

The Thoughtful Art of Alexandra Tyng

by *Stephen May*

Words that come to mind when thinking about the art of Alexandra Tyng: intelligence, knowledge and talent; or perhaps independence, perception and determination. Tyng, 58, stands out among contemporary representational painters for her comprehensive grasp of art history, and for the inquiring mind that infuses her compositions. A mature artist at the top of her game, she knows what she wants—and how to achieve it in paint. Tyng reached her current confident, accomplished style by unconventional means, shunning art school and bucking the tide of Abstract Expressionism in the 1970s by becoming a realist painter. She learned traditional oil painting methods by examining the works of old masters, reading about techniques, styles and materials used by other artists, and observing artists at work. Today she is known for her figurative paintings and landscapes of Maine and elsewhere, and portraits painted in her studio outside Philadelphia. Preeminent Maine art writer Carl Little has observed: “Tyng is equally comfortable—and accomplished—in landscape and portraiture, which makes her something of a rarity among contemporary artists. She even dares to combine the two, setting figures in her views, inviting us to consider how person and place fit together (and they do, splendidly).”¹

Tyng’s passion and well-thought-out ideas about her work became obvious over a series of extended conversations. She doesn’t wear her genes on her sleeve, but she has clearly benefited from her late, architect parents—the



Alexandra Tyng, *Lighthouse Day*, 2010

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celebrated Louis I. Kahn and Anne Tyng, who taught for nearly three decades at the University of Pennsylvania. Alexandra Tyng was born in Rome, Italy, and has lived most of her life in the Philadelphia area. She recalls doing a lot of things with her father as a child—visiting art galleries, museums and bookstores—that have influenced her ever since. When she was ten, her father gave her an oil painting set. “I tried to paint the Beatles wearing striped bathing suits,” she remembers, “I thought it was terrible and I threw” it away.² A few years later, as a teenager, she looked at a photograph and “realized how to model form with color. It just clicked in my mind.” Although admittedly knowing nothing about color mixing, she says her first effort at copying a photo with color “worked.” Now she knows, of course, that “you have to look at real things to get their true colors.”³

When she attended a progressive and then a private Quaker school, her art teachers recognized Tyng’s drawing talent. Her parents, who were “very encouraging and assumed that I would become an artist,” sent her to children’s art classes. There Tyng found that the teachers didn’t take youngsters very seriously. “They give kids lousy art materials and expect them to be happy drawing with them,” she explains. Her parents, by contrast, “gave me good paper and drawing pencils, and I couldn’t wait to go home and work on my own stuff.”⁴

Those experiences influenced her to go to Harvard, rather than the more

Alexandra Tyng
Inspiring Figures
2010
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conventional route to art school. Learning a lot as an art history major and going to museums, she decided she wanted to be a painter. An epiphany occurred while visiting the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston—seeing John Singer Sargent’s *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit*, with a “lot of darkness that makes you feel like you can walk into it...I knew I wanted to be able to paint air like that. That became a goal,” Tyng recalls. “It affected me and affirmed my desire to paint realistically. I tuned in on the way I wanted to paint and what I wanted to focus on: color and how to mix it to get those effects.”⁶ In addition to Sargent, Tyng lists among her favorite artists Cecilia Beaux, George Bellows, Edward Hopper, Andrew Wyeth and Dutch genre and portrait painter Judith Leyster (1609–60).

Tyng approaches a possible painting subject with a skeptical eye; she’s not satisfied with simply depicting what she sees. Light is very important to her work: “I’m always trying to expand my knowledge of light,” she says. “Painting is all about light, it’s all based on your perception of color and light.”⁷ She points out that determining the relationships among direct light, ambient light and shadows made her more aware of color. It keeps her asking what is happening with light in any given situation and why she sees particular colors in particular places.

Tyng finds satisfaction in being a mother and wife as well as an artist, balancing her personal life with a good career in art. After her children got to be a certain age, she was freer to get out of the studio and took up plein-air painting. She tried watercolors briefly before switching to oils. “Plein-air painting has become my source of ideas, and a way of keeping my brushstrokes fresh and my color sense accurate,” she observes.⁸ Since she works so much outdoors, her studio in effect travels with her, and she has the tools narrowed down to fit in a backpack. She takes a portable easel, a tray for paints and perhaps a half dozen colors—two reds, two blues, two yellows and white. In addition, she totes a palette, solvent, canvas and paper towels. In Narberth, a Philadelphia suburb, she combined two former second-floor bedrooms and added a big north window for her cluttered but orderly studio. There she uses a middle-sized glass palette and lots more colors, and she favors Belgian linen as a painting surface. Her easel stands next to the large window, surrounded by several tables and chairs, goose-necked lamps, potted plants, a computer and a stand loaded with paint containers and brushes. Small sketches, reproductions of paintings and photographs adorn studio walls.

