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Pam Rosenblatt

**Artist Clinton Van Inman:
Finding the “magical and
certain human in portrait”**

In mid-December 2013, *Wilderness House Literary Review's* arts editor Pam Rosenblatt started email correspondences with artist/poet Clinton Van Inman from Florida after receiving an email from WHLR's editor-in-chief Steve Glines that requested Rosenblatt to either accept or decline Inman's artwork.

Rosenblatt gladly accepted it! And an email interview resulted, as can be read in the next few pages:



WHLR: How would you like your name written in the *Wilderness House Literary Review* arts article? What is/was your occupation?

CVI: I prefer my full name, Clinton Van Inman, because I like the Van part because of one of my favorite painters, Anthony van Dyck (1599-1641). I am a retired high school teacher.

WHLR: How did you learn of *Wilderness House Literary Review*?

CVI: I learned about the *Wilderness House Literary Review* about four years three years ago by submitting my poetry there. Recently when submitting more poems I learned that they also accept paintings.

WHLR: Some of your poems were recently published in the *Wilderness House Literary Review's* poetry section. And they are excellent. But today we're interviewing you re: your artwork which includes pictures of houses, buildings, portraits of a young man, and more. How long have you been an artist? And why create artworks of houses, buildings, portraits of young men, etc.?

CVI: I have been drawing buildings and portraits for more than forty years. I was in my last year of college, majoring in philosophy, when I asked my mother if I could have her large ink sketch of the Parthenon which she had done while visiting Greece. She refused so I attempted to sketch my own in ink, which came out very well. I continued to draw other Greek temples and eventually added portraits of all the leading philosophers.



From all of this I learned that drawing is essential in art and takes years to perfect. Drawing provides the solid ground in all of my techniques. The initial drawing provides order and structure, the building blocks for essential art. Later

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I added color in attempting oil portraits, again where the initial drawing is essential. This today is considered a little old fashioned because most portrait painters complete a loose foundation in charcoals and or not much on details.

I remember getting a book on Hans Holbein (1497/8-1543), the Renaissance painter, and copying his portraits. "The Holbein line" is a technique I still use today when complete portraits. As a member of the Classical Poets Society, a sonneteer, and a life-long student of Renaissance English Lit-

erature it is natural that I have always emulated these early British Masters. As a child I lived just a few blocks from the Tate Gallery in London. Eventually as an artist I started selling watercolors of English castles and villages, and portraits of Princess Diana. I had many commissions for oil portraits as I emulated that style of Thomas Gainsborough (1727-1788) whom I deem my all-time master. I studied his techniques and have spent many hours examining his collections in England. My greatest accomplishment as an artist is having a large watercolor of mine hanging in the same museum as his "Blue Boy" (c. 1770), albeit mine is in the library. I

still do portraits occasionally, but the last ten years of teaching has limited my painting time and what paintings I do now are mostly watercolor sketches of old buildings. Even then I still use old fashioned techniques that I have perfected. The sketch is in ink and the watercolor is merely a wash, which gives the central figure, whether a building or a portrait, nobility and character.



WHLR: In a recent emailed correspondence, you wrote that your poetry and artwork are "old-fashioned" and original. Why? And what do you mean by "old-fashioned"?

CVI: I have never veered from these old master techniques and that is why I am old fashioned and I guess any portrait painter today is a little old fashioned because portrait painters still deal with realism. I don't believe I have ever seen an abstract expressionist portrait painter sit down and draw someone at the fair. There is something almost magical and certain human in portrait that cannot be replaced with computers and cameras. I use photographs in my art, but they don't use me. Before I begin a commission I take about 20-30 close up snaps of the



subject from all angles. Photographs are merely an aid. At the Huntington Museum in San Marino I took about 20 snaps of the garden gazebo and painted a large watercolor from them. The painting had depth something one snap never yields. Yet the realism that I am after has never been like the Xerox machine, as painting like that attempts too much, makes realism appear flat and dull. What is left out is just as important as what is highlighted. Realism, paradoxically, demands a touch of flair that only the artist can supply. To capture real human expression demands a lifetime. Here, I have always shown my stu-

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dents the work of Rembrandt. Art is not all rainbows and rhapsodies, but requires sweat and pain. One has had to suffer to be a great artist.

