19th-Century Academic Painting: A Living Tradition

BY MICHAEL ZAKIAN

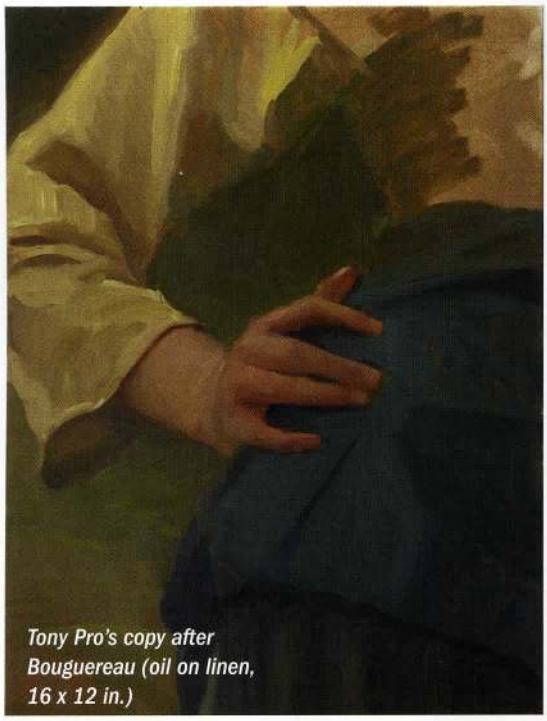
What is the state of academic painting at the beginning of the 21st century? Is it a lively and vital art form, or a tired system for producing conventional images? Can we even speak of a single academic method of painting today? I recently posed these questions to a number of contemporary realist painters. The occasion was an exhibition I had organized, *The Epic and the Exotic: 19th-Century Academic Realism from the Dahesh Museum of Art,* which was on view at the Frederick R. Weisman Museum of Art at Pepperdine University from January through April 2012. It included more than 40 paintings by such luminary talents as William-Adolphe Bouguereau, Jean-Léon Gérôme, and Lawrence Alma-Tadema, as well as many other outstanding artists highly regarded in their time but no longer well known. All were loaned from the permanent collection of New York's Dahesh Museum of Art, which focuses exclusively on this period in art history.

Historical academic art of this quality is not often seen in Southern California. As expected, the exhibition was a great hit, especially with artists and collectors interested in contemporary realism. The presence of so many painters in the galleries made me wonder what exactly they saw and appreciated in art that is more than 100 years old and so remote from our modern, digital world. The artists I spoke with were ecstatic about the opportunity to see so many great examples of 19th-century

Jeremy Lipking (b. 1975)
Enchanted Depths
2011, Oil on canvas, 40 x 70 in.
Private collection

Tony Pro, Alexey Steele, and Jeremy Lipking before William-Adolphe Bouguereau's The Water Girl

