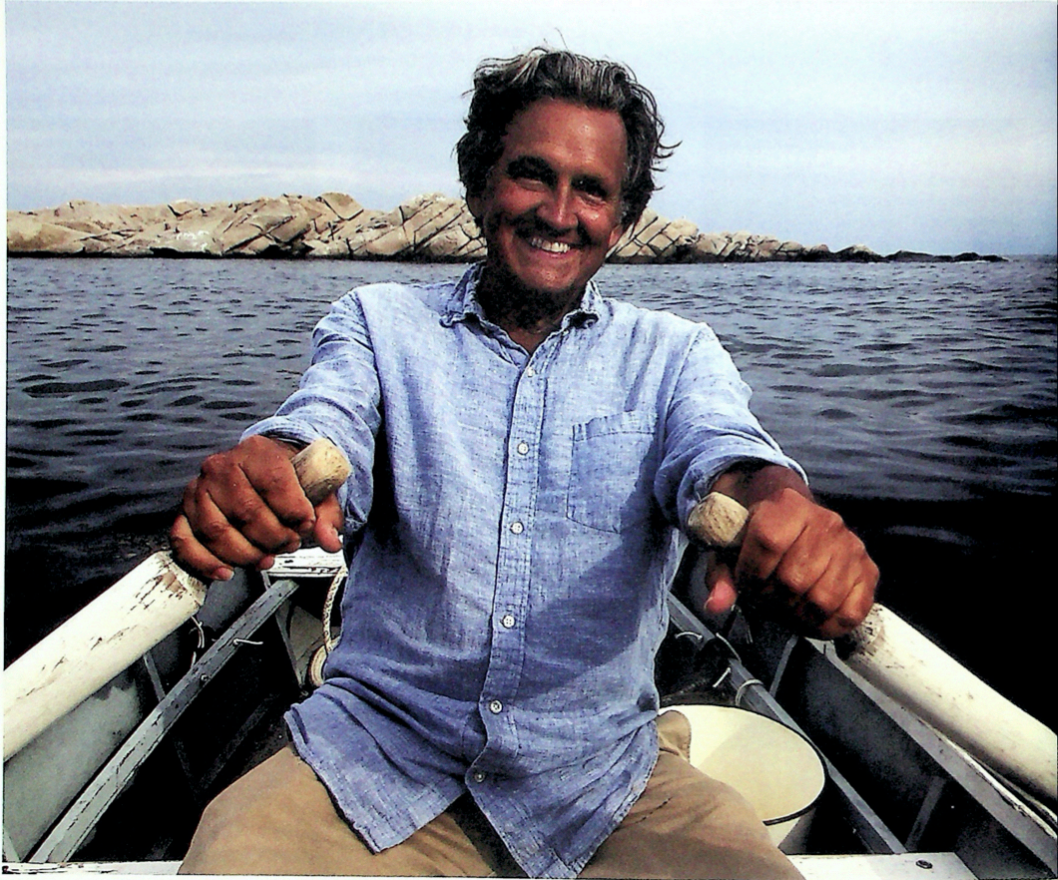




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PARADISE FOUND

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Living and painting on Bo Bartlett's and Betsy Eby's Wheaton Island

