

THREE TO WATCH

There is a lot of superb art being made these days; this column by Allison Malafronte shines light on a trio of gifted individuals.

CARL BRETZKE (b. 1954) recently turned a corner in his pursuit of becoming a full-time professional painter: he has put in enough hours at the easel to get his work consistently noticed in the art world, and his recent achievements – including winning the grand prize in the 2016 *PleinAir* Magazine Salon Competition – are allowing him to conclude his career as an interventional radiologist and devote the rest of his life to art.

Bretzke earned an M.D. at the University of Minnesota Medical School, but the undergraduate degree he had received previously at the University of Colorado included a minor in fine art. About midway through a successful medical career, Bretzke felt a strong call to return to art. While maintaining his day job, he spent several years studying part-time with Joe Paquet, whom he continues to count as a major influence and mentor, while Ben Fenske – another Minnesota native and former student of Paquet – played a significant role in helping Bretzke break through in his understanding of color and light.

The artist predominately paints urban scenes and plein air landscapes, and his paintings featuring distinct and difficult-to-capture light effects – such as sunsets or nocturnes – are particularly notable. In *Blue Night*, for instance, Bretzke's ability to compress and

unify the gradations of mid-value blues and grays allows the focal-point highlights in umber yellow to sing in contrast. Also noteworthy is his ability to add lively elements in landscapes that otherwise lack immediate interest, including winter scenes, overcast days, or gray and flat motifs. "Minnesota has long winters without foliage on trees, and lots of gray days," Bretzke explains. "Many artists can make a serene landscape look great – I tend to want to put things in my landscapes to help them."

Considering Bretzke's medical background, it's not surprising that he has a scientific approach to landscape. He pays particularly close attention to the optics of light and atmosphere, considers prismatic progression in color and value as he paints, and has devoted significant time to analyzing exactly what he is observing. "Whatever you paint, it's always going to look better if you understand the thing that you are painting," Bretzke says. "I like to study the way one sees things. Light is fascinating to study."

Bretzke is represented by Susan Calloway Fine Arts (Washington, DC), Douglas Flanders & Associates (Minneapolis), Grenning Gallery (Sag Harbor, NY), and Settlers West Galleries (Tucson).



CARL BRETZKE (b. 1954), *Blue Night*, 2015, oil on panel, 16 x 20 in., private collection



CHRISTOPHER SMITH (b. 1958),
Perfectly Naked (Nos. 1-14), 2008,
 aluminum-filled resin cast sculptures
 mounted on steel shelves, 20 x 7 x 5
 in. each, private collections

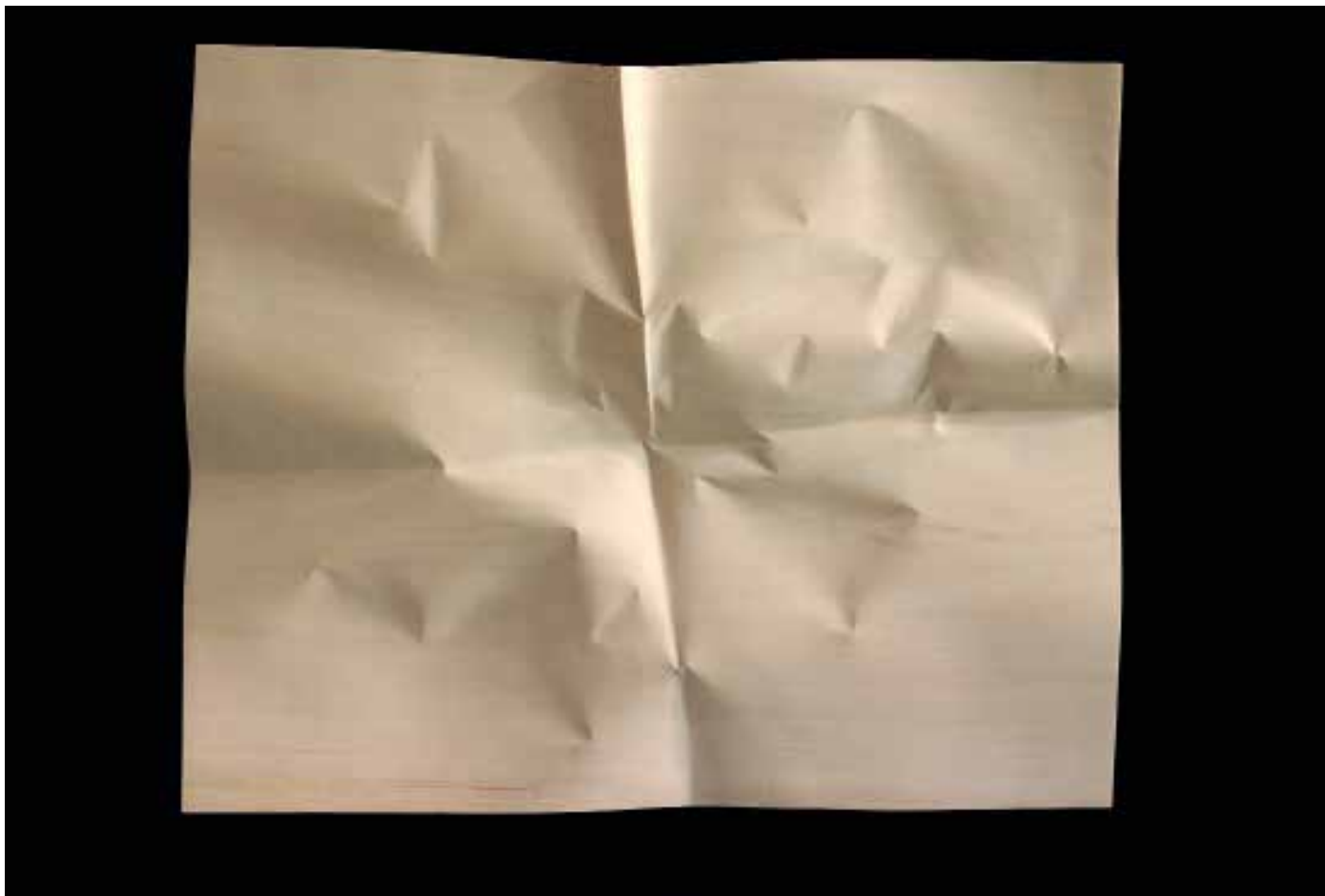
CHRISTOPHER SMITH (b. 1958) is a sculptor from Philadelphia whose compelling work combines the craft of classicism and the innovation of the contemporary. Working from life with traditional tropes — such as reclining figures, bas-relief narratives and portraits, and standing sculpture in the round — Smith uses non-traditional materials and forward-thinking concepts to turn the assumption of how sculpture can be made, displayed, and appreciated on its head.

