

5.

BELOW

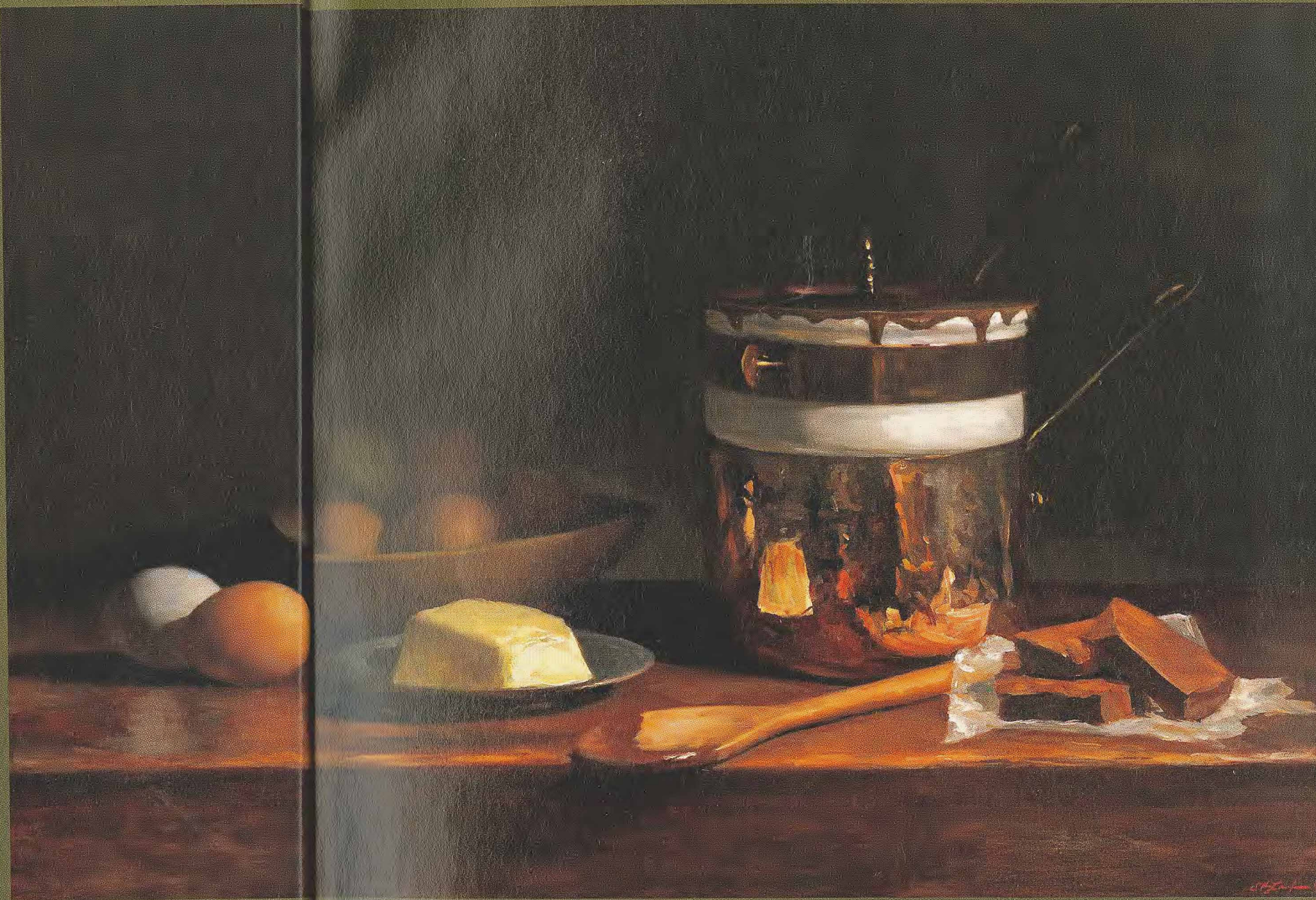
Le Petit Dejeuner

2005, oil on linen,
17 x 24. All artwork
this article private
collection unless
otherwise indicated.

RIGHT

**Mousse au
Chocolat**

2005, oil on linen,
20 x 32.



