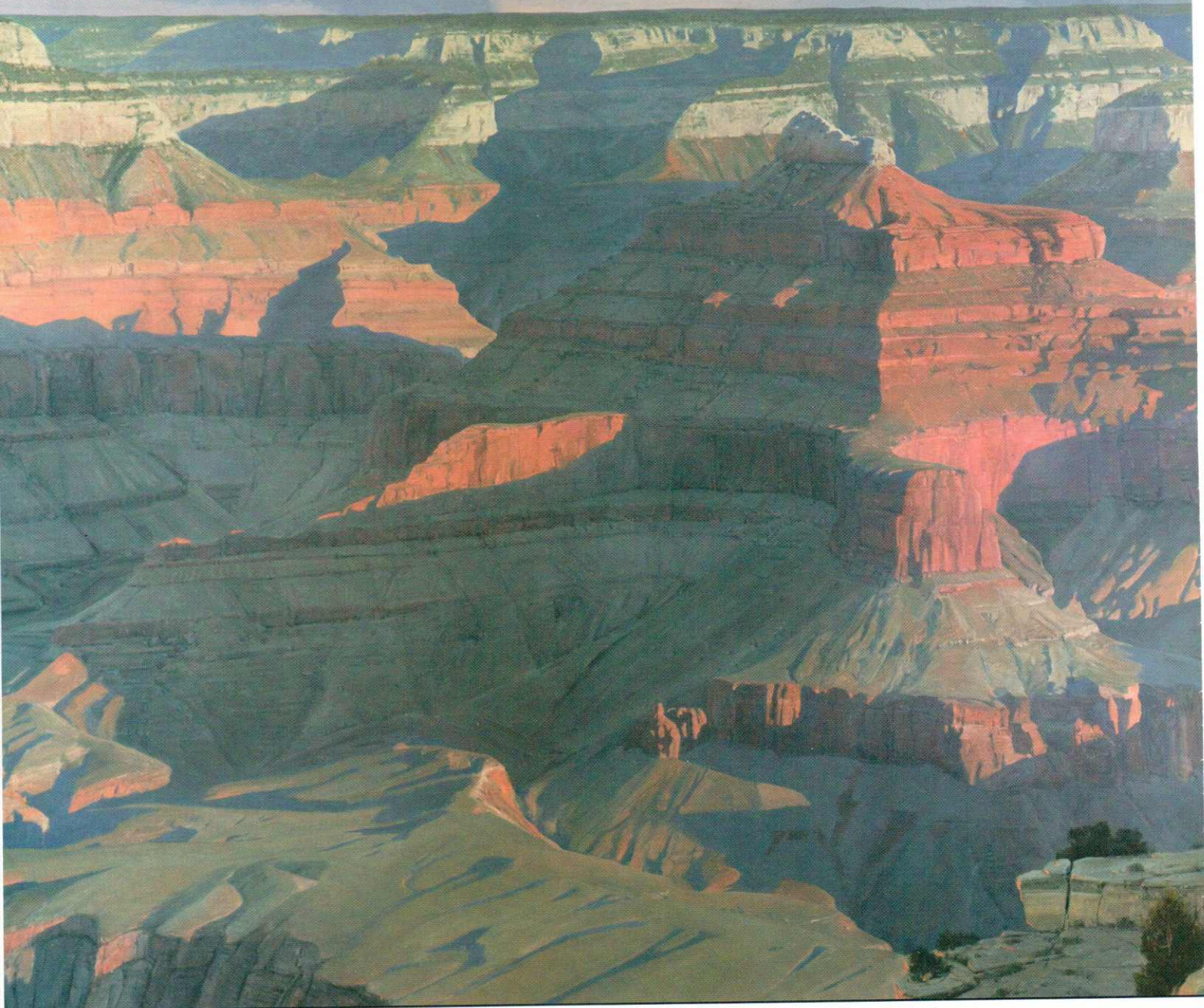


ARTURO CHAVEZ

PAINTING THE MAGIC



By Vicki Stavig

He played classical guitar. He flew airplanes. He owned a business. But the title to which Arturo Chavez most aspired was artist. It took some time for him to reach that goal, but that made it all the sweeter. After all, the harder you have to work to achieve something, the more meaningful it is. For Chavez, being

able to make his living doing something he absolutely loves is pure bliss.

