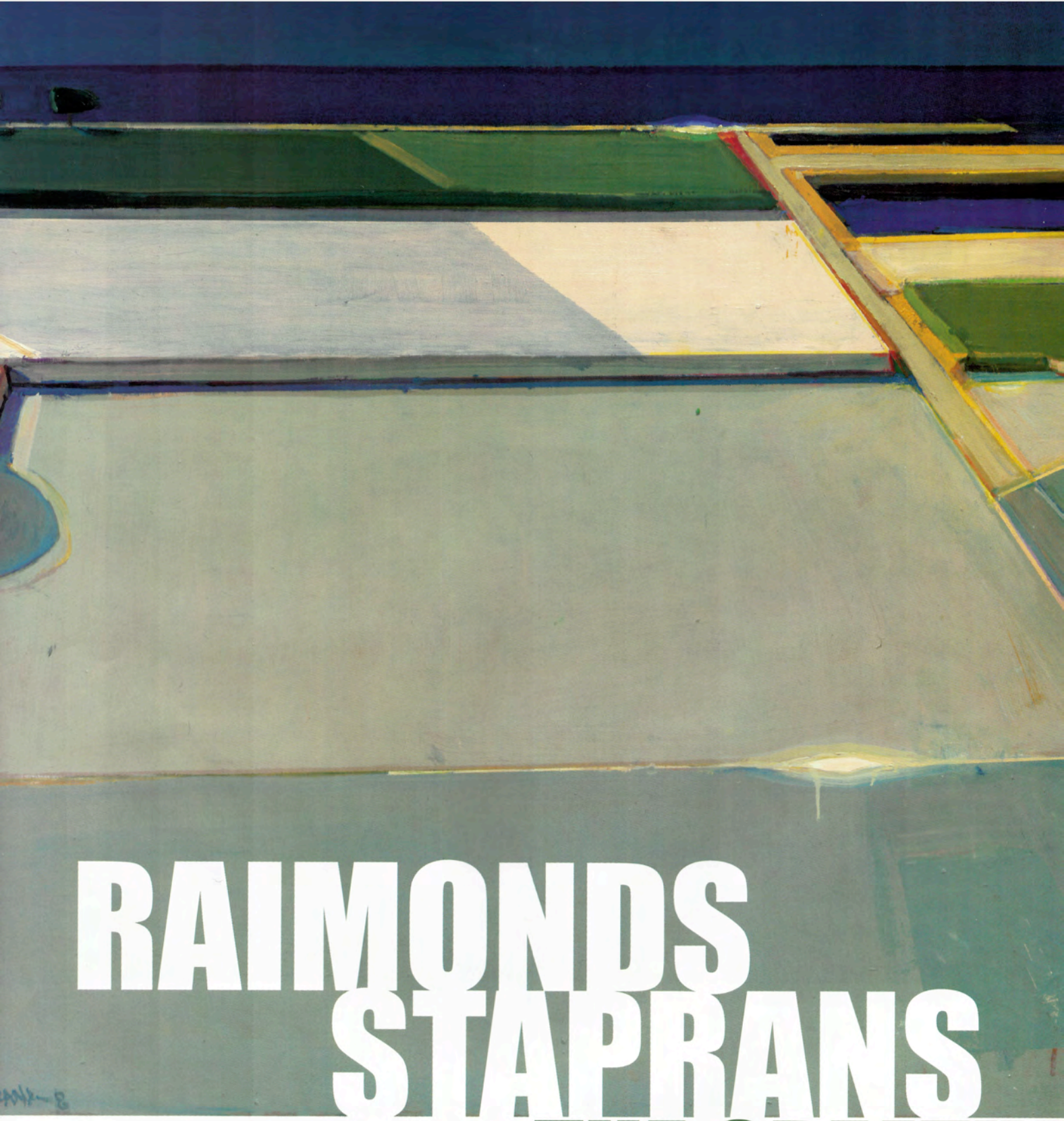

RAIMONDS STAPRANS

