The Nature of realism

Lauren Anne Maines

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THE NATURE OF REALISM

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December 1, 1988
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Date: 12/12/88

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THE NATURE OF REALISM
"The story of art is like a golden beach upon which the waves never cease to break. One powerful wave rushes far up the sand carrying all before it, followed by many wavelets. Then comes a second strong wave surging up with all the force of the ocean behind it. And again, the smaller ones come in its wake."  

Bernardine Kielty
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Reflecting upon my studies at Rochester Institute of Technology, I wish to acknowledge those individuals from whom I have drawn as sources of encouragement, support and wisdom.

The time, energy and money invested toward my artistic endeavors by my parents, grandparents and brothers is greatly appreciated. I would also like to thank Patrick, Jennifer, Suzanne and Doreen for their advice and concerns during the course of my studies. Without the assistance of all these people, my education would not have been possible.

Many teachers I have encountered over the past several years have left subtle, but distinguishable, marks upon my canvas. Philip Bonarth has spent many hours in my studio. He has often encouraged me to investigate the works of various artists. More often than not, his suggestions have led me to discoveries which have profoundly affected my own artistic development. I have learned much from Phil's astute observations and constructive criticism.

I would like to thank Jack Slutsky, another faculty member, for his guidance and shared wisdom during the past five years. He has, on numerous occasions, offered invaluable advice about my educational and professional plans.

To give enough thanks to Ed Miller is a difficult task. During my years as an undergraduate, as well as graduate student, I have come to respect and admire him as a teacher, an artist and a friend. His objective criticism has helped me to identify my artistic weaknesses and to overcome them. During the past five years, each week, I looked forward to his classes. His critiques were rich
sources of historical facts, technical and artistic inspirations, thought provoking comments and passionate debates. Needless to say, never was a single moment dull. Ed has taught me how to appreciate art as well as execute it. For all this, I am greatly indebted.

I wish to thank all of the faculty members and those of my peers, too numerous to list, for their guidance and encouragement. I am sincerely grateful.
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This thesis is dedicated to my brother B.J.

"When a world of disappointment and trouble descends on one, if one doesn't turn to despair, one resorts to either philosophy or humor."¹

Charles Chaplin
This thesis begins first with a concise examination of the historical significance of still life painting in direct relation to the body of work I have created during the past two years. Although the origins of still life painting reach far back into the chronicles of art's earliest history, emphasis is placed in chapter one on American still life painting since the eighteenth century. It is this period, in particular, I find to be the most fascinating, and I credit it as an impetus to my own artistic development.

Chapter two deals directly with a select group of artists whom I feel have had a great influence upon my own work. I came into the graduate program two years ago relatively ignorant of the lives and works of these great men. As I began to search for answers to the technical and visual problems which I encountered early on, I discovered many elements of common interest I held with their work. I studied their sketches, drawings and paintings and directed my readings to further develop my own artistic ideologies. I also learned much about the technical and compositional aspects of painting and drawing in general. Therefore, I feel compelled to include these artists as a vital part of my thesis.

The compositions of my thesis paintings and drawings, the specific techniques I have employed, and the atmosphere in which I have worked during the past two years are the concerns of the final chapter of this thesis. I have chosen to trace the developments and transitions for the most part in chronological order. These changes have played a most important role in my search for personal expression, style and creative growth.
In this thesis the term *still life* refers to those works which are renderings of
placed objects and controlled light sources, void of any implication of movement.
The terms *realism* and *realistic* refer to the faithful rendering of objects creating
a three dimensional affect upon a two dimensional surface. These terms are not
exclusive to illusionism, but they do not embody renderings which are flat,
blatantly graphic or two dimensional in perspective.
"A warm hand / clasp, and push ahead. The visual sense, as it develops in us by dint of study, teaches us to see."³

Paul Cezanne
The origins of still life painting can be traced as far back as the renderings of food and symbolic objects upon the walls of Egyptian tombs and temples. But, traditional easel still life paintings have their most direct derivation from the still life paintings done by the ancient Greeks. However, there exists little record of these ancient works.

Although still life painting was conceived early in the annuls of art's history, it is a subject which has been, for the most part, disregarded in the shadows of other more popular artistic themes and schools of thought. Art historian, William H. Gerdts, states:

"In the past, still life was not accorded the respect enjoyed by portraiture, landscape, genre, figure painting, and history painting because critical estimation so often branded it as merely mutative and not idealistic. It is not surprising, therefore, that the still life has been the subject of far less analysis and publication than any other major thematic branch of American painting."4

I found this lack of documentation to be true not only with regard to the history of
the American schema, but even more so in the study of art history, in general.

