

An abstract painting of a landscape. The foreground is dominated by dark, textured brushstrokes in shades of blue and green, suggesting a field or a body of water. The middle ground features a horizontal band of lighter blue and green, possibly representing a horizon or a distant landmass. The background is a mix of light blue, green, and yellow, with soft, blended colors that create a sense of depth and atmosphere. The overall style is expressive and painterly, with visible brushwork and a rich color palette.

Perennial Earth

Poetry by Wallace Stevens and Paintings by Alexis Serio

Edited by John N. Serio

©2022 by New Perennials Publishing

New Perennials Publishing is a platform for critical thinking about crucial social and ecological questions. Grant funding allows NPP to provide books, pamphlets, educational materials, and other media in free, downloadable formats.

Editor: Bill Vitek, Director, the New Perennials Project;
Scholar in Residence, Middlebury College; Professor Emeritus, Clarkson University
84 pages; 10 x 8 inches.

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission from the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Perennial Earth: Poetry by Wallace Stevens and Paintings by Alexis Serio
ISBN 978-1-7354136-2-4
1. Poetry. 2. Painting 3. Ecology 4. Nature. Serio, John N., 1943–.

New Perennials Publishing, Middlebury, Vermont
www.newperennialspublishing.org

Front cover painting by Alexis Serio, *First One Awake*. (36" x 38", 2018)
Back cover painting by Alexis Serio, *Hearts & Strings & Open Things*. (36" x 42", 2018)
Design by Paul Dahm.

The sans serif typeface is FF Meta, designed by Erik Spiekermann.

Contents

vi	Preface by Bill Vitek	22	<i>Swirl Gazing</i> The Pleasures of Merely Circulating	42	<i>August</i> from <i>Credences of Summer</i>	62	<i>A Million Moons</i> from <i>The Man with the Blue Guitar</i>
viii	Perennial Landscapes: Poetry by Wallace Stevens and Paintings by Alexis Serio	24	from <i>Esthétique du Mal</i> <i>The Honeysuckle Bloom</i>	44	Tea at the Palaz of Hoon <i>Giants in the Sun</i>	64	Nuances of a Theme by Williams <i>Waiting on the Stars</i>
2	Introduction by Glen MacLeod	26	<i>Still Your Heart</i> Large Red Man Reading	46	<i>The Spirited Hour</i> from Sunday Morning	66	<i>Nocturnal Explorer</i> Evening Without Angels
8	Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself <i>Chirp</i>	28	The Dove in the Belly <i>Spectacular</i>	48	from An Ordinary Evening in New Haven <i>A Blanket for November</i>	68	Domination of Black <i>Patterns of Night</i>
10	<i>Morning Rise</i> from Sunday Morning	30	<i>Heirloom</i> from Sunday Morning	50	<i>Eventide</i> Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird	70	<i>Insieme [Italian, Together]</i> Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour
12	Ploughing on Sunday <i>A Ballad for Spring</i>	32	Yellow Afternoon <i>Interlacing the Hours</i>	52	The Snow Man <i>The Contours of Cold</i>	72	Contributors
14	<i>Lullaby</i> from Sea Surface Full of Clouds	34	<i>Love</i> The World as Meditation	54	<i>Time's Witness</i> The Plain Sense of Things	74	Works Cited
16	Cy Est Pourtraicte, Madame Ste Ursule, et les Unze Mille Vierges <i>Two Little Feet, To Carry Me Away</i>	36	The Death of a Soldier <i>A Tale of Many Skies</i>	56	On the Road Home <i>Homeroad</i>		
18	<i>The Sweetest Pause</i> The Sense of the Sleight-of-Hand Man	38	<i>Tracing Our Way</i> from <i>Esthétique du Mal</i>	58	<i>Visions of Home</i> The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain		
20	The Well Dressed Man with a Beard <i>Bounce</i>	40	The Woman in Sunshine <i>Sweet Yonder</i>	60	from Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction, It Must Give Pleasure <i>Moonrise</i>		

Preface

Like so many projects begun during the past two years, this one had its origins in response to pandemic uncertainty and isolation. Around the globe, friends, colleagues, and strangers began sharing daily songs, images, poems, and essays on social media and email. It was an unexpected and welcome burst of creative energy in the midst of so much worry about jobs and our children’s education, and the grief of mourning lost loved ones. There were porch and balcony concerts, the daily banging of pots and drums throughout neighborhoods, and dancing alone in one’s apartment. It was a collective, willful, and joyful resistance to what the world offered us, and what it took away, including our sense of certainty about having much of it under our control.

But even a cursory glance back in history makes clear that it has always been the practitioners of song and dance and the creative artists of every genre who have been among the brave and imaginative first responders to uncertainty, emergency, and disruption in a world that suddenly becomes distorted and foreign. Artists—and the artist in each of us—sense and articulate experiences and horizons that are often hidden. They help us experience what we may not yet comprehend or understand, and to accept, even if grudgingly, what we cannot change.

And they’ve been at it for a long time. Cave paintings in France dated to 35,000 years ago were telling stories of a world undergoing change. The Neanderthal flute discovered in Slovenia and dated to 50,000 years ago was well played,

I like to imagine, telling a story through song. The many varieties of First Nation traditions and celebrations honor the circle of life with reverence and awe for its immensity. And those Greek tragedies where everyone but the protagonist knows what’s coming next helped audiences feel the full force of sudden changes of fate. The arts anticipate change, work with uncertainty, and create anew from cinders, soils, twisted steel and ordinary artifacts, melody and rhythm, pen and brush on paper and canvas.

In May 2020, I started receiving a daily email from John N. Serio, a former colleague at Clarkson University, with an uplifting poem, frequently by Wallace Stevens, and an inspiring painting by his daughter, Alexis Serio, to match the mood of the poem. John called this rather serendipitous project “A Month of Poetry and Painting” and hoped it would brighten people’s outlook during this difficult period. Both the poems and the paintings featured landscapes that celebrated the beauty of planet Earth, and it struck me that this might make a wonderful book in keeping with the mission of New Perennials Publishing. I invited John to consider putting together a book of poetry and paintings that would dovetail with our mission, and *Perennial Earth: Poetry by Wallace Stevens and Paintings by Alexis Serio* resulted.

Stevens died in 1955, more than two decades before Alexis Serio was born. And Serio’s abstract landscapes are not influenced by Stevens’s poetry. But their pairing

here offers insights beyond either poem or painting alone. Knowing and understanding both his daughter’s art and the poetry of Wallace Stevens with equal depth, John Serio was the obvious choice to undertake this project. But John also invited Glen MacLeod, a Stevens scholar whose chief research focus is the relationship between Stevens’s poetry and the visual arts, to contribute to this volume. MacLeod guides the viewer-reader into the conversational powers of poetry and art, linking landscape and interiority with aesthetic surprise such that, once again, the old adage is redeemed: the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Here we are, nearly a quarter of the way into a new century, still in the midst of a pandemic that won’t let up, and too often overwhelmed by political infighting, social injustices, and the destabilizing effects of climate collapse. What to do? What not to do?

“The earth bestows.” These are the words of another poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, and they speak to this book’s rooted, earthy conversation between painter and poet, and to the ways in which artists contribute to their communities in challenging times as muses, expressive healers, and care providers, serving up aesthetic respite with more than a hint of joy.

Bill Vitek
January 2022
Middlebury, Vermont

This book would not have been made possible without the generous support of Peter Hanchak, Wallace Stevens’s grandson and executor of the Wallace Stevens Estate, who graciously gave permission to use Stevens’s poetry. Special thanks as well to Alexis Serio for permission to print her artwork, to Glen MacLeod for his introductory essay, and to John Serio for his abiding love of Stevens.

Perennial Earth

Poetry by
Wallace Stevens
and Paintings by
Alexis Serio

Introduction

This book highlights the work of two artists—one a painter, the other a poet—who celebrate nature in similar ways. Alexis Serio’s series of abstract landscape paintings uses the basic visual elements of the natural world—earth, sky, clouds, and the infinite variations of light and shadow playing over and through them—to express a corresponding range of human emotions. Each of her paintings is paired with a poem by Wallace Stevens that has a similar theme, as well as a similar investment in the physical world. The aim of these visual-verbal juxtapositions is to enhance the reader’s appreciation of these two artists who, though working in different mediums, base their art on the inexhaustible correspondences between the outer world of nature and the inner world of human experience.

The vibrant, colorful paintings of Alexis Serio are the immediate attraction of this book. Although she is art editor of *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, and her artworks appear regularly on the cover of that publication, none of the paintings in this series of abstract landscapes was actually inspired by Stevens. So there is no direct relation between the paintings and poems paired in this book. But considering them side by side in this way throws into relief some basic affinities. Stevens himself would approve of this comparative exercise, for he was deeply interested in “The Relations Between Poetry and Painting,” the title of one of his essays (CPP 740–751). As he wrote elsewhere, “I pay just as much attention to painters as I do to writers because, except technically, their problems are the same” (Letters 593).

These two artists share a central interest in landscape as well as a sense that the natural world is an accurate register

of the human spirit. Serio sees her landscape paintings as representing particular emotions. For instance, about the painting *Still Your Heart* she writes:

This painting is about optimism and dedication. The word “still” works on both levels: 1. “Still your heart”—a request (or command), asking your heart to be quiet and to be witness to silent beauty; 2. “Still your heart”—a promise of continued loyalty (your heart is still my desire). The colors of this painting are romantic and the viewer gazes skyward/upward, away from the land. (Serio)

The painting may not communicate all of this immediately to every viewer, but the more paintings we engage with in this book, the more accustomed we become to Serio’s visual language in this series. The low horizon line in *Still Your Heart* means that almost the entire painting focuses on the sky. That soaring view, with its luminous, harmonious colors, certainly conveys a sense of optimism. The title nudges us to recognize in this uplifting vision the more particular emotions that Serio describes.

Landscape plays an equally important role in the poetry of Wallace Stevens. His early ambition was to write “the great poem of the earth,” in the epic tradition of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and Dante’s *Inferno*: “The great poems of heaven and hell have been written and the great poem of the earth

remains to be written” (CPP 730). He was convinced that all of humankind’s spiritual desires could be satisfied in the natural world, without the need for any imagined paradise or afterlife. It follows that he had an unusually keen sense of place. He confessed in his Adagia: “Life is an affair of people not of places. But for me life is an affair of places and that is the trouble” (CPP 901). This predilection may have caused him “trouble” in everyday life, but it was a great resource for his poetry. Often he conveys his deepest thoughts and feelings in terms of landscape. His long poem “Sunday Morning” identifies the most profound moments in life not as transcendent religious experiences but as intense responses to the physical world of nature:

*Divinity must live within herself:
Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow;
Grievings in loneliness, or unsubdued
Elations when the forest blooms; gusty
Emotions on wet roads on autumn nights;
All pleasures and all pains, remembering
The bough of summer and the winter branch.
These are the measures destined for her soul.
(CPC 71–72)*

This section of the poem is appropriately paired here with the painting *Morning Rise* which Serio characterizes as “savoring the feeling” of the “sensual slow rise of the morning.”

That same reverence for the beauty of Earth is evident

in the concluding lines of “Sunday Morning” which distill all of that long poem’s meditative intensity, spiritual longing, and bittersweet wisdom into a passage of pure natural description:

*Deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail
Whistle about us their spontaneous cries;
Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness;
And, in the isolation of the sky,
At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
Downward to darkness, on extended wings.
(CPC 75)*

This verbal landscape, with its vivid imagery and stately rhythms, conveys a complex range of emotion that resolves the entire poem on a chord of great beauty. Paired with it is Serio’s *The Spirited Hour* which also depicts evening as a time charged with spiritual intensity, the “witching hour” when “night owls begin to stir,” poised and alert for the transition to darkness (Serio).

