

In the Studio: Leo Mancini-Hresko

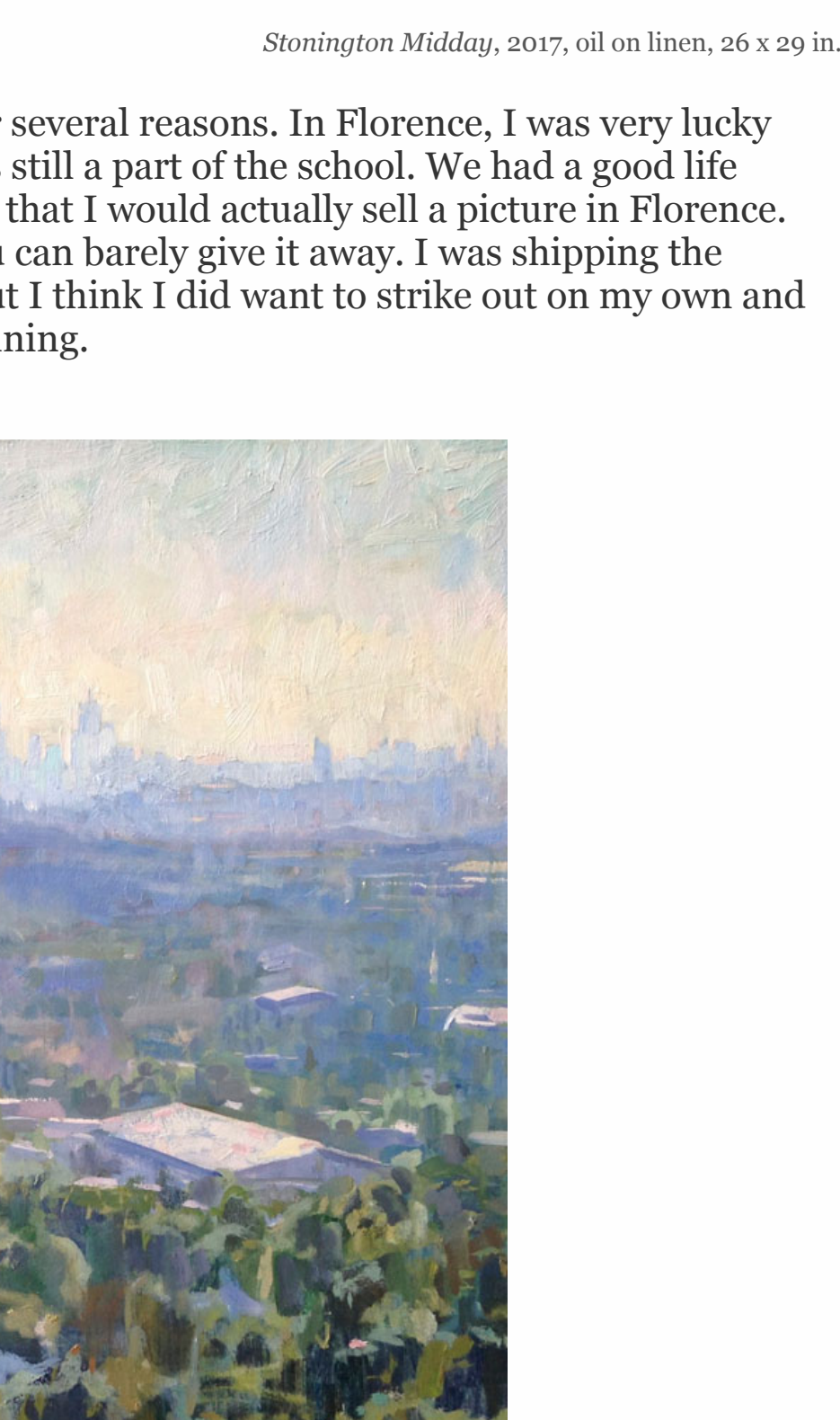


Leo Mancini-Hresko in his Waltham, Massachusetts studio

Landscape painter Leo Mancini-Hresko spent eleven years training and teaching in Florence before returning to his hometown of Boston to set up a studio in the urban outskirts of Waltham. After seven years in that space, Mancini-Hresko's style has become a synthesis of the nineteenth-century academic education he acquired in Italy and the nineteenth- and twentieth-century American Impressionist influence of his native New England. As a painter, Mancini-Hresko appreciates a colorful and calligraphic sense of movement, created through broken and directional brushwork, with unapologetic attention paid to the surface quality of the paint itself. His large-scale snow scenes—for which he has braved Boston blizzards and below-freezing conditions to capture on-site—are the artist's personal favorite, while his light- and color-filled landscapes showing Mother Nature at her best and brightest are perennial favorites among collectors. I recently caught up with Mancini-Hresko through this Q+A, and Russian-American cultural exchanges, handmade materials (including hemp canvases), Florentine techniques and experimentalists in watercolor were just a few of the topics discussed.

