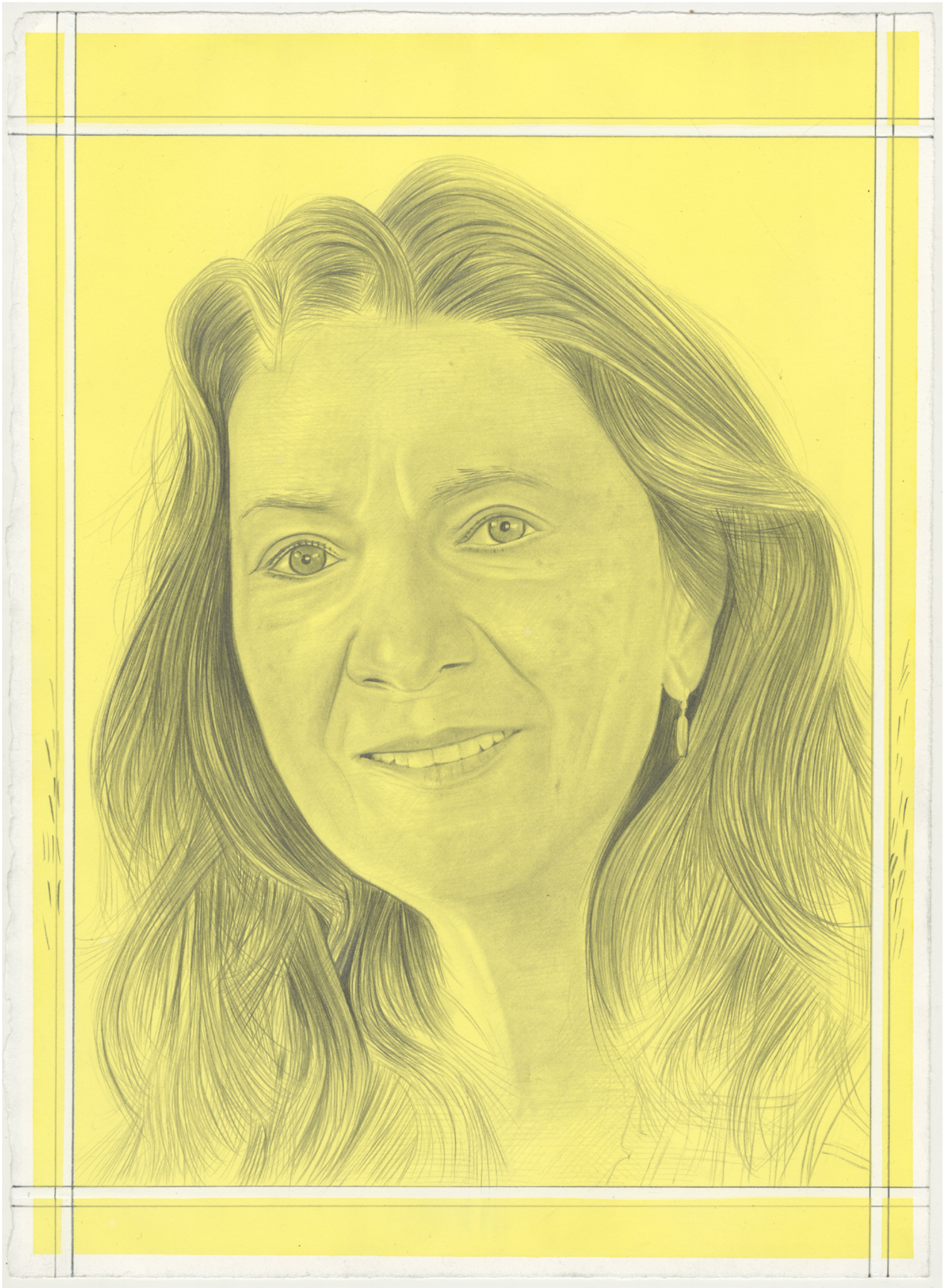
THE BROOKLYN RAIL

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Portrait of Susan Jane Walp, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui. From a photo by John Douglas.

