

An abstract painting of a river landscape. The composition is dominated by thick, expressive brushstrokes in a variety of colors including deep blues, purples, oranges, yellows, and greens. The colors are layered and blended, creating a sense of movement and depth. The overall effect is a vibrant, textured representation of a natural scene, likely a river or a coastal area. The text is overlaid on the right side of the painting.

# THOMAS PAQUETTE

## America's River Re-Explored

Paintings of the Mississippi from Source to Gulf

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PAQUETTE

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Re-Explored

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PUBLISHED ON THE OCCASION OF THE EXHIBITION  
America's River Re-Explored  
Paintings by Thomas Paquette of the Mississippi from Source to Gulf

APRIL 20-AUGUST 26, 2018



MINNESOTA MARINE ART MUSEUM

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FEBRUARY 15-MAY 5, 2019



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First Edition  
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Library of Congress Control Number: 2018901479  
ISBN: 0-9785679-9-4  
ISBN-13: 978-0-9785679-9-6

Printed and bound in the United States of America  
by Corporate Graphics Books, Mankato, Minnesota

Design  
Ines Nelson







I had a plan, modest in scope,

to celebrate the National Park Service's centennial by making some paintings from the seventy-two-mile Mississippi National River and Recreation Area that runs through Minneapolis and St Paul. However, a growing fascination kept the project from ending when it was supposed to, resulting in an additional two thousand miles of river crossing my easel.

# The Long River Project

When I first had the larger idea of painting along the Mississippi River from its source to its finish, I confess it seemed a bit mad. The river's main stream alone is more than 2300 miles long and runs from northern forest to subtropical bayou. It widens as it gathers waters from thirty-one states. Whole other dimensions are added by time, through human history and geologic forces, complicating the notion of a straightforward portrait. It simply has too many faces.

Nevertheless, having lived a good portion of my life near its shores in five different cities from its northern start through its midsection, I was gripped by a lingering curiosity: *What is this river?*

Several decades ago my first plein air oil painting was done on an island in the Mississippi River in Minneapolis. Countless subjects and miles later, I suppose I should be surprised that the Mississippi has returned as the focus of these latest works. That, however, can only surprise someone who has not traveled the river's many-faced length.

This project spanned three intense years, with many trips to the river from my Pennsylvania home (which is coincidentally near the Mississippi's easternmost tributary, the Allegheny River). The most sustained impression was that of the big river's enormous transformations. This is not limited to the fact that at its beginning you can cross it in a few quick steps that may not even get your feet wet, and that at its mouth,

even by airplane it takes far longer to cross. Nor is it limited to the realization that the same river is habitat for both alligators and moose. There are also transformations in quick shifts from urban centers on one shore, to open land on the other; from uninhabited woods, to the hard geometry of factories and tangle-piped refineries; and from the centuries-silent Mississippian-culture metropolis of Cahokia Mounds, to the contemporary metropolis of St Louis—directly across the river, but separated by a gulf of time and ways.

The impact of these shifts inspired different responses in my paintings, from carefully assembled bridges to fluid skies and interlaced woods. The many detail pages in this book—where sections of paintings are shown at exact scale—are included to underscore that diversity as expressed on canvas.

Aptly, at this present moment, as I fumble to summarize the explorations of these last few years on the river and in my studio, an emailed newsletter arrived from a fellow painter, endorsing a new film about Vincent van Gogh, *Loving Vincent*. The film's tagline is from one of van Gogh's last letters to his brother, written the week he died. "Well, the truth is, we cannot speak other than by our paintings." This is the cue I needed to let the paintings now show what stirs on this long river, and return to my easel.

—Thomas Paquette

## INTRODUCTION

# Prelude to an Odyssey

Judith A. Curtis

The Mississippi River, called 'Father of Waters' by the Algonquin people, is North America's most important waterway and ecological river system, contributing to the economy of local inhabitants, and the migratory patterns of fish and birds, along its considerable length. It is so central to the life and geography of the continent, it has been called 'America's river.'

At the outset, Thomas Paquette, having lived and worked in several places along the upper and middle sections of the Mississippi, envisioned a tightly focused exhibition celebrating the centenary of the National Park Service. However, his original idea of selecting locations along the 72-mile stretch running from north of Minneapolis to well beyond St. Paul – designated the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area in 1988 – blossomed into a much larger endeavor when he began to ask himself whether his subject matter might be expanded, rationally, to include the entire river. Surely limiting himself to one stretch would hardly scratch the surface of what might be possible.

With a main stream in excess of 2,300 miles and covering the gamut from

northern forest terrain to subtropical bayou, the mighty Mississippi widens and rolls through, and alongside, ten states. How could he hope to capture so much material, so many transformations? Paquette spent three years working on America's River Re-Explored. Besides his painting, he made sojourns in all four seasons to experience the river's many moods: intense study and observation of the subtle nuances of this immense river road, which has played a major role in this country's history.

In selecting his subjects, which portray everything from the clear headwaters of Lake Itasca down to the roiling watercourse in New Orleans, Paquette has imbued his work with a personal viewpoint, as well as a pictorial one. Itasca Night, for instance, heralds what might be viewed as our allegorical beginnings out of the darkness. His superb handling of a subordinated neutral foreground, acts as a contraposition to the immensity of endless sky with the promise of a new dawn breaking through in lighter notes, and the intriguing outlining of cloud edges, which many an artist would tend to soften, but are exaggerated for effect by Paquette, perhaps reminiscing on his student

days when he would camp beneath the stars with friends. Similarly, Veritas Caput, "the true source" of the Mississippi, depicts one of the most popular spots on the river, a series of stepping stones across the narrow neck at the outflow of Lake Itasca. There are many who claim to have walked across the Mississippi here at its narrowest point, but Paquette chooses to show a quieter mood, sans humankind, to emphasize the natural world in ephemeral light. Observe the brushwork close up, and the expressive use of color and texture. These works are sophisticated in their execution as befits an artist of Paquette's stature and maturity. Perhaps it his working method of studying his location, making sketches, recording images, and then working up larger canvases in the studio that allows Paquette to recreate a scene in his mind's eye and thus distill the essential mood of his composition; sharing with the viewer what he saw himself and felt at that moment, and translating that personal perception to canvas. It is the essential elements that the artist seeks, eliminating detritus, and concentrating on incandescent, harmonious concepts.



# Prelude to an Odyssey

Judith A. Curtis

As a landscape painter, Paquette often seeks the solitude and beauty of pure nature, but he does not shy away from urban grittiness, or man's danger to the environment, and presents strong images of what he finds along the river on the outskirts of ever expanding suburban sprawl. Take *Atmospheric Change*, where the artist captured to perfection what he saw as "plumes of superheated smoke and steam from a coal-fired plant billowing up into the cool air of an autumn morning before reaching the atmospheric ceiling and creating a lateral drift over the land." Here the large masses of harmonious color were created in an abstract approach, with a surface finish reminiscent of Lucian Freud (1922-2011). Freud applied layers of paint that varied in texture, creating visually intriguing surfaces for his subject. Similarly, Paquette uses color and brushwork to explore the diversity of his subject with aesthetically modernist overtones.

Parallel to his own task of following the Mississippi from beginning to end, we can see Paquette was drawing on the influences of Albert Bierstadt (1830-1902) and Thomas Moran (1837-1926) both keen painters of glorious, sweeping vistas discovered during

America's Westward Expansion, a spiritual view perhaps of God's bounty to humanity. However, Paquette is no mere imitator. His concept was to look for grandeur "in his own backyard" – locales he knew and yet could still look at with fresh eyes. Paquette took the theme of the endless vista, and bent it to his own will, creating large canvases of intimate scenes, and smaller canvases depicting fragments of larger subjects. The bridge paintings, for instance, do not have to feature the entire structure for us to feel the solidity and stability of these engineered forms. *Claim*, especially, emphasizes man's imprint on nature.

Another unique facet of Paquette's armory of skills is his fascinating approach to color. "Color," he says, "is a relative thing, something I find endlessly interesting in its own right ..." And so we find him playing with color, substituting a blue sky for green, or white-gray clouds for pink. Of course, those colors do exist in nature, however they are generally elusive tones, but Paquette, in finding those subtle nuances, exaggerates them to create a bolder statement.

Ultimately, this collection of paintings gives us a fascinating overview, seen

through the eyes of a worthy talent, of America's greatest river as well as the land it passes through and the people who live there, "Quick shifts," says Paquette, "of urban land on one shore, to open land on the other ... uninhabited woods, to the hard geometry of factories and tangle-piped refineries...." Paquette's paintings are far more eloquent than words, sharing pictorial visions of present day civilization and timeless nature. *America's River Re-Explored* is a revelation worth sharing.



