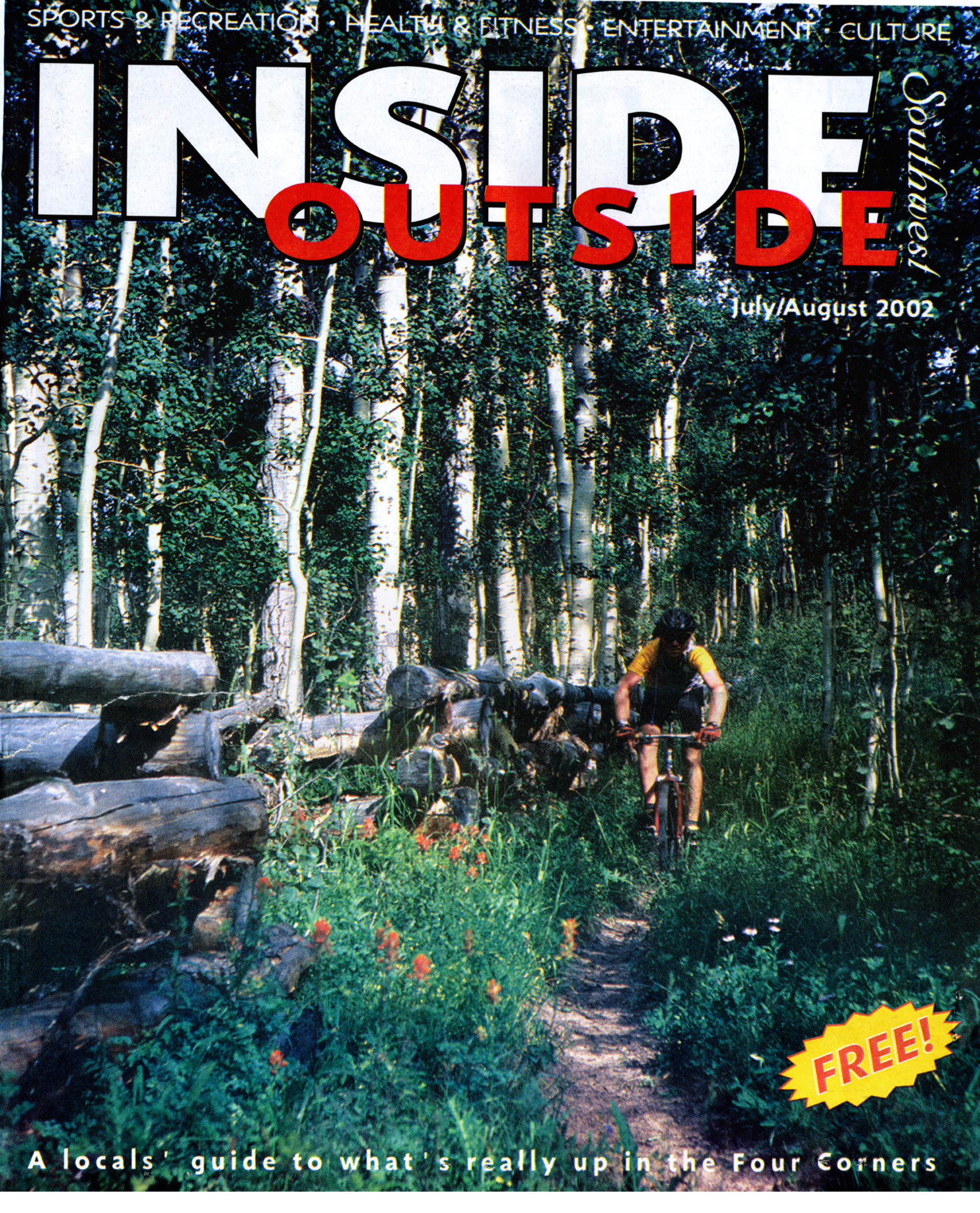


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# INSIDE OUTSIDE

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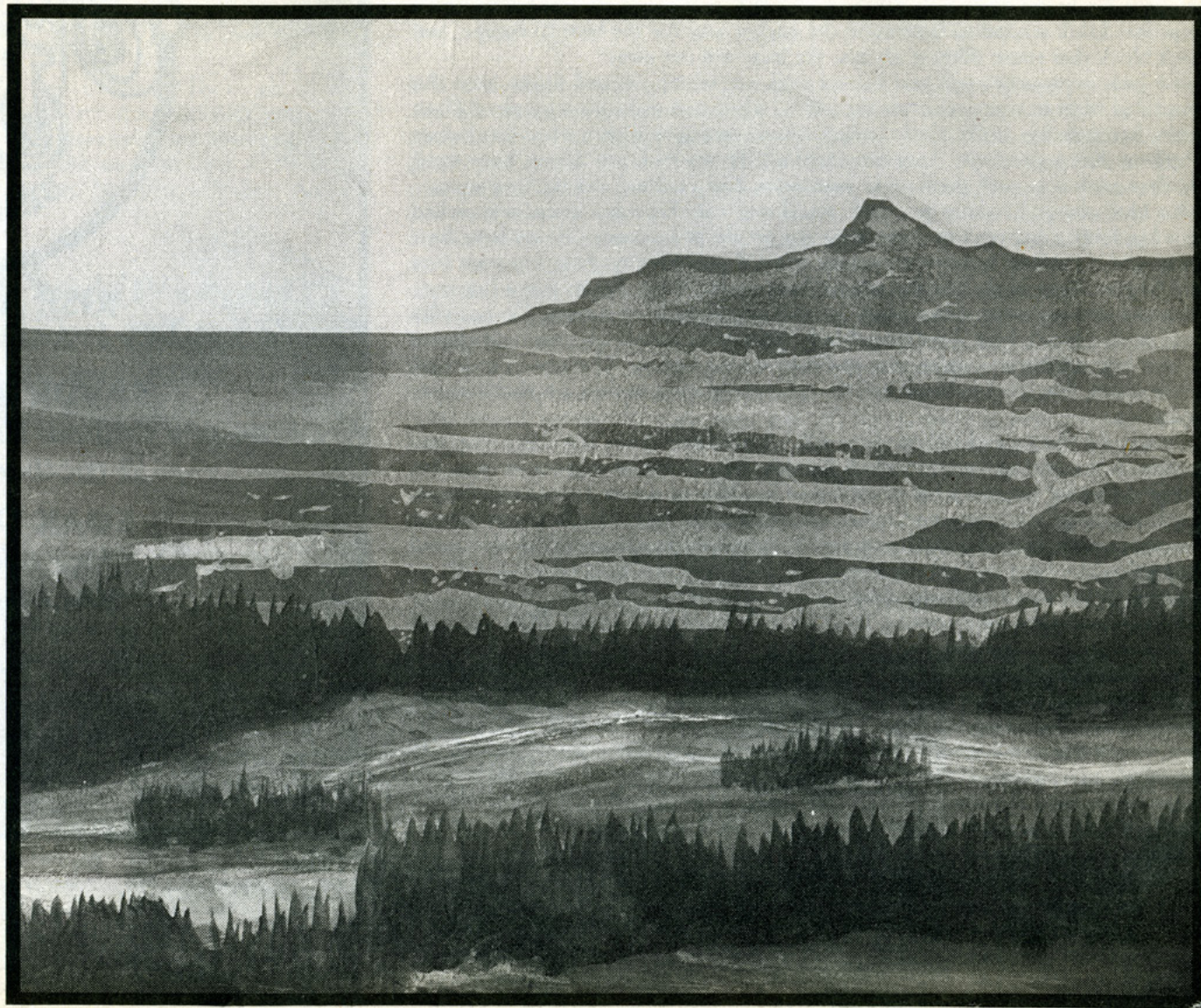
A locals' guide to what's really up in the Four Corners



# Stanton Englehart:

# the inner life of the sky

Story & Photos  
by Sean Cridland



I first encountered Stanton Englehart as a teacher. He taught art at Fort Lewis College for thirty something years and his classes were a "must" for those wanting the full Fort Lewis education during those years. His "Theory and Aesthetics" class was an experience of classical and heretical writings, folk music and paintings, and academic catharsis and emotional epiphany: the only class (unfortunately) in which I ever read Leo Tolstoy and Tom Robbins with equal seriousness and playfulness. Recently, I had an opportunity to sit with my friend and mentor, Stanton Englehart, to talk about his personal and artistic influences.