Sarah Lamb:

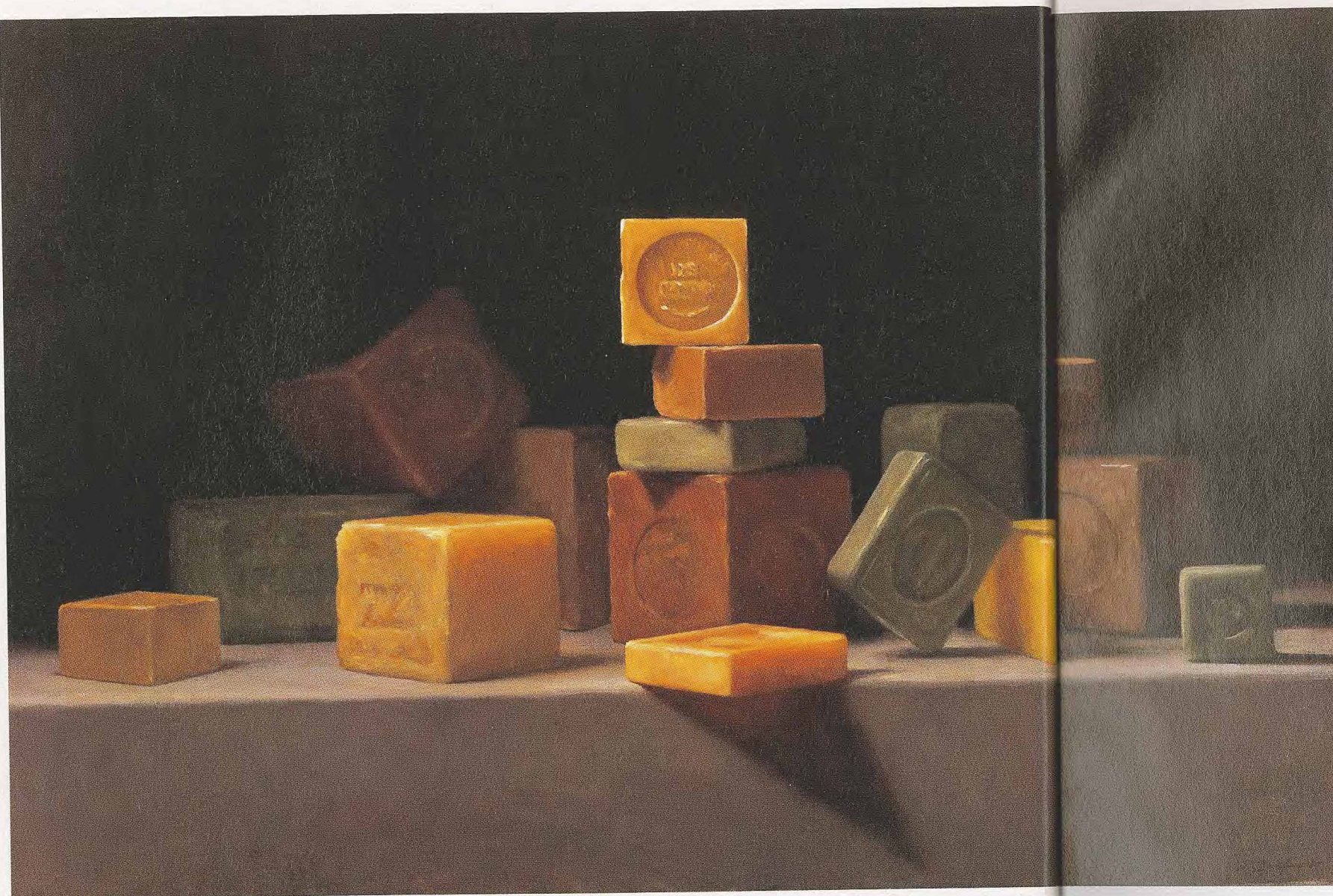
TEXTURE AND TASTE

BY JOHN A. PARKS

“I love to cook,” admits artist Sarah Lamb as she surveys her sumptuous painting *Mousse au Chocolat*, in which the ingredients for the famous dish are arranged atop a wooden table. A copper double boiler oozes melted chocolate from its top while a block of butter sits glistening in a saucer. Over to one side a pair of perfectly formed eggs huddle together, and in the center a wooden ladle is positioned so that its chocolate-coated end sits forward over the edge of the table as though to tempt us to take a little taste. The picture is completed by a stack of raw chocolate pieces atop their wrapping paper in the foreground and a bowl of eggs dropping into the

shadows in the background. This is indeed a cook’s most pleasant moment, when everything is gathered together in an orderly way and work can begin on the delightful business of creating something absolutely delicious.