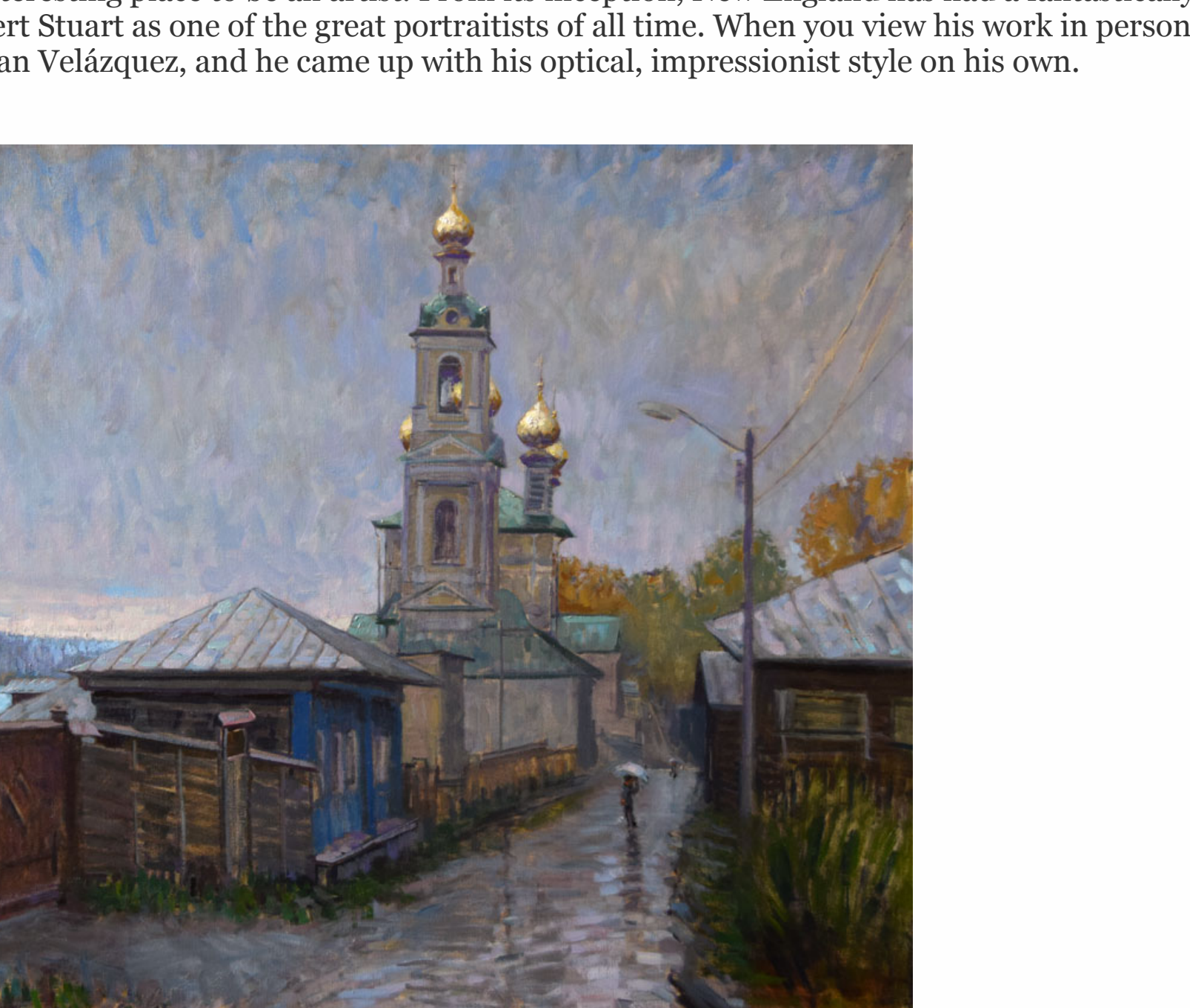
AM: You spent many years living in Florence, Italy (first attending The Florence Academy of Art as a student and then becoming their Director of the Sculpture Drawing Program). What prompted you to return to your hometown of Boston in 2011?

LM: I moved to Italy when I was just eighteen with the original intention of staying only for a three-month study-abroad program. I ended up spending eleven years there, and the experience of living and studying in Florence was a formative period of my adult life. The Florence Academy of Art was a huge part of that, as I was first a student at the school and then on the faculty for a total of ten years. Italy was fantastic. Friends who know my wife and I probably imagined that we would live there indefinitely—we became very ingrained in the Florentine life. On a bit of a whim, both for family and work reasons, we decided to try living in Boston for a bit. Similar to when I moved to Italy, the months turned into years, and we have been in Boston for seven years this June. We have really put down roots and have enjoyed the challenge of starting over. It very much now feels like home—and is a different city than the one I left when I was a teenager.



Springtime Midday, 2017, oil on linen, 26 x 29 in.

In retrospect, I can see that it made sense for us to move back to Boston for several reasons. In Florence, I was very lucky early on to develop good relationships with galleries and clients while I was still a part of the school. We had a good life there. Living and working in Italy was wonderful, but it was incredibly rare that I would actually sell a picture in Florence. Traditional art is such a major part of the history and culture there that you can barely give it away. I was shipping the majority of my paintings to the US and UK. I didn't realize it at the time, but I think I did want to strike out on my own and develop a more personal relationship with painting, independent of my training.



