



# A Beautiful Mess

Manipulating perspective to reveal the artist's view defines **Mel Leipzig's** signature style.

By Amy Leibrock

In Mel Leipzig's portraits, floors are tilted, surfaces are messy and backgrounds are chockablock with books or artwork. In some pieces, he manages to defy reality by painting all four walls of a room.

This twisted, skewed perspective is the 61-year-old artist's signature, as is his knack for painting detailed environments that reveal his subjects' personalities in an authentic way. "I'm interested in what people look like and who they are," says Leipzig.

His singular style and a prolific output have earned Leipzig an esteemed reputation. His paintings are in collections at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the National Academy Museum, the Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum and The White House Collection. Now retired from teaching, he was a beloved art professor at Mercer County Community College in Trenton, N.J., for 45 years.

*The Ibsen Bust, Paul Field's, Orleans* (acrylic on canvas, 48x48) is an example of Leipzig's extreme perspective, as well as his use of white and shadows to control the space.





Leipzig's daughter's family is the subject of *Leonardo's Family* (above; acrylic on canvas, 54x72). "My daughter says that's why I had children—so I could paint them," the artist reveals.

Retirement has not slowed Leipzig's art making. He's working on a series with the New Jersey State Council on the Arts, as well as portraits of graffiti artists in the Trenton area. He's an artist in residence at a local high school, he curates museum shows and has an upcoming solo show at The Art Complex Museum in Duxbury, Mass.

"It's wonderful to be an artist," says Leipzig. "I just paint every day, and I'm still learning things about painting."

#### Mind-Bending Perspective

The figures in Leipzig's paintings are always people who mean something to him. His wife, children, students and friends were regular subjects until the mid-1990s when he branched out to painting series of artists, teachers, actors and religious leaders in their own environments.

When asked to describe a specific painting, it's clear from the energy in his voice that a desire

to capture and communicate what he loves about certain people drives his creative output. Leipzig paraphrases Henri Matisse to explain his passion for painting: "[Making] art relieves you of the excitement that you have in you for this thing."

As Leipzig translates that excitement to the canvas, it often manifests as a warped perspective so he can fit everything that intoxicates him about a room into a scene. "I'm looking in all directions. I think that's the hyper part of my nature," he says. "It's just something I've done since I was young."

"Let's say I'm standing in the corner of a four-walled room. I can look to the right of me and paint that in one perspective and look to the left and paint the other perspective. I'm therefore literally destroying the fourth wall. I'm making believe that there's a fifth wall behind me," explains Leipzig.

An extreme example of Leipzig's panoramic vision is in *The Ibsen Bust, Paul Fjelde's, Orleans*



*Portrait of a Marriage* (above; acrylic on canvas, 54x63) depicts artists and spouses Robert Bunkin and Jenny Tango in their home. "It has a slightly skewed perspective because I kept looking all over the place. The room excited me," says Leipzig.

(page 24). The story behind the family, their friends and the sculptures around the room meant a great deal to Leipzig, but fitting everything into a cohesive painting was admittedly a struggle. He thought the painting was finished in 2011, but he continued making changes up until 2016. An oversize rocking chair in the middle of the room helps ground the scene. "You have to make the space convincing so it holds together even though you're sort of cracking it," he says.

Leipzig likes to point out that there's no rule saying you can't use several vanishing points in a painting. "If you're painting from life, you're not standing looking one way. Your head turns to the

right, it turns to the left, it turns up," he says. "It can be difficult to solve, but that's part of the fun of it."

#### A Realist Rebel

Leipzig didn't always feel celebrated for his point of view. Born in Brooklyn in 1935, he knew he wanted to be a painter when he was 5 years old even though his parents wished for him to become a rabbi. He studied art in the 1950s at The Cooper Union and Yale University under famous artists, like Josef Albers, when Abstract Expressionism ruled art circles and realism was scoffed at.

"I didn't want to do [abstract] painting, but they didn't allow me to do what I'm doing now at

"It's wonderful to be an artist. I just paint every day, and I'm still learning things about painting." —MEL LEIPZIG





For *The Cast of Hedda Gabler* (above; acrylic on canvas, 60x72), Leipzig painted the main actress, then sketched the rest of the actors in relationship to her and to the architecture.

"There's a very strange perspective at work that's all his," said sculptor Jonathan Shahn, the subject in *Jonathan Shahn* (opposite; acrylic on canvas, 54x72), in a PBS documentary about Leipzig.

school," says Leipzig. "I was going through a type of aesthetic hell, really. I would start paintings and couldn't finish them."

Facing criticism from teachers for wanting to explore a realistic style, he stubbornly learned to trust his instincts and forged ahead as a realist painter in an abstract world.

