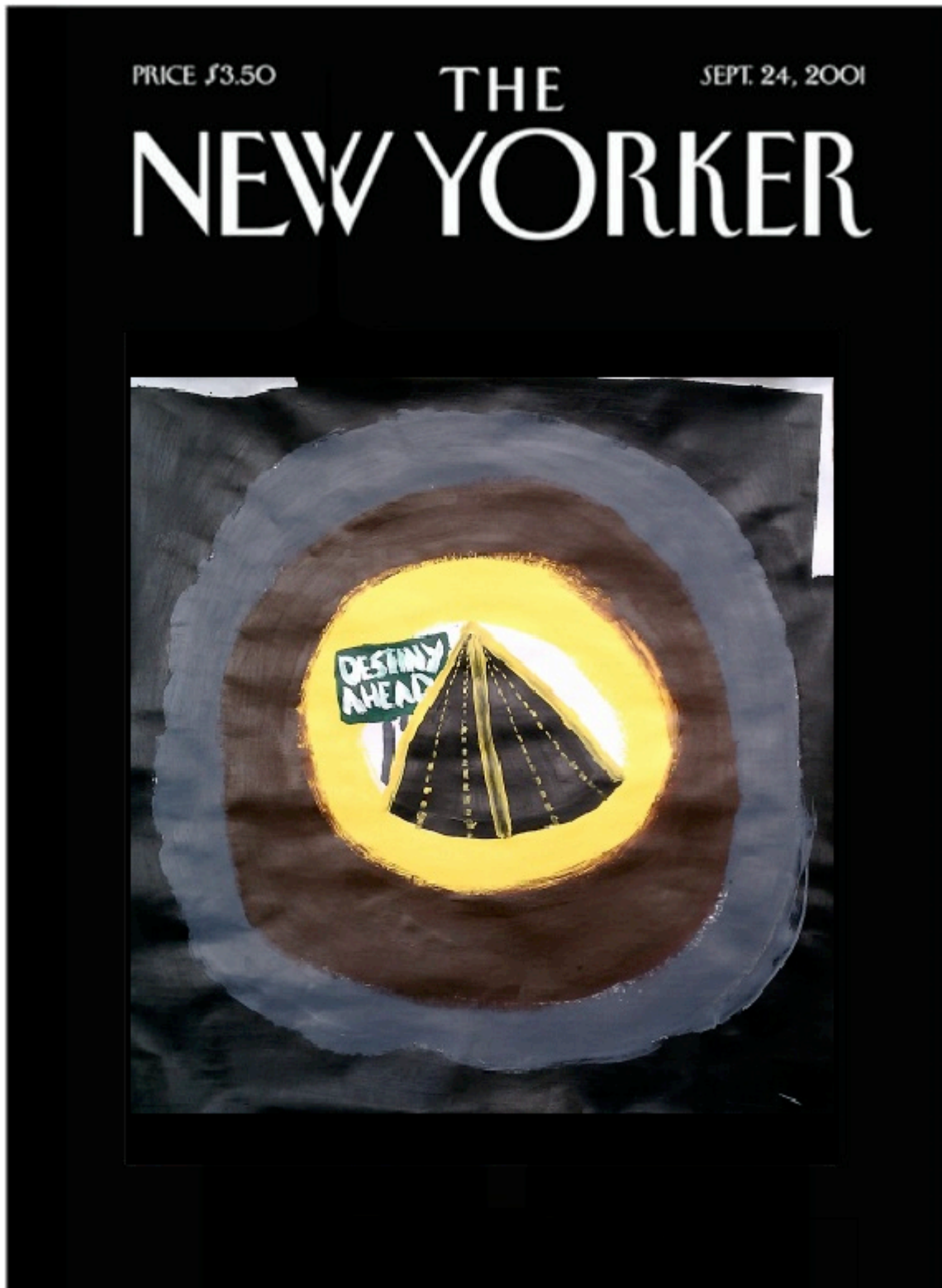
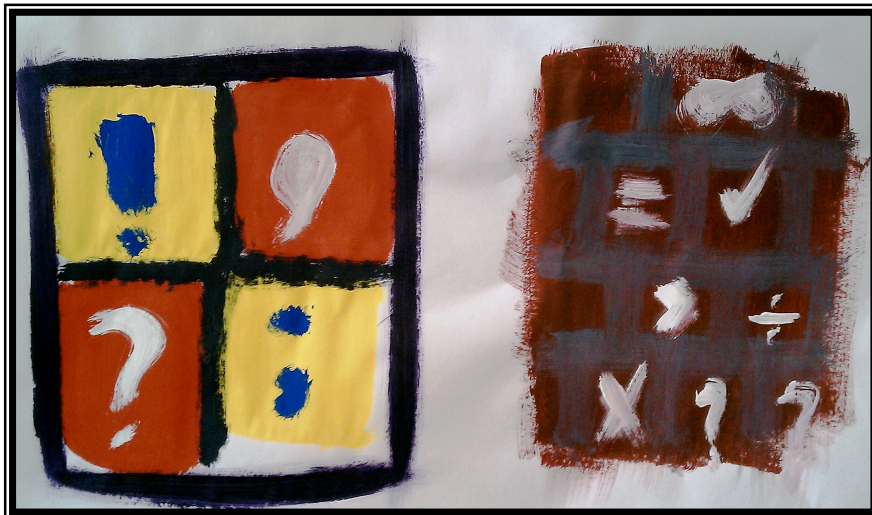


