

# Studio as Setting: The Paintings of Scott Noel

Through the careful orchestration of figures and still life objects, this Philadelphia oil painter uses his studio as the setting for both natural and metaphorical scenes.

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by **Ephraim Rubenstein**

**I**n Scott Noel's *Studying the Studio*, the artist's workspace opens up before you, filled with light and air. As your eye strolls around, you sense every foot of available space in the studio. You feel how, as you enter, you must be careful to avoid the space heater and to walk around the table arranged with pots. Once inside the studio, you might move over to the right wall to examine a painting that has caught your eye, before you settle finally into the armchair in the corner. While resting comfortably in the chair, you can stare out into the expansive cityscape, a reminder that space continues to unfold infinitely beyond the studio's windows and that it is deeply pleasurable to have it more intimately contained in the artist's studio.

While some artists confine themselves to working in one or two genres, Noel paints in every conceivable form—interior, cityscape, still life, figure, portraiture, and narrative painting. Noel's eye is voracious, his aesthetic ambition high. If one of

his life's projects has been to paint in all of these genres, another has been to combine them in such unexpected ways as to baffle the viewer's basic preconceptions about these categories. And the place that he uses as the visual staging ground for these uncanny admixtures is the studio.

For Noel, the studio is a deeply charged place. It is the through-line that links all his endeavors, the crucible into which he throws all his artistic ingredients. We sense this undertaking even in the empty studio. The space heater reminds us that a nude model will soon be present and will need to be kept warm. The table suggests that objects from the real world will soon be sequestered from their everyday functions and conscripted for examination under the artist's scrutiny. The chair will let models, friends, and students sit for their portraits and discuss works in progress. Even the very walls of the room, with artwork tacked up on its surfaces, remind us that the studio, not the museum, is the place for looking at art, for criticizing, and for learning.

One of the most prominent sights in *Studying the Studio* is the tantalizing cityscape outside the window. It is the source of all the light in the painting, and it draws your eye to it like a magnet. It presents a dazzling impression of light, created by radiant puzzle-piece blocks of color.

Noel clearly spends a great deal of time looking out of these windows. Seasons, weather, and time of day all contribute to the variety of his



ABOVE

**February Morning East**

2004, oil on linen, 56 x 60.  
All artwork this article courtesy  
Gross McCleaf Gallery,  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania,  
unless otherwise indicated.

LEFT

**Studying the Studio**

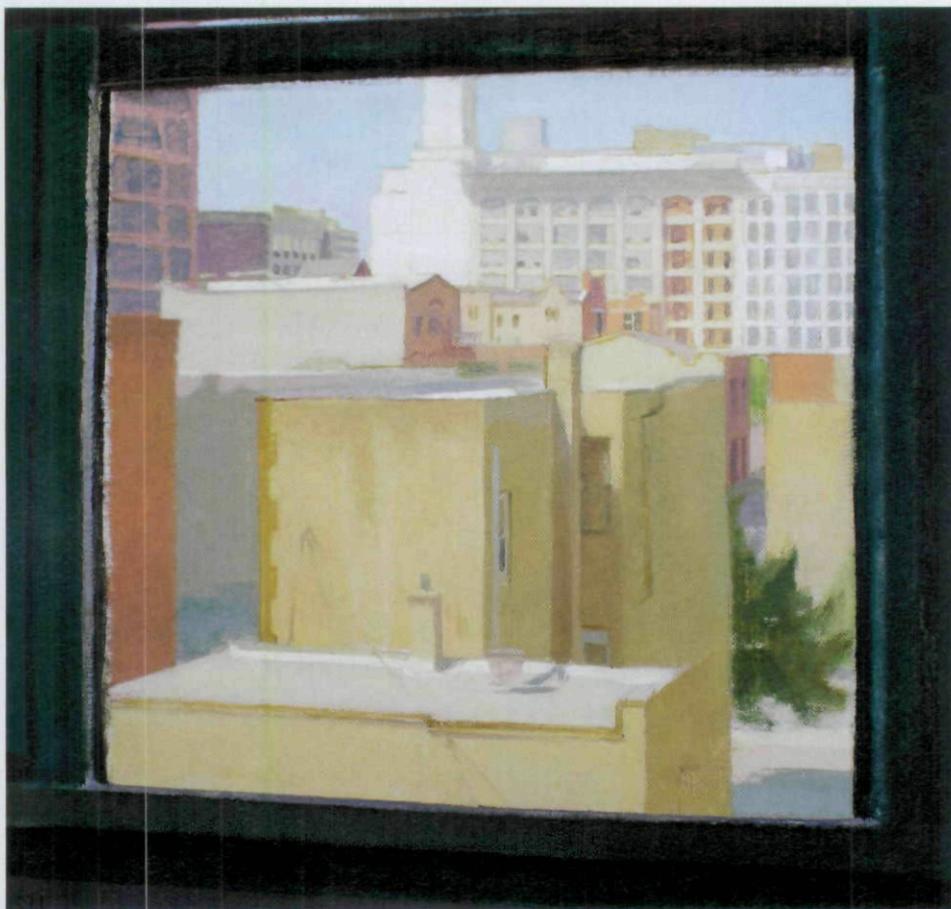
2002, oil on linen, 40 x 64.



