



Painting as Performance

John Gibson's invented still lifes allow him to experiment with color, space, and form, with little chance to correct or revise. | **by John A. Parks**

ABOVE
Lincoln
2007, watercolor, 40 x 60.
All artwork this article private collection unless otherwise indicated.

RIGHT TOP
Middle
2008, watercolor, 51 x 53.
Courtesy Gerald Peters Gallery, New York, New York, and Santa Fe, New Mexico.

RIGHT MIDDLE
Striped Pile
2006, watercolor, 50 x 52.

RIGHT BELOW
Big Pile
2005, watercolor, 52 x 56.

John Gibson devotes his watercolors to a single subject, the kind of cheerfully patterned multicolored balls we expect to find in the toy section of a budget store. He presents them in spare, often near-symmetrical formations on a colored ground. Sometimes three balls are simply lined up a little apart, or a pair are placed dead center in the picture touching each other, or a group are stacked into a modest pyramid. Although he uses a variety of proportions, he often returns to an almost perfect square. All the works are large, generally running about four feet square, and all have broad, soft white margins at the outer edges. Surprisingly, not one of the watercolors is done from life, and all of the colored balls are entirely invented, along with the illumination and the background. The enterprise, at first glance that of a straightforward still life painter, turns out to be a much more cerebral venture that grew out of the artist's work in graduate school in the early 1980s.

"At Yale I studied abstract painting," Gibson recalls. "It was the thing I knew the least about, and so that was what I wanted to learn." The artist spent his time imitating the approach of Kenneth Noland, Frank Stella, and Piet Mondrian as his work became increasingly flat. "Six months after graduation I remember seeing a truck on the highway with an attractive logo painted on the side," he says. "I realized then that the logo was more interesting than what I was doing, and that if I was to continue painting, I needed to reintroduce pictorial space. But how? I could insert some space into my abstract work, like Al Held, in some way. Conversely I could humble myself in front of a still life and try to make some sense out of that. I chose the latter. What I found as I began to paint still lifes was that I immediately started inventing. I kept rearranging what I saw along the formal lines that I had been studying at Yale. I began to invent a series of boxes, sometimes with six or eight sides, with colorful patterns stacked one on top of another. I began to invent other objects that cast

provocative shadows across the boxes—right angles, loops, and then finally, a ball. The ball was surprisingly complex in terms of the way it held and cast shadows. It also became extremely complex when it came to decoration. Soon I found that the balls were taking over from the boxes and other invented objects."

Although much of his early work was in oil on canvas, Gibson became increasingly interested in watercolor, a medium that he says encourages an approach akin to a performance. This was an idea the artist absorbed from his brother, a cellist. "When I started teaching he would ask me questions like 'How do you tell your students how to hold a pencil? Or how do you tell them how to stand?'" says the artist. He found that he had rarely considered such issues when working in oil, but they seemed highly pertinent when it came to watercolors. "How I hold the brush turns out to be really important in watercolor painting," he says. "Each mark with the watercolor is a signature and much harder to change and erase than oils. The angle of the brush is more critical, the pressure on the paper—whether the brush is gripped tightly or allowed to wiggle around—is important. The brush itself matters more than in oil—like a bow for a cellist maybe. The differences between nylon and squirrel and sable are critical. The size, shape, age, and handle length of the brush matter too." Although the artist regards his oil paintings as somewhat slow accumulations



OPPOSITE PAGE
Bixby
2007, watercolor, 50 x 48.

RIGHT
Hubbard
2007, watercolor, 50 x 48.

BELOW
Finn
2007, watercolor, 50 x 48.

BOTTOM
Gleason
2007, watercolor, 54 x 52.



Gibson's

Materials

PALETTE

- a variety of tube paints from Winsor & Newton and Old Holland, as well as some the artist grinds himself with dry pigments and gum arabic
- Winsor & Newton Designers' gouache

BRUSHES

- 2" squirrel flat, among many others in various sizes and shapes

SURFACE

- rolls of Arches 300-lb cold-pressed



OPPOSITE PAGE, ABOVE

Pine
2007, watercolor, 36 x 51.

OPPOSITE PAGE, BELOW

Munroe
2007, watercolor, 40 x 60.

LEFT

Blue 3 Ball Watercolor
2005, watercolor, 52 x 48.



take the frisket off the balls and then work on the design for each ball in graphite." Once this is complete the artist will again use frisket, this time to secure the design on the ball while he slowly works up the interior values. "The very difficult thing at this point is to find a color that enhances, and does not gray out, the nice background color I began with," he says. "After I get the balls painted I'll often go back and adjust the background again."

After so much work on the painting the artist finds that his paper is now somewhat "wavy." To flatten it again he takes it off the support, places it facedown on a large table, and then paints the back with clean water using a large brush. He then hangs it up on a rack and attaches C-clamps to it that allow the paper to stretch and flatten as it dries.

Having completed the painting, Gibson pays considerable attention to the framing. "It's important," he says. "These watercolors really should be floated, within a white or light frame so that the background color can just hover, like a cloud, and then the balls can do their thing within that cloud. If the frame is too dark or too close, that won't happen."

