

Still life like a sort of motion **Interview with Robert Lemay¹**

by Monika Włodzik & Witold Wachowski
The interview was realized in August 2014.

You live in a special place in the world. You wrote on your blog that you wouldn't appreciate flowers and summer as much if it were not for the seven months of winter in Edmonton. Do you find wild roses, the floral emblem of Alberta, in any way inspiring? What other places do you enjoy? Botanically or otherwise?

There are wild roses growing on a path near my house. A few years ago, I clipped a couple of them and took photographs but I never painted them. They had interesting textures and shapes which you don't get from greenhouse flowers but in the end they just didn't speak to me. For me to paint flowers there has to be a confluence of light, shape, and my own mood.

Alberta is the accident of my birth, but places I have chosen to visit usually have great museums. New York and Amsterdam are favorites for their streetscapes and friendly people.

What techniques do you use if you can share the secret? What are your expectations from paints, paintbrushes and lighting while you work?

My techniques are fairly direct and come from observation of the painters whom I admire. For many years Vermeer and Velasquez were top of my list but lately I've returned to Rembrandt, de La Tour, and Degas as my teachers. Part of the beauty of being a painter is one can look over the shoulder of these long dead artists and learn directly how each one shaded drapery or painted highlights. Sometimes from reproductions, but most often from viewing originals. This is why I try to travel.

My basic technique is wet into wet where I start with a focal point and try to match the color and tone from the photograph. I then adjust and work outwards in facets in a way I think Cezanne would have. So, not the classical roughed-in under painting, but a more direct approach. I'm trying to draw slowly and then paint more freely once I've got the shapes I want.

¹ The Artist's webpage <http://robertlemay.com>

I'm primarily self-taught in this, because at the University of Alberta in the early eighties, it was a school which was primarily influenced by Colour Field painting. So we had Kenneth Noland, Antony Caro, Stanley Boxer and Clement Greenberg as visitors. All important in their field, but not really useful for someone who wants to paint figuratively.

My expectations from paint and brushes is the hope that they transform a working photograph into a painting which is not merely a record but an object with its own truth and coherence as an experience.

It seems that you know all about the properties and secrets of colours and light. Are any aspects of your work that you see as particularly intriguing or, perhaps, challenging?

Art since the Renaissance has used the idea of the canvas as a two-dimensional surface containing the illusion of the third dimension. The secret of the illusion is the tonal variation which suggests objects and space within the illusory world behind the picture plane. The challenge is to understand that each new generation reinvents the relationships and forms used – the sign system of painting. So that just because I use the Renaissance and Baroque as my guide, I don't paint old men in funny hats. The influences, both conscious and unconscious, of the time one finds oneself in is the intriguing part of being an artist.

What is so special about flowers? How do you see flowers? Are they your signature mark, like bottles for Morandi?

There was a time when I thought I would never paint another flower. Other subjects, like fruit, drapery, books, typewriters and empty soda cans, seemed to address both formal and emotive concerns for me more than flowers. But then I saw a new way to explore the significant form of flowers. The enlarged scale and simplified presentation eliminated other aspects of the still life – the table plane, space between objects, etc, which I had grown tired of.

Painting a flower five feet tall transforms it for the viewer. This is why most traditional flower painting doesn't interest me. The scale of my flowers relates more to figure painting.

What are your views on botanical art? Do you find Victorian botanical plates inspiring? You seem to like the semi-scientific properties of the white background effect. Do you have your favourite botanical artists? How important are illustrative concerns in your work?

I like the quality of a lot of early botanical art. They were working alongside scientists with the same goal – to look closely and understand what they were seeing – not an idealized “art” viewpoint, but the same desire to observe and record. I currently use a light, uninflected background to highlight the observation of form in the flowers. Today, photographs can probably illustrate and document better than paintings. The painting is, instead, a record of the artist’s interaction with the subject.



[Photo from Robert Lemay's archive]

Have ever collaborated with any conservationists or horticulturists?

I’ve read a little about flowers – the symbolism of the rose, why the Chinese like plum blossoms, but this isn’t necessarily how I “know” flowers. My interest is in what I can do with the “ready-made” shapes and colours of flowers, trying to extend the still life tradition in this way.

