

T O N Y L U C I A N I

Articles / Reviews

**Bruno Capolongo 2011 Invitational Juried Exhibition
Hamilton Conservatory for the Arts Gallery, Hamilton, Ontario**

'**Contemplation**', oil on canvas, 32" x 48"

First Prize Award

Introduction by the Curator:

It is well known that to discern the general intellectual, moral and cultural climate of an era is possible through the window of the arts. I think Luciani's '**Contemplation**' is just such a painting, a pane of glass in a window to our time.

The urban context for this scene is that of a vandalized brick wall and pavement. The sole figure, a young woman in meditation, sits in the lower centre. Like the wall itself, graffiti of sorts riddles the canvas of her body. Worn and scarred, she sits as one snared by the spurious glitter of pantheism, striving to transcend, to fill that God shaped void. It is a picture of deep longing. She is not nude, but in a sense she is *naked* before all who gaze upon her, and her scars, those of true consequence, are etched not on flesh, but seared in memory and soul. So she sits, consumed in her vacuous pursuit, a wandering soul, not once lost, but lost still.

When I first saw the painting I immediately thought of it as emblematic of how we in our relativistic, post-Christian West have embraced Pantheism, existentialism and a make-it-up as-you-go spirituality. And while the painting is complex, eliciting an entirely different response in some, for me it brings to mind the word's of G.K.Chesterton, with which I will conclude my remarks about the painting.

Chesterton, one of the great minds of his day, observed that:

"The danger of disbelieving in God is not that [we] will believe in nothing; alas, it is much worse, the danger in disbelieving in God is that we'll end up believing in just about *anything*."

Bruno Capolongo

Winter 2008 AMERICAN ARTIST MAGAZINE, Drawing Edition

by Linda S. Price

Canadian artist Tony Luciani reveals much about his life in his detailed drawings, which meld images from his imagination as well as from on-site studies.

Art as Self-Portrait

"Drawing is a lost art," Tony Luciani says regretfully. "A gallery owner once told me many students come to see him with their portfolios filled with finished paintings—only. With digital photography it's too easy to take a picture and just copy it exactly without much thought. Often young artists today seem to want immediate satisfaction—it's too tedious to stand in front of a subject and draw it—so they miss the gratifying process of starting with an initial idea expressed in a few thumbnail scribbles, proceeding to a compositional sketch, then on to a detailed study, before even considering the completed painting. Each work should ultimately be a self-portrait that must come from within. If it's the product of simply copying, the work becomes merely a decoration, detached from who you are as an artist."

Luciani's drawings and paintings, on the contrary, reveal a great deal about who he is and what's going on in his life. When his marriage dissolved he embarked on his **Family series**. Drawings of partial heads and views of backs of the artist and his two children reflected what he was feeling—ashamed, embarrassed, and in hiding. Eventually the series evolved into each family member standing on their own. This gradually became the **Body Parts series** on the theme of coming out of the darkness and revealing oneself again. Next came the **Window Scenes series** in which, as Luciani explains, "There is a glass barrier between you and the world. You can observe but can't participate." Finally, after four or five years, Luciani became whole again, and he started doing sky paintings, so colorful and free-flowing they prompted a friend to comment, "You're back." Until then, the artist had no idea how closely his work reflected his life.

The **Lost in Transition series** originated with a dream; the artist dreamt he was lost in a tall cornfield where everything looked the same, and he had no sense of direction. At the time he'd moved to a farm where he felt he didn't belong. "I was an artist of Italian heritage living in a predominately German/Dutch farming

area, so I stood out," he explains. He is the mannequin in this series, wanting to belong but always out of place. The nude female form is vulnerable with nothing to hide. In **'Gossip'** he is plopped down in a field of cows. Behind his back, a large black crow sits whispering rumors and falsehoods about the newcomer. In **'Bound'** the question is whether the birds are wrapping or releasing the twine around the misplaced mannequin while the artist's cat intensely watches from atop one of the surrounding hay bales. This series ended abruptly when Luciani moved to a beautiful little town populated with other artists, musicians, and poets, a place where he finally felt at home.

Another unique series grew out of his time on the farm, but rather than being a profound comment on his life, it revolved around intriguing abstract shapes. Luciani had made many trips to the county dump and, although the image of mounds of discarded tires stayed in his head, it was months before he realized he wanted to draw them. And so began the **Re-Tired series**. "I asked the groundskeeper if I could hang around and do sketches of the tires," he recalls. "The man took a step back and hesitantly agreed. While I walked around taking reference photos and doing thumbnail drawings, I could see him pointing me out to people and making the crazy motion with his finger." Luciani squinted to see the abstract pattern of the tires and how the light hit them. As he drew he didn't hesitate to change things, including the patterns of the treads, to suit his artistic purposes. "I try to capture the feeling I get from the mental visualization of my subject," he says. "Subject matter is less important than mood and feeling, both of which come from within me."

