

Bridging Worlds: The Art of Christopher Rowland

Inspired by Native American culture and tradition



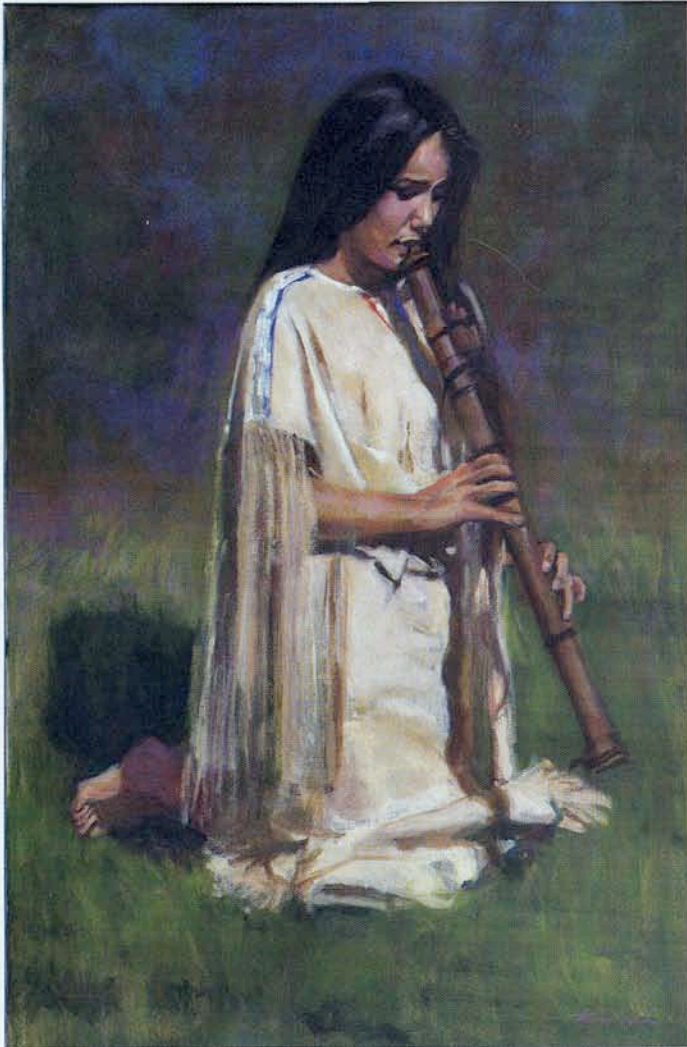
VICTORY
2006
OIL ON CANVAS
23" X 36"

IT'S CLOSE TO 3 P.M. AS ARTIST CHRISTOPHER ROWLAND slides into a booth in one of his favorite restaurants, the time his brain really revs into gear. "I've tried my hardest to get up at the crack of dawn, but I don't really *see* until mid-afternoon," he says. He's forgotten his contacts and squints at the menu. "Focus, Chris, focus," he tells himself. It's something he's told himself a million times, particularly during "the fuzzy paintings phase" when his nearsighted eye would see things one way, while his far-sighted companion reported things differently, resulting in long, Dali-like people and landscapes.

Coffee arrives. Chris is looking buff; it's obvious he's been working out, but it's not for looks. "I tend to be depressed and go into a morose, melancholy place, and working out helps my state of mind," he explains. He's recently cut his long, shiny hair, something he does about every four years. "It's a way of grieving, letting go, but I feel lighter, freer," he says.

Growing up on the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation in Lame Deer, Mont., Rowland dealt not only with depression, but also with oppression and prejudice. After handling some serious anger, he decided to turn his pain into possibility. "It's taken me a while to get used to the way I am—I need my

THUNDERHEAD
2006
OIL ON CANVAS
36" x 48"