Like Serio, Stevens uses the landscapes of his poetry to depict his own interior life. Harold Bloom aptly refers to Stevens as “a poet of the weather” who uses “the presence or absence of sun, the movement of the wind,” as “universal human tropes or metaphors for states of the spirit or conditions of the soul” (Annenberg). Similarly, the poet James Merrill describes how Stevens uses landscape

elements to express his own emotions. For Stevens, Merrill says, the “extremes of weather” stand for “the oscillations of a mood or a temperament. . . . Each landscape has its own flora, its own palette. There are infinite ways of dramatizing this temperament. You have your objective correlatives spread out before you once you call on the imagery of cold or of the tropics” (Annenberg). Stevens uses the natural cycle of the seasons, too, to represent states of mind or the stages of human life, as George Lensing, in particular, has shown.

Serio has similar objectives. Her landscapes are abstract because her aim is not to reproduce in accurate detail a particular scene but to convey her feelings about it. How do you paint the sense of exhilaration you feel experiencing a perfect summer day? Serio’s *Sweet Yonder* is one possibility. She explains, “It is about warmth and optimism. The love for the day (sweet) and the hope that is possible (yonder).” Stevens’s “The Woman in Sunshine” is a literary approach to the same challenge:

*It is only that this warmth and movement are like
The warmth and movement of a woman.*

*It is not that there is any image in the air
Nor the beginning nor end of a form:*

*It is empty. But a woman in threadless gold
Burns us with brushings of her dress*

*And a dissociated abundance of being,
More definite for what she is—*

*Because she is disembodied,
Bearing the odors of the summer fields,*

*Confessing the taciturn and yet indifferent,
Invisibly clear, the only love.*
(CPC 471)

This poem is an extended simile, reversing the conventional comparison of a beautiful woman to a summer day so that it becomes a love poem to a place rather than a person. The loved woman is only an analogy for the intense feeling aroused in the poet by the “warmth and movement” of this ravishing scene. From the beginning, she is presented as an abstraction: “It is not that there is any image in the air / Nor the beginning nor end of a form.” She personifies “an abundance of being” that is, ironically, more “definite” because it is “disembodied.” The poet’s attempts to define her culminate in the paradoxical assertion that she is “Invisibly clear.”

Who is this invisible, bodiless creature? Who but the spirit of summer itself, Nature in her most beautiful guise,

“Bearing the odors of the summer fields.” For Stevens, summer represents the peak of the natural cycle, “green’s green apogee” (CPC 393) as he puts it in “Credences of Summer.” It is the time when the Earth seems perfectly adapted to our needs and desires. “The Woman in Sunshine” is a love poem to the physical world. It could just as well serve as a description of Serio’s abstract landscape, *Sweet Yonder*.

Yet we know this moment of fulfillment will not last. The poem acknowledges this fact in its rather puzzling final stanza:

*Confessing the taciturn and yet indifferent,
Invisibly clear, the only love.*

Even at this most harmonious point of the natural cycle, when nature opens to us her most intimate secrets (“Confessing the taciturn”), she remains utterly “indifferent” to human concerns. Her endless cycles will continue, bringing, in their time, destruction and decay, winter and death. Nevertheless, she is “the only love” because—as Stevens puts it in “Sunday Morning”—“Death is the mother of beauty” (CPC 73). The ever-changing world of nature teaches us to appreciate goodness while we have it, and to feel pleasure more deeply because we know pain. The black band at the base of Serio’s *Sweet Yonder* hints at this darker truth, too.

Each poem or painting in this book can be appreciated by itself as an independent work of art. But considering them as pairs, and pondering the rationale for pairing them, can generate an added dimension of understanding and enjoyment. Sometimes the painting’s title provides a clue to what it has in common with its poem. Serio’s *Homeroad* pairs obviously with Stevens’s “On the Road Home.” *Visions of Home* is appropriately partnered with “The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain” that culminates in a vision of “his unique and solitary home” (CPC 541). And *The Contours of Cold* is a fitting illustration for “The Snow Man.” Sometimes the titles are less straightforward than this: *Spectacular* might seem, at first, to have little to do with a poem titled “The Dove in the Belly,” until we recognize that the theme of that poem is the spectacular beauty of the Earth. Similarly, the titles *Love* and “The World as Meditation” might seem an odd couple until we realize that both painting and poem depict love and longing in terms of landscape.

In some cases it is a particular part of a poem that connects it most clearly to the painting. For instance, the relation between *Moonrise* and its companion canto from “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” only emerges in the final eight lines where “the moon hangs on the wall // Of heaven-haven” (CPC 422). The wintry setting of “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” harmonizes nicely with *Eventide*, which “is about the way a brisk snowy landscape becomes magical at dusk” (Serio), but it is only the elegantly nuanced

fifth section of the poem that fully captures the “magical” aspect of this painting:

*I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendoes,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after.*
(CPC 100)

Discovering such connections is one of the pleasures this book offers.

Perhaps the poem that best epitomizes the profound response to nature that Serio and Stevens share is the final section of “Esthétique du Mal,” paired here with *The Honeysuckle Bloom*. Stevens’s poem begins: “The greatest poverty is not to live / In a physical world” (CPC 342). To live fully in the physical world requires that we sharpen our senses and pay close attention to our natural environment. We need to do this not only for the health of the planet that sustains us but also for the sake of our own happiness. One thing that distinguishes humans from other animals is our imagination. We can always imagine different and more fulfilling lives for ourselves. As a consequence, we are perennially unsatisfied. But those with the most powerful imaginations—poets, artists—can imagine the spiritual fulfillment we desire and give it form, thereby inspiring

others to make the same effort. This is the highest function of the arts in life. They remind us, in James Merrill’s words, of “the transcendence within ourselves that we’re all responsible for—for the keeping of our imagination new and quick” (Annenberg). The conclusion of “Esthétique du Mal” elaborates this process:

*And out of what one sees and hears and out
Of what one feels, who could have
thought to make
So many selves, so many sensuous worlds—
As if the air, the mid-day air, was swarming
With the metaphysical changes that occur,
Merely in living as and where we live.*
(CPC 343)

Wallace Stevens and Alexis Serio celebrate, in their art, the physical world. But their poems and paintings are also “so many sensuous worlds,” replete with “the metaphysical changes” that transform ordinary life into something extraordinary. We can only be grateful.

—Glen MacLeod

**Not Ideas About the Thing
But the Thing Itself**

At the earliest ending of winter,
In March, a scrawny cry from outside
Seemed like a sound in his mind.

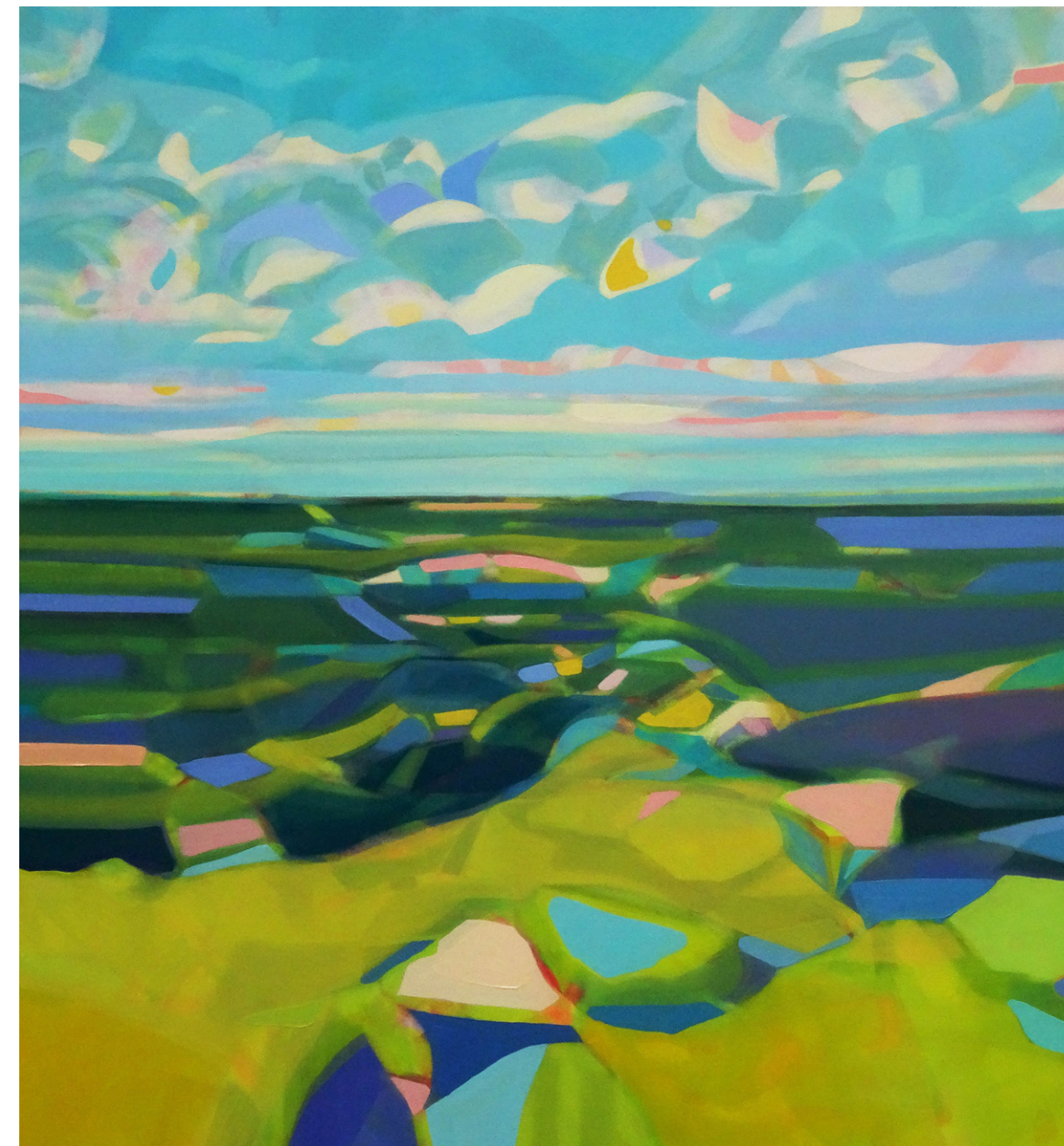
He knew that he heard it,
A bird's cry, at daylight or before,
In the early March wind.

The sun was rising at six,
No longer a battered panache above snow . . .
It would have been outside.

