



Bookkeeper

by

BARBARA GRANT



This is the story of a painting entitled *Bookkeeper*.

An accidental visitor to my studio saw this painting in progress and asked to purchase it. "But it's not finished," I replied. He asked if I was going to change it much, and I said I didn't know! We agreed that he would have first dibs if he still wanted my finished work. He did...



...so this hangs somewhere in the northern part of California, I believe.

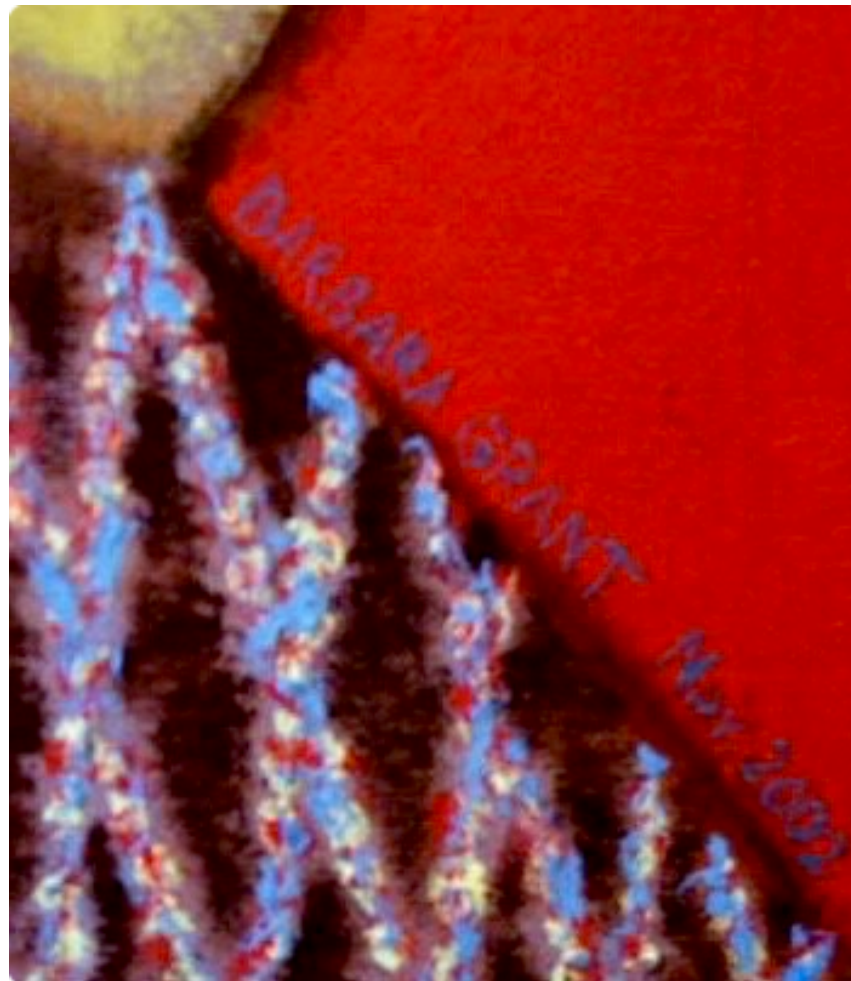
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Dedication

Thank you Mike Rende of DangerousBrains.com for encouraging this project and for its initial publication in FineArtsGuild.com.

Thank you Amy Geszvain for being my muse for this work. Your music, artistry and beauty inspire me.



Introduction

As an artist, I'm often asked, "How did you come up with that idea?" If I've been diligent with my journaling, I may be able search my entries to track how an idea started. But ideas can take on new forms once the actual creative process begins, leaving me as curious as the questioner.

In 2002 I read about a writing professor sharing his work on a poem in progress with his students online - practically a live performance of him sitting at his desk in a messy office laboring over words. Back then this was a novel thing to do, and I was impressed with his courage to demystify the magic for the sake of revealing an example of the creative process. It gave me the idea to do something similar to demonstrate how an artist works at an easel. I decided to photograph each studio session to record the incremental work on a new painting.

At this same time, a friend from art school was creating a website for our group to share our artwork. When I told him about my idea, he agreed to post the photographs as I submitted the painting's progress. Not only that, he encouraged me to write about the progress, because he believed that viewers would want to know my thought process. A sort of **blog** - innovative back then! This was the beginning of *Bookkeepers*.

