OMEN

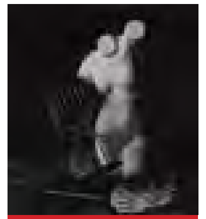
№13

Spring 2015

Juano Diaz
Mariano Rennella
Antonio Lopez
Shelley Wildeman
Pamela Talese
Claudia Summers
Marcus Leatherdale
John Hemingway

Omen Magazine

Omen is a visual online magazine, an international showcase for multi-medium creativity. Paying homage to the strikingly visual in art, photography, fashion and design, Omen also presents literature, music, hybrid and interstitial forms. The magazine aspires to explore and expose a vast array of artistically forceful and thought-provoking work, much of which is off the commercial radar, and that often eludes simple and hierarchal classification. Whether the artists are up-and-coming, widely recognized, or decidedly underground, Omen focuses on the distinctive creativity of their work, the unifying context being the power of art to inspire. To this end, the magazine curates and juxtaposes a heterogeneous collection from sources and contributors around the globe for a community that transcends geographic parameters. Uniting the Omen audience is its enthusiasm for that which, however renegade or variant in form, might be considered "beautiful."



Cover
Lady Luck
Marcus Leatherdale

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Editor's Note

The previous issue of Omen 12 marked a new stage in the magazine's evolution, opening up the parameters for presenting work in a more visually engaging format. Indeed response to the issue has been the most enthusiastic to date, owing as much to the magazine's expanded viewing versatility and facilitated navigation, as to the curated array of works in different mediums. As well as delighting many of our seasoned followers, Omen 12 brought the magazine many new visitors. This has proven immensely satisfying to both Graphic Editor James Caldwell and myself, inspiring us in turn to make Omen 13 the most aesthetically stimulating issue possible.

The range of artists and oeuvres included herein is a bit overwhelming to me, and I'm honored to present them all in one issue. It's truly a fantastic group show in a vast, ideal gallery space – except that the walls are digital. From the stunning psychoactive visions of emerging artist Juano Diaz, to Pamela Talese's haunting paintings of New York City architectural sites, to the abstracted urbanscapes of Shelly Wildeman's photo-based works, to Mariano Rellenna's palpably atmospheric photographs of Varanasi's burning ghat, moving through the issue reminds me of why I was first impelled by the visual arts. With this in mind, included also is a selection of photographic works from my New York period, hopefully helping contextualize and connect mine and the various other artists' journeys from diverse backgrounds and disciplines to these virtual pages.

Punctuating the visuals are an excerpt from John Hemingway's new memoir reflecting on his grandfather Ernest Hemingway, and an evocative poetic piece from writer Claudia Summers. (Lastly, no doubt many Omen viewers will be thrilled to find a special tribute to Antonio Lopez, the most influential illustrator to come out of the New York art and fashion scene of the 70s.) Many thanks to all who have contributed to Omen 13, and to you who read these words. May you find suitable inspiration to bring you back again.

Marcus Leatherdale

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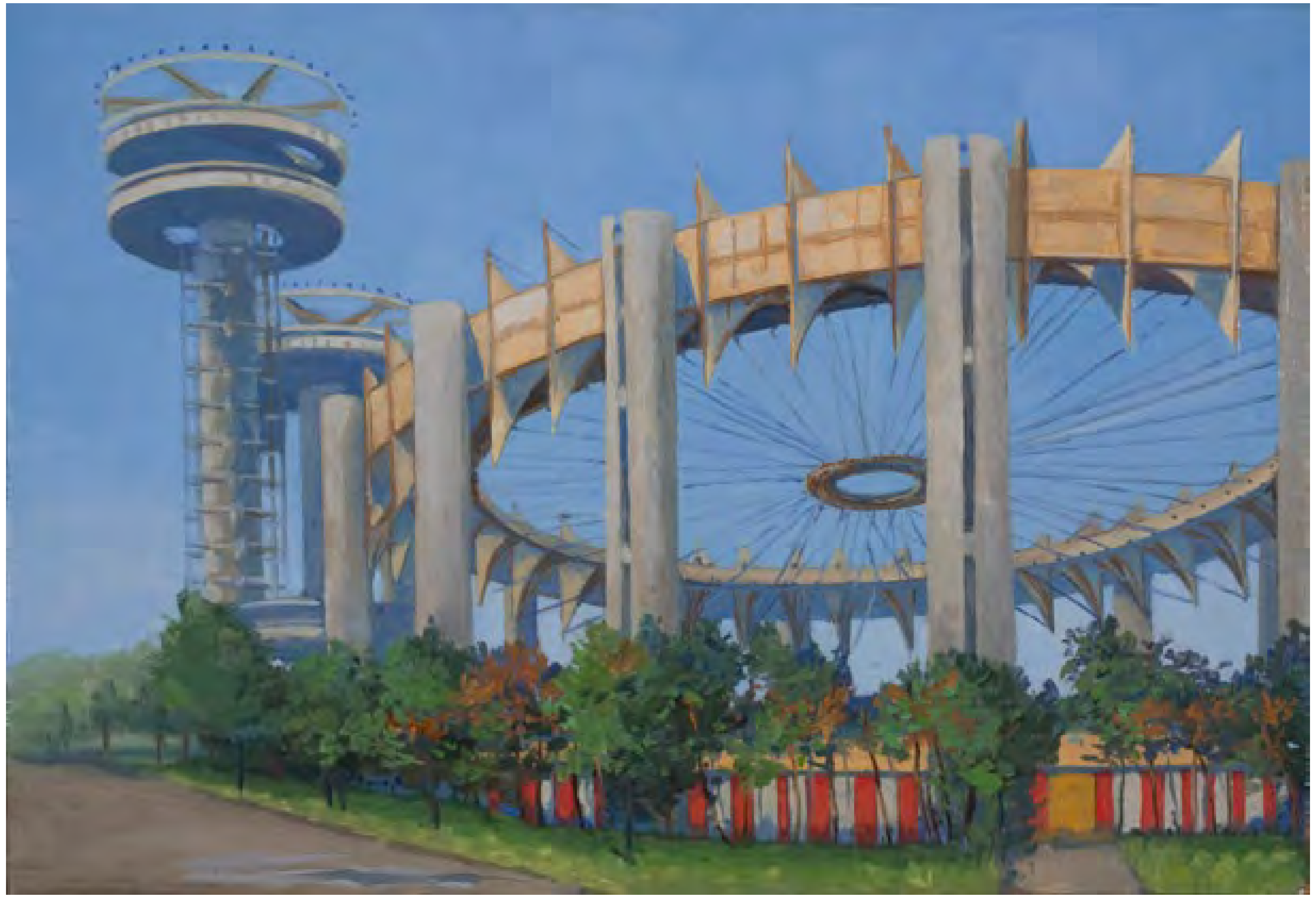
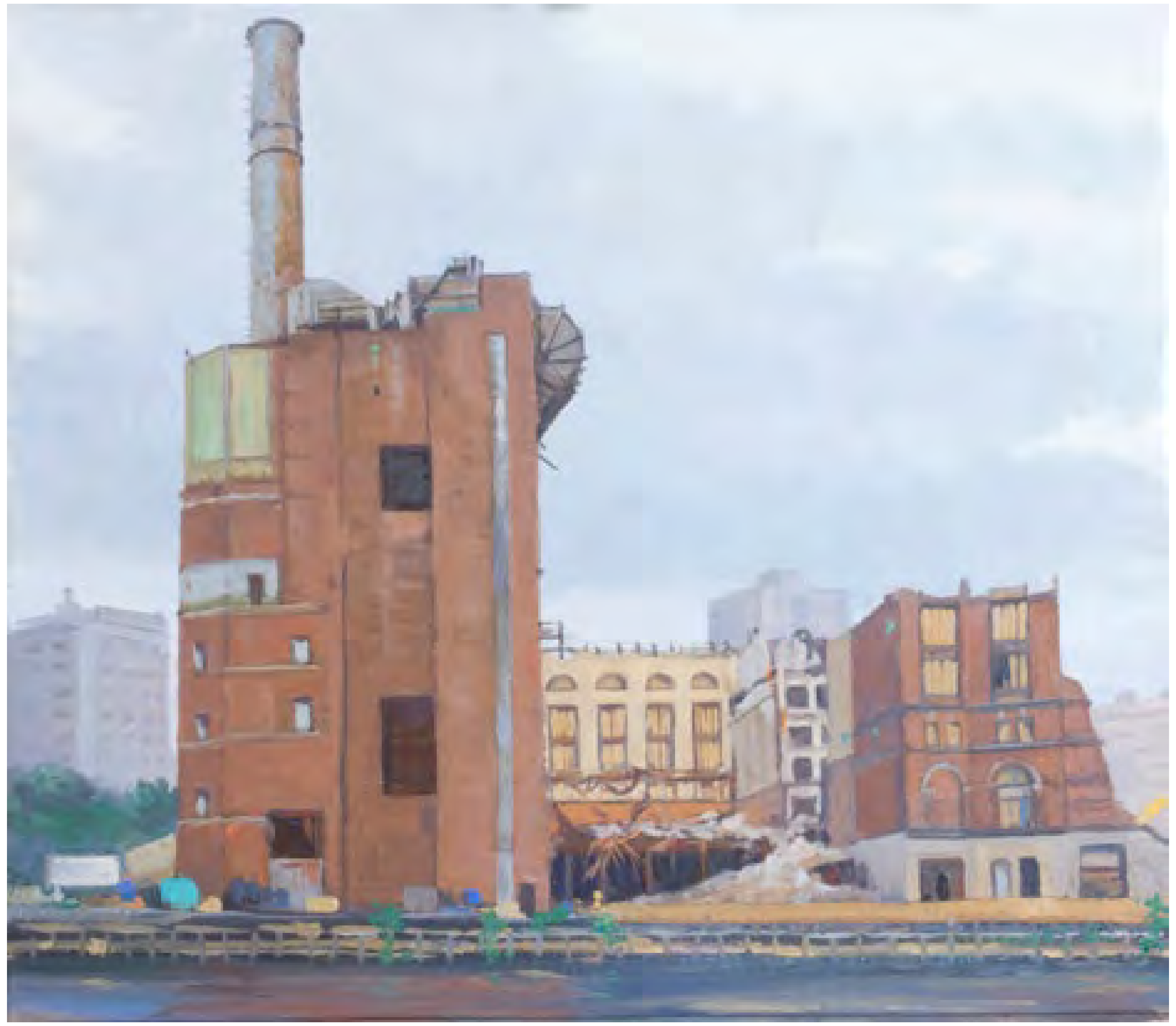


