MONTANA MODERNISTS

Shifting Perceptions of Western Art

MICHELE CORRIEL

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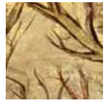
The Washington State University Pullman campus is located on the homelands of the Niimíipuu (Nez Perce) Tribe and the Palus people. We acknowledge their presence here since time immemorial and recognize their continuing connection to the land, to the water, and to their ancestors. WSU Press is committed to publishing works that foster a deeper understanding of the Pacific Northwest and the contributions of its Native peoples.

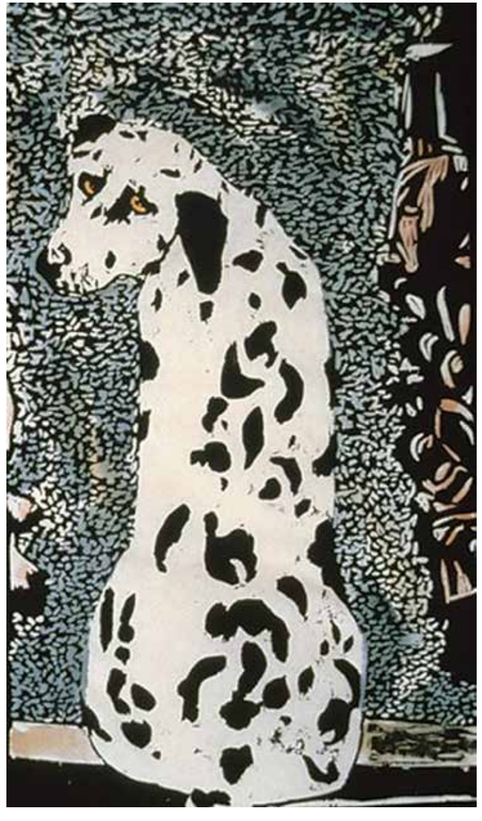
On the cover: *June Patterns*, by Gennie DeWeese
Cover design by TG Design.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to Terry Karson (1950–2017), whose footsteps I have followed all through this process. He was both a mentor and an inspiration. I only hope to have done his work justice





Gennie DeWeese, *Pepper With Doorway*
1994, Woodblock print with watercolor.
31 1/2 x 24 1/2 inches.

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ART WORK

Gennie DeWeese, *Non-Objective Painting,* n.d.
Oil on masonite, 27 x 48 inches.

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This book started before I wrote the first word. I wish to thank Harvey Hamburgh, who sat with me to talk the idea through; Mary Murphy, who guided my dissertation process; and the many students of these artists who generously took time out of their lives to share their experiences with me. Sara Mast kept me on track, adding insights and considerations. Josh and Tina DeWeese allowed me to go through their parents' papers, rummage through their boxes (and more boxes), and borrow catalogues; above all, they spent hours talking to me about these amazing artists who they knew and loved. It is through these people that I have come to love them as well. In addition, my undying gratitude goes to Gordon McConnell who helped me to navigate this journey.

This book would not have been completed without the insight of Washington State University Press editor Linda Bathgate, who understood the historic significance of this work, and the generous help of Montana State University's College of Art and Architecture Dean Dr. Royce Smith, who encouraged me with his belief in this book.

PREFACE

During my more than fifteen years of writing about art in Montana, the same six names came up again and again. Artists of varying aesthetics and disciplines repeatedly spoke of these people as mentors and friends. As I set forth to learn more about them, I discovered the untold story of art in postwar Montana.

Through my research into Isabelle Johnson, Bill Stockton, Jessie Wilber, Frances Senska, Robert DeWeese, and Gennie DeWeese, I developed a very deep, personal connection. Why was I drawn to these artists? Why did their work speak to me so directly? Their visions, which arose from lives lived in Montana, opened a door for me to explore a regional identity different from the usual stereotypes that come to mind when speaking of Montana.

