

TODAY'S
MASTERS

JOSEPH SULKOWSKI'S MAGNUM OPUS

Joseph H. Sulkowski (b. 1951) set out to paint the world we inhabit and that inhabits us. He wanted to create a work that depicts all that defines the human condition, of the past and of the now. No one can claim he is not ambitious.

Even 15 years ago, when Sulkowski began sketching out what would eventually become a canvas measuring eight feet high and almost 13 feet wide, he knew he wanted to include references “to the iconic energies that inform our lives.” He sought to depict on this epic canvas — something he knew would become his magnum opus — the seven deadly sins that tempt us all, no matter what our religious or spiritual beliefs. He wanted to show the ancient Greek ideal of the Three Graces (love, beauty, and joy), attributes to which we aspire and are attracted.

Sulkowski also wanted to ensure that the five senses we experience daily as humans would be apparent, and to convey our primal compulsions — to eat, to stay alive, to procreate as a species. Also important was to show those four fundamental elements of life that don't appear on the periodic table — earth, wind, fire, and water.

To accomplish this monumental self-imposed task summing up the very ethos of human nature and human life on earth, Sulkowski chose to depict foxhounds. Yes, a pack of 38 dogs, immersed in their hunt, interacting with one another in a pastoral landscape, exhibiting behaviors both noble and base, instinctive and learned, functioning as archetypes for us humans. Painted in oils on a fine Belgian linen canvas, the result is titled *Apokalupsis: An Uncovering* and will have its first public viewing at the Morris Museum of Art in Augusta, Georgia



The Three Graces (Beauty, Joy, and Love) — detail from the top section of *Apokalupsis*

(March 1–April 28), before moving to New York City's AKC Museum of the Dog (May 8–August 4). The exhibition also includes a 20-minute film about *Apokalupsis*, 21 paintings and eight drawings from earlier in Sulkowski's career, and a metal sculpture he created with the Virginia artist Diana Reuter-Twining depicting dogs as the Three Graces.

Whether the viewer is a “dog person” or not, *Apokalupsis* manages to speak to everyone about who we are as people, unlikely as that



(TOP) Concept Sketch for *Apokalupsis*, 2010, graphite, black chalk, and red chalk on paper, 9 x 12 in. ■ (LEFT) *Sight* — detail from the bottom center of *Apokalupsis*



may sound. Sulkowski writes in the accompanying 148-page catalogue: “The dogs are a metaphor for humanity, and the landscape they inhabit is symbolic of the field of time and space each of us occupies and negotiates every day. Foxhounds, from the objective universe, are the vehicle I have chosen to take you, the viewer, into the unseen aspects of your own consciousness.” To view the work, then, is akin to subjecting yourself to a kind of self-examination, a concentrated therapy session, a pleasurable inner-body experience.

Sulkowski’s home and studio are located in Franklin, Tennessee — 20 miles south of downtown Nashville. Though he has painted many

a human figure over the years, along with contemplative still lifes, he has been most keenly admired as a “sporting artist,” referencing the popular genre that features animals in their natural and sporting habitats — horses mid-gallop, elks and antelopes grazing, foxhounds on the trail, bison clinging to rock faces. Maryvonne Leshe, owner of Trailside Galleries in Jackson Hole and Scottsdale, and Sulkowski’s longtime representative, recalls her first encounter with his work, in 1999: “It was not just the subject matter of dogs that spoke to me, but also how Joseph paints in the style of the Old Masters — full of light, wonderful brushwork, soft edges, the subtle positioning of the dog’s



head, stance, ears, etc. He captures their soul, with each painting telling a story about this dog's life."

Leshe came to know Sulkowski through his wife, Elizabeth Brandon, a self-described poetic realist known for her still lifes, whom Leshe was then (and is still) representing. "I immediately was drawn not only to his obvious talent, exquisite painting, and style, but also to his subject matter. Having grown up with dogs from early childhood, and having become a parent to many of them later, it is no wonder that I have a passion for dogs in art." But it was after seeing Sulkowski's book, *Masters & Hounds* (2004), that Leshe was sufficiently awed to

Apokalupsis: An Uncovering, 2023, oil on canvas, 96 x 153 in.



JOSEPH SULKOWSKI (b. 1951) and DIANA REUTER-TWINING (b. 1951), *Three Graces*, 2023, stainless steel, acrylic, copper, nickel, resin, polycarbonate, and LED lighting, 88 x 69 x 75 in.

take him on as one of her gallery's featured artists. "That book contains some of the finest dog art I have ever seen."

For both Leshe and Sulkowski, owning and raising dogs can be such a poignant endeavor that it is sometimes "easier" to admire them from afar than to live with them. The painter says he and his wife have "gone through our lives with different dogs along the way." Of the nine dogs he has owned, Sulkowski says some became more like children than others, notably a pair of deceased Boston Terriers. "We've had Redbone Coonhounds, too, which don't always make for the sweetest pets, since they're more independent in spirit." Not only does he know their anatomy well enough to depict them with uncanny verisimilitude, but also their character, at once adorable and engaging, yet distanced and self-sufficient. Recalling those terriers, who died five years ago, Sulkowski admits, "It's been hard for me to have another dog. Elizabeth and I were so close to them that we're taking our time about going there again, if ever."

AN OBSERVER OF LIFE

Sulkowski is a keen observer not only of the natural world, but also of himself. He's not self-absorbed, yet remembers every pivotal experience, often applying the lessons learned years ago to his life as an artist. A native of Pittsburgh, he speaks fondly of attending the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and, later, the Art Students League of New York. At the League he was mentored by the painter Frank Mason (1921–2009), a leading authority on the principles and techniques of 17th-century European art.

