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Contemporary Master

Joseph
Raffael

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Joseph Raffael's luminous, large-scale works in watercolor offer passage to life's many possibilities.

The Creative Instant

■ Interview by Sarah A. Strickley

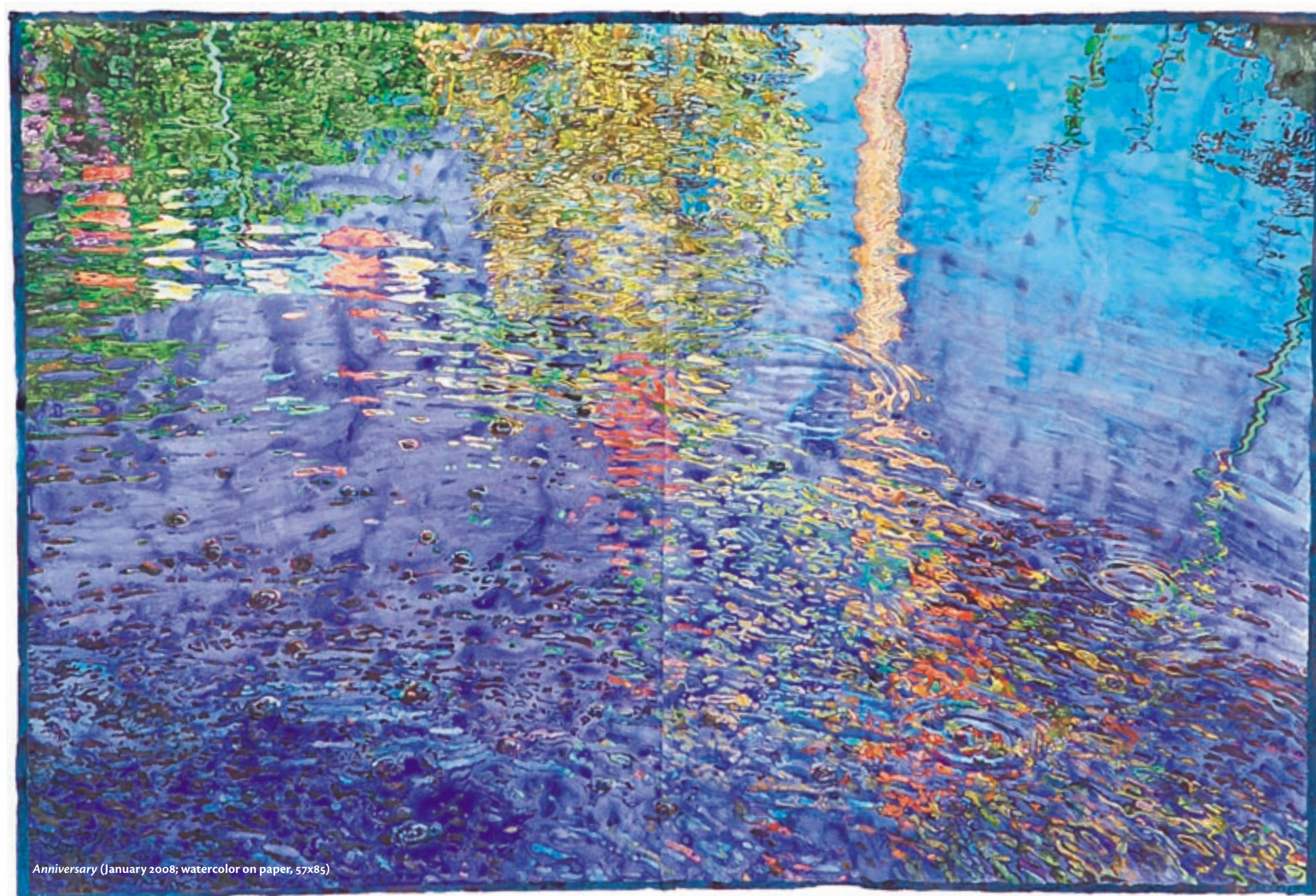
One afternoon last September, Joseph Raffael and his wife, Lannis, took in a film in Paris. A bit of recorded music was playing before the show and, curious to know what it was, Raffael left the darkened room and came upon a man who turned out to be the projectionist. The artist then found himself ascending a spiral staircase into the projection room, where he searched for the song's title with his newfound acquaintance. "You probably never thought you'd find yourself here, did you?" asked the projectionist, and indeed Raffael hadn't.

For some, the visit to the hallowed and mysterious space of the projectionist's room might have passed as a unique, but ultimately insignificant event. For Raffael, it was a revelation. It didn't escape his notice that he might be described as a projectionist himself—he does a good deal of work in a darkened room, projecting images on watercolor paper as he draws them—but more important to him was his sense that the chance encounter encapsulated his understanding of artistic expression. "I never in the world could have imagined this event prior to its moment unfolding. I believe that's the way we experience the creative instant."

