

# Decor Maine

ISSUE NO. 6

LIVING BEAUTIFULLY IN MAINE

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INTERIORS



# STUDIO ARTIST

written by  
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photographs by  
**DAVE CLOUGH**

**FOUR YEARS AGO**, artist Stew Henderson began a new series of intricately composed paintings created from pieced and painted cut-out wood. Initially, the works in the series were sparingly colored and abstract, with a sense of place suggested through the tones and textures of a landscape he knew or remembered. As the series evolved, the works became larger in scale, more colorful, and complex, inspired in part by a visit to the high desert town of Joshua Tree, California. For a native of New England, “visiting the desert for the first time was mind-blowing,” he says. “The expansive views, earthy pallet, and scrubby textures held a beauty that I had never experienced.” Upon returning home and still thinking about the place, he made a pieced-wood painting of the toolbox in his studio.

## OBJECT LESSONS: MIDCOAST ARTIST *STEW HENDERSON*’S BOLD NEW WORK RECASTS THE ORDINARY



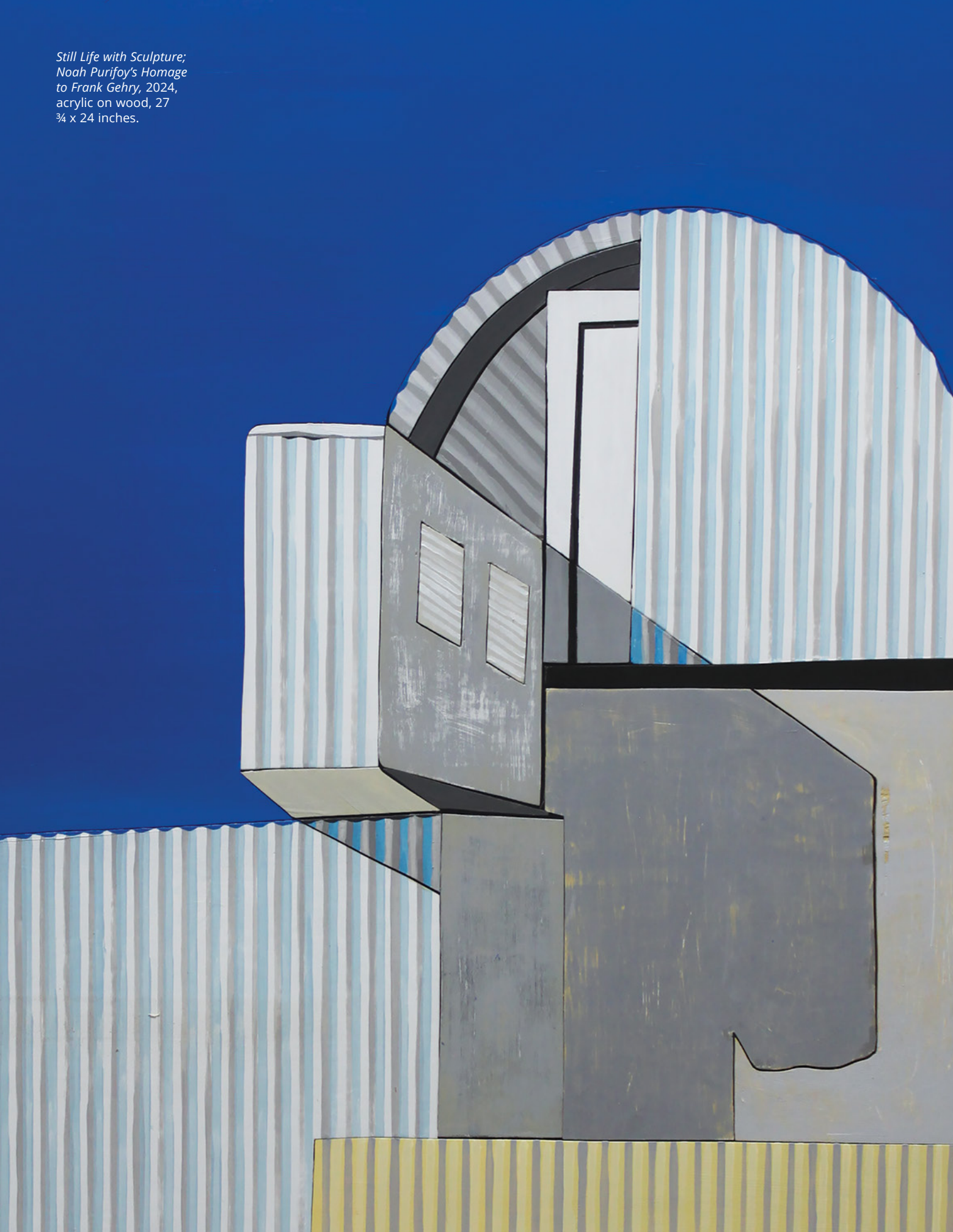
“The toolbox is a familiar object in most artists’ studios, and I realized I could use this commonality to describe a place by portraying the objects that have a function and purpose in our culture. That was when the idea of painting still lifes took shape.” Boldly colored works from the series filled the walls of Henderson’s studio at his home in Northport when I visited. They were soon to be delivered to the Caldbeck Gallery in Rockland, along with a selection of the desert landscapes, for a solo exhibition.

