



Progression: **Work by Robert Stuart**

September 10 – October 19, 2024

Opening reception: Tuesday, September 10, 5:00 – 6:30 p.m.

Artist's Gallery Talk: Tuesday, September 10, 5:30 p.m.

James K. Schmidt Gallery / Voney Art Center / Principia College / Elsah, Illinois
<http://content.principia.edu/sites/jameskschmidtgallery/>



(above) *Midnight Shadows*, 2008, oil, wax medium on canvas, 72" x 56"

(right) *Crack Up*, 2019, oil, wax medium, collage on canvas, 20" x 16", collection of Nina Ozbey

(front cover) *Encounter*, 2012, oil, wax medium on canvas, 48" x 52", collection of Sue Rosen

Introduction

By Debi Zoe Worley

Life is a full circle, widening until it joins the circle motions of the infinite.

- Anais Nin, writer

With no beginning and no end, the circle represents infinity. The sculptor Kendall Buster describes creative thought as a circular motion. She said it is not linear, with a beginning or an end, singular in dimension, but instead, it is constantly moving. This analogy allows new opportunities for us to see and understand ideas from fresh perspectives. It opens avenues for us to revisit and rediscover our work with unlimited possibilities. And sometimes we have experiences that show us that life is a full circle. Robert Stuart might say that this exhibition is giving him that circular opportunity. It was just over 50 years ago that he graduated from Principia Upper School and now, here he is exhibiting selections from his life's work at Principia College.

After graduating from high school, Stuart received his Bachelor of Fine Arts from Boston University and his Master of Fine Arts from James Madison University (1977, 1984). A nationally exhibiting artist, he has received numerous awards and honors, including the prestigious Academy Award in Art from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York (2004). His work can be found in numerous museums' permanent collections around the country. Stuart currently lives and works in Staunton, Virginia.

In the body of work displayed in this exhibit, we can see his progression from landscapes to his own development of minimal abstractions. Through his rich process of layering melted wax, oils and pigments, we can see his love of the natural world that he explored as a child as well as the undeniable qualities of spirituality through the luminous reflection that seems to glow right through the canvas. His titles of *Heaven's Gate*, *Trinity*, and *Unfoldment* give us a glimpse into the artist's thought process. Stuart also speaks of Wassily Kandinsky as one of his artistic influences. According to Soetsu Yanagi (Japanese philosopher,

art historian, aesthete and poet), Kandinsky was very interested in the Japanese word *esoragoto*, which "refers to the quest for truth that goes beyond truth; it refers to the art of imperfection...." (*The Beauty of Everyday Things* p.146) It is the imperfections in this work that captivate the viewer and draw us in for a conversation with this visual language Stuart has shared with us.

Stuart has made his journey back to Principia at the beckoning of his longtime friend and fellow painter, Paul Ryan. Paul has graciously agreed to write a beautiful tribute, in the form of the following essay, to his dear friend, Robert.





(above) *Heaven's-Gate*, 2020, oil & wax medium on canvas, 60" x 144"

(right) *Blue Stack*, 2016, oil, wax medium, collage on paper, 18" x 14"

The Sun in the Barn: The Paintings of Robert Stuart

By Paul Ryan

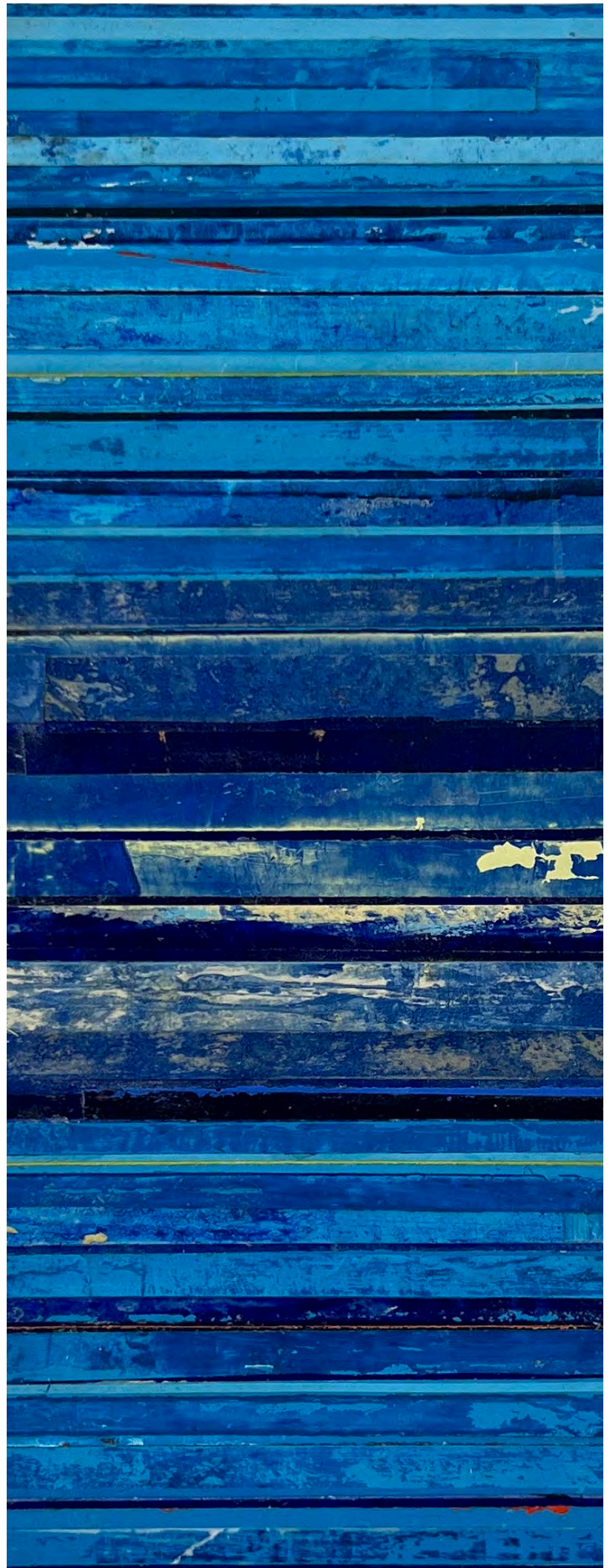
Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy!
The world is holy! The soul is holy! The skin is holy! The nose is holy!...
Everything is holy! everybody's holy! everywhere is holy! every day is in eternity! Everyman's an angel!
The bum's as holy as the seraphim! the madman is holy as you my soul are holy!
The typewriter is holy the poem is holy the voice is holy the hearers are holy the ecstasy is holy!...
Holy the vast lamb of the middleclass! Holy the crazy shepherds of rebellion!...
Holy New York Holy San Francisco Holy Peoria & Seattle Holy Paris Holy Tangiers Holy Moscow Holy Istanbul!...
Holy the sea holy the desert holy the railroad holy the locomotive holy the visions holy the hallucinations
holy the miracles holy the eyeball holy the abyss!
Holy forgiveness! mercy! charity! faith! Holy! Ours! bodies! suffering! magnanimity!
Holy the supernatural extra brilliant intelligent kindness of the soul!