During the Middle Ages, the art of still life existed only as a secondary accessory to other formats, such as religious paintings. Few still life paintings of the fifteenth and sixteenth century exist today. Those which do are relatively simple studies and are small in size.5

Still life painting resurfaced again during the seventeenth century throughout Europe. There exists today works completed during this period by Dutch, Flemish, French and Spanish artists. Although this movement was somewhat idiosyncratic in nature, there are various stylistic developments which can be attributed specifically to each country. The Dutch still life paintings are embodied with painstaking detail. The Flemish work is more opulent and sensual. The Spanish still life paintings are more mystical and objects are arranged for their symbolic value as well as their descriptive characteristics.6

English artists, for the most part, did not encroach upon the rebirth of the independent still life during the seventeenth century. Their concerns were primarily for portraiture and landscapes. This continued throughout the eighteenth century as well.

The French played an important role in the development of the still life during the eighteenth century. Artists, such as Chardin, began to concern themselves with the formal arrangements of still life painting, rather than merely concentrating on their technical accomplishments.7 Interesting compositions and exquisite textural surfaces began to appear in still life paintings during this
period. One of my favorite still life paintings, which exemplifies this mastery, is Jean-Baptise-Simeon Chardin's *Kitchen Still Life*, cr. 1730 - 1735. The simple household objects of this painting are rendered with an unpretentious dignity and a sense of reverent beauty. The textural quality is rich and quite extraordinary. The spatial relationships of the objects, as well, are perfectly balanced.

The appearance of American still life painting is generally considered to have taken place during the late eighteenth century. Matthew Pratt, an artist from Philadelphia, is credited by many art historians to have executed the earliest recorded still life in America. However, it was that of the Peale dynasty to first break through the rooted English traditions of portraiture and establish still life painting, first, as a somewhat radical genre, and, later, as an influential professional pursuit. The Peale family was also active in the Philadelphia area. Their presence helped to establish Philadelphia as the cultural center of the American art world early on.

James Peale, (1749 - 1831), brother of the then established portrait painter Charles Wilson Peale, and Raphaelle Peale, (1774 - 1825), Charles Wilson's eldest son, were the first major forces of American still life painting. Their paintings were faithful to the realism of the Dutch and the Flemish whom they studied. Their subjects were most often simple objects such as fruit, bowls and kettles. These objects were drawn precisely and deftly. Their light sources were usually brought in from one side and created flowing luminosity throughout their paintings. The textures of their still life paintings were rich and appealing.
and their surfaces were tangible.

The work of these two men, in particular, set an example for later artists. The new study of still life painting grew and expanded in Philadelphia by breaking the old limner traditions and developing new possibilities of creative expression.

The interest in still life painting established by the Peales has been carried down through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by many artists, most notably, William Harnett, John Peto and the contemporary artist, William Bailey. But the concept of still life painting has been expanded and developed via the various movements that have taken place since the eighteenth century. For example, artists such as Picasso, Cezanne and Van Gogh have utilized the format of still life to investigate other less primordial ideologies. The boundaries of the traditional still life have been extended, and new concepts have found fertile soil to germinate. Yet, still life painting has never enjoyed the limelight of any one movement in particular. It has, however, been a format which has been visible throughout the transitions of different periods. It is a somewhat eclectic art study, and I am most fascinated by its very nature.
"To appreciate and comprehend a painting, it is necessary not only to look at it with attention, but to have some familiarity with its place in the history of art. A painting, after all, is not merely the product of its creator's imagination and skill. Painters throughout history have been influenced by earlier painters, as well as by religious, political, economic, scientific and social events of their time.”

Bernardine Kielty
To enrich my own artistic experience, over the past few years, I have turned to the study of various great artists. Included in this chapter are the artists with whom I have found the most areas of common interest. In the work of each artist I have discovered specific qualities and techniques which I attempted to emulate in my own work. This chapter is not intended to be a historical survey of the lives and complete works of these endeared artists, rather, it is meant to be an analysis of those specific qualities and techniques which have served me well these past two years.
Jan van Eyck
cr. 1385 - 1441

The Flemish painter Jan van Eyck was the first known artist to successfully use oil as a medium for pigments instead of egg. This method, which he perfected, enabled him to carefully control brilliant colors, tangible textural surfaces and precise elements of detail.