**ABOVE:** Source photos taken by the artist serve as inspiration for his paintings. **OPPOSITE:** The artist in his Northport studio with a selection of his recent still life paintings.





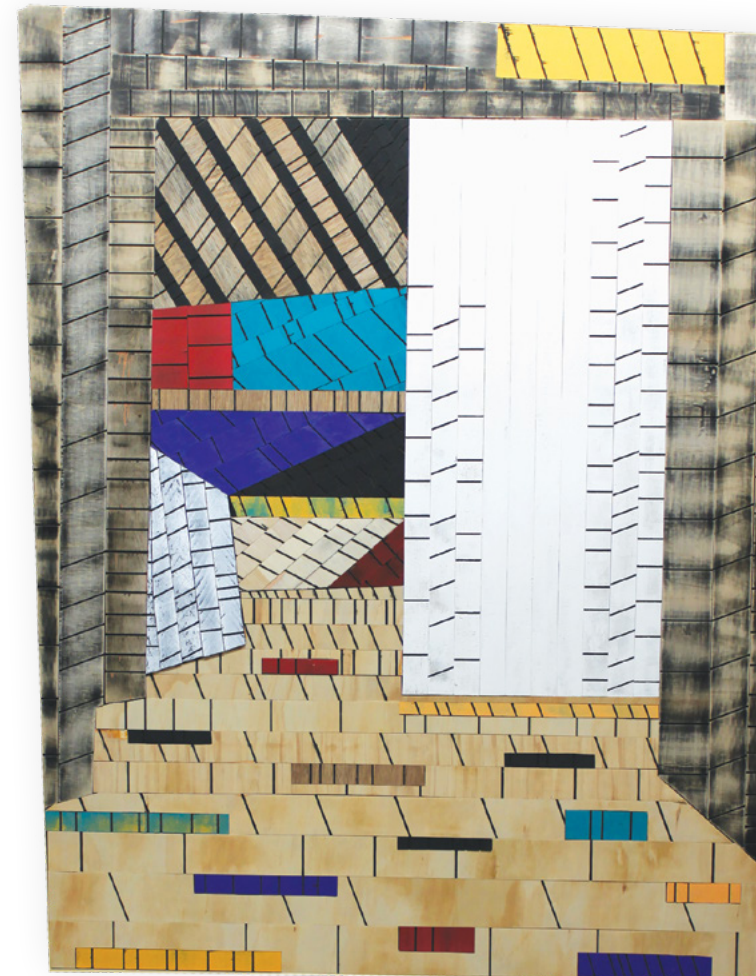
*Still Life with Sculpture;*  
Noah Purifoy's Homage  
to Frank Gehry, 2024,  
acrylic on wood, 27  
¾ x 24 inches.



## studio visit STEW HENDERSON

**SM:** Stew, one of the things I've long admired about you is the diversity of your practice. You work with various materials and are accomplished in painting, sculpture, collage, and printmaking. With this recent series, it seems you're bringing together many of the strands that you've explored throughout your career.