In Wilber's prints of the things she loved—her cats sunning themselves in the garden or a covey of Hungarian partridges scuttling across her yard—I found the same intimate moments I had experienced. Gennie DeWeese's large oil stick landscapes painted in lush colors connected me to the views witnessed many times traveling across the state. In Robert DeWeese's sketches, I felt as if I were sitting in the room with him, seeing the same moments he observed, and my visceral response to his collages sent me back to my afternoons in the MoMA "conversing" with the Dadaists. I had not one bone of ranching in my body, yet Bill Stockton made me feel as if I had just trudged across a muddy field or fought my way back home through a blizzard. Isabelle Johnson introduced me to her favorite hills and valleys on her Absarokee ranch, and Frances Senska won my heart with her hand-sized ceramic partridges. Through each of their visions, these artists allowed me to see Montana in a new way.

My sincere passion for these six artists and their art is expressed in my descriptions of their work. The interpretations of paintings and pots offered on the following pages are the result of my own research and reflection. I am grateful to each of them for their enduring concepts, which gave birth to what I call "Montana Modernism." Their work continues to give us new ways to see this unique place and its history through their eyes.

BRIEF ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES

ISABELLE JOHNSON (1901–1992): Born and raised on a ranch in Absarokee, Montana, she attended the University of Montana, where she graduated with a degree in history in 1922. She taught high school in Fromberg, Montana, for two years. She then went on to attend Los Angeles County Museum School at the University of Southern California, the Otis Art Institute, and Columbia University where she obtained a master's degree in history. She then enrolled at the Columbia University School of Painting and Sculpture to pursue further graduate work in art. While at Columbia she was selected by the artist


Isabelle Johnson


Bill Stockton


Jessie Wilber


Frances Senska


Robert DeWeese


Gennie DeWeese

Henry Varnum Poor in 1946 to participate in the first class of the experimental Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, in Maine. Intermittently, Johnson went back to Montana to teach art at the Billings High School when she needed money for tuition. After she finished her education, she took a year off to go to Europe and visit the works of the masters. Upon her return she taught art at Eastern Montana College from 1949 to 1961. In 1983 she was awarded the Governor's Award for the Arts.

BILL STOCKTON (1921–2002): Born in Winnett, Montana, Stockton moved to the family's ranch at Grass Range in his teens. He joined the army in World War II and was stationed at a hospital just outside of Paris, where he learned about sign painting. After the war he attended the Minneapolis School of Art and then went back to France in 1947 to attend the Academie de la Grande Chaumiere, in Paris. Upon returning to Montana with his French wife, Elvia Cirefice, he lived with her in Billings, but they eventually returned to the ranch in Grass Range. There, he raised sheep (for the most part) and painted. In 2003, a year after his death, he was awarded the Governor's Award for the Arts.

JESSIE SPAULDING WILBER (1912–1989): Born in Whitewater, Wisconsin, Wilber moved frequently as a child. Her family traveled from Illinois to Ohio, and from Oklahoma to Michigan before settling in Boulder, Colorado, when she was eight. She earned a B.A. and an M.A. at Colorado Teachers College, in Greeley, Colorado. She came to Montana State College, Bozeman, in 1941, and, in that same year, was awarded a contract to paint a Post Office mural in Kingman, Kansas. Wilber taught in the art department until 1972. In 1988 she won the Governor's Award for the Arts.

FRANCES SENSKA (1914–2009): Born in Cameroon, Africa, Senska moved to the United States in 1929 and attended the University High School in Iowa City, Iowa. She graduated from the University of Iowa with a B.A. and an M.A. in 1939. She taught at Grinnell College until 1942, when she joined the U.S. Navy and trained as a pilot. Senska took classes from Bauhaus artists László Moholy-Nagy and Marguerite Wildenhain. She also studied with Edith Heath at the California Labor School and Maija Grotell at the Cranbrook Academy of Art. She came to Montana State College in 1946, where she taught until 1973. There, she met Jessie Wilber, and the two became constant friends. In 1988 she was awarded the Governor's Award for the Arts.

ROBERT DEWEESE (1920–1990): Born in Troy, Ohio, he graduated from Ohio State University in 1942 with a B.S. in art. While at Ohio State University, he studied with artist Walter Kuhn and innovative art professor Hoyt Sherman. In 1942 he joined the U.S. Army and played flute in the U.S. Army Air Force Band, stationed in Hawaii. At the end of World War II, he married Gennie Adams, and he attended the University of Iowa, earning an M.F.A. in 1948. After graduation he taught art at Ohio State University, Columbus, and Texas Tech University, Lubbock. In 1949 he took a position at Montana State College, Bozeman, where he remained until his retirement in 1977. DeWeese was given the Governor's Award for the Arts, posthumously, in 1995.

