

"Baby Boom"

oil on wood

26" x 20"

Mikel Glass

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BIRTHPLACE

Boston

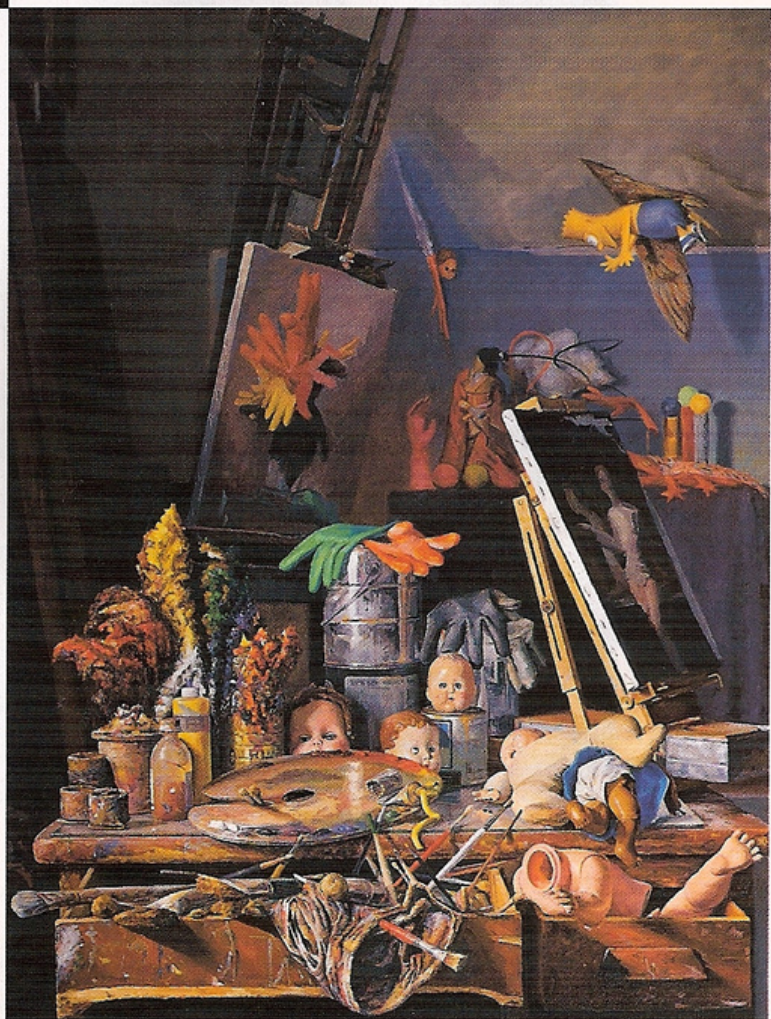
CURRENT HOME

New York, N.Y.

DESCRIPTION AND METHOD OF WORK

Mikel Glass paints what he calls "not-so-still lifes." Like the most traditional of still-life painters, he gravitates toward tables piled with fruit and domestic objects, occasionally even rendering them in a trompe l'oeil style. But Glass goes much further. He may carve and alter the actual fruit. He'll take pieces of plastic fruit and combine them, turning them into fanciful figurative shapes and setting them beside unaltered objects. He may add things as disparate as a doll's head, piles of encrusted paint and even the lights used to illuminate the tableaux. The end result might be a clear-eyed and meditative still life. But it also might be a zany double-take on a still life. Or his painting may wink knowingly at animation, as the objects he's created appear to come to life.

Glass works in a two-part process. He sets up, orchestrates and juxtaposes the various objects, a stage that takes

