

HOPE IS THE THING WITH FEATHERS

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LEANNE REINHOLD

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Title of Thesis: _____

MFA Candidate: _____

Leanne Reinhold

Faculty Advisor: _____

Robin Cole Smith

MFA Program Chair: _____

Peter Zokosky

Dean of MFA Program: _____

Hélène Garrison PhD, Vice-President of Academic Affairs

LCAD President: _____

Jonathan Burke

Date Approved: _____

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ABSTRACT

For me, the word “artist” is interchangeable with the word “seeker.” I see myself as having been on this path for a lifetime, and what keeps me moving forward—adding skills, learning theory, studying history, observing nature, honing my visual acuity, and investigating the work and practices of living artists—is the endless *seeking* after a way to make my life experiences tangible and translatable. The compulsion to make the impermanent endure, and the unseen visible, is the driving force behind all forms of my artistic output, and it is the main purpose of this written work. This thesis is my map for the part of the pilgrimage that covers my recent experience of leaving Australia again, seeking to re-establish myself here in America, and coming to know the permanence of my husband’s family heritage in rural Illinois.

I have sought inspiration from people who seem to have known the same restless seeking. Emily Dickinson wrote prolifically in quiet isolation. Rogier van der Weyden succeeded in reaching me across the distance of five centuries. Turner went to the edge of abstraction to bring poetry, sunlight, and his awe before Nature to generations far removed from his own. Poetry is the prism through which my understanding of painting is illuminated. It is a mysterious but unwavering truth that for me painting is the embodiment of poetry, and poetry needs painting to be complete. Plutarch’s words were echoed centuries later by Leonardo da Vinci, who said: “Painting is poetry that is seen rather than felt, and poetry is painting that is felt rather than seen” (Da Vinci 1). I adopt this as my personal ethos.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work, written and painted, to my husband, Gary, who has
given me his love and lent me his courage
for thirty-five years, and carved out the road I have travelled.

Painting is silent poetry, and poetry is painting that speaks.

--Plutarch

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DESCRIPTION	1
RESEARCH	17
METHODOLOGY	40
CONCLUSION	46
WORKS CITED	47
APPENDIX	48

TABLE OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1.	<i>Hermes and the Cattle of Apollo</i> , David Ligare, 1983	19
FIGURE 2.	<i>The Awakening Conscience</i> William Hunt Holman, 1853	23
FIGURE 3.	<i>The Origin of Socialist Realism</i> , Komar and Melamid, 1982-3	23
FIGURE 4.	<i>Hope</i> , George Frederick Watts, 1886	24
FIGURE 5.	<i>Dream of Pope Sergius</i> , Rogier van der Weyden, 1437-40	32
FIGURE 6.	<i>Farm II</i> , Leanne Reinhold, 2015	34
FIGURE 7.	<i>Poetry on the wall</i> , Leanne Reinhold, 2015	40
FIGURE 8.	<i>Sketchbook pages</i> , Leanne Reinhold, 2015	41
FIGURE 9	<i>Example of sketchbook pages</i> Leanne Reinhold, 2015	42
FIGURE 10	<i>Example of under-drawing on prepared board</i> Leanne Reinhold, 2015	43

TABLE OF PLATES

PLATE 1	<i>Hope is the Thing with Feathers</i> , Leanne Reinhold, 2014	48
PLATE 2	<i>The Farm</i> , Leanne Reinhold, 2014	49
PLATE 3	<i>Self-Portrait with Western Australian View</i> , Leanne Reinhold, 2014	50
PLATE 4	<i>Indian Ocean Breeze</i> , Leanne Reinhold, 2014	51
PLATE 5	<i>Chloe and the Farmhouse</i> , Leanne Reinhold, 2014	52
PLATE 6	<i>Farm II</i> , Leanne Reinhold, 2014	53
PLATE 7	<i>Nature is the Gentlest Mother</i> , Leanne Reinhold, 2015	54
PLATE 8	<i>Redemption</i> , Leanne Reinhold, 2015	55
PLATE 9	<i>Major Mitchells in Perth</i> , Leanne Reinhold, 2014	56
PLATE 10	<i>Sunburnt Country...Pitiless Blue Skies</i> , Leanne Reinhold, 2014	57
PLATE 11	<i>Storm over Kalbarri Coast</i> , Leanne Reinhold, 2014	58
PLATE 12	<i>Storm Approaching Kalbarri</i> , Leanne Reinhold, 2014	59

DESCRIPTION

Nostalgia is a longing for something that never existed. All painting is about loss. I unapologetically let these phrases stand as pillars on either side of a void. It is what materializes in the void between them that describes the mysterious process that leads me to create paintings. These two fragments run through my thoughts as I approach my work. I have searched in vain to find a source outside myself for either one, and they have been touchstones for so long I am not sure if they originated with me, or with someone else. For me both phrases are self-evident truths that seem timeless and universal, and as such, perhaps they are my own distillation of the wisdom and thoughts of others. They are now deeply internalized and personal statements—read as “twins” that reflect meaning on one another—quite different when understood together, than they are when taken separately.

Why do I paint? Love of the tradition of painting, love of the beauty of the visual world and the spiritual power and connection between our physical experience and our deepest consciousness, and above all—a desire to hold onto the fleeting moments of life: the joy, the love, even the pain—because of the dizzying awareness that this magnificent play, in which we mysteriously have a part, is ending with every breath. Wayne Thiebaud spoke about, “the risk of ignobling the great tradition which we use and which we respect and which we are hopefully a part of” (Thiebaud 4).

I am mindful of this warning every time I enter my studio. I am aware of the great tradition of painting, and the long road to some level of competence, and the way I approach this challenge is by acknowledging the importance at the beginning of the 21st century of creating images that cannot be made digitally, or by any other means that excludes the hand,

the mind, and the imagination of the artist. I aspire to create work that is saturated with time, deliberation, intense thought, and sincerity of purpose. If those criteria are foremost in my mind, then I am trusting that the work will, over time, come to reflect a fragment of individuality and integrity that will be a stimulus to the imagination of others. It will provoke thought, contemplation, and introspection. Time is the essential factor in this process. I believe that evidence of time spent—veils of color, areas of detail and close observation, emotive passages of freer brushwork, subjects that are not literal but more akin to the free-flowing connections of poetry and contain a multiplicity of meanings—these elements will be interpreted by the viewer who will respond by taking more time to look than might be expected in an image that is produced with a greater sense of alacrity and artificiality. The delivery is more important than the image itself, so there is purpose in creating a dialogue that meanders, in images that are not readily consumed. If the work engages my attention then I believe it has the potential to engage the attention of a viewer.

Slowing time is a key factor in my process, and it matches my interest in the idea that our experiences are blowing away, leaving little trace. Yet, family connections endure, connection to particular places is deeply cherished, memories are preserved—embroidered with emotions that may not have anything to do with the actual remembrances. We move in a rich stream of remembered feelings, associations and experiences, like the whirl of dust particles illuminated by a beam of light, and just as impossibly, we try to capture these illusory sparkles of gold. My desire to paint is like putting my hand out to capture the rain of light that is real, but not tangible.

Reaching into the past, through the use of an old photograph is an example of this desire to bring something faded back into vivid color. The painting called *Hope is the Thing with Feathers* (see Plate 1) was inspired by an old black and white snapshot, about 3”x 4” in size, of my grandmother. It was taken by my grandfather on a sunny day at the beach in Australia, about 1942. This tiny photograph is laden with loss, love, and joy. My grandmother lived a long life and passed away in her nineties, while my grandfather lost himself to Alzheimer’s in early middle age, many decades ago. Her tanned skin and golden hair, so carefully coiffed, her youth and happiness in that moment of sitting on a warm retaining wall have long since passed away, yet she is important to me, as I live on in the twenty-first century. I am able to imbue that tiny faded photograph with a rich history, and in my mind she still exists. Her Australian-ness is not something I take for granted anymore, and the Australian environment I grew up with is now exotic in my mind, strange and unique, and lost to great distance. Recently, after many years spent in the United States, I returned to live in Australia, and had again the experience of seeing daily the vividly colored native birds—so outrageously, flamboyantly bright, such frenetic morsels of movement and color. I included the Rosellas, as they are called, in the painting as symbols of my Australian experience. They represent the present, life ongoing—not literally inhabiting the same space as my grandmother, but pictorially ambiguous references to life’s continuity beyond one person’s lifespan. Do they “make sense”? I hope not. Are they slightly perplexing? I hope so. Do they mean the same thing to the viewer that they mean to me? Impossible, and but this is not a question I consider important.

The light in Australia is intense. The colors of the landscape are sharp, saturated, and clearly defined. It is harsh and unlike other parts of the world. This representation is a

reflection of my experience of this environment: it is not grey, hazy California: it is not a European landscape full of moisture and softness. I wanted the “memory” to be the way memories are—golden, suspended in amber, warm, and glowing. This is not a painting of a woman on a hot, sunny day: it is the painting of a *memory* of a woman on a hot, sunny day, through the lens of time, distance, and loss. I believe that when viewers look at my painting they are entering into an imaginative compact with me. They know it is a painting, not a window, not a photograph: and so they enter the artificial world of my creation, where natural laws do not apply, and my intentions frame their experience. While it is my created world, it is nevertheless their own experience, and I stand apart from that, as the artists we admire from centuries past are removed from our experience of their work. It is the greater reality that the artist will not be a part of the viewer’s interaction with the painting.

