



BILL SCOTT IMAGINING SPRING

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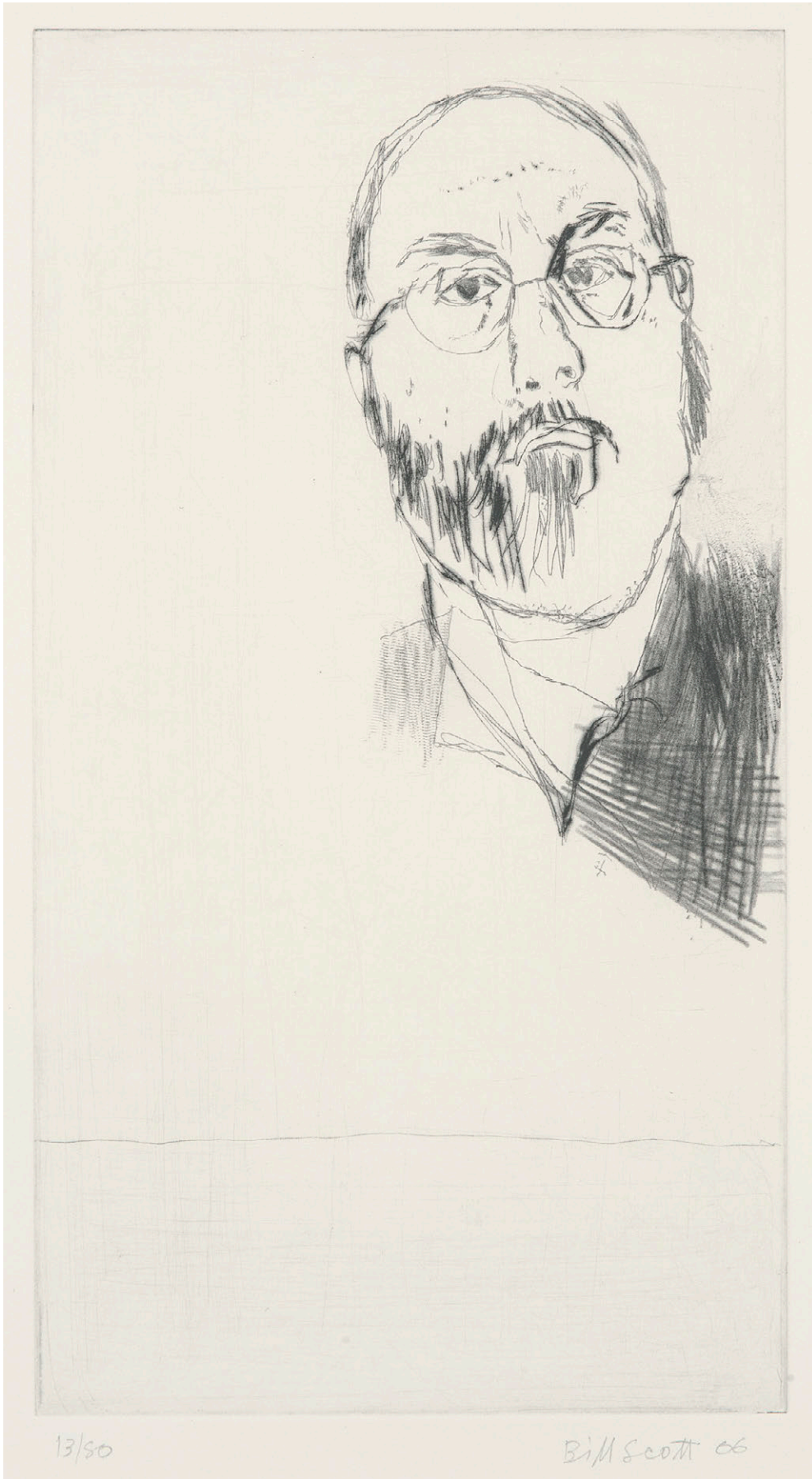
IMAGINING SPRING

10 March to 16 April 2016

Essay by Jason Rosenfeld

HOLLIS TAGGART GALLERIES

521 W 26th Street 7th Floor New York, NY 10001



Bill Scott, *Self Portrait*, 2006. Drypoint, 14 x 6 inches

FOREWORD

This is the sixth exhibition of the work of Bill Scott that our gallery has hosted. The longevity of this relationship is firmly rooted in Bill's continued evolution as a painter. It is a mark of the depth of his talent that he grows and advances with each new body of work while still maintaining his personal and iconic painterly language. *Imagining Spring* expands upon Bill's very solid artistic career and carries us yet again to a new visual height.

Demonstrating the confidence and control of a seasoned painter, Bill's new work reveals an intensified palette and a freer, more expansive use of pictorial space. This is combined with a proliferation of his characteristic energetic overlapping outlines that weave in and out with natural fluidity. With an authoritative hand, he is able to consistently achieve that often elusive balance between abstract form and color.

The complexity of Bill's work is brilliantly analyzed in the catalogue essay written by Jason Rosenfeld. With a fresh, original perspective, Dr. Rosenfeld examines influences, both direct and subliminal, drawing fascinating comparisons between Bill's work and art historical references. His article is provocative and enlightening and we appreciate his contribution to this project.

