

Eric Wert

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ERIC WERT was born in Portland, Oregon in 1976. He received a BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and an MFA from Northwestern University. He currently paints full time from his studio in Portland. His work has been shown across the U.S. and in Europe. In the last decade, he has had ten solo exhibits and has participated in over forty group exhibitions. He has been featured in numerous publications, including *American Art Collector*, *New American Paintings* and *Artists Magazine*. Public collections include the New Britain Museum of American Art, in Connecticut, and the Illinois State Museum. He is represented by William Baczek Fine Arts in Northampton, Massachusetts, and currently has work on display with Sullivan Goss in Santa Barbara, and Evoke Contemporary in Santa Fe.





Roses & Hobnail oil on panel 24"x18"



Q&A ERIC WERT

Explain your process.

A painting like *Deluge* often begins years before the painting is started. I'll have an idea of what I want, but it can take forever to find just the right subjects to make it work. The vase was bought in Thailand by friends. They weren't willing to let me shatter it, so I bought a cheap vase and used that to study the broken ceramic structure.

I start by arranging the still life and take hundreds of digital photos at many different exposures. Each element is shot from several angles to get a sense of the volume of the subject. Using photos and sketches, I get an idea of what the scale of the composition will be. The painting begins with a very fluid line drawing where I can take the time to make adjustments to the

composition. When the composition seems to work, I generally develop the painting piece by piece rather than as a whole. For *Deluge*, I started with the background and finished it before moving to the foreground elements. I have tried working the entire canvas in the past, but with complicated subjects I need to finish each element individually or I lose concentration.

Often my favorite part is at the end. When the painting starts to feel "real", I'll put away the still life objects and the photographs and respond to the reality in the painting. At this point the painting seems to take on a personality of its own. I try not to be too analytical, and just react to what the painting wants to be fully realized and complete.

Do you have a ritual you follow

Uzumaki oil on panel 6"x8"



Deluge oil on canvas 48"x60"





Dahlias oil on panel 30"x40"

before each new work is started?

When I finish a painting, I clean my studio well, get a haircut, and tend to all the aspects of my life that have been ignored for the previous weeks or months. I usually have a new piece composed and ready to go before the previous one is finished. When a painting is done, it can leave me feeling directionless and depressed because I've been so focused. Having a new project to transition into right away helps keep the momentum going.

How does your family life come into play with your artistic life?

My wife is a magazine editor and a fiber artist. As an editor, she takes a hard and critical look at my works in progress. It can hurt the ego when she dissects something

I've been working on for days, but her honest eyes are always invaluable in retrospect. As a fiber artist, for years she would drag me along with her to fabric stores. Over time, I began to appreciate the fabrics and patterns and they are now an integral part of my paintings. Now I'm the one who drags her to the fabric store.

Do you collect any art yourself and if so what, if anything, was the first piece you sold or gave to someone?

My wife and I collect art from our friends and colleagues, as well as small works by artists we admire. We have an eclectic collection that ranges from realist still-life to fiber and textile art. As an artist, I have found it valuable to have the experience of buying work,

working with gallery owners, and being in the shoes of the collector. Having a collector's perspective has helped me in the studio to stay grounded and focused on making work that is striking at first sight, but also complex enough to be rewarding over many years. We buy pieces we'll want to look at every day; in my studio practice I strive to make work that is equally rewarding for others.

The first piece I gave as a gift was a painting of a Protea flower done in memory of my cousin, Elizabeth Bowers. The painting is now used as the logo for the Elizabeth Bowers Zambia Education Fund, which works to educate young women in the town where she worked as a Peace Corps volunteer. (www.bethsgirls.org)



Citrus oil on panel 22"x24"

What tool or supply can you not live/work without?

Along with coffee and cheap brushes, my computer has become an essential tool in the studio. I can use it to collage source images, with five or more views or exposures of the same subject on the screen at the same time. While I like to refer to reality when possible, digital photos are so helpful when working with perishable subjects.

Access to the internet also provides a wealth of research options and subject matter. For example, I hid a salamander in my painting Dahlias and it was easy to find hundreds of images of a salamander species that was regionally appropriate to the subject flower species. Recently, I used an open source CAD program to solve a perspective problem that had been tormenting me for weeks!

"I want to create an image that one can be lost within. To me, still life painting is about looking intensely, about intimately exploring a subject. I hope that my paintings can convey that sense of intensity and fascination."

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Jade oil on panel 50"x40"

INTROSPECTIVE: *JADE*

My most recent piece *Jade* was probably the most challenging to date. It was inspired by the 19th century German Romantic landscape painter Caspar David Friedrich, whose paintings of trees appear both majestic and ominous. As an American urban dweller, my everyday experience of nature is much more prosaic. *Jade* is an attempt to reflect Friedrich's iconic vision of sublime nature within a completely domestic object. The jade plant in this painting is a warm weather plant that has probably never even been allowed outdoors. When observed closely, even this innocuous houseplant can become a symbol of the complexity and mystery of nature.

The dramatic overhead lighting was intended to give *Jade* an almost religious glow from within, and also to showcase the translucency of the leaves. The horizon line of the painting is low to make the subject appear more imposing, and to draw the viewer up into the plant. While I wasn't expecting it to be easy, the painting ended up being more difficult than anticipated. I thought that a rhythm would evolve for painting the leaves of the jade. However, I was continually surprised by the amount of variation throughout the plant and I was forced to treat each leaf individually. Several months of painting hundreds of leaves, each with its own unique nuances of hue, texture and light, became a rigorous technical challenge as well as a test of endurance.



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