

TODAY'S  
MASTERS

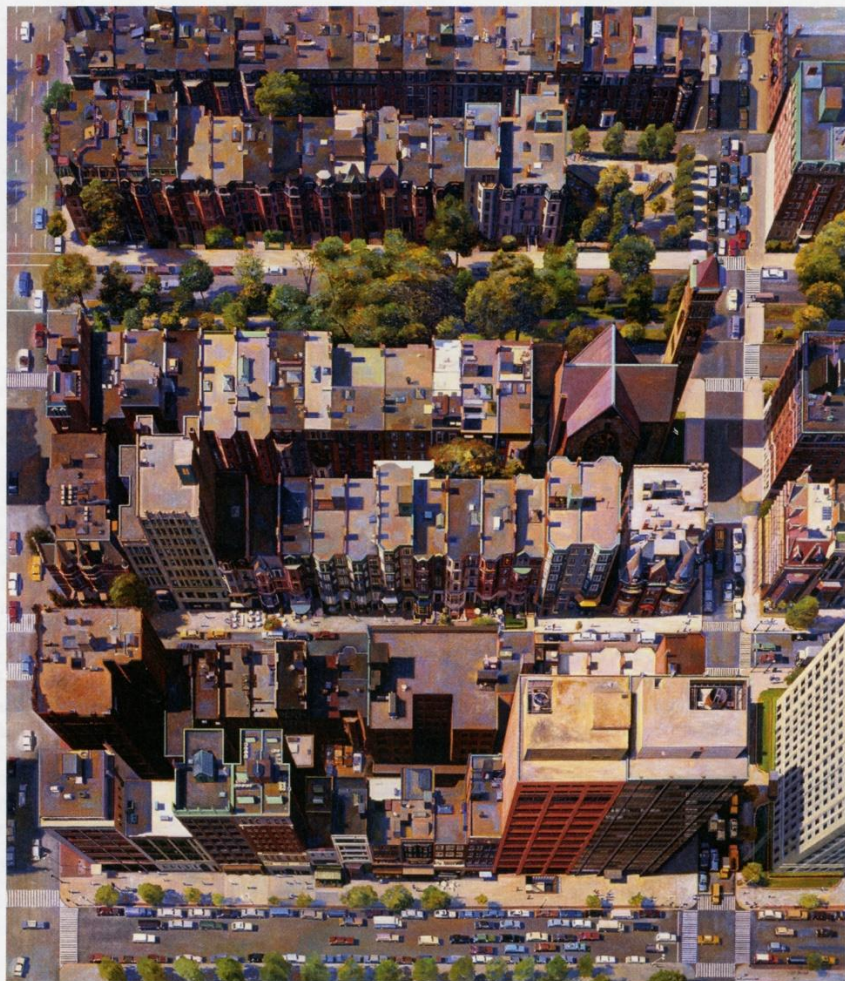
# JOEL BABB

## TOWN & COUNTRY

For all its red-brick charm, the city of Boston has not been represented on canvas nearly as much as have its leading citizens — think of Copley's portrait of a pensive Paul Revere, or Sargent's vision of the scandalously clad collector Isabella Stewart Gardner. With the exception of Childe Hassam, even members of the Boston School, who included Edmund C. Tarbell, Frank Benson, and William Paxton, rarely went out onto the street to paint. Yet the artist Joel Babb (b. 1947), whose work now springs from the backwoods of Maine, once made Boston both his home and his subject. The geometry of its built environment, particularly the 19th-century grid of the Back Bay neighborhood, proved endlessly appealing to the artist, for whom perspective has remained almost an *idée fixe*.

Babb was born in Georgia, raised in the Midwest, and is a New Englander by acclimatization, with an aesthetic sense formed by his sojourns abroad. It was in Italy, amid Old Masters and marble monuments, that he found his focus. His consciousness of art, though, began as a youth in Nebraska. "My uncle was an artist, and my mother idolized him and his works, and I did, too," says Babb, whose own artworks are today in the collections of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the Portland Museum of Art, and Maine's Farnsworth Art Museum.

The notion of becoming an artist took hold, but Babb's route to the studio was irregular. At Princeton University, he studied English and



*Copley Plunge*, 1990, oil on linen, 82 x 65 in., Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



*Back Bay Perspective*, 1987, watercolor on paper, 30 x 42 in., private collection

German and toyed with the idea of becoming an architect before settling on art history. He became fascinated with Chinese landscape painting thanks to courses taught by the noted scholar Wen Fong, who went on to chair the Metropolitan Museum of Art's department of Asian art. The university's studio art program was limited then, but Babb did take classes with George Ortman, the Californian perhaps best known for constructions and collages, and with the sculptor George Segal.