# America's River Re-Explored

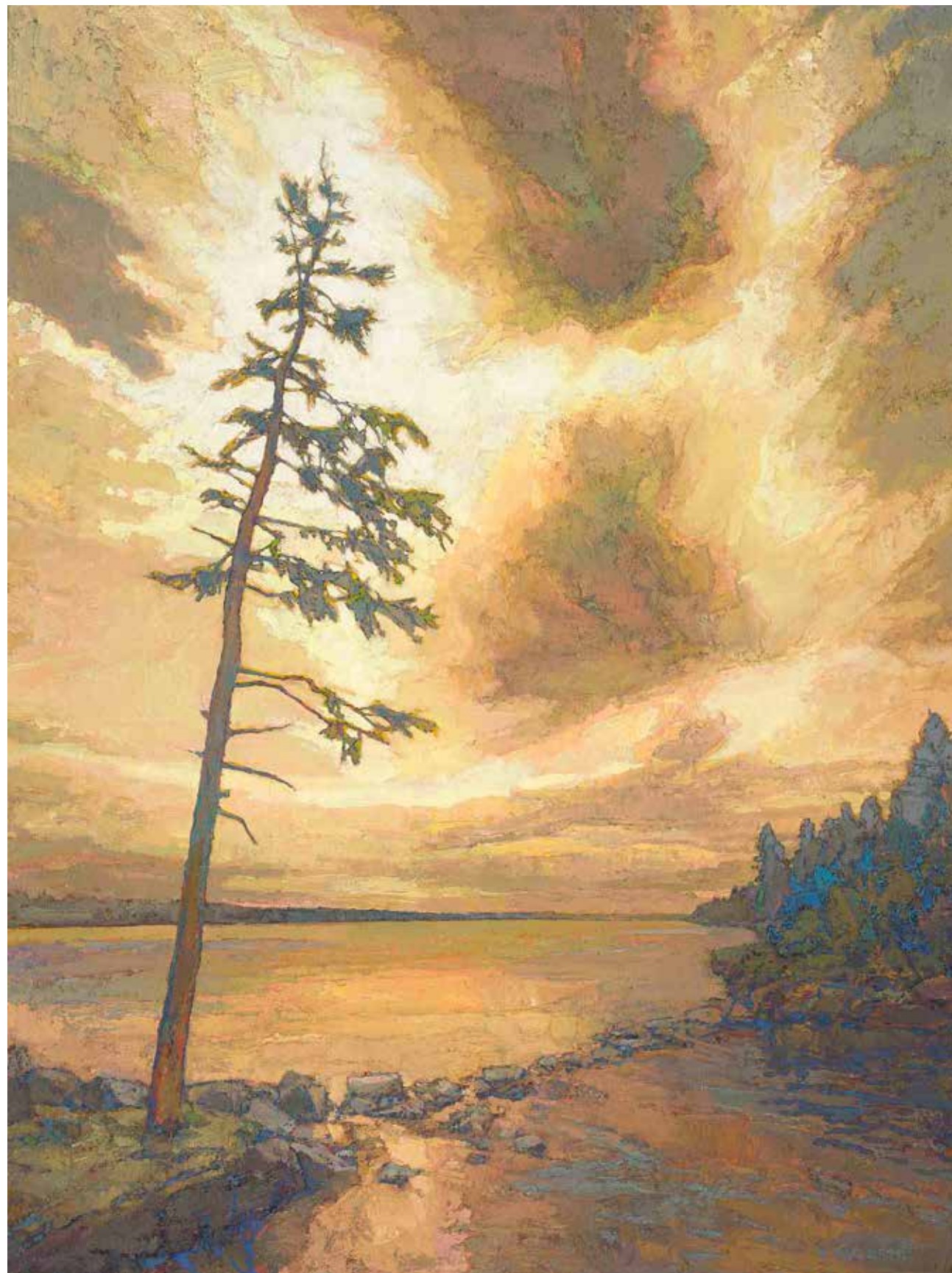


Itasca Night  
oil on linen, 24 x 34



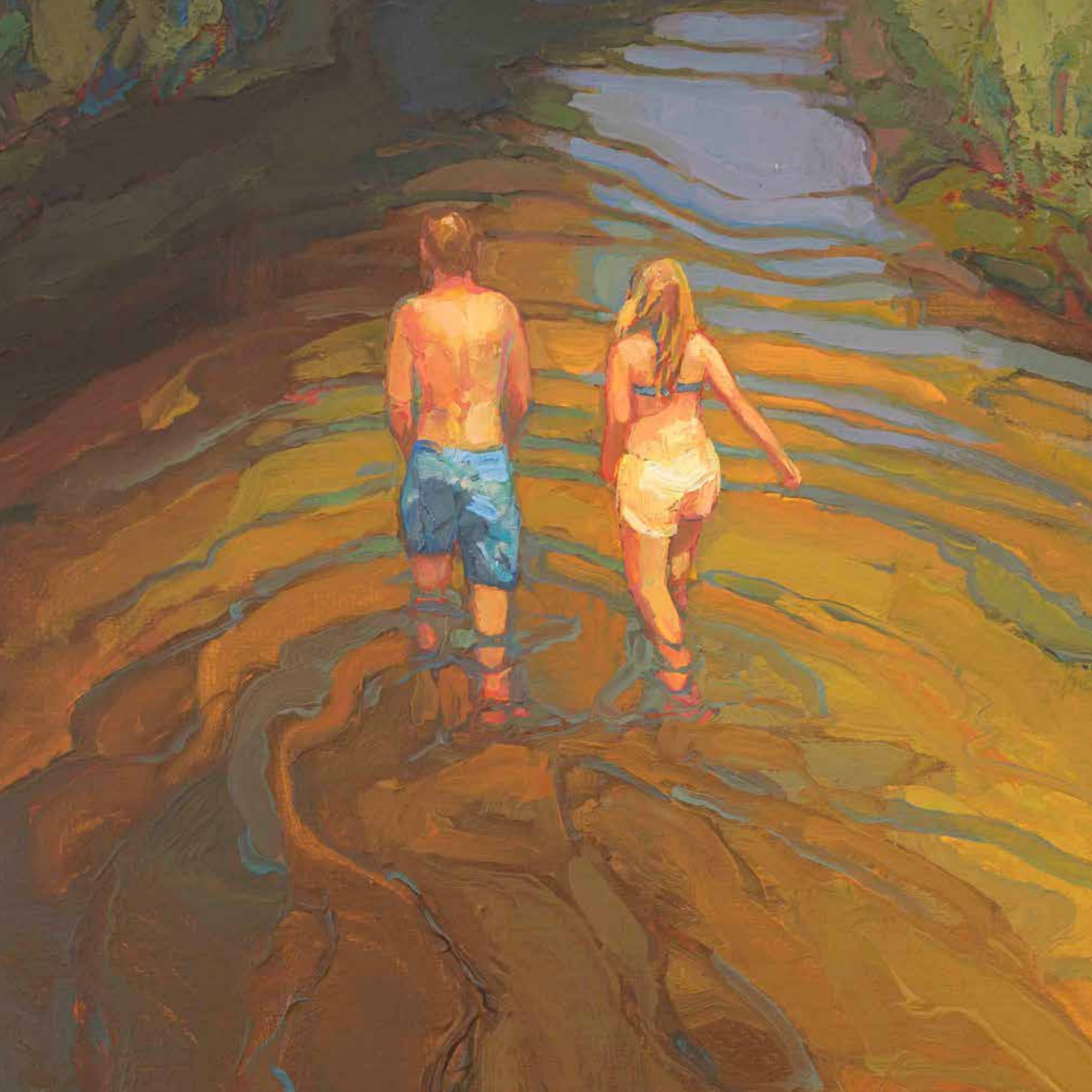






Veritas Caput  
oil on linen, 48 x 36



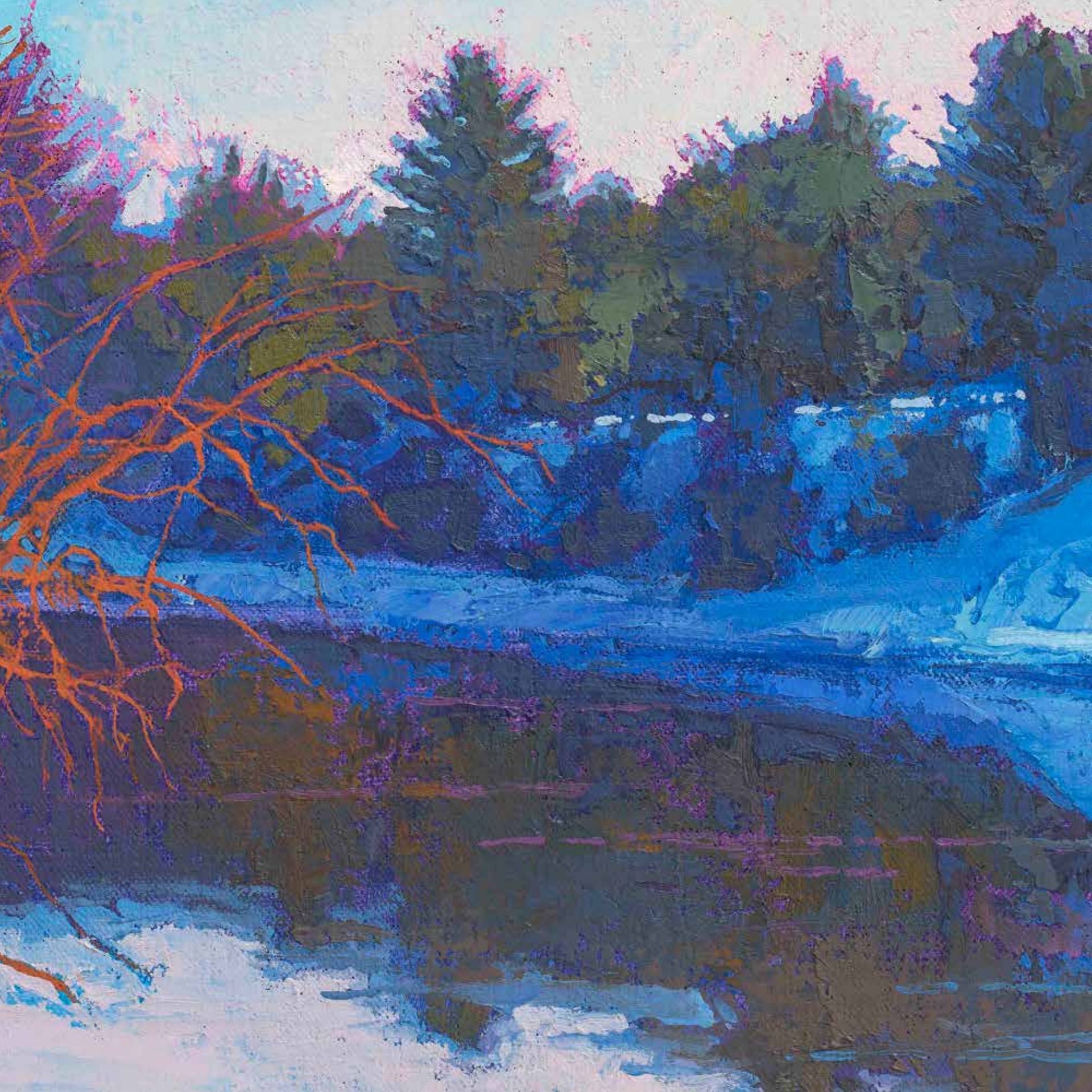




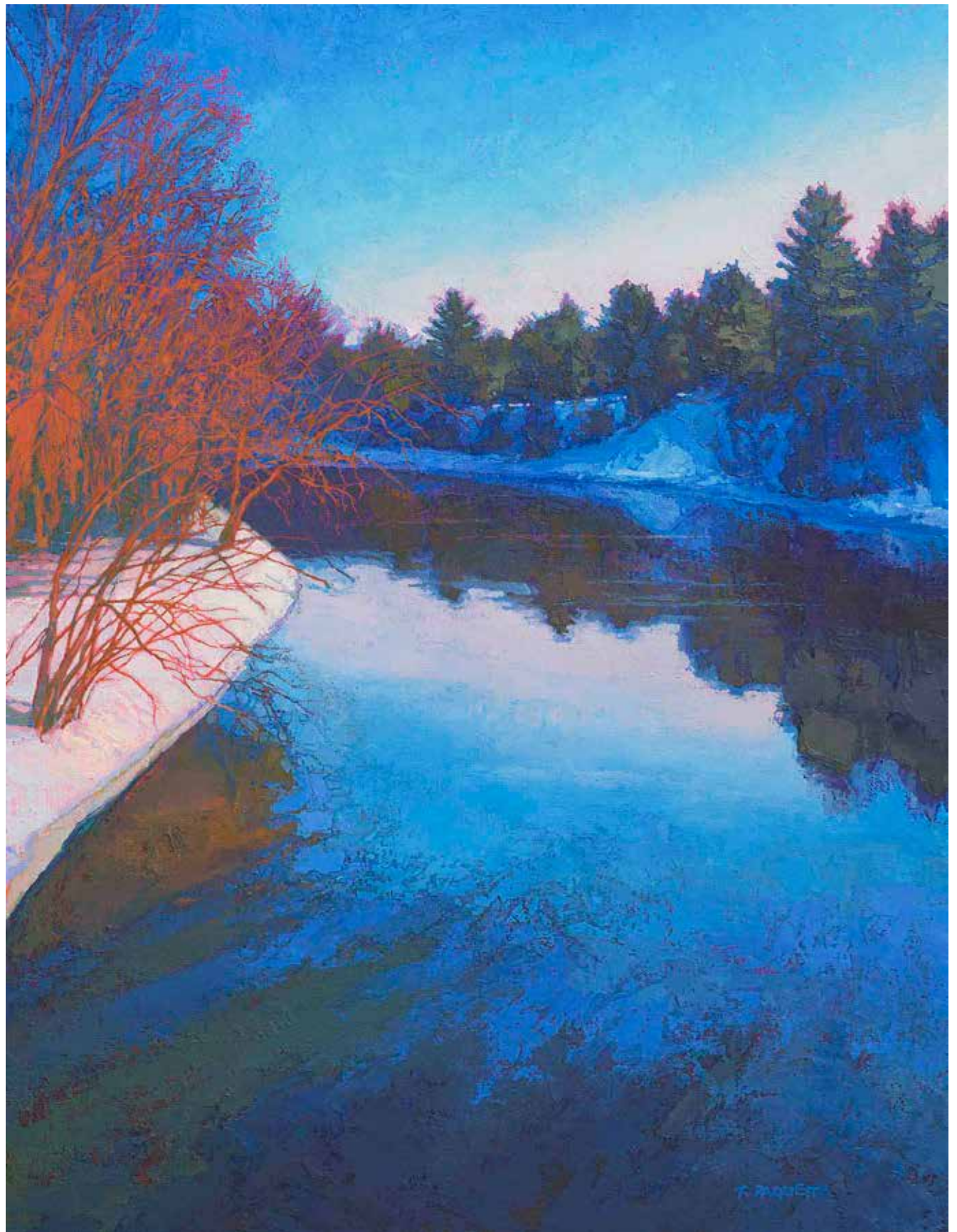


River Walk: At the Beginning  
oil on linen, 24 x 34









