



Kate Sammons ~ Expect the Unexpected

by Molly Siple

Self-portrait
Oil on panel 20" × 16"
Collection of the Artist

KATE SAMMONS IS A DELIGHTFUL BUNDLE OF energy who brings an exacting and inquisitive mind to her masterful work as an artist. Trained classically and drawing inspiration from the arts of the Renaissance, Sammons is known for her exquisitely rendered still life and portraiture. But most interestingly, she bravely steps away from typical versions of these, inventing her own intriguing imagery.

"I am trained as a realist painter and have a very academic background," explains Sammons, "but these days I find myself longing to reach into the subconscious and dreams and memories for subject matter. You know when you see something just on the edge of your vision...almost like one of those floaters you can see in your eye... the ideas I have for a painting are almost like these. The more they catch my attention, the more I want to look and examine." And she continues, "Exploring realism is difficult enough, when a painting must be perfect at each stage, and it was difficult breaking away from the way I was trained. But now, I also want to go into more personal territory, the reason I think I wanted to become an artist in the first place."

A great example of this mix of representation and imagination is her canvas, *Strange Catch*. The juxtaposition of the white rose and the bewitching blue eel is an intuitive combination that, as Sammons says, "came to mind as I took in the beauty of the antique Japanese kimono with blue embroidery that I chose to use as the backdrop. To me, it suggested mystery and intrigue, and the way the designs folded in with the drape of the fabric, along with the deep blues and blacks, reminded me of an underwater environment and projected me into a make-believe world."

SAMMONS PAINTED *STRANGE CATCH* IN HER BEAUTIFULLY executed classic style with very detailed rendering and an exquisitely smooth and polished surface, lavishing weeks of effort to achieve the final effect. This style of painting is typical of the Flemish paintings of the 17th century and later artists such as **Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780–1867)** and **Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825)** who achieved a similar refined look. Multiple layers of glazes give their paintings a deep rich colour and delicate scumbling brings out subtle forms and texture which are visible when examining the painting at close range. By choosing a small 9 by 12 inch format for this painting, as she says, "I'm inviting viewers to

step in closely and see the painting on an intimate scale. I want them to feel the sensation of drifting with the waves and to smile at the thought of floating along with eels."

Another painting that she daydreamed her way into is *Stairs and Flowers*. "I found this mass of flowers to be the perfect fertile area to get lost in," says Sammons. She graphically makes the point by adding surreal stairs and a doorway to the composition, the flowers acting as an entry point into her mental wanderings. This painting is especially interesting as it features both Sammons' classical rendering skills and her freer handling with pigment and form—demonstrating control, plus spontaneity. "I could have been a middle child," Sammons says, "since I'm always trying to balance different elements and find ways to compromise. The



Strange Catch
Oil on panel 12" × 9"
Courtesy Gallery 1261



Stairs and Flowers
Oil on panel 16" × 20"
Private collection

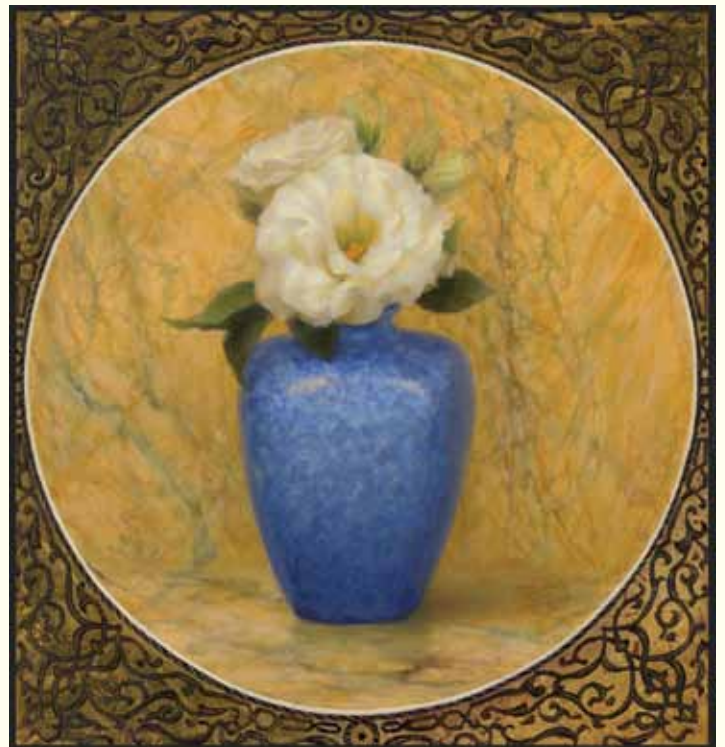
brushy quality of working *a la prima* is so expressive, but I also enjoy being technically precise."

