

# NORTHWEST MEETS SOUTHWEST

*How a recent commission led to a gratifying collaboration  
between artist and collector*



*Crush, 24 x 48 inches, Oil on panel, 2012*

I have often been hesitant to take on private commissions. As a realist still life painter, each painting takes a lot of time, and it is important that each fits within my overall body of work. The prospect of making a commission piece that may be too much of a departure from current concerns in the studio feels risky. Instead, if someone wants to commission a painting from me, I suggest a “right of first refusal” project. With this approach the client can suggest the subject matter they are interested in and any color schemes they prefer. In response I make a painting using those ideas as a starting point. If they appreciate the piece, they can buy it. If not, the piece can still work as part of my portfolio.

My last project produced with this method turned into a rewarding and enjoyable collaboration with a collector. The collaboration allowed me to explore subject matter and ideas that I would not have done on my own, and it provided the collector with a more personally relevant work to enjoy in his home for years to come. The collector, who was from the Southwest, contacted me and suggested a still life that included the elements for making traditional guacamole. I was a bit wary about this idea, since I am from the Pacific Northwest and have little connection with such Southwestern subject matter. I usually choose subjects for their formal qualities, rather than to illustrate a narrative or recipe.



*Blue Crabs*, 12 x 16 inches, Oil on panel, 2013

Much of my recent work, however, has been focused around intense color and swirling, all-over compositions. As a lover of spicy food, I thought about the fieriness of Southwestern cuisine, and how that might be conveyed visually. To find some common ground in the creative process, I asked the collector if he had ever eaten anything so spicy that he became delirious; perhaps that was what the piece could be about. He responded enthusiastically, and I knew that we were on the same page for the project.

Most of our collaboration was online, which was a new and interesting process for me. We live several thousand miles apart, but used eBay to look together for interesting props. He suggested objects based on their relationship to the narrative of the piece. For example, I'm fixated on shiny metal and glass; it would never have occurred to me to include the lava bowl used for grinding the guacamole. After several false starts, I started to understand how the subjects could mirror or contrast each other in interesting ways—the swirling design in the Damascus knife, played against the juicy pulp of the tomato, or the pebbled dark skin of the avocado reflected by the rough lava bowl.

As we began to agree on props, I would set up arrangements, take photographs and get his opinions on compositional ideas. We had a back-and-forth discussion about the elements that would be included. He suggested that a lace doily be made part of the still life. I felt that the doily might make the painting too delicate, but his suggestion made me think of including





*An Offering*, 24 x 24 inches, Oil on panel





Detail of *Mola Salsa*

more cilantro leaves, which are airy, and filigree added a delicate element that integrated well into the overall theme. The collector also suggested including a shot of tequila in the foreground. I would not have included that on my own, but it made perfect sense. It's like Alice's drink in *Alice in Wonderland* – drink the tequila and you see the rest of the painting swirl around you. These elements were brought into the painting collaboratively, and added more variety to the picture than would have occurred to me independently.

Detail of *Mola Salsa*





I work from three different sources in varying proportions: photographs, life, and imagination. Each of these takes different precedents at various stages. The ultimate goal is to make the best painting, without obligation to a photograph or to reality. An example of this is the background fabric in the piece. In reality, the fabric has an intense flame pattern but the original color scheme was too subtle. I wanted to incorporate the design but needed a more fiery color palette, so I used red, and then incorporated the accent colors from within the subjects of the painting. As a realist painter I find it very liberating to use imagination as much as observational or technical skills.

My paintings take a long time. I work with perishable objects, so I often take hundreds of reference photographs of each subject as I am putting the elements of a painting together. Each element is photographed individually and from many points of view so that I have a thorough understanding of the object and its three-dimensional form. With this approach I

am not limited to a single photograph of the item if something needs to be turned, changed or added, and I can manipulate the elements to create the optimal composition. In a way the finished painting becomes almost a collage of elements, rather than a record of a scene that really existed.

