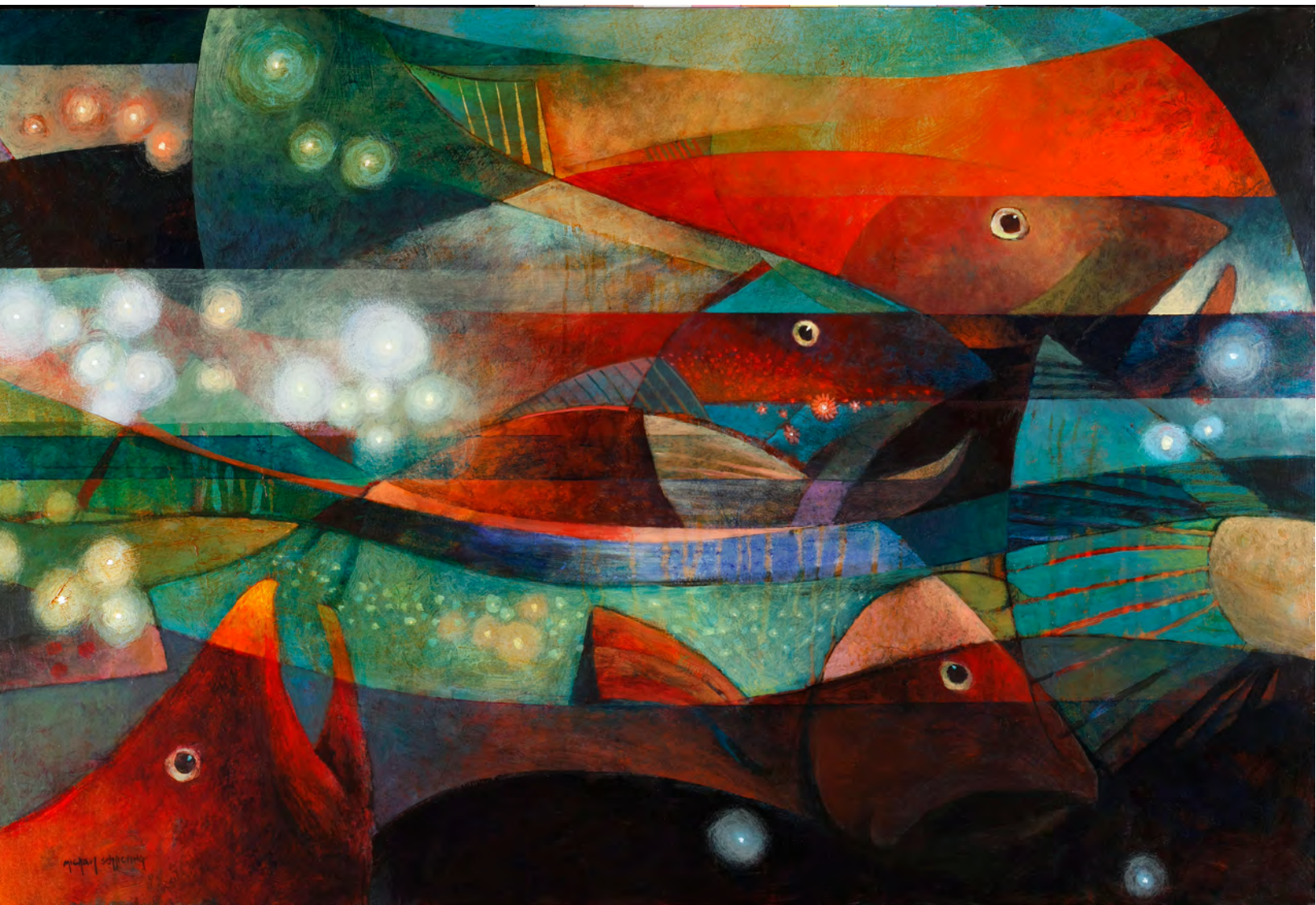


## MICHAEL SCHLICHTING

*Gauntlet, 2012*  
Acrylic on Paper, 32 x 43 in



courtesy: Hawk Creek Gallery, Neskowin Oregon

sunlight beating down. Gulls whirled up above the surf by Sandy Beach and he tiptoed past the waves as they ran themselves out like curtains up the sand. On another morning, from the road he could have looked like a late-night party boy sneaking home from the prom. He watched the road looking for cop cars hissing up the road and he looked for anybody he might know. Sometimes friends would park here to sober up on the beach, build a fire and then sleep on the warm sand. Cover themselves with a tarp.

