

## History as Muse, Art as Record

*Contemporary Paintings of the Historic Dairy Cooperative Association lot in South East Portland*

I was running an errand when I first saw the old Dairy Cooperative Association mill. What caught my eye was the hand-painted “Concentrates” sign on the loading dock, and of course, the bold red and white paint job. Had I turned a corner and travelled back in time seventy years? Then I saw the silos and immediately questioned whether they were paintable, by me. They were magnificent but overwhelming and complicated structures.

A couple of years later, the phrase “Icons of Industry and Agriculture” popped into my head, and I began to understand how I might approach the subject. One unusually clear winter day, with a low sun we rarely get to see in Portland, I wondered how the silos would look. And then I got started.

I set up my easel on SE 8th Street. As happens when an artist paints out-of-doors, people stopped to talk with me. I met the owners and employees of nearby businesses, cyclists, the area homeless, and photographers. Although my initial attraction to the structures had been visual, I came to appreciate their importance to many people.

One early passerby particularly affected me. This young man on a bicycle was photographing the silos, but his true passion was railroads. His several-minute monologue about how Portland was built without power tools, every railroad tie, every nail driven in by muscle, left me looking at my silos differently. Some worker long ago had driven in the rivets on those silos; the least I could do was honor his effort by painting the tiny shadows they cast in the raking light.

As I learned more about the Dairy Cooperative Association, through the Oregon Historical Society records and from Mr. Mark Moore’s wonderful web site, PDXHistory.com, it became even more important for me to “get it right.” This suggested an aesthetic approach; those chutes had once carried grain, I had to make my drawing accurate enough that they started and stopped in the right spots.

Although artists and film makers often use “urban decay” as a threatening backdrop, I didn’t want to treat the site that way. I could tell that these structures were not long for this world, and felt I was attending to their past glory.

—Lisa Caballero