



OUTFITTED WITH white cotton gloves and a magnifying glass, Joe Paquet sat at a long wooden table in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Study Room for Drawings and Prints. He was a 20-year-old student at the School of

Visual Arts in New York City, and it was his first up-close experience with original drawings from various periods in art history. The last piece set before him was Michelangelo's *STUDIES FOR THE LIBYAN SIBYL*, a small, early-16th-century

preparatory drawing for a figure in the Sistine Chapel.

Leaning closer to examine the fine marks in red chalk, Paquet was surprised to feel something coursing through him like an intense, delicate



Prairie Requiem, oil, 28 x 40.

DEPTH PERCEPTION

JOE PAQUET ASPIRES TO ELEVATE
THE COMMONPLACE THROUGH A
PURE EXPRESSION OF HIS VISION

BY GUSSIE FAUNTLEROY

calls looking up from the drawing, astonished, and thinking: “What just happened to me?”

The answer to that question eventually became one of the foundations of Paquet’s own artistic approach. He came to understand that the Michelangelo drawing was created with—and, centuries later, still contained—such a depth and nuance of perception and skill that, as a young art student with his senses wide open, he experienced an actual physical response to it. “No work of art can resonate that which it hasn’t been given,” he says now, sitting in his St. Paul, MN, studio, a hundred-year-old former warehouse graced with tall windows and a well-trodden wood floor. As with great works of art, he says, the studio’s appeal reflects the



representation

Collins Galleries, Orleans, MA;
American Legacy Fine Arts, Pasadena, CA; **Helena Fox Fine Art**, Charleston, SC; **Joe Paquet Studio**, St. Paul, MN;
www.joepaquet.com.

upcoming show

International Art Renewal Center Salon, European Museum of Modern Art, Barcelona, Spain, through February 2; Sotheby’s, New York, NY, July 17-27.

electrical current. Remembering the experience almost 40 years later, his voice still fills with awe. “That drawing emanated something—a sensitivity and force and power and grace,” he says. “The hair stood up on my neck and arms.” He re-



Morning Light on Cat Head, oil, 18 x 24.

living touch it has absorbed over time.

At 57, Paquet is passionate about infusing his own art with nothing less than the authenticity that comes from fully absorbing a scene and translating that experience onto canvas. Most of his painting is done on location, and the more he attunes his senses and opens himself to perceive the environment around him, the more he believes the viewer can share what he felt as he worked. For example, with *OJIBWA AFTERNOON, MAD-ELINE ISLAND*, which is part of his *Forest Interiors* series, he spent five days returning to the same spot on a wooded island on Lake Superior. The experience he aspired to convey contained a lake-scented breeze, soft earth under his feet,

the shuffling of leaves, and shifting, mottled sunlight through the trees.

Yet for Paquet, being deeply immersed in a scene is only half of what it takes to produce a worthwhile painting. The other essential element is a combination of skilled, objective understanding and subjective choice-making. The goal is to order visual components in a way that creates an underlying harmony while still containing all of nature's apparent chaos. After he took his *Forest Interior* pieces back to the studio and had them photographed, he studied the paintings again and realized he had more work to do. "Those shapes are lazy," he thought. "They're not bad, but they're not beautiful." So he spent five more highly fo-

cused days refining what he had already done, "marshaling everything to do one thing," as he puts it. And that one thing was to distill his forest experience to its most genuinely beautiful form.

