

LandEscape meets

Craig Stover

It is my desire to make things that attract people and create that one thing in the room that people are drawn toward, question, and ponder.

For the better part of 30 years, I have been making artworks in which I set out to challenge both myself and the viewer. Over the years, I have shifted from making work that was thoroughly planned out in every detail to slowly morphing into a technique whereby I do not know what the final image will be. This desire to let go has enabled me see my own work more as others do: not with an understanding of what I've created but more with an eye towards seeing other hidden meanings and structures that I wasn't conscious of within the works. I'm fascinated by what springs out of my mind when I'm able to let it loose.

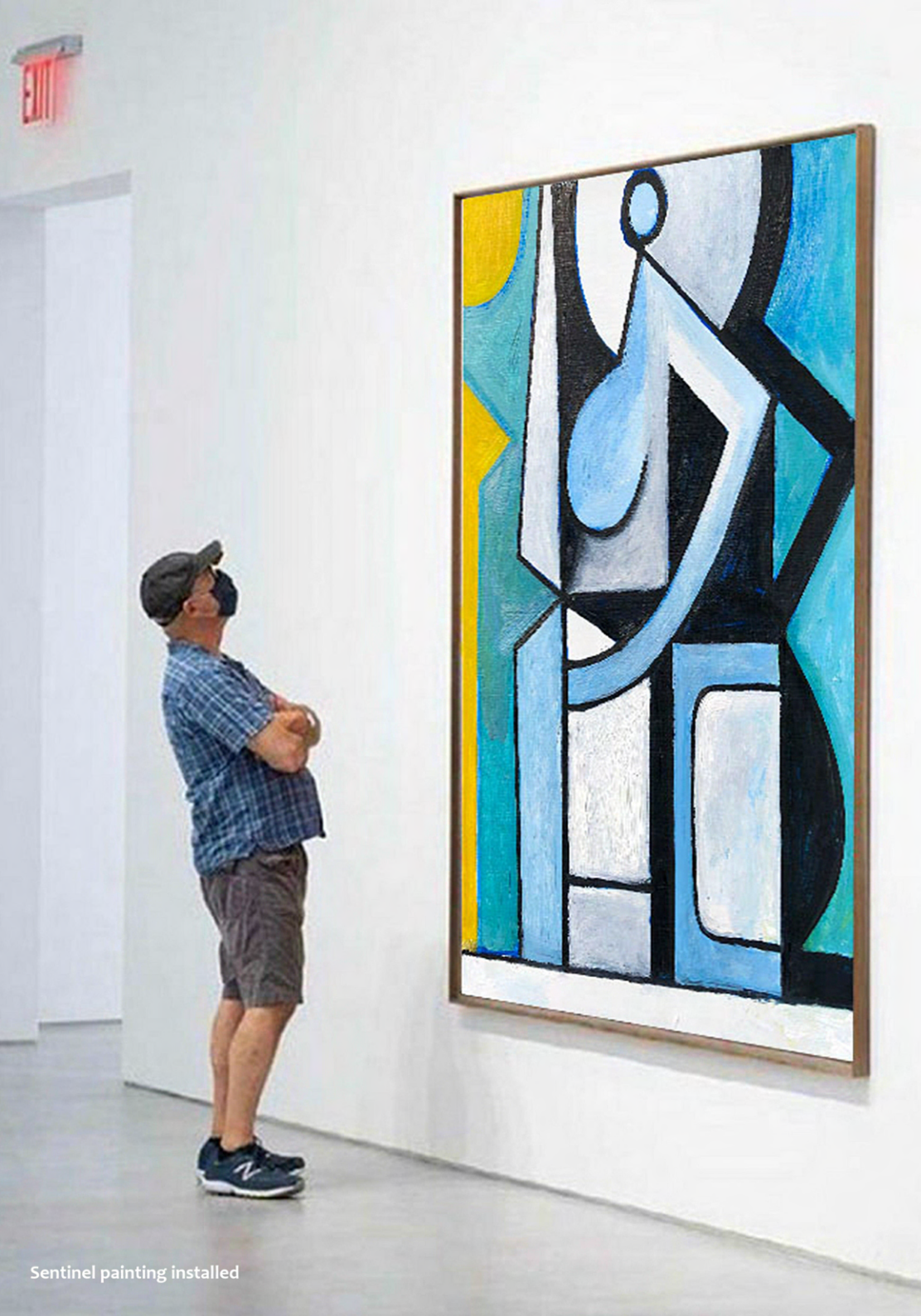
Each picture that I've made in my artistic career has always made references to the ones that came before it. This allows all of my works to not only talk to each other but for the entire body of work to be one big conversation when viewed as a whole. In my early years, these conversations were more thematic. I spoke of things like mythology, war, and nature. More recently, my works have stripped away these themes to focus more on the basics of life and its building blocks: color, line, shape, and imagination. In doing so, I've found a way to let my audience use their own imagination to look at and perceive my work in new ways that I might never have intended.

