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Supper Time (detail; acrylic, 48x60) by Don Tiller

A Cultivated Order

If only life and painting were as simple as **Don Tiller's** acrylic landscapes make them look.

■ By Deborah Secor

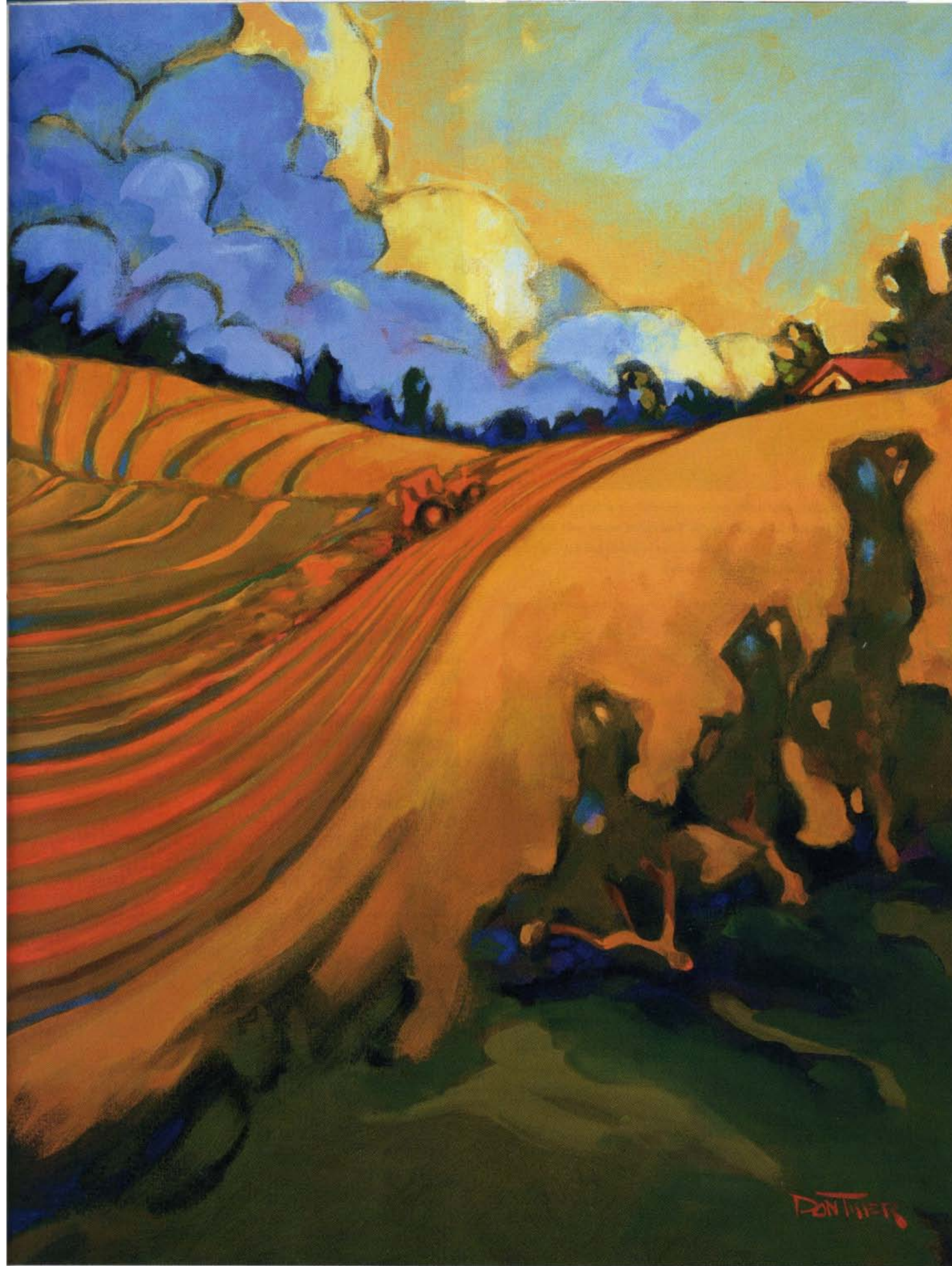
Furrow-lined hills undulate colorfully across the canvas. Swaying cypresses and warped fences line patchwork fields. Birds soar through a perfect-day sky, while a lone car follows a curved road toward a Monopoly-style house. Entering one of Don Tiller's paintings always evokes a smile.