Special thanks are extended to the supremely competent exhibition coordinator, Katie Zoni, who handled myriad details so efficiently. We are also grateful to Kara Spellman and Liz Leggett for all their efforts with the design of the catalogue; and for their assistance and advice, we thank our colleagues at the gallery, Martin Friedrichs, Ashley Park, and Stan Charnin. Each played an individual part in bringing this exhibition to fruition.

Bill Scott has devoted his life to art. Beyond being the consummate painter and printmaker, he is an extraordinary human being. He is an esteemed teacher and a steadfast mentor to generations of young artists. He is a curator, a fundraiser for museum causes, an advocate for his artist colleagues, and a scholar and lecturer on the French Impressionist, Berthe Morisot. It has been such a pleasure collaborating with him over the years, getting to know the many facets of the man as well as the artist.

Hollis C. Taggart
Debra Pesci

BILL SCOTT: REFULGENCE

Jason Rosenfeld

Bill Scott's recent paintings bear ample traces of the distinctive approach to medium and color that has marked his productions over the past two decades, but they also signal a new individuality and untethering in his art. This is a matter of internal form, ever a presiding motif in his *oeuvre*, and of orientation and format with the introduction of tondi. These are circular canvases within which Scott's shimmering planes of radiant color and tendrils of greens and black skipping across the surface with little sense of a groundline become constricted by the very shape that has so impacted his work. At the same time his paintings have never felt so free of the distraction of built-up surfaces, and so liberated from direct influence and reference. Solid areas of color are rendered with the brush in circles or discs, or with the knife in squared forms, but in working with a remarkable absence of surface relief Scott has given his pictures a new potency, a new kind of conflicted pleasure in their moods. They have a density of tone resulting from complicated introspection—evidence of an artist continuing to wrestle with problems of form and relation that have marked Western painting's pursuit of abstraction for over one hundred years.

However, Scott's brand of abstraction does not forgo a human dimension in its mood or imagery. There is a peopled feeling in works such as *Fitler Square Nocturne* (pl. 16), the painting that most resembles a recognizable landscape. Its title references an urban park in the artist's Center City Philadelphia neighborhood. The picture has a kind of foreground on the right side in the form of an olive green embankment sprouting tree-like upright forms. At the bottom, two areas of black

FIG 1 Fernand Léger, *The City*, 1919.
Oil on canvas, 91 x 117½ inches.
Philadelphia Museum of Art,
A. E. Gallatin Collection, 1952-61-58
© Artists Rights Society [ARS],
New York/ADAGP, Paris



vertical bands like the wood slats and woven wire of a snow fence protecting saplings continue the *rus in urbe* feel. The dusky French Ardoise Grey in the background sets the night scene, and color stelae overlap one another in flat planes in the middle ground. These are like the bands of congruent hues in Fernand Léger's (1881-1955) masterpiece *The City* of 1919 (fig. 1) in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Scott's and Léger's abstract color fields convey the experience of urban ebb and flow. Thinly worked and vaguely round forms in the upper third of *Fitler Square Nocturne* can read as heads, street lamp embers, puffs of illuminated clouds. Scott's trademark bulging arcs in the corners give this particular work, with its monochromatic background and dashes

of white highlights resembling glassy reflections, the feel of an old picture tube television screen before the days of HD and low and wide cinematic aspect ratios. In that respect the color stelae noted above now appear as prismatic color test cards, absent the high-pitched drone that accompanied those late-night frozen images.

Fitler Square Nocturne's title bears a rare geographical specificity in Scott's work and little resemblance to its eponymous park, but it does establish a link to an Aestheticist tradition of abstracted landscapes in James McNeill Whistler's (1834–1903) poetic and pensive *Nocturnes*, which he began painting in the 1860s. Scott has used the word in titles previously, but most of the pictures here draw on the recalled landscape without the need for topographical accuracy or indicators of mood.¹ Scott's scenes are ephemeral remembrances, souvenirs of visual stimuli. Instead of remembered locales, some canvases take into account climate in an associative manner. The intensely colored *Cooler Weather* (pl. 11) is Scott at his confident best, interweaving related tones in broad washes, scumbles, blots, and glazes, overlaid and intercut here and there with looping slashes of flat black paint that are often sharply cropped at their horizontal extremities. Scott employs forms of *frottage*, the painting or rubbing of a canvas over a textured surface, and *grattage*, the scraping of the canvas's surface to reveal the forms. The Surrealist Max Ernst (1891–1976) pioneered these two techniques, placing his canvas upon textured surfaces such that the underlying ripples and furrows would pattern the pigments (fig. 2). Scott paints his stretched canvases at an easel and often tucks a piece of corrugated cardboard between the back of the canvas and the stretcher bars to insure the smoothness of the surface—a practicality now employed texturally. If the corrugated side of the inserted board is turned to the underside of the canvas, paint applied on top will bear the textures of its undulating surface, and then can also be scraped down to a thinner striated layer that resembles the slatting of Venetian blinds. The *frottage* and *grattage* effects in *Cooler Weather* are subtle and run horizontal at right center and lower left or vertical in a small and compelling patch at left center that flits through passages of orange and deep magenta. Unlike Ernst, who used *frottage* and *grattage* to unify his surfaces and to withdraw from a traditional, calculated, and masterly authorship, Scott's use of the techniques feels more random and serves visually to break up the smoothness of the painted forms while mirroring the looped slashes of black paint noted above. It also relates to his printmaking practice, as discussed below.



