



Joel Babb, *Wilkinson's Brook*

**Intimate Wilderness: Maine Landscapes by Joel Babb** will be on view this fall at the Bates College Museum of Art in Lewiston, Maine. This exhibition concentrates on Babb's paintings of the woods near his rural studio, although he is equally well known for his cityscapes and aerial views. Whether depicting the countryside or an urban scene, Babb achieves striking fidelity, and he works on a very big scale. In images such as the street-level *View of Harvard Square* (Charles Hotel, Cambridge) and the 1998 *The Weeks Bridge, Charles River* (37" x 97"), based on photographs taken from a helicopter, he employs the difficult panorama format with notable success. Representations of exteriors are built on the



useful fiction of the frame. In most cases, the compositional parameters of a painted or photographed landscape or street scene are more circumscribed than even a stationary individual's field of vision. There have been many ways, historically, of attempting to encompass the sweep of vision available in the phenomenal world—from the continuous unrolling of Chinese scrolls to the cycloramas and composite photographs of the nineteenth century to the cinemascope of twentieth-century movies. The flat-canvas panorama which Babb often essays entails problems of resolving a wide-angled space into a picture plane.

In *The Weeks Bridge, Charles River* he uses the helicopter-level perspective to establish an exhilarating sense of space. From this eagle's-eye height, details such as the rowers skimming the surface of the river are grace notes, while the man-made elements—a church steeple, two graceful bridges—harmoniously shape the flow of water, grass and trees. Over all, a band of apparently infinite sky varies from dense cloud to clear blue. The variable light in this tour-de-force imparts a highly convincing illusion of presence, of being in a particular place at a particular time. This New England-based artist is similarly sensitive to the genius of the place with the smaller (12" x 22") panorama *In the Villa Aurelia, Rome* (1998), a terrace-level view overlooking red-tile roofs, umbrella pines and warm-colored old buildings. With its strong single-point perspective and honeyed light, this landscape has historical resonance as well as hedonistic allure.

Babb's journey as an artist includes a degree in Art History from Princeton University (1969), studies with George Segal and George Ortman, a year spent between Munich and Rome, and an MFA earned from the Boston Museum School and Tufts, where he was converted from abstractionism to realism. He uses that realistic style to evoke a tangible sense of physical space. This is true not only of the exercises in distance which constitute his panoramas but also of what might be called his close-ups. A case in point is *Wilkinson's Brook*, a large (54" x 42") oil in vertical format. The viewer seems to stand on sloping, rocky ground, in the midst of a dense wood. The trees—many young and slender but a few older and more substantial—create a middle ground screen through which buttery, dappled light slants. Ferns, moss and other delicate plants flank the eponymous brook, which is still little more than a trickle. It's an archetypically American, New England landscape, very much in the style of Asher B. Durand's (1796–1886) *sous bois* forest scenes. Yet Babb brings a personal aptitude for painting textures to the enterprise. And the composition, for all its tangled detail, is firmly anchored by the diagonal descent of water, the curved masses of boulders and the emphatic vertical of a tree trunk. Joel Babb teaches at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. He has participated in exhibitions at the Arnot Art Museum, the DeCordova Museum, the Davenport Museum of Art, the John and Mabel Ringling Museum, and the Portland Museum of Art; his work has been shown at a number of galleries in New England and New York City. His paintings appear in the collections of the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard Medical School, the DeCordova Museum and Bates College, as well as in many corporate and private collections.

"Intimate Wilderness" can be seen October 25–December 29, 2002, at the Bates College Museum of Art, 75 Russell Street, Olin Arts Center, Lewiston, Maine 04240. Telephone: (207) 786-6158.