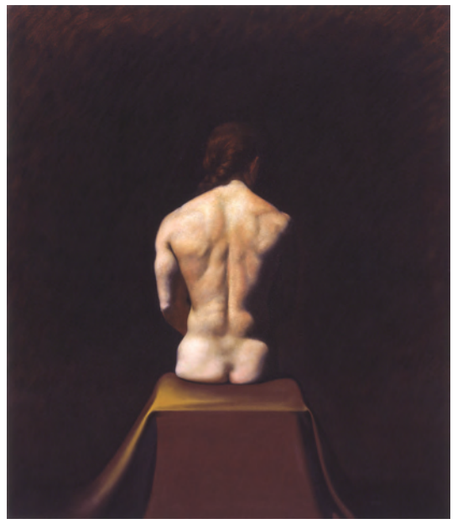
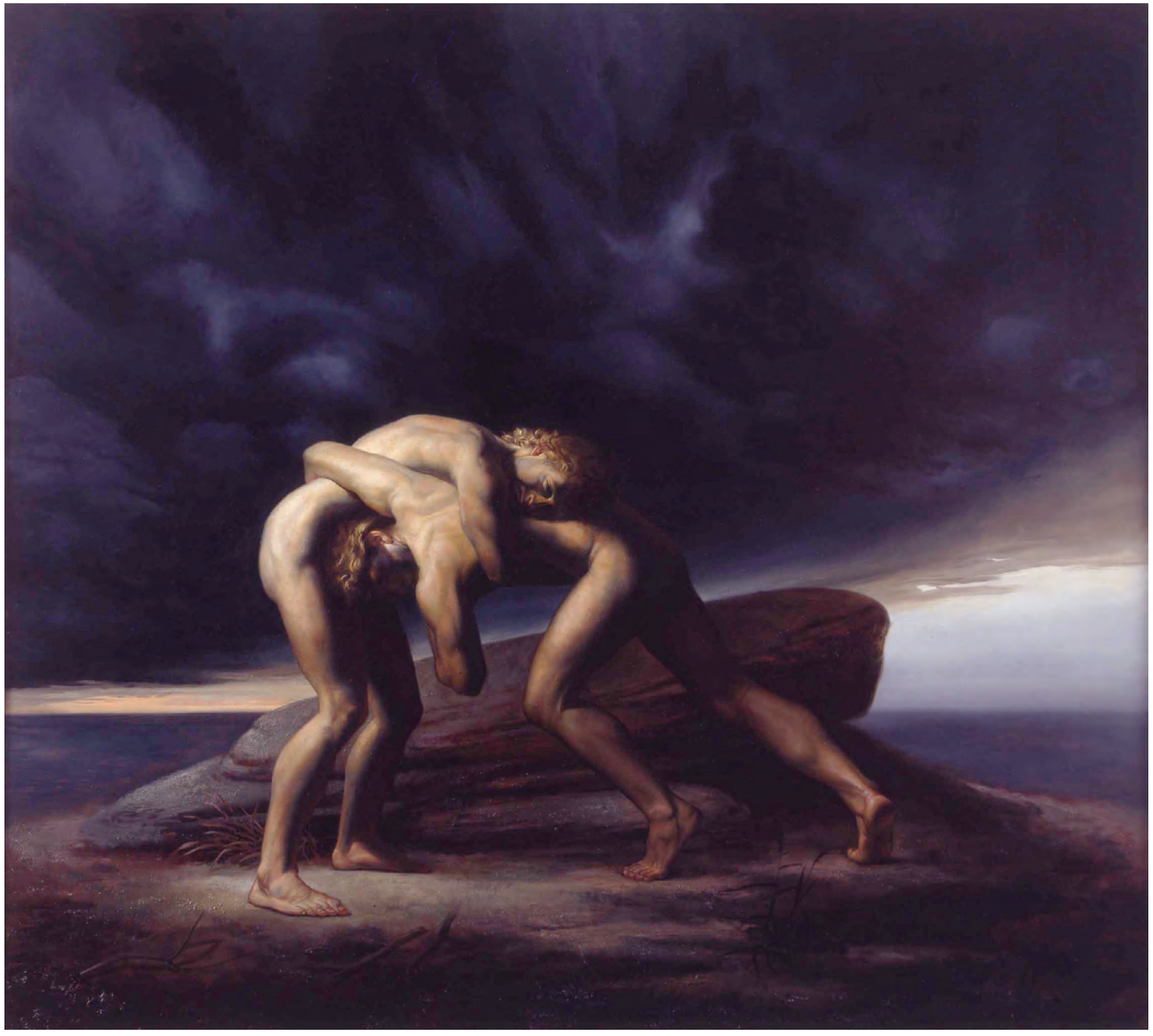
No Babes on Sheets