Prospect Hill, 2014, oil on linen, 22 x 28 in.

AM: What is the Boston art scene like in terms of professional opportunities, representation, teaching opportunities, etc.? And what about the legacy of nineteenth-century New England painters from that area—what have you learned about some of these lesser known painters of the past?

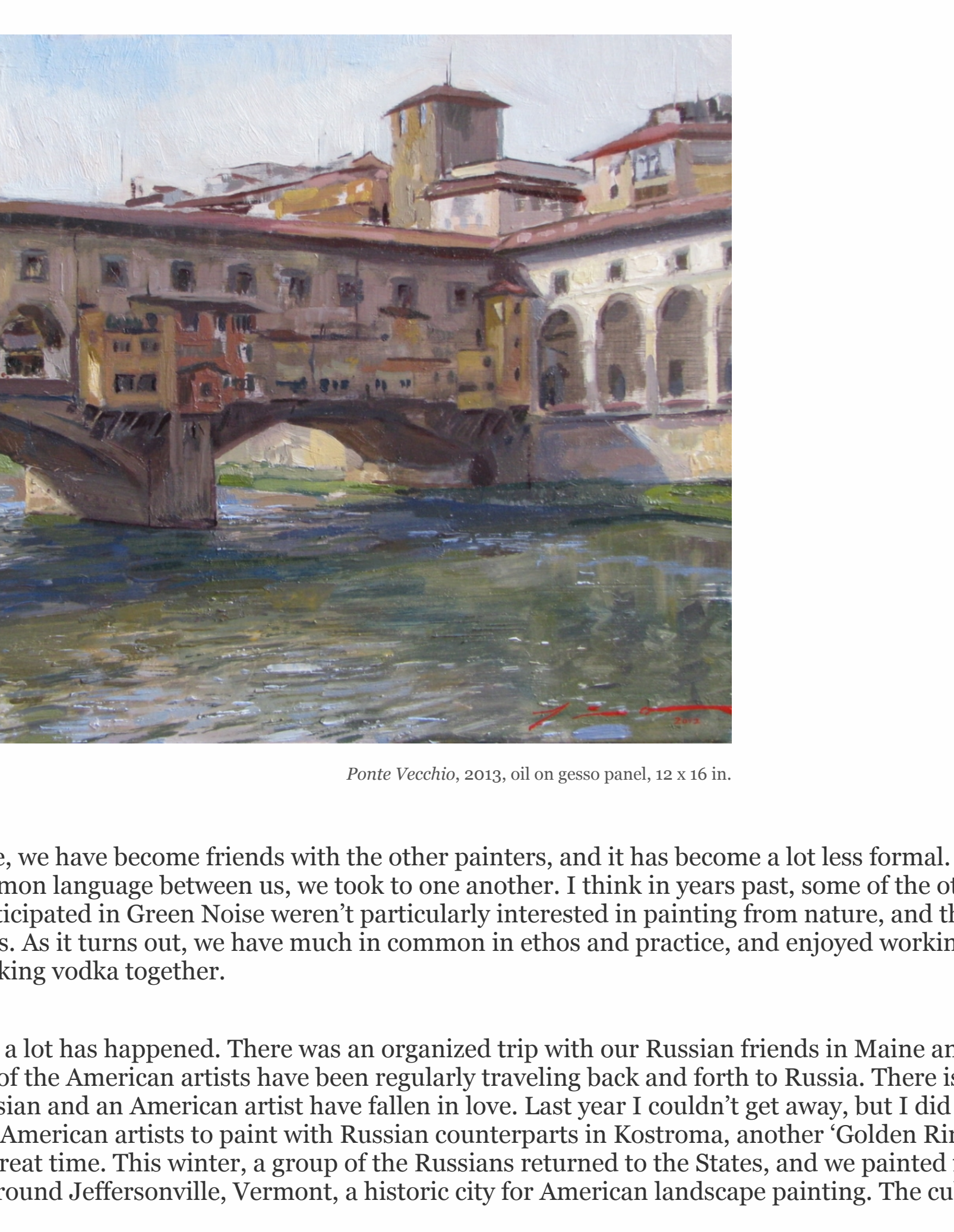
LM: Boston is an interesting place to be an artist. From its inception, New England has had a fantastically rich art history. I would suggest Gilbert Stuart as one of the great portraitists of all time. When you view his work in person, they occasionally look like an American Velázquez, and he came up with his optical, impressionist style on his own.



Plyos, Rain, 2015, oil on linen, 35 x 47 in.

One aspect of Boston that I didn't appreciate until I came back is how fluid of a city it is. Boston itself is a small city built at human scale, with a very European feel. It is easy to convince yourself that you live in a big city and get frustrated with the hustle of traffic through the urban sprawl and congestion. But it also is a very green city, with a lot of nature nearby. It can feel urban or suburban. In three and a half hours I can be in the heart of mid-coast Maine or at Mount Mansfield—but I can also get from my studio to Central Park in that same amount of time.

