

The Watercolors of Ralph Goings

—by John A. Parks

Ralph Goings was born in Corning, California, and studied art at the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland in the early '50s. He recalls that the prevailing interest then was in Abstract Expressionism, and most of the students and teachers had little time or patience for any other approach. Goings followed the trend as a student and painted abstractly for several years afterward.

He began to feel dissatisfied after a while, however. "Abstract painting just didn't offer me the kind of satisfaction I wanted" he recalls, "so I tried, representation." This involved dusting off skills and approaches learned early in art school and long forgotten. Initially, Goings didn't take his new work too seriously and hesitated to show it to fellow artists. He first collaged images from magazine photographs and then did paintings of single figures on neutral backgrounds using his students as models (by this time he was teaching high school art in Sacramento). But these subjects, he believed, were somehow too "arty," and he began to look around "the rest of the world" for something new.

He hit on pickup trucks and highway paraphernalia "things," he says, "that were so common in the environment that people didn't even look at them." Breaking new ground, Pop art had shown that it was possible to make paintings of mundane manufactured objects and mass media images; thus Goings felt "permitted" to approach everyday subject matter not painted previously. The kind of finish and intensity he developed, however, proved far more spectacular than anything the Pop artists had contemplated.

Goings adopted a deliberately cool approach. He photographed the subject, projecting the image from a slide onto the canvas or paper and then painting it with a kind of seamless, flat surface in which the brushwork, or indeed any human touch, was not in evidence. He crammed the paintings with visual effects, featuring extremely neutral even banal subject matter. There exist in them no romance, no hints at intuitive insights, no sensitive brushwork or quirks of drawing.

"My intention was always to remove myself from the work," says Goings, "so that there was nothing no intermediary between the viewer and the subject of the picture." With the personality of the artist taken out of the loop, all that remains are objects and settings harshly and brilliantly exposed under the bright California sunshine. The effect can be unsettling and overwhelming, an invitation to become immersed in the visual wealth and splendor contained in a mundane environment.

In pursuing this line of painting over the last 30 years, Goings has taken time to produce a significant body of watercolors. These are not studies for oil paintings but works intended to stand in their own right. The artist came to the medium, he recalls, on a trip to London in the early '70s. (The day he found himself in a small room somewhere in the bowels of the Tate Gallery, surrounded by an exhibit of 19th-century watercolors by minor artists. The style of these paintings - all very dense and seemingly overworked - differed markedly from the open, fresh use of

watercolor that had been encouraged during Goings's training, an approach with which he'd had little success.

The possibilities of using watercolor in this dense and highly controlled fashion immediately fascinated Goings. When he got home, he picked up one of his children's watercolor trays and tried it out. He was hooked. "It made me see," he says, "that whatever the medium, you can always find something different to do with it."

In recent years, Goings has produced a remarkable series of extremely bold still lifes. These feature the familiar arsenal of diner paraphernalia - cream jugs, napkin dispensers, salt shakers, ketchup bottles, and ashtrays. But now they are painted close up, taking on a new monumental quality. Goings admits that for the first time he is arranging his still lifes in the studio rather than going out to find them in diners, "It used to be I had a kind of 'code of honor' never to move anything I found," he says. "But over the years I've amassed quite a collection of this stuff - jugs and napkin holders and suchlike - so I thought I'd try some still lifes in the studio."

This, he says, has given him a new world of possibilities in which he can control the light and construct whatever groupings appeal to him. In works such as *Sugar*, he has chosen bold frontal compositions in which the viewer is now so close to the objects that they seem to protrude out of the painting. In a sense this is a brilliantly logical step forward for Goings, whose work has always insisted on the supremacy of the physical world and demanded that we look with new eyes at the commonplace rather than worry about the personality of the artist.

In these late works the objects have become so palpable that we can see the tiny scratches on the chrome of the salt shaker, the pits and imperfections in the glass, the texture of the napkin, and the individual grains of pepper clinging to the sides of their container. Further, the paint seems to have taken on a new richness and density, with an unparalleled sense of clarity and resolution. After producing so many extraordinary paintings in his career - pictures that have uncovered and revealed in the visual delights found in the day-to-day world, Goings seems poised to amaze us all over again.

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