

*IN THE FOREGROUND:*  
*CONVERSATIONS ON ART & WRITING*  
A podcast from the Research and Academic Program (RAP)

**“THE MAGIC ART OF FRAMING”:  
ALEXANDER NEMEROV ON WRITING HISTORY  
AND MAKING A WORLD**

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Transcript

Caroline Fowler: Welcome to *In the Foreground: Conversations on Art and Writing*. I am Caro Fowler, your host and director of the Research and Academic Program at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts. In this series of conversations, I talk with art historians and artists about what it means to write history and make art, and the ways in which making informs how we create not only our world, but also ourselves.

Sara Houghteling: For this season, you'll hear from me, Sara Houghteling, Special Projects Coordinator in the Research and Academic Program. I'm also a novelist. I'll be speaking with four art historians about the craft of writing as it relates to their scholarly practice. Alexander Nemerov is the Carl and Marilyn Thoma Provostial Professor in the Arts and Humanities at Stanford University. His many books include *Fierce Poise*; *Helen Frankenthaler and 1950s New York*; *Soul Maker: The Times of Lewis Hine*, among many others. In 2017, he delivered the 66th Andrew W. Mellon Lectures at the National Gallery of Art, becoming the first scholar to deliver them with a focus on American art. Published this year by Princeton University Press is Alexander Nemerov's most recent book, *The Forest: A Fable of America in the 1830s*, which marks a fascinating new facet of his writing. It's part truth, part fiction, imagining the lives of both real and invented characters, living in Jacksonian America and working in a world still made largely of wood.

Alexander Nemerov: *I've always been seduced by this idea of a world picture, or if you wanted to think of it artistically, in the manner of framing and the magic arts of framing, you could say making a work.*

Sara Houghteling: It's a pleasure to have you here with us today, Alex.

Alexander Nemerov: Thank you, Sara. It's great to be here.

Sara Houghteling: We'll be talking primarily about your new work today. I wondered if we could start going back to your childhood, and so if you could start by telling us how you became an art historian.

Alexander Nemerov: It would be senior year of high school. I took AP Art History and really enjoyed it. I grew up in St. Louis, Missouri. I remember we took a field trip to Kansas City to the Nelson Atkins Museum, and it was there I saw paintings by Caravaggio, and Manet and others. And I think

that really cemented it for me. And I went on to study art history and English at the University of Vermont. And from there, I went on to graduate school at Yale.

Sara Houghteling: It's fascinating that a pilgrimage to a museum played a key role in your early intellectual development. We'll talk about pilgrimages more later during this conversation. In *Silent Dialogues*, which was published in 2015, you write about your father, Howard Nemerov, who was a major American poet. He won the Pulitzer Prize and taught at Bennington, which is in southwestern Vermont, near many of the sites that you conjure in *The Forest*. Howard Nemerov is also considered a nature poet, often compared to Frost. Did your father talk to you about writing growing up?

Alexander Nemerov: Not exactly. I remember I needed his help my senior year of high school, but there was an AP English class, and I asked for his help on writing an essay, and I got a C. And the comments were that this was the most pretentious writing that the teacher had ever seen. So, I would say he was supportive, but I generally needed to find my own way. But what I have noticed over the years is that I can hear him speaking through me, as it were, and I don't necessarily mind that.

Sara Houghteling: Are there particular moments where you feel like his voice is resounding with particular volume? Is it in writing descriptions or particular kinds of words?

Alexander Nemerov: I think it could be phrases and the sonority or tonality of my spoken voice. But also, yes, in the cadence of words, and I think underlying all that, some sort of intuitive connection between flowing water and words. He was very attracted to streams and rivers and brooks and so on in, in Vermont and elsewhere. And I, I've noticed, especially more recently, how much I'm drawn to those spaces of reflection. I know about 10 years ago, I must have spent about 45 minutes straight just looking at the Connecticut River on a beautiful September afternoon, watching the light reflect--the spangle or sparkle off the water. And that's a religious experience for me. And I think it's related to writing. Trees too, for my dad, were a big deal. I have no doubt that he, as it were, laid a kind of groundwork for me to be myself, if that makes sense.

