

SAM NEJATI

Mindfulness, 2014
Acrylic on Canvas, 76 x 67 in



COURTESY WESTBROOK GALLERIES, MONTEREY

With the couch gone, Will expanded his rock piles across the width of the living room. “Pads on the couches—all three we’ve had—too meager for my butt,” he confided to his notebook. “Can’t complain about that with rocks.” Will tried drawing larger and larger stones and pieces of driftwood, their misshapen lengths like short masts above the bulky rocks. “Are rocks the subject, occasion, excuse?” he asked himself in his notebook. “Not sure. No dangling propositions to them, like pebbles. Can’t trace the continents and mountains. Histories unknown. Bless my geologic ignorance.”

At first Will drew on a pad of paper but it was forever shifting under him. He dug around in his shed until he found his stepdaughter Helen’s old children’s easel: green blackboard on one side, white dry erase surface on the other, two large red gutters at the base. He C-clamped large rectangles of cardboard on the easel, plopped himself down in the sagging seat of an old beach chair, and set his temperas around him on the floor. This worked for a time, but he found himself thinking too much about Helen’s pouts and cries as she fought with a friend about who got to work on the chalkboard, who the dry erase surface; who broke whose chalk. One day in late October, out of temperas and out of patience with himself, Will headed downtown to the art store, where a clerk steered him through his purchases—cheap canvases, a palette, tubes of student paint, thinner, gesso, brushes. A couple weeks later, walking by a house one night, he noticed a sign proclaiming a garage sale of art materials. He went back next morning and bought thirteen canvases, a portable easel, and thirty-five or forty tubes of paint along with six brushes. He lined up the canvases, all 11x14, on their sides in the living room, where they formed a tiled road of pale, narrow rectangles that contrasted nicely with the bumpy dark unevenness of the rocks that by then overran the house. “How to make the flimsy canvas support that stone weight, question for month,” Will wrote. “Is color a gift to canvas, or theft?”

It was then that he moved the old round dining room table, resting on its oversized central pedestal, to a position in front of the fireplace in the living room. He covered it with a white sheet and arranged his rocks on top. His models, as he liked to call them, would sit, with variations, for days on end as he shifted among canvases. He took a large white tarp from the storage shed and nailed it over

the already closed blinds at the front window, bought work lights from the hardware store that he clamped at various angles on the edge of the fireplace mantle. He worked with one or two of his spotlights, sure that outside light would interfere with the shadows of rock on rock he was trying to recast with paint. “What can interfere with something else?” he asked himself. “Interfere requires direction or desire, route. (I’m interfering pretending something can interfere.) It comes down to light: I can’t stand the sun kind. And instead like the slash of dark shadows my spotlights leave—their trails across, under, behind surfaces. So maybe ‘intrude’ is the right word, not interfere.” He found himself dressing in the same two paint-spattered shirts and the same two pairs of increasingly gessoed jeans, until the rest of his closet, the clothes still on their hangers, took its place in the shed atop a pile of boxes. “If friends saw my wardrobe, let alone house, they’d escort me to an assisted living joint where they’d serve me cottage cheese sandwiches with canned pineapple chasers the rest of my life.”

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When he wasn’t painting, or asleep, Will walked: one route then another, mile after mile. He lost himself in the pleasures of the night: “Why this new carnal love of matter in me,” he asked himself.

Stones, streets, concrete, tar, bridges, lamps, moon, porch lights, water, metal fences, walls: my chemistry. The smell of air preparing for rain, the day’s leftovers, gravel, the sidewalk in fog. Beaker of solitude.

Will traveled along the same streets each night. He learned the domestic patterns: porch lights that remained on at all hours, homes where dogs barked and thrust their noses through fences. He watched cats who loitered along a window ledge, others who sat on concrete stairways or nestled against a front door. He learned how to recognize the occasional whimper or cry, barely audible, that instigated a sequence of lights as (he imagined) one parent or another found their way from bed to child’s side. The pale flickering blue TV glow, so alien against the dark, filled what looked like empty rooms. “Family habits my sundial, or darkdial,” he wrote.

There were more open shades and curtains than Will