

STILL LIFE



Most of these paintings, but not all, were done for Painting classes between 2010 and 2013. My main concern was to provide examples for students to follow, imitate or learn from. Some of them were done with or beside students who were doing the same thing. Some were done for fun, to understand or show the physical facts and painting processes to students or to study a given animal or insect. My concern with still life outside of a teaching aid is rather different. I speak of this in the poem below. The conventions that govern the content of still life, I maintain, are logical but arbitrary. I question that in my own work. But for now let's look at what I did as a teacher.

Usually I would have the students try to imitate a grey scale, values 1-9. Once that was done I set up some white blocks I had made, with a strong light shining on one side, and had the students paint the light using their grey scale. This is an example I made for students.



Then I would ask them to paint the blocks using color, teaching them how to make greys using complimentary colors combined such as ochre and purple, red and green, or blues and oranges. Like this:



A few times I tried to get the students to show the light on the blocks using little or no black or white at all. The warm and cool tones create the light that we see in the work. Warm or cool means that the color tends to red or blue, yellow or purple. You can see that the color on the front left block is yellowish with some blueish. The block on the right side is bluer on its shadow face. The shadow of each block is a little darker, the shadow on the lighter block being darker still.

This was hard for them to do. Another thing that I tried which was hard for beginning students was not to do a square but a sphere instead. I bought some ping pong balls into class and had each student do one. Drawing spheres in space proved very difficult and painting one was even harder. So I only tried this once as a teaching device for a less advanced group of students. It was too hard to do.



Of course, my own work is different than what I taught in classes. The 'genre' of still life is really an arbitrary category. Still life is one of many "kinds" of painting, genre is a word that originates with the word "kinds". Still life is a "genre". Of course dividing painting up into kinds or genres is a dealers or critics conceit and not an artist's concern. We don't paint to satisfy markets or makers of abstract ideas or ideologies. A painter, at least myself, if not others, makes many "kinds" of works. Genre does not interest me much: life does. He is trying to express something about life, not painting kinds of paintings to keep dealers, critics or curators happy. I am largely content driven rather than thinking of genres or kinds. If I paint my kids I am trying to express something about them or if I paint a tomato, it is something about tomatoness or vegetables I am trying to say. I have done 'still lives' of larger things, like a drawing of an Inuit Kayak, an Amish carriage and horse, an outhouse, or a pile of books in a self portrait. In this work, for instance, is a small pile of old books:



Yet there is also a cloisonné candle stick. There are also many books, my own books, gathered over many years, which I know well, and a goblet.



In addition to the candle stick there are few bookcases of books and a man, myself, reading one. This work was done almost entirely from life, except the figure, and most of the objects in it could be considered a still life. But the concept of still life was far from my mind. I am always studying something for myself as well as teaching my kids different things, since they are homeschooled.

This is true of many paintings I have done. Is a breast feeding woman a still life, or a horse, a boy catching a ball? Normally, these are not thought to be still life images, but they well could be, if the artist is seeing them as objects to be praised, or loved, or merely things that he or she wants to record. A real artist is blissfully free of these arbitrary categories such as still life, genre painting, botanical or wildflower images, nudes, baseball images or kids riding a bike or playing tug of war. One thing I like about Realism is that it is largely free of conventions and formal categorizations. In a sense, all my work is still life, yet none is. Yet I organize mostly table top images of fruit or vegetables as still life here, pursuing a more narrow definition of the term, for a painting class. I admit this is arbitrary. As a teacher I have followed the forms this society dictates, but as an artist, I don't.

