

JOSEPH RAFFAEL



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Departures & Destinations

Essay by Christopher Finch

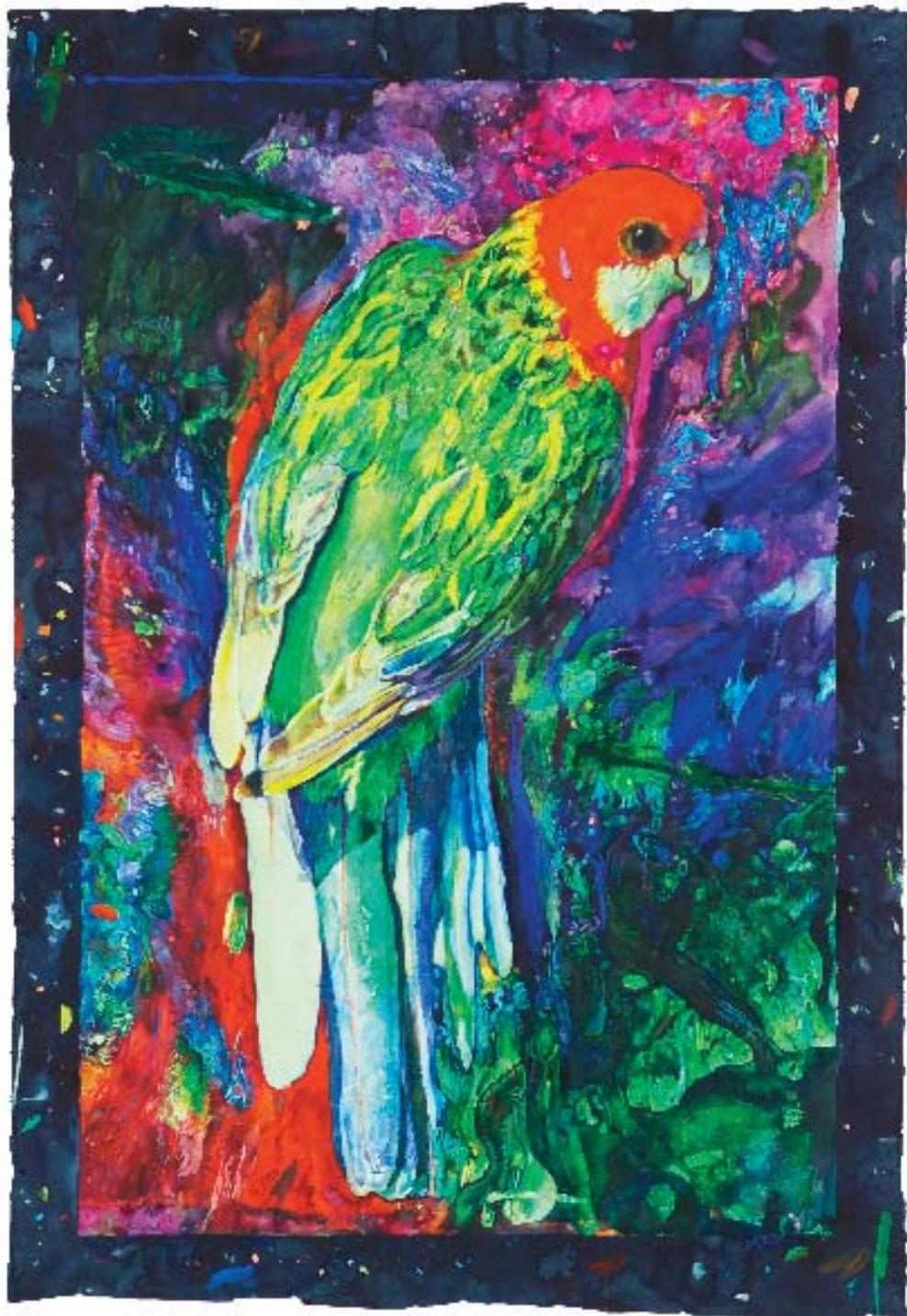
An Interview with Joseph Raffael

Tricia and Thad Scott

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opposite page: *Herald* 2006 watercolor on paper 66 x 44 3/4 inches





Departures & Destinations

There are a number of ways of responding to the voluptuous iconography of Joseph Raffael's recent watercolors. To begin with the most obvious, the seductive glimpses they provide of an Arcadian world, their lush palette, and their sheer exuberance, make them a rich source of immediate, hedonistic delight. Hedonism can be selfish or generous, of course - as in the choice between drinking a bottle of fine claret in solitude, or sharing it with friends - and in Raffael's case the generosity is all-enveloping. His paintings can be seen as a way of sharing the joy of the world that he and his wife, Lannis, have created for themselves.

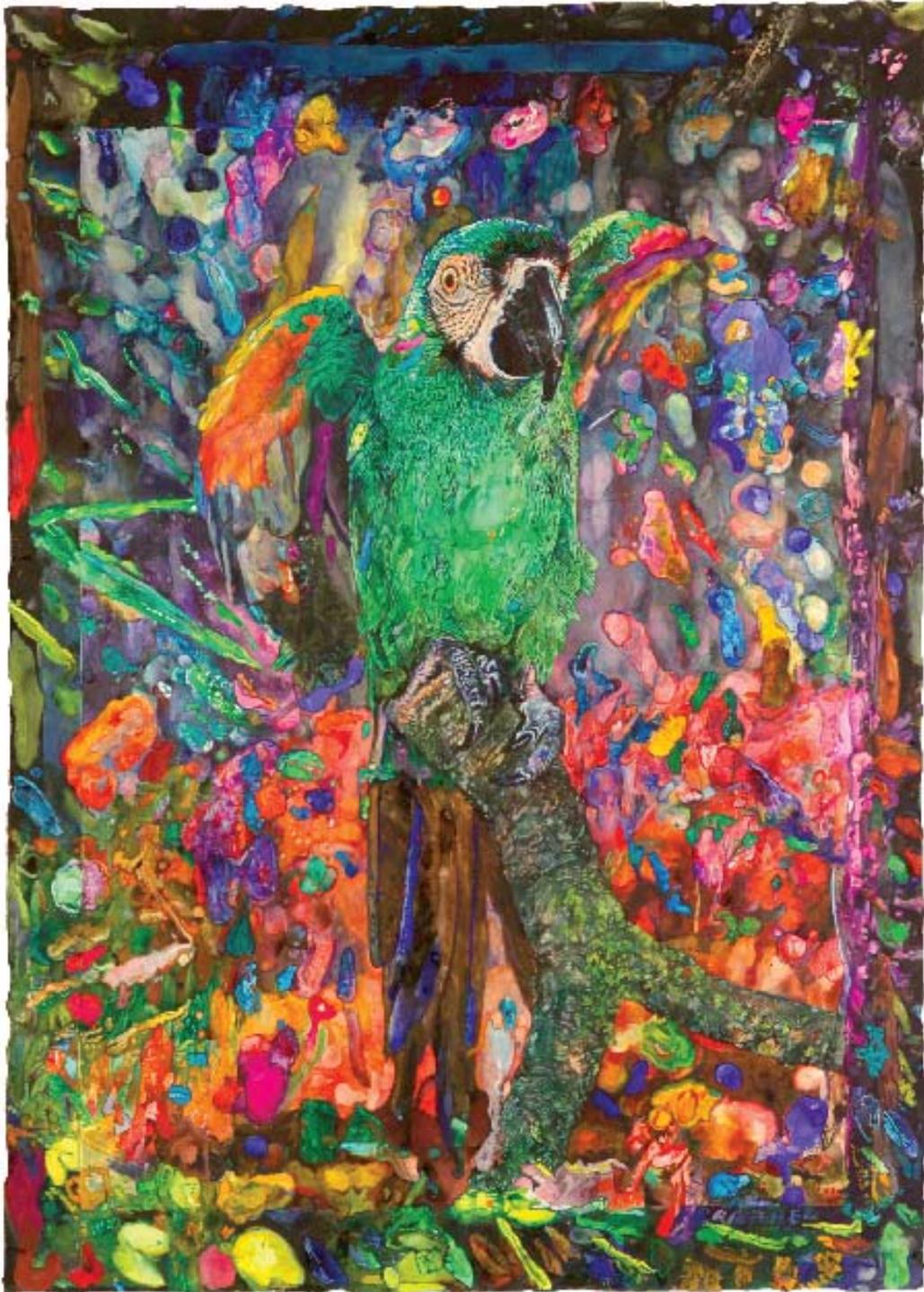
For an artist in any medium, sharing is about the conscious act of communication: in Raffael's case, by setting down on paper or canvas something that will convey pleasure. To leave it at that though is far from adequate since there is much more to these paintings than immediately meets the eye. To spend any length of time in front of them is to begin to understand that what is being shared transcends the immediate retinal satisfactions they provide.

