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# Adrian Gottlieb | Young Master

By: Southwest Art | September 15, 2011

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## Adrian Gottlieb follows centuries-old traditions to create contemporary figurative oils

By Norman Kolpas



Adrian Gottlieb | *Second Thoughts*, oil, 36 x 24.

In the late 1980s, on a family trip from Burlington, VT, to New York City, young Adrian Gottlieb came face to face with his first Rembrandt. Today, at 36, he can't quite recall which one it was among the Met's works by that paragon among old masters, but he still feels its impact powerfully and precisely.

"The sum of all its components came across as larger than life," Gottlieb says. "It spoke to me of his ability to see beneath the surface of form and texture to the human spirit. And I felt that was the greatest type of art there was: to take something that you paint and make it so real that meeting that person or seeing that thing or going to that place would seem superfluous."

More than two and a half decades later, Gottlieb is well on his way to fulfilling that artistic goal. Though the modest, soft-spoken painter would never be so grandiose as to suggest his works rank among those of the artists he most admires, he has deliberately, meticulously set about to learn his craft as painters of centuries past learned it. The result: works likely to stop viewers in their tracks, much like the young

artist himself was riveted all those years ago; paintings of present-day subjects rendered with both striking accuracy and a depth of spirit worthy of an old master.

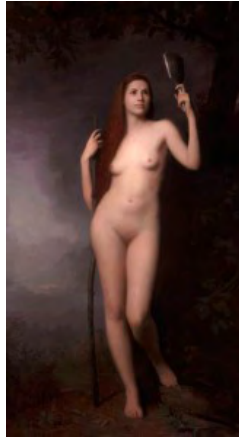
"I'm searching for an emotion, a presence, that tells of something greater than the subject itself," he explains. Still striving to convey precisely what he means, he then quotes a phrase from his girlfriend, portraitist and still-life painter Kate Sammons: "She's looking for her works to supply 'a complete experience.'" Then, as if wary of committing hubris by comparing himself to his painting idols, he quickly adds, "Sometimes I get a little close to it. And lots of times, I don't."

Even before his Manhattan epiphany, Gottlieb knew he wanted to be an artist. His parents, both artistic in their own particular ways, encouraged their son to develop his talents. At 15, he was chosen to exhibit his work in the Vermont state capitol, and three years later he won a first-place Young Inventors and Creators of America Award, receiving his commendation in Washington, D.C., from Vice President Al Gore. After graduating from Essex Junction High, Gottlieb entered Carnegie

Mellon University in Pittsburgh. Choosing his words carefully, he explains that in his freshman year he found the art department to be “very concept-based, while I felt I needed to draw and paint with an extremely logical base approach.”

Looking for that kind of foundation, he transferred in his second year to the illustration program at the Rochester Institute of Technology. And RIT, in turn, led Gottlieb to his ideal art education.

During his first year there, he applied to a summer term of study at the Charles H. Cecil Studios in Florence, Italy. “I had no idea I was stepping off the plane into exactly where I needed to be.” Under Cecil’s atelier-style tutelage, he found himself learning “a perfectly sensitive, nuanced execution of form and color and light,” all while “breathing in the southern Renaissance every day.” It was, he says in summation, “artist-forming.”



*Truth Corrupted by Vanity,*  
oil, 84 x 48.



*Adrian Gottlieb | Piambura of Heather 3,*  
oil, 20 x 16.

Gottlieb returned to Florence two more summers while finishing his degree at

RIT, earning a BFA with honors. Immediately after graduation, he returned to Italy, enrolling in an intensive drawing program at the Florence Academy of Art. Soon he was a full-time student in its painting program, studying under Daniel Graves and Simona Dolci. By 2001, Gottlieb was himself an instructor there, finally leaving in 2002 to paint and teach privately in Italy.

In 2003, he was offered a teaching position and private studio at the Los Angeles Academy of Fine Art. Though he moved to Southern California, the lessons he learned in Italy had become a permanent part of him. Indeed, he was the first LAFA faculty member to introduce such classic atelier techniques as cast drawing, long-pose life drawing, and cast painting in monochromatic paints known as grisaille.

Two years later, he left that post to set up his own atelier in a warehouse in Atwater Village, not far from downtown Los Angeles. It’s “a starter studio,” he says modestly. But the space strikes a visitor as a setting most artists would consider a dream come true. Clerestory windows face almost north for fairly true daylight. Opulent fabrics provide backdrops for models. High-quality paints, brushes, and tools stand at the ready. Gottlieb’s collection of art books provide reference from such heroes as the 19th-century French classicist William Bouguereau, who “understood the grace of design”; Spanish Baroque master Diego Velázquez, who shows Gottlieb “how to simplify a thing to the greatest effect”; and Anthony van Dyck, the Flemish-born Baroque painter to the English court, who demonstrates “the most efficient and effective manner of reproducing the human form.” And then there’s the Italian Baroque great Caravaggio: “His compositions are staged, but they feel natural, and his forms are so visceral. All you really need as an artist is to be as good as Caravaggio. If you want to be better beyond that, you’re certainly welcome to be better. But it’s not necessary.”

Thus inspired and equipped, Gottlieb now builds his career around what he describes as “three pillars of an artist’s livelihood: teaching, commissions, and gallery work.” Sunday through Friday, he executes pieces for the several galleries that now represent him, and for private individuals—including, four years ago, a three-months-long commission to paint a life-size portrait in England for William Herbert, 18th Earl of Pembroke and 15th Earl of Montgomery, whose ancestors had been painted by the likes of van Dyck and Joshua Reynolds.

