

SAM NEJATI

Off the Sea into the Sky, 2014
Acrylic on Canvas, 78 x 68 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

PAUL SKENAZY

Still Life

*If a thing is worth doing once, it is
worth doing over and over again.*

—Mark Rothko

Will Moran closed his front door and began to paint pictures of rocks. Rocks and bottles, driftwood, and the occasional bunched-up rag. Drawings first: in pencil and charcoal. Then in temperas, oils. On paper, cardboard, canvas. Day after day, for months, he devoted himself to painting, rocks, and his walks.

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After his wife Edie died in early June, Will was restless. What little peace he found was late at night when he left the house and wandered down to the beach. He saw people huddled near fires: noisy groups throwing Frisbees into the dark; couples hugging against the cold; someone walking a dog or folded into a sleeping bag. He would watch from the shadows, quietly trace the edge of the shore, then trudge back home, empty the sand, and head for bed.

At home, Will discovered that the only place he felt safe was on the roof. “Used to be afraid of heights, wonder why I’m not anymore,” he asked himself in one of his first entries in the notebook he started, hoping to learn something from the wild and fitful thoughts that consumed him. “World is different up there. So am I.” He sat for hours on the rough asphalt shingles, looking off across block on block of TV antennas and through the telephone lines to the horizon, where ocean, air, and fog met. He took solace in the silence, the clouds, the pale greens, browns and reds of the rooftops. “No more calls on me,” he wrote to himself. “No one to care for, answer to, worry about. Nothing to do but what I want. And what is that, old fart?”

Will had never been very talkative; now he was quieter still. He kept the lights off and the blinds drawn, living in a perpetual twilight breakfast to bedtime. What he needed, he thought, was to be alone. What he needed, he soon discovered, was to collect rocks.

* * *

Long before he married Edie, Will loved the feel of sand. He’d walk the beaches, his pants rolled up to his knees, his feet bare. He admired waves—the turn and loop of them; the way they dropped rocks, shells, and wood, took whatever was in their way to scatter somewhere else along the coast. He’d stalk the tide, picking up and discarding small stones with a random, unthinking impulse. He’d stick them in

He'd weigh his interest in a pebble's shape, the color of a wave- washed glass fragment.

pants pockets, shirt pockets, coat pockets, plastic sandwich bags, and empty them into a basket on his dresser at night, or leave them in paper plates to dry. When he and Edie met, they walked together, but separately. While she stomped from one end of a beach to the other, Will inched his way along, bending and crouching. She'd return to him, grab his arm, cajole a longer stride. Then he'd stoop down to examine some small would-be treasure, and he was lost to her. He'd weigh his interest in a pebble's shape, the color of a wave-washed glass fragment. She would find his goodies atop the dresser and dump them into a box, where they'd sit for months. Sometimes Will forgot to empty his pockets, and the stones would wind up as broken crumbs or fine sand in the lint or caught in the mesh of his socks. When Edie'd scold, Will would carry his stones out to the storage shed, reexamine them for an hour or two, discard some, preserve others. Those that survived ended up amid old clothes, discarded posters, unused kitchen gadgets—Edie's household collection in her annual effort to simplify: "Things we don't use aren't useful. Either they sit in my hand or they move to a box," was the epigram for her spring tear through drawers, shelves, cabinets. The shed became home to their forgotten selves: what couldn't be trashed, needn't be noticed.

That fall Will took up his beach habits again, the waves providing a destination for his treks through town each night. He collected as he went, then dropped the night's pickings in a heap alongside the mail that often sat, unopened, on his hall floor for days. Mornings he rinsed off the sand, let them dry, sifted and discarded and left the survivors in a large salad bowl that had for years been a constant at their family dinners. When the bowl was full, he dumped the stones onto the living room floor next to the old sofa. He started carrying a backpack with him on his walks

and began taking home larger and larger rocks and pieces of driftwood, adding these to his pile beside the couch.