Barbara Grant

2020

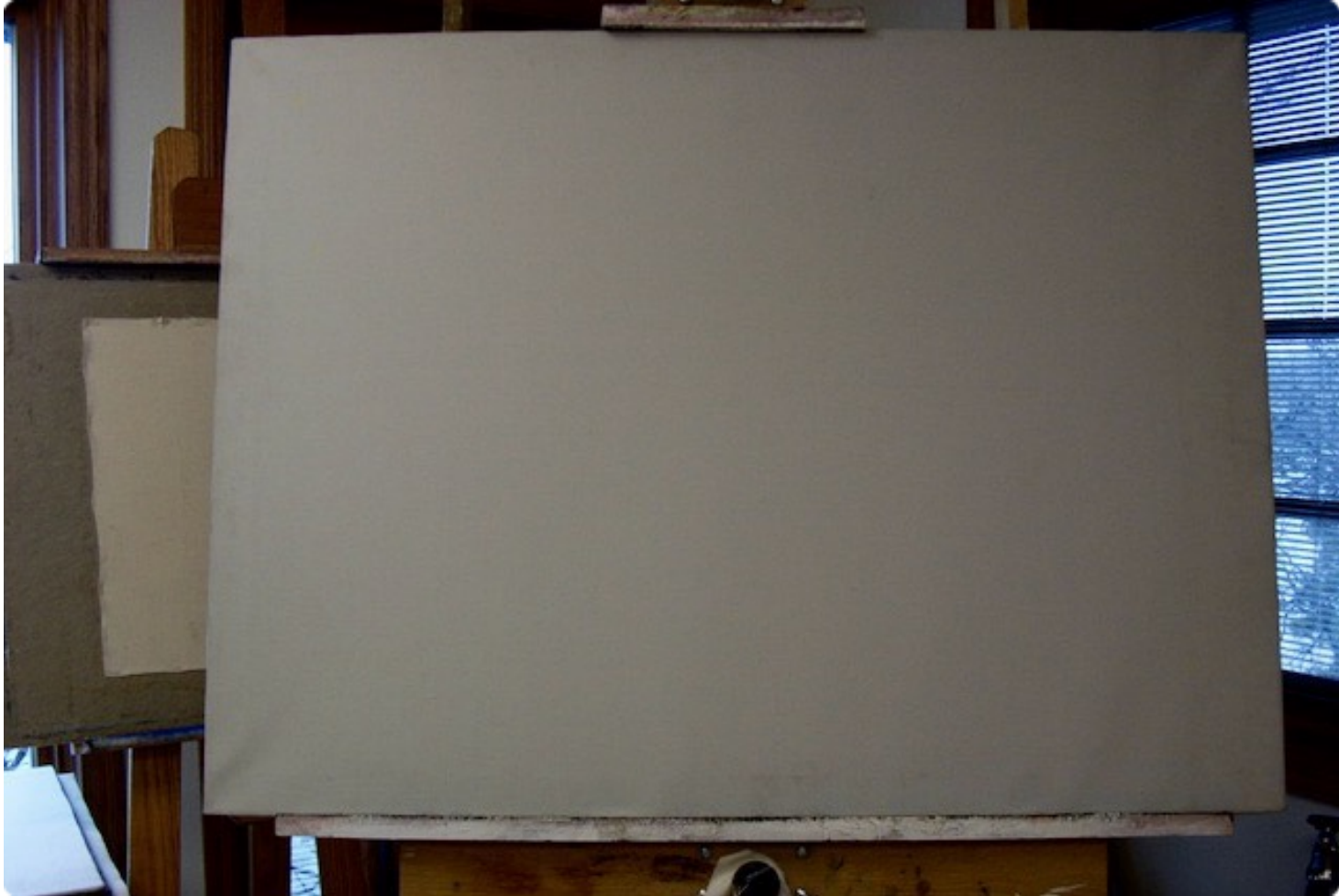


April 7, 2002

It is a rainy Sunday afternoon. The easel is standing in the northwest corner of my studio. The stretched canvas is secured to it, ready and waiting for me to begin. This canvas is one that I inherited from my neighbor, Richard Culley, after he died several years ago. He had it primed and ready to go.



Normally, I use acrylic for the under-painting and switch to oil later if need be. But since I'm not sure if Richard used an oil or water base to prime the canvas, I'm going to play it safe by using oil from the get-go.



It sounds like I'm ready to get right to it, but I have no idea what the subject matter is going to be.

