

BLURRED LINES: Andrew Shears

“I have a natural inclination to draw realistically,” said Andrew Shears. He developed his drawing skills while studying at the Pratt Institute, in New York, where he earned his BFA; during the Drawing Year at Grand Central Atelier, in New York City; and at the Ryder Studio, here in Santa Fe. The results now include some exquisite portrait and figure studies, and continue to underlie his depictions of landscapes in graphite and in paint.

Much of Shears’s interest in drawing came through his father, an architect. “I grew up learning about the importance of drawing. He would often show me stuff through drawing—drawing instead of speaking. It was so powerful.

“One of the things that might be hard to tell from my paintings and drawings is my interest in abstraction,” Shears added. “Some of my favorite paintings are by abstract expressionists. When I visit my parents in Colorado, I often go into Denver to visit the Clyfford Still Museum, designed by Brad Cloepfl, of Allied Works Architecture. It’s such an amazing building that works well with the paintings.

“Another interest is designer furniture—steel, leather, a certain kind of color. I’m obsessed with the Bauhaus.”

Prominent on a wall outside Shears’s studio are original prints by Josef Albers and Herbert Bayer, Bauhaus students who later taught there. Albers’s *Homage to the Square*, a series of paintings and prints, explores the physical and emotional interactions of the juxtapositions of colors. “Art should never be stagnant,” he wrote; “it should always be evolving.”

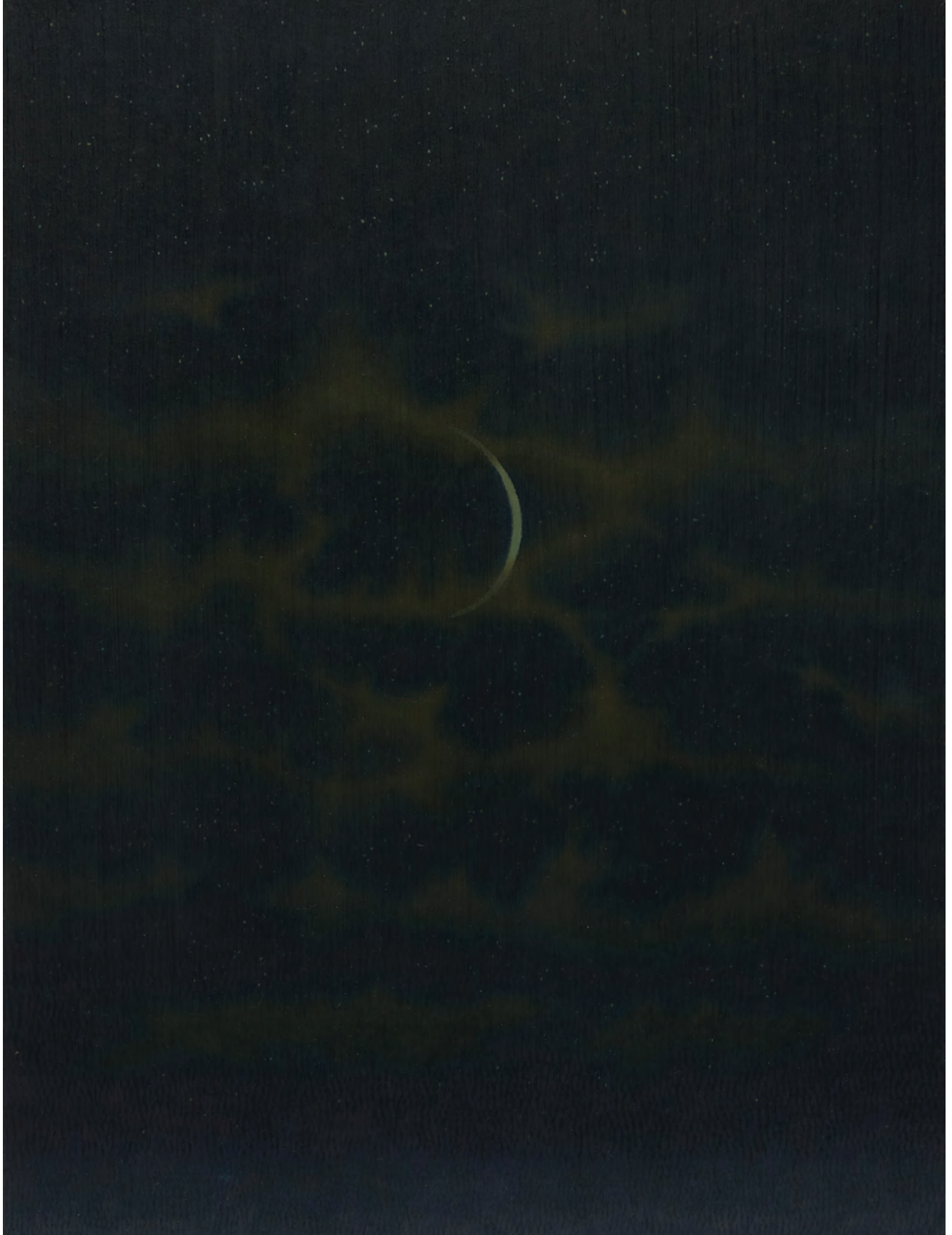
The Bauhaus was founded in 1919 in Weimar, Germany, by the architect Walter Gropius. According to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, “Its core objective was a radical concept: to reimagine the material world to reflect the unity of all the arts.”

