ABOVE

The Way Through

2001, pastel, 16½ x 16. Collection Huntington Museum of Art, Huntington, West Virginia.

RIGHT

But I Am Done With Apple-Picking Now

2004, pastel, 5¼ x 5. Private collection.

OPPOSITE PAGE

Yield

2005, pastel, 22¼ x 22. Collection Ruth and Sid Lapidus.

The Meaning of Things

In contrast to his methodical, painstaking technique, **G. Daniel Massad** takes an intuitive approach to conceiving his pastel still lifes, allowing the imagery to emerge in its own time.

—

by Lynne Moss Perricelli

The still lifes of G. Daniel Massad exhibit a kind of inevitability. The fruits, bottles, bricks, and leaves seem to have always existed as they appear in the paintings, in their exact positions and in the very same light. Achieving such precision requires expert draftsmanship and an arduous method, but the process of selecting and arranging the objects comes about more indirectly. "This is the most important thing, but it is the hardest to talk about because it is the most mysterious and the least in my control," explains this Pennsylvania artist. "The idea for a new painting has to come to me. Virtually all of the paintings I have done in the last 25 years have begun in my mind's eye.

"The overall shape of the picture, the spatial relationships, the scale are all in my imagination from the beginning," he continues. "And it can happen at any time. The process is invention, just as it occurs in business or science or engineering. You're revolving around a problem, you can't get it and can't get it, and then you step on a bus and the solution comes to you. My mind is always trying to come up with the solution to a visual problem, to keep coming up with images that are interesting to me."

Besides the fruit, the objects in Massad's paintings are typically old, worn items he has collected from flea markets and junk shops. A recurring theme in the arrangement of the objects is that of time, or the suggestion of time passing. "I like to think about objects decaying, eroding, and disappearing," says Massad. "The key for me in still life is that it requires a change of perception. I love the way still lifes require the viewer to look at the world differently. It's the same old world, but it becomes transformed."

Once the artist believes a new image is forming, he mulls it over for as long as three or four years. If after this period the image is still compelling to him and has taken on a more defined form, he creates full-scale preliminary drawings, making a few shifts in the spatial relationships and finalizing the details and value structure. Often during this phase he looks for the golden ratio, a proportion thought to be most pleasing. "A lot of the time the ratio is there or almost there," he notes, "so I play with it, tweak it, get it as close as possible."

Massad works from both life and photos as he develops the painting. At first he sets up all the objects using natural

