master of the not-so-still

With theatrical splendor, Sheldon Tapley celebrates the still life tradition by incorporating

still life

excess, reinvesting the figure and complicating the design.

BY DANIEL BROWN

STILL LIFE IS the most problematic—and most abstract—of genres, as the paintings seem to lack the grandeur associated with landscapes or with figures that can assume allegorical or mythological-religious resonance. Because the objects depicted are taken from ordinary life, however, they intimately speak to our daily existence and to our interior lives. Sheldon Tapley revitalizes, indeed, electrifies the still life genre by combining aspects of contemporary life with painterly constructs derived from the history of Western art. His formalist concerns join with his tendency toward metaphor, and his pleasure in painting ordinary objects reminds us of nature's bounties and art's artifices concurrently.

Tapley also frequently utilizes figurative elements—usually copies of famous images from Baroque art—a sly way of putting figures and landscapes in the background, while the still life elements remain at the fore. Such a design is an amusing reversal of the norm in Western painting, for Tapley insists upon the primary importance, indeed the pre-eminence, of the still life. While the artist frequently alludes to Baroque masters and just as frequently incorporates their work into his own, he is not an appropriator; his many influences and references weave through the work but do not dominate it.

A Web of Influence

Tapley selects which objects to include, then designs the composition and lays in color; in the process, ideas and essences emerge in an erudite yet playful manner. When he describes the "sensuality, abundance and force" that he gets from the Flemish master Peter Paul Rubens, he's describing Rubens's essential influence on his own work. "The power and sensuality of Rubens's images have always attracted me. I also love French painting," says Tapley. "Some of the masters I've returned to again and again include Chardin, Fantin-Latour, Cézanne and Matisse. Richard Deibenkorn admired Matisse, and I admire both of them and treasure that linkage."

LEFT: The Roman god of wine and revelry informs ***Bacchanal*** (oil on aluminum, 6x11), in which Tapley places a book cover that shows a detail from Titian's *Bacchanal of the Andrians*. The Baroque curves of the mantel (in Tapley's studio), the flowers,the fabric, the apple, the books and the general air of abundance celebrate life and its pleasures.

Tapley's still lifes are not only a virtuosic study of the history of art, but more palpably a demonstration of texture, dimensionality, spatial relations, perspectival shifts, color relationships and, most significantly, the hallmarks of the Baroque sensibility: theatricality and sensuality.

An Unusual Surface

Although Tapley's mother is an artist, now retired, who worked in watercolor and taught private lessons in their home, Tapley avoided art in his youth. Taking a course with Bobbie McKibbin during his first year at Grinnell College in Iowa, Tapley discovered that he loved to draw (he continues to work with charcoal and pastel). He learned, too, the "amazing and forgiving" properties of oil paint. "I particularly like the way an oily film of wet paint responds throughout a day of work," he says, "so that it sometimes seems to be alive."

Tapley paints not on canvas but on aluminum panels, which he cuts and prepares by coating the panel with an oil primer. Once the primer is dry, he sands the surface until it's smooth. As the painting progresses, he structures each work session according to these steps: (1) He sands away or scrapes off anything he doesn't like (as long as the surface is dry). "For sanding I use wet-dry 600-grit sandpaper, and I work very gently," he says. Scraping (much less common) is done with a tiny palette knife or fresh single-edge razor blade. (2) He applies retouch varnish to the area he's going to work on. "The retouch varnish dries quickly and restores luster, allowing me to see the painting better." (3) Next he applies glazes to any areas that need it (4) and works with direct application of paint, which can go into the wet glazes if necessary; (5) finishes an area; moves on to the next area; (6) and then repeats the last four steps until satisfied with the painting.

To be satisfied with the painting—aye, there's the rub. "It's always difficult to find the right balance between memorable description and a lively surface," Tapley says. "Some painters label that a dichotomy between 'tight' and 'loose,' but I find those words too loaded and inadequate. Too much discipline, and the

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To learn how Tapley controls the lighting in his urban studio, go to www.artistsnetwork.com/tamonlinetoc.

