

Painter **Scott W. Prior** finds
extraordinary beauty in
mundane subjects

BY NORMAN KOLPAS

Size 7, oil, 18 x 20.

Everyday Inspirations



Jim's Place, oil, 18 x 24.

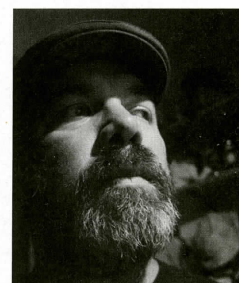
IN 2007, Scott W. Prior attended the Carmel Art Festival, an annual plein-air competition held each May in the beautiful California seaside art colony. Feeling honored to have been juried into the respected event, he showed up ready and eager to participate. And, almost instantly, he veered away from the expected approach. "I got bored trying to do all the landscapes in the area," he recalls of the sort of jockeying for prime painting locations that can go on at such events. "So I started looking for something that got me going, that turned me on. And then I saw this old red truck."

Judges and attendees alike took notice of the unconventional plein-air canvas that Prior created. Not only did his painting of the vintage vehicle win him an Honorable Mention and Emerging Artist Award, but it also fetched three times

its asking price.

Since launching his full-time fine-art career in about 2001, Prior has continually experienced such successes by depicting subjects that diverge dramatically from what most people expect plein-air painters to paint. Taking a down-to-earth approach summed up by the fact that he irreverently proclaims himself a "painter of stuff" on his website, Prior prefers to find his inspiration in "everyday life scenes," he explains. "There is beauty in the mundane places and things we walk by every day. So I try in my paintings to make the ugly and mundane look pretty."

ASK PRIOR about his early artistic experiences, and his matter-of-fact, frequently offbeat and wry account seems to foreshadow the freethinking painter he would become. Born 45 years ago this



representation

American Legacy Fine Arts, Pasadena, CA; **Helena Fox Fine Art**, Charleston, SC.

upcoming show

California Art Club Gold Medal Juried Exhibition and Sale, Autry National Center, Los Angeles, CA, March 30-April 20, 2014.



Above Hollywood and Vine, oil, 12 x 24.

month in Southern California, he grew up a very active child. “I injured myself a lot as a kid, constantly skateboarding and playing soccer,” he says. “In first grade, I was king of the handball court, until I broke my foot. For my boredom, my mom bought me some books on how to draw cartoon characters.” He began keeping a sketchbook. Later that year, his family took a trip to Oregon to visit a friend who was an artist, and she took notice when she saw him drawing a lighthouse one day. “She started looking through my sketchbook, and she encouraged me

to pursue it, to study commercial art and maybe become an illustrator,” he says. “That really first sparked in me the idea of becoming an artist.”

By high school, however, Prior’s active nature and his enduring love of sports had won over—even though he broke his leg during spring break of freshman year while driving a four-wheel all-terrain motorbike on the beach in a long-distance coastal jaunt from San Diego to Santa Barbara. He made the Estancia High wrestling team, and after graduation in 1987, he went on to compete in that sport

in junior college, which he entered as a physical-therapy major.

Over the next five years, he continued sampling other majors, bouncing from college to college and subject to subject—nutrition, radio broadcasting management, business, communications—until a ceramics class he happened to take reopened his eyes to an old passion. “We had to draw out our ideas for our ceramics,” he remembers, “and the instructor looked at what I’d produced and said, ‘Wow! You can draw. You should switch to an art major.’” Eventually ending up



Off Center, oil, 24 x 12.

at Orange Coast College, he entered the illustration department, and from his first classes he realized that at last he'd settled on the right path. "I felt like I'd finally found my niche, my people. This was where I should have been the whole damn time."

After graduating with an associate of arts degree in 1992, the following year Prior moved north to San Francisco with his new bride, Wendy, to enter the respected Academy of Art College (now the Academy of Art University). His four years there earning a bachelor's degree

in illustration, while also working as an instructors' assistant in the illustration and fine-art departments, gave him "a solid foundation in all the basics—like values, shapes, and proportions—for design, drawing, and painting, which is the core of what I do now."

