



BEAUTIFUL BIZARRE

ART · CULTURE · COUTURE

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MALCOM T LIEPKE

A MODERN VISION OF REALISM

interview by Richard Purssey





previous spread
Red Rocker, 2014
 Oil on canvas, 34" x 46"

top left
In His Lap, 2017
 Oil on canvas, 18" x 24"

bottom right
Black Cape, 2016
 Oil on canvas, 8" x 12"

opposite page, left
Balloons, 2017
 Oil on canvas, 18" x 24"

opposite page, right
Girl on a Sofa, 2016
 Oil on canvas, 11" x 15"

passion that he brings to his craft he brings to every part of his life. He is not reticent about his beliefs regarding the hijacking of artistic sensibilities by a coterie of the establishment, and is always ready to speak out for his fellow creatives and lovers of figurative art against those entrenched authorities. And although the obstacles to this rebirth of realism may at times seem insurmountable, he is no Don Quixote tilting at immovable windmills. The spirit of change that he brings is as powerful as his brushstrokes, and with an ever growing audience for his work one feels that, at long last, the tide is turning in our favour.

It is no exaggeration to say that the work of this issue's cover artist, American painter Malcolm 'Skip' Liepke, has been at the forefront of the re-emergence of representational figurative art as a genuine alternative to the overwhelming dominance of conceptual art, so beloved by art critics, major galleries and museums. But the conceptual is not necessarily loved – or even understood – by the visitors to those august institutions. Through his skilful brushwork, painterly technique, masterful use of light and selection of subject, Skip has been leading a revolution to break the shackles that art appraisers and academics attempt to impose on the viewing audience. This is art at its glorious and engaging best, where the viewer is first enraptured by the emotions he captures with such intensity within his works, and is then left breathless by the detail and loving execution of each brushstroke.

Skip, the man, is full to the brim with contradictions. He is an artist who lives and breathes his work, for whom every piece is a personal statement of his skill and passion, but is still able to walk away for extended periods, spend time with family and friends without looking back. A true creative, a breed well known for their naïveté and unworldliness, blessed with the skills and financial acumen of a born businessman, a historian of art and student of the old masters who is unafraid of bringing those techniques to a modern world and also making them relevant to today's audience. A Renaissance man reinvented for the twenty-first century.

Talking to Skip it is impossible not to be captured by his spirit and enthusiasm, the





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YOU STARTED YOUR CAREER AS AN ILLUSTRATOR AND YOU SAID YOU BROKE AWAY TO ESCAPE THE SHACKLES AND HAVE YOUR OWN CREATIVE VISION INSTEAD OF BEING DRIVEN BY COMMERCIAL IMPERATIVES.

With commercial art you don't do what you really want to do, you do what someone else hires you to do and that's a huge difference. I want the ideas to start in my head and I want to be able to do what I want to do and that was always a tough balance in illustration. The money was nice and I made a lot of friends, but at a certain point it started wearing me down. I got tired of them having the say, so I ended up doing a lot of work that was rejected because I did my own thing. In the mid-eighties I started getting more gallery work and had my first show in '87, I had so much fun I never really looked back. I also did my own work when I did illustration, because illustration paid the bills, but after my first show I thought, wow I like this a lot more. In the early 90's I just stopped illustration completely and I've been doing nothing but gallery work ever since

WAS THE MOVE FROM THE STABLE WORK OF ILLUSTRATION DIFFICULT, CONSIDERING YOU WOULD NO LONGER HAVE THE INCOME FROM THAT PROFESSION WHEN YOU CHANGED TO THE MORE FINANCIALLY UNCERTAIN WORLD OF AN EXHIBITING ARTIST?

Fortunately when I was doing well from illustration I kept pretty low overheads and saved and invested my money, so I when I was ready to make the leap I didn't need the money anymore. I was able to walk away without needing an income immediately and that helped tremendously. Even though my first shows sold out I didn't make that much money because my prices were so low. Then after I had my first show in New York it took off incredibly fast. I was able to make the move initially because at the time in the 80s I didn't have a family, I didn't need the money because I'd already been saving and investing and living cheaply. That was a big advantage in being able to do what I wanted to do.

