

*As the Crow Flies*, oil on canvas, 48 x 48". Collection of the artist.

# AS THE CROW FLIES

Arturo Chávez looks to the skies to create his latest paintings

By John O'Hern

Arturo Chávez has always wanted to fly. As a little boy, he could...until his mother told him he hadn't...and then he couldn't...but he still flies in his dreams.

Parachutes, hang gliders, sailplanes, ultralight craft and, in his early 20s, a pilot's license for small planes got him off the ground. For a number of years he was a mission pilot for the Civil Air Patrol. In 1983, however, he planted his feet firmly on the ground in front of an easel and, ever since, has wanted to capture the sensation of flight in his paintings.

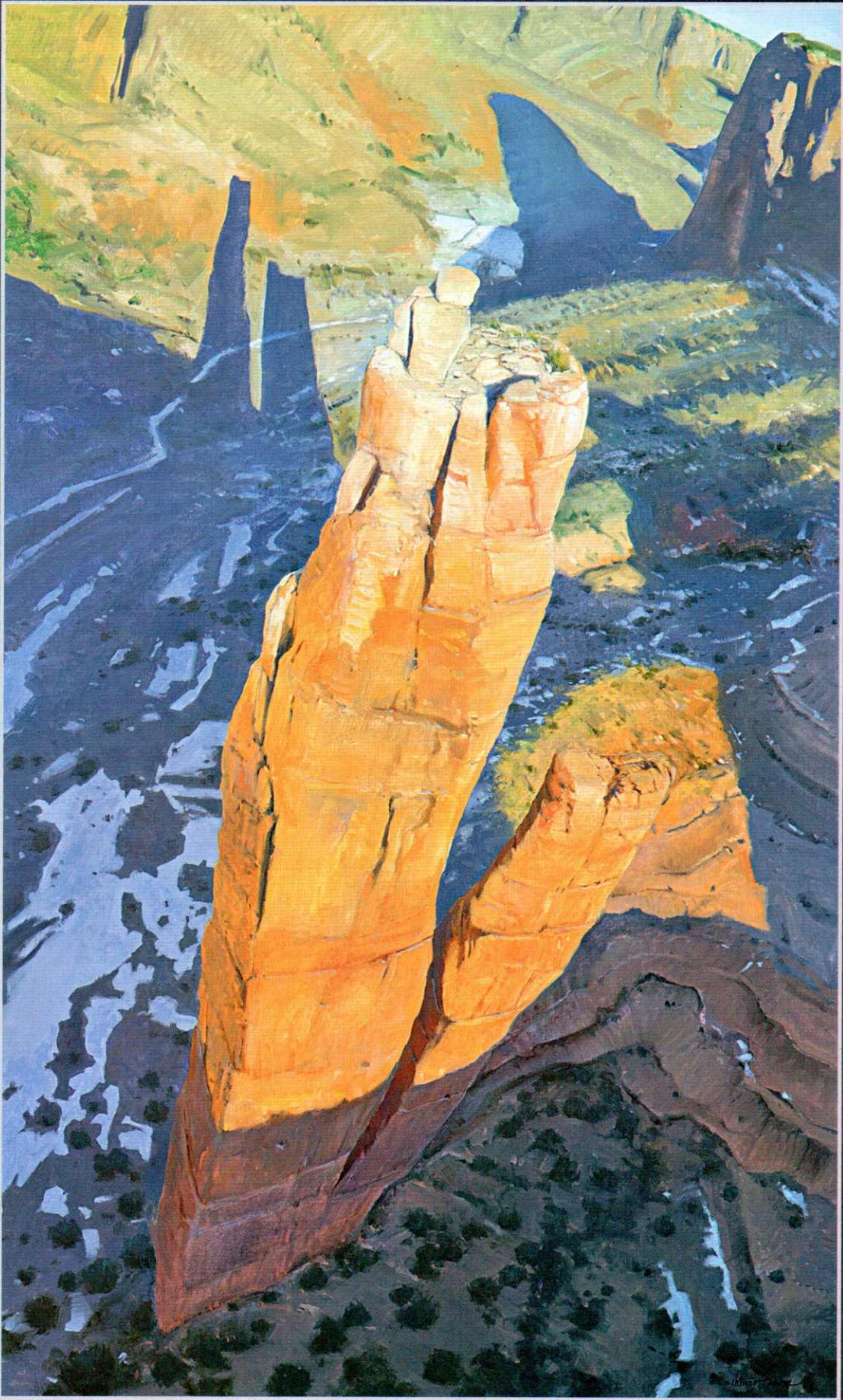
Born in Embudo, in the Rio Grande Gorge south of Taos, New Mexico, Chávez has had

an attraction to the monumental beauty of the region since his youth. Today, he is "dedicated to preserving the landscape, by painting it." He is a 13<sup>th</sup> generation New Mexican.

