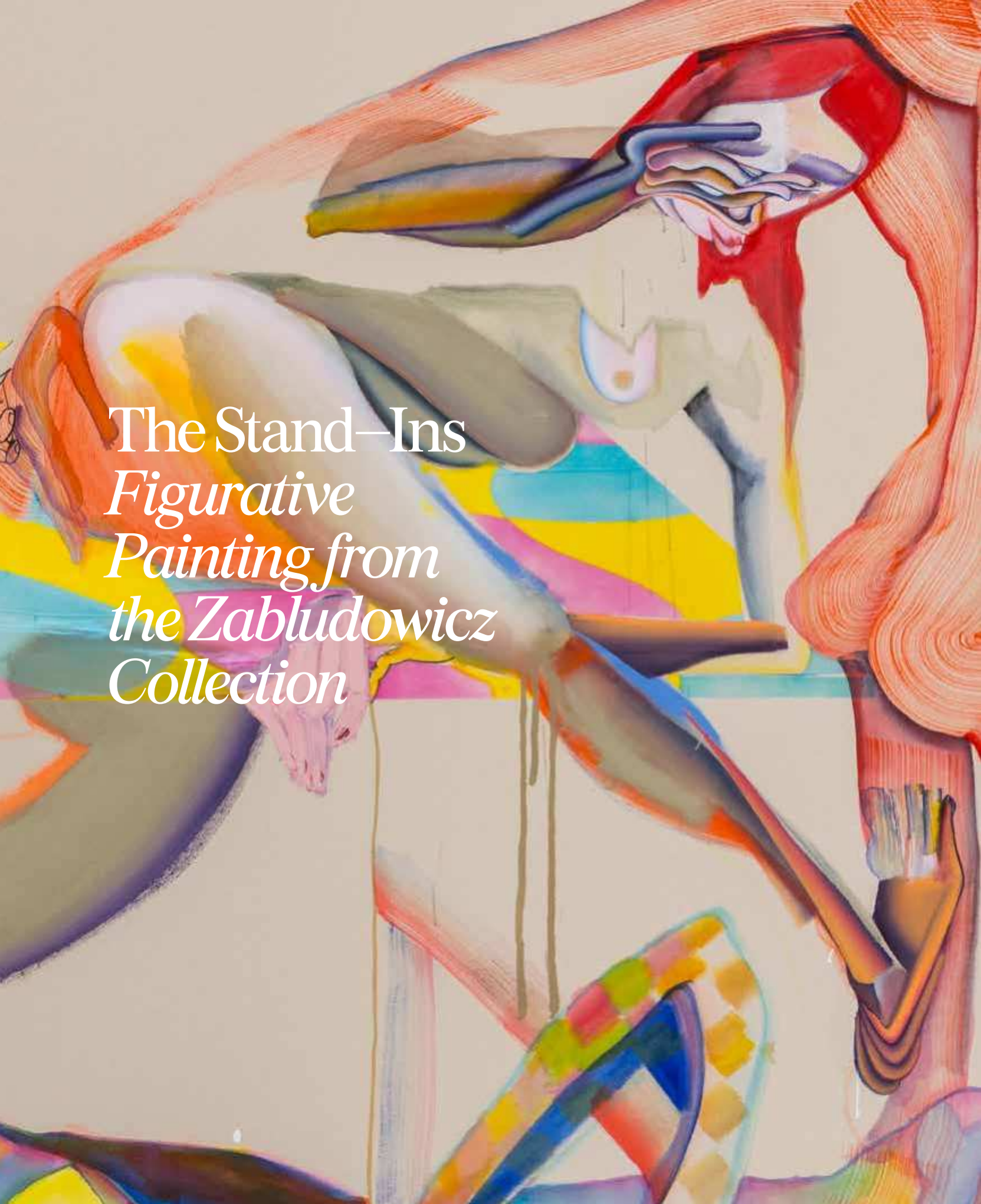


The Stand–Ins
Figurative Painting from the Zabludowicz Collection

The Stand–Ins *Figurative Painting from the Zabludowicz Collection*

Contents

Painting: the enduring (new) media

Elizabeth Neilson, Director

Producing any sort of publication is a marker of time, but never has that marker felt so much like a line in the sand than it does today. We are so intensely aware of both our transience and our fallibility during a pandemic: we are individual, yet intensely connected. It felt important to create a show that was based In Real Life (IRL), not digital; a show that was about handmade objects in space; a show that was open and free for all to see. Our hope was to emphasise a way of looking at art that foregrounds the object, not the biography or the name of the painter.

