

# STEVEN VOLPE

This Page, below, **Balzac's Cafe**, oil on canvas, 32.5" x 36.75"

Following Page, below, **David and Goliath**, acrylic on canvas, 30" x 32"



# Painting Live Theatre

written by Debra Usher and Steven Volpe





## Steven Volpe Painting Live Theatre

### In the Beginning

From a very early age Steven Volpe's aptitude for drawing and painting was evident to all the adults around him. While some of us were drawing stick figures Steven's drawings and even his small tempera or watercolour paintings, seemed to go from stick figures to more advanced renderings as early as the age of seven. For Steven art seemed to be a way of getting closer to the things that were of great visual interest to him: Hockey goalies, birds, electric guitars, and cars were his subjects of choice until high school.



Following Page, above, **Winter Gathering**, oil on canvas, 36" x 42"  
This Page, above, **Natural History**, oil on canvas, 36" x 30"



This Page, above, **Skywriter**, oil on canvas, 36" x 42"

Following Page, above, **Parliament Hill**, oil on canvas, 29-7/8" x 32"

But even though he was always drawing as a child he didn't complete that many pieces of art and many drawings were started but never finished. "I have old sketchbooks that are only partially filled: A simple contour drawing of part of a goalie mask would be a typical entry. Either my younger self was able to capture the essence of the subject like a Minimalist, or I just lost interest very early on in the process - maybe a little of both," says Steven.

In elementary school his art teachers were just as supportive as his parents. In the fourth grade, Steven's teacher had him create an oil pastel reproduction of Henry Raeburn's "Boy with Rabbit". Each day during art class, he would sit at a table at the back of the classroom and work on the copy until it was finished.



"I can't remember how much time it took to complete," says Steven, "but it was my first commissioned piece as I received a Walt Disney book in return." Steve was thrilled to see that same art teacher at his booth at the Artist Project in 2016. She still had the faded pastel painting hanging in her home. What a truly special memory.

### **Along the Way**

After seeing a *Robert Bateman* show at the ROM in 1983, Steven Volpe bought some acrylic paints and a masonite board, attempting to copy Robert's technique.



For reference, he used a big book of his paintings that started out on his coffee table and ended up well-worn and dotted with paint. "I then started doing my own compositions that were a necessary part of my growth as an artist. The very first ones were admittedly awkward but gradually I started making better paintings," says Steven. He was on the road to finding his own style.

"At Queen's University, I learned about art history and my tastes broadened. My paintings at that time mixed classical with contemporary elements as I often put figures from old masters paintings into modern day worlds. This was the beginning of figurative painting for me," says Steve. Queen's was predominately a school of abstract painters and that made it difficult for him, although he did receive some valuable tips from the successful Canadian painter, *Harold Klunder*.

Immediately after university, he painted for over a year and had a show in downtown Toronto and was also part of a two-man show at the Art Gallery of Mississauga. At the AGM, he was privileged to exhibit paintings with those of the late *Robert Whale*, a 19th century British artist who began his artistic career by copying paintings of Gainsborough and Reynolds.



Following Page, above, **Beach Game**, oil on canvas, 32" x 48"  
This Page, above, **Road to Emmaus**, oil on canvas, 36" x 30"



This Page, above, left side, **Ice Age**, oil on canvas, 30" x 26.75"

This Page, above, right side, **Ice Age**, oil on canvas, 30" x 20"

Following Page, above, **Controlled Burn**, oil on canvas, 18" x 28"

### **Seems Life a Lifetime Ago**

For more than a decade that followed, Steven's creative outlet was of a commercial nature. "I was a computer graphic designer and I'm convinced that the numerous designs I made for a wide variety of brochures, labels, and websites contributed to my ability as a painter in two key ways. First I learned how to recognize and create a nicely balanced composition regardless of subject matter and then second I learned how to use Photoshop software that I often use today as a visualization tool."

"Before I was able to work as a full time artist, I did work as a graphic designer on a contract basis, and this would afford me some time during the week to paint. Turning to graphic design was a decision that unwittingly made me a better painter. Good design principles are common to both commercial art and fine art, and I honed these skills in front of the computer," says Steven.