One of Van Eyck's most well-known paintings is *Wedding Portrait*, 1431. Many stylistic aspects of this painting appeal to me, and I often refer back to its realism as a source of inspiration. In this painting, the angular folds of the subjects' gowns seem almost as though they had been carved out of stone. There is a sculptural sense about the manner in which Van Eyck rendered these cloths. He accomplished this effect by utilizing dramatic transitions of light and dark tones within each fold. I often attempt to achieve a similar sculptural effect when rendering cloth or tapestries in my own paintings.

The deft applications of profuse colors and rich tones of Van Eyck's paintings are enhanced by his extraordinary sense for detail. The opulent browns and ochers, set off against the brilliance of his reds, blues and crisp whites, create interesting tensions and a profound sense of realism. This I find to be one of the most interesting aspects of his artistic style.

I am also intrigued with the painstaking detail to which Van Eyck committed himself in all of his works. He paid as much careful attention to the smallest details of the secondary objects in his compositions, as to that of the details of the primary subjects. Although I do not attempt to subscribe to a continuity of detail in the same manner, I do find inspiration in his mastery. By focusing my
attentions on Van Eyck’s command of detail I have been able to promote my own conscious ability to render objects faithfully, as well as, heighten my own senses of color relationships.
Caravaggio was born Michelangelo Merise in the village of Caravaggio in Northern Italy. Although he studied Venetian art during the height of the Renaissance, his realism was different than that of his contemporaries. He was the first artist to depict religious scenes in terms of the common man and prosaic situations. Rather than idealize his art, he chose to paint his subjects in a manner of nature that he knew to exist. His models were people from the streets; his scenes were ones which took place in taverns, stables and similar atmospheres. He translated these people and these places into astonishing religious themes. He truly added new meaning to the word realism.

It is Caravaggio's painterly style, however, with which I am most concerned. The first of his works with which I became acquainted was The Calling of Saint Matthew, cr. 1597 - 1598. This painting, in particular, has left a powerful image in my mind. I am in awe of his convincing chiaroscuro. Certain areas of this painting are bathed in a strong, warm light, and other areas fall in and out of shadows. The contrast creates a tension of sorts which heightens the sense of drama and realism. However, this dramatic play of light and dark is not merely a theatrical device; it also serves well as a means of establishing spatial relationships and balancing the composition. It is most effective. I often incorporate dramatic chiaroscuro in my own work to create similar effects.
Last year I traveled to New York City. Acting upon the advise of Philip Bonartha, I made a stop at the Metropolitan Museum of Art to view a retrospective of the Spanish artist, Zurbaran. Walking through the halls, where his majestic paintings hung, I found myself to be in complete awe. Like Caravaggio, Zurbaran was a master of chiaroscuro. His monumental portraits of monks, bishops and saints are unpretentious and mystical in one sense, yet profoundly realistic and somber in another. These very characteristics intrigue me. I have spent many hours studying his techniques.

Zurbaran often employed the use of a stark light cast down and across his subjects. It was never a flooded or diffused light source. Often the shadowed side of his subjects, as well as the backgrounds of his paintings, are of a somber darkness. This heightens the mystical quality of his paintings. The compositions often also seem barren and void of any unnecessary detail. He seems, rather, to have concentrated his whole being into rendering the principal subjects of his paintings.

In my eyes, above all else, Zurbaran was a master of depicting cloth. The flowing robes and cloaks of his religious subjects were treated with a reverent dignity. Every fold his brush created seems to be raised off the canvas. Never before have I seen such tangible images in a painting. I distinctly remember approaching a small painting of a white veil, at the retrospective, convinced that it was a piece of cloth tacked onto a canvas. The image was so tangible and its presence was so strong, that I literally could not believe my own eyes. I feel his
mastery, in terms of rendering cloth, is unmatched by any other artist of whom I know, contemporary or historic. Therefore, I have studied Zurbaran's work carefully during the past year. The paintings I have investigated have had a profound effect upon the development of my own renderings of cloth. I have carefully studied various techniques he employed and the colors of his palette and have tried to emulate some of his stylistic qualities into my own work.
Jacques Louis David
1748 - 1825

David was a neoclassical painter during the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Empire. Although his ideology was that of neoclassicism, he often created powerfully realistic images reminiscent somewhat of the works of Caravaggio and Zurbaran. Their influence can be distinguished in David's painting, *Death of Marat*, 1793. The dramatic chiaroscuro and sharply cast shadows create a realistic drama much like those of Caravaggio's own paintings. David's stark observations and the neutral space above and behind the figure also seem to suggest Zurbaran's style.

