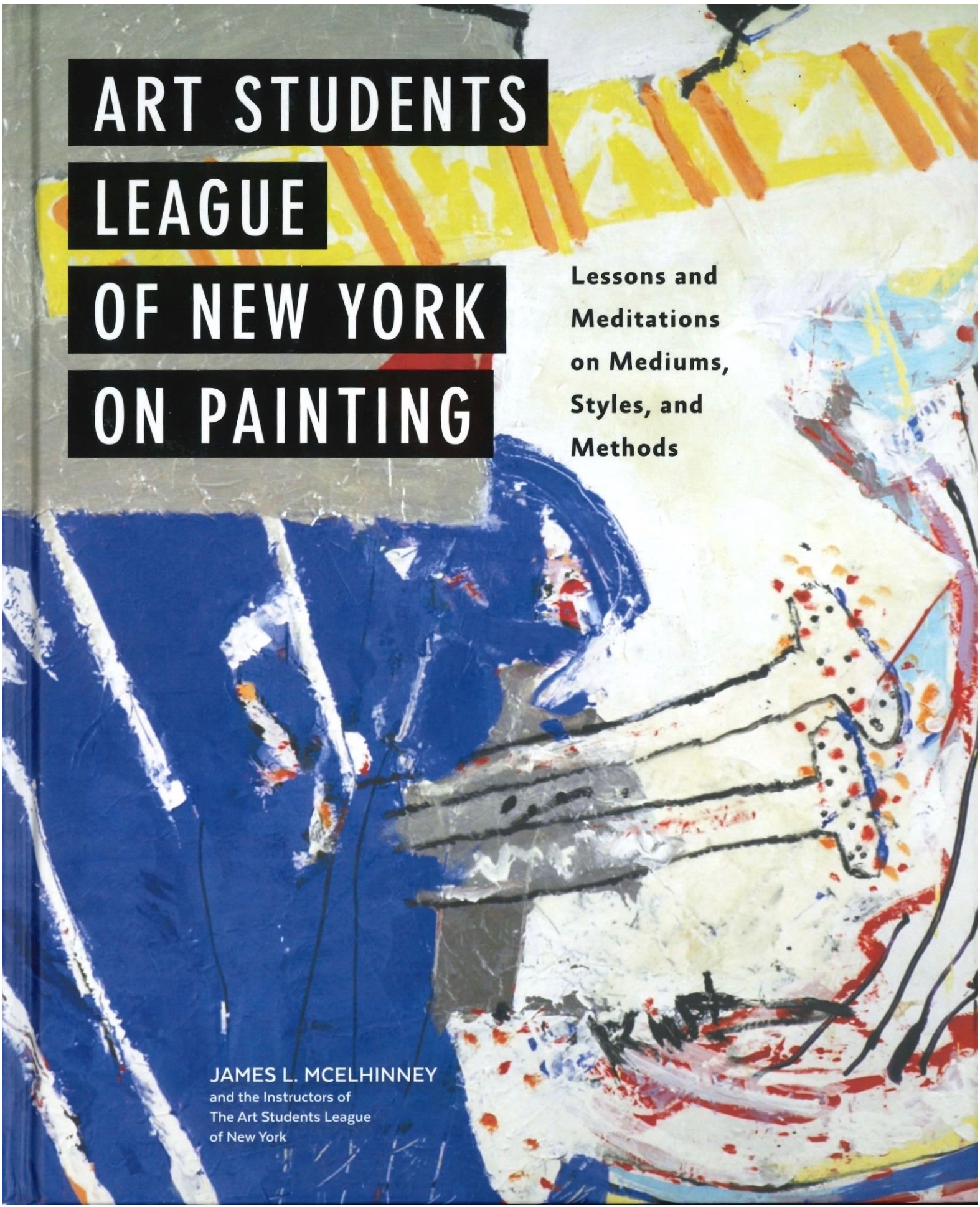

ART STUDENTS LEAGUE OF NEW YORK ON PAINTING
Lessons and Meditations on Mediums, Styles, and Methods
JAMES L. MCELHINNEY
and the Instructors of
The Art Students League
of New York

