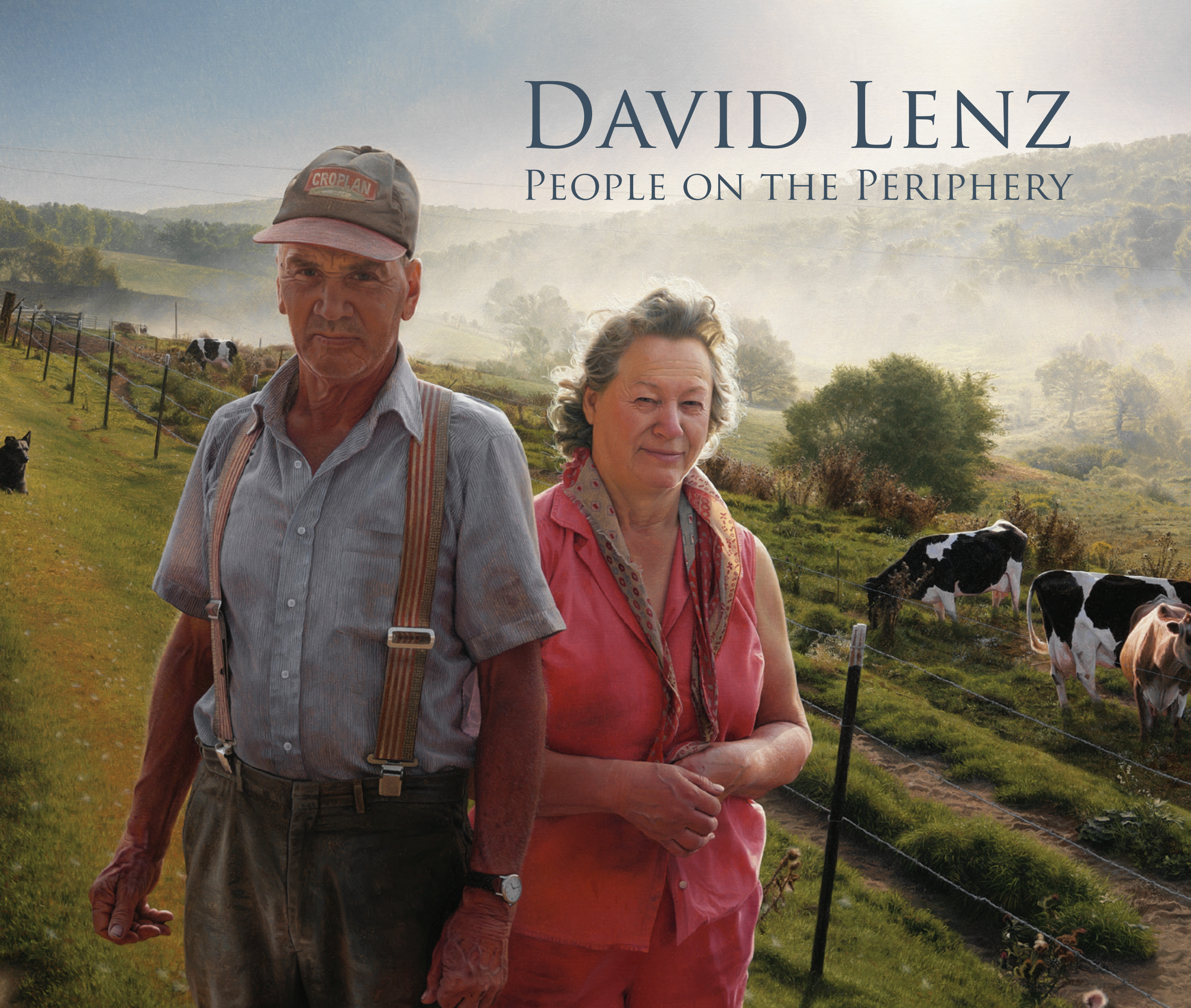


# DAVID LENZ

## PEOPLE ON THE PERIPHERY



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By Graeme Reid

Published by Museum of Wisconsin Art





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# CONTENTS

7    FOREWORD  
LAURIE WINTERS

12   PEOPLE ON THE PERIPHERY  
GRAEME REID

28   PLATES

58   PROFILE



# FOREWORD

LAURIE WINTERS, MOWA EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR | CEO

*David Lenz: People on the Periphery* is the sixth exhibition in an ongoing series at the Museum of Wisconsin Art that features exceptional artists at the midpoint of their careers. David Lenz was an obvious choice. Over the last twenty years, his national reputation has grown steadily with outstanding recognition such as the Smithsonian's Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition Award and a client list that includes serious blue-chip corporate and private collectors. Lenz's strikingly Realist portrait paintings are both original and a powerful social commentary on the people who live on the margins of society. A museum exhibition that examines the motivation and social forces behind his work was definitely long overdue. *David Lenz: People on the Periphery* is the largest exhibition of his work to date and the first major museum exhibition of his work since 2004.

This catalogue is the sixth in an ongoing series of museum publications that are offered as free downloads on the museum's website ([wisconsinart.org](http://wisconsinart.org)), a reflection of the institution's commitment to making Wisconsin art accessible around the world. A printed hardcover edition is available for purchase from [Blurb.com](http://Blurb.com).

A project of this magnitude would not have been possible without the collaboration of a number of individuals who generously contributed their time and talent. Our greatest debt of gratitude is to the artist, who from the outset enthusiastically embraced the concept of the enterprise. We are also deeply grateful to all the institutions and private collectors who graciously lent their cherished artworks.

Graeme Reid, MOWA's director of collections and exhibitions, deserves special mention as the curator of the exhibition and as the author of the catalogue essay, which compellingly articulates the life and vision of the artist. Thanks also go to our talented book designer Amy Hafemann and to the book editor Terry Ann R. Neff, and to the many MOWA staff members whose hard work helped bring this project to fruition.

For their generous support of this publication, we sincerely thank Linda and Daniel Bader and the Suzanne and Richard Pieper Family for helping us share the extraordinary vision of David Lenz. MOWA is proud to present this exhibition and accompanying catalogue. We hope it touches you as it has all of us.

# PEOPLE ON THE PERIPHERY

GRAEME REID, DIRECTOR OF COLLECTIONS | EXHIBITIONS

For a mild-mannered and soft-spoken man living in Milwaukee's middle-class suburb of Shorewood, artist David Lenz has an unexpected rebelliousness against what his career should have been had he followed a more conventional path. For the past thirty years, he has, for the most part, painted portraits of people not generally viewed as portrait material. Throughout the history of art, portraits traditionally featured the great and the good, the wealthy and powerful, or simply those with sufficient vanity and means to see themselves recorded for posterity. In defiant rejection of this custom, Lenz selects his subjects from among the poor, the disabled, and the marginalized. In short, people on the bottom or the margins of the social strata.