Collection
Pamela Talese



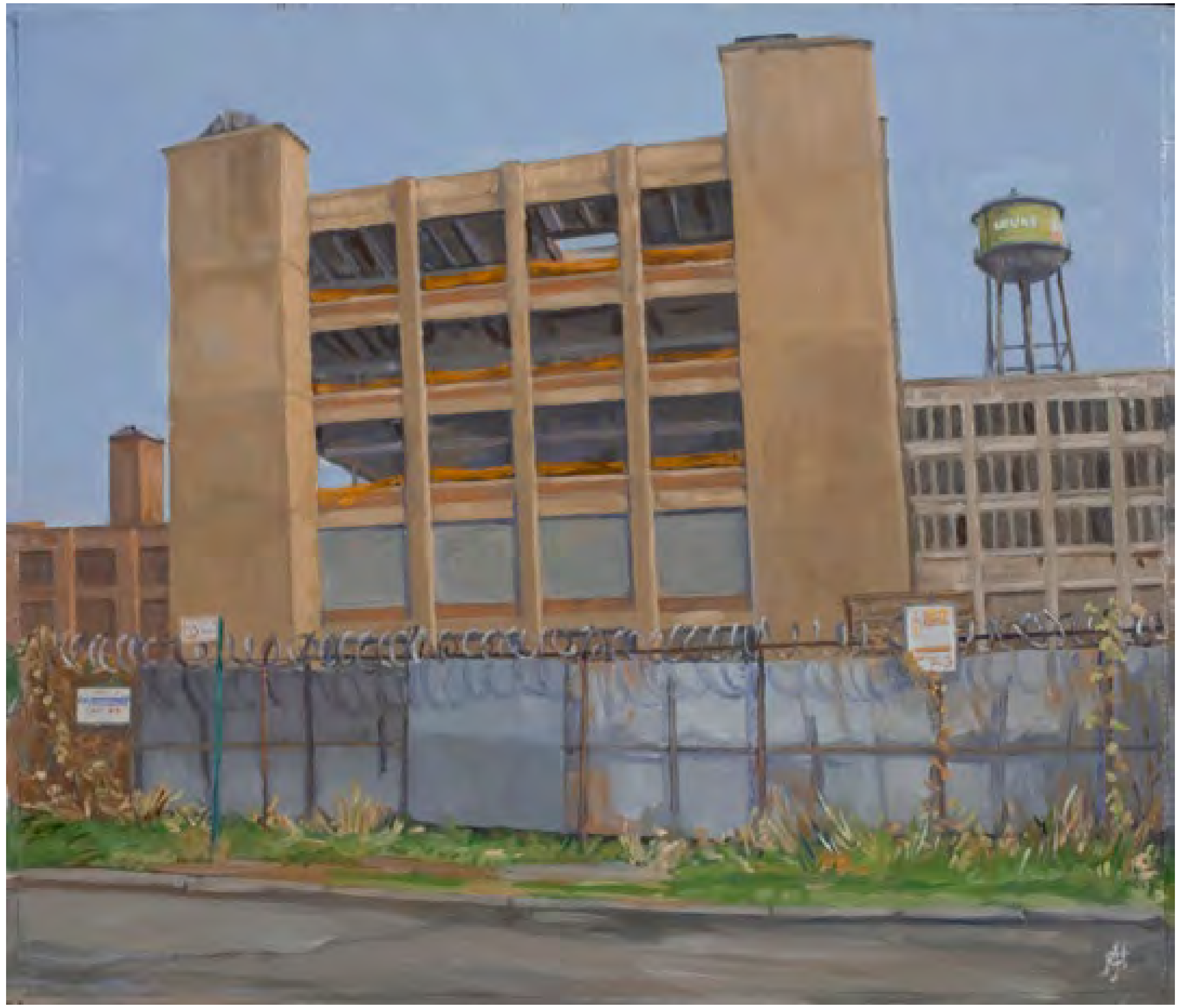
Painting

interview by Jorge Socarras

Pamela Talese paints urban scenes that compel us to look anew. She manages to convey something of her own enthrallment with a place or structure that we perhaps have seen before only as part of the larger urban scape. Indeed for Talese, painting onsite is essential to her process. As she puts it, her “connection to the scene comes from standing out in it.”

