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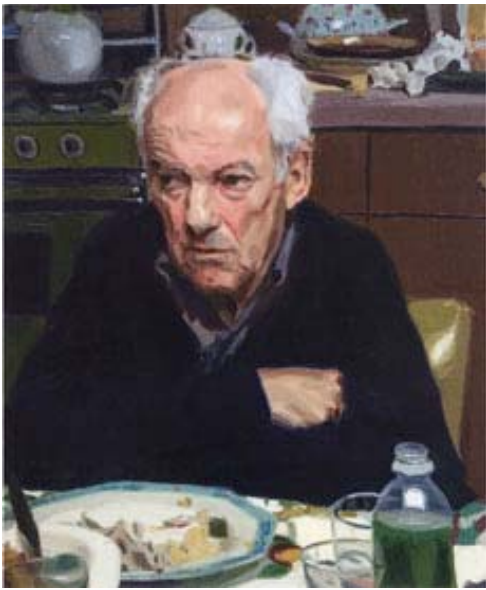
Artist-to-Artist: Michael De Brito

Traditional painting has a new face. Michael De Brito explains to fellow figurative artist Tina Tamaro how and why his work is a synthesis of artistic traditions past and present.

By Tina Tamaro



Small Kitchen Scene, oil on canvas, 4 ½ x 5 ½ in.



The Listener, oil on canvas,
23 x 19 in.

Tina Tamaro: Michael, you haven't been out of school that long. You went to Parsons in New York City, right?

Michael De Brito: Yeah, I went to Parsons for four years. I got my BFA there. And I also studied at the New York Academy of Art for about a year and a half.

TT: Who did you study with?

MDB: At Parsons I studied with a teacher named Robert Levering [pictured here in *Artist in the Studio*] but he is not a known painter. He had a lot of influence on my work in terms of being able to paint what I like painting. He told me that it is okay, especially in the time that it is. A lot of work now is abstract. Traditionalist work is coming back, but it is kind of coming back in a different way. He always explained to me that abstract art took place and was there for a reason. You take that and make your own work out of that.

TT: And you are using abstraction in your own work, a lot actually.

MDB: Up close, my paintings are a mishmash of paint strokes, but when you back up, it kind of forms together. Diego Velázquez does this amazingly well, and John Singer Sargent.

TT: When I look at your work, I think of Edouard Manet the most.

MDB: All of those guys, I mean... they have a really huge influence on me. I love going to museums. I really get a lot out of that.

TT: Did you paint a lot before you went to Parsons?

MDB: In high school, I was really into comic books, and I drew a lot from everything. When I went to Parsons, my direction was really towards illustration. I had a teacher in my sophomore year, who said, "If you really want to understand painting, just go to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City and look at this painter named John Singer Sargent." I had absolutely no idea, so I took a trip down there and the second I saw the way people were looking at the work... After that, the whole idea of what I wanted out of my work just changed.



Summer Supper, oil on canvas,
15 x 21 in.

[click to enlarge painting](#)

"What we are doing now is actually more modern than what abstract artists are doing because that has been done for a hundred years and now it has already been overdone. Now people are wanting something else."

TT: I completely understand. I left Ohio and went to New York City for five years, and I pretty much lived at the Met the whole time. Do you feel that anything about comic books still influences your work?

MDB: I love the dynamics of each little sequence that they have. It is not a direct association with comics, but I guess there is some influence since I did it for so long.

TT: Your work is very accomplished for your age. It is really amazing. What I see you doing is really saying as much as you can with every stroke. Are you doing a lot of sketches?

MDB: I will probably do about 50 to 100 sketches sometimes, depending on how long it takes me to get something. If I am really trying to get the actual face of the person, where it has to look like them, I will spend time doing drawings of them. I do drawings from life, from photographs, whatever I can get my hands on. Sometimes if the people are willing to sit there for a couple of hours, especially if it is my family, I will draw from life. But if not, then I will just take some digital reference, whatever helps me along the way. Sketches are definitely a major factor. I always carry a sketchbook with me.





