

George Gallo

Making Art with Brushes and Cameras

By PAUL RANOGAJEC



*L*OCAL COLOR, which writer/director George Gallo (b. 1956) premiered at this spring's Tribeca Film Festival, is a revealing portrait of this filmmaker's long affair with painting, as well as a searching meditation on the spiritual connections that art can create among those open to its powers. "Local color" is the true-to-life color of a thing — undistorted by fanciful imagination, atmospheric effects, or other kinds of editing. Yet "local color" also means capturing a place's spirit, its unique character and details — an approach closely associated with plein-air landscape painting.

The names Church, Cole, Durand, and Wyeth spring to almost anyone's mind in this regard, and indeed they were among the giants Gallo admired as a young painter, though he also revered the lesser-known Edward Redfield, Clyde Aspevig, and Kevin Macpherson. Gallo's particular fondness for Pennsylvania Impressionism, especially Redfield's, can be discerned in his own canvases (illustrated here). Back then, he recalls, "Paintings by Redfield were selling for about \$600. The same paintings were selling for \$20,000 in the 1930s. I was upset that some of America's finest artists were being ignored and their life's work disregarded. A Redfield recently sold at auction for over \$1 million, which shows that times have most certainly changed."

For Gallo, paintings offer the possibility of life-changing experience because they ask their makers and their viewers to look more closely at the world and to be more open to its wonders. To be "aware of my own mortality" and "to surrender myself to something higher and more lasting than myself" while facing nature's thrilling immensity are part



ARMIN MUELLER-STAHLS AS SEROFF AND TREVOR MORGAN AS JOHN JR.



GEORGE GALLO ON SET

of what makes painting both personal and universal for Gallo. Above all, he says, plein-air painting "celebrates the beauty of the world."

Gallo's passion was ignited in elementary school when art teacher Francis Robinson praised his "perfect sense of perspective." Painting and then filmmaking occupied the rest of his schooling. Having skipped many classes to enjoy New York's galleries and museums, Gallo knew he would find a way to meld these twin pursuits into a career. At the State University of New York, he met the artist George Cherepov (1909-1987), who spent more than a year imparting much wisdom about landscape painting. In 1982, Gallo moved to Hollywood, where he has written screenplays for *Wise Guys*, *Midnight Run*, *Analyze This*, *The Whole Ten Yards*, and other hits. But he soon took up painting again and landed a solo show at New York's Grand Central Art Galleries. Today his richly impastoed canvases are handled by Newman Galleries, Philadelphia; Mountains Edge Fine Art, Santa Fe; George Stern Fine Arts, Carmel; Lois Wagner Fine Arts, New York; and Bluebird Gallery, Laguna Beach.



GEORGE GALLO (b. 1956)
SEASIDE GARDEN
2006, OIL ON CANVAS, 32 x 34 IN.
COURTESY NEWMAN GALLERIES, PHILADELPHIA



GEORGE GALLO (b. 1956)
WINTER STREAM BREAKING UP
2006, OIL ON CANVAS, 30 x 40 IN.
COURTESY NEWMAN GALLERIES, PHILADELPHIA



GEORGE GALLO (B. 1956)
WINTER SET, NEW HOPE
 2006, OIL ON CANVAS, 30 x 36 IN.
 COURTESY MOUNTAINS EDGE FINE ART, SANTA FE

GEORGE GALLO (B. 1956)
SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA COAST
 2006, OIL ON CANVAS, 30 x 36 IN.
 COURTESY NEWMAN GALLERIES, PHILADELPHIA

Local Color is unlike Gallo's other films because it is based loosely on his own life. In reality, Cherepov eagerly shared his knowledge, but in the film, the young artist John Jr. (played by Trevor Morgan) must work hard to get master painter Seroff (Armin Mueller-Stahl) to teach him the tricks of the trade. The main antagonist is John Sr. (Ray Liotta), who is not pleased to discover his son's budding interest. Gallo's family, by contrast, was always supportive. His reasons for distinguishing real life from cinematic storyline were numerous: He did not want to create a self-serving auto-documentary; he relished the dramatic tension between a reluctant master and eager student; he wanted to address broader issues about art; and besides, he knows that a good film always tells a good story.

One scene in *Local Color* is particularly revealing of Gallo's viewpoint: Seroff engages in a heated debate with an art critic, who sees his work as sentimental and retrograde in style, technique, and subject. Seroff demands to know what is wrong with sentiment, which connects us to each other and nature. Gallo believes that "the common person gets this" and rejects the elitist view that art should express only the artist's intellect and subjectivity, thus disconnecting him or her from the rest of humanity.

Local Color expresses Gallo's philosophy not only through its characters but also through the artistry of filmmaking. As John matures, and as Seroff's passion reawakens, a subtle but perceptible change occurs: Gallo used a technique known as the Da Vinci Process to deepen the colors visible on screen, much as the colors on John's canvasses become more refined and intensely real. Art imitates nature, and in Gallo's film, art imitates art.

Gallo believes that revolution can be a very good thing (his beloved Impressionists were once branded revolutionaries), yet he warns against discarding tradition. He once thought a feature film about painting would never succeed, but the several years he spent teaching art in Los Angeles convinced him that the time for *Local Color* had come: In his students, he witnessed a passion for learning traditional techniques and studying nature, a desire that has informed *Local Color* and will, Gallo believes, resonate broadly.

His vision permeates *Local Color* in another tangible way: More than 300 of his own paintings appear during the 99-minute film, including the first five he created while studying under Cherepov. Several close-up



sequences of John painting a canvas actually record Gallo's own hands at work. This remarkable degree of involvement by the director only reinforces his film's deeply felt message.

Gallo's painting method, *alla prima* — Italian for "all at once" — endows his canvases with the excitement of the moment of creation. Not coincidentally, his film production company is named *Alla Prima*, and the term can even be applied to the way *Local Color* was produced: It had to be done right the first time because it was shot in post-Katrina Louisiana in less than a month, on a tight budget. Gallo is ecstatic about the result, which was scheduled for four screenings at Tribeca but generated such positive buzz that three screenings were added. In 2007, audiences nationwide will discover *Local Color* for themselves, and can stay up to date on its release by visiting www.imdb.com/title/tt0472126/. ■

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