

the GILDER'S TIP

JOURNAL OF THE SOCIETY OF GILDERS

VOLUME 29, NO. 1 WINTER 2015

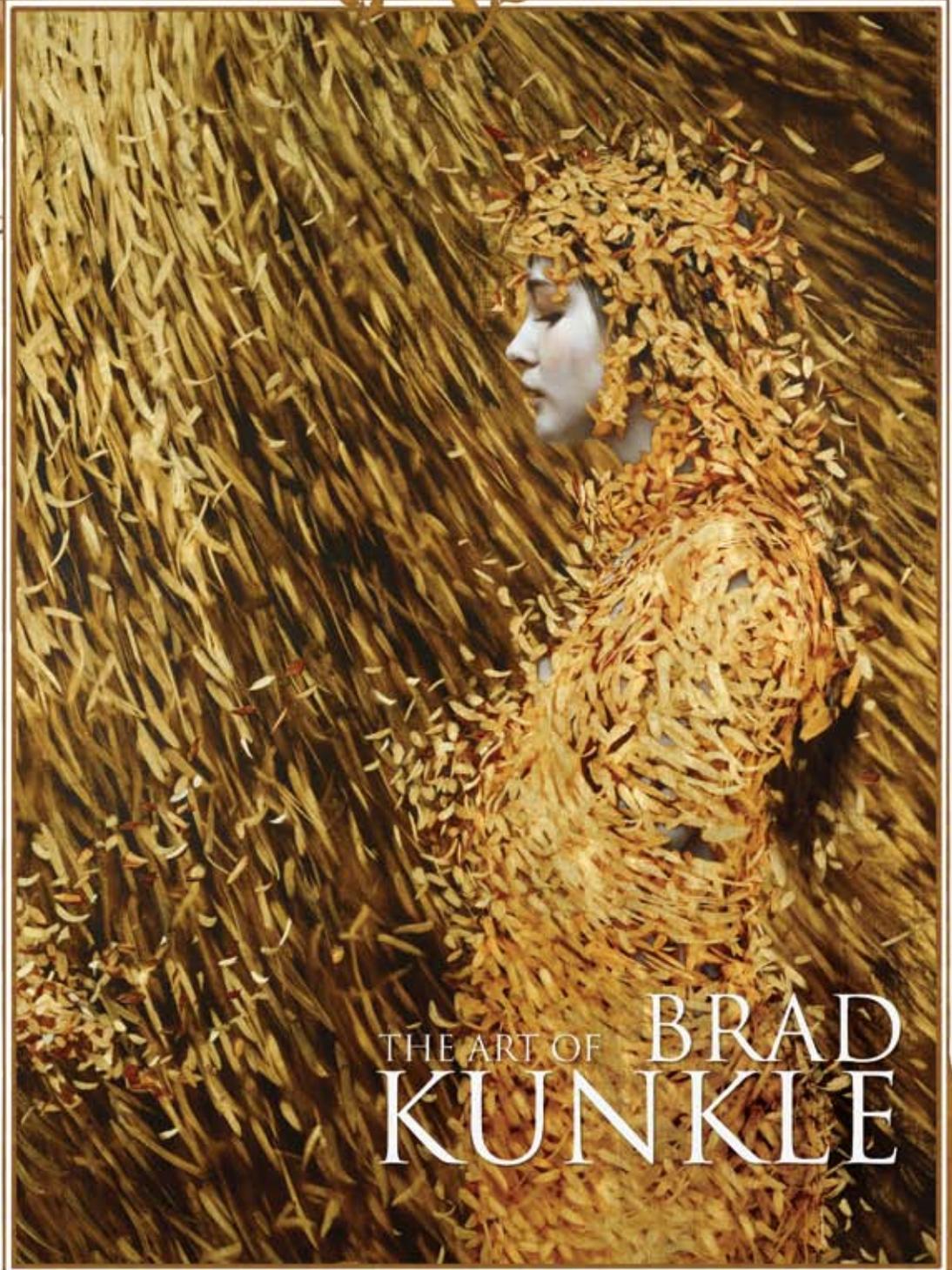


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THE ART OF BRAD
KUNKLE



BRAD KUNKLE

THE MASTERFUL USE OF GOLD & SILVER LEAF IN FINE ART

Interview by Micki Cavanah

The art of Brad Kunkle was first brought to my attention a few years ago by my daughter-in-law, Kelly McKernan, who is a working artist. When another SOG member mentioned his name, too, I re-visited his website to see more of his astounding paintings. His masterful painting is enhanced by brilliant use of gold and silver leaf. Each work catches the play of light as it changes through the day, making his gilded art come to life.

I decided to contact him and see if he could take the time to relate a little about his work. He graciously accepted, so following is our interview. Prepare to be amazed!

Tell us briefly about your art background, i.e. education etc.

Well, I should probably begin by saying I'm a self-taught gilder. I could probably use a few lessons on traditional techniques. I went to college to become an art teacher with dreams of being a fantasy book cover artist during the summers. A very famous book cover illustrator named Dan Giancola came to my school and inspired me to switch to Fine Arts. I got a bachelors in Fine Art with a concentration in Painting from Kutztown University in 2001. I experimented once with gold leaf at university – a Mona Lisa kit – and didn't try gilding again until I was forced to as a decorative house painter in 2007.