# EPHRAIM RUBENSTEIN

Ephraim Rubenstein was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1956. He received his BA in art history from Columbia University and his MFA in painting from Columbia University's School of the Arts. In addition, he attended classes at the Brooklyn Museum Art School, the National Academy of Design, and the Art Students League. Rubenstein just had his eleventh one-person exhibition in New York: seven at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery, one at the Tatistcheff Gallery, and three at the George Billis Gallery. He has exhibited, as well, at the National Academy of Design museum, the Butler Institute of American Art, the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, and the Maier Museum of Art. His work is represented in numerous public and private collections, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Exxon Mobil Corporation, and Deloitte & Touche. Rubenstein was associate professor of art at the University of Richmond from 1987 to 1998, where he received the Distinguished Educator Award and the Outstanding Faculty Award from the Commonwealth of Virginia. He has taught at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA), and the National Academy of Design. He is currently on the faculty of both the Art Students League of New York and Columbia University, where he teaches the Literature of Art seminar and life drawing in the department of narrative medicine. For more information, visit www.ephraimrubenstein.com.

**Ephraim Rubenstein**
*Woodley Interior, Sunlight 3*
2014, oil on linen, 28 x 20 in.

# EPHRAIM RUBENSTEIN

## Painting from Observation

I have wanted to be an artist for as long as I can remember. My grandfather, Edward H. Freedman, was a commercial artist and illustrator, and he taught me to paint and draw at a very early age. I can still smell the turpentine in his studio, and remember the exhilarating feeling of looking at all of those *colors* waiting for me in their trays and boxes. The excitement of the materials themselves, and of all that *potential*, has stayed with me my whole life. For a while, I also dreamed of being a professional tennis player, but I learned the hard way that I wasn't good enough. However, the focus, concentration, and discipline of having been an athlete proved very important to me as an artist.

I grew up on Eastern Parkway, across the street from the Brooklyn Museum. It had a first-rate art school at the time that was based on the *atelier system* like the League and that taught students of all ages and backgrounds. It was there that I took my first professional art classes. The school occupied a full wing of the museum, and the students were encouraged to go back and forth and study the works in the collection. One summer when I was in college, I copied Eakins's portrait *Letitia Wilson Jordan*, a great learning experience for me.

The first painting I remember falling in love with was a George Inness landscape in the museum's collection. As a young boy, I used to wander into the galleries after school, and since I came from a noisy, urban environment, this Inness painting seemed to me to be the most peaceful, lovely place imaginable: green meadows, a running brook, field after field unfolding into the distance, delicate clouds scudding away. . . . The thing that captured my imagination the most was that it didn't matter if it was twenty degrees and snowing in Brooklyn; it was always this lovely spring day in the painting. The power of painting to transcend time and place really got to me, and the fact that a painting could create an alternative reality that spoke to me as much or more than my actual one.

Through a tennis connection, I met David Levine, who invited me to join a weekly painting group that was held on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, in a huge loft over Fairway supermarket. The group was made up of a cadre of some of the best realist painters working in New York at the time: Dave, Aaron Shikler, and Burton Silverman, among others. You can imagine how thrilling it was for me, a young teenager, to be able to work with these guys, watching them block in their paintings, beautiful models walking around, the air heady with cigar smoke and the sounds of Puccini soaring from the stereo system. For the couple of years that I went to that group, I spent as much time just looking and asking questions as I did working myself.

When I was a junior in high school, I was awarded a BACA scholarship to a Sunday Honors Painting Class taught by Francis Cunningham at the Brooklyn Museum Art School, which was made up of some of the best high school art students from all over the city. This class turned my world upside down and represented the first serious challenge to the way that I had been previously taught to paint. Cunningham had been a student of Edwin Dickinson's at the League for several years, and he taught us "color-spot" painting and "tonal drawing," which were practiced by a handful of Dickinson students around the country. In color-spot painting, we worked on the white of the canvas, established the key of the painting through a comparison of adjacent color values, and had the painting develop by expanding out, largely finished, from this initial set of observations. This way of painting was in complete opposition to the "allover, all at once" philosophy I had been taught by Dave, Aaron, and

my grandfather. It took me a while to catch on, but its virtues became completely apparent to me. I practice it to this day, and it taught me that there are many ways to paint, all of them with advantages and disadvantages.