FIG 2 Max Ernst, *Seashell* 1928. Oil on canvas, 25 ½ x 21 ¼ inches. Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection, 1950-134-86 © Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York/ADAGP, Paris

Cooler Weather's formal satisfactions are many: the three wedges of lemon yellow that fan inwards from the upper right, the Rorschach-like splay of mirrored black oblong loops at the upper left, the touches of sap green that poke through in four places on the canvas. Color in Scott's work is always harmonious. Individual hues pop up across compositions in a successful unification of surface and tone,



FIG 3 Charles Rennie Mackintosh,
Textile design: rose and teardrop (recto),
Textile design: rose and teardrop
(verso), 1915-23.
Pencil, watercolor, and gouache on
paper (recto); Carbon ink (verso),
10 x 10 inches.
Hunterian Museum and Art Gallery
© The Hunterian, University of
Glasgow 2016

the result of continually mixing colors he has just employed into new shades on his palette as he works. It is similar to the even distribution of related tones across the works of Nicholas Poussin (1594-1665), that cool and controlled French Classicist. In Poussin's pictures, surface and paint blend into a unified, shallow, and smooth field without the staining effects later pursued by modernist artists such as Morris Louis (1912-62) or Helen Frankenthaler (1928-2011). The lack of impasto in Scott's similarly unstained paintings surprises, perhaps, considering the amount of visible gesture in the canvases, but the expressive energy that Scott achieves in the absence of relief is both remarkable and reflective of a painstaking technique.

These forces all come into radiant play in *Late October* (pl. 18), one of a series of low and wide works bearing dark backgrounds that are very different from the bulk of his recent productions and his more square pictures. The result is a heightened intensity—the lower and wider format denies

readings of landscape in terms of demarcated ground and sky. Imagery is compressed from below and above. The internal curved painted corners are absent. Forms seem to spool across the panoramic dimensions without the customary sense of cessation at the edges. *Late October*, *Bird's Nest* (pl. 21), and *Lovely Weather* (pl. 14) represent Scott at his most richly distinctive, confident in manner and execution, in fully resolved compositions. "When it feels good I stop," he has said. These feel very good indeed. *Late October* retains vestiges of figuration; the work resembles a tabletop still life and *Bird's Nest* bears clumps of low-lying plants in exploding floral circles rendered in intense hothouse colors. *Bird's Nest* channels the applied arts designs of Charles Rennie Macintosh's (1868-1928) incipient Art Nouveau (fig. 3), and of artists of the Viennese Secession at the turn of the nineteenth century. Scott shares with them an unshackled refulgence of color and design. The same cadmium orange that serves as a kind of backdrop in *Bird's Nest* appears abrupt but not unwelcome in the center of *Late October*. It is formless yet anchors the area of seemingly solid colored spheres at the upper left, the spiked greenery advancing at right, and an upward curving Milky Way of multicolored ringlets emitting from the lower left corner. These forms appear to be at war with one another, but somehow they achieve a perfect union around that orange vortex, itself flanked and buttressed by a vermilion patch at its right, speckled like a strawberry.

In contrast, works such as *A Backyard Still Life* (pl. 5) seem to bear less chaotic and more settled, conventional compositions: flowerpots stand in formation on a windowsill; elements follow the rule of gravity. A multi-hued sky is visible through windows at the top. A bank of white at the right could well stand for the stark chalky walls of Scott's studio of twenty-four years. The artist used the cardboard *frottage* to great effect just to the right of center, as foliage springing from the pots. This is one of a number of deft painted plays on Paul Cézanne's *passage*, visible, for instance, in his *Quartier Four, Auvers-sur-Oise (Landscape, Auvers)*, c. 1873 (fig. 4), in the use of short linked diagonal strokes to convey the

visual blurring of forms and color. On a literal level, the *frottage* striations read as the veining of leaves. Process emanates from deeply ingrained art historical techniques in these pictures.

The relationship between the grand oil painting titled *Imagining Spring* (pl. 4) and its similarly titled print (fig. 7) sheds further light on Scott's artistic process. The painting came first, and the artist flipped a photograph of it in order to prepare the copper etched and aquatinted plates, transferring the general forms with carbon paper. Here, Scott rises to the challenge of working on a more narrow vertical scale (along with *Where the Cricket Sings* (pl. 1), *Imagining Spring* is the tallest in the show). And like *Fitler Square Nocturne*, *Imagining Spring* resembles a traditional landscape picture with its intimation of a sun, the curvature of the top corners making the viewer feel as if he or she is peering out from a cave. Elements expand from the lower half up and into the atmosphere of a variegated blue sky. At bottom is a dark form that looks like a hunched woodland creature but actually relates to one of Scott's cats who passed away. Here he alludes to the feline form, wrapped in a green towel and readied for transport to the vet. This melancholy reference is ameliorated in the ebullient colors and shapes above, an overall sensation enhanced in the print by a brightening of the central yellow form. Yellow is a persistent and centrally located motif in Scott's work, in *Trees by a Fountain* (pl. 2), *Where the Cricket Sings*, *A Small Square in the City* (pl. 8), and *Always Night and Day* (pl. 24) in particular. This is unsurprising considering the artist's frequently professed affection for the Barnes Foundation, as the pride of that collection is Henri Matisse's (1869-1954) *Bonheur de Vivre (Joy of Life)* of 1905-6, one of the great pictures ever to use yellow as its bedrock color. In Scott's print of *Imagining Spring*, the yellow is deepened and its form solidified.

