

Living With Art

Sometimes it's love at first sight; other times it's a slow burn. This art collector describes the qualities that drew him to a favorite painting, what sealed the deal, and his process of finding the right spot for it at home.

BY DAVID MASELLO

Years ago, I purchased a painting that depicts a house and garage, and, because I have lived with it ever since, the work still acts as a kind of night light for me. A window in the second story of the work's brick dwelling is filled with the glow from a lamp. A sharp yellow ray cuts across the door of the white garage, making the viewer wonder if the source is incandescent or the light of the moon.

I found the work at the Plein Air Easton art festival in Easton, Maryland, one Saturday morning several summers ago. When I first saw it hanging on display in the town museum whose walls were used to showcase the participants, I hesitated, as I always do when I want to buy a painting. I walked through the galleries again and again, expecting to find a work even more compelling. But I didn't. Then I viewed the canvas from different angles and distances, trying to overhear other people's comments about the work as I looked at it — seeking confirmation, perhaps, that my choice was right.

I futilely tried to convince myself that the painting lacked an element of poetry — that introspective quality I covet in every painting I own. But it did possess that. I believed that the artist was aware of the solitude of the subject — that the house and its accompanying garage were invested with an intrinsic character. She knew, too, that this seemingly prosaic scene she encountered in a small Maryland town had an integrity and resonance beyond its overt form and composition. She recognized that a nearly all-dark house with a white garage and tall trees set

against a gradient midnight-blue sky were worthy of depiction.

As the credit-card machine chigged away, processing my purchase, a woman holding the hand of a young girl came up to me.

"I'm the artist who painted the work you just bought," she said. "I saw them affix the red dot. My name is Shirl Ireland." She was nearly breathless with excitement. "This is the first time I've participated in this competition," she added, as if this information might explain her bewilderment.

I expressed my praise for the painting, and noted the uncanny coincidence of her having seen me at the very moment it was being bought. But because I, too, was suddenly self-conscious, I addressed my compliments to the little girl, who was introduced to me as the artist's daughter.

"Your mother is a very good painter. The moment I walked into this show and saw her painting on the wall, I said, 'That's the one I want.' And now I have it."

The little girl turned and buried her head in her mother's side.

"I like it, too," said the artist. "It's one of my favorite works."

The previous night at the museum, I had heard similar remarks from another artist whose work — a mottled composition of a wooden toy sailboat moored in a workshop vise — had just been sold. When I asked him if he felt any sadness at seeing a favorite work of his leave him, he said, "For me, painting is more about being in love with the process than with the finished product. There's the thrill, of course, of finishing the piece, but

then, not too much longer after that, I'm thinking, 'Okay, what's next?'"

Ireland and I spoke about the details in the painting I now officially possessed — the chosen colors, especially the subtle lavender cast overlaying the white paint, the drama of the angle of light crossing the canvas, the rectilinear composition of shapes, the almost anthropomorphic quality of the house's face.

"I wanted to do a painting about geometry," she said. "I even wanted to call it *Geometry*. And there was something so different about setting up my easel in the evening and painting by streetlight. That's nothing I've ever done before. I didn't even know you *could* paint in the dark."

I told her I lived in New York, and I handed her a business card that revealed my role as a magazine editor. I did that to prove I was worthy, somehow, of owning her painting.

The painting was so new that the smell of its colors (and colors do have particular scents) perfumed the immediate air with a musk while the cashier handed it to me, as I hinged the frame to my fingers. The paint would need days to dry.

For the 200-mile drive back home to Manhattan, I placed the painting face up in the back seat, its scent filling the rental car. As I coursed Maryland's Eastern Shore and found my way back to I-95, I kept imagining conversations the artist might be having back in town.

Midway on my drive home, I reached the still-manned toll plaza for the Delaware Memorial Bridge, which vaults not only the wide namesake river, but also an unpopulated city, of sorts, created by DuPont — an



Easton at Night by Shirl Ireland

expanse of terrible, reeking beauty, a skyline of Byzantinely complex chimneys and pipes and valves. The toll-taker, while counting out my change, cocked her head to look through the window at the painting on the back seat. From her perspective, it was upside down and tilted, yet for those few seconds, she saw its colors and shapes, the alchemic allure of the gold frame circumscribing it. The shaded peace and safety of the small-town street and its house, how different that all was from the landscape surrounding us at that moment.

Over her shoulder, in the distance, blue flames leapt from industrial stacks and the gnarled assemblages of refineries, acned with red lights, gauzed the air with burning methane and sulphur. Here was a subject for a plain air work, perhaps, though the painter would likely need a gas mask while daubing away at the canvas.

Once I arrived home, I nestled the painting in a wing chair in my bedroom, to protect it as it continued to dry — but also so that I could look at it as I read in bed. That scene would be the first thing I would see upon awakening.

As soon as the morning sun filled the room, I anticipated my first viewing of the painting on its first day in my possession. The pleasant, clay-like scent of oil paint was apparent in the room. I was so happy to see the scene again that I carried it with me to the living room sofa where I could look at as I ate breakfast.

And as I do with every new painting I buy, I moved it with me wherever I went in the apartment — hanging it on a wall above the pass-through, positioning it as the centerpiece over the dining table, even leaning it in front of the TV. Then I would carry it back to the nest of the bedroom chair. Within days, I found the right place for it: on a wide support column next to my kitchen sink, a spot of

my home where I am every day, throughout the day. And observing a ceremony I know well, I hammered in the nail and hook, and stretched the wire until it was taut. I felt my way to the hook and lowered the work on to it. I slid it back and forth until it was level. And then, a familiar part of my home became new.

As the painting called *Easton at Night* continued to dry, I thought of the scene it depicts as a single fragile thing, akin to that soft portion of an infant's skull, that patch at the top of the head that needs to be carefully protected as the body seals itself. And, so, my painting feels alive to me, a precious presence of life in my own. 🧑🎨

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