
MAKERS
by
NATURE

LETTERS *from a*
MASTER PAINTER
on FAITH,
HOPE, *and* ART

BRUCE HERMAN



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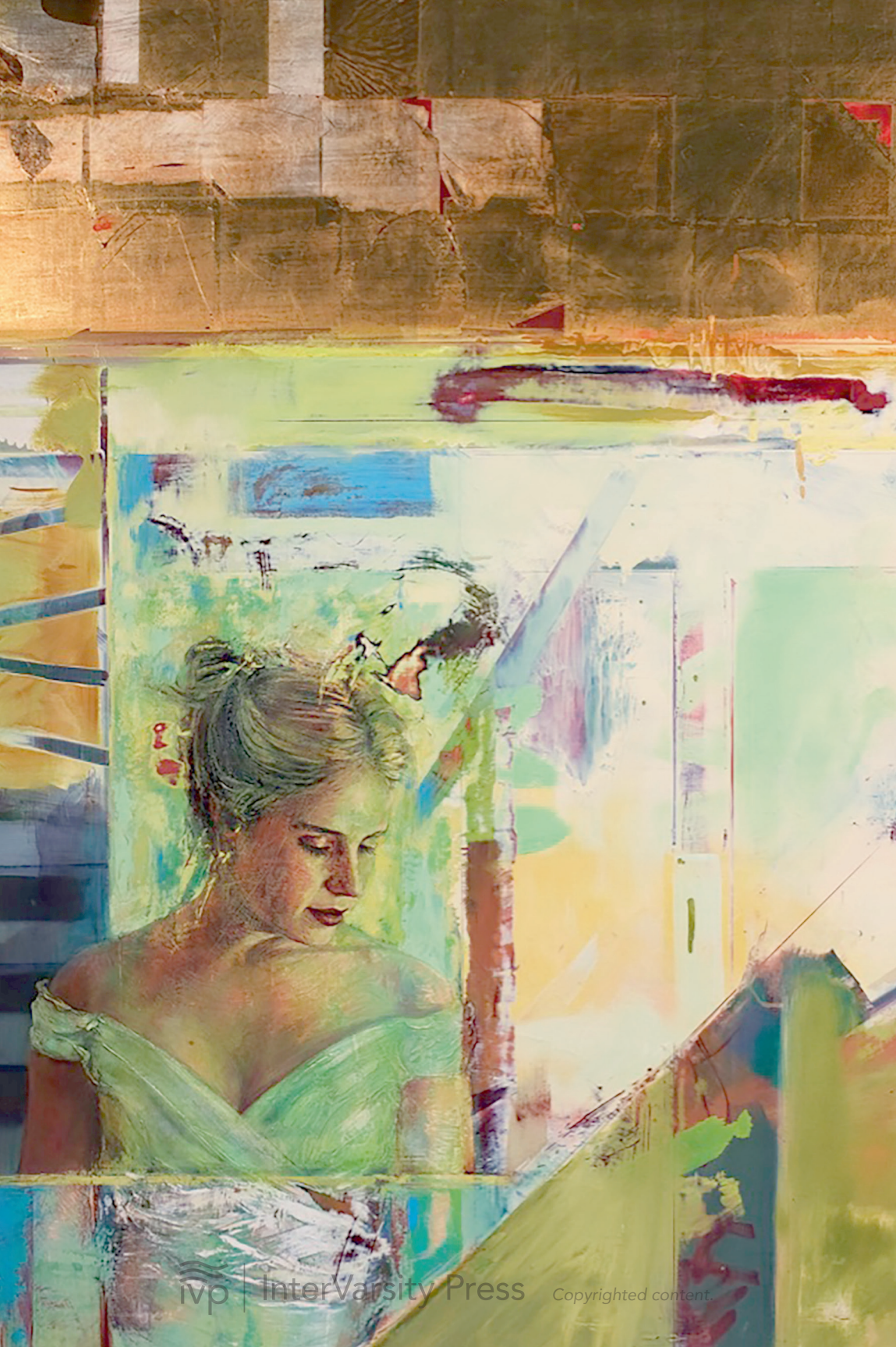
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1

ART
and
CRAFT

LETTERS
to ELLA

Betrothed © Bruce Herman, 2006. Oil on wood with 23kt. gold leaf and silver leaf; 65" × 60". Collection of Walter and Darlene Hansen.