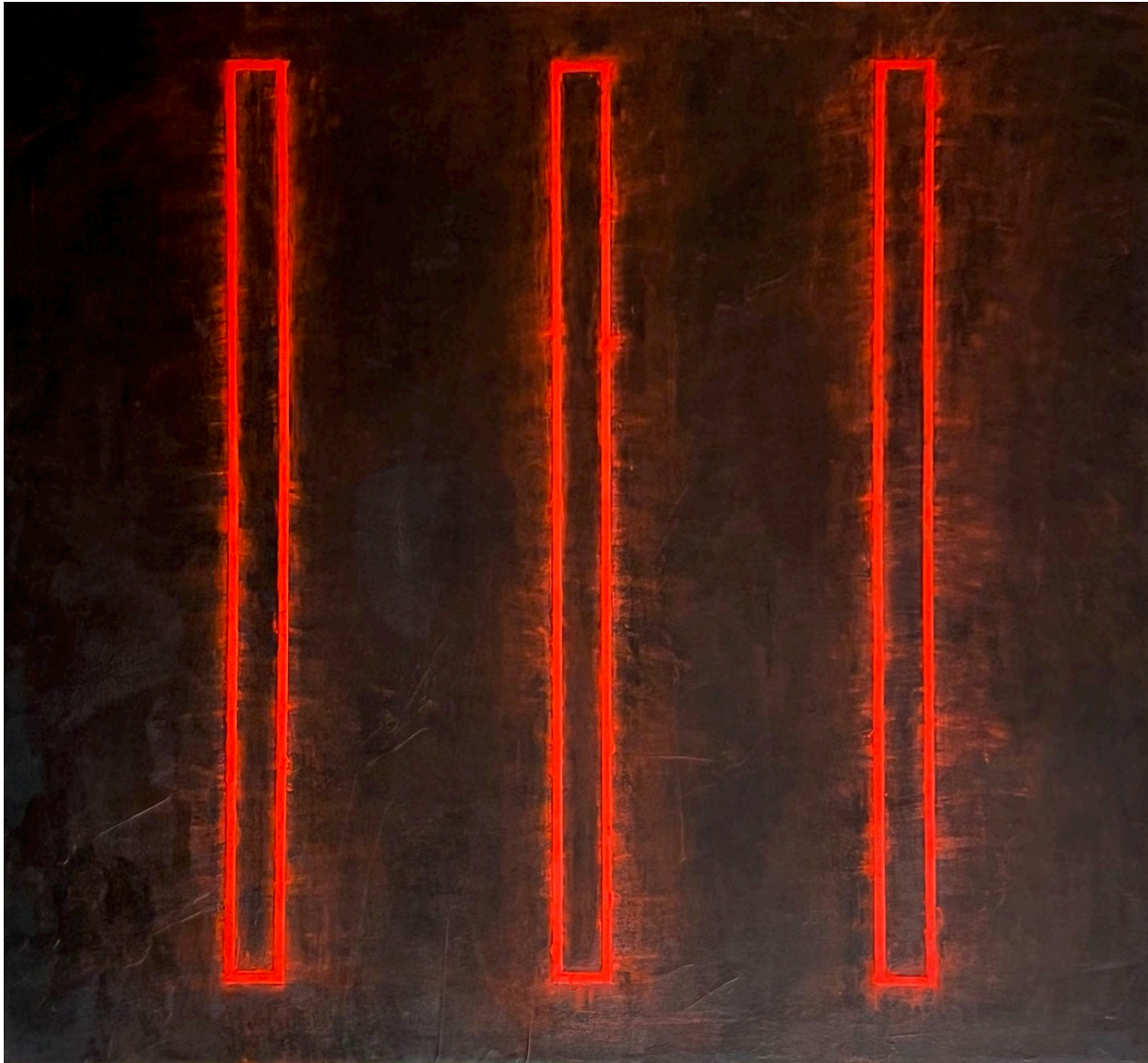
--Allen Ginsberg, from *Footnote to Howl*

