

# Gone *But Not* Forgotten

**Wendy Chidester**  
celebrates the ancestors  
of today's technology

BY GUSSIE FAUNTLEROY



Model G, oil, 36 x 32.

IT ALL started with the rain. In the summer of 1997, Wendy Chidester was using a studio in the Helper, UT, building where acclaimed painter David Dornan taught and had his own studio. She'd made an arrangement with Dornan—among her most influential instructors a few years earlier at the University of Utah—to receive weekly critiques and to deepen her knowledge by watching him work. At the time Chidester's focus was plein-air landscape and figurative art, and she was spending much of her time painting outdoors. But that was about to change.

It was raining, hard. Across the street and down a little was a large antique shop, and since she couldn't work outside that day, Chidester wandered among the shop's relics. Drawn to a blue 1950s-era camera, she pondered where it had been, what it had seen, what it had

captured on film. The shop owner allowed her to take it back to her studio to paint it while she waited for the rain to stop. As she worked, something inside her clicked. Long dedicated to painting from life, she quickly realized there were significant benefits to a subject she could arrange in her studio: "I could put a constant light on it, so the light never changed. I didn't have to worry about the weather," she says. "I could even paint at night."

Chidester returned to the antique shop many times that summer, often finding herself attracted to the heaviest, most cumbersome of antique machines—typewriters, movie projectors, cash registers with marble fronts. She loved the way the old metal looked when worn to a soft patina, the letters almost rubbed off of typewriter keys. Beyond the convenience of painting indoors, another

dimension of her work began to reveal itself: Rendering these almost-forgotten artifacts of earlier technology was a way of giving them new life. She could honor the human ingenuity and craftsmanship that had gone into them—the usefulness in a now-obsolete function, the beauty of their form.

Back home in the Salt Lake City suburb of Draper, Chidester continued with what has become her signature still-life approach: painting antique objects with reverence, almost as icons, whether individually or in groups. Her award-winning work has gained a wide and growing collector base, an indication that many not only appreciate her artistic talent but also share her admiration for well-crafted objects of times past.

**EVEN AS** a child growing up outside of Salt Lake City, Chidester was not one to



Westinghouse 4 Blade, oil, 22 x 20.



Columbia Telephone Manufacturing Company, 1894, oil, 25 x 20.

mistreat her toys or toss them aside in favor of newer ones. "I was always kind of a sentimentalist at heart," she says. "I liked imagining the stories behind old things." Now 52, she thinks back with fondness on her Mrs. Beasley doll and a windup clock that sat on her bedside table for years. She loved drawing and painting, and because her mother preferred not to get the paints out because they made a mess, Wendy naturally wanted to paint even more. Later, when her grandmother died—well before she painted her first still life—Chidester requested the oldest set of silverware, the one her great-grandmother had owned.

At the University of Utah, where she earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts in 1988, Chidester was especially inspired by two of her painting professors, Dornan and Paul Davis. The two founded the Helper Art Workshops, and in the years

following graduation, Chidester studied with both of them. When her four children were young, she painted in watercolors and acrylics—easier to set up and clean up in the midst of a busy family life. As her kids moved into their teens, she shifted to oils, and in the mid-1990s she approached Dornan about a summer internship in his Helper studio.

The experience sparked more than Chidester's radical shift in subject matter: Working intensely day and night and receiving regular critiques from her mentor, she began to solidify the skills she'd gained from Dornan and others over the years. In particular, she remembers Dornan impressing on her to not let her painting become "too precious." Be willing to destroy it and then bring it back, he advised. With his own fearless experimentation as a model, and without galleries to satisfy at the time,



### representation

**Arden Gallery**, Boston, MA; **Coda Gallery**, Palm Desert, CA; **Trove Gallery**, Park City, UT; **Mockingbird Gallery**, Bend, OR; **Miller Gallery**, Cincinnati, OH.

### upcoming show

Realist exhibit, **Gallery 19**, Chicago, IL, June 2-July 29.

Solo show, **Arden Gallery**, August 2-30.