ABOVE: ***Still Life With Flowers*** (oil on aluminum, 36x48) shows a theatrical abundance that's counterbalanced by coiled rope, and, on the top right, with a drawing of *enso*, a Japanese word meaning "circle." In Zen Buddhism, *enso* suggests a state of mind in which the body is free to let the spirit create.

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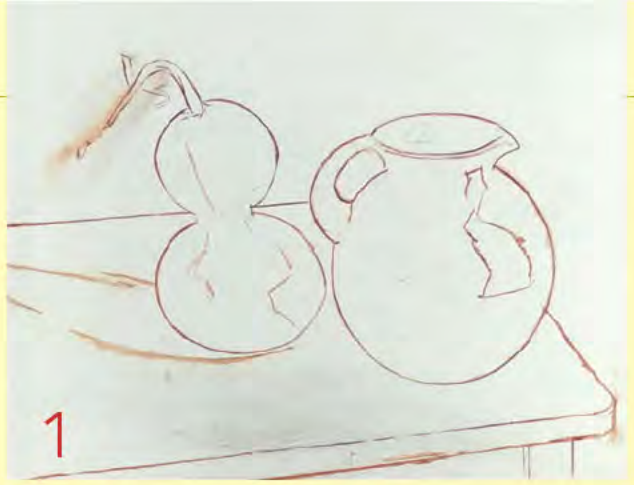
BELOW: The swirling surface of ***Spiral*** (oil on aluminum, 21½x20) shows the Baroque love of circularity (the pitcher, the plate, the lemon and its peel) and movement (the repetitions and folds of the two fabrics), along with a bird's-eye view that disorients the viewer. Another disorienting Baroque motif is the extension of the blue plate and knife beyond the surface of the table.



From Simplicity to Complication

BY SHELDON TAPLEY

1. Transferring the Drawing: I usually begin with a drawing (not shown here), which I transfer, using **Saral** transfer paper, to the primed aluminum laminate panel (16x20). I brush transparent red oxide thinly over the transferred lines and let them dry.

2. Blocking In: I use a hog bristle bright brush to scrub in a thin, flat layer of color. If the paint doesn't flow easily, I add a drop of mineral spirits.

3. Choosing One Area: I choose one area, usually a key object in the composition, and using bristle brushes, add detail to it. This is just a first pass, so I avoid getting too detailed. For this piece, I made some of the edges on the table with a ruler; other edges, like those on the gourd, I kept soft. If the paint doesn't flow easily enough, I add a drop of **M. Graham** walnut alkyd medium. At this point, I wouldn't use mineral spirits in the paint, because mineral spirits can dissolve the binder.

4. Developing One Area: I worked up the gourd in greater detail; I added its shadow and developed the background around it. I wanted to see the character of the gourd clearly before I progressed to other areas.

Demonstration continued on page ••

painting will look well wrought but dull; too much freedom, and it will look lively but lack substance. The entire process is challenging," he concludes, "and I've learned to take nothing for granted. The most difficult decisions in the process, however, come at the beginning, before the panel is even primed, when I'm setting up the subject or even just thinking of the subject: What will I paint? What do I want this picture to be? No amount of skillful painting later in the process will save an image if I don't have confidence in it from the beginning."

The Theatre of Excess

It's the answers to those questions—"What will I paint? What do I want this picture to be?"—that make Tapley's work original. By regularly including images of female nudes from paintings of the past within his still lifes, Tapley intensifies and luxuriates in the sensu-

5. Establishing Light: This was an important step because I established the quality of light in the room. I was still undecided about how to handle the light coming in from the window. I wondered whether I should include the shadow cast on the wall by the window wall. Eventually, I did, but here I was thinking that the table and objects should be suffused with light. I applied the green paint of the background wall generously; then I blended it to a flat surface using large, soft, badger blending brushes. I allowed the light to flood across the edge of the pitcher to avoid building up thick paint at the boundary of the object.

6. Adding the Shadow: The flat, blocked-in pitcher became a three-dimensional object with the addition of a shadow.

7. Within the Reflection: I worked up the table and the pitcher in greater detail. The reflection of Danville's Main Street in the pitcher was so clear that it was like watching a little movie. I began to wonder if I was crazy to try to paint the scene! What you see here, the scene in the reflection, is the result of many tries.

