The Eyes

Tell the Story

Walk into J. D. Challenger's Taos studio and you step back a hundred years. Beaded medicine bags hang on the walls, along with papooses, old firearms, bridles and gauntlets. The space is dominated by Challenger's large, bold paintings of Plains Indian warriors in dramatic face paint. Just as dramatic is the artist himself. Dressed in black hat ("I only take this hat off for two people, and you're not one of them," he said firmly but pleasantly when a photographer complained about shadows on his face), gambler's vest, knee-length red boots, huge concho belt buckle, shoulder length silver hair and Buffalo Bill-style beard with seven-inch handlebar mustache, Challenger lives more than a small part of his life in the Old West. Even his manner is of another age—soft-spoken and earnest but to cross him would be unwise.

As an artist, however, he's very much of this time. He uses acrylic paints, often mixed himself, to get the striking colors that characterize his work. With his paintings in great demand, he recently did his first lithograph, *Ghost Winds*, which will make his work available to a wider audience. Four new lithographs are scheduled for the next year and he's about ready to try his hand at bronze sculpture.

In the next eighteen months, Challenger has exhibitions scheduled in galleries and museums spread across much of the world, including Feathers Galleries in Scottsdale and Philadelphia, the Plains Museum in Amarillo, Texas, a Paris, France gallery and the Calgary Stampede in Alberta, Canada.

We talked with him in August when he was in the throes of preparing for his Indian Market show that Feathers was holding in Santa Fe at the Center for the Arts of the Southwest.

Above: *Spirit Rider* (detail), acrylic on canvas, 50 by 60 inches. All photos courtesy Feathers Gallery, Scottsdale.

***The General*, acrylic on canvas, 52 by 52 inches.**

How did you get involved with art?

You cut right to the quick, don't you. It's just one of those things. I've been doing it all my life, and it's been a lot of trial and error. I started with nature studies and still lifes before I found this subject matter.

How long have you been making a living as an artist?

The last four or five years have made a big difference, let me tell you. I've had to do a lot of things over the years to keep my art career together, and I'm very grateful now that things are going so well.

Indians are obviously very important to you.

I'm probably one of those people who have strong feelings and a soft heart for these people. I grew up in Oklahoma with a lot of Native American influence around me, but the turning point was moving to Taos [about 5 years ago]. Taos has always been a very magical place, and I wanted to live here. I know people all over the world, but my closest friends are Indians. I've spent a lot of time on the reservation, and the more I've been around them, their history, beliefs, their way of life . . . It's a proud, noble heritage, but more than that. For a long time I wanted to paint them, and here I began to work with several elders and medicine men, one Tiwa from Taos Pueblo, another Kiowa. As friends and as models they've taught me a great deal. So many of the stories and beliefs I'm painting have come from them. I'm trying with my work to bring out certain feelings and emotions, a certain awareness that's been misunderstood for a hundred years.

Can you put that awareness into words?

For the most part it's a kind of direction, the inner self. In some respects it says there's a better way . . .

The Indians' closeness to nature, and earth, life and death . . .

You've got it. Some of the emotions that go into my work are hard to describe. One Indian friend calls it "remembering."

***Old Glory*, acrylic on canvas, 30 by 30 inches.**

What artists have influenced your work?

It's a pretty diverse bunch. I'm a great fan of Howard Terpning, who's a wonderful painter and a great historian. I'm a fan of anyone who can paint well, from Albert Pinkham Ryder to Vermeer.

Here in your studio you surround yourself with items of the Indians' material culture—medicine bags, bead work.

Yes, mostly they're things that have been given to me, things that are special to me, made in that period between the 1860s and the 1890s that I'm so interested in. My prize possession—and I don't keep it here—is an arm patch from the 7th Cavalry [the U.S. Army unit that fought at the Battle of Little Big Horn]. It had been in this Indian's family for a long time, believe me.

The period I'm working in now is the tail end of the Indian Wars, the Ghost Dance period. It was short-lived but very powerful. It ended really with Wounded Knee in December, 1890.

