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Matthew Wong, *Going, Going, Gone*, 2019, gouache on paper, 9 × 12½ inches

The Winding Paths of Matthew Wong

An Appreciation by Todd Bradway

*“Many of the painters I admire ... are able to really paint out of themselves without the need to impress in particular. I hope I can develop the courage to get to that stage someday, as I realize the habit of simply making well-qualified work that does not really challenge some existing standards of form and aesthetics is also a symptom of the marketplace. I must always keep in mind to prioritize constant movement and experimentation over the acquisition of virtuosity.” - Matthew Wong, *Studio Critical*, 2013*

As 2020 — surely one of the most collectively surreal and traumatic of recent years, thanks to the Covid-19 pandemic — plodded to a close, the artist Matthew Wong (1984-2019) delivered to the world a metaphoric postcard

from the other side. His posthumous delivery took the form of an exhibition titled *Postcards*, which was organized by the New York gallery Karma — which represented the artist when he was alive, and now his estate — and on view at the nonprofit art space ARCH in Athens, Greece. The show consisted of twenty intimately scaled landscape paintings, ranging from 9x12 to 20x14 inches. In a year of unrelentingly bleak news reports and a seemingly unending stasis brought on by the virus, these impactful, spontaneous — perhaps searching — small works rendered in gouache acted both as a beacon cutting through our endless night as well as a poignant and melancholy reminder of the scin-

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LUIS COLAN

When I'm Not Around, An Interview by Peter Cusack

Luis Colan says of his work that there are no narratives, he's not interested in concepts and ideas, that his work is about material — the paint, the ink, the paper, and his time. Fitting his life as an artist into his life as a husband and professional, Colan uses every opportunity to move his art forward. Finding his earliest inspiration in 17th-century masters, then challenging those concepts with a foray into abstraction and color field painting, Colan creates imagery that sings, moves, and vibrates with energy, calling on the body to experience nature again. More at www.luiscolan.com.

Peter: Luis, Thank you for participating in this issue with an interview. I decided to focus on your monotypes as a way to explore your work as a whole. You've remarked that emotion is the most important quality in your work. How does emotion play into this suite of monotypes?

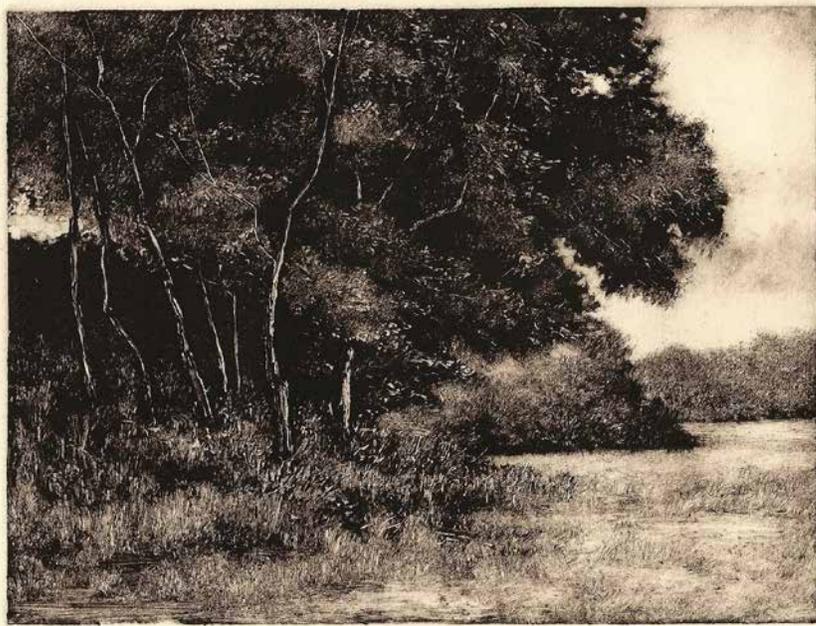
Luis: I am very happy to be a part of this issue, and I would like to thank you for including me. The monotypes are in one way or another based from imagination. They begin as pen thumbnail sketches or they materialize on the copperplate. When working from an internal source of reference there will always be a level of emotion instilled in the work, there's no way around it. When work-

es. What makes them feel so "real"?

Luis: Yes, indeed they are imaginary, but not completely. In 2009 I took up plein air and landscape painting, I spent most of my free time during the warmer months painting outdoors. While in location, I'm recording the experience and imagery in my head. I'm collecting landscapes all the time, even when I'm not painting; while I'm looking out a car or train window or walking down the street, I'm constantly seeing and recording, and once I'm ready to use these images I begin to weave them together. My husband makes fun of me and says that in my past life I must have been a tree because every time we go somewhere I look up at trees, their movement, the way light plays with the leaves; I also look up at the sky and take in the sun and just absorb that feeling. I must sound like a hippie, but that's the way I collect my information.

Peter: We've discussed the many ways, over the years, that you've hacked your artistic process to maximize your output. Can you describe for us your method of creating these and where you are working?

Luis: Time is very valuable to me, and I hate wasting "free time." I have a full-time job, and currently I'm not making a living from my art. This leaves very little time for me to focus on my work, so I have to find little pockets here and there between work, family, and other activities. I have learned to draw in the subway during my work commutes. Half an hour each way makes a good chunk of time to develop ideas for future monotypes, or even paintings. That's why I take my sketchbook everywhere. Soon as I get a few minutes, I bring it out and start working. While making the monotypes I also have to maximize the use of my time because I don't own a press. Since 2014 I have relied on the monthly monotype parties at Salmagundi Club to get work done. After a while I realized that I could get three images done in one session if I inked up three plates at once and work on them one after another and print them at the end of the night when I didn't have to wait in line for the press. I also print at my friend Robert Szot's studio once in a while. After I introduced



Above: Luis Colan, *Untitled*, 2019, monotype on Rives Heavyweight paper, 6 x 8 inches

Right: Luis Colan, *Field and Trees*, 2018, monotype on Arches Cover paper, 6 x 4 inches

ing on these landscapes I get lost in them, it's transportive, and as I wipe away ink from the plate I'm building a haven away from the hectic and rawness of the city. Unintentionally they become romantic and nostalgic.