An interview by **Josh Ryder**, curator
and **Melissa C. Hilborn**, curator
landscape@europe.com

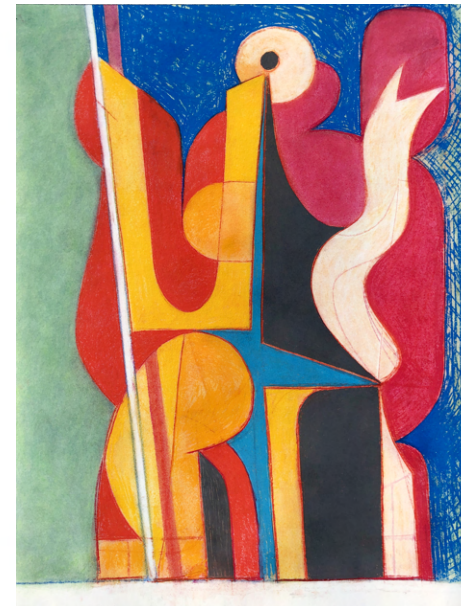
Hello Craig and welcome to LandEscape. Before starting to elaborate about your artistic production we would like to invite our readers to visit www.picturemaker.com to get a wide idea

about your artistic production, and we would start this interview with a couple of questions about your background. You have a solid formal training: you hold a B.F.A. from the University of the Arts, Philadelphia, PA and you later worked as studio assistant for artists Sam Maitin and Elizabeth Osbourne: how do these formative years influence your evolution as an artist? Moreover, how does your cultural substratum address the direction of





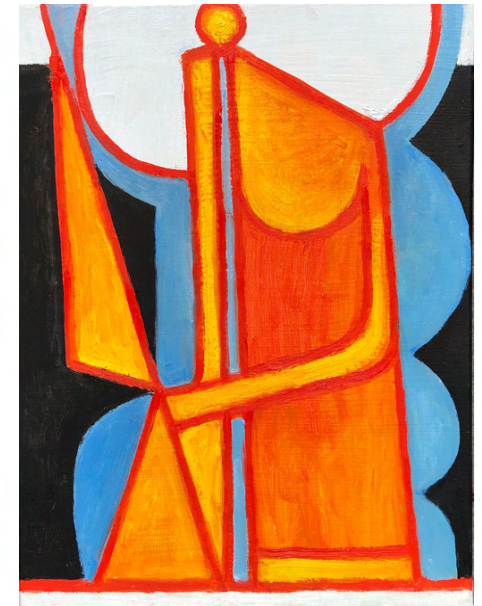
Sentinel painting installed



Sentinel, 2021

Pastel on paper

50" x 38"



Sentinel, 2022

Pastel on paper

20" x 16"