What inspired you begin using gold, silver, (and other types of leaf you use) in your paintings?

I was visiting the Louvre in Paris in 2007 and after an hour or so, I realized that I was more inspired by the gilded ceilings than by the paintings on the walls. That was an affirmation for me to begin using it in my work in a major way. I was partly paying my bills as

Left - Trinity. Oil, gold and silver leaf on linen. 80 x 36 inches. 2010

On the cover - Cocoon, Oil and gold leaf on linen. 30 x 56 inches. 2012. Private collection.



The Near, Far, and Leading. Oil, gold and silver leaf on linen. 35 x 32 inches. 2014

a decorative house painter at the time, and a few weeks later, when I returned home to the States, I was serendipitously hired to gild walls in copper leaf. I had never done this before, but by the time I was done, I had learned a lot and was convinced I needed to use leaf in my personal work.

What relationship does the leaf have to the concepts you works with? Do they influence each other, and the techniques you use?

Yes, they absolutely influence each other. The reflective qualities of leaf are entirely different from the reflective qualities of paint. There is light and a surface. The light and color that we see in the leaf is actually the light and an impression of the color in our reality (such as the room we are standing in), and the painted areas

have the light and color that I've assigned them in the painting. Time and depth have a very surreal feeling with leaf. As the light in a room changes, from day to night, the light in the art changes, and this is why I love to gild skies in paintings: the skies mimic a sense of the passing of time. I've often used gold to accent certain areas or objects in paintings that I want to signify as important or valued within the concept. I also should say that when I first used gold, it was during the recession of 2008. A lot of galleries were closing their doors, and some of the "conceptual art" bubbles were bursting. I thought: what better way is there to say to a collector, "look, my work will never lose value...there's actually GOLD in it. You can melt it down and it will still be valuable one day!" – tongue in cheek, of course.

Can you tell us briefly your painting process, how you decide to incorporate leaf and how you apply your leaf?

I only do oil gilding. Since I was self-taught and I'm an oil painter, I thought it was best to not mix water and oil. I use Charbonnel Oil Size with the 1-3 hr set time, but apply it so thinly that it's usually ready for me to apply the leaf in 15-30 minutes. This is the sweet spot for me, because I then use etching tools to shape the edges of where it meets a dried area of oil paint, or to scratch hair back into the leaf... and it's best to not have the size completely dry while doing this. Most paintings begin with a very thin underpainting that I allow to dry. Then I use a very very thin application of baby powder on a squirrel hair mop brush to kill any tack from thickly painted areas. This prevents



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the gold from sticking to areas I don't want gilded. I apply the size, allow it to tack, then use patent leaf. Always patent leaf. If I'm silver gilding, I use a coat of shellac to prevent tarnishing or I use it on gold if I'm going to be painting on top of the leaf.

Was there much trial and error with developing your technique for gilding?

Yes. I emailed a few gilders early on but got

no response or guidance, so I just started by reading and researching, then by trial and error. There is no better way to develop a style of your own than by going in blindly and making your own mistakes. I first used loose leaf, and quickly realized that if this was my only option for application, that the time and precision required for my vision would be compromised. I found patent leaf and my world was saved. There was always an unpredictability to the

edges of my leafed areas, so I just started cleaning them up using hard edged tools. That led me to use the etching tools as drawing tools, as when scratching the hair into the leaf.

We are always interested in failed projects and how one recovers from those. Do you have any instances of a fail and how you recovered, or how you found out what went wrong?



The History of Nature. Oil, gold and silver leaf on linen. 46 x 70 inches. 2014

I had a show in Berlin and two major catastrophes happened. The paintings were large and heavily silver leafed. I rolled them on 12 inch diameter tubes for shipping. Everything looked good when I stretched them in Berlin. Then I went to the local art store and bought varnish. I can't read German. Apparently the German version of the varnish that is the same brand and type I buy in the states, has denatured alcohol in it because as I started to apply the varnish, the shellac started to melt off. Nightmare. I fixed it, of course. A few of the pieces didn't sell and were returned to my gallery in NYC. They were unstretched, rolled,

and shipped. When we restretched in New York, there were areas of the silver that were just falling off. That's when I realized that the size is too brittle once it's dry to allow for rolling and unrolling like a traditional oil painting will allow. I fixed it, of course. Now I never roll paintings for shipping and most of my work is done on wood panels or linen adhered to panels. Even though my work looks so precise, the nature of leaf is to sometimes stick to whatever it wants to stick to, and I've embraced this. It forces me to allow the work to be unpredictable, which forces me to more open to unpredictability as a human being.

What sort of reaction do you get from viewers, and do they comment on your use of gold & silver leaf?

They do often comment on my use of gold and silver leaf, and I've been so happy to hear that the general sentiment is that I'm doing something new and modern with leaf. Some people have also commented that Klimt would be proud, and I can't think of a higher compliment as present-day painter using gold. 

-Brad Kunkle lives and works in Brooklyn, NY. He is represented by Arcadia Contemporary in NYC. You can see more of Brad's work and be informed of upcoming exhibitions by visiting bradkunkle.com

