

# TRAVELING THE UNKNOWN HIGHWAY WITH ROCKY HAWKINS

*Vivid Abstract Expressionist paintings leave an indelible mark*

Written by Seabring Davis

Walking along the grassy-banked creek that oxbows through Rocky Hawkins' Montana property, the artist talks about the way this landscape inspires his painting. Pointing out a swath of grass he's cut just today, he considers setting up a sweat lodge, next to the water, the sound of it, the refreshing utility of it. This creek's murmur will work into one of his paintings, perhaps. Not the literal twist of it carving away at the banks, but the impression of it. Within his Abstract Expressionist images, Rocky Hawkins paints with the gesture of water, the translation of its sound, the suggestion of it, so that a viewer may not see, but will likely sense the flow of the element in a painting.

ENTHRALLED WITH THE LORE AND SPIRITUALITY of American Indian cultures, his work often depicts these traditional subjects in nontraditional ways.

Hawkins captures the raw sense of elements — natural, emotional and cultural. Raw anger. Raw sorrow. Raw vision. And that is a mysterious thing to explain, but even more mysterious to behold. Unlike the classical approach of most Western artists, Rocky Hawkins asks a bit more from each of us who stop to admire one of his paintings: trust.

"I paint with passion, risk and abbreviated images instead of capturing realism," Hawkins acknowledges. "Set against transit texture and vivid color, images and figures cannot be situated in reality.

These painterly expressions challenge our emotions and communicate with our sense of mystery. Mystery is a part of life. Not everything is easily explainable."

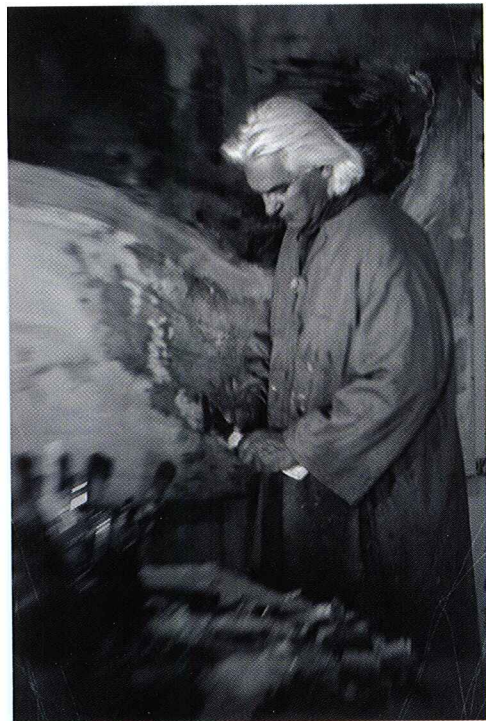
There is no logical explanation for the color of the animals in Hawkins' *Horses Who Turn Red At Night*, yet the brilliant hues of the two horses imply fire, their shadowed riders — heads smudged to suggest a feathered headdress — threaten rage, anger. Offer this interpretation to the artist and he would nod in agreement. Another viewer may see the red ochre horses with mute riders observing a haunting scene; Hawkins might agree with this version as well. "What you perceive, depends on who you are," Hawkins is fond of saying in regard to his paintings.

Born in Seattle, Wash., in 1950, Hawkins grew up near the Cascade Mountains. Through family vacations he had an early connection to nature and began drawing on his own at the age of 9. His interest in art continued into adulthood and subsequently drew Hawkins to pursue a fine art education at Burnley School of Professional Art in Seattle. After school, he began his career as a commercial artist and illustrator.

By the mid-1970s, Hawkins recognized that he could never be satisfied by the constraints of the commercial art world. He left his career behind and became a logger for the next decade. He looks back on that time in the woods, felling massive trees in the Northwest, as a time of discovery, musing over the solitude and silence there.

