

Scorched spring brands artist's paintings

By Sue Vorenberg
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Before the rains came, the countryside had been set ablaze by strikes of lightning, strikes of matches and a relentless sun that kept the lands tinder dry. Now New Mexican artist Bennett Strahan has found a new way to set the landscape on fire: with paint.

Strahan's new show, "Prairie Fire," features a series of paintings inspired by this spring's drought and the fires not far from his home near Cimarron.

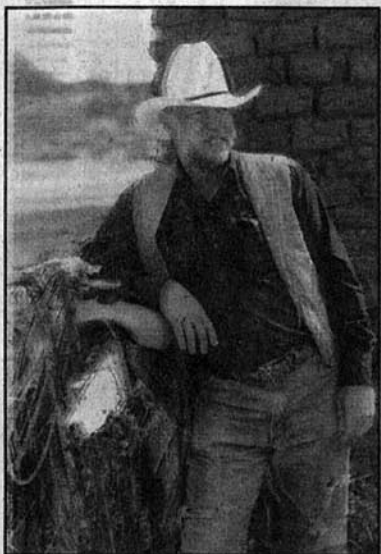
"This spring we had a number of fires over here, one of them that was just a real renegade prairie fire that started, I think, down by Roy and ripped all the way up through Farley and Colfax and on up northeast of there," Strahan said. "It covered quite a bit of ground. I went up to see it — I went through it, actually — when I was hauling some cattle over to Texas, and it was pretty impactive. It really affected me emotionally."

Strahan, who lives on a small ranch with his 9-year-old daughter, a few cattle, an old horse, "a gimp greyhound and more cats than I can count from day to day," said he was also strongly affected by the fires in the Jemez this spring, some of which continue to smolder.

"It really was a devastator," he said. "The next

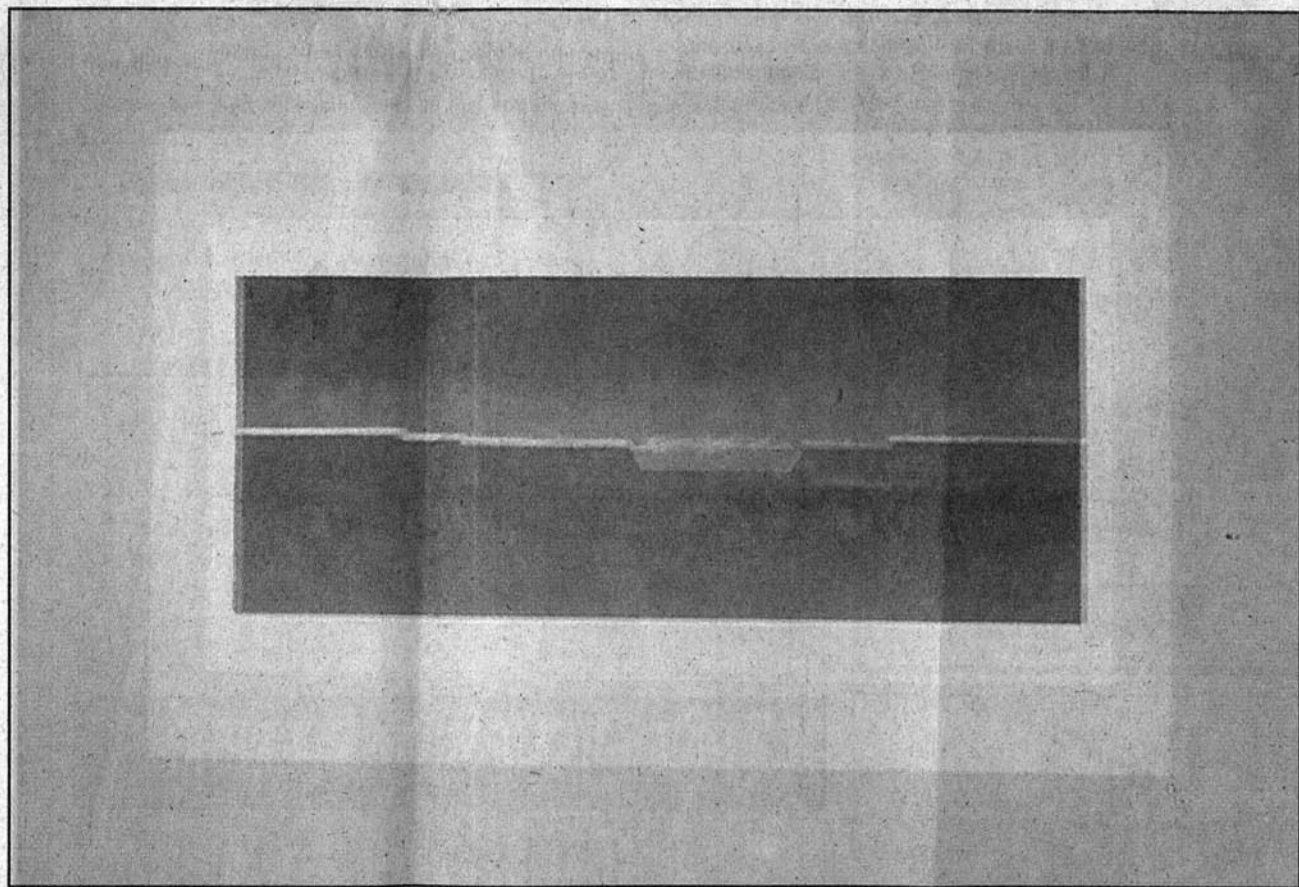
morning I went into the studio and started doing monotype prints, which are a one-of-a-kind printing process. Everything came out fire. That was kind of the beginning of all this, and I decided at that point that I ought to do all new work for this show."

