



Patricia (oil, 30x48)

An abstract painting with dark, swirling colors like purple, red, and black, contrasting with bright, textured areas of white and yellow. The overall style is expressive and gestural.

Light That Stops Time

The figure, as it moves in response to light, fascinates Jerry Weiss, who prefers improvisation to planning, as he works from life.

■ Interview by Maureen Bloomfield



To see examples of the great age of American Illustration, visit www.artistsnetwork.com/article/american-illustrators.

You studied in more than one classical atelier, but there's a roughness to your figures, in contrast to the refined effects associated with the classical realist movement. You told me the other day that you would always choose a Daumier over a Bouguereau.

My father, Morris Weiss, was a very successful cartoonist and what follows from that is, for lack of a better word, an irreverence regarding the world. I don't feel terribly beholden to a particular dogma. I see things as I'm inclined to see them, without thinking that I belong to this school or that school. That openness speaks to my upbringing. My mother and father met at the Art Students League in New York City. My mother had wanted to be a fashion artist; she gave that up and reared a family instead, but to this day she paints still lifes. She's very good, with an exacting eye. And my father brought, obviously, his gift as a draftsman to his career as a cartoonist, and a great sense of humor as well. Both my parents are independent thinkers.

Soon after I was born in New Jersey, my folks moved to North Miami, Florida, where I grew up. I wanted to study classical drawing, and George Bolge, a museum director in south Florida, said Roberto Martinez was the only guy. Roberto was a great gentleman who had studied with the sculptor Marino Marini. It seemed to me then that Roberto knew everything. He was comfortable walking around the class and talking about Pontormo and Raphael; at the same time he had a deeply spiritual view and was sensitive to his students. Roberto was the one who got me drawing life-size, a practice I teach now at the Lyme Academy College of Fine Arts in Connecticut.

I would call your draftsmanship confident, which is different from meticulous.

When I later studied with Ted Seth Jacobs at the Art Students League, I certainly appreciated his love of draftsmanship, and I learned from his instruction in light and form. However, I found Harvey Dinnerstein's more emphatic draftsmanship more to my liking. Again,

maybe it's my background; there's a freedom in cartooning, and I grew up around pictures from the great era of American illustration. My dad was and still is an extraordinary collector. I was certainly influenced by seeing the freedom with which the great illustrators painted—they threw paint around!—because they had the assurance of their draftsmanship.

When I was a teenager, I was in the enviable position of acting as a consultant to my father when he was buying works by Dean Cornwell (1892–1960). He would show me the photos of different Cornwells and say, “What ones do you like?” My dad had grown up with idols like James Montgomery Flagg (1877–1960), whom he met and actually sat for, J.C. Leyendecker (1874–1951), Norman Rockwell (1894–1978), Harvey Dunn (1884–1952), Charles Dana Gibson (1867–1944)—all these illustrators and more were amply represented in

“A model can sit down and I can look at her with impartiality, but the moment she shifts in response to the light, I’ll say, ‘Those are the shapes!’” Jerry Weiss

my dad's collection. I took those drawings for granted as a kid; over my bed was one of J.C. Leyendecker's *Saturday Evening Post* covers, and later a Norman Rockwell and a beautiful early Cornwell.

Of course in illustration there's an implied narrative; do you think of your pictures as having a story line?

If anything, growing up the way I did clarified that I had no interest in overt storytelling! My father's schedule—sitting at the drawing board and writing narratives for comics that ran every day, like *Mickey Finn* and *Joe Palooka*—struck me as terrifically hard work. If I were going to be a painter, I knew I didn't want to feel tied to my work in the same way. I wanted work to stay enjoyable, and I wanted to call the shots.

What is it about the nude that speaks to you?

