

Keep it Fresh: Contemporary Artists Exploring Tradition

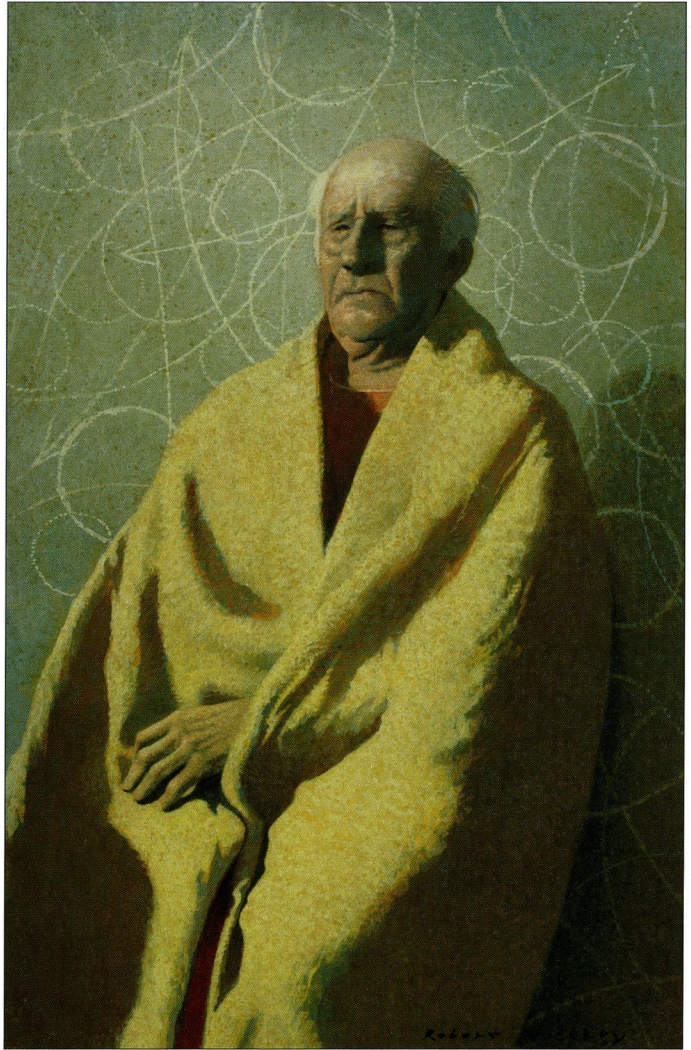
by Gail Leggio

The modernist enterprise defined itself in terms of a break with the past, and one of its cardinal tenets was to “make it new.” The contemporary traditionalist revival grows out of a belief that the past holds the key to reinvigorating art. The most interesting artists in this camp are engaging intelligently with art history, rather than simply imitating old models. One thing they have learned from the modernists is that, if art is to flourish, they need to keep it fresh. Moving forward within a tradition is a tricky proposition, but as T.S. Eliot—who was both a modernist and a classicist, in sometimes contradictory but usually fruitful ways—suggested, we know more than those who came before us, and they are what we know. Recently, two small museums examined aspects of the current revival by focusing, respectively, on a technique and a genre. The Brattleboro Museum presented a group show spotlighting the resurgence in egg tempera, while the Florence Griswold Museum invited a contemporary landscape painter to place her work in a historical context.

One way of engaging tradition is through reviving old techniques. A number of contemporary artists are remastering egg tempera, which dominated easel painting well into the fifteenth century. The word *remastering*—currently used to describe restoration and enhancement technology for records and videos, as well as a return to old master craftsmanship—underlines the hands-on experimentation of this enterprise, which entails considerably more than ferreting out arcane recipes. As Robert Vickrey, a major figure in the mid-twentieth-century revival of the medium, remarked: “There are many ways to use egg tempera, not just one. And with a lot of practice and some imagination, you should be able to come up with techniques I’ve never thought of.”¹ Vickrey was one of nine artists represented in “Egg Tempera: Contemporary Masters,” on view March 28–July 11, 2010, at the Brattleboro Museum, Brattleboro, Vermont. The exhibition suggests the wide range of technical and stylistic possibilities available to today’s practitioners.

