

How to portray the everyday, according to Holly Farrell

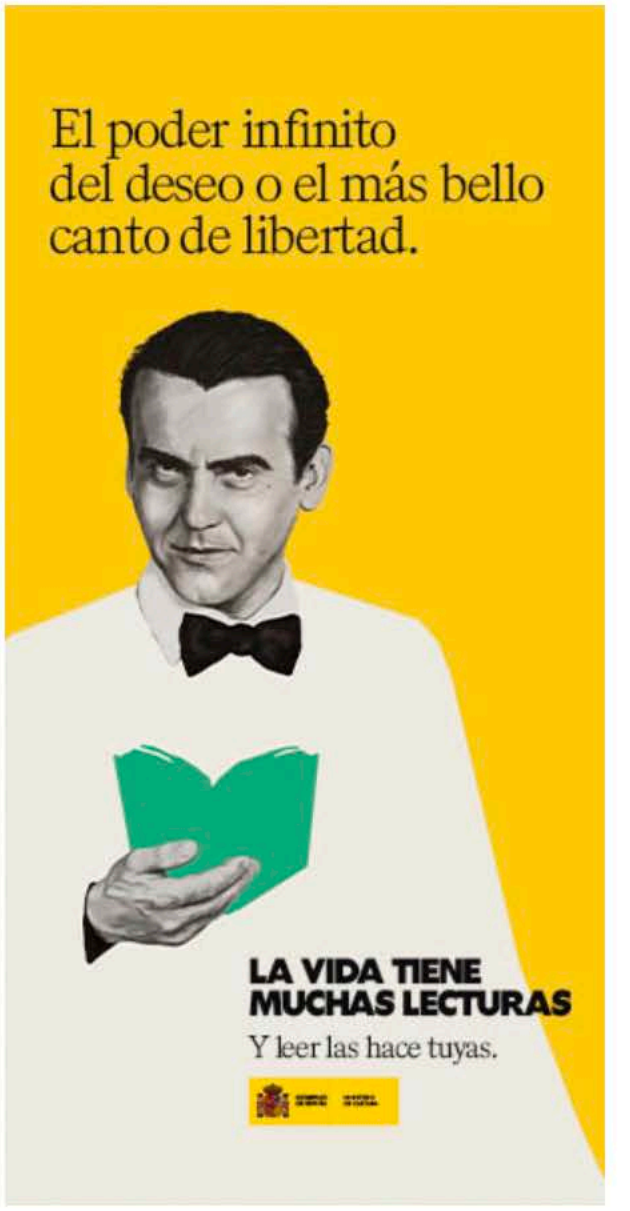
CARMEN LAGO · SEPTEMBER 14, 2026 · CREATIVITY · 8 MINS READ



If **Holly Farrell** were asked to define nostalgia, she would surely turn to her paintings rather than words. There, on her canvases, we find portrayed the melancholy and tranquil vision of everything that reminds us of home, that place we inevitably return to when we think of our loved ones.

This Canadian painter, more than still lifes, creates portraits. Chipped bowls stacked one on top of the other; used kitchen towels hanging alone on a wall of seventies-era tiles; old shoes that have walked a thousand paths; books placed haphazardly on a shelf, their covers worn smooth from countless readings… Behind each of these old, worn, and enormously evocative objects, bearing the marks of time, lies a story, the symbolic portrait of those who once owned them.





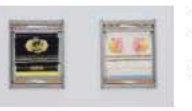
SAME CATEGORY



And Yorokobu became a bright toy box



What goes through your head when you move your feet



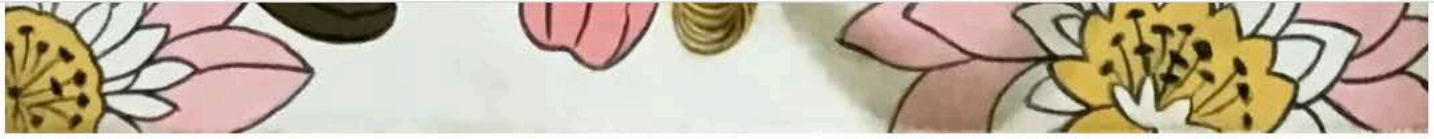
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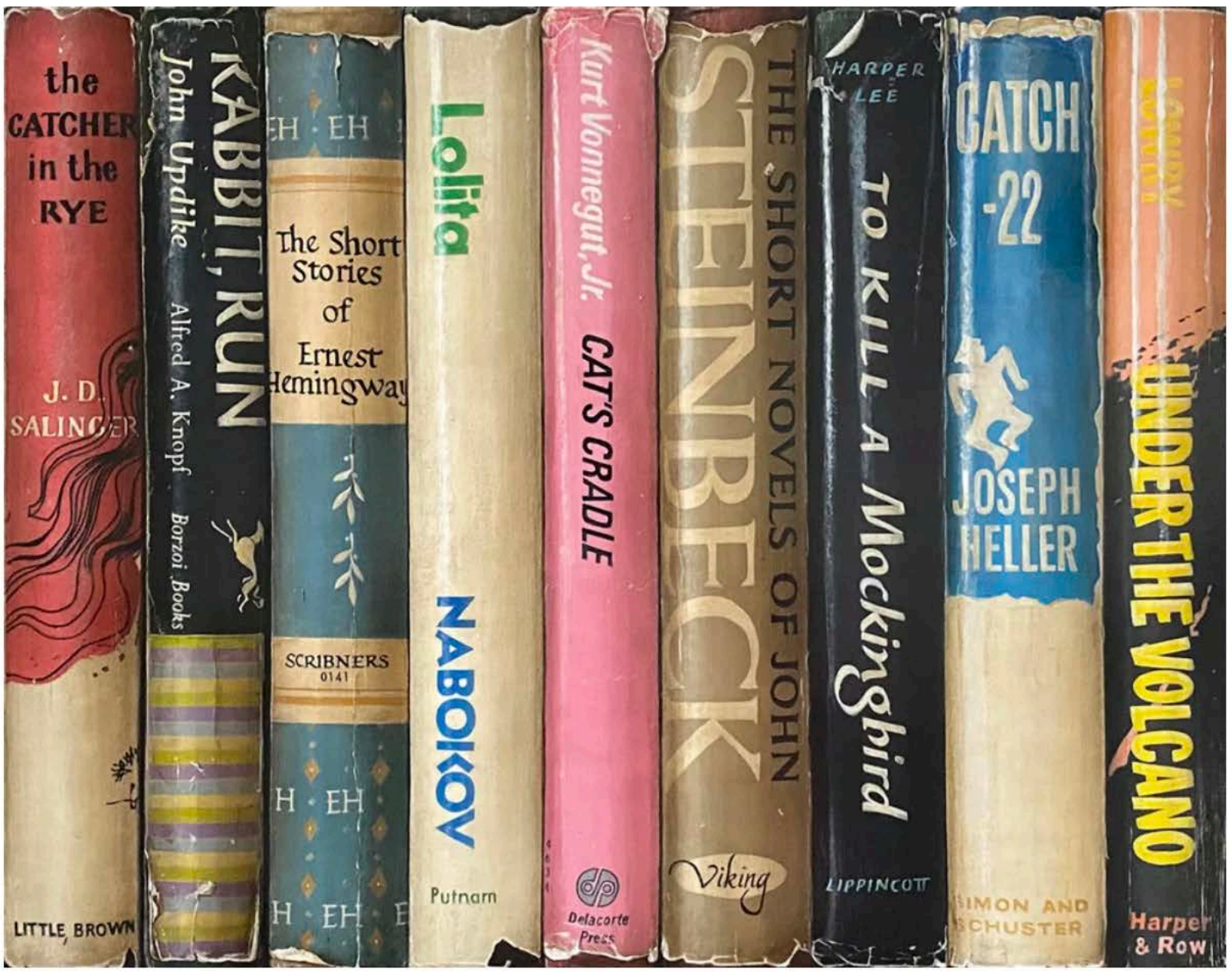


