

# Bathos and Apotheosis: the Familiar Ennobled

27 Works by Michael Tobin

January 6 through February 5, 2016  
Artist reception Sunday, January 10, 2:00 to 5:00pm

SUNY Orange County Community College  
Orange Hall, Upper Gallery  
Wawayanda and Grandview Avenues  
Middletown, NY 10940

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is represented by:  
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646-498-3607  
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Michael Tobin grew up in Elizabeth, NJ and attended high school in nearby Newark. After receiving a B.A. in Humanities from Pratt Institute, he taught high-school Art and Art History for six years before transitioning to a career as an art director. He has received awards from art directors' clubs in New York and New Jersey, and his work has appeared in Graphis and the Graphis illustration annual. He earned an M.S. in Package Design from Pratt Institute and maintains a design practice serving corporate clients.

Mr. Tobin began painting and drawing at an early age, but had little formal training beyond high school until 1993, when he began attending the National Academy of Design, in New York. For a period of ten years, he studied with Furman Finck and Janet Wentworth and took master classes with Aaron Shikler and Everett Raymond Kinstler. Since 2009 he has studied with Andrew Lattimore, in Cornwall. He is a member of the Salmagundi Club, the Portrait Society of America, the Art Society of Old Greenwich, and the Orange County Arts Council. His work has appeared in many juried and non-juried shows in the region, and he has received best-in-category awards for his oils on a number of occasions.

Mr. Tobin and his wife, Gloria Bonelli, have lived in the Hudson Valley for more than 20 years.

# Bathos and Apotheosis: the Familiar Ennobled

27 Works by Michael Tobin

I paint and draw what I see. Or saw, when I work from photographs. There's a mechanical dimension to this. I have spent many hours in classrooms confronting anonymous models toward acquiring skills and devising techniques for recording what I see. This informs my process when I work from photography, telling me when to lighten shade, emphasize a shadow halftone, when to go cool or warm or soften an edge.

The portraits are family, including my wife, Gloria, and, one very close friend. The uncles and cousins are on my father's side, from Newfoundland. When I feel I've succeeded most with a portrait, I sense that the sitter seems ennobled in a way that photography would be hard pressed to match. This perception is more likely to happen when I'm in relationship with the sitter, family or friend. And when working from a photo, it's more likely when I am the photographer. Perhaps in attempting to paint like an old master, I create a tension between bathos, grounded in familiarity, and apotheosis, buoyed by countless images of gods and prophets, queens and saints. The painting holds the space between. And it's a nice place to be, like Augustine of Hippo's position when he prayed, "Lord, make me chaste, but not yet."

A different sign of success occurs in the still lifes. These are household objects, all with connections to family and friends. When the subjects are in any way anthropomorphic, they seem to be more alive in the painting than their originals on the set. My best guess: the apparent animation is imparted by the power of mark and gesture—when we see a brush stroke, we read the energy that produced it. In the process of being engaged with the work, we attribute that energy to the figures.

Another viewpoint is that energy is stored in mark and gesture, that instead of reading it we are feeling it. And in feeling it we are investing the work with our own energy, augmenting its power. But this kind of thinking is tricky terrain for a rationalist American. Frida Kahlo could get away with it. Alas.



Las Meninas, 1656



The Dwarf  
Francisco  
Lezcano,  
c. 1642-45



Pablo de  
Valladolid,  
1635



Juan de  
Pareja, 1635



The Officer of the Hussars,  
Kehinde Wiley, 2007,  
Detroit Institute of Arts  
After The Charging  
Chasseur, Théodore  
Géricault, c.1812, Louvre

## Bathotheosis

This definition of bathos is not the usual, descent from the sublime to the ridiculous. Here it is the juxtaposition of the familiar with its surround, commonplace content exalted by its form.