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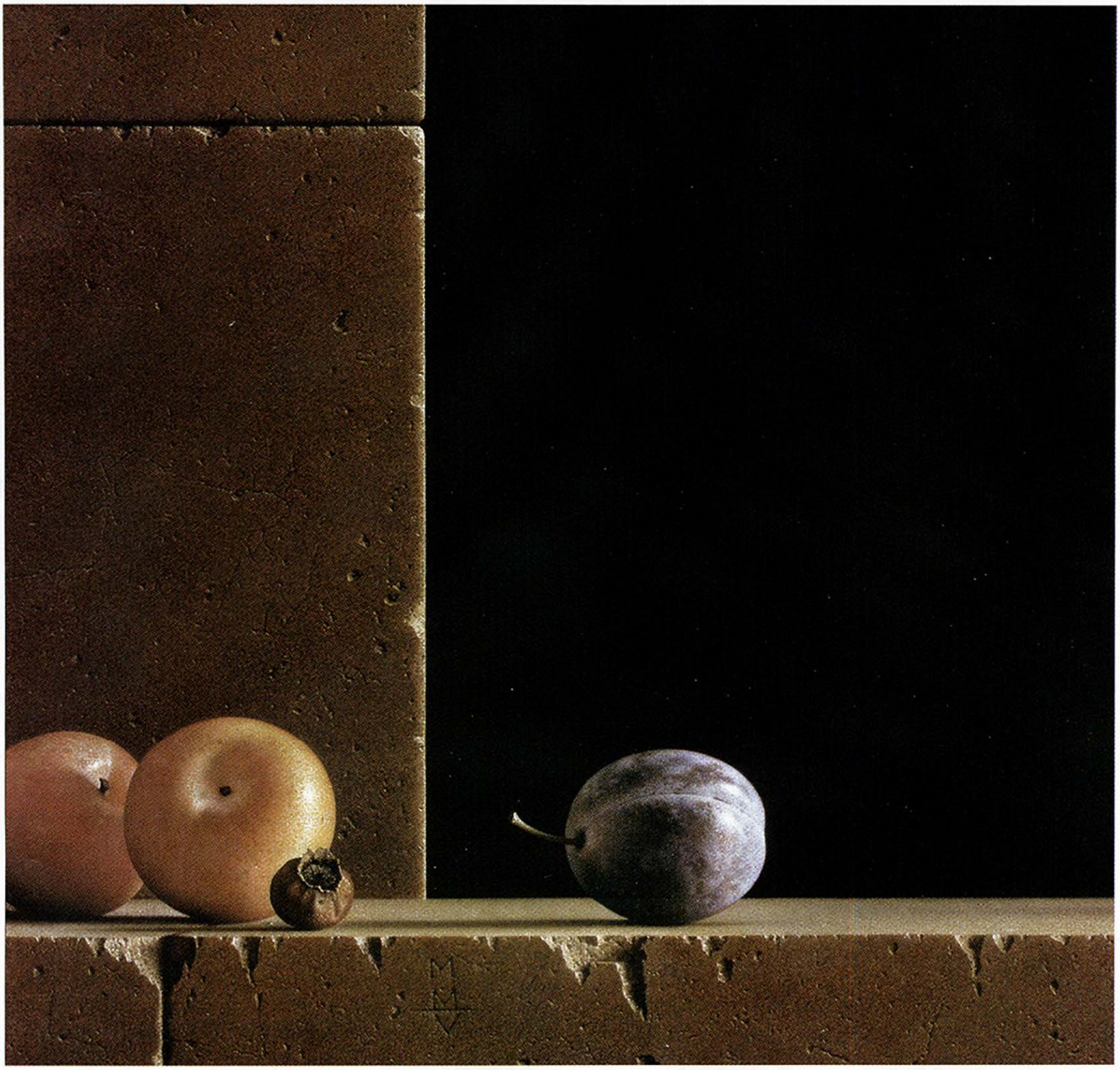
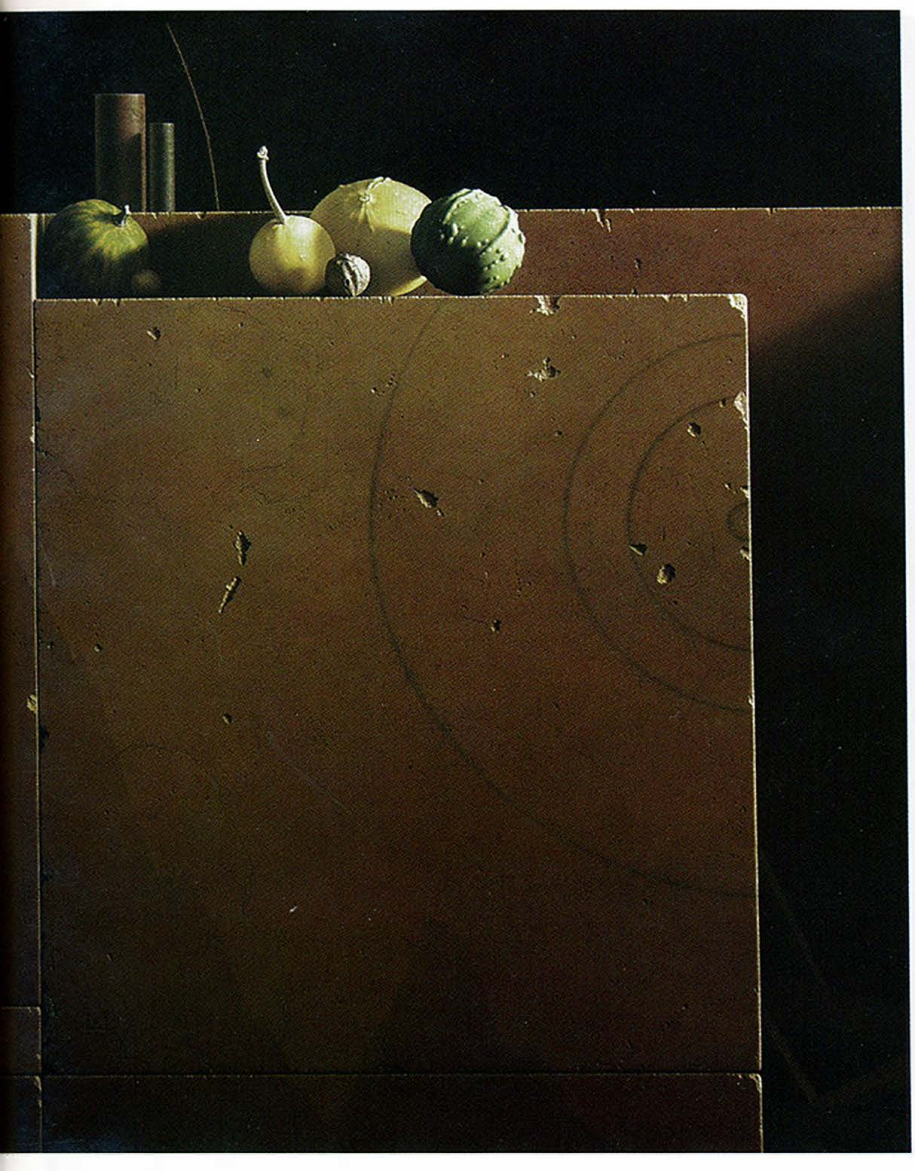




LEFT

Ara

2002, pastel, 26¾ x 22. Collection The Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

BELOW

Reliquary

2005, pastel, 12⅛ x 7½. Collection Barbara Palmer.

