



▲ Weasel Tail's Medicine, oil, 36 x 24.

► Reservations at Eight, oil, 24 x 36.

Lit FROM Within

Michael Blessing captures the luminosity of human faces and neon lights

BY GUSSIE FAUNTLEROY

MICHAEL BLESSING'S eighth-grade school year was just about over when his art teacher stopped him in the hall one day. "I don't want you in my class next year," the teacher said, thumping him on the chest. At first Michael was stunned. He had gotten all A's in his junior-high art classes, was good at drawing, and absolutely loved it. A thoughtful kid with a sensitive side, he mulled over his teacher's words and later saw what may have been behind them. Blessing's father had been in and out of the hospital with two heart attacks, and the situation had taken a toll on his son. As the artist tells it, "It was a pretty rough couple of years, and I was probably angry. I wasn't normally that way, but I was maybe a little cantankerous and disruptive in class."

Still, the teacher's pronouncement had the effect of steering Blessing away from art and into the music department the following year. As it turned out, there



was resonance for him in music as well. Enough, in fact, to lead to bachelor's and master's degrees in music composition and performance and a couple of decades of owning and running recording studios before another unexpected event spun him back in the direction of visual art. When it did, the artist's self-described "hyper-focused" nature propelled him into an obsession with self-education in drawing and painting. That led to wide recognition and multiple awards for his figurative work, much of it inspired by western movies and vintage neon signs.

ALTHOUGH BLESSING thinks of the small town of Roundup, MT, as his boyhood home, his first 10 years or so were spent in various parts of South Dakota, where his father worked in the timber industry. There, early experiences and visual images embedded themselves in

his psyche to emerge much later as inspiration in his art. He and his friends would spill out of the theater after Hollywood westerns, eager to re-enact the scenes they'd just watched. In the Black Hills town of Custer—not far from Mount Rushmore—tourists and locals were beckoned by the glow and dazzle of neon signs. For a child, those colorful signs on drive-in theaters, drugstore soda fountains, and burger joints could only mean one thing: a good time.

Years later, when he began to feature neon signs in his art, Blessing found himself not only compelled by boyhood memories but equally intrigued by the color, designs, and shapes of the signs. "I love how the tubes glow. My favorite time is dusk—there's color in the sky and that electric feeling in the air and the colors of the neon lights. The more I paint, the more I realize the influence of those years," says the artist, now 57,



representation

Hueys Fine Art, Santa Fe, NM; **Old Main Gallery**, Bozeman, MT; **K. Newby Gallery**, Tubac, AZ; **Coila Evans Art Gallery**, Roundup, MT.

upcoming shows

Summer Small Works, **Maxwell Alexander Gallery**, Los Angeles, CA, June 17-July 1.

Cheyenne Frontier Days Art Show & Sale, Old West Museum, Cheyenne, WY, July 20-30.

Solo show, **Old Main Gallery**, August 9-31.



Promise, oil, 16 x 12.



The Wild Bunch, oil, 36 x 48.

sitting in the studio connected to his home just north of Bozeman. With windows looking east toward a valley and low mountains beyond, the spacious studio is divided into his area and that of his wife, equine painter Meagan Blessing. For his part, Michael often has multiple canvases going at once, as he currently does in preparation for an August solo show at Old Main Gallery in Bozeman.

