



Greg Mort

Interpreting Objects from Life

For his complex still life compositions, Greg Mort often finds himself building models and dioramas to enhance his paintings

Whether capturing the sense of a place for a landscape or the harmony and balance in a still life painting, I want to study my subjects as carefully and closely as possible. I prefer to paint or sketch on location for landscapes and I frequently build models, dioramas and assemble intricate still life compositions so that I can work directly from life inspired by the real three-dimensional objects.

My concept for *Tension* offered a unique challenge because I wanted the image to have movement. This scenario required a "moving" still life model so I

could interpret the movement in real time. The first step was to conceive and construct a wondrous "bubble machine" to house and grease five bubbling apples. I built a narrow Plexiglas container to hold the water, bubble pipe and the apples. To create continuous movement of the water I drilled ¼-inch holes in a plastic tube in random places and secured it to the base of the Plexiglas box. Then I attached an electric air pump to the pipe and filled the tank with water and apples. The narrowness of the container kept the five apples in a row nicely. Now I was able to study at my leisure the wonderful

effect and interaction of the water, bubbles and fruit. The setup took about an hour to create and was more than worth the effort.

With drawing pad in hand and at close range I began making graphite studies of the bubbles and their interaction with the apples. This direct observation is paramount in truly capturing motion and understanding ones subject. Interpreting objects from life allows me to experience the changing effects of the light and shadows on the subjects. Though I recognize the use of photographs as a very effective technique, I prefer this immediate experience rather than using the interpretation of a camera. Direct life transcription is much more effective for my sensibilities. In this case, the interaction and motion of the apples and bubbles actually entered into to the mix via the eye, brain and hand. I felt that I was chasing each bubble as it rose to the surface and became quite skilled at rendering them with immediacy.

The bubble machine allowed an extended period of time to study and recognize the tension and action of the bubbles is unified

Our World, oil, 30 x 40" (76 x 102 cm)

Tension between objects can also create an impression of impending or expected movement. Again, careful application of graduated shades of contrasting pigments builds the delicate balance of the Earth upon the ancient stairs. Its future is made even more tenuous because the ancient doors might open at any moment. *Our World* hangs in west wing of The White House and perhaps offers a contemplative moment for the President Obama and his staff.







Night Into Day, watercolor, 18 x 21" (46 x 53 cm)

Night Into Day is a perfect example of how the composition is key to expressing movement in a painting. The unfolding motion of the night to reveal the day is achieved by delicately measured use of graduated tones of gray into blue. The viewer's imagination does the rest.

enough not to distract from the real drama going on with the apples. Studying the ripples of the surface of the water was the key to interposing what I refer to as "Broken Symmetry"—the contrast between of the horizon line and the foreground. Simply put, a curved or uneven horizon line creates a sense of movement.

At first glance the tumult of the action seems overwhelming. With time, though, the situation becomes better understood. In fact, I began to see the amusing similarity between each bubble no matter how large and small or regardless of shape. This was

an important stage of the creative process because a tremendous advantage in the later stages of painting, as I was able to create totally realistic bubbles anywhere in the final piece I felt they were needed. It is important to note here that I kept my initial drawings quite small (8½ by 11 inches). This allowed close proximity to the setup and forced a simplification of the composition. My goal at this stage is to capture the emotional content rather than a multitude of details.

To facilitate the critical step of moving a small to large conversion (drawing to painting) a grid is often helpful in such

a transfer. Because of the nature of this active composition I decided to forgo this method and draw it freehand directly onto the board. Again, this approach lent itself perfectly to the spontaneous nature of the liquid. In the end, the overall effect of that random chaotic feel was maintained and resulted in a more satisfactory work.

I prepared a 36-by-57-inch gesso Masonite panel by sanding the surface with fine sandpaper first, followed by a rolled on coat of gesso and repeating this procedure three times to create a wonderfully smooth, hard surface for the



Earth in Stewardship II, watercolor, 18 x 21" (46 x 53 cm)

I often say a painter is very much like a magician. My bag of magic tricks contains color, design and technical skill. A solid mat background of lamp black against the stark white of the watercolor paper reinforces the illusion of the apple peel uncurling from the *Earth in Stewardship II*. This sweeping beam of light across the primary subject offers further contrast between the background and the primary object.

preliminary drawing outline and paint application. Note that this large piece of suspended Masonite did require a special ¾-by-2-inch pine framework on the reverse side for rigidity.

