

# Daniel Sprick's Fictions: Flesh, Bone and Paint

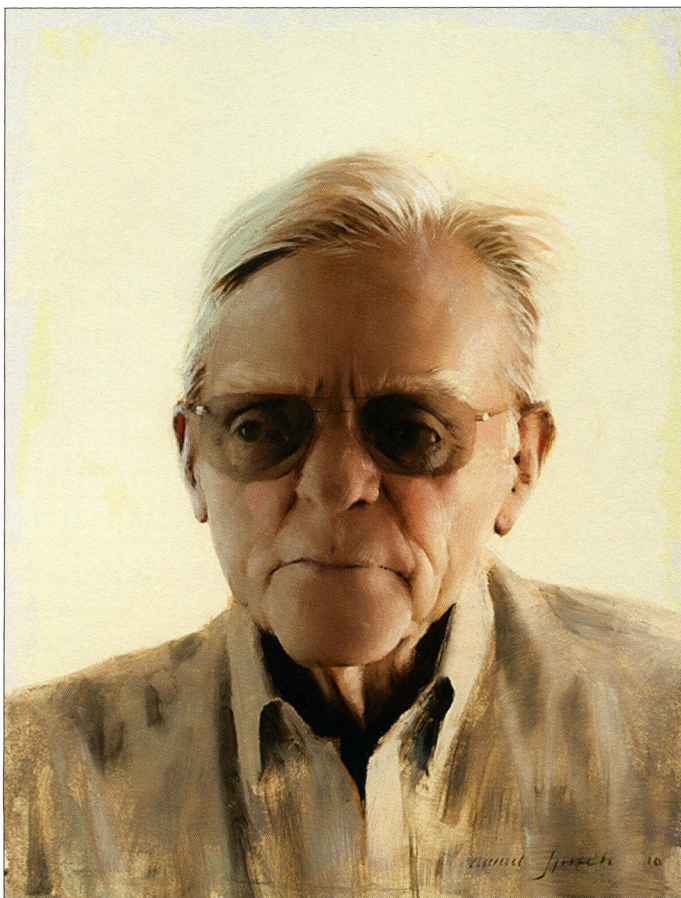
by Gail Leggio

Paintings are fictional constructs, part of a visual universe with its own language, realized through the properties of a physical medium (oil, watercolor, acrylic, etc.). The modernists popularized the idea, which lay at the root of their credo, but good painters have always acknowledged the principle. For contemporary realists, the challenge is to balance formal and conceptual demands with the traditional practice of mimesis. The exhibition "Daniel Sprick's Fictions: Recent Works," currently at the Denver Art Museum, presents over forty paintings by an artist who explores the complexities of representation with skill and depth.

Sprick has become well-known for his mysterious interiors, which often feature mirrors. Traditionally, mirrors signify both truth (holding the mirror up to nature) and illusion (smoke and mirrors), a duality aptly suited to the artwork. Sprick exploits this ambiguity in *Bird and Mirror* (2010), in which a



*Through My Fingers*, 2010, COURTESY DENVER ART MUSEUM, DENVER, COLORADO



*My Father*, 2011  
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large mirror—propped up on an easel, like a painting within a painting—perfectly reflects a tabletop still life. The image reflected in the mirror is, in fact, sharper than its double, because the mirror captures the light from a window, the brightest light in an otherwise shadowy room. The mirror is a fiction, using illusion to reveal the truth with enhanced clarity. An erect bird skeleton, a beautifully articulated memento mori, dominates the still life. Another bird skeleton appears—among more pragmatic objects, including the artist's glasses—in *Corner Window and Bird* (2011). The table with the still life occupies the corner of a room with floor-to-ceiling windows. The windows, another metaphor for the way paintings organize our ways of looking, frame landscapes of houses, trees and distant mountains. Diffuse light blurs the distinction between interior and exterior.

Sprick loves bones. Skulls figure prominently in traditional iconography, in the cells of penitent saints and vanitas still lifes. *Through My Fingers* (2010) features an off-beat vanitas still life, with a skull and a white rose, among others items. Sprick suggests a magician's illusion by wrapping the supporting struc-



ture in white drapery.

The Mexican Day of the Dead has generated a *dramatis personae* of paradoxically lively skeletons. Sprick inevitably picks up on the cultural resonance, but he seems primarily interested in the architecture of bones, which he explores in various ways. The elegantly mounted bird skeletons in his silver-toned still lifes are exquisite objets d'art. The human specimen in *Reclining Skeleton* (2011) packs a more visceral punch. Bony hands seem to grasp the supporting table, and the arrangement suggests a model posing for an artist. The raised knees and ribcage mimic the shape of Gothic arches. Instead of grey, diffuse light, Sprick chooses a warm white void of a background, silhouetting the bones against something like movie-projector light. The same light provides a backdrop for *Strange Remains* (2010), an uncanny display of disconnected bones, scattered across a polished floor. The cleanness of the spare, modern space highlights the primeval power of the bones; some stand on end like totems.