Artist in the Studio, oil on canvas, 29 x 23 in.

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TT: I figured you did. Do you sketch the compositions, too?

MDB: Yeah! I lay it out, organize it. From there I take all the sketches and make one final drawing.

TT: Looking at all the paintings on your website, it looks like you do some color sketches as well, trying to figure out some of the color relationships, considering how you are going to organize color in the backgrounds.

MDB: Sometimes I will just lay colors on a blank canvas, just to see what the colors do, how they interact with each other. I'm also looking at the values of the colors, if it is a darker color versus a lighter color. I mean, I am still working on that. I always feel like I am learning new stuff.



Study, Artist in the Studio, oil on canvas, 13 x 18 in.

TT: Your website is amazing. You have that device where you can study the details and brushwork of your paintings. I like the way you are joining and massing things together in the background, where a whole section will be massed together and all cooled down in a certain light or the whole area will favor yellow. From a distance it reads very realistically, but when you look at just that section, up close, it is almost like a Richard Diebenkorn, quite abstract.

MDB: Especially in the bigger ones, when you look up close, there are a lot of areas where there is a loaded brush, where it is all over the place. I do like that, too. That is one thing that my teacher did influence me on. We would look at Joan Mitchell and see these loaded brushstrokes, and somehow, even though it is abstract, it is organized. So I just take that to a whole other level.



Lady in Polka Dots, oil on canvas, 11 x 8 in.

TT: And Manet and Velázquez were doing that, too. I am doing it in my own work psychologically. In your work you are using it in a way to tell a story, to set off certain things. You are a very good storyteller. That's why, when you said comic books, that made perfect sense.

MDB: I put it out there. I don't want it to be perfectly read. I just put it out there, and if someone can relate to it, even though it is not their house or their family, somehow they feel like it is them, that it is part of them. There is something going on—they might not know exactly what—but they can look at it and understand the interaction between the people.

TT: I think that what you are doing is one of the things that I love about Manet. He gives you a lot of information but he doesn't finish it completely. Sargent did this, too. So it allows us to add our own story to it. When I look at your work, I think, I wonder if those are his parents? Is that his parents' dog? You can't help but do that, and it doesn't even matter if it is true. To see all those generations in a room, I think, is powerful. I grew up in a house with three generations. I am Italian and Hungarian, and there was all this food making and sausage making, and so when I saw this, it was home to me. And that apron brings back memories! Now, is that your grandma?

MDB: That is my grandmother. She and my grandfather are from Portugal. They came here almost 50 years ago now.



TT: Does she gather people around her? Is there a sausage-making day every year?

MDB: The first time it occurred to me to start painting this, I was in college, Parsons. I just came downstairs and saw my grandparents at the table, and... I am always trying to paint



Late Night Coffee, oil on canvas,
17 x 23 in.

[click to enlarge painting](#)

Something that I would like to look at if I was at the museum. I go there and see all the artists I am interested in, and something about this clicked, this whole scene. So I did this one painting, and about a month later my grandfather died from lung cancer. After that, something happened, where I began to understand that this is the direction I wanted to go in.

It just seems like every day is always like a new day there. I eat there every day at two o'clock. I am there, and it almost seems like a movie that just keeps playing. Different people show up, and there are always these different interactions. For now, I just keep working on it. A lot of people keep saying, "Why do you keep painting the same thing?" But for me, I almost feel like it is different. It is a different day and a different time, and it is never the same to me.



Collection of Vignettes, oil on canvas,
10 1/2 x 7 in.

TT: To me, it feels richer because of it, not that you are just repeating yourself. It takes it from the personal story to the universal story. When I look at a lot of the good painters that are out there today, a lot of them to me seem extremely nostalgic. Their paintings feel like they are from the 19th century. I think there is maybe a hint of nostalgia in your work, but it feels like now, it doesn't feel like it is from another time. And that is important, to say something about today.