Peter: Although these images have great fidelity and seem to depict actual locations, they are imaginative pic-



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"Field and Trees"

J.E. 2018

him to monotype, he was hooked and bought a press. When I get the chance to go over, while catching up, we get work done and have a monotype party of our own. I apply the same working method from the Salmagundi parties to get the most work done.

Peter: Many viewers might quickly describe you as a realist. Would you say this is true?

Luis: Yes I get that a lot, and when I hear it or see it written I cringe a little. No disrespect to the realists, but that is not how I approach my work. I let the materials I work with do the talking, I let them do their thing without trying to mold them into looking like something. It's all a perceptual game of textures and layers. If I had to choose a category I guess representational works fine for me.

graphite copies of masters such as Michelangelo, Raphael, and Rubens. This exhibition was huge for Hartford, it was written up in the *Hartford Courant*, which is how I found out about it. I asked my mother to take me and I was floored by the paintings on display. Caravaggio was such a genius, and the way sensuality met religion in his work was so exhilarating to see at that age. It also felt very forbidden. But beyond subject matter, it was his color and use of light that had a big impact. I remember seeing his large St. John the Baptist and the way that knee popped out of the canvas, it was almost like you could touch the flesh, and you were aware that it was made out of paint. You could see brushstrokes and incisions on the canvas. And the red cloak, man how that vibrated; it was insane.

Peter: Another artist that you've mentioned is Chardin. Does his work play a role in these monotypes?

Luis: I love Chardin, I was chasing him during my first two years of college after one of my painting teachers introduced me to his work. I could never put into words what it was about him that captivated me, until years later my boss at the time said that no one could paint air like Chardin. That's it! That was it, it clicked, and when I stop to think about it, I always painted a hazy atmospheric light source around the objects of my still life paintings, but I never knew what I was imitating. Light, air, atmosphere, moments suspended in time; those are all elements in Chardin's paintings, and although I'm not directly thinking about him when I work on my landscapes, I know that those ideas are part of how I make my images.

Peter: You've said that time drives you. What is it about time that is so compelling?

Luis: Time, that's something we all deal with one way or another. Most want to stop it, some want more of it. My case, I know that time is very limited, and I'm not just talking about having a full-time

job, but on a larger scale. I'm not sure how much time I have on this earth. I know that's grim to think about, but life is not guaranteed to any one of us. I may go on to live a long life, or God forbid something could happen to me sooner than expected. In any case, what did you, or I, do with that time? This is why I always put a lot of pressure on myself to get as much as I can done. But it's not just quantity I'm after, I also have to be proud of the quality of work I put out. In the end, after I'm gone, it is my work that will speak for me when I'm not around.

Peter: Indeed, truth. Thank you, Luis.