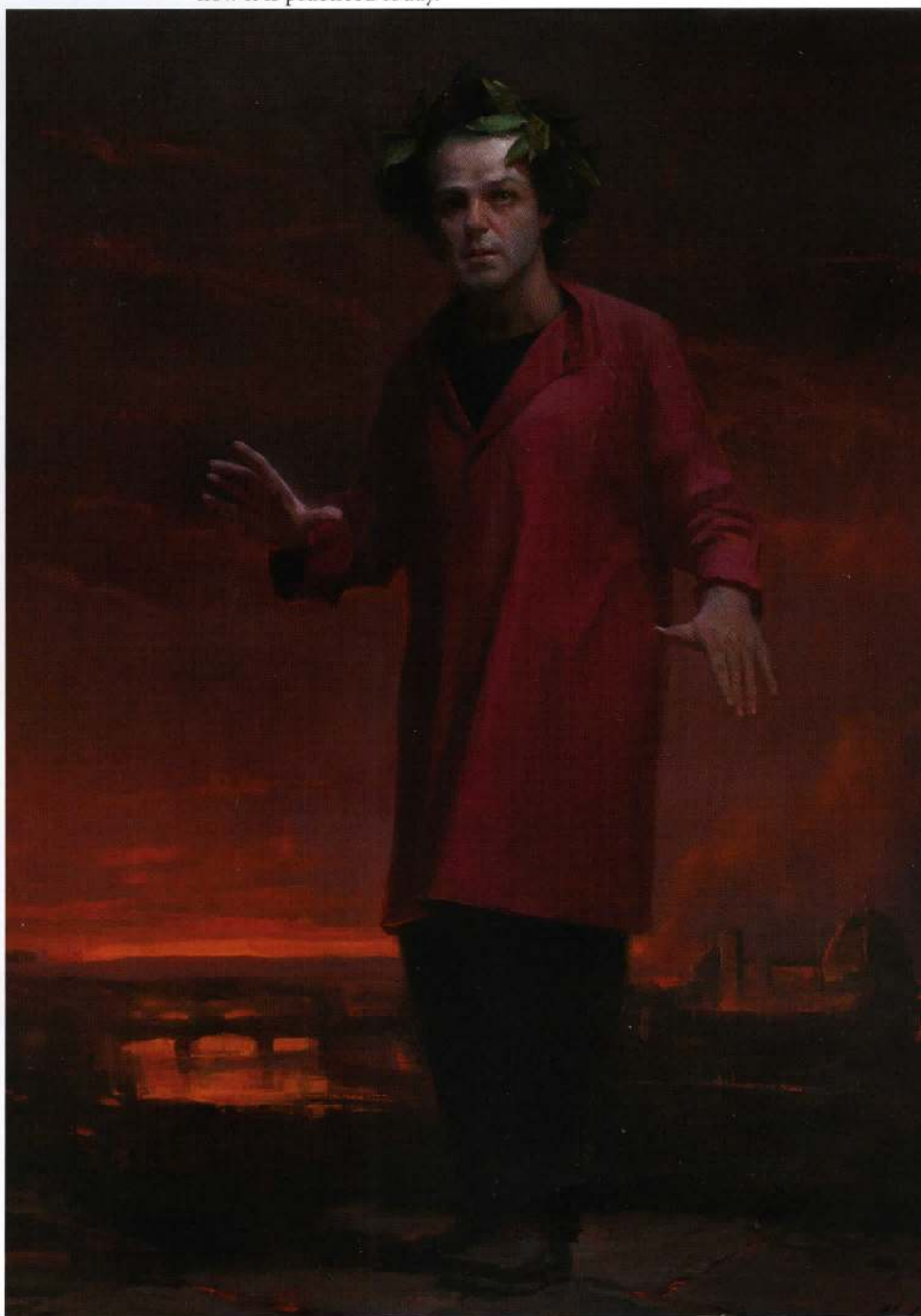
a vital art-making laboratory. In order to generate a meaningful dialogue, I invited five Los Angeles painters — Adrian Gottlieb (b. 1975), Jeremy Lipking (b. 1975), Tony Pro (b. 1973), Alexey Steele (b. 1967), and Vadim Zang (b. 1965) — to visit the museum and paint from the originals. I already knew these artists personally, had studied with each of them, and had great respect for their talent. Each comes from a different background, but they are all accomplished realists and committed practitioners of the atelier method. All five accepted my offer enthusiastically. Therefore, on two separate days when the museum was closed to the public, they came to work from the 19th-century masters. Watching them paint, and talking with them during the process, revealed much about the nature of the academic tradition and how it is practiced today.



Tony Pro's copy after Bouguereau (oil on linen, 16 x 12 in.)

realism at one time. I was surprised to learn that most of the contemporary realist painters I admire have never had the opportunity to paint from original canvases in a museum setting. While copying the masters was an essential part of every young artist's training for hundreds of years, this practice has essentially disappeared because most American museums do not allow artists to work in the galleries.