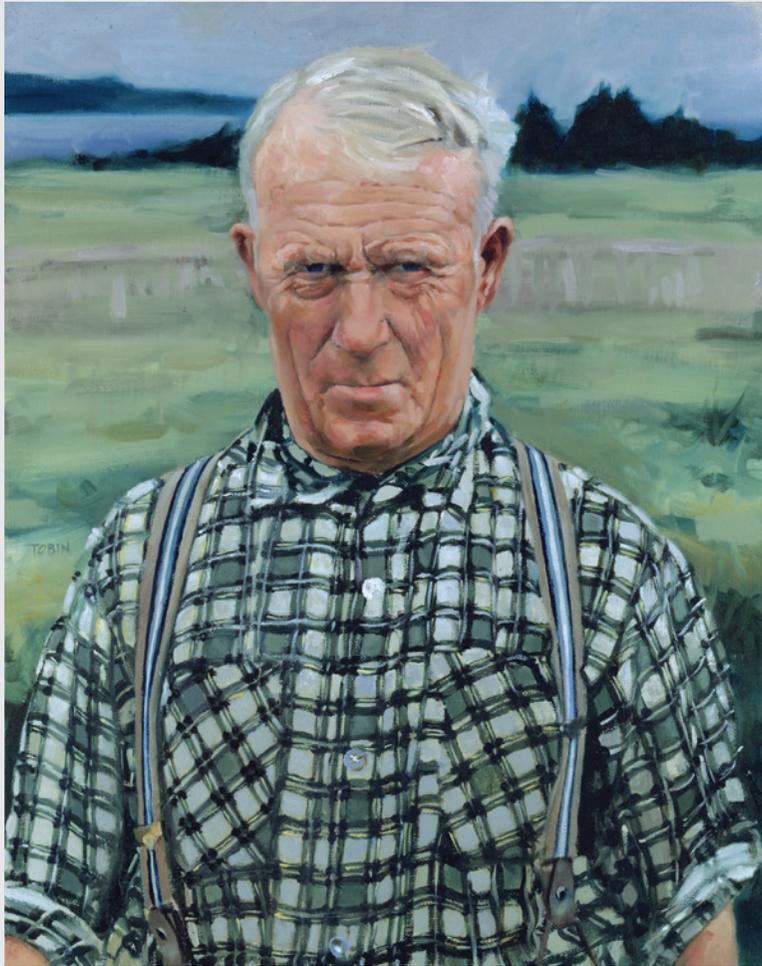
An example from the old masters is Las Meninas, 1656, by Diego Velázquez. The infanta, Margaret Theresa, is seen with her entourage, which includes the two dwarfs on the right. Velázquez also painted portraits of Pablo de Valladolid, the court fool; Francisco Lezcano, a court dwarf; and Juan de Pareja, his slave.

If you can forgive a portmanteau word, I'll call this juxtaposition "bathotheosis." I think it has contributed to the impact of these paintings throughout history.

Las Meninas is one of the most discussed paintings in the history of western art. Juan de Pareja, when it was shown in Rome in a group show in 1650, "was generally applauded by all the painters from different countries, who said that the other pictures in the show were art but this one alone was 'truth.'"\* The Valladolid portrait prompted Manet to declare it "perhaps the most astonishing piece of painting that has ever been made...."

For a contemporary expression of bathotheosis, see the work of Kehinde Wiley.

\* Palomino, Antonio (1724). *El Museo pictórico y escala óptica*. Palomino was to Spanish painting what Vasari was to the Italian Renaissance.



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*Uncle Philip*, 2004, oil on linen, 20x16 inches

Newfoundland. Lifelong bachelor, his romantic ambitions were thwarted by the Depression. He had a prodigious memory for dates. Others got lazy knowing they could rely on Phil for the information.



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*Lizzy*, 2004, oil on hemp, 16x20 inches

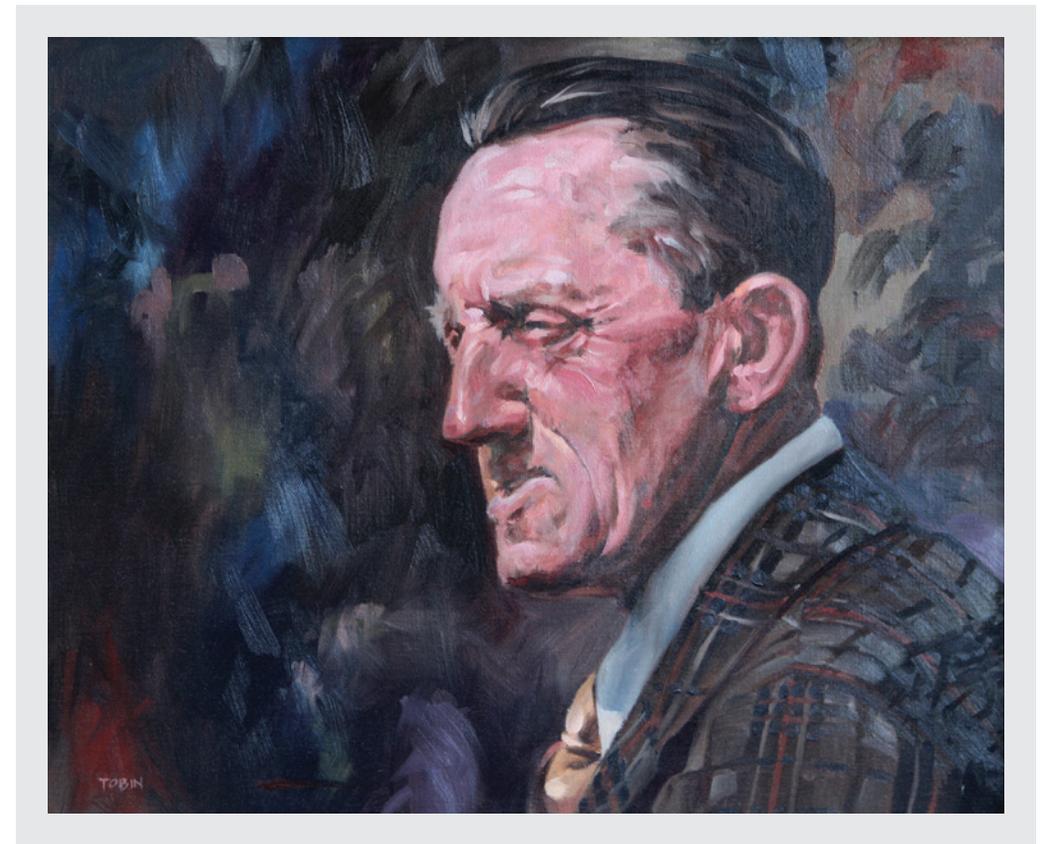
Newfoundland. My grandfather's cousin. Men fished for cod and salmon all summer. In winter, they often went to Nova Scotia to work in the steel mills. During the Depression, there was little of that work, so they stayed in Newfoundland and congregated at Lizzy's to drink tea and tell stories. My father, just a boy, kept his mouth shut and his ears open and had a lot of stories to pass on.