OPPOSITE PAGE, ABOVE

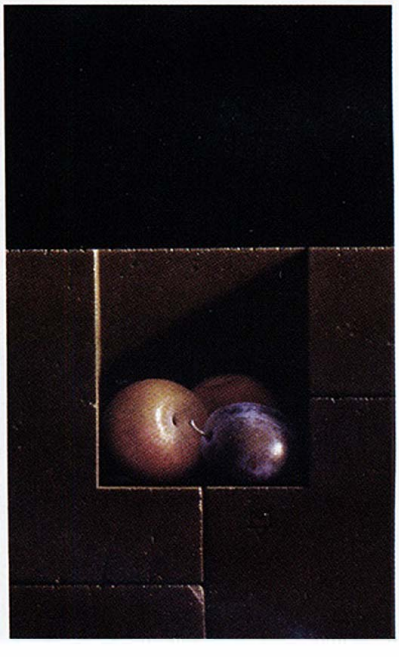
Falls

2003, pastel, 22½ x 22. Collection Burt and Deedee McMurtry.

OPPOSITE PAGE, BELOW

Three Plums and Rosehip

2005, pastel, 11 x 10⅝. Private collection.



north light that floods in from the right. He then makes detailed drawings of the fruit or any other items that will decay and takes photos of the setup. His early still lifes adhered to the traditional tabletop setup, but gradually Massad replaced the tabletop with a wall or ledge of brick or stone. Recently the ledge has become higher and higher, with less atmosphere around it. In some of his current paintings, architecture is the dominant subject, but "I don't build the walls," he says. "I design the walls in the drawings and use stones for details and the surfaces and edges. I don't feel obligated to record stones with exactitude. I move a chip or pock wherever I want. It's all partly from life and partly from invention."

After indicating the main edges of the primary forms with a soft graphite pencil on the final surface—Canson Mi-Teintes paper—the artist generally develops a painting from top to bottom, left to right, executing two square inches per day. One of his first steps is to mark the highlights by rubbing in white pastel to guard those areas. (He has already worked out the full value range in advance, in full-scale preliminary drawings.) To provide himself with a sturdy place to rest his hand, he then covers the entire sheet with glassine, tearing out a "window" only over the area in which he is working. This protects the paper's surface from abrasion and skin oils.

Massad employs a variety of strokes to lay in the pastel. Depending on the object and the work's stage of development, he uses crosshatching, parallel marks, scrubbing with the point, or nondirectional marks (strokes not in the direction of the form). In the beginning stages he uses the blunt point of the pastel stick, working the pastel into the paper fibers and smoothing out the marks with his finger to completely cover the paper. Over that base layer the artist adds more refined marks, which become smaller and smaller as the painting progresses. After the initial marks, Massad breaks up the sticks into shards with an X-Acto knife so that he can make tiny specks or dots. A single painting requires months of full-time

