Hamilton Aguiar

“ From Rags to Riches with a Silver Lining ”

By Bruce Helander

It is always an unexpected pleasure to discover a talented artist whose stars are rising and whose work is distinctive and well-crafted. Hamilton Aguiar follows an honored tradition of artists who pursue their instincts and commit themselves to a lifetime of innovation, invention and professional excellence.

As a child, Hamilton was influenced by his mother who was an artist. His father was a talented entrepreneur, sculptor and writer. Not surprisingly, there is a long and particularly interesting history of successful artists who had the advantage of a parent who supported and inspired them and activated a deep-seated natural creativity that opened the doors to exploring personal expression.

For example, Picasso’s father was a drawing instructor. Kiki and Seton Smith, both accomplished artists, were the children of Tony Smith, who was considered a father of abstract sculpture. Kenneth Noland’s daughter, Cady Noland, became a celebrated contemporary artist.

However, it’s one thing to be affected by inherent talent but it’s a whole different ball game on how to hit a home run with the bases loaded. Practice makes perfect as they say and Aguiar has his eye on the ball. The journey to achieving fame and professional status always has been attributed to hard work and concentration on one’s trade and Hamilton Aguiar is no exception.

The artist fits into the grand narrative of American art, when the mid-20th century emerges as a crucible where disparate cultures, struggles and dreams coalesced. There is a remarkable parallel with Aguiar’s meandering path to achievement, which was profoundly shaped by immigrant artists who arrived on American shores with little more than their raw talent and ambition coupled with an unyielding spirit. Escaping war, persecution, or abject poverty, determined artists embody the quintessential “rags to riches” story—not merely accumulating wealth but redefining the cultural landscape of their adopted homeland. The journey from destitution to international acclaim exemplifies how adversity can fuel creativity, leading to works that resonate across generations and geographies. The Abstract Expressionist Willem de Kooning arrived in America in 1926 as a penniless stowaway after smuggling himself in from the Netherlands, arriving with nothing but the clothes on his back. De Kooning, like Aguiar, fortuitously started his career pathway as a carpenter and house painter, saving whatever money he could to pursue his passion for art.

Mark Rothko is another good example as he immigrated to the United States from Russia in 1913, fleeing political turmoil and anti-Semitic persecution. Settling in Oregon, his family struggled financially, forcing Rothko to take on various odd jobs to support himself as he developed his artistic skills. After moving to Manhattan Rothko's work initially went unnoticed, but as he pushed forward and refined his color field concepts that elicited deep emotional responses, it eventually paved his road to prominence. Aguiar's journey is the stuff movie scripts are made of, stressing overwhelming odds narrowed down by hard work and determination with a sprinkle of good luck. Other artists that fit the mold of rags to riches are Louise Nevelson, who emigrated from Ukraine to America as a young girl and found her way to New York, where she pursued her passion for sculpture, incorporating materials she discovered in the streets. Arshile Gorky is another amazing example of stick-to-it-ness, who among other things survived the Armenian genocide, landing in Boston with virtually nothing in his pocket. Eventually finding his way to New York, his work flourished with strong motivation from figures like Picasso and the Surrealists. However, by far, Andy Warhol might be the strongest comparison to ambition and raw talent inherent in Hamilton's life story. Warhol left Pittsburgh to move to New York on a "do our die basis" with less than $50 in his pocket and no place to stay but a park bench, accompanied by a small portfolio of sketches that were primarily of shoes. The following day he landed an illustration job with Vogue magazine, which he accepted with the provision that they pay him in advance. When Hamilton Aguiar arrived in New York from Brazil he had the same empty pockets as other struggling artists with aspirations, but fortune was on his side.

