

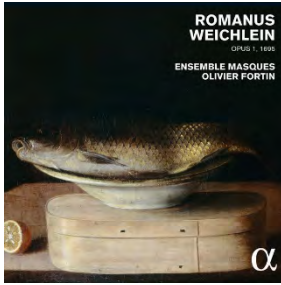
A note on my painting, *Chambers*, by John Hall



2020, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 36 in.

In writing about my painting *Chambers*, I must begin with a general note, and that is that I tend to pay less attention to a painting's iconographic content than to its formal and technical qualities. Composition, size, and surface qualities generally matter more to me than subject matter, and my subjects tend to reflect aspects of everyday life. Having said that, *Chambers* is a complex image—atypical for me—with a few unusual object juxtapositions that led me to create this note about the painting.

The idea for this painting began when fellow realist painter and friend Richard Thomas Davis introduced me to a modest still life painting he had stumbled upon while searching out Baroque chamber music. The painting had been used as the cover art for a CD of compositions by 17th-century Austrian Baroque composer Romanus Weichlein. The artist was Sebastien Stoskopff, a 17th-century German still life painter. He had made the painting, a small 17 x 24-inch oil, in the 1630s and Richard and I both found it charmingly odd. Though Stoskopff did produce larger, more elaborate and “flashier” still lifes I was struck by this one's simplicity and slightly offbeat juxtapositions—a cut lemon, a raw whole fish, a bowl, and a wood-shaving box, all sitting a little precariously on a table. Why, I wondered, was the heavy fish sitting in a heavy ceramic bowl on top of a more seemingly fragile light wooden box perched dangerously on the table's edge? After using the Internet to find the few available images of the original painting, and a couple of variations that Stoskopff painted (like Stoskopff, I also frequently work in series and produce variations on a theme), I decided to use his image and to blend some of his elements with others significant in the painting vocabulary I more typically use.



In *Chambers*, I retained Stoskopff's carp, lemon, and tabletop. The particular carp I used, however, is borrowed from another of his paintings, a close variation of the one used on the CD. This one featured the same ceramic bowl, wooden box, and candle. In my painting, I replaced his bowl with a more highly glazed Italian pasta bowl, and the box in my painting is a cardboard mailing box for a large limited edition book on Canadian artist Jack Chambers published in 1978 by the Toronto gallery known as Nancy Poole's Studio, which represented his work. I've also added a troubled sky background—appropriate given that *Chambers* was painted during the first wave of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic—and a bunch of grapes, and a small cluster of cellophane-wrapped candies.

I've used cloud-filled skies as backgrounds since the 1980s in paintings such as *Indigo* (below left, 1986, 60 x 60 in.). Coming out of a decade of making paintings that relied heavily on modernist conventions, including dramatically compacted pictorial space, the insertion of skies vividly opened up the space depicted in my still lifes. The cloudy skies also represented my new embrace of pre-modernist representational painting practices generally still out of favour in the 1970s and 80s. As was typical of many 17th-century tabletop still lifes, Stoskopff's painting contains a blank dark background. In this case it is quietly defined as a wall, thereby keeping the still life contained in a relatively shallow space. Structurally, my two paintings *Indigo* and *Chambers* are remarkably and coincidentally similar, though they were painted 34 years apart.



The bunch of grapes in *Chambers* is a direct reference to the frequent use of grapes in 17th-century northern European still life paintings. I first used grapes in the early-aughts in my *Quodlibet* series (example below left) as a way of linking my paintings to the 17th-century Dutch still life tradition. Similarly, the glossy ceramic bowl and cellophane-wrapped candies in *Chambers* are intended to make reference to the 20th-century photorealist conventions of careful depictions of highly shiny surfaces.



The cardboard box with "Chambers" written on it is an allusion, as is the painting's title *Chambers*, to Jack Chambers, a major Canadian realist painter who was active in the 60s and 70s. I first encountered his work when I was a student in Calgary in the early sixties when I saw two of his paintings in a travelling exhibition from the National Gallery of Canada on the subject of Canadian surrealism. Nancy Poole, his dealer in Toronto, produced a major publication on Chambers in 1978 and this is the box my copy of the book came in. Incidentally in 2003, the Nancy Poole's Studio became the Loch Gallery, which has represented me since 2010. Below are a 1970 *Chambers* oil on the left and a 2006 acrylic of mine on the right.



A final small element of note in *Chambers* is Stoskopff's treatment of the back edge of the lemon positioned to the left of the Chambers box. Compared to my hard, clearly defined edges as seen in the rendering of the box, candies, and grapes, Stoskopff's dissolving lemon seems almost reckless to a conservative like me. While I have not had the pleasure of seeing his 1630 painting in the original, I am intrigued by the way the lemon seems to dissolve into the tabletop and by emphasizing and even enhancing Stoskopff's treatment of the lemon in *Chambers* I'm suggesting a kind of *that was then-this is now* or *that was him-this is me* contrast.



As a final note, American writer Philip Roth said of writers that we judge them by how well they tell their stories. He's telling us, I believe, that form in art is of paramount importance, and that subject matter and iconography are secondary. And supporting this argument, Alberta artist John Will (a former colleague of mine at the University of Calgary) observed of the text-based works in his 2020 Jarvis Hall Gallery exhibition: "Conceptually, this series of works is obviously text-based and the messages take care of themselves, but being a visual artist, I try to determine the success of these pictures on how they *look*". I agree with both Roth and Will and believe considerations of a painting's iconography and interpretation of its content to be secondary to an appreciation of its purely visual qualities.

John Hall

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