

**Daniel E. Greene** sets his characters on platforms as they wait for trains or raise paddles in auction houses—contemporary versions of the underworld and paradise.



# The World As Stage

BY MAUREEN BLOOMFIELD





**T**“TO PREPARE A FACE to meet the faces that you meet”—J. Alfred Prufrock assures us “there will be time.” At subway stations, passengers assume postures that hide vulnerability; at cocktail parties or auction houses, the players wear masks of bonhomie, authority, indifference. The world’s a stage, and rather than depict players at ease, as many contemporary realists do, Daniel E. Greene prefers a formality that harks back to the gorgeously executed theatrics of French Neoclassical painters like David, Poussin and Ingres.

Greene concluded many years ago that “one painting of a subject was not enough.” He explains: “I would set up a still life on a table top in front of the easel facing me, but I would walk all the way around the arrangement. It would frequently look just as interesting from the back. I would do several versions of the

same still life, and perusing different points of view of the same subject became my method.” To date he has done 117 paintings set in the New York subways. “It’s never ending,” he says, “it will always be fascinating.”

### Elements of Stagecraft

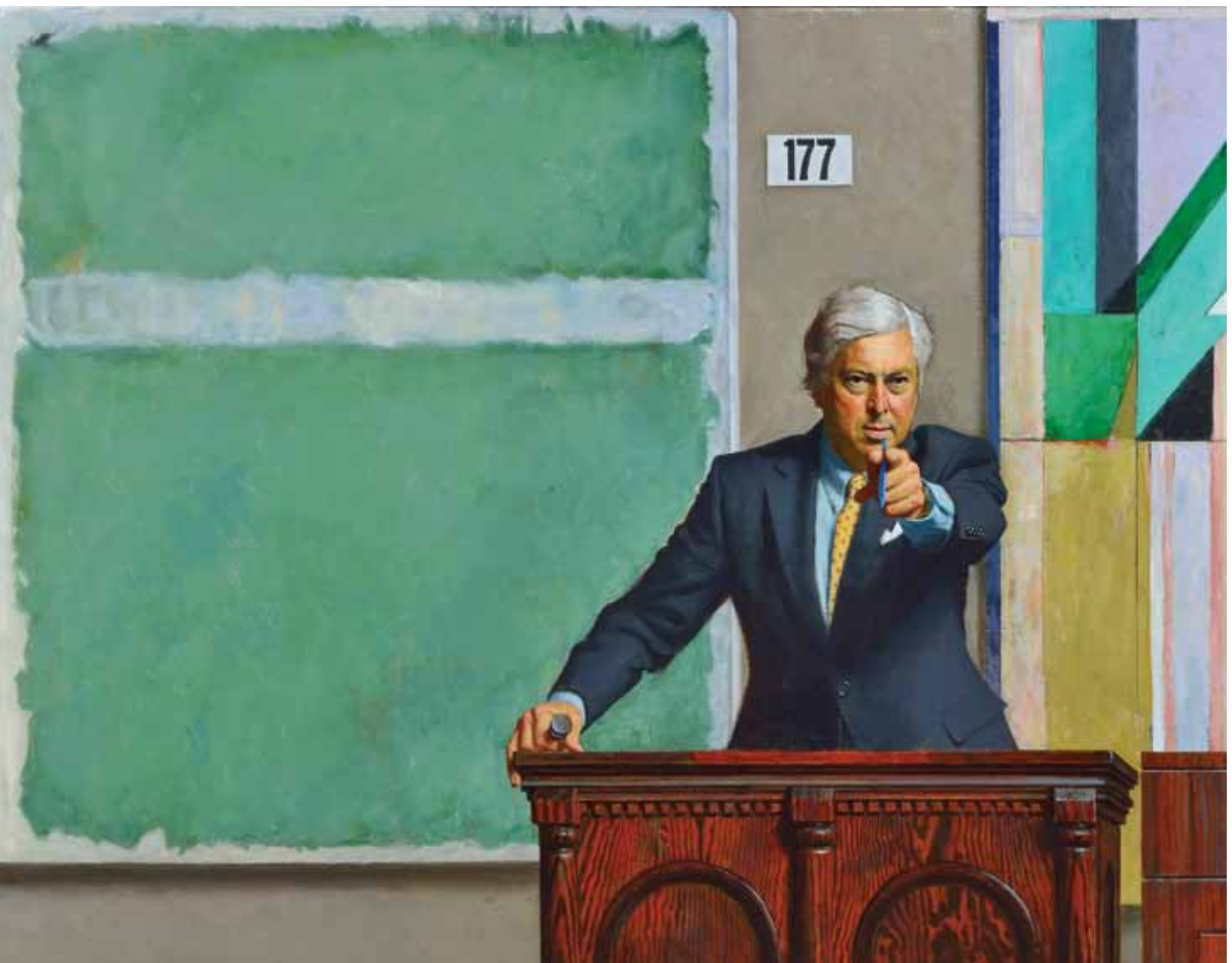
Rather than the Neoclassical forests of Arcadia, Greene stages the dramas in actual places, at times recreating the set. *Waiting for the Train—Brooklyn Bridge*, (pages 34–35) asserts symmetry (mosaic design, mirrored B’s back to back) and then defies it by placing the model alone. The rectangle inset in the center functions as an opaque window, knobless door, or primed canvas; the only passage without luster, it’s echoed by the notebook the model holds. At a station now closed, flanked by an empty canvas, a lone figure looks inward. The