### Refining a Process

Leipzig's methods have evolved over the decades. He used to sketch out a background setting, paint it, and then add the figure last. Now he just jumps right into painting, starting with the subject's eye, and building the rest of the figure around it. "I try to individualize the figure to make it look as much like the subject as possible," he said in a 2013 PBS documentary about his work.

Leipzig has learned to paint fast because his subjects, who are never professional models, don't sit still very well, and he only paints from life. Once he has the figure right, he relieves his subject and moves on to the rest of the painting. "At this point, relate the figure with some loose lines to the rest of the objects in the room, or the rest of the figures," he says.

As he works, Leipzig likes to put down base colors and work darks and lights into them, similar to how Édouard Manet, one of his major influences worked. His fast pace is suited for acrylic. The quick drying time of the paint means he won't smudge his large canvases as he carts them around town in his van. Even so, he always encouraged his students to try both oil and acrylic, or even colored pencils, to find what best suited their work.



### Controlling Color

Leipzig's use of color has also changed somewhat over the years. He's always worked from a limited palette, but in the early 1990s, he went from using 8 to 12 colors down to just 5. Today, he squeezes only Golden's naphthol red light, Hanson yellow medium, cobalt blue, titanium white and carbon black onto his palette. "It limits the certain types of colors you can get, but I love it. It's fun. It also harmonizes the paintings rather easily," he says.

For years he mixed red and blue to get a dark purplish-black, but he recently added black back into his palette at the suggestion of a friend. "At first I was resistant. But I love it," he confesses. "The way you use darks is unbelievably important. I was never taught that in school. Matisse makes good use of black. Picasso also used a great deal of black."

