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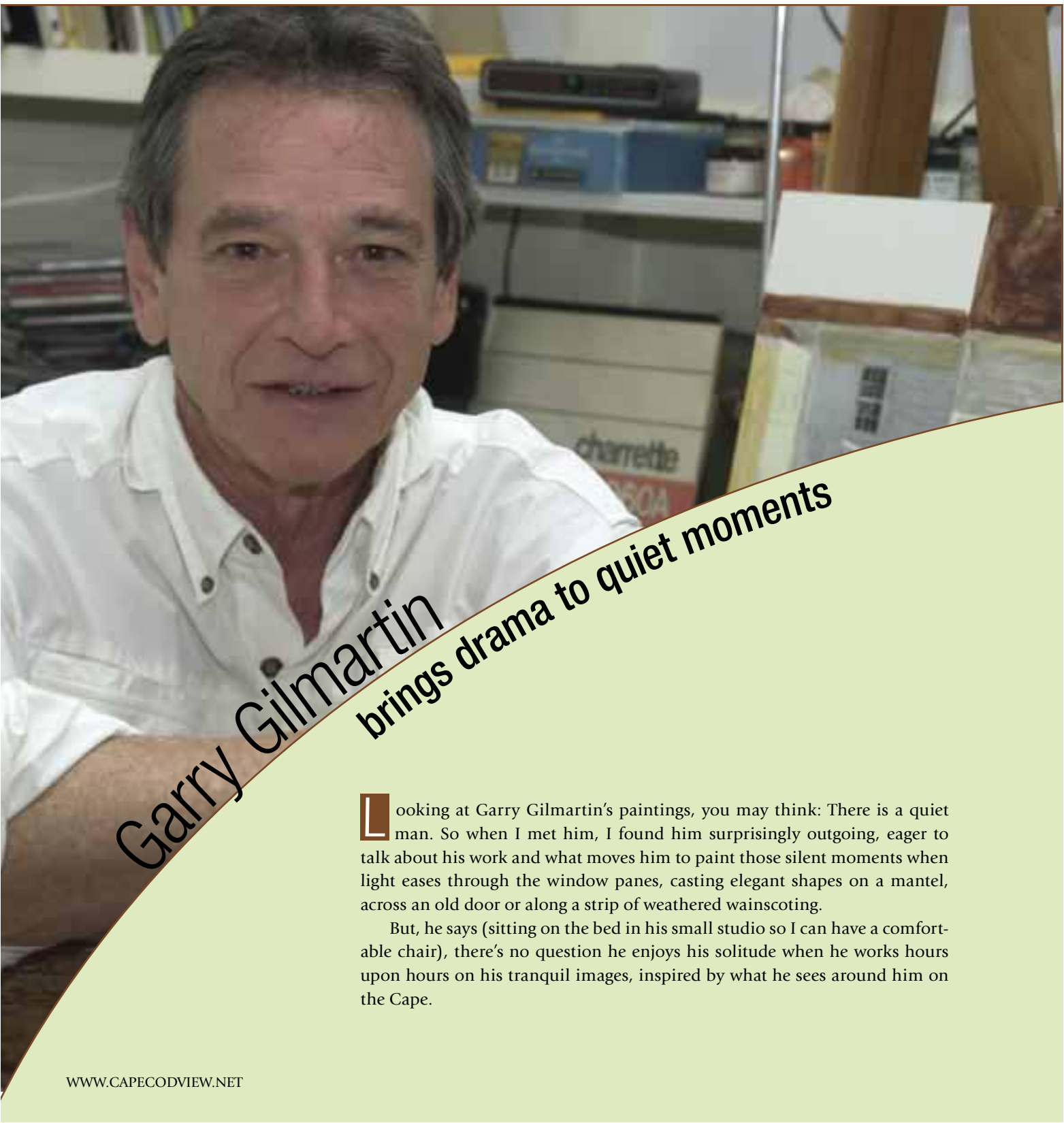
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Light on the Familiar

By Debbie Forman

Photography by Vincent Guadagno



Garry Gilmartin
brings drama to quiet moments

Looking at Garry Gilmartin's paintings, you may think: There is a quiet man. So when I met him, I found him surprisingly outgoing, eager to talk about his work and what moves him to paint those silent moments when light eases through the window panes, casting elegant shapes on a mantel, across an old door or along a strip of weathered wainscoting.