For generations of painters who grew up getting their colors out of tubes, the formularies of earlier artists, the grinding of exotic materials such as lapis lazuli and the preparation of binding mediums carried a whiff of alchemy. The rediscovery of Cennino d’Andrea Cennini’s art manual *Il libro dell’arte* (*The Craftsman’s Handbook*), from c. 1390, was highly influential, through M.P. Merrifield’s *Original Treatises on the Arts of Painting* (1848), the first English translation, and then in a 1933 edition by Daniel V. Thompson, Jr. The egg tempera technique, celebrated by Cennino, has its own set of challenges. It does not favor gestural spontaneity and the loaded brush. The process requires

Robert Vickrey
Myron's Graffiti, 2008
COURTESY
BRATTLEBORO MUSEUM
BRATTLEBORO,
VERMONT



meticulousness. The surface is typically coated with layers of gesso and sanded to “a finish as smooth as ivory piano keys,” in the words of exhibition curator Susan Calabria. The paint—powdered pigment mixed with fresh egg yolk, thinned with a little water—dries so quickly that blending and reworking are largely ruled out. There are plenty of variations. Medieval manuscript illuminators used egg white. Today, as in the early Renaissance, some painters judiciously employ oil glazes for finish.

Vickrey, who aims for something very different from the pellucid sheen of the old masters, scrapes his paint with a razor blade, stipples, sponges and sandpapers it. The result is an ambiguous shadow world of modernist uncertainties. In *Big Bird Booth* (2006), one of the artist’s signature figures, a nun

with a distinctive headdress, incongruously materializes on a carnival midway. In this dream-like night scene, the only light source is a prize booth filled with Sesame Street toys. Vickrey's grainy paint texture gives *Myron's Graffiti* (2008) a weathered look suitable to his subject, an old man with the gravitas of a Roman senator. Wrapped in a yellow blanket, Myron leans against a chalkboard covered in mysterious circles, parabolas and arrows. In the latter half of the twentieth century, the best-known practitioners of egg tempera were Vickrey and George Tooker. Tooker's figures have a timeless quality, which makes their situation particularly poignant as they move through the no-exit limbos of the age of anxiety, the subways and bureaucratic labyrinths that are the settings of his most-reproduced paintings. He can also be a lyrical classicist, as was amply demonstrated by a recent traveling retrospective of his work.² The Brattleboro exhibition includes only one Tooker, *The Dream* (1991), but it exemplifies the warm luminosity of his classicist style. The dozing figure, a bearded, barefoot man who could be Saint Joseph, and the radiant visitor appearing outside his window have the peachy glow that Tooker elicits from egg tempera.

The other, younger artists in the exhibition reflect changes in the American art scene, notably the realism revival of recent decades, and they seem especially intoxicated by what Philip Ball calls "the bright promise of pigments."³ At Brattleboro, two artists, Fred Wessel and Koo Schadler, demonstrated their techniques and discussed the historical context for their work. Both refer explicitly to the triumphal era of egg tempera, playing with medieval and early Renaissance pictorial motifs. Wessel follows in the footsteps of the Pre-Raphaelites, combining illusionistically three-dimensional figures with flat, decorative backdrops. His *La Mia Gioia* (1996) comes with all the appurtenances of a Renaissance court portrait, including a gilded architectural frame with handsome side pilasters. Victorian artists such as Lord Leighton regularly used this kind of frame to excellent effect; Wessel's presentation would be better without its too-heavy pediment, a problem of scale that seems slightly postmodern. The painting itself depicts a young girl in profile, arrayed as a princess with elaborately braided hair and ornate damask sleeves. Where a Renaissance artist would fill in the background with a softly blurred landscape, however, Wessel uses an expanse of glowing cobalt blue. The figure is thrown into bold silhouette, especially the plump hands holding a lily. The skin tones have real warmth.