### Toolkit

**BRUSHES:** nylon brushes for acrylic paints

**CANVAS:** pre-stretched cotton canvas from Jerry's Artarama or Utrecht canvases from Blick

**COLORS:** carbon black, cobalt blue, Hanson yellow medium, naphthol red light and titanium white

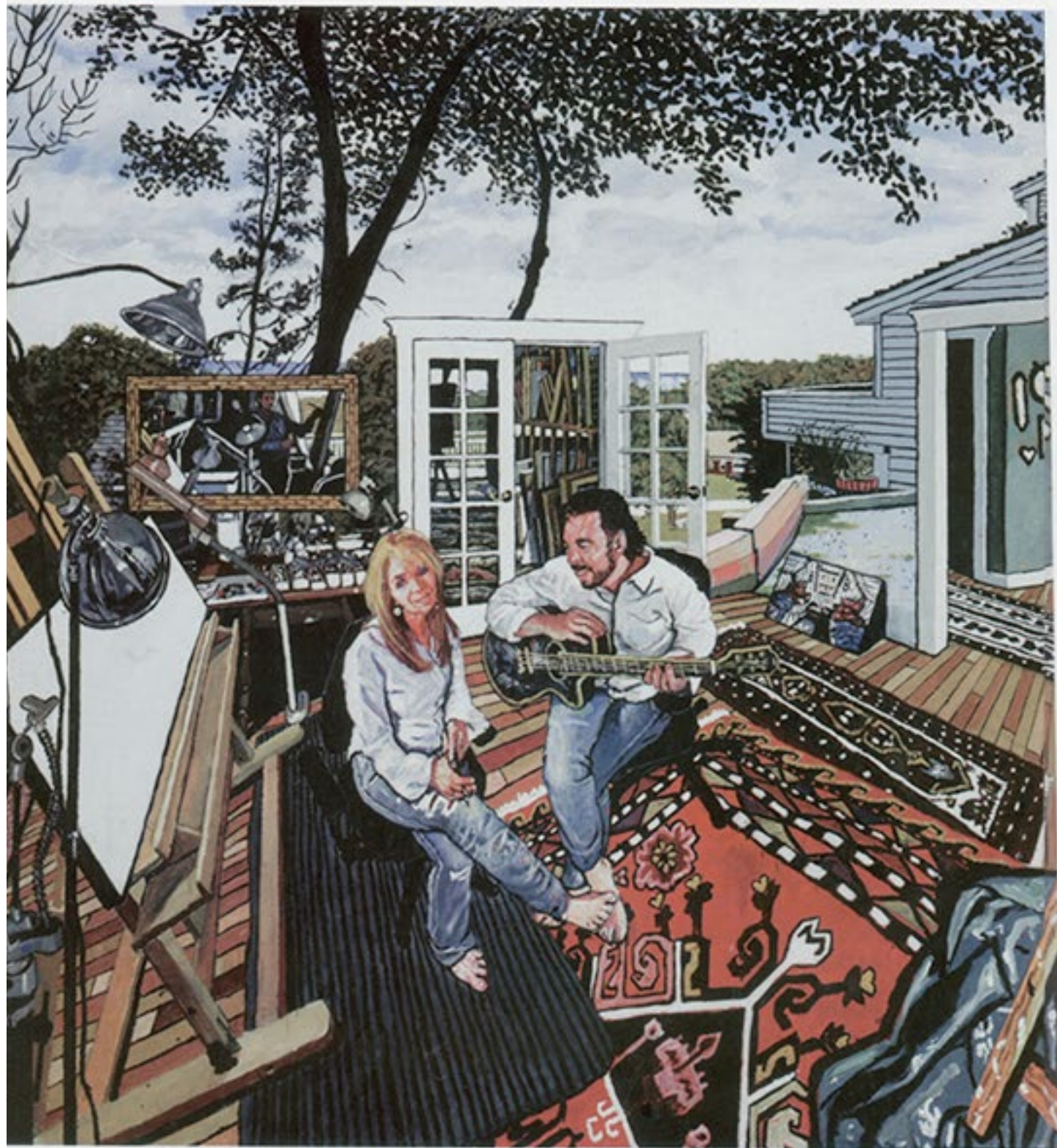
**EASEL:** portable wooden easels

**MARK-MAKING TOOLS:** brushes and pencils

**PAINTS:** Golden products

**PALETTE:** a plastic, cafeteria-type serving tray with a raised lip, and a second one placed over the top of it to preserve the paint





**Laura and Bill: The Wedding Painting** (above; acrylic on canvas, 36x36) is the first painting Leipzig played with getting rid of walls while still making it feel like the subjects are in a room.

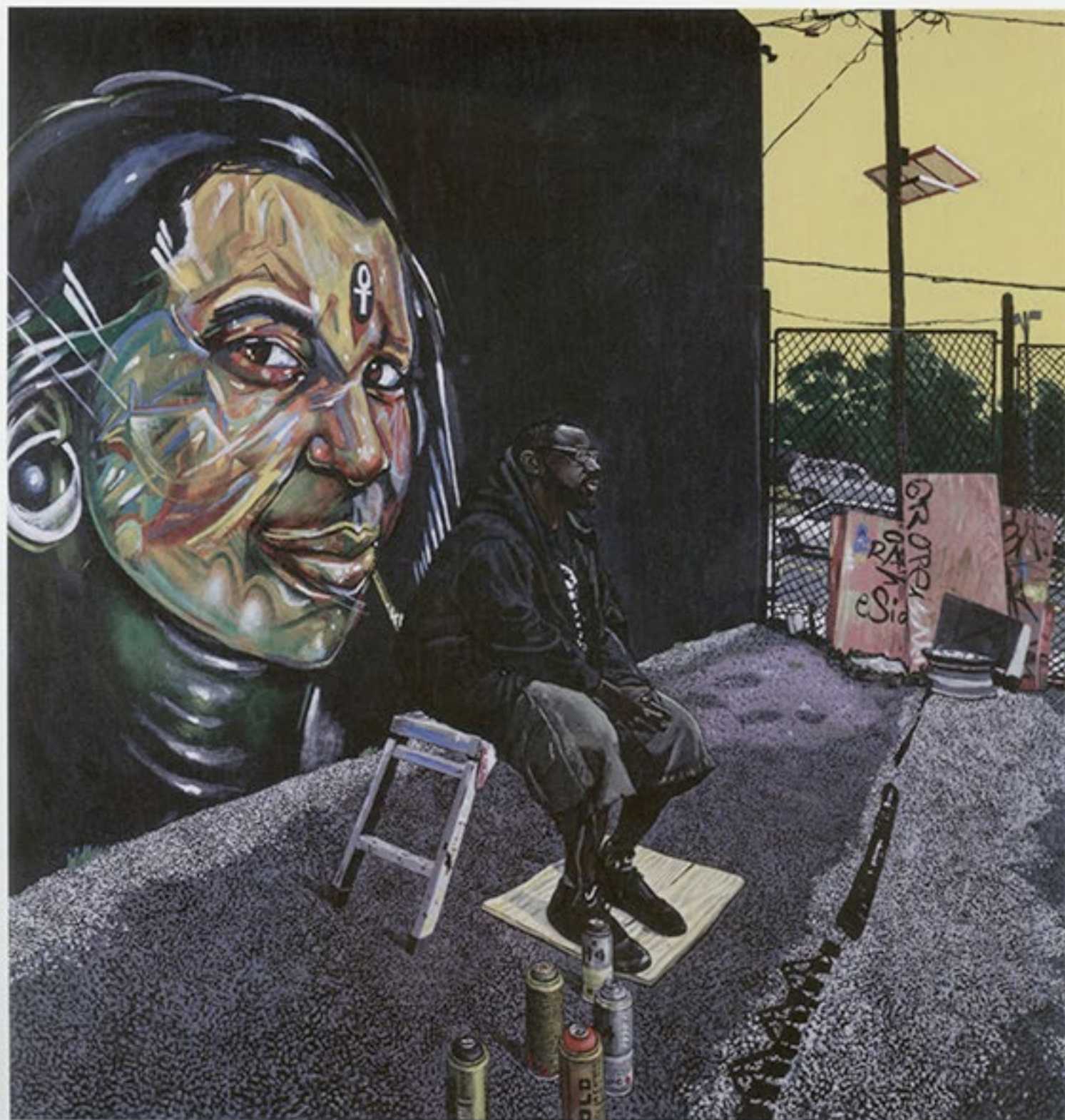
Leipzig's use of pure white is another "rule" broken. "I have met so many artists who were told never to use pure white in a painting," he says. He likes using pure white to create strong contrast at important focal points so the viewer can find focus in his often-cluttered scenes.

