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AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF Eddie Peters for the Master of Fine Arts in
Art: Painting presented May 12, 1992.

Title: Painter's Wilderness.

APPROVED BY THE MEMBERS OF THE THESIS COMMITTEE:

Craig Cheshire, Chair

Claire Kelly-Zimmers

Harold Gray, Jr.

Painter's Wilderness is a transition between painting strictly from
imagination to painting with the use of drawings and sketches to interpret and
authenticate an observation. The transition became an exploration of value patterns,
compositional shapes and color correspondence in building a technically successful
painting while allowing the piece to have its own life.

PAINTER'S WILDERNESS

by

EDDIE PETERS

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of**

**MASTER OF FINE ARTS
in
ART: PAINTING**

**Portland State University
1992**

TO THE OFFICE OF GRADUATE STUDIES:

The members of the Committee approve the thesis of Eddie Peters presented
May 12, 1992.

[Redacted Signature]

Craig Chesmore, Chair

[Redacted Signature]

Claire Kelly-Zimmers

[Redacted Signature]

Harold Gray, Jr.

APPROVED:

[Redacted Signature]

Barbara A. Sestak, Chair, Department of Art

[Redacted Signature]

C. William Savery, Interim Vice Provost for Graduate Studies and Research

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Just prior to arriving at P.S.U. I had been working with the figure as an isolated indoor subject with slight reference to the landscape as a view through a window or a picture on the wall. I wanted to integrate the figure with the out-of-doors. I was interested in "the consciousness of nature and its relationship to the individual." After a year of working at Portland State with landscape and figure integration I determined to include the animal as an element of my work. My approach to painting was not premeditated but was open to use any means necessary to pursue the content. I determined to use imaginary subject matter as well as photography, on site sketches and drawings in preparation for the finished painting. Previously I had worked extensively from imagination in developing work and felt inclined to use this process with the landscape element of my thesis work. However, with the figure I had always used a model and with the animal I had minimal experience other than occasionally suggesting birds in flight.

As my work progressed over the course of a year I became gradually more inclined to work from sketches and drawings done from direct observation. My own consciousness developed into a kind of rapport with my subject. The relationship between my observation and my drawing became one of reciprocation. As I indulged in the "consciousness" of the wilderness my drawing responded with more insight; as I worked harder with my drawing I opened more and more to my subject. I didn't initially realize how important direct observation would become to

my painting. I had always sought to develop my paintings from intuition and "spiritual insight". I now know these qualities are also part of the visual world.

CHAPTER II

NARRATIVE

Early in my thesis work, spring of 1991, I did two paintings which in retrospect I see as a polarization of attitude. One which I call *Spring* (Figure 1) is an example of a landscape developed entirely from imagination. I began randomly smearing cadmium red deep around the central area of the canvas, being particularly conscious of the surface quality. The canvas, having been prepared with rabbit skin glue and lead white paint, provided an excellent ground for exploring paint quality and flexibility. It was rich, smooth and inherently an expressive element of the painting. As a result I responded by smearing about thin glazes of pigment. This pleased me as the saturated pigment came alive and translucent on the bright lead white surface.

I was looking for imagery to emerge. Something suggestive of the birth of new plant life and consequently an atmosphere and freshness of spring. I knew the intense cadmium red would only work in a minimal way to support my intention. I established a palette of viridian, yellow ochre, deep violet, cadmium red light, cadmium yellow, and zinc white. I felt a variety of rich greens would essentially represent the fresh growth of spring. Turning the canvas to work from different sides, I randomly smeared various colors. After several sessions it developed a mass of patchwork and one large shape suggested a hill. This became the ground I needed. Direction established, my next concern was to develop a complimentary grouping of shapes which would support the idea of a landscape. I was less concerned with value patterns than with color relationships and calligraphic

movement. I discovered that by slightly graying the deep violet with yellow and tinting it with white, the mixture became a dynamic presence with the various greens developed with viridian, violet and white.

Generally speaking this painting was a good experiment with smearing and exploring color relationships in a new way. During the previous two terms I had been working much from observation and had felt tight while brushing paint. This *Spring* painting was a breakthrough from a tendency to color in the drawing elements of a work.

