ARTISTIC DEVELOPMENT: INFLUENCES
IN MY QUEST FOR REALISM

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by

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Constantine Carafis, a twentieth century Greek poet, describes life as being a voyage to Ithica. At times I believe that the study of art is like a voyage with Odysseus, because an artist must also navigate through obstacles in order to arrive at his life long quest, the elusive masterpiece.

My quest for learning about the art of painting has taken me on an Odyssey through Columbia, New York, Spain, California, Mexico and Florence. Along each stop I have met different artists and teachers who have taught me different ways of seeing which have influenced and assisted me in my work.

I will proceed in this paper from nineteen seventy-five to nineteen eighty-five, tracing my influences and developments as a student of art. I will conclude this paper with a commentary on my M.F.A. exhibition and an assessment of how my work fits into contemporary trends in the field of art.

Art and Design High School January 1975

I was fortunate to be able to attend a specialized art high school where I met Max Guinsberg and Irvin Greenberg, my first teachers in oil painting. In their class we painted directly from life and were encouraged to study the Dutch Masters, Rembrandt and Vermeer. We divided our time between painting portraits and figure studies of each other and working on still lifes.

The class commenced at seven in the morning and continued until ten. Our teachers would paint with us, during the first half of the morning and would then give criticism in the latter half. We benefitted immensely
from observing the way they developed their paintings. An "alla-prima" technique of sketching and blocking out our shapes with a brush was employed by the teachers and students.

There was an unusual sense of dedication and love for painting by a few talented and sensitive students who participated in this class. As we painted we would inspire, encourage and assist each other. An advantage of studying in Manhattan was that we were able to visit the many fine museums which contained masterpieces by the painters we admired.

University at New Paltz: September 1975 - May 1977

Admiring the Catskill Mountains during my first visit to New Paltz, I was reminded of the Andes in Bogota, Columbia. The beauty of these mountains influenced me in my decision to stay and obtain my Bachelor of Fine Arts degree at this university. After studying in Manhattan for three years I longed for an opportunity to paint from nature.

My B.F.A. degree course at New Paltz began with Basic Studio courses which consisted of exercises in color and design. The projects objectively explored value, texture, color scales and space (interior and exterior) in two and three dimensional media. While I could perceive the validity of these projects I yearned to return to painting from life.

When I did proceed to the painting courses, I was disappointed to discover myself in the midst of teachers and students who were involved in Abstract Expressionism, Conceptual Art and non-representational painting. Realism, portraiture and subject matter were of minor importance.
Many students were more concerned with following the latest styles than with contemplating the content of what they portrayed.

My intimate studies of people and nature were dwarfed by the large scale abstract expressionist painting which dominated the school. Most students and faculty members were not interested in creating a three dimensional illusion of volume and space as they preferred to retain a flat picture plane. The dramatic chiaroscuro of Caravaggio and Rembrandt, that I admired, did not excite many painting students at New Paltz as they were disinterested in the magic of creating light and darkness on a canvas.

I did manage to meet two teachers and a few students who shared my interests in realism. My drawing and painting professors were both absorbed in the landscape and art history of the Hudson River, and they instilled in me an appreciation for painting outdoors. It was a refreshing change to be outside the confines of a studio.

At New Paltz I also had the memorable experience of meeting Dr. Mary Nickles, my English and Greek Literature professor, who stimulated me to reflect on poetry as a source of inspiration for themes in my painting.

Sevilla, Spain and Europe: September 1977–June 1978

After two years at New Paltz I decided it would be beneficial to my growth as a painter to spend a year abroad in Europe.

I selected Spain for several reasons; first I was fluent in Spanish and I longed for an opportunity to experience a Spanish culture; secondly, I was hoping to find an interest in figurative art and; thirdly, I dreamed
of visiting the Prado's magnificent collection of paintings.

My senses were completely captivated by Sevilla's Spanish and Arabic architecture, its mysterious streets, its splendid gardens and its melancholy flamenco music. I attended drawing and painting classes at the "Academia" where I was pleased to see students were still attracted to realism. In the drawing class we drew from the model daily for extensive periods of time, but the sessions were overcrowded and impersonal as there were over fifty students.

The rapport between the "Maestro" and the students was poor as he was feared as well as respected. While the aloof "Maestro" was unable and unwilling to dedicate much time to the students, his assistants were quite helpful and supportive. Despite the difficult conditions of the Academia, I did benefit from the constant drawing from life.

My first painting class at the Academia was the antithesis of my drawing class. The former was quite rigid and restrictive, while the latter was too casual and experimental. Our class would paint in a different style each week proceeding from warm painting style to cool colors, to fauvism, and on to cubism. There existed no sense of continuity or progression in one's work only endless experimentation.