Regardless of his subject matter, Luciani's more complex paintings always begin with charcoal drawings. He starts with quick sketches that he likens to one-minute gesture drawings in life-drawing class. The first sketches are abstract line drawings that establish the positive and negative shapes, as well as the dark-light pattern. Luciani may move objects or add imaginary ones if the arrangement requires it. In this stage the artist is working out compositional problems in his drawing—making sure that the viewer's eye will move around the picture plane without making the eye path obvious or the composition too structured or static. If he is dealing with architectural subjects, Luciani may do more detailed sketches of selected parts of the building for later reference. At one time he did most of his drawing on site, but as he grows older he completes about half his finished drawings in the studio, relying on quick on-site sketches, memory, imagination, and reference photos. But he emphasizes, "I'm not copying the photos. They are just a reminder of certain aspects that intrigued me initially. It could be the light, the mood, atmosphere, or perhaps a striking color. After blocking in the completed composition, I rip up the photograph because I don't want to be influenced or restricted by it. I want to be free to work from my imagination, create light and shadow, add elements, or take them away." As an example, he points out **'Rooster's Perch'**, which began

as a photo of a local building in the snow. Most of the objects inside and outside of the shop were products of the artist's imagination. "The painting," he says, "shows the organized chaos of living in a small town where most of the residents are recycled. They come from other places and have done other things."

Once he has resolved his composition in sketches, the artist begins his finished drawing on heavy-duty, smooth, acid-free paper that he coats with watered-down Golden molding paste to give it a tooth, and to provide the visible brushstrokes he likes. He draws the main lines and fixes them with workable fixative. Then, with soft, wide chisel brushes, he smudges high-quality vine charcoal all over the paper, making it as dark as possible without losing the lines. (If the drawing is intended as reference for a painting he makes a tracing of the original drawing before he tones the paper so he can easily see the lines.) Luciani can then go lighter using a kneaded eraser or go darker with charcoal. He prefers Wolff's carbon pencils, ranging from HB to 6B, for details. He likes this brand because they are more consistent, with fewer annoying hard spots. Although they look like charcoal, they have some graphite in them, which makes them smoother. He blends some areas with cotton balls, tissues, or his fingers to achieve the desired tone, working over the entire sheet of paper and building up areas gradually. He often looks at his drawing in a mirror to check for compositional errors, tonal weight, and proportions. One of the reasons the artist likes to work with charcoal pencil is because it's correctable.

If a finished drawing is not going to be used as reference for a painting, Luciani fixes and frames it. If he intends to continue on to a painting, he transfers the image to the canvas by covering the back of his sheet of tracing paper with charcoal, placing it on the canvas and then going over the lines of his drawing with a pencil. To preserve the transferred lines he goes over them in pen-and-ink, and then glazes over the canvas with an earth tone that allows him to see the lines underneath. His preferred paints are Old Holland oils.

Sometimes his drawings are exhibited with his paintings, but he says, "Many galleries, it seems, don't have the space or inclination for displaying drawings these days. People like color and paint, so most galleries prefer higher priced items to hang on their walls. But I'm stubborn. I've never been discouraged by that. I love drawings because you can see the artist's thought process, and that's intriguing for me. Ultimately, paintings may be the end result, but I like to see how they were arrived at. And drawings that are carried to their fullest potential are major artworks themselves."

About the Artist

Tony Luciani was born and raised in Toronto and became interested in art at a very early age. In high school he took an intensive art curriculum that included four years of life drawing, as well as sculpture, art history, graphics, and illustration. With the intention of going into advertising, he enrolled at Sheridan Community College, in Oakville, Ontario, but was so far ahead of the other students in his course, that he became restless and left after a year. When he applied to the Ontario College of Art, in Toronto, they took a look at his portfolio and advanced him to their third year of the fine-arts program. He spent a post-graduate year off campus in Florence, Italy, where he studied the great masters of Renaissance art. Returning home at the age of 21, he found gallery representation immediately and has been painting full-time ever since. Luciani is represented by Loch Gallery, in Toronto, Winnipeg, and Calgary.

