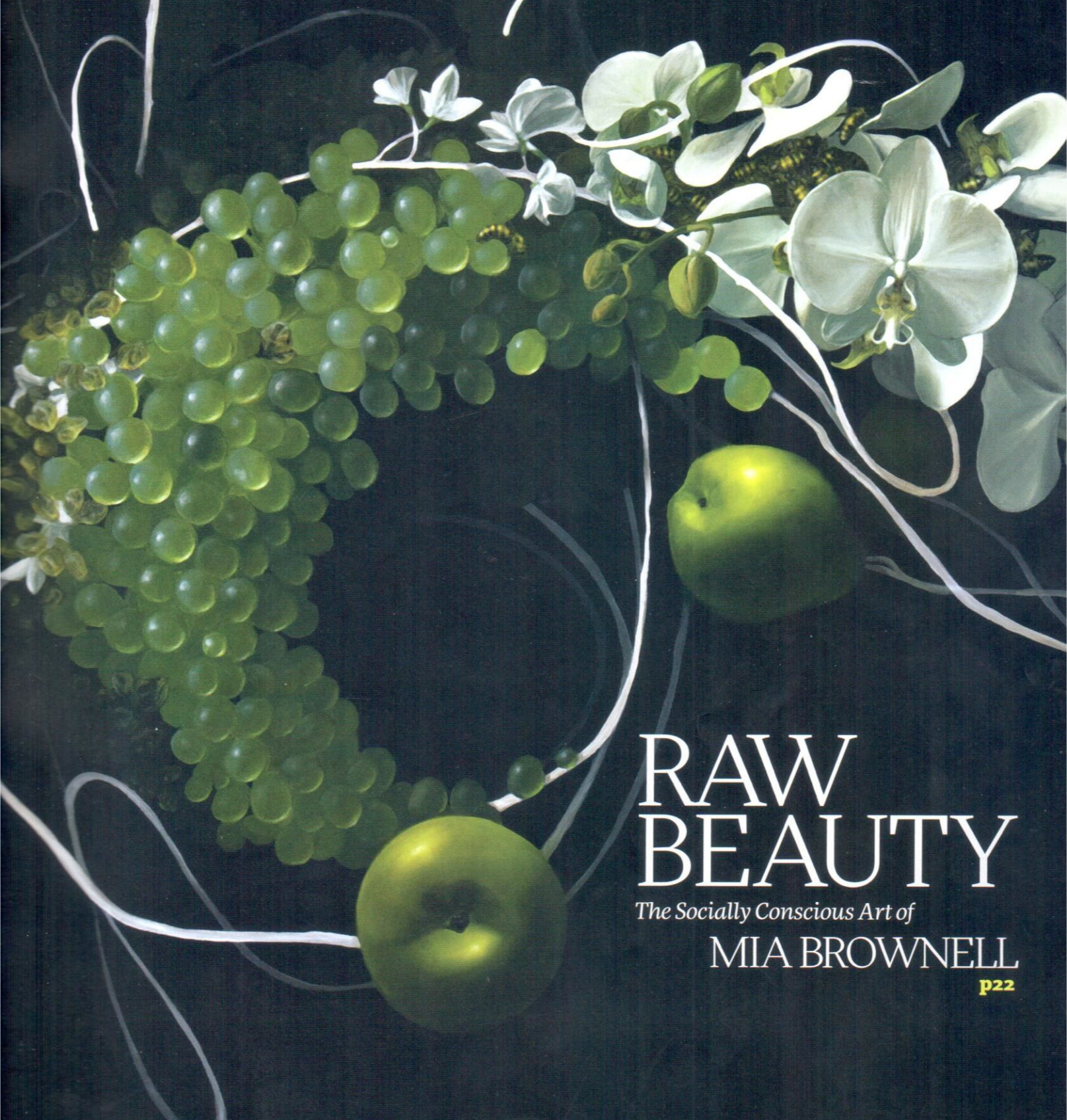


At Buffalo

the magazine for alumni and friends of the State University of New York at Buffalo

