



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

WHEN 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, 38x52)—imparts a sense of well-being. By this I mean it is a place that is 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: The tone of *Abandoned House, Edwadsville, Virginia* (oil, 40x57) is beautifully summed up by 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. My first impressions of the area were not favorable; 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

ABOVE: The house in *Abandoned House, Irvington, Virginia* (oil, 18x30) 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.

farmers themselves died, the houses were left to fall apart and litter the landscape like wooden carcasses.



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 32–33), 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.

Painting in Layers for a Complex Scene



For *Abandoned Row Houses, Richmond, Virginia* (bottom, page 33), I started in the top corner of the central roof, with the green “trash” trees and vines, the delicate Prussian blue sky, and the rich brick-red of the buildings. This trio established the whole key of the painting. The tops of the buildings have an ornamental entablature that has this wonderfully elusive, faded gray-green-silver note, a ghostly patina difficult to capture.

Even though I generally paint *alla prima*, there are times when the visual complexity of a subject demands that one paint in layers, particularly when the subject has multiple visible planes stacked one in front of the other. For example, I worked *alla prima* as much as possible for this painting, but some areas have as many as six or seven layers. The lowest section of the house near the “For Sale” sign is extremely complicated, so the layers had to be painted in order, from back to front. I have zoomed in on and photographed that area for this step-by-step demonstration.



1 and 2. The lowest layer of the painting is a **turpentine wash under-painting**, which I decided to do in sap green. I think I felt the presence of the vines and the threat they embodied more than I realized.

3. I then started to block in the shady **dark green underside of the tree** in front of the sign. First I established the darker tones in the center, then worked up to the lights. This gives the trees and bushes some dimension.

4 and 5. In the next layer, I painted the **lighter upper branches** on top of the shadows and the **cool blue shadow** of the tree on the sign. I often “oil out” a dry, lower layer by brushing a little medium over it before I paint into it. That way the paint feels as though I’m painting wet into wet.

6. Next, I painted the **grass** in what was left of the front lawn, as well as the **base color** of the stone. I didn’t use a glaze here; the paint had to be opaque enough to cover completely whatever was below.

7. Then I put in some of the **bushes**, the **vines** on the stone wall, and the **chain-link fence** on top of that. The fence was a challenge; I thinned out the paint to make it fluid and struggled while painting the parallel rows as there is a fine line between them looking sloppy and mechanical.

8. Finally, I painted the topmost layer (of the multiple layers), the **live and dead vines** on the chain-link fence. My medium consisted of almost straight linseed oil plus a little damar varnish to help things dry faster. Remembering to respect “fat over lean” is important in avoiding cracking.

These two subjects, the “abandoned house” and the “house of well-being,” have acted as emotional poles—metaphors for loss and abundance—between which I have oscillated, depending on the circumstances of my life.



ABOVE: Abandoned Row Houses, Richmond, Virginia (oil, 38x68)

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in need of repair. And any aging person can tell you the same thing, as visits to the doctor and the pharmacy become increasing parts of life. These houses reminded me that life is a constant struggle and of what it takes to stay healthy and functional.

