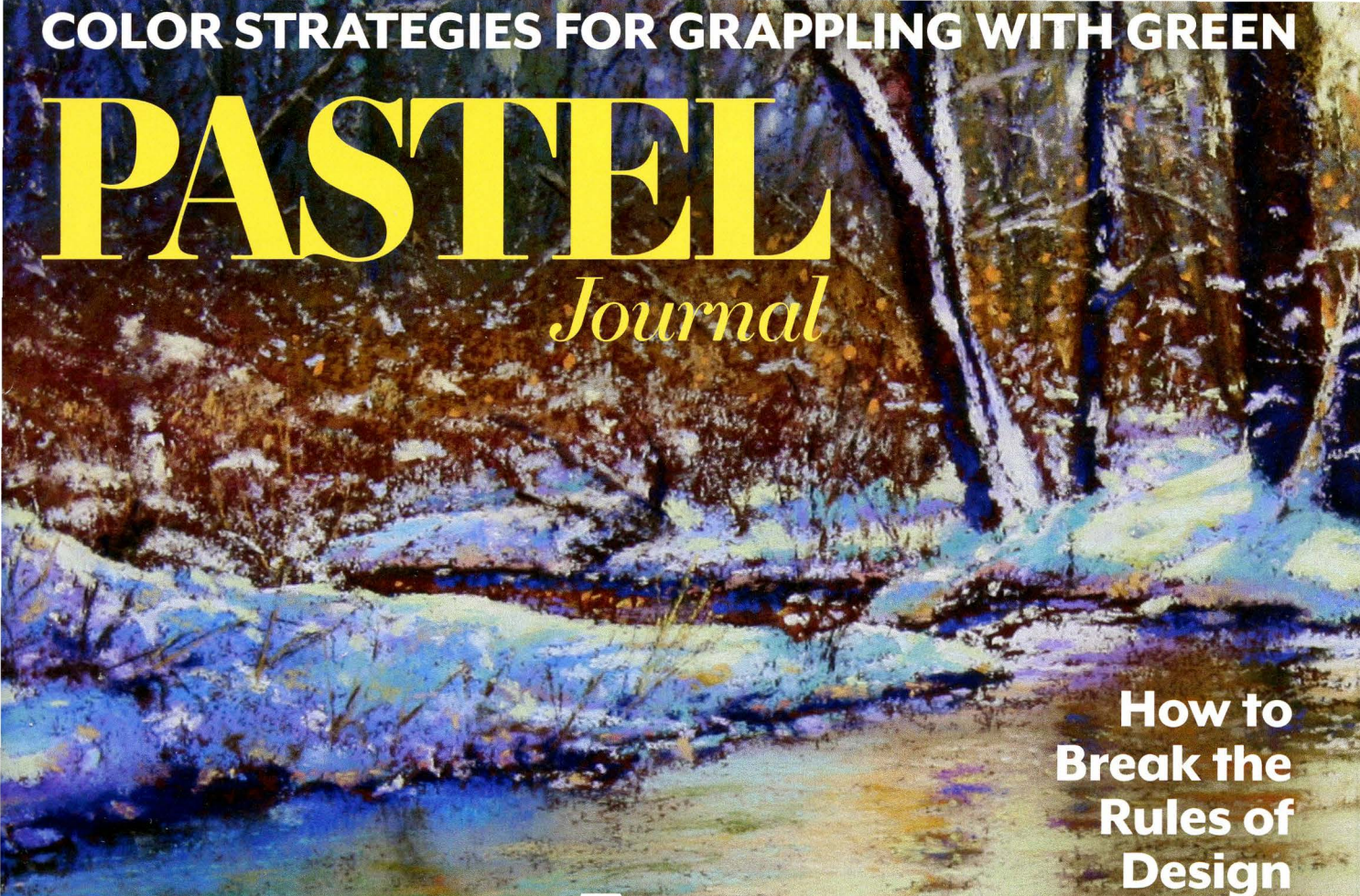
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PASTEL Journal



