

ANNALECTA 23

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

POETRY

JACKIE BROWN	<i>Dream of Joey by the Pool</i>	65
MARIA M. HUMMEL	<i>Unfinished Stories from Saigon Cafe</i>	76
ALISSA JONES	<i>Nocturne</i>	6
MICHAEL K. JONES	<i>It Is Time to Go</i>	31
TOBIAS PETERSON	<i>A Burial</i>	1
KAREN L. SHAW	<i>Mamas</i>	43
BRIGID SPACKMAN	<i>October Lunch</i>	30
☰ FRANK VINCENT	<i>Cruise Park, August</i>	8
	<i>My Lover Robert</i>	58

SHORT STORY

KATHERINE CHARIOTT	<i>Giving It Up</i>	2
SETH SCHAFER	<i>Planes</i>	60
☰ AMY SICKELS	<i>Smoking Kills</i>	66
BLAISE P. ZEREGA	<i>Prairie Dogs</i>	36

DRAMA

LAURA STORM	<i>Dead Letters</i>	78
CHRISTIAN KEEFER	<i>The End of the Past</i>	9

NONFICTION

JOSIE SEELIGSON	<i>Slick Art and Business</i>	45
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ART

BEJAT A. DECKER	<i>The Square</i>	32
	<i>Sunday Afternoon</i>	75
JACKIE BROWN	<i>184 Steps Down</i>	35
☰ JEFF CLARKE	<i>Untitled</i>	72
	<i>Untitled</i>	COVER

☰ FEATURED CONTRIBUTOR

SLICK ART AND BUSINESS

JOSIE SEELIGSON

MEET RON SLICK.

48-YEAR-OLD CARPENTER, JUNK COLLECTOR, SALESMAN, FIELD WORKER, LOVER, ARTIST AND PHILOSOPHER, THOUGH NOT NECESSARILY IN THAT ORDER.

Life is open territory and many of us have neither map nor compass, but find our ways by a combination of crawling, skipping, flying, and groping. Some of us have steady guides, some of us follow butterflies. Those who follow butterflies may accidentally follow hornets every now and then. Some are spiders, creating intricate designs that can attract the appreciating or naïve. Some follow bees, looking for pollen to transform to honey. Most lucrative honey holes are not accidental. Bee hives have a queen and lots of drones. Drones work and work, hoping that one day they will have a huge supply of honey. Once recruited as a drone and desiring a personal honey hole, does one ever seek pollen, or take a day off to create an intricate web, or just fly around for fun?

1992 - 1993

Ron's sponsors, Ben and Julie White, are of the breed of financial consultants who constantly sniff out profitable projects. In addition to the Ron Project, they have invested in a wine vineyard, Hill Country property and coastal real estate renovation and rental. They discovered Ron's work while shopping in a gallery to find decorations for a renovated beach house. Ron's bold primary colors and casual country themes appealed to them. "This guy is brilliant!" Ben says to me later, his eyes huge behind his glasses. He points to the overlapping dynamics of a country-dancing painting, where a blur of heads, hats, arms and bodies all synchronize, even on close inspection. After buying one painting, they kept seeing others, and buying more, until they finally decided they wanted to meet the artist. When they met him, a symbiotic relationship formed. Ron was nearly destitute, and couldn't afford to paint full time. They gave him an allowance and marketed his work, taking a percentage of the sales and hoping he would eventually bring in a mother lode. Betting on the come, they bought their share of it early.

Divorced in 1988, Ron moved from Brownsville to Buda because he says, "I needed to get away from the Valley. You know how divorces are, 'Here honey, you take the furniture.' I just wanted to get out. So I went up to Austin, couldn't find a place there, and found a place in Buda." There Ron befriended a painter, and started painting as a hobby, with no art lessons anywhere in his past. He used his experiences as a field worker for inspiration. "I had worked as a field man, in charge of the crew. I'd put them out in the field, show 'em how to pick. And I did that for a number of years, I really got to know them well and respect them well," Ron says. Paintings of field workers eventually became his most popular pieces.

