

FIVE TO WATCH

There is a lot of superb art being made these days.
This column by Allison Malafronte shines light on five gifted individuals.



ZOE DUFOUR (b. 1990), *Ray* (detail), 2021, ceramic stoneware, 18-carat gold luster, and steel, 40 x 24 x 20 in. (overall), private collection

Currently residing in California, **ZOE DUFOUR** (b. 1990) is a sculptor who creates unconventional compositions that capture the powerful dance between the physical and the philosophical. “There is a strong dialogue between practice and thinking, a direct relationship between the hand and head,” the artist explains. “This balance is echoed everywhere in nature and is a constant source of inspiration. The potential for tactile, emotional, and physical connections among objects, space, people, and nature is what draws me to sculpture.”

Dufour continues, “Sculpting gives me a dynamic framework to engage with the world. My practice is a conscious study of nature, people, and animals, born of affinity, love, and curiosity. This study allows me to become more aware of my perceptions and biases so that I can better understand our world as it exists, in reality. As I sculpt, I am balancing intuitive response and rational assessment. Ultimately, I want to sculpt to create art suspended between how we experience the world and what we think we know about the world.”

Originally from Thailand, Dufour studied for five years at the Grand Central Atelier in New York City, where she learned to sculpt primarily in clay and to cast in bronze. More recently, she has been experimenting with ceramic sculpture, a medium she finds fascinating for its challenges and chemistry-based process. “The material science involved in producing

ceramic work is much more rigorous than anything I’ve encountered in traditional sculpture,” she says. “Projecting results that will occur when you combine various clay bodies and glazes to particular temperatures and atmospheres in a kiln feels primal, magical, and scientific all at once.”

Illustrated here is *Ray*, a sculpture that shows a man surrounded by masked versions of himself, either whole or partial. Created in ceramic stoneware, 18-carat gold luster, and steel, these gilded reflections represent the gradations of influence on a person’s identity over a lifetime. “In geometry,” the artist notes, “a ray is part of a line that has a fixed starting point but no end point. One example is a sun ray. *Ray* was sculpted as I thought about the many iterations of self we pass through from birth, and the many outside influences that shape us in our indeterminate lifetime.”

Earlier this year, Dufour was sculptor-in-residence at the national historical park dedicated to Augustus Saint-Gaudens (1848–1907) in Cornish, New Hampshire. For the better part of six months, she worked on ambitious life-size compositions while studying the artistry of one of America’s greatest sculptors. We look forward to seeing what she produced there.

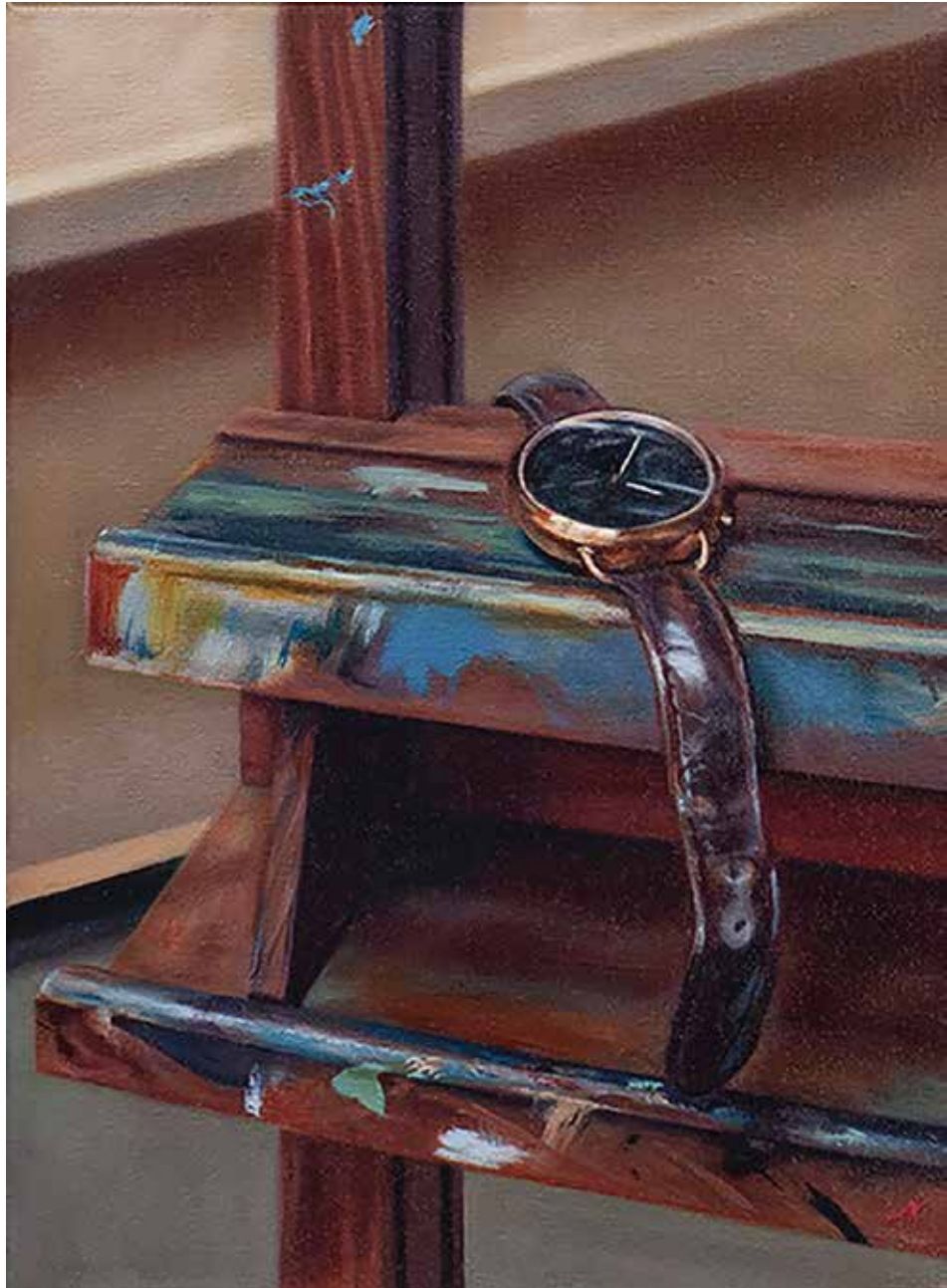
Dufour is self-represented.

