



got milk?

EMBERT  
MNH.

# Still Life With a Smile

Brian Mathas Burt paints still lifes that are serene yet engaging, technically riveting and thematically amusing.

By Anne Hevener

Brian Mathas Burt doesn't like to be bored. Since, in all probability, he's going to be standing before a still life setup painting for 30 to 40 hours, he wants to like what he's seeing. More often than not, that means a setup that's amusing, surprising or just plain fun. In his painting, *Got Milk?* (opposite), the artist groups the question with a spoon and a precise arrangement of breakfast cereal. There's a playful quality to the painting; you can almost feel the wink of the artist as you view it.

Burt was trained in a rigorous fine arts atelier program after college, so he appreciates classical still life, but it's just not what he wants to do now. "If I'm looking at something that doesn't make me smile, make me laugh or make me think," he says, "if I'm just painting it for the sake of beauty, nice color or composition, that has no interest for me."

It may be that the artist's personality is simply better suited for irony and lightheartedness. The painting, *Happiness* (at right), turns out to be a good example of how the artist thinks. The mug in his setup didn't actually have a smiley face on it; in fact, it said Fort Lauderdale. "But I saw the yellow," Burt says, "and I thought, 'How can I make it more interesting?' I put the smiley face on it, and added the tea bag with the Chinese symbol for happiness."

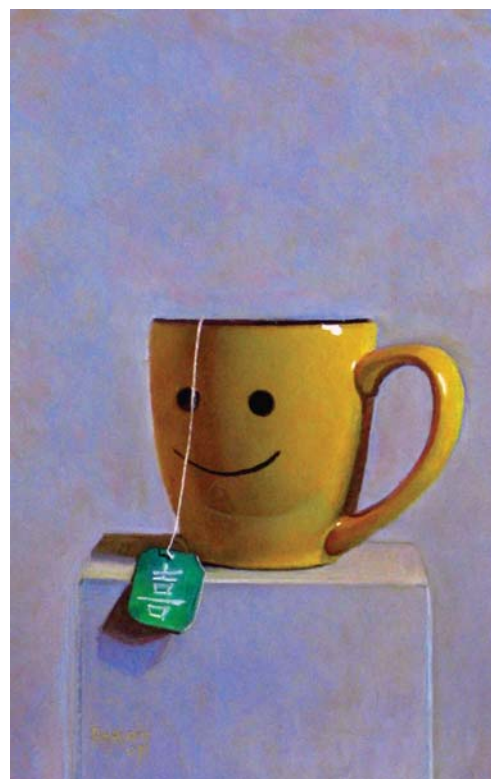
## The Golden Notebook

Burt is primarily a studio painter, but the tool he does travel with is a small notebook. Though the sketches and notes in these notebooks may be indiscernible to others, they're an intrinsic part of Burt's creative process. "If I see something or hear somebody say something that pops an idea into my head, I have to write it down. If I don't have a notebook, I'm writing on napkins, restaurant receipts—whatever."

This is how the artist finds the seeds for most of his still lifes. "I have a very difficult time if I try to sit down and say, 'OK, it's time to think up a still life,'" Burt says. "I have a room that has shelves and shelves of objects. There's all kinds of stuff in there.

