

Kelly Carmody: Deeper Sense

Paintings and Drawings, 2007-2015

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Essay by Katherine French

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Looking at original paintings by Kelly Carmody, a viewer is struck by qualities that might not be evident in a digital image. Her virtuosic handling of paint is quietly gestural; her images are not only intelligently composed, but also exquisitely sensitive to light. Working in a realist mode, she successfully re-interprets 19th century portraiture and still life for contemporary audiences in ways that are fresh, original and absolutely sincere.

The past hundred years have been challenging ones for representational painters. Aside from the overwhelming forces of abstraction, artists seeking to render likeness have struggled against the constraints of an anxious age that questions the very idea of coherent self. But Carmody's *Portrait of Numaël* pays homage to the endurance of contemplative painting passed from one generation to the next. Her former teacher emerges from darkness as if to answer a question. Light illuminates his face, his painting hand, and his brushes. Caught in the act, we see him pause before continuing to make another mark.

Portrait of Numaël Pulido, 2007
Oil on Canvas, 34 x 68 inches





What we hold is important. The brushes in Numaël's hands reveal both the profession and character of a man who believes the world can be truthfully envisioned. In *Man with Dog*, Carmody gives us an unassuming portrait of an individual with his pet. Having just detached its leash, he holds the animal protectively—not showing off, but casually mindful of its welfare. Appropriately designated Best of Show in the Cambridge Art Association's RED exhibition, the wool cap and dog's leash repeat the glow of afternoon sun on the carpet beneath the subject's feet. Self-possessed enough to look directly at the viewer, the man stands firmly positioned and modestly confident, embracing his friend, as well as a symbol of friendship.



Man with Dog, 2009
Oil on Canvas, 36 x 70 inches
Private Collection

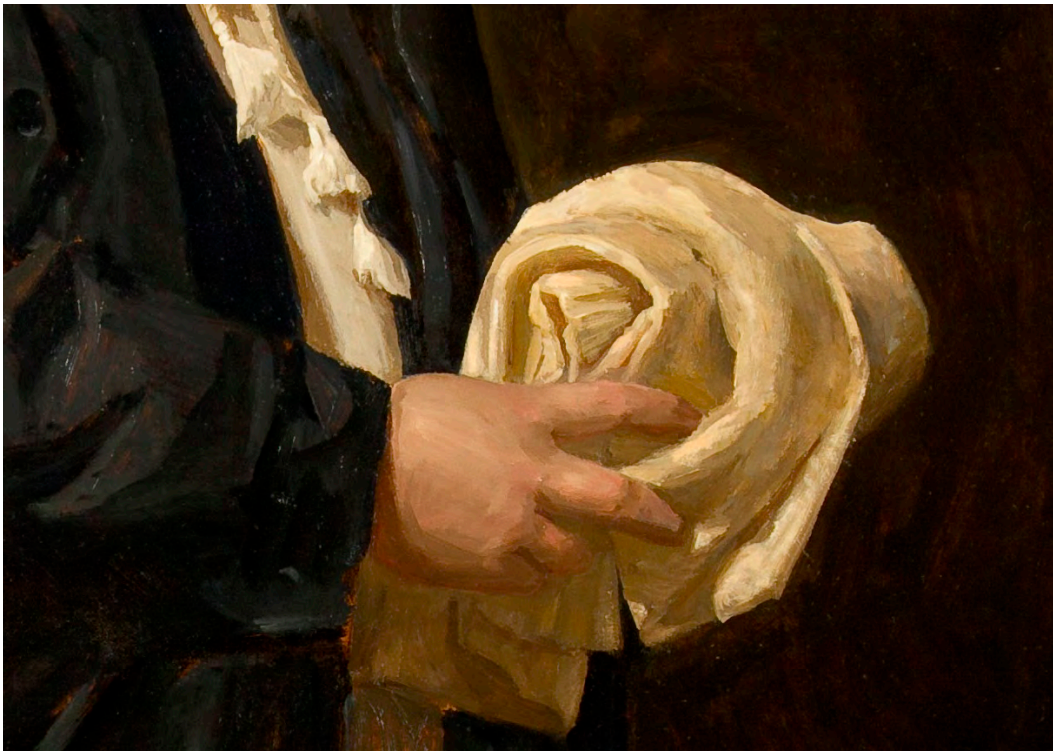
Use of objects within portraiture is time honored and classic. From Van Eyck's faithful little dog in the *Arnolfini Wedding Portrait*; to the work-worn pitchfork in Grant Wood's *American Gothic*; to the impossibly distant house that Wyeth placed before Christina, artists have used the elements of everyday life to visually encode information about their subject. Yet for paintings to succeed, these elements must be integral to the composition and Carmody is attentive to that need. In *The Fisherman*, the pole leads our eye into the piece, directing us to consider the entire figure. The brimmed hat and heavy gloves not only protect the fisherman from harsh weather; together with his creel basket, they serve to graphically punctuate our reading of the work.

