



ELENA SISTO

# What Gets You Up in the Morning and Keeps You Going at Night

BUDDING POETS AND STORYTELLERS are frequently encouraged to stay true to themselves by writing about what they know best. Which in most cases means the modest facts of quotidian existence. Often this advice is a polite way of discouraging them from tackling big topics, themes or ideas that might crush their fragile talent before it has had a chance to emerge. Of course this is bad advice for writers with great expectations and ironclad egos whose most authentic impulse is to try things beyond their ken, and, in the process of failing, come into full possession of strengths about which they might have remained ignorant or timid had they not run the risk of overreaching.

However, there are authors like Anton Chekhov and Alice Munro who prove that literature of the highest order is not exclusively the result of grand gestures but may instead be the product of paying acute attention to lowly, mundane things, in short writers who vindicate the policy cited above without sacrificing their art to caution. Painting has its equivalents. Not all work of value sets out to achieve previously unimagined goals or invent a previously unknown idiom. Indeed memorable canvases are as likely to take their inspiration from simple, everyday pictorial predicates and “speak” plainly about them as they are to articulate heroic concepts and mythopoetic images.

Still lives and other “domestic” genres are the strongest art historical evidence of this. And when it comes to the domestic reality of the artist, nothing is closer to home, of greater familiarity or importance than the studio in which they work. Examples of such studio pictures abound. A recent New York exhibition organized by two curatorial colleagues from my days as Senior Curator of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art, Peter Galassi, former Chief Curator of Photography, and John Elderfield, erstwhile Chief Curator of Drawings and subsequently Chief Curator of Painting and Sculpture, surveyed the paintings and photographs devoted to such imagery by artists ranging from Thomas Eakins, Jean-Léon Gérôme, Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Alber-

to Giacometti, Jasper Johns and Philip Guston, to Constantin Brancusi (as photographer) and André Kertész (documenting Piet Mondrian’s studio) to Robert Rauschenberg and Lucas Samaras (as photographers.)

This wide array of artists provides a useful background for the most recent work of Elena

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AFTERNOON II, 2013–14  
Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 inches

[RIGHT] RAINBOWS FOR LISA D, 2013–15  
Oil on canvas, 30 x 24 inches

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Sisto who is not an emerging artist and needs no prompting to focus on what she knows best, but whose work may—in a moment and setting where obvious novelty and blustering ambition dominate the contemporary art scene—be enhanced by a conscious awareness that certain subjects are artistic perennials that flower in season and should be compared with similar blossoms rather than other types of vegetation altogether. Consider then that the world famous masters listed above—and regrettably there were few women among them—are the natural cohort for Sisto and her new crop of canvases, while remaining mindful that the principal purpose of treating them as such is not to hyperbolically aggrandize her but to draw attention to the manner in which their efforts in the same vein collectively highlight the drollery of her pictorial conceits and her sure-handed but essentially whimsical way with a brush. Sisto's new work is that of a serious, experienced artist having fun in her element and at her ease. And, were any of the greats previously mentioned to suddenly burst into her studio as Guston, for one, imagined his studio being invaded on a daily basis by those he most admired, they would instantly recognize this fact while recognizing her as one of their tribe.

A half dozen of these paintings feature Sisto's face popping up like a gray-maned puppet in a Jack-in-the-Box or popping out like someone peeking through curtains in the corner of a room where the viewer was standing until then unaware of her presence. In several she appears in graphically active T-shirts cradling or juggling things in her hand—a dish with paint in it, a few brushes—but with her head wholly or partially cropped. The compositions of these incomplete self-portraits are jig-saw puzzle tight even as the poses suggest a near loss of control over the items she clutches. That said Sisto never loses control over the strokes that describe these dense amalgams of body parts and objects. Indeed her relaxed command of every mark, whether broad or relatively precise but always painterly, is a principal source of the pleasures provided us. Sisto is an accomplished shape-maker in every register, from the "straight up" depiction of a plant, a coffee pot, a stack of paint cans casting shadows on the wall behind them, to a massive blob of squeezed out yellow pigment that is, as a result of her innate sensibility, shapely rather than shapeless, fully formed rather than "informe" in the current critical parlance. These formal abbreviations and elaborations—Sisto's style of cartooning generally compacts the objects on which she focuses but when it comes to leaves or other repeatable modules it patterns them—give her potentially jumbled imagery a coherence and poise that is unexpected given the apparent playfulness of her approach.

Having used the words "cartooning" and "playfulness" permit me to digress just long enough to reassure the reader that there are no grounds for calling into question the thoughtfulness and deliberateness of her aesthetic—far from it. Artists as estimable and enduring as Fernand Léger and Stuart Davis opened the way she is currently travelling—among early modernist precursors Paula Modersohn-Becker figures too if not as an actual influence



then at least as someone in the past towards whom Sisto points from the present—a way she shares with Carroll Dunham, that ever deft, ever fresh teller of tales as rude and as raunchy as Sisto's vignettes are wryly self-deprecating. She would have shared it with Elizabeth Murray had Murray lived longer and been granted the opportunity to push her versions of the domestic unstill life yet further. Meanwhile, Sisto's sisterhood includes Dana Schutz, a painter younger than she whose devotion to the medium and natural gift for it match Sisto's own, but manifest themselves in intriguingly different choices from the same menu of graphic effects seasoned with her own uniquely bittersweet affect.