*David Lenz: People on the Periphery* recognizes and celebrates an accomplished American—and Wisconsin—artist. Resolutely and obstinately independent, populist, democratic, and equally comfortable in urban or rural situations, Lenz grew up with art in his blood. His grandfather Nicholas Lenz (1890–1974) was an artist and his father, Tom, is an art dealer. Growing up in Brookfield, just west of Milwaukee, David Lenz enrolled at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee for a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree, with the intention of becoming a graphic designer and thus engage his artistic abilities in a profession that offered greater job security than that of a full-time fine artist. In his heart of hearts, however, he longed to be a painter.

Paintings from the early 1980s when Lenz was a student, such as *Niagara Falls* (1984), show he was heavily influenced by the late nineteenth-century Hudson River School of artists whose landscapes paid homage to the inherent beauty of

nature at its most awe-inspiring. Fortuitously, he came into contact with professor of painting Tom Uttech (born 1942), who taught a class called the “Canadian Canoe Workshop” that consisted of a two-week trip to Quetico Provincial Park in northwestern Ontario, on the border with Minnesota, to make art—or at the very least be inspired to make art.

In 1983, at the time Lenz was studying with Uttech, the senior artist was undergoing a profound shift in artistic direction, moving toward painting pure landscape devoid of figures. He had been an active photographer, but whereas his photographs focused on details, his paintings increasingly captured the almost primordial spirit of the landscape in a way that was simultaneously real and mythical. Deeply attached to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area of the park and its environs, Uttech wanted his paintings to transcend the purely visual and arouse in others a similar passion and connection to appreciate such perfect manifestations of nature and see them preserved and protected. Later, and in his own way, Lenz would adopt this call to action through art.

Lenz went on the workshop twice and Uttech remembers him well. The student showed up with a special, homemade box full of small, mostly 14-by-11-inch, Masonite panels primed and ready to be painted. These plein-air works would serve as the inspiration for larger paintings such as *Artist on the Edge* (1985). In comparison to many of the students, Lenz was serious and mature enough to deal with the heady intensity of the deep forest environment that many others found intimidating. With an innate penchant for Realism, he labored to paint exactly what he saw before him; total fidelity was his goal. However, during review



*Artist on the Edge*, 1985  
Oil on board, 40 x 44 in.

sessions, Uttech pointed out that certain parts of Lenz's paintings "didn't quite work" or were "awkward." Puzzled, Lenz pointed out that he had painted exactly what he could see. Uttech replied quietly and sagely, "Remember, the goal is a good painting. Just because it is like that in life, does not mean it should necessarily land that way in your painting." This event triggered a paradigm shift for the young artist. Lenz still remembers the words like it was yesterday: sometimes you have to tweak, change, modify, and cut-and-paste to get at the larger "truth."

The painting *Artist on the Edge* from 1985 encapsulates this perfectly. The title is a sly play on words: the artist is literally working on the edge of an escarpment and metaphorically he is on the cusp of graduating into an unknown artistic future. In the painting, Lenz included one of his Masonite panels on an easel. Close inspection reveals a disparity between what we think it should look like and what he has, in fact, painted; Uttech's advice had been heeded.

These wilderness experiences produced beautiful landscape paintings. Some of them strongly reflect Uttech's influence (*Buckingham Lake* and *Pickrel Narrows*, both from 1989, pp. 18–19). And Lenz's love of American landscape painting persisted beyond college into the 1990s, but was gradually infused with a new artistic influence: the early twentieth-century Ashcan School of painters in New York. Instead of focusing on the land, these artists controversially turned to America's growing urban centers and, without sugarcoating, portrayed the overcrowding and poverty suffered by society's underclasses. At the time of Lenz's own artistic transition, he was living in the heart of Milwaukee's urban eastside (see *Looking Southeast*, 1989, p. 21). The expansive, unspoiled Canadian wilderness was but a memory in a place where even a short walk would reveal grand lakeside mansions, student apartments, and cheap rentals. Lenz inhabited a dividing line between the "haves" and the "have-nots" who exist in close physical proximity, but inhabit different worlds (see *Tonight Blues*, 1992, p. 20). The experience brought out his rebellious streak:

Early on, I was struck by the plight of children (mostly African-American children) living in the city. After I completed the first few paintings of this series, another pivotal moment in my career came when a prominent art dealer pulled me aside and said that art collectors (who are mostly white) would never buy paintings of black children and the central city. It was a rather inauspicious start. My chosen style—Realism—was horribly out of fashion, and my subject matter—African-American children in the city—would never sell.

Despite his rejection of the dealer's advice, Lenz was quite realistic in regard to a career in the fine arts. When he graduated college in 1985, his work was deeply unfashionable—just as the dealer had warned. Rejection after rejection came his way. He remembered:

The jurors for one show found the student art so wanting, that they decided to close off part of the gallery and leave it dark instead of showing more student work (mine included). In other words, my work was not good enough to even open the space and turn on the lights. It was a stinging rebuke. So I canceled my subscriptions to the art magazines, stopped entering art competitions (with a few exceptions), and looked within. Realism made me tick, if this was going to be my life's work, then I had better be making paintings that I believe in.

Although determined to go his own way, Lenz was pragmatic. While in college, he had sold a few paintings, enough to help defray tuition, but not enough to cover all his expenses, so he took a job as well:

I worked for four years as an art director for a publishing company and then an advertising agency. In April 1989, to the shock of my employer, I quit my job to paint full time. I had saved some money and I used that to finance my

art career. I figured I would last a year until the money ran out, but I reasoned I could go back to advertising if needed. Working in advertising was the biggest artistic compromise of all. I promised myself when I quit my job and set out as an artist that I would have full artistic freedom, no compromises. I would paint pictures that I believed in. If I was able to sell them, great. If not, then I would go back to advertising.

