A Portfolio of Sculpture

Landscapes & More by Deladier Almeida

Mentors & Their Students

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Mentors & Their Students

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for 40 YEARS
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New Mexico Landscapes by Deladier Almedia

July 1–16, 2011 in Santa Fe  Artist Reception Friday, July 1st 5–7pm

Chimney, oil on linen, 18"h x 24"w
Deladier Almeida puts his own spin on the Bay Area Figurative movement that inspires him

By Bonnie Gangelhoff

THE FIRST thing you should know about Deladier Almeida is that when he was 5 years old, he asked his neighborhood pals in the port city of Santos, Brazil, to pose for him while he sketched their portraits with his school pencils. When he was 7, he saw a movie featuring an artist who demonstrated how Leonardo da Vinci may have painted the MONA LISA. He was riveted to the screen, and he knew at that moment what he was going to be when he grew up. “There weren’t any artists in my family. It was all just spontaneous for me,” Almeida says.

The charming efforts and interests of the young Deladier were a foreshadowing of things to come. Many years later, Almeida would ask an array of prominent California artists, including Paul Wonner, Gregory Kondos, and Clayton Bailey, to sit for him as part of a series for a 2006 show at John Natsoulas Gallery in Davis, CA. Likewise, the MONA LISA would pop up decades later as part of his provocative visual commentaries on modern life.

Today the California-based Almeida, 50, is known for both his landscapes and his figurative works. This month a solo show at Blue Rain Gallery in Santa Fe, NM, spotlights both genres, including his paintings FORTRESS and OBfuscation. One day recently, Almeida sat down in his studio and reflected on his life, now half spent in Brazil and half in the United States. Slight traces of a Portuguese accent lace his speech. It’s hard to believe that when he first arrived in the United States in 1985, he didn’t speak a word of English. These days he speaks it with the speed of a native New Yorker as he talks enthusiastically about art, geology, and technology.

Deladier Almeida (pronounced de-LA-dee-ay al-MAY-dah) left his native Brazil in 1985 after meeting and marrying an American exchange student. The couple eventually settled in the Northern California college town of Davis, located in the fertile Sacramento Valley. In Brazil, Almeida had studied architecture, industrial design, and urban planning and worked at a Sao Paulo newspaper creating portraits of international heads of state. But in the United States he decided to enroll in the fine-art department at the University of California at Davis.

Pundits are fond of saying that being in the right place at the right time is all-important, and for Almeida that was certainly the case. When he entered the UC Davis art program, legendary artists Wayne Thiebaud, Roland Peterson, and Roy De Forest greeted him in his painting and drawing classes. Even before Almeida arrived, the Davis campus had been evolving from a sleepy university known for home economics and agricultural studies into a hotbed of creativity, thanks to the art department. In fact, today whole museum shows are devoted to the painters, sculptors, and ceramists who taught and studied in the department from the 1960s onward.

Thiebaud, Peterson, and De Forest were all part of the Bay Area Figurative movement—a cadre of artists that turned New York’s Abstract Expressionist movement on its ear, creating their own answer to the East Coast hegemony. The Bay Area Figurative artists left behind the abstraction of Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko and replaced it with artworks marked by figures, humor, and a return to realism. The Davis art department in particular became known as a center for the humorous side of the Bay Area Figurative movement, according to Susan Landauer, known for home economics and agricultural studies into a hotbed of creativity, thanks to the art department. In fact, today whole museum shows are devoted to the painters, sculptors, and ceramists who taught and studied in the department from the 1960s onward.

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a curator at the San Jose Museum of Art. She wrote about the subject in a catalog essay that accompanied The Lighter Side of Bay Area Figuration, a museum exhibit in the year 2000.

Almeida’s recent figurative series carries on, to a certain extent, this humorous tradition of the Bay Area Figurative movement. The paintings in the series focus on the public’s penchant for pulling out digital cameras to photograph everything from London’s Trafalgar Square to da Vinci’s MONA LISA. In OBfuscATION, for example, viewers are trained their lenses on the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace, which on any given day attracts armies of shutterbugs.

But OBfuscATION and the other works in the series also pack a serious punch—a moment that they will take home as a surrogate experience. It could be a profound experience for the rest of your life. At least that is what it was for me. But rather than take the opportunity to experience it, they are focused on the fact that they will have evidence to prove that they were there. To me that is appalling. They postpone the experience of being there, so they can look at pictures of the event from in front of a computer.

Likewise in PRIZEE, viewers see another common occurrence—people raising their arms high above crowds to snap a photograph. In this painting, a woman supports her friend’s arm to help steady it so he is better able to shoot the changing of the guard. For Almeida, the couple’s pose at first seemed reminiscent of the iconic image of the American marines raising the flag on Iwo Jima toward the end of World War II. “There is nobility to their body language. My first take was that there was this humanity to the woman supporting the man’s hand,” Almeida says. “But then it occurred to me there was a mundane pedestrian ambition behind it. Does that take away from the humanity I first saw? The question is: Which way do you take things like this?”

IN ALMEIDA’S landscapes viewers see evidence of his background in architecture. For example, in a glowing piece titled SHADE AND WARMTH that was inspired by the Sacramento River region near Stockton, the viewer is drawn into the scene not only by the bold colors but also by the strong geometric shapes and design. Like his teacher Thiebaud, Almeida is attracted to aerial perspectives—an appeal that originated when he flew from Brazil to the United States to settle in California. It was his first time in an airplane, and he saw the richness of that point of view, he says.

Almeida also remembers his surprise that other passersby were oblivious to the vibrant visual display below. He wanted to shout out to them, “Look out the window!” He explains, “I’ve always enjoyed looking down on large landscapes where the horizon is far away, and I can’t really see the scene unless I go up above it. In California it comes into play in the Central Valley where I live. You see the patterns and shapes that are largely manmade because of farming and water resources.”

Although many artists since Thiebaud and Richard Diebenkorn have painted the land from above, gallery owner John Natsoulas points out that Almeida’s vantage point is from a “helicopter perspective,” which is often much lower than what other artists portray. “Other aerial painters who fly higher paint colors that are skewed—ones that often don’t exist in the landscape,” Natsoulas says. “Del’s colors are truer.”

While SHADE AND WARMTH features the colors of the tropics—the vivid oranges, greens, and yellows of his birthplace—FORTRESS employs a muted desert palette as well as an entirely different perspective. For the past several years Almeida has visited the northern New Mexico town of Abiquiu, the area that Georgia O’Keeffe famously called home. The red-rock country has imposing mountain and mesa vistas. Here, instead of looking down, Almeida gazed upward to behold vertical natural wonders. “It was an opportunity to look at the vastness and ground myself in the earth,” he says. “You feel small because of the geological formations in front of you. You just stop and enjoy being alive. Concerns like traffic mean nothing. They become irrelevant.”

Like the Bay Area Figurative painters, Almeida is fond of building up the surface of his paintings so that, for example, a mound of dirt in a northern New Mexico landscape painting is not a flat depiction but possesses a three-dimensional, sculptural quality. “That heavy impasto creates a topographical feel,” Natsoulas says. “He is similar to the old topographers who mapped the landscape before there were cameras. Del is a purist. He is a painter’s painter.”

Indeed, for Almeida it is all about the paint. In other words, the medium is his message. He keeps a mantra tacked to his easel and reads it daily: “Learning to paint is learning how to use paint.” As one noted critic said recently of his works, there are certain things only paint can do, and Almeida delivers the world outside the reach of a camera.

Bonnie Gangloff is Senior Editor at Southwest Art.

See more of Almeida’s paintings at www.southwestart.com.

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