

MASTER ARTIST: SHERRY SANDER • JOSEPH SULKOWSKI • BROOKGREEN GARDENS • DOMESTIC ANIMALS

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The Sporting Art of JOSEPH SULKOWSKI

BY TODD WILKINSON



Season of the Hunt, oil, 60 x 84"

Joseph Sulkowski is, quite simply, one of the brightest painters rising from the milieu of modern sporting art, though if you mention his name, few mainstream collectors have ever seen his original work.

One explanation for Sulkowski's elusiveness is found in this paradox: The inspired American boasts a résumé of influential patrons on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, but for years, his canvases escaped wider public circulation as a result of his own success. Although original "Sulkowskis" hang in mansions and manors from Dallas to Devonshire, the number of his paintings reaching galleries, until only recently, has been minimal because so much of this artist's work was done on private commission.

Sulkowski (born in Pittsburgh in 1951) elevates his subject matter into a realm of pure beauty that resonates on a deeper aesthetic level, whether people find themselves naturally drawn to the lifestyle of going afield or not. There is no better evidence of Sulkowski's appeal than the stir his work has caused in England, a nation in which sporting scenes, as an expression of a quieter past, are treasured as a fine art form.

Paul Green, owner of the Halcyon Group, with galleries in both Birmingham and London, says





From top:
*Katie, Jessica
and Penny*,
oil, 28 x 36"

*Sheep in the
Meadow*,
oil, 20 x 24"

Bassetts,
oil, 22 x 28"

Sulkowski carries on the same tradition in Britain that has earned his stylistic European predecessors a hallowed place in the National Gallery. During a recent one-man exhibition at the Halcyon, Sulkowski's new originals won rave reviews and quickly sold out, forcing Green to create a waiting list for works whose paint has not yet dried.

Halcyon, it should be noted, is the English gallery that launched the career of master African wildlife painter David Shepherd to worldwide renown. The expectations for Sulkowski are similarly high.

"Whatever Joseph paints, be it a bound, a still life or a portrait, there is something much deeper behind the subject matter.

It's not just a simple representation. His thought processes somehow interact with the viewer, creating a magic which is unique to this deep and sensitive man."

— Paul Green

a teen-ager. Soon, he won acceptance to the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, the oldest training ground for fine artists in the United States. The academy, founded by Charles Wilson Peale in 1805, holds historic ties to several noted painters of the Hudson River School, and romantic chroniclers of the American frontier.

From Philadelphia, Sulkowski set out for New York City and studied at the venerable Art Students



League, where he not only came under the tutelage of Frank Mason, but more auspiciously, met his future wife, painter Elizabeth Brandon. He describes the electric energy flowing through the League's



From top:
Look What I Found,
oil, 22 x 28"

Westies and Roses,
oil, 12 x 16"

Zeus, oil, 22 x 28"

studio spaces as "a brotherhood that transcended time and space."

In Sulkowski's case, he was transported back to the dawn of the Renaissance and began slowly marching forward. A believer in the classical tradition of apprenticeship, Sulkowski finds an affinity with American master artist Richard Schmid's assessment of young painters today as not possessing the same foundation of studio instruction, grasp of art history and basic understanding of the chemistry and physics of painting known to previous generations. Early on, Sulkowski paid his dues by refusing to bypass the arduous, often painful regimen of instruction and critique that has become a foreign concept to some post-modernists.

If anyone is owed credit for Sulkowski's discipline, it is Mason, whom some have described as America's foremost authority on the Old Masters. "He [Mason] always went by Rembrandt's philosophy, which is that the greatest painters were the ones who knew the most, and the more you know the better you are able to express yourself," Sulkowski says.

Mason taught his young apprentice the importance of draftsmanship and anatomy, the secrets involved with preparing canvases, and the methods of making paint pigments from scratch using powdered plants and minerals.

Sulkowski subsequently developed a technique that today sets his paintings apart — a process of glazing the surfaces, giving them an uncommon luminosity and a richer projection of color. "He is a Renaissance man and he captures a quality in his paintings that, in our time, is rare," says Jack Appel-

man, founder and president of Applejack Art Partners in Manchester Center, Vt.

During his years as a student, Sulkowski completed numerous studies of domestic animals. Some of these, in particular, portraits of Arabian horses, landed him his first big break. After graduating from the League, both he and his twin brother, James (also a gifted painter), were awarded a commission from the Saudi Arabian government to paint two murals portraying Saudi history. The experience left an impression on him.