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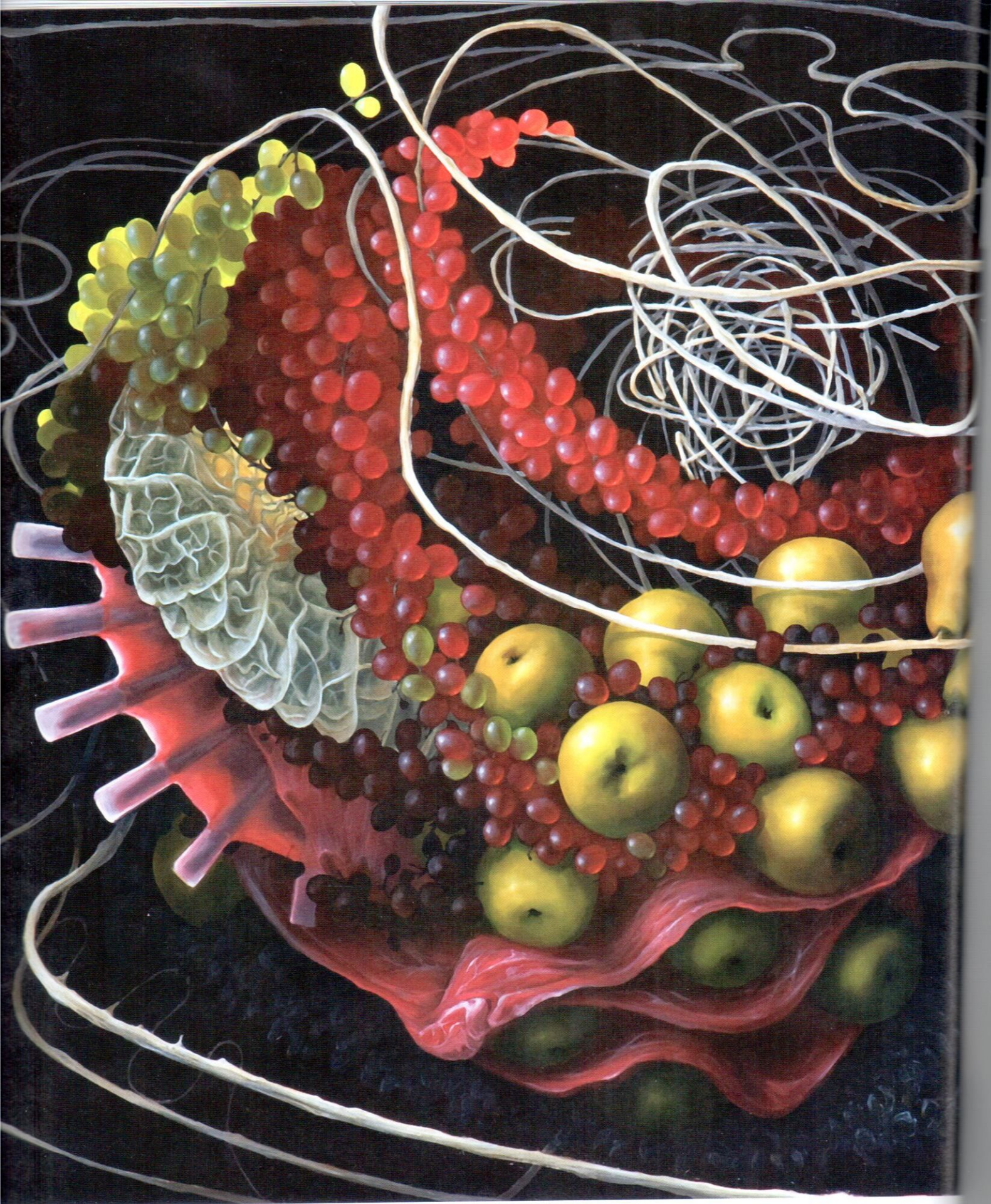


RAW BEAUTY

The Socially Conscious Art of

MIA BROWNELL

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food *for* thought

“WE ARE WHAT WE EAT” TAKES ON NEW MEANING IN MIA BROWNELL’S ART

Story by Rebecca Rudell

Whether we’re debating the use of pesticides, or genetically modified foods, or grass-fed versus corn-fed meat, it seems that everyone these days is thinking about what we put in our stomachs. Artist Mia Brownell (MFA '95) is no exception.