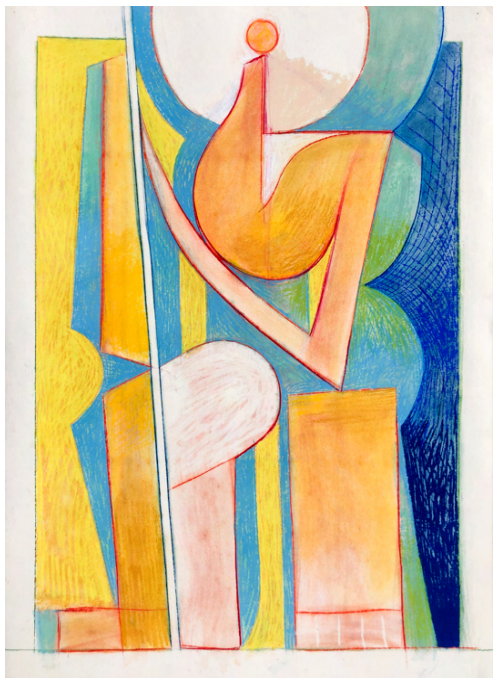
your current artistic research?

Craig Stover: Thank you for inviting me to talk to you about my work. I appreciate what it is you do for the arts and was thrilled at the chance to discuss my a work you and your audiences.

What I saw as a young artist working for both Sam and Elizabeth was a confirmation of their commitment to the arts and their fearless trust in pursuing their own creations using their own language and vision. I believe that their influence in my work is apparent, particularly with the experimentations in color and form. They were both such wonderful people who took the time to talk and listen to younger artists and I feel

fortunate to have worked with them both. I learned firsthand that two different struggles – how to be an artist and what to do as an artist – are not always linked. What I mean is that I found it's common for even great artists to struggle to find audiences if they don't also put time into the business of the arts.

As for cultural influences, my culture set me on the path that I'm on but I'm no longer trying to talk about it in my work. I learned early on that I don't need to chase this to put it into my work, rather, it occurs naturally. Because modern technology produces a saturation of culture at the touch of the button, I've come to a point where I need to deeply filter



Sentinel, 2022

Pastel on paper

50" x 38"

my culture to speak with a clear voice. I seek to make something unique, something universally appealing, and something that speaks more to the core of what it means to be alive.

Admittedly, I know that I differ from other artists because of the path that I have chosen. My path was formulated years ago with a few simple rules: Always follow my interests. Dive deep into my ideas even if they lead to dead ends. Invent a personal language to tell new stories. Be open to big changes and learn from them. These rules are meant to help me invent, create,



Sentinel, 2022

Pastel on paper

20" x 16"

