

Yellow Becomes the Spring, oil, 40" by 28"

"I went through a time in which the most satisfying color for me was yellow, and it kept appearing in many of my setups. I was fascinated with how a color becomes the forms we see—flowers, fabrics, glass—and how those forms evoke a season, or a timeless moment."

BEAUTIFUL WORLD, BEAUTIFUL LIFE

By Vicki Stavig



Cary Ennis' still life paintings embody a simple, elegant beauty while radiating with color and light. They are lovingly arranged, beautifully painted, and enthusiastically collected. A comment made by a viewer of one of Ennis' paintings sums it up nicely: "Oh, I wish I saw the world that way!"

Growing up in Los Alamos, New Mexico, it was much more likely that Ennis would follow in the footsteps of her father and much of the city's population and seek a career in one of the sciences. In fact, that is exactly what she had planned until her second year of college, when she enrolled in a couple of art classes.

Her love of art traces back to her childhood and her mother's influence. "My mother was very instrumental in the art scene in Los Alamos," Ennis says. "She did stained glass and pottery as a hobby

and started a book ordering business and did a lot of ordering of coffee table art books."

Ennis' father was a physicist, who also had a strong influence on his daughter. "I got a big dose of practicality and science from him," she says. "Mom and Dad were both also very appreciative of the natural world, and we took a lot of camping trips. Each was very capable and wise in their own realms and appreciated life in so many ways."

An art teacher during those early years also influenced Ennis, who had been painting on her own, with her mother's encouragement and ideas, since she was in the eighth grade. "The teacher pointed out how to look at colors, that grass wasn't just a simple, green, for example," Ennis recalls. "I was enticed by that idea; it helped me start to see."

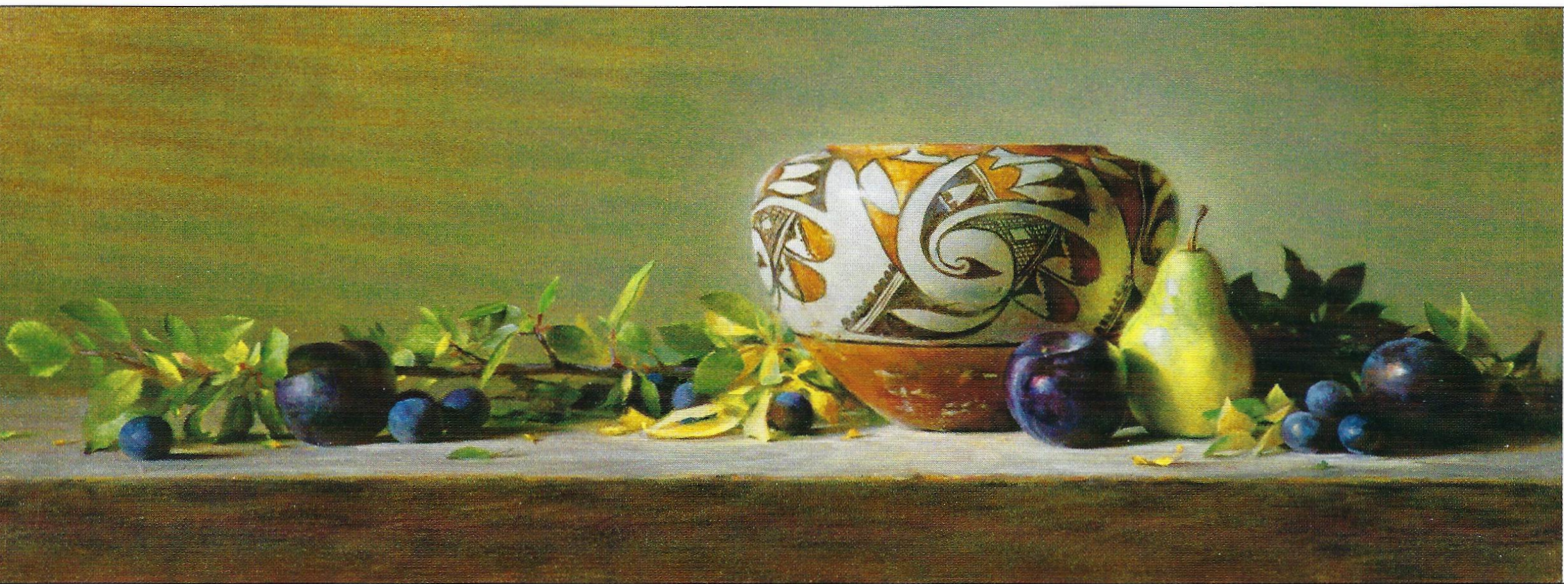
Like so many of the young people of Los Alamos, however, Ennis

A Dance of Orchids, oil, 16" by 22"

"Learning of the name of one variety of orchids—Dancing Ladies—I saw how they were indeed like a delightful arrangement of dancers. My aim was to capture the grace of their shapes, as well as the grace of the shape of the whole, the entire dance."

