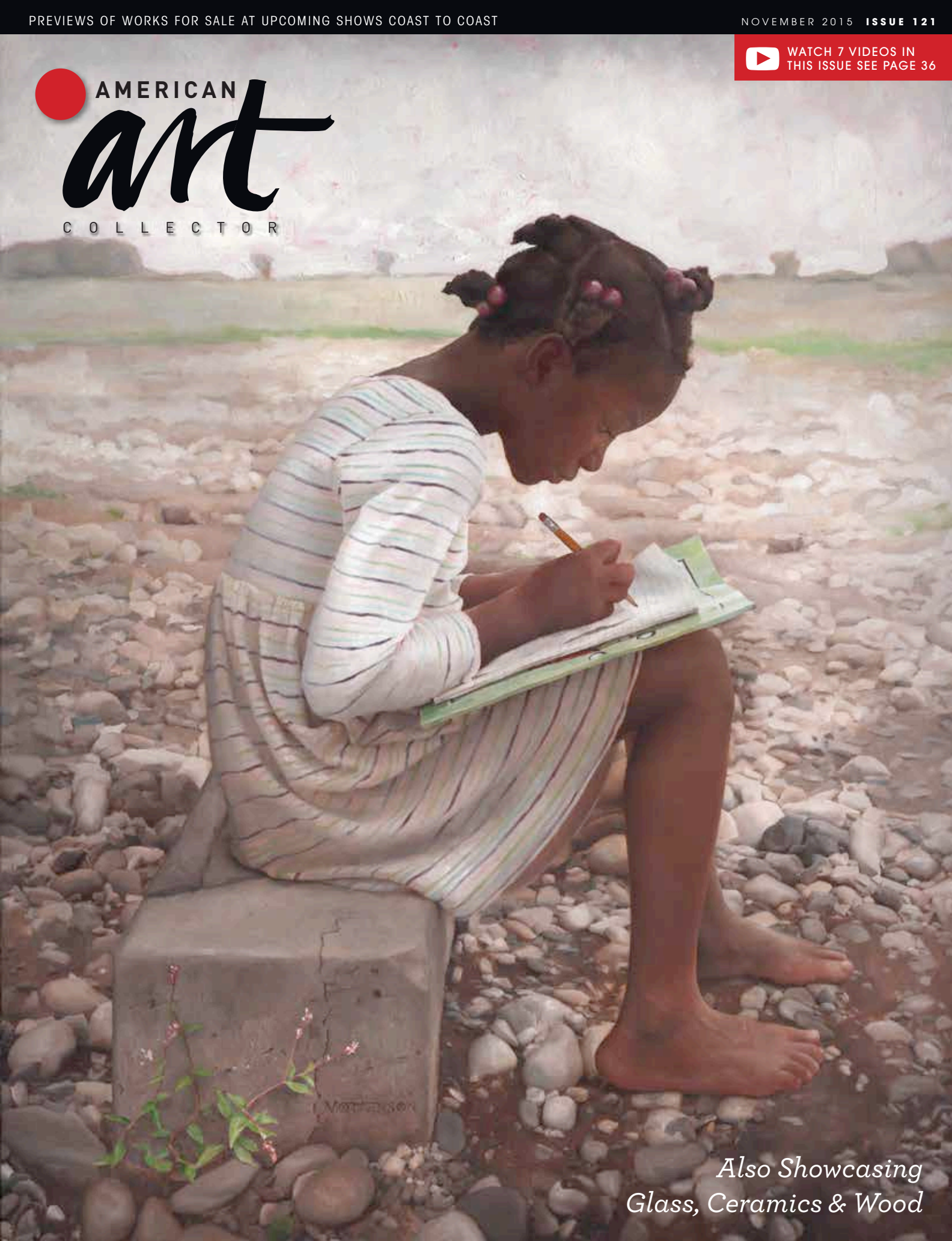


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Glass, Ceramics & Wood*



DISCOVERING

Connections

ERIC WERT'S NEWEST STILL LIFES LINK FOREGROUND AND BACKGROUND ELEMENTS IN COHESIVE COMPOSITIONS.

