Seeing Clearly

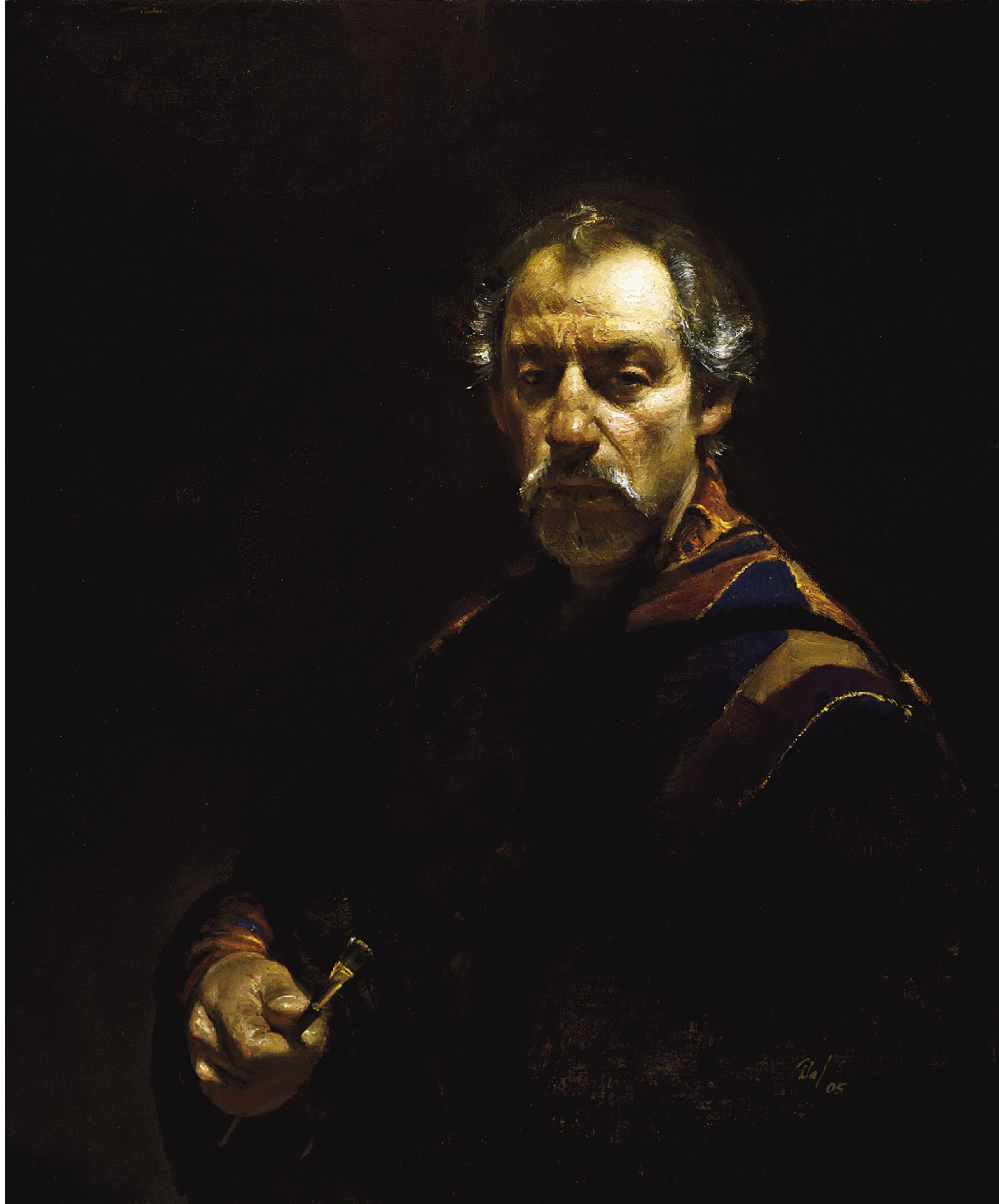
David A. Leffel reflects on his upbringing, the simple language of painting and the art world of today.