Almost as scrumptious as a mouthful of chocolate mousse is the paint that the artist uses to depict these raw materials. Brushing with a generous yet sensitive touch, Lamb uses the pigment to suggest the weight and texture of butter, copper, and chocolate, as well as the fragile, brittle curves of the eggs and the wrinkled wrapping paper of the chocolate. “I enjoy getting the paint to look and feel like the object I’m painting,” says the artist, although she observes

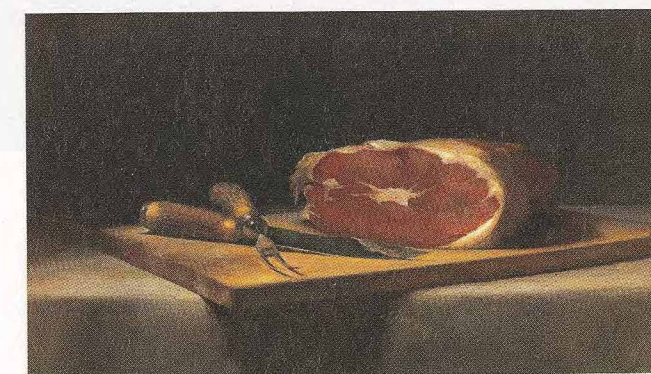


that paint far more readily takes on the quality of some objects than others. Even so, Lamb's ability to summon up the textures and densities of objects through lively manipulation of the paint has an enormous range. In *Le Petit Dejeuner* she suggests the brittle crust of a French loaf, with its fragile dusting of flour, against the soft and broken interior of the bread—not to mention the subtleties of the glass jar with its sticky contents. In *Savons de Provence* she conjures the waxy iridescence of blocks of soap, and in

Prosciutto she miraculously achieves the dense weight of a prosciutto ham, juxtaposed with the sharp darkness of a metal blade and the gnarled texture of antler handles.

Lamb has chosen to take on the very traditional format of still-life painting in which objects are laid out on a tabletop for our observation. In general she conforms to a convention of a single light source and a relatively dark background so that the objects are clearly silhouetted and rendered with consider-

able drama. The danger of such an enterprise is that it can easily appear overly conservative, formulaic, and derivative. To take on this well-known task immediately subjects the artist to comparisons with the great still-life painters of the past, from Chardin to Manet. Lamb's paintings succeed in avoiding the pitfalls because of their obvious delight in observation and their luscious yet lively handling of the paint. She maintains a sensitivity and immediacy of response throughout a work that keep everything alive, and we remain convinced of her passionate interest in the objects she is painting. Furthermore, within her chosen constraints, Lamb deftly plays all the games that still-life painters delight in. She enjoys thrusting the occasional object out toward the viewer, playfully violating the space between viewer and picture plane. She also toys with narrative possibilities, as in *Mussels* and *Le Petit Dejeuner*, where it appears that someone has already starting eating the food depicted. Lamb also delights in the compositional games



TOP LEFT
Savons de Provence
2005, oil on linen,
21 x 36.

TOP RIGHT
Mussels
2005, oil on linen,
23 x 34.

