

[return to updates](#)

My Own Little Salon



by Miles Mathis

As my readers know, I have become quite disenchanted with contemporary realism over the past couple of decades. But among the harsh criticisms, I have included praise and admiration for some works and some artists. This paper will concentrate on the good left in realism, and I will scan the web for current examples of work I like. I will not only present these works as positive examples, I will tell you why I like them, giving a little lesson in art appreciation as we are re-invigorated by beauty.

We start with this lovely little piece by Stephen Scott Young, now available at Haynes Galleries, Nashville.



That's a watercolor, 21 inches long. Just about perfect: simple, not overdrawn or overcolored. It's hard to do a face that small, $\frac{3}{4}$ in shadow, and make it work, but this one works. The shadow on the shoulder is also bold, and many artists would have shied away from that. But it gives the work a natural feel. The work needs that dark patch, regardless, or it would begin to dissolve. Without it, the work would be all lights and midtones, and it would lose much of its strength. I repeat, the fact that Young has not overworked this is very important. He can take his watercolors to a much higher state of finish, and usually does, so he has done this on purpose, not because he can't achieve more. It is called restraint. It is called maturity. I believe Young is around 55 now, and this is the work of a mature artist, one more concerned with an overall effect than with copying every detail exactly or bashing you over the head with heavy technique. Since it is rare you find a work of this quality not sold, I recommend you get hopping. Since I don't know Young and get nothing from saying that, you can take it as a rare bit of unbiased praise.



Guess who that is by? Bet you can't. That's a Jacob Collins! 8 x 10 inches, oil. You will say, "What are you doing, picking a landscape? And what is Jacob doing painting that!" Well, things happen. Jacob just happened to hit a little bit of perfection here, and I just happened to spot it. Blame it on Whistler, I guess. I like it because there's a lot of movement in that sky. Just the right color, with a variation in tone from blue-grey horizon to bluer heights. And even the beach umbrellas are just the perfect color spots to bring the tonal harmony together. The waterline is also smashing, with the surf and the wash and then the two lines of wet sand. Imagine trying to get that all in a few inches of paint. The lonely figure and the empty beach really create a subtle mood. It's just great.

continued below



Here's a beautiful little Mary Qian that Greenhouse Gallery in San Antonio sold for her. Oil, 12 x 9. Subtle coloring, not overdone. It creates a great mood. Look at the greys and greens in the skintones. Love that foot, and the shoulder is really nice, too. And the horizon is in just the right place with just the right amount of blur. If the hat were red, it would be even better, maybe, but that's mostly just quibbling.

continued below



Here's Giner Bueno, also at Greenhouse, doing the Sorolla thing and doing it well. He has a great sense of color harmony and a loose brush that is neither too messy nor too prefab. The transparency of the orange in the boat is super, and the light blue pants harmonize it perfectly. The top corner here is also brilliant, with that little boat coming in on a pink and blue sea. The boat balances the composition exactly right. Also love the off-balance guy in the middle. Few artists would be bold enough to do that.

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Here's a Scott Burdick I just became aware of, from 2008. Really subtle. The eyes and mouth go together in a way we rarely see, creating an expression that is totally mesmerizing.



Here's another one Whistler would love. Glenn Harrington. Oil, 8 x 5 inches. Just fantastic. What an expression. Perfect in every way. The outline of the hair needs pointing out, since there were a thousand ways to do it wrong. Harrington just blasted it in there and left it alone, which was the only way to get it right. The buttons are also worth circling as especially well-done. Suggested and varied in precisely the right manner. But the eyes are the miracle. Along with the eyebrows. Wow.



Here's another little Harrington. Man is he good at these. Oil, 12 x 10. Look at all the attitude he captured in that little boy! Brilliant collar. And look at those ears! This couldn't be any better.

[I had meant to say something nice about Mike Malm here, but he prevented me from doing it by making it impossible to borrow images from his site.]

This is what the higher reaches of realism consist of, in my opinion: capturing mood and expression with understated brushwork and harmonized tones. This is a realism that appeals to intelligence, good taste, and a balanced soul.