I realized that this could be a wonderful opportunity to use the Weisman exhibition as an active learning tool. Instead of treating the artworks as static artifacts from a distant era, we could turn the exhibition into



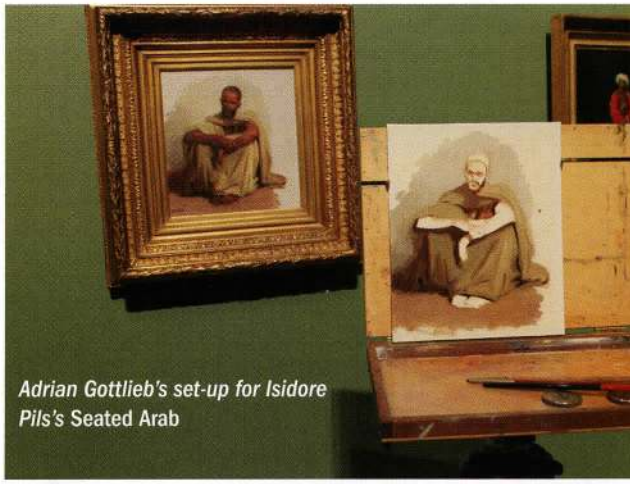
Tony Pro (b. 1973)
Il Comico Divina
2012, Oil on linen, 40 x 30 in.
Collection of the artist

Alexey Steele (b. 1967)
Madonna of the Storm
2010, Oil on canvas, 80 x 36 in.
Private collection

Alexey Steele articulated the feelings of most of the painters when he said, "What is most striking about this exhibition, presented in the setting of a contemporary art museum, is how fresh and relevant it looks. It answers a set of vital questions shared by many artists in our day. It fits right into current conversations about our contemporary art world. The wide response to the exhibition shows vividly that academic principles are the thing missing in so much art today."

So what are these academic principles, and why are they lacking in contemporary art? The academic method traditionally refers to the classical manner of representational painting. It is associated with precise drawing, life-like color, and harmonious composition, all employed to create the illusion of three-dimensional objects in a unified pictorial space. Academic art traces its origins to the academy established by the Carracci family in Bologna in the late 16th century. This workshop for artists opposed the stylized forms of late Mannerism by drawing directly from nature. Observation from life and the discipline to accurately capture what one sees became hallmarks of the academic style. These early efforts to create a powerful naturalist style became institutionalized in 1648, when the French government established the royal academy. Painting was placed in the service of the nation, which capitalized on the power of art to glorify and aggrandize both crown and state. Soon other European countries adopted this model, elevating the art academy to the level of a venerated national institution.

These official academies established the aesthetic standards that dominated art in Europe through the 19th century. This model prevailed until the rise of Impressionism in the 1870s. Conceived as a calculated revolt against the academy, the young Impressionists advanced new artistic values that emphasized spontaneity and originality. In the ensuing decades, academic art fell into disrepute and was replaced by modernism. Art in the 20th century became dominated by a series



Adrian Gottlieb's set-up for Isidore Pils's Seated Arab

Adrian Gottlieb (b. 1975)
Jennifer
2007, Oil on linen glued to panel, 21 x 16 in.
Private collection

of avant-garde movements that posed answers to the question "What is art?" By the late 1970s, however, the modernist project had run its course and was replaced by postmodernism, a perspective based on appropriation that presents recycled clichés as a form of cultural commentary.

Interestingly, it was around this time that people sought a new direction in art and began to re-examine the academic tradition that had lain moribund for decades. New, grass-roots art schools emerged where curious artists banded together to teach themselves how to paint in a realistic manner. They looked to guides in the fields of illustration and animation, areas that never relinquished traditional draftsmanship, as well as to a few pockets of stalwart realist painters who remained faithful to the tradition of representational art. As a result, the last decades of the 20th century saw a revival of the academic tradition that continues to inspire new artists today.

