

Artist to Collect

Robert Bissell



The Lazy River, oil on canvas, 36" x 48"



above, *The Exchange*, oil on canvas, 42" x 40"



right, *The Kiss*, oil on canvas, 24" x 18"

# An Imaginary Realist

written by Debra Usher

"For me, a successful painting has to function on a number of levels. It is my intention to create layers of depth in both a formal, painterly way, and in the intellectual reading of the piece. The paintings are really about looking at all sides of the puzzle, all of our dilemmas at the same time."

- Robert Bissell

"Animals are good for thinking."

- Claude Levi-Strauss

Robert Bissell's work has delighted and captivated art lovers, collectors and critics for many years. I first came upon his paintings in *Southwest Art Magazine* about a decade ago. I had meant to mark the page and find out more about him. But time and moving houses interfered and I was left with a memory of a magical bear standing in awe about him. The joy on his face and the sense of life in the painting never left my mind.

Early tribal cultures believed the natural world to be the bridge connecting earth and spirit.



The Dream, oil on canvas, 30" x 56"

Animals were regarded as powerful spiritual beings that could connect humans to unseen realms, the natural world and each other. Along these lines, Robert Bissell creates and transports us from modern daily life to a completely different atmosphere and invites us to learn more about ourselves.

In his paintings, the world of animals is a mirror for human existence, self-definition and self-reflection. Yet, these are not mere children's tales. "Bissell's work disarms by narrating vitally

grown-up and urgent allegories in the guise of child-like humour," William Zimmer, art critic for The New York Times, warns.

Bissell's paintings explore the idea that animals have metaphysical importance to our own spiritual well-being. Lured into a realm devoid of humans, the animal characters require we consider our own condition and place in nature. While whimsical at first glance, there is underlying tension and precariousness beneath the images. Disarmed, we objectively consider ourselves

without familiar references. His animal work is full of meaning and lore and touched by surrealism which can be deceptive until we delve further into the imagery and underlying story.

The work appeals to the intellectual child in all of us and the paintings are reflections of the environment, life, death, renewal and stages of transition. Just as we depart from the safety of family and make our way in the world. In Robert's paintings there is something conjured that is at the same time real and unreal, amusing and deeply profound.

#### The Beginning

Robert Bissell was born into the English countryside and had contact with a great number of animals on the family farm. He remembers watching the rabbits playing in the field from his bedroom window. The cattle, sheep and pigs were part of everyday encounters. Robert states, "As a teenager I would stalk the deer on the moors above the farm, trying to see how close I could get."

Robert was given a camera at an early age and started taking photographs of all kinds of



subject matter. He was constantly composing and thinking about how things looked and how they appeared as two dimensional images. Later on he enrolled in the local art school and tried a number of mediums but decided he wanted to study photography. For the next five years he did just that, followed by a postgraduate course at the Royal College of Art in London, which was the only postgraduate course in fine art photography offered at that time.

#### His First Jobs

After London, Robert set sail on an adventure, travelling the world as a cruise ship photographer and finally settling down in San Francisco. There he began working as a photographer at The Sharper Image; rising through the ranks of what was a fast-growing company and eventually becoming Vice-President and Creative Director. He stayed for 10 years, eventually branching out to create his own company, doing advertising work for other retail and catalogue companies.

#### Now to Painting

In 1996, Robert was burned out in the advertising game and wanted to get back to fine art. So, literally chucking it all in, he started painting because he wanted something tactile and didn't want to be continually looking at a computer screen (photography was already going digital by this time). He began painting landscapes because he loved having a connection to the outdoors (another thing he had felt deprived of while doing high-tech advertising work).

#### The Animals Appear

In one of the first paintings he executed, he included a small mouse in the foreground. Robert states, "This started me thinking about animals again and I wondered if I could use them to tell stories in paintings. As I started to do this I would watch people's reactions to the paintings and I realized that the animals were something people could identify with. Everybody seemed to have an association or a story about the animal I was presenting."