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Gloucester, September 15, 2022

Dear Ella,

Thank you for your letter—good to hear from you, and it was good to see you recently after several years. Thanks also for the good questions you raised, particularly regarding the studio work for your thesis exhibition. I want to respond directly to your questions, but first a little disclaimer. The distinction you (or your professors) are making between skill and creativity is, to my mind, a nonstarter. Art is in many ways synonymous with imagination, but creativity is an overused word that can be found and used literally everywhere and in everything humans do and make. Better, it seems to me, to stick to humbler ways of thinking about making art. We were made by a Maker to be makers, and our hearts are restless until we make something—something beautiful.

On teaching art: it seems almost a fraudulent enterprise if we acknowledge from the outset that art is a mysterious prize outside normal human control—a gift given from the Muse, as the old saying goes. And by *art*, I mean those aspects of painting, music, poetry that refuse definition and elude full comprehension, deriving from seemingly unknown sources (at least in our experience). I am not trying to aggrandize art. I am simply saying that it is mysterious, and that art as gift is something outside human control. That’s why it’s referred to as a gift.

More directly to your question about art-versus-craft in response to your graduate adviser, I honestly think most of what human makers do is really a form of decoration. And by *decoration* I don’t intend to demean our art-making—as in the phrase “merely decorative.” To my way of thinking, decoration is fundamental to human flourishing. It’s what we do. We adorn our lives constantly—no matter how rich or poor, comfy or desperate our circumstance. Even amid grinding poverty people add color and design to their lives—decorating their bodies, their dwellings (no matter how humble), indeed, every aspect of their lives. Decoration is a basic human urge, and I believe it to be on par with our need for eating, sleep, procreation, and worship. There is no place and there are no people on the planet where decoration and design are absent. The world of high-minded contemporary art in urban centers, with all its theoretical



sophistication, is essentially decoration. The architects of Chartres would, I think, agree with me. But of course, in decoration there are levels of complexity and beauty and worth, as in all human enterprise.

So, what then *is* art if it is *more* than decoration? You've raised a question or made a mild complaint about your professors urging you to be more intentional about making fine art, not merely designing fabric with pattern or decoration. I wouldn't presume to correct your professors—nor would I want to sow discontent. But I believe that urging you to “make art” is probably pointless. In my studio practice I concluded early on that attempting to imbue my work with mystery was a waste of time. The minute I'd try to do it on purpose, to be “creative,” it always fell flat. But when I got on with the work of simply pushing paint around—of arranging color and shape and texture, along with wrestling with my internal conflicts, sometimes that quality of mysteriousness descended on the work as if from on high. In other words, I cannot force it. And those artists who think they can produce art on demand are either self-deceived or hucksters. But of course, painting is more than pushing paint around.

But all this might leave us without much else to say, right? Why even try to make art or discuss it if you cannot be sure that your work will *carry* it, will manifest that elusive quality we're speaking about? This is where I'd begin with your question: in its very elusiveness and the fact of its *impossibility*, art partakes of this quality, this atmosphere of alterity, of mysteriousness, of gift from outside the system.

As a personal example, in my painting *Betrothed* (collection of Walter and Darlene Hansen) I began with a completely abstract composition. I had no plan to include a figure, let alone one symbolizing the church in all her beauty and glory. I certainly didn't plan to do a portrait-like painting of my daughter Sarah and have her become a symbol of all that. What I was doing initially was quite literally brushing out areas of Naples yellow pigment with layers and vague stripes of a certain golden-green and hints of turquoise. I was painstakingly adding areas of gilding—layers of gold and silver leaf (a delicate process in comparison with my usual methods—which include taking a sander or scraper to areas of dried paint).



