10

Josephine Halvorson

James Fuentes Press

Josephine Halvorson

10

Josephine Halvorson

James Fuentes Press

Editor
Laura Brown

Editorial Associate
Ava Ferguson

Design
Other Means

Publisher
James Fuentes Press

Printer
Gruppo Industriale
FG s.r.l.

Typefaces
Magister (Omnitype)
Totally Gothic (Emigre)

Artwork Photography
Julia Featheringill

James Fuentes would like to thank Josephine Halvorson for her creative collaboration and trust. Thank you to Jarrett Earnest and Justine Kurland for their insightful writing and to Emma Karasz, Meg Malloy, and Scott Briscoe at Sikkema Jenkins & Co. for their support and collaboration. Special thanks to Ana Vejzovic Sharp. In honor of Brent Sikkema (1948–2024). Josephine Halvorson would like to thank James Fuentes gallery, especially James Fuentes and Laura Brown for their vision and collaboration; Sikkema Jenkins & Co., especially Emma Karasz, for their care and dedication; Justine Kurland and Jarrett Earnest for their creative fellowship; Liz Flood for her expert studio help; and Terry Halvorson and Peter Buckley, for their support and love.

ISBN 979-8-9887960-2-2

Cover: detail from **Smiley Face**, 2023
Acrylic gouache on panel, 27 × 37 inches

Contents

Justine Kurland

Foreword

This is what I know about Josephine Halvorson's paintings. They are made from observation in acrylic gouache, they almost always depict outdoor scenes, and achieve an unlikely combination of beauty, vulnerability, and humor. You can't call them landscapes because the range is too close, they rarely show a horizon, and their vertical dimensions are usually at a 1:1 scale. "Still life" isn't exactly right, not in a classical sense, as her subjects assert the type of agency or persona more often associated with portraiture; and the choreography between found objects (a jumble of notices tacked to a bulletin board, for instance) is too arbitrary to lend itself to metaphor. If anything, her paintings belong to the order of allegory, but not the melancholic kind—more like

the flamboyant stitching on Hester Prynne's "A" (if a painting can be both boastful and humble). Each painting consists of whispery calligraphic marks as if transcribing a secret alphabet. In cases where actual language appears, the words have been left to fend for themselves against the elements; they have lost the authority to signify. Josephine deftly and gently pushes for a readymade slippage in meaning, a deadpan humor just on the other side of despair. The protagonists of her paintings are most often orphaned or obsolete, discarded to the periphery or camouflaged in plain sight, brought back to life by her tender attention to their every crack and crevice. Or maybe it's more like a battle between Josephine and the thing she's painting, wrestling to see who has the final say. The ground of her panels has been prepared with extra-absorbent layers of paper pulp and minerals, which causes the paint to dry too quickly to be reworked, meaning her movements are mapped as faithfully as the shifts in color and shadow over the scene.

Josephine is the child of a blacksmith and a sign painter from Massachusetts. This is true, and I'm tempted to say something about Promethean origins and the biblical notion of man as the namer of things. But if Josephine's paintings connect in any way to her New England Protestant roots, it is through Anne Hutchinson and the Antinomian Controversy[1], which poet Susan Howe associates

with Emily Dickinson's marginalia, those poems scribbled on torn envelopes that managed to evade official accounts and the manhandling of canonical power.[2] If a studio is an artist's usual place of prayer, Josephine's choice to paint outside calls for an alternate state of grace, and the relatively small size of her panels and seeming insignificance of her subjects relegate her work to the margin of art market trends. Her true inheritance comes from a constellation of art mothers, together bestowing interlocking gifts. From Vija Celmins, mimetic thingness; from Lois Dodd, the angular cut of shapes and frames; from Catherine Murphy, the abstraction of close surfaces; from Sylvia Plimack Mangold, the circularity of measurements that mark themselves. (I might mention Georgia O'Keeffe here because Josephine works in the desert, but she's more like a flowery great-aunt.) I like to think of these women rattling in the back of Josephine's truck as she travels west to make her paintings. I imagine it's their first trip away from their domestic settings; they arrive a little carsick and homesick, their verdant vegetable greens have turned a dusty mustard and mauve in the Southwestern heat. Maybe Josephine needed to bring them all that way so they could meet the ghost of Laura Aguilar, who, after a lifetime of hard-won self-acceptance, situated her plus-sized body in the landscape in her later photographs, rendering herself formally synonymous with the boulders of

Southern California. As one of Josephine's spiritual mothers, Aguilar demonstrates the way an artwork can mediate communion between body and land. The brushwork in Josephine's paintings is her own, but it's connected in my mind to skin. It reminds me of the feathery kisses of blind fingers reading a face, a touch that feels—which is to say, it doesn't take more than it needs.

I want Josephine's road trips to belong to photography as mine have—something along the lines of going out west and bringing the news back home—but she confounds this desire by painting in her own Massachusetts town just as frequently. I once had a professor who wrote that a photographer either had a self (bad) or a world (good), which was a bastardization of another essay that got heavy rotation in art school, dividing photographs between mirrors (inward, feminine) and windows (outward, masculine). I have always preferred the binary articulated by Moyra Davey in her essay "The Wet and the Dry"—in which she writes about Mary Wollstonecraft, and which became the basis of her film *Les Goddesses*—because you get to be both. Davey writes, "[Mary Wollstonecraft] was Wet and Dry. She was a brilliant star in her firmament, a passionate, early advocate of women's, children's, human rights, and a defender of truth and justice: a radical."[3] Josephine is Wet and Dry for so many reasons. Dry: the theoretical underpinnings of her work, and the research behind it;

the matte surfaces of her paintings; the desert, and her eyes after painting in the desert; subjects like rocks, sticks, and sun-bleached wood; the fast drying-time of her paint. Wet: the intuition, chance, and hunches behind the work; the sensuality of her color palette and the fluidity of her brushstrokes; the New England air humming with mosquitoes and fireflies; subjects like tree vaginas, fire hydrants, and shells; the paint before it dries.

I've thought a lot about photography's relationship to time, but Josephine makes me wonder about painting's. The objects she chooses are old. Time cleaves to them through a metric of erosion, rust, vagrancy, defacement, or accretion, and they are older now than when she encountered them. There is a separate tempo that marks the time she spends with them, in which each touch of the brush counts off seconds that proceed to accumulate in the rich surfaces of her paintings. It's the cadence of pure attention—a ritual act, maybe—that transforms her subjects into small monuments, moving between time as action (the time the wind blew over her easel, the time the sun burned her skin, the time it took to paint the painting) and time eternal (death). According to Susan Sontag, every photograph is a *memento mori*,[4] similar to the way a painting can be vanitas, there to remind us of the inevitability of our own death. Josephine's paintings are neither of these. Although the objects she paints are wounded by time, the paintings

themselves are both inside and outside of it, inhabiting an ongoing present.

Josephine paints from life, not photographs, but she photographs her paintings in process with a Polaroid camera.[5] Paintings of photographs are common; so are photographs of photographs. But you hardly ever see photographs of paintings (discounting professionally photographed reproductions and less professional social media posts). The Polaroid camera, with its plastic lens and chemical distortions, is prone to accidents—the color, exposure, and frame are never as expected. Its indistinct renderings emphasize the onset of loss that commences as soon as a picture is fixed (every photograph depicting the absence of what was once there at an ever-expanding distance). More than other types of photographs, Polaroids are keepsakes: their immediacy testifies to our feelings of attachment and satisfies the urgency of our desires. After all that feeling, we shove them into the edge of a mirror or the pages of a book, or let them slide, lopsided and forgotten, under a magnet on the refrigerator. I can imagine each of Josephine's Polaroids as a love letter to an inchoate painting. But I know her too well to stop there; I know about her journals, her note-taking and recordkeeping, her meticulous collecting of ephemera. In Josephine's hands, the Polaroid is a clock, a unit of measure, a way of tracking all the incremental paintings on their way to completion,

along with the chance occurrences, the conversations with strangers, the peripheral observations and distractions that together make up the final painting and call into question the singularity of the finished work.

Notes

1 In the 1630s Anne Hutchinson formed a group of antinomians, which literally translates to "against or opposed to law." She held the separatist belief that God lived inside our hearts (based on the "covenant of grace"), rather than in the churches or the words of the ministers (the "covenant of works"), and she held sermons for women in her home. Convicted as a heretic, she was imprisoned and then banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

2 Susan Howe, *The Birth-mark* (New York: New Directions, 1993), 1–4.

3 Moyra Davey, *The Wet and the Dry* (Paris: Paraguay Press, 2011), 19.

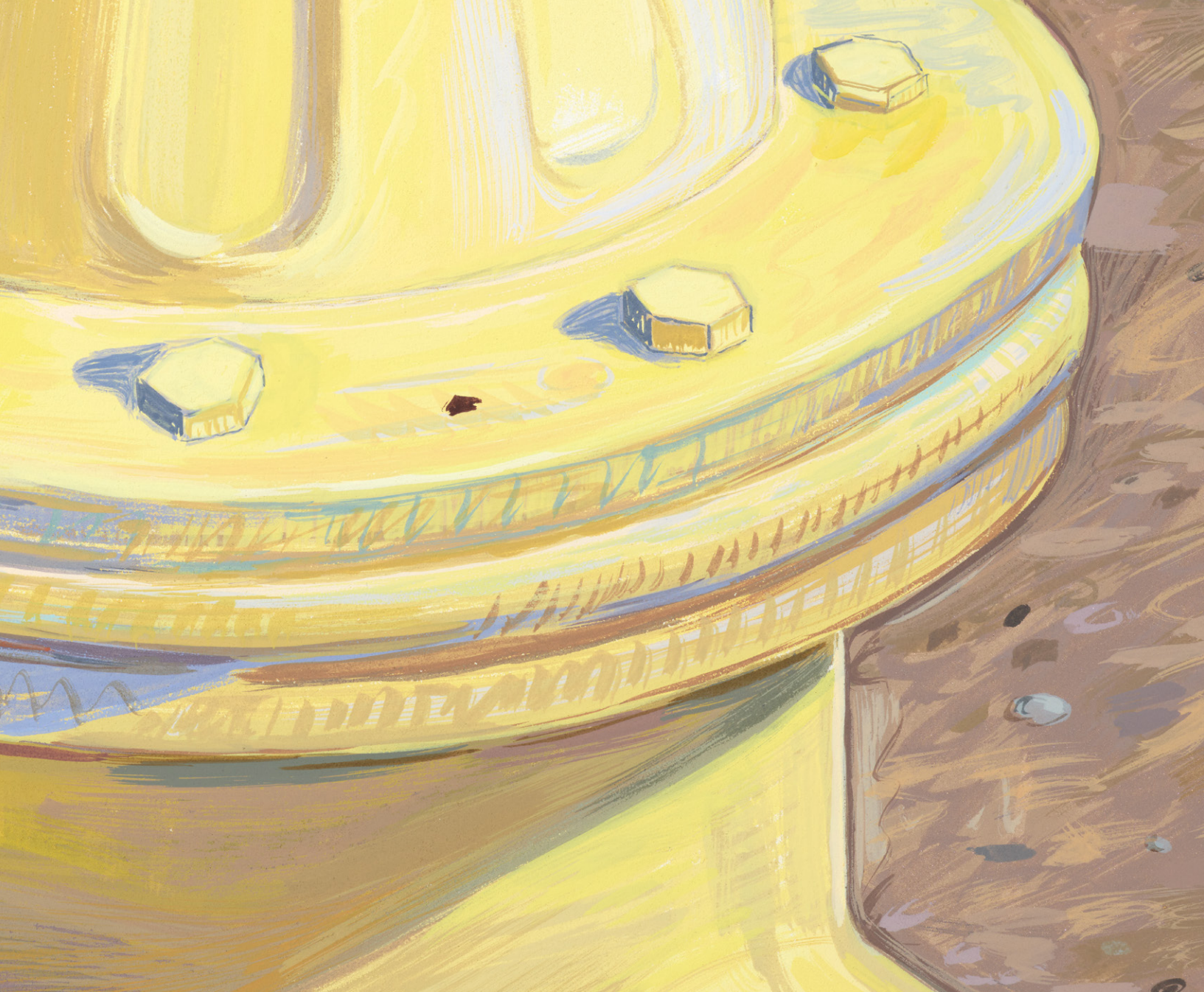
4 "All photographs are *memento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this

moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt." Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Noonday Press, 1989), 15.

