

lifestylearts

Beyond the Paint

By SAL EMMA
Photography by FRANK WEISS/ArtC



Artist Victor Grasso paints them as *he* sees them.

It's weeks after Labor Day. You can tell by the look on painter Victor Grasso's face that he's not all that interested in talking about Norman Rockwell.

He is not unlike his hometown of Cape May — the city itself taking a collective breath at the annual egress of hordes of Philadelphia tourists. He's put summer behind him. And with it the Rockwell experiment. The magazine covers are long recycled. The gallery paintings are down. The show's over. On to bigger and better things. Things Grasso.

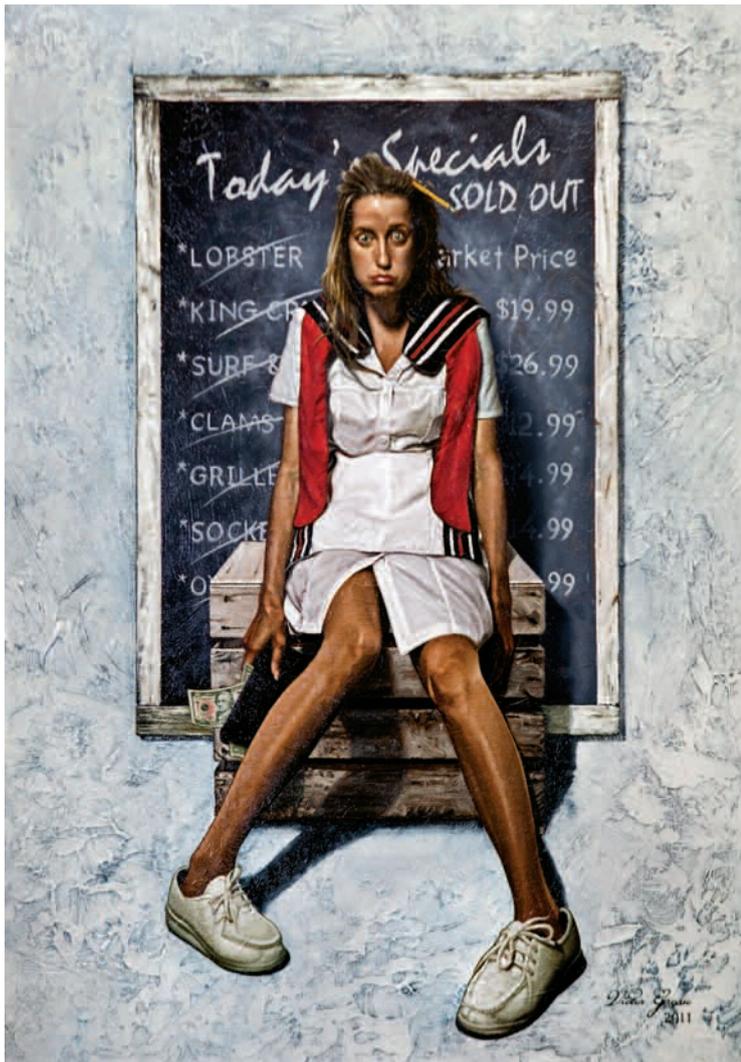
Not that the experiment wasn't Grasso. How could it not be? But it was certainly atypical. Grasso, 34, is known not for charming renderings of the lighter side of life. The summer 2011 magazine covers were a stark departure. It's no wonder people still want to talk about them.

"It was a huge departure, conceptually. But technically, it's still realism at the level I produce it. It was more light-hearted, less in-depth. Typically my work is a lot more metaphorical, symbolic, visceral. And way darker, both in subject and palette. Themes of death and even bondage, but quirky — you know, bondage through diving helmets or octopus tentacles.

Like most Americans, Grasso was exposed to Rockwell in print. But he had never seen a live Rockwell original. That changed when he attended the Washington, D.C. exhibition of Rockwells owned by Steven Spielberg and George Lucas. To Grasso's experienced eye, each was a museum piece, with depth and richness that far outdistanced flat four-color print renderings.

For years, Grasso had been painting covers for *Exit Zero*, a local magazine. So trying his hand at some *Rockwellesque* cover concepts was a natural progression. It all comes down to his philosophy about art. He paints what he wants to paint. Seeing the Rockwells got under his skin. And he decided to take a crack at the style.

