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Time stands still : the catalogue of the thesis exhibition in painting.

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TIME STANDS STILL

The Catalogue of the Thesis Exhibition in Painting

By

Ann Price Davis
B.A., Bowdoin College, 1973

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of the University of Louisville
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

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Department of Fine Arts
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

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A Thesis Approved on

by the following Reading Committee:

Thesis Director

DEDICATION

To M & D, and Liz, Ian, and John

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ABSTRACT

The hurried aspects of daily living exhaust me. Speed is the operative word. Apparently everyone wants more of it. Not me. While I value the innovations that speed up my onerous tasks, in my artwork I am attracted to its opposite -- repose. I try to slow the pace of life around me, capturing those moments of stillness.

This thesis examines a body of work, eight paintings and four drawings, that reflect this aversion to speed.

TIME STANDS STILL

The hurried aspects of daily living exhaust me. Here we are, wrapping up not only 1999, but also the 20th century. Newspaper articles describe the staggering advances humankind has made which have irrevocably changed our lives. Speed is the operative word. Apparently everyone wants more of it. Not me.

I value the innovations that speed up my onerous tasks. I depend on my phone, my car, and my computer. I appreciate the technology that rushes mail and information to my door or computer screen. And I admit that a week-long break on the beach wouldn't be possible without express airline service to Florida and back. But I and many others yearn for a more relaxed life-style, where we are less busy. However, my dream is an anachronistic fiction.

My aversion to speed has permeated my artwork. I am attracted to its opposite -- repose. I try to slow the pace of life around me, capturing those moments of stillness. Ironically, in practice I work quickly. I admit that I often feel the press of time -- I have hoarded a few precious hours and intend to make the most of them. But it is by temperament and self-discovery that I have gravitated to drawing and painting from my previous work in stonecarving and ceramics. From a practical standpoint, both drawing and painting satisfy my natural inclination to work rapidly without a lot of intermediate steps in the process of finishing a piece. Both are easy on the body: I no longer suffer from carpal tunnel syndrome from sanding or tendonitis from hammering. I usually work at home and was heartened when I learned that René Magritte painted in his dining room, cleaning up each evening for dinner.

For this Thesis Exhibition for my Master of Arts I have divided my work into three distinct groups: a series of still lifes, four large drawings, and four figure paintings. While each group expresses a separate interest of mine, differing in size and subject matter, they reflect my love of the media and of the process in creating them. In becoming a painter, I embraced a time-honored tradition. I delight in the fact that the tools of the trade -- oils, brushes, pastels, charcoal -- have not changed in centuries. They remain the same now as in the time of the Renaissance. Of course there have been innovations in such things as lead-free pigments, water-soluble oils, and environmentally correct clean-up, but the basics are the same: painter, brush, and pigment. In all of the current works, I've explored variations of materials and media.

My first group are the still lifes. The tradition of genre painting (scene of everyday life) is in total alignment with my interest in the mundane. Painting a still life provides an opportunity to address a subject for the pure pleasure of painting. William Merritt Chase, a master of the genre, wrote: "in painting a good composition of fish, I am painting for myself." I feel the same. All four of these are painted in oil, a medium I love. Oils are forgiving -- they are slow to set and easy to revise. I love the luscious, buttery ooze of working wet into wet. While "Fresh Produce" (16" x 12") is painted on canvas, both "Fish" (20 1 / 2" x 14") and "Leeks" (20 3 / 4" x 14") are painted on paper. "Tangerines" (29 1 / 4" x 23 1 / 4") is on masonite. I prefer painting on gesso-prepared masonite or paper because the smooth surface doesn't take as harsh a toll on my brushes. It is a more sensuous surface that allows a faster build-up of color than canvas.

All but "Tangerines" are "premier coup" (French for "first shot") meaning that they were completed in one session, since I wanted to put a limited amount of time to good use. Paradoxically, the small format accomodates the time constriction, but I still

had to work confidently and make good color choices. I wanted to "get it while it's hot!" -
- get the leeks while they were crisp, the tomatoes fresh, the fish before it smelled.