GENNIE ADAMS DEWEESE (1921–2007): Born in Indianapolis, Indiana, she spent her first five years there before her family moved to St. Louis, then to Grosse Pointe, Michigan, and finally settled in Columbus, Ohio. In 1938, she enrolled at Ohio State University, where she studied with artist Walter Kuhn and innovative art professor Hoyt Sherman. There, she met and became friends with Robert DeWeese. In 1943 she received her teaching certificate from the University of Michigan. At the end of World War II, she moved to Detroit, where she worked as a substitute teacher and painted. When Robert DeWeese returned from the war, the two married. Gennie DeWeese accompanied Robert to Bozeman in 1949. They had five children. She kept up her art practice throughout her life, always demanding her own time in the studio. She taught at all levels of education, including as an adjunct at Montana State University in 1978. In 1995, after Robert DeWeese's death in 1990, Gennie DeWeese earned the Governor's Award for the Arts. That same year Gennie DeWeese was given an honorary doctorate in Fine Arts from Montana State University.

INTRODUCTION

MONTANA'S AVANT-GARDE

After World War II, Isabelle Johnson, Bill Stockton, Jessie Wilber, Frances Senska, Robert DeWeese, and Gennie DeWeese emerged as the first generation to bring Modernist art to Montana.

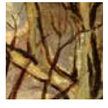
Other pockets of Modernism showed up throughout the state, including Val Knight (1905–1990), who experimented with encaustics and opened a cooperative gallery in Great Falls, and her mentor Jack Franjevic (1924–1992), who attended the Chicago Art Institute after WWII, then went on to teach at Grinnell College and finally at the College of Great Falls (now the University of Great Falls) for thirty years until his retirement.

Also in Great Falls, Sister Mary Trinitas (Rosalba Morin; 1908–1965) spent twenty-nine years as an art teacher at the College of Great Falls. Instrumental in the Montana Modernist movement, she helped Frances Senska build her first kiln and worked with Branson Stevenson as he tried various art forms. Her own art included metalwork, stained glass, ceramics, and woodwork. Henry Meloy (1902–1951) and his brother Pete Meloy (1908–1998), both from Townsend then Helena, contributed to Modernism in their own ways. Henry (Hank), a painter, taught art at Columbia University, in New York City, but would come back to Montana during the summers. Pete, a ceramicist, worked with Archie Bray and Branson Stevenson in starting the Archie Bray Foundation, in Helena.

Helen McAuslan (1917–1970) studied at the Arts Students League and traveled the world before settling in Montana, where she became good friends with Gennie DeWeese. She is best known for her 1970 Kent State Shooting paintings. These artists are noted throughout the book and are worthy of further study, but they were not as visible or active in seeding Modernism in Montana as were Isabelle Johnson, Bill Stockton, Frances Senska, Jessie Wilber, Robert DeWeese, and Gennie DeWeese.

Keeping the focus of this book on these six artists was my decision, made after years of careful deliberation, research, and debate (with myself) as to who made up the core of the movement. Through their art, their teaching, and their camaraderie, these six artists invited Montanans to see themselves in a different light. By bringing a distinguished artistic lineage, combined with observations of their ideas of place, they created a community that ultimately opened its arms to Modernism, and, in so doing, brought a broader context to the Montanan identity. They spoke of themselves as "Montana's Avant-Garde" because they knew their art operated outside the mainstream.

Montana natives Isabelle Johnson and Bill Stockton, both ranchers and artists, portrayed their versions of place in a way that reframed



SECTION ONE: PLACE

The abundance of this place, the songs of its people and its birds, will be health and wisdom and indwelling light. This is no paradisal dream. Its hardship is its possibility.[1]

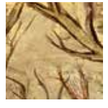
—Wendell Berry

A SENSE OF PLACE: ISABELLE JOHNSON AND BILL STOCKTON

As anyone who ever stood in the shadow of a mountain or stared, exposed, against a windswept prairie knows, the land itself becomes a backdrop to everything; it crackles the sun-dried skin and pulls like old, muddied boots at pasture-flooded dreams. The power of place speaks not only to the present, but also to the past and the future. Place conjures and it chides. For artists, place can act as inspiration or as constriction. In the period just after World War II, Montana's landscape offered opportunity as well as isolation.