Another important component was to keep the underpainting very loose and uneven. Rather than making it a flat color, I painted it mottled to suggest a three-dimensional perspective and create a feeling of depth. Adding a curving horizon line further reinforced the buoyancy of the bubbles and apples. I kept the water and

bubbles monochromatic and subtle. Even though the lower part of the composition is quite busy, the monochromatic nature of the bubble background keeps the whole of it subdued allowing the apples to "pop."

The primary focus of the painting is the five bobbing apples and I wanted every one to be unique and outstanding. Their hyperrealism draws in the viewer. A refined variation in the tone and intensity of the pigments and highlights offers each a distinct character. The dynamic contrast between the quiet gray tones of the water

and bubbles and the bright primary colors of the fruit offers the image an element of mystery.

Timely Apples was a site-specific commission for the beautiful historic home of a Washington couple who are longtime patrons of my art. Although I enjoyed complete artistic freedom on all levels this commission added an additional master. It is a rare opportunity and pleasure for an artist to completely transform a space with a work of art. *Timely Apples* did just that. ■

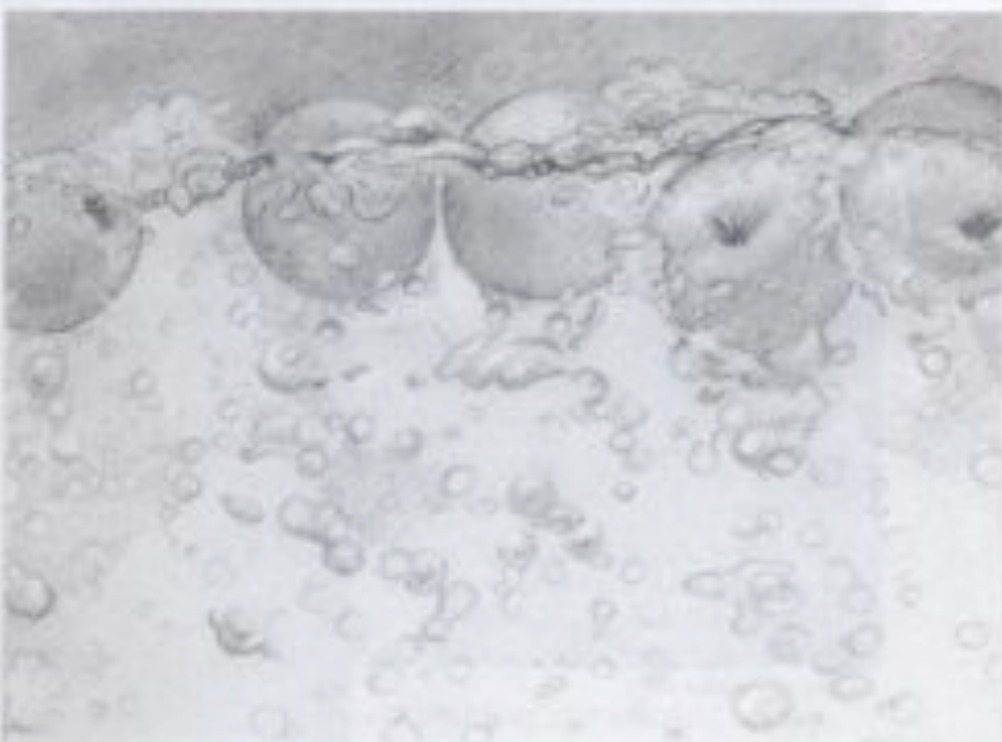
My Art in the Making Tinsley Apples

The Bubble Machine

I designed and constructed a narrow 12-by-24-by-4-inch water-tight Plexiglas box to hold water, bubble pipe and the apples. The plastic pipe was drilled with 1/4-inch holes in random locations along the pipe, which was secured to the base of the container. An electric pump released a constant flow of air into the plastic hose producing strong streams of bubbles that grazed the apples. The narrowness of the container kept the five apples in a row nicely. I was able to study and sketch the wonderful effect and interaction of the water, bubbles and fruit at my leisure.

