



# Refuge

Mary Roberson's artwork  
reflects her Idaho lifestyle—

# IN THE Wild

and contrasts with everything urban  
she's left behind

By Gretchen Reynolds





**ART TALENT ISN'T ALWAYS WELCOME.** Sometimes it takes the better part of a lifetime—with all its cross-purposes, career changes, missed chances, and slowly evolving wisdom—before an artist can begin to cultivate the gifts that she has. Just ask Mary Roberson. Now 57, Roberson grew up in a difficult household in Los Angeles, CA. She had talent—which she spent years trying to squander. Roberson's may be one of the more lurching, sputtering, and, for long stretches, stalled art careers imaginable. Instead of sketching, she tried self-destruction. Instead of drawing, she ran. But her talent didn't disappear. It just bided its time, and when, after years of physical and emotional crises, Roberson had reached the necessary turning point in her life, it tapped her on the shoulder and said, "Now?" And she thought, "Yes." She took up painting again and restarted her true career in earnest, at last.

**LOOK AT A SIGNATURE** ROBerson canvas today, and you'd never know that her early life was so harsh—or so urban. Roberson's oils show wild animals such as bears, moose, and bison, moving with dignity and solemn grace through a chiaroscuro landscape of pines and brush. This work is worlds from her past.

Her childhood was a place of concrete and chaos, with only brief respites of peace. Her father drank, and would rage at Roberson and her mother when he did. "My dad, when he was sober, could be very kind," she allows. "Once, he built me a studio in the garage, and I'd go there when things got bad and paint for hours." Things often got bad.

At the time, she attended a strict Catholic grade school. The nuns noticed her talent and, in their austere, undemonstrative way, encouraged it. "I didn't think I was worth much back then," Roberson remembers. "I didn't value anything that I could do. So it's a good thing that they didn't make a big deal out of my drawing, or I probably would have quit." Instead she continued, winning prizes from local groups.

By the time she was in ninth grade, however, Roberson had moved to a public school and discovered rebellion. She began to drink and smoke and skip classes. But she remained reflexively polite

to her teachers. She also was bright and able with a paintbrush. These attributes kept her afloat, if barely. "The principal liked my artwork, so I got away with a lot," she reasons. Teachers allowed her to turn in assignments late. They worried about her. They hectored her to try harder. They urged her to enter art contests. She won awards. Eventually, with the help of her teachers and the principal, she won a scholarship to the prestigious Otis College of Art and Design in L.A. There, almost immediately, she was recognized as a star. Her watercolors and figure drawings were held up for other students as models.

The acclaim almost ruined her. "I was so self-



destructive back then," she explains. "If something good happened, I had to undo it." Finally one day, overwhelmed and troubled, she asked a friend who had a cabin near Hailey, ID, if she could drive up and stay for a while. He agreed. The trip was meant to allow her to run from herself, but it became, instead, a remarkable, unexpected homecoming. "It was so beautiful," she says. "I'd never seen that kind of open country. I sat and stared at the trees." She sketched grass, hills, and shadows. The art and the land

THIS PAGE: RAVEN ON A BRANCH, OIL, 19½ X 17½.  
OPPOSITE PAGE: IF YOU WATCH A BEAR FOR AWHILE,  
OIL, 48 X 72.



offered refuge. She was content.

The idyll couldn't last, though. Not at that time. Roberson was still too young and too off-balance. She returned to Los Angeles, married, started having children, and quit art altogether. "I told myself it was because I wanted to raise my children," she says. "And that was part of it. I'm a very focused kind of person. I couldn't raise children and do art. But it was also an excuse. And I knew it." Her husband worked in construction, and she went into business with him. At her urging, they moved the company to Hailey, so at least she had a landscape.

