

Joseph Ablow

Recent Paintings



Pucker Gallery, Boston

Front Cover:

1. *Mantle*, 2000, oil on canvas, 24 x 30", JA174

The subject of still life has been common enough in the history of painting and yet, until well into the 19th century, it was assumed to be an inferior branch of art. So dependent was the authority of painting on its subject matter that not even the achievement of such painters as Caravaggio, Zurbaran or Chardin could affect its status – at least wherever the Academy held sway. Sir Joshua Reynolds, an Academician born to the task, placed it at the very bottom of the accepted hierarchy of subject matter. History painting – painting with grand narrative themes – was at the top of the list, followed at some distance by “various departments of painting that do not presume to make such high pretension”. These are, in descending order: portraiture, landscape, and genre. At this point, almost as an afterthought, Reynolds mentions the painter of still life only, as he puts it, because no art is completely “destitute of value and use”.

I must admit that by the time I left art school I was not unsympathetic to Reynolds' musty notion. I had painted too many arrangements of old junk during my student years to feel much enthusiasm for the subject and, although I was in full sympathy with the Modernist assumption that a ginger pot by Cézanne was greater than a Madonna by Bouguereau, I wanted to devote myself, if not to Madonnas, than to subjects of greater consequence than ginger pots. After all, I had studied in Boston and the legacy of Expressionism, with its intense seriousness and high ambitions, was still the order of the day.

The first work I completed on my own was a triptych (of course, a triptych!) built out of a motley of self-invented and rather dour symbols. I then began a series of paintings on themes from Greek mythology. However, after a few years of struggling with Icarus, the Trojan women and Jason and his Argonauts, something did not feel right. Painting from memory had left me feeling visually parched and I wanted to return to working from life for a while. Still life seemed a convenient choice.

Most definitions of still life emphasize the quality of stillness inherent in the subject and when I first returned to it, not now in the public arena of art school but in the calm and privacy of my own studio, it was this stillness that suggested to me a way of studying the visible world within a controlled and concentrated situation. And, most tempting of all, it offered the possibility of problems with clearly defined solutions. Reality seldom surrenders other than reluctantly to the artist's imagination, but this invented world and a tabletop promised to yield itself with only limited resistance.

As I became increasingly absorbed by still life, I found that none of these assumptions were true. Because the objects are inanimate, it does not mean that they are still, and because the objects have been arranged by the artist it does not ensure his control over the world they become. What was to have been for me a subject only for study, became an engulfing involvement with a world that, for all its stillness, was elusive, mysterious and open – a world that, within an atmosphere of compacted, interlocking relationships, was as stable as the imagination that attempted to control it, that could be, for all its insistence reticence, disquieting and provocative.

So dynamic did the still life objects become that I soon found it essential to limit their energies. Ordinary cups, boxes and jars – objects without histories and without either the resonance of

symbolic meaning or of domestic pleasure and purpose – possessed more than enough vitality. The mundane offered a complexity and density of implication that always seemed beyond containment.