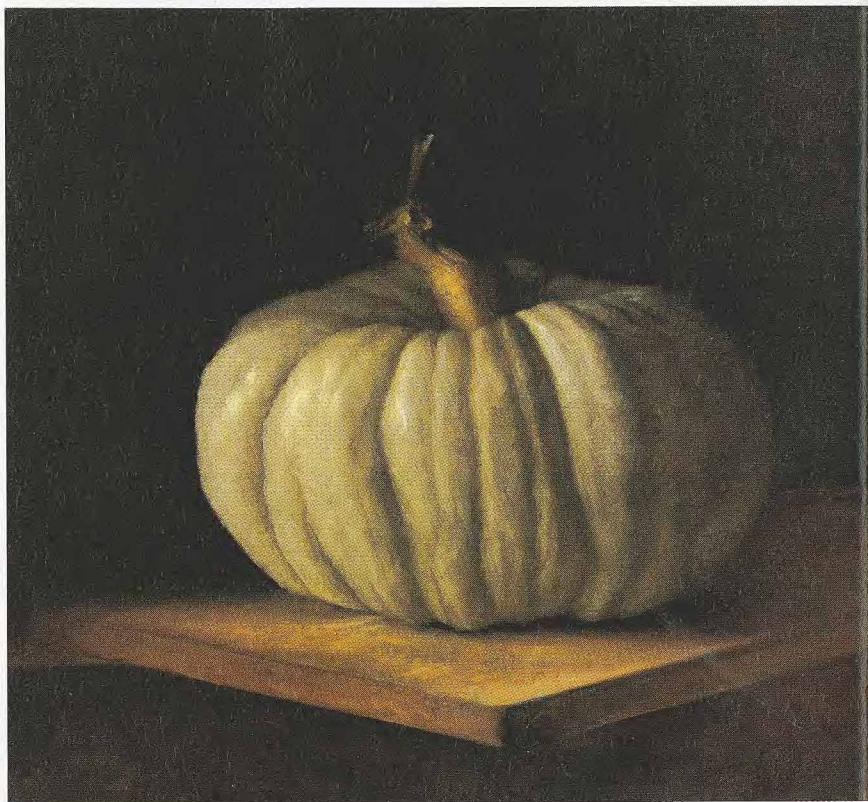
ABOVE
Prosciutto
2005, oil on linen,
19 x 33.

that such painting allows. "I spend a lot of time arranging and rearranging things," she says. "I've learned over the years that it is often more important to take things out than to put things in. I'm realizing that I can usually achieve more by not overloading the painting." In *Prosciutto*, for instance, she originally intended to include several more items to balance the composition—then she realized that the meat and cutlery were enough. The absence of other props confers a thoughtful dignity on the subject and an almost masculine weight to the painting. In general, Lamb's compositions favor a sense of clarity and evenness, with a careful balance of silhouettes and a gentle rhythm of placement. However, in several paintings, such as *Hubbard Squash* and *1930s Classic Yacht Model*, the artist has opted instead for an almost stark centrality, leaving her single subject in unchallenged mastery directly in the middle of the picture.

Lamb executes all her paintings on quadruple-primed linen. She tones her canvas a mid-gray, then she begins painting in a raw umber thinned with a little turpentine, sketching the composition. "It becomes a full monochrome painting," she says. "I not only establish the drawing but also wash in the shadows." As soon as this is finished, Lamb starts to work in color. "I don't wait for the underpainting to dry," she says, "although the umbers dry so quickly that it's really not very wet as a rule." The artist uses a variety of sable and synthetic sable brushes to lay on the paint. "I've never really worked with bristle brushes," she says. "I don't know why but they just don't seem to suit my touch." Somehow, even with soft brushes, Lamb manages to build rich passages of lush impasto. She generally works quickly. "I usually finish a painting in two to three days," she reports, a fact that is somewhat surprising given the richness and fullness of the images she produces. But no doubt it is this very swiftness that gives the paintings their lively warmth and ensures that there is never a sense that they are overworked.

The success of Lamb's painting hinges not only on her powerfully and clearly conceived compositions but also on her sure and sometimes uncanny judgment of color. She understands perfectly how to turn a form, as in the butter dish in *Le Petit Dejeuner*, where she carefully follows the cool grays of the shadows, the sudden orange warmth in the transition into the lights, and the cool highlights. Alternating color temperature is a key way of creating light on form. But Lamb matches this formal control with a sharp eye for the quality of local color. Consider how she combines a substantial variety of grays, oranges, and browns to achieve the copper pan in *Mussels* and gets the exact feel of the reds of the strawberry jam in *Le Petit Dejeuner*. In *Savons de Provence*, the ambers and greens

of the glowing blocks of soap are highly realistic. The ability to deploy pigment like this is, in part, a result of the artist's strong attachment to her subject matter. About *Savons de Provence*, the artist says, "I've collected soaps for years, so many that I almost don't know what to do with them. I spent a long time arranging them for this painting." The composition she arrived at is complex and almost architectural, tending to symmetry in its balance and its even spatial intervals. As in many of Lamb's paintings, an almost geometrical organization acts as a framework in which to display her powerful, sensual response to the subject matter.



BELOW

Hubbard Squash

2005, oil on linen, 22 x 26.
Collection the artist.

OPPOSITE PAGE

1930s Classic Yacht Model

2005, oil on linen, 48 x 48.

