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Carl Samson

BY JENNIFER KORNEGAY



When I asked artist Carl Samson “What moves you about portraiture?”, the short pause and obvious excitement in his voice let me know I had found the right question, the simple probe that opens an artist and leads to a great interview.

“I am excited by the awesome variety of nature,” he said. “It is incredible how no two people look alike. I am constantly amazed by the complexity and vitality of the human form.”

As he talked on and praised “the overwhelming beauty” of eyes, noses, cheekbones and the other shapes and parts that comprise a human face, emotion flowed through his words. If I could have observed him, this was a telephone interview), I just know I would have seen his eyes sparkling with the same life and the same vitality that he sees in others.

It is this life, this complex jumble of physical characteristics and inner personality that inspires awe in Samson when he

paints a portrait.

“With some clients, you establish a connection that helps reveal and develop their portrait,” he said. “When a client is engaged in the process, when you get that human connection, it is so enjoyable.”

Looking at his works, the variety of texture, color and shape in nature that so moves him is immediately evident. No two subjects could look less alike than young Megan and (previous page). One is a fresh young girl, just beginning her life’s journey, the other a distinguished older gentleman in the golden years of his. The myriad of differences in color and shape between these two must have given Samson great joy when painting them.

Yet, for all their differences, there is a common thread. Both must have made that connection with Samson, for both are fully revealed in these paintings.

OPPOSITE: Carl Samson, Sara and Critter, oil on canvas, 48 x 34

ABOVE LEFT : Carl Samson, Benjamin Gettler, oil on canvas, 54 x 42

ABOVE RIGHT: Carl Samson, Megan, oil on canvas, 16 x 20

like happiness in his broad smile, while Megan reveals a somber wisdom that she herself may not even be aware of.

But it is no grand feat for a subject to give a glimpse of his soul; the accomplishment lies with the artist. It is his grand feat to capture the revelation on canvas, to have an eye so trained that all the brief moments of greatness in hours of sittings can be pulled out, saved up and put together for the finished piece.

Samson accomplishes this by painting from life whenever possible. He explained that a photograph portrays only a milli-second of time.

"You always hear people say, that photo doesn't look like me," he said. "That's because the short window of time that is captured in a photo is not enough to represent someone's character."

When painting from life, Samson has the time to observe the whole of the subject's character. He encourages conversation and looks for the tiny revelations.

"I talk with them and try to find out what they are passionate about," he said. "When I find that, we talk about it more, and then I see the sparks."

By the third or fourth sitting, his subjects are comfortable and relaxed with him. He is then able to find the less obvious characteristics that are unique to them.

Samson understands the need to sometimes use photographs for part of the process. He uses photography to help him find a good pose for a subject, but he uses only black and white film.

"I use black and white because there is no color photography that matches the colors seen by a trained eye."

With all the emphasis on "a trained eye," how did Samson train his? His interest in art began in childhood. He still has a drawing of horses in a pasture that he created at age six. The most defining point in his life as an artist may have come when he met fellow artist Allan Banks at age fourteen. He passed an exhibition of Banks' work in his hometown of Sandusky, Ohio and was intrigued.

"To put it mildly, I was blown away," he said. "And when I learned that I could meet the man who had painted these beautiful pictures and actually study under him, I just couldn't believe it."

He studied with Banks until he was eighteen and the close relationship that they formed has had a profound influence on Samson's development. Banks is one of the leading proponents of painting in the *plein air* tradition, or painting in natural light, and Samson has followed in his footsteps.

"I am a purist when it comes to natural light," Samson

said. "I use only natural light to paint because by my estimation, nothing else comes close to giving you the view you need."

At 18, he left Ohio and moved to Boston to accept the Alvord-Little Fine Arts Scholarship and become one of the last two pupils of then 87-year-old R.H. Ives Gammell, the most notable exponent of the Boston School tradition. Samson continued his training with Richard Lack in Washington D.C. and returned to Ohio in 1986 to take up residence in Cincinnati. He then took an interest in and began to study with Cincinnati artist, Frank Duveneck.

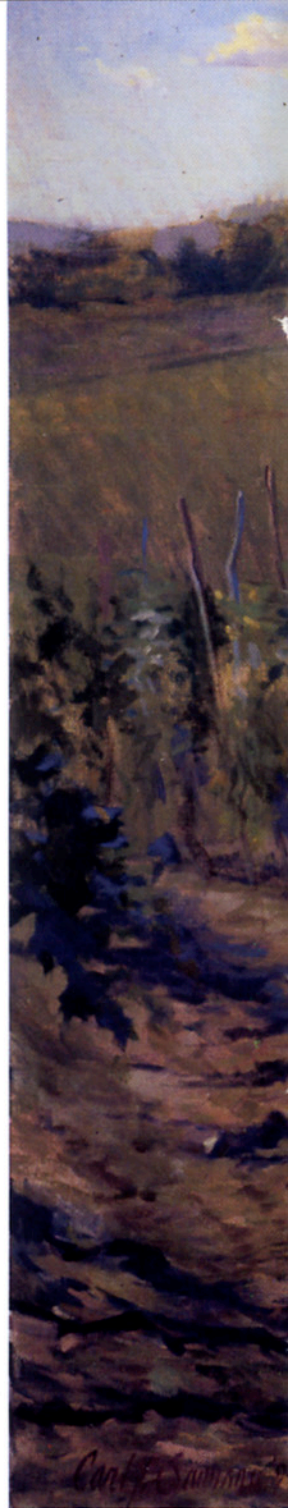
Studying with such renowned artists has given Samson a real depth of experience and he considers himself a blend of the more linear Boston tradition and the mass-emphasizing tradition of Duveneck and other Cincinnati artists.