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Visual Delights

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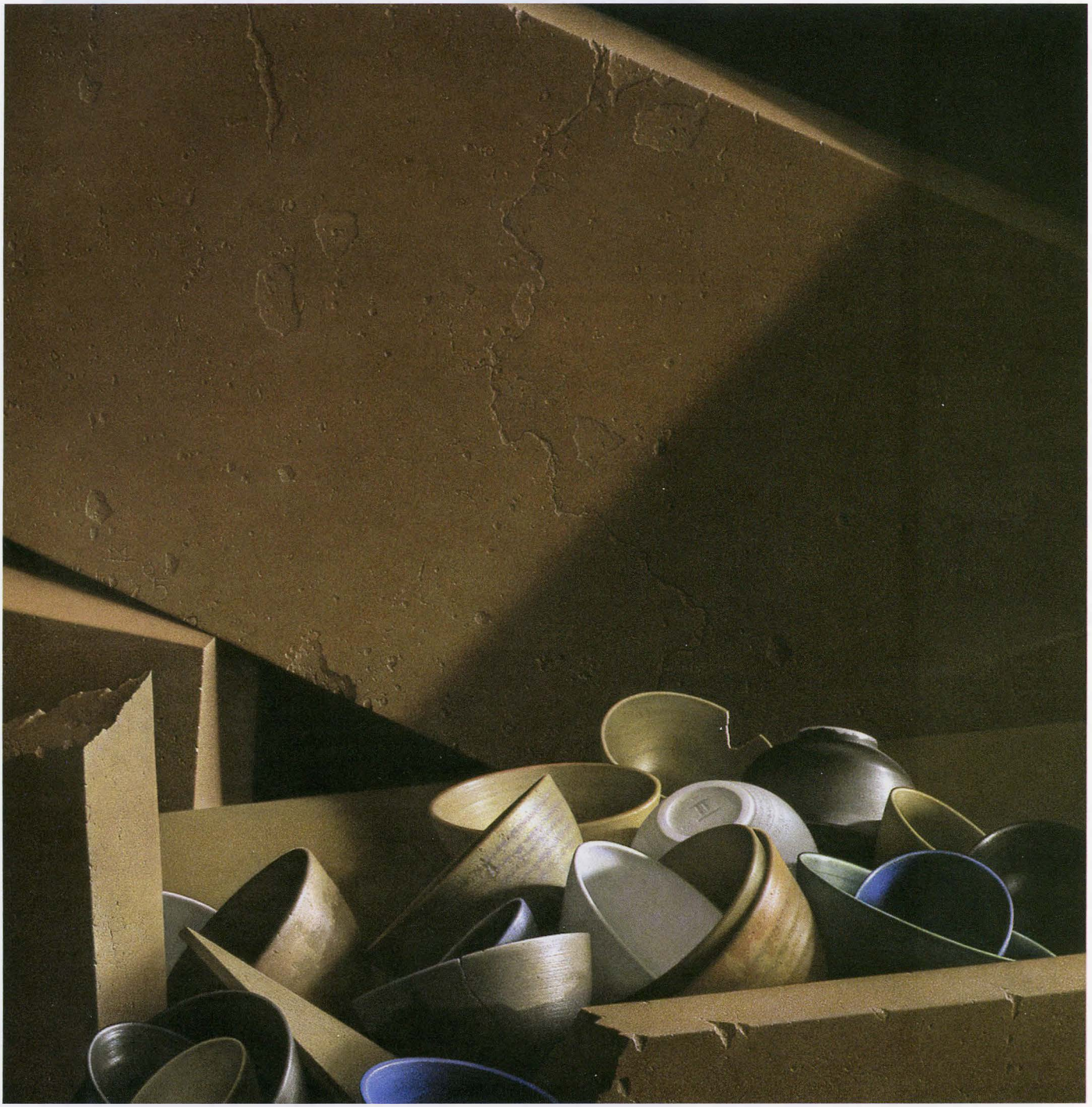