One afternoon Will picked up a pencil, rummaged around for paper, and tried to draw a few rocks that interested him. Tried on and off the rest of the day, and again the next day. He found some charcoal sticks in the storage shed, but soon finished with those—"Too flaky," he wrote in his notebook: "Rubs off on hands, face, everywhere but the paper. Rubs me the wrong way." He hunted through the shed for the temperas his stepdaughter Helen had used to paint signs on cardboard when she was in high school. He found an old, dry brush, and went to work with the red, navy blue, and bright green that were the only colors he could find.

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Will arranged and rearranged the pebbles—bunched together, with space between, in rows, some leaning on others, larger behind or in front of smaller. He'd try to build the flatter pieces into towers, like the cairns that directed him when he hiked. ("Stone watchtowers," Edie called them.) But his small souvenirs defeated him. "Why defeated? What battle am I in?" he mocked himself. "Surface after surface, no whole. I remember too much: when I got them, where. Don't want a family album, just rocks. ('Just'—fucking hard word, demeans as it demands.)"

It was late August when Will admitted he was stumped by what he called his "purposeless stones": "Are they mine? Are they purposeless? Useless questions. Add pencils, pens, paint, brushes, paper; color, shape, shadow: still purposeless?"

8/25

There's no "with" with stones, maybe. Carry one in a pocket, years pass, the stone is worn down a bit by my thumb. Is it still only itself, no relation to me? Does art, or do keys I carry in the same pocket, do anything to the rock's rockiness?

A desire to find relationships—or what he wanted to imagine as relationships—kept him drawing and writing notes to himself: "A stone fits another, or doesn't. Accents, removes, hints at something. Or so I pretend. Need to assume that's my illusion, not the rock's."

* * *

When he wasn't painting, Edie haunted him. He wanted to stop stumbling over the past, he declared to himself every night as he tripped over her slippers getting out of bed to pee. All through their married life he would hit his feet on the slippers on his way to the bathroom. "It's how I know where I am in the dark, Will," Edie would reply to his occasional appeals to her to move them. "Memory needs props. Habit's my crutch." Even in her last months Edie insisted the slippers remain where they always had been, though by then Edie could no longer rise by herself but would instead ring a tiny bell to wake Will, who would pull her up and insert her dwindling feet into the worn shoes. And now, Edie gone, Will found himself carefully setting those tired slippers alongside the bed, where they continued to get in his way.

There were other habits he did alter. He unplugged the phone. "Not answering any calls," Edie insisted, "causes more grief than anything that might be said. But lives go on, me or no me. Or don't go on. No medicine in my flesh." He got rid of the stereo, the coffee table, the armchair, and the sofa. He moved on to the dishes, pots and pans, the Persian rugs. He stripped his house down to a dining room table, his bed and dresser, wooden packing crates, two benches along the kitchen counter, and a bunch of overstuffed pillows. The family gallery of photos in the hall went to the shed. He looked at each one as he wrapped it in newspaper—shots of Edie and him in front of a cathedral, showing off suntan and stomach on a beach, smiling at the rail of an Alaskan cruise ship; his parents' wedding portrait; Edie's grandparents becoming U.S. citizens, their arms raised for the pledge. "No need to see what I know," he told his notebook. "If I remember, I remember; if I don't, it won't help to walk down the hall. Wall space. Empty space. Empty time. Now what?"

"Too many programs," he announced to Luís, the gardener, when he offered him his old TV. He remembered the hours he'd spent watching programs late into the night when Edie was ill. His lifetime in front of the TV condensed into those months of numb viewing: volume low, an old movie replaced by talk shows, paid ads of someone sweeping up rug samples, someone else rolling their muscular body behind a new workout marvel.

He liked the thank-you cards he got from Luís's children. The cards were full of vivid colors and designs that

would peter out before they took actual shape as an animal or person, the letters of the words starting large and grand then gradually reducing in size as they neared the border. The bright energy of the notes led him to try painting his rocks at the edge of the paper rather than in the middle as he tended to do. "Will the weight of the stones tip the composition left or right, displace line and color into grams and pounds?" He was struggling to make sense of his first how-to art book that explained, in an assured way, that shapes tend to flatten at the edges. So if a painter wanted to create the illusion of roundness, depth, and dimensionality, it was best to center objects. This made no sense to Will. He wasn't sure what he wanted, and his centering did little for his still-two-dimensional efforts to reproduce three-dimensional shapes.