Here, the reference to place is not meant in a purely geographical sense, nor is it meant in a unifying, nationalistic way. Instead, this kind of locus speaks to time, space, and, as geographical philosopher Edward S. Casey states, "the formidable presence of place in our lives."[2] He posits that people are distinguished by place: "You are in them not as a puppet stuffed in a box—as would be true on a strict container view of place—but as living in them, indeed, *through* them…. To be somewhere is to be in place and there to be subject to its power, to be part of its action, acting on its scene."[3]

Looking at the landscape as a scenic text provides not only an understanding of a literal sense of place but also a deeper understanding of what that place means in terms of personal identity. While examining the cultural context within which an individual lives (in a geographic place), geographer Edmunds Valdemars Bunkse commented on that individual's "geographic life." It was a life dependent on place and landscape. He noted, "Landscape is distinct from ideas of nature, ecology, environment, space, place, and so on…They can represent a thoroughly humanistic idea and action, provided that all the senses can be engaged in discourses about and realities of landscape."[4] Granted, there is a thin line separating place and landscape in terms of a geographic location. To geographer Karl Benediktsson, the landscape as scenery has devolved into a trope, being too simplistic to actually carry meaning. He revisits the notion of the difference between how a tourist sees a landscape and the way a resident views it: "Even coach tourists can and sometimes do have quite profound experiences when confronted with unfamiliar and startling landscapes which they



find moving." He notes the original meaning of the German word *Landschaft* as "territorial polity," which entailed certain rights and duties for those living within its bounds—a meaning that later took hold, especially in England (i.e., referring to a visual representation of a particular kind or "way of seeing"). Crossing the Atlantic, Benediktsson elaborates on the idea of wildness and how that seeps into the nature of landscape. He concludes, "An aesthetic experience is moreover made up of many strands of sense and emotion.…[T]he aesthetic sense cannot be divorced from everyday life and practices."[5]

As was mentioned but is worth noting again, Yi-Fu Tuan acknowledges that place is knowable through daily experiences over time. This idea of daily experiences adds to the emotional and cultural landscape of Montana during the time of the first generation of Modernists. Unlike the tourists, those artists understood place on a daily basis, through the seasons, the tough times, and the joyous times.

ISABELLE AND BILL: WORKING THE LAND THROUGH THEIR ART

Isabelle Johnson (1901–1992) and Bill Stockton (1921–2002) were friends and colleagues with a shared sense of place, the knowledge of hard-earned calluses from working with the land, and something more. Rooted in the tangled gullies and stretching hills of central Montana, Stockton's work, imbued with fragility and stamina, speaks to the impending threats of winter and the anticipated orchestra of spring. Stockton's home, a sheep ranch in Grass Range, Montana, marked his physical place on the land, but his art decodes his own experience in reflecting the power of place. Johnson was born and raised on a ranch in Absarokee, Montana, on her family's homestead; it sat along the Stillwater River, near the Beartooth Mountains, and became the context for her body of work. The geographical strength of her life matched the power of her paintings, centering on the landscape that shaped her. Donna Forbes, who knew both of them as friends and

Isabelle Johnson outside the Yellowstone Art Museum, 1966

in her position as executive director of the Yellowstone Art Center/Museum, stated, "Bill had a wonderful art mind. He and Isabelle were very close. Bill and she were on another level." Forbes noted that Stockton would visit Johnson at Rocky Mountain College when she finished teaching for the day. "They would talk by the hour. They had a meeting of the minds about making art, who was doing important work and so on."[6]

Stockton notes that Johnson, like himself, was a rural person:

