

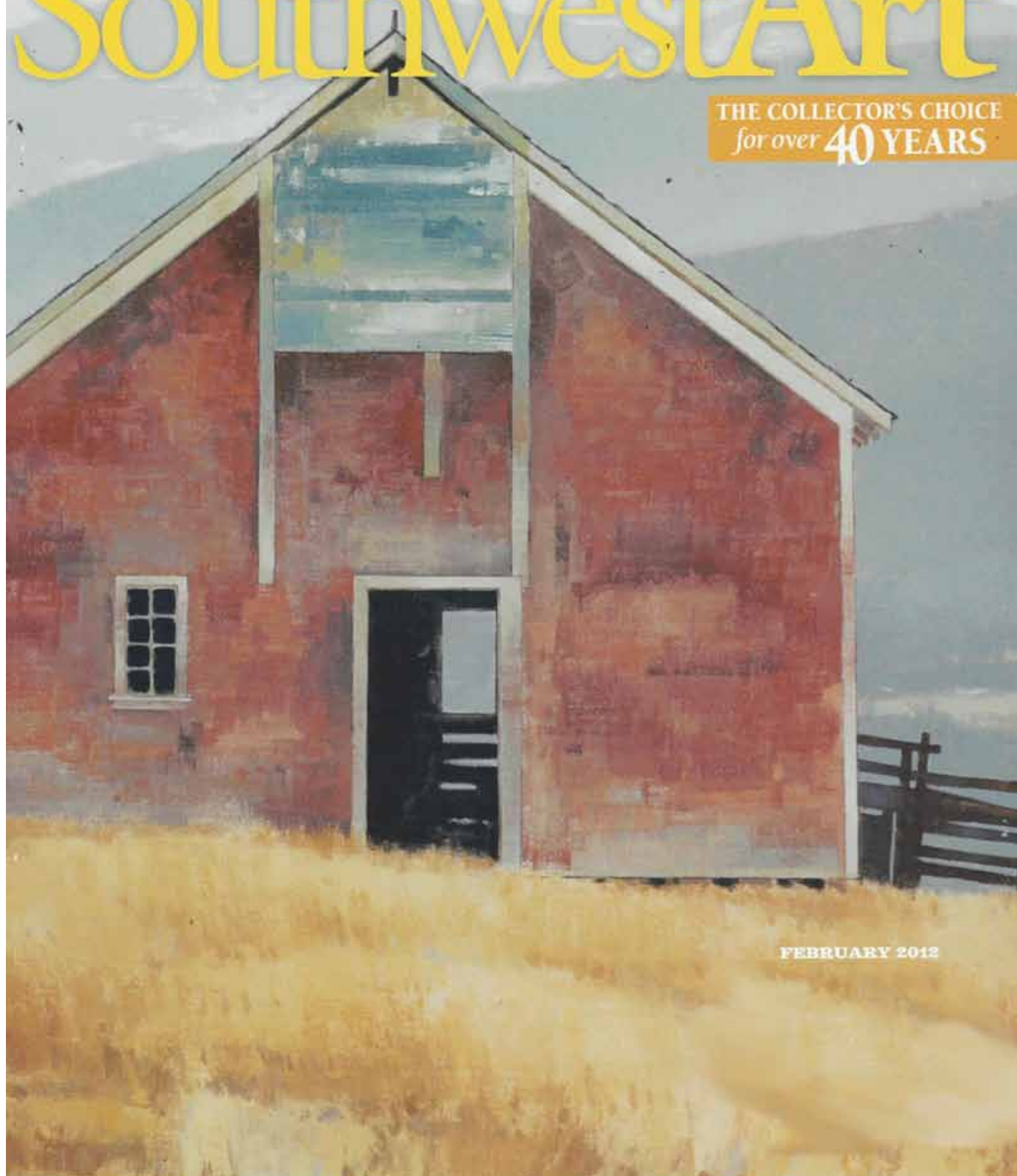
A Tour of George
Carlson's Studio

Special Focus: The
Western Landscape

Rising Star Kyle Sims'
Wildlife Paintings

Southwest Art

THE COLLECTOR'S CHOICE
