



T
TODAY'S
MASTERS



JULIE BELL

LOOKING BACK, LOOKING WITHIN

The

career of Julie Bell (b. 1958) is a testament to the enduring power of realism in American art. Focused on eight recent paintings, this article reveals the depth of her inspiration and sensitivity to her subject matter, even as it underscores the broad range of influences she has absorbed and made her own.

The daughter of an architect father and artist mother, Bell grew up in Beaumont, Texas, in an environment that nurtured her desire to become a painter. Drawing has mattered as long as she can remember, yet she only began to study art formally during high school, then majored in drawing at DeKalb County Community College in Atlanta. There Bell was inspired by her teachers and introduced to color theory, which she has so evidently come to master. Her studies continued under the wildlife artist Jerry Newman at Lamar University (in Beaumont), where she made her first serious life drawing study. At Northern Michigan University, Bell probed the

psychology underlying animals' appearances with the sculptor Wolf Niessen. By 1982, she was a married mother of two living in Ohio, yet found time to take drawing classes at Lorain County Community College while accepting commissions to illustrate children's books.

Bell then took up bodybuilding, a sport that won her national recognition as an athlete while at the same time enhancing her artistic mastery of anatomical detail. This growing interest also introduced Bell to her second husband, the artist Boris Vallejo (b. 1941), with whom she occasionally collaborates. In the world of illustration, Bell has become renowned for her "metal flesh"



(THIS PAGE) *Champion*, 2016, oil on linen, 60 x 48 in., Legacy Gallery (Bozeman). Bell: "At the Trexler Game Preserve in Lehigh Valley, Pennsylvania, Big Boy leads a herd of 14 bison, has fathered quite a few calves, and doesn't seem to be slowing down. I visit this extraordinary place regularly and am fortunate to know these animals, hang out with their caretakers, and even ride in the truck at feeding time. When a calf is born, the whole herd (even Big Boy) becomes highly protective of it. Watching them form an impenetrable barrier just makes me love life all over again." ■ (OPPOSITE PAGE) *Gazing Pond*, 2016, oil on linen, 18 x 24 in., Legacy Gallery (Jackson). Bell: "Combining the textures of water and fur into a painting, then hitting it with a spotlight, was a thrill. The sensitive gesture of the wolf's raised paw, along with his soft gaze, melted my heart."



(THIS PAGE) *Glorious Gateway*, 2017, oil on wood, 36 x 24 in., Legacy Gallery (Bozeman). Bell: "For most of my life, I've wanted to visit Montana and Wyoming. I have flown over them many times and looked down at their mountains, imagining myself there. Last September, Boris and I flew to Bozeman and then drove to Jackson. Every second of every day not only lived up to my expectations, but presented sights and experiences I had not even dreamed of: hundreds of bison at the base of the Tetons; foxes, elk, even wolves living in nature; the prairie sage grasses emitting the complex scent I cannot wait to smell again. I watched these two grizzly bears, Bella and Brutus, at the Montana Grizzly Encounter sanctuary near Bozeman." ■ (OPPOSITE PAGE) *White Velvet*, 2016, oil on wood, 32 x 48 in., Art Renewal Center Collection. Bell: "As I brought this image to life, I brought along the very morning I met this horse named Charmer. Every time I look at this painting, my senses replay that day's unique quality of air and sunrise, the beats of Charmer's hooves, the cold water from the previous night's rain splashing on me, the excitement in my heart while watching Charmer prance, snorting and delighting in these same elements. I'm overcome with gratitude for that moment."

images on album covers, sci-fi posters for music and films, covers for Tor Books, HarperCollins, Simon & Schuster, Random House, and Marvel Comics (including the latter's trading cards), and an array of other commercial advertising worldwide. Now based in Allentown, Pennsylvania, Bell has shifted over the past decade toward fine art, enjoying ever more acclaim in the genres of wildlife, imaginative realism, portraiture, and scenes of the American West.