His first experimental paintings were of cows in a pasture, but he painted them onto plaster that he had smeared across a large piece of wood. When he tried to sell them on consignment at a gallery, the gallery owner told him he shouldn't paint that way, that nobody painted on plaster or wanted to buy anything that heavy. Disappointed but not discouraged, Ron continued to paint, now on canvas, and a few galleries agreed to hang his new work to sell on consignment. By the time he met Ben and Julie, he was plugging along, occasionally selling a painting and living a meager but happy life in a one-room school-house turned farmhouse outside Kyle.

AUGUST, 1993

Ben and Julie's son, Rick, is a college friend of mine. One night, Rick invited two other friends and me to dinner at their Boerne home. As their miniature Rat Terrier "Pinto" ("who cries real human tears, when he gets lost," Ben said) typed on the kitchen floor with his claws and turned nervous circles, the rest of us drank wine and Julie wrapped apples in circular ("fat-free!") pieces of pie-dough. Ron's paintings hang on many of their walls and they told us his story. Ben pulled out slides of Ron's other paintings and tried to coax Rick into helping get Ron into galleries out of state. Rick showed little interest. However, I was immediately drawn to his work, and to the story of this man who could paint so well without any training. Before I knew it, I was hired as Ron's free-lance biographer and marketer.

So one day, the Whites picked me up from work and we drove through the countryside to Ron's farmhouse outside of Kyle, Texas for a meeting. Near his house are rolling

green and black fields edged with trees. August is cotton-picking season, and the crops grew tall and wore white dots at their tips. Sun-tanned field workers in bright colors and wide hats decorated the fields like lights on a Christmas tree. It was like driving into one of Ron's paintings.

Ron's house is a renovated one-room schoolhouse surrounded by fields. Partitions divide the house into five rooms: a bedroom, a living area, a kitchen, a bathroom and an extra room that he used as a studio. Every wall, ceiling and floor surface was constructed of flat wooden planks, painted lime green. A covered porch wraps from the side to the back of the house, filled with trinkets and odd knickknacks.

In the middle of his backyard sits a bathtub. Ron says he heats water on the stove inside and carries it out here to bathe by himself at night. A wood-framed wire fence encompasses the backyard but permits full views of the neighboring cotton fields. One fence's top wooden shelf spreads a line of bottles: antique genie bottles, mason jars, old wine jugs. "I call it sky-line, because it looks like a sky-line," Ron explains. Colored water fills each bottle, dyed with food coloring in shades of Jello: red, yellow, orange, purple, green, blue. Ron says they are prettiest at sunrise or sunset, when the sunlight angles through the basic colors and alters them to amber, sap, crimson and violet. Ron's whimsies play their characters on the bathtub stage within, to where the fence-bottle spotlights carry distorted colors and shapes of the field behind them. The bottles act as a kaleidoscope through which the artist looked at his subjects. Wind chimes played in an orchestra, conducted by the wind, which had a personal life with the golden grass of the surrounding fields. Birds, rocks, marbles, statues, potted plants, collected signs, antiques, cats, dogs, clouds, stars, cotton rows, trees loll about as the audience. Occasional drivers down Ron's farm road probably think nothing of the backyard bathtub. They either live nearby, have a purpose there, or are lost.

The early evening was hot. We sat in rusty metal chairs and faded wooden swings on Ron's rickety wooden porch and had a meeting. Ben was in a dark suit and Julie in the female banker equivalent. Ron attended this meeting about him in cutoffs, a t-shirt and bare feet. Ron sat on the porch floor, the light evening breeze swirling around his legs. I remember looking at his bare feet, at his big toe, decorated with maverick hairs and a long thick nail, read the history of the wooden porch in its planks' ridges, while the Whites read legal documents aloud. How natural, in this element, to see beautiful or harsh reality, chew it within the mind, and transpose it with paint onto canvas as a visual for others who may or may not have access to the scenery. Ron didn't have to wear stifling work shoes or stockings, or ride an elevator crammed with stuffed suits staring at the elevator door. He just hung out here like he was doing now, surrounded by his knickknacks, countryside, animals and paintings. While the three of us sat upright in the chairs, Ron alternated sitting positions on the floor. He leaned back against the rail post and shot marbles through the planks' mazes; he sat on top of the rail, his bare feet dangling and his eyes squinting as he looked up at birds in the sky; he sat on the floor with his legs dangling over the porch's side above the grass, his back to our conversation and his eyes engaged with colors and shapes of the fields next door. From time to time, he picked up pieces of wood and rocks around the porch and announced what they looked like. "Hey, hey—it's a bird!" he said, and his arm flapped up and down to help the piece of wood simulate bird-like motions.