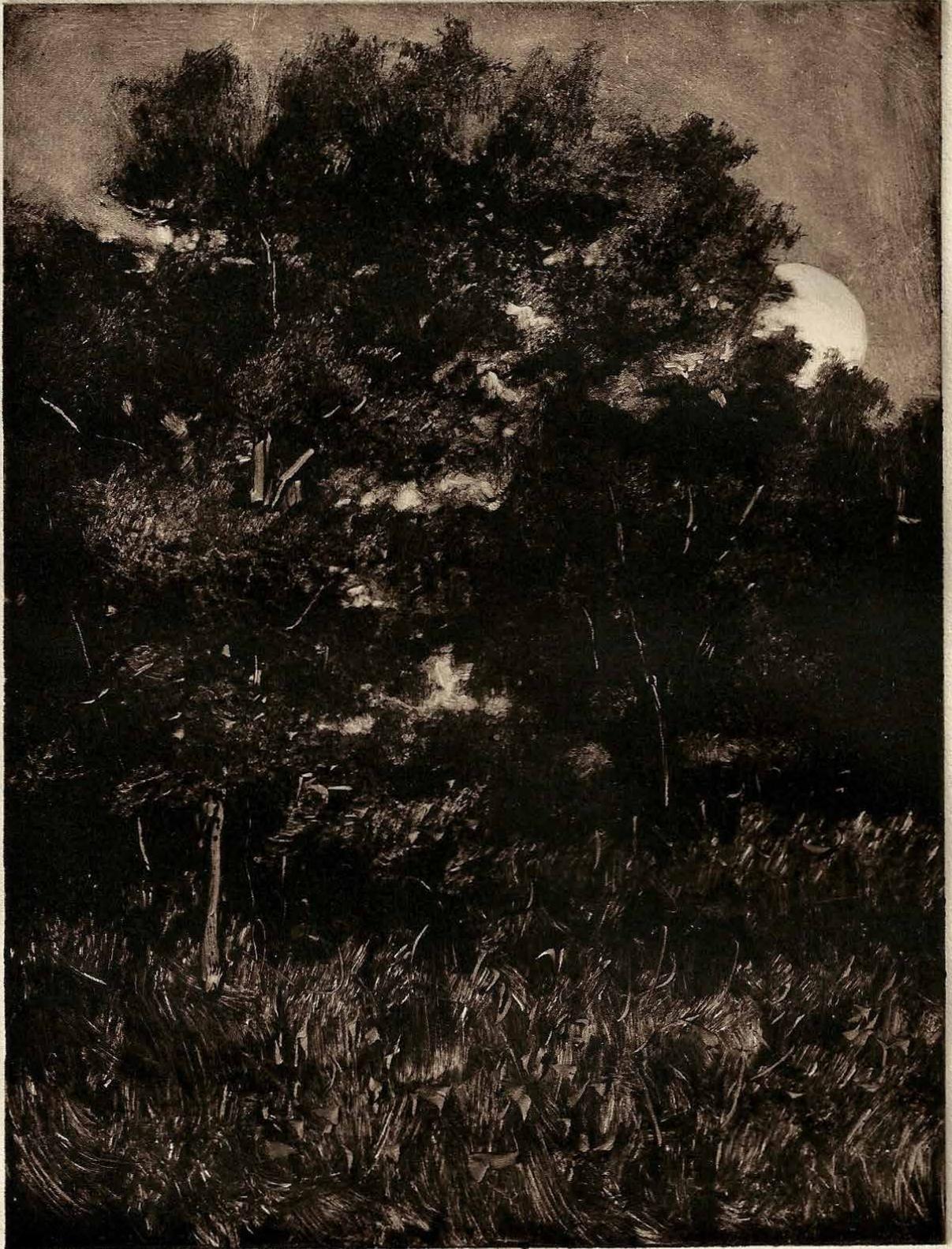


Luis Colan, *Al Borde de in Bosque II*, 2017, monotype on Rives Heavyweight paper, 8 x 10 inches

Luis Colan, *Moonrise IV*, 2018, monotype on Rives Heavyweight paper, 8 x 6 inches

Peter: Can you describe for us your early interest in the 17th-century masters and Caravaggio?

Luis: At a very young age I was drawn to moody and dramatic paintings. I think this goes back to seeing colonial baroque paintings in Peru while I was growing up. Many years later, after my family moved to Connecticut, the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art mounted a large and very important exhibition titled "Caravaggio and His Italian Followers." I must have been 15 or 16 and I had already started digging through art history books in my high school library. Back then I was making



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"Moonrise IV"

LE 2018

The Winding Paths of Matthew Wong

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tillating talent the world lost the year before.

Matthew Wong was a Canadian-born, self-taught artist who, after studying photography in Hong Kong, turned his attention to painting. From the start he was an omnivorous devourer of art history and techniques with the primary source of his painterly education being “Facebook, Tumblr, Instagram, and the reference section of the Hong Kong Public Library’s Central Branch.” Facebook in particular, as he told the blog *Studio Critical* in 2013, helped bring him “out of isolation and put images on public circulation for anyone to access and have a dialogue with.”

Wong’s paintings from his last three years reveal the lessons learned from established and historically important artists, such as Lois Dodd, Marsden Hartley, Edvard Munch, Alex Katz, and Vincent Van Gogh, and as you look closely at his landscapes you may see other reference points — the birch trees of Gustav Klimt, the Mediterranean landscapes of Henri Matisse and the repetitive impasto strokes of Yayoi Kusama, for example. Despite only beginning to paint around 2012, he generated an estimated 1,000 works before tragically taking his own life in October 2019 at the age of 35.

Matthew Wong’s paintings first entered my sightline in 2017 while I was researching the book *Landscape Painting Now* (D.A.P., 2019), within which his work was included. After having come across his work, I remember being frustrated that there wasn’t much to be found in print on him, nor were there significant traces of a digital footprint. There was a *New York Times* article reproducing the *Last Summer in Santa Monica* (2017) — a medium-size, nearly abstract seascape composed of nine of his trademark color bands, starting from umber browns at top, progressing to warm oranges, cool greens, and then ochres, with just a ghostlike rendering of the moon and a bird — but little else that gave a clear picture of what he was about, though at the same time I was intrigued as it was apparent that he deserved a much closer look.

This was especially evident when considering his unique sense of color, his approach to composition and mark-making, and perhaps most of all, the emotional tenor of the work. Like many great artists, his work was both borrowing from and nodding toward the past while clearly being of today, with a “post-Pop” quality that linked him to artists such as Katz and David Hockney. His paintings exhibit a lightness of touch and a confidence in their unusual, emotionally charged form sense, and are fearless in their use of vibrant, hallucinatory color, which link him to the aforementioned artists, but at the same time his work has an unavoidable emotional weight and a heavy melancholy. As research for the book continued, more information began to emerge as his career rocketed off, culminating in his first solo exhibition at Karma in 2018, which received overwhelmingly rave reviews, including by the critic Jerry Saltz, who referred to it as “one of the most impressive solo New York debuts I’ve seen in a while.”

*

The *Postcard* paintings had all been made by Matthew Wong in 2019 in preparation for what would eventually become the 2020 exhibition at ARCH.

Each work was created using gouache, the opaque watercolor which was clearly well suited to his way of working; the medium can be used with more spontaneity than oil paint but with an increased painterly substance and body than watercolor. As is consistent with much of Wong’s output, each of the dreamlike landscapes depicts a place drawn from the artist’s memories or completely imagined. Viewing these works within the context of the oeuvre Wong left behind, one can see that they are filled with his favored motifs — drifting icebergs, crescent moons, windswept trees, and solitary figures traveling empty paths — and showcase his full toolkit of formal devices, including distorted perspectives, pointillist dabs and dots, radiant washes, and dancing hatch marks.

Although the *Postcard* paintings related to Wong’s earlier works, witnessing the works in the year of the pandemic



*Matthew Wong, Diver, 2019,
gouache on paper, 16 × 12½ inches*



Matthew Wong, *Figure in a Night Landscape*, 2017, oil on canvas, 48 × 72 inches

lent them extra potency, making them particularly timely as their haunting spirit, their depictions of loneliness and separation, acted as something of a balm for our condition, as well as a corrective to the dominant narratives swirling around Wong’s work in the media’s arts coverage for most of the year. If, like me, you follow the global happenings in the art world closely — or even if you don’t — there is a good chance you encountered at least one headline like these:

“Canadian artist Matthew Wong died too soon last October. His works are now fetching stratospheric sums at auction”

“A Matthew Wong Painting Just Sold at Christie’s for a Record \$4.5 Million, Marking a Frenzied Turning Point in the Late Artist’s Market”

“Who is Auction Juggernaut Matthew Wong?”

