

RALPH GOINGS: An Interview with Louis Zona, 2004  
Director of the Butler Institute of American Art.

LZ

Let's talk about some of the work you've done over the last ten or fifteen years. Do you see a change in the approach? Is the newer work unique, or have you stayed with the formula that has been so successful in the earlier work?

RG

The changes over the last few years have been mostly with the still lifes. I moved slowly from the "existing in reality" situations, where I would go to diners and find the various images that I wanted to use, gradually switching to making set ups in my studio. There, I could control every aspect of the situation — the light and the arrangement of objects, as well as their proximity.

LZ

Do you actually have a counter top in the studio?

RG

I have a variety of simulations. Many of the close-up paintings, the detail paintings, are arrangements. In most cases you don't even see the counter tops. Seeing just a fraction of two or three objects has fascinated me for a number of years. In the late 1990s through the last year or two, I became fascinated with just a single object, and the sort of illusions that can be created in a very neutral environment. A solid background color allows the object to define not only its own traits, but also the base in which it sits, creating a little cast shadow on nebulous surface. I think that most of the changes have been in this area, but the change has been very gradual over the years.

LZ

Ralph, once you've set up the still life and have begun to paint, do you alter it in any way in the process? Or, once you have created the set up, do you stay with the original concept? Are adjustments made?

RG

The answer to that is yes and no! The studio setup paintings are pretty flexible. The mechanics are the same; I photograph the arrangement and work from those photographs rather than directly from the objects. But I have the objects, ketchup bottles, salt and pepper shakers and napkin holders all over my studio, so I can refer to them as I get involved in the painting process. I like working from a two dimensional image and translating it into a painting that has the illusion of three dimensions. After a time I refer to the photos less and less and allow the painting to develop in terms of itself.

LZ

So the photographs are like working drawings for you?

RG

Yes. They are a way of trying things out to see roughly how the objects look in a two dimensional format. I photograph each set up many times from several different angles, and in several different lighting situations. Looking at the slides I take is where the selective process begins. I look at the pictures over and over again and finally one seems to say, "Do me."

LZ

In looking at your technique twenty-five or thirty years ago, comparing past work to more recent paintings, is there a discernible difference?

RG

My feeling is that it has evolved, I know there have been changes. I hope I have refined it over the years.

LZ

I don't know if we'd ever call your work painterly, but do you find the recent work more expressive in terms of color choices, etc., or have you held true to your aesthetic?

RG

I really like oil paint—I like the substance of it. At first glance my paintings seem very smooth and slick and polished, but they're not. If you look up close you can see brush strokes, little drips of paint and touches here and there. I never wanted that to be an overt part of the picture. I want the image to speak for itself, and for my personality not to intrude on the subject any more than necessary to produce the picture. But at the same time, it takes a long time to make these pictures. Just to keep myself going, I find myself going back to the paint. I put it on and wipe it on and fool around with it—it's all a wet in wet process. I like to encourage accidents. Things happen and change sometimes, even the direction of a little part of the painting might change. Hopefully, over the years, I have refined that whole process. I haven't been aware of becoming more expressive. But who knows.

LZ

You really try to remove yourself so that the technique does not draw attention away from the subject.

RG

Right. That's been my goal. But then age and health intervene so that could change too I suppose.

LZ

That has happened to the best of us over the years, to some of the greatest artists in the world.

And I include you among the greatest artists. As we age we sometimes have to deal with issues like that.

RG

Rather than saying, “ Well I just can’t do it anymore,” my best avenue of approach may be to say, “I’ll do what I can do.” But this has to do with the future, not the past. That is what we are concerned with here.

LZ

Labels are used to pigeon hole artists. For example, when Photo Realism came on the scene back in the 1970s, you were thought to be the leader of that group. How do you feel about labels such as Photo Realism or Hyper Realism?

RG

I have no objections to the use of Photo Realism or Hyper Realism to identify a style or kind of painting. I’ve heard there are some artists who object to that title and the idea of a “movement”, especially since it has been used as a derisive term by some art writers. I was associated with the style in the 1970s and 1980s, I won't distance myself from that, but I wouldn't care to be pigeon holed as ‘just’ a Photo Realist. People who write about painting seem to need those terms more than painters do. It never made much difference to me one way or the other, as long as people spell my name correctly!

