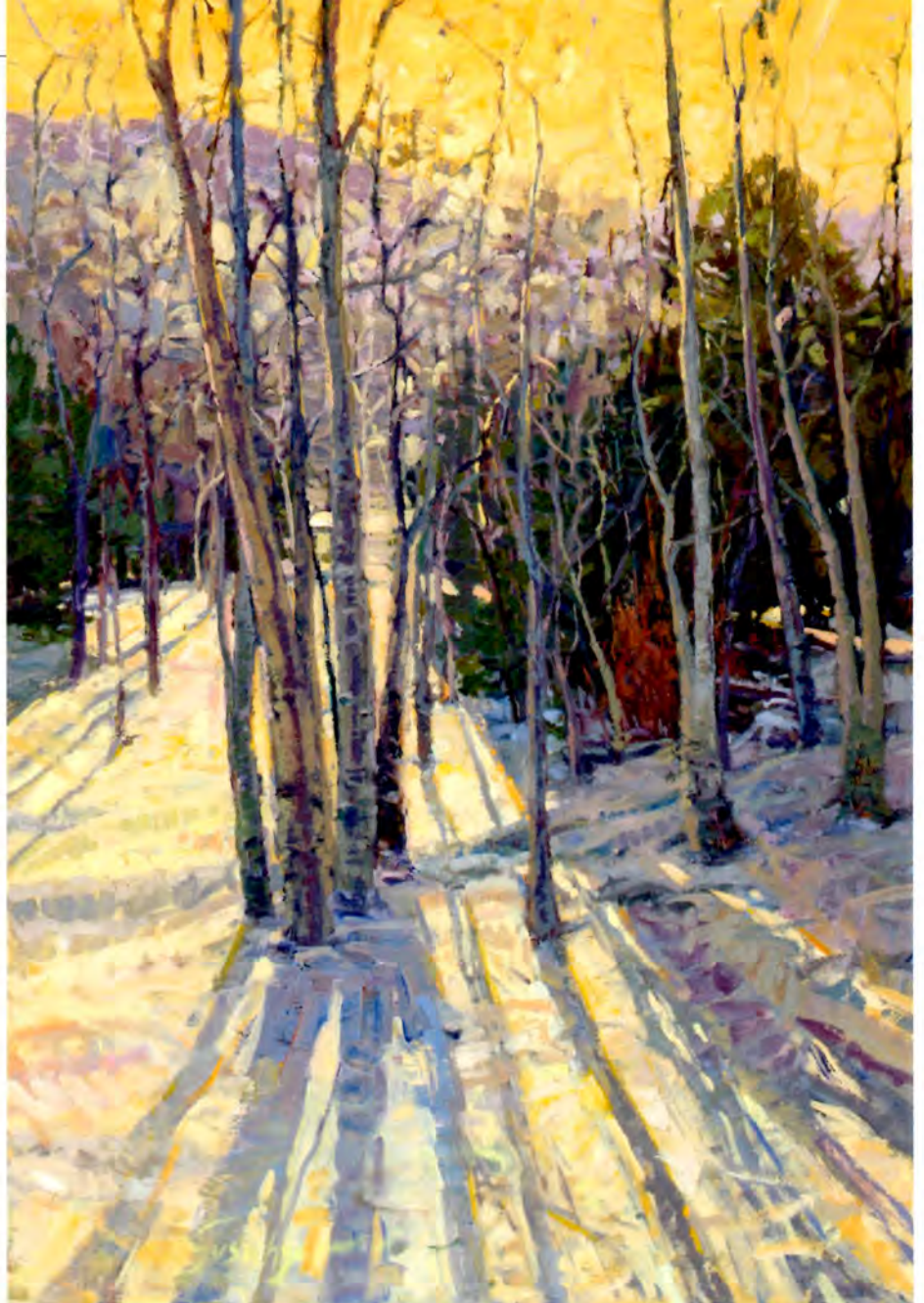
Her mentor at Moravian was Daniel W. Tereshko, who was himself a student of American abstract expressionist painter Richard Diebenkorn [1922-1993]. “Most

of my college art career was really influenced by him. He was doing some crazy stuff and was showing in New York at some of the classy galleries—a lot of abstract work with some representational images. Assemblage was really big—he was doing paintings with [actual] baby shoes in them. It was the era of using found objects in art and a lot of mixed media.” After graduating from Moravian, Hyer studied at the Baum School of Art in Allentown, PA, the University of West Florida, and the Art Students League of Denver with such notables as Kim English, Mark Daily, Kevin Weckbach, Ron Hicks, and Quang Ho. The yearlong Master Painting Class with Kevin Weckbach propelled her into high gear.

Although they are representational, Hyer’s paintings originate and evolve with a big abstract design underneath the more obvious subject matter. “Everything to me is an abstract painting,” she says. “There’s an idea that transcends the physical stuff that’s there. Instead of looking at trees and mountains and skies, what I’m really looking at is shapes, colors, and values, and designing with those, rather than with the subjects themselves. By doing that you end up with a painting that someone else can appreciate. They may not be thinking ‘shape, color, value,’ but that’s what they’re responding to.”

Hyer’s landscapes shimmer and glow with blocks and patches of color. From a distance her paintings portray clearly defined scenes, but up close they dissolve into abstraction. A LATE AFTERNOON IN WINTER, for example, is a collage of color, reveling in the long, lilac-blue shadows of the aspen trees complemented by a tangerine sky and reflected in light-dappled snow. She uses short, obvious, unaltered brush strokes and creamy smears of color.

“Painting is like a metaphor for life,” Hyer says. “It’s a different way of seeing where you’re seeing beyond the object. You’re sort of transcending the physical reality of what’s there. You’re looking at it in a different kind of way. Quang Ho calls it ‘seeing at the second level’ and says that painting is a byproduct of the search for what’s true. It’s very profound to me. And that’s why I think of painting as being such a profound endeavor, a profound thing to participate in.



**A Late Afternoon in Winter,**  
oil, 36 x 24.

“I’m seeing this bigger picture instead of just an object, but perceiving it as part of a grand design, where everything is a smaller part of the bigger picture,” Hyer concludes. “I’ll tell you what—it totally makes life worth living. It really excites me to see things that way.” ❖

Reed Glenn is a Colorado-based freelance writer and photographer who has contributed to major magazines and newspapers.

See more of Susiehyer’s paintings at  
[www.southwestart.com](http://www.southwestart.com).