

# Peas Come to Table

## The Collaborative Histories of Andrew Saftel





**Peas Come to Table**  
**The Collaborative Histories**  
**of Andrew Saftel**  
August 7 — October 9, 2022



**NEW SEMANTICS GALLERY**, Cedarhurst Center  
for the Arts, Mt. Vernon, Illinois

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**COVER** *Peas Come to Table*, 2022, acrylic and  
collage on wood panel, 54x54"

**LEFT** *Our Tree*, 2020, watercolor, 72x32"

**RIGHT** *The Artist's Studio, East Tennessee*, April  
2022, photo R. Freeman

**BACK COVER DETAIL** *Comin' to Town*, 2020,  
watercolor, 34x72"

Printing: Zebra Graphics, Paducah, KY



*I would like to dedicate this exhibition to William T. Wiley, whose kindness, wisdom and encouragement meant the world to me. A.S.*

## ART MAKING IS A MYSTERIOUS PROCESS

by Andrew Saftel, Tennessee, June 2022

Art making is a mysterious process. At times, I am in control; at others, I don't know what I'm doing. I try to not have expectations when I work. I work every day. Having been in the studio for almost forty years, I trust my instincts. The goal is to be engaged with the materials and processes to the point that I almost erase myself. My hands and brain continue to do the work. My art making is improvisational in the same way as a musician improvises, based on a solid foundation and knowledge of the fundamentals. I have spent thousands of hours in museums and galleries and other artist's studios. All of that careful looking and thinking is deep in my subconscious and informs my daily practice.

Since childhood, drawing always gave me a private place to go and my own way to spend time and please myself. My mother supplied art materials and protected my private place for art. To my brothers and sister she said, "Leave him alone, he's drawing."

My grandparents, whom I visited as a child, lived on Grenada, an island in the Caribbean. To this day, my work is influenced by the surprising combinations of color in vegetables, fruits and clothing I saw at the outdoor market, the colorful fish in the coral reefs, and the turquoise sea. Later, in art school in San Francisco in the late 70's, most of the artists whose work I experienced in galleries and museums used a lot of bright, bold, color.

Everything I see, do, read and experience finds its way into my work. For example, the initial inspiration for the painting *Peas Come to Table* was a visit to Poplar Forest, an 1826 house designed and built by Thomas Jefferson in Bedford, Virginia. The painting's title comes from Jefferson's farm book, downloadable from the Massachusetts Historical Society.

For most of my work, I just start by putting something down on the wood panel or paper, respond to it, make the next move, and then hone the composition, colors, forms and meaning as I go. For *Peas Come to Table*, I began with carpenter's tools: an auger bit, level, trowel and chisel, all of which would have been used at Jefferson's Poplar Forest. These tools have a story and inherent meaning from the lives lived by the people who used them. I then projected Jefferson's writing on to the wood panel and carved it in with a router. Next, I stained the panel with acrylic washes in a very loose and random manner. After that layer dried, I began applying thicker paint with brushes and printmaking rollers, responding to the colors of the thinner washes. Every day for three weeks, I applied layers of color and texture, building up the surface, adding images, words, shapes. One of the last things I created was a small brick-shaped stencil to replicate the Poplar Forest brick pattern for the painting. Poplar Forest was sheathed in bricks made onsite at the plantation.



Visual improvisation is key to Saftel's art making. It is noteworthy that he plays drums and guitar informally with a group of musician friends.

***Love of Music***, 2020, acrylic, collage on wood panel, 72x72"

Color in different ways has always been personally important. Color represents the passage of time: the color we see changing every day from sunrise to sunset. Color makes people happy: think flowers, birds, the greens of Spring, the blues, silver and grays of sky and water, iridescent rainbow trout, everything we see in the world. We make color choices every day in our clothing, cars, houses, and even our politics. The color combinations in *Peas Come to Table* would never have been seen by people in Jefferson's day.

All art has meaning and tells a story. Even purely abstract art tells the story of the actions of the artists upon the canvas and the time in which they lived and worked.





