

SURPRISE!

David Lebow injects humor, mystique and rich color into his intriguing compositions.

By Nancy Ellis

It is the unusual palette that strikes the eye first in a David Lebow still life—bold and brilliant color in contrast to the sombre, Old World feeling more typical of this artistic genre.

But the surprise is not only in Lebow's lavish use of rich color, but also in his composition. There is often a surfeit of objects—flowers, ripe fruit, antique porcelain pitchers and vases, and sometimes reading material as irreverent as a comic book—

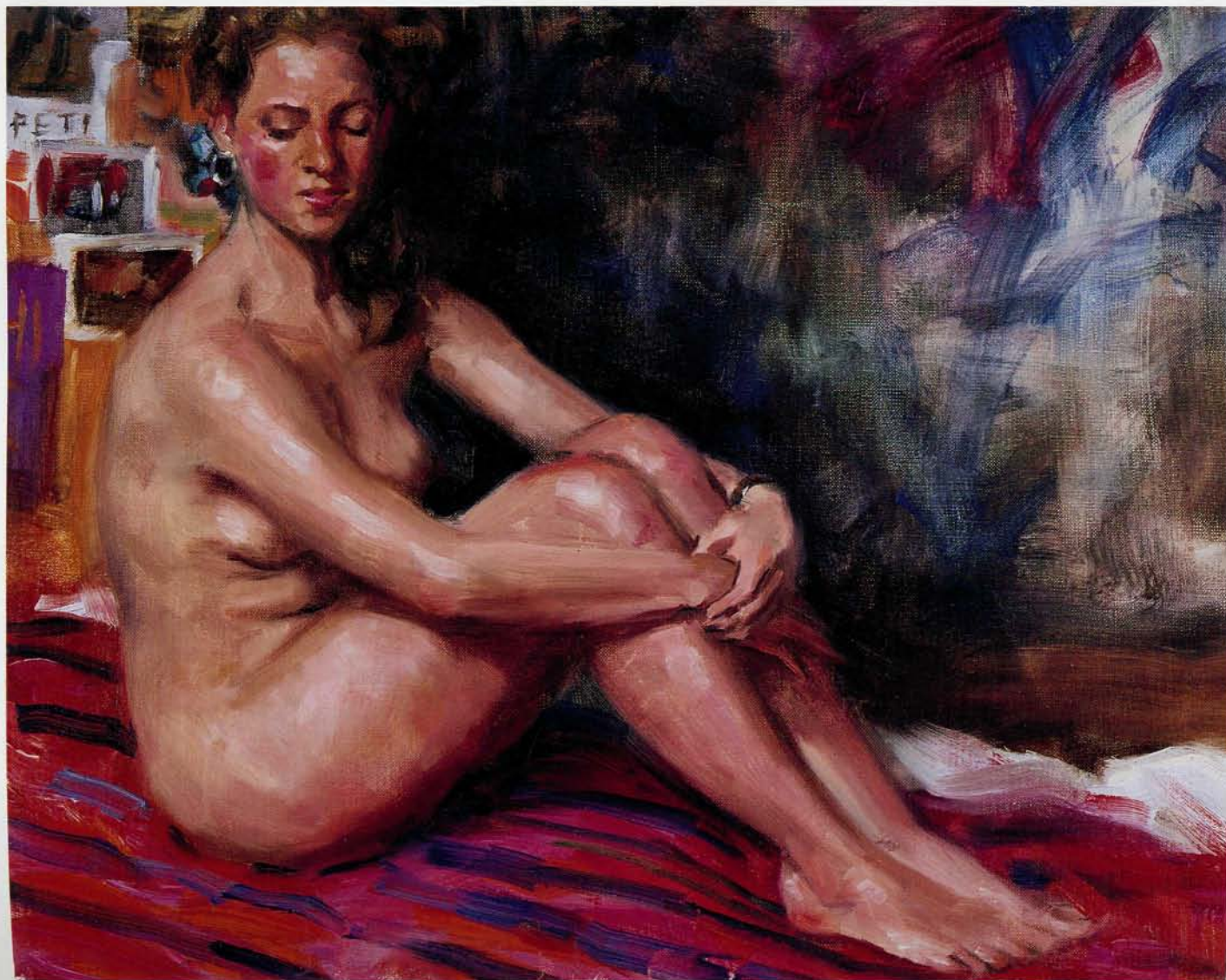
spilling off the edges of the canvas.

These paintings are contemporary, and stretch the more traditional boundaries of still life in a way that is very pleasing to the eye. Lebow injects humor as well as mystery into many of his compositions, and delights in the varied reactions of his viewers.

Yet still life is only part of this versatile Santa Fe artist's repertoire. His figurative portraits of women—always painted from life—also are suffused with color and mys-

tery. They are beautiful, yet contemplative women, and the viewer senses an entirely separate scenario beyond the canvas. His varied landscapes, painted more loosely and on-site, reveal yet another side of David Lebow.

