

Tyler Alpern: Artist Profile

By Alan Bennett Ilagan

Today's digital cameras and their ability to decently capture any given moment have, for better and more often worse, turned all of us into artists. We live in a world where digital media is everywhere, right down to cameras designed for toddlers. Images can be transferred to a computer screen instantaneously, then printed out in all their glorious megapixels within a few minutes. Is there a place in such a world for traditional art forms like painting and sculpture that take hours of painstaking effort to create? Tyler Alpern believes there is, and his paintings may be the best argument that such traditions will never go out of style.

"A well-crafted and beautiful art object will always be in fashion," the painter proclaims. "The rich materials and surface, as well as the dynamic presence that an actual painting has cannot be duplicated or replaced digitally. Both mediums are wonderful and there is plenty of room for both."

Describing his artwork as "technically accomplished narrative painting with a contemporary slant," Alpern utilizes time-honored painting techniques while portraying a modern-day sensibility. He is a Picasso of the Pop World, reveling in and condemning our celebrity-obsessed culture and all of its colorful shortcomings.

As a gay man, he imbues many of his pieces with a homoerotic edge, bringing out the physical features of his men and having them appear often without clothes. He poses timely questions on identity, gender, and beauty in his work, challenging long-held notions on what is pretty, and turning traditional representations of male and female forms on their heads.

Each of his pieces tells a story, often many stories - spinning off one another, ricocheting back with new ideas and slants, and creating an ongoing dialogue within and without the work itself. Under Alpern's touch, the simplest of scenes lend themselves to grandly elaborate tales, replete with psychological back-stories and symbolic gestures of stunning accuracy. He adroitly captures moments of human interaction, invoking those fleeting connections we make as we fumble through life ~ the awkward laugh of a suitor, the seductive glint of an eye, or the vaguely mournful gaze of a solitary bystander.

There are deeper forces at work as well. Many of Alpern's paintings betray an ambivalent view of female beauty. His portrayals of women hint at unresolved issues – they are frequently distorted, and their beauty is unconventional and challenging. They are both revered and reviled, whereas men get off relatively unscathed, if not glorified. The men are also portrayed as more vulnerable, most explicitly in their absence of clothing, but also in the less harsh way Alpern renders their expressions. There is a gay sensibility that resonates here – the beauty of men versus the strength of women.

"I use both heads to paint," he teases before expounding. "My women tend to be real people with complex stories that compel me to paint them, and my men tend to be sex objects."

This is not to say his work is misogynistic on any level; on the contrary, Alpern's ladies are all lovely, in their own way, and he clearly idolizes strong female figures, from the tragic goddesses of the past to his own mother, who inspired him as a child. "Most of all," he says, "it has been my Mother's paintings surrounding me when I grew up that influenced me in the value and importance of paintings."

Alpern was raised near Aspen, Colorado, and the surrounding area remains a source of inspiration, with its vivid landscape of rich colors and vibrant tapestry of intense hues. Both bleed into his work, if not in outright landscape scenes, then in color composition. Considering himself a "colorist" first and foremost, his use and manipulation of hues and shades, along with a striking knack for creating mesmerizing color combinations, makes for a visually stimulating collection. Much of his work is soaked in rich jewel tones, with an underlying base of black that serves to bring out the brazen

color choices even further. Shades of blue infuse many of his pieces - in the sky or a background curtain or the steady backdrop of rain. Darkness and shadows play a main role as well, as a number of his scenes take place at moments of dusk and dimness – an evening dinner party, a night-time stroll, a darkened circus tent – the moments when shadows are longest and colors are deepest. Achieving the desired depth and detail is a result of long hours or ardent work and patient revision.

“What consumes nearly one hundred percent of my time is not the telling of the story but the monumental effort to make the artwork look right, to be well painted. I am very concerned with the actual quality of the painted image. The surface of the work is rich because of the many layers of paint applied over months to achieve the fullness and complexity of color and value that makes the paintings glow. I paint, repaint and repaint until I am satisfied with every element.”

Such perfectionism is at odds with the often imperfect, flawed subjects that Alpern favors. He showcases the freaks of the world ~ our everyday grotesqueries ~ and his genius is the way he manages to simultaneously criticize and celebrate their uniqueness. His way with color highlights the gaudy and garish nature of many of his subjects, serving to challenge the eye and question where real ugliness begins and superficial delights end.

He will sometimes present a gross distortion of form and figure, yet the expressions and stances remain accessible and universal, and he finds beauty even in his most hideous imagery. The bored countenance of a dinner party attendant or the attention-getting antics of a budding drama queen – these are brilliantly conceived and executed. It’s the eye for clever detail and minutiae of subtle visual cues that may be Alpern’s greatest asset. A woman falling down a flight of stairs wears a skirt with a pattern of apples on it, Alpern’s droll nod to Newton’s Law of Gravity. No space is wasted in any of his paintings, and nothing is painted without meaning. Even the blank expanse of a sky or forest manages to convey moments of import.

Alpern is interested in “the power we have to create our own destiny.” One of his most famous pieces - ‘Through the Looking Glass’ - deals with that theme, and was recently selected as the cover artwork for a biography of Yma Sumac. That theme also informs ‘Everything’s Comin’ Up Roses but Ethel’s Pushin’ Up Daisies’. According to the painter, “You are going to be dead a long time so live life to the fullest, do with this life what you want to while you can.”

His own life has been influenced and inspired by the characters he’s chosen to portray, and like a mirror each of them serves to reflect a bit of the artist himself. As he explains, “I really like unusual people who chase their own dreams, and many of my paintings honor them. I also am passionate about gay history so references to it permeate my work. I love the homoerotic, and also the humorous, so I find themes that incorporate them. Somehow my own biography is told metaphorically through all the paintings.”

It’s a biography that he’s written and directed himself. “We create our own reality and thus our own reflections,” he asserts. “So unlike Alice, we do not have to go through the looking glass to find another world, all we must do is reinvent it.” That’s exactly what Alpern does with his paintings – and much of the joy to be found in them is in the way he reinvents everyday images – heightening their dramatic impact, highlighting their bizarre elements, and revealing layers most of us would have never noticed.

It takes courage to take your own path and forge uncharted ways, but Alpern has made it a driving force. “Living life to the fullest by following one’s own dream born out of passion or want and without the paralyzing fear of peers or criticism takes a lot of courage, and the rewards so far have outweighed any embarrassment or consequences,” he claims. “There will be painters who can technically paint better, draw better, create more beauty, and convey more profound content than me. There will be men more handsome, clever, successful and funny than me. Yet, I don’t let them stop me from trying. And I have no regrets.”