Time out from his career became a catalyst for his interest in fine art. He pursued painting classes and developed his own style, learning to trust his intuition on the canvas. He became fascinated with Native Americans, the mysticism and creative qualities of the culture and looked to the work of N.C. Wyeth, Frederic Remington and Howard Terpning. As a result, even today the influences of Realism and Expressionism play into Hawkins' Modern aesthetic.

HE WALKS FURTHER UP THE HILL, talking of the home he and his wife Kat reclaimed from an old broken-down ranch.



Artist Rocky Hawkins in his studio



ARTISTS  
of the West



HORSE THAT TURN RED AT NIGHT  
OIL ON CANVAS  
36" x 48"





FAST HORSE  
OIL ON PANEL  
8" X 10"

They've transformed a dilapidated cluster of buildings into a tidy compound that reveres history and makes no overtures of vanity. The modest cabin where the couple live is nestled in a cup of gentle hills, protected from the wind and overlooking a meadow, then the ruins of an old homestead and beyond that, ranchlands rolling out into what seems to be infinity.

On the hill above their cabin, past what used to be the stud barn, is a refurbished horse barn that is his studio. He stops at the top of the hill. Before the studio, he detours to the old chicken coop, cleaned up for Kat's garden shed. A plot for vegetables has been carved out on the sunny side and fenced to keep out the deer. Above this building is an old bunkhouse; someday the couple will fix it up as a guesthouse. Rocky smooths his hand down the side of a wall, like a horseman feeling a fetlock. "Look at this old wood," he says, pointing

out the weathered beauty of it. This too will work into one of his paintings somehow — the texture of it, the striation.

Stepping out of the bunkhouse Rocky crosses the driveway, his tall frame making long, easy strides. The sky is an uncommon blue with a dash of clouds to the west. He stops to talk about that color, the cloud formation. The mountains encircle this land and beyond them the horizon seems boundless. He takes in the scene with a smile, nodding as if to log the moment in his mind to use as material for his work later on.

"Out here there is nothing to distract my thoughts, except the temptation to work the land, but otherwise I can just concentrate on my painting," he says.

Solitude and privacy are essential to Hawkins' productivity as an artist. He works in the studio daily, while, Kat, who manages their fine art print businesses and markets his art-