In the evolution of Shears’s art since *Still*, his first exhibition at Evoke, in 2021, all of these influences, and the workings of his own inner life, have come together. His new exhibition, *Blurred Lines*, on view at Evoke November 28 through December 20, continues his overall theme of stillness on a larger scale. “I love to be sort of enveloped by a massive image,” he explained. “That’s one of the reasons I like the work of Clyfford Still, Barnett Newman, and Anselm Kiefer. I love that feeling, so I’m interested in that. But I’m also interested in small-scale paintings.”

In *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, James Joyce writes about the experience of art: “The instant wherein that supreme quality of beauty, the clear radiance of the esthetic image, is apprehended luminously by the mind which has been arrested by its wholeness and fascinated by its harmony is the luminous silent stasis of esthetic pleasure . . .” Joseph Campbell, the writer on comparative mythology, summarized this: “The aesthetic experience is a simple beholding of the object. . . . [Y]ou experience a radiance. You are held in aesthetic arrest.”

Shears has been exploring the idea of aesthetic arrest and the difficulty of expressing vast landscapes on a smaller scale. “I was talking with my friend Dan Pullen about scale. He is an architectural illustrator and painter. I told him that I have to make big paintings because I don’t think I can achieve that feeling that we always talk about—aesthetic arrest—on a small scale. I just don’t know if it’s possible. He pulled a matchbook out of his pocket that he had found, like, 30 years ago. It had a little image on it of a landscape. There’s something intimate about these small images.”

In his memoir, *Speak, Memory*, Vladimir Nabokov wrote: “He made me depict from memory, in the greatest possible detail, objects I had certainly seen thousands of times without visualizing them properly: a street lamp, a postbox, the tulip design on the stained glass of our own front door. He tried to teach me to find



Andrew Shears, *Acid Rain*, oil on panel, 12" x 9".

the geometrical coordinations between the slender twigs of a leafless boulevard tree, a system of visual give-and-takes, requiring a precision of linear expression, which I failed to achieve in my youth, but applied gratefully, in my adult instar . . .”

In his paintings, Shears invites his own memory to speak—memories of music, films, books, experiences. Unlike Nabokov, however, Shears finds memories blurred, despite his practice of “visualizing them properly.”



Andrew Shears, *New Mexico Rain*, oil on panel, 12" x 9".

"I'm thinking about memory a lot, and some of them are specific memories, like an experience with my mom. We were driving along, and all of a sudden we looked up and there were millions of birds in the sky. It was absolutely crazy. It was just so beautiful. People were pulling over. There was kind of an apocalyptic, orange-pink sky behind it all—very subtle. I had never seen anything like that. I was just arrested by the whole thing, so I decided I was going to make a painting someday.

"I have done a drawing of birds migrating, and in *Migration*, I'm continuing to draw from that memory. The memory is never accurate. It's always maybe a bit more dramatized. Or certainly different from what actually happened. The inaccurate memories and muddled distinctions blur the line between realism and fantasy. It's harder to differentiate or to tell them apart. So I guess in a way I'm trying to embrace those false memories in order to create a dramatized image of them.

"After looking at a bunch of photos of birds and trying to paint them, I found there's so much freedom—how much do I actually have to paint them to suggest what they are and where do I put them, how far away they are. And I can play with color. These are things I'll be thinking about as the paintings get bigger. They'll be a bit less obviously landscapes and a bit more playful. I'm taking some of these things and sort of turning them into patterns.

"I'll also be thinking about the minimal in the context of the larger paintings. The size will make them more abstract and a bit more mysterious. I'll be looking straight up into the sky and not out at a landscape.

"It's kind of exciting to me, after painting pretty realistically for a long time, to just let the paintings unfold and be surprising to me. I'll start with something, often from a reference, and then when I abandon that reference, I feel free."



Andrew Shears, *Flamboyance*, oil on panel, 10" x 8".



Andrew Shears, *Migration*, oil on panel, 12" x 10".



Andrew Shears, *Iron Oxide*, oil on panel, 14" x 11".

Shears's mark making—his application of paint—implies reality from a distance, but allows the viewer to experience the painting as an object from close-up, when his small brushstrokes become visible.

"As I was struggling with the small beach scene with the mountains and clouds above," he explained, "I wasn't liking the marks, and the color felt off. I decided to slow down and make smaller marks, and to make slow color transitions with those marks that also brought texture to the mountain and the clouds.

"You'll notice in my landscapes they're totally void of any human interaction or material. This idea of desertedness is something that I want to capture because it suggests a kind of a stillness. The more or less centralized compositions, I think, also lend a level of stillness that I like. I want them to be quiet. In terms of the palette, even the rainbows are soft. In these paintings the palette

is subdued, and all of them are turning out to be blue. Maybe this is my Blue Period.

"I think in a limited language of color, shape, and tone. The novels, films, and music I love all have a very specific tone and palette."

The arousing of one sense by another, such as a word or a sound causing you to experience a color, is known as synesthesia. One of Andrew's favorite Bauhaus artists, the Russian painter and color theorist Wassily Kandinsky, wrote "Color directly influences the soul. . . . The deeper the blue becomes, the more strongly it calls man towards the infinite, awakening in him a desire for the pure and, finally, for the supernatural. . . . The brighter it becomes, the more it loses its sound, until it turns into silent stillness and becomes white."

—John O'Hern



Andrew Shears, *Redneck Riviera*, oil on panel, 7" x 9".