BELOW

**White Summer**

2005, oil on linen, 30 x 32.



observations. *February Morning East* is a stunning example of the kind of visual record of these views he has been keeping over the past decade. In this piece the light is crystal clear, the space pellucid. The viewer has an exhilarating sense of soaring through downtown Philadelphia, using streets, buildings, and water towers as landmarks for the flight. And yet this painting makes you realize that cityscapes, for Noel, are largely visual. Although they can depict the urban grunge, they are not *in* it. They are above the fray. Noel is not the man on the street as much as he is the philosopher looking down from the heights. Seen from the upper windows of tall office buildings, Noel's cityscapes are meant to be contemplated rather than entered.

Noel enjoys comparing the studio to his mind. Like his brain, it contains his thoughts and the private world of his interior consciousness. The windows are his eyes—the means by which he takes in stimuli from the outside world. If the windows act as the lenses through which Noel interacts with the world at large, then the window frame

becomes an extremely charged architectural element. It not only demarcates the boundary between inside and outside but also celebrates the constant back and forth between public and private, internal and external reality. *White Summer* speaks to just this dialogue. The subtle diagonals of the window mullions, echoing the edges of the painting itself, remind us that this is only a view, a *veduta*, and that the immediate reality is inside, in the world of the studio with its moldings holding us safely inside.