WHLR: Your artwork is realistic in appearance, looks like the pieces were sketched or hand drawn and then pasteled or watercolored. You also mentioned that you work from photographs. Are you a photographer, too? What is your artistic process? And do you work with pencil, ink, pastels, acrylics, oils, as well as watercolors? And from where do you get the ideas for your artwork?

CVI: My art process is simple: start with an essential drawing. I forget who said it, but one famous artist once said that it took him years to learn how to draw but only a few days to learn how to apply color. Most artists I see today just want to jump in and throw paint on a canvas. The basics are essential. Like music, one has to first learn the scales and art is no different. Whatever medium I am working with it is still the same process. In pastels, I apply a solid charcoal base that started with a detailed sketch all set with a finish as the pastels will cover. Watercolors the same, starting with an ink foundation. Same with oils. I have used all mediums except acrylics which to me seem chalking and pasty. I prefer the old techniques in oils. I use Copal oils and a limited pallet, Raw Umber, Indian Red are essential. After the drawing foundation is completed and set, I do the entire painting in Raw Umber after which I apply layers of light shades.



WHLR: Would you please cite three paintings that you find most intriguing and explain them a bit.

CVI: Choosing a favorite three paintings is difficult, but first on my list is William Hogarth's "Shrimp girl" (c1740-1745) which I have always admired because he knew how to paint! It is an unfinished painting but how he captured her expression with just a few swirls is amazing. I think I like it because it is the opposite of what I try to do. His piece is pure magic.

Another unfinished painting that I adore is Thomas Gainsborough's "The Painter's Daughters Chasing a Butterfly" (c. 1756), where Gainsborough depicts one of his two daughters reaching for a butterfly. They both have the form of a butterfly symbolic of temporal youth, but its construction is dynamic. But his best is simply his two daughters that is in the National Gallery in London. Initially he painted it with them holding a cat, but in the middle of it he painted it out. Incredible and a mark of pure genius to change his mind in the middle of something. Also the painting is loose and brilliant because he was painting it for himself and not a commission.

But my favorite painting of all time is Hans Holbein's "The Ambassadors" (c. 1533) hanging in the National Gallery in London. As you approach it you feel as if you are entering the Renaissance itself as the paint-

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ing takes up an entire wall. The painting is fresh as if incredibly alive in its realism. Everything else about the Renaissance has crumbled and yellow and turned to dust, but here in front of you is this amazing picture of two ambassadors and their collection of gadgets from science to art as if real. But what is truly amazing is how what appears to be a map of some kinds turns into a skull when looking at it from askew. Four hundred years later when everything is gone here stands the painting in its fullest breathe taking fold.

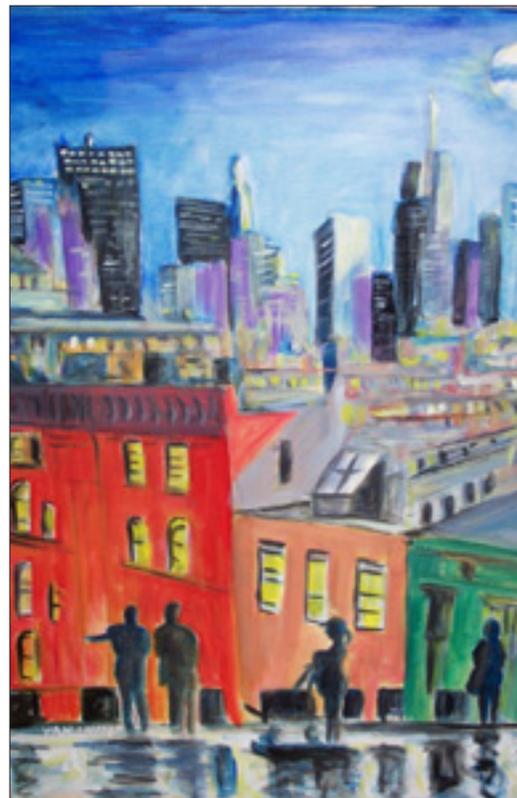
WHLR: You tend to use muted, light colors in your paintings. Why? And how do you achieve these colors? Do you have a specific color theory that you use?

