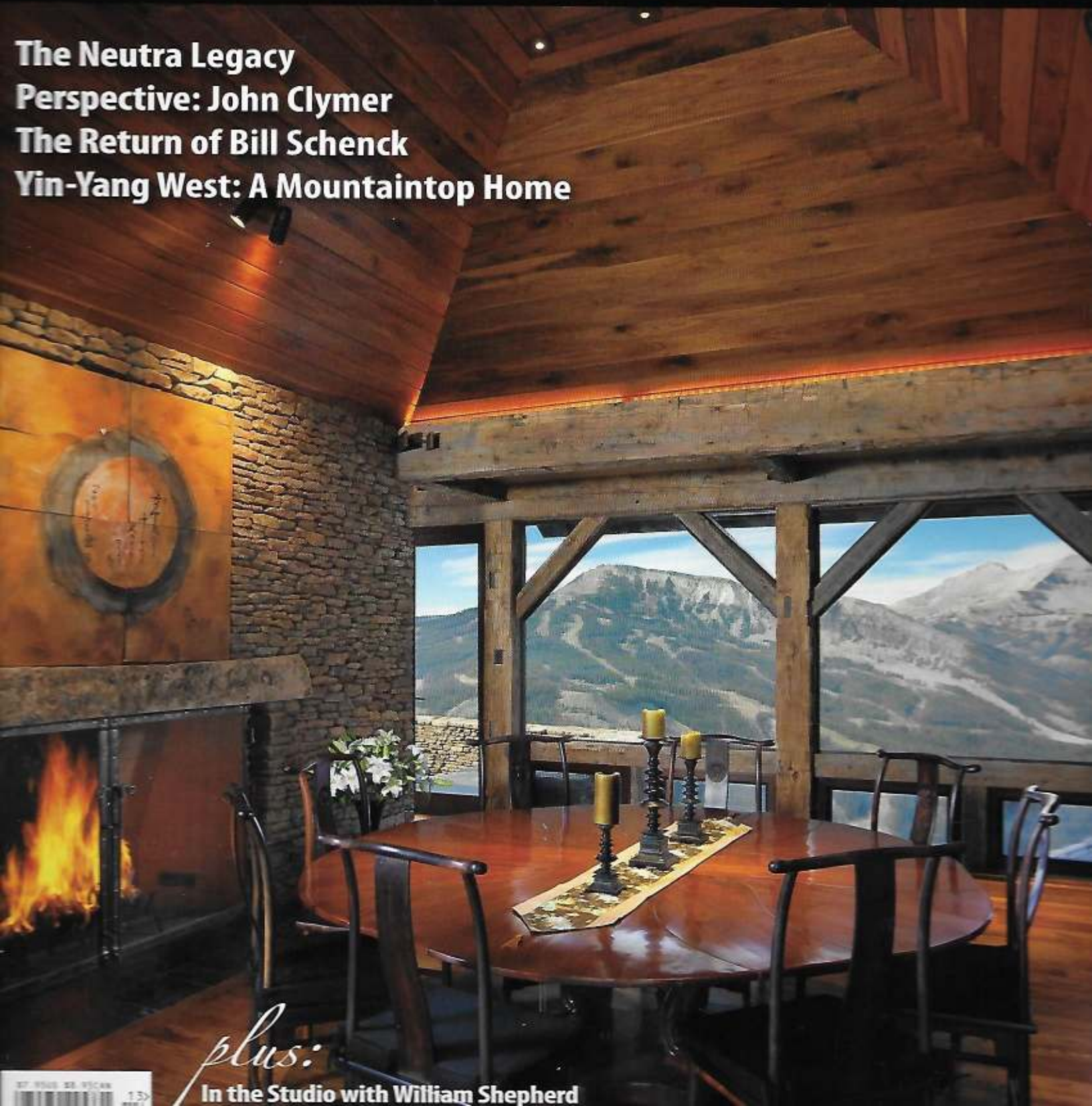


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plus:
In the Studio with William Shepherd



IN THE STUDIO

From his modest adobe studio outside Nambe, New Mexico, painter William Shepherd transcends genre

WRITTEN BY Corinne Joy Brown PHOTOGRAPHY BY Bill Stengel



High in the hills north of Santa Fe where dirt roads curve through wild ranch country, William Shepherd creates paintings that evoke the region's heritage in remarkable detail. His unpretentious studio is an old adobe built in 1890 as a one-room house by a man known simply as Don Amelio, a local who ran a grain mill still on the property. The building, once part of a larger complex, provides exactly the kind of privacy Shepherd requires to focus on work that engages

both mind and spirit, each painting a synthesis of shape, composition and color and something even more intangible — perhaps magic.