(excerpts)

The Art Post

" They favour freehand drawing in place of architectural exactitude, and contain some Citizen Kane-like perspectives and bendings of space that impart a truer feel of the place than the limitations of reality would ever have surrendered."

Focus

"Tony Luciani's paintings are somewhat evocative of Dutch Masters such as Van Eyck, and Italian Renaissance Masters at the same time. Exoticism and simplicity often exist within a single canvas, lending an unearthly (or other earthly) ambiance to the painting's subjects and interiors."

Robert Reid, KW Record

'Luciani's art is moral and spiritual'

"Whether architectural interiors or exteriors, landscapes, village streetscapes, figure studies or portraits, Luciani's representative work reflects and expresses psychological and emotional states. As such, his work is deeply moral and spiritual, without being religious in an orthodox sense."

Robert Reid, KW Record

'Compelling Images'

"Although not surrealistic in a conventional sense, the pictures are imbued with a hallucinatory quality as it is arresting."

Crossroads, Brad Blain, director, KW Public Art Gallery

"There is more to Luciani's art than superior execution; there is a spiritual quality and mystery. As viewers, we are challenged and rewarded by the work of this artist."

Durham Art Gallery, October 10 to December 6, 2009

Transitions

Nationally acclaimed local artist Tony Luciani is exhibiting a selection of paintings and drawings, created between 1980 and present, which reflect his own transition to rural Canadian life.

Luciani's work is more rooted in traditional concerns than contemporary art trends and fashions. His art is representational: realistic in name yet poetic in essence. His practice is determined by the values of hard work, precise craftsmanship and a distinct imagination. What he brings

into the present from the past is a set of artistic skills derived from an in-depth conceptual and technical exploration of the masters. His references are to be found among the Italian Renaissance painters as well as Jan Van Eyck and Bruegel the Younger. He admires the work of German artist, Käthe Kollwitz (1867 - 1945), Canadian artist, Eric Freifeld (1919 - 1984), and British artist, Stanley Spencer (1891 - 1959).

Drawing and painting from life, from observation and from inspiration, Luciani's streetscapes, interiors, exteriors, landscapes, still lifes and portraits are careful renderings in subtle colors and hues, lights and shadows, and they express profound visual intelligence and emotional power. His subject matter is first person driven, rich with the narrative of daily life. While he takes a real subject – a specific scene, a person, or objects – he then emphasizes or exaggerates certain qualities; takes away and adds on what he considers of key importance and creates nuanced compositions.

“Rather than achieving a photo-realistic likeness,” Luciani says, “I try to capture the feeling I get from a mental visualization of my subject. I imagine it rather than copy it. Subject matter is less important than mood and feeling, both of which come within myself. This is why I would call my work interpretive. I put so much of myself into my paintings that, in a sense, each one becomes a self-portrait.”

Before relocating to Durham, Luciani sometimes appeared within his paintings as a displaced female mannequin. Now, more settled, his work “shows the organized chaos of living in a small town, where most of the residents are recycled.” They come from other places and have done other things.

The inclusion of drawings in the exhibition is meant both to reveal the elaborate technical process that underlies the paintings, and to highlight the alternative and more experimental forms of expression afforded. While some viewers might be particularly impressed with the precision and technical mastery with which he paints and draws, others will look beyond the technical mastery and search for the artist's soul.

As Stanley Spencer once said: “In order to understand any picture of mine, it means taking a seat and preparing to hear the story of my life.”

Hanover Post, November 14, 2009

By Laura MacDuff/Post Reporter

Art As Passion

WEST GREY- When asked what makes him feel inspired, artist Tony Luciani, 53, looks away, and smiles. He says "I just need to do it. It's a passion. If I can't do it for whatever reason, after three days I start to get anxious." Luciani then laughs. Surrounding him are his paintings-a collection of works that demonstrate his transitions in life, his personal feelings, his emotions. Neatly hung on the walls of the Durham Art Gallery, his 40 works are being showcased until December 6.

"I try to capture the feeling I get from a mental visualization of my subject. I imagine it rather than copy it. Subject matter is less important than mood and feeling, both of which come within myself. This is why I would call my work interpretative. I put so much of myself into my paintings that, in a sense, each one becomes a self-portrait," says Luciani. His paintings feature musical instruments, buildings, portraits, skies, and even a mannequin who finds itself in the oddest of situations for a mannequin to be in. The paintings make you stop, comprehend, and stare in fascination at the detail, the grace, and the extreme talent and passion.