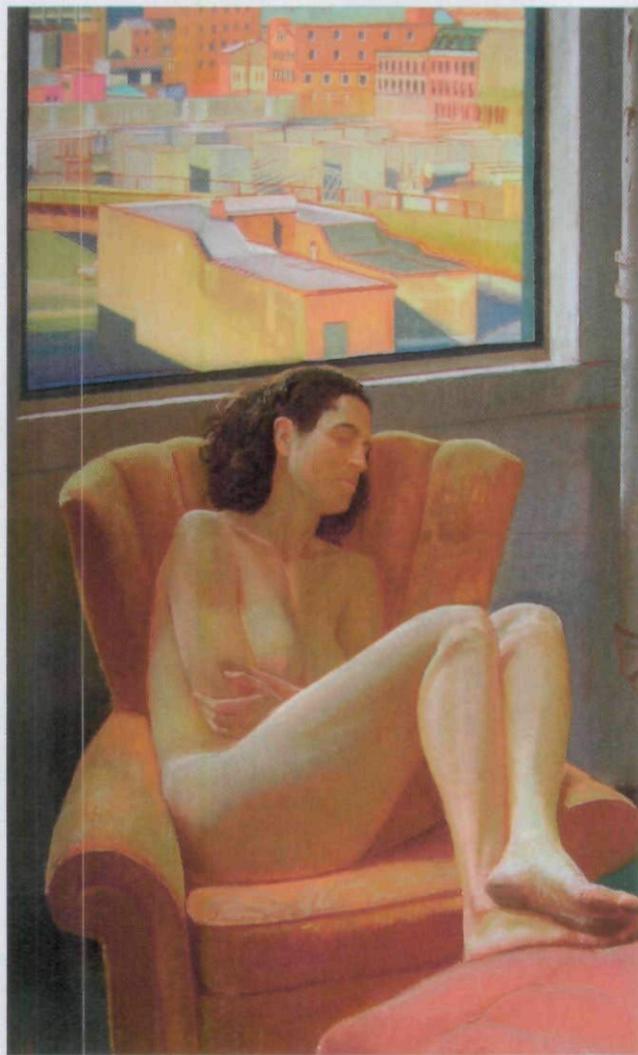
**N**oel was born in 1955 in Charlotte, North Carolina, and recalls drawing constantly as a child, mostly from photographs. He attended Washington University in St. Louis where he studied with such influential teachers as Barry Schactman, Arthur Osver, and David Hollowell. He began M.F.A. programs at both Tyler School of Art, in Philadelphia, and Yale University, in New Haven, Connecticut, but abandoned graduate work to go out on his own in 1982. Most of his knowl-

edge of the “craft and cuisine” of painting he acquired on his own “from close looking at the many painters, past and present, that I admire,” he says. This pantheon includes historical figures such as Jacques-Louis David, Chardin, and Degas, as well as more contemporary figures, such as Edwin Dickinson, Antonio López García, and Lucian Freud. Quite catholic in his taste, Noel has the amazing ability to draw from widely disparate sources and still make his borrowings consistently his own. Noel has taught continuously in and around Philadelphia since 1983. Of teaching, he remarks, “The necessity of making ideas concrete in the classroom has been a great stimulus for organizing my unruly enthusiasms.”

Noel is an extraordinarily gifted teacher. Samantha Simmons, a Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts senior, says of Noel, “Scott is one of the most passionate people I have ever met. He has a contagious excitement in class, and if students are willing to listen, Scott is there to encourage them.” Noel is inherently generous, but also demanding. Former student David Campbell recalls, “Scott was one of

BELOW  
**Discipline and Desire**  
2002, oil on linen, 48 x 50.





LEFT  
**Daisy Substation**  
 2004, pastel, 64 x 40.

BELOW LEFT  
**Portrait of Vivian**  
 2005, oil on linen,  
 30 x 48.

OPPOSITE PAGE  
**Under the  
 Skylight**  
 2007, oil on linen,  
 60 x 44.