YOUR BUSINESS SENSE DURING THAT TIME WOULD CERTAINLY SEEM TO MAKE YOU THE EXCEPTION RATHER THAN THE RULE IN THE ARTISTIC COMMUNITY...

People that I used to negotiate with understood quickly that I was a pretty fair business person. They were caught off guard thinking I'm an artist, but I could negotiate hard and I knew how to handle my money. It was a different combo than they were used to. It proved a great advantage for me as an artist as I had more choice in being able to do things I wanted. A lot of times in art you end up doing things because you run out of money, most of the artists I know still aren't making a full-time living being a fine artist, they're waiting tables, or teaching, or doing other things to supplement their income.

When I was young being rich meant to me being able to do whatever I wanted. It wasn't the money per se, it was to be able to have my days the way I wanted them, I could own them and they were mine. I could make whatever art I wanted to and I had nobody telling me what to do anymore, that was being rich to me. It's the same thing with the gallery work I've done, I do all things that I've wanted to do for myself and I've never had to do things that the gallery says I have to do.

IS THAT SOMETHING YOU COME ACROSS OFTEN? GALLERISTS WANTING YOU TO PAINT IN A PARTICULAR STYLE OR ON A PARTICULAR THEME?

Oh for sure, but if I don't want to do something I don't, and that's a big advantage. There are several paintings that I could've done 100 times



and sold 100 times, but I say that's a one-time piece, all of my work is an original one of a kind. I don't repeat myself. I'll explore a theme as long as it is something I want to keep exploring. I've done a lot of café scenes, and early on I did garment district scenes and women dressing. Themes that I just wanted to explore, like Degas doing his ballet series, but I did that because I wanted to. I didn't explore them because I had collectors saying they wanted me to do them.

GOING BACK TO WHEN YOU LEFT YOUR CAREER AS AN ILLUSTRATOR, DID YOU PICK UP SKILLS AND TECHNIQUES WHEN YOU WERE DOING THE WORK FOR COMMERCIAL CLIENTS THAT YOU BOUGHT TO YOUR OWN FINE ART PRACTICE?

No, because my work and my style when I was doing commercial illustration was always very fine art, it was always very painterly. People kept saying my illustration was fine art, but I kept saying, no, because of the subject matter. When I did an illustration job, say a Time Magazine cover of Ronald Reagan, it would be very fine art stylistically and very painterly, but I would never paint Reagan for myself. The subject matter and being told what to do, what to paint, was the difference. When I quit illustration I just painted what I wanted to paint. So the paintings were different because the subject matter was different and the themes were different, that's all that made them fine art. There wasn't a big transition, I just moved into painting things that I want to paint myself, I didn't need any time or have to change my techniques.

YOU MENTIONED DEGAS JUST A LITTLE WHILE AGO, AND YOUR WORK CERTAINLY HAS THE HALLMARK OF SOME OF THE EUROPEAN MASTERS. YOU HAVE ALSO TALKED OF VELÁZQUEZ AS AN EARLY INSPIRATION. HOW BROAD HAVE YOUR SOURCES OF INSPIRATION BEEN?

Early on, yes, but not so much anymore. I quit the Art Centre College of Design after about two years and got my real education in museums studying all the artists that I just loved. Sargent, Degas and Whistler, a lot of Amer-

opposite page, top right
White Feather Boa, 2015
Oil on canvas, 22" x 24"

opposite page, bottom left
End of Day, 2014
Oil on canvas, 8" x 12"

middle left
Clutching His Head, 2017
Oil on canvas, 10" x 10"

bottom left
Tough Kid, 2016
Oil on canvas, 10" x 14"

top right
Forbidden Fruit, 2013
Oil on canvas, 10" x 12"



ican impressionists, William Merritt Chase, and then a lot of guys like Bouillard and Rembrandt, and as you mentioned Velázquez especially.

New York was a great place for that; they have the best museums in the world. I hung out there and studied those paintings; I looked at them to understand how they built up paint, how they drew with a brush, and the colour and how they handled their halftones. I went to school on that and I collected every book that I possibly could on every one of my favourite artists. I think it's a necessary thing to do, to stand on the shoulders of all those great Masters and then make it yours, put your twist on it. Earlier on you could probably see my influences more than now, but I think it was a necessary evolution to go through and a great way to learn.