Sara Houghteling: Absolutely. And it's a very powerful metaphor for how the natural world connects us through time and beyond death. I remember there's a beautiful poem that your father wrote that's reprinted in its entirety in *Silent Dialogues* about an image of windows on the lawn. Could you conjure for our listeners some of the images from that poem?

Alexander Nemerov: It's so wonderful. It's the kind of thing that only a poet would notice. I imagine him walking home for lunch or something like that in Bennington and seeing some windows that have been removed from the house and just placed with the glass in them on the lawn. And it's seeing the grass through the windows that are laid down on the lawn and writing about—I don't recall exactly—but the kind of liquidity and mystery of that vision, which incidentally is a framed vision and therefore speaks to the powers of art, be it poetry, painting, even photography, which my father really didn't like. And manifestations of the frame and the mysterious power that giving shape, giving form to something transforms it into, as it were, a real-er version of itself.

Sara Houghteling: As you were speaking, I was thinking of, in the book, there's at least one or perhaps two, if I'm not mistaken, images of water that are photographs that you took?

Alexander Nemerov: Exactly. Water is a supporting actor, if you like, in *The Forest*.

Sara Houghteling: You wrote your dissertation on Frederick Remington. On the surface, he seems a far cry from the historical and imaginary characters that populate *The Forest*. Can you tell us about what drew you to Remington initially?

Alexander Nemerov: It was after my first year of graduate school at Yale, so summer of 1987, and I was casting about for jobs, I guess that was in the spring, just as the school year was ending, and the only place that responded favorably to my inquiries was the Smithsonian Museum of American Art, which at that time was called the National Museum of American Art, and they were doing a show called *The West as America*. And I met a person who would become one of my mentors, William Truettner, a curator there. And he was planning this show and he hired me as his research assistant. And then by the next summer, it came time for

me to begin thinking in earnest about a dissertation topic. And it seemed something related to these artists in this “West” show, which I didn't know anything about these artists would be proper. That's how it came about more existentially. I think the reason it happened that way is that Remington was an artist I could handle when I was 25. I felt like I could deliver the iconoclastic goods on Remington and kind of critique his ideologies and just generally feel like I was in the driver's seat. It's an affair of maturity, isn't it, to begin to write about artists who are actually greater than oneself--to find the words there, without self diminishment, but to find the words.

Sara Houghteling: One of the impressions that I had reading *The Forest* is that the characters--I had the sense that they were kindred spirits of yours, and I wondered if, in case listeners haven't had a chance to read this wonderful book yet, if you could give us a brief overview of it, and perhaps highlight a few of these characters.

Alexander Nemerov: Yes, thank you. I think they are kindred spirits. The book is set in the 1830s, but very early on, I decided to call it a fable and not a history in honor of what you said: namely, that it's fictional as well as historical, but also because I think the experiences of the different figures in the book are the stuff of fables. To put it another way, they're visionary experiences and in that sense, I think they are kindred spirits.

I just mentioned my experience with the water in the Connecticut River, seeing lone trees on a path or against the sky. All these kinds of things, I feel, answer to me about what is most elemental and life changing, as it were, about our encounters with not only the natural world, but with ourselves, with being alive.

So, in this book, there are, I believe, 59 different tales, which I call vignettes, and they don't follow from one to another in the sense of a continuous story, but rather they make, as it were, a complete picture, a picture in the round of what life was like then, in the 1830s, and therefore the reader of it might wonder why having made the acquaintance of one figure one is moving on all of a sudden to now another figure and moreover one never finds again the one figure one has just what read about. What is the point of this composite structure? It's to make again a complete picture of the daily round of life then, which is so enigmatic and seductive to me,

and I presume for a reader. What was life like then? How can words portray and, in terms of my own emotional commitments to, history? I'm someone who grew up a block from Lexington Green, or who at least went to kindergarten a block from Lexington Green in Massachusetts. My connection to American history and history more broadly is to do with these kind of visionary experiences.