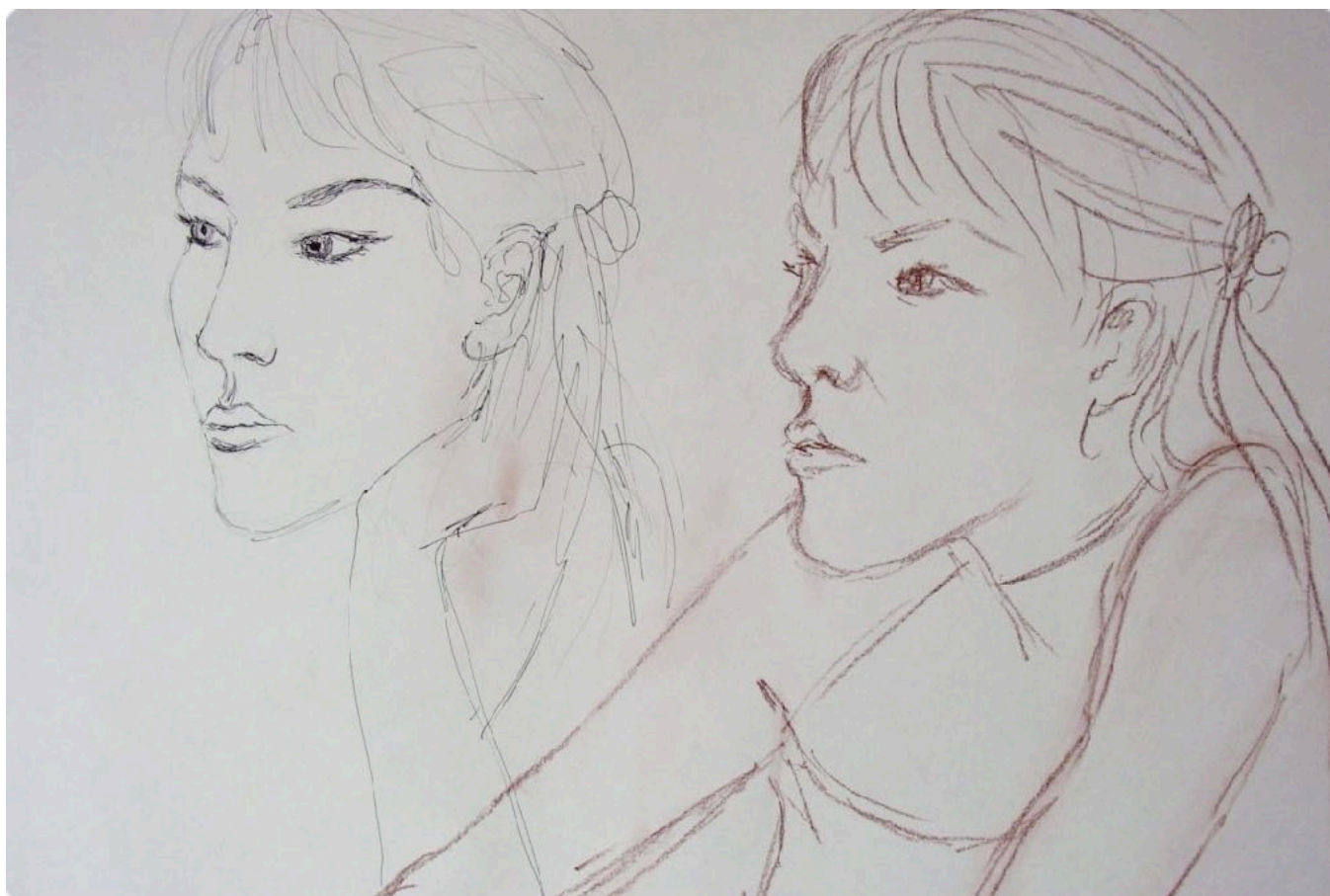
April 14

Last week I stained the surface with burnt sienna thinned with Livos. I did this to warm up the iciness of the canvas. Also, since I did not prepare the surface myself, the application of the stain (rubbing it into the canvas) helped me get acquainted with it, so to speak.



Today the bookkeeper came to show me her drawings, and then we took a hike around the lake.

Afterwards, while she and my husband sat staring at the Masters Tournament, I decided to draw her. My plan is to use these sketches for this painting.



April 27

I had thought to multiply the image of the bookkeeper; reverse one of the drawings so that another bookkeeper could look back at the first. But just before proceeding with this decision, I received news that a loved one has been hospitalized with depression since last Monday – she's having trouble pulling up out of the pit this time. This news concerns me deeply. I decided there will be three bookkeepers at the table sharing a crisis. I used vine



charcoal to draw each with a book to hold.

May 5

I drew over the charcoal lines with a burnt sienna stain. After the lines were dry, I dusted away the loose charcoal. Areas of the drawing are filled with color now:

- ☐ light green on the background, because the bookkeeper told me how much she loves that color next to burnt sienna
- ☐ red to clothe the women in the color of angst



- ☐ violet on the table in order to create a sacred ground
- ☐ blue book jackets – I have become focused on the fact that these are closed books.