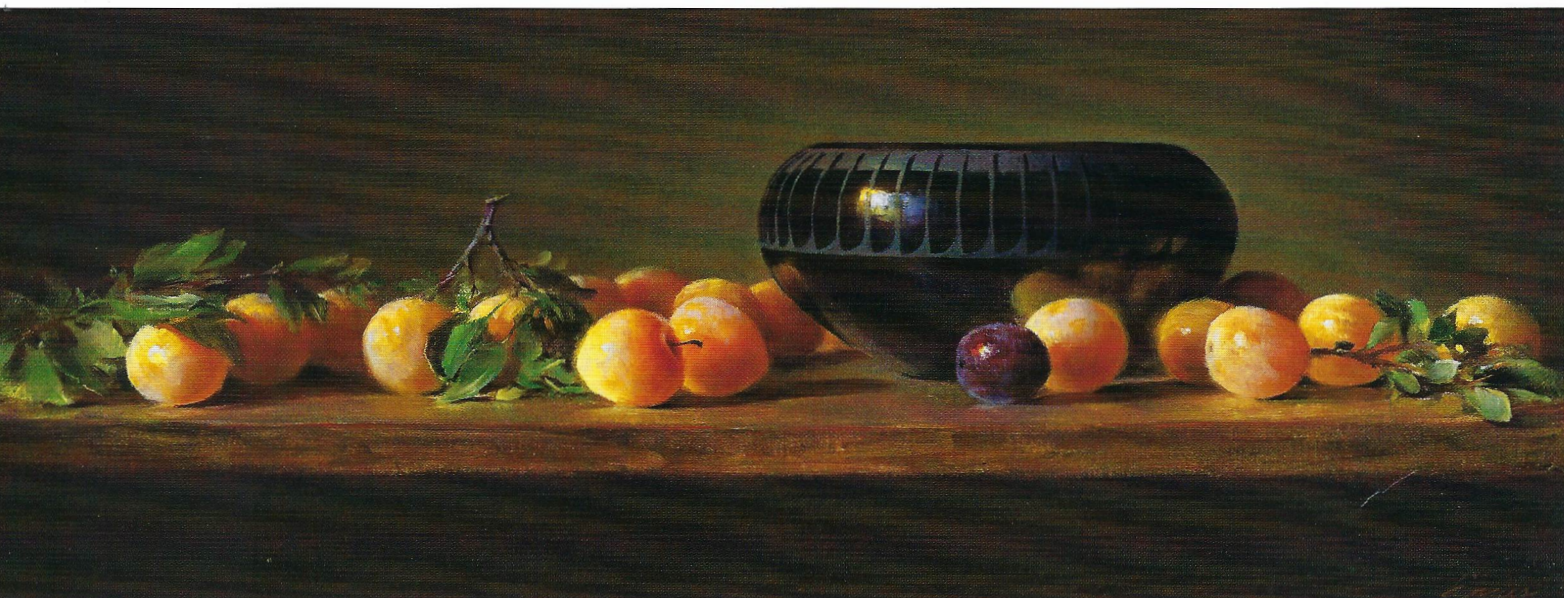
focused on science courses and enrolled at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque with the intent of becoming a biologist. "But I realized I was very, very interested in art and started taking more and more art classes," she says, adding that she earned a Bachelor Degree with a major in art and a minor in English and philosophy, then went on to earn a Master's Degree.

"I wanted to make jewelry; it was fun," Ennis says. "I did that for awhile. I was interested in Japanese metal-working techniques; it was like marbled paper done with metal. I played with different techniques



Acoma Autumn, oil, 12" by 32"

"The forms and designs of Southwestern pottery enchant me. In this painting, the colors on the pot were seen as part of a color scheme, playing the three secondary colors—orange, purple, green—off each other, and this play of colors helped focus attention on the pot."



