



**THE FEMALE FORMS PROTRUDE FROM THE DARK BACKGROUND OF THE CANVAS, THEIR SKIN TONES A COMBINATION OF ORANGE-BROWNS AND YELLOWS. WHILE THE NUDES STRIKE A VARIETY OF POSES, THERE IS A SIMILARITY AMONG THEM — FROM THEIR EXAGGERATIONS AND DISTORTIONS TO THEIR SEEMING REACTIONS TO SOME OFF-CANVAS FORCE.**

The work of Yvonne Petkus is a manifestation of a variety of influences, from her life as an identical twin to the Baroque masters such as Caravaggio, Artemisia Gentileschi, and Orazio Gentileschi. The assistant professor at Western Kentucky University, using a Junior Faculty Scholarship from the University's internal grants program, took a year to more closely study that Baroque influence.

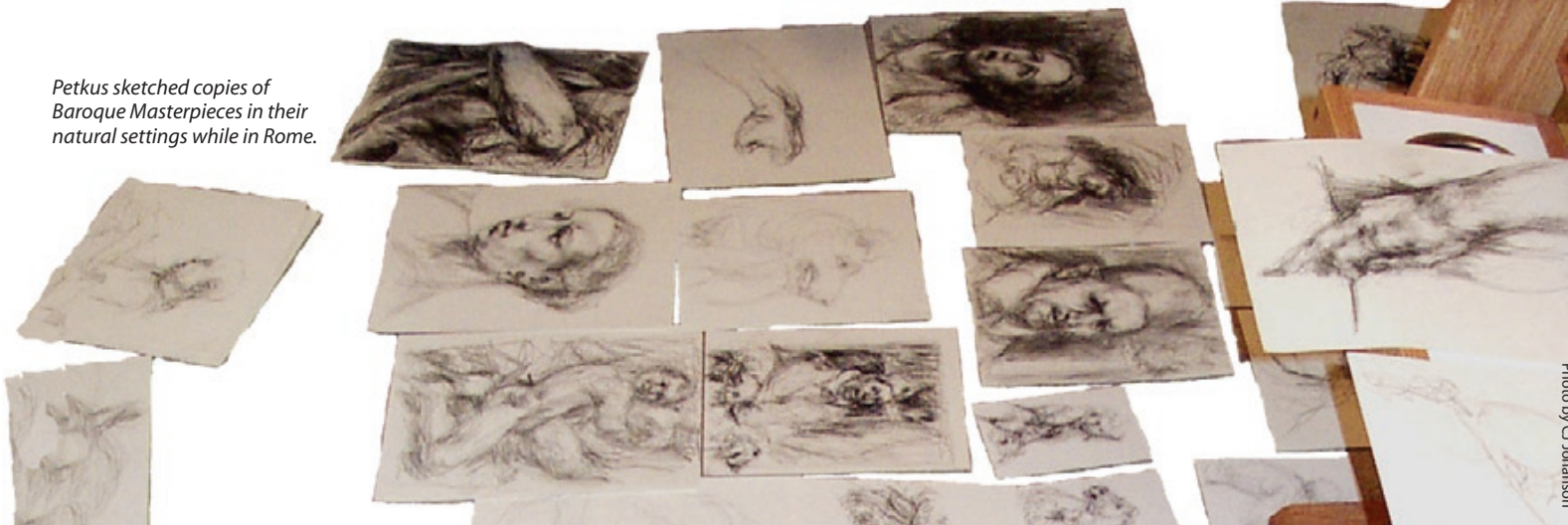
"It is through painting that I attempt to understand, question and reflect upon ideas, experiences and influences," Petkus wrote in introducing the results of that study. "Much as scholars use words and other precise forms appropriate to their field, I use the paradigm of my discipline, the act of painting, to conduct research and to give voice to its discoveries."

Petkus said her art is about questioning perception and the way we see. "I generally start a painting as stream of consciousness on a canvas and find a body that's usually related to a previous painting, or I find it very organically," she said. "Then I put myself in that pose, and over a long period of time of looking, distortions start to occur and a body takes form on the canvas. And usually there's some action, or implied action, or stopped action. So it happens very organically, and I find that in looking, over a long period of time, a very natural distortion starts to come, based on psychology, on everything in how our framework psychologically has evolved."

*Petkus created these two large works following her study in Rome.*

# The Drama of the Gesture

BY BOB SKIPPER



*Petkus sketched copies of Baroque Masterpieces in their natural settings while in Rome.*



Photo by LaDonna Harmon

Her study of the Baroque painters, how they generated their work and what influenced them, was a natural for Petkus. "Having this example of Baroque painting that starts on the canvas without any plans and then organically develops, and is generally exaggerated in some way, made a lot of sense to what my work has been about," she said.