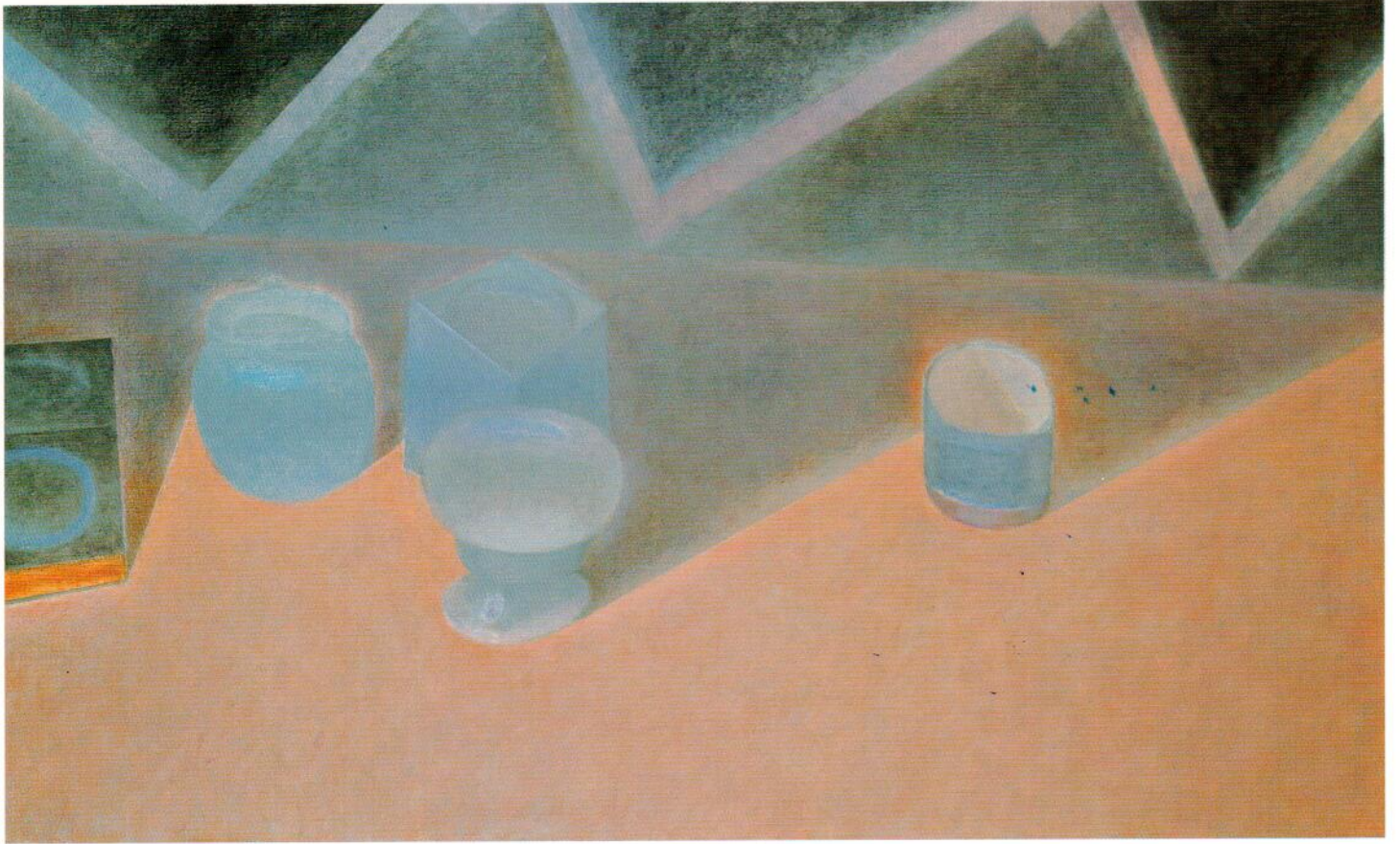
By turning to still life, I had found a subject and, in its unique way, a non-subject – a subject that was both dynamic and passive. The ginger jars and compote dishes were real, particular, and palpable and yet were possessed of no inherent significance except as it might be revealed by the painter in the context of a painting. I began to understand why still life had been such a critical subject for early 20th century painters. Underlying much of Modernism, especially Cubism and its progeny, was a desire to limit the anecdotal or descriptive, the better to re-assert the vitality of the picture, not dependent primarily on the unearned energy of a narrative or of the look of things. The conclusion many artists drew from this argument was to work non-representationally, but I never wanted to give up describing the visible world, even one as circumscribed as I had chosen for my own.

It no longer seemed strange to be investing my painting life in the description of an apparently dull and dusty band of bowls, cups and drapery. My need for more ambitious subjects had ebbed away. Still life had become the constant in my painting life.