“Food is the most profound relationship we have with nature,” says Brownell. “It’s an intersection with most things, so it’s a perpetual theme of inspiration for me.” Her work focuses not only on the innate beauty of food, but also on the undeniable fact that much of what people eat today is churned through the industrial food complex first.

The vibrant helixes so prevalent in her work hint at what happens to a pear (for example) before it hits our plates—when its chromosomal architecture is

manipulated or it is doused with insecticides—and after it ends up in our bodies, when it merges with our own genetic material. Her work is stunning, but also slightly terrifying. And while Brownell’s critique of the food industry is subtle in its depiction, she is not afraid to name names, as titles like “Still Life with Roundup Ready” make clear.

Still Life with
Gastric Peptide
2010
Oil on canvas
30 x 36 inches
Private collection,
Boston, Mass.

CONTINUED



Brownell's influences are many. The daughter of a sculptor, Nancy Schulson Brownell, and a renowned biophysicist, William E. Brownell, she is also a devout pupil of 17th-century still-life artists, who were similarly inspired by scientific principles and discoveries of their day. "The science of vision flourished within 17th-century culture, with the invention of the modern microscope and camera obscura," she says. "The techniques of these artists established the language and conventions that I'm trying to manipulate in my current work."

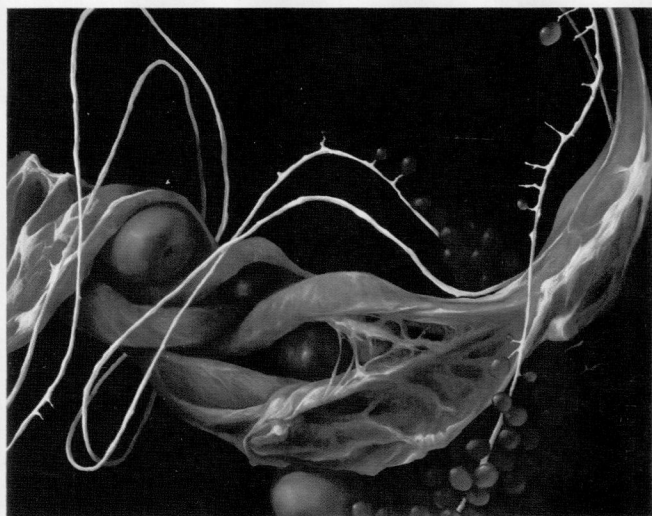
In terms of subject matter, she is intrigued by DNA and proteins—the building blocks of food and life. "Proteins move and spiral and fold unto themselves. That movement is something I try to capture in my paintings," she says. Her work begins with abstract, gestural lines. Some become twisted vines that lead the eye through the painting, others transform into strands of buzzing bees, and still others become luscious swirls thick with ripe fruit. But all of her work touches on the complicated relationship we have with food.



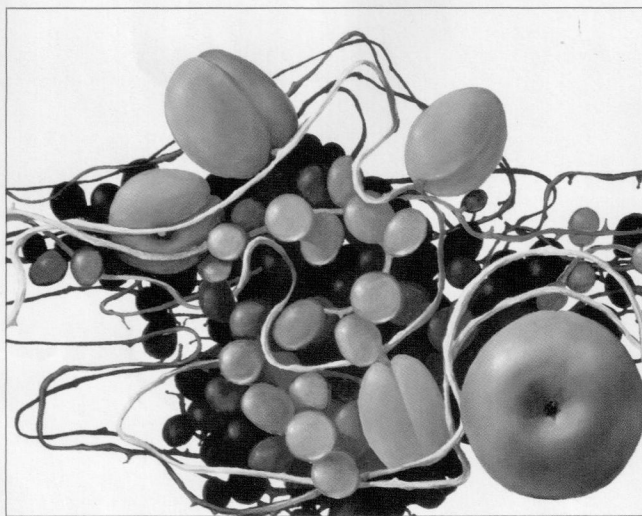
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Mia Brownell in her studio.