Growing up in New Mexico, Chavez says he didn't do well in math, science, or history but always earned A's in his art classes. He began painting as a young boy, thankful today that his parents were supportive of his efforts. "They always made sure I had plenty of paints, brushes, and canvases," he says. "I was winning state-wide awards when I was in junior high school. It was fun



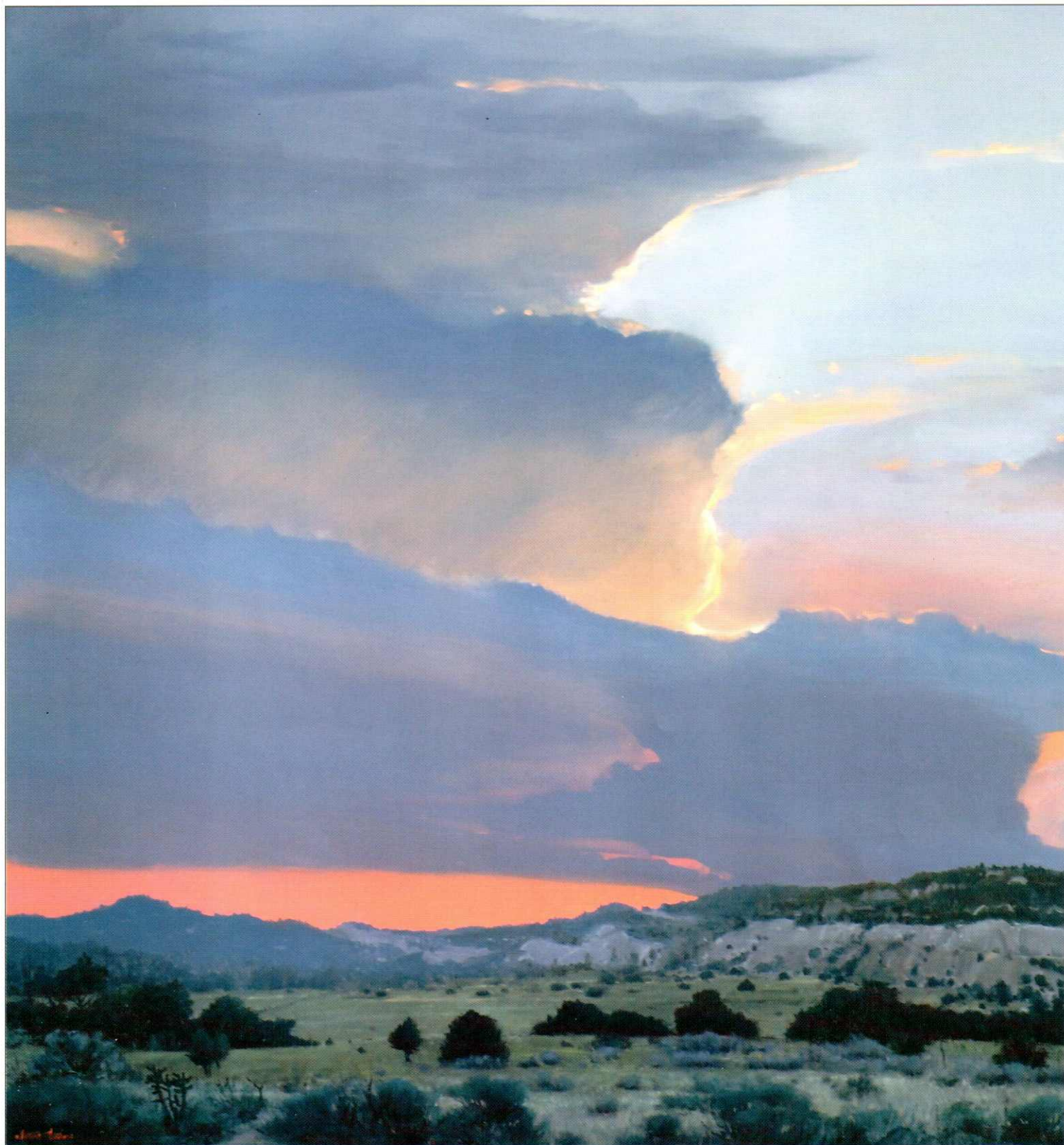
Rock of Ages, oil, 80" by 160"