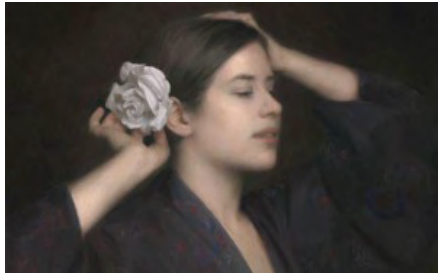
Each Saturday Gottlieb welcomes into his studio three or four regular students who set up their easels alongside his to spend a daylong session painting a live model. “Life provides something photography simply cannot,” he explains. “A camera cannot understand color the same way the human eye can. It doesn’t understand form with anywhere near the same sensitivity and range



*Adrian Gottlieb | A Long Life, oil, 26 x 20.*

of the human eye. It doesn't record any of the infinitesimal changes in a live subject—at any moment, your subject could give you something better than what you already have.”

In teaching his students to paint from life, he'll begin arranging the model and the setting to “conceptualize the image itself.” Then, Gottlieb and his students will devote as much as a day or more to painting small color studies, ideal for working out composition and values. “I'll play with it for a long time until I get something that really works,” he says. While the model takes regular breaks, Gottlieb stops by each student's easel to review progress, offering specific, succinct suggestions that dramatically improve what they're doing.



Adrian Gottlieb | *Anticipation, oil.*

Once the color study is done, the next stage is a charcoal drawing of the same composition on paper, scaled up to the exact dimensions of the final canvas, still working from the live model. That completed, Gottlieb positions a sheet of vellum atop the drawing, tracing the composition in pen. Next, he reverses the vellum and precisely follows the lines on the other side with an oil stick. He inverts the vellum onto a canvas-covered board that he has already primed and *imprimatured*—painted over with the main color of the subject's shadow for greater depth. With a hard pencil, he pushes down on

the vellum to transfer the oil-stick image onto the canvas.

Now, the final painting begins. He'll execute a *piambura*, which he describes as working with “veils of lead white” on the shadows already there to bring out the highlights, creating a realistic underpainting. It brings still more depth to the finished painting, but Gottlieb finds the technique so satisfying that he's also begun to create a series of *piambura* portraits that are finished works in themselves.

At this point, depending on his subject and the effect he wants to achieve, he may complete the painting using one of three approaches. His “additive” process builds up oils on the canvas from dark to light, ending with the highlights. “Straight color” mixes paints on the palette and puts them down on the canvas, an approach yielding more vivid colors. Or often he'll use the *verdaccio* approach, in which he executes an even more thorough underpainting in blue-green and pink tones. “It provides a gentle, very natural glow to everything, mimicking human flesh just about perfectly and making all the final colors feel very alive.”

You can sense such lifelike vibrancy in a wide range of Gottlieb's recent works. *TRUTH CORRUPTED BY VANITY*, for example, presents his life-size ironic reinterpretation of *LA VERITÉ (The Truth)*, an 1870 painting by Jules Lefebvre hanging in the Musée d'Orsay in Paris. Gottlieb approached his own canvas wishing, as Lefebvre had done, “to express the colossal and magnificent nature of the human form.”

By contrast, in *THE POET*, the far more demure subject echoes the pose of Da Vinci's 1490 painting *LADY WITH AN ERMINE*, with a book of verses replacing the aristocratic pet. “I just wanted to go for something here with a great deal of elegance,” he explains.

The lifelike depth and down-to-earth complexity of character one might find in a Rembrandt or a portrait by Dutch Golden Age painter Jacob Backer, another inspiration, come to mind on viewing *A LONG LIFE*. It depicts a handsome gentleman Gottlieb found among models listed at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena. “He had this completely unidealized look, and that just struck me as real.”



*The poet, oil, 26 x 20.*

In these works and others, Gottlieb demonstrates a considerable mastery achieved after almost two decades of serious study, and he's eager for an audience that understands how much effort has gone into it. “Whether in a museum or a private collection,” he says, “I would like my work to be displayed wherever it can be viewed by people who appreciate it.” It's clear that with his inherent talent, drive, and relentlessly inquisitive nature, Gottlieb's work will grow richer still, yielding paintings that demand to be seen face to face.



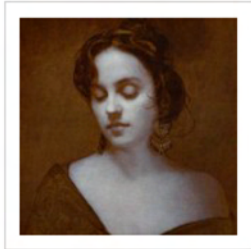
**upcoming show**

Great American Figurative Exhibition, **Waterhouse Gallery**, November 19-December 9.

*Featured in October 2011.*



*Adrian Gottlieb | A Long Life, oil, 26 x 20.*



*Adrian Gottlieb | Piambura of Heather 4, oil, 20 x 16.*



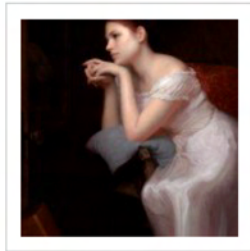
*Adrian Gottlieb | Piambura of Heather 1, oil, 20 x 16.*



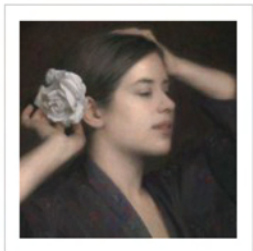
*Adrian Gottlieb | Piambura of Heather 2, oil, 20 x 16.*



*Adrian Gottlieb | Piambura of Heather 3, oil, 20 x 16.*



*Adrian Gottlieb | Second Thoughts, oil, 36 x 24.*



*Adrian Gottlieb | Anticipation, oil.*

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