#003-F



As I look at my series of paintings now, I realize that I was always fighting a battle against conformity and constriction. I could never just “be free” to paint whatever came from this stroke or that stroke, but rather, I needed to have a plan of action and a purpose. I needed to know that at the end of my painting session, I was going to come away with having accomplished a goal. I needed to know that when the painting was done it would be *of* something, and not just a palette of colorful, yet indistinctive shapes and/or scenes. As such, I could never truly be expressive. Thus, I truly have to look *beneath* the surface of my paintings to see what I couldn’t say any other way.

I was fighting my way out of “the black box”—the barrier between my expressive color and creativity, and the rest of the world. The first



painting we did—the warm-up, as well—was frustrating for me. I felt like I was always doing

something wrong. That is, when I could come up with something to do at all. And even then I stuck with something that *seemed right* to me: symmetry and color patterns with symbols that made sense to me and who I am. In my first painting, “Symbols,” (left) I attempted to bring



order to chaos, when the latter was the more appropriate of the two. I was at odds with myself, and I didn't know it. I laid down the colors in the left square and felt comfortable with them. I painted the picture I saw in my head at that moment, and then panicked when I saw all the white. I thought it was too simple and needed to take it steps further. So I added symbols familiar to me—punctuation marks. Still fearful of all the negative space, I added a brick wall to the right, and added more symbols to that one, as well. In the moments after I'd finished, I reflected that, speaking as the painting, "I am the block—the barrier between expression and creativity." I try so hard to create a *product* that I forget how to let myself experience things as they happen. In my post-painting reflection, I began to understand this about myself, and decided to stop *thinking* about the painting, and just allow myself the freedom to let expression flow. That's how my second painting, "Chaos?" (Below) was born.

I sought to use my colors without a plan of action in mind, which is how I started out, and how I continued to paint for a good portion of the time. But then I realized that I was delineating sections of my paper and



had created another dichotomy of chaos and order. And smack-dab in the center of it all was another black box. Once I realized that I had been so meticulous in keeping the

box empty, I thought back to the group mural at the start of the day and knew that I had to let go of the boundaries I'd created. So I filled it with color and used large flourishing brushstrokes outside of the box, making it a “busy” painting. With so much going on I lost my idea of what it *should* be and just let myself put colors in places, not caring about size, shape, orientation, or placement. I hated it—because I like my plans of action; but I did it, and I learned from it, not right away, of course, but as I applied my more carefree attitude to my third painting, I began to see that there was a very specific behavior that I needed to nip in the bud—my tendency to create a solid black barrier around my work. I needed to let the chaotic colors flow and stop trying to reign in the disarray I saw and took issue with.