Although most people think of teachers as teaching some subject, according to Stanton, "I taught people. We're lucky if we teach people. Teaching is always subjective and personal." He remembers all too well that life was hard and often terrifying and death came hard and often could ruin a ranch family. But despite all of that, he says, "there was tolerance, maybe more then than now. You can't be as free these days." Teaching these days would be scary, he thinks. He would be afraid to kid people for fear of losing his

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job or being legally or physically attacked. It's a contradiction to one's ability to teach, he says. How can a person teach without being fully and totally honest in their expression of feelings. He remembers times in which if people had a difference, they would sit down and talk it out.

Stanton is as complex and well composed as his classes were. He is the consummate fly fisherman with an eye for the waxing and waning of natural cycles,

spring hatches, river ecology, and fish personality. He has been riding his bike long distances around the areas's roads many years before cycling became cool Durango chic. He is an unabashed sensualist who strives to incorporate sensuality and sexuality in practically every one of his paintings and is unafraid to express that verbally to his audiences. And he is a Four Corners native intimately familiar with the vagaries of old-school Four Corners ranch culture. In many people's eyes, he is a Four Corners icon. Had a large publishing company employed a single publicist and had Stanton had an ambition to do so, he would have eclipsed the fame and influence of Edward Abbey and Terry Tempest Williams combined. But that's not Stanton. If fame had found him, his favorite fishing holes would find paths well beaten to find him too. For Stanton, painting and fishing and cycling and loving are not about fame. They are about finding the inner soul of the outward experience. For Stanton that search begins with his ranch-family background.

Born in 1931, during the Great Depression, his parents were in the sheep business and drove the stock back and forth between Dolores to Rico on stock trails.

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His first memories are of sheep being sheared and of the great big sacks of wool that he and the other kids would jump into for fun. Everything included family - and water. From the very beginning of his life to the way he thinks about the land and sky, to the way he taught, to the way he formed relationships with friends, family, he says, water was his single most important influence. Community was really a must. Everyone helped one another. They met at the Grange Hall or the Methodist Church. There were Friday night dances with a lot

of drinking and a lot of fighting, mostly over water and water rights. The worst grudges were over water, since water rights would make or break a farmer. Sometimes headgates and water division boxes were tampered with and people would become violently angry since water was their lifeblood and their property. He remembers that those fights were incredibly frightening because the men would have their irrigation shovels polished as sharp as a knife in order to cut through the sod easier. One of his most vivid memories is of his father coming home from the fields to sit on the porch after dinner with a cold glass of milk, talking with his family or listening to the radio while he sharpened and polished his shovel. According to Stanton, "they were exotic and beautiful tools."

But it was that same water that the farmers and ranchers were fighting over that first revealed the sensual relationship between earth and sky that is found in all of his painting for ever after. After all, sexuality is not merely blasphemous physicality, it is the source of all life. And, sensuality, in case we have forgotten, is not merely an advertising pitch for a new car or cologne. It is the driving force for union and creation, as it is eventually for dissolution, death, and the rebirth of the cycle of creation. Whatever you want to believe about the creation of the cosmos, biological life, human life, revolves around a regular supply of water.

For the farmers of dry-side Colorado, from Cortez all the way to Dinosaur, their survival was dependent upon irrigation, snowfall, and rain. It still is. For those people who live on and off of the land, water is not just a commodity. It is a religion. Even town dwellers are acutely aware of the importance of water during a drought year like this one. But the ranchers and farmers have always been painfully aware of how naturally a system feeds the earth. The relationship they develop between the sky and the earth comes from the irrigation system. The sky feeds the mountains with snow and water and the mountain run-off feeds the irrigation ditches.