During the second half of the year my teachers allowed me to visit another class where I was given the freedom to pursue the naturalistic style I preferred. Although I was disappointed with the Academia, the masterpieces in the Prado did impress me. The Vatican, the Sistine Ceiling, the Uffizi, the Palazzo Pitti, the Louvre and all the other incredible museums I had the opportunity
to visit in Europe were also overwhelming. All the
masterpieces of the Renaissance and Baroque confirmed my
belief in realism and representational art.

My year abroad enriched my life and assisted my
growth as a painter. Living in Spain and traveling in
Europe also expanded my awareness of other cultures.

New Paltz, N.Y.: September 1978-August 1974

When I returned to New Paltz, I was eager to advance
my painting skills. During the fall semester I enrolled
in a watercolor course. Prior to this course, I had
dabbled with watercolors, but I had not sincerely explored
this medium. My professor was a master at handling
watercolors, and his facility and love for teaching the
medium encouraged me to produce numerous paintings.

Learning to handle watercolors was a very positive
step toward my development as a painter. Watercolors
gave me a way to compose quick color studies, and they
allowed me a freedom which I did not possess in my oil
painting. The medium also encouraged me to explore land­
scapes more extensively.

For my Bachelor of Fine Arts exhibit I executed a
series of paintings inspired by the poetry of Gustavo
Aldolfo Becquer, Garcia Lorca and Constantine Carafis.
The paintings dealt with art, music and the themes of
creativity, death and departure. My B.F.A. exhibit also
consisted of portraits of my family and friends as well
as landscape paintings in watercolors and oils. While I
had successfully obtained my B.F.A. degree, I was cognizant
that this was only a stepping stone in my evolution as
a painter.
California, Santa Cruz and Mexico
December 1979—October 1980

In December I decided to visit universities in California to inquire about the possibility of continuing my studies and earning a Master of Fine Arts. I was dissatisfied with the type of painting that was being produced in these institutions. The seascapes, the Mexican-American murals and the oriental art I had a chance to admire were much more meaningful to me than all the hard-edged abstract, minimalist and installation pieces I had witnessed at the schools. After teaching and painting in California on my own for seven months I thought it would be advantageous to visit Mexico.

The warm Mexican light, the lush landscape and other young watercolorist in Lake Chapala inspired me to complete many watercolors. When I was not painting from nature I visited various museums and cities in Mexico.

At Teotihuacan I was quite moved by the majestic pyramids, and in Guadalajara and Mexico City I found the murals by Orozco, Rivera and Siquiros striking. Their dynamic and dramatic quality especially impressed me, though I did not care for some of their crude drawing and crowded compositions.

Still, I did appreciate their subject matter which dealt with their revolution, the "compesinos", their heroes and their history. Mexican painters were not embarrassed to be narrative and subjective in their work. The painters believed in what they painted and were ready to risk jail sentences for their beliefs.

Folk music from Mexico, Central and South America also poignantly reflected this concern for individual rights.
and social conditions. Listening to this folk music and studying the Mexican muralists made me question the role of an artist in society. Painters and musicians could be the consciences of their society if they cared and dared to express humanistic beliefs.

We can discern a parallel between Goya's paintings and etchings, and the Mexican muralists as they both documented the horrors and struggles of wars.

**New York: November 1980-August 1983**

When I returned to New York I studied part-time at the Art Students League with Harvey Dinnerstein and Jed Jacobs, two fine Realists. My drawing of the human figure still needed to improve, and my knowledge of anatomy was weak.

During this period I started to develop my pastel technique with Mr. Dinnerstein's guidance. Pastels were a strong link between my drawing and painting. In Mr. Jacobs class I concentrated on my three-dimensional modeling in pencil and with using straight angles to construct my drawings. Mr. Jacobs also encouraged me to work slowly as I had a tendency to rush my drawings.

In September 1981 I was awarded a scholarship to study etching and lithography at the Printmaking Workshop in Manhattan. This scholarship allowed me to attempt lithography for the first time and to advance my skills in etching. My images in printmaking consisted of portraits, landscapes and symbolic still lifes. Recalling my impressions of Mexico, I strived to depict images of nature together with portraits of war victims.

The diversity of artists in the workshop from various nationalities was stimulating as I absorbed many different
views on the art of printmaking. While I continued to progress in my drawings, paintings and prints, I inquired about graduate art schools in Europe.