INTERVIEW BY STEVE SMITH

David Leffel has never liked having a "real" job. The 40 hours a week of plodding along in the same space is pure anathema to him. Learn a bit about his background and you quickly understand why. Confined to a hospital bed during his youth, Leffel has spent much of his adult life rediscovering the world around him. Real jobs don't leave much time for discovery.

And yet, irony prevails when it comes to his art. When putting color to canvas, he becomes totally absorbed by the problem-solving process of a painting, often working from early morning through lunch and until the last fleck of natural light has faded from his studio. This all-consuming zeal for painting has pushed Leffel to become one of America's foremost representational painters and teachers.

His 2004 book, *An Artist Teaches,* details many of Leffel's thoughts on painting, chiefly that rather than "conventional emphasis on technique, Leffel stresses the visual concept that must first exist in the painter's mind." Sherrie McGraw, an artist and former drawing instructor at the Art Students League (NYC), recounts this episode in the book's forward: "One morning during a portrait demonstration, he spoke of the chest of the sitter and casually made horizontal brushstrokes across where



Self-portrait with Shawl and Brush (oil, 25x21).

the chest was to be. These casual brushstrokes, that anyone could seemingly make, created a chest from nothing. To my young eyes it was magic; to my seasoned eyes, it's still magic."

The Artist's Magazine chatted recently with this 20th-century master to try to uncover just where that magic comes from.

Tell me about your upbringing. Where were you born?

I was born in Brooklyn. The closest thing my family came to an arts sensibility was that my mother had a strong love of opera. My father was really interesting; he was essentially a gambler. He held various jobs from time to time, but he had a great head for numbers and loved shooting craps and playing the horses.

He was also what you would call a dandy. He loved fine clothes, fine food—the good things. He could wear a suit all day long, and at the end of the day it looked as if it had just come from the tailor's. Even when we had no money, which was frequently, he would save however long it would take to buy the very best. He wouldn't wear anything cheap.

At right; *Still Life with Tapestry, Tangerine and Flowers* (oil, 17x13½).

Below; *Man in a Black Beret* (oil, 15x13).

When did you start showing an interest in drawing?

When I was about 3½ years old, I'd already started to draw from life and was drawing often. Soon thereafter I contracted an infectious bone disease and went into the hospital, where I stayed until I was 7. After a brief stay at home, I returned to the hospital at 8 years of age and stayed there until I was 15.

In the hospital I drew incessantly. I would copy comic books and make up my own characters. I would copy whatever I could and draw whatever I could from life. I did watercolor or painting, as well. My parents would bring me materials and art instruction books. I think I was 10 or 11 when I got my first charcoal and chamois cloth. Even the smell of it fascinated me—it was very heady stuff.

You know, really, my experience in the hospital wasn't as horrible as it might sound. I'd been in there so consistently that I didn't know any other kind of life. To me it was just the way it was.

When and how did you get out?

Part of it was the discovery of penicillin [drug companies began mass producing it in 1943], which was the perfect cure for what I had. But actually, by then, the disease had already basically run its course and I got out. I survived.

After all those years of confinement, integrating into society must have been both exhilarating and frightening.

Oh, it was a tremendous adjustment. I felt as if I were coming from another planet. I didn't know anything about the real world or how to do anything—not even how to order something at a restaurant. It was very difficult and very lonely. I went from a situation where I knew everybody and all the parameters to a world where I didn't know anybody. I didn't know any of the rules of behavior.

But my dad was very helpful. He showed me how to ride the subway and make all the connections. He took me into the city and introduced me to his friends. They were real Damon Runyon types—gangsters and gamblers with names like "Harry the Horse," "The Three-fingered Russian" and "Lefty Louie." He was part of that whole Broadway group, and that was a lot of fun.

When did the idea occur to you that you could pursue art as a career?

My best friend at the time went to the Parsons School of Design, and I followed him there to study advertising design. My thinking was just to have a career in commercial art as an illustrator or designer. I had no idea that people did easel painting, at least in the realistic mode. I never gave it a thought. If I thought about it at all, it was that it was a lost art and people didn't know how to do it anymore.

