

the *art* of

mindfulness

無心





published by
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text, paintings, etchings and drawings © 2014
Gregory Burns

photography © 2014
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acknowledgements

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On Starting

It began with "All You Need is Love," before transitioning into "Let it Be". I was a child of the 60's and these were messages from the Beatles. It was an era of expansionism on political, social and spiritual levels. I learned of war, free love and ashrams.

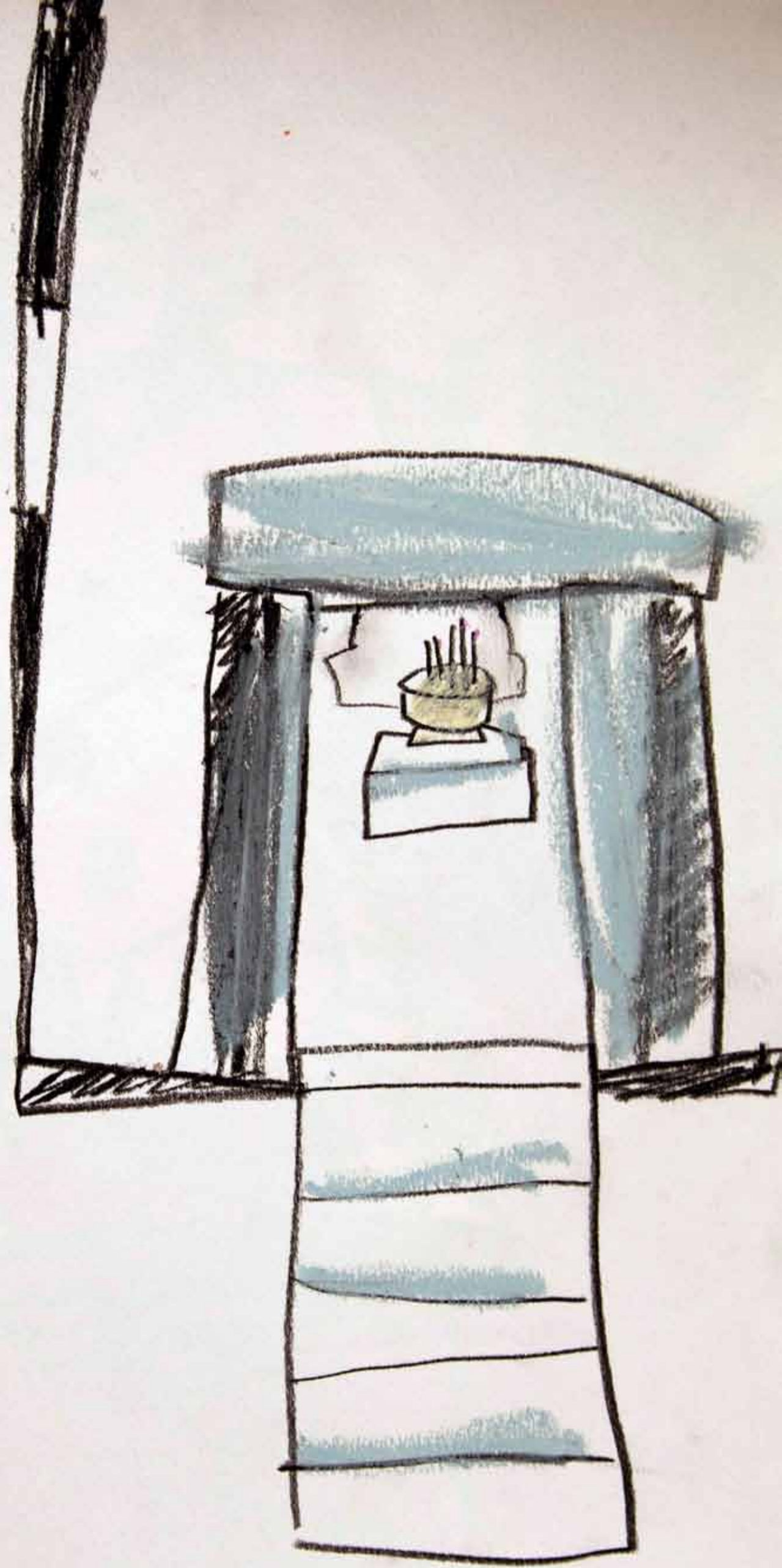
In my teens, I was baffled when hearing that some people were trying to 'find themselves'. Where had they gone and who or what were they seeking? I was in high school in Holland, and life was good.

But after a year of university in Pennsylvania followed by a move to California, cracks in my armor began to surface. Swimming in the abundance and options California offered, I contemplated the benefits of everything from vegetarianism to hatha yoga. We ate alfalfa sprouts and avocados. We sat in silent meditation retreats. We experimented with colonics. We did not eat meat. Our quest was spiritual union with the universe or a version of 'God' we could understand.

Soon I too was lost. Experiencing deep emotional trauma from the breakup of my first love relationship coupled with doubts about my place in the world and what path I should follow sent me into a tail-spin it would take years to pull out of. Living in the beautiful world of the California Dream, with readily available Gurus and Self-Help seminars, I floundered, lost in spiritual and psychological confusion. To deal with the turbulence, instead of seeking professional psychological advice I turned to swimming and painting as counselors. In water and paint I began healing.

Eventually, I 'found myself'. By that time, I was living in Asia, trying to keep up with the industrious pace of the locals. We ate what was available and rarely sat in silence. We ran to keep up with the unfolding economic miracle. We made a living. Our search was for a better life. I kept running while swimming and painting kept me grounded.





On Mindfulness

I have meditated poorly for 30 years. As soon as I manage to excavate a little space in my cluttered head, I immediately shovel in some new plans or judgments. But even though I don't excel at sitting still and focusing myself, I persist. I know that if I stop the jabbering for a moment, like defragging a computer's hard drive, this clears out some of the muddle in my mind, and life is again like a clean crisp day after a rainstorm.

If you are like me, you judge almost everything. This is 'good' or this is 'bad'. It's in our nature to distinguish between what we like and don't like. We are attracted to some things and repelled by others. When mankind started on the savannahs, this was helpful as wild beasts and inhospitable environments were overcome. Today we rely on this propensity to distinguish to produce more comfortable and safer lives. There is nothing wrong with preferences.

What is not useful is when everything we encounter is frantically tagged with a value label as to how this helps or hurts us. If there is a constant onslaught of good and bad we can only find happiness sporadically. We are pleased with this but brought down by that. With all the chatter, we are rarely left with just the present moment. Not good, not bad, this experience just is. With this understanding we are freed of the entanglements that judgments create. Having preferences is fine but if we can accept both the good and the bad, we can appreciate the wonder of the moment without having to push or pull away. We are present. We are mindful. We allow this moment to be, without trying to hold on to it or reject it.

Today, 'mindfulness' is part of popular culture. Oxford Dictionary defines it as, "a mental state achieved by focusing one's awareness on the present moment, while calmly acknowledging and accepting one's feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations..." Being mindful can be done anytime and anywhere. It is like meditation in motion, focusing on the entirety of the moment, without judgment. When we criticize less, we accept more.

Mindfulness is being present and aware without favoritism. I have found that if I can stop my racing mind for just a moment, I have more chances throughout the day to be present and enjoy this wonderful journey. With less judgment, I have discovered more happiness.

On Painting

It began with Dennis the Menace. Reviewing the comics of the International Herald Tribune over Sunday brunch in Paris as a child, offered me the immediacy of images with tidbits of text. I found humor and adventure all expressed in pictures and I tried to do the same. In school, painting started out as something done for fun but later evolved into a lifejacket, which kept my GPA from sinking.

As I began traveling, drawing allowed me to engage intimately with my surroundings as I documented the journey. Painting outdoors on location focused me while the world whirled by, offering countless exciting colors and shapes. I absorbed that which was before me, mixed it with what was inside me and produced optimistic abstractions of reality. Sitting in temples, on mountaintops and by oceans, I tried to absorb and express the moment.

The studio is where things can get messy. It is where I challenge myself to push forward without knowing all the answers. Painting becomes a vehicle to go deeper into mystery and myself as I try to express and understand the meaning of life. In my sanctuary I can dance, cry, laugh and allow painting to pull me deeper into what is significant.