Certainly, the connection between place and history has been addressed by the painters of every historical period, to be ultimately reflected upon by the viewer. Talese’s paintings impart a sense of historicity to ostensibly familiar environs, the kind of temporal perspective often evoked by ruins. There’s also a sense of strangeness – not unlike that which manifests when you realize you’re a little lost. You’re fairly certain you’ve seen what’s before you before, but you never gave it much thought. Now you must.

A native of New York City, Talese paints a wide range of subjects - from cupcakes to people - but the focus here is on her urban paintings. These paintings are as interesting for what they tell us about the city, as for what they perhaps convey of the artist’s own connection with the subject matter. The fact that Talese is a writer as well made interviewing her all the more intriguing.

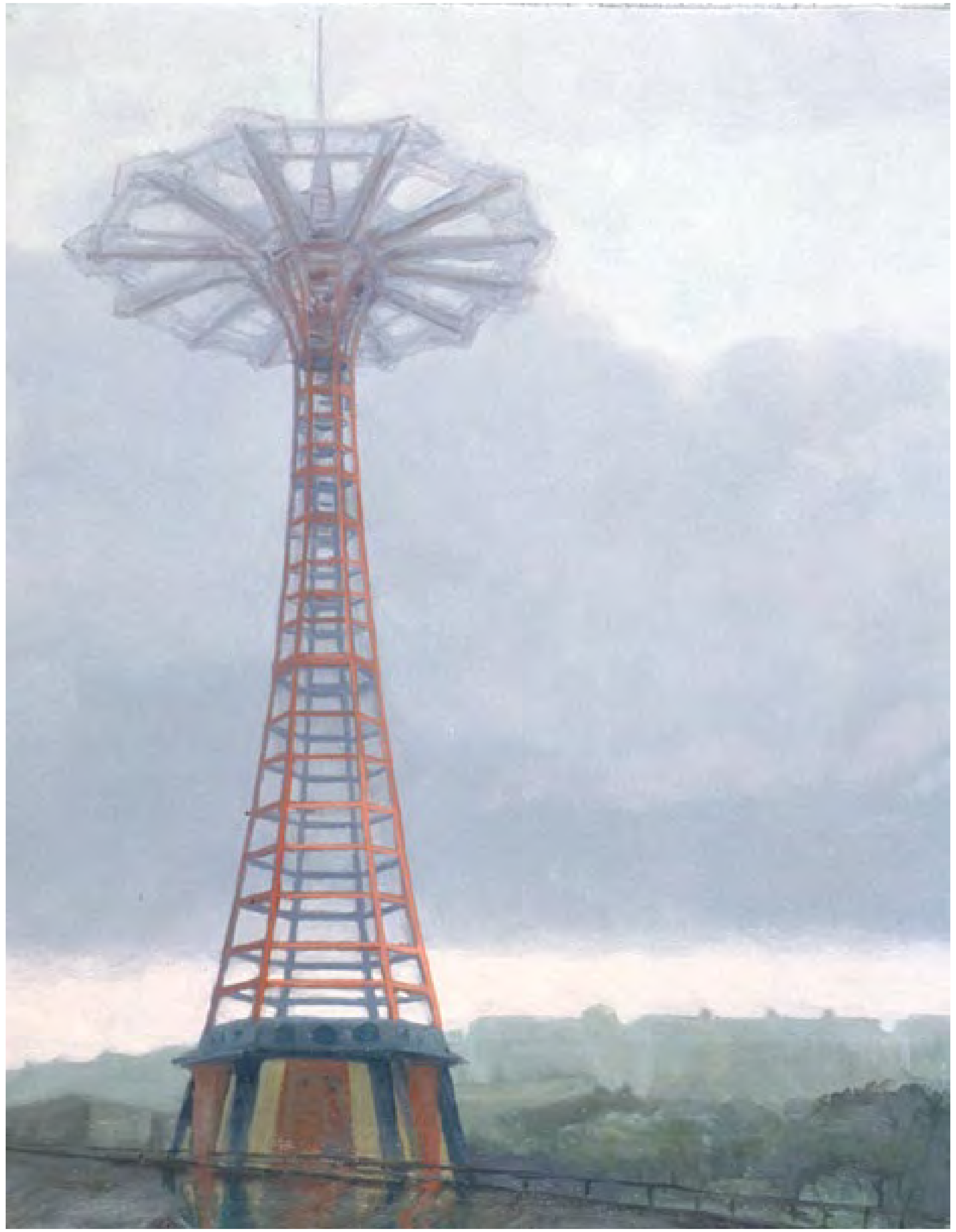


JS: You grew up in a prominent literary household, and pursued literary studies as well as art. What caused you to concentrate on painting?

PT: The discovery had both a decisive moment and a gradual, back and forth process. Looking back, I'm amazed I didn't know I was going to be a painter, as it seemed apparent to others, but I resisted it. I drew from an early age, and am told this started in the crib. My mother says that when I was four, I was fascinated with Paul Klee's painting Black Prince, and wanted to return to it repeatedly. Still, I had no models for a painting career. My parent's friends were writers, journalists, publishing people, actors and directors. The one painter my father knew was Frank Stella, but it was a tennis friendship. So while I had no idea what an actual artist was, I always loved looking at paintings. After seeing Ilya Repin's painting Ivan the Terrible and His Son Ivan in a history textbook, I started using my allowance and later my school job money to buy art books. I was especially inspired by Russian Realists - Repin, Valentin Serov, Isaac Levitan – and would copy their works in pencil. Even after purloining an entire set of Liquitex oil paints my senior year in high school, it would take me six years to finally use them. After college and a design/fashion stint in Paris, I returned to New York and took a painting class at The Art Students League. Suddenly, I felt I had purpose. I had no illusions about how hard the artist's life would be. What I didn't initially understand was how arid and flat my life would seem without painting. Also, I needed a reason, a justification for what I knew would be somewhat isolated and uncertain path, but I found a compelling subject to paint in the quiet streetscapes of Brooklyn and Queens.

JS: Having grown up in New York, when you are painting local scenes, are they conveying coded histories to you about this city specifically?