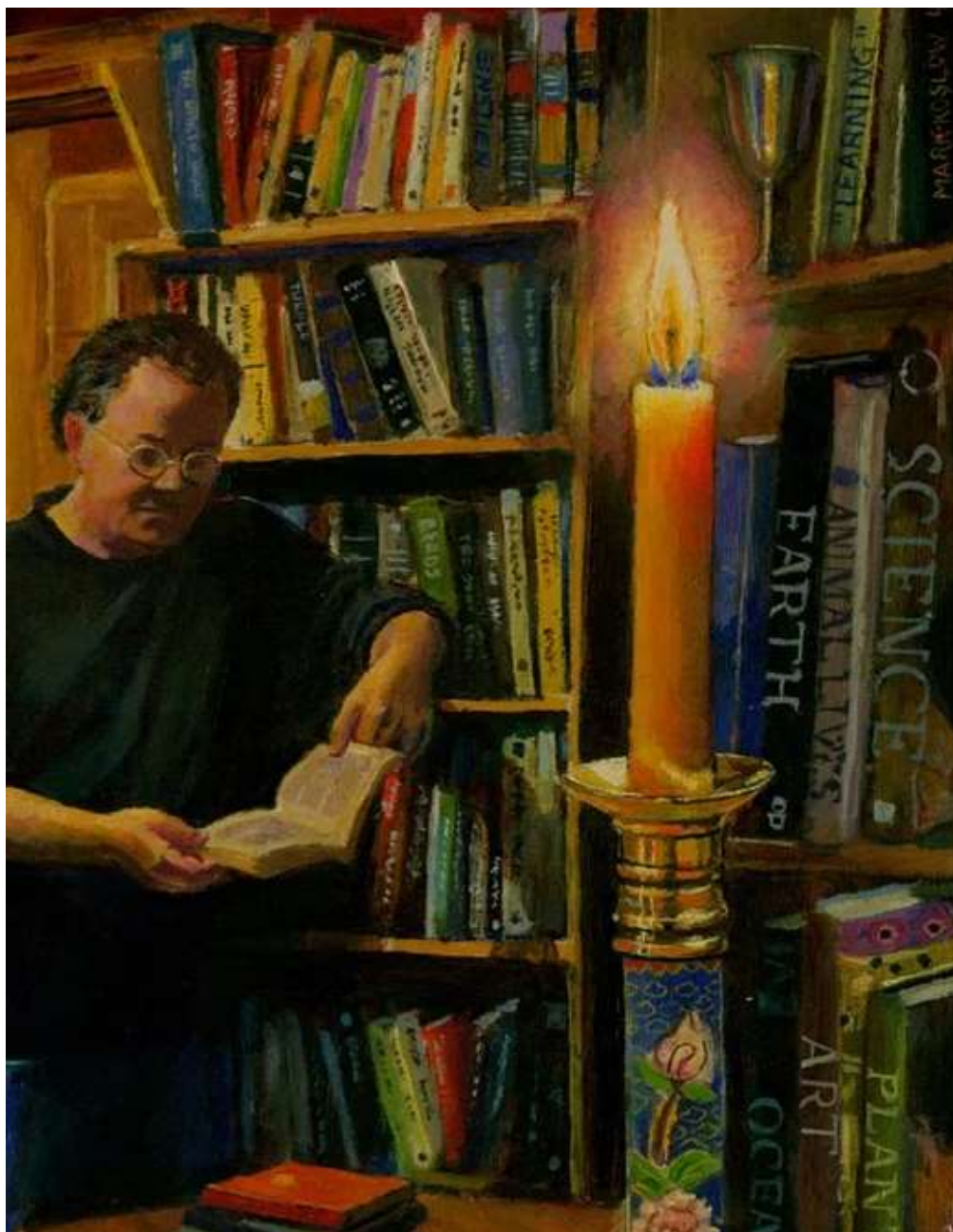
A fairly standard popular text on Still Life is Still Life by Norbert Schneider. It only deals with still life in the early 'modern'; period, namely, the origins of still life in the 1600's especially in the Netherlands. He notes(pg.7) that that the concept of still life occurs in academic concepts only after the "first crest of their development had already passed". Artists had already long been using the forms and content of 'still life' long before the convention of it was spoken of by academics. The concern with what would become Japanese Haiku already existed for some centuries in China. The French do not codify the concept into a phrase until later in the 1700's with the invention of the unfortunate term 'nature morte', or dead nature. Rachel Ruysch would be horrified at this, as she was painting very live things, not dead ones. The concept "immobile objects" (1780) is a little better but not much. There is a lot of movement in the interesting and early natural history still lifes of Otto Van Schrieck.

In the hierarchy of values during the age of Absolutism, 'still life' was put in the lowest rank well below biblical, mythical or paintings of Kings, in accord with the absurd notion of the "great chain of being". I certainly don't subscribe to this. Nor am I interested in the negation of content in cubist or abstract still life. Many early still lifes occur in Speciesist contexts and employ cruelty toward animals as a common theme.. This is obvious in the masses of dead animals in Frans Snyders works of Game Still Lives, or the famous Slaughtered Ox of Rembrandt. One could say with some accuracy that early science is largely speciesist and that still life is an outgrowth of that. This does not interest me, except as an historian.

As painting becomes divorced from absolutist politics and more scientific, the hierarchy of values dissolves, the great chain of being is dismantled and still life becomes the painting of actual life, the small things in life--- and joins up with Chinese and Japanese concepts of the praise of the ordinary. I am simplifying the history quite a bit, but this is what happens over the last 400 years. I like de-Zenned Haiku, and still life devoid of vanitas and joined up with other “kinds” of painting. I pursue a genreless realism.

Painting is a continuum that can picture all of life and death. This is one of the many things I love about it. Painting is about all of life and is restricted only by one’s narrow or wide conception of what life is. Painting can be about my children, go into the past and picture Henry Thoreau, or show vegetables. Art historical or critical categories are conventions more than facts. From the point of view I live in, this is arbitrary. Painting is a way of relating to the small and the large, but it is not about size or conventions. It is about all that one makes it about. I mean to go here beyond the convention of still life. Critics are largely conventional thinkers to try to make art into a fashion that serves money making schemes. None of that interests me. Art critics are largely market wonks, who serve powers that have little to do with art. My work is blissfully outside of that. I am a painter and a thinker, not a paid art critic or museum curator, subservient to an ideological point of view.

The detail below is really an intellectual landscape/still life of sorts, which I know the content of more than anyone. I will leave the content of this work mysterious for now, but it could be spelled out if I wished.



The following poem explains this as well as makes allusions to the paintings below it, so this whole page is a sort of Haiga, a poem-painting that celebrates some ordinary objects I have painted. The poem brings up an argument against the traditional idea of Still Life. I will let it speak for itself:

Ode to Science 18

Ode to Still Life.