Like athletes and priests, artists have rituals. My Chinese brush-painting teacher taught us to grind our ink by hand, which could take up to 20 minutes. This process focused us in preparation for the challenges encountered while painting. The longer one grinds, the calmer and more mindful one becomes.



Many paintings start out nice, like a haiku - short and simple. But often I am not satisfied and a feeling tells me to make some intervention. So I re-engage with the painting in order to achieve something undefined, yet better. Usually, in the process of editing, I must relinquish parts of the painting I cherish most in order to allow the painting to move beyond my attachments and myself. After wandering and slogging in the dark trenches, alone with my brushes, paints, demons and saints, with perseverance and some luck, I pop back up, achieving some sense of resolution and completeness in the painting. I have realized something beyond myself - despite myself.

Painting is now my meditation. I believe I must center myself so I can create more clearly. I try to meditate and become mindful before picking up a brush. The right incense and music helps raise my spirits. Once I engage, painting often forces me to let go in order to find something better, and to arrive at destinations I never knew existed. It is the route that leads me to peace, contentment, something magical, something new and very exciting; something that speaks of the joy in all of our souls.



On Travel

Like a fish, I must keep moving to breathe. Travel is my fuel. It fills me with images, ideas and inspirations, which I feel must be turned into something. The journey feeds me so that I can keep painting and evolving.

Visiting, sketching and absorbing sacred sites around the globe is how I try to understand religion. Backpacking, trekking and sailing through nature is how I return to the roots of my being. Natural and man-made wonders make me want to create something that sings and belongs in the grand symphony in which we all play our part.

Beyond this, why am I compelled to wait endlessly in lines, buy tickets and visit distant lands? Travel cannot save me. But perhaps when I am poured into new landscapes of experience, I see the world differently, not just because it is unique, but also because I have been removed from routine.

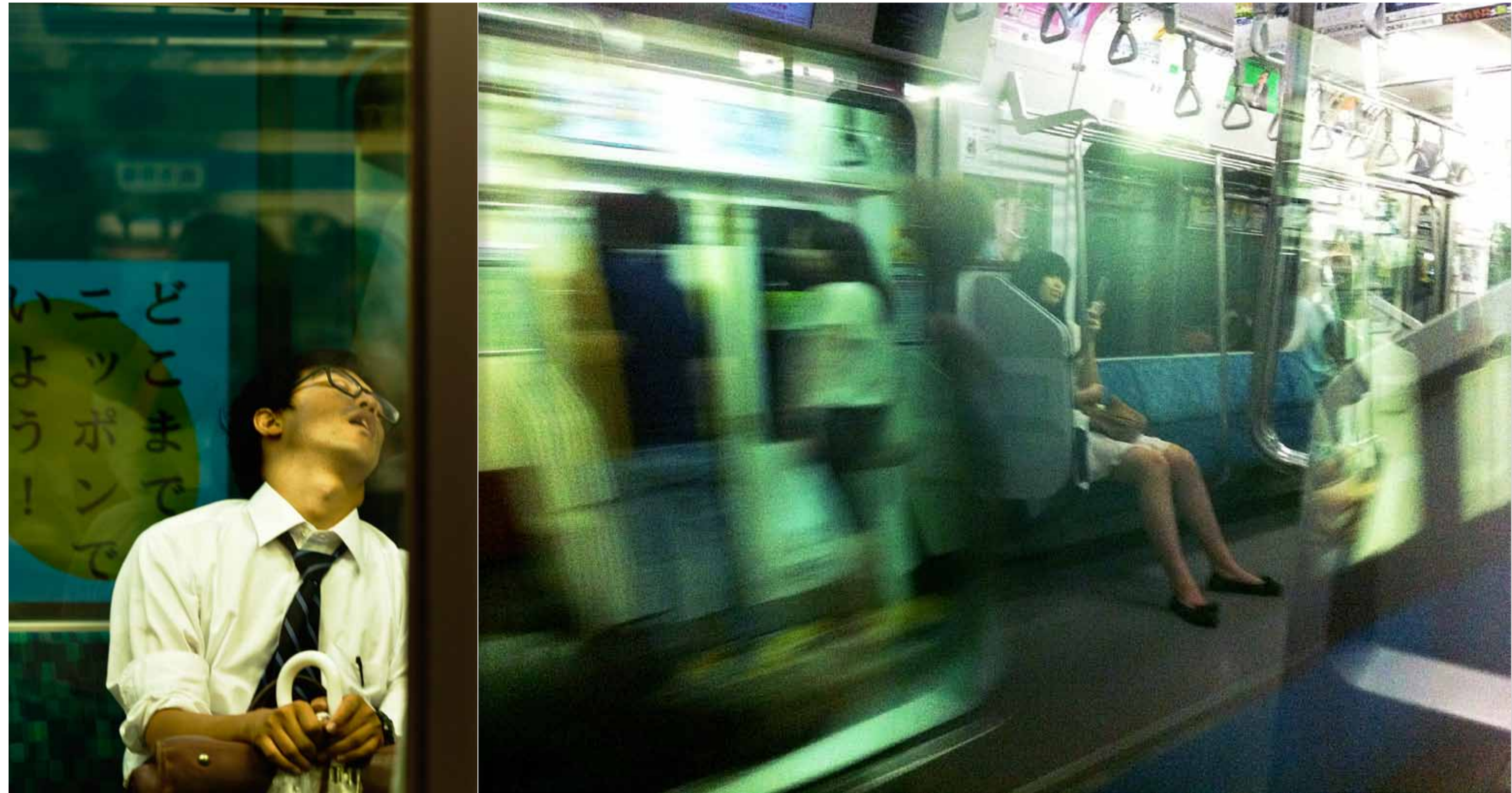
Traveling, and painting the journey, helps me to fully embrace and engage with life as the newness of the now overrides my propensity to categorize. I am catapulted into the immediacy of the current situation, both good and bad, and I am suddenly fully in the moment.

So I keep moving, punctuated with periods of hibernation. Like when playing hide-and-go-seek and someone yells, "Olly olly income free," I too must return home to rest, recharge and take care of paperwork. It is a balance of coming and going, inside and outside, black and white, big and small, freedom and restraint, which creates a splendid portrait of our lives.

On Japan

Upon arriving in Japan, it is immediately apparent to Angie and I that this country is refined. From the bows to the white-gloved taxi drivers, this is a nation that honors humanity. Public transportation runs smoothly and silently. Nobody speaks on cell-phones in close quarters. There is a sense that people understand that their actions affect others and as a result, they curb their appetites. Passing through a beehive of people in the central train station without once being bumped by another person is the norm. Parking lot attendants wear smart uniforms and direct traffic with total respect for pedestrians. Smoking is only allowed outside in designated areas and seldom do you see anyone puffing away in public. Crossing the street is not a contact sport and cars wait obediently until all pedestrians have passed before venturing forward. It is very civilized here. I can see why for centuries Japan didn't feel the need for the outside world.

Japanese cuisine is not social like an American barbeque. The subtle tastes and sensations associated with Japanese food are delicate. One must go within to truly appreciate and taste the depth of the simple flavors. Lost in loud conversation would be to waste the quiet and soft tastes that the singular dishes evoke. Being anti-social during a Japanese meal makes sense to me since the moments and tastes are fleeting and you need to concentrate to catch the unique rich flavors dancing on your tongue. Nourished, but not stuffed, we retire to rest so that we might venture out to explore with the rising sun.



