

CHARLES HEPPNER

INTROSPECTIVE : CHAPTER 3
AT ONE WITH THE BEAUTY OF NATURE



DAVIS GALLERY
AUSTIN, TEXAS
JUNE 24TH-JULY 29TH, 2023



"We let go of our anxieties, had ice-cream and watched the birds", 48"x78", Oil on Linen, 2022.



"Look | Extend | To Be", Volume IV, Page 8, Image Size 5"x17 1/2", Ink-jet on Hahnemühle paper, 2022.

ALWAYS LOOKING INTENTLY

by Lauren Moya Ford

When I arrived for my first studio visit with Charles Heppner, I didn't find him inside. Instead, he was standing in front of his neighbor's curb, aiming his camera at a Mexican plum tree covered in fragrant white blooms. When I walked over and commented on the number of butterflies fluttering between the tree's branches, Heppner replied that these were Red Admiral butterflies, also known by their scientific name *Vanessa atalanta*. He then showed me the colorful wildflowers and large magnolia tree growing in his own front yard. Impressed by his passion for plants, I snapped a picture of the artist tenderly touching the magnolia's leaves with one hand while holding his digital camera in the other.

It's fitting that my initial encounter with the artist involved marveling at plants and insects before stepping foot into

his studio. Nature has always played a profound role for Heppner. From childhood summers exploring the woods of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan to today's avid gardening, the artist has drawn personal solace and creative inspiration from the natural world throughout his life. In fact, when he moved to Texas eight years ago – he lived in Brooklyn and his hometown of Chicago before then – he set up his studio and garden simultaneously. For Heppner, these two acts of cultivation go together and clearly inform each other.

"I'm very moved and feel at peace in the presence of nature," he told me once we were inside his home studio. "So arranging and highlighting that emotional content is something that's very important to me." 'Arranging' may seem at first like a curious word choice here, but so much of what Heppner does in his multimedia art practice is a process of arranging elements

(cont. p. 7)



derived from nature--forms, colors, patterns or artifacts--into singular expressions. In his drawing, painting, photography, *Sanctum Boxes*, and *Prayer Rugs*, Heppner revels in the glory and beauty of the natural world.

The painting “with the magical understanding of how I see a guardian” (2023) was on Heppner’s easel during my visit, and the artist stated that the piece depicts a tree from below and from the side. As with Heppner’s other paintings, the motif is expressed in a non-literal language of floating, abstract shapes painted in tangy colors that jostle with each other for our attention. But even without the artist’s explanation, we can perceive a tree’s form in his organic, branch-like lines, and we can sense something like the hues of bird feathers, insect wings, and flower petals in Heppner’s punchy hues.

Nature maintains a different kind of presence in the artist’s *Sanctum Boxes*. A fond nod to Joseph Cornell’s enigmatic work, Heppner’s small-scale boxes which he has been creating since 2009, are condensed, three-dimensional odes to nature. Inside a compact modified cigar box with finished wooden frames, we find dried flowers, an empty monarch butterfly chrysalis, beeswax, and even a bird carcass. In pieces where no such natural materials appear like “in the moment” and “learn hope” (both from 2021), we see photos of bright red poppies and of two trees growing in the water, respectively. Most of the works feature stark white walls, as if their contents function as intimate sculptures or figurines. In this way, each box represents a sort of inner world and ecosystem, where scale and meaning follow their own individual rules.

Photography is another long-term component of Heppner’s practice and is perhaps his most essential modality. “I think of
(cont. p. 11)



“in the moment”, 7 5/8” x 6” x 3 7/8”, cigar box, acrylic on wood, shellac, archival ink-jet print. 2021
(previous page: detail “Arboreal Jewels”, 36”x32”, Archival ink-jet print on Hahnemühle Paper, 2022.)



"with the magical understanding of how I see a guardian", 26"x40", Oil on linen, 2023.

photography as a kind of sketchbook, he said. “I never leave my house without my camera because you never know what you’re going to see.” For years, the camera has been the artist’s constant companion, coming with him on far-ranging trips and those that are closer to home, as I observed with his documentation of the Mexican plum tree across his street. Taking pictures is a sort of artistic note-taking at the core of Heppner’s commitment to his own aesthetic journey, a concept he identified with deeply while reading the biography of artist Robert Irwin: *Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees* (1982).

