





White Magic

An artist's whimsical paintings explore what it means to be human in a cold world.

BY GLEN WARCHOL

Chris Miles' winter paintings draw on years of outings in the Wasatch Mountains to offer the viewer scenes of pristine snow broken only by the ski tracks of bunnies, wolves, skeletons and the occasional human. Miles calls his whimsical and often surreal paintings "magical realism."

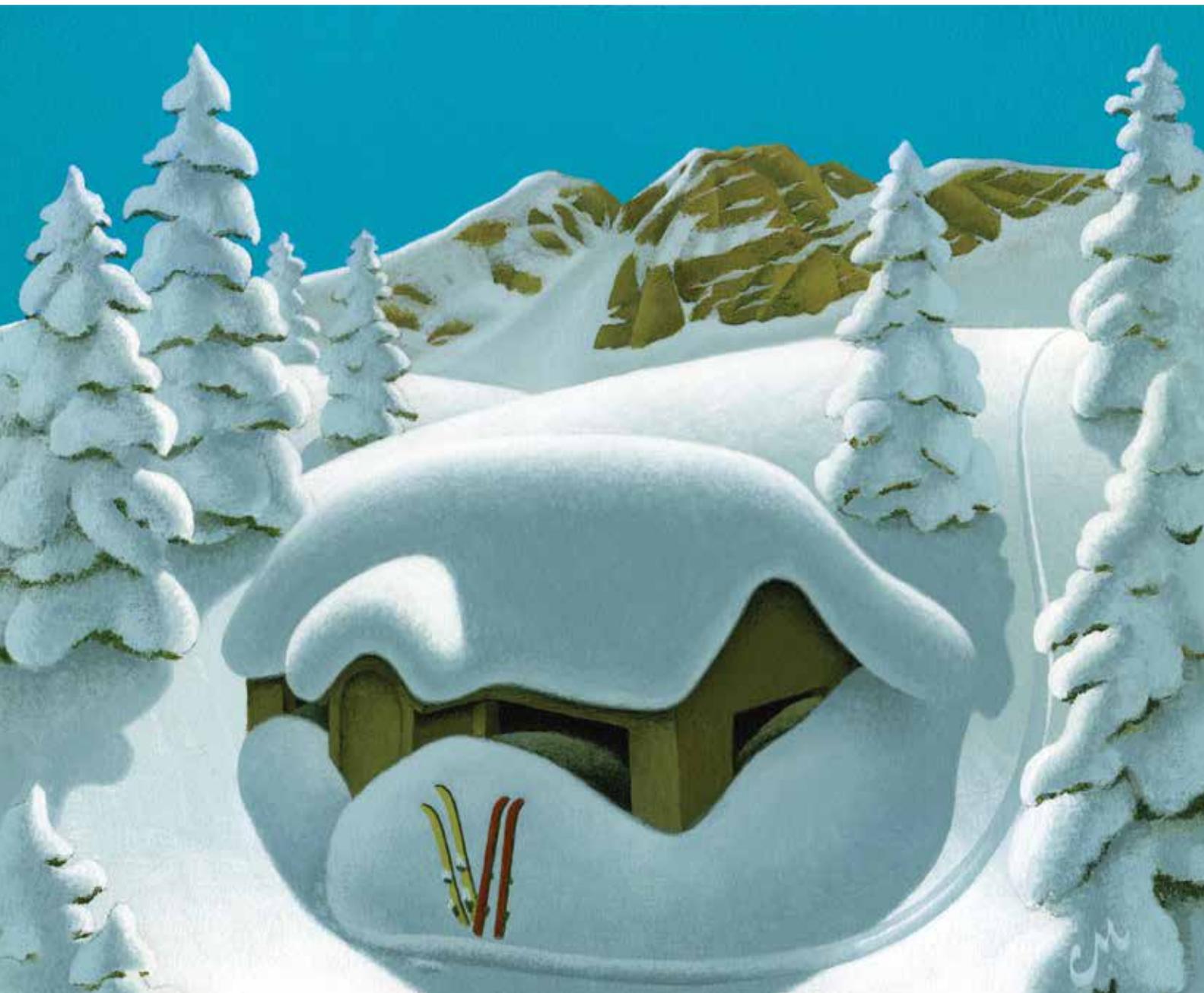
"The painting looks realistic, like a window you could walk through to another world, but the things that are there could not be really happening," Miles explains. "I like painting snow scenes because white reflects all the colors around it. Fresh snow gives a soft quality to the scene. I have always had positive feelings about the snow and being out in snowy landscapes."

Despite his frigid winter palette, the images exude coziness. "They have an emotional warmth to them," he says. "I like that feel."

