

Sam Falls at his studio, upstate, NY.
Opposite page:
Triptych, 2022.



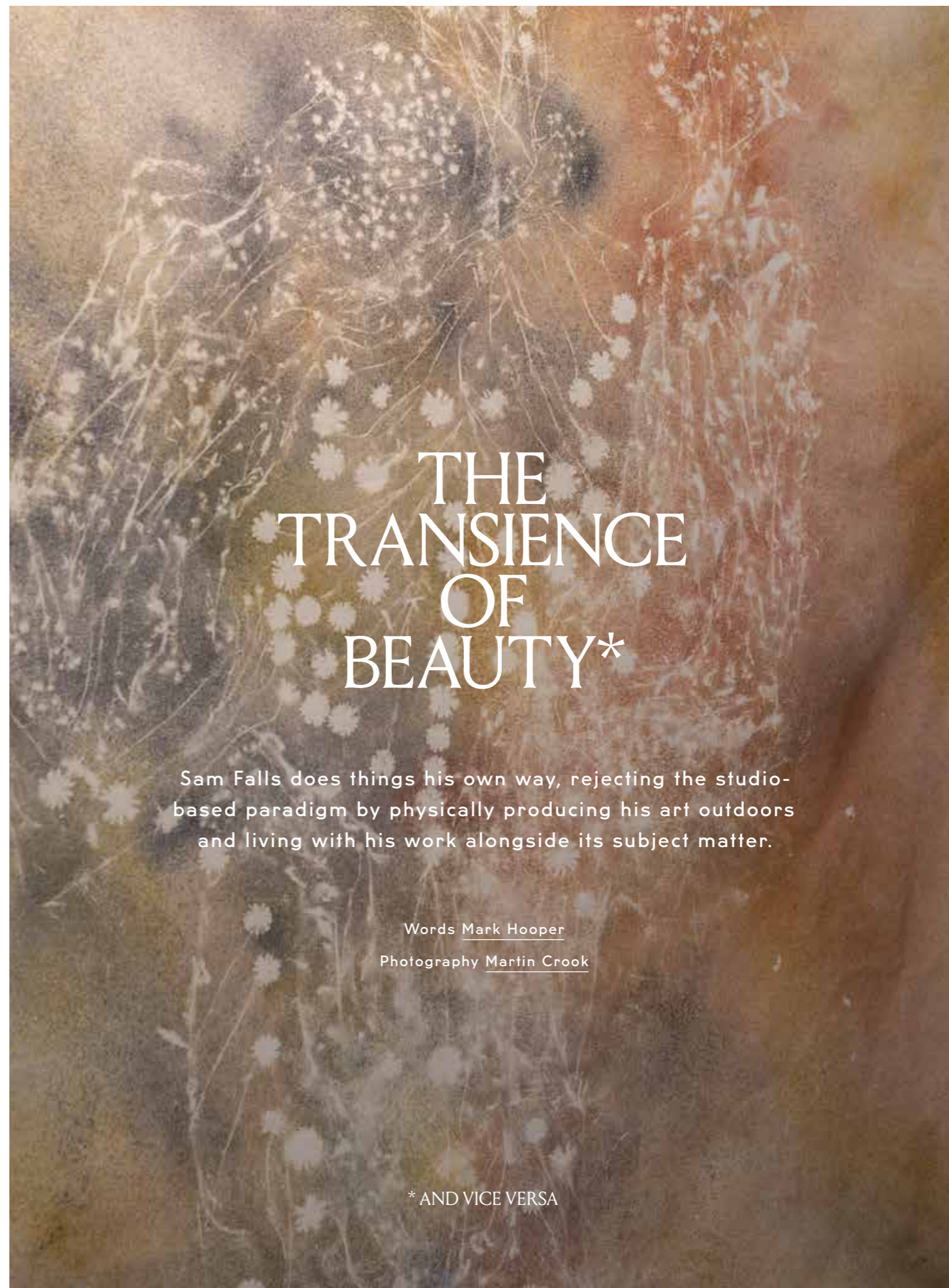
THE TRANSCIENCE OF BEAUTY*

Sam Falls does things his own way, rejecting the studio-based paradigm by physically producing his art outdoors and living with his work alongside its subject matter.