The compositional aspects of this painting also interest me a great deal. David utilized the foreground to its fullest dramatic potential. The compactness of the figure and its surrounding space played against the somber reverence of the background heightens the dramatic realism. The textural quality of this space is also quite extraordinary in its realistic approach. The conscious manner in which he utilized the compositional spaces of his paintings has been influential upon the development of my own work. I have studied his work carefully to better understand the importance of placement and balance within my own compositions.

Although David is by no means one of my favorite artists, I do admire his technical achievements. He was an artist of great ability, but I do not think his artistic ideologies allowed him to ascertain his full creative potential.
Jean Augustus Dominique Ingres
1780 - 1867

Ingres was a neoclassicist painter. His conservative ideology defended the academic position that drawing was superior to color. He once said;

"Anything that is well drawn is well painted."12

Although he considered himself to be a draftsman first and a painter second, I was first attracted to his paintings. The rich tones, extraordinary colors and palpable textural qualities, characteristic of his paintings, captured my attention. For example, Ingres most notorious painting, Grande Odalisque, 1814, reveals his deft ability to create sculptural forms and tangible surfaces. He achieves these effects, not only with his descriptive lines, but, also, with precisely balanced color and tonal relationships. These relationships create the polished surface and the volumetric sense of the elegant figure. The formal treatment of rich tones played against the cooler tones of green and blue creates opulent superior areas of texture and convincing space. I find his sense of color and his handling of tonal relationships to be very appealing and masterfully executed.

I also investigated further and discovered, to my delight, the exquisite pencil portraits also for which Ingres was famous. I enjoy the subtle but striking characteristics of his drawings. His lines seem very precise and confident. The flow of his contour lines and the rhythmic beauty of his shading techniques are graceful and unpretentious. I have spent much studio time during the past two
years drawing the figure. I utilized my study of figure drawing as an impetus to the development of the still life paintings I executed during this period. Through an intensive investigation of the very nature of volumetric forms of the figure and spatial relationships of the figure in its atmosphere, I was able to relate observations of these studies to certain compositional aspects of my paintings. Ingres' pencil drawings served me well as sources of technical information, as well as artistic inspirations while I developed my studies of figure drawing. He was a master of portraiture, as well as superb colorist. Unlike David, I feel Ingres consciously reached for and developed his creative potential to its fullest possibility, as well as mastered his technical skills.
Courbet's realism, like Caravaggio's, was fundamentally based upon his own direct awareness of what existed in nature and his own personal experiences. He once claimed;

"I cannot paint an angel because I have never seen one!"13

Courbet's unconventional realism is of some interest to me, but his distinct style and his techniques interest me the most. The surface qualities of his paintings are profoundly rich and textural. Courbet utilized a palette knife, most often, to lay down heavy impasto. Although I did not rely on the use of a palette knife often, during my first year as a graduate student I did experiment with scrumbling techniques. I referred back to Courbet's paintings to better understand the effect scrumbling could achieve.

Courbet also employed a dramatic chiaroscuro. In a relatively direct manner, he simplified the planes of his composition. His chiaroscuro complimented this simplification. I also find this to be of interest. Early on in my studies I became intrigued with the possibilities of creating tensions between three dimensional and two dimensional planes within my paintings. Although my painterly development migrated towards a continuity of three dimensional planes and volumetric surfaces, I did find much interest in the investigation of Courbet's work and his use of dramatic contrasts of light..

The spatial clarity and the rich colors of his palette personified his unique
sense of realism. Examples of these techniques are found in my favorite painting of Courbet's, *The Stone Breakers*, 1849. The richness and the distinctly concise rendering of the figures, as well as the structure of this painting, creates a vibrant and exciting composition. The textural qualities of this painting are also very tangible and uniquely expressive. Courbet was truly a master of an aphoristic realism.
James Peale and Raphaëlle Peale  
1749 - 1831  
1774 - 1825

Two of my favorite artists are James Peale and Raphaëlle Peale. Their love for the art of still life painting, their dedicated efforts to establish it as an acceptable artistic pursuit in America, and the body of work they completed endear them to me. Their work has been a consistent source of inspiration, technical information and simple aesthetic pleasure.

The Peale's still life paintings are reminiscent of the Dutch and Flemish realism of the sixteenth century. The Peales rendered their paintings with brilliant and opulent colors. Their sense for color was quite extraordinary. They often achieved a realism of precision and clarity.

