

SUBVERSION

**The Code of Apprenticeship:**  
What is Taught to You, You Must Pass On.

Words: Tiffany Silverman

Miles and centuries melt away as artist Ben Long reminisces of Florence from his studio on Broad Street. Cradling a glass of wine as the evening shadows grow darker on walls lined with jars of jewel-colored, hand-ground pigments, he speaks of the past and present, of an artistic tradition repeating and renewing.



Ben Long - *Blue Robe*, oil on canvas, 40" x 60"

Like Titian, Rubens, Rembrandt and other old masters before, Long builds up his figure paintings with a skeleton of monochrome grays on which he painstakingly adds deepening glazes of color, layer by layer. Since this "old" method was not taught in the "painting-is-dead" art schools of the 70s, the techniques of this endangered craft were only available at the foot of a master—so Long escaped to Florence, Italy. As a combat artist in the Marines during Viet Nam, he recalls, "I had thirty days leave to go anywhere. New York felt like a waste of time. I wanted Florence." Once there, he sought out Pietro Annigoni, a classically trained artist who accepted the American as a student and started him at the bottom of the apprentice pyramid. After spending weeks in an attic drawing plaster casts ("Annigoni once forgot I was there and locked me in"), Long graduated to preparing panels and grinding colors, as well as absorbing whatever knowledge he could from Annigoni. "His method was work—but the more curiosity I had, the more he would satisfy it," recalls Long. However, Annigoni preferred tempera and fresco, leaving Long to puzzle out the mechanics of oil through copying the plethora of masterworks and devouring technical books on the subject. "You learn these techniques by plugging away... hard work is the mystical medium that schools don't teach." Noting two-thirds of his attempts are usually destroyed, Long jokes that often "frustration becomes part of your character."

During his apprenticeship, Long met two other American painters in Florence: Daniel Graves and Charles Cecil. "We were all banging our heads against the same wall, trying to learn something." As they each progressed in their skills and careers, they all knew the code of apprenticeship: *what is taught to you, you must pass on*. Graves wrote of this inherent need in an essay in *Realism Revisited*: "Amongst those of us working within this tradition, our knowledge and resources need to be shared, not only to further our understanding of our own work but also to better equip the next generation of artists to carry it into the future." The trio considered starting a school; however, Long left Florence before it came to fruition and the Studio Cecil-Graves was begun in 1984. This studio separated in 1991 into the Charles H. Cecil Studios and Graves' Florence Academy of Art. In the meantime, Long had completed frescos in Italy, including the only painting by a non-Italian at the abbey of Montecassino, as well as frescos in the US. He later founded the Fine Arts League of Asheville in North Carolina, not far from his childhood home of Blowing Rock, yet he still spends much of his time in Florence or in Charleston.

In a fitting full circle, the students have become the teachers and a whole new generation of classically-trained artists is being raised in the age-old techniques. Jill Hooper was first a student of D. Jeffrey Mims (who studied fresco-painting under Long), then Cecil and now she is studying with Long. During her time at the College of Charleston, Hooper studied in Florence, returning again



