



► A fire near Gladstone and Farley earlier this year inspired Strahan to paint this piece. *Special to The Range*

Feeling Fire

Artist puts drought on canvas

By **TODD WILDERMUTH**
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Bennett Strahan has traveled the world: His previous work as an architect took him to South America, Europe and Asia, as well as throughout the United States. What he describes as his “inquisitive nature” led him to the jungles of Malaysia and the Philippines, and to climb the Rockies.

But what Strahan most enjoys these days is expressing his feelings through oil paintings done at his make-shift studio on his ranch in Miami, west of Springer.

“The real challenge probably is controlling my emotions,” says the tall, bearded, 50-year-old Strahan, who left behind architectural work five years ago and returned to his Santa Fe home to dedicate himself as a full-time artist. “It’s real easy to go over the edge. Painting is a very solitary profession. If you really allow yourself to get deep within yourself, you can go over the edge a little bit. I understand why some artists are a little wacky.”

Strahan describes his work as

“I don’t paint for collectors. I paint what I see. I paint what I feel.”

Artist Bennett Strahan

“abstract landscapes.” He says his love of geometry and mathematics plays an important role in his paintings. “I really sit down and study a work before I start it,” he says in explaining that he has been told any one of his works has a “real architectural sense to it.”

“One of the scariest things in the world is a white piece of paper or a white canvas,” says Strahan. “What are you going to do with it?”

“But once you commit yourself to the idea, that’s one of the most enjoyable times in life. Once I’ve committed myself to the painting, and going with it — that is really fun.”

Strahan’s latest “idea” turned into a complete show that opens Friday at the Elan Gallery in Santa Fe. “Prairie Fire” includes numerous paintings that were inspired by New Mexico’s summer drought and fire epidemic. The abstract

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nature of Strahan's art is evident as he swirls and mixes different shades and allows one color to slide into the next, each representing the appropriate part of the landscape — dry earth, hot fire, blue sky, new growth.

While many observers may see only a blur of colors on the canvas, the artist easily explains what is represented in each painting and what was the driving force behind the idea. Strahan says he tries to capture his "feelings" and "emotions" on the paper or canvas in front of him.

"The nicest thing about art is there are no boundaries. There are no fences," he says. "The only boundaries you have in art are what you lay on yourself, those boundaries that you set up to confine your own creativity, if that's what you do with it. I love the freedom of art."

But it was a captivity to one dominating thought that brought about "Prairie Fire," which will run at the Santa Fe gallery through July.

Strahan was driving to Santa Fe with his 9-year-old daughter, Kayla, when the pair began to notice the dark smoke of the Jemez fire that burned in Bandelier National Monument near Santa Fe a couple months ago. The smoke blocked out the sunlight, and caused Kayla to wonder out loud if the sun would ever come out again.

"It had a real powerful emotional effect on me," Strahan says.

When he went into the studio the next day, "It seemed like everything I painted was fire. Instead of fighting it, I went ahead and flowed with it."

"The work is abstract and powerfully emotional, evoking the feelings that we are all experiencing this year," says Cheri Miranne, who promotes Strahan.

Strahan, who started painting "seriously" in 1960 and studied art at Alma College in Michigan, credits much of his talent to his mother, who was also an artist. Growing up in Montana and Wyoming, Strahan was often reminded by his father that "you can't make a living" at art.

Strahan is now proving that wrong.

The Midland, Mich., native moved to Miami a year ago from Santa Fe, where he had come in 1968 following his 1966 graduation from the Frank Lloyd Wright School of Architecture in Scottsdale, Ariz.,

a brief call into the army — ended by an ulcer after four days — and a stint as a campaign worker for presidential hopeful Robert Kennedy. He left New Mexico for 18 years as architecture work took him throughout the country and world. When he returned five years ago, he came back "just to paint."

And that's what he's done. He had a running start five years ago, selling about 70 paintings a year. Now, he says he averages 100 sales a year to regular collectors as far away as Seattle, Oklahoma City, Dallas, Houston and Raleigh, N.C., an area where he once lived. He and Miranne, his promoter, are even talking to an interested New York gallery, he says.

Strahan has bought a building in Cimarron he hopes to turn into his studio. On his ranch, his current studio is housed in a bunkhouse.

Although Strahan readily admits his architectural background's influence on his paintings, he also sees at least one big difference between the two professions.

"Great clients make great architects. But great collectors don't make great artists," he says. "The artist, if his work is good, it stands on its own. "You pray for collectors, but I don't paint for collectors. I paint what I see. I paint what I feel."

The Colfax County author of this poem says the words "drifted into his mind" as "pastures in the eastern portion of our county burned to sand" during this year's drought and fires.

**"Dry Country"
By Bennett B. Strahan**

No rain in Rayado, no rain in Cimarron
The Sweetwater's dried up, the Canadian's gone
Feels like this whole country is scorched to the bone
I got no place to go so I guess I'll stay on
With no water to drink between here and Raton.

The CS has windmills that pump day and night
But the water they pump is all alkali white
The night prairie's a-burning, I see its orange light
My cattle are dying and you know I just might
If it wasn't for whiskey I'd be thirsty t'night.

The devil has taken this land in his arms
He breathes on her rivers, her ranches and farms
While we pray for the storm clouds of thunder and light
It's windy as hell here and it's clear out tonight
Yeh, it's windy as hell here and there're stars out tonight."