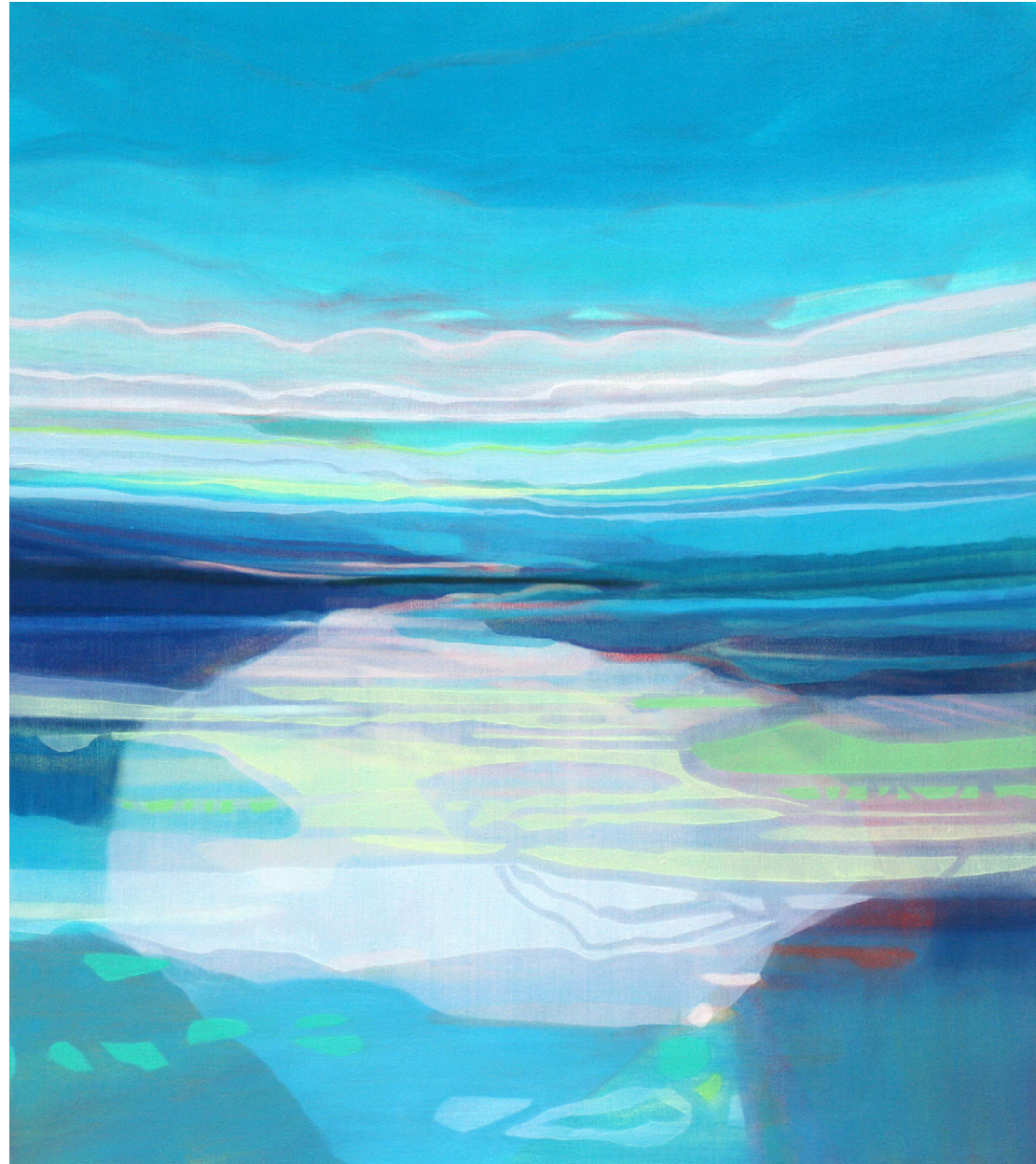
It was not from the vast ventriloquism
Of sleep's faded papier-mâché . . .
The sun was coming from outside.

That scrawny cry—it was
A chorister whose c preceded the choir.
It was part of the colossal sun,

Surrounded by its choral rings,
Still far away. It was like
A new knowledge of reality.



Chirp (52" x 48", 2016)



Morning Rise (34" x 30", 2014)

from Sunday Morning

- I Complacencies of the peignoir, and late
Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,
And the green freedom of a cockatoo
Upon a rug mingle to dissipate
The holy hush of ancient sacrifice.
She dreams a little, and she feels the dark
Encroachment of that old catastrophe,
As a calm darkens among water-lights.
The pungent oranges and bright, green wings
Seem things in some procession of the dead,
Winding across wide water, without sound.
The day is like wide water, without sound,
Stilled for the passing of her dreaming feet
Over the seas, to silent Palestine,
Dominion of the blood and sepulchre.
- II Why should she give her bounty to the dead?
What is divinity if it can come
Only in silent shadows and in dreams?
Shall she not find in comforts of the sun,
In pungent fruit and bright, green wings, or else
In any balm or beauty of the earth,
Things to be cherished like the thought of heaven?
Divinity must live within herself:
Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow;
Grievings in loneliness, or unsubdued
Elations when the forest blooms; gusty
Emotions on wet roads on autumn nights;
All pleasures and all pains, remembering
The bough of summer and the winter branch.
These are the measures destined for her soul.

Ploughing on Sunday

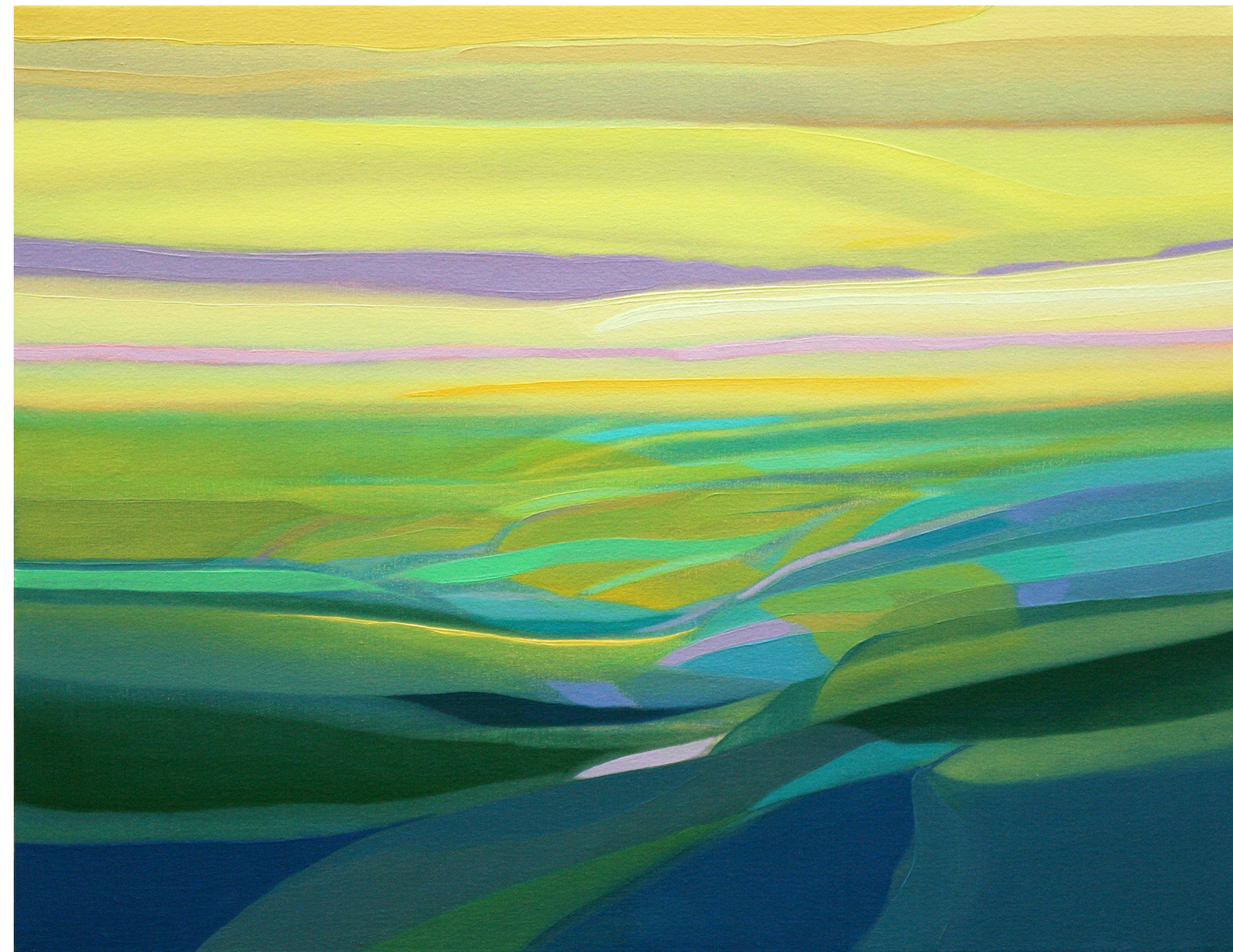
The white cock's tail
Tosses in the wind.
The turkey-cock's tail
Glitters in the sun.

Water in the fields.
The wind pours down.
The feathers flare
And bluster in the wind.

Remus, blow your horn!
I'm ploughing on Sunday,
Ploughing North America.
Blow your horn!

Tum-ti-tum,
Ti-tum-tum-tum!
The turkey-cock's tail
Spreads to the sun.

The white cock's tail
Streams to the moon.
Water in the fields.
The wind pours down.



A Ballad for Spring (20" x 26", 2020)



Lullaby (41" x 49", 2013)

from Sea Surface Full of Clouds

I In that November off Tehuantepec,
The slopping of the sea grew still one night
And in the morning summer hued the deck

And made one think of rosy chocolate
And gilt umbrellas. Paradisal green
Gave suavity to the perplexed machine

Of ocean, which like limpid water lay.
Who, then, in that ambrosial latitude
Out of the light evolved the moving blooms,

Who, then, evolved the sea-blooms from the clouds
Diffusing balm in that Pacific calm?
C'était mon enfant, mon bijou, mon âme.

The sea-clouds whitened far below the calm
And moved, as blooms move, in the swimming green
And in its watery radiance, while the hue

Of heaven in an antique reflection rolled
Round those flotillas. And sometimes the sea
Poured brilliant iris on the glistening blue.

Cy Est Pourtraicte, Madame Ste Ursule,
et les Unze Mille Vierges

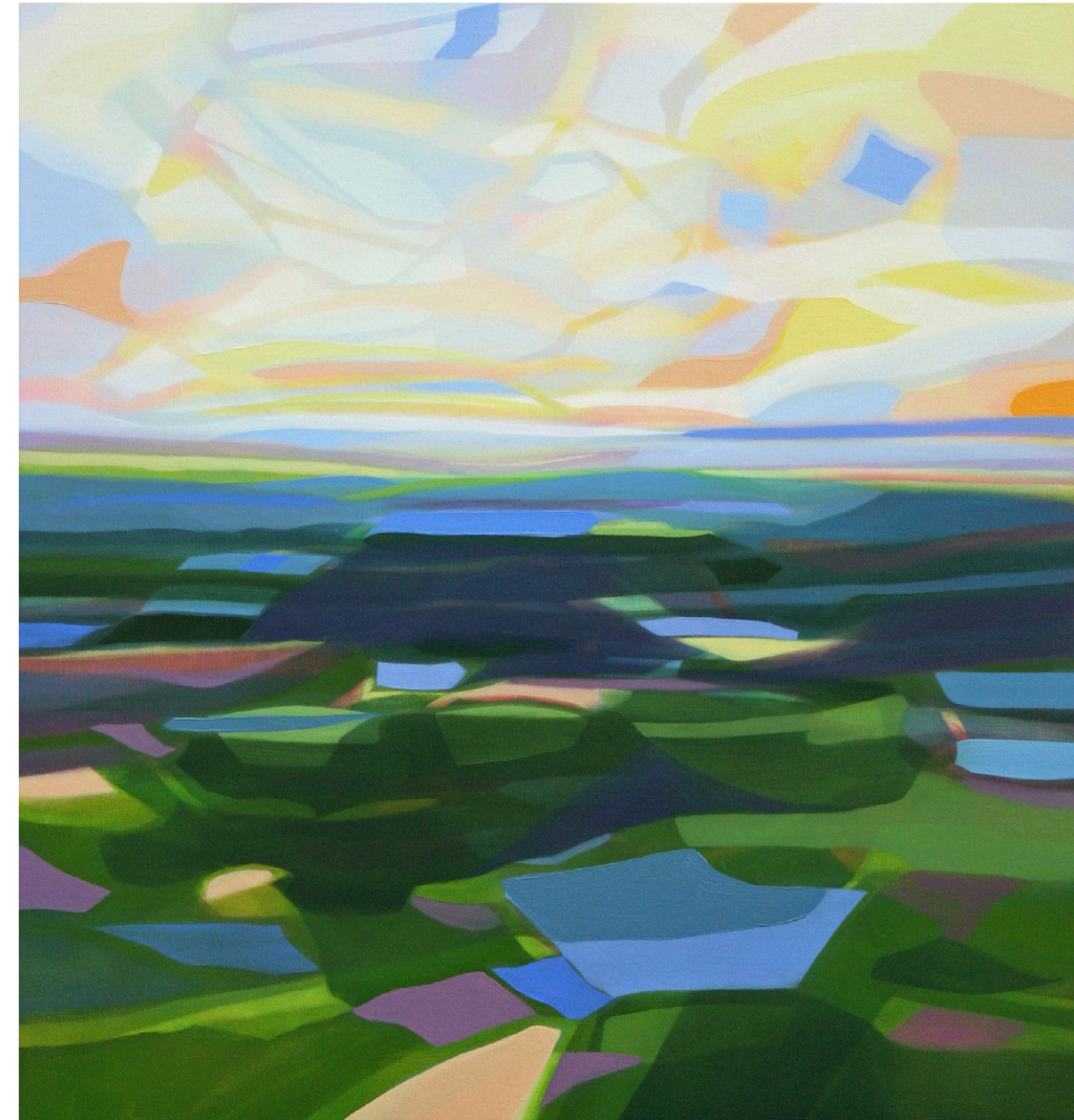
Ursula, in a garden, found
A bed of radishes.
She kneeled upon the ground
And gathered them,
With flowers around,
Blue, gold, pink, and green.

