THE MONTRÉAL REVIEW

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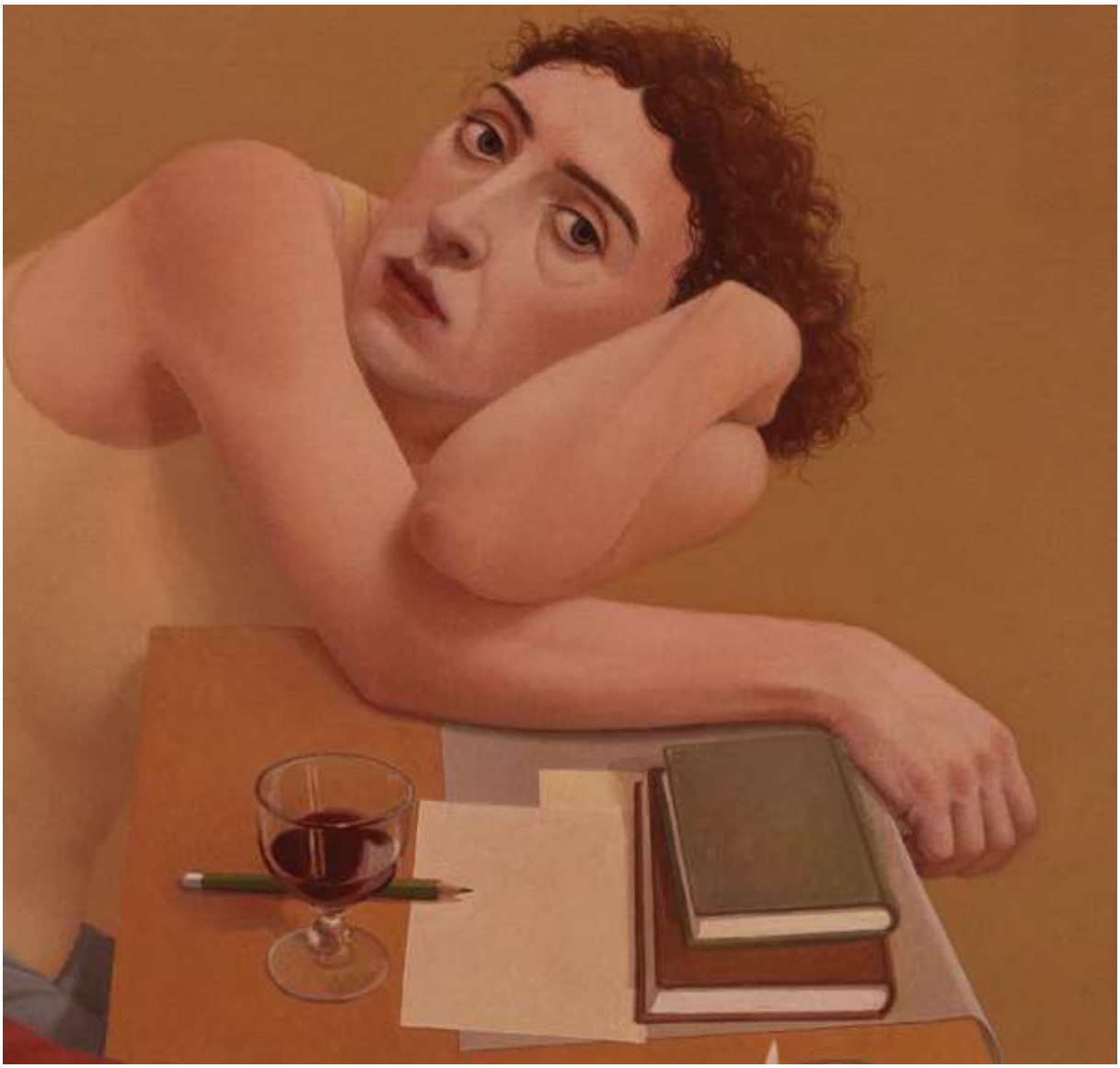

