

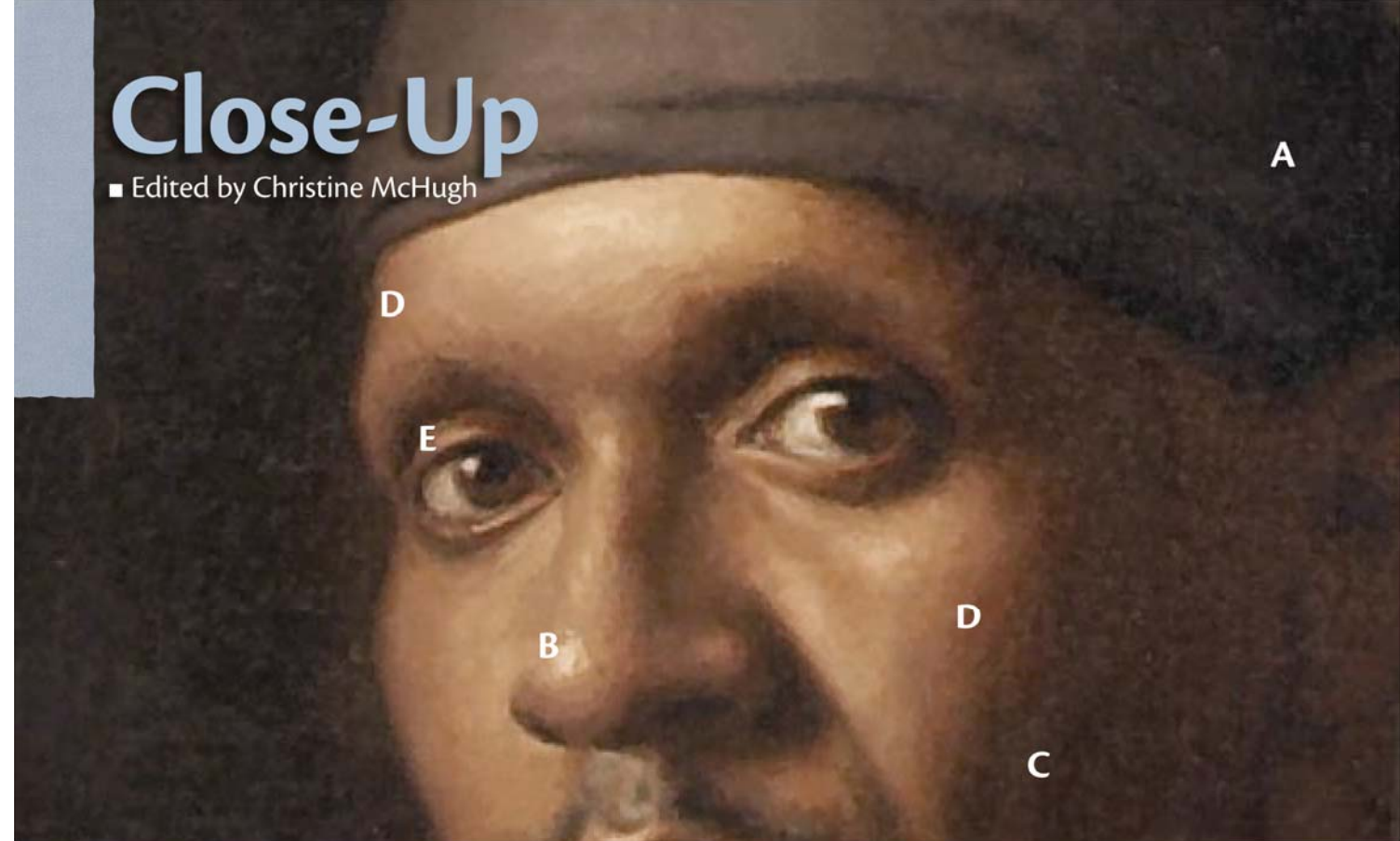
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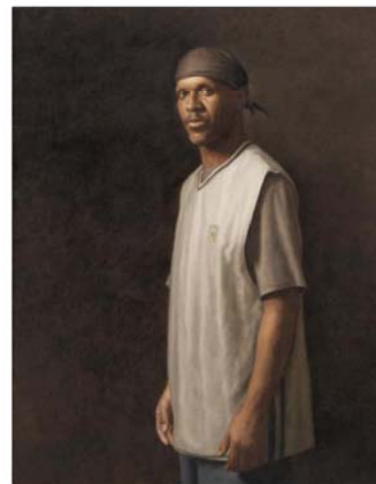
MAGAZINE