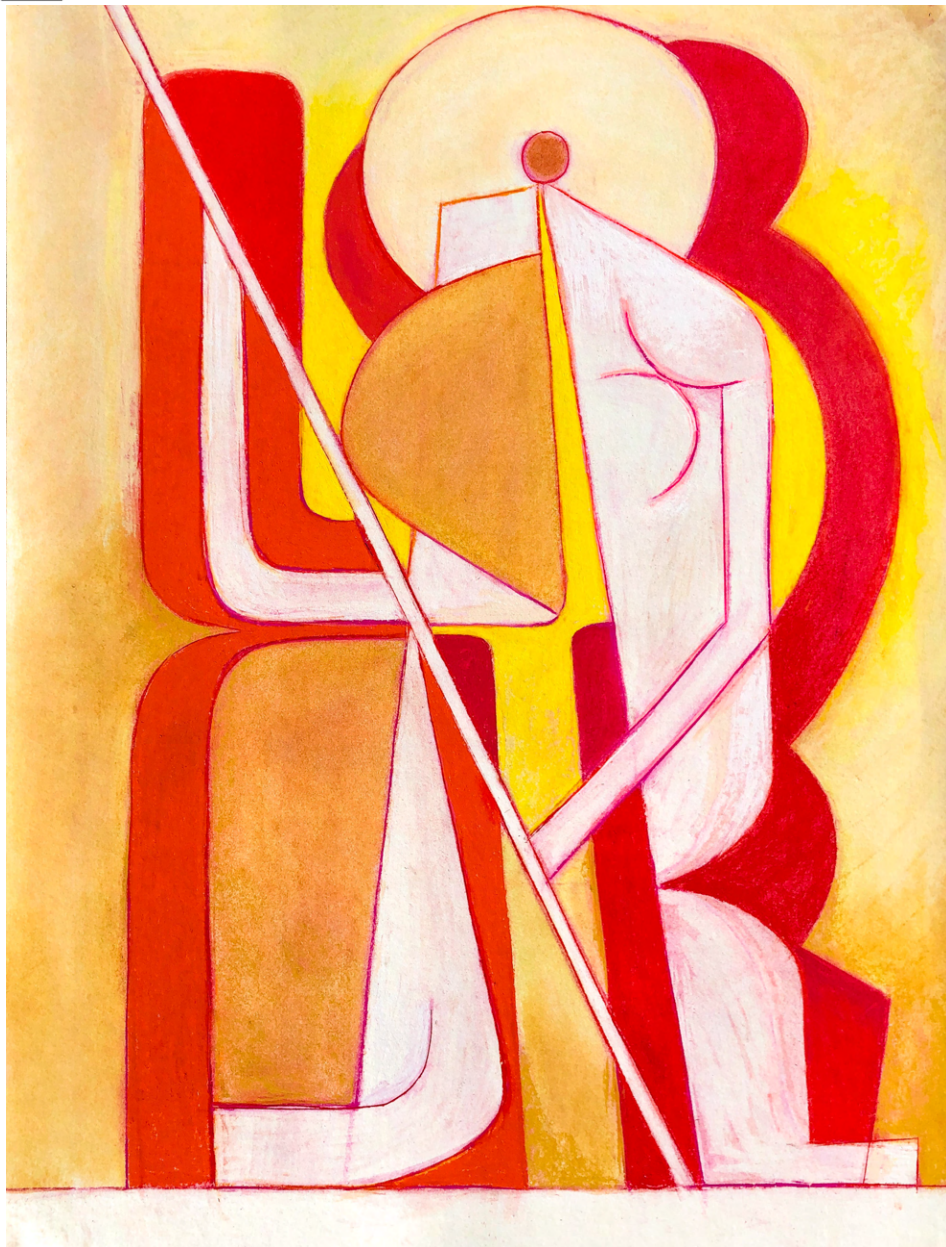
and discover the new from within myself.

For this special edition of *LandEspace* we have selected the *Sentinels* series — a stimulating body of works that our readers have already started to get to know in the introductory pages of this article — that has at once captured our attention for the way it highlights the connection between reality and abstraction through such essential style.

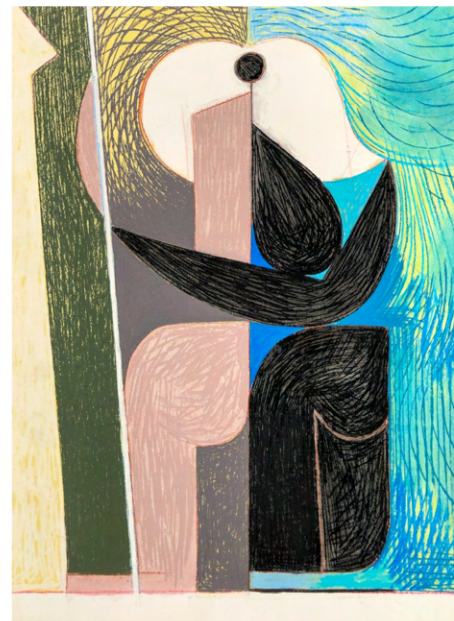
When walking our readers through the genesis of *Sentinels* series, would you tell us something



Sentinel painting installed



Sentinel, 2021, Pastel on paper, 50" x 38"



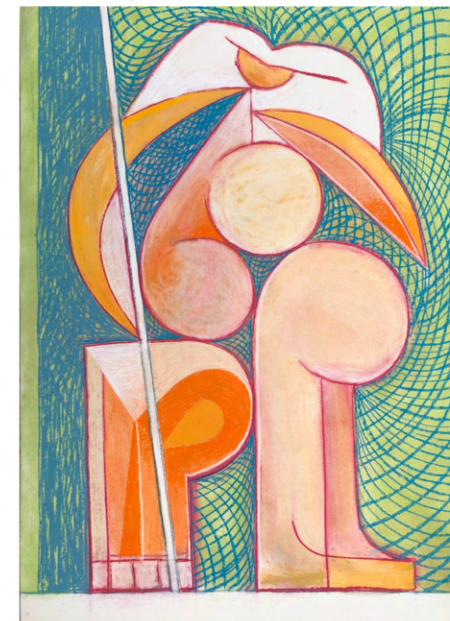
Sentinel, 2021

Pastel on paper

50" x 38"

about your usual setup and process?

