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Creating Atmosphere with Broad Strokes of Color
By Sam Kirby

Walker Buckner recently moved into his studio on the top floor of a building in downtown Boston. Paintings half-organized in racks, some on the floor and others hanging on the wall, clutter the area. The artist stands at the large windows and looks at the city skyline spread out before him. The sunlight reflects in his eyes as a quick congenial smile attests to his satisfaction with this new space. "Isn't it wonderful?" he asks. "It's like floating in the sky-the birds fly below me."

Buckner used to work in television in New York City. The high energy and quick pace of the TV world suited him at first, but then he discovered another medium—oil paint. Eighteen years later, his television career has been forgotten and oil painting absorbs him completely.

You can't help wondering what diverted Buckner from the technically oriented world of television to the fresh, spontaneous one of painting. In fact, the path was complicated and took many turns. He went to Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, as an undergraduate and then to Columbia University Law School in New York City. After earning both a law degree and a graduate degree in business, Buckner taught high school dropouts in the Harlem section of New York City for a year. He also organized day-care centers there and trained people to work in them.

Buckner got involved in the television business by chance through his on-site day-care training sessions. "Rather than bring the staff to some education center after work," Buckner explains, "I would send a team into the day-care center to train them with videos within the dynamics of the school. Through that, I got some contracts to use video cameras in the classrooms as observation tools for psychology studies. I equipped a forty-foot truck with video monitors, cameras, and other TV paraphernalia. I sank $400,000 into this van and then lost the contract!”

"To redeem my investment," Buckner continues, "I organized an independent television unit. Football, baseball, news events-we covered everything in the New York City area. It was an exciting and thriving business. Then one day, we were going to shoot a scene for the CBS soap opera As The World Turns. I was walking up 57th Street to the CBS studios when I passed the Art Students League. It suddenly occurred to me I might enjoy art as a hobby, so I walked in and signed up for a drawing class. It was just one of those things that you don't plan in your life. Everything in my life before that point had been carefully thought out. This thing just happened-it was amazing."

Buckner studied at the Art Students League of New York for five years with Thomas Fogarty and other well-known instructors. He recalls his first day at the League: “The teacher came in and said good morning to the class. We had already started on our first figure drawing. He looked down at my work and said, ‘This gentleman seems to be having some trouble.' I thought to myself I should either leave right then and drop the course or stay and struggle with my work

until I could really master drawing. I decided to stay, and art became more than a hobby for me. The Art Students League was such a great place to learn. The energy was high, and all kinds of people were taking classes there. It's not a pretentious place; you just go, pay your money, and take courses to learn all about drawing and painting the figure." He then moved uptown to study at the National Academy of Design for one year.

During this time, Buckner was still working at his TV business. "It was funny," he remembers, "because painting was a very modest thing for me at first. My classmates would say, 'Why don't you keep going with the TV profession?' I'd take some of them on shoots. We'd cover the parades on Fifth Avenue or interview the mayor of the city. They thought I was crazy for wanting to paint and give up such an exciting profession."

Buckner felt that the television camera hindered his ability to experience life directly. Television, with its mechanical means for capturing moments in a narrative, was opposed to what he was learning in painting classes about the direct experience of seeing. 'The things I was exposed to in art school seemed more immediate," Buckner explains. "In the television business, we had engineers and cameramen. I sold technical services and the director was the customer. He would step in and direct the shoot. My job was simply to produce the image the director wanted. After five years, I sold the company to the other people who were working for me."

So ended Buckner's stint as a television man. From then on, he devoted his time to painting. The images that now hang in his studio couldn't be more different from those he once presented on television.

Buckner says his techniques for painting oil landscapes, figures, and still lifes are fundamentally the same; for him, painting is about paint, not subject matter. When an artist paints something, he or she focuses on how an object will be described in the abstract language of paint. Buckner's pictures make this abstract language tangible, and the harmony of colors and rhythms of light and shadow endow each of his works with a resonant beauty.

“The most important element in a painting is the atmosphere you achieve with the paint-the quality of the air between you and the subject that's captured," Buckner says, glancing at some of his works. "I'm not sure how you catch that atmosphere. I think it comes from being in a place, experiencing its weather and its light. I couldn't do it by working from photographs.”

"I developed my palette completely by intuition," he continues. "I chose my colors mostly from my landscape work, where a change in mood requires a change in palette. I use this approach even with still lifes and figures. My teachers who taught figure work had various methods for organizing a palette, but I never followed them."

Buckner used to use vermilion red-he liked its relative coolness in the red range-but found that it was too fugitive. He doesn't like the cadmium colors because of their overpowering warmth. "Cadmium yellow, for instance, doesn't 'stay' in the painting; it tends to pop out and dominate the work," Buckner says. Instead, he might use jaune brilliant, a mixed yellow from Winsor & Newton: "It's wonderful for sunshine." He recently added cinnabar green to his palette.

