

Nathaniel Robinson

2020 to 2021



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Devening Projects  
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Chicago, IL 60612

**Dan Devening:** Although painting has been an integral part of your practice since the beginning of your career, you're probably best known for the enigmatic sculpture and ambitiously layered installations that have been the focus of many of your recent solo shows in New York and Chicago. Can you talk about where and how your parallel practices intersect?

**Nathaniel Robinson:** Painting was my focus early on. Sometime in high school I started to understand that painting in particular could be an activity that tightly wrapped together seeing, thinking and doing. Later, sculpture and installation (and for a little while, video) displaced painting in the studio partly because I was not ready to settle into taking anything for granted and I felt that my work needed to follow my ideas rather than the other way around. My lack of formal training in those areas also made them seem



*Alphabet Soup*, 2012, pigmented polyurethane resin, 4.75 x 10.375 x 8.75 inches; ed. 1/3, 1 a.p.

more open, and learning how to use a range of materials and tools held an interest of its own. I couldn't accept having any sort of consistent way of doing things, or even a medium or a plan. I didn't want any sense of a personality, or a persona or coherent self, getting ahead of the work and determining it; that seemed backward to me.

But I would periodically try to get back into painting seriously. It seemed important because of how intensively it informed my seeing. I also missed that uncomfortable/exciting immediacy and necessity of decisions in the moment. The way I was making objects had been more indirect, with a lot of labor and facture toward a predetermined result. But I kept getting bounced out of painting by my own misgivings about it and the sense that it was at cross-purposes to everything else I was doing. Eventually I decided to stop trying to square the circle and just approach painting as something to learn and learn from. That gave me the chance to paint with a more open mind and attention to basics. (And more patience with my limitations.) It might be worth noting that I landed in the middle of painting, so to speak, not at the edge—in the sense that they are depictive and traditionally rectangular and have only subtle spatial anomalies. They take their own terms of existence for granted in a way the other work does not.

So, to finally get to your question about how they (painting and sculpture) intersect, at this point it's more important to me that they not intersect at all. They're very different and I like it that way. They have divided, and I don't see that as a problem to be solved, but maybe a solution in itself. One is not an outgrowth of the other; they're free to develop on their own. At the moment, the distinctions between these two paths are as interesting to me as what unifies them, so I'm happy for them to exist in the same universe, but not in the same room.

**DD:** Knowing now that you see the paintings working independently from the sculptural work, in many ways frees them from an overlapping read. Regardless, I still wonder about the relationship between the mysterious and the factual in your work. One might see the sculptural installations as complex, sometimes-surreal manifestations of your thinking process whereas the paintings seem to record moments of fact in the trajectory of your life.

**NR:** Personally, I find the factual to be extremely mysterious. I just happened to come across this line by William James: "After all that reason can do has been done, there still remains the opacity of the finite facts as merely given, with most of their peculiarities mutually unmediated and unexplained."

The paintings have to do with appearances, and I do think there is a logic to appearances, as well as much that is "merely given," which painting is a particularly good medium for discovering. Appearances are intimate with both the world and the self, and appearances shade into dreams. A great thing about painting is that it shares in the contradictions of perception and uses the contradictions as opportunities. One can choose how much to accede to strictures of depiction and how much freedom to take, and I want to sustain a certain amount of ambiguity about that mixture.

**DD:** The source images for many of the paintings in *2020 to 2021* appear to come from a moving vehicle—possibly a car or a train. Is it important that movement influence or destabilize what we encounter in this work?

**NR:** Yes, movement is critical, and it's really one of the main points of tension between natural vision and depiction. In daily life, movement enables perception by resolving the ambiguities inherent to still images; and movement makes still images even more ambiguous through blur and by freezing random coincidences.

I had been taking photographs from the train for a few years before I thought of using them as the basis for paintings. The photographs themselves were mostly chaotic, awkward and confusing. I would try to aim at something passing by, and by the time I pressed the shutter, an intractable tangle of branches or a weird fence with a tarp draped over it would have leapt into the middle of the frame. Even if I did capture the intended subject, it would be surrounded by accidental formations of foreground detail. These ended up being the most interesting images to me. When I started making paintings, I benefited from the "badness" of the photos. I would scroll through and a suggestion of an interesting relationship would jump out at me; but it was implicit, so to speak, buried in the photograph, and if I looked at it again the next day I'd often wonder what I had seen in it. Figuring out what I might need to do to make it more explicit was a lot of the work.