Strahan has come to New Mexico after a life spent often on the ranches and the prairies of Wyoming,



BENNETT STRAHAN

Opening reception for "Prairie Fire" exhibit 5-7 tonight, Elan Gallery, 669 Canyon Road in Santa Fe. Show runs through July 30.



"Hondo Fire Sunset"

though he has traveled the world from the jungles of Malaysia to the peaks of the Rockies. Since 1968, he has lived on his New Mexico ranch on and off. Most of his work is inspired by those prairies and landscapes.

"I'm really affected by what happens around me as far as nature is concerned," Strahan said. "I'm really tied to the earth. The earth and the sky. I have a real strong feeling about what nature is. A lot of the work that I do is based on just that pure beauty of nature, and there are seldom ever any other elements in the paint-

ings — just all nature in a relatively abstract format."

Most of Strahan's paintings are oil-based. He uses a variety of processes, including monotype, which is performed with a hand-rolled etching press. It uses different sized Plexiglas or copper plates, which are passed through a press with paper. The paper lifts most of the ink from the plates, which, because of their various sizes, causes what Strahan calls a dimensional effect.

Please see **STRAHAN/B6**

...Artist paints drought, fires

STRAHAN from B1

"They do have a sense of architecture to them," Strahan said of the paintings. "I come by that quite honestly."

As he has come by architecture. He is a graduate of the Frank Lloyd Wright School of Architecture. He has been a professional architect, doing everything from historic restoration to design. He also occasionally teaches architecture at the University of New Mexico and other universities. He has lectured and taught architecture and art all over the world.

And he has written country songs.

"I wrote in Nashville for a year," Strahan said. "And I've had luck with several hits in Europe — they like Western music. It's kind of cowboy poetry, I guess, more than anything else. It relates to the life that I grew up in and the life I'm living now."

Sounds like a pretty diverse guy. But Strahan said he thinks his various professions all have a similar origin.

"I think it all comes from the same place," he said. "They all come from

exactly the same place: the architecture and the creative side of it, the art and the creative side of it and the poetry and the creative side of it. They all come from that same center of one's self that you share with other people and you get from someplace else."

Many of the titles of Strahan's works in "Prairie Fire" come from a cowboy poem he wrote during the fires. It helped to further inspire him with his paintings.

"The poem came to me about a week after I started the painting series," he said. "I was sitting out on the front porch looking out across the prairie and it was just dry and I thought, 'Gee whiz, this is really something.' And there was the fire in the distance and I just went in and started righting the poem. It was one of those things that just came out."

But although songwriting and architecture still inspire his work, Strahan says painting is his true love.

"(Architecture) doesn't have the freedom that painting does," Strahan said. "There are no borders. The

only boundaries that you have in painting are those that you lay on yourself."

The freedom Strahan feels while painting is the most valuable aspect to him personally, he said.

"Freedom, real freedom, freedom of mind — nobody telling you what color to use, nobody telling you what canvas to use or how to stretch it," he said. "It's a solitary art form. Right now, I just really am enjoying the solitude out of it. The time to really get into yourself — it's almost a meditation form."

Strahan said that while painting he likes to imagine himself in the histories of the landscapes he feels so drawn to.

"I think a lot, when I'm painting, of the thoughts and the feelings of the people who traveled (the Santa Fe) Trail and the people, the natives who lived there, what they saw during those days," he said. "You can still get feelings out in those areas because there's just not that much humanity there."

Those connections really come out

in his work, Strahan added.

"It's real emotional. Some of my paintings are a bit haunting in that regard," he said. "I try to put that in there. That haunting feeling that the first travelers who came across there must have felt like, 'What's over the next hill? What's over the next rise? And you can't tell.'"

Despite his success as an architect and songwriter, Strahan said it's the painting that has always kept him going.

"I've never left painting since I started," he said. "It's really been my joy, my passion. It's always been there, not in the back of my head, it's been right there next to everything."

The rains have come to the prairie. But Strahan's success and recognition as a painter seem to have caught fire.

"Somebody once told me this: Americans don't recognize their artists until they're fifty years old or gray-haired, whichever comes last," he said. "And I've got both, so I ought to be ready."