

Mary Sauer's revealing portraits build a narrative through a synthesis of traditional painting methods and modern technology.

A Contemporary Mirror

BY JUDITH FAIRLY

AMONG THE MYRIAD ISSUES that nettle the fine art community, the enduring debate about the capacity of representational art to convey meaning is perhaps the most inescapable. How does an artist who has mastered realistic techniques transcend the superficial limitations and formal characteristics of the style to communicate an idea? For Mary Sauer, whose portraits are inspired by 19th-century artists such as Cecilia Beaux, John Singer Sargent, and James Abbott McNeill Whistler, as well as the rich dramatic narratives of John William Waterhouse and the Pre-Raphaelites, the answer is a painterly approach infused with emotion that utilizes modern technology while remaining faithful to traditional, old masters' methods.

Meaning and Identity

Sauer believes that the new generation of figurative artists has an opportunity to say something about their work through their technique. "It doesn't have to be a 'big' idea,"

she says. "Perhaps it's just an idea of how they feel about themselves." In her own paintings, Sauer explores the role of social expectations in the way we present ourselves to the world. "In order to be 'seen' by others," she says, "we have to put our best face forward. We present a picture of ourselves that conveys an idea to others of who we are." Her current work examines the decisions about childbearing and career that a contemporary woman faces and the emotional complexities surrounding her choices. Like the characters in the Victorian literature Sauer favors, the subjects of these portraits are feminine and resilient, forging their identities within and in contravention of social norms. "Victorian narrative paintings have so much emotion and drama," says Sauer. "I'm a romantic—but I'm also crazy about contemporary

RIGHT: In *Lauren* (oil, 40x30), Sauer restricts the colors to black, brown, and white and counters the rectilinear files with the ornate (empty) frame to suggest the dichotomies in the subject's life.



artists like Jenny Saville for her paint quality and Jeff Koons for his integration of digital technology in creating his representational paintings.”

Before landing a job as an assistant in the Chelsea (New York City) studio of sculptor and photorealist Jeff Koons, Sauer attended Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, with the intention of studying music, but her discomfort in performing before an audience persuaded her to change her major to fine art. The studio art program’s emphasis on expressionism rather than the traditional skills she wanted to develop led her to illustration, where she studied with figurative artist Robert T. Barrett and acquired a sound foundation in drawing and narrative painting. For two

years, she apprenticed with master painter William Whitaker (a 2012 winner of *The Artist’s Magazine’s* Over 60 Competition), then embarked upon an intense study of figurative art at the Art Students League of New York.

A Continuing Education

For almost three years, Sauer worked alongside dozens of other artists—many with graduate degrees and large student loan bills—in Koons’s gymnasium-sized production studio. At any given time, there were as many as eight to 12 large-scale paintings in progress in the cavernous white atelier, with perhaps half a dozen artists on scaffolds at work on each one. At the color-mixing table, 10 to 15 people would be engaged in a complicated process of mixing pigments with a palette knife to match swatches printed out from Photoshop and then cataloguing and labeling the colors to maintain a consistent palette. “That’s where I finally learned what paint was all about,” says Sauer.

As a painting assistant, Sauer spent her time re-creating the fine details of Koons’s original concept. The illusion that one is viewing a photograph persists at any distance in Koons’s photorealistic style to the point that brushstrokes are invisible even on close inspection; Sauer once spent a full day covering a two-inch square of canvas with thin paint, using a No. 1 synthetic



LEFT: The subject of *Lace in Her Studio* (oil, 30x24) is currently studying cognition as she pursues a doctorate in neuroscience, but previously, as an art student in the master’s program, she drew the series of moons depicted in the background—representing “mental maps of memory.” The chaos of the clutter around her suggests the intensity and breadth of her interests.

