



Fading into Nothingness

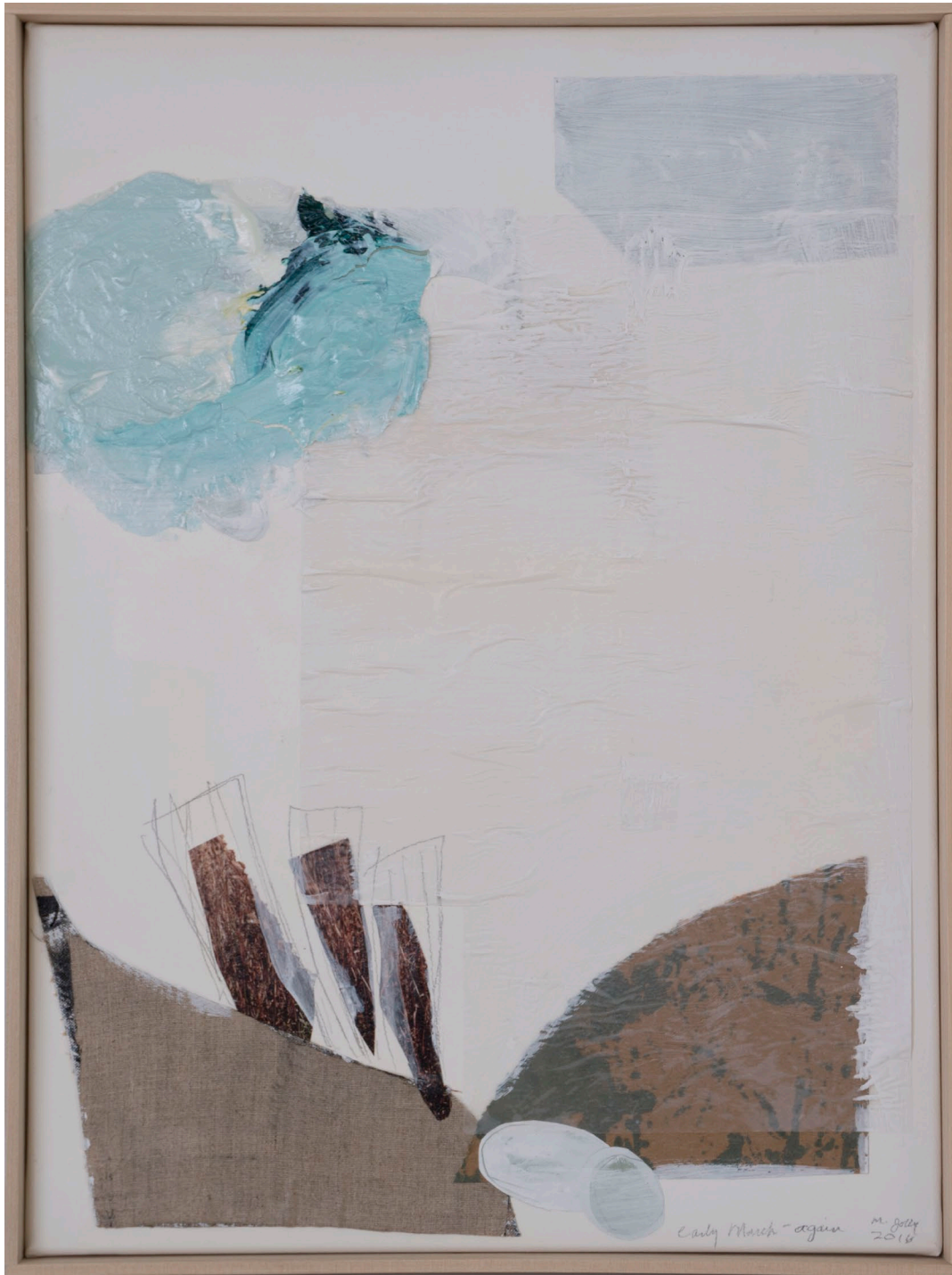
Adrian Zuñiga

On two separate studio visits in preparation for her exhibition at the Arlington Museum of Art, Marilyn Jolly and I discussed work with a cup of tea in hand. One winter day, we carried a freshly steeped pot through her dormant garden and into the warmth of the studio behind her home. A visit in late spring was marked with a pitcher of ice cold black tea – the air-conditioned studio providing refuge from the 90-degree weather outside. One wall of the building is comprised entirely of windows that let in light from the west, providing an uninterrupted view of the garden designed, built, and maintained by Jolly herself. The studio's atmosphere is markedly different at these opposite times of year: the bright sunlight of warmer months floods the green garden outside, while chillier months offer an overcast, grey light and require some plants to relocate in the studio for the season.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the change of seasons greatly affects Jolly's studio practice. It is simple to see it manifested directly in the work. Take, for example, *Early March – Again* (2016), with its light, creamy color palate composed largely of translucent, collaged paper. An abstracted garden scene at the bottom of the

painting remains brown, yet, a sign of warmer days to come is suggested with a gestural burst of blue breaking through the muted tones. Works like these are differentiated from paintings like *Retreat* (2017), with its dense application of black brushstrokes providing a heavier mood. Looking at work in her studio, Jolly is able to recall the season that many of the works were made in, a testament to how significant the cycles of nature are to her practice.

Jolly, keenly aware of this phenomenon, has not shied away from letting it influence her art-making. This acceptance is a clear indication of the Japanese philosophy of *wabi-sabi* and its influence on her in the studio and beyond. A concept often cited by Jolly, *wabi-sabi* resists a concrete definition as it is a mode of thinking and a way of life, rather than a static condition that can be expressed fully in words. With many links to Zen Buddhism, *wabi-sabi* is influenced by a doctrine that promotes anti-rational, essential knowledge that comes from an empty, open mind. Unlike in the West, where emptiness is often associated with desolation and despair, the philosophy of *wabi-sabi* offers one to see infinite potential in emptiness. There is great stress on an appreciation for time and an



Early March - Again, 2016
Mixed media on paper
24.75 x 18.5 in.