Winter River from  
Bluebird Drive Bridge  
oil on linen, 36 x 28





T. PACHETTI





◀ Atmospheric Changes  
oil on linen, 20 x 16

Subject to Change [study]  
oil on paper mounted on panel, 8.75 x 13







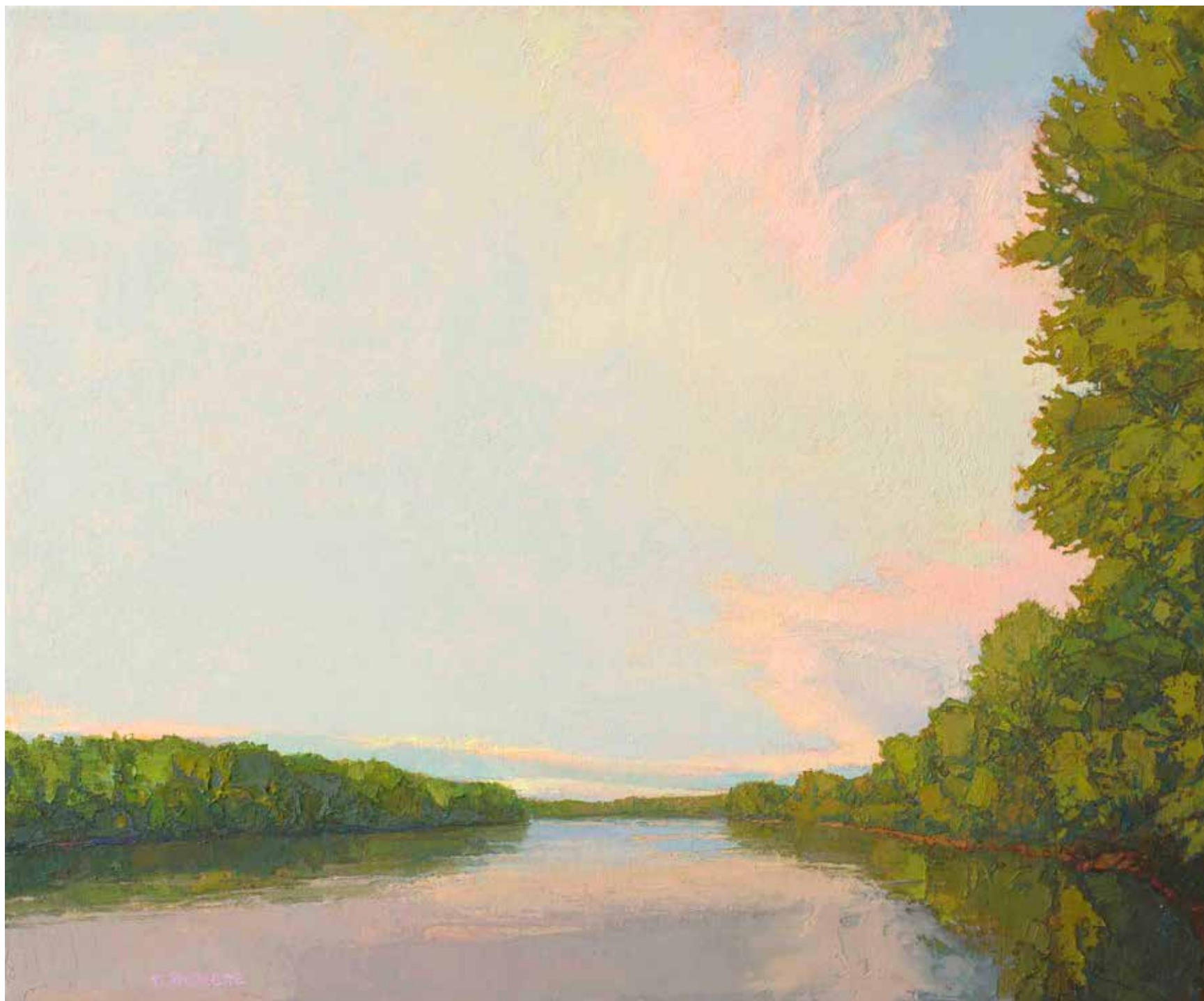


Subject to Change  
oil on linen, 24 x 40



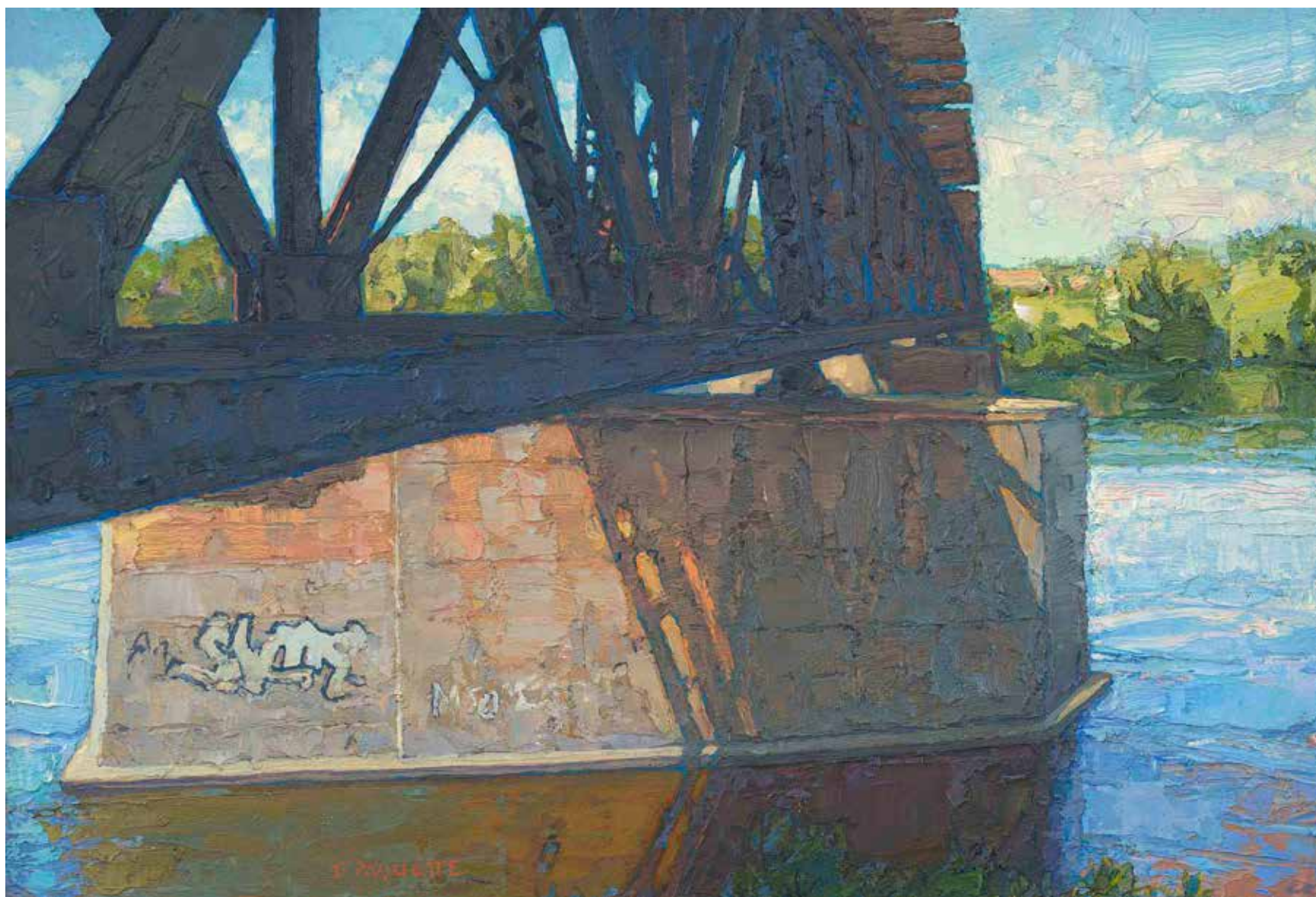


Walking on Water  