For Stanton's family, the irrigated fields were their subsistence. They fed them and made enough money for them to pay their bills and their taxes and kept them from losing everything. A good year would bring enough rain to allow the use of the non-irrigated fields, meaning extra money, maybe a new set of clothes or some paint for the house. Maybe even a new vehicle. But you couldn't count on that. Water above the ditch was an act of God. Sometimes it would hail in August and destroy the whole crop. In 20 minutes it could destroy a whole year's profit. So, your irrigated fields were your base worth. Anything else from the other fields being fed by rain was extra. You knew that below the ditch, you could always do well on pinto beans and potatoes and apples. In fall his dad would take 100 pound

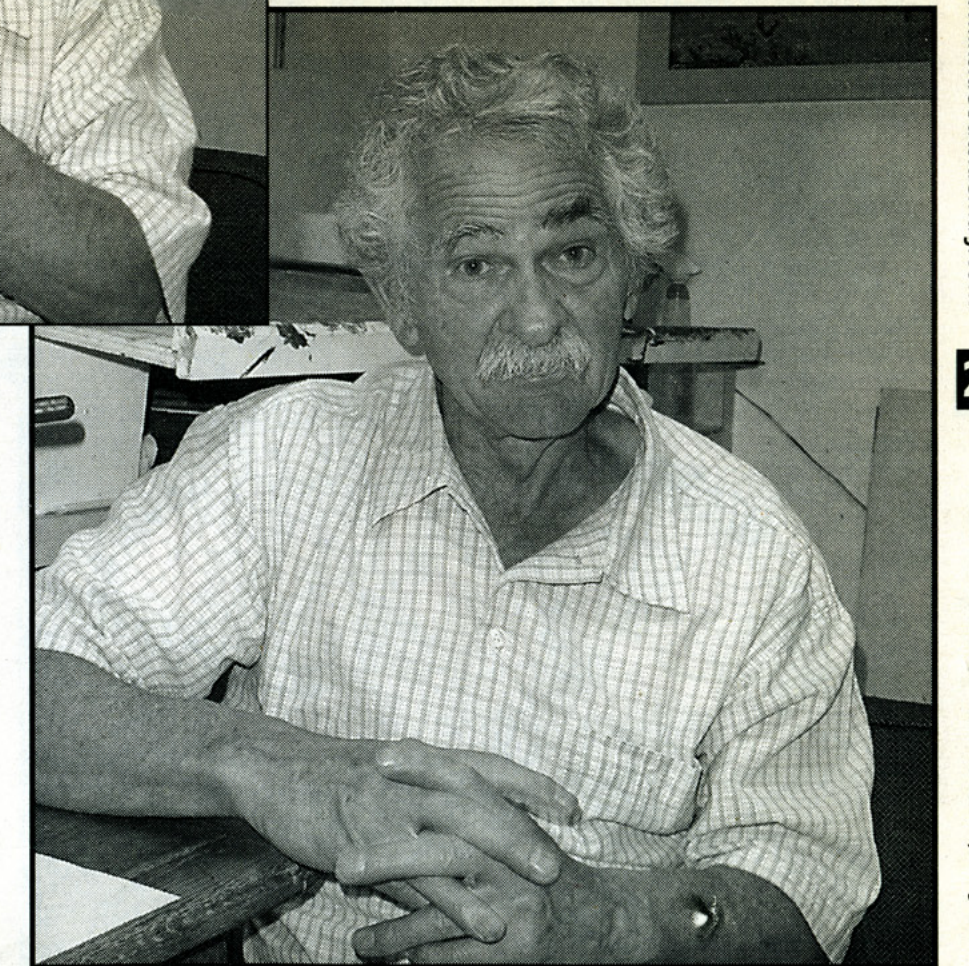
**Stanton recalls that the weather "made an animist out of my dad and a devout Methodist out of my mother."**

bags down and sell them to the Navajo's for \$2 a piece.

