

Soaring Perspectives

Large-scale landscapes by **Arturo Chávez** depict the wonders of the West

BY NORMAN KOLPAS

Rock of Ages, oil, 80 x 160.

THE FIRST SIGHT of landscapes by Arturo Chávez has often been known to stop viewers in their tracks. First of all, the scale often verges on the monumental, with some canvases 14 feet or wider and smaller pieces still measuring 4 feet across. Then, there's the richness of realistic detail: subtle striations and color gradations of river-carved canyons; occasional animals, so lifelike; and hard-scrabble vegetation, with every parched shrub, tree, and blade of grass seemingly captured. These qualities alone, filtered through a stylistic approach Chávez describes as "painterly realism," are enough to draw careful consideration and deep admiration. But one further quality of some recent works may actually leave art lovers not just dumbstruck but also momentarily reeling with a sense of vertigo: the perspective.

In paintings like *SPIDERWOMAN'S DREAM* [see page 83], a view of the towering sand-

stone spire called Spider Rock in Arizona's Canyon de Chelly National Monument, the point of view is high above the subject and steeply angled downward. People sometimes quietly gasp, or make involuntary hand movements as if struggling to regain a sense of balance, while beholding the image. No wonder the 64-year-old artist chose to name another, similarly scaled view of the same subject *AS THE CROW FLIES*.

Such bird's-eye views express not just Chávez's soaring imagination and lofty talent but also a truly elevated ingenuity. He devised an innovative way to achieve these unusual yet wholly realistic images through a process combining knowledge, skills, and talents that trace back to his childhood.

"**AS A KID**, I knew I could fly," Chávez states matter-of-factly, but with a touch of good humor. That's a plausible statement

from a man who grew up as the oldest of five children in a Los Alamos, NM, home with what could accurately be described as Renaissance parents. His stay-at-home mother had been a teacher and a translator during World War II and was also a pianist. Chávez's father worked for 35 years as a scientist at Los Alamos National Laboratory, birthplace of America's nuclear program, and was also a dedicated horticulturalist, gunsmith, and amateur astronomer. Both his mom and dad got the children music lessons and listened with them to composers like Beethoven, Bach, and Mahler. An uncle was a gifted amateur artist, Chávez adds, "and seeing him painting and drawing awakened that interest in me."

In fact, he says, "I realized in kindergarten that I was an artist." He excelled in art throughout school and was singled out for special anatomical drawing studies at Cumbres Junior High. "That's when

I started winning prizes for my art." He went on to work in sculpture and oil painting at Los Alamos High.

But another passion divided his attention: classical guitar. "One day when I was 16, my mother found me playing my cello like it was a guitar. So my parents bought me my first nylon-string guitar, and I started taking private lessons with Professor Hector Garcia," a Cuban-born virtuoso and University of New Mexico faculty member. Chávez wound up studying in the university's guitar program.

In his twenties, though, he entered a family-owned business that manufactured pressure-sensitive labels. He also fulfilled his dream of flying, earning his pilot's license, receiving special training in rugged-mountain flying, and volunteering for search-and-rescue missions in the civil air patrol.

Art, however, "was always lurking in the back of my mind and in my heart,"



As the Crow Flies, oil, 48 x 48.

and he took a sketchbook with him wherever he traveled for work. Meanwhile, classical guitar dreams gradually waned as he came to realize that, "after five or six hours a day of practicing guitar, I had nothing to show for it. With visual art, I'd have a painting."

Finally, at the age of 30, Chávez decided on an art career. He gradually transitioned out of the family business, while painting watercolors that he began selling in street shows and art fairs.

More importantly, the largely self-taught artist found a mentor: Wilson Hurley, acclaimed for his huge New Mexico landscapes. "When I first saw some of his works in my late teens, they brought tears to my eyes," Chávez remembers. In 1980, he worked up the courage to bring his portfolio to Hurley, who invited him to come paint in his studio north of Albuquerque with a group of five other promising artists.

Instantly, Chávez felt a connection eerily reminiscent of his enriched childhood environment. "Wilson's philosophy was that the more knowledge you have, the better you can paint," Chávez says. As much as painting, Hurley talked with his young artists about subjects like geology and meteorology. "Nobody learned to

make a better anything by being dumb," Hurley would tell them.

Gradually, Chávez transitioned from watercolors as large as 40 by 60 inches to paintings with even grander dimensions, executed in oils that enabled him to



Don J. Usner

representation

Gerald Peters Gallery, Santa Fe, NM; **Trailside Galleries**, Jackson Hole, WY, and Scottsdale, AZ.

upcoming shows

The West Select, Phoenix Art Museum, Phoenix, AZ, November 8-December 30.