Because the computer allows for quick manipulation of images, and an endless number of reversible changes, he was able to create new designs almost on a daily basis, training himself to become better at achieving flow and balance of composition - even in something like a bank brochure.

Steven Volpe was also briefly employed as a high school art teacher. Although he felt that teaching wasn't for quite for him, it also helped to shape his painting in interesting ways: An activity or project typically had to be broken down into a series of steps, accompanied with a teacher's demonstration. That was actually quite useful for him as well as for the students. "Also, explaining to the kids why I felt that art was important might have served as a bit of a subconscious push to get me painting again - since I only completed about a half dozen paintings while I was working full-time at graphic design and teaching," says Steven.

### **The Artist**

For Steven nothing else, creatively, has been as satisfying for him as painting full time. "I restarted my painting career in 2008 with a few commissioned pieces and then I launched into a steady string of figurative paintings, psychological in tone," says Steven.

Previous Page, **Adam and Eve**, oil on canvas, 44" x 32"



"I tend to deal with each painting as a separate entity rather than deciding upon an overarching theme for a series. Nevertheless, as I stand back and look at my body of work, there are definite themes that have emerged: a recurring theme of perception and sight, an examination of childhood nostalgia seen through an adult lens, and the creative process itself."

Inanimate objects and representations all play a role, too in Steven Volpe's work. Faces on hockey cards, newspapers, statues, or paintings in museums have all been used as stand-ins for real people. The inclusion of animals even gives some of his paintings a fable-like tone.

"I've never wanted to make work that presents the idea that I might be pandering or ingratiating myself with the people who see my work," says Steven. "I try to be true to myself and my own tastes and my own level of understanding of what a painting is capable of saying. I paint for myself, but I'm always fully aware that I am making things that are meant to be seen, experienced, and dissected by others. It would be wrong for me to deny that I don't anticipate how a painting will be received, even before it's finished."

But, Steven points out that he is not a fan of art that seems to alienate people with a condescending notion that it must be spoon-fed to the public like medicine for their own good.

### Painting Stories

"In preparation for painting 'Beach Game'," says Steven, "I had my next-door neighbour posing with his convincing replica handgun on the front lawn. I took pictures while he was on his back, arm extended upwards with the gun. My wife later commented that it might have been smarter to do that in the backyard instead of putting on a suspicious show for the neighbour - or worse, a policeman doing the rounds."

I thought the neighbours would be used to my strange behaviour by now, as I often set up my camera outdoors, using the self-timer to run into the frame and quickly strike a pose. In 'Messenger', I recall draping a rag on a garbage can lid to get the lighting for a satellite dish." It sounds like it would be interesting living near Steven on days when he is setting up his scenes. Moving art in more ways than one.

Following Page, *Legacy*, oil on canvas, 43" x 33"

### The Studio and Inspiration

Over time Steven has become very used to his small office / studio. This space lends itself more to making smaller intimate paintings. A larger space would come with the option to paint much larger canvases, but Steven has discovered that manipulating scale - or relative size of an object or figure compared to real life - can create the illusion of size. "Some of the smaller-than-life figures in my big canvases make the painting seem a bit smaller than it actually is, whereas a larger-than-life cropped figure can give the effect of a much larger sized canvas," says Steven.

During painting sessions, you will sometimes find Steven playing vintage TV shows, either from a DVD or YouTube. These complement his work habits the best. "Sometimes, I will play music, but I like the atmosphere of other voices and laughter around me," says Steven.

"If I waited for the spark of inspiration to get me painting, very few would get done. Instead, it's a process of active discovery where simple trial and error leads me to something that suddenly feels worthwhile to paint. A photo often triggers an idea for a scene that I cobble together with various elements; or I might have the idea first, and then look for support material to bring the scene to life."

