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The magic of still life

Still life paintings are many times a passion project for the artists who create them, as they engage in the work from initial material setup to the final brushstroke. In the upcoming exhibit *The Magic of Still Life* at Tree's Place in Orleans, Massachusetts, artists **Dana Levin**, **Colin Berry**, and **Steven J. Levin** will showcase new still lifes that are individual to each of them.

For Massachusetts-based artist Dana Levin, still life paintings begin with an idea of the objects and shapes she would like to incorporate, not the complete composition.

"If I go in with a preconceived idea of exactly what I want it to be, I won't be open enough to see if there is something better or interesting," says Dana. "I take out everything that has to do with the thought I am having, and I start moving things around and taking things off the table. The objects left on the table are things I feel have some kind of relationship or mood or have a relationship in terms of their shapes or their significance and I can see that by leaving those items together."

More recently Dana has found a white tablecloth to be prominent in her pieces. In one such work, *Lovers*, viewers will not only see the white tablecloth, but another new element. "*Lovers* was the first time I did an imaginary background. The table was there, but there is a plant under the table that wasn't, and the room behind the table wasn't there. I put it all in afterward," Dana says. "The fact it's imaginary isn't important to me; it's the mood that it sets up."

Another avenue Dana has been exploring recently is working on polyester. She finds the surface is very stable and has been favorable for the cold-weather environment in which she lives. Her painting *My Guide*, a still life of a bell and a photograph, was the first she painted using the polyester surface.

Berry is recognized for his still life paintings inspired by his Fulbright year in Italy. The works combine objects and landscape, with his new pieces focusing on floral subjects. Many times the subjects are



shown on a ledge with a picturesque scene in the background.

"You just fall in love with the atmosphere and the variety of color you find in the Italian landscape," says the New Hampshire artist. "It's a little bit more varied there than we get in the U.S., which makes it very interesting and romantic, which kind of brings a different mood and feeling to

the work. This setup with the still life or the floral in front of the landscape reflects an aesthetic I like to bring into the work. It's less about a narrative and more about a mood and a feeling and an aesthetic the combination produces."

Berry's paintings begin with the subject, and after selecting the objects for the painting, he will build landscape ideas and

colors to accommodate the subject. While much of his work is done directly from life, Berry also uses photographic references. For the floral works, he will sometimes take photos since the flowers can be fleeting. His background landscapes also come from images—occasionally he recycles photos that have struck a new interest or idea.

Minnesota artist Steven J. Levin will present still lifes in the show that continue his series involving hats and bird's nests, and also a new series that combines disparate objects, such as books, vines and butterflies. His 28-by-22-inch work *Books and Butterflies* is from the latest grouping.

Having used butterflies previously, Steven is drawn to the symbolism of delicacy and metamorphosis. The old books, he explains, are tattered and more permanent, while the butterflies are the delicate element.

“With the vine I wanted a way to tie the objects together, so I weaved the vine around the books, and it gave a reason for the butterflies to be there,” says Steven of *Books and Butterflies*. He also explains that the vine goes from dead to blooming as it laces up the scene. He notes the books are old, but the book on the top of the stack is opened, hinting someone just set it down. All of these elements show there is a sense of life in the painting.

“The great thing about a still life is you can do anything you want,” Steven says. “You can put together all sorts of objects, and it has to do with the beauty of the objects themselves—textures, lights, etc... There might not be a direct narrative—as there is in a figurative painting, for instance—but you can imply a lot of things. It’s fun for the artist because they can bring the viewer in, and they can come up with their own narrative.” ●



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1
Steven J. Levin,
Books and Butterflies,
oil on canvas, 28 x 22"

2
Colin Berry,
Velvet Serenade,
oil on board, 14 x 11"

3
Colin Berry, *Shells*,
oil on board, 16 x 20"

4
Dana Levin, *Lovers*,
oil on linen, 30 x 20"



3



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