



Tracking Blue

By Karin Hillhouse

Southern New Mexico in July--it doesn't feel completely safe. The hills bear no trace of human habitation. No signs invite a stop. One slowly develops a stake in emptiness. Boundaries dissolve, tie softens, land and sky and horizon keep an indifferent watch. The elements are on the ascendant.

In San Patricio there's a post office, but no general store, no restaurant, no bar. The population may be 450. The postmaster isn't sure. But the fields and hills here are showing even; green that nature imagined. Chollas in bloom, cottonwoods and yucca, sage and salt cedar, more wild flowers than I can name. Extraordinary summer rains have delivered this bound. And just now, a blinding, deafening cloudburst provides a dramatic close to the day.

I'm here to visit a friend--a painter--who invites me to dinner. She's excited. She has things on her mind. Late in the afternoon I drive to her ranch. By the turnoff a new flag is flying. To greet me there's a bright copper weather vane of a horse she made herself. Outside around the house everything looks different from my first visit. January has given way grandly to July. The vegetation is lush and overgrown. Lily, the goat, is in heaven. The horses, too, are at their feast. Sophie and the other dogs are asleep in the tall grass.

There's a lot of romantic fuss over artists and their studios. Some is perhaps warranted. The point is simple enough: the most accurate measure of an artist's sensibility is her studio. It reflects the state of her mind. And this studio inspires thoughts of lives lived and lives imagined.

An artist's studio is architecture of place and being. What is built, what is a-building, constitutes the architecture, providing shelter, continuity, and the possibility of change. Each bird's nest, each shell, each piece of fabric, each child's toy, each rag and tube of paint, each vase filled with brushes, the wall of hats, the north-arching window, the books, each candlestick--from these the structure slowly takes shape, encompassing finally every sort of beauty and despair and contradiction and joy that is life. There is integrity of person and place, and the palette mirrors the whole of it with ten thousand colors.

To enter Linda Miller's studio is to greet her soul. I wonder if she feels my wonder. I don't know her well enough to ask. The authenticity of things not for show but for love and for work is so complete, so perfectly stunning, I don't know what to say. It's as if I'm interrupting a person in communion. The silence in the room is graceful and grave.

I'm unnerved in the presence of the artist so thoroughly dedicated to what is difficult, honest, direct and fragile. Standing before her and her treasures is disorienting. It's best to sit down.

Linda reads a passage from Cellini's *Autobiography*. Reading, she connects these studio walls with frescos of ancient and medieval Italy. The she shows me *Hondo Still Life*, a life-sized painting of a sheep. Linda held her with one hand while painting her with the other. I am back in New Mexico—New Mexico that is not in art galleries.



Linda is not bothered that I have come into her sanctuary. She's filled with news. And the best comes first. "Look at this ... I waited 14 years ... Finally I found a hummingbird's nest." Then "You haven't seen the anvil yet... Do you like it... It's called *The Third Hand*." And after, "Remember the *Christmas Pony*? .. How I painted it all radiant... I want to do it again, but this time, as it is. Old and worn and loved beyond repair. I'll paint the sad story of that child's pony Lucky."

This is the lover of life talking. Fidelity and watchfulness and care are constant companions. They are also excellent qualities for a painter working in a medium of everyday images. They exact patience of monumental proportions. Linda will spend six months painting the nest, working to match the bird's confidence and commitment. It's a matter of honor. The reward for her vision, for this gradual laying up of color and texture and light and nuance, is uncommon brilliance, the brilliance of revelation, the brilliance at the heart of all beauty.

It's so totally unexpected. Perhaps everything that matters of civilization lives in this remote valley where my friend keeps her dogs and horses and chickens and takes time--a lot of time--to paint images of promise and hope. Art is the work that knows it is made in a context overwhelmingly creative without it. Art illuminates the creation. *Even Light* and *The Wedding Dress, After the Ballet* and *Magic, a Day-Old Colt* speak the language of an order of creation that elsewhere is fractured and endangered. Her I am in the place of art.

The power of Linda's images comes from her unflinching awareness of death. At the very beginning she reckoned with last things. *Migration Ended*, a still life of five dead birds, hangs in a place of honor over the studio fireplace. Linda won't sell it. Now 20 years old, the painting of these five, caught by an early blizzard, captures the mystery and the timelessness of death. I remember the Italian words for still life, *natura morta*. Well, yes, *morta*, but also the transcendence that comes of simplicity and acknowledgement, not from abstraction or ideology. Five still birds are still life. The promise of death, even of untimely passing, steadied her hands. Rendering inevitability, she is free to roam magnificently the landscape of delight.

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