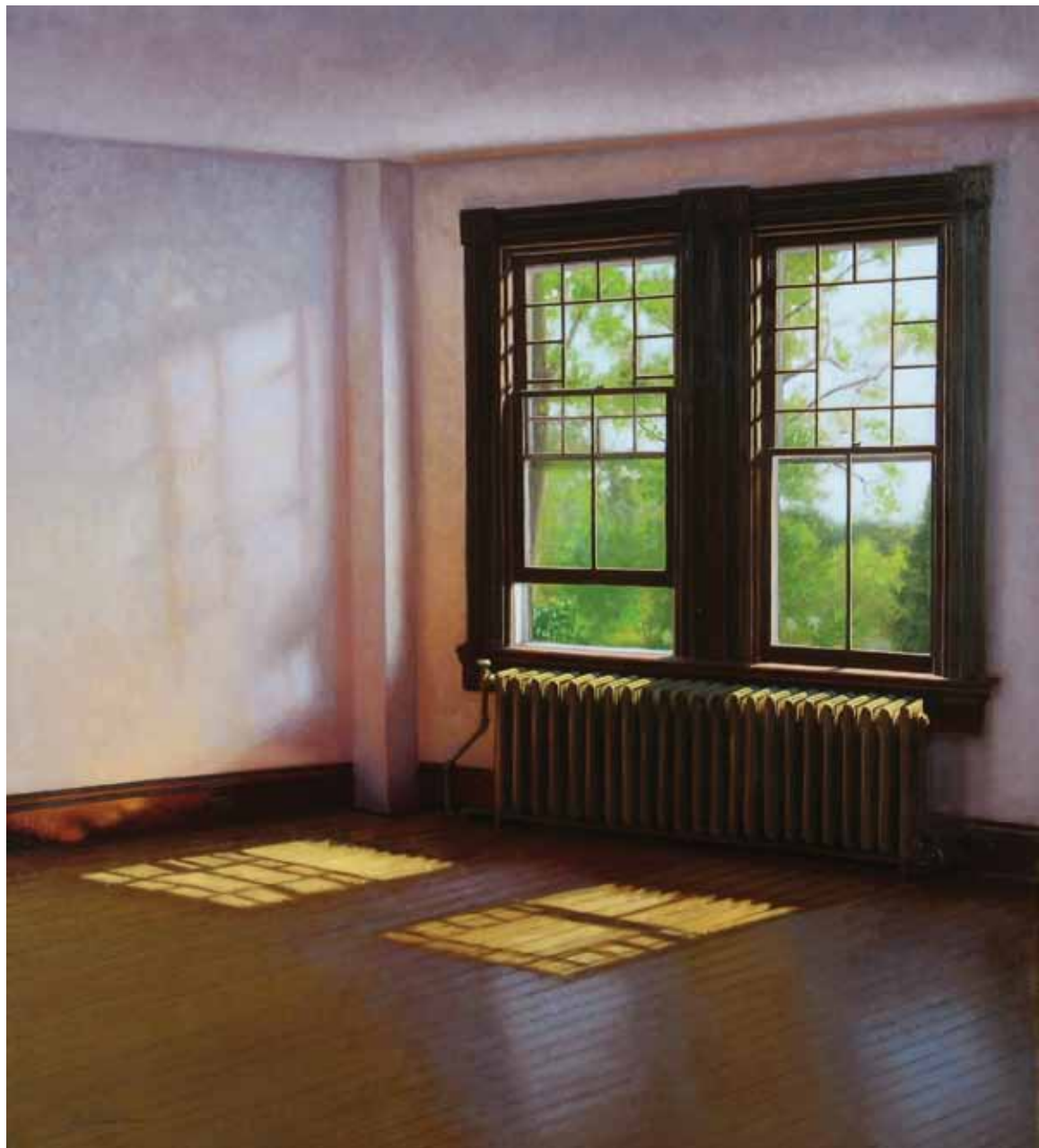
Disintegrating Ruin

The abandoned houses that I came across were in different stages of disintegration. Some had merely lost windows and doors and had sagging rooflines. Others were starting to come completely undone; pieces of the roof

had fallen off and vines were ripping apart the clapboard.

I once decided to enter one of these houses. As I hacked my way through the foliage, I found what used to be the front door of the house. I stepped on the doorsill and the whole house started humming, like the string section of a symphony orchestra warming up. Termites were buzzing and making the entire house move. Snakes slithered, birds darted, mice scurried; the entire animal world had taken up residence even as the humans had departed. If a house had been abandoned for a very long time, it became completely engulfed by vegetation,

RIGHT: Supposedly, on his deathbed, J.M.W. Turner asked to be taken outside so that he could "see the light one more time." It is no accident that light has been a central concern of almost every religion. Light reveals the world to us, and all paintings are ultimately about light. One of the hardest things in the world is to stop thinking about objects and really focus on space and light. One of the best ways to do this is to paint the interior of an empty room, as I did in **Woodley, Sunlight I** (oil, 46x34).