Close-Up

■ Edited by Christine McHugh



In this **Close-Up**, we focus on the techniques and materials Armetta used to create the delicately modulated fleshtones in *Keith* (below; oil, 50½x38½) To learn more about the artist and his work, turn to page 30.



Robert Armetta begins his portraits by establishing a progression of medium-range fleshtones, using Gamblin, Old Holland, Utrecht and Winsor & Newton oils. He then adjusts this string of colors to the unique complexion of each model, further refining them for shifts in saturation and hue. For example, where the lips, eyes and nose areas get redder in *Keith*, Armetta added cadmium red light, cadmium orange and permanent alizarin.

Products and paints used in this painting

A After finishing the drawing, Armetta does an open grisaille underpainting. He covers the canvas with raw umber thinned with Gamsol odorless mineral spirits. While the underpainting is wet, he carefully removes the areas that will be light with a cotton rag, rubbing harder to achieve the lighter lights.

B With various Utrecht Series 325 Sablette Golden Taklon rounds, he paints the details of the eyes, nose and mouth first. **C** Next he paints the large shadow areas with a Utrecht Series 235 Sablette Golden Taklon No. 6 filbert.

D Starting from the shadow edge, he proceeds slowly to the lights and lighter lights, using a range of filberts.

E As he moves toward finishing the skin tones, the artist uses a small round No. 8 in order to apply very small daubs of broken (richer and more saturated) color to enliven the areas around the features. a



For *Sleeping* (oil, 22x44), Armetta began painting the flesh, starting with the face and moving steadily toward the feet, trying to finish each portion of the painting as he moved along. "Early on in the process," he explains, "I also indicated the colors and values of the background and tabletop to help me establish the flesh tonalities—which is my standard practice."

Brush with Tradition

■ By Louise B. Hafesh

Subtle color harmonies, spare compositions and masterly handling of light, reminiscent of centuries past, inform the tranquil beauty of Robert Armetta's paintings.

Renaissance palette and tools

As you might expect, Armetta's palette and a number of his tools are consistent with those used by the masters.

- Palette: titanium white (WN), ivory black (G), cobalt violet (WN), cerulean blue (WN), viridian (U), cadmium green (WN), raw sienna (U), yellow ochre (U), cadmium yellow light (G), cadmium orange (OH), cadmium red light (OH), burnt sienna (U), burnt umber (WN)

Gamblin=G; Old Holland=OH; Utrecht=U; Winsor & Newton=WN

- Medium: four parts turpentine to one part stand oil, on double-oil-primed Belgian linen

- Brushes: bristles for direct painting, mostly *en plein air*—**Utrecht Series 201 Natural Curve White Hog flats**, Nos. 4, 6, 8; and **Utrecht Series 204 Natural Curve White Hog filberts**, Nos. 6, 8, 10, 12; synthetics when working in the studio—**Silver Black Pearl flats**, Nos. 0 and 2; **Utrecht Series 235 Sablette Golden Taklon filberts** in assorted sizes; and **Series 325 Golden Taklon rounds**, Nos. 10 and 12

- Renaissance tools: calipers for measuring proportion; a black mirror—a handy device that helps the artist distinguish between light and shadow; a reducing glass—a reverse magnifying glass that lets you view your work as if from a distance without standing back from your canvas or paper

"These tools enable me to check my colors, values and shapes in a more objective fashion," Armetta says.

Entering the Long Island Academy of Fine Art, the studio school of classical realist painter Robert Armetta, gives the feeling of stepping back in time to a European atelier of the 1800s. Lining the walls are more than 20 still life setups, positioned at various heights, each with its own light source while, toward the center of the room, a model faces several rows of artists who have been intently drawing or painting her in one pose for an entire semester (roughly 72 hours). Despite the calming effect of classical music playing softly in the background, the atmosphere is creatively charged.

