

# A GIFT OF VISION

Chris Reilly's technical skills enhance the power of imagination at work in 'Buddhamirror'

By **Robert L. Pincus**  
ART CRITIC

Virtuosity is a tricky thing. Who doesn't marvel at someone's ability to paint a piece of fruit that looks so real you feel as if you can reach out and touch it? But technique alone isn't enough. Otherwise, every diligent watercolorist who can paint flowers with finesse would be an enduring artist.

The painter with technical gifts has to have the gift of vision, too. It's what sets him or her apart, though it's something hard to define. Still, we know it when we see it.

Chris Reilly has both. He's mastered a difficult medium: encaustic or melted wax. But few would care if his images weren't compelling.

Some of the paintings in his current exhibition, "Buddhamirror," are what I would call spiritual still lifes. They don't mirror nature so much as they heighten our appreciation of it. The flower named in "Floating Orchid" is suspended in space, and the space itself is thickly atmospheric, the waxy surface dominated by white and yellow light in the middle, and imbued with dense greens and blues at right and left.

In other paintings of this same type, creatures enter the picture: birds foraging for fruit; moths and mantids blending into a scene in which the backdrop mixes yellows and oranges. These spiritual still lifes have the most continuity with pictures from the previous solo exhibitions by the Point Loma-based artist.

Other works are departures, because they favor symmetrical designs that isolate an object — a shell, moth, insect or leaf — and place it against a background that is essentially photographic. These also have the quality of materialized visions from his mind's eye, rooted in nature but departing dramatically from it.

In "Floating Shell," fish form a perfect ellipsis behind the shell, and vegetation becomes elegant curves on either side. In "Vein," a lone leaf, upside-down and rendered with crystalline clarity, hovers in front of a forest reshaped into a kaleidoscopic pattern. These images become metaphysical still lifes. They point to an unseen realm with their doubling effect, as in "Mirrorfly," in which the specimen is both upside-down and right-side-up, directly in the middle of a shimmering green background.

An accompanying statement for the show explains that Reilly paints forms "as a meditative practice" and the work

## DETAILS

"Buddhamirror," solo exhibition by Chris Reilly

**When:** Through May 2

**Where:** Scott White Contemporary Art, 939 W. Kalmia St., Little Italy

**Tickets:** Free

**Phone:** (619) 501-5689

**Online:** [www.scottwhiteart.com](http://www.scottwhiteart.com)



Chris Reilly's "Buddhaboy" sculpture becomes a doubled image in "Buddhaboy Reflecting," a picture combining painted and photographic imagery. Jeff Lancaster

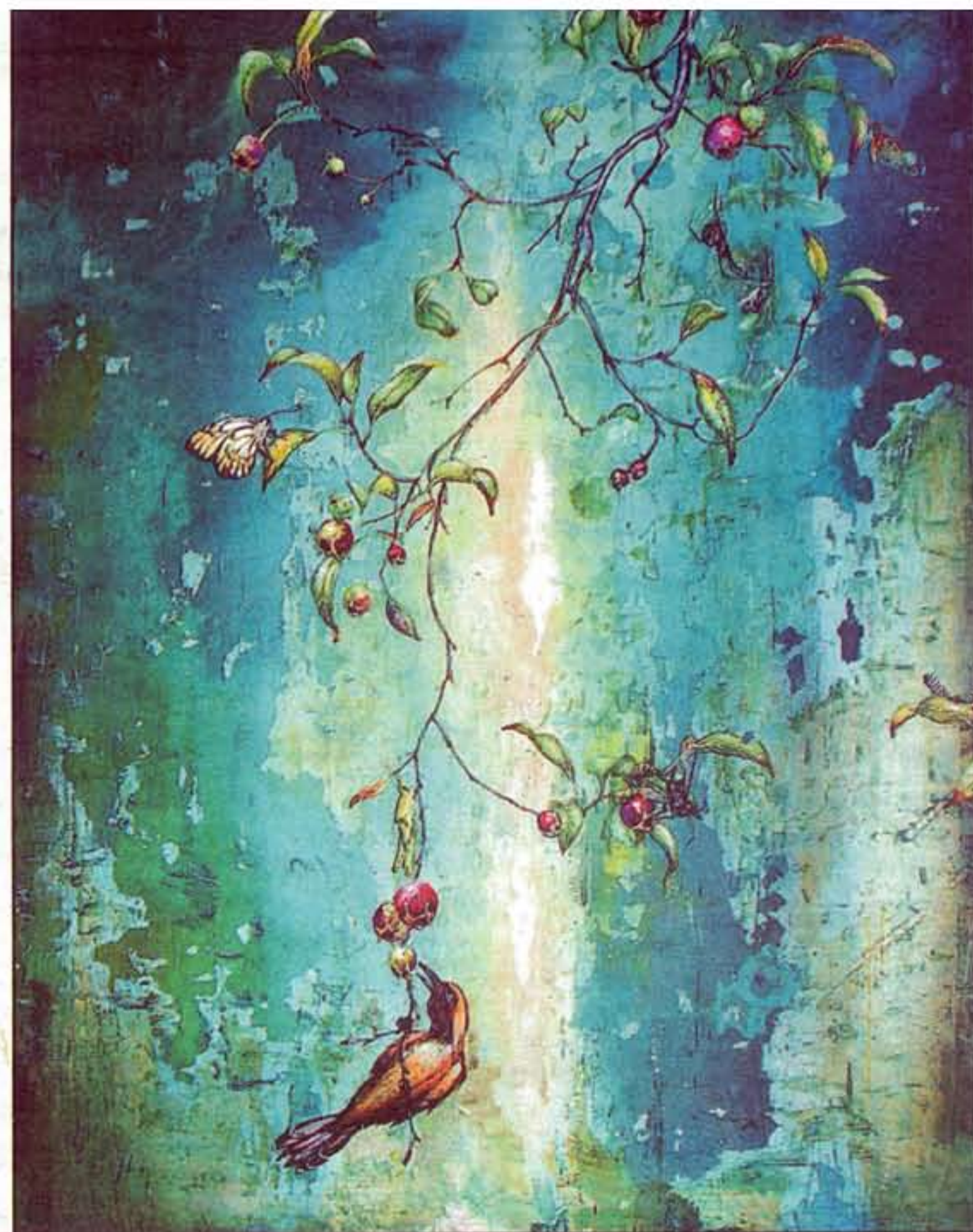
itself communicates that mood.

A second departure, in this exhibition, is the large presence of sculptures: figures and heads. "Buddhaboy" is both powerful and amusing. It's a beautifully shaped ceramic figure that wears encaustic like a thick white skin. He's rotund, a touch regal in his pose, and his face is pensive. Another boy Buddha sits atop a large driftwood "seat," in "Peace Maker (Family of Origins)."

Reilly's sculptural heads are compelling, too. "Hanuman," also ceramic, is a version of a Hindu god with monkey-like features; in this version, he has elegant gold and turquoise skin.

"King Baby" doesn't look so much like a god but a tyrannical tot, a wailing head in red, with a large crown. Hard to say what he represents. But he seems like some sort of symbolic version of self-indulgence and narcissism, as does one other grotesque head, "My Greedy Little Bastard." Maybe these are Reilly's metaphors for lack of enlightenment. And as sculptures, they are as memorable as his Buddhaboys.

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Though the imagery in "Foragers" refers to nature, this painting-on-panel is also otherworldly. Scott White Contemporary Art

"Buddhaboy," one of several ceramic sculptures in Chris Reilly's exhibition, stands 3 feet tall. Jeff Lancaster