

From the Classical Atelier: Secrets of the Sight-Size Method

the **Artist's** magazine

All About
Gouache

New Take on Florals

Digital Images: Learn the Lingo

November 2012
www.artistsmagazine.com

tw media US \$5.99



0 09281 02306 7 11

Display until November 5, 2012

Dahlias (detail; oil, 30x40) by Eric Wert

sweet destruction

Beauty mingles with anxiety
in the dynamic complexity of
Eric Wert's still lifes.

BY BJ FOREMAN

A RECENT EXHIBITION of Eric Wert's paintings drew two different reviews. "Sexy and sumptuous," said one. "Melancholy," said the other. Wert agrees. His paintings always contain luscious color, technical virtuosity and eagle-eye detail. The world he creates includes super-shiny glass vases on tables possibly strewn with water droplets, all set against gorgeous satin backdrops. On the other hand, the vases are often broken or overturned, and the flowers are head-down in the vases or tumbling out in disarray, sometimes with their petals scattered about, "suggestive of domestic disturbance, disaster or jilted love." A Wert still life is the world gone awry, in a very beautiful way.

In this, he is following the centuries-old tradition of Dutch vanitas painting—while still being very much a man of his own time. These elements of decay, turbulence and drama have been accepted symbolism since the 16th century, meant to remind us that the bloom will eventually come off the rose, that all that is fragile can break, and that none of us lives forever.

Mental Collages

The picture next to "still life painter" in the dictionary shows a man in a smock standing eight feet away from a vase of flowers, squinting past his brush. Not so, Eric Wert. He sits to paint, which he says is best for the comfort



of his back. The canvas is rigged into a moveable wall-mounted easel that can hoist an 8-foot-long canvas up and down with a boat winch (see page 31). Wert paints inches from the canvas or panel, addressing a space slightly above eye level.

On his lap is a piece of the satin brocade that serves as the backdrop for the painting, just so he can stay in touch with the reality of the fabric. A vase is nearby, as are various





flowers or fruits. However, the particular arrangement he's painting might not actually exist off the canvas. That's because what he paints is often from his own imagination.

Although Wert works from life whenever possible, he always has a computer handy where, using the cloud-storage software program Picasa, he has uploaded and organized the hundreds of photographs of the elements in the painting. Blooms do come off roses, after

ABOVE: Wert challenged himself with a series of reflections in *Peonies* (oil, 36x48). Here, the table reflects the base of the overturned vase, which in turn mirrors the table, along with the downed flowers and a self-portrait of the artist. "I liked the fact that the vase reflects a bit of the whole still life," says Wert, "and then looks back at the viewer. I'm there, looking closely."

Materials

Surface: MDO (medium density overlaid) plywood panels for paintings up to 30x40; canvas for larger paintings (“whatever brand is least expensive”)

Ground: gesso mixed with about 20 percent matte medium, applied with a squeegee (“which makes it go on more smoothly and sand more easily”)

Oil paint: Gamblin, Williamsburg, Old Holland (“I use lots of different brands of paint,” says Wert. “With every visit to the art supply store, I buy one color I’ve never used before, so I’ve accumulated a large library of hues. I’ve found that different brands of the same color can have different properties. One burnt umber may be very cool and opaque while another can be warm and transparent.”)

Brushes: Daler-Rowney Simply Simmons (“I don’t mix large batches of color,” Wert says, “but prefer mixing each area separately, which gives me more variety in hues. Because of this, I tend to mix with my brushes—so I buy lots of inexpensive brushes and wear them out quickly.”)

Glazing medium: a traditional one: one part damar, one part stand oil, and five parts turpentine (“This combination,” explains Wert, “allows the paint to be applied thinly, to make a very fluid mark and to stay wet to permit smooth blending.”)

all. And by viewing individual reference photos, he’s able to arrange flowers and fruits in a way (sometimes completely in his head) that all the staging in the world could never do for any group photograph. “Stagecraft,” he calls it.

Radical Observation

Observation is Wert’s primary practice. He spends hours trying to get to the reality of a particular element. “But once all the data are there that make something look real,” he says, “I step back and let it become its own creature, develop its own personality. I’m open to what the subject can start to tell me.

BELOW: When is an orange more than an orange? When it has a demonic stem, suggestive of sci-fi and horror flicks, gesturing with tentacles. Or is it just a regular orange? Probably not. Wert paints it peeled, glowing from within, with a tinge of evil in *Satsuma* (oil, 9x12).



Private collection



Private collection

Sometimes, the picture changes a lot.”

“If I want the inside of an orange (as in *Satsuma*, at left) to glow, I’m going to punch that up, regardless of what’s actually there. I do the same thing with form. If part of a subject suggests a certain movement or rhythm,

I’ll play with the drawing until I can really feel movement.”

A recent work features a cornucopia with white radishes tumbling out. Despite the radishes’ mundane status, Wert started to notice their reflective nature, “reminiscent of pearls,” so he looked at Dutch paintings that featured pearls, to try to bring that “sense of luminosity” to the radishes.