Raffael makes paintings that have surfaces as rich as those of Persian miniatures, and it is perhaps not beside the point that - like many of those miniatures - his imagery frequently draws upon the flora and fauna of the garden, seen as an enclosed refuge from the world at large, but also as something more. The word "paradise" derives from the Persian "pairidaiza" meaning a walled

garden, conceived of as a terrestrial paradigm for the Eden promised for the afterlife. The Raffaels' garden in Antibes does not display the geometrical formalism we associate with the Persian model, but it does share the sense of being an earthly paradise, and as such it is a source of imagery capable of directing the viewer towards a tantalizing vision of a higher reality. In an autobiographical statement, Raffael has spoken of being "inspired by the ancient view of art-making as a spiritual activity."

As glimpsed in these paintings, the Raffaels' garden (the role played by Lannis in its creation must be stressed) is a living tapestry of blossoming trees that provide perches for exotic birds, and shady paths where cats prowl and preen, the whole centered on a quiet body of water (an element crucial to the Persian earthly paradise) where carp ripple the surface that catches sunlight slanting from the Mediterranean. It is the embodiment of something that approaches the Ideal, carefully constructed from fragments of reality which are, in a sense, snapshots of this paradisiacal environment.

Raffael works from his own photographs, taken with a digital camera that allows him to respond with the immediacy of intuition to whatever catches his eye. Sometimes he paints directly onto prints made from these photographs, producing hybrid images - part paint, part pixels - in which electronic imaging provides the support for improvisatory brushwork that transforms what the lens has recorded into something quite new. These altered photographs (often of considerable interest in themselves) do not so much

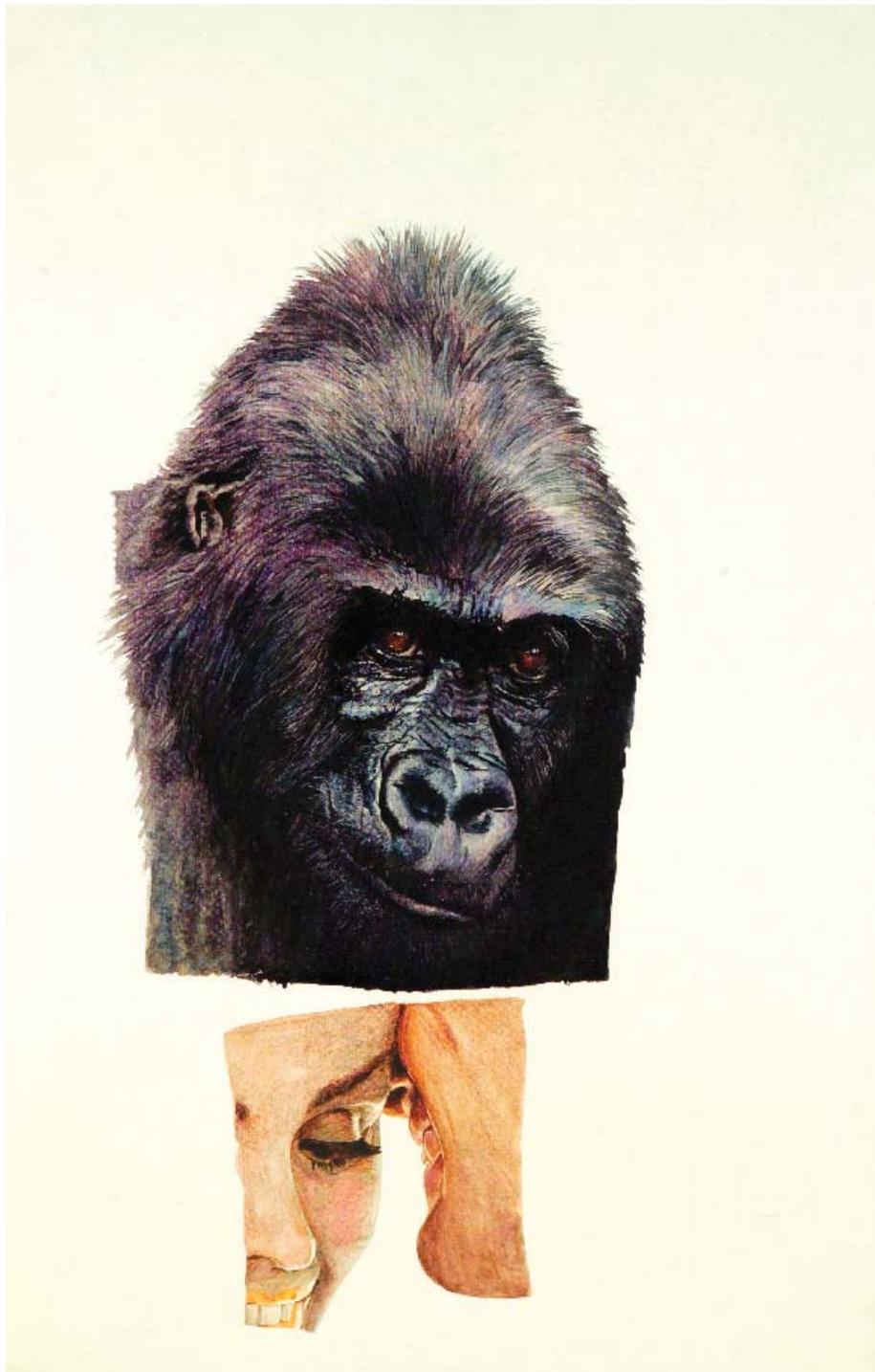


function as simple studies, but rather provide a form of pictorial exercise that has, I believe, helped enable Raffael to achieve, in his recent work, an interplay between representation and sheer painterly invention that has produced especially rich results.