Craig Stover: The Sentinels series started at the beginning of the pandemic. At the time I wanted to start something new and had a number of ideas I wanted to pursue. One idea was to make a warrior, standing at attention and holding a large spear. If I were to make one, it would be a soldier and if I made many, I could make an army. A modern art army. Because everyone was so vulnerable at the time, this concept was especially appealing to me. I felt that making something that could protect us all was an interesting idea. I loved hearing from a collector who has one of the Sentinels that he



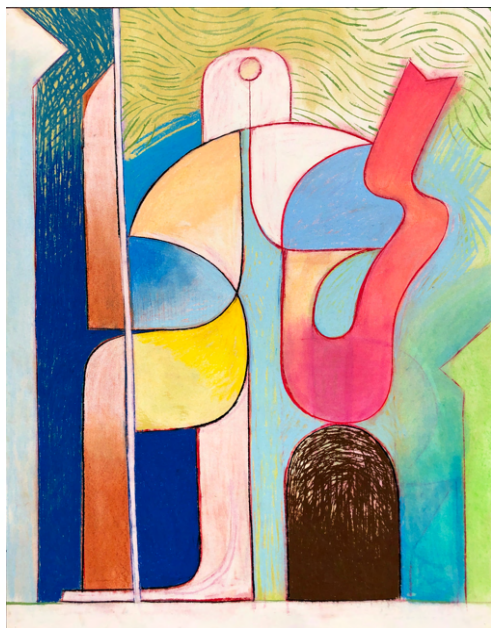
Sentinel, 2021

Pastel on paper

50" x 38"

called it a good luck charm for his house. That made me feel that I was on a good path. I made this series because I still have a deep desire to talk to my audiences and I wanted to say — Here's what I'm thinking. Here's a chunk of time that I dedicated to these ideas and that this picture is a reflection of me.

Because I wanted to make a good number of these warriors, it gave me a reason to approach these figures in a new way from my previous works. Instead of planning, I make these with immediate thought, just right before I put paint to canvas. It's what the abstract expressionists called psychic automatism (which really derived from surrealism).



Sentinel, 2022

Pastel on paper

50" x 38"

I don't use this as the reason for the picture but rather as a tool that I use to develop new ideas - even within a very structured environment. My goal was to make them all unique individuals while unifying them all, much like humankind.

After about a year of working on the series, I realized I had found a reason to work with shapes, color, and line beyond just pure abstraction. It may sound basic but to me it's akin to starting again from the beginning.

We have appreciated the sapient combination between essential — and at the same time refined — sense of geometry and such delicate and thoughtful nuances that marks out your