oil on linen, 24 x 32



Upriver Calm  
oil on linen, 20 x 24

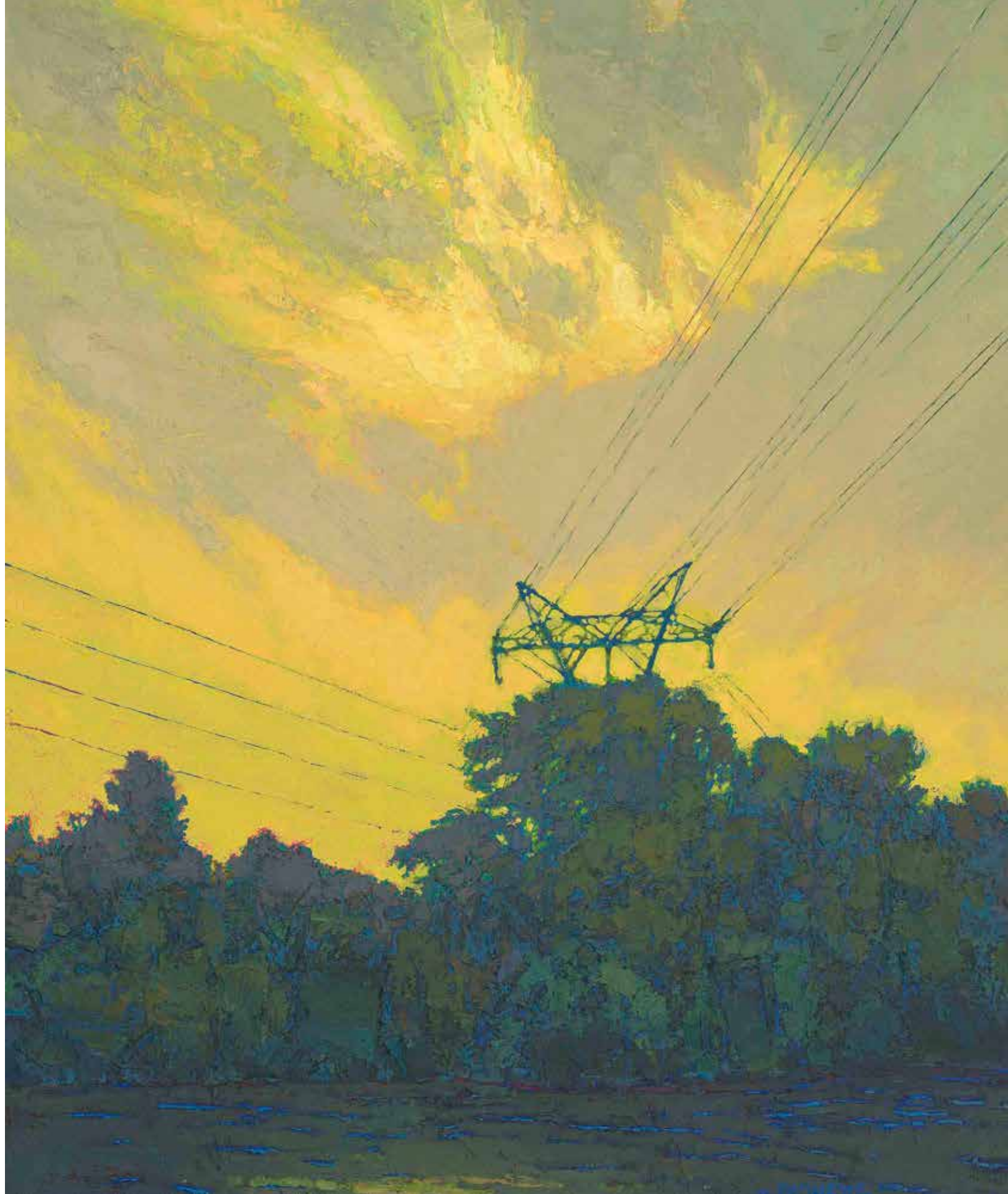




Claim  
oil on paper mounted on panel, 10.5 x 15.5

Current ►  
oil on linen, 24 x 20









Green Gorge  
oil on linen, 24 x 36





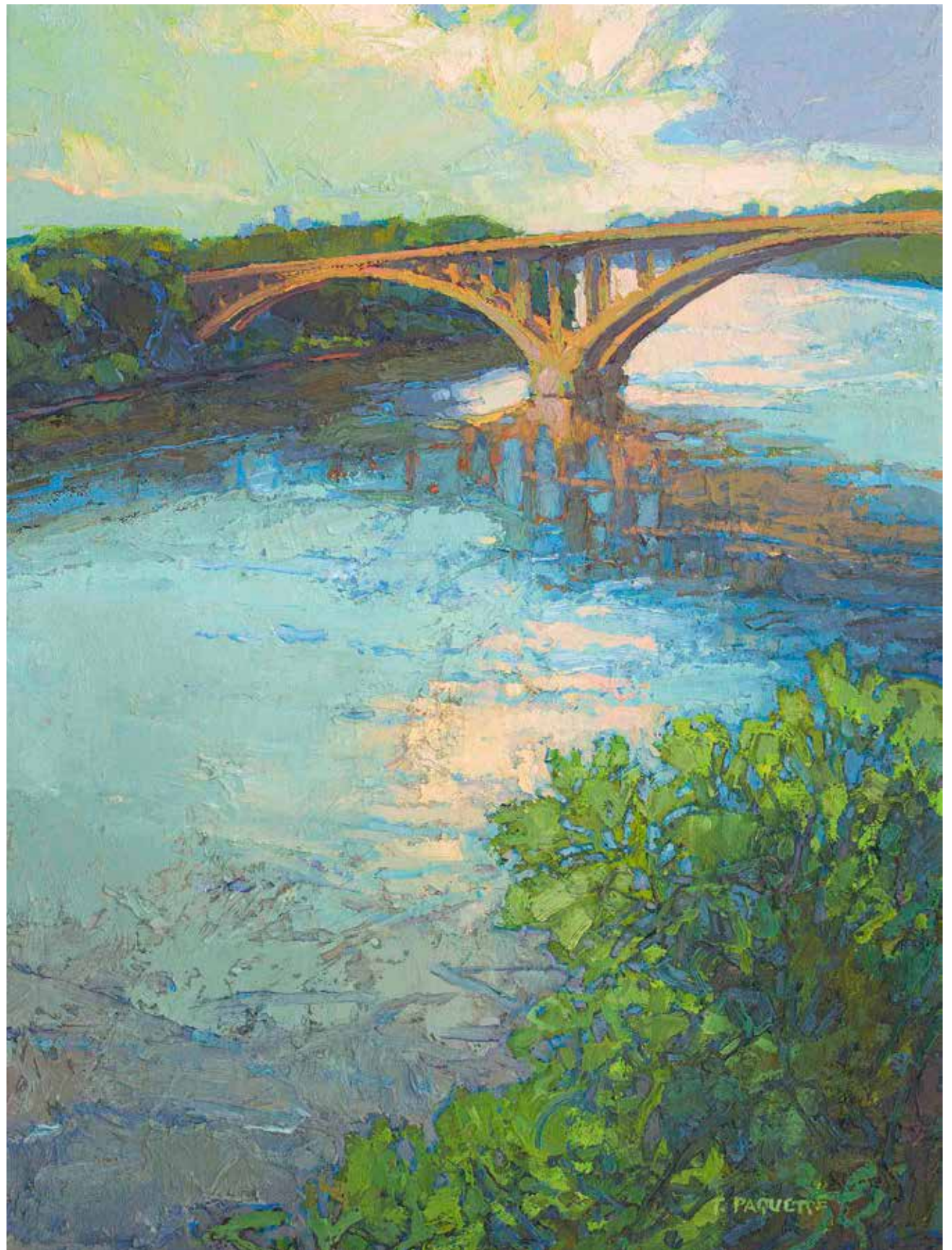
West Light from Indian Mounds  
oil on linen, 30 x 42