Words Mark Hooper

Photography Martin Crook

* AND VICE VERSA



Time passes slowly up here in the daylight
We stare straight ahead and try so hard to stay right
Like the red rose of summer that blooms in the day
Time passes slowly then fades away

Bob Dylan, "Time Passes Slowly"

It would be wrong to simply say that Sam Falls is an artist who portrays or depicts nature. It isn't just that there is a sense of place in his work: he is an artist who uses nature as his medium and who embraces its processes. His art draws from photography, painting, sculpture and performance art, using plant life as his subject matter as well as his raw material, and utilizing the elements — sunshine and rainfall — to create his work.

"I remember being really young and wanting to be a *National Geographic* photographer," he recalls. "But I never really saw it being such a slow process, the way I work as an artist outdoors. It's very intimate, I spend hours and hours basically recreating nature on the canvas." He describes his technique for these art works as a combination between solarization and photography.

"I lay the plant flat on the canvas outdoors, but to make this three-dimensional object flat I basically have to splice it up and then pattern it back out. So that's something I've also become intimate with — recognizing plants that will function well, not just because of where I am but because they will be flat. It's a strange intimacy because of the nature of what I do."

Having studied photography at graduate school (he received a BA from Reed College, Portland, OR, in 2007, and his MFA from ICP-Bard, NY, in 2010), he grew frustrated at the fixation with formats — and the argument between film and digital. "It was pretty much an obnoxious debate and, I thought, superfluous to art in general. I felt that photography had always been segregated from fine art — even at the MoMA. Being in New York, I noticed in the museums it was always, 'And here's the photo room,' which was smaller, and has a rug! How can I get away from that, but still use light?"

His solution was to adopt some of the practices of early photography, essentially creating his own collages and exposing them to light to create his own compositions. So rather than instantly capturing one moment in time as with photography, he was leaning on the traditions of painting, sculpture and installation art, too.

"Time is a big interest of mine," he says. "Time is the thing that gives me the most anxiety, there has always been this fear of death and thinking about how to deal with that. And art was always pushing me towards photography. So, I made these big works outdoors using fabric that I could leave for a year."

Originally working in LA with objects that were non-bio-

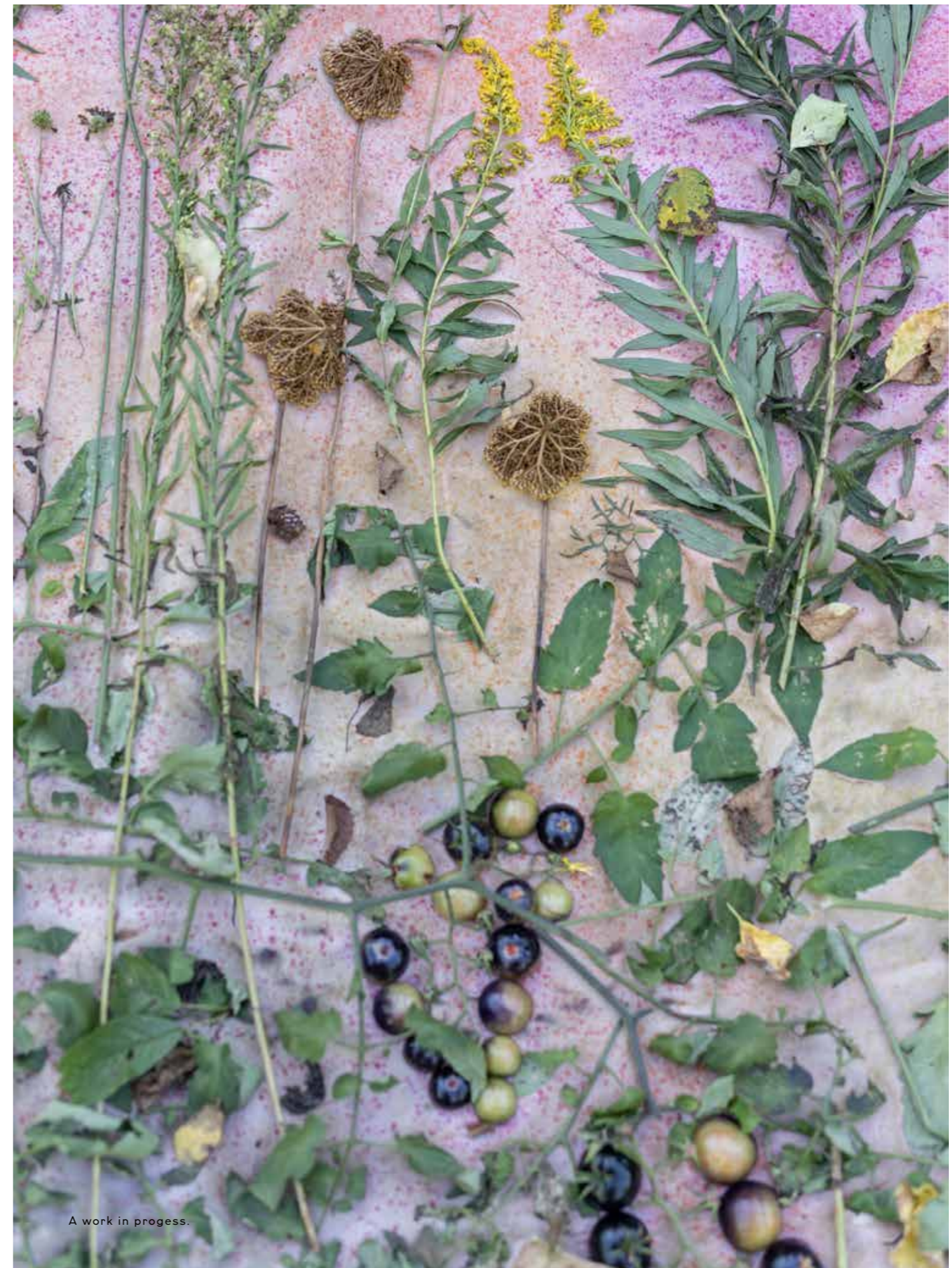
degradable and that he felt represented their area, "like tires or 2x4s," Falls eventually turned to nature, collecting plants that he could use. Of course, the very act of picking living matter for his art means that, by implication, he is working with dying matter — which adds a greater depth and nuance. "That's a big part of it for me," he says. "This microcosm of life and death and the cycle of the seasons, and there's always been a frustration with how the history of painting is all about the flowering moment. Photography can maybe capture more of the melancholy of dead flowers, like those Araki photos, from when his wife died. But I remember looking at those and not really being able to connect with it, because it's still an instant."

