

Artist: **Maggie Siner**

Interviewer: **Simon Thurston** of Pratique des Arts

**1**

Do you still work exclusively from life? Could you talk about the advantages and disadvantages of this approach?

I work from life because I am interested in visual perception and the truth of visual response; particularly, in how we turn the optical stimuli of colors and shapes into the world of recognizable objects in three-dimensional space. Human seeing is much more interesting, complex and sensitive than the camera. Seeing is a creative and subjective act based on the functioning of our brains, memories and emotions. I have no interest in working from photos because a photographic image has nothing to do with the human act of seeing and gives me very little information. A camera has a completely different set mechanics. Of course the photographic image can be used as a 'short-cut' to image-making, but I think short cuts ultimately cheat one of real knowledge in painting. If the goal of painting is to become more sensitive and responsive, photographs are useless.

I try to translate the eye's fleeting perception of the world around me into the permanence of paint. This is not an imagined or photographic process, it is the actual way the eye *catches light in the act*, collecting colored shapes and sending them through the nervous system where the mind deciphers and reacts. This is seeing. To paint is to reenact seeing, to choreograph inside the confines of a rectangular frame, to select and simplify from the complexity of stimuli until the lived experience is recreated. I do not paint pictures of things, I paint the experience of seeing, therefore the camera is of no use to me.

**2**

Why is your work described as having Chinese influences? Can you talk in some detail about your brushwork – both from a point of view of gestures and material.

I spent quite a long time living in China and in close contact with Chinese painters so I became aware of some traits active in Chinese ink painting. I found particularly relevant, those things having to do with gesture and the way materials contain and preserve the marks of the human hand. Ultimately, the use of materials is something that is felt and not calculated. I can only stress the obvious; that painting is made of paint, and the paint is a conduit, a carrier, of everything the painter felt while moving the brush. A painter must become very sensitive to the necessities of their materials and their own personal responses to those materials. The more experienced and sensitive one becomes to one's materials, the better tuned is one's gesture. It is the same for a musician and his/her instrument.

Brushwork is also the smallest building block of the total composition. Each stroke is a brick in the architecture of the whole. Therefore it is critical just exactly where a stroke is moving and what it's intent is.

**3**

What drew you to oils? What other media do/have you worked in?

I began as an oil painter and I have continued to refine and develop as an oil painter. I think mastery is a lifelong pursuit. The longer I work in this medium, the more sensitive I become, the more I can say. It touches me deeply to be working in the same materials as great painters of the past. It is thanks to the permanence of oil paint that the great paintings of Rembrandt, Velasquez, Titian, etc., can still speak to me.

Of course, I have also used other media: pastel, watercolor, tempera, monoprint, as well as making sculpture in stone and clay. The subject matter does not determine my materials. In fact, subject matter plays a very small role in my painting and no role at all in my selection of materials.

Anything may be subject matter. I think of Constable declaring he never saw an ugly thing in his life --"let the form of an object be what it may —light, shade and perspective will make it beautiful." It's all about the way color and shape, line and direction interact and create meaning. Often the spaces between namable objects are much more important than objects themselves. I also love painting things that are unexpected or oddly juxtaposed. It brings new meaning to things. And I like finding beauty in unsuspected places. I would rather find beauty where it was not in evidence than try to paint something we all know is beautiful already. There is nothing new I can add in that case.

But I have always been in love with drapery. I adore how folds of fabric retain the traces of time and action, a conjunction of gravity and human gesture. Drapery falls and sweeps, folds and crumples; it piles up; it reveals the forms underneath. Like a skin it hugs and weighs on the forms. Like clothing it reveals as it covers.

Painting beds, for example, or frocks, was not an idea, it was a visual discovery, as all my painting subjects are. With still-life, each object and juxtaposition of objects introduces a storm of possible meanings and secrets. The shapes of light configure and conspire to silently expose and compose the world's inscrutable chaos.

**4**

Can you talk us through your painting process from A-Z. Starting with your inspiration for a subject, the set-up of the still life, preliminary sketches, etc.... and knowing when to stop.