The other painting, which I call *Home* (Figure 2), was an observational work. I had noticed an attractive gray-pink house on top of a hillside behind a church during my walk to school. I noticed how the perspective changed as I came closer to the hill. I had always thought of foreshortening in terms of the figure or an object viewed at close range but not in terms of an entire segment of landscape. Over a period of a week or so I did several drawings being selective with a handmade, matboard viewfinder. I then went with my camera and took photographs. As it turned out, the drawings captured the quality of foreshortening, the drama of standing at the base of the hill, more effectively than the photographs. A first attempt at painting this scene was done on a small canvas about 16"x20". The painting became an obscure collection of flat shapes with no resemblance to the drawings although I had used a grid for the purpose of translating the scene. It was suggested that a strong vertical canvas might be a more effective format.

With a newly stretched canvas, approximately 16"x40", I began again with the use of my "on-site" drawings. I tried different segments of my selected drawing always using a rectangle which corresponded to the proportions of my canvas. After deciding on what I felt would be an appropriate composition, I sketched out the plan with charcoal. This placed the base of the house about 1/3 of the distance

from the top of the picture plane. From this level the hill descends down to the bottom of the painting and apparently beyond. My drawing had been a little vague in representing the shapes of the hillside. I broke the descent of the hill with curvilinear brush strokes suggesting gullies and mounds. This created an interesting variety of shapes while reinforcing the downward movement. I began applying thin glazes of pigment ranging from blues and greens to yellow-greens and ochres. I sketched out the house in pink, pale blue and gray. I had a problem with its perspective and from a photograph determined I was drawing it at eye level rather than from a low perspective. Lowering the roof line solved the problem.

The base of the hill opened to the bottom of the painting. After some consideration I decided to use an image of a wolf, drawn from a photograph taken at the Washington Park Zoo, to stop the viewer's gaze from wandering out of the composition. With very thin yellow ochre I sketched out the image within a half oval containing the base of the picture plane. I simply applied gray within the drawing of the wolf and a cool pale purple in the oval which contrasted the warm hillside. This completed the composition and created an interesting psychological parallel between the house and the wolf's bed.

A white flowered tree stood before the house. I literally painted it white as that was how it appeared to me. This, along with a stroke of cadmium red across one side of its top and a few bold dark viridian variations suggesting trees and branches, tended to bring alive the otherwise overly subtle value pattern.

I had several significant realizations while working on this painting. First was the power and simplicity with which drawing can complement large areas of paint. Second was a vague notion of what role compositional shapes can play in a painting. As the suggestion of a line or plane of one shape becomes correspondent with other lines and planes in another shape the picture space assumes a quality of

movement or rhythm. I began to recognize the potential of these compositional shapes for establishing a dynamic integration of the subject.

I experienced a freedom of color expression which had been elusive thus far in my graduate work. The white tree and red stroke of paint actually belonged together in mutual support and enhanced the entire palette of the painting. These discoveries were to inspire me along into the next few canvases. They gradually became an inherent quality of my technique.

With *Spring* and *Home* I made progress with my painting skills. Still I was unaware of a polarized attitude in my work. One was the painterly Venetian approach with its looser definition of form, a more playful distribution of color and a poetic sense of expression all of which I found exuberant. The other was the Florentine approach with its strong linear definitions and local color emphasis. As I became more in touch with my subject matter these two qualities would begin to complement one another.

There is a brown bear at the Washington Park Zoo which I became fond of watching. Although aware of "visitors" this bear, never-the-less, demonstrated an unself-conscious curiosity and playfulness with its contrived environment. It would become forgetful of its situation and display its natural instincts. In the caged yard there are several old trees, some lying on their sides or leaning against a concrete hillside. One is a large, hollow base of a tree standing upright. On one occasion I watched the bear climb this stump of a tree and reach its arm deep into an opening midway up its side. The bear transformed. It was as if some genetic memory had triggered a taste for wild honey. This significant gesture became the basis for a relatively large painting (approx. 4'x5') begun in May of 1991. From a photograph taken with a telephoto lens which flattened the subject and moved the view fairly close, I laid out a simple charcoal sketch on the canvas. I liked the idea of hugging

the tree close to the left edge of the picture plane which placed the bear to the left of center and opened the right side of the picture space for imaginary development of the subject's circumstances. My two-fold intention was to develop a sensitivity about the bear's relationship with its environment while also developing a dynamic, readable value pattern.