Miles grew up in Salt Lake City and was trained at Utah State University and University of Utah before working as an illustrator in New York City. But he found illustrating for clients creatively constricting and returned to Utah in 2000 to be a fine artist. Mountain landscape and nature, in which he revelled from an early age at his family's cabin in Alta, provides a backdrop to many of his works. "I love hiking and skiing, especially backcountry skiing. I like nature, being out in nature—and I love painting it."

Miles also admits the obvious, that the great illustrators, including N.C., Andrew and Jamie Wyeth, are an influence. "You can tell by looking at my work—there's an illustration look to it." Miles is also influenced by the Old Masters and Renaissance art,

"Albion", acrylic on panel, 24 x 30 inches, 2010



Top: "The Cabin," acrylic on panel, 8 x 10 inches, 2010
Opposite page: "After Hours," acrylic on panel, 18 x 24 inches, 2006

but clearly most of all by Henri Rousseau, the Post-Impressionist painter known for his "naive" or "primitive" painting style that was ridiculed as childish by critics of the time. Rousseau's approach is echoed in Miles' "animalia" work.

Miles' work, particularly paintings that feature animals, domestic and wild, are often purchased by parents for their children's rooms. But his dreamlike paintings speak to the more sophisticated. "I don't paint for a particular audience or like trying to please an audience. I think more in expressing myself and doing what I want to do."

Salt Lake art collector Louise Ewing is enchanted by the artist's work. She bought the first Miles' painting she encountered, *The Terrible Storm*. The painting is small, but perfect, Ewing says. "It brings to mind *The Wreck of the Hesperus*, with a small

wooden boat fighting for survival against a storm," she says. "But at the tiller, is a gallant pug, dressed in leather boots, a red cape and a feathered hat, resolutely considering his fate."

Ewing also owns Miles' *The Fox* that depicts the subject running across the snowy foreground, giving the slip to a pair of hunters with their dog. "The sky is a heavy green-gray straight out of Brueghel, as are the skaters on a pond in the distance," Ewing says. "In all Chris Miles' art, there is so much warm humor and a wise innocence to each image—you can't help smiling whenever you catch another look."

But a significant number of his paintings, despite the humor, touch on serious spiritual and metaphysical matters: death, wonder, Trinity, decay—what Miles calls "aspects of our universal."





Chris Miller

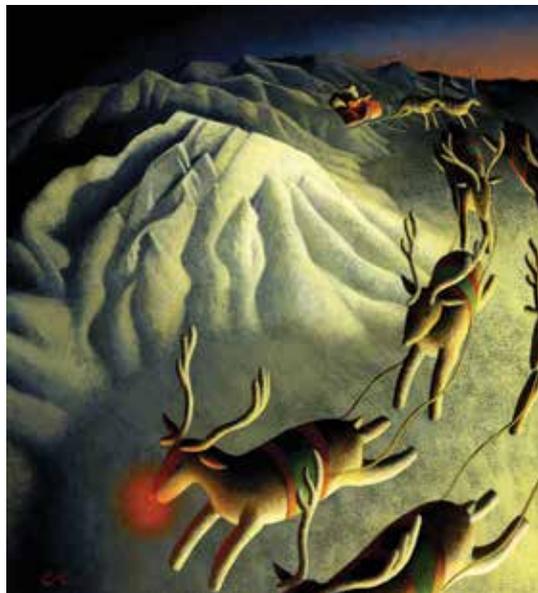


“I do have darker, adult themes, like death. I like Mexican Day of the Dead imagery. It’s a way of looking at dark themes with a sense of humor,” Miles says. “It’s not something you’d put in a little kid’s room.”

Oddly, even when Miles deals with somber aspects of the human experience, his works maintain a naïveté and whimsy—“although the subject matter may not be warm and cozy,” he says. Some of Miles’ innocent tone might come from the drawing sessions he shares with his twin 7-year-old daughters, Maya and Annika. “We do a lot of simple animal stuff. It’s fun to paint with them. Kids are so free about expressing themselves because they are completely uninhibited.”

Miles showed the twins some of Rousseau’s primitive work and one said, “He draws like a kid, but he paints like a big person.”

“That describes Rousseau perfectly,” Miles says. It also describes Chris Miles. [SI](#)



Top: “Superior”, acrylic on panel, 24 x 30 inches, 2010
Left: “Approaching Salt Lake”, acrylic on panel, 14 x 14 inches, 2010
Opposite: “Back Country Bears”, acrylic on panel, 18 x 24 inches, 2005

Chris Miles Paintings are available at Palmer’s Gallery, 16th Street Gallery and UTAH Artist Hands.