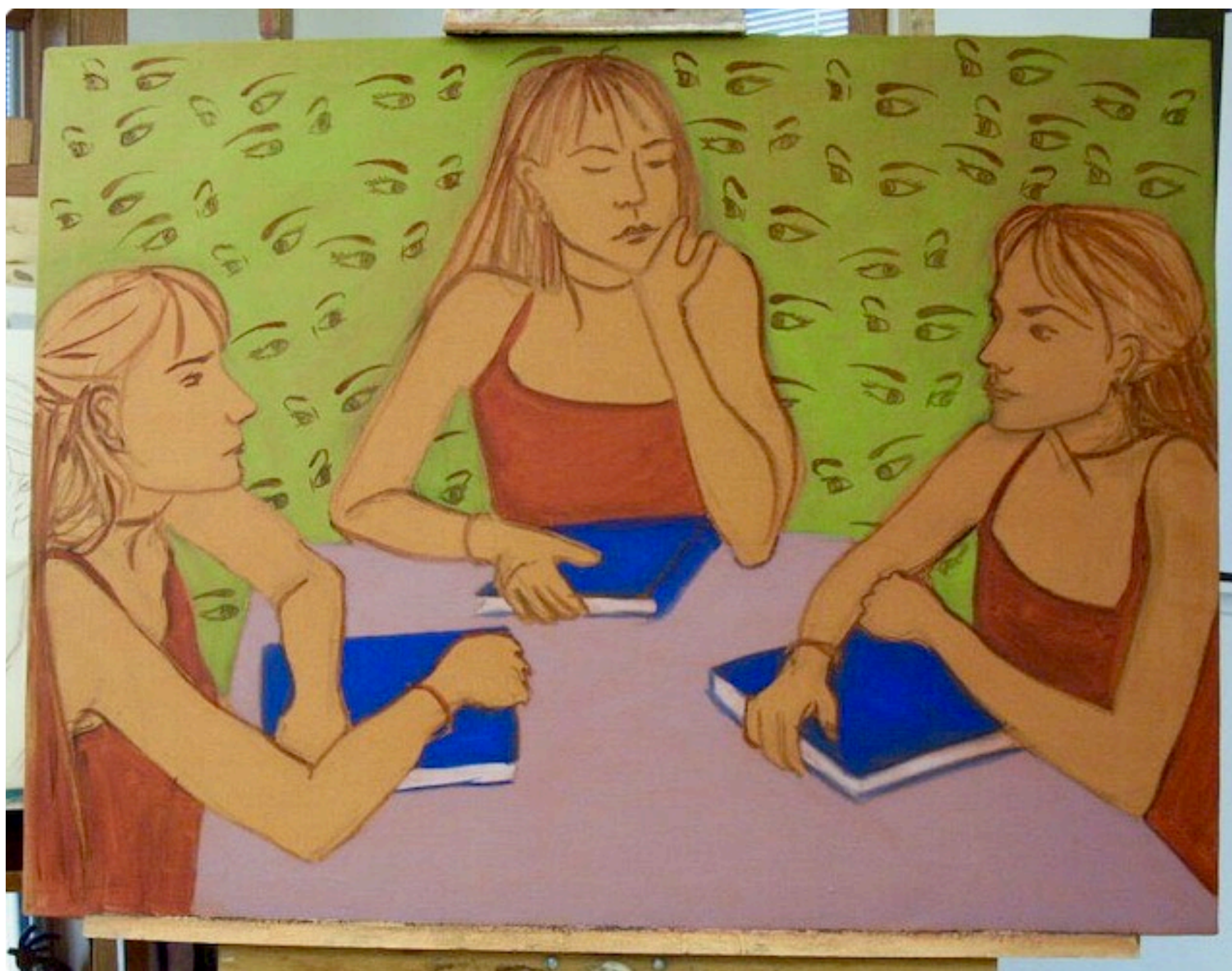


May 11

The bookkeeper showed me her drawing of a Spanish woman with chili peppers floating in the background as wallpaper. I am borrowing that idea for this painting using "eyes" instead of chili peppers. I traced the eyes from one of the drawings I did of her onto the background.



My friend's mother died recently. As Mary was going through her mom's belongings she found some paint brushes that had never been used and sent them to me. One of these brushes was a #6 round - the perfect shape and size to contour the eyebrows. I used it to apply the burnt sienna stain.



May 28

I recently read *My Happy Life* by Lydia Millet and, then, *We Were the Mulvaney*s by Joyce Carol Oates. Both novels deal with the lives of vulnerable young women, portrayed as loving and forgiving no matter how they are mistreated. I perceive the bookkeeper as this type of young woman.

The main character in “*My Happy Life*” is an orphan who experiences various distortions of familial connection. The young woman in “*We Were the Mulvaney*s” is ostracized from her family, and the story describes their struggle to communicate and stay connected. This painting is about that type of struggle.

I have begun to use thicker paint on top of the thin stains. I mixed permanent blue with burnt sienna to fill in dark sections of the women’s hair. I have also darkened the bands around their necks and wrists. Their flesh is now the color of stone, initially by accident. I did not mix the warm, flesh tone correctly. However, feeling ambiguous about skin color and whether the three women are communicating openly or not, I decided that this icy skin tone is appropriate for now.



June 9

I applied a more intense green to the wallpaper background. All eyes are blue now, and I painted eye shadow around them the way the bookkeeper likes to do. Also, I put the eye shadow color on the pages of the books.



July 6

Two interesting things happened while I was away on vacation in Arkansas.

First, I had the following dream:

Someone told me of a death in my family. Because I did not immediately express my sorrow, this emotion built up inside my head until I felt it might explode. I needed to scream, lash out, grab something and shake it. At this point I seized and stared into a mirror. My face did not reveal the emotional frenzy that I was experiencing; instead there was no expression and my skin was colored light, yellow ochre and plastered in place with brush strokes.

As I woke out of this dream, I determined that I should apply the same yellow ochre to the skin of the women in this painting. Once that was accomplished, I could see that their garments required a brighter coat of red – Cadmium Red Hue straight from the tube. I used Paynes gray to define the eyes and the neck and wrist bands.