The title of the painting is taken from a poem by Emily Dickinson. It refers to the element of the birds in the painting and the role they play in bringing a source of constantly renewed life and energy to the scene framing someone long dead. Their color and brilliance is emblematic of hope itself, but further, the reference to a poem by Emily Dickinson is a touchstone to a key belief I hold about all forms of art: art is born of introspection, yet only comes alive in its reception in the mind of another. I am profoundly moved by the knowledge that Emily Dickinson left behind forty hand-bound, hand-written volumes of poetry—eighteen hundred poems written seemingly without a view to publication (Griffin Wolff 4). This legacy would seem to be the collected-work of a woman who was compelled to create for her own purposes. She seems not to have been creating a product to be consumed by others, or destined to be validated by their regard. In a similar way, I am consciously positioning myself outside the discourse of our time. I am side-stepping the role of critic,

which it seems has become tangled with the role of artist, and I reject the premise that I should be thinking like an objective critic about my own work and seeking a place for it in the wider world. It will find its way into the wider world, but in the same way that a stream flows from its source and carves a pathway by gravity and erosion. I will not be excavating a channel to guide its progress, creating a lifeless, artificial canal. This position is consistent with my commitment to sincerity of purpose, so that by limiting the sphere of my involvement I can be more focused on the business of creating work that is true to my own inner voice. Like Emily Dickinson (I presume), I am creating for my own satisfaction, while acknowledging the noble tradition of painting referred to in Wayne Thiebaud's remarks, the tradition that embraces the idea that painting initiates a dialogue between the work itself (not the artist) and the viewer—an infinite number of permutations.

The past is our own creation, and some of us live with an elaborate, constructed view of the past, creating a nostalgia or longing for something that may not have ever existed. My painting called *The Farm* (see Plate 2) was based on another small black and white photograph, this time even older, from around 1930. The figures depicted are my husband's grandmother as a young woman with her three little daughters, the youngest one being my husband's mother, as she was at about three years of age. My husband's grandmother was Nellie, and I got to know her quite well, as she lived to be almost one hundred years old. I knew her from her eightieth year on. When I first met her she was remarkably youthful for a woman of her age, warm and friendly, and easy to like. My husband's family have owned the farmland in Southern Illinois since the mid-1800s when his great, great grandfather settled there from Germany. They are all buried in a private cemetery just before the dip in the road at the creek.

My husband and I spent the entire summer of 2014 working on the farmhouse, first removing the debris and junk left behind by the previous tenant, and then addressing the twenty years of neglect that had reduced the place to a sad condition. We labored hard to bring the place back to the condition my husband remembered with such fondness from his childhood in the 1950s, when he lived there with his grandparents. When we arrived in spring, the place was uninhabitable, and we walked to it across a field of six inch high corn plants from the neighboring farm, where we stayed. It was not long before the corn was about twelve feet high, and formed a dense, high wall all around the yard. Intensely green, quiet, peaceful but demanding hard work from us, it was a unique experience in my life. I am Australian, and I have moved about every two years of my life—I would love to never move again. This farm is my husband's legacy, yet I grew to love it as I planted a garden and worked to make it beautiful again, in its simple way. As I worked, pulling water from the old well (we had several months without running water), I had long days to think about the years of patient (monotonous, I am sure) toil that his grandmother had put into making this place her home. Every task I undertook put me in *her* place, looking out from her kitchen window, planting where she had planted, looking at the wall of corn that formed the close horizon, just as she had looked through the years of the Depression, through the years of World War II, through the prosperous and modern years of the 1950s—for an entire lifetime.

I decided to paint the continuous circles of the quilt pattern over the image of the farmhouse and the family. Every element of the place was fertile, abundant, bursting with life, and I saw it all as essentially feminine in nature. I replanted lilies in the garden, and they bloomed instantly and unceasingly; the soil is black and soft and easy to work. I wanted the painting to reflect the patient aspect of Nellie's life's work, her daughters—all of whom are

now gone—growing to adulthood under the one roof, the tedium of the tiny stitches of the quilts she made, the endless meals she prepared in the small kitchen. Many busy days, each one like the other, little stitches, little patches, and small repetitive steps making a life that connected her life to mine. She had lived with the stability I have always craved. She was rooted in that place, as I had never been rooted anywhere. I felt a calming influence being in that place of lush and dependable growth: it felt nurturing. Australia has a myriad of different environments, but overall, it is a continent of extremes, and its cycles are capricious and often cruel. We lived out in sheep country in New South Wales a few years ago, where it was hot and dry, never green, never soft. Fires burn huge swathes of territory, and the empty distances are enormous. It was so unlike Illinois in every respect, as my husband's farming family was unlike my Australian family in every respect.

In the painting *The Farm* (see Plate 2) my objective was not to create a realistic representation of a particular place, but to suggest the *nature* of the place as I experienced it, and reflect upon the lives that had come and gone there, as my own life will come and go. The colors are warm and bright: suggesting the quilts, but also the happy simplicity of life there. It is not a dramatic family history, yet it is not comprised only of sunshine. It is a story of cycles within cycles, unbroken over a very long time. I wanted the figures to be centrally important, but not colored in a life-like way—they are gone, they are faded, yet they are part of the fabric of the place. This painting could only be a painting; my main criteria for my work. The slowness of the process of applying paint, the liberty of being able to stray from the representation of the real world, the abandonment of illusionistic formulas, the freedom to be able to slide one image over another, to use colors in an expressive way rather than a naturalistic way: this is what motivates me to paint. A small black and white photo will pass

on through the generations of our family with less and less meaning, until perhaps it will end up being held by someone who does not know the names of the people in it anymore. The painting is a greater investment of time and imaginative thinking, and may survive longer, with more of a story to tell. I am taking a fragment, one that can slip to the bottom of a cardboard box and be nibbled by mice, and making from that colorless fragment something that is accorded greater importance as a family artifact, perhaps even as a cultural artifact with meaning beyond the family. I am rescuing that sunny day in 1930 from oblivion, and I am saving Grandma Nellie, on that day when she was so young and svelte, for the next generation of my family. Even in this there is a sweet futility, yet that impulse explains the genesis of this painting.

The stability and permanence of my husband's family story contrasts with my own experience, growing up in Australia. I was born into a nomadic family, from an ancestry that was Eastern European and British. I come from a long line of people who have moved, and moved again, across oceans, across deserts, to arrive in places, and then leave them behind again. This condition is more general than specific in the Australian experience. Other than aboriginals, a tiny minority (who now seem like strangers amongst the transplanted culture), everyone in Australia has landed there from somewhere else. This realization was part of my thoughts from a very young age. Everything about growing up in Australia filled me with a sense that "everything" happened somewhere else, against a backdrop of snow and bluebells, in lichen covered stone walls, all very far away. We had bronze greens, not emerald greens, we had creeks that could dry up completely, not gurgling brooks, and there were no windswept moors for brooding lovers, no Dickensian London alleys steeped in fog, and it all seemed oddly *wrong*. My imagination was nourished by the stories and histories of another

place, while goannas (giant kindergartener-sized lizards) ran crookedly down the middle of my street. When I grew up in the 60s we were a predominantly fair-skinned, redheaded, and blonde-haired people, sweltering and freckling in the harsh summers, eating plum pudding studded with silver shillings on Christmas days when the temperature topped one hundred degrees. This is the disconnectedness that I wanted to depict in the painting *Self-portrait with Western Australian view* (see Plate 3). I am standing in front of a desert scene, which is only nominally framed. It could almost be a view through a window behind me, not in a plausible way, but in the same strange way that landscapes appear over the shoulders of early Italian Renaissance portraits. I have shown myself facing out because I have left this place behind, and everything about my physical appearance is at odds with the landscape behind me: the jewelry, the sea foam colored silk blouse, the very nature of my features does not belong to the empty desert. For all the disparity, for all the estrangement, I *am* connected to this place, and I miss it and long for it. It is the background of my imagination, for while I took in European history and English poetry and literature, it was the Australian landscape I explored, and nothing I have seen since matches it. Not matches it in degree of beauty, for this country is a booming symphony of grandeur and beauty beyond compare, but matches it in the way it resonates with me. I realize now what a gift it was to be born in a place that is so unique and so far from the rest of the world, and as much as I love America, I am grieved to have left Australia behind. I return, only to leave, again and again. I have wanted to change the sadness of the expression that made its way, inexplicably, into this self-portrait, but it seems more honest to leave it, as a reflection of leaving my ill-fitting heritage behind.

The Australian desert is barren, not because of the heat, but because the scouring winds have removed the topsoil, leaving a hard, rocky surface. That wind is impossible to

make the subject of a painting, but it is this wind that holds the floating scarf aloft in the painting *Indian Ocean Breeze* (see Plate 4). When I returned to Australia a few years ago, my feelings of homesickness were reversed: after many years in the Northern Hemisphere, longing for the South, I was back, and now longing for the North. Upon arriving in Western Australia, one of the first things I did was explore the wild, windswept southern tip of the continent below Perth. It is an old whaling coast, and when one looks out at the horizon of the Indian Ocean it is with the knowledge that there is nothing but ocean for a very long distance. This is not just Australia, it is the *wrong* side of Australia, impossibly cut off from the rest of the world. The wind is fierce and cold, and comes straight from the Antarctic, as do the very boulders that form the cliffs there. I walked the beach at a place called Yallingup, and watched the spray curl back from the top of the breakers in the powerful wind, and I held my gauzy scarf over my head. It took off. It flew. As I watched the scarf billowing like a sail, I thought it perfectly emblematic of the way I led my life. I was swept along, blowing about, first across one ocean, then back across another, unpiloted, undirected. It is terrifying, and exhilarating. There is freedom in it, and no freedom at all, as there is no sense that this wild, careening flight is under any control. I painted the scarf with a touch that was delicate, enjoying the beautiful fragility of the material, and the way the sky showed through the weave. I wanted it to be beautiful: bird-like, flower-like, cloud-like—all fragile things that survive miraculously although they are very small in the world—all constant and recurring in a world of constant change.