IN YOUR RECENT WORK YOU SEEM TO HAVE BECOME MUCH MORE MINIMAL IN

YOUR BRUSH STROKES, PERHAPS TAKING A CUE FROM SUMI-E, THE JAPANESE MINIMALIST PAINTING STYLE.

I love the way Japanese printmakers like Hokusai and Utamaro used cropping to show distance and their use of black and pattern. I love that art because of the simplicity, the colour use and the way they flattened out space but showed depth. Degas and Whistler borrowed from the Japanese, and when Japan became open to the Western world a lot of French impressionists and American impressionists looked at Japanese art and went 'wow, look at this, this is incredible!' and were influenced heavily.

Early in my career I was profoundly influenced by that as well, but now I'm influenced more by modern artists, I want my art to reflect my time. My earlier art was more almost 19th century in its outlook, and I've made a determined effort

"I GOT MY REAL EDUCATION IN MUSEUMS STUDYING ALL THE ARTISTS THAT I JUST LOVED"



to reflect more of an artist painting in 2018. My palettes have changed enormously, and how I handled my background. I'm not doing scenes anymore or much of a narrative; I'm leaving that more open and nebulous. It's been an interesting, fun and challenging transition.

WITH THE STRENGTH OF YOUR PAINTERLY TECHNIQUE AND THE EVOCATIVE POWER OF A SINGLE BRUSH STROKE, HAVE YOU CHALLENGED YOURSELF TO REALLY MINIMISE THAT, TO SEE HOW FEW TIMES YOU CAN APPLY A BRUSH TO CANVAS TO GET THE RESULT YOU WANT?

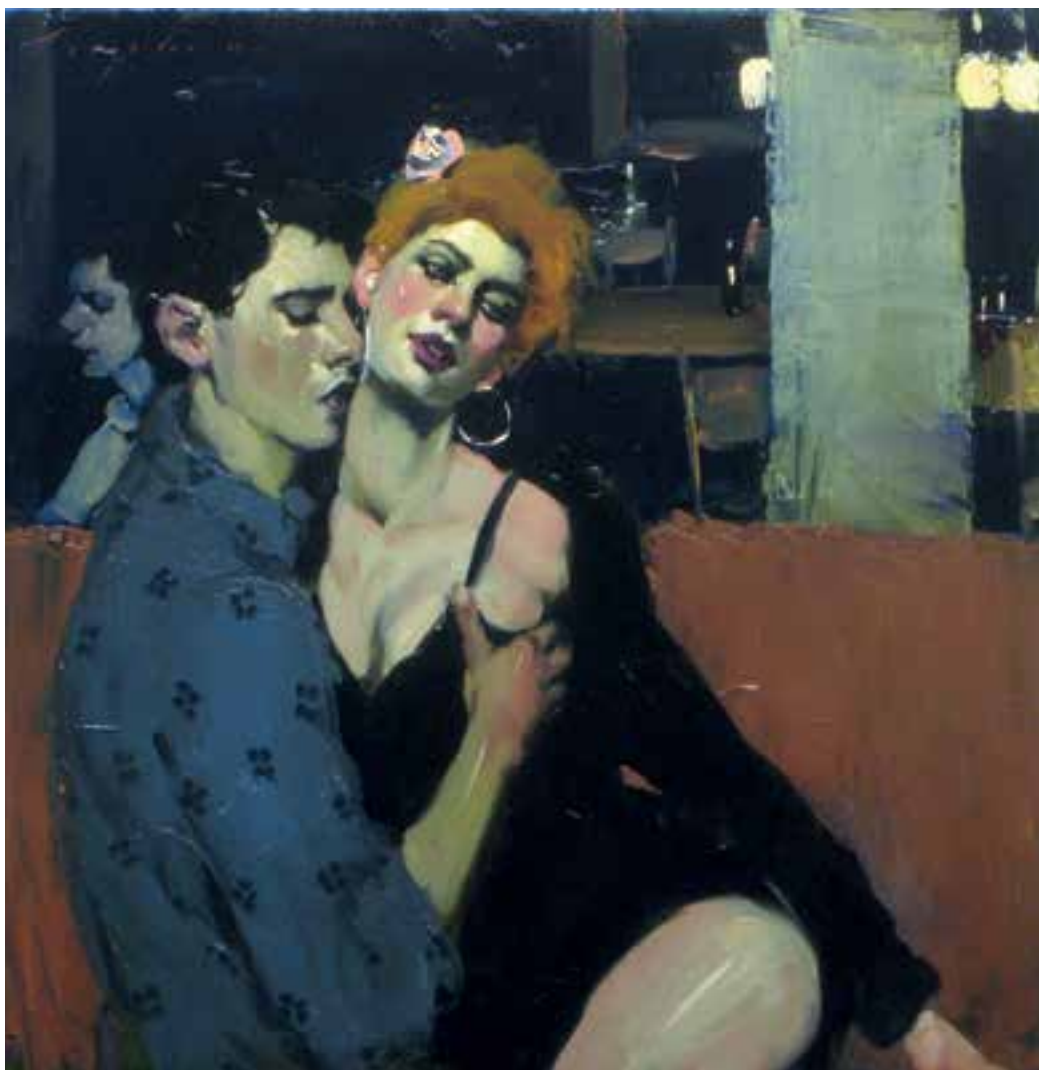
Well it's really a lifetime process of editing, isn't it. As you grow you really want to say the most you can with less, so you start editing out the brush strokes. Early on you learn how to adjust render and make everything photographic and tight, people are amazed by the facility of that, but later you realise that's the easy thing to do. What's hard is to edit it out. It's like a game of pick up sticks, you pile them up and then you start pulling away each stick until it all falls. If you add one more it's too many, if you pull one too many the structure falls apart. At a certain point painting becomes like an exercise in pick up sticks, where every stroke becomes important and you can't add or take