LEFT *Visited This Place*, 2011, acrylic and collage on wood panel, 66x44"

BELOW *Generations of Searchers*, 2021, acrylic and collage on wood panel, 48x48"





I derive meaning from the combination of words, images, materials and symbols I use. Themes reoccur in my work. How humans move through time together is conveyed by the use of the calendar, as seen in the months of the year running along the top of *Years Growing*, and by references to shared historical events. Images of the natural and man-made world appear in most of my work. Larger issues are also included such as, evolution in *How Did We Get Here?* and immigration in *How Will We Get There?*

Children are, I think, the best judges of art and their responses are always enlightening and sometimes humorous. As we all were once children, I try to stay connected to that sentiment in life and work.

I can't know everything about all aspects of my work. Art is mysterious like that. In fact, I always hope that there is more to it than I will ever know. I hope that viewers will take the time to experience the work and bring themselves and their own lives and stories to it. ■



*Arrive and Depart*, 2021, acrylic and collage on wood panel, 60x60"





*Neighbor's House*, 2021, acrylic and collage on wood panel, 40x60"



## ART AS A KIND OF HARVEST

by Rusty Freeman

*Peas Come to Table: The Collaborative Histories of Andrew Saftel* is the name of the Cedarhurst exhibition by Andrew Saftel and the title of his latest painting. With an electric router, Saftel carved Thomas Jefferson's handwritten phrase into the wood panel he uses for all his paintings. One has to look hard to find it; Saftel's use of the phrase is subtle.

Peas were Thomas Jefferson's favorite vegetable. Jefferson, a farmer, cultivated 24 different varieties of peas. Jefferson was a devoted student of agronomy. Plantings were staggered so that he might enjoy peas all summer long. No easy feat. Jefferson kept journals recording plant varieties, harvest dates, yields, successes and failures. The May 22, 1773 journal entry "peas come to table" was copied by Saftel in Jefferson's own handwriting. The phrase meant success was at hand and that soon Jefferson would be enjoying the vegetables of his labor (or, more accurately, the labor of those whose daily work kept the Poplar Forest farm going).

Peas are a harvest. The paintings of Andrew Saftel are a kind of cultivation where signs and symbols, like seeds, are planted, and nourished with painterly

embellishments in an aesthetic field of rigorous diversity. I read "peas come to table" as an analogy of Saftel's art-making; his paintings are gifts for the viewer to harvest.

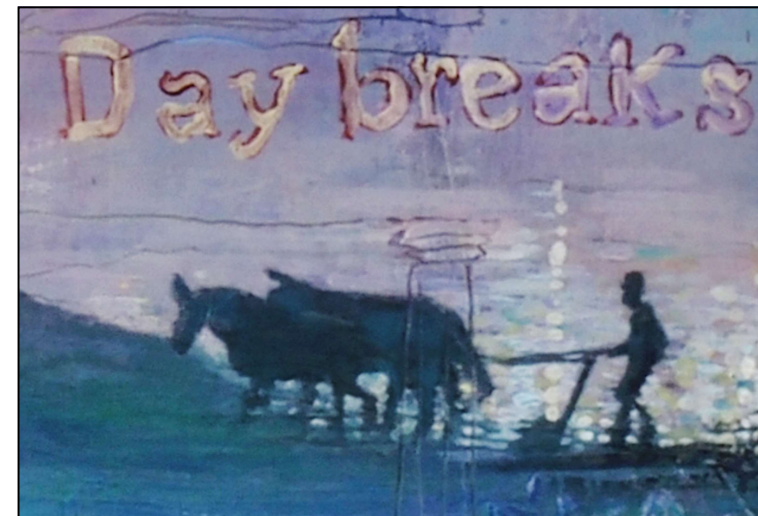
Like a farmer who, in the end, can only hope that what was planted will be reaped, Saftel cannot know beforehand how his new art will be received by each new community. The artist is like the farmer who studies closely all the seasons, weathers, varieties of plants, methods, and procedures for raising successful crops.