I'd developed an expansive area of that golden-greenish hue on the wood panel I was using—and I began to “erase” a whole section in the middle with a wash of white and gray, and suddenly I thought I saw a suggestion of a figure off to the left of the main area. I don't mean this as cloud-reading, though there's an element of that kind of daydreaming in my process. What I mean is more like peering into one's own imagination while working on a piece and seeing something *more*. A certain “excess of meaning,” as Rowan Williams puts it in his book *Grace and Necessity* (which I highly recommend).

That excess, that something more, is what I am always seeking in my painting practice—and that is what art *is* for me as a painter. It's a grace, a free gift that seems to come from nowhere. Of course, a psychologist might be able to analyze me (or any other painter) and explain how an image arrives seemingly full-blown on its own. But I am not interested in psychoanalyzing the artist's process—my own or anybody's. I'd be at best only mildly interested in what some analyst might say about why that photo I took of my daughter the evening before her wedding came to mind in an early stage of this painting—and strangely while I was wiping out an entire section of the piece.

I just “saw” it—that figure. And then began the difficult task of finding how an image of a young bride might work within the painting as it evolved on an abstract or formal level—shifting shapes and fields of color. I was just adjusting color relationships and playing with the shapes and layers I'd laid down on the panel. I had no plan to do a painting about the mystical bride of Christ. Though of course I'd given lots of thought to that theological reality—to that image or existential reality of the church-as-bride. This image, given to us by Christ himself, is probably the most compelling theological reality that humans can grapple with. I know of no other religion that speaks about the believer becoming wed to God. It is a radical idea; or, more accurately, it is a radical reality that will one day be the denouement of all creation. And that is what *Betrothed* is about, as far as I have been able to tell—a sort of eschatological image-symbol. I know that last bit may sound a little disingenuous—for the artist to speak as though he or she was simply a witness to the image rather than

its author, planning out its meaning. But that is the honest truth, Ella. I stand before the work of art that I have made as a witness, a viewer on par with any one of my viewers or collectors—and I honestly do not think I am the best interpreter of my paintings.

I have gone on at length about this one painting simply to make clear my response to the issue you raise about the pressure to “make art.” But I think I’d need to write a whole book if I were to truly take on your issue. In the meantime, my advice is simple: Show up in your studio. Put on your work apron, squeeze out your paints, and roll out your fabrics. *Decorate* to your heart’s content and don’t worry about what others think. (Including your graduate adviser—he will see very quickly that your work has a certain *authority*, and he’ll be pleased to step aside and watch you unpack it.) But first you must take the leap and engage in the basic risk that all artmaking entails. There’s just no way around this one. We are, at our best, vessels for that excess of meaning. If nothing else, you’ll make a decorative object with desirable qualities. Its *inscape* (to use the term of poet Gerard Manley Hopkins) is not under your control. Let me know if there are other things we can discuss. I enjoy writing letters in lieu of conversation around a meal—which is the ideal, right? If you are in touch with your parents, wish them well for me. I enjoyed seeing them last time I was in Dallas.

Sincerely,
Bruce

Gloucester, October 10, 2022

Ella,

I’m glad that you had a fruitful week in the studio.

Thanks for that swift response and call for clarification. I’ll do my best. I was not trying to argue in favor of a visual equivalent of “automatic writing” or of cloud-readings (like the Surrealists). I was trying to evince some sense of looking deeply into one’s imagination—partly by means of surrendering control, or at least avoiding overdetermination of the image. I believe strongly that artists and poets can (and do) engage in rigorous planning of a work. But even the most fastidious planner must



leave room for the serendipitous elements, which are often the best part of her work. I know a story about J. R. R. Tolkien, author of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy—Tolkien was an Oxford professor and professional philologist, and who had worked out an entire legendarium—extensively planning and developing his plotlines and backstories, even creating entire languages and runic scripts for the various groups of creatures that would inhabit the world he was creating, Middle-earth. He was nothing if not a planner.