**SH:** You're right, and I'm glad you've noticed that because, in my mind, there's always a thread. There's always a combination of things that relate. I mean, some artists stay in the same groove, and that's fine, but for me to come into the studio every day and work, I have to make something I find interesting and making the same thing over and over isn't interesting to me.



**ABOVE:** *Lime Kiln, London, 2022*, acrylic and aerosol color on wood, 51 ½ x 44 ½ inches. Inspired by an 1859 etching by James McNeill Whistler.



Courtesy of the Artist

**SM:** There's also a strong balance in the work between the conceptual and the material, between the idea and the making. Is that something you're conscious of?





*Games and Puzzles*, 2023, acrylic on wood, 36 x 48 inches.

I'M CHOOSING TO PRESENT  
A PERSONAL VIEW ON  
CONSUMERISM—WHAT WE  
BUY, WHAT WE PERCEIVE AS  
NECESSARY, AND HOW WE  
CONVEY OUR DESIRES.



**RIGHT:** *Greeting Cards*, 2023, acrylic on wood, 36 x 36 inches.  
**BELOW:** *Still Life with Tool Box*, 2023, acrylic and aerosol color on wood, 40 x 48 inches.





I'M DRAWN TO DISPLAYS OF MULTIPLE, SIMILAR THINGS, WHERE THERE'S A RHYTHM BETWEEN SHAPE AND COLOR, PATTERN AND REPETITION—A TYPE OF VISUAL ACTION.

**SH:** When I attended Hartford Art School in the mid-1970s, I had a truly dual education. I was running the bronze foundry and learning about classical sculpture while also having teachers who had us go out into the field to build bird nests that could house humans. On the one hand, it was a very classical training, and on the other, a very conceptual approach, which has carried through in my work.

**SM:** How did you develop the conceptual framework for the still lifes?

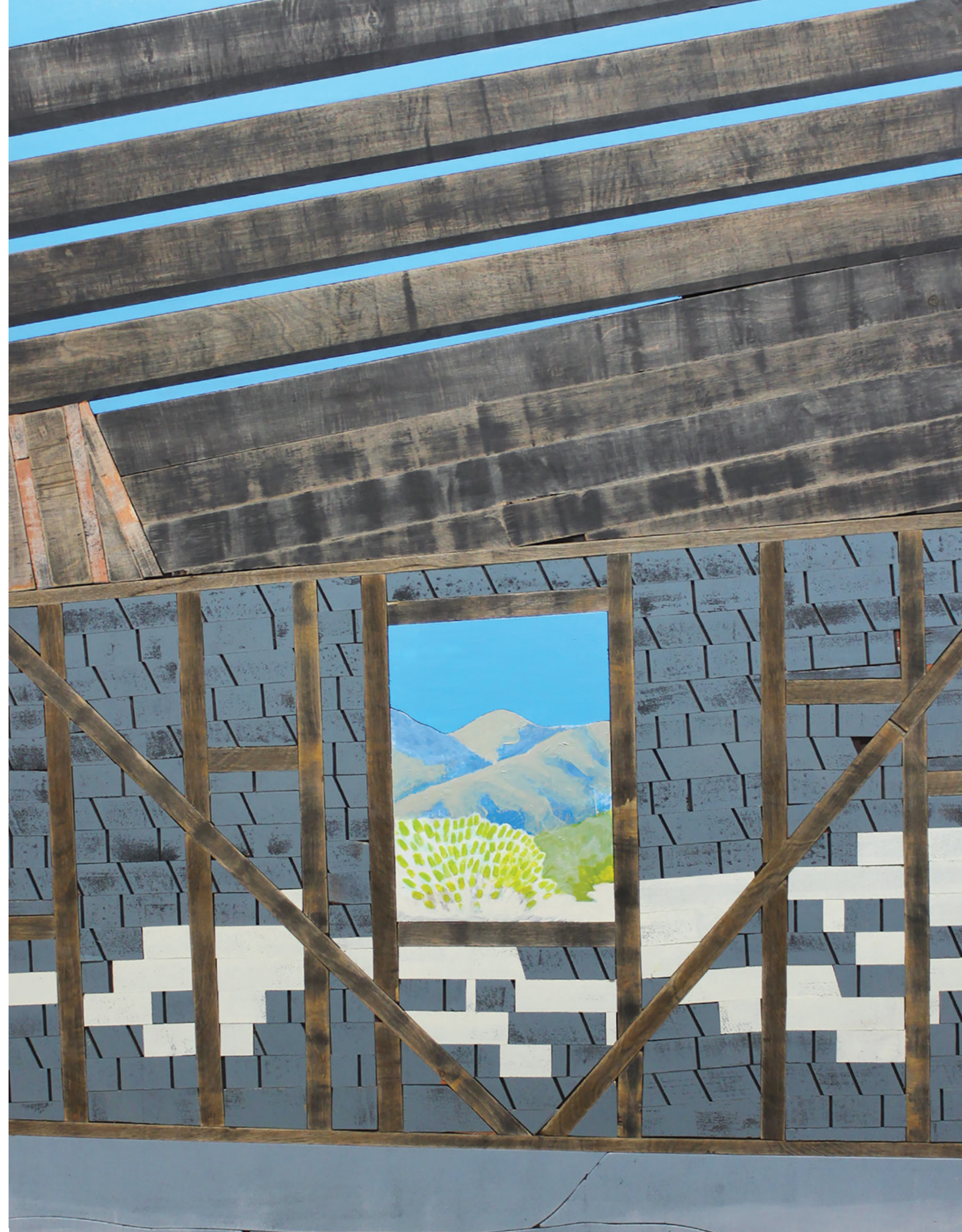
**SH:** When I started the series, I did some research on the history of still-life painting and its meaning over time. It's always highlighted different aspects of society and how objects carry meaning or serve as allegories. In my case, I'm choosing to present a personal view on consumerism—what we buy, what we perceive as necessary, and how we convey our desires. It isn't meant to be critical, just reality, common allegories that tell a story about who we are.