MDB: That is my main objective, to use the techniques of the past and mix it up with a little color of now. Even if you are painting a kitchen that is kind of a classic kitchen, there are still things that are there that are modern. I like those little hints, like if someone is wearing a wristwatch.

TT: There are some painters out there, where their work just becomes about showing off. Like, I think sometimes Anders Zorn goes over the top a little bit [Tina and Michael both laugh at the understatement]. I love his work, and he is an incredible painter, but sometimes it is just about the paint. At the time, that made sense. It was a time when artists were moving towards abstraction, as the 19th century moved into the 20th. Today, many traditional painters seem to be just showing us that they can paint like the old masters. There is nothing about the world we live in today. It is more like a great violinist playing a great composition from a past century. You have that skill but you are definitely painting contemporary people.

It almost bothers me the way some artists today are portraying women. They are just pretty things. The women you are painting, in particular your grandmother—she is obviously the matriarch, the head of your family—and you have given her a great strength. I like that in some of the little portraits of her, she seems really curious about what you are doing.

MDB: It is funny that you say that. She is a great model. She is very natural. I really like being around her. In terms of the work, I look at her like... it is as real as it can get, especially with me as an artist. And with her, she doesn't understand the extent of what I am trying to do, but she is accepting of it and of me. That is all that matters.



Prima, oil on canvas, 33 x 43 in.

"To me, the best work is always the paintings that you can spend hours finding new things in each time you look at them. So I try to create pieces like that so when the viewer is there the eye is always going

TT: That is one reason why your paintings make me think of Manet, particularly that painting that he did of that woman in the bar scene [*A Bar at the Folies Bergere*], with the still life in front of her. When I first saw your work, that painting was the first thing that popped into my head. And what I love about that painting is that woman is relating to us, and we are really the man as he propositions her. And Velázquez, of course, does it in the huge painting, *Las Meninas*. He is playing that same thing. He places us where the king and queen are. I feel that in many of

more, the eye is always going constantly.

your paintings, I feel like I just walked into the room. Sometimes you are almost distorting the still life objects—the pots and bowls—in the front.



Purple Scarf, oil on canvas, 24 x 32 in.

[click to enlarge painting](#)

MDB: I kind of imply what is the most important, but I do like painting a lot of stuff. Like you are saying with the Manet, there is the focal point of the woman but then there is all this other stuff going on around it. To me, the best work is always the paintings that you can spend hours finding new things in each time you look at them. So I try to create pieces like that so when the viewer is there, the eye is always going constantly.

TT: People living with your work are not going to get bored of it. Of course, the subject matter is going to keep them engaged but even more than that, the way you mass things together, the way you are telling the story is not just through detail. You are doing it by how you are creating the backgrounds, how you are setting things off. The way you are making things communicate with each other. The shapes are powerful. Most people may not notice ways you are massing things together, or the way you use color abstractly, but they may notice it six months or a year later. I have spent years comparing the great masters with artwork that doesn't have that staying power. The way they create shapes, the way the shapes evoke the mood of the scene, is what gives it that lasting thing where you can go and look at it every week for years and years and never get bored with it.

MDB: Those always seem to be the best pieces to me. There are a lot of great masters out there that do that. Now, that is what I try to do.

TT: And I think that you are doing it really successfully. Before you mentioned about trying to get a likeness. Do you always try to get likenesses?

MDB: Sometimes, but it is not really the main thing, especially if it is not really that important, if there is a scene and there are six or seven people. The majority of the time, it is not a portrait, so I am not trying to render the likeness. I know I can do it. I really have to step back sometimes and think what my main objective to the piece really is—trying to get a likeness or trying to say something about the whole piece itself. Look at most of Manet's stuff or Rembrandt's. I doubt that is exactly how they looked, you know?