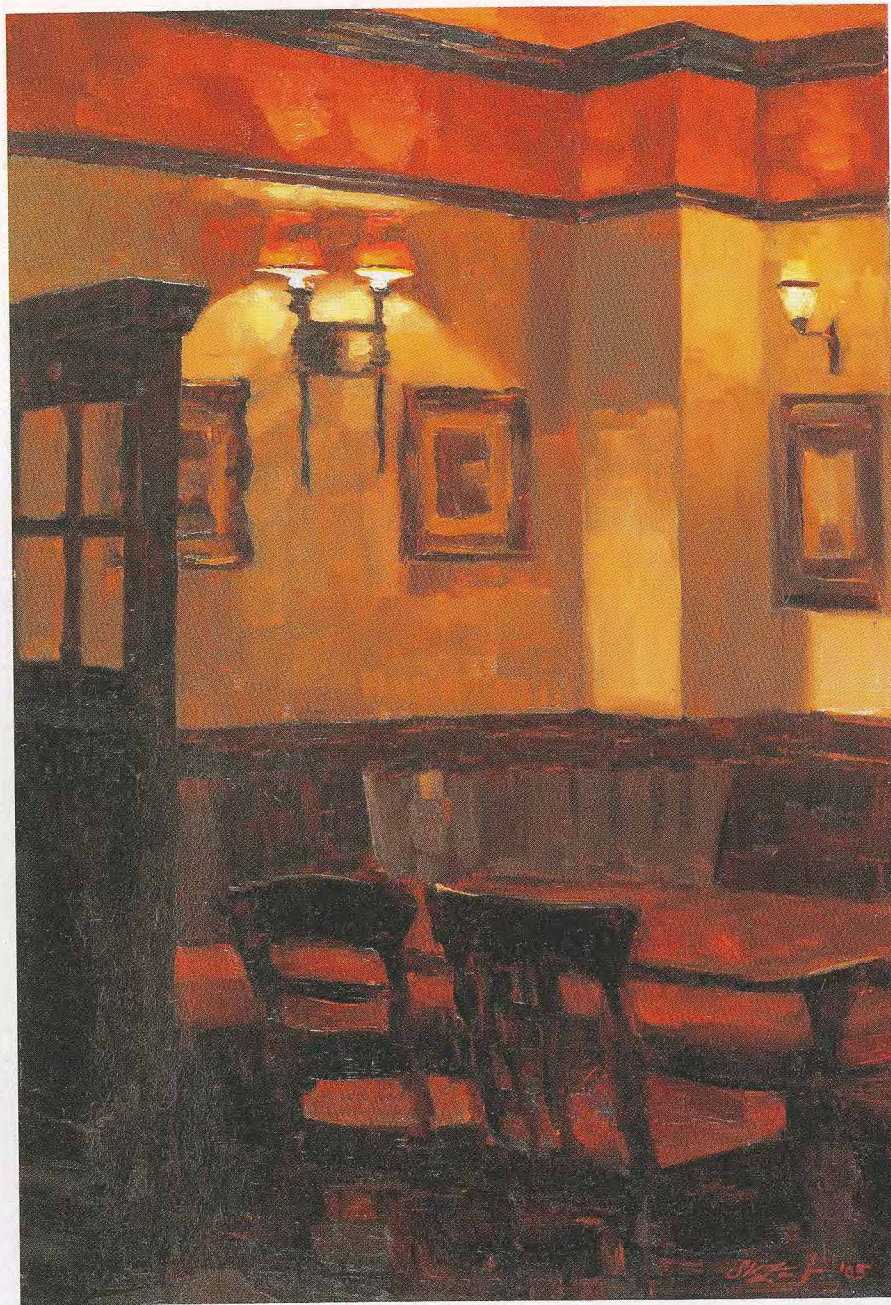


In one painting, *1930s Classic Yacht Model*, the artist used somewhat more artifice to secure her subject matter. "I saw some wonderful antique model yachts for sale," she recalls, "but they were far too expensive. Then I found a contemporary model that was much more affordable. I bought it and then 'antiqued' it—I stained the sails with tea and discolored the paintwork." This picture, one of the largest the artist has created, shows the model yacht in out-right profile sitting exactly in the middle of the painting on an old wooden chest. The very air around it seems to breathe with dust and age.

