

SELF-PORTRAIT IN THE GARDEN
 c. 1995, WATERCOLOR ON PAPER, 30 x 22 IN.
 COLLECTION HILDA TRAUT

Timothy J. Clark

Master of Color, Light, and Shadow

By KELLY COMPTON



This is a banner year for the American artist Timothy J. Clark (b. 1951), and fortunately it is only half over. Best known for his sparkling watercolors, Clark is the subject of a mid-career retrospective now touring the U.S., and also of a handsome monograph just published by Pomegranate Communications. The attention is richly deserved, as Clark ranks among the finest, and busiest, artists working in watercolor today.

TRADITIONAL/MODERN

Born in Santa Ana, California, Clark was hooked on art from his first class. Luckily, he found teachers who helped him look at art from

traditional *and* modernist perspectives: At 18, he entered Los Angeles's Art Center College of Design, where he was mentored by Harry Carmean in a department led by the modernist Lorser Feitelson. Here, says Clark, he got solid *skills*, so he moved on to get *concepts* from Hal Kramer and Don Graham at the nearby Chouinard Art Institute, shortly before it merged into what is now CalArts. Clark capped his education with a master's in painting at California State University, Long Beach, but the real learning came — as it must — through experience in the studio.

BEACHFIRE
 2007, WATERCOLOR ON PAPER, 14 x 22 IN.
 COLLECTION YORK AND SHELLEY SUTCH







THE MAINE WOODWORKING SHOP OF RAYMOND C. SMALL
 1997-98, WATERCOLOR ON WINSOR & NEWTON PAPER, 22 x 30 IN.
 COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST

Clark notes that Abstract Expressionism and photography were widely revered during his student years, and his career might well have blossomed more easily had he pursued one of those directions. Yet Clark “believed then, as I believe now, that there is a place for emotional and aesthetic figurative painting in today’s world.” Time has proved him right, yet it is revealing that Clark prefers the word “figurative” to “realist”: In keeping with his modernist training, he is just as interested

in formal effects as in subjects, and wants viewers to apprehend both fully.

Clark’s process is traditional in that he is a dedicated draftsman who is constantly drawing in a sketchbook. Having initially painted in oil, he grew worryingly sensitized to its solvents and thus focused primarily on watercolor. In short order he visited technicians at Winsor & Newton to discuss their watercolors, and when he needs a color or consistency out of the ordinary, he has been known to make his own. He has also sourced heavyweight handmade papers that will endure as long as an oil painting does. Still occasionally dismissed as a medium for traditionalist dilettantes, watercolor can be just as expressive as oil, says Clark.

His facility enables him to define an enormous amount of visual information with relatively few calligraphic strokes, endowing his pictures with, in the view of his artist-friend Donald Holden, *sprezzatura* — “making a difficult task look effortless.” Effortless or not, the gregarious artist is quite capable of explaining how he works: He has taught regularly since he was 21, and is currently on the faculties of both New York’s Art Students League and the Yale School of Architecture’s *Continuity and Change* graduate course in Rome.

KONA COFFEE PLANTATION
 2003-7, WATERCOLOR ON PAPER, 17 x 30 IN.
 HAMMER GALLERIES, NEW YORK

THE WORLD, ON PAPER

Clark’s images are wide-ranging — figures (including portraits), interiors, urban and rural landscapes, and still lifes. He divides the year





BALBOA SLOOP
1990, WATERCOLOR ON PAPER, 15 X 22 IN.
PRIVATE COLLECTION

between studios in New York City, West Bath, Maine, and Capistrano Beach, California; visits Hawaii annually; and travels to Europe and Asia as often as possible. Thus his scenes are not only international, but also glow with the varying kinds of light that illuminate these regions. Particularly compelling are his images of historic buildings and architectural details, which convey a sense of place far more riveting than any photograph could. It is therefore no surprise that the Museum of the City of New York chose to acquire all 29 of the drawings Clark made of the smoldering ruins at Ground Zero in 2001.

