

An aerial photograph of New York City, showing Central Park in the center, surrounded by dense urban development. The Manhattan skyline is visible in the background under a clear blue sky.

JOEL BABB: *Enlightened Perspectives*

VOSE GALLERIES



*There is a sense of detachment in a broad view like that—so that one doesn't think of individuals on the street, or being in the city, but one sees the city as an organism with a life of its own...You think of the passage of time, and from the distance the city and all its inhabitants seem like part of the patterns of nature. -Joel Babb*

JOEL M. BABB: *Enlightened Perspectives*

October 6 - November 21, 2009

## Process: A Babb of our Own

by Marcia L. Vose

We are proud to report that a very gifted painter living in the Maine woods has been brought to national attention! Joel Babb's first exhibition at Vose Galleries in 2006, in which he presented thirty-one paintings of New England cityscapes and landscapes, was so successful that the artist was able to enlarge his small clapboard house in the woods of East Sumner, Maine, and build a proper studio next door. In that setting for the ensuing three years, the artist has completed a new cache of twenty-three paintings for this, his second exhibition at Vose.

Joel Babb has the distinctive ability to write clearly about his work, stemming from a sharp intellect and also from his teaching over the past thirty years, when he had to explain his approach to painting in a comprehensible manner. We have sprinkled his thoughts on various topics liberally throughout this catalogue with the hope that the reader will better understand the complexities of the mental and technical processes that underpin each of his paintings. Many of his larger works take months to complete.

In reflecting on what I might add to the dialogue, I thought it would be of interest to describe the process of purchasing one of Joel's paintings for our personal collection. My husband Bill and I have admired Joel's paintings for years, and decided to buy something from his second exhibition at Vose Galleries. The first paintings to be delivered to the gallery were the Nantucket scenes that seriously tempted us, having spent many happy days taking in the dappled light falling through the trees onto those glorious

buildings of Nantucket Town. Soon after, Joel proudly unveiled *The Fan Pier, Boston*, which took him over three months to complete. A different take from his bird's eye views of Boston, Fan Pier's perspective is looking up from eye level to the looming patch-work quilt of new buildings springing up around the South Boston waterfront. A stunning tour de force of intersecting lines, the perspective keeps the viewer in the foreground and enables us to imagine being part of the scene on the dock. We were truly smitten.



Not six months later, Joel brought in several paintings of Maine, and among them was *Dappled Brook* (p.15). My jaw dropped. Anyone who has ever grown up with a brook nearby knows the pleasures of climbing over the rocks and discovering a treasure of snails and crayfish in the languid pools, or trying for hours to spear a wily sunfish. The memories of total abandonment found by a stream in the woods made *Dappled Brook* my emotional favorite. There was no brook in

Bill's past, however, and we were deadlocked.

That next spring, Joel wanted to paint one of his famous bird's eye views of Boston, and we took him to a client's offices high up in the gleaming Hancock Tower. The offices occupied an entire floor with panoramas of the Boston skyline extending for 360 degrees. Joel was in his element, and we left him excitedly sketching and taking photos of the magnificent views.

(continued on page 16)

