



THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY  
FACULTY CLUB PRESENTS  
JOHN H. BEHLING'S SECOND  
SERIES OF *"THE REDEMPTION"* PAINTINGS  
THESE ARE ALL NEW WORKS  
THE SHOW IS TITLED  
*"TO LOVE AND BE LOVED"*  
**SPRING 2015**



## An Introduction

### “To love and be loved”

We have all felt a strangeness when entering a room that is deserted and dust covered, perhaps with a broken piece of furniture. It's as if we intruding....into someone's life.

The title “to love and be loved” speaks to what life was in these deserted, dying shelters. There are so many love stories in the darkness of these buildings and of course, love stories long past. But they hold much life that needs to be acknowledged in some way. Not only acknowledged, but honored. I want to honor their struggle with life and love. These paintings, these shelters, are to remind us of those emotions that were alive and felt warm and comforting, harsh and painful. We the living are not far from these human experiences. For me, it is all there in the darkness. It is the darkness that holds the secrets of what really happened long ago.

Maybe by redeeming these shelters through the paintings I am able to redeem, in some way, the lives that once occupied these places. Jon Wilkin and Paul Behling have so eloquently given greater meaning to what these paintings are about. Their sensitive observations add so much to what I am trying to say.

I believe the human condition rides on the proposition that we have no alternative but to learn to love and be loved, because at the end of the day, that is all there is. That is what these paintings are all about.

John H. Behling

## A SHORT BIOGRAPHY

John H. Behling

Although born in Mayfield Village, just east of Cleveland in 1929, I spent my childhood on a farm in Ashtabula County during the Great Depression. After living and working on several other farms, I graduated from high school in Madison, Ohio; a small town a few miles from Lake Erie. In 1948 I attended the Ohio State University for the purpose of becoming a teacher. I earned my way through college by working as a social worker for South Side Settlement House in a poor neighborhood on the south side of Columbus.

In 1951 I was drafted into the Army and served two years. After being discharged, a friend encouraged me to go to Mexico. There I studied art and art making. I loved it. When I finished my degree in social work at OSU, I returned to Mexico City College for more art training. Running out of money, I returned to Columbus to take a job in Public Welfare. I put my art career away and entered graduate school where I met and fell in love with Nancy J. Shaw. We married in 1956 and took our Master Degrees the next year. Our first son, Paul, was born in 1957 while I was working on a Ph.D. in sociology. After receiving my doctorate, I took a position at Illinois State University, but eventually returned to Ohio State to take a teaching position at the College of Social Work in 1964. Our second son, Matthew, was born in Illinois in 1963.

It was during this time that I was active in Civil Rights and the Anti-Vietnam war movements. In spite of this considerable non-academic activity, I earned my full professorship rank in 1980. Shortly thereafter I began to plan my retirement from academic life and return to making art. That first step began with taking courses at the Columbus Cultural Arts Center in downtown Columbus. Shortly thereafter I started teaching painting at the Franklin Park Conservatory as well as the Creative Arts program at the Ohio Union on the OSU campus. I was invited to teach at the Cultural Arts Center as well. I couldn't get enough of art, so I was accepted into the Docent Training program at the Columbus Museum of Art in 1991. There I enjoyed giving tours until we moved to East Tennessee where I joined the Knoxville Museum of Art Docent program and toured for three years before returning to Columbus and the Museum's Docent program touring until 2005.

All during these later years I was making art. In 1988 I was accepted into the Ohio Watercolor Society and had my piece selected for the touring show. At about this time I joined the Worthington Area Art League, the Central Ohio Watercolor Society and the Eastern Ohio Watercolor Society. These memberships gave me the knowledge of art club organizations as well as the companionship of other artists. Not only was I teaching painting, but the College of Social Work asked me to teach research and statistics at the Regional campuses and to visit other colleges to recruit graduate students for the program. I was now involved in three worlds.