Robert found it very interesting that when he showed rabbits or bears some people would become quite emotional and visceral in their reactions. He realized that people who had grown up in western culture knew these particular animals very well as children. They had Teddy bears or Easter rabbits as plush toys or comfort "companions". Also, those particular animals are foremost in much of young children's literature. Robert had grown up with Winnie the Pooh, Peter Rabbit, Yogi Bear and the fantastic rabbit



The Enchantment by the Lake, oil on canvas, 58" x 40"

adventure, *Watership Down*. These images and memories are instilled deep inside us all.

#### Telling Stories

Robert knew he could use these images and stories to talk to the audience in a different way. It became a means for people to get involved in his work in a very intimate way and for Robert to converse with them. He states, "I like to think and conceive of my work as a conversation - the artist telling a story to the viewer."

Robert attributes his unique perspective and viewpoint on the animal kingdom to the creatures he has met along the way. "These animals have taught me many wonderful things and have helped me to explore the world around me," he explains. "In postgraduate school in London, John Hedgecoe taught me how to find beauty in the mundane and Bill Brandt would critique my work and hence I learned much about composition from him. Leaving the relative safety of English farming life for the city and art school and later



The Enchantment, oil on canvas, 58" x 40"

departing for the four corners of the earth were the first big "leaps of faith" I made. I remember being scared to death but knew I had to explore the world and the nature of reality. Giving up a good income and career in advertising to paint was similar in scope."

"I have been strongly influenced by Caspar David Friedrich and the Romantic painting movement in Europe. The Hudson River painters also helped to inspire my art. I have a very rigorous and disciplined work schedule and believe that great art comes from a lifetime of dedicated work and I hope to truly do a great painting one day."

#### His Work

"My work is about the human condition," Robert states. "It actually has very little to do with animals. I want to describe the things I experience in life. I do this through depicting animals as our protagonists. How and the many ways I can express that is what interests me. This is probably the most important thing I can say about my work."

