Homes and Habitat Along Darby Creek

A Year Long Sabbatical Project

Alyce Grunt

During the 2016 - 2017 school year I completed an educational sabbatical in which I created a portfolio of oil paintings that models the concentration section of the Advanced Placement Studio Art exam.

This book is designed with my students in mind. I aim to share challenges I experienced during this project, including the technical aspects of painting architecture and landscape on location, as well as subject matter considerations I made along the way.

I would like to thank the William Penn School District for supporting this sabbatical project. Also, a special thanks goes to Lansdowne resident and historian Matthew Schultz for his support and encouragement for this project. He is the author of *Images of America: Views of Lansdowne*.

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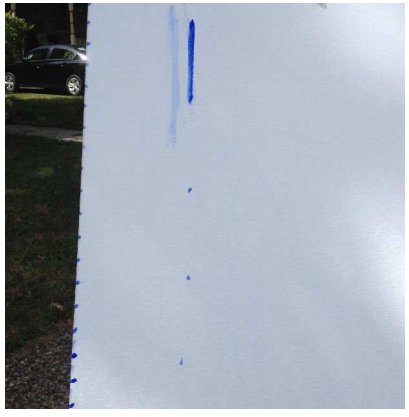
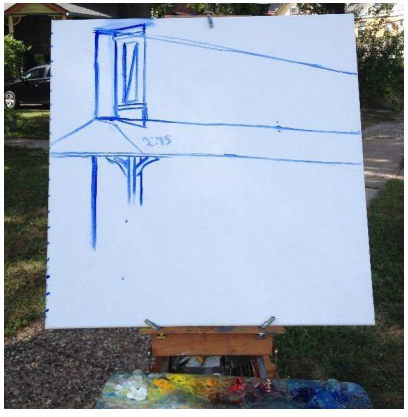
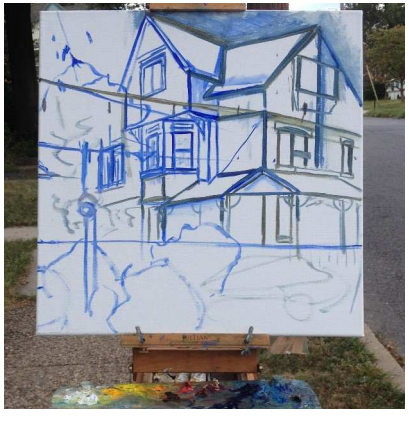
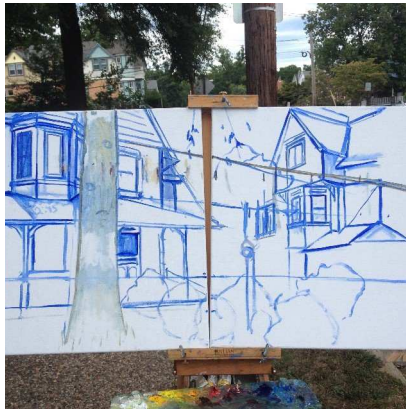
In my experience teaching AP Studio Art, students struggle with developing a thematic body of twelve pieces of artwork for the concentration section of the exam. Often students will start off thinking a concentration means making twelve pieces related by genre and subject matter, such as twelve still life paintings with reflective surfaces. However, students learn that an idea may take shape in many forms. If students delve deeper into their initial interest and find ways to develop a unifying thread through twelve pieces of artwork, they ultimately can be successful developing a strong concentration section. These students take their initial idea and create artwork that helps them explore it in depth. They may take the idea of reflective surfaces and think about what that looks like in another context- their home or their community, for example. They might conclude their project with multiple genres or styles but still show a unified examination of a topic of interest.

In setting out to undertake this project, I, too, wanted to paint subjects of personal interest. As I thought about my work, I noted that I am strongly drawn to both natural habitats and built environments and the relationship between the two. In particular, I like creek settings and older homes. It seemed like a natural fit, therefore, to focus my energies in and around the Darby Creek, a portion of which runs through the historic town in which I teach, Lansdowne, Pennsylvania. Lansdowne even has several designated historic districts that feature intact examples of period architecture from the late 19th through early 20th century. The question for me during this project has been this: How do I paint the architecture and natural environments along the Darby Creek to create a cohesive exploration of a place?