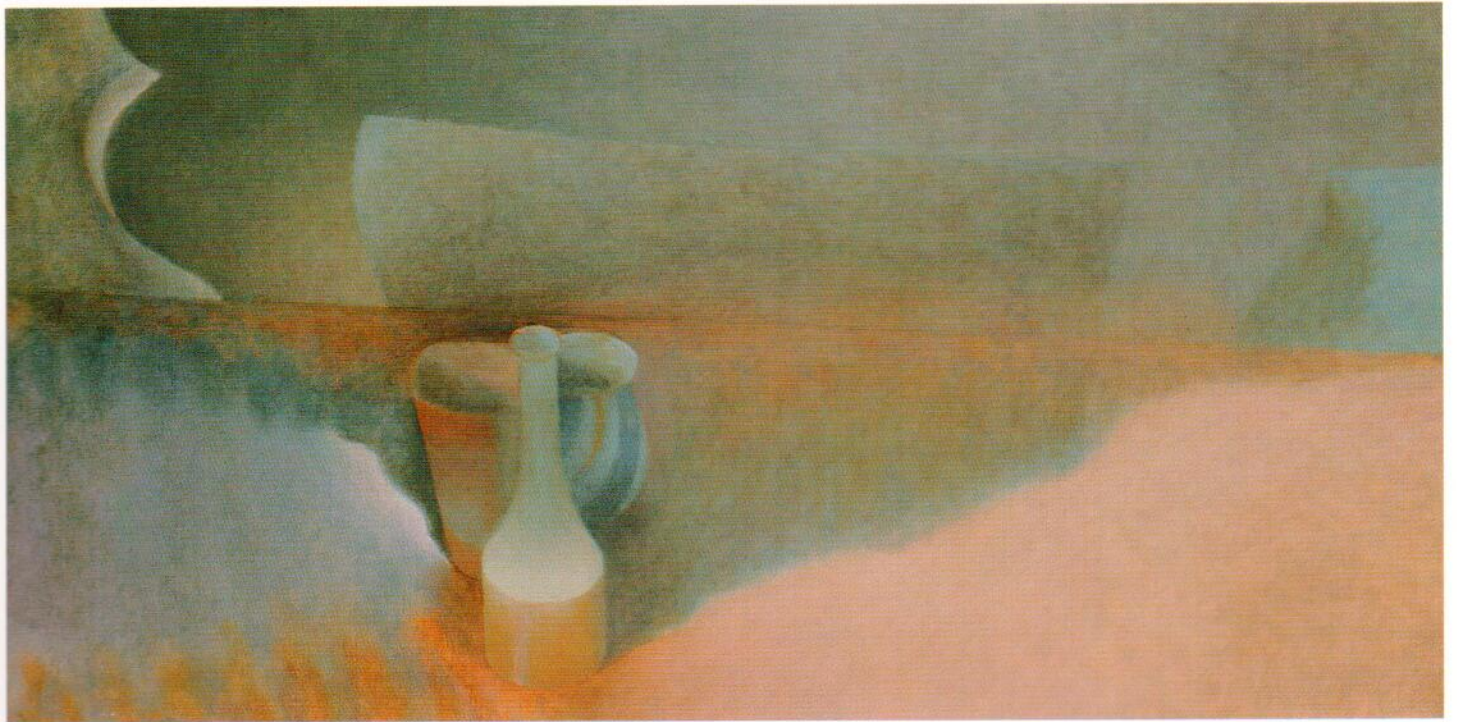
Of course, over time, what I chose to look at and what I wanted my pictures to look like changed, often radically. At first, in order to capture the way the objects and the surrounding space appeared to be in a state of endless transformation, I worked rapidly with less concern for a reasoned pictorial structure than for an immediacy of response. Later, and certainly most often, I have considered a broader range of pictorial and expressive problems. And while I remain loyal to a familiar group of objects, they are continually taking on different roles. At times they have been the center of attention, at others they have become more withdrawn and evasive. On occasion, they have been replaced by drapery and, as was the practice of painters in early times, I have used the drapery to offer commentary on the action. In the last few years, the tables have taken on a greater architectural presence and even though the light has become increasingly anonymous, shadows have become an important pictorial element and sometimes seem to have a life of their own.

As I have continued to work with the characters in my small repertory company, I have found myself, possibly as a remnant of my early desire to paint “histories”, attending to the emotional atmosphere latent in their relationships. On a few occasions the pictures have an autobiographical narrative embedded within them, but these need not be attended to. Once or twice I have used objects that are mementos of someone I have known and some of the paintings are about loss. Just as often, they continue to be straightforward celebrations of what I have seen.

