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Artist of the Month

Suzanne Clements
Melbourne, FL

TAL: *How and when did you start creating art?*

SC: My parents would likely say "when wasn't she creating something?" But truly, I remember being fascinated by fine art from a very young age. My grandfather, a sculptor in Ontario, Canada was able to raise five children using his creative talents. That not only was a huge inspiration to me, but also coming from a creative background, my parents nurtured my desire to create and express myself without worry that it would go nowhere. I took my first art lessons at a young age around the same time I started school and when I was a bit older I had my first painting lessons in oils. I was the worst painter in the class for a long time. Eventually things began to click late in my public school years and finally I was able to grow artistically and learn from watching those around me. I often admired the best artists in the class and tried to figure out what they did that worked well so that eventually I could do it myself. I remember vividly one evening, while I was taking classes at the University at Buffalo late in high school, watching as one student successfully drew crumpled up tinfoil. I was amazed and knew I wanted to figure out how I could change my process or perception enough to create something equally difficult. Ultimately, I attended Fredonia State, in 1995 in Upstate New York and majored in Fine Arts. This is when I really committed myself to working in acrylics and I haven't looked back since. I needed something more portable for my painting classes and something my roommate wouldn't complain about either if I was working in the dorms rather than the studios some nights.

TAL: *What media and genres do you work in?*

SC: Originally I worked in classic oils, however as the need came about to transport my work around campus, I transitioned to high viscosity acrylics on canvas and I really haven't been tempted to go back. There's something about acrylics that caters to my need for speed. I don't have the patience to wait for paint to dry and now that I live in a very humid climate I think working with them would be too frustrating. I've heard people say that you just can't get the same results from acrylics as you can with oils and even I used to believe that at one time. In the end, perhaps it comes down to the artist themselves. I've seen some amazing, vibrant works in acrylics and now I don't feel like one is superior to the other. Additionally, some of my work is mixed media, where I combine acrylic paints in layers and then work in some pastels or Prismacolor pencils on board. Those pieces are more often than not my figure studies from my Body Series. Those pieces are nice quick refreshment works that keep me from being bogged down by the larger paintings. As for genres? I have nearly always been a representational artist although my technique walks a line between painterly and realistic. I don't like to push the work too far into realism because I worry at that point the purpose of the painting gets lost in the impact of the technique. I'd rather people looked at the work and really saw what was there on the canvas rather than becoming distracted by how it was created. I allow imperfections on my canvases and if I find near the end of a work that I would have treated it differently in some way (different color, slightly different composition, etc.) I leave the current painting be and take that lesson with me next time.

September 2006



Self Contemplation



Duet

TAL: *Who or what are your influences?*

SC: I would say that John Singer Sargent was one of my first creative inspirations at an early age. The way he was able to blend realism and a painterly style so flawlessly always caught my eye. Later on in life figurative artists like Egon Schiele caught my eye with his bold and daring works and his fascination with the human figure and form. I know that I'm drawn to the figure in artwork, I'm inspired by new and interesting techniques, other artists who are able to push their works creatively. I recently went on a trip to Manhattan for several days and spent my time gallery hopping through Chelsea and the lower Manhattan. I was inspired by colors, by ideas, by the subtle and bold surprises that met me around every corner. There wasn't any one style or technique that really hit me, because everything had something different to offer. While I don't take elements from other works and adapt them into my own, I really do try to come to the root of why the work made an emotional impact on me and wonder how I can work a similar impact into my own paintings.

TAL: *What was your inspiration for "Self Contemplation"?*

SC: This painting revisits the themes and subject matter of my earlier paintings in the Butterfly Series. I wanted to push the viewer's perspective in very close to the subject and almost personify the butterfly. The butterfly is perched on a spoon in an empty bowl and sees it's own reflection, although grossly distorted. Whether the butterfly realizes the reflection is distorted or not is up for debate. In most of my works, the butterfly represents a certain fragility and foreboding. Butterflies have such elaborate wing displays and unique behaviors in order to appear stronger than they are and I believe that we all do the same in our daily lives. Sometimes the butterflies represent forces working against me, quietly waiting in the background, or as in this case the butterfly could really be you or I.