SUSAN JANE WALP with Dian Parker

Living in rural Vermont is a unique experience of contrasts. There is isolation among the splendors and silence of the natural world. There is also a deeply committed community of interacting artists who live on dirt roads and have for many years. Susan Jane Walp is one of these artists who has enriched her painting practice with these contrasts. A still life painter, her works are worlds of quiet isolation amongst a community of objects, all interacting and yet still, so like the painter herself. Being with Susan is like being inside one of her still lifes. She considers everything she says. She doesn't rush her thoughts or ideas. And, like her still life paintings, she has a lot to say. This interview has been edited down considerably from our original conversation, all so wonderfully interesting.

Tibor de Nagy
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Dian Parker (RAIL): May I first start with asking your age, and how long you've been painting?

Susan Jane Walp (S.J.W.): I just turned seventy-eight. I've been drawing and painting since childhood but I began painting seriously when I was nineteen.

RAIL You started with working from the figure and figurative narratives and moved to still life. Starting with the scope of your painting life for the last sixty years, what is your sense of where you are right now as a painter?

S.J.W. I think about what has been constant. At nineteen, I was attending Mount Holyoke College and became somewhat seriously ill that spring term. I had to basically drop out to go home to have surgery. In order to make up the credits, I decided that I wanted to go to this summer program that Boston University College of Fine Arts was running at Tanglewood, and my parents were generous enough to indulge me. It was my great good fortune that Lennart Anderson was teaching that summer. He ended up becoming one of my main teachers, and eventually we also became very close friends right up until his death in 2015. I don't know exactly what happened but by the end of that summer, I knew I was going to become a painter, and that everything in my life was going to be organized around that desire. That has never really changed for me.

RAIL You said that you love Emily Dickinson's poems, and one of your favorites is just two lines: "Not 'Revelation'—'tis—that waits, / But our unfurnished eyes." When I was thinking about that in relation to your paintings, I thought you certainly don't have unfurnished eyes. You have furnished your eyes with a lot of training, experience, reading, and painting. This takes consistency, rigor of vision, along with incredible endurance. To paint for sixty years, to exhibit as much as you have, and to continue with this rigor and focus, has created your still lifes that are measured and controlled. And your objects, their relationship to one another, the space between. You once said, and I quote, "A mathematical understanding of space, the way shapes move across a flat surface, requires a different balance." Can you explain that?

S.J.W. There are many different parts to this interesting question. First of all, the thing that has been most important to me about Emily Dickinson is the sense of scale she achieves. Often, within just a few lines, she can travel from microcosm to macrocosm. Likewise, I'm interested in how in even a very small painting, if the smallest detail can be arrived at with some accuracy in relationship to the whole, if that precise measurement can be found, then even a small painting can suggest something immense. This is something that I aspire to. Dickinson's work has been an example, an inspiration for me in that regard.

As far as the poem you just read, I think Dickinson is saying that there is some underlying essence, call it "divine," in nature, in the world, that is always there but not yet revealed to our "unfurnished" eye, the eye that is not trained to see beyond the outer surfaces of things. From my experience as a painter, when I sit down to paint or even before when I am setting up the motif, there is a shift that needs to happen. The shift from seeing things in the normal, ordinary way of individual separate objects, to seeing things in relationship freed from any conceptual labels. The first summer that I spent with Lennart was an awakening experience for me in this regard, learning to observe the world as interrelated shapes and colors, in an abstract kind of way. It's a very wonderful place to inhabit, and there is the feeling of no end to the discoveries that can be made. As the painting progresses, it requires a certain amount of vigilance and remembering to stay with it, to stay with the investigation and to not fall back into the ordinary way of seeing things. It's been an ongoing training.

RAIL You have to be really open to have that happen, in a state of surrender.

S.J.W. Yes, you have to be in a very receptive state and allow the blinders to fall.