The place where Steven Volpe paints is more office-sized than a spacious artist studio, so there is not a lot of room for too many 'objects of inspiration' around. "In addition to paints and brushes, I do have some important tools of the trade: some plasticine for making models of figures and objects, a couple flashlights for determining light and shadow on the models, a tape measure, and a mirror. The mirror is in my hand as often as the brush, as I need to constantly assess the reverse image of the painting to become aware of compositional imbalance or anatomical errors that can go unnoticed when I'm looking at the painting the same way all the time. Depending on the attire of the character featured in a painting, I will also have on hand some props like shoes, sweaters, and scarves - often from my wife's closet." It sounds like it would be very interesting to watch Steven paint, sometimes over his shoulder, sometimes just watching his eyes and the brush.

Steven keeps his acoustic guitar in his office, as well. "At some point during the day, even if just for a minute or two, I'll pick it up and play a snippet of something," says Steven. "Over the years, music has been a great source of enjoyment for me, and at one point in my life, playing guitar was more important to me than painting. Throughout high school and university, I had friends who knew me as a guitar player, and had no idea that I could paint."



Following Page, *Bystander*, oil on canvas, 30" x 20"

### Understanding the Art of Painting

"I'm always impressed by the old masters whenever I get a chance to see their work. I have a habit of scrutinizing surfaces of paintings in galleries and museums, always trying to get a closer look at the brushwork, or analyzing the surface sheen by cocking my head at oblique angles. I've often been reprimanded by the gallery staff for getting just a little too close. If nobody was around, I'd almost certainly be tapping the surfaces to feel the tautness of the canvases."

This of course led to Steven spending a lot of time obsessing over materials and techniques, contacting professionals and amateurs alike whenever he came across a painting that he admired. "Artists were always generous with passing along information regarding their favourite oils and varnishes," says Steven. "However, I came to realize that, although different additives yield different effects, no secret ingredient in an apothecary bottle would magically transform my painting. This was a very important lesson to learn."

Steven Volpe states that it is important as an artist to take advantage of the many information resources online: there are some great how-to books, useful discussion forums/videos for technical tips, etc. There is also an endless stream of images of paintings, so it can overwhelm an aspiring painter. "I'm not sure that I've resolved how to deal with that myself. I look at a lot of really good paintings in many different styles, and try to figure out what makes them so good and maybe more importantly why I like them."

Understanding painting is about training the eye and learning the language. Looking at online art galleries or image searches is important, but obviously no substitute for visiting real art galleries. For Steven's day-to-day reference, he likes to keep an art book on his nightstand for a quick flip-through, as he is mulling over the day's painting session. "Lately, at my bedside is a little book called *'The Art Book'* that has colour pictures of about 500 paintings by known artists. I refer to it, and other books, as a way to troubleshoot problems that I might be having with my own paintings. If, for example, I'm not confident about a particular composition or design that I'm working on, I might try to find an example of how another artist found a solution to a similar problem. It's not important that the reference art be in the same style as my own - I look at all different kinds of painting for ideas."







This Page, above, **Namesake**, oil on canvas, 24" x 20"  
Following Page, **1971**, oil on canvas, 26" x 20"



Following Page, **The March**, oil on canvas, 30" x 20"

Steven also goes for many walks, often with his wife, and weekend trips which serve as opportunities for taking pictures. "I don't put a lot of thought into my reference photos, since I've learned that it's usually something caught by accident in the background of a photograph that is of most interest to me," says Steven.

### A Unique Style

"I might describe my paintings as genre scenes that suggest a deeper meaning, with a little bit of Rod Serling's *Twilight Zone* thrown in there for good measure," says Steven. "Somewhere between a snapshot and a parable, there's a sweet spot that I try to find. A little humour or some form of visual irony also makes its way into the narratives."

"But more seriously," says Steven. "I see myself as part of the important tradition of figurative realism, but with a decidedly contemporary sensibility. My ideas are conveyed through flexible narratives where equal parts 'eyewitness account' and 'symbol-laden parable' contribute to the tendency of my paintings to invite interpretation yet still retain a comfortable and coherent plausibility."

