

Paintings From Photos *and aided by photography*

I usually didn't use photographs for visual source material much, preferring working either from life or imagination. The latter tended to dominate my oeuvre, by far. It's easy to tell when artwork was copied from a photograph. There's precision, but also a kind of stiffness that is not as prevalent in paintings done from life. When imagery is already photographically two-dimensionalized, it shows in the translation. From life it's more fresh, showing up in the brushstrokes. Working from imagination can be stiff and awkward too, and often less accurate — yet there are usually more variables: accidental discoveries, stylized by proxy of your handwork beyond being guided by photo-realistic choices, and having the freedom to add details that are not there in real life. These made *not* working from photos more attractive and interesting, regarding my process. — with a few good digressions where sometimes more precise reproduction is called for. Here are the scant few I did with photographic aid, and with a bit of their history.



Marcel Proust - and - Marc the cat
1994 - Oil on panel, 14" x 14" each

These turned out really well, I started using a penciled grid system to translate Proust's portrait accurately, but soon into the process I abandoned that method and made it precise by hand-eye coordination.

These were commissioned by P Segal, in exchange for a well needed new pair of eyeglasses. For her first issues of her then new zine titled *Proust Said That*. Proust himself is an obvious choice. but the cat? You can read about this in the zine's themselves, archived and posted online, here:

<https://proustsaidthat.blog/zines/>

I'm a Proust aficionado/reader from those years. A member of The Marcel Proust Support Group, The San Francisco Cacophony Society chapter.

I don't have any higher resolution images of these, since these were photographed years before we had digital cameras.



*Nicollet Island, Jacks House on Maple Place
1984 - oil on canvas - about 36" x 24"*

My first successful painting done in California, while staying at my brother Brian's apartment in the summer of '84, (I left with him, who enjoyed hanging it for decades.)

I had one foot firmly connected with Minneapolis, while discovering San Francisco. So I painted this architectural wonder from my recent past, using a photo I had. [Notice how I made the address 11-13, instead of it actually being 15-17. Legend has it that the number 13 was seen as bad luck, so it was changed early on. It was said to have been 13-15, but I (erroneously?) made it 11-13. It might be an apocryphal story I heard, but there it is.]

I treated the oil paint with plenty of turpentine, making it more of a thinned watercolor approach. This turned out well for a beginner with oils. I reproduced the house in its crumbling Victorian majesty. It would have been impressive at the time to have painted it refined into restored glory, but it's good as a document of how it once was. The city did restore this house beautifully a few years after I moved west.

My memoirs: https://dean-gustafson.com/autobiographical/Nicollet_Island.pdf



Boulder on Pine Mtn. Trail
2007 - oil on canvas - around 18" x 24"

One of my favorite central Marin County trails that I frequented, both hiking and

bicycling. I'd been hankering for some good local *plein aire* painting during the years when I lived nearby on the borders of San Anselmo and Fairfax. Surrounded by idyllic beauty called for it. I drew the views often in sketchbooks, yet rarely set up with easel, habitually creating works from imagination in my house, I finally set out to paint this scene from a rocky hillside fire trail. Great!

Driving to the small Azalea Hill parking lot, hauling my compact, portable Julian easel up the trail to this spot and began painting. It was hot, with horseflies bugging me, so soon into starting this it ended, thinking "*fuck it*", taking a photo to finish it back home. A reminder of factors that makes painting exclusively in the studio more attractive.

