

AN ARTIST'S JOURNEY

ART AND ITS PRACTICE HELP US FIND OUR PATH

Though widely known as a portrait painter, Joan Feierabend refuses to be pigeonholed. Comparing her work to an archaeological dig, she uses every means available to connect with “some greater energy from which we are only a tiny spark.”

BY SARA TUCKER ✨ PHOTOS BY JACK ROWELL

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How would you justify spending taxpayers' money on teaching art in a cash-strapped rural school district? That was one of the interview questions when Joan Feierabend, a 1969 graduate of Pratt Institute, applied to be a public-school art teacher in 1981.

"I wouldn't talk about art appreciation," she told school administrators. "I'd talk about jobs. Look around you. Everything you see—this pen, the clothes you are wearing, the desk, the chairs, this building—all of it was designed by somebody. That's art." Joan got the job, and for the next 24 years, she taught art to grades K through 12 in Chelsea, Vermont.

At the same time, she made art, painting at night in her studio and rising before dawn to begin a working mom's typical day. Her artwork began with an intense focus on the human figure and in 1986 took an unexpected turn following a week at the Vermont Studio Center.

In 2012, the Duckworth Museum paired her radiant portraits and pendulum-guided "dowsed" paintings in a solo show that elegantly summarized her evolution as an artist up to that point. Recently, at her modest home-and-studio on the Second Branch of the White River, she talked with me about the power of art to inform, and transform, human beings.

—Sara Tucker

You've said that your art has been influenced by your teaching and vice versa. Tell me about that.

Somebody—I wish I could remember who—said that, in order to paint, you have to get everyone out of the studio. You have to get your teachers out. You have to get the buying public out. You have to get your family out. And once they're all gone, then you have to leave. Your own voice in your head is the worst one because it listens to all the others, and it is the most damning. Working with students confirmed this.

Kids are so awful to themselves about their own artwork. I'm no good at this. Kids will say that to themselves because they don't have the skills, but how can you develop skills that you haven't practiced? I made that point to them all the time: If you practice, you'll get better. It has to do with desire. As a teacher, I asked myself, "How can I motivate kids to want to do art?" I chose myself as my own guinea pig: What motivated me?

When I graduated from Pratt, I taught deaf-blind children in the rubella unit of the New York Institute for Special Education for a year. I didn't do any artwork, and by the end of the year, I was like a plant that hadn't been watered. I felt lifeless. I didn't know what was wrong with me. But I knew I needed to do artwork.

