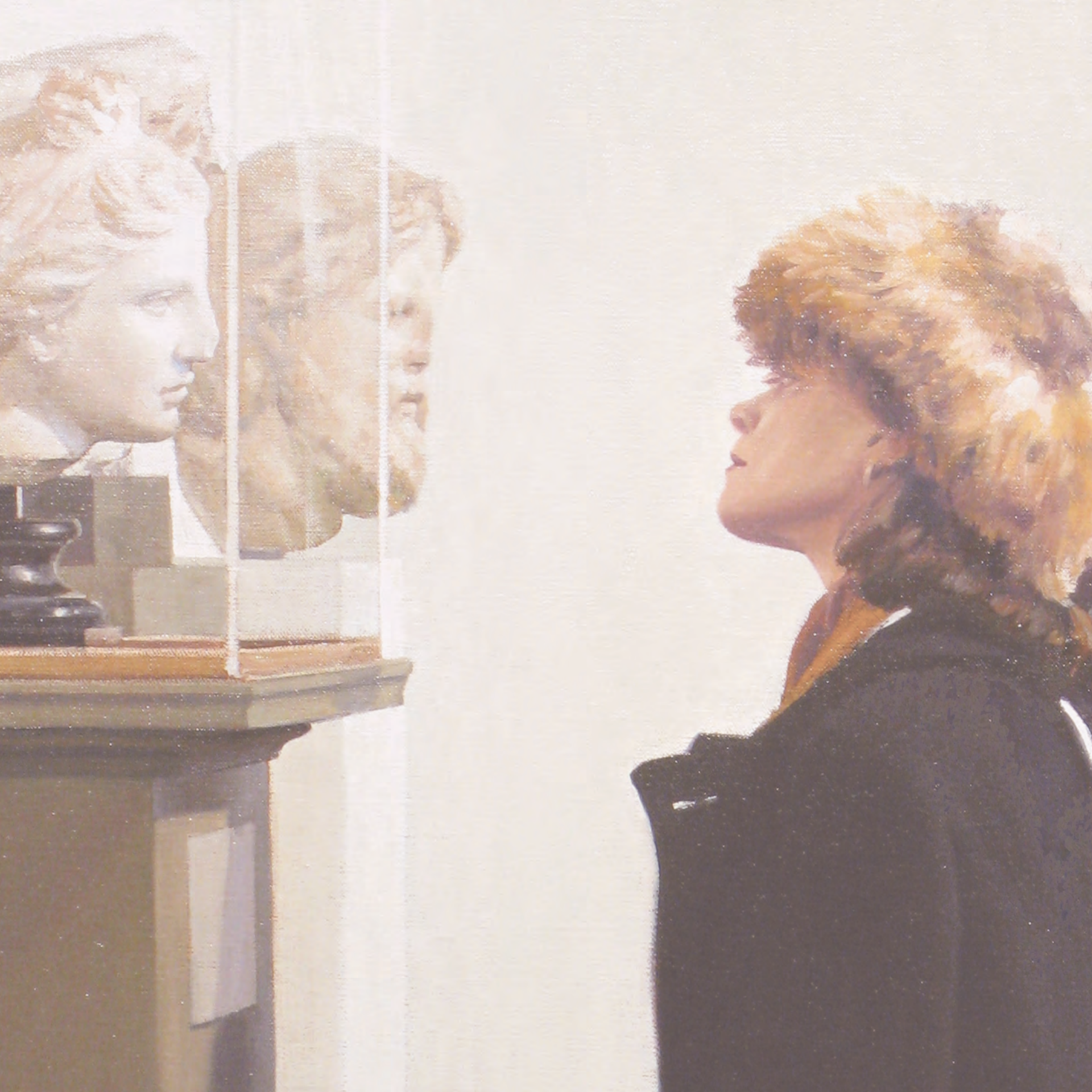


*Duets: Theme and Variations*  
NEW PAINTINGS BY WARREN PROSPERI



VOSE GALLERIES





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## Introduction

BY MARCIA L. VOSE

If it hadn't been for a stroke of good luck, Vose Galleries would still be continuing its ten-year countrywide search to find a world-class figure painter. As it happened, our artist in residence, Peter Greaves, was at our framer's studio and noticed an incredible portrait by a painter totally unknown to us named Warren Prosperi. Peter was stunned by the quality, and within the week Peter and Carey Vose made a studio visit, returning to the gallery with rave reviews. Here was a world-class figural painter right in our own backyard!