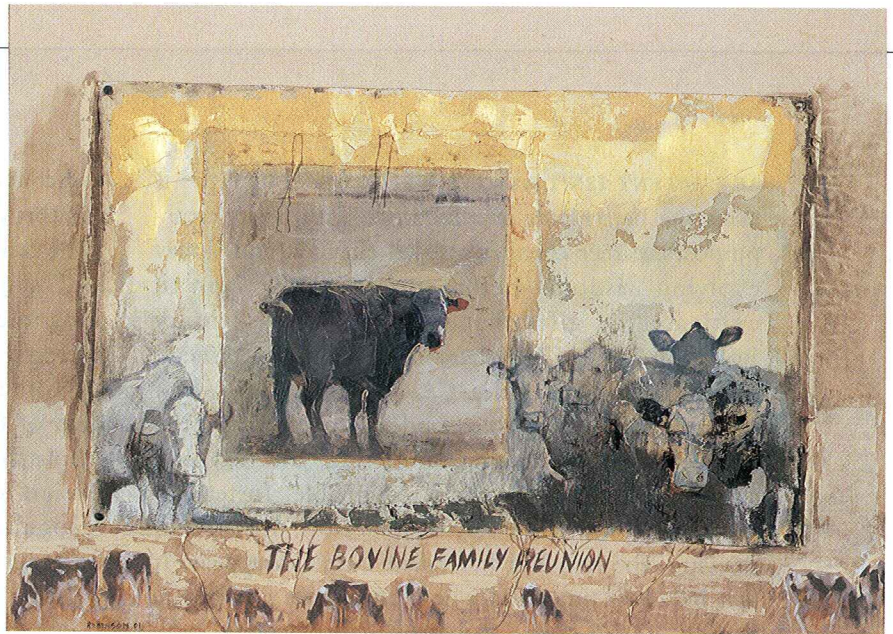
Years passed. Roberson wasn't happy. She felt an ache, a sense of desperate longing and loss that she couldn't define. She drank. She smoked. And in 1987, at 39, she had a stroke, which, she says today, "saved my life." Fortunately, the damage was minimal. But her neurologist demanded that she quit abusing herself. "And I don't know what it was, but something about the way he said it made me realize that I could," she says. "I thought, 'I don't have to live like this.' It was a choice. And I could make different choices. That was a revelation, believe me."

Not long afterward, she divorced her husband. The very day the divorce was final, she quit smoking and drinking and announced to her three startled but supportive children that she was turning their living room into a painting studio. "That was the start," she remembers. "It's been full speed ahead since then."

**THERE'S SOMETHING ENVELOPING** about Roberson's naturalistic wildlife paintings, an extraordinary sense of breadth and depth, of coiled, muscular, inhuman life. A grizzly bear coolly gazes out at the viewer with a hooded, self-contained, and slightly menacing calm. A bison lies in prairie grass, his flanks as curved, powerful, and remote as the hills behind him. For a woman who never saw wildlife growing up, Roberson has come to identify deeply with things untamed.

But first, as a kind of transition phase, she painted cows. She had begun life as a painter by producing unpeopled landscapes, yet they felt empty. "Then one day some cattlemen came through, and I thought, 'I was good at figure drawing at college. Cows are figures. I could do cows.'" And she did.

The bovine paintings began selling briskly at arts and crafts fairs. Then one day, tired of the itinerant

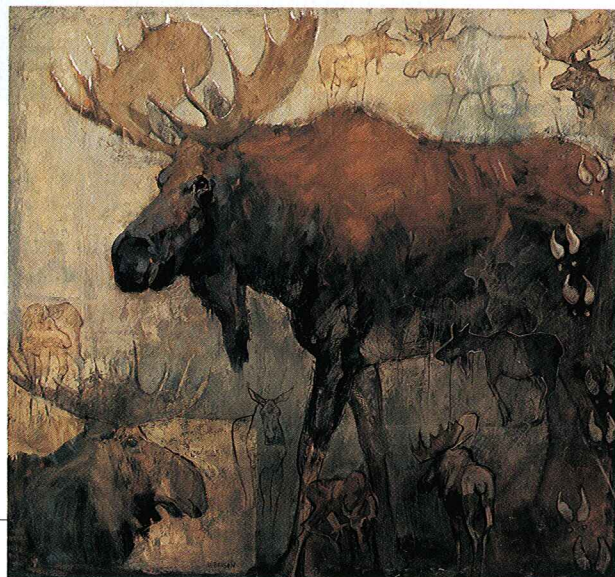


BOVINE FAMILY REUNION, MIXED MEDIA, 26 X 36.

