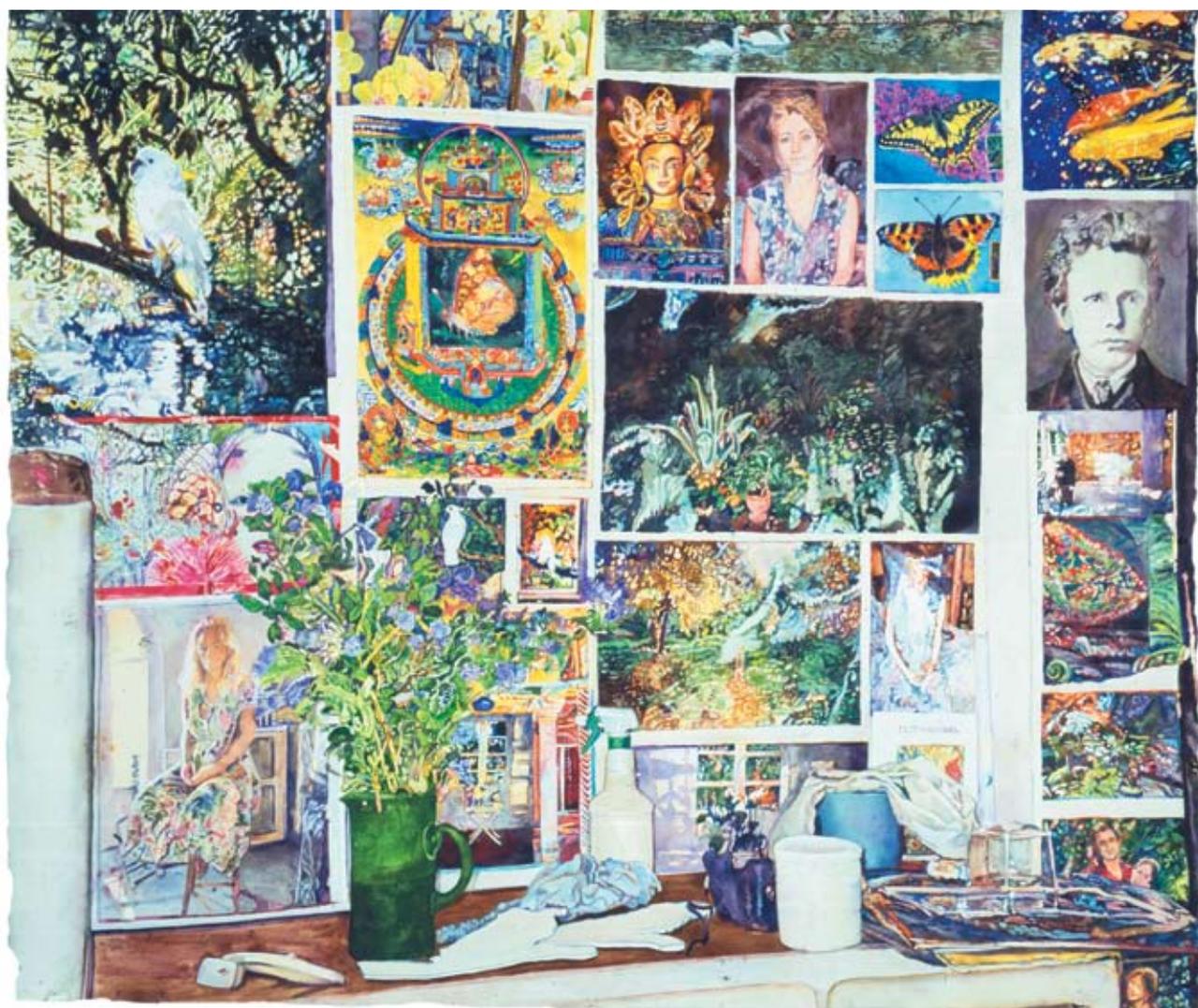


The Story of the Artist

Joseph Raffael offers viewers a rare glimpse inside his studio, his life as an artist and the life of his art.