| BOOK EXCERPT |

LIFE IN THE STUDIO*

By Alan Feltus

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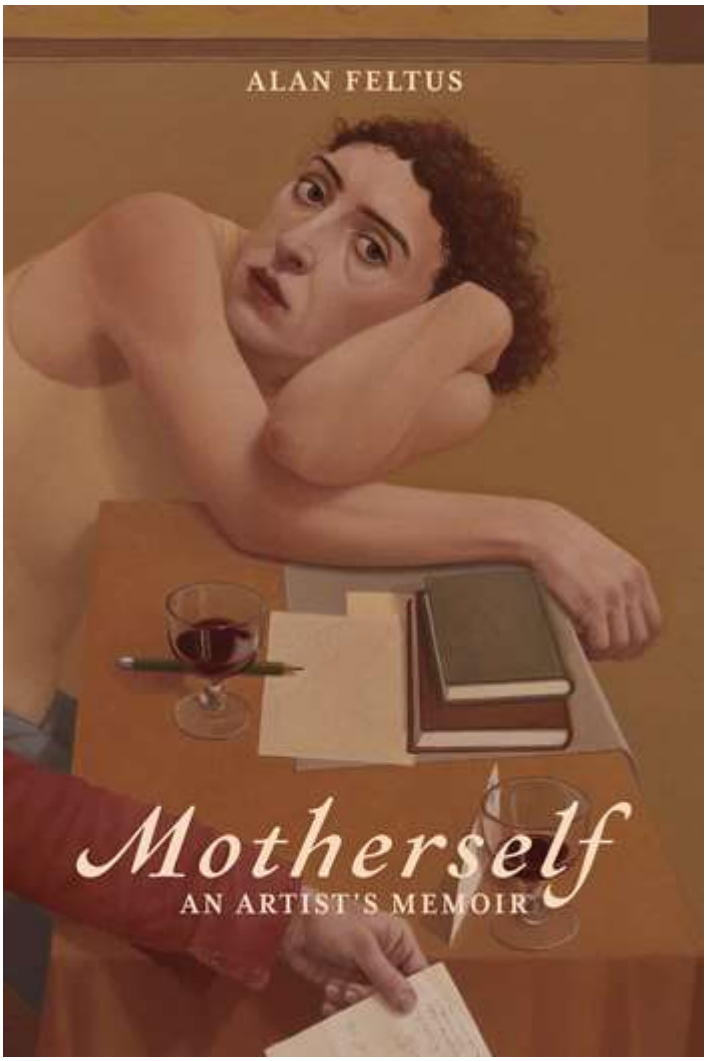
The Montréal Review, October 2024



Our intentions are informed by knowledge and desire, subject to the best of our abilities, and also by our limitations. I see my limitations as part of my identity as a painter. In the making of paintings, I have the confidence that I lack in many other things. These paintings are carefully rendered, to a degree realistic, while at the same time they are altogether invented images with all manner of visual distortions or unreality. For me it would be boring and almost pointless to render a fully formed study on a canvas.

Not working from models was a choice I made early on. As a young painter on a very small teaching salary, I couldn't afford to pay models to pose for me and I didn't want to ask friends to pose. But more than that, I liked my studio time uncomplicated by the presence of another person. I value the solitude of my painting time and I want to invent my figures as my paintings evolve within that solitude.

In any painting day I take breaks to look at books of various painters from different centuries and countries and books of photos of nude models, the best of those being vintage photos, Victorian period and into early 20th century. More than looking at images for a source, I refer to myself in the mirror. So I am my model, whether for a self-portrait or a painting of female or male figures. I look at a hand or a head, a torso. I have a fairly good sense of anatomy but not good enough to work entirely without referring to anything. The figures I find leafing through books of paintings and sculptures and the photos of models rarely have a figure in the position I need. So I turn to the mirror.

Two Women Standing, Greensleeves, 1982

I learn more from painters whose compositional structure is as apparent as the subject they paint, such as Piero della Francesca in the 15th century and Balthus in the 20th century. Another example of this, though more extreme, is Picasso's Cubist paintings in which the forms we see might suggest, without fully describing them, recognizable objects or figures relating to each other and to the vertical and horizontal edges of the canvas, becoming an image that is about compositional structure.

