



CURIOSITY, OIL, 60 X 40.

thought it would be neat to include an art history reference." He soon found himself creating a miniature rendering of the young woman in Jan Vermeer's famous painting GIRL WITH A PEARL EARRING for the head of the PEZ dispenser. Observers familiar with Steele's style aren't surprised to find references to art history in his paintings, which may include everything from Renaissance works by Leonardo da Vinci to 20th-century pop art by Andy Warhol.

Take FANCIFUL FROSTING, for example. It is a deliciously intriguing painting showing Warhol's iconic portrait of Marilyn Monroe's face decorating a birthday cake. Ten candles flicker around the perimeter of the confection, forming a frame of sorts for the blonde movie star, and the subject matter appears to be illuminated solely by candlelight. While the viewer will quickly perceive the reference to Warhol's famous painting, there is another layer of meaning here—an homage to Rembrandt, one of Steele's favorite artists. "I am using Warhol's imagery of Monroe, but my process is similar to Rembrandt's because of my layers of glazing," he explains. "And I used candles as the only light source to echo the lighting of Rembrandt's time period."

Painting objects in candlelight holds a special allure for Steele because, like in FANCIFUL FROSTING, it allows him to paint loose and more gestural around the edges where the scene is darker. "I can put in runs and drips, adding texture to make the painting a little more sophisticated and interesting," says Steele.

When he painted the cake's frosting, Steele incorporated another of his favorite elements: thick, juicy paint. The paint's thickness mimics the icing's goopy texture. Talking about his love of texture, however, sends Steele off on a tangent about one of his pet peeves—artists who use thick paint just for its own sake. "Some artists think thick paint is good, so even thicker paint must be better," he explains. "I love thick paint, but you have to use it appropriately. I think for some artists it's a one-trick pony to a certain extent that's all they have."

FANCIFUL FROSTING took about six weeks to complete. Steele used a photo reference for the cake, but he also kept a real cake in the refrigerator in case he needed more detailed information. Luckily, no one in his family ate his subject matter.

Steele's use of texture is also seen in FARMER'S DAIRY, a depiction of a barn covered with a sprawling image of the farm couple from the famous painting AMERICAN GOTHIC by Grant Wood. Steele wanted to portray the barn as old and weathered and used thick paint to convey the look of the tattered facade. "The dilapidated wood allowed me to use paint in a rougher way," says the artist. "It is still realism, but it's different from a Vermeer painting, which is more polished and refined."

Steele found the reference image for the building by Googling the word "barn"; he's now fond of calling it a "Google barn." He has since become fascinated with old barns and says one of his future goals is to paint some real murals on real barns.

The billboard-style imagery on the barn in FARMER'S DAIRY brings to mind other interests that fuel Steele's free-wheeling curiosity—advertising and pop art. Early in his career path, Steele considered going into advertising because of his affinity for pop art. "The modern, graphic quality of Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein

FANCIFUL FROSTING, OIL, 28 X 30.



are like advertisements—simple, strong colors and imagery," he says. "Fine art gave me the opportunity to incorporate those elements into my work, too."

STEELE GREW UP in Washington State and as a youngster never really thought about becoming an artist. When he was 13, his family moved to St. George, UT, where he became an avid and accomplished golfer. "For seven years I worked at a golf course and played every day. I wanted to be a professional golfer," he recalls. When it came time for college, he majored in business at a small community college because he thought that a business degree would be helpful if he didn't make it as a golf pro. He could then, at least, pursue a career in golf-course management.

After a few years Steele decided life as a professional golfer wasn't for him and instead chose a pathway back to art, his college minor. On the advice of a former professor, he enrolled at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City, where he studied with Tony Smith and John Erickson. He also took workshops with painters Paul Davis and David Dornan. Dornan offered some valuable advice that Steele continues to follow today: "Paint what you like, and don't worry if you are painting a lot of different things. Some things will start to repeat themselves."

What has happened over the years, Steele says, is that as he moves forward in his career, he is able to integrate various areas of interest and disparate elements into a style that has become uniquely his own. He is comfortable letting one idea lead to the next. Most recently, the crayons, gumball machines, and PEZ dispensers have led in a whole new direction—sculpture. One of his latest pieces, DRIPPY DRAWING, is three dimensional.

In it Steele recreates a version of an Itch A Sketch and incorporates a well-known figure from art history. By painstakingly creating tiny black brush strokes on canvas, he mimics Etch A Sketch lines and fashions an image of abstract expressionist Jackson Pollock as he famously flings and splatters paint. The image is framed with a wide, bright red resin rectangle with white knobs, just like the actual toy. But with dimensions measuring 40 by 49 by 7 inches, Steele's mixed-media sculpture is five-times as large as a real Etch A Sketch.

As for his future artistic goals, Steele envisions more sculpture in the years ahead. DRIPPY DRAWING, he says, has opened him up to three-dimensional works. "Bigger pieces demand more attention and have a greater impact on the viewer," says the artist. Ideas for sculptures of giant gumball machines and huge Campbell's soup cans are now percolating in Steele's far-reaching and ever-curious imagination. ◀

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PEARLY PEZ, OIL, 40 X 80.



DRIPPY DRAWING, OIL/MIXED MEDIA, 40 X 40 X 7.