Prominently displayed is Tyng’s “Wall of Inspiration,” a changeable group of reproductions of works by painters she admires: Cecilia Beaux (two portraits), John Singleton Copley (*Boy with a Squirrel*), Thomas Eakins (*The Gross Clinic* and two portraits), Sargent (the Boit daughters), Vermeer (*Girl with a Red Hat*) and Andrew Wyeth (portraits of his son Nicholas, model Helga Testorf and neighbor Karl Kuerner). Tyng says ideas for paintings come to her suddenly, but then germinate for a while as she contemplates how things will work

together visually. She uses a combination of oil sketches, pencil sketches and photographs to build a composition. Like Wyeth, she tends to strew these components around the floor of her studio, fitting fragments together in her mind until they are ready to be made into a painting.

Tyng does some of her best work in Maine. Whether painting on Monhegan Island, Mt. Desert/Acadia National Park or a lake, she captures the clear, tangy air, the rugged terrain, the greenery of fields and forests, the rocky shoreline and even dramatic aerial views of forested landscapes jutting into the sea. As artist and writer Nancy Bea Miller has observed, Tyng “is one of those rare painters who works as easily on an intimate scale as on a grand one. She can draw back and see the landscape from afar, picturing it as a magnificent piece of the earth’s quilted surface, and then just as effortlessly she zooms in on a quiet corner of a hidden lake....[S]he can see the forest and the trees.”⁹ Figurative works focus on people interacting with their own environments, rather than in formal poses: the nocturnal exuberance of youngsters cavorting with sparklers on a lakeside dock; painters working at their easels high atop Acadia’s Cadillac Mountain or on a hill above Monhegan’s harbor; a young man (her son) lugging firewood to a cottage, or a summer resident, an older woman, vigorously splitting wood. For those who know Maine, these everyday activities come alive, the settings are accurate, the colors spot-on. You feel that you are there, sharing the experience. In *Waiting for the Perseids* (2010), the stage is still without with actors, but the telescope set up for viewing the annual meteor shower evokes a place and time.

One of Tyng’s most compelling recent works, *Lighthouse Day* (2010), depicts the lighthouse keeper’s house and attached structures (now a museum) on Monhegan from an unusual vantage point—the top of the adjacent lighthouse. The white-walled, red-roofed structure wends its way across the picture plane, casting shadows on and contrasting beautifully with the browning grass on the hill and looking toward the Island Inn, the compact harbor and blue-green sea beyond the islet of Manana. Edward Hopper, one of Tyng’s favorite artists, painted the Monhegan lighthouse years ago, but in more conventional, ground-level views. Tyng has painted similar perspectives, but this version is realism with a special flair. Equally striking are Tyng’s aerial views of forested islands and peninsulas along the rockbound Maine coast, such as *Jig Saw Coast* (2006), based on photographs taken from helicopters and small planes. This approach allows the artist to lay out the photos, play with abstract forms and create paintings that are, she says, “80% accurate, but aesthetically pleasing.”¹⁰

Some of her finest recent work combines her interest in landscapes and portraits, notably in *Outside/Inside*, an oil-on-linen, measuring 42-by-50 inches. A double portrait stimulated by an old photograph of her brother at age 20, it shows two versions of her sibling standing at the top of the decommissioned lighthouse on his Maine island. His younger likeness leans casually on the

glass surrounding the tower top looking inside, where his older portrait looks out toward the mainland. The main theme is clearly youth vs. middle age, with an underlying message supplied by the lighthouse as a symbol of enlightenment. “As I painted it, I realized there were many dualities in it,” Tyng recalls, “young/old, extroversion/introversion, action/contemplation, striving/achievement and desire/regret.” She points out that she used the layers of glass “both physically and metaphorically...separating layers of space and time, linking layers by allowing one to see through them, and reflecting things inside and outside.”¹¹

Tyng also sees the concept expressed in a personal, spontaneous and direct way through the brushstrokes, tactile surface and colors. It is a reminder of her predilection for synesthesia, seeing “emotions as certain colors.” While noting that the colors, especially blue, white and gold, evoke the feelings and ideas expressed in the painting, she cautions against over-explaining a work: “I...want the ideas to come across more clearly in the painting than in a verbal description.”¹² *Outside/Inside* is a tour de force of portraiture and message.