8. Making It Complex: I decided that the composition would benefit from including the shadow on the right part of the back wall. I described, too, the wall surface in greater detail. My initial plan, to make a simple design emphasizing two forms on the table, gave way to my persistent need for complication: I added a piece of rope.

9. Adding Elements: A rope needs scissors! Not everything in a still life has to fit together thematically, but this juxtaposition is one I often enjoy painting. Also, I love the form of these scissors. The plastic handles have a dynamic, subtle design, as

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To read more about the history of still life, go to www.artistsnetwork.com/tamonlinetoc.

ality of the objects he's depicting, while never losing sight of the fact that all their origins are in the history of art. We relish the Baroque sense of movement he adapts—take a look at the swirling drapes, the bird's-eye focus, the circular plethora that's almost dizzying in *Spiral*, page ••. Tapley makes these qualities of abundance celebratory. Unlike many of his contemporaries who extol austerity, Tapley loves to "pack" his compositions—reminding us that he matured under the aegis of Abstract Expressionism. Working in the realist idiom challenged him to flatten the pictorial space to make an object seem "present," a tactic he learned from looking at Cézanne.

Tapley designs his works as a piece of stagecraft. There's a flagrant exhibitionism afoot, as well as an exuberant physicality—a veneration of life's cornucopia of foods, fabrics and fleshes. When he weaves aspects of

if the designer had been looking at Brancusi or Noguchi. I drew the scissors with blue-gray paint thinned with **M. Graham** walnut alkyd medium because I was impatient to finish and I wanted these last stages to dry quickly.

10. Making Modifications: I was dissatisfied with the right edge of the pitcher, where the dust on it caught very strong light. I'd reworked this difficult passage so much that there was a distracting ridge built up along the contour of the pitcher, so I sanded the area gently with 600-grit sandpaper, as a prelude to reworking it with smoother paint. The scissors were nearly done; the cast shadows of the gourd and scissors would become more intensely warm.

11. Seeking Transparence: Some of the last layers were glazes, in which I used more medium to allow transparency in colors like the blues and purples of the pitcher in *Dust* (oil on aluminum laminate panel, 16x20).

Matisse and Cézanne into the typologies of the Baroque masters, we know we're in the presence of an artist who veers dangerously—tilting picture planes towards us, as if the players/objects were walking off the stage into the audience.

Ways of Approaching the Still Life

In effect, Tapley's work is a case study in how to reinvigorate the still life tradition. His

Painting on Aluminum

Tapley uses aluminum panels that have been laminated onto plastic and painted white (brands **Dibond** and **Omega-Bond**). He says that aluminum is more durable than hardboard, plywood or canvas: "The panels are only 3 millimeters thick and don't need cradling to prevent warping, as wooden panels do. They can be cut easily with a circular saw. Paintings made on these panels are much lighter than those on traditional panels, which is important for larger works."

Materials

Oil Surface: **Dibond** or **Omega-Bond** aluminum panels

Pastel Surface: **La Carte, Arches** cover white

Oils: **Old Holland**

Pastels: **Terry Ludwig, Jack Richeson, Schmincke**

Brushes: hog bristles—**Silver Brush** Grand Prix, **Da Vinci** Maestro, **Daniel Smith** (**DS**) Red Boar, **DS** Platinum; sables—**Old Holland** very small rounds; **DS** Series 55-03 kolinsky; **DS** Autograph Series 46 black; **DS** Autograph Series 85-01 smooth oil blender filberts and rounds; synthetic—**DS** Platinum faux mongoose; fan blenders—**Isabey** Faux Mongoose, **Royal Langnickel** 2-inch and 4-inch badger blender

Medium: **M. Graham** walnut alkyd medium

Varnish: **Winsor & Newton** retouch; **Daniel Smith** picture varnish—3 parts gloss, 2 parts matte, 1 part pure gum turpentine (not mineral spirits)