away anything without somehow losing.

ONE OF THE MOST ARRESTING AND ENGAGING CHARACTERISTICS OF YOUR PORTRAITURE IS THE RANGE OF EMOTIONS ON DISPLAY, EACH SPEAKING TO THE VIEWER IN TERMS THAT THEY CAN IMMEDIATELY APPRECIATE. IS THE EMOTION YOU PORTRAY IN A PIECE SELF-REFERENTIAL, A PORTRAYAL OF YOUR OWN STATE OF MIND AT THE TIME, OR DO YOU BASE THE EMOTION TO BE PORTRAYED BASED ON YOUR REFERENCES?

Probably all of the above. I think it's the most important thing that I try to nail down in any painting, before I get into anything technical like composition, colour or drawing. I want to see what struck me about that person or that gesture in the first place. I can't really say why sometimes, but something did and it's always emotional. The tilt of a head, the arc of a back, or the way someone is looking at you. I try to really capture that part, because that's what means the most to me, that's what I'm drawn to.

Emotion is timeless and something that everyone can relate to, and I always start with the emotion first. I want that relationship with the painting to the viewer, that direct



opposite page, top right
Balloons, 2017
 Oil on canvas, 24" x 28"

opposite page, bottom left
Dreaming, 2017
 Oil on canvas, 18" x 22"

top
Take Me Home
 Oil on canvas, 20" x 20"

bottom
On Her Pillows, 2011
 Oil on canvas, 24" x 36"



connection that stops them in their tracks just like I do. There are certain paintings that I look at by other artists that I just stop in my tracks and think, what is it about that painting? And it's always the emotion of it.

HAVING DROPPED OUT OF A COURSE AT THE ART CENTRE COLLEGE OF DESIGN YOU ARE EVIDENTLY LARGELY SELF-TAUGHT AS AN ARTIST. AFTER LEAVING COLLEGE DID YOU HAVE ANY MENTORS DURING THE EARLY YEARS OF YOUR CAREER, OR HAVE YOU ALWAYS FORGED YOUR OWN PATH?

I never had any living mentors, or older artists that I knew that helped me. My mentors were the museums and the artists I really admired. That was my school of art, where I religiously studied their work. When I went to look at art, what really drew me in was the painters; I loved all the guys that could handle a brush. Modern art didn't appeal to me, I thought it was superficial and I didn't respect a lot of that art, I thought it was very 'one note'. It wasn't art that I could perceive on many levels. A lot of those artists, once they had their one trick down that's all they did for the rest of their careers, they didn't really grow beyond that one note.