For the past twenty years, Warren has been quietly living the life of a portrait painter and muralist. A single commission to paint a posthumous portrait of Dr. Tom Hackett, former head of psychiatry at Massachusetts General Hospital, led to the commissioning of twenty one more portraits of distinguished Massachusetts General doctors, which now hang throughout the hospital. Because of this long and successful association, the hospital awarded Prosperi a major commission to paint a historical panorama of the first public demonstration of ether, marking the birth of modern surgery that took place at Massachusetts General in 1846. Unveiled in 2001, the 10 by 7 foot mural employed twenty MGH surgeons and physicians as models for the reenactment and now hangs permanently in the former surgical amphitheater.

Raised in Fort Myers, Florida, Warren began drawing at age five, when he became engrossed by artist John Gnagy's television series of the 1950s, *Learn to Draw*. Later the artist spent every Saturday at the Ringling Museum of Art in Sarasota, which the artist calls his "spiritual home." Sadly, Warren's father died during the polio epidemic of the nineteen fifties, and Warren assumed the duties of "man of the house". When he turned eighteen, Warren sold the family home, packed his mother and brother into their Volkswagen bus and headed for Boston, hoping to become an artist. "I wasn't drawn by the vanguard art movements in New York City," states the artist, "and knew Boston to be more traditional and historically inclined; the 'Athens of the East'."

To support the family, Warren became head decorator for Filene's department store in Belmont, MA, for four years, but the urge to paint became overwhelming. He found inexpensive housing at the Interfaith Center on Beacon Street, cleaned and mopped floors for the Blue Parrot Restaurant in Cambridge during the early morning, then copied the old masters at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in the afternoon for two years. "Rembrandt, Millet, Velasquez, Reubens, Chardin became my mentors", Warren states. "Reubens sketches reveal almost everything going on in the 17th century, and he taught me how to use paint. Another great source was a book written by a restorer of old master paintings at the Louvre in the 1920s. From him I learned all the techniques and materials used in the earlier centuries."



ETHER DAY, 1846, BY WARREN AND LUCIA PROSPERI  
PHOTO COURTESY OF SAM RILEY

Warren was the personification of the starving artist at this point, but he believed, "If I keep painting, everything will be all right. Doors will open." And open they did. Within the year, Warren would immediately become smitten with Lucia Roetter, an attractive young waitress who was working at the Blue Parrot during the summer after graduating from Hampshire College. "I pursued her like a freight train", exclaims the artist, "and luckily she reciprocated. We've been together ever since."

The couple eked out a living, but their fortunes changed when a Harvard friend showed Warren's portfolio to the Harvard continuing education department. They subsequently hired him to teach classical drawings from plaster casts, and soon many of his students began studying with him privately at his studio from live models, affording the artist an income and time to paint. From there, Lucia began selling his work to friends and nearby businesses, and two of their earliest major collectors, Saul and Naomi Cohen of Hammond Realty, offered them their carriage house for nominal expenses in exchange for paintings. They lived there for sixteen years as Warren continued to master his craft and he and Lucia built a market for his work.



During this time he established his reputation as a portrait painter with his many commissions from Massachusetts General Hospital, and subsequently painted the portraits of Dr. Donlin Long, former chief neurosurgeon at Johns Hopkins Hospital; retired Massachusetts Senate President William Bulger; Adele Simmons, former president of the MacArthur Foundation; and Vartan Gregorian, president of the Carnegie Institute. Also during his stay at the carriage house, Warren began his mural career, painting six murals on permanent display at the Joslin Diabetes Center, depicting the center's history, which later lead to two murals for the lobby of the Rhode Island Hospital, one of patient care in 1886 and the other of patient care in 2005.