"Too many invitations," he wrote in mid-October, deciding not to go down to L.A. to his brother Jerry's for Thanksgiving or Christmas. "Family love: always afraid I'd lose it. Unnerving now," he wrote to himself. "Don't want offers. But don't I want the chance to reject them?" It was then (October 17 was the entry in his notebook) that he began to admit to himself that this was what he wanted to do, full time: walk, collect stones; look at his rocks and try to paint them.

Figured I'd be done by now, back planting, reading, even traveling. Mourning Edie the rest of my life in my taciturn way. Rejoin ACLU, go to City Council meetings, stump for Democrats, volunteer at the nursing home until I need to check myself in. But rocks stay. Implacable, friendly. I greet them each a.m., they don't answer, and so answer.

His early Christmas gift to himself was the way he described the empty months ahead: dark skies, rainstorms, beaches filling slowly with more battered pieces of driftwood, scraps of worn glass, and rocks thrown up by the waves. By the new year, Will hoped, he'd be able to draw a rock or two with some confidence, as he knew he couldn't yet, his lines and proportions all askew, his colors mismatched. ("Though what is not mismatched? What matched to what? Art as outfit coordination? Marriage brokering?")

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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.”

* * *

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

expected, more people who seemed to enjoy disrobing while staring out at the almost empty streets. But Will found their bodies didn't interest him as much as the play of room light, the shifts of geometry that shadow created. "Nights: still, unknown. They are alive to me as days aren't. No one to see, or see me. All quiet except me, alley cat, night prowler. When do I start to howl at the moon?"

* * *

By mid-November, Will's life as a painter was as regulated as when he worked. "Routine, consistency," he wrote to himself:

*Habit is palette of hours, how we compose days.
Perspective, boundary, impression of three dimensions.
Kept me eating, caring for Edie; now, walking beach,
carrying rocks, painting. We break routine, make
new habits. That gives us a split life, + awkward
transitions we call consciousness (or shock, love,
whatever) in between. Then what?*

There were hours when all Will did was rearrange his rock formations on the table, test angles, pick up one rock or another, put them back on his piles. "Waking among boulders," he wrote one morning. "If I could only get the salt air into the paint." He felt his way along, anxious to discover some right relation of elements, though he never worried that he couldn't define what "right" was. "Failures of structure before failures with paint," he wrote. "Does a real painter find or build a still life, see variations as he organizes or after in the paint? Old answer I'd count on was both/and, but maybe I can take sides on this before I die? (That word 'real'; am I an unreal painter? Probably.)"

* * *

Staring at his rocks, Will continued to find himself distracted by memory. He lost days thinking about Edie up until three a.m. one night, working on the dining room table with walnut, sandpaper, and polish to repair a crevice a dinner guest left from rubbing his steak knife along the edge of the wood. The wood was raw, fresh, pale against the dark walnut—a gash that he knew, immediately, was there forever. But Edie tried to bring a bit of life and color back to the table. "Wood is like kids," Edie insisted, morn-

ing after morning repeating her mantra, "Life's in the grain and you never cut against it once you see it. You mend what you hurt, repair what you scar."

"Mend hurt; repair scar," he wrote one morning, hoping to purge his thoughts of the formula by writing it down. "Amends don't last long, scars show we've mended. Tough skin at lesion. What are we, if not our wounds? I love the lines in stones. Edie told me once how the Japanese fill cracks in bowls and vases with gold to accent the breaks. I've only got paint and ineptitude."