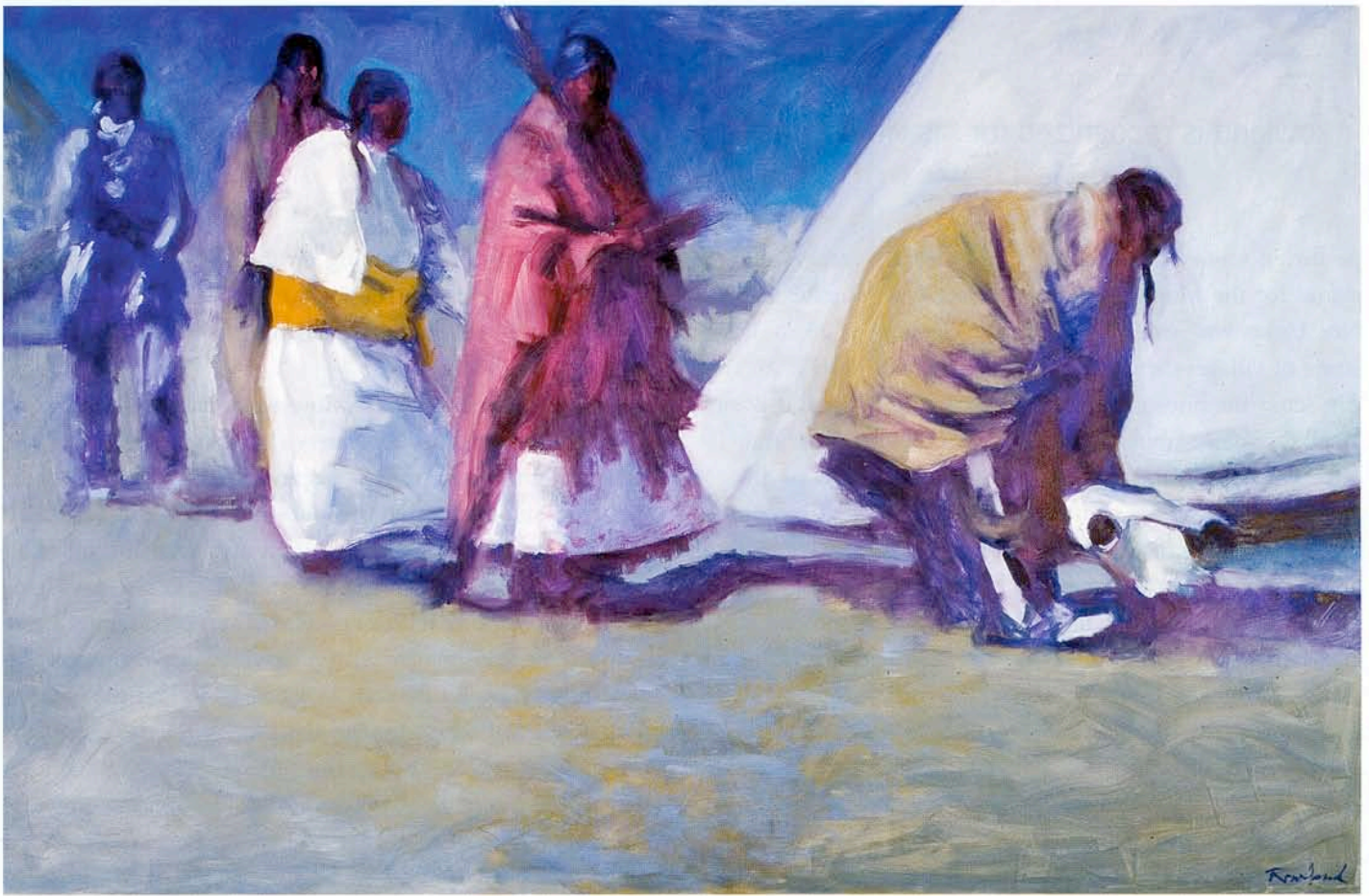
HER MUSIC
2006
OIL ON CANVAS
36" x 24"



peace and quiet and it's hard for me to be around people," he admits. "There is a certain amount of loneliness, though I'm basically an up person."

Finding a pebble in his meal, Rowland removes it from his mouth and flashes a genuine smile: "It's best to swallow the boulders, don't chew on 'em," he remarks. A metaphor? "Yeah, maybe." More coffee.