#### PREVIOUS SPREAD:

Daniel E. Greene in his North Salem studio; photo by Kenneth Kast

***Waiting for the Train—Brooklyn Bridge*** (oil on wood, 44x48)

**BELOW: *Rothko and Diebenkorn*** (oil on linen, 40x50)





shadows cast by the canvas answer the shadow the figure casts. A soliloquy asserting defiance or an elegy evoking loss, *Waiting for the Train—Brooklyn Bridge* represents the desolation of the blank canvas/page and the artist's bleak (but dazzling) determination to make a mark.

### Building the Set

Waiting on a train platform is an introduction to the idea of a journey; that the train is going literally underground deepens the metaphor. If the subway system travels to and through the Land of the Dead, the stage of an auction house is its counterpart. At the start of this

series, Greene observed auctions at Christie's, where he made sketches at previews and during actual events. He then bought an antique podium and pedestal and had carpenters build replicas of the booths, which he outfitted with old-fashioned telephones, in effect recreating a facsimile of the set of Christie's in his north light studio.

He and his wife, the painter Wende Caporale, have long collected antiques. "Antique dealers themselves are acquisitive, a fascinating breed, unique as the artifacts they exhibit and sell," he says. "I found significance in people bidding, vying with one another. An

**ABOVE: At the Auctioneer's Podium** (oil on linen, 46x48)



**RIGHT TOP: *Back Row Study*** (oil on wood, 30x25)

**RIGHT BOTTOM: *Back Row*** (oil on linen, 42x40)

auction is a drama in real time, and auctions exhibit all the elements I'm interested in: I love painting people; I love painting antiques and artifacts; I love painting pictures of other paintings." Indeed, one of the great pleasures of these paintings is the copied works within them. These pictures within the picture are often visible, too, as fragmentary reflections on the auctioneer's platform; so that he can create that illusion, Greene prints copies of master works, then places the copies in baroque frames.