Raphaëlle's still life paintings were usually simple arrangements of common objects such as fruit, bowls and vessels. He usually arranged these objects on a ledge or shelf dropped parallel to the picture plane. This is a technique which I have adopted. I include this format in most of my work. I feel that it creates a sense of intimacy between the viewer and the painting.

The objects Raphaëlle chose were often arranged in a symmetrical fashion, balancing the composition as a whole. He usually avoided any sense of stagnancy by incorporating a strong, single, diagonal light source across the composition. He flowed this light across his objects and rendered sharply cast shadows. This served as a means to bring to the objects a volumetric presence, as well as to create spatial relationships.

Raphaëlle's palette was an opulent array of rich, brilliant and somber colors. When rendering his objects he often focused a singular color upon each.
This technique, coupled with his tendency to simplify forms, lended to his paintings a rather peculiar but convincing realism. It was distinguishably different than his uncle’s style.

James Peale’s still life paintings were less formal in their nature. He preferred more organic shapes and broken lines rather than geometric forms. He did not subscribe to the use of local color either. He placed more emphasis upon the tonal transitions and reflected colors within each object. His brushwork is much more pronounced than Raphaele’s, also. He did not render his surfaces in the smooth and polished manner that Raphaele used. Rather, James seemed to be more concerned with the textural qualities of his objects. The textural surfaces of his objects seem more tangible to me than the surfaces of Raphaele’s objects. But, like his nephew, James usually cast a strong diagonal light across his composition. He also arranged his objects upon a table top, but he was not as concerned with symmetrical properties as Raphaele. I credit these two men as being two of the greatest American still life painters. Their unique styles and their masterly skills have had a great influence upon my artistic development. I usually incorporate a compositional format similar to their format. For example, I usually arrange the objects of my compositions upon a table top or ledge. I also drop the perspective parallel to the picture plane. After carefully studying their different stylistic approaches, I have often attempted to emulate the different techniques the Peales employed.
William Harnett began producing still life paintings about fifty years after the Peales began. This, his early period, is that in which I have been interested.

Harnett's early work is probably a direct derivation from Raphaelle Peale's ideologies and works. Like Peale's, Harnett's early paintings were simple, somewhat geometric studies of common objects. Harnett's objects were usually beer steins, books, money, musical instruments and sheets of music. His style, however, is more illusionistic. His edges seem sharper and more factual than Peale's. But, like Peale, Harnett often piled his objects on the edge of a table or a steadfast shelf. He, also, cast a single, strong diagonal light across his objects. He placed a great deal of emphasis on his lighting and the play of light across textural surfaces. He was very successful. Like the Dutch Masters whom he studied, Harnett painted with a descriptive elegance and a textural intensity. I too place a great deal of emphasis upon the effects of the light sources and the textural qualities of the objects in my compositions. Like Harnett and Peale, I often utilize a single, strong diagonal light source across my composition. I find it as a means to balance the colors and the placements of the objects within the composition.

Harnett masterfully manipulated the edges of his objects to create convincing spatial relationships. His renderings seem to be decisive and visually crisp. The edges of his objects maintained a hard edge, yet they never seemed flat or linear. Harnett was able to render these objects with a tangible sense of volumetric form and presence. I often refer back to his still life paintings.
for this reason. His sensitive consciousness of the edges of his objects and their textural qualities and the lighting of his still life paintings is truly indicative of his artistic genius.
I became acquainted with the work of William Bailey last year. He is one of my favorite contemporary artists. I find his still life paintings to be very interesting, well planned and deftly executed. I have borrowed from Bailey’s oeuvre to develop some of my own compositional ideas.

Most of Bailey’s paintings, which I have seen are large studies of arranged objects such as eggs, bowls, vases and other vessels. The objects tend to be very solid and volumetric. The arrangements often seem to be almost ceremonial. The objects are balanced, often in a symmetrical procession across Bailey’s canvas. This seems to personify his objects with a sense of reverent dignity and somber grace. His backgrounds are often tenebrous and unembellished. He usually includes a single light source to conjugate the objects. Bailey places a great deal of emphasis upon the subtle transitions of his light source, as well as reflections and cast shadows. These aspects of his work interest me most. He is a precise draftsman as well. His objects, their reflections and shadows are rendered with a defined clarity and a pronounced presence. I often refer back to his work when planning my own compositions, and I am very interested in his painterly style.

