

The case of the art-world thriller

By Hunter Drohojowska

"So how did you manage to do it," the journalist asked, "write a mystery about the art world while holding a full-time job as dean of the fine and communication arts at Loyola Marymount University?"

"It wasn't easy," replied the author, Peter Clothier, with a laugh. "I wrote between 4 and 6 in the morning every day for eight months."

Any professional writer knows the kind of discipline that requires, and any reader can imagine. But Clothier, already well-known as an art critic, poet, university professor and administrator, had a story to tell, a character who demanded his attention. That character, artist Jacob Molnar, should soon be grabbing the attention of readers drawn to thrillers, scandal in the art world, or both, in Clothier's book, "Chiaroscuro."

The title, which refers to the modeling of light and shadow in a picture, also serves as a metaphor for the book's settings — the dark, nocturnal action in New York City, the light revelations of plot in Los Angeles. In this fast-paced story, Molnar, a "Post-War American master," reluctantly turns sleuth to discover who is killing artists to profit from the posthumously increased value of their work.

Clothier, 49, explained his book in a British accent softened by 17 years of living in L.A.: "The first draft came really quickly. I was looking at an R.B. Kitaj drawing in our bedroom and a character began to emerge. I also had ideas about the art world that had no means of expression in my critical writings. The character began to grow and I found myself writing something that turned out to be a book."

"I've been a thriller fan all of my life — Wilkie Collins, G.K. Chesterton, Sherlock Holmes, Dorothy Sayers, Dick Francis. I was a real fan of Francis' books and thought that he'd found a niche in the world of horse racing that was similar to the art world. Both worlds were small, confined, circumscribed, with very high stakes, a lot of colorful characters, and lots of different stories."

Clothier aims to be the Dick Francis of the art world and has completed a second mystery called "Trompe l'Oeil" and has outlined a third called "Percent for Art."

Clothier calls getting his first book published "something short of miraculous." He had finished a

draft of "Chiaroscuro" when he ran into one of his former students, a Ph.D. candidate in comparative literature who had gone into the literary business. She was enthusiastic about the book and sent it to Knopf, Viking and St. Martin's Press. All three responded with letters of interest in the property, and St. Martin's finally published it.

In Jacob Molnar, Clothier has rendered a believable portrait of an artist who eschews the commercial values and competitive ethics of the contemporary art arena today. The journalist wondered if Clothier shared Molnar's often conservative opinions. "I have such different opinions on different days," Clothier said with a sigh. "Sometimes I walk into a gallery and I'm Jake and think what is on the walls is just junk. Certainly, there are occasions when I share his prejudices. It's important to remember that the financial value of art is inflated out of proportion to its life value, so to speak. I don't want to gripe, but art has become a market commodity."

"But I'm not Jake Molnar. And, by the end of the book, Molnar is learning that his prejudices had backed him into a corner. He even learns to like some of Carlos Smith's work."

The character of Carlos Smith is roughly based on the art and persona of L.A. artist Carlos Almaraz; his New York dealer, Samantha Dimitri, bears a

resemblance to the high-powered, stylish Mary Boone.

"All the characters are composites," Clothier insisted. "I'm hoping they'll seem familiar." Although none of the characters is real, much of the art is. An art collector has a door on his mansion that is clearly designed by L.A. artist Eugene Sturman; when Molnar goes downtown, he comes across an installation by Moira Sheehan; elsewhere, there is mention of paintings that could only be by Gary Lloyd.

Clothier said that his marriage to Ellie Blankfort in 1969 provided his introduction to the world of contemporary art. His wife had a gallery in L.A. between 1970 and 1975, and Clothier worked as preparator, curator and therapist for the artists. But he traces his interest in the tactile and the visual to his earliest poetry.

Clothier was educated at Cambridge University, where he took a degree in modern and medieval languages. He taught languages at a Berlitz school in Germany, taught grammar school in Halifax, Nova Scotia, got a Ph.D. at the University of Iowa, and was hired as an assistant professor of comparative literature at USC in 1968.

In 1976, Clothier accepted the position of dean at the Otis Art Institute and became acting director in 1977, helping to negotiate the merger of the school with the Parsons School of Design. A Rockefeller Fellowship in 1979 freed him from academic responsibilities for two years, and he concentrated on his poetry. (He has published several books of verse.)

From 1981 until earlier this year, he was dean of fine and communication arts at Loyola Marymount University, overseeing construction of its new Burns Fine Arts Center. And writing "Chiaroscuro."

"I love writing," said Clothier, who has left LMU to write full time, "even if I have to get up at 4 a.m., I still feel terrific all day. As long as I can write."

(Clothier will be signing his books today at a reception hosted by art collectors Stanley and Elyse Grinstein, with St. Martin's Press, from 5:30 to 9:30 p.m. at 170 S. La Brea Ave.)



Peter Clothier wrote "Chiaroscuro" while working as a university dean.

Javier Mendocza/Herald photographer

Hunter Drohojowska writes regularly about art for the Herald.

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