



## Happy Triggers

*By Matthew Lickona | Posted Thursday, Jan. 13, 2005*

'Everybody always thinks that everything's been painted before,' says Thomas Arvid, whose paintings of wine bottles and wine accoutrements have spawned something like their own genre within the art world. 'And all of a sudden, here you are, doing something completely new and completely overlooked.'

Well, maybe not *completely* new. Arvid grants that 'as an artist, you have to take what has happened before you and take it to the next level. I think that, through my work, I kind of pull together a nice balance of abstract and realism.' The realism part is obvious; Arvid's



paintings are easily mistaken for photographs from a distance. As for abstract, he says, 'If you take away the color and just look at the line work, it's very balanced within an abstract sense -- a fair amount of curves, a fair amount of straight lines. It's not so much that it's about the wine anymore; to me, it's

about story and composition and texture.'

Composition does seem to be his chief innovation, the thing that makes people sit up and take notice. 'Most people think of still life as something formally put together. It's there to look at but uninviting. You're afraid to touch it. I've turned that around. My paintings look so natural, you want to reach in and touch them. If the foil is falling off a bottle a little bit, you want to reach in and push it back against the bottle. What I try to capture in all of my paintings is the natural way we go about sharing wine with friends. I think that's one of the successes with my painting, the reason why people have gravitated toward it.'

Part of that 'natural' style has meant paintings that look down on their subjects from above. (Sometimes the angle is steep, as if the viewer were standing at a counter; sometimes less so, as if the viewer were seated at table.) It has also meant overlap among objects, a carefully orchestrated array that mimics how objects might accidentally wind up on a table during dinner. 'Things are layered behind each other. The bottle is meant to be

with the glass and the corkscrew and the table. It's kind of like music; everything runs together."

Perhaps his most effective technique for drawing the viewer in has been truncation. "Nothing is complete -- things are chopped off, or they run off the edge of the canvas." The painting presents "such a micro part of the scene that people add themselves to it." They become involved with the painting, sometimes to the point where life imitates art. "I have people telling me all the time that they're sitting with friends, and they'll look down and try to put together an Arvid composition right on their table. They'll push the glasses over to one side; add a cork and a corkscrew. They say, 'Hey, it looks just like an Arvid; we should take a picture and send it to Thomas.' "

Involving the viewer this way gets at Arvid's notion of art's purpose. "I believe art is when you take whatever medium you're using and move somebody to another place or idea through your work. Whether it's positive or negative or frightening or depressing, it's still art." It's a position that has left him in a rather lonely middle ground. He lives "in a neighborhood like everybody else," which tends to mean that his neighbors think of artists as "people who cut off their ears and do freaky things to themselves." On the other hand, "Within the art world, people are so caught up with trying to disturb people and being negative" that they can be dismissive toward a painter who accentuates the positive.

"I think we need more of the beauty and the happiness," he says. "We tend to surround ourselves with the things that make us feel better, so we can go out into the world and feel good." Wine falls into that, and so, by extension, do Arvid's paintings. They are "just a reminder about that relaxing good feeling. How, when you're around wine, the stress kind of falls away and you have good conversation with good friends. That's what I try to put in my paintings, without actually showing you people sitting around a table sharing wine."

Arvid's paintings are designed to trigger happy memories and associations. Even if you weren't actually there for that bottle of Chateau Lafite he's showing you, if you're a wine lover, odds are it'll hit some kind of chord -- a similar wine, a longstanding dream. "It's not so much the technical part of what you paint or how you paint," he says. "It's the story, and what you're trying to project to people."

*Eight Empties* certainly punched my nostalgia button. It's a familiar image from the end of many happy evenings spent in good company. "A bunch of friends were over all night," narrates Arvid, "and you tried a bunch of different bottles. People brought some, and you had some to share." *Unplugged*, which shows an exhausted corkscrew lying down amid an array of corks, "is a different view of the same sort of party. A pile of corks ends up over at

the end of the table, and if you show up late, you go rummaging through the corks to see what they opened during the evening."

When photorealistic detail is a hallmark of your work, details are key, and Arvid has clearly paid attention. In *Eight Empties*, the foils at the tops of the bottles are a mess. Only one appears to have been carefully trimmed off with a foil cutter -- probably one of the evening's first. "You're busy having a conversation with somebody while you're opening the bottle, and you're not even looking. I know I tend to tear it pretty haphazardly around the top. I've watched people slide the whole sleeve off. I've yet to do a painting of that, but it's in my mind, because I think I'd probably connect with a lot of people if I did."