



SEAN CHEETHAM AN HONEST EDGE

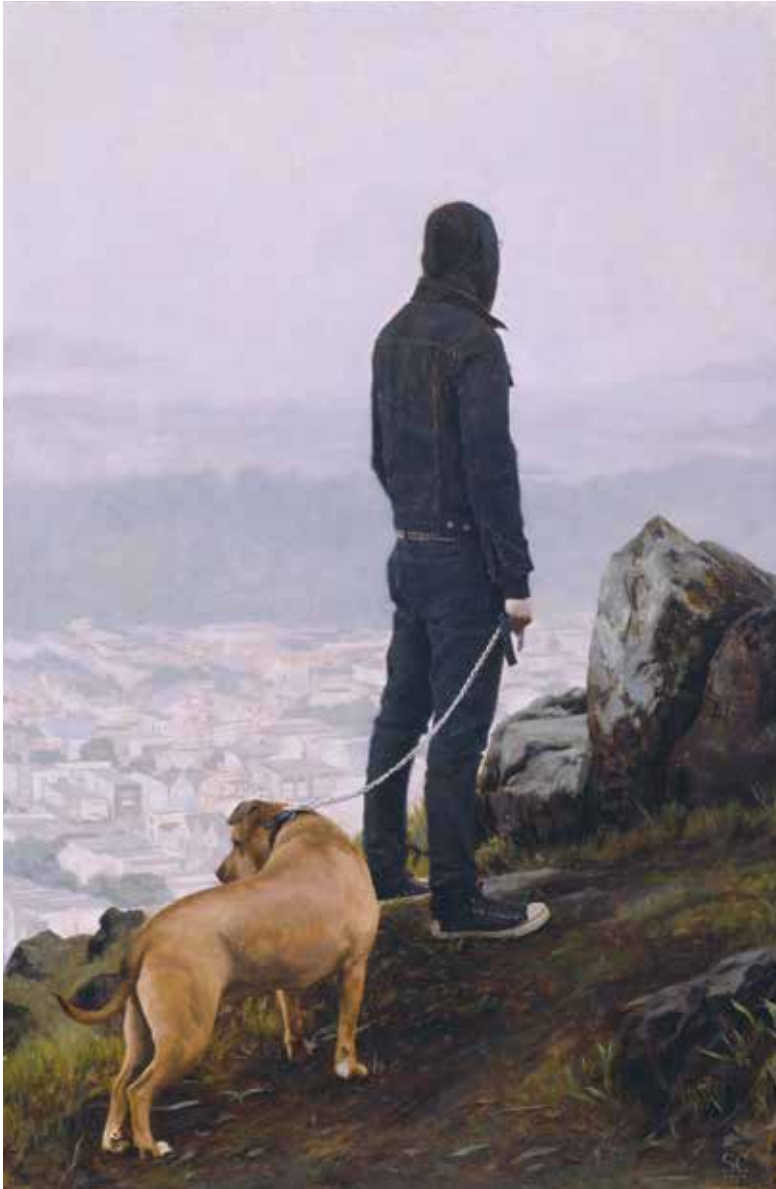
Sean Cheetham (b. 1977) first appeared on my radar 15 years ago when his portrait of Chantal Menard, an artist friend with braids and tattooed arms, was circulated widely to promote the prestigious BP Portrait Award competition organized annually by London's National Portrait Gallery. Many people (including me) mistakenly assumed that Cheetham's painting had won the top prize. Even though it had not, the omnipresence of that advertisement powerfully announced the 28-year-old artist's arrival in the art world.

Two years later, in 2007, I fell in love with Cheetham's painting *Turtle Hill* when I spotted it in the catalogue accompanying the Long Beach Museum of Art's *About Face* portraiture exhibition. This Romantic scene, reminiscent of Caspar David Friedrich's famous *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, depicts Cheetham and his now-deceased dog, Roscoe, on an outcropping surveying the Bay Area's rolling hills. During my visit to the museum in Long Beach, I noticed that the large banner announcing its recent acquisitions showcased another of Cheetham's paintings — confirming my suspicion that contemporary figurative art was starting its comeback. The painting on the banner showed the artist wearing a vintage white leather biker jacket with his arm around a woman sporting a punk hairstyle. I learned later that she is the mother of Cheetham's son, Gunnar.