It was in 2001 when I found the Civilization Gallery in Clintonville. The proprietor, Cathy Babbitt, made me a permanent member of her gallery. I was there until she moved to South Carolina in 2010. She sold many of my paintings. In the meantime I was teaching painting at Lakeside each summer as well as Dick Blick Art Supply outlet in the Dublin area. From these classes, as well as tutoring in my home in Clintonville, a group was formed and became the John Behling Watercolor Society. That organization, founded in 2008, has grown each year with over twenty members with an annual show attracting large crowds. For me the members are not only a source of constant inspiration, but great friendships as well. It has been a good life.

## ARTIST STATEMENT THE REDEMPTION SERIES

It was in the summer of 2010 that I studied the crumbling structure of an old shed in an alley in the village of Linworth, Ohio. I had noticed it before, but now I felt the urge to paint it, as I knew it wouldn't last much longer. When I finished painting it, I felt a rush of wonderful satisfaction. I thought this to be the best painting I had ever done. The act of painting this dying structure was an act of saving it, giving it a life beyond destruction. I immediately named it "I remember". For some reason I thought of my mother who died when I was a boy of eight years. This thought was somehow connected to the painting. This emotional response gave way to thinking about life after my mother's death. We lived on a farm where I spent a great deal of time wandering in the woods. I became friends with loneliness. The painting was somehow connected to those childhood memories. I have always been fascinated with odd things, like abandoned farmhouses or empty rooms. I was drawn to the left over and left out. In my adult life I became a social worker and teacher who believed in social justice causes. Here was a meaningful connection.

The idea of redemption came to me almost immediately and a redemption series began to pour out of me after the Linworth piece. It was for me a rejection of death. I had stumbled onto an idea that turned into an avalanche of enthusiasm for the subject matter. The paintings were the price to pay to redeem the forgotten and the dying. In a symbolic sense I was retrieving the lost. That started a search for subject matter: old houses, crumbling barns, abandoned cars, store fronts, an underpass that gave shelter to the homeless. They are spaces where life once thrived.

I made sure my camera was with me at all times, especially when traveling. I'm sure there were times when I endangered not only my life but Nancy's. On one trip returning from a New Richmond Ohio River bed and breakfast, we returned home through hill country that afforded numerous examples of abandoned houses, barns, and sheds. Stopping to investigate and photograph became an adventure that gave me some great images for the series. Cities provide few sites, as most forsaken properties become vacant lots. The old structures are quickly forgotten.

I devised a criteria to guide my search. Subjects had to be truly abandoned and in the process of decay. This was evident with broken windows, roofs torn away, doors hanging loose and with lots of overgrown foliage, adding to the mystery. My son likes to photograph old abandoned factories, railroad cars, and gas stations so he provided me with many good images. Another requirement for painting was darkness. Each image and painting had to have a darkness; it is the darkness that holds the essence of what life was lived there; the loving, the sadness, the illness, the happiness or the silence of sleep and of course, loneliness. The darkness speaks softly and I was listening.

It is in my painting that I can give a new meaning and evidence that life existed. I still cling to the emotional belief that to know a place once lived in is to honor that place. I hope my paintings do just that.

In the movie, "Shawshank Redemption" the newly released aging prisoner, before leaving his room, stands on a chair and carves into a wooden ceiling beam the words, "I was here".

Enough said.

## The Redemption Series of John Behling<sup>1</sup>

These aquarelles immediately transport the viewer to those frequent scenes of dilapidated buildings seen along back roads in Ohio and the Midwest, but to what end? Are these simply, enchanting, impressionistic images of ruin and decay?

Sublime are the ruins of monuments and grand palaces celebrated in the great Romantic paintings by Friederich and Turner and in the reflective writings of Goethe and Stendahl (on the Colosseum), Twain (on the Heidelberg Castle), and Wordsworth (on the Abbey of Rievaulx). What provides for such pleasure of ruins<sup>2</sup>? Ruins of the grandiose impel a certain instinctive recognition that our worldly ambitions are ultimately in vain and so release deep within us an upwelling Zen-like calm in the awareness of our own transience and insignificance...

Although ruins and decay of the glorious and the majestic pervade great art and literature and speak to the folly of our species' strivings for our visions of fulfillment, it is important at the outset to observe that such a facile interpretation of Behling's Redemption Series would greatly miss the mark, as he demands that we address loss and degradation in the commonplace, the domestic, the familiar! This is not about hubris of humankind, but personal loss.