Recently, I have begun to paint from memory for extended periods. Yet, no matter how far I move away from their actual identity, I always have the pitcher, bowl or tea box set up in front of me because, as I confront these mute forms in the privacy of my studio, they invariably have something to suggest to me that is now familiar yet still mysterious.



2. *Rhymes*, 2000, oil on canvas, 24 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 40", JA187



3. *Studio Dialogue*, 2000, oil on canvas, 24 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 48 $\frac{1}{4}$ ", JA185



4. *Waiting*, 2000, oil on canvas, 28 1/4 x 42", JA186



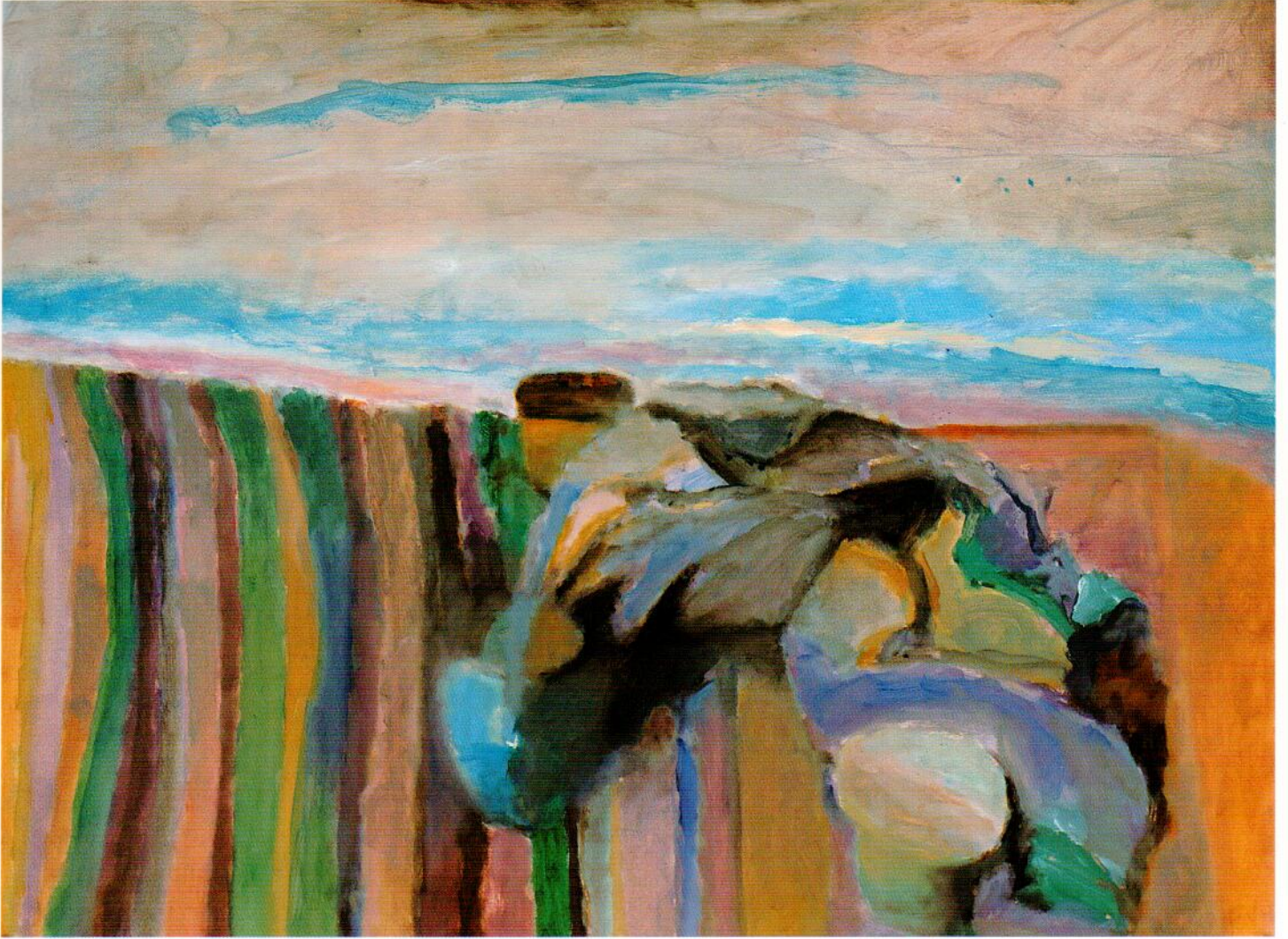
5. *Tuscan Shadows*, 2000, oil on canvas, 44 x 40", JA189



