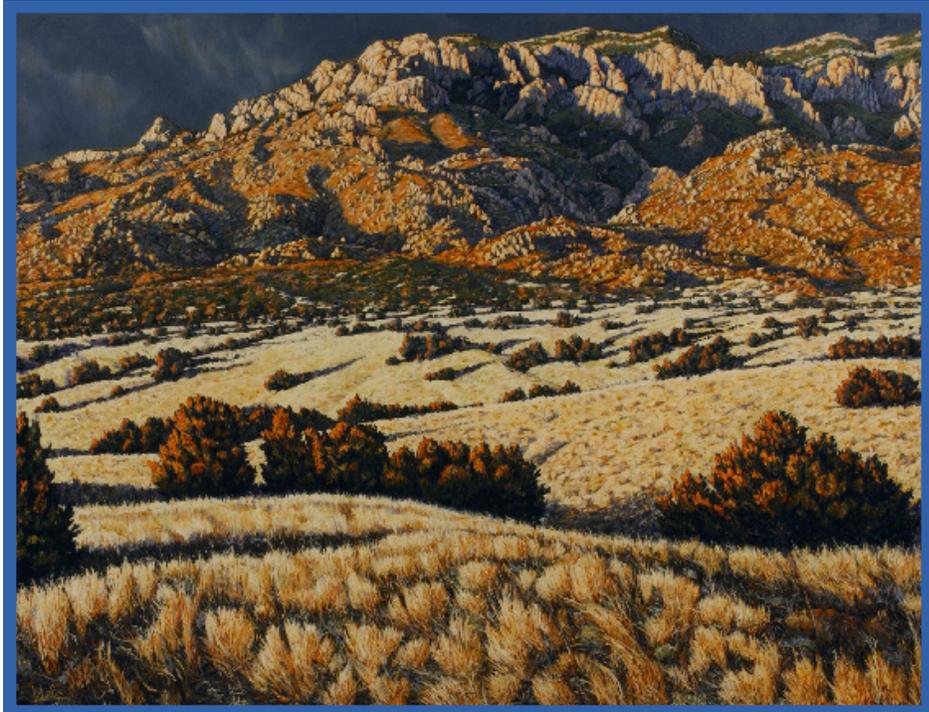


DENNIS LIBERTY

LANDSCAPES OF THE AMERICAN WEST

CORONADO'S GOLD

- 54 X 42
- OIL ON LINEN
- SOLD



Always present and ever changing...

I've studied its structure. For me, its at its best in the last fifteen minutes of direct red-gold sunlight. That is when you can clearly see its nature – explosive upthrusts, fangs of stone, clawed canyons, erosion on such a scale that the whole face looks like it was worked over by a giant Jason with a chain saw the size of the Empire State Building.

I've looked and looked until I've finally seen with a smidgen of understanding. I've finally seen the patterns of the upthrusts, the way the ridges work, how erosion has cut and carved the stone; how the rubble of boulders, some the size of a city block, have tumbled down the scarps. Some were spalled off by water freezing in the cleavage planes, some by earthquakes. I sometimes think that special ones might have fallen because a vandal butterfly landed at the perfect instant.

I've parsed the mountain's colors, a chaos of unexpected shades. The shadows from the cedars go on for a hundred feet and their color goes from green and black to orange and green and brown, to white with hints of violet-orange with a whiff of yellow. These colors cycle through at such a speed that its almost impossible to register them.

I've appreciated the Sandia's shape shifting dance in the late afternoon New

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Mexico sun as Herod Antipas must have appreciated Salome's dance of the seven veils. More often than not, I've felt like my head was on the platter rather than John the Baptist's.

Although I've done a few sketches limited to parts of the foothills, and a half hearted attempt occasionally at the whole thing (all of which usually ended in dismal failure), what I didn't do these thirty-eight years was make a truly serious effort at painting the Sandias until this year. I suppose it finally came down to that old phrase, "no guts, no glory". You know how it is with things that intimidate you. You finally have to face them. I finally had to face the mountain and give it my best shot.

It took me almost two months to just draw the mountain on the canvas. I got lost in its complexity and the details then I'd pull myself back to the larger view over and over again. I'd taken photos and I scanned them over and over again as if I were scrying the impenetrable until the images were welded into my brain and when that wasn't enough, I'd go outside and look at the mountain directly and be swept away by the dance.

Ever so slowly, the drawing came together until I'd put down on the canvas what I thought should be there. The color had a meaning, the shapes were consistent, the details were enough to explain but not befuddle. Then came the fun part, the moment when I let go of the raw information and began painting.

The act of painting, placing deep blue-violet shadows against very high key yellow-orange cliffs; the texture of the foreground grass; the depth of the shadows; the fire of the cedars – all of this caused me to lose the painting's representational meaning. I leapt to sculptured impasto, to color relationships I never dreamed possible, to shapes that were interesting solely for their shape. They ceased to be shadow or boulder or cedar tree. Should I make a stroke that extends into a shadow area? Is there a regular but irregular rhythm for the viewer's eye? Can I use cadmium orange straight out of the tube? You damn betcha, I can!

I explored as many "What if's" as I could, giving myself over to the flow of the mountain. Its not as though I could ever cover all the possibilities.

This part of the painting process never lasts long enough for me. The positive possibilities are winnowed out and fewer and fewer things can be added or removed until I can't add or remove anything. In an instant, a perceptual shift happens. The painting bounces back and forth in my head – before me is the Sandia Crest and the East Mesa; before me is an arrangement of shapes in yellow-oranges and blue-violets and greens. At that moment I realize that the painting is finished and I know what Coronado overlooked when he sought El Dorado.

