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Images of the Ordinary: Figures in Motion

Art is an ever-living question, asked of the visible world by the visual senses, and the artist is simply the man (sic) who has the ability and desire to transform his visual perception into a material form. The first part of his action is perceptive, and the second is expressive, . . . what the artist sees is determined by his desire to discover or construct a credible world. What we see must be made real. Art in that way becomes a construction of reality.

—Herbert Read, *A Concise History of Modern Painting*

Painting for me is an expression of my reality. For almost 20 years I painted landscapes, inspired by the Impressionist painters. It is only recently that I began to include the figure in my work. By painting landscapes, I seek to express the gratitude and spirituality that I feel in seeing the beauty of nature. In painting the figure I seek to express a connection with humanity. My view of humanity is in essence the state of being human; the human race. In my work a focus on the human figure has emerged. Perhaps it is the idea of exploring a different subject matter, and of breaking away (for the time being) from painting landscapes that brought this new direction in my work. As a landscape painter I relish in being surrounded by nature, engrossed in the spiritual connection between man and nature. In my figurative work I relish in my role as an artist, engrossed in capturing the ordinary, simple motions of the human race. The slightest movements may be small and yet significant in that they are affirmations of life.

The theme of my most recent paintings examines the figure in motion. By examining the figure in motion, my intent is to capture the energy that is an important part of humanity. The human figure in motion, whether in the act of athleticism or ordinary motions of daily life, celebrates the theme of dynamic energy within the human figure. The idea of movement or motion in painting has been explored by many artists in the past. The hunting scenes from the

cave paintings of Lascaux are perhaps the earliest images that exhibit motion. Renaissance artists were inspired by the idea of the figure in action. In his engraving called *The Battle of the Nudes* Renaissance artist Antonio Poullaiulo portrayed nude soldiers in the act of battle. The figures in Michelangelo's frescoes from the Sistine Chapel as well as his sculptures of the human form emphasize motion. Sandro Botticelli's painting from the Uffizi Gallery, *Madonna of the Magnificat*, with the angels placing a crown on the head of the Virgin Mary, conveys a sense of poetic motion within the human figure. In the late 1800's Paul Cezanne's fragmented brushstrokes also seem to imply motion. The divided planes in his figures and landscapes are rendered in such a way that the paintings evoke a sense of movement. Pablo Picasso and George Braque later borrowed from Cezanne, resulting in the sense of motion implied in their cubist paintings. The Impressionist painter, Edgar Degas also captured movement in his paintings of ballet dancers. According to the book, *Art: A World* by Elke Bucholz and Gerhard Buhler, the Futurist painters, such as Umberto Boccione, also sought to portray movement in their works. *Charge of the Lancers* is an example of Boccioni's work that shows the figure or figures in motion. Although his manner of painting is similar to the cubists, and differs from my painting process, his technique is another example of how artists have dealt with the figure in motion. In *Modern Masters: American Abstraction* written by Virginia Mecklenburg, the Abstract Expressionist painter Hans Hofmann refers to the sense of energy in his paintings as "a notion that movement and constant change are basic characteristics of reality." Movement or motion is indeed a part of reality. The figure in motion is a part of reality and humanity that I seek to express with my new work. In my figure paintings I find a similarity with the Abstract Expressionists who portrayed "spontaneous expression" of movement in their works, as noted in Robert Bolton's book, *Art: The World of Art From to American Renaissance Masters to Post*

Modernism. There is a sense of dynamic energy common in Hans Hofmann's Japanese *Girl* (1935) or *Table with Tea Kettle*, Willem de Kooning's Woman series and Jackson Pollock's *Number 6* that engages the viewer to follow the movement in these works. I feel that the visual sense of energy has the power to captivate the viewer's emotion.

