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The Museum Is Their Muse; They're the National Gallery School -- Local Artists Who Study Before The Masters

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What really gets them is the shock of the old.

All around the city, even as you read this, dozens, perhaps scores, of them are in their studios painting. They are artists of a distinctive sort. You can tell them by their passion for craft. They're ravished by the way Rembrandt tones a shadow, or Van Dyck selects a pose. Difficult skills intrigue them, old disciplines attract them. They're our diligent depictors. They make Washingtonian art.

It's not the measly market that keeps these knowing painters here, it's the fabulous museums. That's where they learned to paint, and where they are still learning, and where they find the masters they constantly consult. Their reverence for precedent and their stubborn lack of chic are also fastened to this city. Almost without knowing it, this scattering of painters has formed a kind of school here, and it ought to have a name.

It ought to have a name that's both local and suggestive of the sort of art they do. So, honoring their lineage (and their shrine, their Land of Plenty, their mother church and Wailing Wall) and acknowledging their debts, let's call it the National Gallery School.

National Gallery School painters know as well as anyone what's hot. They've attended the biennials, seen the exhibitions, scanned the magazines. They know about the vogues for art-as-installation, for video art, AIDS art, body art, media art and art that whirs and bleeps. But they no longer care.

"Painting," the New York Times last week told its readers, "is no longer the vanguard."

National Gallery School painters paint on nonetheless. They're not worried about painting, they think painting's doing fine. They rather take another view. They think the art world's cutting edge has gone wobbly and dull. They don't accept that art progresses. The notion of an avant-garde steadily advancing through transient revolutions -- startling the bourgeoisie while undoing the past -- strikes them as enfeebled. Early in this century the fierce Italian futurists saw blowing up museums as a way to set art free. Gallery School painters take another view of freedom, and of license. It's not that they hate video art. They just don't want to do it. They prefer the thought of picking up where others have left off. They accept that moving forward may involve stepping back.

"If you want to be completely safe," says A. Clarke Bedford, one of them, "just put a railroad tie in the middle of a gallery. You're juxtaposing color, rough power and a beautiful interior, and there's no way you can fail." Bedford, in his own work, prefers to confront Steichen and the Parthenon, Demuth and Brancusi. He says, "There is something much more interesting about the harder game."

So many Gallery School painters play it: Manon Cleary, Joe Shannon, Jack Boul, Mark Leithauser, Fred Folsom, Michael Clark, William Dunlap, Tom Mullany, Martin Kotler, and many more.

There have been other schools of painting here, most notably the Color School, which -- by combining the big scale of Jackson Pollock's canvases with Duncan Phillips's colors and minimalist geometries -- produced fresh abstractions that were once the art world's vogue.

National Gallery School painters calculate perspective, are students of cast shadows, and draw the human figure, none of which is fashionable. They do nudes, still lifes, portraits, landscapes; they use oil paints and glazes, copperplates and chalks. Their core affections are pre-modernist. They have educated eyes.

National Gallery School painters are addicted to museums, to the feast of pictures served here, which is richer, less expensive and more thoughtfully presented than any offered elsewhere. They crave frequent, direct contact with the grandest works of art.

And National Gallery School painters still believe in painting -- in 30,000 years of it all stretched out before them. This belief sets them apart.

They value its traditions, its minimal technologies (a stick with hairs attached, a bit of colored goo, a flat surface to paint on) and the way it opens worlds. Their belief in the centrality of painting is shared by most museums. But in important circles of the contemporary art world it is not considered hip.

Taking on the masters, painting against Titian, or Seurat or Velazquez, may be thought regressive. But it isn't easy. A contemporary installation made out of street detritus may be assembled well or badly, but it's often hard to tell. When National Gallery School painters fail, and they often do, when the light is inconsistent, the colors out of tune, the portrait not a likeness, everybody notices. These painters take that risk.

For the past month, two of Washington's Gallery School painters -- Joe Shannon and Manon Cleary -- have been showing their pictures at the Maryland Art Place in Baltimore. Both stress the human figure. Both play the harder game.

Cleary, who burnishes her surfaces, specializes in ambiguous self-portraits, many of them nudes. They're both lyric and horrific. She's been making them for years. The horror lurks in Cleary's implied plots (those rapes and screams and smotherings) and also in her props (those bones, those red-eyed rats), but it is mostly overcome, and gentled, by a kind of smoothed-out loveliness. Cleary's colors are Pompeii's, her shadowing Italian. Her victim stuff seems secondary. What her pictures are about is the way light contours flesh.

What makes Cleary a National Gallery School painter is her debt to Caravaggio. That great Italian realist (1573-1610) set the standards for her shadows. She calls him "an obsession." Seeing his art in Rome, she says, "made me a figure painter and kept me a figure painter." Cleary, who teaches at the University of the District of Columbia, often takes her classes to the National Gallery of Art, where, like other Gallery School painters, she tends to feed selectively. She says that 1983's "Painting in Naples From Caravaggio to Giordano" was "the finest exhibition that they have ever done."

Art museums are decorous places, and Washington's Joe Shannon spent 12 years at the Hirshhorn, but his big and antic figure groups aren't decorous at all.

They're raucous, bawdy, sexy and loud. Shannon's name is Irish, but he was born in Puerto Rico, which might help you understand his preference for carnival. In Shannon's painted worlds -- where the music is too brassy, the colors are too raw and misbehavior's on the loose -- the artist and his colleagues dispense with the proprieties, stick their tongues out and drop trou.

Clowning is permitted in Shannon's vision of the art world -- where the phonies show their phoniness, and Pan, the goat-eared god, is present to cause panic, and basketballs are bouncing, and the big guns all get tweaked. In one big work in Baltimore -- "Dance Life: High Rise, Low Down" -- Shannon gibes at Jasper Johns, Brice Marden and de Kooning, and at his own blind lust.

