



Alexander Purves  
*Watercolors*

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Essay by Ruth Miller

This publication accompanies an exhibition  
at the Henry Koerner Center for Emeritus Faculty, Yale University  
October 9 to December 18, 2017

Dedicated to Drika Agnew Purves  
February 2, 1940 – September 19, 2017

Exhibition open by invitation or appointment; call 203-432-8227

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## Foreword

One might expect an architect to draw, and indeed, Professor Alexander Purves studied drawing with Josef Albers as a Yale undergraduate. For fourteen years he has taught an intensive four-week drawing seminar, in Rome, for graduate students of the Yale School of Architecture (with his colleague Stephen Harby). In Purves's view, drawing is a critical skill for an architect: "If you really want to see a building, you should draw it. Drawing forces you to look—and to look with precision and with a sense of inquiry." For most of us, drawing and watercolor would seem to be very different arts and require somewhat different skills. However, I suspect that Alec sees a rock formation in his watercolor in a way not so dissimilar from the building he sees in his drawing; that is, he sees it with the eye of an architect. In any case, it is my expectation that as we live with his watercolor exhibition in the Koerner Center this fall and hear him talk about his art, we will gain a deeper understanding of how this architect perceives form and color. I want to thank Alec for sharing his art, Ruth Miller for her essay for the catalogue, David Baker for editing, Chika Ota for design, GHP for preparing the images and printing the catalogue, and John Gambell for overall management of the catalogue production.

Gary L. Haller, Director



*Rock Reclining 2005 (15 x 22 in.), private collection*

## The Watercolors of Alexander Purves

I've long admired the accomplished watercolors of Alexander Purves, and over the years my appreciation has continued to grow, together with my pleasure and gratitude for the valuable lessons they bring. They are thoughtful, contemplative, modest, sensitive, generous, and knowledgeable, as is the man. Alec is an architect, in my mind a modern-day John Ruskin. He is an esteemed teacher as well as a master of the medium of watercolor.

Watercolor is a medium which has been labeled as a difficult one, but in Alec's hands it behaves brilliantly—and with such apparent ease that one is convinced that it is perhaps the most manageable medium.

Architecture, the mother of all of the arts, I imagine to be the most challenging and difficult of human endeavors. I think of Alec's watercolors in this way. They are like a form of flat architecture—the role the parts play to the whole, the sense of scale, the awareness of light, the measured development of his form, the order and timing of how all of these components build a space, both interior and exterior.

One thinks of Cézanne's late watercolors, or Morandi's drawings, when considering Alec's use of the white of the paper. His method makes one think of stone that is carved or how an architect uses space. The white of the paper is often volume. It is like a foundation, a surface to build from. The white of the paper becomes one of the most active ingredients of the work, not a passive surface to fill, but an active foundation.

I think of his thickets, rocks, rivers and forests, palm trees and ferns—motifs and places he loves and returns to over and over, finding form, light, and order. He brings forth their unique characters. Forms become concrete. In the best of his work a kind of alchemy happens, joining his vision and medium to his subject, expressing perfect balance, harmony, and order.

I especially like the rocks and the thickets. I feel that when he's painting and looking at brambles from his studio window, they are so complicated that he's having to explain to himself how he is seeing them, not only what he is seeing. They become more abstract and free because of this. What often happens when someone comes to painting from another discipline is that they approach making painting with technique alone. They miss the point. They are putting down, naming what they are seeing, lost in the specifics of subject and detail, not involved in the contemplative thing of how they are seeing. And this is why I admire Alec's work most of all.

Ruth Miller  
*Washington Depot, Connecticut*  
*August 3, 2017*

## About These Pictures

My watercolors are made from direct observation. The subjects are drawn from the natural world—not the grand epic view, but rather the modest story found close at hand. These subjects—rocks, brambles, woods—are commonplace, but they are incomparably rich. Taking time to observe closely reveals endless patterns, textures, miniature worlds. It may be that many hours spent as a child transfixed by the tide pools on the rocks in Maine encouraged my fascination with the small and the overlooked.