I work in all sorts of mediums: oil, pastel, gouache, and all sorts of drawing materials. In addition, I spent about a decade making prints—mostly etchings and drypoint intaglio prints, but also some lithographs. All of these processes have taught me something and have added some dimension to my work. I find that going back and forth among mediums is essential to my work rhythm. Sometimes in the middle of a large, complicated oil painting on which I have been laboring for months and months, I will stop and do some small gouache paintings. That fresh, matte, high-key tonality comes as such a relief from the thick, heavy shininess of oil paint. Maybe because I teach so much drawing, I spend a lot of time drawing myself. Many artists I know stopped drawing once they got out of art school. They get preoccupied with painting projects, and drawings don't sell. But I think that is unfortunate. Besides the obvious pleasures of graphite, charcoal, chalk, or silverpoint, drawing keeps you honest and keeps your hand-eye coordination sharp.

I work in almost all genres—figure, landscape, still life, interiors—the whole range of representation. When asked about subject matter, Edwin Dickinson said that he was a *general painter*, and I would classify myself that way. On some level, painting all subjects is the same; we don't paint with cloth or flesh or trees or stone. We paint with shapes of colored paint on a flat surface, and if we get it right, it will *look like* a piece of drapery or a figure or a landscape or a building. I can recognize a Degas immediately, regardless of the subject, because he always reveals his sensibility through his color harmonies and his exquisite drawing.

Growing up in New York City, I started out as a figure painter and thought that would be my primary subject. But early on in my career, I moved down to Virginia to teach at the University of Richmond and found it was much harder to find models. New York has a real *model culture*—it is an accepted part of artistic practice, and there are great models all over the place. It proves much harder in other places. Van Gogh's letters are filled with laments about how hard (and expensive) it was for him to find models. So when I moved down to Richmond, I started looking around me, and I discovered that I loved landscape, and interiors and still life as well.

I am mostly interested in the expression of my innermost feelings. In this regard, almost all of my work can be said to be autobiographical. If it takes a figure to say it, or a foggy riverbank, or a ruined Doric temple, so be it. We sense our deepest feelings present in nature and strive to find the objects or locations that can express them. These are what the poet Rainer Maria Rilke called "sensuous equivalents": objects or places in nature that express our most ineffable feelings. We are constantly on the lookout for these. Jamie Wyeth said that even a bale of hay could be a self-portrait if it is painted with feeling.

My friend David Dodge Lewis taught me (among many things) the value of working in series. The concept of *series* acknowledges the fact that it may not be possible to say everything you want to say about a given subject in one piece. Every artist knows the feeling of getting to a crossroads on a painting or drawing and realizing that you could develop it one way or in a very different way instead. Working in series allows you to have your cake and eat it, too, to continue down both paths, maybe even three or four paths, without the sadness and resignation caused by "the road not taken." The same motif, explored with several different outcomes, becomes like the idea of theme and variation in music. The concept of series became crucial to me, and has become a standard part of my conceptual equipment.

I have two studios in my house: one that has good windows that I use for daylight projects and an attic space that I use with artificial lighting. There are almost no north-facing windows in my house, so I have learned to work with east light, which is hot in the morning but

Top
**Ephraim Rubenstein**
*Woodley Summer Dawn*
2011, oil on linen, 30 x 50 in.

Bottom
**Ephraim Rubenstein**
*James River, Winter 2*
1999–2000, oil on linen, 25 x 72 in.

