



CHALLENGING beauty

Angie Renfro captures
the aesthetic of ordinary,
overlooked scenes

BY NORMAN KOLPAS



SHE WAS ON the road, as Angie Renfro so often is, since it's her favorite way to discover compelling new subjects. "I spontaneously decided to pull off the highway and explore this little town," she recalls of a particular day in central California's agriculture-intensive San Joaquin Valley. "Oddly, the entire town smelled like pasta sauce."

As Renfro drove down the main street of Los Banos, she began noticing tomatoes splattered across the pavement. "I decided to follow the trail of squished tomatoes to see where it led," she relates. Eventually, she found herself at the entrance to a processing plant, where she beheld "rows of bright-green trucks overloaded with vibrant red tomatoes." She excitedly photographed the scene before continuing on her way.



▲ TOMATO TOWN REVISITED, OIL, 36 X 48.
◀ ALL THAT'S OVER NOW, OIL, 24 X 48.

To the average passerby, such a moment might well have been forgotten after the merest glance, its elements dismissed as hard-packed earth, brute machinery, overripe cargo, and diesel fumes. For Renfro, however, it was the starting point for TOMATO TOWN REVISITED, an elegantly composed painting filled with forthright forms, colors both bright and muted, and an air of nostalgia for the days when interstates didn't skirt such sights.

Though Renfro has been painting professionally for barely half a decade, her artworks of too-often-bypassed imagery have quickly struck resonant chords with galleries and collectors nationwide. Her career is soaring: She has 11 shows—solo, two-person, and group—between now and February. Much of her work reflects a perspective the 32-year-old artist gained in her native state of Texas. “Texas is so flat that it makes the sky, the ground, everything, more dramatic,” she observes.

Whether she's depicting mist-shrouded factories or small-town

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REPRESENTATION

Wally Workman Gallery, Austin, TX; Artizen Fine Arts, Dallas, TX; Paul Scott Gallery, Scottsdale, AZ; Diehl Gallery, Jackson, WY; Mondo Fine Art, Salt Lake City, UT; Lark & Key, Charlotte, SC; Huff Harrington Fine Art, Atlanta, GA; www.angierenfro.com.

UPCOMING SHOWS

Group show, Wally Workman Gallery, through September 4.
Two-person show, Mondo Fine Art, September 1-15.
Group show, Artizen Fine Arts, September 11-October 9.
Group show, Mondo Fine Art, October 1-17.
Group show, Huff Harrington Fine Art, October 7-28.
Two-person show, Artizen Fine Arts, October 16-November 20.



MAYBE, MAYBE NOT, OIL, 18 X 12.



streets crisscrossed with telephone wires, life-sized withered weeds or tiny bees magnified to the size of robins, she celebrates the exquisite beauty of what might otherwise be thoughtlessly dismissed as ordinary. “I’m drawn to subjects that are often overlooked. There’s a beauty in their loneliness,” she explains. “And it’s more challenging to create art that challenges people’s notions of what is beautiful.”

RENFRO BEGAN developing her talent at an early age. “As a kid I was dissatisfied with the quality of coloring books, so I used to draw my own—or even redraw the ones that I had—and then color them in,” she recalls. “They weren’t very artistic subjects, just things like Care Bears or My Little Pony, but drawing was what I always preferred to be doing.”

Her “wonderfully supportive” parents got her into private painting classes by the time she was 11. At Wills Point High School in East Texas, her artistic skills were widely recognized in the tight community of 3,000 people. She was regularly called upon to paint “run-throughs” for football games. She laughs when asked if it bothered her to have her creations torn to shreds by football players as they ran onto the field. “It was an early lesson in learning not to take critiques too personally or get too attached to your work,” she notes.



EVERYTHING IS AS IT WAS, OIL, 18 X 48.

That sort of levelheaded attitude led Renfro to take a practical approach when it came time for college. With computer animation on the rise in the 1990s, she enrolled in Texas Christian University in 1996 with a major in computer science and a minor in fine art. "I thought I'd at least always have a job doing computer science and just paint on the side." But, frustrated by TCU's lack of computer animation courses, she left after two and a half years to transfer to the Academy of Art College in San Francisco. There, however, she realized she preferred traditional animation, which fell under the school's illustration department. Learning illustration skills satisfied her lifelong love of drawing and painting. "I thought, 'Oh neat, I can paint and still make money,'" she recalls. "So I stumbled into that career path."

Just for fun during her last semester, Renfro took an industrial design class and discovered yet another passion. "To make something both functional and beautiful is a great combination of problem-solving, design, and art," she explains.