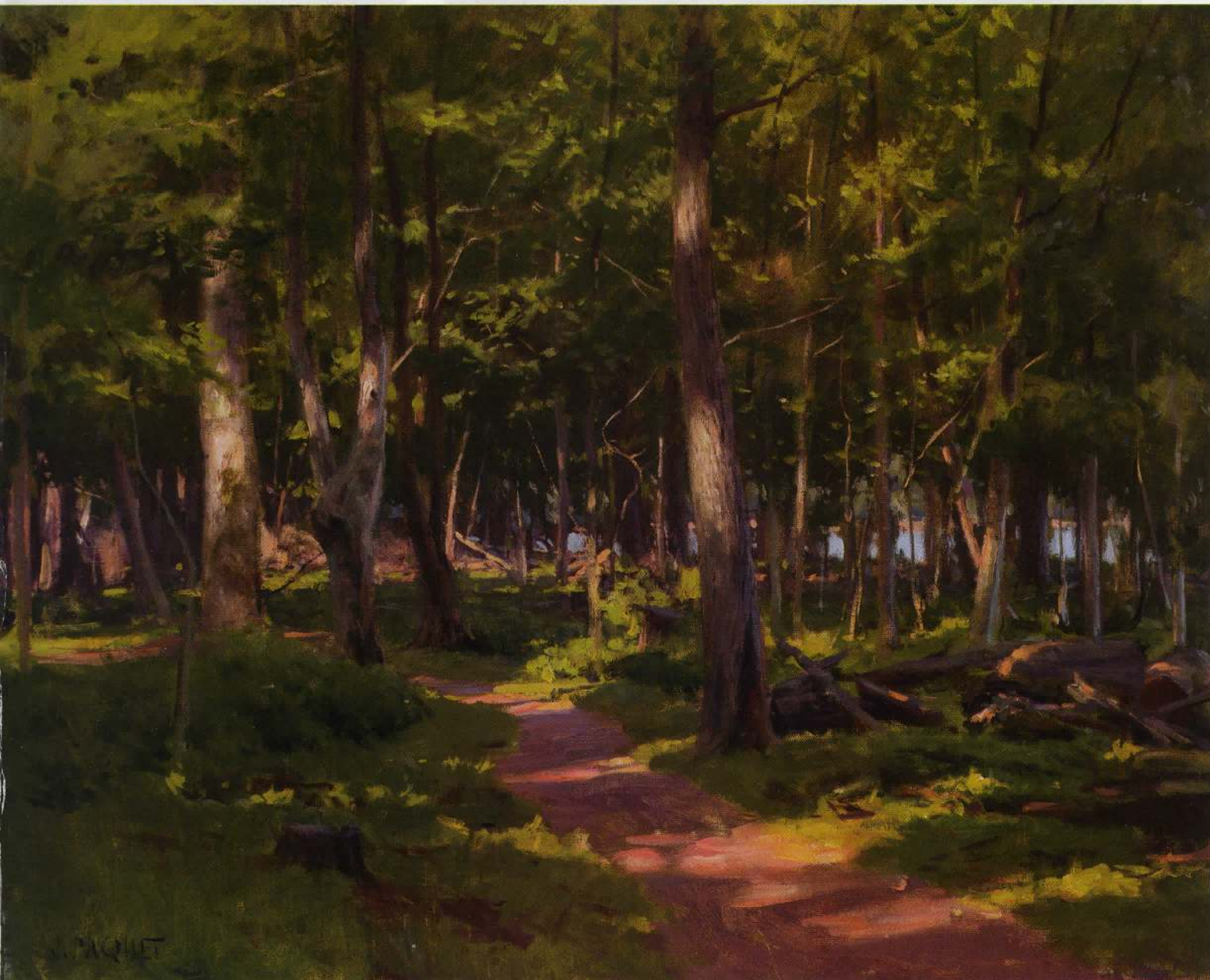
PAQUET'S willingness to put as much time and effort into his paintings as they ask of him is part of a solid work ethic inherited from his father. A big Irish-Canadian man, the senior Paquet was a lifelong railroad worker in Hoboken, NJ, who sometimes held three jobs at a time to support his wife and five kids. He was also exceptionally creative, sculpting or painting when he had time, and building things with stone, iron, and wood.

Young Joe spent his boyhood wandering and exploring everything within walking distance of the family's modest home, often "alone but not lonely," he says. A self-described flighty and sensitive child, he was constantly in the company of his daydreams. One day, shortly after transferring to public school from a Catholic school where he'd learned to be well-behaved, he

was rewarded with the task of taking the blackboard erasers outdoors to clap out the chalk. Standing outside, he was suddenly overwhelmed with a rush of freedom. All he had to do was drop the erasers and run. Of course, he didn't. He clapped the erasers and went back inside. But the memory of that moment remains as a metaphor for his ongoing elation in living the artist's life. "I feel

like the kid who dropped the erasers—and is still running," he says, smiling.