5 Polaroid refers to the replacement brand Josephine used, Fuji Instax Wide.

Plates


UNDERPASS RD
FISH MARKET
PROPANE
BICYCLE RENTALS
FOOD · ICE CREAM
VETERINARY HOSP
U.S. POST OFFICE
HAIR & BODY SALON




NEW HOURS
SUN 9-100
WED 9-100
SAT 9-300

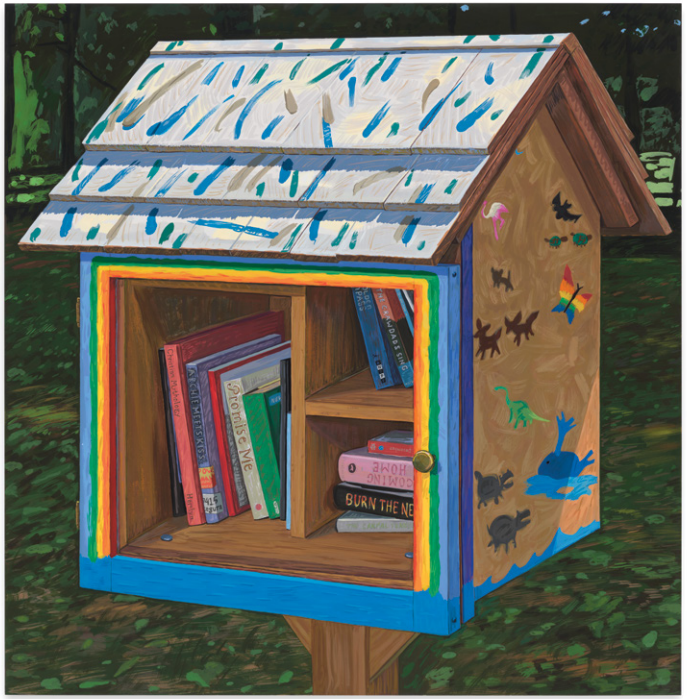

SUN


BREAKING NEWS
I HELP YOU LEARN TO SPEAK FRENCH
YOU'RE INVITED!
PERSONAL TRAINER
Shop
Repair
&
Rental

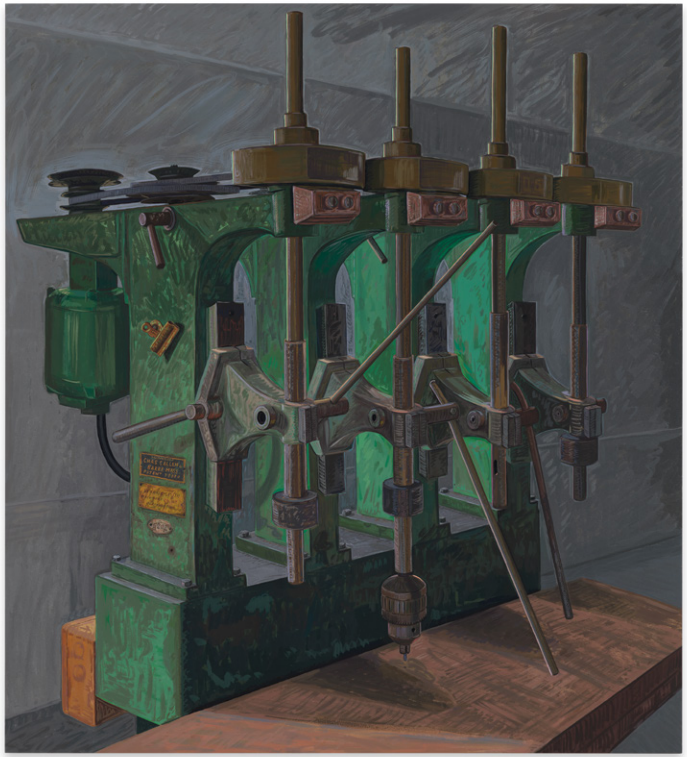

YOU'RE INVITED!
Reflections on Democracy
The WEB Dubois Center
for Freedom and Democracy
Thursday, July 11, 2024
6:00pm
The
Du Bois
Freedom
Center
RSVP
TODAY

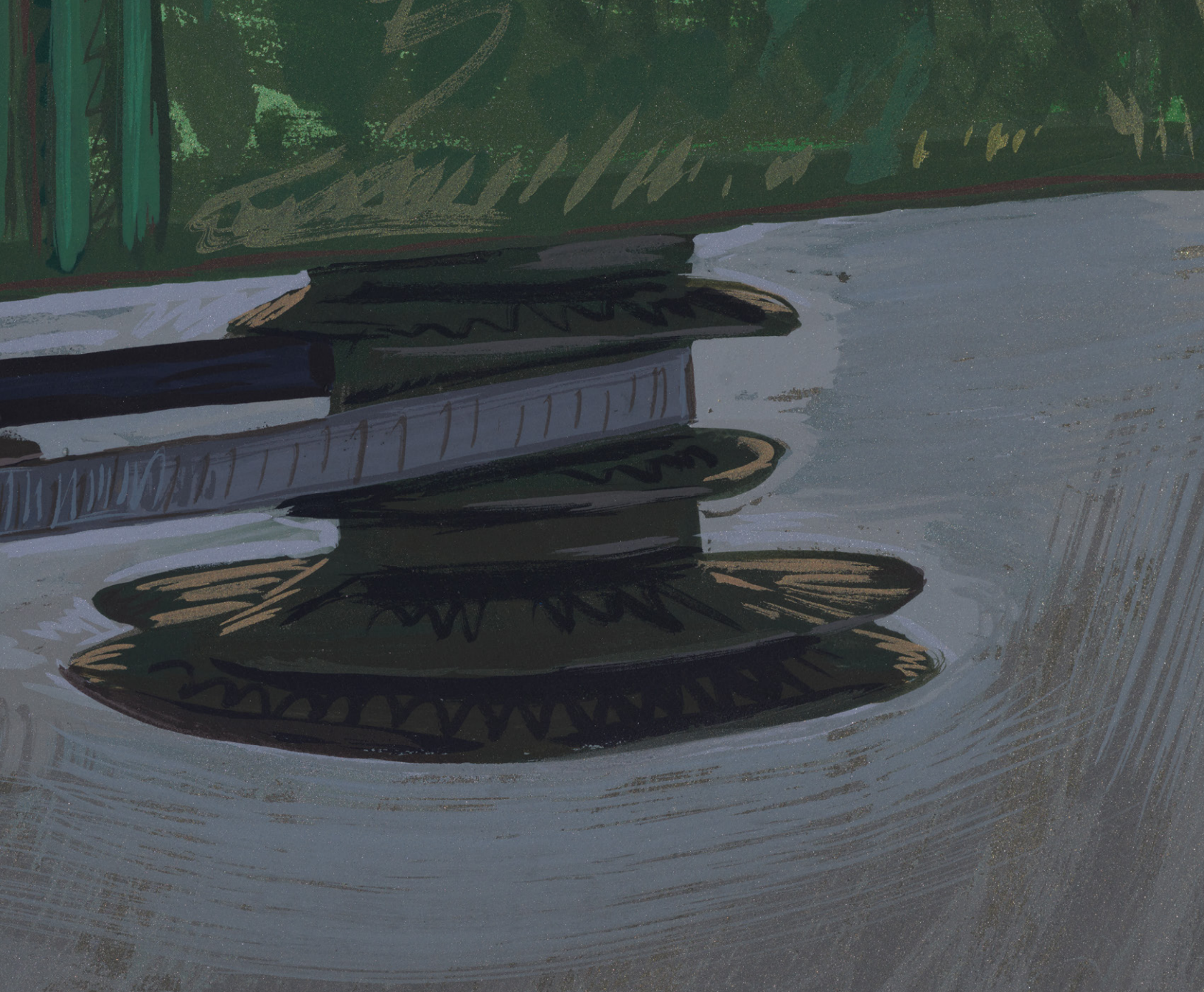

Need to be un-pregnant?
PLANC
PLANC
Plan C Pills
Abortion Pills By Mail
Plancpills.org
SURVIVING
SPOUSE


ACRES
24,500
OODOWN
5YR
60-275-8717


Friends Me
BURN THE NE

December
COMING HOME
BURN THE NE
THE CARPAL TUNNEL





9

Jarrett Earnest

Wisdom to Know the Difference: on the making of Free Library

> Good-by, Good-by, world. Good-by, Grover's Corner's... Mama and Papa. Good-by to clocks ticking ... and Mama's sunflowers. And food and coffee. And new-ironed dresses and hot baths ... and sleeping and waking up. Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you.

Thornton Wilder
Our Town: A Play in Three Acts, 1938

Tuesday, May 21

The lush, low mountainous region between the Housatonic and Connecticut river valleys has been called "The Berkshires" since 1761, when the governor of the Massachusetts colony named it in honor of his childhood home in England. Driving twenty minutes north from Great Barrington, Route 7 hits Stockbridge's Main Street at a roundabout in the center of town. To the right is a block of colonial buildings: the Red Lion Inn still standing from the late eighteenth century, along with the town offices, cafe, and general store, ending with a library on the corner, all built in the nineteenth century and preserved as an ideal New England village. For generations it has been self-consciously maintained at great cost and by an enormous operation of will. The effect is an uncanny

tableaux vivant, as many tourist and vacation destinations are, so that while life is occurring, it still seems somehow less than real.

I hadn't given much thought to what I was wearing until I walked into the Main Street Cafe, suddenly reminded of my short-shorts and Tori Amos tank top, revealing large and undeniably homosexual tattoos across both my arms and upper thigh. I'd arrived directly from my own artificial paradise of Fire Island Pines, where this outfit was considered downright demure. A ferry ride and a three-hour drive was like traveling to another century. Nobody said anything directly, but I felt they were just a little too eager to get me my oat milk latte and see me on my way. Perhaps I'm unfair. Having grown up in a small town in south Florida I'm overly sensitive to being exiled on Main Street.

Coffee in hand, I drove two minutes westward, past the sprawling whitewashed campus of the Austen Riggs Center, where the rich have undergone psychiatric treatments for a century, and a parade of stately shingle-style homes, painted in no doubt historically-accurate shades ranging from cream to beige. Just before another roundabout, where the road splits and changes, there is a small cemetery on the right, populated with weathered and rounded tombstones, stretching back to the town's founding just shy of three hundred years ago.

Across from the cemetery is an august building from the early nineteenth century, four ionic

columns reaching the two stories beneath a pyramidal pediment, set back off the road by an open lawn. It's being renovated by a construction crew, their pickups parked out front during the day. To the west is a four-story rough-hewn granite Chime Tower, topped by a wooden belfry with clocks facing in each direction. Engraved on the front: "This Memorial Tower marks the spot where stood the Little Church in the wilderness in which John Sergeant preached to the Stockbridge Indians in 1739." In the grass are four monuments to those soldiers who died in WWI, WWII, Korean, and Vietnam wars; bronze plaques set into hunks of rock list their names. Tucked behind it, slightly shaded by large oak and pine trees is the elegant pink-brick First Congregational church with its white steeple.

But before all this, exactly opposite to the entrance of the cemetery, snugged to the left of the big white building, is a niche of tall pine trees, casting an alcove of lawn in shadow most of the day. There's a wooden split fence a few yards back, and a row of trees screening the bright glow of the Stockbridge Golf Club, its green stretching far into the sunken horizon where lies the Housatonic river, obscured by a wall of distant trees.

A cement sidewalk runs parallel to the two-lane asphalt road that separates Stockbridge's living from the sacred dead, down which people walk back and forth all day, at a frequency only slightly less than the steady stream of cars and trucks. A

slatted wood and cement bench is installed into this shady pine niche, along with a small rectangular box with a peaked shingled roof, which sits on a post about three feet from the ground. Its front is a pane of clear glass, interior contents visible, hinged on the left with a knob on the right to open. Inside are two asymmetrical shelves cluttered with books. It is one of many "Little Free Libraries" that have sprouted up along roadsides and sidewalks across the country like mushrooms of civic good.

When I arrive at 11am Josephine is already unloading supplies from her truck, unpacking alongside the mini-library: a narrow folding table, a wooden A-frame easel, a jug of water, thirty-some bottles of Lascaux gouache supplemented with a few tubes of other brands, paper towels, palettes, clamps, level, yardsticks, water cups, and a handful of variously-sized round sable brushes. She sets up a wood-backed Dibond panel that she's covered in five layers of an extremely absorbent ground, a recipe she developed several years ago that's a modification of a "true gesso" with the addition of paper pulp, so that the sanded surface feels like hot pressed paper. The water in the gouache evaporates almost instantly, leaving only the pigment, the exact record of the brush strokes, which can be layered, opaque color over opaque color, without them mixing on the surface.

This represents a sharp technical departure from the work for which she'd become known in the

2010s, which were buttery oil paintings made from direct observation, wet into wet, all in one go, produced onsite at far-flung destinations. She called those "day paintings," thinking that they represented a good way to spend a day and would add up into a worthwhile life. It was also a wry reference to the Alcoholics Anonymous credo "one day at a time," a big part of her identity as her father eventually went into recovery.