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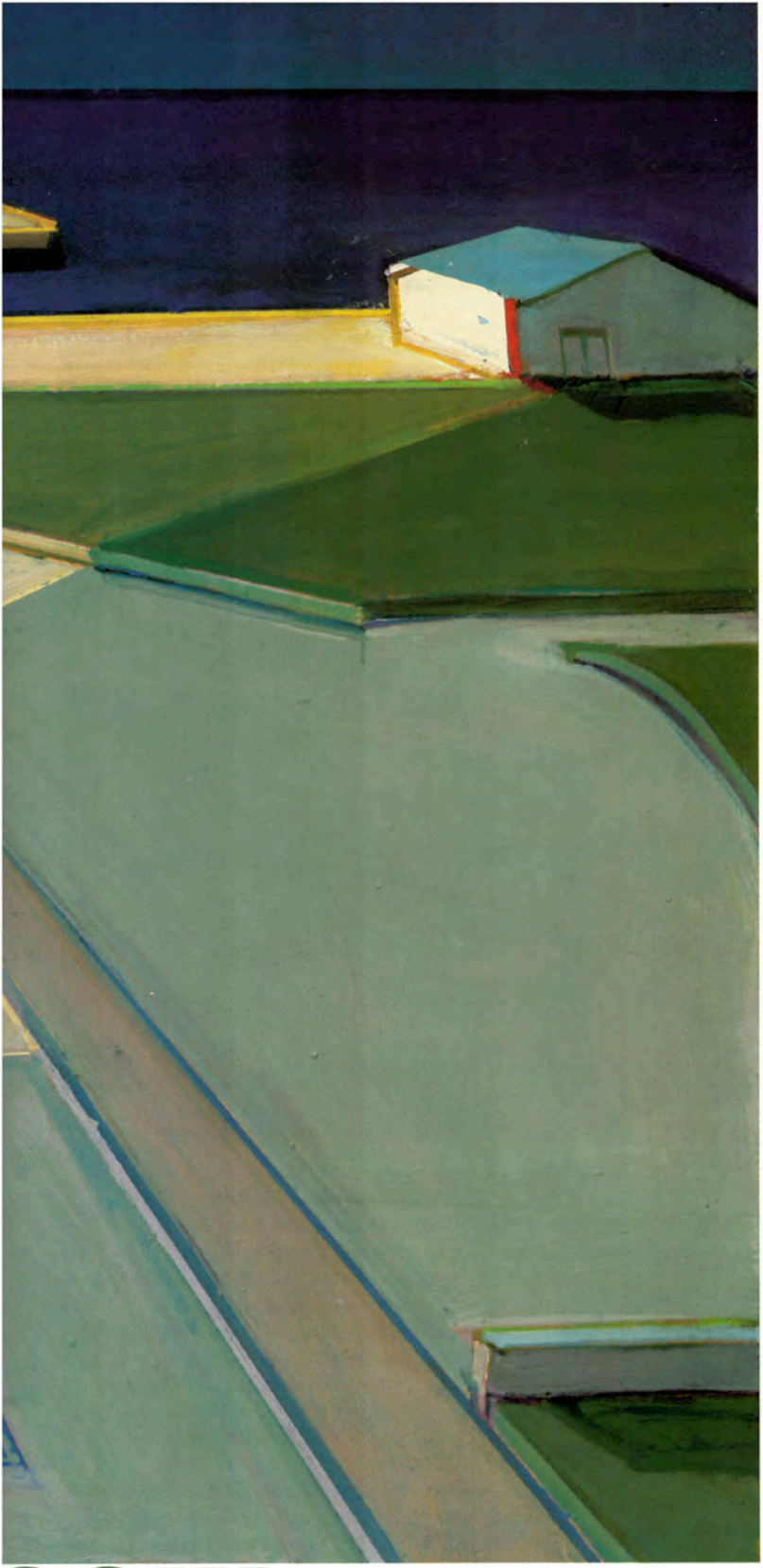

