

Michael's Paintings



Michael Patrick Cronan was one of the most original people I've ever met.

Everything flowed seemingly effortlessly in a spirit of play, with speed, intuition, information (a Trivial Pursuits expert!), faith, generosity, kindness, wit, occasional irony, and a will to believe in the goodness of the world. Michael was a polymath – his curiosity extended to many media, and he brought his unique touch to everything he explored.

About ten years ago Michael's focus returned to painting. He started to seriously explore the grand themes of Art History – portraiture, landscape, still life, religious iconography, spiritualism, and always the investigation of the nature of the material – the lushness of paint on canvas. He decided to train himself to paint with rigorous attention to detail. He took on the challenge of making meticulously realistic, smoothly painted portraits. This series, which he titled “Courage”, began with his moving portraits of the Oakland firefighters commissioned by the US Postal Service after the September 11, 2001 attacks. It continued with portraits of family and close friends – people with whom he had a direct relationship. Michael would invite the subject for a portrait session at a friend's photography studio, and from the resulting photos choose the image that spoke to him in some unexpected way.

Everyone in Michael's portraits is a hero. It is a gallery of heroes that more than anything expresses Michael's faith in people. While they are not necessarily flattering, Michael manages to touch on something fleeting and subtle in his subjects. His meticulous and heartfelt portraits became both his entry point and his training ground. Michael's default approach to art (and life) was always to be learning. When he felt confident in his command of smooth oil, he decided to explore thickness - spreading paint as if he were icing a cake with a trowel. The move into diptychs and triptychs helped him to explore abstraction by blowing up a detail to monumental scale.

When I started to paint full time in my mid-thirties, I had Michael over at a certain point to get some feedback. Michael looked around the studio at all the evidence of what I saw as my deep confusion, and reported what he saw – open doorways, all promising, pointing in many directions. This is how he approached his own work.

The Sistine Chapel series is the conjunction of his fascination with people, spiritualism, mythic stories, and the fun of letting thick paint show him its inclinations. These small canvases were all painted en plein air at a redwoods retreat in the summer during his recovery from his first cancer surgery. He had received as a gift a stunning book of the paintings in the Sistine Chapel, and it overwhelmed him with its beauty, richness, and iconography. He looked and looked, and then, he had to paint what he was “full” of. As Picasso said: “... I go for a walk in the forest of Fontainebleau; I get 'green' indigestion. I must get rid of this sensation into a picture. Green rules it. A painter paints to unload himself of feelings and visions.” (*Picasso on Art, a selection of views*, by Dore Ashton)

With his last painting series, which he titled “Oculus”, Michael continued to explore the rich possibilities of accident and ambiguity. His search had turned to the cosmic scale, contained in the head of a human. He was ever more willing to let the paint take him where it would. Ambiguity, beauty and faith in the journey was the subject of these last works.

Naomie Kremer, May 2013