San Ildefonso Plums, oil, 10" by 26"

"The beauty of the color of the yellow plums and the contrast with the purple plum, enhanced by the bloom on the surfaces, is what captured my attention for this painting. The similarity of the surface of the pot, matte and shiny, was a useful element to include, as well as a good contrast in value to help the plums show up with more brilliance."

and also was painting on the side, mostly with watercolor." Ennis sold her jewelry and her watercolor paintings at area craft shows, until a painting by Gregg Kreutz caught her eye and, essentially, changed the course of her professional life.

"I didn't know anyone was painting like that," Ennis says. "It was realism, not abstract, so I took a workshop from him. He had gone to the Art Students League of New York, and I enrolled there. I took his workshop in February and went to New York in September for several months. I also went back for a

second year."

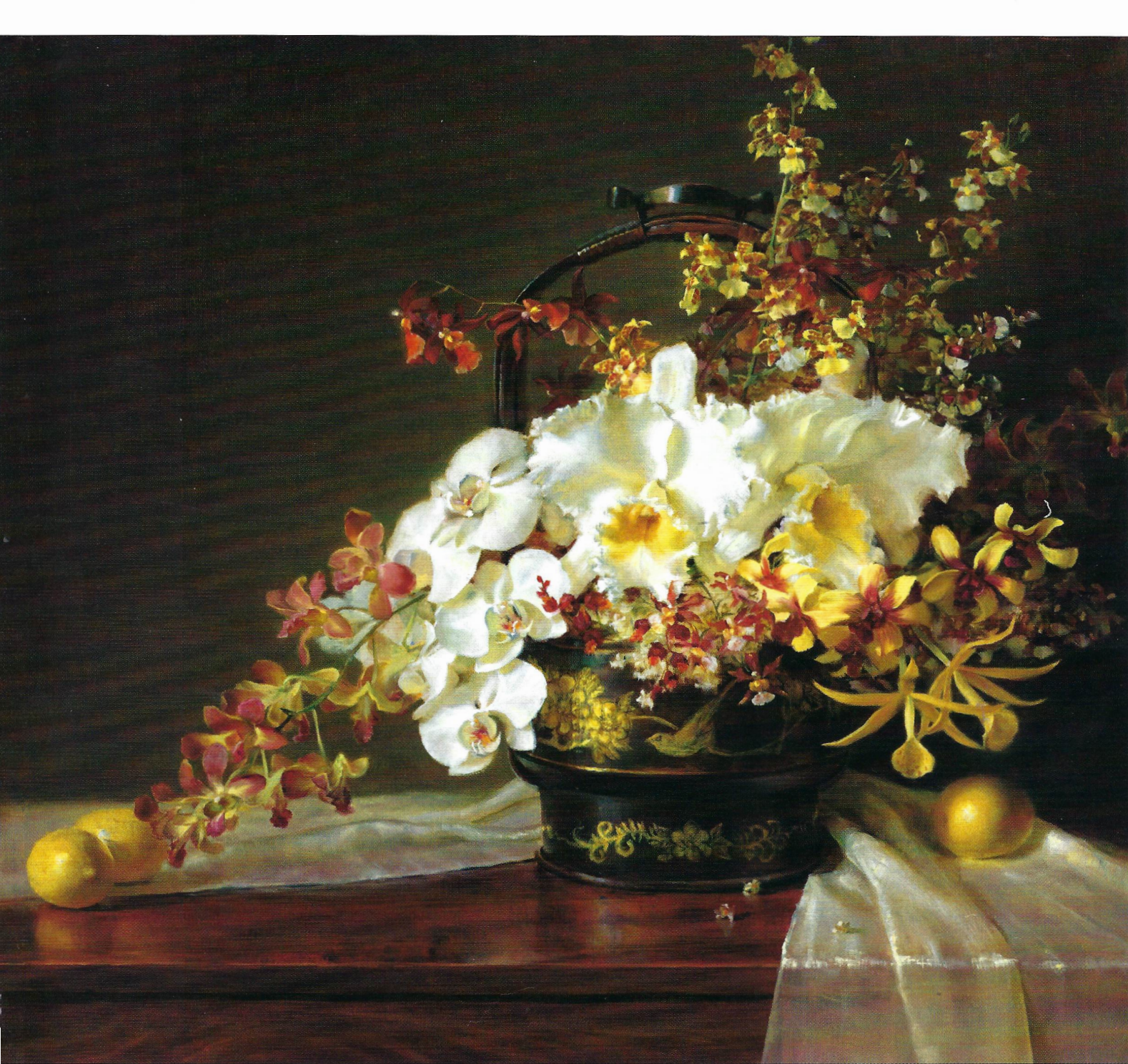
At the time, Ennis was painting portraits and still lifes. "I really loved both," she says. "I started showing at a gallery, mostly still lifes, and that is what was selling, so I focused more on that." That first gallery was in Taos, New Mexico, and a year or so later a gallery in Santa Fe took on her work.