For more than 20 years, Raffael and his wife have lived in a small house on the Mediterranean. Both the abundant gardens outside and the image-adorned walls inside provide Raffael the subjects for his phenomenal, large-scale watercolors. There is a rawness, a roughness, in recent years, to the abstract spaces from which the subjects of the paintings emerge. Eight watercolors comprise the exhibition that will tour through December 2009, and all of them were completed last year. I recently had the great fortune of exploring the stories behind these pictures.

Shall we begin with the beginning? *Anniversary* takes us to the water. What's this painting's story? Where did it begin? This painting's story is a simple one: It's an image of our

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Anniversary (January 2008; watercolor on paper, 57x85)



A Passage (at left, top; March 2008; watercolor on paper, 58½x82) and *Muriel's Vase: Autumn* (at left, bottom; May 2008; watercolor on paper, 60½x89)

pond. I was struck by a particular photo taken of it after I'd seen the blues of the sky reflected in the pond from the studio window. The title refers to my wedding anniversary with Lannis. The pond seemed like a perfect symbol—solid and ephemeral at the same time, always in motion, changing and filled with reflections.

Your work really is your life and your life really is your work—the story behind *Anniversary* both confirms and expounds upon that idea. According to the chronology, *A Passage* is next. I imagine coming around a corner and walking into the immense sense—or scent—of these blooms.

I see *A Passage* as a giant breakthrough painting for me: spring roses, spring painting, a painting experience that was particularly ebullient and filled with plastic, painterly surprises. It was an initiatory kind of early Mediterranean spring celebration.

***Muriel's Vase: Autumn* is one of my favorites. I enjoy the challenges the abstract shapes in the background present, the suggestions of shapes and surfaces. The vase seems very much like an offering—from one world to another, perhaps. Do the flowers come from your gardens? Were they a gift?**

A friend of ours who lived down the road—an English woman named Muriel—died a couple of years ago. Afterwards, Lannis was offered the possibility of choosing a few things that Muriel had left in the house. The vase was one of the things she chose. It had been in my studio for a while, and I'd taken some bouquet photos using it as receptacle. I love the nature scene on the vase and the sturdy grace of its shimmering, opalescent form. In time, the idea came to do a four-season painting group with different flowers from our garden representing each of the seasons.

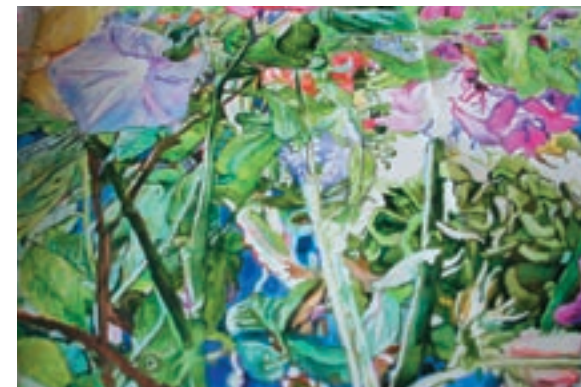
I'd already done the first in late 2007. That one had a bit of my artist's table in it—colors, splashes, abstract traces and the buildup of years of work. When I got to the autumn piece, the form turned out to be horizontal. As I worked on the free-form painting around the vase on the enlarged photo's slippery photographic paper, it became clear that the table wasn't right. The blues just kept moving, covering over and obliterating the table. Obviously, they wanted to wrap themselves all the way around the vase (See *Muriel's Vase: Autumn* in progress at right).

This was the first time I found myself taking the foundation away from the central structure. What



Work in progress: *Muriel's Vase: Autumn*

Joseph Raffael's work often begins in his gardens, where he finds—and photographs—many of the subjects of his paintings. *Muriel's Vase: Autumn* combines that inspiration with a beautiful vase the artist's wife chanced to possess. The artist photographed the arrangement in his studio, enlarged the photo and then painted with watercolor directly on the slippery photography paper, working out compositional problems along the way. Raffael then projected the painted image onto his painting surface and sketched in the composition with pencil. From there, he moved the surface to his artist's table, where he painstakingly rendered the final painting, keeping the painted, enlarged photo nearby for reference. He also displayed the original photo on a monitor for reference and inspiration.





could it rest on? What could I rest on? I went ahead. I had no choice. It turns out, of course, that this is what makes the painting, with all of its abstract forms and vitality, its integrity, its otherness and its unexpected pictorial reality.

Even though I feel the vase paintings are an homage to someone who's no longer here, I find the idea of "offering" succinct and expressive of an ancient rite, which I do believe and feel I was respectfully following. I suppose works of art are often offerings to a higher mystery, directed towards that which has not been consciously known. Once one has come upon it, it's immediately recognized as real—the numinosity that transports one to a knowing beyond all understanding.