The dearness of things: I find myself saying “Dear”
and mean so many different things. My mom--- who is dead 3 years
or “my dear mom....”
---talking to my daughter
or my spouse when they are not there...
I want to say
“dear sweetness of living” or, even “dear tears”,
dear hands now getting old guy
wrinkly skin unstoppable aging---
“dear bedtime stories” I love to tell my daughter
every night,
“dear food on the dinner table”
and the dear way at the table
we say thanks to the earth, my six year old starts it off.
Yeah ---look at the apples and bananas, dishes,
the jar of home made maple syrup from our own trees
with liquid sunlight in it.
Still lives aren’t natura morte at all- but nature alive.
I did not paint a dead downy woodpecker to make a memento of it,
but out of sadness that it flew into our window and died,
and to study a form of nature that is hard to study otherwise.
Not dead nature, not memento mori, far from that
Christian fantasia of vanitas--death worshiping nonsense,
scouring the natural love of life
with obsessions of death---
no, still life art should not be that at all-
but rather like Frida Kahlo’s Watermelons on which she wrote
“Vive la vida”, long live life and no to death, death, death.
So many still lives from the 16th to the 19th century embody the cold
mentality of the Inquisition applied to the lively
and celebratory beauty of Vegetables and Salamanders.
I am not a colonialist of vegetables,

This candle light of my life flickering
for what really matters but

the moments of what was loved—this delicious cluster of grapes these
Intricate Intimacies: what's is close at hand:
the nearness of dear things.
Your hands, your dear lips,
dear socks and orange slices
and sour crème on potatoes I make for my two year old
his smile, all the things corporations don't own---
slim zucchini and fat tomato, purple onion and red radish
friends of the table
where we share what our garden's grown.
But Still Life is not merely kitchen art,
but it is that too.

Yes. Still Life is this failing so beautifully
the effort to grasp the obvious:
to make semi-permanent what passes so quickly
the effervescent joy of all these dear things:
thimble that I used to sew carpets with,
old box I used for gouaches I did by the Pacific ocean,
water drops on the silver goblet I held as a child
at the Sunday dinner my Mom pours cold water in it---
Mangoes my 2 year old and I ate at the table at the Food Co-op
in Eureka, me cutting its sunlight sections
into eatable pieces, using my tiny Swiss knife.
I try to fix in stillness the life that is there and is now going--- gone
in the moment of its exact existence,
right where I kiss the lips of time and blink
when a feather drops toward my eyes and.....
the beauty of a downy woodpecker feather falling.
Periodic Cicadas come only every seventeen years--
and only last above ground for 3 or 4 weeks.
Amazing to see them and appreciate them in paint,
when so many hate them.
They crawl on my 8 year old sons arms.
This delight in the life of things.

What did Isaac Newton's desk look like
when he wrote the Opticks?
Wish I could see that.
Famous not famous all the same love of what is.
Hypatia had a brush on the night stand next to her bed
when she lay there at night thinking of the earth
going around the sun?
Einstein's pipe sits on a page of the last calculations
he made before he died: he was still not able to grasp the whole
after all those years
of seeking a Grand Theory and failing...
Beckett was a still life himself sitting there
in his little house in Ussy, France
day after long day, unable to write more than a sentence.
Giving up that Christian obsession with death at last
giving up the existential horror--
things I live with in this only world there is:
the sad stars that light my eyes with hope for my daughter
the only world that will ever be, now as in the 16th century
when Otto Marseus Van Schrieck did some
of the first Natural History paintings of Mushrooms and
Salamanders with flowers with Frogs.
Records of the real world.
And his follower, Rachel Ruysch
did her resplendent flower studies and "forest still lives".
Yes, that science wedded to a fascination
with the poetry of the small
the Haiku of ordinary things, the existence
finally void of Buddhist voids.
No more sunyata or emptiness
or abstract heavens trumping ordinary reality
the absurd vanity of phony transcendence is what I gave up too.

Away with religious bosch/bosh and bombast:
finger wagging priests condemning the ten thousand things.
Those ten thousand things are all that matters.
Real still life could be anything,
any one of the innumerable ten thousand things
condemned by the religious.

Still life comes of age with science,
once it gave up Christian doom and “vanitas”,
--- religion itself is the vanitas --
Zen narcissism: skull worshipping book burners.
Vanitas is the utterly false idea that life is vain
and all that matters is the fiction
of an unreal “after-life” and illusory gods.
no more skull on the stack of old books,
urging you to go to Church,
the time piece in the middle of coins--
telling you flowers only flower so Christ can die for your sins.
These images of vanity are the real vanity.
The “floating world” is a lie, samsara a lie,
the ten thousand things is a lie
The real “vanitas” is religion.
So I did a bird skull on a beautiful old copy
of Coleridge’s Biographia Literaria,
which I read in my teens but now think it very mistaken.
Once you give up religion objects become ours again
and the world is loveable for itself, abjuring all symbols.
The crucifixion was merely a psychological exploit
sponsored by a corrupt state-church.
Done with all that at last,
it is the dear self of things that matters.