By Sarah A. Strickley



Meet the Artist



Joseph Raffael began drawing at the age of 7. He pursued the study of art in high school, at the Brooklyn Museum, the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Art and Science in New York and at the Yale University School of Art under Josef Albers. He launched his first exhibition of watercolors in 1963 and has since exhibited often and widely. He's been the recipient of numerous awards and prizes and the subject of the full-length art book *Reflections of Nature* by Donald Kuspit and Amei Wallach (Abbeville Press, 1998). His work is available for viewing at many of the nation's finest art institutions and museums, as well as the Nancy Hoffman Gallery in New York (www.nancyhoffmangallery.com), where his next solo exhibition will take place in autumn of 2007. A list of past and present exhibitions, biographical material, images of Raffael's studio, videos of the artist painting, completed work and works-in-progress are available on his Web site at www.josephraffael.com. The artist is pictured here with his wife Lannis and their dog Soleil in front of the painting *Renaissance*, completed in 2007.

On a Sunday morning in April of 1986, artist Joseph Raffael and wife Lannis left California to start a new life in France. While many artists have made this trek—France has long been considered a land of refuge for foreign artists and intellectuals alike—few have done so under quite the same circumstances. Raffael's move came only two days after an exhibition of his work opened to critical acclaim in New York and a few months before solo exhibitions opened in Chicago and San Francisco. In a very real sense, he was moving out of the spotlight.

Raffael and Lannis found a small house on the Mediterranean, where they determined to live a private and solitary life—one with painting at its core. And that's precisely what they've

done for more than 20 years now. While the art world pulses through its many infatuations and fascinations, Raffael paints steadily on. And although he has found critical success—he's widely considered one of the century's foremost artists—he has done so on his own terms. "I see art as a sacred activity," he says. "It's like meditation, like prayer. Just as the artist tries to make the art whole, complete, new and alive, I have attempted to do that in my life also."

Raffael has been called an Impressionist, Expressionist, Abstract Expressionist, Photo-realist, Realist, Naturalist and Illusionist, but he has always been his own painter. He finds guiding inspiration in

An Intimate View ■ *Scenes from a Life: The Studio Wall* (2001; previous page; watercolor on paper, 44½x53½) depicts a close view of Raffael's studio wall, as well as the everyday objects and tools that surround his work.

his home and gardens—places that are also his havens—rather than the modes of the times. “I prefer not being seen personally or as a personality,” he says. “That, in part, is why I live 6,000 miles away from the art world in America and why I don’t have formal openings of my work—just an opening day at which I am present.”

An Insider’s View

Raffael is by no means a recluse—his passion for literature, music and film reveals an artist whose interest and engagement with the world and the arts is both active and energized—but he’s an artist who lives his life beyond the gaze of the art world. Which is why it might be surprising at first to find, among the stunningly lush nature scenes for which he’s best known, a number of paintings that welcome the viewer inside the artist’s studio. But the impulse behind the creation of these paintings isn’t to invite passive voyeurism; rather it’s to celebrate the life of the artist and art as a way of living.

Water and Light ■ Painted in 2006, *Spirit* (opposite page, watercolor on paper, 60x85½) finds the artist returning to the pond, a subject he began painting in the late 1970s.

Often, Raffael’s studio wall is the subject of these self-reflexive paintings. As Raffael began an early studio wall painting in 2002, he wrote in his painting journal, where he often records the progress and development of his work, of his wish to give viewers a glimpse inside where the art is conceived, born and nurtured. “I’m so appreciating this life as an artist I’ve been given,” he wrote. “In a way, this painting will be another homage to that.”

The paintings of the studio wall are large—Raffael is the pioneer of the big watercolor—and they are also lavishly detailed. Within each painting live dozens of smaller paintings (many of them paintings of paintings) each as intricately rendered as the larger painting itself and each a phenomenon of execution. In paintings like *Biography* (below) and *Scenes from a Life: The Studio Wall* (on page 34) we find the studio wall as Raffael sees it, but also as he conceives of it. “Of course it’s not the thing seen, but how it is seen and how it is depicted,” he says. And Raffael sees the

Selections from Raffael’s *Biography* Painting Journal



On Beauty ■ In *Biography* (watercolor on paper, 54x81), one of the earliest of Raffael’s studio wall paintings, his dog Beauty occupies a position of honor, a natural place for the eye to settle.

November 7, 2002 This painting is a ‘whole’ image and, at the same time, also made up of clusters of individual images. In this way, it relates to my early 1960s white ground oil paintings and the ‘whole image’ oil paintings which followed them.

