

HUNTER'S ★HORN



WILDLIFE

Impasto



SOUTH AFRICAN ANIMAL PAINTER JAMES STROUD
WINS PRAISE FOR GIVING PORTRAYALS OF ICONIC
SPECIES CONTEMPORARY FLAIR

BY TODD WILKINSON



Royal Pairing, oil on panel, 51 x 79 inches, by James Stroud

“It excites me that someone is able to look at the animal image and be seduced by it, and then be able to look more closely at the paint itself and understand the actual physiology of the illusion,”
—Painter James Stroud

Often these days, we hear 21st century wildlife artists invoking the masters of their genre, names such as Wilhelm Kuhnert, the late Bob Kuhn and Simon Combes, Texas's own Ken Carlson and a short list of others as providing inspiration. Seldom does anyone make an overt reference to an Impressionist like Vincent van Gogh or to abstract expressionists such as Willem de Kooning or Jackson Pollock.

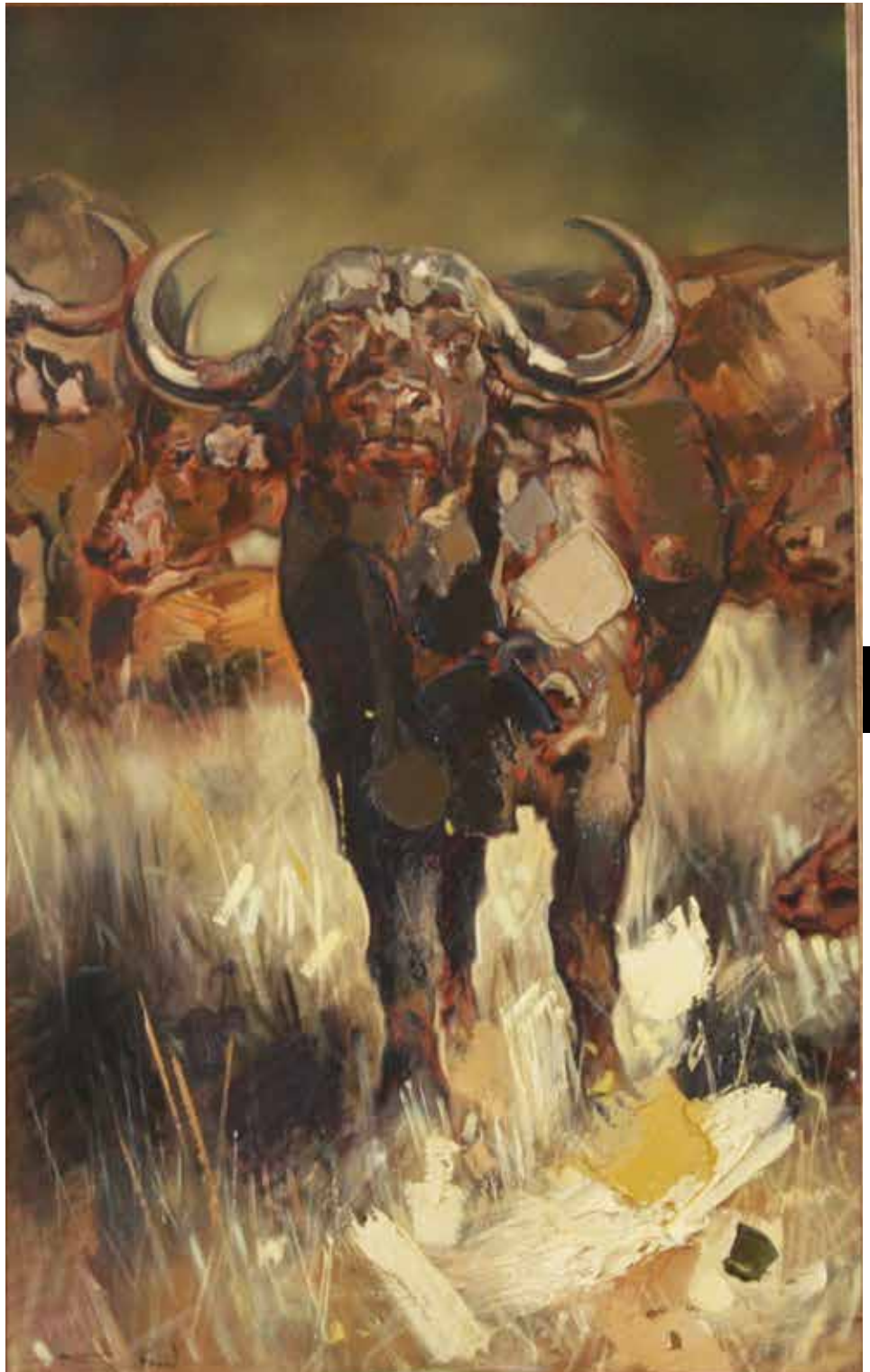
On the first and only meeting I've ever had with James Stroud, he amazed me. The tall and lanky South African painter wandered out of the rain in Cape Town, carrying a heavy stack of new works under his arm.