NATHAN BERTLING (b. 1974), *Present Imperfect*, 2021, oil on linen, 16 x 12 in., private collection

“Convinced that beauty stubbornly persists, I salvage it wherever I find it — and follow it through.” This declaration by **NATHAN BERTLING** (b. 1974) aptly summarizes his motivation for being a painter. Fascinated by the often-overlooked nuances of people, places, and things, he combines a commitment to traditional methods and materials with an active imagination and acute observation to make statements about everyday life.

Bertling studied visual arts and communications at Furman University in South Carolina, followed by six years of intensive training at Ben Long’s atelier in Asheville, North Carolina. In Florence during the 1970s, Long had apprenticed with Pietro Annigoni (1910–1988), sometimes called the Patriarch of Realism and one of the last living links to the Italian Renaissance. Since completing his formal training, Bertling has deployed both this Old Master lineage and various contemporary innovations to shape his own style and approach.

Today, the subjects of this Greenville, South Carolina-based artist’s paintings and drawings include people intriguing to him, sentimental objects, and scenes that conjure memories or forgotten moments. *The Librarian*, a portrait of Bertling’s wife seated in front of a shelf of colorful books, is an apropos way to portray a bibliophile, aspiring author, and illustrator. *Present Imperfect*, illustrated here, tells a story of the passage of time and daily practice. “The watch was a gift from my wife and is a meditation on the necessity of perseverance,” the artist explains. “The worn wristband and paint-stained wood signify the lessons that can only be learned through



patient plodding. In juxtaposing the nostalgia of a timepiece with an artist’s easel, I was able to reflect the weathered beauty and scarred effects of real labor.”

As for his career path and future plans, Bertling states, “I’m looking and laboring down the long road — to see my life and art deepen together.” He is now a member of New York City’s Salmagundi Club, where his self-portrait *Quick to Listen* was recently awarded Best in Show at the annual *Open Painting, Sculpture & Graphics* exhibition. This spring Bertling will travel to France to attend a three-week-long *Portraits at the Louvre* drawing program through Studio Escalier. He will also continue teaching private lessons in drawing and painting at his studio.

Bertling is represented by Dacia Gallery (New York City).



ROBERT PETERSON (b. 1981), *Watch Over Us*, 2021, oil on canvas, 60 x 114 in., private collection

ROBERT PETERSON (b. 1981) is not an emerging or up-and-coming artist. With works in the collections of major museums, regular appearances at *Art Basel Miami Beach*, and celebrity endorsements, he is by all accounts someone who has arrived. Yet the sales, fairs, and collectors are not why Peterson creates. His most important goals revolve around his family, faith, personal growth, and using his art to help shape and shift how Black people are viewed and valued in our society.

Now 41 and based in Lawton, Oklahoma, Peterson has already been through several evolutions, experimenting with different subjects, approaches, and forms of expression. “I believe all visual artists go through various stages exploring not only different media and subjects, but also themselves,” he says. Doing this has “pushed me to come out the other side a better artist and person. Initially, the paintings I created were based on stock images of celebrities I found on the Internet. As I grew as an artist, I began photographing men, women, and children I know.”

He continues, “Over the past two years, my paintings have focused on the Black experience as I have known it through my life. My art is my truth and my voice. It showcases the balance that I have within my own life as a husband and a father, as a Black man. And it reflects a softer side of Black people not often portrayed in the media,

while still showing our strength and resilience, something that I want to see more of in galleries and museums. In 500 years, I want viewers to see the normalcy, peace, and harmony with my subjects — Black people, and Black families in particular — that contrast with the often negative popular narrative. I want these subjects to get the chance to live forever through my work.”