November 10, 2002 Needing to slow down today and take one step at a time. This morning I walked the dogs in the nearby wood, prepared clean water for today’s watercolor, and then chose the next image to work on. I decided to do the Kyoto Temple upside down. Less daunting. Seeing its pictorial qualities in a fresh original way, I won’t get hung up on its almost impossible architectonic elements.

Later—afternoon. It worked. Made progress with the Kyoto Palace. It’s slow with tiny details, and it is working.



Thus far with the painting, I've been solely concentrating on the appendages to the wall. However, at a certain moment today, I found myself seeing in actuality the wall plus the windows and the scene outside. In other words, the bigger picture. I had lost sight of the forest for the trees. So, I was able to see the whole image that the painting will be. What a relief!

November 18, 2002 A fine day of painting. Working on the van Gogh collage, and also the Egyptian couple sculpture. The sculpture's being painted in a kind of greenish, not quite sepia, more of a neutral tint/pale rose coloration. So, the day's been good, and I finally feel here and home at last!

I've been wanting to paint these images which are in this painting for so long. I might not ever have gotten to them as individual, separate paintings. I will be 70 years old in three months. The images I paint will now be part of what I leave. This *Biography* painting is a perfect manner for me to show a view of my spirit's imprint to those in the future who might be interested.

December 7, 2002 Pearl Harbor was 61 years ago. Hard to believe! My, how life has sped by.

Excellent energy today after yesterday's intensity and demands.

The painting's going very well. It's definitely a 'let-go' time. Letting go of any sense that it is me who is in 'control.' I'm not, of course, never have been and never will be. For me, that's watercolor's and life's great lesson: It does what it's going to do.

So much seems to be happening right now.

The word *elucidation* keeps coming to mind and lips. It's interesting to think about the choices I have made or have not made. One made, decades ago, has been for me to enter more deeply into my artist's universe, the inner sanctum where the soul rests, to commune and collaborate with it, and to attempt to paint from that place.

Read the full text of the journal on Raffael's Web site at www.josephraffael.com.

In Homage ■ One of Raffael's most recent works, *Roses for Eiseley* (2006; watercolor on paper, 55x54) was painted in honor of poet and anthropologist Loren Eiseley.



A New Turn ■ First in the series of paintings that represent a new stylistic turn in Raffael's work, *Herald* (2006; watercolor on paper, 66x45) depicts one of Raffael's large tropical birds, a favorite subject.



studio as “the home, the heartland, where it all comes from and where the pictures are made.” Thus the studio wall paintings show us the studio, the place where it all happens, but they also show us the artist's reverence for the happening, for the exquisite mysteries of the creative impulse.

The studio is a bright and luminous space.

Through the twin arched doorways on either side of the wall, we see a wrought iron balustrade and beyond that, the garden and its verdant foliage. Beyond that, we find the nearby

sea and the distant horizon. The horizontal lines of the tiled floor then bring the eye back inside the room to the wall, which is hung with paintings past and paintings-to-be, photographs Raffael may or may not use as source material, images that have inspired and encouraged him, collage materials and even strips of color splotches on paper torn from the edges of a completed watercolor.

The artist has long decorated his walls in this way—with photographs of movie stars as a child and later with photos and collages in his New York, Vermont and California studios—and it has become a part of his process, a way of living with the images that drive his work. Of the studio wall paintings, he says: “I wanted to show anyone interested what surrounded me as an artist, what visually affects me from day to day, and I wanted to offer viewers information about the artist beyond what they usually get to see in a show or a catalogue. I wanted to go beyond the scenes, gifting them with an inside view, an insider's view. To show not only what the artist creates but also demonstrate what feeds the artist, what inspires the artist.”

When Lannis remarked of the not-quite-complete *Biography*, "It's like a play," Raffaella knew immediately what she meant. "There's this cast of characters, there's the plot, there's the décor and the scenery, and there's the unfolding of action between the various dramatic events," he wrote in his journal.

"Moreover, the two halved arched windows on either side of the wall create the feeling of curtains on the sides of a stage." He now observes of the paintings that they're a kind of ensemble playing. "A repertory theatre," he says. "No stars as such. An equilibrium, everyone equal, each building the whole." In this way, he honors the many participants in the production of the play that is the painting, as well as the production itself, the enterprise of painting. We enter the scene to find the story as it's unfolding, the story of the artist and his life.