Study

Using my "moving still life model" created by the bubble machine, I was able to closely observe my subject. I was able to examine and document the wonderful effect and interaction of the water, bubbles and fruit surrounded by churning liquid. Most importantly this allowed me to create a number of preliminary sketches of the apples, from life in real time as they danced in water.



Tinsley Apples, graphite study on vellum, 11 x 14" (28 x 36 cm)

WHAT THE ARTIST USED

Ground

- Gesso, three sanded layers on brimmed Masonite

Mediums/Thinners

- Odorless turpentine
- Unseed oil
- Copal medium

Artist Quality Oils

- Alizarin crimson
- Mars black
- Raw umber
- Titanium white
- Verdian green
- Yellow ochre

Brushes

- No. 10 flat bristle
- No. 8 flat bright
- No. 12 flat
- No. 2 flat
- No. 2 round

STAGE 1 DRAWING TRANSFER

Using my original concept study, I draw the image onto the 36-by-57-inch prepared gesso/ Masonite panel. The composition is very loosely transposed in order to capture the buoyancy.



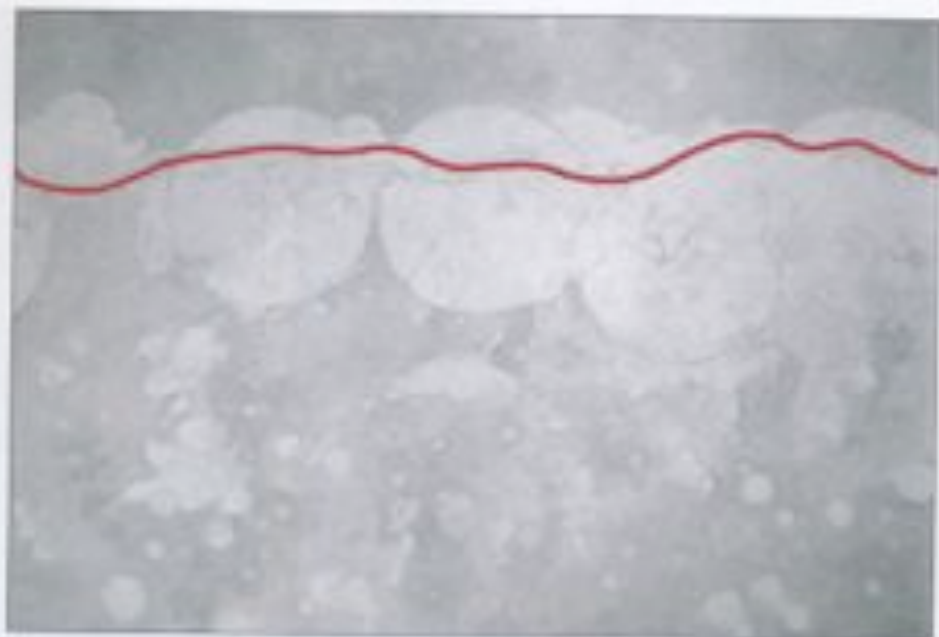
STAGE 2 BACKGROUND COLOR

A free-wheeling application of a mixture of Payne's gray and titanium white are applied in a layer of opaque and varying tones. These variations help to create a dimensional effect.