> Her life, or that part of it, which is really meaningful, is her limited world from the house to the barn to the river and an occasional jaunt up the coulee. I'm a rural person, and I know how important that is to her, because this is home...[S]o many [artists] will never consider that home and self are one and the same...There were artists who painted drunken cowboys of an 1890 vintage, and there are artists who are painting drunken cowboys of the 1971 vintage.[7]

Continuing to discuss what made Johnson's work powerful he said,

> There are artists that paint pretty little lakes bordered by pretty little Christmas trees, and there are artists who are only concerned with high, wide, and handsome Montana. And there is Isabelle. She is about the only artist I know who has really painted Montana, because she has exposed to us a way of life and the very things that attach human beings to the land.[8]

From the willowy outlines of Johnson's distant mountain silhouettes to Stockton's patterned impressions of his surroundings, art enabled them to translate the power of place. Both traveled to Europe to learn at the knee of the Modernists. Neither of them conceded to the commercial aspects of the art world. Their voices spoke in terms of the formal aspects of painting, which reflected their training. Both experimented with their own strand of Modernism that held fast to an intimate relationship with the land through abstract portrayals of nature, to which they gave concrete expression.

Isabelle Johnson, born at the turn of the twentieth century, grew up ranching with her two sisters and her brother, which meant hard work hauling rocks, cutting and baling hay, caring for sick animals or birthing cattle and sheep, taking livestock to the butcher, dehorning and branding steers, taking horses to pasture, shearing sheep, irrigating fields, mending fences, and repairing machinery. Her work ethic continued when Johnson graduated from the University of Montana in 1922 with a degree in history at a time when very few women earned bachelor's degrees. She taught history at Fromberg High School, in Fromberg, Montana, south of Billings, for two years before heading off to Columbia University for a master's degree in history. While at Columbia, Johnson took an art history course that pivoted her from history to art. She then enrolled at the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles and even began working toward a doctoral degree in political science at the University of Southern California.[9] She had a deep love of learning and, before finding art, seemed to be attracted to disciplines explaining the past and how, perhaps, to influence the future.

With art she could discern her individual point of view about Montana and her beloved ranch in Stillwater, which seemed to draw her back time and time again.[10]

She said in an interview, "I got interested enough [in art] that I went on later and enrolled for one year at Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles. I'd go to school until I was broke then I'd come back to Billings and teach until I got enough money for more school—and then I'd repeat the process."[11] She took classes at the Colorado Springs Fine Art Center in 1938 and the next year studied at the Arts Students' League in New York under the tutelage of artist George Bridgeman, who taught anatomy and figure drawing. Johnson said of that time,

> I had my first lesson in art during that year. I was doing very well in drawing.... Bridgeman worked very mechanically, and I was drawing exactly as he was and doing exactly what he did, when one day he came in and went over my work and was very appraising.[12]

Then she heard someone behind her say, "It's no wonder he thinks she's good, she's not trying to learn to draw, she's trying to do like he does." That comment cut through her like a knife. "And I suddenly realized that [being an artist meant] you weren't working for somebody else, that it was something you developed yourself."[13]

From 1945 to 1946, she returned to Columbia University, attending the painting and sculpture school. While at Columbia, in 1948, a professor invited her to attend the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine, the first year of the famous experimental art school. She accepted the invitation and, while at Skowhegan, she studied under the artist Henry Varnum Poor, who chose her as one of the twenty-five students in the country to attend Skowhegan. There, she found her own voice and established a significant style and aesthetic that would carry her forward. Johnson remembered an important moment at Skowhegan:

> [Painter] Karl Zerbe[14] asked why I didn't slice this way and that way and modernize my canvas. And so, I was having a real good time after he left, making all the lines that were in the Maine landscape into slices this way and that way and so forth down to the canvas, when for some unknown reason Mr. Poor appeared and he asked me why I was doing this, and I said because Karl Zerbe told me to. And he proceeded then with a lecture telling me that in any art, whether it was modern or any good art, there was no such thing as exaggeration.[15]

Poor told her that painters dramatized, simplified, maybe emphasized. Then he told her to study Cezanne:

> Cezanne followed completely the lines that were in nature, as did any of the great painters. And suddenly with that, he spent the whole afternoon with me, talking about various painters and the difference between real art and what you might call pseudo art, it was as though someone had pulled up a blind, and I suddenly knew I saw what I had thought I had seen many times and that was the difference between real art and that which was seemingly art. And I think that did more for me than anything else in all the years that I spent studying or in school because I still have that really as my principal precept.[16]