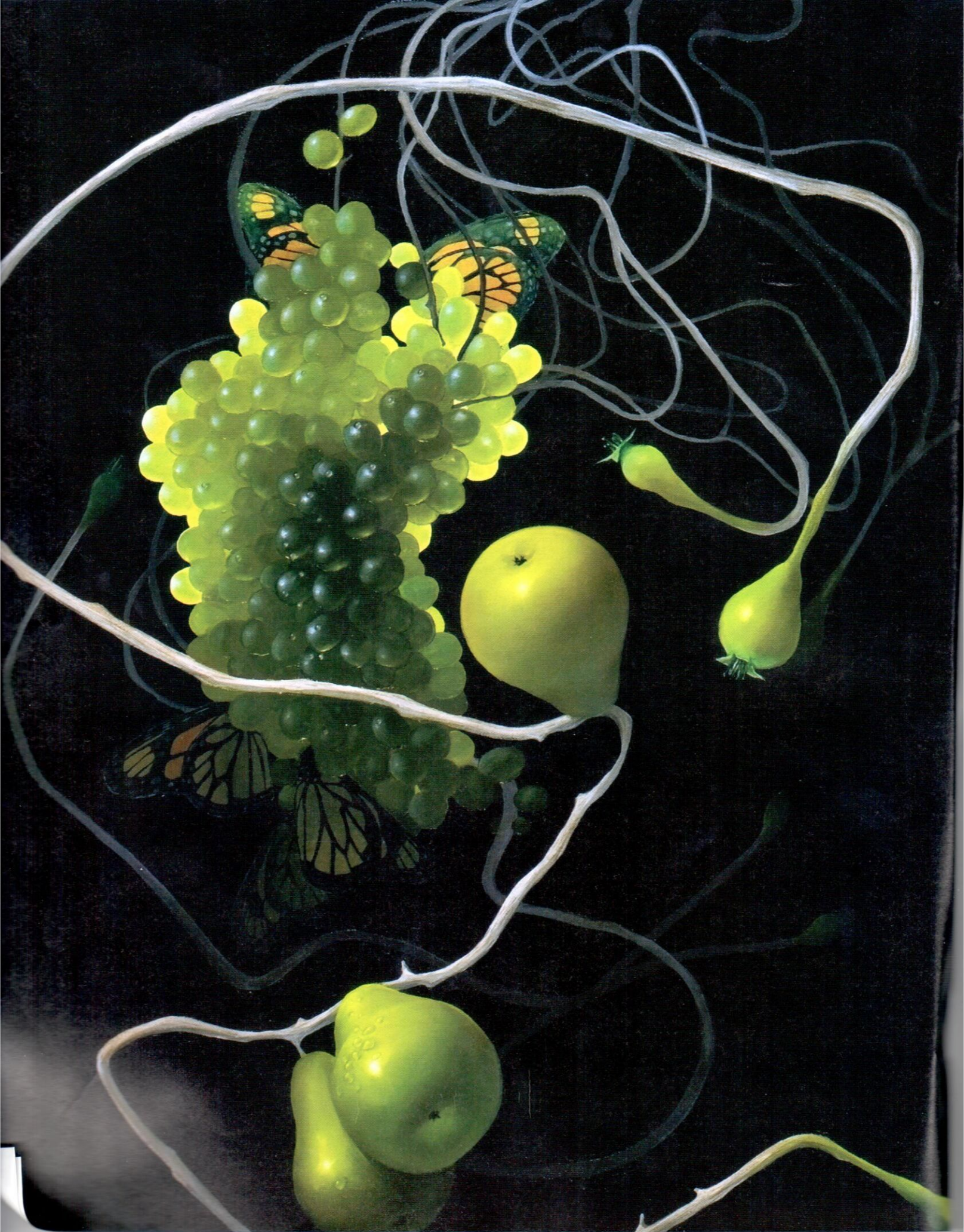
“PROTEINS MOVE AND *spiral* AND *fold* UNTO THEMSELVES. THAT MOVEMENT IS SOMETHING I TRY TO CAPTURE IN MY PAINTINGS.”