SPRING, 1994

The painter puts a great deal more into his experience of the subject than a man who merely looks at it; he puts into it, in addition, the whole consciously performed activity of painting it; what he gets out of it, therefore, is proportionately more. And this increment is an essential part of what he 'externalizes' or 'records' in his picture: he records there not the experience of looking at the subject without painting it, but the far richer and in some ways very different experience of looking at it and painting it together.

—R.G. Collingwood

Cartoon toasters flapped wings across the computer screen as I held the phone and heard Julie's voice say, "It just doesn't sound very nice to include the part about him bathing in his backyard bathtub...you also need to remove..." I looked at the draft of the bio I had written for Ron, and thought that the mentality that made those paintings possible bathed outside in that bathtub. The setting belonged to him; he had focused on it more than anyone else, it had brushed inspiration into his mind, and he had recreated it on canvas.

Ron's first big show, complete with hundreds of invitations to Those Who Buy Art and Those Who Might Buy Art, was about to be exhibited in a San Antonio gallery. Over the last few months, Ron and I spoke on the phone several times. He always happily said, "Oh, yeah, hi..." as if he had all day to talk if you wanted to. He chatted with the fluidity of a child, drifting from subject to subject, a mixture of enthusiasm and obedience, answering each question with ease and candor.

Ron's show was a huge success. Elite and novice art collectors emerged with fat wallets, and by the end of the evening, red "sold" dots stuck onto almost all the pine-framed oil paintings. Approximately twenty-five paintings hung, priced from \$350 to \$7000, most around \$1500. The gallery and the Whites took a cut; I never asked what Ron's take-home pay after cuts and costs was, but oil paints, brushes, stretched canvas on plywood, and framing are not cheap to begin with. Still, Ron was flabbergasted. Dressed casually in jeans and a jacket, he seemed uncomfortable amidst the crowd of admirers, but chatted with those he knew. Whatever the take-home pay was, Ron was impressed.

SUMMER, 1994

Ron stood silhouetted in sunlight streaming through his farmhouse's studio window as Peter Pan's star dust floated down around him through the ray. His easel looked splatter-painted, and bright canvases lay about the open room, as if casually tossed. He was explaining the difference in the speed with which he could paint various calibers of paintings. He picked up one leaning against a wall and declared he could paint three like this in the time it took to paint one like that, pointing to the floor. If he could paint them faster, he could sell them faster, and if he could sell them faster, he could make more money.

We leaned over to examine the large painting resting on the floor. It was a field scene with elaborate detail in the haystacks, individual vegetables in planted rows, baskets brimming with the reaped produce, and figures. Interested, I asked Ron what each vegetable was in the different rows, where and how it grew in real life and what tech-

niques he employed to paint it. He answered excitedly, at length. After a while of such discussion, it occurred to me that, enraptured by this bigger and better one, we hadn't even glanced back towards the "quicker" paintings. I pointed this out to him, and asked him if he really thought he could sell the new ones for the same prices as before. But behind us, Ben was saying that he and Julie had taken one of Price's country dancing paintings, and made 500 poster copies from it to sell.

Ron had acquired a girlfriend, Grazyna, an expatriate Polish woman living in Chicago. They met at a craft fair where Ron was selling fireplace tools to make extra cash, and Grazyna was selling leather goods. Ron was talking marriage. Incidentally, Ron had started painting water-color nudes, which he had hanging in his living room. I liked them, although their style looked suspiciously like Matisse imitations. I pointed at one that I liked best in the group. Without missing a beat, Price plucked the painting off the wall and thrust it towards me, saying, "Keep it, it's yours." He said that he wanted to show his appreciation for my help. Julie said quietly that he had been talking about wanting to give me one of his paintings.

