

# Desert Muse: The Paintings of Johnnie Winona Ross

BY LAURA ADDISON

The ocean has long been a muse to painters, but for Johnnie Winona Ross, who lived for twenty-two years in the coastal city of Portland, Maine, before moving to New Mexico in 1999, the desert was the inspiration he sought. His move from the East Coast to the Taos area has been a familiar trek for numerous artists since the early twentieth century, and it marked an important artistic transition for Ross. The exhibition *Traces* features one dozen of Ross's paintings, dating from 1997 to the present, to explore how the desert muse made its presence felt in one artist's work.

From his studio windows in Arroyo Seco, Ross has a remarkable view of the Taos mountains. These mountains of New Mexico's high desert, the red canyon walls of southern Utah, and the creeks and seeps of Texas constitute part of Ross's long courtship with the American Southwest. It is in this variety of desert landscapes that he finds the physical forms that he manifests through abstraction. The paintings' grid structure may at first seem antithetical to the natural world. Yet what the warp and weft of the composition provide is a rhythm that grounds the abstract paintings in analogous horizontal and vertical examples from the physical world. Like the ebb and flow of ocean waves, Ross's grids can be understood as marking time and locating stasis amid change.

The stasis of mountains and horizons is analogous to the horizontal titanium- or zinc-white bands in the paintings. These white bands vary in translucency and opacity, and echo

the intensity of light experienced in the Southwest. Moreover, despite initial impressions, they do not possess the crisply defined edges you might expect; they have a slight curvature and softness of line characteristic of a mirage. If the horizontal bands set the grid structure of each painting firmly in place, the dripping rivulets of color that form the vertical axis of the painting leave more to chance. They mimic the seepage of minerals and water in a rock wall, the tributaries of a river as seen from above, or the lone storm cloud sprinkling rain on a





Left: Ross in Utah. Photograph by Carole Sue Ross. Above: **Johnnie Winona Ross**, *Salt Creek: Red Rock Seeps*, 2009. Oil and acrylic burnished on linen. 48 × 45½ in. Courtesy of Stephen Haller Gallery, New York. Photograph by Christopher Burke.

distant mountain or plain. They might even evoke the tire tracks left upon the terrain by a nomadic road warrior.

Johnnie Winona Ross is one such nomad. He often experiences the Southwest by moving through it on a motorcycle, an experience he describes as “sensing the environment” in a way that immerses the body and senses. An avid racer in his youth, Ross still loves the road and takes off on many trips each year—when he is not sequestered in his painting studio, that is. On other occasions he slows his pace, traveling by foot through the landscapes of New Mexico, southern Utah, Texas, and elsewhere to scrutinize the light, color, soil, and rock walls

that reveal traces of minerals, water seepage, or the hand of those who came before us. Riding and walking offer two different perceptions of the landscape as it relates to time. Both temporal states reveal themselves in Ross’s paintings, in the permanence and always-been-there quality evinced by the solid whites on the one hand, and the more fluid, quick-to-move drips on the other.

Ross’s paintings are also a temporal experience in their labor-intensiveness. Each painting consists of between 50 and 150 layers. After each layer, Ross painstakingly scrapes the pigment and any imperfections away to assure a smooth finish. At the conclusion of a painting, he burnishes the surface with a stone, as a Native potter would a clay vessel. The result is a remarkably “polished” surface, as much a trademark of Ross’s paintings as his finely wrought grids.

Like the desert itself, Ross’s understated paintings reward close inspection with a complexity of

composition and myriad colors. The selection of works in *Traces* demonstrates the range of referents that appear in his brand of abstraction: from the whiteness of the desert heat to the earthy pigments of the natural world, from the painterly quality of an abstract expressionist to the pristine finish of a minimalist, from fleeting impression to measured observation, and from order to chance. ■

**Laura Addison** is curator of contemporary art at the New Mexico Museum of Art. *Traces: Johnnie Winona Ross* is on exhibit at the New Mexico Museum of Art through January 9, 2011.