Despite the resemblance between these versions of *Imagining Spring*, Scott's prints are not reproductions of the paintings. While he does use roulettes and drypoint hatching on the coated copper plates to approximate the effect of the cardboard *frottage* in the oils, the prints are free translations of the compositions, not slavish transcriptions. Made using up to five plates, each with a different color, the prints are remarkable in their illusion of collage: their surfaces are even shallower than those of the paintings and they emulate lithography in their saturated aquatinting. Scott has had a productive and rewarding partnership for many years with Cindi Royce Ettinger, whose light and airy printmaking studio on South Street, filled with vintage presses, movable type, drawers, and vats, is where the two of them work out the problems of the world. While all of Scott's prints are based on paintings it is too tempting, perhaps, to see the relationship between these two processes as moving in only one direction. The amount of time he spends perfecting his prints indicates how often he now uses paint in emulation of the

FIG 4 Paul Cézanne, *Quartier Four, Auvers-sur-Oise (Landscape, Auvers)*, circa 1873.

Oil on canvas, 18 ¼ x 21 ¾ inches.
The Philadelphia Museum of Art.
The Samuel S. White 3rd and Vera White Collection, 1967





FIG 5 Bill Scott, *Tondo I*, 2014.
Oil on canvas, Diameter: 16 inches.

etchings, with broad blotted areas that mimic the pebbled pixilation of aquatint, or *frottage* that can approximate the action of the roulette.

The remarkable tondi, 16 inches in diameter and a departure for the artist, are a new contribution to this traditional round format, as in *Tondo I* (fig. 5). In the Italian Renaissance, artists used circular panels for ceremonial birth trays, called *deschi da parto*, and as with other painted objects meant for domestic spaces such as *cassoni* (marriage chests) the trays were covered with mythological or historical images redolent of the proper life, or the pleasurable one. Triumphant processions, erotic scenes, images of musical performers proliferated on trays that could be used for breakfast in bed or household display. It was not until the ceiling of Andrea Mantegna's *Camera degli Sposi* in the Ducal Palace in Mantua (1465-74) and then Raphael's *Alba Madonna* (c. 1510, National Gallery of Art) and *Madonna della Seggiola* (c. 1513-14, Galleria Palatina), drawing on the sculptural tradition of tondi in marble and terracotta, that paintings assumed a round form irrespective of a decorative or souvenir function. Imagery within thus began to respond to the curvature of its support. Scott's versions blend the expansiveness of Mantegna's aerial vision and the intricacies of Renaissance tondi with an awareness of more modern treatments of the format, such as Sir Thomas Lawrence's complicated, and by turns, immersive and explosive *Calmady Children* (1824, Metropolitan Museum of Art), wherein convexity and concavity are at odds. Or in memorable modernist explorations of the form in the work of Georges Braque in his marvelous *Soda* of 1912 (MoMA), Joseph Stella's *Coney Island* of 1914 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Jackson Pollock in his *Tondo* of 1948 (private collection), Sol LeWitt in a series from 2002, and most memorably, Robert Delaunay (1885-1941). Delaunay's masterpiece of Orphism, *Simultaneous Contrasts: Sun and Moon* (1913;



fig. 6) is always worth seeking out on visits to MoMA, if only to see if it is hung on the eyeline or hovering closer to the ceiling.² Scott's art is free from Delaunay's somewhat ambiguous Orphist metaphors, but the melding planes of pure color responding to the curvature of the support reveal their close affinities.

While modern artists' tondi tend to be one-offs in their work and, like Scott's, resist the associations with the decorative that the format has come to accrue, some artists have pursued the theme more diligently, such as Emilio Vedova (1919–2006). But that Venetian painter worked on a more galactic scale, and his large discs with their active and mostly monochromatic broad brushwork resemble cratered lunar surfaces, and were often displayed strewn about environments, some on the floor, some on edge in the center of the room.³ Scott's recent tondi resist the bombast of Vedova's canvases, as well as reject the cynical denial of touch of Damien Hirst's (b. 1965) machine-made spin paintings, dating back to 1994. In Scott's new tondi pictures the rules have changed. It is as if his distinctively coloristic world is now viewed through the microscope lens, yet in fact the forms are not magnified but appear as Bill Scott pictures seen from a distance, their parts on a smaller scale, with colors worked into each other. In *Tondo I*, the organization is determined by a demarcation of color running from the upper left, at 11:00, to the lower right, at 4:00. As in *Fitler Square Nocturne*, the white daubs in the lower right quadrant appear as glints of light on a convex reflective surface, such as that of a marble—these are cat's eye paintings, translucent in their energetically colored surfaces in a way that the rectangular work is not. And as the artist has noted, in tondi you are always at a measured distance from the edge, there are no corners to be cornered into, no curves that need to mask the perpendiculars.