Eventually, Ennis began to paint with oils. "Watching Gregg work with oils was fascinating," she says. "With oils you could paint slowly, be deliberate, move things, change things around. If you made

a mistake, it wasn't the end of the world. Watercolor is so unforgiving. Oil was more in tune with my temperament."

In the late '90s, Ennis' life took on another change, this one personal rather than professional. She met Gary Gagne. "I met him at a retreat in Sedona," she says. "I've always been involved and interested in what is a human being? What is life? A part of me wants to understand what we are and what we're doing here."

Gagne was semi-retired and was working as a volunteer at the retreat, and he and Ennis felt a strong



Lemon Orchids, oil, 28" by 32"

"Spending time in Hawaii was enhanced by access to such wonderful flowers. Orchids have such character and variety, and they last a long time, which makes them perfect for still life painting. The exquisite form of these white and yellow Catalpas was showcased with attention to the play of shapes and sizes and a limited range of color."

connection. They dated throughout the years, even while he was living in Hawaii, where Ennis would visit him and spend five months at a time. The couple married about 10 years ago. Gagne sold his home in Hawaii, Ennis sold her house in Los

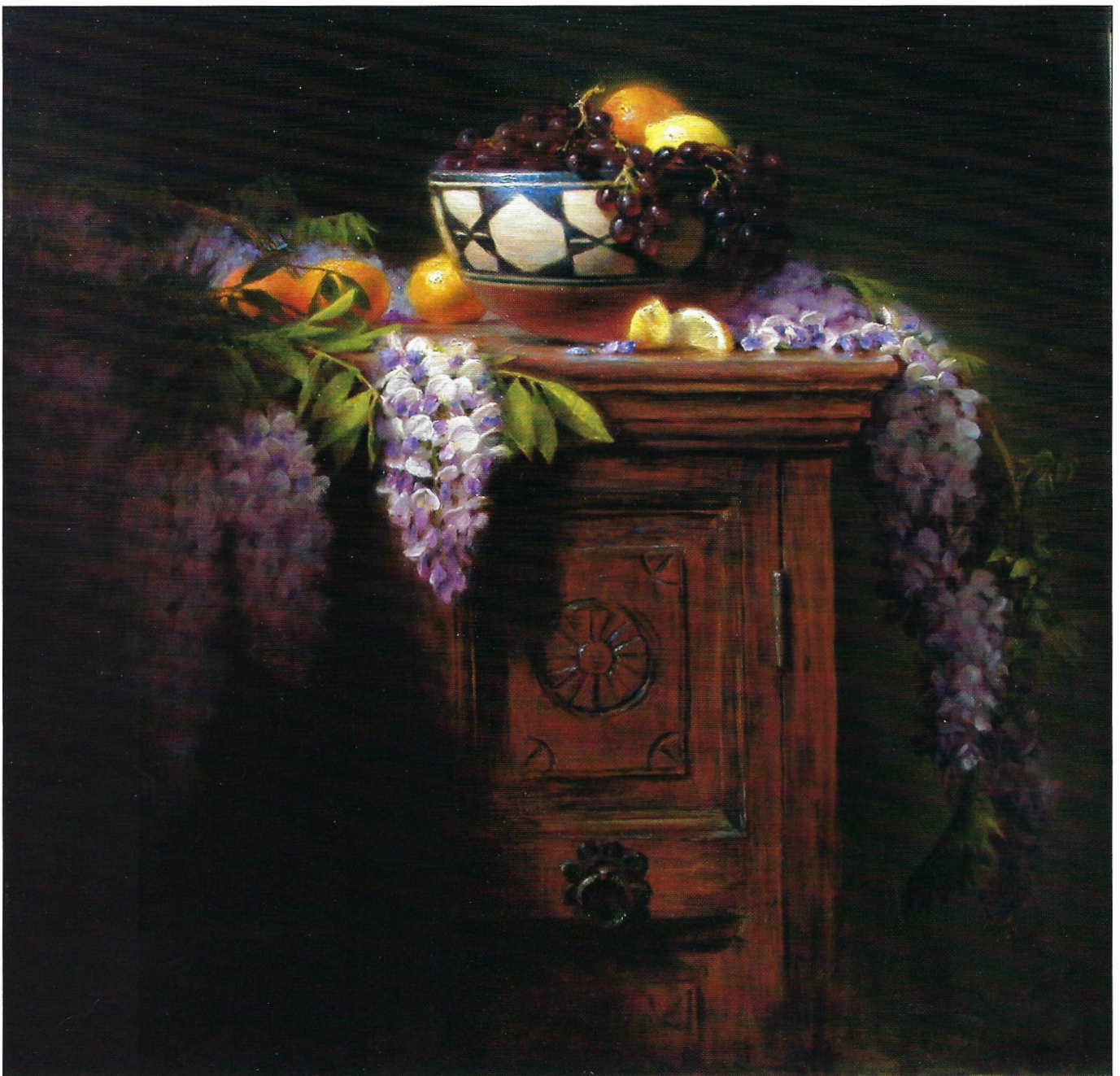
Alamos, and they moved to White Rock, British Columbia. The couple recently moved to Salt Spring Island, British Columbia, where Ennis continues to compose and paint her wonderful still lifes.