Sanctuary Between Cities  
oil on linen, 28 x 42





Marshall/Lake St Span  
oil on linen, 16 x 12



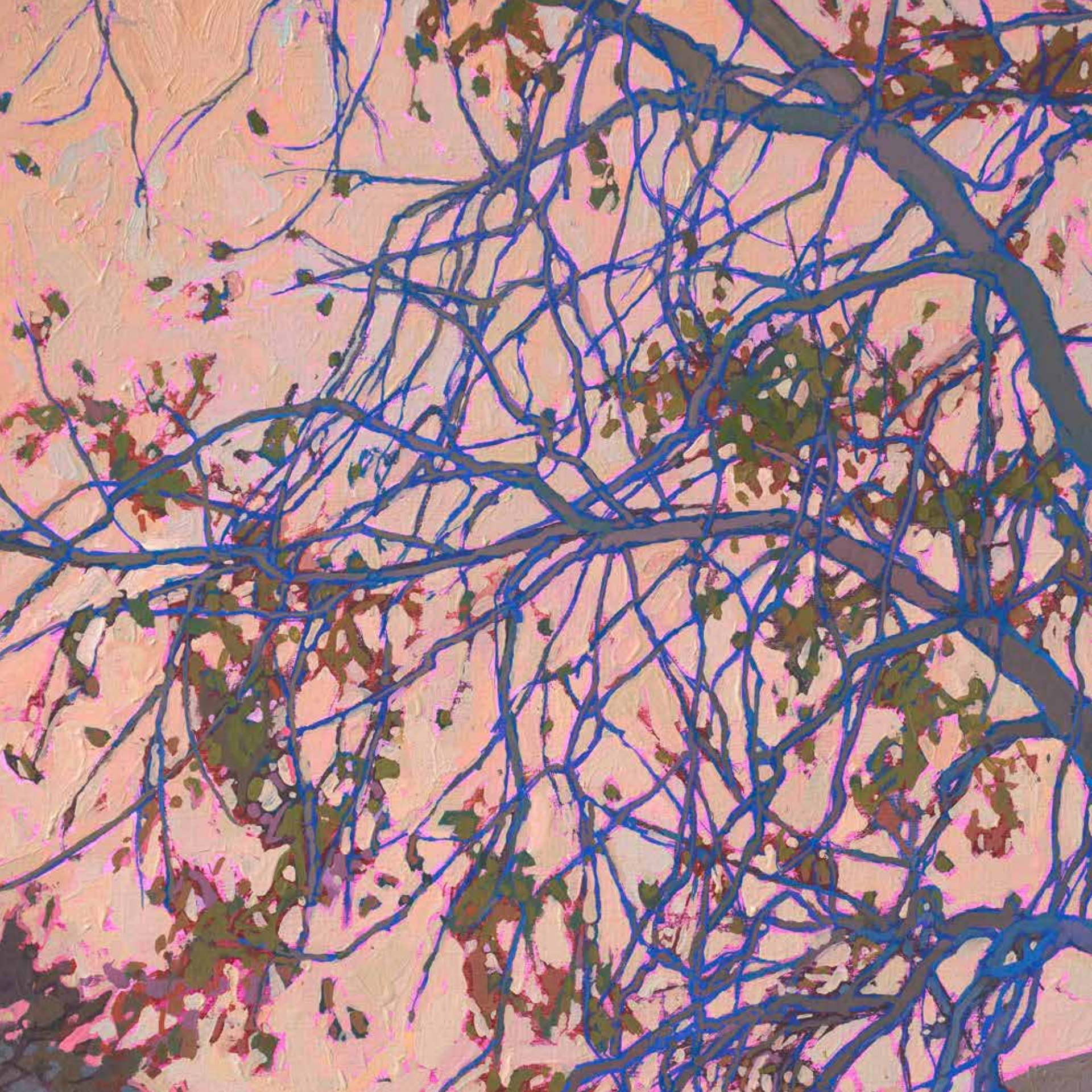






Color of Time  
oil on linen, 40 x 24



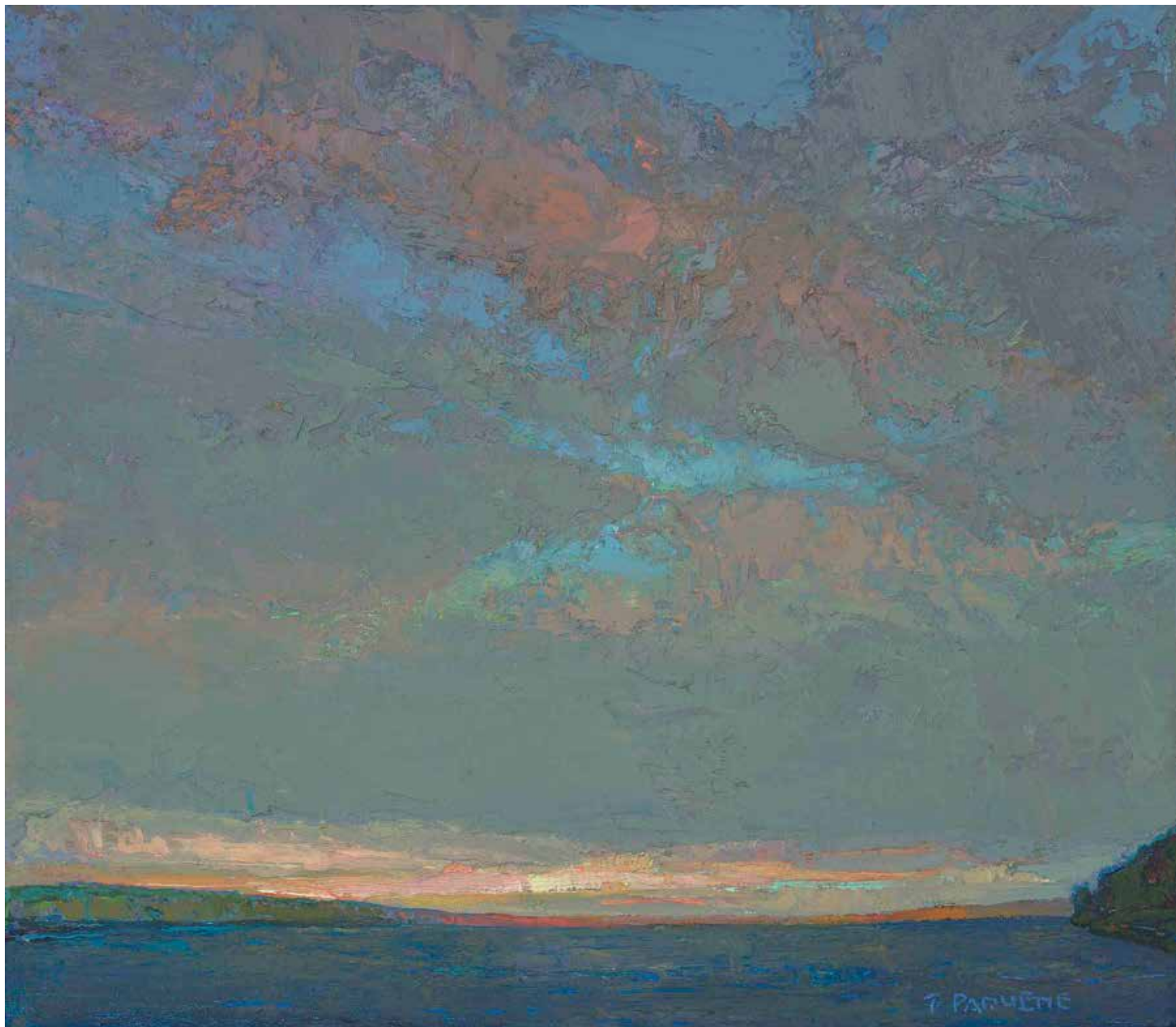






Hidden Powers  
oil on linen, 24 x 30





A Line on the Horizon  
oil on linen, 14 x 16





Buena Vista [study]  
oil on paper mounted on panel, 10 x 14









Alma's Buena Vista  
oil on linen, 40 x 60





Backwater Glow  
oil on linen, 24 x 32



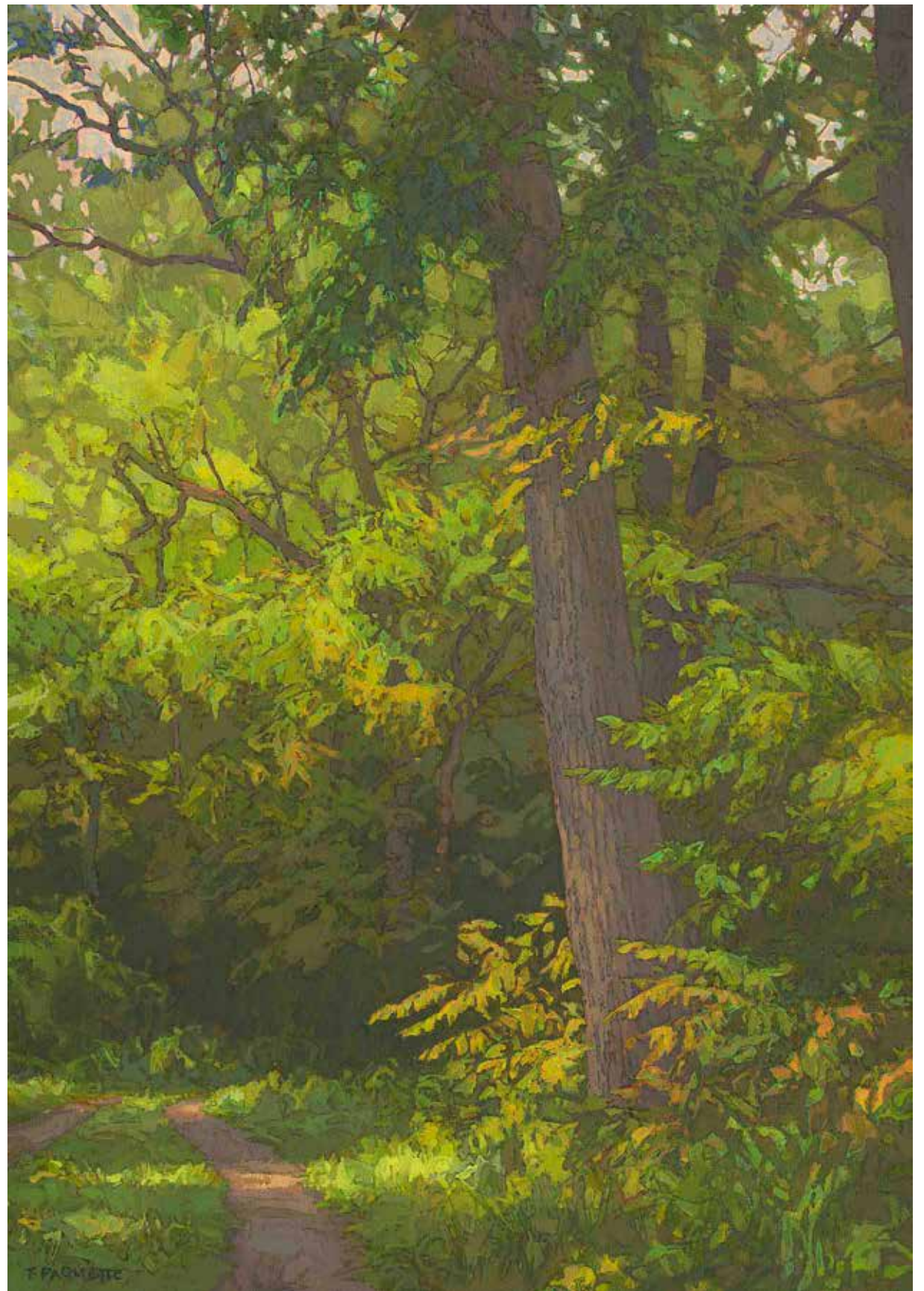


Autumn River Bluffs  
oil on linen, 28 x 36









Refuge: Riverside Trail  
oil on linen, 34 x 24







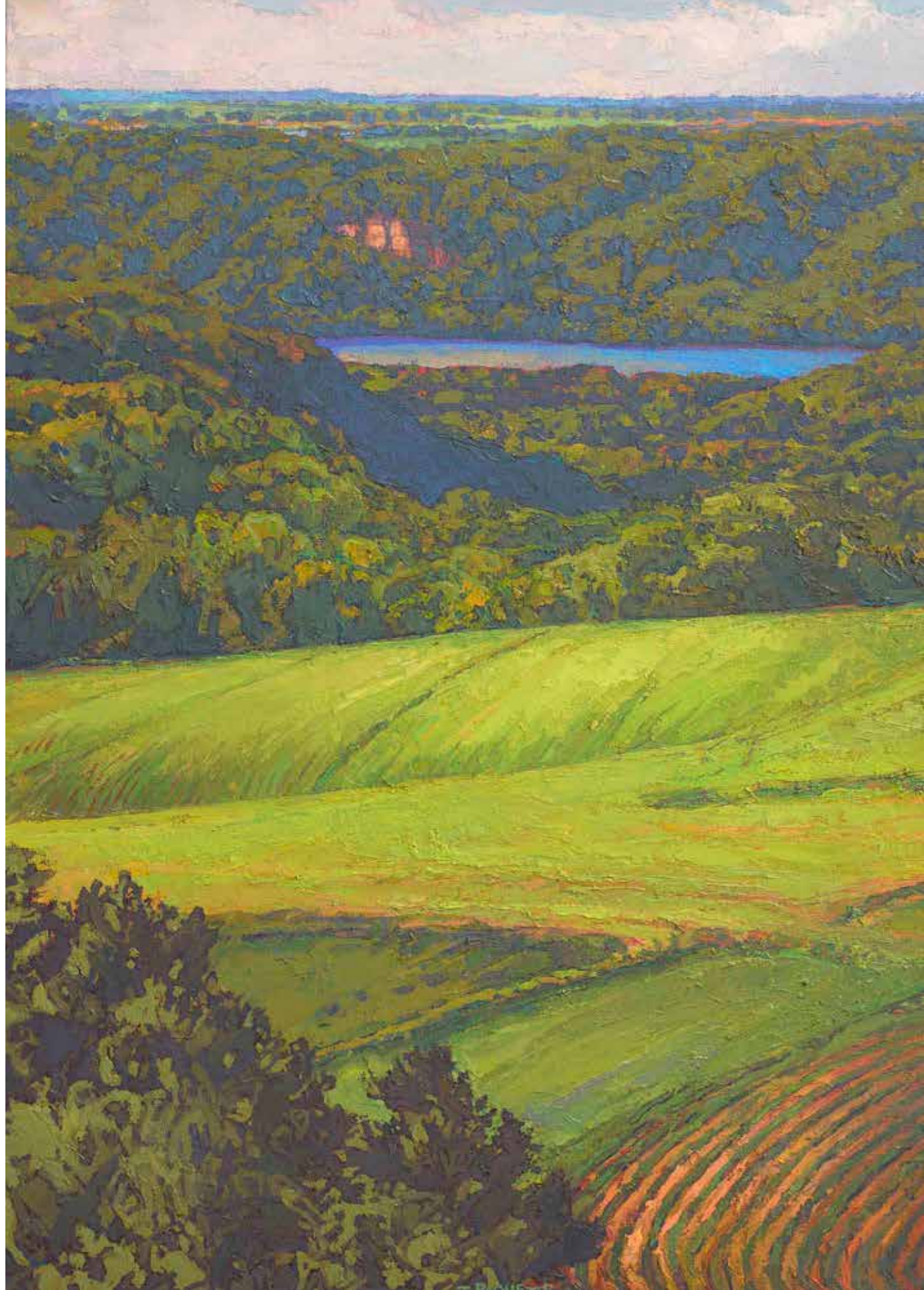
Land of the Turtles  
oil on linen, 30 x 20