'Phone', 20 x 14 inches, acrylic and oil on board, 2020

"In each of my works, I see traces of a past dedicated to one or more people, and often to more than one generation; and for me, returning to the past is easier by observing things, those everyday things that have marked our daily lives and those of our predecessors. The everyday is what serves as my point of reference. The everyday is what I paint," he replies, trying to explain his fascination with these objects.

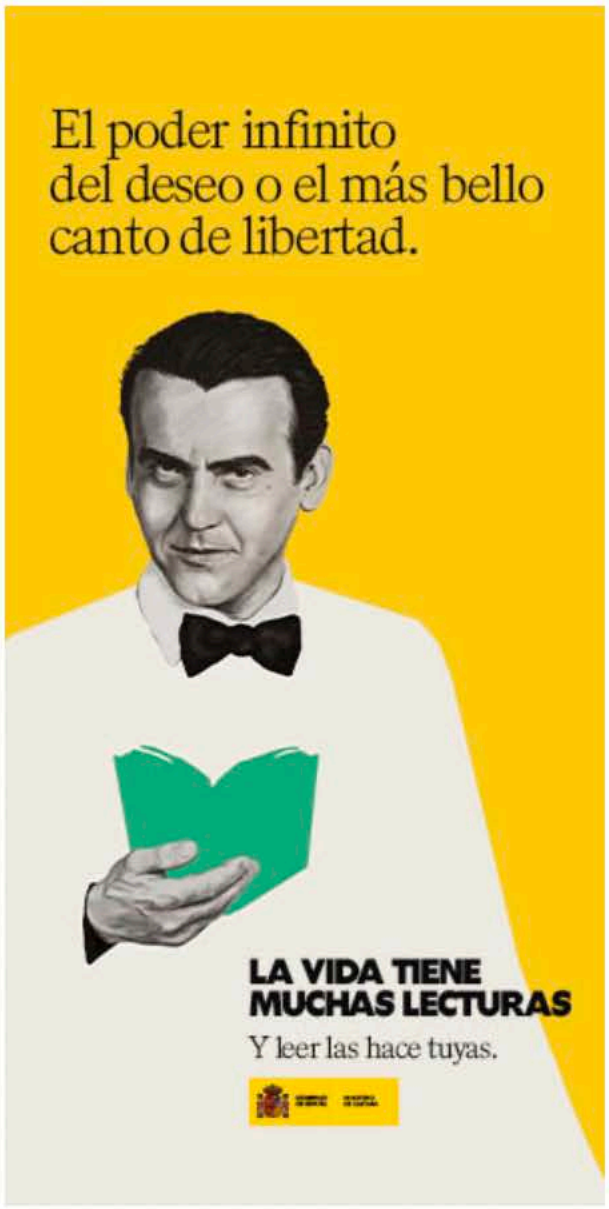
Farrell is drawn to these "old and familiar things." "I like the subjects I paint to express something of their history, with hints of it in the wear and tear, the cracks, the fissures, the chips, or the patches. When I come across something I connect with, it brings to mind, for a moment, the people I've loved," she explains, clarifying her attraction to these pictorial elements.

For this artist, it's essential to see experience reflected in what she paints, hence her fondness for antique subjects. "I see something of myself in all the themes I paint. But perhaps, above all, they are a bridge to the people or places I've known."