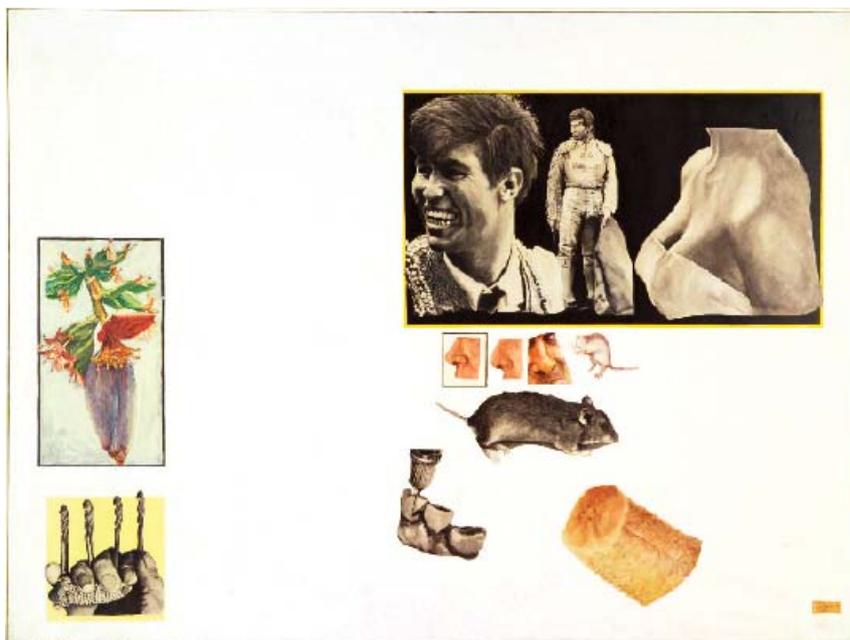
What is easy to miss, as one absorbs the delights of these paintings, is the overlooked fact that Joseph Raffael is very much a painter of his generation. Because he turned his back on the New York art world early in his career, he has not been subject to art-historical cataloguing and infighting. There has been a major benefit to this in that he has been able to pursue his own vision without concerning himself with the umpiring calls made by critics, curators and academics. At this point in his career, however, it can only enhance our appreciation of his work to consider where it stands in relation to that of his contemporaries, not with a view to making one-on-one comparisons with the achievements of other individuals - which are so varied as to render any such exercise pointless - but



Renaissance 2007 watercolor on paper 63 x 44 1/2 inches



Untitled (Gorilla with faces) 1966 oil on canvas 41 x 27 inches



rather from the perspective of appreciating the journey he has made, and understanding where it began. How, if at all, do the pictorial skills he has arrived at relate to the art context in which he found himself at the outset of his career, and to the values and ambitions that prevailed back then?

We are speaking of the 1960s, a daunting time to have been launching a career as a painter of representational images. The whole concept of art, and of painting in particular, was being re-invented. In the previous decade, the Abstract Expressionists - the message of their paintings driven home by the agenda of their champion Clement Greenberg - had cast the future of figuration, as an activity for serious artists, into doubt. They had been followed by color field painters like Morris Louis and Jules Olitski, by proto-minimalists like Ad Reinhardt, and by radical younger abstractionists such as Frank Stella, whose shaped canvas moved painting

towards the sculptural. Robert Rauschenberg, without entirely doing away with imagery, had pushed the collage tradition into the third dimension, while radical thinkers like Donald Judd and Dan Flavin were exploring the possibilities inherent in producing art using industrial means and components, a tendency that led some critics to predict the death of painting.

In the early 1960s, figuration had begun to re-establish its avant garde credibility, but in a very particular and specific way as artists including Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, and James Rosenquist began to appropriate imagery from popular culture - billboards, comic strips, newspaper photographs, movie stills - to produce canvases that, like Judd's constructions, had a decided industrial edge to them. Warhol came to rely on silkscreen technology that allowed him to produce "anti-compositional" figurative works by accumulating repetitions of readymade mass-culture imagery. Lichtenstein's use of the Ben-Day screen produced paintings that mimicked the appearance of commercial printing techniques.

This was the complicated world in which Joseph Raffael (then known as Joe Raffaele) found himself in when he began to exhibit. During his years at Cooper Union and Yale, he had come under the sway of the Abstract Expressionists, feeling liberated by what they offered in terms of expression set free from the need to represent. Figuration seems to have come naturally to him, however, and during an extended stay in Italy he produced a series of watercolor landscapes which were exhibited at the D'Arcy Galleries in 1963, his first New York show. These hardly placed him in the avant garde, but a near fatal bout of hepatitis - the experience reinforced by the death of his father not long after - caused him to radically rethink his approach to painting. Dedicating himself to coming to terms with realism in a far more ambitious way, his outlook was now shaped by a "renewed appreciation of life and being alive within it."

The immediate result was a series of "white-ground paintings" exhibited in 1965 at the Stable Gallery, where Warhol had had his first New York Pop show a couple of years earlier. These canvases, some of them quite large, might best be described as resembling painted collages. Carefully rendered fragments of imagery - a naked torso, a hand applying lipstick - were organized on rectangles of primed canvas in much the way that images clipped from a magazine might be applied to a sheet of paper to create a composition, always with a good deal of white space surrounding the pictorial elements, making them seem almost to be free-floating. Raffael has explained these paintings as reflecting his fragmented state of mind at the time, but they can also be understood as an attempt to come terms with what was the central preoccupation of New York painters in the sixties, whatever their persuasion - Minimalist or Pop - the notion that the flatness of the picture plane must be acknowledged,

even when the artist is consciously dealing in illusionism.



Lipsticks, Braces 1965 oil on canvas 55 x 45 inches

Clement Greenberg had stressed the importance of what he called “the integrity of the picture plane.” He believed that the essential characteristic of Modernism in painting was the recognition of the fact that the flatness of the canvas took precedence over any representation that might be superimposed upon it. He found the ultimate expression of this in Pollock’s all-over drip paintings, from which all hint of illusion had been eliminated. The dialogue between flatness and illusion had quickly and dramatically been raised again, however, by Jasper Johns who had reconciled representation with the integrity of the picture plane by painting two-dimensional objects such as flags, targets and maps. Raffael’s white-ground paintings achieved the same goal in a very original way. The expanses of white canvas are an explicit acknowledgment of the flatness of the picture plane, which is emphasized, rather than contradicted, by the illusionistic fragments scattered across its surface.

Although these early paintings attracted a good deal of attention when they were first shown, Raffael soon abandoned this approach in favor of what appeared to be, to the casual eye, more conservative, single-image figurative paintings. There were a number of reasons for this. The artist believes that the change reflected a transformation in his life, the beginning of a making-whole process that he dates to his introduction to transcendental meditation as the sixties came to a close. This coincided, more or less, with a move to Northern California, and in the years that followed, non-art figures such as Gurdjieff and Carl Jung probably had more impact on his work than did his former New York contemporaries.

It seems to me, however, that the paintings made in California, and more recently in Antibes, never entirely lost touch with Raffael’s early struggles to come to terms with the challenges that had been bequeathed to the painters who came to the fore in the 1960s, challenges that provoked solutions as varied as those arrived at by Brice Marden, say, and Chuck Close.



above: *Untitled* (detail) 1965 watercolor on paper 29 1/2 x 22 1/2 inches



Spirit 2006 watercolor on paper 60 x 85 inches

The painting *Spirit*, included in the present show, is, for me, not only one of Raffael's most masterly works but also a splendid, if highly idiosyncratic, example of how the requirements of representation can be met while the picture plane is permitted to retain its integrity. The form of illusion employed is photo-derived (and it should be remembered that Raffael is a contemporary of Photorealists like Richard Estes and Ralph Goings). Raffael had been taking random shots of the pond with his digital camera and was serendipitously gifted with this composition, the large white fish vertically bisecting the image functioning as a near abstract element, yet at the same time evoking the long tradition of crucifixions in western art. The other fish clustered on either side oblige with random placements of shape and color that provide the painting with an all-over feel that could not have been arrived at as satisfactorily by conscious pictorial decisions.

In its way, the subject is as ideal for illustrating the interplay between flatness and representation as are any of Johns' flags or targets. The surface of the pond is flat, except for the ripples caused by the fish as they break its plane. While acknowledging their photographic origins, ripples and fish alike are captured in a very painterly fashion that makes it possible for the viewer to ignore representation and to see the painting as an almost non-figurative two-dimensional arrangement of intense chromatic elements. Add to this the fact that watercolor's transparency permits the paper support to be sensed through the washes, supplying another subliminal reminder that we are looking at something rendered on a flat surface.

