

# The Benefits and Limitations of Painting Personal Imagery

**George Towne** first painted portraits of friends and members of his community as a way of instilling meaningful content in his artwork and motivating himself through long hours of painting. He now applies what he learned to creating drawings and paintings of models that are only acquaintances but whose appearance and personality appeal to him.

by **M. Stephen Doherty**

Artists who draw and paint figures often wrestle with the question of how well they need to know their subjects before they can accurately capture their personality and intriguing features. Andrew Wyeth refused commissions to paint portraits of people he didn't know well, arguing that he had nothing meaningful to say about strangers, whereas Phillip Pearlstein is comfortable painting hired models so long as they can remain stationary during long hours of posing. Ultimately, the issue is whether artists are interested in the human body simply as a natural form or whether they think of the body as a mysterious shell that we must see underneath in order to understand what it conceals.

New York artist George Towne is definitely in the camp of those who need to draw and paint figures whose interests and experiences he understands. For the past 20 years, he has concentrated on painting gay men who represent a specific realm of politics, social situations, health issues, and community bonds. He first established that focus when AIDS was a death sentence, he continued through a period of social and political activism,



and he finally reached a point when he could portray the individuality of people in his community. "Like most artists, I want my art to have significance for me and the people who see it," Towne says. "At the beginning, that meant dealing with the central issue that was defining my life and the life of people around me. Now I'm able to celebrate individuality and beauty while trying to remain relevant to the people I care about."

Towne's process for developing these paintings is long and intensive, with each piece requiring hours, first for preparatory drawings, then for building up the surface of the oil paintings from a thin wash drawing to multiple layers of glazes. "Even though my paintings have a decidedly contemporary look to them in terms of the way the figures are dressed and posed, I'm really after the kind of surface the Old Masters achieved in their portraits," he explains. "I can become obsessive about applying layers of color and waiting for them to dry before I add more detail. It's important to me that the paintings capture all the subtlety of color, form, and texture that help to convey the beauty of a figure."

Towne creates these complicated paintings by working from life and from photographs. "I live in a small New York apartment, and it just isn't practical for me to hire models to