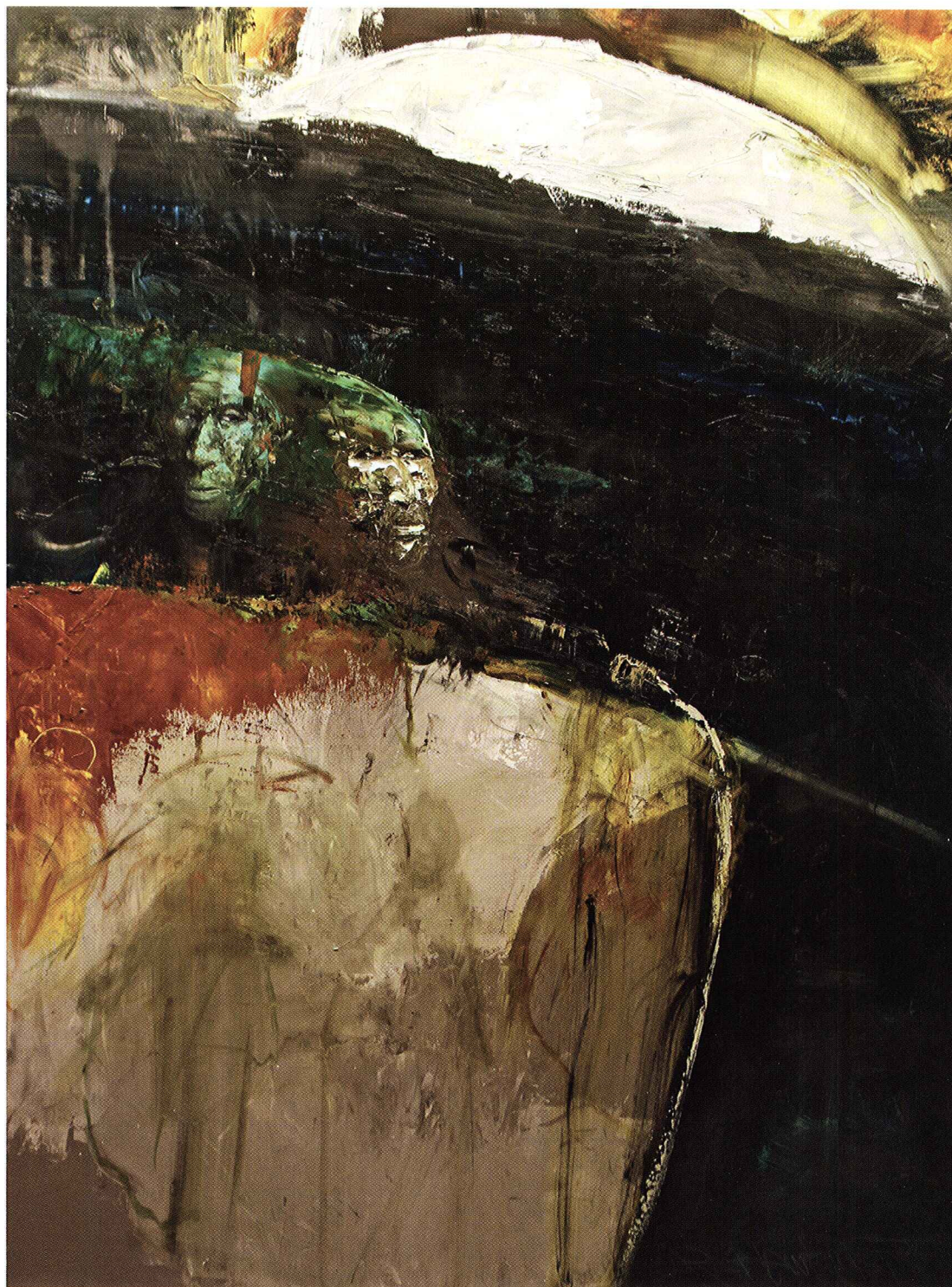




MIDNIGHT WOLVES  
OIL ON PANEL  
20" X 24"



*Hawkins captures the raw sense of elements — natural, emotional and cultural. Raw anger. Raw sorrow. Raw vision. And that is a mysterious thing to explain, but even more mysterious to behold.*



