

## Alexey Steele: The New Cold War

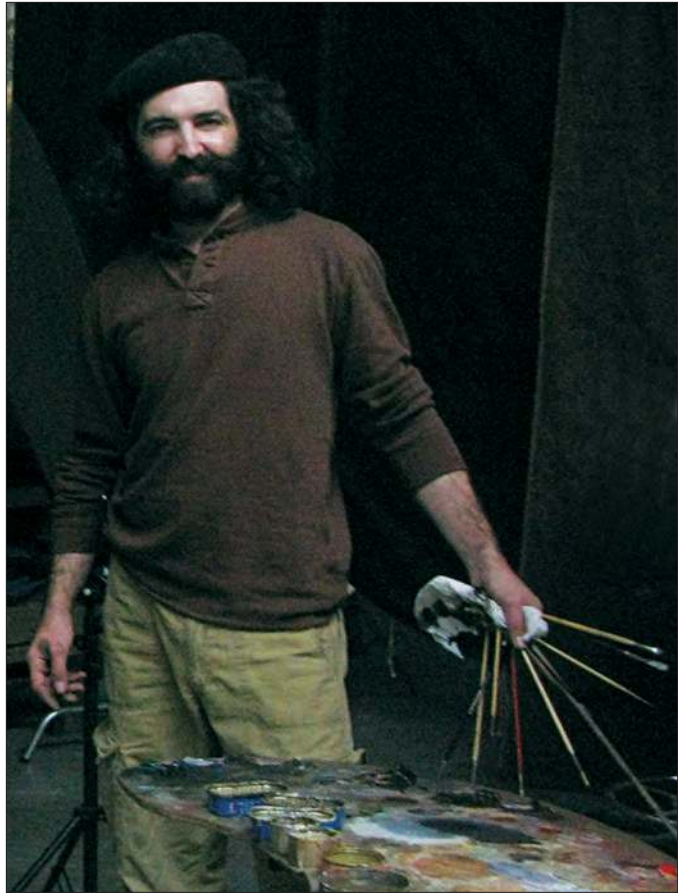
by *David Masello*

Just like his paintings and drawings, Alexey Steele, the Kiev-born, Moscow-raised-and-trained, Los Angeles-based painter, is infused with energy. Even he admits, “I exhaust myself. Everything I do goes into painting.” This is a true statement, but not a wholly accurate one, given the many endeavors in which Steele is involved. Apart from his uncanny, if not cultivated resemblance to a Rembrandt self-portrait, complete with beret and moustache, it would not be inaccurate to call Steele a true Renaissance man. Indeed, many of his drawings and figurative paintings, monumental works that fill domes and ceilings of grand residences, as well as civic plazas, harken to actual, traditional Renaissance and Baroque motifs and forms. But he also embodies the ideals of the Renaissance in his embrace of other disciplines and artforms, especially classical music. For five years now, he has run something he created called the Classical Underground, a monthly alternative arts venue that features everything from a classical music performance to the public presentation and discussion of figurative artwork. “The Classical Underground is a completely democratic body,” he insists. “I have no economic motivation for it—it’s a pure labor of love.”

On one of the typical evenings for the Classical Underground, held in his cavernous Los Angeles studio/loft/think tank/residence, a capacity audience of some 250 people show up—teenagers to seniors. It’s as much theater and performance, even a tame version of a 1980s “rave party,” as it is an artistic salon—but one at which anyone, for a mere ten bucks, is welcome to participate. People bring their own bottles of wine and food, and there is no assigned seating. “It is an absolutely unique democratic setting where people of all strata come together to share a tight personal space with the excitement of art serving as a social binder,” says Steele, who likes to point out that the hour-long intermission is as important as the performance itself. “During that break when the musicians aren’t playing, people meet each other, become friends, fall in love.”

No one would mistake Steele, though, for a mere party promoter. The Classical Underground is not just another entertainment destination, but rather a performance venue that reflects and embodies the visual tenets of Steele’s manifesto for art today. “It is a life style, an overriding philosophy and a way to relate to the world,” he says of the Underground, “and that is what our audience loves the most. It is by no means intended to replace the formal stage where musicians perform, but rather to serve as a bridge to a new generation through shifting formats.” While Steele is talking about music, he might just as well be discussing the “notes” of paint, the elements on a canvas, the very subject matter contained within a frame. Just as audiences at the Classical

ALEXEY STEELE  
PHOTO COURTESY OF  
THE ARTIST



Underground hear venerable musical compositions but at a wildly original venue, so, too, does Steele want past traditions of the visual arts to resurface and prevail, but only in new ways. Steele argues: “The most prominent issue of art is the ‘why.’ Why are you doing art? The way an artist answers that question indicates what he or she does, as well as the choices about how to do it.” Steele insists he is not a musician, calling himself, in fact, “a complete music illiterate,” and, yet, because he is instinctively and innately an artist, he has managed to transform not only the visual arts but also the “sonic” art of music in his Classical Underground.