Tiller's fertile imagination reaches back to his youth when he worked on his uncle's South Dakota cattle ranch. "In the summers we made hay and cultivated corn. Someone would drop me off in the morning, and I'd work hard all day, but I have good memories of those rolling hills. I'm still drawn to the earth, and I'm intrigued with man's attempts to impose order on nature," says Tiller. "I love the smell of tilled soil and freshly mown hay. A friend once said, 'I want to live where Don paints.' That says it for me."

Ironically, the idea of depicting bucolic subject matter came to Tiller as a fluke. "I was experimenting with acrylics," he says, "and had created two paintings with colorful abstract vertical lines going from top to bottom. I was disappointed not to have pictures accepted for a show, so in my frustration I loaded a brush and cut the top third of the painting

The name *Blue Trees Laughing* (at left; acrylic, 28x36) derives from Tiller's struggles during the painting process: "The trees seemed to laugh at my attempt to depict them properly." *Field Day* (at right, acrylic, 36x28) brings to mind fields of seemingly endless rows.

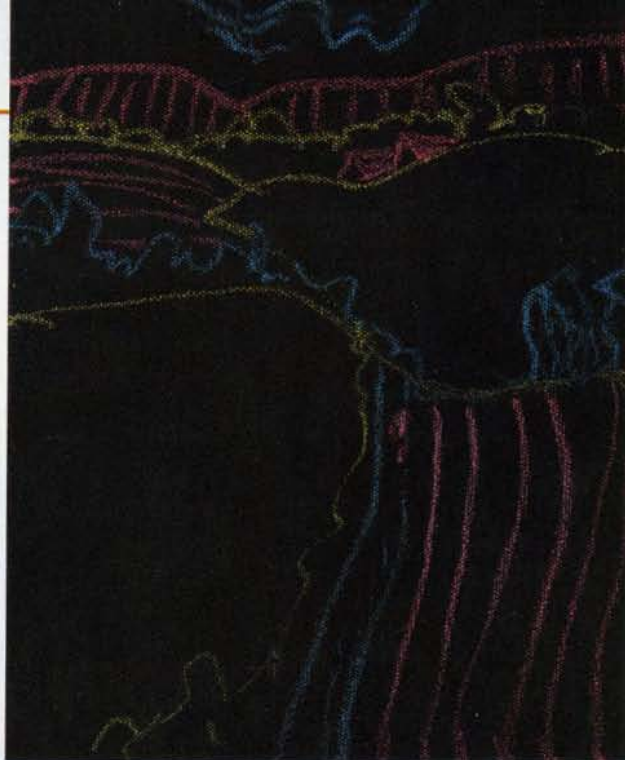
■ **Deborah Secor** is an artist and writer living in Albuquerque, New Mexico.



Step by step

■ By Don Tiller

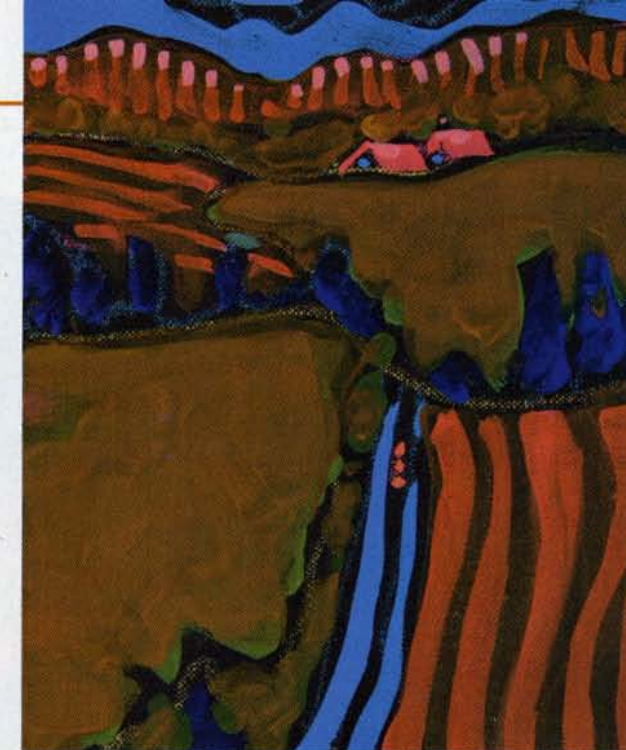
Each step in this demonstration is painted on a separate canvas, so the shapes and lines vary from one step to the next.