"The Grand Canyon is one of the Seven Wonders of the World, and the grandeur one feels when encountering the canyon is truly awe inspiring. This painting exemplifies one of the canyon's majestic wonders: the Temple of Isis at sunrise. In this view, 19 miles of space separate the viewer on the South Rim from the distant North Rim of the canyon, with Isis commanding a central place in the composition."

for me, and it was easy."

When he wasn't painting or playing sports, Chavez was hiking the magnificent landscapes of New Mexico and becoming more captivated by its beauty as the years went on. But, when it came time to choose a career path, he turned to the guitar, planning to become a concert classical guitarist. "I started playing guitar when I was 13 or 14," he says. "I took lessons from a Cuban guitarist named Hector Garcia for about 10 years."

Chavez enrolled at the University of New Mexico, where Garcia also taught, and continued to study with the master. In a flash, however, everything



changed. "One day, after six hours of practicing, I looked at a painting I had done 10 years before, and it was so beautiful I put down my guitar and there was no more music," he says. "I had been at the university for two years and had just gotten a scholarship for music, but I turned it down. I wanted to paint."

Chavez dropped out of college, started painting. He also became part owner of a label manufacturing company and was able to combine his love of flying, as he flew to meet with business clients. "I started taking flying lessons when I was 21 or 22," he says. "I got my private license at 22 and my commercial and instru-

ment licenses at 24." Over the years, Chavez did some commercial flying for private clients and also flew for the Civil Air Patrol for 10 years. A branch of the U.S. Air Force, the patrol is made up of civilians who conduct search and rescue missions following airplane crashes.

"Flying is what gave me the per-



Summer Storm, oil, 46" by 60"

"Between Abiquiu and Cuba, New Mexico, lies the small Spanish village of Gallina. In and around this area are numerous, colorful striated formations of rocks, hills, and faults. I painted this piece from a vantage point looking west at the southern edge of an uplifted fault formation called Cerro Blanco, or White Ridge, located in the heart of Gallina. This painting is a depiction of a thundercloud that has taken on a life of its own and will continue to build with ferocity well into the nighttime hours."

Photo by Don Usner



ception to paint vast landscapes and cloudscape," Chavez says, adding that music also has had an impact on his art. "Music, in my opinion, is the highest art form, because it's pure emotion. I always paint to music—to Johann Sebastian Bach. I wanted to paint like his music. I try to get that same construction mechanically and emotionally in my paintings."

In 1980, Chavez was fortunate to form a friendship with noted artist Wilson Hurley. When he asked Hurley if he should go back to school and study art, Hurley replied, "No; just paint every day. Get up and paint; treat it like a job. Get out on location and paint."

After selling his interest in the label company, Chavez took four months off before diving into painting full-time, taking Hurley's advice and painting every day. "I saw people waiting until they retired to do what they really wanted to do, and then they were having heart attacks and health problems," he says. "I was 33 and decided to do it now."

Chavez was married and had a young son—he and his wife Jennifer would later also have twin girls—so he was taking a great financial risk, but it was one he felt he had to take. "I quit flying in 1983," he says. "I just wanted to paint. I started out at street shows and, within a year, I got into a gallery in Santa Fe and

then one in Albuquerque."

Chavez started out painting with watercolors, but later switched to oils. "I was doing a lot of watercolor in those days," he says. "It was so quick, so spontaneous, and I loved the look of watercolor. Then I wanted something more durable that I could go into deeper. I went to acrylics, but they dried too fast. I went into oil fulltime in about 1986. It's so versatile; you can get the blendings and you have time to work it, because it doesn't dry fast."

Chavez also began to make his own paints. "It's more work," he says, "but the effect is so beautiful. There's a jewel-like quality to it. I wash linseed oil with a mix of sand and salt. It takes about a month. It's like turning lead into gold."