I have an immense gratitude for artists of the past. Studying their works inspired me to paint, and paved the way for the artistic journey that I continue today. In the aforementioned book by Virginia Mecklenburg the author quotes artist Esteban Vicente (1903-2001), who said, "the great mistake by many artists is that they close their eyes to the past . . . you have to look to tradition . . . the artist has to be a part of something. Art belongs in a traditional line that reaches back and will go on forever." I have been interested in the work of the Abstract Expressionists Willem de Kooning, Hans Hoffmann, and Jackson Pollock. I am drawn to the works of these Expressionist painters because of the vibrant colors and dynamic energy in their work. Their paintings immediately convey motion through their expressive brush strokes. This is even more evident in Jackson Pollock's pouring or dripping technique. For these artists, the body in motion, involved in the act of painting, is equally important to the painting itself. While historical artists are important in my work, I also look to the work of contemporary figurative painters for inspiration. Among these artists are Cecily Brown, Frank Auerbach, and Ignacio Burgos. While the eroticism in Cecily Brown's paintings is not present in my own work, as in *Two Figures in a Landscape* (2002), I admire the sense of physicality and motion in her brushwork. The idea of movement is also present in Frank Auerbach's figure paintings. Even in his portraits, with the subject seated or posed, the artist's gestural brush strokes create a moving figure. Spanish painter Ignacio Burgos is another figurative artist who focuses on the human figure in motions of daily life. In a recent PR Web online article featuring the 2011 exhibition of the artist's work in Palm

Springs, the article states, " Spanish-born Ignacio Burgos is one of the most renowned contemporary artist—Latin or otherwise. His works, which portray anonymous men, women and children, in everyday activities, evoke deep emotion, empathy and interest in the subjects." In paintings such as *El Minero* (The Miner) or *Camareras* (Maids), Ignacio Burgos conveys motion and sincerity in his figures---the same theme that I am after in my figurative work. There is a similarity between these two paintings by Burgos and two of my own work, *The Vendor and At the Grocer's* in that the figures are all within the context of physical labor, a part of and in many cases a necessity of daily life for many people. Although I can honestly say that I did not see these two images by Burgos before painting my own images of physical labor, I feel a unique sense of kinship with the commonality of our work.

With the idea of painting figures in motion as the subject for my new work, I set out to obtain the sources for the images that I will be painting. Initially, I used photographs that I had taken from sporting events in which my sons participated. I also used images borrowed from the Internet and from sports magazines. At first, I focused on the figure in the act of athletic movement. However, this focus of portraying figures in motion within the context of athletic activity has evolved into a more subtle type of movement. This realization came about during two subsequent summer trips to Italy, with the most recent one last summer while enrolled in a study abroad program in Florence. In Italy I took random photographs of the activity surrounding me. Upon examining the photographs, I found that the movements of the figures in my images were ordinary motions of daily life; people gathering their things after a day at the beach, a mother chasing her toddler, a man putting a shirt on, a woman hanging wash. Movement in the human figure, after all, may not necessarily have to portray intense activity in order to evoke motion.

The subtle movements of the figure will be explored in these new paintings. The decision to paint the figure in motion is my way of reflecting on life and the passage of time. Indeed, the body in motion is a symbol of life. I am interested in observing and portraying the mundane movements of the human body, the ordinary, simple movements that carry us through our day. I choose to portray these types of movements in the human figure because they are simple and yet so poignant. They speak of the preciousness of life—that we can move our bodies to function in our daily lives is a gift that must not be taken for granted. There are a number reasons and life experiences that leads me to this belief. My experience working in a hospital to nourish children battling cancer, and my husband's profession as a pathologist are reminders of life's fragility. Loved ones who have passed away in recently are evidence of time passing. The movements shown in my figurative work are my way of celebrating life. The simple movements that we make are no less important than the grand standing movements that push the human body to the limit, such as those involved in sports or dance. Having turned fifty years of age this year reiterated the passage of time, so there is a sense of urgency to appreciate beauty in the simple and mundane. In this body of work, the movements of the figures are simple, ordinary, and yet poignant in that they are not staged or rehearsed. The viewer can easily identify with the motions of the figures because these are motions that they have also experienced.

Initially the first pieces were painted in black and white. The reason for this limited palette is to place focus on the figures and the negative space within the canvas without the added visual component of color. I sought the works of Alberto Giacometti and Willem de Kooning as sources for the gestural rendering of the figure, and Richard Diebenkorn in composing the figure with regards to the negative space within the canvas. In the winter 2011 Drawing issue of *American Artist* magazine, an article about the human figure included the work