To become the skilled artist she is today, after finishing a typical arts program, earning a BFA at the **University of Illinois** in 2002, Sammons set out and tackled eight additional years of rigorous study at several highly respected art studios. She began with a year in Florence at the **Angel Academy of Art**, similar to the **Florence Academy of Art** in its emphasis on Classical Realism but with stylistic differences. Here, Sammons spent the year in academic training—drawing from plaster casts and models. She then moved on to **Studio Incamminati**, studying under the direction of the internationally renowned figure painter **Nelson Shanks (1937–2015)**. Sammons experimented with gestural drawing, colour studies, and painting *a la prima*, but she remembers this association not being a comfortable one. As she says with a little laugh, "I'm the kind of student some teachers like and others can't stand. I would ask lots of questions! I enrolled at Incamminati to explore exactly the opposite of what I had been taught in Italy as a way of figuring out why I wanted to draw so precisely. This is just how I go about learning."

MAKING A MOVE BACK TO THIS STRICTER APPROACH, HER final round of education was at the **Waichulis Studio**, a small private atelier in north-eastern Pennsylvania, which has grown into the **International Ani Art Academies** that span across the world to such distant locations as Anguilla in the Dominican Republic and the soon to be launched academy in Thailand. Co-founder and head instructor at Ani, **Anthony Waichulis**, is a consummate *trompe l'oeil* painter, and as Sammons says, "I decided that if I could paint anywhere close to his level, I wouldn't have to worry about setting out on my own as an artist." She enrolled in his four-year program with its rigorous curriculum. Students must pass each stage before moving on to the next, starting with cast drawing, and completing a certain number of paintings before graduating.



Eggs
Oil on panel 10" × 8"
Private Collection



Blue Vase
Oil on panel with 22kt gold leaf 11" × 10.5"
Courtesy Gallery 1261



I'd Love to See You Before I Go

Oil on linen 30" × 20"

Courtesy of the California Art Club in association with the Autry Museum of the American West

This is a structure shared by other technically-oriented programs, but here her personality and that of Waichulis were a perfect fit. As she says, "He was into precise technique, just as much as I was, and taught it in a way that made sense to me. To this day my approach to painting developed from the control I gained over my medium during my study with him." Proof of the skill she mastered is in Sammons' painting, *Eggs*.

As she explains, "Such training is modelled after the traditional atelier of earlier times and is in sharp contrast to the buffet style selection of short term classes from different teachers that many art schools offer today. In the modern day atelier-style school, a complete progressive curriculum in drawing and painting is developed by one main instructor and transferred by demonstration and work from instructor to student. As in my case, the specificity of this style of training often has a notable influence on the artistic perspective of the student. This is what is meant as the "lineage" of the artist, with generations of influential instructors that can be traced back centuries."

Via her instructors, Sammons can trace her own artistic lineage back at least to the Italian portrait and fresco painter **Pietro Annigoni (1910–1988)**, **Charles Hawthorne (1872–**

1930) the American portrait painter and founder of the **Cape Cod School of Art**, and **Jacques Maroger (1884–1962)**, a painter and technical director of the **Louvre Museum's** laboratory in Paris. (For a fascinating look at artistic lineage in the world of Western art since the Renaissance, take a moment and go to timothystotz.com/flowering-staircase.)