The decorative margin within which the image is contained is a far more overt reminder of flatness. It serves much the same purpose as the unpainted areas in the white-ground paintings, though in a much friendlier way, its blue ground dotted with leaf-like shapes, recalling flower-based semi-abstract paintings and watercolors Raffael made in Italy in the late 1950s. All in all, *Spirit* strikes me as being a painting that delivers on the promise that was apparent in the white-ground paintings, but does so in a way that is full of human warmth, whereas those early paintings were somewhat cerebral and clinical, the imagery distancing rather than welcoming.

Lannis has pointed out that several of his recent watercolors are almost pictorial inversions of the white-ground paintings, with a white, central, iconic image embedded in fields of densely-worked and vibrant color. This is very much the case with *Spirit*, and is definitively exemplified by *Another Spring*, which presents a white cockatoo set against a lavish brocade of leaves, branches, and blossoms so dense as to suggest something woven on a loom, and hence two-dimensional. This recalls the fact that, early in

his career, Raffael (like Carolyn Brady) earned his living doing repeats of patterns for a fabric house. An image like *Another Spring* can be seen as his revenge upon the tedium of such repetitious labor since, though fabric-like, the rich ground of this painting (and it is far more than just *background*) is anything but repetitious, having instead the qualities of surface invention one associates with gothic tapestries.



Another Spring 2006 watercolor on paper 44 1/2 x 63 1/2 inches

Two of the four parrots in *The Innocence of Birds* are virtually white, functioning pictorially much like the cockatoo, but what is most remarkable about this painting is the bold handling of the vegetation against which they are arrayed, just as dense as in *Another Spring* but almost abstract in treatment. Looking at this image in reproduction, it's possible to imagine that the four birds on their branch were rendered on an animation cell that has been placed over a non-figurative background. Standing in front of the painting, however, the lusciousness of

the paint handling defies any such simplistic reading. Raffael is a master of classical watercolor technique, but here, as in other paintings in this exhibition, he displays a boldness - sometimes almost a rawness - in his build-up of washes, and his employment of jewel-like color, that belies the medium's traditional self-effacing modesty. Art historians use the term "watercolor *drawings*," but these images deserve to be called paintings, displaying the scale and density of treatment to justify the description.



The Innocence of Birds 2006 watercolor on paper with acrylic border 57 x 38 1/4 inches

Similar near-abstract backgrounds are features of *Herald*, *Emergence*, and *Renascence*, each of which features the kind of functional decorative border (functional because it plays a vital pictorial role) found in *Spirit* and the other paintings already discussed. *Herald* is perhaps the boldest of the three, its dark border setting off areas of red, green, blue, and magenta that, in places, are barely descriptive, but function rather as patches of pure color. In *Emergence*, Raffael has brought out the abstract qualities inherent in the symmetry of the iris's petals, and in *Renascence* the play of broken color across the entire surface of the painting is so complex as to make figure and ground appear to merge, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the parrot seems to be in the process of evolving out of the figure/ground continuum.

Some of the most memorable moments in the history of modernism have come when figuration and abstraction are sustained in a kind of magical balance, and I think such moments are to be found in this exhibition. In *Grace*, the blossoms are spread across the picture plane like the skeins of translucent acrylic in a Morris Louis color-field painting, and the sheer size of the image forces the viewer to perceive it as more than a conventional painting of flowers: yet it remains a spectacular flower painting. Much the same could be said of *Spirit Like the Wind* and *Eternal Loizos*, which at first glance might appear more conventional, yet in fact presents the viewer with a strikingly unorthodox composition. The vase is divided almost symmetrically into green and blue areas, enabling it to be read as either flat or modeled, while the background is divided into dark and light in a way that is spatially ambiguous. In contrast, the explosion of blossom that is the focus of the image, and the striped cloth on which the vase rests, are rendered with vigorous dimensionality, seemingly at odds too with the green border that emphasizes the essential artifice of the



Eternal Loizos 2006 watercolor on paper 69 x 44 1/2 inches

piece. I use “artifice” with the emphasis on “art,” and it should be readily apparent that only an extremely skillful and confident artist could be successful in blending this cocktail of potentially antithetical pictorial elements.

Mastery of this sort can be found throughout the exhibition in the form of paintings that seduce with their apparent directness of vision, but that prove to be unexpectedly and rewardingly layered.



Emergence 2006 watercolor on paper 59 x 39 1/2 inches

Looking at these recent works, I am reminded of another artist who, like Raffael, mixed in advanced circles in his early years, in what was at the time the capital of the art world, and who, again like Raffael, explored the possibilities of painting informed by symbolism and spirituality; an artist who spent the later decades of his career working in a studio not far from Raffael's, and who - though far from forgotten by collectors, who eagerly sought after his work - tended in his lifetime to be undervalued by arbiters of historical taste because he went his own way, and thus was difficult to place (a situation that has been corrected since his death sixty years ago.) I refer to Pierre Bonnard, another exponent of hedonistic imagery and sumptuous color, who like Raffael painted his garden and his domestic surroundings, and who even shared Raffael's habit of working from photographs (black and white, in Bonnard's case, supplemented by color notes).

Bonnard belonged to that generation of artists who emerged in the wake of Impressionism, and came on the scene just too soon to be fully caught up in the revolution wrought by Matisse and Picasso. Raffael, it could be argued, was caught between Modernism and Post-Modernism, but in his idiosyncratic way he has remained faithful to the principals of late modernism, just as Bonnard - in the age of Cubism, Surrealism, and Abstraction - continued to explore the world of retinal painting as it had been understood by Monet and his contemporaries.

It's my belief that, in paintings such as those hung in this exhibition, Joseph Raffael has arrived at the place he set out to find when, thirty-five years ago, he recovered from a near-fatal illness and embarked on an aesthetic and spiritual expedition that took the white-ground paintings as its starting place. Better than that, he has arrived and seems primed to begin a new journey.



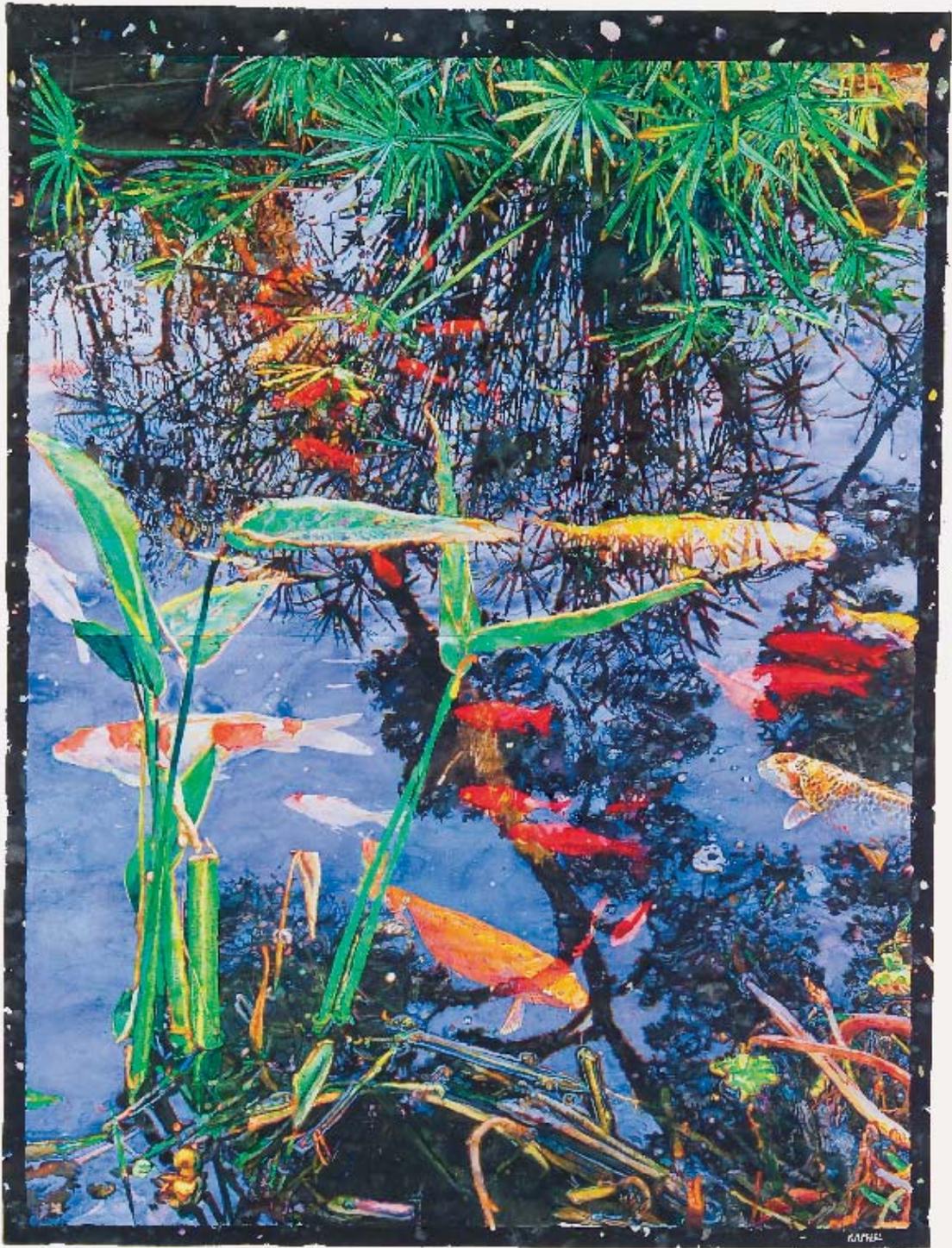
Grace 2007 watercolor on paper 54 x 83 inches