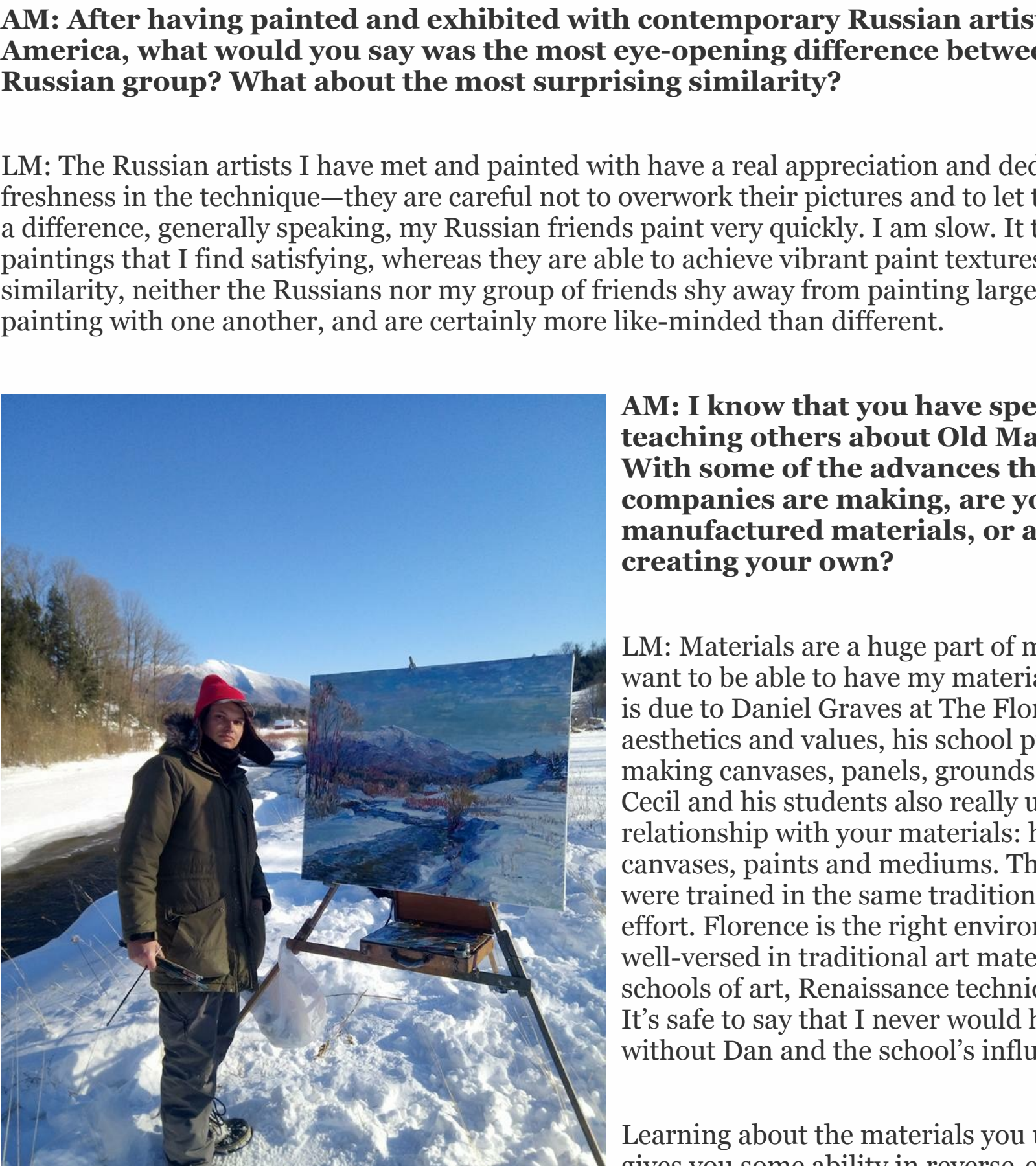
Also, because of the concentration of universities and tech industries, Boston is a bit of an intellectual capital. There are a lot of interesting people around. Although there certainly isn't as active of an art scene as New York, there is enough going on here—and I would say New Englanders have an innate cultural respect for painting. There are smaller museums and art associations peppered throughout the towns, and discovering the local nineteenth- and twentieth-century American Impressionists has been a big influence on my work these past few years. When I lived in Europe I was probably more influenced by late nineteenth-century Italian and French work. Some of my current heroes from the Northeast are Willard Metcalf, the brothers Alexander and Birge Harrison, Aldro Hibbard, John F. Carlson, Emile Gruppé, Frederick J. Mulhaupt, Anthony Thieme, Jonas Lie, Frank Benson, Lilian Wescott Hale, Child Hassam and Frederick Judd Waugh.



Mancini-Hresko teaches how-to workshops on handmade materials out of Waltham Studios and at other schools.

AM: You're involved in an interesting ongoing artist-exchange with Russian painters. Please explain the origins and ongoing projects of this partnership.