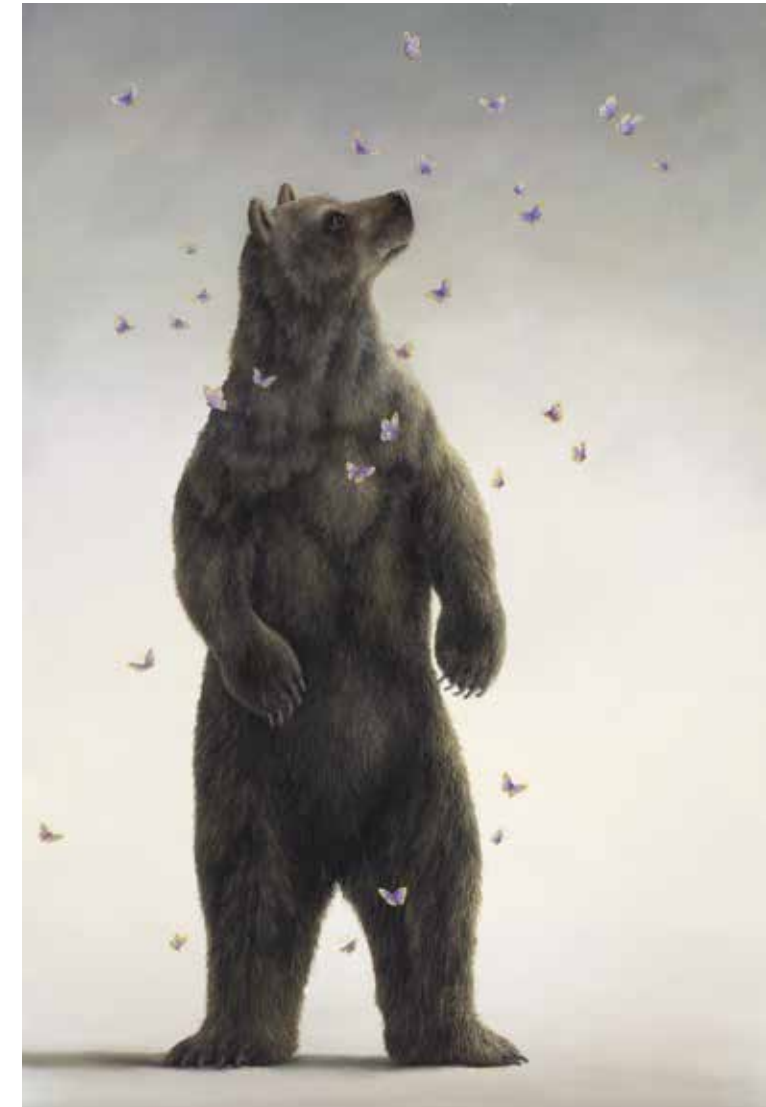


The Embrace II, oil on canvas, 40" x 30"

Robert paints indoors under artificial light and tries to isolate himself from his surroundings as much as possible. He also likes to change studios every couple of years, as he thinks it helps to approach the work from a fresh perspective.

"Life with all its ups and downs inspires my work. My meditation practice allows me to work from a deeper place. In my studio are books, books and more books," says Robert, adding, "I look at photographs and other artists' work all the time. The skill of representing nature in a realistic way fascinates me and to be able to suffuse that with a sense of the sublime is what impresses me most. Caspar David Friedrich did that best. Few artists since have been able to do what he did."

Robert's other job involves marketing; making appearances at galleries around the country, doing various events to promote his work and having conversations with the many collectors who are delighted to meet the man who creates these wonderful stories on canvas. When he wants to disappear, Robert goes to his cabin, where he



Hero #6, oil on canvas, 72" x 48"

hopes people won't find him.

"To be good at anything," Robert says, "is all about work, work and more work. To get really good you have to put in the 10,000 hours that Malcolm Gladwell writes about. When you fall down, get rejected or can't seem to get it right, take a break and get up and just keep going no matter what. You have to be very headstrong about doing what you want and need to do... no matter what people say. My dog is one of my many inspirations - I use his nose to model the bear's noses."

Robert admits that being in the studio and painting standing up, hour after hour after hour, is one of the hardest parts of his craft. Most of his paintings take between 80 and 120 hours to execute.

He gets ideas for paintings from all kinds of sources, mostly when he is hiking in the wilderness or sitting in a quiet spot away from the city. Inspiration also comes from reading, TV, magazines and other artists. These ideas are



above, The Golden Bear, oil on canvas, 60" x 42"  
left, The Discord of Paris, oil on canvas, 40" x 42"

recorded as very quick small sketches. A few weeks later, he takes the ones he likes and creates a larger drawing or pastel. These then sit for several weeks as well. After that Robert selects those he wants to make paintings of and then sketches them on canvas at full size. Next, up to five layers of paint are applied with increasing detail and refinement at each stage. Oil on canvas is what he knows best but he does work on paper with chalk or pastel for sketches.

Robert Bissell considers himself a self-taught artist and says he is still learning how to paint well – at least in his opinion. In my opinion, though, his paintings are perfectly wonderful works of imaginative and truly refined art. He will do commissions, but only of paintings that he wants to revisit. Robert says, "Reworking a new version of a painting is a really good way for me to improve my technique and approach."

#### The Artist's Perspective

"The most valid thing about a painting is that it truly cannot be explained. This was Matisse's point of view and a very valid one," states Robert.

A painting is something that can be enjoyed by many for a

variety of reasons. Robert Bissell believes that art has to disarm the viewer before it can inform. Using the "rabbit's eye perspective" where everything is observed from an animal's point of view is a way for us to look at the world in a different way. Robert's work is concerned with the natural world and basic human essence – our natural selves, our commonality and connection with animals.

