

MICHAEL BREYETTE – PORTRAIT OF AN ARTIST

BY ALAN BENNETT ILAGAN

The environs of upstate New York do not offer a forgiving climate. From lows of thirty degrees below zero to highs over a hundred, the temperature is not the only extreme. Winters can be brutal. Unrelenting wind, sheets of sleet, and thick blankets of snow spread their fury over the ground. Driving shards of ice accompany a bitter cold that sustains and endures and breaks the most stalwart of figures.

A brief, glorious spring, then the heat and humidity of high summer. There is no relief, when it's hot outside and even hotter inside. Cool showers provide but a fleeting respite from the soaring temperatures, and the night does little to quell the heat that comes up from the ground.

It is restless weather, but it can be beautiful too. There are serene lakeside scenes, the majestic rise of mountains, and countless tributaries and streams flowing with tranquil waters. Peace may be found here if one looks long and hard enough – and a brush with the beauty of the sublime has inspired many an artist.

Growing up in this rural landscape of upstate New York, Michael Breyette longed for the chance to depict the beautiful men of his mind. He saw them all in his head – the ravishing hunks of brawny muscle, the sculpted contours of rippled stomachs, the sweaty furrowed brows of intensity, the deep smoldering eyes that told wicked and wonderful tales of the soul. They inhabited his imagination, haunting his interior world as he outwardly painted the pictures that everyone else wanted to see. He was an artist, and though the passion burned inside of him, he had to draw what was acceptable at the time.

He found little ways of escape, of artistic subterfuge, in the secondary characters and the subtle visual hints of homoerotic desire. He would incorporate a shirtless man into the background of a picture featuring a woman, finding brief relief in this small expression. Even when he painted women, his female subjects tended to have rather masculine features. When faced with adversity, art will find a way.

It was the Internet – and its striking blend of anonymity and personal revelation – that brought him back to his true artistic calling. Only when its cloaked safety came into play did he realize his driving inspiration and execute the portraits for which he is now justly known.

"We live in a world where homosexuality is demonized, deemed immoral and sinful," Breyette says. "Even in America, a country that spouts freedom it denies basic rights afforded others just because of someone's attraction to the same sex. Homosexuality is a natural occurrence in humans and horses, in penguins and giraffes and in many other species. It may be the exception but so are having blue eyes or dimples. Being gay is no more wrong and unnatural than those traits."

Breyette's art fosters acceptance, not in an overt, off-putting in-your-face way, but in the natural beauty of two men embracing, in the stunning visage of a man reclining naked, in the quiet countenance of a sleeping lover.

"I've gotten numerous letters from guys who discovered my artwork and wanted to share how it affected them. Mostly they tell me of their coming out story or that they are still in the closet to family members or important people in their lives and that my artwork made them feel better about their situation and their sexual identity. Some felt part of a greater community and less alone. If I just touch a few people in that way that is enough for me. If my artwork can counteract the barrage of negativity heaped on homosexuals, or anyone who is different for that matter, then that is quite an accomplishment."

It wasn't always that way. Back around 1990, Breyette had all but given up on his artwork. At the time, he was working mainly in oil painting, and such a time consuming form fell by the wayside. The artist in him slept until a few years later, though Breyette likes to downplay his artistic nature.

"Once I got my 'real' full time job in 1990 I did not have as much time for my art. Working on paintings became even more drawn out and I would lose interest before I got close to finishing. I don't recall the feeling of missing it," he candidly admits. "I never thought of myself as an artist back then, especially the type that 'has to' paint or write or sing or whatever because their art is like breathing to them. I know that may not be the 'artistically correct' answer but hey, I've never felt comfortable in the traditional perception of an artiste."

It was his shift to pastels and a more passionate subject matter that led to the reclamation of his art. The use of pastels afforded him a faster way of creating and realizing his vision, and the internet became a safe outlet where those who appreciated his subject matter could find him. Those male figures of his past surfaced again, only this time they would finally be released in full form.

"I now had an environment that allowed me to express my interest in drawing the male nude. I also began using pastels more, which allowed me to work faster, no drying time

needed. I got a website and reached an audience for my work. Success and praise certainly is a motivator.”

There is beauty to be found in every moment, whether that involves a perfect sky, a stolen kiss, or a bittersweet good-bye, and Breyette has made a career of capturing such beauty. With that success comes the perceived threat of “selling out”, but Breyette has remained true to his vision, and sees no pressing reason to reconcile art and commerce.

“I don’t think the two have to be opposing forces,” he claims. “I’ve never subscribed to the notion that commercial success somehow diminishes artistic integrity. Sport stars switch teams and hawk cereal for million dollar contracts and their athletic merit isn’t devalued or considered compromised. My artwork has evolved over the years but the basic core of what I am doing now is the same as what I was doing when I wasn’t making money from it.”

He exhibits a down-to-earth, pragmatic attitude toward his artwork, displaying none of the tortured tantrums and theatrics that some of us use as an excuse for bad behavior. It’s this refreshing lack of pretense that lends his artwork an accessible appeal. He connects to the viewer on the most basic level – in the universal recognition of a moment, while still allowing for a distinctly individual interpretation of the details in an image.

The growth of an artist is a fascinating process to witness, and can only be gleaned from a retrospective look at the long-term output of the subject. Breyette has already amassed a sizable body of work. Upon viewing his collection, the gradual evolution of a true artist is revealed. Early work was passionate, raw, rough around the edges. As he grew, his style refined itself without losing any of its integrity. The passion never left, but the execution rose to its level.

Summer Moved On is Breyette’s first book, and offers a selection of his work in one place for the first time. As a theme, Summer is certainly a fertile pasture; mixed with Breyette’s eye for the erotic, it’s a combustible combination, and some of his most sexual images are on display in the book despite his disclaimers.

“My art is not all about sex. As much as I may find a sunset, waterfall or glass skyscraper beautiful, I find that same kind of beauty in a shirtless guy. For me, the male body is a **true** work of art. Perhaps growing up in an atmosphere where it would have been detrimental to my health to be caught ogling a hot guy is why I am so drawn to capturing that taboo eye candy on paper.”

His work, as erotic and sexual as it often is, retains an innocence ~ an untouchable, ingenuous quality that cannot be denied or denounced by more salacious readings or the

condemnation of a questionable moral high-ground. More than a desire to turn the viewer on or inspire torrid thoughts of sex, Breyette's aim is to connect to his audience, and offer something he missed when growing up.

"People like to see their lives, their loves and their fantasies represented in art," he muses. "If my art does that for someone... speaks to them in some way, supports their identity then that is great."

As for the relevance of Art in the world today, he is practical, but respectful. "Art is something that does not need a purpose but none the less has one," he says. "It is critical to the human spirit while seemingly utterly pointless... Art opens the mind, whether it is to new ideas and visions, wonderment and fantasy or different perspectives. It can inspire and enlighten, it soothes and provokes, it's emotional and impractical, and it connects people in the simplest way; through common appreciation."

The world is in a vastly different place than it was when Breyette grew up, but his passion and appreciation – for beauty, for love, for a human connection – has endured. Like the mountains, the lakes, the streams - and the winters and summers too - the beauty of a moment lasts in the eyes and the work of the artist.