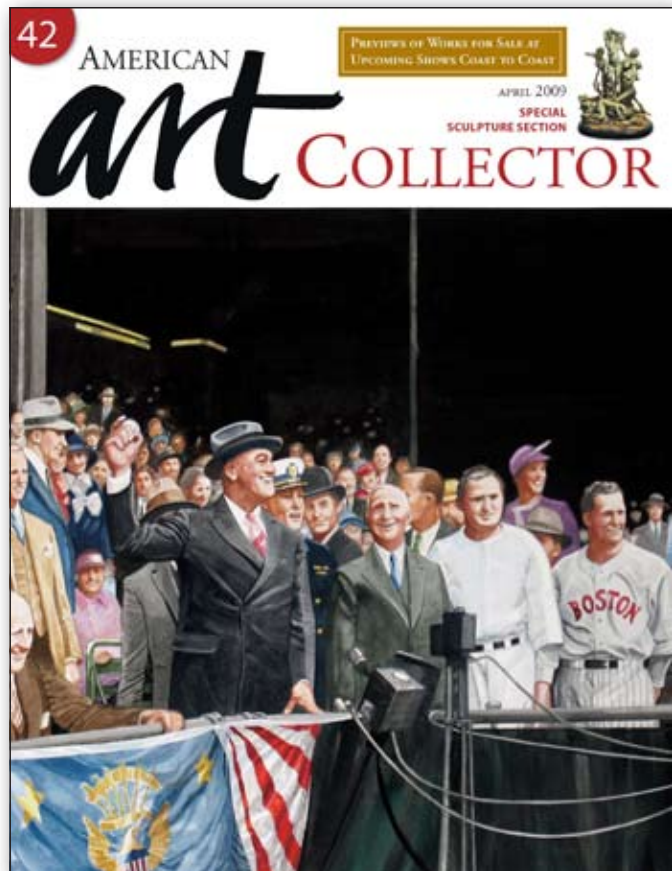


As seen in the
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 AMERICAN
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On the lighter side

John O'Hern reveals how six artists infuse their work with humor and irreverence.