Science is about home and the actual existence of
things and animals, the exploration and the seeking:
snakes are not “archetypes” but lizards without legs,
“Squamates” going back 250 million years.
Shedding the dead skin of wishful thinking
and slithering superstitions,
seeking to know this planet in close proximity,
close enough to see the facts of it, under the tree canopy,
under the fallen logs
on the table, in the microscope, on the window sill
next to the carrots and the glass of wine
the wind on the rare tulip’s petal, the gleam of a silver cup---
I think of Rembrandt’s shimmering chain on the breast of Aristotle
which is really about Rembrandt--- and actually goes far beyond Aristotle
whose longest book is a now unread book on animals.
I praise Aristotle for that, but that chain in Rembrandt’s work

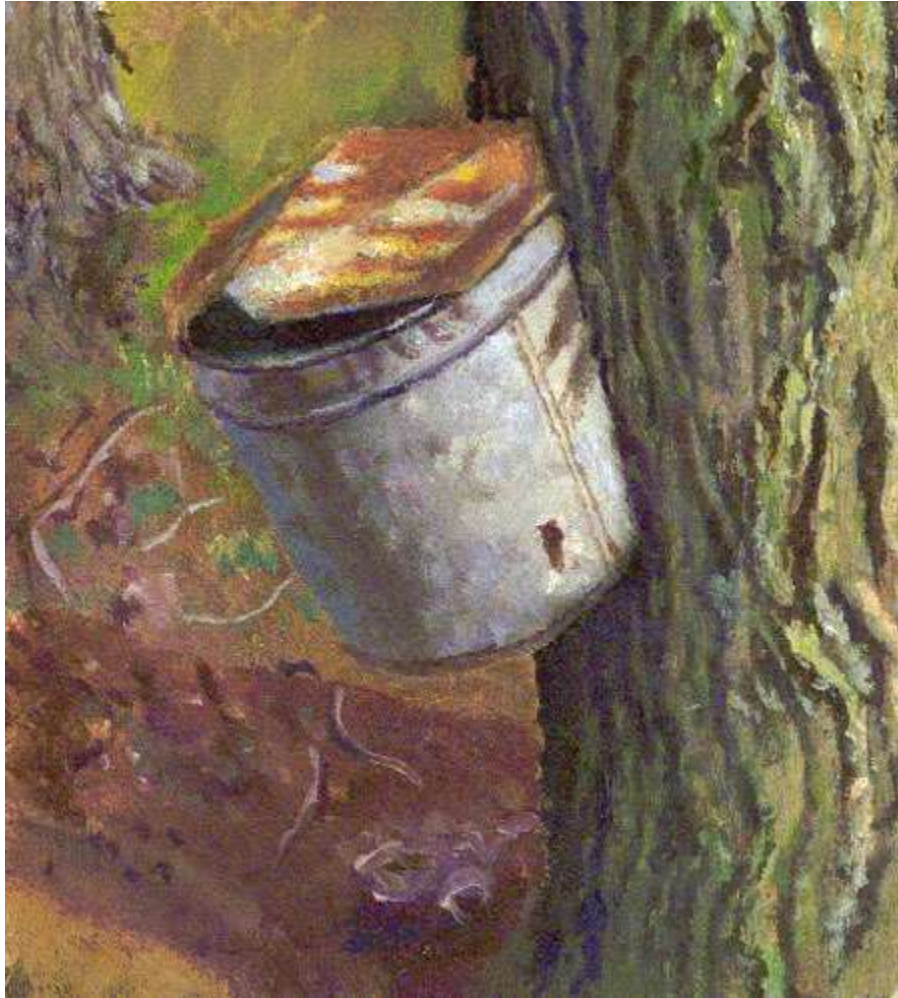
is about love of the actual,
not the “potentia” of the Stagyrite’s imagination.
the actual is where still life begins....
In this mysterious tactility, the fragile present
is where the tear grows and waits
to fall from the edges of the eyelashes—
there is where
Rembrandt came to understand something about observation,
--- seeing what is as it passes and loving it as it is:
Vermeer too, with the bread next to the brass water pitcher
or the woman sewing
next to the window with the light streaming
through onto the pearl earring or
the tiny delicate golden scale,
weighing the poise of consciousness,
the golden air of being alive.
An idea he probably got from his maestro Pieter de Hooch.

Science in the Chinese teacup,
the painting of the oyster opened up and still salty
with seabrine, De Chardin’s copper pot,
or Breughel’s array of blossoms.
Yes, Picasso did satires on still lives, cubist jokes—
not really very interesting anymore, ---all that art about art---
he did those partly because he thought “art is what saves the soul
from the dust of everyday life”.
Boschy Bosh again, and puuey,---
Everyday life
is what art should honor---
and this is not an escape from it at all,
but an avid embrace of the table cloth
and the apple and the spoon reflecting light from the open window.
Cezanne was wrong too, all that reduction
of fruit to abstract composition, the purpose of good
composition is not to imitate the fantasy of eternal geometry
but to arrange real things in space
and show this Haiga to others.
Forget about “souls”
what is here is light on the amber necklace,
the pliant sky-like-skin of water on the river,
the grains of sand on the soles

of a child's feet running toward the waves.
Yes, not the airy fiction of 'souls' but actual
soles of the shoes of children is what matters.
Frans Snyder's tables of dead animals remind me
of the cruel princes and Lords who outlawed hunting
for all but themselves and heaped up carrion on their tables to show off.
Dead Native Americans and extinct species follow on that.
"Throw down thy vanitas. I say throw down".
I mean this opposite of Ezra Pound.
Life is not vain, it is what matters. Throw out vanitas itself.
The important thing is to try to see things as they are.
No Confucius, No Sufism, no zen, just you and the world as it is,
raw perception, detail---
one red flower petal.
The miracle of a world where there are no miracles, the love of fact...
Begin with a painting of a seashell, an egg..... a flower in the seashell
an apple so red you want to share it.

A Walnut seed the skin of which is desiccating
in the leaves on the Forest floor.
An organic egg, not exactly brown
but almost the color of a sunrise in August.
Not so much memories of the dead
as stillness in the midst of so much life.

