

# BARNEY LEVITT: AS I SEE IT

Whistler House Museum of Art  
243 Worthen Street  
Lowell, Massachusetts

May 1 through June 8

Simple still life scenes that overflow with intricate detail have become Barney Levitt's signature style. He creates collages of interesting items and interprets them in paint, always remaining faithful to the reality before him. The Whistler House Museum of Art is featuring 45 of his incredible contemporary realist oil paintings in their newest exhibition, "As I See It."



*As I See It*, oil on linen, 16" x 20".

The Whistler House Museum first contacted Levitt three years ago about the exhibit, which will showcase a mix of still lifes and landscapes, with the occasional figurative piece as well. "I wanted to reach as broad an audience as possible," Levitt said.

Vermeer and other Dutch Masters inspire his work, along with Pieter Claesz and contemporary realist painters like Jeffrey Larson and Scott Prior. His style involves a realism that's somehow heightened and perfected,

bringing out the beauty in everyday items by giving them both meaning and aesthetic. "It is always really fun for me, when I have a solo show," he said, "when you see an entire body of work that's yours in one place, it's pretty powerful."

Levitt is playing a role in the show's curation as well; he intends to group similar paintings together to form clusters of different types for different audiences. Landscapes are placed together, and still lifes with dark backgrounds will also form a group, as will the bright and sunny still lifes. Levitt also paints conceptually driven works that will be hung side by side. These paintings typically use the title to create metaphor — works with a hidden meaning that's often lighthearted, intended for a thoughtful laugh.

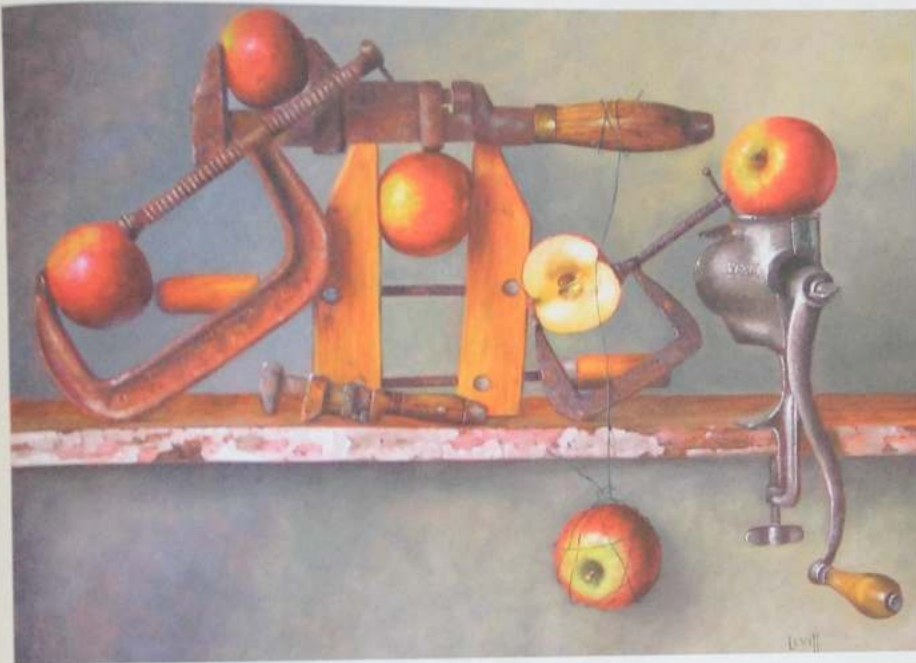
"Humor's a huge piece of it for me," he said. "I love when my pieces have a little tongue-in-cheek."

He sits between his studio's two windows in Jamaica Plain, the farther one casting westward light on the composition before him. He paints eight-hour days there, the space where he's worked since 1986, and every year he's created between 35-40 finished canvases. Levitt said he tries to create the scene with props that are set exactly how he wants to paint them, only referring to a two-dimensional image when he wants to include a bird or something else impossible to keep still. The still life's stage is complete with a white sheet backdrop; plastic fruit, silk flowers, vases and toys collected from antique stores fill the covered shelves below.

"I'm pretty literal," he said, "when I paint, I paint what I see."

He even suspends items from above when necessary, because he said the most important aspect in each work is the composition. For landscapes, he takes a number of photographs at a scene that strikes him, drawing a quick sketch if there's time since the light is too fickle to finish a painting in a sitting. He also writes down notes about the setting — like how the shadows are hitting or what shade of pink a building looks like in the light — so that important parts of experiencing the scene in person aren't forgotten.

Although Levitt's methods may seem traditional, the subjects of many works are anything but, often expressing a complex idea or creating a



*Nine to Five*, oil on panel, 16" x 20".

a baby's shoe and marbles, and "I WON" is set before a glass of wine and a crumpled score sheet.

Other works aren't so literal, and hide layers of meaning within the title. In one of Levitt's paintings for "As I See It," thick metal tools are balanced on an old shelf with peeling paint. Bright red apples balance inside every nook and cranny; one is even covered in thread and tied to a large wrench's handle hung below the shelf, suffocated and held captive by the string. The apples become more than just apples only when you learn that the work's title is "Nine to Five."

"I hope that there's a painting, at least one painting in this show, for everybody," he said, "I hope that everybody comes away with a really strong impression of one painting that just grabs them, one painting that really speaks to them."

Lindsey Davis

narrative by drawing comparisons between the objects that he carefully selects and arranges for each scene. His Scrabble series features the game set up for one player with a board, an Scrabble dictionary and letters that spell out different themed messages. "ITSABOY" is beside

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