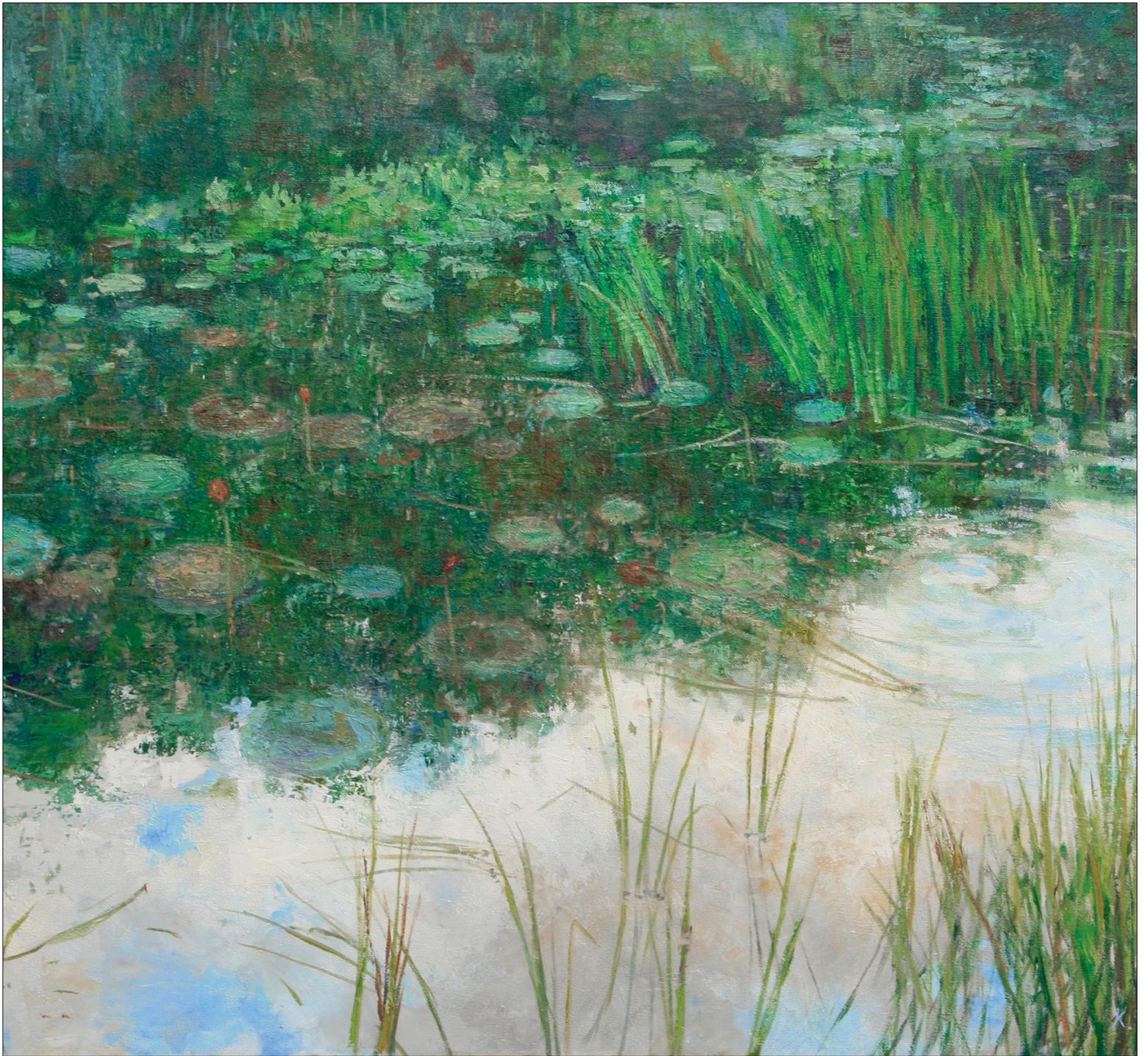


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