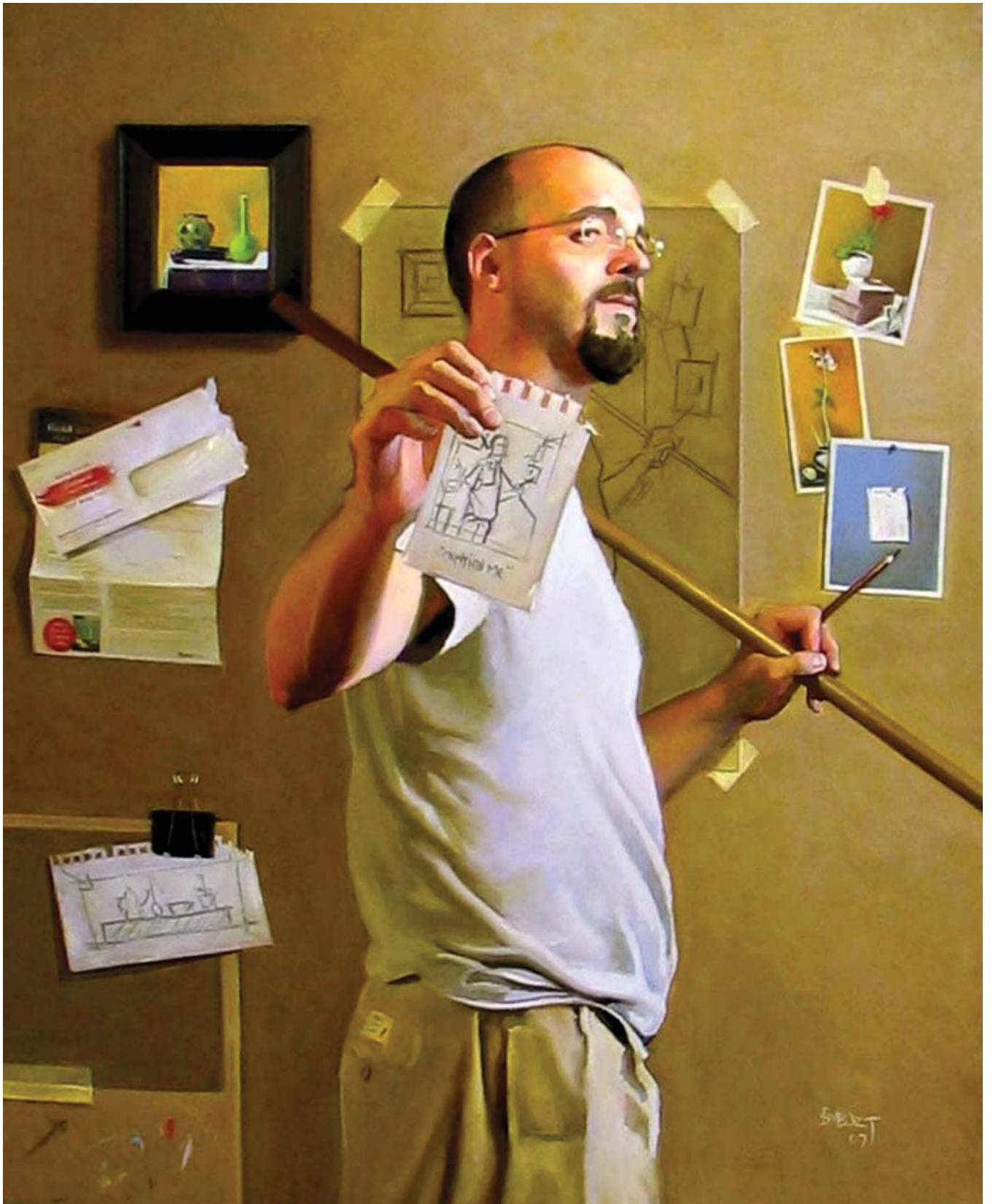
But I find that if I try to go in there, I'll spend hours putting things up and looking at them, and that just isn't interesting to me. But if I go back to this sketchbook, and find an object, or a saying, or a thought, or a color combination that I thought was interesting, I look at that and I think, 'Yeah, there you go.'"

One day, Burt made a list in his notebook of "things that go together," writing down such celebrated pairings as cookies and milk, peanut butter and jelly, paint and paintbrush. That concept evolved into a whole series of paintings in which the artist used the same pedestal with the same background color and lighting, changing only the items on the pedestal in each painting (See *Moo "O" Duo* on page 55). Burt called the series "Put It on a Pedestal,"



*Happiness* (8x6)

*Got Milk?* (opposite; 10x8)



*Mention Me* (25x17)

and with each new piece he painted, he was amazed by just how much that change of items alone altered the entire painting.

### Inspiration & Infatuation

The fact that well-known commercial products, such as Fruit Loop cereal and Oreo cookies, as well as readily identifiable imagery, like the smiley face, make regular appearances in Burt's work suggests ties to the Pop Art movement, and while that association does play a role, the artist's style is more powerfully influenced by the age-old *trompe l'oeil* tradition in which artists employ highly realistic imagery to create an illusion of three-dimensional objects. Many of the items Burt selects for his still lifes—a photograph, a playing card, a dollar bill—are *trompe l'oeil* standards; they're familiar, everyday items that have great potential for the desired "trick the eye" effect.

