



MORE THAN REAL

THE PAINTINGS OF
ERIC WERT

THIS SPREAD:
Eric Wert in his studio,
photo courtesy of the artist



By Clayton Schuster

If I did to animals and people what I do to fruits and flowers I'd be in prison," says Eric Wert. He works in still life. Flowers, certainly—as well as fruits and vegetables, fish, crabs, oysters, and other creatures. Or is it flora and fauna? He paints them. And painting is documentary. It seems truer to use the Latin and scientific terms to describe life recorded in such meticulous detail. And so instead of Chesapeake blue crab maybe we should say he's painting *Callinectes sapidus*. By his hand they look real enough to give off a briny odor. They look real enough for a boiling pot.

But *ceci n'est pas un crabe*. Or pepper. Or dragon fruit. Or vase, or textile, or anything other than what a painting actually is. In this case, that's oils on canvas. It is an illusion by a very deft hand. It is a talent for proportion and color and geometry.

Wert connects his work directly to still life from the Dutch Golden Age of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. He says, "They achieve an insane sense of clarity that allows the viewer to see even the most banal of subjects with freshly peeled eyes. Back then, scientists were artists and vice versa. While I admire their virtuosity, I especially love their compositions because they are so strange."

Merging art with science is a major theme of Wert's career. His foray into professional artmaking was as a scientific illustrator for the Field Museum of Natural History. He began working there while still a student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He started as a specimen preparator and then worked as a scientific illustrator for the anthropology department.

This was some twenty-five years ago. Just before artistic creation could happen wholesale in a digital ecosystem. Wert supported anthropologists by reconstructing artifacts from fragments—the shards or rocks that they brought back from their journeys out in the world. Meticulously, faithfully, his pen-on-paper drawings reassembled something shattered and forgotten into something comprehensible.

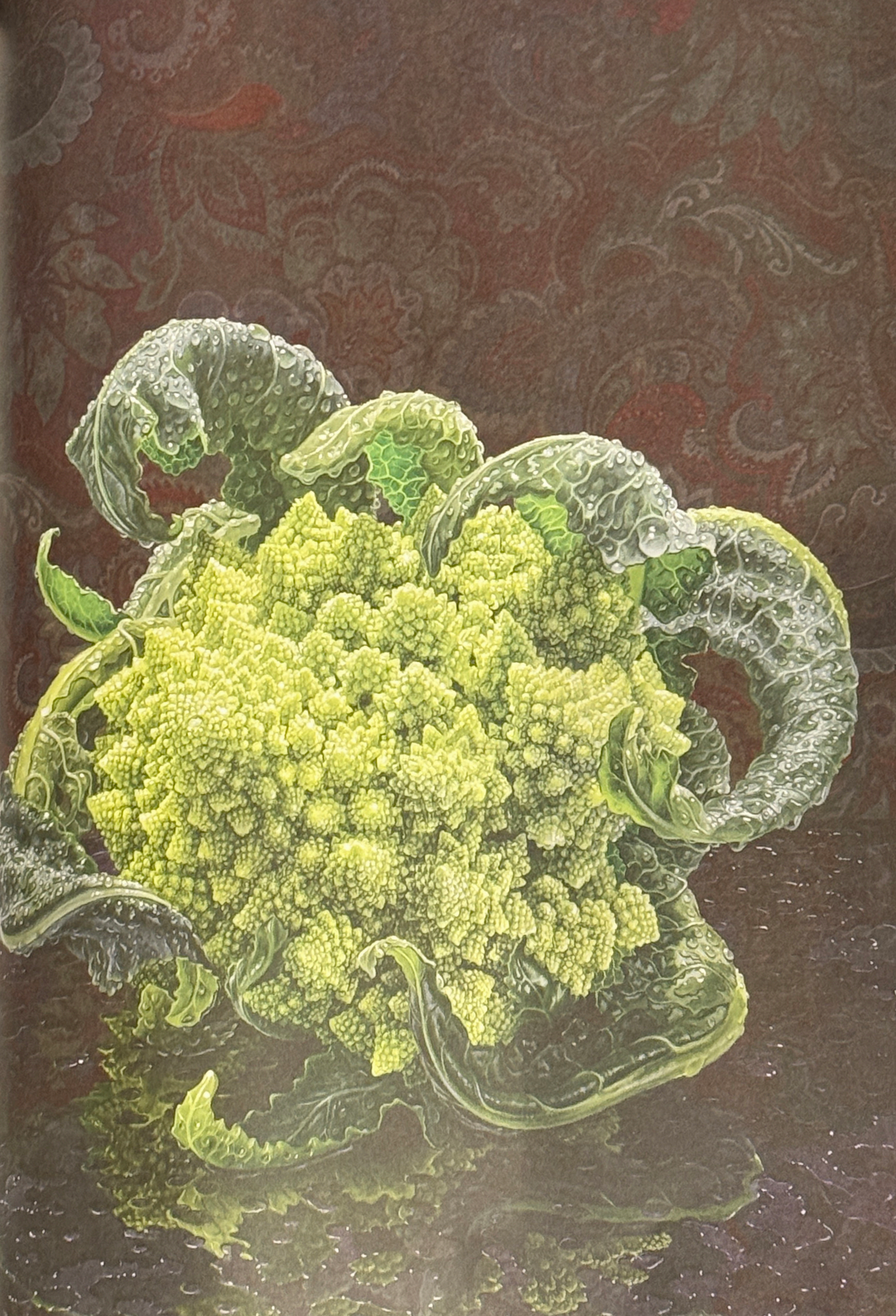
"I spent a fair amount of time dissecting subjects to have a clearer understanding of their structure," Wert says. "At the end of the day, you might have a nice drawing of a cross section of your subject that explains everything very clearly while the real subject in front of you has been ripped to shreds in pursuit of that understanding. That experience of destroying something to understand it has stayed with me."