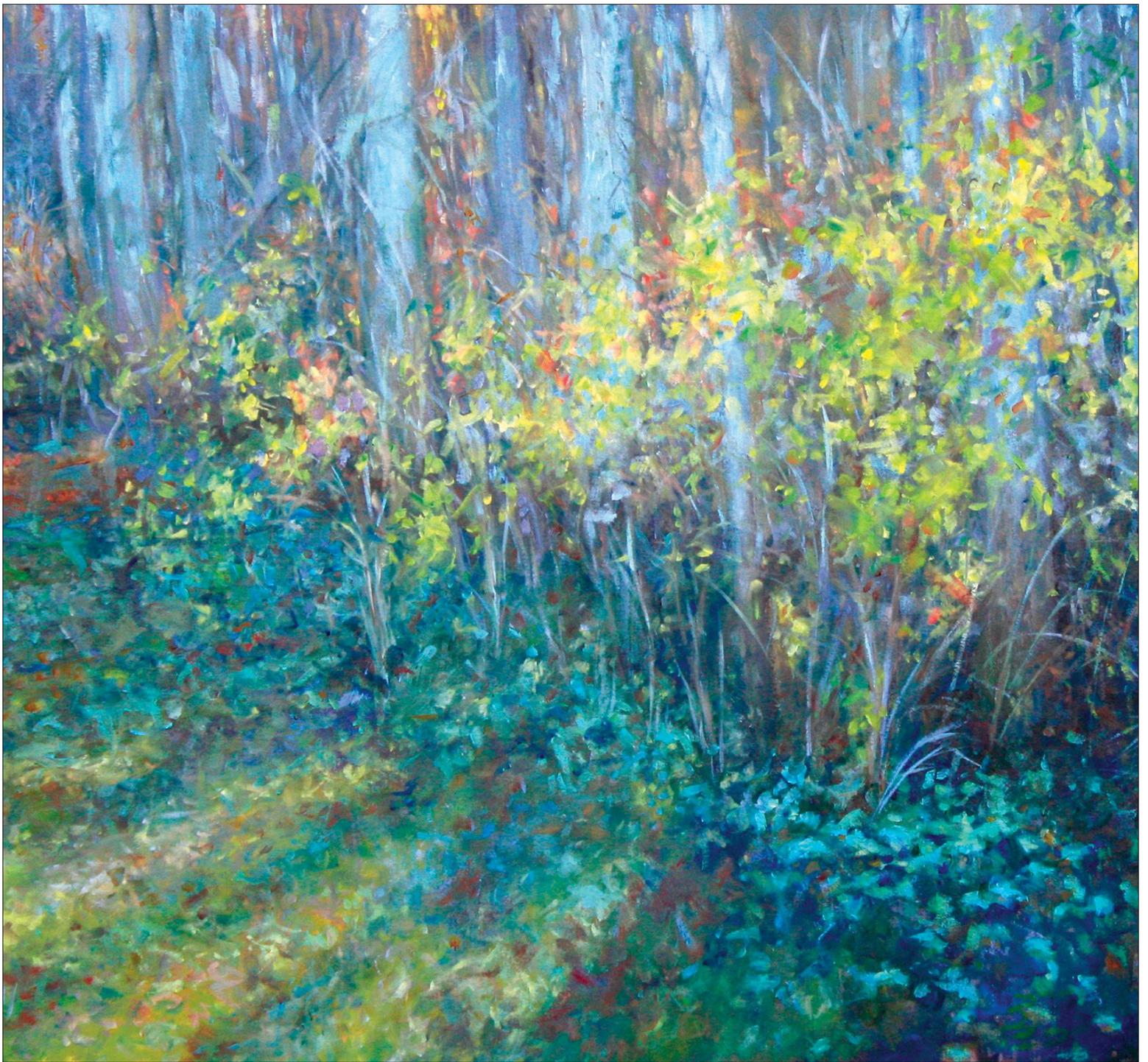