words Dan Kany

photography courtesy of Bo Bartlett and Betsy Eby

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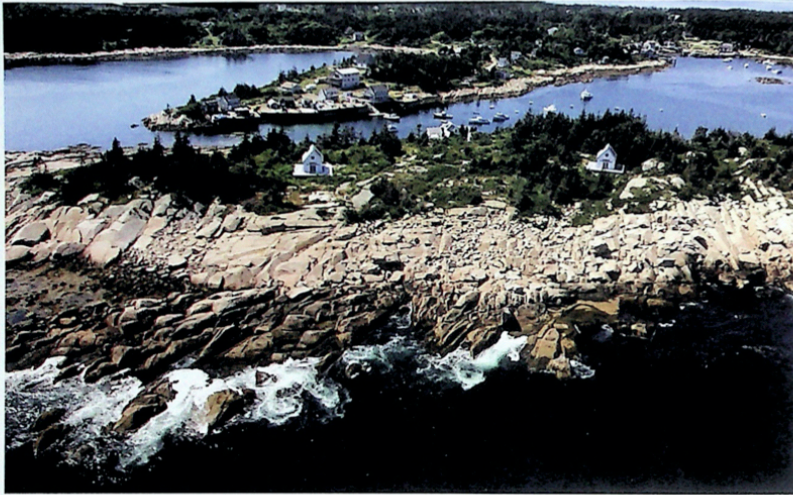
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After studying painting in Florence starting in his teens, Bo Bartlett settled in Pennsylvania, where he became extremely close to Andrew Wyeth. "Andrew Wyeth was my artistic father," he explains. "We were best friends for the last 15 years of his life." When Bartlett traveled with Wyeth to the family's islands off the Maine coast, he was immediately hooked. In 1998, Bartlett bought Wheaton Island, a small and nearby neighbor of Matinicus, 24 miles off Midcoast Maine.

Bartlett met Seattle-based artist Betsy Eby in 2005 and the couple was married two years later on Wheaton. Theirs is the only house on the tiny island. They now live there half the year and spend the rest based in Bartlett's hometown of Columbus, Georgia, where the couple founded the Bo Bartlett Center, a gallery and art space at Columbus State University.

Bartlett has achieved international success with his tableau-scaled, high-focus realism oil paintings. Eby shows her paintings in major galleries across the country. Her work, however, could hardly be more different: "I work in encaustic in a style I think of as lyrical abstraction," she explains.

Encaustic is painting with melted beeswax and resin, a recipe that has changed very little since the Greeks invented the technique more than 2,000 years ago. Encaustic has enjoyed a recent resurgence, particularly in the Seattle area where Eby began to paint around 1990. Eby is also a trained classical pianist and plays every day; currently, she is studying theory

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Photo: Private Collection

Opposite:
Wheaton Island.

Above:
Albatross, 2019
60 x 80 inches
Oil on linen

with the head of the Columbus University conservatory to develop her compositional and improvisational chops. She often connects the look and feel of her painting to her deep interest in music.

Bartlett uses her music for his radio show "Art Haus Radio" on WCUG. "All of our practices are interrelated," he notes. Eby—who, of course, is Bartlett's favorite model—then begins a startlingly vast list of projects on which they collaborate: fundraisers, boards, curated exhibitions, films and more. "My creative processes are different for art and music—the time frame is different but the work certainly interrelates," she says. "For example, I have been creating groups of compositions that correlate to the paintings."

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Photo: Miles McEnery Gallery