Yet, when Tolkien was interviewed toward the end of his life, asked how he'd crafted *The Lord of the Rings* story and how he'd account for its popularity (translated into over forty languages), he replied, somewhat cryptically, "I'd started *The Fellowship of the Ring* and I'd gotten Frodo and Sam out of the Shire and as far as the village of Bree—where they were supposed to meet Gandalf. But Gandalf never showed up, and I couldn't figure out why. I had to write the story in order to find out." This report may have been embellished, and, since I heard it from a friend who heard it from a friend, may not be entirely factual. But even if not, it bears retelling if only because it is the experience of many artists, composers, poets, novelists, etc. It amounts to the universal experience of art makers—that they "receive" the text or image or melody as gift and often find themselves in the posture of a servant of that extra something (art) that they *find* rather than "create." Nonbeliever artists often talk about "luck" in their creative process.

Again, all this may sound cryptic—and in fact it is—and is also in many ways incorrigible, by which I mean to say impossible to break down or fully digest, comprehend, and so on. In fact, I prefer understanding to comprehension anyway—the etymological roots of the latter having common roots with handling, controlling, overcoming, seizing, possessing. The Gospel of John begins with "In the beginning was the Word. . . . The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not grasp it. . . . This was the true Light that, coming into the world, enlightens every person" (John 1:1, 5, 9). The word that is translated as "overcome" can also mean "comprehend"—which has its roots in grasping, seizing, taking hold of something. By contrast, understanding requires an elemental humility, not



hubris—not taking hold or possessing, but receiving as gift. We need to *stand under* something to *understand* it, to receive it into ourselves. To grow in understanding is qualitatively different from having and holding and controlling and overcoming—whether from comprehension or mastery.

I love your question about creativity and “magic.” I’ve avoided that word because of its association with occultism—which many modern artists have dabbled in (the Surrealists in particular, but also many others, including the painter Piet Mondrian and the poet William Butler Yeats). Again, I have no desire or need to mystify or attribute to art the powers of magical thinking or wizardry. (Though I don’t think it’s too much of a stretch to connect artmaking, writing, and composing, with enchantment.) More about that enchantment another time.

With hopes that your upcoming exhibition is all that you hope it to be.
Blessings,
Bruce

Gloucester, November 18, 2022

Dear Ella,

That is such good news! I am not surprised that your professors gave hearty approval to those marvelous, majestic paintings. The scale alone would have awed most folks! But I think your willingness to simply give in to the decorative impulse is at least partly responsible for the vitality of your exhibition. As I said a month or so ago, I honestly believe pattern and color and texture all have their own meanings—and those meanings point beyond the wordy theoretical realm into a more expansive part of the human experience—call it the realm of nature’s *wonder*. Pattern and color are of the essence in creation, and our Creator obviously delights in them, as everywhere the wonders of those delights are extravagantly strewn.

Why, for example, is nature flooded with millions of beautifully patterned bugs, flowers, animal hides, and so on—and why are the very sky and sea and land endlessly variegated? Is it truly necessary that there be millions of different wildflowers instead of just dozens or hundreds? Why does every sunrise and sunset differ in intensity or subtlety—and why do clouds, trees, and rock formations have innumerable shapes and colors and textures



instead of a drab, predictable, limited palette and shape? God delights in this variety and the explosion of creativity, color, and wildness of design.

I'll sign off for now, but congratulations again on a fine exhibit—and remember this is the first of many. Your job now is to show up in the studio and keep trying. Do not accept the little daily defeats as definitive—and do not listen to the enemy who whispers, “You’ll never amount to anything as an artist—you are mediocre at best.” Your answer to this accusation and put-down ought to be, “Yes, yes. I am nothing. What *else* is new?” And then laugh at the freedom you have in Christ who has already given you a new name—so you needn’t worry about making a name for yourself. Besides, that phrase, “making a name for ourselves” hails from Genesis 11, wherein the architects and artists of Babel thought to outsmart God and build a skyscraper so big and high that they’d be gods in heaven: “Come . . . let’s make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered abroad over the face of all the earth” (Genesis 11:4). We know how their fame-seeking ended: in literal idiocy, each speaking a private language. We can apply that lesson to ourselves as painters and internalize the warning in Scripture: don’t seek to adopt an identity or seek after fame or prominence—it won’t end well, and you’ll be isolated, miserable, and incoherent. Seek first the beneficent reign of God our king and all other needful things will be added to your life.