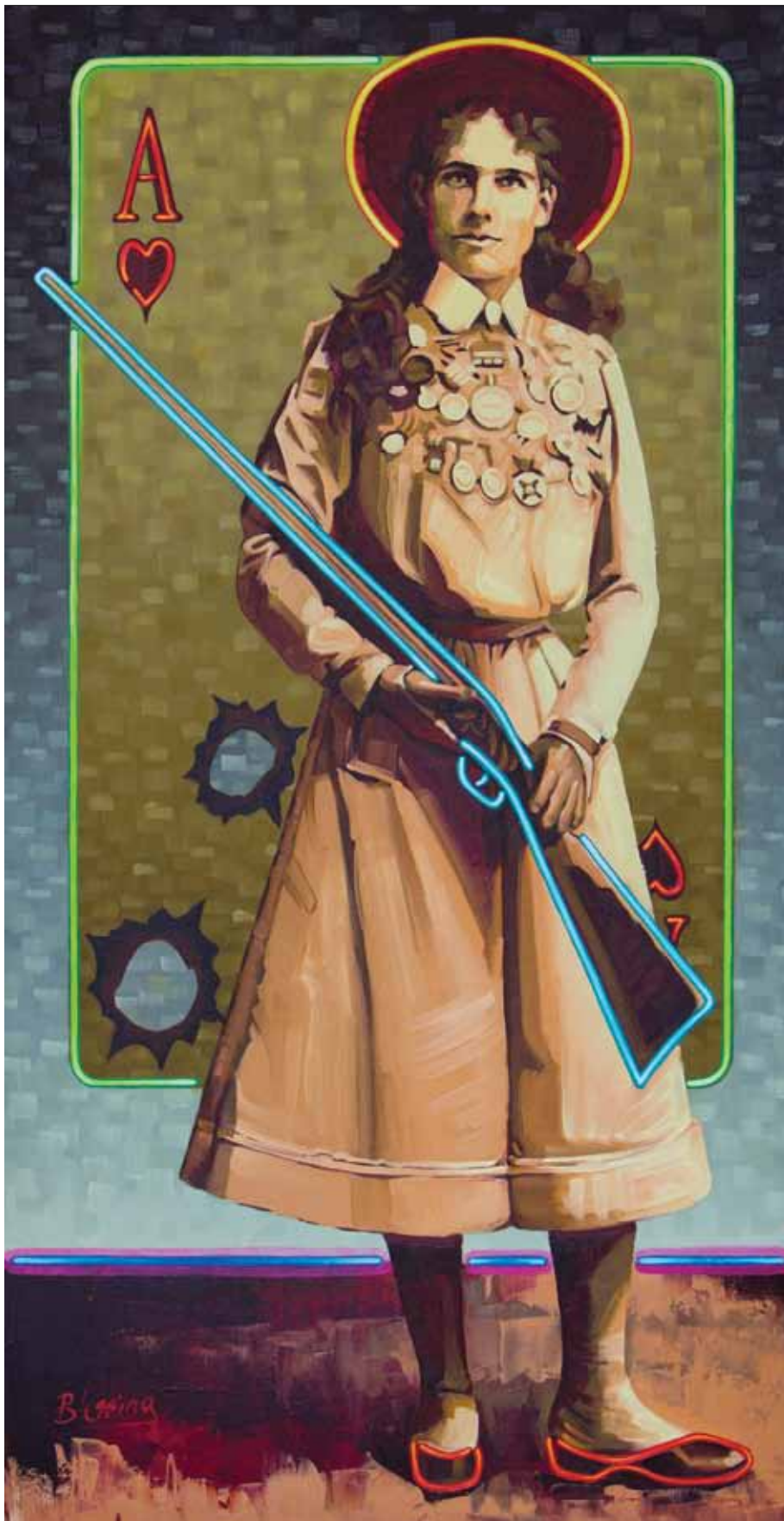
Bozeman has been home to Blessing for many years. It's where he graduated from Montana State University and owned his first recording studio, which, among other projects, produced music soundtracks for Discovery Channel films. When he returned to school for a graduate degree, he chose the University of Montana in Missoula. Following graduation he and his first wife returned to Bozeman, and Blessing established

his second recording studio, producing and engineering more than 150 albums, including some of his own. But music wasn't the only creative thing on his mind. "It's funny," he says. "During that period I would sometimes dream of going back to school to study art. Countless times—I can't tell you how many—that thought kept coming back."

In January 2002 a recording artist called to cancel a monthlong project two weeks before the sessions were to begin. She had just been offered an opportunity to record in Nashville, she said. Blessing was happy for her, of course. But it left a six-week hole in his schedule, in mid-winter, in the cold and snow. "For whatever reason, I went downstairs and set up a still life, got out pencils, and started drawing it," he says. Seeing what he was doing, his two young daughters

brought him toys and other little objects to draw. "I couldn't stop. Oh my gosh, it went on for two or three weeks," he says. Finally his then-wife handed him a full-page photo pulled from *National Geographic*. The image was of a boy in Borneo taking part in a coming-of-age ceremony. "Draw that!" she said. He did.