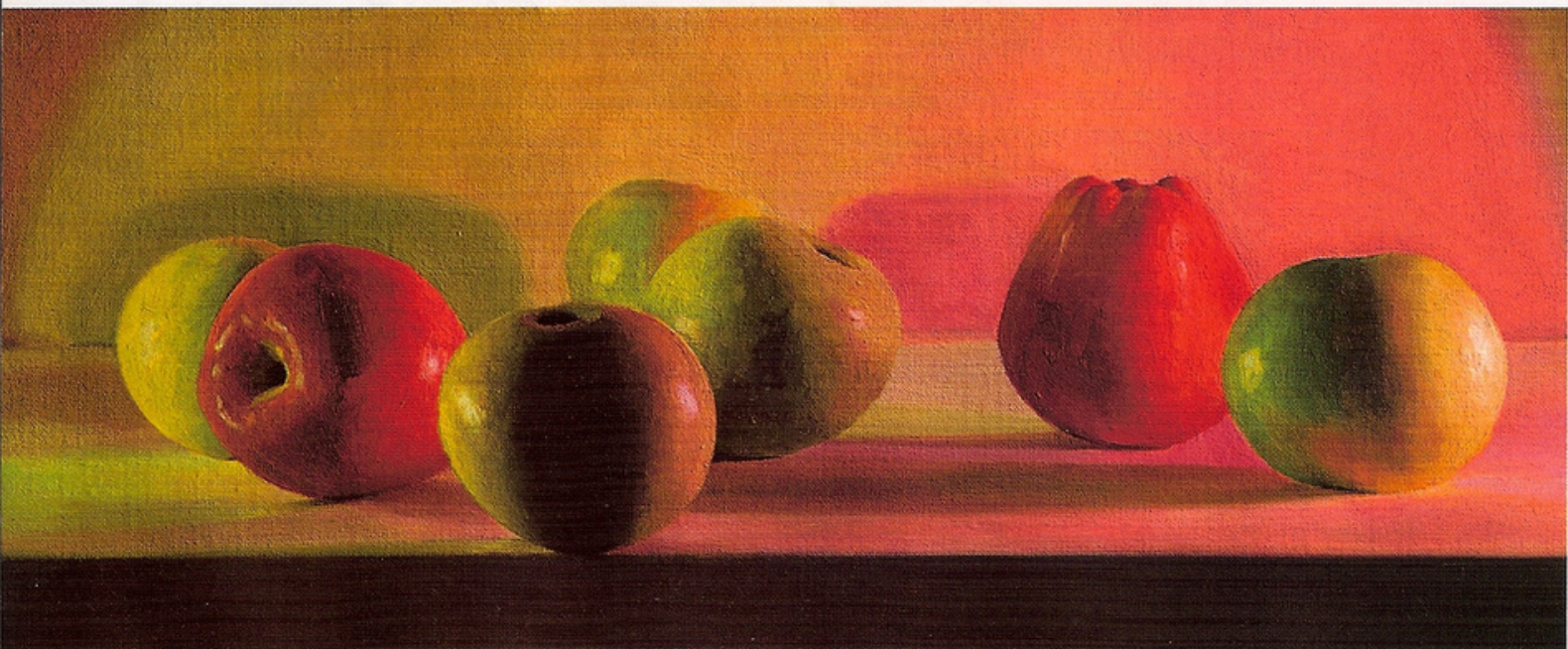


"Attributes of the Artist I"

oil on canvas

52" x 40"

EMERGING ARTIST



"Apples, No. 1 (Two Light Sources)"

oil on canvas

6" x 14"



"Tools"

oil on wood

32" x 26"

him two or three days. That process is what he calls "the sculptural element," which he says is "generated from my unconscious." Then he paints the set-up in oils. Glass says that while he initially tried not to deviate from the still life set-up, "I now tend to embellish what I'm looking at more and more." The actual painting takes about a month because, he confesses, "I start losing interest after a month."

Glass also is an accomplished portrait artist and often combines portraiture and still life, usually with a humorous intent. "I tend not to be a serious person intellectually, but I'm compelled to render things realistically," he says. "There's a challenge to convey the seriousness but stay true to myself and do things that have a not-so-serious read."

FIRST ARTISTIC INSPIRATION

"Building tree forts when I was 9 years old on Cape Cod," recalls Glass, who studied photography and sculpture before he began painting.

