



# SKIN AND TONIC



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# NEW EXPRESSIONS OF HISTORIC FORMS

By Janet Whitmore

Todd Casey and David Palumbo's art offers an opportunity for viewers to enjoy the visual appeal of sensual pleasure, whether represented by a favorite drink or the figure of a female nude. These images may evoke pleasing memories—perhaps with the additional allure of being ever so slightly risqué. Both Palumbo and Casey participate in the academic tradition of classical realism, but it is the context of twenty-first century life that provides the structure for their work.

Casey's still-lifes owe a debt to the seventeenth century masters of this genre, while Palumbo's depictions of the nude human figure have roots in the Renaissance drawings of painters and sculptors alike. Both artists rely on the time-honored compositional strategies codified by the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Paris

as a foundation for their commentaries on contemporary life.

## STUDIES IN UNDRESSING

The practice of making figure studies is almost as old as humanity itself. From prehistoric African pictographs to Greek red-figured pottery, the human body has been the subject of intense study. During the Italian Renaissance, artists abandoned the disembodied representations of the medieval period in favor of a more realistic depiction of flesh and blood mortals. The practice of drawing nude figures was crucial to developing a new understanding of both the scientific and aesthetic properties of the male body. Drawings of female nudes did not become common practice until the nineteenth century. At the École des Beaux-Arts, however, students routinely studied the male nude, receiving prizes for the most skillful examples of these *académies*, the term used for this type of drawing.

David Palumbo assigned himself a similar kind of exercise when he began painting a series of female nudes in 2008. As he explains, "I wanted to experiment with my process and technique, and since the figure is one of my favorite subjects, I decided I would enjoy it most as a set of figure studies." Throughout the series, most of his models are dancers and burlesque performers. Originally, Palumbo thought that their costumes would be a central focus, but as he notes: "I realized early on that the theatrical costumes were not nearly as interesting as their everyday clothing, which had a more personal quality. Though there has been a sensual pin-up quality throughout, I quickly discarded cheesecake tropes in favor of more realist portraits."



1. *Tulip* • Oil on panel • 36 x 24 inches





2. *Gina #6* • Oil on panel • 7 x 5 inches

Over the decade that he has been painting these studies, Palumbo has explored a range of poses and moods. Some are overtly erotic and theatrical, but most are more intimate, a conversation between artist and model. While all are about dressing and undressing, there is a wide spectrum of formats. Some images suggest traditional academic studies of nude figures seen from the rear as in *Tulip* (fig. 1) or in the “Venus pose” of a woman raising her arms to emphasize her breasts as in *Gina #6* (fig. 2). In contrast, an image such as *Liz Reclining* (fig. 3) offers a classic image of a sleeping woman half-clad in a robe and lying on a sofa; a nineteenth century rendering of this composition would invariably suggest that the woman was waiting for her lover, but here, she genuinely appears to be resting, unaware of being observed.

Most of the compositions, however, reflect the poses that flood twenty-first century media as marketing materials for everything from yogurt to automobiles. What distinguishes Palumbo’s images is that the focus is not on a product, but on the individuality of the wom-

en. They wear their own clothes: blue jeans and plaid shirts, leather jackets and comfortable pullovers, robes and t-shirts; in other words, clothes that might be found in almost any woman’s closet. And their bodies express attitudes ranging from detachment to vulnerability, not as a means of advertising something, but as an expression of their personal reactions. Palumbo relies on the models “to pose as they wish with only minimal guidance.”

The moods conveyed in these paintings are open to a number of interpretations. Palumbo points out that the images are “often an exploration of balance about how much to show or how much to imply. In many cases, the story is told primarily through facial expressions and hands.” The artist accomplishes this in part by handling the backgrounds as abstracted surfaces that enhance the figure. In addition, he often blurs portions of the body so that the viewer is encouraged to focus on a particular element of the composition, such as the arms and hair in *Liz #3* (fig. 4) or a skeptical look in *Ryan #2* (page 8). Likewise, in the large multi-figured panels, Palumbo has created a cinematic sequence of figures dressing and undressing, underscoring the fleeting nature of these moments and emphasizing the face of the model at the heart of this process.

The study of female nudes in varying stages of undress engenders emotional responses in the viewer. Because Palumbo has presented his models as individuals, there is a sense of intimacy that is more personal than a similar



3. *Liz Reclining* • Oil on panel • 9 x 12 inches



4. *Liz #3* • Oil on panel • 7 x 5 inches

image displayed as an historical character or an objectified product icon. Viewers are invited to participate in the narrative and to add the elements that seem most appropriate from their own perspective.

## THE CELEBRATION OF A DRINK

Todd Casey's explorations of different types of drinks is both an homage to the tradition of still-life painting and a celebration of the rituals around drinking in contemporary culture. The series began with a commissioned painting of a client's favorite drink and then grew into an extended inquiry over the following years. Casey paintings are examinations of the customs attached to different types of alcohol as well as the historical context in which a particular drink is rooted.

Some drinks are inextricably tied to a specific culture. *The Mint Julep* (fig. 5) has long been associated with Kentucky bourbon country and was reportedly introduced to Washington D. C. (and the Congress) by Henry Clay

in 1850. An old bottle and a silver julep cup remind viewers of its traditional heritage. In Central America tequila first appeared as a fermented agave drink in Jalisco, where it was used in religious rituals. Casey's paintings of tequila reposado in hand-painted ceramic bottles *El día de los Muertos - Blanco* (page 6) reflects that historical context as well as the contemporary practice of creative packaging design. The historical and contemporary references work comfortably together, reinforcing an image that characterizes the mystique of each type of alcohol.