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*Sr. Barbara Tobin, PBVM, 2014, oil on linen, 20x16 inches*

My Aunt Mary's second cousin and best friend. She was born in 1911 and joined the Presentation order in St. John's, Newfoundland. She still assists with light duties around the convent.



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*Pad, 2004, oil on linen, 16x20 inches*

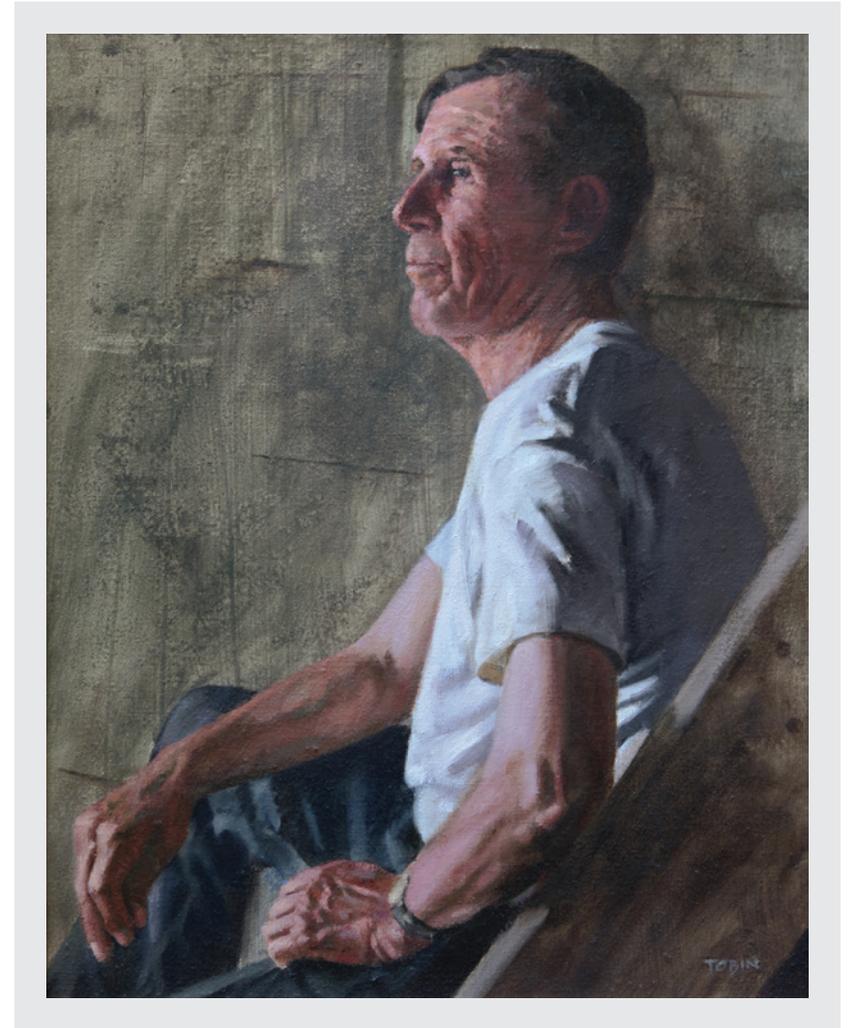
Pad Carey was my father's distant cousin, in Newfoundland. From a photo taken at the parish's annual garden party, a highly anticipated social event of the summer.



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*Hilda*, 2004, oil on linen, 22x28 inches

My second cousin. She died in a car accident in her early twenties. I recently made prints of this painting for her mother and for a friend whose baby sitter she was.