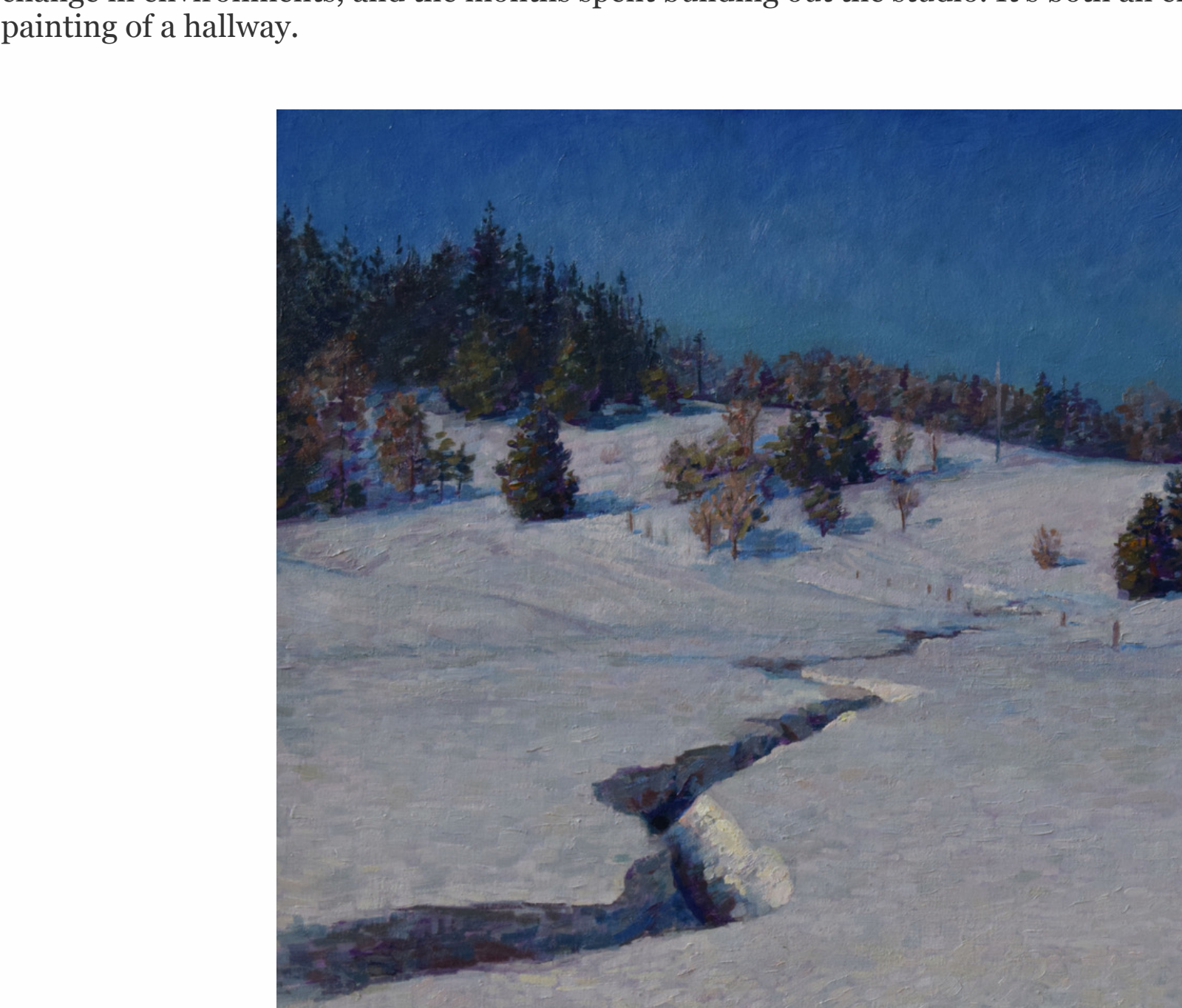
LM: In 2013 I was invited with a group of friends from my Florence days to paint in Plyos, the Ivanovo Region of Russia. This small town on the Volga has an important history, as the great nineteenth-century Russian landscape painter Isaac Levitan closely associated with Levitan, and there is both a Levitan Museum and a Russian Museum of Landscape there. The program that they run, called Green Noise, is a government- and museum-sponsored cultural exchange held every year. The Russian ministry of culture is helping to underwrite international artists coming to paint one of their most important villages. Our opening at the end of the trip didn't sell pictures, but that wasn't the point. We had local news, and a first-rate marching band. As an American artist, it was a surreal, prestigious experience and not at all commercial.



Ponte Vecchio, 2013, oil on gesso panel, 12 x 16 in.

Over the years since, we have become friends with the other painters, and it has become a lot less formal. Although there is relatively little common language between us, we took to one another. I think in years past, some of the other groups of artists that had participated in Green Noise weren't particularly interested in painting from nature, and they probably hadn't expected much of us. As it turns out, we have much in common in ethos and practice, and enjoyed working shoulder to shoulder—and drinking vodka together.

Since that first trip, a lot has happened. There was an organized trip with our Russian friends in Maine and Long Island in 2016, and a couple of the American artists have been regularly traveling back and forth to Russia. There is now a wedding in the works, as a Russian and an American artist have fallen in love. Last year I couldn't get away, but I did help to put together a group of American artists to paint with Russian counterparts in Kostroma, another "Golden Ring" city on the Volga. They had a great time. This winter, a group of the Russians returned to the States, and we painted for two weeks in deep snow and in around Jeffersonville, Vermont, a historic city for American landscape painting. The cultural exchange has proved fruitful.