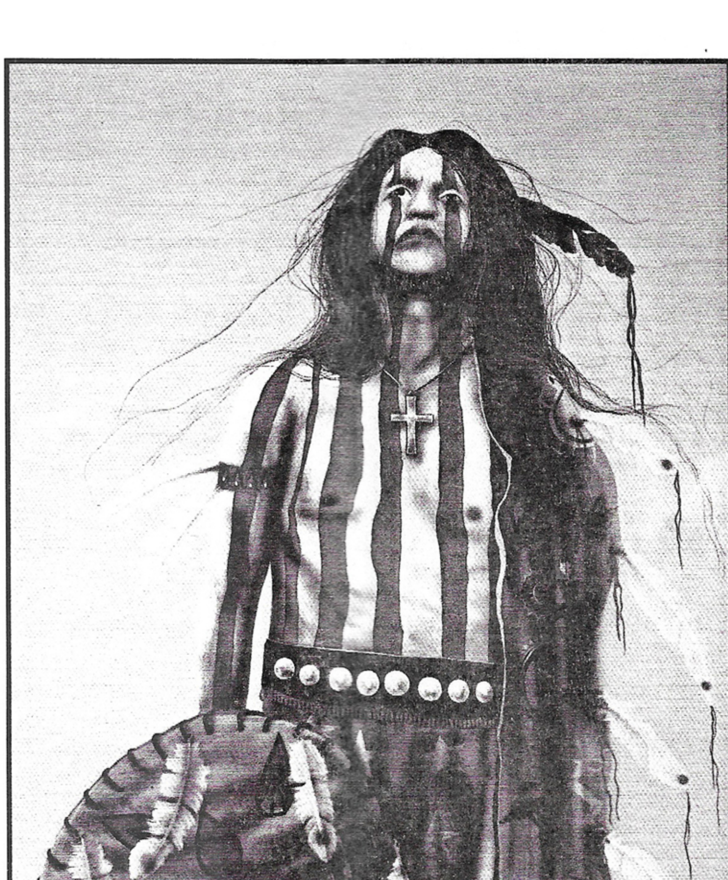
Tell me a little about the Ghost Dance . . .

It was actually started by a man named Wovoka, a half Paiute who was raised as an Anglo. It was a time in history where you had people, the Plains Indians uprooted from their homes and land, a minority in their own damn country. They were looking for hope, something to believe in, and here comes Wovoka. He believed himself to be the Indian messiah.

It was really a religion, and it consisted of a long dance—three, four or five days—and chants. The people believed that by doing this, and by wearing certain items of clothing, such as what they called the ghost shirt, and paint, things would return to the way they were. The white man would disappear, the buffalo would return, and those who had died would come back. That was all they wanted. It was a religion, not a war-like gesture.

The whole concept of this is a constant source of inspiration to me. Maybe it's a hundred years too late . . .

J.D. Challenger paints the meaning and the feeling of the Plains Indians' Ghost Dance.



***Prayer to Wankatanka*, acrylic on canvas, 36 by 48 inches.**

There's obviously a lot of symbolism in the paintings. For example, some of the faces are painted with red and white stripes some half black, half white . . .

The white/black face is a life/death face. The spots represent the white man's bullets and serve as a kind of armor. The dots on the feathers are coup dots, one for each time an Indian touches his live enemy in battle. It's a kind of psychological warfare—touching the enemy takes his power away. The figures in these paintings are wearing Ghost Dance shirts. They have symbols on them—stars, the thunderbird, animals believed to have certain powers. Feathers are important. A black feather is a death feather—the number of feathers indicating the number of men he's killed in battle. A red ribbon hanging from a feather is a victory ribbon. The red and white flag paint, on *The General*, for instance . . . the Indians believed it gave them power. They were assuming the enemies power by using his flag.

So I'm concerned about accuracy, but I also mix things up a little. I put a lot of emphasis in my paintings on the eyes. It's the eyes that tell the story. I get a lot—I learn a lot from my model's. They'll tell me about their history, and often I can just paint the look they give me when they're talking.

To change the subject, who buys your work?

It's been incredible. They're collectors, first of all. Some people look at it and are brought to tears. My work has a two-fold effect. People love it or they hate it. If they can't feel it, they walk away. Some of the collectors are from the East Coast, some from the West. They generally own a lot of fine art. I'm the new kid on the block, but they don't realize I've been 39 years getting here! SWP