# Sherrie Wolf: The freedom of the still life

Paul Sutinen talks to master painter Sherrie Wolf about her explorations of the still life, which in her hands contains universes

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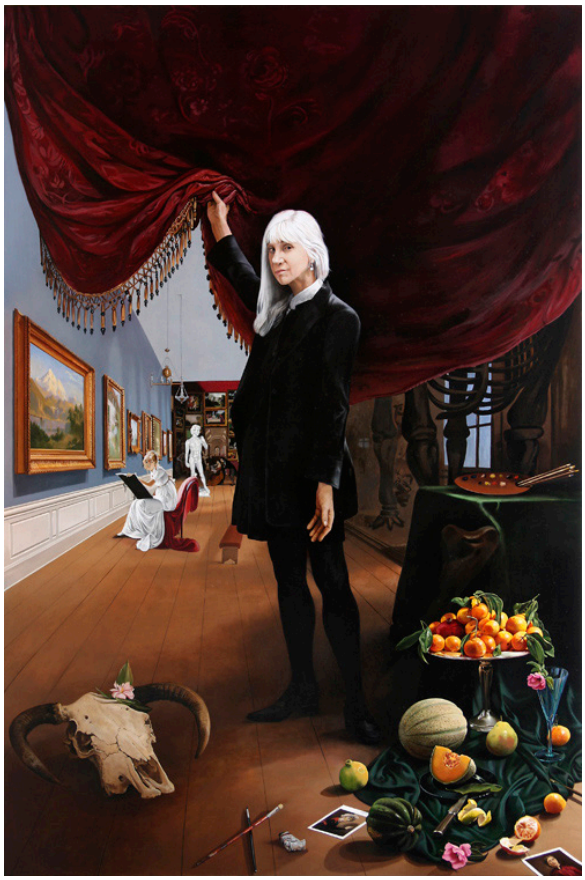
Painter Frank Stella said, "In great art all the relationships sparkle, radiating coherence." In Sherrie Wolf's still life paintings there is marvelous rendering of fruits, flowers, reflections in glass and copying of old masterworks, but the key element in her work is the musicality of the relationships among all the objects depicted—the loud, the quiet and the spaces between them. Wolf takes a genre with a 2,000 year history and keeps it fresh and new. Her new paintings are at Russo Lee Gallery through May.



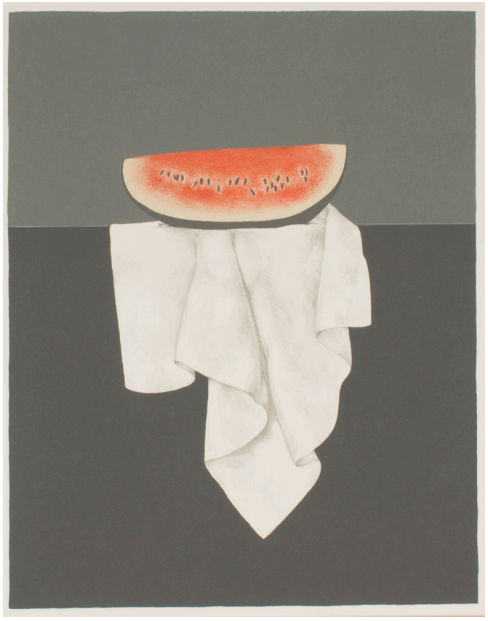
Sherrie Wolf, *Self Portrait with Red Drape,* oil on canvas, 90 × 60 inches, after Charles Wilson Peale, 1741-1827

**You were at the Museum Art School (now Pacific Northwest College of Art) in the early 1970s when minimalism and process art were in fashion. You probably studied with painters steeped in abstract expressionism. Were you planning to be a realist painter when you went to school?**
It was hard to be a realist painter then because it wasn't the thing, except I saw Jim Dine, David Hockney, Wayne Thiebaud, and I went to a huge retrospective of Georgia O'Keeffe's work when I was a first-year art student. I wouldn't say it was minimal. It was all abstract expressionism.

