



*Common Things, oil, 11" by 14"*

*"I've really been surprised by the reactions I've gotten to this little piece, which is largely a study in soft natural light. It won the Hunter Editions Award of Excellence at the 2009 OPA National Show and has earned me a commission by a couple who are after something with a similar feel. I guess our off-hand comments can sometimes be much more powerful than our prepared speeches."*

DAVID GRAY

## *The Beauty of the Form*

*By Vicki Stavig*

"I'm kind of a late bloomer."

So says David Gray, who has been painting professionally for only the past seven years. That short time period, however, is no indication of the quality of his work. Whether painting still lifes or figures, Gray combines light, color and composition with a bit of romance that is appealing to an ever-increasing

audience of collectors. His work also has earned him several prestigious awards, including the 2009 Chairman's Choice Award at the Art Renewal Center Salon, as well as the 2008 Award of Excellence, Best Associate Member award at the Western Regional Oil Painters of America Show.

While Gray is justifiably proud

of those awards and the many exhibitions that have featured his work, such accolades are not a driving force for this talented painter. Rather, it is his love of creating something beautiful that strikes a chord with the viewer, whether it be the smooth metal of a silver plate or the light shining on a young girl's golden tresses.



*Girl, oil, 12" by 16"*

*"Most of the time I would rather not title my paintings at all. I suppose Girl is the closest I'll ever get to that. Those eyes say everything that needs saying."*

"Art was always something I did," says Gray, who still lives in Tacoma, Washington, where he was born and raised. "I was the middle of three boys. We were encouraged in athletics primarily, but my mother had some musical background, so we all had piano lessons, too. I still play a little. And I always drew. I would cover my books with butcher paper to protect them and then would cover the paper with pictures of Walter Peyton and other sports heroes."

Although Gray earned a Bachelor's degree in Fine Arts from Pacific Lutheran University, that was not his original plan. "I went to get a biology major and planned to become a physical therapist, but I took a drawing class for an elective and switched majors in my sophomore year," he says. "I graduated

in 1992, but didn't know what I was going to do with that degree."

Gray found himself somewhat torn as to what his next step would be. "I was passionate about art, but I was more passionate about social work," he says. "I also was in love with Jessica. Right after I graduated I went to East Palo Alto, California, to work with underprivileged kids with a Christian ministry. I was very idealistic and thought I could change the world, and that was how I was going to do it."

Love won out, however, and eight months later Gray returned to Washington, where he turned to music, taking saxophone lessons in hopes of becoming a professional musician, while waiting tables to put food on his own table. When he and Jessica married in 1996, Gray knew

it was time to get serious about his life's plan. "I had been drawing and painting with watercolors but hadn't established a path for myself," he says. "I naively decided to become a professional fine artist."

Embarking on an intense course of self-directed study, Gray read every art book and magazine he could get his hands on and set his sites on a classical realism focus in his work. "I really didn't know how to paint, so I decided to start with still life, because then I could control everything, including the light," he says. "My art education was very broad in college. I took drawing, printmaking, ceramics, sculpture, art history, and photography. I had dabbled a little in paint but really didn't know what I was doing. I thought I could teach myself, and



*Angel, oil, 30" by 20"*

*"Sometimes I feel I could be perfectly content to paint my wife's beautiful back for the rest of my life. The title refers not only to her character, but also to the folds of the shirt, which to me seemed feather-like and made me think of an angel's wings."*



*Braids, oil, 11" by 14"*

*"This doesn't sound very sophisticated of me, but I think braided pigtails are the cutest things. This is my daughter. I love the play of light on all the little shapes formed by her golden braids."*

I did. I read everything I could get my hands on about oil painting. I got to a point that I could control the medium, then focused on reading about traditional painting."

He did indeed and, within two years of starting to paint in a spare bedroom, Gray was selling his work from a gallery near Tacoma. In 2000, he entered his first show—the Pacific Rim Wildlife Expo in Seattle—and, the day after the show closed, a second gallery picked up his work.