So I think it's a beautiful comment that they are kindred spirits. You ask about in particular instances, really every single one of them is, to some extent, someone to whom I feel an emotional attachment, whether they're made up by me or not. But I think my favorite might be the little girl in the piece called "Moose and Stencil." She feels most like me.

Sara Houghteling: Your recent books have tended to focus on a single artist and more modern ones, like Lewis Hine, Helen Frankenthaler, Mark Rothko. And *The Forest* is strikingly different from these other books. How do you describe this shift in your approach, and was it something that you initially set out to write in such a different mode? Or did it develop on its own?

Alexander Nemerov: It was always going to be a multi-character book. My idea for *The Forest* began all the way back in 2012, just as we were moving my family and I from New Haven to Palo Alto. And I remember researching it and then beginning to think about it then. And then I was invited to give the Mellon lectures at the National Gallery in 2017. And already then in 2017, it was a case of many characters. As to why I would be drawn to that approach, you know, the idea of showing a complete picture--I think I've always been attracted to this, if you like, doll's house notion of how the world works, where looking into one room, you see one figure doing one thing, and then in another room, there's someone else doing things.

And if you extend it even more broadly, and to think about, say, childhood, and pictures a child such as me would have seen. I remember how much I loved Richard Scarry's books. I think, from *Busy Town* to "The Shield of Achilles," which is really the big model for *The Forest*, and which is discussed implicitly at the end of the book.

I've always been seduced by this idea of a world picture, or if you wanted to think of it artistically, in the manner of framing and the magic arts of framing I spoke of earlier--you could say, making a world.

Sara Houghteling: That's wonderful. One of my favorite sections takes place in North Adams, which is about 10 minutes from where I am today. This is a wonderful section called the "Dancing Figures of the Mountain Pass," where these pirouetting mechanical dolls appear. And so that kind of uncanny appearance of dolls is a theme that I loved in the book. I'm forgetting now, but there is a painting of--is it a room in the Louvre?

Alexander Nemerov: Yes, that is Samuel Morse's painting, *The Gallery of the Louvre*, yes, which was once upon a time installed in a house on the banks of Otsego Lake in Cooperstown, New York, or just outside it in a building that still stands called Hyde Hall.

Sara Houghteling: There are so many sections that I'd love to ask you to read from the book, but perhaps we could turn to the beginning. It's so wonderfully lyrical and specific.

Alexander Nemerov: I'll read just a little bit, from the chapter "A Lone Pine in Maine."

"The axe struck the pine tree a first blow. The sound bounced from the hillside, echoing back to the woodman. The phlegm of the cut and the scratch in his throat made no common language. The blue sky passing clouds and pine needles on the ground were only sun and shade and softness beneath his boots. He chopped and the tree fell splitting and cracking and thumping to the earth. Sawyers sheared the branches and stripped the gray bark. This was in Maine, north of Augusta, near the Kennebec River. The tree was a white pine, more than a hundred feet tall. It grew in a stand of pines in deep, cool, black sand. The rest of the trees in the swampy ground still stood remarkably straight and without limbs until two thirds of the way up, their summits crowned by a few upright branches that seemed, from a distance, to float in air.

The one now on the ground, wet with moss, would become part of a house, or the beams of a church, shelves for a shop, or barrels for salted fish. A piece might become the frame of a mirror, before which a young woman, a candle at her side, fastened a locket around her neck. Gone were the days when the Royal Navy Had scouted the forests for white pines and

stamped them for future use as masts. Now Yankees turned them into floors, shingles, clapboards, pails, packing crates, the cornices and friezes of front doors, the moldings of fireplaces and the frames of paintings. At Philadelphia, a bridge of white pine crossed the Schuylkill. Another pine bridge crossed the Delaware at Trenton. White pine trestles, 1,500 and 3,000 feet long, connected Boston to Cambridge and Charleston. The clip clop of horses on the spans made a hymn of praise. The Greeks had the shield of Achilles. The Americans made their daily round of pine.”

Sara Houghteling: I’m struck as you’re reading that passage, with the wonderful image of all the bridges and the trestles and the sense of the radiating outwards of the consciousness of the authorial voice and the eye of the reader overlooking this period of history--and I’m reminded of, I think as well, that your father was a gunner in World War II, and there was something you wrote about photography and looking down on the city from above. Am I correct in remembering that image from one of your books?