**Because of the people teaching at the Museum school.**
Yeah. It was all "bigger is better." You would just be embarrassed to paint a small painting.

**Or use a small brush probably.**
Everything was big and we called small paintings "salon paintings."

**Were you competing with fellow brushy students then doing brushy stuff?**
I didn't know really what I was doing, but I knew that I loved to draw from life and I loved painting about things, about the world that I saw. I simplified them. My technique was very different. They were simpler, but they were very recognizable in a pop sort of way.



Sally Haley (American, 1908-2007), *Watermelon Slice,* 1983, colored pencil on paper, Gift of Blount International, Inc., © Sally Haley, 2012.112.8

**In a Hockney, Thiebaud kind of way.**
Yeah, but Sally Haley was around and I talked to her quite a bit. I think seeing her do Giottos—she would render and copy—must've made some impression on me because it was in my brain. Later I started rendering Old Masters. Seeing that probably helped. Then she did those really detailed beautiful paintings

of objects, but then she put them in abstract fields. It was nice. And you kind of got to do what you do. There was a time when I first got out of school that I tried painting kind of flat shapes. They still were interiors. They were always about something that I saw, but they were the most abstract that I ever did and I didn't do it for very long. I'm sure in painting class we had to try a lot of different things. When I did my thesis, I did big paintings of sort of bathrooms, like a bathtub and a toilet.

**Well, those are still lifes.**
Yeah, they're still life. And I did a bunch of charcoal drawings of clothes and things.

**When did the light bulb go off in your head that "I'm still life painter?"**
Well, pretty much I always was. I think I've always just accepted that that was my interest, but I found ways to bring in landscape and figures to the things.

**Certainly by quoting master paintings.**
Exactly. That's what happened. So I paint still lifes, but I pretty much painted every subject there is because of that.

**Is it just the challenge of the rendering aspect of still life that draws you in? Or look at somebody like Giorgio Morandi with just had a few bottles as a subject—you have a much wider vocabulary, you have reflections.**
Morandi was one of my favorite painters. I think I painted more to that style, very simple style. Composition has always fascinated me. I think that's my strength. I just love moving things around. Abstract paintings are kind of the same in a way, dealing with shapes.

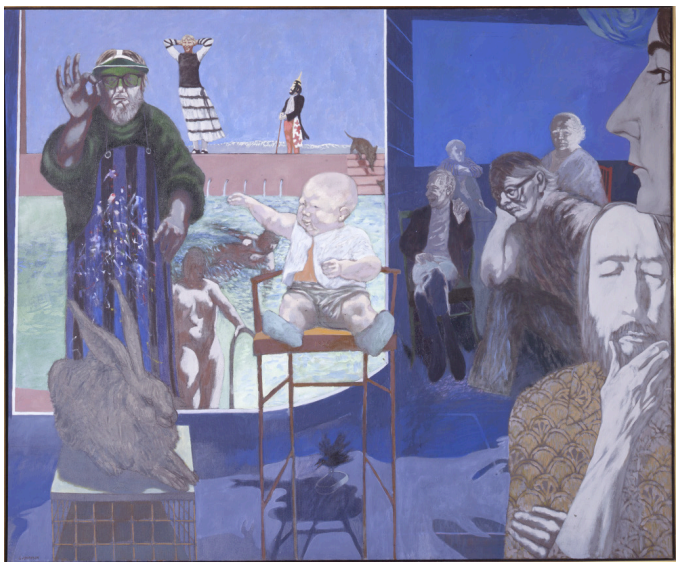
**That's what really struck me about your work, the compositional aspect, just how things play off each other.**
I like to have multiple layers of vision—if it can reflect or bring some part of another world into it that's even more interesting to me. If I have a shiny object, you can see what's behind you or see me occasionally. I think that adds another level of intrigue and it just widens the space.

**Do you do a lot of traveling? You reference Paris—and I'm thinking that there are hardly any still lifes in the Portland Art Museum.**
I love to go look at art. That's been a real passion. Pretty much all my traveling is centered around looking at art. I just did a Mexico City trip. It was great. It's really the first time that I'd been on an art tour with a group and it was geology and history, but we got to see some really nice private things, private galleries, private homes. I didn't have to do any planning. Now I'm excited about going places and finding images for my work, too. That's the new development.

