

ARTS

Life Blooms in Chris Hill's New *Nocturnal Landscapes*

By NATHAN FRONTIERO

SHELBURNE FALLS – Amid the established and extant risks of climate change, the biodiverse reveries of Chris Hill's paintings feel both celebratory and urgent.

Building on a show Hill debuted in 2019 at Salmon Falls Gallery, *Nocturnal Landscapes: World of Soil* offers a vision of botanical bliss in acrylic. These works feature resplendent fields of lush green leaves, glittering purple lupines, and hearty heads of cabbage. Insects flutter and occasionally gaze out toward the beholder. As Hill writes on the show's website, these are images of "cultivation in harmony with nature."

The inspiration for these renderings of farmland bursting with color derived from experiences with starkly different environments. Hill, 35, has a background selling soil and fertilizer, which exposed him to "a lot of really nice-looking farms" and "a lot of farms that were sort of toxic-looking," he says.

"I was in a rental house in North Hadley, living in the middle of a giant toxic potato field," Hill explains. "We would have to close our windows when they would spray the



FRONTIERO PHOTO

Before the Spotted Lanternfly, acrylic on canvas, 2021. The five-by-six-foot centerpiece of Chris Hill's new exhibition took the artist two years to paint.

field, and they'd be spraying the fields at night under cover of darkness. So I saw both sides of this spectrum when it came to healthy ecosystem farms and unhealthy ecosystem farms. And that was the major thing that spawned this painting series."

In *Cottage Garden*, a sumptuous concentration of the leaves and insects in the foreground, by per-

spective and proportion, at once overpowers and seems to guard the eponymous dwelling nestled in the background. *Magical Beings* finds butterflies, moths, caterpillars, and other critters in a joyfully bustling verdant closeup.

"I'm humbled when I look closely at a square yard of field or see **LANDSCAPES** page B5

LANDSCAPES from page B1

forest growth,” Hill writes in an artist statement. “There could be small animals, hundreds or thousands of small insects; millions of nematodes, protozoa, archaea, and algae; billions of fungi and bacteria. Interactions between each organism are specific and contribute to the continuation of the whole.”

On his website, Hill describes that while *Nocturnal Landscapes* “[began] as a reaction against chemical-industrial agriculture, the series has evolved into a celebration of soil regeneration and ecosystem building.”

In an interview with the *Montague Reporter*, Hill elaborates on his style.

“I call my work ‘surreal’ because it represents a vision of agriculture that isn’t reality,” Hill says. “Because the majority of the farms in the country are sort of these toxic wastelands, and if you walk through them, they don’t look anything like the paintings.”

Hill expresses a desire to “focus on the positives,” using his work to explore examples of a healthy relationship between agriculture and the environment.

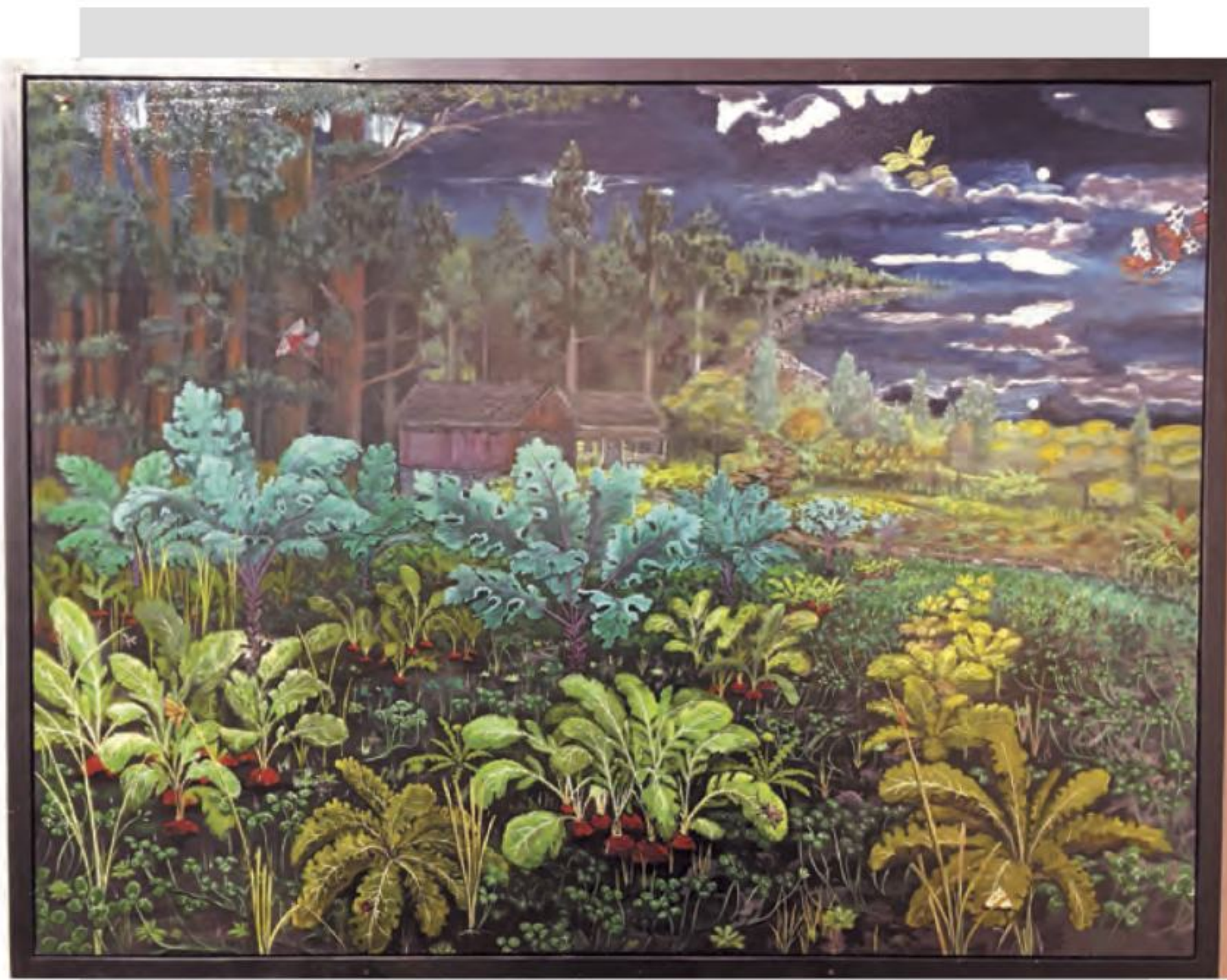
“The paintings are depictions of a lot of small farms and natural gardens, where you do see a diversity of plants and a diversity of insects and animals and a productive growing space,” he says.