i.
East

Behold Allen Ginsberg's resounding inventory of the everyday—a poetic flow that reflects the Flow of Life and is a celebration of the boundlessness of sensuous existence in all its objects, occurrences, and beings! Ginsberg's fiery, untethered embrace of diversity and the innate worth of all being, animate and inanimate, and his simultaneous leveling of social and cultural hierarchies erase strategies of judgment and become a new-old ethics for the arts and society. Fixed in a deep love of our sensuous world, Ginsberg's stance as person and poet was a kind of sacrilegious religiosity for the everyday, a stance that blurs art and life, high and low, the physical and metaphysical. As a vital member of the Beat Generation and counter-culture movements of the 1960s and 1970s, the exuberant declarations of Ginsberg's poetry—which moreover serve as criticism of rigid, elitist parameters and bureaucratic structures—sprang from an ethos of radical openness and acceptance, one in part influenced by Eastern thought, particularly Zen Buddhism.

In the long, dark shadows of World War II, Zen's practices of openness, non-attachment, acceptance of our world ("saying 'yes' to everything"), meditation, and mindfulness attracted the interest of many avant-garde artists and writers at mid-20th century, among them T.S. Eliot, John Cage, Ad Reinhardt, Allan Kaprow, Diane di Prima, Jane Hirshfield, Jack Kerouac, and Ginsberg. Seen as an alternative to the dogmatism and conventional hierarchies of mainstream Christianity, Zen Buddhism offered ways for these artists and writers to reassess and launch fresh, meaningful spiritual contexts for everyday living and for creative practices in the West. The appearance in Western culture, especially in the late 1950s and 1960s, of chance operations, "happenings," meditative aspects of minimalism, list poems, and the revival of forms of Japanese poetry such as the haiku and tanka are examples of some of the artistic forms that sprang from Eastern spiritual influences. Each of these creative forms and strategies, in different yet related ways, focuses on being present in and honoring the everyday and elevating the banal,





(above) *Trinity 2000*, oil, wax medium on canvas, 48" x 52" collection of Vicki Goodhart,
(right) *Ashes*, 2023, oil, wax medium, collage on canvas, 63" x 112"

serving to fuse art and life and mitigating against culturally systemic separations of these two realms.

Zen culture reveals a sensuous-spiritual world in the present—one that the abstract paintings of Robert Stuart, who is not a practicing Buddhist but who embraces an earnest search for spirituality, reflect.

ii. West

The long, wide history of world visual art

contains abundant examples of art that ponder, tap into, and/or evoke spirituality. Many of these signify humans' desire for spiritual succor—for healing, awakening, redemption, survival, atonement, solace, and peace. Such artworks include the functional and symbolic forms connected to the rituals of the prehistoric indigenous people of the Cahokia Mounds in southern Illinois, Renaissance and Baroque architecture, sculpture, and painting commissioned by the Church, the Buddhist temples and gardens of Southeast Asia, the ideologically-informed though aesthetically sublime landscape paintings of the Hudson River School, and

drawings and paintings made by prisoners of Nazi concentrations camps, among many others. These artworks reflect an emotional turning and extending to a “higher power,” possibly to an underlying creative energy that animates the universe and flows throughout eternity.

In the first half of the 20th century, exploring the spiritual through art occurs in the high modernist works of painters such as Hilma af Klint, František Kupka, Wassily Kandinsky, Kazimir Malevich, and Piet Mondrian. This practice, partially derived from innovations within 19th century French modernism and Cubism, evolves into much of the progressive painting at mid-century, especially work by the New York School painters like Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Ad Reinhardt, Helen Frankenthaler, and Clyfford Still. For these artists, pure abstraction became a language of spiritual yearning, a means for constructing visual vocabularies of the existentialist “inward turn,” a desire to glimpse infinity or perhaps the existential void. With the 1960s and beyond, the radical art and influence of these artists stream into the work of more contemporary painters such as Agnes Martin, Brice Marden, Sean Scully, Stanley Whitney, and Edwina Leapman. All of these painters, across the span of more than a century, abandon representational imagery and narratives in order to embrace a reverential, rarefied sense of the spiritual through forms of pure abstraction. It is within this Western painting tradition that the abstract works

of Robert Stuart may be located.