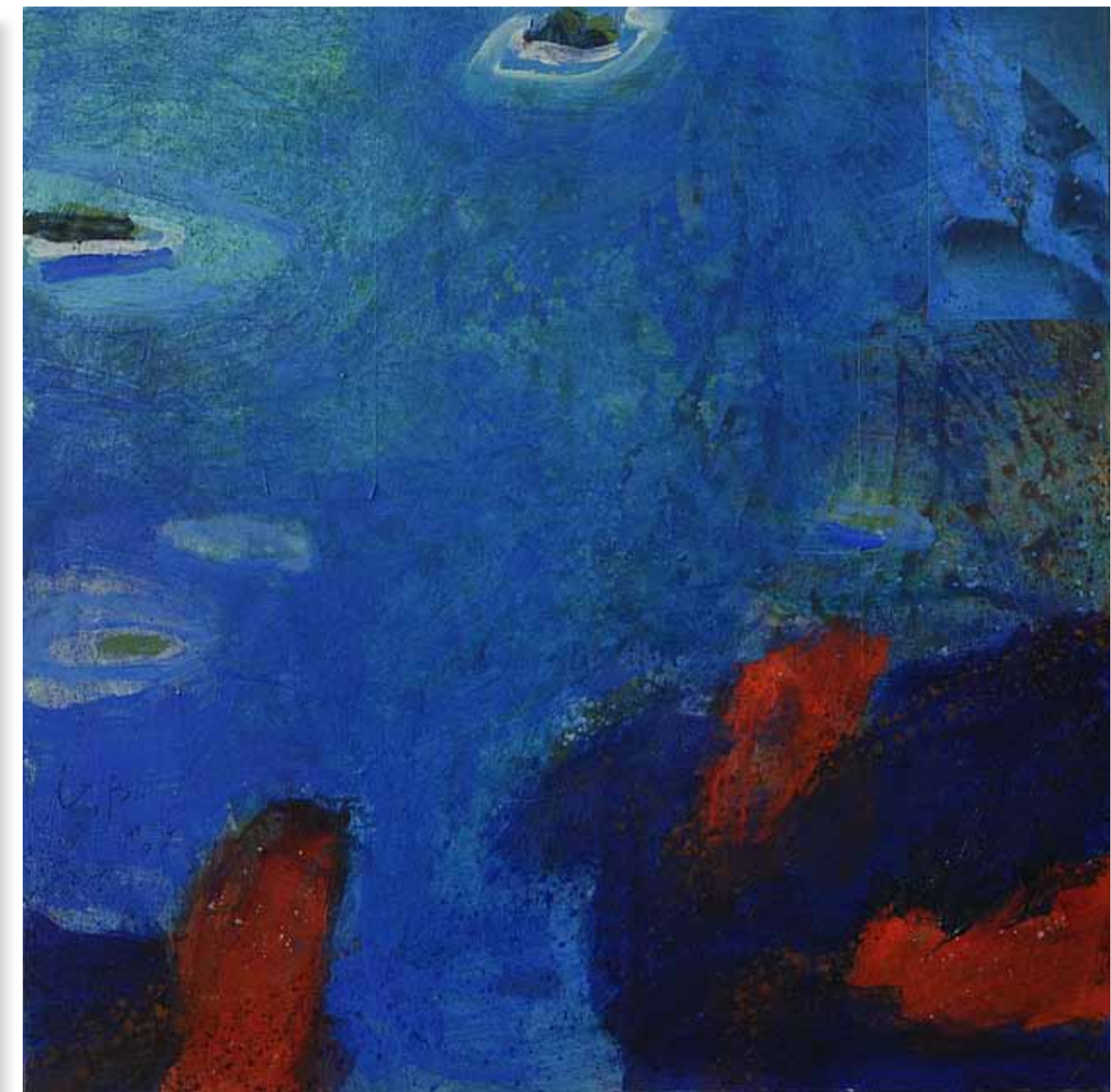
Angie and I take to the metro system and visit numerous shrines and gardens. Japanese aesthetic and architecture, with its clean and minimalist look, inspire us to simplify. Navigating bridges over water, stones through grass and gravel patches, we are led into the beauty of this country. The tea-house or pagoda beside a pond beckons for us to rest and contemplate. A bench positioned on top of a knoll with the best view of the landscape waits for us to stop and notice. I paint. Angie photographs. Together we become one with this landscape. We are present. Refreshed, we march on, filled with a quietness so needed in this busy world.

I feel a great appreciation and respect for this land. Through limitation, the people have adapted and learned to do a lot with less. They have focused themselves and their energy into a simple and structured way of being. I experience this first hand at 7am while sitting in the rock path leading to the Meiji Shrine preparing to paint.

Suddenly three guards descend upon me to say that painting is not allowed here. It has been a rule for 90 years. Photography is fine. But this, my form of meditation is not permitted (which I find a contradiction). Now a fourth guard explains that painting disturbs the shrine. We are caught in an awkward situation. They have a rule that must be followed while I am calmly asking them to look the other way. But this is Japan. I will need to pack up and go.

We then discover that the guard, who likes baseball, and I are the same age. We are connected. Ah, but wait, a reprieve! Somehow we negotiate a ten-minute truce in which I am allowed to continue. I quickly turn to my canvas and sketch in the temple compound. With brushes and acrylic paint I build the composition and layer some colors. The pressure has forced me to focus intensely and I finish up before the deadline. We are all happy and conflict is averted. Who said you can't change the rules in Japan? Sincerity and calmness move mountains.

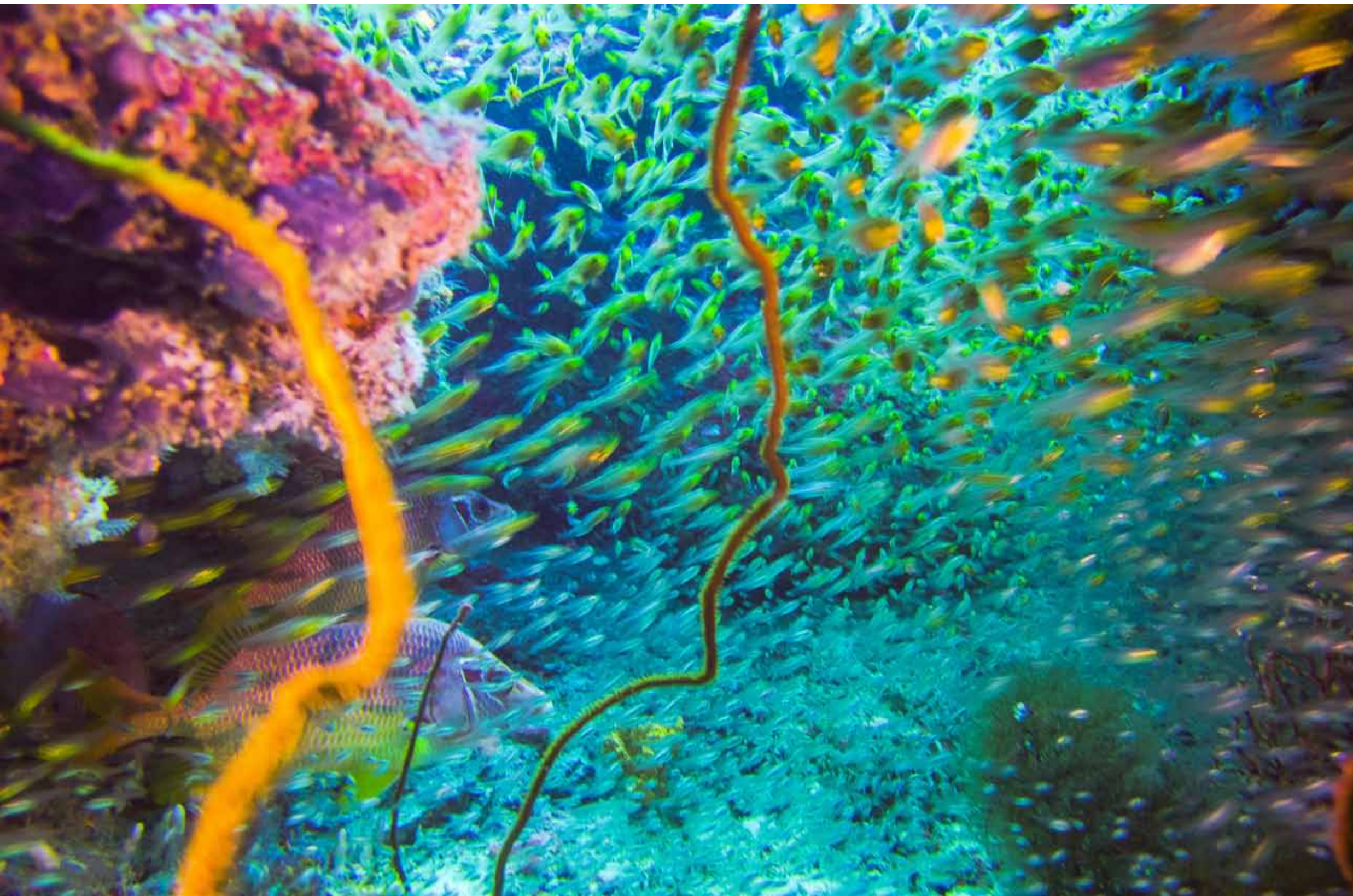




On The Maldives

Screening our boxes upon arrival at Immigration was a chirpy young Muslim woman wearing a veil, asking what was inside. "Canvas paintings", I reply. "We will have to open the box and look inside", she says, and so we do. Pulling out one of my already primed backgrounds with colors and maps, she gives it a look and says, "My youngest daughter can do that". And so Angie and I began our residency in this paradise of islands surrounded by protective coral reefs and inviting warm waters teeming with fish.