To think about what Behling might be communicating, we must begin by reflecting on his means. On entering his atelier the first impression at three meters is that of amazing, cheerful color in dots and dabs, often with analogous colors scattered adjacently for a shimmering effect that speaks of sunlight on foliage. As we move closer we see that such warm, radiant, patently optimistic vegetal forms are embracing old, abandoned, weathered and crumbling homes and gathering places. More than a comfortable sheltering, the herbaceous and the woody they are encroaching upon, obscuring, reclaiming, taking over, conquering. They are among the legion of destruction along with wind, rain, mould, vermin and decay. Approaching closer still we begin to discern the separations between the boards, the missing doors and windows, the broken patches...there will be neither repair nor restoration, as the crumbling, rot and disintegration have already progressed too far.

The cold, dark interior seen through broken or absent windows and doors is black, motionless and silent. Peeling back Behling's bright sinuous vines and his colorful corrosive tendrils, we anticipate what scene will meet our eyes upon entering this infinite, mysterious, hidden inside. But our eyes, not yet accommodating to the dark as we suddenly depart the sunny vegetal world, immediately yield to our other suddenly and fully awakened senses on first attaining the inner precincts. Our skin feels cold and clammy. The wood is no longer splintery rough, but soft and damp. The smells of musty, stagnant, fetid, dying air evoke at the most primitive Proustian level the putrescence of death and corruption, the taste of the moldy, the stale, the rotten, the pungent. There is no sound inside this vault of decay, but on "listening attentively with a still heart, with a waiting, open 'mind'"<sup>3</sup>, we may yet hear the faint whisper of this former home now abandoned to inexorable degradation, dissolution and annihilation.

The title of each piece in this Redemption Series is this Whisper, this barely audible phrase which can only be truly discerned in its full by those who have entered into and embraced the infinite darkness, accepted the complete quietude and listened attentively to the abandoned dwelling. If stilling and emptying our minds and seeing what is really in his paintings in order that we too may hear the whisper, if that is the exercise, the journey into this deeply reflective art of Behling, then what is the goal, the destination he holds to us?

Why does Behling gather together such beautiful, delightful and yet somehow haunting and disturbingly poignant images in watercolor of decaying, abandoned homes and shelters under the theme of Redemption? After all, aren't "abandon" and "redeem" antonyms? The abandonment is artistically, if piquantly and painfully, rendered and apparent, but what exactly is the redemption? Redemption can mean many things, and to get to the essential Heidegger<sup>4</sup>

suggests searching for original meanings, which for “redemption” includes especially “release”, from Latin “redimo” which became Middle English “redimer”. Among all of its many hues of meaning, the verb “to redeem” is transitive, which means that there is both a subject (the redeemer) and an object (the redeemed) for this act (redemption). In von Keyserling’s *Abentliche Häuser*<sup>5</sup>, the old abandoned manor houses in Courland are a metaphor for the decay of the ancient nobility of the Baltic provinces. Does Behling employ these familiar decaying rural shelters as a metaphor for the country folk inhabitants we knew who died or migrated to the city? Where could their redemption then occur? If there is not metaphor, and these exquisitely forlorn, yet beautiful ruins, embraced by luxuriant and radiant vegetal forms stand for themselves, then are they that which is to be redeemed? How could their redemption, especially in the literal sense, occur when already their timbers are rotten and all their materials are useless and without commercial value?

If neither their potential metaphorical referents nor these dilapidated shelters themselves are redeemed, then might they be the actual agents of redemption? And, if these abandoned homes are the redeemers, then who or what is redeemed? To find out, carefully empty your heart and mind and enter into these exquisite paintings, feel their warmth and radiance without and their dampness and darkness within, and linger there in the silence until you too hear the whisper.