THE FIGURES IN MARTHA ERLEBACHER'S PAINTINGS ARE A GOOD-LOOKING BUNCH, BUT LOADED AS THEY ARE WITH SYMBOLISM, ALLEGORICAL NARRATIVE, AND HUMANIST THEMES, THEY GO FAR BEYOND CLASSICAL IDEALS OF THE HUMAN FORM.

by Courtney Jordan



At first glance, Martha Erlebacher's nude figures—robust, fit, and comely—could be confused with more classical manifestations of physical beauty, but the artist finds that idea somewhat disconcerting. "Who knows what 'classical' means today?" she says. "I don't configure myself within a classical paradigm or with these ateliers that call themselves classical. My whole idea about making art has been to say something about the human condition."

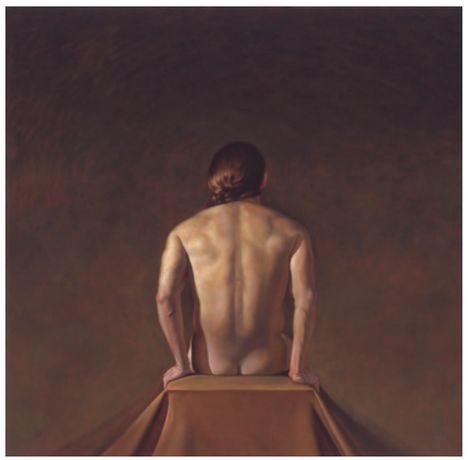


OPPOSITE PAGE
Back
1996, oil, 48 x 42. Private collection.

ABOVE
Agon
1996, oil, 72 x 78. All artwork this article collection the artist unless otherwise indicated.

LEFT
Lilith
1992, oil, 26 x 28. Private collection.

BELOW
Joshua II
2002, oil, 42 x 42.