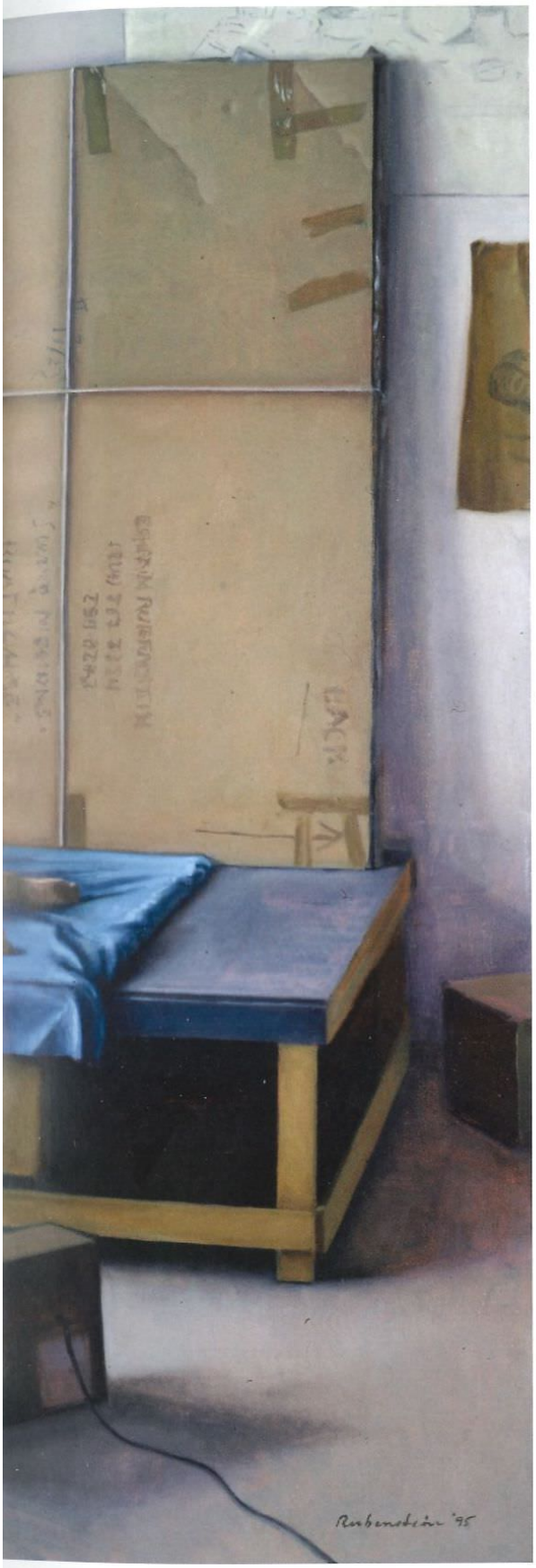
which cools down as soon as the sun moves around the corner of the house. I made some screens that I stretched with Mylar, a film that lets the light through while diffusing the direct, raking light. I have spent a lot of time thinking about, and setting up, the lighting in my upstairs studio, and I try to have all different sorts of lights, lamps, and fixtures on hand in case I want a different effect. For an observational painter, nothing is more important than light.

My studio is a very private place, and something like the ancient *caves*—images on the walls, rites involving mysterious objects, and so on. As I get older, more and more of my space is devoted to storage; but I still have room for reproductions of work that interests me, favorite objects, the work of some friends, and, of course, drawings and studies for projects on which I am currently working. My studio is reasonably well organized; I try to be efficient in that department so that when I need a particular type of brush, I can find it quickly. I get a real kick out of looking at paintings of nineteenth-century studios: huge spaces with skylights, bearskin rugs, ancient statues, potbellied stoves, naked models—nice work, if you can get it.

My teaching has evolved over the years to try to include the best aspects of all the approaches that I was taught myself. However, I always try to emphasize that there are many, many ways of constructing a painting or drawing, all of them with virtues and limitations. I emphasize the fact that no matter what one's strategy for approaching a painting, one's technique should always be in service of a vision. I teach a large number of beginning students, and I teach them about the importance of basic skills and a thorough knowledge of their materials. Just as a music teacher teaches "ear training," I teach "eye training"; the ability to measure and to control scale and proportion, mastery over the color/value range, sensitivity to shapes within the initial rectangle, and so forth.

I try to make my classes a place filled with what Robert Henri called "the art spirit"—a place of energy, excitement, and mutual cooperation. I try to impart the importance of having colleagues and friends with whom one can work and to whom one can go for criticism and the exchange of ideas. Perhaps the hardest part of being an artist is the ability to work alone for long periods of time, and connecting to some sort of larger community is crucial.

**Ephraim Rubenstein**
*Abandoned Houses, Richmond, Virginia*
2012–14, oil on linen, 34 x 68 in.




**Ephraim Rubenstein**
*Studio Interior with Model*
1995, oil on linen, 42 x 50 in.




**1. Ephraim Rubenstein**
*Annunciation*
1985, oil on linen, 19x 36 in.

**2. Ephraim Rubenstein**
*Les Roses 1*
1993, oil on linen, 60 x 30 in.

**3. Ephraim Rubenstein**
*Still Life With Empty Nests*
1992, oil on linen, 30 x 48 in.

## A LESSON IN PRINT: THE SENTIENT OBJECT

Still life painting has traditionally been thought of as the most abstract of genres. Emotionally neutral, it allows painters to pick out forms, colors, and patterns for their visual effects alone. At best, it encourages artists to play with compositions and color harmonies in the abstract; at worst, it is a genre best suited for studies and exercises. Because of this, many viewers have decided that still life painting is emotionally vacant or even boring. But I have always found it to be deeply moving, and the difference lies not so much in the treatment of the subject but in the attitude toward it. The world is absolutely *filled* with natural objects and objects of material culture. Everywhere we turn there is evidence of nature's bounty and man's ingenuity, as well as objects of deep personal significance for us.