Burt has been accused of having a fetish for tape as a painting subject (see *The Offering*, below, among others), and he's the first to admit that he does get hooked on certain items. In most cases,

these obsessions begin in the same way—as a challenge. "When I started doing these pieces that look as though they were put up on walls, I first used thumbtacks and I liked that. Then I got this piece of tape. I thought it looked like it would be kind of hard, because it was a little translucent and picked

**"For me, the most important thing is the process. That might not be as flashy as some other things, but I really love the meditative process of still life ..."**

up the colors of the thing behind it as well as the thing it was holding." Burt appreciates the fact that, because of this quality, the painting experience is never the same thing twice. "I don't always go to the same pastels to represent the tape, because it's always changing," he says. "It's something new every time."

His current fixation is with the dollar bill (See *The Offering*, and *A King, A President, An Artist*, on page 57). "A dollar bill is a very iconic *trompe l'oeil* subject," Burt says. "I feel like, if you paint a dollar bill



Moo "O" Duo (8x6)



The Offering (10x6)



*A Sketch of a Sketch (10x8)*



*Heart Torn In Two (7x5)*

and can paint it well enough to fool someone, then you've made it; you belong." He also discovered, upon painting one, that even beyond the technical aspect, a dollar bill is a beautiful subject. "There are a lot of different colors in there," he says. "I immediately began to brainstorm how else to paint it." He has since created setups where the bill is slipped underneath an object, or even folded into origami. "Any fixations," Burt explains, "have more to do with finding different ways of challenging myself with objects that I really enjoy painting."

### The Still Life of Brian

In addition to still life, Burt has painted quite a bit of portraiture in his time and with it, some self-portraiture. Lately, Burt's self-portraits have been showing up in his still lifes—in a surprising way, naturally. "I don't do a lot of portraits where I'm standing there, turned three-quarters," Burt says. "In the *Got Milk?* painting, however, there's a portrait of me upside-down in the spoon. Most people don't see that until they walk up to it and then say, 'Hey, is that you?!'" The artist also makes a "reflective" appearance in *A King, a President, an Artist* and *The Offering*.

His inspiration for painting self-portraits grows from the same impulse as that for painting dollar bills or playing cards—it's a challenge. "When you're painting yourself, it's a huge challenge," Burt says. "In the end,

no one ever sees themselves as they actually are. We have preconceived ideas that are either grossly positive or negative."

In the same way that he brings portraiture to his still life, Burt has also brought still life to his portraits. In *Mention Me* (page 54), images of four pastel paintings—each one a painting that has been recognized in various Pastel 100 competitions—are tacked to the wall, along with an envelope and subscription mailing from *The Pastel Journal*. In the artist's hand is a note with a rough sketch of the painting and the words: "Mention Me." Though it's unlikely that many viewers saw these elements with the same amused recognition as we did at *The Pastel Journal*, Burt doesn't really worry about every viewer entering a picture in the same way. "If somebody asks me why I painted a piece, I have no problem telling them," he says. "But I'd much rather they bring whatever they have to it. I've found that I'll think a piece has an overt topic, but someone else will think about it in a completely different way—in some way I never would have thought of. That to me is the great thing about art: It's whatever the person brings to it. If I wanted to tell you something absolutely specific, I would've become a writer, not a painter."

### Encounters in Pastel

Burt earned a degree in fine art, but it wasn't until his third year at the Atelier that he picked up a stick

of pastel. And that, he recalls, is when things really started to happen. "I was having a lot of problems with oil paint—mixing on the palette, and keeping my colors correct. I can't remember how I got my first set of pastels, but somehow I got hold of a set of Unisons. I tried them out and I felt really good about the first pastel I painted. It just worked. Everything made more sense when I was mixing and crosshatching on the surface."