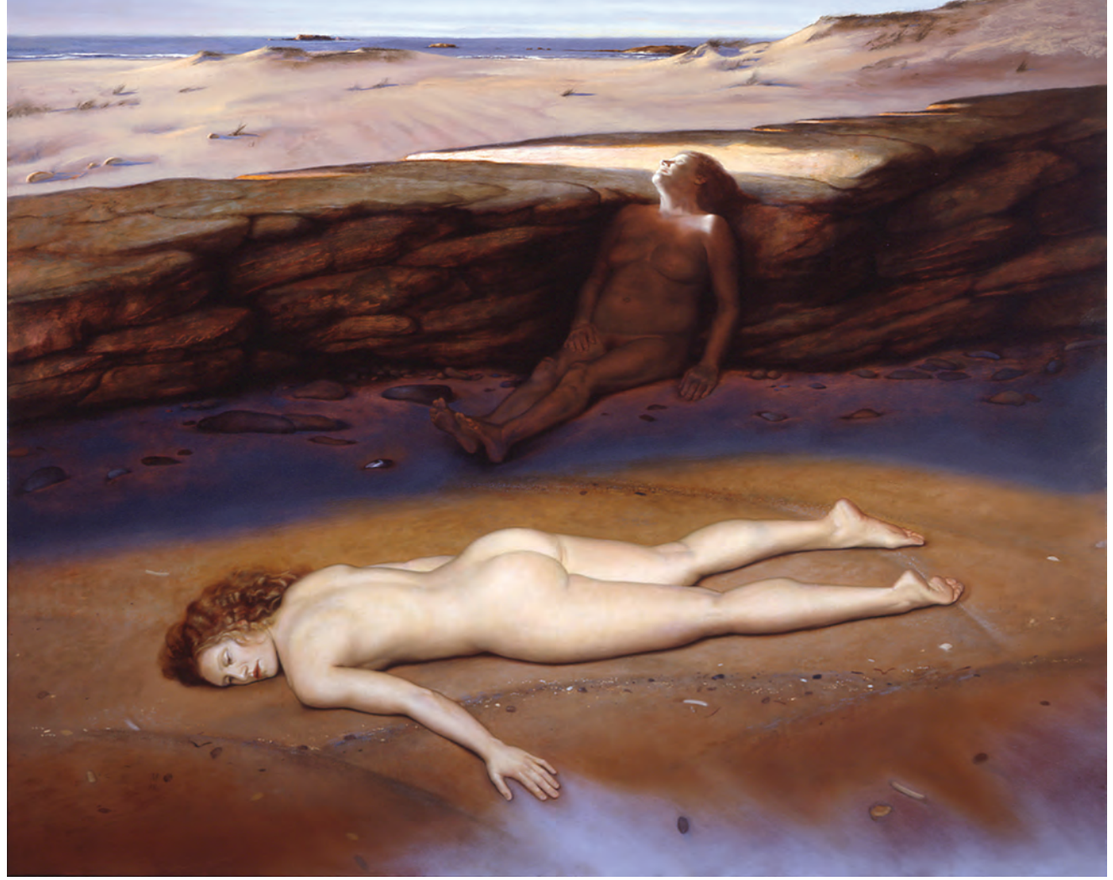
To that end, Erlebacher has spent close to five decades painting figural scenes that explore milestones within the human lifecycle—birth, growth, maturity, and death—and other universal human experiences. And, to her mind, the way to communicate all of these effectively is through the figure. "If you want to make a statement about the human condition, there's no better way than using the human form," she says. "It's a no-brainer. If you're talking about people, if you're representing human ideas—then you draw people."

As a former industrial engineer who taught anatomy for more than 40 years, Erlebacher is well-equipped to understand, paint, and draw the human form. Although anatomy and explorations of the figure initially lured her from abstract to representational painting during the heyday of Abstract Expressionism, Erlebacher stresses that anatomy is not an artistic pursuit in her mind. "It's a tool, just like color theory," she says. "You can use it well, not well, or not at all. It's just structure, and that is neutral." What tips the balance to a worthwhile artistic pursuit for Erlebacher are the meanings and messages that can be conveyed through the human form.

In her work, sometimes meaning is found in how the body is isolated yet connected to its environment—as in *Joshua II*—even if the environment is made up of only light and shadow. Other times, the artist explores passion, movement, and physical force through the figure, as in *Lilith* and *Agon*. But Erlebacher doesn't ascribe to the idea of painting the human form for aesthetic reasons. She paints bodies that are real and beautiful all the same, but purposely nonidealized.

"I'm rather appalled at the amount of skilled rendering that I see that is completely devoid of content whatsoever," she says. "What do those kinds of works say? I see my work as a product of this time. Those babes on sheets that some artists paint, no matter how much they strive to be '19th century,' are not. I don't worry about being contemporary; I just make the figure as true and accurate as I know—bodies that look like they do stuff: breathe, move, and have bones."

Beyond looking like truly physical beings at home in their own skins, Erlebacher's figures must also speak to the content of the work. The artist begins by conceiving a narrative for each painting. "It all comes from imagination, and I invent it before I make the picture," she says. "I don't have drawings or use models to give me inspiration. I know what I want from the model, the landscape—everything—in order to fit the painting. And every little, tiny, itty-bitty thing in the picture has to support the meaning of the whole thing." This mental map that the artist creates is also influenced by her interest in perception theory as it relates to the visual organization of her work. The goal is for any viewer to be able to look at the images and perceive what they convey without knowing art history or anything about the painter or her motivation.



