

Aaron Schuerr: Himself Surprised

*Livingston painter emerging
as an uncommon Montana artist*

BY SAM CURTIS

On a sizzling July morning in Livingston, the basement studio of Aaron and Lynelle Schuerr's home is a cool refuge from the heat and glare out in the street. Oil color field studies and charcoal drawings stand propped in slots and stacked on shelves. Pastels lay under glass. Two small oils that Aaron painted near Mt. Blackmore rest on an easel. But most of his recent works – over 30 pastels and oils – are hanging in a show at Chaparral Fine Art in Bozeman.

Last December, Aaron quit his “day job” in Bozeman and moved his family to Livingston where a small new art studio is taking shape behind their house. Worried about the cost of the studio, Aaron was going to put off the project. But his father received a job bonus and insisted he couldn't think of anything to spend the money on but the studio. So, Aaron's dad and next-door neighbor Steve Krumm are sawing and hammering on the studio's interior. Aaron's family and friends have become a formidable cheering section for his career, which brings a new eye to the landscape of Western plein air painting.

“AUTUMN DANCE” 19”X 16” PASTEL



"MOUNTAIN WEATHER" 24"X 30" OIL

Although only 31, Aaron has been committed to art for 23 years. "There was actually a day when I was 8 that I realized I was going to be an artist," he says. It happened that a lady who lived down the street from his home in Illinois was at his house designing a wildcat mascot for his school. Aaron watched her work, picked up a pencil, looked at some of the books she was using for references and drew a mountain lion. "It was the first thing I'd done that surprised everyone, including me."

By the time Aaron was 18, he was studying at the Chicago Art Institute. Enamored with Dada, the Surrealists and early 20th Century European artists, he created abstract paintings and dabbled in installation and performance art. But halfway through his second year at the Art Institute he had the chance to join an exchange program with Duncan

of Jordanstone College of Art in Scotland. It was a pivotal journey.

"It's strange to go to another country and feel more at home there than in your own country," Aaron says. "But Scotland is very open socially, and the people have a great sense of humor with an edge of sarcasm, like my Dad's side of the family. So, I felt like I was related to all these people. I knew I was getting along with them because they gave me a good-natured hard time. I was their token Yank."

Aaron was still doing studio artwork, collecting found objects, flotsam and jetsam he discovered in the local shipyard, and arranging them into still lifes that looked almost abstract in his rendering of them in charcoal drawings and oil paintings. In his free time, he hiked and climbed in Scotland's rugged landscapes.

Returning to the Chicago Art Institute after a year abroad, Aaron felt like he'd been dropped on his head. His classes met only once a week, and he was lonely. He missed the companionship and the scenery of Scotland. At the end of the semester, he called his professors at Duncan of Jordanstone and asked if he could return. They said yes, never expecting what would happen.

"Shortly after I got back, I took a trip to a beach near Saint Andrews, the world's oldest golf course, with its historic skyline and headlands. It was the first time I'd done any art on location. I'd been doing all this clever, ironic work in the studio. But I did this little charcoal drawing of the skyline of Saint Andrews, and it was just such an epiphany for me. I thought the drawing was the most honest and straightforward thing I'd ever done."

So, on the verge of his fourth and final year of college, expected to put together a show of his work that would be the basis of his degree, Aaron decided to completely change his

artistic directions. He was going to be a landscape artist.

"My professors were dismayed. But after being out in that Scottish countryside I just couldn't go back to what I'd been doing," Aaron recalls.

He launched furiously into making charcoal drawings on location and started to bring a few pastels along to add extra value to his drawings. He threw more pastels in every time he went out. By the middle of his degree year, he was doing work that was more pastel than charcoal, although he'd never had any serious instruction in the medium.

When Aaron finally hung his completed degree show, it almost sold out, and several galleries offered to represent him. But college was over; it was time to come home. Although, after bonding with the Scottish countryside, he knew he couldn't go back to Illinois. "If I hadn't known Montana existed I would have found some way to stay in Scotland," Aaron admits.

Montana had more allure than its landscapes, however; it was also home of his wife-to-be. Within a year of his arrival



"PAINTED SKY" 13" X 18" PASTEL

in Bozeman, Aaron and Lynelle were married, Aaron was waiting tables to subsidize his art career and Chaparral Fine Art was showing his work.

As a pastelist in a community of artists working mainly in oils, Aaron tended to work alone at first. "With oils you have a pallet to work with," he says. "With pastels you create the color you want with four or five layers of different colors. That's part of what makes pastels so beautiful, I think."