'Books', 22 x 28, acrylic & oil on board, 2023







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Spectators who enrich

One of his latest paintings depicts a stack of antique bowls. For Farrell, it's impossible not to start imagining what they once held, their smell, who used them, when, and for what purpose… He sees it in every crack, every chip, in the color faded by time…



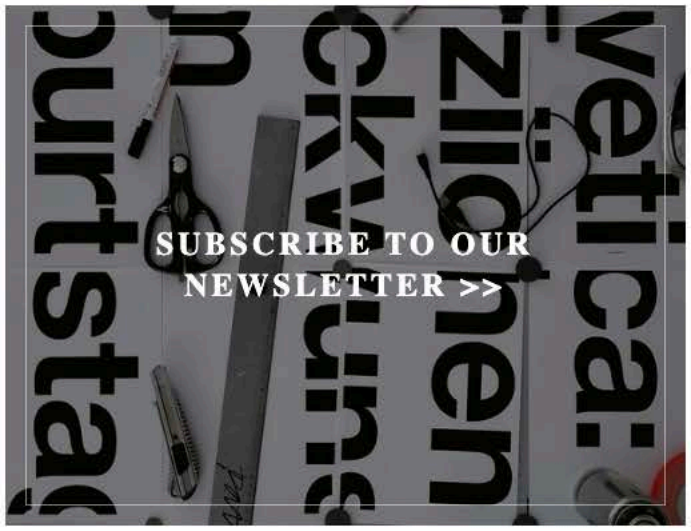
'Bowls', 16 x 20 inches, acrylic & oil on board, 2026

“When I paint, I meditate on what I’m seeing, what I’m painting, and the memories come to me slowly, as if they envelop me,” says Holly Farrell . And that feeling is equally transmitted to those who contemplate her works, because we’ve all had a similar bowl that reminds us of our grandmother, or tea towels that were always in our mother’s kitchen, or books that we’ve seen since childhood in the family library, and that make us want to go back there.

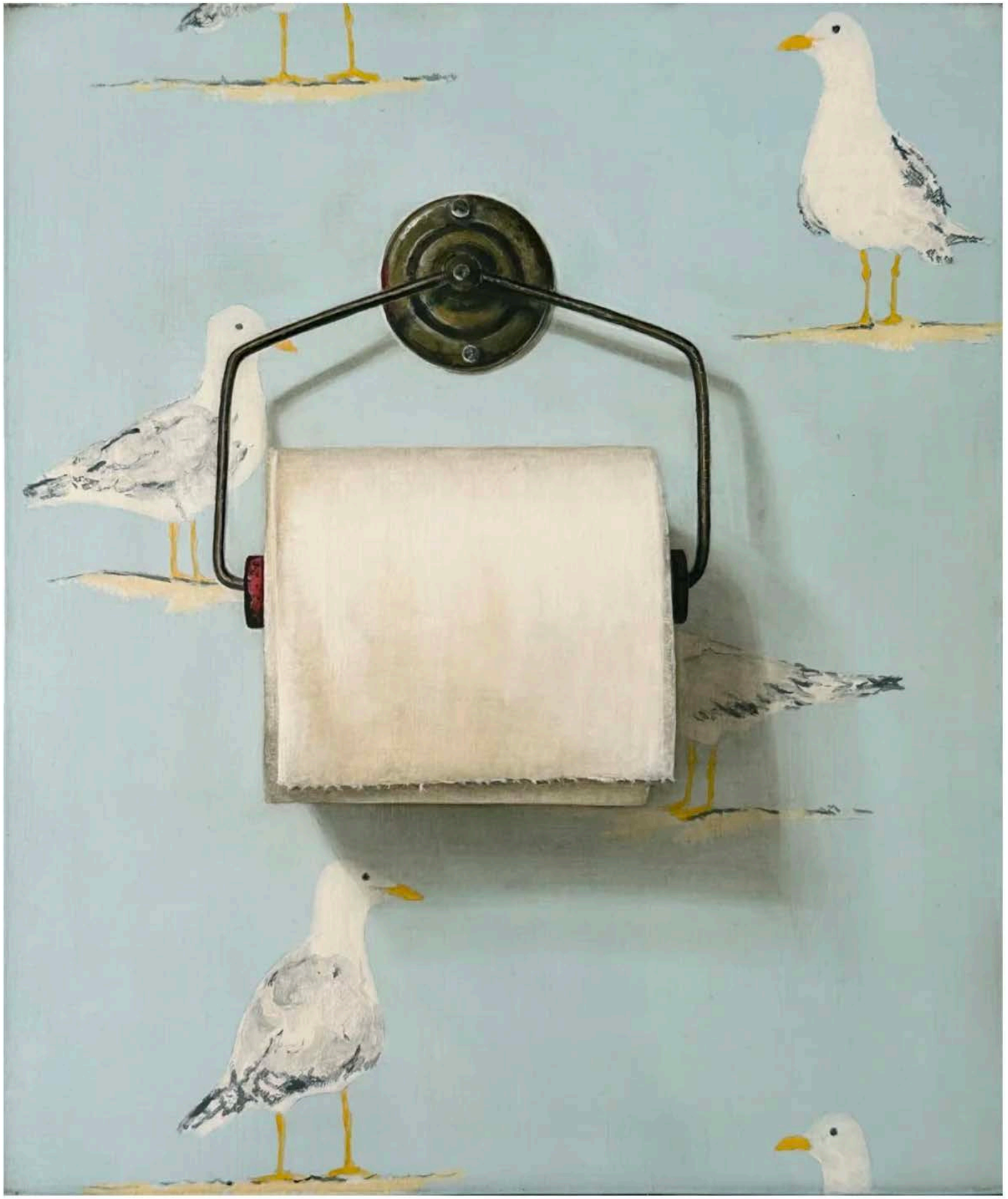


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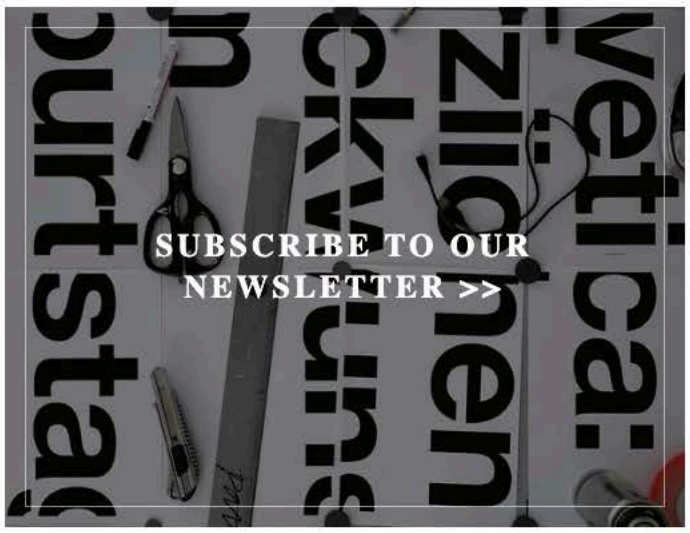
'Toilet Paper', 14 x 12 inches, acrylic & oil on board