While the Covid-19 pandemic showed us all our limitations as social animals, with governments, fear and social morality forcing us to isolate, local events led to global repercussions: people came together to grapple with, and transform, unwanted social realities, from structural racism to trans rights. Alongside these, another change became almost impossible to ignore in 2021: cryptocurrency. The poster child for crypto is a new 'art form', so-called non-fungible tokens (NFTs). A network of decentralised, uncoordinated, faceless, digital mining machines conjures NFTs into 'reality'. Could painting be considered the antithesis of this? Is painting centralised? It is most certainly non-fungible, but is it merely a trading token? Looking at the slew of painting exhibitions that erupted in 2021, one is hard-pressed not to critically consider this medium and how it is put into service. However, painting is *the* enduring new media. Paint, like code, is something that, once mastered, offers endless possibilities. To those without the knowledge, it can seem like an alienating foreign language. Innovation will keep happening: new code, new platforms, new pigments and processes are continually being discovered and invented. Art, like nature, evolves.

This publication expands on an exhibition that took place in autumn 2021. *The Stand-Ins: Figurative Paintings from the Zabludowicz Collection* was the first large-scale painting show since *Painting from the Zabludowicz Collection* in 2013. The previous exhibition was a multi-chapter exhibition that foregrounded abstraction. The 2010s found art stripped down to its bare bones: people called a certain type of art 'zombie formalism' or even 'crapstraction'.[1] At the time it felt important to show that painting was still alive: that it wasn't just about reductive, infinitely reproducible, Instagram-friendly flat things, but it had some critical players and artists. Tauba Auerbach, Sam Falls and Josh Smith, to name just three artists, had a sustained interest in exploring the thresholds and limitations of abstract painting. In 2021 we turn to representative painting and in particular how representations of the human body, siphoned through a history of art, images and aesthetics, have become multifarious, political and cathartic.

The Zabludowicz Collection has spent over a decade publicly promoting and collecting immersive new media art, from video installations to augmented reality, so the focus of this publication on resolutely analogue figurative painting – just as the rest of the world finally embraces the digital and the immersive – may be seen as unexpected. To collect art, one must appreciate what it means to make the most 'enduring' artworks: those that will survive (unaided) into the future. Painting that references the human body is an essential form of art, as those ancient stencils of hands on cave walls that have been found from Europe to Indonesia prove. The urge to record the experience of being in a body as it interacts with the world is strong and innate. Sometimes, if you allow it to, an artwork moves you, no matter what form it takes. As we scroll through our devices looking for meaningful content, we are likely to be offered immersive experiences that give a new form of access to seminal historical painters – Kahlo, Seurat, Monet, van Gogh – their headline paintings digitised and made '360'. Do these spectacular projections and facsimiles drown out the possibility of a spine-tingling sensation when in close proximity to expert brushstrokes?

The artists in this publication are not defined by a hierarchy based on age, sex, gender identity or ethnicity. They are artists born throughout the twentieth century, from 1913 to 1994, in countries including Canada, Brazil, Dagestan and Nigeria. They are gay, queer and straight, born into art families and those who found art independently. The Zabludowicz Collection has an interest in building lineages, in passing on the stories told by artists. Their tales are of our times: of dispossession, of cruelty and of joy. Any collection is an attempt to capture a butterfly without disturbing the dust on its wings. Three key artists who are no longer living are included in the exhibition: Dorothea Tanning, a polymath whose work defies categorisation and who experimented with forms and mediums in a way that some artists today might feel is solely of their invention; Philip Guston, whose turning away from his peers and the abstract expressionist trend of his era to follow his heart is perhaps one of the twentieth century's most romanticised artistic U-turns, a break from consensus that continues to inspire and educate young artists who come into contact with his work; and Maria Lassnig, whose work shows a consistent irreverence around self-portraiture, 'body awareness' and storytelling.

A growing number of painters are marking out a position that explores this new digital era and how it relates to paint on canvas: Louisa Gagliardi, Celia Hempton, Rachel Rossin, Avery Singer, Michael

Michael Armitage, *Followers*, 2016 (detail)
Oil on Lubugo bark cloth, 220 × 170 cm

Williams and Albert Oehlen have all engaged with digital tools for painting. Consider how these new mediums introduce the potential for digital technology to guide not just the content but also the modes of making: printing, computer-aided design and VR all disrupt the idea of a painterly truth. But another group of artists use the depiction of a human body on a canvas to conjure an atmosphere: Michael Armitage, Richard Ayodeji Ikhide, Sahara Longe, Anj Smith and Jakub Julian Ziółkowski make timeless, yet utterly contemporary, work that has a haunting ability to raise the hairs on your arms or to weigh heavy in your stomach. These are paintings that evoke emotion and empathy.