I went to Paris four years ago. I had a little tiny tripod and had some interesting things around in the apartment. So I started doing those "postcards from Paris." That opened up new ideas. I had already done some antique markets and things, but I've been doing it in the studio for a long time, so it's kind of

nice to get out in the world and not control everything, just find it. You still have a lot of control over how you find it. I'm very interested in collections and how people collect objects because I love objects and I love moving them around. It's interesting what people keep and what they put together. It's one thing to have a pair of salt and pepper shakers, maybe they're interesting. But if you have 50 pairs and you put them all together that's really interesting—how repetition helps.

**So back when you were at the Museum School were there particular teachers who especially made an impact you?**
Definitely. George Johanson was a great positive teacher for me. I didn't actually have him for painting. I had him for printmaking, which I was really into, and I just always enjoyed his work and talking to him about art. He would talk to me about what I was doing and give me a lot of encouragement. I applied to graduate school in England. He had lived in England. I talked to him about it. He's just always been a good role model. Mike Russo had very good things to say in my painting class and as my art history teacher.



George Johanson (American, born 1928), *Dürer's Rabbit,* 1978, acrylic on canvas,
Gift of Arlene Schnitzer in honor of Bruce Guenther, © 1978 George Johanson, 2014.175.1

He was sort of between abstract and figurative—very flat ironed-out figures.

Of course I got to Sally [Haley, Russo's wife] through him. But the whole thing of them being artists and their lives and lifestyle was very positive for me because I didn't grow up knowing artists. I didn't even know what an artist could do or be. I had no idea.

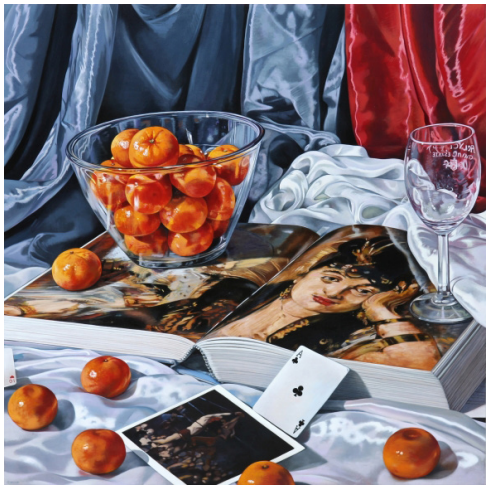
**When did you decide that you wanted to be an artist? You had to apply to school.**
I had to apply to school. When I was a kid you could have classified me as one of the ADD children who was spacing out in class, but they'd give me an art

project and I'd be like a laser—no problem there. When I was in high school I took many art classes.

**Where did you go to high school?**
I went to Wilson [Wilson High School in Southwest Portland] for two years and then I had to move over to Grant [in Northeast Portland] for two years. When I was in high school in the late '60s, the arts were pretty good, there were lots of classes. I wanted to be a folksinger or a dancer or an artist and I didn't really know which. I had this teacher who had been to the Art School [Museum Art School, now Pacific Northwest College of Art]. I didn't know where I was going to go to school. I probably would've gone to Portland State. I wasn't applying to a bunch of colleges. She said, "You should apply to art school." I'm like, "Okay. What's that?" She just kind of pushed me into doing it. That was really good because I thought it was a really good place for me. I was really young. A lot of us were very very young in my class, straight from high school. We had GIs and people that were older, but there was a bunch of us, the babies, that were really young, we're talking 17, 18. In art school you're really focused. You're not doing a broad education. You're really focused. I liked it.

**Evidently it worked out okay.**
Being in an art school where all the teachers were artists —I just thought what a cool thing to do, be an artist, and make a living. I thought, "Well, there's a way, some way to make a living—you'll figure it out."

