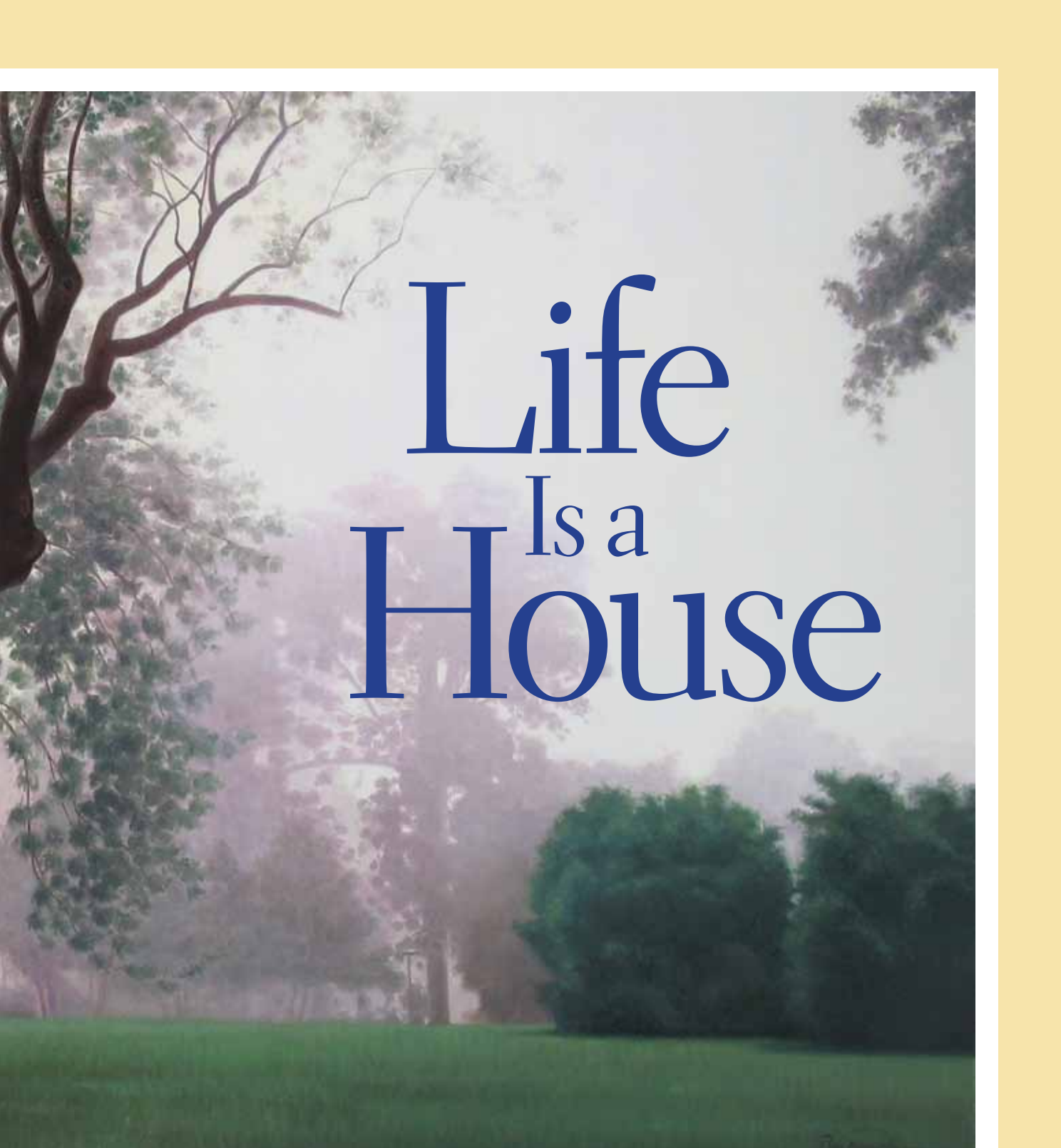


Contemporary realist **Ephraim Rubenstein** explores how images of houses can be powerful statements about the human condition as well as meditations on the passage of time.

BY EPHRAIM RUBENSTEIN



# Life Is a House

**W**HEN I LIVED IN Richmond, Virginia, we often spent the summers on the Northern Neck, a long spit of land bounded by the Potomac River to the north and the Rappahannock to the south. Initially, I found it an unprepossessing area, “patchworked” together by the relatively poor truck farms of

**ABOVE:** More than any place I know, Woodley, my home—and the subject of *Woodley, Summer, Dawn* (oil, 52x38)—imparts a sense of well-being. By this I mean it is a place that’s peaceful, calm, centered—life enhancing. Its beautiful light and spaces invite you to enter and walk around. It is a place that reminds you of people you love or would like to get to know.