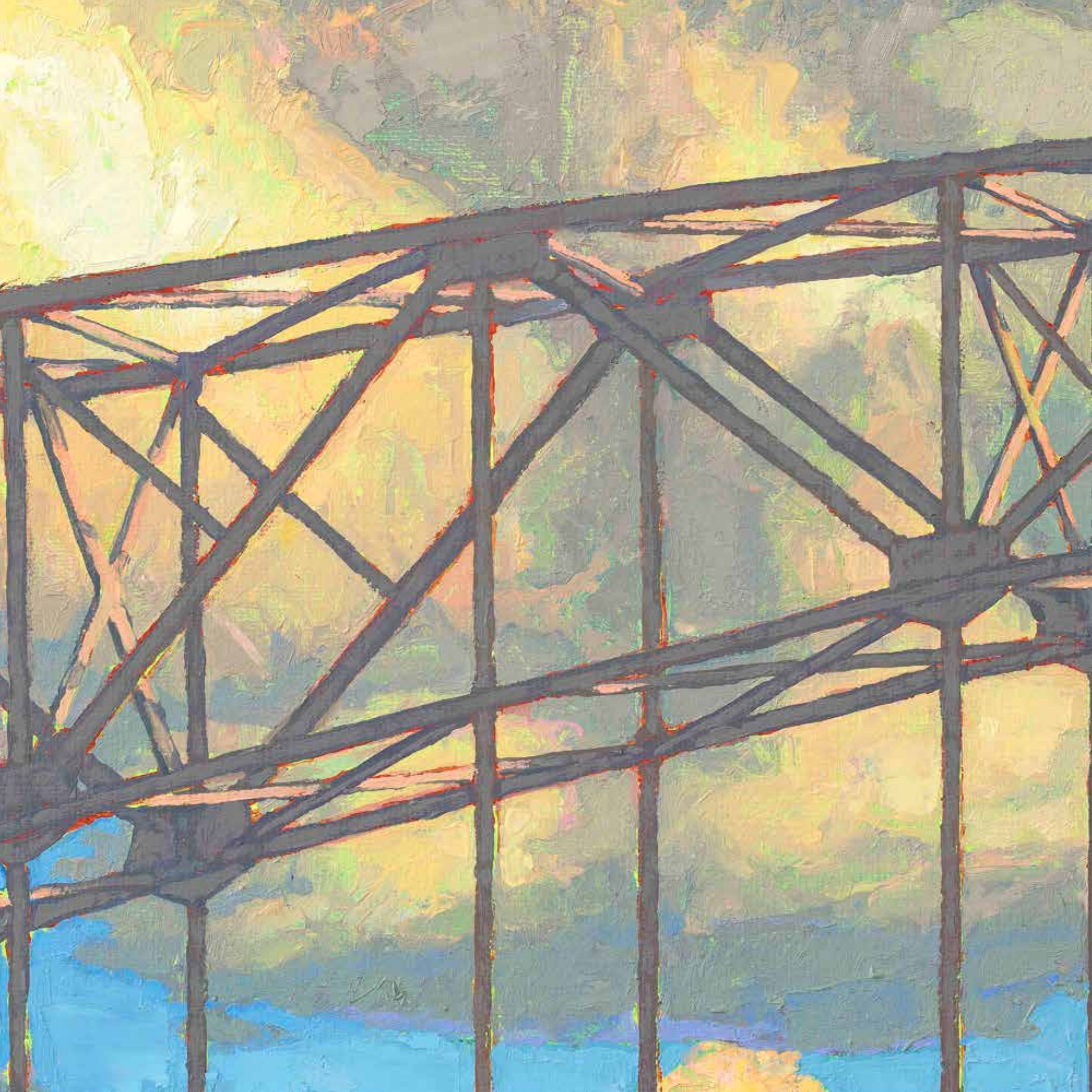




◀ Clouds So Inclined  
oil on linen, 30 x 24

Slice of River  
oil on linen, 34 x 24 ▶



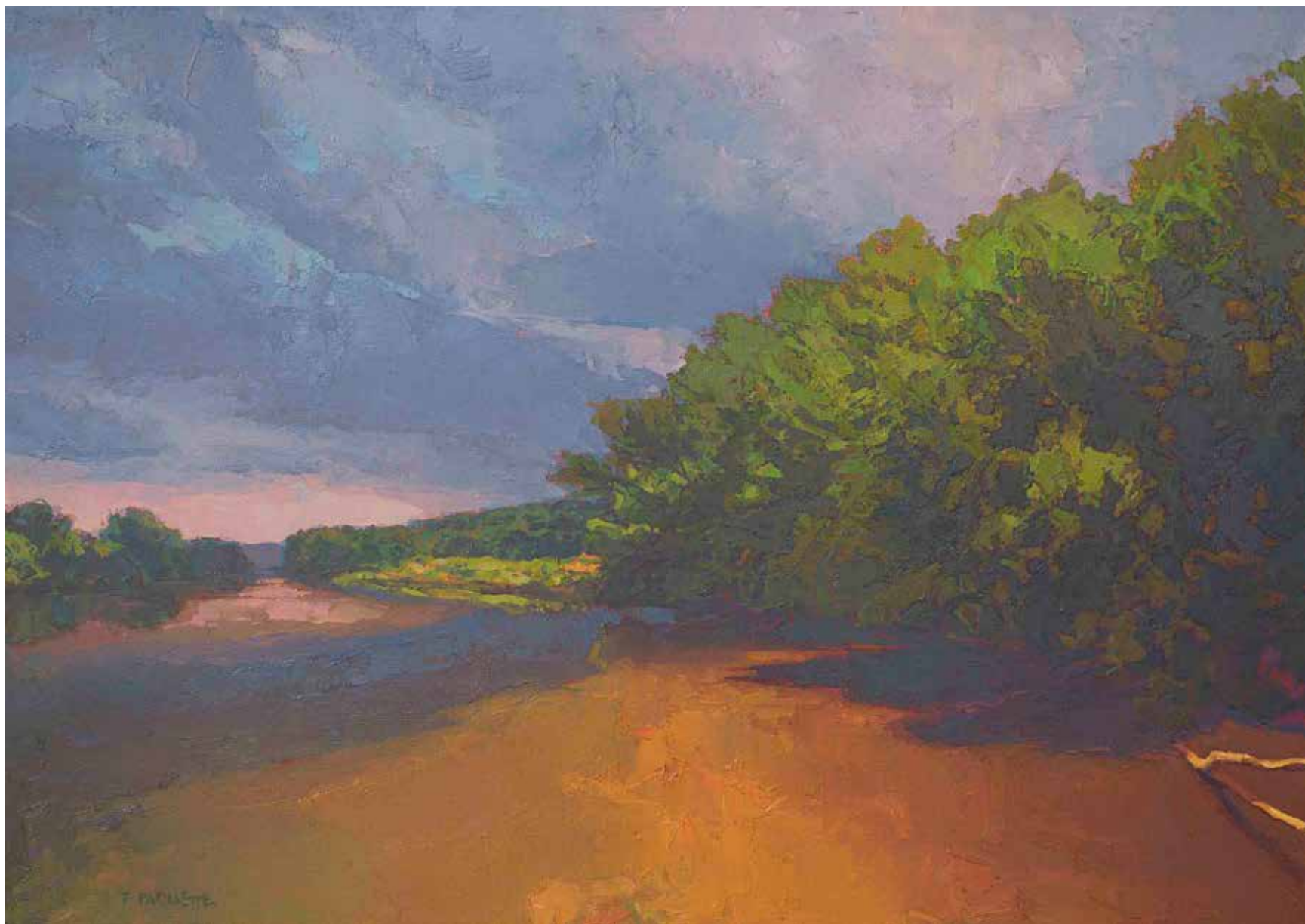






Cross Traffic, Dubuque  
oil on linen, 30 x 34





Maquoketa  
oil on linen, 24 x 34





Waning Light, Clinton Bridge  
oil on linen, 28 x 36





Hannibal Dawn  
oil on linen, 12 x 16





Grand Opening at the Last Dam  
oil on linen, 30 x 34





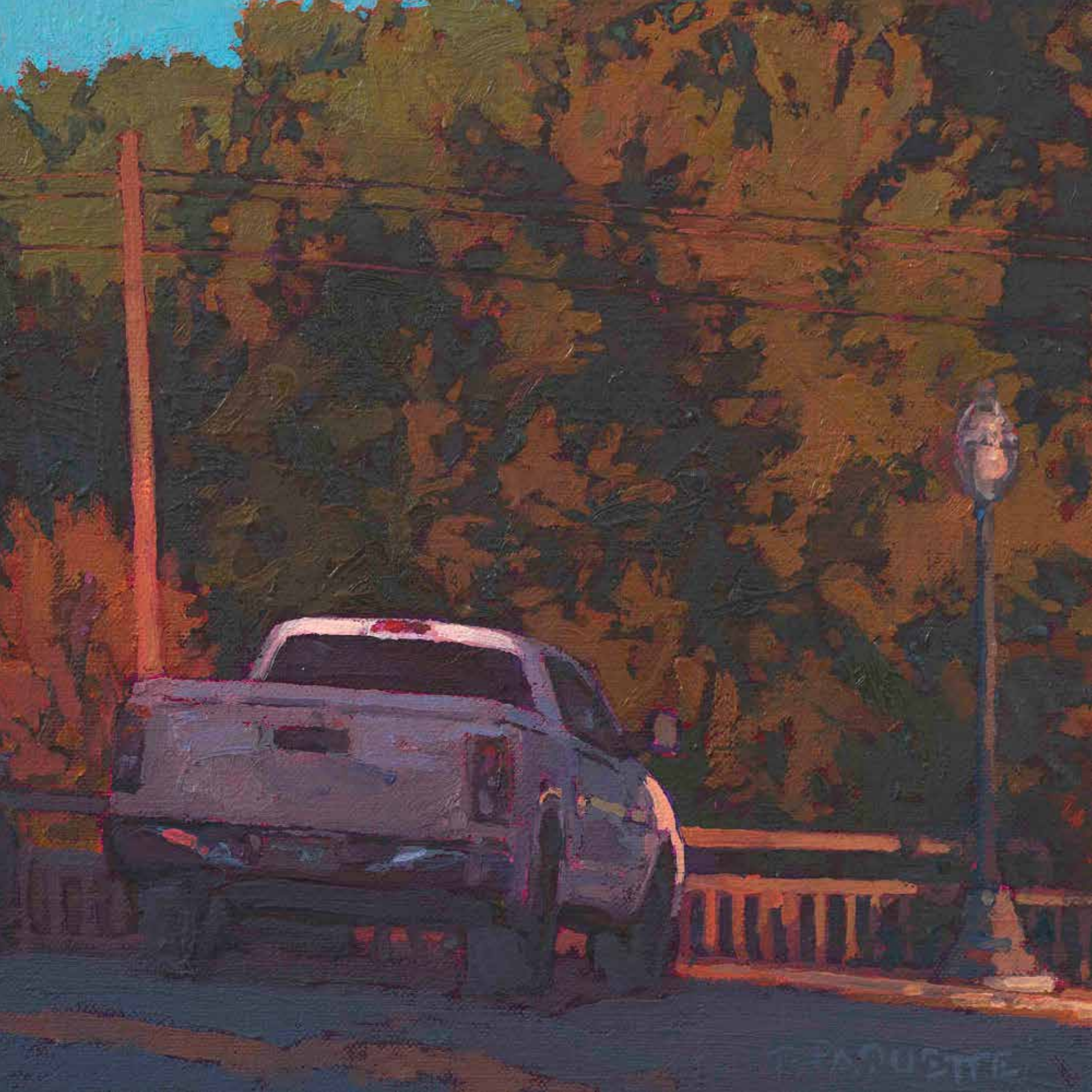
STAY





Stay In  
oil on linen, 30 x 34









Kitsch Stop  
oil on linen, 24 x 34



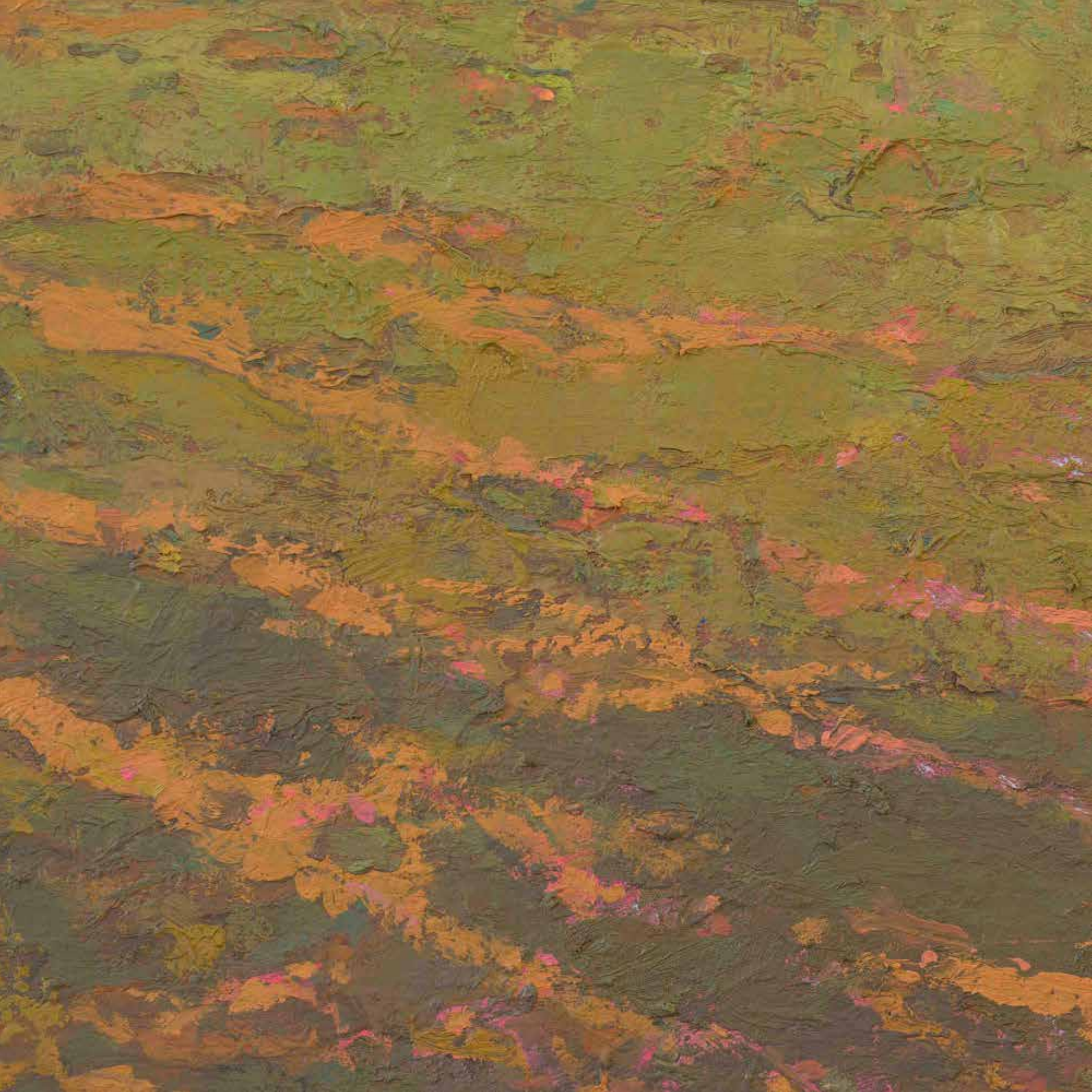






The Mound Builders  
oil on linen, 28 x 36









Distant Arc: I-280  
oil on linen, 34 x 42





Waterway to 280  
oil on linen, 14 x 16





End of Harvest in the Delta  
oil on linen, 24 x 40









Fishing Reverie  
oil on linen, 22 x 32









Reckoning After the Flood  
oil on linen, 40 x 48



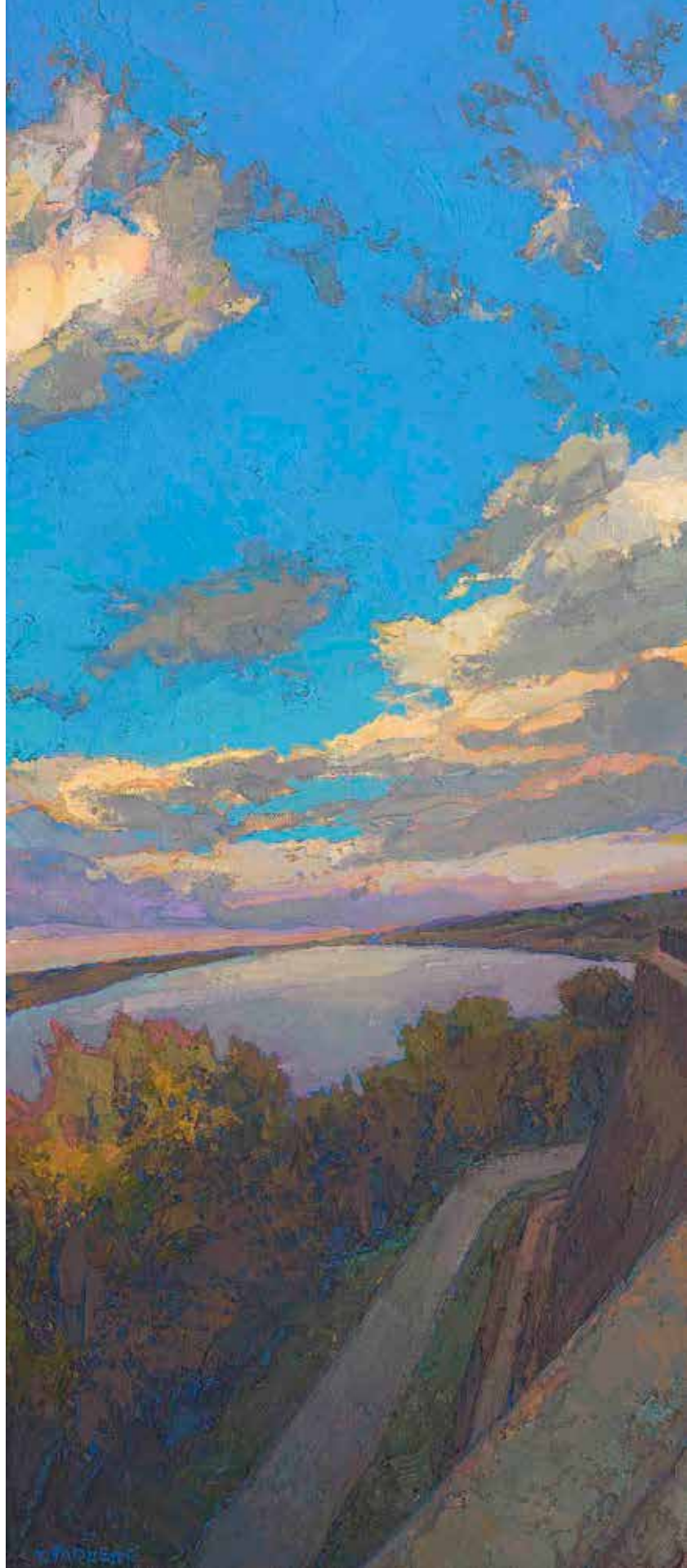






River Deep, River Wide  
oil on linen, 24 x 32





Natchez Bluff Overlook  
oil on linen, 28 x 12





Morning Traffic, New Orleans  
oil on linen, 24 x 30









Wandering Waters  
oil on linen, 32 x 22









Palimpsest  
oil on linen, 36 x 48



# Field Notes

## **Page 13. Itasca Night**

As the source of the Mississippi River, Lake Itasca is almost mythic in stature. Apropos of a mythic beginning, I chose to show the great river's origin-lake emerging from the cloak of night. When I attended college in nearby Bemidji, friends and I spent lots of time camping, sometimes on the middle of frozen lakes, directly under icy stars. This painting from a recent visit to Itasca resonates with my earlier experiences.

**Lake Itasca State Park, Minnesota**

**p.15. VerITAS CAput** – Lake Itasca (whose name is a merged and trimmed version of the Latin for "true head": veritas caput) drains into a stream that, with the help of a great number of tributaries, ends as a massive river. The outflow from the lake is a popular spot with visitors who clamber across it on a series of stones, and who can then declare that they have walked across the Mississippi River. Fortunately, the parade of river-crossers dissipates in rain and snow and at the dark ends of the day, at which point, rightful attention returns to the stream's steady goal of becoming one of the world's great rivers.

**Lake Itasca State Park, Minnesota**

## **p. 17. River Walk: At the Beginning**

I met a young man and woman who walked together down the middle of the stream of the Mississippi. The

young couple and the young river shared in that moment an intertwined story of beginnings.

**Lake Itasca State Park, Minnesota**

## **p.19. Winter River from Bluebird Drive Bridge**

This area is one of my favorites along the northernmost reaches of the Mississippi. Not far downriver from Grand Rapids, deep meanders and oxbows slice this way and that through farmlands and forests. The view I painted from the Blueberry Drive bridge was not a window onto the area's more dramatic loopy arcs and incised banks; it was simply a contemplation of the graceful dynamic between land and water so typical of this stretch.

**Blackberry, Minnesota**

## **p. 20. Atmospheric Changes**

In the morning hours, plumes of superheated smoke and steam from a coal-fired power plant billowed into the cool autumn air, hit an atmospheric ceiling and drifted laterally across the landscape.

**Cohasset, Minnesota**

## **p. 21. Subject to Change (study)**

This second look at the power plant in Cohasset, Minnesota, takes a wider view than the first. It started with the playful substitution of a blue sky for green, and white-gray clouds for pink. Color is a relative thing, something I find endlessly interesting in its own

right, independent of any subject I might portray with it.

**Cohasset, Minnesota**

## **p. 23. Subject to Change**

The title refers to many things at once: the sudden shift from a placid riverine environment to an industrial one; the growing concern about climate change and humanity's role in it; and the fact that this power plant was soon scheduled to close its coal-burning facility and transition to natural gas. The plant primarily generates electricity for iron ore processing on Lake Superior, a hundred miles away.

**Cohasset, Minnesota**

## **p. 24. Walking on Water**

Spurred by thoughts of all the potential paintings I saw in this northern winter landscape, I followed a line of animal tracks as they crossed the river. I stopped short because I had seen sections of the river farther to the north with no ice. It seemed wiser to leave to speculation where the tracks led, rather than to find myself under the ice. As the painting developed I was intrigued by the interplay of warm and cool blues, supported by more muted colors.

**Ball Bluff, Minnesota**

## **p. 25. Upriver Calm**

As the river approached the Twin Cities, a small platform jutted out into the water, creating a point of contemplation for river aficionados



or, by some visible evidence, beer drinkers. This was the view downstream from that platform, a peaceful stretch of water before the river's banks became crowded by the first metropolis on the Mississippi's itinerary.

## **Brooklyn Center, Minnesota**

### **p. 26. Claim**

I know this railroad bridge well, as I grew up less than a mile away. It was a landmark for my entire youth. There was a perennial challenge to walk its length—a dare made more terrifying by the fact that a boy in our neighborhood had lost his legs on nearby railroad tracks. Unlike my older brother, who took "the walk", I did not. Instead, I paced it out here with paint and brush. The structure hasn't changed but for the latest graffiti; new claims on my old turf.

## **Minneapolis, Minnesota**

### **p. 27. Current**

Flowing air, water, and electricity are the focus of this composition. The wires here carry electricity generated by the only sizeable waterfall on the river, St Anthony Falls, less than two hundred yards upstream. The unsettled dynamism of the sky alludes to the charge and change that all currents produce.