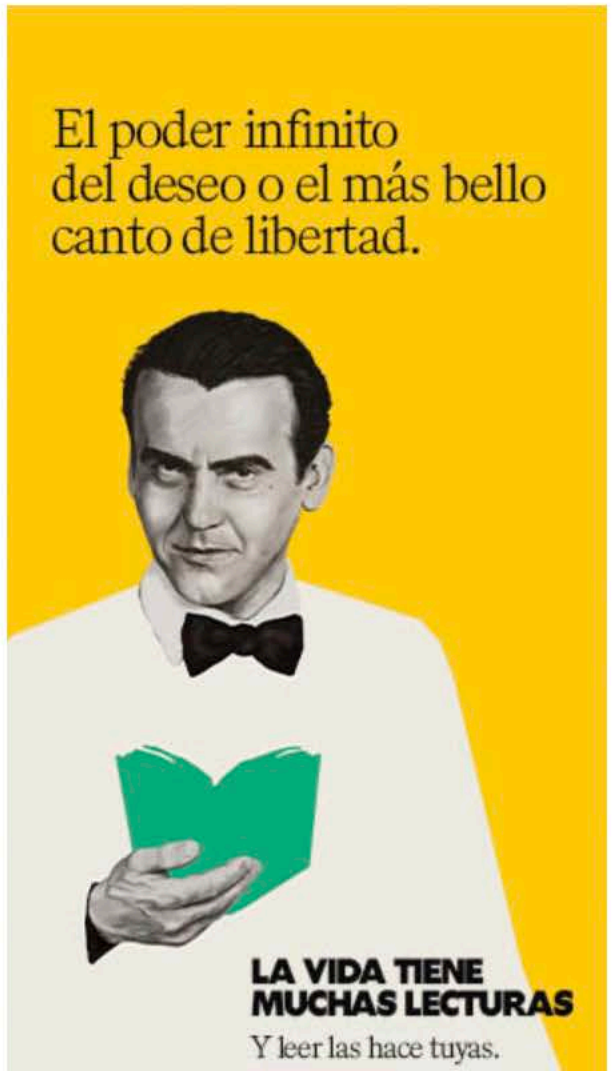
“When people look at my paintings, they often talk about their own relationship with the subject. Their stories, similar to yet different from mine, add layers, somehow making the painting better, richer. That something as simple as bowls can have such a broad reach, beyond the present, delving into our collective past, always amazes me. Each viewer makes the painting their own. It reminds them of someone, at some point in their life. It goes from being a simple still life to a portrait, and then back again. The line blurs.”



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The place where you are born

Being born in a small town in northern Ontario has not only shaped her way of thinking and living, but also her painting. Her childhood and youth were simple, surrounded by humble, hardworking people, like her own family, accustomed to making things last because money was scarce in those homes. Being poor—though they never felt that way—didn't prevent them from being happy. And sharing those same needs, that same way of understanding life, bound them, in a way, to the things that aged with them.