LEFT: I have been chasing this sunbeam in *Woodley, Sunlight II* (oil, 50x42) for several years now. The light stays in one place for only about 20 minutes at a time, so I worked on several paintings in this series at the same time. Not only does the light change dramatically during any given day, it is very different from season to season. The summer light is much warmer, whereas the winter light is starker and colder. For inspiration and perseverance, I think of Monet working away on his stack of canvases in his rooms across the street from Rouen Cathedral.

some to the extent that I barely knew that there was a house within the verdant mass. In these last stages of abandonment, it was as if the earth were starting to reclaim the house and to take it back into its arms. In the case of *Abandoned House on a Hill, Northumberland County, Virginia* (page 31), the house was lost, but the fields to the right were lush and abundant, still farmed and productively organized into rows. It was the contrast between these two states—loss and abundance—that I found so poignant.

These houses are powerful statements about the human condition, as well as meditations on the passage of time and the struggle to remain whole. But one could not possibly live in them.

Magical, Peaceful Place

Ultimately, I think that Clark is correct, that landscape painting has the capacity to impart a “sense of well-being” unlike any other genre. Woodley, the 19th-century Maryland plantation house in which I live and work, is one of those magical places that do just that (see *Woodley, Summer, Dawn*, pages 28–29).

The house immediately makes you feel at peace. It has strong bones, grand without being in the slightest way pretentious. Its 47 windows let in light from every direction and help keep the rich, polished wooden molding and doors from feeling too dark (see *Woodley, Sunlight I and II*, page 34 and above). There is a marvelous flow as you walk through the house because each room has at least two doors in

RIGHT: There is a welcoming, calming flow as you walk through my house, as shown in *Woodley Interior; View of the Library* (oil, 48x38). Each room has at least two doors in it, so you never have to turn around and leave a room the same way you entered. From the doorways other rooms beckon to you to continue through the house.



it, so you never have to turn around and exit a room the same way you entered it. Rooms unfold onto other rooms; there are no obstacles or dead ends (see *Woodley Interior; View of the Library*, above).

In a similar way, the gardens are lovely and spacious, a haven within which we host dozens of species of birds, rabbits, fox, and deer. The grounds still have the original 1757 smokehouse as well as a set of magnificent 18th-century boxwoods that originally acted as a natural gate for a carriage path (see *Boxwoods*, *Woodley*, page 37).

Reflection of Self

These two subjects, the “abandoned house” and the “house of well-being,” have acted as emotional poles—metaphors for loss and abundance—between which I have oscillated, depending on the circumstances of my life. Because I have been battling serious illness in recent years, I have gone back to identifying the house with the ravaged body, the body that is falling apart and can no longer function. The major painting I worked on when I could work was of a set of abandoned row houses. (See *Painting in Layers for a Complex Scene*, page 32.) It is a very moving sight, these



ABOVE: I woke up very early each morning the summer I was working on **Boxwoods, Woodley** (oil, 30x42) and was out there by 6 a.m. As the sun rose, the light started to clip the top of the boxwoods. I wanted to preserve that early raking light, which was constant for only 20 minutes at most. I then had to keep the subject in my memory and when that failed, I worked on other parts of the canvas.

houses that used to be homes to real families, now breaking apart, sagging, splitting, doors and windows all smashed and useless.

Illness and surgery tell you what it feels like to be broken—to have the normal barriers between inside and outside violated. Structures like these remind us that it is work to remain upright every day, to stand up in the face of sickness and entropy. Jamie Wyeth said that even a bale of hay could be a self-portrait if it were painted with feeling and conviction. So can a house. ■

Meet Ephraim Rubenstein



Ephraim Rubenstein has had 10 one-person exhibitions in New York City: seven at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery, one at Tatistcheff & Co., and two at George Billis Gallery in Chelsea, where he now shows. He has exhibited his work at the Butler Institute of American Art (Youngstown, Ohio), the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (Richmond, Virginia), the Maier Museum of Art (Lynchburg, Virginia), and the National Academy of Design School (New York City), where he won the Emil and Dines Carlsen Award in painting and the Beatrice and Sidney Laufman Award in Drawing. His work can be found in numerous public and private collections, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and three of his paintings were recently on loan to the U.S. Department of State as part of its Art in Embassies Program. Rubenstein has also taught at the University of Richmond, RISD, and MICA, and is currently on the faculty of the Art Students League of New York, and Columbia University's Department of Narrative Medicine. Learn more at www.ephraimrubenstein.com.