Other Tools: single-edge razor blades; paper towels

paintings range from the relatively less complex (focusing on single objects) to the nearly all-over compositions reminiscent of the Abstract Expressionists. Radically angled perspectives are common. The tilting forward of the picture plane, which reached its apogee in Cézanne, is pushed farther (towards the viewer and away from realistic space) in a painting as relatively simple as *Bacchanal* (page ••) and as complicated as *Waterfall* (page ••). The beautifully designed *Bacchanal* utilizes the fireplace front in his studio as a kind of framed stage set for those mundane objects so fraught with meaning and emotion when de-contextualized from their ordinary usage. In this variation on *le tableau vivant*, Tapley chooses a Matissean piece of fabric reminiscent of Persian art as the backdrop, a play on painters' drop cloths from the mundane/profane world, the colors of which are picked up by each object he lovingly selects and depicts: an apple, a plate with an overlaid knife (doubling the spatial complexities), a carpenter's claw, a translucent blue pitcher (allowing for further investigation of the play of light), and three types of flowers. Two art books with nudes on their covers complete the scene. The inclusion of tools in so many of his paintings celebrates their shapes and colors as they remind us of the artist's hand and touch (e.g., the *work* of art).

In the exquisite, explosive *Waterfall*, a pastel on paper, Tapley designs his composition another way, according to an arithmetic arrangement. Four potentially separate still lifes are combined in one painting. A pile of rocks suggests the dialectic between soft/hard, smooth/textural that provides a yin/yang of delight. A vase of flowers inhabits the center, and a basket of contorted gourds dominates the middle ground; a picture of a cascading

BELOW: How does Tapley handle such a complex subject as ***Harvest Table*** (pastel on paper, 38x32)? "My initial underdrawing is in soft vine charcoal, rubbed down with a paper towel so the black pigment won't mix with the next layer. The first layers of color are also rubbed down to prevent the surface's closing up."

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RIGHT: When working in pastel, Tapley never uses erasers "since they roughen the surface of the paper and leave visible scars." Instead he rubs with a paper towel or carefully scrapes the surface with a razor blade, which sufficiently diminishes the pastel on the surface to allow for revisions as in the intricate, ornate ***Waterfall*** (pastel on paper, 66x45).

waterfall is tacked on the wall; an Etch-A-Sketch, as if to comment on that explosion, appears beneath it on the left. On the other side of the waterfall is a hand-held light. The foreground includes tools dramatizing the craft of both art and construction: a sledge hammer and ropes that create diagonal spatial relationships and dimensionality; a ripe melon, a bowl of lemons and eggs, and a vaguely anthropomorphic lobster. Finally, a large saw, angled and arched like a scythe in the foreground, reminds us that within the luxuriousness of these erotically charged symbols of life and sensuality lurks the specter of decay, a reminder of death's knock upon Eros's door.

Eroticism indeed is one of Tapley's primary themes as is its cousin, sexuality. The instinct toward love/sex (Eros) as it's commingled with death (Thanatos) and is interpreted as and via still life (*la nature morte*) may be his underlying concern; the sexual climax, we remember, is called *la petite morte*.

From all this it's clear that Sheldon Tapley is a theatrical painter. Tapley's is a kind of vivid hyperrealism, and the very brightness of his colors gives his fabricated objects lifelike qualities, almost in the way a stage director manipulates lighting and the colors of costumes. After years of looking—absorbing ideas and technical lessons from other masters—Tapley has moved into the fertile realms of his own vast imaginative powers. ■

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Meet Sheldon Tapley

Sheldon Tapley was born in Maracaibo, Venezuela, in 1959 to British parents; he grew up in Europe and North America. At Grinnell College in Iowa, he studied with Bobbie McKibbin; he also earned an MFA in printmaking from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He is the Stodghill Professor of Painting and Drawing at Centre College in Danville, Kentucky. "Working with students and seeing things through their eyes keeps drawing fresh for me," he says. His work is represented by M.A. Doran Gallery, in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and can be seen at www.sheldontapley.com.

Web EXTRA **To see Tapley's drawings of the figure in charcoal, go to www.artistsnetwork.com/tamonlinetoc.**