Conceptually, I like that these subjects are inanimate, but perishable, items. Even though time is of the essence, my subject matter is mundane and can be easily replaced. These exercises in form and color sharpened my powers of observation as I tried to capture a spontaneous, uncontrived rendering of the subject matter.

While the still lifes were completed at home, the four drawings were all done in the studio, working from a paid model. These are studies in observing the figure as the studio light reveals it. My relationship to each model was strictly business. I need to maintain an objectivity: their bodies are merely part of the composition, just as fruits and vegetables are in the still lifes. While I knew their names, I was not interested in who they are personally. I did try to capture a physical likeness that has weight and takes up space in a believable manner. And, I actually did develop quite an affection for them, but only insofar as I appreciate good bone structure, a fair complexion or a radiant hair color. However, I was not interested in creating a narrative to explain why one lies in a hammock and the other naps with such abandon. Instead, I tried to eliminate any feeling of anticipation or expectation that something is about to happen or that the subject is missing out on some other, more pressing matter -- another escape from the hectic real world.

Here again, a dichotomy exists between my finished drawings and the streamlined process involved in their creation: I arrived at the studio, considered the set-up and pose, arranged myself and my materials in the room, and got to work. I hope that this abbreviated, intense work mode is not apparent in the finished product. In fact, working

in the studio, away from home, is calming. There were no interruptions, no phones ringing, no immediate responsibilities. Here, truly, I can suspend reality and the rush that accompanies it.

"Jennifer Asleep" is vine charcoal on paper, measuring 52" x 36."Vine charcoal, soft and immediately responsive, creates a dark mark. Moving the charcoal around on the paper is sensual, physical, and messy. On a paper with the tooth of Lavis Fidelis, it is not difficult to make changes. Working in black and white, I dealt with tone and value and responded to light as it washed over each form.

"Seated Jennifer" is also 52" x 36" and drawn on Lavis Fidelis paper, tinted with a tempera wash. Soft-grey provides a mid-tone value to work up to lights and back to dark. This drawing was done in soft pastel, fragile sticks of almost pure pigment. Like working with vine charcoal, working with pastels is sensuous. The tempera finish on the paper is especially forgiving. With a kneaded eraser, I can rework whole sections of a drawing. In this drawing it was important to me that the figure be statuesque. The luxurious high key red of the settee was intended to contrast with the figure's fair skin. The addition of pigment, another tool in modelling the figure, finds color in flesh and shadows.

"Seated Anneliese" is 36" x 48," drawn on masonite. The board has been gessoed, then washed with tempera. It is drawn with pastel and what I call a "greasy stick" -- charcoal soaked in olive oil. The greasy stick makes a wonderfully fluid line on the masonite. It is responsive to some manipulation, either by smudging with my fingers or by rubbing with a kneaded eraser. It makes a deep, satiny black; a dark value that is often hard to achieve with pastel. The surface takes color well and shows the texture of the gesso underpainting. In this drawing I tried to be more assertive in my choice of colors which depict the figure -- vermilion, burnt sienna and hot pink.

"The Hammock" is 52" x 36," pastel on toned Lavis Fidelis paper. In this drawing, I wanted the figure, not the hammock, to "wear" the color. It was especially important that the figure have weight and pull the hammock to fit her shape. The black and white of the background and hammock ropes contrast with the warmth of the figure's flesh.

The last group of works are figure paintings, which recall the work of realist painters from an earlier, less frenzied era. The evocation of privilege and the absence of political message appeal to me in the work of William Merritt Chase, Cecelia Beaux, and John Singer Sargent. Their portraits of individuals, posed in a legible interior space and painted in a fluid, facile manner, have affected my own work. I am even more drawn to the so-called "intimist" painters, Pierre Bonnard and Edouard Vuillard, and more recently, Fairfield Porter. Their depictions of life close to home -- family, the house and its immediate vicinity -- suit my temperament.

