

When Artists and Collectors Look at Paintings Together

BY LINDA WILLIAMS



The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.
— Marcel Proust

August 18, 2011, witnessed the launch of a memorable three-day exhibition and symposium at the Center for the Arts in Jackson, Wyoming. By all accounts, *Artistic Vision* achieved its goal of giving the invited audience of more than 80 collectors a deeper understanding of the creative process, and also of the arts not as a luxury, but as essential to our society's well-being. Organized by Darell Tunnick of Montana, the gathering featured the nationally recognized painters Clyde Aspevig, Christopher Blossom, Len Chmiel, Daniel Pinkham, and Tucker Smith. (Their colleague George Carlson was represented in the exhibition, but could not attend in person.) Also participating was the distinguished pianist and composer Philip Aaberg.

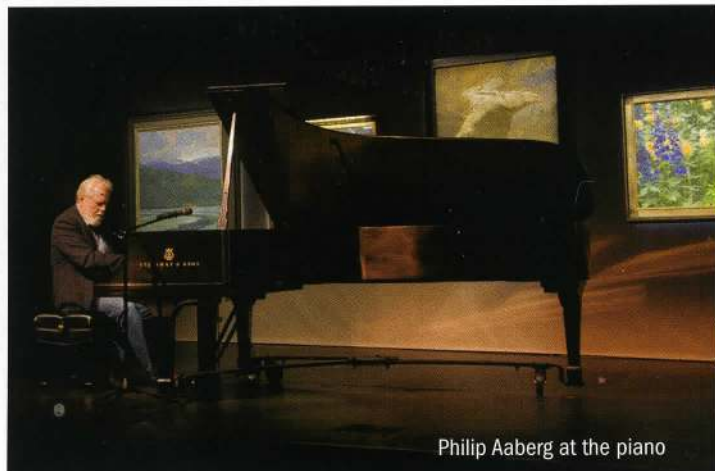
On opening night, guests were formally welcomed in the Center's auditorium, on the stage of which one canvas by each painter had been expertly lit on a black curtain. Once they were seated in front of their creations, the artists were introduced by Byron Price, director of the University of Oklahoma's Charles M. Russell Center for the Study of Art of the American West. He cited a painting by Charlie Russell in which a cow and calf bear different brands; this discrepancy vexes viewers only



Standing at the podium, Byron Price welcomes (left to right) Len Chmiel, Daniel Pinkham, Tucker Smith, Christopher Blossom, and Clyde Aspevig.

until they learn that the picture was painted around the time Russell and his wife adopted their son, Jack. Price reminded the audience that this and most other artworks usually have much more to say than what's on the surface, that an artwork becomes of enduring interest only when we look beyond its ostensible subject matter. He then asserted that all of the artists onstage "have something to say and are saying it. They are heirs to tradition, but not tradition-bound." Guests were then invited to go behind the curtain to view five additional works by each of the painters. Everyone mixed freely and the artists gladly answered guests' questions about their work.

The next morning, Clyde Aspevig presented a canvas only two-thirds completed and asked the audience how he might finish it. With palette and brush, he proceeded to demonstrate the significance of thoughtful placement of various elements, then boldly changed the painting's focal point to show how quickly he can destroy a work. His ultimate goal as an artist, Aspevig explained, is for viewers to understand and participate in how he sees the work himself. He then spoke of our



Philip Aaberg at the piano

Opposite page:
Clyde Aspevig (b. 1951)
Corner of the Garden
2011, Oil on canvas, 40 x 36 in.
Private collection





Christopher Blossom (b. 1956)
Schooner Monitor Off Eastern Point
 2007, Oil on linen, 22 x 36 in.
 Private collection

relationship to the natural world, referencing Denis Dutton's argument, in his recent book *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution*, that art is innate and expressive of human nature.

Aspevig also noted the emotional pull created in a painting by "storytelling." He suggested that viewers instinctively dissect why an artist has made the work as he has, bringing their own experiences

