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the  
**artist's**  
magazine



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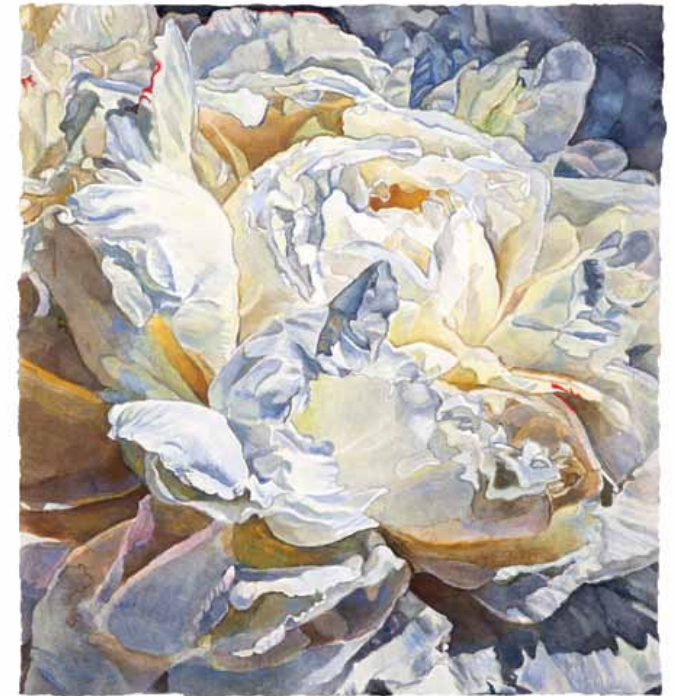
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SEPTEMBER 2017  
artistsmagazine.com

*Dawn Rose* by Joseph Raffael is  
part of his series focusing on the  
beauty of single blossoms.





# JOSEPH RAFFAEL IN THE NOW

Three years ago two friends began a conversation that continues today across continents and seas.

INTERVIEW BY BETSY DILLARD STROUD

LEFT: *Promise* (watercolor on paper, 18½x17¼) Luminous white sparkles against a blue background containing muted circles of color, and transparent grays emphasize form and shadow.

ABOVE: *The Promise of a New Day* (watercolor on paper 18½x17¼) The sensuality of the flower in full regalia is expressed in the soft nuance of voluptuous shapes and variegated colors.



**MY JOURNEY WITH JOSEPH RAFFAEL BEGAN 25 OR SO YEARS AGO** when I first saw, in a book, his painting of a pink rose outside the Matisse Museum. I experienced a sharp intake of breath at its beauty and experienced a strange but intuitive feeling about its significance. Then, about three years ago, Maureen Bloomfield gave me the opportunity to write my first article about Raffael, "Moving Toward the Light." As a result of that article, he asked me to be one of three writers (David Pagel, Lanie Goodman and me) for his book, whose title is the same as that of the article. My part of the book is a conversation with Raffael about his art. An easy long-distance friendship (Raffael in France and me in Arizona) developed between us. With clarity and breadth, he opened up about his art and life inspiring me in ways never imagined. Life is a circle of miracles. My wish to know more about Joseph Raffael which began with that pink rose has manifested in manifold ways—and the miracles continue to unfold. **BETSY DILLARD STROUD**



**I**n his light-filled studio overlooking the Mediterranean sea in Cap d'Antibes, France, Joseph Raffael is hard at work on his new series of small paintings. These paintings, coined "jewels" by his cherished friend, Nancy Hoffman, are usually square in shape (about 19x19 inches.) They possess an almost indescribable luminous, diaphanous quality. They're palpable, they breathe and their transparency, accentuated in the smallness of the work, perhaps could get lost in a bigger piece. As you, the reader, view these paintings, observe the magnetic pull that draws you deep into their essence.

**Betsy Dillard Stroud (BDS):** Joseph, these small paintings are a dramatic shift from your large-scale watercolors.

**Joseph Raffael (JR):** With these new, smaller works, I focus on a limited point in front of me. There's a physical relationship to the work being brought to life, which is the opposite of working in a large format. To bring a large piece to fruition, I work on one area at a time within a great expanse, and when that one area is completed, I then move to another area. With the smaller pieces, the section to be painted is always within the eye's viewing span.

**BDS:** As you began painting on a larger, already drawn piece, you spied a section that cried out to you, "Paint me as a larger piece!" With that, your scissors came out. You cut out that section, painted it, and voilà—your new series was born. These pieces are like the small korai Greek figures in the

ABOVE LEFT: **Dawn Rose** (watercolor on paper, 17½x19½) A yellow rose in its prime with its bright orange background promises the dawn of a new day.

ABOVE RIGHT: **Radiant Heart** (watercolor on paper, 17½x18½) Like a mandala, the circular flower within the square is a meditation upon the purity of white, while a "Zen" orange drop is a witness to the other resplendent colors worshipping the rose.



Acropolis Museum. In a book they appear monumental and huge, yet in person, they are astonishingly small, about a foot tall. Like the korai, the power of your paintings originates from your superb craftsmanship, their exquisite beauty and your creative energy. Amazingly, this new series coincides with the severe illness of your wife, Lannis.