Early on she'd established the conceptual parameters of her work: portraits of inanimate objects, often more or less flat and painted parallel to the picture plane at life-size, where the boundaries of the canvas's rectangle directly match the rectangle of the object: books, signs, windows, shutters, doors, gravestones, portions of cast concrete, often showing signs of wear, handwork, and defacement. Her approach to painting had an unimpeachable clarity, merging minor and discredited lineages of American art, such as the *trompe l'oeil* still lives of John F. Peto, the gritty realism of the Ashcan School, and the *plein-air* landscapes around Cape Cod where she grew up, with the rigors of conceptual and performance art.

These paintings brought immediate attention to Josephine's work out of graduate school, and rightfully established her as an important voice in contemporary art. Her pictures were almost always funny commentaries on their reality as paintings, making observations about the congruity of

a particular painted object as displaced from but continuous with the real world it both referenced and inhabited. What truly set them apart, however, was the sensuality of their surfaces, the way that they seemed to emanate light and love thanks to her brilliant understanding of color relationships, all the more astonishing when depicting apparently dour, humble, and almost concertedly unspectacular things, made lovable by the sunshine of her attention. It seemed like she could go on making those paintings forever, mapping a territory as large as the world.

Thus it came as somewhat of a shock to me, and for some of our friends almost a betrayal, when Josephine began to chafe against the parameters which she'd so shrewdly contrived, and then set about deconstructing: jettisoning louche oils and the one-off time frame, moving toward totally matte gouache which, though drying instantly, paradoxically expanded the time frame of her painting process from one day to several weeks. But Josephine knew what she wanted her paintings to feel like, and that was something fresh—like a cross between a fresco and drawing on paper. She arranges the bottles in an arc on the table, and says, "It's not that I'm beholden to gouache, and I'm not convinced that it's the only paint that could do it—but it's that I want a surface that registers every decision I make in the moment."

She lays the paints out in a personal spectrum

that goes yellows-oranges-reds-purples-pinks-blues-greens-ochres-browns-blacks culminating in white, and then metallic silver and gold, paints with mica powder in them she mixes into different colors throughout the painting. The biggest drawback with commercially-produced paints is that there are colors they simply don't manufacture. "Particularly darks, that I sometimes need and really cannot get. I often want to use a very dark greenish-brown—that is a color I'm constantly craving—or a metallic-y violet-black. There are pigments that exist like that, I just need to find a way to make them into a paint that behaves in a way that works for me." At the center she lays out three plastic shallow muffin tins which she lines with Glad press'n seal plastic wrap; "the only product that will do!" She likes having everything she needs in a compressed area, like an instrument ready to be played, "a little bit like a piano."

This particular little-library is brightly decorated, with a rainbow around the window on the front door, expressive blue brushstrokes on the roof, and little animals painted around the sides. It caught her eye over the past year on her drive between her place in New Marlborough and her partner Peter's house in Canaan, New York. The first decision is where to position the easel, which is largely dictated by finding the right footing. There is a slight slope to the ground she's trying to avoid because it would make it uncomfortable standing

over time. Unlike her early paintings, which would have aligned the rectangular front of the library with the rectangle of the panel, she's going to paint it from the right side, casting in perspective, with a few inches of the space on each side of the object, showing it in landscape. "To me it's more about the approach to it, to opening the door. I wouldn't paint it from the other angle for this reason."

Adjusting the easel, she realizes that it's slanted, the left leg needs a shim. I always keep an "emergency book" in the back of my car, in case something happens and I'm stranded somewhere without anything else to read (more or less my idea of hell). For years that book-in-waiting has been a slightly beat-up paperback biography of George Eliot. I run to get it and offer it as a wedge. Josephine opens it three quarters of the way, to a portrait of the author in the plate section, and slides it, cover down, under the foot of the easel until it's level.

The panel she's using is 35 × 36 inches, almost but not quite a square, and the decision to make it a slightly more vertically- or horizontally-oriented picture is crucial. Studying the little-library, she holds a yardstick in the air, then pivots to the panel. While the object is indeed wider than it is tall, from her angle, due to perspectival compression, it actually appears taller than it is wide, so she flips the panel to 36 inches high. With a pale pink paint she starts dividing the surface, looking at relative distances between each part. Freehand she marks out

lines: the bottom of the box, the edge of the frame, holding her paintbrush in front of her to check the angle of the roof then turning to compare it with the line she just put down. "Wow—that center spine inside the bookcase is also in the center of the composition—love that!"

Once the technical drawing is laid down, she works it over again with a slightly darker gray-ochre, what she calls "verifying" the drawing. Any mistakes in the structure will cause problems later, so she's careful to get it as correct as possible, holding a level against a line to check an angle, back and forth with a ruler, sometimes using it as a straight edge. I tell her I'm surprised that she doesn't use a grid. "Feeling it out, eyeballing it, is important to me. For some reason mechanically transcribing or tracing never feels like figuring it out, it can feel like privileging the appearance of the thing over the sensation of it."

Inside, the library is separated into three compartments. Divided down the middle, the left side is a single large space, with the right half further divided into two stacked cubbies. Among the books are trashy novels with names like *Promise Me*, *Burn The Negative*, *You Betrayed Me*, and *Dating Mr. December*; an assortment of children's picture books and young adult novels including the first *Harry Potter*, *The Golden Compass*, and the graphic novel crossover *Archie Meets Kiss* (where the hair metal band miraculously visits the fictional teens in

Riverdale); a number of vaguely religious self-help books, a volume on *Christian Mythology*, an *ESV New Testament*, a *Children's Adventure Bible*; and a lone DVD promising *The Carpal Tunnel Syndrome Solution*. They're arranged haphazardly with a random bookmark and golf tee resting before one stack. "I wish that golf tee wasn't there," she says, but she won't intervene in any way. "I've learned I can't rearrange the subjects I find—it tempts fate." Also, she doesn't want to interfere in the function of the library, so she'll put off defining the books until the end, and things will have changed by then. Hopefully someone will swipe the tee.

We sit together on the bench, facing the opposite corner of the little-library from where she's painting. The animals continue around the other two sides: a pair of ladybugs, a pair of rainbow caterpillars, a pair of birds in flight, a pair of dogs, a pair of bears, a pair of elephants... and all at once it hits me. "Josephine," I say, "it's Noah's Ark!" Suddenly the band of wavy blue along the bottom edge becomes flood waters, the abstract streaks of blue against the white roof are rain, the animals marching two-by-two, male and female, to salvation, and the rainbow around the window is God's covenant. She's dismayed. "I thought that it was a gay pride rainbow! I wonder if this is a mistake. It's definitely a more complicated subject than I even thought it was."

We look at the First Congregational Church,

and I suggest that it was decorated by children there in some ecclesiastical arts-and-crafts project. "With every subject, there is a motivation to paint what is latent. I might have overlooked the ark to allow myself to pursue it. I'm pretty down on Christianity and organized religions. Over the last several years I'm despondent about it all, especially in America," she explains warily, "but I'm not that interested in my own apparent intent, I'm interested in a deeper intent but I don't know what that is yet." Which is exactly why I'm going to be standing beside her easel, watching her paint, trying to glimpse that other motive as it forms itself throughout her process.

We decide to break for lunch. We're having sandwiches in the cab of her truck when an older woman pulls up behind us. "I saw what you're doing and I just thought you might want to know more about this little-library." Vicky is a retired children's librarian who still works a few hours a week at two libraries nearby. She attends this church, and wanting to "promote libraries in my old age," oversaw the acquisition and installation of this mini one about a year ago. It was constructed by inmates in the Massachusetts correctional institution, as part of a vocational training program called MassCor.

"The kids from the church painted it and we did think the Noah's ark theme would be good. A Sunday school project. Another interesting wrinkle to the whole placement of the library: these are ancestral lands for the Mohicans, and you're not

allowed to dig without making sure there aren't any ancestral bones or anything, and so we had to work things out with the Mohicans. And we were negotiating with that building too," pointing to the large white structure with the columns, "the Waldorf school bought it from the town. It was the original town hall, but it was just deteriorating...." Abruptly a gust of wind blew the painting face first into the dirt. When Josephine picked it up there were a few grass stains on it near the top. "Maybe that sort of fits into the theme," Vicky offers. She goes on, saying that there is a national registry for these little libraries but she hasn't registered this one because it costs money and, she feels, "it speaks for itself anyway."

Josephine blocks out the background with a very bright green, all the way around her initial drawing. As she's filling in the beige side of the box another man approaches, introducing himself as Patrick. He's a town selectman, overseeing renovation of the old town hall and future Waldorf school, and he picks up the history where Vicky left off. "When Stockbridge was first founded it was 'Indiantown' and the first select board, which I am now a member of, three hundred years ago, had two Mohican chiefs and three white people." He narrates how the New Englanders incrementally yet systematically usurped land and governance from the Mohicans until "around 1800, when they were marched out to northern Wisconsin. Last year we

got a grant with them to buy 350 acres here and we founded what's called the Stockbridge Mohican commission with three members elected out in Wisconsin and three locals. We're hoping that they'll have an office in this building, on the exact site that was the headquarters of their tribe."

After Josephine packs up for the day around five—just balling up the press'n seal, returning her paints and brushes to their utility box, folding up the table and easel into the back of her truck—we go to the Stockbridge library on its picturesque corner. The kindly librarian directs me to **The Mohicans of Stockbridge**, a fascinating indigenous history of the town by Patrick Frazier. I learn that over where Josephine is painting, in the 1730s the Mohicans had attempted a new kind of life, at the nexus of complex negotiations with other warring tribes and European nations, between their own religion and the competing factions of Christianity seeking to save their souls as a means of displacing them.

By all accounts the Mohicans liked the missionary John Sergeant, and when he died in 1749 at the age of 29, he was replaced with the esteemed elder theologian Jonathan Edwards, whose sermons of vivid austerity ignited the Protestant "Great Awakening" in nearby Northampton. This uniquely American rhetorical style, as in his most famous sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," blended heightened emotion, metaphysical horror, and acute observation of the natural world,

encapsulated by his injunction: "The God that holds you over the pit of Hell, much as one holds a Spider, or some loathsome Insect, over the Fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked." Thus inspired, New Englanders converted in zealous droves, fundamentally changing the cultural geography of North America. Unlike his predecessor, Edwards did not preach in the Mohican language, and while he appears more or less indifferent to Mohicans themselves, his time as their missionary proved one of delicate hybridity under the sign of Christ. Noting the incorporation of an indigenous conch shell as their regular call to worship, the book's historian ironically observes, "Stockbridge was becoming the quaint New England town that Norman Rockwell would portray two hundred years later—with no Indians in the picture."

Wednesday, May 22

Josephine sets the easel back into position, placing the panel on it. From the sidewalk I look between the two; the silhouette of the little-library in her painting, and the thing itself. I tell her that the painting looks larger than life. She walks to the real life subject with a yardstick and compares its dimensions to the outlines. It's actually slightly smaller in the picture. She explains it's about our different proximities: "The painting is literally in between you and the thing. When I talk about finding the correspondence between me and a subject, the painting is the correspondence. That is why it's never only a painting of something else, it's always a painting of myself too. I think of perspective as my entire body relative to the subject, or thing, or object. So the subject has to bend itself to the painting, and I

have to bend myself to the painting, too—not that we cancel each other out, but perspective is necessary, and scale is necessary, to make a painting feel like the encounter of the thing. Through painting, I want to make a physical-scale relationship."

She starts blocking in the colors of the library, carefully balancing rectangles of blue, red, and brown until they roughly cover the entire surface. In this process she continues to confirm and correct the drawing. She says it's almost like she's making a sculpture to paint on top of, at which point she'll paint the light on things rather than the things themselves; reflections, all the tiny nuances that anchor the plausible reality. Her entire philosophy of color is about reflected color.

"Right now I'm wearing this yellow shirt, and you can see my arm is reflecting that yellow. Everything in the world does that to a degree. It doesn't show up in digital images at all. But when I look closely while painting, I see reflections all over the place and it's what guides my color choices." I tell her that I think often she paints shadows blue, and she says that is a feature of daylight, of the shadow reflecting the sky. One current trend in contemporary painting is how thoughtlessly people paint shadows, if they bother to paint them at all. "It's as though everything is under bright fluorescent lights."

At a certain moment Josephine spots a wedge of sunlight breaking through the branches overhead

to illuminate the bottom corner of the little-library. "That's great," she says, and swiftly mixes the lighter color to block it out. Within twenty minutes it's gone. Every instant the light is changing, the sun is moving across the sky, filtered by moving clouds and trees, and affects the colors we're seeing, not only of the box itself but as it exists within its environment. She tells me that she has to decide what kind of light to paint it in, but also that there can be different kinds of light encoded in different parts of the painting. It's not about a single instant, as in a photograph—it's about synthesizing an encounter in the world. That is the foundational concept from which she works.