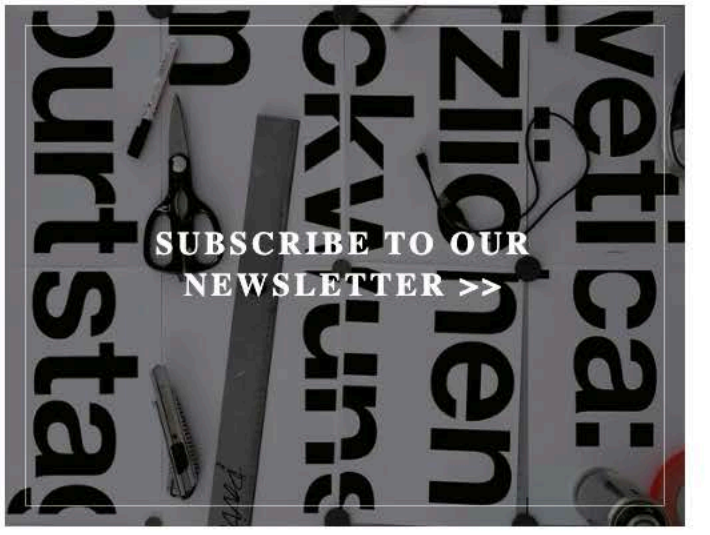


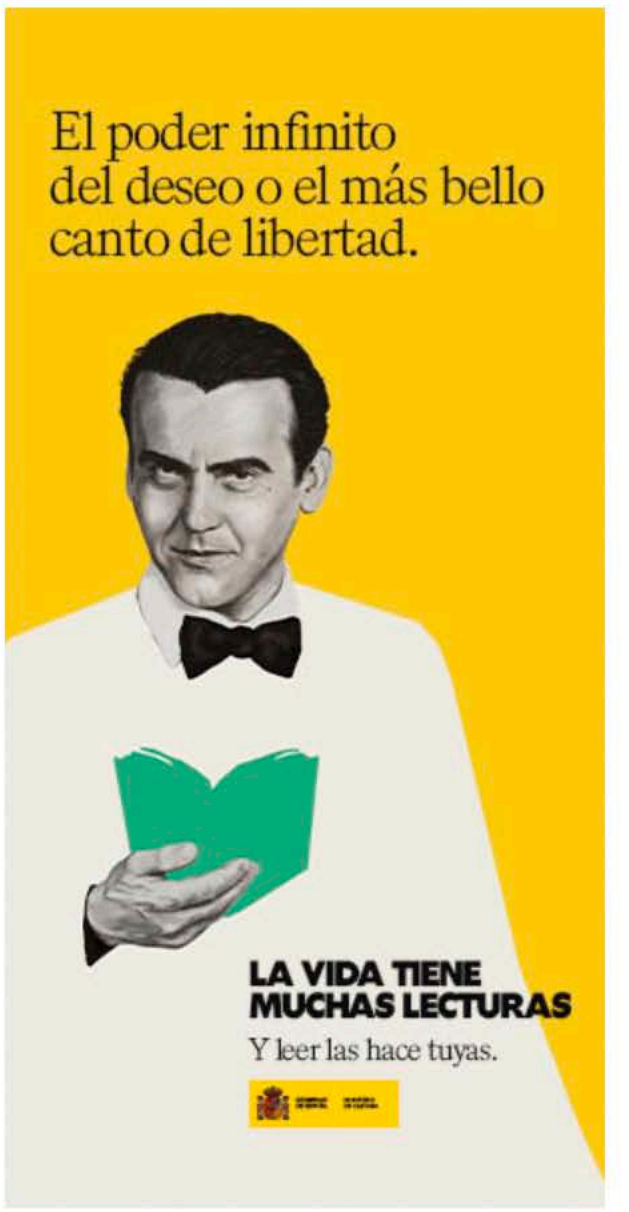
'Clock', 20 x 14 inches, acrylic & oil on board, 2026

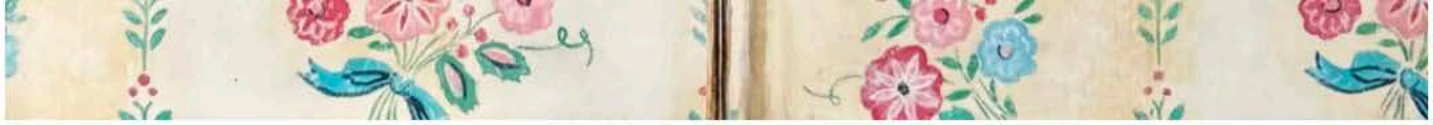


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'Clock', 20 x 14 inches, acrylic & oil on board, 2026

“When I was young, the world around us seemed much more permanent than it does today. Things were made to last. The ephemeral objects we incorporated into our lives were both beautiful and practical. We thought about taking them with us when we left home… As a teenager in the 1970s, I wanted some of my mother’s things to go with me wherever I went, as if I were taking a part of her with me. I think it was a generational mindset. Even now, sitting here 50 years later, when I look up, I see her things all around me.”

"These things, made to last, ended up acquiring small marks from daily use. Their edges softened, the colors faded, sometimes a crack or a stain appeared... For me, they have become memories of our life in the village, and they are what ties me to the idea of home," she explains.



'Teacups', 20 x 32 inches, acrylic & oil on board, 2025

She is the chosen one

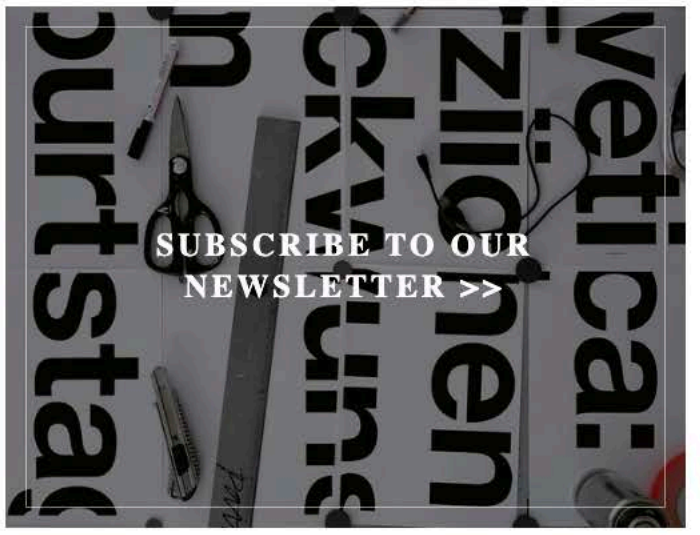
That's why many of her paintings are portraits from that era. "Although I'm very influenced by my childhood in the 60s and 70s, it was common for families to continue adopting the practical approach of previous generations, keeping things because they were still useful. And so, my grandparents' era also occasionally finds its way into my paintings."

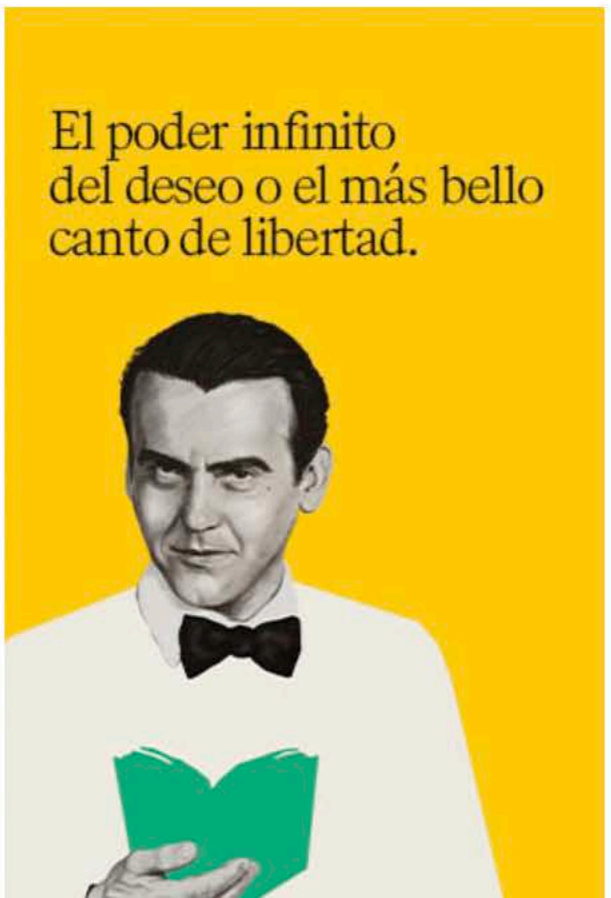
In fact, any object with a history can spark her inspiration and become a still life. In a way, it's the object that chooses her, not the other way around.



