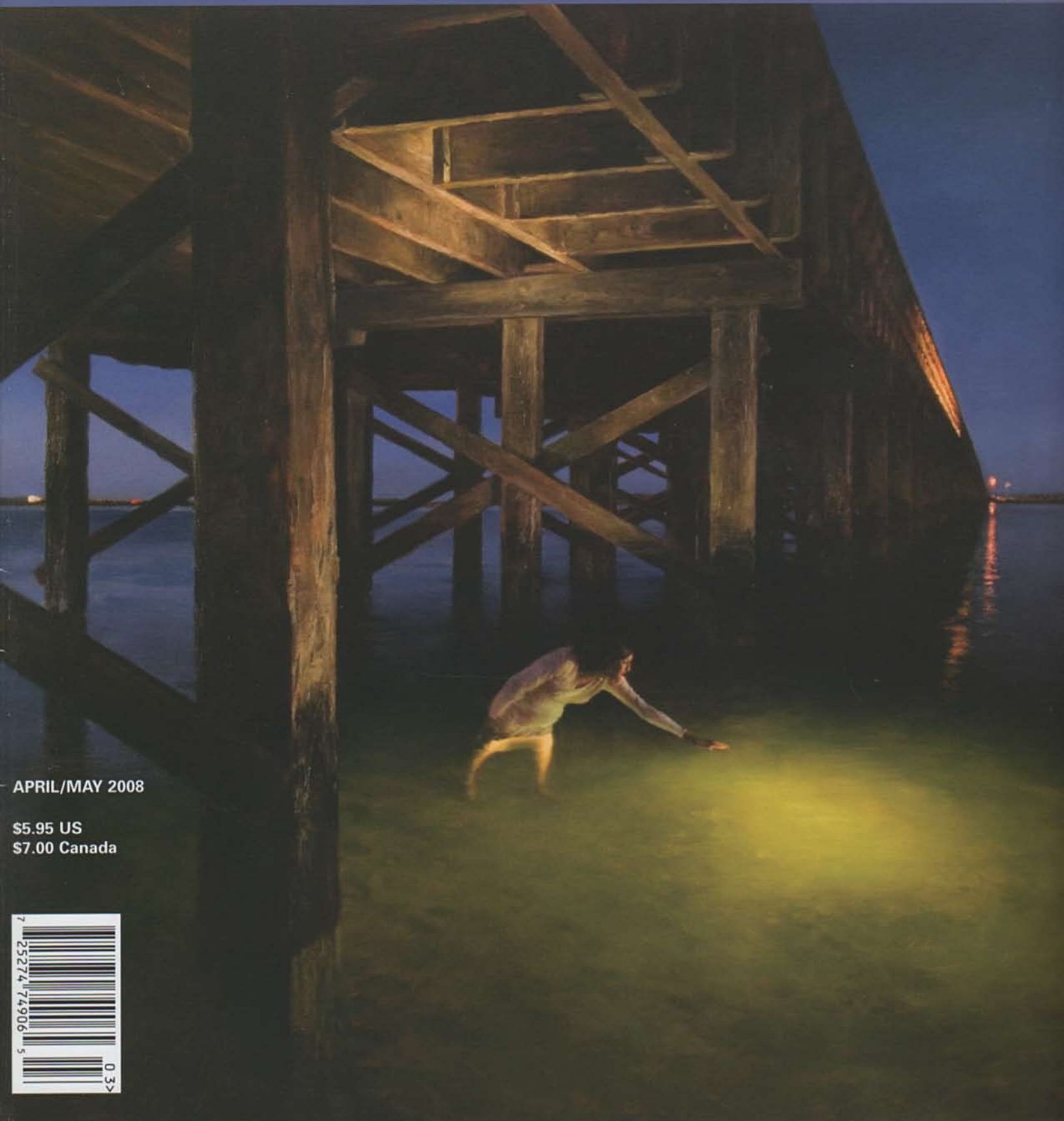


ART NEW ENGLAND

CONTEMPORARY ART AND CULTURE

Antonio López García • Currier Museum Expansion • Matt Brackett's Mysteries



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\$5.95 US
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Matt Brackett, *Threshold*, oil on canvas on aluminum panel, 38 x 72", 2007.

The Insistence of Luminosity

In a giant, old mill building in Somerville, Massachusetts, Matt Brackett's Vernon Street studio is covered with postcards of work by his favorite artists: Robert ParkeHarrison, Winslow Homer, Paolo Uccello, Gregory Crewdson, Francisco Goya, Gerhard Richter, Max Beckmann, Lucien Freud, and Prilla Smith Brackett, his mother. Brackett's latest series of paintings also hang on the walls. They are all about place, family, and mystery.