artist's life, she took an armful into a gallery in Jackson Hole, WY. The gallery director blinked, looked more closely, and then declared that she wanted to personally buy two of the canvases. "She said that they were the most beautiful cows she'd ever seen," Roberson remembers.

The segue to wildlife followed naturally enough. The same gallery director suggested it. "She told me that if my cows looked that good, she wanted to see what I could do with an elk. I said, 'What's an elk look like?'" Roberson had never seen one, and she'd certainly never considered painting one. Obliging, the gallery director pointed her toward nearby Yellowstone National Park. Roberson got into her old van, drove to Yellowstone that evening, and didn't leave for weeks. "I was in heaven," she recalls. "The very first night, some bison walked past my van. The sun was setting and here were these magnificent animals, and I knew at that moment that this was

ALMOST A DOZEN, OIL, 65 X 66.





why I had been given the ability to paint. This is what I was supposed to do.”

When she did finally emerge from the park, she went into a kind of frenzy of work. Her canvases grew larger, her brushwork more accomplished. Each painting seemed to be simpler than the last—“I didn’t worry about tiny details,” she says, “I wanted to get the essence of the thing”—and, in its simplicity, more resonant. Even now, speaking of this revelatory, inspired time, Roberson’s voice warms. “I loved those animals,” she says. “I loved painting them. I still do. I always will.”

Today, Roberson has created a relatively stable, cozy, and by the standards of her past, bourgeois life for herself. After years of using her living room as a studio, she was prevailed upon by her grown children a few years ago to build a separate space onto the house. It has skylights, large windows, and a sense of being almost outdoors. “It makes me happy to be in there,” she says.

She paints almost every day when she’s home, although she’s not in residence all the time. For at least two weeks every fall, she camps and sketches in Yellowstone, reliving the moment when she knew—*knew*—what to paint. At the same time, her interest in new subject matter is growing. “I’ve started painting birds lately,” she says, “especially ravens.” Not all are in flight and not all are, in fact, alive. Sometimes her cat

catches and kills birds near their home, and Roberson has begun to paint some of the cat’s trophies. The resulting paintings are not meant to imitate gloomy, old master still lifes, filled with gray corpses of fish or birds. They’re meant to be, in their way, celebratory.

“I think you can’t look at the natural world and not think about death,” Roberson says quietly. “It’s there, and it’s part of what makes life so beautiful.” Without mortality, there’s no urgency and less meaning to life. “That’s true for me, you know,” she says. “If I hadn’t come so close to dying, I might never have managed to have the life I do. It took a crisis to get me here. But I made it, and I feel really fortunate.”

She pauses. “The best part is that I feel like I deserve to be happy now. That’s a big change.” Recently, she took some of the proceeds from her paintings and splurged on posh towels and other linens for her otherwise spare home. “It was really indulgent,” she says. “But, you know what? I think that I’m worth it. Isn’t that nice?” □

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**Santa Fe-based Gretchen Reynolds contributes frequently to *The New York Times Magazine*; *O*, *The Oprah Magazine*; and *National Geographic Adventure*.**

**Roberson is represented by Meyer-Milagros Gallery, Jackson, WY; Meyer Gallery, Park City, UT; Thomas Moxley Gallery, Santa Fe, NM; Kneeland Gallery, Ketchum, ID; Huntsman Gallery of Fine Art, Aspen, CO; Toh-Atin Gallery, Durango, CO; and Janet Vitale Fine Arts, Livingston, MT.**

AGES II, OIL, 36 X 57.