Some time later, a friend of mine wanted to commission Ron to paint a "Celebration of Life" to give to his first-born niece. I asked Ron if he could paint it, and he said he didn't know if he could paint on command. A few weeks later he presented a watercolor to me, again insisting on no charge. It was a rainbow of nudes skipping and holding hands.

Ron revealed later that he has a mentor. He said, "I met a wonderful man, the kind of person you meet once in a lifetime. He was an older man when I met him. He was really a patriarch of all the arty-hippie type people in Buda. He would help everybody. He'd give us free rent if we needed it. He was just a wonderful man. He was the patriarch of probably eight people. I used to think, 'Golly, he's really giving me special treatment.' Come to find out, he was treating everybody that way. If you got down on rent, he said, 'Forget it.' If you needed supplies, he'd get them for you. Money—he didn't give a shit about. And it wasn't that he had a lot, either, but he was just that kind of person. And he was an intellectual to boot. I mean, an intellectual! And you don't meet intellectuals nowadays. I don't. I don't know of one intellectual right now. But he was. He could talk about anything, and he could talk to anybody. He would go into the greasy spoon in Buda, and he would sit down and be able to drink coffee with anybody. I mean anybody. If you were the mechanic, or the lawn man, or if you were the president of the bank. He could just entertain, and talk, and make you feel like you were important. It was a sad thing to see him go. He died of cancer. He was a hell of a man," Ron said. He cleared his throat, and looked around and sipped his tea, and continued.

"He read everything. All the time. He was very knowledgeable. And he collected junk. Wouldn't throw anything away. He was a big junk/antique collector. But mainly junk. He was a geologist, but when I met him, he was retired and just doing the junk business. That kept him going. He just collected junk. He influenced me in my attachment for junk. Yeah, he did for certain. I used to work for him, too, collecting junk. I went to auctions with him, helped him load up, did a lot of carpentry work for him. When I got to where I needed money or something, he'd always get me a job. A lot of times it was just going with him to collect junk."

Pointing at a sign on his front porch, Ron added, "He gave me this. Just to show you how he was—I was helping him go through a bunch of junk and he had this sign. I said, 'Man, that's a neat sign!' and he said, 'Yeah, I'm really proud of it,' because it has that

Coca-Cola sign bleeding through, see? And I told him I really liked it, and he just gave it to me. He's just a generous kind of guy."

SPRING, 1995

I had not seen Ron all year, but an invitation to another one of his shows found me. I went to it and found not only Ron, but his visiting girlfriend, Grazyna, who looked around a lot, but didn't say much or smile at all. When she did talk, it was difficult to understand her, due to her thick Polish accent. The show featured a few of Ron's original styles, priced even higher and not selling quickly. The nudes had procreated through the year, but weren't selling either.

SPRING, 1996

I try out the number in my address book to see if it works. "Oh, yeah, hi..." his voice rings back, and I fill him in on my documentary intentions. I want to see what really makes him tick as an artist, and inspect past and future projects, etc. Trying to find interviewing times, he said, "I'm traveling around selling this amber jewelry and doing Grazyna's and my business, and I stay at motel rooms, so I'm out of pocket a lot." Amber jewelry? Ron the free spirit, I think, floating along on another project to build a bridge between creativity and reality.

APRIL FOOLS DAY, 1996

I drive forty minutes, past Kyle on I-35 South, to Ron's farmhouse. Ron said to turn left on the county road just before the Diamond Shamrock. Next to it, a Dairy Queen marquis announces "Spring is here." But further down the road, cows graze in low brown fields that haven't seen much rain or warmth this season, chewing and gawking at an emu farm that has recently moved in next door. The soil of naked crop fields is still black, plowed deeper by long shadows from the west. From a passing car window, the rows can visually be freeze-framed or blurred, depending on choice of focus. Few cars travel the county road, and those who do can be spotted a mile away, growing and approaching with increasing velocity until they zoom by, leaving the split-second vision of the driver lifting his hand off the steering wheel to wave hello. A dilapidated red farmhouse retires complacently on the side of the road, decorated with a patchwork of multi-colored boards nailed to its sides, like stripes and medals on an old general. Ron's farmhouse is recognized not by a number, but by the glass jars of colored water on the fence, and the bathtub in the back yard. As I pull in, I realize it's no longer one bathtub, but two. Grazyna has moved in.

