
Joseph Sulkowski

Exalting the light fantastic in the footsteps of the Old Masters.

by Brooke Chilvers

THINK OF THE pleasure of digging into the best dessert in the world—for me, a *Sacher Torte* in a classic Viennese *konditorei*. Very occasionally a painting, inevitably the work of an old master, gives me the same (though less-fattening) gratification. It happened at San Francisco's revamped de Young Museum, when an incandescent Frederick Church of Niagara Falls hooked my eyes and pulled me clear across four galleries, until I stood awed and grateful to be bathed in its light.

In January it happened again, for the first time with a *living* sporting artist at a safari convention. There, among the big-game MacCanvases, was a painter whose ivories and ochres and chocolate shadows reminded me of Rembrandt, whose complex reds evoked Delacroix, whose viscous glowing surfaces suggested Vermeer. And this was 2006, in Reno of all places.

The explanation for my enchantment is simple: Joseph Sulkowski works with traditional materials and centuries-old methods, and his expressive values and respect for craftsmanship are coded in his Polish scholar-warrior genes.

Sulkowski was raised near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in a five-child family that valued the city's bountiful magnate-built cultural life. At the Carnegie Museum of Art his talent was shaped by the Renaissance and Impressionist master-

works he first experienced there, as well as by Da Vinci and Rubens. While most painters of his generation are the artistic offspring of Jackson Pollock, Andy Warhol or Georgia O'Keeffe, Sulkowski is clearly linked to 17th-century old masters such as Rembrandt, Caravaggio and Velázquez. If early on the flat, matte surfaces and primary colors of Mondrian's geometrical abstracts and Roy Lichtenstein's pop art failed to resonate with him, the magic of Rembrandt's brushstroke and virtuoso etchings drew him in.

Why? Because they captured the subtle dance between light and shadow, called *chiaroscuro*, that pulls you into a painting. Light invites you to explore the canvas's myriad colors; shadow leads you to the mysterious places a photorealist painter would define with obsessive details. "Look at the Dutch masters. Their shadows are multi-dimensional, intricate and full of depth." Similarly, a full range of blacks, cobalts and grays bounce off the coats of Sulkowski's black Labradors; and there are just as many nuances in the creamy whites of his foxhounds, Jack Russell terriers and English pointers.

Photorealism has gobbled up most of the artists who have animals as their subjects. And Sulkowski could have gone wild reproducing exactly the accoutrements of the sporting life—the gleaming silver-handled riding crops, polished riding boots

and saddles shiny from wear—that he uses to put the different breeds into context. Instead he favors the emotional effects of light over the showmanship of photorealism. Although the viewer might marvel at the photorealist painter's acute sense of observation and obvious skill, for Sulkowski it is mostly an exercise in rendering the subject. "And so what? You experience the canvas with your mind and quickly know everything there is to know about it, which eventually leaves you bored and devoid of feeling for the work," he says.

Fine art is something greater than projecting a photo to trace it, then filling in the drawing with colors. That is not a living process that creates a living thing, says Sulkowski, whose hounds and horses reverberate with breath and energy even when completely still. Forget picture-perfect droplets suspended from their hides as they crash through a sun-bathed stream; Sulkowski's wet pups are luminescent, their coats of many colors reflecting the light coming off the water or through the vegetation. Forget the blades of grass; his creatures have spirit and soul.

Sulkowski senses the poetry in the simple acts of working dogs, whether foxhounds in the field or a tightly knit pile of Basset hounds at rest in the kennel. The result is an emotional tie with the viewer that, he says, "makes my 'poetic realism'

more real than photorealism.”

