

A Celebration Of Nature

Through the magic of paint, **David Montgomery** reveals his passion for the natural world of the American Southwest.



Abiquiu View oil on linen 30 by 40 inches

David Montgomery fell in love while he was growing up—in love with dry winds and open spaces, foothills and headwaters, the scent of piñon, the concept of time. He loves honesty and revelation, and the look of wet paint. He knows his geographic affiliation, and when he travels he knows his heart is home.

Montgomery grew up in Colorado and has painted in southern Colorado's San Luis Valley for over three decades. He revels in the pristine vistas and the sparse settlements in this part of the Southwest, and actively works to protect the valley's wilderness. His small, broken painting strokes, and pervasive glimpses of canvas relate to spare desert scrub plants clinging to sandy soil, forgotten windswept traces of snow, or sky seen through a mountain pass. As a native of the West, Montgomery can decode the unseen maps of these high plains, as he does in *Juniper Parade*.

"Junipers are water trees," he says. "They grow in arroyos and create visual avenues." Even when the creek beds are dry they define water routes, neatly exploited by Montgomery to take the viewer back into space. There is also an underlying perspective of time. The foreground is colored in pastels and by the hopeful bloom of

chamisa, or rabbitbrush. The junipers seem to hold the late afternoon sun in their burnished branches. As one looks further into the scene, the deeper-hued line of Ponderosa pine and Douglas fir on the mountains suggest a cooler reserve. For now, at least, they are beyond the reach of spring.

Montgomery's *Winter Glory* is a painting whose limited palette belies its strength and its variety of detail. A March storm whistles around Taos Mountain, fresh snow crowning its peak dazzles in sunshine and becomes a halo. Other features are more subtle—dormant cottonwoods, the meandering river. Finishing a painting in his Alamosa, Colorado studio, Montgomery sometimes adds and subtracts elements to attain his vision. "I idealize landscapes," he says, but they are always true. "I know the clouds, and the trees that grow here. I study river morphology." He knows that *alamosa* is Spanish for cottonwood grove, and that Taos Mountain is considered a sacred site to Taos's native people. He knows Taos is part of his turf, ignoring the randomly drawn state line. Whether by lay of the land or sentiment it is a part of the whole he sees as precious—and irreplaceable.

By Suzanne Smith Arney



David Montgomery



Bloom Time 16" x 20" oil on linen

125 Kit Carson Road
Taos, New Mexico 87571
(575) 758-4575
<http://www.waldenfineart.com>

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Juniper Parade oil on linen 16 by 20 inches

Montgomery's hallmark is 'Celebrating Nature through the Magic of Painting.' Like the word 'glory,' for which one meaning is halo or nimbus, 'celebrate' in one sense connotes praiseful ceremony. In a lighter sense it is an expression of joy. Both meanings define David Montgomery's celebration of nature. Although he admires the passion of early artists like Thomas Moran and Albert Bierstadt, he finds that some of their interpretations fall short.

"Their studio work shows the heavy atmospheres typical of the East. They miss the scale of the West, the panoramic vistas, where the thin air lets the eye travel farther than thought possible," he explains. In contrast, he says, "I really connect with the natural landscape that I witness every day." He knows San Luis Valley intimately, as a serious student, steward, and lover.

Celebration also describes his approach to painting. "I love technique, *plein air* spontaneity and larger studio work where I can create an environment for the viewer. I paint *alla prima* (in one session) to work with fluid paint. When I can't complete a piece, I store works in progress in a freezer to slow the drying process."

He is fascinated by the physicality of paint. "I use small, round brushes for a broken, Impressionist stroke, but am constantly balancing the under-paint with the over-painting, trying to balance the opaque with the translucent and the transparent."

This control of technique and his choice of subject matter are Montgomery's means to magic. *Abiquiu View* is a spellbinding example. This large studio painting (30 by 40 inches) throws open an endless vista over the sandstone mesas and Chama River of northern New Mexico, toward the Sangre de Cristo Mountains sixty miles to the east. The crystalline quality of the air sharpens the colors playing across the ground and sparkles on the water, which moves from whitewater to lazy meander. This diversity enlivens the scene and intrigues the viewer. Beside the river, each of the three buttes that dominate the middle of the picture is different. The first, with its sharply jutting cliffs, is layered in bold colors by eons of sedimentary artistry. It contrasts with the second, whose gentle silt slopes are dotted with piñon and juniper trees. Lastly, hulking and scarred, is a stolid mesa with its caprock of ancient lava. In the valley below we find wild country populated by hawks, deer and beaver, adjacent to small, traditional farms and ranches greened by *acequias*.

There's magic too in the sense of captured time, the stillness of this perfect moment. We realize that nature everywhere is composed of this rich and varied mix, but glimpsed from the car window or running to the next appointment, who has time to contemplate?



Winter Glory
oil on linen
22 by 28 inches



Sacred Round
oil on linen
30 by 40 inches

An artist like Montgomery can stop time. He can see this country with his mind and with his heart; articulate its essential power and beauty; and he can magically present it as a gift. It is a reminder of the importance of our connections to nature, and a medium by which we can access such wild and unlimited spaces.

Ute Mountain depicts the isolation and regal prominence of a familiar landmark in northern New Mexico. Montgomery emphasizes the solitary dominance of the mountain, which shadows the surrounding high-desert growth. The legendary peak is sacred to Ute Indians as well as other regional tribes. Its history goes back even further, beyond memory, to its volcanic origins and subsequent carving by erosion. This oil study was a reference for Montgomery's painting *Sacred Round*, but each claims its own ground. Three times larger, the space in *Sacred Round* is palpable. It is as if we are waiting in an antechamber, shivering a bit in its cool shadows. The mountain is bathed in golden light, exuding a spirituality or ancient wisdom. Its more rounded shape embodies endurance rather than autocracy. It is, in fact, wonderfully sensuous, enticing. We long to reach its fertile slopes, but are daunted by the intervening and empty passage.

Montgomery made a similar professional crossing about ten years ago. Moving away from standard approaches and what he calls "fat-brush," he says, "I started playing with complementary under-paint washes, and painting with small brushes, short strokes, to imply details without rendering them—like the Impressionists." (A highlight of Montgomery's career was an invitation from *Forbes* and *American Artist* magazines to paint in France, including Monet's garden at Giverny.) Unlike the Impressionists however, Montgomery doesn't rework the painting's surface. "I really like the purity of the stroke going down," he relates. "Leaving it...the economy of that movement...the zen of it."

David Montgomery has the confidence and intimate connection to nature to paint wide, sometimes empty spaces. His landscapes can be lavish with color and texture or disconcertingly vast. It is a statement of respect, a celebration, and an act of love.

New paintings by David Montgomery will be featured at Walden Fine Art, 125 Kit Carson Road, from March 1 to April 30. 'Meet-the-Artist' events are scheduled for March 13, 3-6pm and March 20, 3-6pm. 575.758.4575. www.waldenfineart.com.



Ute Mountain oil on linen 9 by 12 inches