

Pamela Talese: Painting Civilization

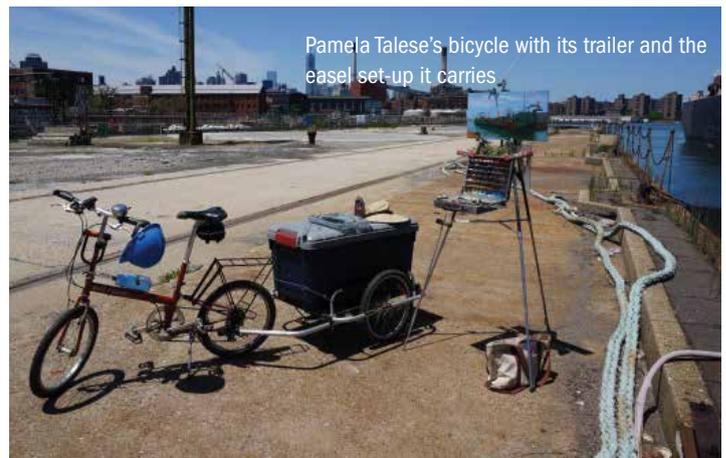
BY CHARLES RASKOB ROBINSON



Last season, art lovers in Washington, D.C., New York City, and London were treated to the superb touring retrospective of George Bellows (1882-1925), one of the American masters admired most by the contemporary artist Pamela Talese (b. 1964). Many Bellows paintings open a fascinating window on the dynamic growth that New York City experienced a century ago; indeed, many were conceived outdoors in some of the city's roughest patches, most famously the deep pit that teemed with the men and machines constructing Pennsylvania Station between 1904 and 1910.

Bellows documented the start of New York's greatest building boom, while Talese keeps busy chronicling its denouement — the deterioration of what Bellows's contemporaries built — or what Talese affectionately calls “Rust.” Thus she can often be found pedaling her bicycle — which tows a trailer loaded with painting equipment — around the city's decaying waterfronts and other no-go zones.

Talese is a highly observant *plein air* painter who requires many hours to capture what she is after. First, this means establishing legitimate and safe access to places where attractive women are not usually encountered, especially alone — such as the dry docks of the 200-year-old Brooklyn Navy Yard, or at the foot of crumbling power plants and sugar refineries. Once Talese has established herself on location, the men who work in these zones often take her under wing, and their stories and insights further inform her artistry.



Pamela Talese's bicycle with its trailer and the easel set-up it carries.

Talese particularly admires the loose brushwork in Bellows's 1912 painting *Men of the Docks*: “I am in awe of the way his bravura captured the tensions so evident in the building of early 20th-century America's cities.” Like other Ashcan realists, Bellows felt that art's main purpose was to communicate truthful and objective views of modern life. His circle rejected the classicism of academic art and the unrealistic or exotic themes of romanticism. Now, however, Talese does not see realists and academics as antagonistic, pointing instead to the great 19th-century critic John Ruskin, who felt that “All great art is praise,” even, surely, the ancient art of shipbuilding. “Today,” she observes, “contemporary academics often seek the sublime, the apex of beauty based on classicism, grace, proportion, and balance of color harmonies. Realists agree with all that — just not to the same degree. But we are all in alliance against the over-hyped garbage that passes for art in the mainstream these days.” Today's mainstream certainly does not offer what Bellows sought when he quoted Aristotle: “The aim of art is to represent not the outward appearance of things, but their inward significance.”



George Bellows (1882-1925)

Men of the Docks

1912, Oil on canvas, 45 x 63 1/2 in.

Randolph College, Lynchburg, Virginia



Valcogen Bow in DD6

2008, Oil on linen, 24 x 20 in.

The Century Association Collection, New York City

draw several sketches to work out the composition before making a small oil sketch that helps refine what I'm after with color and light."

A "large" painting (which can be only as large as will fit on her trailer) will take several weeks to finish "because I am going after real detail, a specificity of light and texture." Talese says, "The outdoor elements must be taken into account and become part of the picture. Unfortunately, a medium-sized canvas can act like a sail in high winds, and a few have even taken down my easel set-up along with them. This is all part of the process, and, as frustrating as it can be, it's exciting to be outside and to share space with the object of my inquiry. In studying the scene, I become obsessive; the data gathered is empirical, but I am enthralled — absolutely in love with the mass of steel before me, the radio towers, the cracking concrete."

Yet Talese is no photorealist, as there are passages in her pictures that are not tightly rendered. Spending time on the scene allows her to see something new, or to find a better way to express what she sees. "Being out there gives me the opportunity to talk to those working near me. I am given details about the ship that help me understand, for example, the way its steel plates are joined. What occurs during the painting process is a temporal layering — an accumulation of perceptual experience over time."