Thus far I have mostly referred to paintings that encompass a range of objects seen from a middle distance, the one centered on an oozing tube of daffodil oil color being the exception. Fully half of the recent works are similarly compressed views of parts of the artist's own body. Two other extreme close-ups zero-in on her black and gray rubber gloved hands at work in the studio manipulating brushes—one tiny, the other a housepainter's sash brush of the sort favored by artists since the days of Abstract Expressionism when former artisans such as Willem de Kooning brought them into

use as tools in the service of the "fine art." In reality these gloves are essential for protecting artists from the toxicity of the heavy metals and chemical dyes used to tincture the unctuous pastes basic to their medium but most artists are careless and end up slathered with this richly tactile, unquestionably poisonous, goo. In the painting with the yellow blob in her open palm, Sisto frankly, if symbolically, avows and celebrates the primal attraction painters have

for the sensual taboo of "playing in their diapers." In the paintings with gloves she substitutes the slip-sliding strokes that describe the gloves, brushes, paint can and painted surface as a testament to the pleasure those gloves in fact deny.

At this juncture it is time to specify that the paint surfaces of Sisto's canvases are unusually uniform and suave. That matte smoothness is the product of applied research into working with emulsions that combine oil and water much the way salad dressing combines oil and vinegar. Of course oil and water won't mix naturally; one has to shake them and use the result while the heavier component remains in suspension in the lighter one. If one is tempted to resist such shop-talk just remember the subject of these paintings is the shop in which they were made. That said, Sisto's motive for taking these measures and running the risk of their disastrous separation is the overall consistency of the surface when individual colors dry, a consistency that is not inherent in tube-paints given the diversity of the pigmenting agents and the wide ranging quality of colors made by different companies. Ever the experimental risk-taker, de Kooning was one of the modern pioneers of this mixed technique, and Janice Biala, the sister of his 1940s and 1950s



studio mate, Jack Tworkov, was another. Sisto is among its contemporary virtuosi. In these pictures she gives painting lessons in the secrets of the Old Masters of Modernism, and of the still older masters of the Renaissance, most notably Titian, that nevertheless are, in keeping with the perennial quest such techniques have always furthered, ever fresh.

Lastly, let's look at the paintings in which Sisto all but eliminates the space between her body and the picture plane, paintings in which compression of space echoes compression within the image, as, for instance, when she holds a dog against her breast with two flat hands nesting a pencil thin brush in the V between the index and middle figures of the right one. It is even tempting to use that designation as the pivot upon which to turn and compare these broadly limned illusionistic images to explicitly indexical works such as those of Jasper Johns and David Hammons wherein the artist's body is literally the imprinted image of the work. "Up close and personal indeed!" There is a similar view of one hand with several brushes but without the dog, just as there is a more complex composition in which the dog appears to be sitting atop a shawl, blanket or throw rug. We recognize the dog because his spiked hair makes it look as if he had just stuck his tail in a light socket, though in the painting where Sisto hugs the dog it seems as if the pressure of that embrace explained the splayed paws and fright-wig hair. Two other canvases pull in still nearer the artist's torso, focusing on the neckline of her shirt and outerwear with just

BLENDING BRUSH, 2013–15  
Oil on canvas, 40 x 60 inches

[COVER] SPLURT, 2013–15  
Oil on canvas, 48 x 40 inches

a touch of flesh tone to account for her hands thrust into bomber jacket pockets. An almost cinematic extreme close-up that crops out the face, the pose defies expectations—of actual intimacy? of narcissistic self-betrayal?—by concealing far more than it reveals, that is by transforming the body into a mask.

All of which attests to a willingness that the ingratiating palette, easy painterly manner, and apparent openness and guilelessness of Sisto's subject matter and style would seem to belie. Happily that willingness is allied to an apologetically droll wit. Sisto is not one to laugh at her own jokes as more aggressively "ironic" artists are prone to doing these days, but she clearly enjoys telling them and gladly shares them with us. And in every dimension of these paintings she unguardedly shares her love of painting as a thing and an activity. That is to say her love of its tools and materials—if only paintings of this kind kept their natural studio scents after they dried they would put three out of our five senses to work, while if oil were composed of cream and spices, rather than linseed oil and lethal powders, we would be able to taste them thereby enlisting the four of five senses—of the ambiance in which it is

realized, of its formal conventions and many available kinds of pictorial rhetoric, and, finally, of the sheer inexhaustible delight and utter necessity a born painter experiences when following his or her vocation.

If this sounds like an affirmation of the self-sufficiency of painting after the much reported and always premature Death of Painting, you have read this essay accurately. And if you bridle at such an "unsophisticated" belief in this supposedly moribund practice's continuity I would only caution against being too quick to think that the source has missed much in the polemical back and forth about the future of art during the last thirty years and more. He hasn't. But he has always valued the vitality of specific works of art—paintings in particular—over generalizations about the evitable course of art history. And he notes that many who feel certain of their rational rejection of "obsolete" aesthetic modes reserve for themselves the option of more or less secretly savoring the works of one or more exponents of those condemned aesthetic tendencies to whom they grant a reprieve because of the satisfaction they receive from them, as if postponing the execution of their chosen Scheherazade for the sake of one more night of forbidden pleasure. And if in rebuttal, anyone asks reproachfully how a serious observer of the art scene could justify a lengthy text devoted to an artist who depicts a woman—herself—in spotted cotton shirt wrapped in a completely monochrome black or blue padded cotton windbreaker or workman's outfit—I will quote scripture, chapter and verse from the *Book of Willem* (de Kooning that is) who wrote in defense of the pretext for Henri Matisse's *Woman in a Red Blouse*:

"What an idea that is! Or the Cubists—when you think about it now, it is so silly to look at an object from many angles. Constructivism—open not closed. It's very silly. It's good they got those ideas because it was enough to make some of them great artists."

*Content is a Glimpse*, excerpts from an interview with David Sylvester, 1963

Amen to that! And all praise to Elena Sisto who has kept faith with de Kooning's deceptively simple proposition.

ROBERT STORR  
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