Materials

Surfaces: preprimed, cotton duck stretched canvas; oil-primed canvas; preprimed panels mounted on **Gatorboard**, built by artist Casey Childs; linen mounted on **New Traditions** Dibond panels

Brushes: All **Rosemary & Co.** brushes, but especially the No. 2 Ivory Egbert synthetic; **Winsor & Newton** Series 7 No. 1 kolinsky sable for small details; **Silver Brush** or **Trekell** large filbert bristle brushes for block-ins; **Trekell** William Whitaker Signature Series sables, **Escoda** sables, **Da Vinci** synthetics, and **Manet** brushes

Paint: All colors—**Old Holland**, **Vasari**, and **Schmincke** Mussini, plus **Holbein** Vernét Superior artists' oil colors for pigments that "pack a punch"; particular colors—**Gamblin** asphaltum and terre verte (the latter as a glaze for knocking back too-pink facial tones); **Winsor & Newton** titanium white; **Holbein** alizarin crimson; **Natural Pigments** Rublev lead white No. 2 (The walnut-oil base dries more slowly than linseed oil, resulting in a longer open painting time.)

Palette: white, lemon yellow, cadmium yellow medium, cadmium orange, cadmium red, naphthol scarlet, alizarin crimson, dioxazine purple, ultramarine, cobalt blue, sap green, burnt sienna, raw umber, black

Mediums: **Natural Pigments** Rublev Oleogel, **Gamblin** Gamsol, pure linseed oil

Palette knife: **RGM** Black Line Series

Digital tools: **Nikon** D700 DSLR camera, **Sigma** 50 mm f/1.4 HSM lens (most closely approximates the perspective of the human eye); **Sigma** 85 mm f/1.4 HSM lens (The short telephoto lens is good for head shots; the large aperture of the 1.4 f-stop has a shallow depth of field that's useful for isolating the subject from the background.); **Apple** iMac monitor, color-calibrated to simulate natural light

round brush. Her representational style and the manner in which she handles paint may bear only a tangential resemblance to Koons's contemporary take on realism, but the work Sauer did in service to his conceptual vision within a highly successful studio/gallery/showcase environment made her a better painter. New York City, with its burgeoning multitude of galleries and museums and art venues, filled in another chunk of her education where the formal instruction and apprenticeships left off.

Old Masters and New Technology

In the solitude of her own studio, Sauer falls



ABOVE: The subject of *Mary Sinner II* (oil, 48x24) is a fellow artist in Sauer's master of fine arts program; the subject chose to have a baby, though her peers perceived her choice as the end of her career. The bright colors around her mirror the colors in the picture behind her and suggest her optimism and confidence.

back on her early musical training to deconstruct a painting in much the same way that a musician analyzes a score and works out technique in order to perform a composition.

Working With a Color Study

BY MARY SAUER



ABOVE: *Erin Color Study* (oil, 6x4)

Whenever I can, I like to paint a color study to help me understand my process before I go on to create a larger-scale painting. The studies help me with color decisions and edge-quality choices; they free me to experiment on a piece that requires a relatively small amount of time and energy, thus helping me to avoid the “preciousness” that sometimes accompanies the more time-consuming, larger works. I do, however, consider my color studies to be finished paintings, and I show them in galleries.



ABOVE: *Erin* (oil; 40x30)

“Even though my painting techniques are traditional,” she says, “I use a lot of new technology in preparing my compositions. It amazes me that so many artists are adamantly against the use of photography. I think that’s mostly due to a lack of knowledge and skill in the use of quality equipment.”

Digital photography is a useful tool for working out the composition and design in the early stages of painting. “I usually photograph my setup and then design the space digitally to get the best composition and light patterning,” says Sauer. “If I’m painting from life, I’ll reposition the setup based on those digital

calculations, but if my photo reference is of good quality, I may paint the entire piece from my iMac screen, which has been color-calibrated to simulate natural light.” As she paints, Sauer defers to a variety of platforms and digital devices to evaluate her progress: a thumbnail is a useful size for evaluating the composition; a blowup allows her to assess line quality and edge detail, and the site-sized image on an iPhone enables her to identify major corrections. She’s mindful of the fact that an image, even with color calibration, looks different on every digital display. “You can’t expect accurate colors from a low-quality monitor or color



Photography Tips

BY MARY SAUER

You can't expect a good quality reference photo from anything less than a professional camera and portrait lens. My undergraduate professor Richard Hull once told my class that the best portrait painters are also the best portrait photographers; you can only go as far as your reference.

The three camera settings that contribute to the correct exposure in a photograph are shutter speed, f-stop (aperture size), and ISO (the camera's sensitivity to light).