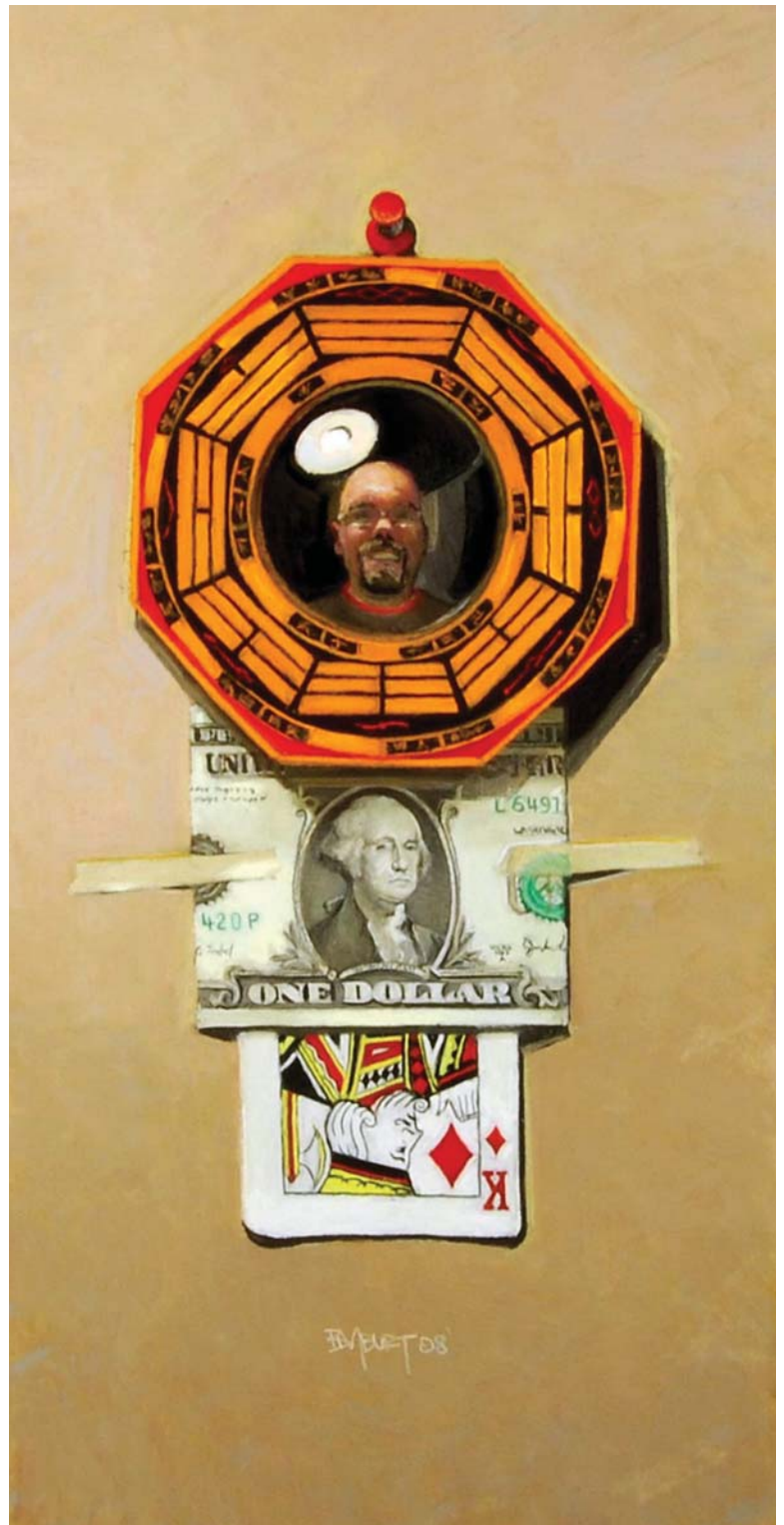
Fired up by these first experiments, Burt immediately began to seek out information on pastel. His first encounter with a book by Daniel Greene was a game changer. "I was fascinated with the portraits he did that were loose in some areas and tight in others," Burt says. From Greene, he was lead next to the work of John Singer Sargent (American, 1856-1925), and from Sargent to French artists François Boucher (1703-1770) and Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904). But Burt is hesitant to even attempt a complete list of influences, because he draws inspiration from a large and diverse circle that includes an artist like Chuck Close, whom he admires "for the originality" as well as Maine artist Alan Magee, who enralls with highly realistic work in acrylic.

Not having the formal training in pastel, Burt has always tried to take in as many different styles of pastel art and artists as he could, seeking out a range of techniques. He remembers getting his first copy of *The Pastel Journal* in December 1999, during his first year at the Atelier. "It was the one with Andrew Hemingway in it and these wonderful still lifes that are so tight and so crisp. And I thought, 'Wow. How does this guy do these pieces in pastel?' My only experience with the medium at the time being these big chunky pieces of pastel."

It's the most common question Burt gets about his own work: How does he achieve the detail? "People familiar with the medium ask me if it's pastel pencil," he says, "but I don't really use a ton of those. The only time I'll use pastel pencil is for very fine detail, like lettering or the detail in a dollar bill—times when I have to really get in there." More often, he uses multiple techniques. For one piece, the artist created the entire painting by tapping, using just the tip of the pastel—almost in a Pointillist manner. Sometimes he uses just the fat end of the pastel to push the color around. Other times, he sharpens his Nupastels, and uses them. "In the end, it's really just a mixture of techniques—whatever works."