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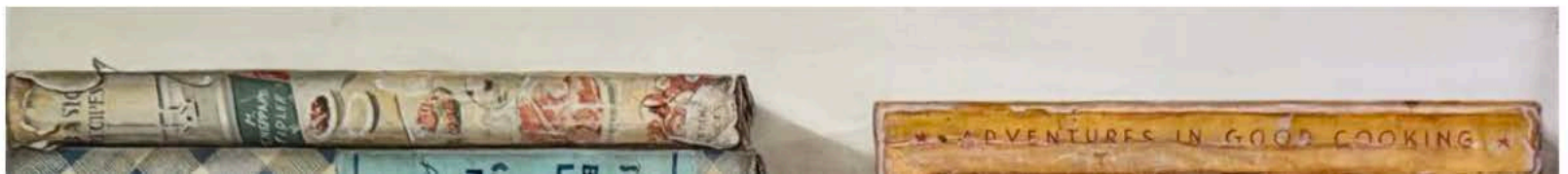
'Towels', 16 x 18 inches, acrylic & oil on board, 2026

However, the process of creating a painting is slow and develops gradually. "Sometimes, a theme evolves over the years, as in my paintings about books; but the initial connection with something is always instantaneous and intuitive. And, occasionally, a theme adapts to include an extension of itself."

The paintings in which she depicts paperback books are one example, she explains. “After years of painting rows of hardcover books, I made the leap to the *humble* paperback, which is more familiar to me and reminds me of my early reading. I often see something and feel like I know it. And I pick it up. My husband says I’m always touching things. It’s true. Holding something in my hand helps me understand my need to paint it.”

Let there be no shortage of books

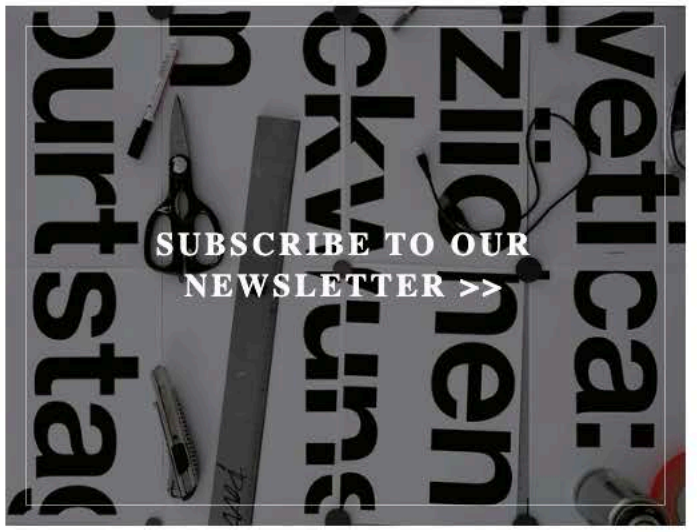
Among his favorite objects, besides vinyl record covers of classic rock and music, are books. In fact, Farrell has a library of thousands of volumes, some, he says, printed in the 19th century. There are books throughout his house, from his study to his living room. They are an omnipresent object in his home.





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'Cookbooks', 18 x 24 inches, acrylic & oil on board, 2026

“I love painting books, with or without their dust jackets,” she confesses. Finding the right composition to transfer them to the canvas can take her days. And in that process, she moves them around, observes them from afar, moves them again… until the size, color, genre, and titles of the chosen works fit together in a way that feels natural. “Paintings of books are the most challenging for me. From the initial idea to the final varnish, I can barely estimate how long it takes. I only know that in the end, I feel like I can breathe again.”

Of all the books, she likes the cheapest paperback editions the most. After all, she says, they're what brought literature to the masses, and to her as well. "That's why I want to pay homage to them. My husband reads to me while I paint. He helps me work on the smallest details, when music simply isn't enough. I love all books, even the ones I haven't read yet."

The work process

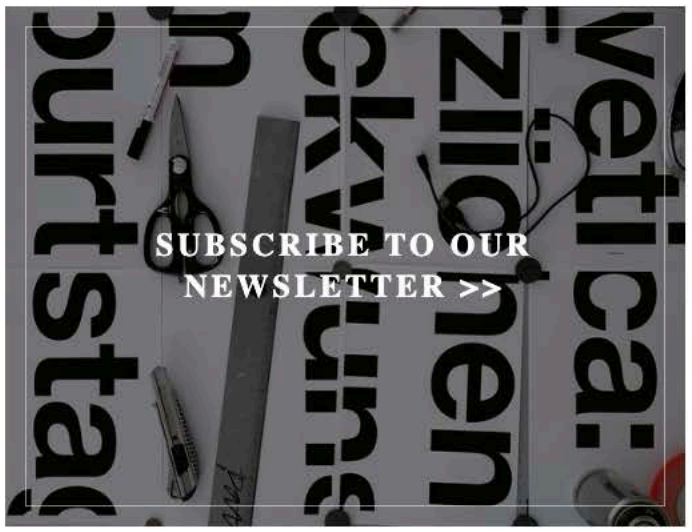
Holly Farrell can't imagine her life without a paintbrush in her hand and a canvas. "If I'm not painting," she says, "I'm thinking about painting."