For forty years Drika and I spent part of each summer on a small island in the St. Lawrence River. The water and the weather were a constant fascination, but what truly intrigued me was an outcropping of rock in the center of the island. One formation in particular held me fast. Over the years I must have painted the same rocks hundreds of times. They became good friends—reflecting many moods. At a certain distance one sees a composition of masses (*Tumble*); closer one begins to see these forms differently—perhaps hard, perhaps soft (*Rock Reclining*); closer still one can scan the surface—the delicate changes of plane—and scale becomes ambiguous—almost abstract (*Crease*).

Ruskin, in his *Elements of Drawing*, prescribes the following exercise. To draw the overlapping branches of a tree, do not draw the branch. Rather draw the shapes of the negative spaces between them—and only those shapes. It is an excruciating exercise, as the slightest error will render the entire drawing useless. It may take forty minutes to execute an area three inches square, but doing this exercise taught me the beauty of

these intricate patterns and I began a series of bramble paintings. These bramble paintings were made in the winter in my studio in northwest Connecticut. They began as views from the window or as impressions remembered after a very cold walk. They also became less and less moored to the actual subject, though never independent of observation (*Wild Vines in Winter*).

Some of the paintings of woods were made on the island, but most were painted just outside the studio. Connecticut in the summer is unrelentingly and aggressively green. There are many shades of green, but one looks forward to autumn when other colors arrive and leaves begin to drop away.

I enjoy the immediacy of watercolor and the fact that one must respond quickly to control the medium. In order to retain the luminosity of the paper, color is applied in transparent layers, beginning with the lightest value and successively moving to the darkest, building the image one brushstroke at a time. Any white in the painting is “reserved”—it is the paper itself. In many of the paintings the perimeter of the sheet is untouched, the image increasing in detail closer to the center—so that one can sense the painting coming to life. I do not use opaque white, nor do I use a resist—and I never work from photographs. Except in winter, I work out of doors where much of the experience of painting in watercolor is dependent on the weather—dry or humid, still or windy. I make numerous study sketches—not as dry runs but as a means to closely observe the subject—to see what’s actually going on. Usually I begin by representing the subject as accurately as I can, but at a certain point, the painting takes over and makes its own demands.

A.P.