**RIGHT: *Abandoned House, Edwardsville, Virginia***

(oil, 40x57) illustrates this excerpt from Alain de Botton's *Architecture of Happiness*: "Left to its own devices, nature will not hesitate to crumble our roads, claw down our buildings, push wild vines through our walls, and return every other feature of our carefully plotted geometric world to primal chaos. Nature's way is to corrode, melt, soften, stain, and chew the works of man. And eventually it will win. Eventually we will find ourselves too worn out to resist its destructive centrifugal forces; we will grow weary of repairing roofs and balconies, we will long for sleep, the lights will dim, and the weeds will be left to spread their cancerous tentacles unchecked."



the locals and vacation homes for the wealthy gentry from Richmond and Washington, D.C. I found the brackish land to be too flat, monotonous, and scrubby.

### **Abandoned House**

Remarkable for me, however, were a number of old farmhouses that had been abandoned and left to collapse in the middle of their respective farmlands (see paintings of houses, this spread). The demographics of the area were such that when the farmers' children grew up, they moved off to the cities, leaving no one to work the farms. Then when the farmers themselves died, the houses were

**ABOVE: The house in *Abandoned House, Irvington, Virginia***

(oil, 18x28) was in a fairly early stage of deterioration when I first came upon it. Someone had come along and at least made the effort, however crudely, to board up the windows. Because of this and because of the flat expanse of unbroken space on the main part of the house, it seemed like a "blind" house to me somehow. The relationship between the interior and the exterior, such an important aspect of most houses, was completely shut off.

left to fall apart and litter the landscape like wooden carcasses. **I'll ask art director to try to even columns on this page up. I've tried.**



## Materials

**Support:** I use **Claessens** double-oil-primed linen from a roll. Because I was interested in a fair amount of detail for my house paintings, I chose a smooth portrait linen.

**Colors:** I tend to like slightly looser paint, so I favor brands like **Rembrandt** and **Sennelier**. A paint like **Old Holland**, as fine as it is, is far too stiff for my purposes.

**Medium:** I use a typical tripartite medium made of linseed oil, damar varnish, and turpentine. Particularly in the areas where I am layering (see *Painting in Layers for a Complex Scene*, pages ●—●●), the upper layers get an increasingly fatter mixture.

**Brushes:** I use good quality bristle flats and filberts, like **Robert Simmons** Signet or **A. Langnickel**, for larger areas, and really good-quality sables, like **Winsor & Newton** Series 7, for the details.

## Fertile Metaphor

I remembered Kenneth Clark's notion that landscape painting was supposed to engender "a sense of well-being"; a peaceful, life-enhancing feeling that God's in His Kingdom and all's right on the earth. Well, these houses did no such thing. In fact, they gave off a tragic, deathly sense that was far from being well, but

that I found extremely moving nonetheless.

I have frequently thought of the relationship between houses and people. The house is a fertile metaphor for many human qualities. As Kent C. Bloomer points out in his seminal *Body, Memory and Architecture*, houses remind us of our own bodies. They are freestanding and autonomous, with areas around them (lawns, yards, plazas) that act much like our own "body boundaries." Children pick up on this similarity immediately when they draw the facades of houses like faces, with window "eyes" and a mouthlike front door. Like people, houses have most of the important features on the front; the backs tend to be plainer and are reserved for the removal of trash.

By extension, houses also remind us of our families, as in the *House of Atreus* or *Windsor*, or in the general concept of *household*. They stand in for our communities when we build a courthouse, and for our government, enough so that we appoint a *House of Representatives*. Lincoln understood the power of this metaphor to express how slavery was dividing the country by saying, "A house divided against itself cannot stand."

These abandoned houses made me think of how hard we continually have to fight against entropy and disintegration. Any homeowner knows this; something is always breaking and

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**ABOVE:**

***Abandoned House on a Hill, Northumberland County, Virginia***

(oil, 46x68) was one of the largest canvases that I ever painted *en plein air*, and the experience turned into a wrestling match. I didn't realize the extent to which the canvas would become a sail, catch wind, and try to fly away. Once I turned around to get something out of my bag, and a strong gust carried the easel away. I ended up having to get stakes and guy wires and tie it down each day. Of course, as the sun moved, I had to keep turning the easel, which entailed pulling up the stakes each time.