When making a painting, I am choreographing figures and objects. Every element is a considered part of the composition, so any line or color, any object or any space between objects, has been positioned, and then adjusted and adjusted again, and again, to work in a precise way with everything else. This holds true for the division between floor and wall, the shape of a cast shadow, the presence of a book or a teacup, and so on. If I paint a piece of drapery or a piece of paper on a chair, that will be there partly because it has a compositional purpose. It might serve to continue a visual line across the painting's surface, establishing a relationship between those several parts that line up in a particular way. A piece of paper painted in perspective becomes a tipped plane. Placed on the floor, such a shape can hold an otherwise ambiguous area of color down as a floor and thus define the space. We can create a whole complicated patterned floor drawn in perspective, or we can paint, in effect, one square of that checkered floor that will serve the same purpose.

Hilton Kramer wrote, "In the life of art there are no virgin births." I like that statement for its simplicity. I have always understood that art comes out of art, and the sources we look to will span many periods and cultures. The ways a painting in progress might be influenced by another artist can be as much unconscious as it might be deliberate. It's something basic to the process of painting. It is right that when we make a painting, in our minds we are in dialogue with various painters from the past. Each of us will have a unique compilation of remembered sensations. For me, the accumulated knowledge I have in my head is always there providing the basis for inventing figures and their environments.

I believe there is no progress in art. We might complicate things by introducing new materials and new techniques that make possible new modes of expression, but the art of recent centuries isn't better in quality than the best of what was made throughout history. And it isn't new. The depiction of a cow (or bull) from the Lascaux cave paintings dated something like 17,000 BC, particularly the red one with a black head, facing to the right, is unsurpassed in translating observed nature into an elegant and refined understanding of the essence of a particular animal. It is as sophisticated in terms of drawing as any cow in the history of art. 16th century Dutch painters like Aelbert Cuyp painted cows that are anatomically accurate and as descriptive as photographs of cows. And Picasso's much more abstracted bulls might, in their way, be as good as the 16th century Dutch cow, but I can't say any of those depictions of a cow are better than the one painted 19,000 years ago. When Picasso painted *Woman With a Fan* in 1905, what he did to spatially separate the forearm of his woman from her torso is precisely the same as what we see in the Lascaux cave painting to make

clear that the legs on the far side of the cow come from behind the cow's body. In both cases a lightening of color behind what is in front interrupts the otherwise continuous contour surrounding the body.

A Cycladic sculpture head from about 2,500 BC and Constantin Brancusi's elegant abstract sculptures are very similar. The Cycladic heads have no eyes, which is highly unlikely for any kind of depiction of a head in almost any culture. I have no idea why that was, or how a cave man could draw with the intelligence we see in the Lascaux paintings. Ancient Roman marble portrait headsfrom the 1st century BC to the end of the 1st century AD are remarkable in their realism, and are great portraits. The best of the wax encaustic Fayum portrait heads from the Coptic Egyptians, dated from about 160 AD, are as beautiful as any portrait painting of any period, anywhere. Yoruba terracotta and bronze heads from Ife, in West Africa in the 12-14th centuries are unsurpassed in realism and elegance, and they are surprisingly advanced compared to what was being made in Europe in the same period.

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Over the centuries, in a long-standing tradition, painters from many countries have come to Italy because they find something they hadn't found elsewhere. For me, Italian painting throughout the centuries has always been of great interest. And for me, to be surrounded by the art and architecture of Italy is like, but far better than, living inside the Metropolitan Museum, which had been a fantasy of mine since I was a child. It did not surprise me when I recently read a passage Degas wrote in his notebook while in Assisi in 1858, after spending time in the Basilica of San Francesco, stating that he could be happy living in Assisi.

