

Janet Rickus brings a highly contemporary look and feel to a venerable genre.

stylish DEPTHES

BY JOHN A. PARKS







OPENING SPREAD:
Above and Below
(oil on canvas,
20x30)

Image courtesy of the artist
and Clark Gallery, Lincoln,
Mass.

ABOVE: Almost (oil
on canvas, 14x18)
Image courtesy of the artist

NTHE HANDS OF JANET RICKUS, still life becomes stylish, contemporary and electric. Many of the props that she works with—fruit, vegetables and pottery—have been staples of the genre for centuries, but Rickus finds new and surprising ways to pose and arrange traditional elements. She also adds curiosities, a modern fabric print or an unusual piece of ceramic that signals something distinctly present day. This sense is reinforced by the overall look of the paintings, a crisp clarity in which each object is fully realized in a crystal, cool daylight.

Objects as Metaphors

Beyond the elegance of their compositions, Rickus's paintings carry with them multiple

layers of significance and often have a deeply felt meaning for the artist. "Still lifes have life," she says, "a connection to people and nature that I love. It's not simply painting objects for me. The fruits and vegetables, beautiful in their own rights and often with evocative shapes, allow me to bring observations of life to the paintings. The pottery, new or old, with its decorative or utilitarian functions, brings its own history and a connection with the lives behind it."

Rickus expresses respect for the objects that she paints in an unusual way: she paints everything its actual size. Gourds, apples, pitchers, bowls and fabrics are all carefully measured and drawn one to one. "I'm not quite sure how this came about," says the artist, "but I do feel that to represent the objects, I have to show them as they really are. If they were

smaller, it wouldn't really be them." The artist's identification with her subjects also means that she never mutilates them in any way. "I'll never cut a piece of fruit or slice something," she says. "I just can't do that."

Relational Compositions

This sense of the objects in a still life playing almost human roles affects the way that Rickus organizes her compositions. In *Almost* (opposite), for instance, two melons are not quite touching each other, signaling something akin to interpersonal tension. Another very human drama is re-enacted in *Being Green* (below), where a green ceramic bird is placed among a group of naturally green fruit. "I think this painting is about trying to fit in," says the artist. "It's humorous but it's also about the kinds of things that people do."

In fact, Rickus says that she often gets her ideas from her fellow humans. "The way I have things touch and overlap and lean in my paintings is something I get from the way people relate," she says. "I don't know what else I would do, and I think this is the way viewers relate to the paintings. Even when I'm not intentionally setting up a human situation, people looking at the picture tend to bring their own dramas to it." Far from seeing still life as a sterile, formal game, Rickus understands the genre as something that reflects deeply on her life and the lives of those around her.

A Measured Process

The genesis of a painting by Rickus combines room for invention with a highly disciplined methodology. Her studio is on an upper floor of a house and faces north, which gives her

BELOW: *Being Green* (oil on canvas, 14x18)

Image courtesy of the artist and Quidley & Company Fine Art



Materials

Surface: medium-textured unprimed cotton duck on heavy-duty stretchers and primed with **Utrecht Professional Acrylic Gesso**

Oils: Old Holland, Holbein and Winsor & Newton

Medium: Winsor & Newton Liquin, odorless paint thinner

Varnish: Liquitex Soluvar Varnish, matte and gloss, in a 1:1 mixture

Brushes: Loew-Cornell No. 1 white nylon flat stain; Utrecht No. 8 white nylon round; Princeton Nos. 2, 4, 6 and 8 nylon filberts

Other: 11x15 porcelain enameled butcher tray for a palette, crank easel, mahl stick, T square

a stable, cool light for much of the day. She never uses photography.

Having chosen objects for a new painting, she sets to work arranging and rearranging them in combination with tablecloths or fabrics. As she proceeds, she weighs the various considerations of abstract design, color coordination and iconography. Once she's satisfied with the arrangement, she stretches a canvas of the appropriate size. Since she paints life-size, the objects in the setup and the proportions of the composition largely determine the dimensions of the canvas. "I measure the actual composition on the table, allowing for an equal margin on each side and an allowance on the top and bottom," says the artist.

Rickus continues her preparation by applying eight thinned layers of acrylic gesso to the canvas, sanding between most coats to obtain a smooth surface. She then applies a thin coat of acrylic paint to tint the entire canvas. "I use a raw umber wash but could easily see myself using any neutral color—black, blue-gray or other browns," she says.