BY JOHN O'HERN



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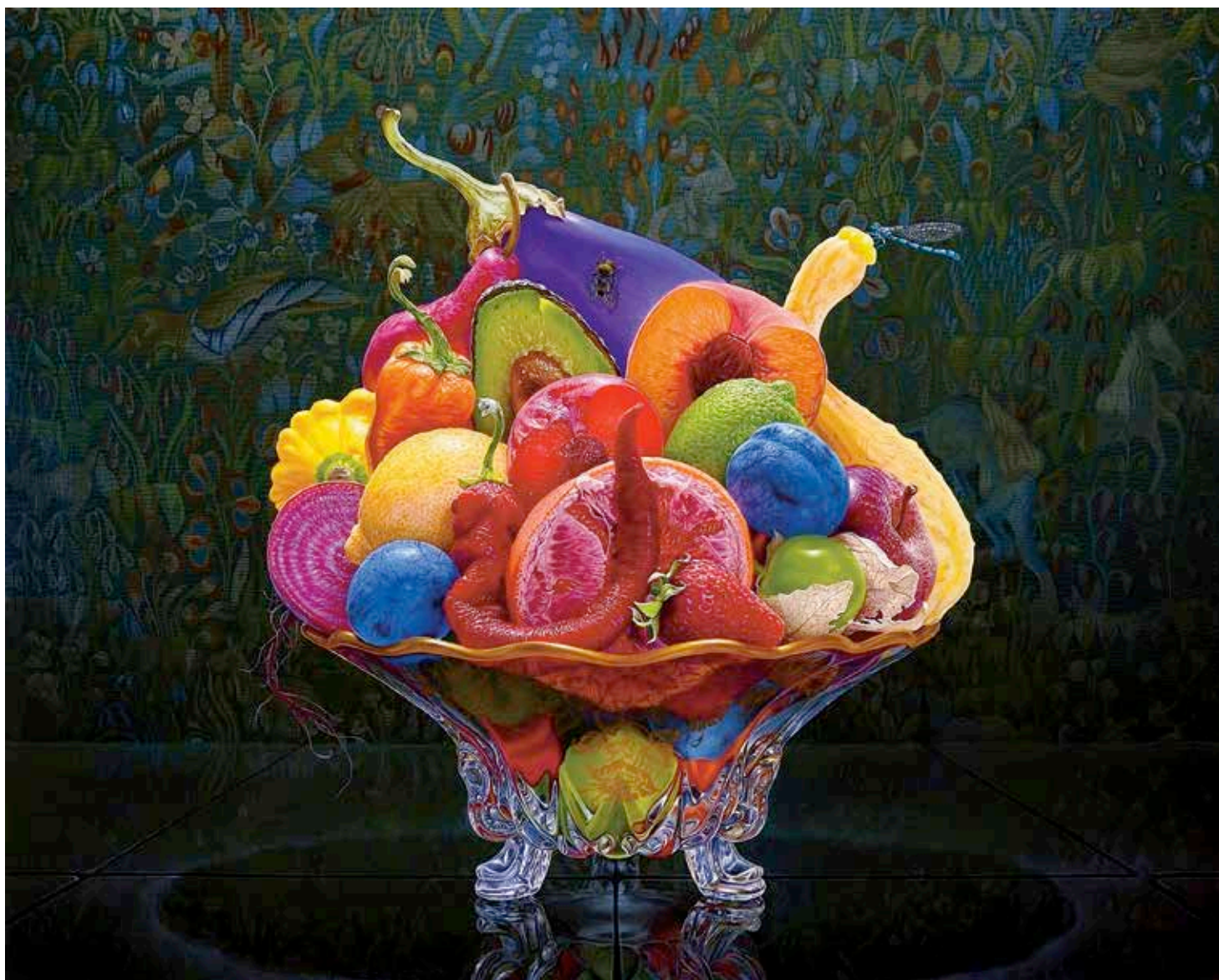
*I*n Eric Wert's early paintings the backgrounds were often textiles he found in a fabric store. The patterns and colors would complement his still lifes. Then he met Marci Rae McDade, who has an MFA in fiber and material studies, became editor of *Fiberarts* magazine, and then editor of the *Surface Design Association Journal*. She is now his wife.

"Marci's a great influence," Wert admits. "When you go to a museum, you focus on what appeals to you. For me that's Dutch paintings. She dragged me to see textiles, and I gained a new appreciation of them. There are many parallels. The optical mixing of colors was developed by the Flemish masters as they wove together threads of different colors.