Born and raised in Casper, Wyoming, Shepherd might be called a Western artist by some and a Realist by others, although his work defies label or category. In his own words, he follows in the footsteps of the South American painter, Claudio Bravo, or the legendary artist Antonio Lopez Garcia

A cedar branch coyote fence trims the property with rustic aplomb while vintage adobe structures, including the studio and residence, entreat the visitor.

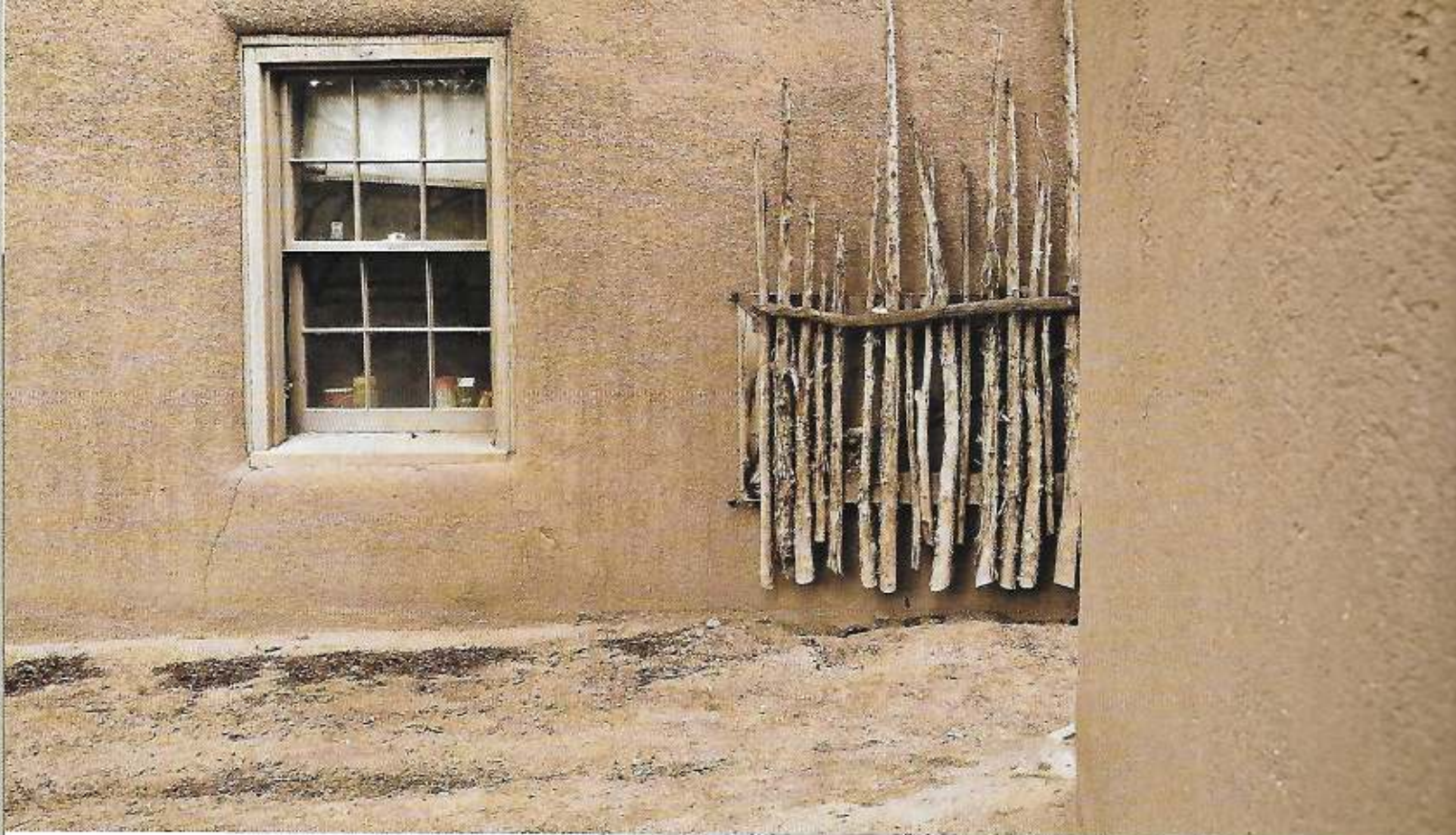


of Spain, whose visually visceral and compelling images are referred to by many European art critics as Timeless Realism.