***Blossoming* is a celebratory painting—at least to me. The abstracted elements in the background pick up shape and character, coming further into being as they near the foreground, where the blossoms open as clarified forms on the surface. Was this a revelatory experience for you, as well?** *Blossoming* is from a cherry tree—a volunteer—at the bottom of our garden. This image hung on my wall as a photo for at least a year. I loved the blue in a painting of a cherry tree that I'd completed in 2006 and was reluctant to paint *Blossoming* because its colors in that time period were definitely less appealing to me. A dear and

trusted friend came into the studio one day, pointed a finger at the *Blossoming* photo, nodded, winked and smiled. That did it. I painted it.

With all of my paintings, the act of painting—the way the paints, the colors and the forms merge into one another and the way each day alchemizes before my eyes and fingers while painting—comes under the heading of "revelatory experience" for me.

Was your volunteer for *Blossoms and Sky* one and the same?

In fact, in the garden there are a few volunteers, all in a row.

The title of your next painting in the chronology, *Summer's Dream of Spring*, intrigues me. I love the idea of one season thinking of another. What attracted you to these blooms and led you to this painting?

Actually, the blooms attracted me, as a bee might be attracted or a gardener. Spring is a joy. It usually comes early here, in late February or so, and, of course the rhododendrons are usually among the first to bloom, along with the peonies. I take many photos throughout the year, but after winter's quiet garden time, the spring bursts forth and I rush out with camera as the spring revelations surprise me. I painted the image in



Take a look at Raffael's diaries at www.artistsnetwork.com/raffael-painting-diaries.

Blossoming (at left; June 2008; watercolor on paper, 60x90), *Blossoms and Sky* (below; August 2008; watercolor on paper, 54½x89½) and *Summer's Dream of Spring* (at bottom; early October 2008; watercolor on paper, 60½x89)



summer, thus the title. Pictorially, the spread of these large-scale flowers plus the restricted, yet epiphanic, gorgeous colors seem unique in the work.

We find the outdoors moving indoors with *Interior Light* and *Studio Bouquet*. One of the things I enjoy about your interiors is the reference they often make to the studio and to the painting life. We find paintings within both paintings—an interplay that honors every level of the process, from blooms in the garden, to brush and beyond. What qualities in a still life setup attract you?

Interior Light as a title is a play on the words *interior* and *light*. In the studio interior, where the eventual image was photographed, there was a photo hand-painted with watercolor behind the flowers in the vase. Its presence could be called an accident—just me not noticing



Meet Joseph Raffael

Raffael launched his first exhibition in 1963 and has since exhibited often and widely. He's been the recipient of many awards and prizes and was the subject of *Reflections of Nature* by Donald Kuspit and Amei Wallach (Abbeville Press, 1998). His work can be seen in many of the nation's finest museums, as well as the Nancy Hoffman Gallery in New York (www.nancyhoffmangallery.com), where his solo exhibition will run in November and December of 2009. The exhibition will also visit the Arvada Art Center in Denver, Colorado; the Fort Collins Museum in Fort Collins, Colorado; and the Butler Institute of Art in Youngstown, Ohio. Visit www.josephraffael.com for more details and to see videos of the artist at work, plus a gallery of works in progress. Raffael is pictured here with his wife, Lannis, in front of *Solstice* (watercolor, 59x87).

Interior Light (at right; late October 2008; watercolor on paper, 57½x86) and *Studio Bouquet* (opposite page, bottom; November 2008; watercolor on paper, 54x84)

the photo in the background as I concentrated on the bouquet—but, as Lannis and I like to say, there are no accidents. There also turns out to be a peek of the exterior's greenery and the tool shed's orange roof outside.

The next painting, *Studio Bouquet*, goes whole hog with the three works on the wall. They were there on their own. I didn't place them there for the photo. In this painting, I also get to honor one of my spiritual mentors, Vincent van Gogh (see upper right). These paintings are about art and being an artist.

The thought crossed my mind today that whatever I'm saying to you is very limiting because the beauty in the art experience is how each viewer gets to have her or his own experience. No two people ever see the same painting, which makes me wonder if one painting ever really exists. I hear it's the same thing in all human experience of perception—no two people see anything alike.

What are the qualities in a still life that attract me? I can say what qualities or elements in a potential painting attract me: I want to make the image as visually and psychically diverse and rich as every moment of life is.

You've said that painting is primarily color. This strikes me as a dynamic lens through which to view these eight paintings. Shifting to another of the senses—I wonder if each painting sounds entirely different to you or if they're all part of the same conversation?

Each painting is like a different person I've gotten to know really well over a relatively short period of time through the minute-by-minute revelations of their characters, personalities and beings as they're revealed. They're different entities, just like people. So, it's not only sound, but the whole shtick: sound, sight, scale and specifics. They're beings who have emerged out of nowhere in a very real sense, except of course the "nowhere" is everywhere and everything. ⌘

