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WAY OUT WEST

Colorado artist **Nathan Solano** finds inspiration in all things western
By Mark Mussari

NATHAN SOLANO doesn't really like to talk about his artwork. But that's alright—his canvases speak volumes. With their elegant chromaticism and captivating figures, his paintings reveal a keen eye for both natural lighting and figurative gesture. Although Solano falls under the aegis of a western painter, his narratives are more pictorial than historical. The light in a distant window, a horse's tail catching the sun, a face slightly turned—these subtle elements convey the story in Solano's paintings.

"My own story is not typical of most painters," admits Solano, who lives and works in Pueblo, CO. His father was a coal miner in Drager-ton, UT, where the younger Solano was born and raised. "I drew a lot as a child," he recalls, "but my parents didn't think you could make a living doing art." Still, they were readers and imparted this interest in their son: "They made me read 24 books every summer." As a child, Solano won a "Draw Me" contest, and while in high school he took an art class on a partial art scholarship. "But I never envisioned making a living at it," he observes.

Solano attended Colorado State University and then the University of Colorado, but he could not stay focused on his studies. "Before long I was drafted into the army and spent a year in Vietnam," he says. When he returned from his stint as an infantry sergeant, Solano began to take ceramic and photography classes. "I took classes that interested

FOUR IN A ROW, OIL, 22 X 30.



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REPRESENTATION

Settlers West Galleries, Tucson, AZ; Texas Art Gallery, Dallas, TX; Abend Gallery, Denver, CO; Ann Korologos Gallery, Basalt, CO; www.nathansolano.com.

UPCOMING SHOWS

Greeley Stampede Art Exhibit & Sale, Greeley, CO, June 24-July 4.

Three-person show, Ann Korologos Gallery, June 26-July 14.

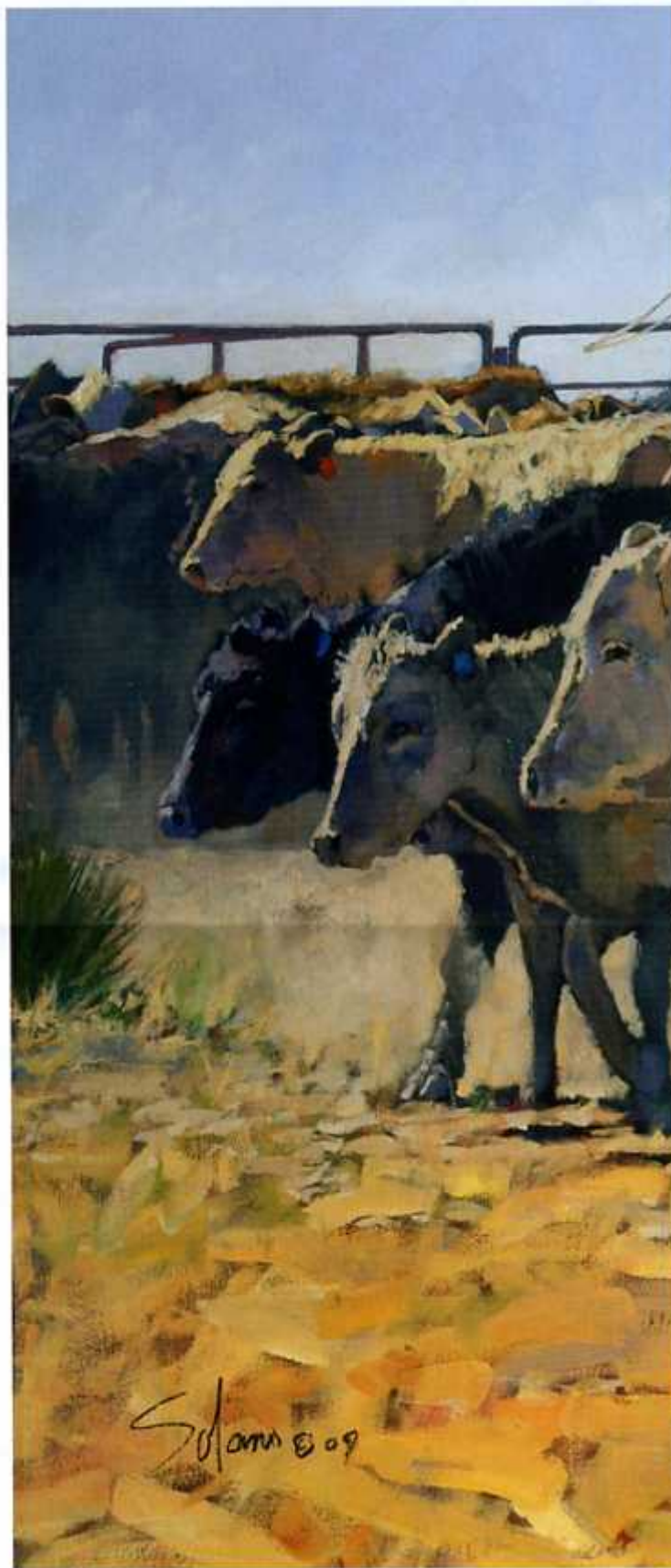
Quest for the West, Eiteljorg Museum, Indianapolis, IN,