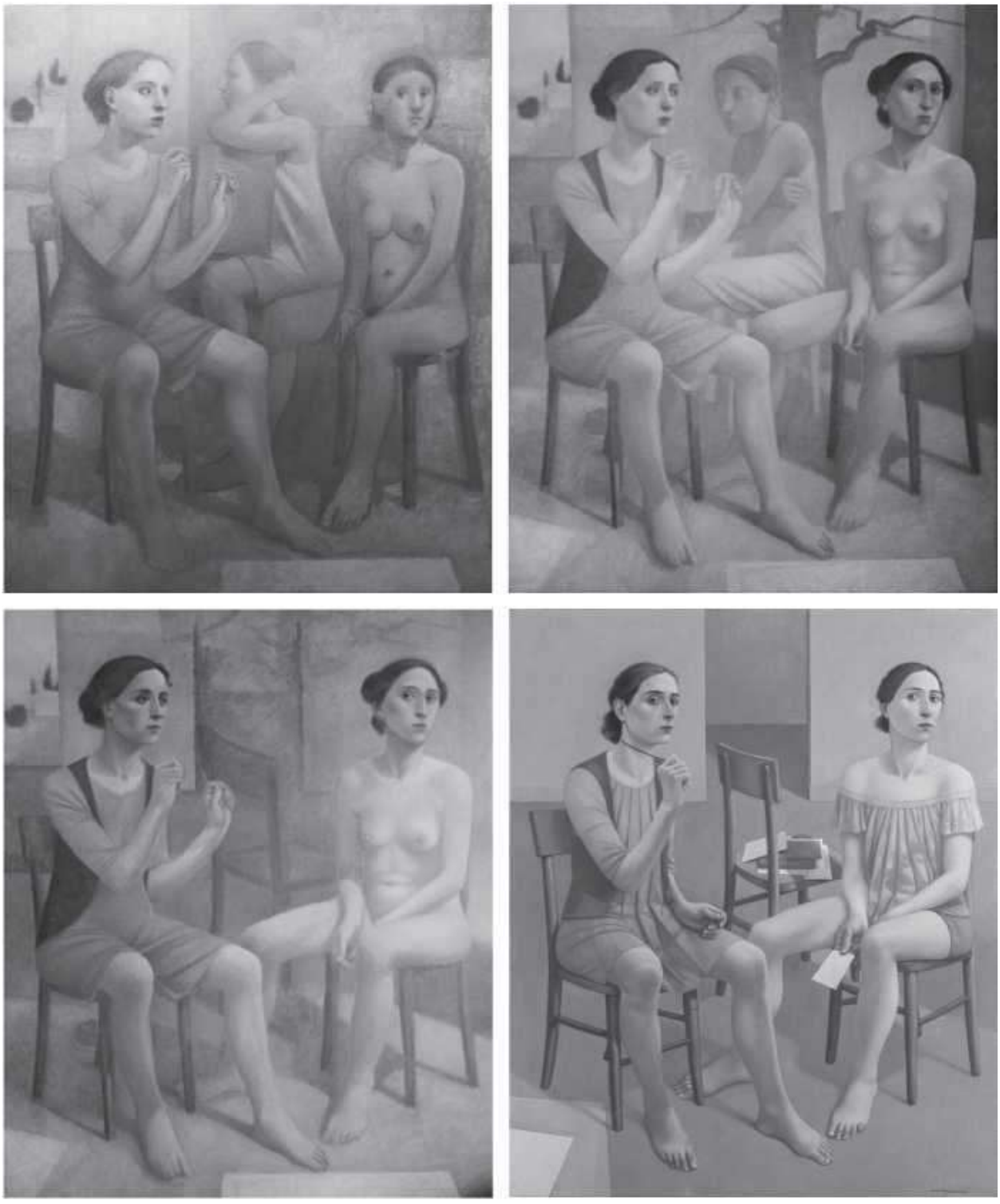
For landscape painters it can be the forms and the colors of an Italian landscape that belongs to Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot and to Giorgio Morandi. They find a quality of light which is subtly different from what they knew at home, that changes with the seasons and changes continually within any day. When Dan Gustin and Israel Hershberg taught together a few summers in Montecastello di Vibio, they went in search of the exact spots where Corot had painted in the late 1820s, comparing paintings in the book, *Corot in Italy*, with the landscape in and around Civita Castellana. In talking to me about the experience, Israel questioned the discrepancy between the numbers and positions of windows on a house both he and Corot had painted. Were the windows changed by generations of homeowners to become what Israel saw, or was it Corot's decision to alter what he observed to suit his needs in a painting? It was not the sort of question that most people would ask. It was one that I liked.