But, he says (sitting on the bed in his small studio so I can have a comfortable chair), there's no question he enjoys his solitude when he works hours upon hours on his tranquil images, inspired by what he sees around him on the Cape.

Although Gilmartin is a realist, a precisionist in dry-brush watercolor and egg tempera, the scenes he focuses on are artfully composed with considerations of the abstract and a striking simplicity.

The problem for any painter is "to make the ordinary extraordinary," Gilmartin says wistfully. "That's a quote from my older brother," who was his mentor and, before he died, an artist and director of the Asheville Art Museum in North Carolina.

The fifty-seven-year-old Gilmartin was born in Palmer, Massachusetts, and studied at the Paier College of Art in Hamden, Connecticut. He was a commercial artist in New York and Boston until, he says, he "burnt out from illustration." He gave it up, came to the Cape in 1989 and started doing fine-art work and, to keep him going, house painting. At least at first.

He had his first exhibition a dozen years ago at the former New Horizons Gallery in Orleans. For the last ten years, he's been with Addison Art Gallery in Orleans.

Gilmartin lives on a quiet road in North Truro. He divides his time between a turn-of-the century house during the off-season and, when his landlady comes in the summer, a studio on the property that was built in the 1920s. It is a rustic setting with a feel of old Cape Cod.

It is a simple life.

"I enjoy my solitude," he says with a big grin. "Being a painter is a solitary life."

But he has a network of friends – artists, for sure, also carpenters and farmers.

He loves the Cape. It's not just the beauty of this peninsula, he says. "At night, you can hear the ocean from here." He's about a quarter of a mile



"The Robe," a dry-brush watercolor, captures a precise moment in an ordinary day.

from the bay and the ocean isn't far either from this narrow strip of North Truro. "There's a freedom here," he says.

And none of those deadlines a commercial artist must heed.

Gilmartin paints only about twenty pictures a year, and you can see why. He is an exacting draftsman, a meticulous painter. His egg temperas require a slow process that involves as many as twenty glazes before they emerge into a dazzling reality.