Slowly but surely, Lenz found his stylistic niche and began to build a small but devoted local following. In 1990, he was the subject of a sizable and very positive article in the *Milwaukee Journal* newspaper. The following year, he won the People's Choice Award at the Milwaukee Art Museum's Lakefront Festival of the Arts. Paintings from the 1990s show a shift in approach by Lenz to his subject matter. In works such as *Riverwest* (1990), *Day One of the Ground War* (1991), and *Peace in our Neighborhood II* (1993), the children are in situ, focused on their environment. They face away from the viewer and thus invite us to look at their world from their point of view. Gradually however, in paintings such as *Raking Light* (1996) and *Navigation Light* (1998), there is a shift: the children gaze directly at the viewer in a benign confrontation that implies that they need the right guidance to find the best roads to take in life.

Patrons and collectors took note of Lenz's burgeoning reputation, as did, no doubt, galleries. Yet, just as his career seemed ready for take-off with a higher profile and potential professional representation, he opted to remain independent, not just for the sake of artistic control, but also for financial control: "Why should I give someone 50% when I can keep 100%?" Lenz said.

Despite the uncertainties attendant on making a living solely from his art, Lenz was dogged in his commitment to his unfashionable subject matter. Nonetheless, he did whatever he could to bring in money and develop patrons. This is reflected in paintings such as *2,800 Sorties Flown Today* (1991), where his appreciation

of the Ashcan School is translated into a Milwaukee-specific context. An early patron, Ken Waliszewski, recalled his relationship with the artist in these early years.

In 1991, David orchestrated an open house and sale of his recent work from his "studio." It was at this event I was able to purchase my painting *2,800 Sorties Flown Today*. I could not afford the full price at once, but David allowed me to make payments. A very nice family memory is taking my wife and three children to David's studio and picking up our painting. That painting has hung in our home now for twenty-five years.

Lenz's willingness to work with potential collectors has paid dividends: Waliszewski now owns four of his paintings. *2,800 Sorties Flown Today* and *Day One of the Ground War* (1991) are superb examples of the complexity of Lenz's paintings and his increasingly subtle commentary on contemporary political and social issues. *2,800 Sorties Flown Today* shows a wintry scene, devoid of people, with a yellow ribbon attached to a porch post. *Day One of the Ground War* depicts an anonymously archetypal snowy Milwaukee street with a young girl carefully navigating her way home while carrying a big basket full of laundry. At first glance, there appears to be nothing radically different from Lenz's earlier paintings of Milwaukee's inner city. But, there are indications of a new point of view in the much more specific, rather than purely descriptive, titles: both paintings make reference to the first Iraq war. They convey an incredible sense of normalcy in contrast to the death and destruction occurring thousands of miles away in Iraq: trillions of dollars would be spent, hundreds of thousands of Iraqis would die, and thousands of American soldiers would be killed or gravely injured physically and psychologically. Visually, Lenz is commenting on the insulation and isolation from war that America has experienced, with all conflicts since the Civil War fought on foreign soil. Life in Milwaukee or almost anywhere else goes on as usual for the majority of the population. As here, snow has



*Buckingham Lake*, 1989  
Oil on board, 13 x 15 in.



*Pickerel Narrows*, 1989  
Oil on board, 21½ x 25 in.



*Looking Southeast*, 1990  
Oil on canvas, 16 x 18 in.



*Tonight Blues*, 1992  
Oil on board, 9 x 10 in.



*Faded Blaze Orange*, 2002  
Watercolor on paper, 7½ x 10½ in.

to be shoveled and laundry has to be done. Lenz is highlighting the huge disconnect between what is done overseas in the name of the United States and everyday life on the home front. He believes the issues he cares about—poverty, inequality, discrimination—call for fundamental shifts in people’s hearts and minds.

The subject of issues close to home took an unexpected, but upon reflection, characteristic, turn in the early 2000s, when Lenz was building his reputation on paintings of inner-city children. In 1992, he purchased forty acres of land in rural Sauk County, northwest of Dane County. This getaway property introduced Lenz, and later his new bride, Rosemarie, to their neighbors, Mercedes and Ervin Wagner. The couple, throwbacks to a bygone age, owned and operated a small dairy farm and barely made a living. This was as far from the increasingly commonplace model of corporate agribusiness as it was possible to get. The couple pledged every day of their lives to caring for the land and cows that nourished and supported them. A strong bond of affection was quickly forged between the neighbors. Lenz naturally wanted to paint the Wagners—not just as friends, but for what they represented: stewards of the land who were the very personification of the kind of people who settled and created what many blithely call the Dairy State.

The four Sauk County paintings in this catalogue, *Thistles* (2001), *Faded Blaze Orange* (2002), *Dairyland* (2003), and *Ervin Walter Wagner* (2007), are not simply remarkable portraits of two people who radiate strength, fortitude, and authenticity; they are symbols of a symbiotic relationship between humankind and the land, a way of life that is relentlessly disappearing to development. Just as he did with his early paintings in Canada and Niagara Falls, Lenz has depicted the emblematic subject—here the farm and farmer, a theme often romanticized in a heroic

and grand manner—yet a grim reality pervades the portraits. The faces, hands, and clothing make it plain that this couple’s life’s work is no hobby. The Wagners labored incredibly hard and their toil showed on their bodies. For Lenz, places such as the family farm *must* be preserved; in their wildness is perfection, in their fecundity, something vital, and in their beauty, real value. The rich, fertile Wisconsin earth and what it represents drew the artist to the conviction that nature is inherently perfect. This belief became another major theme for Lenz.

In 1997, the Lenzes had a son, Sam, who was born with a major disability: Down syndrome. From the very first day, Lenz understood that Sam’s presence and point of view would come to bear on his art and his own experience of life. In May of 2005, he read about the inaugural Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition sponsored by the National Portrait Gallery. It was incredibly appealing as the prize would be the first commissioned portrait for inclusion in the collection other than those of a President or First Lady. Lenz felt very ready—perhaps even overdue—to attempt what he had been dreaming about all these years; a large oil painting about Sam. Rarely had Lenz been so *personally* motivated and committed to a portrait.

The National Portrait Gallery was established in 1962 and opened in 1968 as part of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC. With almost 22,800 artworks, it houses the nation’s greatest collection of portraits and its mission is to collect portraits of “significant” Americans. In other words, very famous and very recognizable people. Against competition from more than four thousand entries from all fifty states, Lenz won with his painting *Sam and the Perfect World* (2005), a portrait of his then eight-year-old son standing in a field on their Sauk County property.

With the subject of the commission requiring the museum's approval, Lenz's rebellious streak kicked in again. He believes that "every person in America is significant. No human being should ever be overlooked, or cast aside." He wrote to the curator, Brandon Brame Fortune, "At this moment I cannot name the individual I would like to paint, but I can describe the person to you. I would like to paint a portrait of the most underappreciated, least accomplished (as it is traditionally measured), most forgotten, and poorest person we can find in America." After some internal discussion, the Portrait Gallery roundly rejected Lenz's idea.