Armetta breaks in with a question: "Is anybody sinking?" And responding to raised hands, he proceeds to make the rounds from one easel to the next. Following him around the room, I'm mesmerized by his ability to home in on each artist's problem areas, patiently address the students' questions and offer insightful, detailed instruction. He corrects specifics by drawing over top of troublesome areas on tracing paper, thus giving the students a permanent reference guide while allowing them an opportunity to compare their own corrections with his adjustments.

A consummate teacher, Armetta constructs his articulate comments in much the same way as his paintings—with succinct, well thought out craftsmanship. "Say what you need to as clearly as possible," he tells one student for the benefit of all. "Never put in more than you see. Clarify but don't exaggerate," he adds. Cautioning another against getting caught up in a formulaic mire, he quips good naturedly, "Don't just 'do hair'—rather, draw what you see. Squint. Ascertain shapes." Then while studying a particularly polished drawing, he engages the artist in a discussion about letting the light flow across the paper, as opposed to trapping it, and advises: "Make distinctions but never to the point of fragmentation. Always consider the whole and keep a unity of light in contrast to the darks."

■ **Louise B. Hafesh** is an award-winning artist, writer and a contributing editor at *The Artist's Magazine*. You can see examples of her work at www.artworks-site.com and www.paintersportal.blogspot.com.

Armetta himself paints portraits, figures and still lifes in oil. "If it's an image that moves me and I think it can translate into a painting, then I'll try to make it work," he states with conviction. On occasion his love of landscapes entices, and he will paint *en plein air* (see *Stream* on page 38), a diversion he says that gets him out of the studio and helps clear his head. In his studio, the top floor of a Brooklyn brownstone that he shares with his wife and young daughter, Armetta works from life, under north light during the day, by simulated natural light by night.

He began his career by painting still life from direct observation but, in the past few years, has been concentrating on the figure. "There's no image quite as powerful," he says, explaining his fascination with the human form as subject matter. "Be it the tortured saints of Jusepe de Ribera or the large multigure painting by William Bouguereau, *The Education of Bacchus*, the human body's beauty and force are unparalleled!"

The artist's powerful compositions have a quiet richness and an emotional quality about them. You can't help but marvel at his sensitive brushstrokes and drawing and painting skills; they are masterly and evident even to the untrained eye. Beyond that, though, his ability to create mood and atmosphere through subtle color harmonies is extraordinary, as evidenced in one of his recent paintings, *Rest* (opposite, at bottom).

As is typical in his work, the light in this subtle

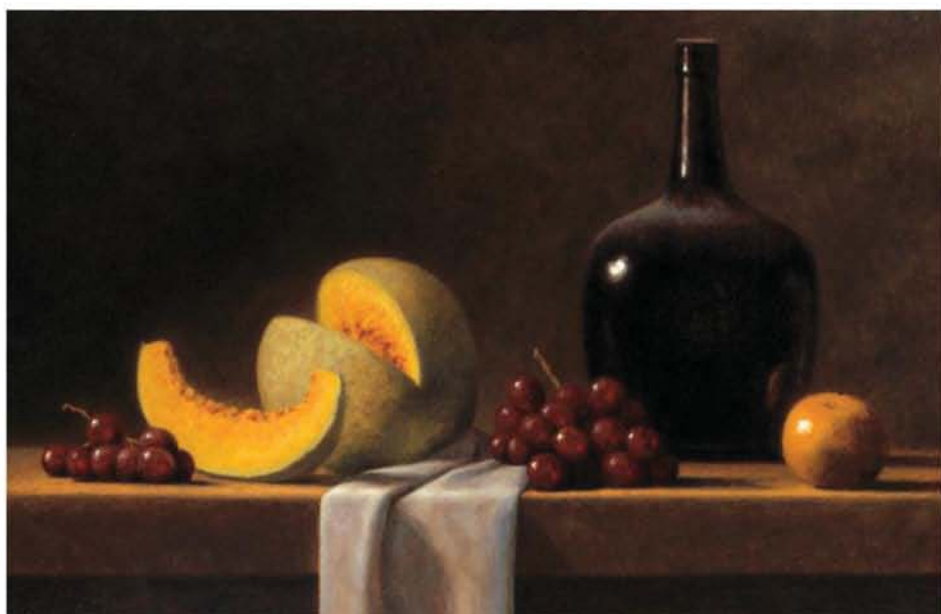
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Wife of Uriah (top; oil, 24 x 30½) was originally only going to be a drawing," explains Armetta, "so I pushed the drawing quite a bit further than I normally would if it were a preparatory drawing for a painting. Here my focal point is the shoulder, so the gesture and lighting is all about highlighting that area."