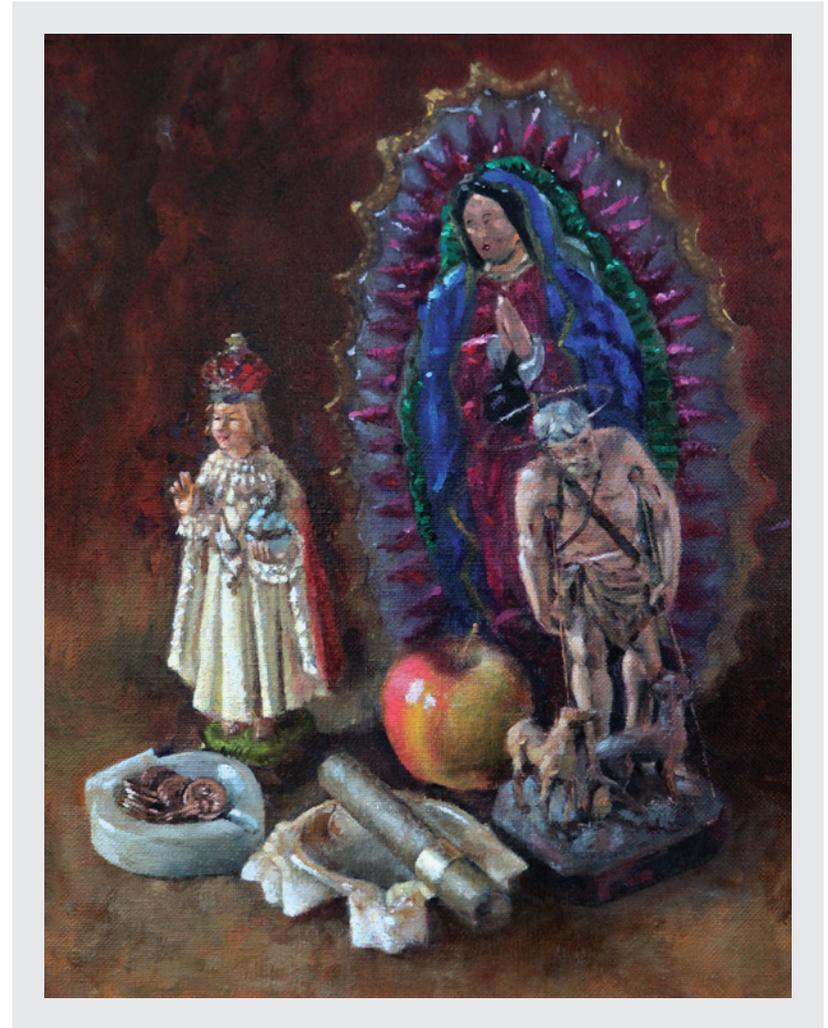
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*Uncle Val*, 2005, oil on linen, 20x16 inches

Newfoundland. Also a lifelong bachelor. Although I never heard him speak of religion, there was something saintly about him.



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*New Arrivals*, 2009, oil on linen, 14x11 inches  
Gifts from friends who travel, finds at ethnic street fairs in New York City.