Alexander Nemerov: Well, yes, he wrote a poem about a friend of his at Bennington College, another faculty member named Paul Feely, who was Helen Frankenthaler’s teacher, in fact. And it was likening this Pollock-like abstraction painted by Feely to the river’s railroads and roads one might see from the air. My father was not a gunner, he was a pilot in the Royal Air Force. During the Second World War, he flew 57 missions over Northern Europe, bombing and attacking Nazi ships and ground installations.

I just actually published a very short piece about him, but really also about my mother. They met during the war. My mother was English. My dad was an American flying in the Royal Air Force. It’s a piece called “Flying Home,” and it’s been a lovely occasion for me to just reflect on. The kind of legacy that you’re bringing up here is, but also really my mother’s gifts to me, which are not always, if you like, cheery gifts because a lot of pain that comes with it.

Sara Houghteling: I’d love to read that piece. But to return to the wonderful passage, I wondered if you could just tell us what you were thinking as you wrote it and why you’ve placed this description at the outset of the book?

Alexander Nemerov: What I remember is that I began writing *The Forest* in the summer of 2020. We were removed from our regular house in Palo Alto



because we were having some work done on our house, and so we were living in a place in San Francisco and I was chair of my department at that time. And it was not a pleasant time to be chair. It was 2020 and the lockdown and many things were happening. And I had been intending to start *The Forest*. And then one day I just decided to begin. No ceremony, no fanfare, no fireworks. I didn't want to be precious about where to begin-- or I just let the writing take me rather than me take the writing. And that's really how I wrote the whole book.

Sara Houghteling: It's fascinating how the form mirrors the content: that it starts with an axe blow. It has this kind of propulsive effect. And the next chapter is "The Town that Axes Made," Collinsville, Connecticut, where they make hundreds of thousands of axes and you just have this growing sense of dismay and mourning as the book goes on, as more and more trees are felled. At times, I almost kind of wanted to look away from the book as one looks away from something painful. And it's made me very attuned to the trees being cut down around me here in Massachusetts. I thought it was both a very beautiful and also a painful way to begin the book.

One of the other themes I found especially resonant in *The Forest* was the connection between nature and language, which seems so germane to your subject. I'd like to ask you to read another excerpt from the section, "Oak Bent Sideways," after you described Sequoia, who created the Cherokee alphabet.

Alexander Nemerov: Right. So this has to do with the resonances between the Cherokee written language and then these Trail Trees that can be seen even today, though their exact whereabouts is often kept secret. Trees, in other words, that were bent, deformed, in a manner of speaking, so that they could reveal a passage, or a right of way, or a direction, etc.

"The language of their forced march can be read in the landscape today, a language of trees. In Monterey, Tennessee, an oak bends over sideways only a few feet off the ground, swerving like a back flipping diver for about eight feet before suddenly rising straight up, the bowl displacing, displaced far from the roots. Near Fayette, Missouri, off County Road 208, another oak bends in similar fashion. These are "culturally modified trees" or "trail trees," as they are also called, that can be found in numerous examples across the eastern United States and other places.

In the southeast, many of these trees apparently date from the 1830s and '40s, the time of the Cherokee Trail of Tears. The Cherokee made them by bending a tree when it was a sapling and then securing it in its new position with a vine, weighted rock, or strips of rawhide. The bent tree over time became a pointer in the woods, a directional indicator designating a place of water, caves, or shelter, or simply the way forward.

The trees were so striking, sometimes with doubled trunks, sometimes when they bent and touched the ground, with two systems of roots, that they could not be missed. Like the artifacts discovered recently in the Tennessee woods, at a site where Cherokee camped for several months in 1838 on their forced trek west, the trees mark a moment of time. But when the campsite was discovered in 2012, it was covered by generations of leaves, moss, straw, and other forest litter, whereas the trail trees are themselves a kind of nature.”