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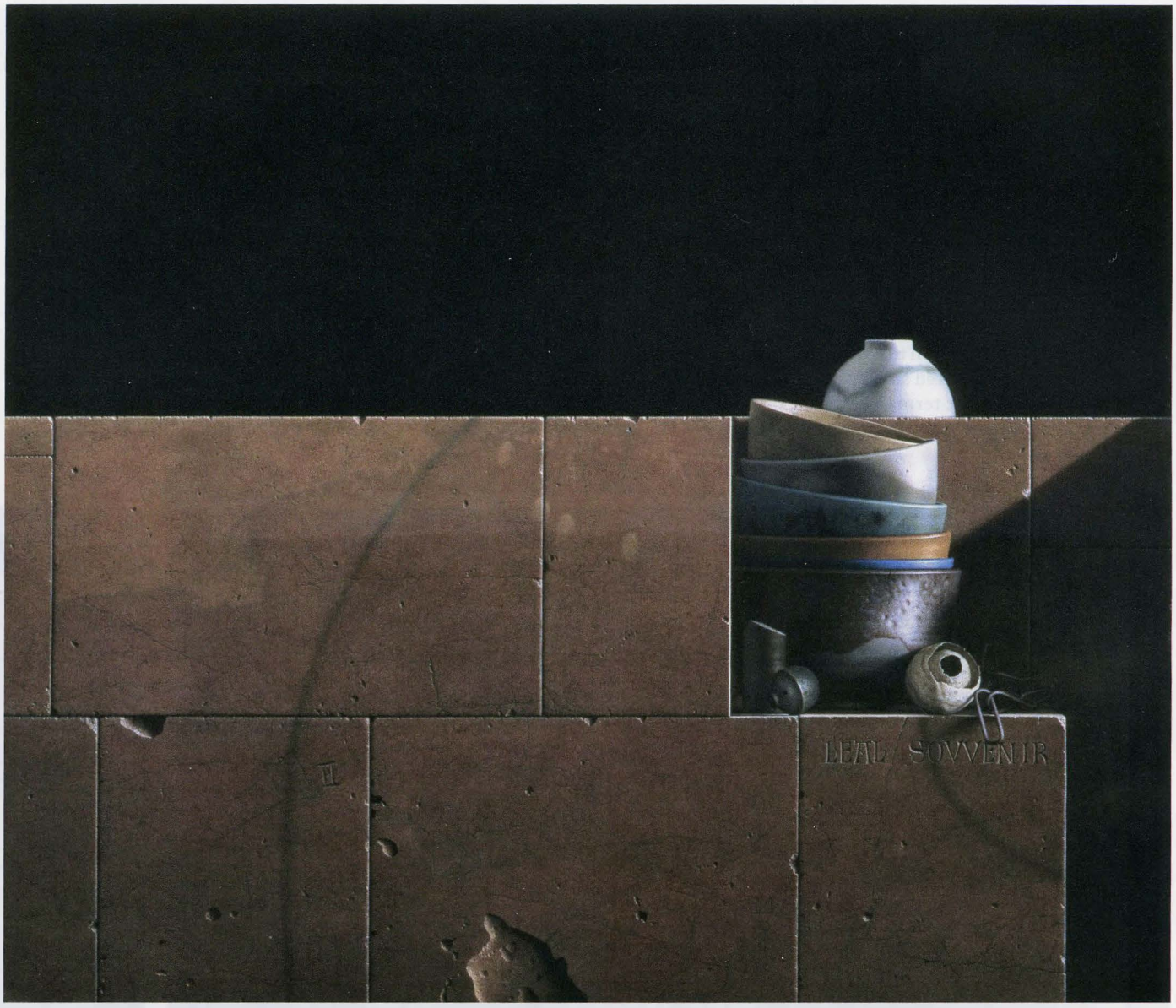
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FORUM GALLERY

