

CLASSICAL PAINTING, CONTEMPORARY PAINTER: LACEY LEWIS

by Barbara Boynton

Like a polestar throughout her career, the human body has consistently been the driving force and object of Lacey Lewis' talent. Either while carefully mapping her best friend's portrait after school, discovering unparalleled joy coloring within the lines, or borrowing her mother's makeup and bingo markers to add that special touch to her drawings, the younger Lewis found a passion for art that continues to inspire and challenge her today.

Lewis earned an associate of arts degree from Onondaga Community College in Syracuse, New York, where she was urged to expand from a purely realistic style to more abstract or contemporary one. Lewis, however, preferred the representational style, which she strove to perfect, and she began to take a strong interest in classical works from the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. She committed herself to achieving her personal artistic goals, researching and learning from traditional oil-painting methods. After mastering the techniques necessary to produce realistic portraiture and figurative studies, Lewis was free to explore concepts and narrative stories in her work.

Upon entering Lewis' studio, I searched in vain for the trademark paint drips of a busy artist on the leopard-print rug. I expected to see murky, paint-stained cups cluttering a table or brushes in various sizes, their handles speckled with chipping paint, but I found that Lacey Lewis' studio looked exactly like what it was — a living room. Mixed amid the inviting sofa and ordinary computer desk, though, were signs that this room is a serious studio where Lewis makes serious work. At the time, she was preparing for a June exhibition at the Hilliard Gallery in Kansas City, Missouri. A noticeably half-completed *Ophelia* painting hung on the wall, stored out of the way and ready for the next day's progress. Clean white carts were neatly rolled under a desk, concealing the tools of the trade. Small canvases with lone female figures, their bodies nude and vulnerabilities exposed, were hidden around the space, revealing the growth which has brought Lewis to her exciting current bodies of work.

After only a few moments of talking with this Kansas City, Missouri, transplant, I found her tidy studio habits



Lacey Lewis with her paintings (left) *Venus*, oil on panel, 18" x 36" and (right) *Visceral*, oil on canvas, 24" x 18". All images courtesy of the artist

made perfect sense. Her studio's cleanliness is not only a result of her charming personality, but also her painting style. In Lewis' work, there is no room for paint splotches, only well-planned strokes of smooth color that create the pearlescent skin tones and minute details of each piece. The modest scale of her paintings helps the artist maintain her controlled movements, as they require a steady hand.

Lewis is a figurative realist painter, who skillfully delivers a mix of contemporary issues and historical influence. She is inspired by old masters, world history, and literature, as well as personal life experiences and strongly feminist beliefs. Lewis communicates the pinnacle of the human experience through scenes of high psychological drama. Previous works focus on capturing emotionally charged themes, drawing inspiration from topics as varied as Japanese ritual suicide and Shakespearian works.

Our culture's tendency to over-sexualize women — or any nudity — annoys Lewis, who has long been interested in human emotion, sexuality, and people's relationships with their bodies. She continues her exploration of social and psychological issues affecting women through a series of nudes. The paintings' style allows the viewer to look past the flawless, objectified nude to discover the substantial message of the work. For example, a piece entitled *Nautilus* shows a nude woman with legs curled and head tucked, a graceful body perfectly formed facing away from the viewer. The painting, Lewis says, is about being "strong enough to own that sexuality and control it, instead of other people controlling whether or not you're being sexual," as well as wanting to escape from being seen as a sexual object. She adds that in her teen years that idea was completely lost on her — that you could decide when and with whom you were sexual.

From the traditional painting style, to the characters represented in many of her paintings, Lewis offers tokens of the past to new viewers. A painting entitled *Judith and the Head of Holofernes* features a young woman wearing a modern, red strapless gown standing

arched framing of Millais' work. Continuing the visual parody is the similar placement of Ophelia's hands.

The online museum Art Renewal Center brings attention to traditional methods and provides resources for

When teaching private painting lessons, Lewis integrates many of these methods, passing a timeline of knowledge to others with similar desires of honing their skills. Her current students range from 8 to 36 years old, most learning for personal enjoyment and



Left to right: *Reflection*, oil on canvas, 36" x 18"; *Nautilus*, oil on panel, 14" x 11"; *Insecurity*, oil on canvas, 40" x 30"; *Ophelia*, oil on canvas, 36" x 24"

in a gesture of complete dominance, proudly stepping on the head of the fallen Assyrian general. Based on the biblical account of the widow who saves her people, the scene was a popular subject covered by Renaissance and Baroque artists including Artemisia Gentileschi and (Michelangelo Merisi da) Caravaggio. Unlike the representations of Judith in the act of beheading Holofernes, as many previous artists depict, where the moment is captured at the height of violence, or even the pause Gentileschi presented, Lewis' reveals the emotion of victory that Judith experiences upon completion of her task.

Lewis frequently integrates contemporary twists in her work. One of the artist's favorite paintings, John Everett Millais' 1852 *Ophelia*, has inspired her *Ophelia*. "Obviously, Ophelia didn't really drown in a bathtub," Lewis says, as she points out the rounded rim of a porcelain tub in the painting, comparing it with the

those who crave the classical. Many people feel, as Lewis does, that realism is a style that is largely being overlooked by colleges and universities. This tendency has led to greater enrollment in schools like National Academy School of Fine Arts in New York City, Lyme Academy College of Fine Arts in Connecticut, and Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia — the latter of which shares a rich history graced by art celebrities such as Charles Willson Peale, William Rush, and Thomas Eakins. These schools' programs implement the teaching techniques of the French Academy, Italian, or Eastern European methods. Many continue to teach in an atelier style, a French word for "artist's studio" and referring to a teaching method with European roots, popular from the 15th through 19th centuries: a small group of students are taught by a master and work through levels of training, obtaining the desired skills at each stage.

fulfillment. Lewis has most recently started teaching at the Carnegie Arts Center in Leavenworth, Kansas, where she will have an exhibition in September 2008. Besides teaching beginner classes to three different age groups, Lewis plans to hold workshops for advanced students who already have an established foundation in art.

Although this artist is working to preserve the traditions of the past, she is moving her career and skill forward. In addition to featuring more male subjects who will meet dissimilar fates to Holofernes', Lewis will concentrate her talents on expanding her narrative paintings and opening a studio in Kansas City, Kansas •

More of Lewis' work can be viewed at www.lacey-lewis.com.

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