

ALAN FELTUS

2004 Summer, 2004
Oil on linen, 39 1/2 x 47 1/4



COURTESY THE ARTIST

ALAN FELTUS

Awakenings: Becoming an Artist

How my early years
informed how I evolved
as a painter

I was sixteen when I saw Robert Rauschenberg's combine titled *Monogram* (1955–59) when it was first exhibited at the Leo Castelli Gallery in New York. Rauschenberg made *Monogram* in the period when he and Jasper Johns used to visit Sari Dienes in her studio, in the same period when I was spending a lot of time with Sari, before I was an art student.

Rauschenberg's *Monogram* was probably the single work of art that spoke to me most meaningfully at that time about what a work of art made in the twentieth century could be, and what my life might be like if I were to become an artist. From knowing Sari, I was predisposed to see beauty and potential in found objects and in the odd things I might see in junk and antique shops that I couldn't afford to buy at the time. Those were the things Sari and Rauschenberg worked with. I liked how such things had elusive meanings that were subtle and poetic and suggestive of things that might live in one's subconscious mind.

Monogram is a very long-haired taxidermy angora goat with paint on its face and a car tire around its body, standing on an abstract collage painting. The goat, once a live animal, seemed to gaze out calmly through glass eyes from a head smeared with paint, making it look as though it had survived some dreaded violent mishap that had left it ensnared by a rubber tire to become transformed into something new and strange and mysterious that stood in the middle of a New York art gallery. Rauschenberg's *Monogram* has since become one of the most famous iconic works of neo-Dada and conceptual art.

Another of Rauschenberg's combines, *Canyon* (1959), has a dark, dusty, stuffed eagle with outstretched wings protruding from it and a pillow hanging from a rope below. I had seen that eagle many times, wings spread wide, atop a wall of cabinets just inside the door of another artist's studio next to Sari's. Whoever lived in that studio often kept his door open, almost inviting me to peek around the barrier to see what was beyond, but the eagle in its place high above was foreboding in that dim light of the hallway where I stood. I didn't know the man behind that wall and never went inside his studio. After the man died, Sari got the eagle and gave it to Rauschenberg.

Everything in an artist's studio, in one way or another, has a purpose specific to the work he or she makes. A studio might have things like old taxidermy and bones, and