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Ben Steele

American, b. 1977

An art history buff, Ben Steele imbues in his paintings tongue-in-cheek references to predecessors such as Leonardo da Vinci, Edgar Degas, Marc Chagall, and Jeff Koons. On many occasions, he has melded famed artists — Georges Seurat, Georgia O'Keeffe, Henri Matisse, Jackson Pollock, et al. — with crayons. His now-signature incorporation of the coloring sticks began with a suggestion from his mentor, David Dornan, who in turn is oft-recognized for still lifes of paint cans and brushes, as well as flowers and jars. David told Ben to paint things he liked.

"How can you not like a crayon?" Ben posits. "They're bright and colorful and nostalgic." "It started as a desire to paint them as an interesting subject matter. Then the scenes started to build around them," he explains. "Over time, it has bounced in all directions, with the crayons staying at the core."

Ben describes his work as "kind of realist or representational oil paintings, usually with a theme [in addition to crayons, he favors the Etch-a-Sketch and gumball machine]. The subject matter may vary greatly, but it weaves in history and pop culture." When he is asked to name his favorite artist, Ben usually says Johannes Vermeer. But (and undoubtedly more consistent with his own artistic ethos), he notes, "It's somewhere between Vermeer and [Andy] Warhol." The juxtaposition of the studious Dutch painter of intimate moment in middle-class society and the irreverent American artist exploiting commercialism and celebrity status speaks to Ben's beguiling marriage of style and subject. For example, one of his odes to Vermeer shows the iconic milkmaid in the midst of the sitcom *Cheers* bar. "I love sampling through the past and combining things," Ben says.

For his 2017 CODA exhibition (Nov. 25-Dec. 22), he created paintings highlighting desert landscapes. One work juxtaposes a crayon box with the recognizable Route 66 sign of Roy's motel/café in Amboy (the tiny town, at one time for sale, that he drives through on his way from Utah to Palm Desert). Another work offers a riff on David Hockney's swimming pool theme with a Palm Springs-labeled water bottle on a diving board. Yet another takes the fiery nightscape of MGM's *Gone With the Wind* poster and injects windmills on the horizon. "Most of the time, I feel like I honor my subjects, but I absolutely am not above making fun of them," Ben says.

Though he exhibited artistic tendencies at a young age, Ben entered college seeking a business degree — thinking he would pursue a career as a golf professional, perhaps even as a golfer. But he didn't enjoy administrative studies and left school, returning a couple of years later to the art program at the University of Utah, where David Dornan was a professor. "I instantly connected [with art]," he recalls.

Over the years, Ben has stayed inspired by expanding his subject matters and style while remaining true to his intrinsic nature. "When I started with CODA, I was painting crayons. Then I made some chrome paintings, putting shiny things in still life's," he says. "We had good reaction to both, but the crayons felt more like an open opportunity. I can't just be a recluse and be misunderstood. My subject matter has to be something to which people can relate. "If I have a show with, say 13 paintings, 10 will be similar to things I have done in the past and three represent something completely different — something pushing a little beyond."

In addition to shows at CODA Gallery, Arden Gallery in Boston, and Gallery 19 in Chicago, Ben's exhibition history includes the *National Contemporary Realism Show* at M.A. Doran Gallery in Tulsa; *Western Heroes of Pulp Fiction: Dime Novel to Pop Culture* at Tucson Museum of Art, and *Artists for the New Century* at Bennington Center for the Arts in Bennington, Vermont. His work resides in several notable collections, such as those of The Tom and Mary James/Raymond James Financial Art Collection, Dennis and Phyllis Washington Foundation, Kelly

Ripa and Mark Consuelos, Fred Couples, the San Francisco Giants' executive offices, as well as in multiple Delta Airline Sky Club lounges throughout the United States.

Ben describes his process as "sketching in my head and then sketching on the canvas. I get the composition right and then switch to oil paint. I never work one painting start to finish; and I don't track my time on them, because I paint in batches: anywhere from four to six at a time. I keep them rotating, because oil paint needs time to dry. "I pretty much work every day," he continues, adding that he spends fewer hours in the studio on the weekends so that he can be home with his family, which includes his wife, Melanie; sons Oliver and Andrew; and their half-English, half-French bulldog ("20 pounds of muscle"), Diesel.

Ben spends at least some time in his studio most days of the year. In order to have sustained quality time with his family, he works limited hours of weekends, applying glazes, which he can do in shorter time frames and still move things forward. On weekday mornings, he handles random tasks. With a studio a mile from his house, he goes home to enjoy lunch with his family. Then, from one to six p.m., he concentrates on painting.