"To know something else in the world requires more effort, more sensitivity, a different kind of description. I like the practice I have because it reminds me to be in relation to things using all of my senses, using time as a shared language of experience, say daylight or seasonality. The same bugs are landing on my painting as landing on the thing, the same sunshine is hitting it is hitting the painting is hitting you. The purpose of the painting is to record and celebrate and mediate and correlate these different forces at play, and show an understanding between me and something else. That is what excites me. It's not objectivity or subjectivity, but about both. It's about how to make it feel like the thing, and allowing those correspondences to flourish. Painting is a pretext for all of that."

All day long people stroll by with their boutique dogs, usually slowing down long enough to say "beautiful" or "good job." At a certain point a genial man's voice comes up behind us. "So are you local artists or are you working on some kind of project?" "Sorta both, I guess," Josephine answers, and says she lives nearby and teaches painting in Boston. He introduces himself as Pastor Brent of the Congregational Church, yes the same church as Jonathan Edwards, which of course was originally in another building. Pastor Brent jokes about the mythology surrounding the current church with its connection to his famous predecessor, "It's like they say, if you collected all the splinters in relics that claim to be the 'true cross' it would make a sequoia." He encourages us to use the bathrooms inside whenever we need, saying there is a kitchen we can store our lunch in and sit in the AC if we need to cool off; we're always welcome.

I ask about the flyers in his hand, bearing a conspicuous rainbow of hearts. One announces "Pride Worship" and another advertises a community conversation with a trans theologian announcing "a genuinely human, deeply faithful, positive exploration of faith and the lives of Transgender people." The pastor explains that he himself is a gay man, and lives here with his husband and their young son, who, he believes, was actually in the Sunday school class that painted the little-library. He works especially hard to make the church feel

inviting for all kinds of people since he himself never felt particularly welcomed when he arrived in town. "You know how New Englanders can be—'I like you but I'll never tell you that.'"

Josephine starts painting the background, and fluently adds the trees and fence with passages of mottled grass coming up to the bottom of the panel. It's a happy painting. "So it's kind of like a park now, all of a sudden. And then there's the grass around here. I've got to keep it loose but I do want to keep the grass darker in the foreground and that will help that stuff back there feel like light in the distance."

As she's painting the blue-gray shadows on the white shingles the yellow school bus pulls up behind us, and Pastor Brent is walking over again to introduce his eight-year-old son, who maintains that he was *not* in Sunday school that day they painted the little-library. To help save face Josephine asks for his help identifying some of the painted animals and he definitively labels a fox, hippo, a bat. As they leave, halfway to the church I see the father bend and kiss his son's head. I say to Josephine, "Have you ever heard that Lana del Ray song 'Norman Fucking Rockwell!'?" "Oh, yeah," she says, and plays the track aloud from her phone's speaker.

I've always been creeped out by the cozy white heterosexual fantasia Rockwell's pictures seem to propagandize, while also sensing that he's unfairly been cast as a synecdoche for the retro-Conservatism I felt staring down my tattoos and booty

shorts the day before. Having never spent more than an afternoon in a small New England town, I thought all this stuff was invented by the Hallmark channel, that Rockwell was some kind of saccharine fabulist, but after just two days observing life on Main Street in Stockbridge, something else must be going on. It's supposed to rain tomorrow which means no painting, so we plan to meet at the nearby Norman Rockwell Museum.

Rockwell himself happens to be buried just yards away at the cemetery across the road. Once she's wrapped up, we go over. There lies young John Sergeant (1710–1739), his grave a dark gray stone lying flat on the earth in the front far left corner. We walk together to a pale free-standing cross marking the final resting place of Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971), the influential theologian who wrote the Serenity Prayer, a lifeline to people in twelve-step programs the world over. Josephine says she started carrying a copy of it in her wallet in her early 20s after her dad got sober. It strikes me that its opening stanza sums up her process in relation to the decisions she makes all day long about what to paint and what not to paint in collaboration with the shifting conditions of the world: accepting the things she cannot change, changing the things she can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

We walk into the back left corner where overgrown hedges surround Rockwell's tombstone. Adoring fans have accumulated pinecones, pennies,

stones, as well as paint brushes and tubes of paint in tribute, and there's a little American flag planted in the ground at its base.

Thursday, May 23

A five-minute drive in either direction at the intersection by the First Congregational church gets you to the Norman Rockwell Museum. Founded in 1969, it celebrates one of the town's most famous residents, housing almost a thousand original paintings, as well as his vast library and archives of preparatory materials, correspondence, and furnishings, in addition to his artist's studio, staged as though the master had just stepped out mid-work.

In the basement a short documentary plays on a loop, highlighting the life of the beloved painter from his birth in 1894 until his death in 1978, the last twenty-five years of which were happily ensconced right here; as Rockwell pronounced, "Stockbridge is the best of America." Upstairs we look at the skinny panorama, almost eight feet long

but just over two feet high that depicts one entire side of Stockbridge's Main Street, from the public library to the Red Lion Inn, powdered in snow and decked out with Christmas cheer. Originally commissioned by Hallmark but not published until 1967 in *McCall's* magazine, it became a widely-reproduced emblem of feel-good post-war American holidays. Every Christmas the town of Stockbridge ritually blocks traffic for two hours, allowing only vintage cars to participate in a living reenactment of the painting; an ouroboros of life imitating art.

We delight in the picture-postcard representation of the very town we're in, and the fact that it still looks the same. Josephine tells me that she wrote a paper in high school about Norman Rockwell, discussing whether his work was art or illustration. "For better or worse, mainly for worse, these narratives are very much lodged in a New England consciousness," she admits. She points at the library building at the far left of the painting, looking exactly as it did when we went in two days ago. "It is the preservationist ethos of Massachusetts, which has to do with keeping history alive—it just underpins so much of my own cultural identity. I also share my life with a historian and I am interested in the liveliness of the material world as something that carries with it its own feelings, its own memories, its own agency at times. Like that Jonathan Edwards desk they have on display in the library's basement, there's something powerful about seeing

the actual thing and knowing his hands touched it—that desk was somehow witness to it all."

She gestures toward another painting in the gallery which we walk toward, called *The Marriage License* (1955), showing a young couple eagerly leaning over a rolltop desk to sign a document, with a world-weary elderly clerk sitting in a chair nearby. "This is similar, in literally having a witness to a marriage taking place. There's almost the administration of witnessing that I think characterizes Rockwell's work, and I think that that is also a big part of what I do." Looking with her I do see Rockwell's canvas alive with effects, the way the geometric panels of the side of the wooden desk is totally parallel to the picture plane, and how it plays off the slanted spines of books stacked against the wall; the door that advertises MARRIAGE LICENSES; the peeling paint of the wall above it; a calendar marked "Saturday 11 June"; the sliver of a clock in perspective over the door at the edge of the painting; the cast-iron stove; the window that frames a view of a sunny brick wall outside—and suddenly I recognize so many of Josephine's earlier paintings, as though their subjects were cropped out of a Norman Rockwell canvas, separated from the figures and the specific stories they illustrate, allowing them to become more subtle and oblique.

Marveling at so many virtuosic surfaces I ask her how she conceives of the relationship between *trompe l'oeil* and illustration. "Actually, I think

trompe-l'oeil has to do with creating a moment where everyday objects and surfaces can be multiple things at once; it's both paint and it's a wall. Is that real concrete or is it not? There's a reality to it, a hyperreality perhaps, that feels related to the world outside of the painting while it's inside the painting, a doubling. Another aspect of *trompe-l'oeil* is facade. Rockwell is really good with facades, building facades, but also something behind those facades that can't be seen. The spines of the town records, the letters, even the brick wall that's through the window—we're kept out and at a distance. I was trying to see if the clerk had a wedding ring on, but I can't tell. That must have been a decision, to have his fingers conceal whether he was married."

Friday, May 24

Last night Josephine called to say that she had a fever and just tested positive for Covid, for the first time ever. She didn't feel terrible, but still she was shaken. She wanted to get a good night's sleep and see how she felt in the morning. Since we're working outside, the situation seemed relatively safe, and I wasn't worried for my own health, if she felt up to painting. But I could hear in her voice how upset she was, and realized that four years ago, her father died from Covid, in the early weeks of the pandemic.

Her art has always been an investigation of *memento mori*. However playfully, the work addresses transience by removing an instant, a thing caught in a quality of light from its inexorable flow, so that we might look at it long enough, casting it into a fixed point to measure our own changing

lives against. *Unforgotten*, the title of her exhibition last year, took on a more directly funereal dimension, with paintings like *Roadside Memorial* (2021) that shows a votive candle of the La Virgen de Guadalupe wedged against a wooden pole and a cluster of stones, plastic flowers stapled around it. At the center, a circular medallion reads: *Friends are the flowers in the garden of life*. As viewers coming upon the painting, just as if we came upon this humble altar in life, we have no idea who is being remembered, but we recognize that someone has lost a loved one, as we have, and will. In this context, the dime-store sentiment—about our relationships bringing fragrance and color into our existence—is made paradoxically more touching by the cheerful artificial flowers, painted in such a way that we know that they're plastic. The things are cheap; the feelings are real.

The emotional core of the show was *Last Words* (2022), a 45-inch square painting that depicts her father's working desk in *deshabille* as it was left at the time of his death: business cards, overflowing pens, curling notes, loose change, errant paperclips tacked, taped, and pinned to a raw plywood wall. It is a painterly tour de force, with the handwritten scrawl and printed text of business cards and notes all carefully reproduced, legible but remaining as elusive as the *Roadside Memorial*. The menu for a Chinese restaurant, cards from a car dealership, instructions for resetting an alarm, a key hanging

from a screw, an arrow pointing to it written on the wood. It's like the Roman mosaics of dinner scraps on an unswept floor, glimpsing a life through its remnants.

These things add up to a personal code we are external to, just as we are outside the young couple's happiness in Rockwell's *The Marriage License*, and in both paintings we are granted an intimacy we can only partly grasp. We're bearing witness to someone else's life as it changes, invisibly and forever, as the lives of those around us are changing all the time, if we bother to notice. As an artwork, *Last Words* can continue to hold all of that, after the "real" desk has been packed away and disassembled, as it has been, and all these little notes and cards discarded, because they don't mean anything anymore. And yet here they remain in the painting, where for other people they can mean something else.

Josephine texts to say that she does want to try painting for a couple hours, so we meet at the spot around lunch, along with Peter and her dog Jason. She spends the day going over the edges, shoring up the blocking, correcting mistakes in the drawing. She says the outer edges of the blue front frame are not parallel, so she changes them. The door is hanging slightly at an angle and she's refining the geometry to get the "slight lilt" of its hinges.

In perspective she paints the animals on the side of the library: hippos, foxes, turtles, a butterfly

with rainbow wings, a whale spouting water, a flamingo, a brontosaurus, a bat. That kind of thing is interesting because they don't have dimension so they need to articulate the plane they're on rather than have the appearance of forms themselves. She says she's not sure about the background, that it might be too busy and distract from the library. Also it might be too bright; she wants the effect of the sunlight hitting the roof, of that little wedge of light on the corner, and this bright green might need to be tempered.

The problem is that subsequent layers of paint can create a texture she doesn't like; it can look overly worked, which ruins a painting. If she needs to she can always sand down an area—but she's not there yet. "This way of painting is the most sensitive surface I could ever imagine a painting to be, other than on paper. First of all, I can't take anything back—I can only paint over it. There is no wiping away. Every gesture, every stroke, counts. And the kind of fudging that I used to be able to do with oil paint—smudge it, drag another color through it—I could revise my decisions, I could fool myself, but now I just can't fake it. There's nowhere to hide."

"I'm one of those people who has always been told I'm 'too sensitive.' So, over time, I have found a way to make paintings as sensitive as I am. I want a painting that can feel like it could get sunburned, or it could feel the wind, or it could hear us talking, that it can bear witness and not be injured as a

result. I think we both know paintings that want to be tough—I don't want my paintings to be tough. I want them to celebrate sensitivity."