Initially painting pueblos—"I love the dilapidated buildings," he says—Chavez, who lives in Santa Fe, began to focus on the land. "I started noticing that rock formations were similar to adobes," he says. "I was interested in the geology of the land, the striations of the rock."

That love of the land goes back to Chavez's childhood, when his parents would load up the car and the family would spend a month visiting national parks and public lands. "I think it has to do with the quality that Americans value so deeply," he says of his subjects and the appeal they have for collectors. "I think it has to do with



Chimayo Winter, oil, 15" by 36"

"My family has resided for three centuries in Chimayo, New Mexico. I spent my summers, weekends, and holidays there, living with my maternal grandmother. I had complete freedom to roam wherever I pleased, and I spent many a day hiking over the beautiful hills there. For all of my adult life I have been returning to these hills to paint and marvel at their unique beauty."



Mount Wilson Winter, oil, 56.5" by 90"

"The incredible, colorful rock formations in and around Sedona, Arizona, are a magnet of attraction. I'm awestruck with the beauty and majesty of these rock formations and am compelled to paint them, especially when the weather conditions offset and frame these majestic temples. This painting won the Harrison Eiteljorg Purchase Award at the Eiteljorg Museum in the annual Quest for the West Art Show in September 2010."



Luminous Twilight, oil, 48" by 96"

"The setting for this painting is in the Rio Puerco Valley in northern New Mexico. Here I find great inspiration. These high desert plains provide a treasure of color and geologic variation to whet the appetite and stimulate the creative juices. I climbed Cabezon Peak, and I must say that the views from the top of this mesa are extraordinary. Of course, I had to wait out the day after the climb for the usual spectacular sunset thundercloud to develop and then begin to paint the magic."

freedom. The success of our country has been bound to our land. I'm trying to preserve it."

Painting outdoors is a labor of love for Chavez. "I go out on location with a box of small canvases and do color studies," he says. "I do a little compositional stuff, too. I take photos of the formations I'm interested in, go back to the studio, and draw the composition in pencil and charcoal, using the photographs but not copying them. Then I transfer the drawing to canvas for an intermediate painting and bring it up to large scale."

Chavez is particularly fond of painting the landscapes of New Mexico, Arizona, Wyoming, and southern Colorado, but he also paints the California coast. "I love the northern coast of California," he says. "Point Lobos is one of my favorite places on earth."

Asked if there is a place he has not yet painted but would like to, Chavez doesn't hesitate before responding, "Denali National Park in Alaska. I want to spend a summer up there."


Wherever—and whatever—he

is painting, however, Chavez says the goal is the same. "I want to create a sense of illusionary space, which triggers a sense of emotion," he says. "I'm interested in a three-dimensional illusion on a two-dimensional plane."

Admitting that he has no hobbies, that he paints every day of the week except Sunday, Chavez says, "I love painting so much that every second is about art. It's the only thing I like to do. Being an artist is the only profession I know of where people will continue even if they don't make a sale. They do it because they're compelled."

Chavez, in fact, admits that at one point he went two years without making a sale, and yet he continued to paint. He was driven to share his love of the land with anyone willing to take a look at his work—and the number of people who did so, and who wanted to take those paintings home with them, continued to grow. Chavez doesn't take his success for granted, however. He continues to challenge himself and to create the best paintings possible.

While Chavez's dedication to his art hasn't changed over the years, his name has—from Arthur Usner to Arturo Antonio Chavez. One reason for the name change was that a family of racecar drivers was named Unser, and writers often confused the two names. The second reason was much more personal. "When my father died in 1999, it was a shock and woke me up to the fact that we are mortals," Chavez says. "I had never acknowledged my mother's side of the family, who are artisans and craftsmen. So I changed my name legally to Chavez."

Other than his name, Chavez says he doesn't envision altering anything else, at least not in the near future. "I don't see myself changing much except trying to sharpen my awareness of nature," he says. "My job is to observe nature, to translate it, and to uplift people. That is the core of true art." 

Vicki Stavig is editor of Art of the West.