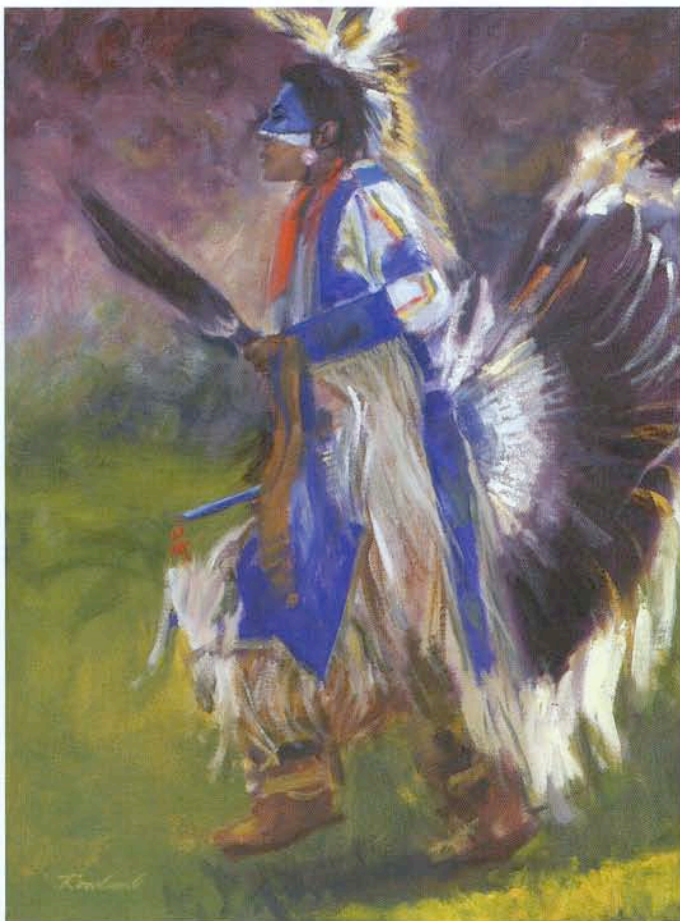
"I've had to reinvent myself again and again to fine tune my art," says the accomplished painter, sculptor and aspiring



CEREMONY
2006
OIL ON CANVAS
56" x 86"

author (he's working on a screenplay). After a stint selling his paintings at Little Bighorn Battlefield, Rowland moved to Santa Fe, N.M., where he lived for 10 years "paying dues painting with blues." Nonetheless, he built a steady clientele and now enjoys a comfortable living that affords him the opportunity to dream big.

"Welcome to the dungeon," says Rowland, who immediately flips on the lights in his bare-bones Helena studio. "It feels naked in here; most of my stuff is in Billings at the moment," he says, picking up an action figure he uses for reference when doing sketches. Two tables are strewn with the open books and photographs he studies for historical accuracy. One of the books depicts the intricacies of horse gaits. "I love the excitement of building a painting," he says,



TRADITION
2006
OIL ON CANVAS
24" x 18"

Rowland is recognized for his vibrant native portraits, as well as for his arresting landscapes.