**That's the interesting thing: evidently people can figure it out. It seems so impractical, but here we are. We've gotten this far in our lives and we've done this stuff—so we figured it out.**
I feel very fortunate to be in the time that I'm in as an artist, as a woman, because I'm a painter with a lot more opportunities. There's a much bigger middle range of artists to make some kind of living than there used to be when a few made money and nobody else did.



Sherrie Wolf, *Ace of Clubs,* 2018, oil on canvas, 40 × 40 inches

**There's certainly more of the market here now. When you think about the early '70s in Portland there were a couple galleries and Portland Center for the Visual Arts had just opened. But, if you have the right teachers you believe it possible.**
But they would say things like, "Just go marry a doctor." They were just so used to the boys club. It was changing though.

**Why did you decide that you wanted to go to London and do printmaking—other than the exotic aspect of it?**
That's part of it. I had gone one summer on a charter flight and Eurail Pass to Europe. That was great. My mother was from New Zealand, so there's kind of a British thing in my family. She never changed her citizenship. So I had an affinity for England. I liked it and the language wasn't a problem. Going to school was so ridiculously inexpensive. I'd saved enough money to pay for my first year. So, it was cheap. It was an MA program in 12 months.

**Part of what you learned in school was an attitude about being an artist, but your work shows that you learn a lot of techniques that you didn't learn in school. How did get yourself an education in the technical aspects?**
Tom Fawkes came to the Art School and he was really the first person there to embrace using photography and actually knowing something technically about pigments and binders. He brought the big thick manual of artist materials and just overwhelmed us with information, but no one had ever talked about that. Paul Missal would have, but I didn't have him as a teacher. And certainly George knew a lot, too, but Tom really shifted it for me and encouraged me when I did something from a photograph. That was really great. I went into graduate school in printing because I thought I'd already done the painting thing. I could keep doing that on my own. But I didn't know enough about printmaking to continue that.

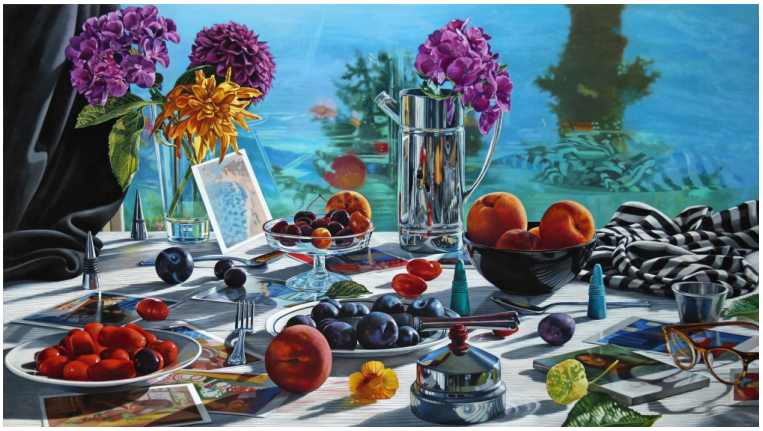
But I was always drawing and doing water colors, so gradually I got back to painting again after doing quite a bit of printmaking. Also I found I could make a living as a printmaker, so it gave me 10 years to kick-off making a living as an artist. I did teach too. Printmaking was a lot easier than painting because you can sell them to your friends for a few hundred dollars. I eventually got a rep, but after 10 years I was kind of done with it.

**What about photorealism? Did that movement itself have any impact on you?**
A lot of those painters I liked. [Robert] Bechtle and [Audrey] Flack, I always liked Thiebaud, but he's not a photorealist. I like someone like [Richard] Estes, but I don't know that I could paint only a few paintings a year like that—so detailed. My work's gotten more and more detailed in the last five to ten years and I learned a tremendous amount about painting by copying the masters—because reproductions have gotten so good. We never did that as students, but it used to be the way artists learn to paint.

**What about looking at actual master paintings in museums?**
You can spend real significant time with them from a reproduction and often in a museum they are all shiny and up high. I got this book on Caravaggio. The reproductions are just unbelievable. Close ups. Just amazing.