BELOW

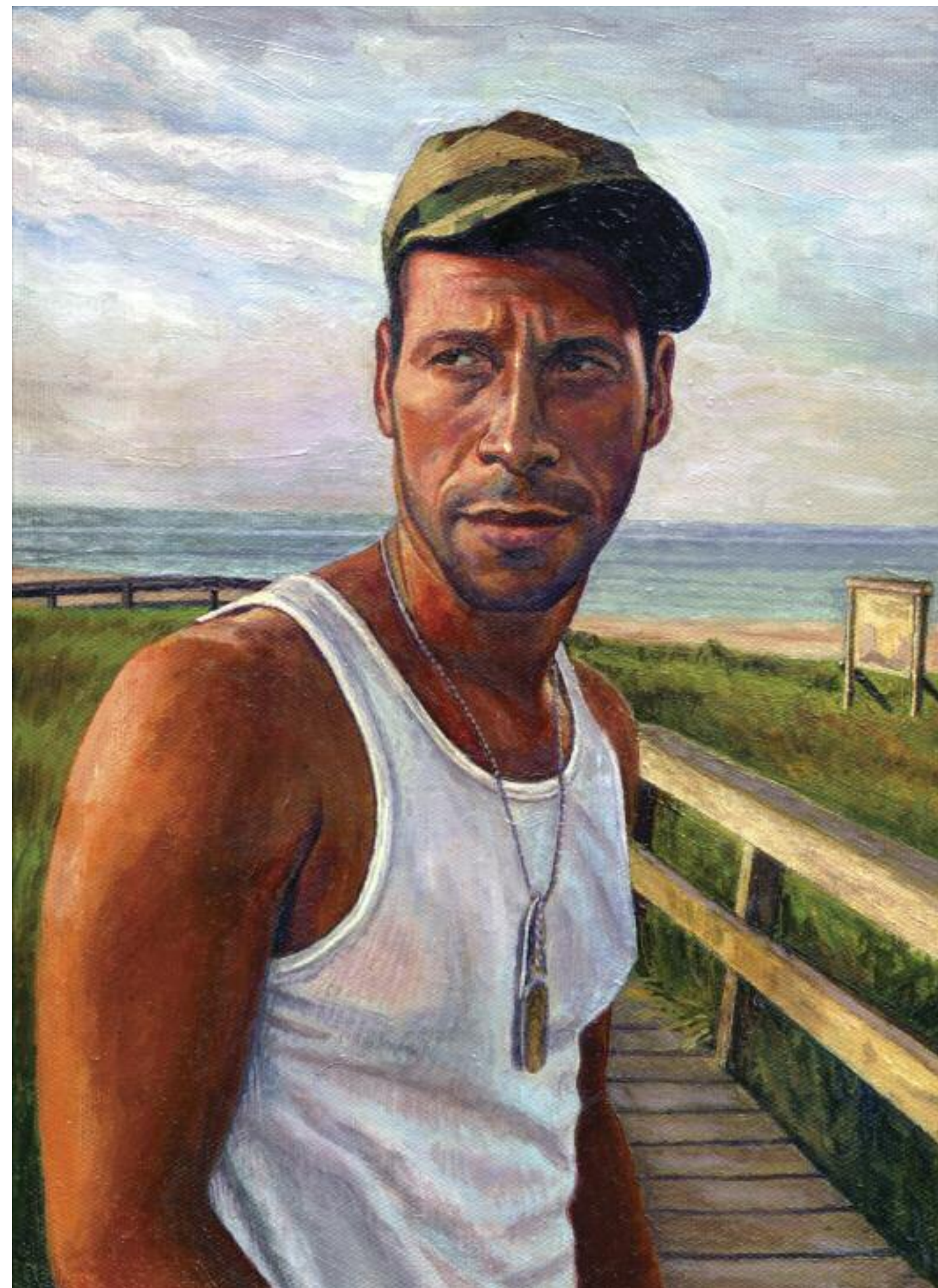
**D.J. Gerald  
Mattera**

2007, oil, 6 x 4.  
Collection Gerald  
Mattera.

OPPOSITE PAGE

**Adriano—Pines  
Party Dawn**

2008, oil, 12 x 9.  
Collection the artist.





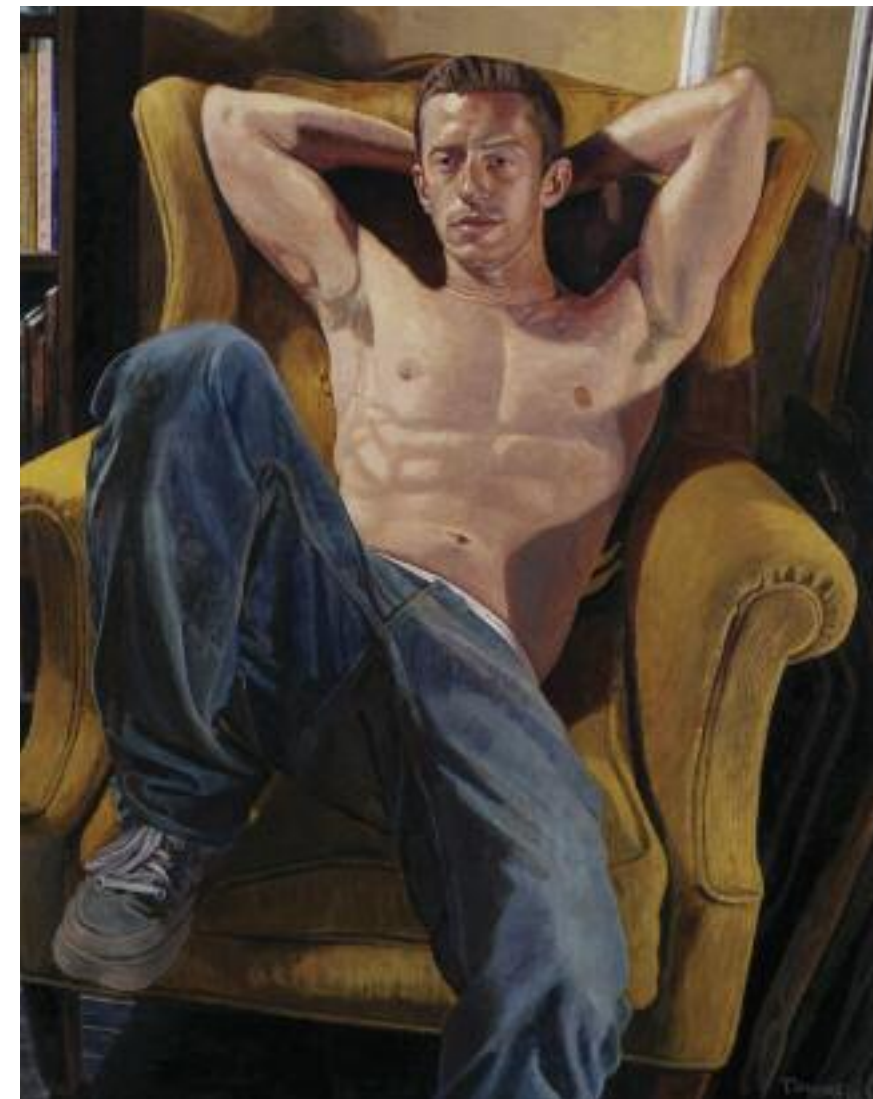
LEFT  
**Mark Allen**  
2008, oil, 20 x 16.  
Collection Brian Coutou.