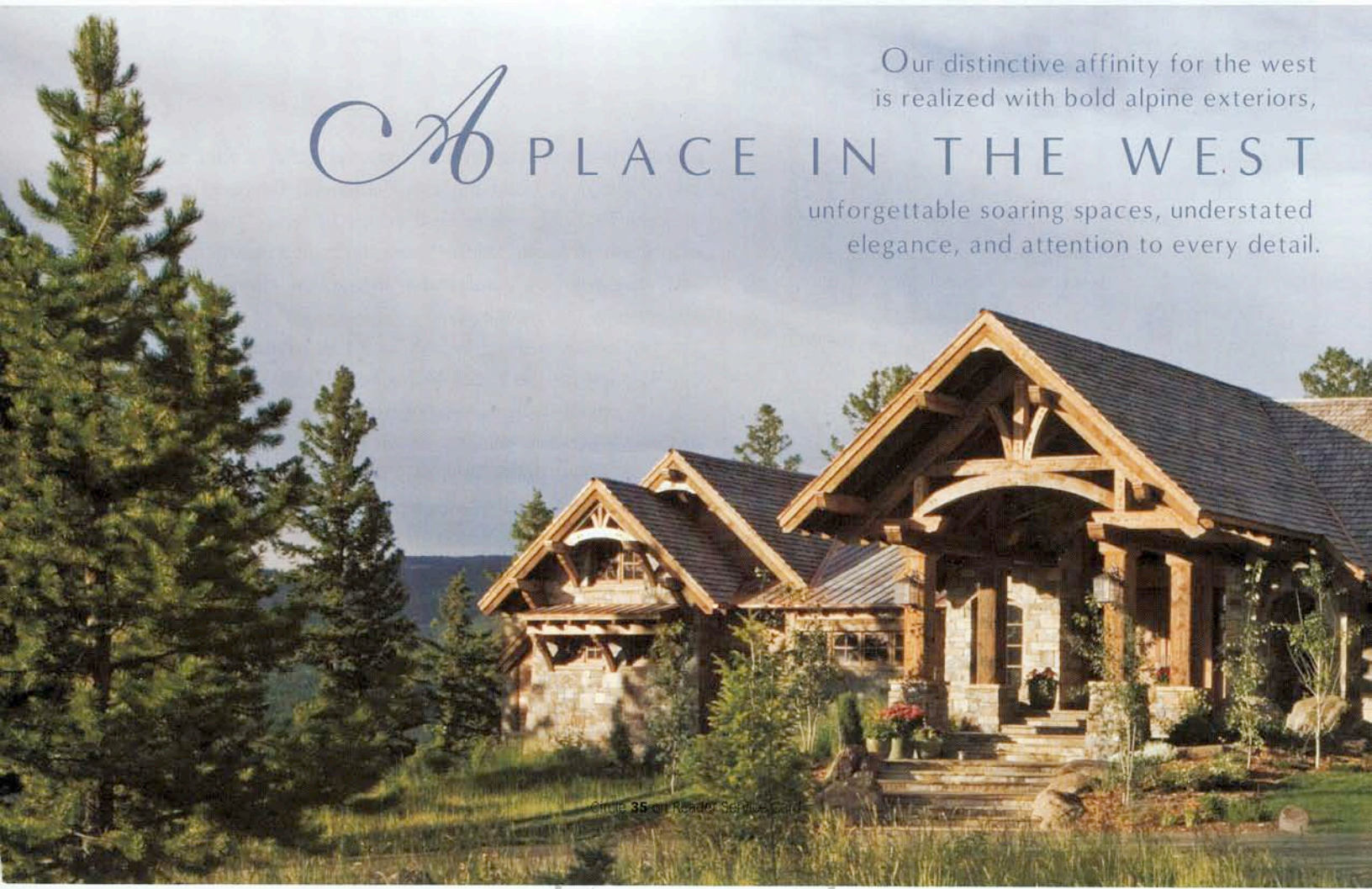
gesturing towards the canvas he's currently working on, a mural for the Montana Historical Society's "Neither Empty Nor Unknown" exhibit (opening in September 2006). It's a scene of villagers returning from a buffalo hunt in 1805. You can sense the horses' movement, sense the wind and water, smell the smoke from the tipis—the handiwork of natural talent. "I'm not lettered and I don't really know how to draw," says Rowland, whose paintings have hung in the Governor's office and now grace the walls of former Montana Supreme Court Justice Terry Trieweiler.

"I have three of Chris' portraits in my office," says Trieweiler. "It's beautifully done artwork; he captures facial expressions really well. I appreciate the combination of colors and the way he communicates a strong feeling for the West and native tradition."

Rowland is recognized for his vibrant native portraits, as well as for his arresting landscapes. He enjoys working on larger pieces because he can put more action and movement

into them. The under-painting on the mural is pretty much done and he points out the nuance of chiaroscuro. "In three days there will be more people here, grassland and textured layering over there."