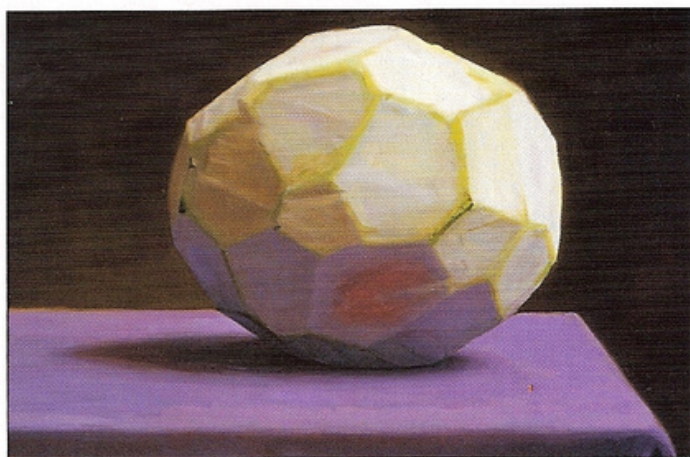
BIGGEST BREAK

Glass was invited in 1996 to create a portrait for "Yanks Paint Brits" at New York's Hirsch & Adler gallery. The result was "Kabuki," a contemporary take on John Singer Sargent's "Madame X."

MOST INFLUENTIAL PERSON

"Jacob Collins taught me how to paint," says Glass of the acclaimed still-life artist whom he studied with at the New York Academy of Art in New York City. "What I had been trying to do in a couple of years he taught me in three months. I was impressed by the ease with which he would make a painting."

EMERGING ARTIST



"Watermelon"

oil on canvas

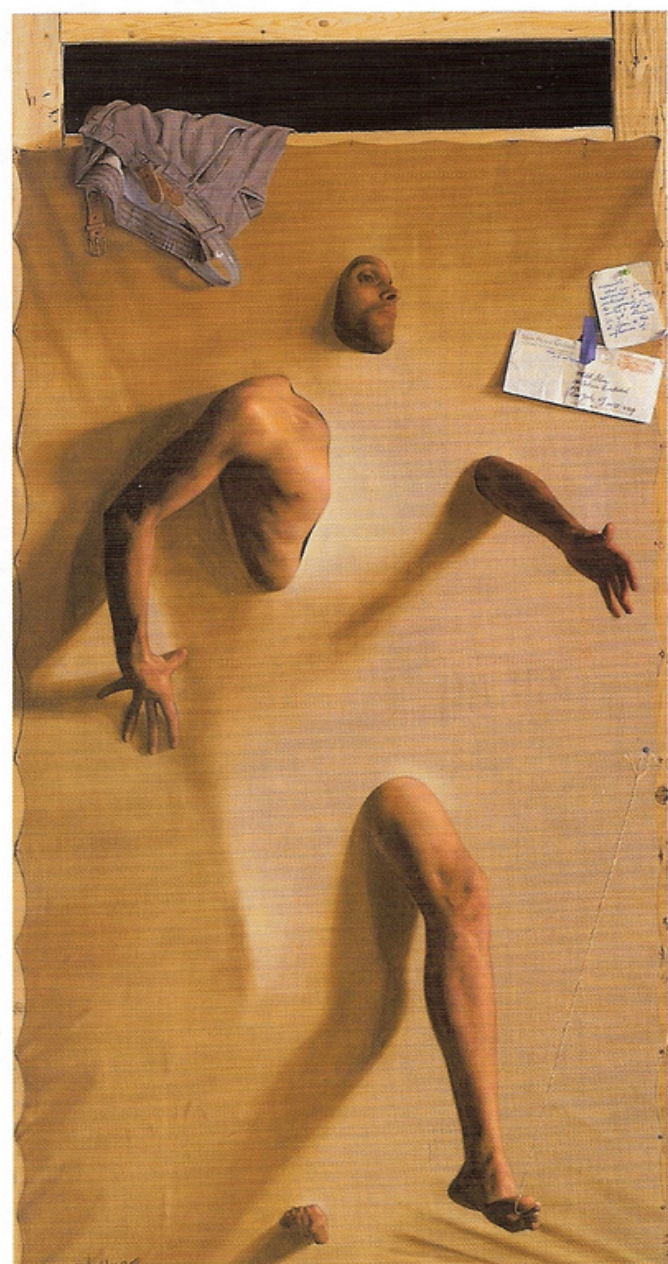
16" x 20"



"Confluence"

oil on canvas

40" x 54"



"Emergence"

oil on canvas

80" x 41"

FAVORITE SUBJECT

Fruit. Glass will take a fruit, such as a watermelon, and then skin it with a potato peeler, giving it facets. Then he'll light it with gels, playing with the shapes that form. The fruit, gels and lights themselves are often incorporated into the actual painting. Another favorite subject are cherubs, which Glass constructs by attaching a doll's head to "wings" of cloth or rubber gloves. He then suspends them with monofilament so they appear to be flying. When human figures appear in his work, they're often based on people who inhabit the rough streets outside his New York City studio.