My third painting did not go as planned. I had this great picture in my head of all these black circles that looked great empty but looked even better filled with all different shades of green found outside. In “Shades” (below), I attempted to paint my view of nature—the various hues of green that I observed in the scenery where we meditated in the

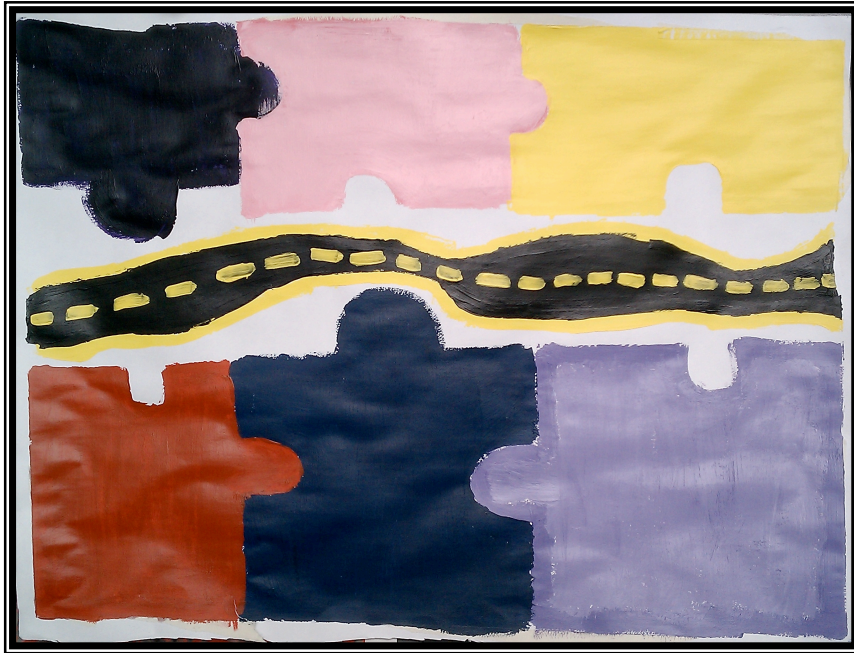


morning of my third painting. I saw other painters do similar things—toying with all the different shades of green—but they did it much more naturally.

They put the colors right next to each other—sometimes connected or embracing one another. I mixed many shades, but I surrounded them by a black circle. And after the fact—I knew it looked forced and infantile—I added sun, sky, and grass in oh-so-amateurish a style. I found myself asking a number of questions of the painting as I reflected upon its creation and existence. Why couldn't I allow the freedom? Why did I need to box myself in? Why could I not just allow my colors to roam as nature would on earth? Why must everything be so rigid? That's when I realized my problem with barriers needed to be exercised from my paintings. They kept appearing and they kept shutting down my flow. It was as though the appearance of a box, or circle—any outline, really—was an expectation I needed to fulfill. And it hindered my creative expression because I was always so concerned with filling them in. The space they created on either side of their existence became charged with a duty to do it justice—to almost make it proud. And that worried me, because I frequently find myself trying to live up to expectations set by others that are never truly voiced, but rather just *exist* in my realm of understanding. No one voices these aspirations I must address; they are silent and without a voice—just like my paintings are voiceless. So I must now address this dark curtain that squelches my free expression.

I started by refusing to use black *at all* in my next painting until I had used other colors first. And I was going *big* this time, too. I used bright colors that took up a great deal of room on the page, in an effort

to drown out that instinct to paint something for someone or some purpose. This was all for me. I wasn't worrying about being spontaneous enough, or being artistic enough—I just wanted to have fun. And “Puzzle