The method of his current work shares many similarities with his work as a scientific illustrator. Back then, the subject of his illustrations was rarely sitting whole in front of him. The components of his current work are never sitting on a table before him so that he can fuss with the position of this peony, or the way the light hits that pomegranate. Sometimes Wert will have something fresh and real right there but more often his paintings are a collage of photographs, online images, and objects from his imagination.

This offers him needed distance from the subject. His work is not tender or coddling. We are not enamored of his handling of the foodstuffs or textiles, per se. It is the soul beneath. There is an intellectual quality to each painting. Not in the sense that the figures are anthropomorphized, but in the way that you can feel there is something more here.

These paintings are not faithful renditions of the food we

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eat. But they do evoke yearning, longing. They do hint at our never-ending need to be fulfilled. That primal quest to abet hunger, only to know it will come back.

And so, indeed, *ceci n'es pas un nourriture*, it is something different, maybe even something more.

Wert says, "I do not know the first thing about poetry, but maybe a painting is poetic if it feels open to many different and conflicting feelings, associations, or interpretations. I am happiest with a painting when it seems as if it can reflect many attitudes. Can it be serene and angry? Sad and goofy? Lovely and gross? Can it be all of these at the same time, or can these qualities emerge as you yourself change, as you see the painting again and again, year after year?"

He maintains, however, that the focus while working on each painting remains on the form and the compositional details. Do the subjects suggest movement or stillness? How do light, color, texture flow together? The symbolic is separate. Any meaning beyond the components of the painting is left to the viewer.

Although, it is difficult to look at a painting like "Artichoke"

and not see something more. The angle of repose, the beads of water. The way he makes something so prickly feel so delicate. Maybe it can also be true, though, that it is really, really easy to read too much into something. Maybe a glistening eggplant is just an eggplant. Or an impossibly sweating pile of plums is just that, a pile of plums. Throw your knowledge of emojis and modern life out. Maybe these are meditations on form and texture alone.

"I tend to choose relatively recognizable subjects," says Wert. "What I love most about painting is observing a subject so intensely that everyday associations melt away and it becomes something unfamiliar—like repeating a word over and over until it loses meaning and becomes just a sound. The experience of painting common subjects reveals just how unknowable they truly are. The closer I look, the more mysterious they become. We might feel like we understand the world around us, but that is an illusion. The world is just as strange, puzzling, and fascinating now as it was to those painters four hundred years ago at the dawn of the Enlightenment."

We can, however, find a few common visual themes that indeed hint at deeper meaning. For instance, his years-long obsession with upending bouquets. The idea first

OPPOSITE: "Paean", oil on canvas, 50" x 40", 2024
ABOVE: "Aubergine", oil on panel, 18" x 24", 2023



ABOVE:
"Tomato",
oil on panel, 9" x 9", 2020

OPPOSITE:
"Nimbus",
oil on canvas, 60" x 48", 2020

NEXT SPREAD:
"Nasturtium",
oil on panel, 18" x 24", 2018









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arose from an urge to quite literally *upend* our preconceived notions of still life. The result creates interesting and chaotic lines from the stems, which portray confusion as they dangle in the air. Wert has an excellent sense for pairing vases and bowls with his fruits, vegetables, and flowers. And with these upturned works, the vases are typically glass so he can never miss the opportunity to create mysterious refractions and distortions of the colors stuffed within. Organic jumbles of brightness and color that feel immense as supernovas.

"It conveys a drama and vulnerability that continues to compel me," he says.

This is the mode for his latest painting, "Paeon," which will be included in the upcoming group show *West Coast* at Gallery Henoch in New York City from October 17 through November 9, 2024.

Spilled flowers and split open fruit offer another consistent theme. We see the former in "Rookwood and Morris." Flowers are knocked about, splayed across the surface of a table. In a work called "Deluge" the vase is broken. "Nimbus" and other works show the splayed flowers paired with the upturned motif. As if the act of stuffing

the flowers in the vase has left a few lost souls go by the wayside. Free of the vase, but without purpose.

The split fruits are a distinct and memorable image throughout his work. "Tomato" has the eponymous fruit's guts on display. "Blood Oranges" mixes pulpy, shorn segments of the citrus alongside halves that are much more cleanly cut. Both visuals, the spilled flowers and split fruits, are whispers of a larger theme: Vanitas. An ancient tradition for a traditional genre. Wert is conscious of these allusions, and he keeps them at the fore with each work.

He says, "I think of my paintings as part of the Vanitas tradition, reminding viewers of the fleeting nature of life, wealth, relationships, and understanding. That may sound maudlin, but the acknowledgment of impermanence might help us to appreciate our present experience more richly. We are here for a good time, not a long time, right?"

Whether you admire Wert's work for its beauty, or feel something stir within you that is more profound, there is a virtuosity that cannot be ignored. His mastery of craft and subject matter offers everyone something to ponder and enjoy. †

OPPOSITE: "Artichoke", oil on panel, 12" x 12", 2024

ABOVE: Eric Wert in his studio