She dressed in red and gold brocade
And in the grass an offering made
Of radishes and flowers.

She said, "My dear,
Upon your altars,
I have placed
The marguerite and coquelicot,
And roses
Frail as April snow;
But here," she said,
"Where none can see,
I make an offering, in the grass,
Of radishes and flowers."
And then she wept
For fear the Lord would not accept.

The good Lord in His garden sought
New leaf and shadowy tinct,
And they were all His thought.
He heard her low accord,
Half prayer and half ditty,
And He felt a subtle quiver,
That was not heavenly love,
Or pity.

This is not writ
In any book.



Two Little Feet, To Carry Me Away (38" x 36", 2018)



The Sweetest Pause (48" x 52", 2017)

The Sense of the Sleight-of-Hand Man

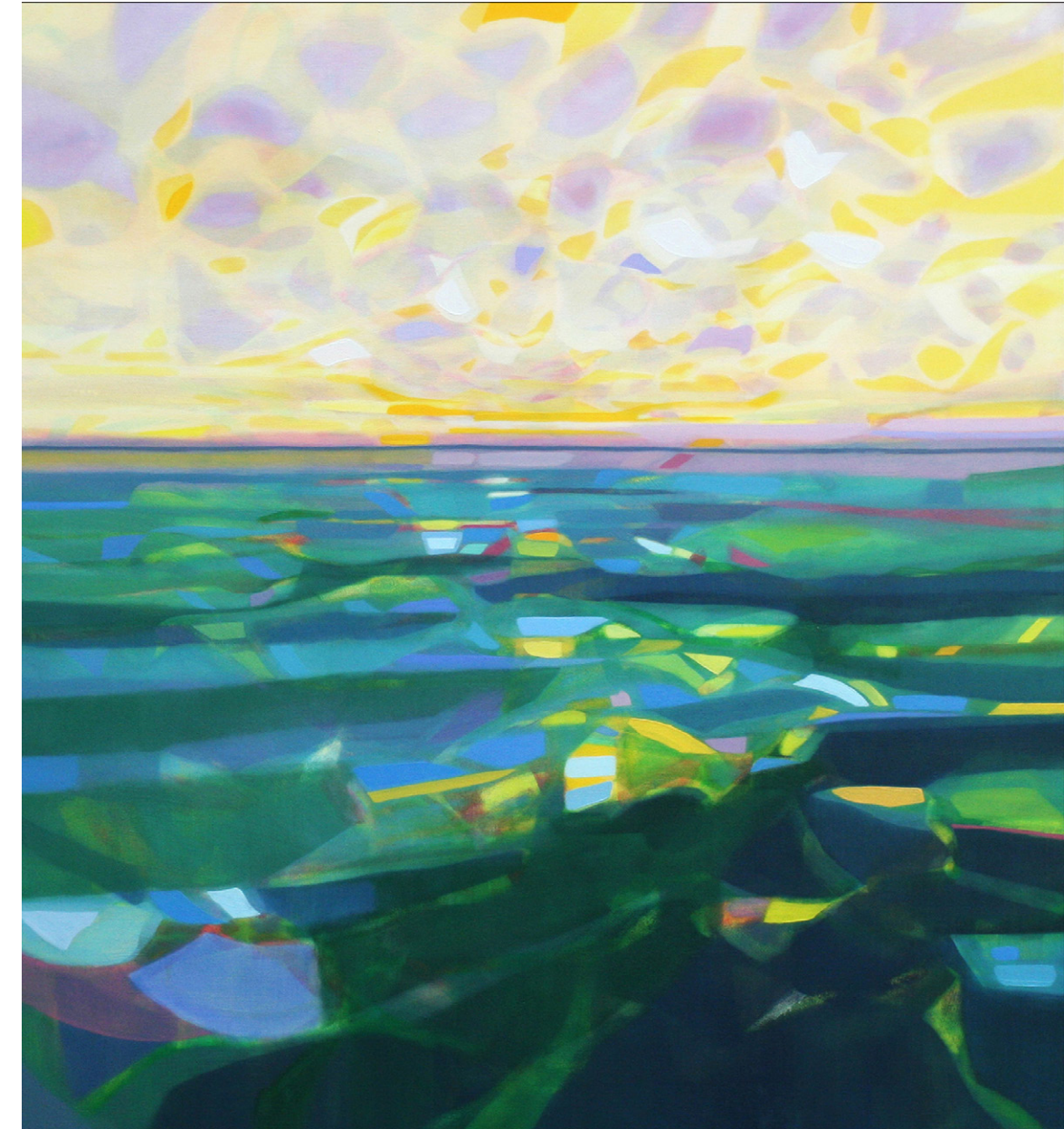
One's grand flights, one's Sunday baths,
 One's tootings at the weddings of the soul
 Occur as they occur. So bluish clouds
 Occurred above the empty house and the leaves
 Of the rhododendrons rattled their gold,
 As if someone lived there. Such floods of white
 Came bursting from the clouds. So the wind
 Threw its contorted strength around the sky.

Could you have said the bluejay suddenly
 Would swoop to earth? It is a wheel, the rays
 Around the sun. The wheel survives the myths.
 The fire eye in the clouds survives the gods.
 To think of a dove with an eye of grenadine
 And pines that are cornets, so it occurs,
 And a little island full of geese and stars:
 It may be that the ignorant man, alone,
 Has any chance to mate his life with life
 That is the sensual, pearly spouse, the life
 That is fluent in even the wintriest bronze.

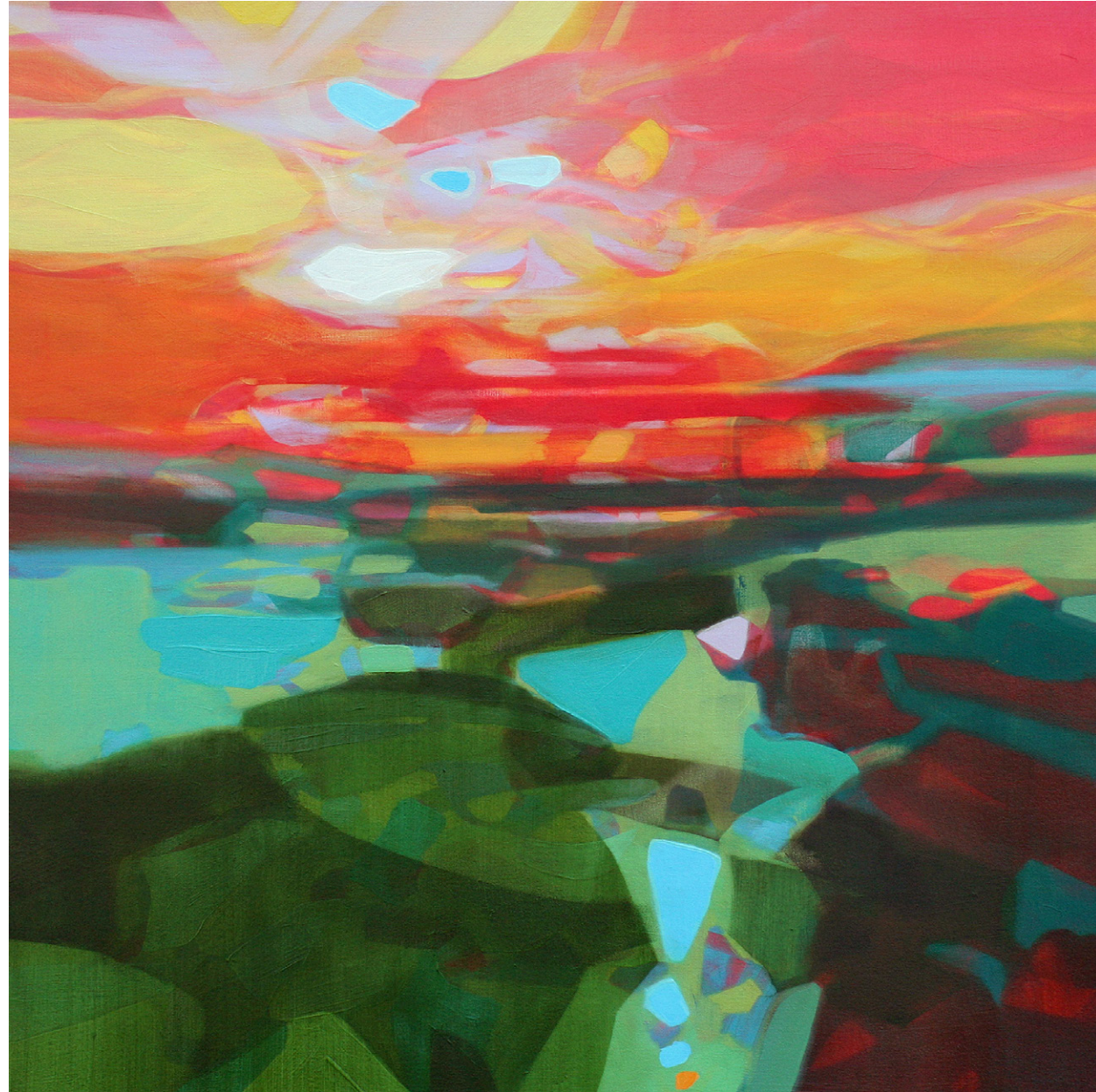
The Well Dressed Man with a Beard

After the final no there comes a yes
And on that yes the future world depends.
No was the night. Yes is this present sun.
If the rejected things, the things denied,
Slid over the western cataract, yet one,
One only, one thing that was firm, even
No greater than a cricket's horn, no more
Than a thought to be rehearsed all day, a speech
Of the self that must sustain itself on speech,
One thing remaining, infallible, would be
Enough. Ah! douce campagna of that thing!
Ah! douce campagna, honey in the heart,
Green in the body, out of a petty phrase,
Out of a thing believed, a thing affirmed:
The form on the pillow humming while one sleeps,
The aureole above the humming house . . .

It can never be satisfied, the mind, never.



Bounce (52" x 48", 2016)



Swirl Gazing (30" x 30", 2016)

The Pleasures of Merely Circulating

The garden flew round with the angel,
The angel flew round with the clouds,
And the clouds flew round and the clouds flew round
And the clouds flew round with the clouds.