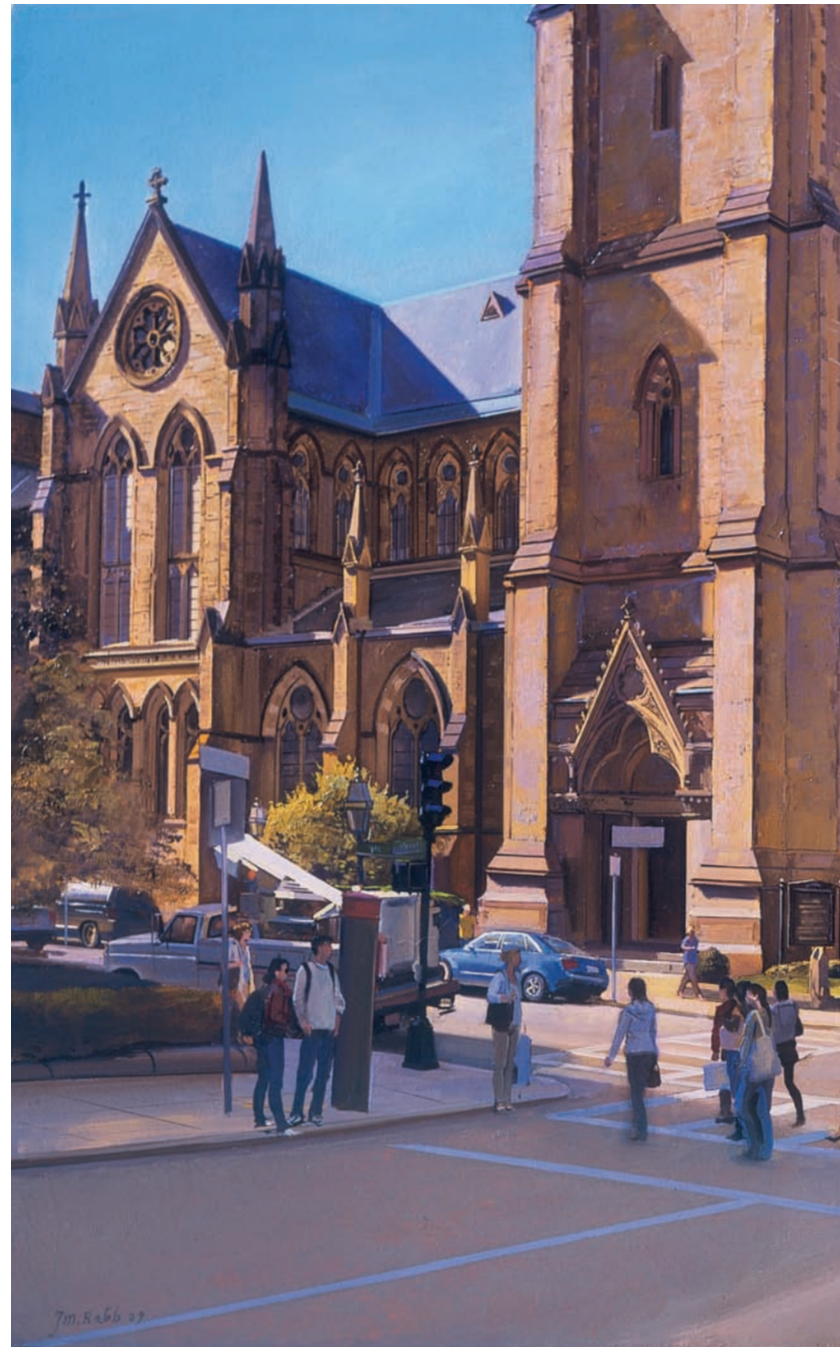
Above: *The Fan Pier, Boston*, oil on linen, 24 x 48 inches, 2007; Opposite: (detail) *Finished Study for The Fan Pier, Boston*, oil on masonite, 15 x 24 inches, 2007; Cover: *Boston from the Hancock Tower*, oil on linen, 36 x 84 inches, 2008



*Enlightened Perspectives*  
**CITYSCAPES**

*Painting Boston's cityscapes, I suppose, is a little bit like Sargent painting Venice—it is a subject richly suggestive of the past, with an elevated aesthetic. I don't wish to paint in Sargent's style, though it would be wonderful to be able to, but Boston really is a great subject for thinking about the relation of the past to the present. –Joel Babb*

*Berkeley and Newbury*, oil on linen, 18 x 36 inches, 2009







Above: *On Commonwealth Ave.*, oil on linen, 18 x 45 1/4 inches, 2009

Below: *Finished Study for On Commonwealth Ave.*, oil on masonite, 9 7/8 x 23 7/8 inches, 2008



Above: *Beacon and Clarendon, Afternoon Light*, oil on linen, 18 5/8 x 36 inches, 2008

Below: *Finished Study for Beacon and Clarendon, Afternoon Light*, oil on masonite, 9 x 15 inches, 2008