This morning he sat on the sand and opened the box. All he found was wedding memorabilia. Christ. He and Deb, unimaginably young. Digging down, he found his old tuxedo and a frilly white shirt. There was Deb's veil. He had thought to bring his old logging boots he had woke up in and his wet socks. They were on his feet. He put the tux on. It fit. It was tight around his shoulders and his arms. He tucked the pants into his boots. He put Debbie's works into the box. Better to deny it was his if he got scooped up.

He remembered camping on the beach as a kid. His dad was white. His mom was Tlingit. His dad was the drinker and his dad was violent. His dad didn't take to him showing any interest in being Indian at all. It was fucked up. His mom was quiet and took beatings and it made him angry. But she always took Wendell back and fed him good. She would always find him on the beach and bring him clothes and a thermos of food and would make sure he got to school. She never stepped in the way of his dad when he was handing out punches. Fuck it. None of it was interesting to him now. He was tired of all of it now. He was tired of AA meetings and all the counselors, of how they stifled their yawns and offered tissues and used their senseless jargon of self-discovery and healing. It was emptiness that he carried in his heart now, not so much as sadness or despair. He had talked and cried and uncovered all of his sorrows. He had forgiven his inner child and he had nurtured that injured boy. He had understood the pain and anxiety of that mean old man, then had cried and forgiven him and washed that baby in that forgiveness so that the baby was clean and seemed healthy once again, but still Wendell felt as if his chest had been hollowed out with a rusty spoon and he was simply bored ... to ... death.

He walked along the edge of the trees and through people's backyards. He walked along the side of the road for a few steps and then crossed and took a trail up into

the woods when he could. Ravens hectored him, and sometimes rain pelted down. Finally he saw a pickup he recognized and he sprinted to the road and he caught a ride with Leonard in his rusted-out Subaru hatchback and Leonard was drunk. Wendell told him he was meeting Alvin up Stargaavin Creek out the end of the road and they were going fishing later and Alvin was going to bring him some good clothes and he was just wearing these goofy clothes to play a joke on him and Leonard laughed that loud eee-eee-eee kind of squeaky drunk laugh that he did. It made Wendell a little sad to saddle Leonard with a bad memory of being the last person to see him but it would be OK, he might not even remember it. When they came the end of the car road he said goodbye to Leonard, and he hugged him a little longer than he should have and then he worried that he might have made Leonard suspicious but Leonard was drunk and it didn't matter and Wendell just turned and wiped his eyes and carried his box of photographs with the cake topper that was of a man and woman kissing up the dirt logging road up the side of the river and up the river to a stream to where only the kids on their four-wheelers went. He found a big old spruce tree stump that had a dry spot scoured out underneath. He was only about twenty yards off of the four-wheeler trail but the brush was thick and he was invisible. He pushed his box into the hole and he crawled in after.

It was a natural little hidey-hole. It had been a big spruce tree, some five hundred years old or more, when it had been cut and skidded out of the valley. There was probably a good seven feet of nearly dry ground under the roots. River otters had been there before; there were old salmon bones chewed down to bits. Bits of deer fur—possibly a deer had starved out there during a particularly deep snow and the critters had gnawed away the bones in the subsequent years. He settled himself and looked through some of the photographs and set them up around the edge of his little bower. There were some little candles in the box, perhaps from a birthday or from an anniversary. He lit them and placed them around the edge. He was not sentimental and didn't linger over the photos of his parents or Debbie. His only thought was, "Jesus, we were never that young." Then he took out the glasses case.

Wendell looked at the kit and immediately saw the flaw in his plan. The spoon was too small. One shot, no matter