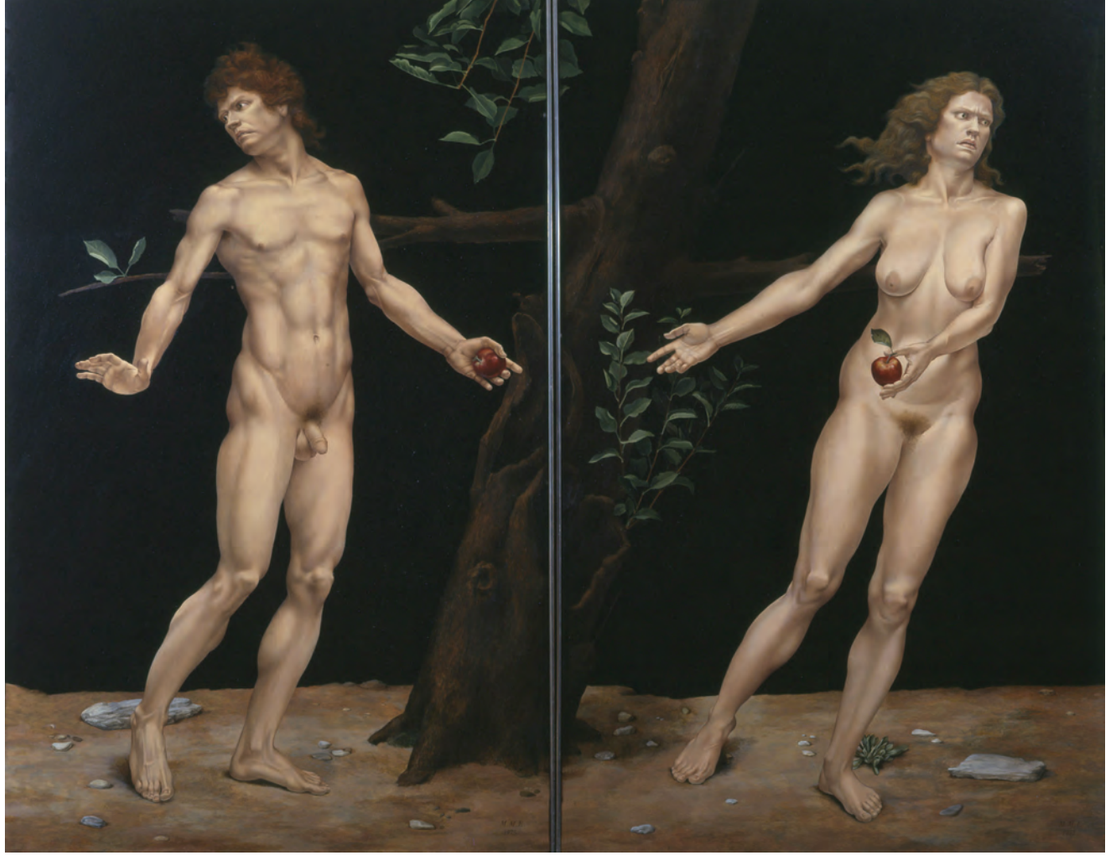
ABOVE
On the Rock or Sand
1999, oil, 64 x 78.

For example, in *On the Rock or Sand,* Erlebacher explores the physical or biological changes inherent in the female life cycle, and the psychological issues that accompany them. The nude female figure in the foreground is youthful. Her body is firm and strong, her skin is luminous, and she is bathed in a halo of light. She is lying on a shore and her hand reaches out to the incoming wash of water. Her eyes are focused on her hand, and the look on her face seems to attest that she is absorbed in the sensations of her body. In contrast, the figure in the background is aged and propped stiffly against an outcropping of rocks. Her body is still womanly, but thicker and more mature. She lies in shadow except for a haze of light that illuminates her face, drawing her eyes to a completely different source of light than the one that illuminates the foreground figure. The direction of her gaze indicates that her thoughts are up and away from her body, focused on a distant horizon.