### Artist Bio, Themes & Teaching

Andrew Saftel was born in New Bedford, Massachusetts, grew up on Narragansett Bay, studied art in San Francisco, finally settling down in East Tennessee. Of all of Saftel's art influences, William T. Wiley (1937-2021) may be the most important.

"William Wiley was an important mentor and lifelong friend. There was a huge exhibit at SF MoMA in 1980 when I arrived in San Francisco to begin art school at the San Francisco Art Institute. For me to experience his work at that young age was life changing. His consummate skills as draftsmen and pictorial genius were immediately evident to me. He used color, humor and language to express his ideas about environmental issues, philosophy, and everyday events. It was my good fortune to meet him shortly after graduating from SFAI, to visit his studio on many occasions, to see lots of his exhibitions and to correspond with him until shortly before his death in April of 2021."

Certain symbolisms and themes recur throughout the Saftel oeuvre. The reaching man symbolizes an attitude toward life—to reach out! Stretch! Be curious! Fruit stands as metaphor for the good things in life. Circular forms, wheels, circles represent the passage of time, as do the phases of the moon and simple calendars. Saftel's musings on how we are collectively moving through time together is another consistent theme. He asks what is lost between



The artist is a kind of farmer, who plants images and words instead of seeds. Like the farmer, the artist hopes his efforts will bear fruit to be harvested by the viewer. DETAIL *Peas Come to Table*, 2022, (See front cover).

humans as time moves on. Another Saftel theme is looking back at History in an attempt to understand how we live today. He places great value on the handwritten word, believing that personal handwriting communicates more than what is said. Saftel questions what replaces the older methods and materials as our modern digital world progresses. And he venerates how people in their different ways find hope in the face of a complicated world.

Andrew Saftel has taught art twice for the US State Department in Bangladesh; been a part of the Tennessee-Israel Visual Artists Exchange; led numerous printmaking workshops including Shakerag at St. Andrews Sewanee School in Sewanee, Tennessee; Haystack Mountain School of Crafts on Deer Isle, Maine; Penland School of Crafts in North Carolina; and Arrowmont School of Crafts in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. He has been invited as a guest printmaker for projects with Hoopsnake Press, University of Central Florida, and at the Colegio Antiguo Jesuita, Pátzcuaro, Mexico, and awarded major public art commissions for the Hartsfield Atlanta Airport International Terminal and the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce.





**Hometown**, 2021, acrylic and collage on wood panel, 40x60"

### Art as a Kind of Map

Saftel paintings perform as something like world maps, such as the Medieval *mappae mundi*.

A *mappa mundi* world map illustrates a way of reading art or literature called “cognitive mapping” or “system mapping.” This reading regards works of art as wayfinding guides. Art navigates the world.

The Medieval iconography of the Hereford *Mappa Mundi* is rich with connections to Saftel’s art-making. The Hereford map features cities, written texts, people, animals, angels, and demons.



DETAIL *Mappa Mundi*, Crete island with its famed Labyrinth. By the Medieval period, labyrinths had come to symbolically represent their cosmological worldview, with its winding paths representing the challenges of life. The *Mappa Mundi* is a palimpsest of geography and literature, ethnography, history, zoology, cosmology, and theology in a cartographic image.