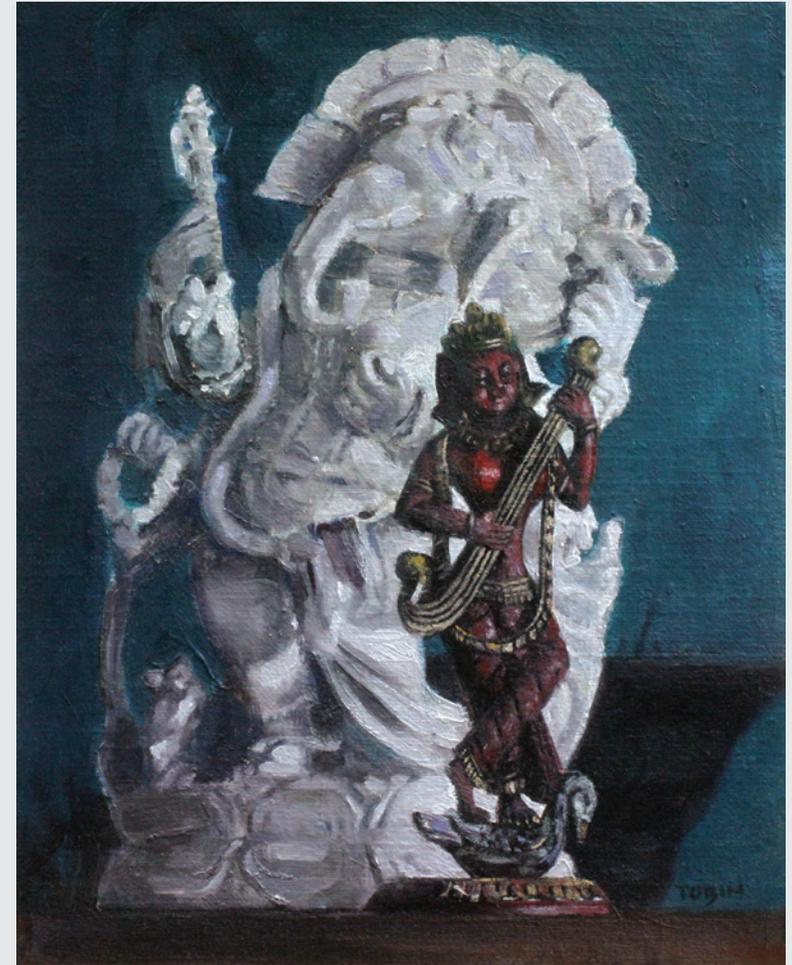


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*Family Saints with Offerings*, 2010, oil on linen, 14x11 inches  
The Infant of Prague is from my mother, the Guadalupe a gift from friends, San Lazaro from my wife's grandmother's Santeria tradition. The objects are offerings to San Lazaro.



*Couples with Cow*, 2011, oil on linen, 11x14 inches

Gifts from a friend who makes regular trips to India and Nepal.



*Ganesh and Saraswati*, 2004, oil on linen, 10x8 inches

Saraswati presides over learning and the arts, Ganesh removes obstacles. Both are prayed to in India before every test. The Ganesh: a Christmas gift from my wife. Saraswati: a friend, about to leave on a shopping excursion to India, asked which deity he should bring back as a gift.



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*Tea and Ivory*, 2013, oil on linen, 8x10 inches

East meets west in our teapot collection. The netsuke suggests a more conscious presence.



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*Fun While It Lasted*, 2011, oil on linen, 11x14 inches

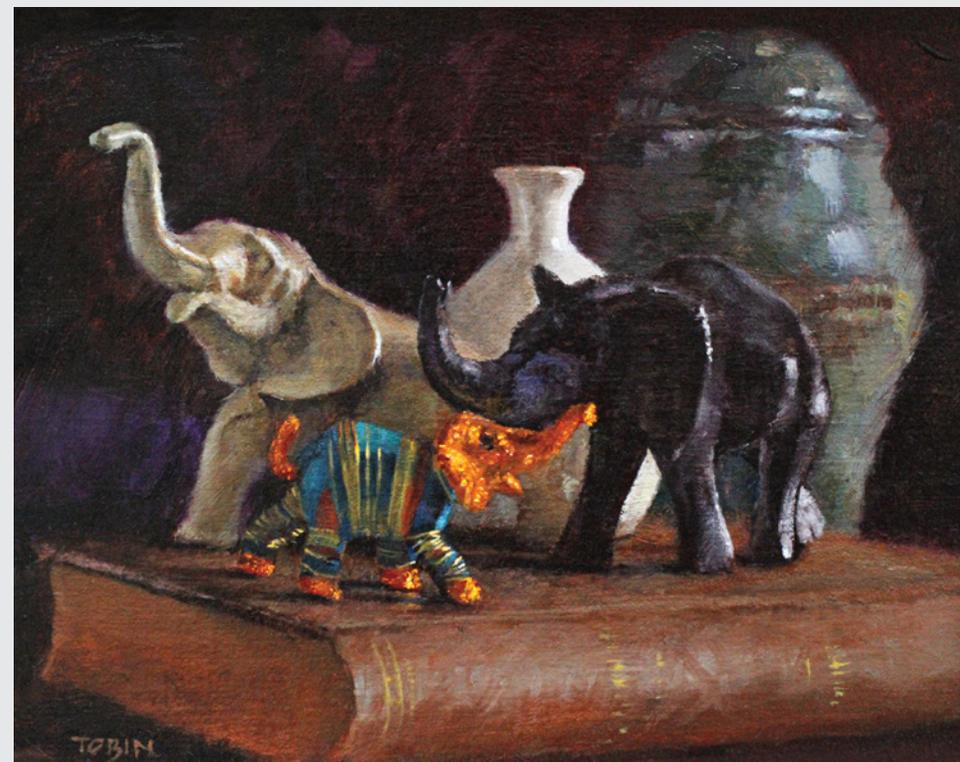
Antique bottles and a wind-up toy from garage sales over the years.



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*Masks*, 2014, oil on linen, 8x10 inches

Last of a series of household-objects still lifes.