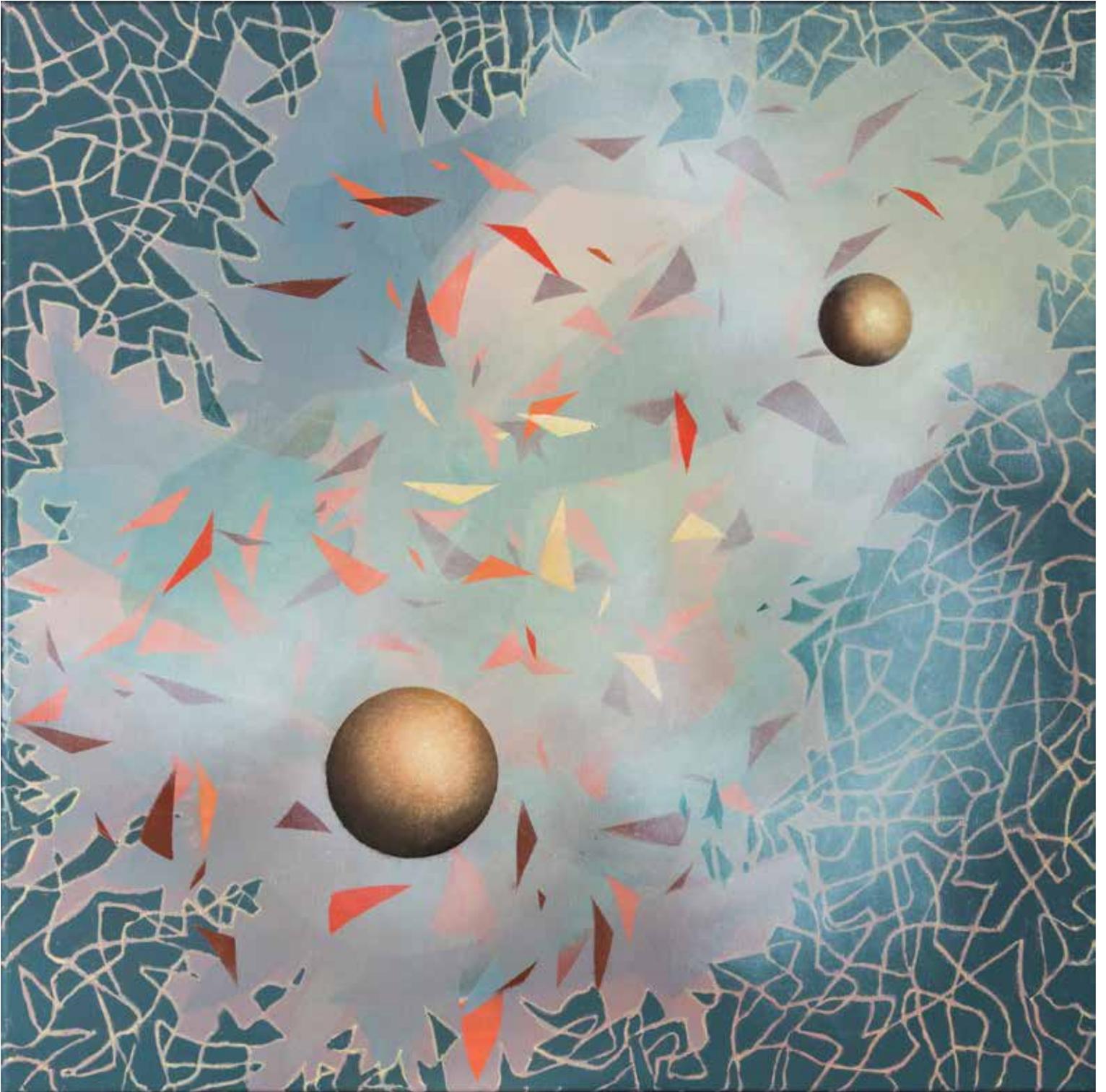
I found it very difficult at first to get the voices out of the studio. When you graduate from an art college, there is this expectation—this method—of entering the art world. You enter juried shows, and if your art is accepted, you get to show it. People recognize your work, and eventually they start buying it. They had these regional art exhibits at Dartmouth years ago, and one time I won people's choice for best of show. I was considered an up-and-coming artist. I sold paintings and drawings, and I got asked to be part of a show in Brattleboro—I had entered successfully. And yet it felt like this was the thing that was going to stymie me as an artist. Success in the regional art world brought very loud voices into the studio.

I had a successful solo show in 1973, the year my daughter was born, and shortly after that I went into a kind of hibernation. I didn't show my work to anybody. I just practiced, for years and years. Invisibility offered me the freedom to explore.

I knew I wanted to work with the figure. I'm interested in human beings—faces, expressions. As a teacher, you have to be able to read a face. I bought a human skeleton, and I drew it. I studied anatomy. I went to every life drawing class I could find in the Upper Valley—and I found a lot of them. I did Kimon Nicolaidis's *The Natural Way to Draw*—he had a practice schedule that was so rigorous. Every three-hour session, he had you do 60 gesture drawings and then an hour of contour drawing. It was like taking an intensive course, and I did that when my children were babies.