While many artists accompany their creative process with music, Ben listens to podcasts. "Way too often, fantasy football is my meaningless indulgence," he reveals with a chuckle.

In 2005, Ben moved into his 13-feet-by-90-feet studio in Helper's downtown, which he describes as having "a Mayberry quality" to it. "We came here from Idaho Falls because David had retired from the University of Utah and was teaching workshops here," Ben says. "He had an old hotel converted to artists' workspaces and 22 rooms for artists to stay. I interned with him for a couple of years." It was during one of those workshops that Ben sold his first painting: a 16 x12 still life of roses in a jar. "A woman taking the workshop loved and asked if she could buy it," he recalls. "I sold it to her for \$200." He knows she still has it because they have communicated on Facebook.

In October 2017, Ben purchased an industrial building with plans to rebuild it and relocate his studio there sometime in 2018. The move will expand his working space from 4,000 square feet (his downtown space includes a gallery and a wood shop for building canvases, framing, and crating paintings to ship to galleries and buyers) to 7,000 square feet. And the new headquarters will put him a half-mile closer to home. "I'll be cutting my commute time in half," he notes with amusement.

Although he says his greatest non-art-related talent has been golf, he claims he was "not good enough" to make it as a professional golfer "But it helped me a ton with my art career, because I knew what I was looking for: good instructors," he says. These days, hiking and running comprise his recreational pursuits. Despite his former skills on the greens, he doesn't golf.

"It just requires so much energy to stay good at it," he says, noting that playing at a subpar level after his scratch-plus-one handicap of yore merely leads to frustration. Nevertheless, he claims he doesn't miss the game and gets the enjoyment of sporting camaraderie "with a little competition" via 5K runs.

If he couldn't paint, he says, he would "be a designer or architect — something to do with buildings." But, he adds, "I feel so privileged to get to create art. It's a pinch-yourself thing to me. I am very grateful that I get to do it and have support from people to continue."

Ben's greatest fear is being insignificant. "I do art for some sense of permanence in an impermanent world," he says. "The best compliment I could receive from others is that my work enriches their life in some way."

Artist Statement

With an education built upon classical training, Steele utilizes the processes of the old masters with a contemporary sensibility; never staying in one place for too long. The result is a wide-ranging body of work, from still life to portraiture to landscape (and often somewhere in between), melding art history and pop culture references in his ever-changing process.

His work can be found in many national and international personal and corporate collections, including Raymond James Financial, San Francisco Giants Executive Offices, the Dennis and Phyllis Washington Foundation, Kelly Ripa and Mark Consuelos, sportscaster Dan Patrick, Academy Award-Winning Producer Michael Sugar, golfer Fred Couples' personal collection, and in multiple Delta Airline Sky Club lounges throughout the US.

EDUCATION

University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT
Fall 2002
BFA, Painting and Drawing
Helper Workshops Apprenticeship, 2002-2004

SELECT EXHIBITIONS

2019

Solo Exhibition, Arden Gallery, Boston, MA
Solo Exhibition, Alta Mira Fine Art, Jackson WY
Sundance Film Festival Solo Exhibition, Modern West Fine Art, Salt Lake City UT

2018

Solo Exhibition, Arden Gallery, Boston MA
Delta Sky Club Guest Artist, Washington DC Ronald Reagan
Solo Exhibition, CODA Gallery, Palm Desert UT
Group Exhibition, National Contemporary Realism, M.A. Doran Gallery, Tulsa OK.

2017

us being u.s. exhibition, Gallery 19, Chicago IL
Gallery Exhibition, Galerie Ariel Jakob, Paris FRANCE
Solo Exhibition, Arden Gallery, Boston MA.
Solo Exhibition, Modern West Fine Art, Salt Lake City UT

2016

Solo Exhibition, Giacobbe-Fritz Fine Art, Santa Fe, NM.
Solo Exhibition, Arden Gallery, Boston, MA.
Solo Exhibition, Modern West Fine Art, SLC

REVIEWS & ARTICLES

"Contemporary SW," *Phoenix Home & Garden*, Summer 2019
"The Audacity of Art: Art for the Midterm Elections," *The Magazine Santa Fe*, Oct 2018
"Avian Art Takes Flight," *Fine Art Connoisseur*, Oct 2017
"A Slice of Americana," *New City Art*, July 2017
"Art Chameleon," *American Art Collector*, June 2016.
"At Home in Helper," *Utah Stories*, Feb 2016
"Pop Goes America," *American Art Collector*, Sept 2015.