I got a couple of scholarships and eventually graduated, although I was almost kicked out for lack of attendance. You can imagine that having just got out of the hospital, I wanted to cut class and go to movies and get a taste of the world. My first semester at school, I was out as much as I was in, but I finally applied myself, graduated and went into advertising.

Were you painting at night or on weekends?

I hated going to work and I especially had trouble coming back from lunch. Everybody would be out on the street and it was so exciting. So I would get fired because of my raggedy hours, not because of the quality of my work. And I have to tell you that I never minded getting fired; it wasn't a stigma for me. I would just collect my unemployment checks until I got the next job.

After about four years of bouncing around to different jobs and advertising studios, I dropped by to visit a friend who had opened his own studio. He needed some drawings for an ad he was creating. I drew what he needed and eventually he proposed that, rather than get another job, I should just use some space in his studio. He would give me some work, and I could do other freelance drawing and design, as well.

That was in the late '50s, when I was 27, and that's when I started painting in earnest. When I wasn't busy with a freelance job, I would paint in my friend's advertising studio.

And that eventually led you to study at the Art Students League in 1959, right?

I moved in with a couple of musicians, who were students at Juilliard. That was a fortuitous move because it put me in a different kind of crowd. Being an artist gave me a certain cachet with them, although that didn't keep them

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from eating my still-life setups. If I went out for a moment to take a break from painting, say, an orange, it wouldn't be there when I got back.

My friends and I hung out at a coffee shop uptown on Broadway. One of the waiters was going to the Art Students League. He noticed me sketching, we got to know one another, and he encouraged me to go to the League.

Why were you so interested in representational painting and drawing? In those days it was basically shunned by the art world.

Back at Parsons we would go on field trips to museums. When I first saw Rembrandt's paintings at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, they immediately struck me. His paintings seemed to have a level of logic that none of the others had. I had an immediate response to the way he used light. It seems so inexorably logical how the light would move from one place to the next—such a tight system. At that time I certainly couldn't express it, but it made a profound impression on me.

At the same time, we were doing a lot of exercises with abstract shapes, cubistic stuff, breaking things down and so on. And it left me with a feeling of arbitrariness. I could put a dot here or a squiggle there, but there was no rationale to what I was doing, and I felt uncomfortable with that. Even when an instructor would say, "That's excellent" or "That's not so good," it just didn't seem to be based on anything that you could grab hold of. At The Museum of Modern Art, while looking at the Matisse or the Picasso paintings, it struck me that anybody could do that. I wondered how anyone could determine whether or not this should be in a museum.

Those two ideas were developing in your mind when you came across an exhibit of realist art.

It's one of the most startling things that happened to my career as an artist. I was driving back into Manhattan after a trip to California, and I saw a gallery around Lexington and 60th that was having an opening. I immediately parked the car—in those days you could still do that easily. I figured maybe there were some women at this opening that I could hit on.

Well, I walked in and it was an exhibition of several realist artists—Burt Silverman, Harvey Dinnerstein, Seymour Remenick, Daniel Schwartz and David Levine. It blew me away that people who were my contemporaries, although a bit older, were painting in a way that I thought was dead. I was flabbergasted. Not too long after that I started studying at the League.

Seeing those realist painters must have been very motivating.

Yes, but in a funny way, even after attending the League, I never quite made a concrete decision that this was going to be my life. I loved being there, but I still felt that eventually I'd have to get a job. I could spend days and days

At left; *Karen* (oil, 27x19).

Below; *Fairy Roses and Fruit* (oil, 13x16).

painting without even noticing. When I was at a job, I just kept thinking, "How can I get out of this?"

When did your fine-art career break?

I left the League in 1960 and started entering various art shows and applying for grants. In 1964 in particular, I applied for just about everything to try to get some money. And they all rejected me. I could have wallpapered my room with rejections.

At the urging of my friends, I applied for a grant from the Elizabeth T. Greenshields Foundation in Montreal. Of course I got rejected from that, too. When I told my painter friends about it, they couldn't believe it. And looking at some of the painters who received the grants, I had to say that I couldn't help but agree with my friends.