Sentinel, 2022

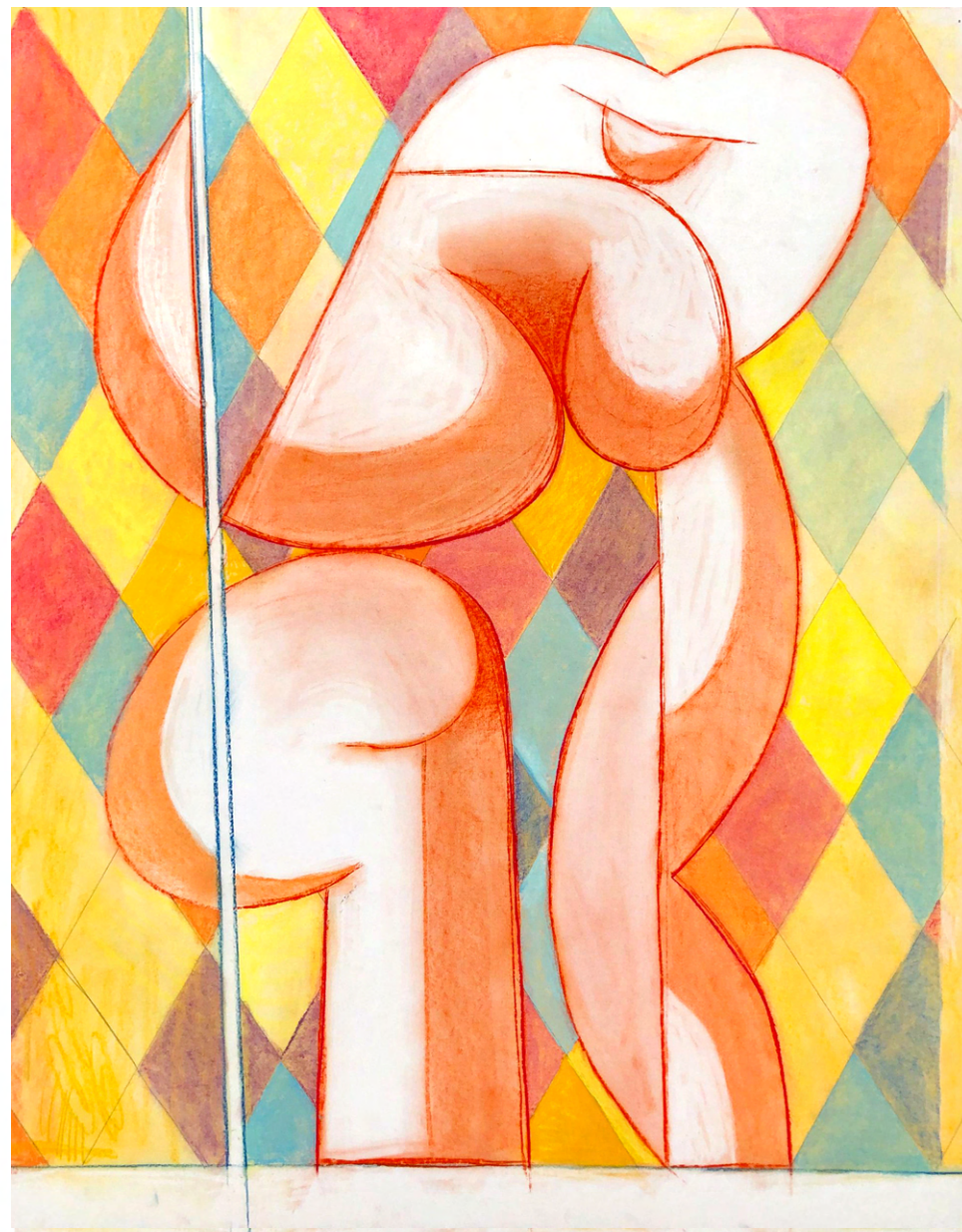
Pastel on paper

50" x 38"

artworks. How does your own psychological make-up determine the nuances of tones that you decide to include in your artworks?

Craig Stover: I think that the tone that you speak of, specifically that of colors, derive not so much from my psychology but rather from a deep understanding of what color can do. The things I often like to hide in my pictures like puzzles, codes, and double meanings can be implied using the tonalities of color. Color can imply more than just feelings. It can define space, shape, and volume.

A flash point in my artistic life came when I really began to understand both negative and implied



Sentinel, 2021, Pastel on paper, 50" x 38"



Aggressive Nature, 2003

Oil on canvas

8' x 15'6" (6 panels)

shape and what they could really do. Doing so opened the door to using those same techniques to hide in plain sight additional references and story lines within my work. The nuances of tone that you reference is most likely me using that same technique of adding additional information within the picture. I believe I've reached a point

where I no longer need to think of color as just an expression of mood or feeling since that just seems to happen automatically. I now think of color as a tool that's just as important as the line.

