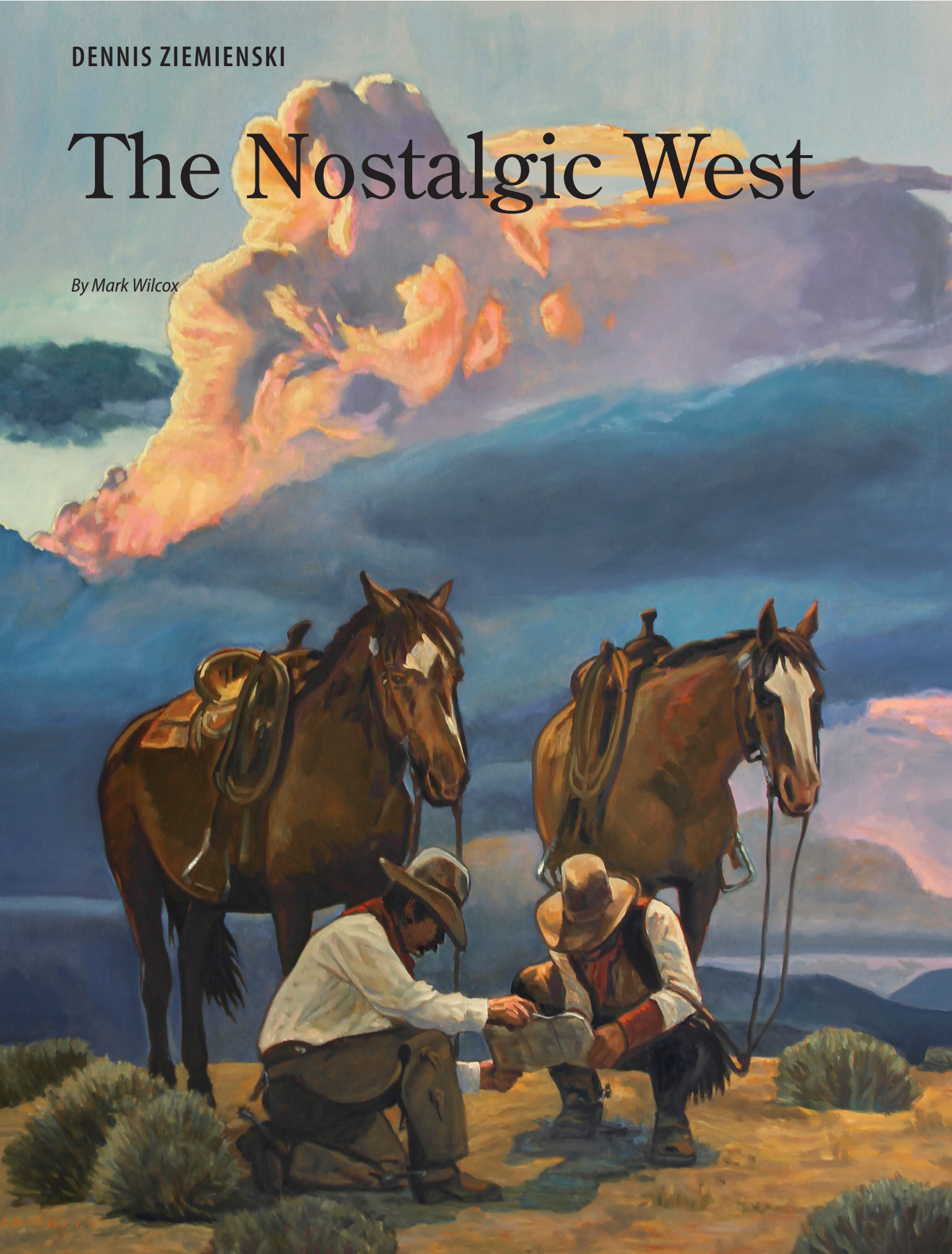


DENNIS ZIEMIENSKI

The Nostalgic West

By Mark Wilcox



Arizona Motel, oil, 30" by 40"

"This sign is in the Tucson area and has the wonderful backdrop of the Santa Catalina Mountains."

A trip to the principal's office in first grade might have been the catalyst that pushed Dennis Ziemanski toward art. When he drew a full wine glass next to a bottle, his principal called his parents in for two reasons: One, he worried Ziemanski might be "imbibing" at home, given the adult subject matter. Two, the principal, who was also an artist, noticed that the child had

correctly drawn the top of his wine glass as an ellipse. The kid could already render complex visual perspectives instead of simple outlines.

"Let this kid go into art, because he has some talent," the principal told Ziemanski's parents.

That singular event gave his parents the permission to encourage him toward art, a direction from which they never swayed. Nor did their son.

"I've always been an artist," Ziemanski says. "When I was a kid, I thought maybe I should be a fireman or something else, but I've always loved drawing pictures and painting and making narrative work."

The early encouragement certainly paid off. He's marched through a successful career in illus-

tration including forays into sports art at the highest level with illustrations for the Super Bowl, the Kentucky Derby, and *Sports Illustrated*. His work has been credited in movies; he did introductory illustrations for "Sunset" that didn't make the movie but his name still made the credits. And now, at age 79, Ziemanski's nostalgic narrative work brings back memories of a simpler time when Route 66 was a dominant transportation corridor and neon signs beckoned to travelers. His vibrant scenes blend historical reverence with mid-century modern design.

Some of his work resembles a 1950's movie poster. Some leans deeper toward fine art, but all of it carries an illustrative, narrative flair

(Left) Lost, oil, 72" by 60"

"Two trackers are trying to figure their way around in some new territory on horseback. They get off their horses to confer with a map, hoping for an answer."



