



Stephanie Schechter

Seeing the Signs

A love of typography led Stephanie Schechter to paint signage that can serve as reminders of a place and time



Al Mac's (Justly Famous), oil on canvas, 30 x 60"

This piece is based on the iconic signage atop the historic Al Mac's Diner in Fall River, Massachusetts. I created this composition to articulate what I find most powerful about this signage—the beauty of the chrome and the sweeping shadows inside the letterforms created by the neon. The building's siding is included in the composition as a means to direct the eye.

Why signs? I am often asked this question. The answer is partially a love of typography and design, but also a need to document history. I majored in industrial design at RISD and settled in Rhode Island after graduating in 1994. Around the time I graduated, I noticed some of my favorite old buildings were being demolished for new development, which sparked an interest in historic preservation. I was also at the beginning of my design career, and soon realized I had more to express than is possible

with design alone. I longed to make art.

I began to paint and quickly focused on using painting as a medium to document the buildings that I loved. As my painting progressed, I started to hone in on the signs on these buildings. I've always had a love of typography, and I began to develop an interest in vintage signs in particular. As my interest in signs grew, I began to see commercial signs as symbolic of more than the words on their surface. I started to recognize them as reminders of a community's

culture and history, the evolution of commerce, design and manufacturing trends, impermanence and obsolescence. I also developed an appreciation for the artistry of the sign makers.

I am often told that my paintings look like photographs. My process does start with extensive photography of a subject. Like everyone else, I've seen thousands of signs in my travels, yet only certain ones "speak to me" enough to photograph. It could be any combination of the typography, the colors, the shadows that

the sign creates, the words themselves, the value of the sign as a local landmark or a personal connection that attracts me to a particular sign. I take photos from multiple angles in order to ensure I have captured every possible perspective. If I stumble on a sign that interests me, but the lighting isn't right at that moment, I return on a sunny day at a time when I feel the shadows will be best. Back in my studio, I choose my main reference photo based on the angle that I feel best accentuates the subject. Although a photograph initially inspires each of my paintings, they are idealized portraits of my subjects. They are highly edited from my reference photos. When developing the concept for a new work, I believe that my job is to create a successful painting, not a copy of a photograph.

To me, a successful painting articulates what the artist finds poignant or compelling about a particular subject. To accomplish this in my own work, I hone each image until it reflects the essence of what interests me. I am primarily attracted to color, three-dimensional forms and



Archie's Pizza, oil on aluminum, 40 x 40"

I was most attracted to the vintage sign for Archie's Pizza in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, by its colors and its sinuous arrow, and its many lightbulbs. This composition was created to best highlight the sign's three-dimensional form. By adding violet to the blue of the sky, I was able to create a strong contrast that made the complementary orange area of the sign really "pop" without visually vibrating.



Luxury, oil on canvas, 24 x 40"

Inspired by the storefront of the Luxury Dry Cleaners in Lincoln, Rhode Island, the focal point of this painting is the exciting chrome lettering with its streamline style font. This composition was crafted to direct the eye toward the letters. I added a hint of the neon "OPEN" sign as an element of surprise and a pop of color in this otherwise muted work.

shadows. To me, details such as rust, dents and the texture of peeling paint that occur in real life, detract from the story I am telling about my subject. In the drawing phase, I edit these elements out and craft a composition that best highlights what I find most powerful about the subject. Elements, such as a section of building, a rivet or a metal support, may be shifted in order to direct the eye. All of this editing results in images that are bold, graphic and stylized, yet maintain the perception of realism. While unintentional, I feel that my design background has naturally influenced my style and my methodical approach to painting.

Over time, I've developed a painting process that enables me to best execute my vision. I primarily use a hard-edged painting technique. My paintings



The Best, oil on canvas, 24 x 24"

This fun piece is based on a small section of a much larger sign for Skip's Snack Bar in Merrimac, Massachusetts. This tightly cropped composition highlights the beauty of the neon and the graffiti-like shadows created by the neon cast upon the curved sections of primary color.