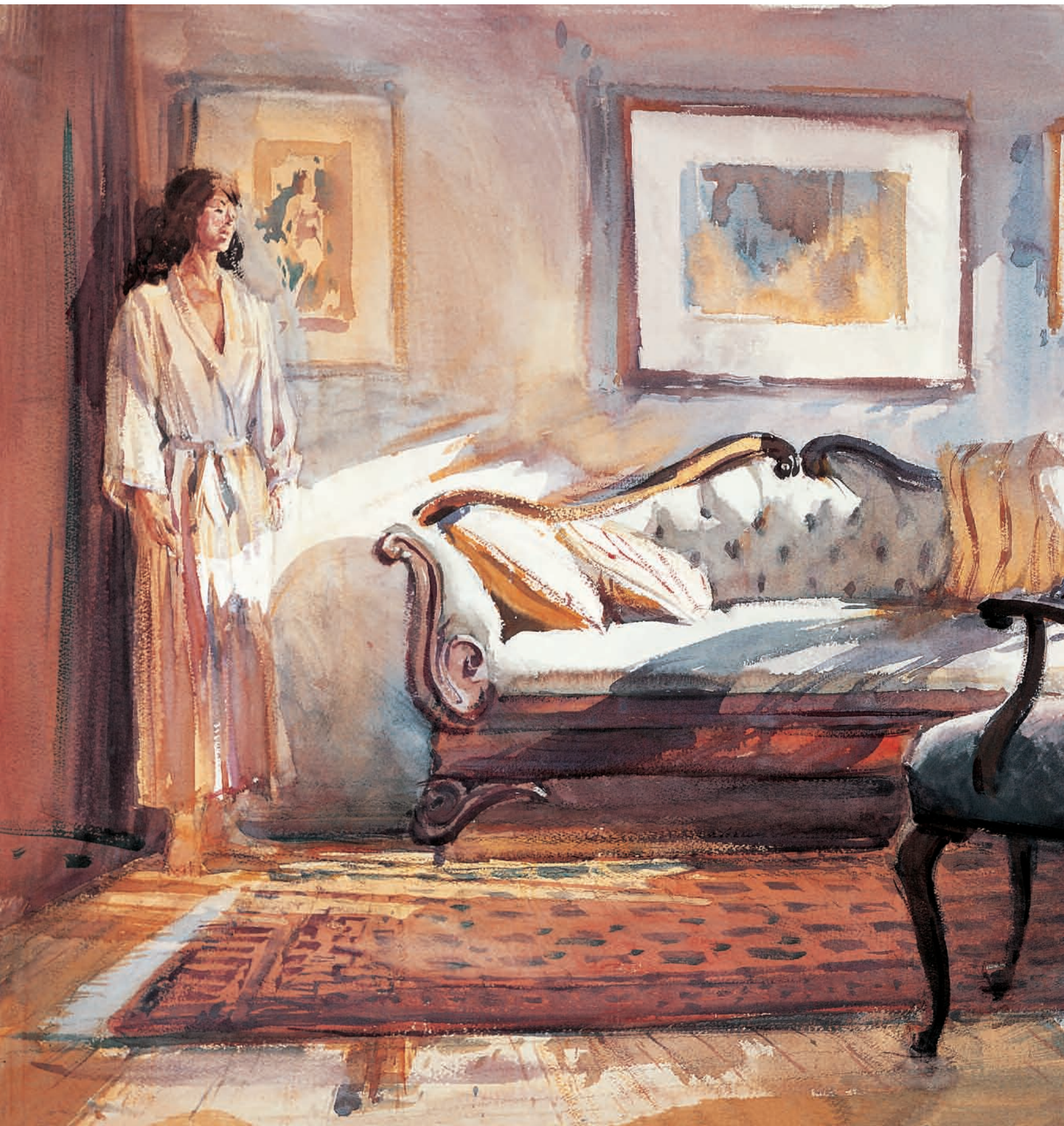
As spontaneous as they appear, Clark's images are carefully composed, sometimes using the Golden Section or Mondrian's grid. Art historian Lisa E. Farrington has explored with Clark the architectural structures within many of his compositions, which owe something to the geometries of 1960s Minimalism, especially the Californian minimalist John McLaughlin (1898-1976). Indeed, Clark claims that McLaughlin's work inspired him, as late as the 1980s, to simplify his spaces and cool his palette. This results in pictures that deftly utilize shadows and negative space to show us how light falls across forms. In his brief but insightful preface to the Clark monograph, the distinguished artist Will Barnet (b. 1911) admires how

SUMMER LEMONS
2003, WATERCOLOR ON PAPER, 15 X 22 IN.
COLLECTION GARY AND MARY EARL SPENCER



Clark's "combined sense of space, light, and composition creates graphic tensions." These tensions help him avoid mere prettiness, which is fatal in the world of art today.

Especially in his interiors, Clark offers intriguing compositions that resist symmetry and predictability, reflecting perhaps his early fascination with the strategies of Degas and Daumier. It is perfectly understandable that many viewers see shades of John Singer Sargent in Clark's innovative compositions and virtuoso brushwork, though he is actually more interested in the late work of Winslow Homer. While teaching at the Worcester Art Museum in Massachusetts, Clark was able to copy watercolors by both of these American masters, and grew so proficient that he later served as a technical consultant to the





WINTER SOLSTICE (SOLSTICE LIGHT)
2003-04, WATERCOLOR ON PAPER, 29 x 40 IN.
HAMMER GALLERIES, NEW YORK

National Gallery of Art's conservators during preparations for their Homer retrospective in 1995. This fascination is particularly apparent in such cool, elegant scenes as *Balboa Sloop* (1990).

Clark actually began his career in the 1970s making dark, moody oil paintings of deserted gas stations, fast-food restaurants, and shopping centers inspired as much by Edward Hopper as by the Pop sensibility of that era. Still more Hopperesque are Clark's recent interiors featuring his wife Marriott, always alone and never engaged with the viewer. These allusions are logical given Hopper's enormous currency today, but less expected is Clark's interest in John Sloan's early 20th-century scenes of workers drinking at McSorley's pub in Greenwich Village, which he has recast during recent visits to Spain and Portugal.

Among Clark's most remarkable achievements may well be his still lifes: Farington rightly underscores his "almost uncanny ability to infuse rudimentary and inert objects ... with something akin to a human soul." It is hardly surprising that Clark's career moved to a new level in 2000 when his astounding *The Maine Woodworking Shop of Raymond C. Small* (1997-98) was selected for the National Academy of Design's 175th annual exhibition and awarded its William A. Paton Prize for a watercolor by an American-born artist. The quivering spirituality of Andrew Wyeth's rustic rooms can be felt here, and in his more elegant interiors Clark channels the fraught salons of the Paris-based American painter Walter Gay (1856-1937), who somehow conveyed the impression that their privileged owners had stepped out moments earlier.

Although Clark's retrospective has already been seen at the Pasadena Museum of California Art and Butler Institute of American Art (Youngstown, OH), admirers still have time to catch it at the Whistler House Museum of Art in Lowell, MA (August 27-October 15), and then next winter at Hammer Galleries, his New York representative. These watercolors look superb in reproduction, but there is nothing like seeing them in person to fully appreciate Clark's mastery of this demanding medium. ■

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GRYPHONS FROM TERRA NOSTRA
2005, WATERCOLOR ON PAPER, 22 x 30 IN.
HAMMER GALLERIES, NEW YORK