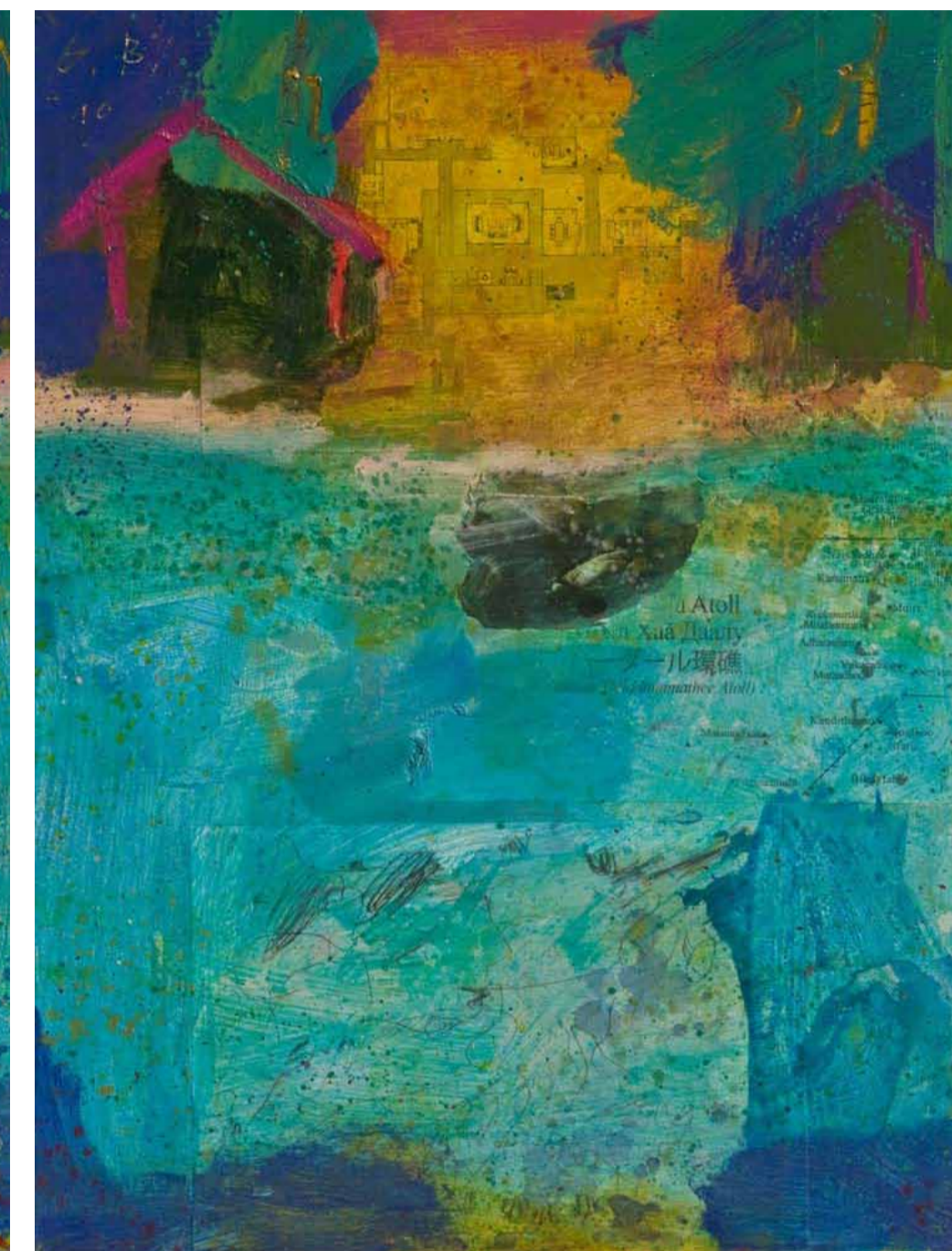
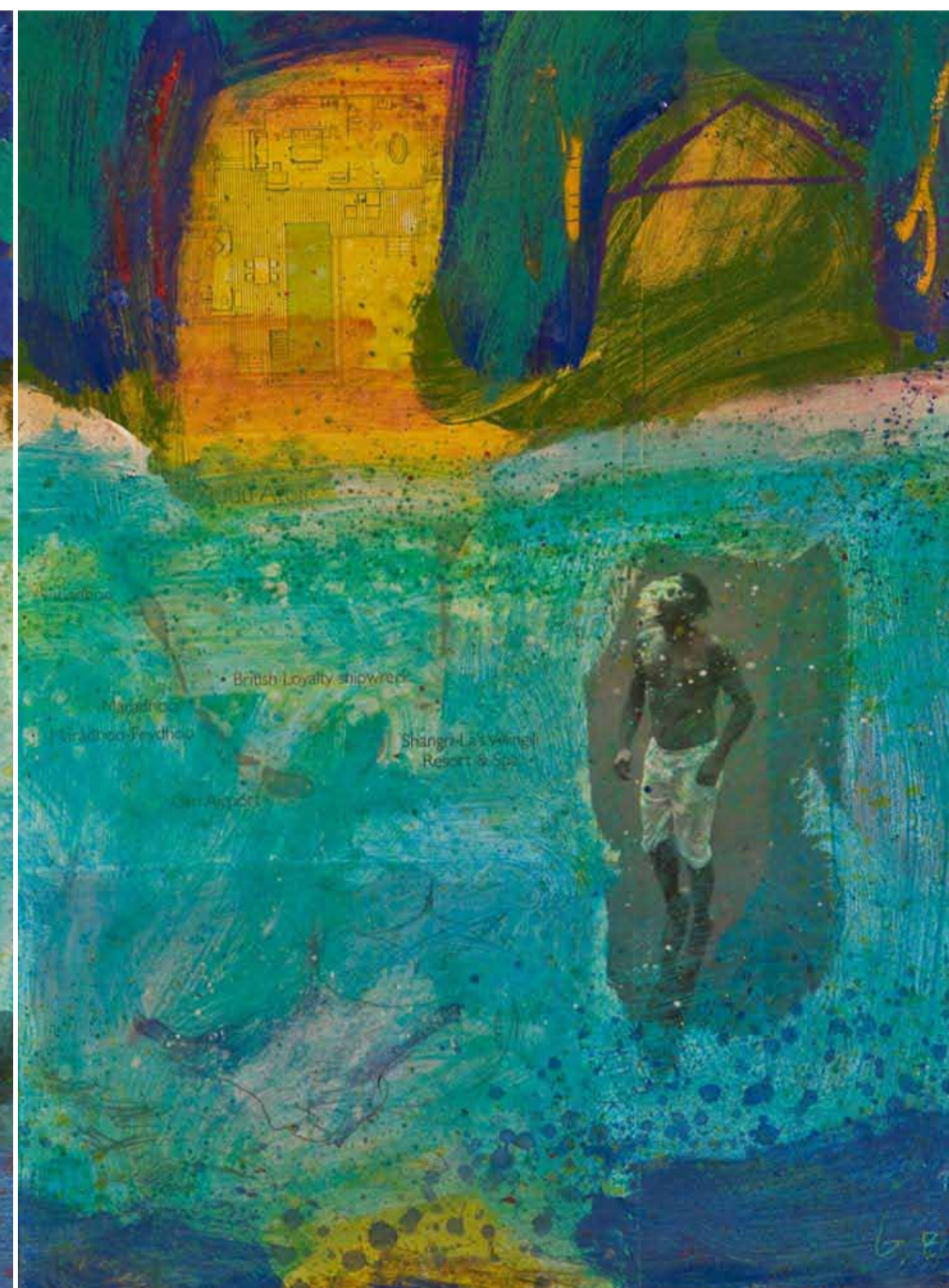
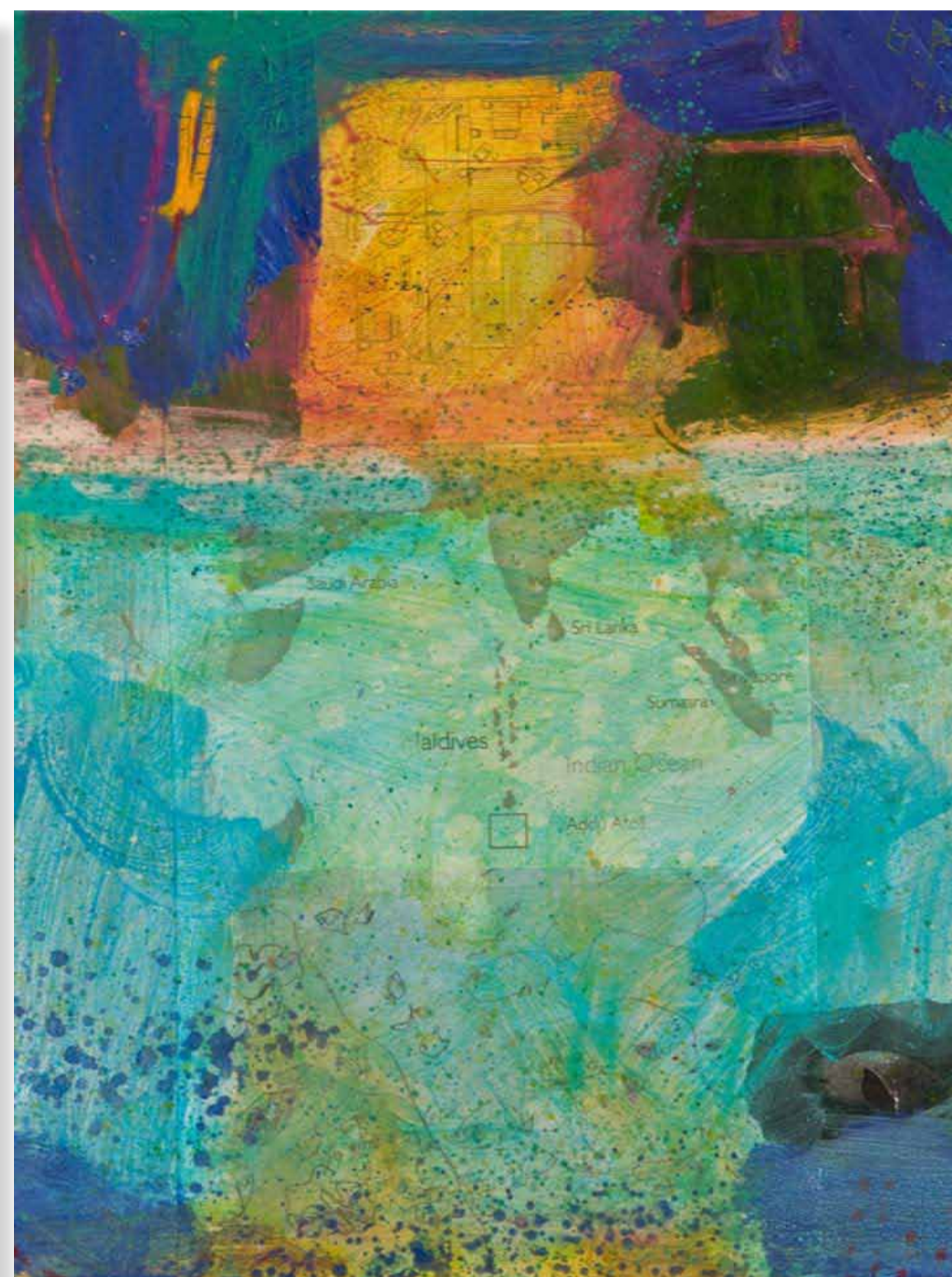
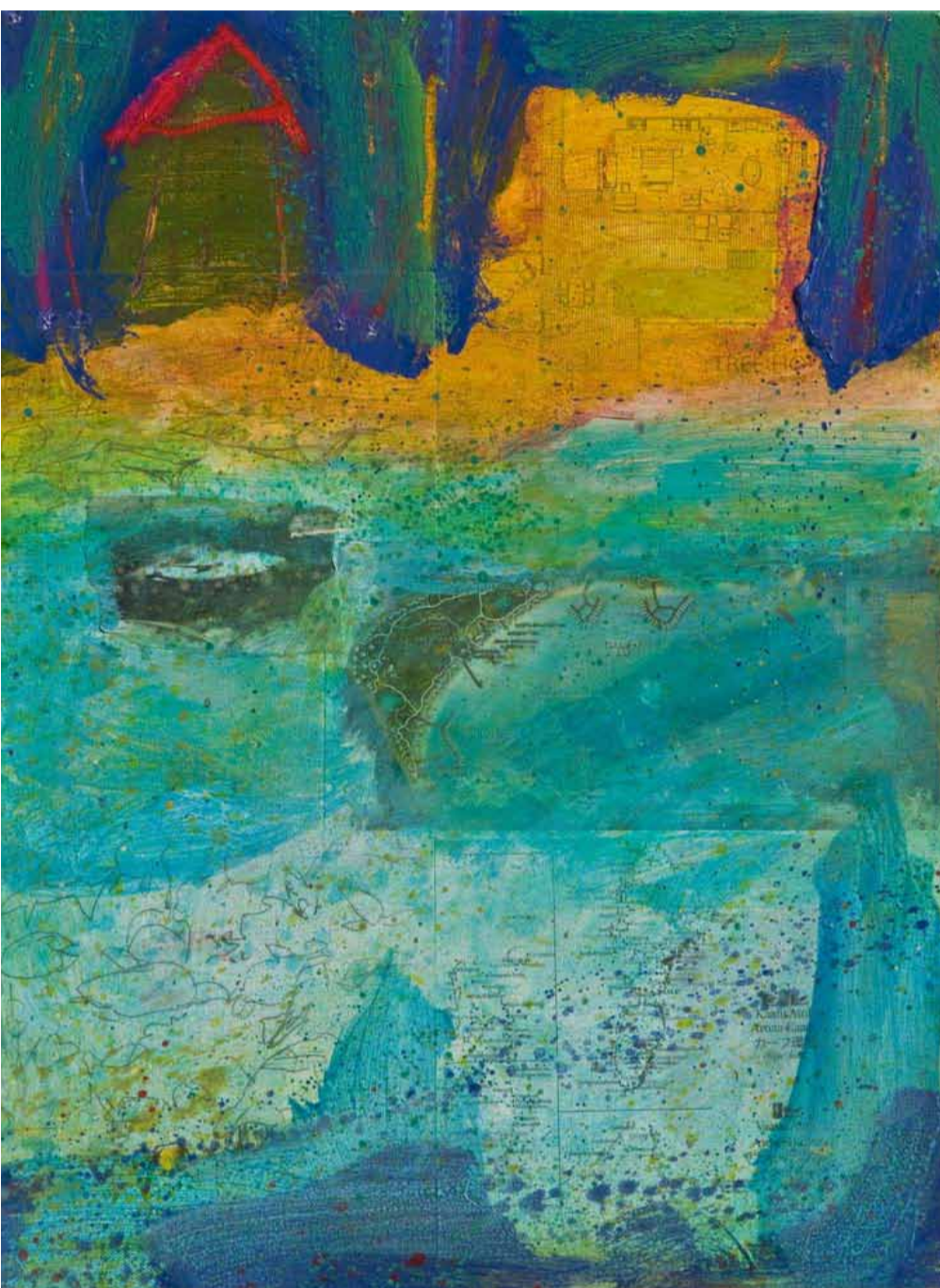
In fact, looking out across any one of the numerous atolls that make up this country, there is not much to see in the Maldives. The horizon offers only a few distractions in the form of little islands with thin lines of white sand that separate the green of the palm trees above, from the prussian blue of the sea below. Even up close, these tiny dots of sand offer only patches of tropical trees with a few huts peppered in between. But it really isn't what is above the sea that people come to the Maldives to see. It is the abundant life below the waterline that leaves us breathless.