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*Jungle Book*, 2012, oil on linen, 8x10 inches

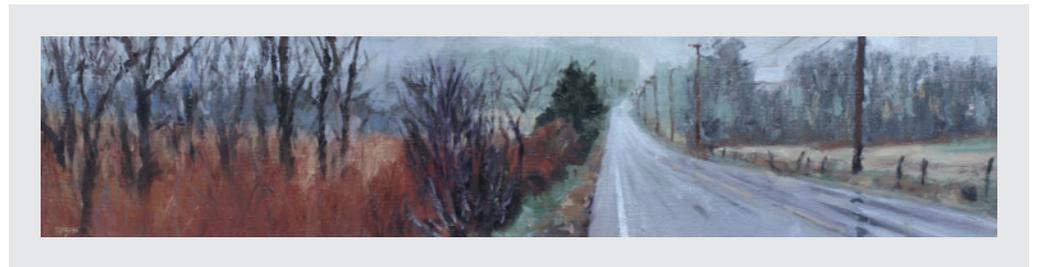
Mama Beco, my wife's maternal grandmother, always had elephant figurines in her apartment. They faced the door – always trunks upturned – for luck and to ward off malicious intentions. The book is from a friend whose father, a Kipling fan, had just passed away.



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*Raggedy Anne and Raggedy Andy, 2011, oil on linen, 11x14 inches*

For the birth of our nephew's daughter, Ella. We bought her the dolls; her parents got the painting.



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*Route 52, Walden, 2004, oil on linen, 8x36 inches*

Near the Jewish cemetery. Back when Pine Bush was reporting a lot of UFO sightings, this spot was considered a hotspot for paranormal activity.



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*Lillibeck*, 2005, oil on linen, 16x20 inches

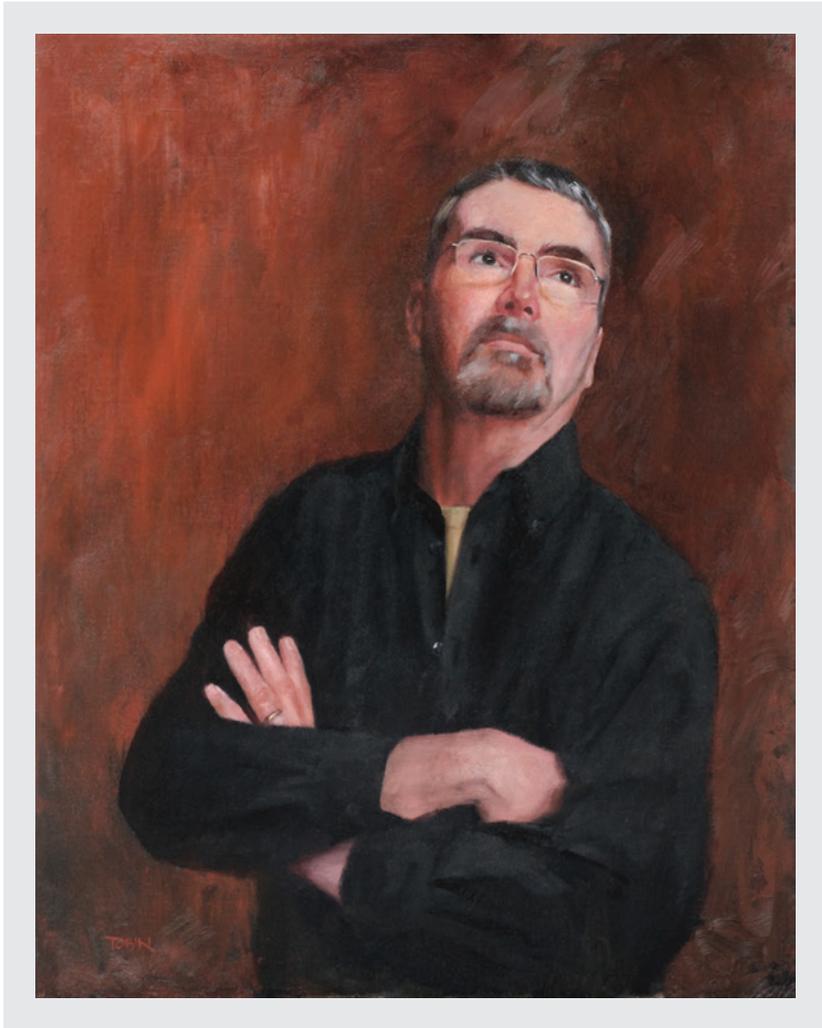
Gloria at Wilderstein, Rhinebeck



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*Her Blue Heaven*, 2006, oil on linen, 16x20 inches

Gloria asleep.



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*San Bob de Baltimore*, 2015, oil on linen, 20x16 inches

A close friend for decades, Bob is not religious but admires El Greco. Here he is captured in an aesthetic ecstasy.