"The young figure is one of fragility and her connection to the sea represents the relation to moisture and fecundity," the artist explains. "The other figure is one of decline, at a time in her life when she has lost her relation to wetness and fertility." The narrative in the work is involved and layered, but the viewer can instinctively understand the underlying theme due to Erlebacher's skill in structuring the composition so that the major elements within the work articulate the message.

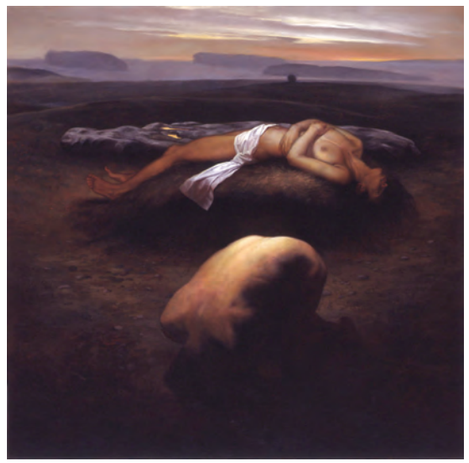
Erlebacher also uses the figure to explore more widely known subjects within Greek mythology, Biblical texts, biology, and metaphysics. One theme that she has returned to repeatedly over the years is that of Adam and Eve, which appeals to her because it explores how two human beings deal with a mutual loss of faith. The two figures are emblematic of humanity as well as humanity's relationship to God and faith as a universal theme that touches our lives.

The diptych *Adam and Eve*, created in 1975, shows how the mutuality of the figures' loss drives them apart. Both Adam and Eve hold apples, indicating the guilt is shared, yet they look and lean in different directions. They search for a connection with



God in their own separate ways, and all around them is darkness. But they still seem together despite the drastic change they've undergone. Their body positions mirror each other. Adam's face is turned from Eve but he almost seems to be stepping toward her, even across the quite real divide of the edge of the canvas. In counterbalance, Eve's body turns away from Adam, but her arms reach out to him in a beseeching gesture. That ambivalence reinforces the overall sense of anxiety in the work. "It is that loss of hierarchy and permanence, accompanied with the knowledge that everything changes, bringing chaos," Erlebacher says. "Permanence becomes a lie. And people long for stability."

In more recent depictions, such as *Adam and Eve (The Return)*, the figures are presented as narcissistic beings, so involved in their own sorrow that God becomes irrelevant. Adam is huddled, kneeling, in the foreground. One can imagine his hands gripping his head in agony or clutched together in a self-comforting gesture, but the shadows that are creeping inward from the perimeter of the work make it impossible to know for sure. For certain, no comfort will come from Eve. She lies stunned insensible on a rock in the center of composition, her arms slackly banded around her torso, perhaps a gesture to indicate her womb and her role as First Mother. The figures are completely isolated in position and gesture, and they occupy a sparse, endlessly rolling landscape dotted with a single tree and devoid of any other presence, human or divine. So if the two figures *were* to come to their senses, their surroundings and equally bereft mindsets would offer little hope.



If salvation is somewhat scarce in her depictions of the first man and woman, Erlebacher's depictions of humanity's relation to the earth is one of comfort, regeneration, and wholeness. "One of my interests is the earth as a metaphor for the body," she says. In several paintings, Erlebacher explores this visual metaphor, imbuing natural objects with metaphysical potency: foliage and grasses indicate skin and hair, the earth as muscle and body mass, and bodies of water as arteries and carriers of blood.

In *Fusion II*, the figure is not just lying on the ground. She presses into it, becoming one with the earth. Her eyes seem to be closed in concentration and her hand is positioned similarly to how one would press a palm against something living and breathing—as if to feel life itself pressing back at you. In *The River*, the male figure is portrayed as dead, but like the earth is inseparable from the sea, the figure as river rejoins the ocean, a metaphor for regeneration or the continuously turning wheel of life.