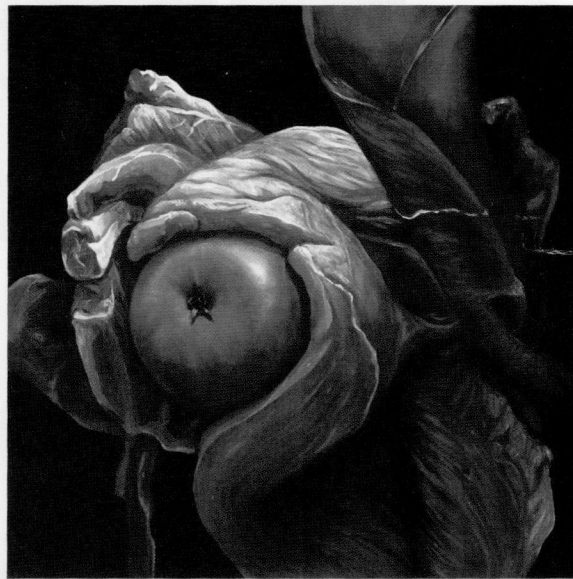


Still Life with Cell Signal
2010
Oil on canvas
16 x 20 inches
Private collection, Houston, Texas



Still Life with Apricot and Pear
2010
Oil on canvas
8 x 10 inches
Private collection, New York, N.Y.





Opposite page:
Still Life with Lost Migration
2012
Oil on canvas
24 x 20 inches
Private collection,
London, U.K.

Far left:
Still Life with Poppy
2011
Oil on canvas
10 x 10 inches
Private collection,
New York, N.Y.

Left:
Still Life with Meat Flower
2010
Oil on canvas
10 x 10 inches
Private collection,
New York, N.Y.

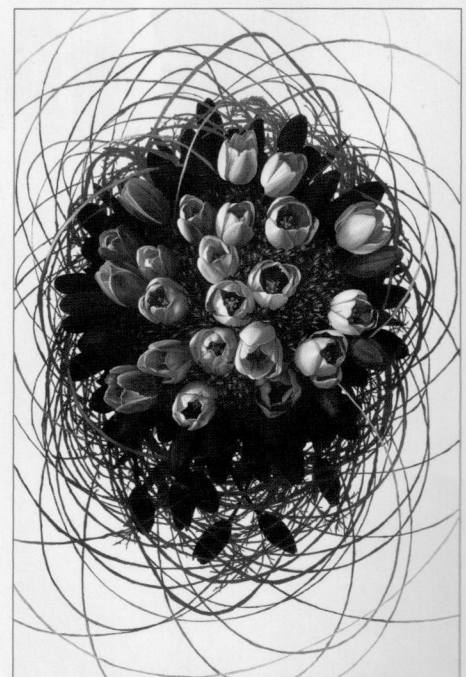
“I’M FASCINATED BY THE VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE ASPECTS OF *food* AND *science*, AND I THINK MY PAINTINGS TAP INTO THAT POLARITY.”

Brownell’s paintings have been exhibited in solo shows throughout the U.S. and included in more than 130 group exhibitions worldwide. They belong to several private and public art collections, including that of the National Academy of Sciences. In addition to her personal work, she is on the faculty at Southern Connecticut State University in New Haven, where she teaches painting and drawing. She credits UB—where she stayed on after receiving her MFA, first with a teaching fellowship and then as an adjunct professor—for preparing her for both roles: as an artist and as a teacher. She also met her husband, artist Martin Kruck (MFA ’95), when she was a student at UB.

Brownell’s newest works, currently on exhibit at Bert Green Fine Art in Chicago, continue her investigation of food, genetics and the impact corporations have on what we eat. She hopes that her art becomes part of a greater conversation about what happens to our food when it’s not farm-to-table. “I’m fascinated by the visible and invisible aspects of food and science, and I think my paintings tap into that polarity,” she says. At the same time, she hopes that people will find pleasure and beauty in her work.

To be sure, Brownell’s paintings make us hungry—both for food, and for knowledge about the process it goes through before reaching our mouths. **B**

Rebecca Rudell is a contributing writer for *At Buffalo*.



Still Life with Lost Pollinators II
2014
Oil on canvas
36 x 24 inches
Private collection, New York, N.Y.