The caffeine is kicking in. Rowland is circling from station to station in the studio. You can see his mind spinning and he begins talking faster, clearly inspired. "I love the reflection, refraction and absorption of light—the luminosity of light." He's fascinated by patterns of light and with the question "when do light waves become particles?" He also loves science and is working with a vision of 3D art pieces, interactive sculpture (a flute player with a hawk swooping in, maybe some butterflies, he thinks). "Michelangelo had his granite, marble and alabaster—for the artist today it's different light media, like lasers and holograms." He envisions it all: digital media, wood, clay, glass, polymers, liquids, lights and words. "This is the kind of art that would allow us to interface with our neurological selves," he says, stretching his arms and



A PLACE IN THE WEST

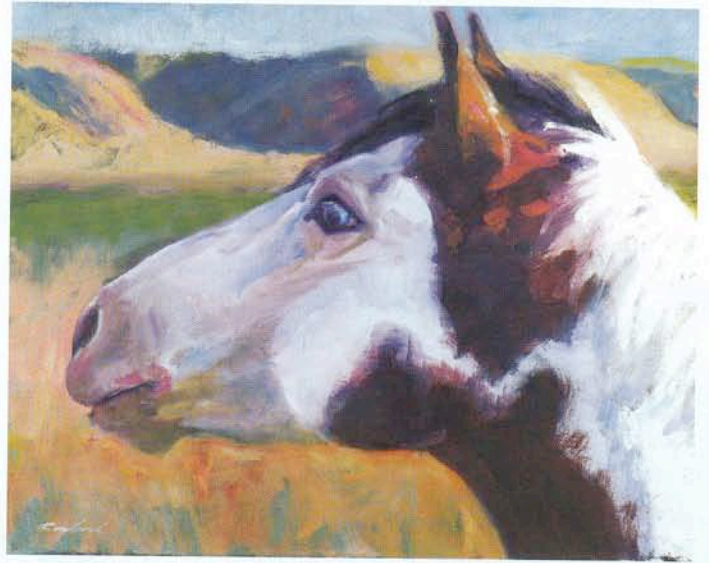
Our distinctive affinity for the west is realized with bold alpine exteriors,

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walking around such an imaginary piece.