As my image was drawn from an eye level perspective, I placed the bear above center to allow for developing a mountainous background with sky and leave space for a tilted perspective of a hill below. The idea of a tilted foreground perspective became more obvious and important in later work, although its possibilities were played with in *Home* and *Bear* (Figure 3) and my next painting, *Cougar* (Figure 4), I began developing the composition by dividing the background space into a group of mountains with a river curving through just below mid-canvas to disappear behind the tree at the level of the bear's legs. As I developed my local color in the mountains from viridian, cadmium yellow and ochre, I pulled some ochre from the bank of the stream and essentially established a shape which I thought of as a sandy shore. This created more variety in the landscape shapes, improving the overall reading of the composition. The change of the river to a lake for the sake of the whole painting was a significant decision in this work. It was a development toward liberating the drawing element to help integrate my polarized attitude. No longer did I think of the confined forms of the drawing as absolute but instead I began to understand them in terms of their plastic potential.

In following through with this painting I continued to explore the potential of compositional shapes. By pulling the direction of the farthest mountain side through the bears shoulders to curve around the side of the tree and continue along the bottom of the right side of the canvas, the bear becomes contained within

another shape creating a more intimate presence. This large compositional shape also occupies the central portion of the picture space, while corresponding through color distribution and line movement with other shapes and the value pattern to form a more thorough integration of content.

I had discovered that after establishing local color, I could smear small quantities of it into other areas of the picture space as I sensed the need for it. This practice creates a harmonious atmosphere and gives the composition a quality of correspondence which helps hold it together visually and psychologically. These gestures are mostly random and often become calligraphic in character. Having established the mountains as a variety of greens ranging from a dark cool to a light warm, I determined the figures local color from cadmium red light, ochre and deep purple for browning the orange. I continued into the sky with the violet, mixed with a little viridian and some ochre to slightly gray the hue. This created an obvious temperature difference between the bear and surroundings.

As I mix fairly small quantities at a time, each mixture is slightly different causing interesting variations of pigment. Generally I establish a local color order through the entire picture, then begin developing value patterns and atmosphere continuing to work the entire picture space simultaneously.

As this painting gave me a new perspective on the possibilities of combining the animal with the landscape, I was turning over another idea in my mind. I needed to get out into the wilderness, to explore and experience the circumstances of wildlife. It had been two years since I camped on Mt. Ranier with a friend for a week. Even then it was a public camp site and not exactly what you would call experiencing the wild. I had always wanted to go it alone, yet some vague fear had always prevented me from following through. Summer was here. I went to work

painting apartment buildings. A venture into the wilderness was lurking within my mind as necessary to continue developing my thesis work.

In the meantime I had what some people refer to as a power dream. I had climbed to the top of a mountain and straddled it as if it were alive. Below were valleys and streams. As I climbed down from the summit to a plateau, I stopped, leaned over a knoll and looked into the sky. There was an odd shaped canopy. Under it was an obscure skeleton. As I watched, the skeleton descended to the mountain turning into a large cat as it touched earth. This cat walked toward me and as it neared I held up the back of my hand. It pushed the side of its head against my hand, its fur thick. I later determined this cat to be a cougar and decided to interpret the dream with a painting.

I wanted to portray the cat in such a way as not to be obvious at first glance. I intended to establish an interesting composition which would pull the eye about until it might finally become startled by the confrontation with the cougar. Feeling successful with the bear painting, I liked the idea of pulling the cat form far to the left of the picture space and developing a mountainscape with which it could co-exist. Working with images from a book on mammals of the Pacific Northwest, I decided on the posture of the cougar and drew it into place, simultaneously sketching organic forms to suggest mountains and valleys. I drew a crude shape in the sky to represent the canopy and skeleton forms from the dream.

My initial palette consisted of ultramarine blue, cadmium red deep, cadmium yellow medium, yellow ochre and white. I developed most of my color scheme in a very light value range. The local colors were a subtle contrast of warm and cool grays. In effect the linear qualities of the painting gave it form. It was a gray painting with calligraphic drawing and it told the story of a strong dream. I didn't know what more to do with it. It was August and I set it aside.

I had information on several trails into the Columbia Gorge Wilderness and made arrangements to be dropped at the trail head of Eagle Creek on a Monday afternoon. I would spend a week packing in, setting up camp and absorbing all I could about the way of the wilderness. This involved shooting film, basking in the hot afternoon sun while sitting on a partially submerged log with my bare feet in the water, crayfish nibbling at my heels, sketching with pencils, pens and stick & ink, fly fishing with an old rod and reel which I found at a car wash, skinny dipping in the deep, cool lake as fish leaped splashing and ducks flew just above the surface and of course breathing the fresh air.