**1.** For instance, when my wife became pregnant with our first daughter, Amelia, I painted an "Annunciation" still life for her that included a large ostrich egg, a pinecone, and a seashell (which, because they illustrate the Fibonacci sequence in nature, have always been symbolic of birth and growth), and a postcard reproduction of Fra Angelico's San Marco Annunciation fresco, which we had recently seen in Florence. The painting hung over our mantle and seemed to protect the whole endeavor.

Rilke developed a concept that he called "sensuous equivalents," or objects in the real world that were suffused, or could be suffused, with deep personal meaning for the artist. The word *sensuous* is used to connote an actual thing existing in the world, and not just an internal feeling, although the one becomes a stand-in for the other.

**2.** Rilke loved flowers, and he wrote a poem about pink hydrangeas, one of my absolute favorites.

> Who thought such pink could be? Who knew it there
> Accumulating in each blushing cluster?
> Like gilded things which by and by unluster
> They gently grow unred as if from wear.
>
> —Rainer Maria Rilke (Walter Arndt, translation)

In *Les Roses I*, it is amazing how a single flower can electrify the simple corner of a room and make all the surrounding color notes come alive. The blue/gray wall looks completely different in the presence of that tiny note of brilliant yellow.

**3.** The opposite pole from the abundance of flowers is the still life of loss, as embodied by *Still Life with Empty Nests*, a collection of old nests, hives, and cells that have outgrown their use and have been abandoned. Here, everything has been reduced to the grays, blacks, and browns of the colors of the earth.

**4.** Books have always been extremely important to me. My library is one of my "places of peace," another one being in front of my easel. In *Library I* (page 51), the photograph on the desk is of Charles Dickens, one of my favorite writers.

**5.** *Still Life with Books, Mirrors, and Lenses I* (page 51) is a meditation on how we know what we know. In it, my books are seen among all sorts of optical devices: magnifying glasses, diminishing lenses, prisms, convex mirrors, even a Victorian "gazing ball." If everything can be distorted by how one is looking at it, how can we be sure of what we know?

**6.** Violence against books is violence against the beliefs encoded within them. A society that bans books may end up burning books; and burning books has tragically been a prelude to burning people. I laid out the charred remains of three books that I burned sacramentally on an altarlike surface so that they could be mourned in *Still Life with Burned Books*.

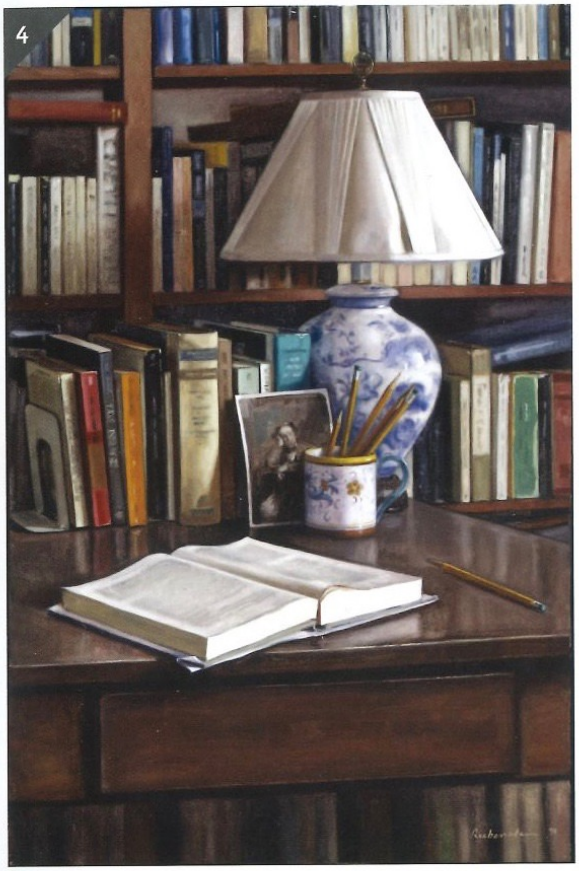
**7.** Still life objects assembled together can create a compelling portrait of a person, a sort of still life of attributes. The objects speak to the interests and pursuits of the person, and become an eloquent stand-in for the person themselves. I have done two such *still life portraits*.