Is there any secret in skulls,
The cattle skulls in the woods?
Do the drummers in black hoods
Rumble anything out of their drums?

Mrs. Anderson's Swedish baby
Might well have been German or Spanish,
Yet that things go round and again go round
Has rather a classical sound.

from *Esthétique du Mal*

xv The greatest poverty is not to live
In a physical world, to feel that one's desire
Is too difficult to tell from despair. Perhaps,
After death, the non-physical people, in paradise,
Itself non-physical, may, by chance, observe
The green corn gleaming and experience
The minor of what we feel. The adventurer
In humanity has not conceived of a race
Completely physical in a physical world.
The green corn gleams and the metaphysicals
Lie sprawling in majors of the August heat,
The rotund emotions, paradise unknown.

This is the thesis scrivered in delight,
The reverberating psalm, the right chorale.

One might have thought of sight, but who could think
Of what it sees, for all the ill it sees?
Speech found the ear, for all the evil sound,
But the dark italics it could not propound.
And out of what one sees and hears and out
Of what one feels, who could have thought to make
So many selves, so many sensuous worlds—
As if the air, the mid-day air, was swarming
With the metaphysical changes that occur,
Merely in living as and where we live.



The Honeysuckle Bloom (45" x 70", 2019)



Still Your Heart (45" x 50", 2019)

Large Red Man Reading

There were ghosts that returned to earth to hear his phrases,
 As he sat there reading, aloud, the great blue tabulae.
 They were those from the wilderness of stars that had expected more.

There were those that returned to hear him read from the poem of life,
 Of the pans above the stove, the pots on the table, the tulips among them.
 They were those that would have wept to step barefoot into reality,

That would have wept and been happy, have shivered in the frost
 And cried out to feel it again, have run fingers over leaves
 And against the most coiled thorn, have seized on what was ugly

And laughed, as he sat there reading, from out of the purple tabulae,
 The outlines of being and its expressings, the syllables of its law:
Poesis, poesis, the literal characters, the vatic lines,

Which in those ears and in those thin, those spended hearts,
 Took on color, took on shape and the size of things as they are
 And spoke the feeling for them, which was what they had lacked.

The Dove in the Belly

The whole of appearance is a toy. For this,
The dove in the belly builds his nest and coos,

Selah, tempestuous bird. How is it that
The rivers shine and hold their mirrors up,

Like excellence collecting excellence?
How is it that the wooden trees stand up

And live and heap their panniers of green
And hold them round the sultry day? Why should

These mountains being high be, also, bright,
Fetched up with snow that never falls to earth?

And this great esplanade of corn, miles wide,
Is something wished for made effectual

And something more. And the people in costumes,
Though poor, though raggeder than ruin, have that

Within them right for terraces—oh, brave salut!
Deep dove, placate you in your hiddenness.



Spectacular (18.5" x 20.25", 2020)



Heirloom (45" x 70", 2019)

from Sunday Morning

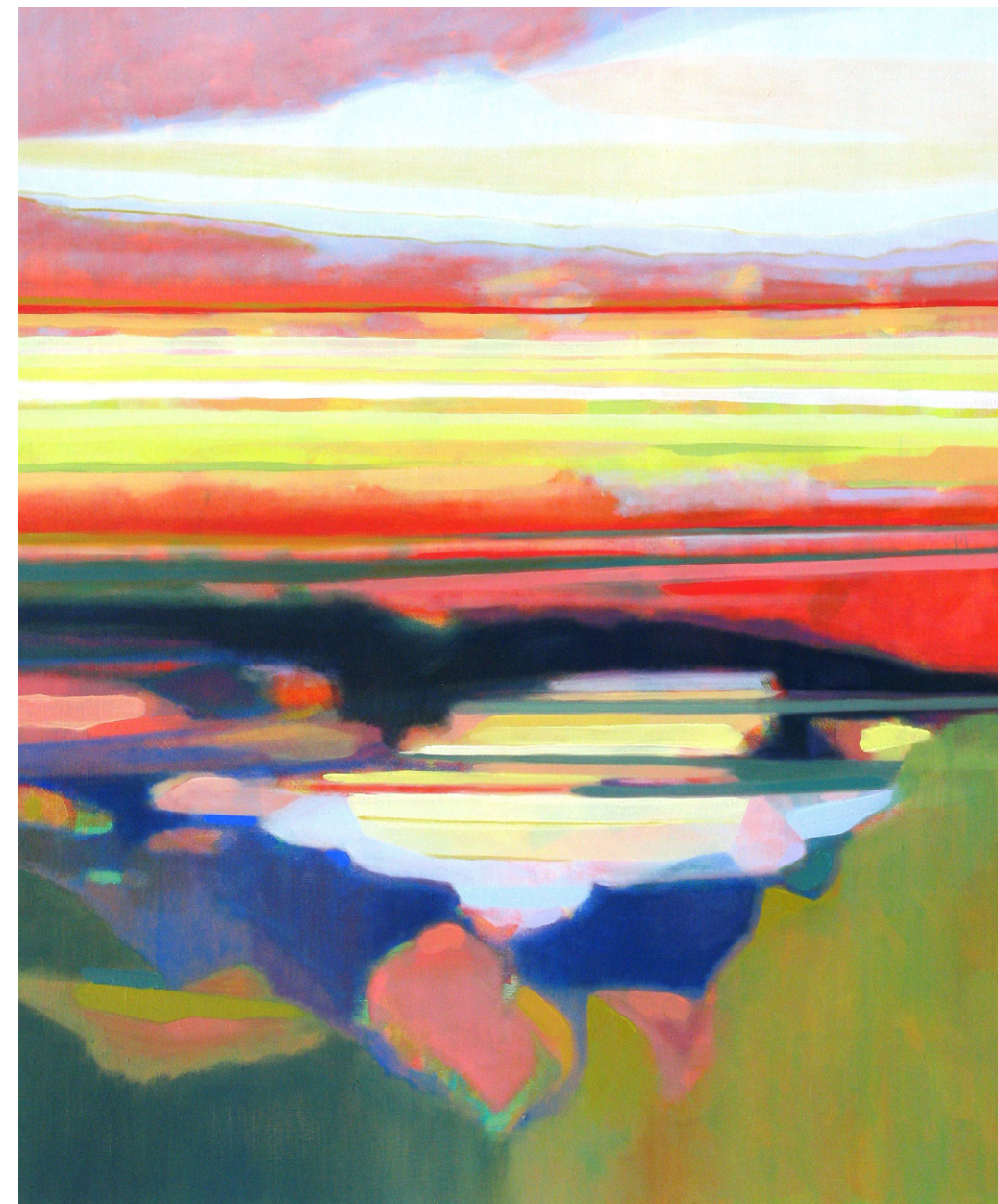
- iv She says, "I am content when wakened birds,
 Before they fly, test the reality
 Of misty fields, by their sweet questionings;
 But when the birds are gone, and their warm fields
 Return no more, where, then, is paradise?"
 There is not any haunt of prophecy,
 Nor any old chimera of the grave,
 Neither the golden underground, nor isle
 Melodious, where spirits gat them home,
 Nor visionary south, nor cloudy palm
 Remote on heaven's hill, that has endured
 As April's green endures; or will endure
 Like her remembrance of awakened birds,
 Or her desire for June and evening, tipped
 By the consummation of the swallow's wings.

Yellow Afternoon

It was in the earth only
That he was at the bottom of things
And of himself. There he could say
Of this I am, this is the patriarch,
This it is that answers when I ask,
This is the mute, the final sculpture
Around which silence lies on silence.
This reposes alike in springtime
And, arbored and bronzed, in autumn.

He said I had this that I could love,
As one loves visible and responsive peace,
As one loves one's own being,
As one loves that which is the end
And must be loved, as one loves that
Of which one is a part as in a unity,
A unity that is the life one loves,
So that one lives all the lives that comprise it
As the life of the fatal unity of war.

Everything comes to him
From the middle of his field. The odor
Of earth penetrates more deeply than any word.
There he touches his being. There as he is
He is. The thought that he had found all this
Among men, in a woman—she caught his breath—
But he came back as one comes back from the sun
To lie on one's bed in the dark, close to a face
Without eyes or mouth, that looks at one and speaks.



Interlacing the Hours (49" x 41", 2012)



Love (36" x 38", 2018)

The World as Meditation

J'ai passé trop de temps à travailler mon violon, à voyager. Mais l'exercice essentiel du compositeur—la méditation—rien ne l'a jamais suspendu en moi . . . Je vis un rêve permanent, qui ne s'arrête ni nuit ni jour. —Georges Enesco

Is it Ulysses that approaches from the east,
The interminable adventurer? The trees are mended.
That winter is washed away. Someone is moving

On the horizon and lifting himself up above it.
A form of fire approaches the cretonnes of Penelope,
Whose mere savage presence awakens the world in which she dwells.

She has composed, so long, a self with which to welcome him,
Companion to his self for her, which she imagined,
Two in a deep-founded sheltering, friend and dear friend.

The trees had been mended, as an essential exercise
In an inhuman meditation, larger than her own.
No winds like dogs watched over her at night.

She wanted nothing he could not bring her by coming alone.
She wanted no fetchings. His arms would be her necklace
And her belt, the final fortune of their desire.

But was it Ulysses? Or was it only the warmth of the sun
On her pillow? The thought kept beating in her like her heart.
The two kept beating together. It was only day.

It was Ulysses and it was not. Yet they had met,
Friend and dear friend and a planet's encouragement.
The barbarous strength within her would never fail.

She would talk a little to herself as she combed her hair,
Repeating his name with its patient syllables,
Never forgetting him that kept coming constantly so near.

The Death of a Soldier

Life contracts and death is expected,
As in a season of autumn.
The soldier falls.

He does not become a three-days personage,
Imposing his separation,
Calling for pomp.

Death is absolute and without memorial,
As in a season of autumn,
When the wind stops,

When the wind stops and, over the heavens,
The clouds go, nevertheless,
In their direction.



A Tale of Many Skies (20" x 26", 2011)



Tracing Our Way (38" x 32", 2013)

from *Esthétique du Mal*

III His firm stanzas hang like hives in hell
Or what hell was, since now both heaven and hell
Are one, and here, O terra infidel.

The fault lies with an over-human god,
Who by sympathy has made himself a man
And is not to be distinguished, when we cry

Because we suffer, our oldest parent, peer
Of the populace of the heart, the reddest lord,
Who has gone before us in experience.

If only he would not pity us so much,
Weaken our fate, relieve us of woe both great
And small, a constant fellow of destiny,

A too, too human god, self-pity's kin
And uncourageous genesis . . . It seems
As if the health of the world might be enough.

It seems as if the honey of common summer
Might be enough, as if the golden combs
Were part of a sustenance itself enough,

As if hell, so modified, had disappeared,
As if pain, no longer satanic mimicry,
Could be borne, as if we were sure to find our way.

The Woman in Sunshine

It is only that this warmth and movement are like
The warmth and movement of a woman.

It is not that there is any image in the air
Nor the beginning nor end of a form:

It is empty. But a woman in threadless gold
Burns us with brushings of her dress

And a dissociated abundance of being,
More definite for what she is—

Because she is disembodied,
Bearing the odors of the summer fields,

Confessing the taciturn and yet indifferent,
Invisibly clear, the only love.



Sweet Yonder (36" x 42", 2018)



August (25.25" x 21", 2020)

from Credences of Summer

iv One of the limits of reality
 Presents itself in Oley when the hay,
 Baked through long days, is piled in mows. It is
 A land too ripe for enigmas, too serene.
 There the distant fails the clairvoyant eye

And the secondary senses of the ear
 Swarm, not with secondary sounds, but choirs,
 Not evocations but last choirs, last sounds
 With nothing else compounded, carried full,
 Pure rhetoric of a language without words.

