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classical realism paintings - american artist



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"One of the great things about a classical training is that you are sincerely trained. Dedicated students come to studio 9-4 Monday through Friday for several years. In their free time they read mythology, study anatomy, go to museums, anything that can help them with their drawing and painting."

Dana Levin

American Realist Artist Interview



Dana Levin Artist Interview - May 2007

+1 ::: When did you first realize you are an artist?

I never thought of myself as anything else. When I was very young I wanted to be a maid, then a psychiatrist. By the time I was 11 years old, I wanted to be a painter. I was interested in all the arts: dancing, music, and theater. What I enjoyed most about the visual arts was that you could create something all on your own from start to finish, every aspect of the work is the responsibility of the artist and reflects their temperament. Paintings were like magic to me, an illusion that could transcend me into other realities, like music. When I hear a beautiful piece of music or see an amazing painting I forget about myself and become completely absorbed in the work. Also, my personality is suited for the studio rather than the stage.

+2 ::: Could you tell us some more about your work?

I am inspired by symbols and stories of the desire to bridge a gap. This could take the form of our conscious and our subconscious, between lovers, or between humanity and the divine.

The symbolism I use and the emotional impact I strive for is in great part inspired by the writings of **Carl Jung**, the story The Epic of Gilgamesh, and especially the writings of thirteenth century poet **Jelaluddin Rumi**.

I use purely visual information to paint by, to create images that are poetic rather than illustrative. My training is in the lineage of the Boston School Painters and my collection of reference books

are mainly from the 19th and 17th centuries.

+3 ::: Have you found it difficult painting in a classical style in a contemporary art world? And would a contemporary artist benefit from your classical realism classes (even if he/she plans to work in a more contemporary manner)?

I haven't found it difficult working in a classical style. When people see my work they are pleased and relieved that beauty is still seen and expressed in today's society. I do find it peculiar that there is a large part of the media and arts community that doesn't know there are artists expressing themselves in this manner. They may know but don't see the difference between beauty in art and something saccharine.

If an aspiring artist wishes to work in a representational style, he/she should go to an atelier where they will learn to how to translate what they see in nature. The traditional art school or university does not offer rigorous training in drawing, the foundation of visual art. Without that skill they will be very limited in their work for the rest of their careers.

If a student has no intention of working in a representational manner, they don't need to study classical realism. They should have exposure to it as they develop the same as with all styles of art. The standards in terms of accuracy and the effort required developing drawing and painting skills is not a means to an end for them.

+4 ::: What artists have influenced you, and how?

I am drawn to some painters for technical reasons, some for aesthetic reasons, and some because of the pure emotional power of their work. A few of the artists that have influenced me are **Rembrandt**, Jean-Francois Millet, Jean-Jacques Henner, Pieter Bruegel, Serov, Repin, Fantin LaTour, Vemeer.

+5 ::: What other interests do you have outside of painting?

Everything in my life outside of painting, somehow contributes to my work. I teach and I enjoy mentoring the next generation of realist artists. I like hunting for old art books and shopping for still life objects. I also enjoy going to the gym and eating healthily, if your going to be standing at the easel all day for the better part of your life, its important to keep in shape.

+6 ::: What inspires you to paint and how do you keep motivated when things get tough in the studio?

One of the great things about a classical training is that you are sincerely trained. Dedicated students come to studio 9-4 Monday through Friday for several years. In their free time they read mythology, study anatomy, go to museums, anything that can help them with their drawing and painting. They go out and see the world and discover themselves. After this, you are prepared to go out on your own. So, if you've had a good training, you're already in the habit of going to studio everyday. In terms of inspiration to paint, it has never been a problem.

When I feel things aren't going well in a painting, I put it aside before I get too frustrated and go back to it later.

+7 ::: How have you handled the business side of being an artist?

First of all I have a MBA business advisor to guide me in areas that most artists are not trained in, such as, marketing, distribution strategy, strategic planning, and finance. My advisor emphasized the importance of my web site for growing the business. I hired a professional web designer and a web master to handle updates and search engine placement. The web site is like a store, potential customers go to the web site to find products of interest. My offerings fall into several specific product and service categories each of which requires its own marketing and channel development to be successful: portrait commissions, teaching, oil paintings for sale through galleries, juried professional competitions, and graphite and charcoal drawings available direct from the web site. I am currently in the process of updating my website again as it is a living document updated in real time.

Psychologically it can be very challenging to separate the business and art making. It is difficult to put my paintings in the frame of a "product", but it is a necessity.

+8 ::: Where do you see yourself in 10 years?

My work will consist of large symbolic still lifes, interiors, and interiors with a figure or grand floral compositions. I will have my own etching press and spend evenings printing. The work will continue to grow in complexity, depth and technique.

I will still draw from the figure to keep my skills sharp and, although it is well thought-out, my studio will be more organized.

My school (The New School of Classical Art) will have moved to a larger space to incorporate the growing number of students. It will offer not only the current curriculum, but also extra courses in the evening and weekends so full-time students can attend extra classes and students that can only come part-time will have an option. There will be several students who have graduated and are successful in their careers.

+9 ::: What's the best and worst parts of being a full time, working artist?

The best part is that I am able to paint as my career and I have complete freedom and control over my art and business. The hardest thing is thinking about the business end of everything. I would much rather spend all my time at the easel. It can be difficult because there is no security in terms of finance. There are some personalities that wouldn't be able to live with the instability.

+10 ::: What advice would you give to an artist just starting out?

Apply yourself to your work with everything you have. Study and practice as much as you can. There will be distractions such as friends or family wanting your time and attention but make sure your work doesn't suffer. You will have to disappoint people sometimes, or often.

Don't let criticism get in the way of learning. Whatever negative comments a teacher or a college or even your family may make, consider them. Take it as an opportunity to see your work with a different perspective. It is an opportunity to hear what the viewers who you communicate with will be thinking before the work leaves your studio.

Stick it out through the hard times and don't doubt yourself, have people in your life who believe in you to give you a pep talk.

When you wake in the morning and think of your day, put painting at the top of your list. And when you are in studio working, put all other things out of your mind.

Traditional colleges and universities do not offer training in classical drawing and painting techniques. Go to an atelier school where you can receive the education you need to become a master draftsman and painter.

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