Poor's own work concentrated on the natural world of landscapes. His lines and style, inspired by the French Post-Modernists, incorporated strong lines and graceful movement. The lineage from Poor to Johnson can be observed by comparing Johnson's portraits of her bare winter trees and Poor's *Willows and Mountains*. Even the color palette retains similarities with dark colors and deep earthy tones. Poor also advised Johnson to return to Montana, a place he said was a desert for art and a setting where her paintings would make Montana bloom.[17] Once she finished her formal schooling, Johnson took a year off to travel to Europe and study the masters. During an interview at the age of 70, Johnson noted that she did not feel comfortable calling herself an artist, "But I'll never forget that I'm trying to become one."[18]

She taught both art and art history at Eastern Montana College from 1949 until 1961, when she returned to her ranch on the Stillwater. During those years, some of which she spent as the department head, her students found courage in the relentlessness and inspiration of her example. Artist Ted Waddell credits Johnson for his painting career. "I met Isabelle Johnson in [my] first painting class and within three or four weeks of knowing her, I decided that I didn't want to be alive and not make art. I don't think there is any way to over-estimate the influence of Isabelle on all of us."[19] Johnson, in turn, cites Waddell as one her students of whom she felt most proud. Waddell held Johnson up as a model for women during a time when it may not have been considered appropriate for women to travel and to study abroad. Waddell added, "She not only did that, but she brought it back to us. Isabelle bridged a gap between the Impressionists and Charlie Russell and brought us into modern times. It's an amazing sort of circumstance when you think about it." Waddell, close to both Johnson and Stockton, noted their courage in painting during a time when there was, at best, a lack of attention paid to modern art. "She was fiercely independent yet wonderfully formal, and fiercely private. In all the years I'd known her I'd only been in her parlor once. The rest of the time we'd sit in her kitchen."[20]

In a 1952 essay Johnson wrote for the *Montana Institute of the Arts*, she started with a quotation from philosopher George Santayana: "The subject matter of art is life as it actually is; but the function of art is to make life better."[21] In the essay she speaks to the amateur artist and, in the course of this short article, her ability to inspire shines through:

> With constant drawing and painting, with keen observation of surroundings, the acquisitiveness born of increased knowledge, only form, design, beauty can result. If the desire is to paint realistically, the painter will simplify, clarify, invent new means of making his painting more real. If the desire is to express feeling, the feeling will be greater.

One could imagine her in a classroom studio accepting her students' abilities and yet pushing

Isabelle Johnson, *Red Willows in Winter Landscape*, 1958, oil on canvas board, 15.75 x 19.75 inches.
Collection of the Yellowstone Art Museum; Gift of Isabelle Johnson Estate. Courtesy of the Yellowstone Art Museum.

them to their limits and beyond. "If the desire is to express relationships, dynamics, to symbolize, to abstract, to become more contemporary than the latest innovator, the door is open, and the amateur may pass through."[22]

Johnson considered the role of the artist as a way to connect with humanity. When asked what she learned by being an artist, Johnson answered:

> First of all you learn to see the way things really are instead of the way the photograph tells you they are because the photograph takes one view whereas the artist takes many views...I think all art is really primarily religious, not religious in the sense of Christianity necessarily, but that you have to rise above yourself and connect yourself with humanity as a whole if you're going to be successful or really do something as an artist.[23]