OBJECTS of THOUGHT

With a recent museum retrospective that coincided with the release of a new book on his work, G. Daniel Massad continues to blaze his own artistic trail, elevating the art of still life painting. BY ROBERT K. CARSTEN





OPPOSITE
Yield (22¼x22)

ABOVE
Leal Souvenir (23x27)

To view a G. Daniel Massad painting is not unlike witnessing a fusion of past with present, of dream with memory, of the known with the unknown. His hybrid form of hyperrealism diverges from that of photorealists. Through his fine draftsmanship and refined techniques in pastel, he creates worlds in which intensely real objects appear fettered to memory, imagination, reverence and symbol.

His art is the kind that transforms the commonplace. Massad compares his intention to that of an insect consuming and making a leaf into a home. "Self-expression isn't my conscious aim," he explains, "though I know that these images come out of millions of my own memories—of life and art and especially art that reenacts some part of the world. But the personal meanings embedded in these images are very often not clear to me until I'm well into finalizing the preliminary drawing or even midway at work on a painting."

SLOWLY BUT SURELY

While a painting takes four to five months for Massad to complete, its development from initial thumbnail sketch to a finished preliminary drawing usually takes from one to several years. "I wait, sketch and develop," he explains, "in order to find an image that satisfies on all levels: its formal properties (composition, depth, color and value relationships, textures, palette), its objects both individually and as an ensemble, the atmosphere, and the way all of this conspires to create an

object of thought. At any stage, what I need in order to say 'yes' to an image is nothing more than a quiet but definite sense that everything about it matters to me. It's just a little gleam of excitement coupled with something close to confidence—that this image, I know, will work for me, and will satisfy my eye. This is, I've come to believe, my best shot at creating a piece that enriches another life."

Although Massad works to completion on one painting at a time, sometimes paintings become paired. While each one shares visual relationships and the two are often of similar format, he doesn't create them with the intention that they'll be exhibited side by side. "I think of them, in formal and thematic terms," Massad explains, "as two pieces that are talking to each other—as siblings." One thematic contrast the artist has often used shows up in the pair, *Breach* and *All Fall Down* (both below), in which objects from the natural world contrast with manufactured materials. Mirrored images in compositional design, each depicts fallen objects spilling through a break in a wall. Dry leaves have figured prominently over the years in a number of Massad's visual meditations on mortality. He views the leaves in *Breach* as the last step in a life cycle, the one from which new life may spring.

BELOW LEFT
Breach (pastel, 16¾x16½)

COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, WASHINGTON, D.C. A GIFT OF THE ARTIST IN MEMORY OF HIS PARENTS

BELOW RIGHT
All Fall Down (13½x13¼)





In the heap of children's wooden letters in *All Fall Down*, the artist offers the idea that a viewer might find or compose initials of individuals. When he was working on the piece, Massad had recently lost his mother and also a close friend, and his father was in failing health—all falling away and, like their initials, moving from light into darkness. The artist's own initials—still in the light—can be read in the far right corner.

BODY LANGUAGE

Unearthed bottles with corrosion on the surface, especially those with an iridescent patina, have long fascinated the artist, who often uses them as stand-ins for the human body. "After all," he points out, "bottle collectors use this language to describe them; bottles have body, shoulders, a neck, lip and mouth." Massad's conviction and ability, however, to imbue objects with personal and even universal associations elevates his work from the ordinary to the contemplative.

Memoria (page 22), a recent painting, depicts a jumble of fragile bottles in a narrow gulf between walls of stone. The origins of this work were thumbnail sketches Massad had from years past. "I was inexplicably drawn to work on them while I was reading books about World War I," he says, "but it wasn't until halfway through the preliminary drawing that I realized the gulf represented a trench, and the bottles, fallen soldiers." While the artist clearly puts plenty



A VERY SPECIAL PAINTING

At the age of 10, Massad accompanied his father on one of his business trips to Washington, D.C. On his way to a meeting, his father dropped him off at the National Gallery of Art (NGA), where Massad spent the day. "It was my first experience with original fine art, and I fell in love with Vermeer, Chardin, Degas and Dali's *The Sacrament of the Last Supper*. In retrospect, I know my vocation as an artist began right there—though I couldn't have put it into words at the time."

Years later, after both his parents had died, Massad started thinking about donating one of his paintings to a museum as a memorial gift. "The NGA had already gone through the lengthy process of accepting an earlier work of mine as a promised gift from a private collector," says Massad, "and it was my first choice for honoring my parents. I was thrilled when they accepted and thrilled again when they included it last year in their show, 'The Touch of Color,' tracking the history of pastel painting."



"I make art not to represent or imitate the visible world, not to fool the eye or impress with virtuosic technique, but to embody the way I experience the world."

LEFT
Memoria (15¼x14¾)

OPPOSITE
Mrs. Earth (24½x24)

of conscious effort and intent into his imagery, there's a good deal of influence that springs from his subconscious.

COMPOSING BEAUTY

To avoid static compositions, Massad is mindful of the interplay between symmetry and asymmetry, as seen in *Mrs. Earth* (opposite). The painting, titled after a poem by Walter de la Mare, one of Massad's favorite writers, is part of a series of works involving stacked objects. While the ensemble is centralized, everything is placed carefully off-center. "Putting a stack of things in the middle of a square could bring down the energy, so there's a purposeful displacement here," Massad says. "Stacking correlates to the idea of a memorial cairn, or a waymarker that someone has left on a path, or to the Jewish custom of leaving small stones on a gravestone."