TAL: *Describe your creative process.*

SC: Many people have asked for a peek behind the scenes in my painting process. In order to help facilitate this, I have a webcam set up on my website. This allows visitors to join me during one of my painting sessions. Although this does allow visitors to watch as I paint, it does skip several preliminary steps. So where does the creative process actually begin? For one thing, I use real dried butterflies as my models. I've been collecting them perfectly mounted and framed for several years now. Originally I purchased 100 unmounted dried butterflies that I could work with and pose as I needed. I researched how to rehydrate the butterflies and spread their wings, purchased the appropriate supplies, and spent evenings working with a good friend of mine who has some entomology experience. She and I experimented with our techniques, and soon I had a collection of models to work with. My intimate moments with these butterflies give me a great appreciation for their diversity, ingenuity, and fragility. Make a single wrong move and the wing will tear, or the antenna will snap free. Butterflies are truly beautiful and delicate creatures. To begin a new painting, I start out with an idea of what I would like to accomplish emotionally. Usually the concept begins with ideas that are strictly disjointed snippets of imagery that have yet to be pulled together into a complete composition. I know, for example, what setting and what elements I would like to include, but the final image doesn't focus until I assemble it all for a photo shoot. The setting is put into place, complete with props. From there I set up my camera on a tripod, grab my remote, and begin to shoot. Throughout the session I pause to check the images captured and make small adjustments to the positioning of the camera and props as I go along. Often I'll take 200 or more images before I go back to the computer to view the results up close. At this point I weed through potential candidates, whittling them down until usually only three images remain. Occasionally, one image from the group jumps out at me immediately. I take notes about the images and then leave the project for a few hours to return with a fresh perspective. Upon my return I pick out the final image, crop the image down to fit the size canvas I will be using, and then begin to sketch directly on the canvas using the grid method. I use the grid method to transfer the image to the canvas accurately. This allows me to break down the image into more digestible pieces, leaving less room for error and distortion. Once the sketch is finished, the painting begins. The time it takes to complete a single painting varies greatly based on the scale of the canvas and how complicated the image is. Paintings can range from



Distant



The Gift



Waiting For Tomorrow

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as little as one hour for a quick study (4" x 6") to 28 hours for a complex 18" x 24" painting. On the following page I share with you each step in my process from photo, sketch, and progress shots to finished painting.

TAL: *What are your near/long term goals as an artist?*

SC: I've been shopping around for galleries throughout the US that would find my work to be a good fit. This is a real challenge as it is nearly impossible to know exactly what a gallery is looking for. My place in North Carolina doesn't really have other figurative work and so I might not have tried to contact them, but we ended up being a perfect fit! My work brought something new to the gallery that they didn't have before, and apparently their clientele is also pleased as I've had more sales through them than any other gallery. My short term goal is to make more connections like that. It's so important to get your work out there in person and to find a gallery/venue that has a passion for it. I've shown in plenty of venues, but the best ones have someone at the wheel emotionally invested in my paintings. It's true that I can do a lot online to promote my work, however, there's nothing quite like seeing it in person. Long term I'd like to be able to do more than support the artwork I create and a few living expenses, I'd love for it to be a truly profitable venture. Eventually I want to buy a house and right now I'd have a really hard time pulling that off with just my fine art sales and so I also work part time as a freelance graphic designer. It certainly helps pay the bills, but I would love to just do my paintings fulltime and not worry so much about the bottom line.

TAL: *Where can people view/purchase your work?*

SC: There are a few places where my work can be seen in person. If you live or visit the North Carolina Coast, head on over the Swansboro and visit the Tidewater Gallery (www.tidewatergallery.com) and be sure to say hello to Ray for me. He has a wonderful gallery there and a variety of exceptional talent. If you visit the Eastern Coast of Florida (just East of Orlando) you can view my work at the Fifth Avenue Art Gallery in Melbourne, Florida year round (www.FifthAvenueArtGallery.com) In late September to mid October I'll be exhibiting an entirely new body of work in Cocoa Beach, Florida. You can find out more about that at: www.OurCreatureComforts.com Online, all my work is available at: www.SuzanneClements.com

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