In this initial phase of exploration of Western Australia, I took myself into the Perth Hills region, and this is where I found the scene depicted in the next painting *Chloe and the Farmhouse* (see Plate 5). Like the wind-blown scarf, this painting is also about my feelings

of estrangement as an immigrant. My grand-daughter stands in for me, a little girl in the Australian landscape. My explorations were sometimes solitary, as on this day, to paint, draw, and photograph the unfamiliar territory. This painting came from the experience of a plein-air day of exploration in 2013. When I found this place, it was starting to rain, and I had to head back to the city as a powerful storm built on the horizon. I chose not to include the kangaroos, or the cockatoos, that were originally part of my design. They were everywhere when I went out into the country, but they seemed too iconic to include. A kangaroo in a painting just seems too clichéd to me, although it would be a truthful reflection of the place. I now question the validity of this decision: why *not* include something that genuinely belongs? It seems like a clever affectation to exclude something simply because it does not accord with a sophisticated, acquired taste. Looking at something from the vantage point of greater physical distance, or time, as with the paintings of the early Renaissance, I am glad the painter was not too clever to exclude the peasants on the distant hill behind the nobleman's portrait. It is an authentic detail that would otherwise be lost. Perhaps there will be a time when kangaroos are not so abundant (although this defies imagination), and my inclusion of them will go from being peripheral and obvious to interesting and revealing.

As in my self-portrait, again the figure inhabiting the painting *Chloe and the Farmhouse* (see Plate 5) is looking out, with the landscape behind her, and it carries the same meaning: this is the place I left behind. The sunny expression of the child reminds me that when I was that age, and literally running wild, I had no idea I would ever leave the country. My family was always building new houses on the edge of developed areas, bordering on the bush, and from a very young age I was allowed to roam at will. One day when I was out exploring, I went over hills like these that I painted and found an abandoned farm house and

an old pioneer graveyard. I was enthralled. Abandoned buildings like this were not uncommon, however. I was with my brother that day, and as we returned across the empty fields a man ran towards us, yelling something unintelligible and waving his arms. We ran from him, terrified of him, and unaware that he was trying to get us out of the area where they were blowing up tree stumps with explosives. Trees started to explode. We ran out of danger—by sheer luck. The empty house in my painting represents for me my sense of homelessness, which I hesitate to describe in those terms, since I have never known the real distress of not having a comfortable place to live. My parents planned and built lovely houses, and as a child I drew elaborate house plans and planned gardens that were never planted (where I planned to grow bluebells), but we always moved, and did it all again. And again. Finally, I left the country completely at nineteen years of age, and began an equally nomadic life with my American husband.

The irony of living in a way that is the exact opposite of everything I have always longed for causes me some frustration. I seem to have no ability to make the wind stop blowing, and I sail hither and thither on the capricious current. The innocence of my granddaughter's smile is my reconciliation with this reality. She represents me in this painting, but she is also a little American girl, and represents the life that I built on the other side of the ocean.

There is a complicated kinship between the two paintings, *Chloe and the Farmhouse* (see Plate 5), and *Farm II* (see Plate 6). Complicated because they are opposites in many ways, yet they mirror each other in formal terms: similar palette, similar composition, and similar mood. The painting of Chloe in the hills behind Perth is like the reverse side of the coin to the painting called *Farm II*; this painting features a portrait of my husband, his grandfather's

team of plough horses, and another historic image taken from a small, black and white photograph of my husband with his cousins, as they were photographed on the farm in the early 1950s. These two works are as different as can be when broken down into their component elements. Where there is a little girl in one, there is a middle-aged man in the other; one is America, while the other is Australia; one features an abandoned farmhouse, while the other references a farm that has sustained generations. The painting called *Farm II* (see Plate 6) is the male counterpoint to the female painting, *The Farm* (see Plate 2). Color choice was a symbolic decision. Just as the predominantly golden glow of the painting *Hope is the Thing with Feathers* (see Plate 1) symbolizes the hazy act of elevating a mundane moment to mythical significance. So too, there is symbolic meaning in *The Farm* (see Plate 2) which is lush with vivid greens and glowing oranges as a reflection of fertility and feminine powers of regeneration. By contrast, *Farm II* (see Plate 6) is a simple harmony of earth and sky. The limited palette of blue and sienna is a way of communicating the elemental nature of the created image: a way of simplifying or codifying it. The unconscious act of always placing the figures looking out from the landscape depicted has been repeated often enough now that I recognize in this device my deeply held conviction that we hold places in our minds, as part of our identity. A particular place frames us, and gives us form—I do not use it as a stage upon which my characters act. If it were a stage the figures would be integrated into the depicted space and would be acting on it, perhaps with their backs to the viewer. This is not the way I use space in my paintings.

Space for me is symbolic, and I use the setting to inform the identity of the characters, much as a contemporary art director in the medium of film will create a set that is layered with clues as to the life and identity of the character, but in a way that becomes

background. In *Farm II* (see Plate 6) this chosen attitude toward the landscape is reminiscent to me of the way early Italian Renaissance painters (such as Bronzino) placed lands of ownership behind the portraits of the noblemen and women: it is the land and the place shown behind that gave the figures in the foreground their status and their identity. The relationship between the portrait and the place can be seen as an arbitrary device (how else would an artist connect the portrait to the place?) Or it can be seen, as I believe it is, as integral to understanding the person depicted; their land is to their portrait what a pedestal is to a sculpture. It elevates them, completes them, and gives substance to their identity. So it is that the land in the painting behind my husband's portrait in *Farm II* (see Plate 6) speaks to his identity. Once again I have taken a very small black and white photograph, dating to the 1920s, of my husband's grandfather coming out of the barn with his team of work horses. My husband remembers the horses and the barn well. Magically, that memory is now a part of my experience too. He is part of the cluster of small boys who also exist anachronistically in the painting—a link to his childhood and a reference to another time period within the composition of the one painting.

These floating references to times past, out of sequence, without logical connection, are meant to mimic the way our minds blend memories from one time to another. We need follow no logic in our fondest recollections: the fonder they are, the more sentiment they carry, the more likely it is that wild inaccuracies and incongruities are mixed seamlessly to create the fantasy of our past. Who has not had the experience of analyzing a favorite recollection—perhaps airing it with other family members—only to discover that we have conflated events, included fictions, and created a jumbled sequence that holds no linear historic truth? Yet, I believe that it is the fictions we create that hold the greater degree of

truth in regard to our personal history: we are all painters when it comes to creating memories, for we color them symbolically, and compose them hierarchically. Photography is not incidental to this process, but fundamental to it. I believe that in pre-photographic times memory would have been composed very differently. We recall static, posed moments, reinforced by the photos we see over the years, and I suspect that prior to photography our memories would have been more sensory: laden with recalled fragrance, remembered sounds, textures, sensations of light and movement. This is why I find the tiny black and white photos of family history so intriguing. They fool us into believing we remember things that we do not. We come to feel nostalgic for things that did not happen, for times that were not as we suppose.

The body of work described in this document does not have a beginning date, and it does not have an end date bracketing an artificial “product” that fits neatly within a construct that would, for me, be false. This is the moving river described by the Greek philosopher, Heraclitus; this is the stream that can never be entered twice. I trained my theoretical viewfinder on the experience of returning to America after living in Australia again for a few years, of picking up again in California after leaving abruptly; a sudden departure and relocation that echoed a lifetime of sudden departures and relocations. However, this journey has continued, and now I am writing, and painting, after a year of re-establishing myself back in the United States. The river is opening out onto new vistas, carving out new channels, and while it is the same, the scenery is beginning to change. Events in my own life, and events in the wider world, are impressing themselves every day into the fabric of what I do, and paintings I could not have foreseen twelve months ago are becoming part of the visual poem. One such painting ties in thematically with the ideas of family continuity and attachment, and

links themes and concerns that pre-date this body of work by decades, to ideas that will continue to be explored long after May 2015. This bridging work is of my eldest granddaughter, yet it is *about* many things beyond her.

Why did I paint my eldest granddaughter, bathed in light, with a pensive expression, on her ninth birthday? It was a personal indulgence, a retreat to a mental state of pleasure, but it was also a response to the outside world in a direct way and one that goes to the heart of my motivation to paint. The day before, a pilot had been caged and burned alive on the other side of the world. The abject horror of that thought made it impossible for me to focus and concentrate on any task in my studio, although I was working hard to avoid thinking about it. A phrase from Edward Burne-Jones kept running through my mind: “The more materialistic the world becomes, the more angels I will paint”. My version is, “the more vicious the world becomes, the more angels I will paint”. The little girl represents all the clichéd ideas that little girls in paintings have always represented: purity, goodness, and hope for a gentler world. By responding to this impulse and painting the antithesis of what was on my mind, I created a soothing retreat for myself, but I also marked a day in history. I will always look at that painting and remember what prompted its creation. War has played a significant role in my family history, and although this body of work skirts that issues to focus on others, this painting points the way to a return to a thematic path that is broad and well-worn in my life story. Nothing that comes from a genuine impulse is irrelevant, or a deviation in theme; if it comes from my experience in life it will be dyed with the same colors, knit with the same pattern, and when put in the company of other works it will take its place and add something to the whole, maybe a dash of contrast, maybe a softer repetition of a similar refrain, but definitely a component of the whole.