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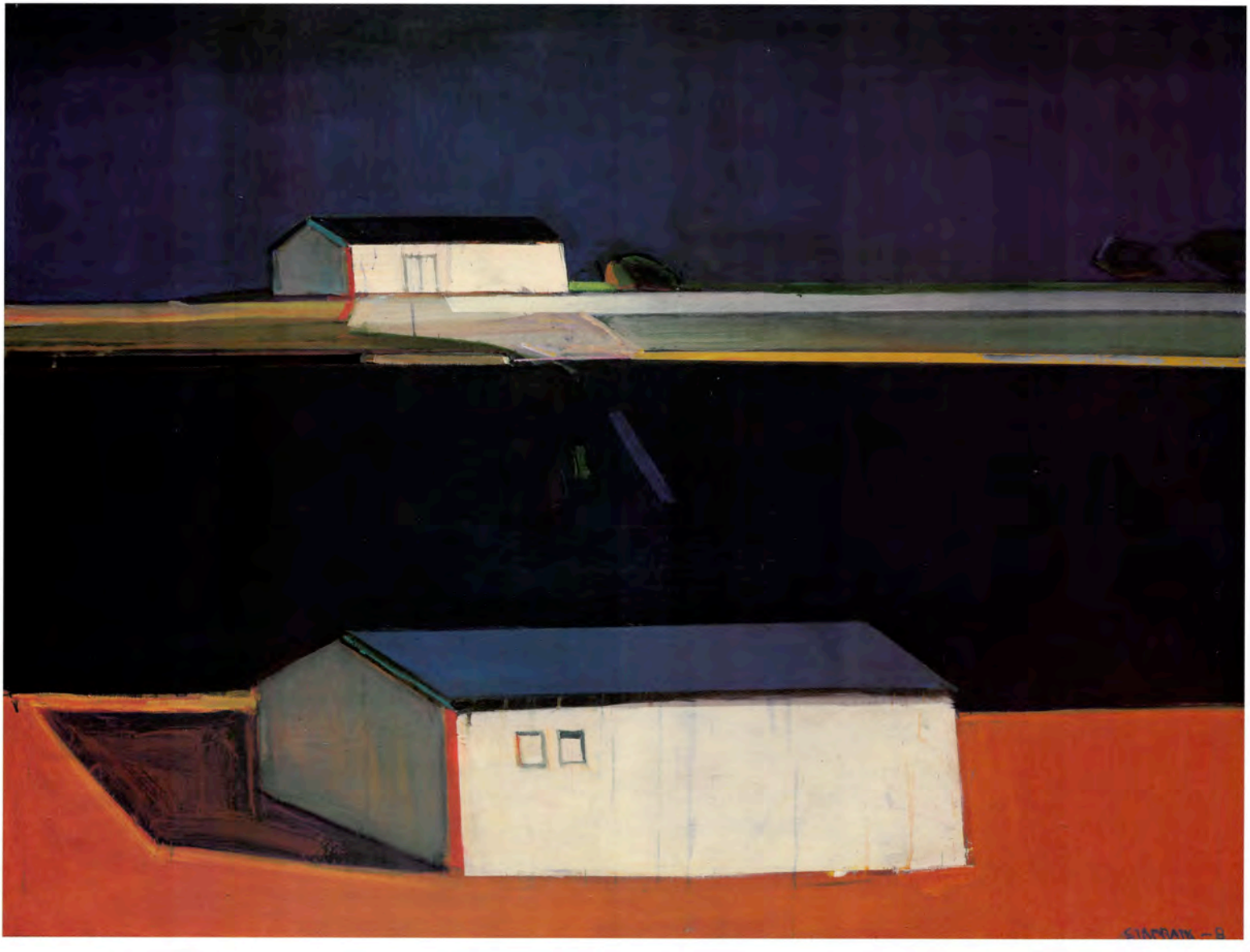
By Eastern European standards he was a child of privilege. The family had a nice third floor apartment overlooking the hospital where his father worked as a surgeon. A mortuary was located next door for obvious, practical reasons, and as a young child, the people coming and going fascinated Raimonds Staprans. Looking out the window, pencil and paper in hand, he would draw funeral processions. "People who saw the drawings would say, 'What a morose child,'" Staprans recalls. "But really I had a happy childhood until the war. The war changed everything."

