



The Moment

HAVING ESTABLISHED A HIGHLY SUCCESSFUL PAINTING CAREER, CALIFORNIA ARTIST SALLY STRAND RISKED IT ALL TO SEEK A DIFFERENT VISION OF WHAT ART CAN BE.

BY ROBERT K. CARSTEN

In-Between

A MATTER WORTHY OF ATTENTION is why some artists, already at highly accomplished and successful points in their careers, choose to make a dramatic change of method or style and set out in a new direction. Perhaps even more intriguing is when those changes result in a new, higher pinnacle in their art. Sally Strand is one such artist, and her recent work offers elegant solutions and insights into the purpose of art.

Metamorphosis

“I had painted for decades, but I was feeling increasingly restless. I sensed that there was much, much more to know about art than I knew,” Strand recounts. “So I decided to enroll part-time in a nearby MFA program. Laguna College of Art and Design has one of the very few graduate programs in the country with an emphasis on representational art. At my stage in life, it was a risk to leave a career behind in order to go forward. But I did, and it felt good to be among younger people in a wholly different

environment: one that was academia-based. Instead of being technique-driven,

it was concept-driven, questioning why and how you paint what you do. Importantly, we learned how to look at and generate ideas from historical art and also to recognize artistic lineage. It was really challenging for me and proved to be just what I was searching for.”

Delving Into the Past

One of the historical artists that continues to be of keen interest to Strand is Fairfield Porter (1907–1975). “Porter had the ability to balance representational verisimilitude with abstract structure. Also, he influenced me to paint people and places most significant to me. Painting from his own life, Porter was drawn to his immediate visual surroundings: family, friends, home and neighborhood,” says Strand. This knowledge and recognition of how artists have worked and reworked ideas throughout history excites and inspires Strand to engage in a deeper, broader vision of what art can be.

For example, when she wanted to paint a portrait of her mother, she posed her in front of a mirror, enabling the viewer to see not only Strand’s subject, but also the artist at work and

LEFT: *Interval* (oil on canvas, 59x47)



the deeper space of the room behind (see *Mother, Myself*, opposite). “Rooms in paintings can signify the inner mind and self, whereas exterior views reflect the world,” says Strand. “I placed our faces close together because of the deep bond and friendship we share as artists and human beings. Emotionally, as I was painting her, I just needed my face to be almost a reflection of hers. I see her in myself. So much of what I am is because of our relationship. *Mother, Myself* is a painting of pictures within pictures, of artists looking at each other and also seeing each other through the act of creating art. My mother is a multimedia artist. In fact, I spent much of my life growing up in her studio, and I wouldn’t be an artist today if not for her.”

While working on *Mother, Myself*, Strand recollected a similar idea presented in Fairfield Porter’s painting, *The Mirror*, which is a portrait of Porter’s daughter as much as it is, by reflection, a self-portrait, a view of the interior of the artist’s studio and an exterior view from a window.

Movement-Filled Spaces

Vacation (below) is a major work in which Strand wanted to challenge herself. “I made lots of preliminary studies, trying different things to piece together a multitude of concepts, such as deepened space; passage of time; and opposites like young and old, male and female, or

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SALLY STRAND

darkened spaces and sunlit rooms,” says Strand. “I also wanted to work with perspective. The viewer is looking down at the scene, and I wanted to bend the edges in this wide-angle view. I had studied the work of Rackstraw Downes (b. 1939), who makes paintings and drawings with horizons that bend and who features single scenes from multiple angles. The curvatures in my painting serve to create a sense of movement, sweeping you into the complex arrangement of space.”

Movement plays a significant role in *Lose No Time* (page 32).

Strand explains how she captured just the right action of the figure: “We had guests visiting, and I saw the light beautifully streaming into the room, so I made myself inconspicuous and watched them the whole morning. I particularly try not to have people look posed. I prefer real life, as it’s happening. It’s the idea of finding a motif in the midst of life so that my art and life merge. I am painting everyday life, which connects me to a whole, historical lineage, but I’m painting my own time, instead of some other time. Watching people drink coffee, moving around the room, doing all kinds of things interests me. I’ve always been drawn to the moment in-between, not the moment, for example, when you’re stepping down a stairway firmly onto a step. I prefer the act of stepping when you are just off a



MATERIALS

SURFACES: oils: linen, cotton duck canvas or lauan board; **pastels:** UART 500 pastel paper

OILS: Sennelier, Gamblin, Utrecht

OIL MEDIUM: Winsor & Newton Liquin, M. Graham Walnut Alkyd Medium; mixture of Grumbacher damar varnish, Gamblin refined linseed oil and turpentine

BRUSHES: Richeson Grey Matters brights; Trekell red sable filberts; bristle filberts by Princeton, Robert Simmons, Grumbacher and Da Vinci; Rosemary & Co. synthetic filberts; various flats

PASTELS: Girault, Unison, Terry Ludwig, Sennelier, Rembrandt, Cretacolor, Nupastel, Richeson

OPPOSITE TOP: *Mother, Myself* (oil on canvas, 17½x26½)

LEFT: *Vacation* (oil on canvas, 32½x103½)



She explains that her way of stroking the paper has changed over the years. In the past she used a more linear approach, crosshatching and building forms accurately by mostly using the tips of the pastels and allowing the undercolors to show through. Now she combines linear techniques with loosely applied scumbling. Although her mastery of technique in both pastel and oil is readily apparent, Strand now views technique and accuracy as a part of, but not the most important, qualities of a painting.

