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Renewal and Natural Order

The Art of Ephraim Rubenstein

by Charles W. Johnson, Jr.

*The sap is mounting back from that unseenness
darkly renewing in the common deep,
back to the light, and feeding the pure greenness
hiding in rinds round which the winds still weep.*

— Rainer Maria Rilke

The Sap is Mounting Back II (1992), inspired by one of Rainer Maria Rilke's poems, is a crystallization of Ephraim Rubenstein's most recent artistic endeavors, a quiet reflective late winter landscape painting, a vision of reconciliation with the world through the contemplation of nature. In the terrestrial sphere man is a humble part of the natural order.

Rubenstein's painting and Rilke's poem are poignant expressions of faith in the ongoing renewal of life. His painting has caught the moment of nature's earliest ripening into the liturgy of spring. The scene resonates with a sense of reverie, but also solitude, the sense of being connected to, yet isolated from the world — a theme Rubenstein finds powerfully expressed not only in Rilke's poetry, but also in his own life as an artist. This is a private work, a kind of sacred reliquary of the artist's inner world of introspection, quiet reflection, and aspired regeneration.

Rubenstein is known for his finely crafted drawings, life-size figures, portraits, still-lives and landscape paintings. Born in Brooklyn, New York in 1956, Rubenstein is a graduate of Columbia College (B.A., Art History) and Columbia University's School of Arts (M.F.A., Painting). He also trained with New York painter Francis Cunningham at the Brooklyn Museum Art School, the Art Students League and the New Brooklyn School of Life Drawing, Painting and Sculpture. His training with Cunningham (elected into the National Academy of Design) and his study of anatomy at Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons give him an exceptional foundation in representational painting.

There is a quiet reflective beauty about Rubenstein's work which is born out of personal experience and a deep understanding of the great visual and literary traditions of Western culture. His drawings and paintings are beautifully crafted with a virtuoso technique that gives direction to impulse and feelings. His work manifests a process of intellectual and technical concentration of extraordinary discipline. His art expresses a variety of personal and contemporary insights. The importance of his insights is heightened by connections to the European masters who provide Rubenstein with a syntax for working out ideas of immense personal value.

Despite Rubenstein's response to the European tradition, he remains a decidedly 20th-century artist, bearing witness to our age's introspection and even isolation. His technical virtuosity and deep understanding of the human figure have not gone unnoticed. Rubenstein has had four one-man shows at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery in New York since 1985, and his work is in The Metropolitan Museum of Art collection. He has also exhibited at the



Ephraim Rubenstein, *Still Life with Empty Nest*, 1993
Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York

Photo: Katherine Wetzel

National Academy of Design, the Butler Institute of American Art and the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. He is currently Associate Professor of Art at the University of Richmond in Virginia.

In *Still-Life with Empty Nest*, striking nest-forms from nature are endowed with a sense of mystery. A powerful light sharply delineates contours and greatly enhances the perception of surfaces and textures, yet somehow fails to illuminate the background space, which is submerged in deep shadow. Nothing distracts the eye from probing these humble objects, which once nurtured life but now lie abandoned. Silent on a table, almost sacramentally, these hollow shells are reminders of the inevitable metamorphosis common to all living things after life has ceased. This quiet, haunting painting with its elevated table top arrangement rekindles the mysterious, complex emotions that great 17th-century Spanish still-life artists such as Juan Sanchez Cotan (1560-1627) and Francisco de Zurbaran (1598-1661) evoked in their unprepossessing genre. In Rubenstein's treatment, these skeletal nests are contemplated close-at-hand, and we are once again reminded that life is fragile, transitory, and brief.

We are reminded of the opposite end of the life cycle in Rubenstein's beautiful nude drawings of his wife, Sarah. Rubenstein's masterful drawings, rare in contemporary art, come from a passionate response to both life and artistic medium. These drawings are acts of love — the emotional response of the artist's pencil as it etches ever so delicately over the smoothness of paper, defining a tactile quality that gets at the softness of female surfaces. Such marvelously delicate drawings reveal the most intimate workings of the artist's mind. Whether inspired by historical masterpieces or the comfortable intimacy of a long-established relationship, the nude is one of the most enduring of all subjects. It can be a study of form, a meditation on the nature of the artist's vision and methodology, a demonstration of love for the anatomical truth of the body, or an expression of a particular emotional or psychological state. On a personal level, the nude can celebrate love or the

natural beauty of the human body.

Rubenstein's interest in the nude is not limited to one set of emotions. The figure, for him, is the vehicle of expression for every human emotion and thought through its gesture, movement and countenance. In his works, the figure is not merely a collection of beautiful shapes and colors, but a manifestation of the emotional life of the subject. Rubenstein makes this inner life accessible to us through the outward appearance of the body.

In contrast to the tenderness expressed in the drawings of his wife, a slightly different feeling is expressed in *Summer Morning Boathouse II*, painted during the summer of 1991, while Rubenstein was working in the Northern Neck of Virginia. In this work, he imbued a figure with the structure and significance of a Quattrocento fresco, but also located it firmly in the landscape, in the world of observed color. This is a completely new undertaking. The figure has the structure of the studio, but does not smack of the studio; it has the light of day in it, without dissolving the form. Working directly on location, he captures the immediacy of the young woman, wrapped in her thoughts in an unself-conscious moment, looking out over the landscape, as the light beautifully caresses her body in a quiet, intimate space. The naturalistic breasts, one partially covered by the long, flowing soft brown hair, the recognizably feminine abdomen, the wide hips and weight-bearing knees attest to the fact that this figure was closely studied from life.