Rickus then uses a T square to draw a pencil line on her canvas, indicating the tabletop of her setup. She adds small pencil marks

to show where the composition will begin and end on the left and right of her surface. "Since I work life-size, I often measure, as best I can, the objects I'll be painting to get a good approximation of size relationships," says the artist. "I make some pencil marks for these, too. I then squeeze paints onto my palette, whatever colors I think I'll need for the objects before me. I begin on the left side, sketching the first object with my brush and the appropriate color. My hope is that when I get to the other side of the picture, I won't be too far off from my right-margin pencil mark." It's worth noting here that Rickus doesn't build a monochrome underpainting but begins with direct statements of the color in front of her.

Corrections and Colors

Having sketched in the whole picture, Rickus then makes whatever adjustments are needed to stabilize the composition and correct the drawing. She then begins the layering process of slowly bringing the entire painting to completion.

Rickus works with modest-sized synthetic brushes, building the paint with small strokes as she explores the subtle



RIGHT: Still Life With Spoons (oil on canvas, 16x20)

Image courtesy of the artist



variations of color across surfaces. She doesn't use a fan brush or any other blending tool. Later in the process she adds Winsor & Newton Liquin to the paint to create greater translucency and depth as she glazes the color over the more solid layers beneath. "Each object works off the other," she says, "and as one object comes closer to completion, the next object has to come up to the development of the previous one."

One of the issues Rickus must resolve at this stage is her choice of background color. "This is one of the most difficult parts of the painting," she says. "The backgrounds are usually some shade of gray—warm, cool, brownish or bluish. But it's always difficult to get the right color or tone that complements

every object in the painting. It's often a matter of trial and error."

As she paints, the artist looks at her work in a mirror from time to time, a strategy that allows her to see the piece with a fresh eye. Often this reveals any errors in the drawing or weaknesses in the rendering. In the evenings she'll take the painting into another room so she can look at it in a different light, a move that not only refreshes her vision but also helps her understand how the painting might appear in another context.

Eventually Rickus must decide when to stop. "I can't say how I know when a painting is finished," she says, "except that it's uniformly completed and nothing about it bothers me."

ABOVE: Borrowed Series VIII (oil on canvas 16x20)

Image courtesy of the artist and Gallery Henoch



ABOVE: *A Bird Painting* (oil on canvas, 18x18)

Image courtesy of the artist and Gallery Henoch

Once a picture is finished, a task that takes between two and four weeks, Rickus allows it to dry a few additional weeks before applying a mixture of matte and gloss varnish to even out the finish of the painting and add a measure of protection.

A Stage for Creative Play

Rickus's paintings have a consistent look, something that emerges from the artist's vision but also from her commitment to a uniform approach. All the paintings are painted in the

same light with the easel at the same distance from the objects. The viewing angle, a level just above the tabletop, never changes, and the choice of a fairly neutral background color occurs in all the paintings.

The advantage of rigorously limiting these variables is that the artist defines for herself the stage on which she will be creative. Rather than confining her creativity, these constraints allow her to focus as she explores a broad and fascinating range of ideas.