So Angie with her camera and I with my drawing slate began diving in earnest and are greeted on our first dive by dancing manta rays. We are paralyzed in awe as four acrobats came swooping in, around, above and below us within inches of our outstretched fingertips-like giant kites gently sailing through space while clinging cleaner fish removed parasites from their milk-white undersides. Clown fish, Triggerfish and countless other players participated in the drama, adding color and activity to this giant blue sea stage. It was just another Monday morning in the Maldives.

The Sunset Jetty on Vabbinfaru became my studio while we resided on Ihuru. Each morning my commute consists of a boat trip by Dhoni, a local inner island vessel, across the sparkling blue sea with fish darting below, followed by a walk of 100 meters across the island from the Sunrise to the Sunset Jetty.





My studio for the month is a table from the banquet department tucked below a thatched roof set upon a wooden jetty protruding into the sea. There I attempt to bring the Indian Ocean to bear on my canvases. Angie has a studio stretching the entire length of the atoll with everything inside fair game. Above and below the sea she documents the colors and lives of the local inhabitants, be they land or sea creatures.

Once my collection of paintings is completed, 'Maldives: Above and Below the Sea' opened at the resort. Opening a show on a tropical island has little of the pomp and circumstance of gallery openings in cities. But we are having no problem getting accustomed to this simpler style of living. Sitting on an island smaller than a parking lot at Wal-Mart, our perspectives and expectations have shrunk and become more condensed as the essentials began floating to the surface. Sometimes it takes less to feel more.

On Breathing Under Water



When scuba diving with others, one needs to keep up with the group. It is not a race, but it is important not to lose your dive buddy. On rare occasions, I have been able to just stop, and sit on the sea floor for an extended period. Slowing down my breathing and just looking at the life around me is very centering. I sketch silently for 20 minutes in 20 meters of water, and slowly become a part of this liquid world of fish and coral that thrives at the bottom of the sea. It is a form of meditation and my mind and senses become clear. I see creatures and corals that I never noticed before when swimming from place to place. I realize that a whole universe is within my peripheral vision. I could spend eternity watching this dance of sea life.

Two juvenile triggerfish locked in either courtship or conflict spin around, oblivious to the hulking creature staring on who pokes and taps at them in their embrace. Anemone fish dart in and out of their protective coral forests. The contrast between size and colors is startling. It is all so magnificently rich as my mind becomes attuned to what is actually happening in front of and within me. I become mindful for a moment and feel the exceptional nature of this and all other moments. It is time to move on and return to the dive boat, but not before being fully engaged with life below the surface.

On The Train



We take the train across French fields that Van Gogh immortalized in striking greens and golden ochers a century ago. The scene has not changed, although the machinery has. Tracking like a rocket along steel beams we lean and whiz across the fall landscape.

Without an agenda or time constraints, we can just be here. We can be now. We can observe all that is around like kids on their first field trip and train ride out of town. Muffled whispers combine with the quite whirl of our passage through space and time.



We are not really coming or going anywhere. We move while sitting still. Perhaps this is what twists us back into a consciousness that is not informed by our usual day's schedule. We don't really know what the next moment will hold. We only have this instant and all its wonder. The color and compositions fill and empty our vision. The sounds and smells come and go. We let go. We ride on rails. The tilled soil feeds on sunlight. We are the falcons on the fence post scanning the horizon.

At some point ahead, we will reach a station. We will descend back into our plans. But for this moment on this train we are only now. A track filled with possibility stretches out across the view from our window. Here, we are on the journey now.



On Czechoslovakia

The Czech Republic sits beside a very prosperous Germany. Our train across the invisible border soon offers a subtle contrast between the 'haves' and the 'someday may haves'. Though the landscape, graffiti and barometric pressure don't change much one can feel the drop in GDP. But as we pull into Prague station the smorgasbord of ancient buildings and sights takes our attention away from the present and refocuses it on a glorious past. Glaringly apparent is that Prague was once a cultural center. Gothic spires stretch towards the stars while cobblestone streets with intricate patterns combine to embellish everything between heaven and earth.

Walking is the best way to see the city, as Prague has more pedestrian zone streets than any city I have ever explored. Lined with trendy consumer goods stores, modern society rubs shoulders with tower guards dressed in traditional court costumes while stone structures hundreds of years old form a historic blanket. Arched gateways and windows combine the strength of the male line with the female curve, softening the structures. Overhearing a local guide describe Prague, he informs his eager crew that the best bargains are smoking, drinking and eating. We choose two of the three after long days painting and photographing the Old Town, Charles Bridge and the Prague Castle. We skip the torture chamber and sex machine tour in favor of the view from the Clock Tower in the Old City Center.

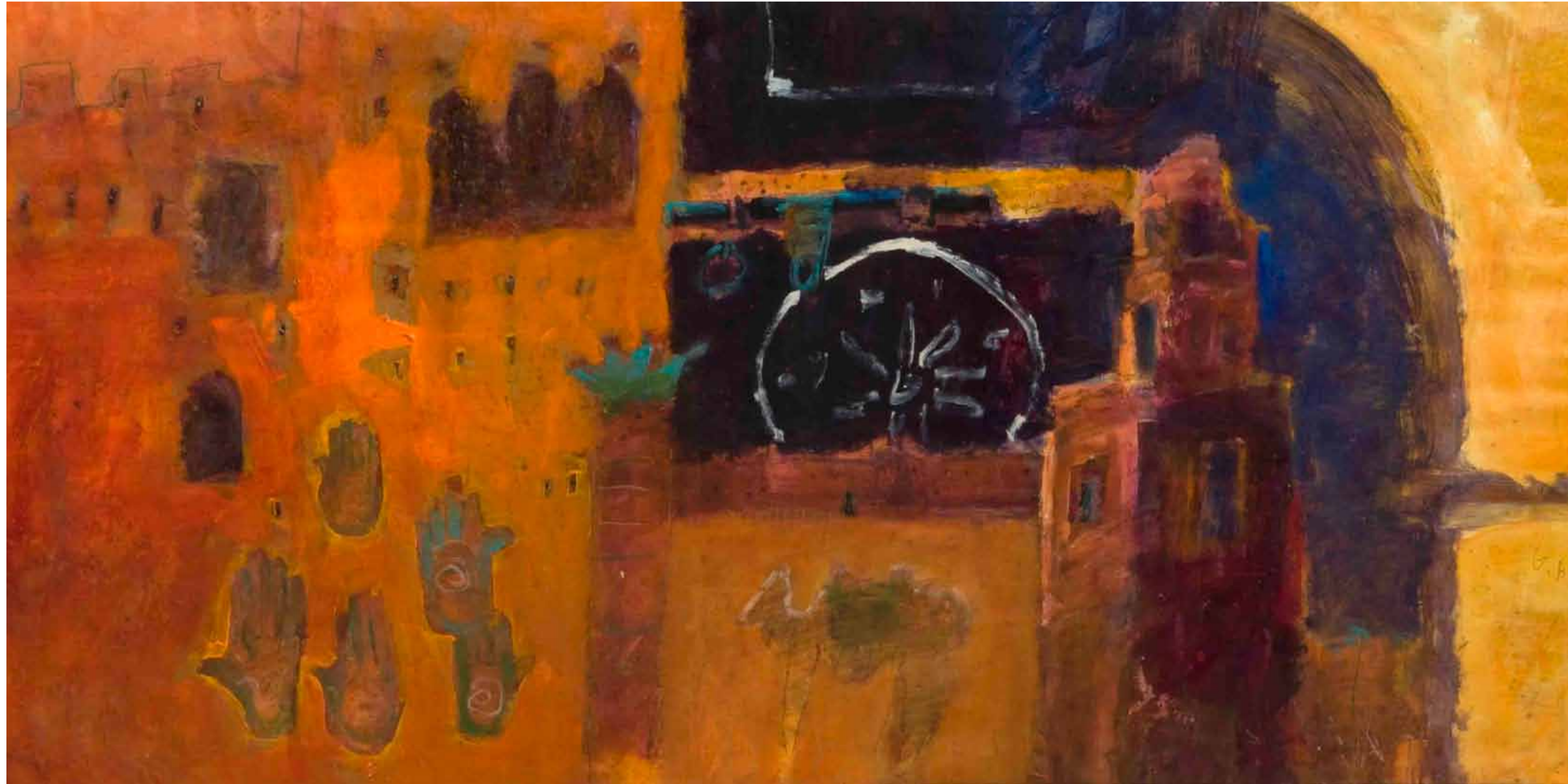
Despite what must be a challenging economic environment and the onset of a drizzly winter, many locals wear smiles. The Arts seem to be thriving with ballet, music and film all well represented. An ancient musician plays an equally antiquated musical instrument we cannot identify but which creates sound from a past era. Thai massage parlors and Chinese restaurants augment the cacophony of people and races found here. Still a crossroads for pilgrims and businessmen, Prague has something for everyone. But most memorable is the architecture, which seems unchanged since the invention of the wheel. Slipping quietly out of town at dawn, we say goodbye to picturesque Prague on its journey back to a cultural renaissance.