"That commission did a couple of things," Sulkowski says. "It put some very badly needed money in my pocket — Elizabeth and I were just newlyweds. But more importantly, it gave me credibility to put out a shingle." Fortunately, all the advertising Sulkowski needed came by word of mouth. The first recommendations led to portrait work of people, who eventually asked him to paint them riding their horses. Ultimately, this led to a flood of commissions painting patrons' favorite hunting dogs and equine scenes in the European style.

In both the United States and Britain, Sulkowski has found his talent to be in high demand among



Thoroughbred owners involved with the training and breeding of racehorses in the most prestigious derbies. "I like the little things you don't usually see painted, the dramatic moments that go unnoticed," he says. "Painting horses racing down the stretch is a total bore. I'm interested in the subtleties, maybe something that is happening in the paddock or before the riders reach the track — the psychological elements. I like to paint a scene that you can get your mind into, and shy away from the pageantry."

Sulkowski's vision has been described as "poetic realism," but his language of representation is not literal, at least in the sense that photo-realism has subsumed the definition. "Robert Bly says great poetry expresses the metaphor and I aspire to be a poet," Sulkowski notes. "The dialogue I hope to establish isn't literal. As a painter, you create a mood and emotion. You inform the viewer how the information present in nature affected you in getting the message across."

Just as Sulkowski does not aspire to replicate precise detail in a given scene, his portraits aim not for the exact markings of a pet as much as conveying the animal's personality through body language.

For centuries, landscape Impressionists have painted portraits on the side to help support themselves. To maintain their integrity, they'd produce canvases that transcended the subject. "[John Singer] Sargent did that with his portraits," Sulkowski says. "I remember walking down 57th Street in New York and seeing a Sargent portrait in a gallery window. He often didn't care who the person was posing in front of him. Foremost in his mind was simply producing a great piece of art."

Sulkowski cites as influences the great English, Flemish and Dutch artists, chiefly Peter Paul Rubens. With his fly-fishing landscapes, one cannot escape



Top:
Prince Charming,
oil, 12 x 9"

Below:
*Chairman of
the Board*,
oil, 30 x 40"

an inference to British painter Sir Thomas Gainsborough, and in his dog and equine canvases, the artist tips his hat to Sir Alfred Munnings, the master of British foxhunts and racehorse portraiture.

While discussing specific works, the artist explains *Foxhounds in the Kennel*, a painting, that blends his fascination with foxhunting and the stars of the activity, the hounds. In this elegant work, he finds a wellspring of elements to work with.

"Foxhounds are a favorite subject for me," Sulkowski says. "I continually return to paint them, sometimes as a single character study or en masse, as in this painting, lazing around the kennel." Using the hounds as a vehicle for examining light, shadow and value, he triumphs over age-old artistic challenges.

"I was actually inspired by Rembrandt's technique of his later period of the 1660s, where brilliant glowing masses of light melt smokily into the deep transparent washes of chiaroscuro or shadow," he offers. "The heavy impastos in the illuminated areas ultimately give way to a counterpoint of luminous black masses on the left side of the canvas, pushing the scene into a tour-de-force of contrasting values." The limited palette of blacks, umbers and ochers, he adds, is offset by tiny, but pure, touches of vermilion and cobalt blue in the transition planes of the figures.

Under a novel working arrangement, the Halcyon Group owns rights to sell all of Sulkowski's originals; meanwhile, Applejack has secured the rights to view those works as they come off the





Top:
*Foxbounds in
the Kennel,*
oil, 40 x 50"


Below:
English Setters,
oil, 40 x 30"

artist's easel and to reproduce them in print form. While Appelman says that giclées are the reproduction medium that delivers the truest fidelity to Sulkowski's originals, his limited edition lithographs are in great demand as decorative pieces in homes and offices.

"Besides the masters, there's another tremendous influence on Joseph's painting and it's someone who lives with him every day, his wife, Elizabeth Brandon," says Appelman, who also has her under contract. Brandon's forte is still life, and, like her husband, she brings a highly evolved wisdom to her work.

"To have such an intimate sounding board and soul mate who is that gifted critiquing your work on a regular basis — as Sulkowski and Brandon have in each other — only solidifies the high standards they have imposed on themselves," Appelman notes.

For Sulkowski, his is a never ending journey in which he continues to steer himself away from the heavily trodden path of contemporary nature painters who have embraced animals as convenient post-modern commercial icons instead of as artistic connections to the past.

"Life is 10,000 joys and 10,000 sorrows," says Sulkowski. "What appeals to me is the life found between those extremes because that is where life is lived." 

Todd Wilkinson, an accomplished author and a longtime contributor to Wildlife Art lives in Bozeman, Mont.

Images courtesy of the artist