With the table covered, he thought he should be done with what the wood once looked like. But nothing seemed to disappear. Or everything, he corrected himself. Did but didn't, stayed but left, persevered and eroded. He retreated from this conundrum to his paint, shifting around the living room while he looked, as he wrote, for some "point of view that matters":

*As if one matters more than another. As if an ocean
has one. But people: forced into each other. Why—
how—choose one person, one rock? Why put it next
to another, stand to look at it or paint it, stare from
right or left? Don't know. Why this color or that on a
map to indicate countries? Who gets noticed that way,
forgotten? So blame mapmakers for wars? Who else?*

For two days after that comment he didn't paint at all, just kept moving his easel in an arc around the dining room table and adjusting the legs on it up and down, from knee height to full extension. "How can I figure out my position in the living room, let alone world?" he asked himself. Finally he decided he'd be systematic, and do a five-day circuit of the scene each week with two wild cards allowed when whim would reposition him. He got out a compass, drew a circle on the back of a drawing, ruled out hexagrams around the edges, labeled days, then repeated the exercise on the oak floor of the living room in carpenter's pencil. "The democracy of math," he concluded in his notebook: "Can't decide, so I pretend it doesn't matter. But I know it does, or pretend I know, even if not how or why. If mystery, write formula. Doesn't explain, does reassure."

But after three weeks working his way around his hexagons, standing before the easel, adjusting the angle this way and that, moving one of the battered stools from the

SAM NEJATI

Anonymity, 2014
Acrylic on Canvas, 48 x 72 in



COURTESY WESTBROOK GALLERIES, MONTEREY

kitchen into the living room so he could rest his legs once in a while, he felt frustrated again. He'd used up all but two of his canvases, felt like maybe he was painting on the wrong surface. He thought of going back to sketch pads.

Until one afternoon he started painting on the wall, about shoulder high, and realized that he'd always wanted to do that.

Developing rules for this game, breaking them as I go.

1. *Never buy new what can be used.*
2. *House not home. Don't get comfortable.*
3. *Studio too big a word; call it space.*
4. *Walls and floors can get dirty. Dirty, dirty, dirty. Wish I knew this raising Helen. Could have had more fun, though Edie'd die if she saw. (Already did, dickhead.)*

The first wall painting had no edges, extended out in an awkward, uneven rectangle. A piece of driftwood Will set alongside three rocks stuck up with no background to hide his awkward rendering of its tangled surface. Then he painted four versions of the same grouping around the original, in counterclockwise order, still with no borders, no backgrounds, awkward proportions. By the fourth painting the driftwood piece had gone squat. Still no depth, he realized, consulting his how-to book until he learned that a white line along a cylinder on one side near the edge, and some darker paint along the other edge, can (with some practice, the book intoned) give the illusion of reflection and encourage the eye to turn the flat paint round. Or should be able to, he said to himself angrily as his paintings continued to defy grace.

November 23.

Two days, then Thanksgiving. Driftwood my turkey leg. What next? Frescoes? Murals? Graffiti? No.

5. *But yes to color on the walls.*
6. *Same arrangement of materials until at least two more paintings after first show I'm bored with the setup.*
7. *No new arrangement for two days after deconstruction.*

8. *Redo disassembled arrangement week or so after I disarrange it to see if it can be new again. Don't worry if it's not the same arrangement.*