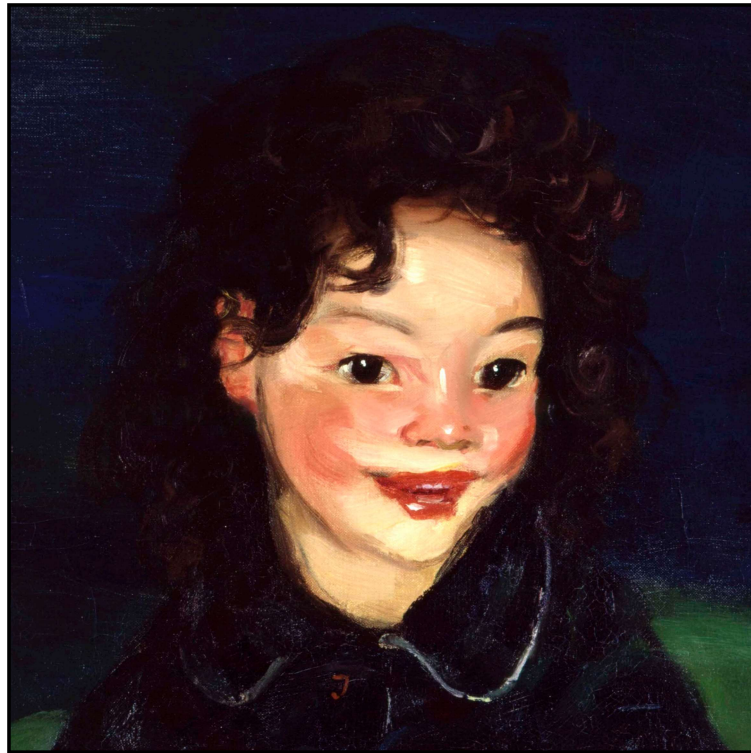


The entire **Hereford Cathedral Mappa Mundi**, c.1300, ink, calf skin, five feet by four feet. Courtesy of the Hereford Cathedral, United Kingdom  
This map was not trying to represent geographic reality; instead, the makers expressed their worldview through their religious beliefs.



DETAIL *Mappa Mundi* features people, animals, cities, words, where mythological unicorns were used allegorically.





DETAIL **ROBERT HENRI**, (1865-1929)  
***Patience (from the Gypsy Camp)***, 1916, oil  
 Gift of John R. and Eleanor R. Mitchell, Collection of  
 Cedarhurst 1973.1.23

Religion, Mythology, Culture, and Nature mix. The circa 1300 map cites prominent cultural landmarks and marks boundaries, while articulating social mores, codes, and conventions. Saftel paintings function, for me, as a kind of world map energized by an abundant amount of good will.

### Art as Record of History

Saftel's paintings of "collaborative histories" can be fruitfully compared to select paintings from the Cedarhurst Permanent Collection. It is a way to recognize and celebrate the historical values lying dormant in those great works of art. The Cedarhurst paintings, like Saftel's, make connections to the histories of America. There are historical links in such works as Robert Henri's *Patience*, a beautiful gypsy child. And George Bellows' *Mrs. T*, Mary Tyler, an older woman painted in her wedding gown, which caused a stir. Bellows overlapped the meta-histories of the young woman who wore the gown

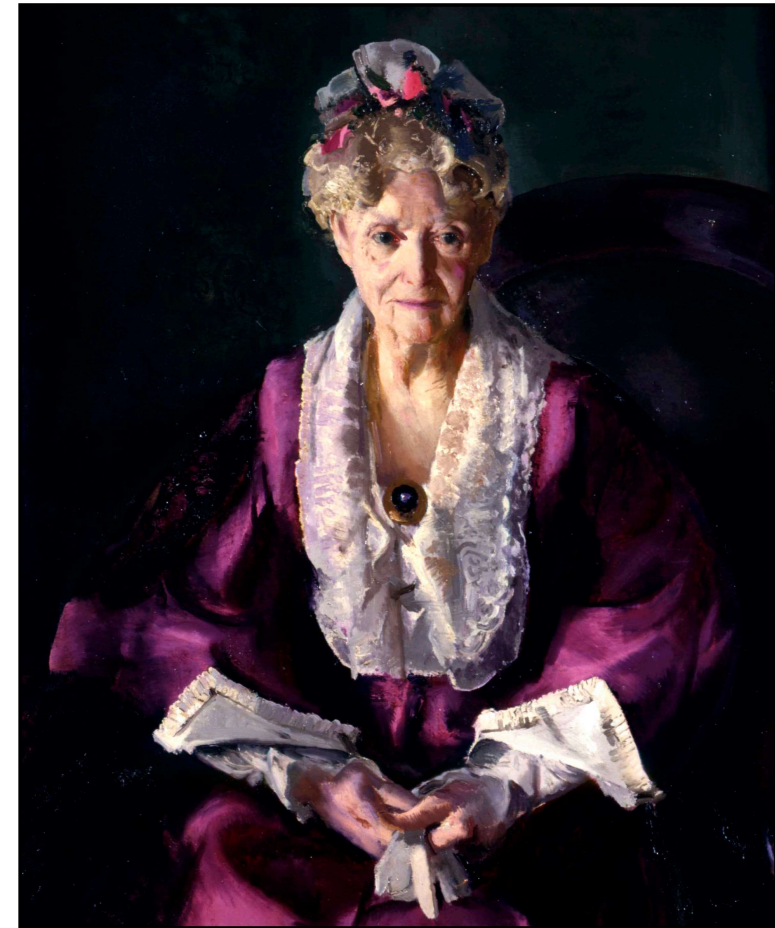
with the elder identity she became—a brilliant mixing of young and old identities flowing through time and space. Saftel-like themes can be found in Paul Strand's *Family*, a group photo of family pride and solidarity. And the comics of Chris Ware, *Building Stories*, which map everyday life in our post-industrial world rife with digital diversions and political and economic challenges.

