

Truths of the Spirit

William Acheff's paintings do more than merely fool the eye

By Norman Kolpas

T*rompe l'oeil*. These days the French term, which means literally “trick the eye,” is so freely and swiftly applied to any painting with a three-dimensional sense of realism that many people don't stop to think about why artists choose to paint *trompe l'oeil* works or what they aim to achieve.

The style has a rich and long history. In the earliest surviving examples, dating from some 21 centuries ago, *trompe l'oeil* murals in the villas of Pompeii provided breathtaking open-air vistas where none actually existed. Renaissance artists used a similar approach to open the wall of a mansion to the city beyond or to reveal a vision of heaven on a cathedral ceiling.

More than 20 new works by William Acheff and a retrospective of his career are on view along with sculptures by Oreland Joe in the Gilcrease Rendezvous, held April 30-June 27 at the Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa, OK

Rather than expressing the sacred through idealized realism, American *trompe l'oeil* still-life painters who enjoyed some vogue in the 19th century often pursued the technique for the sheer intellectual challenge of succeeding at the illusion. Working in oils on canvases instead of in frescoes on

walls, artists like William Harnett and John Frederick Peto hoped viewers would be compelled to touch their creations in order to convince themselves the surfaces actually were flat.

The objects they assembled in their compositions often reflected the lives and interests of the people who commissioned them. Wealthy patrons might choose to display items such as musical instruments and leather-bound books. Small-business owners sometimes bought so-called “rack pictures,” *trompe l'oeils* depicting the sort of correspondence, advertisements, and other printed ephemera that might collect on an office bulletin board.

As the 20th century draws to a close, one of its most successful *trompe l'oeil* artists finds himself painting in this style for yet another reason. “I do it for the pure joy of painting,” says William Acheff. “And I hope my paintings bring people inner peace.”

Both joy and peace shine through in the works of Alaska-





born Acheff [b1947], a resident of Taos, NM, since 1973. You can sense the exuberant pleasure he gets from the obvious mastery of techniques he has gained during 30 years as a professional painter. And, when you contemplate his canvases of exquisitely rendered chiles and onions, Pueblo Indian pots and Plains Indian moccasins, and unmistakable sense of serenity does come upon you, as if you're experiencing the very spirit of those objects.

That's not surprising, considering Acheff's avowed tendency to paint a subject "not as it looks but

ABOVE: BONNET MAKER (1999),
OIL, 18 x 27.

LEFT: TAOS JAR (1999), OIL, 7 x 9.

as I want it to look." His goal, in short, is to represent an idealized version of reality, an approach that has not changed for him since he first put brush to canvas three decades ago in San Francisco as a protégé of renowned realist painter Roberto Lupetti.

Change, however, is nonetheless in the air for Acheff. The first inklings of it show clearly in the more than 20 works on view this month at the Gilcrease Museum's

Rendezvous show in Tulsa, OK.

Until recently, you could say that many of Acheff's still lifes told stories. One of his most familiar approaches was to combine objects from the present and the past, the natural and the manmade worlds, in juxtapositions that struck poignant chords evocative of the changes that have swept through the American West.

Consider, for example, the way he described one composition in a previous *Southwest Art* article: "The Remington print shows the white man canoeing up the river - a sign of change for the Indian life-



way. The books represent the white man's laws and values. The railway spike and the white man's utensils vie with the Indian utensils. The tall pitcher signifies Indian resistance; the pot leaning towards the white man's objects is capitulating. And of course, the red blanket indicates that blood was shed as

the cultures clashed."

Compare that complex concept with some of Acheff's more recent works. Several of them are nothing more complex than simple arrangements of chile peppers and onions around southwestern Native American pots. In *ZIA POT*, for instance, he places a pair

of brown-skinned yellow onions and three red New Mexican chiles alongside a pot, decorated with a bird, from Zia Pueblo, about 30 miles north of Albuquerque. So many aspects of the painting please: the similarly rounded forms of the onions and the vessel; the contrasting textures of dry, worm

pottery, shiny onion skins, and lustrous peppers; the wondrously varied palette of earth tones ranging from yellow to tan, light brown to brick red to jet black. Not to mention a *trompe l'oeil* realism that seemingly sends the chiles jutting out of the canvas while the pot recedes deep into the wall.