Bailey is a creative force whom I predict will be recorded in the annals of art history as a master of still life.
"I'm into onions."

Lauren Ann Maines
My major as an undergraduate at Rochester Institute of Technology was Graphic Design. Although I enjoyed my design classes, I began during my junior year to recognize a conscious desire to apply my creative expressions in a less structured format than that of graphic design. I began to struggle with this inner conflict of disciplined design versus a freer, perhaps more personal desire for artistic expression of some type. I had been taking painting courses as electives every quarter for three years. It was in these electives that I found a sense of artistic fulfillment and freedom that seemed to be absent from the design classes I was taking. Upon completion of the undergraduate program I decided to pursue painting as a course of graduate study. I chose to stay at Rochester Institute of Technology for simple reasons. Since I was making a transition from the study of Graphic Design to the study of Painting, I did not think it was imperative to continue these studies at a different school. In fact, I felt Rochester Institute of Technology would suit me well for various reasons. I was impressed with the faculty in the Painting Department, as well as the small class sizes and the large painting studios offered to painting majors. I also anticipated the transition into a field of study in which I had a limited background would be more successful in a familiar atmosphere. Continuing at Rochester Institute of Technology as well as pursuing a Master's Degree in Painting are decisions I have not regretted. I sincerely believe that my studies these past two years have served as an impetus to my creative and intellectual growth.
At the onset of my graduate studies I felt a natural inclination to investigate the possibilities of painting utilizing oil pigments as a medium. I cannot honestly explain the nature of this inclination with any certainty, but it was a choice that seemed comfortable and natural. I had previously experimented with other mediums such as acrylic, pastels and watercolors, but it was with oils that I found the most technical success as well as personal enjoyment. The rich and opulent colors of oil paints attracted me immensely. I was, and still am, a relatively dilatorious painter. The slow drying process of oil paints afforded me the ability to rework areas and to maintain a continuity of timing and a sense of relaxation. However, my friends and family often have chided me that it is, in fact, the smell and rich textures of the oil paints themselves that have enticed me. This sentiment may bear some truth, for I unconsciously but inevitably wear as much paint upon my skin and my clothes after a painting session as do my canvasses.

Choosing the study of still life painting as a format was as natural as my choice of a medium. There had never been a question in my mind as to what I intended or desired to paint. I was most intrigued with organic objects and creating interesting spatial relationships and lighting situations within my compositions. The objects I tended to chose were usually simple in form, robust in color and volumetric. I was not initially interested in objects as symbolic images. Rather, I was more interested in the objects for their aesthetic qualities alone. I found apples to be interesting objects due to the diversity of rich colors they offered, coupled with the the volumetric presence they could command. I
also enjoyed painting dried flowers, small plants, cloth and glassware. I was especially interested in depicting cloth and glass objects, but for assorted reasons. Cloth intrigued me because I found it to be an accessible format with which to experiment, creating sculptural planes as well as softer more voluminous surfaces. Depicting glass objects served as a means to investigate reflective surfaces and their properties, which also interested me a great deal.

As my studies progressed I began to study all that I could about art history, the great masters of painting and contemporary artists. I began to become interested in the symbolic possibilities of the objects I could choose and the significance of creative expression in terms of personal statements. I did not divorce myself from an interest in objects for their aesthetic values, but I began to concern myself with the integrated assertions and implications that the choices of subject matter would constitute in terms of an artistic or personal expression. I became fascinated with depicting onions. Here, I thought, were these elegant organic forms consisting of vibrant reds, yellows, greens, opulent golds and rich browns. Their surface qualities could be reflective, if placed in the proper light. Their delicate skins could be torn, folded and manipulated to create interesting textural surfaces. But, most intriguing to me was the nature of their shape and the volumetric presence they could command within one of my compositions. I found that if I placed an onion in a certain position, it would strike me as bearing a resemblance to a human breast. If I placed another next to it in an a different manner it could assume more of a phallic presence. The onions became to me
very figurative and animated. I began to investigate the possibilities of creating personal symbolic scenarios within my compositions. I did not limit this inquiry to the personification of the objects alone, but also to the placement and the spatial relationships of the objects within each composition. I did not stray from the initial interest I held in organic objects, cloth or glassware. Instead, I continued throughout my two years of study to work with these objects, but with a developing sense for symbolic potential as well as their aesthetic values.