Studio Hallway, 2014, oil on linen, 24 x 30 in.

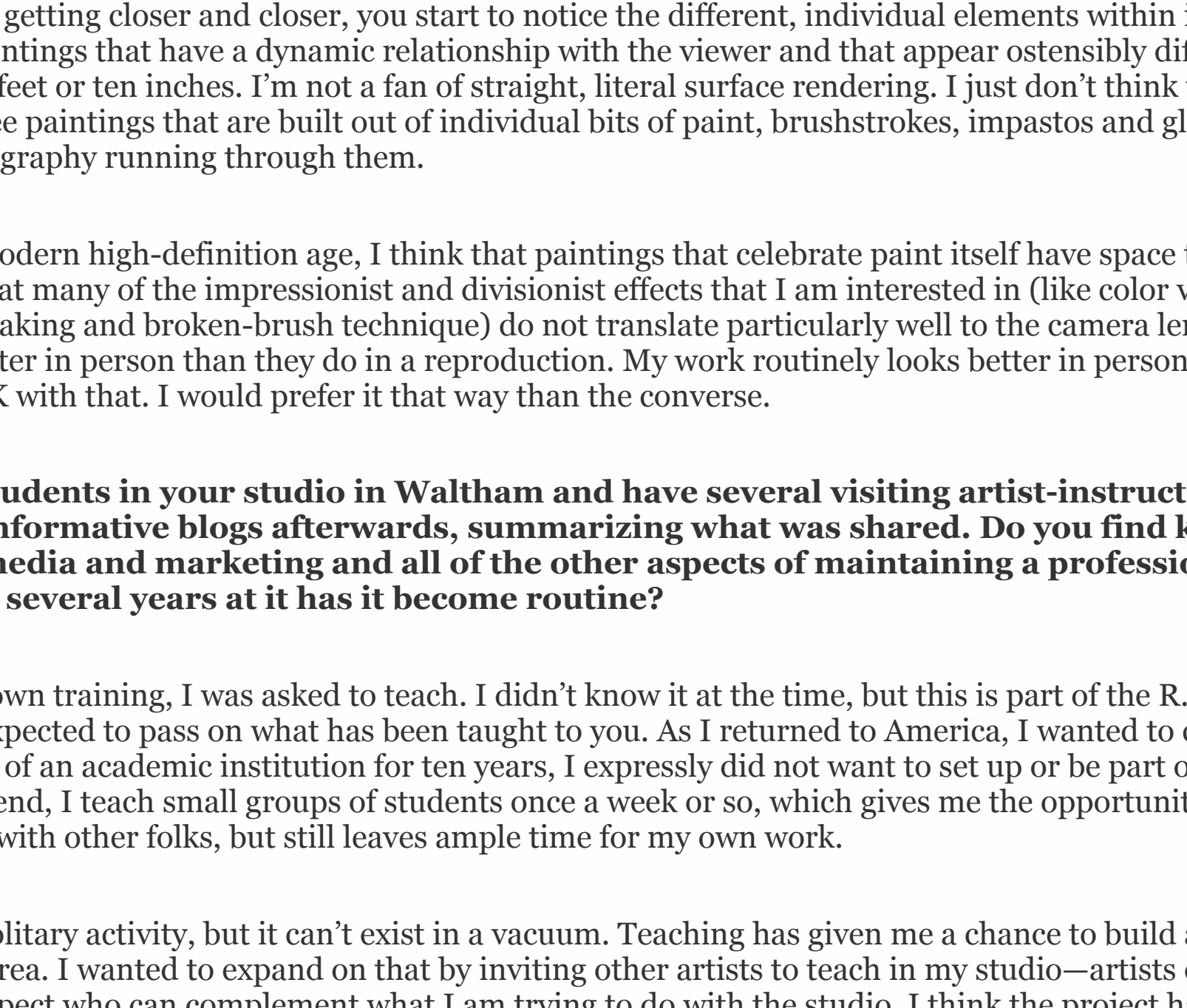
AM: After having painted and exhibited with contemporary Russian artists in their country and in America, what would you say was the most eye-opening difference between the American group and the Russian group? What about the most surprising similarity?

LM: The Russian artists I have met and painted with have a real appreciation and dedication to painting from nature and for artfanship. There has been a sea change in recent years in paint manufacturing. Newer paint companies are really different—and some are literally basing their advertising on the fact that they don't use fillers or stabilizers, and their high pigment content. Similarly with brushes, there are companies that pride themselves on their direct relationships with artists. In many respects, what you can buy is of excellent quality, and since I simply don't have time to make all these materials myself, I discern what will work for me and buy them happily.

That said, I would wager that with these advancements in some areas, painting supports have never been worse. Literally no company in America is making hide-glue canvases. This is one of the most historic supports, and one of my favorites. I have to make them myself. I do purchase the best primed linen money can buy, but to be honest I don't love the priming. For me, my hand-made canvases and panels behave better than anything on the market.