Things stop in that direction and since they stop
 The direction stops and we accept what is
 As good. The utmost must be good and is
 And is our fortune and honey hived in the trees
 And mingling of colors at a festival.

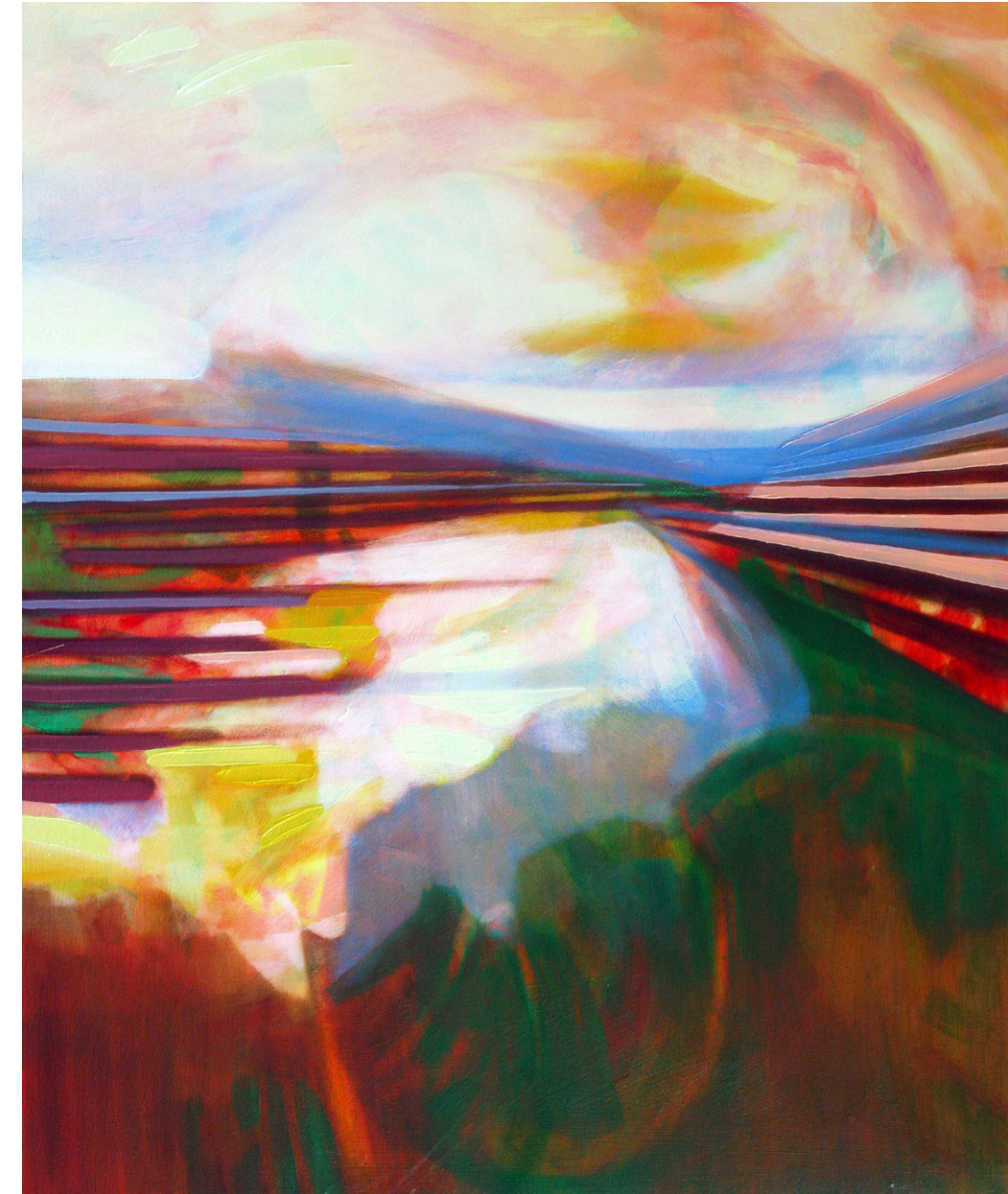
Tea at the Palaz of Hoon

Not less because in purple I descended
The western day through what you called
The loneliest air, not less was I myself.

What was the ointment sprinkled on my beard?
What were the hymns that buzzed beside my ears?
What was the sea whose tide swept through me there?

Out of my mind the golden ointment rained,
And my ears made the blowing hymns they heard.
I was myself the compass of that sea:

I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw
Or heard or felt came not but from myself;
And there I found myself more truly and more strange.



Giants in the Sun (38" x 32", 2013)



The Spirited Hour (65" x 45", 2020)

from Sunday Morning

viii She hears, upon that water without sound,
 A voice that cries, "The tomb in Palestine
 Is not the porch of spirits lingering.
 It is the grave of Jesus, where he lay."
 We live in an old chaos of the sun,
 Or old dependency of day and night,
 Or island solitude, unsponsored, free,
 Of that wide water, inescapable.
 Deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail
 Whistle about us their spontaneous cries;
 Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness;
 And, in the isolation of the sky,
 At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
 Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
 Downward to darkness, on extended wings.

from An Ordinary Evening in New Haven

xxx The last leaf that is going to fall has fallen.
The robins are là-bas, the squirrels, in tree-caves,
Huddle together in the knowledge of squirrels.

The wind has blown the silence of summer away.
It buzzes beyond the horizon or in the ground:
In mud under ponds, where the sky used to be reflected.

The barrenness that appears is an exposing.
It is not part of what is absent, a halt
For farewells, a sad hanging on for remembrances.

It is a coming on and a coming forth.
The pines that were fans and fragrances emerge,
Staked solidly in a gusty grappling with rocks.

The glass of the air becomes an element—
It was something imagined that has been washed away.
A clearness has returned. It stands restored.

It is not an empty clearness, a bottomless sight.
It is a visibility of thought,
In which hundreds of eyes, in one mind, see at once.



A Blanket for November (36" x 48", 2019)



Eventide (20" x 14", 2020)

Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird

- | | | | |
|-----|--|------|---|
| I | Among twenty snowy mountains,
The only moving thing
Was the eye of the blackbird. | viii | I know noble accents
And lucid, inescapable rhythms;
But I know, too,
That the blackbird is involved
In what I know. |
| II | I was of three minds,
Like a tree
In which there are three blackbirds. | ix | When the blackbird flew out of sight,
It marked the edge
Of one of many circles. |
| III | The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds.
It was a small part of the pantomime. | x | At the sight of blackbirds
Flying in a green light,
Even the bawds of euphony
Would cry out sharply. |
| IV | A man and a woman
Are one.
A man and a woman and a blackbird
Are one. | xi | He rode over Connecticut
In a glass coach.
Once, a fear pierced him,
In that he mistook
The shadow of his equipage
For blackbirds. |
| v | I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendoes,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after. | xii | The river is moving.
The blackbird must be flying. |
| vi | Icicles filled the long window
With barbaric glass.
The shadow of the blackbird
Crossed it, to and fro.
The mood
Traced in the shadow
An indecipherable cause. | xiii | It was evening all afternoon.
It was snowing
And it was going to snow.
The blackbird sat
In the cedar-limbs. |
| VII | O thin men of Haddam,
Why do you imagine golden birds?
Do you not see how the blackbird
Walks around the feet
Of the women about you? | | |

The Snow Man

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land
Full of the same wind
That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.



The Contours of Cold (38" x 32", 2013)



Time's Witness (50" x 45", 2015)

The Plain Sense of Things

After the leaves have fallen, we return
To a plain sense of things. It is as if
We had come to an end of the imagination,
Inanimate in an inert savoir.

It is difficult even to choose the adjective
For this blank cold, this sadness without cause.
The great structure has become a minor house.
No turban walks across the lessened floors.

The greenhouse never so badly needed paint.
The chimney is fifty years old and slants to one side.
A fantastic effort has failed, a repetition
In a repetitiousness of men and flies.

Yet the absence of the imagination had
Itself to be imagined. The great pond,
The plain sense of it, without reflections, leaves,
Mud, water like dirty glass, expressing silence

Of a sort, silence of a rat come out to see,
The great pond and its waste of the lilies, all this
Had to be imagined as an inevitable knowledge,
Required, as a necessity requires.

On the Road Home

It was when I said,
“There is no such thing as the truth,”
That the grapes seemed fatter.
The fox ran out of his hole.

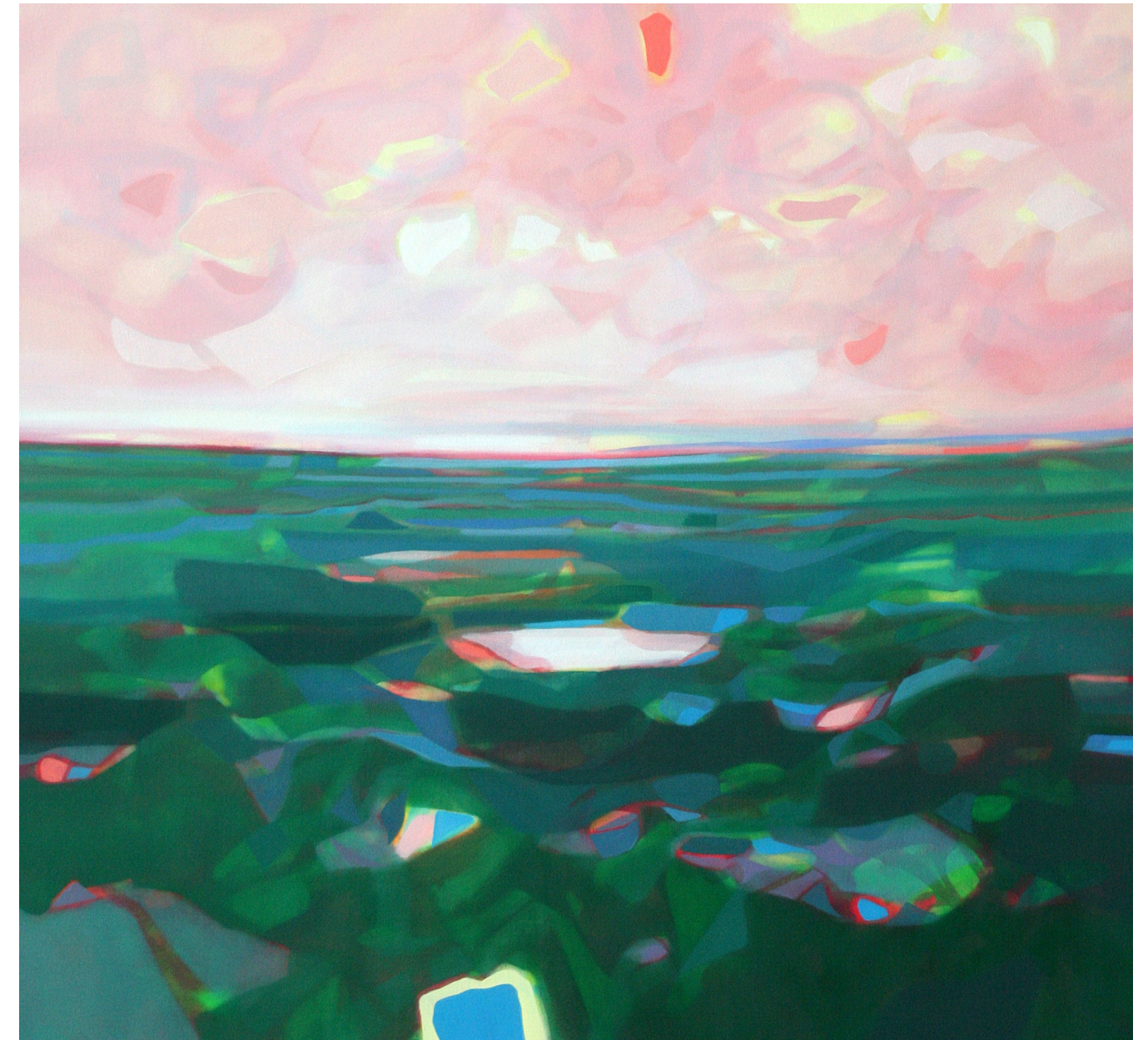
You . . . You said,
“There are many truths,
But they are not parts of a truth.”
Then the tree, at night, began to change,

Smoking through green and smoking blue.
We were two figures in a wood.
We said we stood alone.

