



luminous illusion



LEFT: *Fourth of July Sail* (oil, 10x16) is an example of one of Polomis's visual sentences. Red, white and blue toy boats sail across a shelf, with the marble acting like a buoy. "The painting is a different take on 'Fourth of July Sale,' says Polomis, "which every department store and car dealer promotes at that time of year."

Ted Polomis shares his toys—staging visual puns and painterly pleasures, rendered with a translucent glaze on opaque color.

BY BJ FOREMAN

IT'S LIKE A FORCE OF NATURE: You see a still life painting by Ted Polomis, and your first impulse is to reach out and touch it. Whether you're viewing the image of an impossibly shiny round glass vase, a nostalgic, beaten-up toy, or Native American pottery, the seeming reality of the painting calls to you. Ted Polomis believes the attraction comes from his paintings' honesty. For him, that's the whole shebang.

From Illustration to Painting

This is the same artist who, as a student at the Rhode Island School of Design, hated classes in still life. “The setups—always generic school items—held no emotional attachment for me,” he says. He majored in illustration and spent his junior year studying the old masters in Europe. “After graduation, I got a job in illustration and, as the years of doing assigned illustration work progressed, the desire to paint my own work became stronger. I just didn’t know what I wanted to paint,” he says.

There were experiments with Jackson Pollock-like color drips and fantasy-based Santorini Island beach scenes. “After a while, it all seemed hollow. I felt as if I were cheating, with no reckoning for what the image really was. I had fun, but I knew I needed to be a better painter.” The experiments continued on and off while Polomis worked in medical illustration, animation and graphic design.

Then came 9/11. “The dull shock and search for meaning that we all felt made me see my own work as dishonest and unsatisfying,” says Polomis. “I decided to go back to basics and, one night, something clicked. I grabbed two onions and a bulb of garlic, plunked them down and started painting. It was a small painting, about 5x6 inches, but it felt honest, and the results were better. When my wife saw it the next morning, she said, ‘Now, I like that!’ And, basically, I’ve been doing ‘that’ ever since—painting from life. It’s the only way to the truth.”

BELOW: With *Road Block* (oil, 9x14), Polomis illustrates a simple word play, but the image transcends the pun, achieving a sort of monumentality. For Polomis the toy paintings are “like quiet moments long gone, evocative of childhood.” These paintings “combine a childlike quality with endurance and wisdom.”



Artist as Collector

During the 17th century, Dutch artists often painted still lifes for the rising middle class by incorporating the patrons’ most precious possessions into the setup. For Polomis, still life elements come from his own possessions. He’s an avid collector, and his purchases from yard sales and eBay can be seen in his paintings. In contrast to his school experience—because his still life setups are arrangements of his own treasures—every moment spent painting them is a pleasure.

His setups reflect three of his passions as a collector: vintage toys, Native American pottery, and cobalt glass with blue-and-white pottery. All of his paintings, however, share a singular vision—a reverence for each object, depicted with dramatic lighting and luminous color schemes.

The artist positions his objects in a shallow space, with a wall or drapery directly behind the shelf or table on which the arrangements are staged. In his more whimsical works showing vintage toys, the playthings and the shelves they rest upon are generally chipped and worn. The Native American pottery paintings are spotlighted against rich, velvety black backgrounds.

Bright marbles often punctuate Polomis’s visual sentences, perfect little accents that contrast with the chipped toys. In the more traditional still life paintings, a variety of blue, glass vases and blue-and-white pottery reappear—always rounded shapes, often paired with branches of dried money plant. A popular name for that plant is *honesty*, so appropriate for an artist who wants that virtue in his work.

“Honestly,” he quips, “it grows in my yard. I just love those circular planes in space.”

A recent fascination for Polomis is the Acoma Pueblo pottery he began to collect a few years ago. The first painting in this series appeared in 2010. “The paintings are odes to the artists who created the pottery,” he says. “I love the seemingly primitive, yet actually very sophisticated sense of design



LEFT: *"Arrangement with Green Vase* (oil, 16x20) is a departure from my blue-and-white paintings," says Polomis. "I wanted to do a limited-palette piece and found the green vase and bottle soothing objects on which to base an arrangement. The reflection on the vase provided the opportunity for an intimation of a painting within a painting."

BELOW: In *Tea with Lemon* (oil, 10x14), the saucer, in accord with the Mannerist convention, hangs precariously over the shelf. This painting demonstrates Polomis's love of glazing, as well as his love of the color blue. "I always mix a bit of raw sienna and raw umber into the glaze," he says. "The glaze is mostly blue, but I don't want a pure blue, which looks too neon to me. The glaze I did use looks pure blue because what's next to it isn't very blue."





ABOVE: Early on, Polomis painted groupings of native pots. In more recent pottery paintings, like **Acoma Vase** (oil, 24x24), he's pared his vision to feature a single pot. This particular pot is shown warts and all—with chips on the lip and neck—which lend it the air of a relic that has seen use in its day. The pot is displayed on a dramatically lit shelf that seems to be made of clay itself.

exhibited in these pots. They convey a sense of graphic design that's so balanced and restful."

