

Mary Gottschalk: Artist Statement, 2010

## Introduction

Throughout history, still life paintings have been rife with narratives. Objects in the composition serve as anecdotes about the transience of life and beauty, love, moral lessons, or the nature of everyday life through use of the objects. I build upon the still life tradition by painting matches and candles as the focus in narratives about life, love and death. In my paintings I intensify the narrative by anthropomorphizing matches and candles, transforming them into main characters of a love story. I turn the still life into a theatrical stage where imagination and belief can walk the line between reality and fiction. In creating and explaining this body of work and my intentions, I refer to the work and interpretations of contemporary artists Emily Eveleth, Wayne Thiebaud, and Eric Joyner, as well as historical artists such as Caravaggio and the Dutch Still Life and Genre Masters.

## Emily Eveleth

Painter Emily Eveleth creates large-scale oil paintings of donuts. She employs heavy chiaroscuro, a loose painting style, monumental scale, and detailed visual description of the donuts to create highly dramatic settings for ordinary objects. Janet Koplos describes Eveleth's donut paintings as "sublime" and "spiritual," referencing clouds, landscapes, food, or bodies. John Stomberg insists that Eveleth builds theaters for "monumentally mundane" objects, where "comedy and tragedy vie to dominate the theme." In her paintings donuts lie in couples and groups with clear foregrounds and backgrounds, creating apparent narratives with donut characters (Israel). Through her paintings she creates a tension between this comedy and tragedy, as the meanings and symbols are interpreted differently by the viewer. Nico Isreal points out many of the tensions and oppositions in Eveleth's works that make the paintings successful. He explains how they "conceal as they reveal", that they are "theatrical and restrained...open as a wound and yet somehow private, they seem to invite the viewer's gaze, acknowledge it, and then absorb it, folding it into their won particular dramas. They are monumental and bold but maintain a strong sense of discretion." The paintings maintain ambiguity in the poses of the donuts, which could be "wounded" or embracing, labeled with equally obscure titles, carrying both positive and negative connotations (Israel). In an interview with Edward Gomez, Eveleth discusses how she was attracted to the donut because of its "beautiful, perfect form" and that her paintings are meant to be neither ironic nor cynical. She also mentioned several of her influences, including Flemish painter Hans Memling, Caravaggio and Zurbaran. Like Eveleth, I use paint as a medium to create dramas for simple objects. My matches and candles enact characters in a state-like space filled with the heavy chiaroscuro technique credited to Caravaggio. My paintings contain a certain amount of ambiguity; the poses of my characters, dramatic lighting, and close perspective indicate meaning behind the forms. Depicted gestures of the objects is crucial in both Eveleth's paintings and my own, creating a tension between grace, fragility, violence and tenacity. While Eveleth's paintings hint at a narrative, however, the story is the driving force in my paintings. She does not rely upon sequence, each painting serving as its own narrative and description of light, form, and space. Sequence plays an important role in my work, however, and I allow the viewer to decide the nature of the sequence that forms a constant thread of story throughout the paintings.

## Wayne Thiebaud

Contemporary artist Wayne Thiebaud (1920- ) also creates paints still life artworks where he seeks to realize objects in their form, color, and relation to space. His paintings, drawings, and prints

show prepared foods or make-up or toys in various sized groups placed into ambiguous spaces. He experiments with hues of different colors in the highlights and shadows of the objects, which introduces an expressive, emotive aspect in his paintings. Like Eveleth he focuses on the formalistic qualities of objects in his paintings, and chooses his content based on their simple forms as well as their context to a specific time, place, and culture. In his interview with McGough, Thiebaud discusses his interest in prepared food, how it has been manipulated or played around with by people, and what it reveals about culture (9). He is largely influenced by the work of Chardin, Mondrian, Morandi, and Van Gogh (11). In making my own work I am drawn to Thiebaud's art for his stylistic rendering of objects of mark and invented color. I place multiple complimentary and analogous hues beside each other in highlights and shadows to create aesthetic and expressive forms, but unlike Thiebaud I am primarily interested conveying narrative through the forms as characters. My candles and matches reside in dark, moody spaces that accentuate the role of light and flame while Thiebaud's subjects often inhabit empty, open, flat spaces where objects function as descriptions of a decorative surface than illusory depth of real space.

### Eric Joyner

Eric Joyner is a contemporary painter and illustrator of robots and donuts. Like Thiebaud, he focuses on these mass-produced objects that reference pop culture and art and painting them with "heavy pigment and saturated colors" (McCaig-Welles Gallery). His paintings are imaginative scenes and scenarios where toy robots take on personalities, emotions, and desires. In a press release for one of his shows at the McCaig-Welles Gallery, his style is described as "decidedly realist" though he depicts a "whimsical world." His works are full of a variety of moods; playful, humorous, plaintive, lonely, and frightening (McCaig-Welles Gallery). I relate elements of Joyner's series of paintings on the Rock 'Em Sock 'Em toys to my paintings where the lit matches take the center stage. In his painting, *The Blow*, Joyner referenced the *Dempsey and Firpo* painting by George Bellows in 1924 (Kellog). In this painting, the red robot knocks the blue robot out of the boxing ring. Surrounding them are the wildly excited audience of other robots and toys. Joyner describes the toys with saturated colors that recede into the background. Stylistically, Joyner depicts his toys realistically and tight, as they might look in a traditional still life arrangement. However, his toys seem to move on their own accord, their punches and swerves magnified by the thick impressionistic lines in the negative space around them describing their motion. There is a clear narrative presented in the story in height of the action in his series as well as in my own. In my paintings I do not depict the props I use to hold my matches in place, but my scenes are still based in real, physical set-ups unlike Joyner's invented scenes. The matches in my paintings enact a graceful fight likened to boxing, where characters compete and risk their fates. I do not include the raucous crowd in my paintings but rather one or two still witnesses removed from the violent action.