RAIL Now the quote—I wanted you to explain because I don't really understand it. "A mathematical understanding of space, the way shapes move across a flat surface, requires a different balance."

S.J.W. I don't know where that quote is from but I think I must have been talking about Piero della Francesca, an artist from fifteenth-century Italy who has been with me pretty much all of these nearly sixty years. I was introduced to his work by Philip Guston when I was a student at the New York Studio School, and Guston was teaching there. He came in once a week and did the rounds of the advanced students. I was still a beginning student, but anybody could follow him from studio to studio and listen to his brilliant monologues. One particular day, I remember it so clearly—Guston had brought a book of Piero della Francesca's work, and he showed a detail from one of the Arezzo frescoes. I had no idea who Piero was. I just loved his work right away. I didn't have to be educated to love it. There was just a big feeling for it, immediately. I've been to Italy six times, and on every trip I've done part of the Piero della Francesca tour. The thing about Piero's work is that first of all, he was known as much as a mathematician as an artist. Along with Paolo Uccello, he was one of the developers of linear perspective for painters. His own work shows an incredibly accurate and deep understanding of spatial relationships. Everything is mathematically plotted three-dimensionally, but at the same time he retains something from medieval art, a beautiful movement of flat shapes across the surface of the painting. I think every painter, whether consciously or not, has to work with what I feel is the great metaphysical challenge of painting. We have this three-dimensional experience of the world, and



Susan Jane Walp, *Cantaloupe Cut-open with Asparagus Spear (Valle Reale)*, 2025-26. Oil on linen, 11 x 11 ½ inches. Courtesy the artist and Tibor de Nagy.

how do we find an equivalent for it on the flat surface of the painting, of the panel, of the wall? For me, there's something about the balance that he has found between those two things, the three-dimensional and the two-dimensional, that feels like exactly where I would like my own paintings to be. It's something that I aspire to. His work has been a constant inspiration for me in this way. The other thing I'm drawn to is the emotional restraint in his work.

RAIL **Thank you, that explains the quote very well. I'd like to read a Guston quote about Piero he said at the Studio School:**

> **Piero seems to have some kind of, I have to use the word cosmic. As if all these forms, buildings and columns and draperies and figures, the way in which distances are located, the slowness of spaces moving up and down, the spaces across and at the same time moving in and out like planets, are like a celestial system of some kind, which produces this feeling of wisdom.**

I think that is expressed beautifully. When I read that again the other day, I was thinking of your paintings. It's that same kind of feeling, that there's something going on between your objects in the still lifes. It's not what you think it is. It's not really a grapefruit, not really a brick, or a hair scrunchy. It's like these objects become something else of a whole. What you just said about your quote along with Guston's quote, I understand so much more about where you're coming from with your still life. You often use a cut-open fruit so that you can see inside to the abstract design of the seeds. You use photocopies underneath the fruit, as well as black-and-white photos. You use a knife, a fork. You have this wire incense holder that Howard Norman gave to you. All of these are not just objects; you have a personal relationship to the objects.

S.J.W. Yes, I do have a personal relationship with some of the individual objects. I'm always on the lookout for objects that I could use in a still life. For a while, I was using old bars of soap. Soap bars get these cracks that I find very beautiful. I would steal them from public bathrooms. Or if I saw one in a friend's house that had a nice pattern of cracks, I would ask if I could have it. A few years ago, I was at the painter Nick DeFriez's house. He's someone you and I both know here in the community, and he had a beautiful knife on a cheese plate. I took one look at that knife and just fell in love with it. I already knew I wanted that knife, and I said, "Nick, that is really a beautiful knife." And he said to me, "That knife is one of my favorite possessions." I realized, well, this is going to be a little trickier than I thought, but within three days I had the knife in my studio. Eventually of course I returned it, and then a few months later he surprised me by giving it to me as a Christmas present. I now have used it in a number of paintings.

