



#### PERFECT FOCUS

Over the past decade Tom Curry has painted tiny Chatto Island in all seasons and all weather. His remarkable series of paintings deal with the nature of fixedness amid a swirl of uncertainty.

# Painting Chatto Island

**For Brooklin artist Tom Curry, inspiration comes in the form of an unassuming offshore isle.**

BY SUSAN HAND SHETTERLY PHOTOGRAPHY BY BENJAMIN MAGRO

**A**t Center Harbor, in Hancock County, a cobble beach runs below a path that emerges from the woods to the west of Brooklin Boat Yard. Chatto Island stands directly to the south, across almost a mile of water. It is granite-based, with some huge stones resting against it, and above the stones runs a saw-line of softwoods. From this vantage, where the island is at its narrowest, it looks somewhat hunched and unassuming.

For the past ten years, the painter Tom Curry has made Chatto a subject of his work. He has hiked the path down to the shore in every weather and time of day. On the good days, he carries paper, pencils, a French easel, and pastels. He finds a place where he wants to sit. He faces out across the water and makes his studies.

The finished paintings, which he calls portraits, hang in homes around the country, in galleries such as Thos. Moser in Freeport, the George Marshall Store Gallery in York, the Firehouse Gallery in Damariscotta, the Neighborhood House in Bar Harbor, the Leighton Gallery in Blue Hill, and in his studio in the town of Brooklin. In Curry's hands, Chatto is a totem to a certain kind of fixedness in a swirl of uncertainty and change.

"When I get down there, I walk along the water, and I start setting things up," he says. "Is the tide coming in? Is the wind up? What is the sky like right now? If it's really over-the-top gorgeous, I do the sky first. Sometimes the water is the key because it is going to change. But if you can tell that the clouds are going to blow out, you've got to do the clouds first.