"Today the textile collections of museums are online with high-resolution images so I have access to the greatest textiles in the world," he continues. "I browse and then download images. When

1
Spider Mums, oil on panel, 12 x 12"

2
Eric Wert in studio with some of his newest paintings on display.



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I'm working on a painting I leave the background kind of simple and wait for a connection to merge—theme, color, composition. The background is an equal partner in my paintings. It's just as interesting and worthy of inspection as anything in the foreground."

I mention to him the leaves in *Cherries*, especially the lone yellowed leaf, seem to pick up the weave of the fabric behind them. He responds, "That's one of the things I like—discovering connections. It would be easy to set everything up and work from a photograph. I could make all the decisions in the set-up. As I work over months, discoveries start to emerge. It's intuitive. It's the magic of painting. The basic data is there in a high-resolution photograph. The challenge is to leave space in the painting for connections to emerge."

The metal bowl in *Cherries* also appears in other paintings. "I think I like it because it appears to be a gold bowl used in some kind of ritual," he says. "But it's just a cheap hammered brass bowl. I love it when a subject can bridge that ocean between the mysterious and valuable and being prosaic and something you could throw away."

I first saw Wert's painting over 10 years ago and included two of them in the exhibition *Re-presenting Representation VII* at the Arnot Art Museum. "Back then I was more literal, and I had to rely on the subject matter in front of me," he explains.

Technology has made his work easier in some ways and gives him more freedom to both discover and to create connections. His set-ups are ephemeral and begin to deteriorate as soon as he arranges them. He takes photographs from different angles and with different light, creating a digital sketchbook he can refer to as he goes along. I commented on the red reflections on the bowl in *Cherries* and asked if they were actually there.

"With the photographs I have the freedom to move things around," Wert says. "If I don't like an orange slice I can find something in another photo, just like looking through a sketchbook. The Dutch masters made big sketchbooks of flowers they could put together for great compositions. I incorporated reflections from several photographs when I was painting *Cherries*."

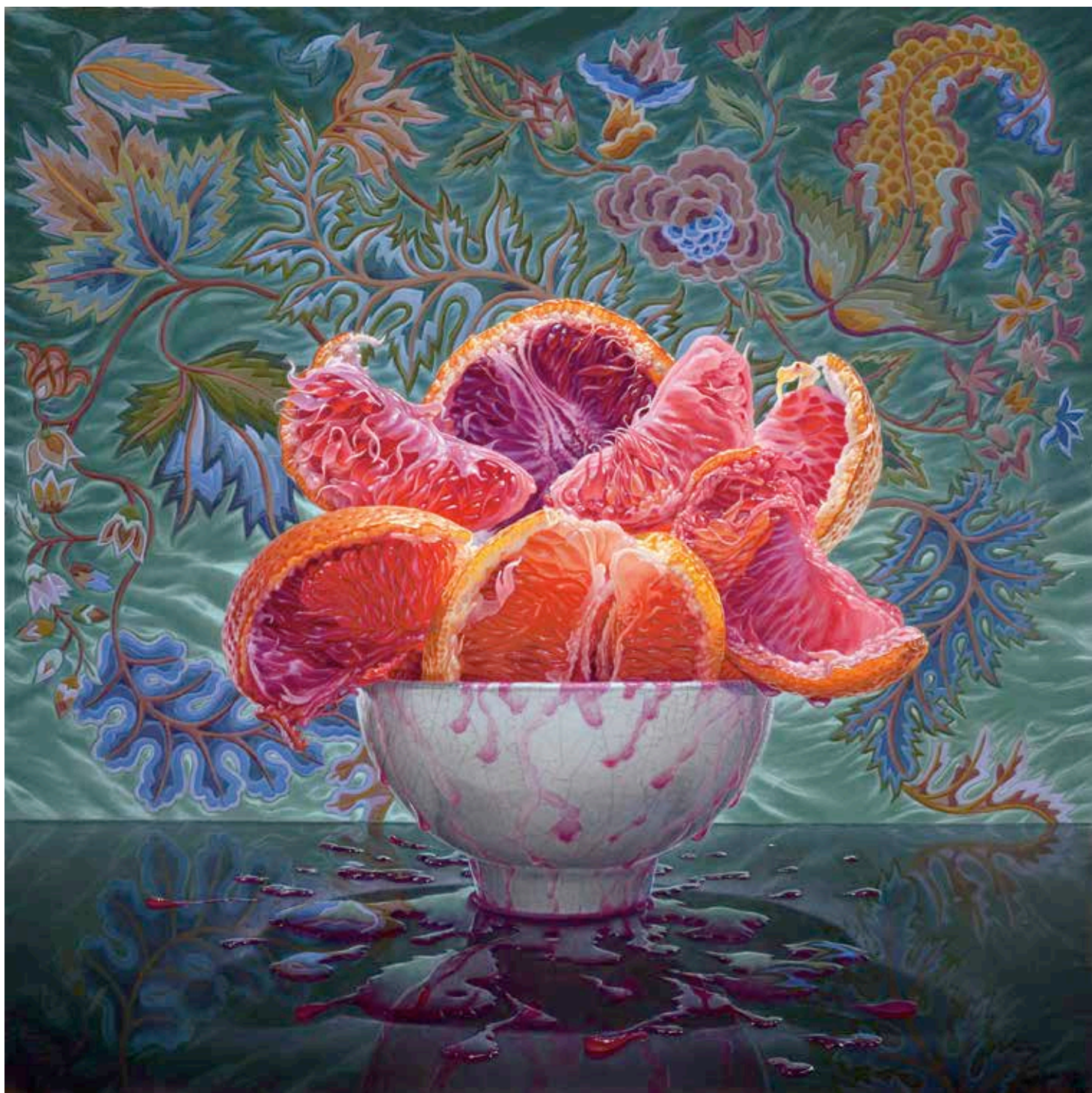
Explaining his process he says, "I start with a