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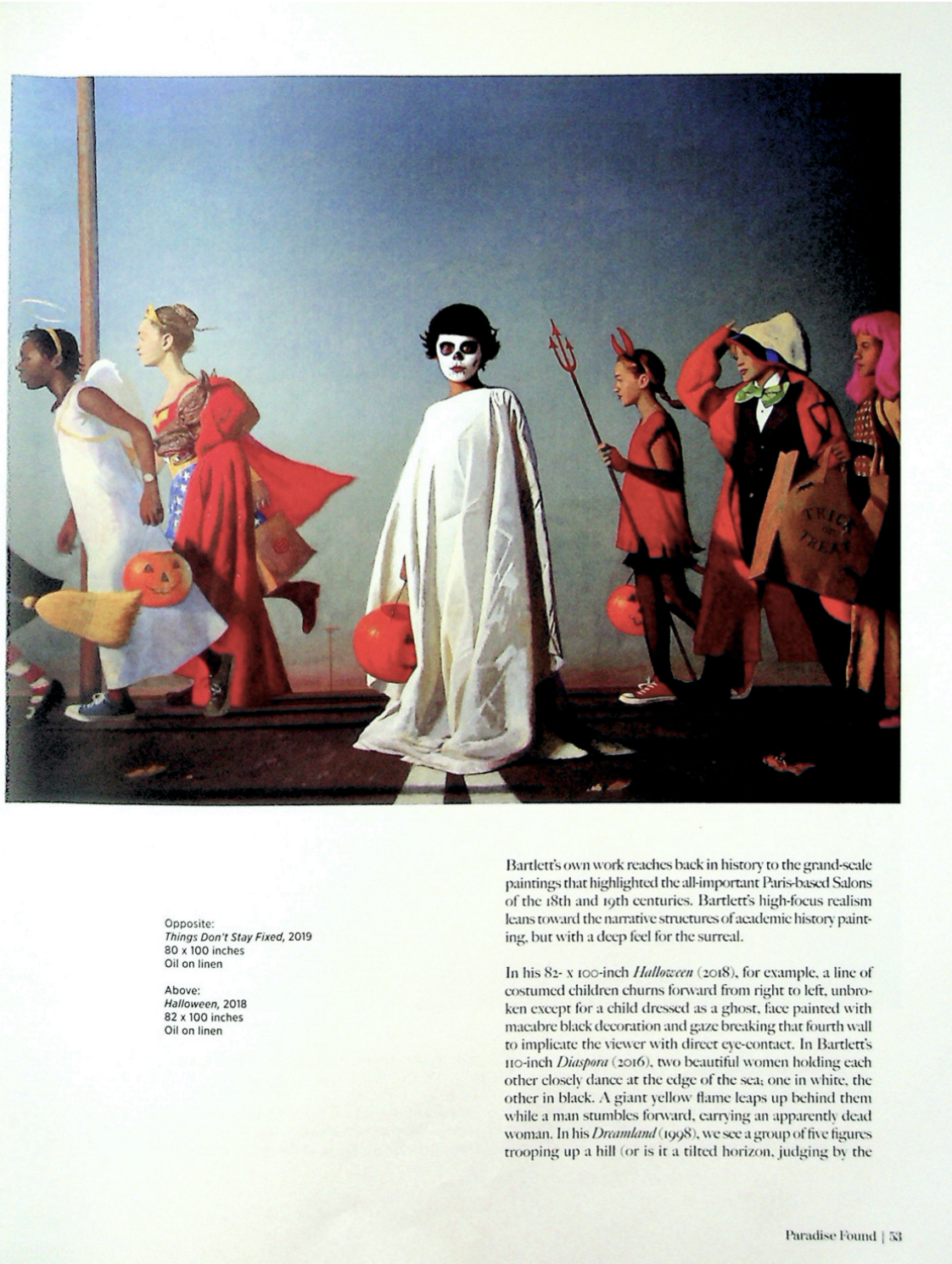
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Opposite:
Things Don't Stay Fixed, 2019
80 x 100 inches
Oil on linen

Above:
Halloween, 2018
82 x 100 inches
Oil on linen

Bartlett's own work reaches back in history to the grand-scale paintings that highlighted the all-important Paris-based Salons of the 18th and 19th centuries. Bartlett's high-focus realism leans toward the narrative structures of academic history painting, but with a deep feel for the surreal.

In his 82- x 100-inch *Halloween* (2018), for example, a line of costumed children churns forward from right to left, unbroken except for a child dressed as a ghost, face painted with macabre black decoration and gaze breaking that fourth wall to implicate the viewer with direct eye-contact. In Bartlett's 110-inch *Diaspora* (2016), two beautiful women holding each other closely dance at the edge of the sea, one in white, the other in black. A giant yellow flame leaps up behind them while a man stumbles forward, carrying an apparently dead woman. In his *Dreamland* (1998), we see a group of five figures trooping up a hill (or is it a tilted horizon, judging by the

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Pleasure Principle, 2019
60 x 60 inches
Hot wax, cold wax, ink, oil on prepared aluminum

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seascape behind them?); a makeshift clown, a focused man in a frock coat holding a chicken, a bride who has spied the viewer ... or is it that all three women are the same woman and the forward-focused men are the same dreaming guy? In his *Things Don't Stay Fixed* (2019), a woman in a yellow dress seems to rise into the sky with flowers floating up all around her.

While many of Bartlett's images seek to be straightforward scenes, such as a portrait of his wife, they find their strongest subjective purchase with the viewer when they amble into uncanny turf: images that blur the lines between the possible and the unlikely, the dreamlike, the irrational and the fantastic. Bartlett is often at his best when blending the visual language of history painting's extraordinary events and surrealism's propensity for psychological poignancy—those ever-meaningful, sea change moments of psychic shift.