6. *Gathering Place*, 2000, oil on canvas, 40 x 50", JA172



7. *Markers*, 2000, oil on canvas, 40 x 26", JA171



8. *Still Life Landscape*, 2000, oil on paper, 22 x 30", JA184



9. *The Gaps Between*, 2000, oil on canvas, 30 1/4 x 38", JA173



10. *Forms Remembered*, 2000, oil on canvas, 28¹/₄ x 42¹/₄", JA188



11. *In Memory*, 2000, oil on canvas, 40 x 44", JA190



12. *Paraphernalia*, 2000, watercolor/gouache on paper
9 1/2 x 10 1/2", JA183



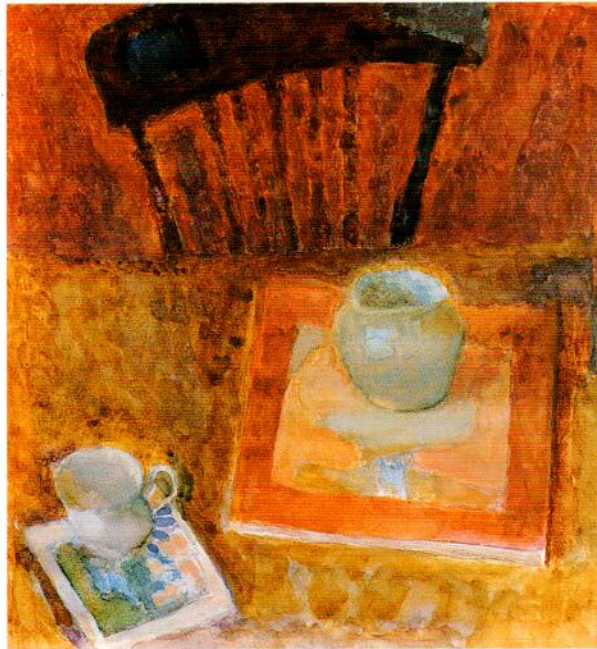
13. *Dialogue*, 2000, watercolor/gouache on paper
10 3/4 x 14 3/4", JA175



14. *Still Life with Striped Shawl*, 2000 watercolor/gouache on paper
16 x 14", JA180



15. *Two plus One*, 2000, watercolor/gouache on paper
9 x 10³/₁₆", JA177



16. *Still Life with Paul Klee*, 2000
watercolor/gouache on paper, 9 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 10 $\frac{1}{2}$ ", JA182



17. *Trio*, 2000, watercolor/gouache on paper
8 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 12 $\frac{3}{8}$ ", JA181



18. *Second Trio*, 2000, watercolor/gouache on paper
7 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 14 $\frac{1}{4}$ ", JA178

Born

1928 Salem, Massachusetts

Education

1955 Harvard University, M.A. (Art History)
 1954 Bennington University, B.A. (Art and History)
 1951 Diploma with Highest Honors for five years of study in Painting, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
 1952, 1953 Undergraduate study at Brandeis University
 1950-1951 Tufts College
 1946-1947 St. John's College
 Advanced study in painting with Oskar Kokoschka, Ben Shahn, Karl Zerbe, and in Design with Gyorgy Kepes

Academic Positions

1996 Professor Emeritus, Boston University
 1976-1995 Professor of Art, Boston University
 spring 1982 and 1975-1976 Visiting Professor, Amherst College
 1976 Boston University Summer Program, Lugano, Switzerland
 1973-1982 Member of the Cambridge Humanities Seminar and Visiting Scholar, MIT
 1963-1975 Associate Professor of Art, Boston University
 1964-1967 Chairman, Division of Art, Boston University
 1969-1970 Visiting Associate Professor, MIT Department of Humanities
 1962-1963 Assistant Professor, Wellesley College
 1959-1961 Assistant Professor, Bard College
 1955-1958 Instructor, Middlebury College