RAIL **You said that in setting up these motifs, you wait for that experience when you know that this is it. It's like a holding. You are held by it.**

S.J.W. Yes, I am waiting for the image to appear. I start paintings with the new moon. The setting up of the motif is a very improvisational part of the process, something that I really look forward to. Sometimes I'll start with an idea, or maybe with

an object that I'm interested in, but I have to be willing to let go of that initial idea or any personal attachment to the objects. I just take a lot of stuff out of my still life closet. Maybe I've been to the grocery store and I've found some beautiful fruits or vegetables, and I just start arranging and rearranging, and then at some point the image will appear. It can happen from one moment to the next. It's not there, and then suddenly it's there. I really wait for that moment. It always comes as a surprise. If out of impatience I settle for less, then inevitably I end up not staying with the painting. So I've learned to be patient.

RAIL Once you have the motif, you said that you like to initially cover the whole canvas. Do you do that with color? How do you start with filling the canvas?

S.J.W. I use big brushes and don't premix paint in the beginning. I just kind of pull paint from the palette that I've set out. I'm looking more for the organization of the values because I feel that's really, really important. The color can be refined later in the process. The image has so much to do with that value structure, how the interconnected shapes exist on that scale from lightest to darkest, the patterns they form.

RAIL You have north-facing windows in your studio. Do you paint at night or do you always paint during the day? Is it always natural light that you work in?

S.J.W. Yes. I only work on the still lifes during the day from natural light.

RAIL When I went to your studio last week, there was a big painting on the wall by your easel. It was of two figures. How big is that painting?

S.J.W. 44 by 54 inches. It's not really that big, but for me it's huge.

RAIL Your still lifes are usually under nine inches.

S.J.W. The new ones are a bit bigger than that. Up to 12 by 12 inches. Usually they're square or close to square.

RAIL This big painting has figures, and it's not square. You've been working on it for a while. It has the quality of your still lifes; the two figures, a man and a woman, the background, everything has that same feeling of stillness. How is working on that painting different from your still lifes?

S.J.W. My earliest work after my studies was narrative figure paintings. Initially they were large but over time they grew smaller and became what I called diary paintings, scenes from my daily life. I used memory and sometimes studies from life, but they were largely invented. They came to a kind of dead end, and that's when the shift to still life happened. I felt as if I had come up against the limits of my imagination and so turned back to something that felt more reliable you could say. I have continued those figurative paintings in various ways throughout the years, but the still lifes have been my main focus.

RAIL That's interesting, because you have nineteen black notebooks in your studio from 2014 and there's lots of figures in them.



Susan Jane Walp, *Honeydew Cut-open with Fern and Beans*, 2025-26. Oil on linen, 10 ½ x 11 inches. Courtesy the artist and Tibor de Nagy.

S.J.W. The notebooks were started after my husband died, now almost thirteen years ago, and initially it was a way for me to work through my grief. I would wake up and spend a few hours in the morning to give myself a break from the really deep grief I was experiencing. I can't even call up what those feelings were. A lot of the imagery had to do with Michael and our relationship. So it was a way also to be spending time with him. I wasn't ready to let go of him yet, and our life together. I never intended to show that work to anyone. The thing that was so liberating about it is that I decided I wasn't going to worry about my lack of knowledge of the human figure. I was just going to let it come out as it was going to come out, and it was very freeing for me in that way. I was working primarily with water-based media. I just used whatever I had there on my drawing table to get the image that was coming into my mind onto the paper. At a certain point, it started becoming more of a dream journal. As with the still life, I was working from a visual motif, but in this case from what I could see in my mind 's eye of what I could remember from a particular dream. Sometimes it was just the color or tone of the dream. So it was very clear visually what I was working from, and this seemed a lot easier for me than working purely from my imagination. In the earlier work, when I was doing those large and small figurative narrative paintings, I was very influenced by Balthus, and so there was this kind of anxiety of influence thing going on. I couldn't really do anything without it feeling like a third-rate version of Balthus. I felt like my own imagination had come up against some insurmountable obstacle. It was a very dark time in my development. And the interesting thing is, when I turned to still life and to working again from direct observation, which had been my training with Lennart, I found so much more freedom there than I did working from my imagination. The more I looked at something, the more it seemed to open an infinite kind of world. However, when I started working from the dreams in the black books, I realized, oh my God, this is my mind. Every night it is making up these images, and there is no end to what it can do; it is one endless surprise. So that was interesting information, and I still don't really quite know what to do with it.