Focused and Detailed Work

Although he has exhibited drawings, these days Wert works mostly in oil for its versatility and range of options from opacity to transparency. He embraces oil paint’s slow drying time because it allows him to delve into an extreme level of detail and to proceed slowly. But drawing still plays a big part in his painting process.

“I’m not prolific,” he says. In fact, he works on one painting at a time through a challenging 14-hour workday. He has learned to take several breaks each day and to include an hour of exercise as well. “I may not work fast, but I can be pretty focused when I get going. If I take a few days away from a complicated project, I ‘lose my place,’ and it can take a long

Text continued on page 30

ABOVE: Wert professes to feel some apprehension before undertaking a difficult project: “With a sense of dread, I tend to choose the complex flowers that inspire me.” Balancing reflections in *Spider Mum* (oil, 12x16) had to be tricky—the vibrant yellow backdrop throws its own light, casting shadows that extend toward the viewer, while, in its bright reflection in the rivulets of water, the mum seems to be melting.

Make It Glow!

To achieve a luminous glow, Wert cautions against using too much white paint. “When you want to have a light value, paint thinly over a white ground,” he says, “if you add white to your hue, you reduce its saturation. Every oil color has a mass tone, which is its opaque color, and an undertone, which is its transparent color when applied thinly. Some colors, like phthalos, can be dramatically different—almost like two different paints. First, try mixing quinacridone red with white; then try applying quinacridone red very thinly on a white ground, and you’ll see what I mean: the transparent hue will be a vivid red, while the tinted hue will be pink.”

Luminous and Dynamic Complexity

BY ERIC WERT



1. Begin with a line drawing. I start with a very light gestural line drawing (the contrast is enhanced in this photo). At this stage I avoid details; the goal is to establish the composition and general proportions, and to get a feeling for the movement and rhythm of the subjects. I work with a number of sources—from life as well as from numerous photographs—and play with scale and placement. For example, I enlarged and lowered the flower in the center considerably to create a focal point and to deepen the space within the bouquet.



2. Complete the grisaille. Over the years, my compositions have become more complex, and I find the grisaille (monochromatic underpainting) very helpful as it allows me to organize the composition and the distribution of value without also having to worry about color. The grisaille is a bit light because values will darken as color is applied. Translucent areas where I want to convey a “glow” are left to the white of the canvas.



5. Finish with the tabletop. I think of the tabletop reflections as a sort of reward after I've finished the hard work of painting the main subjects and background. The reflections are my chance to play with abstraction and to add a bit of movement to the composition. To begin, I use a muted version of the palette from the reflecting subject to block in the shape of its reflection. Then I sketch out the general placement of the water, if there is any, on the table. I tend to use pools and rivulets of water as a way to draw the eye around the composition and to activate areas that seem flat. I paint the reflections in the water with a more saturated palette than the tabletop so you can see the difference between water and table.

Learn More
ONLINE 

For a link to larger step-by-step images for this demonstration, go to www.artistsnetwork.com/tamonlinetoc.





3. Apply the local color. I glaze local color over the grisaille. This stage gives me a chance to see how the color works with the composition as a whole. You might notice that I added a leaf on the far right to help provide a counterpoint to the red vase. I concentrated on refining the edges of forms and played with the rhythm of the ruffled petals. At this point, even though I'm itching to start painting surface details, it's important to take the time and become confident that the composition works well as a whole. It's still easy to make changes at this step, but making changes later can be very difficult.



4. Finesse the individual elements. With the underpainting finished, I can refine the individual subjects, one at a time. I have hundreds of photographic sources (by this time the flowers are long dead), and I find it important to shoot many views of the same subject. Multiple photographs allow me a better understanding of the volume of the subject, and with that understanding, I can play with the rhythm and movement of the form, while still retaining accuracy of the structure of the fruit or flower.



ABOVE: *Crush* (oil, 24x48)

Text continued from page 27
time to build up steam again.” Most canvases take him two months to complete.

An Ever-Evolving Process

Each painting begins with an application

Why the Waterdrops?

In the disarray of Wert’s overturned vases, of course, there would be water scattered on his polished surfaces. In addition to using the droplets to increase the detail and drama in his compositions—and to balance the intricacy of some of his fabric backdrops—the artist also uses the small pools and rivulets, which he now easily paints from his imagination, to energize certain areas and draw the viewer’s eye through his paintings. To differentiate between the reflections on the tabletop and those in the waterdrops, he paints the latter with a more saturated palette.

of gesso applied with a squeegee for a very smooth surface. Wert calls his subsequent process “a hodgepodge of techniques.” First, he pencils in the composition. For the past five years, his next step has been to paint a grisaille, a preliminary monochrome painting over the pencil drawing. “It gives a sort of preview,” he says, “establishing boundaries and a sense of light and shadow. I paint the grisaille lightly, as values will darken after the color is applied.” He leaves the areas that need to “glow,” white, so that after the glazing they “pop” with color.

He describes the following steps: “Next,

BELOW: Whenever it’s possible, Wert prefers to work from life. When the flowers have withered or the fruit has shriveled, he tries to have extra subjects available. The flowers for *Wildflowers* (oil, 12x16) are from his own garden. “I try to find my subjects as locally as possible,” he says, “either by growing them myself or finding them at the local farmers’ market.”