MART, oil on linen, 24 x 36"


When I first noticed this facade of a gas station's convenience store in North Providence, Rhode Island, I fell in love with the exposed neon inside the A, which was missing its plastic face. My goal with this painting was to create a strong, dynamic composition, using the angles of the various elements to direct the eye.

typically combine large areas of solid color with carefully blended transitions. I choose not to do any masking, as I find that masked edges can be obvious and create a stopping point for the eye. I've modified my easel with a hanging hand rest that slides on rails. I find this easier to use than a mahl stick. The hand rest allows me to keep my hand steady for hand-painting neat lines and edges.

A smooth, consistent surface quality is important to me. I strive for an opaque paint application, without visible brushstrokes. I work in oils, without solvents. I find that oil best suits my work because it gives me plenty of time for blending and smoothing. I use walnut oil as my only medium, which allows me to achieve a uniform consistency with my paint mixes. I mix large batches of color, which is necessary when painting areas of solid color, since it is nearly impossible to mix an identical match for touch ups. I store my paint mixes in labeled packets made out of folded aluminum foil, and keep the packets in sealed Ziploc bags. Storing them this way keeps the paint wet for the duration of creating the painting.

While there are many methods for storing oil paints, I find that this technique is the most convenient for me. I typically apply two to three layers of paint to each area, waiting for the paint to fully dry in between coats. While paint is applied in layers, this is not done as a classical realism approach with glazing, it is done to achieve opacity.

However, with each layer I am adding more detail and refinement.

My process is labor intensive and each painting takes months to complete. I truly enjoy the slow evolution of each piece and all of the efforts involved in creating meticulous work. I am committed to crafting paintings that express the beauty I find in my subjects. 



Thrift, oil on aluminum, 25¾ x 47¾"

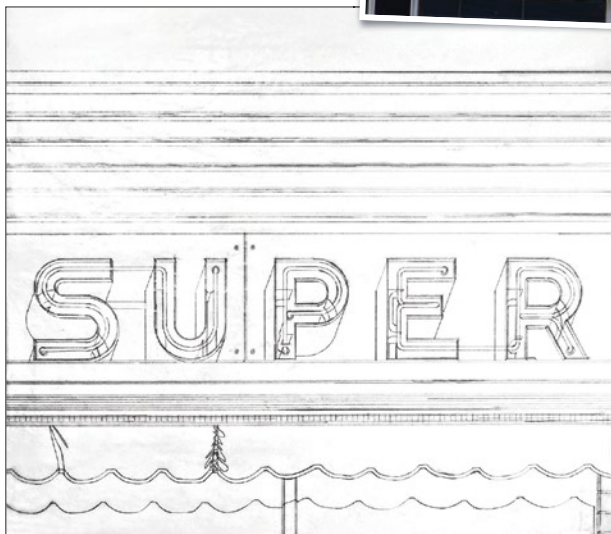
There is a forlorn quality to this painting of the facade of a Salvation Army thrift store from Danielson, Connecticut. I was attracted to this subject by the missing plastic face of the "H" and the older, sun-faded faces of the "T", "R", "I" and "F". This straightforward composition gives just a hint of the Salvation Army logo for context.

My Art in the Making SUPER

This painting was inspired by the storefront of Eagle Super Market in Providence, Rhode Island. I chose to paint this subject because I loved the contrast of the linear siding and the softness of the awning. I was also attracted to the letterforms with the interesting connectors between the S and U and the E and R. The aspirational word “super” resonated with me, and I felt it might be meaningful to the viewer. I intentionally photographed this local sign at a time of day where the shadows would best emphasize the letters.



Reference Photo



STAGE 1 DRAWING

I began by creating a pencil drawing. This tightly cropped composition is highly edited and simplified from the reference photo. I chose a straight-on, Trompe l’Oeil point of view to make it most impactful.