The first step when I begin a piece is a very light line drawing. At this stage, I can focus on composition, the right balance of forms, proportions, and movement, and it is easy to make lots of changes. The photograph below may not clearly show it, but every element has been erased and redrawn a couple times to find the right view of each object and the correct interaction between elements. Many elements line up in ways that make sense in a photograph but that may look awkward and unintentional when translated to a painting. The line drawing stage ensures that all the elements are portrayed accurately, and interactions between objects that may be confusing or that flatten the space can be avoided.

Process #1, *Mola Salsa*





The next image is *grisaille*, a black and white under painting technique that has its roots in Renaissance painting. At this stage the local values of each object are established, and I begin to get a sense for the basic relationship of light and dark values. I used to work more directly, without such an explicit under painting, but as the work became more complex, I needed a way to organize the structure more fully. After a few near nervous breakdowns using my earlier technique, I looked to the intricate work of the Dutch Golden Age painters like Jan de Heem and Rachel Ruysch, and realized that I had to learn to make the work in a much more traditional fashion. Working with a *grisaille* makes the painting more labor intensive, but it also makes the later stages much less stressful, and makes it possible to achieve clarity and more luminous color. The *grisaille* is left a bit lighter in value because it will darken as colors are applied.



Process #2, *Mola Salsa*

The next stage is high-chroma under painting. After the *grisaille* is dry, I apply a layer of the most intense transparent pigment of the local color for each object. It is always possible to make a hue duller but it is not always possible to return to the intensity that is achieved when layering a transparent hue over a white ground.





*Process #3, Mola Salsa*

The last step is to settle in and resolve the painting. The preparatory steps were concerned with basic color value and composition, and thinking about the painting as more of an abstraction than as a representational image. It is important to ensure that the major formal qualities are engaging and balanced before starting to paint any details. Once those elements are developed, I can start concentrating on resolving all the surface textures and details. With the preparatory material done, the rest can be painted in a rather direct fashion with each element painted wet into wet.

Reference to both photographic sources and to real objects are used to paint the still life elements. Whenever possible, I like to have the object in front of me to understand its tactile nature, which can often be misleading in a photograph. For example, the pockmarked stone bowl appeared much smoother in photographs, but I could exaggerate that structure based on observations of the real bowl. For most subjects, I like to hold them in my hand while working, and be able to move my fingers over the surface to get a sense of their tactile qualities. I was fortunate to see an exhibit of paintings by Willem van Aelst last year at the National Gallery in Washington D.C., and was struck by how I could really “feel” each texture distinctly as I looked at his work. Since then I’ve been trying to push that aspect of my work.





Detail of *Mola Salsa*

Reflections on the tabletop and water droplets are usually invented; no real surface is quite as uniformly reflective in the same way. Over the years I've developed some techniques for inventing reflections and I like the way they both reflect and distort the reality of the still life to add an element of abstraction or fantasy. I enjoy this dreamlike quality. Having painted these elements many times, I now feel comfortable inventing them in ways that draw the eye around the painting to complement the composition or add movement.

I thought of *Mola Salsa* as a "soft" commission. The collector made suggestions as to the subject matter and the general progress of the painting. However, there was no down payment and neither of us had any obligations to the other. This allowed me to develop a painting that I was comfortable with in my body of work. He was able to have a painting that has personal relevance, but he was not obligated to buy the piece if it was not what he expected.





*Mola Salsa*, 24 x 24 inches, Oil on panel, 2013



Overall, this experience was refreshing and enjoyable. It allowed me to work with subjects I would not normally consider and created a work of more personal significance for both artist and collector. Our collaboration was mostly virtual, which was a new and interesting experience, but he came to Portland several times on business and could see the progress of the painting. His visits were important because it is hard to understanding a painting based on virtual images. On his last visit, the collector was able to see the completed painting in person and was kind enough to bring a bottle of tequila so we could sit in my garden and toast our shared creative accomplishment.



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Learn more about Eric Wert at: [www.werteric.com](http://www.werteric.com)



*Willakenzie Loam*, 24 x 30 inches, Oil on panel

*The Locavore*, 40 x 50 inches, oil on canvas

