

Joanne Belair Paints a Personal ‘Watershed’

The local artist’s solo debut offers a vision of seasonal renewal.

By **NATHAN FRONTIERO**

TURNERS FALLS – The title of Joanne Belair’s new exhibit, “Watershed Moments,” evokes not only the natural area of its subject matter and “the turning point to the spring season,” as the artist’s note explains at the gallery entrance, but also a personal milestone. The two dozen paintings, on view now through April 29 in the Great Falls Discovery Center’s Great Hall, represent Belair’s first solo show.

“This is kind of a bucket list thing for me,” she says.

Belair is drawn to a traditional figurative style. Her show, comprising mostly oil paintings with some mixed media work, depicts the Connecticut River watershed and the flora and fauna along the river walkways in Turners Falls. Blending directly representational studies with evocative conceptual pieces, her brushwork exudes by turns the kineticism of the river’s vernal awakening and the placidity and softness of other elements of natural reemergence.

Poppies, daisies, sunflowers, and apple blossoms bloom with warmth and dappled light alongside contemplative renderings of the sunrise over the cove and skyline. In one piece, the shadow of a heron’s regal stance wriggles in the rippling water beneath it as the amber glow of morning peeks in at the upper edges of the blue-green surface. In others,



Joanne Belair stands with a painting from her solo exhibition, “Watershed Moments,” at the Great Falls Discovery Center.

water rushes over itself and rocks, the hardier gray and brown textures of earth ceding to the smooth and sinuous sinews of the current and its bursts of foam.

In the show’s mixed media entry, stretches of canvas run beneath four oil sketches of riverside scenes like material tributaries, presenting images Belair witnessed on walks in Turners Falls specifically during the

pandemic: two gentlemen sitting socially distanced on the riverbank, a trio of geese amid a jaunt for food, a peaceful moment on the river surface with the cushioning background of trees and sky, and the ruddy rise of town’s brick buildings seen from across the water.

“I’ve spent a lot of time walking and watching the water,” Belair says.

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“The source is just from looking around here. Especially during COVID, when nobody could visit, everybody was doing a lot of walking, distancing.”

Belair is a lifelong painter, though she was able to focus more on her creative passion after her semi-retirement. Beginning around 2016, she began taking senior painting workshops at Greenfield Community College with a group of supportive peers and instructors Penné Krol and Budge Hyde, which offered an additional catalyst. The seeds of some of the works included in “Watershed Moments” were planted in those few years prior to the upheaval of the pandemic.

“Over the years I’ve painted, put my paints down, picked them back up,” Belair explained. “But coming to GCC for the senior workshop – that was huge. It was great. I met a lot of wonderful people and it was like an incubator. And we had a dedicated space.”

As public health protocols ushered in the need to stay home, Belair’s creative efforts continued largely in her basement, with occasional, socially distanced meetings with friends from her workshops to discuss works in progress. For



In a mixed-media piece from “Watershed Moments,” Belair depicts scenes witnessed on walks in Turners Falls during the pandemic.

the paintings ultimately featured in “Watershed Moments,” her process varied between steady and spontaneous.

“These can happen very quickly. Leave it, put it away, let the paint dry. I do a lot of mixing on the canvas. But also sometimes you want to

preserve the brushstrokes. Just put it down, let the paint dry and set, and come back to it,” said Belair. “Adjust color, or not. A lot of times they’ll be adjustments of contrast and light. I do a couple different things. Blend on the canvas wet on wet, and then other times will be straight out direct. To step away, maybe it’s subject matter or day to day or whether it comes together – a lot of these things aren’t quite planned.”

After growing up in Turners Falls, Belair spent 40 years in West County, around “the Charlemont area of the Mohawk Trail.” She returned to help care for her mother, and after her mother and uncle’s passing, bought out her old family home, where she now helps nurture her granddaughters’ burgeoning interest in the arts.