for over 40 YEARS



FEBRUARY 2012

Landscape painter **J. Chris Morel**
chooses a painterly path

the road taken

BY MARK MUSSARI

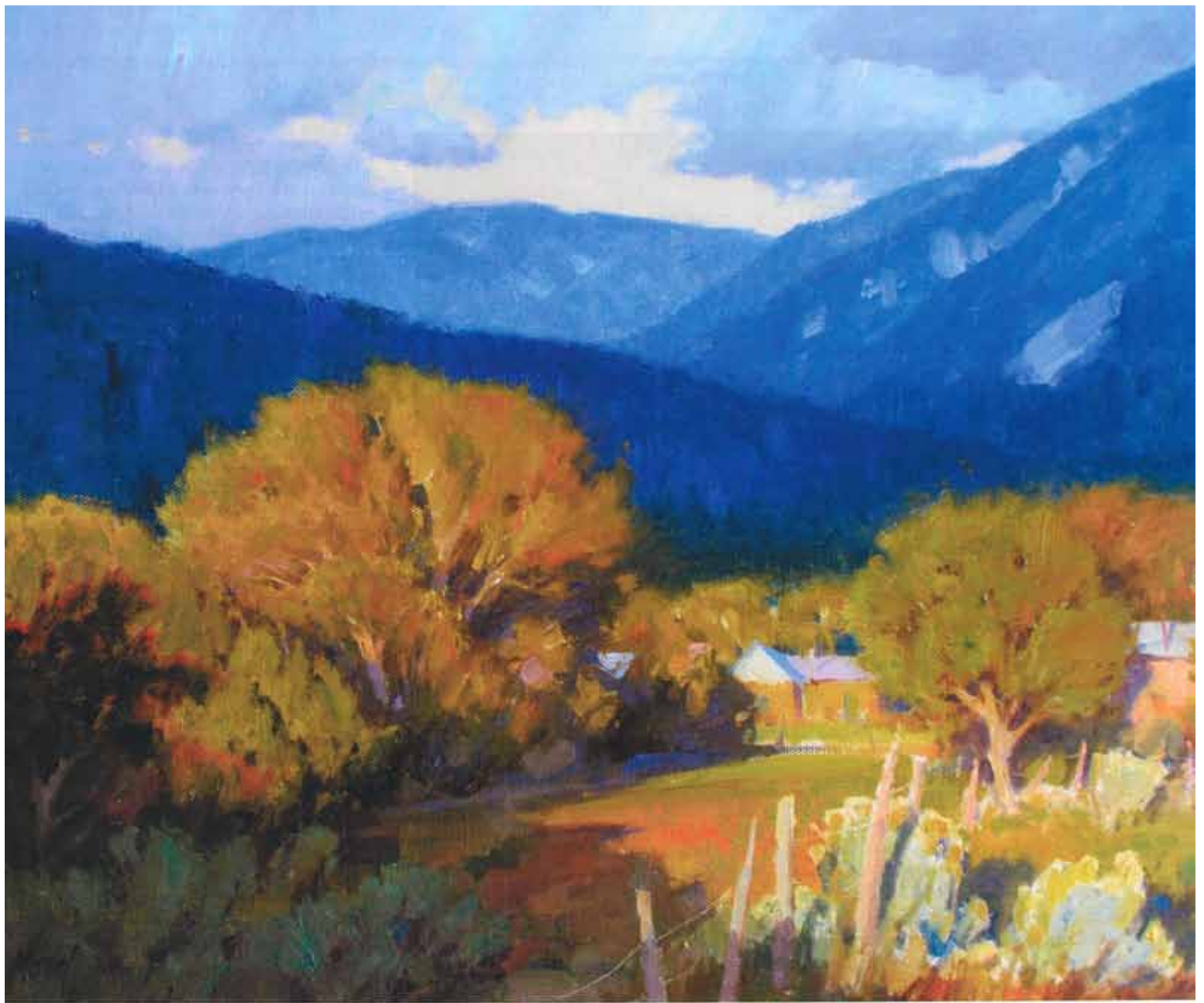


Mora Valley, oil, 18 x 20.