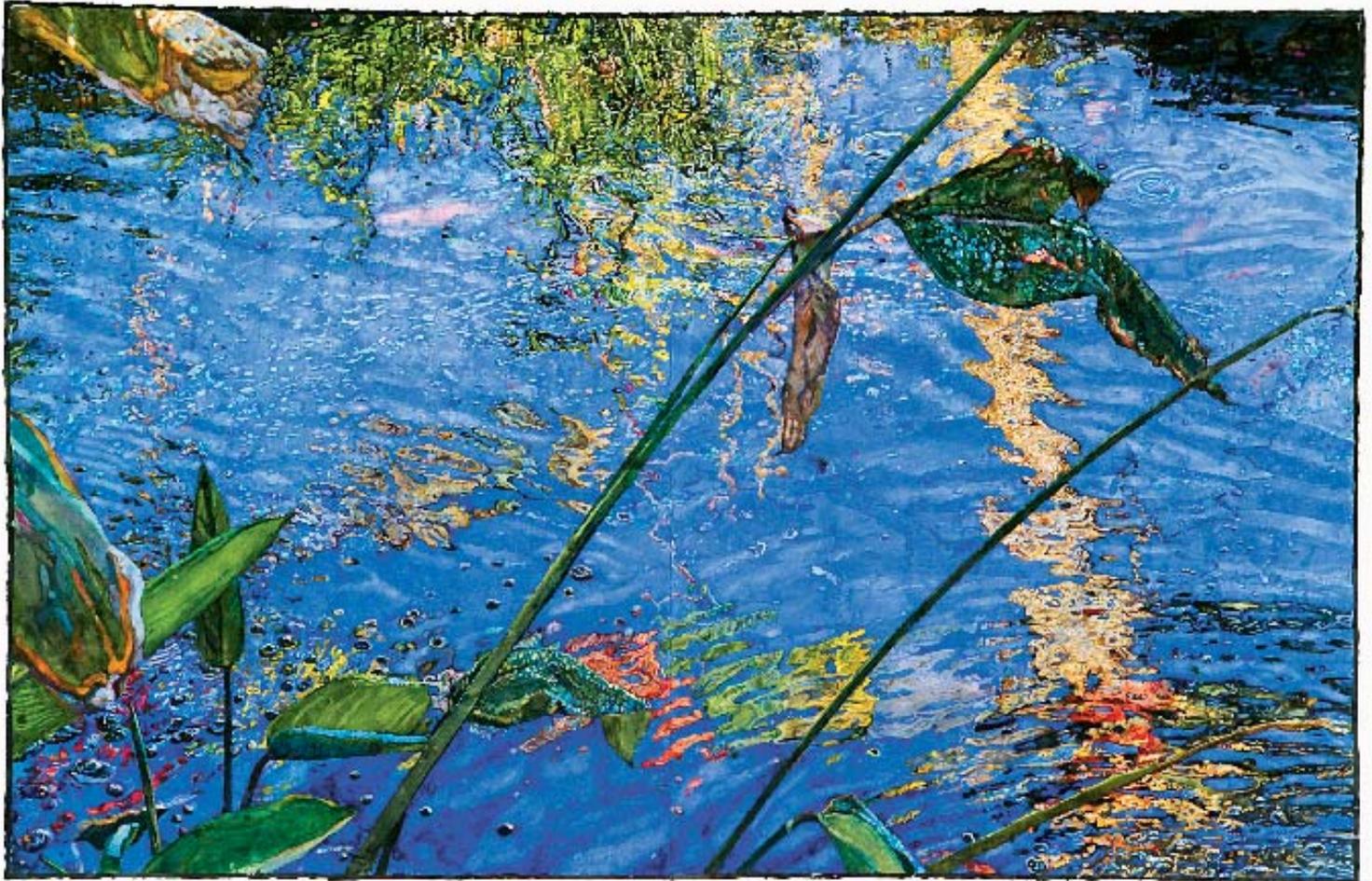


Stegner 2006 watercolor on paper 52 x 78 inches





Pond, Fish Reflections 2005 watercolor on paper 90 x 66 inches



Prayer 2007 watercolor on paper 55 1/2 x 85 1/2 inches



Spirit (detail)

An Interview with Joseph Raffael

Tricia: (Looking at the painting “Spirit” in progress) So I’m wondering how does it start, what is the process, where does the painting begin? It starts with you capturing this moment in a photograph. You take your own pictures right?

Joseph: Yes, I do. When I feel the moment is right, I go out with my camera and see if there’s anything which strikes me in that moment to take a picture of. It depends on the light, it depends on my mood, and also lots of other things I’m unaware of.

The French call a photographer ‘un chasseur d’images’ (‘a hunter of images’.) It can often feel that way - the excitement of the hunt. In this instance, about six months ago, I went down to the pond, and took a lot of pictures using a new digital camera. You know how it is with the digital - it’s really easy to take a lot at once because...

Tricia: ... because they’re not as precious.

Joseph: Exactly. In the photos I’ve taken in the past, very often my chosen views have been ‘field views,’ an image which goes from left to right and back, and up and down, an overall lateral view. However, as I was quickly clicking away at the moving fish, I zoomed in. I couldn’t have anticipated the image I got. I didn’t know that there was going to be this vertical fish cutting the picture right in half, making a big white cross, like a crucifixion or something. I wouldn’t have chosen this white fish vertically cutting the picture plane exactly in half. I didn’t choose it. One of the big

‘don’t do’s’ in art is you don’t cut the composition in half. At least that’s what I learned in school. Yet, there the photo was - a perfect union of shapes and forms which I could never have set up or imagined. With a digital camera it all happens so quickly.

I knew I just had to make a painting of it. I started referring to it as “the Lollapalooza.” What appealed to me, what made me yearn to do it, was that it was so strong, so present, so centered, so different compositionally; and there was all that blue. The white fish moving upwards and *smack* in the middle of all that blue was my reason for choosing it.