We have had many lively meetings discussing art philosophy with Warren and his wife, Lucia, who has always played a large role as Warren's business manager and close collaborator. It is an unusual partnership, one that combines two bright minds converging on all aspects of each painting. "Lucia and I view things both aesthetically and personally so similarly, that even our differences work to build a cohesive artistic vision," notes Warren. Lucia continues, "I think the reason the collaboration works as well as it does is because intuitively I know where my contributions end and his easel work begins."

Warren aligns himself with the tenets of optical naturalism, a method started by Caravaggio, perfected by 17th century masters Hals and Velasquez, and continued by late 19th century contemporaries Zorn, Sorolla, and Sargent. "This tradition examines the nature of visual experience and the structure of an actual moment," cites the artist. Warren employs a complex set of visual inventions with a particular emphasis on light/dark contrasts. One of the artist's current students, Dr. Alice Flaherty, a renowned neurologist and noted author at Massachusetts General Hospital, has spent many hours with Warren and Lucia trying to understand the connection between how the mind works and how it relates to paintings. Dr. Flaherty's fascinating essay on the subject is included in this catalogue.

In preparing for this exhibition, Warren was particularly excited to find another outlet for his creativity, and began a two-year process defining his focus and preparing a cohesive body of work. Initially, the artist wanted to work on a theme similar to that of genre painting, focusing on people in the moment, reflecting both the character and environment of the subject. As he traveled around New England for subject matter, however, he rediscovered a passion for painting the landscape and decided to change the focus of his theme somewhat. He would paint two views of similar subject matter: two different images of a woman gazing at a statue in a museum, for example, or a fisherman viewed from two different angles. The result is both simple and elegant!

Warren has the rare ability to make his subjects come to life, and is an expert at facial expressions and body language. His figures are often pensive and engage the viewer in wondering what the subject might be thinking about. What are the two little girls discussing as they ponder the pounding surf? With her hands clasped, a woman gazes at a classical marble statue and ap-

pears deeply touched. The artist's focus on moments of everyday life allows the viewer to identify with the scene, establishing a sort of intimacy. His masterful design sense, creative approach, and painstaking craftsmanship are all hallmarks of his immense talent.

"When I came to Boston in 1968, I visited Vose Galleries and was crushed that they didn't handle living artists at that time. Now my dream of having a show here has been realized, and I am reminded of my old mantra: 'If I just keep painting, everything will be all right. Doors will open'."

We are so pleased that this door opened into Vose Galleries.



(DETAIL) *THE FIRST CASUALTY OF BUNKER HILL*,  
BY WARREN AND LUCIA PROSSERI

A Surprise:

It has been many years since Vose Galleries has staged an unveiling of a painting. When Warren and Lucia showed us their new mural, *The First Casualty of Bunker Hill*, we knew that it was a masterpiece, worthy of great fanfare. Two years in the making, the 7 x 10 foot painting is the first in a series of four murals depicting the events that led up to the American Revolution in Boston. It will be unveiled at Vose Galleries on May 14th, 2011.