Normally, I would read such articles with a passing curiosity; they wouldn’t typically elicit a strong feeling either way, perhaps because, for me, they are something more akin to perusing reports on the stock market or scanning the gossip pages of *US Weekly*. However, this time, these articles brought on a combination of frustration and sadness. The earliest of these articles emerged in the spring of 2020, their frequency increasing through the summer as several of Wong’s canvases, including his masterful *Realm*

of *Appearances* (2018), sold at auction for an astounding seven figures, and then finally culminating in a fervor at the close of the year when *River at Dusk* (2018) sold for a mind-numbing \$4.9 million. When the dust settled, no fewer than twenty-four Wong works (16 paintings, seven works on paper, and a painted book) had sold through the three largest auction houses (Christie’s, Phillips and Sotheby’s). As the records toppled, the coverage in the media intensified, making it harder to ignore.

Forgotten in all the reporting seemed to be the essence of the artist himself. Each article contained the same recycled biography and the new numbers; reading them left me with a nagging feeling that something was being lost. Perhaps it was because readers were learning about him through this type of financial reporting. More likely it was the grotesque aspect of the speculation happening so quickly after his passing. Looking at social media, it appeared that I was not alone in my reaction. For many who knew Matthew personally or had a deep appreciation of his paintings, these articles resonated with a sensationalism that was unsettling. The problem seemed not to be so much the astronomical prices themselves but the fact that the works were being flipped by collectors so quickly after they were made and acquired. Flipping — the selling of art for a quick profit within five to ten years of a work being made or acquired — has been a hot-button issue in the art world, and according to industry insiders this phenomenon is not considered healthy for the market, especially for emerging

artists, as it often corrupts their trajectory.

Of all the commentary on the Wong auction sales, the collector, curator, and writer Kenny Schachter came the closest to describing what I felt when he wrote for *The Art Newspaper* that what was happening was “morose speculation” within markets that have “no motivations other than opportunism and greed.” The consternation was amplified by the fact that almost none of the reporting discussed the pertinent issues surrounding the flipping of the work, which was leading to the heights that were reached. What was lost were the essential aspects of the artist—his sensitive nature, his innate curiosity, his highly personal yet ambitious approach to making paintings, and his obvious, and deep respect for other artists and art history. Simply put, Wong was at the polar opposite of the machinations and manipulations taking place in the global marketplace.

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The landscape paintings of Matthew Wong often depict winding paths, many times with solitary, faceless figures that are usually visible to the viewer, though at times woven into — or entrapped within — his marks. These figures could be read as stand-ins for the artist himself, as the critic John Yau astutely pointed out in *Hyperallergic*: “the figures, which disturb the landscape, can be read as surrogates for the artist working his way through the landscape of art.”

Even when there is an absence of figures, the path itself becomes a narrative device; an expression of an inner psychological state that weaves along it. Wong’s 2018 Karma exhibition included a number of path-driven works including *The Bright Winding Path* (2017), where the picture plane is tilted up, one lone figure making his way up the path flanked on either side by a patterned terrain that brings to mind the graphic language of Yayoi Kusama’s Infinity Net paintings. At other times, as in the haunting *Figure in a Night Landscape* (2017), figures wander off the path, trapped in a forest of no visible escape.

The winding paths weave their way through many of the Postcard works. In *The Gloaming* (2019) an empty, pale mauve path meanders through the center, viewed through what appears to be a window framing the landscape on two sides. The heated orange sky radiates behind both the

hills and a single tree, with branches that radiate out like veins towards the sky, poignantly capturing the dramatic moment when the sun recedes from sight and night creeps in. In the darkly titled and more naturalistically rendered *Going, Going, Gone* (2019), a hatted figure, possibly on horseback, lumbers towards a setting sun. The dusty sienna brown landscape recalls for that a Western film, with the lonesome cowboy riding off into the credits.

The path in *A Walk by the Sea* (2019) is hidden by a shadowy beach in the foreground as two figures in the far distance descend toward a hypnotic orange and yellow-banded sky and a foreboding ocean. With its sense of stillness and warm light, Wong’s work brings to mind the Norwegian Romantic painter Thomas Fernley’s *Old Birch Tree at Sognefjord* (1839), with its depiction of two figures in the distance viewing a dramatic sunset. However, here the simplicity of the compositional structure and dark void filling the foreground add emotional

weight to the journey the travelers are embarking on — unlike the peaceful contemplation in Fernley’s work, one is left with a sense of dread that returning may not be an option.

Diver (2019) contains many of the characteristics of the best of Wong’s works — a dramatic arrangement composed of dynamic dabs and strokes. Although not depicting a path of soil and rock, here a waterfall stands in, dividing the image while lending narrative and compositional force. As in Wayne Thiebaud’s paintings from the 1960s of rocky cliffs, Wong disregards traditional perspective, flattening the visual field leaving the viewer without a clear foothold. The surrounding landscape follows the verticality of the waterfall as if existing on the same plane. A lone figure plunges but is held in stasis three-quarters of the way down, on the verge of falling from our view forever. Like Thiebaud — as well as Jasper Johns and his large-scale drawing *Diver* (1962-3)—Wong makes gravity a subject of the work; the viewer can’t help but have a somatic response to this depiction of unbreakable free fall. Life and death are held in the balance, the figure not only a proxy for the artist himself but also a simulacrum for all of us who witnessed 2020, frozen in place, temporarily, while, like the diver, suspended on our journeys.



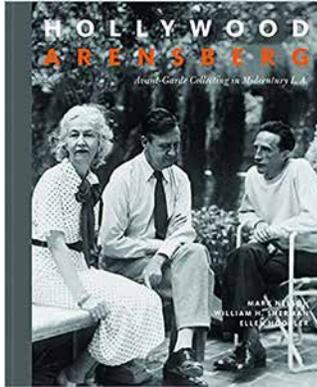
Matthew Wong, *A Walk by the Sea*, 2019,
gouache on paper, 12½ × 16 inches

Modernism in Lotus Land

Hollywood Arensberg: Avant-Garde Collecting in Midcentury L.A.