Degree in hand, she set out looking for work in the Bay Area. For a year and a half, she worked for a home-goods company, using Adobe Illustrator software to create mass-produced artwork to go in frames and photo albums. "I've seen my stuff at Target," she laughs.

She then landed a dream job as an industrial designer, coming up with a wide range of objects, such as laptop bags, pilot's gloves,

and light-up umbrellas. "I learned a different sense of design there, a less-is-more aesthetic," she says. "Simplicity is oftentimes more readable and more powerful than something complex."

Renfro might still be happily working as an industrial designer had she not been laid off in 2005. She found it hard to land another position in the field without a degree that specifically focused on industrial design, however. "And I was loathe to go back to school," she says.

Around that time she reunited with a friend from art school who had actually begun to make a living as a fine-art painter. "Throughout my life, while painting on the side and enjoying it, I had never really considered that I could make a living at it," she says. "But I decided to gamble and take a shot at it, giving myself six months to build up a volume of work to see if I could get in a gallery. Looking back, it's so funny how naïve I was about all of it."

Well, maybe more optimistic than naïve. At the urging of her mother, who had moved to San Antonio and offered to support her efforts, Renfro returned to Texas for her six-month shot. She found herself a small studio on the outskirts of the city in a complex converted from old grain silos. "There were train tracks and factories all around. And I'd just get in my car and drive, taking pictures from the side of the road of a pile of pipe or an old broken-down windmill or some farm equipment, whatever



DAY 115, OIL, 30 X 40.



RISE AND FALL, OIL, 24 X 36.

seemed like a good idea to paint,” she recalls. “It was awesome. I practically lived in my studio, painting sometimes until 2 o’clock in the morning.”

Soon, Renfro’s particular aesthetic began taking shape. She painted realistic images of the everyday objects around her, presented in simple compositions that, through loose yet absolutely sure rendering and often-muted colors, managed vividly to capture not merely the forms but also the spirits of their subjects.

Before six months had passed, she’d sold her first painting at a local gallery show and was offered representation at Wally Workman Gallery in Austin, which took the rest of the 40-some paintings she’d completed. She returned to San Francisco, kept painting, and was named an “Artist to Watch” in the October 2006 issue of *Southwest Art*, soon gaining still more galleries.

IT’S TEMPTING to look for influences in pieces that, at first glance, feel so instantaneously familiar. “I’m definitely more influenced by artists you’d call contemporary,” Renfro responds, citing inspirations as diverse as the stark urban scenes of



ANYWHERE FROM HERE, OIL, 36 X 48.

Edward Hopper, the pop still lifes of Wayne Thiebaud, and the vibrant abstract expressionist canvases of Richard Diebenkorn.

Yet her paintings have a distinctive look all their own. Credit that, in part, to compositional skills that pare images down to their eloquent essence, a trait that may owe something to the less-is-more approach she fine-tuned as an industrial designer. Consider the tree branch and bird's nest in *ALL THAT'S OVER NOW* or the silos and conveyor belts in *EVERYTHING IS AS IT WAS*, both of which exemplify a spare presentation and subdued palette that remind some viewers of Japanese art yet also feel as all-American as a Texan trained in San Francisco could be.

Renfro goes on to observe that, along with the subjects toward which she naturally gravitates, her deliberately blurred, slightly washed-out style, executed with a relaxed, self-assured mastery, also “harkens to memory”—producing the kinds of images viewers might see when closing their eyes and thinking back to the past. “I think that’s why some people feel a sense of nostalgia about my paintings,” she notes.

With so many galleries and collectors now clamoring for her work, Renfro could easily rest on her well-earned laurels and

produce canvases similar to what she’s done before. But that wouldn’t suit someone who, from the moment she first entered college to study computer animation, has always looked ahead to possible new paths. So, late this past spring, she packed up her San Francisco studio and moved to Chicago.

“This is an experiment,” she explains. “I was starting to feel complacent, so I decided to change my input to see if it affects my output.” It’s too early to see the results. But her much larger studio space, in a working-class light-industrial neighborhood, occupies part of an old warehouse “next door to a place that makes granite countertops, with lots of power tools and trucks.” So, she continues enthusiastically, “I already have ideas for new series that I’m really excited about. And my works may get bigger.”

No doubt Midwestern roads will soon beckon, too. And they’ll likely provide Renfro with still more fresh subjects that, to her discerning eye alone, demand to be portrayed in ways everyone can appreciate. ❖

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