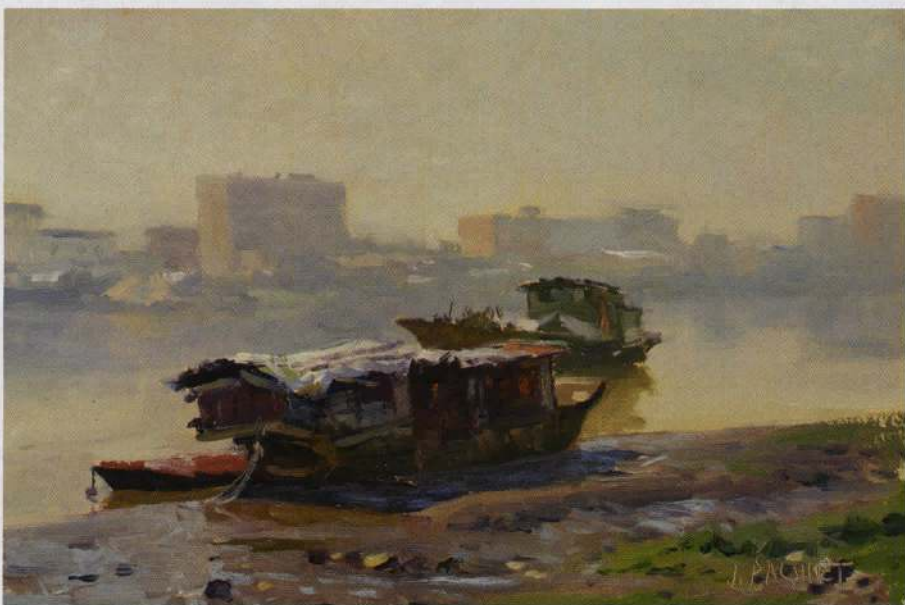
In between that early glimpse of freedom and the creative freedom Paquet enjoys today came many years of hard work and learning. In high school he hid his sensitive nature behind the shield of athletics, muscling up his skinny frame to wrestle, play football, and throw the shot and discus. He also



Ojibwa Afternoon, Madeline Island, oil, 22 x 28.



Crossroads, Bubbling Springs, oil, 24 x 30.



▲ **Sultry Day, Kaiping, oil, 8 x 12.**

► **Brooklyn With Barrel, oil, 28 x 40.**



excelled in art class.

When it came to choosing between the two, he found himself guided by what he now calls “angels in life who tell you exactly what you need to hear, even if they don’t know what you need.” One of these angels was his school’s athletic director, who sat him down one day and said, “What do you want to do with your life, Joe?” The teen hesitated. Well, he

said, he could either go to a good college for football or wrestling, or to a good art school. The athletic director pointed out that Paquet was too small to ever become a star football player, but he could become a great artist.

At the School of Visual Arts, Paquet fell in love with figure drawing. After graduation, he signed up for weekly figure-drawing sessions with a New York-based

painter named John Osborne. The moment he stepped into Osborne’s studio, however, he was astounded by the older artist’s landscape work. He ended up studying landscape painting with Osborne twice a week for more than three years, in the studio and on location. Then he took a year’s leave of absence from his day job and spent the whole time painting, absorbing what he’d learned and “finding out what I want-



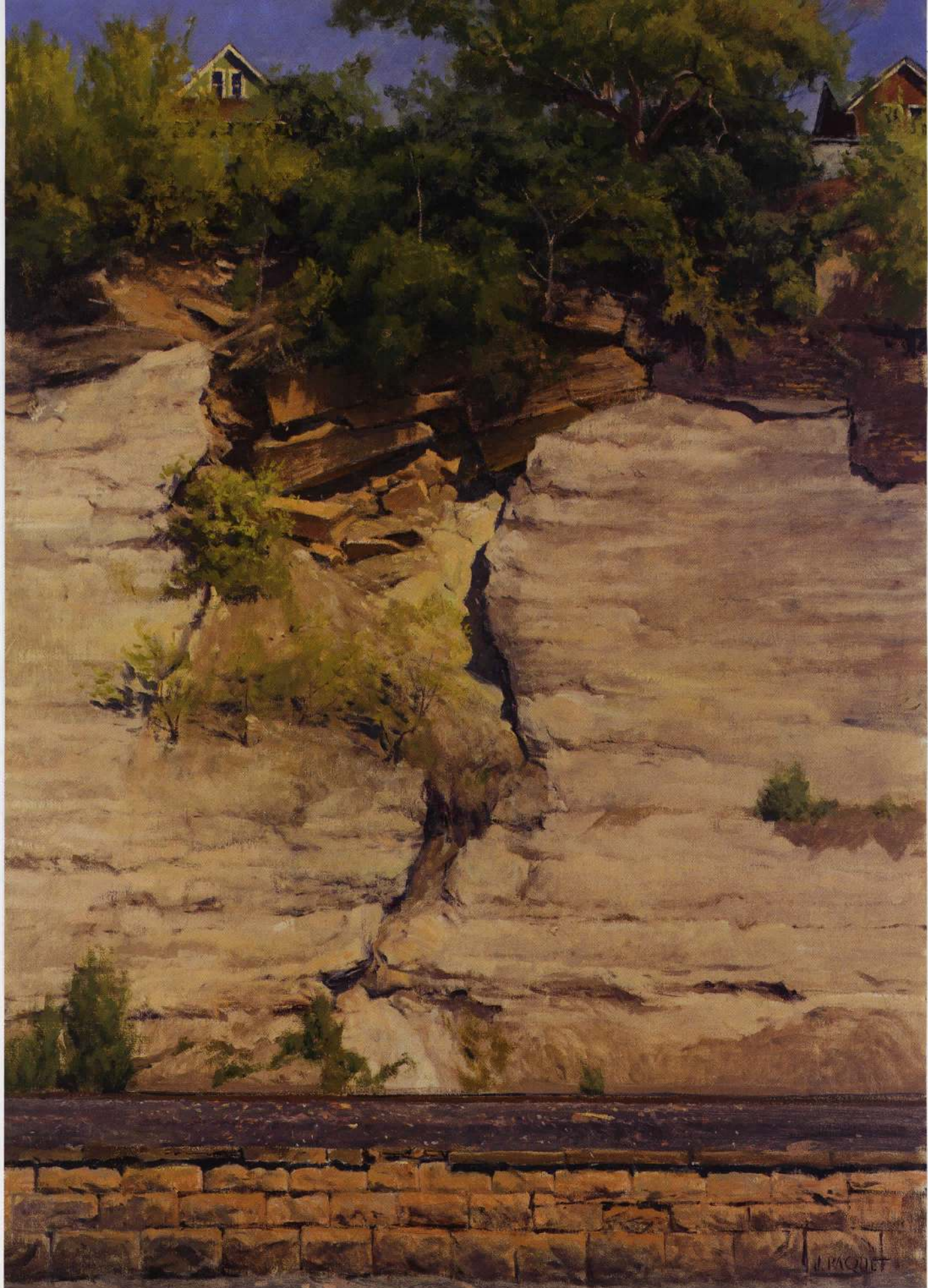
ed to be," he says.