For Smith, sculpting is all about structure and space, and the artist not only considers the space the sculpture itself inhabits, but also the larger context that surrounds it. In this way he conceives and designs his sculpture as both craftsman and architect, and the resulting work appeals to both worlds. As an example, Smith's *Perfectly Naked* series — a 14-piece collection of 20-inch-tall aluminum-filled resin sculptures, mounted on steel shelves — was recently chosen by Wayne Braun, the design director emeritus of design and interior architecture firm PDR, for his personal collection. Braun's home in the museum district of Houston is filled with an eclectic mix of modern works, but he also collects bronze sculpture from the late 19th century through the 1950s, observing that "the castings are so beautifully done; the sculptural technique and

the images are less intellectual than most art, so it's more about the craft."

Keeping craft and intellectualization in constant concert, Smith's sculpture series are motivated by philosophical observations and narratives. His recent bas-relief figurative triptych, titled *Antigone's Dilemma*, shows the central figure moving from a position of seeking power to being removed from it. In the artist's words, this three-panel relief is about "the nature of power and its capricious behavior." The *Perfectly Naked* series explores several individuals' responses to being exposed and vulnerable, and also considers how their surroundings play a role in that response. "In this series, the narrative is found in the models' reactions to a vertical surface, a wall," the artist states. "What is the male or female response to being exposed and isolated? I wanted to make the series modular so the viewer or curator could group the pieces according to their own narrative or story, using as many or few as needed."

Smith is represented by Seraphin Gallery (Philadelphia) and by the independent curator Eileen Tognini.



CHRISTIAN RENONCIAT (b. 1947) is a French found-object sculptor who delights in his materials and derives near-poetic inspiration from their use. He thinks of his artworks — the categories of which include cardboard, douceurs, paper, tremors, and varnishings — as presentations of both the artistic process and the materials' essence, rather than exact replications of any particular object. "I do not conjure an image to be appreciated by the mind," Renonciat states, "but matter, consistency, surface, texture, that I set before the body and its senses, directly, without mediation. In a way, I am not providing an interpretation of what is presented, but revealing what is."

Rarely have the inherent qualities and inner workings of materials been more enjoyed and deeply explored than in Renonciat's sculpture. Simple surfaces — cardboard, paper, plastic — take on new configurations and meaning in the hands of this artist. He bends, moves, and adjusts his materials, or creates entirely new constructions, with full awareness of how they are wired and want to behave — almost like a trained musician whose familiarity with his instrument results in the most natural and agreeable sound.

Even the sounds and smells of the materials mean something to Renonciat: he mentions the wrinkling, rustling, and rippling of the paper; the icy crackling of plastic manipulation; and the "happy fumes" of alcohol and lacquer vapors involved with varnishing — all

CHRISTIAN RENONCIAT (b. 1947), *Unfolded Paper, Four Folds*, 2016, ayous wood, 26 3/4 x 29 1/4 in., private collection

contributing to the overall experience of creation. Of course the tactile qualities of the surfaces contribute to the process, too. Describing his work with paper, Renonciat states, "Paper is also organized matter: a sheet, a piece (as we say "a piece of fabric"). In this way, it can be folded and unfolded, draped and unfurled; *pli selon pli* —crease by crease — it remembers and reveals. Moreover, fold down the four corners of a sheet of paper and it's an envelope: matter organized into graphic object — a tribute to the diagonal. The created object has uses: it bears writing on the surface and also enfolds another sort of paper in turn: paper not as matter but purely a medium for thought. Paper and wood in connivance, pleasure of texture, happiness in hand: paper is like skin, fine and sensitive."

Renonciat's latest works will be exhibited at Waltman Ortega Fine Art (Miami) in November, and at Gremillion & Co. Fine Art (Houston) next year.