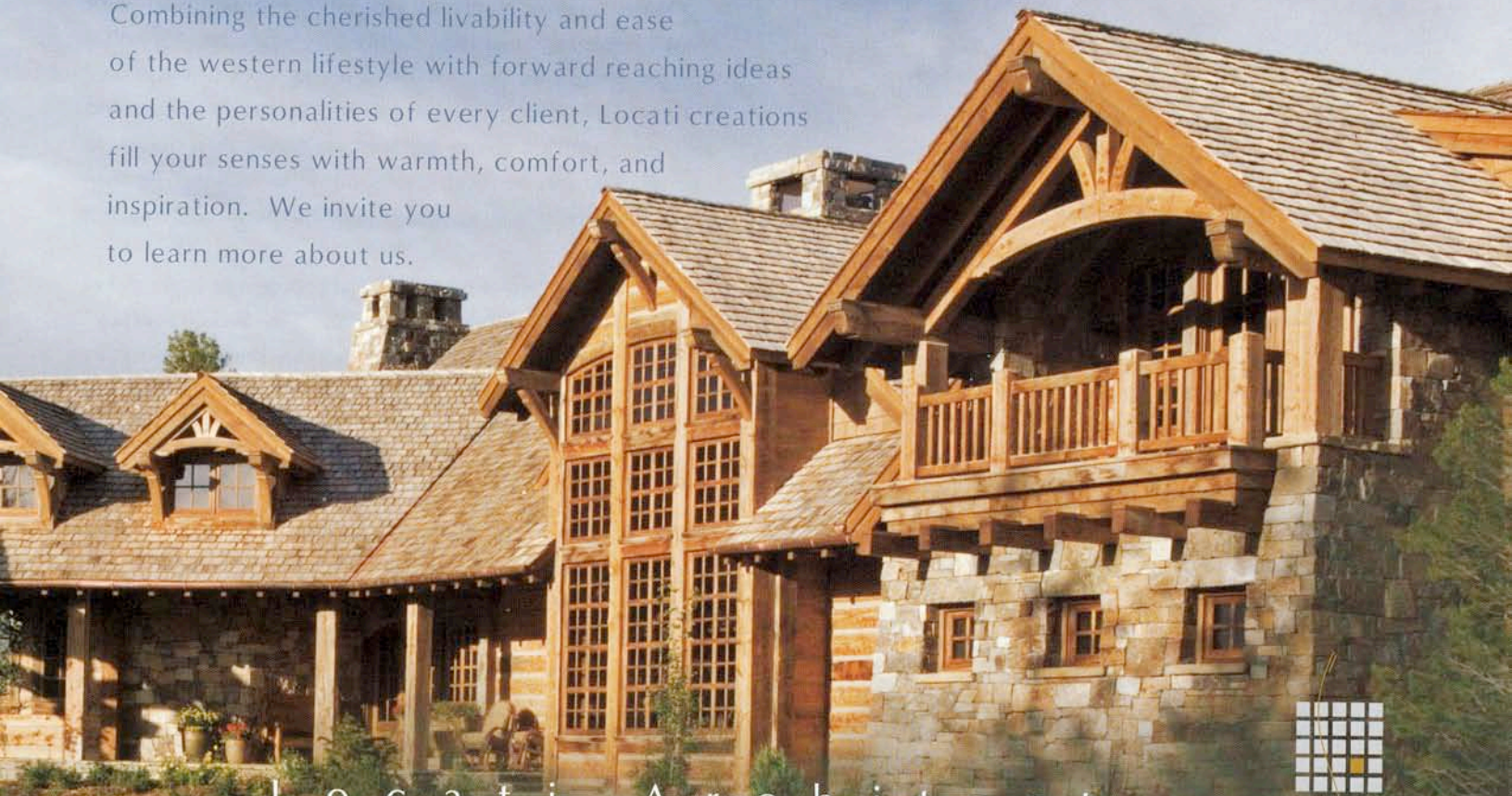
Both space heaters are blasting as he sits in a red picnic chair positioned in front of the mural and reflects on art: Rules are meant to be broken. Let art flow through you, don't let it get too rigid. He admires 'plein air' painters Clyde Aspevig and James Poulson. "Jim helped me a lot with color," he says, and picks up a palette of vivid-hued oils, then plays with some brushes standing in turpentine in a mason jar. A few wolves stare from the walls (the Cheyenne are known as wolves for their adaptability, decisiveness and quick actions).

"I like to play the Native American flute," says Rowland, pulling one out of its colorful polar fleece case. He plays a few notes, mentioning that the instrument was a gift from a friend, renowned flutist, R. Carlos Nakai. "So many songs come from 14 notes—when I'm blocked, this seems to break it up and things start to flow again." He loves classical music and often puts on Rachmaninoff, Chopin or Bartok while working. He also takes long hikes in the woods and centers himself



MEDICINE HORSE
2006
OIL ON CANVAS
16" X 20"

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Artist Christopher Rowland

in silence before beginning a project, inviting the Creator to work through him.

Rowland is an easygoing guy, but the romanticization of Native Americans irks him, particularly when he sees artists using the motif for profit without giving back to the source of their inspiration. "If you're inspired by native culture and tradition and it's a source for your creativity, then donate to an Indian education fund; contribute in some way," he suggests. "Creativity is supposed to be something collective, not ego-based."

As a descendant of the handful of people who broke out of Fort Robinson and made what he calls "The Sacred Journey" from Oklahoma to Montana, he honors their memory by "doing the work on myself" and "going where no artist has gone before." "It's time for the Northern Cheyenne to shine," he declares. Christopher Rowland is doing just that.

A FREELANCE WRITER AND EDITOR for the past 12 years, Cynthia Logan began her career in sixth grade when she launched The Washington Elementary Times in Santa Barbara, Calif. A regular contributor to Atlantis Rising magazine, her articles have also appeared in regional and international publications. She makes her home in Bozeman, Mont., with her son and two very literate cockatiels. **BSJ**