LZ

I personally believe that labels might be a negative. Since we have the tendency to look at art history in a linear way, there might be a danger of placing you as an artist that belongs to the 1970s—but that is not the case.

RG

You’re right--I agree. I prefer to think of myself as a “painter” who worked through the 1970s.

Recently I discovered a site on the Internet listing artists associated with Photo Realism and they were placed in chronological order. I had the dubious distinction of being the oldest living Photo Realist.

LZ

They do say that any publicity is good publicity, but we’ll certainly try not to use those pigeon hole type labels.

RG

One of the curious things I have found is the way things evolved from the late sixties and early seventies with realist painters—and I think this happened almost exclusively in the group—artists became identified with specific signature subject matter. John Salt paints cars, John Kaceri paints “bottoms”. . .

LZ

. . .McLean paints horses.

RG

Right. And Goings paints pickup trucks. Everybody got categorized like that, even to the point of gallery people saying to me, “You can’t change your subject matter— collectors won’t stand for it.”

LZ

I think dealers have been talking to artists that way for generations. Are there any outside forces that dictate what you do in the studio?

RG

Indirectly I'm sure there are. I like to get feedback from people—not just Ivan (Karp) and gallery people, but I'll show my pictures to anyone who will look at them, and I like to get feedback whether it is positive or negative. I can't say that it has much of a direct effect on what I do but I'm sure it gets sifted into the mix. But generally, no.

LZ

Is there a work of art that is semi-finished in your studio including a direction that you thought you would try, but then decided to forego? Does that happen to you—you decide to experiment with something, carve a new path and then you discover that, "This has nothing to do with me."

RG

I've done that but ultimately have not let it go. On occasion, I have started something and gotten into it and thought, "This just is not working. This is not going anywhere." And rather than destroying the works, I put them in my painting rack and leave them—sometimes up to ten years. I look at these works from time to time. I might pull one out and still think that they are terrible—but every once in a while I'll pull one of those paintings out and think, "Oh, I see where that can go." And then I finish it.

You may notice that there are some pictures that I have done that are dated with a span of years, indicating that that was exactly what happened. That work got stuck in the rack because I couldn't find a solution to problems that I had developed. Four or five, even six or seven years later, I did.

LZ

We have a John Steuart Curry in the Butler collection that is dated 1939-1945. Historically, artists have done that. What has drawn you to the particular subjects that you have painted over the years? Is it the surface quality of your subjects?

RG

It's not just the surfaces. I'm fond of the objects, the places and the people I paint. They are the ordinary inhabitants of my world and they're loaded with visual excitement for me. I'm fascinated by surfaces, obviously. But it's a combination of a number of things. I am interested in the light and the effect it has on surfaces, and the spaces where these objects exist. Also, the objects themselves, and how their form is defined by their surface and the light...and that ultimately creates the illusion of the three dimensional object even though it is on a flat surface. That whole package of mechanical art is a concern and part of my interest. The surfaces of objects really fascinate me. I think what drew me to the diners in the first place was all the metal and glass, the vinyl and so forth.

LZ

Your compositions to me are classical. I've used your compositions when teaching art history, relating them to the Greek Classicism. You don't miss. I believe you have an extraordinary sense of composition. Everything seems to be so well thought out. Is that the case, or is it mostly intuitive?

RG

I'm afraid it's entirely intuitive. I describe my general technique as taking lots of photographs, and then sitting down and looking at them over and over again until one seems to be "the one." As I look at the slides and try to make a selection, I'm not thinking about whether or not the composition is a little lopsided, or not as active a composition as I would like. It's all visceral. I just respond to things I see and go with that without trying to analyze why I like them. I'm afraid if I think about it too much I might mess it up!

LZ

That's why certain baseball players are great, They say if you have to think about it too much, you'll probably strike out. You see the ball and you hit, versus anticipating a certain pitch. Tell us a little bit about your relationship with Ivan Karp over these many, many years. I am prejudiced because I think that Ivan Karp is a cultural icon.

