

ARTIST VITAE

MICHAEL FLOHR'S SOCIAL COMMENTARY OF OUR TIMES

by Sarah Seamark

"All I do is paint every day. It is an obsession, I can't stop," says Michael Flohr, a 27-year-old San Diego artist whose modern impressionist paintings of bar and café scenes and rainswept city streets offer a social commentary on our times.

"I can tell different feelings and attitudes you get from people—from their faces and conversations—and I blend their figures and gestures." Nightlife in cafés mirrors the social status quo, he observes. "You get a lot of views on what is going on in the world, hearing what people are saying. A man earning a million dollars sits next to someone who can barely afford the beer they are drinking—so many different worlds come together in a bar or café."

To some extent, Michael paints rather than writes his social commentary. "I am not the best writer," he admits. "I have these great thoughts and they come out better on canvas than as the written word on paper." His broad, square, brushstrokes, creating almost a mosaic effect, obscure the figures in his paintings, leaving an illusion of the characters depicted to tell the story in vivid, pure pigmented colors through their gestures and subtleties. At a young age it was found he suffered from dyslexia, and by second grade had fallen behind in school. As a result, his parents arranged tutoring, consisting of math, reading, and, best of all, art classes, where he excelled.

His father David, owner of an auto repair business, and his mother Sandy, who works in the family business, encouraged him in the arts. In fact, he says his mother is his best critic. Nurtured in a happy, fun home, Michael and his younger sister Kristine grew up in the small dusty town of Lakeside in San Diego County, a place he describes as "nice and safe." Fishing trips on the nearby lakes with his father were a highlight of his youth. And everywhere Michael went, he took a notebook and drew.

"In high school, my Dad got me a bass fishing boat, so instead of going out to parties my friends and I



Michael Flohr

went out on the lake, and while they fished, I drew. It kept me out of a lot of trouble," he jokes. Later, he entered the Academy of Art College in San Francisco. Encouraging him in his pursuit, his grandfather promised to pay half the college loans upon his graduation. "It showed me he believed in me."

At the Academy Michael experimented with all types of media and artistic styles. "We had such intense drawing classes," he admits. He was one of the few who elected, after a six-hour class, to take a three hour optional workshop. "Covered in paint...I was always painting," he recalls, adding, "I wasn't much into girls. I thought I would be this lonely artist, always single." At the time he lived in a one-room studio apartment on Nob Hill, where he stacked his paintings under the bed and around the room.

Michael's living conditions may have been cramped, but his career was blossoming. In his final year at the Academy he was accepted into New York's Society of Illustrators. The following year, the Society awarded him the prestigious Herman Lambert scholarship. On graduating in 2000 from the Academy, he was honored with "Best of Show" at its spring exhibition for his painting, "Irish Coffee." That piece, together with two others, was later selected

for exhibition at San Francisco's de Young Museum.

After graduation, Michael toured Europe, peaking his interest in European culture. It was this experience that led him to pursue his desire to capture the nuances of social interaction, city nightlife and cityscapes in his artwork. "Seeing strangers intermingle in unfamiliar places is an inspiration to me," he says. There he can be found, in cafés and bars, with friends or, more often, his wife of just a few months, Melissa, whom he describes as his inspiration. She is to be seen in many of his paintings—a figure in a red dress in the 1920s style that she favors, recognizable only by her shadow and mannerisms. He likens this effect to squinting your eyes in a crowd. The details blur and become simplified down to the bone structure.

"I am the guy in a café," he says, "noticing a beautiful, warm, orange-violet light chipping on people's faces across the room, and immediately thinking of ways to combine color and capture that moment in my



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next painting." Sometimes he is with pencil and notebook, sometimes a camera. Observation is everything to him—whether seen, heard, or read, "it is all connected to that which can be processed into a visual."

He sketches the "moment" as a scene unfolds, often in charcoal. Many times, these sketches become works of art in themselves. Back at his studio, the front room of the new home he shares with Melissa, he works

in oil like the Impressionist artists through history that have inspired him, enjoying the richness it brings to the canvas. Often he paints late into the night, listening to jazz and blues, kept company by Cosmo, an orange kitten, and Charlie, their dog of indeterminate breed.

His style has been described as a cornucopia of avant-garde, abstract expressionism, and impressionism. "I love the colors of Cézanne, and try to take some of them for my own paintings, adding a contemporary twist." He was not afraid to use pure pigment, straight from the tube, a characteristic Michael strives to emulate. In Rome, a candlelit exhibition of Monet's work left a lasting impression on this young artist. He also studies the works of Manet, Pissarro, and Degas, as well as those of Toulouse-Lautrec. He admires the structure and boldness of Michelangelo, and the sculptures of Rodin.

The challenge is not to make a painting look overdone, but to synthesize a scene down to its essence, he says, likening the technique to that of John Singer Sargent's, using the least number of brushstrokes. "I want to show that a painting doesn't have to be challenging. It can just be something that pleases your eye. It doesn't have to have a meaning. You don't have to dissect it. Enjoy its beauty and what it brings to you."

Imagine a street scene at night when it has just got done raining. There's a window above with an orange light reflected in a puddle below. Maybe this reminds you of nights you've been out, and where you have been, and with whom. Michael captures those moments in time that bring back memories to the viewer through his paintings and prints.

Flohr's work is represented by Crown Thorn Publishing, San Diego, publisher of his limited edition mixed media prints, combining lithography, serigraphy, and artist embellishments, in editions of 195, 25 APs that sell for \$1,200–\$1,800, and his original paintings ranging in price from \$4,500 to \$8,000.