The second interesting thing that happened was that I arranged to meet a woman who represents my artwork through ArtExchange.com. which has offices in Hot Springs. It was quite an informative meeting and tour of the facilities, but I found myself totally captivated by Rebecca's unusual widow's peak. I have tried to replicate it on the forehead of the woman seated in the middle. That led to adding highlights to the hair of all three woman and all eyebrows.



August 4

The tabletop had been screaming for my attention. Weeks passed as I pondered how to address this dull violet space, which I previously referred to as "sacred ground".

I mentioned to the bookkeeper that I thought it needed a tablecloth with a pattern; she suggested diamond shapes like what she's seen in some Picasso paintings. I began leaning toward the idea of lace, but I couldn't get the thought of diamond shapes out of my head. I laid the canvas on the floor and, with pencil and ruler, marked off a grid of lines crisscrossing to create rows of diamond shapes. (The light pencil lines may not be dark enough to see in the photograph.)



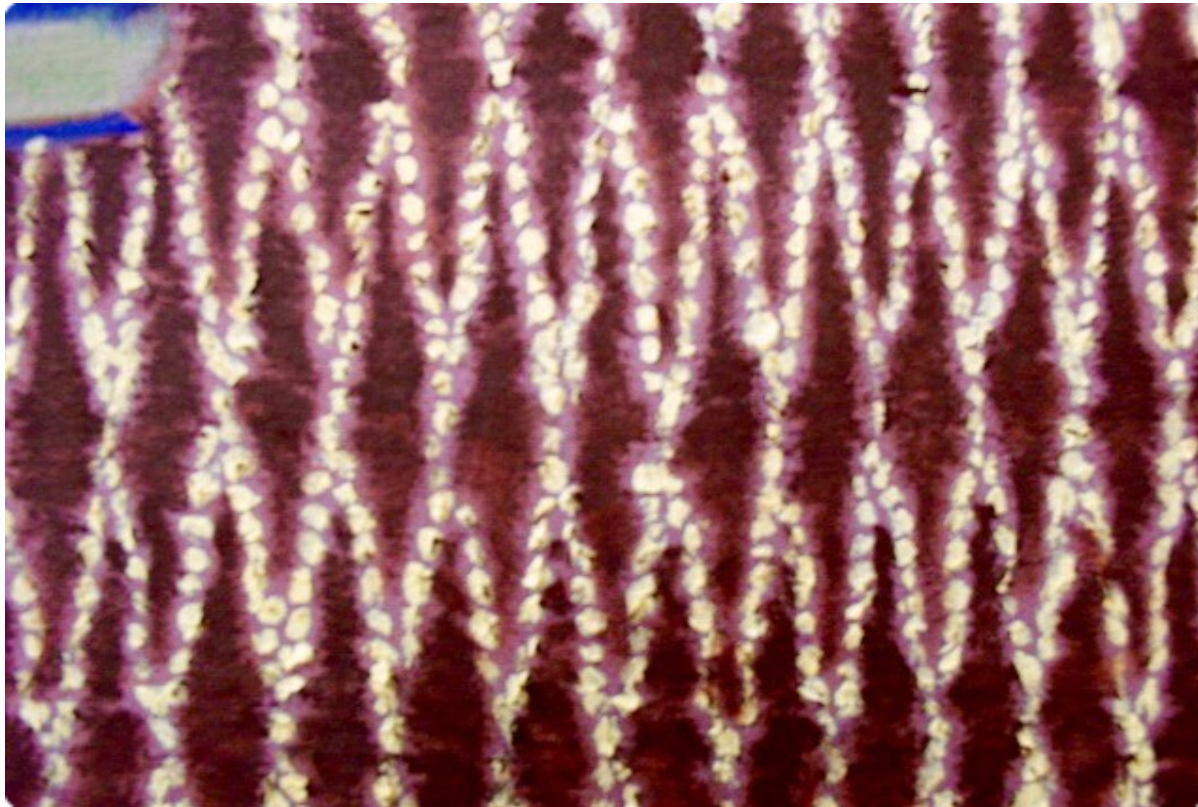
I almost applied white paint to these lines to make the lace, but Dori warned me that would give it a cold feeling. So I went with her suggestion of a pale lemon yellow.



I am pleased with the result, but it is not what I expected. I was going for a way to describe the chaos of emotion beneath the placid expressions of the women, and I thought swirling lines or a labyrinth type of pattern would do that. But now I realize it is not chaos that I'm after here – it is tension.

August 30

I applied burnt sienna with agitated back and forth strokes inside of the diamond shapes. The darker value was needed for depth and contrast.



Also, I toned down the bright blue books with a lighter shade of burnt sienna for a softer, leathery look. This may be a mistake, but I won't know that until I address the pages of the books. They are calling for my attention now, but I need to give this problem more thought...