PT: My approach may have been patterned beginning with an early appreciation for urban architecture. As a child in 1970s New York, there was so much to observe: different building styles, neighborhoods in flux, and characters roaming around the streets. I explored what I could on foot and



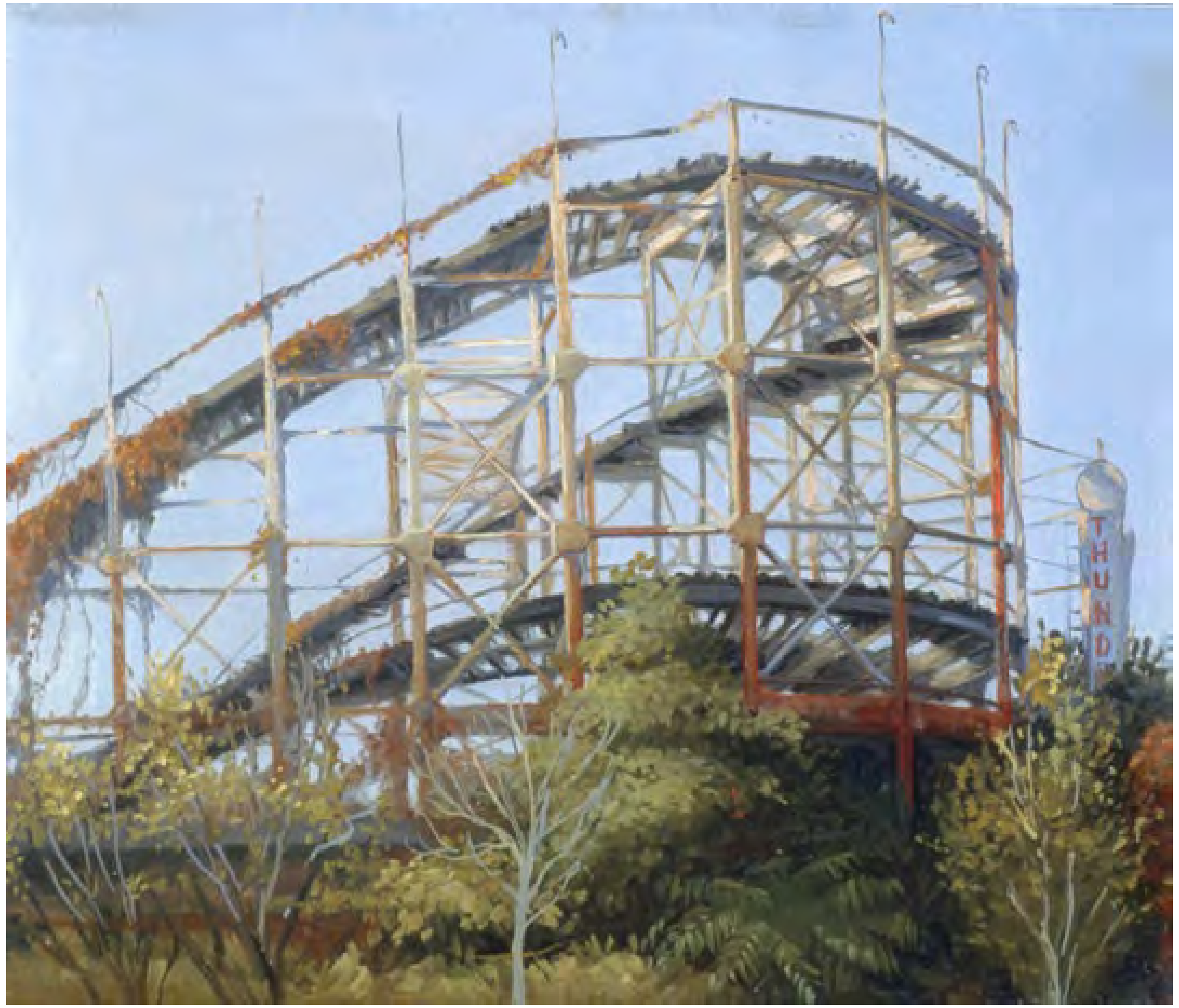
looking out the bus window watching scenes roll by. In a way, neighborhoods have always been my beat. I kept track of the shop signs and the subtle changes on the avenues, so during the 80s building boom, I felt a certain outrage. Why were they tearing down this elegant structure to put up that massive, light-eclipsing glass box? I still feel this way to some degree as I track development in each borough. Cities are what I love in general. Their coded histories are about people as reflected in the buildings and spaces they create and use.

JS: Your urban paintings trigger the viewer's own memories and associations of what a city means. Do you consciously seek out subjects you feel have some evocative or poetic power?

PT: I think the subjects call me. Something catches my eye and only in painting these places does the historical or emotional meaning reveal itself. In 1992 I started painting onsite in northern, rural Vermont. As beautiful as it was, the landscape couldn't sustain my attention. By comparison, in October of '89 a friend and I drove through Northern Ireland. The landscape was stunning with acres of lush greens and warm ochers against a bright gray sky. It was also relatively people-free. While the wild emptiness was attractive, what got me was the city of Derry. Coming in off the A2 what I noticed immediately, aside from the dark graffitied walls, was a bristling, seething energy. It felt familiar, only much more intense. I remember thinking "there's a story here."

JS: There's haunting quality to the scenes you paint, a temporal sense like that elicited by ruins. I know you are concerned about preserving vanishing sites - are you painting tomorrow's ruins?

PT: I don't intend to be an architectural ambulance chaser. What I value just isn't in alignment with what Ada Louise Huxtable referred to as "Force Majeure of Real Estate." I believe that a working waterfront, rather than a purely recreational one, is essential for a strong economy and economic



equality, but it’s obvious that developers and those who bank them disagree, so I end up painting “tomorrow’s ruins” by default.