"Experiences both planned and unexpected have influenced my studio work and continue to provide rich nourishment for this development," she explained. *The Drama and The Gesture: Paintings and Studies from the Studio Research and Study of 17th Century Painting in Rome, Italy* began as a three-week journey to view the masterpieces in their natural environment — the churches and museums for which they were created.

"As a painter, you have different influences and you foster different influences, and your work grows

based on what you see and how you process that," Petkus said. "For me, the Baroque painters were always of interest as very dramatic painters, using dark and light very dramatically. Caravaggio painted right on the canvas, so it was a direct way of painting. I really wanted to go and see the work where it originated. There's nothing like seeing it where it was intended to be hung."

She spent the first week taking in as much as she could, then was able to target what she wanted to go back and study. "So I chose certain pieces and went back and did drawings and little studies on site, and at night did paintings of those pieces as well and then brought all of that work back here to my studio and let that influence my work," she said.

She relied on her husband, CJ Johanson, who has studied in Rome, to be her guide. "He knew the lay of the land and we did a lot of planning ahead of time, and he helped me with the language," Petkus said.

Even with the planning, however, she ran into one side effect of being surrounded by artistic history. "The thing artistically that I ran into, was that I really expected to do my work while I was there, too, to do some studies that were more *my* work," she said. "But there was so much rich art to take in that I wasn't able to let it out that quickly. That was interesting as an artist to feel. It was only a three-week trip, so it was a lot to ask."

She didn't have to keep it in for long. "When I got back I did two pieces in particular and just let it all out," Petkus said. "So when I got back it did come out, but while I was there, I couldn't make my work. I could only copy. I think it was wise to just let that go and concentrate on copying."

Those two large paintings were the beginning of a year of creating paintings in response to the work she studied in Rome. That work became *The Drama and The Gesture*. But while the year was a type of artificial stopping point, the influence continues. Petkus has also taken advantage of Baroque exhibitions in the United States, taking students with her to view pieces from private collections that are normally not open to the public.

"I keep trying to further the questions. My questions usually come from psychological and philosophical basis and are about perceptions. It's an endless quest. I try to see more, see further, allow more influence in," Petkus said. "Just like a mathematician will push thought through mathematical equations, maybe start with what's known and further it somehow, that's what my quest is: to further the thought and understanding of the bigger questions through painting. That's a big thing to try and do. It comes down to every mark you make. It's sort of the grand and the very base at the same time."

As a result of her study, Petkus discovered that her own work had changed. "I still have the studies in my studio. They feed into the work,



along with other things, but it's always been there," she said. "Influence doesn't just stop like that, but that was really a targeted, focused way of letting that influence fly in my work. So my work got much darker, much earthier. The landscape changed a little bit."

Petkus discovered her path as a painter while attending Syracuse University. She knew she wanted to work in a visual medium and found painting to be the best medium to speak through. "Over the years I did a lot of different things with figures, some of which were dual figures," Petkus explained. "I am an identical twin and it came into play as a young person. After a while, when I really started to centralize what I was doing and pare away any noise — anything that I didn't need — I realized that was a crutch for a while. Having one figure, with sometimes an implication of something happening outside of the picture plane, was much more the psychology that I was after and I didn't need to have my twin there all the time."

In her artist statement for the Brad Cooper Gallery in Tampa, Petkus writes: "The source of my work is the body and the history that it holds. I study my mirrored reflection to find borders and edges, openings and weaknesses. Through a process of looking, recording, looking and adjusting, again and again, a particular presence emerges from the page. This is *The Act of Looking*, an intense confrontation of perception motivated by the realization that the self is fleeting, not a stable truth. The reflection is more illusion and distortion than solid and knowable form."

A reviewer for the *Herald-Tribune* in Sarasota,

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Florida, wrote that Petkus infused her Baroque influences with a contemporary feel for the figure. "These are well-executed personifications of psychological conundrums that do not seek to unravel the complexities of the modern world, so much as remind us such dilemmas are unique in their particulars while rooted in a generalized conception of the human form," Kevin Costello wrote of one of her exhibitions. "They are works that stand for the duality of mind and body, philosophical understanding that cannot be avoided



Photo by LaDonna Harmon

Petkus works in her studio mixing a range of colors.

and must be examined by each generation in order that reason, expressed through the emotions of art, continue to humanize us with images of ourselves as courageous yet fragile spiritual beings."

It's about perceptions. "There are a lot of body issues that come into play, especially when you are standing this close to a mirror, you can't help exaggerating, seeing things pretty harshly," Petkus said. "I don't feel that my work is about me, necessarily. I'm using myself, and using my honest way of seeing myself to maybe discuss bigger issues, bigger questions out there that I think women in particular, and a lot of men, too, share: what we are and how we see."