Casey's paintings occasionally invoke iconic art historical images as well. The painting of *Absinthe* (fig. 6) recalls the work of Edouard Manet, Edgar Degas and Pablo Picasso, all of whom created well known paintings of absinthe drinkers in nineteenth century Paris; it also summons the image of Picasso's small sculpture of an absinthe glass from 1914. In all of these artworks, as in Casey's piece, it is the ritual of absinthe drinking that is highlighted; the unique spoon with its slotted design allows the sugar cube to melt slowly into the green liquor, creating swirling eddies as it is consumed.



5. *Mint Julep* • Oil on panel • 10 x 8 inches

The artist's attention to history and ritual is key to these paintings. As Casey notes, he wants to "create an ode to things that are disappearing," to tell stories through objects that may no longer be familiar. His discovery of an 1862 bartender's book, *Jerry Thomas' Bartenders Guide: How To Mix Drinks: A Bon Vivant's Companion*, exemplifies how a narrative can originate in an object. Originally published in nineteenth century San Francisco, this book offers a glimpse into the genesis of American mixology. Included are old favorites like the Gin and Tonic, but there are many unfamiliar creations—a Catawba Cobbler or a Cherry Shrub. In *Bar Study II* (page 5), Casey pays tribute to this find not only with an array of bottles and mixology tools, but with the fountain pen laid carefully on top of an open notebook as if Jerry Thomas had just stepped away from his musings on cocktail formulations. Most importantly, the painting offers an open-ended narrative that the viewer is welcome to expand, enhance and complete.

This series of drink paintings inherently elicits the viewer's attitude toward alcohol, undoubtedly awakening memories of many occasions over the years. Alcohol may encourage freedom of thought; as Casey remarks, the expression "take a shot" suggests that good things can result from considering options outside accepted parameters, and alcohol certainly has the power to ease inhibitions. That capacity may also lead to less than salubrious behavior; the danger that implies is part of the risk.



**7. Long Island Iced Tea**  
Oil on panel • 9 x 12 inches



**6. Absinthe** • Oil on panel • 8 x 6 inches

In the twentieth century, cocktails have often been associated with sophistication, even elegance. Depression era films are full of art deco nightclubs where champagne cocktails seem to materialize out of thin air; in the 1950s "company men" enjoyed martinis at lunch and a whiskey sour before dinner; and in the 1990s *Long Island Iced Tea* (fig. 7) embodied urbanity nationwide. At a very basic level, cocktails signify adulthood and a certain degree of savoir faire—an appealing diversion and an occasion for celebrating life.

In *Skin and Tonic*, Todd Casey and David Palumbo address subjects that evoke the viewers' personal experiences. Whether these memories are joyful or embarrassing—or both—will depend on what the individual sees reflected in the paintings. Both artists have created compositions that allow each viewer to respond with a personal narrative, in the hope that the paintings will encourage an exploration of the attitudes and emotions that arise in observing these works.





*Revealing* • Oil on panel • 30 x 40 inches



*Big Bar Study 2* • Oil on panel • 8 x 12 inches





*El Día de los Muertos - Blanco* • Oil on panel • 9 x 12 inches



*XOXO* • Oil on panel • 9 x 12 inches



*A Soft Touch* • Oil on panel • 12 x 9 inches



*Babe with the Power* • Oil on panel • 36 x 24 inches

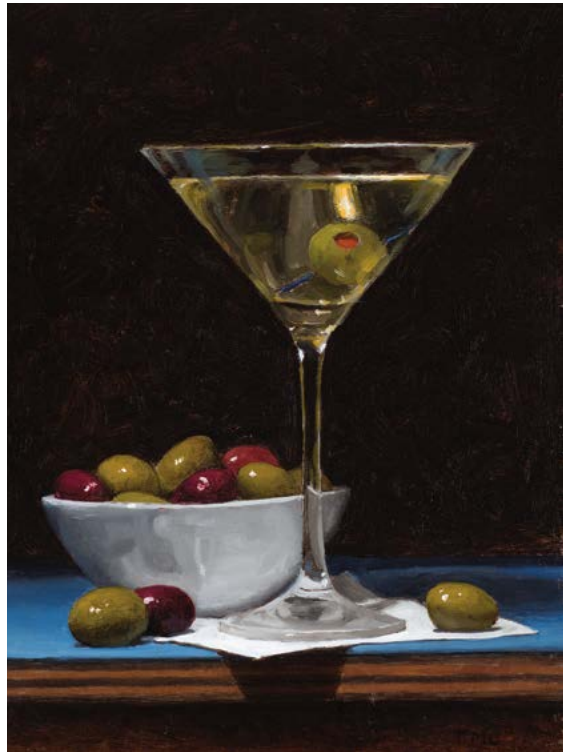


*Big Bar Study 1* • Oil on panel • 6 x 9 inches





*Tom Collins* • Oil on panel • 8 x 6 inches



*Dirty Martini* • Oil on panel • 8 x 6 inches



*Janette #40* • Oil on panel • 7 x 5 inches



*Christine #3* • Oil on canvas • 9 x 12 inches





*Gina #7* • Oil on panel • 7 x 5 inches



*Janette #42* • Oil on panel • 7 x 5 inches



*Sidecar* • Oil on panel • 8 x 6 inches



*Bloody Mary* • Oil on panel • 8 x 6 inches



*Where Inspiration Often Begins* • Oil on panel • 7 x 12 inches



*Feline* • Oil on panel • 12 x 16 inches





*Tiki Yoda* • Oil on panel • 8 x 6 inches



*White Sangria* • Oil on panel • 12 x 9 inches



*Study of Curves* • Oil on panel • 9 x 12 inches





*Ryan #2* • Oil on panel • 7 x 5 inches



*In Furs* • Oil on panel • 20 x 16 inches



*Moscow Mule* • Oil on panel • 6 x 8 inches



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