She admits that her subjects haven't changed over the years, although her approach to them has. "I think my seeing of it has changed somewhat," she says. "The process has been not so much about the subject as about continually trying to see better and paint better and explore more and more how paint can be used. I still get dazzled by

the same beautiful things—flowers, a combination of colors, or how light hits something."

Ennis continues to study her craft and, in time, hopes to show some of her other subjects. "I've painted a lot more lately with landscapes and have started working more with people, but I'm not showing them yet," she says. "Occasionally I take workshops from David Leffel and Sherri McGraw. I'd like to do some figures; I've always loved that, and it's being revived. I'm feeling more capable with it."

Until then, Ennis focuses on her



first love: the still life. Setting up those scenes, she admits, can be a challenge, but it is a challenge she thoroughly enjoys. "It can take a long time to get it to feel right," she says. "Sometimes something will just capture my eye. It could be just walking into the kitchen in the morning and seeing a bowl of fresh peaches, or the juxtaposition of colors in a grocery store, the flowers and fruit, or white and red onions. I'll take them to the studio and try to understand what it was about it that captured me—the color, the shape, or the way the light was hitting it—and that's what I want the painting to be about."

Ennis says she attempts to stay

clear on what it was that initially captured her attention. "I want to keep it simple enough that that continues to be seen," she says. "If it was a color juxtaposition, I want the other things in it to help to show that. What was it that was so beautiful? I spend lots of time and look at it. Then something in me stops and rests, and I'm satisfied."

While Ennis focuses on setting up a still life that will maintain and convey that initial attraction, occasionally the items set up themselves. "One time, while setting things up, I wasn't getting what I wanted, so I'd set one thing aside and put something else in it, think, no, put it aside, and reach for something else," she

Cascades of Light and Shadow, oil, 25" by 25"

"Wisteria falls in such graceful cascades, shapes that invoke simply stopping and resting. This painting uses the repetition of that shape throughout the light and shadow, as well as simple verticals and horizontals, to invite a quiet stillness."

says. "Then I got up to leave the studio, looked back, and saw everything I had been setting aside. That was the painting! It was a beautiful combination of colors."

Often, Ennis includes a piece of Southwest pottery in her scenes, admitting that she has a particular fondness for black on black pottery. "I love the elegance of the matte



Apple Blossoms, oil, 42" by 34"


"Seeing the beauty of the apple blossoms one spring, I was struck by their delicacy and abundance. This was most easily shown by creating a painting that worked primarily with edges—soft and crisp, lost and found. The contrasting textures of ceramic and peach also rely on attention to edges, while the simplicity of the colors help let the focus on edges take precedence."



black and shiny black together," she says. "I very much appreciate the beauty of the older pots from all the different pueblos. They have so much character and feeling of history, and the elegance of the forms, of the shapes, are just astounding."

Ennis also makes time to teach, enjoying the opportunity to share her knowledge with others, but says she also learns during that process. "It helps me focus, really stop and see what is important enough to impart to other people, and that helps me keep that in mind for my

own work," she says. "I also enjoy seeing what the students do and seeing when the light goes on and they think, Oh, I understand!"

Ennis couldn't be more pleased with her life and her art. She sees beauty everywhere, even in the smallest, most common things, and happily sets out to share it with the rest of us, saying, "I want to convey how beautiful the world is, how beautiful life is." 

Vicki Stavig is editor of Art of the West.