One of the distinguishing characteristics of the artist's work is his inclination to load images with engaging data. Each block in this painting bears a symbol representing a planet from our solar system. The centralized star, for example, represents the Evening Star, or Venus—a name connected throughout art and lore as an idealization of love and beauty. The composition also includes constellation-like pock marks and an arc suggestive of a rainbow. At once, anchored in the particulars of object and place, Massad simultaneously unfetters our view into the vastness of earth and sky.

GETTING UNDERWAY

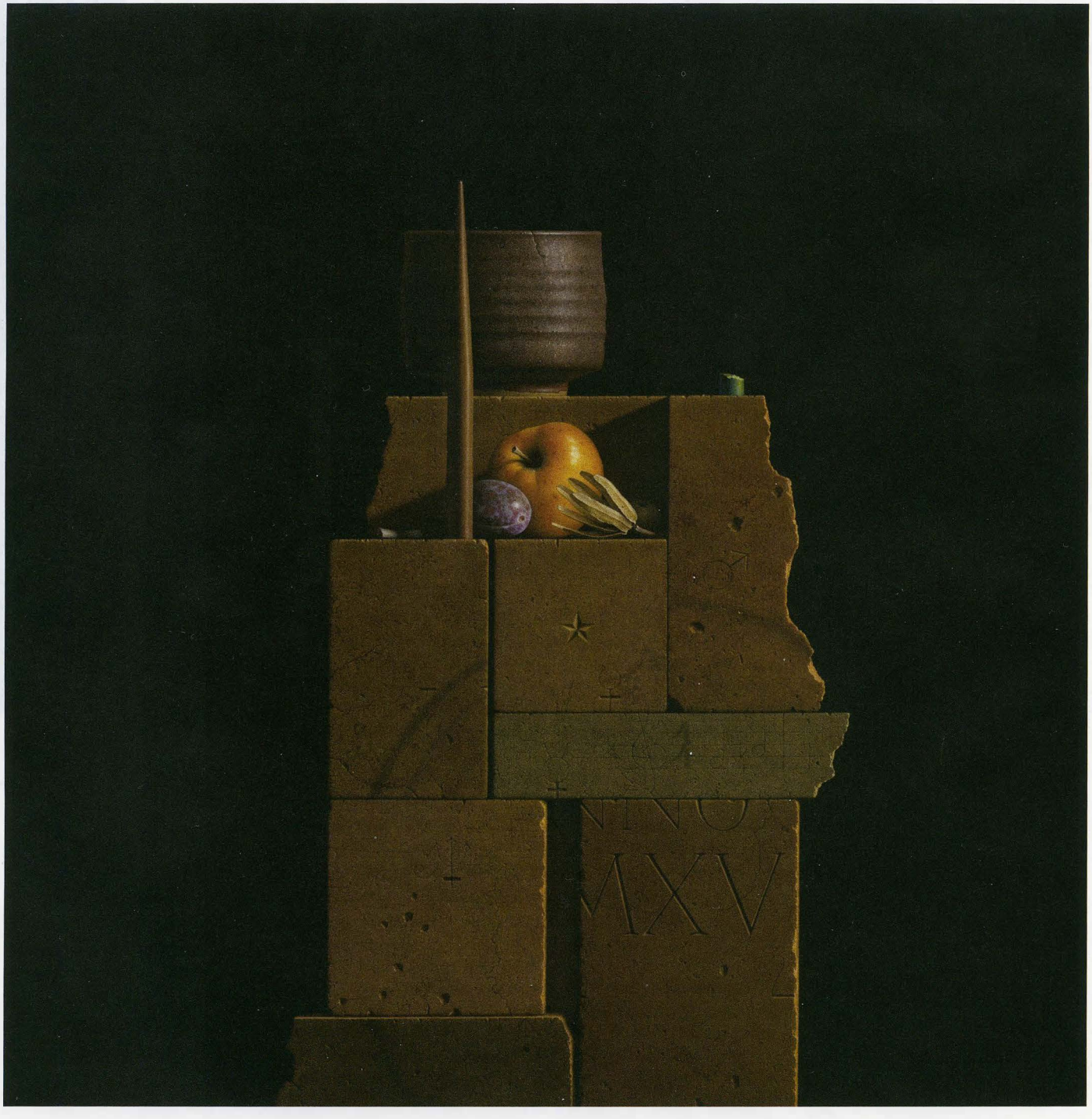
All of Massad's paintings begin in the mind's eye. "A vividly fuzzy image turns into a thumbnail sketch, usually in my journal," he says. "Some of these seem to light up on the page, and those eventually form the basis for a full-scale preliminary drawing in pencil. The details may change, but for some reason, the scale and format never do."