Essays by Mark Nelson, William H. Sherman, and Ellen Hoobler

Getty Research Institute, 2020



The artists and writers who gathered at the New York apartment of Walter and Louise Arensberg on East 67th Street formed one of the seminal avant-garde salons of the early 20th century. In 1921 the couple relocated to Los Angeles, and in 1927 they bought the then-newish Med-

iterranean Revival mansion at 7065 Hillside Avenue in Hollywood. There they installed their growing collection, which was acquired in 1950 by the Philadelphia Museum of Art. These events frame the scope of *Hollywood Arensberg*, an utterly absorbing study of the collection's installation in the Hillside Avenue house.

If collecting is a kind of derangement, the Arensbergs (Walter first, then Louise) lost it at the 1913 Armory Show. Photos of the apartment taken just a few years later reveal walls densely hung with works by leading European Modernists as well as figures of the New York Dada group — in particular, Marcel Duchamp. The critic Henry McBride marveled that “not only a perfect balance but a hitherto unheard of harmony has been attained.” (Family money, primarily from Louise's side, provided the means and allowed the time for this pursuit, in which they were greatly aided by Duchamp.) The Hollywood house allowed the Arensbergs to take their flair for curatorial copiousness to another level entirely.

Hollywood Arensberg's 431 pages consists of scores of photographs, primarily black-and-white, taken during the postwar years, recording the collection's installation in nearly every room in this capacious, art-filled structure. (There are no photos of the bathrooms, though apparently they, too, were jammed with art.) Around 1940, the couple shifted their focus to acquiring pre-Columbian artifacts; by mid-century, the collection exceeded a thousand works. The authors use a chessboard metaphor to relate the complexities of movement and placement to Walter's enthusiasm for games, cryptography, and literary puzzles. But rationality can't explain the aptness of the proximity, for example, of Duchamp's *Chocolate Grinder No. 1* (1913) to a compact, chunky Olmec carved-stone figure

— and to the dozens of other works in the vicinity.

Though personally publicity-averse, the Arensbergs were true believers in the new art — of which there was little then in town — and wanted the public to see it. In the 1981 documentary film *Philip Guston: A Life Lived*, the painter recalls visiting the Arensbergs as a young artist growing up in L.A.: “There was one source of inspiration ... Walter Arensberg, who had perhaps the only collection of modern art there ... it was the first time I had seen Picassos and Miros, Brancusi, Klee — the whole School of Paris modern movement ...” Guston adds that it was seeing the Arensbergs' de Chiricos that made him want to be a painter: “I felt as if I'd come home.”

The photographs assembled for this book are the work of seven individuals, including Floyd Harold Faxson, whom the couple hired to document their inventory; Karl Bissinger, on assignment for the short-lived monthly magazine *Flair*; Frederick Richard Dapprich, an innovative architectural photographer esteemed by Rudolf Schindler and Julius Shulman, shooting for *Vogue*; as well as the more broadly accomplished artists Charles Sheeler — an habitu  of the New York salon whose paintings the Arensbergs had seen at the Armory Show — and Beatrice Wood, a close friend, known as “the Mama of Dada.” The scholarly apparatus of the book includes notes on the dating and location of photographs, notes on selected objects, and an extensive bibliography.

A previously unpublished interview by Kenneth Ross, director of the municipal office that became the Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs, provides insight into the couple's approach to collecting. Walter, thinking, perhaps, of their early American folk portraits, Romantic landscape paintings, Renaissance altarpieces, and Oriental rugs, says, “We had a lot of things we liked, but we didn't buy them on a logical scheme or program. If it turned out to be a logical scheme, it was subconscious.”

By the time of this interview, probably around 1951, the Arensbergs had found a permanent home for the collection at the PMA. It opened to the public in 1954, but by then Walter and Louise had died, a few months apart. The physical objects, transported to Philadelphia, are preserved intact, but not the idiosyncratic interrelatedness that colored their meanings on Hillside Avenue. *Hollywood Arensberg* makes a convincing case that, to some extent, the content of a work of art is indelibly marked by its context.

PROCESS PAGE

A Case Study by Ruth Rosengarten, London, UK

Evocative Objects



Mommy



My Ponytail

My practice used to be bifurcated: writing on the one hand, studio on the other. Now, I see making and editing images (photographs, drawings) and writing as part of a single continuum. I have been working on evocative objects for about two years. The storied objects that unleash my trains of association and unfurling narratives are as idiosyncratic as anyone else's private relics.

A severed ponytail, a dog-chewed book, a cigarette lighter, a hairbrush, a napkin in its ring, crumpled pyjamas, a photograph album, a pile of letters, a pair of shoes: these evocative objects are things that enable me to experience my self as I inhabit my particular world. Each thing is a survivor, testifying to a period in my past, and

thus to my own survival as a narrator. They speak about the way I rub along, living in things, as Virginia Woolf puts it. The self finds and defines, and then re-finds and re-defines itself in the process of assigning shifting mental and emotional places to and for things. Loved, unloved, loved again perhaps. We attach ourselves to objects because of their perceived stability. The very thingness of our evocative objects, their staunch assertion of presence, confers the fantasy of stability on the subject, on me.