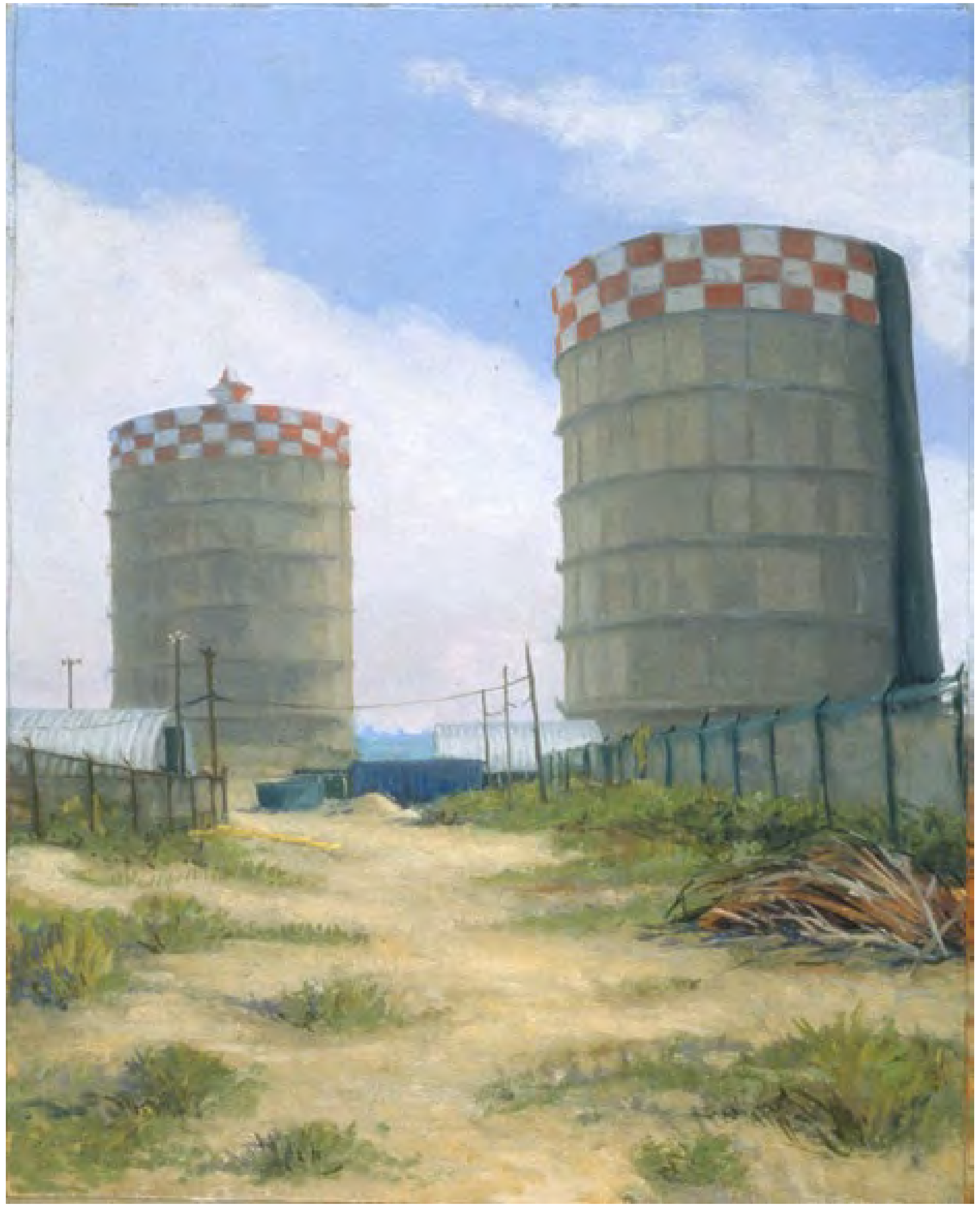
I first became aware of historic preservation in the early 80s, but it’s never been my intention to paint ruins per se. It’s true that my first urban series “718” was an exploration of changing neighborhoods in Brooklyn and Queens, but what I hoped to illustrate was less about the buildings and structures themselves than what these structures tell us about the priorities of an earlier city, to examine what got lost in the wreckage, and what gets obscured by so much flat glass. My paintings of the Eagle Electric Sign provide a good case in point.

Neighborhoods - how they are built and how they change, the compression of cultures and how societies identify themselves around place - this is what I seek to excavate through my study and painting of buildings, ships, and public spaces. I consider the aspirations of design, and whether its original intent endures or can accommodate new uses. On a more tactile level, I pay close attention to the application of craft and materials, and how they weather over time.

Appreciation of time is always central to my work, combined with the physical experience of standing out in the scene that I’m painting.

JS: The kind of urban scape you present could be a glimpse of the city unpeopled, the lonely setting of an ephemeral habitation. Does this reflect your own feelings?

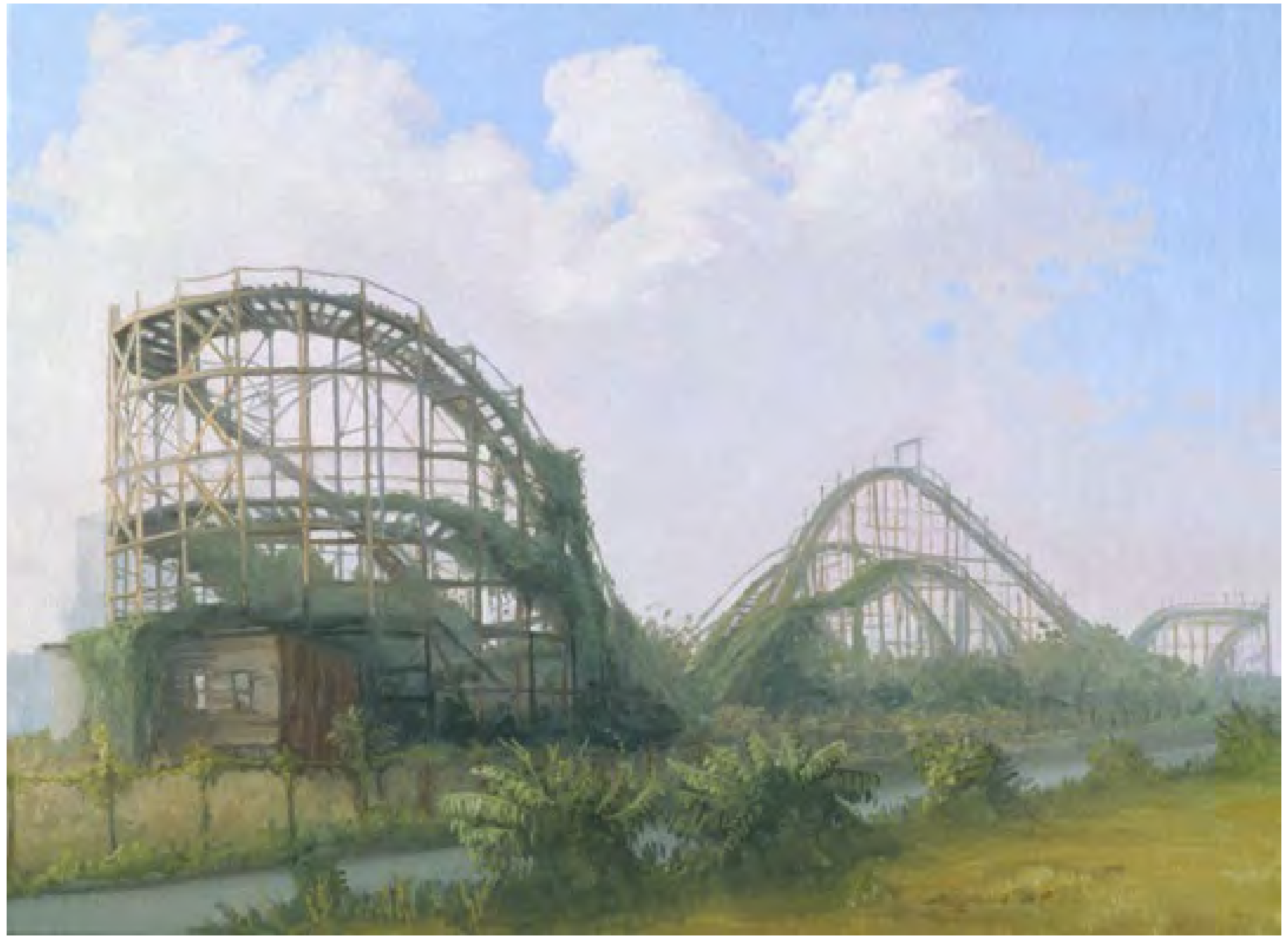
PT: I do paint where people are, but I am standing still and they are moving, so while they are not painted, they are implied. Cities are human spaces, built and often overbuilt environments that are layered with stories of the people who pass through. There’s a great passage in Bernard Malamud’s A New Life where the protagonist reflects “We’re here for a short time,