But Aaron soon began to realize that despite the difference in their mediums there was a lot to learn from other artists, and he started seeking their company. "I'm now part of the Montana Painters' Alliance, a group of artists from across the state that paints outside. It's a great learning tool when three or four of you are standing shoulder to shoulder painting the same scene."

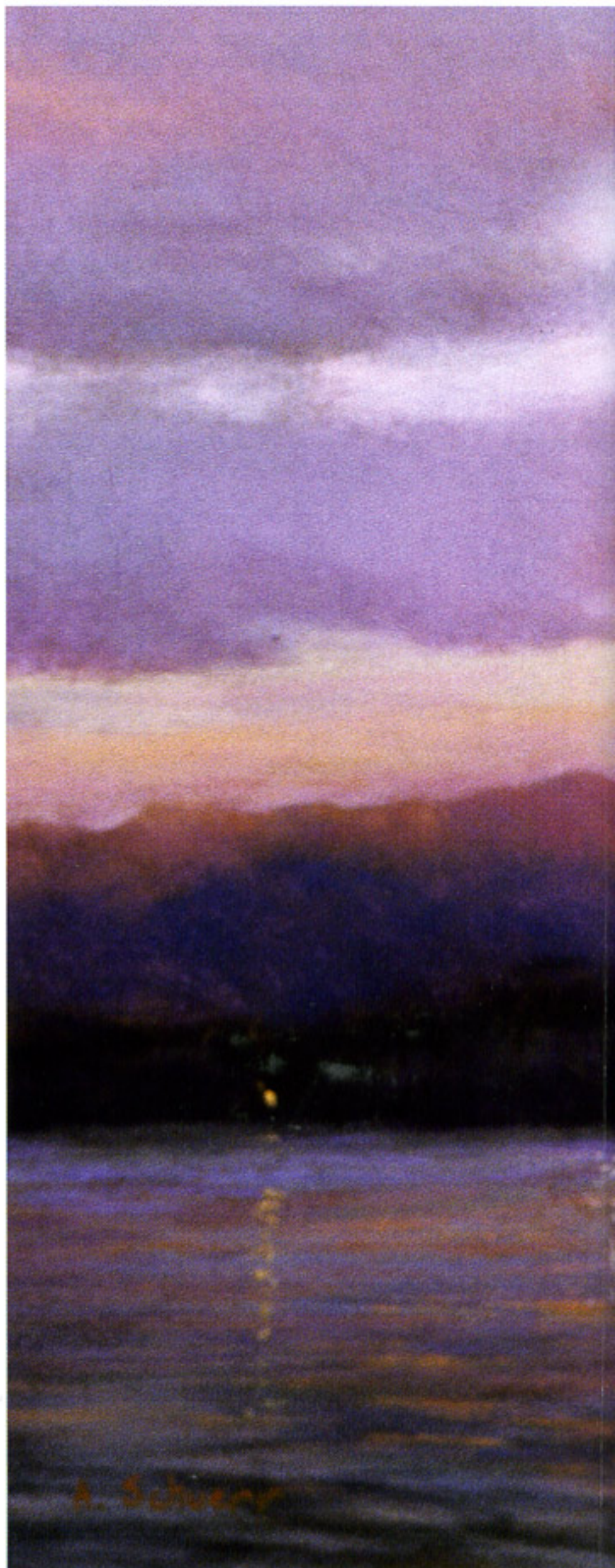
Gayla Wiedenheft, an equine oil painter who has followed the evolution of Aaron's work for nine years, says: "Aaron is so open to learning from other artists that he has an on-going student mentality that keeps him learning and exploring new territory, and that's what keeps his work so fresh."

One of the things Aaron has learned over the years is that working in the field with pastels presents some real challenges, from all the gear he has to lug along to pastels and paper ruined by rain, sleet and snow. So, he now works with oils when he's on location.

"With plein air painting, the worst weather usually creates the most beautiful environment for good paintings," Aaron says. "But I respond to adverse weather; it almost feels like I'm chasing a tornado when I'm painting in a storm. Weather sharpens my focus. I'm chasing something that is transient and uncooperative. If I'm 'getting it,' it almost feels like an adrenaline rush. I forget myself, forget the cold fingers and wet palette. I am often transcendently happy when I am physically miserable. For me this dichotomy sums up why it is so important to 'be there' and why a photo won't do.

"When I return to the studio I seek to describe my relationship to the environment. I'm not just trying to paint a pretty picture; I'm trying to tell you what it was like to be there. For example, a group of us recently went to Red Lodge to paint, and there were storms coming off the Beartooths. The wind was blowing so hard my paint was getting gritty from flying sand. But it is one of my favorite field studies."