AM: There is a painting you did while back that has always stood out to me, Studio Hallway. What is the story behind this painting?

LM: It's hard to pinpoint which paintings are successful during the years that they are created, but that's one that I also now look back on favorably. It's just the hallway outside my studio, with orange sunlight streaming in the window. In retrospect, I think that painting is probably one where I was able to successfully merge the more academic or "traditional" training from Florence and the decidedly impressionistic techniques and look that I have become more interested in over the years. In some sense, all paintings are like self-portraits, and that one reflects the period in which my wife and I had first moved, the change in environments, and the months spent building out the studio. It's both an embrace of our new space and also just a painting of a hallway.



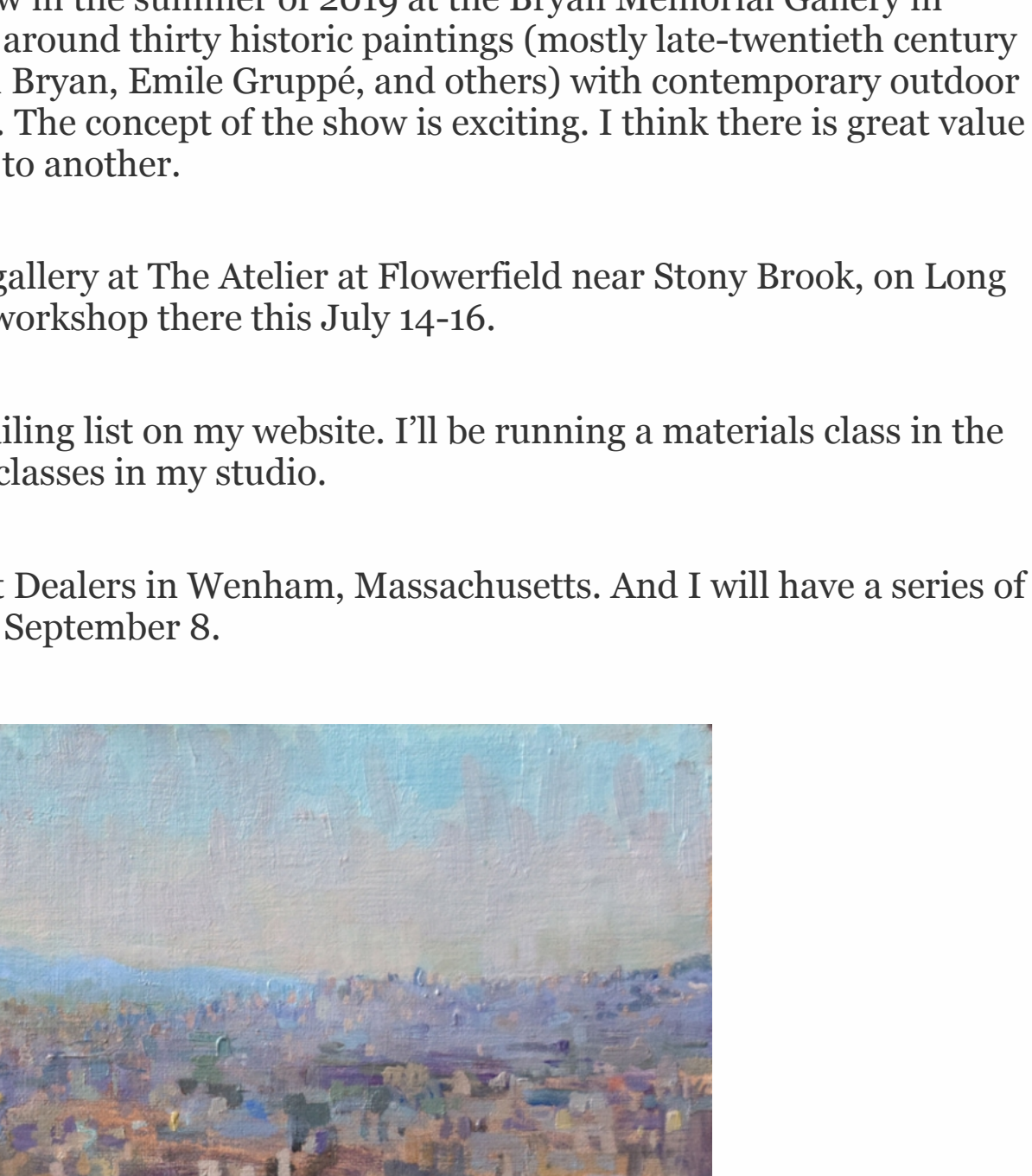
Greensboro, 2018, oil on linen mounted to aluminum, 24 x 28 in.

AM: On developing painting or series are you most proud of to date and why?

LM: Every year I delight in painting snow. There is a quiet magic to the landscape, and the sheer difficulty of painting outdoors in those conditions lends an urgency to the look of a painting. We used to have to drive hours to find snow, but now the snow comes to us. Snow is opalescent in color, reflecting everything around it, and it is immediately obvious in a snow painting if it is observed from nature, or painted from a photograph in the studio. I do think that snow painting also keeps me well-balanced in the winter—it keeps me outdoors and looking forward to snowstorms that many of my friends and family start to dread throughout the long winter. As spring starts, my days painting usually move indoors until the pollen is done, sometime toward the end of June.