After an exhausting search for work in Astoria, Queens, he decided to go to Manhattan and try out the 'no risk, no reward' philosophy. On the subway he met a guy that also was Brazilian and was about to leave his position at an art university on 57th street. As luck would have it, the penniless artist got the job. After that he found an opportunity in the Hamptons (home to de Kooning and Pollock), where he worked in construction and was encouraged to start his own company of home improvements particularly with self-taught faux finishes. In a few years, he received US citizenship and later he came across an empty store for rent in Southampton and decided to open an art gallery. Much to Hamilton's surprise, the experiment was an amazing triumph for both his career and financially. In 2004, he participated in Art Expo NY in Manhattan and sold out every work in the show. From then on, he received enthusiastic support from collectors and numerous art galleries that spotted this unusual talent and the rest is history.

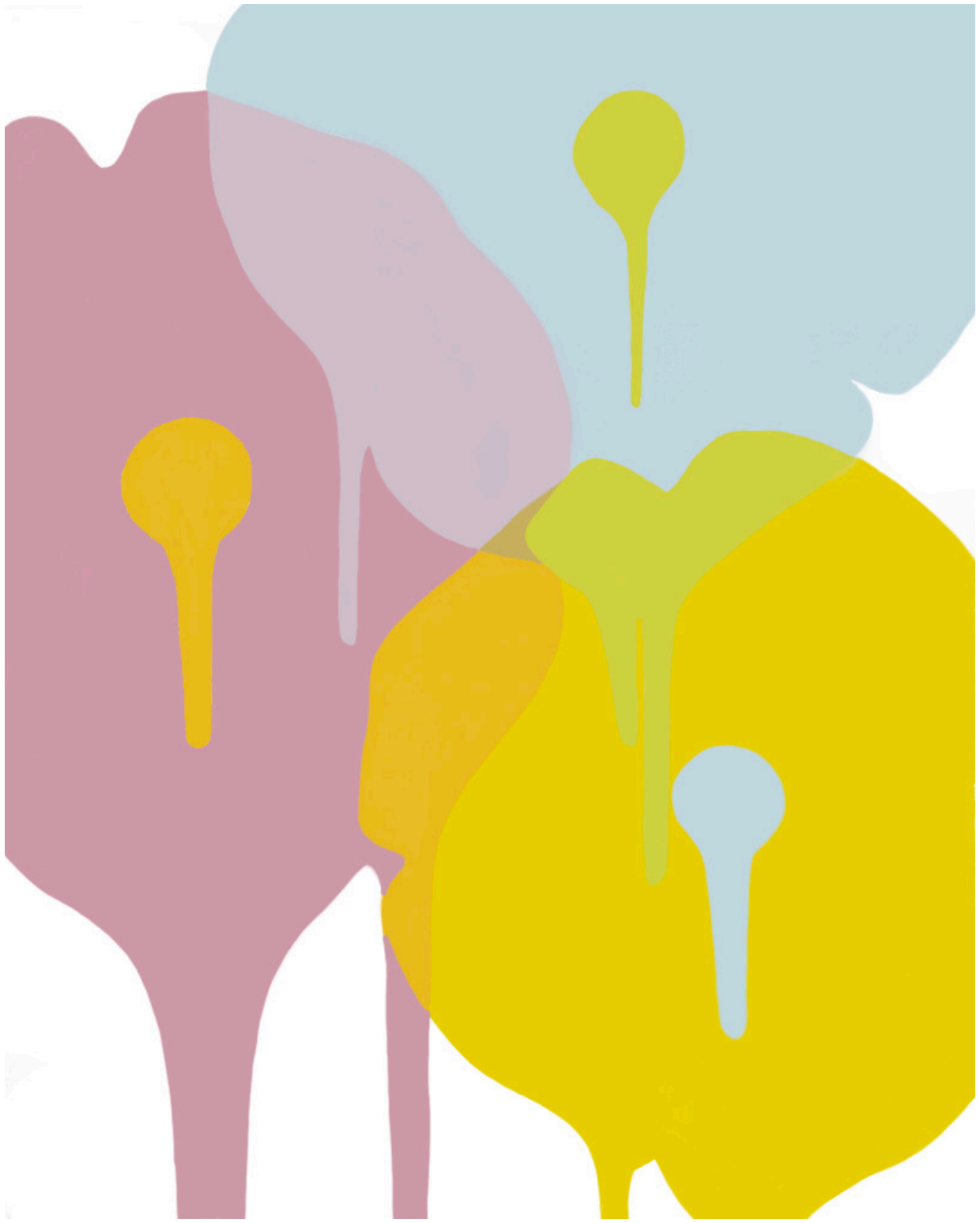
Like many thriving artists before him, Hamilton had a keen interest in producing, often painstakingly, facets of his work in painting and sculpture. One of the artist's most dynamic series is his optical depictions of evocative and forcefully compelling all-over wave-like patterns, often reminiscent of a huge curtain or giant hand-held fan, fashioned in oil on canvas. This remarkable series of works generates distinct properties that portray illusions of movement and spatial impressions and owes its inspiration to the pioneers of color field painting and artists who promoted poetry in motion with non-representable configurations. These admirable illusionistic compositions in squares and circular shapes coupled with a purposeful all-over dramatic surge, keep you a bit mesmerized with their natural flow and pure aesthetic properties.