Within the Boundary

Even the most favored treasures, though, won't compose themselves into a perfect setup or design. "I use photography as a tool to test setups," says Polomis. "I don't paint from photographs, though, because they remove you a generation from the source." He is, after all, an illustrator with true skill in drawing. "If you take a photograph of my subject matter and compare it to my paintings, you'll see quite a difference," he says.

The design process begins with pencil sketches on paper to determine the size and format of the finished work, and Polomis often uses empty frames to eyeball the height-to-width ratio he might like to use. He approaches composition in the way you would expect of a graphic designer. "I try to have

a nice balance within the frame," he says. "I hate seeing a well-executed painting with, say, a boat mast cut off, or a still life with too much space on one side. A painting is a scene confined by an artificial boundary. Start off as a good graphic designer and get the proper boundary for your subject at the outset so you don't doom your finished work." By the time he begins the actual painting, he knows what it will look like.

His home studio is a 12x12-foot room in his 300-year-old home. There, at any given time, you'll find hundreds of objects and six setups for the six paintings he's working on simultaneously. He can thus rotate projects while the paint dries (on average, a painting takes about 40 hours to complete). He admits that the small work area is a bit claustrophobic, but he hopes to go to a larger space in the future.

A simple lighting setup allows for a variety

Painting From Back to Front

BELOW: “*Native Pots* (oil, 16x20) is more akin than my still lifes of toys to the darker Dutch and Flemish still life paintings that I admire—only simpler and more modern,” says Polomis. “I fell in love with native pottery on a trip to the Southwest. The simple designs of these pots are so balanced and clean that I had to paint them.”



of effects. There are six old-fashioned arm lamps, which he masks to control the light and heighten the drama. He uses incandescent bulbs, ranging from 25 to 60 watts and, while the rest of the room is relatively dark, a halogen bulb provides ambient light.

The Joy of Glazing

Twenty years of illustration assignments and Photoshop work have honed Polomis’s technique as an oil painter. As a medical illustrator, he often used as many as 40 layers to properly depict his subject, so we’re not surprised that the system he’s devised for his still lifes involves applying translucent color layers over opaque layers, alternating many times in the course of creating a painting. The resulting luminosity is a hallmark of his style.

To prepare his hardboard-panel surface, he applies two to three coats of acrylic gesso thinned with water. With a soft mop brush,

Rather than build all areas of a painting at once, Polomis looks at his painting technique as “a little puzzle,” for which he fits the pieces in order, back to front. He explains the sequence for *A Touch of Orange*.

“I hung a blue sheet behind this arrangement,” says Polomis, “but I painted it a little ‘foggier’ than life—a little light in the middle and dark on the edges.” He wanted to contrast the hard edges of the arrangement with the ethereal quality of the background: “So first I painted a blue gradation with the shadow, although I hadn’t painted the objects making the shadow yet.”

Next, Polomis painted the drapery on the table and then the big white vase. “It was just a white vase at this point,” says Polomis, “no design yet. The blue pattern on the vase came later. At that point I glazed with two different gradations of blue generated with titanium white, raw sienna, raw umber, French ultramarine, cerulean blue and a bit of ivory black.”

Next, he painted the orange up to the outline of the inkwell (with the help of faint pencil lines), “because,” as he explains, “the orange is behind the blue inkwell.” He painted the blue vase to the right in the same sitting as he did the orange. Finally, he painted the inkwell and the teacup.



ABOVE: *A Touch of Orange* (oil, 21x32)



Meet Ted Polomis

Ted Polomis started drawing as a child and has simply never stopped. He majored in illustration at the Rhode Island School of Design where, during his junior year, he was elected to the European Honors Program in Rome.