FOR MANY fine artists, life presents a choice between making a living and making art. For the lucky few, the two paths merge successfully. Just ask New Mexico landscape painter J. Chris Morel, who considers himself one of the fortunate ones. At several points in his career, Morel could have chosen a more commercial—and perhaps more lucrative—path. But he remained true to his love for landscapes, and that choice has made all the difference.

Joseph Christopher Morel was born in Washington, DC, and raised in Mount Airy, MD. “I come from a family of six kids,” he says. “I was that kid who was always drawing.” His father, who worked for the National Institutes of Health in DC, would bring home large sheets of paper that were used for X-rays so that young Chris could draw on them. “My mother also encouraged me,” he remembers. “She would buy art supplies, like tempera paints and watercolors.” Although his classes in Catholic grade school were mostly academic, Morel says he still had the opportunity “to do as much art as I could.” Attending public high school, he took classes in drawing, painting, and ceramics; in addition, he worked six days a week at a local thoroughbred farm, mucking stables and soaking in the rural landscape that first inspired his art.

Also drawn to music from an early age, Morel studied piano as a child and played guitar in his teen years. “Music and art—it’s the same groove,” he says today. “In high school I figured I’d build houses and start a rock ‘n’ roll band.” His mother had other plans for his future, however. Recognizing her son’s talent and determined to see him go to college, she filled out an application for Towson University in Baltimore. “She saw my art talent as my best asset,” explains Morel, “one that would lead to a saner lifestyle.” At Towson, the budding artist studied life drawing, ceramics, and sculpture (classes he now



Taos Blues, oil, 20 x 24.

refers to as “good therapeutic stuff” because they allowed him to dabble in a variety of art disciplines before deciding on the brush and canvas). Throughout college he continued to play in bands: “We rocked our way through college playing parties and generally making noise.”

In his senior year, Morel was introduced to painting *en plein air*. “We would go out and paint, then bring back our work for critiques,” he says. At the time, he was drawn to the landscapes he knew and loved growing up, the farms and fertile valleys of the Northeast. “[The experience became] part and parcel of who I was. [It] forced me to learn how to paint on location,” he says.

After obtaining his BFA with a concentration in watercolor in 1980, Morel pursued a career in commercial art. “I was painting signs, lettering trucks, and working as a graphic artist,” he remembers. Today, he still sees the emphasis on composition and visual balance in commercial art as a positive influence on his fine art. “You learn how to prioritize,” he says about graphic work, “and you learn to compose shapes. It’s like a map, and you are trying to get viewers to rest their focus on certain places on the map.”

In 1985, Morel moved to Austin, TX,



representation

Nedra Matteucci Gallery,
Santa Fe, NM; **Total Arts
Gallery,** Taos, NM.

upcoming shows

Featured artist, **Nedra Matteucci
Gallery,** February 4-25.

Maynard Dixon Country, Mount
Carmel, UT, August.



Winter Afternoon, oil, 16 x 20.

where he worked as an illustrator for the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. His work appeared in the department's magazine and on official Texas hunting and fishing stamps. But in 1988 Morel was at home recuperating from a short illness when he realized that the time had come to make a change. "I decided to make a leap of faith and become a fine artist," he says. And so, still working predominantly in watercolors, he began to exhibit his paintings at art shows and festivals. And he fell in love with the drama and grandeur of the western landscape. "I began to travel and paint—from Oklahoma to Arizona to California," he says. "I collected names and addresses of any and all who were interested in my work. I marketed to them persistently with letters, phone calls, and photos."

At one point Morel took a trip to Santa Barbara, CA, where his sister lived. Inspired by the Mediterranean-style villas found in abundance in that area of California, he began to create paintings of villas for a publishing house. "There was a gigantic market for the prints," he says. But by this time, Morel had moved to Taos and had fallen in love with the high-desert mountain landscape. "My in-

terest had changed because of my change in location," Morel explains. "But in some ways, I was still painting like an illustrator." In his heart, he knew what he had to do and eventually stopped producing the more commercially successful villa scenes to focus on the landscape work that inspired him. "I wanted to follow my gut, my own path," he adds. Increasingly, he began to work in oils.