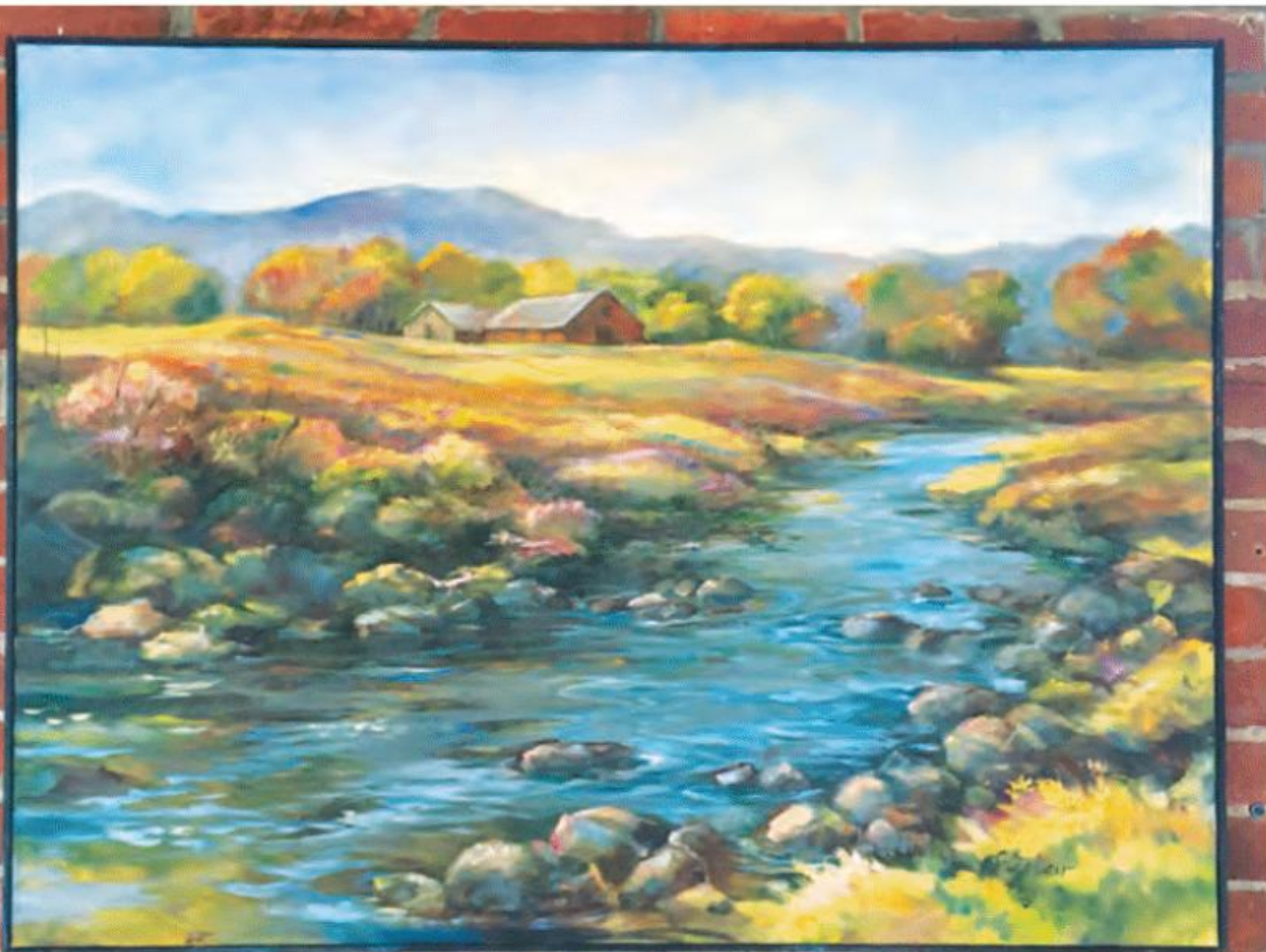
“I have a grandma house,” she says. “We always have crafts and paints and papers and glues and everything out.”

Returning after four decades has brought the changes to Turners Falls

into sharp relief for Belair, who recalls early memories of watching the river run with dyes from the village’s former paper mills. But a through line, alongside the excitement of local development, has been the community with whom she’s been able to reconnect. The gift of those lasting friendships, and the observation of resilience amid crisis, inspires in her a similar wonderment to that of the natural brilliance she captures in her work.

“There’s so much tragedy and sadness,” she says. “It’s overwhelming. But I do appreciate the fact that there’s also so many positive, amazing things all around us. Sometimes I’m just dazzled by everything.”

“Watershed Moments” by Joanne Belair may be seen in the Great Hall at the Great Falls Discovery Center, 2 Avenue A, Turners Falls, until April 29. The Center is open from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., Wednesdays through Sundays. Admission is free.



Belair captures seasonal change’s momentum with a blend of soft and kinetic brushwork.