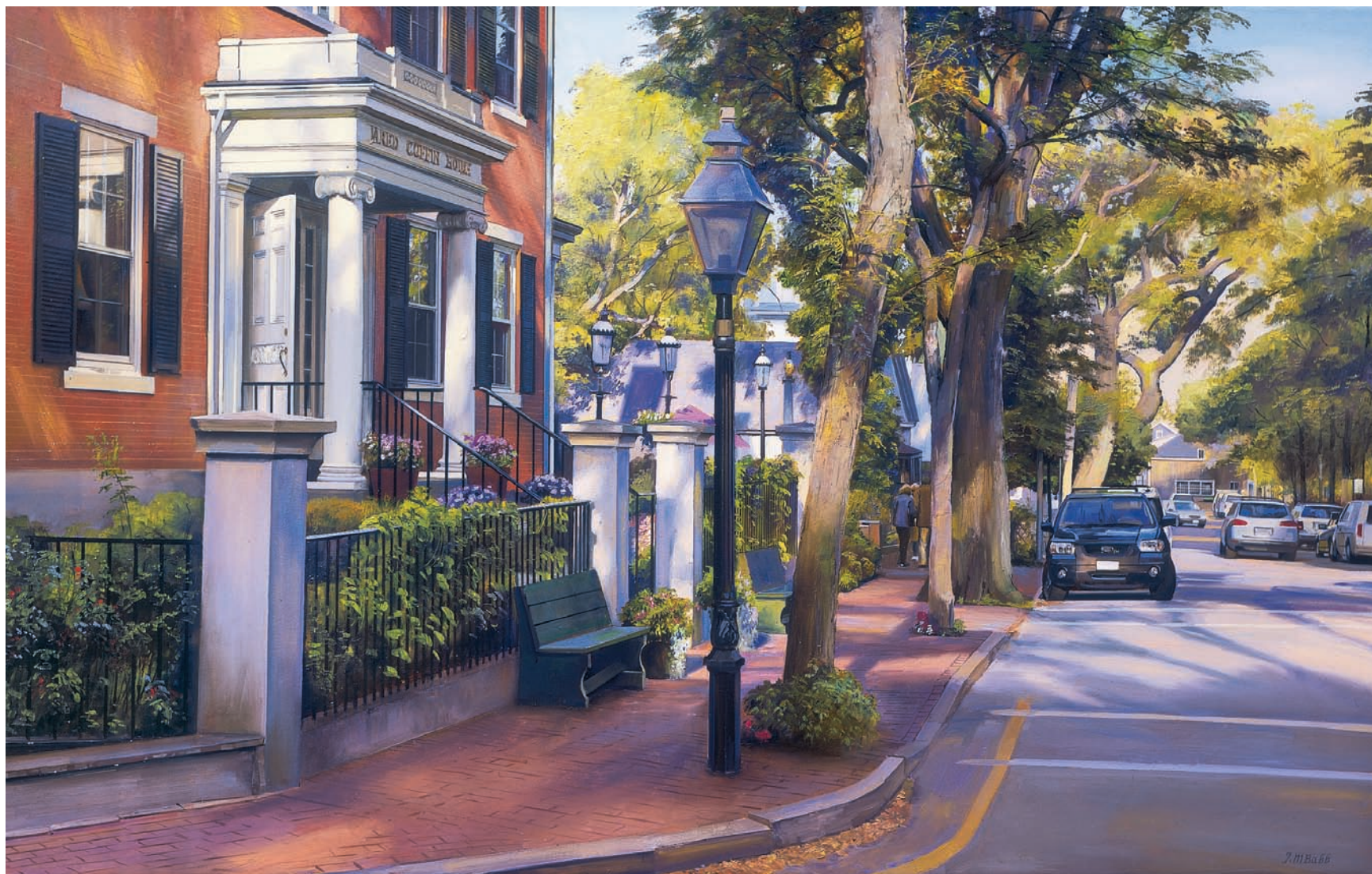
Left: *Bowfront and Tower, Commonwealth*, oil on linen,  
28 x 22 inches, 2009



Right: *Commonwealth Turrets*, oil on linen, 28 x 22 inches, 2009



*Gloucester and Commonwealth*, oil on linen, 19 1/4 x 36 inches, 2008



*The Jared Coffin House, Nantucket, oil on linen, 22 3/4 x 36 inches, 2007*



*Three Bricks, Nantucket*, oil on linen, 20 1/4 x 36 inches, 2007



*I particularly loved the gracious old architecture and the vast overshadowing trees of Nantucket, both of which speak of the passage of time and a vanished world. –Joel Babb*

Above: *Gray Shadows, Nantucket*, oil on linen, 15 x 36 inches, 2007

Left: *Blue Victorian, Nantucket*, oil on linen mounted to panel, 18 1/2 x 19 1/4 inches, 2007



*A Seafaring Gate, Nantucket*, oil on linen mounted to panel, 18 x 28 inches, 2007



## *Enlightened Perspectives* **IN THE WILD**

*The city's beauty of architectural forms requires linear perspective—the woods and streams demand a whole different strategy for coping with the complexity of nature's self-organizing forms...Of course it's all nature, and the subject of painting is about what light is doing in the physical world. –Joel Babb*



*Dappled Brook*, oil on linen, 48 x 51 inches, 2007

After six months of painstaking work, Joel brought in the finished *Boston from the Hancock Tower* (cover). It is simply riveting. The view looks east, the Charles River snaking to the Zakim Bridge on the left and the downtown district and harbor in the far center distance. Joel feels it is his finest panorama, and it demonstrates dramatically his brilliance in handling light and perspective. Now our dilemma worsened as we tried to choose from among three masterpieces.