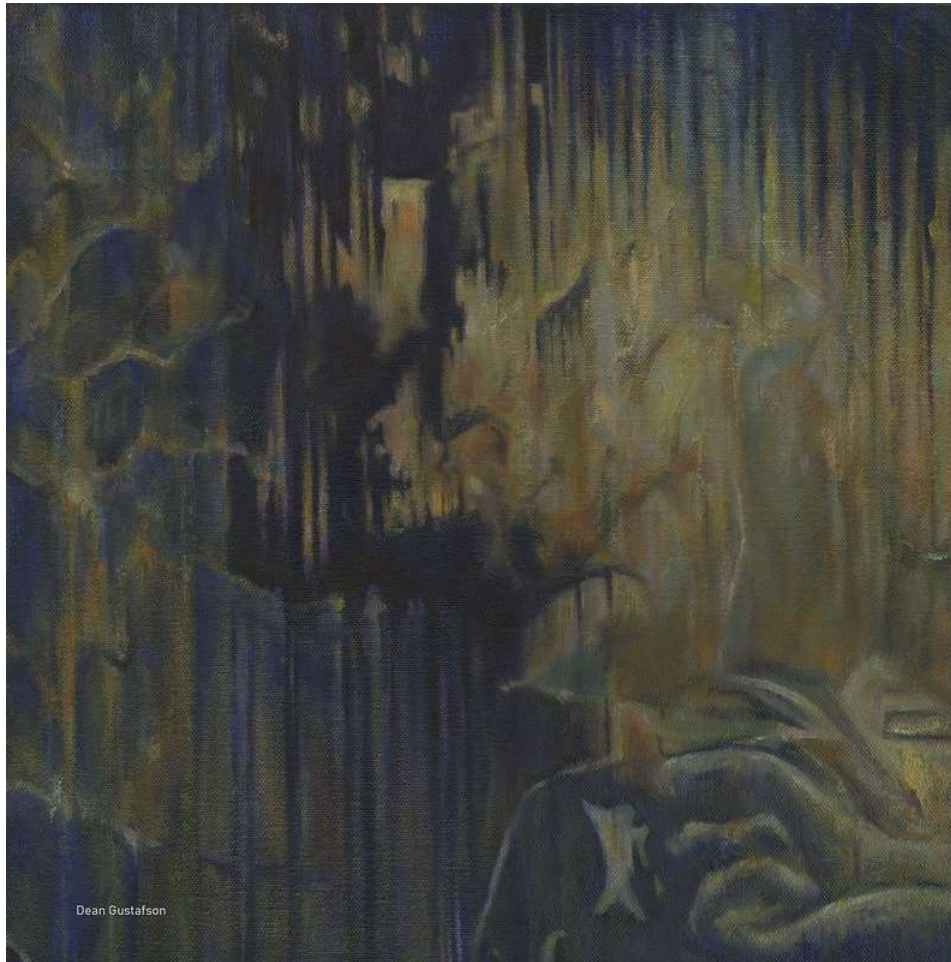
This ended up looking too much like the photo, and that is one of the reasons for painting from life.



Strawberry Field (with Jim Capra)
2005 - oil on canvas - 13.5" x 11"

As a lifelong Beatles aficionado, the gates of Strawberry Fields in Liverpool, England

meant a lot to visit in 2005. A photo taken of a detail proved to be a pretty good resource for painting. It's a small canvas, and the gate details really pop here! The rest is contrived, based on the foliage in the photo but not faithfully. The figure is my tribute to a late friend who died in '97, and it was high time to commemorate him in artwork. I figured he'd be tickled to have his ghost wandering Strawberry Field! Sauntering at this angle was my first impression of him back in 1981. Sadly he's not around to see it.



***The Face** - 2007
oil on canvas - 10" x 10"*

Face? The face of who or what? That answer is the face of Half Dome in Yosemite! I took a photo of its sheer rocky face, stained by centuries of weathering I thought would make a good abstraction. It kind of works, existing between possible abstract and nature scene.



Portrait of Alisa
2000 - Oil on canvas - 56" x 42"

Most of this was painted from life, only using a photograph as a guide for when the poser was away. Turning out well ! It's a balance of figure painting from life, photographic likeness, and imaginative atmosphere.

It's a large portrait of my ex-wife, and focused with plenty of T.L.C. It looks like something painted in the 1930's. I like it's other- era qualities, having a hankering for the anachronistic. I probably aiming more for a 19th century kind of romanticism.