Fortunately, a way to please both sides emerged. Sam had been treated like a superstar when he had attended the unveiling of his portrait in Washington, DC, and gallery staff knew of his love for the Special Olympics. Eunice Kennedy Shriver, the sister of President John F. Kennedy, whose portrait already hung in the gallery, was suggested as a subject. Shriver had long been an advocate for people with intellectual disabilities and had helped found the Special Olympics. Lenz agreed, and painted her alongside five Special Olympics athletes on a beach near her home in Hyannis Port, Massachusetts. Subsequently, the painting, *Rare Halo Display: A Portrait of Eunice Kennedy Shriver* (2009), pp. 24–25, entered the National Portrait Gallery's collection as its first nonpresidential commission. The compromise was a perfect solution: the portrait met the gallery's requirement that it be of a significant person, and Lenz's portraits of Airika Straka, Katie Meade, Andy Leonard, Loretta Claiborne, and Marty Sheets entered the nation's most prestigious portraiture collection. Brandon Brame Fortune recalled working with Lenz on this historic commission:

He was a trailblazer, and he did not disappoint. His portrait, which also included portraits of Special Olympics athletes who were close to Mrs. Shriver, is hung in our "Struggle for Justice" permanent collection galleries devoted to the ongoing quest for rights for all people living in the United States. It is a favorite for our visitors.

Rather than parlaying the incredible recognition and accomplishment of a National Portrait Gallery commission into representation by a prominent gallery and the fulfillment of lucrative portrait commissions, Lenz again rejected what conventional wisdom may have suggested and his bank balance would have welcomed. He has always chosen to represent himself. An established coterie of patrons and collectors enthusiastically purchase whatever he produces and he has used his success and heightened stature to draw attention to people and causes he cares about, rather than needing to meet another's demands or visions. The few commissions he does accept are on the condition of his having artistic freedom. The commissions *Thistles*, *Ervin Walter Wagner*, and *Calliope's Epic Poem* (2013) fit seamlessly into his overall body of work. Other "commissions" are simply agreements by patrons to buy his next available painting.

Self-representation also means that Lenz can set his own pace and schedule. Even as he works full-time, maybe two large paintings leave his studio a year; if the scale is smaller, perhaps ten to twelve. A gallery might expect higher productivity. Lenz is keenly aware that it is a very rare thing in Wisconsin to be an independent, full-time artist. He wryly observed, "If your goal is to make a living, a career as a full-time fine artist is a very difficult way to do it." It is even more difficult given that in the overwhelming majority of cases, his subjects are not the clients or patrons and do not pay for the painting.

Lenz spends considerable time thinking about and researching themes and ideas. His process, techniques, and materials are very traditional because that is how he was taught. He starts by making small pencil and oil sketches to rough out an idea, then gathers reference material and photographs many of the different elements of a painting individually. He uses small, round sable brushes to apply pure, unadulterated oil paint to a warmly tinted canvas. As he works toward the final painting, he changes, refines, and modifies his sketches and reference images.

In respect to his use of photographs, Lenz has considerable historical precedent. For hundreds of years, artists have used optical and photographic devices as tools to facilitate the creation of paintings, so he has no qualms about taking advantage of contemporary options. He certainly appreciates the ease of documentation a camera offers, but as a trained painter, prefers the more intimate artistic relationship between artist, brush, paint, and canvas.

As this exhibition clearly shows, Lenz's Realist painting technique has been honed over the years to a remarkable degree. This is perhaps most evident in his depiction of light. For example, in *Day One of the Ground War* from 1991, the brightly illuminated street displays carefully rendered areas of shadow and sun. In *Raking Light* from 1996, the street corner is softly but more dramatically lit from the back. *Calliope's Epic Poem* from 2013 takes on another level of luminosity and spectacle as light seems to envelop the whole picture. Indeed, light is a salient feature of this exhibition: not only does it chart the shifts in the artist's choice of subject matter, but it clearly demonstrates a steady progression in Lenz's painting as it grows from simple illumination to become almost spiritual in its presence.

A cursory inspection of Lenz's work can be misleading. The sheer technical virtuosity, meticulous brushwork, and the exacting Realism may suggest that a painting is benign or "pretty." Lenz's ability to paint so photographically might be seen as "perfect" painting, harking back to his student days when painting what he saw as realistically as possible was the goal. But the fact is that Lenz's Realist style is reflective of the reality of his subject matter. His photo-realist technique underscores that these places and people really do exist, and allows an ease of access that a more abstract approach might hinder. Herein lies the crux of Lenz's paintings: on the surface they might seem perfect—meticulously crafted with an extraordinary attention to detail—but the people and their lives do not meet accepted standards of "perfection." As Lenz said:

In America today, perfection is highly valued. We dump loads of chemicals on our lawns to try and get rid of every weed, every dandelion. Models and supermodels are tall, impossibly fit, their clothes stylish and wrinkle free. Images like this tend to change our perceptions, our ideals, until finally they leave us looking around at the peeling paint on our own houses, and our less than fit bodies, and it leaves us wanting. Perfection, I would submit, is overrated. And besides, I like dandelions.

For Lenz, this pursuit of "perfection" means things and people deemed less than "perfect" are often overlooked, judged, shunned, and ignored. In short, they suffer discrimination. This goes against his sense of fairness and his personal experience with Sam. Lenz uses his easel as a subtle bully pulpit from which to bring awareness of individuals who are all too often invisible.

Indeed, the reality behind some of the paintings can be brutally shocking. Snow, so often a feature of Lenz's urban paintings, looks pretty and is fun for kids to play in (*Peace in our Neighborhood II*, 1993). It can also literally cover up a multitude of unpleasant features: unmowed yards, badly paved streets, and run-down housing. As in many American cities, in Milwaukee's inner city a cycle of renting and eviction from high cost/low quality housing is a hugely underappreciated by-product of poverty that leads to severely disrupted lives, low educational attainment, and poor physical and mental health. Studies have repeatedly shown that children with disabilities, particularly girls, are at much greater risk of sexual abuse, and that both genders face severe challenges with regard to employment and independent living.