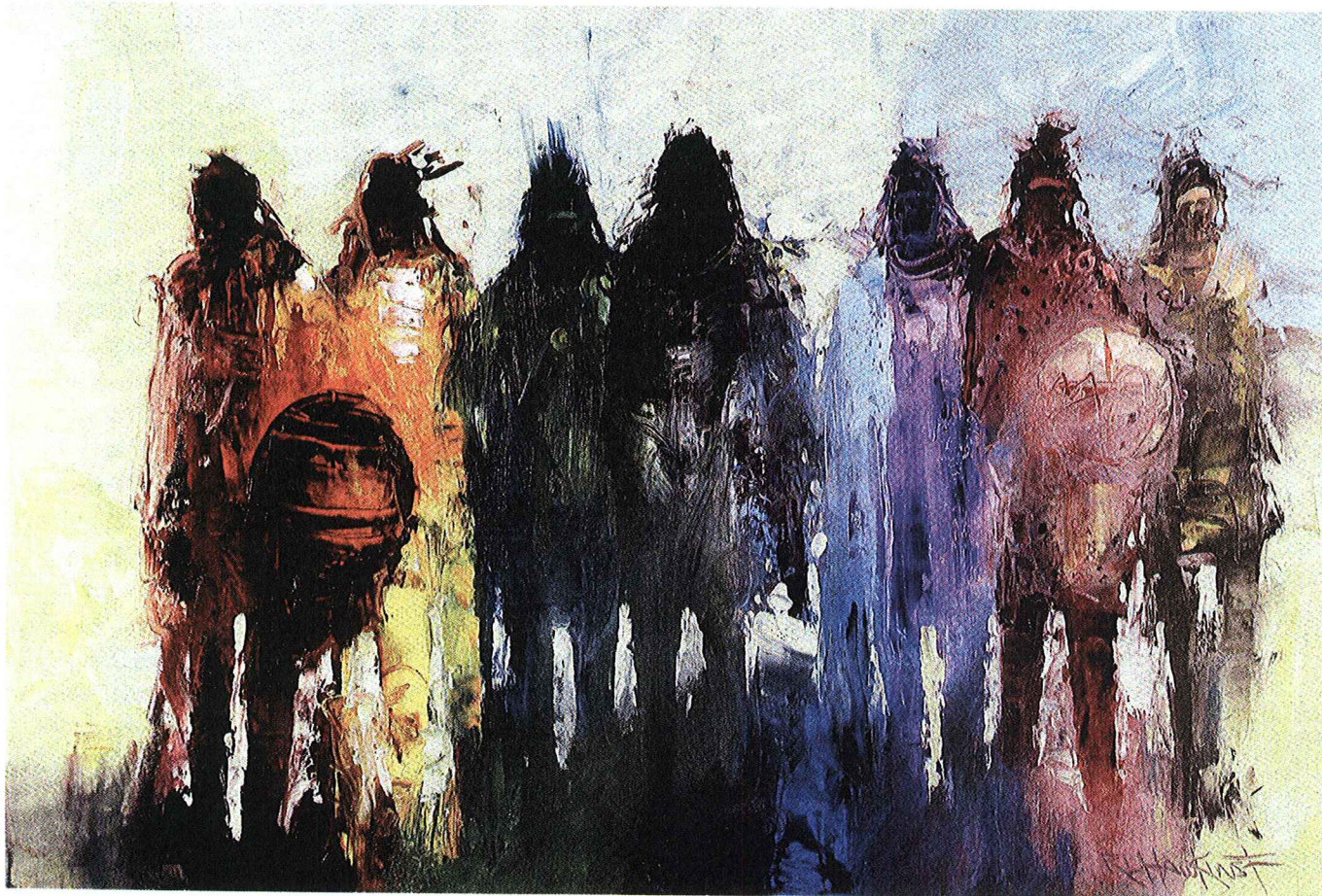
HALF MOON HIGHWAY  
OIL ON CANVAS  
36" x 48"

work, operates from an office in the basement of their cabin. They live a quiet life, punctuated by occasional visits with dear friends, a love of being outside, music, movies and books that inspire ingenuity.

"I have always thought an artist has to educate himself and this can only be done through his eyes ... to create and to use your imagination one needs to be comfortable with isolation to a degree, and learn to be around only those who understand a creative temperament," explains Hawkins.

At the core of Hawkins' success — his resume of exhibitions, shows and awards spans three decades and his collectors are varied in background, but loyal, often purchasing multiple paintings — is his penchant for hard work. He is devoted to his painting; it is a means of self-discovery and exploration, so he pursues it as if on a crucial quest. His fine art background has led him through a creative evolution, from commercial artist, admirer of Realist painters to the unearthing of his own Modern style. And the truth is, even if no one ever saw one of Hawkins' paintings, he would still create them; they are a form of expression intricately woven into his spirit. He likens each painting to an emotional battle — a struggle





COLOR CHANGERS  
OIL ON CANVAS  
20" x 30"

to cross boundaries, surpass taboos and emerge triumphant in original experience.

It was this unique perspective that drew Nikki Todd as a young collector to a Hawkins' painting almost 16 years ago. A gift from her parents to start Todd's collection, the small work entitled *Superhumans* depicts four abstract figures in a milky blue-green mist with the nuance of horned headdresses or hats that imply a hunting party.

"What drew me to that painting was the shamanistic quality of it," she says, pointing at the artwork, "but also my eye was drawn to this one hand — the detail and realistic quality shows the talent of the artist in his understanding of composition and perspective."