ARTIST KAREN ROLL

Taking a Different Path

FINDING BEAUTY IN UNLIKELY PLACES
BY CRAIG R. GRALLEY



Karen Roll

If you are an early riser and look hard enough, you might find Great Falls landscape artist Karen Roll wandering behind a Safeway, a Texaco station, or even a Walmart. You'd never know it, but around back of these forgotten places, the morning mist might be hugging the ground; maybe there's a small marsh where cattails are nodding gently in the cool breeze. Or perhaps the sun, now just above the horizon, is illuminating the few autumn leaves that remain on an ancient maple. Each may not be a tableau of great splendor. With only single elements, they're hardly complete landscapes. But for Karen, each scene holds a special beauty she can use to enrich her larger works. "No

one looks at these places," she says, "but I do."

Karen has often taken a different path. After graduating from business school at the University of Virginia, she decided to forsake corporate life and instead turned to art.

She first started painting in middle school, creating her "masterpieces" using Q-tips dipped in paint. Karen continued painting until the demands imposed by academic life at UVA caused her to take a hiatus.

Then about ten years ago, she rediscovered the palette and brush and never looked back. Today, Karen is firmly on the path of becoming a landscape artist.



“I try to create landscapes that let my audience wander around and discover different visual avenues.”

—Karen Roll

“Business school was wrong for me,” she says. “The case study approach was always so ambiguous. There were no right or wrong answers.”

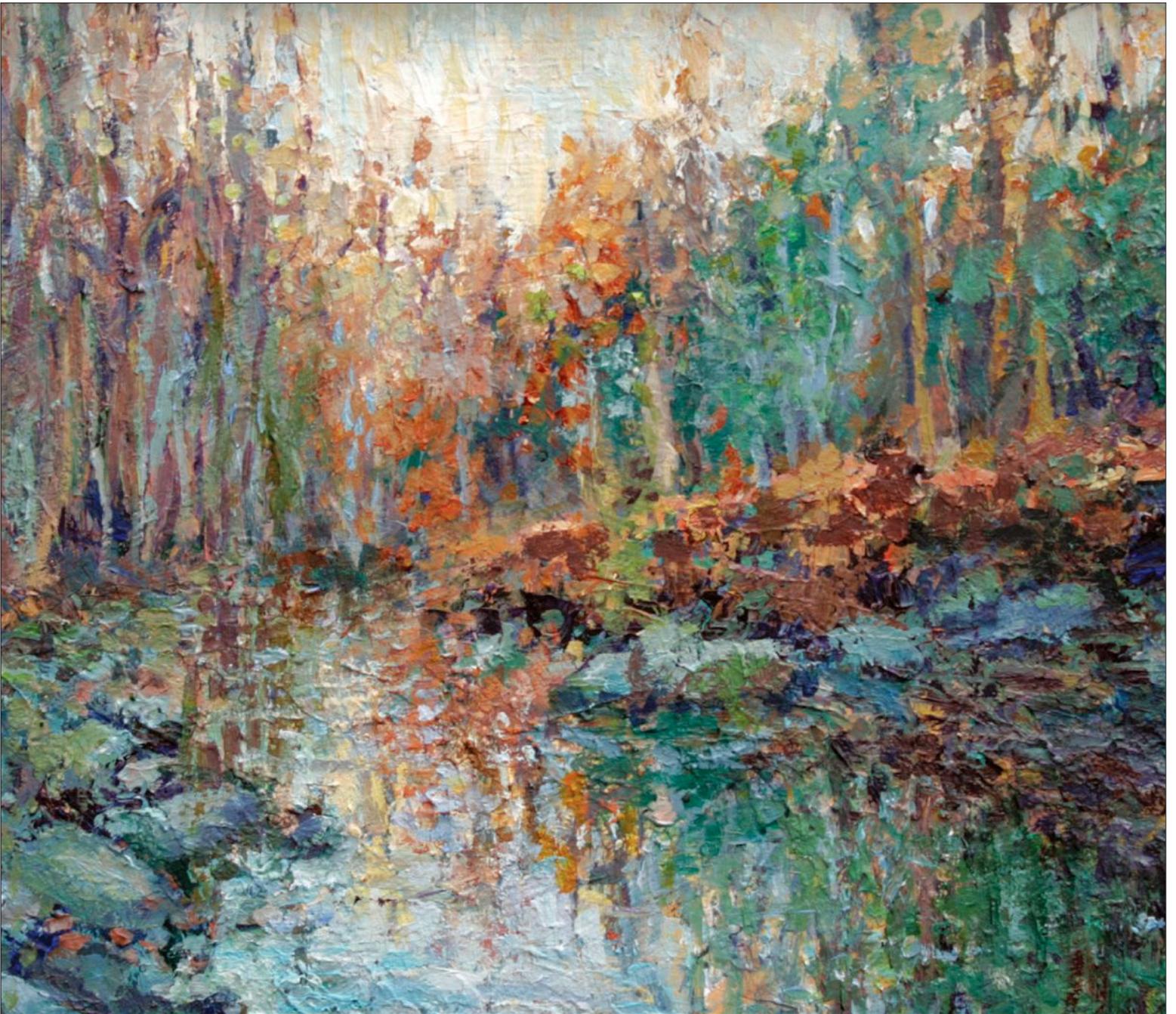
As Karen begins to tell me about the process of creating art, and the choices it requires: composition, color, texture, I have to bite my tongue. It seems to me there are parallels between the decisions Karen made in business school and those she now makes as an artist. Both require wrestling with ambiguity and the mental challenge of selecting the best path from a number of competing alternatives.