"For *Rest* (above; oil, 22½x46½), Armetta did a detailed drawing of the model's pose, establishing proportions and shadow shapes and paying close attention to the detail in the feet. After transferring the drawing to canvas and doing the underpainting, he worked out the anatomy and the light and shadow. Then he painted the figure, "starting with the small of the back and moving in both directions from there."

The artist started the painting *Cantaloupe* (oil, 18x27) directly with a brush. "I first tried to establish the drawing of the objects," Armetta says, "as well as the shadow patterns, with raw umber. Then I painted each object, beginning with the cantaloupe."



A painstaking process

1 Set the pose and sketch: When setting up a new work, Armetta spends his first session with the model as he attempts to figure out the pose, jot down notes and do preliminary sketches, which vary from very small thumbnails to larger (usually one-third the size of the final paintings) finished drawings for transfer.

2 Complete drawing and transfer: After deciding on the pose and setting, with charcoal or graphite on paper, he begins a detailed drawing—a critical step that serves to establish the general shapes and proportions of the model.

Admitting that his greatest struggle is getting the initial drawing down, Armetta insists that training the eye is where it all starts: "Informed observation is our birthright," he says. "You have to be able to see shapes, proportions, values and colors accurately and sensitively."

burnt umber + burnt sienna + alizarin crimson	burnt umber + burnt sienna + raw sienna + cadmium red light	raw sienna + burnt sienna + cadmium red light + burnt umber + white
white + raw sienna + cadmium red light + cadmium orange + burnt sienna	white + raw sienna + cadmium red light + cadmium orange	white + raw sienna + yellow ochre + cadmium red light + cadmium orange
white + yellow ochre + cadmium red light + cadmium orange	white + cadmium red light + yellow ochre + cadmium orange + cadmium yellow light	white + cadmium orange + cadmium yellow light

3 Scale up and transfer the drawing: As most of his work is close to or actually life-size, scaling up can be painstaking and technically challenging. He uses a number of different methods to transfer the drawing in charcoal—from a traditional grid-to-grid transfer (usually with 1- to 3-inch ratios) to photocopy enlargement to projecting the image upon the canvas.

4 Establish grisaille in umber: Armetta next attempts to bring his drawing to a greater degree of accuracy on the canvas. He explains: "Once I'm satisfied with the drawing, I cover the entire surface with a raw umber/burnt umber mixture, being careful to create an even tone throughout. While the paint is still wet, using paper towels and old bristle brushes, I wipe out those areas that will be light; pressing harder and removing more paint where the form rolls deeper into the light." In doing this, Armetta establishes an open grisaille (monochrome-value painting) in umber that both sets his drawing and begins to suggest the turning forms he sees on the model.

5 Prepare the palette: Before putting color to canvas, Armetta complements his standard chromatic palette by mixing a string of nine average flesh colors grading from light to dark, which contributes to his congruous skin tones (see swatches at left).

6 Begin to paint: "My palette set," says Armetta, "I begin to paint and, working from area to area starting with the main focal point, usually the head, attempt to bring the entire piece to a finish."



"This man was a neighbor of mine in Brooklyn, a cab driver who, after totaling his car in an accident, was out of work for some time, so he posed for me," says Armetta. "For *Tony* (oil, 40x30), I did a very small drawing on paper to map out proportions, shadow shapes and gesture before transferring the drawing to canvas."

"No one has screwed up or painted himself into a corner more than I, but you have to keep at it, figure it out to the best of your ability. Otherwise, you might just as well have become a shoemaker or an accountant." Robert Armetta

Progression of a portrait

■ By Robert Armetta



After doing a drawing to establish the model's general shapes and proportions, because of the drawing's complexity, I scaled it up by using the traditional grid method. Then I did an open grisaille (monochrome-value painting) on canvas. When this was dry, I began to paint the face, starting with the shadow and then moving into the lights. I next painted the hair and began to suggest loosely the areas of the background surrounding the head. I then moved to the painting of the hands and also suggested the color around them on the book cover.