Most of the paintings are influenced by a beloved family house, bought by Brackett's great-great-grandfather in 1914, overlooking the sea in Duxbury, Massachusetts. "Both my mother's generation and my generation spent a lot of time together there. It was a house that had a lot of history—it also had a lot of material remnants from all of those lives," Brackett says. Although some additions were made over the years, the interior remained largely as it had been during the 1960s. "It was kind of a time capsule, and it was terribly important to me." Though he grew up in Cambridge, the memories that influenced Brackett's work were from the Duxbury house.

Many of his earlier paintings are set in the interior of the house, peopled with individuals doing perplexing tasks, symbolic of his own uncertainty about the direction of his work. In *Distant Waves*, a young man by a light-filled bedroom window hoists a large ship's anchor, about to cast it out the window. In *Preparations at Dusk*, two young men hoist a bundle of

packages into a tree, illuminated by an unseen porch light. A few years after his grandmother died in 2001, Brackett's family had to sell the house. He would later return to draw the South Shore tidal marshes that were reminiscent of the area around the house, and his new series is based more on that landscape, which was such an essential part of his life. Though Brackett's paintings often reflect a sense of loss, some pieces look instead to the horizon to see what's ahead.

While he was working on paintings that dealt with the feeling of loss, Brackett's mother was struggling with similar themes in her own work. The two had a joint exhibition at the Duxbury Art Complex Museum in 2005. "We were both talking about such a personal thing. It helped me process that feeling of loss—[transforming it] into an event with fond memories. That was a once-in-a-lifetime experience."

In *Threshold*, characteristic of the new direction in his work, a couple is perched on a high



Matt Brackett, *Distant Waves*, oil on canvas, 26 x 46", 2005.

cliff looking out at a verdant panorama, embracing each other while balancing on one foot. Brackett says that the work "symbolizes new beginnings, ideas of birth, rebirth, changing roles, and changing locations." He and his wife are expecting their first child. But the imagery has ominous potential—the couple could jump or fall off the cliff. Brackett adds, "A lot of the things that influence me include suggestions of the unknown. I think that all reality is very subjective because perception is faulty, and memory is faulty, and those are the two main ways that we interact with the world in our lives. I want to reflect that mystery, that is inexplicable, because my paintings are tools for me to grapple with uncertainty."

The paintings began as "stream of consciousness drawings," a technique he learned from his mentor, John Hull, at Yale, where he graduated with a BA in 1997. Early twentieth-century surrealists used similar drawing exercises to tap into the subconscious. Though some may see Brackett's work as surreal, his work is more of a personal narrative, though ambiguous and occasionally symbolic and eerie.

Brackett's realistic painting style belies its conceptual underpinnings. He provides a visual idea, with a setting and figures, hints at a possible storyline, but pauses just before the conclusion. Instead, he allows the viewer to

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complete the story, never making it clear what the figures are doing, only providing a sense that something mysterious is happening. In *Cold Front*, a woman crosses the jagged frozen salt marshes cradling a bunch of oranges; one orange has fallen, or was intentionally placed on an icy rock, or needs to be picked up—the possibilities are as vast as the imagination. Brackett says this painting, “suggests a potential narrative that reflects the idea of motherhood, parenthood, and the instinct to protect fragile things.”

Within the coastal landscape, many of the paintings contain figures examining, touching, or partly submerged in water. *Water Sign* shows Brackett’s pregnant wife cautiously wading under the Duxbury Bridge, an important fixture from his childhood. The painting’s long perspective pulls our eye to the distant horizon. As his wife approaches a greenish-yellow glow in the water, she is illuminated by the intense light; the bridge further adds to the feeling of mystery. Brackett reflects that, “she is either examining the glow, or producing it, or absorbing it. It could be natu-

rally occurring, it could be magical, it could be a lot of different things.”

I wonder then if *Doubting Thomas II* references Caravaggio’s powerful work (*Doubting Thomas*) of the skeptical Thomas inserting his finger into Christ’s wound, or Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty*. In Brackett’s version, a solitary man kneels precariously on a partly frozen inlet, and forms a spiral in the frigid water with his finger. “Because I accept the presence of ambiguity and mystery in my paintings, sometimes that can be perceived as dangerous. We’re hardwired to distrust uncertainty, or be wary of it,” says Brackett.

Matt Brackett’s narrative works move the viewer beyond the boundaries of the canvas itself, but they engage equally with the painted surface and the insistence of luminosity below the hidden waters.

Grace Consoli has worked in galleries, museums, and conducted radio programs in New York, Provincetown, and Florence, Italy. Since 1997, she has written about art, and currently teaches art history at Suffolk University and the Art Institute of Boston.

Matt Brackett: Threshold, March 1–April 2, 2008
Alpha Gallery, Boston, MA
www.alphagallery.com

DeCordova Annual Exhibition, May 10–August 17, 2008
DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park, Lincoln, MA
www.decordova.org