It would be a disservice to pigeonhole Bell into just one of these contemporary niches, however: collectively her paintings demonstrate an unusual gift for assimilation of painterly traditions ranging from the Renaissance to 19th-century realism. In last year's exhibition of imaginative realism at the Delaware Art Museum, its curators noted the seamless connection between Bell and various historical painters, including the English Pre-Raphaelites Edward Burne-Jones and John William Waterhouse and American Golden Age illustrators such as Howard Pyle and N.C. Wyeth. This is all the more remarkable in view of the fact that Bell has never studied art history formally, nor has she received the academic training that normally requires replicating Old Master techniques. Only later in life did she encounter the academic tradition — through her two sons, Anthony and David Palumbo, who both attended the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and have become professional artists. She observes:

My sons share with me things they have learned about the nuts and bolts of creating art like materials, techniques, and composition, as well as more conceptual lessons. It's so different from the way one would approach a commercial illustration — so many subtleties in the thinking. I love having so much information from two vastly different worlds of art.

When asked about conscious study versus unconscious assimilation, Bell notes that both are relevant:

Sometimes when I become aware of an artist who really grabs me, I like to stand in front of his or her work and make believe that it is on my easel and that I am painting it. I can suddenly see exactly which techniques and ideas are different from those I already use. I feel like I'm slipping into the mind of that artist and being given a private lesson.

Regarding specific role models, Bell cites Michelangelo, Théodore Rousseau, Alfons Mucha, Aubrey Beardsley, William Bouguereau, and J.W. Waterhouse, among others. "But I'm constantly seeing new work that inspires me," she adds. Her appropriations are nuanced, of course: even connoisseurs are hard-pressed to put a finger on individual sources of inspiration in any given painting. Instead, each is a beautiful blend of individual expression and nod to the past.

RECENT PAINTINGS

Fans of the American West will surely recognize and appreciate the depictions of Western life illustrated here. Sometimes a majestic bison pushes out from Bell's picture plane (*Champion*), or perhaps it's an aerial view of a lone wolf (*Gazing Pond*), or a foreshortened glance from a grizzly bear (*Glorious Gateway*). These are just



some of the species Bell depicts, which range worldwide from subtropical flamingos to Siberian tigers. Her attention to detail is meticulous — be it individual tufts of fur, feathers, or a glistening eye — always convincing viewers completely. Such precise brushwork is typical of 1960s photorealism, yet Bell's is closer to that achieved in the 19th century by John James Audubon, or during the early Renaissance in Jan Van Eyck's flora and fauna. The aged horse depicted in Bell's *White Velvet* has an air of decrepitude reminiscent of Albrecht Dürer, the authenticity of Rosa Bonheur's farm animals, and the pathos of a steed past its prime that Edwin Landseer might have captured. Likewise, the bison in *Champion* and the wolf in *Gazing Pond* suggest her indebtedness to both Bonheur and to the topographer-painter Frank Tenney Johnson. In distinctive ways, *Big Red* and *Backstage Jitters* pay homage to the cowboy life celebrated by Frederic Remington and

C.M. Russell. Indeed the latter picture adds an element bypassed by those Western masters — a hint of the silent communication between horses that evokes a Renaissance *sacra conversazione*.

Bell's wild animals assume an imposing presence thanks to the superbly painted landscapes against which they loom, confirming Bell's familiarity with such forerunners as the Hudson River School, Albert Bierstadt, and Thomas Moran. Like them, she captures with sublimity the grandeur of mountainous terrain and the atmospheric play of light through clouds. Her compositions are balanced in the classical manner of Claude Lorrain and Nicolas Poussin; on the horizon, forests and mountains are silhouetted against the sky, in dramatic contrast with the foreground's sometimes larger-than-life figures. In *Glorious Gateway* and comparable scenes echoing an Old Masterly approach to the composition, the landscape is secondary to

the narrative playing out in the foreground, with animals replacing human figures acting out episodes from the Bible or history.

Animals also figure prominently in Bell's imaginative realism, what some observers call fantasy art. A noble red hawk dominates *Bridge*, and in *Norn Fates* it is a dragon-like creature. Both images point back to the painterly techniques and visionary themes of 19th-century Symbolists (like Gustave Moreau) and the Pre-Raphaelites (Burne-Jones again). Indeed, the human flesh and musculature, so well differentiated from the textures all around them, hark back to the Pre-Raphaelites' medieval sensibilities as much as to Michelangelo's post-Raphaelite sibyls.