FUTURE PLANS

Glass was involved with a loose coalition of six like-minded painters called "The Paint Group," who were bent on exploring realism. The group included his mentor, Jacob Collins, and the six had a successful group show at Hirsch & Adler. But Glass states that "the opening was a closing for us." He broke ranks with the group and today, he says "I'm obsessed with finding the common ground between the world of abstraction and the world of realism."

BETWEEN STILL LIVES

He still does one or two commissioned portraits a year, but even then he's conscious of his still-life work, noting that he's "eager to use objects in the painting that people hold dear to themselves."

PRICE RANGE OF WORK

\$1,250–35,000

GALLERY REPRESENTATIVE

John Pence Gallery, 750 Post St., San Francisco, CA 94109. (415) 441-1138. Hirsch & Adler Galleries Inc., 21 East 70th St., New York, NY 10021. (212) 535-8810.

—Everett Potter

Real Life?

Mikel Glass goes beyond the portrait and the paint.

By John T. Spike

Seventy years ago, René Magritte painted a tobacco pipe and then wrote across the canvas in large letters "This is not a pipe." It was a surrealist's playful reminder that paintings are not what they pretend to be. They are only mirages. Modern art thought there was something suspect about picturing the world in 2-D and passing it off as "real." So painters from Manet to Hockney, not to forget the Abstract Expressionists, began to emphasize the inescapable fact that canvases are flat.

That was in the 20th century. Mikel Glass is a new realist whose paintings should probably be labeled with a warning: "This is not a photograph." Born in Boston in 1962, Glass, like many painters his age, has no issues with illusionism. Nor is he fazed if his painting "Elizabeth Shea," a commissioned portrait, makes people think of photographs: It's part of his strategy.

Earlier this year, Glass took his picture on a date in New York City. A bunch of painter friends were sharing supper and discussing their latest works. When the wrapping paper came off "Elizabeth Shea," there was an audible gasp. The room was filled with realist painters, so it wasn't about technique. Everyone was surprised to see a painting that seemed so contemporary and so *true*.

Stealing a nap while leafing through magazines is probably not a subject in



the same league as, say, "George Washington Crossing the Delaware." It's just a simple pleasure that nearly everyone knows. Come to think of it, though, has this little moment of American life ever been captured as naturally as this? Has anyone even tried?

In place of modernity's Shock of the New, Glass is proposing the shock of recognition. If you've ever had a day off, reading and napping a little, "Elizabeth Shea" pulls you back into the feeling. If you're a dog lover, it should take you over the top. Let's see how he does it:

Whether to photograph is one of the most vexing questions facing contemporary realists, many of whom learned in academies how to hold their own against the camera's voracious eye. They can pose a model, arrange a few papers, throw in a dog for good measure and make a good painting with the right mood and life-like details without ever glancing through a viewfinder. So be it, but Glass opted for a photographic look because it was the only way to obtain his objective (so to speak).

By this point in post-modern time, we have seen infinitely more photographs in newspapers and magazines and on TV than we will ever see paintings on a wall. Bear in mind, too, that we all believe, with some misgivings, that the camera

Mikel Glass' "Elizabeth Shea," 2005, oil on canvas, 40" x 70".

does not lie. Like it or not, the flat lighting, out-of-focus foreground, awkwardly projecting foot at lower left and other quirks of the lens make "Elizabeth Shea" seem more real than Goya's reclining "Duchess of Alba," no matter which picture we might prefer.

On the magazine page, it is impossible to tell that "Elizabeth Shea" is not a casual 3-inch by 5-inch snapshot. If it were, it would be something for the family album, nothing more. Seen life-sized on a 4-foot by 6-foot canvas, this is a big, lustrous painting with an impressively refined technique. By varying the thickness and direction of the brushstrokes, Glass keeps the paint surface from feeling dull or mechanical. We instinctively respond to the daunting investment of talent and labor. It took an artist's ingenuity to accommodate his sitter's request for an informal portrait and his own desire to make a painting that engages for entirely different reasons. After all, as Magritte would say, "This is not Elizabeth Shea." □

Critic and author John T. Spike is the director of *The Florence Biennale of Contemporary Art*.