

A Tour of George
Carlson's Studio

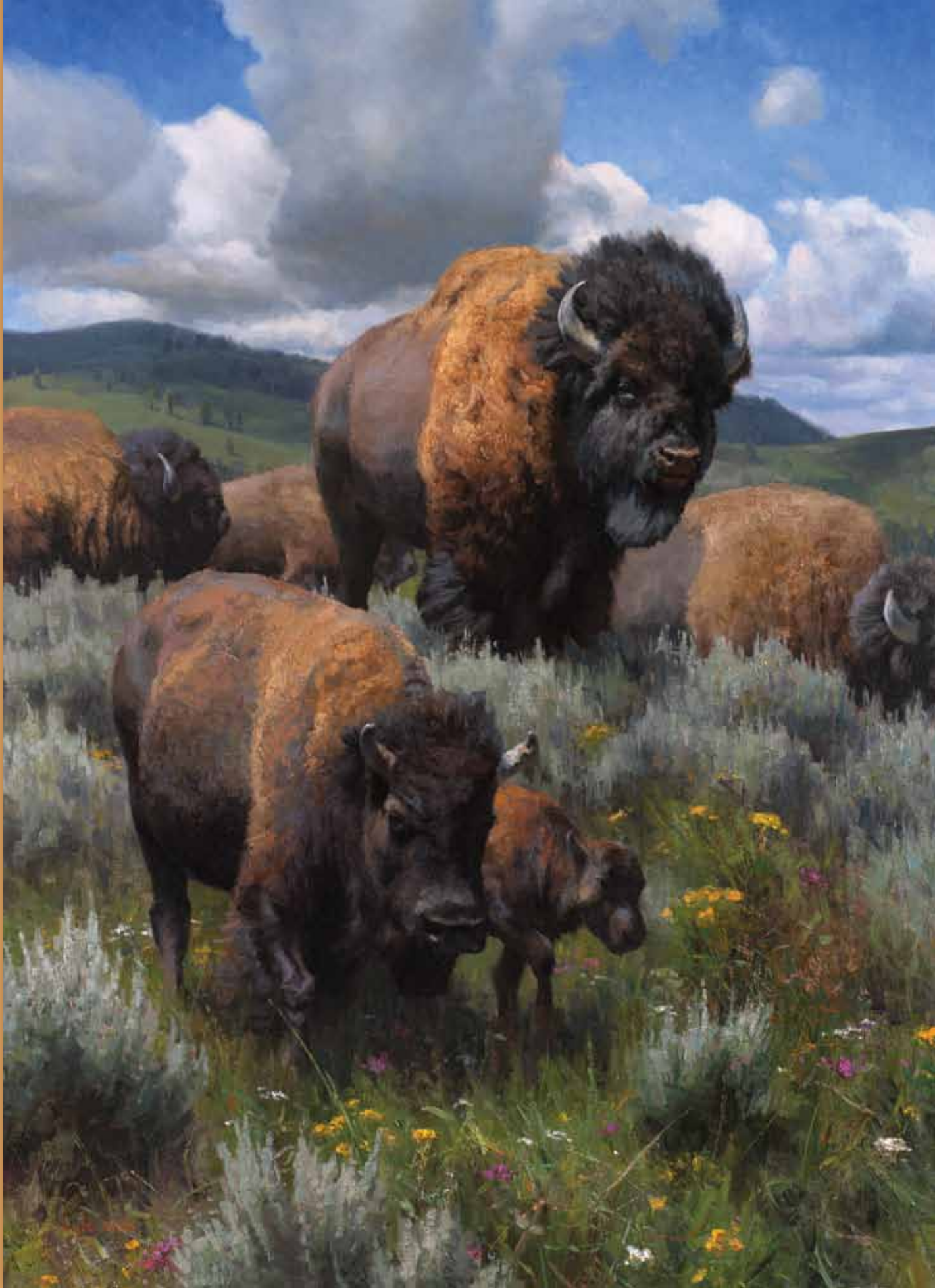
Special Focus: The
Western Landscape

Rising Star Kyle Sims'
Wildlife Paintings

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A Yellowstone Migration, oil, 55 x 40.