The interiors and skeletons bring to the forefront the conceptual aspect of Sprick's work. But the vast majority of the paintings in the Denver exhibition are portraits, an apparently more straightforward genre, or figure studies, another bedrock of contemporary realism. *Nude (Loni, Standing)*, from 2009, sculpts the slender figure through chiaroscuro, making pale flesh gleam in a dusky room. *Figure Chair (Loni, Seated)*, from 2011, boldly combines the human form with the graphic lines of a chrome-and-black-strap modernist chair. Against the intense white of the backdrop, the composition has the energy of a Franz Kline abstraction. Although the model's face is cropped out, the warmth of her skin and the strength of her body make the figure seem both approachably human and heroic.

Many of Sprick's portraits are of the head-and-shoulders variety, a formula that can easily turn into a cliché. But he keeps it fresh, capturing the personalities of his models while continuing to experiment with the possibilities of the painted surface. His sophisticated compositional skills stand out in *Tbo* (2012), a close-up portrait of a young Asian woman. She raises her arms to pull back her hair, framing her face. Sprick plays dark shapes—her hair, her clothes, the rounded shadows of her face—against the white shapes of the backdrop. He captures the softness of her skin with tight rendering but lets us see his brushwork in the hair, with visible paint streaks of black and white. Brushwork creates a vibrating energy field in *Carmel* (2013). The model, an attractive mature woman with a big smile, stands in front of what looks like an abstract sunset landscape. (Described in the catalogue as a work in progress, the picture may eventually acquire the white backdrop of other portraits in this group.) Sprick outlines her shoulders in ragged black lines, highlights her arms with patches of white, and blurs the borders of her dark hair in a nimbus of gestural brushmarks. His paint-handling feels loose, spontaneous, impromptu, although his faces have a remarkable degree of finish. His skill at achieving the illusion of flesh-over-bone realism, manipulating structure and texture, is rock solid.

Sprick's style of portraiture is casual, rather than formal. His sitters— young and old, reflecting a range of ethnicities—strike us as individuals we might encounter in our everyday lives. They bear no attributes of status or markers of achievement. Clothes (when we see them at all) are nondescript. There are no setting details, just a blank, abstract space. The artist avoids editorializing, even in *Moses Homeless* (2012). While Sprick adopts a low angle that gives the model an almost monumental dignity, he clearly responds to the painterly possibilities of the man's wiry beard, hair and eyebrows, bristly with tendrils of white paint. The Victorian photographer Julia Margaret Cameron achieved a similar effect—the unsentimental, naturalistic halo—in her portrait of the astronomer Sir John Herschel. In *My Father* (2011), Sprick emphasizes the luminosity of the model's crisply cut white hair, as it blends into the other-worldly backdrop.

Most of the works in the show could be classified as realist portraits, but that deceptively modest description in no way implies a lack of ambition. As the exhibition curator, Timothy J. Standring, remarks in his excellent catalogue essay, Sprick, “by sticking to realism...opens up a Pandora's box of criticism that judges art based on standards of accuracy.”<sup>1</sup> Sprick achieves a highly convincing illusion of three-dimensional life, a touchstone of the realist artist's skill. His people are round rather than flat, a distinction also used by literary critics to differentiate nuanced characters from stock figures. The pragmatic uses of portraiture—to flatter, to memorialize, to document, to engage in psychological or sociological analysis—are largely irrelevant to Sprick's enterprise. Nor is straightforward mimesis—if mimesis can ever be straightforward—his primary goal. Standring writes that Sprick's “subject matter may be recognizable and representational, but...the subjects offer the foundations that enable him to create a world built up from his own language, vocabulary and syntax.”<sup>2</sup> Or as William Butler Yeats's spirit guides told him, laying out the occult system he outlines in “A Vision”: “we have come to give you metaphors for poetry.”

While creating a convincing likeness may not be the realist artist's ultimate *raison d'être*, it is an important and complex part of the art-making process. Sprick's subjects look natural; their body language seems unrehearsed. We feel we are glimpsing something of their interior lives, although they also guard their privacy. Some compositions play with traditional personae but do not succumb to the lure of archetypes. In *Jared* (2012), the bearded, unclothed young man with long dreadlocks has a rock star/pirate glamour, but the expectation of swagger is undermined by his subtly averted gaze and air of introspection. In *Nicky* (2009), another young man with long hair confronts us, eyes lowered and arms hanging straight at his sides, like a Christ figure. The face and unclothed body, mostly in shadow, stand out sharply against the luminous void of the background. The artist has captured a momentary transfiguration, but he has not exhausted the possibilities of this individual model. In another





*Julia*, 2012  
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*Nicky* (also 2009), he shows the subject in profile, skinny and stoop-shouldered. Sprick maintains a careful balance, in his portraits, between intimacy and reserve. Unlike T.S. Eliot's *Prufrock*, his subjects do not need to "prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet." Sprick gets beyond the façade, but he does not pry.