Sara Houghteling: It was very moved by this passage. Were you able to make a pilgrimage to see these trees or are there other pilgrimages that were part of the writing of the book that you could tell us about?

Alexander Nemerov: I never did see one of these trees, no, but I think “pilgrimage” is the right phrase. I made two pilgrimages to a very small, obscure, backwoods part of Maine called Temple, Maine, which even to this day can't really be called a town. There's no Main Street. It's more like just a collection of houses where the prostitute Helen Jewett—her name was Dorcas Doyon, from a poor family—and she, Helen Jewett, to go by her professional name, was murdered at age 23 in Manhattan, and it was the first breaking news, the first penny press journalistic extravaganza coverage of her death, murder, and the exoneration of her psychopathic boyfriend killer. But I just wanted to go to where she was a little girl and that was a completely quixotic quest. And the photograph that appears in the book of that site is actually of a frozen stream, like a light pointing off that.

The other pilgrimage that was really profound for me was going to the eastern shore of Maryland and finding the canal that the father of Harriet Tubman, along with many other enslaved people, dug in the 1810s and '20s to connect an inland plantation to a bay, and thereby facilitate the transfer of shipment of goods at that site. That experience which was, again, like the one in Maine, completely solitary, was so moving to me on many levels. Not only because I'm at the site of a historical happening, but

also, because the site of pain is converted into something very beautiful. They're not in a redemptive way. I don't believe in annulling the past, and I also don't particularly appreciate relentless condemnation and nastiness as the keynote of any way that one might regard the American past, nor do I regard the rote academic dismissal of beauty and generosity and depth of feeling as anything other than bullshit.

I thought that the tripled movement of the water I was seeing that day in this canal--that is, the movement of the current of the water as the wind was riffling, ruffling the surface, and also the movement of the clouds in the sky above as those clouds were reflected in the water was profound for me, and it had to do with a kind of unlikely scene of gentleness and grace that was made possible by the people who made that canal, a canal whose purpose, if you like, may laterally come to seem to have been precisely the delivery of a kind of gentleness on earth that would not have been available elsewhere. For that they labored, and you know what? As I go on, and as I try to teach and try to ask what I give to my students and to my readers in a book, like a forest, I think it's this kind of gentleness. You point out that the book is painful to read in many ways, and no doubt it is. How can any treatment of American history not have its darkness? But I really wanted it to be, and believe it to be, an affirmative book, a gentleness.

Sara Houghteling: Could tell us about this last chapter and its origins? Did it really happen? And also talk about your decision to turn to the first person, which is something that you use fairly frequently in your writing and it's incredibly effective, but a lot of scholarly writing doesn't use the first person.

Alexander Nemerov: So the postscript is what you're talking about, and it's entirely made up. It's called "The Shield," and it is about finding a shield on which the daily round--such as we've been talking about and such that the book really aspires to portray--is manifest mysteriously to this soul discoverer. Namely, this little girl who finds this thing lodged on a bank of a stream. It's funny how a lot of the things we're talking about just completely appear. And that finding in the book happened so long time ago, back in the 19th century. But then yes, in, in my way, in the first person, I think I described myself as talking to a descendant or descendants of this little girl and hearing the story from them. I don't know. I didn't really think much about what I was doing there. I just wanted a nice way to end the book. And I even thought about whether I

really needed that shield section, yet it felt like it wanted to be written. I say that I wondered if I needed to include it because the last section of the book proper, that is before the postscript, which is called “Two Sisters at the Mountain House,” is a really apt ending for the book too, and which I think contains a figure for me in the artist who draws the trees.

So I thought about ending it there. But to our point about the tone, you know, for those of you out there who write about American history and art, how does one portray calamity, pain, like the sort of permanent scarring of the world and of persons in a way that it has qualities of gentleness and faith and hope and that leaves the reader, how can I say it, more alive at the end rather than less alive? Both these last two pieces in the book are to do with something that is about hope.

Sara Houghteling: I kept thinking about the German writer W. G. Sebald as I read your work, both in the sense of varied traumas emerging slowly in the same way that a photograph might develop and how images of sites of trauma reveal themselves as time goes on, but it does seem that one of the things that art can do for us in trying times is get us to slow down, get us to look, get us to admire the spangles of sunlight on water in a photograph.