I invite students to determine if and how the artwork I've made works together cohesively. I believe analyzing the work in this context, no matter one's conclusion, will help further students' understanding about developing a unified body of artwork. I look forward to the conversations with them that this work sparks.

Note the segment in first image above. All subsequent lines will be related to this length, called my unit of measurement. This is how I keep everything in proportion.

Triptych Habitat, 20 x 60"
This was painted on Owen Avenue in Lansdowne, PA.
These houses are part of the Lansdowne Park Historic District in Lansdowne.

I selected this view because I liked all of the geometric architectural shapes framed through the thick veil of oak leaves in the foreground.

Because this is a triptych, I was able to paint one canvas at a time (as opposed to taking over the sidewalk with a 60" long canvas). This was an exciting discovery as it allowed me to work much larger than I normally would while out on location. I did not anticipate just how challenging it would be to keep my proportions consistent between canvasses, a crucial step in getting the perspective to be convincing. While I was working a groundhog popped out. Though I was focused on the architecture and large trees, it was a good reminder that other species call this place home too.

Peeking House, 20 x 20"

Below, working on location with a limited palette (essentially two versions of each primary (red, yellow and blue) plus white.

This location provided a nice balance of architecture and nature, especially as an iconic Lansdowne home is partially obscured from view.

Right, completed work painted on Lacrosse Avenue in Lansdowne, PA.

These houses are part of the Lansdowne Park Historic District in Lansdowne.

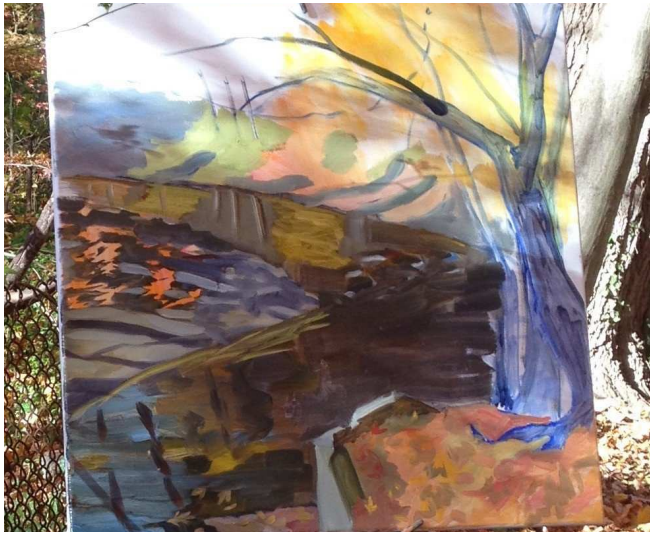
This piece actually is a continuation of a painting I made several years ago. I put them together to make a diptych, something that I revisited during the course of my sabbatical.

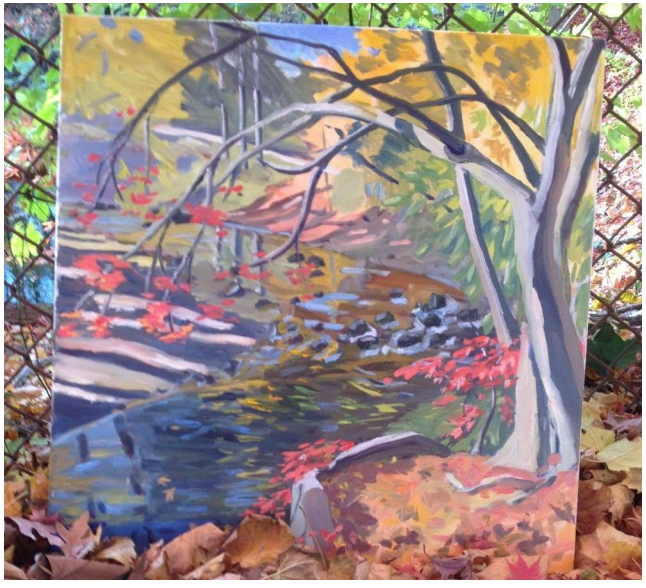
I've begun to block in the colors. The painting will only appear consistent if the rest of the work is painted during a similar window of time. For *Triptych Habitat* I literally noted the time (2:45) in the line drawing.