"To see them in print, they look almost like photographs. But to see the actual painting, to see how the paint was applied, the actual colors, how much paint he applied, they're really beautiful paintings. Very gestural, very impasto. It was freeing in a way, once I saw how much paint he was applying. That's why I compare him to Rembrandt and Vermeer —





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thick paint, making forms. It's almost sculptural. Like Francis Bacon — the paint becomes a sculptural object.”

Whoa. Vermeer? Rembrandt? Rockwell?

And what of the art world snobs who don't even consider Rockwell an artist? Grasso's response is sharp and belies his passion for painting; they don't know what they're talking about.

True, Grasso admits the art establishment spurned Rockwell for much of the 20th century. But that was about style, not quality.

“From the turn of the 20th century, art went avant-garde. Look at William-Adolphe Bouguereau. Van Gogh was famously quoted saying that you can't make money unless you can paint like Bouguereau. Well nobody can paint like Bouguereau, even to this day. His canvases are huge, creamy, beautiful, like porcelain glass. But he was a figurative realist. And he was shunned, too. Van Gogh and Matisse and the impressionists and Picasso, these guys are tearing down the walls of what art is, completely deconstructing it and ripping it apart. This goes all the way through the 1950s when Rockwell was painting. He's not having gallery shows, he's not in the avant-garde, He's working for a magazine. Same as N.C. Wyeth,

Howard Pyle, J.C. Leyendecker. All these great artists. Even Andrew Wyeth, who was not an illustrator. They were shunned by the art world because they weren't Pollock, doing something that nobody had ever seen before. But anybody who knows art knows it's good.”

For Grasso, every painting, every show, every inspiration moves the experiment forward. And he's ready for the next phase. Since the show, he's back to the dark, the visceral — like an oversize portrait of his baby daughter, Gray. Honest work, as fellow South Jersey painter Stan Sperlak has described it. Now, Grasso can internalize the lessons learned and move on.

“It's time to incorporate it into a larger script and let the paint do the talking. Hopefully it's taking me down the path to my own Mona Lisa, my own Sistine Chapel. That's the goal.”

He embraces a complex word picture: describing how realism helped free him from realism.

“When you're painting realism, you can fall into the trap of wanting to make the painting exactly like reality. The great masters achieved what they wanted with minimal brushstrokes. Caravaggio and Velasquez — those dudes used paint. They weren't trying to hide it. That was a real revelation

for me. Vermeer was a master of light. Rockwell got that. I can see my work getting brighter, creamier. With more confidence, building light. I had stayed subdued in darkness before. Now I can apply that knowledge of light into depths of darkness and create bigger chiaroscuro contrast. You're going to see things more sculptural. More experimental."

Grasso is in an admirable place. Never more passionate about art, never more serious about his craft. But also willing to acknowledge his own potential. It's a mental roadblock many an artist never overcomes.

"I have met successful artists who have taken themselves out of the category of the masters. That's where I want to be. I want to be in the annals of art. I want to be in the ring with my heroes. I am striving to be like them. I see something amazing, I want to own it. There's a time where you wake up one day and instead of saying 'I'll never be that good,' you think 'how do I do that.' You get inspired from it rather than pissed off and jealous at it. I'm inspired by almost everything. A lot. I love fashion. I love death. I love sex. I love art. I love animals and nature. All these things are everywhere. Most of all, it's art — things that people create. They put a stamp on me."

He talks a lot about stretching, getting out of the comfort zone. Putting passion ahead of logic. Embracing chaos. Painting from some organic place, a depth of soul.

"I've been doing this since I was 18. I've never done anything else. When I was 18, I wanted to be the best. Now I know that's B.S. It's not about being the best, it's about pushing yourself and never being satisfied, no matter what. It's about being bold and ballsy. You paint because you have to paint. You create because you need to create. You don't create for respect. You don't create for fame. You don't create for attention — though every artist craves attention. You create because if you don't you're either gonna kill somebody, kill yourself, blow something up or sit in a closet and cry all day."

He's not quite ready to talk about his next project. He allows a description in general terms.

"It's a combination of things. Trying to pull together everything I've been working on my whole life. I want to attack stuff. Mash it up. It's cool, so far. It's going to be liberating. I don't know how people will react to it or if they'll get it. Give me a year. We'll see what happens. Either way, it's gotta be honest." ■

Victor Grasso is endorsed by ArtC — promoting the arts in southern New Jersey in partnership with the Noyes Museum of Art and the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey. www.artcnw.com