Leipzig calls light essential to a painting, but rather than try to capture the exact lighting of the situation he manipulates light and casts shadows

to control space. "One of the qualities of the cast shadow is that it can obliterate the color of the thing it's cast on. On a sunny day with strong shadows, it can be black," he explains. "If I'm messing with the perspective, I still want it to look like you could walk into the painting. Light is very good for that."

#### The Most Valuable Lesson

Leipzig's style may look consistent, but he's far



from stuck in his ways. Recently, he's been experimenting with using blocks of brilliant color for walls or skies, like the yellow sky in *Will Kasso* (above). He's been enlivened, too, by new connections he's made in the graffiti art community.

Recently, Dean Innocenzi, a graffiti artist and former student of Leipzig's, demonstrated the love that the Trenton art community feels for the octogenarian artist in a big way. He painted Leipzig's

picture on the wall of TerraCycle, a Trenton business that allows graffiti artists to use it as a rotating canvas. It was a surprise homage for Leipzig. "I went there one day to work on another painting," he said. "I parked my van and [saw the mural] and said, my God, it's me! I really love it, because I'm in contact with the young."

Innocenzi's mural shows that the most valuable lesson Leipzig passed down to the hundreds

Leipzig painted a Trenton graffiti artist under a bright yellow sky in *Will Kasso* (above; acrylic on canvas, 48x48). "That's what I'm doing now," he says. "It's getting me into mixing areas of brilliant color with the realist painting."





of students he taught over the years was not how to paint figures or distort perspective. Rather, it was how he encouraged them to nurture the artists within themselves.

*Peer Gynt, Act II* (above; acrylic on canvas, 48x48) is from a play by Henrik Ibsen. "I read an Ibsen play when I was 13, became hooked and it's lasted all my life," says Leipzig.

When Leipzig saw a mural of Andy Warhol images on a wall in Trenton he had to paint it. Soon after he created *Trenton Graffiti Artist's Homage to Warhol* (opposite, top; acrylic on canvas, 48x60).

"If you're becoming an artist, you should do something that relates to something inside you," Leipzig says. "You have to go through a lot of heartache, and it's not easy. But you've got a lot of innate things in you that can do extraordinary things. You just have to stick with it." /ai

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PHOTO BY FRANCESCA LEIPZIG PICONE

## Behind the Paint: Mel Leipzig

**LATEST ACCOMPLISHMENTS:** I've been continually working on several series of paintings featuring artists in their studios, my family, students, teachers and administrators at Lawrenceville High School in New Jersey.

**NEXT GOAL:** I'm 81 years old and I'd like to do a book on my work, and I'd also like to have a comprehensive retrospective of my art. In 1998 I had a retrospective at the New Jersey State Museum in Trenton.

**BEST ADVICE RECEIVED:** The Pratt Institute in Brooklyn was the first school with teachers wanting to help me paint the way I wanted to paint. The late Ralph Wickiser (1910-1998), then the head of the art department, gave me a half-hour talk on mixing color to achieve harmony. That was an astounding revelation to me and made it possible for me to develop the type of painting I wanted to do. I'm truly grateful to him.

**BEST ADVICE TO GIVE:** Stick to your own concept of how you should paint—you know it instinctively. Be it abstraction, realism or whatever, it must come from within you, and you must work at it. Creative work is a high form of pleasure, but it can, as every artist knows, often entail self-doubt and anxiety. When you work through all of that, you'll succeed at your art.

**FAVORITE QUOTE:** Learn to tell light apart from vapor; living is an art.  
—Act I, *Brand*, by Ibsen

**QUESTION:** Re-reading Ibsen's plays and *Manet, A Retrospective* by Theresa Ann Gronberg

Work can be a high form of pleasure. Painting is a life-giving activity.—ML