Sometimes political in tone, sometimes psychological, always personal, Steven's paintings do bear the imprint of our time. A quality of postmodern irreverence often finds its way into his work: statues are dismantled, books are in danger of being burned, a mirror is held up to a security camera, and a parliamentary barrier is breached. These images are less about challenging any specific tradition or authority, but serve more as metaphorical expressions illustrating how nothing is exempt from manipulation within the artist's discretion. In terms of negotiating philosophy and design, everything ultimately bends to the will of the artist. Nothing is sacred.

Steven's states, "If I were a filmmaker, I'd probably cast the movie before the script was written. Long before I know how the story will unfold, the spark of an idea presents itself in the form of a face, an expression, or a gesture. The gesture, almost always candidly captured, is prominent in most of my work. Since body language is held in a tenuous relationship with any kind of objective truth, context is indeed everything. I use this to my advantage to highlight tension through visual irony - all in the service of provoking thought."





Previous Page, **Street Performer**, oil on canvas, 48" x 36"

This Page, above, **Artist and Hawk**, oil on canvas, 36" x 48"

Following Page, **Arrival and Departure**, oil on canvas, 44" x 32"

### **From Idea to Complete Work of Art**

Steven has an archive of many personal photos from trips and excursions. Often, the body language or gesture of a figure will serve as the subject of a painting, triggering an idea. *'Parliament Hill'* is an example of how a fairly mundane activity in a photograph can be transformed into something more emotionally charged.

He also keeps a sketchbook with ideas or phrases that can also serve as core ideas. "For example," says Steven, "I might jot down a phrase like *'gun versus balloon'* reminding me of how I was curious if a released balloon would travel higher than a bullet. Then, I search for the photos that can provide the subject and setting, giving life to the idea. Or, a phrase might be something very specific like *'welder dismantles statue while bird waits to build nest in boot.'*"





Previous Page, **Lift and Drag**, oil on canvas, 48" x 36"

This Page, above, **Union Station**, oil on canvas, 36" x 45"

"In that case, I take my own pictures using lamps and flashlights, donning the appropriate clothing, in addition to making use of the vast library of images on the internet. My wife has also served as a model in paintings such as 'Winter Gathering'."

"Answering a series of questions can be useful in bringing a scene to life," says Steven. "How many people are in the painting? Are they aware of each other? Where are they? Is the viewer part of the narrative? What is the angle of view? What's happening beyond the edges of the canvas? What time of day is it?"

Steven will use the computer as a visualization tool to work out various possible compositions. After he decides on one that he likes, he will use it as the guide for the painting.



This Page, above, **The Exchange**, oil on canvas, 43" x 36"

Following Page, **Nursery Rhyme**, oil on canvas, 45" x 36"

"I say "guide" because often figures and elements are crudely air-brushed in like a rough sketch. On my nightstand is my real sketchbook where I will also scribble some thumbnail options."

During the painting process, Steven might do several little photo-shoots for clothing, anatomy, different objects, etc. There has been quite a variety of objects set up inside and outside the house: one of his wife's sweaters draped over a chair, some caution tape stretched across the kitchen, pylons, balloons, name tags, newspapers, and even parts of an old violin buried in black earth in a wheel barrow. Steven keeps a couple of flashlights and some plasticine that are handy for quickly assessing tricky shadows. "Changes are inevitable," says Steven. "I might decide to eliminate figures, change architecture, or even crop the composition and re-stretch the canvas over a smaller frame."

"My figural compositions are derived from photographic fragments of mundane narratives observed in everyday encounters, and I like to reconstruct these fragments in such a way as to make an image that transcends the sum of its parts."

For Steven an effective composition evokes a sense of mystery or tension, irony or drama; it suggests something more profound than is revealed by dissecting its pedestrian origins or simply unraveling the story. The narrative is a vehicle through which he explores allegorical or metaphorical ideas. These ideas, partially established at the outset, are routinely transformed when the collaboration between intellect and intuition is subverted by the demands of the painting itself. The end result, if it is successful, is something that eludes a one-dimensional interpretation.

### The Painting Process

"Every stage of a painting can feel like the hardest and finding an idea that is interesting to paint is difficult enough. Then you have to decide what to put in a painting and where to put it; rendering hands and faces; achieving a natural and seamless compositional order out of the hodge podge of elements that one can bring together; and of course, recognizing the moment when you should stop - all of these things can very be difficult. However, the hardest part of what I do is more psychological in nature," says Steven.