**How do you feel about being be old-fashioned still-life painter in the day of video and computer art?**
A lot of the time I think I'm just kind of a craftsperson. I do slow art, brushstroke by brushstroke. I love painting and the things I learned. But I certainly could have fun making a video and I could certainly have fun doing photography, but I just still really enjoy painting and obviously some people still enjoy having them, and the museums are full of them. I don't think they're going to go away. It's a technique that you really can't have it unless you do it. It just takes years and years and years of experience. I think the pendulum's going to swing. For a while painting's out and it comes back. It's a hand thing. People are going to crave, at some point, seeing something the hand makes.

**Seems like at a time when you we're starting to make these realist still lifes you must have struggled to get them to work, and then at some point you would finally feel like, "Oh I can just do this." You no longer had worry about figuring out how to do it.**
There are always things that challenge you and it's never easy. Certainly, every once in a while you get a painting that just paints itself. Sometimes paintings that are hardest to do, I put away for awhile, and I might finish them a year or two later. My attention span has just gotten much much longer than it used to be.



Sherrie Wolf, *The Fork is Irrelevant,* 2018, oil on canvas, 49 × 85 ½ inches

**We get more patient has we get older.**
Yeah, more patient. I don't think I have more time. I have less time now, but I realize I have to do the work to get what I want. There have been little breakthroughs along the way. I can look back on my work and say I can do that better now, I know what I should have done there, I can fix that. But there are

some things I did 10 years ago that I still look at and I think, "Oh, yeah, I did a good job on that." I'm not as consistent as I'd always like to be in terms of critiquing my work—about whether it's called "done." You just kind of keep going forward. I think I'll keep getting better. I don't know why you wouldn't just keep getting better.

**You found a way to keep the concept of still life with flowers and fruits and pictures fresh and new for yourself.**
I have hundreds—maybe thousands—of ideas I'd love to paint. I can't do it all. I take lots and lots of photographs. Usually I make a still a life set up, take lots of photographs, and I think, "I can paint a whole bunch of these." Then you get away maybe six months or year, and you go back and you only pick out a couple. You'll get it down to the really good ones. It's never a matter of not having enough ideas, it's just having time.

Technology has helped me—projection, digital projection, quick photography. I used to be intimidated by photography. The first photography class I took was completely intimidating, and I walked out because I couldn't figure out what the difference was between aperture and an f-stop. It just didn't compute. I just thought that I will never be able to do this, but later I started taking pictures and has gotten so much easier. I understand it now. I can put them on my screens and look at them and manipulate them if I want to. I don't use Photoshop on them much. I love doing it on my iPad though, taking pictures and fiddling around with Photoshop.

**Interesting you say photography was intimidating. People could look at your work and think, "I have no idea how I could do something like that."**
People say, "You're so talented, you can do that," and I say, "Well, you know you can't be a runner if you don't run every day." You have to get skills. That's how you get better at it. That's what you do. I went to school with plenty of talented people. There's lots of talent.

**I think a lot of talent is being really interested in something. Therefore, you work at it. Maybe talent is that level of interest that makes you really work on it.**
And the really key thing is opportunity. I just think a lot of people have all those other things, but they lack opportunity and that's tragic.

**What if your high school teacher didn't tell you to go to art school?**
I know. And what if I was living in an economy where you could barely get by without working full-time. When I got out of art school I just got a waitressing job for two or three hours a day.

**How do you decide how big a painting should be?**
It has to do with what's in it. There's so much going on. It's very very unpleasant for me to paint things too small because of the detail. For me it's painful to work small. I'd like to do everything bigger. Some of it is just economics, just having all these huge canvases and shipping them and the whole deal. I'd like

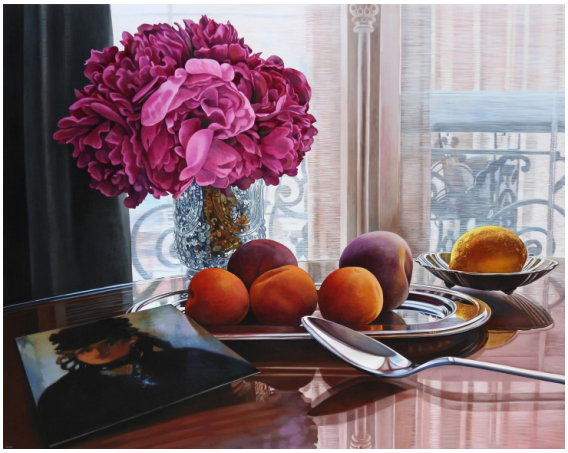
to do more big work. Scale is really important. I like the human scale, like it's nice when the peach isn't smaller than a real peach could be.