Sensuality, for sure, but also the opportunity to study flesh and bone for their formal beauty, and to find

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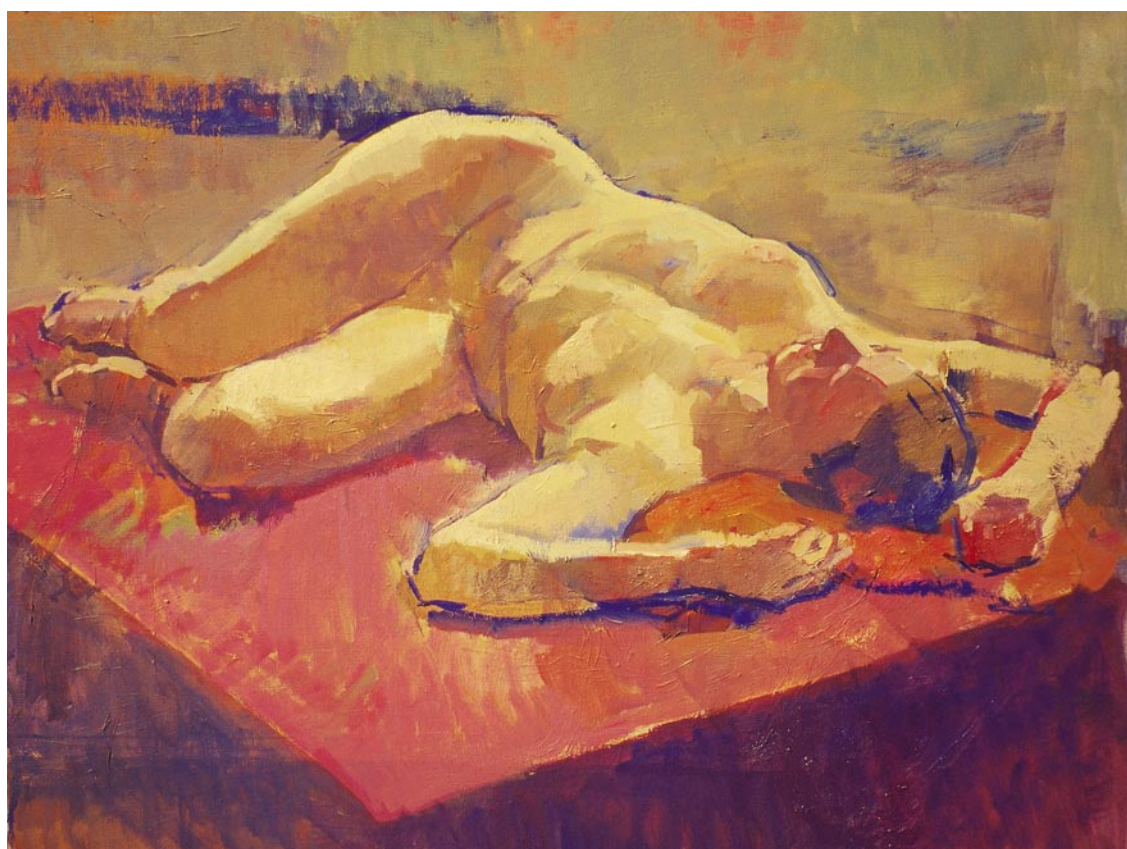


Nude with Amaryllis (above, left; oil, 48x30), **Standing Nude** (above; oil, 48x24) and **Friends** (at left; oil, 36x48)

Sam and Liza (below; oil on canvas, 50x40),
Prom Dress (at right; oil, 48x34) and Nude
Study (bottom; oil, 30x36)



PRIVATE COLLECTION



certain harmonies within the figure and the drapery. I've always been interested in painting the female nude, not purely for its obvious physical charms, but to suggest the intellect, spirit and psychology of the woman, as well. More prosaically, I look for poses that suggest movement and are comfortable for the model to hold. Did I mention Michelangelo? His sculptures in the Medici Chapel (*Twilight and Dawn; Night and Day*) are powerful templates for the reclining but active figure. It's ironic that his figures are ostensibly of the female but really refer to the male nude; I reference them obliquely in a much more feminine context.

Can you tell me how a painting begins?

The first layers of paint set the table, so to speak, for what comes later, but they also have an independent function. I like Monet's idea of having a swift and complete image first that may be built upon subsequently. The initial lay-in of paint is both a linear and color structure for what comes later, yet ideally the lay-in will have some merit unto itself. I prefer an *alla prima* approach. Even when I'm working in stages, each session is composed primarily of direct painting, rather than glazing, which would require a premeditated approach.