September 11-October 11.

Art for the Sangres, Westcliffe, CO, September 26.

Great American West Show, Settlers West Galleries, November 6.

Preview 2010 Party & Auction, Texas Art Gallery, November.







CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
FULL MOON WARRIOR, OIL, 12 X 9.
THE MAKE UP OF A COWGIRL, OIL, 22 X 28.
OUT STANDING IN THEIR FIELD, OIL, 30 X 46.

me," he explains. This training led to a job as a photographer on a local newspaper. Today, he traces his strong compositional sense to that experience. "But the learning curve really steepened when I became an illustrator at an ad agency," he comments. To make a living, Solano juggled jobs in advertising, illustration, and bartending.

Solano started to paint after moving to Florida in 1982. "I was doing a lot of work for a real estate company," he says. "Every week they wanted a new painting showing a scene from their development." Commissions soon came in from restaurants, too. "I received a commission for 15 paintings from a sports bar," he remembers. In 1987, he returned to Colorado and took a job with Hewlett-Packard in Colorado Springs, but was laid off shortly thereafter. "I began doing freelance paintings for restaurants in Colorado Springs and Pueblo," he says. Solano may not have realized it at the time, but he was slowly becoming a full-time painter.

His painterly eye soon turned toward western landscape and narrative. "I've always had an affinity for riding horses," says the artist. At one point he met a rancher and began to herd and brand for him. These experiences fed into his paintings. "I'm not a cowboy, but once you do it, you know what it's supposed to look like," he notes. Though often reticent about discussing his artistic inspiration, **continued on page 100**

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Solano, continued from page 72

Solano does point out that "you can't wait for inspiration to strike. You have to work through it. If you have to be inspired to paint, you're in the wrong business."

Solano's background in photography also informs his canvases. "Photography jump-starts me. I have thousands of photographs that I use for ideas," he says, readily acknowledging the advantages of working from photographs, particularly when capturing gestures that define and add character to his figures. "When trying to do figures on horseback—or a crowd scene or a portrait—a photograph will pick up the details," he observes. Painting from photos can pose challenges, though, especially when painting livestock. "The camera often captures animals at odd moments. If I painted directly from a photograph, it wouldn't look right," he explains. "That's one of the limitations of photography."

Many of Solano's paintings reveal the interplay that occurs between original photographic image and artistic interpretation. He admits that he is more concerned with evoking a feeling than historical fact. "Still," he says, "I wouldn't put a Hopi blanket on a southern Cheyenne [Indian]." For reference purposes, he maintains files of historical photographs, especially of Native American tribes.

Though Solano is best known for his western works, his scope is actually much broader: He has received commissions to paint several National Football League players and has also done work for the Air Force Academy's football program. Yet for someone who readily admits he's not a cowboy, he is clearly attuned to the cowboy way of life and the history of the West.

SOLANO PAINTS every day of the week, including weekends. "I'm driven to do so," he says. "It's also a necessity because I do 10 to 12 shows a year." He is especially fond of the annual Art for the Sangres show, held in Westcliffe, CO, with proceeds going to local land preservation. Solano's work has also appeared in the respected annual American Miniatures show at Settlers West Galleries in Tucson, AZ. For years, he held a private one-man show at Christmastime in his Pueblo studio, which is located in a 100-year-old former post office building that he shares with four to five other artists. "It has 14-foot ceilings—I love it," he says.