When we began to think about where we would actually hang each piece, however, we had an easier time deciding. Our house in Duxbury simply does not have the wall space to properly view *Boston from the Hancock Tower*. And, sadly, *Dappled Brook* did not fit in with our other paintings, partly because of size, but also because it is a soloist and overwhelms the other paintings in the room. I'm determined to add on a room where I can sit in front of *Dappled Brook* and dream. As it turns out, *Fan Pier* works nicely with our other work and will take center stage in our living room. We're ecstatic with our choice, but wish that we could have accommodated all three!

Joel's work is often misunderstood as the simple recreation of a photograph. While Joel uses photography as a tool, it is only one aid that helps with the final canvas, particularly in determining perspective. The artist explains:

*For the Fan Pier idea I took 45 digital images and worked from them. Some were overviews, some of details I knew I would need. But there is no single photo that shows the whole view. Everything is changed from one picture to the next—nothing matches up, everything is distorted. The easiest thing to notice is that the edge of the pier slopes differently in each pic-*

*ture. In fact, the shape and angle of everything changes when you move the camera from side to side. Also, the range of color values which a photo can capture is nowhere near great enough to capture the range of lights and darks which are comprehended by the eye, and must be painted. When the work is finished, the painting takes on a life of its own which was not evident in the photograph.*

*After I made the smaller finished oil study to get a feeling for the light and color (p.3), I worked out the drawing of the final composition on the canvas in pencil, and then applied a tone to the canvas and finished a careful underpainting with burnt umber, Indian yellow and black. When that*

*was dry I began working on the sky in color, and established the lightest lights in the picture, and some of the darkest darks, so that these would be reference points for determining the tones of everything in the picture. This is very important, because since some of the photos are lighter or darker, one can never just copy the apparent color in the photo. All values have to be judged in comparison to the benchmarks which you establish in the beginning.*

*I think it's interesting that I ended up using all forty-five of the pictures to do the painting. You learn something about the view from each of them. Perspective and photography are interlinked, fascinating and complicated. When you study traditional painting, it seems obvious that the old masters would have used cameras if they had had them. In fact, they did have cameras: Camera Obscuras. These enabled one to make very accurate contour drawings of perspectives, or landscapes—but they didn't help one in painting the color and atmosphere. There is still the danger of using just photography to paint, if you don't understand how to paint without using the camera!*