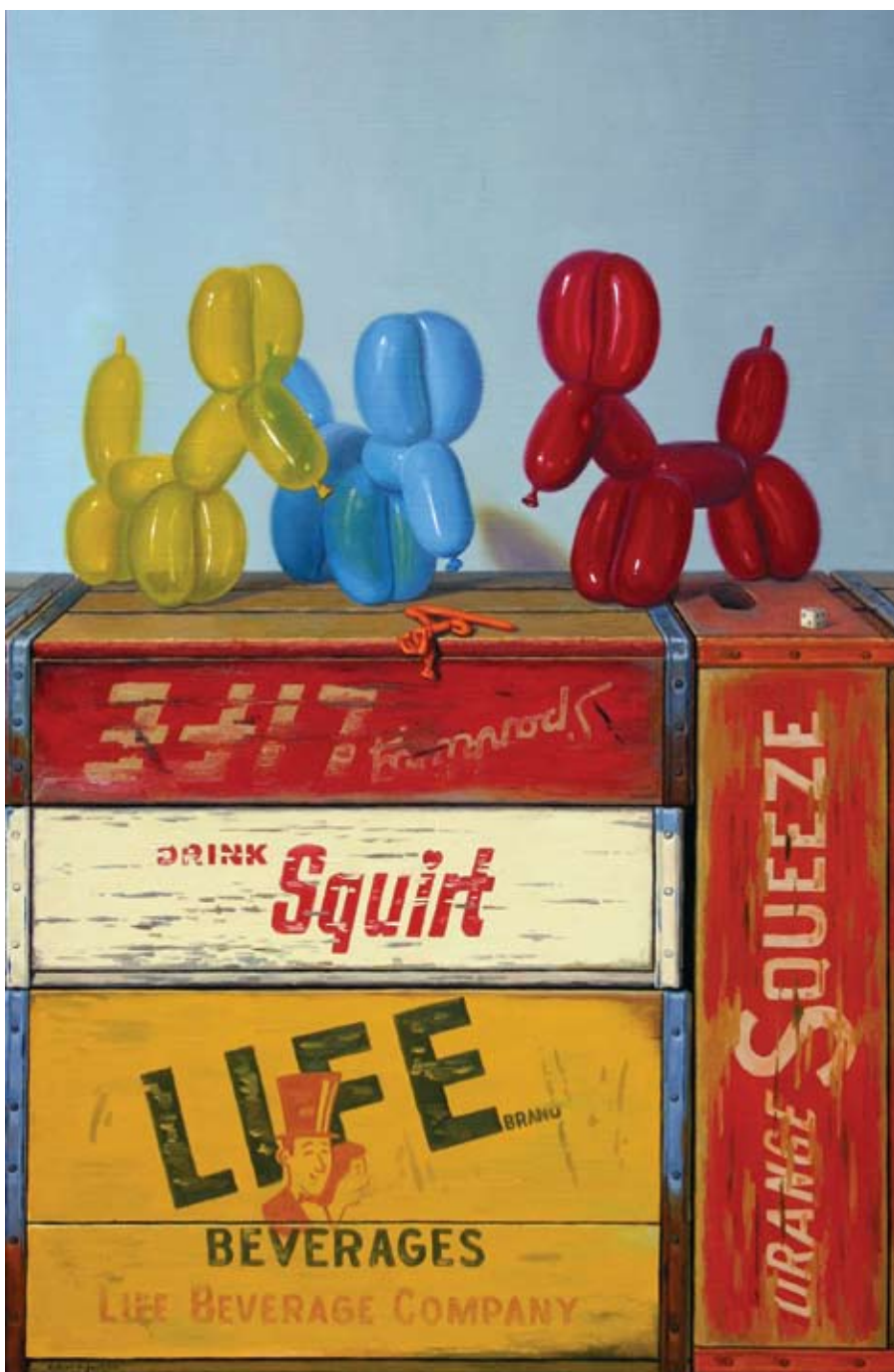
In these parlous times we don't need to be reminded of the brevity and shallowness of pleasure. It's all too apparent. In Northern Europe, in the 17th century, artists painted lush still lifes abounding with ripe fruit, flowers, and game. Yet, they were compelled to remind us of the passage from Ecclesiastes: "Vanity of vanities; all is vanity." I never quite knew what that meant until a recent translation, going back to the actual meaning of the Latin word *vanitas*, states, "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless." To convey this meaninglessness, artists included skulls, flickering or extinguished candles, ephemeral bubbles, and decaying fruit among the plenitude.

The tradition continues today in paintings such as **Robert C. Jackson's** *Balloon Dog Vanitas* in which the balloon dogs mourn the loss of one of their own who has, literally, "expired" or lost his breath. Among the bright colors and abundant references to "life" and to blood squirting through the veins as the heart squeezes, their hand-dog expressions express contrary emotions. Critics who doggedly attempt to belittle contemporary realism will miss the fact that this work sits firmly in the tradition of still life.

Louise Peterson sculpts dogs, Great Danes in fact, as evidenced by her sculpture *Process of Elimination #2*.

"Rigel is an uncoordinated, goofy and absolutely lovable Great Dane," she says, "but as such he doesn't inspire the most elegant sculptures. However, the shape his body takes when he does his business was irresistible to me as the basis for a sculpture."

Samuel Johnson referred to puns as



Robert C. Jackson, *Balloon Dog Vanitas*, oil on linen, 36 x 24"
COURTESY ARDEN GALLERY LTD., BOSTON, MA



Robert Kinsell, *Portobella*, oil on linen, 41 x 41"
COURTESY ANN NATHAN GALLERY, CHICAGO, IL

“the lowest form of humor.” Its official name “paronomasia” wipes out the humor altogether. Dr. Johnson would be aghast at the lengths to which some contemporary painters go to throttle the language. Have you ever been confused in a restaurant as to whether a mushroom

was a “portobello” or a “portabella”? A little brown crimini mushroom becomes a portobello (or portabella) when it grows up.