awareness of its cyclical and fleeting character. Overall, qualities such as awkwardness, aging, impermanence, imbalance, and imperfection are seen as unconventional denotations of beauty to the practitioners of wabi-sabi.

Coincidentally, the roots of wabi-sabi in Japanese culture can be traced back to the tea ceremonies of Zen monks in the 15th and 16th centuries. The meetings over tea in the studio, our own informal tea ceremonies, opened my eyes to the ways in which Jolly's practice truly resonates with the philosophy. Being in tune with the change of the seasons, as discussed, falls perfectly in line with the practice's respect for transience. The bounties of spring and summer are never permanent but give way to the slumbers of fall and winter, only to thaw and begin the cycle again. As an avid garden designer, no one is more at the mercy of nature's shifts than Jolly herself. One can feel the patience required of a gardener during colder months in *Every Breath is Different – Winter* (2018). A grey cloud-like form looms over the composition, drips of paint suggest the pattering of a winter drizzle. Concentric rectangles done free-hand in graphite emanate from the center of the painting towards its edges as dots of white paint are repeated over the entirety of the six-by-four-foot panel. Jolly shares her enduring diligence as these meditative marks imbue pause in the viewer.

The concept of impermanence is not only reflected in changes of the seasons. Objects that we interact with on a daily basis shift gradually over time. Tools grow dull with use; clothing frays with wear. Wabi-sabi encourages an appreciation for these physical signs of time's passing. There is also a lack of stability in the function of these objects throughout their timespan. An over worn t-shirt may eventually get cut and used

Quiet Chaos, 2017
Mixed medio on paper
44.5 x 36 in.

as a soft cloth. Jolly's work is often driven by the use of materials and objects like these that have expired from former responsibilities, chosen by the artist for their condition that shows past use. A beautiful example lay in the work on paper *Quiet Chaos* (2017). Collaged on the work's left side, scraps of brown paper are marked with splatters and streaks of paint and the occasional hand-written note. This paper is not painted by the artist but taken as-is from the university painting studios where Jolly teaches. Used to cover the studio's work tables, brown paper like this serves as a surface for priming supports and numerous other projects by countless students. When the paper is deemed too worn it becomes discarded and the tabletop is recovered with a fresh roll of paper. The scraps found in *Quiet Chaos*, in fact, managed to catch the eye of Jolly who envisioned the waste's potential.

