

Literary Still Life

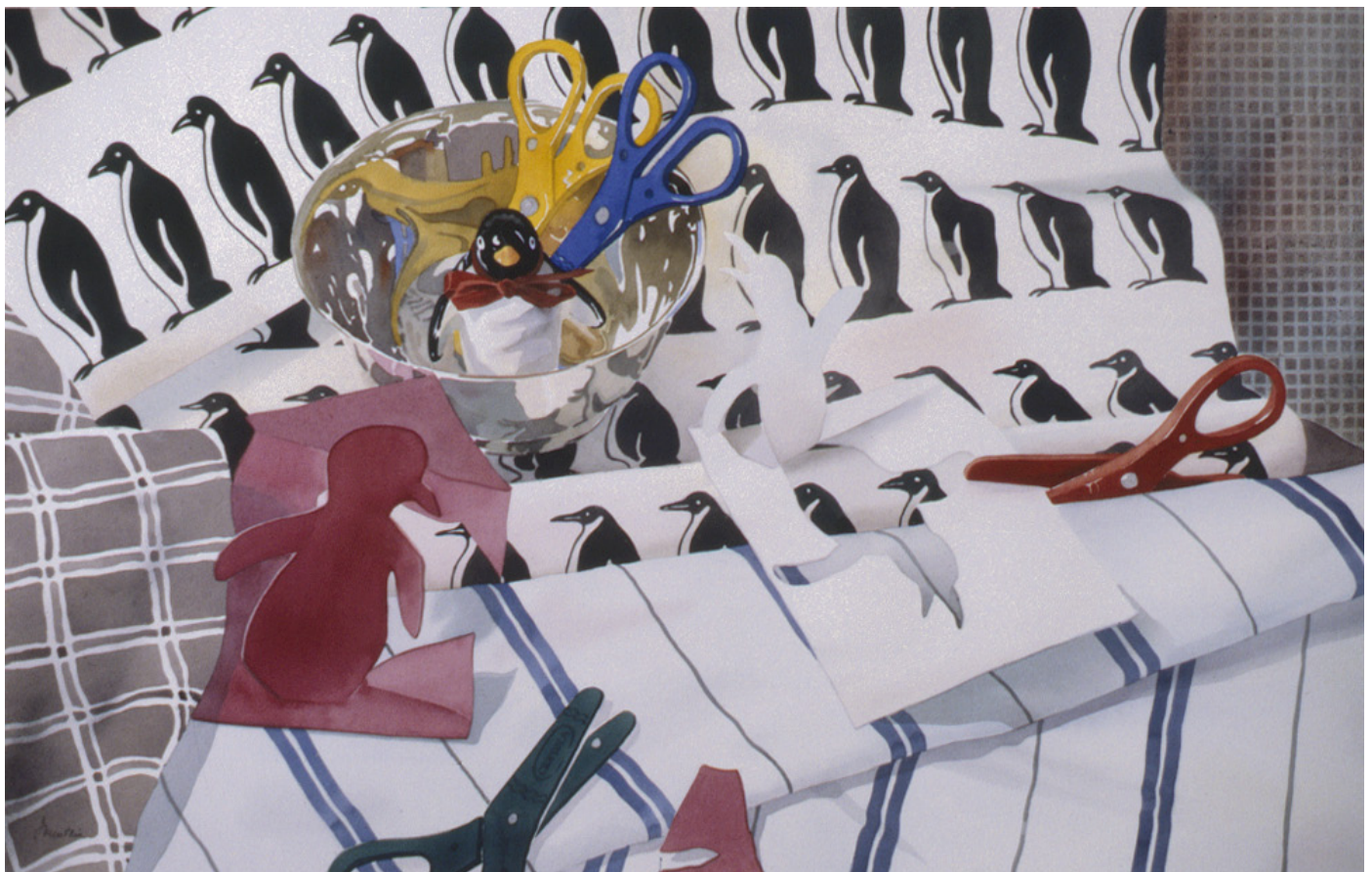
Week 4: Content Focus: Synecdoche (se-NEC-do-key)
 Technique Focus: Reflective surfaces

Synecdoche means the use of a part to signify the whole. For example, “Come take a look at my new wheels” means you got a new car. In art, synecdoche means that we might represent “cowboy” by painting just a heel of a boot with a spur, or by a cowboy hat, or by a large “western” silver belt buckle. Synecdoche is often used for dramatic effect, or to control viewer’s attention through awareness of details they might otherwise overlook.

Technique:

We are going to address two kinds of “reflective” surfaces in this still life assignment. The first is a shiny fabric (vs. a non-shiny one), and the second is a “shiny” object (brass, silver, pewter, etc.) Keep in mind that the illusion of shininess depends on sharper contrasts. Shapes within reflective objects tend to be hard-edged, and most highly reflective objects will have some pure white paper highlights.

In my painting below, the silver bowl looks shiny because of the carefully observed and painted shapes of color that are formed when the other objects around and in it reflect off its curved surfaces. This painting alludes to a favorite childhood activity of mine –paper dolls. Only this time I’m cutting out penguins instead!



“Cutting Up Again”, watercolor by Ellen Fountain, Image 25” x 40”. Currently on loan to the Arizona State Supreme Court, Phoenix, Arizona



*"Year of the Flood" by Ellen Fountain, watercolor
Image 30" x 22". Personal symbolism for me, this was painted
in a year when a whole bunch of life-changing events happened
all at once, and life as I knew it seemed to be getting "swept
away" by forces outside of my control.*

Painting fabrics that appear shiny also involves using more contrast between the light and dark areas, and in many cases will mean using near-white highlights along the tops of light-struck edges or folds of material. I used this kind of contrast to create the "satin" fabric that suggests water in this still life [left]. Notice that this fabric feels different visually than the rest of the fabrics.

I began painting this fabric with underpainted shadows, some soft and some hard-edged. This was allowed to dry. Then I mixed up my local color and began applying it, but used a "dry" brush, paper towel, or tissue to "wipe back" highlights to nearly white paper as I painted and before the paint was dry.

If you are not using a staining pigment, then you could just apply your local color wash and let it dry, then go back and rewet with clean water those areas that you wanted to lighten, then blot them to lift the color. This won't work with staining pigments, however, only with non-staining ones.

Painting Exercise:

Decide first on the content of your still life. How will you treat your subject using synecdoche? (What parts represent what "whole"?)

Set up a still life that includes EITHER a shiny fabric or a shiny object (or both, if it works for your idea and you want to tackle that much "shininess"). You may wish to do a different kind of composition for this still life....perhaps using small isolated images overlapping a larger one, or you may just wish to use exaggeration, and greatly enlarge just one "part" that will eloquently suggest the "whole".