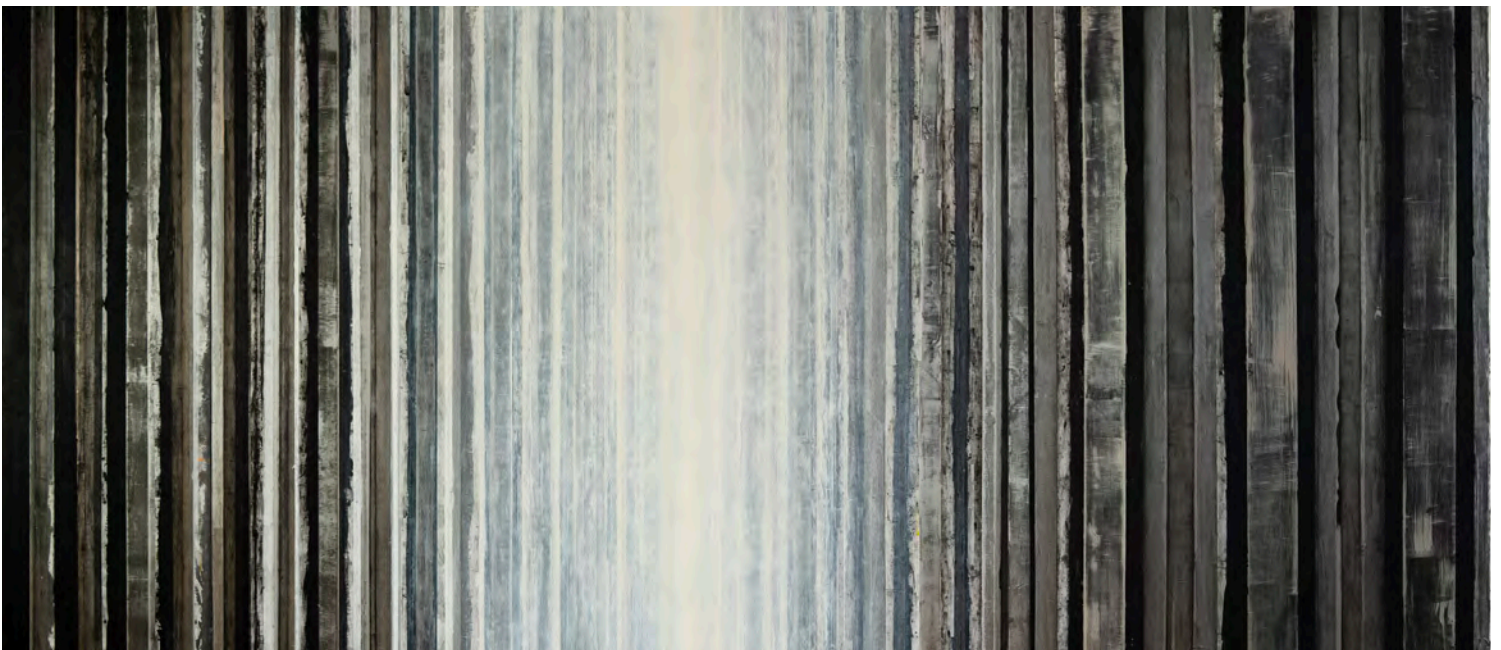
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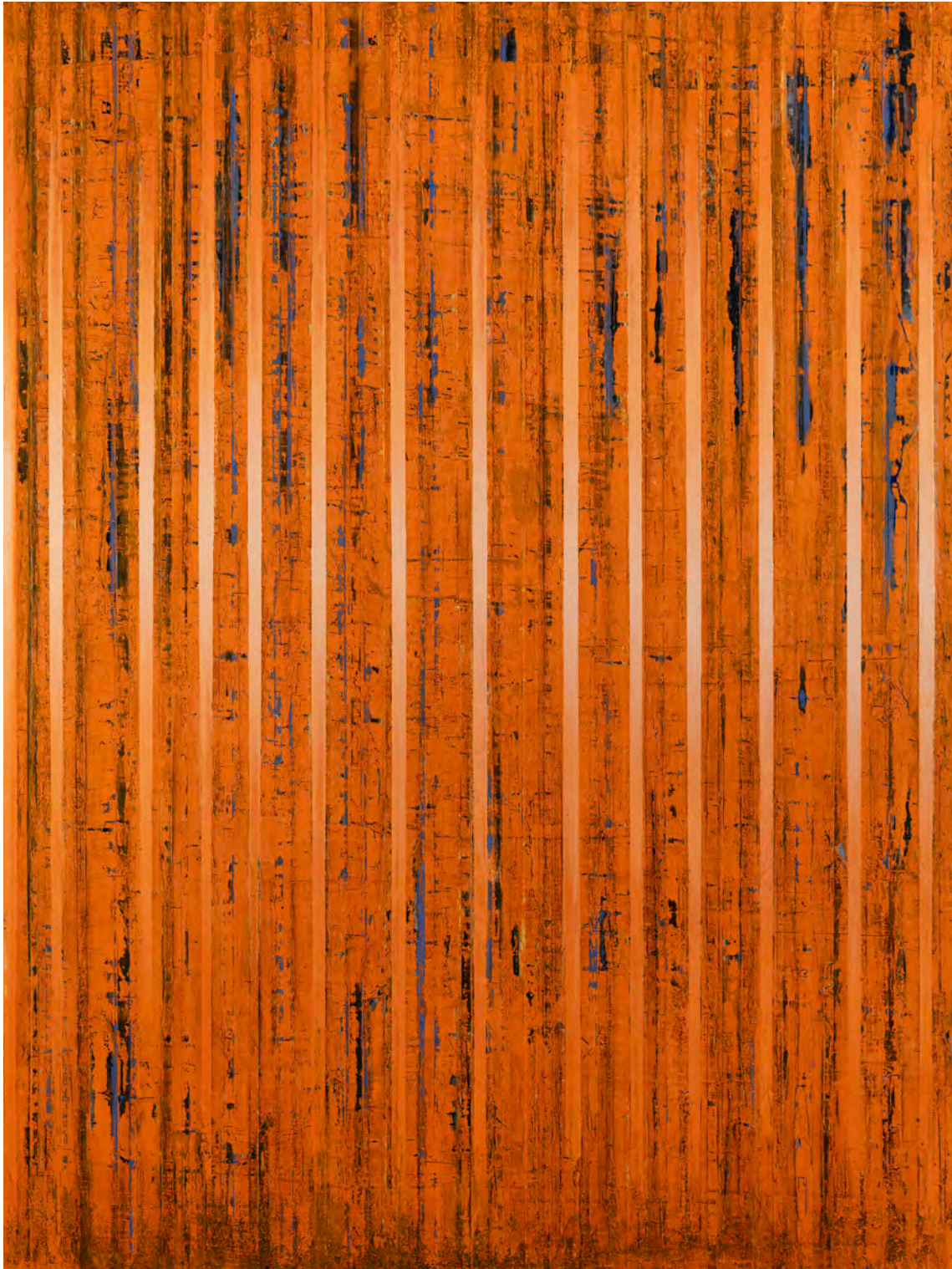
Sunlight, Wooden Planks, and Infinity

