

Hungry Eye: Alexey Steele—Flowers after the Firestorm

by Kirk Silsbee

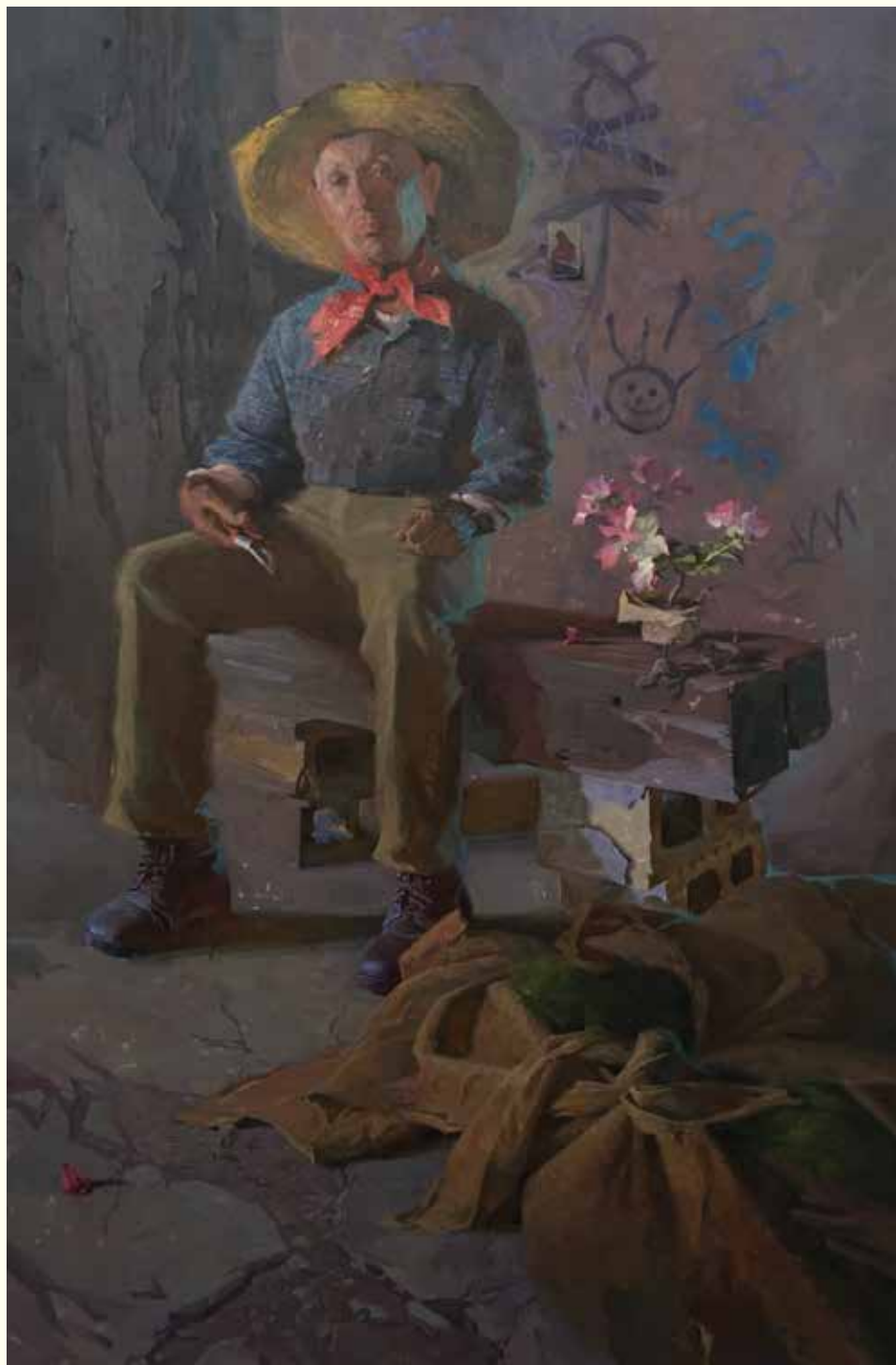
PAINTER ALEXEY STEELE'S ENTRY into the **California Art Club's** recent *106th Gold Medal Exhibition* was a portrait called "Ricky." The three-quarter bust shows a raw-boned young man with a defiant upward gaze. His wind-blown chin whiskers bristle wildly from a resolute jaw, and the tattoo-covered sternocleidomastoid muscles erupt out of his shirt like a flesh-covered volcano. The hands and fingers of the defensively folded arms are also tattooed. This looks to be a feral character operating on society's fringes. Were it not for his hooded sweatshirt proclaiming *Carson*, we might be looking at a harpooner from the Pequod or an eighteenth-century pirate in repose between rounds of pillage and plunder.

That would be the City of Carson, where Steele maintains his studio near the 110 Freeway, in a row of two-story, high-enclosed spaces that, from the outside, might be mistaken for movie sound stages. From the inside, his studio looks as though it could comfortably hold an airplane or two. This working class enclave is not a likely setting for an heir to the Russian academic painting legacy.