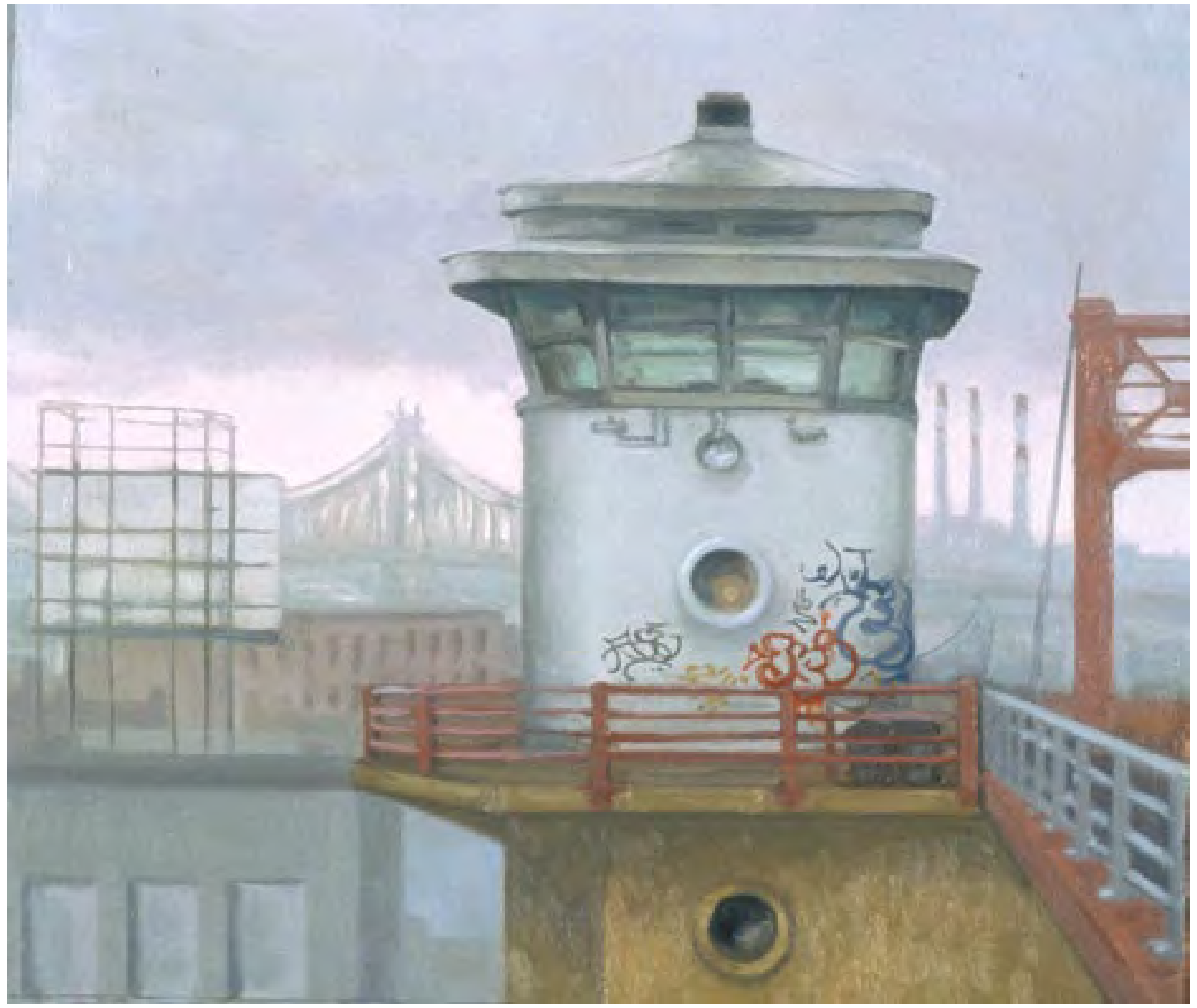


often under the worst of circumstances-possible that man may someday be blown off the tips of Somebody's Fingers; the battle lost before we knew what we were about, yet how magnanimously beautiful even to have been is." This appreciation is what painting onsite is all about for me. And in returning to these sites over time, there's an excavation of meaning that goes on, something I am exploring about social context, and about how we live. People often feel so rushed, so isolated. It's the artist's job to stand still, observe and create something for others to see, hear and recognize.

JS: What thoughts might you share on the connection between place and history with regards to painting?

PT: In all of my painting, especially the onsite work, I'm also looking at everything in terms of social context, showing urban life and work as it is lived. Painting on location in cities has allowed me to explore my fascination with architecture, history, and urban planning, as well as the effects of industrialization and globalization. I am less attracted to planned historic centers or preservation zones than I am to the edges, where cities really live and die. One of the two onsite series I am developing concerns Rome, where I focus almost exclusively on 20th Century structures; but, as Rome is a city of layers, there will always be evidence of its past lives. Though I usually start any series with a general premise, I go to be enlightened and surprised. As I work, returning with new eyes each time, I begin to see and feel the deeper significance of a place. To quote Alfred Korzybski, "The map is not the territory." There's always some mystery between an object and the representation of that object. I think painting tries to bridge the space between reality and our layered and dispersed understanding of that reality.