On Morocco

We transit from Singapore at Dubai enroute to Casablanca. At six in the morning the international airport, like Disneyland for a United Nations of shoppers, is packed with women wrapped from head to toe wearing Christian Dior bumblebee sunglasses browsing for gold and electronic goods.

Landing in a toasted Casablanca we transit to the train that will take us north to Marrakech. Not knowing any better, we take 2nd class seats for the 3 hours of roasting across a parched and barren landscape of scrubby cactus in a desert pocked with walled Kasbahs. With its pink-tan stucco walls and 'sortie' signs the country feels like a cross between Mexico and France. Thankfully, a breeze occasionally interrupts the punishing sun, which broils all below this un-sheltering sky.

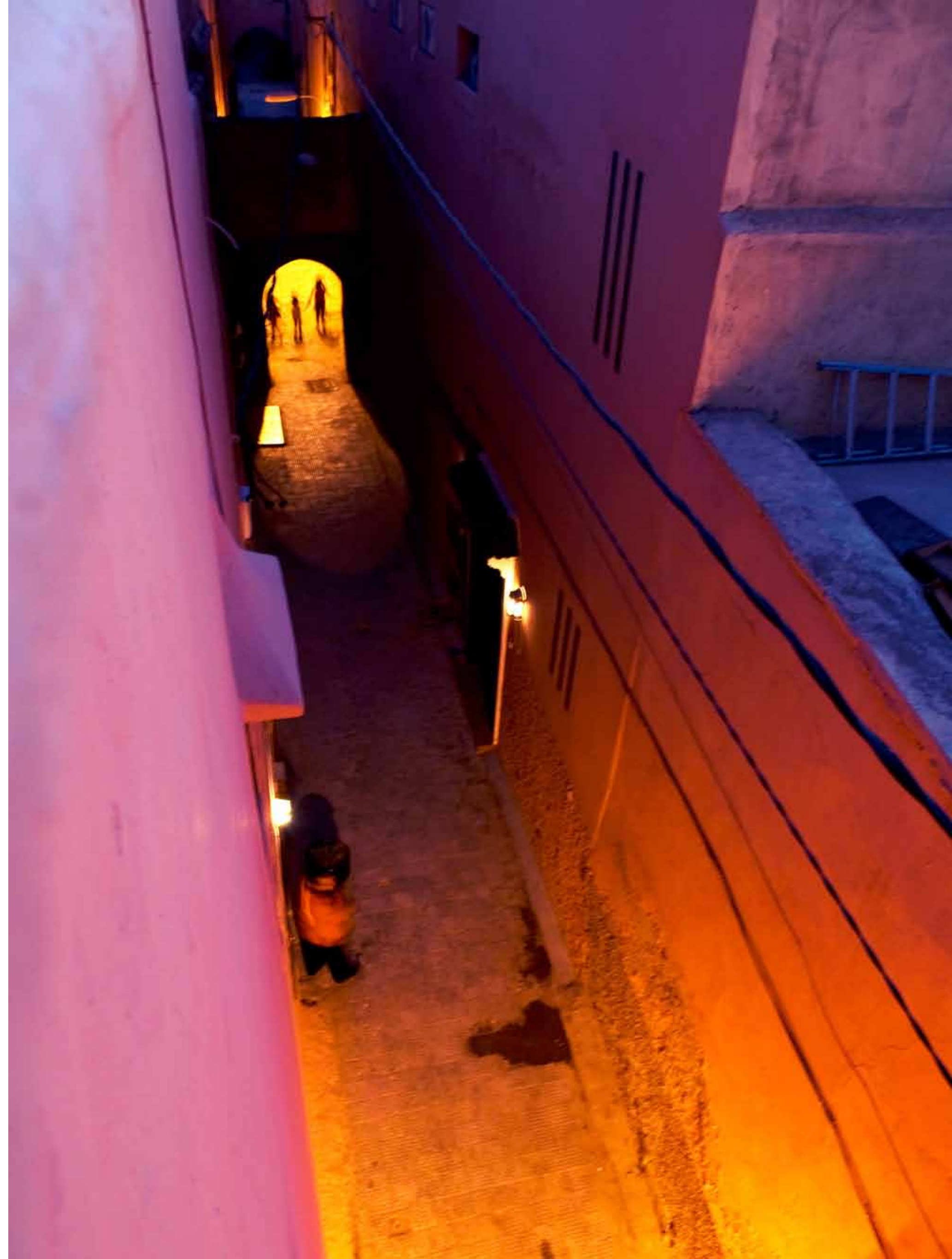
Dehydrated but jubilant we arrive in Marrakech and begin our five-week stay in the Medina. The friendly shopkeepers and neighborhood children do not fit the guarded descriptions we expect from our guidebook. We feel welcome and at home wandering the maze of alleyways carved between pastel colored buildings. High walls and decorative doors protect inner sanctuaries from harsh sunlight and outsiders while an army of cats keeps all rats at bay.