"In the morning, the first look at a painting in progress can be difficult. It's never an easy decision wiping away the previous day's work in an instant, but it happens. With wet paint, there's no turning back."



“For this reason, I take photos of my paintings during different stages just in case I need to restore something lost. Making changes over durable dried paint is preferable, if not always possible, because I can always easily revert back.”

“At times, it’s still difficult treating a painting on the easel as something that isn’t precious; often times, it’s the figure or object that I regard as sacred that has to go. Being fearful about making changes never leads to good results,” says Steven. “If I’m starting to get that feeling that I’m intimidated by the painting, or unsure of my progress with a specific passage, or if I feel like I’m getting too finicky, I will wipe the whole thing off and start again. I don’t like the feeling of being controlled by the painting.”

“Another difficult part is accepting that a painting is finished and resisting the temptation to put it back on the easel. My wife always jokes that when I say a painting is finished, there’s still another two weeks to go.”

The creative process for me can feel like an emotional roller coaster, and it’s often difficult to know what’s working and what isn’t. This is usually when a long walk or some time away from the painting restores clarity. One thing I have learned is that I usually can’t think my way out of a problem, so I allow time for my subconscious to give me the answers I need.

Steven Volpe painted with acrylics for many years, and also used casein and gouache very briefly. But he has come to prefer the properties of oil paint, the most desirable of which is the greater open time for ease of blending. He also likes that, unlike acrylics, there is no colour shift or loss of texture after it’s dried. “My paintings have a softness to them that would be difficult to achieve with anything other than oil paint,” says Steven.

### In the End

“My wife, and best friend, has been a source of great moral support and encouragement and there is no one with whom I talk about my ideas and my work more than Wendy,” says Steven. “I value her keen eye and her opinions regarding composition and anatomy. She’s always willing to lend a hand or arm, or ear or whatever anatomical reference I need for a painting. Most notably, she’s featured in ‘Winter Gathering’ (SSNAP People’s Choice Award winning painting, 2019) playing the role of a detective in a museum.”

Because Steven often shows a person from an angle that might conceal part of their face, there have been many instances where people see family members in the paintings: fathers, uncles, etc.



*This Page, above, 1974, oil on canvas, 26" x 30"*

On two occasions, the narratives have caused people to become very emotional when looking at his work, stirred up memories of their loved ones passed.

“For painting subjects,” Steven says, “I often use people from my own photographs taken when I’m out and about. Of course, they are unknown to me almost all the time. On one occasion, a neighbourhood acquaintance brought some of her friends over to the house to look at some of my work. As one lady was standing in front of my painting entitled, ‘Meeting of the Gravity Cult’, she paused while staring at the head and shoulders of the life-sized, back-turned figure. “That looks just like my green coat,” she said. Then, “those are my earrings.” She realized that not only was she the main figure in the painting, but she also recognized her husband’s bald head peeking out from behind.”

Previous Page, **Artist and Level**, oil on canvas, 26" x 20"



Steven had used some photos from a local concert event that she and her husband had also attended.

So I guess if you are in the Orangeville area be careful of artists carrying a camera or a phone – you never know how fascinating you might be, at least to them.

*Steven Volpe's representational works are complex and cryptic. There are times in our life when we will catch a glimpse of something or someone across a crowded room, a busy street or even just out and about exploring. This is a moment where time paused and it is something we cannot grasp or take hold of. Then that moment is gone. That is what the work of Steven Volpe is all about - catching those interesting moments where just for a second we stopped. When we stand in front of his paintings we are left to finish the story as Steven only guides us partway and then allows us to create our own truth as we are immersed far beyond the frame of the canvas.*

To learn more about Steven Volpe please visit, [www.stevenvolpe.ca](http://www.stevenvolpe.ca). Steven is represented by galleries throughout Canada.

**Please visit this gallery to see some more works:**

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**STEVEN  
VOLPE**