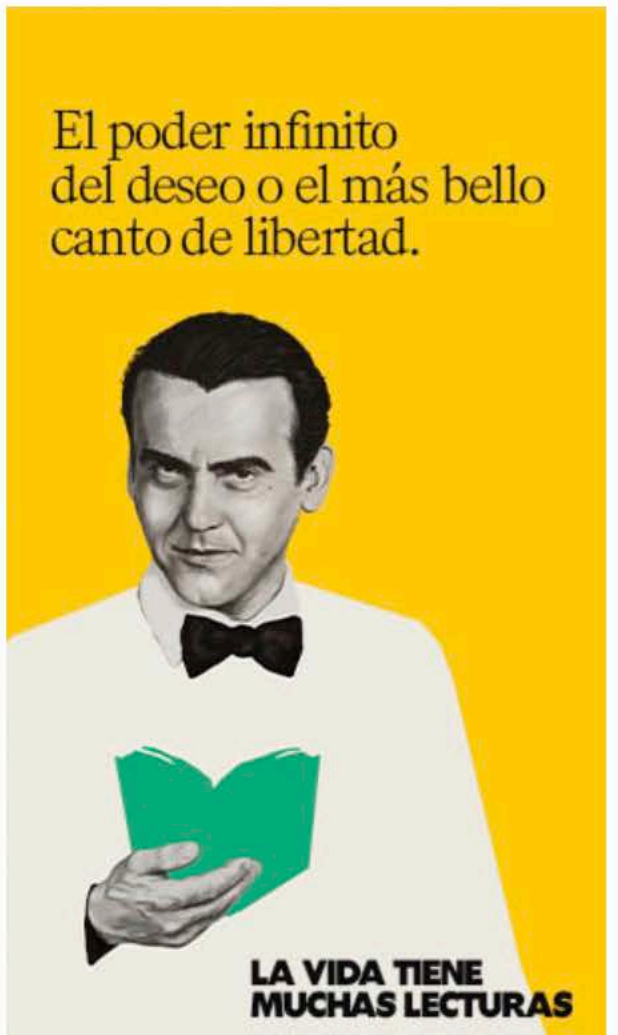
Her eye is always searching for some antique object that is new to her. And that novelty can be as subtle as a slight change in wear. “Often, I buy the same subject again and again, perhaps with a different paint job, or a different binding, or because it’s worn in different ways. Two books, for example, identical in every way except for the small differences that come from having lived in different homes.” And in doing so, she says, she feels accompanied and guided. “When I paint, I almost feel that there’s someone nearby, helping me work, like my mother used to do when she was trying to teach me to cook something homemade.”



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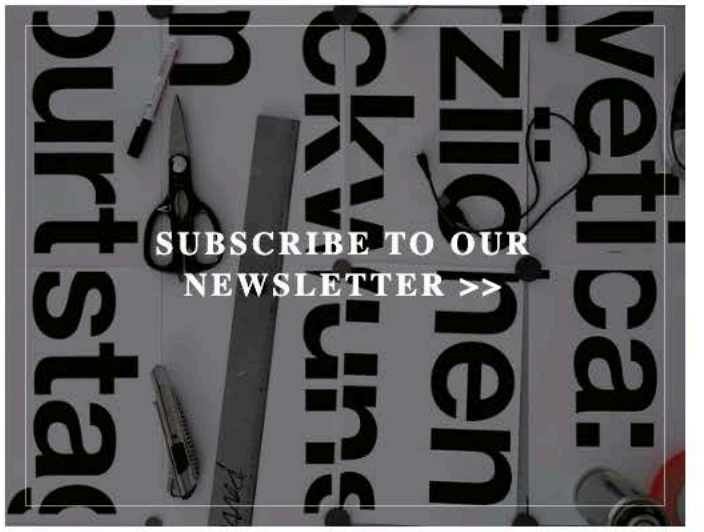
'Soap', 24 x 8 inches, acrylic & oil on board

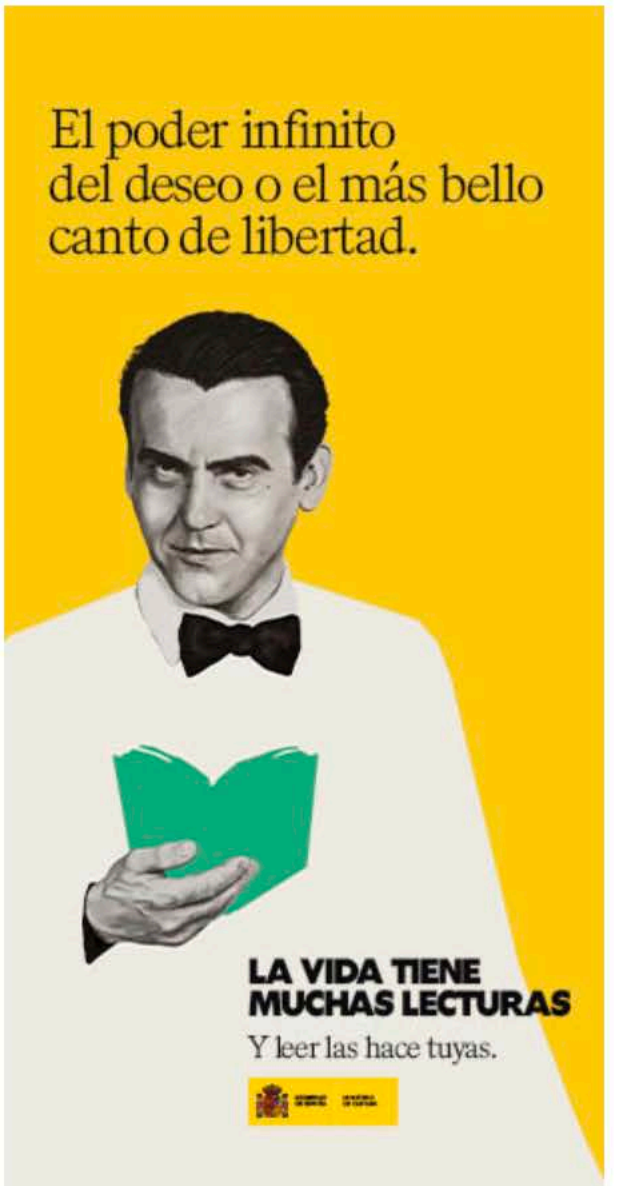
“My painting style is, in a way, unconventional,” she explains. “It’s a combination of acrylic and oil, a technique that stems from a set of skills I’ve acquired through projects with my mother, working as an interior painter alongside my husband, and later, through a tireless process of trial and error over many years. I continue to learn with each painting, and I stop when I don’t know what else I can do.”