“What I am trying to do at this phase is mine deeper emotions in my art rather than make a nice, technically adept piece, which is what I felt I’d been doing,” says Strand. “In pursuing my MFA, I didn’t have to paint so much for a gallery. I could do things that had more meaning to me. That takes on a whole different flavor for an artist with respect to content than coming at it from the standpoint of accuracy.”

Harriet Studio (opposite top) bears testimony to the effectiveness of Strand’s earnest aspirations in her art. “My mom is a beautiful woman, but I didn’t choose to do a painting like that,” she explains. “We were in the process of clearing out her studio because, at 87, she was moving to a senior residence. There was a lifetime of work and things she had collected. I grew up in her studio, so it was a very sad time for both of us. I created this

painting as I remembered the studio from my childhood, from the viewpoint of a child looking up. The shelves are empty and form diagonals pointing toward her hands, signifying she is an artist. The only thing left on the shelves in back is a clock, representing time. I utilized the abstract shapes and the interior in a different way than I had before by including more of the ceiling. It’s a different approach than a straight-on portrait like those I’ve done in the past.”

step. So the figure in my painting is not down, yet he’s not completely up. He’s going through the movement of getting up.

“Also,” Strand continues, “what always makes something more interesting is the light. I try to use it to extract the subject from the commonplace, the mundane. So the light coming from a high window adds contrast and accentuates the forms.”

Mining Emotions

Strand takes many photos of her subject; however, she often changes things around, building her compositions by combining elements from several images. In addition, the way the artist uses pastel strokes and textures contributes to the palpable sense of light and movement, as seen in *Lose No Time*.

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Exploring Pictorial Design

It’s apparent that Strand is pursuing different conceptual ideas. “I’m trying different compositions and not necessarily abiding by all the rules I had learned,” she remarks. *Napster* (opposite bottom) and *Shower* (page 34) evince



OPPOSITE TOP: *Lose No Time* (pastel on paper, 17½x12)

LEFT: *Harriet Studio* (oil on canvas, 30x24)

LEFT BELOW: *Napster* (pastel on paper, 16x24)

her courageous experimentation in this area, lending a contemporary quality to her work.

In *Napster*, Strand crams the figure up front and boldly crops him off the right side. She flattens the background elements of sky and grass by not including transitions in value or saturation, and the result is a play on spatial depth. The background simultaneously appears to recede and compress forward against the foreground elements, creating a dynamic tension, pushing and pulling forms through the illusory space.

The surprising compositional daring in *Shower* (page 34) places a figure, essentially in shadow, against light and facing out of the picture. Our eyes are at first attracted to the figure at far right. Strand then deftly employs a complex interplay of planes and abstract shapes of light, as well as a partial view out a window, to entice viewers’ eyes left, away from the figure through space. It is somewhat uncommon in Western art to visually read a painting seemingly backwards, from right to left, opposite of the way we read text. Strand makes this compositionally difficult task look both easy and natural.

The artist emphatically addresses the perception and passage of time in *Front Page* (page 34). “I had learned about historical paintings that show multiple time periods, telling different parts of the story simultaneously,” Strand explains. “This painting of my son, depicted repeatedly in the foreground, and my husband, in the doorway, does this. The front figure engages the audience. He is moving and turning; multiple things are happening. Forms are overlapping and edges are





ABOVE: **Front Page** (oil on board, 23x32)

LEFT: **Shower** (oil on canvas, 24x36)

RIGHT: **Light Fare** (oil on canvas, 24x18)