In the yet-to-be published book, *Talking Beauty*, David Pagel and you wrote: "Making art is founded in the heart, where love unlimited and abundance abide. Each is a heartbeat." And Joseph, that heartbeat is visible in each of these small works, so alive, throbbing with life and color, each telling its own story about what was going on with you in your life. How did *Talking Beauty* begin?

JR: Nancy Hoffman suggested that David and I write a few pages on the subject of beauty for an upcoming exhibition of mine at Nancy's gallery. During the following year those pages evolved into a book. David and I have never met, and we're very different from each other. He's young and cheery. He expresses through words and is an art critic for the *Los Angeles Times*. Our two voices and differences created a lively, unexpected and inevitable tapestry, a jubilant oratorio.

It reminds me of Rumi's quotation: "Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and right doing there is a field. I'll meet you there. When the soul lies down in that grass, the world is too full to talk about."

In our back-and-forth, where memory and conscience merged, where those previously untouched parts of our lives and minds (i.e., hearts) surfaced, we tapped into life, death, love, loss, creativity as inevitable portals to beauty.

Thus, these small paintings, in part, are borne from the *Talking Beauty* exploration. It seems that David and I met in Rumi's field. It's as if the path to



ABOVE: *Golden Heart* (watercolor on paper, 15¼x17¼) Here is the heart of hearts. Beams of light permeate the petals, translucent and laden with dew, and we are drawn into the depths, the very heart of this rose.

RIGHT: *Light in Spring* (watercolor on paper, 19x19) The brilliance of white and the nuance of grays defining form are surrounded by muted circles of color, their neutrality enhancing the contrast between the white cherry blossoms and their background.



'now' had been swept clean during our search. "Now" also brought with it Lannis's health scare. She and I went to the edge of life, to the essential, to what matters most. The unnecessary evaporated like the mist into mystery, while the little paintings pulsed with new breath.

**BDS:** Your painting *Golden Heart* (page xx) mesmerized me. To summarize: Here is the heart of hearts. Beams of golden light permeate the petals, translucent and laden with dew, and we are drawn into the depths, the very heart of this rose.

The rose's symbolism can reflect both *le jardin secret* (the secret garden), as well as your feelings about Lannis. The flowers are bold, their voluptuous color is emotional and alive—yet paradoxically, they have an ephemerality, as they are here now, yet they will be gone in a second.

These "jewels" exemplify the vibrant color of your larger works, the loose, ambiguous backgrounds, and each seems to depict perhaps a stage you experienced during Lannis's illness. *Beginning* (opposite) displays such an exquisite diaphanous quality, such a poignant fragility, as if the petals would fall off in my hand. I recall the words you wrote underneath a photograph of a gorgeous sunrise you sent me: "Art helps. Art heals. We are all here to help each other."

**JR:** The idea of a new day beginning interests me more and more. Each moment counts. There is limited time left to paint and live and love and communicate.

These new small paintings address themselves to that. They are like new days. They burst forth with an energy and a startling presence which stuns me—new and never before seen documents of one person's being, one's soul. The expressions of the artist's soul can aid others to remember their truest selves. Artists, composers and writers all speak to one's heart.

**BDS:** In these small paintings, we witness the genius and mystery of your color, the luminous light that opens our hearts, and your uncanny ability to captivate us visually, emotionally and spiritually. Art, like the dawn, calls out to us—reminding us who we are and who we are meant to be. Your "jubilent visual oratorio" is a bridge to bring us into the "now." ■

**BETSY DILLARD STROUD** is an artist and author. Her most recent book *Watercolor Masters and Legends* (North Light Press), is available in book and art stores and at northlightshop.com.

LEFT: *Beginning* (watercolor on paper, 17½x18½) A voluptuary composed of light pinks and oranges, deep crimson, luminous whites and grays fills the picture plane with its lovely gradations, while its deep red secrets and its brilliant light pull the viewer into the painting.

TOP LEFT: *A Rose for Vincent* (watercolor on paper, 19x19) The yellow rose in its prime is a complex configuration of petals accentuated by the contrast with the yellow, wet amorphous shapes on its cobalt blue borders and anchored by a rich, deep-green petal.

TOP RIGHT: *Lannis Rose* (watercolor on paper, 18¾x19) A vertical orange-yellow rose, before full bloom, stands stalwart in a neutral abstract background of gray, light greens and white.



**JOSEPH RAFFAEL** attended Cooper Union and earned a bachelor of fine arts degree from Yale University, where he studied with Josef Albers. During 1958 and 1959, he traveled in Florence and Rome on a Fulbright scholarship. While in California, he taught at the University of California, Davis; the University of California, Berkeley; and California State University in Sacramento. After the death of his son, he and his wife, Lannis, moved to Cap d'Antibes, France. In a 1973 article in *Time* magazine, Robert Hughes wrote that Raffael's work presents "a tender virtuosity without parallel in other American figurative painting today." A book on Raffael, *Moving Toward the Light*, is available through Amazon.com and Nancy Hoffman Gallery ([nancyhoffmangallery.com](http://nancyhoffmangallery.com)), which represents his work. Visit Raffael's website at [josephraffael.com](http://josephraffael.com).