I have two hours to talk with Ron. He told me earlier that he and Grazyna have to leave at noon. Grazyna wasn't there when I arrived, and Ron offers me some tea from a white kettle on his old gas stove. Above the sink is a row of smaller bottles of colored water. Ron explains, "when I was a little boy, the mother of one of my best friends had a window right above her kitchen sink, and she had these glass shelves with these glass bottles filled with water, colored with food coloring. That just always struck me. It's always been in my mind and one day I just started messing with it. That's where the idea for my fence bottles came from. One day I'd like to do so massive sculptures with colored

bottle waters. I've got some ideas already on that, but I'll have to experiment with it later on when I get down to what colors and dyes I want to use. This one here used to be pretty neat," he said, pointing at a line of tiny bottles above his own sink, "but it's been neglected, and things have fallen off, and we've just put em back. But at one time, it was pretty neat-looking, and it could actually be a sculpture in itself, if you put it on an iron base with some little legs. You can do a lot with those..."

Ron and I walk outside. All the porch knickknacks are still in their places: Plants, rocks, old signs and bicycles occupy all space on the side porch. Christmas lights dangle beneath the porch roof. Some marbles the size of rubber balls, sit in holders nailed vertically on a porch post, their sole purpose to catch, color and redirect the morning and evening sunlight. "I used to have marbles scattered everywhere. But they'd get knocked down. They're really neat, when the sun goes down, and if you stand over here and look at them, they glow."

The medley of mason jars and other odd-shaped bottles still sits on a fence line next to a gravel driveway. Ron says, "I used to have tons of them. Even stacked em on top of each other, but the wind keeps blowing them down. I finally got these that have a much bigger base, and they don't blow down as much. People used to drive by and stop and look. None were ever stolen. But I had someone come by and try to buy one one time. It wasn't a rare bottle or anything, it was one of those big jugs with a finger hole in it. But he was a little bit intoxicated, so I didn't feel like taking advantage of him, I just gave him the bottle. It's just a simple thing that can be beautiful, with a little color."

Besides a few things, I note that not much else has altered in two years, yet the place is somehow cleaner. The only accidental or creative objects were also there three years ago, but dust seems to have been brushed off of them. The grass is cut short and edged. Even Ron is somehow cleaner and more poised. He doesn't lounge around, he stands up straight. His previously blissful smile is fleeting and his tone is brisker. For the first time ever, I noticed a vertical crease in the skin between his brows. And for the first time ever, I am conscious of being a visitor, of taking up his time. I ask Ron if he used to have more rocks and sticks laying around the porch. He says he did, but Grazyna has cleaned up a lot. I ask him, knowing that she makes leather art, if they inspire each other. Ron says, "We don't really have that much spare time to devote to really creating things. If we have any spare time, we like to spend it out here relaxing... These rose bushes are great too. I planted these about three years ago, and you wouldn't believe how many come up—I mean hundreds. I don't do anything but water them with plain water."

Beyond the wire fence that circumvents the back yard, rows of plowed dirt emit like rays of sunlight. Under a tree lies a new cat grave marked "Abby," decorated with painted rocks and flowers. "I guess this will be out pet cemetery," Ron says with a sigh as he looks down at it. By the bathtubs is a new cement statue of Venus, which Ron says came from a garage sale. I ask him what it's like to bathe out there at night. "Great," he replies "You see the stars. It's great for two people. Me and Grazyna used to bathe side by side, until last year, when that big sculpture of (cotton gin) ducting over there fell down, that I had the hose and water heater hooked up to. A big wind came through here—sometimes the wind blows unbelievably high, and blew that thing over. You fill that thing full of hot water—it gets boiling hot—and you can take as long a bath as you'd want to. The sink doesn't work—it's just for atmosphere," Ron adds, laughing, "I told Grazyna next time we have a big Amway person come out here, that we'll tell them that this is his bathroom."

"What's Amway?" I ask.

"Oh, that's our business. You and your husband ought to think about it. You guys interested in making any extra money?"

"Yeah, always," I say casually.