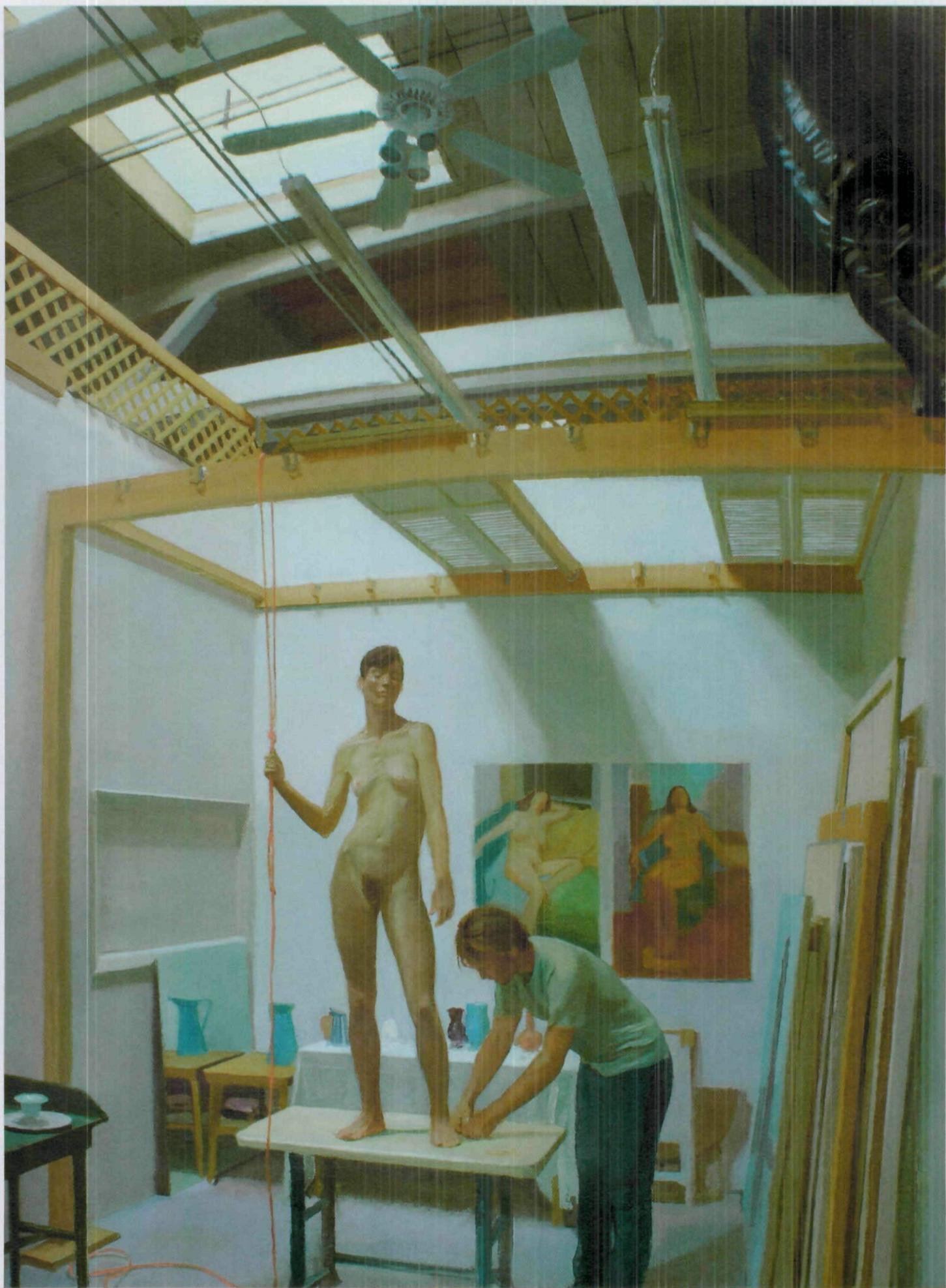
the first people to confront me, to stress that I shouldn't think of my paintings as precious and that if it wasn't working, I should scrape it down and start over again. All of his provocations prompted an attitude in me to take more risks, which I believe is the only way to get better as a painter." Even to speak casually to Noel is to make you aware that his role as a teacher is inseparable from his role as a painter. He is what one might call an "involuntary teacher"—elucidation just comes out. He will be talking to you, and then he will start to explain, clarify, reference, and make analogy. As Simmons remarks, "He can make you see the formal similarities between a De Kooning and an Ingres."