The Fisherman, 2013
Oil on Canvas, 34 x 68 inches





The crumpled rag in *Patrick (Man Holding White Cloth)* has a similar function. Reminiscent of the small white dog from an earlier painting, the coiled piece of fabric demands our consideration. Art historians versed in religious iconography will discern a baptismal cloth or a coffin pall, while less informed viewers will see a towel plucked up off the studio floor and thrust into the model's hands. But whether it symbolizes the washing away of sin, eternal life, or nothing much, Carmody's white cloth is undeniably the formal center of the piece, instructing us how to approach and travel through it.



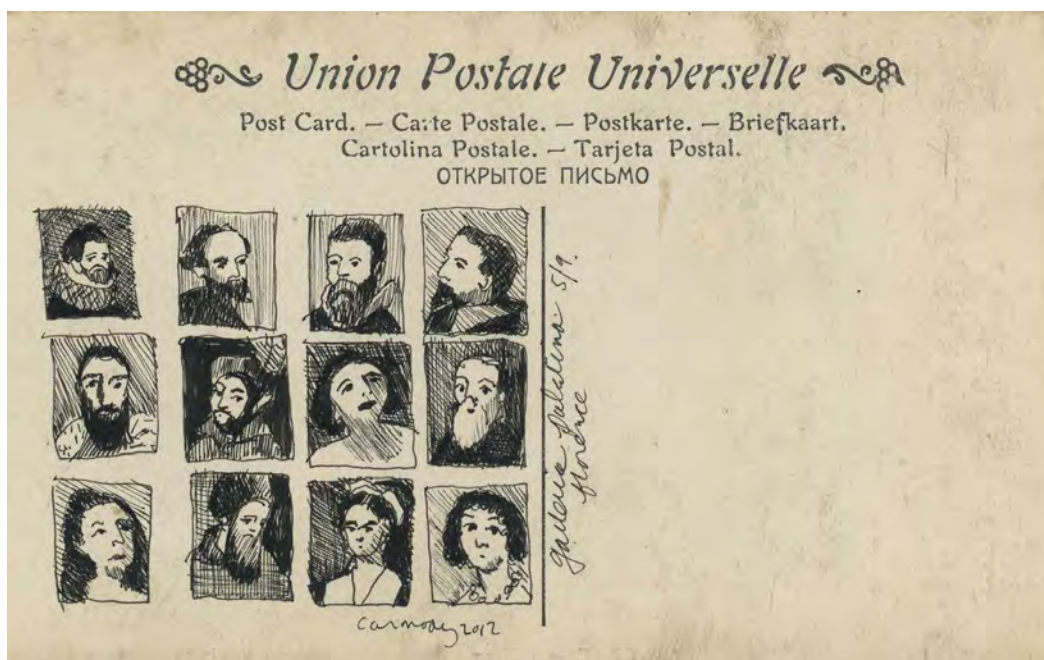
Patrick, 2013
Oil on Linen, 35 x 68 inches

For Carmody, formal composition is more compelling than narrative. An inventive storyteller might find a lot of material to work with in *Woman with Rooster*, but the relaxed fowl with its dangling talons really plays a minor role. Unaware that he's about to be butchered, the rooster might be a symbol of threatened innocence. However, the deeper sense of the painting begins at the triangular tip of the woman's shoe calling attention to the play between light and shadow. Copper tones in her skin and apron resonate with the same tones in her cuffed glove. Together, simple shapes add up to something complex, revealing the artist's intent to "go to a place that is less personal, where the essence can be interpreted."