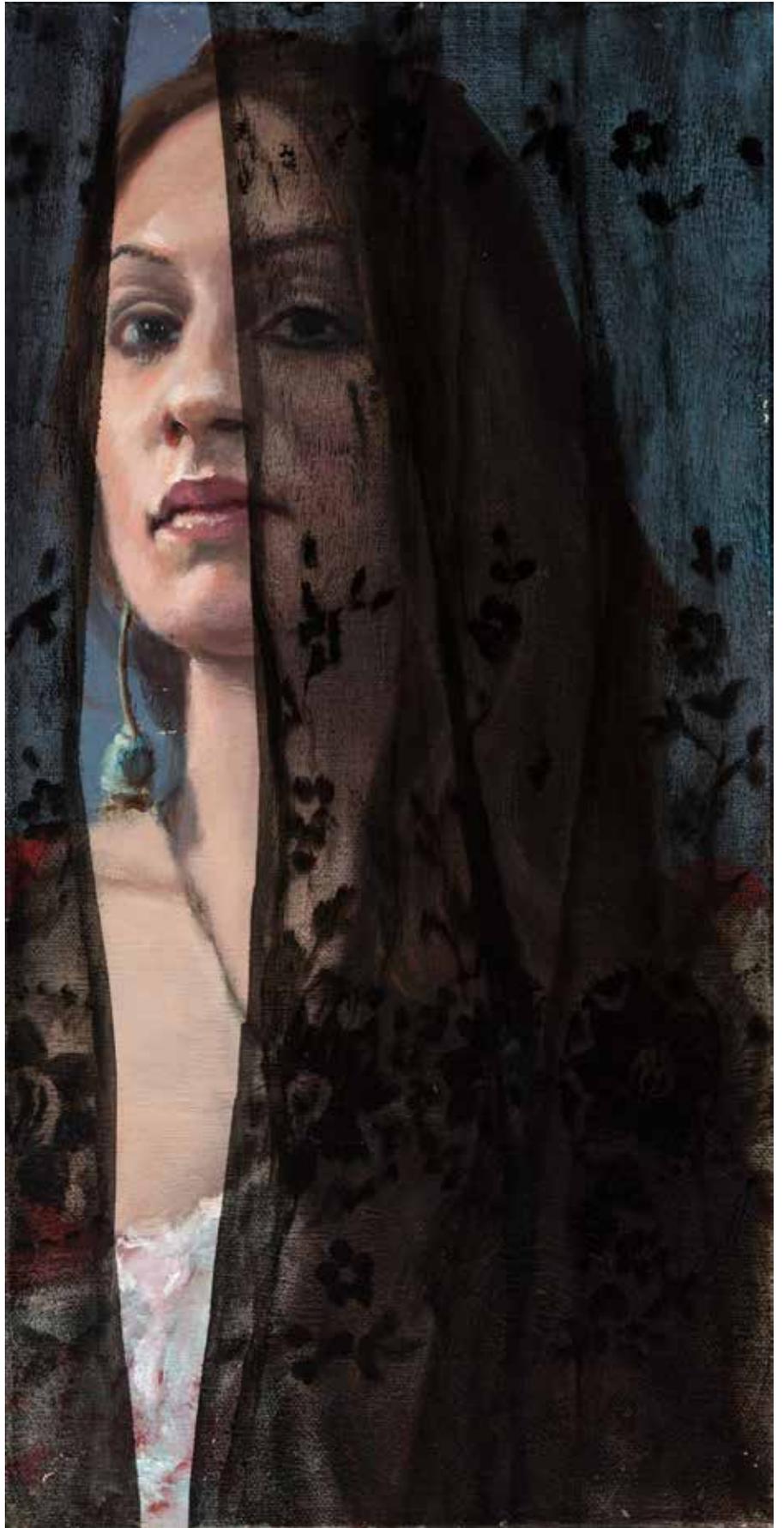
I met a teacher, Aidron Duckworth, who admired and encouraged my dedication to practice. It felt right. So I practiced constantly, and I got better. I even got pretty good. I became dedicated to practicing. I learned that the work was educating me to what it wanted me to know. This isn't rare. Writers, musicians, dancers all talk about it. When you want to do something creative and you do it regularly, you connect with something greater than your own understanding.