This group includes portraits of my father, son, daughter, and me. Since none of the portraits was commissioned, I had no client to please and no responsibility to produce a flattering product. A commissioned portrait is often expected to impart something about the subject -- an evocation of leadership or power from a CEO, an evident maternal instinct in a woman, etc. In these portraits, I was more interested in the psychology of the painter than that of the subject. Indeed, my unabashed affection for the models eliminated the objective relationship that I had with a paid model. Working from the studio model started and ended with the pose -- a brief memory. The pose in each of the portraits, however, was deliberately chosen to preserve a memory. Each portrait singles out an attitude I've seen so often as to take for granted as part of the everyday scene. In the act of

selecting and painting it, I've made it special. None of the portraits is a snapshot which has accidentally captured a fleeting moment in time. Instead, each shows a scene so common to me as to be easily overlooked. Not surprisingly, what I treasure is that each is a quiet moment of suspended animation.

My dad is a retired travelling salesman turned businessman. He gardens, swims, hunts, plays tennis and gin rummy, and is at his best in front of an audience. He reads voraciously, likes a good cigar, and loves his dog unconditionally. He is also 79 and winding down. "Dad and Carrie" is 36" x 48" in oil on masonite prepared with gesso. A more conventional portrait would have him posed at his full (former) 6'2" height, prepared to stride purposefully out of the picture plane. Without being maudlin, I've chosen a more typical pose: Dad seated, just having put down his book, with his knees flexed to hold the dog on his lap. It is painted over the false start of another painting; some of whose brushwork is evident in this one. I wanted to let the roughness of the underpainting and the active brushstrokes used over it express the forcefulness of my father's personality, while the pose expresses a softer side of it. The palette is fairly limited. I kept Fairfield Porter's mastery of neutrals in mind as I painted.

My son Ian is sixteen. His life is a whirlwind of school, soccer practices, driving, work outs, homework and socializing. When he's home, he eats, sleeps, plays Nintendo soccer, and catches up. This "catching up" is nonconversational inactivity -- a perfect opportunity to catch a willing, oblivious, model. "Ian Vegging" is 34" x 26 3/4," painted on masonite. The smaller format, along with drawing skills honed in the studio, allowed me to finish the figure itself fairly rapidly. The only real difficulty was creating a believable interior that did not dominate the picture and detract from the figure. I like to work with local (not invented) color, which in my house necessitates working with

neutrals. In this picture, I used the more vivid colors in the figure and in the "props" -- phone, magazines, Gatorade, and blanket. These details help activate the space.

"Liz" is also 36" x 48" on masonite. As an experiment, I did a fairly complete charcoal drawing on the board before starting this painting. By and large, it proved to be a waste of time. I much prefer to paint "alla prima," working directly and spontaneously without a lot of preparation. I have also learned not to treat any drawing or painting as so precious to me that I was afraid to make a change. I made a number of changes in the course of completing this portrait -- from concept to pose to color. I had seen my daughter Liz bundled up in front of the TV so often during her teen-age years that it is an indelible memory. She spent hours wrapped in a chrysalis-like blanket. Now at college, she has unfurled her wings and flown.

I had started with an unsmiling model in a completely inert pose. As I worked, I found myself losing interest in this "old" posture. In a radical departure, I overpainted the figure, eliminating the blanket, loosening the pose, and adding a wisp of a smile. As always, I was concerned with how light fell across the figure. The fact is, the lamps and ceiling fixtures in my house don't cast dramatic shadows. A few sunny days allowed me to use light from outdoors. Here, I treated the figure as part of the interior, placing the same emphasis on it as on the other elements in the composition.

The largest painting, a self-portrait, is 42" x 72", one of the last really large paintings I've done. It represents a slight departure from the others conceptually. In it, I am obviously not composed, but a little at odds, perhaps, with how the painting is going. It did present a significant challenge in its size and in the complexity of the space. Besides the figure, it is filled with the stuff of the studio. In effect, each surface depicted is a still life.

As I view these works as a body, I see that they share some compositional elements that I believe are intuitive, rather than merely habit. Usually the subject is arranged on a diagonal. This is certainly true in "Leeks" and "Fish," as well as "Seated Jennifer" and "Ian Vegging." Often the viewer's eye enters the picture from a lower edge and travels up a diagonal into the picture space. In "Jennifer Asleep," the diagonal is created by the line of the bedsheet as it slides off the mattress. One's eye actually travels up the shape of the model's leg in "The Hammock." In the still lifes especially, diagonal stripes on the fabric function to move the eye around the composition and to organize the space. In addition, they offer a graphic counterpoint to the organic shapes of the vegetables and fruits.