No matter who is on stage, though, or which painting and painter are brought to the footlights for their Hollywood close-up moment, Steele is always the star performer. He cannot help but be the main attraction, and the high profile that the Classical Underground assumes in the alternative cultural life of Los Angeles results from Steele’s movie-star-quality personality. He is an artist blessed with talent and charisma. Even as you hear him discourse on the meaning of art today, which artists he admires and doesn’t, the interplay

of capitalism and Marxism in the art marketplace, the definitions of Russian maximalism and American minimalism, with some of the nuances lost amid a Russian accent, you know that whatever Steele is saying is worth hearing. Among his central tenets is his belief that: “Art is the first religion, the first language. Art existed before language existed. Science works for *us*—artists—now, not the other way around.”

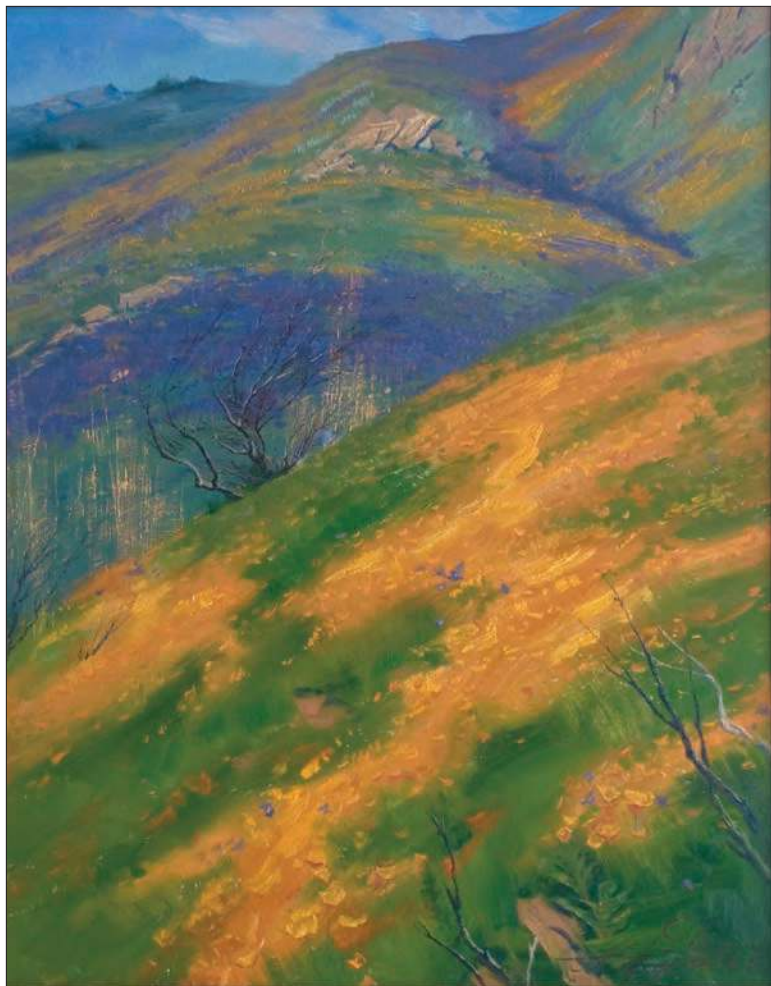
Steele paints tender, even erotically charged, depictions of male and female lovers, and hugely scaled canvases of fantastical scenes that evoke a new mythology. His cartoons, rendered in colored Conté crayon, evoke the refinement and expertise of a Raphael or Leonardo or Pontormo, but on a Herculean scale. He paints ruminative, life-size, full-on oil portraits of figures in the art world, among the most notable being that of his 90-year-old artist father, Leonid Steele, a work he completed entirely live in four sittings. Alexey and Leonid Steele were the subject of a 1998 joint exhibition at the Fleischer Museum of Art in Scottsdale, Arizona. And like any great portraitist, his depictions of unnamed people are so character-driven and nuanced that the viewer is captivated, as with his *4 Learners of Dominguez* (2011), a narrow, horizontal work that reveals four favored students of an art teacher at the Dominguez Hills branch of California State University.

Steele is also a seasoned plein-air artist, who captures the natural poetry of the roiling California surf, the effects of morning mist and refracting sunlight along its beaches, the subtle cast of moonlight, the approach and retreat of tides. In April, 2012, he was a featured guest at the first Las Vegas Plein Air Convention and Expo (sponsored by *Plein Air* magazine), where he proved so popular that some of the hundreds of participants were more intent on painting him on stage than the red rocks of the surrounding desert. Given the amount of painting, talking and drawing Steele undertook at the event, he said that “it proved, once again, that art is an extreme sport.” But ever the artist, Steele speaks still of the “absolutely staggering cloud formations in glorious light” that accompanied his drive to Las Vegas, vistas so enrapturing that he pulled over onto the shoulder to make some quick sketches.