WHAT THE ARTIST USED

Support

- » Smooth primed canvas

Brushes

- » Synthetic sable round brushes sizes 1, 6, 10
- » Synthetic sable filbert brushes sizes 8, 10, 12, 14
- » Synthetic sable fan brushes sizes 4, 8

Oil Paints

- » Titanium white
- » Raw umber
- » French ultramarine
- » Cobalt blue
- » Ivory black
- » Naples yellow light
- » Cadmium yellow pale
- » Cadmium red
- » Permanent rose
- » Quinacridone magenta

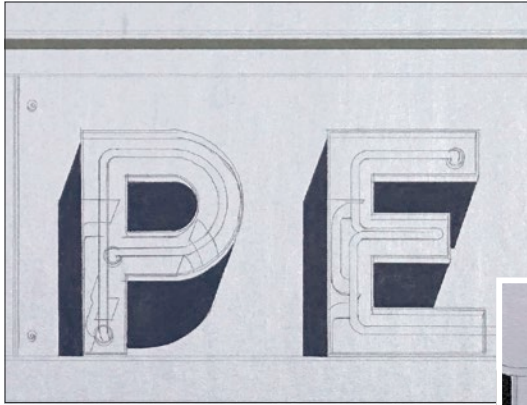
Medium

- » Walnut oil

Additional Supplies

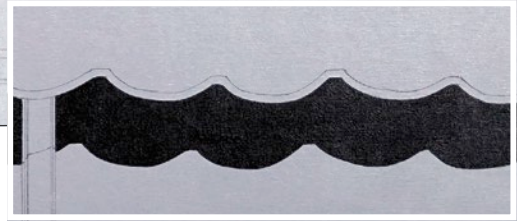
- » Thread
- » Palette knives
- » Silicon tipped clay sculpture tools
- » Q-tips
- » Aluminum foil
- » Ziploc bags





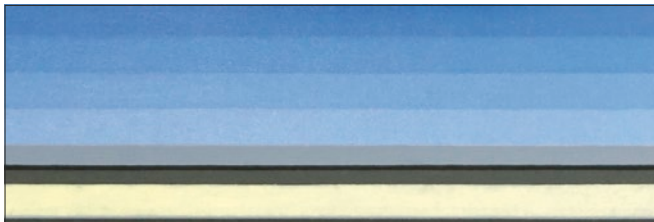
STAGE 2 BLOCKING IN DARKS

After painting a cool gray ground as a value reference, I transferred the drawing and began adding darks to start establishing some additional reference values.



STAGE 3 ROUGHING IN SOME COLOR

In this stage I continued to rough in the first layer. I started to fill in large areas and add in some color.



STAGE 4 CREATING A GRADIENT IN THE SKY

I created a dark-to-light gradient in the sky by painting four graduated stripes. I loosely blended the bordering edges of the stripes, then carefully smoothed those transitions with a fan brush.



STAGE 5 CONTINUED ROUGHING IN OF FIRST LAYER

I continued to add more color and detail. Although the neon wasn't lit in my reference photo, I chose to "light" it to draw the eye to the letters, creating a focal point.

STAGE 6 SECOND LAYER

I applied a second layer to the painting, adding more detail, refinement and opacity.



STAGE 7
KEEPING
EDGES NEAT

I used a silicone tipped clay shaping tool and Q-tips to keep edges neat, and clean up any wet paint that has gotten "outside the lines."



STAGE 8 TOUCH
UPS AND CHECKING
EDGES

In this stage, I did touch ups and checked the straightness of my lines by using thread. I've found that using thread is easier and more accurate than pressing a ruler against a stretched canvas.



STAGE 9 FINAL PAINTING
SUPER, oil on canvas, 29 x 32"

ABOUT THE ARTIST




Stephanie Schechter is an oil painter known for her meticulous, bold, graphic depictions of signs. A New York native, Schechter graduated from Rhode Island School of Design, where she received a BFA in industrial design. Although she began her creative career as a designer, she now uses painting as a means to express the beauty she finds in the everyday, human-made world. She lives and works in Providence, Rhode Island, USA.

Schechter's striking paintings have been displayed in exhibitions throughout the United States. She is represented by Anthony Brunelli Fine Arts, where her work will be featured in a solo exhibition in the fall of 2020.

Represented by

» Anthony Brunelli Fine Arts, Binghamton, New York, USA, www.anthonybrunelli.com

Contact at
stephschechter@gmail.com
www.stephschechter.com

Find me on
 [@stephschechter](https://www.instagram.com/stephschechter)