One work portrayed a leopard, its spots practically leaping off the canvass; another depicted a band of zebra, their stripes catching the eye in a mesmerizing maze of patterns; and finally, there was a bull elephant, imposing and magnetic, its appearance seeming almost sculpted in big wide brushstrokes. There were small-sized works, each weighted down by thick layers of dried paint. I was left to wonder about the kind of hefty impact that Stroud's larger, more ambitious pieces would have.

Right off the bat, Stroud made it clear he didn't see himself as being a "wildlife artist" nor does he seek to emulate the style of others whose works are typically found in hunting and angling magazines. "Yes, I paint animals and landscapes, but I'm not trying to make a literal interpretation," he said. "I want the viewer to walk away with a feeling rather than merely encountering a picture."

It was a provocative declaration, partially misleading and at the same time extraordinarily true. To collectors who can't seem to get enough of Stroud's luscious, deeply textured celebrations of large-African, big-game species, his paintings represent a refreshing contrast to typical, old-school sporting art.

"It's not just about appreciating the beautiful imagery he makes. His work ignites that little light that all great art does," says



In the Face of Danger, oil on panel, 48 x 30 inches, by James Stroud

"I want the viewer to walk away with a feeling rather than merely encountering a picture."



Watchtowers, oil on panel, 30 x 48 inches, by James Stroud

Atlanta businessman Buck Woodruff, who has traveled to several countries in southern Africa to hunt. Woodruff has a high standard when it comes to what will hang on his wall.

“I’ve always said that Africa doesn’t fit into a camera. James brings the continent and its iconic animal life to justice in a way that appeals to modern tastes. His paintings have a vibration about them.”

Woodruff owns more than a dozen Strouds of various sizes and they fit in well with a diverse range of paintings and sculptures from other artists across the ages in his collection. Stroud, he says, is one of the most exciting contemporary talents of his generation. Several well-known Houston art collectors agree, hanging Stroud originals on their walls next to works by European masters of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Art Dealer, Ross Parker, born in Zimbabwe when it was still called Rhodesia, says

Stroud’s work emanates a “vibrancy.” Parker was there with me that day in Cape Town when Stroud shared the works mentioned above, all rendered in his preferred, impasto technique.

Only days after the paintings were air-freighted across the Atlantic and reached Parker’s Native Visions’ Call of Africa galleries in Florida, they were quickly purchased. By that time, Stroud himself had slipped out of Cape Town and was traveling through the South African bush to gather more visual reference material. “When I try to communicate to the spirit of my subjects, I wonder how Van Gogh would have interpreted the animals of my homeland,” Stroud says.

Stroud grew up on a timber plantation in the foothills of the Mpumalanga (Drakensburg) mountains. The property is sandwiched between the town of Graskop that sits atop the escarpment and nearby, Kruger

National Park (South Africa’s version of Yellowstone), which stretches out towards the Mozambique border to the east.

“The landscape there is breathtaking with misty, rainforest-covered canyons in the Western highlands morphing into the drier, hot lowlands that are the bushveld regions most people associate with an acacia-covered African landscape,” Stroud says. “It is there that a region larger than Switzerland is home to one of the most extraordinary manifestations of the natural world.” Private game parks and public preserves are havens, though the plague of poaching has never been far away. Elephants and rhinos, ruthlessly killed for their ivory and horns, have suffered huge losses from black market criminals.

Stroud hopes that art can help elevate awareness and hasten a global dialogue about what needs to be done to ensure that species, so much a part of his national heritage, will



Silent Sentinel, oil on panel, 48 x 24 inches, by James Stroud



On High Alert, oil on panel, 36 x 48 inches, by James Stroud

persist into the future. “Art reflects social consciousness,” he says. “It should inspire us, sure, but I think it should also remind us about the issues challenging us in our own time. I am glad that Americans who enjoy my work are so passionate about wildlife in Africa.”

Following his rural childhood, Stroud went off to the University of Natal in 1988 and eventually settled in Cape Town, a city touted for decades as one of the most beautiful and cosmopolitan in the world. The intention of his art is not to manipulate viewers, though he does want to inspire human compassion.

