

## Why Subject Matter Matters

Discover five ways to make your content your own.



*Ephemera* (18x24) by Robert K. Carsten

**NO ARTIST ACTUALLY OWNS A SUBJECT**, but some have made themselves unforgettably attached to specific imagery. Think of Monet's haystacks and water lilies; van Gogh's starry nighttime sky or sunflowers; and Cézanne's apples, card players and Mont Sainte-Victoire. Each artist was able to mine a subject for its gems of inspirational ideas and revelations. They discovered, uncovered and explored the power

of expressive content within their chosen subjects.

When a picture of a game of cards is seen at face value, for example, the card game is the subject, and all of the people and objects the contents. Content involves the ability of artists to bring meaning to a subject. It's capable of profoundly inspiring experiences of truth and beauty. In 17th-century Dutch or French genre painting, such an image might have

been tinged with nostalgia, humor or narrative elements. Viewed today, this painting might appear sentimental and dated, yet we're able to appreciate it for its beauty and skill in defining a certain time and place.

In Cézanne's series of card players, painted during the 1890s, any outward specificity yields to broader, more internal and universal issues. He monumentalized his card players by paring down his subject to its



*Moth to Flames* (30x20) by Jimmy Wright

essence. Cézanne flawlessly melded subject with content, wonder with beauty. Not all art has or needs a message or deeper meaning; however, some works thrive on it. I hope the following examples will provide a jumping-off point for you to cultivate stronger content in your own work.

**1) Reference a profound, personal experience. Relate your painting to an established theme or past work of art.** During a visit to The Metropolitan Museum of Art when I was young, I was unexpectedly overwhelmed while viewing Cézanne's *The Card Players* (1890-92, oil on canvas). I was enraptured by the mystery and strength of this work of art, sensing that it was somehow fresh,



*Sunflower Violet and Red* (41x29) by Jimmy Wright

new and modern—even revolutionary. It was an epiphany for me to personally experience the effect of content in art. Decades later, I saw it again and decided to create a painting in response. An art card of Cézanne's painting appears in the upper right of *Ephemera* (opposite). The objects on the table are stand-ins for the figures and objects in his masterpiece.

**2) Utilize narrative elements imaginatively. Choose expression over sentimentality.** In his extraordinary pastel, *Moth to Flames* (above, left), Jimmy Wright poetically rather than narratively depicts an irresistible and dangerous attraction. "The choice of the sunflower as subject

matter was conscious," says Wright. "The moth appeared during the work process while I was searching for a pictorial resolution of harmony between form and color. The choice of the moth wasn't entirely unconscious, as I have a large collection of mounted moths and butterflies. A symbol that isn't sentimentalized arrives in an organic way during the formal process of picture-making."

**3) Establish continuity and perseverance in your work schedule. Work in series. Explore figure-ground relationships and emphasize the formal elements of your subject.** Resplendent with color and mark-making, Wright's *Sunflower*

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*The Letter* (26x18) by Sally Strand

*Violet and Red* (on page 19) places emphasis on movement and figure-ground relationships. “This painting came during an uninterrupted progression of works created by working each day at the same time,” he says. “Continuity in a studio schedule facilitates surprising progress. The strokes of the color develop a synchronized rhythm that harmonizes the entire composition. The limited but intense palette is in contrast to the baroque forms while unifying the movement of the forms.”

**4) Use forms and spaces symbolically. Develop themes or concepts around the subject matter.** By imbuing her scene with a quiet mood, mystery and a keen sense of a fleeting moment, Sally Strand enabled *The Letter* (above) to speak volumes. “Soft window light falls across the back of a woman, turned away. She’s quietly absorbed by something unseen while the pages of a letter lie on the counter nearby,”

An advertisement for a book titled 'What inspires you?' by Yael Maimon. The top half features the title in large white letters on a red background. Below is a photograph of a landscape painting with a large pencil resting on it. The bottom section includes a small image of the book cover, the 'General's' logo, and contact information for General Pencil Company, Inc. in Jersey City, NJ and Redwood City, CA.

An advertisement for a book titled 'ANNOUNCING - New Book - Yael Maimon's ONCE UPON A TIME Painting Series'. The top half has a black background with white and red text. Below is a photograph of a painting of a young girl in a striped dress. The bottom section features the text 'NOW AVAILABLE in two formats: large and standard sized book' and provides the website 'www.yaelmaimon.com' for purchase. It also includes a short description of the book's content, mentioning fairy tale characters like Alice, Little Red Riding Hood, and Peter Pan.

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says Strand. “The room and the doorways symbolize the woman’s mind or interior life, presumably as they relate to her concentration and the letter, the contents of which remain a mystery. I hope this painting entreats viewers to consider the transitory nature of time passing and to linger over fleeting moments in the present, which might otherwise go unnoticed.”

**5) Formulate a theme and/or mood. Create a composition using elements from a variety of sources.**

**Make objects and atmosphere/space work in harmony to express your idea.** As Strand explains it, “*Cook Works* [below] is a composition pieced together from different sources to create a mood—cooks laboring together but absorbed in their own separate duties. I considered the movement and direction of each figure to add rhythm and flow. Concentrating on the light and shadow patterns, I chose colors that would create the feeling of artificial light above the heat from the stoves. In the background, I used thin washes

of iridescent acrylic to create a smoky effect over the hanging pots, capturing the atmosphere of a kitchen with vats of steaming food. Overall, this is a tonal painting with a few spots of strategically planned pure color.”

These are but a few ideas to help strengthen your subject matter. Constructing content with meaning can elevate a work and engage viewers. 🎨

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*Cook Works* (30x40) by Sally Strand