That idea of centeredness turns out to be something that’s been going on in my choices of subject recently. I notice I’ve been choosing a central focus in my painting and in my thinking.

Tricia: Did you feel that coming on or was it a gradual process?

Joseph: I wasn’t aware of it. However, let’s put it this way, I’ve been trying to get ‘centered’ all my life. (He laughs.)

Tricia: Yeah, I can see that. I see that there’s this main focus here in the body of the vertical fish. However, I notice that with what you paint the specific subject is never just simply that - it’s like a fish is never... just a fish. You know, it’s more like an explosion of color and depth. So, I can understand that you can approach it without any fear that it wouldn’t work out because it’s become so much more merging, while inter-relating



with everything around it.

Joseph: I feel that too. The reason it will always work out is that it's not the photograph I'm trying to duplicate - it's all the tiny flowing abstract parts on the white surface appearing little by little, stroke by stroke; colors merging with other colors forming that which, eventually when finished, will be 'the painting'.

That's the exciting part ---- watching it appear, something emerges which I couldn't possibly have foreseen beforehand. The 'inconceivable' reveals itself.

Tricia: I love that.

Joseph: Yes, it's thrilling that aliveness and inevitability. I believe that is what you are sensing and seeing, when you stand up close to the painting.

Tricia: You know it is an explosion of color. The photograph is just a starting point for you. When you're actually painting, a very different momentum ensues.

You also have up on the studio walls photographs for possible future paintings.

Joseph: That's right. I like living with the photographs on the walls and coming upon them unexpectedly, always seeing them afresh. Already I've got them up on the wall which means that I'm attracted to them as possible painted works.

It can take six months, or even several years, to know if the photo's image could become a strong painting. I learn if it could hold its own as a large painting, sometimes up to seven feet or so long.

Tricia: You become so close to a painting while doing it, and then you let it go out into the world. Then right away you have to be focusing on the next one. What are the comments that you get or the responses you have heard about your works? Do they influence you?

Joseph: Well, I wish I could answer that, but I can't. I don't hold on to what people say because it can be too... leadening. Of course feedback is encouraging in the moment, and I always appreciate what people say, but I never hold onto it because then I would have to, how shall I say, live up to some kind of concept that is out there about what people like, or what they don't like.

The wonderful thing about doing a painting and let's say being able to live from painting, is that one needs only one person to buy a painting to make the painting, in a way, a success.

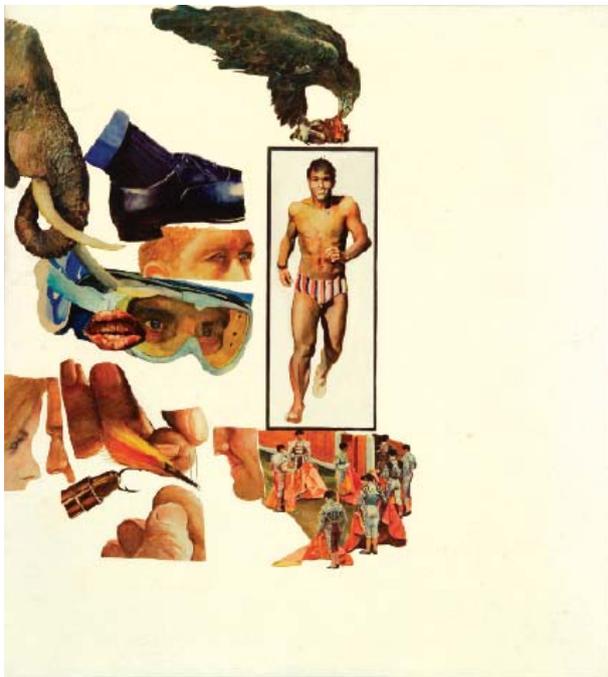
Tricia: Yeah, yeah!

Joseph: You make a record you have to sell a million copies, or 600,000 or whatever it is. If it's a

movie you have to make 30 million dollars on the first weekend. It's similar for an author who has to sell many, many copies for a work to be considered a success. It's not the same for a painter.

Tricia: Well, so was there a point then in your career that you stopped listening to what other people had to say about your work?

Joseph: Well, you know, a long, long time ago I learned something crucial. When I was beginning to show, there used to be an art critic for the *New York Times* named John Canaday. At the time there were probably only one or two art critics writing for that paper. Canaday was quite influential, and well known because he had written some books which had had popular mass appeal. At the time, in the '60s, I had a show at the Stable Gallery. The paintings were very realistic; they were what we call 'the white ground paintings'.



Sonny (detail) 1967 oil and mixed media 85 x 107 1/2 x 13 1/2 inches

In these works there would be isolated, fragmented realistic details on a white ground. Elements like an arm, or an animal, or a logging-truck, or an exotic flower combined in a kind of rebus.

Canaday thoroughly panned these multiple images on these white ground oil paintings. He said something to the effect, "it's a pity that Raffael, with his talent, does this thing with the white."

He didn't like the paintings at all. He was knocking, knocking, knocking the use of the white ground being such a prominent element. Then, about two years later, I had another show at the Stable. I had gone from the images being cut up and separate from each other to painting whole images, which went out to the edge of the canvas in each direction. The white ground disappeared. With this show and these 'whole' images, that same critic wrote, "one misses the white in Raffael." (He laughs.)

These full image pieces were getting back to a certain centeredness. Before them, the white ground paintings had been a visual map of my psychological state at the time - my father had died in 1962.

I was reeling in a way from that experience, somehow shattered and in pieces. I was all over the place, and in a way quite like the paintings. The white ground fragmented paintings mirrored that head and heart space.

Then with time, a restructuring, a coalescing was taking place. I was becoming more whole, and the disparate fragmented sense and view of things lessened, the floating pieces in the white space disappeared. See what I mean about the difference between the different pieces in the painting becoming one?

Tricia: I think the John Canaday story is a good lesson.

Thad: Who knows what led up to that review? It's a great lesson.

Joseph: When this happened, I was a relatively young artist, and so I learned early on the ephemeral and quixotic aspect to art reviews, people's opinions, and judgments.

Here's another lesson I learned in the '60s. If an artist was unknown, as I was, and wanted a gallery to see their works, one had to bring, or get a selection of work to them somehow, so that it could be considered. Well,



Spirit (detail)

I made an appointment with a 57th Street gallery dealer, and packed some works into a yellow cab and schlepped them uptown from the Village. By the time I got there, after having maneuvered the pieces in and out of the taxi, getting them into and out of the elevator, and, of course, being nervous throughout, I was surprised when upon seeing the works the gallery dealer said to me: "What are you wasting my time for with this shit." And then she walked away, and just left me standing there.

Tricia: I think it's amazing that people have such an attitude with judging artwork. When you've worked so hard and put your heart into it, and also you're looking for appreciation. Were you able to just go "OK"?

Joseph: I was of course surprised, shocked, and disappointed but in a way... yes, I was OK.

All these people are angels in disguise and they're all encouragers for our art. Ultimately it was a great gift, that lesson. You know, it's like the Zen master - he'll do all sorts of surprising, unexpected, un-wished for, sometimes seemingly cruel things to make the student come to a self-realization. For me, this person, and her reaction, turned out to be exactly what I needed to experience. Both those events for me, the art critic and the art dealer, were crucial in showing me what the being-an-artist-in-the-world-terrain could be.

If you are going to be an artist, you have to be like an Olympic athlete. They have a career. Let's say a sports person has a career which lasts maybe 20 years. They have to train every day. If you're going to be an artist, it's the same thing. However it's a lifetime of training. You need to train, to have the stamina to go the whole way. And the training

never ends. The training never ends. It's horrible. It's wonderful. You have to keep training in order to keep the art and the artist, you know, moving, developing...