**SM:** Where do you find your subjects?

**SH:** They're almost all from places that I regularly go to, the hardware store, the supermarket, Goodwill, Walmart, Renys, everyday places. I'll see a display or arrangement that catches my eye and take a photograph with my phone. I'm drawn to displays of multiple, similar things, where there's a rhythm between shape and color, pattern and repetition—a type of visual action.



**ABOVE:** *Wonder Valley Mirage*, 2022, acrylic and aerosol color on wood, 40 x 40 inches. **OPPOSITE:** *Desert Interior*, 2023, acrylic and aerosol on wood, 36 x 48 inches.







Henderson is drawn to subjects where there's a rhythm between shape and color, pattern and repetition.

**SM:** So then, what comes next? How do you translate the idea to the material?

**SH:** On the computer, I crop the image down to find an area that serves as the basis for the composition. Then, I draw it out on a sheet of 1/4-inch wood. Each piece is individually cut, sanded, gessoed, and painted, then assembled like a puzzle or a mosaic. They're very time-consuming. Some of the paintings have a couple of hundred pieces in them, while others have 20 or 30 pieces.

**SM:** This is a significant body of work, where do you see it going from here?

**SH:** It's interesting you ask that because the way I work, is I get an idea and if it's worth pursuing, I'll stay with it until I get to that last painting, that last print, that last sculpture and it says, yeah, that covers everything I wanted to do with these ideas. I've been on this series for four years, and I think I've hit that spot where, in each body of work that I've done, I say, all right, I did it; it's time to move on. ■ [stewhenderson.com](http://stewhenderson.com)



Summer Wear, 2025, acrylic on wood, 30 x 24 inches.



Henderson's paintings are intricately composed from pieced and painted cut-out wood. "Each piece is individually cut, sanded, gessoed, and painted, then assembled like a puzzle or a mosaic. They're very time-consuming," says the artist. Some of the paintings have a couple of hundred pieces in them, while others have 20 or 30 pieces. **ABOVE:** *Still Life with Neck Ties*, 2024, acrylic on wood, 36 x 29 3/4 inches. **BOTTOM, LEFT:** *Jack Rabbit Suite*, 2023, acrylic and aerosol color on wood, 40 x 48 inches.