*MUSEUM EPIPHANY I*, OIL ON CANVAS, 36 x 24 INCHES, 2009





*MUSEUM EPIPHANY II*, OIL ON CANVAS, 36 X 24 INCHES, 2009





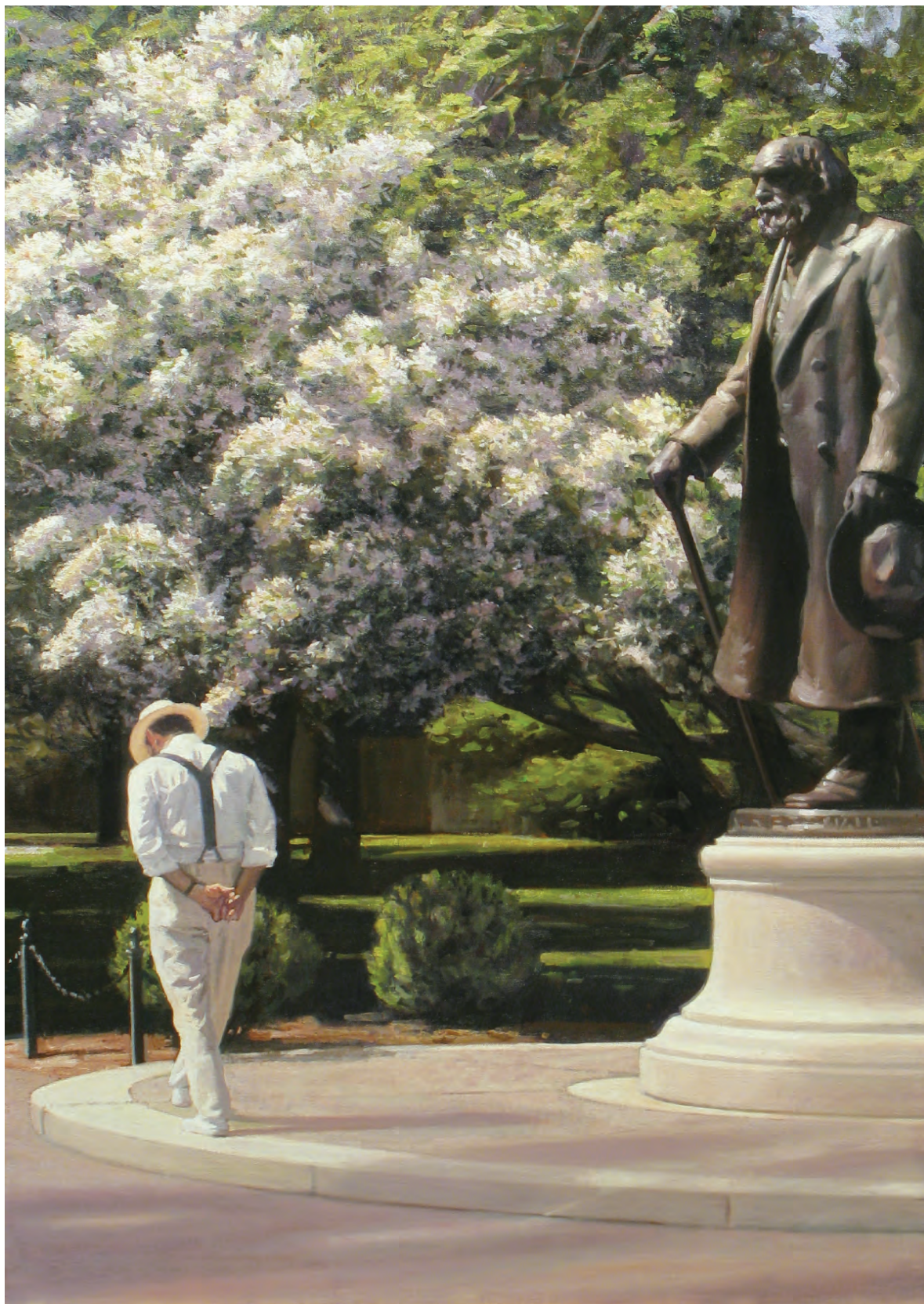
*EKPHRASIS II*, OIL ON CANVAS, 36 x 24 INCHES, 2009