**Rosary Graduate School, Florence: September 1983-May 1984**

It was gratifying to return to Florence and to have the opportunity to concentrate full-time on my studies. As soon as I viewed the Villa, I was stimulated to paint. I immediately commenced drawings and paintings of the garden and its surrounds. San Domenico and Fiesole offered a wealth of inspirational vistas for a painter interested in landscapes.

Once I received my museum pass, I started drawing from the monuments and masterpieces in Florence. With my drawing professor's assistance I conceived of a special project which consisted of copying sculptures and paintings in the Bargello, the Medici Chapel, the Uffizi and the Palazzo Pitti. By drawing from Donatello's and Michelangelo's sculpture I learned quite a bit about anatomy, structure, expression and movement in the human figure. When I drew from the paintings by Titian and Raphael I could recognize the subtleties that were missing in my painting. Studying these masterpieces motivated me to learn more about their techniques.

Unlike many students I did not believe that copying would ruin my creativity and individuality. The practice of copying is time-honored, and the greatest masters Michelangelo, Rubens and Rembrandt devoted their talents to doing so even in their mature years. My belief was if it served these great masters it could not do me any harm. With this in mind I attempted to learn all I could in my course "Painting Techniques of the Old Masters".
The following are the important concepts and techniques covered in this course. The limited palette encouraged me to exploit ten colors to their full potential. With this palette I was introduced to various earth reds and ochres which formed the basis of the Old Masters flesh painting technique. My knowledge of the Masters techniques was increased by discussing Sir Charles Eastlakes research on the Venetian methods and by visiting the Uffizi and the Pitti Palace collections. I also applied various techniques as described in Leonardo's treatise on painting, such as the use of the mirror, plumb line and the sight-size method. As Leonardo said the use of the mirror prevents the artist from becoming enarmed with his mannerisms. The mirror offered a fresh view of the work and helped in checking proportions, whereas the plumb line determined the vertical relationship of the figure.

Sight-size is a method of drawing to scale which was first described by Alberti in his treatise of fourteen thirty-six and has been subsequently practiced by many figurative painters.

Throughout the year I had been impressed by some of the other students watercolors, but it was not until the summer that I rediscovered this medium. My summer and early fall were dedicated to landscapes in oils, pastels and watercolors. I was enchanted by the Tuscan hills in Calenzano and Settignano. By the end of Summer my watercolors had considerably improved and contributed to the development of my oil paintings.

Rosary Graduate School: September 1984 - April 1985

During the past year at the Villa I believe my work has evolved due to numerous reasons. The first was the repeated practice of drawing from the model which helped
me become more confident in employing the sight-size method. By using internal measurements and straight lines to develop my drawing I was able to achieve more accurate results.

Secondly, learning to grind my own oil paint improved my color sensibility immensely. The hand-ground paint also affected my painting medium. Due to the higher quality of paint, I did not need much medium and consequently my painting surface was no longer slick and glossy.

Thirdly, I did more careful studies which led to accurate renderings in my oil paintings. The monoprint technique I experimented with in printmaking also gave me a way of evolving my compositional ideas.

Learning to put certain images aside in order to proceed to others was a difficult habit to acquire. My tendency is to work diligently on an image until it is completed. Now I have learned that sometimes it is better to walk away from an image and then return to it later with a fresh eye and an open mind.

The nature and scope of my M.F.A. exhibit can now be better appreciated as my background has been described. I tried to select a balanced variety of my best efforts from my last two years at the Villa so I was very critical about what pieces I chose.

My exhibit will be discussed in groups starting with my watercolors, proceeding to prints, drawings and concluding with my oil paintings. The paintings will be described in geographical and chronological order.

"Le Croci di Calenzano" was the inspiration for my first group of watercolors. These four paintings were created within one afternoon. The motif of a path leading the
viewer into the picture is repeated throughout this group.

In "Casa San Genesio" the first watercolor I tried to contrast the vivid colors of nature with the simplicity of the white house. The next image "Le Croci di Calenzano" also attempts to demonstrate how harmoniously the Tuscan houses blend with the surrounding countryside.

The third picture was a development of the first watercolor study. By this third picture I felt more confident with the medium. "Casa San Genesio" is now seen from a distance and the path leads you toward the house. My goal was to convey the strong late afternoon light. "Il Tramonto", the last painting, was a romantic attempt at trying to capture a sunset as it softly disappears behind a path.

The next watercolors were conceived in Montevarchi on a hill overlooking Tuscany. In the first two paintings "La Mattina a Montevarchi" and "La Mattina Nebbiosa" I was trying to render the soft mist which envelops this area at dawn. The fog mysteriously transforms Tuscany into an oriental Chinese landscape.