In the pictures depicting the figure, gestures and glances give the viewer clues for navigating the pictorial space. In "Self-Portrait," the viewer enters the composition at the left edge and follows the edge of the open drawer into the space, then continues across the body with the paint brushes. Then, instead of heading out of the picture at that point, the eye is brought back in by the elbow, which leads the eye to the top of the picture, behind the figure, across the open expanse of window and back down the window frame. Repetitions of color reinforce the eye's movement around the composition. In "Self-Portrait," it is the use of various reds: on the palette, the chair, brick building and fish painting that keep the eye moving.

The majority of the work is three feet by four feet or more. I love the gross motor motions required in a format that large. I haven't physically gone any larger, because a masonite board gets too heavy to lift, and paper that big is already difficult to store. Additionally, I don't want to be dependent on an assistant, as useful as one may be to

prep, move things about, or clean up. I relish the independence and crave the satisfaction I get from painting and drawing.

"Time Stands Still" reflects my reaction to the frenetic hustle-bustle of everyday life. I want the viewer to feel this sense of completion, relax, and take in each piece in a leisurely manner. One belonging, perhaps, to a bygone era.

LIST OF SLIDES

1. Fresh Produce Oil on canvas, 16" x 12" (fig. 1)
2. Fish Oil on paper, 20 1/2" x 14" (fig. 2)
3. Leeks Oil on paper, 20 3/4" x 14" (fig. 3)
4. Tangerines Oil on masonite, 29 1/4" x 23 1/4" (fig. 4)
5. Jennifer Asleep Charcoal on paper, 52" x 36" (fig. 5)
6. Seated Jennifer Soft pastel on paper, 52" x 36" (fig. 6)
7. Seated Anneliese Soft pastel on masonite, 36" x 48" (fig. 7)
8. The Hammock Pastel on paper, 52" x 36"(fig. 8)
9. Dad and Carrie Oil on masonite, 36" x 48" (fig. 9)
10. Ian Vegging Oil on masonite, 34" x 26 3/4" (fig. 10)
11. Liz Oil on masonite, 36" x 48"(fig. 11)
12. Self-Portrait Oil on masonite, 42" x 72" (fig. 12)