## **St Anthony Falls (Minneapolis), Minnesota**

### **p. 28. Green Gorge**

[Minnesota Marine Art Museum only] The Mississippi carves a gorge between downtown Minneapolis and its confluence with the Minnesota River. The water's elevation drops 110 feet in that eight-mile segment. While the river below continues its relentless carving, verdant walls rise up to meet the cities nestled on either side of the gorge.

## **Minneapolis and St Paul, Minnesota**

### **p. 29. West Light from Indian Mounds**

[Minnesota Marine Art Museum only] This is St Paul as seen on a bright, hazy late day from Indian Mounds, a promontory just east and downriver. St Paul is a hilly city whose downtown has always hugged the river, while its sibling Minneapolis is a prairie city whose hub has migrated inland. If they are twins, they are certainly not identical.

## **St Paul, Minnesota**

### **p. 30. Sanctuary Between Cities**

[Minnesota Marine Art Museum only] The sprawling, peaceful park called Hidden Falls is located on the St Paul side of the river. It is astonishing that within this river gorge separating Minnesota's two largest cities, there exists what seems to be another world altogether, where nature dominates.

## **St Paul, Minnesota**

### **p. 31. Marshall/Lake Street Span**

Lake Street in Minneapolis and Marshall Avenue in St. Paul trade names on this bridge, the first span to directly connect the Twin Cities. It was oddly coincidental that as I painted this, I kept feeling the echo of one of my favorite paintings pushing to the surface. The painting, *St. Paul's Cathedral [London]* by Fauvist Andre Derain, just happens to be in the collection of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. The double-layered references to Minneapolis/St Paul('s) did not surface consciously until long after my painting was completed.

## **St Paul/Minneapolis, Minnesota**

### **p. 33. Color of Time**

I reached the river bluffs outside Prescott, Wisconsin, with plenty of time before sunset. Though the colors in reality were not so far progressed, it was a particularly appealing and jubilant moment to arrive. I was reminded of Thoreau's declaration, "I have never got over my surprise that I should have been born into the most estimable place in all the world, and in the very nick of time, too."

## **Prescott, Wisconsin**

**p. 35. Hidden Powers** – These nuclear reactors at Prairie Island are two of eight reactors on the Mississippi River; there are thirty-one within the entire watershed. Critics point to the inherent and unambiguous risks of nuclear power as a reason to decommission



# Field Notes

such generators. The screen of trees I painted in front of them was undoubtedly grown as a visual barrier to divert attention from the reactors. It had that effect, but not as intended. Rather, it caused me to think about the solar energy stored in the trees, with no threat of radiation.

## **Prairie Island, Minnesota**

### **p. 36. *A Line on the Horizon***

For any landscape painter, especially in the Midwest or looking out to sea, the first task is to diminish the unrelenting power of the horizon—"Thou Shalt Not Draw a Horizon Line". Yet the opposite is sometimes true, as when, at the end of an otherwise bleak day, I found myself at the south end of Lake Pepin (a long and impressively wide part of the Mississippi between Minnesota and Wisconsin) and the horizon was exactly where interesting things were happening.

## **Maple Springs, Minnesota**

### **p. 37. *Buena Vista***

Up the bluff from Alma, Wisconsin, is Buena Vista Park. True to its name, it really does have buena views. The one I painted looked south toward the power plant. To the north was Lock and Dam No. 4, which I also hoped to paint, but the allure of the deeply receding vista, the water's intense reflection, and the southern sky's haze, all conspired to swing my painting-compass southward.

## **Alma, Wisconsin**

### **p. 39. *Alma's Buena Vista***

There are many great vantage points on the Mississippi. Two of my favorites in bluff country are Pike's Peak State Park near McGregor, Iowa, which has a sweeping panorama of the Mississippi and the mouth of the Wisconsin River, and Buena Vista Park in Alma, Wisconsin. The view at Buena Vista was my choice as subject for the largest work in this exhibition because it embodies the grandness that characterizes the Mississippi from head to toe; where nature certainly dominates, but humanity has a significant presence.

## **Alma, Wisconsin**

### **p. 40. *Backwater Glow***

Ever since I was sternly reprimanded as a child for looking into the sun, that particular direction has attracted my gaze. I find that while the sun mostly obscures with its brilliance, it can stir poignancy into a view. This is true even for a humble backwater island of trees which I observed beneath a blinding sun. My fascination with this scene is reflected in the painting's broad brushstrokes, and the inclusion of unexpected colors across the composition.

## **Winona, Minnesota**

### **p. 41. *Autumn River Bluffs***

Emblematic of this region are the limestone bluffs that rise up on both

sides of the river, sometimes tight to the shore on one side, sometimes miles away on the other. The yellowish-white karst cliffs and towers, untouched by glacial ice, are remnants of land that was deeply scoured by massive rivers draining glacial melt. They add a dramatic quality I have always appreciated. One of my first jobs out of high school was as a short-order cook in bluff-country's Red Wing, Minnesota, where I was warned about the hordes of "leaf peepers" that would descend on the restaurant for a week or two each autumn. Many years later, while painting these limestone bluffs during autumn's full color, I enjoyed being one among the invading horde.