TT: We assume those great paintings look like those people. I copied *Juan de Pareja* by Velázquez that is at the Metropolitan in New York City. It was a fabulous portrait to copy. I put it on my studio wall for years, comparing my paintings to it. At one point, I was reading about him and I saw a portrait that Juan had done of himself. There is a little bit of a likeness between the two paintings, but not really.

MDB: Even with the paintings he did of the king, Velázquez wanted to paint him exactly as he saw him. But the king always wanted him to take off the double chin. You never know exactly what these guys looked like. The best one is the portrait of *Pope Innocent X*. The pope was like, "No, I don't like that. It looks too much like me."

TT: He really got the complexity of that man's personality, and it wasn't all positive. When I am looking at your heads, you are obviously simplifying to tell more in some way. Are you trying to get a certain type of expression?

MDB: Honestly, I think I just try to let go. If I really don't try to spend time trying to make it look like something, it always seems



Dinner Guests, oil on canvas, 57 x 46 in.

like something comes through without me even wanting it to. So if I just try to let myself go a lot of times, it just seems to work. I always try to think that they are never masterpieces or anything like that. I just try to think like, if I just let go and think of my sketches, then always in the end they seem to work.

TT: Now, you don't work really big. In fact, sometimes you work really tiny!

MDB: The biggest work I have done was for my show that's currently at the Eleanor Ettinger Gallery in New York. I did a painting that was about 4 x 4 inches, and I did a painting that was like 67 inches high by 45 inches wide. I am going a little bigger as I go on, but I think, do I really need to do a gigantic painting to explain what I am trying to say? As for now, I don't really need to go to that size. In the show, I like the fact that I have huge paintings and really small paintings. I like varying the sizes throughout the show. This way the viewer is not always looking at the same size throughout.

TT: How did it feel to go into the gallery and see them all together?

MDB: For the first time? This was my first actual one-man show in New York, so it was pretty amazing. It was a good feeling. I went the day before, and it took a while to kind of take it all in. It's a great feeling!

TT: I would imagine. Did your family go? How did they act when they saw themselves up on the walls?

MDB: My family has been so supportive of my career. At the show, people would point at them as they looked at the paintings, especially at my grandmother. I think she is like four foot eight inches. So the second she walked in, everyone looked at her.

TT: She was a celebrity. That must have been great. Most of the time you center around her kitchen. Why do you do that?

MDB: For me, it has always been where my family joins together. There are not too many times a year when everyone is able to be there and do that. My grandmother's house... she is able to do that, to pull everybody together. Whether they are working or whatever they are doing, they come up.

TT: When I go home, it is the same thing. It is always the kitchen. You include a lot of patterns in your paintings.

MDB: Like the tablecloth, that blanket on the couch, those kinds of patterns? I do see them but not the way that they are. They actually help with the composition of the painting. They help balance it out, with the colors and everything. It always seems to help.

TT: Sometimes you use a low viewpoint, like you took the photos or did the sketches from sitting in a chair.

MDB: I always think about that. I think of Mary Cassatt. She painted pretty much the same type of subject matter her whole life. The thing is, if you can figure out how to organize the composition and the figures the right way, it almost seems like it is different every single time, even though it is the same mother and child. But especially with my work, if I figure out different viewpoints, I think the viewer is able to engage, whether it is behind one person or you see the back of one person. Sometimes I have it open to them, where it seems they are able to come into the actual painting. Or I will close it off where I will give the

back of someone. It is like you are looking into it but you are not really allowed to go in.

TT: It reminds me a lot of Degas in the way he set up a lot of his compositions. I am very aware of myself when I look at your paintings. Where am I? Am I sitting in a chair? Would I just be coming in the room? It feels like this is very important to your narrative. I am curious how some people will relate to your work if they didn't grow up like this, with people from other countries and especially with your grandmother's apron. This feels like home to me. But women in the next generation don't dress like that. I think you are capturing a part of America, just like Wyeth is capturing his own corner of the world. You are both capturing a world that is going to soon disappear.