I start with a pastel line drawing on a canvas covered with black gesso. My compositions come either directly from my memory or from my sketchbook.

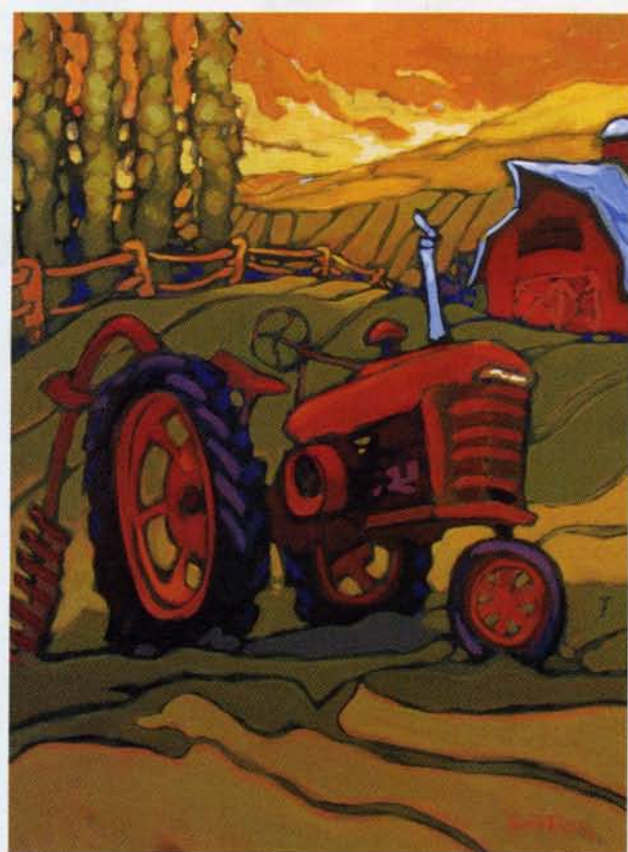


Next I block in the shapes with bold colors. Getting this initial color selection right is important because it will later allow me to achieve my desired final glazing and layering results.



I begin the layering and glazing process using transparent yellow iron oxide for the warm areas and cobalt blue—thinned with a glazing medium—for the shadows and cooler areas.

Demonstration continued on the next page



with a bold horizontal stripe of color. I added a few more colored stripes, stuck in a couple of funky trees on the horizon line and added a sketchy sky. When I stepped back to look, the remaining vertical stripes on the bottom two-thirds of the painting reminded me of the windrows of hay back on the ranch. That was my inspiration."

"My paintings look simple," says Tiller. "That's the goal—but I spend a lot of time getting the balance I want." One painting may have as many as 20 or 30 layers. Rollicking lines not only add charm to



In the summer of 1957, Tiller spent many hours in the saddle of a tractor similar to the one in *My Summer Ride* (above; acrylic, 48x36). "After the hay is cut and put into bales or stacks, the fields still have a pattern—it's just flatter than before the harvest," Tiller says of *After the Harvest* (at right; acrylic, 28x36).

Tiller's work but also unite the elements of his paintings. The unifying secret is his underpainting, composed of three layers of black gesso. This underpainting remains partially visible as Tiller adds his layers of acrylics—glazing and scumbling colors to achieve a warm glow. The style is reminiscent of batik, an art form that intrigues Tiller, though he's never tried it.