### Caravaggio

Michelangelo Merisi, known as "Caravaggio," is known for his realistic genre paintings from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Of his surviving works and copies, nearly all paintings contain people and several contain still lifes. His paintings carry narratives, many based on the saints and scripture. He emphasizes drama with tenebrism, heightened chiaroscuro created with dramatic lighting in a dark space, and his realistic depictions of everyday (genre) people in the roles of the main characters. These realistic depictions were a significant controversy in his time, as many of his elders and contemporaries sought works of the Renaissance for source material such as the human form, believing that those artists had already succeeded in characterizing the most beautiful human forms in nature. As Bellori stated in his criticism, quoted in Hibbard's book, "...when [Caravaggio] came upon someone in town who pleased him he made no attempt to improve upon the creation of

nature" (51). While his contemporaries depicted gods, saints, heroes and patrons idealistically, Caravaggio's gods, saints, and heroes resembled his models, often members of the working-class. By choosing to represent realistic, specific, emotional characters, Caravaggio could capture the momentary glances and expressions that gave his subjects vitality and depth. This representation of reality is relatable to the viewer, making the conceptual stories concrete and believable. I wanted my work more grounded in reality than Joyner's paintings, and Caravaggio's work serves as a significant source in creating dramatic and convincing spaces and characters. Unlike Caravaggio's highly specific human models, however, I have relatively non-descriptive objects as my characters. They are common and seemingly unimportant objects, like Caravaggio's models, who are given significant roles. I make these objects more specific through understanding Thiebaud's mastery of painting similar objects that represent their unifying and differing traits through unique colors in shadows and highlights. These dramatic shadows and highlights are often from a hidden light source that shines a directional beam into the space, as well as by lit candles that illuminate objects only within a limited proximity of their flames. Candle light is not only a crucial lighting element in my paintings but is the main action that influences the story.

## Dutch Masters

Though the Dutch Masters are arguably distinctive from each other in their subject matter and individual artistic decisions, In my process I look to the trends and traditions in Dutch Still Life and Genre painting to understand my own work. My inclusion of still life, genre objects that I meticulously arrange and paint connected me to the still life tradition, and my desire to implicate somewhat hidden meanings and narratives identify me directly with the Dutch Masters. There are multiple reads on the symbols and intentions in Dutch paintings through the lenses of philosophy, anthropology and history (Brusati 145) to which my paintings relate and much of the symbology and meaning upon which my paintings depend was popularized by the Dutch. The transient nature of flame is likened to life and death as well as to love with its destructive and beautiful qualities. Flame also serves as a dramatic lighting element creating chiaroscuro that creates the drama I reference. Like the Dutch Masters I also blend the lines of realism in creating seemingly accurate depictions of objects in ways that do not exist in reality. For example, many Dutch flower paintings portray a bouquet of flowers that bloom in different seasons. The Dutch Masters would use their own or other artists' sketches and studies to combine the various plants and creatures and heighten their believability through detailed descriptions "...such as the tiny veins delicately enumerated on the petal of a flower, the complex play of light as it passes through and reflects off of glass..." to appear accurate (Brusati 145). I also fabricate a reality by creating a stage and posing my objects, though I omit the props used to keep them there because I prioritize their animation in the narrative over their actual limits as objects.

## Conclusion

By utilizing formal, technical and conceptual components from artists such as Eveleth, Thiebaud, Joyner, Caravaggio, and the Dutch Masters, my work actively combines and compares components from each of them. Each of these artists are connected to the painting tradition of realism, though their modes and motivations differ. The Britannica Encyclopedia describes artistic realism as the "accurate, detailed, unembellished depiction of nature or of contemporary life. Realism rejects imaginative idealization in favor of a close observation of outward appearances." Realist artists typically try to make their work accessible to the common viewer, typically representing the common man and common objects (genre art). The clear rendering of common objects serves as a language the viewer can recognize, and can often convey messages and meaning through stories and events. Realism is a slightly problematic term in art, however, as it carries multiple

connotations and meanings contextualized within the culture and philosophy surrounding the art. Linda Nochlin discusses Realism as the dominant art movement from 1840 to 1870 and 1880. She says the aim was to give a “truthful, objective and impartial representation of the real world, based on meticulous observation of contemporary life” (13), giving more credit to fact and accuracy than imagination and invention. Seen in this light, my work and the work of my sources relate to this description differently. Thiebaud invents color, and Joyner imagines scenes. Caravaggio blends contemporary people with historical stories and events. I create and alter my source material to fit an imaginative story, and invent color while the depicted spaces feel realistic, though exaggerated. Nochlin also describes the Realist artists’ connection to photography for its apparently unfiltered lens to capture a specific instant or moment, not unlike the intent of the Impressionists (29). Photography is an important part of my process to capture the fleeting moment the flame introduces to the set-up. This is part of the drama in my work, based on an actual, documented event, but not one that occurred naturally. Thus, my relation to realism is predominantly based in my selective depiction of reality, deviating from accuracy to create a fictional story about real objects who come to life and experience human-like emotions, fears, desires, and feelings.