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Brooklyn Flowers by David Wells Roth

IN THE THRALL OF SPACE; THE BLAZE OF LIGHT

"...the paint itself has to be alive, it has to speak. The paint is the subject."

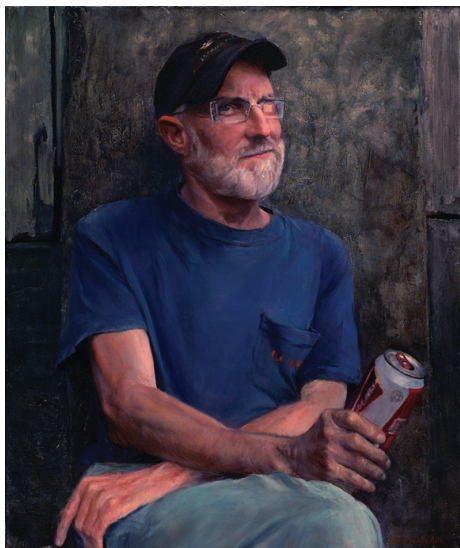
David Wells Roth.

by Adrienne Garnett

Everything an artist observes and experiences feeds that voracious eye and avid appetite for elements to propel the work.

David Wells Roth is widely recognized for his series of Judicial Portraits as well as for his comprehensive portfolio that also includes vibrant urban and street scenes, portraits, figures, coastal land/seascapes from Europe and America and many other notable historical paintings.

Born in 1957 and growing up in Florida near Eglin Air Force Base that presented annual air shows displaying the latest test vehicles, young David dreamed of vast dark spaces pierced by dazzling lights. "I was fascinated by space. I found the stark contrast of light and shadow inspiring. I tried to capture the phenomenon of the emptiness of space; the concept of solitude of the people suspended against a black, starry sky. It gave me not a feeling of loneliness or longing, but instead a feeling of limitless vastness with infinite possibilities. I can't say what psychological mechanism allowed me to be attracted to particularly these themes, but I believe they continue to influence many aspects of my work."



Mike, Oil on linen 36" x 30"



Night Vender, Oil on canvas 24" x 30"

David (whose father is an electrical engineer, radar designer and inventor who studied advanced physics) grew up thoroughly intrigued by his early associations with the space industry. He would visit the air force base and sit in the cockpit of the X-15 rocket hybrid; smelling the jet fuel and glorying in the walls of instrumentation, loving the space industry. A 1965 LIFE Magazine article that featured the Gemini 4 astronaut experience captured his imagination; he mused "...how beautiful is the jewel of the earth!" David's life-long obsession with the awesome Stanley Kubrick film masterpiece "2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY" (in full Cinerama, 1968), augmented by the gripping visual, aural and emotional spectacle was made palpable. He is thrilled during each new viewing by "...the highly contrasted light; the vastness; the solitude; the freedom." Study Roth's night scenes in the city and let all of your senses light up.

David exhibited early signs of keen visual and aesthetic observation: at age four the boy began drawing lessons and studied at home under his parent's guidance and at various museums. Making his first oil painting at age 10 he discovered and further explored rich and sophisticated tonalities that went on to inform his later palette. The sensitive/intuitive portraits of Abraham Lincoln that young David made reveal an astounding acuity and graphic skill.

Roth's passion for drawing was further sparked by his father's insightful use of city street scenes for teaching perspective; he was fascinated by magical illusions of 3-D space that transformed the flat surface of his paper. David's mother was also a major inspiration. As a college art student she had studied under Abstract Expressionist painter Robert Motherwell. Motherwell's intuitive and practiced structural awareness can be seen

supporting many of Roth's more realistic compositions.

"I loved drawing and painting from life and observation... My formal art education came during college and was based on understanding how 'to see,' it stressed the observation of light and form and how to interpret them through paint." With continued intensive practice "...the 'rigid' basic elements such as perspective and form are now handled more or less intuitively, freeing me to allow the paint to speak and flow, permitting me to explore my emotional expressions from my conscious and sub-conscious feelings of the world around me."

Still just in high school in Massachusetts while visiting NYC with his family, Roth made powerful drawings and paintings to convey his visual and emotional impressions of the isolation and dismal conditions of his family's former South Bronx neighborhood. These were amplified by his studies of the urban art of Wayne Thiebaud, Richard Diebenkorn, Richard Estes and Edward Hopper. "As a teenager, I became aware of homeless people in New York City and the rundown buildings of my parents' old neighborhoods. I drew and painted many of these scenes, which struck a chord relating to my earlier depictions of space. I was drawn to the sense of isolation and solitude I felt from them, and the grittiness of their environment, and I tried to express those ideas in my work."

Roth's career was bolstered in 1975 by a Ford Foundation scholarship to Boston University where he earned his Bachelor of Fine Arts in painting. Right after college (1980) he ventured to NYC for two years and refined his "peoplescapes" within the city. Times were tough for fledging artists; Roth often lived in his car while he painted and sold views of Central Park and his personalized New York City street documentae to passersby from a portable French easel.