**5**

More specifically how do you combine the feeling that your works have been painted rapidly in a few brushstrokes, with such a feeling of solidity? They combine the effect of a rapid colour sketch, with the impression of solid foundations, structure and of having spent many hours developing the composition. How do you get spontaneity contrasting with the impression of thought and preparation?

a. Painting starts with looking, seeing and discovering some visual event, usually having to do with the way light falls on things, or an arrangement of colors that is somehow stimulating or meaningful. I do not start with ideas or sketches.

b. If I am working indoors, and I can control the set-up (that is to say I can move things around, as opposed to outdoors in the landscape where I can only move myself) then there usually follows a certain amount of moving objects, turning folds

this way and that, adding colors, tilting surfaces, and whatever it takes such that the shapes work together in a completely dynamic and coherent way.

c. Once I have 'found' the subject (this could take all day!) there then follows a lot of wiggling around and obsessive ritualistic behavior while I set up my palette, change my shoes, arrange my hat, get something to eat, and generally do whatever is necessary to prepare for battle, all the while looking at the subject to get a 'fix' on it. Basically I have to talk myself into believing that painting this particular experience is possible.

d. I paint on a toned ground. Usually it is a more or less neutral wipe of raw umber and ultramarine blue that serves as the imprimatura on my lead primed linen. With this traditional ground of middle value, I can structure the lights and darks right away.

e. My palette is always the same six colors and white. (SEE PALETTE BELOW)

f. I begin with gestural marks that move throughout and across the canvas as a way of locating the larger movements. These are usually very thin but fast moving lines of dilute paint. I look for the pattern of light and dark and how it responds to the outside rectangle. Then I usually lay in some larger areas of color to establish the spatial relations, such as background to foreground colors, and the major movements of light and dark. These color areas are not necessarily in the 'correct location' on the canvas, since I don't really do any drawing at this point, and I don't really know exactly where things will end up. I am always very careful about color mixing and getting color relationships exact, even from the very first stroke. Some of this paint gets scraped off fairly early on. Painting is a continual process of putting paint on and scraping it off. I'd say at least half the paint from my palette ends up in the trash. It is also a continual process of drawing and un-drawing. This may account for the 'spontaneity' that people attribute to my work. Most of those so-called spontaneous brushstrokes have been scraped off dozens of times, but each time I deliver the stroke as if it were the first time, so that it always feels fresh. Each stroke has to be in the right place, the right density of paint, the right color and direction, and applied with the right gesture. This is more a matter of trial and error than any rational process. I'm trying to make malleable oily paint become the hard three dimensional objects of our real world but there is no rule book for that magical transformation.

g. Eventually, some part of the painting gets 'locked' into place. That means I get a good sense of it's exact position and location in the rectangle, as well as it's sense of solid three-dimensionally. From then on the painting has a way of telling me what to do. Things become more inevitable and smaller events can be painted. Of course, the whole painting may have to be scraped any number of times.

h. I spend a lot of time stepping back from the painting and looking at it in the mirror to increase my distance. That way I can really see how things are working. Looking at the painting from close-up, that is to say from the distance of my arm, gives a wrong idea of what the painting will really look like when seen from across a room. It is very important to know what 'resolves' visually at what viewing distance in order to make the painting work as a whole and feel like the true experience of seeing. That means many parts of the painting are less 'rendered' than others. This is ultimately because I am trying to paint the way humans being actually see. Seeing

is a process that occurs instantaneously and also in time. We see a collection of various points of focus and only the most salient contrast events appear with clarity.

i. A painting is 'finished' when there is no more urgency to 'get it right'. That is to say, when I have 'gotten it right' or as right as is humanly possible given the constraints of the medium. When the urgency is gone I become bored and there is no reason to continue. Of course, I have overworked many hundreds of paintings in my life, but I have also learned how to bring them back to life after they have died.

## 6

Can you tell our readers what material you use: brushes, paints, any specific items... Can you describe your typical palette – and if this palette changes depending on your subject?



The photo shows my portable french easel palette rather than my regular table palette which is also wood but twice the size. In any case, I only use these colors.