In photography, learning the correct distance from the subject is as important as using the correct camera settings. Having the camera too close to the subject creates distortion; too far away, and the camera can't read details.

print," says Sauer. "If you want to paint from photographs but aren't using good photos and good equipment, then you're setting yourself up to fail before you even begin."

Working From Life

To keep her work from growing stale and looking lifeless, Sauer regularly paints from a model. "I can't stress enough the importance of working from life so that you know what to correct if you're working from a photo reference," says Sauer. "I've spent a lot of time

ABOVE: Inspired by Agnes Martin and James Abbott McNeill Whistler, Sauer worked primarily with white and its variations for *Anna II* (oil, 40x30). The antiseptic grid of shelves, each containing a single object, and the unmanageable stack of books at her bare feet suggest the conflicted compartmentalization of her life.

learning how to make the camera act as my eye would, overcoming problems with distortion, value contrast, color intensity, and atmospheric perspective."

When she works from life, Sauer tones



her canvas with a mixture of raw umber and ultramarine blue thinned with Gamblin Gamsol. When that dries, she mixes a warm, dark value—burnt sienna with a little black and cadmium orange—with turpentine to establish large areas of light and dark

in a grisaille (a monochromatic painting). Once she's satisfied with the overall composition, Sauer wipes paint from the light areas.

As she begins to paint, Sauer uses a mother color, mixing it at a slightly high saturation level at first, then slowly pulling



ABOVE: *Lily* (oil, 14x11) is a 15-hour life study Sauer built up from a grisaille painted with a mixture of burnt sienna and ultramarine blue. To create depth in the shadow areas, she varied the degree of paint opacity, leaving the original semitransparent grisaille to form much of the shadow.

LEFT: Sauer painted *Megan* (oil, 40x30) in a somewhat direct style, without glazing or working over a section after the first coat of paint had dried. “Sometimes,” says Sauer, “I prefer seeing this initial reaction to the subject.”

piles of the color to either the warmer, cooler, lighter, or darker tones as she goes. She paints wet into wet, laying down the facets from dark to light rather than blending values together. Her goal is to get the right color and value the first time. “That’s the freshest way for me to achieve color and buttery brushstrokes,” she says. “Getting it wrong and going back to change something often results in muddy colors and messes up the quality of the brushstrokes, so I wipe off and repaint a whole section rather than noodling one area till it gets worked to death.”

Learning To Simplify

Sauer works form to form in the model’s face, beginning with the forehead and progressing to the light-most facing plane (the area on the form with the lightest value), moving from warm shadow to neutral core shadow to a more saturated light value. She thinks about the form sculpturally, imagining the way it moves back and forth in space, determining which edges disappear and which advance. “I’m continually learning to edit

Meet Mary Sauer

Mary Sauer has a bachelor of fine arts degree in illustration from Brigham Young University (Provo, Utah) and is currently a master of fine arts student at the University of Utah (Salt Lake City), where she also teaches. She’s a 2014 recipient of an Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation Grant. Sauer has exhibited her work in solo and group exhibitions throughout the United States. Her painting



ing *Anna* won the Best in Show award at the 2012 Portrait Society of America International Portrait Competition, and her work has appeared in *International Artist*, *Southwest Art*, and on the cover of *American Art Collector*. Sloane Merrill Gallery, in Boston, represents her work. Sauer lives near Salt Lake City with her husband, David, an operatic tenor, and her dachshund, Cocoa. Visit her website at www.marysauerart.com.

information from what I see in order to simplify my technique,” says Sauer. “I think Sargent was a real master at this. He knew what could be painted loosely and how to do it with the fewest brushstrokes imaginable—to make something seem tightly rendered when viewed from a step back.”

Even as Sauer’s work evolves, as she continues to refine her themes, updating the narrative on her historical influences and tethering traditional techniques to modern technology, there remains one constant: the need to spend time in the studio. “I think that the practice of painting—and making it a rigorous routine in your life—is the best way to improve your work,” she says. “I might have a spurt of enlightenment the day after something genius seemed to happen in my painting, then nothing for several months. My work might not look incredibly different between those few months, but the way I understand what I’m doing will change.” ■

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Mother color: a color one uses in every mixed color in a painting to create harmony and to lend unity to the color and composition