Elizabeth Barlow  California, USA, Portrait of a Glamazon, oil 24 x 30" (61 x 76 cm)

Finalist

My Inspiration
Inspired by the portraiture tradition, but working in the still life genre, I use objects, often shoes (rather than faces), to explore the human experience. I call these paintings “portraits in absentia.” I am interested in illumining and celebrating the lives that have touched these objects. In Portrait of a Glamazon, I created a portrait of a woman I know by painting her shoes. She is tall, glamorous and has an exuberant love of life. I selected shoes from her closet that are as expressive and vital as she is.

My Design Strategy
In the tradition of my heroes Vermeer and Zurbaran, I use light to create drama and presence. I place my subjects under a dramatic light source, as if they are under a “follow light” on a theater stage. The composition part of my process is the most important part of every painting. I spend days arranging the objects and working with the angle and quality of the light. I know when the composition and lighting are “right” when I experience a frisson (a wonderful French word meaning “an inward shiver of excitement”) when looking at the composition. At this point, I take many photographs with different exposures. People often ask why I don’t paint from life—and the answer is really just one of mechanics. Since my compositions always have dramatic light and deep shadows—and often have an aerial vantage point—it’s simply more comfortable to work at my easel with photographs as reference.

My Working Process
I use multiple photographs of my composition as reference while painting. My first step is a graphite drawing on the linen canvas (oil primed). Once I’m satisfied with the drawing, I do an initial layer using paint thinned with a little Turpenoid. If necessary, I will make a few adjustments in the composition at this point. Next is the most delicious part for me—where I paint layer after layer to create luminosity, drama and sensuality. I am still amazed when I add a glaze to a particular passage in the painting and it suddenly “sings” back to me. That is joy!

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