

A Journey in Art

Lael Weyenberg's
life and paintings
reflect a path of
creative choices

By Gussie Fauntleroy



DOSSIER

REPRESENTATION

McLary Fine Art, Santa Fe, NM;
Roby King Galleries, Bainbridge
Island, WA; Center of the
Earth Gallery, Charlotte, NC;
Gardner Colby Galleries, Naples, FL;
www.laelweyenberg.com.

UPCOMING SHOW

Restaurant scenes and
other food-related paintings
by Weyenberg are on view at
McLary Fine Art during Santa
Fe's ArtFeast, February, 20-22.

ARTIST IN RESIDENCE,
OIL, 17 X 14. ▲
STUDYING MONET,
OIL, 12 X 9. ▶



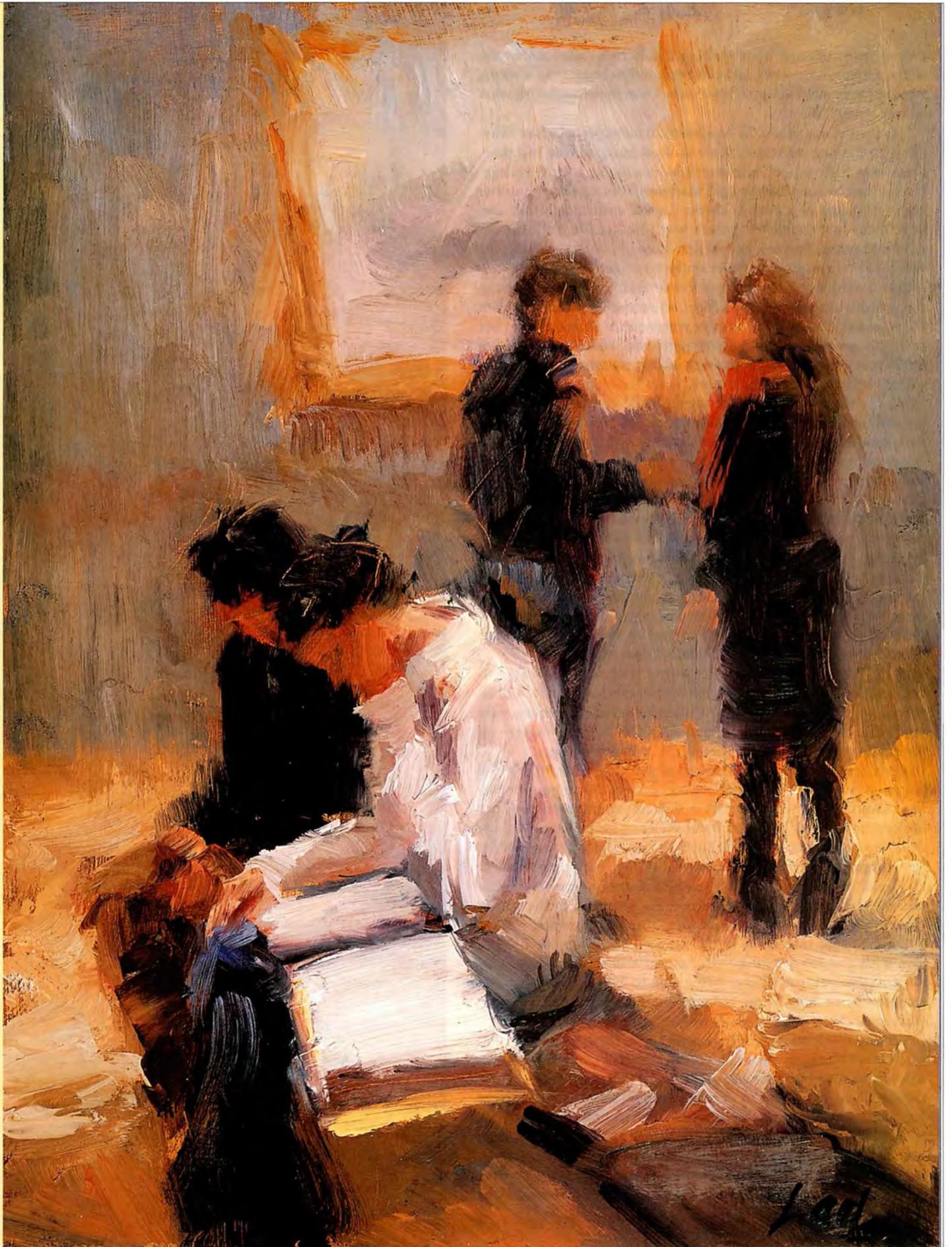
LAEL WEYENBERG glances warmly around at the objects and furniture in her cozy adobe home, with her studio at one end of a long room that also contains an open kitchen and living space. Her eyes rest briefly on her paint-splattered easel, on the shelves of brightly colored Mexican pottery, on an antique armoire, a vase of flowers, a pair of slinky high heels. "I love everything in here," she reflects, then smiles as she adds, "Every part of this room has been in a painting at one time or another."