RESEARCH

From the year of my birth in 1960 until the early years of the twenty-first century I have lived like one moving along on a growing, roaring avalanche of visual images. I remember the reverence I felt, at about three years of age, when my father took me to the public library for the first time. I went home with a book of black and white photographs of traditional Japanese dress, landscape, and architecture. One book. I studied those images with untiring fascination, and I remember them more than half a century later. Contrast that experience with today's daily dose of Pinterest images, fingers flying over the screen, scrolling through an endless confetti of colored images. Like a visual glutton I then immerse myself in Artstor, where I can search my favorite paintings from museums around the world and zoom in, until I can see the cracks in a five hundred year old surface, and with lightning speed, zoom into my next search, occasionally being told, "your search returned more than two thousand results: would you like to narrow it"? For this reason I have considered the current role of painting very carefully, as it relates to my own production.

I came of age artistically at a time when all the art teachers I encountered had been developing their talents as abstract painters; they had either never been classically trained in traditional disciplines like life drawing, or perspective, or had consciously chosen to jettison such outdated intellectual baggage. They certainly were not going to cripple the creativity of the next generation with such detrimental nonsense. I drew from life at home, studied bird and botanical paintings, pored over the illustrations of my beloved historical novels, and moved splodges of color around big canvases at school, supported by volumes of writing about time and space, in an attempt to prove that I was clever. Australian museums are not richly endowed like those of the United States, which meant that there was no opportunity to

see a broad range of historical painting. When the museums did show international exhibitions they were thrilled to bring Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism to the Australian audience, so I saw De Kooning and Rothko, but not Raphael or Botticelli outside the pages of books. Growing up in this representational desert gives a sharp edge to my views about the period discussed in Charles Jencks book, “Postmodernism, The New Classicism in Art and Architecture.” Based on Jencks’ survey of the 1980s and the revival of representational painting, I saw a clear picture of what I thought failed in the world of representational painting. I took as warning signs some of the trends Jencks described. I was determined not to fall into some of the stylistic patterns as I saw them.

I can see little value in the type of painting I consider to be journalistic or didactic. This has been a long-held, but unexamined, preference, until I read Charles Jencks’ chapters dealing with the new (then) representational painting. This gave me the perspective I needed to be able to identify what I found jarring about such painting. Jencks’ chapter “Allegorical Classicism” provided a varied selection of examples of painting from the 1970s until through the 1980s. Like a language grown awkward from lack of use, the re-emergence of representational figurative painting seemed to suffer from its decades of dormancy. The struggle to achieve representational skills was visible in the paintings: the accomplishment of historically minimal levels of figurative finesse seemed to overshadow any other concerns. I know from personal experience that mustering painting skills in an environment where such skills are not taught, but instead are actively discouraged, represents a formidable task. Jencks’ “Allegorical Classicism” chapter features stilted, oddly crafted contemporary scenes presented with lovingly painted semi-photographic detail. I understand the relish with which those artists rediscovered representational detail, yet I fail to see how the results can compete

with the original photograph from which they were constructed. I also reject false allegory: the popular trend in the 80s of creating contemporary scenes that seemed to be laden with mysterious symbolism, or to be allegorical, except that the allegory is left dangling, untethered to any corresponding narrative beyond the superficial one being described.

Examples of this false allegory are presented by Jencks in the painting by Komar and



Fig. 1. David Ligare, 1983, *Hermes and the Cattle of Apollo*, oil on canvas, 51" x 56", detail, Courtesy Koplín Gallery, LA.

Melamid *The Origins of Socialist Realism* (Jencks 118), and again in the paintings by David Ligare, namely *Hermes and the Cattle of Apollo*.

False allegory is my characterization of the phenomena, although Jencks betrays some skepticism in his response to some of the featured paintings. The Californian artist, David Ligare, painted a contemporary landscape of Northern California, where a naked young man, “sits on a stone, cocking his head impishly toward the viewer, proud of having stolen away the herds of Apollo”

(Jencks 118). Unless cattle theft by errant Greek gods is a contemporary issue in Salinas, California, it is hard to see how this allegory is anything other than an attempt to give depth or meaning to a painting with a purely decorative purpose. Jencks questions Ligare’s “polemic, if it can be called that” (Jencks 118), and asks the unavoidable question, “What can this allegory possibly mean applied to Salinas in 1983” (Jencks 118)?

My response to such paintings as the ones presented by Jencks, as representative of a category he defines as Allegorical Classicism, clarified my own sense of what painting does best, by highlighting examples that I see as failures. Given the frosty climate for representational figurative painting when Jencks wrote this survey I applaud these first forays back into the realm of representation in figurative work, as it seems to me that Jencks does too. However, the return is a shaky one, on legs grown stiff from lack of use.

This relates to my own work in the strongest possible way. This was a landmark moment for me as an artist, because I saw the justification for my own path, and came to see what I *was*, by contrast with what I was *not*. It seems to me that representation in painting is such an anachronistic way to present images that it has to be chosen for its *singular* qualities. Painting has to function as only painting can—it cannot be a pale, unmoving version of the nightly news, or the feed on Facebook. It seems to me that painting belongs now to the same realm as poetry; its natural sphere is the realm of emotion. The following passage from Wayne Thiebaud parallels my own belief:

I'm very interested in poetry and think there is maybe a closer relationship to poetry and painting than people think. Someone described, if you want to understand literature, poetry is the way to do it. They call it an x-ray of literature in the sense that you see in and around and through in ways that are not readily available and visual. And painting is like that, I think. I think painting also has to define itself in terms of its ability to see things that people have not seen. (Thiebaud 12)

James Griffith is a contemporary Californian artist whose work blends representational elements with areas of abstraction created by the use of unusual media, such as tar: his work

is a balance of explicit and controlled description of the natural world, and loose, flowing passages that resemble oil slicks on water, or smoke stains on a cave wall. During a discussion of his work Griffith made a comment that strikes me as an elegant summation of my own position. I heard him say: “What the mind cannot understand, the heart will intuit” (Griffith). In the simplicity of this statement I find a perfect description of why painting is akin to poetry. Poetry is a literary form where ambiguity and open-ended meaning have always been accepted. It is hard to imagine anyone seriously critiquing a poem with the comment “it doesn’t make sense”. As we enter into the lilting rhythms and idiosyncratic word choices of the poet, we are not looking for the answer to a question, rather we are enjoying the framing of a riddle. Similarly, I do not believe that a painting should have to appeal directly to the mind, but is better suited to the intuition of the heart. I heard the contemporary painter Vincent Desiderio say, “painting is not communication: if I want to communicate something to you, I will write you a letter, and you won’t have any trouble understanding what I am saying” (Desiderio). Painting is inherently ambiguous, and so it seems logical to allow it to remain so, and understand that its richness and depth comes from this very quality. This inherent ambiguity deepens over time, even when a painting is specifically designed to convey narrative meaning, as in the paintings I admire from the fifteenth century. When I look with twenty-first century eyes on the scenes of religious parable by Rogier van der Weyden I certainly miss many layers of meaning that would have been evident to the religiously literate viewer of his own time. With research I can learn the secret, arcane language of this long distant period, yet whether I interpret the painting as the artist intended, or not, there is a world of interest in the work for me that has nothing to do

with the intended meaning of the artist. Mystery seeps into painting over time, even if mystery was never intended.

That mystery and ambiguity are integral to the power of art is supported by a statement by Cynthia Griffin Wolf, a biographer of the poet Emily Dickinson, when she describes the enduring appeal of the poet: “Here are two paradoxes, then: a poet whose work defies understanding, but who readers nonetheless agree was an artist of the highest order; and an undeniably cryptic author who nonetheless addresses some very deep need in a wide variety of readers” (Griffin Wolf, 8). When the word “cryptic” is used to describe Emily Dickinson’s entire body of work—not merely an odd example here and there—the systemic nature of mystery is suggested. Here is an example of poetry written by a retiring, nineteenth century, upper-middle class spinster, who lived in a New England world of narrow dimensions, and yet her art still finds an audience. It is not quaint and dated. It is not oddly interesting like a flounced crinoline, or a beribboned bonnet. It remains relevant. I would suggest that it is the very elusiveness of her meaning, and the individuality of her poetic voice, that makes it possible for people from different centuries, and different places, to find meaning in her work. In the blurry edges of her vision there is a place for the modern eye to catch a glimpse of personal truths. Specificity becomes dated, restrictive, and ill-fitting. Openness encompasses many realities.

I mentioned the word didactic in a salvo against painting that is representational in a journalistic, document-the-facts fashion. The impulse to be didactic, or to drive home a specific message for a specific desired outcome, is bound to become dated and misunderstood. Grasping this has been central to the development of my current body of



Fig. 2. William Hunt Holman, *The Awakening Conscience*, 1853, Oil on canvas, 30" x 22", Tate Gallery, London.