Now a fine art dealer in her own right, as proprietor of Visions West Galleries in three locations — Bozeman and Livingston, Mont., and Denver, Colo. — that first painting still hangs in the living room of her old ranch house and is one of 30 works by Hawkins in her eclectic and extensive collection

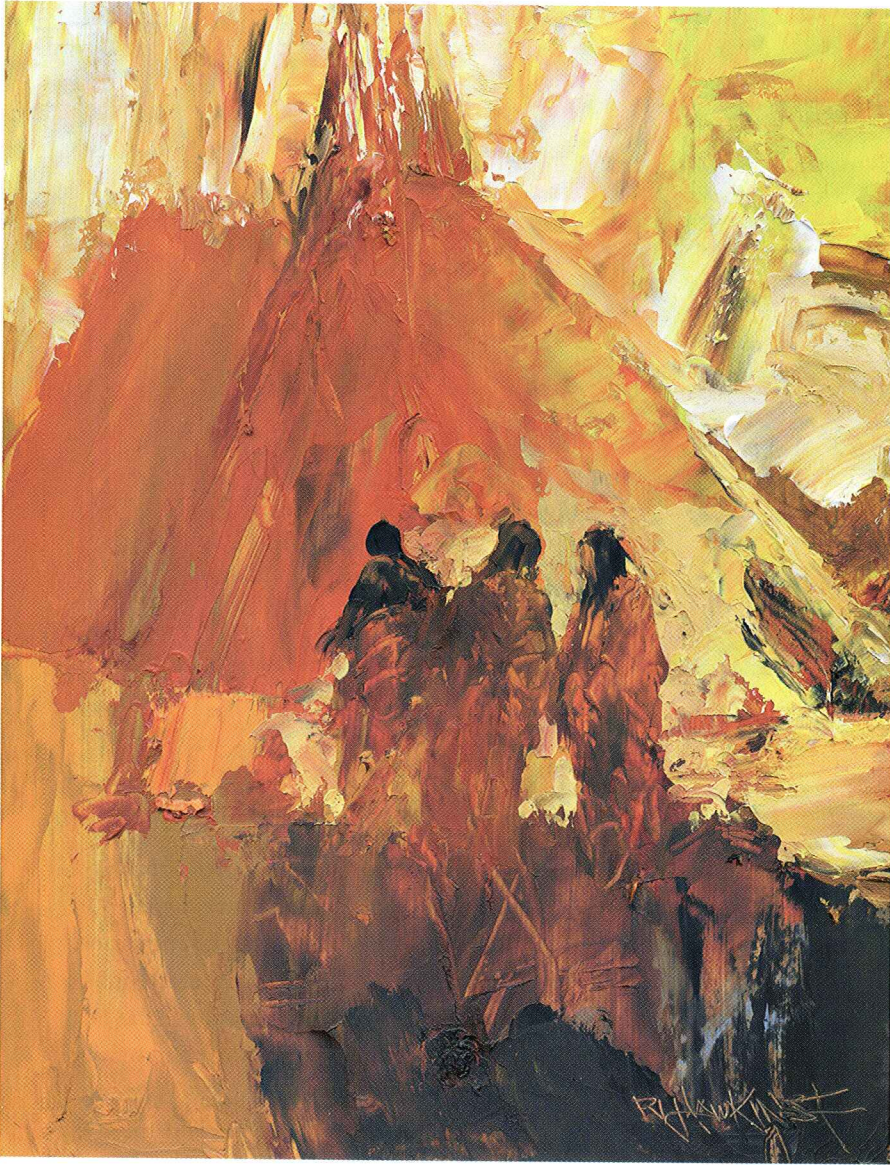
of contemporary artists. The paintings hang in her house and range in subject matter from a jaunty Indian brave depicted in autumnal yellows and reds, to sultry female burlesque forms, to the goofy profile of a wolf painted with human feet smoking a cigar. She has watched his work progress over the last two decades and considers Hawkins to be one of the premier painters in the American West.