Stanton recalls that the weather "made an animist out of my dad and a devout Methodist out of my mother. Both of them had grown up in similar situations and had seen the same kind of stress and fear in their parents regarding the ways in which the weather had determined their fates. Living close to the land made them live their hopes and dreams in the faces of the skies." That's why his paintings include so many studies of the sky. Because farmers and ranchers are always looking to the sky to determine their fortunes or their failures. Water has always been really precious in the Englehart psyche and is the core of his creative vision. It's not surprising then that he has such a deep love and respect for the water-carved canyons of the Southwest. Their source of beauty is the same source that fed his family, that has fed all of the families of this region for time immemorial.

According to Stanton: "I don't think anybody could live in the Southwest or visit the southwest and see any of it at all and describe it any way other than sensual. It's just a rich world. The Colorado plateau is like everything in the universe in terms of time and space. There is nothing in the Universe that can't be seen in the Colorado plateau. If one doesn't see that, it isn't the fault of the plateau, it's the fault of the viewer. If you travel through it, you travel through the universe."

When I asked him how he got started painting the landscape as openly sensual, his answers were straightforward. "Probably by spending too much time looking at Georgia O'Keeffe's work. Also spending long periods of time in Hite, Utah and Navajo Mountain and being privileged enough to be able to walk in those canyons where they're not gated off. They're so dramatic and isolating in that you're either on the top or you're on the bottom and if you don't know where you're going it's going to take you a VERY long time to get up or down. In some of



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those areas, to go five miles means that you have to travel fifty to get up and down through the canyons and over the ridges. Without a helicopter, you might never go two canyons over. I don't know where you could find anything that is more evocative of the sensual creative forces of the cosmos. Look at all of the photographs that are taken of Antelope canyon, Monument Valley, Arches,

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Natural Bridges and those are just the ones that are easy to get to. Those sandstone canyons are so sensual and not just from the female or male point of view. It's not just the human body or mammalian structure. It's the same force that Walt Whitman describes in his poetry. And that's what life is. I've seen it in my youth and I see it in the world now. It's what my paintings are all about."

For Stanton there is no separating sky and heart, or sky and mind, or sky and life and death. His paintings are about heart, mind, life and death. He paints with the same themes in mind that all great painters do. The sky is a giver and taker. According to Stanton, he doesn't try to paint clouds like he sees them (although he says - with a wry smile - that he wishes he could and is trying to get better). He grew up with majestic sunsets. They didn't have movies or television and so whether they were in the fields working or sitting on the porch visiting with friends, neighbors and family, the sunsets were a great form of entertainment. His father would give a character or a quality to a particular cloud. He would think up stories and events and characters with a particular cloud and apparently taught his artist son

to develop that sensibility. Stanton carries on that tradition. It's interesting to hear him talk about this summer's drought: "This year the clouds look like they have water in them this year, but they don't, they have dirt. They get dust from the great basin or the Gobi. Those kinds of clouds break the farmers hearts. They start getting up at 4 in the morning to watch the clouds, to see if there will be rain. And these clouds look like they might. But they don't. They creep up over the horizon in the morning and drift lazily over in the hot dry sun and creep back over the horizon in the evening leaving nothing." Most of us don't understand what that means. Until this summer most of us haven't worried much about it. But the farmers and ranchers who live and die by the weather, says Stanton, are really religious and do a lot of praying. But then he half-chuckles and theorizes that their prayers don't go all the way to God, but are stopping at the bottom of the clouds. That's how important the weather is."

He pauses quietly for a moment and tells me something perhaps even more revealing about his respect for the sky and weather. His mother's brother, living in Lewis, went out one day to walk through the fields. One of Stanton's brothers remembers that afternoon as if it were yesterday. He was in the field when a little cloud came over. It was the only cloud in the whole sky, a sky remarkable for being otherwise completely clear just like most of us know the Colorado sky to be. One lightning bolt came out of that cloud. He didn't think anything of it and went on about his work. That night, his uncle didn't come home. After making

several calls around the community, they decided to go looking for him. It was dark and they started walking. They found him and at first they thought he'd been shot, but he'd been struck by that one bolt of lightning. It is events like that that made such an impression on a young artist's mind for the rest of his life. To this day Stanton is deathly afraid of lightning.