While admiring it, I began to grasp what makes Cheetham's art so striking: he brings a genuine element of cool — a unique and honest edginess — to contemporary representational painting, which can often seem like the art world's nerd corner. Cheetham delivers on the advice I have long received from mentors and gallery owners: "Paint what you know; paint what you love." Unfortunately, much figurative art — be it historical or modern — falls



Portrait of Chantal Menard, 2004, oil on panel, 10 x 8 in., collection of the artist

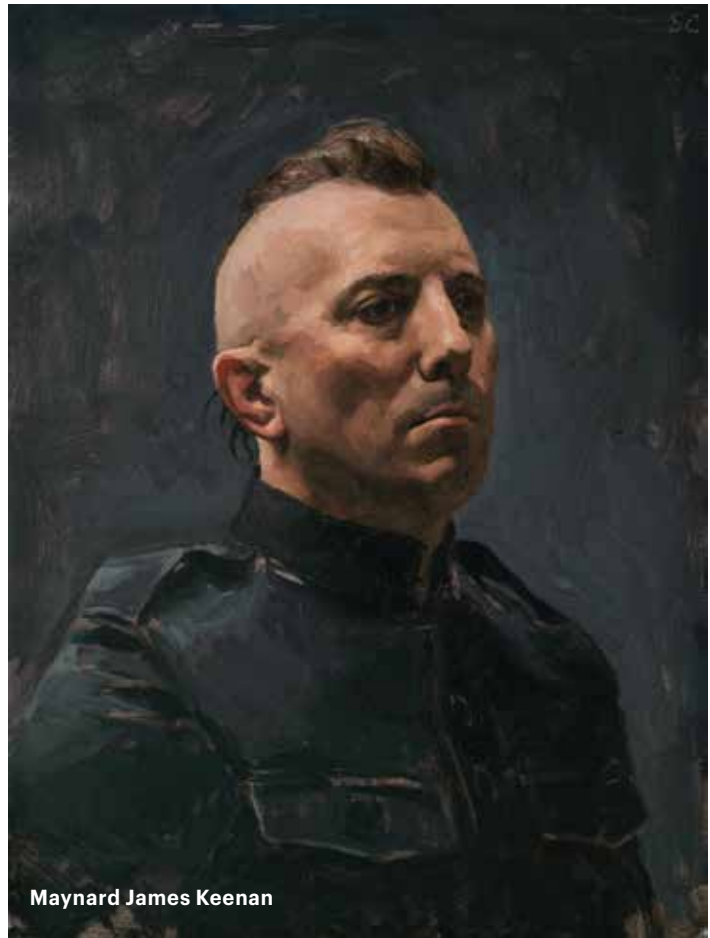


(CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT) *Turtle Hill*, 2007, oil on panel, 45 x 30 in., private collection ■ *White Leather*, 2005, oil on paper, 10 x 8 in., private collection ■ *Champagne Wishes and Caviar Dreams*, 2011, oil on paper, 10 x 8 in., private collection ■ *Coach Robbers*, 2016, oil on panel, 11 x 14 in., private collection





Justin Chancellor



Maynard James Keenan

All four portraits of the members of the band Tool were painted by Cheetham in 2019 in oils on panel and measure 12 by 9 inches. All are in the private collection of Tool.

into pastiches of itself: scenes of mythology, religion, genre, and other tropes. One aspect that is so radical, yet incredibly natural, about Cheetham's compositions is how they capture his forays into cultural realms outside painting and art. Rather than pulling from the vast sources of traditional subject matter, he draws from his life experience as an all-around cool dude of diverse interests.

