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THE 2012 ARC SALON



Amelie by Thomas Reis
Best of Show

by Miles Mathis

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One of my readers suggested I look at the ARC Salon [artrenewal.org] again this year, telling me that there were some nice works over there. He was right. There are quite a few, and, unlike other years, I am only here this year to point out the best ones. I will leave the others alone.

I have only one major piece of criticism this year, and it has nothing to do with any work of art. It has to do with the copyright warnings, which I notice come with an increase in security this year. On the one hand, I understand this. The Chinese are reproducing my works without my consent, and of course I am getting nothing from it. However, I have decided to accept the fact gracefully. If they can find a market for lower quality images at a lower price, they are welcome to it. I am not pursuing it, and it can't really affect my market. In fact, it should probably help it, because at least it means my images are worth stealing. It proves there is demand at the lowest levels, which may translate to the highest levels. Regardless, I am not about to waste my time suing poor Chinese people.

On the other hand, I think these copyright warnings and image locks can be defeating. They make it harder for writers to review these shows, and ARC and the artists should want reviews. They should want all the press they can get, even negative press. As they used to say, all press is good press as long as they spell your name right. People talking is always good PR. I don't want people stealing my images and ripping me off, but I don't mind people downloading my small jpegs and putting them on

refrigerators and bulletin boards. I painted my paintings to share with people, and that is part of sharing. Many times they just create slideshows in their blogs of the favorite things they have found on the internet. Why would I not want to let them do that? It is free publicity for me. As long as they aren't illustrating their books with my images, and making large sums of money from it, I don't really care. Besides, there isn't much you can do with a 50kb image. To make even a decent small-size print, you need ten times that resolution. And even then, it is just a photo. I am not a producer or seller of photos, I am a producer of paintings. You can't steal my paintings by stealing a photo.

As a perfect example of that, we can look at this work of Mike Malm, which I wanted to borrow from his personal site a few months ago for a review. I was not savvy enough to bypass his security, but I did figure out how to borrow his image from ARC, which of course I have a right to do as a reviewer.



I wished to give him a good review, and I don't see why he would want to prevent that. Even if he thinks I am a jerk with worthless opinions, he has no reason to prevent me from saying nice things about him. A jerk can send you clients just as easily as your best friend can, and if that jerk gets millions of hits a year, he can probably do it *more* easily. When I visited his site then, this painting was still available, and I recommend you rush over there and see if it still is. It is one of the loveliest things he has done, in my opinion. Why? Well, because it is simply dripping with real emotion, for one thing. She has the eyes of a young Virginia Woolf. Nothing fake or manufactured about it. Backlighting can sometimes be overwrought or false, but it isn't here. It is used to perfect effect in bringing out the emotion in the face. The color harmony is also spot-on. [I recommend you go to ARC and study [the larger image](#). My comments here are based on that.] His tones are low but not too low, since he has both warm reds and cool blues in the face, at just the right levels. Then he uses just the right toned-off green in the background, which fades off from cooler blue-gray above her forehead to a warmer tone low. That blue plays off the blue in her hair and neck, you see. That is one of the things that really makes this painting pop: the way the background supports everything else in the painting. If the background weren't just the right color in each place, this painting wouldn't work as well as it does.

The orange backlight also has to be just the right tone as well. If it were a shade yellower, it wouldn't work. It is a very aggressive thing to do here—especially that hot white right under the chin—and if

Malm hadn't done it just right it would have destroyed the whole painting. Another thing to notice is the red-orange line where the white spot meets the shadow of the neck. That by itself adds more sparkle than you can possibly imagine. Remove it and the work is diminished.

Another thing he does right is that his brushwork fits the size of the canvas. We are looking at a 16x12 here, and the looseness fits that like a hand in a glove. There is neither too much detail nor too little.

Also refreshing is the hidden signature. Where is it?

But let's leave the technique and return to the emotion. Even if Malm hadn't painted this perfectly, it would still be a powerful painting, due to the subject matter. He has caught this model in a moment of complete openness, and you can see right into her soul even in profile. The mouth and eye are incredibly expressive, in a completely natural way. That is beastly difficult to capture, especially in such an offhand way. Parted lips, with a hint of tooth: a million ways to botch it and only one way to get it right. Also notice how Malm has not shied away from painting the dark around the eye, including not only the umber overlid but also a touch of green. Many artists would have avoided that, and many buyers will find it off-putting, I imagine, but it is one of the things that makes this painting great. Malm has also resisted giving her a nose-job, which many artists would have done. He painted her as she is, and by keeping the idiosyncrasies has created a vastly more interesting portrait. He is capturing her individuality, not just using her as mannequin. This painting should really have placed much higher in the competition.

That said, the Best of Show, which I have already put under title, is also excellent. It was a good choice. Thomas Reis has hit a home-run here. The brushwork is great, the color is restrained, and he has done the fur really well. You might be tempted to put a bit more red in the scarf and complement it with some green in the background, thinking to make the whole thing a bit richer. But the problem with that is that the hat and coat don't have much color to begin with. If you surround them with too much color you wash them out. The low tones match the subdued wintry feel here, and Reis may have hit on the best solution.



First place in landscape went to Denise LaRue Mahlke, for this pastel *Living Waters*. Another good choice from the judges, and surprising. I encourage you to study the larger image at ARC, which is stunning. I find the bold simplicity of this really refreshing: you can almost hear the water bubbling as it cascades down that icy bank. As a pastellist, I can normally spot a pastel, but I truly can't tell here. She has matched the technique to the subject perfectly.