Woman With Rooster, 2014
Oil on Canvas, 35 x 68 inches

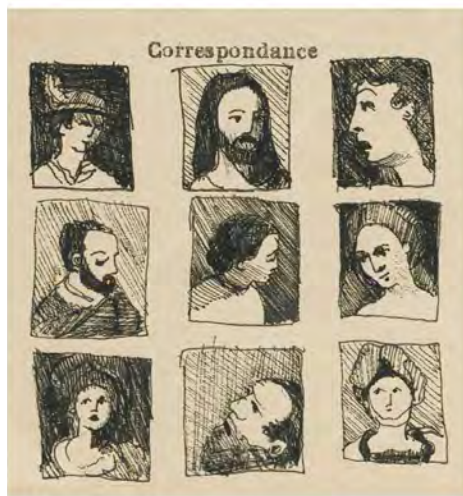


Carmody views the past without cynicism and without irony. When she received an Edward G. McDowell Travel Grant in 2011, she went to Europe to study the Old Masters. Velázquez was a favorite, and so was Manet. Using antique postcards to record her experience, she filled the left side of the cards with thumbnail sketches of paintings she saw in museums like the Louvre, the Palatina Gallery, and the Uffizi. Timeless and classic, these angular drawings connect her to the history of painting. Yet, set within a grid, these sharp vignettes have a contemporary feel. They are a modern visual diary, messages the painter is sending home about her journey.



Left, *Antique Postcard: Palatina Gallery, May 9, 2012*
Ink/paper, 3 x 5 inches

Right, *Details from Antique Postcards, 2012*



The tiny drawings also support her interest in miniature. Concurrent with work on full length portraits, Carmody also paints portraits “in little.” These intimate calling cards are sometimes consciously historical as in *Portrait of Albert*, which finds Carmody’s friend, an actor and antique dealer, donning a 19th century costume from his own collection to pose. Others present a more up-to-the-minute feel depending on what the sitter pulled from his closet that morning. Pierre is most definitely a head study, but the yellow in the scarf and hat band in *Profile* are what we notice. Similarly, *Portrait of Michael* is defined by the shape of his heavy black scarf in contrast to a thin band of red holding back his discrete dreads. These miniature oils, mostly 5 x 7 inches on wood panel, present likeness without apology, but Carmody’s true subject is the “harmony of light, color and shape.”



Albert, 2010
Oil on Board, 5 x 7 inches
Collection of Thomas W. Lollar



Michael, 2011
Oil on Board, 5 x 7 inches
Private Collection

This composed harmony is integral to her flower paintings, which reveal an interest in Dutch still life. The subject might be roses, but *Roses* and *Roses with Scissors* support a knowledge that life is fleeting—and liable to be cut short at any minute. No matter how recently the bouquet was gathered, at least one blossom is about to droop. The lone petal on the table beneath the jar of *Peonies* will soon be joined by others. Although the painter uses light to construct these diminutive works, she also embeds a dark memento mori within them. Our time on earth is rationed, they seem to tell us. Eventually it must all come to an end.



Roses, 2014
Oil on Linen, 10 x 10 inches



Roses with Scissors, 2014
Oil on Linen, 10 x 10 inches



Peonies, 2014
Oil on Linen, 8 x 10 inches
Collection of Remak Ramsey



Roses in Tall Vase, 2014
Oil on Linen, 9 x 10 inches

Carmody's studies of dead birds expand upon this commentary. Creatures who once found freedom in flight lie motionless. Even the pure, clean water in the jar cannot revive them. A bird at the window means death at the door, but there is nothing romantic here. Our eyes might be drawn to the deep red of the cardinal's breast or the blue of the parakeet's, but formal composition does not satisfy a desire to know what happened in these poignant works. A lifeless songbird cannot represent the bounty of a hunt to contemporary viewers who differently procure food. Instead, these realist paintings strip away what might be mysterious about death and force us to consider mortality with a clinical eye.