Robert Kinsell clouds the language issue even more in his painting *Portobella*. Two grown up criminis hang

on a string in front of a chalk drawing of a beautiful doorway on an aged stucco wall. He creates a steady symmetry with the string and its shadow lining up with the scroll at the top of the doorway and counters the symmetry with jagged cracks and missing stucco.

Jacob Pfeiffer seems to suggest that he and much of the rest of the world are hanging on by a shoestring. Rather than dwelling on such a trivial pun, he has chosen to follow the time-honored tradition of the still life. Still life paintings can be found in ancient Egyptian tombs

and reached their apex in the 17th century *vanitas* paintings alluded to by Robert C. Jackson. In his painting, titled *Still Life with Pairs*, Pfeiffer reaches into the more recent past by featuring a pair of saddle shoes from the 1950s still favored by some of our more laced-up contemporaries.

A pair of shoes, a pair of pears, a pair of flies and, in a flourish of bravura, two subtle pairs of chips in the stone shelf.

When I asked **Geoffrey Laurence** for a painting to use in this column he responded “I don’t really do humor (as you know) but ... I think my red

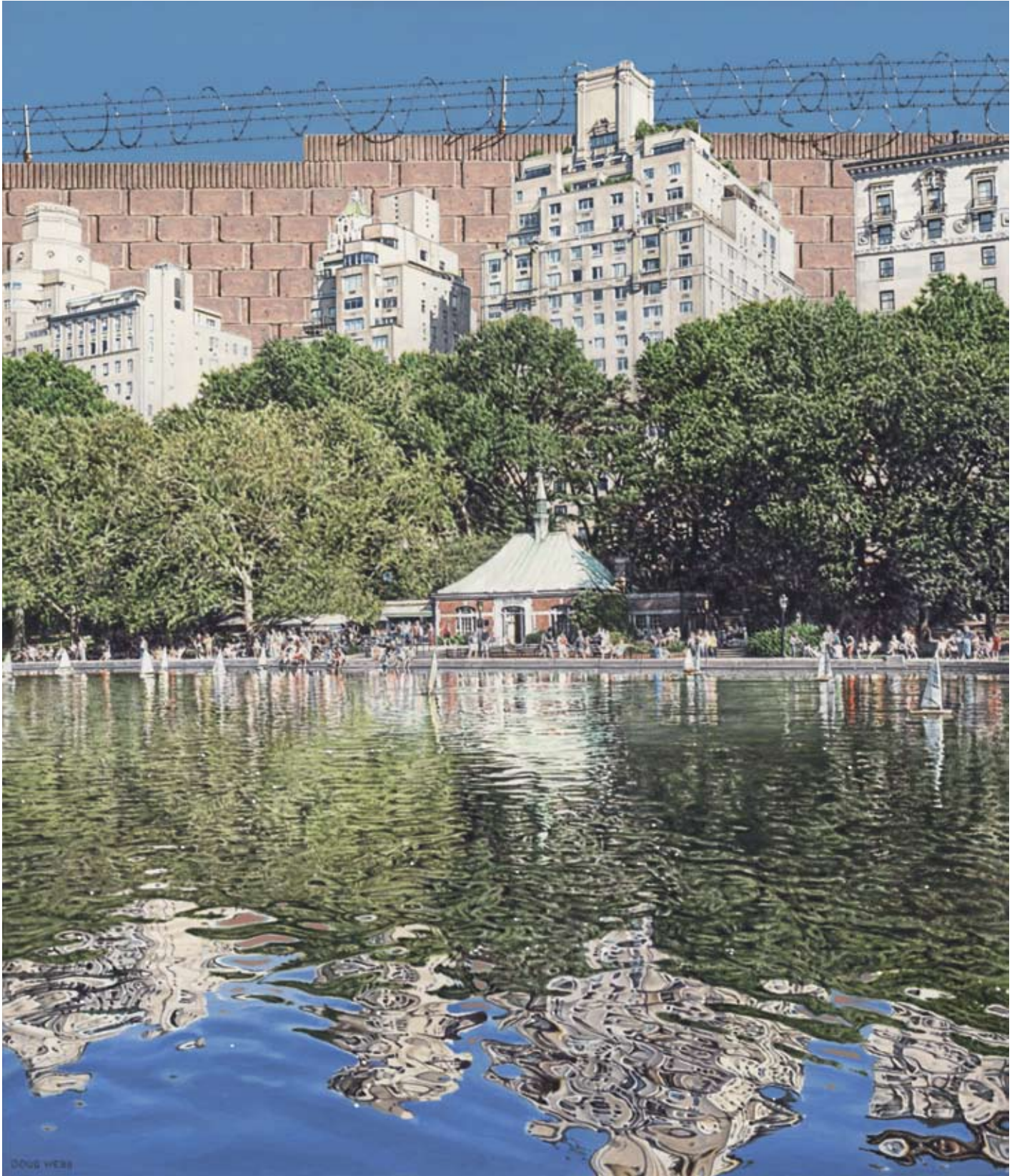


Louise Peterson,
Process of Elimination #2, bronze, ed. of 25, 17 x 8"
COURTESY GIACOBBE-FRITZ FINE ART, SANTA FE, NM