Bell's virtuosity is more than stylistic — it stems just as much from her profound engagement with animals:



(THIS PAGE, TOP) *Big Red*, 2017, oil on linen, 20 x 30 in., Saks Galleries (Denver). Bell: "Experimenting with my palette knife, I sought to feel the dynamic movement of these three figures while capturing a freeze-frame of their intensity and excitement. Watching this horse, Big Red, perform at the Atlantic Reined Cow Horse Association event last fall was so interesting — he's a natural performer with such stage presence. Every time he broke into a run, he stood out from the other horses with dramatic facial expressions and body language. I couldn't help but think that he must have seen Remington's paintings of horses with their eyes wide open and heads thrust forward." ■ (THIS PAGE, LEFT) *Backstage Jitters*, 2017, oil on wood, 18 x 24 in., private collection. Bell: "I suffer from a degree of stage fright, so when I saw these horses off to the side at a reining event, I wondered if they might be dealing with it, too. Observing how animals communicate with each other is one of the main reasons I paint them. Analyzing the expressions of a creature that shows its feelings creates a sense of love in me. Analysis brings understanding, and understanding brings empathy. I realize I'm projecting my own feelings here, but it feels wonderful to get that sense of connection to their world." ■ (OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP) *Bridge*, 2016, oil on board, 36 x 36 in., Rehs Contemporary (New York City). Bell: "Painting has become my bridge between tangible reality and the infinite. Using the physical properties of paint, my hand and brush swirl across the surface, taking my mind into a world that doesn't exist until I go there. This is my favorite way to start a painting. Only after bringing in some 'infinity juice' do I apply some discipline, some recognizable reality. This offers the surprise of something new and reacquaints me with something buried deep inside." ■ (OPPOSITE PAGE, BOTTOM) *Norn Fates*, 2015, oil on board, 36 x 28 in., Art Renewal Center Collection. Bell: "At the core of my art is a reverence for the human body. It has been my focus since childhood, both in learning to draw (from life and photographs) and in scientific/athletic studies of its construction and functionality. Having this foundation led naturally to fantasy art, which is often based on beautiful, even glorified, figures in otherworldly scenes. I like blending physical movement with deep emotion, and *Norn Fates* was created from this desire."



Deep visual observation always causes me to feel a connection with them... I came to realize that this connection was taking place in the part of my brain that is practically identical to theirs: the emotional mammalian brain that pre-exists the higher thinking part which makes us human.

In this respect, Bell's images — whether they depict animals, humans, or a fantasy combination of both — are close descendants of 19th-century Romanticism in their expressive intensity. Her vibrant colors and swirling patterns of luxuriant fabrics contribute to a mood of confusion, of conflicting feelings of angst or eroticism we might experience waking from a dream. The German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel (1770–1831) wrote that “in Romantic art, the form is determined by the inner idea of the content or substance which this art is called upon to represent.” For him, music was the ultimate fulfillment of Romantic expressiveness. No surprise, then, that Bell “listens to music while Boris and I work. The impressionist composers, especially Ravel, Debussy, and Scriabin, contribute directly to the creation of some of my art. Their sound is as close as I've come to the visual and emotional experience I have in translating a concept into a painting.”

The 19th-century Romantic cult of nature, where artists found their feelings reflected and confirmed, bordered on spiritual experience. Bell has sustained that sense of connection between creation and the unseen:

In my earliest memories, I can remember feeling like everything around me, especially in nature, had some kind of spirit or soul and was, in a way, speaking to me. Not in the sense of an actual auditory delusion, but more a feeling of connection and support. I was raised as a Southern Baptist ... but my family wasn't particularly religious and I definitely had questions about the humanizing of the universal spirit that religion seems to do. Still, I can easily relate when a religious person talks about God.

Bell's paintings, it seems, are part of the historical continuum and completely of the moment: they offer a glance back to a legacy of international influences, but also a glimpse into the artist's heart and soul. ●

Information: Bell is represented by Legacy Gallery (Scottsdale, Bozeman, and Jackson), Saks Galleries (Denver), and Rehs Contemporary (New York City). Rehs will present her next major solo show in May 2018.

Louise Joyner dedicates this article to the memory of her husband, J. Brooks Joyner (1944–2016), the renowned museum director and art historian. Having authored the large Harry Jackson article in the August 2016 issue of *Fine Art Connoisseur*, Brooks Joyner was then commissioned to write this article, but passed away from ALS before he could begin it. May his soul rest in peace.