Ian's pyjamas



Ian's napkin

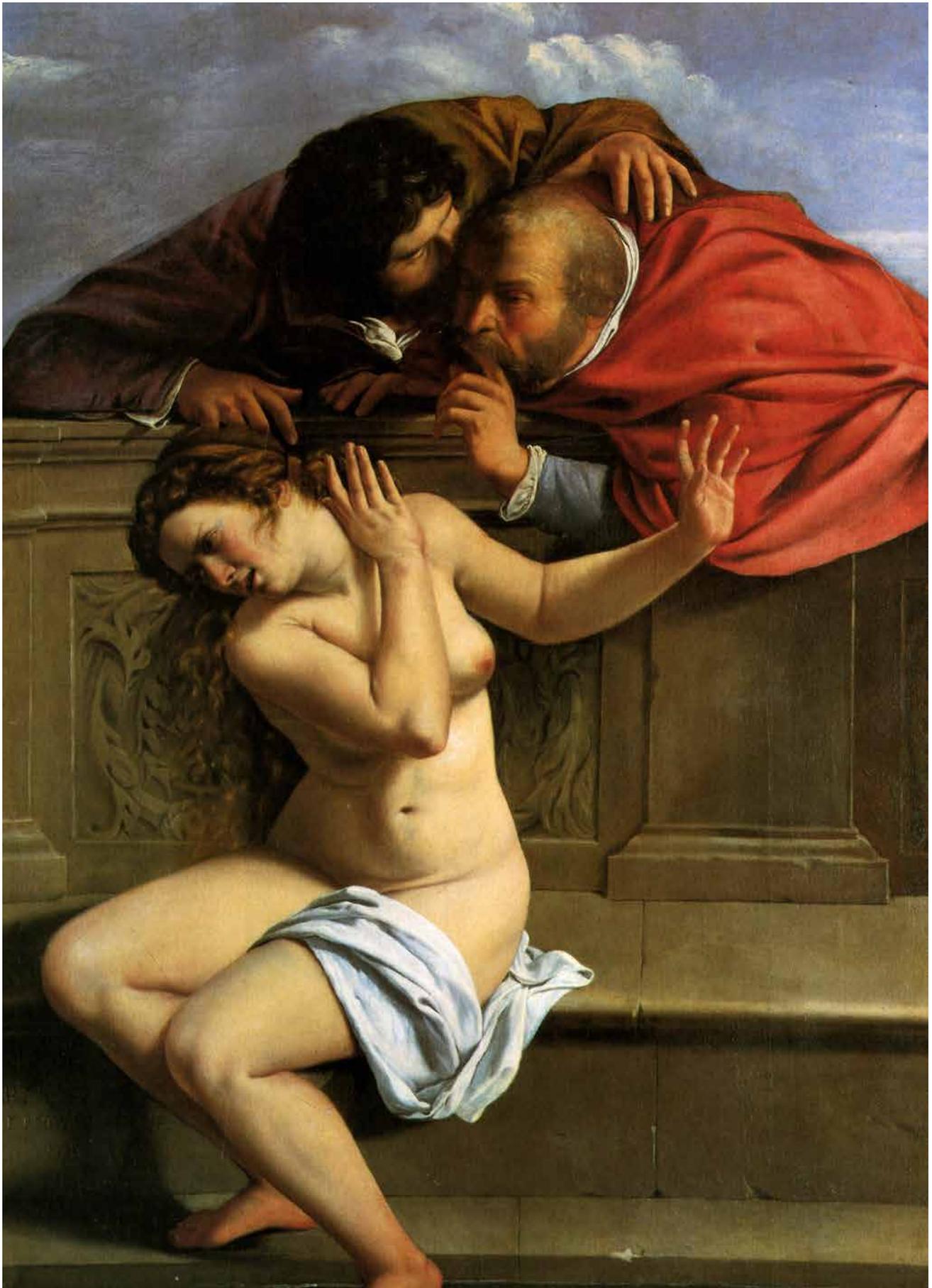


Dad's hairbrush



My baby book

In order to write about these objects – to experience them in a mediated, communicable way – I need to photograph them first, as if to fix and contain them, to frame them. I am particular in how I do this. I want the ground to be neutral, white; I want the light to be soft and even. No horizon line. I don't want these images to be too much like art. Still, their quality as images matters: they are not snapshots. I cannot begin the process of mnemonic unwinding and un-forgetting without first positioning the image at the start of a blank document. Scaling and centring it; separating it from the luminous page.



Artemisia Gentileschi, *Susanna and the Elders*, 1610, oil on canvas, 67 × 47 inches

Lives of the Artist

Artemisia Gentileschi by Lisa Zeiger

“All my life I considered myself Rahel and nothing else.”
—Hannah Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen, The Life of a Jewess*

Behind the paintings of Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1653), on exhibit until January 24, 2021, at the National Gallery in London, the artist herself lies in wait, her life story as extreme as her greatest works.

To learn more about her life, I chose to read Anna Banti’s 1953 novel, *Artemisia*, not least because Susan Sontag wrote an introduction to it in 2003. Sontag’s interpretation of *Artemisia* as a tale of two minds — author and remote subject — reminded me of Hannah Arendt’s first book, a biography of Rahel Varnhagen, a late 18th century German *saloniste*. Varnhagen’s Jewishness was a disadvantage and distinction she would “not have missed,” as she said on her deathbed. Arendt adored Rahel as her “closest friend, though she had been dead over one hundred years.”

Artemisia begins in August 1944 in Florence, where Banti sits, insensate from horror and dispossessed, in the Boboli Gardens at 4 a.m., wearing only a nightdress. After the fall of Mussolini’s government, the Nazis detonated mines all along the Arno, destroying its ancient bridges before evacuating Florence. Banti herself is all but destroyed, for her house has just been blown to pieces by the Germans. Interred in its rubble is the manuscript of her first novel, *Artemisia*, begun in 1939.

Banti writes the book all over again, as a votive to Artemisia, who infiltrates her every thought. Their conversations, unheard by others, course beneath Banti’s everyday life. We may infer that the second *Artemisia* surpasses the buried manuscript, deepened as it had to be by Banti’s collision with terror and loss.

Banti is a skilled ventriloquist. She gives us a cascade of Artemisia’s inner reflections, an ever more exacting inquiry into how an artist must live. Artemisia’s unsparing self-examination is complicated by her sex, which adds new imperatives and subtracts ancient comforts.