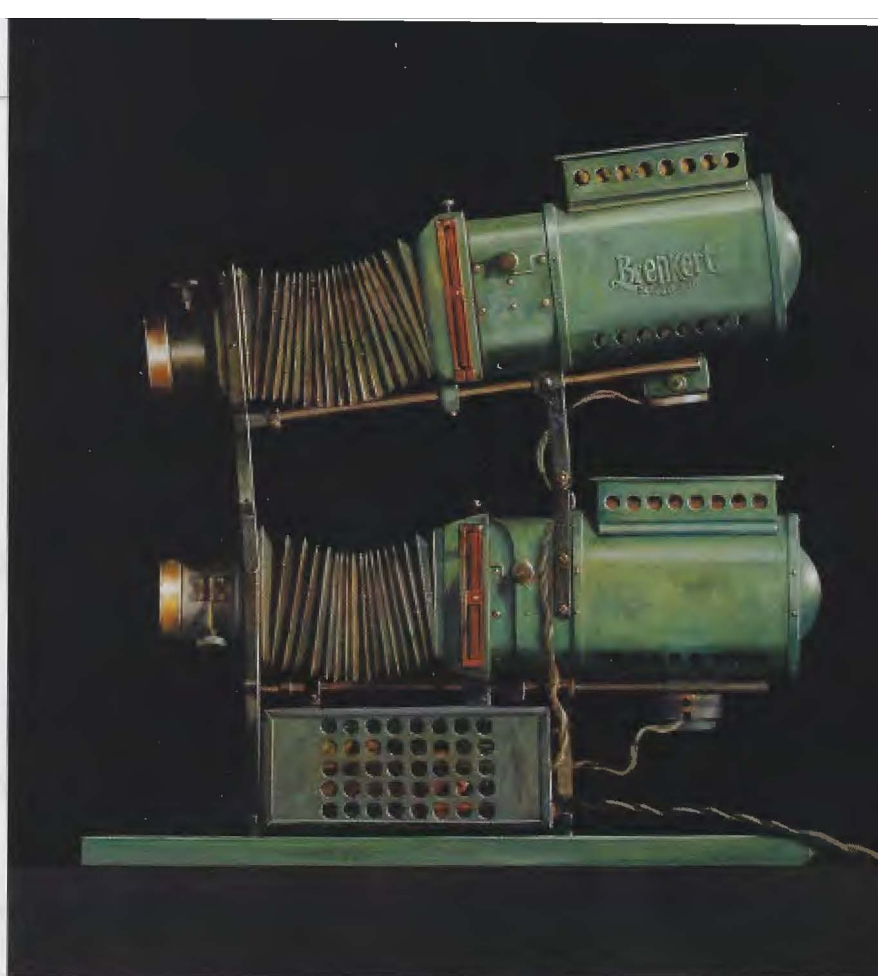
**Nest: Women Artists of Helper**, amjworks gallery, Helper, UT, August.

the younger artist was free to try things she otherwise might not—like creating still-life images of beautiful, outmoded, intriguing things.

The range of those things has expanded over the years. Along with early versions of convenience technology—rotary telephones, manual typewriters, and flash-bulb cameras—Chidester began painting old leather suitcases (*sans* wheels), treadle sewing machines, lunch pails and thermos bottles, candy tins, and sturdy old toys. BELAIR II is part of a recent series depicting 1950s-era children's pedal cars. "They're not easy to find these days, and they're fun to do," she says. "They take you back to simpler times—no motors, no batteries, nothing to plug in, just pedal and go!" Unlike plastic Big Wheels, pedal cars were metal and had the suave feeling and cool colors of the full-size convertibles of the day.

For Chidester, color is a fascinating aspect of art. When depicting objects whose colors have faded with time, she often bumps up the saturation to give them life, but not so much as to lose their sense of age and wear. In fact, returning to Dornan's admonition to "destroy and bring back," she engages a painting's surface in ways that parallel the nicks and marks well-used objects endure over time. She scratches into the paint, flicks on bits of complementary color, or applies multiple glazes, allowing glimpses of other colors underneath. An image of an old leather camera case, for example, appears as a warm, soft brown from a distance. Up close, many other hues reveal themselves. "It would be pretty boring if I just painted it brown," she says. "I enjoy making the painting surface as rich and interesting as the objects themselves."