Cardinal with a Brass Pot, 2014
Oil on Linen, 13 x 9.5 inches



Above
Parakeet, 2014
 Oil on Linen, 8 x 10 inches



Below
Parakeet with Jar, 2014
 Oil on Linen, 8 x 10 inches

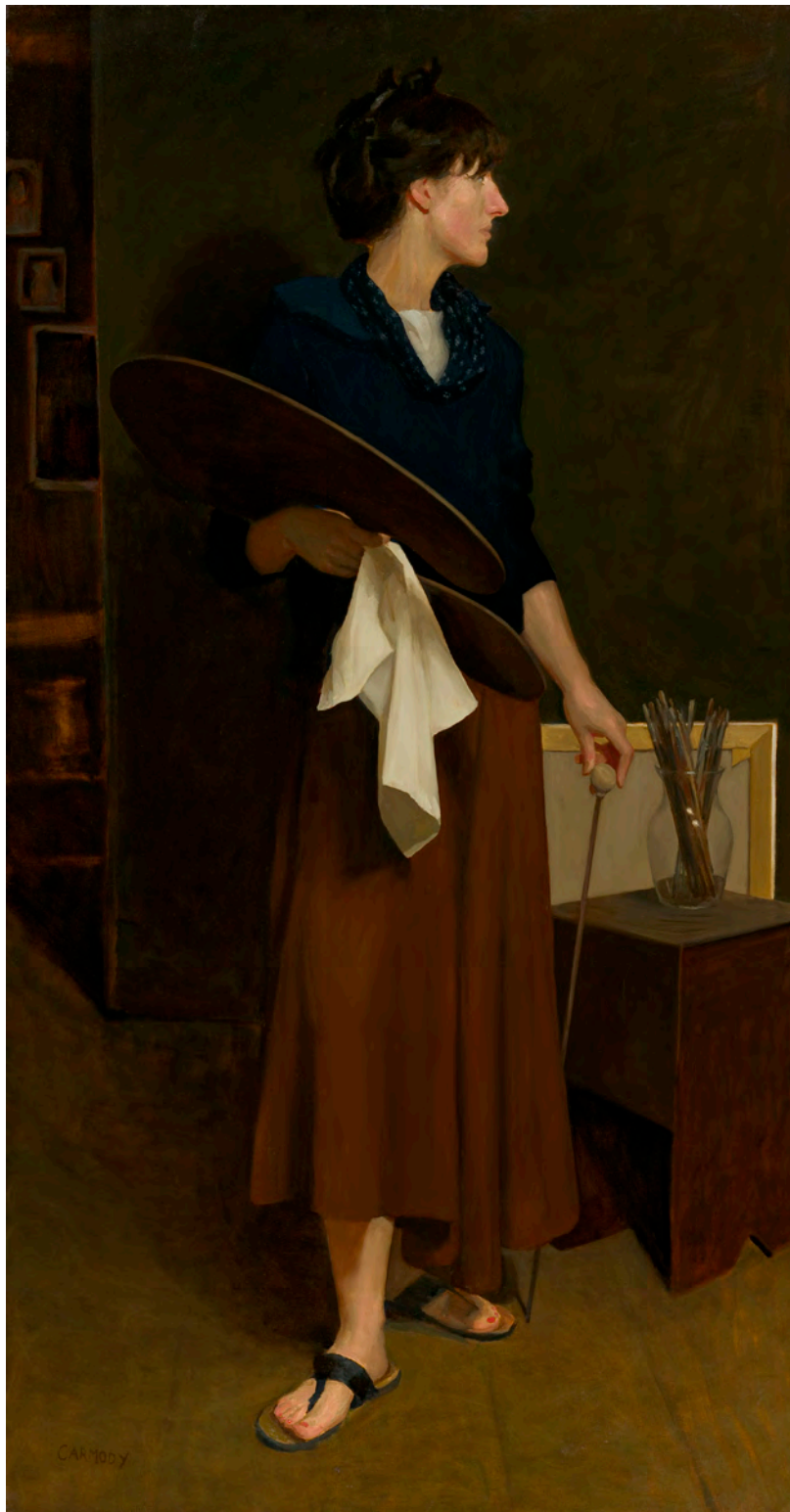


Above
Hermit Thrush, 2014
 Oil on Linen, 8 x 6 inches

Below
White Throated Sparrow, 2014
 Oil on Linen, 8 x 6 inches
 Private Collection