We appreciate the way your artistic production invites the spectatorship to question the basics

of life. In particular, your *Sentinels* series draws from the covid pandemic and these current troublesome times: how do your memories and your everyday life's experience fuel your artistic research?

Craig Stover: I can only hope that when audiences

learn that this series was drawn from the pandemic, that they are challenged to question what they are seeing. For me, it's not so much my memories and experiences that are a driver of my works but rather I know that their inclusion might help reflect the current zeitgeist, which I find interesting. I strive to make a more universal artwork rather than talking about personal memories. However, that doesn't mean that my experiences in life aren't very much reflected in the works. If everyday experiences are reflected in the works, I usually make a point to hide them because those experiences don't need to be up front. I consider them more like journal notes.

Over time I've seen the rise of art that reflects both our current social ills and victories. I realized that not only are there are many, many artists who are pursuing this in their works, but that I didn't want to be just another voice in the chorus. I found that what I really want to pursue are ideas that come from within. The success of pictures like *Imaginary Botanicals*, 2004 and *Minotaur*, 2012 helped reinforce those ideas and allowed me the room to explore invention to a greater extent. I believe that this path is the one that will help me most while I seek out the bigger answers.

As you have remarked in your artist's statement, the works from your *Sentinels* and *Imaginary Botanicals* series are specifically constructed with undefined parts so that the viewer is challenged to use their own imagination to see what they are looking at. We dare say that your artworks highlight contours of known reality in an unknown world, inviting the viewers to look inside of what appear to be seen, rather than its surface: how important is it for you to provide your audience with freedom to realize their own perception? More specifically, how important is it for you to trigger the viewers' imagination to address them to elaborate personal interpretations?

Craig Stover: The parts that sometimes appear undefined are actually invitations for the viewer

to see the works in different ways. In my work, a single line (of a figure) may be a shoulder, breast, elbow, or torso. Leaving the work open like this gives the viewer an opportunity to decipher the work themselves. People who see the line as a shoulder then have to make decisions about what the rest of the image may be and then in doing so, they imagine the remainder of the figure, whereas a person who sees that same line as a breast, then imagines a different figure. I enjoy knowing that the figure is different for different people and that given time, people can make what they see different depending on their own imagination.

I believe it would be a mistake for me to try to force an audience to see things in a very specific way to understand the work of art. I believe doing so has limitations that not only impede the works' clarity but also makes the work more about an artist's hubris more than their message. How people perceive reality varies greatly from one person to another and no one's understanding of their reality can dictate that of another.

I believe that if someone says they see something within a work that I made and that's not what I intentionally did, their vision and understanding of what they see can be just as right as my own. This freedom to accept wildly different audience perceptions in my work is actually been a big benefit in the evolution of my work. It has lead me to believe that the truest definition of a work of art is everyone's understanding of it combined.

You often work with large canvas, that — as the interesting *Aggressive Nature* — provide the viewers with such immersive visual experience: how do the dimensions of your canvases affect your workflow?

Craig Stover: The size of my pictures are usually very intentional. The smallest works force viewers to come up closely, usually one at a time, and I think of them as small conversations — sometimes even whispers. These are usually very

personal pictures with very specific meanings. Making larger works requires different muscles, which in turn provide different shapes, textures, and ideas. A larger picture interacts with its audiences differently. They can command peoples attention and require them to physically stand back to view them. Larger pictures help when telling a larger story but they can also be harder to control. The only real difference in the workflow in crafting larger pictures is that it often does force me to create studies beforehand.

To make something larger is to make a louder statement. My biggest works are often messages to the masses. When I made *Aggressive Nature* in 2003, I wanted to make a work that addressed the idea of war (this painting was a reactionary response to the Iraq/American war).

It is not just a peace painting but a picture that reflects on the nature of man that leads to war. To tell a specific narrative, I needed to make studies of a number of references within the picture, to have them work together correctly.