Instead, Falls explores the transience of beauty (and the beauty of transience), recognizing that the blooming of the flowers that he grows himself are part of a wider lifecycle that also includes decay. "Working over the course of time, I was really interested to somehow capture the essence of this mortality process in the work," he explains. "And you also have a primary source. With photography, no matter how gnarly the thing you're photographing is, like a dead body, it's still transferred from a card or film to paper and presented in this certain way ... like it's been cleansed. In the work I did, the plant died on the canvas that you're looking at. It's like the Turin Shroud."

Falls suggests that this interest in exploring mortality stems from personal experience, and when I ask if he's comfortable in going into more detail, he tells the heartbreaking story of how he lost his mother at a young age.

"I was an only child, my parents divorced, and I didn't know my father really. I grew up in a small town of 5,000 people, in Vermont, and one day when I was 8 or 9 there was a snowstorm, and a lot of parents were late picking up their kids from school. I remember waiting on the playground and the sun was going down, and slowly everyone's parents showed up, but my Mom never showed up. My Mom's friends were all telling me, 'Oh yeah, she'll be here, there was this car accident and all the traffic's backed up.' And then there was this awareness that she was the one in the car accident. And then I had this flash of being totally alone in the world."

Falls spent "a good few years" of child therapy trying to address and deal with the sense of dread and fear that resulted from this loss, only for another cruel blow to strike when,



A work in progress.



Clockwise: Sam Falls uses plant life as his subject matter, as well as his raw material, utilizing the sunshine and rainfall to create his work. "I lay the plant flat on the canvas but, to make this three-dimensional object flat, I splice it up and then pattern it back out."

Clockwise: The very act of picking living matter for his art means, by implication, he is working with dying matter — which adds a greater depth and nuance. "Working over the course of time, I was really interested to somehow capture the essence of this mortality process in the work." Sam Falls with *Northeast (Wildflowers)*, 2022. *Summer Window*, 2022.

in 2013, Jamie, the boy who for all intents and purposes had been his stepbrother, passed away. Jamie was the son of their next-door neighbor, who eventually became godfather to Falls.

“I asked him to be my godfather because I heard someone say your godfather takes care of you. And he became this father figure for me. When my Mom was waitressing, I would sleep at their house, so it felt like a second family.”