"Do you remember TV Guide magazine? They used to have these contests on the back page, where you were asked to copy an image, and mail it in for a prize. I did this week after week, too young to even know what a postage stamp was" says Luciani. "One day I got a disturbing letter back, with all of my drawings I had previously sent, and the accusation of cheating. I cried my eyes out. I remember my older brother saying, 'Well kid, you must be darn good, if they think that.' I was seven, or eight at the time."

In the years following, Luciani attended Central Technical High School in Toronto, taking the art program. Then, after a year at Sheridan College, he was accepted into 3rd year at the Ontario College of Art. At age 21, Luciani did his post-graduate studies in Florence, Italy. His work has been featured in many exhibits in Toronto, Montreal, New York, Monaco, London, along with closer venues such as in Owen Sound, Kitchener, Guelph, Fergus and Bayfield.

Luciani even was awarded the Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation Grant, funding which is given out to promising young artists to assist them in their formative years. And Luciani wasn't just awarded this once, he received it two times (1977, 1979), and was also given a purchase award by Greenshields in 1989.

"For someone to get it twice, that's a great accomplishment. I'm very proud," says Luciani. "Greenshield's, in fact, thought of awarding an unprecedented third grant, but they decided to purchase a painting from me instead." That work permanently hangs at Canada House in London, England.

Years later, Luciani, spends his days in his studio at home stretching canvas and cleaning brushes, and pouring his heart out from brush to canvas.

Among his latest accomplishments is being a finalist in 'The Kingston Prize: Canada's National Juried Portrait Competition', a travelling exhibition with artists from all over Canada.

"It was one of the thirty selected, from 471 submissions." says Luciani. "This particular portrait is very personal. It's about healing and resolve. It was never meant to be shown to anyone. Infact, this showcase has been a difficult one to accept. It's called Wonder Woman". And upon first glance, the portrait strikes you with sadness, but it's all about hope and strength.

Luciani's artist's statement reads:

"The painting 'Wonder Woman' began as an intense emotional response to my partner's breast cancer diagnosis and her courageous voyage to find healing. I witnessed first hand the many setbacks of the psychological and physical challenges that people in her position were being subjected to. Through all of it, however, my life deepened in profundity. In the portrait, I tried to capture the meaningful spirit of quiet strength, yet acknowledging the helplessness cancer brings."

A woman, unclothed is standing, placing a protective hand over the fresh, painful markings of breast surgery. The surrounding bruises discolours her skin, and her hair is gone, but beyond the end result of a mastectomy, the viewer is struck by the woman's eyes.

"'Wonder Woman' is about humanity's fragility and vulnerability, about

life and the power to endure and overcome. It is about our questions of who we are, where we are going and how to uncover a way to achieve our dreams, no matter what obstacles fall onto our paths. 'Wonder Woman' is my ultimate hero," says Luciani in his artist's statement.

The portrait, along with all the other finalists, is available for viewing at www.kingstonprize.ca.

"I love living in Durham. It seems it's a gathering spot for so many talented artists, writers and musicians. And all very nice people too," says Luciani. "I feel so much a part of it now."

Luciani lived in Harriston for 18 years before moving to Durham. He was born and raised in Toronto.

The Creative Process: An Emotional Adventure

by Ruth Mittelholtz, Mozaic Magazine, Nov/Dec 2006

An interview with artist Tony Luciani

Spiritual, mysterious, psychological, moral, and other earthly: these are some of the terms used by reviewers to describe the work of Durham artist, Tony Luciani. As I look at the images in his studio and on his website www.starvingartist.ca, I see all of this, as well as sensitivity, drama, mood, and humour. In style his work is representational, and in some senses traditional. It is apparent at once that he has great technical gifts. He works in a broad range of media including charcoal, oil, egg tempera, watercolour and pastel and explores an equally broad range of subject material from portraits and figure studies to interiors, landscapes and village streetscapes.

What Tony himself says about his work is that he is trying to portray from within himself the mood and feeling that he gets from the subject

material. He describes his work as "interpretive realism, traditionally inspired."

Tony honed his gifts through formal studies during most of the 1970's, first at Toronto's Central Technical School, and then at Sheridan Community College, the Ontario College of Art, and, at the postgraduate level, in OCA's Off-Campus Program in Florence, Italy. He has been a full-time practicing artist for 30 years, with work in private and public collections in Canada, the USA, and Europe, including Guelph's Macdonald Stewart Art Gallery, the Art Gallery of Mississauga, and Canada House, London, England. He is represented commercially by the Loch Gallery in Toronto, Winnipeg and Calgary.