Because of Sam, Lenz feels a personal connection to the dismal social statistics associated with disability. He has also become increasingly political. In 2010, he was proud to have his painting *Wishes in the Wind* (2010) hung in the

*Eunice Kennedy Shriver*  
*(Rare Halo Display)*, 2009  
Oil and acrylic on canvas, 36 x 70 in.  
National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian  
Institution; Commissioned as part of  
the First Prize, Outwin Boochever  
Portrait Competition 2006





Governor's Mansion in Madison. It was the first painting to be commissioned by the Wisconsin Executive Residence Foundation Board that maintains the mansion. The only directive was that it should include children from the city so that school groups visiting the Governor's Mansion could see children who looked like them. It was a perfect commission for Lenz.

The finished painting features three Milwaukee children who each had a traumatic backstory: DeAngel Beckworth was a regular attendee at the Don and Sallie Davis Boys and Girls Club (half the members of Boys and Girls Clubs come from families with annual incomes under \$15,000); Brogan Calvillo's father and brother were killed by a drunk driver; and Dimitria Campbell spent three months in a homeless shelter. Lenz readily confesses that he had a personal political agenda in his selections and it was aimed squarely at Governor Jim Doyle and the Democrats in the State Legislature. Lenz has been a strong advocate and supporter for Boys and Girls Clubs and the positive role they play in providing activities, mentorship, and role models for children. In 2001, after Lenz lost his brother, Tom, to a drunk driver, he had personally lobbied Doyle for stronger laws against drunk driving. And while Lenz knew that Doyle was not going to run again, potential gubernatorial candidates, such as Scott Walker, would be dealing with the same issues. Consequently, he intentionally included Dimitria Campbell, who had stayed at Milwaukee's Rescue Mission, a place where Walker had delivered Christmas trees when he was the Milwaukee County Executive. As the mission receives no government funding, Lenz saw an opportunity to highlight a connection between Walker's past actions and political philosophy of smaller government and more private charity, making the point that while the private sector is vital, it cannot be the only answer to every problem. The painting ultimately was unveiled at a reception with Governor Doyle where the children and their families told their stories. Walker won the subsequent election and almost immediately after he and his family moved into the mansion in January 2011, the painting was removed and replaced with a picture of a bald eagle. Lenz's painting was installed at the downtown Milwaukee Public Library later that year.

Lenz was deeply stung by this decision. He hopes that his paintings can in some small way change the hearts and minds of politicians and the public:

I believe in the power of art. If *Wishes in the Wind* was hanging in the Executive Residence, then it had the potential to influence the heart and mind of the most powerful person in Wisconsin, our governor. It was an opportunity I took very seriously and I tried very hard to make a painting that would give a voice to the voiceless, and at the same time have an optimistic tone. Homeless, central-city children and victims of drunk drivers normally do not have a voice in politics. This painting was an opportunity for future governors to look these three children in the eye and, I hope, contemplate how their public policies might affect them and other children like them.

In short, children can benefit from governmental legislation—or be collateral damage.

Lenz's painting *Through the Snow* (2000) maintains this theme: five children variously afflicted with diabetes, sickle cell anemia, cancer, and Down syndrome are depicted with Children's Hospital of Wisconsin, their treatment center, in the background. The scope and availability of state and federal healthcare programs have a huge impact on children. The deep pictorial perspective, wintry trees, and deep snow suggest the distance traveled and the obstacles they have overcome thanks to exceptional medical care, but the future is still beset with challenges, be they racial, intellectual, or socio-economic. And this is what concerns Lenz the most: even having benefited from outstanding health care, what kind of world awaits these children as they grow into adulthood?

*Youth and the Great Divide* (2016) is a companion piece and a counterpoint to *Through the Snow*. The children featured are from Arizona and this was a commissioned portrait with complete artistic freedom. The title is, again, open to interpretation. Literally, the Grand Canyon is a "great divide" in the surface of the

earth, but the divide also applies to entrenched political parties, and to festering racial conflicts. Both paintings, however, reflect the growing concern Lenz has for the world that all children enter: the environmental, economic, educational, and political issues they will inevitably inherit and have to contend with. Lenz is clear that for him, his art is also advocacy:

With my paintings I hope to tap into your natural ability to have empathy for other human beings. If the image seems real, almost as if you could step into the painting, if the person portrayed seems whole and natural and believable, then maybe you will know what they know, feel as they feel. What is it like to live in the central city, or farm 120 acres of marginal fields and hills? What is it like to be homeless, or lose your brother and father to a drunk driver? What is it like to navigate the world with an intellectual disability? Maybe in some small way, my work, my paintings, will lead to a greater understanding of the people on the margins of society.

That being said, Lenz is well aware of the fine line between advocacy and preachiness. He does not want to be too heavy-handed in his concern or in his belief in the need for greater awareness and compassion:

I think visual artists are blessed with a lot of latitude in this regard. By their very nature, images are rather amorphous and open to interpretation. I think you have to go at it pretty hard to cross the line to being too preachy. Ultimately, I rely on my gut instinct, and with major paintings I don't rush into anything. The long process I go through to develop the image for a major work can be both a blessing and a curse. It is a blessing in that it tends to weed out anything that might be too overt—I tend to gravitate to images that can be read in multiple, even conflicting, ways. A career as an artist gives you plenty of things to worry about, but to be honest

I really don't worry about this at all. I would rather err on the side of coming across too strong, than to have my paintings be too timid and lack a strong point of view.

So, ultimately, what are the paintings of David Lenz? Are they exercises in technical mastery of uncommon subjects? Are they stunningly painted advocacy on behalf of those on the periphery of society? They are both, and therein lies their value: they pack a beautiful punch on behalf of those who are often ignored without descending into melancholy, triteness, or sledgehammer editorial. Over the course of his career, Lenz has been successful on his own terms rather than following a more predictable path of teaching or joining a prestigious gallery's roster. Unlikely subjects painted in a deeply unfashionable style have become his sought-after trademark. His rebellious streak, bolstered by admirable tenacity, has paid off far beyond what he could have imagined in Quetico Provincial Park. He has succeeded because he has found patrons who do not simply appreciate his skill with a brush and paint, but who share his beliefs and opinions. Philosophically, he emerges on the side of optimism or, at the very least, demonstrates a hope that we, as a society, will achieve greater empathy even at a time when political divides seem to be more clearly defined and attitudes are solidifying demonstrably into "them and us." While clichés abound—"we're all in this together" or "it takes a village to raise a child"—such words contain kernels of truth. The "village" Lenz paints is Milwaukee, but it could be any American city. And if we, as a society, continue to marginalize, ignore, and neglect certain constituencies, then we, as a country, will never fulfill the aspirations of our founders and be a land where this truth is self-evident: all are created equal.