Tricia: Yeah, not only your art, craft, and talent evolve but your spiritual growth is intertwined with that also. Your consciousness is forced to 'move' along as well with your art.

Joseph: Another big learning moment for me was when I first came to Europe. Landed in Plymouth by ship, then took the train up to London. That Sunday, I got the *London Observer* and in it was a little article called "A Writer's Catechism," by Julian Huxley, Aldous Huxley's brother. He wrote that the worst thing for a writer is to have somebody standing over the writer's shoulder while he or she is writing,

observing what was coming forth and what might come forth. Or people commenting on your work, while you're in the process of doing it or after it's completed. It's all very tricky.

We all have lessons along the way and these were a couple of mine.

Tricia: Before today, we've spoken about your and Lannis' decision to come to live and work here in France on the Côte d'Azur in this house, this spot, in 1986. Your work is this place, I look at your work, the subject matter, the spirit and it is this place. Do you ever think of the other artist you would have been, or what you'd be doing as far as subject matter is concerned, if you weren't here in this spot? This is constant inspiration, isn't it?



Garden View 2007



Spirit Like the Wind II 2007 watercolor on paper 43 1/2 x 66 1/2 inches

Joseph: Yes, it is. I feel if we hadn't come here 22 years ago, I'm sure the work would be very different - on many levels. Before that, I had been an artist in New York, where I had some recognition, and as soon as I got the recognition I left New York. Then I went out to Northern California. Then when I got recognized there, appreciated there, I left there too. Why? Because, in part, I found that I began identifying too much with what people thought of me, of my art. And as soon as that happens, one can get concretized into a mold, and that's very unhealthy, for both artist and the art.

Fortunately, I had met Lannis, and luckily lots of quote-unquote "negative or serious" things happened in my life to spur me on to follow my dreams, and as it turned out, for Lannis to follow her dreams too.

The 'career' aspect of being an artist got to me. I had to get the hell out of that context to keep my artist alive and growing. I needed to return to a more innocent, purer me - to retrieve '*my original self, my original artist*'.

Donald Kuspit recently described this place as a *hortus conclusus* - an enclosed garden. The French have an expression 'le jardin secret,' meaning one's own inner place where one's being abides, where one feels whole and 'oneself', away from the illusion of the world. If we hadn't come here to retrieve the soul and life energy of my 'artist', I think my 'artist' would have been dead by now. I mean, I literally would have died, because my 'original artist' would have died, just dried up and died. My duty was to keep my artist alive. So, Lannis and I came here to follow a dream, a dream directed to us by our inner selves, to regain our way.

In fact the final show before we moved to France at Nancy Hoffman's gallery was called "A Dream Remembered." Leaving there and coming here, I was seeking to refind the innocence of the artist I had been

at four or five years old, who spent hours and hours drawing with Crayolas on the floor.

Tricia: Was it very hard to get back to?

Joseph: Yeah, it took time and the process has been wonderful. It's been hard, and I wouldn't have missed it for the world. It's about taking the responsibility for one's life, and the choices we make are our portals opening up to living a more conscious life or not. That's what this move and time have been about.

Thad: So speaking of the tools you are now using in the process of making your art. How did you make this change - using the computer, and how has it changed your work?

Joseph: That's been a really interesting process. The computer came into my life the way it's been coming into all our lives, and with it, Sam, this young man who works here, has opened it all up to me and for me, in a way that could not have happened without him. He has a very inventive and original mind, and is a whiz with the computer. He encouraged me to switch from working with paper photographs as my point of departure, to working directly from the image, seeing it on the computer screen. So, it's been Sam



Studio View 2007

who has seen me through the mechanical aspects. He takes care of all that. I don't have to do any of the technical stuff - Sam does it. I'm freed to paint as much as possible. He showed me how I could zoom in and blow up details. It's been such a revelation. Now, he has even set up a video projector attached to the ceiling for me to use to draw in the original image on the paper. One thing led to another. I resisted for about six months then realized about five weeks ago that it was the next step. It turns out to be absolutely thrilling working directly from the screen and being able to zoom in and see details of the image really large. This way, there's so much to see, so much visual information. The light coming from behind the photographic image is also more luminous.

Tricia: Well it's what you've been doing all along with your eye, and the photograph on paper - but now there's this new tool.

Joseph: This new tool, this digital image has a different kind of detail than the analog image. Actually this image of the vertical white fish isn't all that detailed. This one is quite, umm, quite simple, isn't it?

So it will be interesting to see what happens when I do get into a detailed image.... I'll probably go mad. No matter how simple the image is I see such complexities in it. It's like my mind breaks everything down into cellular realities.

Thad: Have you ever started the journey here and gotten to there and said this is a completely different journey? Or do you just always accept that there's always going to be changes, there's going to be the journey down a winding path, and that where it began and where it is will be completely different, and you accept the whole. Or have you gotten so far at the end and said this is a *different* journey at this point.

Tricia: Boy, it's... it's really different. Where it begins with the photograph and how you transform it.

Joseph: It's always a journey. In the painting, when I go from here to there, or when I go from one point to another, the journey does change. In fact it's always changing. It's a visual, physical journey in time and space. No two moments are alike. Every inch of what is emerging begs to be its own self. I never know what's coming around the corner. I need to be open to the 'new' which wants to be seen, each and every moment. Continual change, like life. Nothing remains the same.

Tricia: It seems like your work is very embracing of what wants to enter the work. It seems like your work, and you and Lannis have more, I guess the term would be such 'acceptance' of what appears, more than anyone, almost anyone I've ever met.

Joseph: Well, that's definitely true of Lannis. She accepts everything.



Joseph and Lannis Raffael

Tricia: You've said you feel the universe is supporting each one of us. It seems as though you take that same philosophy into your work. And yet at times, I'm sure your work feels like a struggle which every artist feels.

Joseph: Yes, every day, every day. Often it used to feel like it was a lot of struggle, and then there'd be this energy in the daily process, a little glimmer that kept me going. Actually, it has changed in the past year or so, and now I feel much calm energy in the daily process.

I notice that during the 'journey,' as Thad calls it, during the making of the painting, when there are sections I don't 'like', that don't look the way I would have had them look, or that I wish just hadn't happened, that in fact, when the painting's finished these are the areas I most appreciate. They're so often the 'heartbeats' of the piece. They are what make the painting alive and breathing.

Sometimes, I'll see these sections when they first appear and I'll ask myself, "Who painted that? I would never paint that! I would never paint anything like that!" And yet they turn out to be the 'best' parts of the painting. They are in fact the 'real' gifts.

It's about trying to remain focused, and totally open, and conscious all at the same time.

Thad: Do you have moments when you're working where you feel like you're slipping into sort of an autopilot and you're not giving enough, like you're falling back into old things that are comfortable and familiar to you and that you have to tell yourself, push it, push it.

Joseph: Aaah... How can I answer that?

Thad: I don't know if that's a fair question.

Joseph: It's a fine question. I don't go into auto-pilot. The process of painting has its own rhythm and flow. There are long stretches of time when I withdraw from the decision making and the painting just moves slowly and quietly forward. See what I mean? I don't know if that answers your question or not.

Thad: I think it does.

Last time we were here, you were saying I think that with watercolor you can't fix your 'mistakes.'

Joseph: No you can't. Though I don't really believe in 'mistakes'. The thing about watercolor which I find fascinating, I've said this over and over, that when it's wet, when it's just been painted, it looks one way and when it dries, the wetness, the water, has seeped elsewhere, even changing patterns and forms. All the relationships of color-to-color change. It's very liberating because my limited self is no longer in control - it's the painting itself which decides how it will look and be.

Tricia: It's different - the initial touching the paper and then what you see minutes later, hours later, it really changes.

Joseph: For example this painting we're looking at. There isn't a centimeter in it that is the way it looked when I painted it. It metamorphoses.