## **Buffalo City, Wisconsin**

### **p. 43. *Refuge: Riverside Trail***

In the 1980s I worked for a short time at the Trempealeau National Wildlife Refuge, clearing stands of black locust trees which were introduced to the area many decades earlier to help control erosion. The newer goal was to re-establish a prairie environment. The trail in the painting follows along the river's lagoon within the Refuge. While I was not surprised that the locusts have persisted despite our efforts, I was pleased that the prairie grasses and flowers had also taken a strong hold and were thriving.

## **Trempealeau, Wisconsin**



**p. 45. *Land of the Turtles***

My timing was very good for a reconnaissance of the National Wildlife Refuge. Besides herons and assorted birds, one day I had several meetings with turtles. The view here is from a half-mile causeway that cuts across the lagoon. It's also just a few steps from where I watched a painted turtle deposit and bury her eggs in the soft sand. I kept her secret safe.

**Trempealeau, Wisconsin**

**p. 46. *Clouds So Inclined***

In the Driftless Area, a region that was never glaciated, river bluffs are stunning reminders of the "big geology" that formed this landscape. I never tire of scanning the bluffs for eagles, interesting shadows, and unexpected outcroppings. There is often a striking interplay between land and sky; here, clouds seemed to react intentionally to the bluffs.

**Lamoille, Minnesota**

**p. 47. *Slice of River***

Perched on the edge of a high hill some miles northwest of Dubuque, Balltown (population 64), is obviously proud of its vantage point. The view in this painting was from the town's dedicated overlook, which is equipped with those big tourist binocular-contraptions and enough parking spots to accommodate a good percentage of Balltown's residents' cars, if it came to that. I try to catch this great view whenever I am in the

area. Someday I hope to meet and thank a local resident for generously sharing their breathtaking view with all comers.

**Balltown, Iowa**

**p. 49. *Cross Traffic, Dubuque***

Dubuque is famous for its focus on the river, and has a rich history as a hub for the region dating back to the early nineteenth century. The Mississippi was an important transportation corridor well before highways crossed it, and it remains so. The Julien Dubuque Bridge (named, like the city, for the area's first permanent European settler) was added to this composition to set up a dialogue between these "crossroads," though never the two shall meet.

**Dubuque, Iowa**

**p. 50. *Maquoketa***

The Maquoketa River feeds into the Mississippi at the Upper Mississippi River Wildlife and Fish Refuge. At that point it is a sluggish, beautiful tributary that I felt compelled to paint. A painter could spend a hundred lifetimes painting tributaries of the Mississippi—I live along one, many hundreds of miles from this particular spot—but the Maquoketa makes a beguiling representative for them all.

**Green River, Iowa**

**p. 51. *Waning Light, Clinton Bridge***

The bridge in Clinton, Iowa, emerged vibrantly from the Illinois side of the

river as the sun approached sunset on the opposite horizon. I have been on most of the bridges that cross the Mississippi, and it would be tempting to document them all. Sometimes however, a bridge will collaborate with the hour and season, as here, to produce a remarkable scene that is necessary to paint.

**Clinton, Iowa**

**p. 52. *Hannibal Dawn***

Well before the business day began at the downtown shops, I had the streets of Hannibal to myself. I wanted to witness the historic district in repose, to make an atypical tourist-town portrait, one that might better embody the quintessential river town. I aimed to capture a timelessness that the busy afternoon would surely chase away.

**Hannibal, Missouri**

**p. 53. *Grand Opening at the Last Dam***

A half-mile upstream from Lock and Dam No. 26, floodgates in the levee opened onto the action in the river like a theater's proscenium. The height of the protective raised-earth embankments and their persistence for long stretches of the river, particularly in the south, serve as reminders of why this river is said to be "a very bad neighbor." Floodplain farms and towns, bridges, locks and dams suggest a long-settled truce between residents and Old Man River. But topographic maps provide better insight into the river's past and its



# Field Notes

probable future, revealing huge swaths of the landscape that have been scoured or changed at the river's whim. All alliances, then, look temporary.

**Alton, Illinois**

## **p. 55. Stay In**

The sign on the drawbridge advised, "Stay in vehicle," which of course suggested the possibility of doing otherwise. I got out of my car to get a good look at the bridge and the views it afforded, while waiting for a raft of barges to pass under the draw. There was plenty of time for taking notes and sketching. When you stay in, you miss everything that out offers. Helen Keller put it this way: "Life is a daring adventure or it is nothing." This was my escape, at that particular moment, from nothing.

**Fort Madison, Iowa**

## **p. 57. Kitsch Stop**

Having been though Hannibal many times since the 1980s, I braced myself for the deluge of so many "Aunt Polly's" and "Tom and Huck's" shops. I felt compelled, nevertheless, to re-encounter Hannibal, and to see what there was to see. It was the hometown of the most famous son of the Mississippi, after all, and if I could find the right folksy subject, an homage to Twain was in order.

**Hannibal, Missouri**

## **p. 59. The Mound Builders**

This is the view across the river to

St Louis from Monk's Mound. This central mound, ten stories high, was at the hub of Mississippian culture (c. 600-1400 C.E.), the largest pre-Columbian civilization north of Mexico. Having done my graduate work in Edwardsville, just a dozen miles from Cahokia Mounds (where Monk's Mound is located), I happen to know of another mound-building society very nearby, still thriving. On the far right of this painting I included the landfill that has been growing now for at least thirty years, a future remnant of contemporary "Mississippian culture."

**Cahokia Mounds, Illinois**

## **p. 61. Distant Arc: I-280**

The first time I drove to the Mississippi to make "portraits" from along its length, I instinctively approached the river very slowly, not wanting to miss a molecule of nuance. I formally met the river at a small park near the Quad Cities. That meeting is reflected in this painting, with its preponderance of water depicted in many layers of paint. The significance of this place to me as a formal starting point made it an essential subject to paint on a larger scale.

**Rock Island, Illinois**

## **p. 62. Waterway to 280**

My first forays into this project of painting the river brought me first to the Quad Cities, the closest point to my Pennsylvania home. The late afternoon sun and the exhilaration

of finally getting to the core of this big project took form in this painting, evocative of that golden day.

**Rock Island, Illinois**

## **p. 63. End of Harvest in the Delta**

Crossing the Mississippi from Memphis, I was alarmed to see the sky to the north engulfed in a massive, high-climbing cloud of smoke, fuming like an industrial accident or an epic fire. Traveling in that direction (admittedly, an entirely voluntary choice), it became obvious that this was simply an agricultural practice not familiar to a northerner: the burning of rice stubble after the harvest in the fertile lands of the Mississippi Delta. It was one of a few impressive conflagrations I saw that afternoon, none of which inspired visible panic in cars with Arkansas plates.

**Joiner, Arkansas**

## **p. 65. Fishing Reverie**

This scene reminded me that deep personal connections with the river are not impossible in our high-speed society. In places up and down "America's river" I encountered people boating and fishing, sometimes for sport, but often for dinner, like these two women on a cold February day.

**Hickman, Kentucky**

## **p. 67. Reckoning After the Flood**

Significant floods, always a threat on the Mississippi, caused widespread



damage before and after some of my trips to the river. The natural shoreline at Meeman-Shelby State Forest near Memphis had been recently inundated, as evidenced by a thick deposit of hard sand coming up to the trees. Barge traffic was again moving up and down the river, and winter proceeded as usual: life does go on.

## **Memphis, Tennessee**

### **p. 69. *River Deep, River Wide***

The title of this painting can obviously be attributed to its subject, the broad and deep Mississippi River—in this case with sunlight playing intermittently on its far shore. Here I wanted to communicate a sense of the water itself, as I found it early one morning south of Memphis.

## **Tunica, Mississippi**

### **p. 70. *Natchez Bluff Overlook***

The rain that accompanied me to Natchez was drenching. Sitting it out along the walled bluff there, the heavens morphed from an impenetrable gray sheet of rain into dramatic towering clouds, which eventually became tattered late-day clouds. The cinematic nature of that weather seemed bound with the dramatic history I had read of the bluff city, of pirates and gamblers Under-the-Hill, and respectable citizens who migrated up the hill to avoid the rowdy "dissipations" below.

## **Natchez, Mississippi**

### **p. 71. *Morning Traffic, New Orleans***

Though ocean-going freighters look like aimless toys from the air, there is no mistaking their purposefulness as they ply the final miles of river to and from the busy Port of New Orleans. I like to remind myself that the waters carrying these ships were, only three months before, flowing through the Rocky Mountains, the northern plains, and the Appalachians. They had come here to merge with the sea.

## **New Orleans, Louisiana**

### **p. 73. *Wandering Waters***

Starting within a mile of its headwaters, the Mississippi River forms small meanders and oxbows, presaging the grand bends and loops hundreds of miles downstream from "Paul Bunyan" country. Those wandering waters appear enormously inefficient, but oh, how fascinating they are from the air, in topographic maps, or right up close as the river wends by. This painting's composition resulted from a flight I chartered in order to see the river's delta in one encompassing view, analogous to how I could see its narrow width in one glance at its beginning in Lake Itasca State Park. This goal required more than Paul Bunyan's height; a bird's eye view was needed.

## **Near New Orleans, Louisiana**

### **p. 75. *Palimpsest***

We all know that the world is forever changing, but seeing large-scale

evidence of that first-hand can be unsettling. The random network of canals that cut through the bayou around the Mississippi River's incomprehensibly wide mouth is slowly sinking below sea level. What looks to be simply rising water is something more complex, however. The main channel of the Mississippi, straightened and deepened for better navigation, prevents the massive load of sediment—carried for thousands of miles from thirty-one states and two Canadian provinces—from being dispersed across the width of the delta as it had for millennia. This is a problem because the bayou, which buffers and absorbs tidal surges from hurricanes, sinks without these continual deposits. Visible from the air, the remnants of the bayou resemble a very large message in mysterious script formed in the soft mud and marsh of the delta, its traces now being erased.

## **Gulf of Mexico at the Mississippi River Delta**

### **BACK COVER. *The Arc of I-280***

My re-exploration of the Mississippi River began at this spot with this painting, which shows an expanse of water and a hint of the Interstate 280 bridge on the horizon. This painting and a second very similar version (p. 62) served as wellsprings for subsequent Mississippi paintings.

## **Rock Island, Illinois**







# Biography

Born in Minneapolis, 1958, the eighth of eleven children, Thomas Paquette grew up a mile from the Mississippi River. He later lived near the river in Bemidji, Red Wing, and Winona in Minnesota, and Edwardsville in Illinois.

For several years after high school Paquette alternated between studying at colleges and taking long trips across the country traveling unconventionally by freight trains. He eventually graduated summa cum laude from Bemidji State University with a BFA degree in Painting in 1985, and has painted full-time since 1988, when he earned his MFA degree in Painting on full fellowship from Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

Paquette's landscape paintings have been exhibited across the United States, and were featured in more than fifty solo exhibitions at prominent art galleries in Chicago, Minneapolis, Philadelphia, New York City, Washington DC, and elsewhere. Besides the three museums hosting America's River Re-Explored, solo museum exhibitions of his work were mounted at Erie Art Museum, Evansville Museum of Art and Science, Georgia Museum of Art, Quick Center for the Arts, The Rockwell Museum, Westmoreland Museum of American Art, and Wildling Art Museum.

Commissions include major paintings created for the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, and the States of Minnesota, Montana, and Maine. Forty of his paintings have been selected for exhibitions, either as loaned works or part of purchased permanent collections, in nineteen U.S. embassies on five continents, including embassies in Amman, Athens, Brussels NATO, Moscow, Rome, St. Petersburg, Santiago, Taipei, and Vienna. He is the recipient of awards and honors including visiting artist residencies at the American Academy in Rome, the Aegean Arts and Cultural Exchange (Greece), three U.S. national parks (Acadia, Yosemite, Rocky Mountain), Blue Mountain Center, and in Miami on a three-year Residency-Fellowship at the National Foundation for Advancement in the Arts. His paintings are in numerous public, corporate, and private collections, and he has lectured abroad at universities in England, Wales and Greece. Paquette resides with his wife in Warren, Pennsylvania, which is on the Allegheny River, the easternmost tributary of the Mississippi.