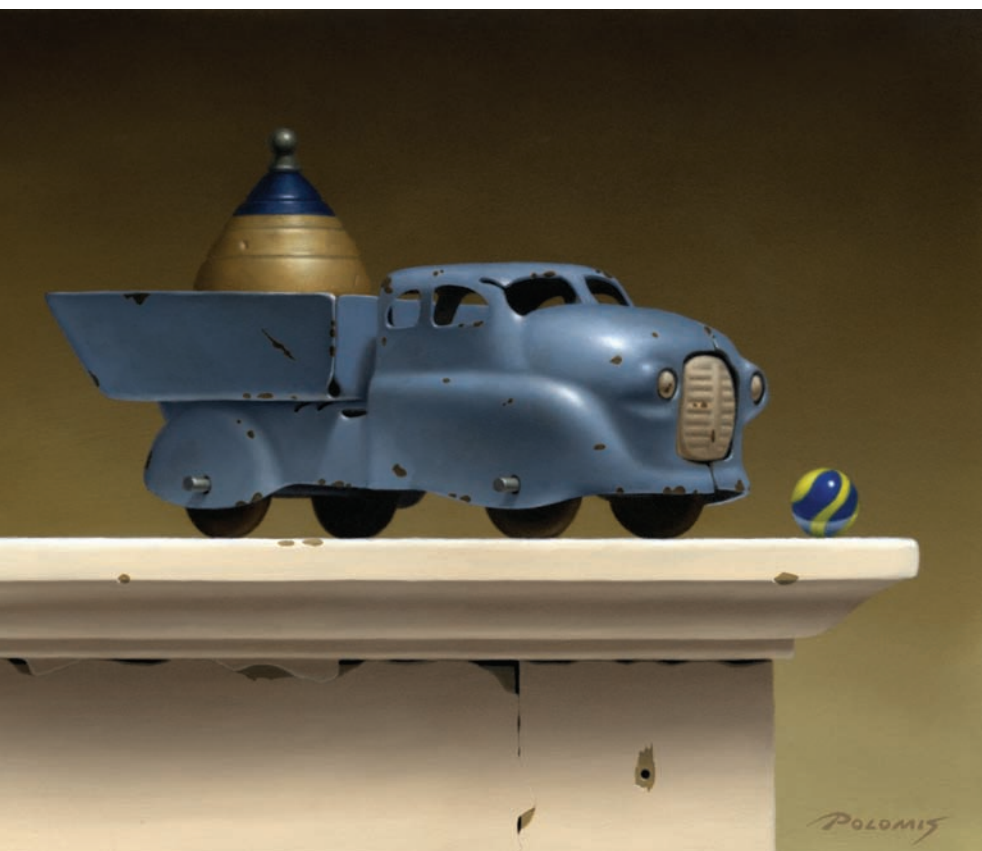
He traveled widely in Europe, where he studied the work of the old masters. Today his artistic heroes include Johannes Vermeer (“you can see points of color up close, but stand away and there’s nothing!”), John Singer Sargent (“he was such an intuitive painter in both watercolor and oils; he knew the media so well”) and Jackson Pollock (“there’s something so satisfying about how he lets the paint do what it does”). Polomis’s work is represented by Cavalier Galleries in Greenwich, Connecticut, and Nantucket, Massachusetts; Meyer Gallery in Santa Fe, New Mexico; Scottsdale Fine Art in Scottsdale, Arizona; Sheldon Fine Art in Naples, Florida; and Palm Avenue Fine Art in Sarasota, Florida. He paints from his home studio in Marshfield Hills, Massachusetts. Learn more at www.polomis.com.

BELOW: “The bulbous front and simple pressed metal of the truck in *Truck’s Top* (oil, 12x14) make the toy a delightful still life model,” says Polomis. The headlights of the beaten-up truck seem to stare in puzzlement at the pristine marble that stops both the viewer’s eye and the truck’s would-be progress.

he smoothes the surface as it dries to lay a foundation that will accommodate fine detail.

Next, he paints in the background opaquely, “the fastest and often the most fun part,” he confides. “Once that has dried, I paint in the objects in stages, back to front. He applies paint in layers—as if working in Photoshop or with toy Colorforms—which must be overlapped. “I know that many artists want to develop all parts of the painting as they go along,” says Polomis, “but this is a strange technique that I’ve developed, and I’m comfortable with it.” (See *Painting From Back to Front*, page 57.)

BELOW: For Polomis, the Volkswagen in *Vacation Bug* (oil, 12x28) evokes first memories of riding with his blanket and stuffed leopard in the space behind the back seat of his mother’s red Volkswagen (“mandatory child safety seats were unknown then,” says Polomis). The attached trailer offers a matching touch of red while completing the symmetry of the hill-like curve created by the upper edges of the two vehicles.



The final steps involve opaquely painting in details and applying translucent overlays of glazed color, using Liquin as a medium. “I love glazing,” he says. “It makes everything pop and provides the saturated colors and details.” Sometimes he applies four or more layers of glaze in a given area. “My early work was on canvas,” he says, “but once I got into glazing, I couldn’t quite get the detail I was after because the colors pooled in the little crannies of the fabric. So when I found masonite and panel board, that was it.”

But for all his opaque layering and translucent glazing, his actual use of oils is restrained. “I don’t go through a lot of paint,” he says, confessing that some of his paints are 27 years old. “I know one impressionistic artist who uses as much paint for the works of one show as I go through in three years.”

Embracing the Artist He Is

To beginning artists Polomis offers this advice: “Don’t make things up. Paint from life. Find subjects that fascinate you.” His counsel stems from his passion for honesty, not just to his subject, but also to himself as an artist. “I learned classical technique (start with a

turpentine wash and get tighter with repeated sittings) in only one class,” he says. No one was teaching realism at the time, just painterly expression. A teacher I respected told me, “Your painting is so tight—loosen up!” I wasted years trying to change my technique. Finally, I decided that I wasn’t going to worry about being the painter I couldn’t be. I’d be the painter I could be.” And the rest is history. ■

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Materials

Surface: hardboard panel prepared with two to three coats of acrylic gesso thinned with water, which Polomis smooths with a soft mop brush

Palette: Winsor & Newton titanium white, raw sienna, raw umber and French ultramarine (other colors added as needed for the subject)

Brushes: flats for general painting; small rounds for detail; large, soft brushes for blending and smoothing

Mediums: Winsor & Newton Liquin, especially for glazes; Martin/F. Weber Japan drier; W.M. Barr Klean-Strip odorless mineral spirits

