

Artist to Collect
Klaas Hart



left, Trompe l'oeil , oil on panel, 16" x 20"
above, Silver Spoon, oil on panel, 8" x 10"

Simply Magic

written by Lorie Lee Steiner

Toronto-born artist Klaas Hart has come full circle in his artistic adventure. From curious student to master of the craft, his inquisitive nature and passion for discovering "how" has never waned. Now, as a teacher, he shares his enthusiasm and skill with eager artists-in-the-making. In his own work, he continues to delve into the magic and mysteries of creation on canvas. His paintings evoke a soothing simplicity; life at its basic, beautiful best.

"My first impression of painting was a feeling of awe that a human being could create such a thing of beauty," says Klaas. "I remember being in the Vatican museum, it felt like I had just seen a really well-performed magic trick, I knew what I had seen but I couldn't quite believe it. The paintings had a tangible presence and I had to know how this was achieved. I was determined to figure it out, and whether I knew it at the time or not my 10,000 hours had begun."

Living in Toronto with Dutch immigrant parents taught the young artist much about the value of everyday items. His Father taught post-graduate Philosophy; his Mother was a hands-on creative soul. "Both my parents endured WWII so nothing was wasted, nothing was taken for granted and being Calvinists you worked hard...period. My Mother was a tireless worker, from her gardening to refinishing old furniture, our home was her creative outlet and she made it an esthetically pleasing environment for all of us."

The carefully thought out ambience taught Klaas the significance of how a Dutch home's interior is presented. "There is an esthetic value



Asian Pears #1 (warm), oil on panel, 36" x 48"



Asian Pears #2 (cool), oil on panel, 36" x 48"

placed on objects that are brought into the home and displayed, either for their age (antiques) or for their quality of workmanship. You see this in the paintings of the Dutch golden age, in room interiors and still life paintings with a sense of the every day."

Growing up in the midst of the Dutch-influenced decor of his extended family in Canada had a punctuating effect that Klaas believes he would not have felt if he lived in the Netherlands, where that atmosphere would have been commonplace. He remembers visiting his grandparents and being endlessly curious about all the objects his Opa had collected and brought with him to Canada.

Apprentice becomes Magician

Given his esthetically-centred upbringing, it isn't surprising that Klaas's ambition to understand how to make art with presence (first experienced in the Museums of Europe) started with still life as a subject. His search for an education led him

to the Ontario College of Art, where the focus was – as it was with most other art colleges of the day – on creative freedom and individualism rather than the technical process of painting. Klaas recalls, "My aim was simple, to learn how to paint, but in my case this proved difficult given the teaching philosophy back then that artists were better nurtured than actually given a structured education."

Later, Klaas became an art teacher himself with a strong conviction to pass on practical knowledge. "Initially I taught privately and with other artists. There is a large demand for teaching practical solutions to painting and if the students see you can paint and explain your ideas well you can get a following. This segued into teaching for art groups and at some of the non-academic art schools. There are a lot of very dedicated painters who, although they don't pursue making a living from their art, are very passionate about making it.

"Currently, I'm at Sheridan College teaching

figure drawing and anatomy in the animation department. This intensive drawing program has reinvigorated my own drawing practice. I still teach privately in the spring and summer to a group of students who I've worked with for many years."

Despite a lack of practical instruction in his early painting days, Klaas began to understand some of the tricks of the trade and how to apply them. As he explains, "I have come to understand this stage of my development as an important stage in the creative process, still working somewhat from a place of naivety but being in awe of the possibilities. I was driven and inspired. In putting together a painting it was as if the magic trick was still mysterious to me but now I was the one performing it. I started exhibiting my work, hosting my own shows wherever I could with the help of my Uncle Bill who is also an artist and happy to share his experience.