FIG 6 Robert Delaunay, *Simultaneous Contrasts: Sun and Moon*, 1913 (dated on painting 1912). Oil on canvas, Diameter: 53 inches. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund. Courtesy of: ART RESOURCE © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY

Ultimately, the tondi relate to the circles that appear throughout Scott's new work and that most flourish in macro and micro scale in *A Month in the Fall* (pl. 3). It is a work autumnal in feeling and form, with its bubbling and ultimately descending rings, the two oculi that make up its binocularity (as opposed to the telescopic singularity of the tondi), its scrims and washes of diluted color. This is Scott at his most frenetic and active, and while the forms threaten to befuddle and elicit a state of unmanaged chaos, the superbly controlled colors, their harmonized tones, and their frequent recurrence across the canvas (as in the lovely burgundies in the upper left reprised in the lower center, the ambers and emeralds throughout) combine with a sense of release in the thinned and dripping French Ultramarine at upper right.

In the past Bill Scott's art has been linked to the Philadelphia school of abstract colorist painters headed by the still under-appreciated Arthur Beecher Carles (1882-1952) and his student Jane Piper (1916-91), with whom Scott worked informally. Joan Mitchell (1925-92) was an early and pervasive influence, and there are evident debts to modern old masters such as Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841-1914), Berthe Morisot (1841-95), and Matisse. The links with Ernst and Cézanne are technical and not about resemblance; they are learned and perfected elements of Scott's mature process. These all now seem less important as Scott's present work is boldly and clearly in his own voice, with but vestiges of the past heroes that impacted him, vestiges that are harder and harder to discern in the color that he breathes onto his canvases. On the cusp of turning sixty Scott has found a singularly distinctive vision, one that in works such as *A Month on the Fall* presage new and ever-distancing evolutions to come.

Jason Rosenfeld, Ph.D., is Distinguished Chair and Professor of Art History at Marymount Manhattan College. He has co-curated *River Crossings* at Olana and Cedar Grove in Hudson and Catskill, New York (2015), *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde* at Tate Britain, the National Gallery in Washington, D.C., and the Pushkin (2012-14), *John Everett Millais* at Tate Britain and the Van Gogh Museum (2007-8), has published a monograph on Millais (Phaidon, 2012), and has worked on exhibitions of Marcel Dzama, Stephen Hannock, and Lionel Smit.

The author would like to thank Bill Scott for his generous participation in this project, jack-of-all-trades Katie Zoni for her expert collaboration on the catalogue, and Hollis Taggart and Debra Pesci for bringing me on board.

ENDNOTES

¹ As in *Nocturne II* (1995), reproduced in *Bill Scott: Paintings* (New York: Prince Street Gallery, 1997), p. 22, and *City Nocturne* (2004), in *Bill Scott* (London: Albemarle Gallery, 2006), pl. 4.

² <http://www.moma.org/collection/works/78302?locale=en>

³ <http://www.fondazionevedova.org/node/364>



FIG 7 Bill Scott, *Imagining Spring*, 2015. Aquatint with drypoint and etching in eight colors, Plate: 24 x 16 inches, Paper: 30 x 22½ inches.