First place in drawing went to Roger Long for *Justin's Muse*. Again, a good choice by the judges. I think they missed out on Mike Malm, but otherwise they found many of the other gems in the entry pool. I couldn't find a list of judges, but they seem to be doing a better job than in years past. This drawing is pretty much flawless. The eyes are especially well done, as is the hair. And the window behind is a nice touch.

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Michael de Brito's large painting *Men on Faro Beach* was a finalist, but it probably deserved better. At 96x72 it would be difficult to judge from a photo, but I get the feeling we are missing something here. It reminds me a bit of Sorolla's *Mending the Sail*, although it is tighter than Sorolla. We need to see something like this in person to really know how good it is. It isn't my kind of thing, you know, being slice-of-life and all; but there is something I really like about it. Excellent use of color, and a tough subject to tackle. It needs to be on a wall for a while, for the judges to live with. As a jpeg it is at an unfair disadvantage.



I am pretty sure the same could be said of this entry by Aron Wiesenfeld, called *Winter Cabin*. The large jpeg at ARC looks to me like it is washed out, and I have taken it into photoshop to give it a tweak. Once again, we would have to see it in person to know how much we are missing. I suspect a lot. Even taking the jpeg as it is, it deserves better than finalist. It has that Wiesenfeld mystery, which is so rare. It is one of those paintings you have to stare at for a bit, to get inside it. I encourage you to do so.



Here's another one they probably missed, Shawn Zents' *Cafe Rouge*. The large jpeg at ARC doesn't have much resolution, and it hurts this entry. I suspect it might be better in real life. It's an interesting composition, one that Whistler might like. Sort of an update of Whistler's *At the Piano*, with a little Degas stirred in. We need to see it on the wall.



Here's another one that begs closer inspection. Anthony Ackrill's *Idyl*. It also looks a bit washed out at ARC, and my intuition is to blame the jpeg. It looks like it needs a bit of yellow and a bit more contrast, to better represent the actual painting. If we then live with it a few moments, we begin to get the feel of a nice Titian. That swan is excellent regardless, and the girl sort of grows on you. It definitely gets better the more you look at it, which is the opposite of most of the other entries. It needs to be seen in the flesh.

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Here's another one very much hurt by its jpeg at ARC. *Tom Poynor* by Lynn Sanguedolce. I have tried to correct it, so that you can give it a fair judging. Once we correct the contrast, it comes alive. Very Edwardian in style and emotion. We really get a strong feeling from this young man, though of course it isn't a sunny feeling.



Let's look even closer. That's a powerfully painted head. The eyes and eyebrows tell us so much. This is much better than the judges realize, I think. They may be judging her based on reputation rather than on the entered image, but they shouldn't do that.

Some readers will say, “How do you know the problem is in the jpeg and not the painting? Isn't it sort of unfair to go in and start tweaking other people's jpegs?” No, it isn't unfair, and in this age of judging from jpegs, the best judges should be able to do it, in my opinion. I can do it because I have had a lot of experience trying to get my jpegs to look something like my paintings. I usually fail, because jpegs simply can't really look like paintings. In my experience as a painter and judge of paintings, I have found that jpegs often improve poor paintings, but they always diminish really good paintings. You simply cannot capture the subtlety of a really fine painting in a jpeg, and the better the painting is, the more you fail. This tends to homogenize the pool of entries in any contest, pushing them all to the middle. A good judge should be able to separate them out anyway, based on experience.

Another thing that allows me to do this is that I have seen the paintings of many of these artists, and I know what color and contrast levels they tend to use. If I see a jpeg that is way off those levels, I know it is probably the problem of the jpeg. Another thing that allows me to do this is knowing how paintings tend to go wrong versus how jpegs tend to go wrong. As a teacher, I know the myriad ways that paintings go wrong. An overall fog, like we saw in Lynn Sanguedolce's large jpeg, is not one of them. You could detect the fog even over the signature, and anyone should have known the primary problem was in the jpeg.

We must also remember that everyone's computer screen is different, regarding contrast, brightness, and color. This means you *have* to guess anytime you are looking at an image. You better get good at guessing or you will miss a lot online.

You also have to take into account that not all artists will be equipped with expensive cameras, and the knowledge of how to use them. An art contest should be an art contest and not a photography contest, but it turns out to be a photography contest as well, since the artist's ability to provide a sparkling image becomes crucial, as we have seen. Successful artists like Malm and Burdick and Gerhartz have this end covered, and their images are normally about as good as they can be. I didn't have to tweak Malm's image, you know, since he is already either a master photographer or has hired one. But the same can't be said for Sanguedolce. Some will say that is her problem, but since it has also been my problem, I tend to sympathize with her.

Another thing to consider is that the size of the online image affects its apparent saturation and contrast. Just by making the image larger or smaller, you change the apparent levels. For instance, whenever I post a detail of my work, I have to re-calibrate all the levels, just to match it to the full image. When you blow it up, you automatically lose contrast and saturation. That doesn't happen in real life, of course.

Finally, we must remember that even in life, a painting can change dramatically depending on how you light it. For this reason, changing brightness is always allowed. You are simply turning up the light to suit your own eyes.

Others will say that judges can't be expected to put all entries through photoshop, guessing what they actually look like, and that is true. Most judges won't take the time to do what I have done here, pulling out the most interesting entries and really studying them. Which is why the paintings should always be judged on the wall, in proper light.