Sometimes Aaron will hang a field study in a gallery



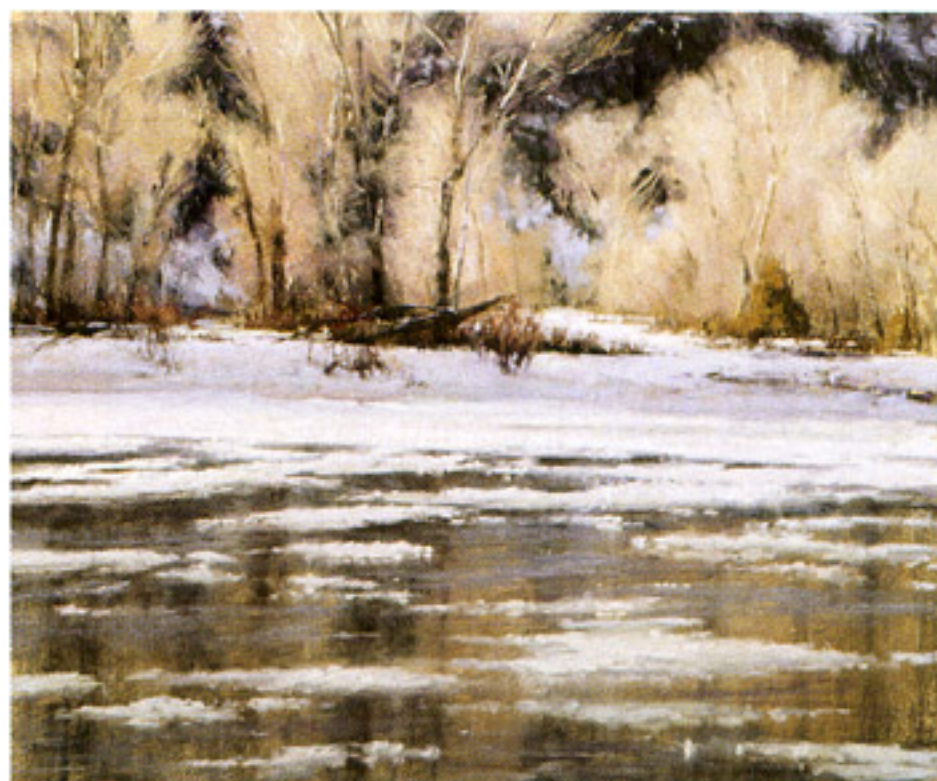


show, but more often it becomes reference material for work he completes in his studio. Working on location is like improvising music in a jam session because you're always responding to the changing environment, Aaron says. But studio work is more like composing music.

"In the field I have to decide the moment, with its unique intensity and shape of light and shadows, that I want to build everything around. Over time I've developed a process, working the dark toward the light, trying to find the center of focus. What's interesting about working on location is you're responding to the changing light, shadow and atmosphere that are out there. But as the painting progresses, back in the studio, you start responding more in terms of the dynamic within the painting itself."

When Aaron has completed a piece, says Meg Sullivan of Chaparral Fine Art, "you notice that his technique focuses on the distinctive and changing light across the landscape. Every element in his composition is a light-bearing vehicle, and this gives his works a wonderful luminosity."

In "Ice Flows on Yellowstone," a pastel featured in Aaron's recent Chaparral show, he says he was trying to capture a moment in the flux of shadow and sunlight that became almost an abstraction in his treatment of it. "I was trying not to over detail the trees so you would notice the beautiful relationship between shapes, between dark and light. Often I'm looking at the landscape as a vehicle to create beautiful shapes and harmonies. So, even though



"SPRING ICE" 18"X 24" OIL

it's a representational painting, your appreciation of it in some way may be more on the abstract level."

When working on a studio piece, Aaron may have a field study, a charcoal drawing and half a dozen photographs to use as references. "Photos are pretty crude eyes. They tend to wash out the light areas and make shadows black, but they're useful tools if you recognize their limitations. Charcoal lets me focus on composition and values without messing with color. Color can keep you from getting a good sense of form and composition to begin with. A charcoal drawing gives me a strong image to start with, so I feel more confident to investigate light and to play with color later."