2012-2018



Maple Syrup bucket on Red Maple



Syrup from our Maple Trees



Lemon, Radish and Onion.





Home Grown Tomato and Silver cup



Two Tomatoes

Why do I love vegetables? Because I am a vegetarian and they sustain my life. That is a major reason. They are also beautiful, like Sunset or some faces, bodies, trees, stars.



Human Breast "Milka" I feed our kids.

I did this because I knew my son was going to stop drinking breast milk, which I had been giving him nearly every day for more than 4 years, since a few months after he was born. I did the same with my daughter, which means I was bottle feeding my children breast milk for 8-10 years. The names of my kids and wife are suggested on the kids blocks behind the bottle. This painting is about my feelings for having done this for so long. I was going to miss it. I do miss it, it was a great source of love and care of them.



Thinking of Newton



Candlelight



Tomatoes



Apples



Rose Petal



Egg in grey



Egg



Bird Skull and Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*

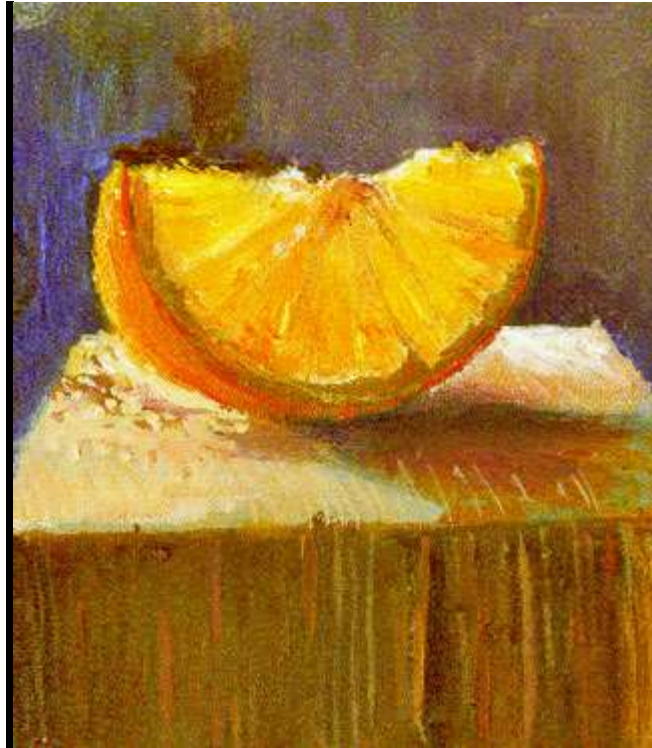


Banana, Tomato and small Apple

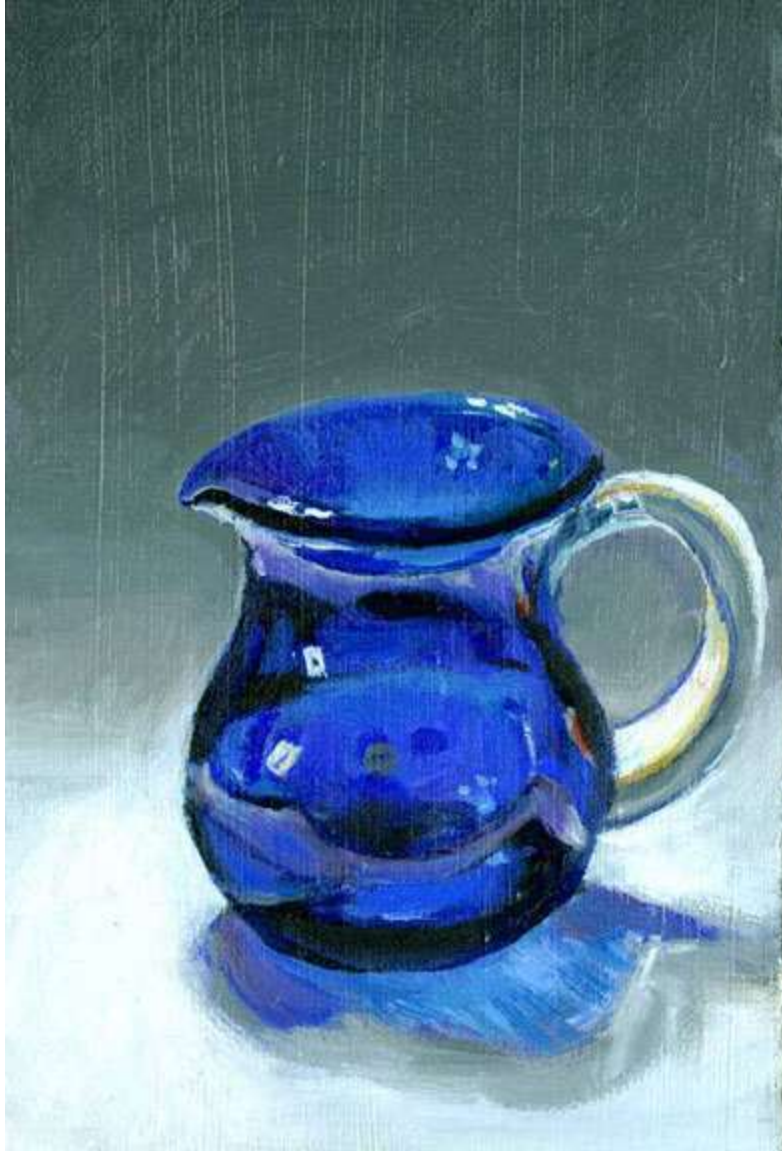


Strawberry





Orange



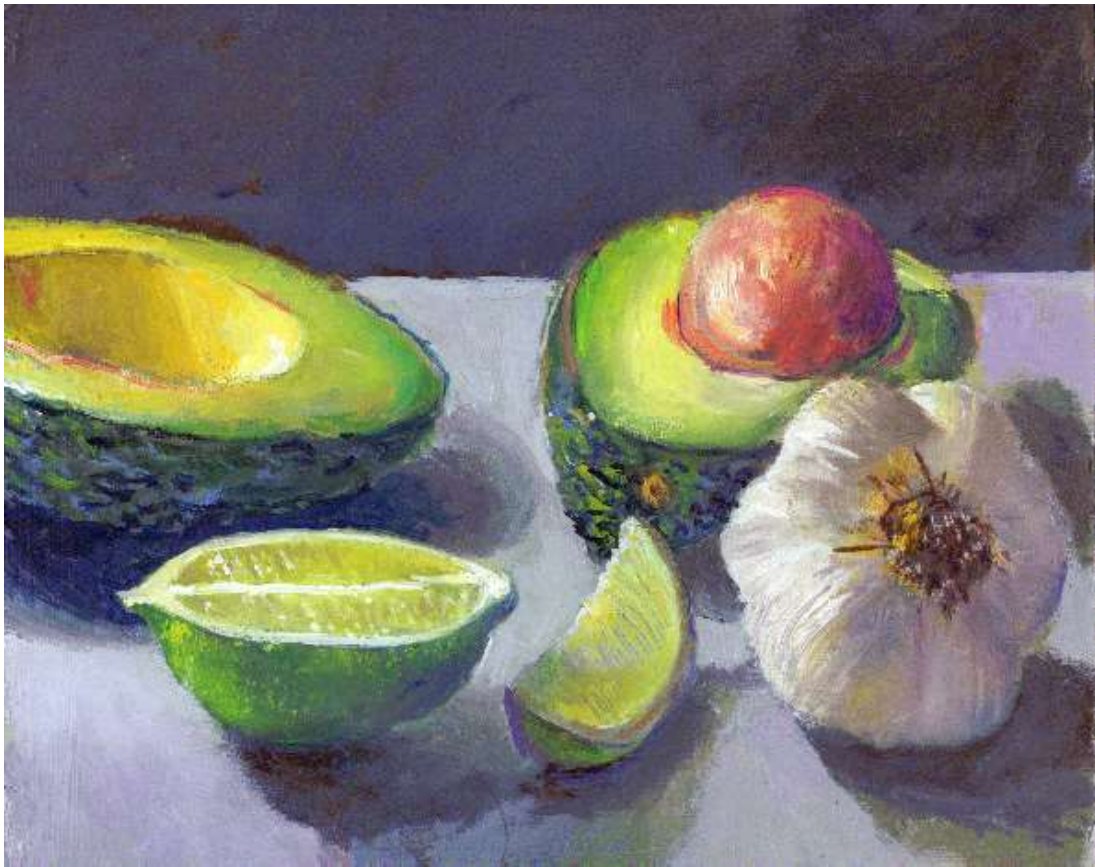
Handmade Glass



Dandelions in Flower and Seed



Teaching Still Life



Avacado, Lime and Garlic



Gourd and Pumpkin, Watercolor and Gouache



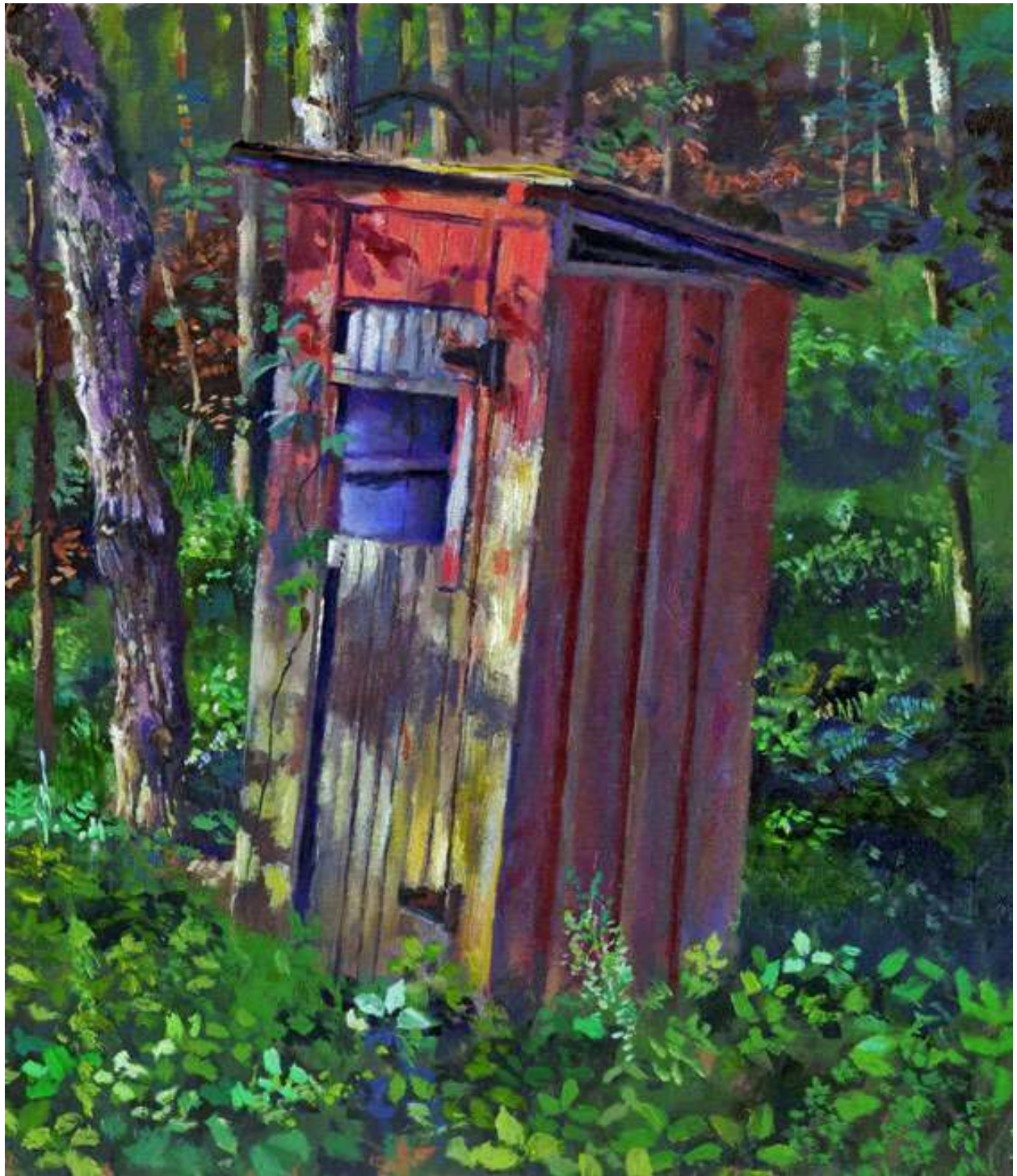
Garlic and Knife



Robin's eggs in our garage.