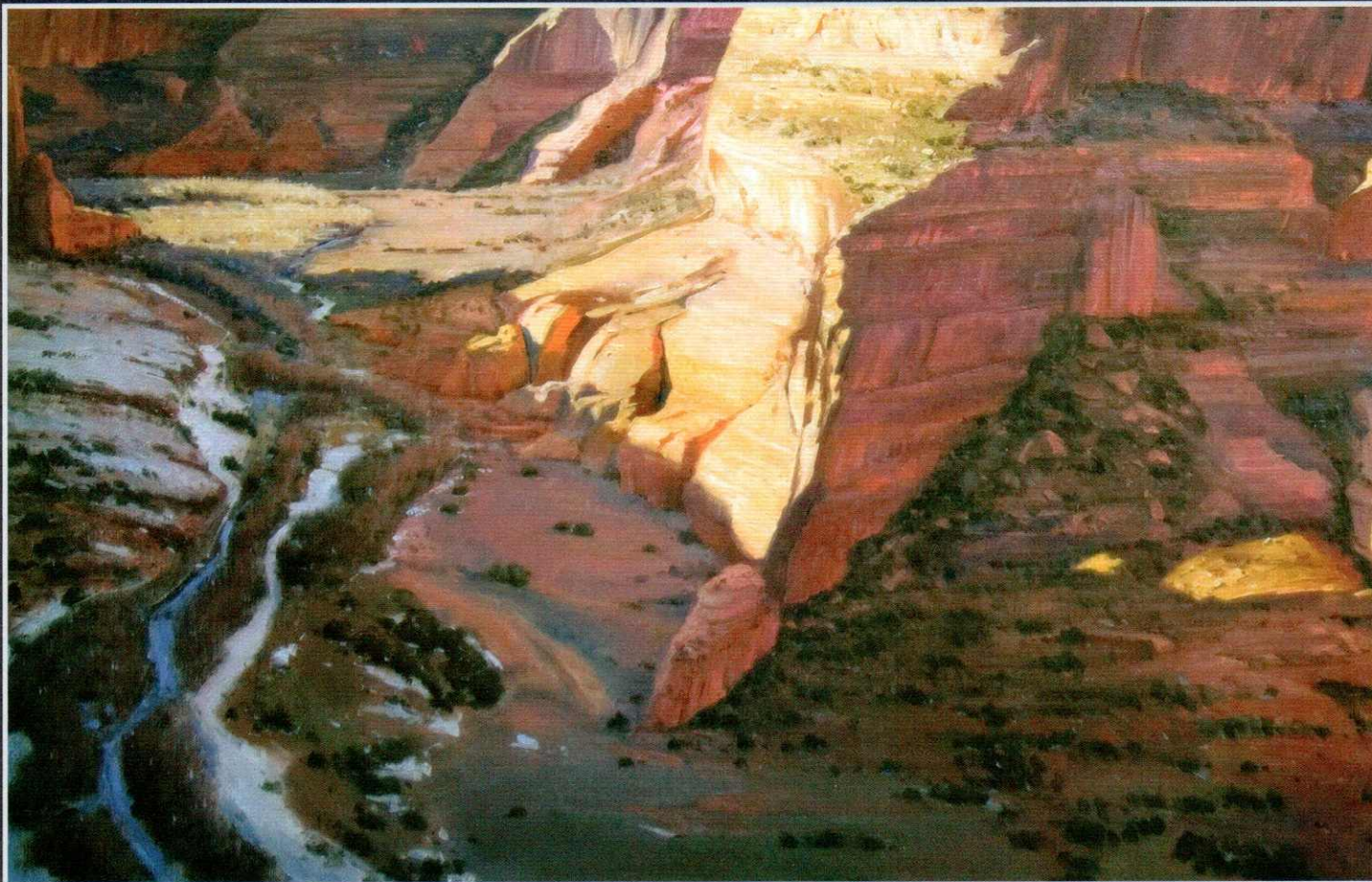
His painting process involves plein air studies done on location as well as photographs and drawings. He says, "The human eye is far more sensitive to subtle variations in color than can be revealed in photographs. Knowing my subject matter firsthand helps me to convey feeling in my paintings." He combines the information on a detailed perspective drawing which he then transfers to the canvas.