October 6

I stare at this painting every morning while I stretch and do my sit-ups, but I was not able to find time to continue working on it until today. It has been over a month, but that's okay, because I have been stumped on how to proceed with the pages of the books. They have become more significant. I came across the following poem that helped me to understand why they matter to me so much now:

To My Dear Children

This book by any yet unread,
I leave for you when I am dead,
That being gone, here you may find
What was your living mother's mind.
Make use of what I leave in love,
And God shall bless you from above.

by Anne Bradstreet (1612 - 1672)

So, I began by painting the pages white. While I had white paint on my brush, I lightened up the pupils of the eyes. Then I applied yellow to the white pages. I will let this dry while I decide how to proceed with this area.

Having done that, I felt that the tablecloth was competing with the attention I want to give the books, so I toned it down by dabbing red (the same as on the dresses) on top of the white. Up close this is evident, but when I back up my eyes blend the colors so that it looks pink. This is my crude version of Pointillism. It always amazes me how that works.



I photographed it before I covered the whole tablecloth just to compare the difference.



October 16

With my tiniest brush, I added darker lines to the pages of the books with the intention of giving them more definition. Instead, now they look dirty and have less contrast against the tablecloth. This does not make me happy. But if I wait for the paint to dry and then add lighter lines again, it could work better than before.



I also added darker lines to accentuate the curl of the widow's peak.



Ever since I made the changes to the tabletop I knew the green background had to go. I decided to mix up a blue, similar to the eye shadow on the women, and work that around the eyes in the background. I mixed together some Ultramarine blue, Cadmium red hue, white, and Payne's gray.



(I applied this new color to the eyes of the three women, but it was way too bright so I wiped it off.)

It is also very intense in the background, the way I applied it as a mosaic pattern on top of the existing green. But I'm pleased with the sense of movement that has come from this new development.



November 3

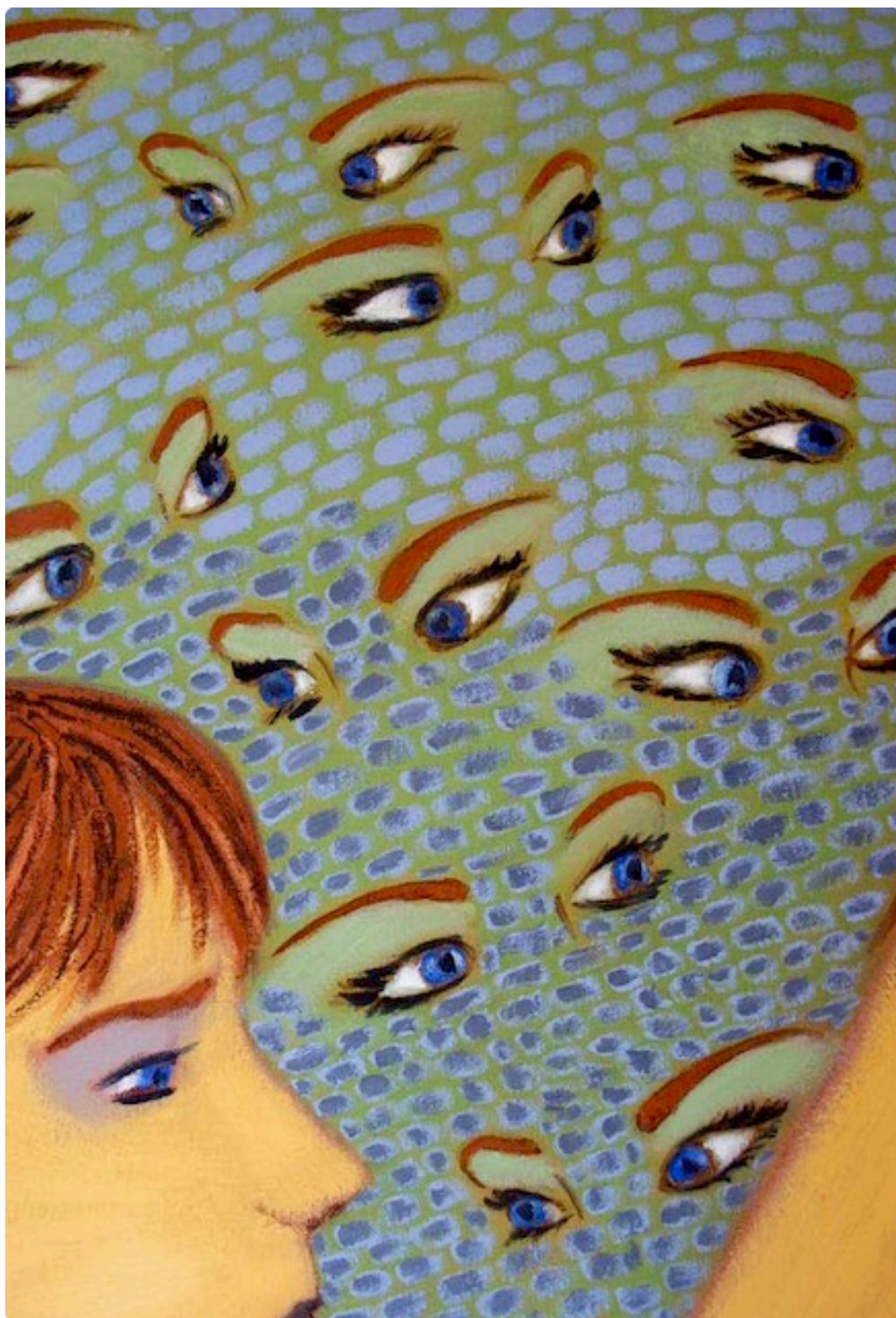
To help the background relate to the rest of the piece, I snaked some of that same blue in the mosaic down through the lace on the table. Now the tabletop reminds me of the violet surface I began with, but it is more interesting.



