

Fields of Dreams

Houston artist's newest collection inspired by Texas landscape

By Cheryl Alexander



Ted Cowart ♦ *Marshland*, mixed media on canvas, 72 inches by 48 inches. ♦ *Thistle Weave III*, mixed media collage on canvas, 48 inches by 48 inches. ♦ *Pond Reflection*, mixed media collage on canvas, 60 inches by 48 inches. ♦ *Dandelion Dance*, mixed media collage on canvas, 60 inches by 48 inches.

When Ted Cowart opened his front door and invited me into his home the day of our interview, I was immediately struck by the lightness he exuded, both from his eyes and the level of his energy. So it was no surprise to me when I asked him to define “beauty” that one of his responses was, “Beauty is the way light bounces off things.”

Ted Cowart’s River Oaks home is a testament to this view of beauty as his abode is washed in natural light, but what is also evident here are his roots and the steps he’s made along his very interesting

path—a journey that began right here in Houston.

By his own admission, Cowart’s childhood in Houston was as close to *Leave It to Beaver* as you could get. He says fondly, “My parents were the ideal loveable cute couple of the ’40s and ’50s, and I grew up with all this structure, so it made sense for me to be unstructured.” He also readily admits that his parents never really knew what to do with him as his natural talent began to take shape at the age of 2. Then, when Cowart’s talent really became evident by age 5, his parents were both alarmed and excited to the point that they

took him to a professional who informed them that Ted was going to be an artist.

Once this was confirmed, Cowart became a source of entertainment for his parents and their friends, who continually wanted to watch him create. His abilities also impressed the powers that be at the Museum of Fine Arts Houston—so much so that he was awarded a full scholarship at the age of 8 and continued his training there for 10 years.

There, in Cowart’s formal training, he learned what he feels is the most important thing for anyone who wants to paint. He learned to draw well. He says assuredly,

“... Stopping to observe the activity of nature is what all these paintings came out of—nodding thistles as a sculptural form. ...”

"Learning to draw well is the number one skill you can learn as a painter because if you can draw well then you can abstract. If you haven't got the right forms or shapes, then the structure won't work. Classical drawing and painting comes first; then customizing and abstracting."

He should know. Cowart is one of very few true artists who has been able to support himself throughout his life drawing and creating. He is quick to point out though that he hasn't always been fortunate enough to rely entirely upon his passion for painting. However, paying his dues along the way made for some pretty glamorous experiences for a boy from Montrose.

Cowart continued his formal training at Los Angeles Art Center College of Design as one of the youngest students ever accepted. Then, military duty took him to Europe where he eventually made money painting portraits.

Next, New York City, the mecca of design and high fashion, beckoned, where he began a successful career in advertising working with the original supermodels and even inheriting Andy Warhol's advertising accounts. Being in the throes of the design worlds of Madison and Park Avenues, Cowart says, is what distinguishes him from other artists. "It's rounded me out and toughened me up. The advertising business, especially in New York City, is very demanding and requires quick creativity. It's not like going into your studio and thinking and playing with ideas for four to five weeks. There is no time for that."

Absorbing all of the high style of the advertising industry also gave Cowart a distinct edge. He definitely knows what constitutes an upscale, polished and elegant look which clearly shows up in his work.

What also shows up in his work is the influence of his childhood. Growing up in Montrose, back then, Cowart recalls, there were lots of empty lots and he spent a lot of time outdoors playing. His early inspiration came from those experiences, and his love and respect for the natural world are what continue to inspire him today. In fact, his newest collection is titled *Fields*.

Fields reflects a shift that occurred in Cowart's style stemming from when he bought his home in Palm Springs. He