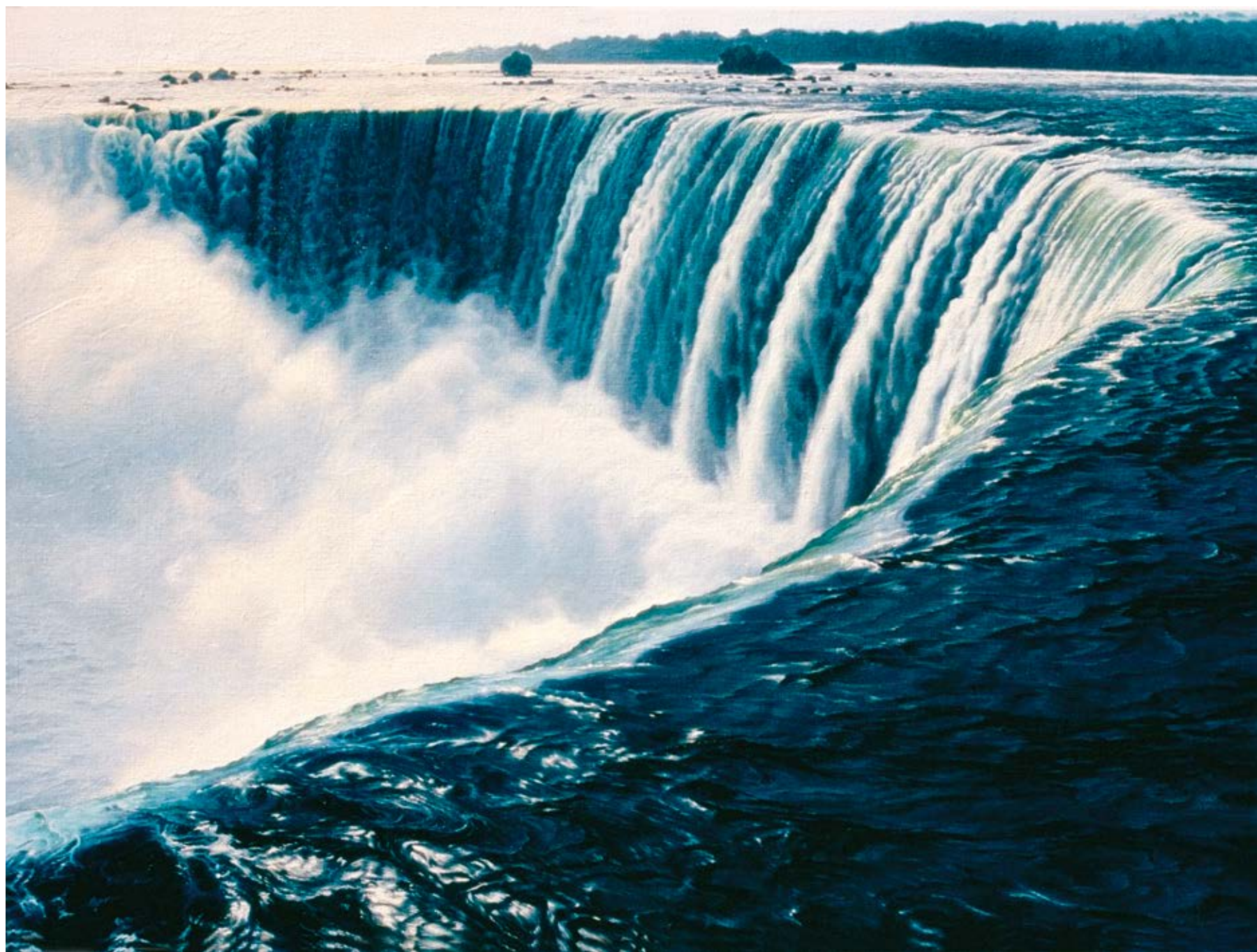
*Author's Note: The quotations from David Lenz, Brandon Brame Fortune, and Kenneth Waliszweski are taken from conversations and email exchanges with the author from January to July, 2016.*





# PLATES

The plates are organized chronologically except where it seemed more logical to create groupings of similar subjects. All dimensions are in inches with height followed by width.



*Niagara Falls*, 1984

Oil on canvas, 45 x 60 in.

Lent by West Bend Mutual Insurance Company



*Walker's Point*, 1990  
Oil on canvas, 36 x 53 in.  
Lent by Pieper Electric Inc.



*Riverwest*, 1990  
Oil on canvas, 41 x 53 in.  
Lent by James D. Ericson



*Day One of the Ground War*, 1991

Oil on canvas, 31 x 36 in.

Lent by Pieper Electric Inc.



*2800 Sorties Flown Today*, 1991

Oil on canvas, 21 x 22 in.

Lent by Dr. and Mrs. Kenneth Waliszewski



*Can't We All Get Along*, 1992

Oil on canvas, 22 x 23 in.

Lent by Elizabeth Goodman Schneider, Timothy Goodman, and Jennifer Atwater



*Peace in our Neighborhood II*, 1993  
Oil on canvas, 19 x 22 in.  
Lent by Barbara Stein



*Milwaukee's Hope II*, 1994  
Oil on canvas, 32 x 36 in.  
Lent by Steven and Mardee Gruen



*It Takes an Entire Village to Raise a Child*, 1994

Oil on canvas, 22 x 24 in.

Lent by Bonnie and Gordon Olinger



*White Duplex*, 1995  
Watercolor on paper, 7 x 7 in.  
Lent by Barbara Stein



*Raking Light*, 1996

Oil on canvas, 30 x 36 in.

