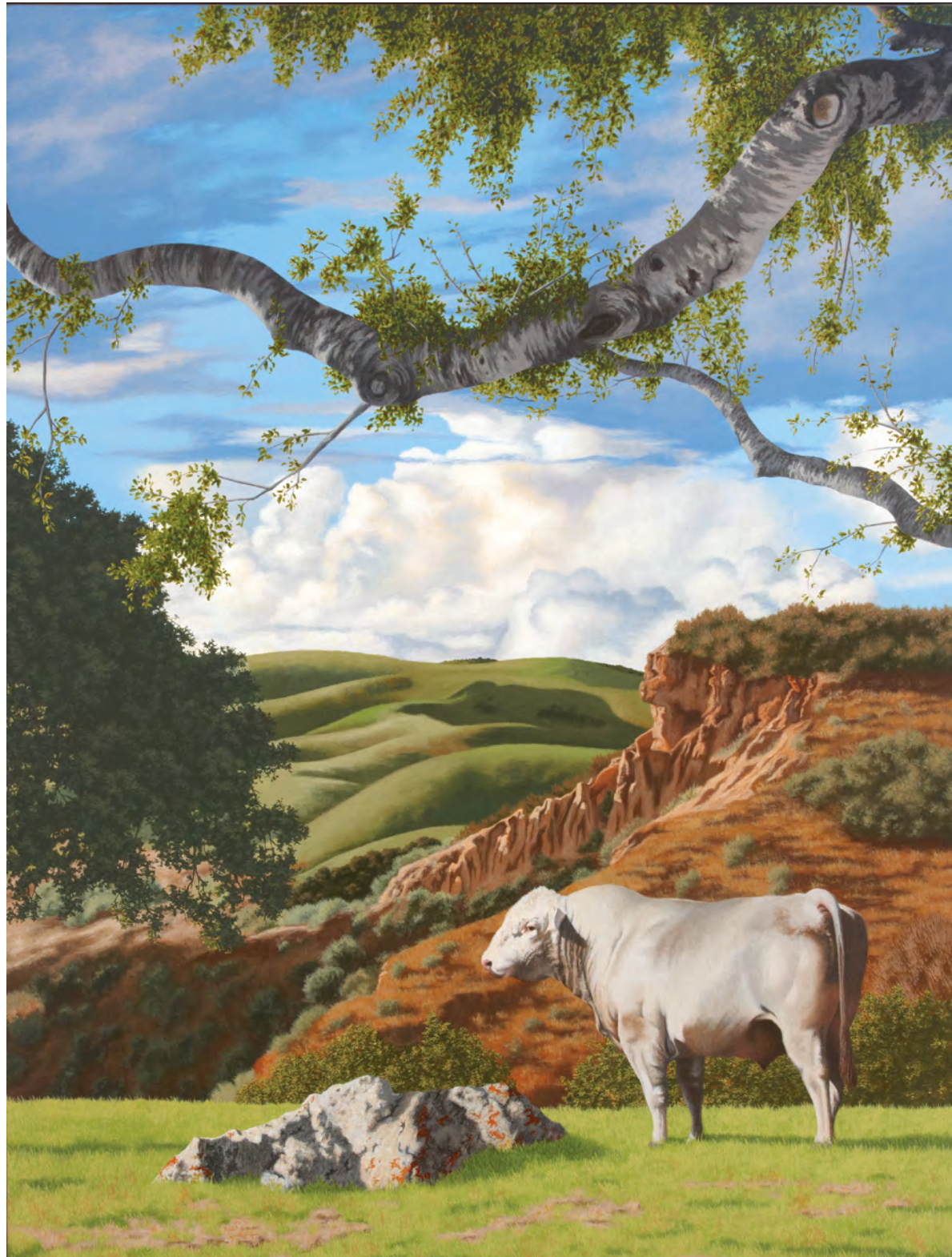


ANDREA JOHNSON

Untitled, 2013
acrylic on canvas, 42 x 32 in



courtesy: Winfield Gallery

place. Their shared vision was about living in place. To understand humans and their environments you start simply and move to complex interactions—or you start with the concrete and end with the abstract. A lot of authors move from realistic to abstract, of course, but Steinbeck described the reading process as deeper and deeper participation, going outward in patterns.

DW: And this process of “building outward” requires a slow and steady gaze. You’ve spoken of the slowness of pacing in *The Grapes of Wrath*—the readers lose themselves in the details of their lives, in the natural observation, in the attention to detail.

SS: Steinbeck said it obsessively in his journal, “I have to slow down. I have to make sure it flows.” Over and over again.

DW: What about this book makes it a perennial? All these years later, people are buying hundreds of thousands of copies.

SS: Part of it is the relevance—the cycle of banks seizing assets, of drought, of poverty, of power and powerlessness. The issues in the book are still so contemporary. And Steinbeck’s prose is lucid. He connects with readers. I’ve taught Steinbeck a long time. Students start one book and they want to read them all. There’s something in him that causes readers to connect. I think it’s empathy. His style was not Hemingway’s style, but he was interested in what Hemingway was doing, which was to clarify and simplify. He wanted readers to participate in the actuality of what he said. He was a reporter first, before he started *The Grapes of Wrath*. He had that feeling for detail, that sense of truth and getting it right. He wanted it to be accurate. The prose is beautiful, so you luxuriate in the words at the same time the book takes you to uncomfortable places. Chapter 25 is such a lyrical picture. It shows you how beautiful spring is in California, but it turns into the angriest chapter in the book. It’s a diatribe against growers, and so his prose leads you from lyrical to polemic. By the time he wrote *The Grapes of Wrath*, he’d honed his instrument.

DW: You’ve mentioned his sense of humility, and that comes across in the work, too.

SS: He’s not arrogant. He’s approachable. He never thought he was a great writer. He said he wasn’t like Faulkner, who had ideas percolating in his mind waiting to get out, had a hundred stories in mind. Steinbeck didn’t have that kind of brilliance, but I think he had the talent and the love of writing, and he kept working at it.

DW: He was always considering strategies to make the work more impactful. Between the chapters, we pull way back and get this almost bird’s-eye or God’s-eye view of what’s going on.

SS: I think it slows you down, because you’re reading the Joads’ story, and we love narratives, stories, plots; and so we think, “Okay, what’s going to happen next?”—and the narrative will move it along from there too. But I think the inter-chapters, which tend to be experimental in a lot of different ways, pull us out of that narrative and make us look at a broader perspective, as you said—but they also slow you down.

DW: He knew there were going to be people out there who would be so offended by his work—not just the growers, but readers who objected to the language of his characters, the earthiness. One of the famous button-pushing scenes is, of course, the ending with Rose of Sharon in the barn.

SS: I think he knew that people would object. He’d tell his editors it wouldn’t be a popular book, and “Don’t print too many,” etc. Part of his concern was the raw language; he didn’t want to change a word like “shitheels”; he didn’t want to change anything. The editors wanted him to change the final scene, and he said no, he had the final scene in mind about a third of the way through the novel and he knew where he was going. He wanted something to shock, there’s that; but he also wanted a symbol. If you break down, if you lose everything, what do you have left? What kind of existential decision can you make? The Joads have no house, no family, no food, no warmth, no baby. What they lack is so palpable—but, given that, what