Ask him to describe his style in technical terms and he provides two answers: "On the one end you have the epitome of the naturalistic representational painters like Andrew Wyeth and on the other end Grandma Moses, a primitive. Grandma Moses was pure. Andre De Sol was pure. Fredrick

Remington, Thomas Moran was both a superb representational but also with beautifully abstract and primitive. By intuition, I ended up right smack in the middle because my work is adjudicated by intuition: does it feel right? Sometimes I'll do a painting that I think is as good at representation as Andrew Wyeth, but more often than not two days later I'll take it out of the frame and scrape off the paint and do it over again because it's not abstract enough. It's too much of a picture and not enough of an experience or a mental exercise."

He goes on: "I want it to look like what it depicts, but more than that, I want it to feel like that. That's the way my mind and my heart come together. They're relentless in pursuing the balance between the emotional and the objective. It's pure renaissance composition. Stage, platform, the sky. Also influenced by the low stage of landscape at eye level, with the elevated sky rising up behind it. Early renaissance, especially where they were first learning perspective. Often I draw in the perspective lines and just leave them in the painting. It was a simple mathematical principle that I still use, but then I create a kind of sensuality that I incorporate in the shaping of the sky, in the form and color. I really believe in borrowing. I don't see any reason to reinvent the wheel. It's been done for hundreds and even thousands of years. Thousands of years ago in the cave painting as Las Caux and Altamira, those people were, in my opinion, the greatest painters

that ever lived. The Lion Wall is incredible. Recently I saw my first lion just up behind my house. I looked at him and he looked at me. That lion, after a minute, jumped 15 or 20 feet into the brush and disappeared just as if he was never there. And that's the way those people thousands of years ago painted lions on the wall at Altamira, as if they were there and not there at the same time. And they did it in the dark!"

What's interesting about all of this artistic intent, he says, is not it's newness but the way in which it is unique or unusual. It's that it's all been done, even 50,000 years ago. But, it is the experiential and internal life of the artist, combined with the creative spark that is brought forth by his or her place in the time and place of the cosmos, that informs the uniqueness of all artistic style. Stanton notes that, "All the technique you need is enough to express whatever it is to make it unique. If you're lucky enough to be born with that tiny percentage of what it takes to make you unique and then you are capable of drawing that uniqueness out of yourself."

"I may have that just little bit that helps me to make the landscape and sky-scape seem unique. All of the great philosophers were looking at whether or not human beings can control their own destinies. But, I don't think that you can get closer to the secret of human nature without looking into the secret of that

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which controls it all: the environment of the land, sky, cosmos, death, sexuality, spirit....That's all it is, whatever mystery it is that started it all. The big bang or the creation can both be found in the mystery of the pinto bean that my family and my neighbors and I all grew up with. It's just one little bean, but it gave life to all of us, with the help of all of the other elements. Life and the drive for life is the beauty that doesn't take any technique at all to create. In that sense, I'm not unique at all. Maybe just in the way that I express it all. In my painting, I often play with and develop those images with emerge because of the way the paint hits the canvas. I usually try to let them develop themselves, although I help them a little bit. But I've found that when I try to make it happen, it looks awkward and I end up taking it out because it doesn't seem honest or sincere. It's a matter of feel, is what it is."

Stanton's latest series of paintings are a departure from his usual desert/canyon subjects. Despite the claims of some of his critics who suggest that by painting mountains he is "selling out," Stanton is excited by the rich texture of the mountainsides and by the early morning and late evening sun on the high alpine and alpine river settings. They are darker than most of his desert paintings in order to reflect the subtleties of the rivers, streams, peaks and light. For Stanton, he's not painting mountains to sell paintings. He's painting them to discover new in his talent for expression. It's a new direction in his art that allows him to be freer and to contemplate the sheep trails and fishing spots of that young boy from bean country that turned into the man who could speak the language of the sky: the man who has allowed so many of us to participate in the secret life of the sky and, through his painting, to know something more about ourselves.

Sean Cridland is a self-admitted art junkie who teaches Philosophy of Art and other fun courses at Fort Lewis College. He can be reached at [www.adventurestudies.com](http://www.adventurestudies.com)



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