**DD:** Are there any commonalities in what you describe as the "interesting relationships" you uncover in the photographs?

**NR:** That's hard to pin down. I think I look for kinds of integrity which elude resolution. A preoccupation of mine has been the intrusion of physical reality into our world of ideas and expectations. So, I think the paintings need to be a mixture of structure and intentionality with a sense of particularity whose only explanation is itself. It has a lot to do with the mystery of facts we mentioned before.

**DD:** How does the fact that you're working from a photographic source—from those moments of travel we discussed above—limit or expand the possibilities of its re-presentation as a painting?

**NR:** As I mentioned before, whatever interests in an image is often hidden, so I use aspects of the photographs, ignore other aspects, and go beyond them as needed. Painting from observation made a big impression on me early on, especially outdoors in natural light, and I go back to that periodically. So, I have some understanding of how much photographs lack and what they're good for. What I've been finding them good for lately is the random character of what they capture, especially when poorly aimed from a moving vehicle. At this point it's more interesting to think, "here's a situation, what does it do?" than to construct compositions for preconceived purposes.

**DD:** There are a great many obstructions, barriers and concealments that withhold from the viewer. We see windowless walls, fences, brambles and tree canopies in many of the large paintings. Is there something conscious in your decision-making that intentionally restricts access to fuller elements of the narrative?

**NR:** You're right, and it is conscious, but my feeling about this question is that I should leave it open.

**DD:** Time—time passing and time standing still—seems to be a subtext of your recent paintings. The images here are simultaneously fleeting and still-framed. How does time define or contextualize the choices you make when selecting specific images and/or the choices you make as you construct those images as paintings?

**NR:** Many of the paintings involve a sense of glimpses caught in passing, and the puzzle I try to solve is how to preserve that informality and precipitousness, while also crystallizing a certain

structure or relationship. Sometimes this is a simple puzzle, and sometimes it's more complicated.

**DD:** Emotionally, the paintings are simultaneously detached and charged (or simultaneously mute and unsettling). Is regulating the psychological tone of the particular composition important to the way you construct the painting?

**NR:** I like the way you phrased the question, because detachment itself is an emotion, not merely an absence of other emotions. And I see what you mean about the paintings having that sense to them. I'm not deliberately aiming for that, but apparently my decisions trend in that direction. I do think suspension is a good place to start from when approaching something you don't fully understand. It also allows the harmonics of other emotions to remain unresolved.

**DD:** Suspension is a beautifully poetic way of talking about the balance you achieve in this work. Can you say any more about that?

**NR:** I don't want to wrap the subject in a sense of judgement about whether it's good or bad, or beautiful or not, or important or trivial—it could be any or all of those.

**DD:** Light is clearly an important tool in your paintings that you use to fine-tune the emotional resonance of the scene. There are times when the light is flat and even, revealing not only the time of day but also the unexceptional nature of what's seen. Other times, the light is dramatic, nocturnal and charged with contrast. Can you share something about how you think about light when working on your paintings?

**NR:** Part of the reason for the lighting extremes is probably just restlessness, wanting to do different things. But it's also an interest

in the experience of darkness and the experience of light, and situations in between, and how different they are. You mentioned obstruction before and I think darkness is of interest as something which can interrupt the circuit between vision and knowledge, and in doing so make seeing itself the subject. I also just happen to be fascinated by the workings of light, how it interacts with the atmosphere and surfaces, and how we perceive it. And then there's the issue of depicting lighting conditions within a painting, and then having the painting itself in a room, on a wall, subject to the light in the room. This seems mundane because we're so used to it, but it's very significant, and there's something almost funny about it, especially when the color world of the painting differs a great deal from that of the room it's in.

**DD:** In addition to the larger landscape paintings in this exhibition, you've included a series of still-life subjects featuring direct evidence of particular domestic encounters. There's something poetic about a simple piece of fruit, a bowl of milk or a cellophane-wrapped, partially eaten cake. Do these paintings help confirm the presence of an occupant in order to fill in a part of the story that the other works do not?

**NR:** Like the landscapes, the still-life paintings draw on what I see around me, things I don't have to go out of my way to discover and that many people would consider ordinary sights. I think they do affirm presence and make presence strange because of how much isn't there. I don't know if I'm expressing this well, but I think there's an undercurrent of doubt in the still lifes about their own self-sufficiency as paintings, and this basically mirrors the way I feel about domesticity. There's a vertigo to considering the systems involved in making these things possible, and the object becomes like a tiny toehold on a giant invisible cliff.