Works such as these in the Cedarhurst collections, harvest History and engage the arts as wayfinding maps.

"System mapping," as Saftel's history paintings do, involves a momentary grasp of the world's totality if only to represent a portion of it. Saftel's historical paintings convey the great turning gyres of reality. The world whirls in its vast variety of languages, representations, and cultures. In any Saftel painting, recognizable images bump up against unknown images, waiting to be interpreted. Nature confronts Culture. Science meets Art. Positivity battles Negativity. Ambiguous abstract images contrast with sacred geometric symbols. Real objects attached to



**PAUL STRAND**, (1890-1976), ***The Family, Luzzara, Italy***, 1953, silver gelatin print, Gift of the Paul Strand Estate, Michael E. Hoffman, Collection of Cedarhurst 1987.8.2b. © Aperture Foundation



DETAIL **GEORGE BELLOW**S (1882-1925)  
***Mrs. T in Wine Silk***, 1919, oil. Gift of John R. and  
 Eleanor R. Mitchell, Collection of Cedarhurst  
 1973.1.03

Saftel's aesthetic fields bring with them tangible histories. Words, often Saftel's most powerful markers, drive denotations and connotations, whose multiple-layered meanings flow outward influencing surrounding imagery with additional cadences.

Above all, Saftel's exuberant multi-color fields unite in harmony his sweeping arrays of historically diverse peoples and cultures. "I use color with all the intensity I can find. In the end, the color must be evocative, exciting, and uplifting." ■





ABOVE *How Will We Get There?* 2016, watercolor, found objects, 52x156x6"

*La Frontera*, 2010, 33-color woodcut, 30x60"

*La Frontera* was inked and printed with the help of Derli Romero, Carolina Ortega, and Julian Guerrero at the Centro de Formación y Producción Gráfica del Antiguo Colegio Jesuita in Pátzcuaro, México. (Center for the Production of Graphic Arts at the Colegio De Jesuita).