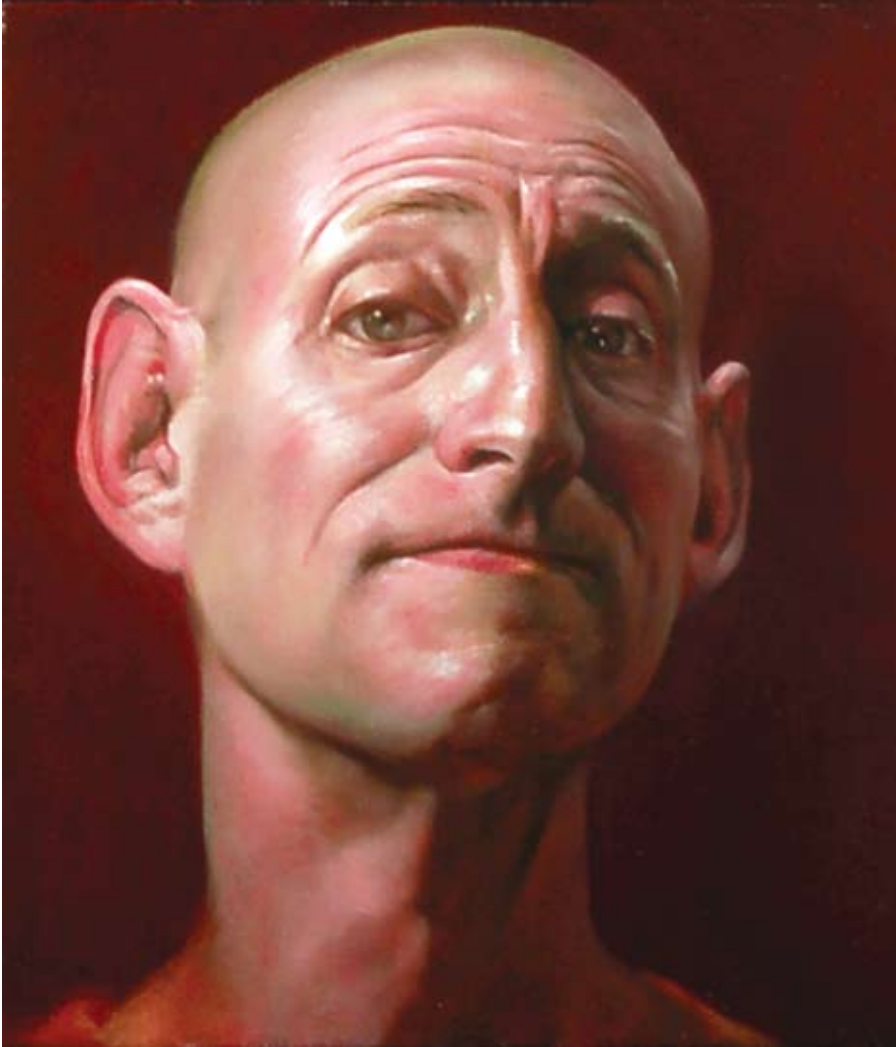


Jacob Pfeiffer, *Still Life with Pairs*, oil on panel, 24 x 18"

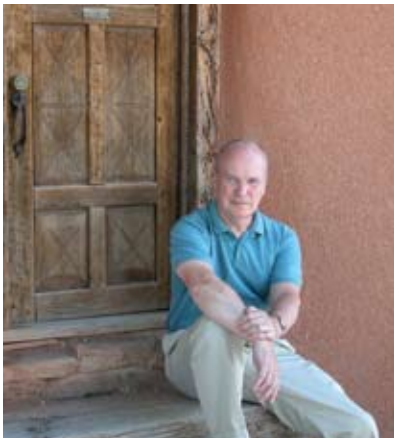
COURTESY JOHN PENCE GALLERY, SAN FRANCISCO, CA



Doug Webb, *Homeland Security #2 (study)*, (Central Park, NYC), acrylic on linen, 14 x 12"
COURTESY KLAUDIA MARR GALLERY, SANTA FE, NM



Geoffrey Laurence, *Red-Self*, oil on canvas, 12 x 10"
PRIVATE COLLECTION, COURTESY THE ARTIST



Santa Fe Editor John O'Hern, who has retired after 30 years in the museum business, specifically as the Executive Director and Curator of the Arnot Art Museum, Elmira, N.Y., is the originator of the internationally acclaimed Re-presenting Representation exhibitions, which promote realism in its many guises. John was chair of the Artists Panel of the New York State Council on the Arts. He writes for gallery publications around the world, including regular monthly features on Art Market Insights in Western Art Collector magazine.

self-portrait is sort of humorous ... ” Here, Laurence captures a momentary expression that contains a variety of emotions from hauteur to silliness. The figures in his large, dramatic, narrative paintings are full of expression and, as he says, “common emotional themes.”

Although this portrait could be of Samuel Johnson looking down at puns, Laurence is not above word play when he addresses even serious topics.

Laurence says, “I don’t feel comfortable with being described as a ‘realist’. I have no interest in ‘realism’ per se. My interest as an artist continues to be in exploring emotional response to my drawings and paintings, and I would rather be described as a ‘feelist.’”

Doug Webb brings us back to “these parlous times.”

Webb says, “With the use of composite imagery and shifts of scale between everyday scenes, situations and common objects, I weave a tapestry blending threads of satire, irony, conflict and hope.”

Webb’s painting *Homeland Security #2 (study)*, (Central Park, NYC) embodies these goals. The solid high-rise apartments and condominiums along New York’s Fifth Avenue dematerialize as their reflections in the boat pond are broken up by a slight breeze. At first the view seems one of many bucolic scenes throughout the park. Yet, Webb has constructed a high wall topped by razor wire behind the buildings, protecting the rich from the less rich, perhaps. The scale of the blocks in the wall is equivalent to two floors of apartments making the actual apartments Lilliputian or the wall itself Gargantuan.

Speaking of security, H. L. Mencken wrote, “Most people want security in this world, not liberty.”

Mark Twain opined, “Irreverence is the champion of liberty.”

These irreverent works by revered artists set us free of the doldrums and remind us, as we chuckle, that life is far from meaningless. ●