You told the editor of *Edmonton Journal* that you have always painted still lifes and never tried other genres. Have you never tried to paint any objects in motion?

Someone once said, “still life is about contemplation, and therefore not for the young.” I’ve always been “old” and my most special moments have been in quiet observation and reflection. Working from photos, I look at a split second in time, an instant, and then expand it in the painting of the work over the course of weeks. This is a sort of motion.

You are seen as a realist painter. It seems that your objects have their own, profound individualities, like human faces, beautiful and true, with their wrinkles and bruises. Is this anti-perfection stance your deliberate intervention in our photoshopped reality?

The realist impulse in art is always to see what is there, what actually is. Caravaggio and Vermeer show us aspects of this. Marc Quinn has made some paintings based on his sculptures of flowers frozen in perfection. My flowers try to show the life cycle and connect to the memento mori tradition.

There is also an abstract quality to your paintings. We think that it is possible to see your magnified flowers as reminiscent of imposing architectural forms or Renaissance draperies and clothing, as their ordinariness is diminished by their size. How would you define your position in relation to abstraction or, for that matter, abstract art?

I like all kinds of art. Cy Twombly is one of my favorite painters. Marina Abramović's work is intriguing. But I seem most drawn to the depiction of "things." Most art is a form of abstraction. You are taking a part to represent a whole but many have even questioned whether there is a truly non-representational art. Robert Motherwell said there is no such thing as a non-objective red, that red only had power as a pigment because of its associations.

In terms of mood, your paintings seem to evoke quite contemplative, zen-like musings on the transitoriness of nature. Are your paintings in any way philosophical?

I think all paintings have to ask a question. Since they are not for depicting or recording great battles or kings any more they must serve another purpose. Zen and Wabi-Sabi spiritual values state that Truth comes from the observation of nature and that greatness exists in the inconspicuous and overlooked object.

Two rather typical questions: How was your own artistic taste shaped, starting, let's say, from early childhood? Are there any old masters who have had a decisive influence on your style and technique?

People have observed that infants' earliest impulses are to reach out and grab whatever objects are within their grasp. This may be the original impulse to still life – the exploration of the visual and tactile nature of objects outside of ourselves.

As a kid, I always loved history. The school library had books about ancient Britain, Rome, Egypt. Partly, I loved escaping into the past, but I also liked finding out about other people and cultures. So as part of general history, I started reading about Leonardo, Michelangelo, Rembrandt, and they, not Napoleon, became my heroes.

Leonardo still influences me because it was the Renaissance which began the scientific inquiry into vision, geography, the nature of the cosmos, mapping, lenses, the exploitation of natural resources, also known as “the voyages of discovery,” modern banking, etc. In short, the processes we are still experiencing now. So my work is based on the optics and perspective of the Renaissance.

Would you say that your temperament and personality is expressed in your paintings?

Yes. Matisse said the work is finished when the artist has painted themselves out of it. But the impulse to make art must derive from the need to express one’s own subjective thoughts and feelings about the time and place one finds oneself in.

How much, in your opinion, have the processes of art perception and appreciation changed since, for example, the Renaissance? To what degree are they now different processes?

My central idea is that the world we now live in owes a lot to the mapping and classification and quantifying of the natural world begun in the Renaissance. One of the biggest changes in the dissemination of art has been the internet. We wouldn’t be conversing without it. And this has made it easy to see what’s going on in Hong Kong, New York, or Warsaw, without leaving home, or having to read ARTnews Magazine. As with music and books, there are fewer gatekeepers deciding what people can see or hear.

To what extent viewers are present in your art? What do you demand from them? Would you say that your paintings have quite a specific or rather a more universal appeal?

In still life, the viewer sees the same thing the artist sees: the object staring back. This is what I want to communicate to the viewer – the excitement I feel when looking. When you paint non-referentially you are asking the viewer to “speak your language.” The beauty of realism is you can manipulate the abstract qualities of art – shape, colours, space, light – using recognizable objects, everyday objects. Working painters understand that a realist painting and an abstract painting have more in common as mark making on a flat surface than either has with the “real world.” Any artist’s appeal – be they writers, musicians, or painters – consists of the number of people who feel moved by the work. This may be 10 or 10 million.

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Painting on the cover: "Garden Rose" by Robert Lemay

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