After a while, I tell Karen my theory: perhaps business school was good for her art. She smiles and says, “Maybe you have a point.” But it’s clear she enjoys the challenge of painting landscapes: blocking a scene on board or canvas and deciding

how best to capture the shadows of early morning, when illumination shifts from soft to bright, and later, when the sun turns soft again. Karen’s pictures show a fine grasp of the edges and hues of these special hours.

But it’s not always easy for Karen to find her way. Her greatest test comes in the middle of painting when her choices become permanent. “I try to create landscapes that let my audience wander around and discover different visual avenues,” Karen says. “Sometimes I have a tendency to over-think the problem of where I want people to walk within my paintings. I want them to wonder, what’s back there, beyond the frame?”

Like many artists, Karen also admits to having a hard time letting go, knowing when a painting is truly finished.



Page 30: "Lily Pond at Meadowlark Gardens," oil on canvas, 24" x 30"

Page 31: "November Light," oil on paper, 18" x 24"

Above: "Scott's Run," acrylic on board, 8" x 10"

Opposite: "Forest in Late Spring," oil on board, 30" x 40"

As I walk through Karen's landscapes, I am impressed with how she helps to navigate my experience by creating captivating artistic pathways. "Lily Pond at Meadowlark Gardens," is one of my favorites. It's emblematic of the peaceful, meditative scene that Karen seeks to create. There's an introspective quality to the piece that is both absorbing and relaxing. And yes, I wonder what scene lives beyond the frame. "November Light" and "Forest in Late Spring," among others, reflect Karen's intent to capture the boundary between light and dark during these distinct times of the day and different seasons of the year.

We're about to wrap up the interview. It's gone on for close to two hours, but there's another painting in her portfolio that catches my eye. This landscape is different from the others: less defined,

more abstract. It's a deconstructed woodland scene in autumn with a brook in the foreground that recedes into a forest. Karen used a palette knife, layering paint with rich earth tones, to create a landscape she calls "Scott's Run."

The painting is a departure for Karen, who seems to be pushing away from the clarity and precision of the brush for a less tangible, more conceptual approach. Maybe this tension between certainty and abstraction will be a continuing theme of Karen's painting. Perhaps, too, it signals greater comfort with ambiguity. But for now, what we can say is that Karen is consistent. She's taken a different path. é

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