Here note the strong light and shadow pattern on my canvas. I have to be mindful of how lighting conditions can impact how I see my work. To judge its progress, it helps to occasionally move the work out of uneven light.

Antiquity in Front Yard, 24 x 48"
This was painted on Greenwood Avenue in Lansdowne, PA.
This house is part of the Henry Albertson Historic District in Lansdowne.

I was attracted to this subject in part due to how the natural environment almost engulfs this home. By adding the second panel on the right I hoped to more fully capture this feeling. The completed painting shows the original painting on the left, and the newer painting on the right. I ended up re-working the first painting to unify the entire composition.



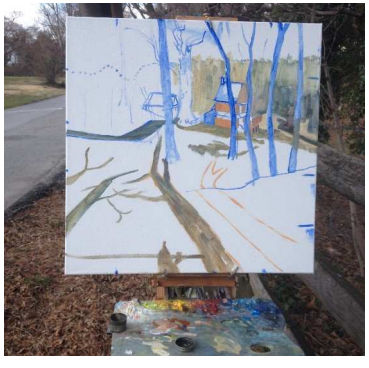


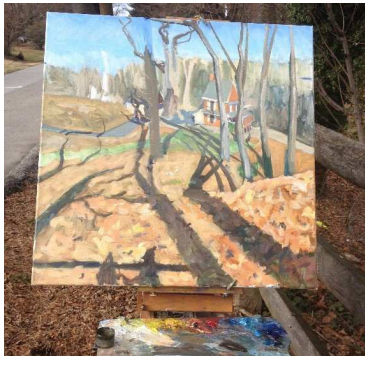
Darby Creek with Fall,
24 x 24"
This piece was painted on Lansdowne Court in Lansdowne, PA.

I selected this view because it contained an interesting curve in the creek. It also shows what I believe is the remnant of a bridge that once crossed the Darby creek.

I tried to keep my colors transparent to allow for a feeling of light coming through the leaves, especially in the upper left.

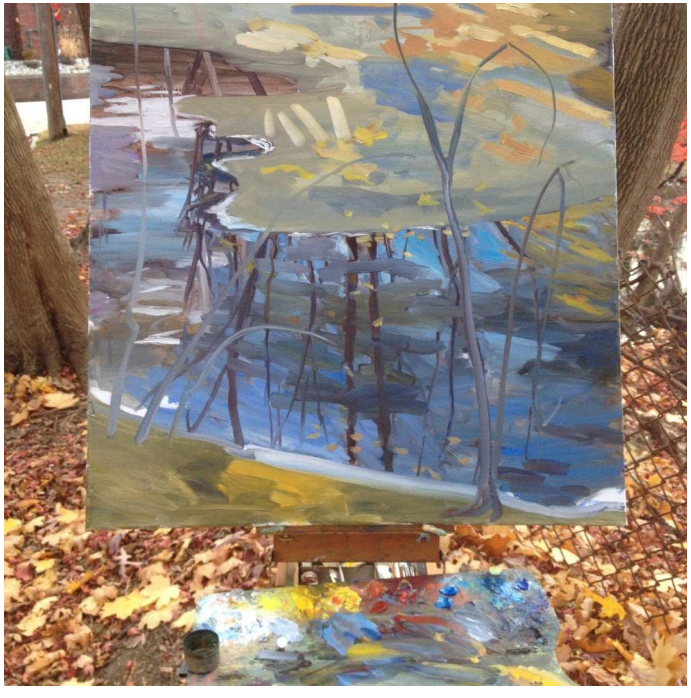
I was surprised to observe just how much darker the water was than the land. To suggest the nearby colors that were reflecting into the water, I darkened reflected colors, especially in the foreground.