It was there he learned to indulge in his obsession for Old Master techniques — even grinding his own pigments and mixing oils and varnishes. Sulkowski has continued to fashion many of his own canvases, sourcing fine raw linen from Belgium and Ireland; he spends hours preparing each surface with two layers of rabbitskin glue, over



which he applies coats of lead white as grounding. “You have more control as a painter if you’ve made your own materials,” he emphasizes — “a better understanding of your craft.”

Though Sulkowski still concocts some of his oils and varnishes, he doesn’t hand-grind pigments from powdered plants, animal matter, and minerals as much as he used to, as he has now found excellent sources. “I’m of the school that the advent of tube paint was the kiss of death; all of us at the League in that era were purists. I think of artists like Velázquez and how he could create a coarse pigment for

(ABOVE LEFT) *Water Element (Study)*, 2010, charcoal and black chalk with white highlights on gray paper, 11 x 14 in., collection of the artist ■ (ABOVE) *Water Element (Drawing)*, 2012, charcoal and black chalk with lead white highlights on blue rag paper mounted on aluminum, 40 x 50 in., collection of Cal Turner, Jr. ■ (BELOW) *Water Element*, 2016, oil on canvas, 34 x 46 in., collection of Mr. and Mrs. Edmund S. Twining III





A Difference of Opinion (Study for Pride and Anger), 2012, charcoal and black chalk with highlights in lead white, 48 x 58 in., collection of XXX



A Born Leader, 2010, oil on canvas, 36 x 48 in., collection of Dr. and Mrs. Michael Morykwas

one effect on the canvas and then something finer for other effects. But I'm still so devoted to making some of my materials that you'll sometimes find me cooking linseed oils in the sun or on a hot fire like the Old Masters did."

Upon graduating from the League, Sulkowski began to literally paint himself into a career as a master artist, attracting collectors from around the world. He confides, "Even if my works are never going to be hung alongside the Old Masters, if I spend my life trying to capture the 'essence' of my subject — its energy and place — well, that is a life well spent." Today his creations can be found in multiple venues and continents. In addition to Trailside, Sulkowski has been represented by New York's Findlay Galleries and London's Halcyon Gallery. He was commissioned to paint two murals for the royal family of Saudi Arabia, now centerpieces of the King Abdul Aziz Museum in Riyadh. His works can be found, too, in Rolex's New York headquarters and in Woburn Abbey, the English country estate of the Duke of Bedford.

A NEW OLD MASTER

In keeping with his penchant for adopting, adapting, and applying Old Master techniques, Sulkowski early on embraced the ideals

of the Golden Section, that centuries-old, rigorously geometric approach to painting on a canvas — where balance, symmetry, composition, and form are in harmony. For instance, at the very center of *Apokalupsis* he positioned a black hound, in contrast to the other dogs, most of whom are white or mottled brown. While painting the darker hound, Sulkowski recalls experiencing a kind of epiphany: "I realized that the black hound was much more than the contrasting element that I initially felt crucial to my overall composition. She is the symbol of the transforming agent known in mystical terms as the Black Madonna."

So symbolically charged is that hound that Sulkowski regards her as representing "the point where love becomes possible." Everywhere in this canvas, and indeed all of his paintings, he has carefully calculated dyads, intersecting circles, pentagrams, and the like in such a way that his works cohere, most notably in *Apokalupsis*. Its title translates in Greek as "to uncover" or, as Sulkowski riffs, "to lift the veil to reveal something new." He is well aware of the controversy the word might stir: "We always think of 'apocalypse' as referencing the end of time. But actually, it's about a meeting of time with eternity, about creating something new, something with order that results in harmony and balance." Suddenly, a term whose meaning has been corrupted over time has, perhaps, assumed its original, and thus, new, definition; the meaning of the word is literally rendered on the canvas.

Though Sulkowski had been sketching out schemes for *Apokalupsis* for many years, the work itself took about two years. (The full story is recounted in the film.) When he mentions two years, though, the artist cites the famous story about Leonardo and his *Last Supper*: "Some days, according to monks who watched him, the artist would come in and paint a single stroke and leave. I can say that it's okay to do that. You have to let the painting speak to you."

In his studio Sulkowski paints something every day, often with his wife working nearby on a canvas of her own. While describing his process and the Old Masters he admires — who range from Raphael to Rembrandt, from Michelangelo to Velázquez — he becomes as much a philosopher as a practitioner. Maryvonne Leshe concurs: "In addition to being a creative genius, Joseph is also a kind, sensitive, and gentle spirit, a deep thinker with a lot going on under the surface."

Just weeks before *Apokalupsis* was to appear at the Morris Museum, Sulkowski was still pondering certain details about its presentation. Would he frame it or erect a barrier before it? How much explanation should the wall label contain, and should it contain a line drawing with certain dogs highlighted to explain some of the human traits they represent? "You're bringing up some interesting ideas," he said during our conversation, underscoring his capacity to truly listen and absorb others' suggestions.

Sulkowski pays attention to people and to the world as a whole. As if mirroring the human condition he conveys through his animals, he declares, "If you have become what you're painting, you have succeeded in the act of painting." ●

Information: apokalupsis-an-uncovering.com; morrismuseum.org; museumofthedog.org. The project is accompanied by a handsome 148-page publication. All works illustrated here are by Joseph Sulkowski unless noted otherwise.

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