Heppner is a multi-faceted artist who uses art-making as a kind of tireless exploration. Accordingly, his photographic work uses the medium in divergent ways. In this exhibition, photography is variously utilized in three separate series of works. In his *Hortus Noster in Urbe* series, dark backgrounds resemble a sort of stage where Heppner positions flowers and fabrics like actors in a dramatic tableaux. In another series, triptychs from Heppner’s art books *Look | Extend | To Be* combine shots of the artist’s delicate watercolors with closely-cropped snapshots of plants, animals, and people in urban and natural settings. The *Prayer Rugs*, with their digitally-collaged, fractal-like designs, are a visual feast.

Whatever the media or material, Heppner’s message is transmitted through his fundamental appreciation for the beauty of nature. As I witnessed in my first meeting with the artist, he is spurred by a genuine sense of curiosity and awe for the world around him. It is a rich and endless source for any artist, but especially for this one.

(page opposite: “be at one with nature”, 12” x 6 1/2” x 2 1/2” cigar box, empty monarch chrysalis, dried wildflower stem, varnish, shellac, oil on board, plywood, mirror, wood, brass and stainless screws, waterproof india ink, 2023. Following page image: “life is for real” 5 3/4” x 6 5/8” x 2 5/8”, cigar box, yellow crowned night heron eggshells, glass, mirrors, archival foam core, brass nails, hemlock, shellac, 2023.)







"x-axis: synopsis at the sensation of being at the shoreline", 44"x74", Oil on Canvas, 2018.

Nature is not an object

by Charles Heppner

I recall, as a child, being enamored by tiny, deep-yellow, oblong orbs nestled above a sea of pale purple. I was observing the stamen of the blooms of my Mom's African Violets. I knew then as I know now more deeply, that the stimulation of seeing such intense beauty is not trivial but something to be heralded, cherished and nurtured.

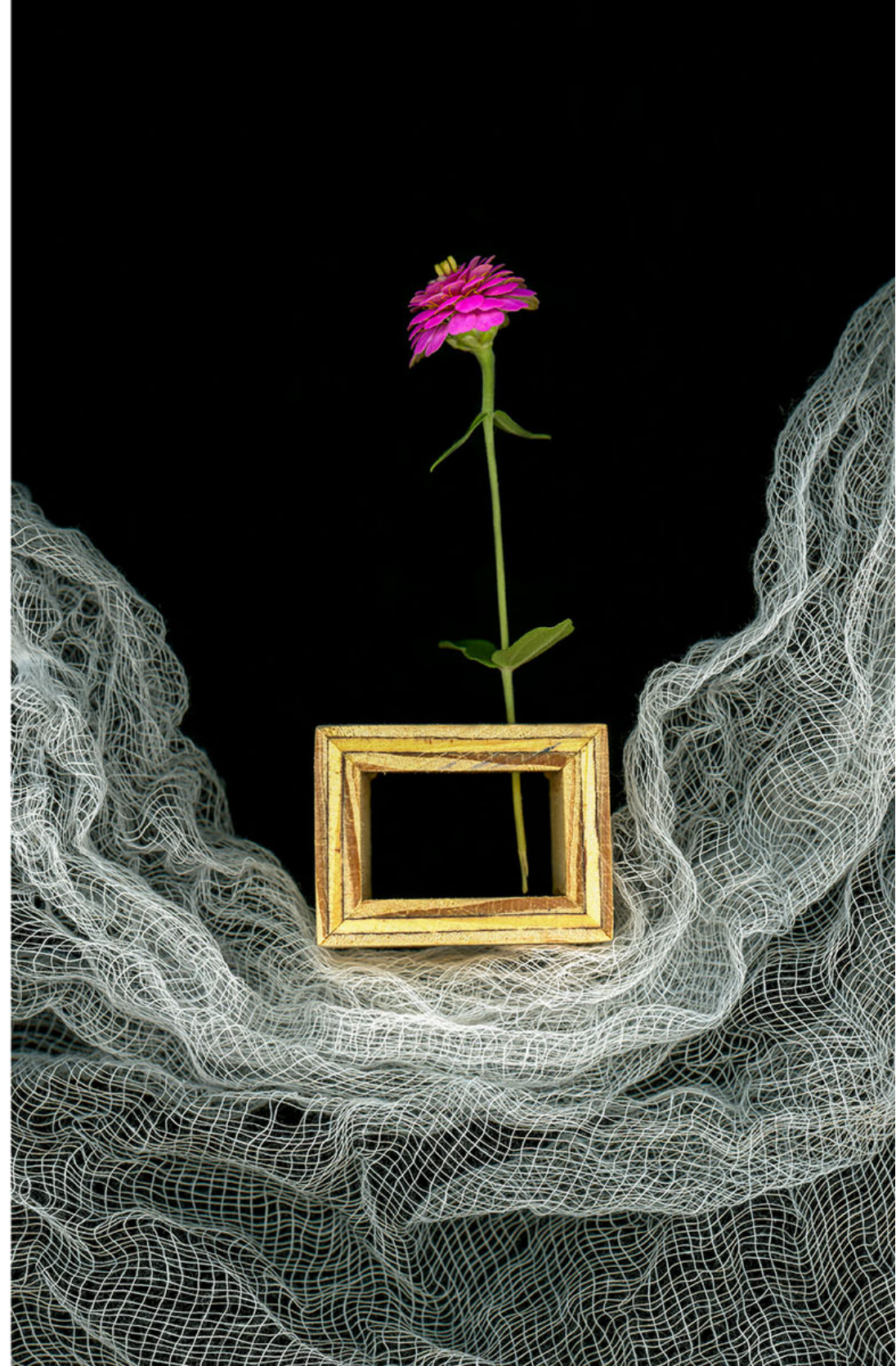
My Mom kept a home filled with house plants, we had a large yard, we spent summers in the country at my grandma's house which was surrounded by fields and woods. I learned then how we are of, in, and with Nature.