It is freeing to answer the enemy’s accusations with an honest “Yes, you are right. I am nothing.” Then he will flee from you, realizing he can get nowhere with someone who has already accepted and celebrates their creaturely dependence upon God. Joy in making begins with humility and love of the making itself—more than in making of a name for yourself. Blessings,

Bruce

Gloucester, November 21, 2022

Ella,

This will be short because I’m packing to leave for Italy to teach a month-long course on portable altarpieces. I’m exhausted from my hearing loss and needing to adapt to a very different “soundscape” of



distortion and diminished volume. And I confess to dreading the fact that my students there will need to speak directly to my face, slowly and deliberately, which might result in the naturalness of the studio atmosphere becoming something that feels forced. I share this in the spirit of honest vulnerability—knowing that you are aware of my strong faith, my trust in God’s providence despite all. I do believe it will go well; Lord, help my unbelief. (At the very least I do know that God works all things for good to those who love God and are called in accordance with God’s purposes.)

Quick reply to your question: I do not have a sense of having “arrived” at all after fifty years of studio practice. And in response to the enemy’s whispers that I am a failure, I laugh and say—“You are right! I fail every single day—and those failures are the manure, the fertilizer for honest growth!”

I’ll be in touch when I return. In the meantime, please pray for me and for my ten students, that our time together would be fruitful for God’s purposes—purposes that are always beautiful, always good.

Peace,
Bruce

Gloucester, Christmas Day, 2022

Dear Ella,

Merry Christmas!

It’s been an honor to engage your questions—honestly—no need to apologize!

I’m back from Orvieto and settling back into a studio pattern at home, and have the early mornings free, so this is a great time to write back. I love the fact that you’re still thinking through the question of decorative versus fine art! I could have predicted that the theoretical prejudices of the university graduate program would get stuck in your throat a bit. And that’s all for the best, to my way of thinking. First, as I said before, I believe that the most sophisticated art being made out there today is still decoration. Think about it for just a few minutes and it should become obvious. Where is all that celebrated and expensive



contemporary art going? Mostly on walls. And not just any walls. As in centuries past, they're going on the walls of the wealthy—whose apartments and homes are filled with finely crafted glassware, furniture, clothing, and so on. Paintings of any sort that adorn their walls are still adornments. Decorations!

Yes—a sophisticated Mark Rothko color-field painting hanging in the Upper East Side apartment of a wealthy New Yorker is a piece of art history—because Rothko's work was written about by influential critics and art historians and collected by the MoMA. But it is still decoration. Here is what I was driving at a little further back in our correspondence: decoration is of the essence. There's nothing “mere” about it. It goes to the heart of creation itself and participates in God's glory. And we have only the faintest idea about that glory. I'll confess that the word itself is so covered in familiarity that it just rolls off my tongue without much thought. What do we mean when we speak about “glorifying God”? Do we really *know* what that means?

I'd argue that your adviser's criticism last year—telling you to move past mere decoration—was a blind spot in his thinking. The whole division between fine and applied arts, between craft and *poesis*, is artificial and hollow. In truth that very word, *poesis*, originally meant simply “to make”—and making requires craft. Yes, the word has come to be associated with the poetical aspects of art, but it is still just *making*. Plato, in *The Republic*, argues that artists and other craftspeople do not really belong as citizens and statesmen of a thoughtful republic. He may have originated the problem of prioritizing special knowledge over craft, over mere making, over the “trades.” (As though artists and musicians ought to stay in their lane and just entertain the philosophers and statesmen! Ha!) But in the Renaissance, artists were accorded higher status and invited into royal palaces, befriending popes, princes, and powerful people. Guarding that privileged status has become the sacred duty of successive generations of composers, painters, and writers.