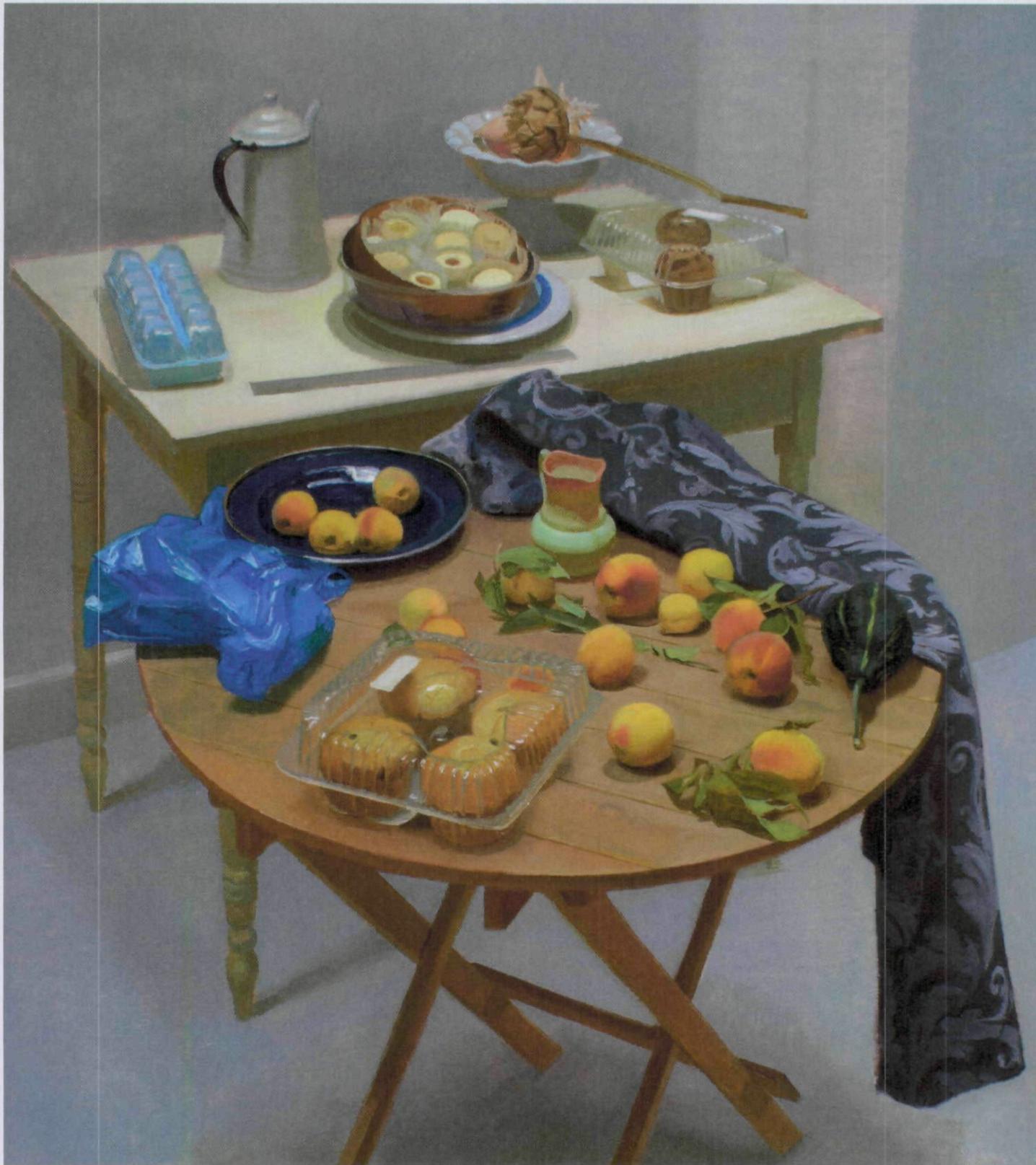
Noel invariably introduces people and objects from the outside world into the inner world of his studio. Like a master stage director, he populates his studio/stage with still life objects, single figures, and figures involved in narrative dramas. *Daisy Substation* brings these inner and outer worlds into direct relation. In the painting, the view out the window is as much on top of the woman as it is behind her. It functions as a kind of rectangular "thought bubble," bringing news from the outside world to this vulnerable figure—nude and huddled in the studio as if for warmth and protection. She is soft, warm, private; the view is hard, public, glaring. The relationship is further echoed by her pose; her thighs and knees are in a position similar to the shape of the substation itself, a visual echo of the aesthetic kinship.