In terms of magic tools, the artist says he has tried just about every gizmo out there, but his most useful discovery has been the humble No. 2 eraser.

He uses the bigger ones with angled sides that you find with school supplies or he uses a razor blade to sharpen the small eraser on the end of a regular No. 2 pencil into a flat surface. "The eraser actually pushes around the pastel on the paper



*A King, A President, An Artist (12x6)*



## About the Artist

After earning a fine arts degree at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, **Brian Mathas Burt** ([www.bmburt.com](http://www.bmburt.com)) was

accepted into an apprenticeship at The Atelier School of Fine Arts in Minneapolis. His work, primarily in pastel, has been shown at Meadowcreek Galleries in Edina, Minn., The Minneapolis Museum of Art, The Cincinnati Art Museum and The Taft Museum of Art.

He has received awards in a number of shows and competitions, including the Grand Prize in the Painting/Pastel/Drawing category at this year's Old Town Art Fair in Chicago, and a first-place win in Viewpoint 2007, the annual exhibition of the Cincinnati Art Club, of which he's a member. His pastel work has also earned Honorable Mentions several times in *The Pastel Journal's* annual Pastel 100. Burt lives in Cincinnati, where he sells his work from a studio in the Pendleton Art Center.

without taking it off," he explains. "Sometimes if there's something that's not blended or it's catching too much light, I'll take the eraser and just push it around a little bit. A lot of times, if I'm wanting to smooth down a background, one of these erasers does it better than anything; I don't ever use my fingers."

### Materials & Methods

Though he likes to try new things continually, Burt is rather devoted when it comes to his choice of paper. "When I picked up the Wallis sanded paper years ago, I thought: 'This is exactly what I've always wanted,'" he says. "Something I can work multiple, multiple layers on, and it won't fight against me." He mounts the paper to tempered hardboard, primed MDF or Masonite. "I prime the back and sides with gesso," he says, "and put a layer of gesso over the top. Then I put the paper down on top and weight it. Then, once it has dried, it's a completely archival pastel panel."

The bulk of his pastels are Unison, about 80 to 90 percent, but he also has some Rembrandts, Schminckes, Senneliers, Giraults and Nupastels, plus an assortment of pastel pencils.


Burt was trained to draw using a sight-to-size method. With the still life in front of him, he draws a subject to size on the paper using "sight" marks to get an accurate drawing and spot mistakes. "I don't draw in a lot of detail," he says, "because, the way I work, I lay down color pretty aggressively initially; any kind of small detail would get obliterated." Burt describes his pastel application this way: "It's like a

camera that's completely out of focus, moving downwards, slowly moving into focus."

He always works the whole piece at the same time, beginning with a background color that he accepts will end up being wrong. "I'm not good enough to pick that absolute end color," he says. But since his background isn't just one color, but five or six layers of different colors, he simply starts by trying to pick a correct value and color temperature within a color family. For example, he may ask: Is this color warm? Is it a 3 in value? Is the color somewhere in the neighborhood of yellowish orange? If so, he puts it down. "I do that same process for everything," Burt says. "When everything has a color on it, then I can start judging the relationships—the background to the foreground, the background to the middle ground. Because once you make an adjustment somewhere, it's like a scale that has a thousand arms: You take a little off here, then you're going to have to put a little on over there."

### Sold on Still Life

Though Burt has done portraiture and paints an occasional landscape, still life is his passion. His complaint with painting commissioned portraits is that it's difficult to find someone willing to take the time to sit for you. He adds, "Also—and this is where I'm selfish—you're working with somebody else; somebody else has a say. You're the employee." And with landscape, because he can't paint as tightly as he likes to paint *en plein air*, he must defer to photos, which he finds limiting—especially in the color area. "For me," says Burt, "the most important thing is the process. That might not be as flashy as some other things, but I really love the meditative process of still life—getting up there and looking at every little cranny and selecting what I want to keep, and taking out what I don't."

It's a process that can be time-consuming—some times 20, 30 or 40 hours, so after he's finished with a piece, his wife will often ask him if he's happy to be done. "I'll say yes," Burt says, because he's usually happy with a painting, "but I was happier when I was doing it. I really like the doing it." It's for this reason that still life is such a perfect fit. It allows him to work from life, and relish in the process for as long as he likes. 

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