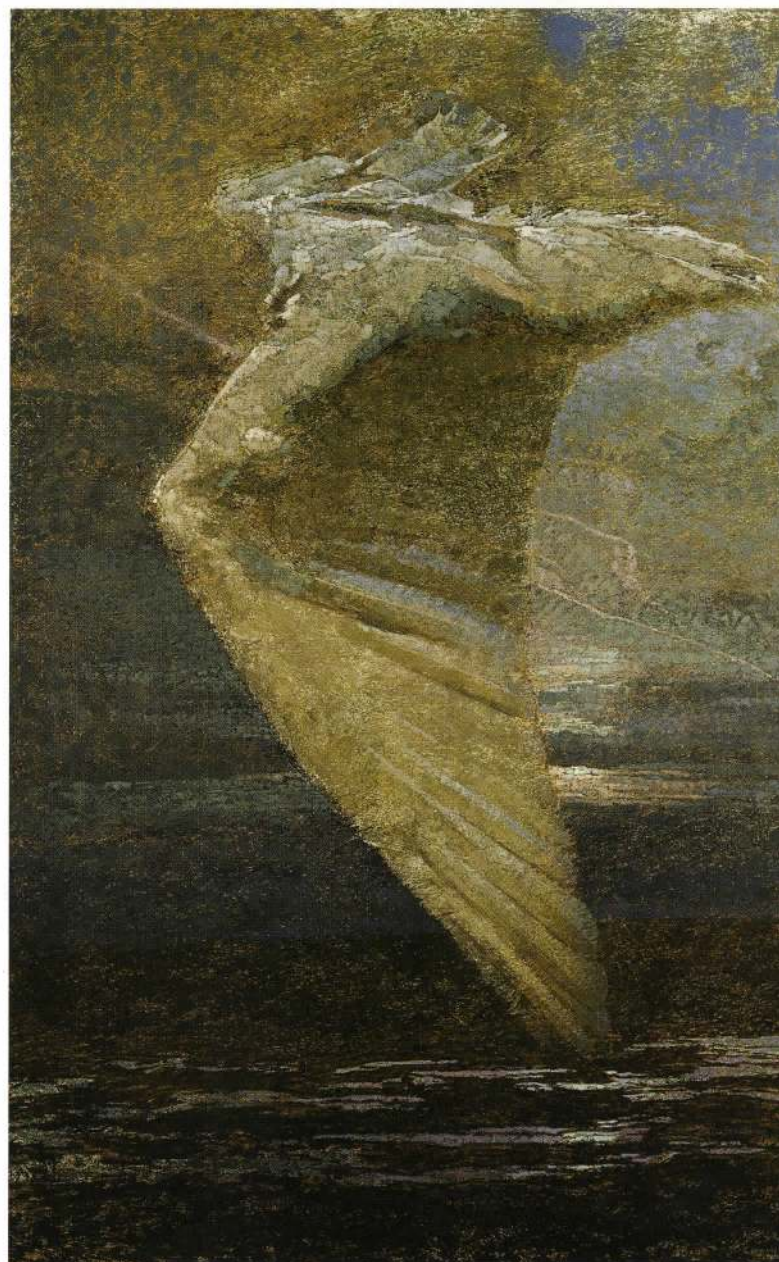
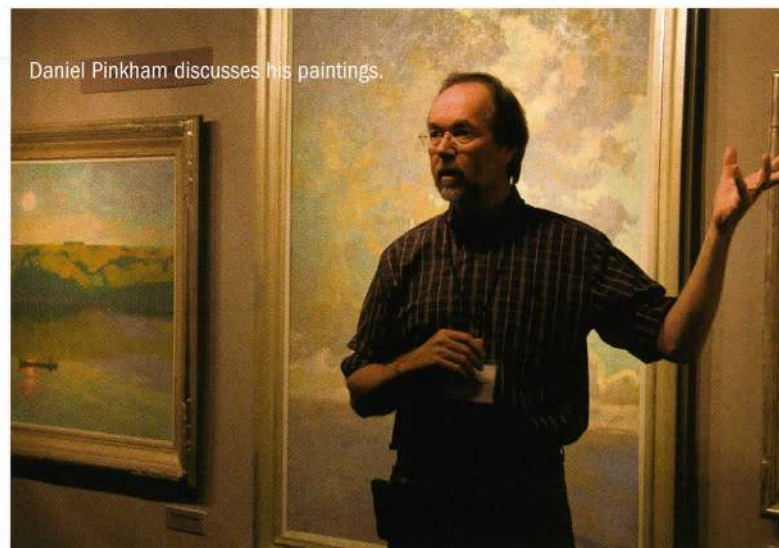
and perceptions to the picture. Painters, he said, should create "complex simplicity, breaking everything down to big shapes and how they relate, before any detail is added." Sensitivity to the subject is also essential, and the artist must always ask himself, "Is this work truthful?"