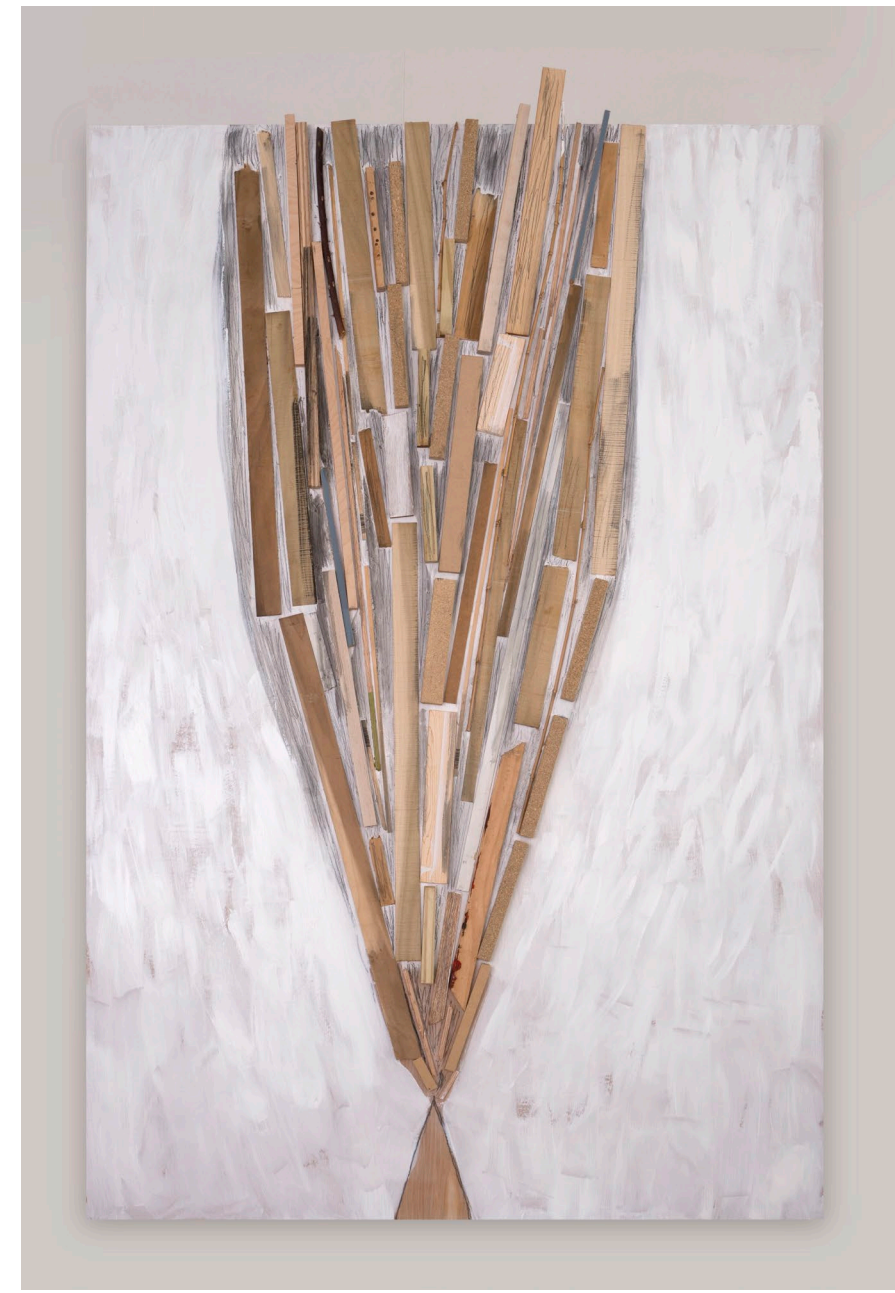
They are given new purpose in the artist's studio, poetically symbolized by yellow irises that grow from stems created by the collaged recycled paper.