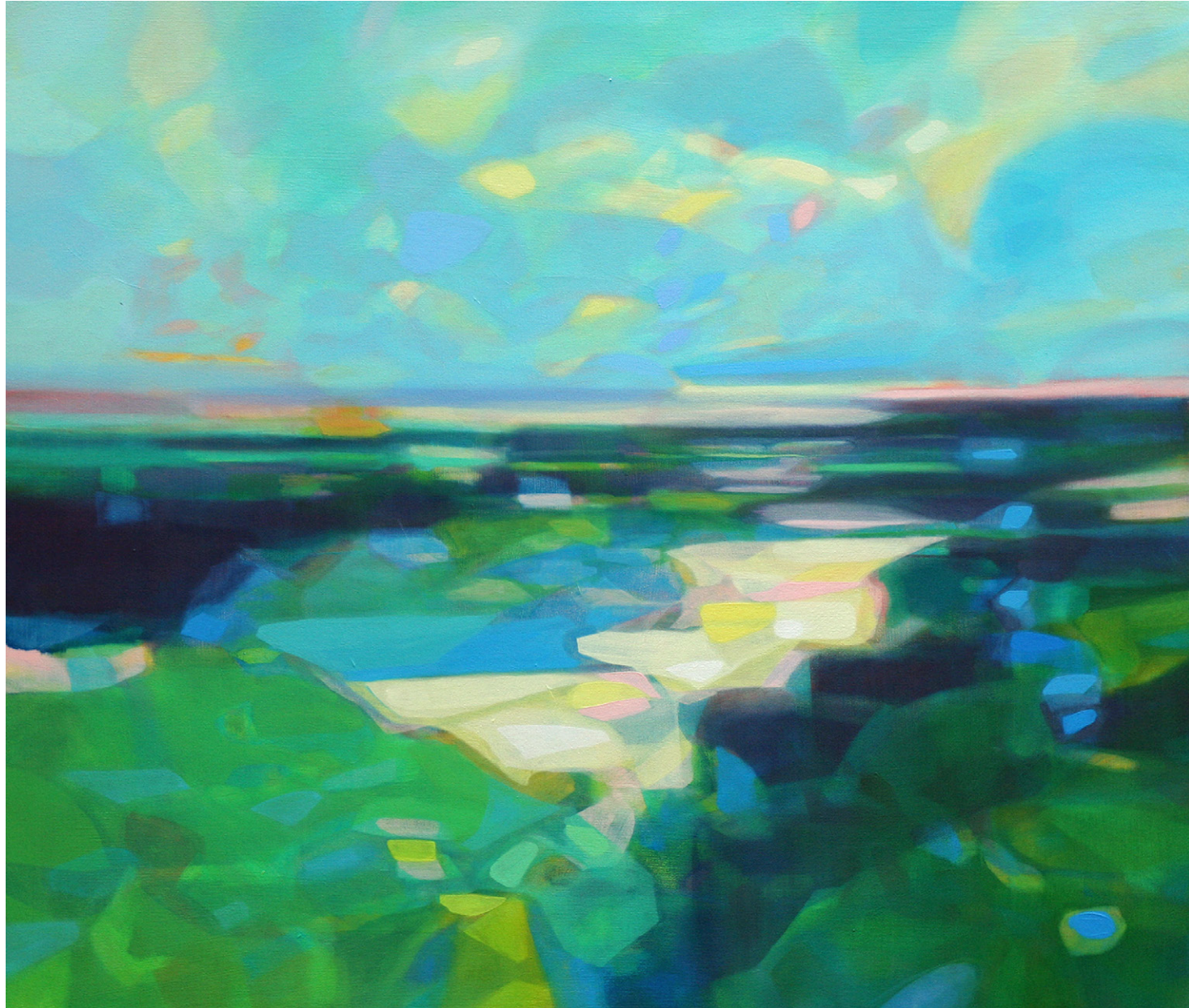
It was when I said,
“Words are not forms of a single word.
In the sum of the parts, there are only the parts.
The world must be measured by eye”;

It was when you said,
“The idols have seen lots of poverty,
Snakes and gold and lice,
But not the truth”;

It was at that time, that the silence was largest
And longest, the night was roundest,
The fragrance of the autumn warmest,
Closest and strongest.



Homeroad (48" x 52", 2016)



Visions of Home (36" x 42", 2016)

The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain

There it was, word for word,
The poem that took the place of a mountain.

He breathed its oxygen,
Even when the book lay turned in the dust of his table.

It reminded him how he had needed
A place to go to in his own direction,

How he had recomposed the pines,
Shifted the rocks and picked his way among clouds,

For the outlook that would be right,
Where he would be complete in an unexplained completion:

The exact rock where his inexactnesses
Would discover, at last, the view toward which they had edged,

Where he could lie and, gazing down at the sea,
Recognize his unique and solitary home.

from Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,
It Must Give Pleasure

I To sing jubilas at exact, accustomed times,
To be crested and wear the mane of a multitude
And so, as part, to exult with its great throat,

To speak of joy and to sing of it, borne on
The shoulders of joyous men, to feel the heart
That is the common, the bravest fundament,

This is a facile exercise. Jerome
Begot the tubas and the fire-wind strings,
The golden fingers picking dark-blue air:

For companies of voices moving there,
To find of sound the bleakest ancestor,
To find of light a music issuing

Whereon it falls in more than sensual mode.
But the difficultest rigor is forthwith,
On the image of what we see, to catch from that

Irrational moment its unreasoning,
As when the sun comes rising, when the sea
Clears deeply, when the moon hangs on the wall

Of heaven-haven. These are not things transformed.
Yet we are shaken by them as if they were.
We reason about them with a later reason.



Moonrise (22" x 26", 2020)



A Million Moons (48" x 52", 2016)

from The Man with the Blue Guitar

xxxii Throw away the lights, the definitions,
And say of what you see in the dark

That it is this or that it is that,
But do not use the rotted names.

How should you walk in that space and know
Nothing of the madness of space,

Nothing of its jocular procreations?
Throw the lights away. Nothing must stand

Between you and the shapes you take
When the crust of shape has been destroyed.

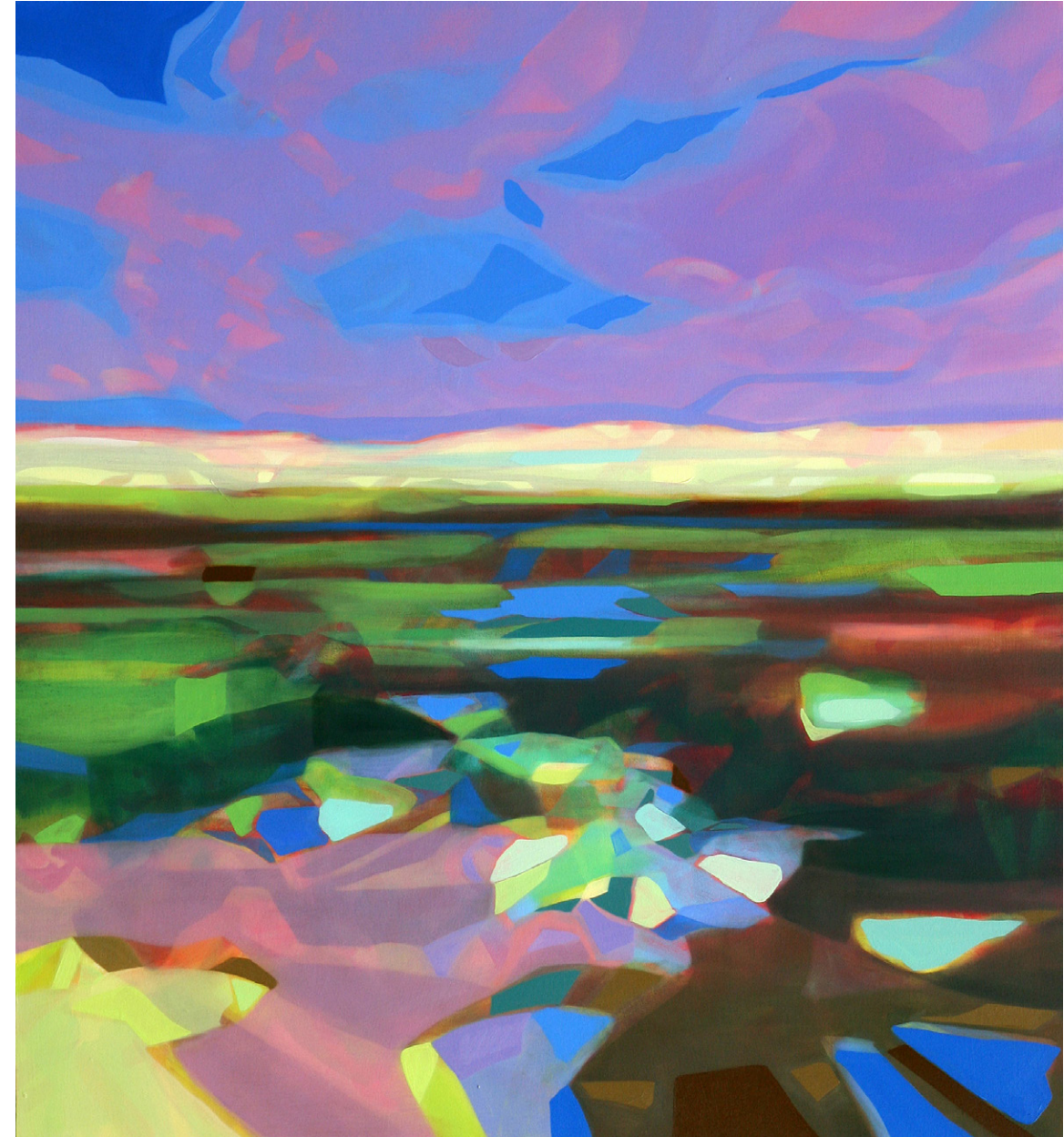
You as you are? You are yourself.
The blue guitar surprises you.

Nuances of a Theme by Williams

*It's a strange courage
you give me, ancient star:*

*Shine alone in the sunrise
toward which you lend no part!*

- I Shine alone, shine nakedly, shine like bronze,
that reflects neither my face nor any inner part
of my being, shine like fire, that mirrors nothing.
- II Lend no part to any humanity that suffuses
you in its own light.
Be not chimera of morning,
Half-man, half-star.
Be not an intelligence,
Like a widow's bird
Or an old horse.



Waiting on the Stars (52" x 48", 2017)



Nocturnal Explorer (20.25" x 18.5", 2021)

Evening Without Angels

*the great interests of man: air and light,
the joy of having a body, the voluptuousness
of looking. —Mario Rossi*

Why seraphim like lutanists arranged
Above the trees? And why the poet as
Eternal *chef d'orchestre*?