HERMES at 29TH and BROADWAY: Roth calls this painting is a "self-portrait": we see the artist anonymously scouring the wet city in the darkness of night for visions to share in paint. With his sketch pad and painting gear strapped to his bike and back-lit by brilliant headlights, he is bringing awareness of a different facet of our world to us; the weight of the buildings, the exciting and mysterious luminescence of the piercing light refractions haunting our inner selves. Wikipedia tells us that in Greek mythology Hermes was the emissary and messenger of the gods. He is described as moving freely between the worlds of the mortal and the divine "...a bringer of dreams, a watcher by night". He was also cited in DANUBIAN HISTORICAL STUDIES, (1988, p. 32) in the



The Bridge, Oil on linen 48"x 48"

"role of mediator between the worlds of the visible and invisible" ... the role of the artist.

THE (BROOKLYN) BRIDGE: "...I'm not painting an underpass necessarily, I'm painting the shapes...with the light reacting off of it." Yes, he loves space with light contrasting the shade, but he is clearly also painting the city's underbelly with its own social contrasts; the roller-coaster flow of the roadway (energy and action inherent within still forms); the programmed movement of viewers eyes; the ups and downs of inhabitants lives and so many intersecting angles.

BROOKLYN FLOWERS (cover): We see the masked man (Lone Ranger-like mask of shade) riding his trusty "Silver" in the shadowy canyons of Brooklyn; his partially hidden face is looking away from the scene. We see splashes of paint and color and a pregnant girl laden with bulging plastic bags. She too is looking away from the spotlighted scene as she leans against the doorway wall. The display window houses clusters of "love-token" flowers while shining brilliant light out into the darkness.

THE NIGHT VENDOR: The night vendor's world (his life, his rituals) is illuminated for a moment in the passage of night. David describes: "I was walking through my old neighborhood reliving past times, thoughts, feelings, observations, when I came upon

the night vendor's stand. I was struck by the nobility of it all; the vendor standing there like a regal knight, a prince...I could see it all: the knight's shield, his sword, his pose in profile while surveying his realm." Nearby, an otherworldly window to the everyday, to our time, reveals a night garage looming out of the darkness.

A fortuitous opportunity facilitated Roth's next move to France and Italy for fifteen years. While he was struggling financially in NY, a French family invited the young artist to live with them in their home in Fontaine de Vaucluse in the South of France and offered the use of an old Renault for a few months in exchange for one of his New York paintings. The light and energy in this new creative



Road in P-Town with Cat, Oil on canvas 11"x14"
11"x14"



National Seashore, Oil on linen 26"x30"



Reliance sailing, Oil on board 18"x22"



Street with Yellow and Blue Building, Oil on canvas 37"x30"

environment ignited his paintings of the region around Avignon. Soon after, a relative of this sponsoring family offered to barter their apartment in the Paris suburb of Le Pre St. Gervais for the next two years in exchange for one of these exciting new works. Roth continued to live there bartering his paintings for his apartment for another 13 years.

While in Paris, Roth focused on Parisian urban life, landscapes throughout France and Italy and the French society and café culture. The paintings were sold in exhibitions throughout Paris and Boston including solo shows at the French Library in Boston (now the French Culture Centre), the Copley Society of Boston, and at the historic Angelina Tea Salon of Paris, (founded in 1903) in the only solo exhibition ever offered in that venue. Roth was also represented in group exhibitions at the Grand Palais (Paris) and a juried competition at the Cirque d'Hiver called Les Tropheés de la Couleur.

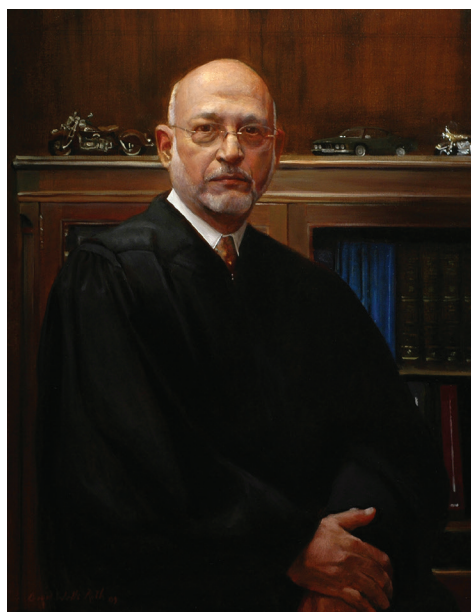
DEAUX MAGOTS: two tables, two people sitting in immediate proximity though totally unaware of and disinterested in the existence of the other. Here in the dimly lit Deaux Magots Restaurant, outside light blazing through the window, is a scene of the isolation and anonymity of city life; the subdued stories of random individuals sharing time and space but not each other.