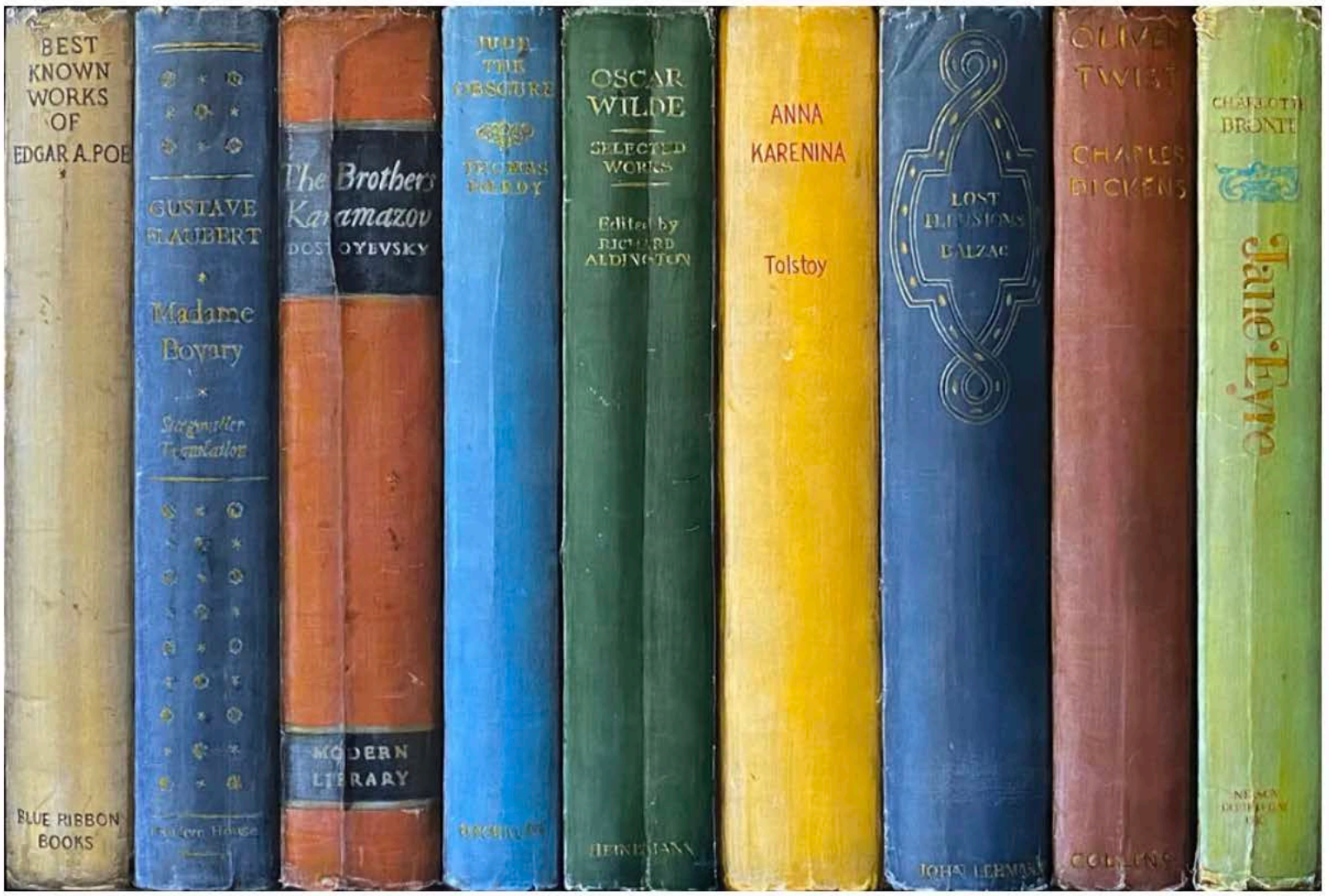
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Farrel doesn't consider herself a realist painter, but that, she says, doesn't mean she doesn't want her work to look on the canvas as she sees it in life. "And I feel that it's my life experience, along with the experience reflected in my motifs, that comes through in the final details."



'Popular Classics', 20 x 30 inches, acrylic & oil on board, 2024

Just as her objects openly display their flaws and minor imperfections, she herself prefers not to erase her own in her paintings. "I don't like to erase the fact that I entered this world with few skills. But somehow, I managed to approach painting indirectly and found my own methods, adapting to the different pressures that come with making art your life, your sole means of subsistence, without a safety net."

Art, she states emphatically, will always be present in her life. "Whether a blessing or not, my anxiety prevented me from considering studying at any art school: too much of an audience! In my studio, I don't worry so much about failure, which, in itself, is a good lesson. Learning what not to do has been just as useful as learning what to do."

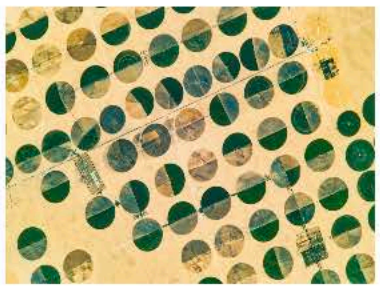
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