As a reflection of his belief that local arts are important to a community, Tony is the founder of the Minto Arts Council and the Harriston-Minto Heritage Gallery, a non-profit volunteer-run gallery. Until moving to Durham, he was on the gallery's board of directors, curating many of the exhibitions. He says he is amazed with a lot of the work of local artists he meets. "They just need the space to publicly show their talents, and the encouragement to continue." Tony also offers private art classes to groups and individuals of all ages and at all levels from beginner to advanced.

At his studio in a former church, I ask Tony first about the obvious, his great skill in drawing. He says with both modesty and confidence that all his instructors drew – it was a time when drawing was an important part of art school curricula, and cites one of them, Eric Freifeld, as an artist whose work he especially admires. (Eric Freifeld, 1919–1984, Canadian Drawing Master.) Although he has worked in many media, drawing is his passion, and will always be number one.

How does he manage to express so much feeling while working within what might seem to be the tight boundaries of representation?

"The most important thing is the feeling behind the painting", he says, but he does want to know that an artist has an understanding of the technical background. He compares painting to writing: "Before you can write a book, you must first learn the alphabet, then words, sentences and eventually create a story." Similarly, every artist must start at the beginning, with the basics, the bones, in order to get to the point of relaying a message, a thought or a feeling. An artist may work in various media, but the artist is still the same person inside.

He gives as an example the Spanish realist painter, Antonio López García, whose paintings of mundane objects such as kitchen sinks are deeply imbued with emotion. It is the atmosphere in the work that is important. Picasso was a technically gifted artist who used his abilities for expressive purposes. If an artist isn't in touch with his feelings "it's as if he just throws the paint on the canvas and says 'there.'" Tony's response to this is, "OK, what is it?" At Canada House in London he's happy to have his work hanging next to a painting by Canadian abstract expressionist Jean Paul Riopelle. "He got it. He was true to himself".

When Tony views work by others he's looking to see if there's a "hum." It's hard to explain what this is, he says. Only a few pieces in the world have given him that "hum." "You look a piece and feel it in your gut. It's not completely about subject or colour or anything visual. You get an electricity inside of yourself that encompasses your whole body. It's very personal for sure. What I get from a work of art, or listening to certain music, and what you'd get, will be completely different sensations".

But how does one translate feelings into art? As an illustration, Tony describes how his most recent series of drawings and oil paintings, titled 'Lost in Transition', came about. He doesn't analyze intellectually: images "just come" to him, and this series started with a vision of himself in a high cornfield, lost. "The tall stocks were symbolic of everything that looks and feels the same. Direction was confusing". As a metaphor, he used a store-front mannequin torso that was gathering dust in his studio as the model representing himself and ultimately anyone else who feels misplaced or in limbo. Without a head, arms or legs, the torso awkwardly appears in a pasture surrounded by cattle and a gossiping crow, in a horse stall mimicking a neighboring Clydesdale, in a hayfield bound by twine, and in an antique storefront window mingling with other castaways, but in all the paintings the theme is similar, wanting to fit in. With the series ended, he can see that the significance of the mannequin is that it doesn't belong in the settings in which it is painted, and that he was working through feelings of being "hopelessly lost, not knowing where you are emotionally or physically." Now that he's 'found Durham' - the town itself and a suitable studio and home - he finds that the series has simply stopped.

Tony shares another example of how feelings – feelings not necessarily consciously recognized – direct his art making. Ten years ago he was working on a series of paintings that began with family images of his

wife and children, progressed to images of himself and his children with faces hidden and then to "unclothed body parts with no faces" (drawings and paintings of figures cropped by the edge of the paper or canvas to leave only the torso, or the back, or the legs), and then to interiors looking out of closed windows. Finally, paintings of skies began to appear. A friend of his pointed out to him that the series reflects his re-emerging from a dark period (the breakup of his marriage, and death of his father) into the sky, as if he were free again. The point is, the series was not planned; it just happened, and in retrospect, he was able to see where he was going.

Tony sums up his creative process by saying that making art for him is "an emotional adventure".

What does the future hold? In view of his recognized mastery of technique, I am surprised when he says he finds painting "very difficult." He "draws in his painting" but is intrigued by paintings that have "no trace of drawing." He offers as examples the paintings of Lucien Freud (British painter and printmaker who during the course of his career moved from a meticulously detailed style to a broader handling of paint) and Francis Bacon (Anglo-Irish figurative painter who employs thick layers of paint). Tony is moving towards this painterly approach, but the evolution is not something that can be forced. Like thematic subject material, style must come from within. One must be one with one's work.

It's all part of the adventure.