Some of his other works, such as the "Eden" paintings, are more formal and direct. The viewer is face to face with an animal that appears to be equal in size to them. In this case, Robert wanted to create a reflection and an interaction between the viewer and the animal at the same time. He

realized this by looking at the life-size French and English court portraits done by artists like Gainsborough and Boucher. In these paintings, subjects were shown in rich landscape settings from a low viewpoint that made the subjects appear more important than they probably were. Robert surmised that adopting this approach would elevate the status of the animals to that of a human and catch the viewer off guard, forcing him or her to look both at the painting and the animal differently.

For this purpose he picked animals that strive to or could stand on two feet, which instantly gives them common ground with the viewer. The background settings are derived from Romantic



left, The Oracle, oil on canvas, 44" x 46"

above, The Guru, oil on canvas, 42" x 44"

era landscape paintings where the intention of the artist was to idealize a world in which man was in total harmony with nature. The very fact that we know this to be a false vision seemed to fit with Robert's own intentions to elevate the animals' importance and disarm the viewer at the same time.

"My paintings are meant to provoke thought and conversation – my main concern is for the well-being of our inner selves. It seems to me that it will be much easier for man to fix the huge environmental problems we are facing if we ourselves are healthy in our minds – aware of our true nature, free of some of the toxicity and attachments of modern society. I'm not suggesting we all become tree-huggers and Buddhists, but I

do believe we need a re-balancing, and I hope my work will provide some weight to the side of the natural world."

Being alone in the wilderness for a few days can provide incredible insight into one's own nature and place in the world. In that sense Robert is a spiritual person, a seeker on the path to a higher reality and awareness outside of himself. In certain respects wild animals are further along that path, unfettered by human-like concerns of self and ego. Of course they still have to deal with a level of suffering, just like humans and sometimes at the hands of humans.

"To me it is critical my work promotes an integral understanding of our world, helps raise consciousness and transforms people's lives,"



AM2, oil on canvas, 40" x 60"



above, Bathers at Dusk, oil on canvas, 36" x 48"

below, The Dance, oil on canvas, 30" x 40"



says Robert. "If artists don't start talking about contemporary problems and worldly issues, providing a moral stance, high art is going to be swallowed up by a rabid pop and corporate culture. And, at the risk of sounding elitist, I'm prepared to take a stand in this effort. If the world is going to be saved, it's not going to be by politicians, corporations or religious fundamentalists – artists can help us understand the relationships between nature and humankind."

#### The Goal

Robert believes, "If I can take someone's breath away, even for a second or two, and truly take them out of themselves to a place of different awareness, somewhere quiet and beautiful, then I consider that painting a success."