Latvia is a country bordered by Russia on one side and the Baltic Sea on the other. At the beginning of World War II, and under a pact with the Germans, the Soviets took control of Latvia in 1939, officially annexing the country a year later and launching what the Latvians call "Baigais Gads" – the year of horror. Mass arrests, disappearances and deportations terrorized the small Baltic nation. Raimonds' family somehow survived the first wave of terror despite the fact that Staprans' physician father was an outspoken social democrat.

Written by ERIN**CLARK**
Photographed by DARCY**RODGERS**

IMAGE: *Artichoke Road*, 39.75 x 60.25", oil on canvas, 2008. Courtesy Hackett-Freedman Gallery, San Francisco. All photography by PHOCASSO/JW White.



He would tempt fate again when the Germans invaded in 1941, and began the systematic extermination of close to 90,000 Jews. Raimonds' father did what he could to help his desperate Jewish neighbors and was, at one point, interrogated by Nazi investigators. The fact that one of the Gestapo agents was a former patient probably saved his life. He was told to lay low, go to work and keep his mouth shut, which he did for several years. But after the bloody Baltic Offensive of 1944, the Soviets regained control of much of Latvia and Dr. Staprans didn't believe that he and his young family could dodge another bullet. Fearing another mass deportation to Siberia, the Staprans made a critical decision.

"The family sat around the dinner table – my father, my mother, my brother and me," Raimonds remembers. "We all decided together. It was time to leave. We locked up the apartment with everything in it. Each of us had a suitcase, small enough to carry and that's how we left." The Staprans were now refugees, launched abruptly into an uncertain future.

"It's rare to see big money, good taste and a real appreciation for art come together. Usually people who truly appreciate art can't afford it."

Raimonds was supposed to be a doctor. He even attended a special high school designed to get students ready for the rigorous curriculum in medical school. "Where I come from the son does what the father does," Raimonds explains. "I was expected to be a physician. It never occurred to me to do something different. Drawing was a pastime, a hobby." That is until Raimonds ended up in a displaced persons camp – better known as refugee camp. Unbelievably, there was an art center there, which was a haven for a bored teenager with artistic talent. Raimonds took some lessons, did some soul searching and started thinking about art as a possible career. To his surprise his biggest supporter turned out to be his very no-nonsense father. "He said to me, 'You will probably be poor but you will have an interesting life. Being a practical doctor is boring.' My father liked the people in the arts but didn't really understand the art. I think I got my artistic genes from my mother who was a teacher of German literature. She also reviewed poetry. I am more like my mother; introverted and very anxious," he says. But it was his father's support that gave him the push to pursue art. First though, the family had to get to America.

Two things made it possible for the Staprans to immigrate to the United States; they had relatives that could act as sponsors and the U.S. government was looking kindly on people who had helped Jews during the holocaust. The family ended up in Salem, Oregon, where Raimonds' uncle lived. Dr. Staprans had worked hard to learn Eng-

IMAGE: Above, *Barns by the River* 36 x 48", oil on canvas, 2008. Courtesy Hackett-Freedman Gallery, San Francisco. At left, *Vase with Orange Background* 25 x 22", oil on canvas, 1967. All photography by PHOCASSO/JW White.


STAPRAN

RAIMONDS STAPRANS

lish, and immediately set out to get his medical license in America. He also eventually earned a degree in psychiatry as well, and went on to some prominence in that field. But while Raimonds' father may have hit the ground running after arriving on U.S. soil, his oldest son was less prepared. Raimonds didn't know one word of English. In fact, he remembers going to the grocery stores to buy lunchmeat and, armed with a dictionary, he asked the butcher for "some flesh." Everybody laughed at the young immigrant who finally got what he wanted by pointing.