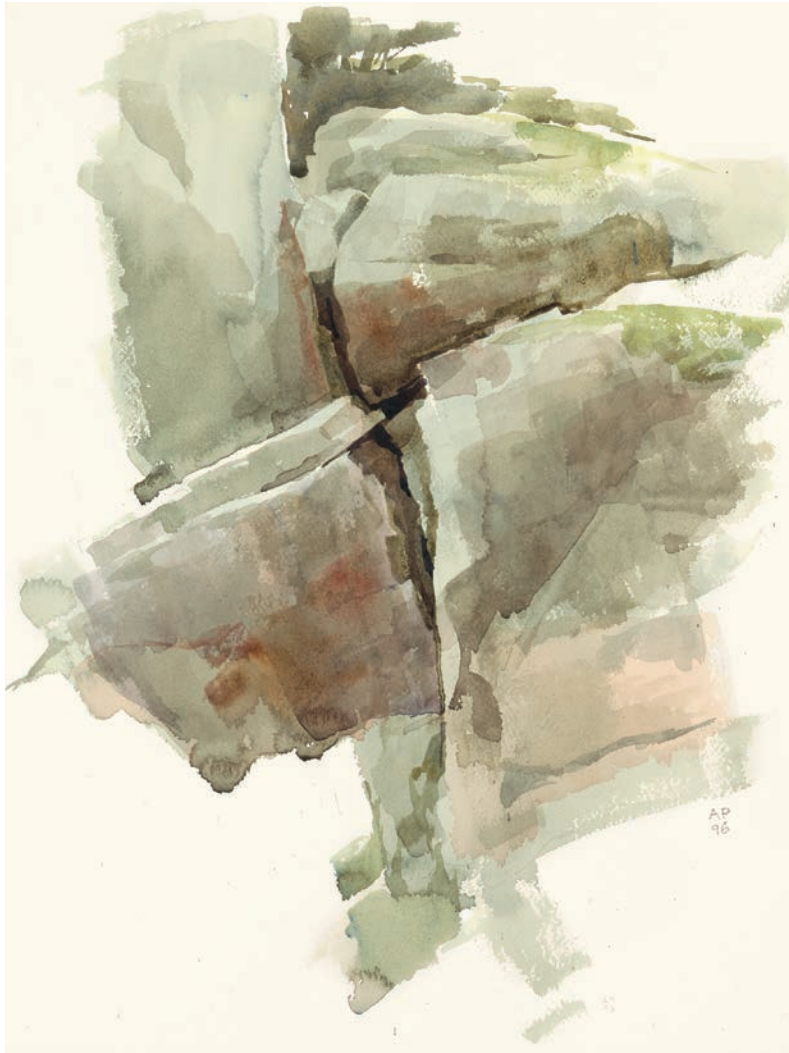
*August 2017*



*Wild Vines in Winter 2013 (15 x 22 in.), private collection*



*Afternoon Shadows 2010 (15 x 22 in.), private collection*



*Rock Study 1996 (16 x 12 in.), private collection*



*Slice 2011 (22 x 15 in.)*



*Crease 2012 (11 x 15 in.)*



*Wedge 2012 (11 x 15 in.)*



*Tumble 2012 (22 x 15 in.), private collection*



*Scramble 2013 (11 x 15 in.)*



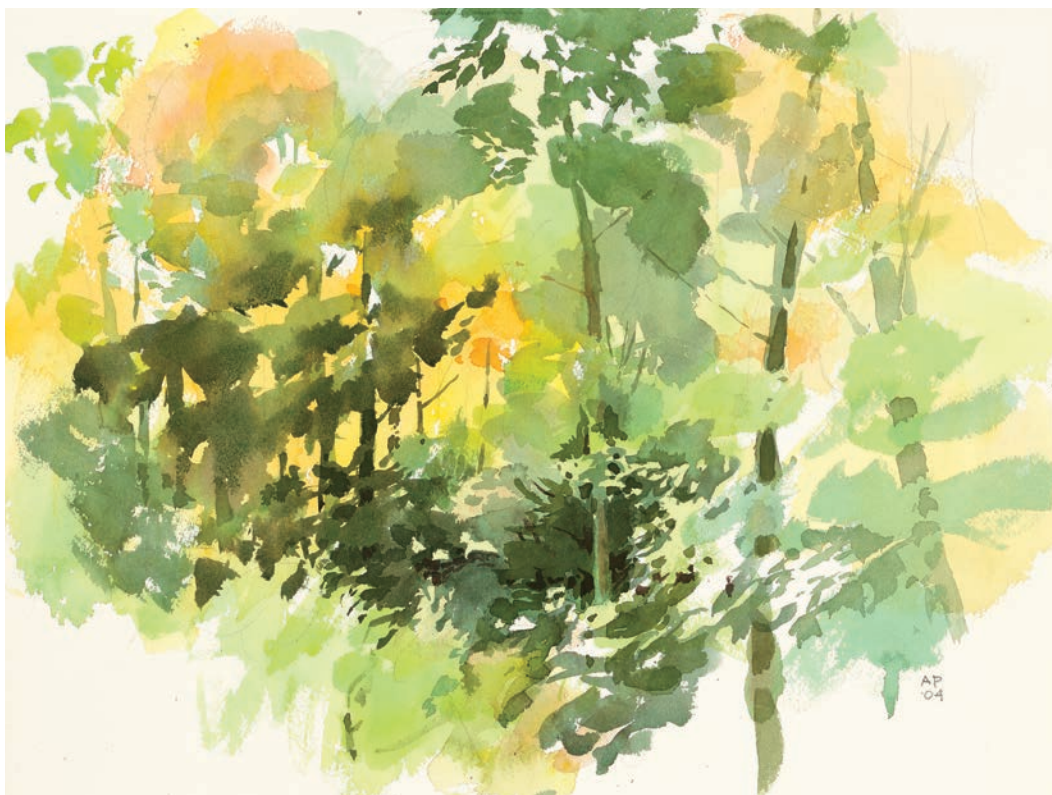
*Winter Flames 2009 (15 x 22 in.), private collection*



