

DENNIS LIBERTY

LANDSCAPES OF THE AMERICAN WEST

LAST STAND

- 54 X 66
- OIL ON CANVAS
- \$18,000



One stand of aspens in full fall glory...

This painting, *Last Stand* is one of those paintings – Death and Resurrection.

I went to Taos in the fall of 2004 to paint “The Great Taos Painting”. My wife and I and a painting buddy stayed a week and I got some good plein air work done but nothing to knock the old Taos Painters into the dumpster.

My wife and I decided to go home the long way, through Tres Piedras and over the San Juan Mountains. Just over the pass with Jawbone Mountain in sight, we sighted a storm line headed south at a hell of a clip. At the same time, we saw one stand of aspens in full fall glory, the last stand on the mountain that had not given up its leaves. All the others were bare poles, prepared for the first snows of a winter that would last into late April at that altitude.

This one golden stand had been waiting for me, clutching its leaves to itself while the other families had thrown theirs away and gone dormant. We screeched to a halt and I grabbed my easel and hastily set up.

Nearly two miles up, the air is thin. I was puffing like a marathon runner as I slammed out a 5" x 7" inch plein air sketch and took photos, aware that the rapidly approaching storm would soon be upon me. As the wind began to rattle the leaves and bend the grasses, I packed up and scurried to the car. Just before leaving the



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LANDSCAPES OF THE AMERICAN WEST

mountain, we heard a tremendous clatter and then soft thuds as the golden trees relaxed and their leaves began to hit the ground.

Returning to the studio, I knew immediately that I had to do a large work and stretched up a 54" x 66" Belgian linen canvas and blithely began to paint. I knew in my gut this painting was a lead pipe cinch.

Hubris is not a small town in north central New Mexico.

I received an education from Hubris with that lead pipe. I could not get the painting to realize itself. It was dull, listless, lifeless, boring and I was forcing it into an uninteresting being. I tried everything I knew, consulted all my books, found that everything I did turned to excrement. Three times I started from scratch. Nothing worked. My painting buddy, Tom Smith, came by while I was fighting nausea and suggested a white glaze to cover and subdue the cursed canvas. I took his suggestion and achieved a step up from visual disaster to merely wretched. This is when I did a brilliant thing. I shoved the painting into the deepest, darkest, depths of my storage area. It stayed there for a year and a half.

Then one day, I hauled all my paintings out for a photo shoot. I was again forced to look at the wreckage anew and realized with confidence that I could make the painting work and I did.

It was in this process that *Last Stand* taught me that no matter what the art teacher told you, there is no such thing as a muddy color. I put down colors that would normally make a blind man gag. But in this context, they made the painting shine.

I learned that every color is pure in respect to context. In fact, I am firmly convinced that any art teacher who tells you that this or that color is muddy is dead wrong! There is no ugly color. There is only one color against another color. Only that complexity is worth discussing. Context is everything!

Three days after I began working on *Last Stand* the second time around, I finished it and signed it with a nod to humility. It had taught me about integrity and authenticity and the malleability of color.

In a representational painting, color becomes its own reality. Raking colors across the grass area maintains its grassiness but the colors I use have no basis in any world but the painting. Likewise, the aspens in the fall have a color mass that is not believed by someone who has not seen it. The leaves range from the deepest red to the brightest yellow and on the canvas, that is not nearly riotous enough.

There is no tube of color that approaches the true nature of aspens in the fall, but when I sneak in violets, red violets, blue violets and blues, I can help you feel and see the impact; I can help you hear the sensational song of aspen leaves at 10,600 feet near Jawbone Mountain in October.