Figures introduced into the studio often have some reference to either the painting or the teaching process. *Under the Skylight*, for instance, is a loving narrative describing the working relationship between artist and model. A sort of homage to Eakins' late paintings of William Rush and his models, the piece depicts the artist taping the position of the model's feet so that she can break from her pose. The painting depicts one of those in-between moments; not the heat of creation or the languor of one of Degas' dancer's breaks but a transitional moment between work and rest, a syncopated beat rarely struck in painting. In addition, *Under the Skylight*—like so many of Noel's paintings—contains an intriguing mixture of old and new resonances. The figure itself reads like a 19th-century *académie*, complete with rope to keep the arm raised. But the feeling of the painting is modern, with its light, airy tonality, the unusual cropping of the artist's feet, and the bending perspective of the beams.

Even when the reference to the world of painting and the studio is not so direct, it is almost always hinted at through subtle cues. While most artists place their portrait subjects in either a neutral setting or in a location related to the subject's life and world, Noel insists on placing the subject in *his* world, in the arena of the studio. In *Portrait of Vivian*, there is a studio drawing pinned up on the wall behind the figure, and one of the chairs—like a character in a novel we have come to know and love—is familiar to us from *Studying the Studio*. The open door expresses the model's comings and goings, as does the intriguing little still life on the table consisting of wallet, money, and keys, as if Vivian had emptied her pockets upon arriving to make herself more comfortable for her sitting.

At Noel's moments of highest ambition, figures combine with other figures to make complex narratives about painting and teaching. In *Bill's Master Class*, Noel's friend and fellow Philadelphia painter Bill Scott sits critiquing a student's work. The painting combines a radical empiricism with a classical organization, the two poles of the artist's imagination. On the one hand, Scott is depicted in a T-shirt and in a pose so casual that he might as well be