What he wanted and what needed to be done soon diverged, though, as marriage and family responsibilities entered his life, leading to 10 years in commercial illustration and design—"anything I could do with my hands" in the pre-computer era, Paquet says. He continued to paint on the side, and when he left commercial art following a divorce,

he knew his years in a cubicle had saved him from being "just another painter, because painting was sacred to me," he says. "By the time I could do it, it was pure. I couldn't do it any other way." He moved to Minnesota to teach painting and eventually met his wife Natalie, who encouraged his dedication to the easel.

Some years later, during a period of frustration with the direction of his

painting, Paquet had a dream, which he calls a gift. In it he found himself completely mesmerized by the color harmonies in an unstretched painting on a gallery table. He asked the artist where she'd painted the piece. A surly, impatient young woman, she flippantly pointed across the street at a weed-filled vacant lot. "Over there," she said. He looked. It was indeed the scene





▲ Tagged, oil, 28 x 40.

◀ Fractured, oil, 40 x 28.

in the painting, but the woman had magnificently translated visual facts into what Paquet calls a subjective truth. A door of understanding suddenly blew open in his mind. "It's not the subject that matters," he realized, "it's everything you bring to it."

THAT AWARENESS is at the heart of all his work these days. It's especially evident in such paintings as *TAGGED*, a winter-brown scene in which the artist finds beauty in graffiti and eroding blue clay along railroad tracks. Similarly, *FRACTURED* features a wall of cracked limestone block slowly crumbling under the pressure of urban tree roots and time. For each of these, the painter returned to the scene eight or nine times,

calling on decades of experience to make subjective changes to the image while remaining true to the light. "These pieces feel like the most pure form of what I've been after all along—they're what I've been evolving into," he says. "To elevate the commonplace, if the work is authentic, is glorious."

This evolution has resulted in a number of awards, including first place in the 2019-2020 International Art Renewal Center Salon's plein-air category. That honor means Paquet is part of an exhibition currently on view at the European Museum of Modern Art in Barcelona, Spain, which travels to Sotheby's in New York this summer. Among other awards he's received over the years: Artists' Choice and Collectors' Choice at the Laguna Plein Air Painting Invitational

and a top award at the Salmagundi Club of New York. Yet for Paquet, all of these external consequences of his work—accolades, sales, and the business of art—fall away entirely when he sets up to paint. "When the creative vibration is pure and natural and I'm hyper-focused, the world literally goes away, turned down on a dimmer switch," he says. "It's a magical place." ♦

Colorado-based Gussie Fauntleroy writes for a variety of art publications and is the author of three books on visual artists. Learn more at www.gussiefauntleroy.com.

See more of Paquet's work at
www.southwestart.com/featured/paquet-j-feb2020.