

Q and A: A conversation with Michael Brophy

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Overlooking the Council Chamber in Portland City Hall is an eight-foot tall, semi-circular painting by Michael Brophy. Brophy's description of the painting is quoted on the Regional Arts and Culture Council public art web page: "Portland is a city founded on a river in the middle of a forest and my intent is to depict the sweep of the river valley with a nod towards its history. Stretching from the lower left across the canvas, up river, the 20th, 19th and pre-settlement centuries are presented. The foreground trees are Douglas firs, the state tree, and rise like columns supporting the region, and defining its character and prosperity."



Michael Brophy, Council Chambers in Portland City Hall, "Lower Willamette Arch: River and Forest," acrylic on canvas, 95" x 192"

His best known paintings embody a romantic attitude—whether the majesty of the old forest or the tragedy of the clear cut. An exhibition of his paintings will be at [Russo Lee Gallery during January](#).

This conversation took place in his spacious studio in north Portland in late November. A large painting was in progress on one wall and on another wall a large set of drawings was pinned up.

You do a lot of drawing.

I do. I draw all the time. There's tons of sketches. There's boxes of this stuff. At one point I did all these big charcoal drawings, about 50 of them or so.

You made a bunch of big pain-in-the-neck charcoal drawings—what do you do with them, because they're too big to frame? But they need to be protected.

I just put them in cardboard and they're here somewhere.

Yeah, drawing's really important. That's the first thing I ever did as a kid. I don't remember not drawing. I was "the kid that drew."

You were known as "the kid that drew?"

Pretty much, from cousins...

I just did it for myself, didn't take any classes, mostly just copying comics and superheroes, trying to draw the room, make the angle—why does it look like that? I read [Cindy's \[Lucinda Parker\] interview](#). She said she always knew she was an artist. I didn't until I was 20 years old. I didn't even think about doing anything like that.

You didn't study art in high school at all?

I took one little class. It was my mom haranguing me to take an art class. She wanted me to take an art class and I wouldn't do it.

Do you know why she thought that would be important?

So I could draw. My grandfather was a Sunday painter. I have paintings of his. I'm half Italian on my mom's side, so everybody painted and drew on that side. The only artists I knew of were comic book artists or my grandpa and my uncle and my great uncle Augustino. I remember them painting. I went to Lincoln [High School] and I did take one little half-year drawing class. It was pretty fun, but I didn't think about it beyond that.



Michael Brophy, "Old Growth (The Visitor)," 2015, oil on canvas, 78" x 90"

So did you go to college to study something else?

I went to U of O and just took just crap classes and business or whatever. I didn't know what I wanted to do. I didn't even know who I was. I went on an exchange program to London. It was like, "We can drink beer! We can go to the pubs and drink beer!" It was a humanities exchange program. I don't think I even gave it a thought—just was a semester. Took art history, English art history, drama. We saw plays. Really it was the first time I'd ever seen any culture.

Where did you grow up?

Northwest Portland.

But you didn't see any culture in Portland?

I might have gone to the museum as a kid. I don't remember it. I was just into the woods and playing outside, kind of a jock-y kid. I'd never thought about anything like that. It's not like my family was against it. It just wasn't in the air. And I don't remember paintings in anybody's houses when I was a kid.

But you were drawing.

I was drawing. I was really into Jack Kirby, he was a huge influence—the cartoonist, Marvel universe. I remember I wrote him a letter. I was copying his comics and I sent this package to him. I was maybe 10. About a year later I got this card that said, “You’re learning from the greatest school of all, the comics themselves” Someone probably wrote it. He signed it. I don’t know whatever happened to it. It was kind of a thrill, you know?

So, after going to London I came back, finished the year at U of O, and then I started art school at PNCA—changed everything.

Where did that lightbulb come on for you to say, “OK, I saw all that stuff in London and now I want to go to art school.”

I knew the minute I saw paintings, like in the National Gallery. The scale of things—my mind was blown by the size of things. An artist I don’t think about much, Francis Bacon, there was a room of Bacon’s paintings [at the Tate Gallery] and it terrified me. I didn’t know that art could do that. I had to leave the room. I had a kind of like a panic attack.

I think they call it “epiphany.”

Yeah, so after that I just knew what I was going to do. Just as simple as that.

You saw them and said, “I want to do that.”

It just called me. It was like the old romantic notion of a calling.