Len Chmiel then gave an eloquent presentation on the importance of composition, color, temperature, and texture, illustrating his points with historical masterworks. He views nature as organized chaos, and believes we must train ourselves to observe: "Be delighted about what you see." Regarding subject matter, Chmiel begins with a concept, and prefers an area of interest to a focal point. "I'm not looking for anything," he explained. "What I 'find' is what I paint."



The second day concluded with a dynamic piano recital and talk by Philip Aaberg. He opened with *High Plains*, his glorious homage to his home state of Montana. Aaberg explained that Montana is full of wind and air, and that these needed to feature in the composition. There are three tools a composer has at his disposal: repetition, variation, and sequence. Although the brain likes repetition, it gets bored easily and

George Carlson (b. 1940)
Passage at Dusk
 2007, Oil on canvas, 62 x 43 in.
 National Museum of Wildlife Art, Jackson Hole





Len Chmiel (b. 1942)

Kiftsgate Border

2008, Oil on canvas, 31 x 28 in.

Private collection

moderated by Byron Price. All of the artists acknowledged their debt to earlier masters; Smith noted that his favorites tend to be from the late 19th century and early 20th century, among them George Bellows, Ernest Blumenschein, Herbert Dunton, Mariano Fortuny, Frank Tenney Johnson, Alfred Munnings, Carl Rungius, John Singer Sargent, Anders Zorn, and Heinrich von Zügel.

Blossom cited such heroes as Frank W. Benson, William Merritt Chase, Dean Cornwell, Isaac Levitan, Howard Pyle, Joaquín Sorolla, J.W. Waterhouse, James McN. Whistler, N.C. Wyeth, plus A.Y. Jackson and Tom Thomson from Canada's Group of Seven. Pinkham hailed the sensitivity evident in Andrew Wyeth's art. He perceives this master's great humanity even when no figure is depicted, and sees his paintings as full of life, love, spirit, intimacy, and honesty. Having studied with Sergei Bongart ("a romantic Russian — emotional, spontaneous, and fresh"), Pinkham also reveres the works of Levitan, Albert Pinkham Ryder, and John Henry Twachtman.

Audience members were then invited to return backstage to hear each

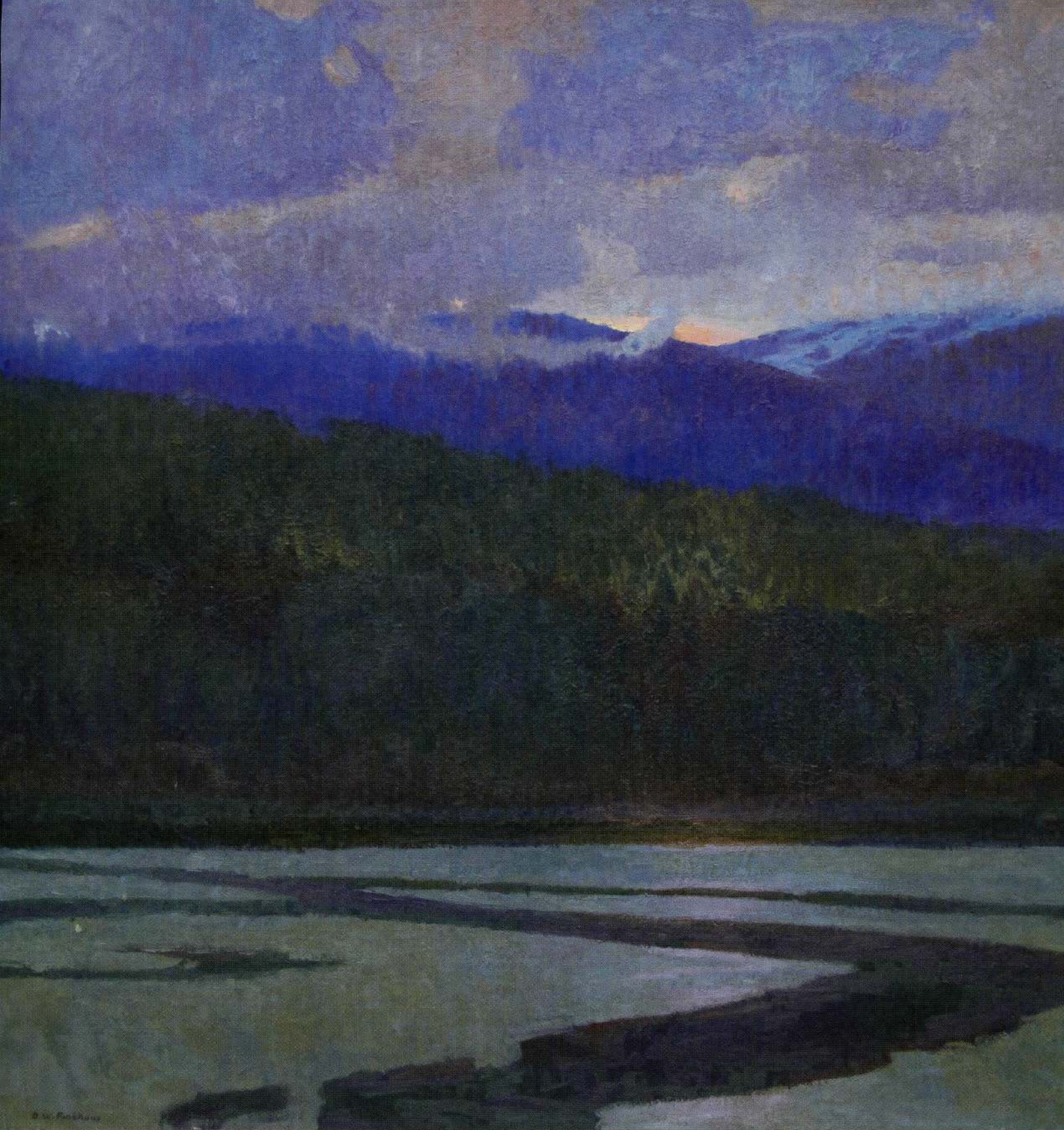
thus also craves variation. Aaberg noted that musicians must frame their performances with silence.