*EKPHRASIS I*, OIL ON CANVAS, 24 X 36 INCHES, 2008





*PACING WITH EDWARD EVERETT HALE*, OIL ON CANVAS, 36 X 24 INCHES, 2009, PRIVATE COLLECTION





*SEATED AT THE SHAW MEMORIAL*, OIL ON CANVAS, 36 X 24 INCHES, 2009, PRIVATE COLLECTION





*WHITE MOUNTAINS: DISTANT STORM*, OIL ON CANVAS, 36 x 50 INCHES, 2008





*THE AMMONOOSUC RIVER*, OIL ON CANVAS, 24 X 36 INCHES, 2008





*CASTING UPSTREAM*, OIL ON CANVAS, 36 X 24 INCHES, 2011





*STRIPPING OUT LINE*, OIL ON CANVAS, 33 x 50 INCHES, 2011





*CONVERSATION BY THE SEA, BASS ROCKS, GLOUCESTER, MA, OIL ON CANVAS  
50 X 33 INCHES, 2009*





*A STILL DAY, BASS ROCKS, GLOUCESTER, MA, OIL ON CANVAS, 24 X 36 INCHES, 2009*





*THE REHEARSAL*, OIL ON CANVAS, 29 X 43 INCHES, 2011





*A QUARTET OF FRIENDS*, OIL ON CANVAS, 24 X 36 INCHES, 2009





*AFTERNOON LIGHT*, OIL ON CANVAS, 36 x 24 INCHES, 2010





*MORNING LIGHT*, OIL ON CANVAS, 43 x 29 INCHES, 2010





*OF THE WATERS I*, OIL ON CANVAS, 45 X 37 INCHES, 2007



About ten years ago Warren Prosperi, an admirer of the Symbolist movement of the late 19th century, which included The Pre-Raphaelites in England and The Secessionists in Austria, tried his hand in painting in their tradition. The resulting canvases represent Warren's personal exploration of scientific and philosophical views concerning the nature of the world.

In *Of the Waters I* and *Of the Waters II* the nude represents the cosmos and the white cloaked figures are seekers after wisdom. There are also subtle references to myth and the ancient world, but the artist intends to create ambiguous dream-like images that allow the viewer to interpret their meaning.



OF THE WATERS II, OIL ON CANVAS, 36 X 24 INCHES, 2007



# Artists Show us How We See

BY ALICE W. FLAHERTY, MD, PHD

Many conversations with Warren and Lucia Prosperi have made me fascinated with the way artists affect our perceptions and emotions. As a neurologist, I'm curious about how the brain processes visual art. Artists teach us to see the world differently, of course. What's less well known is that their techniques can also show us how we see, how the brain makes images of the world. Scientists have begun to study artists to learn what artists instinctively know about how we extract form and meaning from the jumble of information our eyes take in.

When skilled artists look at a painting, they do so differently from people with untrained perception. Even the eye movements of artists are different. Artists' eyes fixate on figures for longer periods of time than amateurs do, but less often. Instead, artists look more widely at the background, in part to see how the picture is built. Most people, when looking at a painting like Warren Prosperi's *Museum Epiphany II* (Figs. 1 and 2), have eye movements like those shown below in the lefthand figure. They look rapidly back and forth between

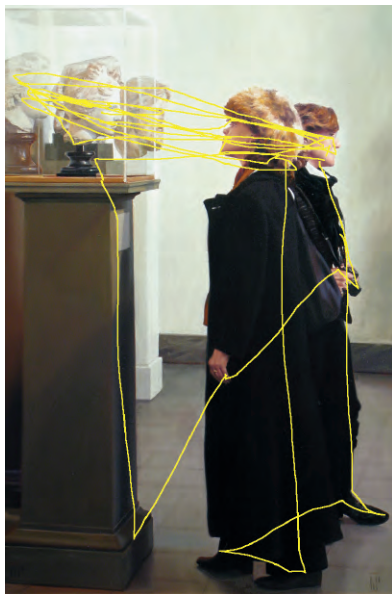


FIG. 1. *MUSEUM EPIPHANY II*,  
NON-ARTIST'S VIEW



FIG. 2. *MUSEUM EPIPHANY II*,  
ARTIST'S VIEW

the living faces, with a few forays to the marble heads that mirror them and a glance at the feet and plinth. An artist viewing the painting may spend relatively more time on the gradation of light across the white wall, or the relationship between the parallel columns of the women's bodies and the two pedestals.

Artists work to keep the viewer's eyes from glancing off the surface of things, to help the viewer look longer and deeper, as artists do. One of Prosperi's characteristic techniques to slow down the viewer's eyes is the way he plays with basic aspects of vision, such as figure-ground transitions. All human brains are wired so that we see a shape as either figure or ground, but never both simultaneously. In the famous Rubin face-vase illusion (Fig. 3), all of us see alter-

nately the white vase or the two dark profiles that outline it, but we must pause to make sense of the image. Artists are more aware that in any picture the background is a shape too.