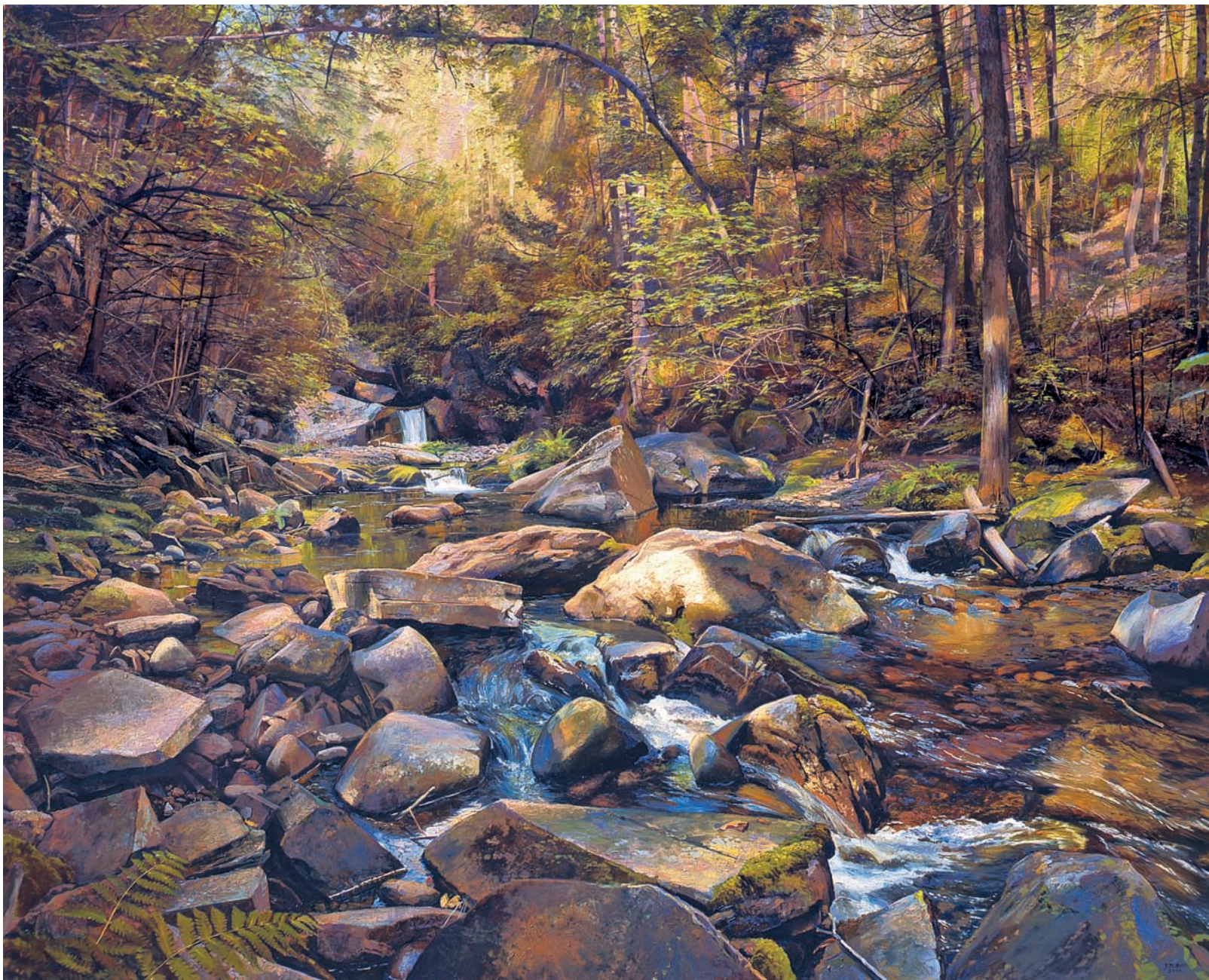


*The Pleasant River, Maine*, oil on linen, 46 x 54 inches, 2009



*In landscapes of streams and forests I'm particularly delighted by the play of light filtering into more shaded areas, and the refraction of light in water, the rippled distortion of rocks seen through moving water. This is where natural law seems most animated, and the time spent making studies there is happiest. -Joel Babb*

*On Hardwood Island, Blue Hill Bay, Maine, oil on linen,  
60 x 41 1/2 inches, 2008*



*Gulf Hags Brook, Maine*, oil on linen, 58 x 72 inches, 2009



Above: *Schoodic Peninsula, Maine*, oil on linen, 27 1/2 x 45 inches, 2007

Left: *Finished Study for Schoodic Peninsula, Maine*, oil on masonite, 15 x 24 inches, 2007

For those who wish to read further about the artist, a PDF of Joel's first Vose Galleries catalogue can be downloaded from his website: [www.joelmbabb.com](http://www.joelmbabb.com). Also look for an article in the October issue of *American Art Collector* covering his second exhibition at the gallery. This winter, Bates College will host an exhibition of Joel's work entitled *Joel Babb: Process Revealed*, October 10, 2009- March 26, 2010.

And for those who are fortunate enough to find themselves in Naples, Florida, next February, visit the Naples Art Museum to see an exhibition of Joel's Maine Scenes entitled *People, Places and Things: The Art of Ben Aronson, Joel Babb and Alec Soth*, February 2- April 18, 2010.

Written by Marcia L. Vose, Vice-President

Designed by Elizabeth W. Vose, Director

Abbot W. Vose, President

Carey L. Vose, Director

Courtney S. Kopplin, Gallery Manager

Christopher R. Greene, Gallery Associate

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Printing by Kirkwood Printers, Wilmington, MA

*Otter Cliffs, Mt. Desert, Maine*, oil on linen,

72 x 52 1/2 inches, 2008