There is one zone, however, in which Shannon is unsmiling. He cares deeply for depicting the moving human figure, and his fervent admiration for those who've done it best -- among them Degas and Watteau -- is a constant in his art. Shannon sees the painting of Velazquez as "something to aim for, with no hope of attaining." He says of the Van Dyck exhibition at the National Gallery, "I couldn't keep away."

That's one intriguing thing about National Gallery School painters: They each pick their guides, and they mostly do so for private, inexplicable reasons of their own.

As groups of working artists go, this one is more scattered, less conformist than are most. They don't hang out together, a lot of them don't even know one another. No single gallery represents them. And their pictures do not look alike. Some are tiny, some enormous, some startle, others soothe.

Jack Boul's may be the smallest. They're certainly the gentlest. Boul, who works suggestively in monotype and oil, conjures figures in interiors, light glancing off meadows, glimpses of Italian streets, and lots of grazing cows. He early on decided that he'd never earn a living making pictures of such subjects, and that decision freed him. He is 70 years old. His themes may seem too quiet, but his surfaces surprise, and his touch is sure. The smallest of his pictures is no larger than your palm. In 1997, with humility in the art world the scarcest of commodities, Boul's modesty feels huge.

The artists whom he most consults are those who painted out of doors just before the ignition of impressionism. He likes the quiet, pastoral Barbizon School landscapists, the Italian Macchiaioli, and Whistler, Degas and Corot.

The little paintings of Jack Boul and the big ones of Joe Shannon share only that note of pedigree, but that's enough to bond them to the National Gallery School.

If one painter crystallizes its values, it is Mark Leithauser. You may not know his name, but if you saw Vermeer or Tut, the country houses show, Titian or Cambodia, you have seen his superb work. For 20 years, Leithauser has been showing us his subtle skills -- he's a draftsman and an etcher, an architect and a dramaturge -- in major exhibits at the National Gallery of Art, whose design department he heads.

He may be the best-educated artist living. At least nobody has known more varied masterworks than he. Aztec carvings, imperial Chinese treasures, Pacific island masks, Rembrandts, Leonardos -- Leithauser has actually touched these things, moved them about, examined them them in situ. He also is a painter, and his education is apparent in his art.

Something in his art suggests old fables told at night in wintertime in the shadows around fires. Leithauser's trompe l'oeil still lifes and his once-upon-a-time northern-woodsy landscapes are fastidiously fashioned and fastidiously sourced. In a single work he'll call to mind Kyoto and Michigan, Ingres, Giambologna, Peto and Hokusai, and in nearly every image, there behind the masters, one can sense the shade of the late Gil Ravenel, his design department predecessor and mentor, winking in delight. You might think that the unbluffable difficulties of National Gallery School paintings might veil the emotions, the individualities, of the artists who produce them, but this does not seem to be the case. Craft can be releasing. In emotions given out, Cleary's work and Leithauser's, despite a shared meticulousness, could hardly be less alike.

Fred Folsom's theme is faith -- though the setting he has chosen (that seediest of strip clubs), and the figures he depicts there (those losers and boozers), might delay one's recognition that his is Christian art. Jesus, in these paintings, is implicit in the love that saves the foulest sinners. The art of the museums glows in them as well. You can see that in the way characters from Rembrandt, and others from Manet, appear in Folsom's oils to witness God's redemptions -- and perhaps to tie the painter to the National Gallery School.

The painters of that company don't have one mentor only. So grand are the museums here that they can mix and match.

Unlikely as it sounds, the formal grids of Mondrian, and the brio of George Bellows, that American Scene vitalist, and the colors of Corot calmly coexist in the strong streetscapes painted out of doors here by Martin J. Kotler. Kotler says Corot "enveloped" him, and adds he must have gone to see "Corot in Italy" at the National Gallery more than 20 times.

William Dunlap -- a painter well known in Washington as both a nostalgic rememberer of his native South and a nice-guy-about-town -- says the Luminist exhibition there was a show that changed his life. Among the teachers chosen by artist Tom Mullany, who both sculpts and paints, are Thomas Hart Benton and Tiepolo, Will Rogers and Stanford White.

And then there's Michael Clark -- who differs from his colleagues in that he's a Washington Color painter and a National Gallery School painter too.

In his recent pear and orange still lifes (many of them painted cooperatively with his wife, Felicity Hogan), Clark successfully pulls off the most unlikely combination: His hues and broken brush strokes, filtered through the Phillips Collection and the lessons of the Color School, come straight out of French pointillism. His fields with hard edges are minimalist. And yet his cunningly colored paintings suggest something else entirely. They're so traditionally American, so formally polite, that they could hang over the sideboard in any Georgetown dining room. Clark's fruit pieces are curiously hybrid. Imagine, if you can, one of Raphael Peale's table-top still lifes painted by Seurat and Barnett Newman with a scent of Martha Stewart thrown in just for fun.

There are others, too. William Woodward, Frank Wright, Bill Newman, Lee Newman, John Winslow, Val Lewton, Judy Jashinsky, Charles Flickinger, Edward Knippers, Eric Sandberg, and Robert Liberace, Washington artists all of them, are all attached, centrally or peripherally, to the National Gallery School.

Not all of them are all that good. We're not always talking about genius here. Some of them paint pictures that almost make your teeth hurt. Still, there is no way to truly gauge the state of art in Washington without factoring in the painters of the National Gallery School. These independent artists have kept a flame burning. They have done so with small help from the dealers or the critics or the curators who validate contemporary art. Their fidelity to painting is a loyalty that matters.