Air is air.
Its vacancy glitters round us everywhere.
Its sounds are not angelic syllables
But our unfashioned spirits realized
More sharply in more furious selves.

And light
That fosters seraphim and is to them
Coiffeur of haloes, fecund jeweller—
Was the sun concoct for angels or for men?
Sad men made angels of the sun, and of
The moon they made their own attendant ghosts,
Which led them back to angels, after death.

Let this be clear that we are men of sun
And men of day and never of pointed night,
Men that repeat antiquest sounds of air
In an accord of repetitions. Yet,
If we repeat, it is because the wind
Encircling us, speaks always with our speech.

Light, too, encrusts us making visible
The motions of the mind and giving form
To moodiest nothings, as, desire for day
Accomplished in the immensely flashing East,
Desire for rest, in that descending sea
Of dark, which in its very darkening
Is rest and silence spreading into sleep.

. . . Evening, when the measure skips a beat
And then another, one by one, and all
To a seething minor swiftly modulate.
Bare night is best. Bare earth is best. Bare, bare,
Except for our own houses, huddled low
Beneath the arches and their spangled air,
Beneath the rhapsodies of fire and fire,
Where the voice that is in us makes a true response,
Where the voice that is great within us rises up,
As we stand gazing at the rounded moon.

Domination of Black

At night, by the fire,
The colors of the bushes
And of the fallen leaves,
Repeating themselves,
Turned in the room,
Like the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind.
Yes: but the color of the heavy hemlocks
Came striding—
And I remembered the cry of the peacocks.

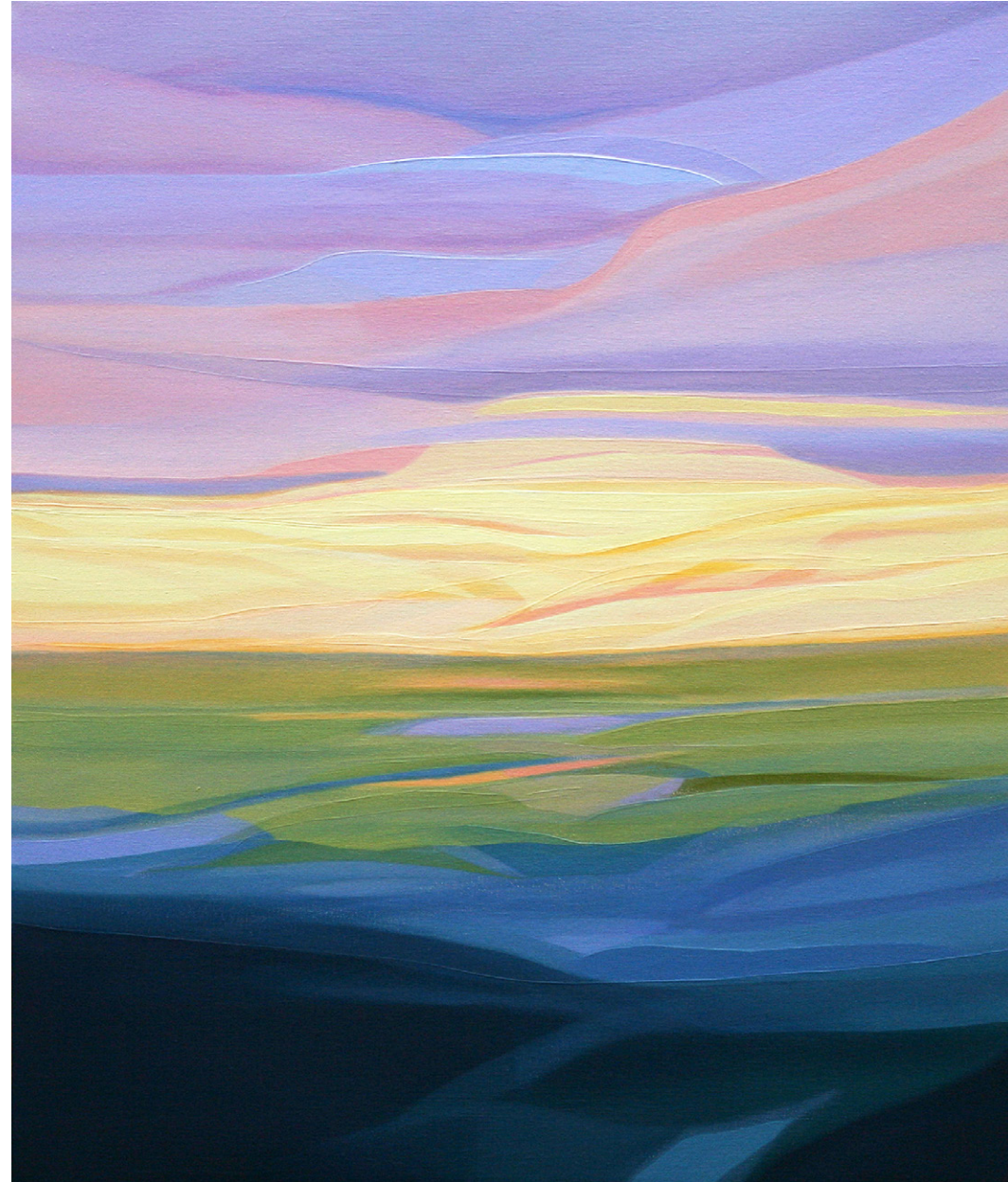
The colors of their tails
Were like the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind,
In the twilight wind.
They swept over the room,
Just as they flew from the boughs of the hemlocks
Down to the ground.
I heard them cry—the peacocks.

Was it a cry against the twilight
Or against the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind,
Turning as the flames
Turned in the fire,
Turning as the tails of the peacocks
Turned in the loud fire,
Loud as the hemlocks
Full of the cry of the peacocks?
Or was it a cry against the hemlocks?

Out of the window,
I saw how the planets gathered
Like the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind.
I saw how the night came,
Came striding like the color of the heavy hemlocks.
I felt afraid—
And I remembered the cry of the peacocks.



Patterns of Night (30" x 34", 2014)



Insieme [Italian, Together] (26" x 22", 2020)

Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour

Light the first light of evening, as in a room
In which we rest and, for small reason, think
The world imagined is the ultimate good.

This is, therefore, the intensest rendezvous.
It is in that thought that we collect ourselves,
Out of all the indifferences, into one thing:

Within a single thing, a single shawl
Wrapped tightly round us, since we are poor, a warmth,
A light, a power, the miraculous influence.

Here, now, we forget each other and ourselves.
We feel the obscurity of an order, a whole,
A knowledge, that which arranged the rendezvous,

Within its vital boundary, in the mind.
We say God and the imagination are one . . .
How high that highest candle lights the dark.

Out of this same light, out of the central mind,
We make a dwelling in the evening air,
In which being there together is enough.

Contributors

Wallace Stevens (1879–1955) has emerged as one of the greatest poets of the twentieth century. His lyrical and often philosophical poems give voice to our vast and often inarticulate inner lives. By profession, Stevens was a lawyer. He joined the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company in 1916, specializing in surety bonds, and became a vice president in 1934. He never retired, but his foremost love was poetry. An acute observer of nature, he was an ardent walker and would often compose poems while strolling through Elizabeth Park in Hartford or on his daily two-mile walk to and from the office. He would even jot down lines in the midst of dictating a legal document. In his later years, he garnered numerous awards, including the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize for his *Collected Poems* (1954).

Alexis Serio has an extensive exhibition record that includes shows at the Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum in Japan, the Martin Museum of Art at Baylor University, and the Wichita Falls Museum of Art in Texas. Her work has appeared alongside artists such as Andy Warhol and Richard Diebenkorn in a show at the Delaware Center for Contemporary Arts. She was an artist-in-residence at the Gullkistan International Residency for Creative People in Iceland and a finalist for the Hunting Art Prize. Numerous galleries across the country have featured her paintings, and many of her works are in public and private collections. Serio's abstract landscapes are responses to the transience of light, especially as seen most dramatically at sunrise

and sunset, in moving water, and in the light cast over grand vistas. Her fluid imagery functions metaphorically to express concepts and feelings about perception, time, memory, love, longing, spirituality—in other words, what it means to be human. Serio is professor of art at the University of Texas at Tyler and serves as art editor of *The Wallace Stevens Journal*. She received her B.F.A. in painting from Syracuse University and her M.F.A. in painting from the University of Pennsylvania, where she was awarded the Charles Addams Memorial Prize. She is currently represented by the Edgewater Gallery in Middlebury, Vermont. To see more of her artwork, visit alexisserioart.com.

Glen MacLeod, Emeritus Professor of English at the University of Connecticut, is the author of *Wallace Stevens and Company* and *Wallace Stevens and Modern Art: From the Armory Show to Abstract Expressionism*, and editor of *Wallace Stevens in Context*. He serves on the editorial board of *The Wallace Stevens Journal* and as vice president of the Wallace Stevens Society. The chief focus of his research has been the relations between Stevens's poetry and the visual arts. In addition to his book on Stevens and modern art, he has curated the exhibition *Painting in Poetry/Poetry in Painting: Wallace Stevens and Modern Art* at Baruch College in New York, and published essays on the influence of Wallace Stevens on contemporary artists, Stevens's relation to the long Western tradition of displaying plaster casts

of famous statues, and Stevens's relations to surrealism, abstract art, Picasso, and Matisse.

John N. Serio, former editor of *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, has edited a number of books on Wallace Stevens, including *Teaching Wallace Stevens: Practical Essays*; *The Cambridge Companion to Wallace Stevens*; *Wallace Stevens: Selected Poems*; and *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens: Corrected Edition*. He has won several awards for his scholarly work, established an online concordance to Stevens's poetry at www.wallacestevens.com, held Fulbright Fellowships in Greece and Belgium, and taught five times for Semester at Sea. He is Professor Emeritus of Humanities at Clarkson University.

Bill Vitek is editor of New Perennials Publishing, and director of the New Perennials Project at Middlebury College. Vitek taught philosophy for 32 years at Clarkson University, always with the goal of helping students experience the potential of the philosophical imagination to do useful work in the world. For 35 years, he has collaborated with Wes Jackson and The Land Institute. Vitek and Jackson co-edited two books, *Rooted in the Land: Essays on Community and Place* (1996) and *The Virtues of Ignorance: Complexity, Sustainability, and the Limits of Knowledge* (2008), with another one in the works.

Works Cited

Preface

Rilke, Rainer Maria. "The Sonnets to Orpheus," Book I, #12. *Ahead of All Parting: The Selected Poetry and Prose of Rainer Maria Rilke*, edited and translated by Stephen Mitchell. Random House, 1995. 433.

Introduction

Annenberg Foundation, *Voices and Visions: Wallace Stevens* (video).
New York Center for Visual History, 1988.
www.learner.org/series/voices-visions/wallace-stevens/

Lensing, George. *Wallace Stevens and the Seasons*.
Louisiana State UP, 2001.

Serio, Alexis. Unpublished, typewritten descriptions of the paintings reproduced in this book.

Stevens, Wallace. *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens: Corrected Edition*.
Edited by John N. Serio and Chris Beyers. Vintage, 2015.

Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poetry and Prose*.
Edited by Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson. Library of America, 1997.

Stevens, Wallace. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*.
Edited by Holly Stevens. Knopf, 1966.



Perennial Earth: Poetry
by Wallace Stevens and
Paintings by Alexis Serio

“Wallace Stevens and Alexis Serio celebrate, in their art, the physical world. But their poems and paintings are also ‘so many sensuous worlds,’ replete with ‘the metaphysical changes’ that transform ordinary life into something extraordinary. We can only be grateful.”

—Glen MacLeod

NewPerennials
PUBLISHING

ISBN 978-1-7354136-2-4



9 781735 413624