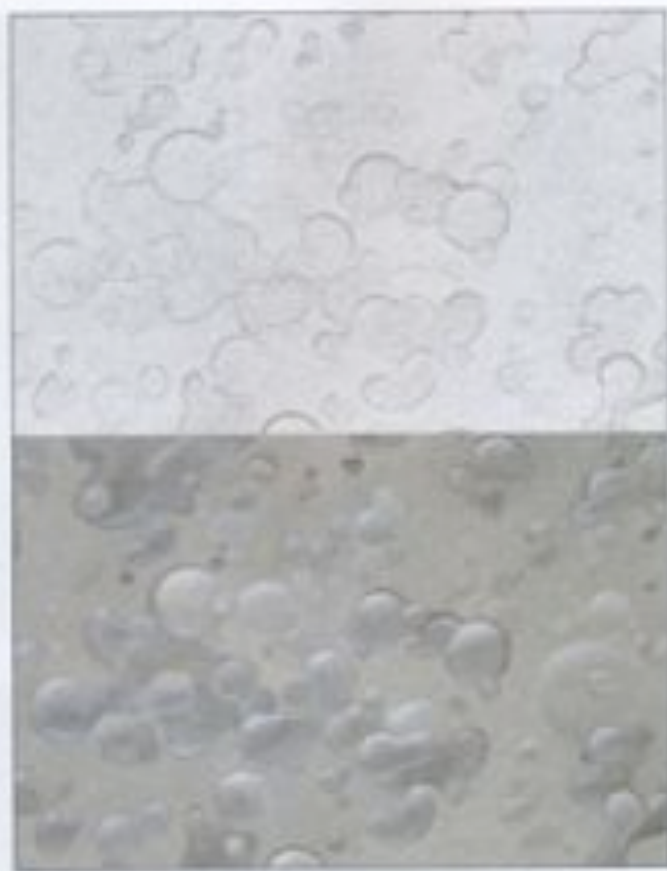
STAGE 3
WATER CONTOUR

Special attention is paid to the waterline and its sense of motion. This critical line adds to the feeling of movement of the entire scheme.



STAGE 4 APPLE UNDERPAINTING

First true application of color using titanium white, alizarin crimson and a touch of yellow ochre. I prefer the underpainting to be opaque. Note that the composition is upside down. Rotating the painting surface helps to keep a fresh perspective on the work.



STAGE 5 COLOR PROGRESSION

Careful rendering of each apple created volume, highlights and reflective surfaces. At this point a decision was made to complement the redness of the apples with viridian green and Naples yellow in a semitransparent glaze (copal medium and turpentine). These opposing colors, not present on the real apples, made the red jump considerably.

The Earth is Blue, oil 42 x 72"
(107 x 183 cm)

I wanted the Earth and apples to appear to be tumbling out of a star-filled universe directly toward the viewer. In order to achieve this motion-filled perspective the apples were developed with a continuous layering of intense pigment to emphasize their three-dimensional luminous highlights set against a dark miniature star-filled matte background of constellations designed to reflect deep space. Note that the background is matte and the primary focus, the apples, are highly reflective. *The Earth is Blue* is in the permanent collection of the Wiener Institute, and I hope is a reminder that art is the true daughter of science.





STAGE 6 COMPLETED PAINTING

Timely Apples, oil on Masonite, 38 x 57" (97 x 145 cm). The finished painting contains more than twice the amount of bubble rendering than the original sketch. Despite this fact, the busyness of the work remains minimal, but instead exaggerates the feeling of movement. This is also reinforced by the rather low contrast and very subtle color changes throughout. I also decided to add a gentle mottled effect to the upper one-third of the composition above the water surface to continue the flow of movement.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Greg Mort is a widely recognized American contemporary artist whose unmistakably modern creations have the classic feel of the Dutch Masters juxtaposed with startlingly modern designs. Mort's art is in many prominent collections including the Smithsonian, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Delaware Art Museum, Farnsworth Art Museum, Academy Art Museum, Portland Museum of Art, Brandywine River Museum, and the White House.

Deeply fascinated with astronomy and the universe, Mort's lifelong interest in science is frequently reflected in his artwork. He has been a commissioned NASA artist since 1983 and serves on the board of the Lowell Observatory. A skilled astro-photographer and telescope builder, Mort is a sought-after speaker on the

interaction of art and science. In 2001 he established The Art of Stewardship Project, a foundation that supports and encourages environmental awareness through the arts.

During the winter Mort lives and paints in rural Montgomery County, Maryland, and in summer on the rugged Maine coast in the village of Port Clyde.

Contact at
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Represented by

- Carla Mazzoni Gallery, Chantertown, Maryland, USA, www.mazzoniart.com
- Somerville Manning Gallery, Greenville, Delaware, USA, www.somervillemanning.com