"His work has gotten a lot more energetic and there is more texture to it now," she says thoughtfully. "He reaches beyond the typical historic representation of Western art and finds inspiration from different genres, and there's a bravery to his painting that no one else can copy. The thing about great art is that the artist is creating something new, something that's never been done — Rocky does that — he's a groundbreaker."

In Todd's galleries, Hawkins is one of the most sought-after artists and his paintings rightfully dominate a substantial amount of wall space in all three locations. Rocky and Kat are



*"Each painting I begin as an explorer with a vision into the unknown. And so each painting is an expression at that certain moment."*



TIPI TALK  
OIL ON PANEL  
8" X 10"

selective about where they show his work, careful to build relationships with gallerists who appreciate his style. Visions West is one of the few places that represent his paintings. The only other location is Mountain Trails Gallery in Jackson, Wyo., where the artist has developed a longstanding relation-

ship with art dealer and collector Mark Tarrant.

Tarrant is a longtime collector of Hawkins' work and anticipates the artist will be showcased in prestigious museums sooner rather than later. He uses adjectives like daring, prophetic and passionate in regard to Hawkins' painting.

"I see Rocky Hawkins' artwork as somewhere between Gauguin and de Kooning," Tarrant says. "He is interested in the primitivism that Gauguin sought, and pays little attention to the classical use of perspective and color. He ignores everything that is artificial and conventional. In my opinion he surpasses Gauguin in the ability to connect with the pure and primitive spirit."

Hawkins has recently finished a painting for Tarrant's gallery, entitled *Color Changers*, depicting a band of Indians in a close, ragged line. The vibrancy of the rainbow color spectrum communicates some sense of peace or hope, the Technicolor shift from cold to warm within these figures is moving.

It's exactly the kind of painting Hawkins knows Tarrant will appreciate. It is the kind of image that will evoke superlative praise from this friend who has a keen admiration for Hawkins' talent.

"He paints from a place of pure passion," enthuses Tarrant, "a place of harmony between body and spirit in a boldly prophetic vision. Hawkins is a 'shaman' with paint, connecting with the viewer at the super-consciousness level of image, energy, spirit."

AT LAST, HAWKINS AMBLES BACK TOWARD the studio. Framed by a wide porch, the deep chocolate-colored corrugated metal building is part garage for the vintage cars and hot rods Rocky restores and creates, and part painter's lair. Rocky pauses as he opens the door. He does not allow many people to visit his workspace. It is deeply personal and he covets his privacy. Yet, he opens the door wide and lets me in.



The windowless room is a cloister for Hawkins. Like an altar to creativity, he has filled it with offerings that inspire him. The atmosphere is serious. Medicine bundles and fetishes hang on the wall next to his own paintings; found feathers and a mounted raven are displayed; erotic art and vintage photos of American Indians are framed above the doorway; and hanging conspicuously at the door is a kitschy 1950s rubber doll of an Indian — big-nosed and smiling, tomahawk in hand.