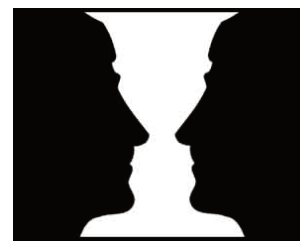


FIG. 3. *RUBIN'S VASE*

*Conversation by the Sea* (Fig. 4) shows a delicate ambiguity in figure-ground relations. It is more easily seen when looking at the painting upside down, so that the subject matter doesn't distract us from the design transitions. Viewed this way, it is more evident that the sea foam's brightness pulls it forward visually, even though it is in the background of the scene. The reversed luminance presses the seascape into the foreground and creates visual tension.

Figure-ground ambiguity in painting work the way subtle puns do in poetry: they show us similarities we didn't expect. Because contour is the major cue that the brain uses to identify forms, the children's pale clothes make their bodies hard to distinguish from the white breakers. The children could be bits of sea foam thrown higher on the rocks. When Prosperi twists and breaks up a scene's contours, he helps us see beyond conventional categories, such as "cute kids" and "surf," to something new.

The pursuit of the new in art is fraught with risk, because the viewer may recoil from objects that are too unfamiliar. Our brains are wired from birth to look longer at novel objects than at familiar ones—but only if the new things are only slightly new. Our eyes and bodies instinctively withdraw from very unfamiliar stimuli. This makes sense evolutionarily, because large changes in our environment are typically destabilizing or dangerous. Most people do better exploring what they nearly know.



FIG. 4. *CONVERSATION BY THE SEA*





FIG. 5. WARREN PROSPERI, *SELF-PORTRAIT*

Nonetheless, some people—explorers, inventors, artists—search for new experiences from birth. Not only their upbringing but also specific novelty-seeking genes help drive their pursuit of the new. Explorers' maps and artists' paintings help us incorporate their discoveries into what we already know. Thus, rather than create an alienating sense of strangeness, art can evoke an emotionally rich combination of newness and familiarity. Both the experience of novelty and of recognition come from the temporal lobe of the brain. That lobe is, not coincidentally, also the region that controls object recognition in art and our sense of meaning.

The most highly refined object recognition that humans can do is face analysis. Indeed, one region at the bottom of the temporal lobe is hard-wired to recognize human faces. Viewers' precision in face discrimination makes portrait painting challenging. When an artist paints a face, moving a brushstroke 1/64th of an inch can change an emotional expression. Two or three such changes can make a viewer say, "Oh, that doesn't look like her at all." Precision and brush control at that fine a level can take a portrait from good to great.

At the same time, selective loss of fine detail can make a painted portrait paradoxically seem more real. *Self-Portrait* (Fig. 5), for instance, at first glance seems hyper-realistic. A closer look shows that minor features such as the shirt front are indistinct. This mirrors the action of our retinas, in which only the central focus of vision is sharp. The painting's chiaroscuro, its exaggerated contrast between light and dark, removes all but the core of the subject's body, yet creates a greater sense of depth and dramatic interest.

A painting that plays with fundamental aspects of vision, such as depth perception or figure-ground contrasts, can defamiliarize objects, and make us see them anew. After the retina and the brain's primitive visual areas detect color and contour, temporal lobe regions identify objects and faces, and finally image analysis moves forward into brain areas that compare what we perceive now with our memory of past experiences. At this higher-level stage, the painter's choice of subject contributes to the painting's narrative and emotional associations. The painting *Morning Light* (fig. 6), for instance, has resonance for lovers of Dutch painting because of the way its slanting window light recalls Vermeer's delicate illumination. The tableau recalls our own past kitchens and cats, and the quiet of Sunday mornings.

Painting, like photography, excels in its ability to capture a particular moment of light and gesture. But the painter's greater range of technique can more easily help our minds travel from the particular to the universal. The complexity of Prosperi's technique paradoxically uses the way our brains perceive images to move us beyond perception, to give an experience of more direct contact with the world around us. The vividness of that experience helps take us outside ourselves.

\*Alice Flaherty, MD, PhD, is a neurologist at Harvard Medical School and the author of *The Midnight Disease: The Drive to Write, Writer's Block*, and *The Creative Brain*.



