





By Peta Owens-Liston

Photo by Douglas Burke

DAVID MERRILL



There is no shortage of sky in David Merrill's paintings. The artist loses himself in abstract clouds, the play of light and shadow, and the sheer vastness of sunrise and sunset. In "Symphonic Sunset," Antelope Island and a shimmering ribbon of the Great Salt Lake abutting a land mass barely take up a quarter of the canvas; the rest is sky. "In some of my paintings, the land mass keeps getting smaller and smaller, and the sky larger and larger," admits Merrill, who shifted gears six years ago from a lucrative, fast-paced career as an art director/designer in New York City to pursue his painting in Park City.

A Utah native, Merrill left the state at age 20 to attend the prestigious Art Center School in Los Angeles where he studied illustration and advertising design. After graduation, Merrill headed east to New York City — the make-you-or-break-you island of the design



Aspen Ribbons

world — to see if he had what it took. “I had a tremendous amount of drive and ambition when I went to New York, but I was scared, too.” A grin flickers across Merrill’s face as he recalls sitting on the New Jersey side of the Hudson River, staring across the George Washington Bridge that leads to New York City. “I didn’t have the guts to cross that bridge. I went and got a motel room in Jersey for the night.” The next day, however, Merrill did cross that bridge, becoming part of the city’s energy for the next 36 years.

The Art Center’s network and reputation provided him a sturdy springboard into a career that included being advertising art director with Ogilvy & Mather, and then art director of *TIME* magazine, where he worked with some of the best illustrators and photographers in the world, conceiving and designing more than 500 covers. In 1977, he founded his own company, David Merrill Design, where he redesigned maga-

zines. Clients included the likes of *Reader’s Digest*, *Us*, *Golf*, *Popular Science*, new magazines for *The Economist*, *Playboy* and more than 100 others.

After 23 years of running his own business, Merrill strategically raised his prices to an extravagant amount in order to force himself out of the industry and therefore spend more time painting — turning a hobby into a later-in-life career. He envisioned himself painting eastern seascapes and covered bridges, but health issues and concern for his 88-year-old mother brought him back to the West.

Merrill explored the art market in Utah and learned that western landscapes sold best. Eventually, he also discovered that opening his own gallery would result in more sales and certainly more space to exhibit his growing collection. In a hurry to “catch up,” he signed up for classes with artist Bonnie Posselli — taking her morning, afternoon, and evening classes (an 11-hour exercise) on the days she offered

them. “I’m an old guy, and I need to get on the fast track,” he explained to her. He studied with Posselli for a year.

With his prior experience in the art world, David took to painting landscapes very quickly. He made remarkable progress, and within a short period of time, was able to refine his technique, and according to Posselli, “... had the ability to speak the essence of place in his landscapes.” Bonnie also mentioned that when he stopped going to class, his female classmates especially missed him. “He was fun and romanced the ladies in an attentive, gentlemanly sort of way.”

Inside Merrill’s 1,137-square-foot gallery tucked in the northern corner of the Park City Main Street Mall, patrons can glimpse familiar scenes of the Rockies — aspen and pine trees, towering peaks, wintering elk — as well as redrock landscapes of Southern Utah, and images from Sedona, Arizona, and the Tetons in Jackson Hole. It’s a hike for the eyes through nature.



Camel's Head and Snoopy Rock

Merrill's studio is an exposed, elevated corner in the back of his gallery, where he stands at his easel, surrounded by windows and a clutter of brushes, photographs, open books, paints and rags. Lit up like a triangular fishbowl at night, Merrill has been told he's dinner-time entertainment for the diners across the street at 350 Main Brasserie.

When Merrill is painting, the rest of the world disappears. He loses himself in the creative process, pulling from artistic experience to determine the composition and color that engages viewers. He spends 50- to 60-hour weeks in his gallery, much of it painting, not only because he loves to paint, but because it is also a refuge for him in the face of a stage four lung cancer diagnosis.

Merrill's cancer diagnosis came three months after he opened his gallery. Doctors told him that perhaps he had as little as a year to live. "A lot of people quit their jobs at this point and travel a few weeks between

chemotherapy," says Merrill. But doctors warned Merrill that the people who die first are the ones who go straight home and go to bed. "For a split-second, I thought this over, and then I decided I'm right where I want to be — I've just opened a gallery, and I'm painting," says Merrill with the flicker of determination in his eyes that must have been there the day he crossed the George Washington Bridge. "I just wish I had 10 more years to refine my talent." Felix Saez, who owns a gallery next to Merrill's and who has become a good friend, observes that Merrill loves being in his gallery because "he loves the chase, the game of selling, and engaging customers — that's what he did for so many years in New York."

Merrill certainly doesn't look like he's dying. Wearing jeans and running shoes, he appears fit. An animated pair of salt and pepper eyebrows dances above his serious eyes, while he cuts to the chase as only a New Yorker can,

riddling his conversation with wry humor. He tells the story of a well-heeled customer who wanted to purchase several of his paintings in nine months when his vacation home would be completed. "I wanted to yell, 'I may be dead by then!'" says Merrill, feigning exasperation but also surrendering to the fact that his timeline is now different from that of others.

When one converses with Merrill, hope and realism swirl together like two unlikely colors of paint that ultimately end up looking beautiful together. He has already exceeded the worst case scenario, as it's been 17 months since he began chemotherapy. So Merrill focuses on painting and on living, rather than on the future — just as he concentrates, paint brush in hand, on the ephemeral elements of so many brilliant sunsets. 🐦

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