Meet the Cast

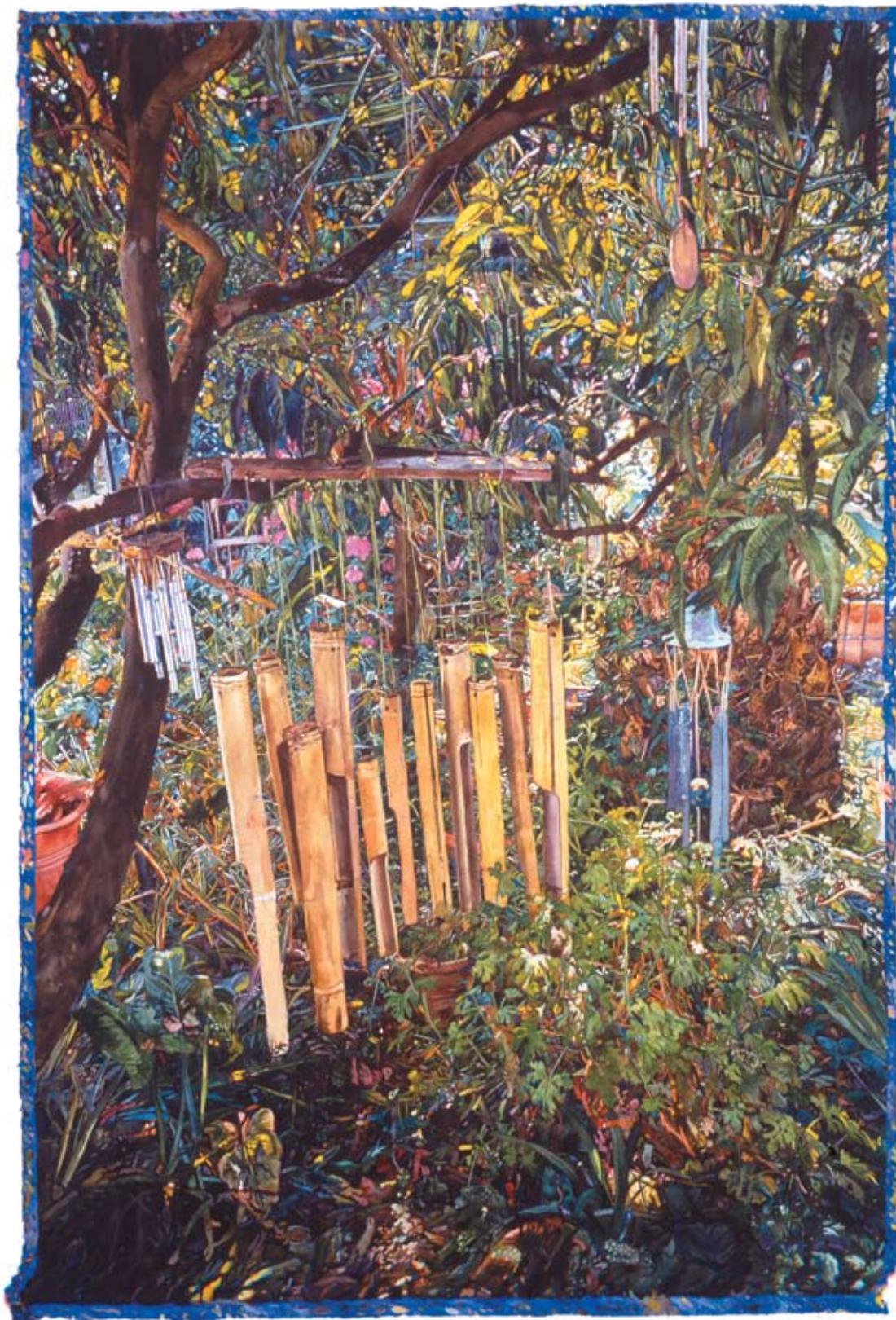
Vincent van Gogh. Images that have long inspired Raffaella include van Gogh's self-portraits. "What would a biography of mine be without van Gogh in it?" he says. He'd been wanting to make a painting of a van Gogh self-portrait collage that he'd done for 10 to 15 years before it finally made its way into *Biography*. It appears in the upper middle portion of the painting, framed by a flat Japanese screen painting, which is in turn framed by a photograph of Raffaella and Lannis' garden at night. A photograph of van Gogh as a child with a watercolor border also appears in *Scenes from a Life: The Studio Wall*.