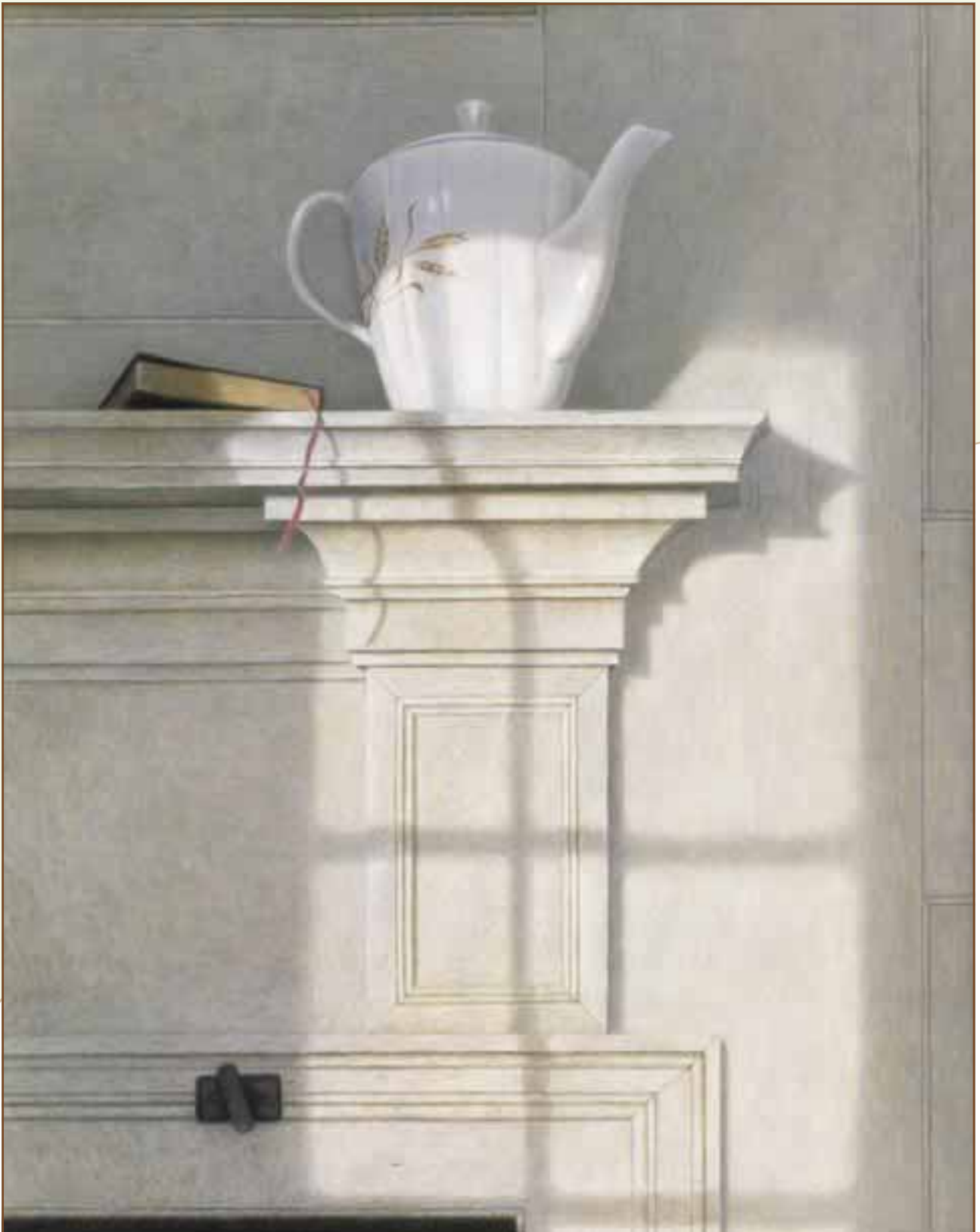
Light is more than just a minor element of his work. It is a major player that casts distinct patterns, which become a vital part of his composition. That's where the abstract aspect of his work comes in.

"People say, 'You paint so tight,'" he says, "but the abstractness of my composition is what gets your eye first. Then I draw you in. I want you to keep looking for more." He pauses a moment, "If I can knock your socks off, then ..." he doesn't finish the sentence. "I'm not a formula painter. Sure, I have my own little rules." Then he laughs, his weathered face shining in a wide grin. "But I break them. Do I look like I have rules?" he says as he looks

down at his white shirt, khaki shorts and sandals, actually quite respectable attire for a summer afternoon.

In art school, he says, in the beginning, "I did nothing but black and white – balls and cubes." Those basic shapes come up in our conversation more than once. "Keep it simple," he emphasizes, sounding like Cézanne, who believed everything could be pared down to its basic geometry. "That's essentially what (everything) is," he says, referring to those balls and cubes. "Then you add the blood to the veins. The blood is the feeling, the atmosphere, the mood."

Despite the preciseness of his fin-



“Sunday Morning,” an egg-tempera painting, shows Gilmartin’s skill at rendering the colors and gradations in white.

ished work, Gilmartin says, "I begin real loosey-goosey. I don't try to control it. Then I start to see things evolve." That's when he gets down to the exactness of his lines, the texture of those shingles and the almost photographic rendering of a pottery bowl or the wood grain of a floor.

And there is always his splendid light, not the dappled light exploding in the colors so many impressionists paint, but the serene light that illuminates his delicate palette. "I've always liked light," he says. "It has a drama to it." And as simple as they are, so do his paintings. Although he doesn't often put a figure in his work, the human presence is suggested by a slicker draped over a chair, a pair of boots left on a porch, a book resting on a mantel. "It gives the feeling that someone's there, gives some humanness to the still life."