**DD:** Can you speak to your process? When moving forward into a new work, what comes first and how does that work evolve? In theory, it would seem logical that you first make decisions about what to paint based on photographs you've taken. In fact, maybe the process begins well before that with the memory of an experience, a view or a particular light effect. Can you share something about what initiates a work?

**NR:** It varies, but often I'm just scanning through my photographs and something strikes me. It's funny, the photographs I choose to work from I'd never think were good photographs in their own right. I'd have a hard time making a painting from a compelling photograph, I think. "Bad" photographs leave more space for experiential memory to come into it, and for the paint to do its own thing. I do some preparatory drawings, but they're very fast and practical, more like sloppy diagrams than rendered sketches. They usually have written instructions to myself about how to go about making the painting, such as what to preserve and what to leave out, or what order to do things in. I keep this planning simple and pretty vague and leave more granular decisions to be made as I go. I try to complete the painting while all the paint is still wet. It doesn't always work out that way, but I try. I like the way the paint behaves when it's wet-into-wet, and I prefer to make changes by completely removing areas of paint and starting over, rather than painting over dry areas. I'm also a person who enjoys doubt a little too much and staying ahead of the drying paint keeps me moving.



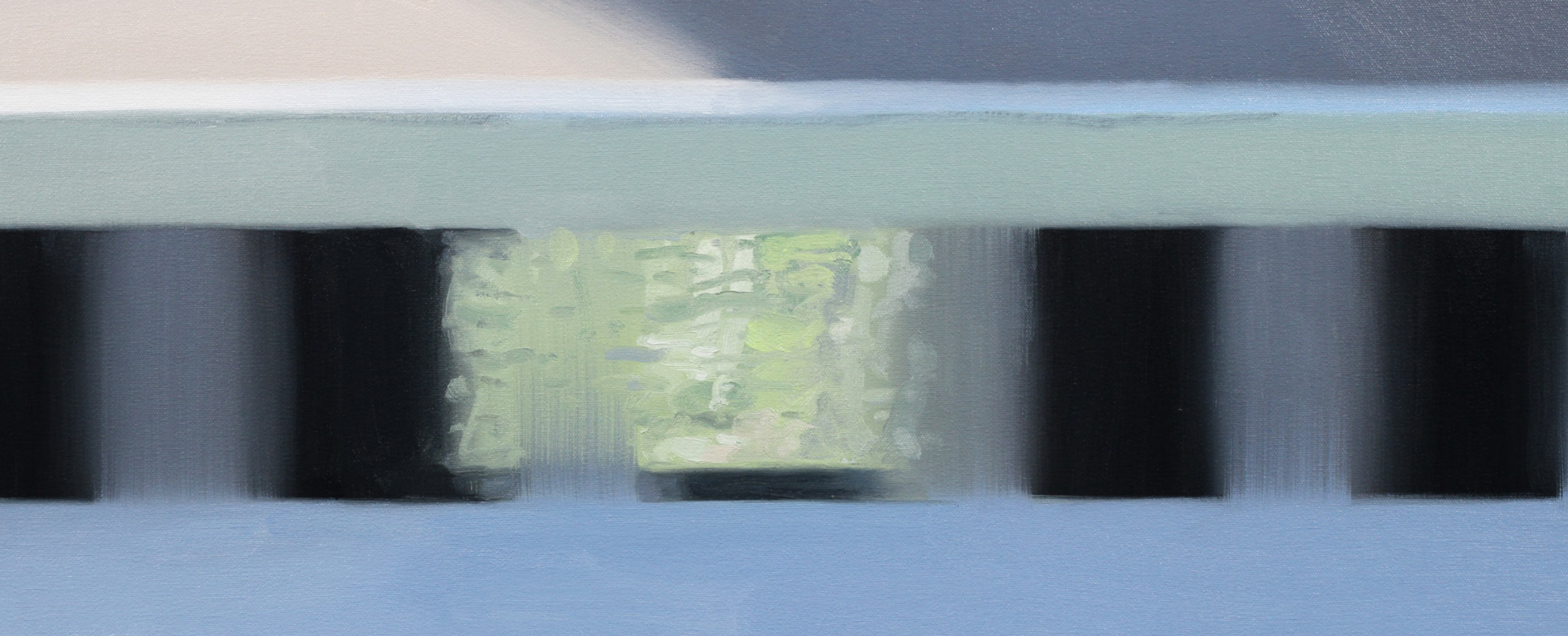




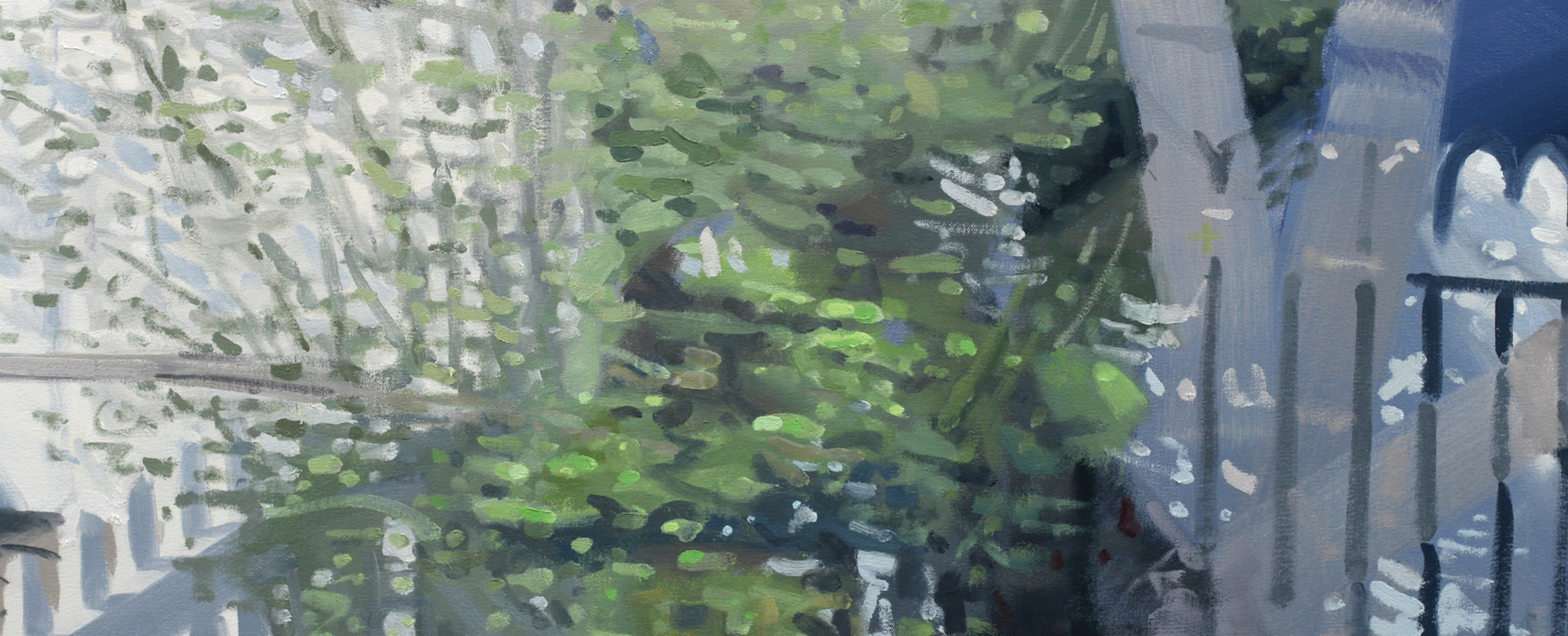
















*Untitled, 2021, oil on canvas, 12 x 16 inches*



*Untitled, 2020, oil on canvas, 16 x 24 inches*



*Untitled, 2021, oil on canvas, 12 x 17 inches*









Untitled, 2020, oil on canvas, 15 x 24 inches



Untitled, 2020, oil on canvas, 16 x 24 inches



Untitled, 2021, oil on canvas, 12 x 14.75 inches



*Untitled*, 2021, oil on canvas, 48 x 72 inches



*Untitled, 2021, oil on canvas, 13 x 19.5 inches*



*Untitled, 2020, oil on canvas, 16 x 24 inches*



*Untitled, 2021, oil on canvas, 13 x 19.5 inches*









*Untitled, 2020, oil on canvas, 16 x 24 inches*



*Untitled, 2020, oil on canvas, 11 x 16 inches*







*Untitled, 2020, oil on canvas, 15 x 24 inches*



*Untitled, 2020, oil on canvas, 18 x 24 inches*



*Untitled, 2021, oil on canvas, 16 x 24 inches*





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