IN 1994, Morel received a phone call that changed his life. "I got a call from an artist friend who had moved to Taos and was doing quite well," he recalls. The friend told Morel about a small studio/gallery space that was available in the shadow of the historic San Francisco de Asis Mission Church in nearby Ranchos de Taos. It would be the first of three galleries Morel ran until turning his attention solely to his painting in 1998.

"Moving to Taos changed my art dramatically," he ob-

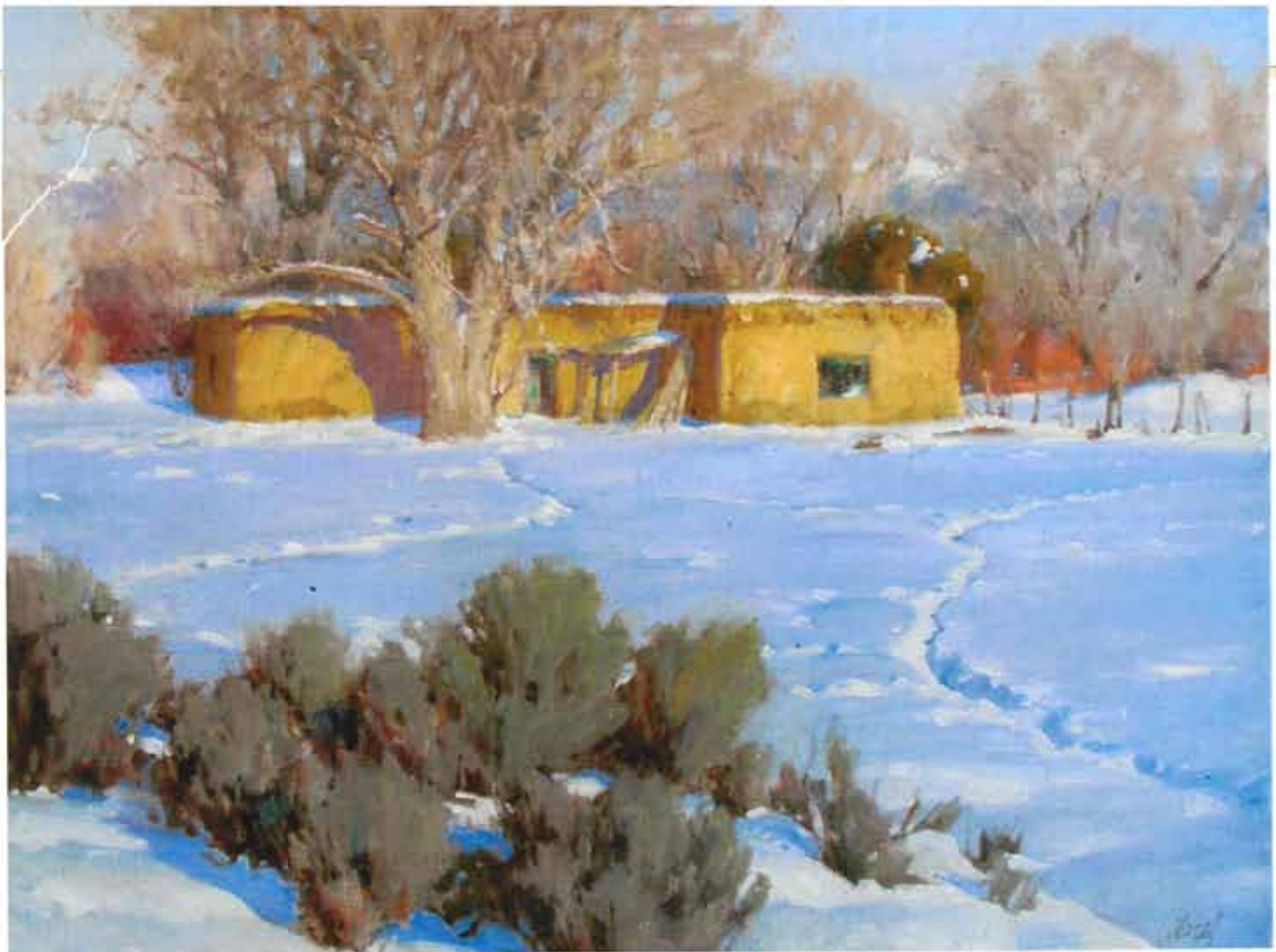
serves. "For the first seven or eight years after moving here, I was painting outside on location 75 percent of the time. I was really learning to see color, light, atmosphere, and the four seasons directly from life—and everything it encompasses. When you go outside to paint, you don't have time to dilly-dally or overthink things. It creates a tremendous editing process in your head and gets you down to the essentials." Today, Morel's richly colored landscapes reveal an intimate knowledge of the northern New Mexico landscape and a deft hand at rendering impressionistic canvases that are heavily dependent on tone and contrast.