Another icon of feminine beauty, *The Red Dress* (2002, cover), demonstrates a stronger grasp of how to integrate different periods and registers of realism. The model has a contemporary look, with a strong face and casually disheveled hair—the wisps of red-gold hair drifting across her face are exquisitely painted. The Renaissance is suggested by the acanthus molding running behind the figure and her sumptuous crimson bodice and white ruffled sleeves. The crucial element in the composition is the backdrop of

irregular sheets of gold leaf, more brilliant on the right, shading into mottled ruby on the left. The backdrop gives the picture its own internal light source and works, in a modern way, as a passage of painterly abstraction. Wessel takes the gold field of medieval painting, the *fondo d'oro*, and makes it new. Earlier artists burnished the gold, not just to bring out the shine but to make it richer, more nuanced. According to Cennino, “the gold becomes almost dark from its own brilliance.”²⁴

Koo Schadler, too, paints what could be described as Renaissance revival portraits, but her sensibility is different. Her human subjects are most often children, as in *Brother I (Ethan)*, from 2006, a profile portrait of a young boy. His red shirt and dark cap are contemporary, but the setting is medieval. He is framed by a Gothic stone niche, set on a parapet overlooking a cool landscape under an intense blue sky. The stone wall across the foreground, with a worn, chiseled inscription, is topped by plants and visited by an inquisitive lizard. Schadler is enamored of historical compositional forms, especially altarpieces and manuscript pages, and she seems particularly taken with the marginalia of the miniaturist. The psychological aspects of portraiture don't seem to interest her; she is at her best depicting animals or still-life elements.

In *Snowy Egret Enthroned* (2009), she reconceives the Flemish sacred court picture to celebrate, in an ecologically sensitive modern way, the endangered white bird. All the Early Netherlandish elements are there: the picturesque landscape in the background, the patterned tile floor, the Cloth of Honor that stands behind the Virgin's throne. But instead of Mary, the bird takes center stage, standing on a speckled stone/egg. An elegant pitcher, which in Marian iconography would hold three lilies, here has reeds, appropriate to a marsh bird. All the meticulously observed detail is subsumed into the stately hyper-reality of religious art. The painter's craftsmanship—the glitter of the bird's eye, the downiness of the feathers, the refinement of the deep yet translucent colors—becomes almost devotional, without a hint of sentimentality or cant. Schadler's *Fra Angelico and Milton* (2006) is a brilliant little compendium of creative quotation, beginning with the trompe l'oeil carved text, which reads, in part, “What if earth be but the shadow of heaven.” She captures the softly speckled stone tablet's texture, and the cool tones set off the warmth of the picture-within-a-picture, a Fra Angelico angel. The angel—with luminous skin, strawberry blond curls and robes of blush red—points, with one hand, to heaven and, with the other, to the text. Gold rays and a flat circle of a halo suggest celestial authority. Like the medieval manuscript illuminators, Schadler is also a naturalist, adding leaves and stones and butterflies to her page. But she makes the three leaves larger and more prominent, and they are imperfect specimens, discolored and ragged-edged. In the shallow yet illusionistic space, they cast delicate shadows. One holds a caterpillar, cousin to a pair of butterflies. The image celebrates the mutable beauty of earth as much as the splendor of eternity.

The husband-and-wife team of Pavel Ouporov and Suzanne Scherer also explore traditional subject matter, frequently ornamenting their surfaces with gold leaf and semi-precious stones. At times, their pictures have the look of Russian folktale illustrations, as in a recent show (April 1–30) at Arden Gallery in Boston, where Fred Wessel was also exhibiting his latest work. The American Scherer and the Russian Ouporov met at the Moscow Surikov State Academy Art Institute. Their two paintings in the Brattleboro exhibition, *Jacob's Ladder* and *Twilight* (both 2004), are oneiric scenes featuring their favorite protagonist, a young child, often naked, in a symbolic wood. The contemporary realism of the figure is juxtaposed against the flatter, more stylized form of sky constellations or a starry world tree. A contrast in color, between warm flesh tones and the deep blue-green of the setting, allows us to read the forest as a dream-projection.