The Games She Plays

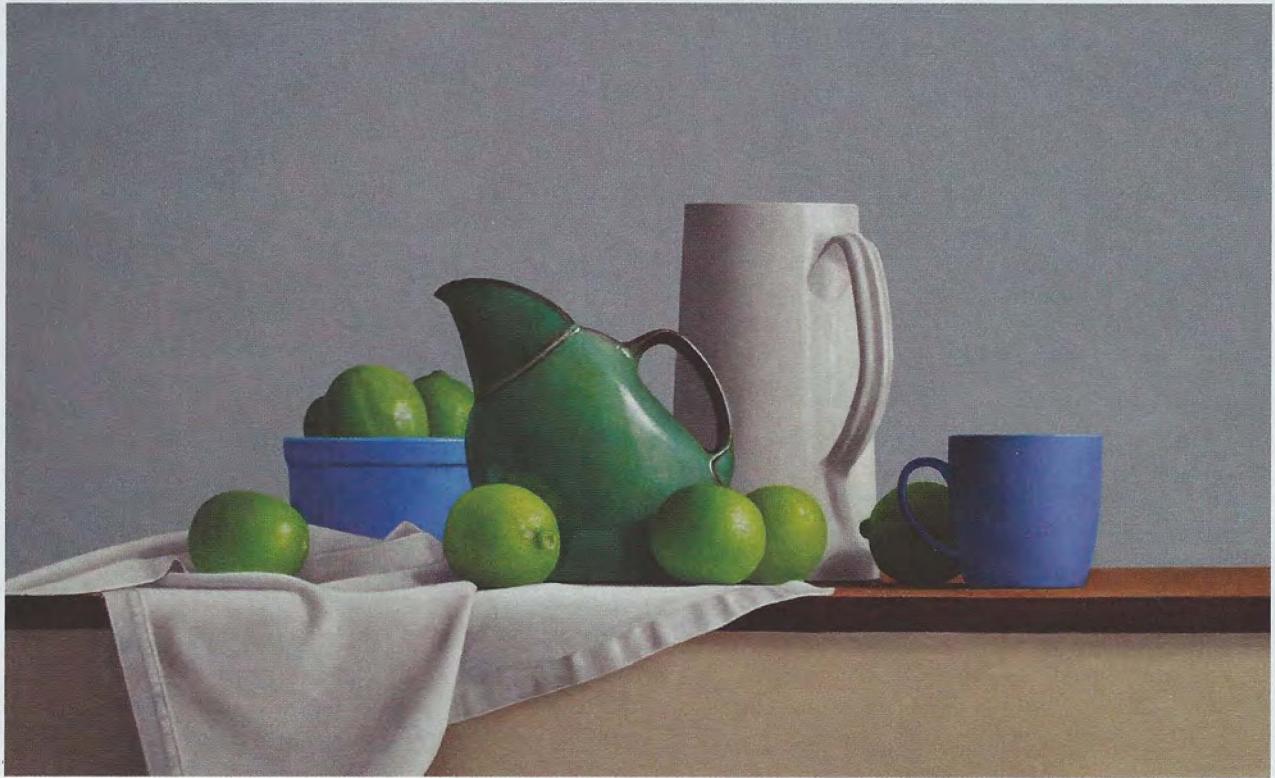
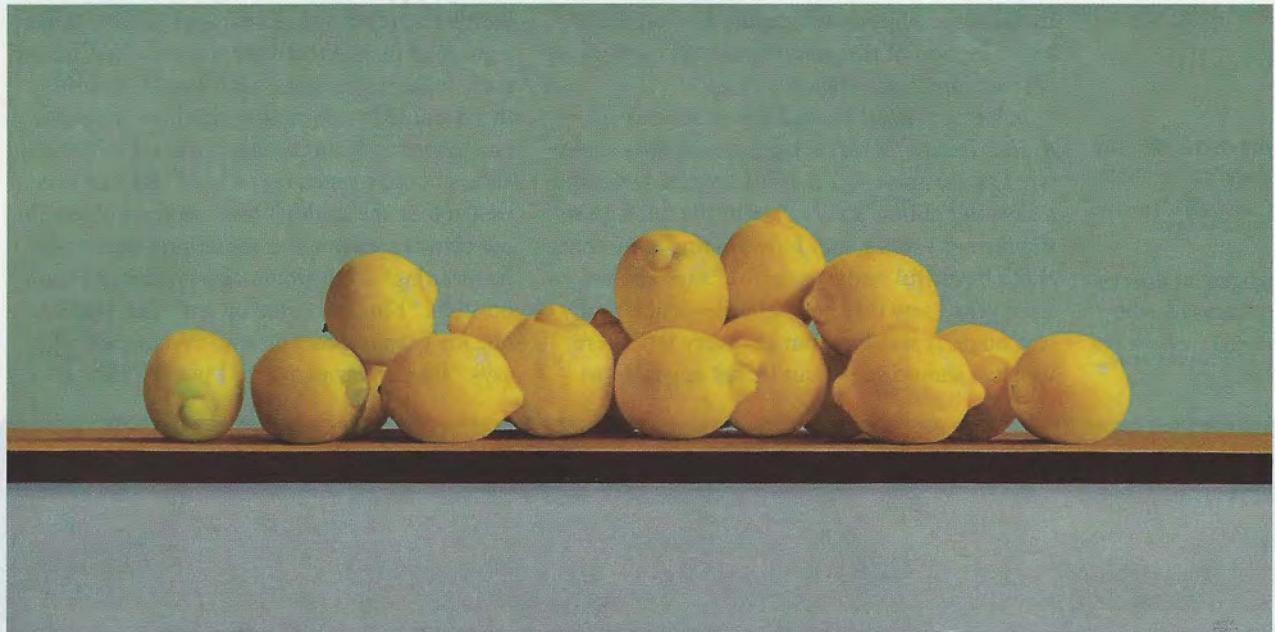
In *A Bird Painting* (opposite), for instance, Rickus incorporates multiple images of birds, setting up a playful correspondence between three-dimensional and flat representations. A green ceramic bird anchors the composition, but birds also appear in each of the objects: printed on the fabric, painted on the jar,