At this point I began to paint the book to a greater finish and moved on to the model's sweater. I first started this while working from the model; afterwards I dressed a life-sized manikin in the model's clothing, carefully arranging it to match the drawing I'd already established.



I began to work on the dress next, harmonizing it with the sweater in terms of color and value, and then returned to working on the sweater to make some adjustments. Before painting the chair, I rubbed in the tonalities to the right of the model and then blocked in the chair—first the armrest, then the seat. At this point the canvas was covered. I was set to bring the looser areas around the canvas to a greater finish.



Painting the large area of red on the back of the chair to a finish, I next moved to the dark areas to the right of the model and the chair's armrest and seat, painting those to a finish. The piece near completion, I made some small final adjustments to the face and hands—clarifying the lights and accentuating some color notes—and then softened a few of the hard edges throughout. The result of my labor is *Flora* (oil, 36 x 24).

"I was working on large still lifes and exploring compositional schemes when I painted *Yellow Squash* (oil, 24x36)," says Armetta. Playing with a pyramidal composition, he wanted a focal point that was pronounced and chromatic, flanked by two quiet, pillar-like elements that were just the opposite—subdued and somewhat neutral in color. "The apples served as a visual counterpoint to the dominant yellow squash, and I liked the way they were set off by the gray-green drapery."



Armetta began work for *Studio Still Life* (oil, 18x27) by making a detailed drawing directly on the canvas. "I then did an underpainting in raw umber, establishing the values and trying to suggest the form," the artist says. "As with all my paintings, I started with the focal point—in this case, the glass jar on the brick—and painted each object one by one, with some indications of surrounding areas as I moved along."


Armetta began *Stream* (opposite; oil, 16x24) *en plein air* and finished it in the studio. "I wrestled with the lower half of the painting while in the field, feeling that no matter what I did, it wasn't working," he says. "So when I got back to the studio, I ended up scraping the lower half down and just invented the stream and the flora surrounding it."