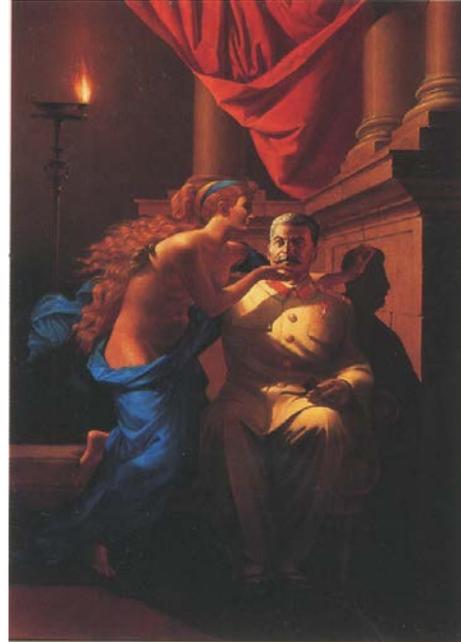


Fig. 3. Komar & Melamid, *The Origin of Socialist Realism*, 1982-3, Oil on canvas, 72" x 48", Ronald Feldman, NYC

work. There has been so much that is specific, current, political, or timely, in the revival of representation: it is as if the very inclusion of recognizable space and well-observed figures demands that a painting must focus on logically representing a moment in time with photographic fidelity. *Mis*understanding where something specific was intended is not the same as leaving meaning open-ended. If you throw a ball to a catcher, you expect it to be caught. It is disappointing when it falls short. The whole point of the exercise is the satisfying smack into the catcher's hand. I can happily construct my own series of associations from a work that has no single point: if there is a single point, and I miss it, then I am simply puzzled and frustrated. There is a subtle, but definite, difference between these two approaches to painting: we know when we just are not "getting it". Conversely, when Andy Warhol used a documentary style of image presentation in his series of repeated images, such as the car crash series, or the mug shot series "Wanted Men", the message and the means age

together, and the datedness of the artifact become part of the story. When painting is representational, and seeks to address issues outside itself as a subject, the painting style and the subject matter age differently, and the tension inherent in this tears one away from the other, like a strong fabric stitched to a filmy fabric will cause the seam to rip. When I look at painting that had a political message from the late nineteenth century, or the late twentieth century, I see two things: an outmoded vehicle, and an outmoded message. The more specific the intended message, the worse the discord, and the more archaic the message seems. Look at the examples of Komar and Melamid, and painting from the Victorian era with an instructional moral message. The more timely this content was when it was conceived, the less relevant it is now.

Contrast this with the painting of the Symbolists, as an example, of how non-specific or poetic intentions are not time-sensitive and become more universal. Some artists float outside of time and history and can re-emerge in contexts far from their own, and still have relevance, and it seems that this quality is tied to the openness of meaning.

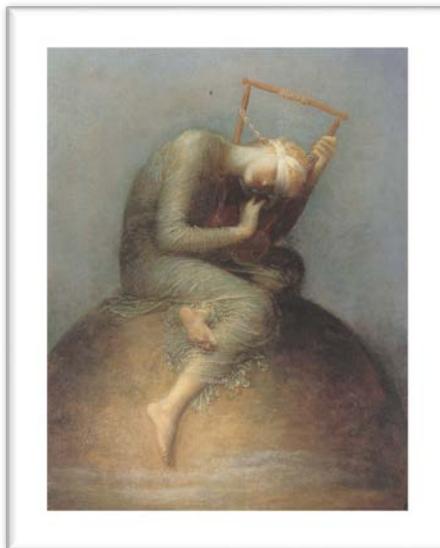


Fig. 4, George Frederick Watts, *Hope*. 1886, Oil on canvas, 141 x 110 cm, Tate Gallery, London.

I believe that painting has a potentially vital function that is thwarted when an artist consciously works to inject a current message. It is an ironic obstruction of the way art can come to represent the essential qualities of a time, person, or place, by the very act of trying to represent those things too explicitly. Writing about the enigmatic Emily Dickinson, her biographer, Cynthia Griffin Wolff made the observation, “Occasionally, the intensely felt, essential concerns of one individual’s life coincide with the overriding concerns of an epoch and a nation” (Griffin Wolff 9).

Taking van der Weyden as an example again, if he had painted sharp political indictments of petty potentates, how interested would we be five hundred years later? Instead, he painted within the stream of his cultural milieu, diving deeply into the well of his religious subject matter. His single-minded absorption in every detail of the pictures he created gives us a window into his world, and we see it, as perhaps he could not see it). When an artist works intuitively he can become the prism through which his time and experience is refracted into its component parts: paradoxically, when he tries to stand outside his own experience and present a lesson on it for us, we are all too likely to miss the point. Emerson’s words go to the heart of the artist’s role, as I see it, which is to be the “lens through which we read our own minds” (Emerson).

I have learned that a dominant, recurring theme for me is the desire to unite opposites. Perhaps this is not unique to me, but rather a constant in any artistic endeavor where light plays against dark, mass against line, symmetry against asymmetry, loud against quiet. However, when I make a simple list of my artistic influences it naturally divides into two oppositional “teams”, as different from one another as a red team versus a blue team. What comes from swinging between two opposites? It is the way to chart a course when the desired

destination is known, but the way is not marked. I think of my journey in Platonic terms. Just as Plato envisioned his “ideas” or “forms” as really existing in some other plane, and not as mere abstractions, so I believe that my artistic self already exists, fully formed, and it is my quest to find it. Since my artistic path does not come with a map, I have to grope through the dark to find it. This is a sensory journey, and it involves looking at other art and making a determination by weighing two opposites: a little more like this, and a little less like that. I heard the contemporary painter Vincent Desiderio liken the completion of a painting to the tacking course of a sail-boat down a river (Desiderio). His image brought to my mind the idea that the destination does, indeed, lie at the mouth of the river, and a painter is wending his or her way down to it, but not by ploughing straight down the middle of the waterway. Rather it is like a sailing course, a zig-zag path, where one wends to one bank, and then veers back towards the other. The course down the middle, while efficient, would not lead to the subtle discoveries of the tacking course. First a painting must be too saturated, and then too dull; it must be too crowded, and then too empty; it must be too explicit, and then too ambiguous. By touching first one side of the river, and then the opposite bank, the artist will progress in the direction of completion. For me the unfolded panorama of art history is this river, and I take a winding course, bouncing back and forth between opposites; never hugging the edge, or blazing down the middle leaving a confident wake. I love the glossy, still perfection of fifteenth century European painting, and the turbulent, idiosyncratic work of Rembrandt, Turner, and Van Gogh. I admire the vague, the washy, the incomplete, and the seemingly accidental in various painters, just as much as I admire the spellbinding precision and micro-intensity of others. Somewhere between these opposites I will find the exact balance that will exist in no other work I have seen: I will find my own.

Falling into one group are the painters who create within the frame of their image a pellucid world of glossy, enameled precision, where there is no hierarchy given to the visual information, and the entire picture is a meticulously prepared feast for the viewer from one tiny detail of a floor tile in a corner to the exquisite outlining of the iris of an eye. This is the world of Bronzino, Rogier van der Weyden, Pontormo, and Filippo Lippi. One way to express succinctly what I admire in the work of these painters is to describe its antithesis: the brushy, evidently rapid, careless virtuosity of Sargent, where certain elements are subordinate to others, and my eye is directed through the painting as clearly as if he had drawn a diagram over it, with signs that said “look here first, now here, now here.” When I consider a painting by Rogier van der Weyden, by contrast, I feel that the artist has withdrawn to a discreet corner, and it is up to me to decide if the major narrative of the work hangs on the tiny figure emerging on the crest of a distant, pale blue hill, or whether I should focus on the elaborately draped and embroidered robes of the figure in the foreground. Each is detailed as if the artist held his breath, and a single haired brush, and as I enter that quiet, still world I see beyond the image into my imaginary vision of the candle-lit silence of the artist’s fifteenth century life. These paintings are portals into two alternative experiences; one of the scene depicted, and one of the world inhabited by the artist, which is a world I sense through the artifact of the painting.

While I specified an artist at the opposite end of this spectrum who does not interest me, namely Sargent, there are a group of others as dissimilar from my fifteenth century idols as it is possible to be—yet linked by certain mysterious commonalities. Artists like Rembrandt and Van Gogh do not present me with a smooth, unrippled paint surface like a deep, undisturbed pond. They churn up the surface of their images, creating ruts and tracks

in thick paint, where detail is lost, but an overriding sense of their emotional commitment to the work is strongly communicated. I admire their passion—a passion I could never find in the carefully constructed world of a Bronzino image—for that passion is emblematic of a fierce individuality and an unswerving allegiance to their own voice. George Innes (to whom I will return later) said, “Our unhappinesses (as artists) arise from disobedience to the monitions within us.” (Inness 208). What are the mysterious commonalities between the artists who paint with evidence of physical and emotional vigor, and those who leave us with a sense of their disciplined restraint? I sense an indefinable sincerity in the works of the two dissimilar groups that is a stronger link for me than any superficial stylistic similarities. It is not possible to look over the breadth of either Rembrandt’s life’s work, or Van Gogh’s, and not be impressed by the sense that these artists were forever searching, exploring, and analyzing their experience of the world, both internally and externally. J.M.W. Turner is another artist whose life’s work and life’s story make him a natural companion for Rembrandt and Van Gogh. In the work of these artists there is no empty sense of production or virtuosity for the sake of it; there is evident toil, struggle, a sense of wrestling with the materials to create something transcendent, something that would approximate the real experience--the rapidly retreating day in the case of Turner and Van Gogh, or the vanishing experience of a personal encounter with a model (or the artist’s own image in the mirror) in the case of Rembrandt. There is a palpable sense of urgency that acts on the viewer like a drum beat in the works of the three artists mentioned. We know, instinctively, as we look through the thick history of the painter’s progress on the canvas, that theirs was a *journey*. The finished painting almost seems incidental to the actual experience of the artist—just as the footprints we leave on the sand are evidence of our movement, but say nothing about the

purpose of our wandering. There is a connection between the abandonment of control (which is masked by skill) and a laying bare of purpose. It is this strong sense of intentionality that I find compelling.