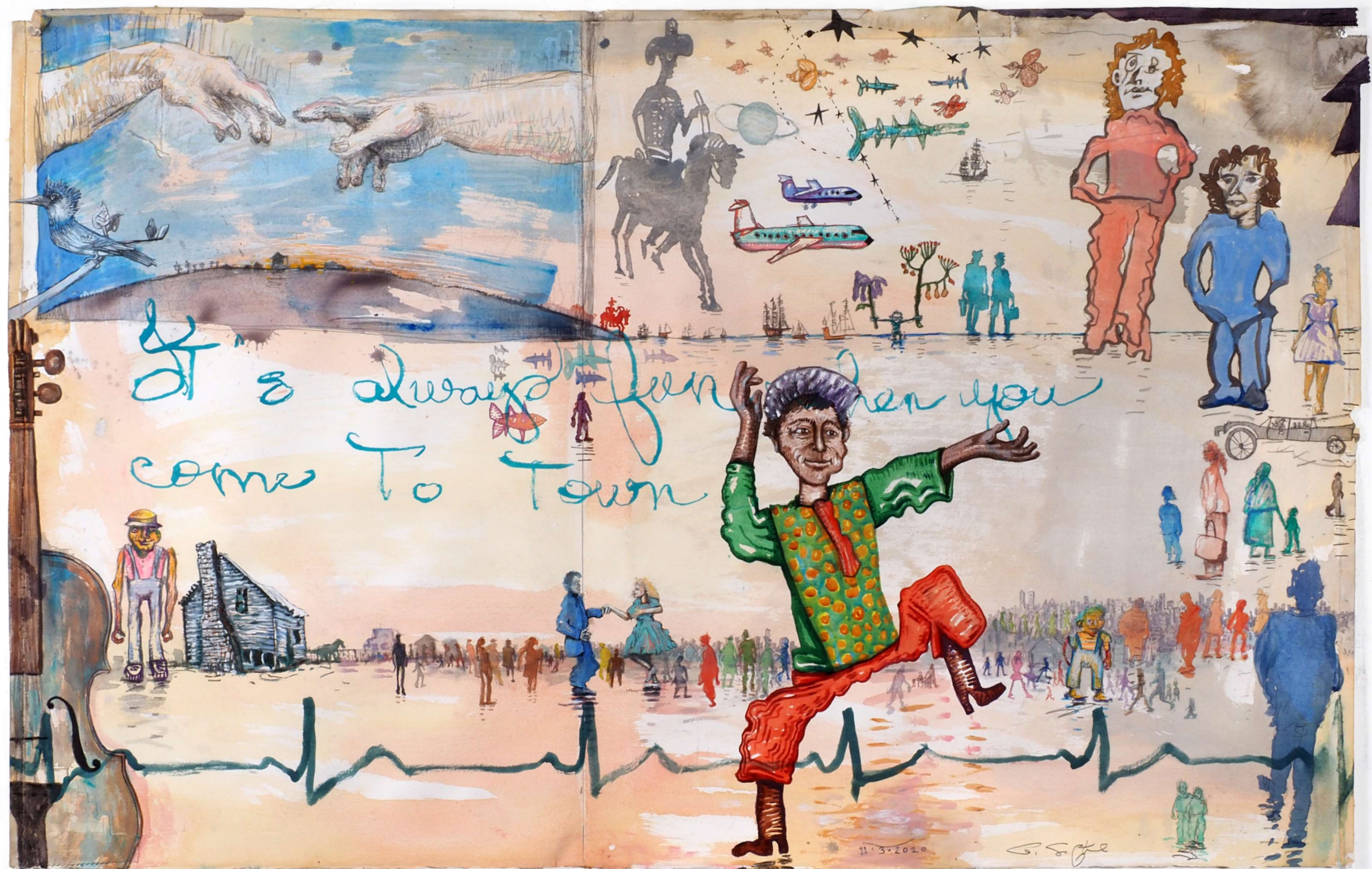
Abraham Lincoln and Benito Juárez, who were presidents at the same time, meet in the middle.











*Comin' to Town*, 2020, watercolor, 34x72"





ABOVE **Wall of Wishes**, 1999, acrylic and collage on wood panel, 56x48"

Juan Servin, **Orchard Keeper**, 2015, hand-dyed, hand-woven natural wool, 84x60"

The textile *Orchard Keeper* was a collaboration based on the 2014 Saftel watercolor by the same name which is also included in the Cedarhurst exhibition. The weaver Juan Servin followed closely the original watercolor but was encouraged to creatively improvise where it felt necessary. Saftel collaborated with the Servin family in Pátzcuaro, Mexico.







ABOVE ***Years Growing***, 2021, acrylic and collage on wood panel, 36x96"

NEXT PAGE TOP ***Childhood Home***, 2020, watercolor, 48x48"

NEXT PAGE BOTTOM ***Pick and Shovel***, 2021, watercolor, 48x59"



*"I live and work in a valley in East Tennessee,  
embedded in the landscape, comforted by the  
feeling that I am part of the unfolding spectacle  
of trees, birds, fields, river, garden."*

Andrew Saftel 2003