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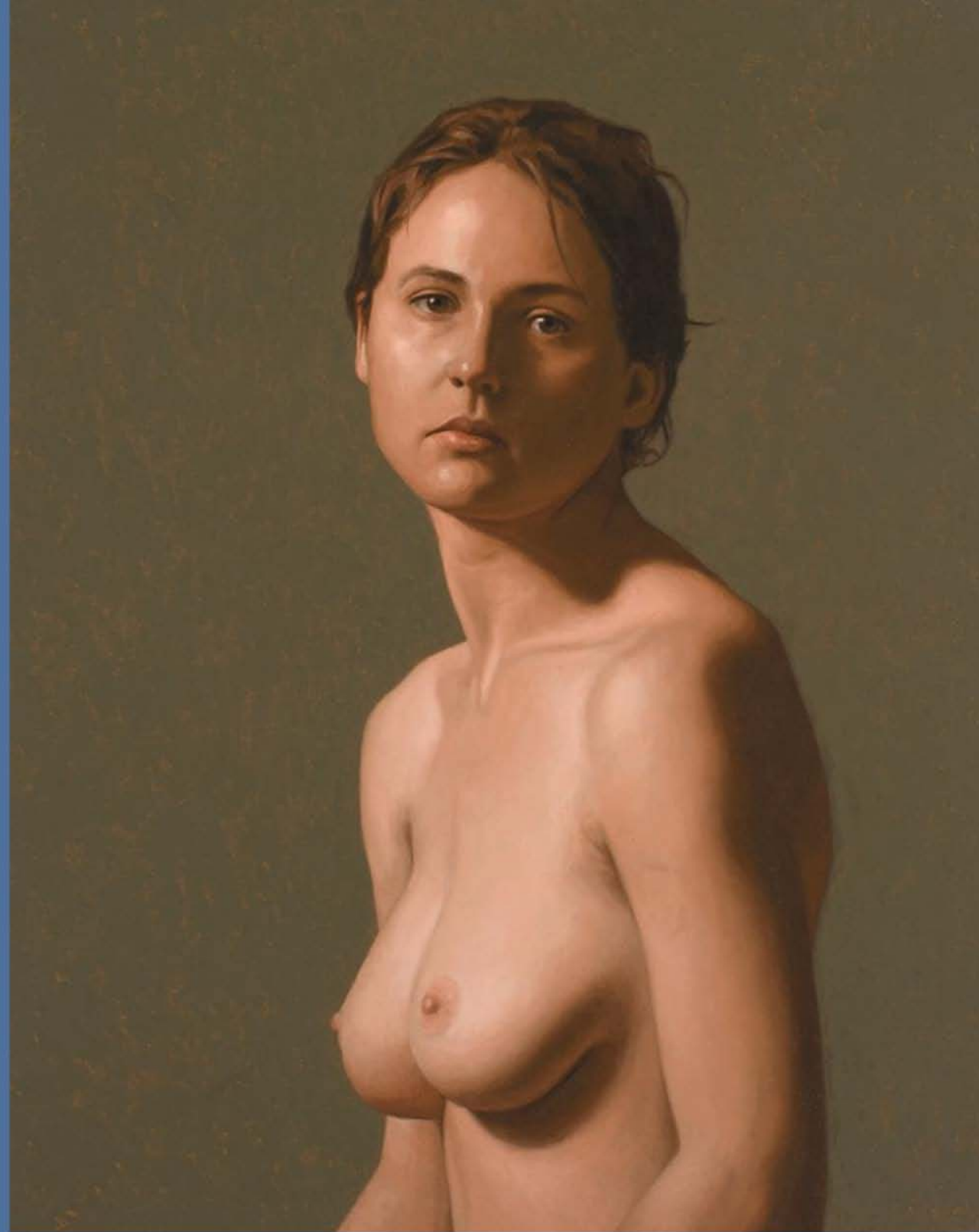
tone poem comes from the left and rakes across his subject—a figure of a woman reclining on a large platform. Both the background and cloth on the platform have been consciously kept dark and similar in value. "I had in mind some of the drama that I so often see in Caravaggio and Ribera. Their spare compositions so appeal to me in that there are few, if any, unnecessary elements. There's the main subject and that's what you focus on. I worked hard to study the way the light undulates over the forms of the model's anatomy."

His goal, he says, with this and all of his work, is to make beautiful paintings without resorting to kitsch or sentimentality: "I really think some of the imagery in many contemporary paintings is a bit too sweet on one hand; far too overtly dark, foreboding and in-your-face on the other. The artists I admire found a place between those two extremes and are far more lasting because of it."

As a teacher, Armetta encourages his students to work through and learn from their mistakes. "No one has screwed up or painted himself into a corner more than I," he notes with a laugh, "but you have to keep at it, figure it out to the best of your ability. Otherwise, you might just as well have become a shoemaker or an accountant." 

Meet Robert Armetta

"I guess you could say I was on an art odyssey," explains this Brooklyn-based painter, who is definitely in his element at his Long Island Academy of Fine Art—having honed his skills in similar classical milieus across the United States and in Europe. He eventually earned his master's degree in fine art from the New York Academy of Art, thus rounding out his formal education with exposure to 20th-century principles and themes. "The Academy was basically the antithesis of my atelier schooling," he recalls. "Nevertheless, it was important in my development as an artist because, while I believe it's crucial to comprehend the world around us and the times we live in, what I ultimately found out—through an eclectic course of study—is that I have a classical temperament that lends itself to a particular type of painting." Armetta has exhibited at the Allen Sheppard, Grenning, Arcadia, John Pence, Seraphin and Nabi galleries, the National Academy of Design in New York City and the Fort Wayne Museum of Art in Indiana. Learn more about him and his atelier at www.robertarmetta.com and www.liafa.com.



For *Magdalene* (oil, 28x22), Armetta did a fairly detailed drawing, focusing on the face and expression of the model. Later, after scaling up and transferring the image and doing the underpainting, he started painting the flesh, "beginning with the head and moving downward, completing the painting piece by piece."



To see more of Armetta's work, go to www.artistsnetwork.com/article/robert-armetta.