of Diebenkorn and Willem de Kooning, two of the artists whose work I have used as sources for my figure paintings. Because of my intent to portray the figure in motion, I am more concerned with rendering the figures in a loose, gestural manner, rather than a scientific, anatomically precise handling of the figure. While allowing me to focus on movement and more complex edges, the use of a limited palette was also a way to temporarily cease from using multiple colors, which I had always used in my landscape paintings. Perhaps ceasing from a method of painting that I had used for so long will help me to use color in a different manner. In plein-air painting, inspired by the Impressionist painters, I relied on the method of using either local or heightened local colors of a specific view. The first few figure paintings were rendered in black and white in order for me to focus on the figure without the added problem of color. Later, taking the advice of my instructor, I began to use an under painting of rich, dark color throughout the canvas as an initial surface to add depth to the painting. Using a limited palette also helped to unify the work. The average size of each canvas is 4 feet by 5 feet, which enables me to paint with expressive motion. The physicality in my painting process, like the Abstract Expressionists, is essential in portraying the figure in motion. The size of these paintings also allows for an immediate body-to-body connection with the viewer.

*Triptych in Red (Woman Sweeping, Out for a Ride, On her Way)* is a series of three paintings included in this body of work. These three panels continue the theme of figures in motion. Again, the motions evoked are the motions of everyday life—easy to ignore because the movements are ordinary and uneventful; a woman sweeping, another pushing a baby carriage, and a third walking while carrying her books. In *Triptych in Red* I chose a red pallet for two reasons. First, the figurative paintings that I have completed at the time were done in a blue or green monochromatic palette. I decided to change the palette for the three paintings in order to

give this body of work a variation in color and perhaps a sense of balance with regards to color. Second, a red palette represents warmth, and the significance for this is that my subject is the human body—the warm blooded human being. Red is the color of blood, which flows through our veins and organs to keep us alive. Willem de Kooning's use of red in his figure paintings was a source that I used in my compositions. The red palette shared between the three paintings in *Triptych in Red* is also a way to unify the three separate pieces. Viewed as a series of three paintings, the format becomes larger—the window more inclusive.

I use photographs that I have taken as sources for my paintings. In examining these photographs I see my role as an observer of life. I photographed my subjects when they were not aware that they were being photographed. I think that the moment one is aware that one is being observed, the image becomes less natural or sincere. I want to capture the beauty of life through my observations of people in movements that we make from day-to-day. My intent as I was taking the photographs was to capture humanity in the motions of daily life and to use these images as sources for my work in portraying the figure in motion. The images captured on camera were random and unassuming. I did not observe any specific figure for a long period of time. In retrospect, I was also in constant motion as I took these photographs (since I was trying to keep up with my husband who was walking a mile a minute). What I had captured on camera were fleeting images, since I was also in constant movement. I can say that I saw myself as an observer and not as a voyeur because there was nothing indiscreet, sexual or perverse about the photographs I was taking. These photographs were taken in a public setting. In creating the composition for each painting, a part of the whole photograph is singled out as I try to magnify the motion within a specific figure. The images from the photos and the subsequent paintings

stem from the idea that life is fragile and precious, and that every day that we are able to get up in the morning to start our day is a gift.

The focus in this body of work is the figure and the motion implied by the figure. The environment is not as significant because the movements portrayed in these paintings are not specific to the environment. The figure is moving, so the environment is in constant flux. I also wanted to create a sense of ambiguity in the environment because, while the images were taken in Italy, the figures themselves can come from anywhere in the western world. One of the challenges to these compositions is the treatment of the negative space surrounding each figure. Since the focus is the figure in motion, the space surrounding the figure is treated with less detail. Adding much detail to the negative space will take away from the movement that I want to highlight in the figure. Richard Diebenkorn's figurative paintings were a constant source of compositional reference for these works. In his figurative compositions, Diebenkorn did not place much detail in the negative space, but he created interesting negative shapes within the negative spaces by the placement or the cropping of his figures. In my own work, some of the figures are cropped in order to create negative spaces that will complement the figure. The treatment of the negative space is like that of a minimalist abstract work. Expressive mark making was used in the figure while the negative space is treated by flat, even strokes often using a palette knife. Shapes within the negative spaces were created by color.

