



by John Pitcher

Still Life in Motion

*Leiper's Creek Gallery Showcases
the Paintings of Maggie Siner*

May 21 – June 10

American painter Maggie Siner has spent the past few decades enjoying a remarkably productive self-exile. A true cosmopolitan, Siner has lived and worked in France, Italy, and China. Her paintings, moreover, have graced galleries and private collections the world over.

Many of Siner's most evocative still-life paintings will be on display at Leiper's Creek Gallery in Franklin. These works—intimate, whimsical, and infinitely colorful—all display this artist's bold brushwork, beautifully balanced structure, and absolute clarity of light. We caught up with Siner in Venice, Italy, where she lives part of the year, as she was preparing for her show in Leiper's Fork.



In addition to art, you have also studied medicine and anatomy. How have these studies informed your figurative art?

I had my first anatomy course as an undergraduate at B.U. and continued to draw from the live model my whole life. As earlier artists knew, it's difficult to understand the structure of the human body from the outside because all the determining forms are hidden underneath the skin. To make a believable figure, a figure that could get up and move around like we do in reality—in three-dimensional space (as opposed to being stuck on the flat page)—one really has to understand how a body is put together, what forms and movements are in the normal range of possibility, which of the lumps and bumps are hard bone or soft fat, which are fixed, and which change with action. You have to understand how the human body functions with respect to gravity. No amount of photography will teach this. The goal of anatomy is not to make anatomically perfect figures, but to make meaningfully expressive figures.

Many years later I was attracted to medicine through my involvement in woman's self-help. Living in France at the time, where the first year of medical school was free, I signed up. That's when I began to understand how the human body works and became completely enthralled by how complicated and delicately balanced it is. Later I worked as a medical illustrator and dissector at Georgetown Medical School, and I did facial reconstruction for police.

Santa Maria Formosa, 2011, Oil on linen, 14" x 11"

Left Page: *Descent*, 2006, Oil on linen, 18" x 14"



Salute from Giglio at Night, 2012, Oil on linen, 15" x 10"



Red Hangers, 2005, Oil on linen, 36" x 30"



Table Magenta, 2015, Oil on linen, 28" x 24"



Maggie Siner in her studio

Photograph by Denise Folmer

“Marketing has nothing whatsoever to do with painting. It’s only through years of painting that one can arrive at some kind of mastery and a truly individual voice. The study of painting is a lifetime endeavor and never stops being challenging, rewarding, frustrating, encouraging, and life affirming.”

It is impossible for me to create figures that aren’t informed by my knowledge of anatomy. I see how every pose is an intricate set of relationships between parts connected and interdependent, and above all I see how small changes in the physical body expose mood and expression. A tiny difference in the position of a head makes a person confident or oppressed. The position of the shoulders tells a whole life story!

Anatomy is important because human beings look at paintings with active mirror neurons. Viewers feel a physical empathy with the figures they see in paintings. If a figure is flat, the parts unconnected, the bones broken, or immovable like a mannequin, the viewer will never be able to truly empathize.

Can you talk about your influences? Who are your favorite painters?

All of the great painters of the past have been my teachers! They all have something to inspire because they have all dealt with the same complex issues of painting in varying ways. To me, it’s not about who are my favorites but who are the best. Value judgments are underrated these days. (And personal tastes are overrated!) These are some of the great painters I study most (in no particular order) and who have all influenced me: Degas, Rembrandt, Cézanne, Titian, Vermeer, Giacometti, Chardin, Vuillard, Diebenkorn, Morandi, Piero della Francesca, Giotto, Velázquez, Balthus, Bellini, Monet . . .

You are exhibiting many beautifully expressive still-lives at

the Leiper’s Creek Gallery. Could you tell us about your preference for this kind of work?

All my painting is from life. I work from direct visual perception, which means I am looking at the subject as I’m painting it. In truth, I’m painting the colors and shapes created by light falling on various things, but not painting the things themselves. Just about anything that creates interesting shapes, has three-dimensional form creating light and shadow, and some delicious color harmonies is a good subject for painting. That being said, I’ve always been attracted to drapery. It is very expressive of movement and time passing—something which is difficult to evoke in painting, which is after all a fixed image. By that I mean the folds in drapery or clothing imply the form that is underneath and retain the traces of the movements and forms that put them there. Fabric hanging over a chair or sheets thrown open in a bed seem to capture the action that just occurred. Drapery is very animated in that way. For me, all still life is animated through the stresses and tensions between objects. In any painting subject, it is the stresses, tensions, and action of the colors and shapes, as well as the natural movements of the eye perceiving the world of color and shapes, that animates the canvas.

It’s been noted that you rarely use black pigment, yet your paintings are remarkable for their wide-ranging color contrasts. Could you describe your use of color?

There are only six colors on my palette—the colors of the spectrum—and you’re right, there is no black. If I need black,

I mix the exact black I need from the colors on my palette, rather than using a factory-produced black. There are infinite shades of black, just as there are infinite shades of red or gray. Those six colors on my palette provide the full range of my color contrasts. However, color is relative and dependent on the colors nearby. One is never really painting the color one sees but the relationships one sees. So, in fact, you don’t really need a big range of color to create the effect of intense color. You only need to know how colors affect each other (something dull makes something else look bright; something red makes something else look green) and have developed a very sensitive eye.

Your bold brushstrokes have been described as having something of a Chinese flavor. Could you tell us about your brushwork?

My mentor, Robert D’Arista, talked a lot about brushwork, only he called it touch. The tactile aspect of painting is very personal, like handwriting, and a big carrier of meaning and expression, but it’s also a major part of the structure of a painting. Brushwork guides the eye through the painting and directs it where to look next, taking the eyes on a journey of

experience. Every brushstroke delivered to the canvas is put there with a gesture of intent, with a specific speed, direction, thickness, and feeling. I learned a lot more about brushwork when I lived in China and had the chance to study with Chinese ink painters. There the brushwork is everything and the illusion much less important. Brushwork is not calculated. It has its own necessity, which comes from years of using paint and becoming fluent in making the paint transform into a visual image. Again, as viewers, our mirror neurons are at work, responding to brushwork by empathizing with the hand and gesture that applied the brushstrokes.

What advice do you have for aspiring painters?

The only advice I can safely give is: In order to be a painter you must paint! Find a good teacher; learn from as many painters as you can; study the great masters, and paint. 🎨

Maggie Siner’s show at the Leiper’s Creek Gallery opens May 21, 6 to 9 p.m. and runs through June 10. For more information visit www.leiperscreekgallery.com and www.maggiesiner.com.