No matter how it is presented, a body is never just a body in Erlebacher's work. She may pursue more involved, loaded narratives, as well as those that are much simpler, but the figures all relate to the human condition from a universal, everyman kind of perspective because art and humanity illuminate the same simple truth for Erlebacher: "Despite all the suffering and all the stress, I think how beautiful and aesthetic life can be." ■

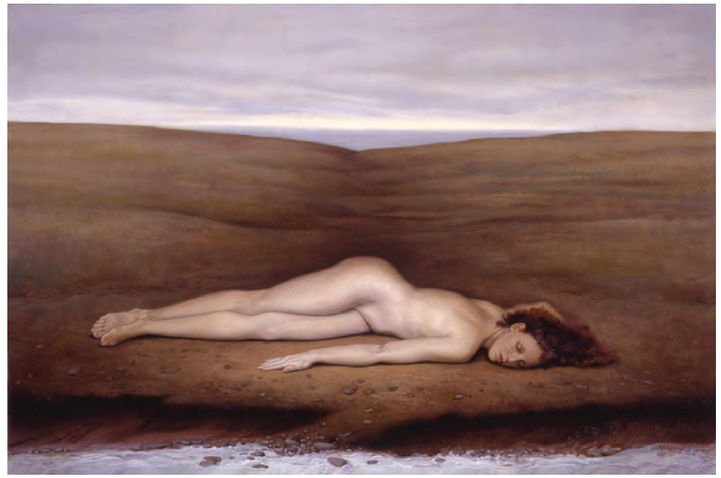
Courtney Jordan is the online editor of ArtistDaily.com.

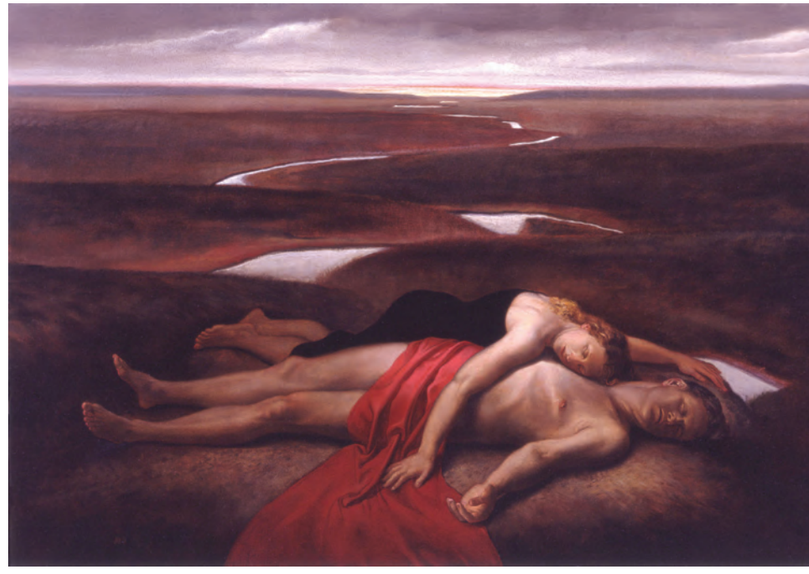
OPPOSITE PAGE, ABOVE
Adam and Eve (diptych)
1975, oil, 80 x 128. Collection Brauer Museum of Art, Valparaiso, Indiana.

OPPOSITE PAGE, BELOW
Adam and Eve (The Return)
2001, oil, 62 x 62.

RIGHT ABOVE
Fusion II
2000, oil, 20 x 30.

RIGHT BELOW
The River
1996, oil, 22 x 32. Private collection.





ABOUT THE ARTIST

Martha Erlebacher was born in New Jersey and studied abstract expressionism at Pratt Institute, in New York City. It wasn't until the late 1960s that she broke away from the movement to become a representational artist. Since then, she has pursued a successful career in still life and figurative painting, and worked as an instructor and lecturer. Her work can be found in such notable collections as the Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Cleveland Museum of Art, and the Art Institute of Chicago. For more information, visit www.marthamayererlebacher.com.