### Call Backs and Casting

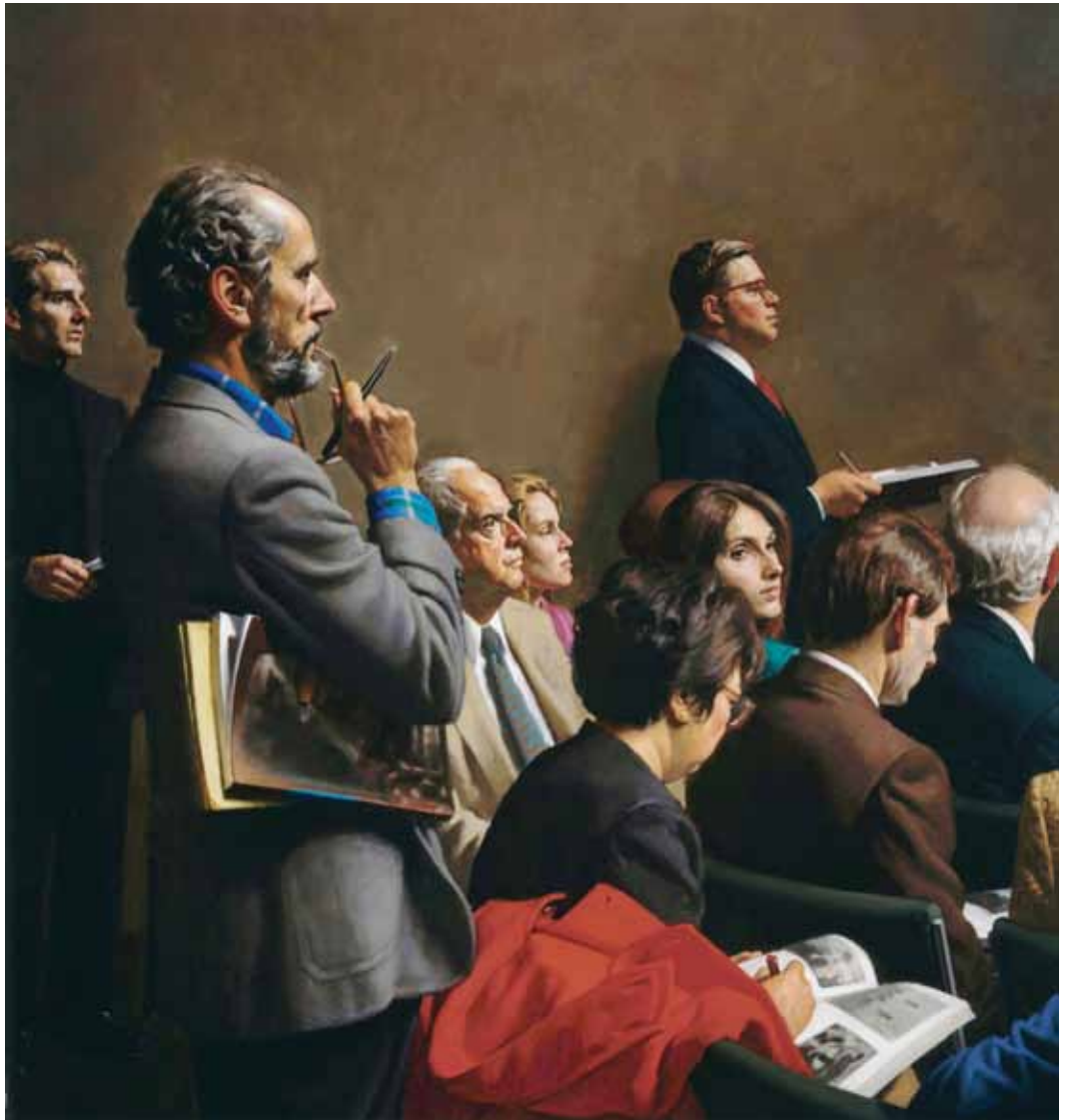
Because the artist couldn't paint pictures of the people who were actually buying and selling, he started "scouring" his North Salem, N.Y. neighborhood for models who could play the part. He was fortunate in his friend, the

