



"Fruit Bowl After Gentileschi," (Orazio Gentileschi: "Moses Saved From the Waters of the Nile"), by Sherrie Wolf, oil on canvas 2001

VISUAL ARTS/preview

Fruitful dreams

Artist Sherrie Wolf overlays lush images on the work of historical masters to create dreamy, surreal compositions

By **BOB HICKS**
THE OREGONIAN

Walk into Sherrie Wolf's spacious still-life composition of a Northwest Portland house.

Past the hanging Laura Ross-Pauls and Dennis Cunninghams and Gregory Grenons and other Oregon artists of a certain age ("I like to trade with my friends," Wolf says casually).

Past the tiles she painted in Matisse motifs to surround the gas range in her kitchen.

Straight to the back wall of the added-on dining room. There, in the shining colors and rich round shapes of the early Baroque, is a scene from another world.

Stretching taut on a 53-inch-wide canvas is the gorgeous "Moses Saved From the Waters of the

Nile," by the Italian painter Orazio Gentileschi (1563-1639), perhaps the finest of the truculent genius Caravaggio's followers.

At least, it *looks* like "Moses Saved From the Waters of the Nile."

But floating across Gentileschi's dramatic scene of young women kneeling toward the child — almost floating *above* it, as if a cushion of air were between — is a clear glass bowl piled high with luscious plums, peaches, cherries. The women's bodies and faces are obscured and distorted by the rising angle of the bowl. "I just love what happens with the glass," Wolf says with satisfaction, looking at the strange stretched ripples in the image below.

The painting, of course, is hers. It's one of dozens of newer works that combine copied historical canvases with Wolf's intense, slightly surrealistic still lifes — images, as she puts it, that are realistic but "up the ante." Looking around her studio walls is like taking a light romp through art history — a slyly dislocated romp, charged with the gentle absurdity of

Please see **WOLF**, Page D2

Continued from Page D1

Wolf's odd juxtapositions of content and scale.

With gallery representation in San Francisco, Seattle and at Portland's Margo Jacobsen Gallery (where she is one of nine artists in the realist invitational exhibition "Points of View," opening Sept. 6), and with commissions or exhibitions from New York to Germany to China, Wolf has built a successful art career since graduating from Portland's Museum Art School in 1974 and earning a master's degree in printmaking from London's Chelsea College of Art the following year.

But because she's always chosen a nominally realist path, and specifically still lifes (for years vivid, tensely exotic flowers were her forte), she's often been overlooked critically. Part of that was the timing of her entry into the art world, which in the early and mid-'70s was transfixed by other things. Yet her prints and paintings have always contained much more than what's visible at first decorative blush. They share a stylistic rigor; a below-the-surface fascination with formalist structural questions and the illusionistic possibilities of *trompe l'oeil*. And they share a sometimes eerie sense of hyper-

"In a way there is no such thing as realism, since it is always an abstraction from the world, or a quote"

SHERRIE WOLF,
ABOUT HER WORK



reality. "In a way there is no such thing as realism, since it is always an abstraction from the world, or a quote," she says.

One other thing may have cost Wolf her share of critical due. In an art world often obsessed with political or social content and suspicious of the purely beautiful, she adores paint. Whatever else they do, her paintings exude a frank joy in the pleasures of color.

"It's like a stage"

Wolf is playing with a lot of things in her neo-historical paintings, among them proportion and plane: the fruits seem huge and as if they are popping out of the flat surface of the paintings below. "It's like I'm borrowing the landscape as a backdrop for my still life," she says of another fruit-bowl painting,

this one after a roiled-sky scene by the great Dutch painter Jacob van Ruisdael (1628-82). "It's like a stage. Very theatrical."

If Wolf's paintings are plays, her theatrical workshop is her large white attic studio, which is hung thick with paintings finished and in process. All of the paintings repeat, with their own idiosyncrasies and stylistic conceits, the basic structure of the faux Gentileschi and faux van Ruisdael. Lush fruits hover over images by Whistler, Goya, Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, George Stubbs, VanDyck and Gentileschi's equally renowned daughter Artemesia, who was raped by her tutor and delighted in painting vivid images of women decapitating men.

The range of style and the quality of homage are impressive. But with all of these paintings, Wolf is insistent on one thing: The focus isn't on the Old Master below. It's on the still life above. "I like the way the fruits get big," she says of the intensely orange apricots that frolic above the brown-purple cloak on a young woman in a Goya portrait. "It monumentalizes them. And I think at a distance it makes them more real."

Natural light streams into Wolf's studio — it can get sticky-hot here

quickly in the summer, and on such days she flicks on a rumbling air conditioner when she's working. Under the sloping ceiling in one corner is a little platform where she sets the fruits or flowers for her paintings. Piles of art books — "The World of Goya," "Manet by Himself," "The Age of Rubens" — lie opened and unopened. And strewn across ample tabletops are slides, slides and more slides that she studies intently, looking for clues to brush stroke, to composition, simply for paintings that speak to her and might be incorporated into her own work. "I take thousands, literally, of slides," she says. "It's sort of like sketching."

Wolf haunts museums

Getting to know the old paintings she borrows isn't always simple. The truth of a painting is elusive in reproduction and fully plumbable only by seeing it in the flesh. But that, too, has its disadvantages. Even with access, Wolf says, you can be disappointed: Museums often hang important paintings one atop another on their walls, and it can be difficult to truly see what is almost within arm's reach yet too high for easy eye contact.

When she can, she haunts museums. But studying slides,

often in sharp detail, can actually be more fruitful to her work. "The quality of reproduction has improved so radically," she says. "Even in the past five years."

Each original master painting has its own unrepeatable energy and stylistic detail. Wolf can't hope to, and doesn't want to, create a believable Goya or Vigée-Lebrun. These aren't copies or forgeries. They are *borrowed* images, transformed into Wolf's own style. She is quite faithful to the image itself but takes a lot of liberties with color and technique. "It's *my* painting," she says. "Interpretation is always there."

For all her rustling through the past, Wolf doesn't consider herself an art historian. But looking backward is both a grand adventure and a matter of practical application. "Through rendering paintings from the past you learn so much about how they're made," she says. "Students from the past always learned from copying the masters. I wasn't taught that way. But I think anyone can learn to paint by copying."

Sometimes the process — or the result — startles her with something unanticipated. She looks at the girl in her "Grapes After Whistler," and the cascade of big purple-blue grapes, stems still

attached, that flows downward across her face and dress. "It looks like she's at a party," Wolf exclaims. "The grapes are balloons falling down."

Looking at the Goya portrait-with-apricots, she discovers a compositional point of centrality. "I like the way her eye is dead center," she says of Goya's young woman. "Eyes are so important. If you can't get the eyes, the painting's dead wrong."

Wolf works and reworks her surfaces, giving them a high, smooth, almost polished finish: Her meticulousness borders on obsession. "Painting takes so long," she says. "There's just a lot of marks. A lot of brush strokes. I think the longer I work on it, the richer it gets. I like to have a year to work on a show. Let the paintings simmer. If you think you're done, you're usually not."

After all, what she's after — the surrealistic wedding of new and old, the delicate interplay of flatness and height — is something of a conjurer's trick, and perfecting a conjurer's trick takes time.

"Painting for me is all about illusion on the two-dimensional surface. It is quite magical. I am always amazed at how you can fool people into seeing the third dimension."