Those who practice wabi-sabi are emboldened to be immersed in the present rather than impatiently looking toward the future. Through truly situating oneself in the present, one is allowed to build a mental space that remains unaffected by the worries of tomorrow. This is, of course, easier said than done. As humans in the contemporary age, quiet introspection inevitably gives way to the pressures of deadlines, emails, and to-do lists. Balance gives way to precariousness. In the quest for a clear mind, Jolly's moments of precarity are often manifested in the work and nowhere is it displayed more directly than in *Precarious Predicament* (2016). In this work, Jolly paints a three-legged stool to rest directly on





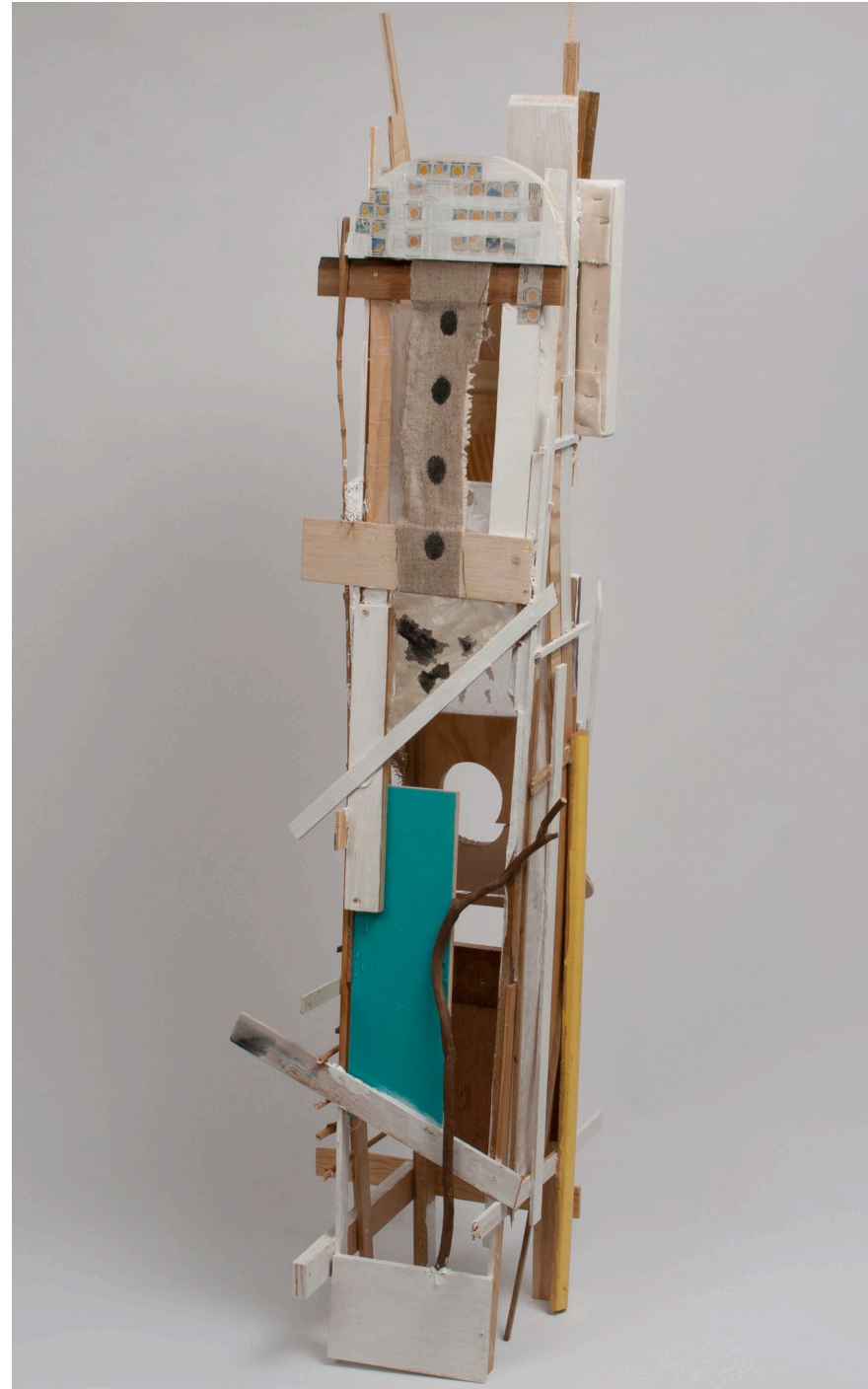
Precarious Predicament, 2016. Mixed media on canvas , 48 x 36 in.