Being There

BY GUSSIE FAUNTLEROY

Montana painter **Kyle Sims** aims for an animal's essence in his wildlife art

IMAGINE THE many stages and changes a painter normally goes through—from early interest to exploring various mediums to formal training, mentors, and workshops—and move it all up so each phase takes place perhaps 10 years earlier than one might expect. That's the track Kyle Sims has taken with art. At 31, the Montana-based wildlife painter already has been pursuing his second-choice passion for more than half his life.

His first choice, until age 13, was paleontology. He recalls being 5 years old, watching a television program on dinosaurs, and feeling the powerful urge to re-create these awe-inspiring prehistoric creatures on paper. It's not such a leap from a love of dinosaurs to a love of painting wild animals of all kinds—the career choice Sims settled on in his early teens.

These days, collectors around the country are taking appreciative note of the sense of awe and the essence of natural realism with which Sims renders some of the grandest of North American wildlife. With representation by Trailside Galleries since he was 24, he has already received such honors as Best of Show at the 2009 Buffalo Bill Art Show and Sale, and the Major General and Mrs. Don D. Pittman Wildlife Award, the top wildlife award at the 2009 Prix de West Invitational. Sims also was invited to participate in the Autry National Center's Masters of the American West Fine Art Exhibition and Sale this year, which opens February 4.

GROWING UP just outside Cheyenne, WY, Sims found himself enthralled with wildlife painting at the same time he was outgrowing dinosaurs. His mother, always encouraging his interest in art, took him to museums, galleries, and art events. In one print gallery in particular, he remembers being mesmerized by the exquisitely detailed wildlife imagery of Belgian illustrator and painter Carl Brenders. "I was fascinated with how he's able to maintain a softness but also create a hyper-realistic look," Sims recalls.



representation

Trailside Galleries, Jackson, WY, and Scottsdale, AZ.

upcoming shows

Masters of the American West, Los Angeles, CA, February 5-March 20. Group show, **Trailside Galleries**, Jackson, WY, March.

Prix de West Invitational, Oklahoma City, OK, June. Group show, **Trailside Galleries**, Jackson, WY, September.



Headed for New Heights, oil, 40 x 60.



▲ **High Rise**, oil, 50 x 28.
▼ **Making Him Work for It**, oil, 42 x 60.



First in watercolor, then gouache, and then acrylics, young Kyle attempted to produce the kind of realism he admired. By age 13 he came to the conclusion that there was no reason he couldn't have a career in art. "I've always believed in myself," the friendly, enthusiastic painter relates, speaking from the studio he helped build at his home outside Bozeman.

In his midteens Sims was already making a little money selling his paintings to friends and at art shows. So at 16, when he saw a magazine ad for a workshop in Jackson Hole, WY, he was able to pay for half the cost while his parents kicked in the rest. Wildlife painters Terry Isaac and Rod Frederick instructed the workshop, and their guidance and support inspired Sims to double down on his own efforts. Most days at school he painted during the lunch hour and tried to finish his homework during the school day so he could paint all evening at home.

"My style at the time was super-detailed; I focused on one little area at a time," Sims says. "Looking back on it, I can see that it was meditative. It was an escape from stress, from the social pressures in high school that I simply didn't enjoy." As he continued taking workshops, artists who became mentors and friends began encouraging him to paint on location. But it wasn't until he was 18 and met painter Paco Young (who died in 2005) that Sims

began to focus on the elements of a painting—in particular, true colors and the feeling of *being there*—that can be attained only by sketching and painting from life. Simultaneously, he switched from acrylics to oils and shifted from a tight, controlled approach to a looser, more soft-edged style. "You definitely can achieve softer edges quicker with oil, and images in real life do appear softer to the eye," he explains. "I want my painting to evoke the sense of looking at the real thing. That's what's satisfying to me."

Wildlife continued to be the primary subject for Sims, even as he honed his skills by painting landscapes *en plein air*. He also gathered crucial experience in observation and positioning himself where he could watch and absorb animal behavior and movements, even when he wasn't putting paint on canvas while in the field. Sims frequently spends time in wilderness areas like Yellowstone National Park, just a little over an hour from his home—either alone or with his brother, his friends, or his wife, Joylene.