Falls notes that Jamie’s death had a significant impact on his work. “That was when I really started working more symbiotically with nature,” he says. “Up until that point I’d been much more conceptual, in a Robert Smithson-esque way, visiting these places and taking the work with me.”

One project in particular involved building wind chimes out of bronze, steel and copper that he then left in every National Forest in California, for a year, letting them oxidize naturally so that their sound would alter. Jamie accompanied him on the trip, driving around the various forests for a month “because he just wanted to go camping with me.” They planned to make the return trip together 12 months later, but a few days before he was due to fly out, Jamie died. “So, I went on my own, and it was a very cathartic experience, going to all these different places. In a way it was seeing him in nature, and that’s how I really connected to it. I think that’s how people mourn, connect and grieve. Often, especially for a non-religious person, this connection to nature becomes more profound.”

This deep resonance that Falls feels with nature has led to him working largely outside, rejecting the traditional studio-based paradigm. “I found it very inhibiting,” he says. “And early on it was also just impossible for me to be able to afford one. So, my first shows were done without a studio, I’d just make the work outside and basically roll it up and put it under my bed. And now I don’t really go to my studio except for practical things like stretching the paintings and emailing. It’s just personal, but for me, going to a studio every day just doesn’t inspire me. I like to see new things, and that gives me a plan.”

Having moved from LA to the Hudson Valley during quarantine, Falls and his family decided to settle in New York City, partly because the schools were better and also because his wife found a new job there, with Falls reverse commuting two hours upstate by train.

“It’s a bit annoying, but I was never a 9-to-5 person, so I spend the night up there and I can get a lot of work done.” Does he feel a sense of release and escape when he leaves the city? “Yeah I really do. Growing up in Vermont, I don’t really feel any connection or affinity to the city. It’s an alien thing for me, raising kids here.”

He moots the idea that art should be decentralized from urban areas, which prompts the question that, having removed himself from the studio set-up, does it irk him to then show

his work in a formal gallery space? **Opposite page:** “Yeah it does,” he says, laughing dryly. “It really does. The one thing I like about it though, no matter how literally dirty or rugged my canvas is, the gallery is so white and clean that it makes it look nice. So that encouraged me to really push the limits, even with how long the paintings are outside and how much they accumulate from nature. Sometimes leaves and things get stuck to the paintings, and originally I would try to scrape it off to make it clean, but now I can’t seem to make a work dirty enough or natural enough! There’s that tension that I like.”

There is an obvious environmentalist strand to his work, which has been brought into sharper focus since the Trump administration tried to deregulate America’s National Forests, at the same time that he was witnessing, first-hand, the effects of climate change. Part of the reason they moved from California, he explains, is that he became “micro-conscious” of the changes that were happening in nature — from the increase in wildfires to the systematic, year-on-year reduction in the rainfall that he needed for his “rain paintings.”

There is an integrity to the way Falls’s enquiries into nature draw from the legacy of the great American naturalists Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson. “I discovered all those books that I read in college and found them really boring, and now they’re like pulp fiction to me. I totally get it, it’s so great. It takes time, I guess, to get to that point. It takes undisturbed time. Our culture has embraced all these forms of entertainment that make it even harder for nature,” he says. “I’m always encouraged by watching people figure out how my art is made and thinking about where it’s come from.”

But, however people respond to the final work, it’s the journey that is most important to him. “For sure. It’s hard, sometimes, to care about it that much because the process is so great and so intimate. And once it’s finished, I’m kind of done with it too,” he says. “Something that I always had an issue with, early on, was how my work was always compared with Land Art, just because it’s everyone’s go-to reference for working outdoors. I always thought it was such an aggressive, masculine kind of art. You go to nature and put this geometric figure there, that’s usually metal or concrete ... I see what I do as more like camping: “leave no trace,” you know? I work with nature, but then it’s left for the next person, the way it was with me.” ■

Sam Falls opens his solo exhibit June 9th, '23, at 303gallery.com in NYC. / Mark Hooper is an award-winning editor and writer. His book, The Great British Tree Biography is published by Pavilion. mark-hooper.com and @markhooper / Martin Crook shoots for Tiffany & Co, Hole & Corner, and Conde Nast Traveler, among many others. martincrook.com

“I NEVER REALLY SAW IT BEING SUCH A SLOW PROCESS, THE WAY I WORK AS AN ARTIST OUTDOORS. IT’S VERY INTIMATE, I SPEND HOURS AND HOURS BASICALLY RECREATING NATURE ON THE CANVAS.”

