



JUDITH VIVELL

The Consummate Painter

Crawford's Kalig,
oil on linen, 34 x 34"

In a recent interview with *Wildlife Art*, New York City artist Judith Vivell, credited her father's encouragement and intervention at critical points in her education with steering her to become the painter she is today. During her junior year at the University of California-Berkeley, he sent her to Florence, Italy, and Vivell immersed herself in art. Upon returning to Berkeley, she switched her political science major to art history. In the early '60s, Vivell took graduate courses in art history at Columbia University in New York City. After one

semester, she signed up for classes at the Art Students League to explore her love of painting.

Three years later, again at the behest of her father, Vivell enrolled at Hunter College. She studied mainly with Ray Parker, an abstractionist. Her first paintings were large, abstract nudes, working from pictures of nudes she found in men's magazines. Eventually, she began to use photos of her own body, and gradually, those photos became the work itself. In the early '80s, Vivell returned to painting. Here is the rest of the interview.

WA: How did you get into nature art?

VIVELL: I had been photographing orchids but couldn't make the photos as big or as abstract as I wanted, so I began painting them. My work was abstract, but it was tied to nature. The orchid paintings were exhibited at a gallery in Florida. It was the best work I had ever done. After that, many difficult things happened in my life and I chronicled it in my work. My paintings became small, personal and autobiographical. I didn't show anything for about 12 years.

WA: Do you consider yourself a wildlife artist?

VIVELL: I am a painter, and I've painted in many genre during 40 years. I did a large painting of an elk that I found in a book because it reminded me of my sister who had just died. I painted a whole series of cows and bulls because I visited friends in New Mexico and I took a lot of photographs. At the moment, I am fascinated with birds. I try to stay in the moment. Being labeled would be limiting. It is not my purpose in art or in life to consciously limit myself. Birds are my subjects because I haven't finished with them; birds allow me to explore the things I want to explore. When that stops, I'll find something else to paint.

WA: Describe your work, your process and your technique.

VIVELL: I travel all over the world and take photos that I work from. I'm a studio painter. I paint spaces, shapes and colors, not objects. I often do preliminary drawings. Much of the time these drawings are the same size as the painting. I like to do smaller, less formal drawings as well. So, though I draw from photos, I paint from drawings. That intermediate step is important. I like to paint on the wall and later affix the canvas to another stretched canvas. The painting has the feeling of a drawing because I use the canvas like paper. I erase a lot as I'm working, but I never paint over dried-on paint. If it gets to that point, I discard the painting and start again. I'd love to be able to tack a canvas to the wall of a gallery or museum as a finished product instead of having to stretch it.

I use oil paint because it dries slowly and gives me time to remove it. Water-based paints don't offer that option. I use oil stick as well as paint and brush. Everything is layered. There are often three or four layers of color on a background, for example. I paint in glazes. My goal is to enjoy the process. There are mini-goals along the way but I call them purposes. When I am painting, I may stop to ask

myself, 'What exactly is my purpose here?' When I am unhappy with an outcome, it is because I forgot—or was too lazy to remember—my purpose. Sometimes I am unable to discern my purpose when I'm doing something. At those times, I act because the process is enjoyable in some way. I achieve my purpose many times each day, but there is no real overarching goal for all that I do. There is only my purpose to be a painter and to remember what art is.

WA: What struggles or challenges do you face?

VIVELL: It is always a struggle to move beyond what you are doing now. Staying with a particular subject is a kind of discipline—not a 'hair-shirt' discipline, but rather a way of marking a familiar territory so it's easier to take chances. I always take chances, but most of them don't work. You should see how much rubbing out I do!

From top:
Roadrunner No. 1,
oil on linen, 40 x 56"

Elliott's Pheasant,
oil on linen, 28 x 38"



From top:
Secretary Bird,
oil on linen, 34 x 34"

Prothonotary Warbler,
oil on linen, 34 x 34"

My challenge is to grow, to push the work to new places, to be true to the purpose of art. The purpose of art is something that I can't talk about or touch or name. It is spiritual. To be an artist is to daily go to a special place inside and to speak to oneself in a language that looks like paint and brushes and canvases. For me, going into nature is part of that process.



I go there with my camera and I lose myself. When I return, I begin the process of speaking to myself about that experience. I use the pictures only to give me the shapes and lines and spaces I need to speak my language.

WA: *Do you ever experience a creative slump?*

VIVELL: Creative slumps occur when I forget the purpose of art.

WA: *What inspires you?*

VIVELL: I am inspired by great artists in all fields: poetry, painting and music; and by things I see in nature. My house is filled with stuffed birds, animal skulls, shells, antlers and all kinds of coral. I don't like work that is trying to be different, just to be different. Work that knows its purpose is so clear. It announces itself to the viewer. When I see that, I am inspired. That's why I had to become an artist. I was inspired by studying the great painters. I wanted to do what they were doing.

WA: *How do you fit art around time for family and friends, time for yourself?*

VIVELL: I'm older now. I have a partner, children and grandchildren. They all understand that I have come to a place where my work is my first responsibility. No one seems to mind. When my 14-month-old grandson comes to visit he always runs to my studio first to see the birds. My granddaughter is 2 and we paint together in my summer studio. My daughter is a writer. She struggles to find time for her work. She looks at me and sees that if she just keeps going everything will be all right. Like me, she fought becoming an artist because she saw how hard it was. When she gave in to it, I rejoiced for her.

WA: *What's the toughest thing about being an artist?*

VIVELL: It just looks tough from the outside. Being an artist is probably the natural state of man. Trying to stay alive, raise a family and make a business out of it is tough.

WA: *How do you deal with the business side of art?*

VIVELL: Like most artists, I've had a million part-time jobs, from waitressing to teaching to selling real estate. Real estate was the worst, but I learned the most about business from it. My partner, Gordon, is a businessman and my teacher in all things business, mostly by example. We share our lives, but he doesn't take an active role in my business. I protect my business as I would one of my children. Without the business side of art, I would have to go back to selling real estate. I can't afford to be snooty about it. Art is a business—but not while I'm painting!

WA: *So how do you get exposure for your paintings?*

VIVELL: It is difficult to get started, but once a few people know your work they tell others, and so on. If someone wants to see my work, I have a Web site, (www.judithvivell.com) I can refer them to, but I don't use it to sell my paintings. I sell my work through galleries, one in Stowe, Vt., and one in Manhattan. Mostly I have gotten shows and galleries through friends and friends of friends. I send



announcements to the galleries that show work I like. I recently did a catalog mailing from the Ward Museum show I had in February 2004 in Salisbury, Md. I had two solo shows last year, so I am hoping to have some time this spring to travel and paint without having a show hanging over my head.

WA: *What qualities do you think an artist needs the most?*

VIVELL: More than any other quality, an artist needs perseverance. It also helps to know the right people. It's good to be pushy and assertive, even if you find it embarrassing at first. I try to think of my work as if it were my children. What wouldn't I do to get them into the right school, or off drugs, or to help

them find the life work that will sustain them. That is what I am learning to do with my work. I treat it like an at-risk child who is going to jump out the window if I don't do something fast!

WA: *Is it important to have a formal art education?*

VIVELL: Some of the most wonderful art one sees in New York is at the annual *Outsider Art Exhibition*. I sometimes think that formal education is deleterious to artists. It would be more important to learn to meditate, or maybe several years of analysis would do the trick! **WA**

Interview conducted and edited by Audrey Kupers.

Images courtesy of the artist.

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oil on linen, 34 x 34"