Once in Alaska, as the artist was observing the local wildlife, a mother grizzly and her two cubs fell asleep right beside the bush plane on which he and his brother had been flown in. A ranger helped the pilot move the plane, but in the process one of the floats took on water. Lifting off from the lake, the plane tilted perilously to one side and started going down. Sims and his brother pushed open the door on the high side and jumped onto the float, balancing the weight and allowing the plane to gain altitude. "There are a hundred things that can kill you out there," he smiles. "The best part of this job is being out in the field. It's so exciting; it's where I get all my inspiration as an artist."

With experience, Sims has learned the best places and times to observe, sketch, and photograph hoofed animals such as elk, moose, bison, and deer. In **MAKING HIM WORK FOR IT**, Sims captures the distinctive stance of a bull elk pursuing his cows: neck outstretched, head lowered, nose up into the scent, and eyes rimmed in white.

In choosing the subject of **YELLOWSTONE MIGRATION**, Sims was intrigued by the sight of a massive bull buffalo standing atop a rise. More of the herd walks behind the bull as a buffalo cow and her



Delights of July, oil, 24 x 34.

calf make their way below. “I was able to see great interaction, herding behavior, little head gestures, subtleties you pick up on,” Sims says of the time spent observing these iconic creatures. “Eventually it gets ingrained, and you remember it.”

Some animals, especially large predators, are much harder to find and observe, so Sims relies on other means of getting close. In *HIGH RISE*, for example, a cougar looks down from a rocky promontory, intent—one imagines—on prey below. In reality, the cougar was a trained animal, led into the setting by his trainer. The artist, toting sketchbook and camera, was along for the glorious sight. “I couldn’t paint a cougar otherwise,” he acknowledges. “I love cats. I’d be devastated if I didn’t get to paint them.” Reference material is also gleaned from books, videos, and even zoos, while further inspiration comes from continually studying other artists’ work.

A year ago, Sims traveled to Russia and experienced what he calls a “life changing” visit to museums in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Among other shows, he viewed an exhibition of works by landscape painter Isaac Levitan (1860-1900). Gazing at a small Levitan painting of a

birch grove, Sims remembers being powerfully moved by the artist’s sensitivity to subtle elements in the painting that add up to an astonishingly real sense of being there. It is this paradox of apparent detail produced by abstract marks and brush strokes that especially intrigues him these days and inspires continual effort to refine his own approach. In this he looks to all the artists he esteems, regardless of genre, including Nicolai Fechin, John Singer Sargent, Joaquín Sorolla, and Anders Zorn.

Describing himself as competitive, disciplined, and driven by a strong work ethic, Sims generally spends 40 hours a week in his studio, where a bay of north-facing windows frames the highest peak in southern Montana’s Bridger Range. Yet even when he worked a part-time job as a FedEx package handler, just out of college at 22, he committed himself to as much as eight hours of painting each day. Less than a year later he dropped the FedEx job and has been a full-time artist ever since. “I like to keep ahead of the game, pushing the limits, pushing the boundaries,” he observes.

While Sims is drawn to the essential

freedom of wild animals and loves the stories that can be told through animal imagery, the quality that initially attracted him to wildlife painting as a boy remains: the ability of a work of art to pull him out of everyday life and into a world where the feeling conveyed is as immediate as the soft chatter of leaves in a breeze, the smell of wet grass, or the breath-catching sound of a bugling elk. “I’m working on how to create a three-dimensional illusion through things like texture and sculpting with paint. I’m trying to grow with that,” he reflects. “My painting style now is incorporating variety in brushwork, texture, and color—but controlled variety, not random. What I’m after is a natural, spontaneous look. It’s not new, but I’m trying to do it in my own way.” ❖

Colorado-based Gussie Fauntleroy also writes for *Native Peoples*, *Phoenix Home & Garden*, and other magazines and is the author of three books on visual artists.

See more of Sims’ paintings at
www.southwestart.com/featured/sims-k-feb2012.