I saw a lot of artists who couldn't paint or draw, so they got into abstraction and other forms, because all that was left to them was that limited form of expression. The skills of being able to draw and paint well were discounted in the contemporary art market, it was looked down upon. I fought against that and still do, in the big galleries if you're painting on can-

was it's thought of like an antique, they look down their noses at figurative art or oil paint on canvas. So much of the art you see when you go to a modern museum you think, well, that's just garbage, my kid could do that. A lot of people think the same way, but they're told 'you should like this' or 'critics think this is great!' or other people more 'knowledgeable' than them think it's great. But if they just trust their judgement and what they are seeing themselves they would think 'nah, that's awful!'

Another thing I dislike is that there is no room for different forms, without being told they are somehow 'less than.' In music there is allowance given for all forms of music, there's room for classical music, for jazz, and folk, and rap, and rock. In the art world it's just contemporary – and that's it. They ignore everything that doesn't meet their narrow definitions. If you go to any of the large galleries there is absolutely no allowance for anything but their one way of thinking.

IN MANY OF THE CONTEMPORARY ART GALLERIES AND MUSEUMS THERE SEEMS TO BE A TENDENCY TOWARDS, IF NOT AN ACTUAL REQUIREMENT FOR, LONG EXPLANATORY NOTES FOR THE ARTWORKS. AT BEAUTIFUL BIZARRE WE HAVE ALWAYS FELT THAT THE INHERENT VALUE OF AN ARTWORK SHOULD NOT RELY ON EXTERNAL CLARIFICATION, IT SHOULD BE IN THE AFFECT AND ENGAGEMENT IT HAS FOR THE VIEWER. WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS?

It's almost comical! I saw a piece of art one time and I didn't like and didn't understand what I saw, but next to the painting was a page long description of what I was supposed to get from it. I remember thinking 'this person should have been a writer!' If I have to read several pages to understand or appreciate what I'm looking at, well that's the wrong thing to do, art



bottom left
Kissing Couple, 2017
Oil on canvas, 10" x 10"

top right
From the Back, 2016
Oil on canvas, 18" x 20"

middle right
Female Attitude, 2016
Oil on canvas, 10" x 8"

opposite page
Couple in Bed, 2017
Oil on canvas, 18" x 23"



should be visual! If you don't get that understanding just by looking at it then it misses the point. If I had to read a book to understand music then the music would be missing it too. Unfortunately a lot of the big galleries and museums just control the art world; they control the narrative of what you are allowed to see and what is thought of as important. Nobody can break through; it's tightly bound in this little clique of critics and galleries that control it all, but art should allow for all different kinds of expression, as you get in movies, in music, in literature.

That freedom doesn't exist for representational art in the art world, it's like you're only allowed to look at one thing, and I will always rail against that. I've been out there fighting in the front lines, trying to be accepted as a representational figurative artist, but the big galleries treat you like you're from another century, they don't even consider your work and because of that people are missing out.

IT'S AS IF AT SOME STAGE THE IDEAS OF SKILL AND TECHNIQUE WENT OUT OF STYLE

AND THEY'RE NOT BEING ALLOWED BACK...

That's right. They actually think that skill and technique is an anathema to an artist, they think that's 19th century thinking. You do need to have skill and craft. If you want to be a professional musician you have to understand the scale and major chords, all kinds of things about music. Even if you can't read music you can understand and appreciate it. It should be the same thing in the art world; I think it's important to have knowledge and understanding behind your art. Picasso started out as a draftsman, he knew how to draw and paint, but unfortunately today they're saying that is the last thing you should do, so a lot of art schools don't even teach it.

JUST TO FINISH WITH SKIP, WHAT DO YOU HAVE COMING UP, ANY INTERESTING PROJECTS ON THE HORIZON FOR YOU?

I'm booked out for the next two years; I have a lot of shows coming up and I've picked up a couple of new galleries, Pontone Gallery in

London and the Nikola Rukaj Gallery in Toronto. Other galleries I work with are Arcadia Contemporary, initially in New York but now in Culver City, California, and Telluride Gallery of Fine Art in Telluride, Colorado.

EXHIBITIONS:

SOLO - August 2018
Telluride Gallery of Fine Art. Telluride, CO, USA

ART FAIR - December 2018; *Art Basel Miami*
Pontone Gallery & Nikola Rujak Gallery

SOLO: November 2019
Arcadia Contemporary. Culver City, CA, USA