CVI: I paint with muted colors, especially watercolors, because I believe too much watercolor creates a flat, opaque surface. Watercolor washes create a mystic. The sky is never a flat, dark hue, but transparent. Color to me only highlights the drawing or portrait; it should never dominate unlike most artists today who can sell their art by the yard to decorate walls. I have never been that kind of artist. Though I emulate old fashioned techniques I have never been high on color theory and have never used a color wheel. My color theory comes with my hands in the paint. Like in nature, I try to eliminate hard, strong colors. I prefer softer pastels in everything.

WHLR: Which artists do you favor? And have you learned art from looking at their styles? Or did your artistic style develop on its own?

CVI: Again, I have favored old masters like Holbein, van Dyck, Gainsborough. Modern masters that follow the same tradition and that I greatly admire are Andrew Wyeth (1917-2009) and Edward Hopper (1882-1967). I really love Wyeth's style, his attitude, and his work. Both Wyeth and Hopper were criticized because of their realism but the greatest painting in the modern era has to be Wyeth's "Christina's World" (c. 1948). I favor it more highly than any Picasso (1881-1973) or Matisse (1869-1954).

Lately, I think I have learn more from Wyeth than any other painter as I too have tried to paint rural homes and sides of buildings to capture their mood. Wyeth is earthy and even his portraits are presented not in a pretentious, aristocratic fashion but people standing next to trees, at the table, etc. Wyeth's realism is simple and direct returning to the roots of art itself as Wyeth spent years painstakingly learning how to draw. In a world of gobble-ly-goo



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and abstract express, it is easy to see why he is so underrated. I guess us realists are like violinists in a world of rock n roll.

WHLR: Where do you see your artwork heading? More abstract? More realistic? Do you work in any other artistic genres, besides painting and poetry? Sculpture, maybe; mixed media, maybe?

CVI: My artwork is headed back to where I original started years ago: simple pen and ink sketches with washes of watercolors. I spend less time now doing complex portraits but more time with watercolors. And, ironically, my work is becoming more and more abstract in its realism. Something I never thought I'd say. I see now that too much realism is boring, the right combination is a mixture of realism with spontaneity, the artist's signature.

WHLR: You mentioned earlier that you were a teacher. What did you teach? And what would you say to your students and other people about pursuing a life in the world of art? [It may deal with the question: What is art to you?]

CVI: I have been a teacher most of my life, a high school teacher. I retired this year. I have mostly taught English and have inspired many to write poetry but to paint as well. The last eight years in Florida I got drafted into teach math: algebra and geometry. Math classes in an effort to keep pace with standardization and rigorous testing have eliminated all the fun activities especially in geometry. I battled tooth and nail to keep hands on activities in my geometry classes. I keep the art in classes and by showing them examples of famous paintings and what geometrical devices were used in the painting. These lesson plans are removed from the standard syllabus as students in geometry spend all of their time learning formulae and solving problems. Even across the boards with the science and math initiatives in America, little attention is given to the arts. In general, it does seem like art per se is in danger. But, as long as humans have an imagination, art will never die. Kids still learn to scribble and draw houses before they learn to calculate. Art is essential, but art appreciation is something lacking in our materialistic society, probably the way it was in the Renaissance. Fewer people than ever hear of Holbein or Rembrandt (1606-1669). Regardless of the push for science and math in this country, art continues to flourish. We have more poets now than we have ever had, but sadly less poetry. Art to me simply means human expression, our mark, our signature against the blank nothingness of reality. Art highlights the human character, the human model of excellence.

WHLR: Do you have a favorite saying from an artist that you respect or from yourself that you would like to conclude this interview with?

CVI: My favorite saying from the art world is this sum up in my sonnet:

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FINE ART

*It is more than just tasting fine wines
While dining listening to local jazz
Or introducing well-dressed wives
Surrounded in mink while posing
For the local well-to-do magazines
Or even experts discussing techniques
Or docents, directors, and patrons disclosing
The latest collection of Chinese antiques
Among the proud, the pomp, and the pizzazz
The dinner receptions and the latest book signing
With all the applause and customary handshakes
Or cutting purple ribbons or slicing cakes
Or for the call for juried art for art's sake
As painting still goes on make no mistake.*