Alexander Nemerov: And I think for me that to be a historian who thinks in those terms is to have one's awareness, the kind of mystic awareness and non- utilitarian awareness you've just spoken of cut two ways: which is to say, one into a kind of suspension of time, which I think of as poetic and is connected for me with the pilgrimage and the idea of communing with figures who, as you were saying, are kindred spirits, but then cutting the other way towards loss and absence. The historian, whether it's you or me or anyone, is someone who feels the world on that knife's edge. The paradox maybe is that there's a softness to that position too, and it's taken me a long time to--I was going to say “learn that,” but I would just say more speaking autobiographically to *rediscover* that feeling that I've had.

Ever since I was a little boy, and then as a teacher and as a writer, to be able to shepherd that feeling through the different public fora, whether it's this podcast or one of my classes or a book, etc., without it becoming like a panacea or an instance of self help, you know, anything crude, right? It's an interesting position to be in, but I would have it no other way. I love what I do.

Sara Houghteling: And hearing you speak reminds me one of the wonderful hallmarks of your writing and the way that you've really shaped writing in the discipline is these incredibly attentive, alert, close readings of an image that are marked by that kind of gentleness. And I'm just thinking of the wonderful description of the little girl at the outset of your book, *Soul Maker: The Times of Lewis Hine*, and that there's both a kind of a gentle sense of communing with this little girl who's appearing in the photograph, but also an attentiveness to writing about time and to thinking about what time means for this person, what it means for her day to be interrupted by a friendly photographer, and how different that is for her to have her picture taken versus the constant attentiveness to the bobbins and threads and everything that's happening in the factory around her. So it's interesting to think about how writing about time and time's flow also is really crucial to your scholarly tasks.

Alexander Nemerov: That's really beautifully said, and I think that ever since I was a little kid, this sense of the kind of decrepitude and melancholy of historical time is one aspect of my imagination, but then there is the more miraculous notion of the clouds reflected on the screen, the window pane--I think it's been the harder one for me to find and, and to be able to offer to other people, whether again, it's my students or my readers, but again, it's that knife's edge that's soft at the same time, or how can one best use it if the language, the kind of disagreeable Silicon Valley language of optimization can be invoked at least just for a moment--what am I supposed to be doing here? How can I not go through the motions? How can I overcome my own sadness? How can I sit down and write a sentence that actually helps someone to breathe? I think these are huge questions, which I don't really have a good answer to it, but I think I'm getting freer and more peaceful as I get older.

Sara Houghteling: I'm thinking of the passage of blackberries at the beginning of *The Body of Raphaelle Peale*, that wonderful extended description of blackberries. And I remember walking through a museum with a friend, we were in San Francisco, and suddenly they said, "Stop!"--this was before I had read *The Body of Raphaelle Peale*, and they said, those are the blackberries, those are the blackberries of Raphaelle Peale, and it was a moment where someone who had read your work was kind of going through the motions of moving quickly through a museum and then

suddenly was arrested, stopped, and brought out of time to look again at this image that they had seen in a book and hadn't been expecting to see in the museum....

Alexander Nemerov: Thank you for telling me that story. That painting, I think, is almost like an altarpiece for me, even though it's only seven by ten inches. I think Raphael Peale was--I mean, with all due respect to Jules Prown, who was my real PhD advisor, and who, who certainly helped me in so many ways--just like Bill Truettner at the Smithsonian—I often think of Raphael Peale as my real PhD advisor, as the person who taught me what a painting is and what attentiveness is.

Sara Houghteling: In terms of thinking of how we teach others about writing and attentiveness, is there particular advice about writing the history of art that you find yourself giving students year after year? Or is there any editorial or writing advice that you've been given that you return to?