While there would seem to be a natural congruence between what was long considered an archaic method and historicist subject matter, a number of egg tempera painters depict contemporary scenes or move toward abstraction. Doug Safranek updates the urban slice-of-life subjects of the Ashcan School. In *Fortune Place—Free Delivery* (2002), he looks down from an upper story in a Brooklyn neighborhood, with elevated tracks, take-out joints and Peter Luger, a legendary steak house. The soft glowing colors of egg tempera capture the poetry of evening light. *Ascending City* (1995) is an aerial overview, a vertiginous sweep of skyline plummeting to the streets, notable for the play of natural and artificial light. Even an ostensibly natural scene, *Out-to-See* (2009), is a Coney Island rush hour of bathers, without the architectural framework that shapes Safranek's best compositions.

Altoon Sultan studied with Philip Pearlstein, but her work has evolved in a more abstract direction. The outlines of the industrial objects that are her starting points remain but are seen in disorienting, frame-filling close-ups. Her titles emphasize her fascination with color and shape, which she sees as well-suited to the “crispness and luminosity” of tempera.⁵ The creamy yellow cylinders, silver bolts and blue plastic casings of *Blue Tubes* (2007) are vibrant, and the forms are convincingly three-dimensional. The distressed metal plates of *Blue Angles* (2007), on the other hand, have become almost otherworldly. *Yellow Crescent* (2007), with its bright green, russet brown and golden shapes, seems an exercise in geometric meditation. Robert Paul Saphier uses egg tempera in a more layered way, cumulatively building up veils, putting blue sky over an underpainting of Indian red, for example. His pictures are essentially symbolist landscapes, inspired by a number of spiritual traditions, notably the Golden Section and Divine Proportion of the Renaissance and Indian mandalas. *Flowering Geometry* (1998) floats a red flower on a blue-green surface that has been geometrically segmented. The painting has the look of a waterlily by the American esoteric painter and stained-glass master John La Farge. The blossom is sitting in a deep-blue vase which nearly



John Kensett, *Fort Dumpling*, c. 1871

FLORENCE GRISWOLD MUSEUM, OLD LYME, CONNECTICUT

disappears into the faceted aqueous ground. The aptly named *Recession* (2000) maintains a schematic illusion of three-dimensionality in the townscape at the bottom of the picture, but the sky above is a fantasia of color, criss-crossed by delicate branches.

Modern-day egg tempera artists have been reviving a technique out of favor for centuries. The landscape genre, however, never completely disappeared from art history. It lingers in Jackson Pollock's splatters and Robert Smithson's earth works. The amorphous forms of sky and water make it easy to see how representation and abstraction exist along a continuum. The Florence Griswold Museum, in Old Lyme, Connecticut, explored the creative exchange between past art and contemporary practice in "Tula Telfair: Landscapes in Counterpoint" (on view April 24–June 27). Telfair juxtaposed nine of her own monumental paintings with nearly forty nineteenth- and early twentieth-century landscapes from the museum's collection. Artists acting as curators can present familiar works in a fresh way by breaking out of the standard art historical narrative. Telfair, a professor of art at Wesleyan University, arranged her museum selections in floor-to-ceiling compositions, grouping them to explore formal themes such as paint-handling, color harmonies and lighting. Her own paintings—wilderness vistas saturated with light—clearly allude to the Hudson River School and nineteenth-century images of the American west. But Telfair, who spent her childhood in West Central Africa, distances herself from specific topography. Her landscapes are conceptual, fictional constructs, distilled in the studio from memories of real-world places, artworks and more

intangible qualities such as atmospheric effects. She called them “illusions of epic moments in nature.”

Her titles emphasize the difference between the nineteenth-century works and her paintings, which, she remarks, deal “simultaneously with both illusionism and modernism or abstraction.” Many of the Hudson River School paintings depict specific places: Frederic Church’s *The Charter Oak at Hartford* (c. 1846), John Kensett’s *Fort Dumpling* (c. 1871) and David Johnson’s *View near Greenwich, Connecticut* (1878). For modern viewers, the principal interest of Kensett’s painting lies in the diaphanous peach-toned light that fills the sky and shimmers across the water, in contrast to the blocky shadow of the fort. This is the sort of light we prize in the Luminists. Light is equally important in Telfair’s *Most Approaches Suffer from the Predictable Isolation of Schools* (all works 2010) but the abstract, philosophical title cues us in to the fact that this place does not exist in the phenomenal world. Telfair shows us a scrubby foreground in shadowy red and green. In the distance, a butte with a distinctive profile lies in sunset red-gold splendor, under a big sky of cerulean with lavender-grey and white clouds. It’s theatrical and slightly otherworldly. Like the sunset before the Indian attack in John Ford’s film *The Searchers* (1956), this Technicolor light emotionally heightens the reality of the scene even as we acknowledge its artificiality. In the nineteenth century, Church and Albert Bierstadt framed their huge canvases in proscenium arches, a proto-cinematic bit of stagecraft that celebrated the art of illusion. Telfair adds flat strips of color to the three edges of *Most Approaches*—shades of blue on the left and across the top, sage green on the right. She does this on all her landscapes, undercutting the illusion of spatial recession and reminding the viewer of the modernist dictum that the object in front of us is not a window but a two-dimensional surface covered with paint.