I ask him about his current painting habits, and he replies "God, I painted for seven years, and then all the sudden to have to really give it up—you know, it's kind of a cold-turkey process at first. It really wasn't easy to just give it up. And now, I've gotten to where I don't miss it, at this point in time." He stops, sets his jaw and looks straight ahead. "I honestly can say that at this moment in time I don't have any urge to go in and do any painting. I don't even think about painting, per se. I go to art galleries all the time and look at art. I'm still interested in art, but I've gotten to where I'm so busy with my business and stuff that I have suppressed it enough to where it doesn't bother me—the fact that I can't do any creativity right now." We keep walking around the yard and he continues, "But I know that when I go back to painting, I'll probably paint some completely different things. I think that my style will probably stay the same, but my subject matter will change. For instance, if I was to go back to painting now, I wouldn't have any need-or, any urge—to paint field workers. Which is my basically popular, good work. But that was in the past. When I worked in the field, that was long ago. And when I painted the workers in the field, that was long ago. I've just gotten that basically out of my system, I think. When I go back to painting, I'll probably paint a lot of portraits, of Grazyna, and little Ola" (Grazyna's nine and a half year-old daughter who also lives with them). "It will probably be more of a personal thing."

"So, you basically paint what is central in your life?"

"Yeah. That's what I did last time, and I'm sure that's what I'll do next time. All those old motifs that I had that were so good for me just don't do it for me anymore. The field workers, the dancers, even the fiesta ware" (paintings of colorful plates) "My grandmother had fiesta ware and when I was a little boy we would go almost every Sunday to eat at her house. And right there in her kitchen, where we ate, was a big china cabinet, and it was just loaded with fiesta ware, and we always ate with it. My grandfather wouldn't eat off of a blue plate, and we always tried to trick him. Fiesta ware is very collectible now, and it came in those four basic colors. And my grandmother bought it when she went to the five and dime—that's how you bought it—it was a promotional thing: you buy so much worth of goods from their store and then you receive a free plate. They're very expensive now. But they had those solid, basic colors and that always left an imprint on me. And so I naturally started painting them."

"If the selling of the art becomes the motivation for making it, does that improve its quality or detract from it?" I ask.

Ron thinks for a second and says, "It waters down your art after a while, because it does become somewhat of a motivation. . . if you're trying to make a living at it like I was trying to do and have done, but it is a meager life. I mean, Jesus, I wasn't making any money off of it at all. But my rent's a hundred bucks, I didn't need a lot of money. But as you begin to need more money, you find 'Oh my God, the fiesta ware paintings are selling. I better paint a few more fiesta ware paintings.' And you try to extend the motif to its limit like I did: fiesta ware, dancers, field workers: 'O.K., I'll do one with two field workers, I'll do one with one hundred field workers, I'll do one looking down from a different angle.' You're trying to maximize as many different paintings as you can from the motif before you have to move on to a new one. Selling does have to do a lot with

what you have to paint. It did with me. I was fortunate in that I had a lot of motifs that were successful for me. Maybe it was because of my style of painting—apparently my style had appeal—I don't know if it was the subject matter or the style. Maybe I could just paint anything and it would sell."

I ask him about his remaining connection with the Whites (I had asked the Whites the same question a week earlier, and they had shrugged and said he was "busy doing other things").

"They know I'm not painting, and I know that they're not selling any," Ron says as he looks around the yard. "They didn't know anything about art. I think that they thought that if they found a good talent, that was all they needed. They didn't know how much time it would take to market it, or how much money they would spend, and it got to be just more than they were willing to do."

Ron and I walk back towards the porch as a turquoise sedan—Grazyna's—pulls up in the gravel driveway, beside Ron's rusty van. Ron and I pause by the rail and I ask him about his rocks.

He smiles and says, "Rocks, I like rocks. I do collect a lot of rocks. I just like to pick them up, when I see an interesting rock. I just like them, because they're different. I picked this one up in Missouri, and it reminds me of Missouri. I got this one in Mason, where there's more iron in the soil, so you get a lot of dark-colored rock. I got this one up in Llano. They just kind of remind me of places that I've gone. I haven't made anything with the rocks. I hadn't really thought of it. But I've had a lot of fun with this one, let me show you." Ron picks up a multicolored rock off the rail, "I tell people that I found it in the bottom of the coliseum in Rome, and it was used by the Gladiators, and that it used to be rare, and they used it to practice the discus throw! Some people go, 'Oh, really? Wow!'" Picking up another rock, he says enthusiastically, "You know what this is? What do you think? This is dinosaur poop! It's April fools, isn't it?! No, that's truth. It's dinosaur dung, is what the lady called it, dinosaur dung."