"My two favorite books about art are van Gogh's *Letters to Theo* and Alexander Liberman's *The Artist in his Studio*," says Raffaella. "The first showing the interior of an artist's being and the second showing works of the artist and also the environment in which the art was created and

Inspired Support ■
Lannis in Siesta XIV
(1988; watercolor on paper, 63¾x44½)
depicts the artist's wife in repose.



A Remarkable View ■ The subject of *Wind Song* (2002; watercolor on paper, 66x45) is the artist's garden, a constant source of inspiration.





the surrounding people or partners in the individual artists' lives." Inspiration for the overall concept of the studio wall paintings was also derived from Pierre Bonnard (1867-1947) and Giorgio Morandi (1890-1964), artists who, as Raffael phrases it, "showed 'us' what they saw daily."

The Couple. A recurring image in the studio wall paintings, the Egyptian couple, which appears in *Biography*, is a photograph Raffael carried with him wherever he went for 25 to 30 years. It often hangs on his studio wall. "For me it has been a way of honoring Egyptian civilization, its art, the artist who created the original, the time it was created in, the couple depicted, and it's also an homage to all couples," he says. "I love how the woman has one arm around him and one arm and hand touching his arm. It reminds me of Lannis' support of me and my work all these years."

And indeed Lannis herself appears frequently in the studio wall paintings. Look for multiple images of her in *Scenes from a Life: The Studio Wall*. Raffael credits Lannis, who was once his professional spiritual counselor, with helping him to move towards more clarity in his life. He first painted her in 1988—in a series of 14 large *Lannis in Siesta* watercolors (see page 39 for an example)—and has since devoted a number of paintings to her, some inspired by the work of Sandro Botticelli, Henri Matisse and Francisco de Zurbaran.



Sacred Symbols. The Kyoto Imperial Palace is another image that appears and reappears in the studio wall paintings—look for it in *Biography*. "I've painted it a couple of times," says Raffael. "The first time in 1985, in a painting called *Marriage* honoring Lannis' and mine, which had just taken place. But this is a different angle—same season, just a newly restored golden expression of it." Raffael often chooses Japanese themes in his work and although he doesn't consider himself a practicing Buddhist, he often paints statues of Buddha and other

Color Bloom ■ At top left, *Mandala Bouquet* (2003; watercolor on paper, 36½ x 21½) reveals the artist's fondness for brilliant color.

An Inside View ■ Above, *Interior: R.S. & F.D.F.* (2005; watercolor on paper, 60x40) lends us yet another view inside Raffael's studio.



Beautiful Border ■ In Stegner (2006; watercolor on paper, 52x78) we find Raffael's trademark use of a painted border. "The borders are about how two realities meet," he says. "Not unlike how land meets the sea."

sacred symbols out of a respect for the aesthetic and spiritual harmony they represent. A collage of a Buddhist shrine with autumn leaves around it, a Tibetan Tanka and a Tibetan scholar meditating in his special room of study and worship have all appeared in his work. Look for a Tibetan collage as it curves up on the top shelf of the basket stand in *Biography*.

Nature. Butterflies abound in the studio wall paintings—Raffael regards them as “amazing ephemeral beings spreading and extending nature with their perfect methodology.” Flowers like hollyhocks and variegated colored roses gathered from the couple’s garden, birds and other animals are also primary characters, speaking to the artist’s deep regard for nature. “In nature and in particular through my responses to the garden, whether it be with the plants, flowers, birds, fish, or while watching the ever-changing

sea and skies which I see just beyond the garden here where we live—all this inspires me to make art,” he says. “It always has. It’s been this way for me since I was a child, silently gazing upon and entering nature’s ‘mysterium,’ unconsciously processing it and then lying on the floor drawing with Crayolas, transmuting it into my drawings. Basically it’s the same for me now.

“That which I see in the natural realm has an alchemical effect upon my being. This is what I call ‘inspiration’—breathing in the divine, the mysterious, and then expressing it during the act of painting, which is, of course, opportunity after opportunity to enter the creative moment. Nature reminds me who I am in my deepest self, and that alchemizes the need to paint and out of it all hopefully issues the invisible made visible in the painting.”