Our choice to live in Italy with all of the art and beauty meant leaving the support and company of friends and choosing a certain isolation from the world of contemporary art. There were times we felt isolated and lonely. Being part of a community of creative people who share interests is important. Over the years we have been fortunate that many people, many artists, have visited and become friends. We get together for

lunches and dinners coupled with studio visits. Our studio visits and conversations feed all of us and keep our isolation from becoming a problem.

Entering my studio is entering my personal private world, the quiet refuge where I make my paintings. Reproductions of Rousseau's *Sleeping Gypsy* and Gorky's *The Artist and his Mother* hang on my studio walls, along with three taxidermy boar's heads and the partial musical instruments and old locks and hinges and tools that I find in the monthly antique markets. They hang next to photographs of Lani and anonymous vintage portrait photographs, most of which are still in their original frames. And I have art books and paintings and drawings. There is a palpable quiet that my paintings create when friends first enter my studio. Then conversations start that are about what I have been working on. Often there are two paintings in progress, maybe of the same size, one might be vertical and one horizontal, and one or two already finished paintings.

Typically when I start a new painting, I'll tentatively place first one figure, and then a second figure on a blank canvas. As I'm shifting them in position to work together, I might add a third. Or I might take out a figure that had been there. A head turns, eyes shift in the direction of their gaze, an arm changes its position. A book or a cup on a table will move. The table moves. A nude gets dressed or a dressed figure sheds her clothing. A chair turns to face the other direction. A wall moves back and a shadow divides it diagonally. Its color changes. A window becomes a landscape painting, or it is painted out. And it goes on like that. Decision-making will continue until I accept the way everything is working. This can take weeks or months, depending on the size of the canvas.



Progression of *Inner Voices*, 2006

Sometimes during studio visits with artist friends, someone will suggest that I leave a painting in the unfinished state that they see it in, though they make this suggestion

with the knowledge that it would be an unlikely thing for me to do. I have briefly considered doing that, but we seem always to have to keep working to take an image through further changes, believing it will emerge a better painting for the additional weeks or months we might stay with it. I sometimes regret that I always want to go further toward a finish that loses the spontaneity paintings can have in their earlier states. In the way I work, paintings lose the openness that comes with the painterliness of faster moving brushes and the trying of ideas that are part of a continuum in a process that will take them past what looks exciting for its openness to something more resolved, which for me would be more right.

From my studio we continue into Lani's, with its collections of dolls and puppets, bones and toys, and with owl decoys standing on their thin sticks, and antique church mannequins with their glass eyes, and Japanese silk butterfly kites hanging on the wall, with parts of theater costumes, and corsets from the markets draped on seamstress mannequins, and many other things, all of which have found their way into her paintings as still life props and clothing at some time or other. Conversations unfold there as in my studio, with Lani taking paintings out from her storage racks so they can be seen. It's aways interesting how different our paintings are in spite of what aspects they more or less share.

More than mine, Lani's paintings might have stories. Or if not stories as such, they have associations with specific things. The things she chooses to put in her invented private world are often symbolic, though more than not they are fairly non-specific in meaning. Or they have multiple implied meanings. Compositionally, Lani's paintings can be more complex than mine, having a space more filled with things and patterns than the space I create in my paintings. It isn't clutter that Lani creates, but an unlikely density of forms and patterns that seem to press on the paintings' edges and almost move out from their confines to enter our space as we look at them. Her recent paintings are unlike anyone else's paintings I can think of. She will do things I cannot do with my imagery. She creates an unreality that is not like the dreams I have, nor like places or situations I would find in my imagination. And for those reasons I am fascinated to see where her paintings will go from beginning to end.

Lani can look like someone belonging to the world she creates in her studio, sometimes wearing the dresses she has made for herself from fabrics and costume fragments collected over a lifetime, reconfigured to become a mixture of parts from different ethnic cultures. She makes these dresses in a process that is like how she makes her collages and her paintings, and how she makes necklaces, even how she might make a meal.