In opposition to this abandonment of control that I read as sincerity, is a different form of sincerity: one born of meditative control. This is how I would characterize the strange quality of stillness that pervades the painting of the fifteenth century, and it is this quality above all others that attracts me most. Perhaps a viewer who has never held a paintbrush might be less inclined to interpret painting in this way, but having a physical memory of what it feels like to paint an area of meticulous detail informs the way I respond to painting such as that in Rogier van der Weyden's *Miraflores Altarpiece*, ca. 1440. Every flowing tendril of Christ's hair is described with the finest of highlights; each crystalline tear that drops on Mary's cheek is painted with loving attention, and every delicate frond of greenery seen through the window is formed with perfection: the image is soaked in time—saturated with quiet patience. This approach creates an image of jewel-like beauty, but it brings with it a chill sense of repressed animation. Emotion is described, but I sense that the painter must have suspended his own emotions in the pursuit of this polished ideal. How different to the feeling of Turner's swirling snowstorm *Snow Storm—Steam Boat off a Harbour's Mouth making Signals in Shallow Water, and going by the Lead. The Author was in this Storm on the Night the Ariel left Harwich*, and his response to the critics who likened the painting to soapsuds and whitewash. "Soapsuds and whitewash! What would they have? I wonder what they think the sea's like? I wish they had been in it" (Smiles 158). In my own work both approaches are evident and competing, although I believe that time will see one yield in favor to the other. The detail of the blouse and the birds in "*Hope is the Thing with*

Feathers” (see Plate 1) reflects my desire to slow time, while the undefined areas of landscape in *Farm II* (see Plate 6) are in the tradition of allowing the paint to tell the story of rapidity and emotional tone.

This seeming backward focus—looking into the distant past for inspiration and validation—is my response to the visual environment of the twenty-first century. As such, it is not so much that I seek to enclose myself in a sealed room of the past, as it is an attempt to find a legitimate, relevant purpose for representational painting in our time. We live in a whirlwind of moving images, and I think this fundamentally changes our internal, mental landscape. I have noticed a distinct trend in the painting of my contemporaries to create images that are blurred, or repeated in fragments, suggesting movement, or the passage of time. As a snapshot of contemporary work the 2014/2016 Laguna College of Art and Design handbook contains several examples of this type of work: by Benjamin Soward, Tim Smith, and Scott Hess. A primary example can be seen in the work of Alex Kanevsky. My own solutions are emphatically different. Rather than reference movement, or passage of time, by the use of multiple images or blurring and repetition of partial forms, I want to reference time by freezing it into an image of preternatural stillness. For this I take as my example the repose and tranquility of the long lost fifteenth century. In conversation with a group of representational painters at the Laguna College of Art and Design, Marshall Astor, a Los Angeles art critic, made a comment about the way we, as painters, are “in competition” with other media, with video, installations, movies, short films, etc (Astor). Nothing can make painting more anachronistic, stilted, ineffective, and potentially irrelevant, than such a Quixotic endeavor—which is how I interpreted Marshall Astor’s remark. Even the most pedestrian video game can reach into the very circuitry of a player’s mind and fool them into

feeling like they are functioning in a different, virtual reality. Movies can make us time travelers, space travelers, and shape shifters, as they take us into the lives and experiences of people impossibly removed from our own real life experience. The tour de force of cinema employs abstract cinematographic design, representational imagery with great fidelity to life, powerfully evocative music, and clear narrative reinforced with spoken language. What of painting? It is a shallow square of canvas, hanging in a silent, empty, white-walled room: how can this possibly “compete,” if the stated goal is to convey movement and the passage of time through blurring and fragmentation? In the face of this battle, I choose to leave the field, not in resignation and defeat, but rather in acknowledgement that painting cannot compete, to use Astor’s term, but should, I believe, find its own arena. Painting has a few devices to employ whereby movement and time can be suggested, but repeated, fragmented images are less effective than the most primitive animation tricks of early cinema. Stillness is the province of painting, and in that province it can reign unchallenged. Embedded in this stated view is the irony that I am concerned with the presentation of time and memory.

Again, this leads me back to the paintings from the fifteenth century that inspire me. Rather than pinning this point to a nebulous and ill-defined body of work, I will focus on one particular painting by Rogier van der Weyden.

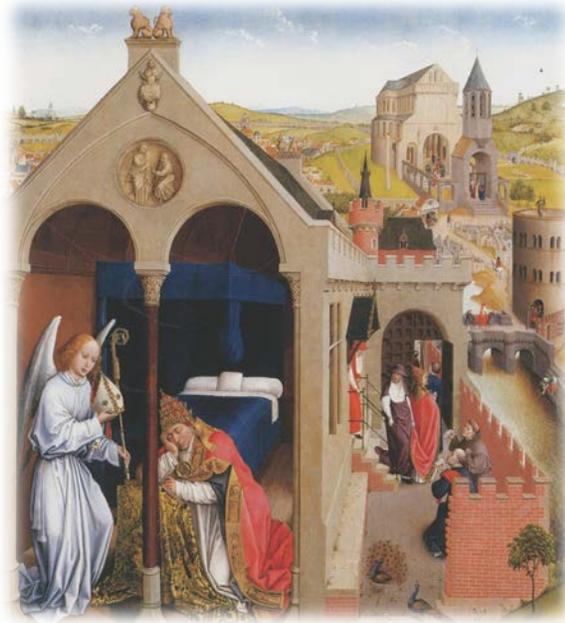


Figure 5. *Dream of Pope Sergius*, ca 1437-1440, Oil on oak panel 89 x 90cm, The Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

Although I rely heavily on books and online imagery, I have a strong conviction that serious study of painting should be based on the act of standing before the real work of art.

This limits me, most of the time, to the works that have found their way to California

It is representative of other works by this artist, his workshop, and his general milieu. I cast my mind back to my understanding of the fifteenth century when I consider this painting. I imagine dim light through small windows, or candlelight, and I know that the artist created this in a world where the only moving images were the fleeting ones of real life playing out before his eyes. That is the only visual “competition” this artist had to consider, and he uses it as an ally, not as a foe. Time and narrative are at play in this painting, but not by the film-influenced device of blurring and repeated still “frames.” Rather, van der Weyden creates a stage set where the viewer looks on and sees several different parts of the

story taking place simultaneously across the picture plane. It is the painting of a dream. In that dream the future Pope sees an event take place, prophetically, and he sees how this distant event will shape his destiny. The painter shows us the sleeping, dreaming future Pope, the distant event which will elevate him to the status of Pope, and the moment where, in his wakeful state, he is presented with the news of this event. These depictions are linked compositionally, and linked by the fact that they occupy the same picture plane. Other than that, there is no attempt to run one event into the other to suggest the direction, or action, of the actual train of events. Each moment is distinct and clear, and they hover in relation to each other as if in invisible, separate bubbles. This is the way I have approached time, memory, and space in my own work. For example, in my painting *Hope is the Thing with Feathers* (see Plate 1) the birds belong to a different part of story, a different time period, to the woman on the wall, but this is no more explicitly defined than the separate time events in van der Weyden's dream painting. Can I make the birds fly? No. This is a painting, and when the viewer looks into this still, created visual illusion I do not want to make a cartoonish attempt to convey movement. I realize that my adoption of such an archaic convention may confuse or mislead the contemporary viewer, yet it is the very suspension of logic that I find deeply satisfying and poetically justified.

The lack of logic in the spatial convention adopted by van der Weyden appeals to me in a significant way. It does allow for a mysteriousness and looseness of interpretation that I find necessary. Since I am coming from the strongly held belief that painting should not encroach on territory it cannot hold (movement, and time as movement) I want to avoid this particular piece of turf completely. Time can be referenced, not with blurry continuity,

but rather with succinct, episodic clarity. This point is best illustrated by my painting *Farm II*.



Figure 6. Leanne Reinhold, *Farm II*, 2015, Oil on canvas, 30" x 40".

There are three islands of figurative interest under a dual dusk/day sky: four little boys painted in sepia tones to suggest that their pictorial origin is an old photo reference, a contemporary portrait painted from observation, and a team of work horses emerging from the barn, with the farmer riding the wagon they pull. These three areas of figurative subject matter are references to different time periods, and there is no perspectival logic to the way they occupy the picture plane. I want these visual elements to operate, like the elements of van der Weyden's painting *Dream of Pope Sergius* operate, as intriguing poetic snippets for the viewer to string together in the pattern that is suggested to them. Perhaps the viewer will see links and relationships where I did not: I know the farmer on the wagon is the grandfather of the man depicted in the portrait, and that he is also the smallest of the boys in the sepia

grouping. However, my contemporary portrait is of a man who is also a grandfather to a group of small boys, and so the boys in the 1950s represent his grandchildren, and not his childhood. What is important is the way the memories and the fiction of the present tense is laid out like a string of words from a poem—suggestive, evocative, and shifting in tone and meaning as they are considered singly or in combination. Consider a random phrase from Arthur Rimbaud’s nineteenth century poem, “Blackcurrant river rolls unknown in strange valleys”. This phrase brings visual images to my mind, and creates a sense of mood and a thousand associations that are not dependent on the rest of the poem to “make sense” or have meaning. It is a morsel to be savored, and I could never explain what motivated me to focus on this phrase and write it out and post it on my studio wall, where I see it often. It is a mystery to me, and similarly, I want the discrete elements of my painting to operate in unison, and independently: a creation of the viewer’s own.