Michael Brophy in his North Portland studio, November 2017/Photo by Paul Sutinen

So why did you choose PNCA versus going into the art program at U of O?

When I was at the U of O, I took life drawing, painting 101. Painting was with a grad student guy. He did paintings that were kind of interesting, hot air balloons. He said, “If you’re serious you should go to art school.” The only place I could afford was here. My dad and I built a little room for me to live in in my grandmother’s basement—because I wasn’t going to move back with my parents. It had a separate entrance. I stayed there for a year or two. When I went to PNCA, Paul Green and Eric Stotik—I met those guys. They’d been wanting to be artists their whole lives, but I didn’t. It was a really sweet spot for PNCA as far as being a painter—good teachers, Lucinda [Parker], Harry [Widman] was teaching, Jay Backstrand, Bob Hanson.

People who made you think about painting.

They were really, really, good. It was pretty fantastic actually.

So what did you think you’re going to do after you went to school? Painting is a great career to go into.

Yeah, I got lots of grief from my mom particularly, though she’s very supportive now. But, at the time she was really worried about me. She wanted me do something like be an architect, be a graphic

designer—nope, I'm going to be a painter. So I just didn't think about it. I graduated. I moved into a warehouse, living on the sly for the first six years after I got out of art school. Rolled up a futon and stuffed it in a closet if a landlord ever came around, and just painted. I worked part-time at Powell's for the money.

Back then you could have a part-time job and live on it.

I was three years on Mississippi. It was in '88 that I moved in over there. It was a really intense neighborhood, but you go wherever you get the cheap place. I was in a storefront in the Rexall building with the coffee shop in it. I was riding my bike to visit [artist] Tom Cramer over here and I saw this building. I'd been looking for a place. I wanted to have a studio on the ground floor and live above. I saw the "for sale" sign. I bought it from Mrs. Jackson, an elderly lady. So every first of the month—I had a contract with her—I'd walk down and pay her. Then after 10 years I paid her off. The best move I ever made by far.

This first floor studio is a big room with huge walls.

This can handle a big painting, which is important to me. Painting small is relatively recent because I always worked big.

Your work that I'm most familiar with is big stuff.

That's because I think, being in Europe, seeing those paintings. People say I paint big—I say you've never been to Venice, obviously—because then you'd see a big painting.

Yes, it is important to see the real things.

I went to the Prado one time, by myself. It was amazing—just how much I learned about painting in five days or whatever. I just spent the whole day in the Prado.

You say you think you learned a lot looking at those paintings. What do you think you learn by looking at paintings?

I think from the Prado, what I learned, the same with Venetian paintings, is they're quicker than they look. They're massed out in big tones and then they're worked back into. The other thing you see is they are pretty tonal, which helps for me because I'm slightly colorblind, so that was a huge thing for me to see. Those Venetian paintings—there's a huge amount of black in those paintings, the same with the Spaniards, Velasquez and Goya. And even Manet. I feel I'm in this pictorial thing. I'm really in more of the pictorial tradition. The physicalness of them I guess—the physical presence of them—how that white's really loaded up so it actually sits on the surface.

Yeah, there's a little dab of it.

Exactly. It catches light in a particular way. And maybe the light in those paintings—that's something you don't really get from reproductions.

And you don't get anything about the scale. In reproduction that white is just a teeny little pinpoint.
Or in a Goya the tree would be a big fat mark and then cut back into.



Michael Brophy, "Forest and Clearing Fire," 2016, oil on canvas, 18" x 20"

The paint itself had presence.

There were two things going on—the image first, then there was the paint. They were melded in a way that was really important. I was really glad that when I first saw painting I didn't get it from reproductions. That was huge. The first time I saw paintings they were *the paintings*, and I love that idea that there's just one. You could do a copy, but it's going to be different.

Did you find that all that practice copying comics was helpful when you got to a real drawing class?

There were two really good drawing teachers that I had. First, Bob Hanson was an incredible drawing teacher, and then Backstrand for life drawing. Jay was really important because he wanted you to nail a contour, make a decision. Is it straight or a convex curve or a concave curve? And that related to Kirby. And then I saw [German expressionist Max] Beckmann, and I just copied that guy forever. He had these bold black lines and it related to this graphic thing I had in my head. So [copying comics] helped a lot actually. I didn't know these languages people have for drawing because I hadn't taken any classes. But it came really fast in a way.

You'd been practicing with your drawing instruments. You didn't have to learn how to put a pencil or pen to paper.