The initial lay-in also must possess, or be painted with, a high level of energy. To begin methodically or too accurately is to set the wrong tone for the later sessions, so the idea for me is to begin in a mood where I'm completely engaged. I want the image to be valid at all stages, right from the start, when it must be founded on a strong sense of abstraction and breadth of drawing. Otherwise, all the subsequent modeling of form is meaningless.

I use a wood palette and a limited color range that includes titanium white, yellow ochre, cadmium red light and ultramarine blue, to which I might add cadmium yellow light, a deeper red, cerulean and occasionally a green. I prefer flat brushes of various sizes (they encourage a kind of blocky modeling, almost sculptural in conception), Turpenoid, and linseed or other oil. I prefer painting on portrait-grade Claessens oil-primed linen, though for landscape studies and class demonstrations I often use pre-primed panels. Sometimes I scrape or apply paint with a knife.

I start by blocking in the figure and all the important compositional shapes, with paint. Initially it's a painted linear structure, quickly supplemented by large

value shapes, dark and light. This is done fluidly, with a lot of turpentine, so as to cover territory quickly. My palette is a train wreck. I never clean it; I just throw it out when there's no mixing space left. I work very rapidly, an approach generated by necessity as well as temperament.

If I've blocked in the entire composition in the first half-hour or so, I then pay more attention to color intensity and temperature. To put it simply, the remainder of work consists of a continuous refinement of drawing, building of form, and recognition of an atmosphere or quality of light that unifies the whole picture. I'm constantly working around all areas of the painting, so that many parts may be redrawn and repainted a dozen times or more.

When the picture turns a corner from its uncertain start to that point when I know it's going to work, I feel a certain relief, and I can really get down to business. But it's all about good composition, and once the painting is laid in and the big shapes of value and color work, happiness is darn near unavoidable.

Your compositions have a vitality, because you work with planes so the figure is not the only interesting aspect of the painting. Can you describe how you divide the space?

I'm not a big planner. When a model comes to my studio or when somebody sits for a commission, I almost never start with any preconceptions. I have the sitter come in and I ask her or him, "What if we do this and do that?" and I play with the pose until something strikes me as right.

When the figure is in the painting, it's obviously my focal point. So the first issues I'm addressing are where am I putting the figure on the canvas, how is it taking up space, and how much do I want it to dominate space. Usually the answer to those questions is "front and center" and "dominant," but I have a lot of fun playing and moving the figure around, not necessarily having it be dead center—nor do I want to be cutesy and put it off to the side self-consciously.

A model can sit down and I can look at her with impartiality, but the moment she shifts in response to the light, I'll say "Those are the shapes!" It's probably a very visual thing, but it's funny how quickly it can get visceral and go to other places and even become—one hesitates to use the word *spiritual*, but it's unavoidable. When you look at the work of certain great masters, light implies other things beyond mere shape and

Claudia (at right; oil, 46x42) and
Caity Nude (opposite; oil, 48x30)

color. I have in my head Vermeer and Rembrandt and the late Euan Uglow, who used light and pattern to create a stillness. Corot is another favorite example of one who paints the figure in light that stops time—quite of this realm but at the same time of another realm.

Ingres's paintings are like enamels. Even though the surface is immaculate, there's obviously something beneath it. There's a story that when Degas was an old man and had just about lost his sight, he went into a museum and ran his fingers over the surface of paintings by Ingres. I can't imagine the surface told much of a story, but if anyone could feel and read the surface, it would be Degas.

Can you describe in more detail how you achieve a painterly surface?

I have a feeling my liking for a roughness of execution was ingrained early on by seeing works by Harvey Dunn, who liked *impasto* surfaces that one critic described as “looking as if paint had been laid on with a trowel.” For me, the building of a varied surface is the result of trial-and-error; hence, it's different in each painting. It seems to come from an attempt to work without too much restraint—and the desire to build forms by continually adding more pigment. Sometimes I enjoy painting over old canvases, too, because they give you a built-in surface. Initially it's confusing and a bit strange—trying to paint something on top of a painting that didn't work—but after the first couple of hours, when you have it all covered, it gets very interesting.