The beauty of a flower or butterfly is still a profound experience for me because the magic of our existence has not waned at all in my heart.

I am moved to the realm of ecstasy in the presence of the newly bloomed dandelion. The yellow bursts into my eyes with welcome. (cont. p. 21)



(above: "a happy place" 9"x21", Oil on Linen, 2022. Opposite: "zinnia" 42"x32" Ink-jet on Hahnenmühle Paper 2023.)





"dandelions", 42"x 30.2", Ink-jet on Hahenmühle Paper, printed 2023.

The awesome lyrical canopy of a wise old elm tree begs my attention. It poses and models its elegant limbs against the infinite sky. Sublime.

Standing at the road's edge looking across the undulating landscape with its embedded greens, blues and grays. A fully joyous moment.

The golden hour sky with its polarizing light exposing an abundance of details in the grasses also highlighting the reflection in the surface of a pond. I am smitten.

The fantastic saturated colors in a dried wildflower petal leaps through my synapses, making me gasp.

Oh, you bright fuchsia zinnia, you make me blush!

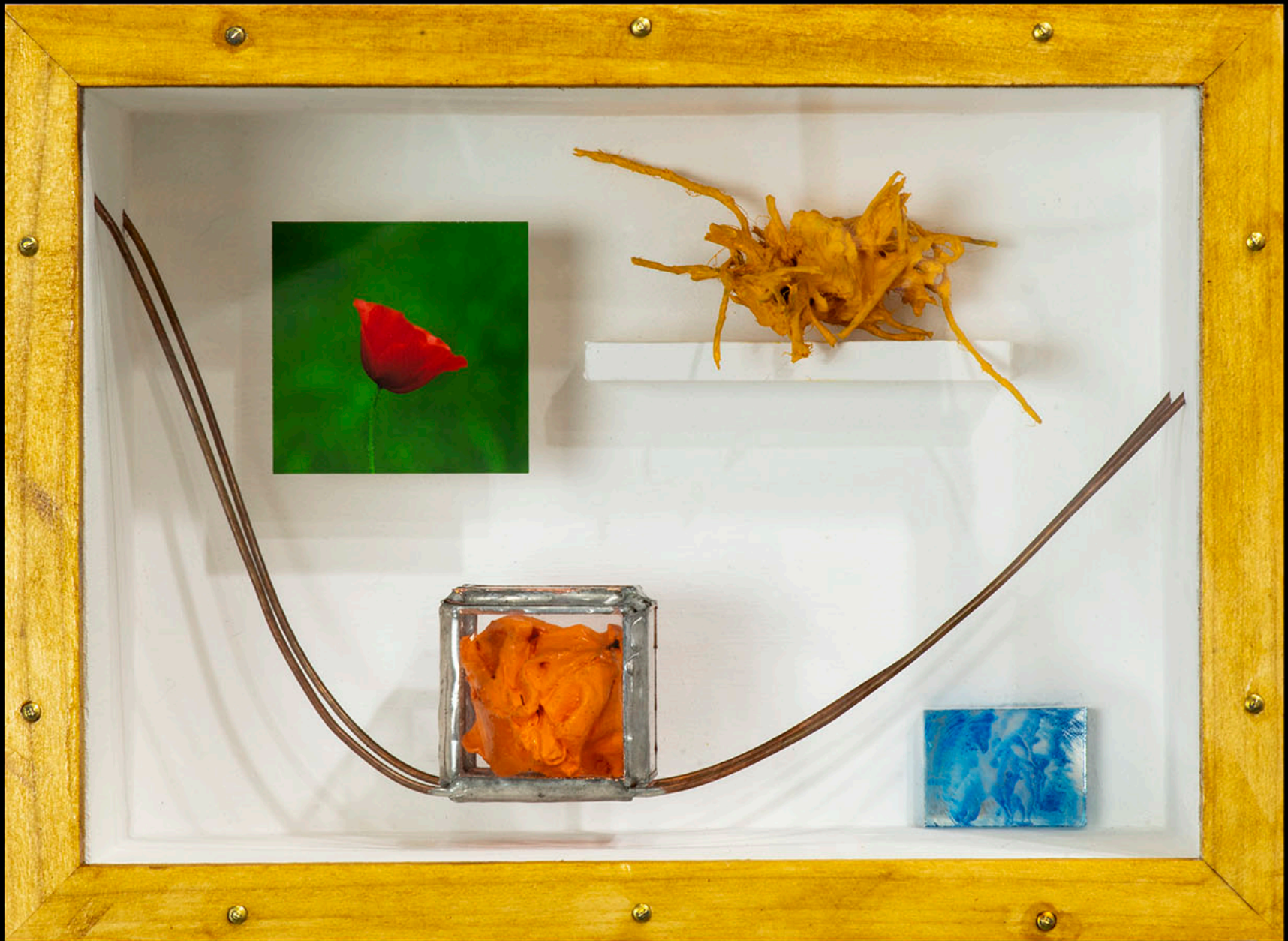
The experiences do not end—my mind is open to the sights and sounds and smells of you beloved Mother Nature, to whom I am most extremely grateful.

Nature is ever.

April 2023



(Above: "untouched.", 17"x13", Oil on Linen, 2023. Left page: (detail) "Efficiency. 72"x48", Chromatic print on Fuji Pearl Paper, 2016.)



"beheld thee", 6 1/8" x 8 1/4" x 3 3/4", cigar box, oil on burlap, oil on linen, acrylic gesso, oil on glass, glass, mirror, wood, copper wire, solder, archival inkjet print, shellac, 2022.



The artist Charles Heppner is currently living in Austin, Texas. He was born in Chicago into a large Catholic family where individualism was allowed unfettered. He attended St. Ignatius College Prep then went on to earn a degree in Mathematics from the University of Wisconsin—Madison. Though always an artist, he has raced bicycles in France, had a career in finance, and is a devoted parent of three. Charles' practice includes painting, photography and mixed media. His aesthetic voice has strong connections to nature and spirituality.



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(Back cover: "I sat and watched at the end of the lot", 22"x16", Oil on Linen, 2022.
Front over: "quiet solemnity", 42"x32.5", Ink-jet on Hahenmühle Paper
Printed 2023, Created 2017.)