MADE IN CALIFORNIA

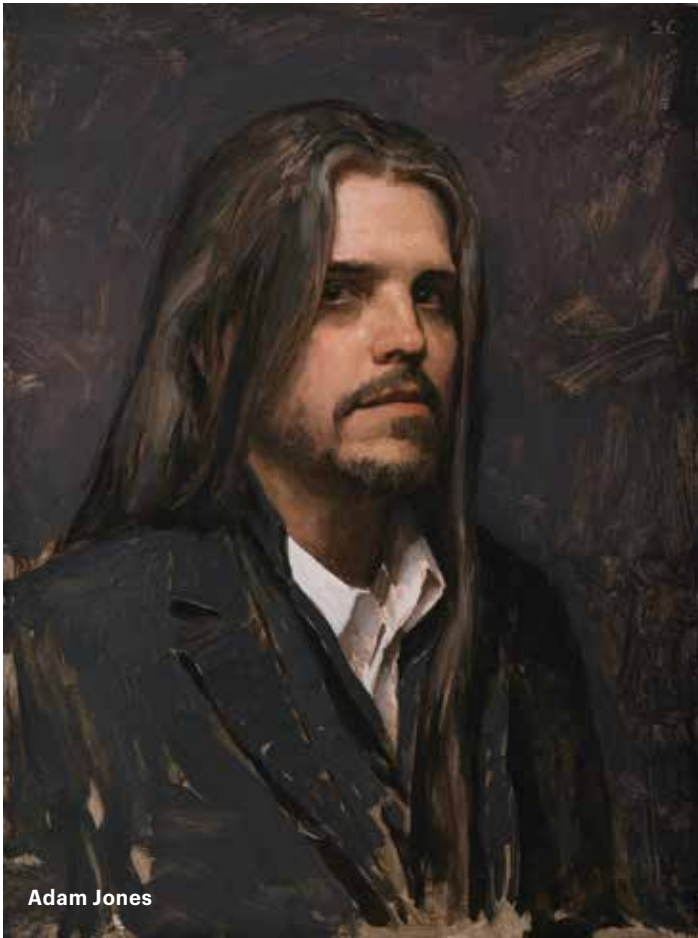
In 2009 Cheetham and I were finally introduced by our fellow artist Marc Trujillo. I immediately found his laid-back, deadpan, and slightly twisted sense of humor perfectly in sync with how clearly he observes his surroundings, without the rose-tinted lens of classical idealism. Within a year I was visiting Cheetham's home near downtown Los Angeles; he still lives there and keeps a studio in the multi-car garage behind his apartment building. On the walls hung an eclectic mix of images, including Elvis, antique weaponry, and a painting of a dog attributed to Delacroix. Near Cheetham's easel rested a beautifully shaped wooden palette that his students had crafted for him. The garage space was interspersed with stacks of demo paintings made during his workshops, and with piles of hockey gear. (Hockey-playing caused the "shiner" of a black eye Cheetham sports in his 2011 self-portrait illustrated here.) Also cluttering this makeshift storage area were the heaps of wires, amps, and other equipment used by his rock band, Del Toro. This trio's other members include Jeff Nentrup and Johnpaul Altamarino, whom Cheetham met while studying at Pasadena's ArtCenter College of Design.

Having grown up in San Francisco obsessed with *Star Wars*, Cheetham dreamed of making storyboards for similar movies. In