The result of all this effort and thought are paintings in which the sets of balls hover in a strangely ideal space of clean light and air almost as though they are the Platonic ideals for all the scuffed, dented, and deflated balls of our childhoods. While the subject matter recalls real playgrounds, the paintings themselves are also a set of artistic playgrounds in which Gibson plays with the classical problems and opportunities of figure and ground, the turning of form in space, the import of composition and design, and the balance of color. In *Pine*, for instance, the artist creates a background of a slightly muted dark violet-blue with a rim of transparent pink shimmering at its margin. On top is placed a line of three patterned spheres that touch one another. The design painted on each sphere features a blue that is just a little bit sharper and more saturated than the background and a red that is a little more intense than the pink at the edge of the background. The white parts of the ball mirror the white margin of the paper, and a reflection in the foreground implies a surface on which the spheres rest. The forthright symmetry of this design, along with the closely

of thoughts that can be endlessly revised, he is acutely aware that watercolor is a much more immediate and risky high-wire act. "A big experience of the watercolors is reliving the way in which the broad strokes of a 4" wash brush with a lot of paint swishes over the surface of a great big piece of paper," he says. "It's an exciting thing to do, and some of the excitement is left over, I hope, for the viewer. Mistakes cannot be made. The watercolors need to be done right the first time and just 'appear' on the paper like a cloud or a dream. A watercolor is of, about, and in the moment."

Although he relishes the spontaneity and inherent risk-taking in watercolor, Gibson follows a procedure for making his paintings that allows for considerable control. He begins by setting the paper up on a temporary support made of 1/4" plywood, an approach that allows him to keep the enormous sheet flat and yet move it around. "It's important that I be able to put it up on the wall and then down on a table for washes," says the artist. His first step is to lay out the margins he likes to maintain at the edges of his work and to protect them with glassine. He then draws in the position of the balls in pencil. "The next step is to frisket those areas, just as circles, so that I can work on the background wash in an aggressive manner," he says. "The background wash starts with an undercolor that usually contains some acrylic medium to stabilize it so that I can paint over it without lifting it up. This is an important carry-over from my oil painting." The artist will then do as many as eight or 10 washes over this first layer. "I'm trying to find the right note, feeling, or brilliance," he says. "The edges of the background are always feathered toward the margins. Once I get a background color I can live with I





Straw
2008, watercolor,
51 x 36.

judged color relationships, makes a statement of considerable elegance. In *Straw*, the artist brings about a completely different set of dynamics when he sets three balls in a pyramid against a vivid scarlet-orange background. Here the solidity of the balls with their assertive black stripes fights off the overwhelming power of the surrounding color, setting up an uneasy balance of disparate elements, an equation as improbable as the balancing act of the spheres themselves.

Gibson is thoughtful when he considers how his works might read. “The paintings are not so much about a scene, a slice of life, or a familiar tableau,” he says. “These paintings are inventions so that, hopefully, the way they act upon a viewer is through metaphor rather than through straightforward depiction. In other words, I invent the balls because the paintings aren’t really about balls. They’re about instability and, for me, a kind of longing. They are also about the history of painting. By inventing I can concentrate on these qualities. If I worked from life, the paintings would be much more anecdotal. They would be about a specific ball in a specific light at a specific time. I’m after something else—the balls in my mind maybe.”

The idea that his work forms a dialogue with the history of painting is particularly important to the artist. “For the last

four months I’ve been working on a large-scale copy of Titian’s late painting *The Torture of Marsyas* in oil,” he says. “I am very involved with looking and working with paintings from history. For me, painting is history. When the history of this period is written I’m not sure painting will occupy a very important place within it in terms of contemporary art. It’s tough to compete with the cultural relevance of a lot of installation and performance work that’s going on. Painting’s old-fashioned crustiness is, I think, its advantage in that it deals directly within a comparison to historical models. One understands and “sees” my work by comparing it to other still life paintings. Rather than seeing that as a disadvantage, I see that as an opportunity, but it means I have to know the work that my paintings will be compared to. That way I can do something that is subtly different.”

Asked about the future of his work, Gibson expresses some ambivalence. “I have a certain amount of anxiety about having painted these balls for so long,” he admits, “so the issue of ‘developing the work’ or ‘progress’ is one that I am sensitive to and about. Should I stop painting balls? I just don’t know. I have a lot of work going on in the studio. I know what today’s problems are. Tomorrow is tomorrow. I’ll deal with that then.” ■



LEFT
2 Ball
2007, watercolor,
50 x 46.

BELOW
Franklin
2007, watercolor,
46 x 50.

About the Artist

John Gibson attended the Rhode Island School of Design, in Providence, for undergraduate work and then earned an M.F.A. at the Yale School of Art and Architecture, in New Haven. Following graduate school, Gibson pursued an active career as an artist, showing in New York at Allan Stone Gallery and taking a teaching job at Smith College, in Northampton, Massachusetts. His artwork is represented by Gerald Peters Gallery, in New York City and Santa Fe, and his paintings have found their way into many corporate and private collections around the country. He makes his home in Northampton, just a few miles from where he was born. More of the artist’s work can be seen at www.johngibsonart.com.