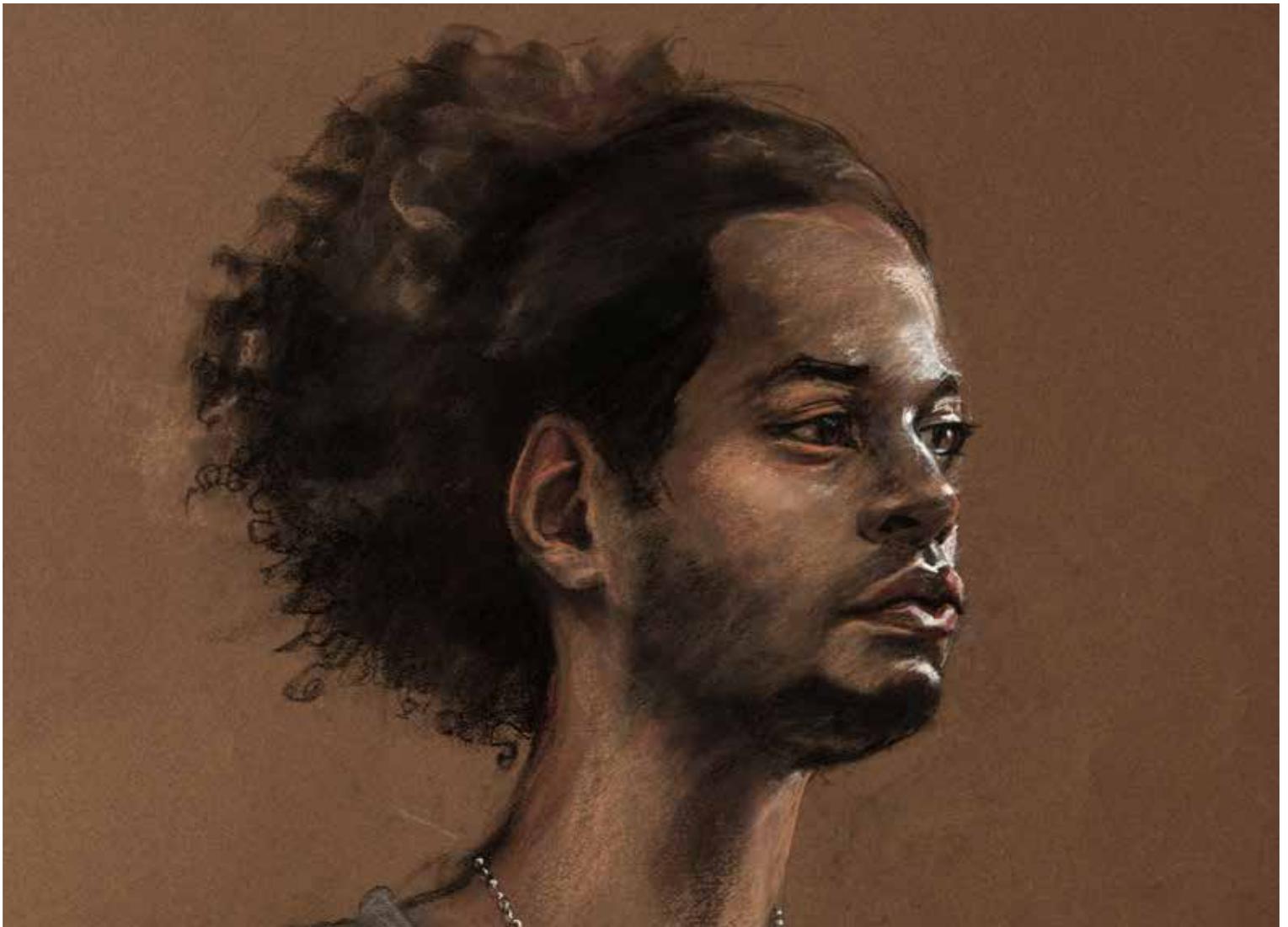
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I learned for the first time that the work wanted to be in control of how it came out, and that if I just allowed the painting to develop, it would take over. The power and the wisdom is in the work itself. It's there for you, and your job is to allow it to happen and receive it.