Cropping the figure also helped to convey movement in the figure and emphasized the movement to the viewer. In reality we often see only parts of figures when they are in motion. A cropped figure placed in a given space on the canvas leads the eye outside of the space, thus creating motion in the composition. The middle painting in *Triptych in Red* where the baby carriage is cropped to the right of the canvas magnifies the action of the figure pushing the



carriage. In another image from the same series of paintings, the woman sweeping the floor, her right arm is cropped to the left of the canvas so that the motion of sweeping is highlighted. Cropping as a compositional component became more evident as the series of paintings progressed. In *Father and Child*, the figure of the father is cropped on the left side of the canvas. His left leg is cropped on the left edge of the canvas as if he and the child had just jumped into my visual frame. The negative space created on the upper right side of the canvas opens up space for the flow of movement in this composition. *The Vendor*, where the upper half of the figure is cropped, directly focuses on the motion of his legs and right arm while pushing a wheeled carrier. Another example of cropping is found in *Couple*, where the figure on the left is cropped to the side of the canvas. Both figures are positioned so that the tops of their heads as well as their lower legs are not shown. The right arm of the second figure is also cropped to the right side of the canvas. In this composition, the figures are a bit larger in order to convey a closer distance between subject and viewer. The cropping on all four edges of the canvas is balanced by the action that takes place near the middle of the canvas: the motion of touch.

Edward Muybridge's photographic studies of figures in motion were also considered as a source. As a photographer, he was also interested in portraying the human figure in motion. However, I found that his photographs portrayed the figure in intense movement, perhaps even choreographed. I also found the photographs to have the feel of a scientific study. There were runners in action or divers preparing to dive from a diving board, and each motion was photographed frame by frame, as if in a movie reel. These are indeed figures captured in motion, but motion somewhat contrived. I found that the scientific study of motion found in Muybridge's work showed a different type of motion than what I was after. Another distinction is that

Muybridge's figures were often nude, which differs from my clothed figures. My figures are involved in motions of daily life and in real life we are clothed for most of the day.

In painting the figure in motion, I want to express the energy that is an important part of being human. Movement is a basic necessity and reality of life. It is a way of reaffirming to oneself that he or she is alive. I realize that it is only one of the ways that a painter can portray the human figure. Many artists have portrayed the figure in static position and still convey a sense of energy within the figure. Richard Diebenkorn's figurative paintings such as *Seated Woman, Head in Hand and Girl* and *Three Coffee Cups* are a few examples. My decision to focus on movement within the figure does not place less importance on those of us who for whatever reason or circumstance are unable to move, to feel life in that manner. But in choosing to paint figures involved in movement, I want to express my interest in creating paintings that convey a sense of dynamic energy and reflect my process of painting actively. Painting for me is both an intuitive and physical process. It is a method of painting that is similar to the method of the Expressionist painters. My painting process is like a dance; an unrehearsed dance with no set pattern of steps in place. This is a dance led by the first gestural strokes on the canvas, where I am stepping back and forth, side to side, reaching, lunging, even circling the canvas when it is placed flat on the floor. I feel that if my intent is to portray positive energy through figures in motion, then it is important for me to be active as I paint. Painting figures is a departure from the landscape paintings that I have done for many years. My figurative work has evolved from its inception to the final paintings of my thesis show. I started the journey by painting athletes in motion, using a black and white palette. Coming from a family involved in various sports, it was a natural decision in my effort to convey movement within the human figure. The trips to Italy proved to be a turning point. It is where I began to take random photographs, frustrated by the

fact that I had no time to properly "find" my subjects. I was obliged to keep moving as I took the photographs. What I felt was problematic in my search for subject matter proved to be surreptitious, for it was only upon examining my photographs that led to my decision to paint figures in the motions of daily life. Indeed motion is around us the minute we find ourselves in a crowd, with each person going about his or her own part in the daily business of life. In this body of work the compositions evolved. The framing of the whole figure within the canvas in *At The End of the Day* differs from the composition in *Father and Child*. The latter painting, where the father is lifting the child up, introduces cropping as a technique to highlight movement. In *Father and Child* the idea of motion for the purpose of touching one another is also introduced. *Couple*, an over-all painting in blue, highlights the idea of motion for touch.

I began my artistic journey here at Kendall wanting to paint figures. As a landscape painter, the figure was both a subject that I craved and feared, not knowing if my skills could do justice to the subject, or if my skills could convey my intent. *Images of the Ordinary: Figures in Motion* is a culmination, a high point in my journey as an artist. By introducing a figurative element in my new work I have taken up a challenge that I feel is necessary for my growth as an artist. Although this reflects a change in my work, the theme that remains constant is the message of positive energy that I wish to convey to the audience

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