In the mid-90's Roth commuted from Paris to Boston for a commission to paint a series of historically referenced works for The Union

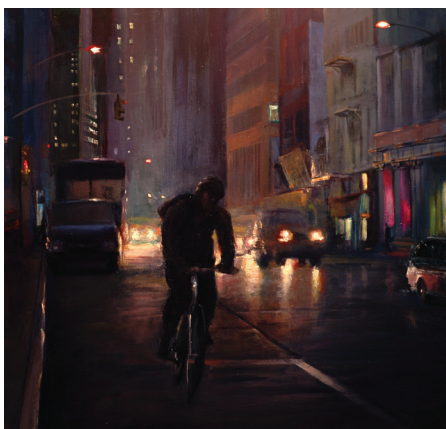
Oyster House, (America's oldest continuously operating restaurant; a historic landmark in Boston). The series centered around the lives of Isaiah Thomas (Boston Revolutionary War publisher) and Daniel Webster and included images of early Bostonian History. These, as well as the insightful portrait of Daniel Webster remain on view in the Society's Heritage Room and displayed in its sidewalk windows.

In 1997, upon returning to the states, Roth participated in group shows in the Allan Stone and DFN Galleries in New York City and had solo exhibitions of his work at the American Institute of Architects in Boston and the Whistler House Museum in Lowell, MA. He was a finalist in the Blanche E. Coleman Award Competition. The Boston Public Library and the Fort Wayne Museum of Art, Fort Wayne Indiana recently acquired several of Roth's drawings and watercolors for their print and paper collections.

Natural environments often draw David out of the cities. Coastal themes have been a strong focus of Roth's repertoire since his early years in Florida when the family home was within walking distance of the Gulf of Mexico. As a child, he would join his mother and observe attentively as she painted views of the Gulf. Beach and sea scenes continue to beguile him and while different-yet-similar in deeply essential ways from city atmospheres with contrasting values and space, David maintains a special love affair with the coast. While living in France and since returning to the United States, he has made painting trips to Cape Cod and Maine part of his regular painting routine.



Portrait of a Judge, Oil on linen 30"x24"



Hermes at Broadway and 29th, Oil on linen 46"x46"

NATIONAL SESHORE:

The slope of the dune is like the roller-coaster ride of the Brooklyn Bridge's roadway (energy-in-motion that is inherent in still forms). This multisensory scene fills us with the sounds of the wind and sea; the smells of the sea and its inhabitants; the prismatic colors at play; the gritty textures of sand and the startling hard edges of shells and large stones; the sense of peace and at-oneness with all that is. This reviewer feels the force, hears the sounds of the wind in the dunes and the waves climbing the shore.

JUDICIAL PORTRAITS:

In 2006, as Roth was finishing a sensitively aware, humane portrait of the Hon. Judge Richard Stearns (that now hangs in the John Joseph Moakley US Courthouse, Boston), the huge success of this portrait was announced throughout the 1st Circuit which includes Puerto Rico. The Chief Judge of Puerto Rico's Federal Court was just then planning a project to have portraits painted of all 34 judges in the history of Puerto Rico's Federal Court. The Commission for the total project was awarded to Roth. This historical series now hangs in its entirety in the Atrium of the Clemente Ruiz Nazario Courthouse, the main federal court

in Hato Rey, San Juan. Roth describes some of his process: "About 2/3 of the judges were deceased...many of the remaining (photo) images were faded and bleached...as for the living ones, I painted water color studies of each one mainly to allow myself a few hours to sit with them as they moved and spoke to me, so I could see their faces in action."

"As for the Chief Judge's own portrait, PORTRAIT OF A JUDGE, he was a motorcycle and high-performance car enthusiast (so I placed models of his favorite vehicles behind him within the somberly lit background-just above his law books."

Other Portraits:

"...one of the properties of art is its interpretation is subjected to the uniqueness of the viewer's personal feelings and experiences." These interpretations are often revealed on the surface of that viewer with greater-or-lesser subtlety. This holds true particularly for portraits, be they of friends, strangers, or subjects of private commissions.

"I've always loved to draw and paint people. To express character and personality through painting is among my greatest artistic challenges."

MIKE: David's vibrant and touching portrait of Mike; a fellow "2001: A Space Odyssey" enthusiast and dear old friend exemplifies his acute insight into character and personality paired with his carefully honed skills of representation. Jaunty with a guarded smirk, the great sensitive hands of this master cabinet builder project a personality that belies his bandaged, missing eye while the other eye directly pinions the viewer. We wonder what he is thinking as he toys with, yet resists saying it. You can visit David's site: www.davidwellsroth.com for more images and information. ♦

Adrienne Garnett is an artist, arts writer and arts educator in the greater Eastern metropolitan area.



Deux Magots 2, Oil on board 14"x11"



Times Square, Oil on canvas, 20"x16"



"Atrium of the Clemente Ruiz Nazario United States Courthouse in San Juan, Puerto Rico"