—Joan Feierabend





You spent a week at the Vermont Studio Center in 1986. What happened there?

All you were supposed to do was go to your studio. You didn't have to take care of your kids, cook a meal, clean the house, do anything. You were expected to just work. I took to that like you wouldn't believe. I almost didn't sleep, I was so involved in the work.

I did a triptych that was six feet tall and fifteen feet long—big! I had taken with me about 200 gesture drawings that I had done from Two Penny Circus, which was a clown troupe out of Montpelier. I wanted moving models, so I asked them if I could draw them during their rehearsals. I thought I would do this triptych on performance art, and I'd have the evaluation on one side, the practicing on the other side, and the performance in the center.

So, you have to practice, you have to perform, and you have to see what you have done. The practicing and performing went along just as I had planned it, but for the evaluation thing, I thought I was going to paint a bunch of people standing around looking at the performance with judgment on their faces. But when I stood back and looked at my roughed-in painting, I saw I had painted a primordial forest with birds coming out of rocks, and I thought, yeow! The painting was informing me that it starts primordially. It was saying, This has nothing to do with just you. This is coming from the rocks, from nature, from birds, from some other space.

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You have to be sensitive to the idea that creative work has its own personality and that you are its conduit, not its master. Ask the work as if it's a person: "What do you want me to do?" —Joan Feierabend



the work itself. It's there for you, and your job is to allow it to happen and receive it. I thought about what made that happen, and I realized it was working, all day long, showing up and being there.

I didn't know how to make paintings without looking at something; I was good at that, but I knew that wasn't what this artistic journey wanted. I decided to do six drawings a day for the rest of the school year. I had three rules: I had to do six; if I didn't do them, I had to make up what I missed; and most important, I couldn't judge them.

This practice made all the difference in the world, the nonjudgment and the showing up. I felt like a faucet had been turned on. I would pick up the pen and hear, "Draw this." These were odd drawings—kind of funny, kind of wise. I knew I had found a secret, just showing up and making it happen; 1,680 drawings later, the school year was over and I had learned how to turn on the flow.

Tell me about dowsing. I thought it was a method of finding groundwater with sticks, but you use it for painting and drawing. How does that work?

The dictionary defines dowsing as a type of divination that's used to locate objects and materials without scientific apparatus. I use it to make artistic decisions apart from my personal tastes and training. Years ago, I went to a one-day class in dowsing past lives at the Lightgate Learning Center in Thetford, Vermont. When I picked up the pendulum and asked it how it would say yes, it went whack-whack-whack-whack, like "Where have you been? I've been waiting to talk to you. Let's get going."

That was my method of leaving the studio. Dowsing turned it over to an unknown voice. I was very curious when I learned that I could dowse. I quickly lost interest in the past-life aspect. For me, dowsing was a way to silence the personality voice and get to that mysterious creative voice. The pendulum becomes like a cell phone, a communication device. You're not talking to a pendulum, obviously. I don't know who you're talking to, actually. When I discovered that I was

getting answers, I asked if I could paint. It said yes, but not right away. I had to wait six months. And it didn't paint like me at all, not at all. It painted geometrically, nonrealistically, and there were always spheres. Eventually, it had me work in series, and I would create this body of work, and a show would materialize out of nowhere.

When my mother died in 1998, I stopped dowsing for two years. I was right in the middle of a series, and that series never went anywhere. The paintings buckled. I knew I had to work, so I started drawing again. People started giving me sketchbooks, and I filled them and gave them back. I would draw in them every day. I did that for two years. After a while, I realized I could paint again. But it was slow. It was almost like back in the early days, when it was really hard to start a painting, but I kept at it. In the meantime, I was still practicing with painting portraits. You know, I'm known as a portrait painter. That's how people know me: "Joan paints portraits." But I don't think of myself as a portrait painter at all—except that I've done hundreds of them.