Banti’s rendition of Artemisia’s dates, places, and significant relationships departs markedly, however, from the meticulously charted information in nonfiction biographies. But precisely because distanced, verified histories of Artemisia focus on external facts, they are prone to be less insightful. Banti’s novel, in contrast, records Artemisia’s interiority; necessarily invented, powerfully convincing.

Despite the author’s errors of fact; or possibly her deliberate exercise of creative license, *Artemisia*’s pages are thick with fine-tuned truths — if not *the* truth. Artemisia’s innermost reflections flow purely from her experience, never from philosophy or literature, for she did not learn to read until her mid-twenties in Florence.

In 1611, when she was seventeen, Artemisia was raped by Agostino Tassi in her own family’s house in Rome. Tassi was a much older artist friend of her father, the celebrated painter Orazio Gentileschi. After plundering her virginity, Tassi made empty promises of marriage to Artemisia, lulling her into further sexual relations. When Tassi reneged on the marriage, Orazio pressed charges.

After testing Artemisia’s veracity with thumbscrews, the court believed her testimony that before the rape, she had been a virgin. Had she been otherwise, the verdict would have gone against her despite the rape. Indeed, only a virgin could press charges at all. For his crime, Tassi was sentenced to exile but remained in Rome.

Down the centuries, history has fixed upon the rape of Artemisia as the origin of the cold female violence in her paintings; famously, no fewer than six depict the biblical episode of Judith beheading Holofernes. And, for a time, painting well was the best revenge for a young woman’s ransacked virginity. Shamed but not ashamed, Artemisia mourned her honor with dignity and moved on, shedding her hairshirt of violation and calumny.

After Artemisia won her case, Orazio hastily married her off to Antonio Stiattesi, a childhood friend of lower social status. Orazio rushed the marriage to repair Artemisia’s reputation. Banti claims that Artemisia spent her wedding night alone in her bed at Orazio’s house.

In 1612, Artemisia left for Florence, staying eight years. According to Banti, Artemisia never lived there with Antonio. She describes Artemisia’s Florentine period as almost conventual, confined to the company of her female servants and a few aristocratic gossips, some of them ladies she painted.

In fact, in Florence Artemisia not only lived with Antonio, she gave birth to his five children, three of whom died. She also had a passionate affair with one of her noble patrons, Francesco Maria Maringhi, first revealed to the world by the discovery in 2011 of 36 letters dating from 1616 to 1620.

Artemisia’s life in Florence was anything but sequestered. As her art flowered, proliferated, and sold, the art-

ist herself was received with admiration and respect by the opulent Florentine courts and the House of Medici, and accepted with surprising alacrity by her peers, major artists who all were men.

While Artemisia circulated adroitly within the all-male society of the art world, in the other, sovereign world of her studio, she exerted an unprecedented naturalism in depicting the female face and form. More radical still was her unfettered portrayal of women as forceful beings. At the same time, she was noted for her virtuosity in reproducing the traditional accoutrements of femininity: fluid drapery, rich brocades, and armatures of jewels worn by the noble ladies who sat for her. Artemisia knew every facet of the feminine, illuminating its every variegation and paradox.

As a famous court painter, Artemisia executed one masterpiece after another, paintings now enshrined in great museums, among them the Wadsworth Atheneum, the Palazzo Pitti, the Uffizi Gallery, and the Museo di Capodimonte in Naples. Major works of her Florentine period include *The Conversion of the Magdalene*, *Self-Portrait as a Lute Player*, and her three most famous renditions of Judith: *Judith and her Maidservant*; and two paintings of *Judith Beheading Holofernes*. She became the first woman to be inducted into the elite *Accademia e Compagnia delle Arti del Disegno*. As the sole woman encircled by the most important artists of the day, Artemisia was what today we would call an icon.

In Banti's narrative, Artemisia leaves Florence in 1620 to rejoin in Rome the husband she left at the altar eight years before, now a stranger to her. Banti imbues their reunion with pleasures that might have been, describing a surprising, short-lived idyll Artemisia shares with her once cast-off husband. In this shy, unremarkable man Artemisia finds emotional peace; in cohabitation, profound comfort. Living with Antonio, Artemisia slowly falls in love

with him.

As the couple settle into the squalor of his father's flat, with his fishwife spouse, obstreperous sons, and visiting pimps and thieves. Artemisia relaxes into unmixed womanhood for the first and last time in her life. For a season, her talent lies low.

But then she and Antonio leave the quiet room they have cordoned off within his father's rambunctious hovel, and everything changes. Artemisia is set up in an aristocratic house provided by a noble patron, and her calling awakens with redoubled ambition. The new house is equipped with liveried servants who eavesdrop and hover, Artemisia's cadging private secretary, and a splendid carriage, her favorite indulgence.

The pomp of the house intimidates Antonio, with his humble roots and bearing. Annoyed by Antonio's maladapted presence, Artemisia hurls at her husband a savage diatribe, detonating her marriage in earshot of the servants. Antonio does not desert Artemisia. He flees.

After Antonio has gone, Artemisia discovers she is pregnant, one more predicament to navigate alone. She laments Antonio's leaving, a sorrow she has brought on herself.

In pregnancy Artemisia grows more beautiful by the day, basking in her unfamiliar fullness. Regret falls away; ripeness is all. She gives birth to a girl whom, according to Banti, she names Porziella. Banti erroneously asserts that Porziella was Artemisia's only child. Raised in a convent school, the daughter will love the nuns and disdain her mother.

Mainstream art history gives a very different story of Artemisia's three years in Rome. Antonio does vanish from her timeline in 1623, but it is unknown why.

But just after arriving in Rome in 1620, Artemisia suffered a more piercing emotional loss. Her father Orazio, her artistic idol, teacher, and unchallenged critic, left for



Artemisia Gentileschi, *Portrait of a Lady, Three-Quarter Length Seated*, 1620, oil on canvas, 51 x 38 inches

Genoa, never returning to Rome. Artemisia's daughterly love for Orazio was doubly consecrated by the lifetime they shared as painters. Her father was present and all-powerful to Artemisia even from a great distance.