Contributing Editor, *Bostonia Magazine*, 1986-1989

Solo Exhibitions

2000, 1994 Pucker Gallery, Boston, MA
 1995 Miami University, Oxford, OH
 1991, 1987, 1983, 1981, 1979 Pucker Safrai Gallery, Boston, MA
 1987 Fitchburg Art Museum, Fitchburg, MA
 1983 Trustman Art Gallery, Simmons College, Boston, MA
 1982, 1976 Mead Art Museum, Amherst College, Amherst, MA
 1982 Rachel W. Davis Gallery, Houston, TX
 1980 Swansborough Galleries, Wellfleet, MA
 1972, 1961 Bard College, New York, NY
 1971 Princeton Gallery, Princeton, NJ
 1969, 1966, 1961 Boris Mirsky Gallery, Boston, MA
 1968 Middlebury College, Middlebury VT

Group Exhibitions (partial list)

1999 "Boston-Paris 1949", Boston Public Library, Boston, MA
 1983 Mitchell Museum, Mt. Vernon, IL
 1981, 1964 DeCordova & Dana Museum, Lincoln, MA
 1977 American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, NY, NY
 1946-1976 A Selection of American Art: The Skowhegan School, ME
 1976 Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA
 Colby College, Waterville, ME
 1969 Künstsalon Wolfsberg, Zurich, Switzerland
 1962, 1963 Simmons College, Boston, MA
 1957 62nd American Exhibition, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL
 1954 Young Americans, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA
 1962, 1961, 1958, 1956, 1953, 1952 Boston Arts Festival, Boston, MA

Awards

1987 Silver Medal Award, Best Article of the Year, Council for Advancement and Support of Education
 1982 Boston University Research Grant

1961 First Prize, Rhode Island Art Festival
 1958-59 Fulbright Grant in Painting, Paris
 1953 Purchase Prize, Skowhegan School of Painting
 1951 Paige Traveling Fellowship, School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Lectures (partial listing)

1995 Miami University, Oxford, OH
 1990 Salve Regina College, Newport, RI
 1987 Fitchburg Art Museum, Fitchburg, MA
 1986 Saint John's University, Collegeville, MN
 1986 The Ten o'clock News, Channel 2, WGBH Boston, MA (Aug. 22 & 29)
 1984 Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA
 1982, 1983 Nieman Foundation, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA
 1980 Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA
 1980, 1982 University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH
 1977 Fine Arts Center, Provincetown, MA
 1975, 1978, 1982 Amherst College, Amherst, MA
 1975 Philadelphia College of Art, Philadelphia, PA
 1972 Portland Art Museum, Portland, ME