In that vein, Peterson’s *Watch Over Us* (2021) is one of his favorite works to date. Measuring almost 10 feet wide, it shows two brothers who clearly have each other’s backs and a special bond. “I wanted to create a work that shows the younger brother keeping watch so that his older brother can rest,” Peterson explains. The figure in front “is actually looking to the sky seeking God’s help to watch over both of them — not so that he can rest, but because he knows he isn’t strong enough alone. With God’s help, he can do all things.”

Peterson is currently creating work to be exhibited by the New York gallery Albertz Benda at *Frieze Los Angeles* this February. At some point this year, Peterson will also be presenting a show at Band of Vices, a Los Angeles gallery.

Peterson shows with Albertz Benda (New York City), Band of Vices (Los Angeles), and Claire Oliver Gallery (New York City).

STEPHANIE BUER (b. 1982), *Untitled (Snow)*, 2021,
charcoal on paper, 42 x 56 in., private collection



Some artists do their best work indoors, where still lifes, florals, interior scenes, and other subjects come to fruition in the comfort of their own studios. But **STEPHANIE BUER** (b. 1982) thrives on the unpredictability of being outdoors — observing the evolving light, elements, environment, and architectural structures on any given day or season, then creating a heartfelt interpretation of what she saw and felt in that moment.

Buer grew up in rural Michigan, but when she moved to Detroit to earn a B.F.A. from the College for Creative Studies, she embraced the idiosyncratic beauty of urban life with all its colorful sights, sounds, and textures. “I lived in Detroit for 10 years, so that city is quite special to me,” she says. “I initially struggled to adapt to urban living after being in the countryside my whole life, so I took to wandering the streets and exploring old, abandoned buildings. I ended up falling in love with these beautiful, peaceful, marginal spaces. The relationship to Detroit completely shaped my aesthetic and conceptual language as an artist.”

More recently, during the pandemic, Buer decided to move once again, this time to Vancouver to pursue an M.F.A. at the Emily Carr University of Art + Design. Being highly sensitive to her surroundings, she once again has used art as a therapeutic way to embrace and connect with a new environment. “I moved to Canada during

the depths of the pandemic,” Buer explains. “It was a very difficult time to be in a new place. I found the entire experience generative, though, as I had a lot of time to wander the landscape and become better acquainted with it through the slow, meditative process of drawing and painting.”

One of the pieces that resulted from that time is *Untitled (Snow)*, the charcoal drawing illustrated here. Buer couldn’t have picked a better medium to convey the heavy, gray silence and solitude of a stark winter’s day. In this scene, we feel the familiar forlornness that winter often brings, while also detecting a bit of the loneliness, even sadness, the artist likely felt during this new season of her life. It’s a dramatic piece that instantly transports viewers to a specific time and place while connecting us to the emotional state of the person who created it.

Buer now resides in the state of Washington and looks forward to exploring new territory and ideas this winter during a two-month residency at the Ellis-Beauregard Foundation (Rockland, Maine).

Buer is represented by Abend Gallery (Denver) and Thinkspace Projects (Los Angeles).

One look at the paintings of **MARTIN GEIGER** (b. 1997) and it's evident where his artistic education took place: the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia, where he earned a certificate after four years studying drawing and painting. There he trained under the influential instructor Scott Noel (b. 1955), best known for inspiring the Perceptual Painting movement more than a decade ago. Those who follow this approach aim to paint their direct responses to the visible world with a focus on space, volume, color, and shape.

This experience-based approach is well-suited to Geiger because it requires close, careful observation and thoughtful reflection; curiosity about, and admiration of, the physical world have long been his strong suits. "The world itself almost seems like an immense playground of sorts," the artist writes. "Everything in my surroundings feels and looks intensely interesting at all times. It seems always about ready to reveal itself, almost like a piece of music leading up to a crescendo. It's clear that there is something very important just beneath the surface for the artist, and making art is my best attempt at excavating these ever-present patterns and showing them to the world."

The subjects Geiger feels compelled to paint range from figures and landscapes to interiors and architecture, but the formal elements

of light, space, and design are consistently his main subject. In *Robert's Table/Tribute to Scott Noel*, for instance, the artist made two contrasting light sources the main characters of his visual narrative while giving a nod to his longtime mentor. "This painting depicts a messy table covered with various overlooked envelopes, containers, and other detritus in a seasoned artist's studio," Geiger explains. "The dark interior and cool light bathing these items are contrasted with a blazing, luminous exterior landscape. This theme of outside versus inside was a hallmark of Scott Noel."

Born in Charlottesville, Geiger has returned to Virginia and now makes his studio in Staunton. There he is an instructor at the Beverly Street Studio School and also serves as head assistant at Bronze Craft Foundry in nearby Waynesboro. Geiger has won two grants from the Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation (2018 and 2022) and considers those experiences instrumental in helping him realize several large-scale works.

Geiger is represented by Steven Francis Fine Art (Lynchburg, Virginia).



MARTIN GEIGER (b. 1997), *Robert's Table/Tribute to Scott Noel*, 2022, oil on linen, 32 x 48 in., Steven Francis Fine Art (Lynchburg, Virginia)