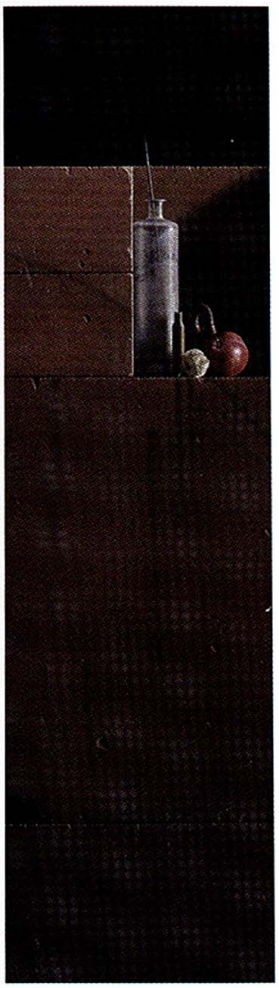
About the Artist

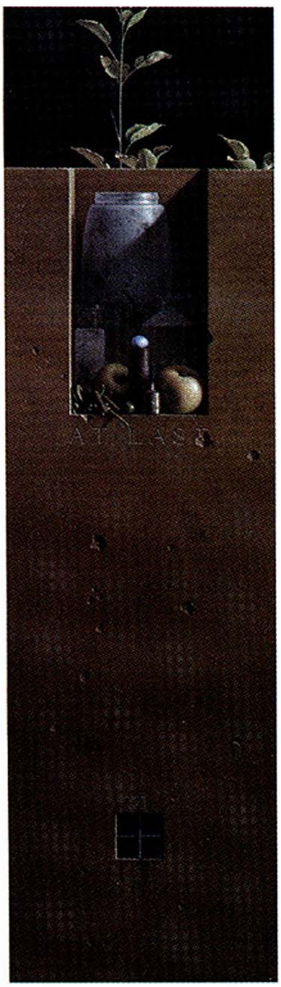
G. Daniel Massad holds an M.F.A. in painting from the University of Kansas. He has participated in numerous exhibitions, including recent solo shows at the Philbrook Museum of Art, in Tulsa, and Forum Gallery, in New York City. Group shows that have featured his work include "Graphic Masters," a traveling show organized by the Smithsonian American Art Museum, in Washington, DC, and "Transforming the Commonplace, Masters of Contemporary Realism" at the Susquehanna Art Museum, in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Massad is the recipient of fellowships and grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, The Pollock-Krasner Foundation, and the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts. His paintings are in the collections of such institutions as the Arkansas Arts Center, in Little Rock, The Art Institute of Chicago, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, in New York City. The artist lives in Annville, Pennsylvania, and is represented by Forum Gallery, in New York City.

OPPOSITE PAGE
ILE
2001, pastel, 15½ x 16. Private collection.

BELOW LEFT
Stele
2004, pastel, 41½ x 11½. Collection Palmer Museum of Art at The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pennsylvania.

BELOW RIGHT
The Garden of the Hesperides
2006, pastel, 41½ x 11½. Private collection.





work; the artist completes fewer than three pastels a year.

After each layer has been applied, Massad bangs the back of the board so any loose pastel will fall away. He then rubs his fingers to clean them and gently presses the marks into the paper with his fingers, being careful not to smear. He never uses fixative. "I believe this method works because of the moisture in my hands," the artist adds. "After I cut up the sticks, I hold them in the palm of my left hand, and in a few minutes they are warm and a little damp. I have to think this affects the stability of the final surface." Massad uses Rembrandt pastels exclusively, which he organizes by color in small boxes near his easel as he works on a piece.

As in most still lifes, the viewer is tempted to assign narratives to Massad's paintings. The artist, however, is ambivalent on the subject. In some works, a story, however vague, unavoidably emerges, often of a personal nature, but Massad never sets up a narrative intentionally or desires that his work be overtly thematic. Rather, he thinks of the items and their arrangement more as "objects of thought," as he puts it in a personal essay on his career. He continues, "They contain the potential for interpretation, but the potential is kept in reserve, to use or not to use. I am concerned primarily with the rightness and power of the whole image—the power it exerts even before it can be explicated, and after explication has failed to sum it up."

Bolstering the sense of mystery is the ambiguous darkness that at times dominates the composition. Formally speaking, the darkness is pure black pastel, which Massad lays in with thick marks and blends with his finger. A departure from the rest of the painting, the area is meant to be lifeless, which he intends as a contrast to the minute detail and expertly rendered form of the objects and also as a metaphor, as a kind of "dark night of the soul that spiritual illumination requires; it is everything hidden from us, before birth and after death."

Metaphor, in fact, has great appeal to Massad. "I tend to think metaphorically," he says. Describing his attraction to still life, he adds, "I like the indirectness, the limitations. I like its link to poetry and the implication of time. A still life intensely celebrates the moment. The viewer looks much longer than he would in ordinary life. He notices things and takes longer to think about them."

Indeed the concept behind his pastel paintings is Massad's primary focus. Despite his technical virtuosity, he is compelled as much by the overall images as the minutiae of the individual objects. "In 1986 I realized how for years I had trained myself not only to look hard at things we usually don't see but also to see other aspects of reality," the artist describes. "I had also been taught to avoid minute detail, which has fascinated me all my life. Detailed surfaces express the history of the object, the wear, the erosion, the life cycle of fruits and leaves. They record time itself. I did not want to work longer on my pictures or tighten them up or make them look more real; what I wanted was to include an aspect of the world that was interesting to me. I wanted viewers to move up close, to see what I see. I knew that I would be getting into strong currents that would pull me and viewers in different directions. Some find it so realistic, and they love that. But that's not what's important to me." ■

A former editor of American Artist, *Lynne Moss Perricelli is a freelance writer and editor based in New Jersey.*