Describing his process, Morel says that he usually begins by taking photographs and painting preliminary sketches on location. He creates larger versions of the same scenes when he's back in the studio. "I find it rejuvenating to transport that energy from outdoors into bigger pieces," he says. "You learn to bring some of that abbreviated beauty into your canvas. That's where the art lies." And Morel is never at a loss for inspiration in the Southwest. "The West just takes my breath away," he affirms. "The drama occurs on a huge scale in the western landscape."

Influenced by American Impressionists, such as Frederick Childe Hassam and William Merritt Chase, Morel brings both a strong sensitivity to light and a loose, expressive brush stroke to his canvases. **TAOS BLUES** offers a striking example of his approach. "I was out in the Taos Valley right after a lot of storms had



Summer Adobe, oil, 14 x 16.



Talpa Adobe, oil, 24 x 30.

passed,” recalls Morel. “It was spring—but there was still snow on the mountains. The storms cleared and then the sun broke through.” The artist depicts the mountains in deep layers of indigo, contrasting sharply with the warmth of the afternoon light in the foreground. Warm foliage in orange and green balances the cool background shades, affording the canvas a strong sense of chromatic completion. “It’s that contrast between warm and cool” that appeals to him, he adds. “The drama happens in the landscape as the light changes temperature throughout the day.”

In TALPA ADOBE, a wintry depiction of an old adobe home, the color is more subtle. Deep oranges depict some willows behind the house, and a touch of blue-green appears on the home’s lintels and doorway. “This painting is mostly about that time of day when the angle of winter light coats the snow in a blue-violet glow,” Morel explains. The artist has rendered the adobe structure in warm yellow

low tones that contrast with the cooler blues. In front of the house, the painter tightens his brush strokes to capture the intricacies of a winter cottonwood, whereas the more distant trees appear almost a blur. He began with some photos and a quick 8-by-10-inch study *en plein air*. In the studio he created a vivid chromatic interplay, making the adobe structure more organic to the overall painting.

MOREL MAINTAINS a studio in his home in the mountains outside of Taos—although he is in the process of building a new 800-square-foot studio with direct north light. “I work as much as I can,” he says, “at least three days a week. I paint mostly in the mornings because, for me, it’s the most conducive time for good work.” Morel has three children—two older boys, who no longer live at home, and a younger daughter—who also vie for his daylight hours.

Morel has won both the Best of Show

Golden Thunderbird Award (in 2007) and the Founders Award (in 2011) at the Maynard Dixon Country invitational in Mount Carmel, UT. In 2008 he was awarded the blue ribbon in oil painting at the annual Phippen Museum Western Art Show and Sale in Prescott, AZ. For more than a decade he has also been teaching plein-air painting.

“At this point in my career,” Morel says, “I have become clearly convinced that, most importantly, I must always be a student of painting. I want to build on the knowledge I’ve acquired and continue to grow and improve my skills so I can make better paintings. I’m a work in progress.” ❖

Mark Mussari is a freelance writer, translator, and scholar and the author of numerous educational books.

See more of Morel’s paintings at
www.southwestart.com/featured/morel-jc-feb2012.