Take TAOS JAR as another example of the world of wonder Acheff is capable of conjuring within a minimalist work. In this case, he chooses a one-handled water jug as the centerpiece and a single onion and three chiles as its companions. The work is spare, yes. But the way in which the artist captures such minute details as the torn edges of the onion's brown skin and every fleck of mica in the rough-textured jar is nothing short of enthralling. You feel as if you're seeing the innate beauty of these everyday objects for the first time.

Acheff, a soft-spoken man of few words, is modest about such works. "I just paint them to make a nice piece, I guess," he says of these paintings. Once he begins talking about the objects in them, however, his passion for the canvases quickly grows evident. "I just love the complexity of the onions, the texture, the translucent skins," he says. "They're a challenge to paint. So are the red chiles, to get

that rich red color and their gloss."

Even when the canvases are larger and their elements more varied, you can see a paring down in content and meaning from Acheff's past works. *LADY*, for example, joins together ears of dried blue and red corn, a Taos Pueblo pot, a black Hopi shawl, and Plains beaded moccasins. A rich combination of colors, textures, and forms, it is viewed by the artist as a simple celebration of femininity. Not least among its additional pleasures is the way in which Acheff captures beadwork so convincingly. "At a big show of mine once in Houston," he recalls with a laugh, "this one guy got into a heated discussion with me because he thought I used real beads. I had

to insist it was paint."

Reflecting on all these new works, Acheff admits to seeing a change. "I think I'm evolving to more simplicity," he says. "There's probably greater simplicity in my life right now, and how you live is how you express yourself." Recently he sold his 8,000-square-foot house and 2,200-square foot guest house on 30 acres in Hondo, a quarter-hour's drive north of Taos. He's moved much closer to town now, to a 1960s adobe on three acres, and is enjoying the humble pleasures of remodeling it. He also took a break from his usual pace of working seven days a week last November and December, traveling to France to relax and look at art. It was a rare chance, he

"I just love the complexity of the onions, the texture, the translucent skins. They're a challenge to paint. So are the red chiles, to get that rich red color and their gloss."



ABOVE LEFT: *LADY* (1999),

OIL, 16 x 12.

RIGHT: *ZIA POT* (1999),

OIL, 7 x 9.



says, for him “to decide and reflect on how I want to evolve.”

Another sign of evolution can be seen in a work at the Gilcrease called *BACK HOME*. Featuring his mother’s fur parka, an elk-hide scraper, a beaded Athabascan bag, a photo of a moose painting, and a birch-bark basket made in the 1940s by an Indian friend of his mother’s, the painting is a rare acknowledgment in art of Acheff’s one-quarter Athabascan heritage. “I’ve never called myself a Native American painter because I wasn’t painting in my native Alaska and usually wasn’t painting subject

BACK HOME (1999), OIL, 16 x 18

matter that was native to my heritage,” he says. “I could have gotten away with it, but I didn’t want to be in too much of a niche.”

With such a wealth of subjects to portray and an approach that continues to evolve, there is little danger that Acheff will paint himself into any kind of confining niche. Certainly not when you consider that, as he says, he continues to apply brush to canvas “for the pure joy of painting.” Nothing else, it seems, quite brings him into touch with who he is. “When I

started to paint again this year,” he explains of the works begun for the Gilcrease show after his trip to France, “as soon as I sat down to paint, it felt like I was home.”

Norman Kolpas wrote about C.W. Mundy in the April issue.

PHOTOS COURTESY THE ARTIST AND NEDRA MATTEUCCI GALLERIES, SANTA FE, NM; SETTLERS WEST GALLERIES, TUSCON, AZ; TEXAS ART GALLERY, DALLAS, TX; AND JN BARTFIELD GALLERIES, NEW YORK, NY.