Another important portrait that incorporates a descriptive setting is her posthumous portrait of her father, Louis Kahn, which is in the collection of the National Portrait Gallery. The site is the architect’s office, where he sits alertly—bespectacled and sporting a bow-tie—on a bench lined with the 1911 *Encyclopedia Britannica*, “which he said was the best edition.” He seems to be about to gesture to the large book he holds as he looks out the window toward a favorite view of Philadelphia. To his right, atop a pile of books, is a paperback about Swiss artist Paul Klee. “We liked to look at books together and shop at



Alexandra Tyng, *Fig Saw Coast*, 2006
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Alexandra Tyng, *Waiting for the Perseids*, 2010

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the old and rare bookstores near his office, so the portrait refers to that, and to his contemplative side,” Tyng observes.¹³ Tyng filled the portrait with light, because her father loved light and it was so important in his architecture. Portrait Gallery curator Dorothy Moss observes Tyng’s “father is...shown in a moment of inspiration with light reminiscent of his architecture suffusing the canvas.”¹⁴ On the wall behind Kahn is a charcoal drawing of a proposal for the Palazzo del Congressi in Venice (unbuilt, 1968–74). This is a likeness at once affectionate, perceptive and respectful of a distinguished architect and influential father.

Even in her so-called formal, commissioned portraits, Tyng manages to inject notes of informality, interesting poses against descriptive backgrounds and perceptive expressions from her sitters. They tend to be a distinguished group: university presidents, doctors, architects, writers, musicians, artists—even younger subjects who look like they are likely to grow up to be distinguished. Among the interesting likenesses are a series of medical practitioners in white lab coats, who seem fully engaged by the artist, perhaps because she talked with them as sittings proceeded. Also notable: a warm portrait of Beth and Joe Krush, children’s book illustrators, whose work Tyng admires, shown thumbing through one of their publications, and an affectionate likeness of her handsome mother, Anne Griswold Tyng, standing in familiar surroundings in front of an architectural model and extending her hand toward a geometric form.

In *Complexity and Contradiction*, the famed architectural team of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown are portrayed sketching out ideas in their art-filled studio. A bundled-up Frolic Weymouth, founder of the Brandywine

River Conservancy and Museum in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, stands with his dog beside his beloved Brandywine River, in the highly evocative *The Ford*. These are portraits of insight and distinction. Another standout is *Inspiring Figures* (2010), depicting pianist Claude Frank and his violinist daughter, Pamela Frank, playing a duet in Mr. Frank's New York City studio. This painting began as part of one of the many philanthropic projects in which Tyng is involved, Portraits for Artists. She raises money for the arts in the Philadelphia area by painting likenesses of visual artists, writers, architects, musicians, performing artists and benefactors.

When Tyng paints a portrait of more than one person, she likes to observe them for a while, to see how they interact before deciding how to depict each individual and design the overall composition. In this case, she asked the Franks to play some music together. As they played a piece by Mozart, with Tyng watching and sketching their gestures, "I became so drawn into the excitement of the music, and the way they were interacting, and their enjoyment of making music together that I decided I wanted to paint them...in action, rather than in a more formal, posed portrait."¹⁵ Tyng says that, as she painted, she wanted to use "colors and brushstrokes to capture the feeling of the music, the color of music as I saw it, and the movement of the music in the air, and the energy in the air that connected them and connected the musical sounds." Concerned about overworking the picture, she "tried to be purposeful in the way I put paint down, but also let the brushstrokes be visible—basically, to keep some of the evidence of the process in the final product."¹⁶ The result is a charming view of familial teamwork, the father leaning to his task at the piano while looking toward his daughter standing nearby, her bow caressing her violin. Their musical affinity and father-daughter bonds are palpable.

Tyng has been the subject of a number of museum exhibitions and numerous gallery shows around the country. Currently, she is represented by Dowling Walsh Gallery in Rockland, Maine; Fischbach Gallery in New York City; Haynes Galleries in Nashville, Tennessee, and Gross McLeaf Gallery in Philadelphia. She has received national and regional awards and has been featured in major art publications. For the future, it seems clear that Tyng will continue to hone her emotions and skills in creating landscapes and seascapes, figurative works, plein-air scenes and portraits. It seems likely she will continue to paint in Maine and Pennsylvania—and elsewhere around the world. It is rare that this much intelligence, experience and skill are enlisted in the cause of representational painting. It will be interesting to see what Alexandra Tyng produces in the years ahead.

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NOTES

1. Essay in "Alexandra Tyng, Right Here: New Maine Paintings," brochure for exhibition at Dowling Walsh Gallery, Rockland, Maine, August 5–28, 2011, no pagination.
2. Interview with R. Barry Shauck, May 11, 2012.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Interview with author, July 19, 2012, in Rockland, Maine.
6. Shauck, op. cit.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. "Alexandra Tyng" in "Three to Watch: Artists Making Their Mark," *Fine Art Connoisseur* (January/February, 2009), p. 34.
10. Interview with author, op. cit.
11. Quoted in "Alexandra Tyng," *Poets and Artists* (March/April 2010).
12. Ibid.
13. Artist's statement accompanying the portrait of Louis I. Kahn at the National Portrait Gallery.
14. Email to author, August 14, 2012.
15. Statement for dial-in audio accompanying the exhibition "Inspiring Figures," 2010, at the Butler Institute of American Art.
16. Ibid.