Like the design aesthetic of her home, Weyenberg's richly evocative, sumptuously rendered still-life, figure, and interior paintings often feature simple arrangements and objects that tell a story of quiet beauty. Then there are the pointy-toed, bright red shoes with four-inch spike heels. Posed coquettishly before a mirror near the easel, the shoes don't exactly speak of quiet charm. ("I don't wear them, I just paint 'em!" the Santa Fe artist laughs.) Still, along with people and animals, high-heeled shoes are among Weyenberg's favorite subjects to paint. Her expressive use of lush colors and strong composition comes through even in portraits of saucy shoes.

GROWING UP in a small town in central Washington, Weyenberg was raised in a home infused with beauty. Her mother adorned the house with fresh-cut flowers from her garden. Lael, the youngest of five and the only girl, absorbed her mother's love of flowers, sewing, and cooking, although not her mother's by-the-book approach. "I'm always breaking the rules—in cooking or painting," she admits.

As a quiet girl who loved sitting in her room and drawing, young Lael did not envision a future art career for herself. As children do, she had her own way of understanding why this was so. "One of my brothers already had the label of the 'artist' in the family, and I used to think there could only be one," she recalls.

When Weyenberg was in her late teens, her parents began collecting original art. Without galleries or art museums nearby—and in a town where few people collected originals—having oil paintings on the walls helped reinforce the value of art in her mind. She also felt



a deep inner stirring upon visiting the British Columbia studio of the artist whose work hung in her family's home. "As a young woman I remember going to his studio. I was impressed with what he was doing," she says.

As it turned out, it would be almost 20 more years before Weyenberg's lifelong attraction to art evolved into painting full time. Following high school, she studied drawing at a local college. But her instructors discouraged students from aspiring to drawing or painting as a serious career. In the meantime, other creative threads were weaving their way into her life, refining her aesthetic sense, keeping her skilled hands busy, and paving the way for the ultimate expressive outlet to come.

After establishing her independence and seeing much of the country during two years as a flight attendant based in New York City and Los Angeles, Weyenberg returned to Washington in her early 20s and settled on Bainbridge Island. She remained there for 26 years, raising a son, growing lush flower gardens, and pursuing a series of creative ventures.

One day when her son was young she pulled out a straw hat and painted flower designs on it with acrylics. She began painting more such hats, which caught the eye of a sales rep with contacts at major department stores. Weyenberg's hats were picked up by Nordstrom and soon were selling throughout the country. After "lots of hats," she recalls, "I got tired of it." The clothing chain was asking for other products and designs, but the artist was ready to move on.

Weyenberg stopped painting flowers on hats and shifted into floral design with fresh-cut flowers. She created her own hand-sewn clothing (no sewing machine involved), and she did stone carving for fun. "I always had to be making something, doing something creative," she relates. "I knew from a young age I could never work in an office. I thought if I did, I'd shrivel up and die. I had always wanted to do oil painting—and finally I decided to try."

In 1995 Weyenberg signed up for a class with well-known painter Cheri Christensen, who also lived on Bainbridge Island. Christensen had studied under award-winning artist Ron Lukas, who studied under Russian impressionist master Sergei Bongart—an impressionist lineage that continues in Weyenberg's art.

Weyenberg's reaction to that first oil painting class: "It felt like magic. It felt like what I really wanted to do." Among her earliest subjects—no surprise—were flowers, an expression of her lifelong passion for heirloom floral varieties such as peonies, hydrangeas, and antique roses. Soon she also became known for serene interior scenes and intimate still lifes, including shoes of all kinds. In recent years, after taking a drawing class with Sherrie McGraw, Weyenberg also turned her attention to the figure, which today comprises a significant portion of her work.