THE FIRST DAY

On the first day I had scheduled with the artists, Jeremy Lipking, Tony Pro, and Alexey Steele arrived at the Weisman. These painters are close friends and participate in Novorealism, a movement that believes in using realism not to imitate reality, but as a powerful tool to create new representational images. Since they had barely six hours to work, the trio knew they could do only one painting in the allotted time. Both Steele and Pro quickly settled upon Bouguereau's *The Water Girl* of 1885, a larger-than-life-size canvas of a standing girl carrying an empty water jug. This painting, a centerpiece of the exhibition, attracted the most attention from visitors, who revere Bouguereau's uncanny ability to handle paint and tonal values. His canvas appears to glow with an inexplicable internal light. As an artist once said, Bouguereau's realism seems to emerge directly from the paint surface itself.

A native of Russia, Alexey Steele studied at the Surikov Art Institute of the Soviet Academy of Arts in Moscow, participating directly in a tradition that always upheld academic training. Raised in this legacy of grand European figurative art, he favors dramatic compositions with figures engaged in majestic allegories. Because of his eye for emotional drama, Steele is deeply sensitive to compositional dynamics. Staring intently at the Bouguereau, he immediately focused on one particular feature — the girl's hand resting on her right hip. "That is the center of the entire painting," he proclaimed. "Everything in the composition comes from this point." He recognized that the hand is the linchpin where the figure's legs and torso dramatically shift direction, producing an elegant S-curve.

Adrian Gottlieb at work

Artists at work: Vadim Zang (foreground) and Adrian Gottlieb (background)

Jeremy Lipking's set-up for Peder Mønsted's Portrait of a Nubian

Steele and Pro both decided to make a study of this area and found themselves working side by side, literally shoulder to shoulder. They knew they could never duplicate Bouguereau's actual working method in the time they had. Like most of the academic painters, Bouguereau used a multi-stage approach and labored over large compositions such as *The Water Girl* for weeks, if not months. Working within the museum and under pressing time constraints, the contemporary painters could only approximate Bouguereau's look. Their challenge was to paint wet-on-wet, using *alla prima* techniques (from the Italian meaning "at first attempt") to imitate the appearance of a historical canvas realized through far more complex and laborious means.

To capture the luminous quality of Bouguereau's skin tones, Steele and Pro both chose to utilize contrasting color temperatures. Their palettes focused on setting warm reds against cool greens. The dynamic play of these red-green passages produced beautiful optical midtones that captured the feel of light falling upon a young girl's delicate skin. It was especially interesting to see that although they had a similar goal, they approached their objective in different ways.

Tony Pro, who grew up in sunny California, is fascinated by the quality of light. From the start, he began to block in his subject using an underdrawing of reds and greens. He wanted to produce a vivid "color-space" with his initial marks that would then serve to guide his entire process. Steele, on the other hand, was trained in a classical atelier method and used more traditional neutral grays to establish the shape of his forms. He switched to color after his drawing was complete. While they approached their subject in different ways, both arrived at studies similar in appearance that successfully capture the essence of the original. As Steele declared, "It's not about 'look.' It's about visual substance."

While Steele had the benefit of a true European academic education, native Californians Tony Pro and Jeremy Lipking obtained their training in a typically roundabout and practical American manner. Both studied under the illustrator Glen Orbik at the California Art Institute, a small art school in a suburb north of Los Angeles. This school was founded by Orbik's teacher Fred Fixler, an entertainment-industry illustrator who had studied after World War II at the Art Students League of New York with the legendary teacher Frank Reilly. Reilly learned art from the great anatomy instructor George Bridgman, who was himself a student of one of the outstanding artists in the exhibition, Jean-Léon Gérôme. From Gérôme to Bridgman to Reilly, and then from Reilly to Fixler to Orbik, the basic tenets of the academic tradition were spread from Paris to New York and then to Los Angeles, and they came to be taught in the unlikely locale of Westlake Village, California.