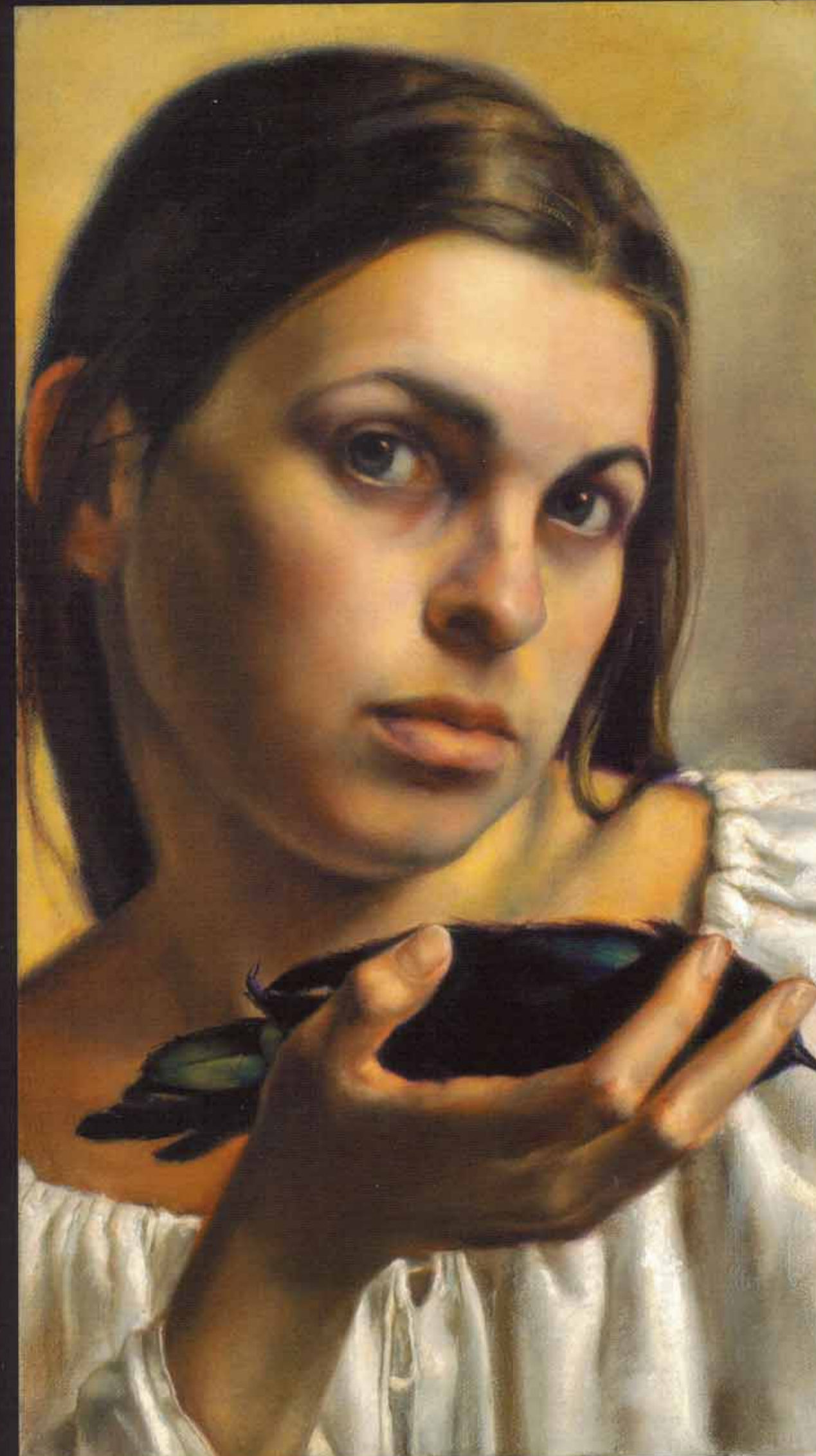
Ben Long - *Tropic of Cancer*, oil on canvas, 52" x 76"



Kamille Corry - *Threshold*, oil on mahogany, 30" x 17 1/2"



Jill Hooper - *Lapis*, oil on linen, 28" x 39"



Jill Hooper - *Blackbird (self portrait)*, oil on canvas, 52" x 76"

and again for a decade. "Every corner is magical. The massive museums, the aesthetic... it all breathes life in a different way. My heart does swell when I am there," recalls Hooper. However, home was in the Carolinas and she now spends her weekdays at the Fine Arts League of Asheville and weekends at her Charleston studio—just across the hall from Long. The camaraderie of the Florentine-trained artists is apparent; they share the same passionate devotion and dedicated work ethic along with a shared artistic lineage.

Although many miles separate them, these artists hang their works together in the Ann Long Fine Art Gallery on King Street. In '96, Ann Long (no relation to Ben Long) entered the picture by first collecting Hooper's work. Realizing the value of this type of work, Ann Long decided to open up the Ann Long Fine Art Gallery. Featuring paintings by Hooper and Mims and two of their Florentine painting peers, Kamille Corry and Frank Strazzulla, the

gallery was an instant success. Ann Long recalls, "the response we got told us we were doing something right... the Charleston art scene needed figure work." In the same generous spirit of sharing knowledge between master and apprentice, many of these artists that had either taught or apprenticed under one another began culminating in this gallery. Ben Long soon joined up, as did Charles Cecil and Daniel Graves, growing to nearly two dozen "family" members, represented by Ann Long.

At a reception at Ann Long's gallery one night, I heard someone remark, "I didn't know there were people that still painted like that! It's so beautiful." True to the apprenticeship code of "what is taught to you, you must pass on," this remarkably talented "family" of painters/apprentices is constantly teaching and learning from one another. They are keeping an ancient tradition alive with each vivid stroke of genius.