RAIL Throughout your life, you have aligned with disciplines with inherent limitations: still life, poetry, the Go game, Indian drumming, languages, Buddhism, even gardening has limitations. What is it about limitations that you seek?

S.J.W. It's true that certain parallel disciplines have played a role in my life as an artist, starting with the board game Go, back in my twenties when I was living in Denver. Later here in Vermont, I was a student of aikido until I injured my shoulder, and then for a while I studied Indian tabla drumming. And I've studied different languages. These were more than passing interests—I really did apply myself in some cases for long stretches of time, but they never challenged my devotion to painting and I never gained any real expertise in any of them. Maybe Go is the one exception, but now I haven't played for decades. I don't know why I have felt the need to have something else going on that was a focused discipline of its own. Maybe to bring a broader perspective and not to get too fundamentalist about painting. And to remind myself of the wonderment of being a beginner. I suppose I am a natural kind of student. I've always loved learning and being a beginner at something. Since 2006, when I found my way to Vajrayana Buddhism here in Vermont, the need for another parallel discipline seems to have fallen away and my daily life is more about bringing the knowledge and practice of Buddhism and painting together.

RAIL What books have been important to you?

S.J.W. My two "bibles" in the studio are an edition of Agnes Martin's writings (*Agnes Martin: Writings/Schriften*, edited by Dieter Schwarz), and the Clark Coolidge collection of the writings and talks of Philip Guston (*Philip Guston: Collected Writings, Lectures, and Conversations*). I know the latter also has been important to you, Dian. It's of interest to me that both Guston and Martin, along with a number of writers and other artists, attended D.T. Suzuki's lectures at Columbia University in the early 1950s, which served as one of the important introductions of Buddhism to the West. Agnes Martin never uses the word Buddhism, but her writings are infused with its ideas.

RAIL How is your studio set up? And what is your daily painting routine?

S.J.W. I work mostly in the mornings. Light is everything for me. My favorite thing is to be in the studio just as the light is coming into the world. As you can see, I have been a spiritual "seeker," for lack of a better term, my whole life, and my mornings are reserved for meditation, study, and studio, not necessarily in that order. I try very hard not to schedule anything else in the morning. In the studio, for as long as I can remember, I begin by sitting quietly for a few minutes, to help decide what I want to work on for the day. Then I say a kind of prayer—it may sound a little corny, but I don't know what other word to use—that will help me find a calm and peaceful state of mind with the hope that these qualities could manifest in the work, and someday the paintings might provide a small light in that way out in the world.

The main part of the studio is not so big, only 200 square feet, with an additional 150 square feet of closet/storage space built into the eaves. Because of the wall of windows and the cathedral ceiling, the studio feels spacious and kind of chapel-like. I'm glad you asked me to describe it because it is making me realize how much I love it. I just recently packed up paintings after a very focused summer of work for the Tibor exhibit, and for the past few weeks I've been catching up on other things. I am missing the studio and eager to get back to work.

RAIL You talk so much about how everything shifted for you when you were studying with Lennart Anderson, but there's also a moment when you were seventeen while reading *Tonio Kröger* by Thomas Mann. How that was a moment you realized you could have a life as an artist, and then being with Lennart you realized that you could have a life as a painter.