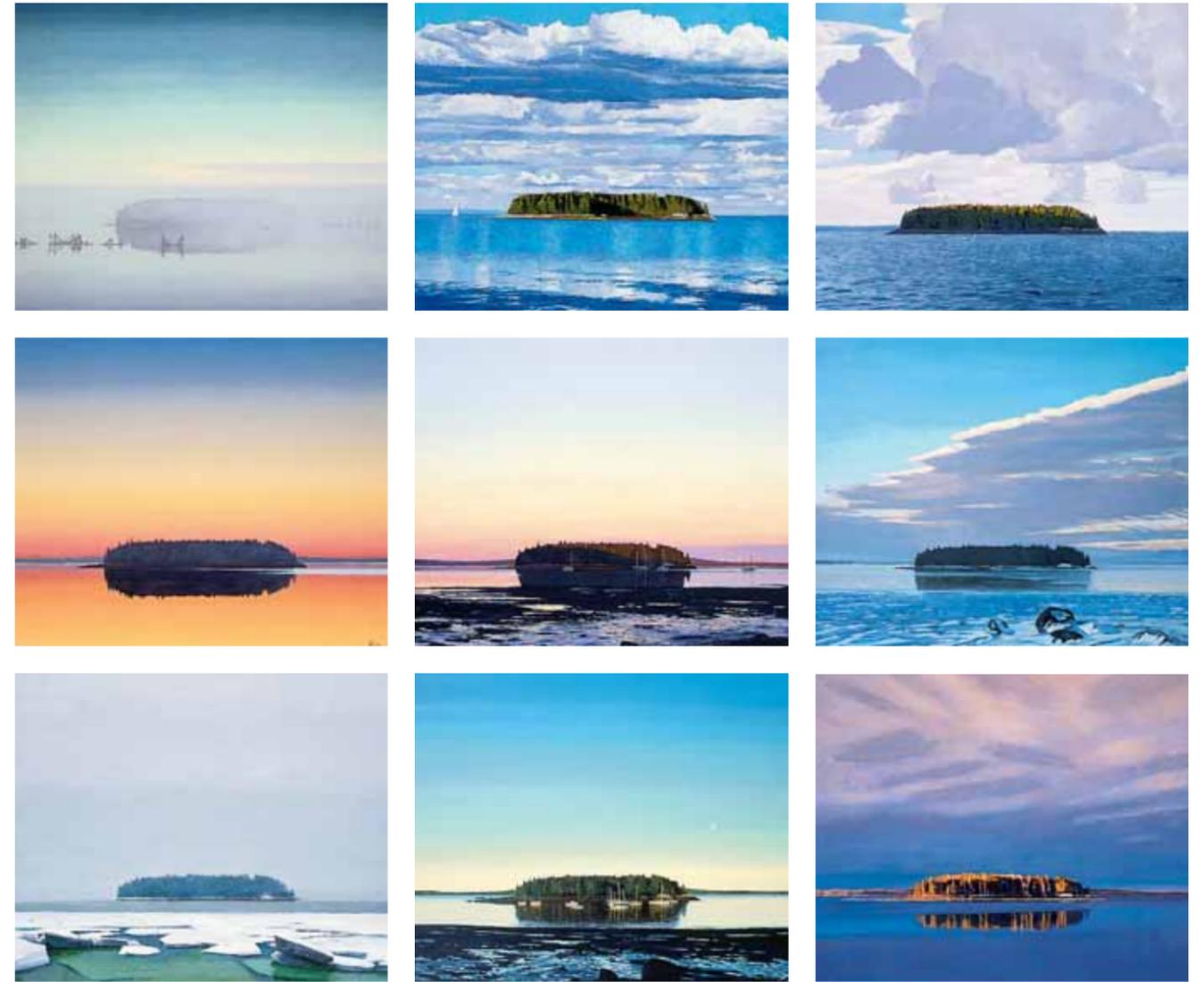
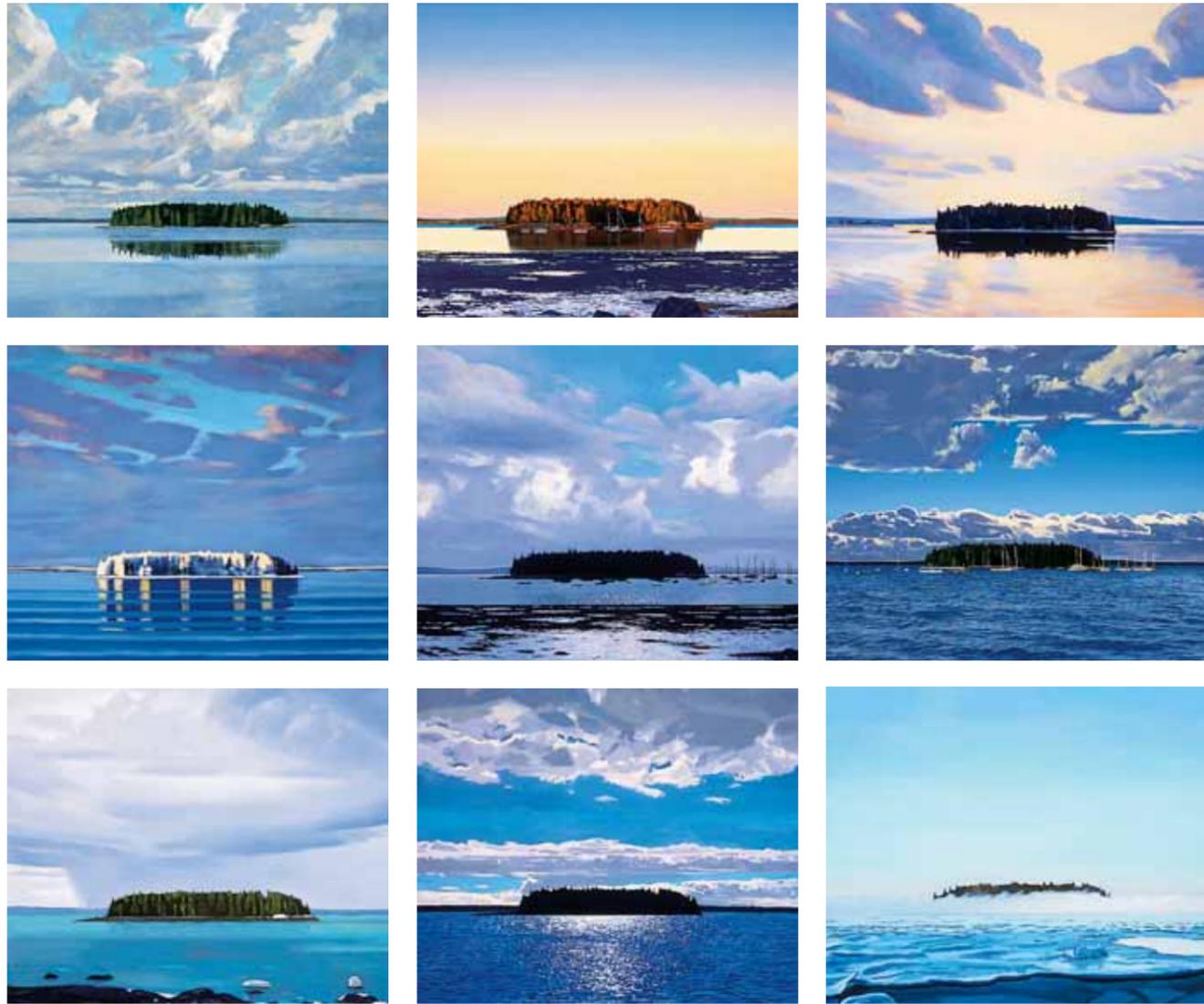
"One of the most gorgeous lights is early morning light because it's behind me. It cuts across the water as I'm staring at the island. It has cadmium yellow in it. Sometimes it's even pink. Everything on the island changes, and Deer Isle, that landmass behind the island, is pink. Once that happens, you go to town!

"This morning light on the island stays for only a short time," he continues, "and the water is more luminous in the middle of the day. I put that in. And sometimes the sky is gorgeous mid-day because the light's hitting the tops of the clouds — *zing!* — I do that. These paintings are about a whole sequence of time, not just a moment."