In Rome, Artemisia's career became a phenomenon, a widening constellation that shone for all to see, starred with artistic splendor and international patronage. The only patronage Artemisia did not gain in Rome was that of Pope Urban VIII, who was more impressed by large-scale decorative altar works and ceiling murals than by easel painting, Artemisia's metier.

But she was nonetheless a nonpareil doyenne of the art world. To describe her as "unrivaled" is mistaken because it implies she faced contenders. There were none. I am reminded of the title of Marina Warner's book about the Virgin Mary: *Alone of All Her Sex*.

A variety of styles were at large in Rome, for numbers of artists from other parts of Europe and Italy had taken up residence in the Eternal City. The stillness of composition in Northern painting was especially startling to Italian eyes. They remained in awe of Caravaggio, whose composition grew organically from the motion of protagonists caught in heated action.

Artemisia remained in Rome until 1626 or 1627, afterwards moving to Venice, where she lived for three years. In 1630, she decamped to Naples, where she stayed until her death in 1656, her longest commitment to any city.

In 1638, in her mid-forties, Artemisia had lived in Naples for eight years. She vowed to herself to see her father, absent now for nearly two decades. From Genoa Orazio had moved on to Paris, where he was established at the court of Marie de Medici. Now in London, Orazio was the most favored painter at the court of Charles I and Queen Henrietta. Artemisia was beside herself with urgency to be with Orazio. "I decided to leave in order to bring my life and my work to a close near my father."

Artemisia felt wounded by Orazio, as if he were a god who had forsaken her for his devotional ascent toward the greatest painting and patronage he could master. Yet during his long absence, Artemisia, too, had scaled sheer verticals, a slippery climb to a shimmering career. Father and daughter had followed the same pattern: peripatetic lives designed to serve art, patrons, and fame, sacrificing all that was safe or settled. As with Caravaggio, the greatest painterly influence upon them both, the endeavor of art drove them without mercy from place to place; without, of course, Caravaggio's added impetus of escaping punishment for his crimes.

Artemisia's voyage by sea from Naples was harsh, the passengers coarse. At Genoa she changed ships, sailing to Beaune, then making her way through France to Paris.

In London, Orazio's untidy, interesting room in the queen's palace was filled with venerable furniture utterly mismatched in style. In his studio dwelling, Artemis-

ia found the forgotten freedom of being Orazio's pupil once more. She ceased thinking of the future, wholly consumed by her father's presence and her love of doing for him. His canvases lay everywhere, but he hid from Artemisia whatever he was painting. His unspoken law forbade her to look at his canvases finished or unfinished. In hurried secrecy, she did.

Till the end of her life, Artemisia exalted Orazio as her artist-idol. Her only teacher, Orazio was sparing with praise, but when once, in London, he came out with it, to Artemisia it was a glittering prize, the one victory she took to heart, surpassing the gifts of kings.

Orazio died suddenly one night in 1639, Artemisia kneeling before him in his last minutes. She took his hand and kissed it from love, but also from an emotion that for Artemisia went deeper still: "the total devotion of a pupil."

In the darkest predicaments Artemisia always discovered a hidden good that served her art. Even the rape and the trial had resulted in a peculiar liberation. As a disgraced woman, "I at least had the right to be as free as a man." The shadow side of her freedom was loneliness, sealed by her renegade status as a female artist. Sontag points out that to Banti, neither rape nor marriage nor motherhood was at the center of Artemisia's life. "It is her solitude, the inexorable result of her commitment to her art," writes Sontag.

Like a chatelaine jangling a ring heavy with keys, Artemisia held together a quartet of commitments each one clanging against the others. Yet all of them were indispensable to the passionate, triumphant existence she desired.

In the secret workshop of her solitude she arranged and rearranged the essentials of herself—daughter, wife, mother, artist—as if mapping a composition on canvas before beginning to paint.

Alone with her lives, Artemisia brokered with care their delicate truce.

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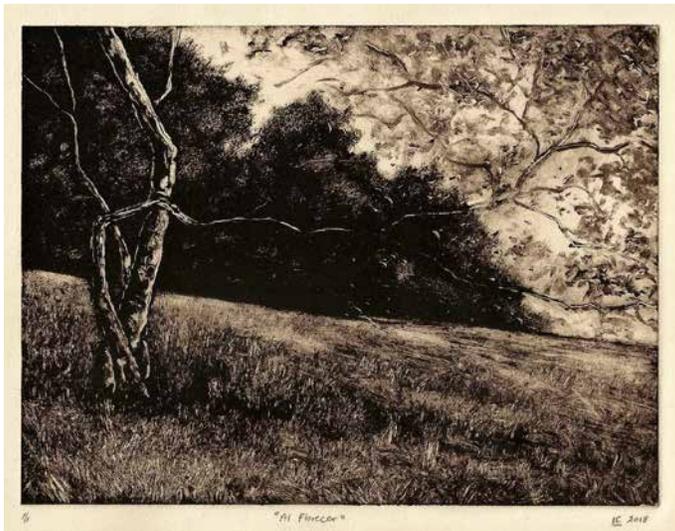
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Luis Colan, *Al Florecer*, 2018, monotype on Rives Heavyweight paper,
6 x 8 inches, Private Collection

*I think that I shall never see
A poem lovely as a tree.*

*A tree whose hungry mouth is prest
Against the earth's sweet flowing breast;*

*A tree that looks at God all day,
And lifts her leafy arms to pray;*

*A tree that may in Summer wear
A nest of robins in her hair;*

*Upon whose bosom snow has lain;
Who intimately lives with rain.*

*Poems are made by fools like me,
But only God can make a tree.*

— *Trees*
Joyce Kilmer

