



G E O F F R E Y S T E I N

A B S T R A C T I O N A N D R E A L I S M

After working as a lawyer for twelve years, American painter Geoffrey Stein got back into art and started painting full-time thanks to his wife. Shared between work done from life and photographic references, he is documenting what needs to be shown and what does not through this tension between abstraction and realism he is interested in and collages. We spoke with him about his works and paintings' techniques.

Tell us about your background.

I have always made art. I made wood and metal sculptures as a kid, worked as a photographer for the local newspaper in high school, and briefly studied product design at Parsons. After graduating from Bard College, and looking for a job in New York during the recession of 1982, I fled to law school. But there has always been a tension between the creative visual impulse and the more linear verbal worlds of law and business.

How and when did you decide to be a painter?

I was a reinsurance litigator for twelve years. During that time, I failed to combine art with practicing law. In 1999, my wife heard me complaining, again, about being a lawyer. We don't have kids, and she said "If you want to paint, go paint. But if you don't, you can never complain about being a lawyer again". So, thanks to a little tough love, in February 2000 I quit my law job and started painting full-time at the New York Studio School.



Did your studies at the Slade School of Fine Arts in London influence your work? What are the most important lessons you learnt there?

The Slade was great. When I was working on my MFA, from 2005 to 2007, the Slade was one of the few graduate schools that had a 'life room' with models available for students. There is a British figure painting tradition that goes back to the founding of the Slade that emphasizes working from life. From Tonks to Coldstream to Uglow, to my tutors Paul Richards and Jo Volley, the Slade has always provided models for students to paint. I was one of the few graduate students working like that. As such, the Slade forced me to articulate why I wanted to paint from life (often seen as an old-fashioned notion in modern art schools). This was very helpful after I finished my degree and returned to New York to paint, because so much of the art world takes a dim view at figurative work done from life.

According to you, (if they exist) what are the differences between your older work and the pieces you create nowadays?

My older work, from 2000 to 2009, was all done from life. In 2009, I began working from photographic references as well as from life, when possible. I have maintained this practice to date.

Any other painter you admire for their work?

I try to look at everyone from Rembrandt to Alex Katz, mid-career Richard Diebenkorn, Lucian Freud, Euan Uglow, Jenny Saville, Alyssa Monks and Michelle Doll. Jenny Saville has been a particularly important influence. I remember first seeing her painting *Fulcrum* in Soho in the 1990s. The painting felt bigger than the gallery space. The huge figures were made up of chunks of paint. Beautiful, powerful pieces of colour. This was a new way to paint a figure. I was blown away.



Walk us through one of your days in your studio. How does the process of your work come about?

On a typical day, I go to the gym and do errands in the morning. After that, I go to my studio, which is located in the last two blocks of the Garment District in New York City. The first thing I do in the studio is look at the painting I am working on as I drink my coffee. I tend to work on one or two pieces at a time. My painting wall runs the length of the studio. It is where I paint and hang any work I am uncertain about. There are also clippings from magazines and photographs of work by artists I am interested in. I spend a lot of time looking at my work in progress and thinking about whether it is done or what my next move is. The radio is on with news programs from National Public Radio most of the

time I am in my studio.

I usually eat lunch late in the afternoon. While I eat, I check my e-mail and post images of my work to Facebook and Instagram. In the studio, I am very focused on not getting sucked into the black hole of social media. I usually work until 7 or 8 pm, staring at the work in progress, putting pigment or collage on the canvas. At the end of each day, I take a photo of the day's progress with my phone and send the image to my laptop. I store the progress photos in files for each painting, which allows me to see how the work is progressing and whether I made a wrong turn. For my last show of large collage portraits, we made GIFs of each collage being made from those photos.

I am incredibly fortunate to have a supportive spouse, who has supported my leaving law in 2000 and painting full-time. It is her support that allows me to have the opportunity to spend my time painting. How would you describe this tension between abstraction and realism you are interested in?

For me, the tension between abstraction and realism involves questions including: how much detail do you need to put into a work so that the subject can be identified? How much can you leave out to make a composition work? What needs to be shown and what does not? I love the messy mid-career Diebenkorn's mixed media drawings. He shows and he hides: the ink and paint flow into one another. This also applies to collage. Up close, the eye (and brain) see the text, the words, the pictures. But in the distance the collage becomes tone, a palette to build a form with. But even in the distance the unconscious sees the text in the collaged tone.



Tell us about your last exhibition, entitled Kings and Queens of Late Night, at the Lionheart Gallery in Pound Ridge in New York.

Kings and Queens of Late Night was a show of large-scale collage portraits of late night television hosts. It was also the first show I'd ever painted for; in the past I would gather what I'd painted, and a theme would emerge.

Since my 2009 Irrational Exuberance, which depicted players in the financial crisis, I have been using materials from the subject's world to create their likeness. This is a modern take on the renaissance tradition of putting objects into a portrait to illustrate the attributes of the subject – for example, books to show the subject was educated, a dog to show loyalty or furs to show wealth. For Jon Stewart, I used collage material from the 9/11 responders' act he championed; Amy Schumer was done with her cousin Senator Chuck Schumer's gun control bill; Jimmy Fallon was done with thank you cards to reference his 'Thank You Notes' segment, and John Oliver was done with the London tube map and USA Today because he's so British.

What is the main message you want to share through your art?

I paint to find out what I think about the world; to discover the things I do not have words for. I savour the slips of the hand that express one's unconscious feelings about the person being painted. I am interested in the tension between abstraction and realism. I do not want to make an academic copy of the model or a photorealistic illustration. Ultimately my message is conveyed in visual rather than verbal terms.



Could you speak about how you play with collage and acrylics sometimes?

In my studio practice, I use collage as a formal element. It provides a way of putting down tone or erasing previous marks. There is a randomness in collage; the secondary meaning in the text or image becomes an important part of the finished work. Collage provides a method of capturing the fast-paced, often fragmented images of our 21st century culture. It brings together multiple images and texts from various sources into a final portrait. Collage allows me to put layers of images over the scaffolding of a drawing.

In recent years, I have been using acrylic paint exclusively. Acrylic paint, as opposed to oil, is compatible with paper and collage, so it allows fluidity to happen between collage and painting. I use acrylic both as a glue, a painting and drawing element, and an eraser.

What can we expect from your next projects?

After working for sixteen months on the collages for Kings and Queens of Late Night, I find myself in transition, not knowing exactly what will come next. Since the show ended, I have been working quickly in ink from the figure. I am enjoying working directly from life again and plan to begin a series of larger painted portraits done from life.