“One of my main motivations in creating these works is to give voice to a world that desperately needs our empathetic attention. The kind of approach to wildlife art that interests me is one that does not subjugate nature for personal aggrandizement or even romantic notions of nature as a symbol for our own inner worlds,” he says.

“I admire depictions of the natural world as an autonomous wondrous phenomenon that is as worthy of respect as any human-centered endeavor. This is a world we need to understand as it becomes ever more apparent that we depend on it for our own long term survival.”

Stroud came onto Parker’s radar screen more than a decade ago as the art dealer was making one of his regular pilgrimages to Africa and set out into the bush with some of his regular artists. They mentioned Stroud, who was making a name for himself in contemporary collecting circles. He had no name recognition in the United States.

“When it comes to being authentic in art, there is no substitution for having real-life exposure to the kinds of topics you are portraying and themes you’re exploring,” Parker says. “If you are going to paint African wildlife, you can’t do it well and convincingly by copying photographs or spending your afternoons studying zoo animals in the U.S. Stroud is from the region. He grew up there, he still lives there, and his trips to the bush give him insight to animals that rings true when he paints them.”



Danger in Numbers, oil on panel, 35 x 55 inches, by James Stroud



Royal Gaze, oil on panel, 30 x 48 inches, by James Stroud

At the same time, Stroud does not want to be a hostage to a way of seeing animals that existed centuries or many decades ago. "A shift is going on in the art world," Parker says. "Younger generations just starting to build their own collections are tending to favor more contemporary approaches to nature art than their parents and grandparents. James' work appeals to both older, seasoned collectors who have more traditional décor in their living spaces and to young urban collectors who have more modern tastes."

Stroud loves painting impasto, especially wildlife, which few of his contemporaries do. Van Gogh is legendary for adopting this method. For a long time, however, Stroud struggled with this wet-paint approach which delivers engaging surface topography and interesting light effects, like sculpture. The reason for Stroud's frustration: adding on layer after oozing layer of paint normally takes a long time to dry and cure. About ten years ago, Stroud perfected a method to expedite the drying and allow him to work faster, not having to wait many months before a piece was ready to leave the studio.

"A lot of younger artists have seen James' work, the response it generates from collectors, and have tried to copy it. But his ability to get the paint to cure and harden has enabled him to overcome the obstacles that stymie others," Parker says.

Stroud delights in the way it adds mass to the surface, enhancing the way a subject is projected toward viewers. "I have always responded to the physicality of paint and do not see it only as a means to creating an illusion. The paint itself holds as much expressive power for me as the image it may construct."

Stroud says he worked for a while as a ceramic artist which helped him think of image making not just in terms of a flat surface but it also drew him to consider three dimensional possibilities. The tactile sculptural nature of clay definitely left its mark, he notes.



Dust Up, oil on panel, 35 x 55 inches, by James Stroud

“Part of finding my own voice involves absorbing elements of other painters’ work which resonate with my own needs. So I would have to say that most art I’ve experienced has had an effect on my own work to some degree. Painting seems to be a very cannibalistic affair too. You feed off others to grow your own, hopefully unique style.”

The process, for him, does not always inhabit a rational space. Often, his response to line, color and texture is an unconscious one that leads him in directions he cannot easily explain. “The work of Van Gogh resonates very strongly with me,” he says, noting that brush strokes line and color are used for their emotional content as much as for representational qualities. “I also respond very strongly to the work of the American abstract expressionist painters De Kooning,

Gorky and Pollock who took these ideas to their natural conclusion.”

“Some have referred to James Stroud as the LeRoy Neiman of wildlife art, except that he uses a palette application that’s much more textured. And his colors are truer to life than Nieman’s which were splashy and popish,” Parker says. “The prices for an original Stroud, who is still on his creative ascent, compare favorably too. You can own an original Stroud for less than a limited edition signed and number Neiman lithograph.”

When the Houston Safari Club Convention opens in early 2016, Parker plans to showcase a dozen new Strouds in addition to those now in his Native Visions’ Call of Africa Galleries in Naples and Jupiter, Florida.

Parker offers this assessment. “All we can ask of artists is that they use their extraordinary talents to make visible what we’re unable to see. The great artists in history have been able to channel the uncommon. James Stroud is doing that. He lives in a place that in many ways is ahead of where the world is at, not behind. His art inspires us—and it demands that we pay attention.” ★

EDITOR’S NOTE: Todd Wilkinson has been writing about wildlife art for a quarter century. He is author of the recent critically-acclaimed book “Last Stand: Ted Turner’s Quest to Save a Troubled Planet,” and a new book coming this fall, “Grizzlies of Pilgrim Creek: An Intimate Portrait of 399, The Most Famous Bear of Greater Yellowstone.”