"You didn't buy that, did you Ron?"

"I sure did," Ron says proudly, "Paid \$2 a pound. It's funky."

Grazyna walks up to the porch and I introduce myself and remind her that we met a year ago at Ron's show, which she doesn't acknowledge. Nor does she smile. She turns to Ron and states authoritatively, "Ron, we need to go." He says, "Sure, at noon, right?" (It was just past 11:00) "No, fifteen minutes" she states, and walks into the house. I try to sum up my questions. I ask him if his things are haphazardly or purposely placed.

"Both," Ron replies.

"Do you have an eye for detail?" I ask.

"Composition, more than anything else," Ron says, "Some of it's composition and some of it's haphazardness and I guess that's the way life is, too, you know? But nothing seems to conflict with nothing," he says. Looking around his porch packed with odd trinkets, he adds, "And it's also a place to store stuff. You just put stuff here and there."

I ask Ron to show me his amber jewelry. We walk inside and he pulls out a velvet tray and starts showing it to me. He says that amber comes from the Baltic area, near where Grazyna is from. He gives me one of their business cards, which reads, "Graces Art Gallery. Grazyna Zalinouski, owner. Ron Slick, Salesman."

The phone rings for Ron. While he is talking on it, I try to talk with Grazyna about her leather artwork and Ron's art.

next to an unidentifiable road kill. A horse leans through a wire fence to eat the grass on the other side. The cows look happier, and wind blows the branches of the trees.

Ron, Grazyna and I sit outside in chairs on the porch as wind gushes by us. Ron wears a collared linen shirt, pressed shorts and leather shoes; Grazyna a flowered shirt and shorts. She is furious that Frates didn't come, although I hadn't said he would. Ron had called me a week before to arrange the meeting, but we only agreed that I would look at the Amway catalog to see if it contained items we normally buy, and that he would talk more about his art. They try to convince me that my cheapest route to buy their products is through the 10% member discount, available for a membership fee of a \$150. I tell them again, bluntly, that we don't want a membership. I would be happy to look at the catalog, but won't pay \$150. They take me inside to show me the catalog. The door to Ron's studio, closed the last time I visited, stands open. I look inside. Like fallen dominoes, his paintings lay overlapping in slanted rows against three walls. The studio has regressed to a disorganized storage room, a mass grave of paintings, not functional as a studio any more, because there was no space to paint. Shoving the paintings back into the room was a work table with amber stones laid across it.

In the living room, Grazyna's daughter, Ola, sits on the floor in her underwear as she plays with a litter of kittens and watches television. A beautiful child, with dark hair, eyes that match the amber, and a sweet voice bearing no trace of a Polish accent. She asks me if I want to adopt one of her kittens.

In the kitchen, Ron makes tea as Grazyna flips through the catalog pages and explains the products. She explains the soap is biodegradable and Ron demonstrates that Amway's packing materials look like Styrofoam but are really made of starch. "See," he says, and dissolves them under sink water.

Grazyna yells, "I am saying the same thing over here! Listen to me!"

On the kitchen table, next to stacks of Amway methodology books and motivational tapes, sits an 8x10 framed photograph of Ron and Grazyna's Amway bosses, dressed in formal attire and laden with jewelry.

After a while, Ron says, "Now, Josie, you wanted to talk to me about art. We can do that, too."

Grazyna again loses her cool, "But first, you must tell us an answer!! What do you want to do?!"

"The same thing I told you when I arrived," I say firmly. "I'll look at the magazine, and if I want to order something, I'll order through you, but I'm not joining Amway."

Exasperated, she writes her name and account number on a catalog to give me. She asks me if I want the bigger catalog, too. I say sure, and she tells me it costs \$7. I tell her I don't want it. She tells me the smaller one, that she has already written on for me, costs 50¢. I tell her I don't want it. Ron tells me to just keep it.