I began this discussion by outlining a framework where opposites function as an essential balance. There is work that contains earnest, loving detail such as that of Rogier van der Weyden; to paraphrase George Inness, who said, “No artist need fear that his work will not find sympathy if only he works earnestly and lovingly” (Cikovsky, Quick 209) On the verso side of the coin is work that harnesses a chaotic, accidental force—that finds the poetic vein I am seeking in a suspension of control, and an abandonment of description. In this corollary I see a process of maturation. For myself I see the love of control, and the exaltation of detail as a handrail across a dangerous chasm. With time, experience, and growth of confidence, I imagine that handrail will be gripped less and less tightly, and eventually the chasm will be crossed with a determined forward focus, and the handrail will be forgotten. I see this arc clearly in the work of J.M.W. Turner. Early works hold tightly to

descriptive detail: later works swirl away from it in a cloud of atmosphere and light, untethered and unafraid. By referencing Turner I am indicating a signpost that marks a way I have yet to travel. There is nothing overtly Turneresque in my work to date; I can point to no example where I have employed what I am beginning to learn from him. However, his is an influence with deep roots for me, and because of that depth, the impact is not yet apparent on the surface. If I see Turner as having arrived at the Promised Land, where poetry, feeling, and painting sing in unison, I also see the vital role of travelling a long, circuitous route to get there. I cannot start swirling paint around with bravado and pretend to have arrived at the same place as Turner. My understanding of Turner is that he rides the maelstrom of his painted surfaces with consummate finesse. He mastered and internalized perspective, so he was able to dash off the ancient Roman forum with flawless structure, lost in a haze of dust and light—bathed in time itself made visible. He studied from nature the effects of light, water, and movement, until he could orchestrate these elements to fit his own composition. Any contemporary art tourist town presents examples of paint slathered on with a palette knife—courting the accidental effects that mimic nature. They are to Turner what a MacDonald’s hamburger is to a culinary masterpiece: comprised of roughly the same materials, but vastly different in conception *and* reception.

Turner is such a complex figure that to mention him at all opens up an enormous field of study, and one that quickly spreads beyond the limits of this project. Narrowly, my experience of the exhibition of paintings from the last fifteen years of Turner’s life, presented by the The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, California under the title “J.M.W. Turner: Painting Set Free” both solidified and expanded my grasp of what his work means for me. My experience has taught me to favor the direct experience of art over the indirect, filtered

experience of art through books, or any other intermediary. It is what happens between me and a painting, or better yet, a collected body of paintings—that furthers my understanding of painting in general, and my own work in particular. Of course, there is the curatorial filter, but in the case of the Getty Museum’s exhibition(s) this represents such deep and thorough level of scholarship and sensitivity that it is a more of a magnifier than a filter, and one I welcome.

This exhibition revealed the root of my affinity for Turner’s work. It is not in the superficial aspects of his painting. It is not found in how his painting *looks*, instead it seems to reside in his intention, as it is expressed in the following passage of wall text under the title “History, Myth, and Meaning”.

Throughout his final years, Turner maintained a firm commitment to narrative and meaning in his compositions. Even in paintings that at first sight appear to merely illustrate effects of light and color, his intention was to provide opportunities for contemplation—the past offered lessons for the present; the present could be best understood from a historical perspective. The subjects ranged widely, from classical history and mythology to the Bible and more recent history, poetry, and literature. Their deeper significance, however, often eluded his critics. (Getty Museum, Wall Text 1283)

The exhibition addresses the way Turner was taken out of context by critics and art historians after his own time, who sought to cast him as the “first modern artist” (Foreword, J.M.W. Turner: Painting Set Free), by emphasizing the increasing abstraction of his later works. However, the curators of this exhibition bring to light facts about Turner that contradict this posthumous narrative. Listed simply: his extremely abstract later works were

unfinished “lay ins”, and he was still courting the approval of his loyal collectors with a view to making sales—not turning his back on the marketplace and flouting the prevailing tastes of the Victorian age. However, it does seem evident in the paintings themselves that as age, mastery, and financial security carried Turner towards his final decade he did rely on his own internal directives; not in the creation of works where abstraction stands alone, but in works inspired by history, literature, or poetry, combining contemporary experience, and expressed with less emphasis on descriptive detail.

Whether I cite Turner, for translating references to the external world into statements that reflect the passion inspired in him by nature’s grandeur, or the measured perfection and balance of Rogier van der Weyden’s supremely crafted objects of beauty, the constant thread I am seeking is the poetry that lies at the core of the effort. I mentioned my belief that all painting is about loss, and I find that truth reflected back to me in both styles of painting. Both give me a window into the artist’s thoughts (an unverifiable impression to be sure) and in both I detect the desire to celebrate transitory sensory experience. A desire to *pin it onto a board*, like a naturalist’s insect specimen; a desire to hold that sunset, that storm, or that moment of spiritual dawning in an imagined Annunciation. This is the impulse that drives me, and I see in such disparate works the same desire to hold onto what cannot be held. Another painter I admire immensely is George Inness, who said “No artist need fear that his work will not find sympathy if only he works earnestly and lovingly” (Cikovsky, Quick 458). This thoroughly 19th century sentiment may seem out of place here, but this statement supports my belief that the essence of painting is poetry, and as such, it should leave passing issues to other mediums, and concentrate on the language of our deepest feelings and most inarticulate thoughts.

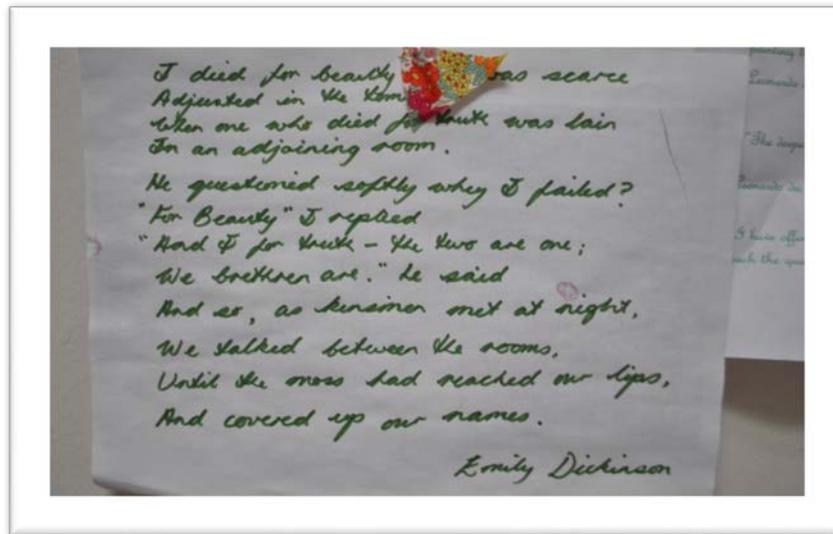
METHODOLOGY

I would like to think that if I sat down to write about my working methods every six months for the rest of my life, I would be writing something different every time. The idea of formulating a method that remains reliable, fixed, and inflexible is antithetical to the ideal of responsiveness, evolution, and ultimately, growth that I am working towards. Just as my heroes from art history represent two poles in the sphere of painting, so too, my methods are on the arc formed between two opposite compass points. On the one hand, there is a love for the meticulous, the polished, the highly crafted, and on the other, a love of the spontaneous, the unfinished, and the loosely defined. I consider “ideas” and “inspiration” two separate sources for my work: one comes from intellectual inquiry and can be well described by written and spoken language, and the other is emotional and can only be intuitively sensed, and when described at all falls into the realm of poetry with words and phrases that are separate and meaningful as independent elements. There is a juncture between these two, but it is mysterious, and can only be seen after the work is complete, and perhaps only after much time has elapsed.

Visual experience is secondary to the stream of thought that is emotionally fed. I am keenly aware of my environment, and most keenly aware of my visual experience outdoors. It does not often happen that I will find a pattern of light, or color, or a vignette of interior objects exciting. I am always excited by patterns of light through trees, across water, or in clouds, and these are the experiences I seek constantly to fuel my work. The drama and emotional impact of the landscape is tied directly to my emotional life and my response to the people and places of my own history. Words play a part in the genesis of visual ideas: scraps of poetry and the powerful cinematographic memories created by my favorite authors

are filtered through my mind and combine with experiences of time and place. The essence of this process is mystery. This is why painting is a vehicle for ideas/inspiration that has no equivalent, as it allows for the melding of all kinds of thought and experience and is the field upon which separate players can dance together in unpredictable ways.

Figure 7. Poetry written on the wall, or in the sketchbook.



I characterized visual experience as secondary to emotional experience, yet visual experience can be thought of as the steady stream of water channeled in to irrigate the growing crop of emotionally based concepts; without the fresh supply of visual stimulation, they would never flourish. Since a large part of my experience has involved changing my physical location, I know that when I come to a place that is unfamiliar I am hypersensitive to the sensory experience of that place. When I return to Australia after a long flight through darkness I am struck by the intensity of the light, the vividness of the color, the sparkling quality of light playing on foliage, the mellowness or crispness of the air, and the different smells—coffee in the airport smells different, the exhaust fumes from the taxis queued outside smell sharply different. The people are a different mix of ethnicities, and have

different ways of behaving in groups. These everyday things have fresh impact when they are new. When I leave California to drive across the United States to Illinois, I am aware of the change from aridity and openness to the rich green of growing things bathed in constant moisture. In this state of change, my awareness is heightened, and the inanimate landscape represents the dominant influences of a particular place. Illinois is like a warm blanket; muffling sounds, softening, enclosing, and protecting. Western Australia is a dazzling panorama; a vast empty stage swept by forceful winds, suggestive of an exhilarating and frightening freedom.