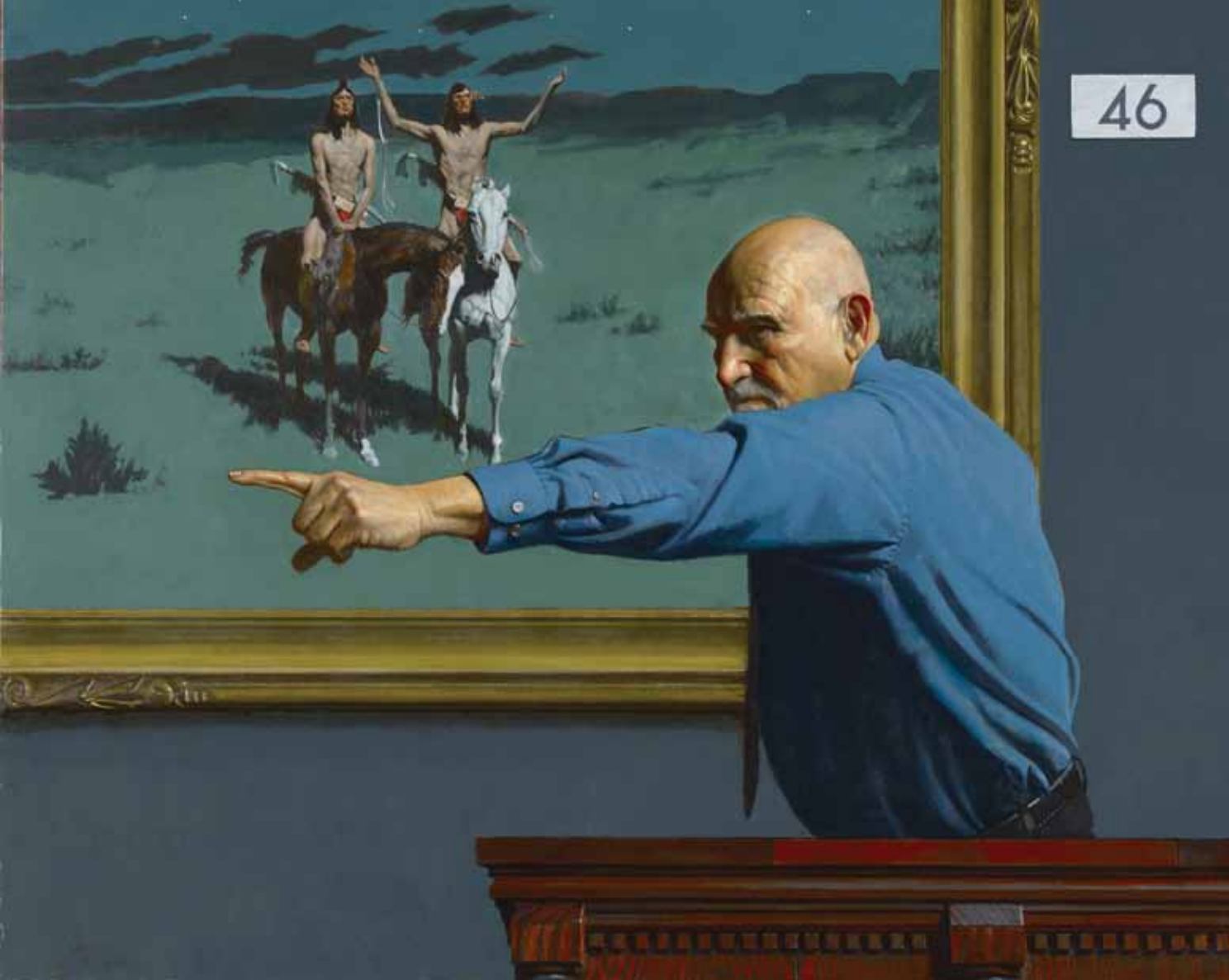
## Materials

**Oils:** ivory black, Prussian blue, raw sienna, burnt sienna, raw umber, burnt umber, yellow ochre, cadmium yellow medium, sap green, phthalo green, cadmium red medium or scarlet, alizarin crimson, Permalba white, alkyd titanium white

**Brushes:** Silver Brush bristles, filberts, sables, flats, cat's tongues

**Mediums:** Winsor & Newton Liquin, and mixture of 1/8 stand oil and 2/8 mineral spirits





collector Bryan Colley, “a great looking guy who is more believable as an auctioneer than the actual one (see *Rothko & Diebenkorn*, page 36).” Greene and Colley made a deal: a painting in exchange for posing for paintings. Then Greene advertised at senior citizens centers for artist’s models and secured paddles from various auction houses.

Greene animates the charged atmosphere by choreographing all the characters’ gestures. (Look at the eloquent arc of the model’s hand, wrist and arm in *Telephone Bid-21*, page 41 for example). Along with the glamour, there’s an undercurrent of greed: filthy lucre is being exchanged for priceless works of art and that lucre is passing into hands other than the artist’s, after all. Greene heightens both shadows and lights and often gives the auctioneer a judgmental aura, evident in *At the Auctioneer’s Podium*, a textbook on the uses of chiaroscuro (page 37). By pointing at an unseen bidder, the

auctioneer implicates the viewer, putting him on the spot, inviting him into the picture’s tense illusion.

### The Drama of Acquisition

The metaphorical and literal darkness of the theatre broken only by stage lights is repeated in *Auctioneer and Remington’s Pretty Mother of the Night*. In the latter, the auctioneer, with grim-faced intensity, again points to the bidder/viewer to convey that the painting is sold. The gesture, however, is accusatory. *Pretty Mother of the Night—White Otter Is No Longer a Boy*, one of Remington’s nocturnes, was intended to illustrate a story of a young man’s initiation. A nocturne within a nocturne, Greene’s painting’s chromatics are as finely calibrated as Remington’s and Whistler’s: the sky is a variation on the auctioneer’s shirt, and the red of the young men’s garments is picked up by the podium’s veneer.

