

**Deborah Rosenthal**

**The Seasons: Paintings**







# Deborah Rosenthal

## The Seasons: Paintings

RIDER UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY  
March 3 - April 10, 2016

OPENING RECEPTION  
Thursday, March 3, 5 - 7 p.m.

GALLERY INFORMATION  
Tuesday to Thursday • 11 a.m. - 7 p.m.  
Sunday • noon - 4 p.m.  
Professor Harry I. Naar, *director*

FRONT COVER: *Fête*, Oil on linen, 28 x 36", 2013.



This exhibition is funded in part by a grant from the Mercer County Cultural and Heritage Commission, New Jersey State Council on the Arts, Department of State.

Deborah Rosenthal's paintings in "The Seasons" reveal a sensibility immersed in landscape, in natural cycles of transformation and renewal. Rosenthal is no plein-air painter, however, no illustrator of scenic views. What makes her so remarkable is the strength of her aesthetic imagination. She is that rare artist whose formal knowledge has fused so thoroughly with her inventiveness that they appear indistinguishable: with a few brushstrokes she can bring the entire history of painting to bear, even while those brushstrokes remain spontaneous.

But history and spontaneity are not the only dichotomies Rosenthal sets in imaginative relation. Her fascination with counterpointed doubles shows in the contours and shapes themselves. The immovability of mountains and the transience of water, the hardness of rock and the softness of cloud, the repetition of patterns and their sudden interruptions—these are only some of the opposing sensations rendered in the paintings.

And this is what makes Rosenthal's recent work not only beautiful but masterful. By engaging contraries, she constructs powerful metaphors. I mean that Rosenthal is a "literary painter" in the unconventional, deepest sense of that phrase. She doesn't reproduce familiar scenes, much

less build her pictures beneath any conceptual scaffolding. Instead, she manages, while remaining true to the innate properties of her own medium, to endow her paintings with a poetic fusion of intellect and feeling. To spend time with the work in "The Seasons" is to explore metaphor itself, to feel the consubstantiality of all things "rolled round in earth's diurnal course," along with the urge to wrest form and meaning from that mutability.

Consider "Doubled Landscape." One of the pleasures of looking at this painting is following its rhythms. Curvilinear and angular lines alternate and segue into each other. Abstract shapes balance against those legible as leaves or clouds. The scalloped forms along the edges reoccur in the middle to create pattern, even as they work as a framing device and thereby stave off the sense of infinite repetition. What's more, these rhythms occur within a composition which itself engages our sense of time. Placing a diagonal in the center of the painting, Rosenthal has tilted the horizon line upward, making it a temporal divider: we see the form of the house as well as its surroundings as if on different days, in different conditions of light and weather. "Doubled Landscape" proves, then, not only to contain rhythms but to offer a searching meditation on rhythm itself, on what remains and what changes in the cycles of repetition and variation that we call time.



In a group of paintings from her series called “Winter Journey,” inspired by Schubert’s song cycle “Die Winterreise,” Rosenthal’s ability to render the experience of time combines with her skill for painting the human figure in the landscape. Here, the figure moves through a winter scene, and through the stages of mourning a lost lover. Using an approach she developed ten years ago, while painting her Orion series, Rosenthal plays with the scale of this figure, making him as big as the hills and mountains. He seems to have come from a space larger than the frame of the picture, an otherworldly or mythical space, even though he inhabits the landscape that he in fact resembles—see, for instance, how the figure’s head in “Winter Journey II” merges with the shape of a mountain summit. The individual, human process of grief has become part and parcel of the elemental, seasonal cycle of death and regeneration.

For all of these “literary” or metaphorical resonances, the “Winter Journey” paintings turn out to be rewarding on purely formal terms as well—consider, for instance, the spiral shapes created by the stark lines forming the figures, and by the winding movement between the vibrant yellow and the cool gray of the ground.

The combination of figurative and abstract approaches is not simply a method for Rosenthal but a subject itself, one she explores for its metaphorical richness. Take “Landscape Painter.” Here, the blend of abstraction and representation

turns out to occasion some wonderful humor. The figure at the left leans toward the center, as if guiding the viewer into the distance, setting up the expectation of recession from foreground to background, in the manner of traditional landscape painting. But instead of a valley or vista, we get a moment of pure abstraction, a playful arrangement of mostly triangular shapes and lively colors. If she flouts the expectation of deep space, however, Rosenthal is not a programmatic “pure” abstractionist, bent on steamrolling the picture plane to total flatness; ambiguities of depth do occur here: the shapes at the top of the composition, for example, do suggest mountains in the distance, even as they fit into the arrangement of abstract forms.

The play between representation and abstraction occasions humor in “Landscape Painter,” but it also reveals a profound response not only to formal challenges but existential ones. I have in mind the feeling of simultaneous inevitability and surprise that Rosenthal manages to convey: the figures and forms in these paintings appear as instances of reality uncovered, carved down to what cannot be reduced. Still, Rosenthal’s work seldom feels “subtractive.” Instead, for all their inevitability, those figures and forms have the air of previously unforeseen pieces of consciousness that have just now grown into being.