Without fluent English, work options were limited. Raimonds worked a variety of menial jobs: dishwasher, cannery worker, laborer, house painter and sewer cleaner. "I cleaned sewers for a while because it paid well – $4 an hour, which was big money at the time," Raimonds remembers. "My wife complains that I have a very high shit level. It's true! And it started early." But Raimonds eventually learned the language, and then got perhaps the break of his life. He got a scholarship to the University of Washington, and he took full advantage of the opportunity. He took a full slate of art classes and got involved in theatre – the two things that would set up his parallel careers as a painter and playwright.

He wrote his first plays in college, but he admits they weren't very good. "They were the worst kind of melodrama. I remember one about a surgeon and his wife. She has cancer and the leg has to be amputated and only her husband can do it, but the wife is also a ballet dancer. So you can imagine the complications," he laughs. He wrote the plays in English and quickly learned that the nuances of a native tongue are critical to good drama. Later, after college, he switched to writing only in Latvian, and became a literary star in his homeland, but first things first – he was still navigating a collegiate cultural minefield where he says he always felt "in between." To deal with the anxiety, he jumped in with both feet.

"It was total artistic immersion," he says. "I would spend all day and all night at the theatre or in the studio. I didn't have any romantic inclinations. I was really focused and I couldn't afford to go out. But I didn't feel poor. I had my whole life ahead of me and I was pretty optimistic. Coming from Europe I remembered the persecutions and bombings. I considered myself lucky. I was grateful to be in the United States. All the freedom was an entirely new thing. Americans take it for granted."

"During the Bush era I think we realized it could change – we could lose freedoms. When they asked us (Americans) to report something suspicious about our neighbors, it made me nervous because where I was raised you were supposed to report people with different political views, and I knew what the consequences would be." Like his father, Staprans considers himself a liberal democrat and he is not shy about sharing his often provocative views on politics, sex, relationships, and art.

One his most famous Latvian plays was so controversial it almost didn't make it to the stage. "It was decadent," says Raimonds by way of explanation. It did include two of his favorite subjects – history and sex. The plot involves a couple; the husband goes off to war and comes back a "different person," and the wife is no longer attracted to him. It's a heart-wrenching story about lost love and lust. The husband wants sex, the wife doesn't, and she figures the only way to really resolve the situation and save the marriage is to kill his sex drive by tying up his testicles. A theatre group in San Francisco first performed *The Freezing* in 1979. It opened in Latvia a year later.

Castration as a plot twist is bound to make at least half the audience uncomfortable, and although he has no problem making people squirm, Staprans does offer a reprieve. "There is always an element of comedy in the work I write because if you write without any comedic interlude then it's melodrama. You need an element of relief," Staprans says. "I do think I have a little knack for dialogue. I spend a lot of time rewriting. I go over the same scene 30 or 40 times. You always have to ask yourself, 'Would I sit and listen to this for two hours?'" For his many fans the answer is a resounding, "Yes!" Staprans has written at least 15 plays that have been produced for the stage or television in Latvia.

His most successful play, *Four Days in June*, about the Soviet occupation of Latvia in 1940, played to sell out crowds in 1989. The Soviet Union was collapsing, Latvia had proclaimed its independence and the winds of freedom were blowing. "It was the right play at the right time," Raimonds admits, adding, "It probably wouldn't resonate as well today." Raimonds loves watching his words come to life and especially likes sitting in the audience anonymously. "It's a wonderful thing. You see how the audience responds. It's exciting because you are with people – with painting you are alone."