While his two friends were focused on the Bouguereau, Jeremy Lipking chose to paint Peder Mønsted's *Portrait of a Nubian*. He had admired this Danish artist's better-known Nordic landscapes and was fascinated to see this small but focused study of an African man, made while Mønsted visited Tunisia. Lipking's mantra is "Shape, Value, Edge." He believes that every artist should look first for the specific large shapes of his subject, then establish the value, and finally adjust the edge, which determines how adjacent shapes relate to one another. Using soft brushes, Lipking began to lay in thin areas of paint, aiming to record the proper shape, value, and edge with each mark. His study captured the amazing richness of the subject, rendering the figure's deep black skin with a variety of subtle tones that vary from warm reddish browns to hues with a bluish cast. Although he has established a national reputation as one of our outstanding figurative painters, this was the first time Lipking was able to do a master study in a museum.

THE SECOND DAY

On the second day I organized, Adrian Gottlieb arrived with Vadim Zang. While the previous group had worked in complementary modes, Gottlieb and Zang have diametrically opposed styles. Gottlieb studied in Florence under the American realists Charles Cecil and Daniel Graves. There he learned the sight-size method, an approach that uses careful measurement to plot the linear parameters of his subject. Zang, on the other hand, was schooled in the Russian academic tradition in his native Armenia. He learned to work in a looser and more gestural Impressionist technique that historically was developed to fit the needs of 20th-century Soviet Realism. When the two were at work, literally back to back, it was a classic opposition of line versus color, reason versus emotion, Florentine classicism versus Russian romanticism.

Vadim Zang (b. 1965)
Male Model
2011, Oil on canvas panel, 24 x 18 in.
Private collection

Although Gottlieb reveres Bouguereau as an artist who "understood the grace of design," he chose not to work from *The Water Girl*, feeling it was far too ambitious. He decided instead to copy Isidore Pils's *Seated Arab*, c. 1861-62. "I chose that painting because it was done in a manner very different from the way I work," he explained. "In my studio, the mantra is always dark to light, back to front. In the cloth here, Pils sculpted highlights and shadows simultaneously within a large mass of mid-tone color." Gottlieb set out to "copy the painting verbatim" so that he could understand how another artist constructed his image. "In reproductions the colors get flattened out," he said. "You lose the sequence of brushstrokes. Working from an original, you can see how the artist painted, stroke by stroke." I found it remarkable that although Gottlieb studied for years in Florence, a city filled with the art of the Renaissance masters, this was his first opportunity to work from a painting in a museum. He was amazed by how much he learned, concluding that it was such an "invaluable experience that it shocked me."

While Gottlieb believes in rendering his subject with a perfectly drawn line, Vadim Zang takes a tonal approach. He thinks and works in terms of large masses of value. "There are no lines in nature," he explained. "Lines are an abstraction. Our eyes see light and dark shapes." Zang utilizes the limited "Zorn palette," named after the late-19th-century Swedish naturalist Anders Zorn. It consists of four colors: white, black, yellow ochre, and cadmium red light. Zang's astute command of these basic hues produced a surprising array of harmonious tones that actually came very close to matching the appearance of Bouguereau's pigments.

Zang approached his composition like a master builder. He began by using a large brush to lay in broad swaths of color that immediately captured the value and temperature of the original. Once these large masses were established, he set out to gradually refine his image. Zang switched to smaller filbert brushes, allowing him to sculpt individual shapes and edges. Soon he resorted to even finer brushes that he cuts down to create a sharper rendering tool. It was fascinating to see that although he moved from large to small forms, Zang never really painted details. He believes that painting is based on the large effect. As he worked from larger to smaller areas, he was always thinking in terms of basic, essential masses. And as a result, even his smallest touches have the breadth and grandeur of fundamental shapes, giving his paintings an essentially epic quality.

Watching these artists work, and hearing their reflections on the 19th-century masters, revealed much about the nature of the academic method, both as a historical process and as a living practice. Academic painting today is just as creative and varied as it was in the 19th century. It is not a single, monolithic system, but was always a complex series of techniques and procedures, employed in various ways to capture the beauty of the natural world. As Joshua Reynolds, first president of England's Royal Academy of Arts, said, "The art of seeing Nature ... is in reality the great object, the point to which all our studies are directed."

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