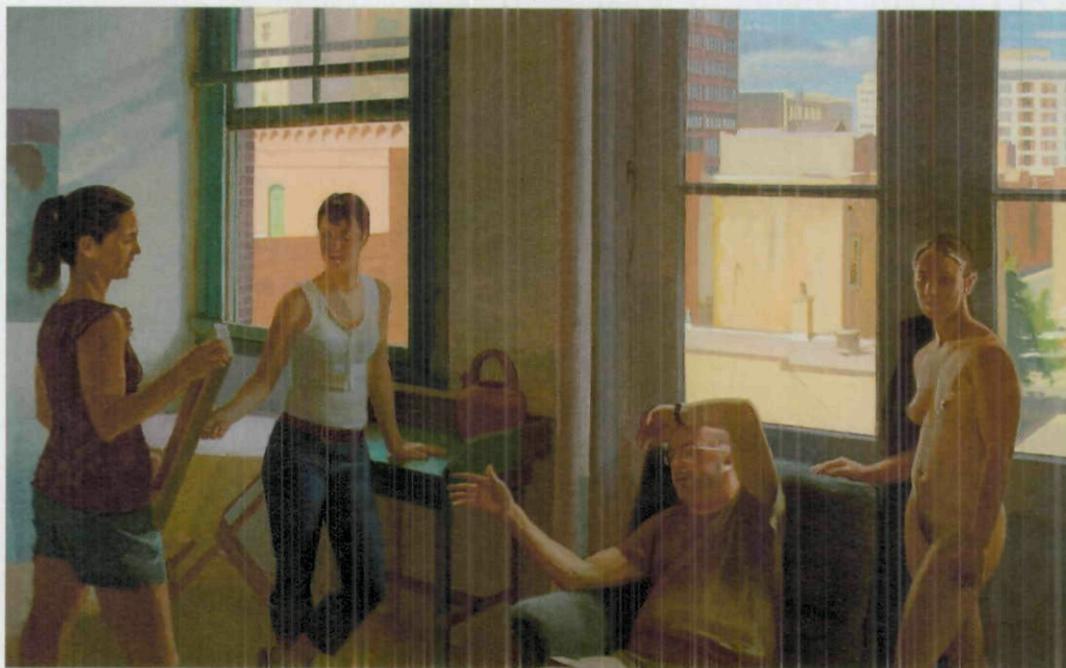




watching a Sunday afternoon football game. On the other hand, the musical line made by heads, arms, and hands sets up a formal rhythm that could have come from a Greek funerary frieze. As an abstract movement, it has at its center Scott's gesturing hand, a hand that electrifies the empty space between it and the work under discussion.

In addition to figures, still life objects invariably emi-

grate into Noel's studio world. Sometimes—as with tables, chairs, and canvases—these objects seem a logical part of what one would find in the studio. In other cases, however, they can seem incongruously gathered together—imported either to tell a story or for the sheer joy of being grouped together. Pitchers, vases, fruit, and all kinds of delectable sweet things participate, in the artist's words, in a “volup-



RIGHT  
**Bill's Master Class**  
 2005, oil on linen, 49 x 79.

OPPOSITE PAGE  
**Still Life With Street Peaches**  
 2005, oil on linen, 46 x 42.

tuous mingling of objects." Noel's congregants sing with a Baroque jubilation that makes you smile with delight.

*Still Life With Street Peaches* is just such a joyful work. The composition leads the viewer from one delicious confection to another. Two tables are necessary—one could not possibly contain this visual largesse; cookies, muffins, and peaches spill out of the canvas. And it is in his sumptuous still life paintings that one best recognizes what a beautiful colorist Noel is. His tonality is high-keyed and bright, like a clear summer morning. His palette is rich but subtle as well, always picking up reflected hues from one adjacent area to another.

One of Noel's most intriguing compositions is his deeply sensuous *Discipline and Desire*. The painting weaves almost all of the artist's concerns—interior space, still life, and the figure—into a revealing personal narrative. Noel presents us with a typically incongruous combination of bakery goods and tools of the trade—a brush, an oversized tube of oil paint, along with supermarket muffins and doughnuts. The viewer's first sensation is of the yumminess of it all, with everything bathed in icing that drips onto the table and with muffins bursting with chocolate chips.

We get a hint early on that the painting may be moving us toward parable when we realize that Noel pays as much attention to the containers and wrappers as he does to the objects themselves. The contrast between wrapped and unwrapped is at the heart of the painting and alerts us to the idea that desire may undress things that discipline might otherwise keep under wraps.

The nudes on the wall are equally appealing, with their languid limbs spilling across the page. In fact, everything in the painting is desirable; an embarrassment of delights for the senses. What, then, is the role of the dog, who enters the painting nose first, smelling, scouting out when and where to jump up on the table? The fact that the dog is kept on such a short leash by his master—in this case, the artist's wife, Jan—makes us recognize that the painting is, in fact, a full-bore allegory, an apologue of appetite. In Noel's teeming mind, all of his desires—visual, gustatory, erotic—are all scrambled together. It is only through the discipline of painting—by using the brush and the tube of paint—that Noel is able to keep reality controlled and measured and can finally make something beautiful and abiding out of all of his unruly enthusiasms. ■

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## About the Artist

**Scott Noel** has been the subject of numerous solo and group exhibitions, and his work hangs in dozens of corporate, private, and public collections, including the Museum of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and the Woodmere Art Museum, both in Philadelphia, and the Arkansas Arts Center, in Little Rock. He earned a B.F.A. from Washington University in St. Louis, in Missouri, and pursued graduate work at Yale University, in New Haven, Connecticut, and at Tyler School of Art at Temple University, in Philadelphia. Noel currently teaches at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. He is represented by Gross McCleaf Gallery, in Philadelphia. For more information, visit [www.grossmcleaf.com](http://www.grossmcleaf.com).

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