Originally an oil painter, Tiller switched to acrylics about four years ago. "I struggled with acrylics at first, trying to make them do what oils do," he says, and then adds wryly, "The advantage of acrylics is that they dry fast. The disadvantage is that they dry fast." With his multilayering technique, the advantages of fast-drying paint won out. The nature of acrylics pushes Tiller to move quickly, but he moves with assurance. Tiller once asked a fellow painter what he did with paintings that didn't work. "He told me that he makes them work," says Tiller. "I do the same thing—that's my job."

Composing a painting can demand a considerable amount of Tiller's time. Deriving his scene from one of many 1x2 thumbnail drawings, he creates a pastel drawing over the black gesso layer. When he wants to correct or change a line, he simply erases it with a wet sponge, wiping the pastel off as if erasing chalk from a chalkboard, as he puts it. After the pastel block-in, Tiller fills in the color in a manner he amiably compares to paint-by-number, although the pastel lines show well into the course of the painting. "I paint up to the lines so that when I finally do erase the pastel, I end up with a black outline from the black gesso underlayer

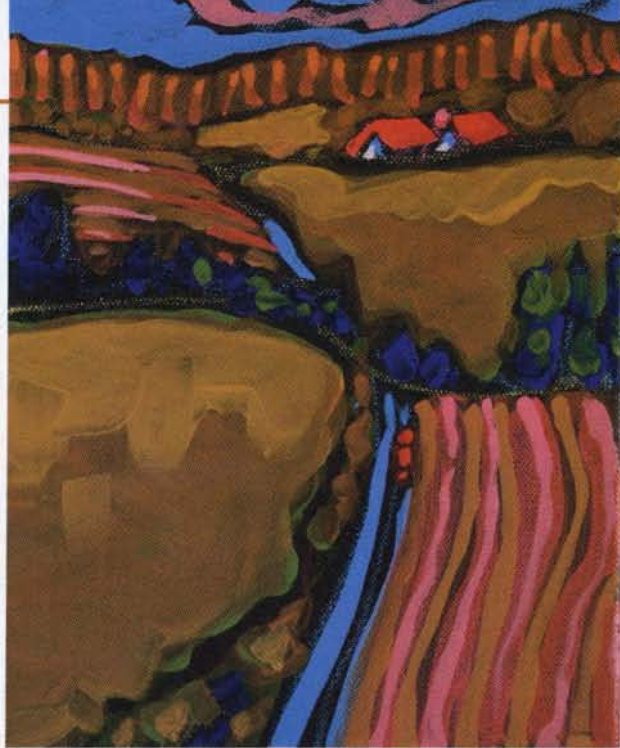
Palette of Golden fluid acrylics

- cobalt
- cerulean
- ultramarine blue
- pyrrole red medium
- pyrrole red light
- red oxide
- primary yellow
- Hansa yellow medium
- Hansa yellow light
- raw sienna
- yellow ochre

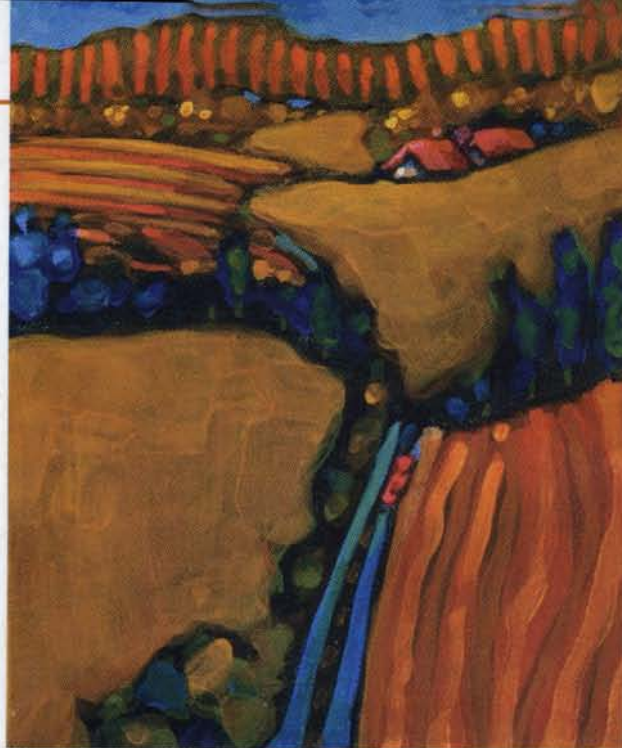
I mix all my own greens. That gives me richer color, especially with the glazes over them. —Don Tiller