Shepherd, nonetheless, carries within him the Old West of yesteryear. Growing up, he was fascinated by objects that ranchers often found out in the brush and took home to use as decorative objects: common tools or broken pieces of gear. Native American artifacts, often acquired in trade

from Navajo shearing crews, were a part of ranch décor back then, too. Not surprisingly, Shepherd started to collect these artifacts, as well as Western kitsch, and still does to this day. Fine art works made by hand or simple cast-offs of everyday life often appear as elements in his vignettes, all rich fodder for his unfailing brush.

"I look for 'authority' in the objects I select for my paintings," says Shepherd. "They have to manifest a visual compo-



Yellow Trunk
Oil on Oak Panel
42 x 42 inches | 2011

ment that appeals to me. I often say the object needs to have 'presence,' an undefined quality that transcends. I arrange them so that the surfaces, colors and patterns all meet in a way that I find intuitively and visually satisfying."

To the casual observer, the random clutter that defines his work space, especially the assemblage of found objects and artwork that fill a high bookcase across the back wall, are essential to his process.

"I can look from where I'm sitting to the collection and back again," said Shepherd. "I like having things on the shelf to make a selection from. I often change things out if I'm not happy with the original composition."

With a Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of Wyoming, Shepherd began his career painting large scale landscapes and detailed beds of river rock, slowly transitioning into the rich complexities of his supra-realistic pattern paintings

of the last decade. These deftly join textiles to wood to pottery to beadwork, no object or surface too complex for his keen eye. His current still lifes — which now include fruits, vegetable and flowers, as well as fine pottery and Western



Above: A variety of found objects and pottery used in still life vignettes crowd a shelf above a library of fine art books, all within short reach when needed. **Below:** No subject matter is beyond Shepherd's reach, regardless of its surface complexity or minute detail; in this case the contrast of metallic reflection, fine beadwork, painted pottery and woven wool.





everything. Then I go after the painting as a whole, seeking out what's needed and what's not there but what needs to be there, including color."

Approaching his work in an almost classical manner, painting on dry board in oil with as many as 30 glazes on a single work, Shepherd is still very much a Modernist. Although astutely observant, his work adheres to an interior and highly subjective world of his own preferences, not some academic boundary. As Carlson so aptly summarizes it, "In the wake of a return to Realism as a movement, Shepherd can be seen as the exception, not the rule. His work reminds me of the maxim credited to the renowned Russian painter Ilya Repin, who said 'Great painting takes over where words leave off.'"

Shepherd's paintings can be found in major collections throughout the United States, Mexico, Europe and Japan. His work was included in the exhibit *Out West, the Great American Landscape*, which traveled to the National Art Museum of China in Beijing and the Shanghai Museum. He's been invited to numerous American museum shows including the Buffalo Bill Historical Center, the Eiteljorg Museum, the Arnot Art Museum, the Rockwell Museum and Santa Fe's Museum of Fine Arts. He is currently represented by the Gerald Peters Gallery in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and the Astoria Fine Art Gallery in Jackson, Wyoming.

At home near Nambe, Shepherd admits he prefers

Hopi Bowl

Oil on Oak Panel
20 x 36 inches | 2010

small towns and the company of a few friends and family. Somehow he's able to resist the lure of nearby Santa Fe and savors the quiet and beauty of his rural environment instead of leaving the rest to tourists. He's settled in for the long run, certain that he's found a space that not only provides for but nurtures his art.

"Changing studios has a negative effect," said Shepherd. "It's not like you're unwelcome, but more like the feeling you get when staying in someone else's house and don't know where anything is. At this point, I'm certain that my studio proves that I'm right where I need to be."

Sometimes working seven days a week and producing four to five major paintings per year, it's evident that these adobe walls are a perfect vessel to Shepherd's boundless energy, a virtual launch pad to the creative. ■

Corinne Joy Brown is a Denver-based freelance writer and author who specializes in art, design and architecture, and every aspect of Western culture. A staff writer for *Persimmon Hill*, the publication of the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum and *Working Ranch Magazine*, among others, she's fascinated by artists who depict the modern West.