1 Where the Cricket Sings 2014. Oil on canvas, 65 x 43 inches



2 **Trees by a Fountain** 2014. Oil on canvas, 55¼ x 60¼ inches



3 A Month in the Fall 2015. Oil on canvas, 43 x 59 inches



4 Imagining Spring 2014. Oil on canvas, 65 x 43 inches



5 A Backyard Still Life 2015. Oil on canvas, 39 x 43 inches



6 An Aquarium of Flowers 2015. Oil on canvas, 52 x 43 inches



7 Butterfly 2015. Oil on canvas, 48 x 45 inches



8 A Small Square in the City 2014. Oil on canvas, 39 x 43 inches



9 Mornings with Evan and Wyeth 2015. Oil on canvas, 32 x 42 inches



10 A Tabletop Landscape 2014. Oil on canvas, 45 x 57 inches



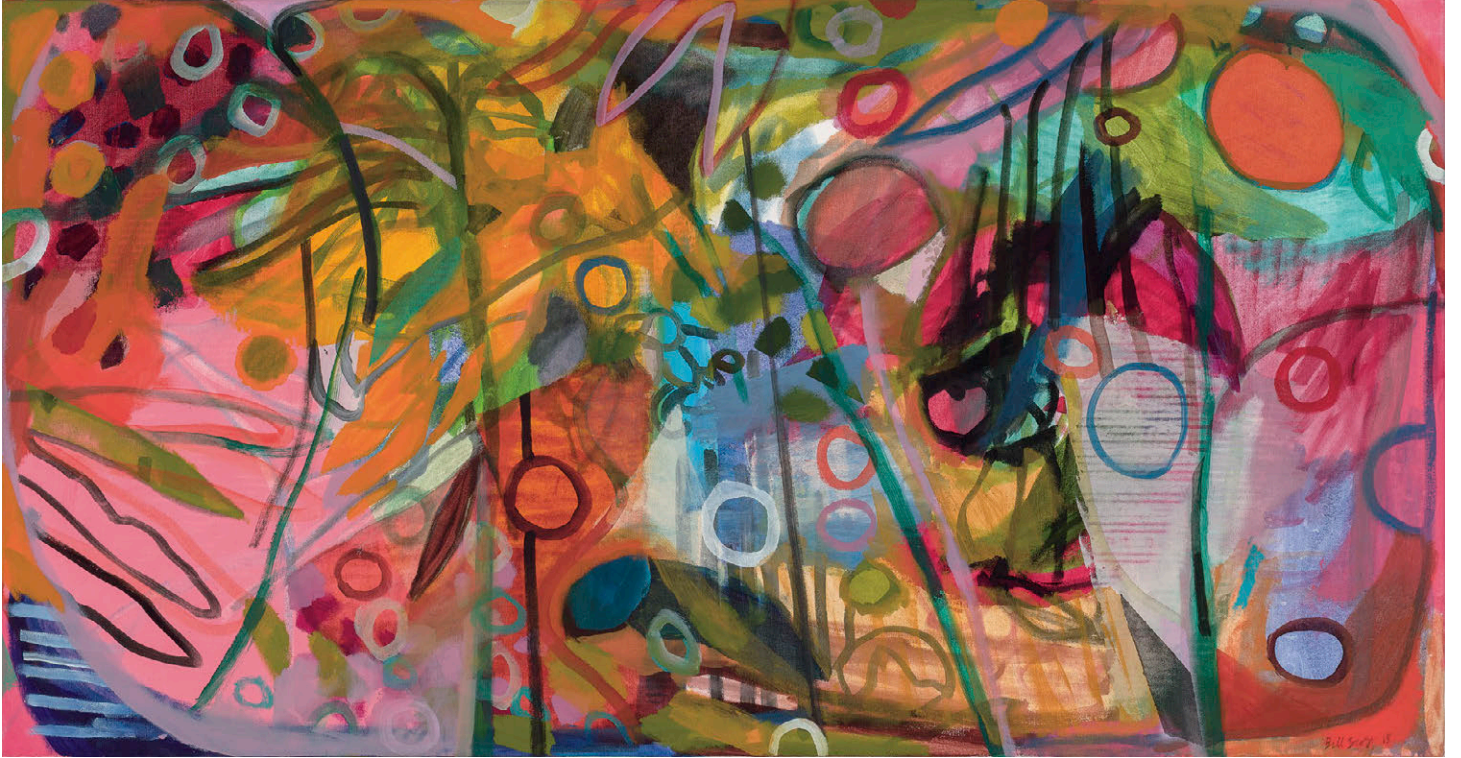
11 Cooler Weather 2015. Oil on canvas, 43 x 52 inches



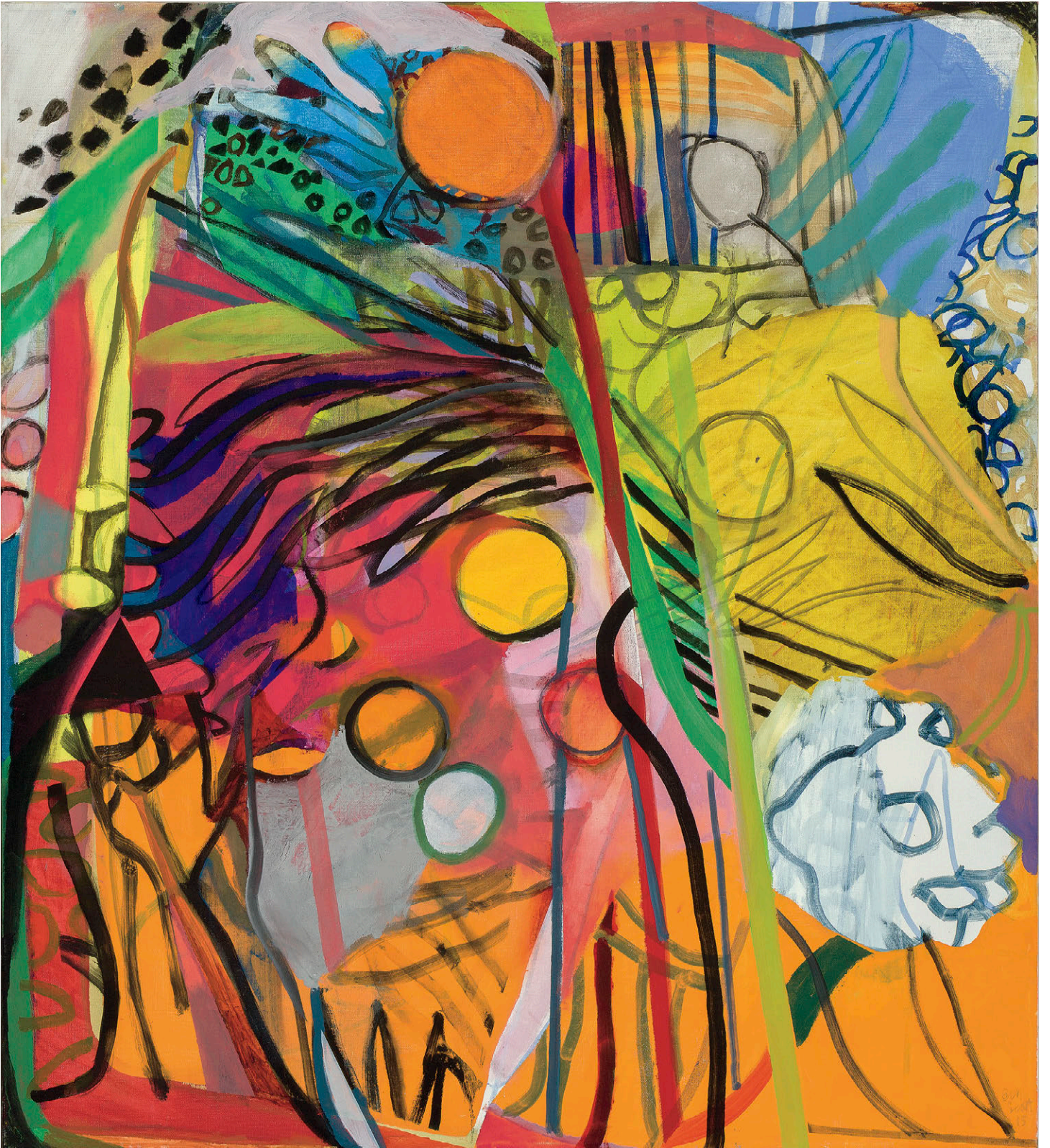
12 One Orange Left 2014. Oil on canvas, 39 x 43 inches