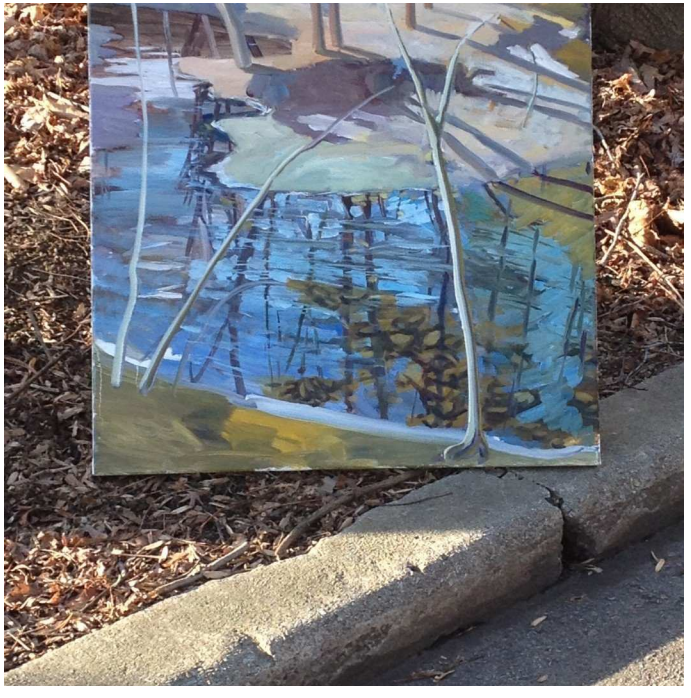


Shadows Above Creek,
24 x 24"
This piece was painted on Hilldale Road above Darby Creek looking towards Yeadon, PA.

This painting felt like an important bridge between my more architecturally focused paintings and the pure landscapes where wooded settings figure prominently.
In the second image on the left page, note the cardboard "L" shapes on the palette. These are used to create a tool called a viewfinder. It is adjustable and allows me to create a frame that is the same ratio as my canvas (in this case 1:1). By using a framing device I can plan my composition before I begin painting and get everything to fit where it's supposed to as I work.



This painting went through many changes before completion. The moving water and changing weather created challenges for me while painting. I liked the loose brushwork but wasn't quite satisfied with the image.



Here I made big changes from the previous image, but I was still unsatisfied with the direction in which the piece was going. I liked the rocks visible through the water but in the end decided the painting was better without them.

Darby Creek with Winter,
24 x 24"
This piece was painted on Lansdowne Court in Lansdowne, PA.

I struggled with the water during this cold winter painting. On some days the water was still and had strong reflections; on other days the wind disrupted its surface.

I finally settled on the rippled water and worked only when this condition was present. This meant covering up most of the rocks that were painted under more still water conditions on the previous page.

In *Views of Lansdowne*, there is an image from 1910 of this section of Darby Creek, frozen, with a rope bridge in the background and children skating on the ice.