MDB: Without a doubt, I truly believe that, and that is my biggest issue, especially when I go to my mom's house, because it is definitely not the same thing. The colors aren't there. You can try to make the house look like that but it is almost like you are forcing something that's really not there. At my grandmother's house, everything is there. The colors, the complementary colors, somehow they just seem to be there. It just happens. My vision, especially with design and art and architecture, have Modernism combined with traditionalism. I kind of create something new from that.

Today, if you are painting and you understand traditionalism and you understand painting with proportion and perspective, from there you want more. Then you kind of go to a different level and try different things. When there is a background in art and there is an understanding of art history, then you take it to another level. You are able to grasp something a little bit more.

When I went to Parsons, I had to actually go into the illustration department because the fine art department is so against models and figures. How can this still be going on? They are trying now to even get rid of some of the drawing classes and put computer classes. But all the students now are rejecting these classes, saying they would rather have the figure drawing classes. There is good and bad abstract art, just like there is good and bad figurative or traditionalist work. To learn to draw and paint well takes practice. It takes a lot of time and practice. What we are doing now is actually more modern than what abstract artists are doing because that has been done for a hundred years and now it has already been overdone. Now people are wanting something else.

TT: I love that you are painting older people in a world that is so much about looking young. The American media tends not to be interested in older people.

MDB: Especially with a painting that I did that is called *Artist in the Studio*. That is my teacher from Parsons. He is going to be 90 this year. I have friends my own age, but to really understand life and have somebody who can influence you and explain things in a totally different way, those are the people you look to. Here is a guy who was born in like 1919, and to me that blows my mind when I start thinking about that. I go to his studio and I try to do the same thing there that I am doing in the kitchen scenes and then do it with him because there is so much to him as well. I really admire him. He doesn't want any fame. He can paint like Velázquez and he can do any Modern stuff. That is the reason that I get so much out of him. I really like that way of thinking.

TT: I think you are very good at telling a story, and it is a story that is very personal. It is like watching a movie we get very engaged in. I often think of Degas, how he was seeing the world

in a new way. I think we got off that track and began to use painting as a way to talk about art, but we can get back to using painting to talk about the world we live in. I think you are leading the way for that.

MDB: It is funny that you mention Degas, because I read that Gauguin used to tell him that he should go out and find a new place. Degas said, "You are a wolf and I am a dog," and that always to me meant a lot. You don't have to go far away. People always tell me, "Why don't you go to Europe? Go to other countries and try to understand it." If an artist wants to do that, it is fine. But if I am going to communicate anything to the viewer, I want them to know that I understand it to the fullest. That's why, to me, painting what you know always comes out the best.

TT: In many of the paintings, like in this one of your teacher, you are massing things together and not putting in detail, leaving a large open area. You really feel this older man being by himself and you really capture Degas's idea that everything in the room should tell the story, not just the figure.

MDB: I love leaving the narrative open-ended. I love leaving a plate on the end of the table and it just sits there. Not many people know it's me, but there is always a plate there, and you wonder who is there and why is someone missing. I like leaving it open-ended and letting the viewers interpret it in their own way.

TT: You tend to play colors off each other in really bold ways.