After graduation, Babb headed for Munich, where Princeton's German department had secured him a temporary position in a bank. While there, he visited the city's superb museums, taking in the masterworks of Rubens, Rembrandt, Titian, and Caspar David Friedrich. From Germany, Babb traveled to Florence and then Rome, where he marveled at the "incredible concentration of architecture, painting, and sculpture, all fused in the matrix of the Catholic Church." He obtained reading privileges at the Bibliotheca Hertziana — the German institute for art history in Rome — where he discovered the landscape drawings of Claude Lorrain that would become his touchstones. "Lorrain's drawings," Babb declares, "are the best articulation of the basic structure of landscape, of how the sense of recession in the landscape occurs."

Babb's time abroad convinced him that he wanted to be an artist. "I had the ambition," he claims, "but no real ability." With a letter of recommendation from Segal, he applied to several graduate programs, finally choosing the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. To support himself, he took a job as a night watchman at the museum, carrying a sketchbook as he made his rounds of its empty galleries. While he loved being able to study great works so closely, Babb's learning curve wasn't easy. "There I was, a Princeton art historian, and I still didn't know anything," he recalls. "There was a whole language I had to get up to speed on." While dismayed to realize that the Museum

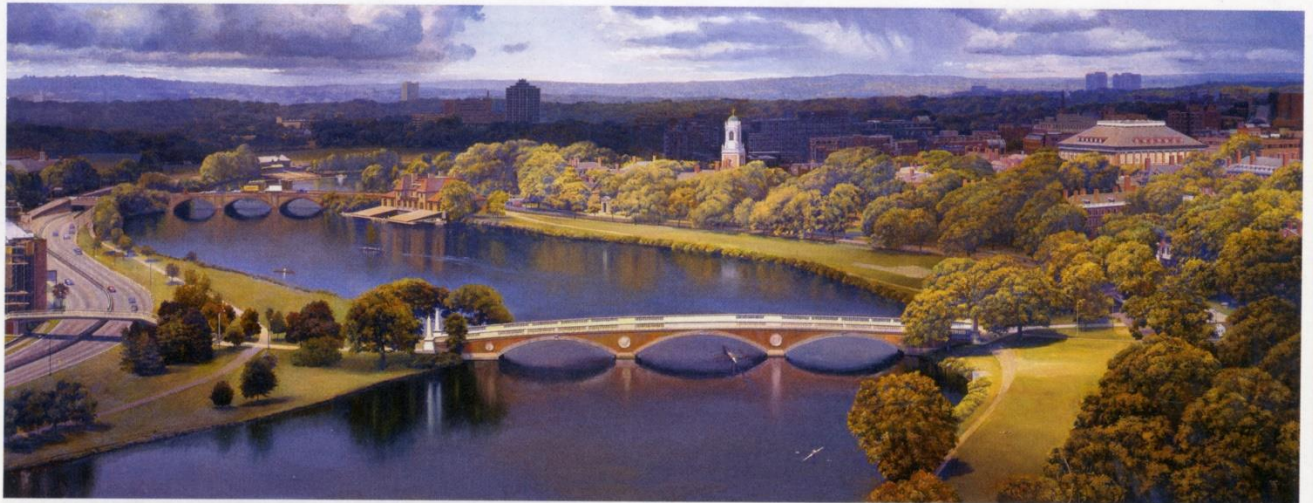
School pursued a fairly avant-garde ethos, Babb did respond to the "Color and Light" course taught by the photographer-turned-painter T. Lux Feininger.

Soon after receiving his master's degree in 1972, Babb became the teacher himself through a job in the museum's education department. "For me, the mysteries of perception are at the root of what I enjoy about painting, so I explained the course this way," says Babb. "Imagine Leonardo da Vinci and Georges Seurat meet in a field in France. Do they actually see the same things? Do they actually see the same way? The biological perceptual system — is it identical? If it is, then why did they paint so differently? I think it's fascinating to think about."

In his own art, Babb was diving deeper and deeper into an exploration of perspective. "I had drawn Roman church facades and had become familiar with the *vedutisti* of Venice. I had studied the great Renaissance architect Leon Battista Alberti. There was a fabulous exhibition of Canaletto at the Met in New York that got me enthused about doing view paintings. Would I be able to make a Boston street scene with the same qualities? That was the challenge."