Small Works, Great Wonders, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, OK, November 15-December 1.



Where the Buffalo Roam, oil, 50 x 120.

create an even more profound sense of realistic depth. “I’ve always been interested in large-scale works, and I’m infatuated with depicting, on a two-dimensional plane, a three-dimensional feeling,” he explains. “I want to feel it in my stomach, like I can actually walk into a painting. I want people to be moved emotionally, to lose consciousness of their own bodies and feel transported to an altered state of awareness.”

But how, more specifically, do you conjure a feeling that the viewer is soaring like a bird above the landscape? Almost two years ago, Chávez devised a solution.

He couldn’t pilot a plane himself over iconic southwestern landmarks, since the vertiginous perspectives he envisioned would require a perilously low flight path. But he’d met and made friends with Don Anderson, a pioneer of radio-controlled aircraft and 2009 inductee into the Model Aviation Hall of Fame.

Not that the National Park Service, which manages Canyon de Chelly, would let them fly even a model aircraft over that pristine landscape. So Chávez sidestepped the NPS, going straight to the Window Rock, AZ, headquarters of the Navajo Nation Council, which holds ultimate authority over those sacred native lands.

On December 27, 2011, accompanied by an official Navajo guide, Chávez and Anderson headed for a mesa top overlooking Canyon de Chelly. With them, they carried a battery-powered, radio-controlled plane with an almost-7-foot wingspan,



Cuyamungue, oil, 48 x 80.

mounted with a high-definition video camera. The plane was also outfitted with a retractable propeller, a safety feature for one more requirement of the project: Limited landing space meant that, as each 15-minute flight came to an end, Chávez would actually have to catch the 10-pound plane—which would be coming in at about 20 miles per hour—in his heavily gloved hands. “We had some pretty squirrely times,” says the artist of the 10 or so flights they managed over three days.

Back in the studio space of his

2,000-square-foot “New York-style loft” in Santa Fe, Chávez selected about a thousand still reference images from the two hours of flight video. Then, he embarked on the same creative process he follows for all of his paintings.

He modifies and crops his reference photos using Photoshop, and then develops a working drawing at a much smaller scale than the final painting will be. Along the way, he adjusts the focal point and composition to take into account the ideal viewing distance for the painting’s ultimate size. “The optimum [viewing

distance] is twice the dimension of the painting’s longest side,” he explains. “So, for example, you would need a 200-inch viewing distance for a painting 100 inches wide.” Granted, most collectors don’t live in residences that allow for such measurements. “In the average home, you can’t get far enough away from one of my paintings to do it justice,” Chávez admits. “But I just do my paintings and let the chips fall where they may. In general, there are still a lot of people with huge homes that need big paintings for the walls.”