I ask how she relates to time within the painting, and the time of making the painting, whether it connects to concepts of labor, which seemed so integral to her earlier work. "First of all, there is an equation between labor and time that I don't think exists in reality—you can put in a lot of labor and very little time and vice versa. I always balked when people would ask, 'How long did it take you to make that?'—I thought, if I just answered that question from the start I could take it down. But it only made them ask it more. The day paintings were a kind of *fuck you* to the question. Also there was a lot of conversation around labor in graduate school, which I couldn't take seriously, because we were all in art school and paying a ton of money to be there. I felt we all had different definitions and understandings of labor and of art. So sometimes that conversation felt like a disservice to art in that it diminished it to punching in on the clock, and it was a disservice to labor in a way that it defined this mostly-leisure activity as work. I thought, if I make a painting in a day then I can have both. Not to mention *plein-air* painting—it can be leisure, it can be labor, everyone will know how much time it takes, and I'll be painting things that are remnants of labor. Everything I paint is free. Free for anyone. Free to come across. It's a major tenet of how I think as an artist. At the

get-go: things for free. That's why I love that Joni Mitchell song, 'For Free.'"

She knows I love that song too. It opens: *I slept last night in a good hotel / I went shopping today for jewels / and the wind rushed around in the dirty town / and the children let out from the schools....* Each vignette ushers you into a world that changes at each stage, from the individual to the social. It goes on to contrast her experience as a famous artist, paid extravagantly in money and attention, with an anonymous musician who is doing the same thing on the street. The song circles this complexity, situating herself in it without letting either her or us off the hook from the contradiction: *I'll play if you've got the money / or if you're a friend to me / but the one-man band / by the quick lunch stand / is playing real good for free.*

"And that is the context for my own work," she says, gesturing to the little-library, "this is made by prisoners, and I'm free. Labor is really important to me. Painting is not labor compared to what they're doing," pointing at the construction workers gutting the old town hall, "and that is important. And the other thing I never thought about when I was making those 'day paintings' is the scale of time relative to one's life, because I was young and the day was going to be a day whenever, when I was 26 or 28 or 31—a day is a day is a day. And it turns out, in my forties a day means more because I have fewer of them left, and it's also not long enough to do

what I want to do. First of all I don't have the kind of endurance that I used to have physically. Also I'm interested in sharing time and space with something for longer than a day. Third, I have the means to do that—I'm not constantly on the go trying to figure out where I'm going to sleep that night, which is how I was for a long time, living life on the road. A day is not the right unit of time anymore. I now ask myself, what can happen over the course of a few weeks?"

Saturday, May 25

Josephine starts by painting animated, roughly vertical brushstrokes on the white roof, hitting only the sunny stretches with bright cobalt and cerulean, and in a few places a warm gray, mimicking the shape and freedom of the children's symbolic rain on the object, her strokes stopping where they'd dive under shadows—that will have to be continued with another color.

We start talking about how important photography has been to her ideas, that when she was an undergraduate she felt more at home with the photographers taking pictures of their families and communities than the painters shut away in their studios. Taking her camera out into the world she thought, "Oh, this is similar to plein-air painting." This is surprising; I always assumed her work

was diametrically opposed to photographs, that her paintings were somehow a reproach to images. Putting aside purely synthetic digital images, photographs purport to show something that sat before a lens at a particular moment, in particular lighting conditions, an appearance that is transposed onto photosensitive paper or film, creating evidence of what something looked like right then. That capacity to freeze-frame life is photography's incredible affective power. "Photography helps me understand the natural relationships that exist between myself, my technique, my subject, and the context in which we find ourselves. It choreographs it in a way that 'painting' doesn't necessarily."

Josephine explains, "Other things have something to say. Even though I am the author of the painting, I don't feel that I'm the only force that is involved. My will is just part of the puzzle. I'm not just saying that; it really is the case. I did not choose these books. I did not choose that they get moved. I'm annoyed that Christian Mythology is in a different place, because now I have to deal with whether I use my will to put it back in place or not, in a way that makes me feel like I have to confront my own agency and the power dynamic between me and the subject and who wins out, but that is what life feels like anyway. When I paint from life, it's my negotiation between will and chance, and I have a practice that allows for more chance than would happen in my own studio."

Every morning when we arrive, the books have been re-arranged, with additions and removals, changes I announce to Josephine while she sets up her table, paints, and easel. She's roughly filled in book-shapes but already some of those have disappeared. As though on cue, Vicky walks over with a stack in her arms: another Harry Potter, a teen novel called The Warriors, a nonfiction book about the NXIVM sex cult. She skips one. "Fire and Fury," Josephine notices, "that's about—" "Oh, that's about what's-his-name," Vicky says, and flashes the picture of Donald Trump on the cover. She shuffles them into the library shelves, then looks at the painting, "Oh wow, you've come a long way! Beautiful!"

"You've got a great day today," Pastor Brent joins us, and indeed it is ideal late spring weather, both cool and bright. People are out en masse, and to capitalize on this, his son has set up a little snack stand in front of the Chime Tower. At some point during the week, Pastor Brent had slipped a copy of his own book of sermons in the box, and I'd been reading it on and off while Josephine worked, alongside Edwards' sermons from the Great Awakening. I show Pastor Brent the two books side-by-side, saying it's interesting contrasting them, almost three hundred years apart, pastors of the same church.

"I'm related to him—my middle name is Edwards," Vicky adds. Pastor Brent explains that he's interested in how the Stockbridge-Munsee Mohicans' beliefs influenced Edwards' theology,

and directs me to the church's "Jonathan Edwards room," a trove of books related to both Edwards and Niebuhr, where I'm welcome to grab whatever I want, as long as I bring 'em back.

The Jonathan Edwards room is a kind of multipurpose rec room with bookcases along one wall, off the side of the church's sanctuary and opening onto a hallway with classrooms, offices, and bathrooms. There is a graven image of the stern old man in a powdered wig by the door. Above the kitchen is a cross-stitched version of the Serenity Prayer and a sun-faded print I immediately recognize as the scene where we are: the pine trees and town hall, chime tower and pink church all in their places, even the little bench we've been sitting on. The vantage is from the opposite side of the street, from the cemetery. It's a reproduction of Stockbridge in Spring, painted by Norman Rockwell in 1971, and now, seeing the print on the wall is like falling into the twilight zone—it still looks exactly like that! From the church I borrow a copy of Freedom of the Will (1754), considered Edwards' major theological work written while in Stockbridge, and walk back out onto the lawn, stopping to pick up two lemon-cherry shaved ices from the snack stand.

When I come back Josephine is adding loose beige marks in a slightly lighter color to show the painted texture around the animals on the side of the little-library. I start looking through the book, thinking there's some connection between

Josephine Halvorson's determination to make this painting subject to the whims of the social and natural world and a Calvinist's consideration of the problem of free will. Amid waves of interminable theological distinctions in the book, there are flashes of limpid insight on perception:

> Among a number of objects in view, one will prevail in the eye, or in idea, beyond others. When we have our eyes open in the clear sunshine, many objects strike the eye at once, and innumerable images may be at once painted in it by the rays of light; but the attention of the mind is not equal to several of them at once; or if it be, it does not continue so for any time. [...] There is nothing in the world more constantly varying than the ideas of the mind; they do not remain precisely in the same state for the least perceivable space of time; as is evident by this: that all time is perceived by the mind, only by the successive changes of its own idea. Therefore while the perceptions of the mind remain precisely in the same state, there is no perceivable length of time, because no sensible succession at all.

I don't know how this positions Edwards to explain free will (apparently we have it only to the extent that is predetermined by our "innate characters," which God can change through grace... or something like that, don't quote me, I was

skimming), but it does, in ways that have nothing to do with the good reverend's intention, clarify why Josephine makes paintings and not photos, despite having so much in common with documentary photography methodologically. As Edwards so amply explains, our thoughts and perceptions are durational; they unfurl in time, which Josephine encodes into her pictures through the act of painting. Her process condenses an entire span into an object, so that many instances, lighting conditions, and movements of attention are combined and calibrated to plausibly appear all at once. Visually retracing every move across the surface enacts our awareness of the painting as these overlayed durations, reconstituted into our consciousness like a bouillon cube dropped into boiling water. Her brushstrokes individually register like the ticking of a clock, embedding that succession into visual form and inseparable from it, through which we perceive the passage of time, even within an apparently static picture. And with that, we close the book on Jonathan Edwards.

The pastor's boy walks over to us. He says it's the first time he's ever had a snack stand and so far it's going pretty good. Appraising the painting he shrugs, "It looks exactly identical, I have to say," then quickly adds, "well, I have another customer!" and runs back to blend a bright-red slushy.

Sunday, May 26

Two retired ladies stop to drop off some books, a couple of big novels about World War II, one old and one new. They pause long enough to shove them into the library and say, "How lovely that you're painting that little library," and then keep power-walking. Josephine is pulling fine dark lines under the shingles, to make sure they're perceived as "on top of" one another, "otherwise it would just be a piece of wood that had that ziggurat shape." With a deeper blue she starts extending the colored strokes on the roof beneath the shadows, and the effect is miraculous. Carefully replicating the children's original free-form daubs, it describes the slant of the roof and makes instantly credible the sense of light on an object. In three different colors she extends those strokes, and I realize that painting shadows

is integral: without them, colors can't become light.

This isn't the first time I've watched Josephine paint. Almost a decade ago she was the first American to receive a prestigious fellowship at the French Academy in Rome, where she lived and worked for a year in the sixteenth century Villa Medici on the edge of the Borghese gardens. I went to visit her there for a few weeks. The cultural politics were weird, with a uniquely French hostility that made me grateful to not understand what they were saying (only French is to be spoken inside the villa).

Her studio once belonged to Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres when he was himself a *pensionnaire* at the beginning of the seventeenth century, one of my favorite artists, and also one of the coldest and most French painters imaginable. For all that is incredible about being in Rome, I remember that Josephine was having a crisis of subject matter. She generally painted things that nobody noticed, but there was nothing, not a doorway or cornerstone, that had gone unnoticed in Rome, continually, for thousands of years. In fact, it had all been intentionally arrested at a particular point of ruin. Not to mention the fact that Rome is where painters go to confront the whole history of their endeavor, and that too can be paralyzing. It's the kind of place where an ambitious young artist is supposed to make a statement about who they are in this long conversation.

The studio was on the second floor with three windows. One looked out across the city: on a clear afternoon you'd see foliage from a tree within the Medici walls, and then farther treetops from the street that runs along the top of the Spanish steps; beyond that, late afternoon sun lit up the many stone buildings of Rome the colors of aged apricot and smoked honey, framed by far-off hazy green hills and a pale but bright sky. On the opposite wall of the studio was a large grid of windows, providing the room with perfect northern light. Finally, a smaller window, about 31 by 21 inches, looked out onto the corner garden of the courtyard, filled with citrus trees. This most modest window was to become Josephine's subject.

She started making paintings looking out of it at night, with its picture-perfect, historically-encoded view totally blanked out. Life-sized, the canvases measured the outer perimeter of the window frame. They were each made over the course of a single evening in oil paint, from February to August of 2015, in what would become the ironic culmination of her "day paintings"; as close to an image of negation as you could get. Here was an undeniably abstract painting, a monochrome in the most rigorous tradition, literally reframed by the representational gray-green casing of the window frames, withholding the perspectival vista that structures European pictorial form. This adamant position was the center point between cross currents:

Europe and America, Catholic and Protestant, Ancient and Contemporary, Night and Day.

On May 24th, 2015 we pulled an all-nighter as she made the sixth painting in the series. Josephine started setting up around five in the afternoon and finished just before five in the morning. While we talked and listened to music, I kept extremely detailed time-stamped observations of her progress in my notebook:

> 10:20pm: Josephine is mixing paint— indigos and violets and licorice one after the other in a pile— with the tip of the knife. She uses a small round brush to lick the paint off the edge of the palette knife, carefully making a dark line, like a coin's edge, the separation between the window frame and its encasement. The pinky finger of her right hand rests on the outside of the canvas to steady it as the line grows inch-by-inch; these are movements made with the fingers. At this stage the gray frame is like five stripes. Painting this line up the left side, she rests her hand, very very softly, on the white canvas center.

Having made five of them before, she had a clear sense of the paintings then, their colors and order in which she painted, so there wasn't much vacillation or discovery, but she was still looking intensely at every aspect of the window the entire

night, the colors shifting in nuance from one canvas to the next.

I remember telling her about a life-changing trip I'd just taken to Southern Italy. After visiting Naples with my friend Christy, on the spur of the moment, upon leaving Pompeii I bought a train ticket to continue on alone a few hours farther south to Paestum. I didn't have a map or a smartphone and didn't even, you know, speak Italian, but I had confidence that I'd figure it all out. I wasn't quite prepared for the darkness of night in the seemingly empty field where the train let me out. I didn't see any lights or anyone to ask where to go. I just started walking in the direction that sloped slightly downward, imagining that way was the sea, and hopefully, a hotel. The evening was warm and the air was salty. Passing the famous Greek temple of Athena, with its massive ionic columns, I thought I could sleep there if need be, and that would have a kind of glamor.