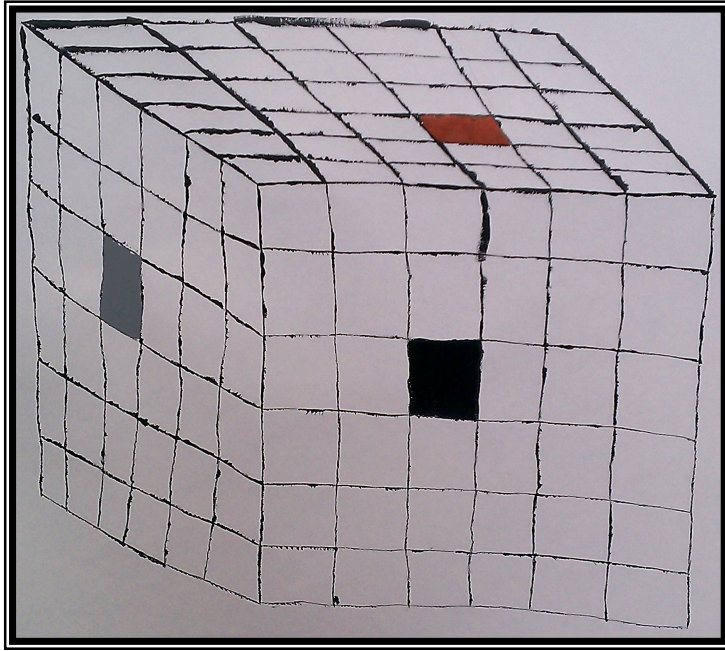
Pieces” (below) sounded like an excellent way to go about it. I had this idea to have eight puzzle pieces colored in, with the center piece

being a puzzle piece of negative space in which I was going to draw a road going “into” the painting in perspective. Unfortunately, I made the top and bottom rows of pieces too big, and there was not enough room in the middle to paint the road the way I wanted to. But I wasn't upset by it. I painted what I wanted and because I was meeting my expectations and no one else's, the fact that it couldn't happen exactly the way I had intended suddenly didn't matter so much. I consider this painting the turning point in my series. There was no drama, no panic. I adjusted, just as I would if a wrench were suddenly thrown into a planned lesson. I was in command of my own painting, just as I would be in my classroom, and because of my taking ownership over both the intention and follow-through of my



painting experience, I could change courses easier and with less strife. My original intention did work out. My response?—no problem; and I instead painted a road running through the entire middle section of the puzzle. It still came out nicely and I felt in command of myself whilst painting it—like for a moment or two there, I actually knew what I was doing. I enjoyed that. I enjoyed that very much.

It took me a while to find my stride, but once I did, I understood that I *could* have a plan if I wanted one, so long as that plan was to create something *I* wanted, and not something that's worth would be measured by others or the social expectations of today. As long as what I painted was for me, and me alone, there was no problem with doing what I



wanted. I was trying too hard to be perfect, when I should've just been having fun expressing myself as I wanted to. All of a sudden, it was like opening myself up to this great new adventure all my own. I could make

of it exactly what I wanted because I didn't have to care what others thought. This free-thinking, free-paintbrush-wielding train of thought built and built until I'd grown fond of my paintings—all of them (even the ones that I cringed at near the beginning)—and grown enough in general that my final painting was this incredible blend of simplicity and complexity; an artistic enigma that I, for once, didn't set out to create. I just thought it would be fun to try to paint a Rubik's cube; but my cube then turned into this black and white monstrosity, which eventually became this simple statement with a powerful punch. "Not So Black and White," (left) my

eighth and final painting in my entire series, truly makes me smile. I stumbled upon its meaning by accident and that made it ten times better in my book. Because as you look at it, you'll see that things aren't so black and white from other perspectives. Not at all.

Perhaps my journey "out of the black box," is my symbolic journey to break out of ingrained instinct of social conformity. Perhaps it is my way of telling myself to understand that I am subject to only myself, and that other people's opinions, judgments, and concerns about my life are theirs to worry about, whilst I should concern myself with how best to live my life to the fullest extent of who I am and what I want. It's a great lesson; hard to learn and even harder to live by for longer than it takes to come to these conclusions in journals or papers. But so long as I'm only ever measuring my life against what *I* want it to be, I think I can live just as I want for as long as I need to be me. And as an educator, it is important to know who you are at heart, what you want, what your expectations are, and whether or not you are prepared to change them as you yourself change. Being honest with oneself is the quickest way to fulfillment. End of story.