But I think that's all to the loss of art—associating it too closely with privilege, power, and high-status social standing. As I said before, I believe genuine (and great) art springs from humility, from receptivity to beauty



and the wonders of the created world. If I were to summarize this attitude, it would go something like this: if, as an artist, you are more in love with yourself and your accomplishments than with your subject matter, your art will eventually go stale. Motivation and impetus for great art is always outside the self and its demands—and most often starts with a simple love of what is seen.

Thanks for your kind comment about the figure in *Betrothed*. When I finished the painting, I stood back and was truly moved—not because of my own achievement, but because the painting seemed to have come to life. The figure in her wedding dress, partly submerged in a mysterious pool of broken color, seemed to be breathing, excited, anticipating something wonderful. The shattered elements in the painting (including areas directly surrounding the figure and bordering on her hair and dress) seemed to me to be vibrating with life—as though the very fact of brokenness occasioned new vitality and hope. She is a bride, but she appears to have undergone suffering—some kind of baptism or ordeal. Yet she shines. I am so grateful for this. I thank God that images like this have come to me, offered themselves to me, in the process of making. I wish I could account for them more rationally or offer better advice to a young painter as to how she can access this level of symbolic and emotional intensity. I can only really say that most of my hours in the studio are spent in a humble process of craft. That “something more” is always a gift. Beyond this I’d share with you that I pray, read, study, and I am always looking. Looking always comes first.

As always,

Bruce

Gloucester, January 13, 2022

Thanks, Ella.

Yes, as I said, I do a lot of thinking, reflecting, and research prior to painting. But it is almost never directly correlated to a specific work. I don’t set out, for example, to illustrate a theological idea like *grace*—but I steep myself in Bible stories that are characterized by it (e.g., the parable of the prodigal) and I will sometimes write a brief reflection essay in



response to a biblical passage, with the thought that at some point it may become a painting or a series of paintings. But I seldom if ever plan out a series in detail.

The habit of letting literature, Scripture, poetry, and theology “steep” in me goes way back to grad school in the 1970s. I don’t think my imagination works in a predictable way—and I know that this could be frustrating if you, as a student, want to have clear instruction. But you’re now beyond the classroom phase of your apprenticeship. You’re expected by your professors to think for yourself and develop your own visual strategies, sources, and “maps.” By maps, I mean simply plotting a course the way a sailor or airplane pilot would do. You account for the currents, the prevailing winds, the weather, and the depth soundings, and then plot your journey—realizing all the while that you’re not really in control of much of anything except your little boat and your sails and steering rudder. That little boat is a small thing in the face of the jet-stream, the weather, and the tides.

What I intend here, in this extended metaphor, is to say again that you do need to read, think, pray, and consult many sources—but in the end you must set out in unknown waters, understanding that you’re not in control of the larger forces at play in the creative process. You’re in control of your painterly craft to the extent that you’ve mastered it. It takes many years of steadfast practice, and even then there are no guarantees. You can make something well crafted and it may or may not participate in that larger conversation we call art. The stakes feel high (and they are, in a very real sense), but there is no way around the risk factors. Without risk, there is no authentic art.

Well, once again I’ve veered into seemingly mystical aspects of art. But I do think that there are, in the realm of the imagination, things equivalent to tides, winds, currents, and undertows. Gosh, there may even be continents and islands and massive weather systems. I’ll admit that there have been seasons in my studio in which I felt that thunderheads were forming over me—and I have most certainly felt those times of simple joy in the returning of the light, the fresh air of simple creativity and discovery. But I’ll also say that I’ve had long seasons of drought. These



weather metaphors come easily—not because they are clichés, but because the experience of making over many years necessarily connects to nature’s cycles, as does our own physical and mental health.

Keep in touch, friend. Please let me know when you “land” after graduation—and keep me informed about your making. I’m honestly eager to see where those massive, patterned paintings go—and I’ve every confidence that a gallery will invite you to join—if that’s the route you want to go.

Blessings,

Bruce



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