Artist Robert Bissell's fascinating work

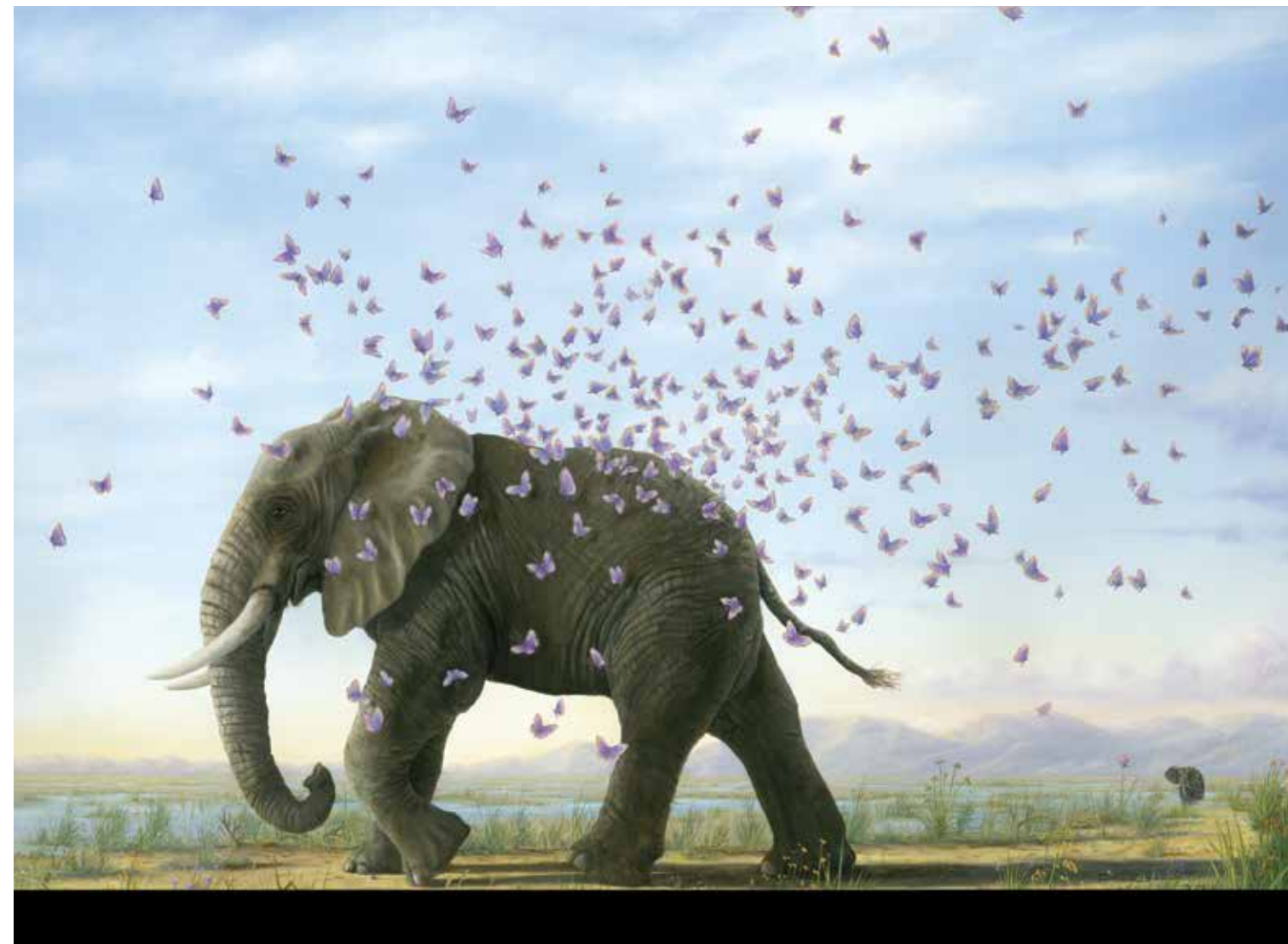
transports us to a peaceable kingdom where animals contemplate the world through calm, philosophical eyes, inviting us to enter a reflective landscape where bears levitate above lakes, surrounded by clouds of lavender butterflies. Rabbits walk down paths side by side with bears – what is the bear or rabbit thinking? All kinds of questions are posed by a Bissell painting – the answer is yours and yours alone.

Robert Bissell readily incorporates animals and animal lore into his imagery, in settings that exist between reality and some other, less concrete place. He moves us with the telling of a beautiful story and animals seemingly intent on sharing their world with us. It is a strange and magical world that these creatures inhabit and we are left on our own to decipher what they are trying to tell us. The paintings have the power to linger in our





above, Rhapsody, oil on canvas, 30" x 46"



below, The Decision, oil on canvas, 28" x 40"



mind and in our imagination for a very long time.

Robert sees something in life that I hope all of us at some point along the way do too. If not it will be a sad and very lonely journey and not the magical one that Robert's footsteps walk.

Robert Bissell currently lives in Northern California with his wife and their Springer Spaniel – the nose dog. Robert regularly exhibits in museums and galleries across the United States, Europe and soon to be Canada. He can be reached at [robert@robertbissell.com](mailto:robert@robertbissell.com), [www.robertbissell.com](http://www.robertbissell.com), or telephone: 1.510.495.4904



above, Metamorphosis, oil on canvas, 40" x 56"  
left, The Dancing Wolves, oil on canvas, 24" x 30"



above, The Prayer, oil on canvas, 40" x 36"



right, Bubo, oil on canvas, 40" x 30"