#### MAPPING THE CITY

In 1984, Babb was invited to submit a proposal for *Arts on the Line*, a program bringing art to Boston's subway stations. Although his concept was not accepted, the experience added a new dimension to how he went about his work. He explains, "I was assigned to a station in



(ABOVE) *The Weeks Bridge, Charles River, Cambridge*, 1998, oil on linen, 37 x 97 in., Cambridge Savings Bank, Massachusetts ■ (BELOW) *Automotive US*, 1982, oil on panel, 30 x 45 in., collection of Susanna Fichera



South Boston, and my idea was to do a *trompe l'oeil* painting on the ceiling of what you would see if you were able to look through to all the buildings in the neighborhood above." To help execute his vision, Babb hired a pilot with a two-seat helicopter and flew over South Boston snapping photographs.

Seeing the city from the air set Babb's investigation of perspective on a new course. While he continued to render Boston at street

level, he took to the sky again and again, each flight feeding his fascination with perspective. Whether based on photographs taken from the air or from atop tall buildings, his vistas became masterful demonstrations of mathematical illusion.

At first glance, Babb's scenes of Boston might appear merely documentary, but his painterly approach — and his attention to form as defined by light and shadow — give them a compelling quality above



*First Successful Organ Transplantation in Man*, 1995–96, oil on linen, 70 x 88 in.,  
Countway Library of Medicine, Harvard Medical School

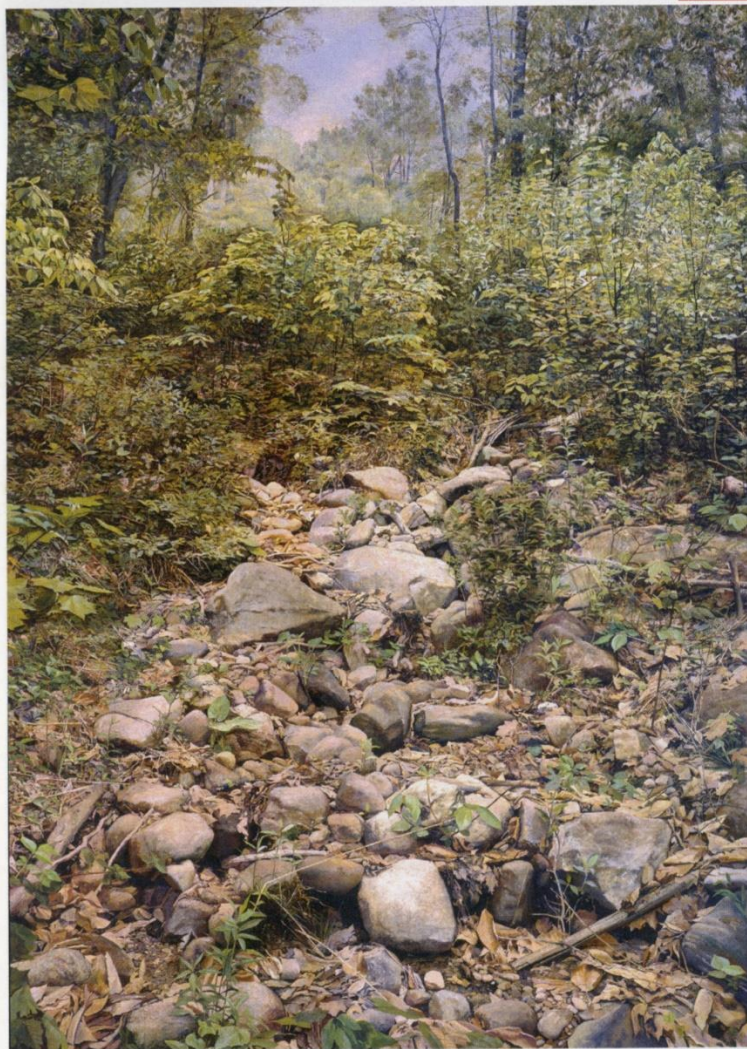
and beyond technical virtuosity. *Copley Plunge* (1990), which offers a dizzying perspective with the vanishing point down at the viewer's feet, is clearly a rendition of the city grid. Utterly representational, its facades and rooftops nonetheless seem to morph into geometric abstractions. *Back Bay Perspective* (1987), a watercolor generated from aerial shots, inverts linear recession, with the sunlit street growing wider as it extends to the horizon. While this "fine disregard" (to borrow a phrase from the late art historian Kirk Varnedoe) upsets the expected logic of representation, Babb suggests, "Our lines of sight radiate outward, so this seems perfectly natural." Looser and more softly rendered than his cityscapes in oil, *Back Bay Perspective* is almost delicious, in a Wayne Thiebaud sort of way.

