



## Translating into art

By **EVE BYRON - Independent Record - 03/24/08**

Christiane Buell describes her oil paintings as "controlled uncontrolledness," and the same could be said of her.

With flashing brown eyes and a shock of uncontrollable red curls, Buell dances like a gypsy around her studio near the head of Rodney Street, a small woman with big art - literally. Some pieces are brightly colored, others are more muted, but most are on large canvases.

"I like to work with 40-by-60 (inches) or bigger. That's my favorite format," she says, pausing only briefly to consider the recently completed paintings lining the walls. "These are smaller, because the space at the Holter (where they'll be displayed soon) isn't really large."

Buell's accent reflects her European heritage; she grew up in Zurich, a Swiss city of 7 million people, and lived in Germany. She also has shown her paintings in Italy.

Her entire family is artistically inclined, playing music and painting, and her sister is a photographer. Buell's first romance was with dance, and she trained at the Swiss College for Dance and Ballet in Switzerland, then at the Alvin Ailey Dance School in New York. That career path ended after she broke her leg in a car accident when she was 23.

She turned to oil paints and moved to California.

Life on the West Coast was good initially - Buell was showing her work in the Berkley area and had won some awards - but her marriage was ending and she was looking for a change.

She found that and then some after being accepted into the artist-in-residence program at the Montana Artists Refuge in Basin in 2004.

Buell notes she had spent three months showing her paintings in Switzerland before taking the I-15 off-ramp into Basin, and the contrasts couldn't have been more distinct between the booming metropolis and the laid-back mountain enclave with dirt streets, a few small bars and a tight-knit artistic community.



Eliza Wiley IR Photo Editor - Swiss artist Christiane Buell is a high-energy woman who loves creating on large canvases in her Helena studio.

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"The people," she says dramatically, stroking back that red hair. "The people here were unbelievable.

"I didn't know what to expect, but I thought that no matter what, I will make it work."

In this backcountry haven, Buell refined her artistic voice and found herself.

"I stayed there for a year and a half and painted like crazy," Buell said, and points to a large oil painting. "This piece is one I did at the refuge, and later I did this one," she adds, pointing to a similar painting. "It's like a chain. One leads to the next."

Her work caught the eye of Liz Gans, executive director for the Holter Museum, which is showing a handful of Buell's smaller works in April. Gans said she was interested in Buell's paintings because of their "lyrical quality" and her process of responding to the landscape through her work.

"I'm interested also in her work because she brings a different cultural background and aesthetic to her work, then responds to the Montana landscape through her 'transcontinental vision,'" Gans added, which happens to be the title of her exhibition at the Holter.

Gans also is fascinated with Buell's physical process of painting.

Buell puts her canvases either flat on the floor or on a table, and layers the oil colors by pouring or squeezing one color onto the canvas, then moving it about with a wide range of tools that she finds in the back aisles of hardware stores.

"I have to work flat so the oil doesn't drip, then I spread it with these spatulas," she says, displaying a wide variety. "Look at this rubber-tip paint brush. I love hardware stores."

Buell starts with light colors, then adds layer upon layer of other blues, browns, reds, yellows and greens, until she is satisfied the piece is complete. It's not always what she envisioned initially, but that's part of her artistic evolution.

"I paint what I see, but I translate it into my language," Buell said, looking at a painting that evokes images of long grasses or bamboo, or possibly trees in a forest. "I see those shapes, those things in Montana, but the outcome is always unpredictable."

Because the paint needs to dry between layers, Buell often is working on a number of pieces simultaneously. She sometimes listens to music, but other times lets silence draw out her inner muse, concentrating and focusing while letting her mind flow freely.

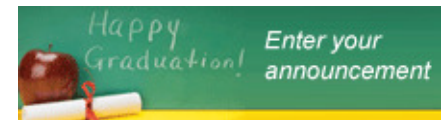
She doesn't expect everyone to like her work, and that's fine with Buell. She sees art as form of communication.

"Art unifies people. It tears down racial, religious and political barriers," Buell said. "Artists are supposed to think outside the box and raise questions that come up with interesting answers.

"But it has to be fun. If it gets too heavy, it gets intellectual, and then I get lost," she adds with a grin.

## Exhibition

Christiane Buell's paintings will be on display at the Holter Art Museum March 25 through April 20. Meet her at the artist's reception



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Reporter Eve Byron: 447-4076 or eve.byron@helenair.com



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