The one concession I make to the reality that I'm doing something not technically wise is that I add more linseed oil to the mix in hopes that over the long term it will help the new paint adhere better to what's underneath. I know the “fat over lean” rule from experience. When I was younger I painted over paintings that were already rich in oil content; the pictures I painted had a lot of titanium white on top that flaked off so easily, I could practically chip it off with a fingernail. I learned a thing or two.



PHOTO: RICK SCANLAN

It's also a great deal of fun to work on white canvas and start as if it were a watercolor, with a series of broad and fluid washes—a practice I didn't begin until I shared studio space with Thomas Loepp, a fine painter and friend who started all of his paintings on pure white. I realized then something that's implicit in the work of certain Impressionists: By working on a white ground, you're starting from a higher key. It brings your whole palette up.

Let's talk about *Claudia* (above, oil, 46x42).

Claudia is a painter who had been a student of mine; the painting of her falls under the heading “really difficult.” At one point her head was turned away from us, and I had her in a white top with a black skirt; I deep-sixed that pretty early on and said, “Let's do it all in black.” I wasn't getting her head, so I asked her to face me, and I spent hours trying to get the head right. On the last day I repainted the background, which had been an abstract jumble of shapes that I realized was distracting. I threw a white sheet behind Claudia and scumbled the area, painting an off-white shape with a healthy dollop of linseed oil mixed into the pigment, which resulted in something not quite opaque, so you



Meet Jerry Weiss

"It's important for a teacher not to say, 'This is the only way to do it,' but rather to give guidance and encouragement and let students figure out some of the important things themselves," says Weiss, who teaches at Lyme Academy College of Fine Arts. His paintings are in the collections of New Britain Museum of American Art and the Harvard Club of New York City. He has a solo show on view now at Ruggiero Gallery in Madison, Connecticut. To learn more, visit www.jerryinweiss.com.



PHOTO: BETTINA ARCHER

To see more of Weiss's work, go to www.artistsnetwork.com/article/jerry-weiss.

can almost see through the drapery. That single change threw Claudia's head into much better relief.

You mention trying this or that, as if you're just as ready, at any moment, to start a work or abandon one.

The ideal situation is to have a few paintings going at once. That way I'm not putting all my emotional eggs in one basket. Right now a painter and his wife are posing for me. The piece started as a large oil sketch without too much expectation on my part. I was backing into it, as it were, saying, "We'll just try this." After a few more sessions of struggle and work, the piece began to take more shape, so I started thinking that it wasn't merely an oil sketch; it was more and more a painting. It's nice to have the latitude—I should say almost the attitude—to start a painting without expectations, to say, "I'm just playing around here; let's see what happens."

Do you convey the importance of "playing around" to your students?

Yes, a sense of play is a necessary balance to the rigor of the training; for me, play came first. The most important lesson I can tell beginning painters is to work from life. A lot of people come to art the way I came: I

worked from imagination as a child, and then I copied photographs when I was a teenager. Well, that trains the eye and hand, but it's a process well-removed from working from life, which begins with observation. Then it's about practice.

You also paint landscapes that you describe as having "lineaments," as if the landscape had a skeleton.

Landscape was a genre I learned strictly on my own. After 10 years, it dawned on me that landscape could be handled the way I see the figure in an interior—as shape, pattern, composition. As I moved farther north, I could see architecture in the landscape; that's the reason I love painting on the Maine coast: rocks. And there's something sensual—not only to the flesh and the skin of a figure, but also to the texture of a landscape—that's all part of the natural world that's hit by light. That's probably the reason I never got into painting man-made substances. Metal doesn't appeal to me. I have no interest in painting plastics. If a model wears a watch, I generally ask her to take it off. And I like the models to wear cotton or linen, natural fabrics. I must have a little bit of hippie in me. ☺