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*Gloria*, 2015, oil on linen, 20x16 inches

From a photo taken at The Rooms archives, art gallery, and museum in St. John's, Newfoundland



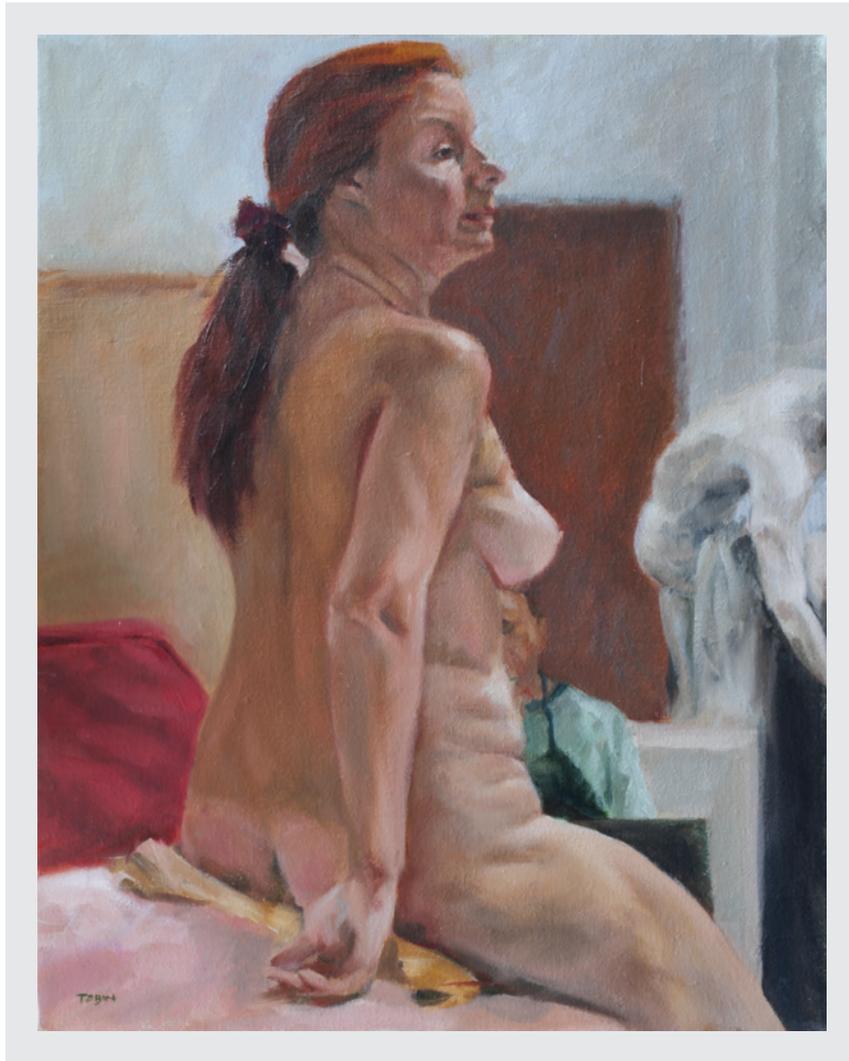
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*Fog Lifting*, 2005, oil on linen, 16x20 inches

Newfoundland. From a photo taken in 1974. People still grew potatoes and harvested hay for their horses.



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*Root Cellar*, 2005, oil on linen, 16x20 inches

Newfoundland. Built by my paternal grandfather in 1910, it kept the family in home-grown potatoes and turnips through the winter. This was subsistence living. The only purchased provisions were flour and salted pork. They kept a cow for milk, sheep for wool, a horse to haul wood, and they made their own bacalao. They also hunted ducks and snared rabbits.



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*Seated Nude*, 2002, oil on linen, 20x16 inches

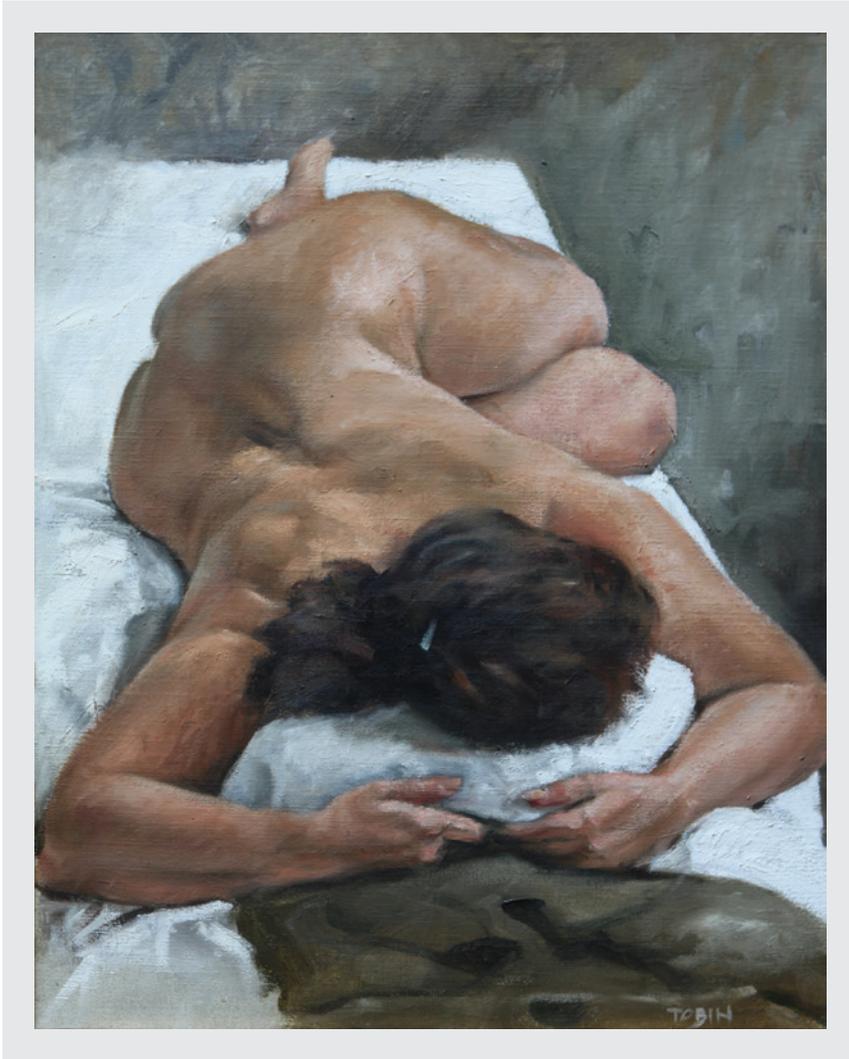
From life. Student work at the National Academy. This painting gave me everything I set out to accomplish: energized pose, a likeness, correct proportions, loose brushwork, yummy shadow tones. I even included another student and a plaster cast.