that gives rhythm," says Tiller. "I soften the edges with glazes as I go along." He seldom uses any black paint, mixing a dark color instead. "I use transparent glazes to achieve continuity. I want the shapes and colors to dance together, so that they appeal to my eye intuitively." (For a demonstration of Tiller's painting process, see the sidebar Step by Step, starting at the top of the opposite page.)

Tiller stretches his own canvases from a roll of 12-ounce canvas. "I also use panels that I build out of luan plywood, making a 1/2-inch gallery wrap around the panel edge with the canvas. I like painting on these panels because I can get aggressive with my brushwork."



Using opaque colors, I continue layering and scumbling. Then I glaze with mixes of transparent colors to unify the hues.



I finish this demonstration by adding details and refining highlights and shadows. A top coat of clear semigloss medium protects the painting and unifies the sheen.

He prefers Golden fluid acrylics purchased in 16-ounce containers, which he compares to “maple syrup in a squeeze bottle.” Small plastic applesauce cups serve as paint-mixing containers, and Tiller conserves his mixed colors by working on several paintings at a time. “I’ll concentrate on one painting,” he says, “but I may mix, for example, a sky color and move on to use that mixture on two or three other paintings.”

Tiller also uses quite a bit of acrylic glazing liquid medium (usually gloss finish), mixing it with transparent yellow iron oxide or transparent red iron

oxide, which makes those colors even more transparent and retards their drying times a bit.

A stint as a sign painter taught Tiller to use a push-and-turn movement with his brushes, a technique similar to that used in calligraphy that allows him to vary the thickness of his lines. “I use flat, soft, natural bristle brushes from Daniel Smith, choosing the 1- and ¾-inch brushes most often to get different effects.”

To determine if his painting is working, Tiller checks its reflection in a mirror. “I don’t think I could paint without a mirror,” he says. “It gives a new perspective when I’m buggy-eyed from looking at my work. Things jump out and look fresh in reverse.”

Some of Tiller’s most intriguing works are his series of visually connected panels. *Neighbors: The Connection Series* comprises one image over 60 feet long on 19 different panels (see *Connection Five Right*, at right). “I’m working on a new series now that will be viewed in the round,” he says. “This sequence will go from an urban cityscape to the fields and back. The 24x48 panel size is the common denominator, but as you walk around the outside of the 12-foot-diameter circle, the paintings will make swooping curves up and down.” This series promises another merry visit to the imaginative world inside Tiller’s mind and will surely continue to bring smiles. ☺

Meet Don Tiller

If Tiller’s signature painting style seems familiar, you may be remembering his work in “**Splendid Over 60**” (*The Artist’s Magazine*, March 2008). This self-made painter took a few art classes in college and after graduation was seeing the first buds of success as a working artist, selling paintings and entering shows. That’s when the realities of providing for a wife and two children set in. Tiller left the art world for a “real job,” taking over his father’s hardware store and eventually purchasing a franchise for a Ben Franklin variety store. After 25 years in retail he moved to Port Townsend, Washington, a community highly supportive of artists, and found his way back to the full-time professional painter’s life.



To see more of Tiller’s work, go to www.artistsnetwork.com/article/don-tiller



Supper Time (above; acrylic, 48x60) conveys the satisfaction of heading home after long hours amidst the rows. *Connection Five Right* from *Neighbors: The Connection Series* (at left; acrylic, 36x28) is part of a sequence of 19 paintings comprising one image over 60 feet long that has been on display at Rive Gauche Art Gallery in Scottsdale, Arizona.