Raimonds graduated from the University of Washington with a major in fine art and a minor in drama. He decided on Berkeley for graduate school largely based on the school's reputation and less on whether it would be a good fit. At the time, Staprans was a representational painter and Berkeley was a bastion for abstract expressionism. Staprans has some strong views on art schools. He thinks they are a scam and minus a few exceptions – Karl Kasten on color, Alexander Archipenko for commitment to the craft, and Mark Tobey

"A German reviewer once said that I paint empty spaces. I like that description."

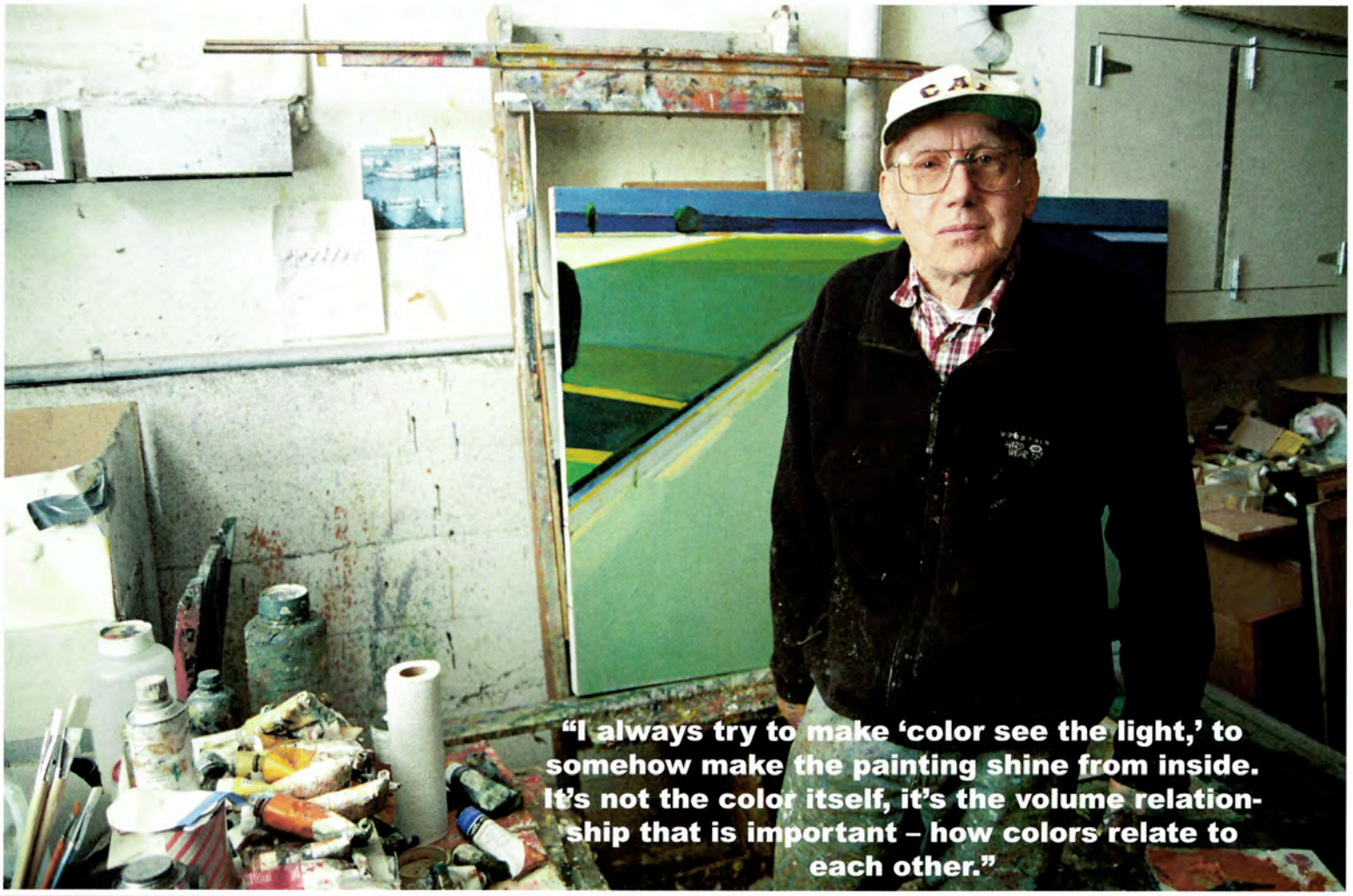
IMAGE: Above, *Still Life with Green Stripe*, 48 x 36", oil on canvas, 2008. Opposite page, *Still Life With Eggplant*, 44 x 48", oil on canvas, 1999. Courtesy Hackett-Freedman Gallery, San Francisco. All photography by PHOCASSO/JW White.