BELOW  
**Adriano-Leopold  
Room at the  
Belvedere**  
2008, oil, 24 x 16.  
Collection Aaron Cobbett.



BELOW  
**Dave/St.  
Sebastian**  
2008, oil, 10½ x 7.  
Collection the artist.



RIGHT  
**Andy/Seated  
Portrait**  
2009, oil, 28 x 22.  
Collection the artist.

RIGHT  
**Lorenzo—  
Army/Flag**  
2009, tempera on  
paper, 7½ x 6.  
Collection Earl Carlile.



FAR RIGHT  
**Nando**  
2008, oil, 8 x 6.  
Collection the artist.



pose for long periods of time," he explains. "I do a lot of drawing and take digital photographs, and I refer to both as I'm painting. Digital photography is so much better than film because the images can be adjusted in a computer to get them closer to the actual appearance of the person."

The artist is a member of several drawing groups that meet in New York, so he is able to spend at least six to eight hours drawing models each week. "There's no substitute for working from a live model under a time constraint," he comments. "It's the only way to develop and maintain the ability to make accurate judgments about what one is seeing and to record them with conviction. One of the side benefits is that I discover good models I can hire to pose for my paintings. Even in New York it can be difficult to find people who can strike interesting poses and hold them without moving."

Even when Towne has to rely heavily on photographs, he deliberately poses models in positions they could hold for long periods of time. "If I were to photograph a model jumping in the air or grinning from ear to ear, people who saw the resulting paintings would immediately think they

were just copies of photographs," he says. "I prefer to go for comfortable poses of models slumped in chairs, laying on mats, or leaning against supports. I also like to use the classical contrapposto positions of models turning their bodies so that the legs are pointed in one direction, the shoulders in another, and the body has a kind of S-shape."

The discussion of classical poses prompts Towne to talk about some of his favorite artists. "Like many figurative artists, I am influenced by the work of Caravaggio," he explains. "I saw an exhibition of his work at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, in New York City, and it opened my eyes to a number of possibilities. For one, I saw how effectively he used a single, raking light to illuminate figures, making sure that the pattern of light and shadow brought drama and emphasis to the important aspects of a painting. Additionally, I was struck by the way he used common people to tell the stories of the Bible and mythology. Instead of following the practice of using saints, wealthy patrons, noblemen, and beautiful young women to depict key events, he populated his paintings with peasants and

## DEMONSTRATION: JAMES ORONA



### Step 1

Towne set up his easel across from the model, James.