His painting **OUT STANDING IN THEIR**

FIELD exhibits an impressionist sensibility toward lighting and color. It depicts a field of grass near the Arkansas River, with grass encompassing a good two-thirds of the canvas. "It was summer, about 6:30 in the evening," Solano recalls. "I laid out the colors first—lots of purples, greens, oranges, and reds." The soft symphony of tones loosely defining the field balances the more defined trees in the top third of the canvas. A thin stripe of yellow light defines the horizon beyond the trees. "This one came out the way I saw it in my head," adds the artist.

In *FOUR IN A ROW*, he moves the eye to ground level to show a cowboy on horseback about to lasso some calves. "They were branding about 600 head that day," remembers Solano, who has wrestled and branded a few cattle in his day. The mass of running cattle gives the canvas a voluminous quality, with the artist using a loose, almost abstract brush stroke to convey the animals in the background. Solano admits that two of the four calves in the foreground were originally white. "I changed them to black for contrast," he explains. The cowboy serves as the painting's focal point. Encircled by running cattle, the cowhand lifts his lasso in the moment just before capture. A flash of light glints on his hands and hat. "I like backlight," notes the painter.

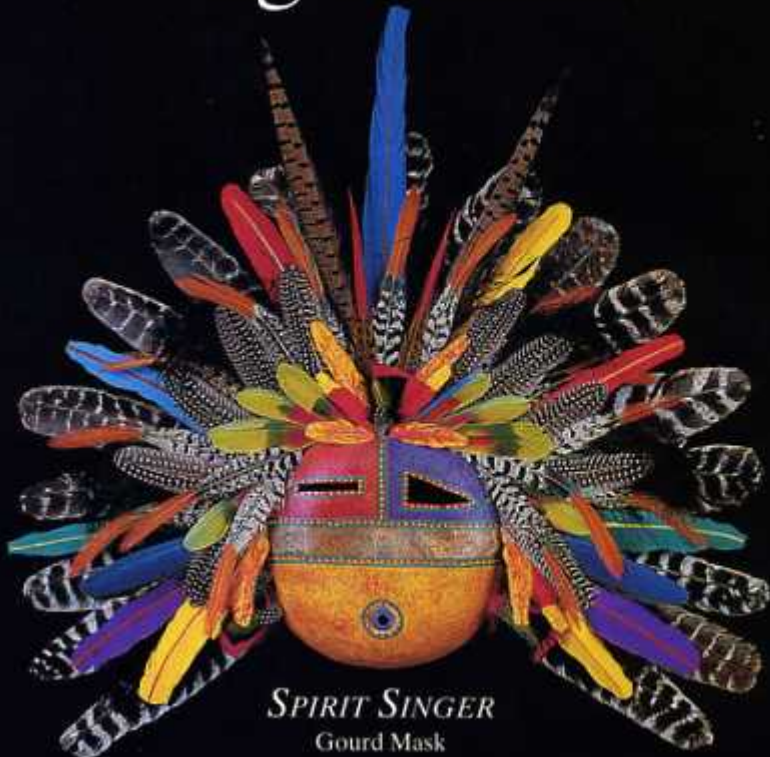
For *FULL MOON WARRIOR*, Solano posed a model from the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. The figure, sitting on a grazing horse, depicts a member of the Oglala Sioux tribe as he stops in a field on a moonlit night. White paint on the warrior's face repeats in the horse's mane, face, and pasterns, echoing the solid white disc of the moon. In rendering the background, Solano seems to paint solid atmosphere in the shimmering blue ambiance.

"I don't start with a concrete idea," explains Solano, who claims that his greatest challenge in painting is "making it look right." Describing his approach as "an editing process," he says he often wishes he had more time with each canvas. "I can work on a painting forever," he admits, "but there comes a point when you have to stop."

There is something undeniably ironic about Solano's reluctance to talk about his paintings, because they have so much to say. But maybe he knows that. "I just paint what I see," he insists. Fortunately for the rest of us, we get to see it, too. ♦

Mark Mussari, Ph.D., writes frequently about art and design for a number of publications.

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