Ruffed Grouse, 2011
Oil on Linen, 7 x 12 inches
Private Collection



Self Portrait, 2013
Oil on Canvas, 36 x 68 inches

But realism also has the power to make everyday life heroic by concentrating on people from all walks of life. Velázquez painted portraits for wealthy patrons, but the faces of attendant dwarfs and court buffoons were also intelligent and dignified. As the son of wealthy parents, Manet didn't need the money and painted well-off friends for pleasure. However, the startled street singer emerging from a Paris bar remains one of his greatest works. Although she relies on commissions to make a living, Carmody's subjects are often friends wearing clothes that do not impress. Instead, she asks them step out of their ordinary lives for just a moment in order to present a glimpse of the extraordinary reality we find in art.



Profile, 2009
Oil on Linen, 10.5 x 11 inches



Pierre, 2009
Oil on Canvas, 8 x 10 inches
Private Collection



Niamh, 2009
Oil on Canvas, 22 x 40 inches
Private Collection



Kari, 2008
Oil on Canvas, 24 x 36 inches
Private Collection

Despite Alfred Stieglitz's prediction that painting might become obsolete, photography never replaced it as a way to reach deeper sense. Carmody might use photographs as an aide to memory, but painters have been doing that since the medium was invented, most notably Degas or Eakins. But the strength of portraiture lies in its ability to portray the sensitivity of relationships between light, color and space, or between the artist and subject. In her 2015 portrait *Father and Son*, Carmody manages to do both.

The book on the floor, the draped cloths, and triangular wedge of another painting—all shape the composition. We have plenty to absorb. However, Carmody uses this painting to put forward a compelling argument for portraiture. Sweeping aside the implied sentimentality of *Father and Son* through sheer virtuosity of brushwork, she gives us with a real, live boy who's become bored with his picture book. Throwing it down, he's begun to messily peel an orange, but looks out at the viewer with the kind of self-possession we might expect from adults. As an infant, he first learned to recognize his parents and then understand emotion through a careful study of their smiles, frowns and puzzled looks. This informs how the boy looks at us. Perhaps, thinks Carmody, the study of the human face is a developmental need, critical to our ability to make sense of a world we'll inherit.



Father and Son, 2015
Oil on Linen, 52 x 70 inches





Artist Biography

Kelly Carmody has exhibited at venues including the Portrait Society of America, the Art Students League, the Guild of Boston Artists, and the Ann Long Gallery in Charleston, SC. Publications that have featured her work include *American Art Collector*, *International Artist Magazine*, *Fine Art Today*, *Studio Visit Magazine*, *Boston Magazine*, and *The Boston Globe*. Carmody has won grants from the Ludwig Foundation, Turkey Land Cove Foundation, and Massachusetts Cultural Council, as well as receiving an Edward G. McDowell Travel Grant. In 2014 she won 3rd place in the Portrait Society's International Portrait Competition. Carmody attended Massachusetts College of Art and furthered her studies at the Art Students League and in the studio of Numaël Pulido. She paints and teaches in her Waltham, MA studio.

Curator Biography

Katherine French is Director Emerita of Danforth Art, where she curated numerous exhibitions exploring historical and contemporary expressionism. Recipient of an award for curatorial excellence from the International Association of Art Critics, she was also named Best Curator of Locally Made Art at the Boston Art Awards. Under her direction, Danforth Art was designated an Outstanding Cultural Organization by the Massachusetts Arts Education Collaborative.



Girl with Apple, 2015
Oil on Linen, 32 x 48 inches

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The artist would like to express deepest gratitude to friends and family, who have modeled for paintings, sent over dead birds to paint, or been encouraging in ways that inspire the confidence that allows her to paint. A short, but by no means inclusive list would include: Jane Carey, Lexie Carmody, Lauren Cawse, James Forren, The Grenham Family, Jon London and Ihrie Means, and Gabrielle McDermit. Finally, profound thanks go to her father Gerald Carmody and Laurie Johnstone for their unwavering support.

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For more information about the Artist and her work,
please visit www.kellycarmody.com.

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Detail of *Father and Son*, 2015
Oil on Linen, 52 x 70 inches