Consequently it seemed the background was pushing forward, so I mixed Paynes grey & white to layer onto the light blue so it wouldn't be so bright.

As I proceeded, it occurred to me to vary the background space. So I left a big swirl of it and mixed a dull shade of red to dab onto the blue in this section. Overkill. Didn't work, so I layered the Paynes grey on top of the red.











Now that I think about it, I could have scraped the paint off instead of trying to cover it.



Layers are okay, though. While I'm waiting for it to dry, I can think it through.



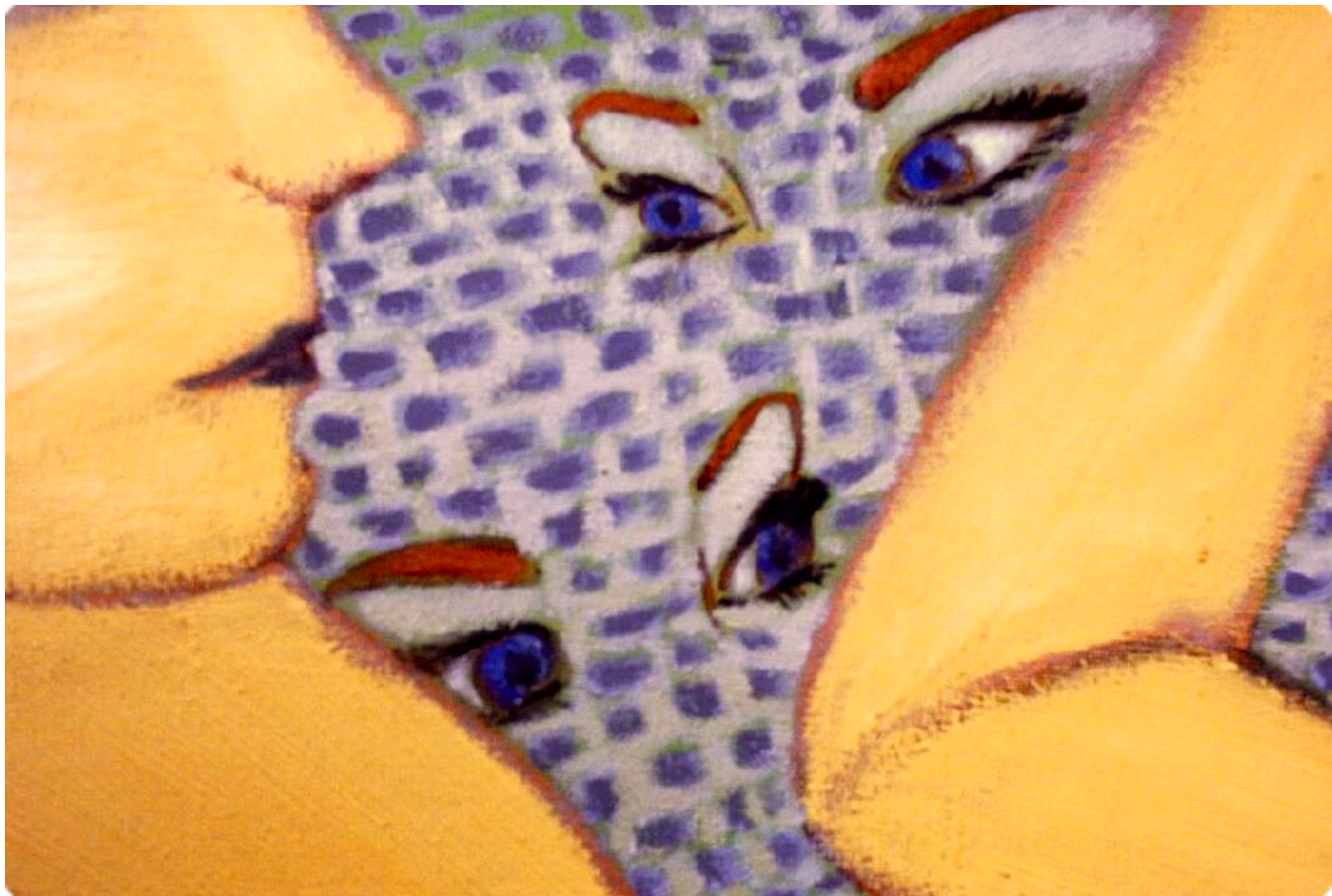
Finally, I added white to the pages.

November 28

I began applying a lighter mixture of Paynes grey & white to the “mortar” of the mosaic. It didn't take long to see that this was too icy, so I blended in some yellow ochre. This warmer color now threads through the background.