Lani in her studio, 2023

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I found a stone bead on the ground in Mexico when I was six. It was drilled and barely carved with some geometric pattern to make it special, possibly some sort of talisman. That was probably the first little possession of this kind that I treasured. Peter and I owned very few things normal to childhood. In our years of no money and no home of our own, to have two or three small things of my own was a comfort. Somehow they grounded me. They were there, in my possession in a drawer or somewhere secret and not left behind when we moved from hotel to hotel or briefly to the apartment belonging to one of my mother's friends.

A postcard with writing in two opposing directions, and old parts of wind instruments and other collected objects in my studio. A view of my desk and the Whitney Museum poster of Arshile Gorky's *The Artist and His Mother*.

For me, collecting is about surrounding myself with things that I identify with, so they are, in a way, there to define or identify me to myself and to other people who enter my space. It would be reasonable to say, I live in an accumulation. For many people it may

seem obsessive, a curiosity that Lani and I live among the many things we have collected. For me it is a wonderful obsession to collect and live surrounded by things so rich and lovely, or so peculiar and unlikely as what we find and bring home.

Wandering through an antique market is like a slowing down of time and being outside of the continuum that time ordinarily is about, being surrounded by things that are parts of all kinds of times and places, like being in the present while also being in flashbacks that slide freely through time. Rome's weekly Porta Portese market had wonderful things among a vast sea of uninteresting junk. There were little piles of silver plated brass ex-votos that in my Academy days cost very little. They were images of various separate parts of the body, such as a head, a pair of eyes, a breast, a hand, a foot or a leg, lungs, kidneys, a nose, an ear. Sometimes they were men in a suit or dressed in a uniform with a rifle, or women wearing an apron, infants in swaddling, or children, or animals like a cow or a pig. The most common and often the most ornate were hearts, because a heart represented any illness. In addition to their peculiar beauty, they have stories that resonate among themselves as they hang on our walls.

Now there are few votives in the markets and they are no longer cheap, so I buy paper things instead. Envelopes, postcards and photographs, often old family portraits. I find things that might seem insignificant to other people, but when I take time to think about what they are and what stories they might tell, they take on meanings, fictions I create.

Years ago in Italy, when a postcard was sent in the mail the cost of the stamp varied according to how much writing was on the card. So a simple greeting in a few words cost less to mail than one that was *tutto scritto* (all written). I found a few postcards in Italian street markets that had writing not only on the message half of the address side but also written on top of the photo on the other side. I even found a few postcards that have small handwriting in two opposing directions, vertical and horizontal, one on top of the other, on top of the photograph of the postcard, legible because their separate directions don't become one confused mess. All of the old postcards and envelopes have a very beautiful calligraphic handwriting, and the stamps from that late 1800 to early 1900 period were all single-color stamps that might have something like a man's head in profile looking to the right, and when the stamp was put on an envelope sideways the head would look up to the sky above. I liked that. An envelope with its calligraphy and a stamp that had no value to a stamp collector can be a wonderful little unselfconsciously made work of art I might buy for only 50 centesimi.

A tool fashioned by a contadino can also tell a story. I recognize in such objects a need to invent a tool or an object to serve a purpose, and the way it was made reveals a thinking process that makes sense to me. I have a rat trap made from an olive oil tin, with a grooved wood frame holding a sliding metal door of sufficient weight that it can drop down with a thud in a fraction of a second, trapping a mouse or a country rat that moved a hair trigger bait lever at the opposite end. It is a perfectly fine trap, made of things generally considered worthless clutter. Because I, too, am a maker of things,

such objects tell me their stories, and each has its kind of beauty, unique unto itself.

Occasionally something happens in these markets that I think of as spontaneous theater. One such time was at the Pissignano market. A few months earlier in Pissignano I had bought a taxidermy crow. When I was a boy, long before I started to buy anything for myself that wasn't essential, I remember thinking it would be really nice to have a taxidermy raven above a door that would look down on me like Edgar Allan Poe's raven. And my mind would speak the word "Nevermore." This crow, with its link to my childhood memory, now perches high up on top of a cabinet in my studio, its glass eyes looking down at me as I paint.