13 Turning Time to Flowers 2014. Oil on canvas, 45 x 57 inches



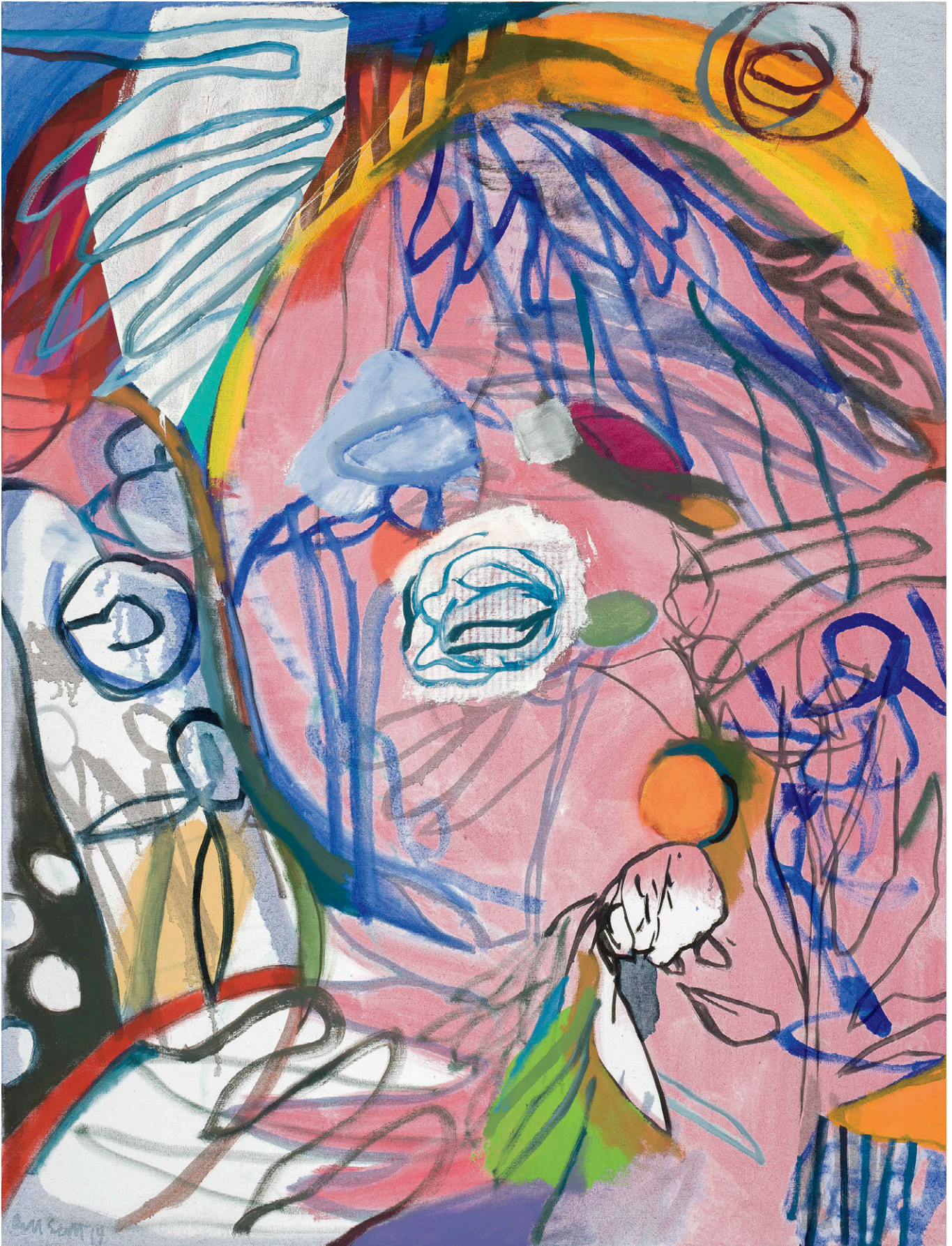
14 **Lovely Weather** 2015. Oil on canvas, 32 x 61 inches



