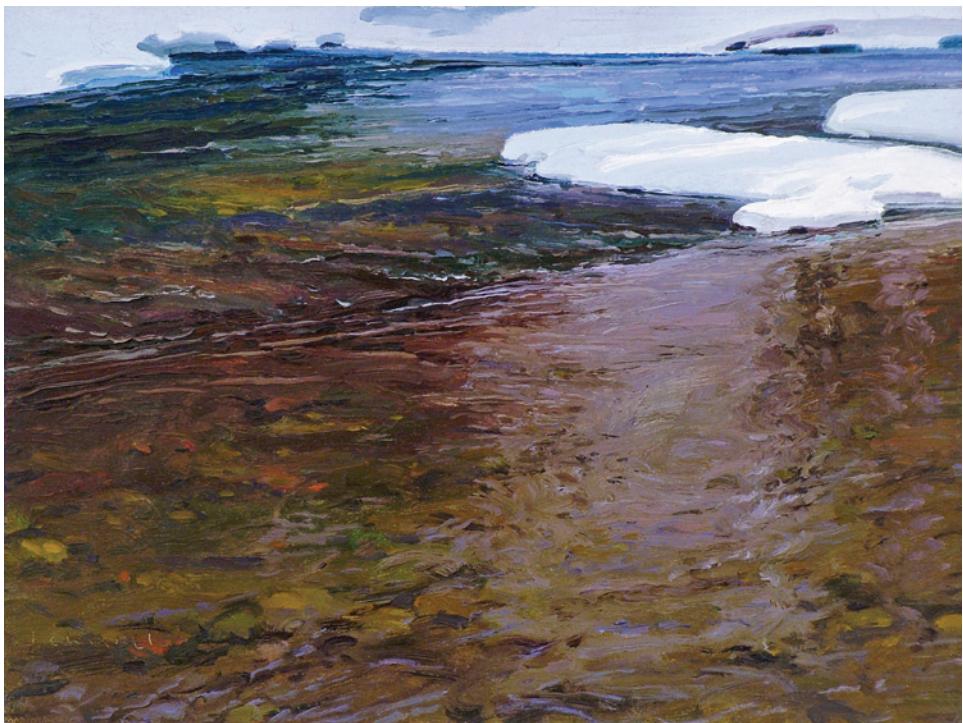


On The Spot

Oil painter Len Chmiel thrives on chaos. Inside his adobe-clad studio in Hotchkiss, packing crates, art supplies and current and past works surround the creative space of the famed Western artist. “It’s organized chaos, which is also how I’d describe my painting style,” he says.

Every year, Len presents his latest work at three or four prestigious shows, including the National Western Art Exhibit in Denver, Masters of the



Courtesy Len Chmiel

"Gin Clear," 12"X16" oil, is on display at the Steamboat Art Museum on Lincoln Avenue until Saturday, April 9, during the Len Chmiel Retrospective.



Courtesy Len Chmiel

"Absolutely Glorious," 12"X16" oil, was painted on Rabbit Ears Pass during October 1992.

American West at the Autry Museum in Los Angeles, California, and the Maynard Dixon Country Show and paint-out in southern Utah.

Throughout this winter, visitors to the Steamboat Art Museum also have the chance to experience a rare glimpse into Len’s lifetime of works at Len Chmiel: A Retrospective. The exhibit is a fabulous hodgepodge of profiles and landscapes, and includes one of his first drawings as an 11-year-old boy, a favorite depiction of aspen trees on Rabbit Ears Pass and a selection of works on loan from collectors throughout the country.

Raised in Southern California, Len started out as a technical illustrator for Hughes Aircraft while attending night school at the Art Center College of Design, then located in West Los Angeles. In 1968 he left Hughes and set up as a freelance illustrator and designer masterminding advertising campaigns for clients including Safeway and Starkist Tuna. In 1971 he opted to make a living as a painter, moving to Colorado in 1971. "I wanted to decide what I get to paint, instead of designing someone else's ideas," Len explains.

Modest, despite critical acclaim within the art world, Len prefers to call himself a painter who has made a career as an "on-the-spotter." "The term 'artist' comes with a lot of baggage, and I don't like the use of en plein air. That's a marketing tool referring to French painters, who are all dead," he quips. He has traveled the world painting landscapes in his trademark abstract style, pulling over at roadsides or on rivers banks, wherever he feels inspired.

In recent years, he has been concentrating on larger pieces created within his studio, but all his work starts as small on-site paintings. "What I do outdoors is the impetus for larger paintings," he says. Smaller works are often the springboard for sizeable commissions, such as an 11'X4' piece titled "Vintage Finale" that now hangs in the dining room of one of the founders of USA Today.

Looking out from his home and studio to a 360-degree vista that spans over the North Fork Valley on the Western Slope, Len does not always have to travel to find the inspiration he draws from landscapes and the natural world. At home his artistic mind is stimulated when tending to his one-acre vineyard, 25-tree fruit orchard and substantial vegetable garden. "I was once told, find what sells then keep painting and make it your niche. Not me, I am interested in everything. I don't want to keep painting the same things," he says.

Judging by his works on display at the Steamboat Art Museum, Len Chmiel is true to his word.