*Bramble Study 2006 (5 x 7 in.)*



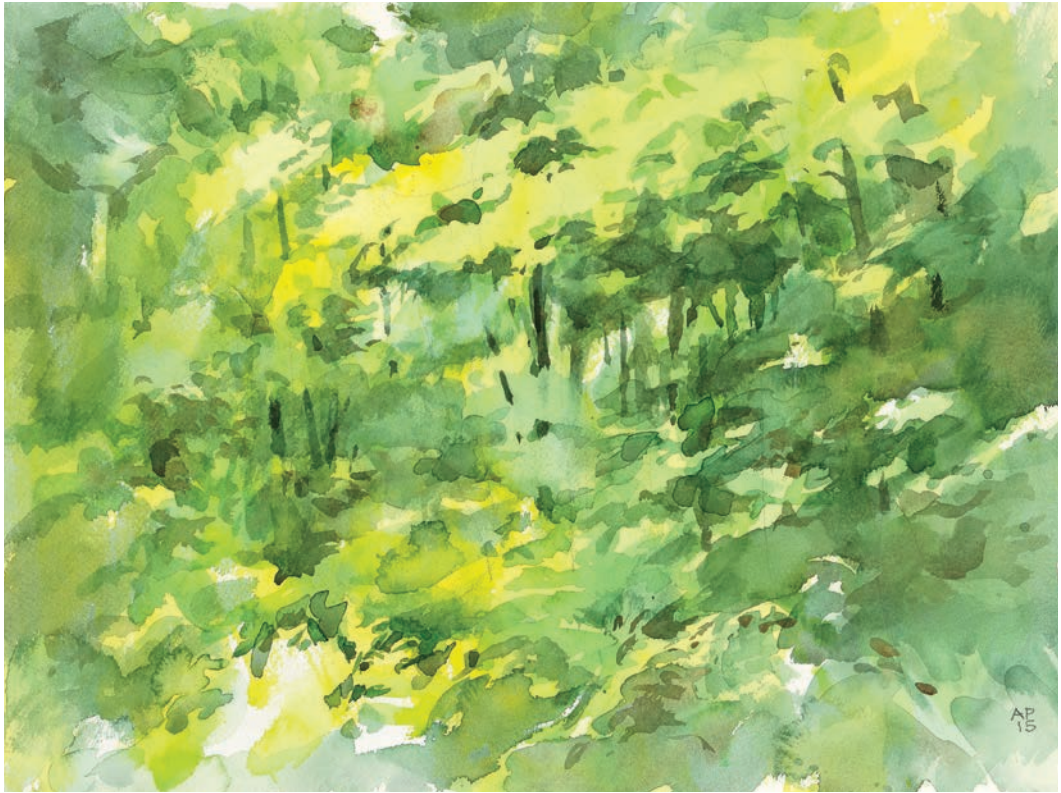
*Flutter 2014 (5 x 7 in.)*



*Autumn 2004 (12 x 16 in.), private collection*



*Layers of Green 2006 (12 x 16 in.)*



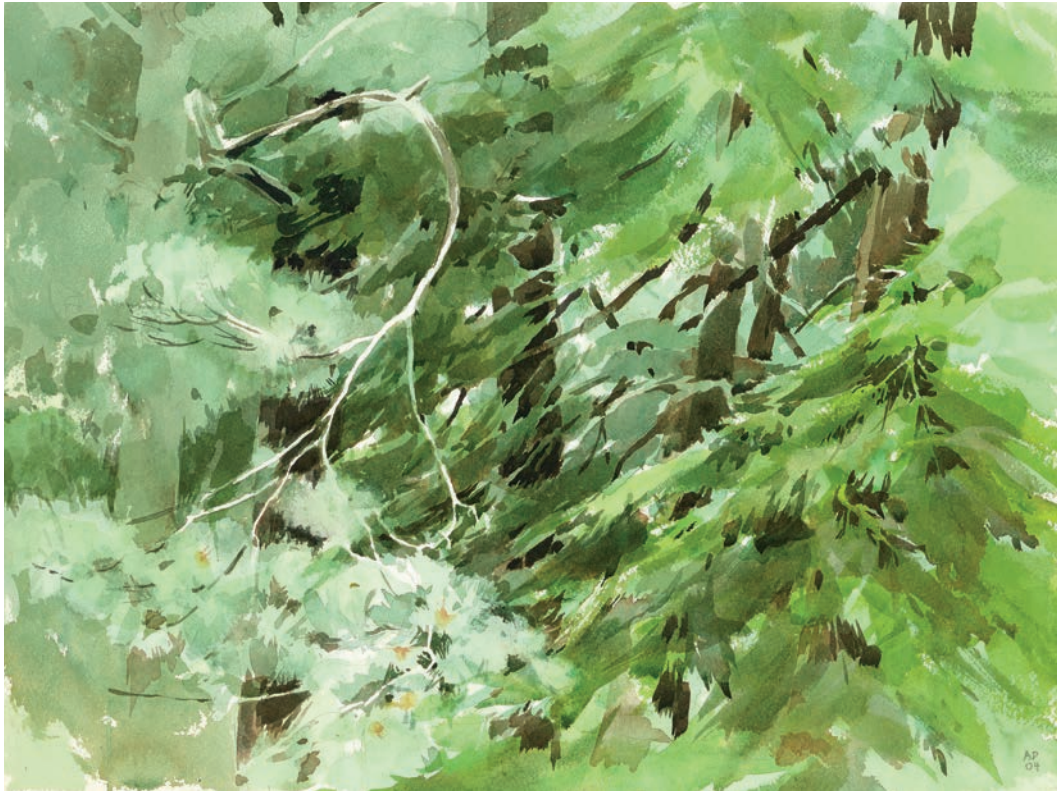
*August 2015 (12 x 16 in.), private collection*



*Grape Vines 2016 (15 x 22 in.), private collection*



*Banana Palm 2016 (12 x 16 in.), private collection*



*Forest Stirrings* 2009 (12 x 16 in.)



*Shoreline in the Afternoon 2010 (12 x 16 in.), private collection*



*Farmhouse, Lazio 2001 (12 x 16 in.), private collection*



ABOVE *Fields, Umbria* 1984 (5 x 7 in.), private collection

TOP RIGHT *Torgiano* 1984 (9 ½ x 13 ½ in.)

BOTTOM RIGHT *Thunderstorm, Umbria* 1984 (5 x 7 in.), private collection





*Rome, View from the Gianicolo 2012 (7 ½ x 11 in.), private collection*



*Rome, Piazza Sant'Eustachio 2011 (11 x 7 ½ in.)*



*Ceramic Duck, Italy 1984 (13 ½ x 9 ½ in.)*



*Tureen, Italy 1984 (5 x 7 in.), private collection*



*San Fortunato, the Blue Sofa 1984 (9 ½ x 13 ½ in.), private collection*



*San Fortunato, the Green Sofa 1984 (9 ½ x 13 ½ in.), private collection*



*San Fortunato, the Piano 1984 (9 ½ x 13 ½ in.), private collection*



*Rome, Courtyard Sant'Ivo 2007 (11 x 7 1/2 in.)*



*French Fields and Clouds 1997 (5 x 7 in.)*



*French Sky 1997 (5 x 7 in.)*



*Pear n.d. (4 x 3 in.)*

## Checklist

### *Rocks*

Crease 2012 (11 x 15 in.)

Tumble 2012 (22 x 15 in.), private collection

Wedge 2012 (11 x 15 in.)