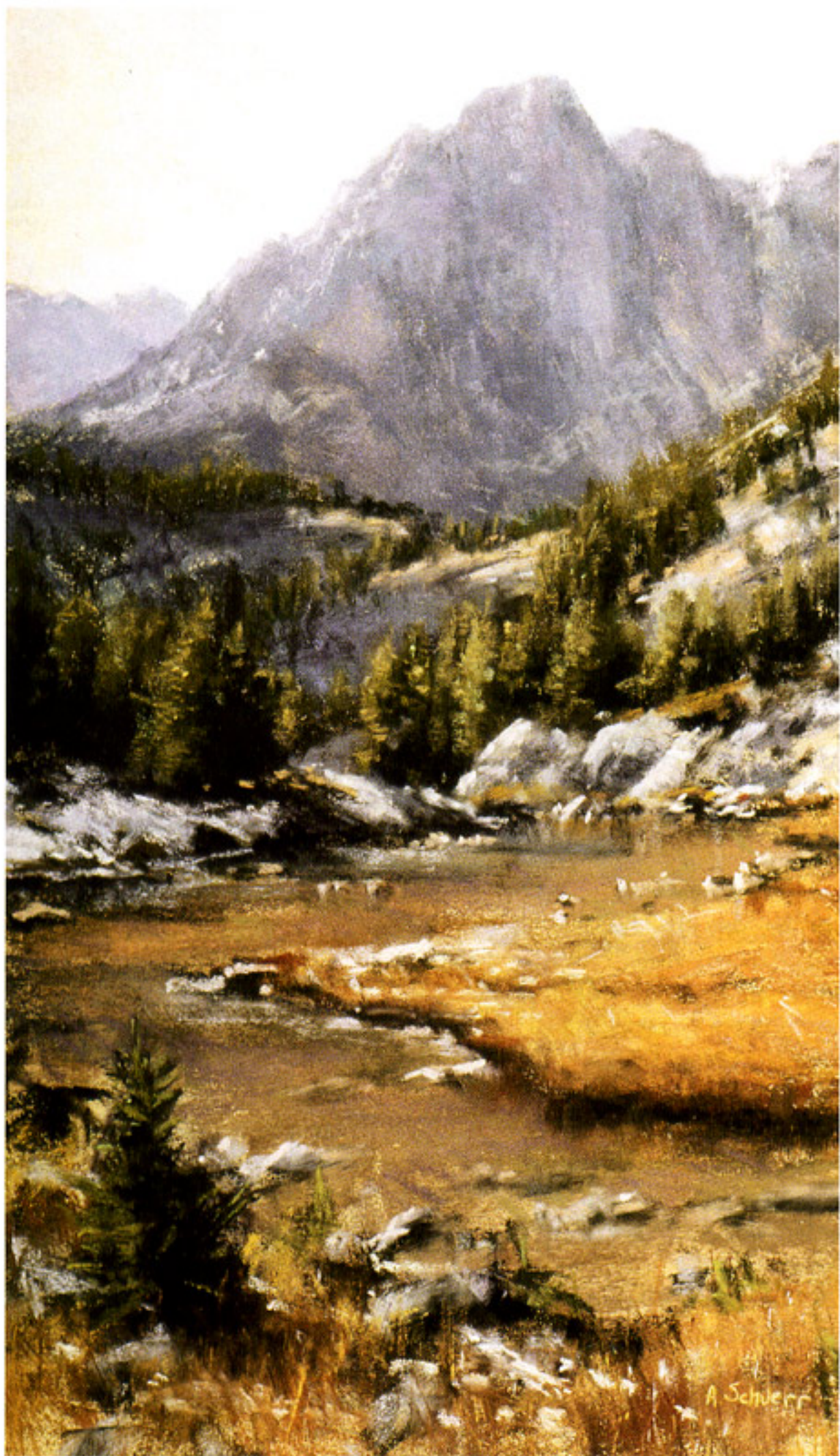
Early in his career, Aaron was doing fairly monochromatic pastels with "wonderful textures and really fine nuances of color," says Wiedenheft. "Now, he's more bold with color, but he has the ability to keep it under control."

As Aaron has matured as an artist, he has gotten more disciplined and harder on himself. He forces himself to create work that focuses on areas in which he feels unsure. A few winters ago it was snow and the multitude of colors that it takes on under different environmental conditions. More recently, forest interiors became his challenge. "A forest interior, like the one in 'Autumn Dance,' is more like a group portrait than a landscape," he says. "You're dealing with figures and the way they relate to each other in a grouping."

It is this dedication to pushing and experimenting with his art that keeps Aaron's work evolving. "He doesn't rest on what he knows; he's always trying new things," says



Aaron Schuerr likes to work outside, frequently with his children such as 5-year-old August, tagging along.



"COTTONWOOD BASIN" 19"X 12" PASTEL

Wiedenheft. "I'm collecting his work now because it's not going to be too long before I can't afford it. Aaron's young and he's just going to keep getting better." 