Moment of Balance, 2016. Mixed media on panel , 72 x 47.5 in.

the canvas' bottom edge. Atop the stool rests a collaged mass of burlap and canvas – the form's bulky bottom provides an unstable support for its top half that leans dangerously to one side. Thick lines of black paint suggest a heaviness to the mound that remains at the brink of toppling over. Still, as the present moment will have it, the structure manages to keep its balance despite the circumstances. Jolly similarly reclaims her stability in *Moment of Balance*, another composition from 2016. The bottom edge of this work provides support for a small painted pinnacle shape whose top point provides solitary support for an inverted mass many times its size. Emphasizing the weight of the top form, it is comprised of bulky wooden objects that are attached to the panel and aligned to funnel down toward the pointed base. As if cheating gravity, the enormous mass remains in equilibrium and its composure is further suggested by the painting's ground of gestural white brushstrokes. It is in this ground of nothingness where Jolly is able to remain in the present and find harmony among the chaos.

While painting and drawing have been central to Jolly's practice for decades, sculpture has become increasingly significant to her ideas. Like her two-dimensional work, the materials used in her sculpture are often found and repurposed objects that cross her path. The found objects are often minimally reworked in respect for the physical qualities that drew Jolly to them in the first place. These sculptures allow Jolly to explore similar ideas that drive her paintings, but in a more



physical way. The complex quest for self-knowledge is confronted in *Building Self/No Self* (2016). The human-scale sculpture rests on the ground, comprised of multiple objects ranging from found lumber scraps and sticks to paper and a stretched canvas. All of these materials are meticulously adjoined to make one structure that, despite a slight lean and rudimentary construction methods, manages to find stability.

The influence of wabi-sabi in Jolly's sculptural work is most visible in a new work from 2018, titled *Kintsugi*. The piece gets its namesake from one of the most straight-forward, aesthetic examples of the philosophy's tenants: a technique called *kintsugi* that highlights the reconstruction of broken tea cups and other ceramics by filling its new cracks with gold leaf. In *kintsugi*, rather than discarding these objects for their imperfections, the beautiful golden lines are applied as a celebration of the object's history. In Jolly's version, an upright plank of wood acts as the base for multiple painted and raw wood scraps, given to Jolly by a student, all precisely arranged to fit together as if once broken and now reconfigured. Gold-plated screws hold each piece in place, commemorating the scraps' newfound function. On the opposite face, the base is left exposed to show two curvilinear cuts presumably etched into the wood by its former owner. In *kintsugi* fashion, Jolly highlights these cracks with gold leaf, finding beauty in what may have caused the wood to be discarded in the first place. In *Kintsugi*, as in nearly all of Jolly's sculpture,

Building Self/No Self, 2017
Wood, fabric, paper, latex paint, gesoo
66.5 x 19.25 x 16 in.



the material's imperfections and signs of wear are proudly enhanced, creating a visual vocabulary that is unmistakably her own.

There is a key Zen concept that states all things are either dissolving into or emerging from nothingness. It is within this nothingness, this empty void, that an infinite creative potential lies. The exhibition, *Big Empty Head*, occurs on the occasion of Jolly's retirement as

painting department head at the University of Texas at Arlington, where she has taught for twenty-three years. The exhibition does not look back in nostalgic retrospect but is decidedly a representation of where Jolly's artistic practice presently stands. Like the ideas that drive the paintings and sculptures, the exhibition is an exercise in situating oneself in the current moment. It encourages a still, clear mind that allows one to grab hold



of the smallest details that ultimately offer rewarding satisfaction. While it is tempting for us to posit what is next for Jolly as her role as an educator comes to an end, her work reminds us yet again that our presence in the present is far too valuable to evade.

Opposite: *Kintsugi*, 2018

Above: *Kintsugi*, 2018 (reverse)

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Arlington Museum of Art
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