I think museums are interested in big work, public spaces. It's visually exciting. I always think of drive-in movies, the idea of being surrounded by a huge screen. It's wonderful to have big shapes and colors all around you. And, also your hand—to render something on a bigger scale is so much fun because you can get more detail if you want and in a way it's much looser.

**Do you think of yourself as working in that long tradition of painting, from the caves through the Renaissance to now?**
When I'm feeling confident, yes. When I'm feeling unconfident, I feel like an amateur phony or something. I can't say I feel that way that often, but every once in a while, but it's my ideal to be part of that club. That is my romantic idea.

**Your paintings have the feeling of the "romantic." Fruits and flowers, nice fresh sunny days.**
I like beauty. You try to make a beautiful thing. Some paintings are really beautiful, but you have a look at them for a while to realize that. Other paintings immediately suck you in because they're beautiful by some kind of cultural term. Most of them are universal. If they're beautiful most everybody will like them, unless they're offended in some way by the content.

**Sometimes the artist is striving too much have the appearance of beauty, the all frosting and no cake problem.**
You've got to have some genuine interest in creating something new because I don't want to paint something that just feels like something I've seen before.



Sherrie Wolf, *Paris Still Life,* 2018, oil on canvas, 48 × 60 inches

**Painter Robert Ryman said, "It seems that the main focus of painting is to give pleasure: if someone can receive pleasure from looking at paintings,**

**then that's the best thing that can happen." Is that the best thing that can happen for somebody looking at your work?**
Well, not in the candy way of pleasure, sweet, but if somebody really gravitates to it, finds it meaningful, enjoys having it around, sees something in it that stays with them, that I feel really good about. You can't please everybody, and you can't just aim to make something that everyone's going to like. It's not going to happen. That's not going to be a very good bar to set for yourself. It's very flattering to have people like your work, and if they cried about my work I wouldn't feel bad at all. I'd be thrilled.

**Do you work on more than one painting at a time?**
Yes. I have more ideas than I could ever do. So, when I design a show, I try to have the meat of the show all picked out. Say I was going to do 12 or 14 paintings I might have 10 and then have a few questionable add-ons—maybe at the end even add something very quickly. But, generally I start them all, get them all drawn in and roughed out so I can see the whole show.

**So you're like a musician planning an album.**
Yeah, planning an album. Exactly. I love that. I do try to make them look good together. I added the smaller fruit paintings to this show, for one because they don't take as long, I didn't need to have that all figured out. The big one's going to take a long time. If I don't get that one done early, I don't know if I'm going to get it done. I have to strategize how I use my time. So it is an ensemble of things. I want them to look good together.

**What's your routine in the studio? Do you keep regular hours?**
All I know is that I have to get in the time, but generally speaking, because my studio's in my home there's certainly lots of distractions that can come along. But, in most cases I neglect the house more than the studio. If I was going off to the studio every day, I probably would be more rigid about my routine. I used to be a really good early morning painter, but now I'm becoming more of a night person, so I get my best work in from about noon to 8 o'clock. When I have a show I really push it. And when I don't have a show, maybe paint only four hours a day.

**Do you do like Monday through Friday or seven days a week?**
If you paint too many days in a row you need a break. If I have a show I definitely paint seven days a week, but when the pressure is, off particularly if you've just opened a show, you allow yourself to goof off. But taking the whole day off isn't anything that I structure in and say I have to do. I just work when I want to. Even just coming to the studio and just puttering around, if you don't know what you're going to do, just be there.