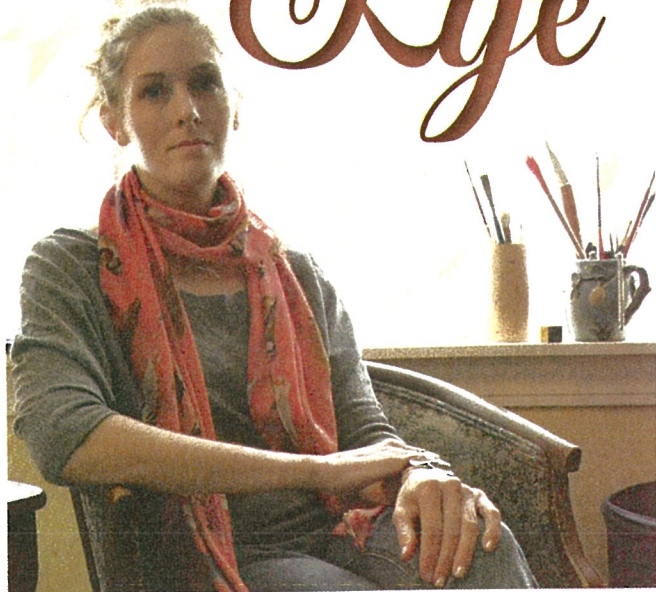


Painting the Seasons of Life



by Jeffrey Mix

WHEN NATALIE STEWART-UTLEY drives her car she notices the tiniest of details in the passing landscape. Whether out near Sandpoint, along the Pullman Highway or areas in the Spokane Valley, there will be something about a little pocket of land—a certain bend in the river, an odd sloping hill or an old snow-covered barn—that will speak to her, forcing her to pull off to the side of the road. Walking out into a field or forest, she stops and wholly absorbs the moment, before capturing the scene with her cell phone.

A wife and homeschooling mother of three, Stewart-Utley hangs onto the inspiration until time opens up for her to paint. As wonderfully hectic as her household can be, this time might not come for days, if not weeks. So she holds onto the scene, and not just the image in her phone, but her experience of it: the wet air, the heavy feeling in the sky that day, the way the wind kissed her cheek and bent the long blades of wild grass. She holds onto the smell of wood smoke, the dense light from a setting sun, so that by the time she sits down to work, there is already a certain nostalgia she associates with the piece.

Stewart-Utley's artist's life grounds her, and when working on a new painting she feels completely alert and in the moment, falling into a meditative state that allows her an innate sense of balance. She starts by toning the canvas, then sketching and blocking it in with her lights and darks. "At that point I keep pushing and pulling different colors, using thin layers of acrylic. I keep working until it comes into its own, until it finds itself."

As a child, Stewart-Utley would pretend to be sick so that she could stay home from school and watch her mother, the accomplished artist Elsie Stewart, work on a new painting. "Mom has always been really nurturing about my work. Even now we're always talking about art, different artists and their processes, and we critique each other's artwork."



If her mom was her first and most influential mentor, then Daniel S. Rice, the classically trained teacher at the Northwest College of Art, was her second. From Rice she learned a very precise method of drawing and painting that, over time, enabled Stewart-Utley to perfect her portraits and other such works of realism. As she began to grow as a person and as an artist, married and had children of her own, however, she realized that her life was anything but exact, and nor should her art be.

As a remedy, Stewart-Utley began working *en plein air*, which is the French equivalent to, "in the open air," or to paint outdoors, because she wanted to loosen up with the brush strokes and to be more expressive. Her work *en plein air* was different because there was suddenly an abundance of color and atmosphere that a camera just can't pick up. "With plein air everything changes so drastically, like light, that you've no choice but to get just the beginning statements, the shapes and the direction. You don't have time to be a perfectionist."

When asked what she enjoys most about being an artist, she pauses for a long, thoughtful moment and says, "What makes me feel really great is when one of my pieces evokes a memory for somebody. When it speaks to them and they see themselves in my work." She recalls one elderly lady who bought one of her paintings, a little 5" X 7" that portrayed two young girls flying a kite across an expansive prairie. It transported the buyer right back to her own childhood, when she would run and play with her now departed sibling. "She got glossy eyed and gave me a big hug."

There is something nostalgic about Stewart-Utley's landscapes that seem to have a mysterious way of conveying mood. "Must be all the sepia colors—the raw umber," she says with a smile.

A series of Stewart-Utley's regional landscapes will be featured at the Bozzi Collection Gallery throughout April, beginning with the April First Friday artist reception. **S**

Jeffrey Mix profiles a different local artist in each issue of *Spokane Coeur d'Alene Living*.

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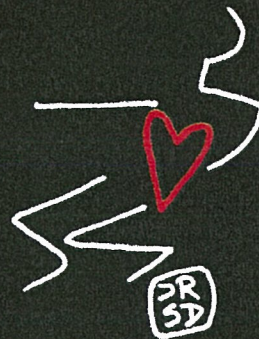
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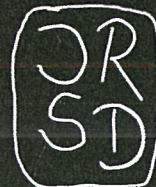
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