As much as these paintings are, in a sense, mapped out, they are nonetheless fully infused with atmosphere. This can range from an impressionistic aura to a vaguely Grant Wood-ish aspect, as in *The Weeks Bridge* (1998), where the image's crisp clarity assumes a slightly fantastical aspect. One of the more singular works from Babb's Boston years is *Automotive US* (1982), a view of a parking lot bounded by a row of nearly identical three-story houses. While not

strictly photorealist in execution, the banal subject matter certainly brings photorealism to mind.

In the 1990s, an unusual commission came Babb's way, from the trio of physicians who had performed the first successful living-donor organ transplant. This operation, a kidney transplant between 23-year-old twin brothers, was conducted in 1954 at Boston's Peter Bent Brigham (now Brigham and Women's Hospital). "One of the reasons I took this on is that it was a chance to do a history painting, essentially. Also, I had a heart operation when I was 13, and that was really a traumatic experience. You get over your traumas, but they are still there. So going around the operating room with Dr. Joseph Murray, who won the Nobel Prize for his work, was an incredible experience. I did not see any heart operations, but they wanted me to know who was standing where, who was responsible for what." Babb worked from historic photos to create the final image, which was ultimately displayed in the Countway Library at the Harvard Medical School, opposite Robert Hinckley's painting *First Operation under Ether* (1882–94).

After 2000, Babb made several return visits to Rome, his first since the late '60s. Inspired by the 1996 exhibition *In the Light of Italy: Corot and Early Open-Air Painting* (organized by the National Gallery of Art and the Brooklyn Museum in association with the Saint Louis Art Museum), he set himself a project. "Now that I had learned how to paint, I wanted to go back and try my hand at some of the spots Corot



(ABOVE) *Rome from the Palatine Hill*, 2021, oil on linen, 32 x 72 in., private collection ■ (LEFT) *The Hounds of Spring*, 1988, oil on linen, 96 x 68 in., Harvard Business School

had done,” says Babb. “In 2005, I painted three pictures while standing on the Palatine: the view looking to the left to the Campidoglio, the view looking straight toward the Basilica of Maxentius, and the view toward the right with the Arch of Titus and the Colosseum. It has to be one of the great views in the world, evoking the passing of empires and the rising of the modern world. During the pandemic I put everything together into one large panorama, *Rome from the Palatine Hill*.”

#### SEEING THE FOREST FOR THE TREES

In the early 1970s, Babb began building a cabin in Maine and spending summers there. In 1988, he and his wife, Frannie, moved “DownEast” permanently from their home in Hull, Massachusetts. Initially, Babb continued to work on city views, but in time, with camera in hand, he turned his attention to the natural landscape. Determining what constituted a view, and how to interpret it, presented a new challenge.

“When you are out in the forest, everything is chaos,” Babb notes. “If you randomly point a camera and shoot, there is no sense of ordered space. There is no decipherable space. It’s just leaves. What I love about painting the woods is trying to clarify all this so that a viewer will be able to move through the space and know what’s going on. In a Marsden Hartley painting, the trees, in fact everything, might as well be cast in plaster, they are so solid. But nature isn’t like that; it’s transparent, much more like a Corot.”

The resolution that Babb sought — the orchestration of specificity, depth, color, and volume — is engrossingly manifest in his *The Hounds of Spring* (1988), which takes its title from a verse by the British poet A.C. Swinburne. Of this scene, Babb has written, “I would make a large vertical painting which would be a kind of doorway for a viewer to enter the picture space. Plants and rocks would be rendered life-size in



the foreground. They would allow you to survey the nature at your feet with the intimacy of the wasp's-eye view of the ground — to be aware of the microcosm. As you pass over the threshold and climb up the hillside, detail begins to dissolve, and you journey from microcosm to macrocosm beyond.”

At 76, Babb's learning curve continues its ascent, often in the company of his friend and fellow Mainer Bernd Heinrich, the acclaimed biologist and nature writer. “I have learned a great deal from Bernd, whose intense powers of acute observation lead to endless discoveries in the forest within walking distance of his cabin. This is very like my feeling about realism in art — that through intense and correct observation of a corner of the universe, one can express the working of vast universal forces. What is the most familiar can be discovered to be the most sublime.” ●

**THOMAS CONNORS** is a Chicago-based cultural writer whose work appears in a number of publications, including *The Magazine Antiques*. His profile of the Rhode Island stone carver Nick Benson ran in the November/December 2022 issue of *Fine Art Connoisseur*.

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*Bernd Heinrich's Brook in Autumn*, 2013, oil on linen, 60 x 68 in., Farnsworth Art Museum (Rockland, Maine), anonymous gift in honor of the Osher family of Maine, 2023.2

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