World of Soil’s grand centerpiece, the five-by-six-foot *Before the Spotted Lanternfly*, renders a moment of sheer beauty before the destruction of overcorrection. In a fictional narrative that Hill wrote after completing the painting, he describes a thriving wild lettuce crop contaminated by pesticides used to combat a spotted lanternfly invasion.

“Now many of the insects and toads are gone,” Hill writes. “The wild lettuce remains but it pulls up pesticides from the soil and it shouldn’t be harvested here anymore. The lanternflies are the first ones to return the following spring.”

The specific organisms Hill highlights stem in part from their relationship to ecological decline.

“I certainly want to draw awareness to the decreasing biodiversity



FRONTIERO PHOTOS

Cottage Garden, acrylic on canvas. Flora and fauna at once overpower and seem to guard the dwelling nestled in the background.

in our insect life,” he says. “That’s a core part of my series, just drawing attention to the insects. They are indicator species, so are toads and frogs, so I have those portrayed in my painting. They’re some of the first things to go when the land is treated with pesticides, or when an environment shifts because of natural causes.

“When local ecosystems start to collapse, the amphibians and some of the more sensitive insects are gonna be the ones that go first, such as fireflies, they’re another one that I like to paint a lot.”

Hill lives in Turners Falls. He says he takes about a year for each painting, working at a gradual pace. *Before the Spotted Lanternfly* took two years.

“I might spend an hour on a single insect, and then do the same the next day,” Hill says.

He doesn’t use an easel, opting instead to balance the stretched canvas on his lap while sitting on his living room couch.

Hill and Salmon Falls Gallery intentionally timed the show for the September 10 iteration of the Shelburne Falls Art Walk. They did not predict the episodes of severe flooding that damaged western Massachusetts farms earlier this summer – or the resonance those losses would have with this collec-

tion of paintings.

“I booked the show six months ago,” Hill says. “I’ve been working on these paintings for a long time. I was going to hang the show last month when all the flooding was happening, and I decided that since a lot of these local farms around here are the inspiration behind some of my paintings, I’m gonna donate 15% of my proceeds to the Mass Farm Resiliency Fund.”

If his finished works illustrate the endurance and sanctity of the natural world when given the conditions to flourish, Hill’s artistic process also evinces the value of thoughtful cultivation.

“I started painting when I was about 13 years old,” Hill says. “Prior to that I was doing wood sculpture, since a very young age – I’ve always been interested in arts. Then in my 20s, I started to get very interested in painting and I pretty much paint every day. My secret to success, if I had one, about getting the art done is that I just do it a little bit each day. I chip away at it.”

Nocturnal Landscapes: *World of Soil is on view at Salmon Falls Gallery, 1 Ashfield Street, Shelburne Falls, until October 29. The gallery is open from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. every day. Admission is free.*



Chris Hill’s Cabbage Fields, acrylic on canvas, 2021.