So my wife and I packed seven paintings and took the night train to Montreal. I decided I would just go there with originals—no appointment or anything. Well, we got in at 8 a.m., took a cab to the address, and they weren't there. I don't mean they were out, I mean there was no listing for them on the directory. They were gone. It was nine degrees and snowing.

Finally we found a building superintendent who told us the Greenshields Foundation had moved. So we took another cab to the new building. The chairman was there; he looked at the paintings and I eventually got my grant. And that changed my thinking. It validated what I was doing. An outside authority, who wasn't a friend, said my work had merit, and that really was a turning point.

Variation #1 in Orange (oil, 30x25).

Let's fast-forward to today. How do you work? What's your typical day like?

Normally I eat breakfast and then head into the studio to start painting. I set up my palette and take a look at what I'm working on, which gives me a chance to warm up. Once I start to work it's very difficult for me to stop. It becomes so fascinating to solve the problems of the painting. It absorbs me.

For me, everything has to be logical in the painting. Every brushstroke has to function to help the entire painting. You have to get into that zone where you see the whole logic of what you're doing. If it doesn't help the painting, it hurts the painting. So every brushstroke is part of the composition; this contrasts with how people traditionally think of composition, which is in terms of shape.

When you're in the zone, it's hard to break even for lunch. I tried for a time to go without eating lunch, but I lost too much weight.

What happens when you can't find the zone?

I fight through it. I find that, when I'm really working consistently, I can put myself into it like a time warp. I'm thrusting myself so much into the painting that I can make it happen.

Even when I'm not in the zone, just moving paint around has a sensuous quality that's fun. And if I just keep painting, eventually something is going to click. It's like going from a self-conscious state to an unself-conscious one. That's when it's the best. I have the painting in the palm of my hand—I'm holding the brush and it's flowing through me. During those moments it feels as if I'm painting with light—putting actual light, not paint—on a canvas.

A theme of your book, and perhaps of your life, is a fervent curiosity—a desire to uproot things and understand them at a very basic level. When did you start asking so many questions?

My mother always said that I incessantly asked why. It would drive her crazy. I guess I was born with that. When I was learning at the League and later on in life, I always wanted to know why something worked. I wasn't satisfied that it worked; I wanted to know why and to reduce things to simpler components. It's just the way my mind works.

I've always felt that if I could see something clearly, I could paint it. If I was looking at an object or a piece of anatomy and it looked as if it would take too many brushstrokes to paint, I'd ask myself if there was a simpler way. Instead of using 25 brushstrokes, could I paint it with three? And if I couldn't, I knew I wasn't seeing clearly. Painting has to be a simple language, a shorthand, as opposed to rendering, which is longhand.

Do you still draw often?

That's my bugaboo; I don't draw enough. I got so much into painting that I just stopped drawing. I go to a sketch group once a week now to keep my hand in it. But sometimes I look at the figure, and all I can think about is color and brushstroke.

Can you be a great painter without being a terrific draftsman?

No. It's not so much that you need the technique to put something on paper, but being a good draftsman means that you can see clearly. You can see the way the forms interlock; you can see the gesture, the pose. If you can't see to draw, you can't see to paint. I've never met anybody who couldn't draw and still understood painting. It's impossible. Take someone like David Hockney, with all his essays about *camera obscura* and that business. He can't draw and, well, he can't paint, either.

Mery Miguez (oil, 15½x13).

You're not a fan of painting from photographs. Why?

You lose touch with all reality. What's the challenge if you're working from a photograph? In certain instances, such as a portrait of a deceased person, it's the only option. But it's so prevalent today. It seems that people just want to turn out a product. Working from life requires an entirely different mindset. It's the challenge—the fun of the confrontation. I've always painted with natural light and almost always from life.

What's next for you?

I was thinking about asking someone to give me a whole new palette with a new set of colors so that I could mix colors that I've never mixed before. I'm still trying to learn new things. And I'm still trying to create as beautiful a painting as I possibly can. In the painting I just finished, for example, I'm thinking I could just touch one more spot that might make it a little bit better. Nobody else would know, but I would know. ♦

Steve Smith is senior editor to *The Artist's Magazine*.