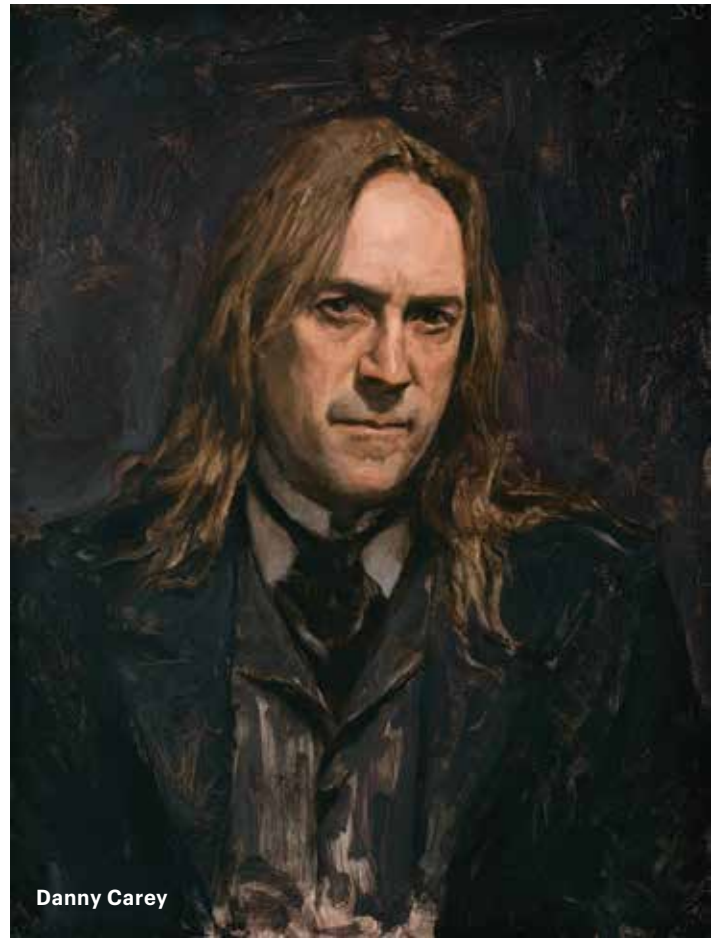
1998, the 20-year-old enrolled at ArtCenter — a major pipeline to the entertainment industry — and went on to earn a B.F.A. in illustration with honors. "Illustration is about getting the job done," Cheetham explains. "We would often get painting assignments that had to be completed overnight. It was like boot camp, in a way; the school got people ready to work."

Partway through the program, Cheetham found himself hooked on oil painting, mesmerized by its alluring goopiness. He had started taking classes with Michael Hussar, the school's head painting instructor and an influential artist known for dark pop-surrealist images of ghoulish figures. Cheetham notes that "whole generations of artists use Hussar's system of observation, and also his methods for organizing a palette." Their student-mentor connection blossomed and the pair began organizing group sessions to paint models from life in the evenings away from school — an ideal opportunity for accelerated growth and learning. Cheetham's bandmates were among the painters in this group who shared a loose yet precise approach, in which unblended patches of paint are applied with extraordinary accuracy.

In 2012, this group of friends found a new playground when Nentrup and his wife, Sonya Palencia, also a gifted artist, moved to a small ranch community in Los Padres National Forest. These new digs provided a perfect setting to delve into the group's longstanding fascination with the Wild West. Cheetham recalls, "As a kid, I would dress up as the Lone Ranger and play the theme song and get really excited. It has always been a thing for me." Using dirt bikes as trusty steeds, the trio would ride through the dry chaparral and sometimes shoot at a firing range, closing the day around a fire while drinking and grilling. "We thought it was so much fun that it should be illegal, but it was legal.



Adam Jones



Danny Carey

We had the idea to make some paintings of ourselves doing this. Then Fouladi Projects asked me to mount a three-person show.” In 2013, this San Francisco gallery opened the exhibition *Ballad Del Toro*, featuring paintings by each of the band members. I was lucky to attend its lively opening and the mini-concert afterward, though Cheetham reports the show itself “wasn’t a huge success. I think only a few things sold. People are always asking me for paintings of tattooed women, but I can’t cater to that market all the time.”

Indeed, Cheetham’s paintings in this vein have always won acclaim. Many students and emerging painters, intrigued by his ability to capture likeness and depict tattoos, wanted to learn his techniques. Immediately after graduating from ArtCenter, he was invited to teach at the Los Angeles Academy of Figurative Art, launching his career as a highly sought-after instructor around the world. He now limits his workshops to 10 or 12 per year, with pupils ranging in age from kindergarten (at his son’s school) through the elderly.