Steele’s output is so prolific and his subject matter so encompassing that it is not always easy to immediately identify a work as his—that is, until a viewer starts to learn his style. Steele is a kind of canvas chameleon, in that he is as comfortable depicting the mythological as he is the pastoral, the fantastical as much as the actual. For instance, his 2008 group of *After the Fire* paintings, in a larger series he calls “Force of Life,” are decidedly poetic editorializations of the aftermath of a forest fire. Trees and fields stripped of vegetation, set amid a charred grey background, compete with other works that show rebirth, conveyed with an almost giddily Fauvist celebration of color. This mottled, hue-intensive depiction of vast swatches of topography, usually California, and often at dusk or dawn, appears in many other works, too, including his *Last Light, Mission Viejo* (2009).

*After the Fire*  
Force of Life  
Series  
2008

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FINE ARTS



Perhaps, too, it should be no surprise that a more than occasional element in his works is that of an angel—or some winged version. The figure in his cartoon *Morning* (2003) that sprouts gigantic billowy wings, the fairy-tale vision of the female on a flying white horse in *The Last Ride* (2010), his owl-winged *Angel of Unity* (2003) sculpture all evoke figures not at rest. Just as the art of today is evolving, a restless force in apposition to modernism and abstractism, so are many of Steele's figures. They are ready to take off to a new destination.

Given his ability to work in multiple mediums (including the occasional polychrome sculpture), Steele admits to being “dumbfounded by the question I often hear, which is, ‘How would you describe your art?’” A viewer might say that Steele is, decidedly, a realist, a figurative painter—and that would be correct. But Steele himself has coined a new term to describe not only his art, but those of contemporaries he admires: Novorealism. “Our generation's realism



*Last Light, Mission Viejo*, Voice of Land Series, 2009

COURTESY OF AMERICAN LEGACY FINE ARTS

is of a clear difference from everything that was there before us,” says Steele. “Novorealism is a way of rethinking theory and realigning it with humanity instead of distancing it from people.” Whether Novorealism—the Latin means “new” or “refreshing,” though Steele prefers “starting anew” and “out of ashes”—enters the aesthetic lexicon remains to be seen. But it is a philosophy fundamental to Steele and one whose principles he explores regularly on a well-read webzine that he established ([novorealism.blogspot.com](http://novorealism.blogspot.com)) with fellow artists Jeremy Lipking and Tony Pro, both of whom Steele describes as being “the closest to me artistically” and “my brothers in art.”

As a young boy, Steele lived in Communist Russia and trained at Moscow’s Surikov Art Institute of the Soviet Academy of Arts, experiences, he claims, that have made him “the biggest anti-Commie and Commie all at the same time. I grew up detesting money and, incredibly, neither my stint in America, nor a current cult of money in Russia has really changed that.” Steele can expound on the charged topic of capitalism and art with the fervor of a Cold War radical politician or intellectual, but much of his belief system can be summed up by saying that he recognizes the practical realities of money and art. He is, however, careful to warn: “It is important for an artist to sell his art, but not be a sell-out.”

While Steele cites Velázquez, Rembrandt, Caravaggio, Michelangelo, Winslow Homer, Joaquin Sorolla and the nineteenth-century Russian artists Ilya Repin and Isaac Levitan as giants of the past that he admires, he reserves

a particular passion for Andy Warhol, albeit a negative one. “The artist I love hating the most is Andy Warhol,” he says. “I will always reaffirm his vital importance in art, that I won’t dispute, but what he was about was the glorification of consumerism. Unlike a Damien Hirst or a Jeff Koons, Warhol was not about perpetrating a financial fraud. He was just a self-indulgent fraud.” Again, in a combination diatribe/manifesto about the effects of Pop Art giving rise to postmodernism, it is best to simply say that Steele cites the pivotal fatherly role Warhol played in that evolution.

Of course, Steele recognizes, too, the central irony of contemporary traditionalist/figurative painters: that they are the true revolutionaries. Those working in opposition to the contemporary art we know today—the conceptual installation pieces, Hirst’s halved lambs and sharks floating in tanks of formaldehyde, sacred images marinating in urine, the seemingly limitless supply of Warhol silkscreens that sell for tens of millions at auction—are the artists who are anti-establishment. “I include myself in this group,” says Steele. “We are rejecting the money creed of postmodernism. We’re on the front line. We’re the true modernists. We’re the only true anti-establishment movement of the day. Contemporary American Realism is the new form. We are fortunate to be living in this time and to have this role!”

