

Mary Joan Waid's  
radiant still lifes  
are restrained  
yet mesmerizing  
in their effect.

**R**educed to its essence, every easel painting is a rectangle, and the artist's task is to place marks in that rectangle in an intriguing, possibly beautiful, way. If the artist is painting either a portrait or a landscape, many formal concerns are solved as soon as he chooses the subject or site. For the still life painter, on the other hand, composition starts out and remains a deliberate act. When she chooses the objects, arranges them in a setup and records changes that invariably occur in time, she continually considers the principles of contrast and balance, as well as the relationships among sizes, colors and shapes.

As Mary Joan Waid talks about that process, she describes it in stages. "Of course, beginning with a vision is always exciting and hopeful," she says. "There's a brief moment when it seems that all that's required is to commit the internal image to the canvas. Oh, but it's not that easy! The actual painting process challenges

# Simple Gifts

■ By Maureen Bloomfield

that clear vision. Usually there are some highly frustrating, and sometimes depressing, periods as quandaries surface." Waid echoes other artists who define painting as "problem solving." While mulling over those problems, she's "exploring," as she puts it, "trying to find solutions rather than impose them, allowing accidents to happen and being open to chance—all positive parts of the process."

Whether she's painting in pastel or oil, Waid works with subtleties. She is committed to working from life, peering at the setup as fruits soften and flowers turn toward the light. Though the elements in her still lifes are recognizable as objects, they are persuasive and beautiful as shapes. As Giorgio Morandi (1890–1964), the Italian modernist whose austere formal works

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*Radiant Orient* (oil, 40x36)



*Summer's Wild Berries* (above; pastel, 22x30) and *A Rose* (at right pastel, 10x13)





To see more of Mary Joan Waid's work, visit [www.artistsmagazine.com](http://www.artistsmagazine.com) and click on **Gallery**.

have something in common with Waid's, explained, "I believe that nothing can be more abstract, more unreal than what we see." How strange that art—that follows from simply staring at a setup and painting what it looks like—evokes, in both Morandi's work and Waid's, such emotion. While the tone is quiescent, the paintings are full of feeling. Does that emotion—on the part of the artist and viewer—derive from the contemplation of beauty or from something else?

**The still life first appeared** as bowls of fruit on the walls of Herculaneum and Pompeii, but the genre reached its apogee in Holland during the 17th century, when Dutch burghers celebrated their wealth by buying paintings of lavish arrays of flowers, fruits and game. Within this abundance, time's ravages of death and decay were implicit. To opposite effect, in the 20th century Pierre Bonnard (1867–1947)

works exclusively with one medium for a span of time before switching to the other. For her pastels, she likes either Arches cover (100 lb paper) or Sennelier La Carte card stock, because both surfaces accept a lot of pigment; she sometimes applies sandpaper to a sheet, in order to rough up the surface further. When I spoke with her, she told me she'd just started painting in oils again. "For a while, all my energy was going into pastel; now I have this urge to paint in oil, probably because my life is calmer. Pastel allows me to work in smaller chunks of time." When she paints in oils, she likes a medium-weight cotton canvas primed with gesso.

"My still lifes," explains Waid, "start with an object that has caught my imagination. As an artist I want to make works that portray something universal and true, but the only way to achieve those ends is by being rigorously specific." She moves the objects around as she looks for compositional relationships "with one another

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celebrated radiance by painting tabletops strewn with dishes and flowers in the effulgent light of an interior that opened to a garden; Waid uses a similar compositional scheme in *Radiant Orient* (page 29) and *Spring's Casement* (page 32). Bonnard, too, often assumed a bird's-eye view, as Waid does in *A Rose* (at left) and *Summer's Wild Berries* (at top, left). While Waid's work seems to allude to these various traditions, her still lifes are absolutely her own. In place of ornate abundance, Waid presents a small bowl of wild berries or a single rose and thus argues for modesty in place of ostentation.

If the still life historically has proffered abundance in order to hint at the penury that is death, Waid's still lifes present small arrays of common objects as if they were lavish gifts. Her still lifes are quiet, positing serenity and encouraging contemplation. In a similar way, Chinese artists paint one stem of a cherry tree or one peony, but for Waid the objects do not represent qualities or virtues or anything other than what they are.

Waid paints in both oil and pastel. She usually

and with the edge of the painting rectangle." In order to place the objects, she does a loose sketch on the canvas with sticks of pastel. "I then do a very thin, loose wash within the enclosed spaces of the sketch, up to and beyond the pastel line," she says. "Yes, the pastel does run a bit, but that's not the purpose. What happens when I overlap from one space to another is that at the overlap there is a darker transition that defines the space but is more subtle than a precise line." Her next step is to wipe the canvas with a cloth so the surface is relatively dry. "Nonetheless there are still faint indications of the composition that I can use as a guide, but I've found that the composition can change during the actual painting process."

As a medium she uses linseed stand oil thinned with artist's turpentine. Her favorite paints are Old Holland oils. Her palette changes with the conditions of the light—and "light," Waid reminds us, "is affected by location." Waid has two homes, a loft in New York City and a country house in Vermont. "Vermont country light is

## Meet Mary Joan Waid

Born in Emporia, Kansas, Mary Joan Waid moved to New York City after she graduated from Wichita State University with a degree in fine arts. She has paintings in the collections of the Indianapolis Museum of Art, the Minneapolis Museum of Art, Wichita Art Museum and the National Academy of Design in New York City. Today she shows her work at Nohra Haime Gallery in New York and Atrium Gallery in St. Louis. Another aspect of her life is that she's a master teacher of tai chi. For *The Artist's Magazine's* 2007 Competition, she will be the juror of awards in the still life category.

*Self-Portrait* (pastel, 30x22)



*At Spring's Casement* (above left; pastel, 26x20), *Traces* (above; pastel, 26x20) and *Floating Scent* (opposite; oil, 36x42)



more green or blue,” she says, “whereas Manhattan studio light goes more toward either a warm or a cool gray.”

**One way the artist finds** inspiration is by looking at paintings, “seeing how other people put down paint—the way it rests on the canvas, the way the energy bounces against the edges of the painting.” She explains: “There is generally something unique that sticks in my mind and expands my own use of materials or offers challenges compositionally. And it’s good to look at all types of paintings. About 30 years ago, I saw a large Kandinsky exhibition. The use of color, the freedom of the brush and the vitality of the paintings thrilled me. Afterward I painted a self-portrait that was influenced by his paintings, but I’m probably the only person who would ever make the connection, and I think it had to do with a particular blue that Kandinsky used.”

Having recently started a cycle of work, she’s understandably hesitant to describe it in too much detail. “I’m thinking about how objects inhabit space. I was working on a still life that had four tangerines on a green napkin sitting on my worktable. As I was working, I became so aware of how, when we’re doing a still life—and this is true in any art—we’re organizing, we’re making order, we’re controlling space. And especially when we’re setting up a still life, we’re thinking about what the rectangle is going to look like and how these things are going to sit in it and how energy is going to flow through the space. Well, I had this setup and I noticed it was orderly, but around the outside edge was chaos. Within the total disarray of my worktable, there was this little island that was organized. This is the idea I’m looking at now: the contrast between the order we try to establish and the unruly world as it really exists.”