Painting in a realistic and somewhat traditional manner has always personally dominated any inclination to paint in a more abstracted manner. Although I have experimented with less formal and less traditional painterly mannerisms and ideologies, as well as having studied and appreciated the abstract works of other artists, I have always felt compelled to depict my own work in a relatively realistic and traditional style. It is what I did best and the style from which I attained the most gratification. Perhaps this is a reflection upon my personality, for I have been accused of being a conservative and cautious individual, but I prefer to view my artistic tendencies, up to this point, as constituting a developing process indicative of a conscious struggle to investigate the infinite possibilities of still life painting, as well as being recorded reactions to the world around me.

To those who are learned in the area of oil painting, the techniques which I have employed may seem unorthodox in their nature. However, after endless experiments and investigations with my medium, they are the techniques which
have produced the most favorable results and ones I am comfortable using.

I usually painted upon a prestretched canvases of high grade linen quality. I had little patience as well as limited success with stretching my own canvases. The size format which I have preferred has allowed for me to indulge in this expenditure. The size of my canvases usually did not exceed fifty-eight inches on any side. I would usually apply a thick coat of gesso upon these canvases to create interesting textural surfaces.

The palette from which I consistently worked consisted of: zinc white, cadmium yellow in light, medium and deep, yellow ocher, cadmium red in light, medium and deep, alizarin crimson, ultramarine blue, cobalt blue, magnesium blue, bunt and raw umber, burnt and raw sienna, and on occasion thalo green. When I first began painting I also used bone black, but I became unsatisfied with its inherent properties and its tendency to muddy the other colors I would apply. Within the first quarter of my graduate studies I abandoned its use completely.

I never committed myself to any particular brand of pigments. In all honesty, I usually purchased whatever was on sale, or the least expensive. I never ran into any problems with the paint quality that was readily apparent, nor did I ever discern any drastic distinctions in the colors of the different brands. I did prefer London Oils but I most often used Grumbacher paints.

I used high grade gum spirits of turpentine as a mixing medium. I avoided any use of oil mediums, drying fixatives or gel mediums. I must admit that on occasion, due to prevailing personal economic factors, I would buy an
inexpensive can of paint thinner as a substitute for turpentine. Needless to say, these were clandestine purchases and left me with a sense of unprofessionalism and guilt.

To best describe my painting process, the words slowly and thickly undoubtedly come to my mind. I would begin a painting by spending days, sometimes weeks setting up the composition. I constantly searched for the perfect subjects. The corner grocery store clerks must have thought I was quite mad, for on many occasions I spent long periods of time sifting through the onion bin, searching for that perfectly colored and textured specimen.

Once my subjects were collected I would set up variations of compositional placements. After many sketches of these variations and careful analysis, I would choose one that best suited my ambitions. This process, including light settings, would take anywhere from two days to two weeks.

At that point, I would draw my composition upon the canvas in pencil. Again this would often prove to be a tedious and a slow process. I was very concerned with exact proportions and faithful renderings. I took care in creating solid foundations for my paintings.

Once drawn in, I would lay directly on top of the pencil marks a paint mixture which consisted of a cobalt blue and cadmium red light, considerably thinned down. This mixture is called puce. This process took little time, dried quickly and prevented the pencil marks from bleeding into the colors of my paints. I would also use the puce to mass all shadows and areas of darkness, which
would be the next step.

The next procedure is what I call the under painting. This entailed working up the whole composition by breaking down the color spectrum in direct relation to the light setting. For example, an apple bathed in a strong light on one side and dark shadows on the other side, would be painted in yellows on the lit side and transcend into orange then red and finally blue on the shadowed side. I felt this process created a sense of verity and an clearer understanding of the play of light upon volumetric forms and textural surfaces. This underpainting was done with thinned paint to allow for relatively quick drying. I would not begin the next process until the underpainting was completely dry.

I usually attempted to work up all of the areas of the composition simultaneously. I found that if I concentrated on one area of the composition and worked it to a finished state, it would seem isolated and unattached from the rest of the composition when it was completed. I would, instead, begin with dark tones, blues and browns, and apply these pigments throughout the appropriate areas of the composition. I then would apply red tones and finally yellowish and golden tones. I avoided at this stage any intricate detail. I would rework areas during this process until I was satisfied with my results and consequently this stage often proved to be time consuming. The actual application of the paint was always relatively thick so I did not usually encounter any problems in terms of the paint drying to quickly.

The last process would be the rendering of detail such as highlights or fine
brushwork. This was done when the painting was near the completion of its initial drying stage.

