



The still life paintings of Jeffrey Ripple experiment with light, color and texture.

BY JOHN O'HERN

# Mystery of Nature



**I**n 1998 I saw Jeffrey Ripple's paintings for the first time at the former Hackett-Freedman Gallery in San Francisco. I perused each piece, attracted by the impeccable still lifes in nebulous space. Later, after visiting several other galleries, I returned for another look and ran into the artist himself. We chatted, and have kept up over the years.

His early oils were on paper—flowers, fruits and vegetables often isolated in their setting, with a strong side light. He brought to our attention that “these things are worthy of our notice. Their

texture and their color are somehow more than just pretty. They're magical,” he says.

“It's a process of pulling these things out from everyday life and giving them a place where they can be beautifully balanced and contained in a way that makes us see them in a new way,” Ripple explains. “I combine them with other things in contrast or in similar relationships and give them a light that enables that to happen.”

Ripple is now painting on panels, introducing other light sources and sometimes changing it with colored

**1**  
*Garland*, oil on board,  
20 x 20". Private  
collection. Courtesy  
Tory Folliard Gallery,  
Milwaukee, WI.

**2**  
Jeffrey Ripple in  
his studio.



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filters. As his paintings have evolved, so has his sense of the mystery of nature and his inclusion of that in his paintings.

His mother tends a series of gardens in northern Michigan. “She’s a really good gardener,” he says. “She has a little rose garden, vegetables and flowers. She lives in northern Michigan, which has a short growing season, crappy weather....and deer. But she always manages to have a phenomenal garden. She’s always trying different things.”

Ripple has an herb garden and “a wide variety of flowers in the summer.” Container gardening has broadened his scope. The fruits of his labors appear in his paintings along with more items such as pomegranates and persimmons that he buys at a local

Vietnamese grocery store. “They have fruit that isn’t perfect looking and hasn’t been cleaned up.”

His painting *Hellebores and a Korean Bowl* illustrates his combination of the sublime and the mundane. He grows hellebores in his garden and rejoices when they sometimes bloom on a warm day in January. “The gloves are my dad’s,” he explains. “The stains on the tabletop are from my teacup.” The Korean bowl is useful despite its imperfections. At the bottom of the composition is an ephemeral hellebore blossom. “It’s an homage to gardeners in the sense that they tend the soil and bring water to the garden so these things can grow,” he says. “There’s also the relationship between big and small. The large form at the top is something like God and the small thing at the bottom is sort of like me.

**3**  
*Green Plums*, oil on panel, 12 x 12". Private collection. Courtesy Arcadia Contemporary, Pasadena, CA.

**4**  
*Studies From My Garden*, oil on panel, 16 x 12". Courtesy Arcadia Contemporary, Pasadena, CA.





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*Scribe*, oil on wood panel,  
12 x 9". Courtesy Hirsch &  
Adler Modern, New York, NY.

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*Life in September*, oil on panel,  
19 x 16". Courtesy Tory Foliard  
Gallery, Milwaukee, WI.

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*Hellebores and a Korean  
Bowl*, oil on panel, 16 x 16".  
Courtesy Tory Foliard Gallery,  
Milwaukee, WI.

"My dad's worn gloves also relate to my interest in Spanish Baroque paintings in which the painters portray humble cloths and materials like that. I was brought up Roman Catholic," he continues. "The poet Dana Gioia wrote that Catholicism is a faith which believes that transcendent truths are incarnated. I feel like I see that in very Catholic Spain. In Velazquez's *An Old Woman Cooking Eggs*, the materials are almost spiritual. Part of my agenda is to look at these natural things in a spiritual way. They deserve our attention in a solemn spiritual way. Light can enhance that idea. I feel that if I can arrange and light the materials well, I can at least try to give them a spiritual dimension."

In *Studies From My Garden*, he takes the opportunity to study some of the flowers he grows. "As I'm painting," he says, "there's a lot of mark making. In a study like this I can put a little bit of the process in as it develops, information that wouldn't be in a large painting."

The studies have given way to the more complex paintings on panel. When we spoke, he was setting up persimmons from that Vietnamese grocery. He shares, "Putting them on the plate I've been thinking about how I can cast shadows and I think I may put them against something architectural. I've been taking photos and composing and making drawings. I'm creating a little world. Everything has to work together. It has to be a balanced thing in the end. I struggle with that."

His explorations of light, color and texture led him to do a Trompe l'Oeil painting, *Scribe*, with its shallow space and background parallel to the picture plane. His rendering of the materials is meticulous and he has worked in visual puns—implements for "scribing" or making marks, from the central carpenter's wood scriber to a faint drawing of a hand holding a pencil. He has also experimented with a colored gel to add colored light to the top of the painting—a departure from the tradition of Trompe l'Oeil.

In *Garland*, Ripple's skills, developed over the years, and his desire to experiment reach a high point. The glistening pomegranate seeds and matte tiles, the brightly lit foreground and a pear nearly lost in shadow combine in an image of both clarity and mystery. ●



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