Underlying all of this artist's varied work is a classical background in drawing and composition, garnered over years of study that began in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where he grew up. "My mother was always painting," Lebow recalls. "She really is a very good



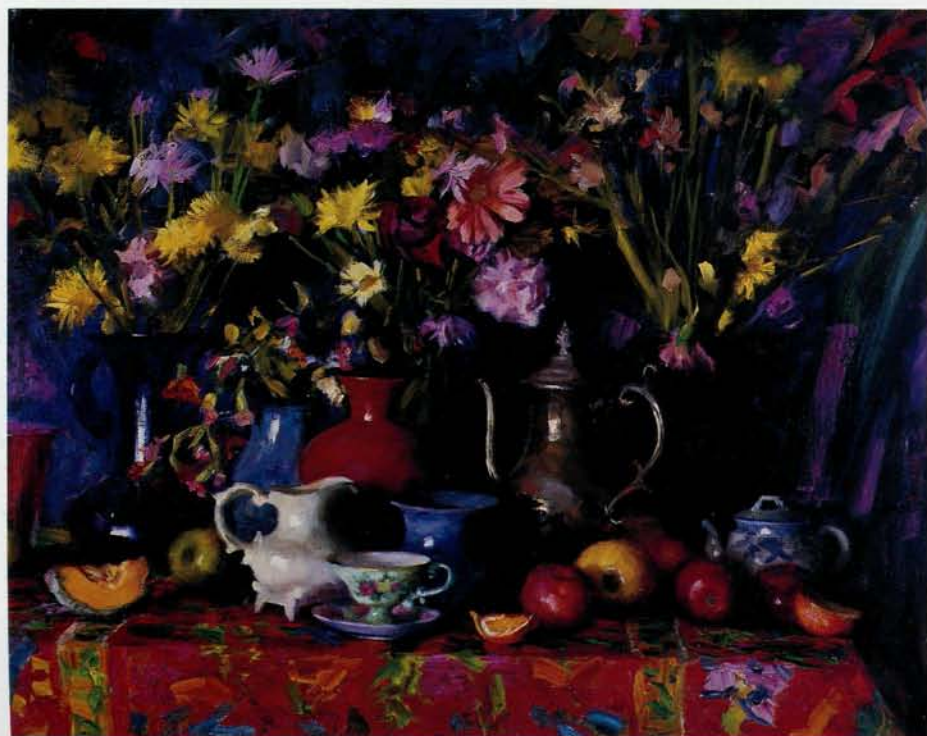
"Repose, oil, 16" x 20"



"At the Shrine of the Feminine," oil, 56" x 48"



"Purple Umbrella and Pineapple," oil, 24" x 30"



"Green Teacup," oil, 30" x 38"

painter, although she never pursued it as a career." But when her son showed extraordinary interest and talent in art, "she was always encouraging and supportive, as was my father." Lebow studied art in school, as well as at classes outside, and by the time he was in 9th grade, he was already painting in oils.

After graduation from high school, Lebow left immediately for Los Angeles, where he spent a year at the Art Center College of Design. He followed that with one year in New York City and numerous classes at the Art Students League there, then later moved to Chicago where he attended classes at the American Academy of Art.

By the late 1970s, Lebow had settled in Boston, where he began to pursue his art on a fulltime basis. And this is where he learned the discipline so vital to a serious artist.

"I've always been interested in figurative painting, as well as in still life," Lebow says. "Actually, I like anything that will sit still long enough for me to paint." He considers himself a "loner" as a painter, enjoying being in the studio in a controlled light situation. And although he enjoys painting on location out-of-doors, he does not join in with other artists who sometimes paint in groups.

"I am a very social person," Lebow admits, "but most of my friends tend to be from other fields of endeavor besides art." In his spare time, Lebow likes to ride his mountain bike on trails that are easily accessible from his studio, and he enjoys attending films with friends.

It has been more than five years now since Lebow, at the urging of a friend, made a trip to Taos. Captivated by the legendary Northern New Mexico light, he decided to stay, and after several months there moved south to Santa Fe, where he has remained ever since.

At first, he recalls, "the color was intoxicating. And the exposure to so much color from the work of other artists was exciting." But you have to be careful, too, in your own work, he says, "not to be overwhelmed by the color, but to always make sure you have good drawing underneath."

Lebow's Santa Fe studio is as colorful as his art, overflowing with a jumble of toys, masks and other objects of beauty and interest that are often incorporated into his work. Two cats—long-time companions for the artist—keep him constant company.

When David Lebow paints, it is like a performance that is captured—actually solidified—on canvas. There is an energetic application of the paint; each stroke is put on as right as it can be, but with energy and flow. His ability to do this "just comes from lots of practice and years of experience," he says.



"Elizabeth," oil, 20" x 24"

And if Lebow's "performance" is well-drawn and well-painted all at once, "I get very excited," he says. And if it is not, the artist doesn't hesitate to trash it. "A lot of times I just scrape it off so I don't have to offend anyone, especially myself," he says, laughing. "Or, I just throw it out."

Many of Lebow's colorful still lifes overflow the edges of the canvas, not only with color but with composition. "I'm adding and subtracting things right up until the end," he admits. "I look at the overall composition almost as an abstraction that needs to be balanced." Although most of Lebow's time is spent in the studio, he does report a growing desire to spend more time outdoors. When working on a landscape painting outside of his studio, Lebow's strokes are looser, more abstract, and the color is tempered by atmospheric conditions.

Although the artist is very influenced by beauty, he doesn't "just like to paint pretty things," he says. "I like paintings that are interesting." Some of his more recent work, such as a very large canvas titled "At the



Shrine of the Feminine," is definitely a still life—abounding with the rich color, fruit, flowers and feminine objects—but it also packs a powerful message open to various interpretations. Another recent still life, "Ladies and Gentlemen of the Jury," juxtaposes a series of masks and dolls with several cartoon images, challenging the viewer to his or her own explanation.

"I have to paint every day," Lebow says. "It is like playing a musical instrument. You have to stay in practice. I think I would get sick if I didn't paint; it's not something I have a choice about. I feel very lucky to be able to do what I do, and make a living at it."

Viewers of Lebow's original work can find plenty of reason to agree.

David Lebow's work may be seen at Jan Ballew's Northern Gallery, located at 806 Old Santa Fe Trail (at the intersection of Old Santa Fe Trail and Old Pecos Trail). Hours: 10:00-5:30 Monday-Saturday and noon-4:00 Sunday. (505) 989-4336.