In their daily lives, however, Bartlett and Eby occupy their own little island, brutal and beautiful.

Bartlett's Wheaton Island studio is a light-soaked, house-shaped structure with an all-white interior where he is focused on major works for a 2020 show at Miles McEnery Gallery

in Manhattan's Chelsea district. Eby has her own similarly white studio. Her next major exhibition is a January solo show at the Manhattan location of Winston Wächter Fine Art. Her studio, however, is set up for her to work in encaustic which, because of its gaseous toxicity while in a melted state, requires ventilation or a mask.

What the couple does on Wheaton Island is work. They paint every day, generally in their studios but often outside on the island.

Over the past two years, Eby has been making more realistic works on paper. "I have made pictures on the beach—rocks, sea spray—for the past couple of seasons. Painting outside has been a mode of exploration for me, to stretch the way I see," Bartlett agrees: "They're like colorful Marsden Hartleys—they're gorgeous."

What does he paint during this time? Why, his wife, of course. "I have to work quickly to capture her while she's working. My big paintings, like *Charm School*," he explains, "each take about six or eight weeks. But painting Betsy painting on the rocks? It's a win/win."

Eby was a cultural exchange artist with the State Depart-

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Fathom, 2018
30 x 70 inches
Encaustic on panel

ment's Art in Embassies Program in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, where she was sent to "teach and convey the message of female empowerment." While recounting this experience, her tone gets a little more serious: "There is a part of humanity that really needs essential experience. We need to keep art and culture alive."

The two of them dovetail as the conversation shifts from studio practice to philosophy: "Craftsmanship and artistry," Eby expounds, "go hand in hand; one has to hone their craftsmanship to deliver their story. The first hit is the visual hit and that comes with the execution of your masters. The viewer is faced with story, philosophy and mood. For me, it's about a synesthetic experience."

Bartlett picks up on this: "I think many artists have it [synesthesia] to some extent, it's a sensual experience." She continues: "I think we all have it to some extent. I think there is a synesthetic spectrum." The conversation ebbs and flows on this topic until Bartlett shifts gears. "Some things have to do with subject matter, but in the end it comes together with the why—why you're doing it in the first place. What you're paint-

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ing and why you're doing it. A small statement can be as complete as a large statement; it depends on why. It's important; it makes people appreciate the world more. It is a kind of honoring of humanity."

"I do a lot of sketches and idea pieces before I start a major painting—sometimes for years before," he explains. "The *mise-en-scène*—the scene—is about the whole thing; it's a feeling. I think of my works as taking that form. The scale of the painting has to match the scale of the concept. If paintings are smaller, the intent changes. This is why I develop my concepts as I develop my work. It gets me into the place of doing it for the right reasons. When I started working with Andrew Wyeth, I knew *how* to paint. What I learned from him was *why*."

Bo Bartlett and Betsy Eby are both represented in Maine by Dowling Walsh Gallery: dowlingwalsh.com
bobartlett.com
betsyby.com

Bo Bartlett's FAVORITE ...

Maine view? Without a doubt, the view from Wheaton Island looking out to the open Atlantic. There is nothing between us and Portugal except wide open ocean.

Drink? Hot water with lemon.

Maine restaurant? Now that's a hard question ... so many favorites in Midcoast. We love all of the great restaurants in and around Rockland, Rockport and Camden, but since Betsy and I had our first dinner together in Maine at In Good Company in Rockland, let's go with that. We always make sure we eat there at least once when we are on shore.

Place you've traveled to as an adult? Nepal.

Shoes? Glerups.

Ways to relax? Paint!

Betsy Eby's FAVORITE ...

Maine view? What we call the Portugal side of Wheaton. It's where my studio sits.

Drink? Water with cucumber and lemon. I call it spa water and I always have a pitcher of it in the fridge.

Maine restaurant? In Good Company in Rockland.

Place you've traveled to as an adult? So many, but to pick one, Turkey.

Shoes? My P Monjos.

Ways to relax? Playing piano, yoga, meditation, walks.

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