If the preliminary drawing holds his interest, the artist will continue working with it, solving as many visual problems as he can while still working in black and white. Once satisfied, he uses a soft 6B pencil to transfer the basic structure of the drawing to his pastel paper, placing some guide marks in the margins to help him retain the straight lines after the drawing is covered by pastel.

Massad uses only light from a north-facing window and a light above his easel. "I work from top to bottom, left to

right, resting the heel of my hand on a flat mahlstick to protect the paper below," he says. "Except for pure black areas, which are one thick coat of black pastel gently rubbed into the paper, all areas begin with a rubbed-on base color." These colors are usually a blend of three or four hues. Over this, the artist applies a layer of small loose marks of a darker value, followed by smaller marks of various hues. "Then with the sharp tips of cut shards, I make the tiniest, subtlest marks I can make," he says. Next, he uses a fingertip to slowly and delicately press—not blend—each layer.

With little exception, Massad uses Rembrandt pastels on the smooth side of steel gray Canson Mi-Teintes paper. "To achieve what I'm envisioning, there isn't any other paper and pastel combination that allows me to build the edges I want and to layer the surface with the tiny marks I need," he says.



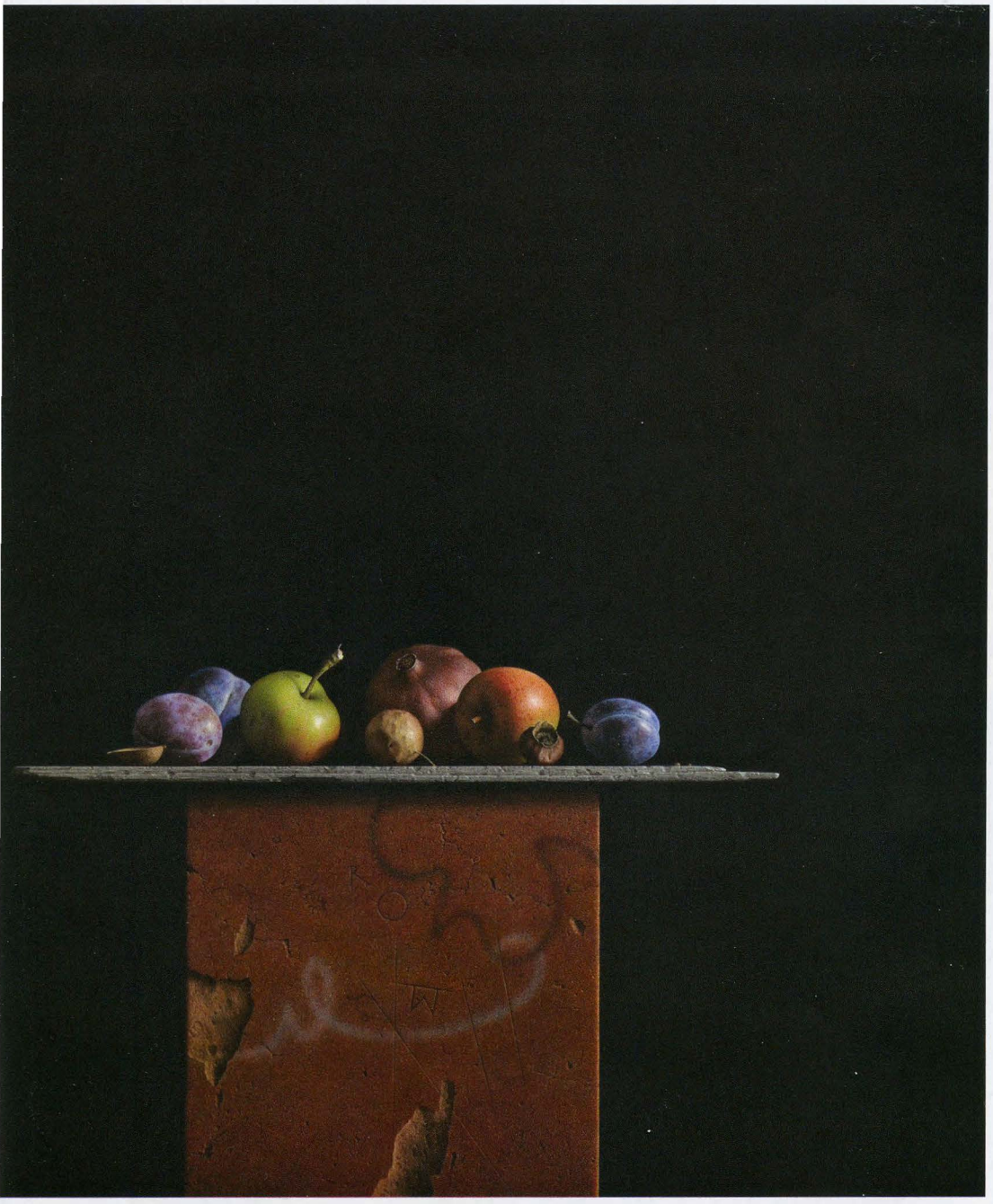
Once a painting is finished, Massad spends a few hours noting his recollections—the story of a work's inspiration and process, many of which appear in his book, *A Small Radius of Light*.