For a long time, Steele used a studio space that was located on the far more comfortable and trendy Westside, right next to an upscale gym. When he needed to vacate, one of his patrons, **Richard Rand**, suggested the Carson module, which Rand owns. The relocation didn't only provide a more spacious setting; it birthed Steele's current ongoing series, *Love My Neighbor*.

A nearly fifty-year old who carries the familial and cellular memory of Old World art, now documenting ordinary people in the fifth most diverse city in the country, is not quite the stretch it would seem. The ever-voluble Steele weaves the rambling narrative of his personal and professional odyssey as he guides his visitor around his studio.

Steele has enough room for multiple set-ups and points out, "Different spots



El Rey Trabajador
Oil on canvas 72" × 48"



Alexey Steele with his painting, *Ricky of Carson*, exhibited in the California Art Club's 106th Annual Gold Medal Exhibition held at the Autry Museum of the American West in Los Angeles.

have different light sources; I have six spots with their own distinct lighting." In one of his trademark straw Panama hats, the intense painter's stream of commentary bursts out much like the ungoverned beard and moustache that sprouts from his face.

After years of rigorous training, at the **St. Petersburg Academy** and elsewhere, Steele arrived in the United States in 1990, a difficult period for representational painting in the art market. "I was told," he recounts, "by people that I respected, 'This is great, very good. No one wants it, nobody needs it.' Can you imagine hearing that at the tender age of twenty?" Like so many other realists, he found himself marginalized in the art world.

Speaking of himself and his colleagues, Steele says, "True art does great under pressure. One of the greatest blessings that we have as a movement is that we had to come out of the wilderness. We needed that fire of refreshment to go through the current renaissance that we're experiencing now. The need for new artistic expression came as new flowers after the firestorm."

He credits the California Art Club for its role in what he calls a present-day renaissance. "The CAC provided a platform for artists on the West Coast to know each other and to develop

personal friendships over the years—because art is always personal. We would have this raging social interaction, and that's crucial over the years."

His father, painter **Leonid Steele (1921–2014)**, found acclaim and sanction in the old Soviet Union, but quickly realized the pitfalls of being an "official" artist in an oppressive system. "I am grateful," Alexey declares, "personally, for



Mrs. O'Neal
Sepia on Fabriano paper 30" × 22"

being stuck out in the cold, because I know what it does to an art form when it becomes an official expression. It dies; it has the heart ripped out of that expression. My dad struggled with that all his life."

His father's solution to artistic integrity and personal renewal was to retreat to the Russian provinces and paint the ordinary people and workers whom he found there. In turn, his son looks at his neighbours and finds occasional nobility, though it is seldom recognized as such.

A full-length portrait on an easel shows a slightly portly older man in dignified dress. "That's **Imam Assaf**. He's this amazing imam—not like the Saudi-funded clowns—who has his flock and he interacts with priests, ministers, and rabbis. I painted him full-scale because he's a hero."

"Look at this," he says, peeling back a protective sheet from a sketch on an easel. "This is **Cirillo**. He's a 70-year old gardener who works every day. He's raised children and grandchildren and he won't stop working. If he stops working, he knows he'll die." Steele's crayon sketch gently catches the facial folds and undulations of a life lived rigorously.

"All of the people I paint in the '*Neighbor*' series possess a specific human quality that I can express," Steele



Uncle Lincoln, Study for Ukulele Player
Sepia on Fabriano paper 30" × 22"

states. “Character. That was the Holy Grail of Russian painting. And visual effects and tricks can never give the viewer character. That quality becomes a magnet.” Steele’s had financial help from the **City of Carson** in this project, and it’s already paid dividends. The two showings of the *Neighbor* series were in Carson Park and at the local **Wells Fargo Bank** where 40,000 people saw Steele’s paintings. Wells Fargo has also granted Steele with support for his community-focused project.

So, who is the figure in the *Ricky* portrait? “He’s my next door neighbour,” Steele shoots back. “He looks like a Latino gangster, but the truth of his life is a different story. He had a horrendous accident and had multiple surgeries; he covered up his scars with tattoos. He has a construction business and he built an indoor soccer field to train kids. One of his teams is a California State champion. Come on, I’ll introduce you to him.”

Wending through a noisy throng of soccer-focused children and adults in and out of uniforms, Steele finds a tall man with a quiet authority in the back of the building. They hug and exult boisterously in a private exchange. “This is **Ricky Achevarria!**” Steele shouts above the noise. The tall, brown man with the chiselled facial planes smiles broadly as he sticks out his hand for a warm grasp. There’s a bond between these two men that’s as unshakable as it is unspoken.

Later, Steele pontificates on his motives. “This society has great strengths,” he concedes, “but people have lost faith in its institutions. What we can believe and hold onto is our neighbour. Now not every neighbour is great, of course, but among them you will find true heroes. Start looking and you’ll find great people. They do something special and unique—just because they can’t help but to do it. This is how we rebuild society.”

Notes:

Kirk Silsbee writes about jazz and culture, and has written about art since 1990. His articles appear in various publications including *Los Angeles Times*, *San Gabriel Valley News Press*, and *DownBeat Magazine*. Silsbee is known primarily as a music journalist, and has degrees in drawing and painting.



Steele painting *El Rey Trabajador*



Ukulele Player
Oil on canvas 48" × 60"