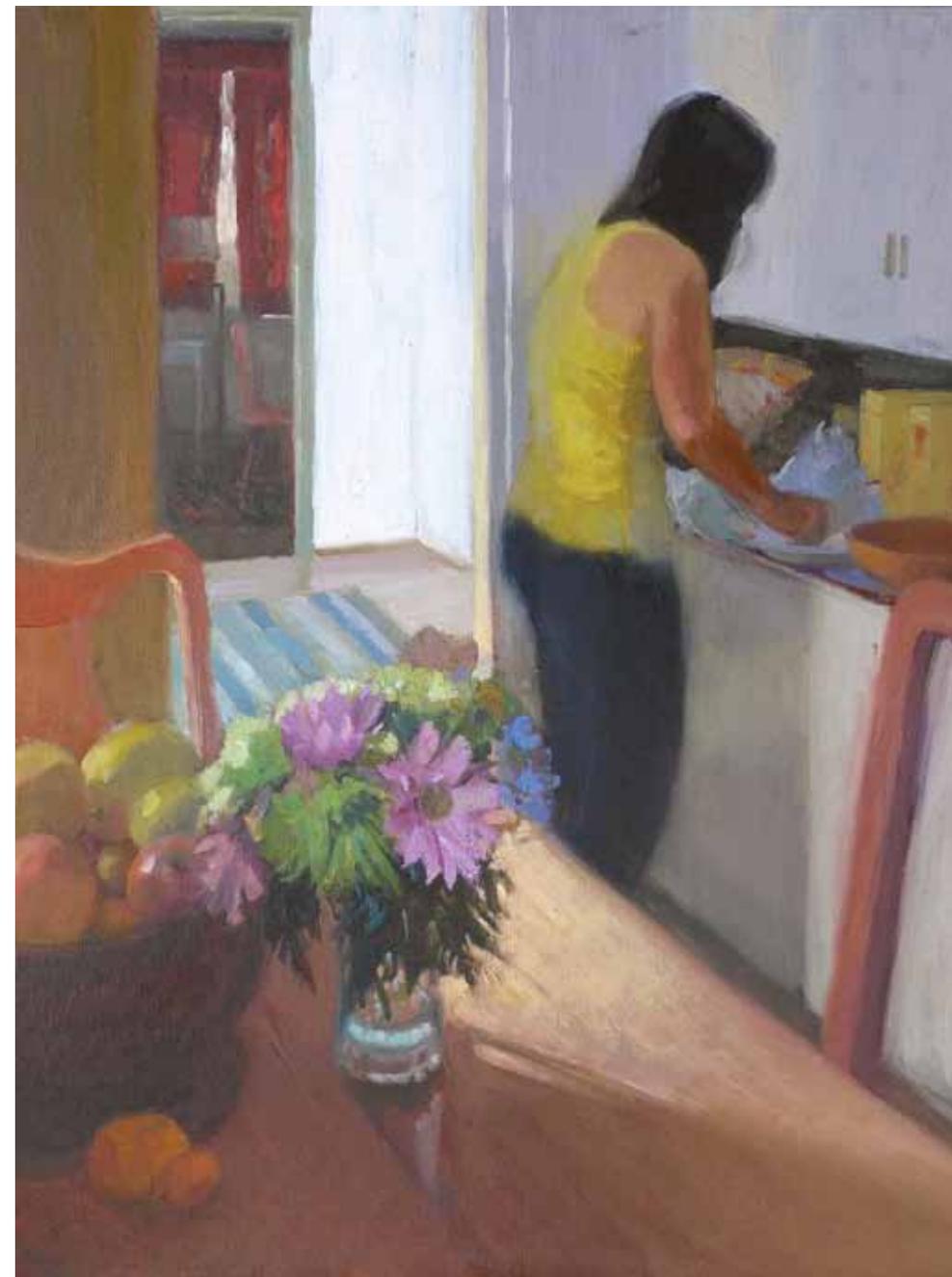
the head on one of the figures and just left it, creating a sort of double image. Moving things around and leaving residual images is very freeing. Everything doesn't have to be so precise and prescribed. Then a painting can take on a quality of its own," she concludes.

A Profound Essence

Light Fare (opposite), in which a family member is engaged in an everyday activity, encapsulates many of the explorative ideas and new territory Strand has embarked upon. The painting seamlessly combines



blurred; nothing is overly defined to halt your attention. I wanted to leave space for viewers to have their own interpretations. This is something new that I'm thinking about, namely, leaving enough room for a viewer's imagination to fill in the story. I altered the position of



different genres of still life, the figure, an interior and even a hint of an exterior. Opposing values, large shapes, deliberate color and edge qualities are all orchestrated to grand effect. There is as much meticulous attention to depicting space as there is to pictorial organization: relating the abstract shapes to the flatness of the picture plane and to the four edges of the canvas.

"There are a lot of concepts of abstraction going on in these realistic interiors," explains Strand. "I just see shapes, and I'm very aware of trying to draw the eye through the composition. I find that being more intentional with color is a part of that: for example, the way the red violet of the flowers catches viewers' attention and the way the yellows move their eyes through the

composition and contrast with the violet, and the use of red in the far room. Essentially though, I want to try to say something. That's where the realism comes in. I want to make just a suggestion of a narrative, and I want all of these elements together to create a mood. That's very important to me. I want my paintings to cause viewers to stop and see something beyond the obvious—to show the usual in an unusual way, a much deeper way." ■

Artist, exhibitions juror and workshop instructor, **ROBERT K. CARSTEN** has written extensively on art and artists. Visit his website: robertcarsten.com.



A professional artist for more than 35 years, **SALLY STRAND** has had her work in both pastel and oil featured in many solo exhibitions, including a one-person retrospective at the Bakersfield Museum of Art (Calif.). She was inducted into the Pastel Society of America's Hall of Fame in 2007. Widely published, her work has garnered many top awards and is represented in many private, corporate and museum collections. Strand studied at the American Academy of Art (Chicago), the Art Students League of New York and the National Academy of Design (New York City), and holds a bachelor of fine arts degree from the University of Denver and a master of fine arts degree from Laguna College of Art and Design (Calif.). She teaches workshops and master classes internationally.

Visit Strand's website at sallystrand.com.