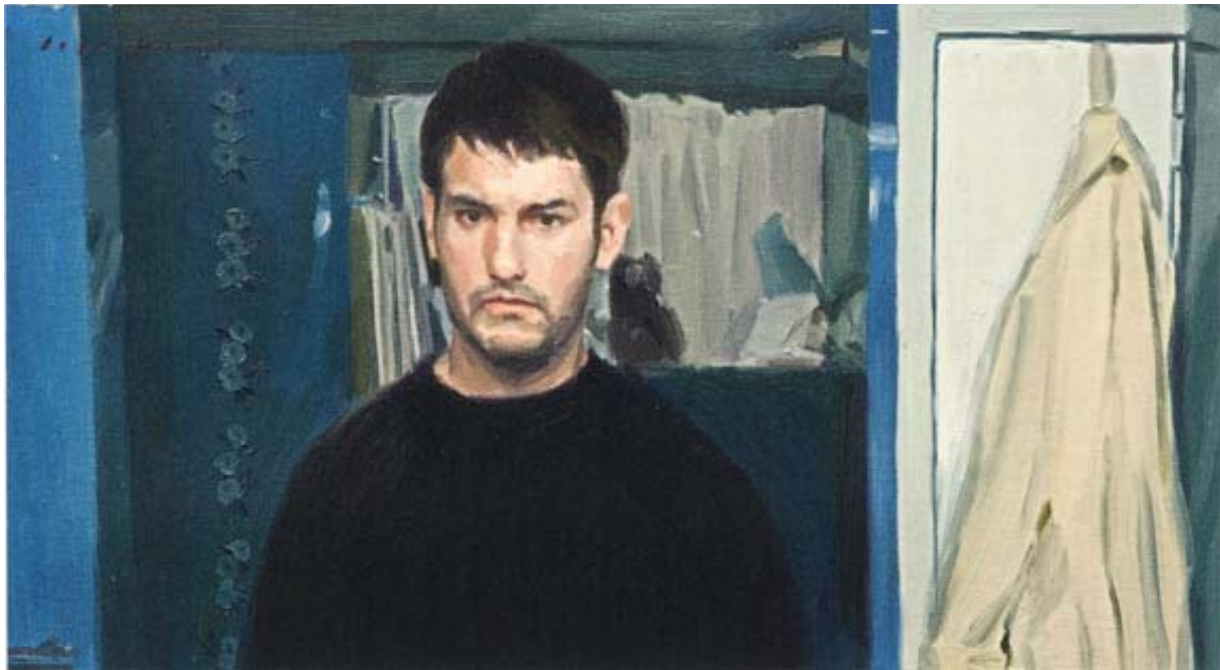
MDB: You can do what Caravaggio did, where you make it really dark around the edges and then you have the main focal point, which is very light in value. Or you can loosen it up like Degas, where there is a focal point, but there is a lot going on around it as well.

TT: You look at artwork a lot, don't you?

MDB: Yes, I do.

TT: The whole history of painting is in your work, including abstraction.

MDB: I feel like a good painter should have a need for that, and a lot of time it is overlooked. To me, I just want to understand everything. I want to take it all in and blurt it all out.



Blue Self-Portrait, oil on canvas, 11 x 19 in.

About Michael De Brito

In a world awash with conceptual art and abstraction, Michael De Brito's paintings stand out as a modern take on the bravura of figurative masters of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Just as it fascinated the masters before him, the human being, formidable and familiar, provides Michael with opportunities for interminable nuances and expression. He earned his BFA from Parsons Design School, and furthered his studies at the New York Academy of Art. He is represented by Eleanor Ettinger Gallery in New York, which hosted a one-man exhibition of his work through May 4. Learn more about Michael by visiting his website at www.michaeldebrito.com.



About Tina Tammaro

*"I love to watch people. How they communicate and don't communicate. To help me express this complexity in human interaction I pull from the traditional styles of the Old Masters as well as the expressive power of Modern art," says Ohio artist Tina Tammaro. She earned her BFA at Miami University and her MFA at the University of Cincinnati. A popular juror, Tina has lectured at such institutions as the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the National Gallery in Washington, and she has written for publications such as *The Artist's Magazine*, *Watercolor*, and *Drawing*. She currently mentors other artists in her Cincinnati studio, and she has recently exhibited at Manifest Gallery and Northern Kentucky University.*

Self-Portrait, oil, 12 x 12 in.,
by Tina Tamaro



Mother Son I, oil on linen, 5 x 7 in.,
by Tina Tamaro



Mother Son II, oil on linen, 5 x 7 in., by Tina Tamaro



Family Table, oil on canvas, 23 x 31 in.

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