



looking through Glass

Truth and fantasy are reflected equally in Mikel Glass's provocative and allegorical still lifes.

BY ROSEMARY BARRETT SEIDNER

IT IS WITH IRONY, HUMOR and an intense eagerness to explore issues such as life and death, obsession, conflict and the dream world that New York realist Mikel Glass approaches each canvas. His boundless imagination, teamed with a seeming unwillingness to limit his subject matter by any parameters whatsoever, results in a remarkably diverse and always challenging body of work that is worthy of far more than casual contemplation.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: “The mess in the background is slightly romanticized in that the typical reality in my studio is complete chaos,” says Glass. “Otherwise, **Artist in Studio** (oil, 24x34) is a straightforward, modest self-portrait.”

BELOW: “The arrangement of the unaltered, unadorned banana bunches in **Combat** (oil, 10¼x27¾) exposes their anthropomorphic qualities—vegetarians, take note!” says Glass. “There’s a sense of melancholy as the exhausted victor stands over his vanquished.”

From formal portraiture to paintings of discarded dolls; from startling figurative narratives to still life tableaux of feuding fruits and space-invading vegetables to classical “floral” arrangements of brightly-colored rubber gloves—the artist is tireless in his pursuit of metaphor and unafraid to delve into the deepest, darkest corners of his, and the collective, mind.

His greatest painting influences are Vermeer for composition, mood and atmosphere; Rembrandt and Sargent for portraiture; and Rubens for the figure. Of the Dutch flower and vanitas painters who inspire his “rubber florals” and battling fruit and vegetable scenes, he names “no-one in particular—they have too many consonants in their names to remember.”

The Rubber Glove Treatment

Perhaps most startlingly odd are Glass’s rubber glove florals. “I acknowledge the ironic and seemingly anti-traditional aspect of my rubber floral paintings,” states the artist, “but their genesis was rather practical and innocent.” Like any other realist painter, Glass has always understood the accessibility and salability of

flower paintings. However, the subject never interested him. Then he got a freelance job painting for Ralph Lauren Polo and made a couple of hundred floral paintings on leather that was upholstered onto chairs, ottomans and settees.

Afterward he revisited the idea of painting flowers on canvas. “On several occasions,” Glass says, “I purchased bouquets of various flowers, arranged and lit them—and then spent hours staring at a blank canvas. I just couldn’t do it.” It’s not that the artist doesn’t appreciate flower paintings—in fact, he finds Dutch treatment of the subject includes “some of the most beautiful and ambitious paintings ever made.” It was indeed these works that inspired him to take seriously the pursuit of his rubber glove florals as a way to imply a story. (See sidebar Tulips and Vanitas Paintings, opposite page.)

Asked how he made the leap from attempting to paint fresh flowers to painting arrangements of rubber gloves, the artist responds: “I was drawn to their color and form. The gloves are an attempt to satisfy my deeply repressed inner decorator. I’m most comfortable when dealing with offbeat subject matter within the realm of harmoniously composed canvases. I do enjoy the tension between the zany and the harmonic, and when they peacefully co-exist within the same rectangle, they make me smile.”

“The colorful rubber gloves have elegant form and embody an undepicted human presence,” says Glass. “They at once sit back and serve as elements of a passive composition, but with longer inspection (or a glass of wine!) they also start writhing individually—‘Is

that one pointing at me?’—and as we project anthropomorphic qualities onto them, we then must conclude that the limp ones are troubled.” So in this way, Glass intends the gloves’ initial impact to be decorative, but further inspection reveals other layers of meaning—and whimsy.

Battling Fruits and Veggies

It’s clear that Glass has a “passion for pursuing matters of the psyche.” A quick glance at one of his complex fruit and vegetable panoramas in his Conflict series leaves us feeling something is a bit amiss and, on more careful inspection, we recognize the picture is about both combat and cannibalism. “For example,”

BELOW: Inspired by the Dutch floral paintings and Dutch Boy brand paint, **Dutch Boy Floral** (oil, 57x41) is the one instance when Glass combined his interests in rubber gloves and plastic fruit. “It celebrates the man-made pigments we artists now have available to us,” says Glass.