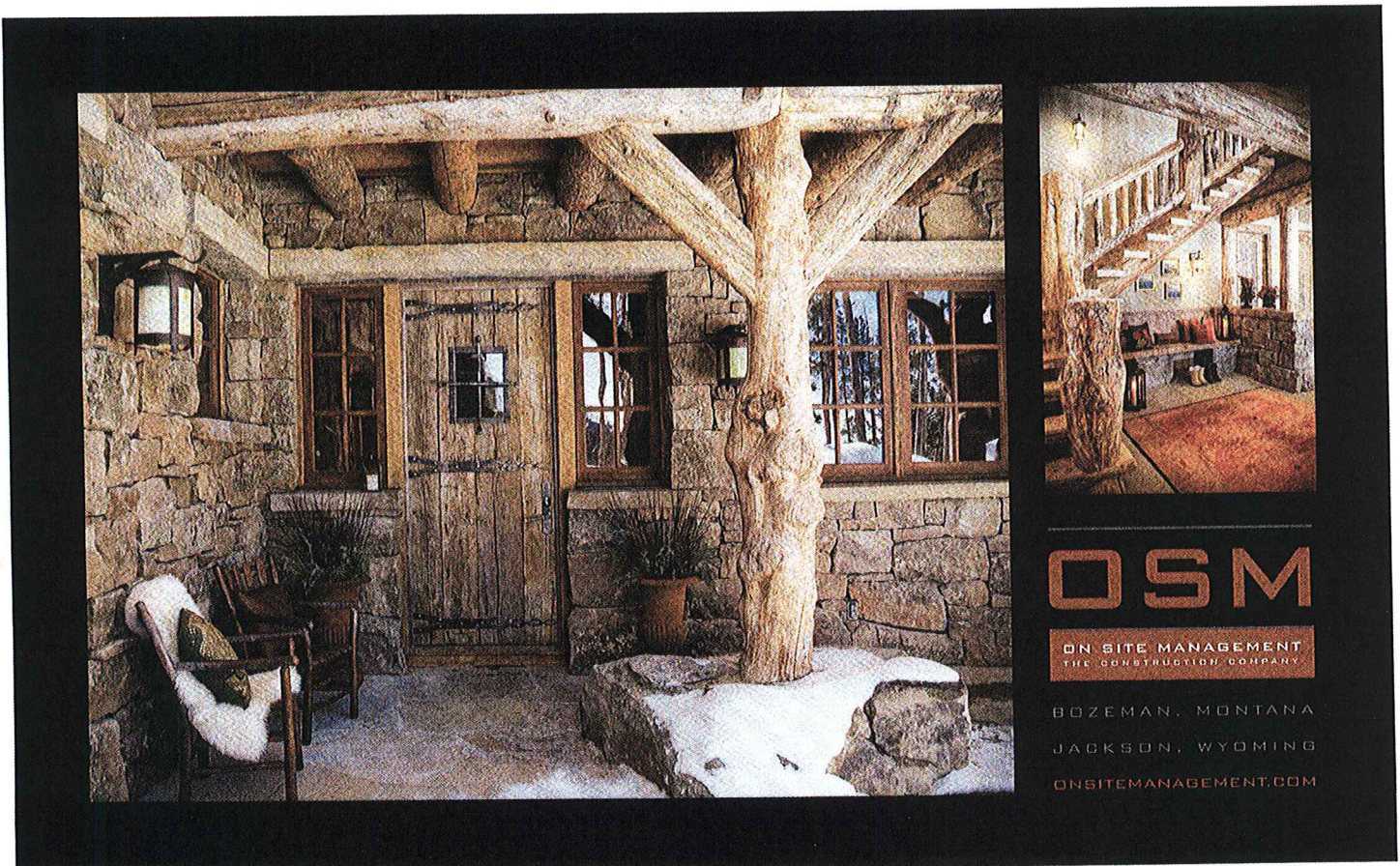
“That’s where it all began,” Hawkins jokes about the keepsake given to his parents when he was born, a souvenir brought back from a trip out West. It’s a silly image, this stereotyped Indian, but it alludes to Hawkins’ playful sense of humor that is frequently obscured by the dramatic and often dark images portrayed in his paintings.

Further into his studio, a white floor-to-ceiling painter’s wall dominates the space. An adjustable steel easel is bolted to the wall where a large-scale canvas hangs in progress — a dark curve of road curls around an Indian face, but the depth

and layering of paint that Rocky applies has yet to come. Next to the easel a long table of jars and buckets hold brushes, palette knives, rags and paint. A rough sketch — merely pencil scratches to illustrate composition — hangs on another small standing easel nearby. He prepares each canvas with gesso to smooth out the “toothiness.” The next coat is likely a dominant color that will provide a focal point within the image. Hawkins layers his oil paints onto the canvas, creating movement, dimension and depth from color and texture. He combines passion with skill, striving for an unforgettable image.

Nearby, the “thinking chair” centers on the big wall: this is where the artist sits to edit his work. He ponders color and form, adds and erases, and waits for passion to speak. While he paints prolifically, the time he puts into each canvas is indefinite — some images come easily, while others are a struggle. And it is not uncommon for Hawkins to scrap a painting near completion, scrape the layers off the canvas and begin again.