And because the person is absent, a mystery is invoked. There is a story there, you think, as you ponder the subtleties of his work.

Although his portraits are quite lovely, what Gilmartin most often paints are still lifes, with an emphasis on "still." These are not your typical vases and bowls of fruit. Rather, they are supremely calm moments that seem to stop time. You want to hold your breath so as not to cause even a ripple to disturb the hushed beauty of these very ordinary subjects. His pictures do not depict objects that you would consider beautiful in their own right. They are mundane, often old and worn: a paint-chipped chair with a frayed cane seat, weather-beaten shingles or clapboard, an old rocking chair, laundry blowing in the wind. Commonplace things. He paints the rustic, the rural, not unlike the subjects depicted by one of his idols, Andrew Wyeth, who also paints in egg tempera and watercolor.

Gilmartin speaks admiringly of Cape artist Robert Vickrey, whose medium is also egg tempera. And, of course, Edward Hopper, who spent a lot of time not far from where Gilmartin now lives.



Gilmartin's fine, exacting work is eloquently demonstrated in the watercolor "Gift Basket."

Egg tempera is a difficult medium. Gilmartin mixes the yolk of an egg with distilled water and dry pigment, and he likes to tell a funny story about the attraction of that egg – although it wasn't so funny at the time. Not so long ago, after he finished one of his egg temperas, he sent a photograph of it to a New York collector, who bought it over the telephone. Gilmartin took the painting to his girlfriend's house to show her and left it there overnight. The next morning, looking very chagrined, she told him her dog had knocked over the painting and, not only that, attracted by the egg, had licked a hole in it the size of a softball. Gilmartin had to do the painting all over again.

On a tour of the house where he spends most of the year, Gilmartin points out places he has painted. "Look how the light's coming through here," he says, pointing to the windowpanes and the reflection the light casts on a table and across the wall. "It changes every fifteen minutes. You can catch it changing." He exults over morning light that streams through a window. It was the inspiration for a painting he did of a bathrobe hanging on a door and a white pitcher and bowl on a table. He points out a narrow white staircase, which he painted, with a couple of decoys at the top.

Like John Singer Sargent, Gilmartin loves to paint white. But, of course,



Gilmartin loves to capture light through a window as in "Truro Raincoat," a dry-brush watercolor, above, and the egg-tempera "Charlotte," below.



white is never really pure white. "White on white absorbs so much color. You have to just look and it's there. A lot is going on in the shadows with the reflected light."

Because of the speed of the light changing, Gilmartin often works from photographs, whether indoors or outside. He captures the exact moment when the light is creating a brilliantly shaped shadow under the archway of a church or when the sun casts the neat pattern of a fence on dry grass. "I'm a studio painter," he says, "not a plein-air painter." His motivation, he says, is simply to express his experience, "what I saw that day, that moment."

Although this one-room studio where Gilmartin spends his summer is small, he moves through it as if it were a much larger space. You can tell he is happy here as he points out its blessings: the vaulted ceiling and weathered beams, a tiny kitchen and enough room for two work areas – one with an easel for his egg temperas and the other a table where he does his watercolors, opposite the cooking area. He looks up at a window and says, "Perfect north light."

On the wall below the window is a slip of paper with a quote from Edgar Degas: "Only when he no longer knows what he is doing does the painter do good things."

Obviously, Gilmartin knows what he's doing, but, he says, "Halfway through a painting, I sometimes don't know where it's going. I've hit a million walls. You can get bogged down in technique. I have no idea what's going on and then ..." he thinks a moment and quickly adds, "the essence of what I'm looking for comes out." ♦

Thinking of going?

What: Paintings by Garry Gilmartin
Price range: \$2,000-\$15,000
Where: Addison Art Gallery, 43 South Orleans Road (Route 28), Orleans
Contact: 508-255-6200; toll-free: 877-291-5400; www.addisonart.com