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*Seated Male*, 2002, oil on linen, 16x20 inches

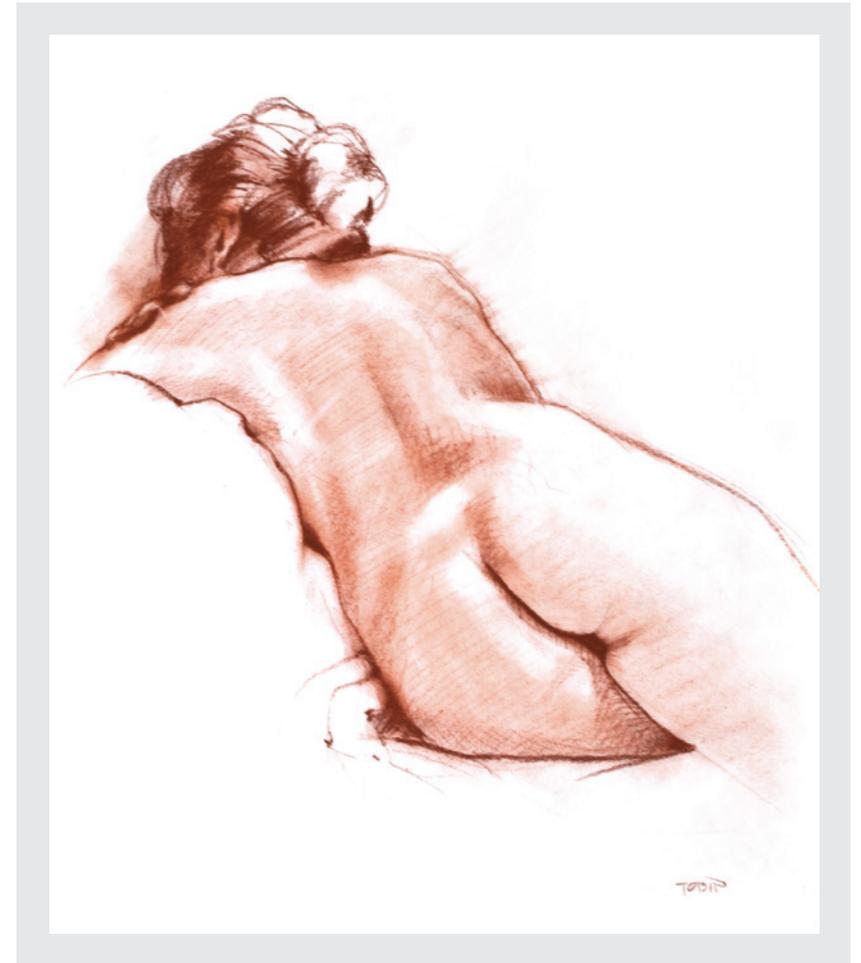
From life. Student work at the National Academy. I learned early in my tenure there that I had trouble painting people who don't look like me. A wide face, full lips, high cheekbones seemed insurmountable challenges. I felt I had made a breakthrough with this likeness – bearing no resemblance to me or anyone in my family.



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*Resting Nude*, 2001, oil on linen, 20x16 inches

From life. Student work at the National Academy. At the time, I was using a mixed medium: oils and egg tempera.



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*Nude*, 2006, conte on paper, 24x18 inches

From life. Unison Arts Center, New Paltz. I attended life drawing sessions there once or twice a week for ten years. As indispensable for an artist as going to the gym for an athlete.