Eventually I saw a sign for a resort a few miles off and kept following the road until I arrived. It was big and empty, vaguely reminding me of the hotel in *The Shining*. I told the attendant I couldn't afford the price quoted for the room, and he suggested another hotel further down, if they were still open. When I reached the door he called after me and asked what I could pay, and whatever it was, he took it and I spent the night in slightly bizarre luxury.

Paestum was the site of the ancient Greek

colony Poseidonia, where the indigenous pre-Roman Etruscans mixed with exported Greek culture. This is seen especially in the fresco tomb paintings which unite the Etruscan's uniquely lyrical and loose paintings with the more acute observations of Greek visual form. There are pictures of friends feasting, of horses drinking, of birds flying, all among the most vibrant paintings ever made. It's as though, because they were for the dead, all the usual grief of funerary art is gone—the dead don't have to mourn themselves—replaced with visions of blazing life.

The next morning at the National Archaeological Museum I went directly to the famous Tomb of the Diver, one of the earliest representations of queer lovers, gently caressing each other on a bed, gazing lovingly into each other's eyes. Painted on four stone slabs, they're actually the interior sides of a coffin. This is what I came to see: the delicacy of those fingers on that chest, just swift lines, a few colors, a few thousand years later, and as present as anything that ever was.

I wasn't prepared to encounter the painting on the larger stone that would have covered the coffin, that the dead would have looked up at forever. Against a blank white ground a naked red-ochre youth in profile is suspended in midair, his arms, torso, and body in an elegant arc. Only the feet are flat, parallel with the ground and sky, and the head is raised, facing a pale blue form at the bottom of

the painting which could be a sea or a cloud, a pool or a portal. On the left there is a tree the same color as the diver, with tendril-like branches as though feeling the air around it. To the right is the skeleton of a structure from which he jumped, a grid of black strokes that effortlessly signify Civilization, Architecture, or even just Geometry, which the diver is leaving behind for the amorphous undulant color.

It was the single most perfect painting I'd ever seen, all the more so for its seeming speed, clarity, and simplicity. Also it's incredibly sexy. It diagrams what art can do more directly than any other I know—that painting, like the body of the diver itself, is forever suspended in time; that fullness of life isn't an escape from death but a gift born of it, embracing sensate reality while bidding it adieu. I remember insisting, "Josephine, you have to go see this."

I've been thinking about our time in Italy together a lot for the past week in Stockbridge—which, as it turns out, was exactly nine years to the day—and contrasting how we've both grown, and the myriad ways friendship deepens with years, as life accrues around and between you. The form of her work has changed and so has mine, while at the same time being direct extensions of what we were doing then. We start talking about it, about the *Night Windows* and the Tomb of the Diver. "Well, first of all, I paint in this fresco-like way because

of Paestum," she says. "There's the permanence of the mark that is then trapped inside the tomb for 2,700 years before it was excavated, the privacy and publicness of that, and the vitality of those marks are just... I know it was probably just some guy in Poseidonia whose job it was to make the tomb paintings. But wow, did he do a good job."

"It's so exquisite. Actually—this is a little bit of a sore point for me, but I'll talk about it anyway, which is that I originally wanted to paint in this way with gouache to be much freer and looser and quicker, and it's developed in the opposite way. I don't know why. It's a riddle, but I've got to go with it. I don't have a choice in the matter. I think that it was intentional that the vitality of mark-making was on the inside of those tombs. In other words, it's not just the image of, say, homoerotic love or your favorite animal, or a hunting scene, or something that brought people joy. But it was the way it was painted that brought it to life. It really feels like there's wind in this underground tomb. So when I say it's a sore point, I mean: I want what I'm doing now to have a different kind of vitality, a different kind of freedom of saying what I mean. But I will, in time, get there. It's just going to take me a while."

I tell her I've been thinking of getting the diver tattooed on my neck. "Oh, you should—I really think you should." Eternity made flesh.

Tuesday, May 28

Yesterday was Memorial Day, when America remembers its soldiers, and the red, white, and blue parade route went right down Main Street, past our little-library, with remarks on the lawn in front of the Chime Tower. Josephine couldn't paint with all that going on, and it rained that morning anyway, so instead she returned to working on a large painting of a machine press that was left inside a barn she bought to convert into a studio, thirty minutes away in Sandisfield.

Before she'd arrived this morning she had sanded off the background, as well as the rainbow butterfly painted on the side (it didn't look in perspective and sat too parallel to the picture plane), and the two oblong black smudges on the upper right corner of the rainbow frame. Maybe the kids

were painting bats? There is just no way to make them look not confusing, she says, so she's editing them out.

After thinking it over a few days, she realized that the brighter colors on the roof and rainbow of the little-library were competing with the background, while the surround was too light to create the spatial distinction she wanted. Now she mixes a number of very dark greens in the muffin tins, and sunlight disappears beneath her brush. It seems like a drastic move to me, but after she's covered the top portions she says "Oh my god, I like it so much more—it feels like this place. I think I was afraid of being too dramatic but I'm going to lean into the drama. In the end I don't think it will look like such a radical decision."

The darkest part of the trees read as black in context, with just a few flecks of light blue in the upper right corner to signal the bright sky above the glowing peridot band of the golf course. Loose passages of light and dark mimic the sun filtering through the dense canopy and the patchwork of reddish pine needles. Once she finishes at midday, the area around the little-library is heavily shadowed, and she's totally right, it does look more like what we're seeing right now: this almost mystically illuminated house in a darkening space.

In the late afternoon Pastor Brent pulls his car over beside us on the road. "We've got something to show you." He rolls down the rear window to

reveal his son lifting an arm in a bright purple cast. Apparently once the boy packed up the snack stand he tried dragging it back home behind his bike and fell. We were out there all day, so it must have happened when we were paying attention to the color of the grass or the wedge of light that lands briefly on the corner of the library. Anyway, he's not in pain and they think it'll heal fine. Off they drive.

Wednesday, May 29

The longer we've been out here, and as the painting comes farther along, the visits and conversations have increased in frequency. Another woman stops early in the morning: "I've been seeing you here for days—that's very nice."

"I've changed the background a bit."

"Mind if I glance in the box?"

"Not at all. Do you frequent this little-library?"

"Yes I do. I'm a book nut. Are you going to put titles on any of those books?"

"Yes!—We'll see what's there when I go to paint them."

Today Josephine is finishing all the edges of the box, inside and out, finalizing the structure. "The color of wood is just never what you think—it can be garish, subtle, orange, blue...." The way she

moves her hand and the kind of strokes she makes has a lot in common with handwriting, and when I mention that, she says she really likes thinking of them as "longhand" paintings. That term has something to do with how she relates to "description"; the level of specificity and detail necessary to feel like adequate representation of the experience. "I think these paintings are almost written—it's no coincidence all the text is included."

When I ask for an example of description in that sense, without hesitating she names the poet Elizabeth Bishop. Together we move to the bench and she plays a recording of Bishop reading "At the Fishhouses." The poet lays out a scene, listing colors—a dark purple-brown, silver, emerald moss—constructing the buildings in the landscape, going from precise detail to precise detail:

> The big fish tubs are completely lined
> with layers of beautiful herring scales
> and the wheelbarrows are similarly plastered
> with creamy iridescent coats of mail,
> with small iridescent flies crawling on them.

The close repetition of the adjective "iridescent" enacts the word's multidimensionality, describing the disembodied fishes' scales and living insects simultaneously flickering in the light. The poem is organized around the sea, and continues returning, not just to its visible characteristics, but its taste,

temperature, motion, modified in sequence—cold dark deep and absolutely, clear / the clear gray icy water—until it becomes something metaphysical:

> It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:
> dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,
> Drawn from the cold hard mouth
> of the world, derived from the rocky breasts
> forever, flowing and drawn, and since
> our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown.

When the recording stops Josephine has tears running down her cheeks.

"First of all, it's just so matter of fact. Secondly, it's really visual. And she clearly seems to be making notes for some anticipated future activity. It's almost like notes for a painting. She enumerates things: how many there are, what color they are, what relationship they have to other things—there is a real flow from one thing to another thing to another thing to another thing. It's almost topographical, which is how I feel with painting, where edges meet. And you know, the thing about matter of factness, why it's one of my favorite things, is because it really lends itself to double entendre and multiple meanings. I believe the more something is what it is, the more it can be something else. When she talks about the scales of the fish, and it's actually about scales of the world, in terms of knowledge, and the ocean as the infinity of knowledge,

and yet she's talking about this thing at hand... That kind of back and forth is exquisitely done in this poem. She's so sensitive to a reader, orienting them to a season and a place as if providing a map of where they can find it. She's a really good mapper without being pedantic or didactic. I feel this is a whole life in just a little poem. It says that you can do all of that just through describing your immediate environment."

Thursday, May 30

As a diehard bibliophile I'm ashamed to admit that I always thought little-libraries were kind of dumb, just a way-station for bad and thoroughly unwanted books on their inevitable scuttle toward landfill. Sometimes I've glanced inside the one in my Brooklyn neighborhood but have never taken a book, and also never left one, feeling like I didn't want to burden anyone with something I myself didn't find worthy of keeping. If a book is *really good* I'd just give it directly to a friend. So imagine my surprise at discovering how heavily used this one is. Their positive attributes now verge on radical—a place where people engage in this oblique conversation by exchanging books without leaving much of a trace—in public, for free. It is an almost utopian proposition about what it means to live together.

Today Josephine is going to paint the books as they are presently configured; if anyone comes to take one, we might ask them to wait until tomorrow. The Trump book Vicky dropped off is long gone, along with *The Adventure Bible*, both to Josephine's relief. A Reese Witherspoon book club bestseller *Where the Crawdads Sing* appeared about two days ago, along with a fat romance novel by Rosamunde Pilcher called *Coming Home*. Also the golf tee just disappeared last night, no questions asked. Thankfully, *The Carpal Tunnel Syndrome Solution* remains.

She starts clarifying the shape and color of the covers, beginning to paint the text on their spines. First is the bottom of *The Golden Compass*, tucked in the corner, with the checkered Knopf logo and its tiny leaping borzoi. When she sets in on *Crawdads*, I tell her my mom read it, then call her on speakerphone: "Hi mom, you're my phone-a-friend, like on *Who Wants to Be A Millionaire*. I'm on the side of the road with Josephine who is painting a little-library and there is a copy of that *Crawdads* book in there and we wanted to know what it's about." Mom says the young girl protagonist runs away from her abusive father and lives in the marshes, and eventually publishes a book of drawings of shells and feathers, and she's dating this popular boy and then he dies, but it turns out she actually killed him—which my mom felt kind of ruined the ending. Her final estimation: "It's not that good, you don't need to read it."

I ask if the crawdads actually sing or is that just a metaphor—and they don't! "Love you, bye!"

Josephine has a theory that when painting lots of discrete objects, between two and eight will tempt the viewer to decode them into a coherent narrative. But if there are fewer than two or more than eight then it just becomes matter-of-fact—in other words, one thing. This is one library. I quickly count the books that are visible from her perspective, and then the painted animals on the side: there are about a dozen of each. "If there were fewer books it would be too symbolic. And I find that math surprising but consistent. Keep it in mind and check for yourself—anything between two and eight becomes allegorical in a really insistent way."

As an antidote to allegory, to stay present in the task at hand, Josephine is interested in tedium and boredom, because that is also a space where she feels the most creative and most free, as in the old adage of "boredom being the mother of invention." Increasingly in life, though, she finds it hard to get bored because there is so much to do, so much responsibility, so to get bored feels irresponsible. "I think it is also boring, painting this library."

"There is an exciting push at the end when things start to harmonize, that I'm really looking forward to. There's a lot going on out here, there is a lot of plot and subplot. And it's very interesting but it requires waiting, and that is why I think attention is close to waiting, anticipating, but also not really

knowing what you're waiting for. There is a passing-the-time quality, but the work is also about time passing, so that is a part of it too. I don't know why I'm painting a little-library in Stockbridge for two weeks. I'd be hard pressed to justify, rationally, that kind of experience and the conversations I'm having here with all this really horrific shit that is happening in the world, even stuff close to home with loved ones who are going through something right now.

"But there is something about putting yourself in a place and processing it that I feel strengthened by, the process of confronting the limits of what my own will and intention can produce. And the painting takes this time. It is never going to exist unless I do this. The cultivation of attention and time and the refusal to be deterred by tedium or fear or failure or the publicness of being out here and having to deal with that. By painting this small thing I'm really painting the whole town, including myself and you. It's bigger than what it seems to be."