After performing his own compositions, Aaberg proceeded to play an impromptu piece for each of the six paintings displayed onstage. Amazingly, he had never seen any of them before, yet his profound insights into each brought many in the audience to tears. After each musical passage, the relevant painter described his own inner emotional, aesthetic, and intellectual dialogue while he created the picture. Aaberg's presentation powerfully reinforced Aspegiv's earlier points about the close interconnections of art and music, about how he hears music in the landscape as he paints, and about how visual art relies just as much on the right mix of structure and emotion as music does.

The symposium's final day opened with a talk by Peter Kloman of the American Art department at Christie's on issues of valuation, authenticity, and restoration, as well as how to buy and sell art — at auctions and elsewhere. Next came a panel discussion featuring Tucker Smith, Christopher Blossom, and Daniel Pinkham,



Clyde Aspegiv discusses his paintings.



Daniel W. Pinkham (b. 1952)
Hope and Truth
2011, Oil on canvas, 40 x 40 in.
Private collection



Tucker Smith (b. 1940)
Moose at Dean Lake
 2010, Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 in.
 Private collection

artist discuss his five artworks on display. Chmiel spoke of that crucial “moment of recognition, when you finally ‘see’ your painting,” and said he prefers to finish paintings outdoors, as “they are not the same once I go into the studio.” Aspevig said he enjoys “land snorkeling” — observing the prairie as if it were a coral reef. He claims he is “symbolizing nature while retaining the realist tradition; when you totally abstract, you have to intuit, but in representation you retain the intellectual aspect.” Pinkham noted that a painter has three tools at his disposal (value, color, and temperature). When one is eliminated, he exaggerates one of the remaining two. Blossom observed how something as simple as light hitting an ocean wave can mark the start of a grand marine painting.

In his eloquent foreword to the exhibition catalogue, Price writes that each of the participating artists “has developed his own distinctive and transcendent ‘artistic vision.’ Although deeply rooted in time, place, and tradition, none is a slave to circumstance or condition. Instead, each seeks truth and comes to terms with the world through

the creative process. Each shares the pain and pleasure of their artistic journeys in every brush stroke, color choice, and emotion rendered. Guided by inner vision, the results are sometimes bright and sometimes somber, but almost always magical.”

During informal conversation after the symposium ended, it became clear that most attendees had begun to recognize the subtle differences between art that is “good” and art that is “great.”

Energized by their encounters with great art and music, it is likely that most of these collectors have been seeing their paintings at home through new eyes ever since. ■

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All event photos courtesy Jerolyn Dirks

Editor’s Note: The second annual *Artistic Vision* exhibition and symposium is scheduled for August 9–11, 2012, at Jackson’s Center for the Arts. For details, please contact darell@clydeaspevig.com. Like the first edition, its proceeds will benefit Arts Without Boundaries, a nonprofit community outreach program that facilitates workshops, residencies, concerts, and instruction by performing and visual artists.