Alexander Nemerov: Two really good questions. With my PhD students, I think it's hard because they're drawn to me because they want to write in, let's just say, like a more essayistic, less argumentative way. And so they come to work with me. And then it's a mixed blessing because in many cases I consider them to be more proficient, more gifted than I am. They're brilliant thinkers. You know, they don't often succeed and why don't they? It's because their work is illegible in an academic context but for whatever reason I have succeeded. It's like my wife says I could easily be an assistant manager at Barnes and Noble. That sounds like my wife is super hard but she's actually lovely, but she's just being real. And she's saying that I've been fortunate enough to have mentors, figures at different way stations of my life. Jules Prown, Bill Truettner, Wanda Korn, a number of others who have been kindly people--beneficent people, and who have not been the kind of fearsome gatekeepers that academe is known for, and consequently who somehow let me into the club.

And although I think I'm a little miscast as an academic, I think I probably should have been an artist. It's a story for another day, but basically the idea is that my family was chock full of artists and poets and it was kind of either too intimidating for me or else made clear to me that it was not my deal and not my opportunity to be an artist or a combination of those

things. I chose art history as just a kind of quieter place to be, whereas, you know, left in a kind of full and untrammelled field, I might've been an artist and therefore I'm miscast as an academic. But that said, it has been a good place for me and it's allowed me actually to become an artist whose medium is scholarship. That's how someone said it to me, and I've always liked that. Academic knowledge production, as it is called, is often about closure and specialization and all the things that are often talked about. One of the things I say now, which is true, is that I could never get a job as an academic now doing what I do, but to put it more positively, I think, boy, is it needful for me or one of my colleagues or whoever it may be to speak from the heart, and I would say speak from a position of hope and possibility and to be a kind of light--to bring light, which can be fabulously made of darkness as well as light itself.

That's why it's so invigorating, though also exhausting to do it in the way that I do it. And then you asked about my own writing, what I've learned. I think I learned a lot from the Frankenthaler book, which is my one trade press book, which was published with Penguin, and I just give a big shout out to my editor at Penguin, Emily Cunningham, and also my agent, Elias Altman, who really showed me how to write a story-based book and get away from an argument-based book. As different as *The Forest* is from the Frankenthaler book, I think the lessons I learned in the Frankenthaler book are very apparent in *The Forest*, which is itself, as we've been talking about, a book of stories.

Sara Houghteling: I wondered if, just in closing, if you could tell us about an object or a place or a question that has your attention right now?

Alexander Nemerov: The paintings of Velázquez are occupying me, and I hope will be occupying me very specifically this afternoon even. I've long been interested in them, and who wouldn't be? But I just find they show up in my teaching a lot now. So I'm contemplating writing something about teaching Velázquez or being taught by Velázquez, which would be nothing less than speaking about paintings of his that I think open up a lot of the questions of the kind you and I are talking about today.

And then another artist I'm thinking about a lot is Franz Marc. I had the opportunity to go to Munich and environs in March and just, again, in terms of pilgrimage, just commune with the places where he grew up. And

there's something about his work, of course. He's famous for his paintings of animals, the blue horses and the yellow cows and things like that, and I'm interested in the portrayal of animals. And Franz Marc would be an artist that I, like most people, would think of right off the bat when contemplating such a subject.

Sara Houghteling: I can't wait to read both of those books, wherever they take you and in whatever direction they come to you. Alex, it's been really a pleasure to have you here on *In the Foreground* today. Thank you so much.

Alexander Nemerov: Well, thank you.

Caitlin Woolsey: Thank you for listening to *In the Foreground: Conversations on Art and Writing*. For more information about this episode and links to the resources referenced in the conversation, please visit [clarkart.edu/rap/podcast](http://clarkart.edu/rap/podcast). This program was co-created by Caroline Fowler and myself, Caitlin Woolsey and produced by me, with music by Light Chaser, sound editing by C. J. DeGennaro, and additional support provided by Annie Jun and Sara Houghteling.

The Clark Art Institute sits on the ancestral homelands of the Mohican people. We acknowledge the tremendous hardship of their forcible removal from these homelands by colonial settlers. A federally-recognized nation, they now reside in Wisconsin and are known as the Stockbridge-Munsee community. As we learn, speak, and gather at the Clark, we pay honor to their ancestors, past and present, and to future generations by committing to build a more inclusive and equitable space for all.