His choice of colors and his avoidance of cadmiums reveal his personal color theory. "I try to paint with a cool palette," Buckner says. "If you have a few areas of warmth, they read well against the overall coolness of the painting. The nineteenth-century French painter Camille Corot was a master at arranging and balancing cool and warm hues. Corot made little hints of warmth. His greens were mixed with blues and blacks to keep them cool. He used a cool yellow as well.

"I like taking a single color and modulating it toward other colors, toward a brown or toward a yellow or blue, so that from a distance it reads as a mass but shifts to show how light falls differently along an object's surface," Buckner adds. For instance, in his series of paintings of chairs, the greens and browns of the background are used on parts of the chairs to push those surfaces back into the painting. They read as part of the chair but are set deeper into the painting's atmospheric environment. In his series of boat paintings, the color of the water reflects on the sides of the boats-objects take on the hues of the things around them.

Buckner points out some smaller paintings he did in St. Lucia of storm clouds piling up above the mountainous Caribbean island. He painted these on cherry-wood panels he had prepared with one coat of shellac. The warm red color of the wood makes a beautiful ground for the cooler colors of the painting, which are vibrant and clear.

In Buckner's finished paintings, the color of the ground peeks through between many of the brush strokes. He paints loosely, which helps to capture the spirit of the places he depicts. The artist doesn't underpaint because he believes it ruins his spontaneity and his ability to render emotion. "I've done some landscapes with underpainting (and drawing) and it changes the work's feeling," he says. 'The paintings become static, lifeless things. I don't like that approach. I don't like what an underpainting does to the color. For lively colors, it's better for me to use a direct attack. I can keep the hues fresh and make the skies interesting-they pop out Speaking of skies, you don't want to overwork the clouds. If you spend too much time trying to define their edges, they begin to have a cutout quality. The same thing happens with waves."

Buckner thinks of drawing and painting as two separate elements. When he begins a work, he lays in large masses at first instead of drawing outlines. "Drawing is helpful in a graphic sense because of the edges," Buckner explains. "But it's not sculptural enough to build something up into a physical presence."

The artist says his landscape paintings take one or two sittings to complete—an embarrassingly short time, he thinks—and admits that many of them just don't live up to his standards. "I throw away a lot of paintings," he says, "—my technique is a high-risk one. I lay in the values, the shapes, and the relationships between objects all at once, without referring to a drawing. The process is so direct that there's always a good chance the painting won't work out."

As Buckner talks about his figures, he sorts through a stack of canvases against the wall and props some up for comparison. Like fragments of Greek sculpture used as models of ideal form in art academies, Buckner's painted figures are presented against a blank background and have no narrative context. They simply celebrate the aesthetics of the human form. And just like many relics of ancient statuary, they often have no defined faces or heads, or sometimes even limbs. 'The problem with faces and heads is that they immediately engage you," Buckner says. "I'm

trying to avoid the storytelling aspect-to suppress the narrative that the human face demands in a painting. Although I don't think about it much, I find myself trying to push away all the things that might make the painting nostalgic, ridding it of that 'you had to be there' feeling. I don't think that real painting-realism-has anything to do with that sort of thing."

Recently, Buckner began rendering small figures on wood, but these works share many of the beautiful qualities of his landscapes. Indeed, Buckner likes to think of them that way. "I'm trying to paint them as landscapes," he says. "When I paint a bluff on Martha's Vineyard, I paint the light breaking across space and form. I approach the figures the same way-as forms modeled by the light that passes over them. It's just like painting the atmospheric qualities of the water, the sky, and the land."

Buckner keeps the small figural paintings loose and fresh like his landscapes. He uses warmer colors, though, and a cool gray ground. Once the paint is dry, he sometimes attacks them with a saw. 'The cropping is done after the painting has taken shape so as to rid it of all the unnecessary aspects of portraiture," he says. "I know it must look rather gruesome to watch me cut away the pieces of a painting. At the end of the day, my garbage can is full of scraps of wood panels painted with heads, arms, and legs."

Buckner's other new project is a series on bowls. These paintings are executed with bold shadows and lighted surfaces, with no apologies made for the candid appearance of brushstrokes. As in the work of Wayne Thiebaud, the paint strokes inform these sti11lifes with a bold independence from the objects depicted. "They pull you away from the thingness of the bowls," Buckner explains, "and get you to appreciate the painting itself, rather than a depiction of some mundane thing. The nature of the work is in the paint and the light.

"For instance, when I start a picture of a bowl," he continues, "I first look at the crescent-shaped shadow in the bowl and block that out in a single solid form of color. Then I paint the lighted surface of the bowl's interior against the shadow. In this way, I can carve out the inside of the bowl using form, not line."

Following the tradition of painting light and space, Buckner moves from subject to subject-from landscapes to chairs and from figures to bowls-and his facility with color and composition breathes life into each one. The spirit of his paintings arises, however, not from his changing subjects but from the language of painting itself.

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