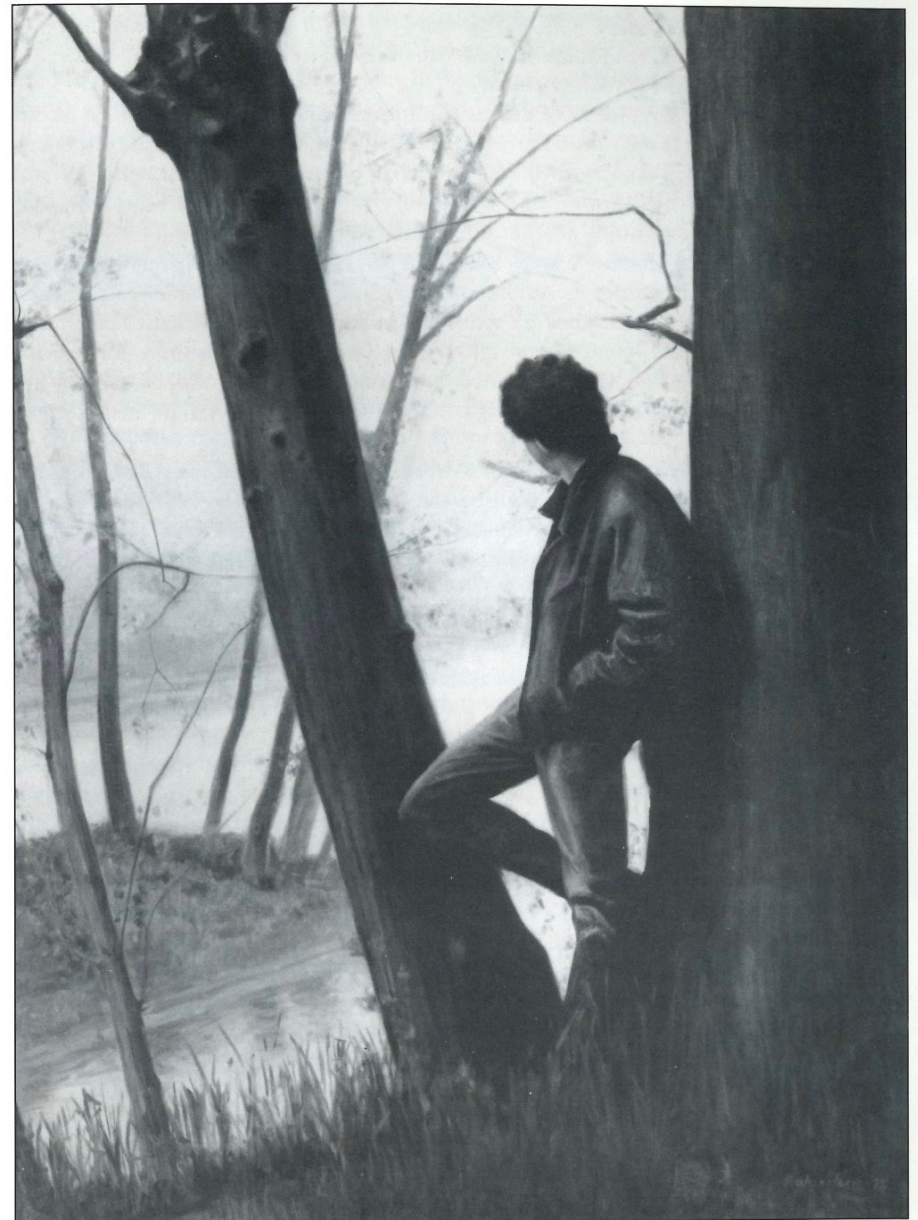
The work seems a meditation on nature's endless capacity for regeneration. The brightly illuminated young female body, dappled morning sunlight filtering through the early summer trees' nurturing foliage, fresh cool summer air — all express "joie de vivre." Here the age-old theme of integrating the figure, particularly the nude, into the landscape is beautifully reinterpreted. The integration is made possible through the open, airy space of a boathouse which Rubenstein used as a studio, providing him with direct experience of the landscape, so essential for this immediacy of color observations.

Not all works strive for this type of consonance. *Portrait of Joseph Aranyosi* is a somber work of noticeable contrasts: dark figure against light background, stacked books on the left against blank canvas on the right, a Boccioni image tacked to the wall above several blank canvases lined up on the floor. Rubenstein's subject was a prized student of exceptional skill and talent, a complex undergraduate of Irish/Hungarian extraction.

The pose of the figure, its relationship to the interior space, the complexity of shapes and colors in and around the figure, the tonality and the chiaroscuro of the work — all contribute to its significance. One is reminded of the 17th-century portraits of Diego Velazquez, whose extraordinary naturalism was not simply a device for describing the physical world, but also a way of revealing the complex order of intellectual and psychological relationships. Using knowledge, experience and artistic intuition, Rubenstein describes a dynamic pupil-teacher relationship at an important time in each of their lives.

In a world where Nature, for most people, has been replaced by mass media, cities and congestion, Rubenstein's work affirms humanity and nature. His art is about life itself, the continuity of Nature, cycles of growth and decay, seasons of the year and ceaseless renewal. Rubenstein's works are, like acts of love, affirmations of life in all of its marvelous complexity.

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Ephraim Rubenstein, *The Sap is Mounting Back II*, 1992
Collection of David Bickimer

Photo: Katherine Wetzel