Like many of his contemporaries, particularly Jeff Koons, who is known as the Alchemist of Banality, as well as Marcel Duchamp, Damien Hirst and Sherrie Levine, Aguiar has explored subjects that are also narrative and tend to suggest a story line. In his own words, "My art is not confined by a single medium; it is an evolving conversation between my hands and the materials I work with. I find freedom in exploring the boundaries between abstraction and representation, challenging conventions to create a visual language that speaks to the heart and soul."

In addition to his oeuvre of handsome abstract landscapes of oil and silver leaf highlighted with surrealist accents and bold luminous color field configurations, Aguiar has demonstrated a passion for interpreting and reformulating images initially made famous by other artists in a respectful and professional manner. The most famous artist who became universally recognized and successful for appropriating already existing imagery was Andy Warhol. Famed outlandish stunts performer Evel Knievel was also well known for his pronouncement that without risk there is no reward, which is universally accepted within the context of art history. Warhol imperiled his career with controversy over reproducing common, familiar images transferred to canvas such as photographic depictions of Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley, and commercial products like Campbell's Soup can labels and Brillo boxes but ended up as the undisputed Father of Pop Art. Appropriations, although initially contentious, are now considered standard respected fare. Jeff Koons, mentioned earlier, has invested his entire career with appropriations, including a polished Balloon Dog sculpture, Michael Jackson and Bubbles, and Silver Bunny as well as toy shapes, ornaments and advertising. Aguiar has investigated appropriating famous contemporary art images with a different slant. His rendition of a cast Balloon Dog is instantly identifiable even though the surface is a rusted façade with an insinuation that the original patina has weathered away, leaving only a hint of the original color. One of his most ambitious projects is an interpretive casting of Giacometti's iconic "Walking Man" (132 inches tall) as well as "Dog" (60 inches tall), a steel work in progress. Koons' exploration in appropriation is more than mere borrowing; for Aguiar, his sculpture is a transformative act that redefines how we perceive and interact expressively with the world.

Another series that has become iconic is the artist's large scale flower series where groups of simple blooming forms are meticulously painted in shades of gray or brightly colored hues, which he also has expanded to "dripping flower" forms that seem to be welded together, particularly those constructed with gold, copper, silver leaf and resin on wood.

Hamilton Aguiar has developed an idiosyncratic sculptural language that utilizes expressive resources of neo-figuration and color field textural inventiveness that continue to move forward his celebrated career while his current projects remain fresh and visually invigorating.



“ Three Flowers “ 60 x 48 x 2.5 inches, Acrylic on panel wit resin , 2022 HA_221888

Bruce Helander is an artist who writes on art for The Huffington Post and WhiteHot Magazine of Contemporary Art. He is a member of the Florida Artists Hall of Fame, a former White House Fellow of the National Endowment for the Arts and former Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs at the Rhode Island School of Design. His most recent books are “Chihuly – An Artist Collects” (Abrams, Inc.) and “Hunt Slonem – Bunnies” (Glitterati Press). He is currently showing his work at the Norton Museum of Art in West Palm Beach and Contessa Gallery in Southampton.