

Sketches From Life GALE D. JONES

BY ROBIN LONGMAN

SINCE MARCH 1981, when he learned that he was going blind and also suffering from kidney disease, Gale D. Jones of Nebraska has regarded each day as a race against time to create his woven watercolors.

In his works, Jones strives "to take my painting beyond an image stopped at a certain second or point in time." To create his woven watercolors, Jones paints two separate watercolors identical in subject matter but varying in hue and value. Then he strips and weaves them together, using a hand-held magnifier and occasionally a photograph or projector as aids. Jones began painting his woven watercolors in 1979, while earning his BFA at Kearney State College.

Although Jones has been diabetic since age nine, his health had been fine until 1980 when he began to experience blurred vision due to the onset of diabetic retinopathy, a disease in which the blood vessels behind the retinas begin to hemorrhage. To seal off these vessels, over time Jones has undergone a total of four laser treatments. Three vitrectomies (microsurgery) have also been performed on both his eyes. More recently, Jones has had cataract surgery on both eyes. His vision, in the meantime, has stabilized.

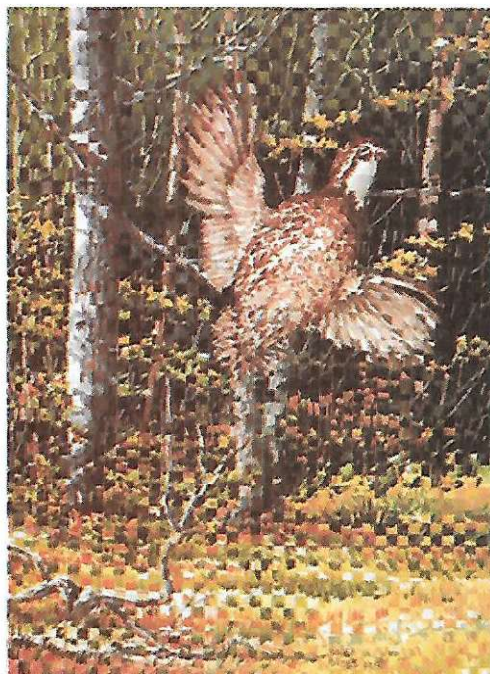
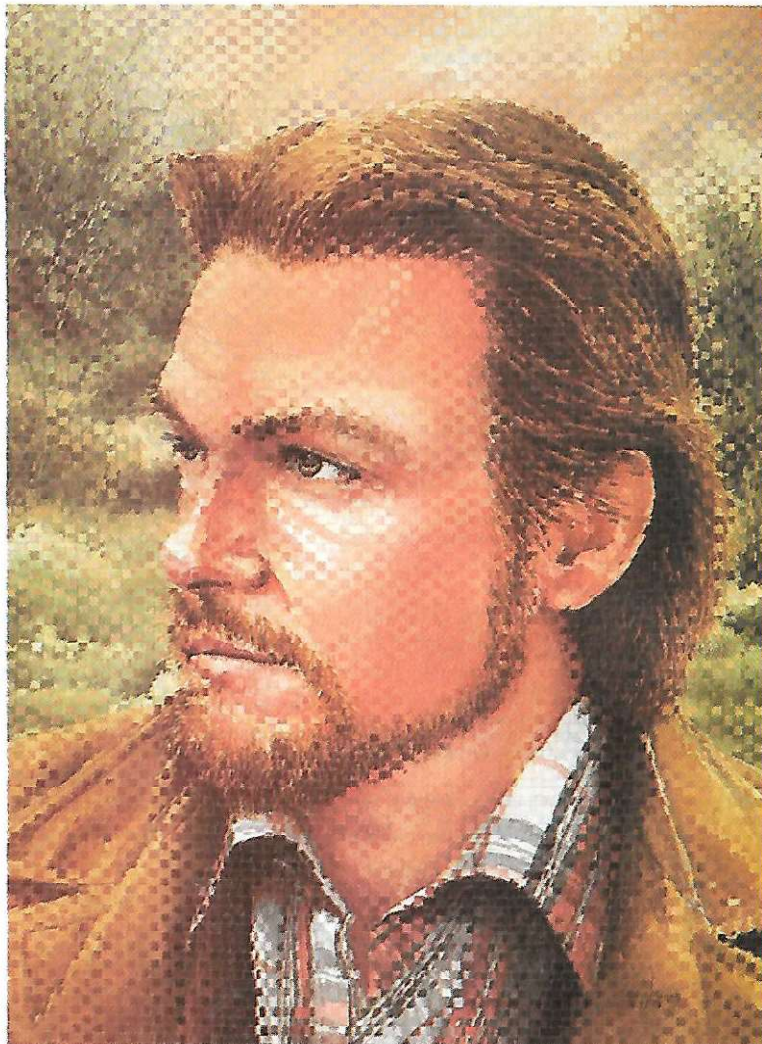
But during the period when he was legally blind—from March 1981 to the summer of 1982 (when he had his first cataract surgery on his right eye)—Jones was not sure he would ever be able to paint again. His wife, Carol, who is also an artist, got him through these rough times by encouraging him to be patient.

In February 1982, although he had a cataract in one eye, he attempted his first woven watercolor after a year of not picking up a paintbrush. Wearing an opti-visor for magnification and using a hand-held magnifying glass, Jones found "I wanted to paint like I used to, but I couldn't see like I used to!" Jones learned to compensate for his fuzzy vision in one eye and his lack of vision in the other.

One of the first woven watercolors that he completed during this time was of a bison separated from its herd, entitled *The Survivor*. This painting was accepted into a traveling show of work by visually impaired artists sponsored by the National Exhibits by Blind Artists* (NEBA). The show ended its tour last fall at the Brooklyn Museum in New York.

Jones is no longer legally blind, having had his second cataract surgery last June, but he still must compensate for the different vision in each eye (wherever the laser was used, a spot of vision was lost). Moreover, he realizes that his eyesight could worsen at any time.

But, says Jones, "as fate, it seems, closed one door to my vision, similarly, it opened another to my senses. I have been forced to slow down and view things more closely. I would like my paintings to help other people stop and see how valuable time, people, and things are to them. These are things that we all stand chances of losing in a moment's time." ●



Above: *I See . . . A Second Chance* (self-portrait), 1983, watercolor (1/4" weave), 29 1/2 x 23 1/2. Collection the artist. This work signifies the artist's reprieve from blindness and his new awareness toward life.

Left: *One Brief Moment . . . Then Gone*, 1982, watercolor (1/4" weave), 15 x 11. Collection the artist. Says Jones: "In this painting, I tried to show the beauty in such short moments as when there is a brush of grass, a flutter of wings, and then only the accelerated pounding in one's chest. . . ." Jones painted this work while legally blind.

*NEBA is located at 919 Walnut St., Philadelphia, PA 19107.