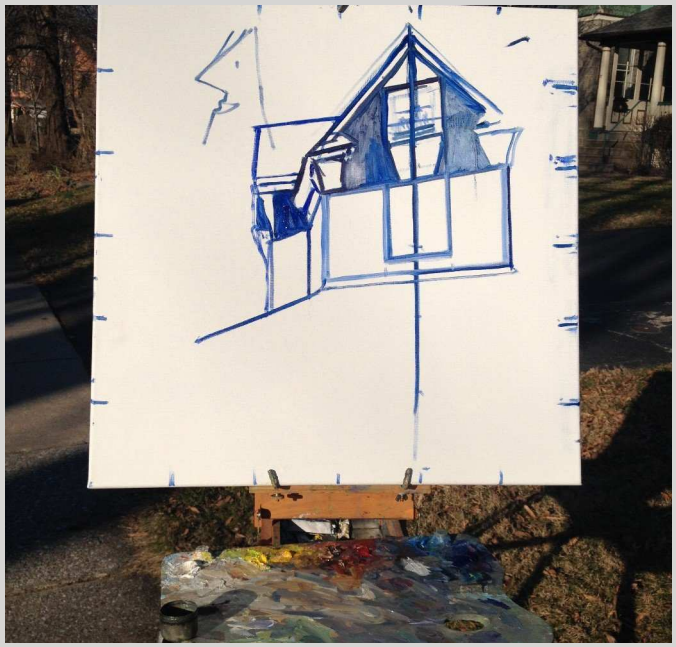
Painting along a bridge over Darby Creek felt like another important piece that would literally 'bridge' the subjects of the natural habitats and built dwellings in the Darby Creek watershed. The remnants of bridges, though no longer recognizable, also figure in both of my pieces painted along Darby Creek in Lansdowne (page 9 and page 13).

A thread of history weaves through the subjects I painted during my sabbatical. Darby Creek was settled as early as the 1600s, and it powered mills up until the late 1800s. Then railroad stations sprang up along the watershed, leading to the development of more housing, such as what is found in the two districts where I painted for much of my project, the Lansdowne Park and Henry Albertson Historic Districts.

This painting was made facing Buttonwood Park in Darby.

Darby Creek with Bus, 20 x 20"

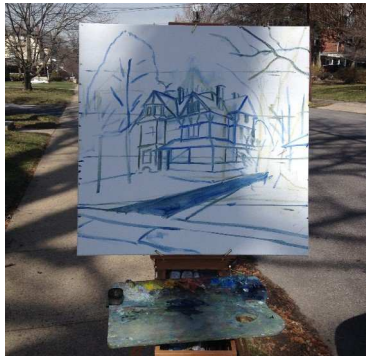
Though I had been working on my project for over 6 months, I was surprised (and frustrated) to find I had made some major errors when I started this piece. Essentially, I was shifting my view and painting from two differing vantage points. This can be an interesting effect, but I would have had to push it to an extreme for it to be intentional and not the mistake that it was. Oil paint is fairly forgiving so you will see how I re-drew over my image and corrected in the image below.

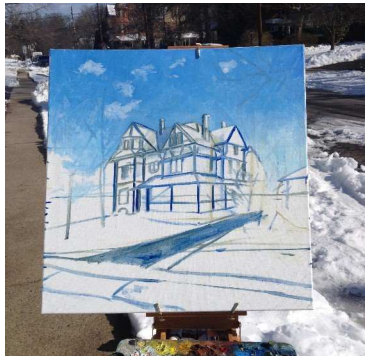
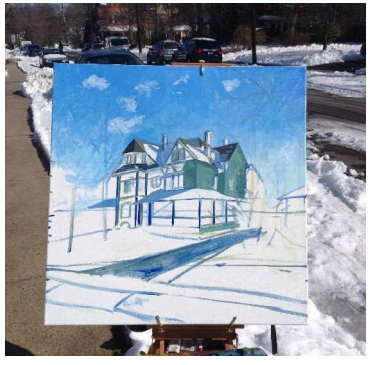
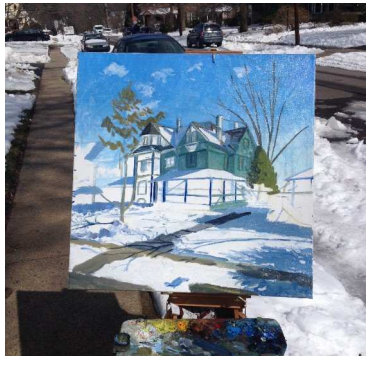
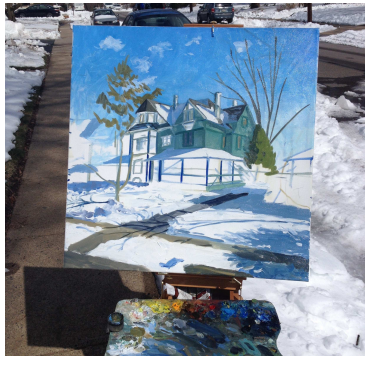


In reflecting upon why I was felled by this error, I realized that I was planning to create a diptych and include the neighboring property in a canvas that would sit to the left of this image. I was inadvertently shifting my view to the left to accommodate this other house. In the end, I decided this could stand on its own and I re-positioned myself to ensure I was painting from just one angle.

