Uneasy Memories:

Recent Paintings by Bo Bartlett

In a current exhibition a well-known artist turns to his past, with some unsettling results. | **by Austin R. Williams**

This issue of *American Artist* focuses on interiors—both physical locations and spaces of mind, memory, and reflection. "Bo Bartlett: Paintings of Home," a current exhibition at P.P.O.W. Gallery, in New York City, serves as an intriguing and unsettling entry point into our investigation of these themes.

Bartlett is an acclaimed painter whose work spans many genres, including figuration, still life, landscape, and interiors. His calm and composed pictures often evince degrees of both nostalgia and unease, and the pieces included in "Paintings of Home" carry on in this tradition. Bartlett spent the winter in Georgia, where he grew up, painting images of and about his childhood home and other personal recollections. The resulting works use stately compositions and delicate light and atmosphere to interpret the artist's childhood memories in a sometimes cynical, sometimes humorous, but consistently dark way.

The painting *Home*, for example, seems to bask in memories that are more haunted than nostalgic. The composition is dominated by the gray-brick house where Bartlett grew up. It may once have been—or may still be—a source of comfort for the artist, but you wouldn't reach that conclusion from studying this piece. The total blackness issuing from the house's windows makes it a sinister place, closer in spirit to a fairytale witch's cottage than to Norman Rockwell's Americana. In the foreground, a barefoot woman stands in the center of the composition and stares straight at the viewer with a gaze that holds no obvious empathy or kindness. Male figures occupy the ground on both sides of her. Most striking is the man on her left, crawling to look around the house. We cannot see his face, but his posture makes him look hesitant, scared,

RIGHT
Home
2010, oil on linen, 88 x 92.
All images this article courtesy P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York, New York.

RIGHT
Inheritance
2010, oil on linen, 48 x 66.

The cynicism and unease that pervade any potential nostalgia or kindness in Bartlett's paintings serve as a reminder of the many results that are possible when an artist looks to his or her memories, dreams, and emotions.

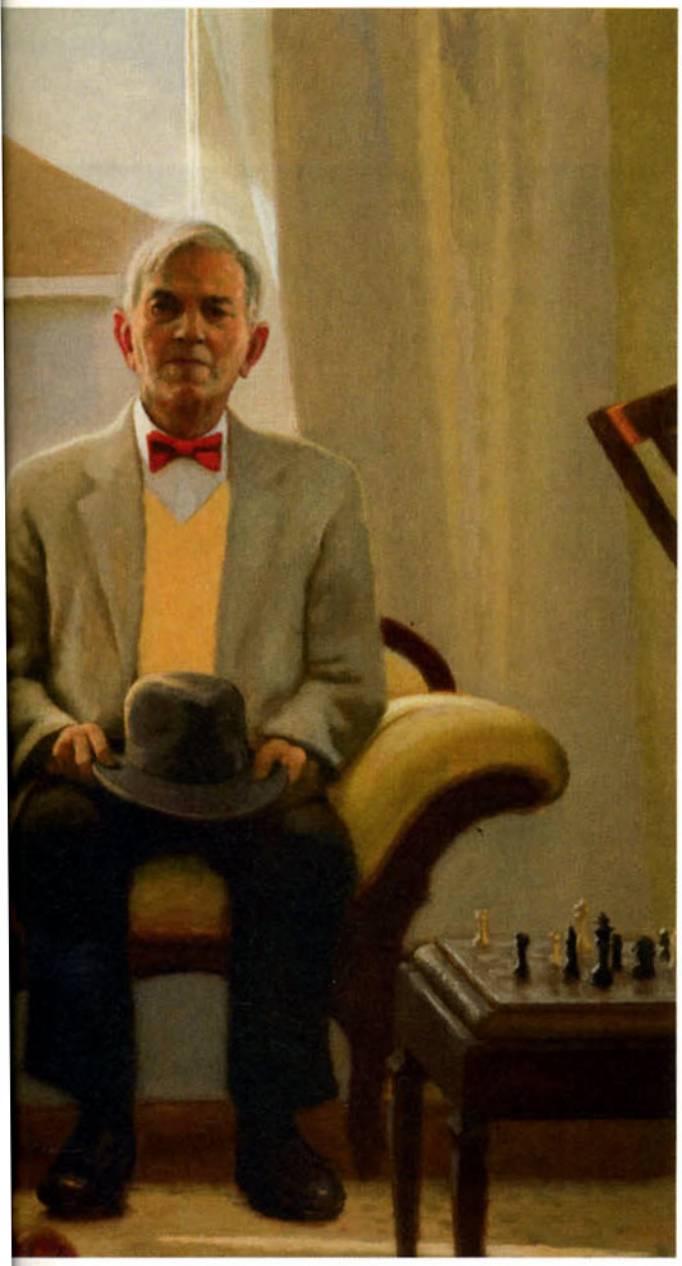
and submissive—perhaps looking for escape. The painting's strong sense of calm and its glowing warm light only make the scene more disconcerting.

In contrast to the ambiguous menace of *Home*, the painting *Inheritance* seems almost comical. The composition depicts two seniors symmetrically posed on a couch in a clean room. Again, the scene is lit with a warm—but hardly comforting—daylight. A toppled chair at left suggests that either figure could keel over any time, and the painting's title cynically but playfully suggests that the couple are relevant only for the money they will leave behind when they die.

The cynicism and unease that pervade any potential nostalgia or kindness in Bartlett's paintings serve as a reminder of the many results that are possible when an artist looks to his or her memories, dreams, and emotions. For many of us, the interior world can be a complex and dark place indeed. ■

Austin R. Williams is an associate editor of American Artist.

LEFT
Belief in the Afterlife
2010, oil on panel, 28 x 25.



About the Artist

Bo Bartlett was born in Columbus, Georgia. He studied at the University of the Arts and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, both in Philadelphia, and studied privately with artists Ben F. Long IV and Nelson Shanks. He is the recipient of numerous awards, and his paintings have been exhibited in museums and galleries around the world. For more information, visit www.bobartlettart.com.

TOP
A Miraculous Outcome
2008, oil on linen, 79 x 90.

ABOVE
My Childhood Home
2010, oil on panel, 28 x 25.