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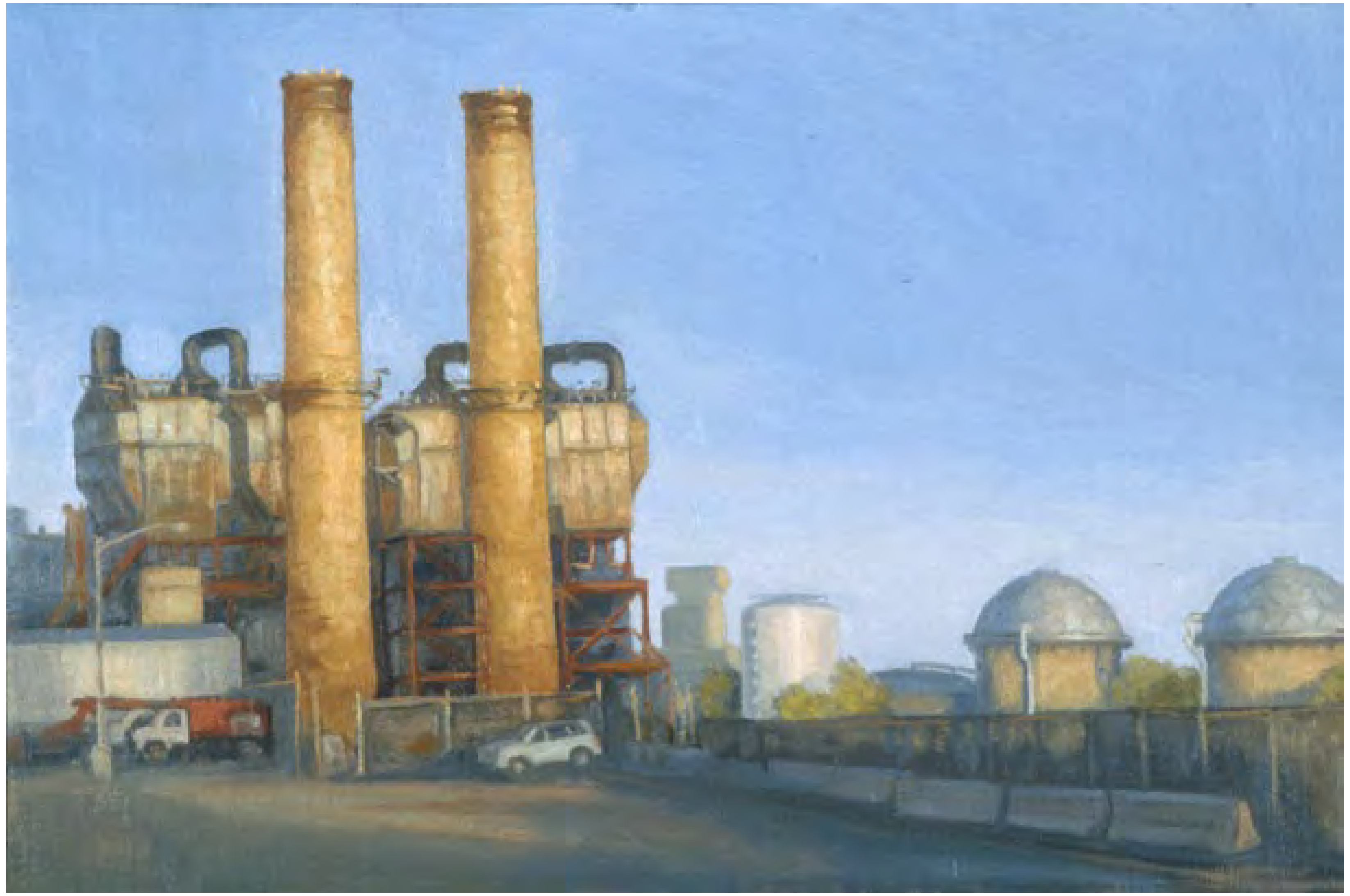


JS: You paint buildings, bridges, industrial sites, boats, navy yards, signs, amusement park rides, still lifes, plants, and people. Yet people rarely, if ever, comingle with your other subjects. Why?

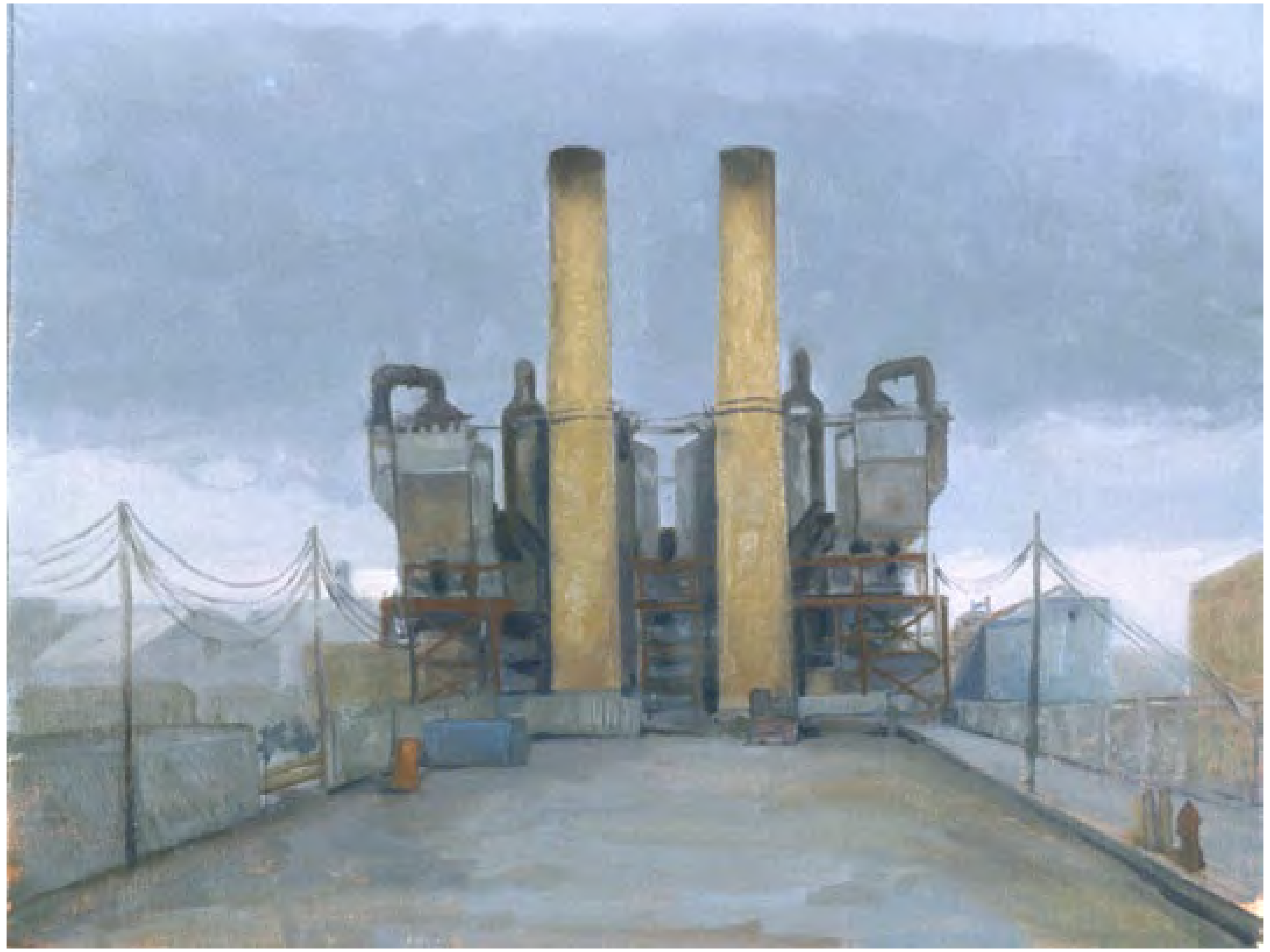
PT: The reason is a practical one. I am often asked by someone, particularly by the laborers in dry docks or by kids on the street, if I am going to paint their portraits. I answer that I'd be happy to if they'd be willing to stand still for an hour or more.

JS: Does it take considerable effort to be able to paint urban scenes without people around, or do you just not paint them in?

PT: I just don't paint them, but this may change. My next New York series continues with current industry. Should people become part of this picture, the shift will present new and interesting challenges, not only in the drawing of them, but also because the narrative concept will become more overt rather than evocative.

JS: You're a Manhattan native, but most of your urban scenes are of locations in the outer boroughs, notably Queens and Brooklyn. Why not Manhattan?