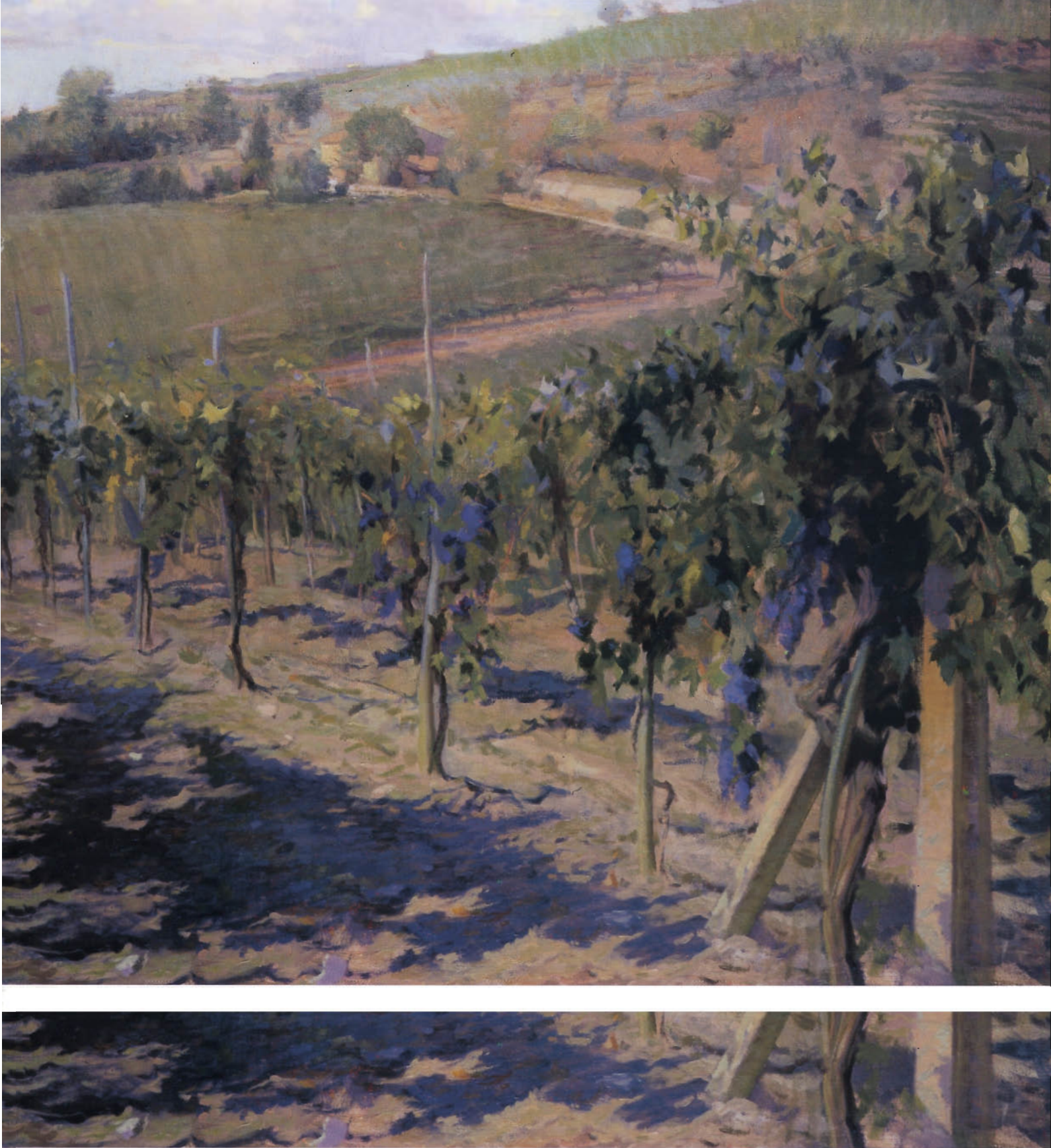
"I have been significantly influenced by Duveneck's view of the head as a three-dimensional solid and therefore I have a more sculptural approach than other painters trained in the Boston School," he said.

While Samson's talent in portraiture is immense—he has won numerous awards, including the Grand Prize John Howard Sanden Award for Excellence in Portrait Painting and the Portrait Institute Award for Distinguished Achievement in Portrait Painting at the National Portrait Competition—it does not lessen his work in other areas. He is one of America's premier contemporary realist painters and his beautiful landscapes range from the American Southwest to Monet's gardens in Giverny, France. In his landscapes you see again his fascination with nature's variety and its infinite storehouse of color, pattern, texture and shape.

Samson believes strongly that all painters should be well-rounded.

"I try to steer aspiring portrait artists to paint all subjects,





not just portraits,” he said. “They all help you learn.” Closing my interview, I asked Samson another basic question, “What best sums up your approach to portraiture?” Again, I was rewarded with a telling, engaging answer.

“It has been my goal to connect with other people,” he said. “When you have passion for human connection, you’ll see

help them tell it through your work.”

Samson’s statement proves that he is a “people person” in the truest sense of the phrase, and it is this love of his subjects that makes his portraits the exquisite art that they are.