I was pleased to have a warm day that encouraged residents to lounge on their porch one morning, allowing me to discretely paint them into the view.

Porch Time, 24 x 24"
Painted on Runnemede Avenue in Lansdowne, PA.
This house is part of the Lansdowne Park Historic District in Lansdowne.

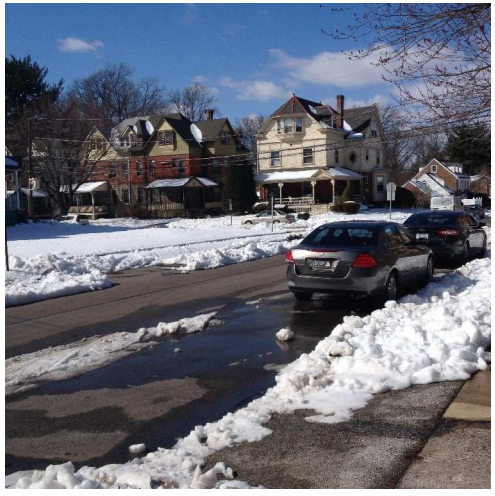


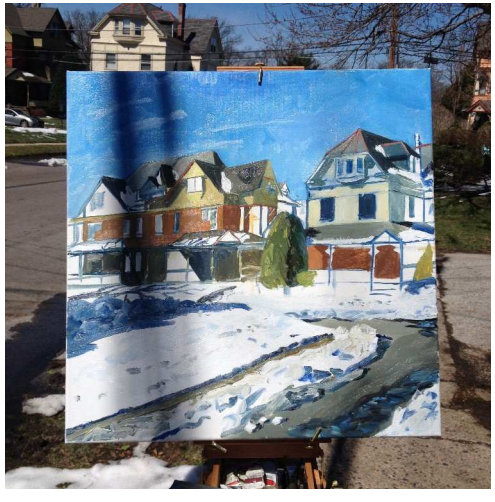
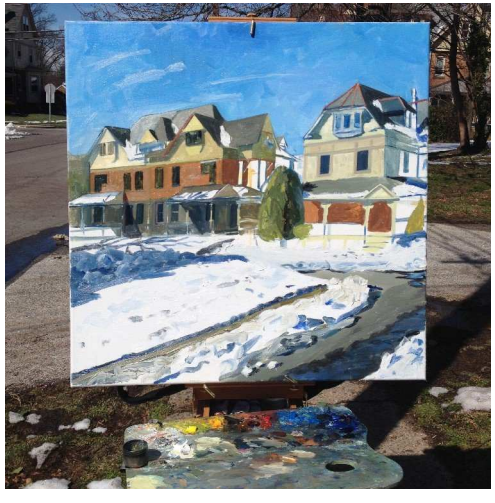





Note in the first square on the left how large the house was to be painted. This painting was begun concurrently with *Porch Time* and I hoped the two would make a diptych once completed. You can see how the tree is cropped on the right edge of the canvas. This would have lined up with the large tree on the left edge of *Porch Time*. I was already having the technical problems mentioned in *Porch Time*, and then I heard snow was in the forecast. I decided to abandon the diptych idea and instead zoom out and include more surroundings around the house. You'll see how I then shrink the house in image two and how the piece develops from there.

During this project I had the luxury of experiencing four seasons outdoors. This allowed my exploration to include the rich variety that seasonal change affords us, and to document habitats in these various circumstances.

Spring Meets Winter, 24 x 24"
Painted on Runnemede Avenue in Lansdowne, PA.
This house is part of the Lansdowne Park Historic District in Lansdowne.