White: Mixture of Titanium, Zinc and Lead

Cadmium Yellow Light (pure)

Cadmium Red Light (pure)

Alizarine Crimson

Ultramarine Blue

Cerulean Blue Hue (phthalo & white)

Raw Umber

This is a simple balanced palette of intense colors, arranged from light to dark and in order of the spectrum. Since the spectrum is the absolute source of light and seeing, it is the best way to understand color. Having so few colors means mixing is everything! There are two yellows (one light and one dark), two reds (one toward the orange, one toward the purple), and two blues (one toward the purple, one

toward the green). The last two colors are only separated from the others on this palette because it is convenient to place my brush washer over the thumb hole. Otherwise they would be placed in sequence. Having two of each primary color means I can get equal intensity throughout the spectrum. For example, a palette with only cad red medium as the pure red, does not make oranges as intense as cad red light, nor purples as intense as alizarine crimson. Having two of each primary color means one is lighter and one is darker. Raw Umber is dark yellow, Alizarine is dark red, and Ultramarine is dark blue. That means shades of black can be mixed through the whole spectrum. With these saturated pigments I can make very bright colors, and can also use complementary mixing for infinitely nuanced shades of grays and less intense colors.

This is also a harmonious palette in terms of materials; the characteristics of the individual pigments work well together and they are all permanent (permanence meaning the long life of the painting) except for, arguably, alizarine crimson. Of course, some dry faster than others (raw umber and ultra blue dry much faster than cadmiums), and some have a higher oil absorption index (meaning they should not be used in the first layers of painting to maintain the 'fat over lean' rule of binding layer to subsequent layer) but the range is not extreme. All are about the same saturation and make strong flexible paint films. Alizarine crimson and ultramarine blue are more transparent than the other colors, and dry to more brittle paint films, but I rarely use them by themselves. In fact, all my colors are mixed and it is rare for me to use any color straight from the tube except for white.

Even though color is relative and one can make colors look different by the other colors placed around them, it is still nice to have the full spectrum of possibilities of this palette. Occasionally I paint with only three colors - red (burnt sienna), black and white - and use the range of warm to cool for full color. Here is an example:

## PAINTS

Mostly I use **Old Holland** paint, as it seems to be the only paint left that is still made with cold pressed linseed oil. Many manufacturers have switched to safflower or other oils which I avoid because they are inferior in their drying properties. Having been trained in the chemistry, materials and techniques of painting, I stick to the traditional materials as much as possible.

**MEDIUM:** This is my basic medium which I mix myself

1 part damar varnish

2 parts stand oil

3 parts turpentine (not paint thinner or mineral spirits or god-forbid odorless)

few drops of Venice Turpentine



It is a fairly lean medium. The painting usually starts with no medium at all - only turpentine. If the painting goes on for a long time I make a slightly fatter medium. (such as 1:2:2)

I usually need retouch varnish to bring back the gloss and always apply a final layer of varnish (damar) before the painting goes out into the world.

#### BRUSHES:

Good quality hog hair bristle brushes which I wash every day in soap and water. I'm not in love with washing brushes (a job for my studio assistant whenever possible!) but I do need clean springy brushes which respond to my touch.

PALETTE KNIFE: As long as it's a trowel shape with a bent handle, the size doesn't matter. I use it constantly to scrape the paint off the canvas and to clean my palette.

100% COTTON RAGS: Couldn't live without these. I clean my brushes constantly and have to get the dirty thinner out of the brush. It's much nicer to hold a soft piece of absorbent old flannel for all those hours - my security blanket!

BRUSH WASHER: This might be the most important tool I own. I clean my brushes constantly so I can mix perfect colors.

#### 8

Can you briefly tell us about your art studies?

I was very lucky to attend one of the last truly classical art schools in the early 1970's when old-fashioned art training was being rejected by most other art schools. At Boston University we drew all day, every day, for two years before 'graduating' to

color. No one could graduate without being an expert figure draughtsman. There I studied anatomy (with Jack Kramer, author of Human Anatomy and Figure Drawing), materials and techniques (with Reed Kay, author of The Painter's Guide to Studio Methods and Materials), sculpture and of course, art history. Nothing can replace that kind of foundation. I will only add that Robert D'Arista became my great mentor in painting. I met him during my early undergraduate years and continued studying with him through graduate school. His influence on me has been profound.

**9**

Can you talk about any influences?

Most of the great painters of the past 600 years have been my teachers. By studying their works in museums throughout the course of my life, over hundreds of hours and filling dozens of sketchbooks, they have shown me what makes great painting. I cannot stress enough that one should study with the BEST. It makes no difference the time or style, or even the medium. Great painting is always great painting.

**10**

Any comments about your career and the art scene/market in the US today?

I have no interest in the art market or the art scene, or even my 'career'. I am only interested in making the best paintings I can possibly make during my short life.