How do you think of yourself?

I would say I'm an archaeological painter. I'm searching for some kind of connection through the earth for something I don't quite understand. I think I'm using art as a way to search through life, and I think of it as a gift.

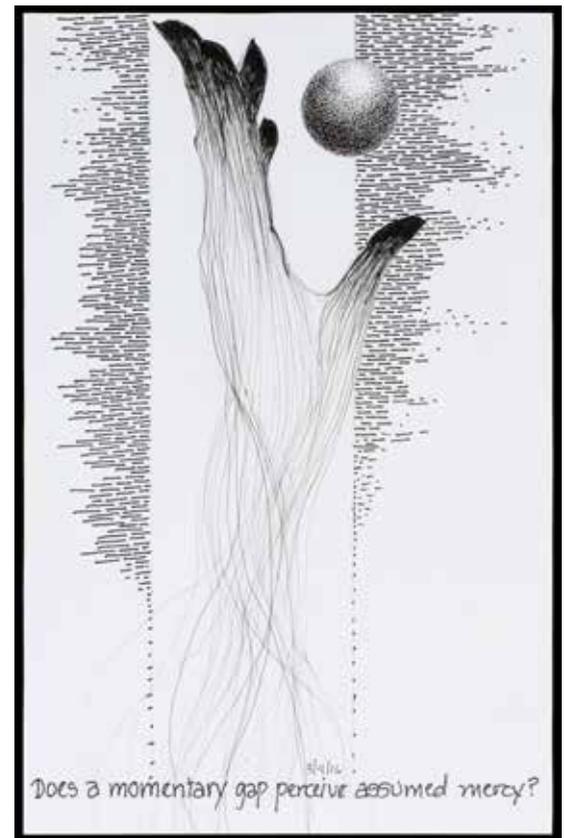
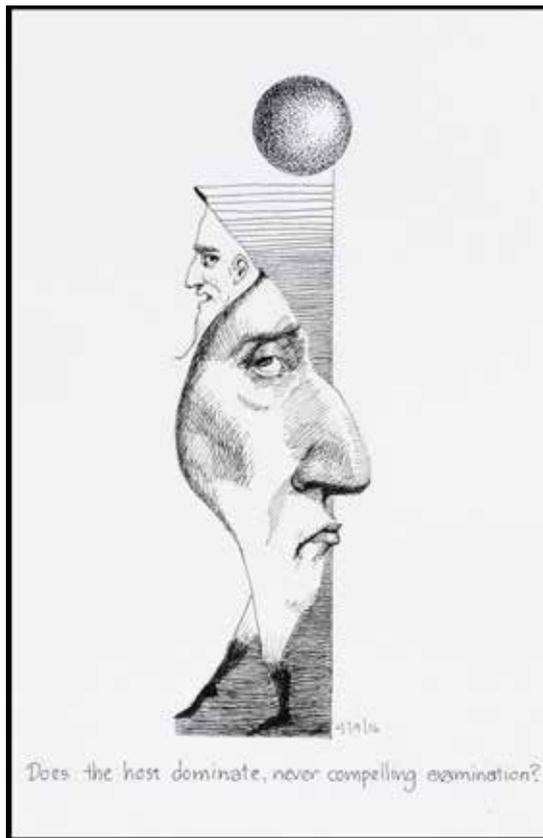
While I was getting my MFA at the Vermont College of Fine Arts, I read *The Gift* by Lewis Hyde, and I began to understand that art has a different tradition from what college taught us. *The Gift* talked about the creative spirit as a blessing of sorts. We even talk about it as being gifted. I started seeing art not as a commodity that you sell but as a relationship. As a viewer, art is best lived with as a familiar presence. I became aware that gallery shows especially aren't the best way to view work. After all, you are at a party, drinking wine, eating broccoli and dip, and catching up with the people who are standing around doing the same.