A month or two later, when I was in Pissignano, I stopped to see what the man I had bought the crow from had in his collection of open boxes on the ground. Remembering that I had bought his crow, he told me that he had a stuffed penguin at home. Very rare, he said. Interesting, I thought. A penguin. Thinking later about the stuffed penguin, I was sorry I hadn't asked if he wanted to sell it. I guessed it would be way too expensive, if he did want to sell it, because penguins come from the Antarctic and indeed are rare in most of the world outside of natural history museums or zoos. But at the next two Pissignano markets, the man wasn't there to ask about his penguin.

The weather was nice for the March market and all the vendors were there, even the penguin man. He recognized me and called me over as I approached his area. He said he had brought the penguin. And he picked up an old cardboard box from beneath a table and set it on top and opened it and took out his penguin. It was about two feet tall, and nothing like the beautiful pure black and white of all the penguins I have in my mind, but a mottled brownish gray and a very disheveled looking thing. Disheveled isn't the right word. That word brings to mind something far less miserable than what this man was showing me, holding it up and explaining to me that its head needed to be glued back on, that's all. Very rare, he said again. The penguin's head was barely attached by a bit of brittle skin, and what I think was once sawdust was falling out of the neck into the penguin's dusty cardboard box.

The man was still holding his penguin, supporting its head with one hand so it wouldn't fall into the box, and he said forty euros, what do I think. I said it was rather ugly. He said yes. Just then another man who was walking by stopped to look at the penguin, still held above its dirty cardboard box. The vendor told that man forty euros, without having been asked anything. And he put it back in its box on top of a scattering of dirty sawdust the same color as the penguin. And I thanked the man for showing me his penguin and wandered on.

About ten minutes later I was looking at what was on another vendor's table quite a ways beyond. There was a figure ofJesus, about ten inches high, standing in the middle of whatever else was there that I don't remember. It was broken cleanly at the neck, hollow inside, white edges of porcelain above its white and blue gown. The head of the Jesus was next to this broken body on the table. Just then a voice said to me something in Italian like "another thing decapitated." And I saw he was the man who

also didn't buy the miserable looking penguin.

Buying clothing from street markets and thrift shops is a carryover from the years when I couldn't afford new. There is also the challenge of finding a bargain or something especially beautiful. When I was an art school student I found a beautiful tweed jacket of a soft ochre color with a subtle pattern of vertical and horizontal lines in pale blue. I loved that jacket. Probably it was an English gentleman's tweed sports coat. But it was a bit too big for me. And I also had a dark gray Brooks Brothers suit that was a little too small for me, but was beautifully made and fine in its material. Because neither one was quite my size, I was undecided about whether I ought to try to lose a little weight so the suit would fit me better or to gain a little weight so the jacket would fit me better. I kept both the jacket and the suit for years although neither ever fit me well. I have always had a sense that fine clothes like those were special, however, when I wear ill-fitting second hand clothing I don't worry about wear and tear and I'm more comfortable in them. Sean Connery described himself as looking like an unmade bed in The Russia House when telling Michelle Pfeiffer how she would recognize him when they were to first meet. I sometimes think of myself as looking like an unmade bed.

In the studio, 2023

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* *Life in the Studio* is an excerpt (Chapter 25) from Alan Feltus' autobiography, *Motherself: An Artist's Memoir*.

Alan Feltus was born in Washington, D.C. in 1943 and grew up in Manhattan. He is married to Lani Irwin, also a figurative painter, and they have two sons.

Alan studied for a year at the Tyler School of Fine Arts in Philadelphia, then at Cooper Union in New York (BFA 1966) and Yale University (MFA 1968). He has received numerous awards for his work, including the Rome Prize Fellowship, a National Endowment for the Arts Individual Grant in Painting, a Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Grant in Painting, two Pollack Krasner Foundation Grants in Painting, the Augustus Saint-Gaudens Award from Cooper Union, and the Raymond P.R. Neilson Prize from the National Academy of Design.

Alan's has been represented since 1976 by the Forum Gallery, NYC, where he has had more than a dozen solo exhibitions.

You can find out more about Alan's art at www.alanfeltus.com.

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