In 2007, Cheetham was offered a teaching position at ArtCenter and six years ago he became a full-time, salaried instructor there. Soon, however, he found himself living out of a suitcase: between teaching, traveling to workshops, and twice-monthly visits to see his son in San Francisco, there wasn’t enough time to produce artworks for gallery shows. “Lately, I’ve backed out of most gallery stuff,” he explains, and now he finds that illustration gigs are a more reliable way to get paid for new work. “Recently I painted portraits of the members of the band Tool. They paid me for the digital images and then bought the physical oil paintings as well. That was generous of them, and lucrative for me.”

Eventually Cheetham felt run-down and realized that something had to give. Because his teaching at ArtCenter had become his



Sean Cheetham forging a palette knife, February 2020



Saloon Brawl Study, 2018, oil on dibond, 7 x 5 in., private collection

rather than for profit, despite the interest his social media posts have generated. “People are always asking if they can buy my knives,” he observes. “But I don’t think they could pay me enough. I’m worried about my passion becoming about money. Again.”

Cheetham is now planning several larger paintings that evoke a sinister vision of the Old West, somewhat like that of the film director Quentin Tarantino. “I’m going to make a very large brawling piece and videotape the process. It will feature some of the knives I’ve been making, and some of my friends who have been part of my journey will be featured. I want to include all of the different demographics who populated the Old West, battling it out. I can’t just make ‘pretty sunset’ kinds of paintings. I’m interested in some of the darker themes in American history, like the Donner party.”

Unfortunately, Cheetham’s current studio is too small to accommodate these new projects, so he will create them nearby at Nohwave, a production studio that has already filmed videos of him demonstrating his *alla prima* painting technique. Now Nohwave will document every step in Cheetham’s new multi-figure works, and ultimately the artist will create his own videos capturing his technical process.

Cheetham also sometimes offers one-on-one instruction. For almost a year, he taught a famous Hollywood actor privately — a few days each week in Northern California and a few in Los Angeles. She then recommended him to a friend who comes from a high-profile film industry family. That pupil participated in Cheetham’s workshop in Rome, where “they were photographed by paparazzi constantly.”

Things are going well for Cheetham on another front, too. His girlfriend, Kate Zambrano, teaches painting in the atelier tradition to underprivileged city teenagers who could not otherwise afford art school or workshops. Now she is creating a scholarship program in partnership with art supply firms and a filmmaker who is establishing an inner-city arts

least favorite activity, he quit last year, recognizing that his workshop pupils were much more eager to learn than those at school. He adds, “With workshops, there’s no homework or grading, or having to punish people who don’t want to learn.”

NEW HORIZONS

One benefit of leaving full-time teaching has been the availability of time for other creative pursuits. Cheetham’s father is a retired jeweler whose work instilled the young artist with a deep appreciation for meticulous detail. He recalls “trying to make a sword and chainmail with my uncle and a crusader-type helmet with my dad’s friends.” During a trip to Sweden in 2015, Cheetham visited a knifemaker’s shop. Its cool minimalism reignited his desire to try his hand at this craft, so in Los Angeles he started taking classes at a blacksmithing shop. This past year, Cheetham dedicated one of his garage’s spaces to metalworking. So far he has made elaborate cowboy-style knives, as well as a few special palette knives. Cheetham is pursuing this hobby for himself

center. Cheetham reflects, “I used to think that it might not be right to date another artist, but you just have to find the right one. Kate and I have a bunch of gigs lined up the rest of the year; we will be teaching different classes within the same workshop — in Scottsdale, Bakersfield, Chattanooga, and Rome. It’s really great.” ●

DAVID MOLESKY is an oil painter based in Brooklyn, known for his nature narratives and paintings of turbulent water and fiery infernos. His upcoming online-only solo exhibition with Andra Norris Gallery (Burlingame, California) is titled *Her* and will run from May 8 through July 4. (See page xx for details.)

(OPPOSITE PAGE) *Kate*, 2019, oil on panel, 14 x 11 in., private collection