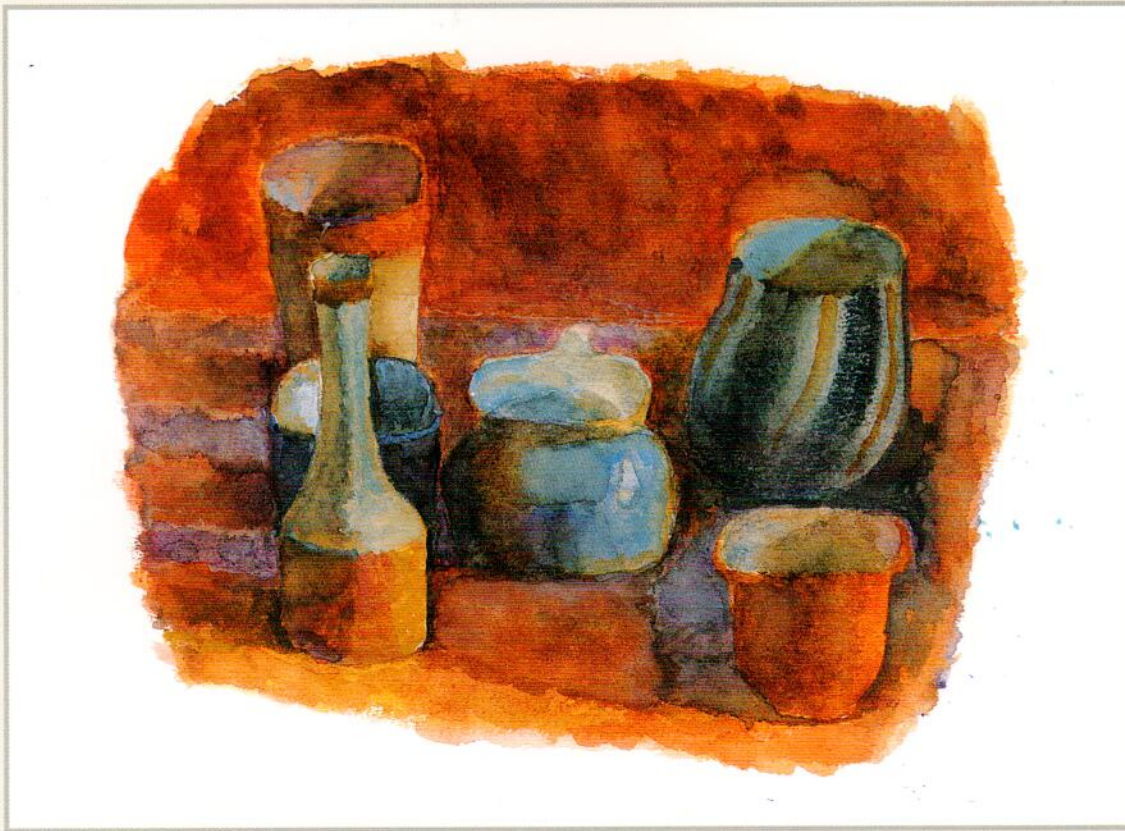
Publications

Bostonia Magazine Articles:

June/July 1987 "Oscar Kokoschka's World Viewed"
 April 1987 "The Musée d'Orsay: Resurrecting the Salons"
 February/March 1987 "Inter Stella Space"
 December/January 1987 "Je Suis le Mystere"
 October 1986 "Bostonians: Elegant and Otherwise"
 April/May 1986 "Metamorphosis of an Artist: Philip Guston and the Nature of Identity," Vol. 60, no. 2
 1984 "New Beginning: The Last Paintings of Philip Guston" an introductory essay for the exhibition, "Philip Guston: The Late Works", arranged by the International Cultural Corporation of Australia for the National Gallery of Victoria, The Art Gallery of Western Australia and the Art Gallery of New South Wales
 September 1978 "Two Cheers for Realism," *New Boston Review*
 September 1978 "Gombrich's Art and/or Illusion," *Boston University Review*
 1978 "Gombrich's Art and/or Illusion," *Boston University Journal*, Vol. XXV, No. 3
 February/March 1979 "Boston Expressionism," *New Boston Review*
 Spring, 1976 "Hyman Bloom and the Uses of the Past," *New Boston Review*
 1979 "The Art of David Aronson," an introductory essay for the retrospective exhibition, Brandeis University and the Jewish Museum
 1969 Introduction to catalogue for the exhibition, Oskar Kokoschka's Schuler und Freunde, Zurich
In preparation: Pictorial Practices: Ways and Meanings of Paintings

Collections

Bard College, Annandale-on-the-Hudson, NY
 Beth Israel Hospital, Boston, MA
 DeCordova and Dana Museum, Lincoln, MA
 Mead Art Gallery, Amherst College, Amherst, MA
 Middlebury College, Middlebury, VT
 Rose Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA
 Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Skowhegan, ME
 University of Massachusetts, Harbor Campus, MA
 Wiggin Collection, Boston Public Library, Boston, MA



19. *Sextet*, 2000, watercolor/gouache on paper, 9 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 11 $\frac{1}{4}$ ", JA176

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21 April 2001 – 23 May 2001

Opening Reception: 21 April 2001, 3:00 to 6:00 p.m.

The public is invited to attend. The artist will be present.

PUCKER GALLERY
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www.puckergallery.com

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Sundays 1:00 to 5:00 p.m.

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