Hudson River School founder Thomas Cole claimed that “all nature here is new to art” and celebrated an American wilderness that was not “hackneyed and worn by the daily pencils of the hundreds.”⁶ The American landscapists were not ignorant of the genre’s tradition. The lessons of Claude were absorbed into their vocabulary, and Cole’s *Study for “A Wild Scene”* (1831)—with its loose paint-handling, waterfall and storm clouds—owes something to Salvator Rosa. But they cultivated an aura of strangeness as they created an American sublime. More than a century and a half later, American landscape painting has its own history and its own conventions. Telfair makes the genre fresh by placing it in a contemporary context and by reminding us that paintings are both works of imagination and acts of visual problem-solving. The scene in *Pure Formal Manipulation* is an apotheosis of northern nature: the hills are striated with rivulets of ice, the foreground lake has a cool shimmer, and the billowing grey-blue clouds are barely tinged with blush. Bands of grey, taupe and blue continue the low-toned palette. *Pleasure Was Considered Decadent* plays hot against cool, grey clouds against one of the signature gold hills lit



Tula Telfair, *Pure Formal Manipulation*, 2010

COURTESY FORUM GALLERY, NEW YORK CITY

from within. In these unpopulated vistas, the viewer is kept at a distance, even from the most prominent features. In *Non-Invasive Methods of Examination Were Lacking*, we look down through pearly grey-blue clouds at a mountain ridge. The aerial point of view is Olympian. The narrow bands of blue, brown and pinky-lilac reinforce the sense of disorientation. One of the most immediately appealing of Telfair's suite of works, *The Essential Elements of Romanticism*, captures the elusive quality that William Wordsworth called "the light that never was, on sea or land / The consecration and the poet's dream" ("Elegiac Stanzas, Suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle"). Under the diffuse light of

yellowish clouds, a silvery, meandering stream draws the eye through a dark blue-green marsh toward a line of grey hills on the horizon. Some artists get to the heart of the matter by focusing intently on the details of the visual world. Others, like Telfair, take a more oblique approach, investigating what she terms “the subjectivity of perception and the power of memory.”

There are many ways for contemporary artists to explore tradition, and it is to be hoped that more museums will mount exhibitions such as “Egg Tempera: Contemporary Masters” and “Tula Telfair: Landscapes in Counterpoint.” Brattleboro Museum and Art Center, 10 Union Street, Union Railroad Station, Brattleboro, Vermont 05310. Telephone (802) 258-9182. On the web at www.brattleboromuseum.org. Florence Griswold Museum, 96 Lyme Street, Old Lyme, Connecticut 06371. Telephone (860) 434-5542. On the web at www.florencegriswoldmuseum.org

NOTES

1. Cited, Philip Eliasoph, *Robert Vickrey: The Magic of Realism* (Manchester and New York: Hudson Hills Press, 2008). See also the artist's manuals, *New Techniques in Egg Tempera* (1973) and *Robert Vickrey: Artist at Work* (1979).
2. “George Tooker: A Retrospective,” at the National Academy Museum, New York City, 2008–09.
3. Philip Ball, *Bright Earth: Art and the Invention of Color* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), p. 35.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 98.
5. See Altoon Sultan, *The Luminous Brush: Painting with Egg Tempera* (New York: Watson Guphill, 1999).
6. Cited, Barbara Novak, *American Painting of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Praeger, 1969), p. 61.