S.J.W. My brothers and I went to a high school in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, that was run by the Moravian Church. I had a very wonderful German teacher there, Madame Girodet. She was Swiss, and taught French and German. We read the novella *Tonio Kröger* in German, and it made a big impression on me at the time. This was before I knew that I was going to become an artist. It is basically the coming-of-age story about Thomas Mann himself, whose mother was Brazilian and had a kind of southern sensibility, and his father who was a northern German. There was something about this difference between the parents, south and north, that contributed to his becoming a writer. I recognized a parallel in my own upbringing with my parents. It's a book I've never forgotten.

RAIL Why were you studying German since ninth grade?

S.J.W. The school actually was conducted completely in German for many years. It was founded in the 1700s, during a time when a lot of Europeans, many of them German-speaking, were settling in that part of Pennsylvania to escape religious persecution in Europe.

RAIL Why did your parents send you to the Moravian Preparatory School, now called the Moravian Academy?

S.J.W. We lived in a rural area, and when it came to high school, the township did not have a high school, and we would have been bussed pretty far away to a school in another township. We had cousins who were attending Moravian Prep, and I talked my parents into allowing me to apply. A few years later my brothers followed. It was a wonderful experience. The Moravians are a really wonderful people, very education-oriented, and also are pacifists. There were only twenty-eight people in my graduating class.

I had an upbringing in the Lutheran Church, which was the religion of my mother's family. My mother's parents were immigrants from rural Austria, the Burgenland, where the Protestants were a tiny minority. My paternal grandmother came from a Mennonite background. My parents weren't particularly religious beyond going to church every Sunday, but my grandmothers both were, and I seem to have inherited their religious bent. When I was nine years old, we had just moved into our new home, and one night while I was saying my prayers, kneeling by the bed as I had been taught to do, I had a kind of vision; it's not easy to describe, a kind of vision of infinity. I think it's not so uncommon for someone that age to have this.

RAIL Yeah, I had one of those too at that age.

S.J.W. For quite some time, I would look forward to bedtime. In the dark of my bedroom, I was able to return to that place, over and over again. I never mentioned it to my parents or to anyone until I was well into my thirties. Looking back, I think there has always been something in me searching to understand what that experience was about.

RAIL Meditation is still very much a part of your life and practice as a painter.

S.J.W. One of the things about still life painting is that it's very close to meditation. A meditation practice involves setting up a situation where you are eliminating distractions. The whole process of quieting the mind is supported by the environment in which you're doing the meditation, and working from still life is a lot like that.

RAIL What is it about the Indian miniatures that captivates you?

S.J.W. I think it's the level of invention. The work is done within very strict limitations. They were illustrating specific stories, and often related to specific seasons and times of day. The technique itself was quite restricted, and yet the level of invention in the compositions from piece to piece by anonymous painters is just remarkable.

RAIL Similar to Piero, because he was doing frescoes and had the limitation of the plaster and of time, as well as very specific stories.

S.J.W. The Indian miniatures place more emphasis on the flat shapes moving across the surface of the page than on any logical understanding of the three-dimensional space, as in Piero. The other western painter who has been really important for me is Johannes Vermeer. There's a lot in common with Piero in terms of that balance between an understanding of the space and the movement of shapes across the picture plane. There was a big



Susan Jane Walp, *Blueberries in a Red Cup with Twist of Wire and Shadows*, 2026. Oil on linen. 8 x 8 ⅛ inches. Courtesy the artist and Tibor de Nagy.

Vermeer exhibit in Amsterdam at the Rijksmuseum a few years back. I went with my painter friend, Ron Milewicz. We had memberships to the museum so we didn't have to wait in lines. We were there for three days and we went through the entire exhibit twice a day, so six times. It was one of the most remarkable viewing experiences of my life, completely inspiring.

RAIL Contemporary painters you find inspiring?

S.J.W. Oh, I think I will refrain from answering this for the list would be too long and there would be omissions I would later regret. Suffice it to say that my trips to the city are very important for me. I look at a lot of stuff; studio visits with friends, museums, galleries. Mostly I am waiting to see the thing that makes me want to be back home in the studio and painting.