For her that meant to connect the viewer to her sense of place and what it meant to bond with the land in a meaningful way. This included her idea of the artist's multiple viewpoints and relationships within a painting stemming from the Cubists' perspective of portraying an object from all possible sides onto a flat surface. Cezanne, with his groundbreaking work depicting not only different perspectives but relating the spaces between the objects as well, influenced her work on many levels, especially in her use of sinewy lines that spoke to nature and, although decidedly not a Cubist, she did play with the idea of a personal perspective that did not necessarily reflect a mimetic illustration of place. For Johnson the lines in nature acted as a topography, guiding her in and around the foothills and creeks that expressed a wild and infinite dedication to her interior sense of self meshing perfectly with her exterior surroundings. In her 1958 oil painting, *Red Willows in Winter Landscape* (page 16), a hint of denim blue works its way along the top of the piece, a thread of sky laid bare. Mountain tips obscured by snow-laden clouds frame the horizon. Deliberate, hard-edged cliffs stagger across the piece, black and smoothed by erosion. Along the foothills, a rolling tumble of grays shows the viewer the ox-bowed creek bottom, silvered in frost, buffered by snow. Although the title refers to *red* willows, their salmon-pink bodies bend in the inferred wind instead. Johnson's use of colors, like the violet shadows and ocher banks, expresses a season known for its colorless limits yet conveys a hidden abundance.

Founding Director of the Yellowstone Art Center (now Yellowstone Art Museum) Terry Melton wrote:

> She has never been diverted from her sense of place. To say that she was a well-schooled painter who ranched might have only a slight edge over a well-informed rancher who painted. Therein lies the real essence of Isabelle Johnson's work. Her drawings and paintings are essences of Absarokee, the home ranch and magnificent Stillwater country of southern Montana.[24]

Melton saw her pictures as the totalities of fragments of her beloved Stillwater County: "Smells of cattle, grassland, sheep and river; sounds of the North and the Chinook; documents expressive and factual of living, growing things, knowing all is tempered by the coming of winter of the land but never the winter of the spirit."[25] He wrote

later that Johnson was so skilled in her seeing that she never had time to merely copy the landscape:

> For her, painting has become an organic growth out of the land. A genuine observer of nature, she has used objects only to lead her to the process of painting. A painter's painter, it's my guess that Isabelle thought no more than a moment about what to paint.[26]

When he thought further about the type of artist Johnson was and how to cast her work he wrote:

> Why should one make this attempt? Isabelle remained a painter of her own making, her own visionary, her own seer, her own self, and she was great enough to handle that extraordinary task. Her work is straightforward and independent of those pervasive (and oft-times attractive) influences, which beguile and turn heads of lesser painters.[27]

After Melton left Montana, he carried Johnson's artwork with him in his heart. During his service on the Oregon Arts Commission, he wrote a letter to the Smithsonian Institute enclosing the catalog from Johnson's retrospective show he curated. Melton wrote to the director, Dennis Gould, in 1971:

> Isabelle is a portion of that small slice of life which represents extremely competent people who have devoted more time to being competent than sounding public relations horns. She's a hellova painter. Montana has paid little attention to her because of their paranoia devoted to [Charles M.] Russell.[28]

Melton refers here to the overwhelming public dedication to everything Charlie Russell and Melton believed that this kind of dedication and limited appreciation had become detrimental to all genres. To Melton and Forbes, it felt like Montana's art-viewing public gave the Modernists like Johnson and Stockton short shrift.

Melton spoke about Johnson in a 1986 catalog essay: "In 1965 as director of the YAC, I purchased one of her small paintings for a new collection at that new institution. We had no funds for purchases; I cut back on other funds to buy it." He had hoped his purchase would provide a spark for the continuing purchase of work from important artists in the region. "Isabelle was by no means a new painter but was, as often the case, under-sung. Well before her exhibition at the art center she had established a personal, painterly style and has never strayed from it." In 1961 Johnson returned to her ranch for good. As Melton said, ranching was in her nature. He noted how she

> wrestled with many winters as well as celebrating those rare summers in the sweet grasslands of the north side of the Absarokee Mountains. The meadowlark calls, "Ab-sa-ro-ka" each morning, and the high country smells remind us that there are places to live beyond the gridlock.[29]

Forbes recalled that, in 1970, Mitch Wilder, director of the Amon Carter Museum of Art in Fort Worth, Texas, came to view Johnson's work. After staying for hours, he asked her to participate in an exhibition at the Amon Carter Museum. "Finally, recognition from a renowned expert.

Isabelle Johnson, *East Fiddler's Creek*, 1967, oil on canvas, 36 x 46 inches. Collection of the Yellowstone Art Museum; Gift of Isabelle Johnson Estate. Courtesy of the Yellowstone Art Museum.