"Now that the process was alive, in and around me, I wanted to find it in my own environment

and in contemporary painters. The Spanish painter Antonio Garcia Lopez was an influence and inspired me as a living and masterful painter. Although I was gaining confidence I felt like I needed to understand the process better and was always looking for new opportunities to learn from my peers. And I wanted to find a living painter whose work had the conviction I saw in traditional paintings."

At that time, Klaas was married and remembers telling his wife about a desire he had as a single student to live in Europe and embrace his heritage while studying painting. He ended with "well that isn't possible anymore" and to her credit she said "why not?" His wife was a freelance medical journalist at the time and fortunately not tied to a day job. Klaas had just quit his job on the sage advice of a friend who told him, "If you don't need to live off your art, you may never be able to." So twelve months later, the couple had rented their house out to tenants, saved some money and



previous page, Honey Dew, oil on panel, 20" x 30"



top, Ginger and Chinese Lanterns, oil on panel, 48" x 72"



bottom, Opa's Books, oil on panel, 20" x 30"



Oyster Shells, oil on panel, 30" x 40"

booked a ticket to Amsterdam with the intention of making it work for a year.

Coming Full Circle

Klaas recalls, "Through the Dutch community in Canada I had come to know of a painter, Henk Helmantel, whose strong painting skills impressed me. After our initial meeting in Holland he agreed to work with me for a time. I stayed in a converted horse stable dating back to the 1600s in the village next to his and we met regularly to discuss painting and process. Being able to see his paintings at various stages of completion was important to understanding how it all came together.

"I remember the first time I walked into his studio, the smell of oil paint and the light coming in his window. What struck me most was that the painting on his easel had more presence than the objects in front of him. Seeing that contrast I came to realize it wasn't about painting realistically as

much as amplifying experience. He was looking at something but he wasn't copying it, he was reacting to it and expressing his reaction in the totally different language of paint."

This was a significant moment in Klaas's goal to understand and embrace painting, what started with a realization in front of a great work of art in a museum came full circle when he stood in front of a living artist creating such a piece of art. The epiphany being: It was in the doing not in the viewing.

The European adventure was remarkable on many levels, but one occasion stands out vividly in Klaas's mind. "When I was traveling in Europe post OCAD I had a letter from the head of the fine art department asking permission for me to visit the drawing archives in museums. When I was at the Uffizi in Florence I showed the letter to the museum office and they told me it was not possible, despite the letter. Not satisfied by this



Box and Paper, oil on panel, 36" x 48"

answer, I went outside and around back to the receiving doors. I showed the letter to the security guard who (to my surprise) led me down a hall to a curator's office. After seeing the letter, the curator (to my further surprise) handed me a lab coat and cotton gloves. He asked me to go through the rolodex of artists and said I would be brought their drawings, but only three artists at a time. That was very memorable."

Innovation over Originality

What moves men of genius, or rather what inspires their work, is not new ideas, but their obsession with the idea that what has already been said is still not enough. (Eugene Delacroix)

"I'm not a big believer in originality," Klaas admits. "Most things grow out of what came before them. Because of the modern demand for individuality we tend to forget this. Most of the stories we tell are rearrangements of place and character but the plot is much the same. So what

inspires me is that there is still so much possibility in the arranging of it all, or rearranging if you will. I believe in innovation, someone comes along and does something of real value but it's usually based on an old idea reworked. We can only create from experience and experience is based on what has already happened."

Klaas advises beginner artists to "Make peace with your work. If you accept where you are in your practice and learn to appreciate what you have achieved you can get on with the progression. Drawing is also important, it is a lost art for the most part because it takes so much continual practice and people today want instant gratification so they go straight to colour."

His own studio is an active place, where he listens to music while working and has half-finished paintings "lying around" amidst still life set-ups and object d'art that he wants to paint. The room is always messy but inspiring. As for the work at hand,



Apples and Strawberries, oil on panel, 48" x 60"



Book of Poem's, oil on panel, 18" x 24"





Plums and Grapes, oil on panel, 30" x 40"



Bread Basket, oil on panel, 48" x 60"



Lemons, oil on panel, 36" x 48"

Klaas sees an interesting contradiction between a painting being a fixed object frozen in time, and the act of painting that is actually a performance. He says, "The painting process is done in time, it is very fluid and requires a careful balancing act to pull off. When I'm in the middle of it and focused I find it quite captivating."