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1. Wilken, Johannes. Der Bericht über den Besuch bei vier amerikanischen Künstlern: II. Die Erlösungserie von Prof. John Behling (Ohio), read in Liepsig, 1 Mai 2013. The author gives permission to Hr. Pr. John Behling to use this second of four sections (II) as translated to english by the author.
  2. Referred to in german variously as Ruinenempfindsamkeit, Ruinensehnsucht and Ruinenlust.
  3. Hesse, Hermann. Siddhartha: Eine indische Dichtung. 1953 [“...das Lauschen mit stillem herzem, mit wartender, geöffneter Seele...”]
  4. Heidegger, Martin. *Unterwegs zur Sprache*. 1957
  5. v. Keyserling, Eduard. *Abentliche Häuser*. 1923. S. Fischer Verlag. Berlin

## A Few Thoughts on Abandoned Industrial Sites

An interesting quality of old industrial sites and other man-made structures is that, once abandoned, they become altered by nature. A place that once bustled with human activity, a place where workers spent a good portion of their lives, a place that belched smoke and produced shiny new things now lies forsaken by people. Empty of people, nature co-opts what humans have discarded and re-imagines the place, carving with rain, sun, wind, frost, plants, and time, producing a kind of work of art though always a work of art in progress.

Being a place that now exists outside of society, an industrial ruin can become a place where the conflation of the artificial and the organic can occur, a process that is soothing (as the contradiction is resolved) and exciting (as nature produces a new reality) and melancholy (as the human presence is reduced to memories, dreams, traces, ghosts, and echoes).

What was once nature altered, transformed, and corrupted by man through industrial process is, in this new reality, now reversed, with these man-made places being altered, transformed, and redeemed through organic processes. These physical processes are producing a kind of artwork, an artwork produced by an unconscious collaboration between the artificial and the organic, between humans and nature. This redemption is an artistic process. Like the alchemy of plain lead being transformed into gold, decay and loss are transformed into poetic beauty.

In addition, I believe that the simple human acknowledgement of this process by human beings has, to some extent, the effect of further redeeming these lost and forsaken places.

By Paul Behling  
February, 2014

## THE PAINTINGS

1. TO LOVE AND BE LOVED – Nancy's grandfather's farm house
2. WISH YOU WERE HERE #2 – abandoned
3. REMEMBERING YESTERDAY – the Linworth Shed
4. YOU HAVE GROWN OLD – very near Cedarville Falls
5. TIME PASSING – from Madison county
6. LONELINESS – an abandoned desert-prairie house
7. I CAN HEAR THEM LAUGHING – school house from long ago
8. SOMETHING HIDDEN INSIDE – from a farm in Greene County
9. THEY WILL NOT LAST LONG – found on a road in Delaware
10. IN AN UPSTAIRS WINDOW – found in Ohio prairie county
11. A BEAUTY AND A SADNESS – Foster Street in Springfield Ohio
12. WILL YOU ALWAYS LOVE ME – these were once with people
13. LISTEN TO THE WIND – each time we pass by, it is diminished
14. YOU WILL FIND ME IN THE DARKNESS – the barn next to it is gone
15. THE HORSES ARE ALL GONE – from a farm near Gambier Ohio
16. ALONE IN TIME AND PLACE – it once served a desert town
17. THERE IS SOMETHING MISSING – this kind of place was so common when  
I was a farm boy
18. WHERE HAVE THEY GONE – lonely farm on the road to Lakeside
19. OCTOBER AND THE CHILDREN ARE GONE – it's a rural grade school on  
the road to Urbana Ohio
20. STANDING ALL ALONE – the red barn not far from Johnstown Ohio
21. I'M ALONE AND FRAGILE – near Utica – now it's gone
22. GONE AND FORGOTTEN – in memory of a place in Kentucky Hill county
23. I CAN HEAR THE SOUNDS OF YESTERDAY – Nancy's grandfather's farm
24. THE RUINS SPEAK SOFTLY – near Lakeside and now it is gone
25. DOES ANYONE REALLY CARE – not far from Lakeside Ohio
26. NO ONE COMES TO SEE ME ANYMORE – near Cedar Bog
27. THEY ARE ALL GONE – an abandoned house on Route #2, Ohio
28. WE LAUGHED AND WE WERE FRIENDS - once a busy factory
29. CYRUS SHAW – again Nancy's grandfather's shed
30. IT WAS ONLY YESTERDAY - a tool shed on the farmstead