Tulips and Vanitas Paintings

In the Dutch still life treatment, inspired by the cultural phenomenon of the tulip craze in the early 17th century, artists had a practical reason for painting the works because a large canvas was sometimes cheaper to buy than a single tulip bulb. “But artists being artists,” Glass explains, “they soon enriched their works with all kinds of secreted attributes, transforming the practical motivation for creating the works into expressions of the artists’ psyches. In fact, the best examples operate as vanitas paintings.”

Associated in particular with Northern European still life painting in the Netherlands in the late 1500s and early 1600s, *vanitas*, a Latin word meaning emptiness and ostentation, refers to the insignificance of our earthly lives, the transient nature of life, and the concept of vanity exemplified in Ecclesiastes 1:2 when the Preacher says, “All is vanity.” In response to this history and tradition, Glass decided to “endow his rubber florals with attributes and spirit worthy of contemplation.”



GLASS'S PET PEEVE

"I think that one by-product unleashed by Modernism is a sort of opposite reality—that good is bad and bad is good. It was fine and appropriate and even important as an expression of angst when it first developed, but most things that embrace it as a defining principle in contemporary art seem dated and passé."

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For more of Glass's memorable quotes and insights, visit www.artistsnetwork.com/articles/mikel-glass-quotes.

Glass explains, "if a pumpkin washes ashore on a secluded beach in this fictitious land, conflict inevitably ensues. The theme of this series is the tragic nature of interspecies or interracial cohabitation. The fruits and vegetables, which I devised as a strategy for allowing an objective reading of content in the narratives, are simple stand-ins for living creatures. You don't need to be in the Middle East to experience conflict—it's all around us, and we're too often engaged in it for base reasons, which I deplore."

On the Grid

Other artists and visitors to Glass's studio are surprised when they discover his complex drawing process. He initially renders his composition directly on the canvas, sometimes using a grid made of string attached to a frame built of stretcher bars. He sets the grid

up directly in front of the subject. Looking through the frame, he creates a corresponding grid on the canvas, sometimes with charcoal, but more often by taping thread directly to the canvas (this helps avoid the charcoal mess). His goal in the drawing phase is to establish the main interrelationships of the objects rather than focus on specific details, which are left to the painting stage. He tries to preserve the drawing envelopes established with the grid but tweaks them as necessary.

"Distilled" Classical Technique

For most of his career, Glass has painted oil on canvas. He describes his painting style as a "distilled version of classical technique." He works on canvases stretched to fit the composition as determined by his preparatory sketch or analysis. Working mostly in his studio, he prefers to paint from life but has relied on



LEFT: Glass intended *Self-Consumption* (oil, 28x46) as a "not-so-still life" painting. "The traditional, staid arrangement of fruits has come to life," he says, "in the form of anthropomorphized fruit creatures that then rely on eating the rest of the fruit for sustenance. In the background a pair of creatures propagate their species—implying the inevitable replenishment of the scene."



Early Fall Step by Step

BY MIKEL GLASS

I usually think of the gloves as representing flowers of a specific season. My intention was to paint a summer—or fully blooming—composition, but then my dog's girlfriend broke my favorite flowerpot. As I'd been thinking about the fall of the American Empire, I realized I had the opportunity to make a play on words. The broken pottery symbolizes primitive civilization; the background is evocative of the pyramids; and the mostly silhouetted gloves take on the shape of a Greek cross. Hence, in step 5 I present *Early Fall* (oil, 36x48). Of course, I don't expect anyone to see or agree with my reveries.

1. Setting up a composition requires a lot of thought and hard work. They (the rubber gloves) must heed my orders! But to get them to do this, I make armatures out of wire, dowels, paint brushes, chop

sticks, metal rods, paint stir sticks, rags—whatever is around. I try to arrange them as if possessed by the spirit of a floral designer."

2. After assembling my setup, I frame the composition with stretcher bars that determine the dimensions of the canvas. I make a grid on the stretcher frame with thick thread, and then a corresponding grid on the canvas. I seem never to follow the same process twice, but in this case I chose to draw the grid onto the canvas with pencil. Sometimes I tape thread onto the canvas instead, and often I'll use different (but corresponding) colors to help me keep my place. For this painting I scaled up the drawing by making a $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch grid on the frame and a 1-inch grid on the canvas.