In the artist’s statement on his website (robertstuart.net), Stuart describes three “encounters” that have been crucial to his studio practice and conceptualization as an abstract painter:

The first was walking unawares into an exhibit of eight sequential grid paintings by Agnes Martin, and seeing that contemporary painting could be about the infinite. Another was standing on brilliant crevices of light in the loft of our large, old barn as early morning sunlight filled the bay below transforming slits between the floorboards into lines of light. It was what I wanted in painting. And thirdly, directly after a trip to Japan which included a tour of Zen gardens, a vivid dream of a large red abstract painting with white lines...compelled me to start on this path.

These encounters represent three instances of the essential role of context: art history and the dialogic aspects of artmaking; the tangible verity of daily personal experience; and religion/spirituality. The





(above) *Nimbus*, 2023, oil, wax medium on canvas, 64" x 48"

(right) *Honeycomb*, 2005, oil, wax medium on paper, 9" x 11"

second encounter, witnessing the silent drama of the sunlight in the barn at his family's farm in rural Virginia, as a spontaneous, experiential sign of flow between art and life, perhaps offers the most currency for interpreting Stuart's work. The image of the morning sunlight piercing the long narrow spaces between the rough-hewn floorboards of the barn's loft was an arrestingly beautiful phenomenon in and of itself, especially because it was also a space that Stuart stood upon and within that morning. Yet, the ethereal nature of the brilliant light intersecting the solidity of wooden planks extends into a visual metaphor—an image that became a kind of muse for Stuart—suggesting intersections of the physical and metaphysical. The experience was both a distinct event of the everyday and a spiritual revelation.

Stuart's "after-image" of his encounter in the barn and his subsequent expressionistic abstractions share the same overall geometric structure—essentially a grid within a field of light that generates plays of chiaroscuro between and within the grid's geometric forms. As Stuart says in his artist's statement: "It was what I wanted in painting." As an iconic image usually viewed in a gallery setting and in dialogue with other abstract paintings, Stuart's evolving grid can function aesthetically and conceptually as a kind of extraction from experience, separated from its empirical source. But, in addition to its art context, its richest offering lies in preserving and understanding it in its original, natural context as an unprompted incident in which it signifies one of many, perhaps infinite, occurrences that present themselves in the flow of every day. If the encounter with holiness, even with infinity, is *within the sensuous present*, then Stuart's encounter in the barn, translated and conveyed through his painting practice, affirms this. As philosopher, ecologist, and cultural critic David Abram believes, the process of human perception is not a one-way act of sensing; rather, it is a reciprocal one between an individual and the encountered world—a process of "coupling" with the sensuous world.

The contemporary novel, *Seven Steeples*, by Irish author and visual artist Sara Baume, illustrates the holiness and flow of the sensuous present. Parallel to David Abram's thinking, Baume depicts



the sensuous present not only as the object of a human subject's attention but also as an active subject itself. That is, the sensuous present (all things, beings, and events one encounters) is an animated "player" in the everyday. Essentially a list poem-as-novel, in its own quirky way *Seven Steeples* is an updated, expansive variation on Ginsberg's *Footnote to Howl*. Set in contemporary rural Ireland, the story follows the outwardly uneventful lives of a couple, Bell and Sigh, who move into a small, ragged cottage adjacent to a modest mountain and the Irish Sea. The book is an intersection of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, where famously, "nothing happens," and the practice of animism, a culture initiated by early indigenous peoples where individuals attribute an active soulful existence to all of nature and every inanimate object, whether natural or human made. The "Godot" of Baume's novel is the mountain that Bell and Sigh live next to, observe every day, and vow to climb early in the first year of living in the house, a vow not fulfilled until eight years later, at the very end of the book. The animism practiced by Bell and Sigh, described through Baume's specific and often poetic accounts of myriad humble household and natural objects and occurrences—typically things and events that are liminal—is a lens for encountering the real action of the story. Baume's descriptions in the novel remove the usual subject-object dichotomy in ways that emphasize the reciprocal relationship that Bell and Sigh have with the world. The book's

genius is in its loving, participatory attention to and embrace of the extreme margins of everyday living where typically “invisible” or dull objects and occurrences may become subjects, actual characters engaged in the action of the story. Through Baume’s tender embrace of the sensuous present she has constructed a reverent though unassuming flow of vignettes that honors the infinite appearances of beauty and liveliness that exist everywhere, every day.