Sulkowski attended the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia, but he unearthed no mentor in that sea of Modernism. In 1974 he switched to the Art Students League of New York and found Frank Mason—then the foremost authority in America not only on the classical principles of drawing, human anatomy and figure painting but also on mastering the actual materials and techniques developed and used by Rembrandt, van Dyck and Rubens. From Mason, Sulkowski learned how to grind his own pigments from powdered plants and minerals, and to mix them, following the old recipes, with the finest hand-prepared linseed oils, amber varnishes or Venice turpentine. (Producing pigments based on toxic materials, like lead and chrome, is probably best left to manufacturers.) The result is the rich texture and buttery shine we recognize in the old masters and that is mostly absent in today’s ubiquitous acrylics.

Each morning Sulkowski ceremoniously lays out his “keyboard” of colors on a glass palette, from brilliant suns (yellows, reds) to cool shadows (blues, black); more specifically, from Flake white, through a string of yellows and ochres, to warm and cool reds, warm and cool blues, to the blacks and complicated earthy umbers that are so effective in the subtle art of gentle shading. Greens are created on the spot by mixing yellows like cadmium with the ochres, blues, blacks and crimson already on his palette, depending on the hue, temperature and texture he wants to express. (In case you’ve forgotten, brown, like pink, doesn’t have a place in the color spectrum.) His golden retrievers call for the middle colors

and values of his palette, where the golds, ambers and Naples yellow reside. For black labs, he mixes a wide range of color values from the lower scale of his palette.

But Sulkowski’s talent, like the old masters’, originates in “draftsmanship.” Draftsmanship is the bringing together of all the physical acts of art to put down a line, because each brutally critical stroke of the pencil, brush or etching needle counts for creating shape, perspective and depth of perception as well as movement by an accurate piece of anatomy in motion. When the brush is loaded with pigment, each stroke also imparts color and substance and can add a third dimension to the canvas, if that’s what the artist is seeking. Where—and how—that line lands determines form, color and texture, and immediately communicates to the viewer whether the wind is blowing or siesta-still.

First-class draftsmanship allows the hand to go where the imagination leads. “As has been said, you begin with drawing,” wrote Cennino Cennini in the 15th century. With a classical education in portraiture, landscape and equine art, Sulkowski could have gone anywhere with his gift. And he chose sporting art. Yet he is more an avid observer than an avid hunter. When asked, “Why dogs?” he said that they present the same challenges of anatomy and expression as humans. They are beautiful creatures to paint, and for an artist adept at stimulating his own imagination, there is no reason to tire of painting dogs.

He calls his style “poetic realism” because his canvases tell an immediate story and imply an entire world of sport beyond. The Jack Russell terrier sitting protectively on the red riding

coat suggests the wider activities of venery; you can hear the horn of the hunter through the woods. Alert with anticipation or exhausted from the hunt, his dogs have a timeless quality; they are suitable expressions of the sporting life of both earlier times and today.

Following Mason’s advice to “exalt the light,” like his masters before him, Sulkowski works in the subdued consistent light of a north-facing studio. There he recreates some of the working conditions the masters, like Vermeer, would have experienced in their attic studios. He finds parallels between the light pouring through the high windows of a barn and the solemn, peaceful light penetrating a 17th century Dutch interior or church. Yet Sulkowski works as easily *en plein air*—out of doors with a field easel like the Impressionists—observing Southern quail hunts or walked-up grouse in the Scottish Highlands.

Despite having chosen the road less travelled, Sulkowski seems supremely comfortable with his art. Any wavering he might have experienced about devoting his life’s energy to a style some might call obsolete was countered with Mason’s quip: *If you can paint like Velázquez, Rubens or Rembrandt, you don’t have to worry about what’s in style.* “Even if my works are never hung next to the old masters, if I spend my life trying to capture an ‘essence’ of an animal—its spirit and place—well, that is a life well spent.” ■

Brooke, whose own drawing skills never evolved beyond the stick figures of kindergarten, says that a life spent exploring great art is good compensation for her total lack of talent with a brush.





*“On the Scottish Highlands, Two Setters,” an original oil, 28 x 35 inches, by Joseph Sulkowski.
Courtesy of Halcyon Gallery, Birmingham, England.*