I did not utilize any washing or glazing techniques. I preferred a heavy impasto. I felt that it gave to my paintings an interesting textural sense of life. I also enjoyed the wonderful tactile sensations of mixing and working with thicker applications. Naturally, this process would prolong the drying process. I have also been told that this heavy application could prove to be disastrous in terms of the potential for surface cracking. However, I am not as concerned about the longevity of my work as I am the actual painting process as an experience.

My tools usually consisted of four or five rounded red sable brushes varying in size from .01 to 2., and two or three flat Bristol brushes. I would use a larger Bristol brush to create interesting textures and large areas of my composition such as the backgrounds. But, I relied most on the softer sable brushes when painting. Occasionally I would use a palette knife to scumble certain areas of texture.

My palette was a large piece of plywood sealed with a polyurethane finish. I kept my paint out and readily accessible around the perimeters of the palette at all times and reserved the inside area for mixing. I covered the flat palette with plastic wrap when I was finished painting to prevent drying.

The atmosphere in which I worked during my graduate studies could best be described as consistent and comfortable. I did all of my painting at the graduate studios on West Main Street. The spaces I occupied were large, airy
and served as an excellent atmosphere in which to accomplish my work. I usually worked between four and six days and nights a week in my studio. I usually began painting in the late afternoon or early evening. I never painted in a natural light, I always drew the shades down and shut off any overhead lights surrounding my studio space. I preferred the strong, warm and directed luminosity of a single 100 watt tungsten light, usually set at a forty-five degree angle to the right of my composition. I would cast a single softer light directly across my canvas.

Music was also an important part of the atmosphere in which I worked. I always wore head phones when I painted. Music served to block out other distracting noises in the studio and it also relaxed me psychologically. I most often listened to classical music, especially the music of Mozart and Tchaikovsky. I usually was not consciously aware of the music as I painted. It served as a secondary stimulus.

My painting sessions would typically last between four and six hours each time. Naturally, physical comfort was also vital. I usually sat on a metal box, one and-a-half feet high, with a couple of pillows as padding. I would sit eye level to the setting and as close as possible. This created a sense of intimacy between the still life and me.

In conjunction with the still life paintings done during my graduate studies, I consciously and consistently attempted to improve my drawing skills. I felt that this would have a effect upon my painterly skills as well.
I worked from the figure six to twelve hours a week. I usually utilized the time spent with the model to do gesture sketches and three to four hour poses. These exercises often inspired new compositional ideas in relation to the still life paintings I was also creating. These figure studies also sharpened my perception. I began to render the volumetric forms of my still life paintings with a keener sense of their subtle qualities and detail.

During the second year of my graduate program I began producing a series of still life drawings. Initially these drawings were to be monochromatic tonal studies done in pastel. As time passed I began to immerse myself in the series with a zealous interest. I also began to feel more comfortable handling pastels. I never lost any interest in continuing with oil painting, but I also began towards the end of my second year, to concentrate on the development of this series. I decided to include two of the drawings as part of my thesis work because I feel that they have very direct visual relationships with the thesis paintings. I think that the time I spent improving my drawing skills was vital to the development of the still life paintings done simultaneously. My drawing skills improved; I became more sensitive to the mediums I was using and I began to render volumetric forms in space more faithfully and achieve better results in detailed work.
Conclusion

During the past two years my artistic ideologies have expanded and grown. I have broadened my knowledge of art in a historical pretext and I have become better acquainted with contemporary art as well as more aware of the artistic activities which have been taking place around me. My artistic skills have improved and I am better able to manipulate a broader range of mediums with marked ability. I have grown as an artist.

During these past two years another metamorphosis has taking place. I have come to terms with many of my own personal goals as an individual and I have acquired a much stronger sense of self esteem and self identity. Upon the end of this particular journey I will carry forth not only a degree, but also a sincere sense of accomplishment, fond memories of special relationships and diverse experiences and, most importantly, a strong desire to further develop my own artistic endeavors.
Untitled

Oil on Canvas

1986
Untitled

Oil on canvas

1986
Pookie's Study

Oil on Canvas

1987
Solitude's Graceful Invitation

Oil on Canvas

1987
The Afterthought

Oil on Canvas

1988
Inside Out

Oil on Canvas

1988
Untitled
Pastel on Paper
1988
Untitled
Pastel on Paper
1988


5 ibid., p.34.


7 ibid., p. 13.


9 ibid., p.48.

11 ibid., p.73

12 ibid., p.174.