In 1997, back on his home turf along the Southern California coast, Prior launched himself on a freelance career, specializing in illustrations, storyboards, layouts, and background paintings for animated and live-action TV shows and movies. He supplemented his growing family's in-

come by working as a barista at Starbucks and waiting tables at night. All along, he also painted for his own pleasure on the side, and he began teaching pastel classes at the Palos Verdes Art Center.

One of Prior's students there asked him if he'd heard of the California Art Club, an organization that has supported traditional art forms and styles since its founding in 1909 by some of the great California plein-air painters of the time, including Edgar Payne, Franz Bischoff, and William Wendt. In 1999, his first-ever submission to the club was juried



Gamblin Man, oil, 8 x 16.

into one of their shows. “And I thought to myself, okay, I’m going in the right direction here,” he says.

For Prior, the right direction had nothing to do with painting in a certain style or portraying a particular subject matter. At that point in his dawning fine-art career, he says, “I tried not to look at books or be influenced by anybody. My style emerged from just painting and figuring out what worked for me.”

And what worked for him, he discovered, were expressions he found all around himself of the Southern California world in which he’d grown up. “I’ll see street scenes or the movement of people or a really rad car, and it gets me going,” he explains. “Back when I was doing

the plein-air circuit, I was the guy trying to find the truck up on blocks while everyone else was off painting palm trees.”

Perfectly suited to such everyday subject matter, Prior developed a style that, while certainly owing something to the century of California plein-air painters who came before him, feels entirely of the moment. “I like the term ‘post-impressionist,’” he says. “You could call me a contemporary representational painter with archaic ways. I also like to think of my paintings as tight drawings with loose paint application.”

Regardless of the description one might settle on, Prior’s paintings are unmistakably his own. A cityscape like *ABOVE HOLLYWOOD AND VINE*, for exam-

ple, realistically captures the skyline of the movie capital and tourist mecca in all its jumbled glory, from its billboards and signage to the landmark Capitol Records building and the strip of Hollywood Freeway that slashes across the foreground. Yet, the canvas also offers so much painterly pleasure, from the clouds rendered in heavily textured brush strokes to the occasional drip intentionally allowed to leave its trail. “I love building up texture,” Prior explains. “Sometimes, one of the first layers I paint will come out thick in places, and then I’ll build up even more on top of that.”

He brings the same approach to other subjects as well. In the still life *GAMBLIN MAN* (the title plays on the brand name of



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For Sale, oil, 24 x 30.

his preferred oils), the paint application can be so loose and so heavy that the work almost veers toward abstraction—apart, that is, from the fact that the composition and drawing skill at its foundation leaves viewers absolutely certain of what they’re seeing. Even in recent figurative paintings like *SIZE 7*, Prior’s sure approach creates an unmistakable and appealing image of a shoeless young woman sprawled across a chaise, even as seemingly haphazard brush strokes capture her form against a loose background that drips down the canvas. “Making things even less overly rendered like that,” Prior remarks, “is along the lines of where I’m going. I’ve been told I’m becoming a more painterly painter.”

Now happily settled in the northern San Diego county town of Oceanside with Wendy, with whom he recently celebrated their 20th anniversary, and their two daughters, Prior has gained a sure understanding of his preferred subject matter and his personal style, though both continue to evolve naturally. But he’s not content with that alone. “We never really do *arrive*,” he says, putting special emphasis on a word that often signifies success. “We all aspire to do more.” One of his big aspirations is to find gallery representation in New York City. “I think that’s every artist’s dream. If I can get into one of those galleries someday, it would be huge.”

At the same time, he is also eager to share the good fortune he has already

found, by continuing to teach in person through workshops and longer classes, as well as through new graduate-level courses offered online by the Academy of Art University. “I want to give back what I can while still focusing on the things I love to paint, the things that challenge and inspire me,” he says. ❖

Norman Kolpas is a Los Angeles-based freelancer who writes for *Mountain Living* and *Colorado Homes & Lifestyles* as well as *Southwest Art*.

See more of Prior’s paintings at
[www.southwestart.com/featured/
prior-sw-dec2013](http://www.southwestart.com/featured/prior-sw-dec2013).