INWARD SIGNIFICANCE

Usually, when we see an actual container ship or industrial landscape, it appears tired even as we

SUBJECT AND APPROACH

Talese spends a good deal of "pedal time" scouting potential subjects and places to paint outdoors. She was doing this long before the tragic events of September 11, 2001, after which wary neighbors began to interfere with her explorations. Who, they wondered, was this young (radical fundamentalist?) woman pedaling a (suicide?) bike, towing a (bomb-laden?) trailer through quiet parts of New York, especially its (strategically vulnerable?) waterfront? Their apprehension was a key reason Talese sought access to the Brooklyn Navy Yard; though it took six months to secure official approval, once inside, she was suddenly free to work unmolested by suspicious onlookers. Better yet, she does not have to move to change subjects, because the subjects come to her.

"When a big ship comes in," Talese explains, "I call the dry dock manager to learn if there's going to be a great deal of sandblasting, how long the ship will be around, etc. Then I pedal over and start drawing." This stage "is just a graphite expression of the looking stage," but it also allows the crew and laborers to indicate if Talese is going to be in danger or in the way. "I can't understand anything before I draw it," she says. "I

The Sandy Hook

2007, Oil on linen over panel, 13 x 15 in.

Private collection





Eagle Electric V

2000, Oil on linen over panel, 15 x 22 in.
New-York Historical Society, New York City

first see it. Looking at a painting of it, however, allows us to see it anew, or — to invoke Aristotle again — to discover its inward significance. For Talese, this is true whether she is painting a scene in Brooklyn, Wyoming, or even Rome, where she has just completed her second stay as a visiting artist at the American Academy. “The only way a subject can become interesting, to my mind, is to be very specific — no generalizing. What is the weight and mass of this cargo vessel? What is the texture of the scars it boasts after a year afloat? I am fascinated by these details because they tell me about the life of what I see. This is really my way of trying to paint civilization: how we create, think about, and occupy our built environments.”

In reviewing Talese’s 2007 show at the Atlantic Gallery in Chelsea, *New York Times* critic Roberta Smith observed, “The subjects have all seen better days, but the images are not nostalgic ...

Horizon Lines (Dusk)

2011, Oil on linen, 18 x 24 in.
Collection of the artist





The Freddy K
2007, Oil on linen, 14 x 20 in.
Private collection

magazine jobs, including a stint as assistant art director at *Vogue*, where, she confesses, she “did not excel. The only times I felt centered were at the League.” It was during a summer class in Vermont that Talese discovered *plein air* painting under the legendary League instructor Frank Mason (1921-2009): “Now *plein air* is what I do,” she marvels.

Talese worked as an interior designer until 2000, when she “went out to Coney Island to paint a building I had my eye on, only to find that it had disappeared. I knew then that I had to spend more time painting.” Her prompt shift to full-time artmaking resulted in a 2003 solo show at Atlan-

tic Gallery, 718: *Changing Neighborhoods in Brooklyn and Queens*. In 2005 and 2007 that gallery presented two shows of paintings focused exclusively on the Brooklyn Navy Yard, and in 2009 came *Rust Never Sleeps*.

they record places of honest work by exemplifying it. They are carried by an unforced accuracy abetted by a subtle color sense and straightforward surfaces that are neither finicky nor juiced up.”

Talese’s fascination with rust reflects her concern about New York City’s steady evolution away from the manufacturing and shipping powerhouse it once was. Thus she has studied — and painted — wharfs and dry docks transformed into luxury apartments and commercial warehouses. “Someday,” she says, “I look forward to painting shipbuilding centers that are still thriving, such as Bath, Maine, or Hamburg, Germany.” New York is hardly finished as a port, though: Talese lives in Battery Park City, at the southwestern tip of Manhattan, where she is ideally positioned to observe constant maritime activity in the Hudson River and New York Bay.

AN INHERENT LOVE OF WORK

Though educated in top Manhattan schools and then Smith College in Massachusetts, Talese comes from a family that has traditionally worked with their hands; on her father’s side were generations of Italian tailors, and her mother’s mostly Irish side boasted a few brave firemen. She and her sister, Catherine, were raised by parents who work with words: the famed writer Gay Talese and the noted publisher Nan A. Talese. She enthuses, “This family knows only continual work — nobody retires. It’s implied that ‘If you are not working, you are not alive!’”