PT: First, it's simply too crowded, too busy and chaotic. I did one small painting of Ratner's delicatessen just after it closed in 2002. I stood on the median that divides Delancey Street with its two streams of traffic traversing the Williamsburg Bridge. I lasted only a day. But I think it really had to do with timing. I moved to Long Island City, Queens around 1993 when there was simply nothing around. I was working in midtown Manhattan at the time, but weekends in southern Queens and northern Brooklyn were extraordinarily peaceful. I was just starting to explore the area and the



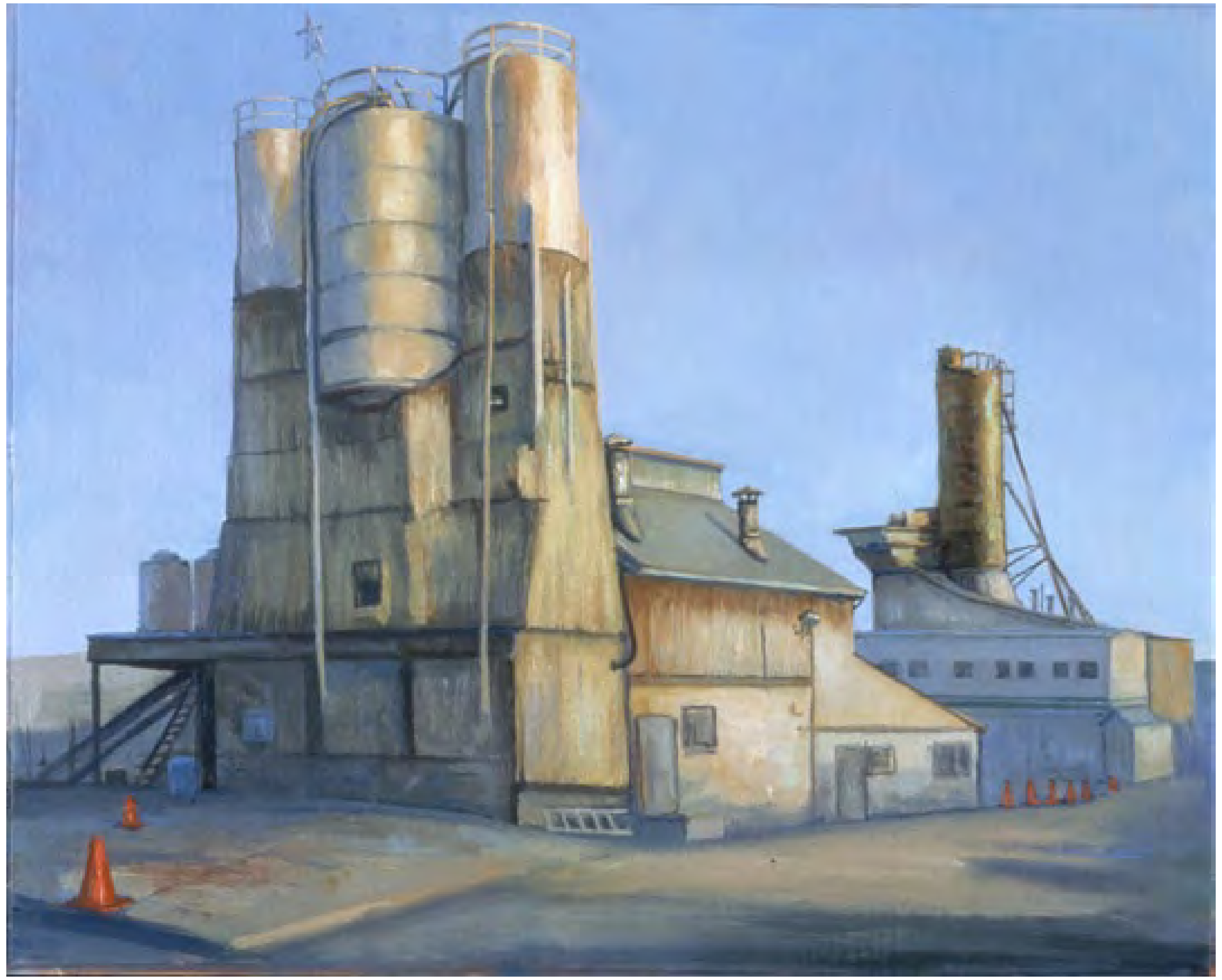
serenity helped me get outside to paint. Finally, I favor working in locations anywhere people are also working. This is the case in the dry docks. There may be a comment here and there, but most everyone is on the clock so there isn't too much distracting chatter.

JS: You assert the importance for you of painting on site and your connection to the scene by standing in it. Does your own endurance inform the process, or is it a purely aesthetic experience?

PT: Plein air painting is hard work, but the physical challenge of doing the work is an aspect of the painting itself. It's about being there. It's immersion journalism with poetic license. I'm further enmeshed in the topography in that I convey myself and my gear from one point to another by bicycle. I ride through living neighborhoods, gather data, collect visual details, and develop themes as I peddle and paint. For me, what occurs during the painting process is a kind of temporal layering, an accumulation of perceptual experience over time that seems to encompass the encrustation of hours, the erosion of weather, the lived life I feel in whatever I paint.

JS: Your brushwork holds its own beyond what it depicts. Do you remain distinctly conscious of your technique when you are painting, or lose yourself in it?

PT: I lose myself in it. When I'm painting a place or even an object, I am enthralled, fascinated how things are made, be they natural and manufactured. Were it not for the changes in light or having to go to the bathroom, I could stay there all day. Other forces that stop a day's painting are inclement weather, time constraints - a ship is leaving, a building coming down, or the fruit is rotting. I've learned that while produce withers, pastry is forever. I once painted the same extravagantly decorated cupcake three times in two years. No detail is uninteresting or without beauty when the light hits it in a certain way.



JS: Harkening back to my first question, what has painting offered you that literature couldn't. Is it possible you might again shift your creative emphasis?

PT: This is a good question, and I'm not sure if there's a real separation for me save for what I reveal. I'm a reader and I keep two journals regularly. In the morning I write n'importe quoi with an ink pen; then, after a day on site, I've a typed journal which is integral to my painting. In fact, the people whom you suggest seem absent in the paintings are very much alive on the page. While painting my "718" series, I wrote regular one or two page summations of what happened outside. I often scribbled ideas in the sketchbook margins, color notes, a strange expression, the way someone walks, some rude remark that was aimed at me, my painting struggle and so on. A few of these became longer essays, pensées about different populations or polemics about the urban developments that displaced them. The first of my Navy Yard journals is 116 pages full of dialogue and impressions. The daily logs while abroad are what one might expect: what I painted, who I met, confusion about language, road conditions, getting lost, how much gelato I ate in Rome, or cheese in Ireland. The practice of writing immediately when coming back from a day onsite is a pleasure when I have the energy for it - I usually try to get something down before passing out. I think all of this adds to my perceptual experience and filters into the painting. Only a few people have read these entries, but there exists a constant conversation between the painting and the writing, each side hopefully sharpening the other.