One afternoon I climbed a trail behind Wahtum Lake which was marked Mt. Chinidere. After about an hour I emerged from the cool Douglas Firs, Hemlocks and Northern Pines onto a rocky trail which quickly warmed as it left the trees behind. There were a few small, scrubby pines about and much rough brush. I could see a bare mound above and in the distance many ranges of mountains. I had an eerie sensation that I would meet a cougar on this mound. I was truly excited as I rounded the last fifty yards approaching the summit. It felt so much like my dream. An afternoon crescent moon hung in the sky as the canopy and skeleton of my dream. As my view rose above the last of the hill, there beside a large rock overlooking a great valley of trees and streams was a young couple having a snack.

I don't think cats hang out in the August afternoon sun. I was at once disappointed and relieved. I had been convinced I would find a cougar there. I wandered a ways over the mound and sat sketching for some time while still being awe struck with the beauty of it all. There was Mt. Hood standing above the many peaks and valleys between us. Far, far below I could see this small beautiful deep, dark lake. I could discern approximately where my camp would be. Maybe there was a cougar drinking from the lake at this moment.

During this week of indulgence in the wild my drawing became simpler and more spontaneous. I would sit by the shore of the lake with sticks, India ink and sketch book. I might select a scene through my viewfinder and study it for a moment, then with full presence explore the imagery on paper with ink dipped sticks. There was something intimate about this practice in the wild.

On returning to Portland I felt more confident about the subject of my thesis. Still, a way to express the experience eluded me. It wasn't something which could be blatantly strung up for display and explained with a given set of principles. It could not be delineated. If the wilderness was to be expressed in painting terms at all, it would have to be through experience and respect.

I played at my cougar painting off and on, attempting to finish it. I didn't know what was causing my blind spot but it was persistent and frustrating. In retrospect I believe the distance between my imagination and the "real" experience was too great for me to bridge at the time. I was searching for a sense of authenticity in my painting to recall my trip. The painting had been conceived from imagination. My frustration was caused by my inability to paint authenticity into it.

One evening during my visit into the Wilderness, while leaning on a large, dry fallen tree overlooking Wahtum Lake, I had dipped a sharpened stick into India ink and sketched freely as I studied the far shore and its relationship to the shore on which I stood. Now, in my studio, I randomly began a painting from this stick and ink drawing. For several weeks I had struggled with *Cougar*. I began this new painting for the sake of escaping my frustration with *Cougar*. *Wahtum* (Figure 5) became a playful piece intended to loosen my attitude. Then I realized something interesting was happening with this painting. It was too representational for my taste, yet, within its context there emerged a hint of a lyrical atmosphere. This was

appealing and with some effort the value patterns, color relationships and compositional harmony came together. This was the impetus I needed to continue my thesis work. I felt like a painter again and decided to work on another animal painting.

The *Foal* (Figure 6) painting was developed from a photograph in a National Geographic magazine published in 1959. In 1977 I did a painting for my two year old daughter from this photograph. It was on masonite with acrylic paint. The newborn was painted, simply postured, in a meadow surrounded by oat grass. When I rediscovered the magazine again last spring I at once felt an urge to develop the subject again. The landscape is entirely imaginary and drawn from memories of the Columbia River Gorge. My primary intention was to create an interesting arrangement of value patterns, then express the innocence and curiosity of the foal. I developed a volcano in the mountain range to signify Mt. Hood and arbitrarily painted a vertical pole through the left 1/3 of the picture plane. The pole proved to be a distraction. After many hours of painting, attempting to integrate the pole, it became clear that it wasn't going to work in the composition. I painted over it.

Technically I began this painting with washes or glazes of paint, generally separating large shapes which I had drawn in lightly with very thin paint. I then made exploratory efforts to establish a readable value pattern among the larger shapes, these being the sky, hills, gorge cliffs, river and foreground. With the exception of the foal, I developed the imagery of the painting from my imagination. Generally the color and value patterns worked, yet as with *Cougar* something was askew. In retrospect, it was missing the direct experience translated onto the canvas. I sought an authenticity which I couldn't achieve from imagination in my studio. I finished the foal painting by dealing with its formal elements.