I began *In Memory of Primo Levi 1919–1987* (page 52) upon hearing of the death of Primo Levi, another of my favorite writers. Levi was a chemist by training but became a writer after surviving the Nazi death camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau. His experiences there became a central theme of his writings, and he often interwove them with his insights as a research scientist. I took a large, old university-type desk and filled it with objects from a chemistry lab as well as with books and writing instruments. I wanted it to seem as if Levi had been sitting in the chair thinking and writing, took off his glasses, got up, and has not returned.

**8.** Continuing the concept of still life as portrait, I explored my grandfather's participation fighting in the First World War. I had no idea, however, what the reality of his experiences were until I happened to find a tiny journal that he kept from 1917 to 1918, when he went to France with Pershing's Expeditionary Forces. The journal is at the very center of a still life painting I made entitled *The Great War and Me* (page 53). His written account was a blow-by-blow description of the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, all seen from his point of view. The objects all refer to parts of his body and constitute a symbolic portrait: the helmet is his head; the uniform, his chest; the medal, his heart; the canteen, his stomach; the gas mask, his lungs. The shovel is his strong arms, which he used to repair roads and bury the thousands of horses and mules that were killed in bombings. It was absolutely thrilling for me, as I worked on the painting and read about the war, to experience the intersection of one of the defining moments of the twentieth century and my family's history. My grandfather was especially important to me, because it was he who first taught me how to paint.

**9.** The World War I gas mask in *Gasmask II* (page 54) is a difficult object to contemplate. I laid it out, without specific comment, just so that it could be examined. On the one hand, it is horrific to view—it looks like some kind of wizened, reptilian fossil. On the other hand, it is strangely human: the mask is the face; the tubing, the throat; and the canister, the lungs. It all folded up and got put in the sack. Masks such as these kept millions of men alive, as we began to introduce chemical warfare to the history of the world.

Paintings like these show, I hope, the emotional range that still life painting can have. If you think that still life as a genre is emotionally vacant or even boring, it is because you have failed to exercise your imagination. Each day, you encounter hundreds of objects in the world. Which of them are compelling enough to paint, and how would you present them to the world?



