

PAINTER TODD MESSEGE

LIGHTING *a* STORY





BY MARY AWOSIKA

Storytelling is at the core of the art Todd Messeguee creates. Each brushstroke contributes to the larger story he's trying to tell.

Whether it's an oil painting of a bowl of fruit, a photograph of wooden toys or a charcoal sketch of a nude woman, the image must convey a story. It's not just a still life painting, but rather a scene within a storyline. "Still life is like meditation—mentally taxing," he says.

To accomplish his desire for presenting a continuous narrative, the Fairfax Station resident opts to paint in series. His mission: to take viewers on a journey.

Working into the wee hours of the night, Todd is in the middle of his robot series inspired



TODD MESSEGEE

by a vintage tin toy robot from the 1950s. At the center of each piece is a larger-than-life metal robot that boldly jumps off the canvas. Kicking off the series is "American Gothbot," Todd's interpretation of Grant Wood's "American Gothic."

"It's challenging because all elements are imagined," he says. From the looks of a couple of unfinished pieces, his imagination is thrilled with the theme. Two pieces will be showcased this month at the 2008 George Mason University Festival of the Arts—a pinup damsel in distress being saved by the robot hero and a monster robot exploding out of a box only to scare away the children at play.

While observing Todd's quick movements and listening to his energetic conversation, one might assume he's a free spirit accustomed to creating fanciful illustrative stories from his daydreams. He has always leaned toward

the surreal in his art, but only recently has he begun to see his work in color.

For the past 20 years, Todd has envisioned his art in hues of black and white, specifically through the lens of his camera as a professional photographer in Los Angeles, where he settled for 15 years following graduation from the Rhode Island School of Design and a stint working in New York City's commercial photography scene. While living on the west coast, he pursued his master's degree in fine art at the California Institute of the Arts.

Todd's awareness for detail and crafting a magical story was enhanced when he worked as a freelancer for the Team Imagineering at Disneyland in Los Angeles. There he restored paintings for special projects on deadline, with restrictions that continue to influence how he works today.

"RED, RED, GREEN," OIL ON PANEL, 16" X 13"



Although painting has always played a fundamental role in his life, Todd has never taken a formal painting course. He learned by osmosis, growing up in a household of artists. His parents' hobbies include carpentry, drawing and painting. Of their three children, Todd is the only one who followed his creative heart.

Three years ago he returned to his childhood home in Fairfax County to start a family with his wife Lisa. He took a teaching position in the art department on the Manassas Campus of the Northern Virginia Community College and established a portrait photography business.

A pivotal moment came in 2005 as he sketched the setup for a photo shoot in his at-home studio. After abandoning the photograph altogether, he transformed the sketch into a oil-on-canvas still life called "The Rich Man Talks of Treasure While the Poet Sings of Love." This breakthrough piece brought Todd full-speed into a world of color.

His first still life series, *100 Pieces of Fruit*, soon followed. This ambitious project required him to create a five-by-seven-inch oil-on-linen painting every day for 100 days.

"It didn't feel natural at first, but it's so beautiful," says Todd, referring to the luminescence of oil paint. "It's very seductive."





Todd's newfound obsession with color was magnified by his intrigue with the process of creating a story through light. He views light in a painting the same way he approaches lighting a photograph. Lighting is the thread that connects all media, because it helps tell the story.

Although he knows how to light a tin can or a wooden fixture perfectly for the purposes of film, he finds it more complex to obtain a true understanding of light and dark in a painting. The intricacies of light is a point he stresses to his students.

"It has to rise above technique," Todd says. "Art is not simply an academic exercise."

He admires such artists as Carlos Schwabe and John Singer Sargent, whose every brushstroke created a tangible emotional experience. Revealing yet another aspect of his artistic complexity, Todd compares his role as a painter to that of a gifted dancer who knows

how to incorporate exquisite technique and sell it with feeling during a performance.

To push his aptitude with still lifes, Todd recently challenged himself to paint a series of bird's nests. He says he is intrigued by the layers of sticks and contrasting light he'll have to navigate with each painting.

"Your work must function on several levels, in the draftsmanship, the craftsmanship and the narrative storytelling," he says. "It's up to the painter to decide how far to go... It could be a never-ending rabbit hole."

For more information about his work, contact Todd at tlsaint@aol.com.

FACING PAGE, TOP: "RICH MAN POOR MAN," OIL ON CANVAS, 30" X 20"; AND "AMERICAN GOTHBOT," OIL ON CANVAS, 28" X 22"; THIS PAGE: "OFFERINGS," OIL ON PANEL, 24" X 24"