AM: When was the last time you experimented with a new medium, material, and/or subject that you hadn't tried before? What were the results?

LM: Last year I spent some solid time painting in watercolor. I had always wanted to explore the medium, and although I only painted a couple, the learning experience was enormously valuable. After years painting in oil, it was challenging and invigorating to have absolutely no idea what I was doing. I think it's important to occasionally find yourself out of your comfort zone.



One of the results of Mancini-Hresko's recent experimentation with watercolor was this figure-sketch

In mid-June, for the first time, I prepared a batch of hemp canvases. Something people perhaps aren't aware of is that many of the Old Master pictures are on hemp, not linen (and certainly not cotton). At one time, hemp canvas was ubiquitous, but during the twentieth century its production in the States was shut down entirely. For reasons that are perhaps obvious, I am now able to order as many different samples as I like, and the stuff looks great. Hemp is much stronger, less expensive, and less susceptible to humidity than linen, so in theory it should make an ideal painting support. That said, I still haven't painted on it. We'll see whether it becomes a regular part of my process when this first group of canvases have fully dried.

AM: What qualities do you most admire in other artists' work? What qualities do you find disappointing?

LM: Frankly, anyone who is able to make a career painting and drawing pictures is worthy of respect. It's an immensely competitive and difficult vocation that calls for huge amounts of sacrifice in other areas of your life and demands your attention. Painting after nature is not easy. Aesthetically what is most interesting to me in painting is the appearance and impact of a visual impression. This is the great magic trick in oils: something appears real at a certain distance until upon getting closer and closer, you start to notice the different, individual elements within it, and the illusion falls away. I like paintings that have a dynamic relationship with the viewer and that appear ostensibly different at thirty feet than they do at ten feet or ten inches. I'm not a fan of straight, literal space rendering. I just don't think that glorifies the medium. I like to see paintings that are built out of individual bits of paint, brushstrokes, impastos and glazes. Paintings that have a sense of calligraphy running through them.

Especially in this modern high-definition age, I think that paintings that celebrate paint itself have space to shine. That said, I am quite aware that many of the impressionist and divisionist effects that I am interested in (like color vibration, directional mark-making and broken-brush technique) do not translate particularly well to the camera lens. These paintings will always look better in person than they do in a reproduction. My work routinely looks better in person than it does online, and I am OK with that. I would prefer it that way.

AM: You teach students in your studio in Waltham and have several visiting artist-instructors as well. You regularly write informative blogs afterwards, summarizing what was shared. Do you find keeping up with a blog and social media and marketing and all of the other aspects of maintaining a professional studio to be difficult, or after several years at it has it become routine?

LM: As part of my own training, I was asked to teach. I didn't know it at the time, but this is part of the R.H. Ives Gammell heritage: You are expected to pass on what has been taught to you. As I returned to America, I wanted to continue teaching, but after being part of an academic institution for ten years, I expressly did not want to set up or be part of a school. I wanted autonomy. To that end, I teach small groups of students once a week or so, which gives me the opportunity to share my studio and process with other folks, but still leaves ample time for my own work.

Painting is a very solitary activity, but it can't exist in a vacuum. Teaching has given me a chance to build an artistic community in my area. I wanted to expand on that by inviting other artists to teach in my studio—artists often from far away that I know and respect who can complement what I am trying to do with the studio. I think the project has been very successful. At this point, the outreach around classes is fairly straightforward. I don't advertise. I have a mailing list, and I write class announcements and blog postings about the courses afterwards. Writing about the courses is enjoyable, and it gives those who can't participate an opportunity to see what sort of things we are up to. At this point, it just feels like part of the routine.

A shot of Waltham Studios during a demo with guest instructor Joe Alwehr

AM: Are there any upcoming exhibitions, workshops, or events you would like to share?

LM: I will start preparing work later this year for a group show in the summer of 2019 at the Bryan Memorial Gallery in Jeffersonville, Vermont. The show will compare and contrast around thirty historic paintings (mostly late-twentieth century impressionist pictures from the likes of Aldro Hibbard, Alden Bryan, Emile Gruppé, and others) with contemporary outdoor painters working in the same areas, painting the same motifs. The concept of the show is exciting. I think there is great value in looking at the past and trying to draw lines from one artist to another.

There is a group of my paintings on view this summer in the gallery at The Atelier at Flowerfield near Stony Brook, on Long Island. I will also be teaching a weekend landscape-painting workshop there this July 14-16.

If people are interested in classes, they can sign up for my mailing list on my website. I'll be running a materials class in the fall, and both Marc Dalessio and Ben Fenske have upcoming classes in my studio.

I also have pictures on view this summer at Williams Fine Art Dealers in Wrenham, Massachusetts. And I will have a series of paintings in a group show at Tree's Place Gallery, opening on September 8.

Athens from Areopagus, 2016, oil on linen mounted to board, 14 x 18 in.