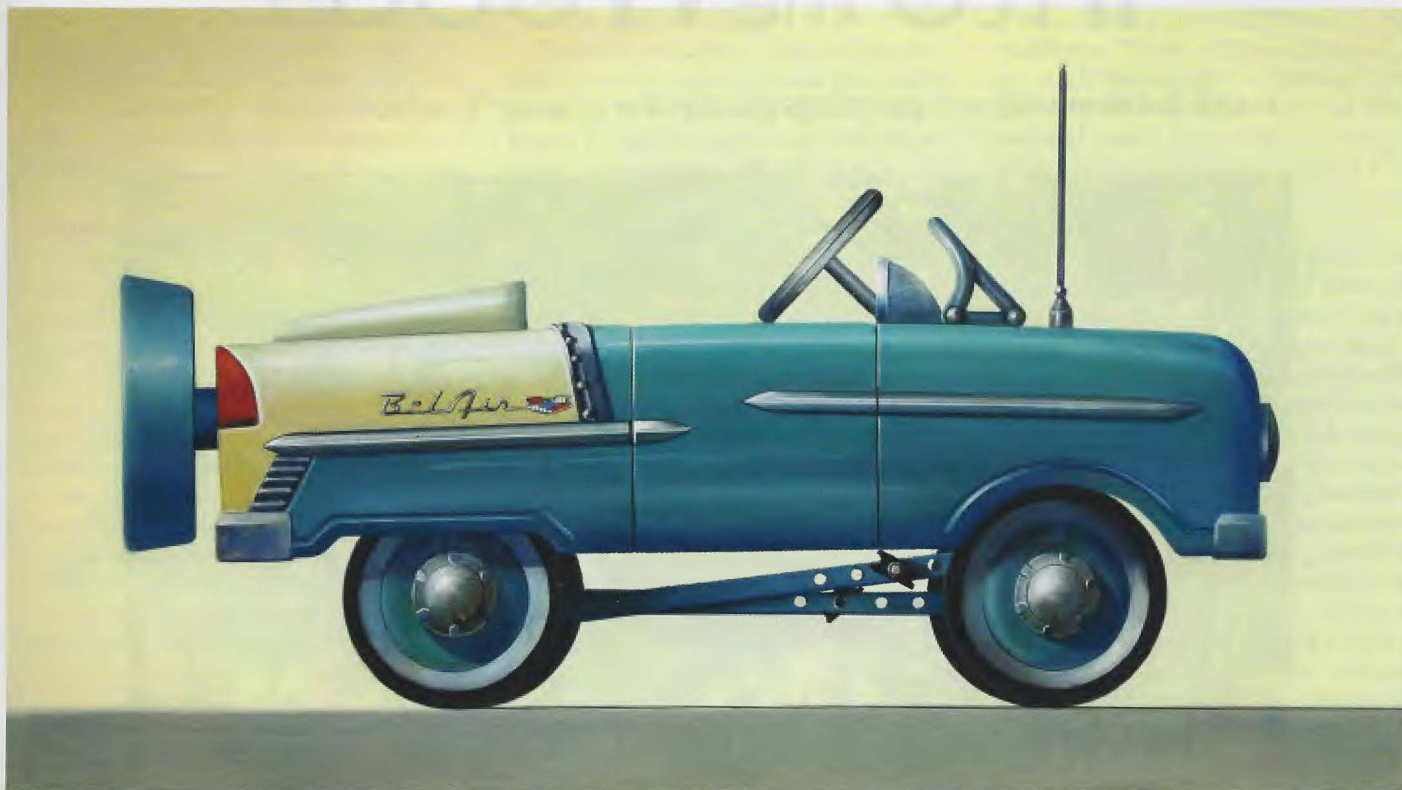
Because artifacts of early to mid-20th-century life may be tucked away on antique-shop shelves or covered with dust in attics, it can take time and persistent searching to find the most interesting ones, Chidester says. But sometimes things just come to her. People approach her, saying something like, "There's this old typewriter that was my dad's...." Perhaps Chidester's most memorable encounter of this kind was a call from Peter D'Acosta, a Texas-based collector of antique candlestick telephones dating back to the late 1800s. D'Acosta invited the



1918 Slide Projector, oil, 36 x 32.



Lenses, oil, 24 x 26.



BelAir II, oil, 27 x 48.

artist to his home to view the collection. Since she couldn't borrow or buy any of the rare and valuable telephones, she took careful, high-quality photographs. They are among the few objects she has painted from photographs.

**CHIDESTER** continues to spend time painting in Helper, especially during the summer, but these days it is in her own studio on Main Street. The quiet former mining town has attracted a number of artists and offers fewer distractions for focused studio time. At home in Draper, the artist's spacious studio is just a few steps from her house. Here the artist can paint at one of the two easels she has set up at all times. A single light source illuminates a still-life arrangement before her, and other lighting falls upon her easel and palette. The remainder of the room rests in shadow. Glass-faced display cabinets hold antique objects she has gathered over the years, while larger items are stored, appropriately, in her attic.

A few of Chidester's personal favorites have made their way into her home

décor, including a selection of antique cameras on display in the front hall. These became the subject of the painting *LENSES*, which depicts still cameras, an old movie camera, and leather cases—all stacked and facing squarely forward. "It's almost like all these cameras are taking pictures of the viewer. It puts you in the spotlight," she says, smiling. "Each one seems to have a soul or spirit. They almost come to life."

Old objects return to life in other ways as well after Chidester finds them. She dusts and cleans them and often plays with them before starting to paint, tapping typewriter keys or turning the rotary dial of an old telephone. The sounds from these venerable machines bring back long-buried memories, she says. These are sounds that younger generations have never heard firsthand. This poignant fact is reinforced when Millennials and other young viewers inquire about the subjects in her work. "How does that telephone work? Which button do you push? I tell them, well, you dial," she says.

This loss of collective memory is one reason the objects in Chidester's paintings are carefully arranged, dramatically lit, and face us squarely. It's her way of according them the deep respect and appreciation she believes they deserve for their years of service, inherent beauty, and their roles in our cultural history. "I'm placing them in a position where they demand attention," she says. "Still lifes of the past were often pretty quiet. But these speak a little louder. They almost have a voice, like, 'Hey! Remember me?'" ❖

Colorado-based Gussie Fauntleroy writes for a variety of art publications and is the author of three books on visual artists. Learn more at [www.gussiefauntleroy.com](http://www.gussiefauntleroy.com).

See more of Chidester's work at [www.southwestart.com/featured/chidester-w-jul2017](http://www.southwestart.com/featured/chidester-w-jul2017).