3. I mostly use the grid to determine perimeter points and internal points of line convergence. Then I paint between the lines, just as Mrs. Strauss used

to make us do in second grade, under pain of ridicule and scorn.

4. My next step is a solid-color lay-in. Usually I'm fatalistic about not changing anything at this time, but I realized I preferred the view from a foot or so to the left. Also, a client in Maryland had just sent me a pair of the most beautifully colored (magenta!) gloves, and I had to incorporate them into the scene.

5. In completing this painting, I did something I rarely do: I took license with how I portrayed some of the attributes of the setup. Most notably, I added a couple of gloves in an attempt to balance what I felt were under-massed portions of the composition. Secondly, I repainted the black gloves brown because my wife told me to—and I listen to everything she says.

Angst and Materials

photographs for part of the foundation for portrait commissions and, more regularly now, for his complex figurative work.

“Painting, for me, is a way to visually record ideas in an expedient manner,” Glass says. “Earlier in my career, when things were less complicated, I would revel in the sheer splendor of sloshing thick paint on canvas—it can be quite orgasmic. Since kids, mortgage and all, painting has become more a means to an end, and any euphoria I permit myself to feel is typically achieved in the lay-in stage, as I still allow myself a bit of freedom in establishing color relationships. Painting can be quite magical. The moments I most enjoy

are when my entire arm is engaged. I feel I can still achieve a sense of bravura during my initial washes of underpainting. I wish I didn’t feel the need to cover them up with subsequent passes!” ■

ROSEMARY BARRETT SEIDNER is a director of Miller Gallery in Cincinnati, Ohio, and a freelance writer.

BELOW: “In *Fresh Bouquet* (oil, 24x38), I’m attempting to evoke the excitement of bringing home fresh flowers to a loved one,” the artist explains. “The colors and objects are crisp and clean to evoke a sense of optimism.”



“After 25 years of painting, I’m still trying to figure out mediums,” admits Glass. “Usually, I make a couple of passes with turp-diluted paint, then a couple with straight paint, then a couple more with a little bit of linseed oil added. I’m pretty infatuated with oil-primed linen, though lately I’ve been using more panels—just Luan plywood that I prime with acrylic gesso.

“I’m quite derelict with my materials,” he confesses. “My nylon brushes look like palm trees and my bristles can pop balloons. My paint tube caps disappear like socks in the dryer! I use a lot of 3-inch finishing nails to break through the crust of dry paint around the mouths of my paint tubes to get to the wet paint inside; it’s a little bit like eating a lobster dinner every time I have to set up my palette. The brands I put through this torture are most often **Utrecht** paint and **Robert Simmons** brushes. I apologize to both.”

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To see more of Glass’s art, go to www.artistsnetwork.com/article/mikel-glass.



Meet Mikel Glass

In addition to painting complex figurative works, still lifes and commissioned portraits, Glass is also a sculptor. “I can’t recall a time when I didn’t make art,” he says. “I remember my father scolding me as a child for creating a sculpture out of raw hamburger meat.” Glass has a master of fine arts degree from the New York Academy of Art and has shown his work in numerous solo and group exhibitions. He’s married to a professional cellist and together they have 12-year-old boy/girl twins and a 10-year-old son. He loves sports and plays in recreational softball and soccer leagues and coaches his children’s baseball, soccer and basketball teams.



LEFT: In *I Once Was Lost* (oil, 46x44), a symbolic self-portrait of Glass’s adolescence, toys act as metaphors for Glass, other people and events. “The bright colors suggest a happy facade,” he explains, “while an exploration of the content in the circular composition reveals a cycle beginning with turmoil and ending in discovery and freedom. I’m represented consistently in yellow and blue: first as Bart Simpson, then as Willie Wee Wee, next as a paint roller and sphere, and finally as Bart again.”

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To read the fascinating story behind Glass’s painting *I Once Was Lost*, go to www.artistsnetwork.com/article/i-once-was-lost.