Friday, May 31

On the final morning we start early. As usual, I bring Josephine a cortado from Stockbridge Coffee and Tea, handing it over while she unpacks her truck there for the last time. She's set up her table and easel, and before she's even taken out the painting, two women approach, "Oh, the Crawdads is already gone!" And it is, must have been scooped up last night after we left. One of the women had grabbed it about two weeks ago and then put it back when she finished. Both of them agreed they did not like the ending. As several people have inquired this week, one of them asks Josephine if she knows where she can take painting lessons, for portraits specifically, and Josephine directs them to a local artist she knows. As they're walking away one of the women tells us that as a birthday gift she made

a painting for her husband, of a bookshelf with all of his favorite books on it, and he just kind of shrugged. "I thought it was a good present but what do I know...."

Most people encounter plein-air painting as an amateur activity, and Josephine is frequently mistaken for a hobbyist, an aspect of her work she likes; it makes her presence less threatening and allows everyone to feel more comfortable. A couple times people have called the cops on her, most recently when she was painting out in the desert, and that kind of thing remains a possibility. Several visitors have suggested she have an exhibition in the town library, and seem surprised that she's had solo exhibitions before. "What are you going to do with your painting?" Josephine says she thinks it's going to be in her exhibition in Los Angeles in the fall, but that depends on if it turns out well. They get the message without being embarrassed.

Josephine starts the final stage of the painting, a process she calls "auditing": looking at every inch of the surface, checking things she made a mental note of changing, like that edge she wanted shifted. She'd done it with the brown already on her brush, but knows it needs to be covered with red. There are a few details she's just been putting off, like the "POW! graphic novels" sticker wrapping the spine of Archie Meets Kiss. "It appears to be only three colors, red, yellow, and black, but it's half in shadow so that's mixing six colors. I'll just go ahead and do

that now."

One sour older lady finally works up the umbrage to ask if Josephine had gotten a permit; they need a permit to do everything in that town, even to hold a tag sale on their own front lawn. A guy in a big red-orange dump truck going back and forth to the construction site has started giving us a honk every time he passes, about twice a day. Another lady who's lived here since the seventies stops to talk on her way from the library to a meeting at the church. When asked how Stockbridge has changed in that time she says, "About twenty years ago they put in a second stop sign." And there are the Rockwells to prove her right. It seems like people can sense that Josephine's painting is almost done and they are pouncing on their last chance to see it, to talk to her, or maybe, it seems to me, to keep her from finishing.

A woman who introduces herself as Joanne appears, asking about painting lessons with a beautifully thick Massachusetts accent. She explains that she went to art school in Boston in the seventies, where she had to make a painting with gouache too, of a grid where you get the colors to go from light to dark, and a still-life of a fork and egg. She looks at that painting in her kitchen every day and realizes she still doesn't know how to paint a fork and egg. She'd spent time near where Josephine grew up in Cape Cod because her grandmother had a trailer there, and she worked at Filene's

in the Natick Mall, the town next-door to where Josephine's father was from. It's like Joanne is some bizarre specter of Josephine's parents, and maybe even a different version of herself: not "Josephine" but "Joanne."

Joanne asks if she's going to paint the glass in the library door, and Josephine explains she probably won't; it's too risky. Josephine likes the idea of reflecting the town, and sometimes she can see the reflection of the yellow line of the road across it. But she thinks that will be too visually confusing for the painting; it can be either a painting of the books or a painting of the reflection, and if you're looking through a window to the other side, you're not really seeing what's reflected on top of it. But she will, she reassures Joanne, try to indicate the presence of glass, probably by the little shadow at the edge of where the glass meets the frame. Perhaps that will be enough.

This was similar to her position regarding the *Night Windows* back in Rome; she did not paint her own reflection in the glass or the room, because, she said, she was looking through the window into the night, and so she tried to paint the space between her and the glass, the glass itself with its undulations, dust, and bugs, and the space beyond. This conceptually separates her from the work of virtuoso observational painters like Catherine Murphy, who glory in depicting the simultaneous reflections and distortions on the surface of translucent

objects, as in Murphy's *Nighttime Self-Portrait* (1985), which reflects back in the murky panes of a darkened window.

Over the previous two weeks I'd noted how often Josephine uses the term "practice," something I fastidiously avoid in writing or talking about art, feeling it's overly professionalized and jargon-y. Dentists have practices, and lawyers, not artists. But in her case I understand it differently, because she is a "practicing artist" in public as though it were any other job. She's doing her thing, in the same way those construction guys are, or the dog walker, no better and no worse. She'll talk to you if you come by. You can see her painting right there, you don't even have to go into an art gallery or museum to do it. And the implication of "practice" as something ongoing, a daily activity which is driven as an ongoing means of attending to itself, makes perfect sense. It's painting as a way of living, and of being in the world.

Furthermore, every painting she makes is as specific as this one, addressing the vastly different cultural histories of their individual subjects and the locations she finds them, and the distinct kinds of engagement it solicits. Thinking out loud, I hazard, "Because you don't paint figures, one might think your work is about objects themselves. But all these social dynamics seem as important. Maybe the paintings are more about a love of people, and the objects can act as complex surrogates for all

these kinds of interactions?"

"Yes, I think you can feel it in the paintings. It would be difficult to prove. But it is something that I do believe is in the paintings," she replies.

Josephine finishes the books and moves out to the rainbow around the front door-window. She realizes that the children's loosely-painted bands of color have to contrast with a very straight outer frame to make the distinction clear, and she focuses on tightening those edges while making the rainbow looser. When she finishes she says, "It looks like a gay pride rainbow library to me again, instead of Noah's Ark." We both turn to see a giant rainbow flag has been hung over the entrance to the First Congregational in anticipation of Pride month, which begins tomorrow.

She pulls a pale blue-gray line down the inside edge, then adds a sliver of red reflection. "That's the glass." The brass knob is added breezily, described with colorful highlights and shadows in just a few moves. "I wish I could just paint knobs all day long because that knob was so fun to paint." She realizes she can very slightly see the two hinges on the far side and paints them in. There are details that matter, and there are details that don't; the distinction is not arbitrary but subjective.

The afternoon is growing late. The last thing she has to do is reinforce the bright line on the top of the roof, and along the shingles where it hits the landscape. Every day this week around this time

of day, the Chime Tower begins ringing a lugubrious selection of the American song book: "Star Spangled Banner," "Camp Town Races," "Kumbaya," "Auld Lang Syne," "This Land Is Your Land." Because of the technical dynamics of the chiming mechanism, the songs sound very slowed down; it's like trying to recognize melodies underwater. They begin at 5:30 but we've never stayed through the end until today. Soon after six a woman in a car pulls up beside us to say, "Those chimes bothering you? Because I'm the one playing 'em."

Apparently it's a Stockbridge summertime tradition dating back to 1878, spanning "Apple blossom time and the first frost on the pumpkin," now set from Memorial to Labor Day. We thank her and say it sounds great and hope she didn't hear us making fun of them for the past half hour. Not long after, Josephine pronounces the painting finished. Surveying the pine niche, the golf course, the cemetery, and the church, the whole vast town organized around this multicolored little-library, she laughs. "This world is just so fucking weird—this whole painting has shown me that. I know it's going well when I say to myself, 'you can't make this up.'"

As she's packing I notice bald spots in the grass where Josephine and I have been standing: two brownish rectangles, parallel and roughly the same size, the aggregations of two weeks of standing, pacing, talking, and looking, creating their own kind of temporary drawing in the landscape. I think

about the recursive conversations of life and death that have risen and vanished over our time here, and the intense focus on remembering: the Main Street reenactment of the Christmas painting, the Memorial Day parade, the dedicated Chime Tower and war monuments, the visual preservation of the town architecture, of the storied ruins of Rome, the Protestant cemetery, the Etruscan tomb, the roadside altar—how overwhelming this predicament of being in time is, and the myriad deeply human ways we embrace it, displace it—tying knots of past and future in objects and images.

Unbidden, I recall the ending of *Our Town*, Thornton Wilder's 1938 play set at the turn of the nineteenth century, a high-concept portrait of life and death in a fictional New England town, for which this town would still be an appropriate setting. In the first act we meet Emily Webb as a child, in the second she is a seventeen-year-old on her wedding day, and in the third act, nine years later, she appears as a ghost in the local cemetery, having just died in childbirth. There she is reunited with deceased townsfolk, a chorus of the dead with strong New England accents who all studiously avoid the living attending her funeral. Emily, quite understandably as a young mother and new ghost, wants to go back with them, to relive the happiest moments of her life. Her fellow departed beg her not to do this. But there is no dissuading her, so they urge her to choose an "ordinary day" to return

to, not one of her favorite or most important.

Emily then finds herself watching her young mother and father and brother as they were on the morning of her twelfth birthday. Life is going on, nothing special, but Emily is so sensitized to its fleeting fullness she cannot bear more than a few moments, lamenting, "I can't look at everything hard enough." It continues until she begs to return to the cemetery on the hill, saying goodbye to so many specific details—sunflowers, coffee, hot baths—bursting into tears, "I can't. I can't go on. Oh! Oh. It goes so fast. We don't have time to look at one another." Upon her return she is chided by another ghost:

> Now you know! That's what it was to be alive. To move about in a cloud of ignorance; to go up and down trampling on the feelings of those... of those about you. To spend and waste time as though you had a million years. To be always at the mercy of one self-centered passion, or another.

This knowledge is made all the more painful because earlier in the play Emily had already proven herself as especially perceptive, pausing in her youth to look at the moon and remind her father about the night fragrance of the heliotropes. The rather heavy-handed and yet inescapably effective point is that human life, no matter how sensitive

we are to it, needs us to be more sensitive still, that there is a violence being done every moment that we are not, to each other, and to ourselves.

It is something we cannot learn well enough, and it is one of art's chief lessons, allowing us to prematurely rehearse that loss, to brush against our own transience. I think back on the stream of people who walked by for the past two weeks, realizing how I've regarded them as stock characters, no more concerned for the complexity of their doings than the squirrels ferrying food along the fence. That there was indeed a surplus to our experience hardly sketched in—even the painting remains, in these words, so inadequately pictured. It is impossible for the living to recognize the depth of this interconnection, of what it means for our emotional, psychic, and civic lives to be so inextricably intertwined that we have to adapt some kind of myopia to go about our day, to be able to do any one thing or another.

The canniness of Wilder's play is that it imagines ghosts shedding these blinders to finally learn this, too late; and in this sense art, by insisting on its radical presence, enables us to do so while still alive. To look carefully at Josephine's precisely described still-lifes positions us as ghosts in the same way seeing the Tomb of the Diver aligns us with the vantage of the dead, as one for whom life has already changed into something we cannot understand.

The bright colors on the library will fade in the sun, but knowing Stockbridge, it will be repainted and preserved for decades, until eventually it rots, and either is or isn't replaced. If properly cared for, Josephine's painting of it will stay exactly as it is, after she or I, after the population of the town, even after everyone currently living on this earth, is long dead. Good-by, Good-by, Berkshires…Jonathan Edwards and Norman fucking Rockwell! Good-by snack stand and golf course…and Archie Meets Kiss and The Carpal Tunnel Syndrome Solution… and creepy chime songs and the cool dump truck guy. Oh, and the little-library— all too wonderful for anybody to realize.

Photographs

Underpass Road

In 1990, my mom made three sets of signs highlighting local businesses, including her own. Each was installed at a different intersection in Brewster, Massachusetts, the town where I grew up. She charged $30 per sign, which paid for the permitting and materials, but not her labor.

F 6/7/24: Looking towards the top of painting

Last summer, one was hit by a car that breached the curb. My mom collected the pieces and brought them to her shop. Ever since, they've been waiting for repair. The town is unlikely to grant new permits.

Su 5/12/24: Paints + palettes, Brewster

Their deep green in my memory is chalky with time. My paint dries matte like the tree pollen that coats everything in May.

F 5/10/24: Mom at Rose Forge, Brewster

My hand becomes my mom's as I transcribe her letters. I recognize her in the way she paints R's. She also designed the lettering for her shop, which sells stoves and forms custom metalwork. After 45 years, she's closing her doors.

I paint slow change. The sign is on the ground, but in the painting it levitates. It's not quite standing on its own and it's not at rest, either.

Desert Hydrant

Hydrants around Joshua Tree, California are pale yellow. Online searches tell me that color designates flow rate and ownership. Chrome yellow is the standard, but the ones I come across are faded and bright.

T 3/12/24: One of the political banners in town

Political banners call for continued funding for local fire protection. The vote coincides with the day I begin painting the fire hydrant.

F 3/8/24: Table setup with paints + palettes

I work with water-based paints, which evaporate quickly in arid conditions. My surface is a specially prepared ground that absorbs color instantly.

The high desert is home to plants that conserve water and survive harsh conditions.

I string a rope through my easel and the painting's backing frame. I tie one end to the base of a nearby cholla cactus and the other to my left rear hubcap.