Recalling the experience of painting *Wahnum* I looked through my notes from the wilderness. There I found another stick and ink drawing which I thought might work as a composition for another playful painting exercise. It was another view of the lake, *Wahnum 2* (Figure 7). I sketched it out with charcoal. The development of the value patterns was becoming more natural although it still required a strong conscious effort. I integrated several boughs entering the picture plane from the top and sides with the mid-ground trees. This created several compositional shapes which gave the painting a sense of depth and intimacy. It made the picture space more immediate and coherent as an empathetic experience. The so-called "real" experience was the show, the sketches were the notes from the wilderness and the painting became the story of the experience.

A friend had invited me to visit a part of the Columbia Gorge where she had lived as a child and one early Sunday morning we cheerfully headed out highway so and so, complete with sketchbook, watercolor paper, paint and brushes, fruit, crackers and cheese. It promised to be a gorgeous day as the fog was already lifting and coolly drifting about the cliffs as the sun stretched far from the edge of the earth. We turned from the highway to cross the Bridge of the Gods into Stevenson, Wa. and head north up into the Cascades beyond Carson, into the state forest. We slowly approached an area called Hemlock Lake. As we arrived the trees seemed to dance. We walked along the dirt road sensing the tense response of the wildlife to our presence. The ducks, fussing, splashed across the lake. Smaller birds hopped about, swooping through the brush as we sought our spot. The dragonflies danced about in large circles hovering occasionally to assess the newcomers. We settled on a picnic table ten yards from the shore.

During the course of the next few hours I sketched and did a watercolor study of the woods along the lake shore. We snacked, walked and relaxed into the

mood of the area. We were gradually tolerated without fuss from the local wildlife inhabitants. Late in the afternoon I walked through the woods along the lake and turned away onto a trail. As I entered abruptly from the brush I was startled by the whoosh, whoosh, whoosh of two powerful sets of wings swooping from the trail high into a hemlock above. In three swoops these two huge raven had lighted far above and were watching me. The feeling I had was as if I had entered into a secret family ritual. I was transfixed for some time as the three of us shared consciousness. The raven talked back and forth with an incredible variety of language, from a guttural clicking sound to a more elongated voice whose articulation was precise, intelligent and barely eluded my comprehension. I wanted to take back to the studio something which would convey my sense of awe.

I hadn't sketched the raven. Yet my friend was completely at home in this part of the Cascades from which she came. Back in Portland I drew her as representative of the wildlife consciousness of her childhood sanctuary, Hemlock Lake. The painting, which I call *Auspice* (Figure 8), as in reading the birds, became a synthesis of sketches from the lake, the watercolor and a drawing I did of Sarah in her Portland home. With some forethought these elements came together smoothly and quickly to represent much of the feeling I had experienced at the lake. My understanding of value pattern, compositional shapes and color harmony were realized effortlessly in this work. I felt like a painter.

I was ready to pursue another painting working from on-site sketches. Responding to Stefin McCargar, who hikes with her shaggy Newfoundland through McCleay Park, I decided to explore the area with a sketchbook, looking for something more immediately accessible than the Columbia Gorge Wilderness. After descending the steps from the east end of the steel bridge on NW Thurman, I followed the asphalt trail into the woods. There the pavement stopped. The trail

became dirt which this day was wet with leaves and fine mist. The woods smelled rich and earthy. They felt comfortable. To the left was a small stream strewn with rocks and babbling away in the cool morning. I could see a bridge a hundred yards away which carried the trail across to the far bank. I stopped, moved to the side of the trail and looked through my viewfinder. I knew I wanted a composition which emphasized an intimate subject so I settled the base of the opening close in towards my feet. This raised the horizon line near the top of the picture plane cutting the view of the immediate trees close to the ground. This effect kept the subject close at hand.

I did a small quick pencil sketch. This canvas was my largest to date and I had been told a small sketch would translate well to a larger canvas. A small sketch eliminates unnecessary details and gets directly to the basics of design and composition. After comparing the proportions of the drawing to the canvas and making the necessary adjustments, I sketched in the composition with charcoal. My painting process had changed as my paintings became larger. The glazing which I used as an underpainting became more vigorous and expressive. I was using slightly larger brushes to lay out the paint. My immediate goal was to get paint over the entire canvas, with distinct values while keeping the pigment pure. I find this procedure is valuable in beginning a work as it produces an immediate effect from which to discover the painting's life or direction.