Lent by Dr. and Mrs. Donald Whitlock



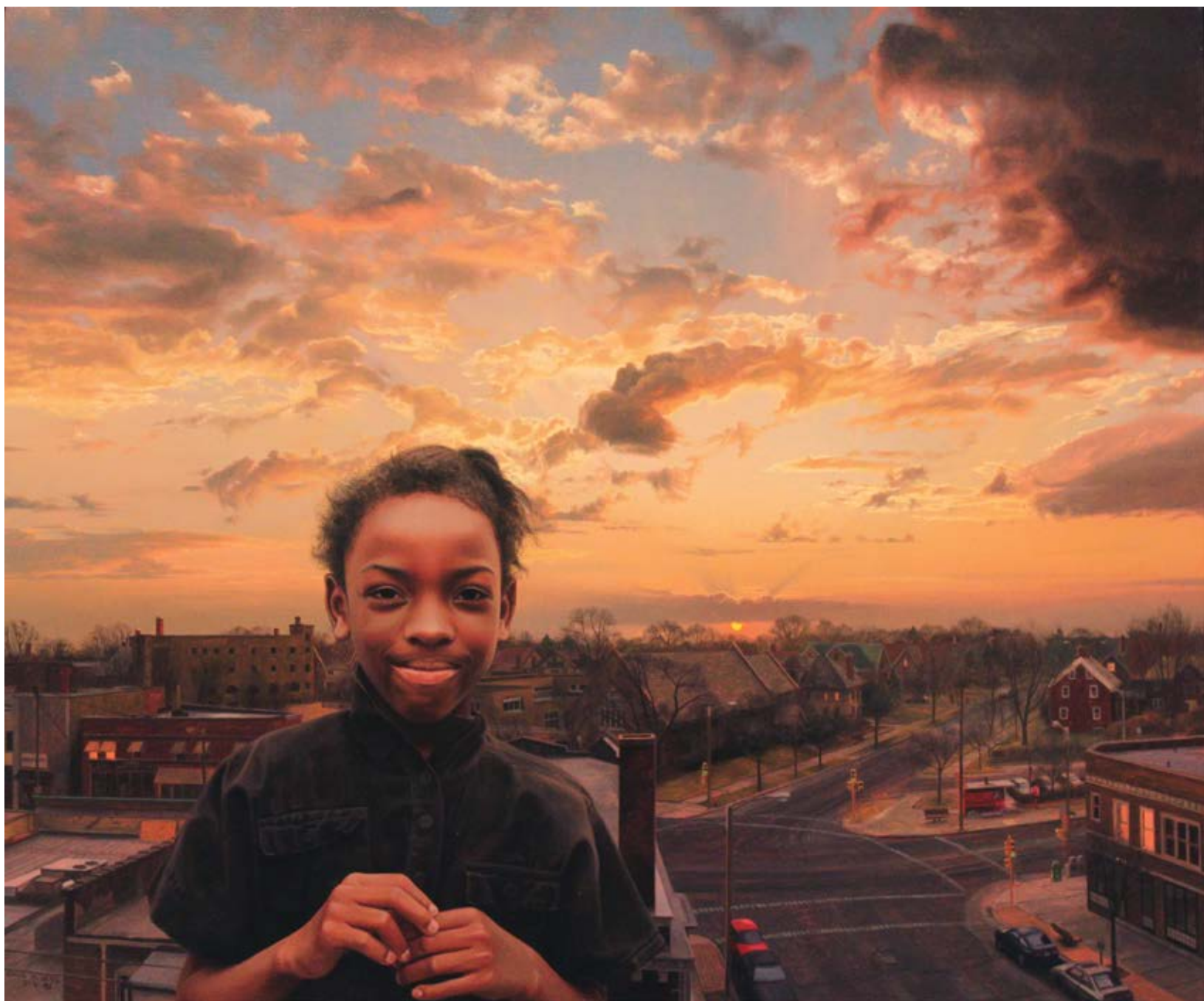
*The Shadow Across the Street*, 1997

Oil on canvas, 19 x 20 in.

Lent by Beth Schoshinski



*Navigation Light*, 1998  
Oil on canvas, 34 x 46 in.  
Lent by Helen Bechthold



*Sunrise*, 1998

Oil on linen, 20 x 24 in.

Museum of Wisconsin Art, Gift of Barbara Stein, 2013–7



*Winter Blues*, 1998  
Watercolor on paper, 10 x 12 in.  
Lent by Barbara Stein



*Through the Snow*, 2000  
Oil on canvas, 60 x 84 in.  
Lent by Children's Hospital of Wisconsin, Milwaukee





*Thistles*, 2001  
Oil on canvas, 32 x 54 in.  
Lent by Pieper Electric Inc.



*Dairyland*, 2003  
Oil on canvas, 30 x 36 in.  
Lent by Daniel and Linda Bader



*Ervin Walter Wagner, 2006*

Oil on canvas, 38 x 50 in.

Lent by Dennis and Natalie Wallestad



*Sam and the Perfect World*, 2005  
Oil on canvas, 44 x 46 in.  
Lent by Milwaukee Art Museum



*Total Eclipse*, 2006

Oil on canvas, 22 x 22 in.

Lent by William and Robyn Collins



*Slippery Sidewalks*, 2005  
Oil on canvas, 12 x 18 in.  
Lent by Jonathan and Donna Moberg



*Wishes in the Wind*, 2010  
Oil on canvas, 40 x 50 in.  
Lent by the Suzanne and Richard Pieper Family Foundation



*Calliope's Epic Poem*, 2013  
Oil on canvas, 32 x 54 in.  
Lent by William and Robyn Collins



*Warm Winter Sun*, 2016,  
Oil on canvas, 38 x 40 in.  
Lent by Daniel and Linda Bader





*Youth and the Great Divide*, 2016  
Oil on canvas, 50 x 76 in.  
Lent by John C. and Cynthia L. White





# PR○FILE

## BIOGRAPHY

David Lenz's paintings—whether of central city children in Milwaukee, a Sauk County dairy-farm family, or people with intellectual disabilities—explore the particular circumstances of individuals in their respective environments. His paintings, replete with breathtaking skill and warm humanity, have been described as unflinching in their detail and realism. Lenz has built a reputation as a first-rank Realist painter whose work is exhibited frequently in museums around Wisconsin.

In 2006, Lenz received national attention when he won first prize in the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery Competition for *Sam and the Perfect World*, with his portrayal of his son, who has Down syndrome. The award included a commission to paint a portrait of a prominent American and the resulting painting—a portrait of Eunice Kennedy Shriver—is now part of the National Portrait Gallery's permanent collection.

Lenz has been painting professionally since 1989. In 2008, he received a Wisconsin Visual Art Lifetime Achievement Award; in 2009, he was inducted as a fellow into the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters. Lenz lives in Shorewood, Wisconsin with his wife, Rosemarie, and son, Sam.