And I knew that touch, and speed, whether the line creeps along, or goes really fast—things like that. Harry Widman told me that you can learn all the stuff without going to school, it just saves you some time, you'll figure it out.

Somebody figured that out originally, but it took thousands of years. How do you begin a painting?

I paint the grounds sort of an off-red. I got that from the Venetians.

Robert Colescott did that, too.

He's another one. I'm really into his stuff. After that I use chalk and [referring to a painting on the wall] for the first two weeks I just chalked in that painting. Where is the horizon? Up, down, up, down. I get the big shapes, where they might be. Just chalk, not rendering it really. Once I find that, I just start painting.

Do you work on several at a time or just one?

I used to work several at a time and still kind of do that, but I changed mediums so I got away from the turps. I'm using Galkyd [painting medium], a petroleum distillate, instead of the turpentine. It dries a lot faster, so I can stick with one rather than having to wait for the thing to dry. Instead of a week or two it will dry in a couple days. So now I tend to work maybe just a couple or maybe one at a time.

Why did you change mediums?

Just health things. I did gouaches. I would stop oil and do gouaches. I'd do that for a couple months. Then I'd go back to the oil. I'd notice I'd get little headaches. So I thought, "I've got to get away from this."

How do you know a painting is finished? That old abstract expressionist question.

To me the painting will tell you. I don't have to even think about it. You just look at it and eventually it will just irritate the shit out of you if it's not right, and you will be compelled to make a change. So I just sit and look at it. What's great about having my studio here and living above is that I can just come down here any time and sit and listen to music and just stare at it. And then I'll be like, "Oh, man, that's what's not working," and I'll make a note. The next day I'll come down and attack it or whatever.



Michael Brophy, "Terminal 6," 2016, oil on canvas, 54" x 60"

You're primarily a landscape painter now.

Yeah, I really have been. It's funny.

You were talking about the paintings that you saw at the Prado or Venice and they're primarily figurative interiors. But we were talking about when you're younger you were really into being outdoors...

Forest Park was huge. As a kid that's all I did, play in Forest Park. My parents always told me that when I was really little I would terrify them because I would disappear all day in the woods. I remember I would go behind the houses and through the canyons. I would do these things like how long could you go without touching concrete? Could you move through the whole neighborhood without touching any concrete? To me the forest was very room-like. I was raised Catholic, being an altar boy and all that. You're in a room like a forest, really. When I went to Europe, those cathedrals were like forests.

Early on I did figurative painting. There was one, kind of a self-portrait—I used myself a lot—a figure holding a bird and painting the sky. So I'd done these figurative paintings early on. Then what happened was, I was going to do figurative painting and then I didn't know where to put the figure, whether it would be in a room or out in a field of color. Then eventually I would paint these figures in a brushy field or something. Then I made a horizon. I started looking at the horizon. I was working at Powell's out in Beaverton. There's a big parking lot. I'd come out of work every day and I'd see this horizon. I just started thinking about it a lot. Then I put the figure in a landscape. And then the landscape, which was like an extra in the painting, came forward and became the subject of the painting. Then I started thinking about landscape. Eventually I was doing portraits of landscape. Those snag portraits I did were really based on those buffoons from Velasquez. Velasquez had these paintings of the court jesters, and they're painted with the dignity of the king, so I thought I'm going to take this cast-off thing in the forest, a stump or a snag, and I'm going to paint it like a person, with that kind of dignity. The funny thing is, a lot of times I feel like they're almost like figures or something—like I'm painting a portrait of a place.

The snag kind of painting seems like finding still-life in landscape.

The clear-cut thing happened—my dad retired from being a school teacher and he built a beach house—they always wanted to do that. So I'd go down to visit and help out sometimes. It was in Manzanita. One time I took Highway 53, which goes from Elsie to Nehalem. They were logging this road so I saw it get cut down—a month later it would be like, “Holy shit all the way to the horizon.” So I pulled over and I did a little pencil drawing. Then I did the painting of it, and it caused such a stir. It was incredible. People were really angry about this painting.



Michael Brophy, "Forest and Clearing Peak," 2016, oil on canvas, 18" x 20"

Because...

It was political, you know, it was early '90s with all the timber wars, the spotted owl.

Did people think you were saying something negative or positive?

Well that was a real Rorschach test with these kinds of images. This first painting was bought and someone put it in a lobby downtown. Then the occupants of this building petitioned to have it removed. They said, 'This painting is ugly.' Laura Russo [his dealer] gets this fax. She calls me up. She's really worried that I'm going to be really upset, but I thought, "That's just awesome!"