And it seems that Los Angeles, rather than New York or London, is the right place for this movement to germinate. When Steele’s parents emigrated to America in 1990, they settled in Los Angeles, where Steele has chosen to remain. “Los Angeles is a remarkable place for art precisely because it does not have any internally imposing cultural structure. Here there is no need to conform as there is nothing really to conform to. You either make it as an artist on your own or you don’t, based only on what you’ve got. There is no world to fit in to, only one to create. With such a high concentration of talent here, there is a much greater sense of community and camaraderie among the artists. We hang out together, travel, drink, paint, and that, I think, affects the approach to what we do.” For Steele, Los Angeles is not the stereotypical one-industry town. Rather, the visual arts are its other defining force, and it’s a growth industry. “Los Angeles now is enormously close in spirit to the burgeoning, dysfunctional and structure-less cosmopolitan boiler of Parisian life at the turn of the last century, out of which Picasso and Modigliani emerged. In this sense, I call Los Angeles the Paris of the twenty-first century.”

Steele is a key figure in that new Paris, the ultimate on-wheels boulevardier. Many of the local cultural institutions have adopted him for exhibitions: the Carnegie Art Museum (located some sixty miles north of Los Angeles in Oxnard), the Bowers Museum of Cultural Art in Santa Ana, the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, the Frederick R. Weisman Museum of Art at Malibu’s Pepperdine University, the Pasadena Museum of California Art and the gallery space in the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels. Pasadena’s American Legacy Fine Arts ([americanlegacyfinearts.com](http://americanlegacyfinearts.com)), Steele’s

longtime dealer, recently hosted a solo show, “Torn Beauty” (June 2–30, 2012). This September, California Lutheran University brings together a series of his large cartoons, some as large as nine feet in length. “Los Angeles is a constellation of independent micro-worlds and universes, connections to which you build on your own and without asking anyone’s permission,” says Steele.

As for that uneasy interplay between capitalism and art (i.e., the marketplace driving the need for art and vice versa), Steele plays the game well. In 2005, he was commissioned to paint the ceiling of a private Bel Air residence, a commission for which he was paid, he admits, “in the high six figures.” The Hollywood-mogul owners of the house wanted Steele to paint an allegorical scene entitled *The Soul of the Hero*, meant to be an examination of the stages a noble soul takes on its journey from birth to death to redemption. The 21-foot-diameter work took Steele two and a half years to complete. Suzanne Bellah, director of the Carnegie Art Museum, was so impressed with the drawings for the project that she mounted an exhibition of them in 2005.

Then, in 2008, Bellah and the museum’s board commissioned Steele to create a monumental pastel-on-graphite drawing for their permanent collec-



*Rincon Glow*  
Wet Sand Series  
2007  
PRIVATE  
COLLECTION

tion entitled *Quiet Steps of Approaching Thunder*. “In the work, Nature’s thunder rolls over the ocean, reaching shore at Rincon Beach (California) in the guise of prophetic angels heralding the ominous outcome of man’s greed and literal trashing of the environment,” Bellah wrote at the time the work was unveiled. She now describes the ongoing public response to the work as being a combination of “amazement at the drawing skill and expertise, admiration for its scale (72-by-48 inches) and puzzlement, followed by recognitions of the layers of subject matter involved in the composition.” But just as Steele is able to render such epic—and epically scaled—scenes, so, too, is he able to reveal the more tranquil moments of this same setting, as in his *Rincon Glow* (2007), a kind of meditation on the surf at dusk, a visual tone poem.

One of the central missions of the Carnegie is to build a permanent collection of works by working California artists. “The museum seeks to have works by artists that capture either a high point or a pivotal point in an artist’s career development,” says Bellah. “*Quiet Steps* captured a first, real, major spurt in Alexey’s approach to the narrative in large-scale composition, aiming it away from pure past mythical reference to something of beauty that is relevant to our times.” And as for her rather unorthodox decision to commission a work for a museum collection, she says: “In terms of viewing experience and art historical import for our times, who, in retrospect, would not have wished to acquire a large prototype by, say, Velázquez or Tiepolo’s *Allegory of the Planets and Continents*?”

Steele thinks—and lives—big. “In my head, I have one-hundred-foot canvases I want to complete, and complex, multi-figure work is the pinnacle of my drive. I think of my career as akin to scaling Mount Everest. Reaching the top of Everest in the world of art is impossible, but I’m going to make the climb. There are lots of bones and skeletons on the way up, of other artists. Everything I do now is a study for that great canvas. I want my skull to be found higher than anyone’s before. But hopefully, I’ll reach the summit of my personal Everest. And if I get there, while I’m staring at the beautiful mountains all around, I’ll also want to have a shot of vodka to celebrate.”

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