sculpted onto the pot handle and carved into the relief on the wall. "It took quite a while to gather all of the objects for the painting," says Rickus. "I searched antique stores and friends' houses looking for things with bird imagery." She visited fabric stores but couldn't find a suitable bird print. "I finally found the print on a homemade apron in a local handcraft store,"

BELOW: Peepers
(oil on canvas, 15x30)

BOTTOM: Borrowed Series IX (oil on canvas, 17x28)

Both images courtesy of the artist and Gallery Henoch



she recalls. "I took the apron apart and made it into the tablecloth for the painting." She found the pot in the same handcraft store and bought the green ceramic dove on eBay.

She plays a different kind of game in *Above and Below* (pages 46–47) where a large group of objects, including a pitcher with a colorfully painted floral design, sits atop a selection of fabrics whose colors reflect those of the objects. It's almost as though the lower section of the painting is some sort of abstraction of the objects above.

A more literal playfulness is at work in *At Rest* (below) where a large gourd rests somewhat preposterously on a full-sized pillow, like a sleeping child. "Every year in the fall I go to the farmer's stand, and I always find something that's beautiful and wonderful," says Rickus. "This year I saw this huge gourd—and it really was huge. It was long but also very fat. There was just something about it that appealed to

me in the way a fat baby might: you just want to hug it, but you also feel a little bad because it's so fat. But it's just so huggable looking! My heart went out to it. I brought it home. And then I thought, 'It's so special I have to put it on a pillow.'" The finished painting has a quietly bizarre feel, a gently humorous surrealism.

An almost private game is underway in *The Gift* (opposite), where a group of objects is lightly encircled by a ribbon with a bow. "I have a group of people that have been my best friends since teenage years," says Rickus. "I decided that I wanted to do a painting about us, but I had to work within my constraints. I told them all to choose a vegetable or fruit." Rickus says that at first she couldn't find the right object for her own representation, something that would be meaningful but would also anchor the composition. "Finally I came up with this pitcher, one my grandmother gave to my mother," she says. "It's all very personal. I put the ribbon

OPPOSITE: *The Gift*
(oil on panel, 14x18)

Image courtesy of the artist
and Gallery Henoch

BETWEEN: *At Rest* (oil
on canvas, 23x34)

Image courtesy of the artist
and Clark Gallery, Lincoln,
Mass.





around everything to tie it all together, as in friendship. I suppose that a viewer would never know this interpretation, but, I hope, the energy and feeling are still doing something."

Rickus plans to continue working in this way for the foreseeable future. "I just keep coming up with ideas," she says, remarking that she's happy working within her set of confines. She observes that her work has become sharper and more skilled with the years, a feature that she's clearly proud of. With greater control will come, no doubt, yet more subtle games and strategies, and new depths of feeling. The artist is looking forward to it. ■

JOHN A. PARKS is an artist as well as a writer. His latest book is *Universal Principles of Art: 100 Key Concepts for Understanding, Analyzing and Practicing Art*. Visit his website at johnaparks.com.

Meet Janet Rickus



During Janet Rickus's last two years at Central Connecticut State University (New Britain), where she would graduate with a bachelor of science degree in business education, she took a few art courses with no intention of pursuing a career in that field. After college, she continued taking occasional art classes and began exhibiting widely and receiving honors. Gallery Henoch (New York City), Clark Gallery (Lincoln, Mass.) and Quidley & Company (Boston and Nantucket, Mass.) represent her work. View more of her paintings at artsy.net/artist/janet-rickus.

Photo by Dorothy Rickus