The experience inspired him to contact a local artist for advanced drawing lessons. When Blessing showed the artist the Borneo drawing, the teacher's eyebrows lifted in admiration. "'You could get into any art school in the country with this image,' he said. So I started taking it seriously," Blessing says. Within three months he sold the recording studio and began focusing on figurative drawing, with his daughters among his first subjects. Soon he shifted to color with pastels and eventually



into oils. "Life changed. Everything changed," he says. Thinking of the musician who canceled her sessions, he smiles. "I blame it all on her."

Aside from an introduction-to-oil-painting workshop with Peggi Kroll-Roberts, Blessing is essentially self-taught. As soon as he became serious about drawing, he began stocking up on art books. "Fortunately for me, it's that hyper-focus. It's benefitted me in anything I've been interested in. I just could not get enough looking at art," he says. He studied brushwork in paintings and scrutinized the interactions between strokes. He soon found himself able to mix any color he wanted. "I'm pretty intuitive. I paint from my gut and my heart," he says.

Blessing's first neon-sign-inspired piece was the result of a request for work by a gallery owner in Missoula. Long attracted to the star-studded sign for that city's Big Dipper ice-cream shop, he sketched, photographed, and painted it. He then sought out and painted more vintage neon signs, often western-themed ones, delighting in the possibilities they provided for playing with color and shape. In 2014 he was invited to The Russell art auction and submitted a neon-sign painting. It set a record, selling for eight times its estimated price. For the next two years the demand for Blessing's neon-themed work was so great that it was virtually all he did. The figurative art he also very much enjoys was put on hold.

Then in the fall of 2016, a thought crossed his mind: Why not use neon as a compositional element in a figurative piece? His boyhood matinee memories came flooding back, and the Neon West series was born. Rather than rendering signs, he began to incorporate intense neon-inspired color spectrums within the figures themselves, as if they were illuminated from within. EMISSARY [on the cover] is one such work, based on a historic photograph of a Native American figure whose eyes spoke volumes to the artist. He adds that whenever he paints historic Native Americans, it is with a feeling of deep honor and respect. Other works in the series depict rainbow-hued gunslingers or iconic figures from popular culture, with neon tubing as graphic



▲ **The Last Day**, oil, 18 x 10.
◀ **A is for Annie**, oil, 48 x 24.



Morning Sentinel, oil, 36 x 24.

highlights in the composition's design.

At the same time, Blessing's first artistic love, straight-up figurative painting, remains close to his heart. "I'm still intrigued by a face, the shape of a shoulder; I love hands and feet," he says. "If a moment can be captured within a face or gesture or body posture that conveys a candid, fleeting feeling, or someone deep in thought, that's what I go for." In *THE LAST DAY*, for example, the canvas is filled with the seated figure of a barefoot, red-haired girl whose pensive expression suggests the wistfulness of summer's end. The work earned a Bold-Brush Award from the judges at Fine Art Studio Online in April 2016. When a painting contains multiple figures, as

in a series featuring couples or small groups with vintage cars and travel trailers, the viewer is invited to read the subjects' facial expressions and body language and imagine what may be going on, Blessing says.

Those narrative hints may be subtle, but the larger visual impact of his paintings is not, and Blessing thinks he knows why. Just as he sees the genesis of his neon obsession in childhood, and his figurative work reflects a long-time interest in portraiture—he continues to receive requests for portrait commissions—he perceives clear parallels between his earlier musical endeavors and his current visual art. "The music I wrote and produced for myself was

very dramatic," he says. "There were really deep lows and crystal highs. It was robust and dynamic music, and my painting is definitely the same." ♦

Colorado-based Gussie Fauntleroy writes for a variety of art publications and is the author of three books on visual artists. Learn more at www.gussiefauntleroy.com.

See more of Blessing's work at www.southwestart.com/featured/blessing-m-may2017.