Of the largest natural image hanging on the studio wall in *Biography*, Raffael remarks, “This is a lithograph of *Pink Lily*



with *Dragonfly*. I did it about 25 years ago after a trip to a Buddhist monastery on an island off Hong Kong. I was poised to take the photo when a dragonfly alighted on the flower. I clicked. And I believe I did an oil of it, also a watercolor, and then also the lithograph. The lithograph was on my wall a few years after I had given it a watercolor border. Now the lithograph becomes a watercolor once again.”

Essential Choices

Raffael works in small areas, unrolling a large sheet of paper as he paints so that he can focus on the details in front of him and embrace a sense of process. “It’s about life. The creative moment,” he says. “When I go from one color to another, the journey changes.” Of watercolor as a medium, he remarks, “It’s really liberating. It dries differently than when it’s wet—it becomes what *it* wants to become, not what I would have it be.”

The somewhat unpredictable character of watercolor feeds directly into one of Raffael’s wishes for his work: for his paintings to be like nature and life, which are always changing. Nature is, after all, the source of much of his inspiration. “I feel this is one of nature’s roles—to bring us to a state of awe, to give us something way vaster than our limited life views,” he says. “I believe all the arts often aim towards

and accomplish the same thing for those who experience it.”

Although he graciously offers insight into his creative process, he’s careful not to delve too far into the technical, lest he inadvertently determine the paths of other artists—a fate he himself has taken pains to avoid. “There’s an alchemy in the creative process which is so hidden and unconscious, deep and mysterious,” he says. “All the decisions that one makes in life (and all of them not made) affect the creative process and one’s life. I actually prefer the ‘choices.’ They are essential.”

Of his new work, Raffael remarks, “It strikes me that I’ve never seen anything quite like these new paintings. Having been led to a juncture in the road, I’ve taken a certain path and now I’m moving along it.” The new path involves buzzing bright color and organic forms that emerge from active abstract spaces. Paintings like *Herald* and *Roses for Eiseley* (both on page 38) express a certain raw energy, a roughness that feels almost primordial in its portent. “I get to have color for color’s sake and an abundance of free, mysterious and totally natural forms, describing a straightforward abstract distillation,” he says.

Raffael may not know exactly where this new path will take him, but he feels assured that the painting will lead the way. “The painting has chosen me to bring it forth,” he says. In his painting journal for *Roses for Eiseley*, which he completed on Christmas day 2006, he wrote, “In the studio, briskly, urgently trying to let the painting through. Yes! Moments of panic. Yes! Hours of calm. Yes! Seconds of doubt. Yes! A life of ups and downs, ins and outs. The mountains and the valleys. Yes!” ■

Sarah A. Strickley is a writer and the managing editor of *Watercolor Magic*.

Picture THIS

by Joseph Raffael

"And as the eye is the best composer, so light is the first of painters." —Ralph Waldo Emerson



Orchids for Juan (2001; watercolor on paper, 37x53½)

Orchids for Juan is one of the many paintings-within-a-painting that appear in Joseph Raffael's Scenes From A Life: The Studio Wall (on page 34). Look for it just above the table, tucked behind his painting supplies. The artist explains the personal significance of the painting and the story behind it:

Orchids for Juan was painted in homage to Juan Gonzalez, a brilliant artist who died of AIDS in 1992. He and I were among the first artists to show at Nancy Hoffman's gallery when it opened in 1972. My wife Lannis and I loved Juan and his work. Early on, we purchased *Untitled (Birds)*, one of his colored pencil drawings. In it, there are shadows of birds on the walls. Birds were important to me as a subject in my early work, and have only become more so in my new paintings. For me, birds have always symbolized the human spirit. Over the years Juan's painting, as art so often does, influenced our "seeing"; we saw shadows differently thanks to him.

Then, years later, after Juan had died, Lannis gave me orchid plants in blossom for my studio as a Christmas gift. One Winter dawn, I entered the studio, and the sun's light was pouring in, creating these beautiful never-to-be-repeated shadows of some of our caged birds, intermingling with the orchids. I quickly photographed the view. Juan had also made beautiful works which included orchids—it was instantly clear that this work I would do was to honor his memory. 

To read more about **Joseph Raffael's** work, see "The Story of the Artist" on page 34.

To see the Juan Gonzalez painting that inspired this work, visit www.watercolormagic.com/gonzalez.asp.