Sprick finds a formal rigor compatible with naturalism. What are the roots of this aesthetic? In "The Mask and the Face: The Perception of Physiognomic Likeness in Life and Art," E.H. Gombrich suggests that the snapshot changed the way we think about portraiture and the "problem of likeness." The snapshot "has drawn attention to the paradox of capturing life in a still, of freezing the play of features in an arrested moment."<sup>3</sup> In *Ketsia* (2013), the model—a young black woman with braided hair piled up—cocks her head and smiles, somewhat wistfully. Sprick emphasizes the roundness of her cheeks, the light on her shoulder and in her eyes. But the image seems particularly alive because the edges of the figure are unstable; illusion dissolves into visible brushstrokes. Her hair flies away into a gestural passage of paint. Sprick attends closely to

the forms generated as his models shift position. In another *Ketsia* (also 2013), the model closes her eyes, as if dreaming. Sprick captures her in profile, elegantly silhouetted against the light. Patches of white paint begin to break up her shoulders at the bottom of the image, while her braided hair erupts into an Abstract Expressionist tangle. Sprick's models tend to be quiet, even laconic: he avoids the exaggerations that are the stock-and-trade of caricature. Yet, while he is attentive to their moods and the variety of formal possibilities, he preserves the continuity of the individual. This skill allows him to, in Gombrich's words, "produce a convincing likeness not only of the mask but also of the face, the living expression."<sup>4</sup>

Sprick achieves "the living expression," the appearance of vitality, while simultaneously exposing the raw material of his craft—paint as paint. In *Raj* (2012), a man's face coalesces, with insightful clarity, from a scumble of paint marks: his shirt is made up of slashes and drips, the edges of his hair capture the artist's hand in visible, almost calligraphic strokes. The emphatic gestures of black-over-white and white-over-black signal that this is a painting, that all this—from the palpable illusion of the face to the vortex of brushstrokes—is what a painter can do. Even the white backdrop, which is too luminously alive to be simply blank, is an artistic creation.

In the catalogue, Standing describes watching Sprick in his studio, roughing up the gesso surface with steel wool for tooth, laying on a pale magenta ground, using a surprising palette—sap green, ultramarine, cobalt, turquoise—for images that seem, when finished, subdued in color.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps that hidden chromatic richness accounts for the extraordinary depth of his flesh tones, as well as the warmth of his white. Sprick sometimes leaves the edges of the picture raw, reminding us that the white field is as much an illusion as anything on the canvas. He lets us see the darker material underneath around the borders of *Lady in Swimsuit* (2011). The abstractionist Robert Ryman does something similar in his all-white works, reminding us that simplicity itself can be an illusion and, not incidentally, calling attention to fine gradations of texture and color. For painters, white is a color, not the absence of color.

Many of Sprick's models close their eyes, perhaps losing themselves in their own dream worlds. Rather than making them seem passive, these trances look like a variety of self-empowerment. The artist communicates this energy through his paint-handling. In *Sherry* (2012), the model stretches her long neck, and the artist relishes the architecture of her head and shoulders, and the way the light caresses the contours of her face. Brushstrokes form a gestural halo around her dark hair and drift like a waterfall down her back. In *Julia* (2012), we can see the brushstrokes that create the light on her cheeks and closed eyelids. The eyebrows are drawn with bold strokes. Her dangling earrings, delicate drops of pearl, are as pellucid as Vermeer's jewels. Her dark hair, casually tied up, explodes in a pyrotechnic display of paint—swirls, splattered pigment, like ash from Vesuvius, Romantic storm clouds.



Some consider portraiture a too-predictable genre for realists. But Sprick practices it as a truly adventurous mode of art-making, worthy of a superb painter's skill. "Daniel Sprick's Fictions: Recent Works" is on view June 29–November 2, 2014, at the Denver Art Museum, 100 West 14th Avenue Parkway, Denver, Colorado 80204. [denvermuseum.org](http://denvermuseum.org)

#### NOTES

1. Timothy J. Standring, *Daniel Sprick's Fictions: Recent Works* (Denver: Denver Art Museum, 2014), p. 11.
2. Ibid.
3. E.H. Gombrich, Julian Hochberg and Max Black, *Art, Perception and Reality* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Press, 1972), p. 16.
4. Ibid., p. 17.
5. Standring, p. 9.

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