This ability of Rosenthal’s shows with particular strength in those paintings containing both a male and female figure. In

“Fête,” the figures look as if they’ve sprung from the roughed-up surface: the white and blue from which they’re made beguile their surroundings, so that the whole composition breathes with atmosphere, with the charged sense of living presence. In “June, or What I thought I knew,” the framing has been beaten back, to make the whole painting hinge on the two figures, inhabiting separate places in the landscape, yet endowing the space between them with an intense magnetism. In both of these paintings, otherwise so different from each other, the figures are not depictions but things in themselves. Their being semi-abstract only heightens this sensation of consciousness at play: just as Rosenthal’s landscapes prove all the more vivacious for being half perceived and half created, so these figures reveal a liveliness for remaining pairs of separate, singular selves and also subjects of others’ imaginations—the painter’s and each other’s.

Perhaps the most thrilling, and moving, example of Rosenthal’s skill for rendering separate yet connected figures occurs in “Garland.” At the center of the painting is an infant, whose abstract body coalesces into the detailed face. On either side, the heads of mother and father appear in profile. All three float at the center of circular shapes that resemble cameos, and these shapes appear bound to a chain that winds beyond the sides of the picture. This structure of the garland opens space differently than a ground plane: there’s a sense of being flung, propelled along a cycle of time and generation. And yet the space does still open, arresting the suggestion of infinite

repetition, and holding those three figures with all their particularity. Rosenthal’s mastery shows here. By virtue of those formal decisions, she manages to return genuine wonder to the image of the young family, a motif that otherwise might feel too familiar or sentimental, but here gains tremendous force and feeling.

This is what makes Deborah Rosenthal so important a contemporary painter: her prodigious technical talent is not an end in itself but a means of giving each painting, indeed each shape and color, its maximum sensation. Her metaphors of nature, love, and family bear the imprint of necessity, even as her paintings retain all their formal vitality apart from subject matter. In “The Seasons,” such virtuosity feels indistinguishable from generosity. These paintings by Deborah Rosenthal are an occasion for gratitude.

Peter Champion is the author of three collections of poetry, *Other People*, *The Lions*, and *El Dorado* (all from the University of Chicago Press). The recipient of the Guggenheim Fellowship and the Rome Prize, he teaches at the University of Minnesota.





*Doubled Landscape (Familiar Sights)*, Oil on linen, 35 x 50", 2011.





*Paired Scenes*, Oil on linen, 36 x 44", 2013.





*Hills, hemlocks, and cataracts with river god, Oil and oil stick on linen, 20 x 40", 2015.*





*Winter Journey*, Oil on linen, 30 x 24", 2010.





*Winter Journey II*, Oil on linen, 25 x 20", 2010.





*Landscape Painter*, Oil on linen, 30 x 40", 2014.





*Landscape in the Studio*, Oil on linen, 40 x 30", 2014.





*Country Matters*, Oil and oil stick on linen, 22 x 30", 2014.





*June, or What I thought I knew*, Oil on linen, 36 x 48", 2014.





*Silent*, Oil on linen, 32 x 42", 2013.





*White Landscape with Young Figures (Homage to Claude Lorrain)*, Oil and oil stick on linen, 44 x 33", 2011.





*Garland, Oil and oil stick on linen, 30 x 40", 2014-15.*



# Deborah Rosenthal

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Deborah Rosenthal is a painter who also writes about art. Born in New York, as a child she attended life classes at the Art Students League. She studied art and English literature at Smith College, where she worked with Leonard Baskin; she graduated from Barnard College with a degree in English literature in 1971. In 1968 she attended Robert Beverly Hale's lectures on anatomy at the Art Students League of New York. Rosenthal received an MFA in printmaking from Pratt Institute in 1974, and while at Pratt she attended classes taught by Ilya Bolotowsky at Queens College and Alfred Russell at Brooklyn College.

Upon finishing her printmaking studies at Pratt, Rosenthal returned to painting, and began to show her paintings in New York while on the 2-year Federally funded CETA Artists' Project, for which she curated exhibitions at various New York venues. In the late 1970s, she began writing regularly for *Arts Magazine*. Her subjects ranged from the work of contemporary artists to the art of seminal modernists such as Paul Klee and Piet Mondrian and artists of older traditions, such as Romanesque art.

In 1980 she was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts Art Critic's Travel grant to interview André Masson and Stanley William Hayter in Paris. Since then, Rosenthal has written for a number of publications including *Art in America*, *Artforum*, *Drawing*, *Modern Painters*, the *College Art Journal*, *The New Criterion*, and *Yale Review*.

In 1984 she began to exhibit her work in solo exhibitions at the Bowery Gallery in New York, which still represents her. She has shown as well in group and solo shows in museums, galleries, and university galleries in the United States; Rosenthal's paintings,

drawings, and prints have been discussed and reproduced in many publications including *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *Modern Painters*, *Art in America*, and *Yale Review*. In 2011, Rosenthal started a book series, *Artists and Art*, for Arcade Publishing in New York. The series comprises seven books, including Rosenthal's collection, with notes and introduction by her, of the writing on art in English by the French painter Jean Hélion.

Rosenthal has taught in art schools and universities since 1980, and is Professor of Art in the Westminster College of the Arts at Rider University, where she has taught and mentored students in painting, drawing and printmaking since 1989, and curated many exhibitions for the University Gallery. She has been guest artist/critic or faculty over the past three decades at many institutions, among them the Kansas City Art Institute, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Queens College (CUNY) MFA program, and the New York Studio School, where she taught the Drawing Marathon; she has also been a Visiting Artist at the American Academy in Rome. She taught art history at the Parsons School of Design and the School of Visual Arts in New York, and was resident faculty for several years at the Chautauqua Institution and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago Ox-Bow summer programs.

Rosenthal is married to the writer Jed Perl. They live in New York and in the foothills of the Catskill Mountains in New York State.



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