Embracing and modifying the language of late modernist abstract painting, Robert Stuart’s work reflects this sense of infinity of the sensuous present. It portrays the emotional energy of the ever-flow of objects and occurrences in our sensuous-spiritual world. But, within this context there is a conceptual difference between Stuart’s paintings and Baume’s poetic inventory. Whereas Baume crafts a long string of vignettes that honors a wide range of distinct everyday objects and

experiences (a sagging blue tarp, mud, a cow trail, leeks and beets, a drawer at the bottom of the fridge, earthworms, a robin, the living room window, the garden wall, pencils...), Stuart’s paintings are derived from a single vignette: his spontaneous encounter in the barn that occurred years ago. The image of the morning sunlight shining through the floorboards of the barn’s loft—a glowing grid-like configuration—has, for 30 years, served as a kind of aesthetic blueprint and theme for Stuart’s many abstract paintings and drawings. With this unprompted moment/image, Stuart glimpses and honors the infinite through his painting practice. It is as if he is saying that a single moment of beauty is worthy of infinite attention; and, that nothing insignificant occurs within the human experience.

iv. Practice

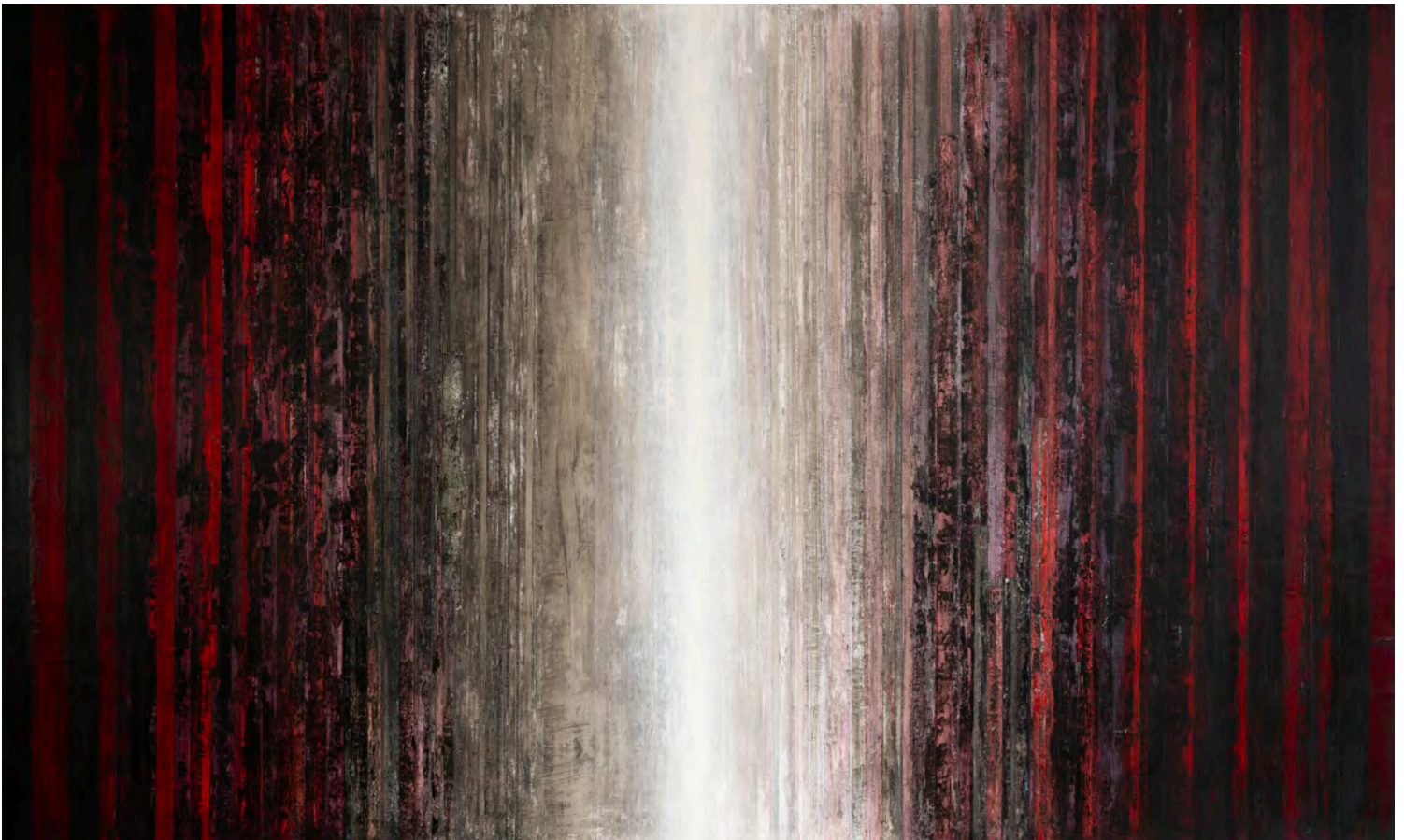
The 30-year series of Stuart’s expressionistic grids is a long one by any artistic standard; yet the paintings have maintained a consummate vitality and freshness. Formally this has been achieved in four ways: through nuanced innovations and investigations of figure/ground relationships; inventive plays of visual and emotional rhythm and movement; focus on the power of color, usually through establishing a limited palette within each painting; and, through an emotional understanding of surface development and tactility, with Stuart sometimes introducing collage into the paintings. Explorations of form and hard-fought aesthetic resolutions (the “nuts and bolts” and sheer difficulty of making a painting—what painter Philip Guston referred to as “the contest” between the plastic form of painting and the artist’s intentions) are essential for Stuart in his studio practice, as is his rich dialogue with modernist and contemporary abstraction. Yet, the soulfulness of Stuart’s abstract paintings lies in the artist’s recognition of the holiness (to echo Ginsberg) of everyday experience as the work’s imagistic and conceptual source, the worth of every moment, and in the intersections of the necessary struggle with doubt, existential desire, and hope that run through Stuart’s practice.