This sequence documents the view for *Snow Puddles* and subsequent steps I undertook to paint it. In the second image note the marks I make around the perimeter of the canvas. I divide it up into equal segments to allow for an imaginary grid over my canvas. Ideally my unit of measurement is the length of one of these segments, which makes it easier to count and figure out how everything fits together. One can see these marks in the early stages of many of the pieces in this book.

Snow Puddles and Houses, 24 x 24"
Painted on Runnemede Avenue looking towards Lacrosse Avenue in Lansdowne, PA. These houses are part of the Lansdowne Park Historic District in Lansdowne.

Springtime Along Greenwood Avenue, 24 x 48"
Painted on Greenwood Avenue, Lansdowne, PA.
These houses are part of the Henry Albertson Historic District in Lansdowne.

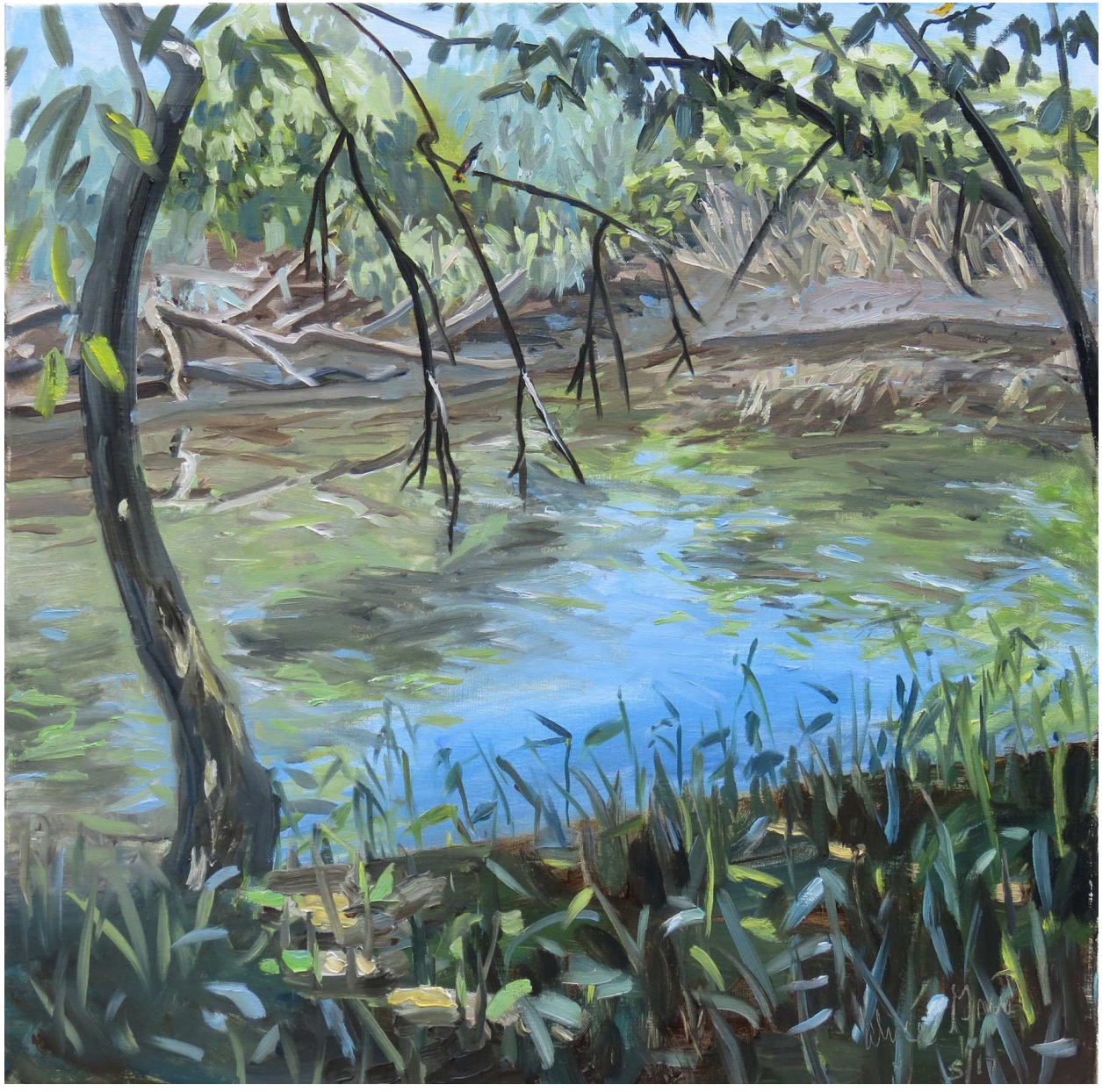
This view included several elements that I had been focusing on during this project: a clear seasonal indication (spring), historically significant homes, and vegetation overlapping architectural forms.