For the past 10 years he has been imagining

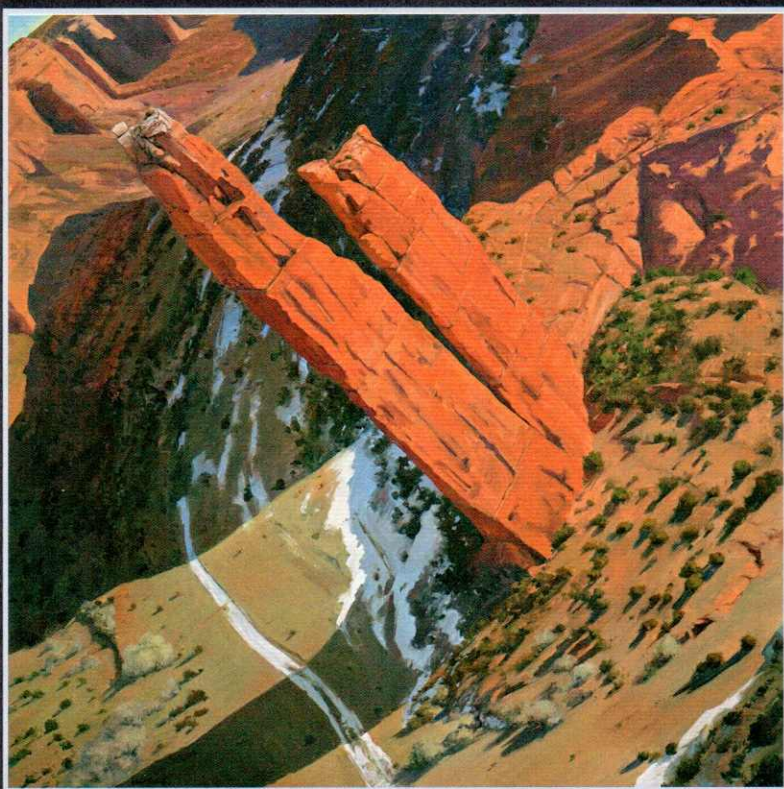
and planning how he could photograph Spider Rock, a sacred site for the Navajo within Canyon de Chelly in the Navajo Nation. Spider Rock began to form 230 million years ago as its sandstone began to be laid down. Wind and water have eroded the rock to create a 750-foot-high megalith that the Navajo believe is the home of Spider Woman. Spider Woman brought the art of loom weaving to the ancient Diné and her husband, Spider Man, who created the wooden loom. One of the stories passed down from generation to generation is that the top of Spider Rock is white because of all the bones of little children who were



*Spiderwoman's Dream*, oil on canvas, 48 x 29"



*De Chelly Magic*, 24 x 51½". Courtesy of the Eiteljorg Museum.



*Airborne over Chinle Wash*, oil on canvas, 24 x 40"

devoured by Spider Woman if they had been bad. Chávez approached the megalith as an eminent visual motif and as the special spiritual place it is for the Navajo.

He thought of getting a remote controlled plane to pilot out over the monument with a high-definition camera on board, but learned that as a pilot used to flying forward, he would probably crash the craft trying to direct it "backward" to its starting point. He found a pilot with a plane who was excited to join the project.

A major roadblock came from the National Park Service, which manages park operations at Canyon de Chelly National Monument. A representative pronounced the project "impossible" and refused to grant him permission. Discouraged, he began thinking of other sites that interested him until he thought of contacting a Navajo guide because the Navajo actually own the land. He was able to contact Daniel Stanley, who agreed to take Chávez and pilot Don Armstrong to various sites on the canyon rim for his regular guide fee, and the project was off.

Spider Rock is ¼-mile from the canyon rim and the tiny aircraft would disappear from sight at that distance. Armed with binoculars, Chávez directed Armstrong, who piloted the plane, to capture dynamic, steeply angled views of the monument. They made 10 flights over several days at different times of day, and in different lighting conditions.



Arturo Chávez with Don Armstrong preparing the airplane for launch.



Composite photo for  
*As the Crow Flies*

Gallery in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and by Mountain Trails Galleries in Sedona, Arizona. His work will be at *The West Select* at the Phoenix Art Museum beginning November 8. 🐦

Armed with a vast amount of visual information, including his color studies, Chávez returned to the studio and began the arduous process of converting the imagery. He made stills of the video frames, printed them out, and then mechanically assembled them into what would become the composition of his final painting. Because the camera lens distorts and creates a wildly curved horizon, he had to make a drawing from the composite image, establishing an accurate horizon as well as vanishing points and distance points so the result would be "as the human eye sees it."

With the hard work done...he made a drawing, experimenting to establish the final composition and the values within the scene. Armed with his color sketches done in the field, he could approach the canvas.

Chávez finds the result emotionally satisfying and viewers of his work either comment on the sense of flying "as the crow flies" or succumbing to vertigo and having to look away. Either way, the process and the experiment have been a success.

Chávez is represented by Gerald Peters



*John O'Hern, who has retired after 30 years in the museum business, specifically as the Executive Director and Curator of the Arnot Art Museum, Elmira, N.Y., is the originator of the internationally acclaimed Re-presenting Representation exhibitions which promote realism in its many guises. John was chair of the Artists Panel of the New York State Council on the Arts. He writes for gallery publications around the world, including regular monthly features on Art Market Insights and on Sculpture in Western Art Collector magazine.*