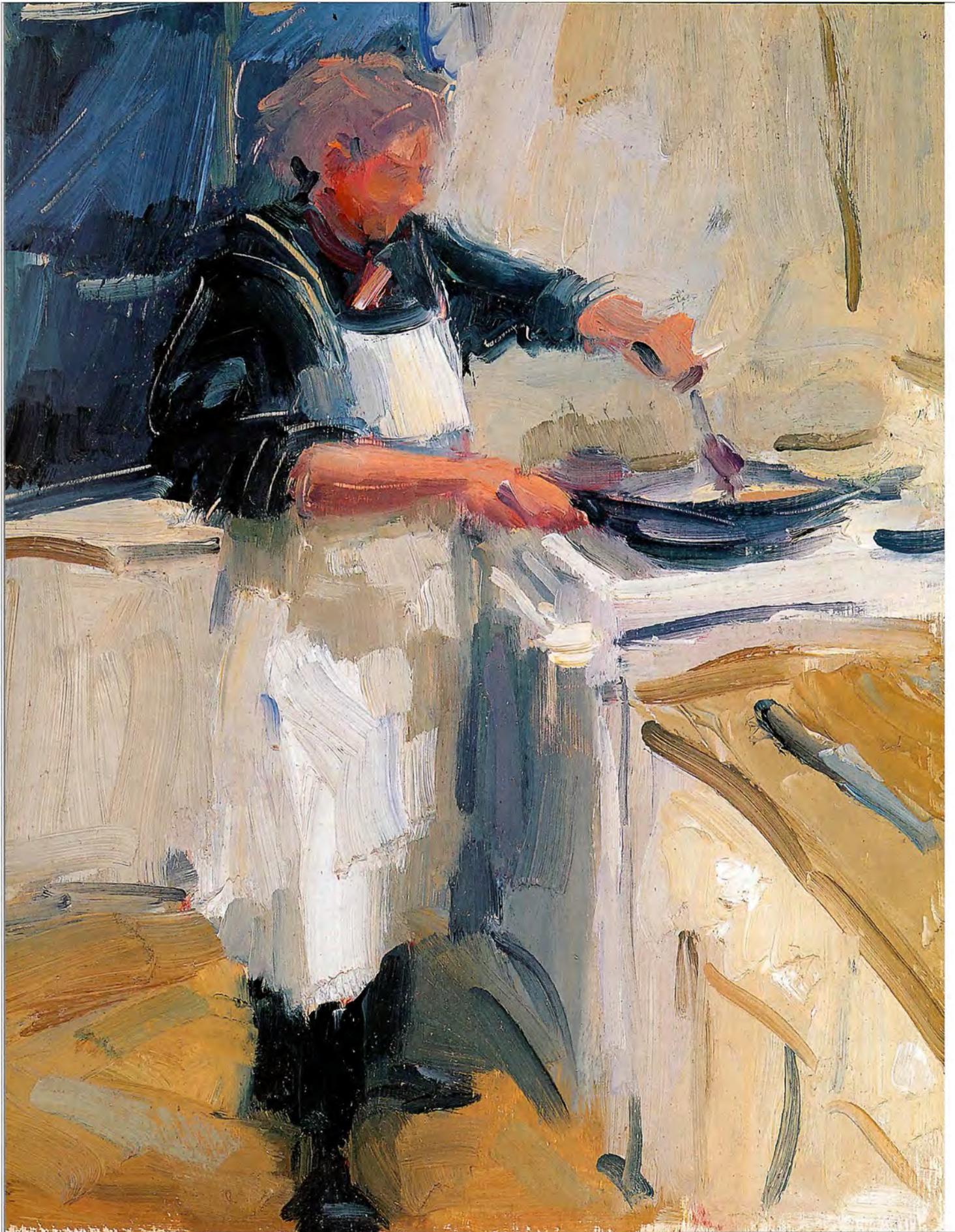
"I wasn't that interested in the finished drawing, but I fell in love with gesture drawing," she notes. "And that led to gestural figurative painting. I love being able to capture people doing something, or just being themselves, without them knowing you're watching. I'm not really interested in the posed figure."

Pursuing this kind of imagery has meant learning to be swift and discreet with a camera, and it has taken the artist to places she probably would not have otherwise spent time. Like a local rodeo, where the scenes she was drawn to were not the ones she expected. "I went hoping for action shots in the arena, but then I found myself more interested in what was going on outside the arena," she recounts. Such as the glow of afternoon light through the mane of a horse being readied for competition, or a pair of cowboys in pressed shirts and white hats, seated side by side and sharing a moment of conversation as

SUNDAY BRUNCH, OIL, 10 X 12. ▶









◀ **HOME COOKING, OIL, 9 X 7.**
MOVERS & SHAKERS, CENTRAL PARK, OIL, 12 X 12. ▲

they await their turn. “I’m interested in the gestures and movements of people interacting with each other,” Weyenberg explains.

The extent of movement she wants to convey determines her approach, especially how she applies the paint. In *MOVERS AND SHAKERS, CENTRAL PARK*, for example, the image of four young women jogging was produced entirely with a palette knife. On the other hand, *HOME COOKING*, a quiet tribute to a friend, shows a woman in a white apron preparing a meal. The painting has a strongly impressionistic feel, yet its thickly textured strokes were achieved with a brush. Other works employ both palette knife and brush.

Weyenberg’s first solo show took place in 2000, the same year she moved to Santa Fe to paint full time. Along with inspiration from New Mexico’s legendary light, she finds creative motivation in spending time with other artists and taking in the city’s abundance of fine art. Living within walking distance of dozens of galleries

and several museums, Weyenberg feels fortunate that long walks are among her favorite ways to spend her non-painting time.

Like walking, the process of painting is a journey in itself, she believes. Each painting contains its own distinct record of artistic choices. In a similar way, the painter’s larger body of work becomes a visual journal of where she has been. “It’s a way of seeing that it’s all connected,” she reflects, “because it’s all part of my life.”

Much like brush strokes on a canvas, the direction of her life could have taken an almost infinite number of turns. Weyenberg says she is grateful her choices led to exactly where she is today.

“The great thing about impressionist painting is that all the details aren’t filled in. There’s a mystery,” she observes. “The story is in the process. You get to see and feel the painter’s involvement with the subject, and when you see the hand of the painter in the work, it’s like a window into the artist’s soul.” ❖

Santa Fe-based Gussie Fauntleroy also writes for *Art & Antiques*, *New Mexico Magazine*, *Native Peoples*, and the *Santa Fean*.