15 The Last Days of August 2015. Oil on linen, 43 x 39 inches



16 Fittler Square Nocturne 2014. Oil on linen, 36 x 42 inches



17 Precious May Mornings 2014. Oil on canvas, 32 x 42 inches



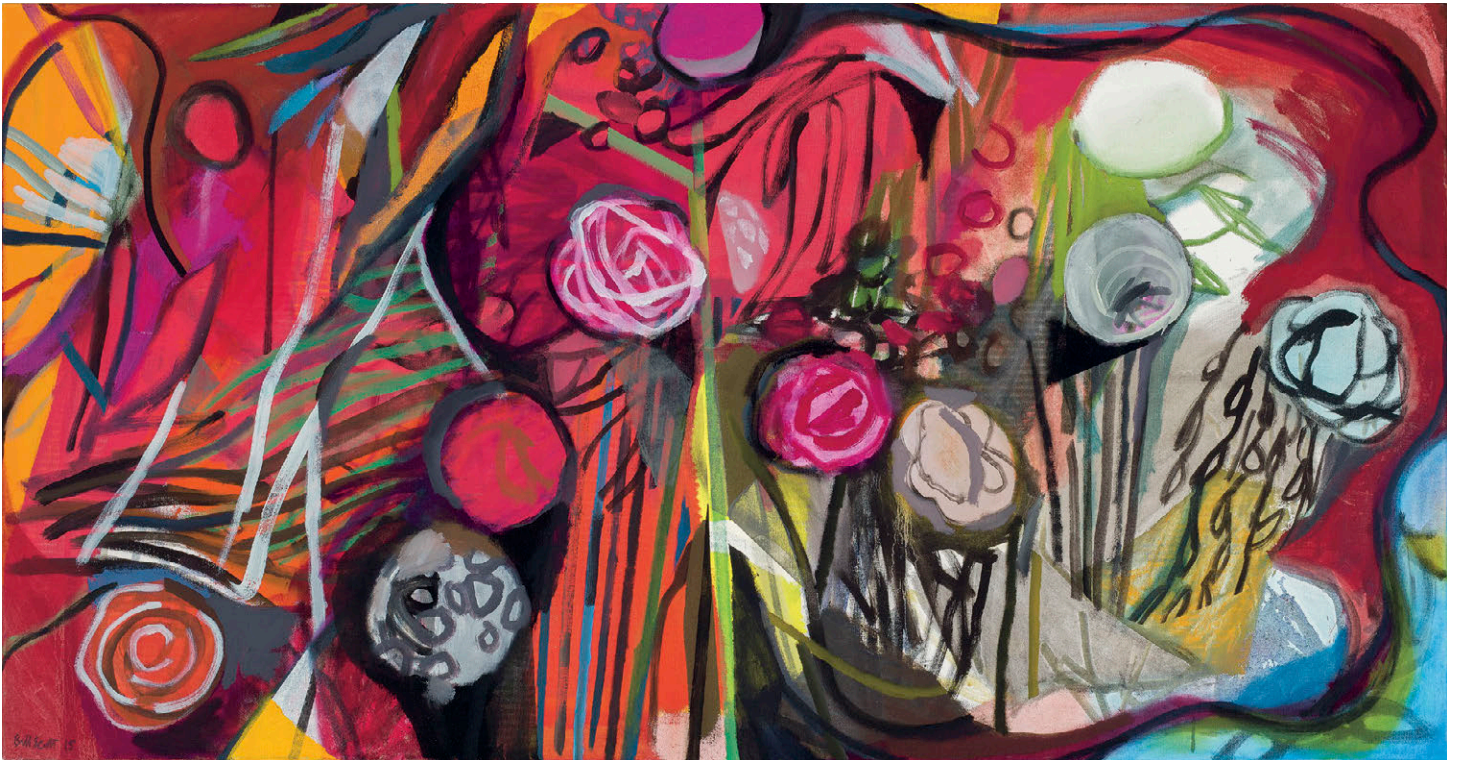
18 Late October 2015. Oil on canvas, 35 x 58 inches



19 Inches from the Water 2014. Oil on canvas, 50 x 65 inches



20 Tracing Lines to the Lake 2015. Oil on canvas, 36 x 18 inches



21 Bird's Nest 2015. Oil on canvas, 32 x 61 inches



22 Flowers Toward Landscape 2014. Oil on linen, 36 x 42 inches



23 **A Wave of Leaves** 2014. Oil on canvas, 26 x 26 1/8 inches



24 Always Night and Day 2014. Oil on canvas, 37 x 43 inches



25 Early May I 2014. Aquatint with drypoint and etching in five colors, Plate: 24 x 12½ in., Paper: 30 x 22½ inches

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