Where the Buffalo Roam, oil, 72" by 80"

"I really love painting clouds, and I wanted to make them majestic, even though the song calls for skies that aren't cloudy."

with open-ended storytelling. Ziemienki isn't telling the whole story; he's letting viewers fill in the blanks as they see it, or transporting them to their own nostalgic moments.

Born in 1947, he lived through the golden age of road trips. Much of his work evinces the sense of open-road freedom from a bygone era. Decades traveling artistic roads have recently led him to a 100-year

art retrospective of Route 66 from July 21 to August 10 at Blue Rain Gallery in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and at Blue Rain Gallery in Durango, Colorado, from October 2 to October 23. He also exhibits in prominent museum shows such as the now-defunct Masters of the American West Show at the Autry Museum in Los Angeles, California, and at Rendezvous Royale at the Buffalo Bill Center of

the West in Cody, Wyoming.

The road that took Ziemienki to this point of his art career meanders as much as Route 66. Born in the San Francisco Bay Area to a nautical engineer father, who drew cartoons, and an artist mother, he gravitated to art early. In the 1950s, he began to win Bay Area art contests. In the '60s, he founded his high school's art club and became the go-to guy



Fine Cars, oil, 36" by 48"

"I remember, when I was growing up, going with my father to look at cars. He loved old cars as I do also. The 7-Up sign painted on the bricks was a popular way to advertise."



Truck Stop, oil, 24" by 48"

"This is an old sign from Nevada that needed a lot of work since it was destroyed. I had to imagine the sign as it might have looked years ago to be able to paint the neon."



California Dreamin', oil, 24" by 36"

"I am slightly obsessed with painting Giant Oranges. These refreshment stands were popular in the 1950s along the California highways. I begged my parents to stop, and they wouldn't because they had a schedule to keep."

for posters for school events.

In 1970, after serving with the U.S. Navy, Ziemienki attended the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland. He launched his career as a freelance illustrator, eventually splitting his time between San Francisco and a studio in New York's Greenwich Village and became one of the most prominent illustrators in the country. His bi-coastal representation led to high-profile artwork for the Academy Awards, the Los Angeles Olympics, "National Lampoon,"

"I need a variety of imagery to feel fulfilled."

and "The New Yorker."

Working against tight deadlines taught Ziemienki how to execute a strong, centralized focal point. A lot of his work is in the foundation, the storytelling, and the ideas. His goal is to generate stopping power—a "billboard effect"—with his pieces. "You're driving by a billboard, going 60, and if there's too much going on, you don't even look at it," he says. "But, if there's a centralized [image], your eye goes directly to it."

Ziemienki's illustration career

continued into the 1990s while he dabbled in teaching art. The wild success and high-profile clients he had as an illustrator enabled him to build a custom home in the coveted Sonoma Wine Country in 1995 where he still lives today with his wife Anne, who creates mosaics.

When illustration began to go digital, Ziemienki started to transition toward gallery work to keep "pushing paint around." He took the bravado-edged path of advertising his artwork with full-page ads in prominent art magazines in the early '90s, and soon Mark Sublette of Medicine Man Gallery in Tucson, Arizona, reached out to him, com-



paring him to a unique interpretation of Maynard Dixon.

Sublette quickly sold all 10 of Ziemienki's paintings, which led to more than a dozen one- and two-man shows at Medicine Man Gallery. The gallery ball kept rolling, and he now exhibits in a number of high-end galleries across the West, while also doing private commissions and continuing to send work to museum shows. The fertile ground has allowed him to have a varied fine-art career. "I need a variety of imagery to feel fulfilled," he says.

Unlike many Western artists who end up painting cowboys and horses time and again, Ziemienki has a definition of Western art that's more expansive than horse and rider—old convertibles with their tops down on distant dirt roads, neon signs glinting against a blue sky, dude ranch cowgirls, and old-school speed boats at Lake Powell.

The storytelling in Ziemienki's paintings has been enough to catch the eye of another prolific storyteller—John Lasseter, once the chief creative officer of Pixar and Disney Animation Studios—who commissioned him to paint labels for the Lasseter Family Winery to reflect that wine-making is an art form. "We see Dennis as a storyteller," Lasseter writes in "The Art of Dennis Ziemienki," the artist's coffee table book. "He paints stories of the landscape, and he does it in a travel poster style, beckoning in and capti-



Gas, Food, Lodging, oil, 36" by 36"

"These signs exist all along Route 66. I picked a place where you not only see the restaurants, gas stations, and motels but also the wonderful scenery of mesas, mountains and, of course, clouds."

vating the beholder."

Ziemienki's creative process is highly structural. He once composited images much as he'd done for illustration work by hand, but at his artist daughter's insistence he now utilizes the same Photoshop that once sent him packing from illustration to composite references. He might pull clouds from Utah, a mesa from Arizona, and cattle from California as he builds his narratives.

He preps his canvases with a warm wash of raw sienna. Like Norman Rockwell, another prime influence on him, Ziemienki sketches the scene, using a small brush dipped in Mars violet, meticulously outlining the strongest areas before blocking in the darks with ultramarine blue and burnt sienna. He'll oc-

asionally ask Anne and their daughter Sofia, now a surface designer and illustrator, to help critique his works in progress.

With all the success he has realized—and continues to earn—Ziemienki has no intention of slowing down. "You have to grab your hand like this and pull it away, you know, because you could keep going and going and going," he says. And for an art world that loves sunlit memories, retrospective art, and the pure road-trip nostalgia that is ever-present in Ziemienki's work, his collectors hope he can never fully pull that hand away. 

Mark Willcox lives in Cache Valley, Utah.