Tricia: So part of it is the accepting, that the medium, in this case watercolor, and the painting have a life of their own. And you give it that life and let it...

Joseph: ...and let it go ---

Tricia: Let it go.

Joseph: Yes.

Tricia: It feels like there are some moments where you're creating a kind of a new reality.

Joseph: This area here was sort of like that - a Zen moment. There are many new realities which appear. Hopefully the whole work will be a new reality. After all, it's a painting, it's not recreating a photograph. Isn't this what art does? Create new realities.

Tricia: To stand here in front of this work and to be here in the environment where you create, it's ah, it's electric. I mean for me, it's almost unreal how there's so much energy going on in the painting and to see where you start, to see where you take the image from the initial photograph - it's indescribable.

Joseph: Well, thanks for saying that. That's what happened to me the other day, when I was sitting in front of it pausing to look at the painting, which I almost never do. Just now as you were talking, I was just gazing upon a certain area. I wasn't really looking at this particular area - I wasn't looking, that's the thing, I was gazing, I was really 'seeing.'



Joseph Raffael and Soleil



Spirit (detail)

Something's happening here, that I know. I've never painted anything like this before. Of course, I've painted fish before, yet this is new. I find myself saying so often this is happening "just in the nick of time."

Tricia: When I let myself start looking, and gazing at this painting, it's not like fish anymore. It's like a journey of color. I mean they could be islands we're looking at.

Joseph: Definitely.

Tricia: There's so much movement. Each change of color and each change of the light blues and dark blues.

Joseph: I believe what we're talking about, that which transforms and moves towards the finished work of art, is how this other reality can be let through. Letting that which did not exist before come through as 'art' is such a difficult and subtle tight-rope walking process, and that's why there can be much pain, doubt, and confusion in it, and why artists sometimes become disturbed and suffer acutely, because they go to an interior space where they are very alone, and there they connect with an unknown, the not-experienced before. They enter this domain from which 'creativity' springs forth.

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Thanks for bringing this up because that's what happened to me the other day when I was just sitting right here, gazing towards the painting on the wall. I never knew what an epiphany was. It's a word that came into fashion in the United States after we had come over here. I first heard it a lot when I returned one year to the States, and I heard my brother-in-law Chris Desmond say something about "epiphany". I had thought it was something about the Catholic Church. I thought it was a feast day or something.

I didn't know what an epiphany was - and since then I never got the sense of how, why, or when to use it. However, the other day I was sitting here with Lulu, our dog, gazing at the painting, and I experienced what you just described. It was like I was perhaps having an epiphany. Whatever it was, it seems to be the only word I can use to describe the experience.

So that's what a painting is supposed to do! Take speech away. Transport the viewer to the inexplicable, the non-verbal. Art can be living proof in an external, experiential way of that which we can only know within the silence of our inner being. It shows us that we're part of something much larger than what we see before us in the outer world. It reminds us of who we are.

That's why writing about art is so hard and almost impossible. The art experience cannot be explained in words. It's like Edvard Munch said, "When people see my paintings, I want them to stop and take off their hat as though they were in church." The older I get the more I understand deeply what that Munch quote means. Great art inspires awe - deep reflection and silence - not words.



Joseph and Lannis Raffael



Quartet 2007 watercolor on paper 44 1/2 x 48 inches



Autumn II 2006 watercolor on paper 65 x 44 1/2 inches

Biography

Born in Brooklyn, New York, 1933

EDUCATION

- 1958-59 Fulbright Fellowship to Florence and Rome
- 1954-56 Yale School of Fine Arts, B.F.A., studied with Josef Albers
- 1954 Summer Fellowship Yale-Norfolk School
- 1953-54 Attended Cooper Union, New York

SELECTED PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Allentown Art Museum, Pennsylvania
The Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois
Brauer Museum of Art, Valparaiso, Indiana
The Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, Ohio
California College of Arts and Crafts, Oakland
The Canton Museum of Art, Ohio
The Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio
University of Connecticut, Bridgeport
The Contemporary Museum, Honolulu
Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento, California
Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington
The Denver Art Museum, Colorado
Des Moines Art Center, Iowa
Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, New York
Fort Worth Art Museum, Texas
University of Georgia, Athens
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
Jacksonville Art Museum, Florida
Glenn C. Janss Collection, Sun Valley, Idaho
Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska
Krannert Art Museum, Champaign, Illinois
Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
Long Beach Museum, California
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, California
University of Massachusetts, Amherst
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Mint Museum, Charlotte, North Carolina
Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Illinois

Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg, Florida
The Museum of Outdoor Arts, Englewood, Colorado
National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
University of New Mexico, Albuquerque
The Oakland Museum, California
Philadelphia Museum of Art, Pennsylvania
Rahr West Art Museum, Manitowoc, Wisconsin
San Francisco Ballet, California
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, California
Santa Barbara Museum of Art, California
The Speed Art Museum, Louisville, Kentucky
The Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio
Tulsa Performing Arts Center, Oklahoma
University Art Museum, Berkeley, California
Utah Museum of Fine Arts, Salt Lake City
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond
Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota
Washington County Museum of Fine Arts, Maryland
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York



Joseph and Lannis Raffael, with Soleil, *Studio View*

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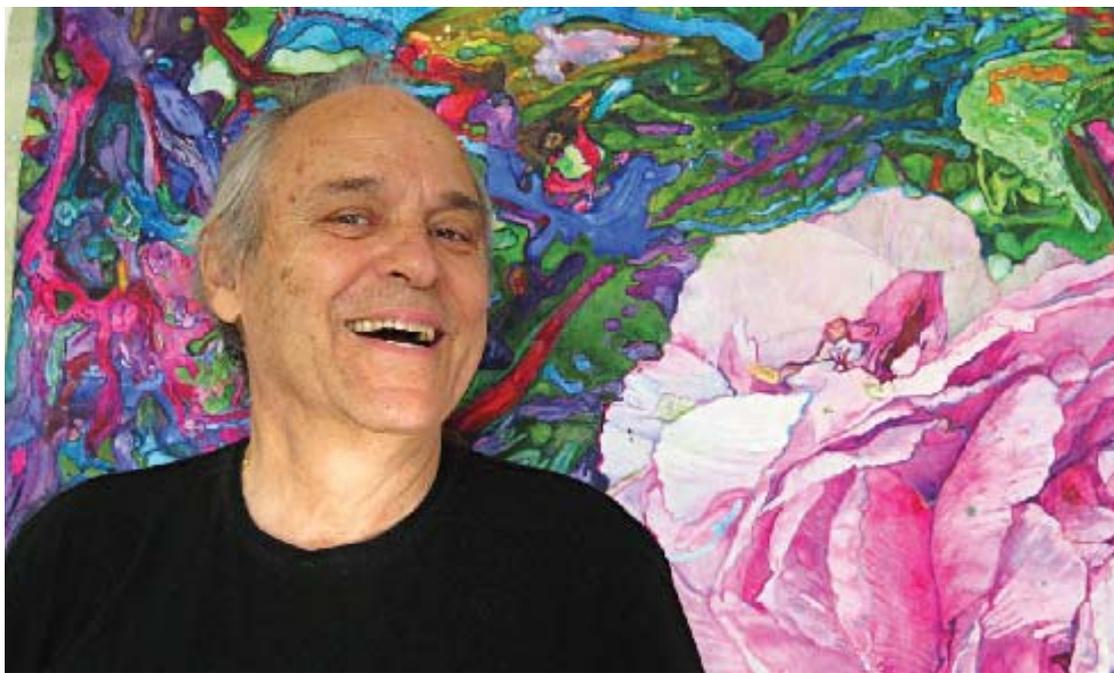
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Reflections 2007 watercolor on paper 56 x 86 inches
opposite page: *Stegner* (detail)