Hobo Tea



Outhouse



Red Leaf



Leaf my Daughter Found



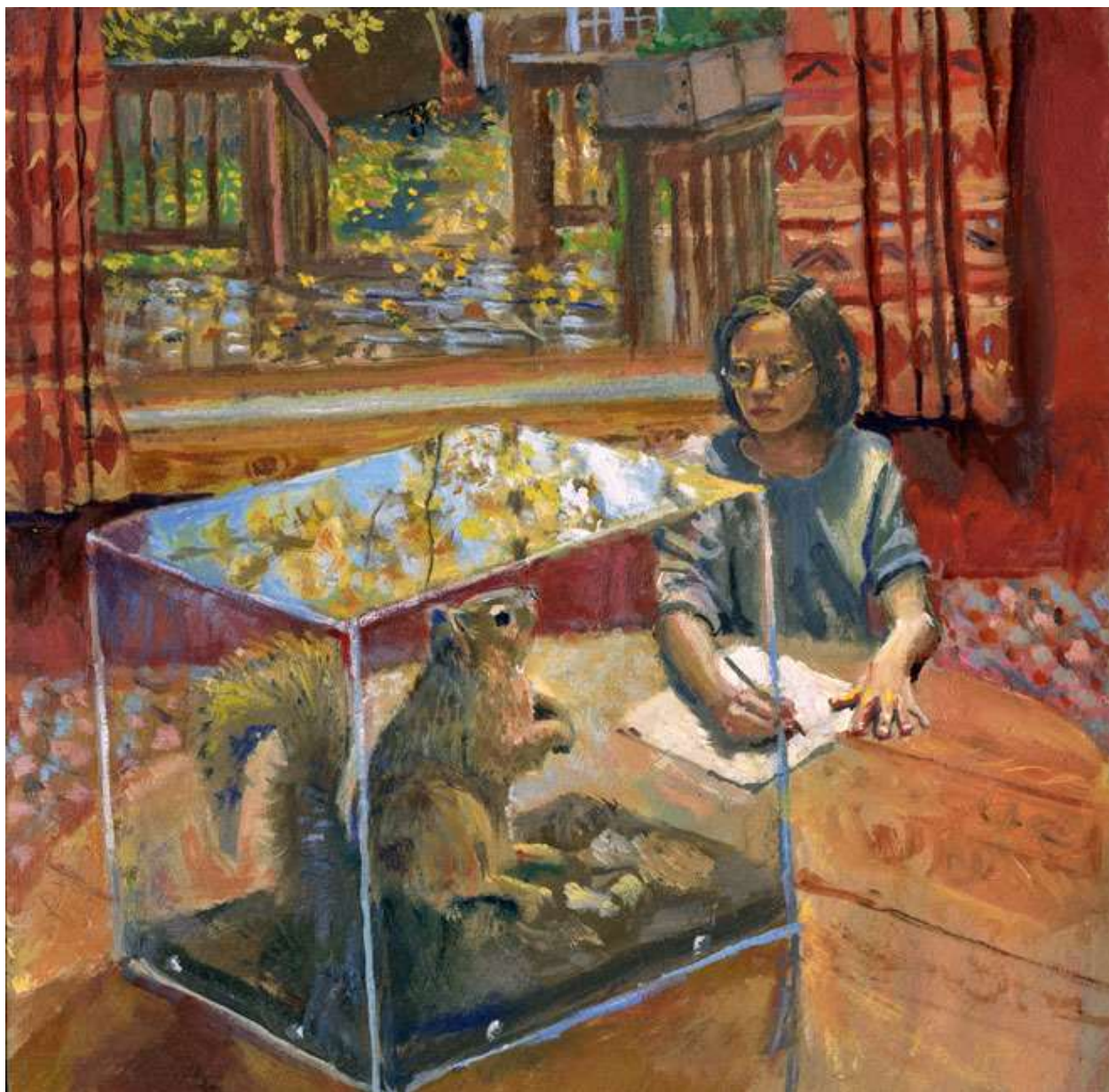
Cicadas



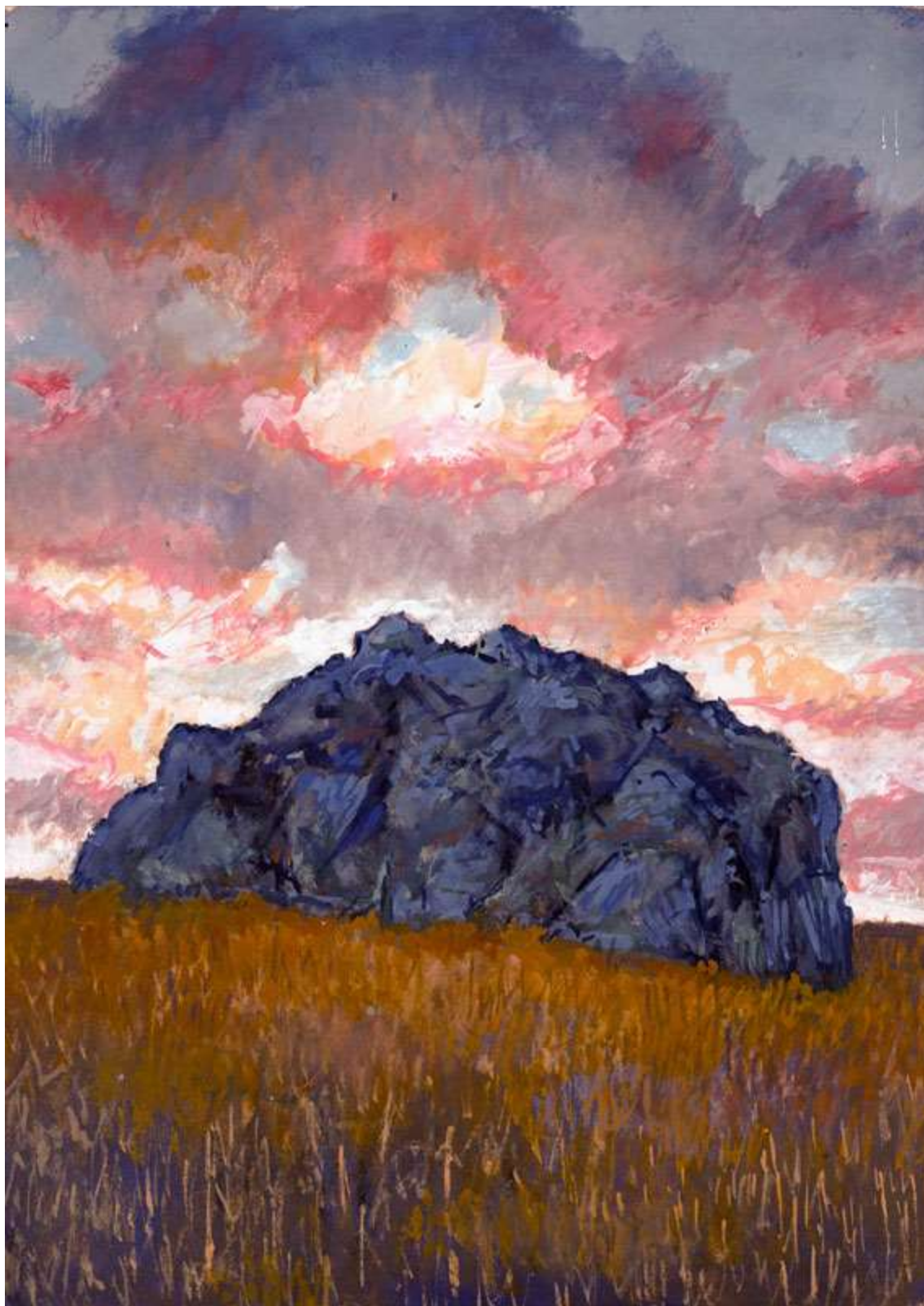
Downy Woodpecker



Homage to Rachel Ruysch



My daughter drawing an exhibit we borrowed from the Cleveland Natural History Museum. This is not just a still life but a still life as well of a person drawing a still life. Done entirely from life.



Rock at Nicasio

Even wild rocks are and are not still lifes.



Again from the Natural History Museum



Picking Dandelions

This is essentially a still life done in my yard. All the plants are real and done from life. Dandelions in bloom and going to seed. I imagine the blue flower is Speedwell, which nearly looks like water from and distance, though I am not entirely sure. Only the figure is from a photo which I took because it is impossible to pose a young child like this. It would be cruel to even try. I love this work and think it one of the only surviving life like

painted images of my son's one year old hair, which was fine a shiny like silk. My daughter had hair like this too at one or two years old. I did a painting about that too.