“I think a painting is about feelings, emotion, self expres-



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*Lately, Hawkins has embarked on a new path in current paintings for his Unknown Highway series. Moving beyond the well-known themes of portraits, horse and rider, warriors and runners that have been his signature subjects, this series touches on the concept of spiritual journey.*

sion, and choices like finding relationships with shapes and colors, adding and subtracting, and embracing mistakes," Hawkins muses. "Each painting I begin as an explorer with a vision into the unknown. And so each painting is an expression at that certain moment."

A far wall is lined with Hawkins' own avant garde photographs, mostly black and whites; photography is another outlet for his creative urges. Nearby a large set of bookshelves holds other sources of inspiration for Hawkins. Fine art and photography books and tomes by artists writing on the artist's life, its struggles, challenges, motivations. He is a tireless reader, studying and rereading artists whom he reveres: Robert Motherwell, Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock. Peppered throughout the studio are inspirational quotes written in Hawkins' own hand, plucked from his readings:

*Imagination is more important than knowledge.*

— Albert Einstein

*Painting is self-discovery. Every good artist paints what he is.*

— Jackson Pollock

*An artist's "art" is just his consciousness, developed slowly and painstakingly with many mistakes en route.*

— Robert Motherwell

In one corner, below Hawkins' framed degree from the Burnley School of Professional Art in Seattle (now known as the Art Institute), is a smaller easel where he sketches and paints small-scale works of oil on Masonite boards. Clipped to the easel is a haute couture photo of a model wearing an elaborate feathered hat and dramatic eye make-up, torn from the pages of *Vogue*. The magazine clipping is a launch pad for the artist's imagination to leap into a wild portrait from Hawkins' *Many Faces* series, but you'd never know the idea came from that clipping once the painting is finished. To be too realistic in painting would remove the mystery, Hawkins observes.

Lately, Hawkins has embarked on a new path in current paintings for his *Unknown Highway* series. Moving beyond the well-known themes of portraits, horse and rider, warriors and runners that have been his signature subjects, this series touches on the concept of spiritual journey. Inspired by the

independent film *Powwow Highway* about two Cheyenne men who take a road trip to a powwow out West and their experiences along the way, Hawkins' new selection of paintings will be exhibited at Visions West in Bozeman, September 12 through October 11.

Operating on a "less is more" premise, the artist uses the highway as a metaphor for life, creating provocative, vivid images that engage wonder in the viewer.

"Right now my search is to get more minimal in my work," says Hawkins. "I'd like to be able to paint an image in one movement, so that it's almost childlike, that kind of freedom is the expression of my true self."

In one image a liquid turquoise swatch of color leads the eye to a pensive Indian face and then on to an allusion of road — deep black asphalt and a yellow dotted line. Is this Indian figure, the viewer wonders, coming or going? Is this his vision, a premonition of the paved roads that would shrink his land? Is it me who is on the road, watching this Indian man as I pass? The painting is open to interpretation, but the viewer has to trust his or her instincts. "Rocky's work is not hemmed in by one experience, but instead it is threaded with many," notes Nikki Todd.

LEAVING THE HEAVINESS OF HAWKINS' STUDIO, he steps out into the sunlight and follows the path to the old barn, down the hill, below the house. It's a cobbled century-old structure, with a stone and rubble foundation. Inside, the high noon sun filters boldly through gaping cracks in the wood. But Rocky speaks reverently of this old building. His expression is alight with the idea of transforming it into a place where he could work. There will be a tall white painter's wall on the far end, bookshelves over there, storage for canvas and frames down there, a loft above, he says enthusiastically. It is full of possibility, even if that isn't apparent now. His eyes see something in the angle of the beams, in the gesture of history within this building. Just as he does with his painting, he trusts in its shape and form and believes in what it will become. **BSJ**

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*Seabring Davis* is Big Sky Journal's editor in chief.