December 15

I came to a point where I was no longer attached to the soft, leathery look of the book covers. Something needed to be done to make them go with the rest of the painting. I came across an ancient tube of Cadmium Red Purple that had belonged to Richard Culley (the artist mentioned in my first update). It is such a deep, rich color. I used it straight from the tube to cover the books. And then I decided to darken the lips of the women with this dark purple.

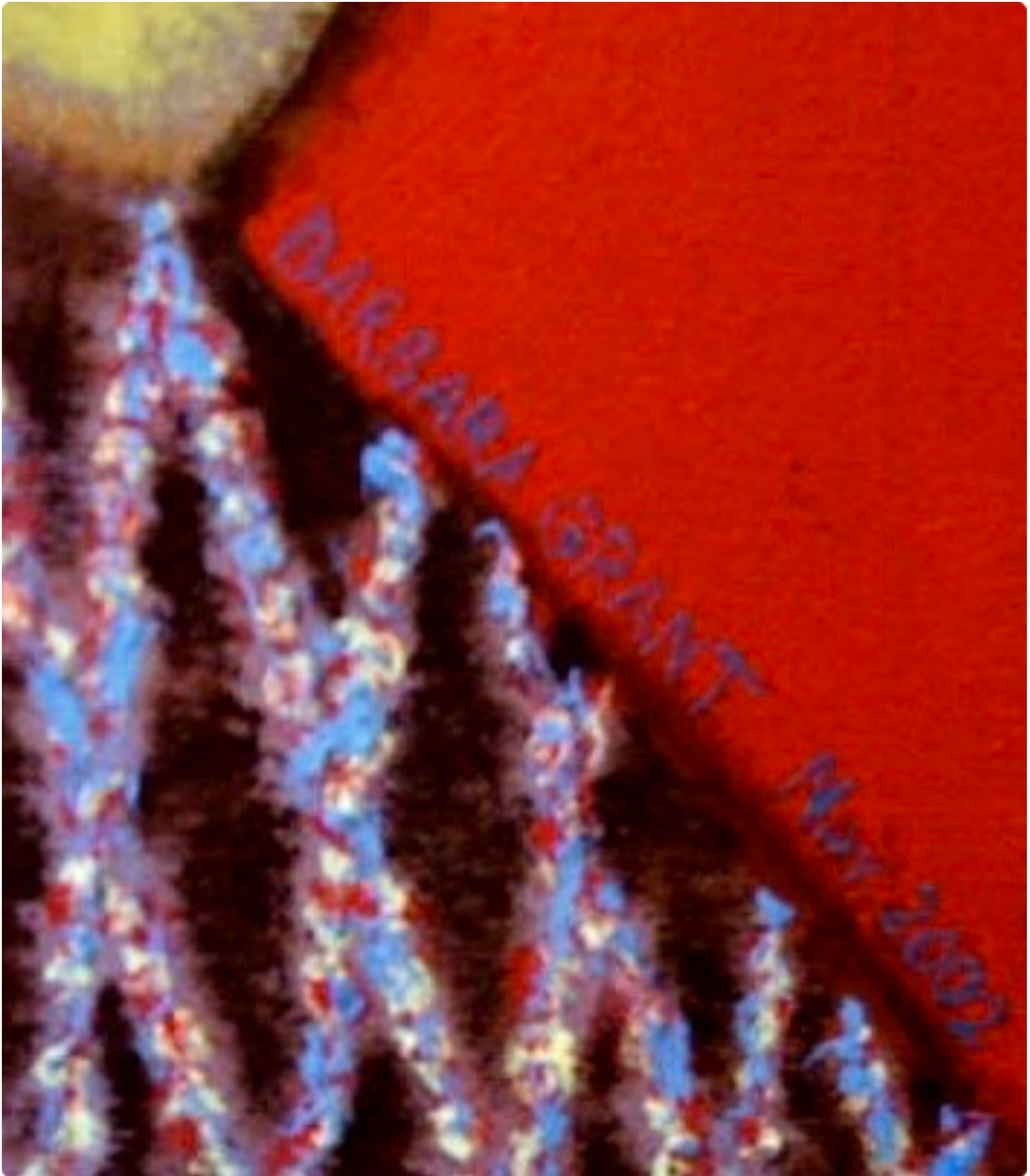


I have been feeling close to completing this painting lately. I asked Bob for a second opinion. I asked him if there was anything that bothered or annoyed him about this piece. Not so much about the meaning of it or the use of symbolism. I said, "Just pretend it's abstract, and tell me if there's anything that doesn't fit color or design-wise. " His response was that the blue eye shadow on the three women was distracting. After consideration, I agreed that they looked like raccoons. So I toned their eye shadow down by applying the same color I used on the background eyes.





Then I signed it by printing my name and date with my tiniest brush down in the right hand corner.





The End



Barbara Grant is from Peoria, Illinois, but the Milwaukee area has been her home since 1987. She earned a BFA from Northern Illinois University in 1989.

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