Getting Technical

Painting is a two-part process for Klaas: what he envisions and how he works it out in paint. "When you have an idea it's usually a concept or an emotion, both are hard to say in coloured mud, so you have to figure out how your thoughts and feelings can be translated into form, colour and shape. You have to stay open to the way a painting evolves, that's the editing part, sometimes even the performance of painting needs to be edited."

On the conceptual side, Klaas compiles new

ideas in a little book but they are usually visual impulses or parts of a bigger idea. He makes note of them to refer to later when making a composition or developing a theme. At other times, he'll base a painting on a colour harmony or particular painting technique.

"Lately," he says, "I've been doing a lot more drawing. There is something beautiful and primitive about holding a stick of black matter and making direct marks on a page. I like working on cheap paper so I don't worry about it turning out, but oil is my medium. Computers can be helpful in composition and for reference when doing figurative work. But painting from life is a richer experience to draw from."

When beginning an easel painting, composition is key to Klaas. "I want the arrangement to be inspired. If I don't like the still life set up I don't begin the painting. I can sometimes spend the



Purple Plums, oil on panel, 30" x 40"

better part of a day working out the composition."

The painting begins with a careful drawing that focuses on placement and proportion to get the feeling of the composition on the panel. Here he concentrates on the outside shape of the objects, looking for the silhouette. "The first bit of paint I put down happens quickly. I establish the relative tone from one object to the other. At this stage I'm looking for the overall atmosphere of the piece to come through. Sometimes I do this in a dominant colour tone like umber and at other times I break it down into a local colour for each object. I find it important not to get caught up in detail at this stage. If it gets too tight too soon, you tend to work around things cautiously in the latter stages, and this can stifle the final effect. I like the first layer of paint to feel somewhat unresolved, almost a controlled mess. That way it invites another layer on top that resolves the form in a fresh manner."

The painting process slows at the next stage, where Klaas finishes one section at a time, making small adjustments to bring out the form in the objects that will give the painting its final effect. Sometime it resolves itself in one attempt but if it's not working he'll go over it until satisfied.

When he needs a break from this time consuming, disciplined technique, Klaas employs another means to give his work variety. "This process is more direct and requires doing the drawing, tone and colour, and composition all at once. I try to do as much of this as I can; it keeps the hand loose and the eye sharp. I often do a small piece in 'a painting a day' format. Usually one object, that I finish in one sitting. It challenges me to be decisive and gives a sense of accomplishment at the day's end that is sometimes lacking in a painting process that takes a month or more. I'll use this direct approach when working plein air or from the live model. I



Ginger and Mangosteens, oil on panel, 36" x 48"



Harmony in Purple, oil on panel, 36" x 48"



sell these paintings online or locally, making the work accessible to a broader range of people."

The Power of Expression

Klaas believes that, like most things in life, if you look hard enough you see another layer. That is where he finds himself today, exploring a new layer. "Although I will always be learning, I find my preoccupation is more reflective and I am concerned with what I want to say. My current work is about taking that platform of craftsmanship and pushing it towards expressing a more personal viewpoint. I believe what you say has to be supported by how well you can paint it and not the other way around."

This new age master's old-style work speaks for itself. Simply magic.

Learn more about the fascinating life and style of artist Klaas Hart at his website www.klaashart.ca He can also be contacted by email at klaas.h.hart@gmail.com



Snow Berry, oil on panel, 8" x 10"



above, Test and Egg, oil on panel, 36" x 48"
previous page , Pomegranates, oil on panel, 36" x 48"



Lemon and Bread, oil on panel, 23" x 30"