When this state of newness to the environment is strongest, I like to capture images, photographically, in sketches, and less often in small plein air oil studies. My preference is to take page-sized torn pieces of colored Canson paper in my sketchbook, and use pastel pencils



Figure 8. Sketchbook pages showing pastel sketches on colored paper

to make quick studies of places or things that interest me. I like the immediacy and ease of the pastel for making color memories without a lot of preparation or cumbersome equipment.

Sometimes I will write descriptions, and I find these word pictures very helpful in recreating the feeling of my initial response. Figurative elements in paintings come from “found” photographs, (like the old, black and white snapshots I have used), or are posed reference photos that I take with a painting in mind. Sometimes a particular phrase or image from a book will be running through my mind, like a refrain in music: constant, important, yet subordinate.



Figure 9. Example of sketchbook pages.

I like the picture-making process to be evolutionary, and I have abandoned the rigid planning I used to employ. It is terrifying to launch into something without having all the details figured out, but it is also exciting and liberating. For subjects that I envision with more precision and detail, I begin with a board, primed with gesso and sanded. On the board

I do a detailed drawing of the figurative elements in either silverpoint, or terracotta colored Prisma colored pencil.



Figure 10. Example of under-drawing on prepared board

The detailed drawing is my way of learning about the subject, of knowing exactly where everything is placed. Both silverpoint and terracotta pencil melt into the subsequent layers of paint without creating muddy greys in the lightest areas. The warmth of the terracotta works well as a base for skin tones, and the silverpoint yields initial precision without toning the paint significantly. I like the washy effect of the first layer of oil paint on the smooth surface, and I like to preserve the white gesso for the lightest areas. My natural tendency is to treat landscape elements more loosely and expressively, and I create these with a less analytical approach. When I am describing different time periods, I like to transition from one area to another with transparent layers of paint, with less delineation of detail. This is a way of delaying my commitment to the ordering of visual priority: some areas will

remain less distinct, while other areas will be brought into sharper focus as the painting evolves.

Some subjects seem better suited to a canvas surface, which retains a more pronounced surface texture and allows for more vigorous application of paint. “Vigorous” in that subsequent glazes and scumbles catch on the texture of the gesso and the canvas and create unpredictable effects. Regardless of the surface, important color and value choices are made in process, and the state of mind I work towards is one where I will trust my instincts and make unpremeditated decisions.

There is a passage in Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* that is emblazoned on my memory, and that I think of often when I am trying to describe the state of mind that facilitates the most satisfying work. The character based on Tolstoy himself is a nobleman who owns an expansive estate, and in the days of serfdom, he owns many peasants. He is troubled by this, and chooses to work alongside his peasants during the harvest. They work long hours in the hot sun, swinging a heavy scythe, and in their path the crop falls in neat, cleanly cut rows. They sing, and seem to move with an effortless rhythm. The nobleman is physically robust, and puts tremendous energy and effort into the cutting motion: his progress is pitifully slow, he is exhausted, and his disproportionate effort yields a small, badly cut row in his wake. He is trembling with fatigue, while the peasants spend their break in the shade and fall into an instant nap. The comparison between his own massive effort and poor performance, and their sparing effort and perfect performance teaches him that overthinking, to use a modern expression, retards mastery. Mastery is fluid, and comes from hard-won practice, but in the moment of execution it is an act of remembered momentum, of unthinking ease and certainty. In this parallel is the goal I am seeking in painting.

CONCLUSION

Growth is an untidy process. Anyone familiar with gardening will know that the abundant growth we seek when we wait for seeds to germinate can quickly lead to a wild tangle of weeds, and unexpected, unidentified sprouts competing for space, and the orderly pattern of planting rapidly can be obliterated by vigorous, unbridled proliferation. Similarly, my approach to the experience of the MFA program has been one of planting a neat row of ideas, and framing an orderly set of goals, only to find that by nourishing the experience fully I have created an abundance of new material for myself. Now it is time to stand back, survey the growth, remember the pattern that was planned, tame the extraneous blooms, and still preserve the serendipitous discoveries.

I wanted to make sure that my efforts would not be thoughtlessly at odds with the current theoretical climate. What I came to understand about Postmodernism gave me the confidence that any choice I made would be valid—any direction I took could be defended and upheld. My identification with the kinship between poetry and painting has necessarily taken me down a meandering path, as I have placed great value on following intuitive impulses, and worked to suspend analytical thought during the process of creating paintings. Of course, analytical thought plays a vital role and cannot be abandoned, so I have been learning how to balance these two opposite forces.

My garden will never be a pruned, swept, orderly arrangement made up of predictable combinations. I know it is in my nature to range widely, but I am mindful of the importance of discipline and forethought. At the conclusion of this endeavor,

which for me has been a long and interrupted one, I am facing a new beginning. I will sow the seeds, but I hope to be surprised by the results.

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APPENDIX



Plate 1. Leanne Reinhold, *Hope is the Thing with Feathers*, 2014, Oil on canvas, 40" x 30"



Plate 2. Leanne Reinhold, *The Farm*, 2014, Oil on canvas, 30" x 40"



Plate 3. *Self-Portrait with Western Australian View*, 2014, Oil on board, 24" x 18"

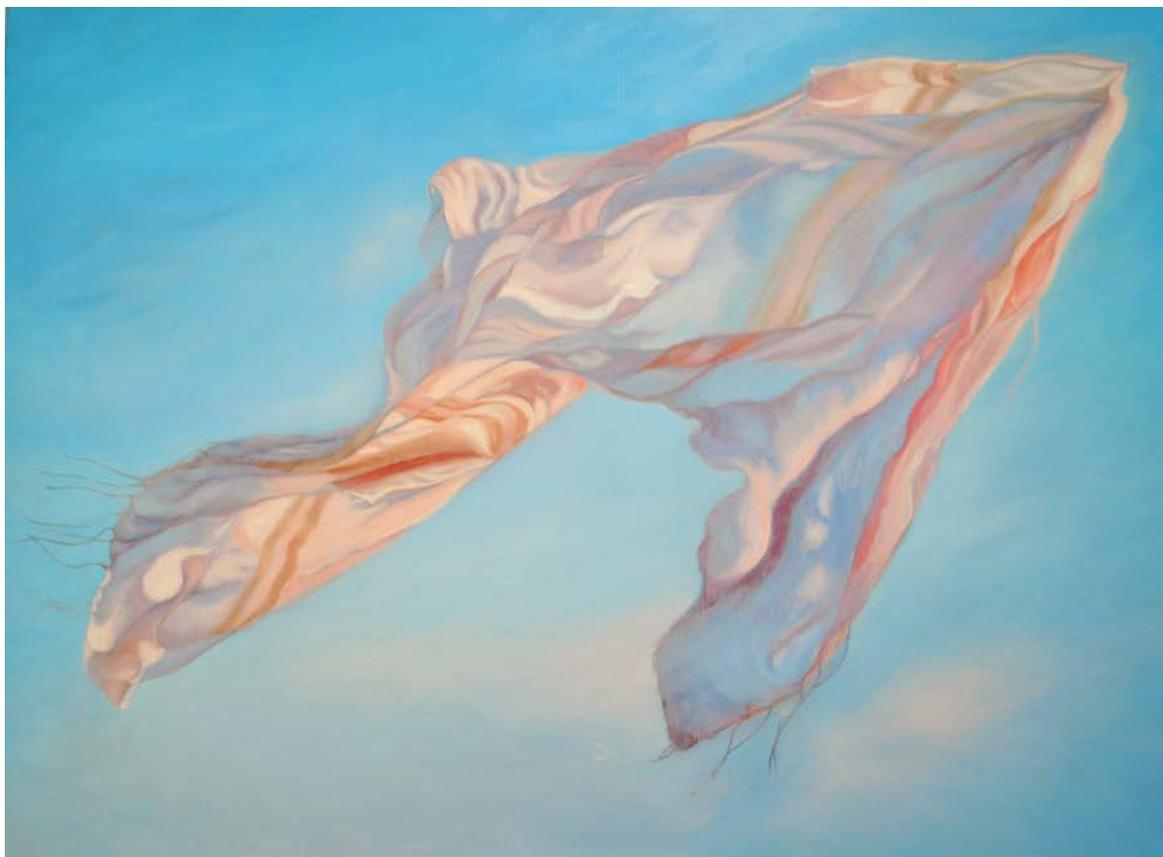


Plate 4. *Indian Ocean Breeze*, 2014, Oil on canvas, 30" x40"



Plate 5. *Chloe and the Farmhouse*, 2014, Oil on canvas, 30" x 40"



Plate 6. Leanne Reinhold, *Farm II*, 2015, Oil on canvas, 30" x 40"



Plate 7. Leanne Reinhold, *Nature-the Gentlest Mother is, Impatient of no Child*, 2015, Oil on board, 24" x 18"



Plate 8. Leanne Reinhold, *Redemption*, 2015, Oil on canvas, 40" x 30"



Plate 9. Leanne Reinhold, *Major Mitchells in Perth*, 2014, Oil on canvas, 40" x 20"



Plate 10. Leanne Reinhold, *Sunburnt Country...Pitiless Blue Skies*, 2015, Oil on canvas, 20" x 40"



Plate 11. Leanne Reinhold, *Storm over Kalbarri Coast*, 2014, Oil on Canvas, 18" x 24"



Plate 12. Leanne Reinhold, *Storm approaching Kalbarri*, 2014, Oil on canvas, 18" x 24