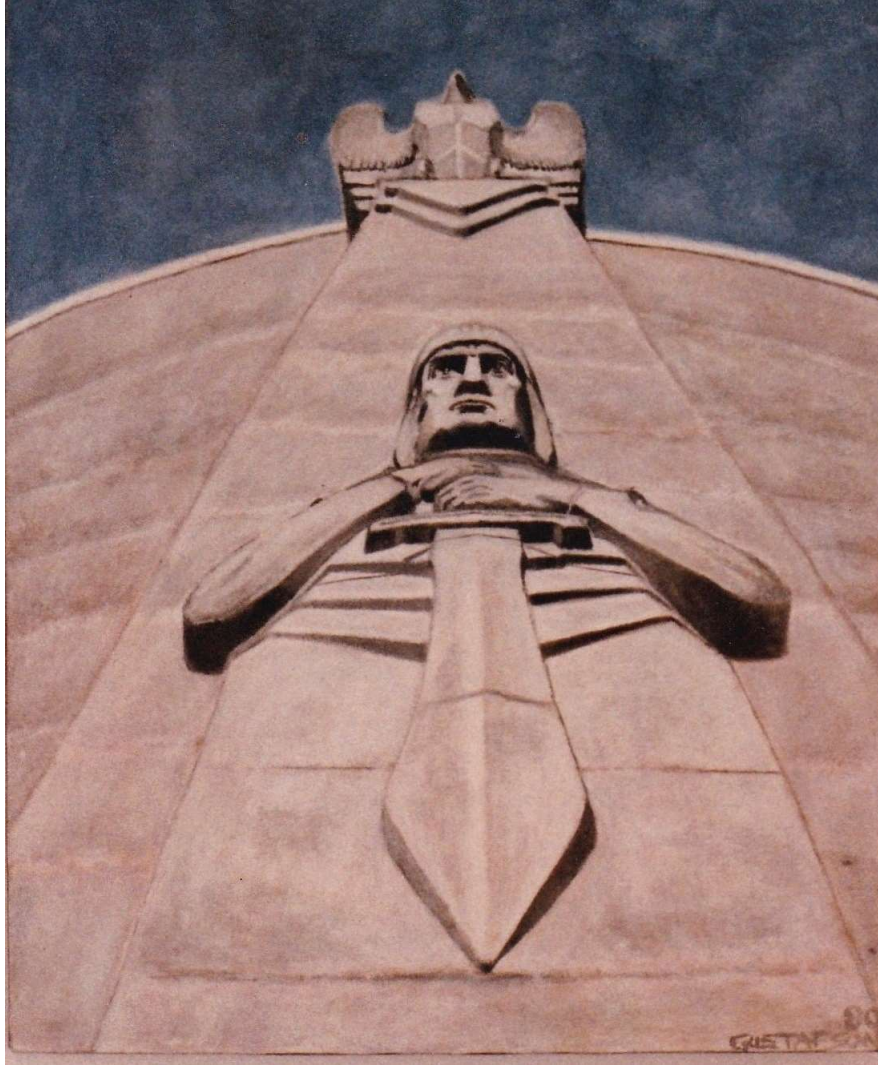
*preparatory drawing for "Front Summer Porch"
2007 - pencil on Bristol paper. 12" x 9"*

I already wrote about the painting here,

[https://dean-gustafson.com/artwork-essays/Front Summer Porch.pdf](https://dean-gustafson.com/artwork-essays/Front_Summer_Porch.pdf)

I'm including the drawing, because I drew the figure from a photograph, and this composition called for becoming a full-blown oil painting.

Aside from the figure, the rest of the dazzling details are pure psychedelic creativity. I then carefully translated this drawing to a large canvas. A good plan — at that scale and in color the effects are startlingly successful!



"Washburn Tower"
1980 - acrylic on canvas. 24" x 18"

Ending this writing with my first ever serious painting. Done in high school in the autumn of 1980, attempting to be more constructive after an unacademic year of getting high. I thank my brother Craig for setting me up with both technique and the photo he took of the impressive Washburn Tower, on a park hilltop a few winding blocks from Washburn high school where we went. This was a favorite local party spot for years in the 1970s (and most likely before), until the city removed the trees ringing the cylindrical tower. It's still impressive as a grand structure from the WPA era, and a functional water tower. The stern Germanic figures are like exotic guardians from old Europe — not

Midwestern USA — giving them an air of enchantment.

Craig taught me the grid system for translating one image to another larger surface.

Utilizing a bit of mathematics, making a grid on transparent tracing paper over the photo.

Making calculations of how big the corresponding grid is relatively to the size of the canvas, filling each individual square in pencil makes proportions easier to do right versus its entirety by hand-eye coordination (especially for a young beginner.) It was a point of pride to finish this. Later I saw how this could have been much better — looser brush strokes and more color would wake this up. Yet, I moved on to other more challenging creations — most of them flops for the next few years. Guess I appreciated the process enough to not give up trying — fortunately!

That was a fine time in the art classroom, with a gang of new creative friends. Some of them saw me as "a good copycat artist" — rightly so at the time. The school liked my painting enough to hang it in the lobby of the principals office (a likeable fellow.)

I made more art for that entire school year, using acrylic paint, before I dared venture into the messy but more satisfactory qualities of oil painting. Now that was a major shift. So was this, for a beginner in high school, my journey as a lifelong painter began here, from a photograph my brother Craig took — it's his composition.

I only used photos for a total of eight paintings. Not many and I'm glad.

- Dean Gustafson, September 2025