**ABOVE: *Auctioneer and Remington’s Pretty Mother of the Night*** (oil on linen, 40x50)



**ABOVE: Two O'Keeffes** (oil on linen, 44x52)

**OPPOSITE: Telephone Bid-21** (oil on linen, 40x30)

Switching formats (the vertical echoes the contours of a telephone booth), *Telephone Bid—21* (next page) demonstrates Greene's mastery of composition, as the assistant's gesture repeats, varies and mirrors the contours of the Avery hanging above her, at the same time her own reflection appears distorted in the counter top. That kind of technical tour de force, reminiscent of Van Eyck, delights Greene who actually lived in Greenwich Village at the time the Cedar Tavern Abstract

Expressionists did. "It was tempting to do that kind of work, but I didn't find it challenging enough," he says.

### In Pursuit of Complexity

In contrast to the often torturous emotions the Abstract Expressionists released on canvas, Greene, in describing his process, talks a lot about "fun." It's fun, he says, to paint the coils of old fashioned telephones; fun, too, to recreate intricate patterns in the folds of a Persian rug. The pleasure of his work, for both artist and viewer, is its complexity. Within that complexity the starkness of the human presence becomes more bold.

Often working with pairs, Greene posits female figures, more alike than different in appearance, as they confront one another. The subject then becomes duality rather than difference. In *Cat's Cradle & Gameboards* (see page 4), the pretext is a string game with high

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**ABOVE: *Naked Maja*** (oil on wood, 48x44)

**OPPOSITE: *Ceremony*** (pastel on wood, 32x50)

stakes. The element of skill as it interacts with chance is emphasized by the folk art gaming boards on the walls. In *Naked Maja* (above), a print of Goya's *Maja* is pinned to the wall (note the pins' shadows), while the two seated women remind us of the clothed version. Look past the figures and the surface resembles a Rothko, a spectacular but subtle allusion.

Finally, in *Ceremony* (page 43), the figures face one another in what appears to be a transfer of power. The means of this initiation

is a set of stretcher bars suitable for a head and shoulders portrait. "When I was a very young man," Greene says, "my goal was to become as good a painter as the masters. Now I see that there is a huge amount of talent out there; I acknowledge that those painters are up and coming. I see *Ceremony* as the passing of the baton to the younger generations."

In *Ceremony*, the numbers stenciled on the blackboard, instead of forming a sequence, suggest the chaos that lies beyond every ceremony

or facade. Numbers and words can constitute a code and language, or just appear to. This is the tension—between the structure suggesting ratiocination and the fact of nonsense—between the beautiful edifice and the void it hides. Like Avery, Rothko and Diebenkorn, whose pictures often appear within Greene's pictures, Greene always asserts the actuality of the painting rather than the illusion of life. Like an ornate text, Greene's pictures quicken the heart of the viewer eager to pen a translation or an exegesis.

In fact, the prevalence of pairs in Greene's work may point to the inextricable connection between artist and viewer. One figure mirrors and is tied (*Cat's Cradle and Gameboards*) to the other. And that constantly renewing reflection is a solace of art. Thinking of Rembrandt, "one of the greatest artists who have every lived," Greene says, "the more you know, the more you see; the more you see, the more you learn." ■

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**MAUREEN BLOOMFIELD** is the editor of *The Artist's Magazine*.



Susan Farley, The New York Times

## Meet the Artist

Born in Cincinnati, Daniel E. Greene, N.A., has taught at the Art Students League of New York. He has won every conceivable award. Cavalier Gallery in Greenwich, Conn.; Miller Gallery in Cincinnati, Ohio; Portraits, Inc; Beverly McNeil Gallery in Birmingham, Ala., and S.R. Brennan Gallery in Santa Fe, NM and Palm Desert, Calif. represent his work. "At The Auction," a show of recent paintings, will open at Gallery Henoah ([www.galleryhenoch.com](http://www.galleryhenoch.com)) in New York City on April 2 and will continue until April 25. To register for his summer portrait workshops, July 26–31, August 2–7 and August 9–14, visit [www.danielgreeneartist.com](http://www.danielgreeneartist.com). To purchase his instructional DVDs, visit [www.northlightshop.com](http://www.northlightshop.com).