While Gray's skill has improved during the past seven years, his subject matter has remained constant. Asked how he composes his still life paintings, Gray says, "It's just intuition, really. I just sort of move things around until it feels good. I like to clump things together and

let the rest be an area where it's trailed off from that, so it's more a supporting element than a focal point. There's the focal point where you have all these objects grouped together somewhere in the middle and, as you go out from that, I trickle things out until it makes sense."

Gray chooses those items from a growing collection in his home studio, adding objects as he has the time and money to do so. "The objects appeal to me as individual objects," he says. "They have a feeling of timelessness. I like the shape. I will hold it up on my fingertips at eye level and start turning it. Sometimes I'll sketch little ideas. When I start to put a still life together, I'll pick things I like. Maybe I bought a silver pitcher. I'll set it down and start adding to it, or maybe I'll want to feature white things or metal things, or fabric."

Whatever he features, the final product is sure to feature a soft light. "Understanding how to translate light to a two-dimensional surface isn't easy," Gray says. "I've been

struggling with that. I think I can go further in translating light with three-dimensional objects on a two-dimensional surface. I like light interacting with form. I'm a realist. When you look at my paintings, I want you to feel its reality. That's a difficult thing to do."

Surprisingly, Gray says he never wanted to be a still life painter. "I just did it to teach myself," he says. "I really always wanted to be a figure painter. I've always done figures, too, but maybe not as well. I've also done some landscapes, but I've narrowed my path for efficiency's sake. I'm not into narratives or telling a story. I think the essence of my work is just the beauty of the form itself, whether a figure or a flower."

"Without having a story to tell or a message, people really seem to respond to my work. The three dimensions and the reality and the way light plays on it is enough for me and seems to be enough for my viewers. I just feel there is something valuable and something to be com-



*Top - Silver Plate, oil, 16" by 32"*

*"I needed a fairly large object for my compositional idea, and I didn't have one suitable. So I took this silver plate and set it on edge, leaning it slightly on a brick I set upright behind it. That big, clear circle is just what I needed to set up the rest of the design."*



*Bottom - October Shapes, oil, 14" by 28"*

*"The underlying non-objective design will always come first in my still life work. But it's fun sometimes to use objects that are full with so many pleasant connotations: harvest, fun, family, a new season . . . ."*



*Light's Caress, oil, 12" by 16"*

*"This is my beautiful wife again. I really enjoyed translating the subtle nuances of form created by the raking light brushing across her back. Challenging, but enjoyable."*




municated in just an object. There's nothing romantic or exciting about it, but there is in trying to create that feeling in a painting. It's exciting when people connect to that."

When painting figures, two of Gray's favorite models are his wife Jessica and his daughter Lauren, 8. "All the paintings of little girls are Lauren," he says. "We have a 5-year-old son, too: Forest. I've painted him a couple times, but it's hard for him to sit still. I took 150 photos of him for one painting. I plan to paint him more, but female subjects seem to be more saleable."

Gray admits that he has been tempted to keep some of his paintings, but earning a living and communicating with art lovers take precedence. "I've done paintings where I say, 'I wish I could keep this,' but the thing is, I'm a professional artist," he says. "On one level, I have to make a product to sell. On a more romantic level, art is a form of communicating, and I'm painting these

for people, not for myself. I'm half of it; the other half is the people who come into the galleries and, hopefully, buy my paintings."

Gray is pleased with his professional progress. "Over the last two or three years I've matured quite a bit to where my product is consistent," he says. "It's only been the last two years that I can say I know what I'm doing."

He also is pleased on a personal level. "I have everything I want," Gray says. "I'm utterly and completely in love with my wife; my kids are amazing, healthy, and intelligent. I'm so blessed. I pray hard, too. I feel this is God's path for me and, as long as I'm doing my part, I'm being taken care of. I'm really humbled and thankful and will continue to work hard. I want to be a positive force in the world by creating beauty." 

*Vicki Stavig is editor of Art of the West.*