The most surprising painting in her recent exhibition at Spanierman Gallery, in New York City, was *Hubbard Squash*. In this piece, an enormous, curiously milky white squash sits boldly in the center of the canvas, announcing itself to the world in a most uncompromising fashion. "It's my favorite painting in this exhibition. I've still got her in the studio," says Lamb affectionately of the squash, "only now she's just beginning to turn orange." In this painting the centrality of the form, married with the symmetrical placement of the cutting board thrusting its corner out toward the viewer, puts us in an almost confrontational relationship

with the squash. It is certainly a magnificent creature, with its heavy folds and gnarled stalk, and it seems to have every right to be allowed a whole painting to itself.

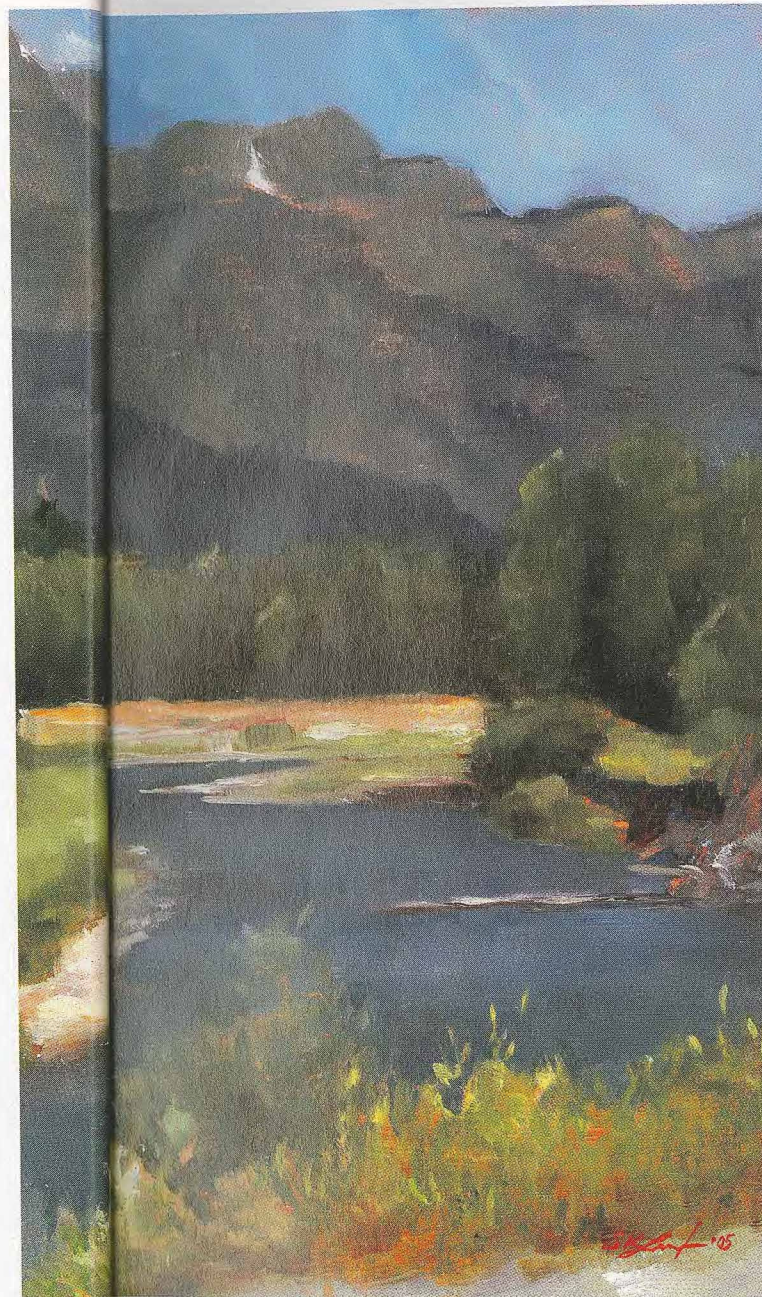
Although Lamb focuses on still-life paintings, she is also an accomplished plein air painter. "I simply love painting," she says, "and I enjoy painting outside. I finally bought a big umbrella, which makes a huge difference because I can shade the canvas from the sun. I don't use a French easel—I have a spindly landscape easel, and I attach the palette to it so that it is sloping up toward me." Lamb usually paints her landscapes on gessoed panels that are toned with an



LEFT
Milnes Pub,
Edinburgh,
Scotland
 2005, oil on panel,
 12½ x 8¾.