W 3/7/24: Justine at the painting site

Justine teaches me photography and I teach her painting. We spend a couple of weeks working alongside each other. In the afternoons, when the sun drops behind the boulders, she brings me turmeric tea.

T 3/12/24: Peter reading while I paint

Peter reads an interview with Helen Oyeyemi to me from the shade of the car while I work.

Through interpretation, the subject and its function distance themselves from one another. Painting personifies the hydrant. It's naked, adorned, at attention.

New Hours

I'm painting at my local transfer station. This is where I bring the detritus that filters through my week. The sign at the entrance announces "new" opening hours. It's been there ten years.

M 6/17/24: The sanded-down panel

I sand down a mediocre painting because its panel corresponds to the size of the sign. I trade old hours for new ones.

T 6/25/24: Colors for New Hours

Each of my tubes and bottles of paint has a lightfastness rating, indicating the color's resistance to UV light. The red of the sign's lettering is still intense. In the painting I match it with Napthol.

W 6/19/24: Painting

For years, I started and finished a piece over the course of a day. Now I return to the same site repeatedly, painting in longhand.

Sun 7/7/24: Afternoon shadow

In my practice, units of time—hours, days, weeks—are shorthand for constant transitions of circumstance. SUN appears in this painting twice, in letter and in light.

It's dusk when I hear a small bark and look up. A raccoon stares at me from the other side of my table. I back away. There's been a change of shift and I'm here after hours.

I Help You

This notice board is in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. I like this spot because it's at the edge of downtown but still gets foot traffic. W.E.B. Du Bois grew up across the street. To make a painting here, I'm a "tourist at home," to use Lucy Lippard's phrase.

W 6/27/2024: Hanging new notices

It's counterintuitive to post printed matter in the information age, but in person you can feel the urgency of each analog message. They are temporary and time-sensitive.

W 7/3/2024: The notices

Locally, self-improvement is a theme. So is democracy and small business.

F 6/28/24: Sidewalk setup

I set up on the sidewalk, aware of my footprint. The guy who runs a store down the street yells at me for detracting shoppers. For the rest of the painting, I work while his store is closed and feel angry. On my last day, he apologizes, telling me I was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

T 7/2/2024: Edge of the painting

The *trompe l'oeil* tradition gathers fragments of architecture, images, and text and suspends them with new significance. Through illusionism and life-scale, it asks what is real and what isn't.

Passersby comment on the verisimilitude. Some don't recognize the painting at all, assuming I'm posting notices or offering French lessons. Someone making deliveries calls out over their shoulder, "Où est la bibliothèque?"

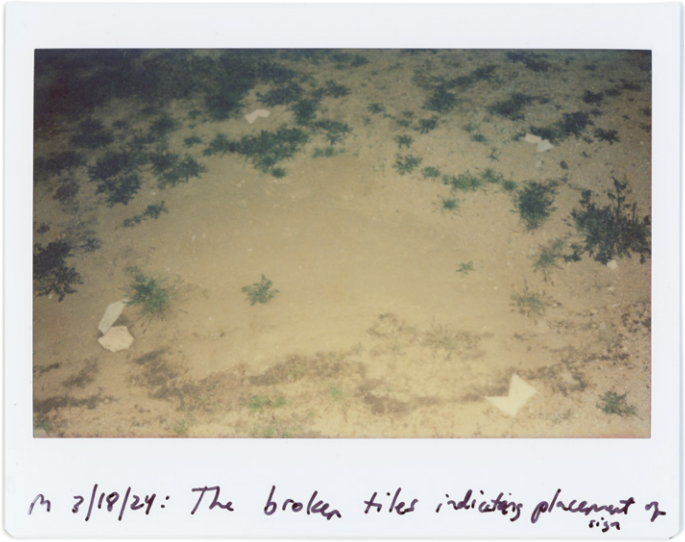
5 Acres

M 3/18/24: Peter with the sign, Landers, CA

Peter and I find a For Sale sign on the side of the road. We drive it to our Airbnb. Two weeks later, we return it.

W 3/13/24: The 5 acres sign in the afternoon

It feels more stolen than borrowed.



M 3/19/24: The broken tiles indicating placement of sign

The heavy plywood lands on the ground and I mark its placement. The sign is now farther from the parcel it advertises, yet calls attention to my own use of property to depict it and the cost of development.

The sign lies flat but is cleaved. Was it run over? The lettering spells out a revised price and terms of sale.

In her poem **Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings**, Joy Harjo writes, "The land is a being who remembers everything."

W 3/13/24: Sketching out the sign

The trapezoid of the sign in perspective becomes a different kind of plot. Its boundary is defined by grasses, pebbles, shadows, and my own wavering hand.

Free Library

While driving through Stockbridge, Massachusetts, I see a colorful, freestanding library box. I'm drawn to subjects that are not for purchase, nor demand a price of admission.

W 5/29/24: Current books in the library

Little free libraries are in many towns and cities, a gift economy. Installed on public and private property, they encourage the circulation of books.

W 5/29/24: Jarrett reading his essay on Dana Schutz

Jarrett is visiting to write about my practice. He's the most avid reader I know. We share a love of words.

f 5/31/24: Mini Library painting in situ

We chat with loaners and lenders, as well as curious passersby. The selection of titles changes frequently.

W 5/22/24: Vicki, Librarian, Stockbridge

Vicki installed the library with permission from the Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohican Indians, for whom this ground is sacred, and from the Waldorf School, which now owns the land.

The box, decorated by local children, illustrates Noah's Ark and the rainbow, which now symbolizes Pride. The library is as multifaceted as the town itself.

In my paintings of books, signs, and posters, I merge color and language through the sensuality of touch. It's a challenge to balance text and image.

Smiley Face

Last August, I took a detour in Sandisfield, Massachusetts. Along the shoulder of the road, trees were marked in fluorescent pink spray paint. The color was still bright so the plans to cut them down were fresh.

Digital photo of the painting in situ

One was tagged with a smiley face. I paint the tree's bark, spray paint, light, slivers of the landscape, and someone else's gesture.

The painting in my studio

I read, and read into, objects and their surfaces. I look closely, transcribing what I observe and sense. The channels bored by insects become glyphs and the face looks back. There are messages everywhere, an intermingling of expression.

where I stood last year

With sustained attention, there is reciprocity and exchange. Jane Bennett's concept of "thing-power" affirms my experience that objects have a say in whether, when, and how I paint them.

faded
Smiley Face, one year later

Almost a year later, I follow my tracks to visit the site. The wide trunk, still standing, was never cut down and the pink has faded. I look up and realize there is no new growth; the tree was dead all along. My painting gave it extra time.

Drill Press

This four-armed drill press made airplane parts in a barn, which is now my studio. The machine is too heavy and expensive to move. I return to it over the course of the academic year.

My students' eyes show up in the switches and stare out warily. I feel the pressure to prepare them for an uncertain future. I want to get the proportions right and things in perspective. This painting relies on draftspersonship.

Ladybugs appear in spring, sputtering on the nearby window. The scene is a study in opposites: in-flight and grounded, red and green, energetic and static.

My brushes articulate the hardware and cast edges of the press. To paint the dank air, I soak my largest sable in metallic gray and drag it around in cursive.

The American Precisionists, overwhelmingly male, owned the subject of industry and its promise. I now live in the shadow of its effects. I'm the female heir to the drill press's obsolescence.

Mass

Freight and passenger trains travel these tracks to and from Boston and Chicago. I'm working at the state line, standing in New York while looking towards Massachusetts.

M 6/10/24: CSX train passing by, loud + fast

The gates close quietly because the signal doesn't ding. I feel the force of the oncoming train when the sound of the horn reaches me.

W 6/5/24: Where I've been standing

I begin this painting in winter. A gust catches my panel and we both go down hard. I bruise on the sharp rocks of the ballast.

It's summer now. There's less wind and more visitors. I meet Ariana who brings me cold water. She's concerned for me in the heat.

Bill works for the railroad and approaches me in uniform. I'm worried he'll tell me to leave, but instead he wants a photo to send to his wife. I give him a Polaroid and he says he'll frame it.

Th 6/13/2024 : State police

I get thumbs up from passing drivers, construction workers, and a state trooper. I'm surprised by the fondness travelers have for this marker and the goodwill they extend to my painting.

T 6/4/24: State line painting, Amtrack passing

The painting moves along like the train. Unexpected experiences, associations, and puns appear like station stops. Injury, kindness, boundary, a tumor, a crowd, sacrament, a tombstone. I think of the flatness of Ana Mendieta's *Siluetas*. Mass does exist in two dimensions.

The final day.

Shells and Glass

Venus arrives on the half shell to Cyprus via the wind. She's a washashore, you could say; someone who isn't born on the island but decides to stay. I'm a Cape Codder who leaves and returns, both possessive of this place and possessed by it, haunted by its ancestral pull.

T/W 7/16/24: Painting at the end of the day

I'm painting a pile of shells and beach glass combed from the shores of Provincetown. This is where, as a teenager, I first learned to paint. I spent the mornings at Herring Cove and the afternoons on Pearl Street, scraping the color of light onto masonite panels with a knife.

W 7/17/24: Oysters + their shells, P-town

25 years later on the same street, I'm shucking oysters for my friend Liz. She's teaching drawing on the local beaches, where she helped collect the shells for my painting.

M 7/15/24: Shells in the Sand

A manuport is an archeological term that describes an object, usually unaltered by humans, relocated from its original environment. The word derives from the Latin **manus**, meaning "hand," and **portare**, "to carry."

M 7/15/24: Shells

I carry the shells and glass in a towel and open the bundle out on the table. I paint the pieces where they land.

The tide redraws the shoreline.

Jarrett Earnest

Jarrett Earnest is the author of *Valid Until Sunset* (2023, MATTE Editions) and *What it Means to Write About Art: Interviews with Art Critics* (2018, David Zwirner Books). He edited and wrote the introductions to *Feint of Heart: Art Writings 1982–2002* by Dave Hickey (2024), *Devotion: Today's Future Becomes Tomorrow's Archive* (2022), *Painting is a Supreme Fiction: Writings by Jesse Murry, 1980–1993* (2021), *The Young and Evil: Queer Modernism in New York, 1930–1955* (2020), and *Hot, Cold, Heavy, Light: 100 Art Writings 1988–2017* by Peter Schjeldahl (2019). His essays and interviews have appeared in publications around the world, and regularly in the *New York Review of Books*.

Josephine Halvorson

Josephine Halvorson makes art that foregrounds firsthand experience and observation. She works primarily in painting, but also in sculpture and printmaking. Born in Brewster, Massachusetts, she studied at The Cooper Union (BFA, 2003), Yale Norfolk (2002), and Columbia University (MFA, 2007). Halvorson's work has been exhibited at Storm King Art Center, New York; ICA Boston; Havana Bienale; James Fuentes, Los Angeles; Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York; and Peter Freeman, Paris. In 2021 she presented a solo exhibition of site-responsive work at the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum in Santa Fe, New Mexico, as the Museum's first artist in residence. Other residencies and fellowships include the John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship (2021), the French Academy in Rome at the Villa Medici (2014–2015), the Harriet Hale Woolley at the Fondation des États-Unis in Paris, France (2007–2008), and the US Fulbright to Vienna, Austria (2003–2004). Since 2016, Halvorson has been Professor of Art and Chair of Graduate Studies in Painting at Boston University. She lives in western Massachusetts.

Justine Kurland

Justine Kurland is an artist known for countering masculinist myths and creating space for women through photography and collage. Kurland's work has been exhibited at museums and galleries in the United States and abroad. Her work is included in the permanent collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum of Art, New York; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Carnegie Museum, Pennsylvania; Getty Museum, California; National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; and the Museum of Fine Arts, Montreal, among others.

List of Plates

1 *Underpass Road*, 2023–2024
Acrylic gouache on panel
63 × 44 inches

2 *Desert Hydrant*, 2024
Acrylic gouache on panel
33 × 28 inches

3 *New Hours*, 2024
Acrylic gouache on panel
25 × 31 ¾ inches

4 *I Help You*, 2024
Acrylic gouache on panel
36 × 31 inches

5 *5 Acres*, 2024
Acrylic gouache on panel
35 × 42 inches

6 *Free Library*, 2024
Acrylic gouache on panel
36 × 35 inches

7 *Smiley Face*, 2023
Acrylic gouache on panel
27 × 37 inches

8 *Drill Press*, 2023–2024
Acrylic gouache on panel
60 × 54 inches

9 *Mass*, 2023–2024
Acrylic gouache on panel
60 × 34 inches

10 *Shells and Glass*, 2024
Acrylic gouache on panel
18 × 23 inches

979-8-9887960-2-2 52000 >
9 798988 796022