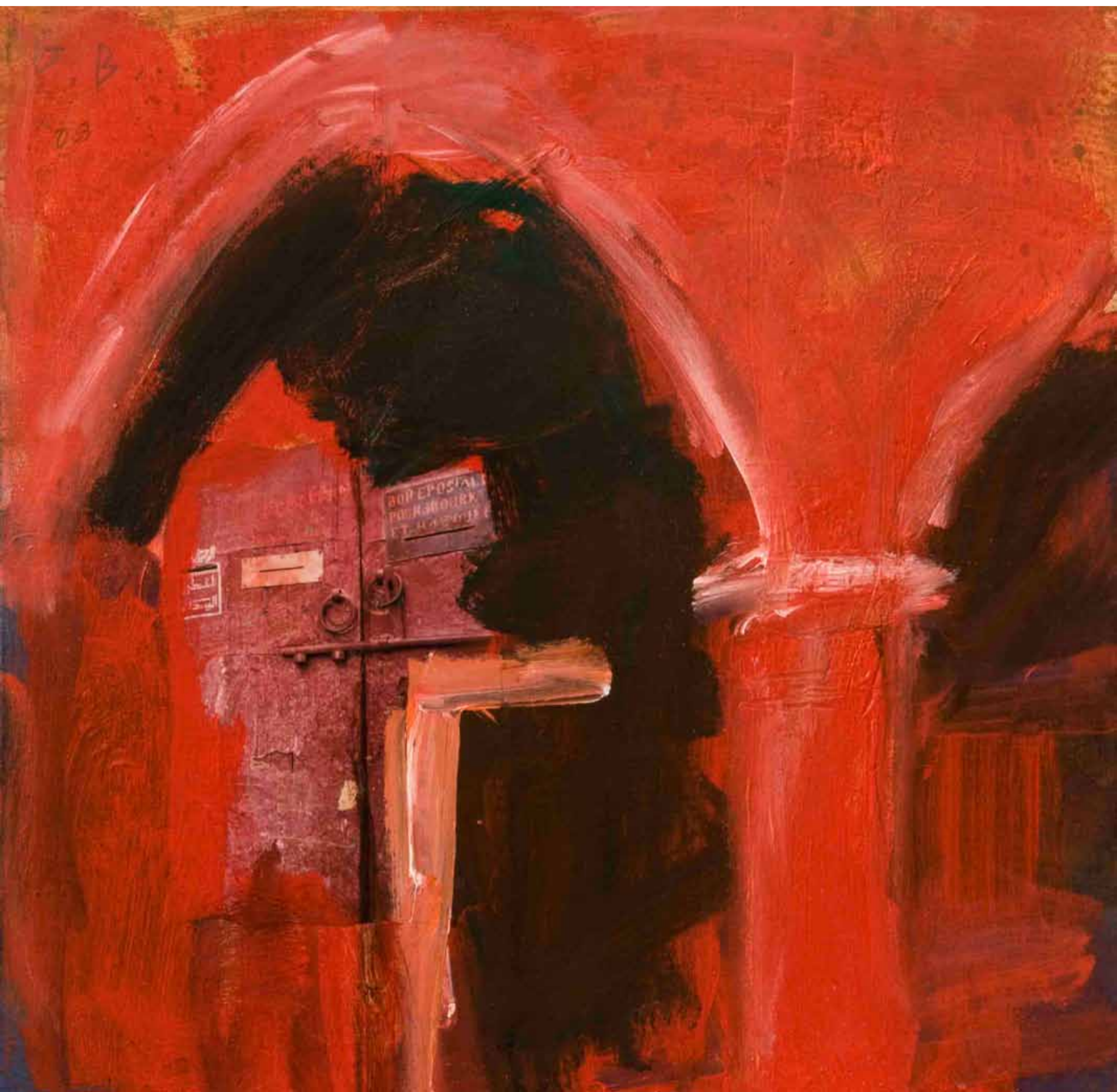




Angie and I survey a half-dozen Riads and find each unique and appealing. The word 'Riad' means "inside garden" or "courtyard" which traditionally must include the elements of water and foliage. The configurations of these inner courts, surrounded by walls and rooms, create intimate cocoons where we feel at ease and cloistered yet connected to nature with the open sky filled with azure blues, chirping birds and twinkling stars at night. The Riad is a contained swatch of nature where humans connect with the earth and themselves.

The narrow, intimate alleyways that squirrel between and connect these enclosed compounds are a labyrinth where one is easily led astray. Pink, ochre and mauve walls jut up around you as bicycles, donkey carts and humans vie for a section of path while navigating home. In the Medina one is confronted with sensory overload until you finally open the unique and intricate door to your courtyard and leave everything behind, recharging inside for tomorrow's next onslaught.





We have been given Riad Dar Zaouia for my painting studio. Blessed with an open-air courtyard in which to paint, I begin to make sense of the dozens of sketches I have created in our first few weeks scrambling around. I try to connect with this feeling of protection, which the Riads provide, juxtaposed to the mayhem of that which is just outside the gate.

Doors and walls figure prominently in this discourse, each offering a lifetime of experiences as the river of humanity ebbs and flows throughout. While I paint this internal world, Angie photographs the spectrum of life that abounds beyond the portals.

We are up and out at dawn to see the kittens nipping at the plastic bags of garbage left outside each Riad. Angie looks for the light as it paints the walls with earth tones and pastel pinks. Respectful not to photograph locals unless given permission, she focuses on the cornucopia of life that swirls around us. Looking down from roof gardens, like a loving sniper she shoots the exotic costumes and commerce of those in Jemaa El Fna—a market of trade with charming merchants.

We have seen both sides of these emotional people with their hand holding and warm embraces. The codling of children and respect for cats warms the heart and yet without notice, a conversation between a mother and son or boy and girl can turn into a slap-up with wailing and shouting. We see there is equal passion for connecting and rejecting.



Venturing out of the Medina we finally head towards the desert to see sand. In our air-conditionless van, we find lots of hot desert and a few patches of green, the rare oasis clinging to any minor water source. The life-blood leached from a begrudging sandy plain in order to color the landscape with olive and ochre. Around these lush spaces are stone homes of mud and sand. Eking a living from the land, the Berber natives live with this blast furnace of an environment, which we tourists stumble through in a heated daze. We are fascinated with the sanctuary of the oasis. Surrounded by nothing but scorched sand, like the Riad these compounds provide shelter and a retreat from heat and desert harshness. We ride camels and reach our Berber tents before sunset and just in time to experience a real live sand storm. Miniscule granules of sand blanket everything and make their way into eyes, nose and mouth. At 10pm we turn in but it is still 40 degrees Celsius and the wind has died and we are not far behind. We languish on mats outside our tents but can't sleep in this endless desert oven.

Having eaten enough of the Sahara, we return to Marrakech to prepare for my exhibition at the Riad Si Said. To showcase the series, Angie orchestrates the paintings to greet guests at the Riad's entrance and then punctuates a pathway to the rooftop where the body of paintings looks remarkable set off by the pastel colored walls and traditional carpets on the terrace. Our mission complete, our adventure draws to a close. We prepare to depart this oasis in the desert full of colors and images that combine a relaxed form of Islam with encroaching modernity. Our senses filled to overflowing, we depart, laden with photos and paintings that we hope will fully attest to the dynamic mix of old and new, man and nature, God and all that lies below heaven and the un-sheltering sky.





On Ta Gong, Tibet

Three bumpy days' drive from Chengdu, China, and we finally stop in Ta Gong. At 3700 meters, one can be excused if breathless after 100 paces. With mostly local Tibetans in this tiny town surrounding the Monastery, one can forgive the town for not having Internet. But what it lacks in oxygen and modernity, the community more than makes up for with its culture and natural beauty.

This is the place where God invented clouds, which tower over the five holy mountains that ring this village. We watch mesmerized as the endless pastures beam bright green then muted olive as the sun plays hide and seek behind giant cumulous clouds. In the distance, a young girl armed with a few rocks and twigs corrals and persuades a dozen frisky yaks to head home across the cold rushing river. A burgundy wrapped monk makes his way up the mountainside towards the strands of prayer flags fluttering in the evening breeze.

On the single main street lined with tiny provision shops, a few pool halls and restaurants, the local boys and monks ride their motorcycles and buy apples from ladies with bulging sacks of fruit. Around the Monastery, devoted Tibetans circumambulate and spin the many prayer wheels. Mangy dogs sleep wherever, covered with years of life without a brushing. Wrinkled men and women with wooden faces and hands head home after a long day walking, collecting scraps of wood, talking and praying. This is the Tibetan Autonomous region and it is thick with Tibetans and lean on Han Chinese, except for the dozens of police vehicles passing through town keeping everything stable and under control. Even though the land is occupied, spirits are free.

Buddha said that life is suffering. To cope with this, Tibetans have rituals and religion. Living with just the basics is not a problem until advertising and television parades the excesses of commercialism to the masses. And yet up here, far from Hollywood Road, the people seem to thrive, and accept a life of less. Throughout our travels, we have found the same. Those with few material possessions seem to smile more. Perhaps it is because they know that all they have and need is here and now.



On The End

After an arduous climb to the top of a pass, we stop and make out the line of our trail leading back down into the valley only to scratch its way back up the side of our next mountain. My guide explains that the summit is not what is important, but rather the effort we willingly expend in its pursuit. The journey is more important than the destination. Reaching the end of one ushers in the beginning of the next. So may you never be finished and may you too seek, find and seek again. And may this seeking be mindful and fill you with a big and colorful life.



Cover front & inside:

DEPART (diptych)

30x30x40, Mixed Media on Hahnemuhle paper
mounted on Dibond panel

Cover back & inside:

RECLUSE (diptych)

30x30x40, Mixed Media on Hahnemuhle paper
mounted on Dibond panel