**4. Ephraim Rubenstein**
*Library 1*
1998, oil on linen, 30 x 18 in.

**5. Ephraim Rubenstein**
*Still Life with Books, Mirrors and Lenses 1*
2002, oil on linen, 36 x 60 in.

**6. Ephraim Rubenstein**
*Still Life with Burned Books*
1997, oil on linen, 39 x 50 in.


**7. Ephraim Rubenstein**
*In Memory of Primo Levi*
1988–90, oil on linen, 60 x 70 in.

**8. Ephraim Rubenstein**
*The Great War and Me*
1998–99, oil on linen, 72 x 60 in.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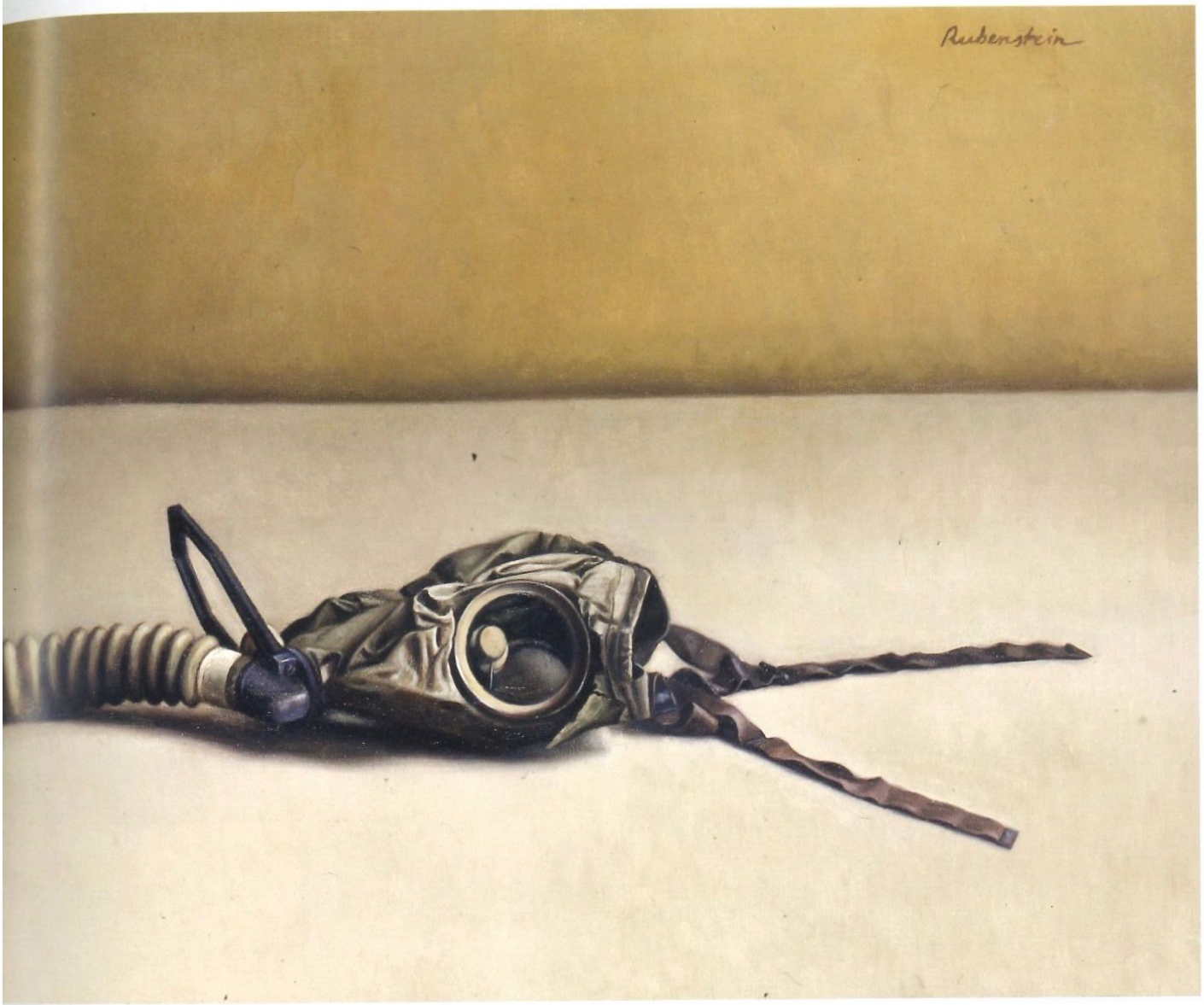
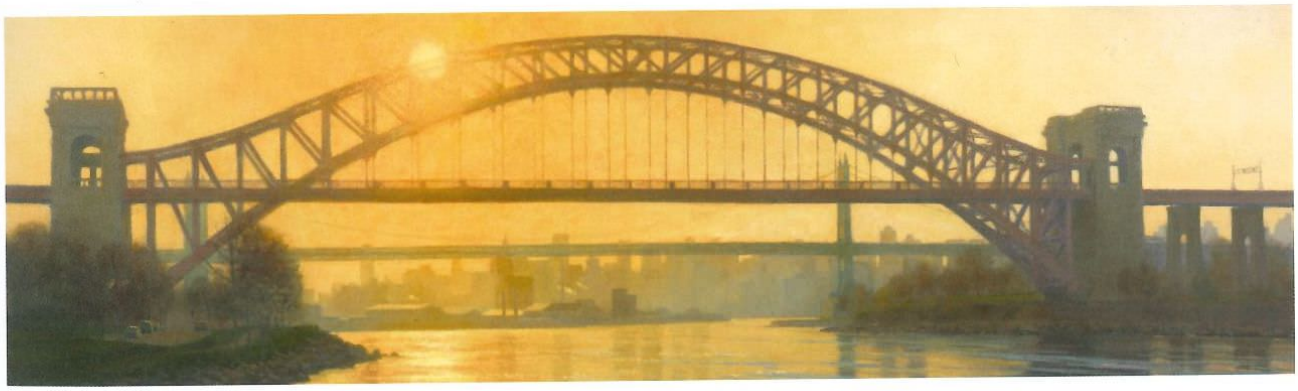
**9. Ephraim Rubenstein**
*Gasmask 2*
1999, oil on linen, 22 x 54 in.


Rubenstein

# STUDENT GALLERY

**Diego Catalán Amilivia**
*Tyrone*
2008, oil on canvas, 15 x 11 in.



Top
**Hipólito Torres López**
*Between Woods and Frozen Lake*
2005, pastel on sabertooth paper, 22 x 30 in.

Bottom
**Eric March**
*Hymn for the General Slocum*
2005, oil on canvas, 16 x 60 in.