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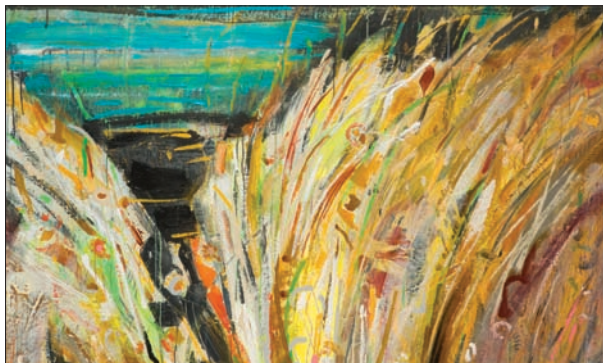
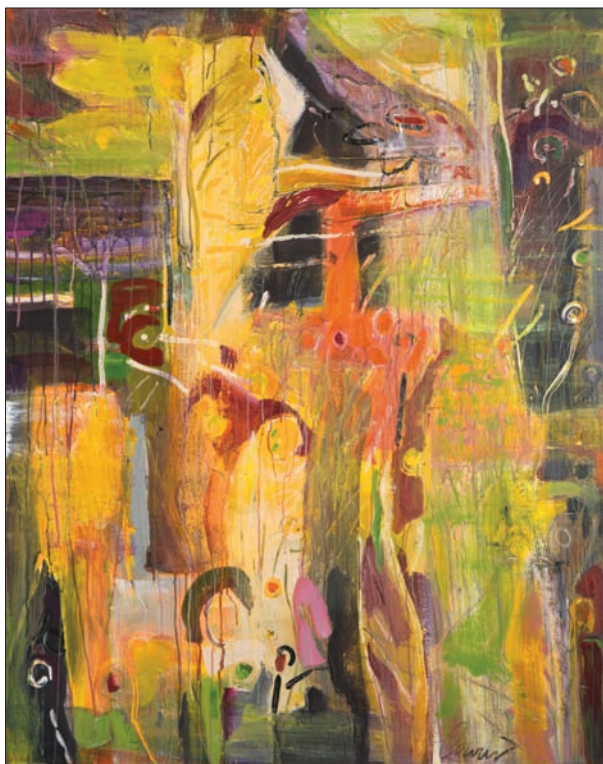
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(Clockwise starting top left) Meadow III, mixed media on canvas, 48 inches by 60 inches. ❖ Thistle Field, mixed media collage on canvas, 36 inches by 48 inches. ❖ Sunflower Patch, mixed media on canvas, 48 inches by 60 inches. ❖ Copper Thistles, mixed media collage on canvas, 48 inches by 60 inches. ❖ Salt Grass, mixed media on canvas, 60 inches by 48 inches.

recalls, “This home is so beautiful and is surrounded by mountains and desert, so my sense of perspective about landscape and nature changed. I began to see nature completely differently. I began to look more at the shapes and forms rather than the individual leaves and flowers. I began to see nature as sculpture.”

In fact, he describes his current style as part painting and part sculpture, as it is entirely three-dimensional and a kind of marriage between collage, layering, texture and paint. He says what he is creating now is “pure me and what I’ve evolved to.”

Cowart’s current *Fields* series was also born out of one of his trips to Santa Fe. But he quickly adds, “On the way there, we went through the Texas Hill Country, and at the time all the wildflowers were blooming and these thistles struck me, kind of nodding and bobbing, blowing in the

wind. Stopping to observe the activity of nature is what all these paintings came out of—nodding thistles as a sculptural form. Colors and forms in nature can’t be beat as inspiration.”

After inspiration, Cowart takes a photograph of the scene which initially inspired him. He will study the photo and absorb its impact, then work begins. Cowart says his finished product starts after he throws away the photograph. He says he doesn’t look at anything but the canvas once he starts to create. Typically he will draw with black pastel on white paper, which then eventually becomes a painting.

The process, however, is quite interesting due to the preparation of the canvas prior to the application of the paint. Cowart explains that the preparation takes the longest due to the layering of materials he uses to texturize or “sculpt” his paint-

ings. Everything is white on white to begin. “The canvas, the collage, the tubed paint, all the textural elements are white, so I must have light to see what I’m doing. I paint with a light shining on the canvas, so I can see the sculptural effect as I paint.”

Underneath a Cowart painting there may be a variety of elements, such as layered paper, cardboard, sand or even stucco. Those elements must then dry very well before any color is applied, and though he may use 20 colors on the canvas, the viewer is only aware of what comes through the surface. After the color, he then applies varnish to give the piece a lacquered, attractive look.

Attractive indeed. Just what you’d expect of someone with Cowart’s background. Needless to say, several local socialites and celebrities house Cowart’s fine art. Beyond Houston, Kip Forbes of *Forbes* magazine owns no less than three and Cowart’s work is even part of the *Forbes* magazine collection, as well as part of the Motion Picture and Television Association collection in Beverly Hills. You’ll also find his art throughout the country in numerous galleries and museums, including the William Siegal Gallery in Santa Fe.

Additionally, Cowart also does commissioned work. He recently did a series of paintings for a multi-million dollar yacht in Palm Beach. He admits he’s never done anything like it before and says it was like designing art for a floating hotel. It’s not surprising that many designers buy his work. He says, “It’s a compliment that the people I work with think my work is valuable. It’s extremely validating.”

It was also no surprise to me when Cowart remarked that people always want to know how old he is. And just because he said it, I didn’t ask his age. I didn’t have to ask. I already know... he is ageless, just like his art.

For more information on Ted Cowart or to contact him, visit his Web site at www.cowartfineart.com. ●