## EDUCATION

Bachelor of Fine Arts, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, 1985

## SELECTED AWARDS

- 2009 Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters, Academy Fellow
- 2008 Museum of Wisconsin Art; Wisconsin Visual Artists; Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters, Wisconsin Visual Arts Lifetime Achievement Award
- 2006 Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition, First Place Award
- 2005 John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Eight Counties exhibition, First Place Award
- 2002 Milwaukee Art Museum, Lakefront Festival of Arts, Award of Excellence (also in 1990, 1993, 1995, 1998)
- 1993 Milwaukee Art Museum, Lakefront Festival of Arts, People's Choice Award (also in 1991, 1992)

## PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Bader Philanthropies, Milwaukee  
Chazen Museum of Art, Madison  
City of Milwaukee Public Library  
Children's Hospital of Wisconsin, Milwaukee  
Milwaukee Art Museum  
Museum of Wisconsin Art, West Bend  
Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Company, Milwaukee  
Pieper Electric Company, Milwaukee  
Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC  
West Bend Mutual Insurance Company, West Bend, Wisconsin  
Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison

## EXHIBITIONS

2016

Museum of Wisconsin Art, West Bend, *David Lenz: People on the Periphery* (exh. cat.)

2014

University of Wisconsin–Green Bay, Lawton Gallery, *Figuring It Out*

2010

Museum of Wisconsin Art, West Bend, *To See Ourselves as Others See Us: Contemporary Wisconsin Portraits*

2009–2010

John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan, Wisconsin, *American Story*

2009

Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC, *Rare Halo Display: Portrait of Eunice Kennedy Shriver* (unveiling and permanent installation in Struggle for Justice Gallery)  
*Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition*, 2006 (First Place Award)

2008

James Watrous Gallery, Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters, Madison, *Building a Visual Arts Legacy: Wisconsin's People on the Land*

2006

New American Painting (Juried exhibitions in print). *Midwest #65* (juried by Carl Belz) August–September, 2006

2005

John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan, Wisconsin, *Eight Counties* (First Place Award)

2004

Charles Allis Art Museum, Milwaukee, *David M. Lenz: Urban and Rural Paintings of Wisconsin* (exh. cat.)

Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum, Wausau, Wisconsin, *Beyond City Limits: Rural Views of the Midwest*

2002

Charles Allis Art Museum, Milwaukee, *Self & Other Portraits: Wisconsin Artists*

Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, Madison, Wisconsin, *Wisconsin Triennial*

Milwaukee Art Museum, Lakefront Festival of Arts (also 1990–98)

1993

West Bend Art Museum (now Museum of Wisconsin Art), West Bend, Wisconsin, *New Work*

Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, Madison, Wisconsin, *Wisconsin Triennial*

## PUBLICATIONS

- Auer, James. "Before the Fireworks: Art Imitates Life to Immortalize a Milwaukee Tradition." *Milwaukee Journal* (now *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*), July 3, 1994.
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- Bub, Dr. Barry. "Commentary: Sam and the Perfect World." *Academic Medicine*, February 2007.
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- Fischer, Joan. "A 'Perfect World' with Questions," *Wisconsin People & Ideas Magazine*, Fall 2006.
- . "Painting the Unseen." *Wisconsin Trails Magazine*, August 2008.
- Hayes, Jeffrey R. *David M. Lenz: Urban and Rural Paintings of Wisconsin*. Milwaukee: Charles Allis Art Museum, 2004.
- Heslewood, Juliet. *Child: Portraits by 40 Great Artists*. Frances Lincoln, Limited, London, 2013.
- Hickey, Dave. *Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition 2006*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, 2006.
- Jankauskas, Jennifer. *American Story*. Sheboygan, Wisconsin: John Michael Kohler Art Center, 2009.
- McNally, Joe. "Back in the Picture." *The Capital Times*, August 14, 2013.
- Neary, Lynn. "Looking History in the Eye at Portrait Gallery." Talk of the Nation, National Public Radio (online article, and on-air interview), July 13, 2006.
- Pabst, Nick. "Through the Eyes of an Artist: City's Good Nature Shines Through in Painter's Realistic Look at its Neighborhoods." *Milwaukee Journal* (now *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*), July 12, 1990.
- Piaskoski, Paul. Interview. CBS News Milwaukee, Sunday, July 26, 2009.
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- Schumacher, Mary Louise. "In a Father's Experience, Perfection: Shorewood Artist's Work Earns Top Award in National Contest." *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, June 23, 2006.
- . "A Different Lenz, Son Forces Local Artist to See the 'Perfect' World with New Eyes." *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, July 17, 2006.
- Seed, John. "David Lenz: The Egalitarian Realist." *The Huffington Post*, November 16, 2012.
- Stephenson, Crocker. "Canvas & Plow: A Wisconsin Elegy." *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, January 14–February 4, 2001.
- Spencer, Susan. "Smithsonian Spotlight: Making the Winning Portrait." Smithsonian Channel, Season 3, Episode 1, February 2010.
- Worland, Gayle. "Behind the Brush: Realist Painter David Lenz Finds a Rural Wonderland in Sauk County." *Wisconsin State Journal*, April 22, 2007.



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Details:

Cover, *Thistles*, 2001, Oil on canvas, 32 x 54 in., Lent by Pieper Electric Inc.

Page 2, *Walker's Point*, 1990, Oil on canvas, 36 x 53 in., Lent by Pieper Electric Inc.

Page 4, *Wishes in the Wind*, 2010, Oil on canvas, 40 x 50 in., Lent by the Suzanne and Richard Pieper Family Foundation

Page 6, *Youth and the Great Divide*, 2016, Oil on canvas, 50 x 76 in., Lent by John C. and Cynthia L. White

Page 8, *Total Eclipse*, 2006, Oil on canvas, 22 x 22 in., Lent by William and Robyn Collins

Page 10, *Warm Winter Sun*, 2016, Oil on canvas, 38 x 40 in., Lent by Daniel and Linda Bader

Page 28, *Raking Light*, 1996, Oil on canvas, 30 x 36 in., Lent by Dr. and Mrs. Donald Whitlock

Page 58, *The Shadow Across the Street*, 1997, Oil on canvas, 19 x 20 in., Lent by Beth Schoshinski

Page 63, *Navigation Light*, 1998, Oil on canvas, 34 x 46 in., Lent by Helen Bechthold



*People on the Periphery celebrates the work of David Lenz, whose passionate and intimate depictions of inner-city children, people with disabilities, and rural farmers have made him one of America's preeminent portrait painters. The artist's remarkable Photorealist technique enhances the authenticity of his subjects—not portraiture's traditional powerful and famous sitters but the poor, disabled, and marginalized—those on the periphery of society. Decisive recognition of his talent came in 2006, when Lenz won the National Portrait Gallery's first Outwin Boochever Portrait Award. This major retrospective spans three decades of Lenz's career and includes many paintings that have rarely—or never—been exhibited in public.*

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