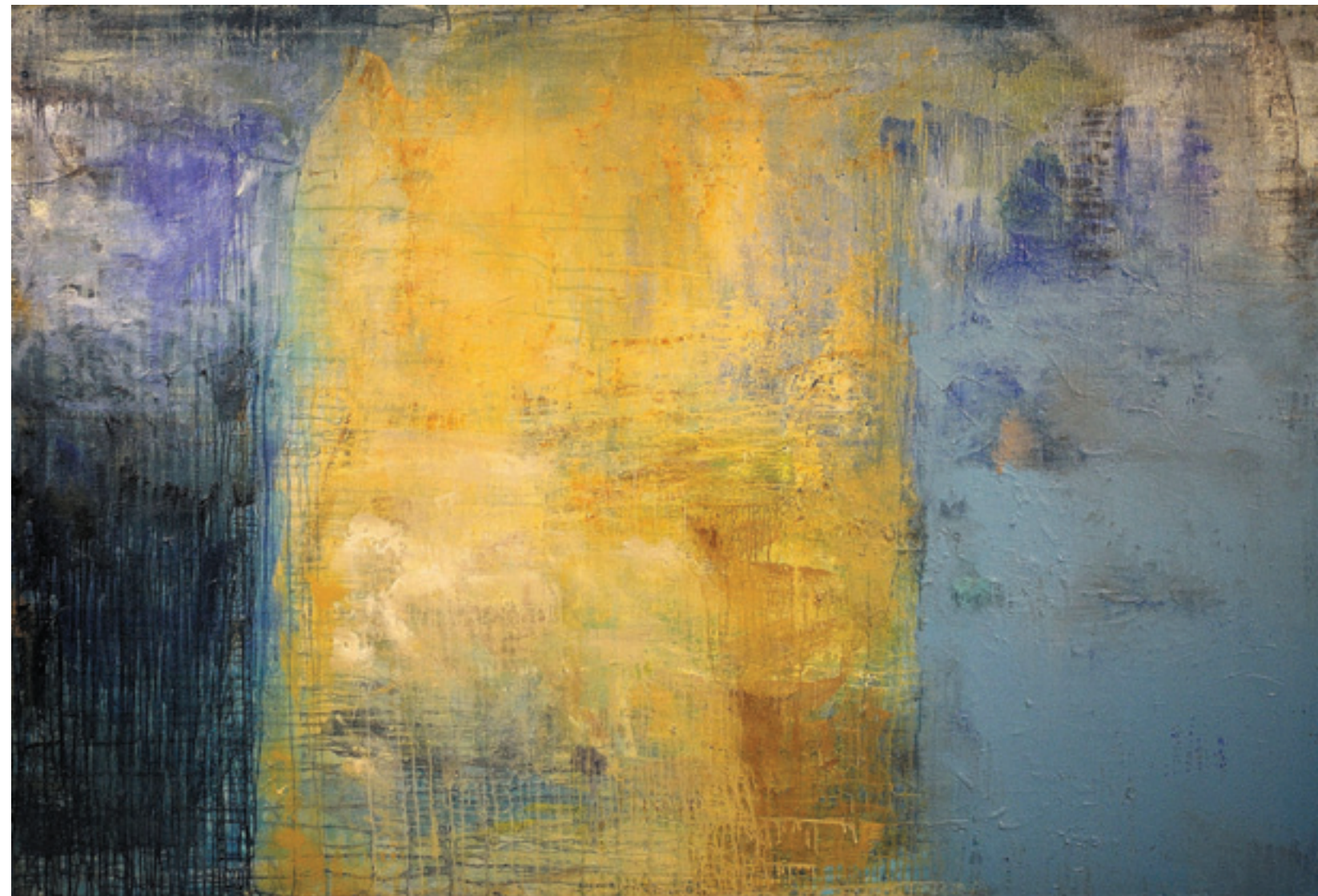
By early December, Will decided to paint over his wall scenes. "I don't paint to make a records for others. Not an historian: libraries overrated. U.S. needs national memory dump, deposit leftovers we can't contribute to charities. Or weekly pickups, like garbage, for recycling. Pack past in plastic bags, stuff in bins, leave curbside. Special dumps for art, toasters, talk shows."

Will bought himself some carpenter's white paint at the hardware store and covered over his five wall studies. He took a ruler and divided the wall itself into rectangles as high as he could comfortably reach and as low as he felt he could draw sitting on pillows. These lines would be his new canvases. He carried the easel into the storage shed, bought ear plugs ("Noise Reduction Rating 31 decibels if worn properly") that he curled into the sides of his head each morning. And began, with the new year, to paint his way across one side of the living room.

Paul Skenazy taught literature and writing at the University of California, Santa Cruz. His stories have appeared *Chicago Quarterly Review*, and *Red Wheelbarrow*. "Still Life" is the opening section of a novel in progress. His previous publications include a revision of a posthumous novel by Arturo Islas (*La Mollie and the King of Tears*); books and articles on James M. Cain, Dashiell Hammett, and other noir writers; a collection of essays on San Francisco fiction; and a selection of interviews with Maxine Hong Kingston as well as hundreds of book reviews.

SAM NEJATI

Apex, 2013
Acrylic on Canvas, 48 x 72 in



COURTESY WESTBROOK GALLERIES, MONTEREY