In the images on the left, note how when I can, I like to place my unit of measure along a central axis of my canvas. I like working from the inside out as I find measuring outward from the center easier.

At the start of this project I had conceived of completing my work where the Darby Creek ends and flows into the Delaware River at the John Heinz National Wildlife Refuge. Known as an important bird habitat in our region, it seemed like a fitting place to conclude my project. I was rewarded by several species of warblers migrating through as I worked.

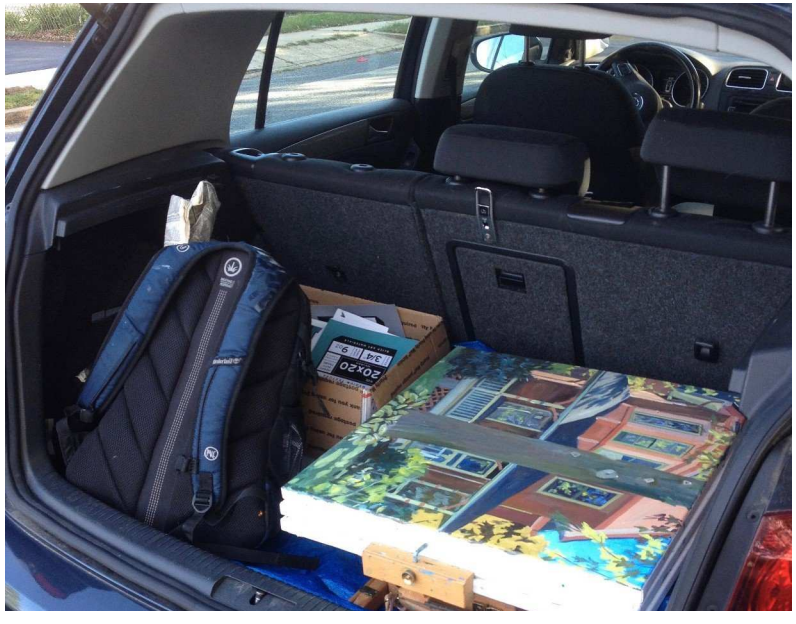
Note how between the third and fourth image I wiped out most of what I had painted for the water. I decided the wiped out marks served me well and tried to only add a little more paint to complete the water. In painting, less is often more.

Migrating Along Darby Creek, 20 x 20"
This was painted along Darby Creek in the John Heinz National Wildlife Refuge.



In conclusion, I came to think about these paintings as falling somewhere on a continuum: architectural/house portraits at one end and creeks/landscape at the other. As I painted I tried to think about moving along this scale, with some pieces serving mostly as architectural subjects and others mostly as landscape subjects. The majority of work, however, fell somewhere in-between.

In all cases I was thinking about my subjects as homes, both natural and constructed, and I enjoyed the various ways these homes co-mingled. A friend saw the pieces when I was done and commented that it's like I had made a patchwork quilt of a place. I love that description. I worked with squares throughout this project, even piecing them together in the case of the diptychs and triptych. Perhaps a way of explaining this work is that it I've been creating a patchwork of homes stitched together by the meandering path of the Darby Creek.



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