You are a versatile artist and your practice unveils the point of convergence between abstraction and figurative. Scottish painter Peter Doig once remarked that even most realistic paintings are derived more from within the head than from what's out there in front of us, how do you consider the relationship between reality and imagination, playing within your artistic production?

Craig Stover: The relationship between reality and imagination for me are two sides of the same coin. What I imagine I make real.

I would agree with Mr. Doig in his assessment about realistic paintings but I'd go one step further. Even the most realistic, most photogenic artworks are still just abstractions of reality made manifest by the artist's mind. For my own work, I have always been more



Imaginary Botanicals, 2004

Oil on canvas

52" x 60"

interested in what I can imagine rather than what I see. When I first became an artist I asked myself what I could do that would be different, that would be truly me, and what I could focus on for the entirety of my life that would keep me interested and learning, even if it meant going against all current trends and isms. I realized that the one path I could take that would guarantee

this would be to explore what's in my head. I find it more unique, interesting, and a better process for talking about what it means to be human — to be alive.

Over the years, you have shifted from making work that was thoroughly planned out in every detail to slowly morphing into a technique



Minotaur, 2012

Oil on canvas

58" x 60"

whereby you do not know what the final image will be. How do you consider the role of chance and randomness playing within your creative process? In particular, how important is intuition for you?

Craig Stover: Intuition is a great tool, but it's not the only one working at the time of creation. I try not to think of one technique as superior to another but just as tools for ways of expressing

myself depending on what it is I have to say. I may use intuition in parts of my pictures but there may be other parts that are completely planned out. It's the combination of both techniques that interests me.

I've seen a gradual rise in the use of chance and randomness in the arts over the last decade with a number of artists who only use these methods, often letting paint and its attributes be the entire reason for the artwork. Although it can yield interesting results, I find it quite boring if that's all that's being said. Personally, I am attracted to artworks that are challenging, don't easily reveal all they have to say, contain secrets, and give me more questions than answers.

My shift from planning to a more intuitive method slowly evolved over time but it never became one or another. It would not surprise me if I eventually shift back to fully planned images, if my ideas take me in that direction.

You are an established artist and your works have been exhibited in many occasions, including your solo *Sentinels* at the Alber Gallery in Philadelphia: how do you consider the nature of your relationship with your audience? As the move of Art from traditional gallery spaces, to street, and especially to online platforms — as *Instagram* — increases, how would in your opinion change the relationship with a globalised audience?

Craig Stover: My relationship with my audiences is imperative and allows my art to exist. They are paramount and yet I find them elusive and shifting. Audiences are living, breathing entities that are in constant flux and so the relationship to them is complex. As a painter, I'm not only thinking about these relationships, I'm also aware that my most receptive audiences may not yet even exist. As for the new addition of a global engagement with audiences through technology (of which I've happily gained new audiences particularly using Instagram – www.instagram.com/stover_studio), it very welcome. I think technology benefits all

artists (past and future). Giving art increased exposure, even if just a facsimile, is better than none. That being said, this global audience does not necessarily translate as real support. It simply means the art is out there being seen and enjoyed. As much as technology gives artists new ways of sharing their work to larger audiences, I believe that it's still a face to face conversation with the art and artist that is the most valuable.

We have really appreciated the multifaceted nature of your artistic research and before leaving this stimulating conversation we would like to thank you for chatting with us and for sharing your thoughts, Craig. What projects are you currently working on, and what are some of the ideas that you hope to explore in the future?

Craig Stover: It's been a pleasure to talk to you about my work. Thank you very much for this opportunity to speak to your audiences about my work.

I'm still working on the *Sentinels* series currently and hope to continue evolving them in both size and materials. Additionally, I continue to make sculptures that directly relate to these abstracted figures and would love to find a way to make them larger.

As for the future, that's always a tough question to ask because I'm never sure what will inspire me in the future. I'd love to be in a place where I could create the works I've had to delay and am still searching for the right partners who can help me realize my dreams. Regardless, I know that whatever I do, I'll always continue to paint.

An interview by **Josh Ryder**, curator
and **Melissa C. Hilborn**, curator
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