THANKS TO SUCH TRAINING SAMMONS IS ALSO AN ACCOMPLISHED portraitist, but here again she elaborates on her subject matter, adding narrative to the imagery. In *Estaba Aqui*, a portrait of **Liza Beltran**, a woman devoted to ethnic studies and feminism, Sammons shows her subject holding an illumined candle, its flame lighting the way. In *I'd Love to See You Before I Go*, a portrait of fellow artist **Phelan McConaha**, Sammons incorporates McConaha's own artistic aesthetic and includes a hypothetical example of McConaha's work, which she holds in her hands, a small painting on layers of glass that shimmer and transform throughout the day as light passes through them. In this painting, Sammons adds flecks of the butterfly's turquoise which float and glitter in the pictorial space. This captivating work was ranked number ten of over one-thousand entries in last fall's Member's Only Competition of the **Portrait Society of America**.

Both sitters are friends and neighbours of Sammons who currently lives in the Elysian Valley area of Los Angeles, just north of downtown, a community of artists and families located on the banks of the newly revitalized Los Angeles River. She moved here in 2010 with her husband, **Adrian**



Estaba Aqui

Oil on panel 30" × 24"



Squash
Oil on panel 16" × 20"
Courtesy Gallery 1261

Gottlieb, also an accomplished and classically-trained portraitist and figurative painter (profiled in the 2015 spring-summer issue of the *California Art Club Newsletter*). Sammons settled in quickly, becoming a Signature Artist member of the California Art Club and joining the faculty of the **Los Angeles Academy of Figurative Art**. In addition, in recent years she has exhibited her work in galleries and museums across the country including the **Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery** and the **Butler Institute of American Art**.

However, Sammons started life far from her current world, born in Seoul, Korea. She became a naturalized United States citizen one year later and subsequently was raised in Urbana-Champaign, Illinois, which she describes as "a small, charming city of cobblestones, supercomputers, and cornfields where, since 1956, a total of nine Nobel Prize winners were born or called the town home." About her life now Sammons says, "You spend so much time painting you have to find a way of making it fun for yourself, and for me this means finding what I love to paint and embracing that. You need to decide what you want to express." And she continues, "More and more I want to paint images I've been dreaming about and develop subject matter that expresses certain emotions that are intensely personal." That she's found a way to have a good time creating her exquisite works of art seems obvious given her animated, light-hearted presence during our conversation that became this interview. 📷



A Place in the Sun
Oil on panel 25" × 20"
Courtesy of the California Art Club in association with the Autry Museum of the American West

Notes:

*About the Author: Senior Editor Molly Siple studied painting and art history at the **University of California at Berkeley** and is an Artist Member of the **California Art Club**. She has also taken formal training from master artists **Shuqiao Zhou**, and **Jove Wang**, and **Ian Roberts**. Siple is a frequent contributor to numerous national art publications, and co-author of *Enchanted Isle, A History of Plein Air Painting in Santa Catalina Island* as well as *California Light, A Century of Landscapes: Paintings of the California Art Club*.*

Gold Medal Program: *For a first-hand experience of Sammons' remarkable talent and lively spirit, be sure to reserve your place at the special demonstration and discussion entitled Giving Life to Still Life, planned for the opening weekend of the upcoming Gold Medal Exhibition. Sammons, along with **Jim McVicker**, will share their unique approaches to still-life painting as they each paint from similar set-ups. Sammons will be demonstrating her a la prima technique, focusing on representing objects, light, form, and colour as simply as possible. "I find simple things to be some of the most clever and delightful if they are the result of intelligent decisions," says the artist. "A single statement that is presented clearly and concisely can be stronger than a more complex one."*

Event Information: *Gold Medal artist **Peter Adams** will moderate this fascinating event that takes place April 3, from 1:00 to 3:00 p.m. at the **Autry Museum's Wells Fargo Theater**. Tickets are \$30 for California Art Club and Autry members; and \$40 for non-members. Reservations are required and tickets include admission to the museum. To reserve, visit californiaartclub.org*