RG

Oh, yes, no doubt about it..

LZ

The fact is that you have been loyal to him and he has been loyal to you. It seems like a pretty special relationship. RG

He's not only my dealer, he's also a good friend. We have had a lot of years of what my wife describes as "good eating." With Ivan that is a very important aspect of life. I have never had any regrets. Ivan has done wonderful things for me and for my career, and I can't say enough good things about him. He is "a unique personality." As in all great friendships there are conflicts. So we occasionally cross swords but it's never serious. And his sword is always mightier and faster than mine. I don't mind....

LZ

Do you think Ivan wishes that your method enabled you to create more paintings. Does he offer related suggestions.

RG

Well that is always the case. I wish I could make more paintings! He will ask about the progress of a painting I'm working on, but there's no pressure to "hurry up". When I was first associated with him, he would make suggestions about subjects, venues and so on. I didn't know quite how to take that, never having had a New York dealer before. Actually, I had never dealt with any professional art dealer. I didn't know if it was my place to take those suggestions to be successful, or whether I should ignore them. I said something to Ivan one time about one of his comments. I said, "I just can't do that." He said, "Oh, I just express these things.

You listen, and then you do what you have to do.” That has been our operating slogan over the years. If there is something he wants to say about something I’m doing, he says it, and then he always ends up saying “. . .but you do what you have to do.” I welcome and value his opinions and appreciate his sensitivity to painters needs.

LZ

Do you have feelings about the role of critics? Overall, critics have been very, very good to you. What are your feeling about critics generally?

RG

I agree that those who have paid any attention to me have done well by me. My only complaint about critics is that not enough of them have paid attention to me.

LZ

Will you comment on the current situation as far as painting goes. One goes into exhibitions of the socalled “new art” and you seldom see a painting. What is your feeling about the current direction of the visual arts?

RG

I don’t want to reject anything on the face of it. There is a lot going on that I find confusing or not interesting, or even outside of what I consider the scope of art, because it is basically not visual. I’m a little put off by overly cerebral pieces. It’s probably perfectly legitimate, but I don’t understand it. I don’t have time to figure out every aspect of every twist and turn that modern art takes. I’m too busy with my own work. I try to keep an eye on various trends, but I don’t pursue them and I very seldom go to shows anymore. I used to avoid going to shows even when painting was the prevalent mode simply because it messed me up in terms of my own studio work. I’d go to what I thought was a really good painting show and I’d have to wait until I got over it before I could go back to my own work. I would get so involved with the painting problems that another artist was dealing with that I would forget my own.

LZ

I think that is a pretty healthy attitude. In terms of the future, are you going to stay the course? Do you see any major shifts ahead or can’t you predict at this point.

RG

I just want to keep doing what I’m able to do, health permitting, as long as I can. I don’t plan any specific changes but as I’ve gotten older I’m taking more and more chances. That could lead to some change. My biggest plan is just to keep going.

LZ

When you were growing up, who were the artists that influenced you?

RG

Vermeer, Homer...a long list of historic painters. It’s hard to pinpoint more recent artists. I like all painting.

LZ

I was pleased to read your commentary about Abstract Expressionism. I think you had a real fondness for that painting.

RG

I did. That was the mode as I was growing up. At the art school I attended most of the teachers were pretty traditional, but what was going on in the world outside was pretty wild stuff. As students, we were as much aware of the current art scene as what was going on in the classroom. So everyone would go home at night and switch to their big brushes and their big canvases and make enormous messes.

LZ

Did that include you?

RG

Oh, yes. It took me a number of years after I got out of college to work my way out of Abstract Expressionism. I went through my de Kooning phase, my Gorky phase.

LZ

I was talking to an older Ohio artist who was a traditionalist in every sense of the word. He had taken several classes from Hans Hoffman, and that surprised me. He said, "I wanted to gain the information he could give to me and I found, as a result of those classes, my whole sense of color changed, particularly in the way I painted still lifes." I guess there is something to be said for experiencing things that are not part of your personality.

RG

Absolutely. I like all painting. It's all a source.

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