Who knew that art could do that nowadays?

It was like, "I'm going to make it bigger. I'm going to turn the volume up!" So I did these really big eight-foot clearcuts.



Michael Brophy, "Overflow Lake 1," 2017, oil on canvas, 38" x 32"

How big was this original one?

It was maybe 6 feet-by-4 feet. It was a painting of a clear cut, and I had little red robins in it because there were all these timber ads on TV, like "making room for the forest animals"—a pro timber ad campaign. So, I put these little robins in the painting. It's a political image, but I didn't approach it that way. I didn't

think, “I am making going to statement about deforestation.” I didn’t really think that way. Originally it was like, “This is visually unreal, it just looks unreal.” It’s sublime, but in an apocalyptic sense like [Civil War photographer] Mathew Brady photos or something. So then I did about a decade [of those paintings]: I really explored this whole forest thing.

I think that’s when I first became aware of your work.

That’s how people really know me. That’s when I first got some attention. Still, to this day people are like, “Where are the trees?” if I do something else. That last show I did, really big paintings of clear cuts and forests, was strange because I hadn’t really painted that image in about 10 or 12 years. So I went back. I was thinking like the metaphor of a spiral, you come past the same point with different vantage.

The new clearcuts all have cell phones in them, people taking cell phone pictures. I think there’s one called *The Machine in the Garden*, which is a reference to a book of literary criticism about the 19th century, and the sublime tradition, the entry of the steam train. So, I was thinking of that, a chainsaw being a machine in the garden, and then I thought, “Well, a cell phone now is a new machine in the garden.”

Speaking of cell phones, how do you think of yourself in the long tradition of painting versus video and computer art nowadays?

Well, the funny thing with painting is it’s slower. I use photo sources. It’s really interesting, with the photo, it captures everything, anything the camera looks at, unless you’re going to edit it out by software. If I think about it, when I take a photo of something, I’m not taking a photo of everything. I’m taking the photo of something. When I use a photo, I edit out so much of what’s there because that’s not what I was interested in.

I think painting can actually show the truth of place better [than with a photograph]. Not always. For example, Robert Adams. I love his work. I don’t have a beef with video art or any of that stuff. I just really like painting. I’d much rather look at painting. You know Bob Adams just has a poetic soul. I like that too. I think there’s something about a painting—it’s personal. It has one person’s kind of vision. Certain photographers can do that, too. There’s only one of a painting. You can reproduce photos exactly. A video piece—here’s the DVD. You project it and there it is. So, it exists in multiple forms. The thing about a painting—if you want to see [Velazquez’s] *Las Meninas* you have to go to the Prado in Madrid. That’s interesting to me.



Michael Brophy, "If You Lived Here," 2016, oil on canvas, 22" x 24"

Robert Ryman said, "It seems that the main focus of painting is to give pleasure. If someone can receive pleasure from looking at paintings then that's the best thing that can happen." What do you think?

I guess that's true on some level. It's not the first thing that comes to my mind. I guess it is pleasure, a sense of pleasure. Sometimes I look at paintings because they make me think. Maybe that's the interplay between an image and how it's made. I really love abstract painting, but I could never make one myself. You can use elements of that. I'm not really sure I know what's compelling about looking at a painting. I never thought about it in those terms.

Eric Stotik told me that how you use the painting is by looking at it. That's how I think about a painting—if you're a visual guy like I am, Eric is, you too. I'm sure most artists are. That is pleasure I guess.

When people talk about art being an elitist thing—owning a four hundred and fifty million dollar da Vinci is an elitist thing—but you can look at art for free, use it for free.

One time I was a finalist for a commission I didn't get in Seattle. One of the guys asked me, "How are you going to engage the community?" I was stymied by that because my paintings are for everyone to look at. I never thought of having one audience. I just thought they were for everybody. I've always liked that about my work. My brothers-in-law—one's a lawyer, one's a marketer car guy—they get what I do. Or my uncle Roger was a river dredger. He loved what I did, especially the logging paintings. He'd been a logger. One time a guy came up to me—I did a painting of a forest fire—this guy came up and said, "I'm a firefighter. I jump out of planes. Wow this is great!" I always thought that's really a great thing for me to feel like people can look at paintings and isn't about theory—you know I may be thinking all the stuff, but they can get that direct thing.