for friendship – he doesn't think his instructors taught him much of anything. "I do have a big gripe about art schools. In general, you are expected to paint like your teachers. It was superficial. I didn't learn much," he says. But even so, Staprans enjoyed his forced foray into the abstract, and some of his early work shows the influence.

One good thing to come out of his years at Berkeley was meeting Ilona Peics. She was a smart, beautiful scientist who was also from Latvia. They shared the language and a love of tennis and chess. Raimonds fell hard and fast. They married a few years later in New York City, and Raimonds' dealer, Fred Maxwell, paid for everything, including a honeymoon in Europe. Raimonds was grateful and stayed loyal to Maxwell for 40 years – longer than was probably good for his career.

Raimonds hooked up with Maxwell in 1954, shortly after graduation. It wasn't the logical or obvious choice Maxwell handled dead artists and several other galleries were courting the young painter, but Staprans connected with Maxwell on a personal level. Raimonds' first one-man show at the Maxwell Gallery was a smashing success solidifying a relationship that would grow more personal over the next several decades. But during the 1960's, the art scene in San Francisco started to change. A new generation of dealers came to town. They had connection

RAIMONDS STAPRANS



and influence in other big art markets like New York and Los Angeles. Fred Maxwell didn't keep up with the shifting trends and his gallery and reputation suffered, but Raimonds would not abandon his longtime promoter. He stayed with the Maxwell Gallery even after Fred's death in 1973.

The 1970's were turbulent years for Raimonds – both professionally and personally. He and Ilona bought a house on San Francisco's Potrero Hill, but with two small children, money was tight. Raimonds had trouble balancing family with work, and his marriage suffered. Eventually the union fell apart, Ilona filed for divorce and moved out with the couple's two young daughters. To deal with it, Raimonds threw himself into painting. He even bought into a gallery. The Arlene Lindt Gallery catered mostly to corporate clients who had money to spend on art. Staprans saw an opportunity to make some cash. He teamed up with another artist and started painting under the name Karl Ullman. "It was a joke," laughs Raimonds. "Even the name – Karl Ullman was the president of Latvia, but no one knew it. The paintings were strictly commercial. We would spend no more than three hours on a painting." The paintings sold for around $700 – not bad for a few hours work. But after a couple of years, Raimonds said the scam started to affect his mindset, which in turn started to affect his serious work. He finally decided it "wasn't worth the money."

About this same time, he reconciled with Ilona. Raimonds says they realized that they have a great deal of respect for each other, and that was the foundation on which they rebuilt their relationship. He insists there was no correlation between his marital problems and the fictitious painter, Karl Ullman. He says he wasn't acting out of anger or any psychological need to "get back" at the world. He was simply giving people what they wanted and making a little money in the process. "It's rare to see big money, good taste and an appreciation for art come together. Usually people who really appreciate good art can't afford it," he says. In this case it was the reverse – people who knew nothing about art, but had lots of money to spend. Karl Ullman was a perverse alter ego – an artist who catered to the very people Raimonds finds contemptible.