RAIL Other books that are important to you besides the Agnes Martin and Guston conversations you mentioned before?

S.J.W. François Jullien's *In Praise of Blandness*, which I discovered quite by accident in a bookstore in Boulder, Colorado. Jullien is a French sinologist and philosopher. The main idea of the book is that in traditional Chinese aesthetics it's a positive thing for a work to have a quality of "blandness," that he defines as a kind of neutrality or detachment, not having a lot of ego, not calling out for attention. In Western aesthetics, "blandness" would not be seen as a virtue. Maybe from the perspective of a painter of small still lifes that can feel somehow inconsequential in the current world, the book came as a kind of confirmation of something that I want to believe in. Another book is *The Ink Dark Moon*, poems by two very early (ninth to eleventh centuries) Japanese women poets, translated by Jane Hirshfield and Mariko Aratani. They are love poems grounded in nature and Buddhist thought. They are tankas, a form strictly governed by the number of syllables in a line, a pattern of fives and sevens. This is again going back to the inspiration from Emily Dickinson. That you can be infinitely inventive within a very strict form. My interest in poetic forms led me during COVID to take on an online course on the sonnet.

RAIL Once, when I was working in Hawaii and things weren't going very well, I had a lot of free time so I ended up writing one hundred sonnets in the hotel room. Shakespeare wrote one hundred, so I challenged myself to do that. Then I would go to the library and look up Michelangelo's sonnets, which is the Italian form, and I also worked on the Italian sonnet form. That joy of having limitations, I understand.

S.J.W. Yes, I so agree. It's a paradox—the freedom that a good limit can provide. What I also love in the sonnet form is how it is structured to surprise the reader. You're reading along, and things are presented in a certain way. And then comes the *volta* (the turn), the change where everything shifts and is turned on its head. I really, really love that idea of surprise. I remember seeing the Giorgio Morandi show at the Guggenheim, which I think was around 1980. Even though he is using the same objects over and over again, as I was traveling from one painting to the next, I would almost gasp because each painting came as such a big surprise.

RAIL When you see an exhibit of yours, do you experience that surprise?

S.J.W. I don't know if I can make that assessment myself. It's something I hope is true for those who see the work. Generally I've liked seeing my work in the exhibits that I've had in New York, and tend to feel more critical in the studio. Distance is helpful for me to appreciate it.

RAIL What's it like for you at the openings?

S.J.W. It's good. For such a private person who loves her solitude, I'm also a little bit of a party girl.

RAIL I think that's partly living in Vermont. When you get to New York, it's thrilling; there's just so much. It's energetically completely different. What is it that Vermont gives you that New York doesn't, and what does New York give you that Vermont doesn't, and why are these two places actually complementary for your work?

S.J.W. I loved living in the city. But as a young artist I was highly impressionable. It was very hard for me to really know who I was as a painter in the city. Every time I walked out the door, I felt overwhelmed by so much to take in. When I moved to Vermont, the first seven years when I started working from still life, I didn't show my work to anyone, except for taking a painting or two to show Lennart when I visited the city. Other than that, I was working in isolation. I needed that time to figure out who I was as a painter, and the solitude really suited that process. The relationship of community and solitude has been of ongoing interest for me because although I really love my solitude, and as an artist depend on it, at the same time, throughout my life I've been drawn to various communities of people sharing a common aim. First the Moravians at my high school, then the community of students at the New York Studio School, and now my connection to the Buddhist community here in Vermont for the last twenty years. It seems to be part of my genetic makeup, wanting to be a part of a group where your own ego is not so important. The best moments in the studio can also be an experience of losing that sense of ego.

Dian Parker is an arts writer for the *Observer*, *Art & Object*, and other arts publications. She trained at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London, and now lives in the hills of Vermont, working on a novel.



Susan Jane Walp, *Apples in a Green Glass Bowl*, 2026. Oil on linen. 10 x 10 ⅜ inches. Courtesy the artist and Tibor de Nagy.