FIG. 6. *MORNING LIGHT*



COVER: (DETAIL) *CONVERSATION BY THE SEA, BASS ROCKS, GLOUCESTER, MA*  
OIL ON CANVAS, 50 X 33 INCHES, 2009 (P. 14)

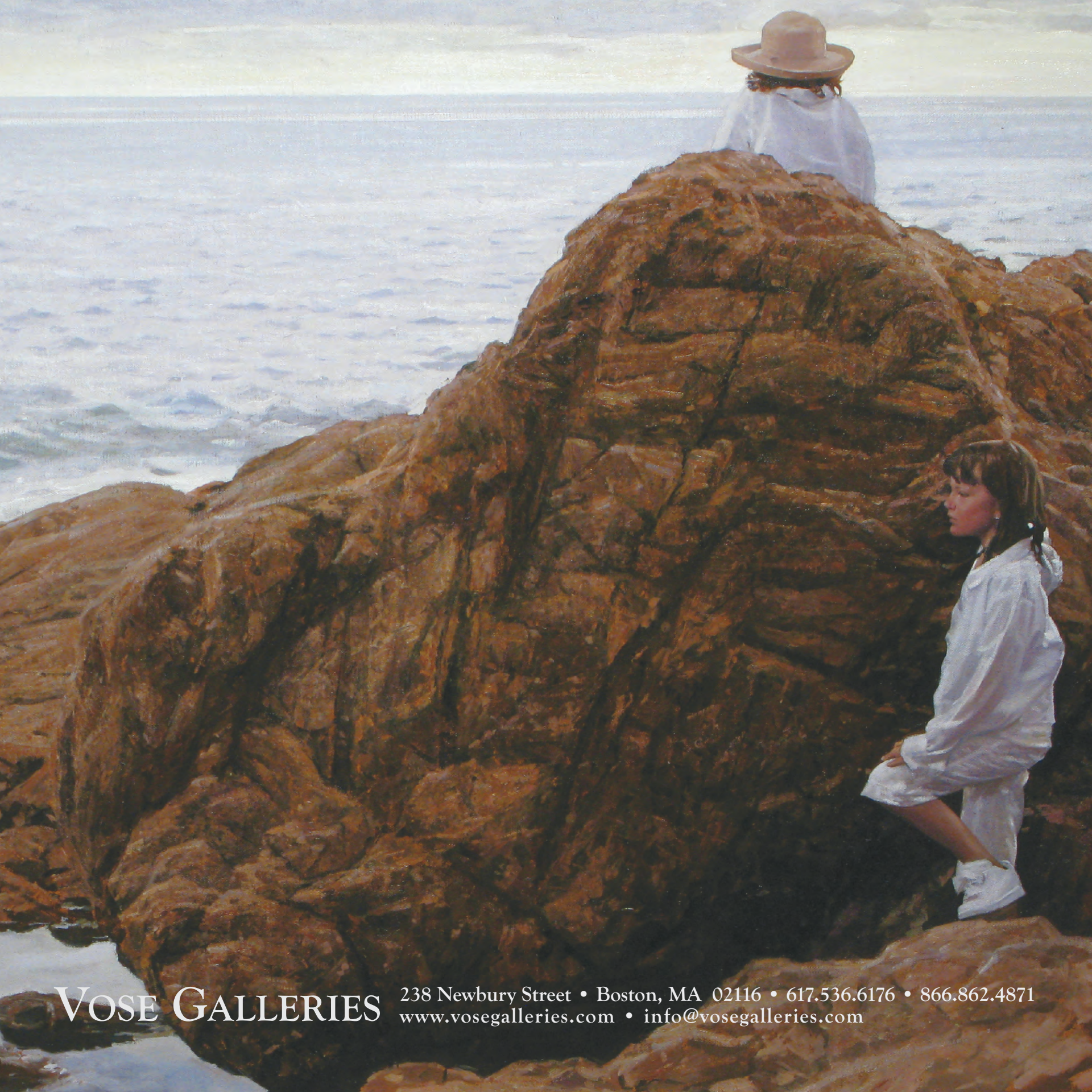
BACK COVER: (DETAIL) *A STILL DAY, BASS ROCKS, GLOUCESTER, MA*  
OIL ON CANVAS, 24 X 36 INCHES, 2009 (P. 15)

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