With Ullman retired and his family put back together, Raimonds could re-focus on his painting and writing. It was during this period that wrote his first commercially successful play (*The Freezing*), and he was finally starting to feel good about his painting. Confident enough to take some risks like his series of large abstracted female nudes. Some have called them disturbing. "I liked them, other painters liked them, but my family thought they were too revealing. They didn't sell so well. A husband would buy and the wife would bring it back," he laughs. The nudes were a departure for a painter who has always been dedicated to the architectural construction of color, line and light – something he always returns to. "The color on the painting should be greater than what comes out of the tube and you achieve that by manipulating colors around it," he says. "You can put all the brightest colors on a painting and the painting can still look gray because the colors cancel each other. Think of a Persian rug. All those colors and it still looks dull, and then there are paintings that are almost black and white and they are so colorful they shine. I like playing around with the color volumes. The color changes in relation to what's around it and I think that's the basis of painting. For me, it's the joy and mystery of painting."

His home on Potrero Hill is modest in size but spectacular in location. The walls of the first floor foyer are packed with books, many shoved in wherever there is an inch of extra space. Raimonds studio is off to the right. It's a basement room with windows on one wall offering the only natural light – enough, though, to illuminate the canvas he is working on at the moment. He works on a half dozen paintings or more at a time. "When I reach an impasse with one, I move on," he explains. "I go from one painting to the next asking myself, 'What looks good today?' If none of them look good, I go to the store and buy a new canvas." The room is chaotic in its messiness – very unlike the paintings, which seem a calm oasis amid the clutter. Although large enough, the room seems too small for more than one person. It is a one-artist, one-man space. This is where Raimonds spends his days, unraveling the mysteries of color on canvas.

For him, painting is a visceral experience – don't look for any stories or narratives. He has no time for artists "with a message." He says if you want stories from him read his plays because his paintings aren't billboards. He looks to other painters for ideas: Diebenkorn's diagonals, Matisse's use of black, or a slew of unknowns cut from art magazines and stuffed in a file. Raimonds isn't shy about "borrowing" from other artists, but only as a means to an end. The point is to solve the puzzle of his paintings and then, somehow, give them a soul. Raimonds is relentless in his pursuit of this nirvana. "People always ask how I know when a painting is finished? I really don't know the answer. It takes time. Maybe tomorrow, maybe never."

He breaks for lunch at the same time everyday, climbing the stairs to the second floor living space. The front room is dominated by a large plate glass window, which offers sweeping views of San Francisco. The furnishings are eclectic and comfortable. Ilona rustles around in the back room, always quick to answer the phone or offer a cup of coffee. Raimonds speaks about his wife with pride. "Did you know she is a world-renowned scientist? It's really a misnomer to say only artists have creativity. Scientists need it, too. Ilona has a very organized mind." Recently retired from her job as a UC heart researcher, Ilona is now home "taking care of things," as Raimonds likes to say. He is grateful because at 82 years old, he is feeling the pressure of time. He works 15 hours a day "because he has so much more he wants to do." He will spend the afternoon in the studio and then devote several hours to writing after dinner.

Even today Raimonds Staprans seems a man divided; he lives and works in California, but his roots are firmly planted in Latvia. He still speaks with a thick accent and has the gray demeanor of a stereotypical Eastern European, but yearns for the "brightness" of San Francisco when he is away too long; and he paints to satisfy the sensual side, and writes to satiate his intellectual half. It may be a bit schizophrenic at times, but it works for him. "Painting helps with anxiety because it requires focus. I forget about everyday life. Writing, though, is very connected with real life and real people. It requires a different kind of organization." Painting and writing are the ying and yang of his creative soul, and it's clear he desperately needs both. But is he happy? Raimonds pauses before he answers. "Happy? That's a difficult question. When you talk about everyday life, I'm not that easy to live with. Intellectually I know that I am a lucky person, but I'm still, how do you say it? Somber. I'm most content when I'm working."

IMAGE: Opposite page top, Raimonds Staprans in his San Francisco studio. Opposite below, *Seated Model*, 46" x 46", acrylic on canvas, 1973. Above, *On The Beach*, 25" x 22", oil on canvas, 1964. Courtesy Hackett-Freedman Gallery, San Francisco. All photography by PHOCASSO/JW White.

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