In "Casa di Kristina", the next watercolor, I was attracted to the chiaroscuro effect of the dark wall and the light passage. The contrast I believe could have been accentuated with more strength. My last landscape in this group was painted in Settignano, and I think it is one of my best watercolors. Positive criticism by my professors and other students confirm my opinion. The watercolor was successful partly due to my repeated studies of the site.

The last two watercolors were painted during the winter when I longed for color. I rarely painted still
lifes with watercolors so this was an experiment. With these images I was attempting to create a tropical still life using bright colors. "La Mia Finestra" posses some spontaneous qualities which are missing in "La Natura Viva". The handling of the flowers is fresher in the first image, but the light red background in the second is softer.

My watercolors tend to be more successful when they are smaller and done quickly. In the future I would like to create larger watercolors and have them be as effective as the smaller ones.

Concerning my prints "Paesaggio Toscano" and "Serenata Boliviana" were my most successful lithographs. The landscape shows the dramatic light I admire, and the "Serenata" was the first in a series of images dealing with music and flutes.

As I have stated earlier, music is an important element in my work. I am especially attracted to wind instruments which I play and collect. "Il Flauto e le Mele" was a traditional depiction of a still life which I drew in my first year. With "La Musica Spara ai Soldati", I was attempting a different kind of still life. Flutes have been traditionally painted as passive instruments, but I believe they can be powerful as well.

In South American music, flutes play a major element in voicing the joy, loneliness and anger of its people. In my prints I wanted the flutes to resemble cannons firing against the military which suppress society and culture.

In the monoprints and the etching one of the toy soldiers is shown wounded. A toy soldier being wounded by
a flute seems outside of reality, but the image is also inspired by Garcia Marquez novels which speak about a magic realism where many unusual realities are possible.

"La Maschera" was the last in a series of dry point and engraving prints I did on hand. It is an extremity I need to continue strengthening. This year I have dedicated many hours to studying hands and feet. The "Studio-Posteriore" is one of my best drawings from this year. I chose this pose in order to be able to concentrate on limbs. "Beatrice" was done earlier and I still find the drawing pleasing, but I do not believe its as strong as the "Posteriore" study. A technical note about these drawings is that the paper was hand prepared in tea in order to achieve the flesh tint.

"La Maddalena" and the "Brutus" are studies which demonstrate my belief in copying the masters. "La Certosa" was an architectural study conceived without a painting in mind, while "Serenata per la Villa" was specifically done for a painting. Originally, I had planned the pastel of "Casa Vecchia" as a study for a painting, but the longer I worked on the pastel, the more it became a painting in itself.

"Il Nudo Seduto" and the "Nudo Sdraito" were both painted using the sight-size method and hand ground paints. I also developed drawings in preparation for the paintings. These two nudes are a considerable improvement over the nudes I did last year, but they are just one step into the next level of painting I hope to achieve.

The portraits of "Brent" and "Donatella" are also better than my portraits from last year. The painting of "Brent" was a tribute to a friend who has assisted me
throughout the year. Donatella's portrait is one of the best I have ever painted and I hope I can surpass this portrait in the future.

"Vista Fiorentina" is a fond memory of a view I will always treasure. This painting was my best landscape from last year. I repainted parts of the sky and the light red of the Duomo and the nearby roots with hand ground paint this year, which gave a greater luminosity to the painting.

"La Casa di Cosimo" was painted during the summer. I tried to contrast the starkness of the yellow fields with the quiet blue hills. The small house and the white sheep served as the focus.

"Casa San Genesio" was the first painting in which I utilized the motif of a path leading the viewer to the center of attention. This painting served as an inspiration for my water colors. I think the painting is well composed and it creates the sense of distance I was striving to depict. The foreground has some problems but on the whole the painting is unified.

"Serenata per la Villa" is the largest most complicated landscape I have ever attempted. I was searching for a site which could symbolize the end of the Villa as a place of inspiration for artists and musicians. The perspective of the statue serenading the Tuscan hills, I believe captures this idea.

This site combined my interest in music and poetic landscape and tested my drawing skills with its architectural elements and dramatic perspective. "Serenato per la Villa" was also the first landscape I painted with handground paints and I believe this contributed to its luminosity.
CONCLUSION

When I began my art studies a decade ago in New York, realism was out of fashion, but it still survived in certain circles. Today, there is a growing interest in realism in Europe as well as in New York.

In my voyage as an artist I have sought out the teachers and painters who could show me the way to develop my skills. This search brought me to Florence where I have met several artists who have helped me to build my work as a realist. Returning to New York will not be a final destination but another step on my life long quest for the elusive masterpiece.
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