Stuart’s evolving, breathing grid has not only



(above) *Whitish Bottle on Lined Table* 1994, oil on canvas, 23" x 19", collection of Paula Rau

(right) *Unfoldment*, 2024, oil, wax medium on canvas 62" x 103"



emerged from the “three encounters” he describes in his artist’s statement. Further reflecting the weight and chemistry of context, his grid also developed through prior work from the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s—a period that included studying and graduating from Boston University (1973-1977), where Philip Guston’s role as professor was influential, and Stuart’s graduate work in painting at James Madison University (1981-1984). During the 1980s and early 1990s Stuart concentrated on painting the landscape and still life. While Stuart grew up internationally because his father worked for USAID and UNESCO, he has family roots in the mountains and farmlands of western Virginia. His exposure to the sublime views of the Blue Ridge and Allegheny Mountains and Shenandoah Valley necessitated a creative response from the artist. Not falling in line with conventional approaches, these earlier paintings were profoundly informed by modernist painting’s ideas about flatness (remaining true to the two-dimensional painting surface and the literal qualities of paint), structure (acknowledging the formal characteristics of the picture plane itself), and color (using it for

purposes of structure, optical effect, and emotional expressiveness, and not merely as verisimilitude). Inspired by the work of Paul Cezanne, Henri Matisse, Georgia O’Keeffe, Richard Diebenkorn, and Giorgio Morandi, Stuart was painting abstractly, though not yet in the “pure” or nonrepresentational sense. The nonrepresentational work was to follow in earnest beginning in the mid-1990s, arising from the influence of his “three encounters” and what one might refer to as a “pull” or “calling” to venture into pure abstraction. But transitioning from representational to nonrepresentational work took some courage on Stuart’s part, as he had achieved a degree of success and recognition in the mid-Atlantic region and beyond as a skilled painter of the landscape and still life.

v. Beauty

On the first page of philosopher and cultural critic Elaine Scarry’s insightful and generous book, *On Beauty and Being Just*, Scarry writes:



(above) *Green Bands*, 2021, oil, wax medium, collage on board, 20" x 16"

(right) *Landscape with Silo and Barns*, 1996, oil on board, 14" x 30", private collection

Beauty brings copies of itself into being. It makes us draw it, take photographs of it, or describe it to other people. Sometimes it gives rise to exact replication and other times to resemblances and still other times to things whose connection to the original site of inspiration is unrecognizable.

She asks the reader to consider any specific experience of beauty as an ongoing event, a fluid process. Scarry regards beauty as an ongoing occurrence of transformation that involves a series of responses, actions, and revisions that can serve to educate and play a role in advancing society toward fairness. Her argument for beauty embraces a double meaning of the word, fairness—both its indication of loveliness and its implication of fair actions within society. For her, beauty is not a single, solitary, self-enclosed thing. Scarry understands and promotes it as an active verb rather than as a noun. “[B]ringing copies of itself into being” is one of the first actions of this process.

Experiencing beauty and following through with “bringing copies into being” is what happened for Robert Stuart when, years ago, he experienced the morning sunlight shining and rising through the floorboards of the loft of his family’s old barn. This event—an instance that became a fluid model of beauty as a transformational verb—has continued for many years in Stuart’s studio practice, and

for his viewing audience. As the initial image of the occurrence in the barn has been regenerated through Stuart’s layers of personal experience and creative practice, his painterly grids have become echoes of infinity, rhythms from the Flow.

Scarry believes that beauty is not morally neutral, that it is inherently connected to moral value, and that it is perhaps an ethical failure to not follow through with its aesthetic appeal and inherent ethical demands. She states in her book: “Beauty is, then, a compact, or contract between the beautiful being (a person or thing) and the perceiver....Each ‘welcomes’ the other.” (*On Beauty and Being Just*, p. 90) For Scarry, this “reciprocal pact” can lead individuals to consider and engage with problems of justice in society. In this light, Stuart’s paintings are not only aesthetic objects. They are also icons for the holiness of the everyday and concurrent with ethical commitment and action.