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

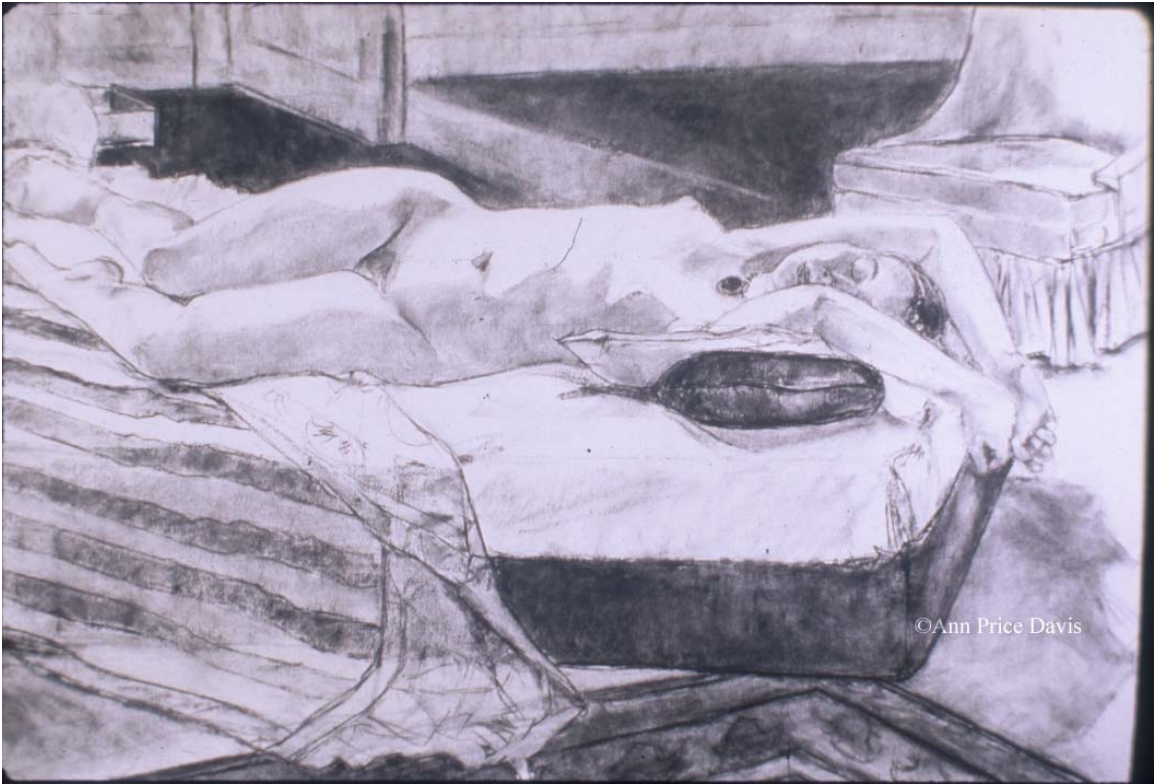


Figure 5



Figure 6

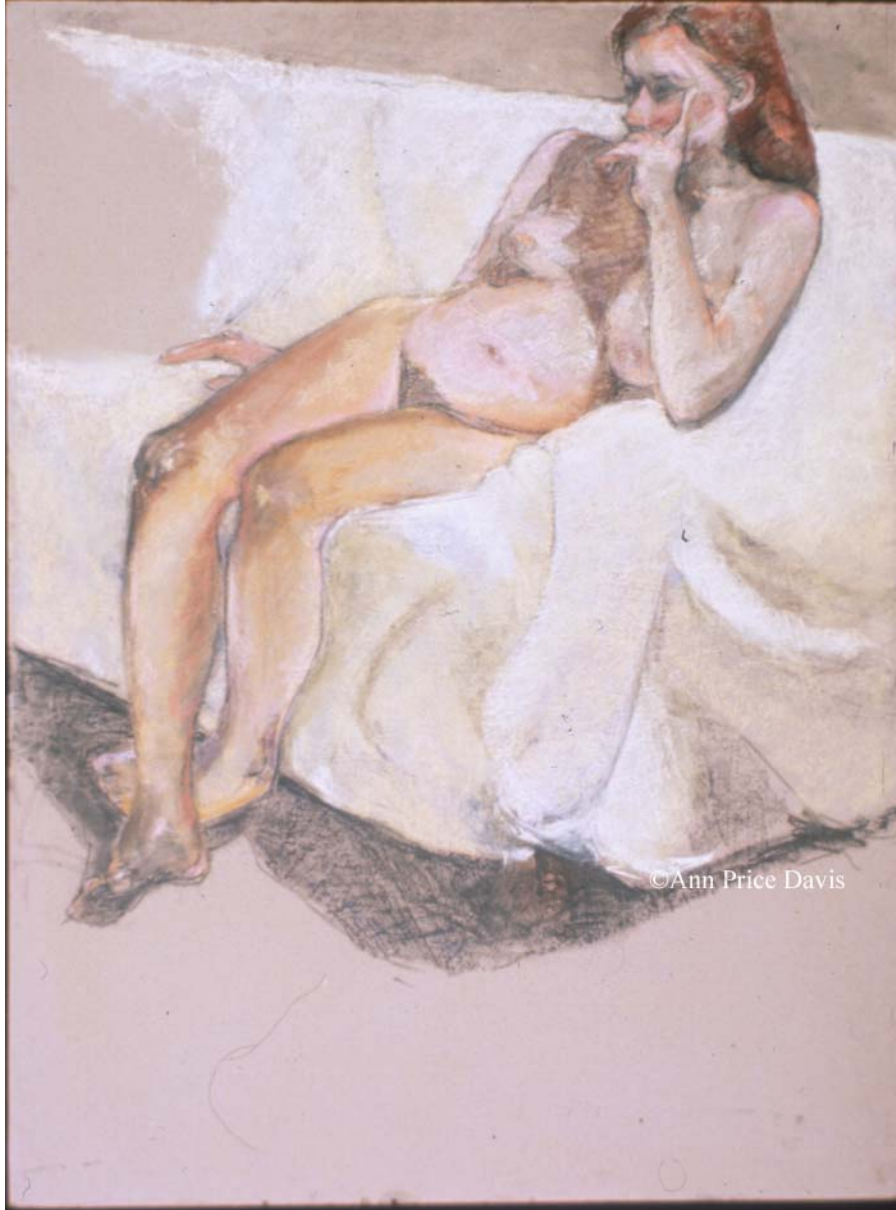


Figure 7



Figure 8

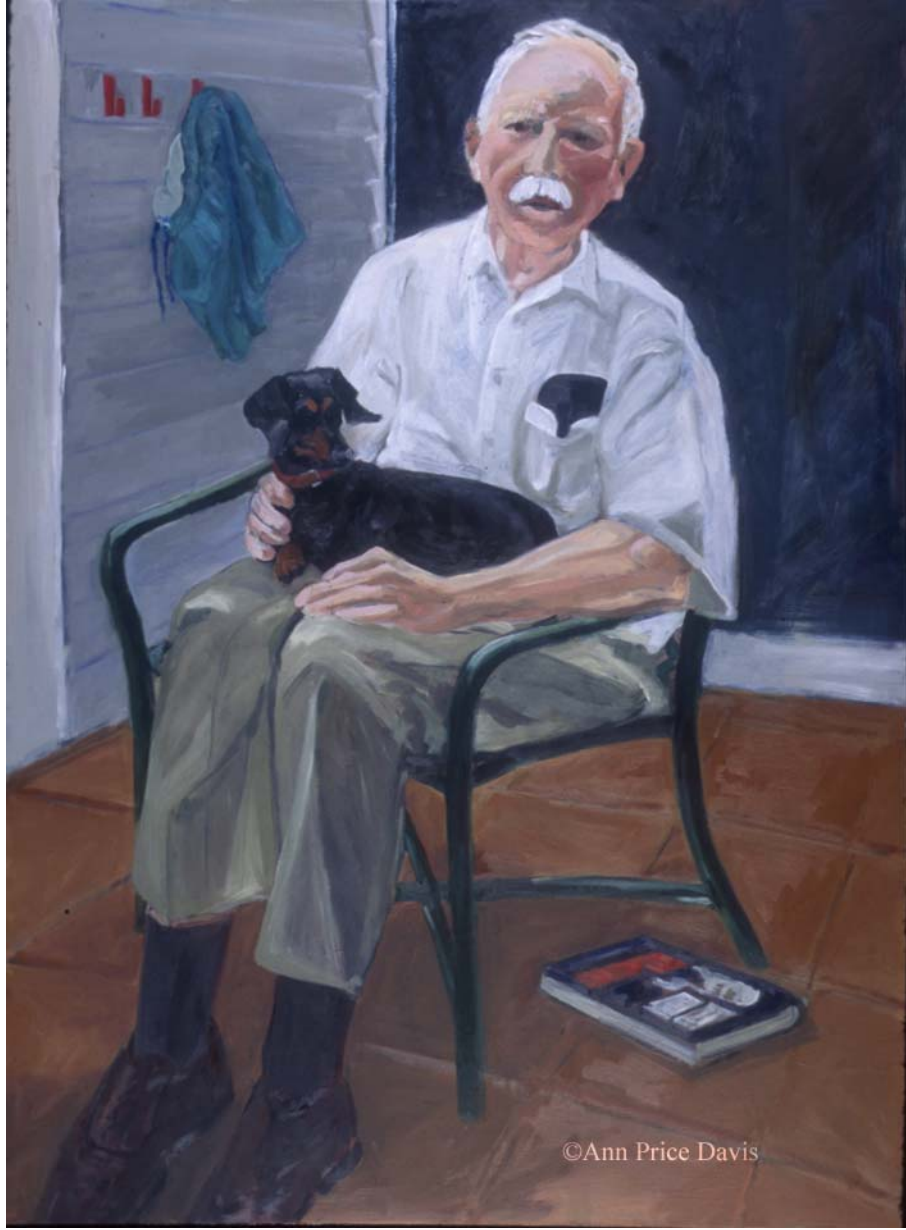


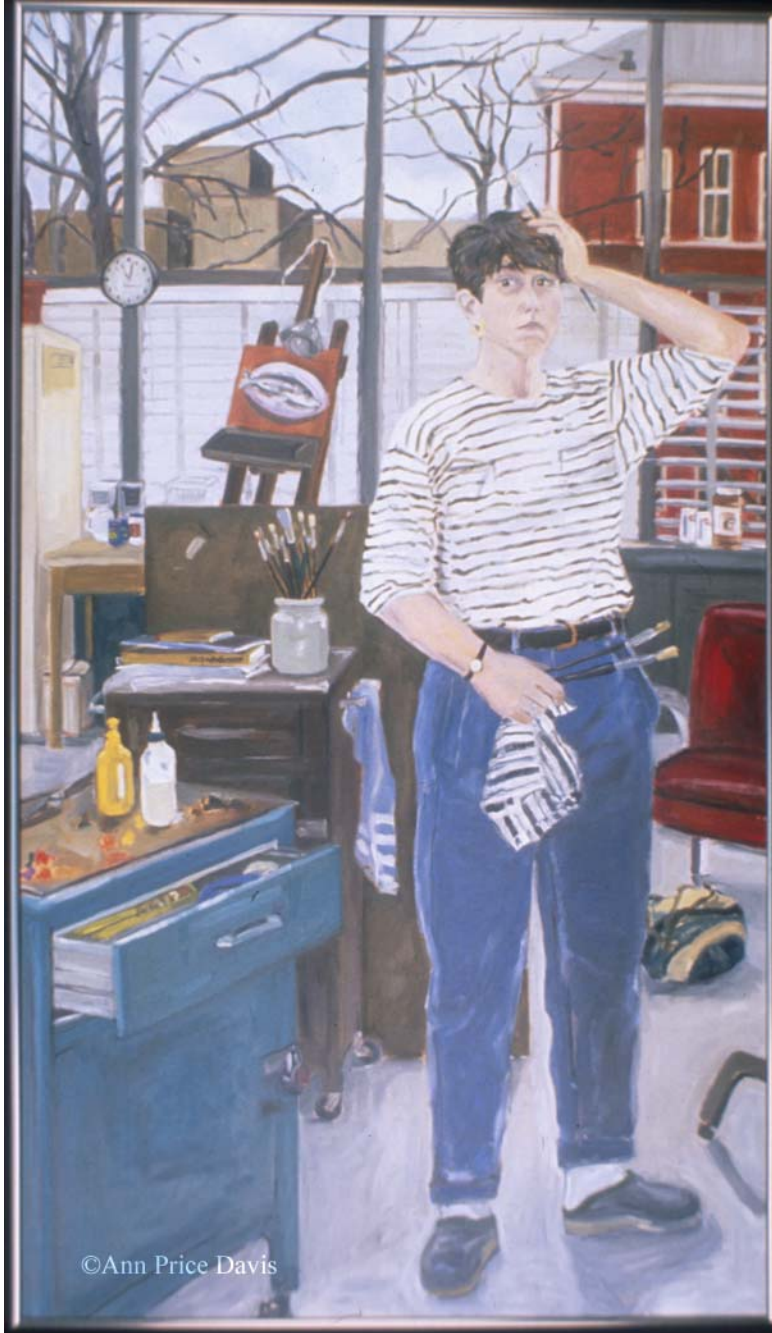
Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11



©Ann Price Davis

Figure 12

VITA

Ann Price Davis was born September 4, 1951 in Louisville, Kentucky. A graduate of the Louisville Collegiate School, she attended Smith College. For several summers she studied ceramics and stone-carving at the Louisville School of Art. During the summer of 1971 Davis studied jewelry-making at Haystack Mountain School of Art in Deer Isle, Maine. In 1973 she earned her Bachelor's of Arts in art history, magna cum laude, from Bowdoin College. From 1974 to 1989 she practiced free-lance graphic design in Louisville. Davis resumed her art studies in 1989, at Bellarmine College with Bob Lockhart. Davis began painting for the first time in 1992 at the University of Louisville with Guinever Smith, and later with Henry Chodkowski. She is married and has two teen-aged children.