At Smith, Talese studied English and printmaking, “but I also drew all the time.” After graduation, she deferred becoming an artist in favor of a career that would offer a “viable income.” She says, “I knew that my father wanted me to become a reporter for *The New York Times* (where he had once worked), so I felt my only option was to leave the country.” For a year and a half, she relished her glamorous odd jobs in Paris, but soon “my mother asked me a simple but profound question: ‘What do you do when time stands still?’ I thought for a second and replied: ‘Draw.’ That nagging feeling that I would become an artist had come closer to the surface, so I enrolled at the Art Students League of New York.”

Studying at the League — which Bellows had attended — “was a revelation.” Talese spent five years there part-time while juggling

Driggs Avenue, Gate 1
2003, Oil on linen over panel, 13 x 9 in.
Private collection





Side-Trip
2002, Oil on linen over panel, 11 x 16 in.
Collection of the artist

Silvercup
2007, Oil on linen over panel, 11 x 22 in.
Private collection





Building 128 over DD4-1
2005, Oil on linen over panel, 12 x 24 in.
Private collection

Plein air painting is hard work. “The physical challenge of doing the work is integral to the painting itself,” Talese explains. “It’s about being there. It’s immersion journalism with poetic license. Better to just push ahead as a farmer would, turning the corner at the edge of a field, at a slow but steady pace.” She admits, “At times I do see my whole enterprise as completely absurd. If I were to think about it too deeply, consider to whom the big prizes go, the adulation and auctions for this pile of wood or video of water dripping into a cup, I would go mad. I am a careful painter and don’t possess the elegant agility of John Singer Sargent, Anders Zorn, or even George Bellows, alas — so I will never be wildly prolific. But the time spent on site is alive for me, and I hope some of this direct engagement engages the people who see my work, sore back be damned.”

ROLE MODELS

Perhaps it is reflective of her desire to “paint civilization,” but the artists that Talese most admires hail from all over the globe, and are not limited to painters. “In addition to Bellows and other Ashcan realists, the Precisionists of the 1920s who dealt with industrial structures interest me, like Elsie Driggs, Charles Demuth, Charles Sheeler, and, on occasion, Georgia O’Keeffe. And because of shared subject matter, I look at a lot of photographers — among others, W. Eugene Smith, Margaret Bourke White, and Walker Evans.”

Across the Atlantic, Talese cites England’s William Nicholson (1872-1949), “whose subject matter is more high-toned, but whose design and brushwork are electrifying,” as well as Glasgow’s Euan Uglow (1932-2000). She also admires the Russian Isaac Levitan (1860-1900), whose “focus on landscape is deeply moving, completely rendered, yet still mysterious and a little melancholy.” She goes on, “What I find myself drawn to now is not painting as often as really high craftspeople, like the Nigerian sculptor El Anatsui [b. 1944], who works with wood, clay, and — most recently — dis-

carded bottle caps; the American Nick Cave [b. 1959], who makes ‘sound suit’ costumes covered with fabrics, objects, and beading; and the Chinese fiber artist Lin Tianmiao [b. 1961], who also studied at the League.” Clearly these contemporary artists reflect Talese’s inherited respect for people who make things with their hands, and who pay attention to detail. “But painting lives!” she adds. “I continue to meet fabulous and diverse painters working today. Among the several art blogs I read, the ‘realist tribe’ is becoming more present. I am also impressed by the vibrant work I see coming out of the New York Academy of Art these days.”

When asked to advise young artists just starting out, Talese is very clear: “Draw, draw, draw.” More broadly, she urges them simply to celebrate being an artist: “We care about truth and beauty, and appreciate the great privilege to witness life unfolding as it does, with both light and shadow defining how we experience our journey.” Talese’s daily writings transcend the amusing anecdotes about heavy backpacks and encounters with bystanders to reveal her joy in the work, and also her dawning awareness that painting is less about subject matter than about a way of seeing.

As noted above, Talese has recently returned from Rome, where she has launched a series of paintings juxtaposing the architectural styles, textures, and tones of different neighborhoods, especially those on the periphery. Rome is, quite literally, a place of layers, so it makes sense that Talese has been painting iconic sites such as the Foro Italico, but also the Palazzo del Sport, the Termini train station, and the terraces of mid-20th-century apartment buildings. Concrete was invented by the ancient Romans, so she is particularly fascinated by its usage across the centuries. Readers of *Fine Art Connoisseur* have every reason to anticipate Talese’s next show of the resulting works, to be announced in these pages *con gusto*. ■

CHARLES RASKOB ROBINSON is a contributing writer to *Fine Art Connoisseur*. A Fellow of the American Society of Marine Artists, he recently produced a video documentary about the War of 1812 in conjunction with the U.S. Navy (naval-war-of-1812-illustrated.org).

Unless noted otherwise, all images are by Pamela Talese.