Paul Ryan is a painter, art writer, and curator. He is Professor Emeritus of Art at Mary Baldwin University; formerly The William Martin and Mina Merrill Prindle Professor of Fine Arts at Principia College; and former critical theory instructor for the MFA Program of the Department of Painting and Printmaking at Virginia Commonwealth University. He is also a contributing editor for *Art Papers*.





(above) *Grove*, 2024, oil, wax medium, collage on canvas, 50" x 24"
(right) *Still Life with Shell & Bottle*, 1996, oil on canvas, 24" x 44",
collection of Ryan Russell

Artist's Statement

In paintings I strive for "new beauty," for opening pathways to emotional and intuitive responses.

Three "encounters," have been particularly inspiring to me as an abstract painter. The first was walking unawares into an exhibit of eight sequential grid paintings by Agnes Martin and seeing that contemporary painting could be about the infinite. Another was standing on brilliant crevices of light in the loft of our large, old barn as early morning sunlight filled the bay below transforming slits between the floorboards into lines of light. It was what I wanted in painting. And thirdly, directly after a trip to Japan which included a tour of Zen gardens, a vivid dream of a large red abstract painting with white lines that compelled me to start on this path.

In the process of painting, I feel that I am exploring, following leads, intuitively interacting with the materials and the evolving structure. Getting a sense of light from the work is important. The process is additive and subtractive, as I layer, scrape, add and erase with knives and scrapers, fingers, cloths, wax and mineral spirits. Sometimes I use collage from painted paper strips, residue from the making of larger paintings. The colors and textures of these residual, painted papers are often the inspiration for new works.

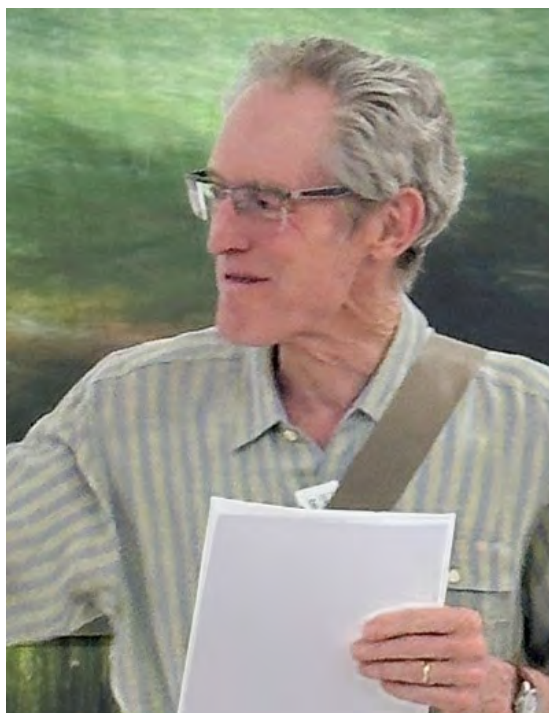
Artist's Bio

About half my time growing up was spent overseas while my father worked for USAID and UNESCO. Four years at Boston University's School for the Arts was a rigorous, traditional program with much figure drawing. Philip Guston was a major influence there.

After living in Guam for eighteen months, Boston again, then Virginia, I had a Teaching Assistantship and earned an MFA at James Madison University. Following this I launched a career as a painter of landscapes or still-life's and found success in galleries. Being selected for the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Un/Common Ground exhibit was a great early boost.

After ten years established in this representational style, but with episodes of experimentation in abstraction, my response to abstract painting became so evident I could no longer deny it. Discovering Agnes Martin's paintings and writings was crucial. Finally, after a trip to Japan visiting Zen gardens, a vivid dream of a large, red, abstract painting was so compelling that I set out in a new direction. Then almost immediately major confirmation when chosen for the New Orleans Museum of Art Triennial, and not long after, receiving an Academy Award in Art from the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Stuart's home and studio are in Staunton, Virginia. He is represented by Reynolds Gallery in Richmond, Virginia. www.robertstuart.net



Gratitude

Penny Schmidt and Schmidt Family for their generous support Principia's Art Department.

Principia's Art + Design Department for their enthusiasm for these exhibitions.

Robert Stuart for sharing your life's work, your time and your inspiration.

Paul Ryan for this generous essay and one more lesson in art theory.

Kristin Martin my co-Gallery Director this year and her support and always available advice.

Deb Wold our registrar and her uncompromising attention to detail.

Bruce Rea our impeccable graphic designer with his endless patience.

Sarah Borja for her unparalleled attention to detail with editing.

Luci Evans our gallery assistant ready to jump into any project, anytime with grace.

Jon Hosmer our wonderful website designer for The James K. Schmidt Gallery.

Heather Holmes for her hospitality team that always creates a beautiful spread.

Steve John, Chris Ajuoga and Merilee McFarland our Marketing support.

Jaimie Carter, Dale Desherlia, Terri Schneider with facilities who helped us install this exhibition.

Sarah Foster and Becky Hill who keep this gallery sparkling.



Blue Waves, 2016, oil, wax medium, collage on paper,
15" x 22"

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This exhibition was initiated and curated by the James K. Schmidt Gallery.



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