REMEMBRANCE & REVERENCE

The painting, *Plenty* (opposite), is an example of an image that came into the artist's mind at a very specific moment. Massad was visiting the Cathedral of All Saints, in Albany, N.Y., with his partner, who had only recently recovered from a serious illness. The artist was handed a piece of slate from the cathedral's roof, and the imagery—with the slate as the tabletop—sprang to mind. "Paraphrasing a line from author Michael Pollan, 'The world is the body of God,' and that's how I experience the world when I'm at my clearest," says Massad. "So this little group of things culled from the natural world and placed on a makeshift, slate altar makes spiritual sense to me. To pause in front of these objects, not to worship them as though idols, but to celebrate them as part of the whole body of creation, is enough. It is plenty."

Massad doesn't approach his painting as a method for depicting an



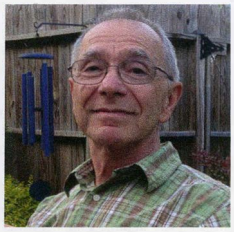


ABOVE
Plenty (22x22½)

OPPOSITE
Phials (15½x15)

arrangement of objects. His goal is not description. "I make art not to represent or imitate the visible world," he says, "not to fool the eye or impress with virtuosic technique, but to embody the way I experience the world." The hope is that a painting might capture the attention of someone who sees it—perhaps engaging them deeply. "To see clearly is, for me, to catch a glimpse of the complexity, structure and beauty of this 'great rondure'—to use Walt Whitman's phrase—which reveals itself even in the most minute details on the surfaces of things." ***PJ***

Robert K. Carsten (robertcarsten.com) has authored numerous articles on art and artists.



A full-time painter since 1983, Pennsylvania artist **G. Daniel Massad** believes the medium of pastel connects him to the red clay of central Oklahoma, where he grew up and where he first enrolled in weekly oil painting classes at the age of 10. After earning degrees in English at Princeton and the University of Chicago, Massad eventually returned to his early interest in art. It was while he was working on his MFA at the University of Kansas that he landed on pastel as his primary medium. The artist has received numerous fellowships and grants, and has had many solo exhibitions including a recent retrospective, "A Small Radius of Light," at the Palmer Museum of Art, at Penn State University, which included a companion book. His pastel still lifes can be found in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in New York City; the National Gallery of Art and the National Museum of American Art, in Washington, D.C.; the Art Institute of Chicago; Philadelphia Museum of Art; the Brandywine River Museum, in Chadds Ford, Pa.; and the Philbrook Museum of Art in Tulsa, Okla.; among others. Massad has been an artist-in-residence at Lebanon Valley College, in Annville, Pa., since 1993. His work is represented by Forum Gallery, in New York City.