### Step 2

Working on a toned panel, Towne used a thin wash of oil color to draw the outlines of the figure's basic appearance.



### Step 3

The artist then blocked in the local colors in each area of the figure.



### Step 4

Towne added a background tone and continued to refine the definition of the model's body.

#### THE COMPLETED DEMONSTRATION:

**James Orona**  
2009, oil, 16 x 12.  
Collection the artist.



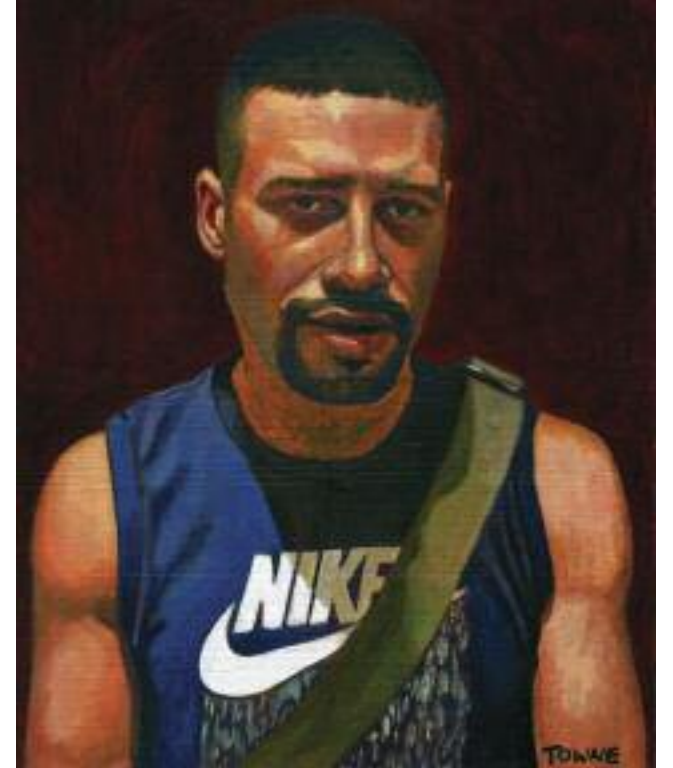
farmers. That helped me realize that unknown figures can be used to effectively convey the artist's message."

The first series of paintings Towne created in graduate school included portraits of men whose partners had died of AIDS. He posed each living person with an object of significance to his deceased partner. Those paintings were followed by a group of large portraits of men who were well-known in the gay community, each of whom was depicted in a static standing pose. "I wanted the poses to be similar to passport photograph or mug shots," the artist explains. "Every man faced forward and held the same position."

In recent years, Towne has created individualized portraits in which the pose, clothing, or settings are indicative of the person's life, and he has painted provocative images that celebrate the subject's sexuality. "Sex is an important part of life, and now that gay men can look forward to longer and more productive lives it makes sense for me to celebrate that."

Towne's drawings and paintings have evolved from being autobiographical and political statements to celebrations of life. As such, they are more universal in terms of both their content and their appeal. ■

*M. Stephen Doherty is the editor-in-chief of American Artist.*



#### ABOVE **Adriano/Nike Shirt**

2009, oil, 7½ x 6.  
Collection Steven Sergioivanni.

#### FAR LEFT

**Fabio Tavares**  
2008, oil, 30 x 18.  
Collection the artist.

#### LEFT

**Dave/Red Background**  
2008, oil, 12 x 6.  
Collection the artist.



## About the Artist

**George Towne** earned both a B.F.A. and an M.F.A. from the School of Visual Arts, in New York City, where he later taught basic painting and portfolio presentation. His paintings have been the subject of solo exhibitions at Leslie/Lohman Gallery, in New York City; The Barbara Ann Levy Gallery, in Cherry Grove, on Fire Island, New York; and Delaware Valley Arts Alliance, in Narrowsburg, New York. They have also been reproduced in *Time Out New York* and *Art & Understanding* magazines, as well as in Australia's *Blue* magazine. For more information, visit the artist's website at [www.georgetowneart.com](http://www.georgetowneart.com).