RIGHT
Snake River—
Late Afternoon
 2005, oil on panel,
 10 x 7¾.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Peaches
 2005, oil on linen,
 17 x 20.



earth-red ground. In *Snake River—Late Afternoon* she demonstrates what is possible in an hour or two of painting as she evokes a whole world of depth and scope with well-judged variations of greens and blues.

Meanwhile, in *Milnes Pub, Edinburgh, Scotland* the artist shows herself capable of rendering an interior with great skill. “This was painted while traveling with my husband,” she says. “The owners of the pub kindly let us set up in a corner, and we kept ordering drinks to ‘pay’ for our spot. Everyone seemed to enjoy what we were up to.” The painting shows Lamb’s sure feel for color, which allows her to render to perfection the yellowing walls and soft orange lights of a very typical pub interior with all its simple, much-used furniture and dark paneling. The restraint and

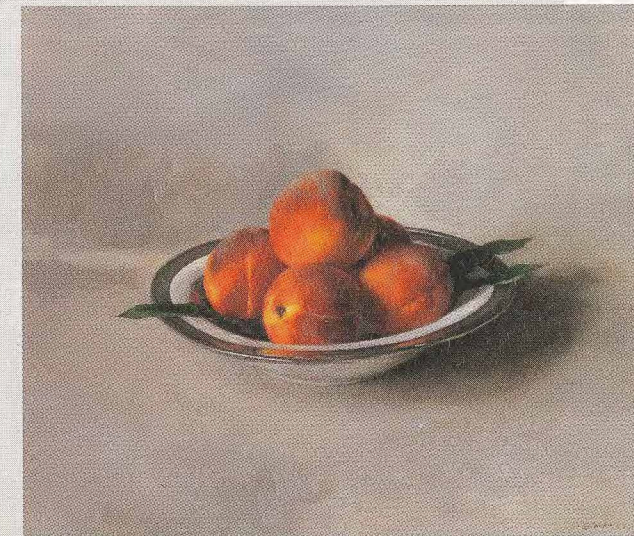
evenness of the painting suggest that the artist left most of her drinks untouched.

Whether she is painting landscapes or still lifes, Lamb brings to her work a robustly sensual grasp of the world, a vision that relishes the straightforward glories of food, a vase of fresh flowers, or a day out in the fresh air. The task may be traditional but the artist’s keenness of eye and joyful brush make the whole enterprise feel freshly alive, as she reminds us what the really wonderful things in life are.

Lamb was born in Petersburg, Virginia, and grew up in Georgia. She received a B.F.A. from Brenau Women’s College, in Gainesville, Georgia, and furthered her studies in Les Cerqueux, France, at L’Ecole Albert Defois, under Ted Seth Jacobs. In 1996 she moved to New York City to study

with Jacob Collins at his Water Street Atelier, in Brooklyn. She also attended various courses at the Art Students League of New York, in Manhattan. The artist credits Collins, and his passion for teaching a traditional approach to painting, for much of her success. Lamb has mounted many solo and group exhibitions around the country, including exhibitions at Spanierman Gallery, in New York City, and the John Pence Gallery, in San Francisco. The artist lives with her husband in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania.

John A. Parks is an artist who is represented by Allan Stone Gallery, in New York City. He is also a teacher at the School of Visual Arts, in New York City, and is a frequent contributor to American Artist, Drawing, Watercolor, and Workshop magazines.



Lamb’s Technique & Materials

The artist usually paints on quadruple-primed linen, although she will occasionally use Claessens single-primed linen “just for a change.” She begins by toning the canvas a neutral gray and then does an underpainting in raw umber in which she develops a fairly full rendition of her subject, washing in the shadows and wiping out the lights. Lamb begins work in color before the underpainting has dried, using mostly synthetic sable brushes along with some real sable. She doesn’t use a hand-held palette, preferring to set a large, flat palette at an angle close to the painting. The paint is applied in a lively fashion, using some dragging and overlaying. Occasionally, to achieve a specific effect—such as the whitish, furry nap on the fruit in *Peaches*—she will use a little glazing at the end of the process. For the most part, however, the illusion is achieved with good choices of color and tonal values, sophisticated drawing, and a strong feel for the paint itself.