Slice 2011 (22 x 15 in.)

Afternoon Shadows 2010 (15 x 22 in.), private collection

Rock Reclining 2005 (15 x 22 in.), private collection

Rock Study 1996 (16 x 12 in.), private collection

### *Brambles*

Scramble 2013 (11 x 15 in.)

Wild Vines in Winter 2013 (15 x 22 in.), private collection

Winter Flames 2009 (15 x 22 in.), private collection

Bramble Study 2006 (5 x 7 in.)

### *Woods*

Banana Palm 2016 (12 x 16 in.), private collection

Grape Vines 2016 (15 x 22 in.), private collection

August 2015 (12 x 16 in.), private collection

Flutter 2014 (5 x 7 in.)

Shoreline in the Afternoon 2010 (12 x 16 in.), private collection

Forest Stirrings 2009 (12 x 16 in.)

Layers of Green 2006 (12 x 16 in.)

Autumn 2004 (12 x 16 in.), private collection

### *Italy*

Rome, View from the Gianicolo 2012 (7 ½ x 11 in.), private collection

Rome, Piazza Sant'Eustachio 2011 (11 x 7 ½ in.)

Rome, Courtyard Sant'Ivo 2007 (11 x 7 ½ in.)

Farmhouse, Lazio 2001 (12 x 16 in.), private collection

Ceramic Duck, Italy 1984 (13 ½ x 9 ½ in.)

Fields, Umbria 1984 (5 x 7 in.), private collection

San Fortunato, the Blue Sofa 1984 (9 ½ x 13 ½ in.), private collection

San Fortunato, the Green Sofa 1984 (9 ½ x 13 ½ in.), private collection

San Fortunato, the Piano 1984 (9 ½ x 13 ½ in.), private collection

Thunderstorm, Umbria 1984 (5 x 7 in.), private collection

Torgiano 1984 (9 ½ x 13 ½ in.)

Tureen, Italy 1984 (5 x 7 in.), private collection

### *Other*

French Fields and Clouds 1997 (5 x 7 in.)

French Sky 1997 (5 x 7 in.)

Pear n.d. (4 x 3 in.)

### *Studies [in the vitrine]*

Bramble Studies 2015 (12 x 16 in.)

Snow Studies 2015 (12 x 16 in.)

Rock Studies 2011 (12 x 16 in.)

## **Alexander Purves**

Alexander Purves graduated from Yale College in 1958 and, following a three-year tour in the U.S. Army, received a master's degree from the Yale School of Architecture in 1965. Following ten years as an architect with Davis, Brody & Associates in New York City, he moved to New Haven in 1976 to join the faculty of the School of Architecture and to open his own practice. While in New York he worked primarily on middle-income housing. His architectural design work in New Haven includes the Cushing/Whitney Medical Library and the renovation of the Hope Building, both for the School of Medicine and executed in collaboration with Allan Dehar Associates.

Having coordinated and taught design studios at all levels in the School of Architecture, Purves currently restricts his teaching to "Introduction to Architecture," an undergraduate course open to any student in the university. For fourteen years he led an intensive drawing seminar in Rome for graduate architecture students. Purves has lectured widely and participated as a visiting critic at schools including Harvard Graduate School of Design, Columbia University, University of Pennsylvania, Carleton University, Rhode Island School of Design, Ohio State University, and Regis High School in New York. He has also led a number of Yale Educational Travel programs in Italy, France, and the British Isles as well as Eastern Europe, the Turkish coast, Egypt, and Japan.

Purves's watercolors have been included in many group shows. Major exhibitions of his work have been held at the Blue Mountain Gallery in New York City (2006, 2010, 2013, 2016), the Bar des Artistes at the Union League Café in New Haven (2010), and the Washington (CT) Art Association (1987, 1992, 2003). In 2013 the Whitney Humanities Center mounted a show of his Roman sketches, and in 2002 his travel drawings were exhibited at the Hunter College Leubsdorf Gallery in a show titled "On Site."



Yale

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