At the risk of being somewhat corny or trivial I decided to impose a group of dancers into the picture space as a celebration of nature's consciousness. The theme, as ancient as joy itself, is much at the heart of life. By juxtaposing the trees and figures I attempted to represent a harmonious movement through *Dancers* (Figure 9) as if the trees were a lively part of the dance supporting the idea of the human being as a part of the consciousness of the earth. I invented the three

smallest figures in the background, took the jazz dancer in the midground from a photograph and used a model for the foreground figure. Interestingly, the foreground figure integrated more readily with the landscape which also had been translated from sketches.

Although *Dancers* came together without much difficulty I decided to back away from the figures and approach another painting simply as a landscape. I climbed the wildwood trail in McLeay Park looking for a subject. On a hillside I looked out over a ravine with Balch Creek streaming down. I noticed how my perspective could shift from looking almost straight down on the stream, upward to a vanishing point on the imaginary horizon line. With my viewfinder I selected what I felt was an optimum composition to represent this quality of a tilted perspective. Although the quality I sought was not adequately translated into a two-dimensional equivalent, the painting, *Balch Creek* (Figure 10), came together quickly and was successful in its subtle value pattern and contrast of warm and cool colors.

I decided to do another study in McCleay Park. I developed another drawing with a tilted perspective. This time I sketched from directly beside the stream. Sitting on a cold damp rock hovering just above the stream, I became mesmerized by the rhythm of the water pushing its way through an infinity of ancient stones, each an artifact of nature, a rune, a haiku. I returned several times until I distilled the structure which adequately represented the perspective I sought. The sketch translated well onto canvas. The painting developed more slowly than the previous work as I became engrossed with representing the quality of the water. I took time for a smaller painting attempting to clearly show the direction of the water flow.

Again I returned to the creek to draw its movement. The direct experience with the stream gave me the notes I needed to authenticate the painting, *Balkh Creek 2* (Figure 11).

Figure 1. *Spring.* (Oil/canvas, 30"x40".)

Figure 2. *Home.* (Oil/canvas, 29"x46".)

Figure 3. *Bear.* (Oil/canvas, 44"x50.)

Figure 4. *Cougar.* (Oil/canvas, 48"x47".)

Figure 5. *Wahltum*. (Oil/canvas, 31"x34".)

Figure 6. *Foal.* (Oil/canvas, 44'x33".)

Figure 7. *Wahtum 2.* (Oil/canvas, 33"x40".)

Figure 8. *Auspice.* (Oil/canvas, 45"x53".)

Figure 9. *Dancers.* (Oil/canvas, 72"x60".)

Figure 10. *Balch Creek.* (Oil/canvas, 60"x70".)

Figure 11. *Balch Creek 2.* (Oil/linen, 33"x46".)

CHAPTER III

CONCLUSION

As I would wander through McCleay Park, crossing Balch Creek, day after day, in the cool, sunlit afternoons or in the cold, early morning as drizzle spattered my face and softened the corners of my sketchbook, I slowly, gradually awakened to a reciprocal process. The more time I spent there, wandering, breathing the earth and stream and wood, observing, the way the vines hang like rope, the crossing and gesturing of the myriad branches, stems and twigs, the arrangement of different forms scattered about (fern, ivy, rocks, patches of fallen leaves), small winding vines or roots, dead sticks, moss, brambles and bushes folded for winter holding a canopy of brown leaves, the freer my drawings became. As my consciousness merged with the woods my drawing became more spontaneous and the many drawings and sketches done there captured a sense of authenticity which had been lacking earlier while trying to invent my experience. The intimacy of experience translated through sketches into paintings, which had worked for me on an unconscious level as I wandered into my Wahtum Lake paintings, has become a part of my conscious mind.

Along with my deepened understanding of allowing a painting to have its own life, the use of value patterns, compositional shapes and color correspondence to build a technically successful painting, my breakthrough of consciousness into an empathetic visual experience in the wilderness has become the most significant, aesthetic realization of my thesis year; a respect to the earth and a trust in direct

experience with her, whether wandering in the Columbia Gorge Wilderness or sitting on the summit of Mt. Shasta listening to the sound of the moon echoing off the glaciers.