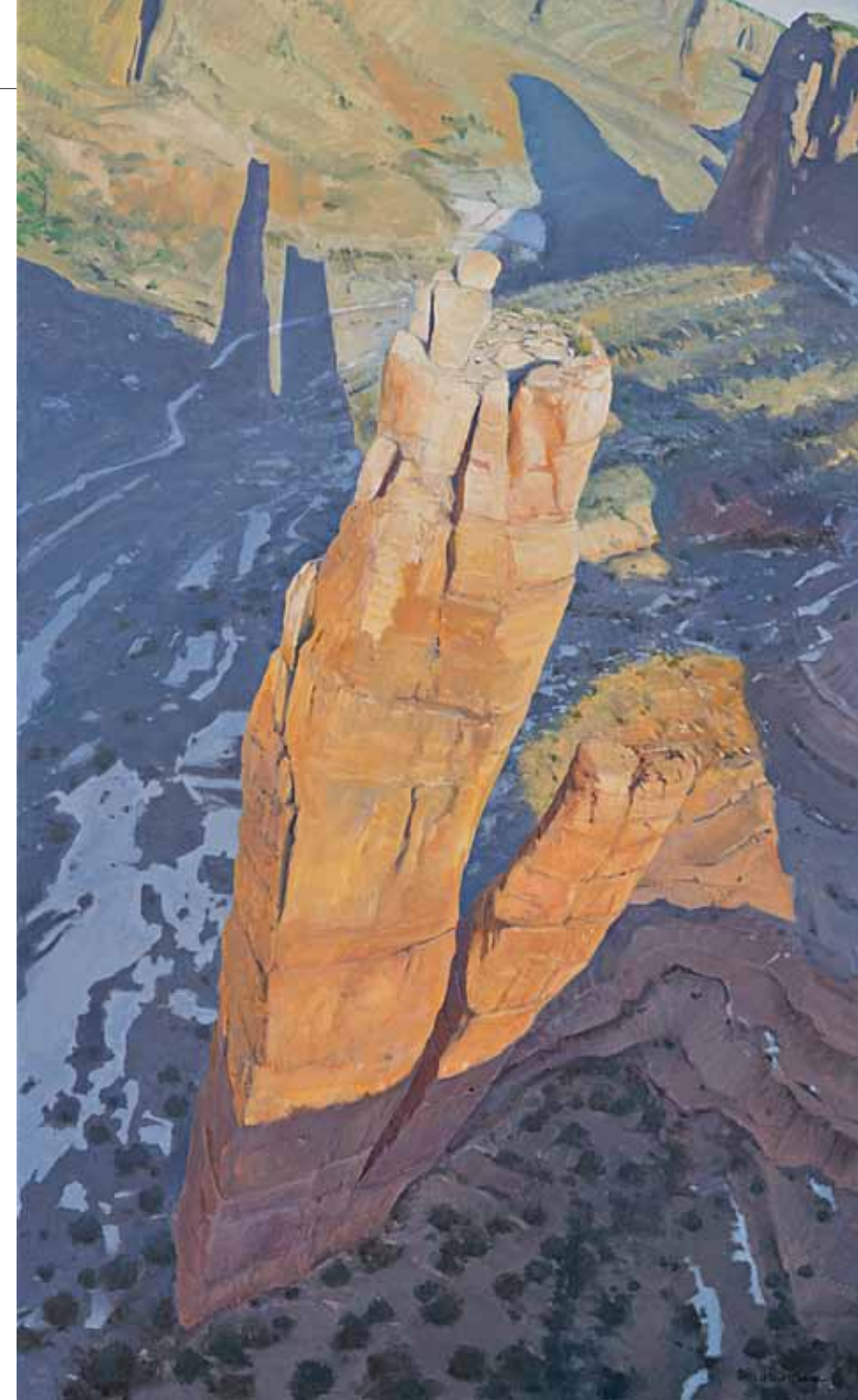
His scale drawings completed, Chávez then preps the painting surface, itself a logistical challenge for such large works. For stability, he glues his canvas to ½- or ¾-inch-thick panels of honeycombed aluminum, a material used in airplane construction. Then, he transfers the working drawing using a grid system of black thread stretched across the canvas. The actual painting process itself is even more painstaking. “I work from the top down,” he says, “and can do 80 to 100 square inches per day.” That calculates out to about 14 days of painting for SPIDERWOMAN’S DREAM—and as long as four to five months for his 13-foot-long Grand Canyon scene called ROCK OF AGES.

Prices for Chávez’s paintings reflect such extensive efforts. A smaller 4-by-8-foot piece will fetch \$81,000, while a mammoth Grand Canyon canvas approaches a quarter of a million dollars. “But I can have \$42,000 tied up in a painting before it sells,” Chávez adds.

For private collectors and institutions with the money or the space, it’s a sound investment. Chávez has works in the permanent collections of such prestigious museums as the Eiteljorg in Indianapolis, the Millicent Rogers in Taos, and the Phoenix Art Museum; government and educational settings including the Santa Fe Capitol Collection and New Mexico State University; and corporate collections including Peabody Energy in St. Louis, Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway in Fort Worth, and Fuji Electric in Tokyo.

That’s an impressive lineup, befitting Chávez’s goal to be remembered as “the number-one landscape painter in America.” Still, he admits with a laugh, “It takes about a hundred years for art history to shake itself out.”

In the shorter term, he simply aspires



Spiderwoman's Dream, oil, 48 x 29.

to go on making paintings that transport viewers. And that includes a plan to paint La Ventana, a 35-million-year-old natural sandstone arch on the Acoma Pueblo west of Albuquerque. “I want to see it from a high angle, looking down through the window in the top of that arch,” he says. Which can only mean that Chávez, and his imagination, will soon be flying once again. ❖

Norman Kolpas is a Los Angeles-based freelancer who writes for *Mountain Living* and *Colorado Homes & Lifestyles* as well as *Southwest Art*.

See more of Chávez’s paintings at www.southwestart.com/featured/chavez-a-nov2013.