The phone rings, Grazyna answers it and exclaims "Really!!" and then to Ron, "Yaba is coming! Yaba is coming!"

"Hooray!" Ron agrees, and tells me, "Yaba is a top guy in Amway. He's coming here to speak."

With Grazyna on the phone, I finally get a few minutes to just speak to Ron. He still talks rhetorically about how Amway changes a person's life. I comment that it had certainly changed his. He agrees, "Oh yeah. It's definitely changed my life." I ask him how, and he replies, "Well it just makes you a more positive person." I ask if he wasn't a positive person before. He says, "Well, I was positive in the sense that I liked to sit out

on the front porch and drink beer and smoke dope and paint. I thought I was cool, but I wasn't. I'm cool now. This is cool." I ask him if he uses his creativity in Amway. He says, "My creativity, although it might not be art, is still there. I'm going to refocus that creativity into a business, for the first time ever. I'm going to be creative with my approach to people in Amway. Just because you stop painting doesn't mean you're not an artist. Art is a frame of mind. There's a lot of people, like movie stars, and musicians—like Bob Dylan—who are in certain fields of art, and next thing you know, these people are painting. Have you ever seen Bob Dylan's paintings? Creativity doesn't have to be narrowed to painting."

Grazyna gets off the phone and I ask her the same question. She glares at me and says, "Creativity in Amway? What mean?" Both Ron and I start explaining our conversation. Grazyna rolls her eyes and throws up her chin, and moans, "You DON'T understand what Amway is. Amway is the biggest product..."

"I do understand what Amway is," I correct, and attempt to clarify the question.

"NO, NO, you DON'T!" Grazyna screams, "I tell Ron all the time, 'If you can create paintings as beauty as you do, you can create your life, but you have to make thinking much more wider. Making any product, it doesn't matter what you make, you making leather, or you making painting, or you write a book, you express yourself. For Amway, you pick from the person, what is the best inside of them, and show it for the person.'"

"Grazyna, that's exactly what we were talking about," I say and turn back to Ron "Ron, in what ways do you directly use creativity in Amway?"

Ron says, "To be successful in Amway, you have to be creative with people. You have to be able to relate to people, and you have to love people in a sense. And what I mean by that is that you have to help these people build their dreams, up to a point where they realize that this dream that they have in their heart and in their mind is actually possible. So you have to work with them in a very loving and a very tender way. You're not just creating a canvas, you're creating a dream. You're helping this person create a dream. You have to do it, and you really, really can do it. These other people have done it. You can do it too. You have to dream. Build the dream! Build the dream! If you don't have a dream, then how can you have a dream come true?"

Grazyna interjects, "If you have a dream, you cannot paint paintings."

Ron says, "You have to have dreams. That's what makes the difference between a successful person and an unsuccessful person, or a successful person and an ordinary person."

Grazyna jumps in again, "I love this house, but I'm gonna go here," pointing at a framed photograph of a massive, ornate house—an estate—hanging on the kitchen's green wooden wall. "And I'm not going to go buy this house with credit. I'm going to go buy this house with cash."

"We're going to go buy that house," Ron says and taps on the glass frame, "in five years."

Scrutinizing the pictures for the first time, I ask where they got them. It's not common that people have framed photographs of somebody else's home hanging in their kitchen. This must be one of the motivational methods suggested on the lecture tapes.

"Those pictures are from a Louisiana plantations book I bought" Ron said, and pulled it out from a stack of books on the table.

Grazyna grabs the book from Ron's hands, thrusts it in front of me, flips the pages and says, "Here is the book. Which house would you like to have? This one? This one? This one?"

Ron says, "If you have a plan, you can break the plan down into little goals, and then you just go for it. Five years. We have four and a half years left."

I ask them if they see any payoff yet. They say no, but that now they are building their character...they again explain the cliché bonuses of Amway: relationships, building goals, passive income...

"If you can imagine, you can create," Ron says, and stands in the kitchen doorway looking into the living room at little Ola, who is playing "When the Saints Come Marching In" on her toy organ. Ron chants and claps to the tune.

Grazyna sneers and asks me, "What kind of money can you make being an artist?"