Private collection



I start to lay in very general local colors (true colors of the subjects) to get an idea of the overall color relationships and to see what needs to be changed. At this point I like to choose one element to finish, to use as an anchor and have as a reference for how to resolve other areas. I choose whichever spot seems most exciting or challenging and next paint those details and color subtleties

directly—all wet into wet. Then I may come back with some very thin layers/glazes to make some color adjustments.” Wert then works his way around the painting, finessing one element at a time.

Because the reflective tabletops mimic the arrangements above them, Wert paints the tabletops last. He invents these as he goes, “so they add to the energy of the composition,” with the water rivulets leading the eye into the arrangements.

ABOVE: The vase in *Deluge* (oil, 48x60) was purchased in Thailand by some friends of Wert’s. “They weren’t willing to let me break their vase,” he says, “so I broke a few smaller ceramic vases and used them to study the shards and cracking patterns.”

All-Revealing Illumination

A very complicated fabric of light is woven into Wert’s paintings, and this, as much as



ABOVE: “The most interesting piece of furniture in my studio,” says Wert, “is my wall-mounted easel. It can accommodate up to an 8-foot-wide painting or several smaller ones, and it can be easily raised and lowered with a boat winch. Having an easily adjustable easel allows me to maintain good posture while I work in different areas of the painting and helps reduce back and arm strain. No more standing on stepladders to reach the top and lying on the floor to reach the bottom of the painting!”

The Vanitas Tradition

Eric Wert’s paintings embody a significant message—borrowed from Ecclesiastes 1:2: “All is vanity”—that life is fragile, and all is not what it seems. He works magic with his unique twist on the vanitas theme, popular in Northern Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries. painters’ favored symbolism includes peeled fruit, cut flowers, insects, skulls, and shiny glass and mirrors, sometimes broken. Several years ago, Wert painted beautiful potted flowers, standing in dirt without their pots—lost in a surreal way. His current work focuses on cut flowers, and arrangements of fruit and vegetables.

anything, accounts for the fantasy aspect of his work. Wert regards his light as “all-revealing illumination,” as opposed to a more romantic use of light that conceals, as with atmospheric lighting or with chiaroscuro. “Ironically, the more my subject is revealed,” he says, “the more mysterious and otherworldly it becomes.”

Wert considers every element in the painting in terms of three qualities of light: direct

light, which contains the color of the light source; reflected light, which contains the

BELOW: In *Red Paisley* (oil, 40x36), the stems and leaves of the flowers show us their backsides, while Wert has strewn fallen petals in a cryptic pattern, as if to communicate in code. No translation is needed, as the artist again proves to us that there’s something beyond what we think we’re seeing.



Private collection



LEFT: The idea for *Roughage* (oil, 24x30) was one Wert had for years, but he was never able to get the cabbages to work together in a bowl. "I spent lots of time gently propping them up with putty," he says, "but after many photographs, I realized it wasn't working." So he shot separate photos of each item and used Photoshop to arrange the composition. "If I can't see what's happening in the darker areas of the photographs," Wert says, "I change the contrast levels in Photoshop to better understand those spaces."

color of whatever is reflected; and any translucence of the subject, which will often be a very saturated form of the subject's local color. To prepare for this depiction, he photographs with many different exposures. "A darker exposure allows me to see details in the light areas more clearly, while darker areas will be obscured," says the artist. "A lighter exposure does the opposite. By having a range of exposures, I can see clearly all of the information—from details in the lightest highlight to those in the darkest shadow. The light in my paintings is very different from the light you see in any source photo." Wert even asked his gallery what sort of light his work is shown under, which happens to be incandescent light, so that's what he uses in the studio.

Raising the Bar

This artist's thorough, deliberate reference preparation and drawing and painting methods demand discipline and patience. "Frustration is part of the process and should be embraced," he says. "Some think that at some point drawing is supposed to come naturally, but art is like an athletic event. It's not supposed to be easy, and if it is, you should raise the bar." Wert believes in continually challenging himself: "After 10 years of painting professionally, I thought it would

Meet Eric Wert



Drawing was Eric Wert's first love as he grew up on the family tree farm in Portland, Oregon. After graduation from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, he began working at Chicago's Field Museum as a scientific illustrator in the department of anthropology. The job entailed drawing artifacts as they might have been when they were in use. The parallax view of drawing not what he saw but some other reality was clearly formative for the work he does today. After earning a master of fine arts degree from Northwestern University in Chicago, he returned to Portland as a professional painter. His work is represented by several galleries—William Baczek Fine Arts, Northampton, Massachusetts; Gallery Henoch, New York City; Miller Gallery, Cincinnati, Ohio; and Wendt Gallery, Laguna Beach, California—and will be on display at the Boston International Fine Art Fair with William Baczek Fine Arts this November 15–18. Learn more at his website, www.werteric.com.

get easier. But every time my skills improve, I find myself creating more challenging projects. If there isn't a challenge that forces me to stay attentive or risk ruining the piece, I lose interest." ■

BJ FOREMAN is an art critic who lives in Cincinnati.