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I'm interested in the creative process as the part of our brain that needs to be used for the sake of humanity. —Joan Feierabend

Museums are much better, especially if they are nearly empty, and reproductions in books, although not the real thing, offer an intimacy of holding as you look. Most artists have piles of paintings everywhere, hard to store and never seen. Museums have vaults of work that are never seen. That's why I started giving my work away. It gets a life. It forms a new relationship with someone else.

My first giving-away show was at the Thetford Library in 1995. Libraries are a gift to the community, and I wanted to thank them in a meaningful way. To have my paintings hanging out with books—with all the great minds of the world—that was cool for me. My show at the Kilton Library in 2015 raised several thousand dollars. All people had to do was speak for the paintings so I could mark them as taken, and when the show was over, they took them home in exchange for a donation of any amount to the library.

Let's talk about your recent work. Are you still dowsing?

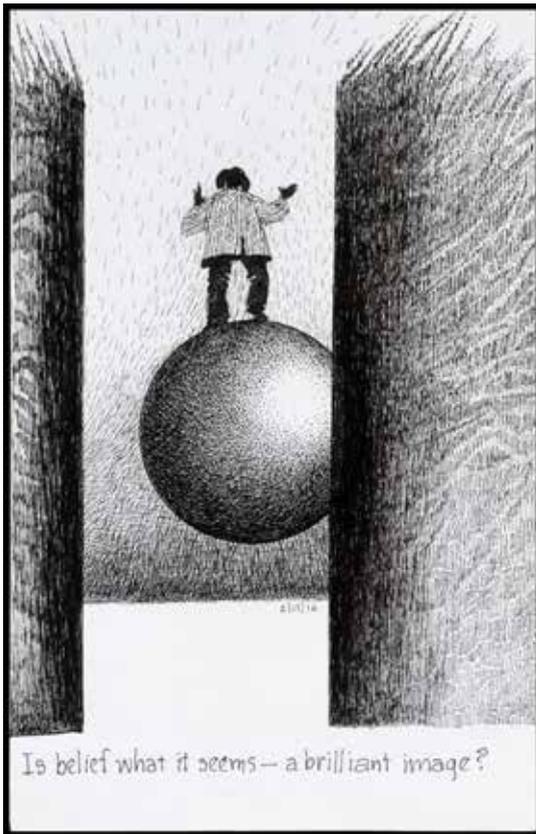
After the Kilton show, I began downsizing from a big house in Tunbridge where I had lived for 40 years. I did

one drawing every day for a year during that transition. I didn't miss one day, not even the day I moved to the new house. The 365 drawings are like lucid dreams, and each one is associated with a dowsed question. It was sort of like working with a therapist, where you tell them your dream and they ask you a question about it, except that the pendulum's questions are quite esoteric. My last painting was partially dowsed. Before it was finished, the pendulum said, "You take it from here."

What else have you learned from making and teaching art?

I think talent is a very troubling word because it implies that it's something you either have or don't have. I truly believe that we are all creative. In order to get kids to learn from their work, you have to steer them into a good way of looking at it. You don't judge it; you just talk about it: What is going on here? What do you see? You describe it, carefully. Paying attention, without judgment, is critical.

You have to be sensitive to the idea that creative work has its own personality and that you are its conduit, not its master. Ask the work as if it's a person: "What



do you want me to do?" The kids would think this was a little crazy, but without fail, it would work. Oddly, it didn't necessarily make the work better; it made it theirs.

I'm interested in the creative process as the part of our brain that needs to be used for the sake of humanity. We are, with all our drama and misconceptions, in the way of a clear connection to something art is helping us find, some greater energy from which we are only a tiny spark. If we could only see this more clearly, we might be able to care more completely about the nature and needs of the whole. It is a huge struggle to see through our own personal drama. We need art and the practice of art to help us find a path for our personal journey. ❶

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