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Still Life with Flemish Tapestry, oil on panel, 24 x 30"

4

Blood Oranges, oil on canvas, 20 x 20"



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grisaille drawing and work out the lights and shadows. I have to really understand the structure of light. Then I lay down glazes with intense color. I do the finish elements above that. I weave light into the painting from the beginning. The luminosity of the cherries, for instance, is light going through the paint and bouncing off the light ground." In the case of the leaves in *Cherries*, he continues, "Rather than painting in the leaf's body color and then painting bright green lines over it, these start with a vivid green. Then I paint

the leaf and scratch out the veins with a toothpick to reveal the color beneath."

Wert's paintings are not only in the tradition of the *vanitas* paintings of the Dutch masters, reminding us of the impermanence of life. "They are also reminders that the innocuous elements of your life are important and worthy of inspection," he says. "They have a fascinating life of their own." On a trip to the Netherlands he had the opportunity to really inspect some of the great 17th- and 18th-century Dutch still life paintings. "The

quality of their observation blew me away," he observes. "They were able to paint the real and make it surreal and otherworldly at the same time."

He admits, "I can spend months painting a flower and get more interested in it as time goes on." *Blood Oranges* is an example of his fascination with the mundane and the fleeting as well as an illustration of his maturing technique. "An orange rind is not an important subject," he says, "but to get close to it and see the light passing through it and to see how parts of it are moist and





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puffy and others dry and stringy, is fascinating. I've painted so many thousands of water droplets they come easily now. The drips on the bowl are basically invented."

Wert's invention is always based in truth. He trained as a scientific illustrator and aimed for scrupulous accuracy. "I want to create the real thing," he explains.

I use the word "perverse" several times in our conversation, more as a term of admiration than criticism. In *Lilies*, for instance, there is more than immediately meets the eye. Coiling in among the blossoms is a snake, but not just "a" snake. There is a saying to teach the difference between the poisonous coral snake and its harmless mimic: "Red to yellow, kill a fellow; red to black, venom lack." The snake in *Lilies*

exhibits the characteristics of both.

When I comment on the male and female sexual imagery in *Still Life with Flemish Tapestry*, he retorts, "You get out of it what you come in with. Fruits and flowers are the reproductive parts of plants, after all. The subjects are so innocuous. Viewers coming to expect a dainty painting of lilies or cherries will find that. I try to find the middle space where interpretation can go in several directions." ●

ERIC WERT

When: November 4-December 12, 2015

Where: William Baczek Fine Arts, 36 Main Street, Northampton, MA 01060

Information: (413) 587-9880, www.wbfinearts.com

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Lilies, oil on panel,
20 x 16"

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Cherries, oil on canvas,
24 x 24"