Curry, who is forty-nine years old, has a sandy-haired, all-American boyishness about him and speaks with a certain wry playfulness. He almost looks like a stand-in for an older, wiser Tom Sawyer, until one looks more closely and finds a wear about the eyes and mouth that implies a sensitivity and a somberness of long-standing that Tom Sawyer never had.

On the second floor of the old Brooklin Elementary School, Curry rents an open space for his studio, gallery, and the pastel classes he teaches. This is where he works on his canvases from the sketches and the pastels he makes in the field, where he puts all the different elements together.

He calls himself a Maine painter, not because he has deep roots in this state (his father served in the navy, and Curry grew up in many places before the family finally settled in Massachusetts), but because this landscape is his subject. In his studio, one finds paintings of high blueberry



Top row, from left: *Big Sky*, Karla Austen collection; *Chatto Island*, Nick Ludington collection; *Chatto Island Sunset*, private collection; *Cradle Cove*, Nancy Kales collection; *Fair Wind*, artist collection; *Gathering Clouds*, private collection. Middle row, from left: *Chatto Island with Snow*, Randall collection; *Clouds over Center Harbor*, Penny Parson collection; *Cloudscape Center Harbor*, private collection; *Crimson Sky*, private collection; *Dawn*, private collection; *January*, artist collection. Bottom row, from left: *Thunderstorm*, artist collection; *September Skyline*, artist collection; *Sea Smoke*, Nancy Kales collection; *January Thaw*, artist collection; *Moon Setting*, private collection; *October*, private collection.

barrens, long reaches of sun-dashed fields beneath wide skies, houses beveled into their plots of land, and, of course, the bays and the coves close to home.

“But I didn’t want to come here,” he confesses. When his wife, Kimberly Ridley, told him that Jon Wilson, of *WoodenBoat* magazine, had hired her to be an editor to his new publishing venture, *Hope* magazine, Curry panicked. It meant leaving their house in Somerville, Massachusetts, and a freelance job in computer graphics that gave him time to paint.

“Then we came and I was blown away. I couldn’t get enough of it!”

The paintings of Chatto are remarkable because they combine what is immensely kinetic with what is completely still. They also provoke a strange sense of familiarity. The viewer who has never seen the island says, “Oh, yes!”

as if the canvases themselves were calling up memories. Perhaps, in an odd way, they are. Curry explains that the human eye is capable of seeing many, many variations of color, and this heightened drama of color in the Chatto portraits may hark back to childhood, when the simple act of looking at the world was still magical.

For those of us who have lived a long time in the Maine landscape, it is as if he were rendering the ache of the familiar and beloved. We feel kin to these weathers, these clouds and water. Take, for instance, his portrait of Chatto at high tide, the water splashy, dark and glittering, the sky with a slight hint of menace, the island black, surrounded by a spangle of quick waves. Or the island socked in a fog, a gray-purple ghost, with boat cradles sticking up out of the water to one side like spectral hieroglyphics. Or the island at sunset, seeming to drift into darkness and sleep. Or in a winter dawn, cold and clear, we find the island

stunned with snow and sudden light, the water lying before it in streaks of bright blue.

“My friends say, ‘What? What? You’re not doing another painting of Chatto Island! There are lots of other islands around here!’ But I tell them it is not the island I’m painting. The island is about one fifteenth of the whole picture. Less! What is really happening with these paintings is not the island, it is everything else. Everything that affects the island. Chatto is either lit from the back or it is lit from the front or it is lit from above or it is obliterated by fog or softened by it.

“You know,” he confesses, “I’m afraid of the water. I live in Brooklin, Maine, and I’m afraid of the water! But water has reflection and transparency. Shadows sit on top of it and they are stunning. And it is always changing. A breeze comes through. Breaks up the water. Disappears. There is so much going on.”

The Dutch landscape painters of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries have influenced Curry’s work. What they did with landscape was to use enormous skies and diffused light that seems to fall only incidentally across limpid, reflecting water and

narrow stretches of solid ground, with very small people moving about on it.

He also loves Claude Monet. The haystack paintings. The water lily paintings. Monet’s subjects are, like his own, weather, the passage of time, the things of this earth, and the gift of being able to look at and into what is so fleetingly here.

“There is so much life out there, you can’t help but reflect it in your work. It becomes a part of you, filling you up and slowing you down and,” Curry adds, “there is nothing wrong with beauty.”

Last winter, he found himself painting a lot of gathering clouds. “It was hard with so much going on — I’m talking about the war — but then I remembered a teacher telling me, ‘Don’t be over-symbolic. Your work will come out the way you feel.’”

“Reverence and gratitude,” Curry says. “Those are huge words. But if you have a life and you enjoy it, they come back and back and back. All this constant radio news, I think you have to turn it off after a while. You’re not hearing solutions. You’re hearing agitated problems. I think you have to go back to where you live. Love the place where you live.”