This publication is not exhaustive. It is certainly not a compendium of all the artists working with figuration today, or even a full list of the incredible paintings the Zabludowicz Collection is fortunate enough to be the custodian of. It is a curated selection, featuring artists whose names will endure and those whose names will fade, but whose paintings will be cared for. That is the commitment one makes when one decides to be a collector. I am grateful to Anita and Poju Zabludowicz and their children for allowing us to generate this publication and exhibition from the works they have brought together. To the team at the Collection whose job it was to source images and write texts, and of course to all the artists and their galleries, I extend my heartfelt thanks. Your efforts continue to inspire and shape our understanding of ourselves and our times.

1 See https://www.vulture.com/2014/06/why-new-abstract-paintings-look-the-same.html; https://www.artspace.com/magazine/contributors/see_here/the_rise_of_zombie_formalism-52184; https://artreview.com/april-2015-opinion-mike-watson/

The Stand–Ins

Paul Luckraft

This publication celebrates the variety, energy and exuberance that can be felt today within the medium of painting, focusing on artists who depict the human body in their work. It follows on from, and extends, the exhibition of the same name presented in London in autumn 2021. Although it encompasses a stylistic range, *The Stand–Ins* has a central interest in the way artists experiment with constructing images and narrative, and the inherent sense of play and risk-taking in this approach. Rather than naturalist translations of scenes or sitters, the artists here conjure up characters – and these characters are not necessarily fixed, static or resolved. Formal experimentation in composition and the use of materials is bound up with the deconstruction of the body into parts: as hollow vessels, mask-like layers or a jumble of gestures. Rather than paintings depicting exterior appearances, they can feel closer to a mapping of interior psychological spaces. Sabotaging the idea of a singular self or fixed identity, this group of paintings looks at bodies from the inside out. In the words of Christina Quarles, there is the desire to convey 'the experience of living in a body rather than looking at a body'.[1]

Perhaps figurative painting is, at its essence, always a route to a reimagining of the self, a mode of self-portraiture even when the bodies being depicted are not the artist's own. It is certainly a decent vehicle with which to explore the slippery complexities of identity. To firmly identify the autobiographical elements of a painter's output requires a tricky game of second-guessing. Certain works in this book feature direct depictions of artists' appearances or emotions, in the form of avatars or symbolic 'stand-ins'. But the enduring and magical mystery of art is that the viewer can never fully know the intentions or feelings of the artist. Painting is full of illusions, and not just of the optical variety. Because we have a direct trace of the artist's body movements via the marks left on a surface – whether this is thick impasto daubs on a studio-floor-dirty canvas in the case of Rose Wylie, or crisp-edged airbrush facets on a super-flat surface by Avery Singer – painters expose themselves to a certain voyeurism, or perhaps a type of projection by a viewer, which adds all sorts of external possibilities to the material reality of a canvas. Projecting subjective readings is far from unique to painting as an art form, of course, but as artist Allison Katz suggested in a recent talk, there is a sense that a visitor to a gallery or museum could pick up a brush and carry on where the painter left off.[2] This is not advisable or desirable, but an understandable impulse, and one that carries a timeless, almost electric charge.

There is a game afoot within painting. Feelings of spontaneity or control, authenticity or artifice are as much part of the toolkit of a contemporary painter as paints on a palette. And perhaps this is why painting is a form well suited to the atmosphere of today. The sense of our lives being roles we perform, much like actors perform a role on stage, is a familiar observation spanning from Shakespeare to 1950s sociology.[3] The possibilities, or even necessities, of projecting an image of an identity to others have increased exponentially in recent decades, with the internet becoming a space defined by image-based social networks.

Over the last decade there has been a resurgence of interest in figurative painting within the contemporary art ecosystem. The return of bodies to canvases, and the return of these canvases to exhibitions of all types, held in major public museums, blue-chip galleries, small commercial spaces, artist-organised grassroots projects, and countless Instagram feeds, has the potential to be seen in a negative light.[4] Indeed, the title *The Stand–Ins* is intended to acknowledge the uncharitable point of view that painting as a commodity is a safer bet in times of economic and cultural turmoil than, for example, video or multimedia installation art. Everyone who collects art has walls. Indeed, a cynic might accuse the latest interest in painting of being a 'stand-in' for art of radical experimentation, a placeholder until the market is able to oscillate back to the 'real' avant-garde. But, truthfully, the binaries of painting vs non-painting, tradition vs radicalism and market vs artistic purity are blunt and rather boring. The wrong-headed idea that depicting the human body in art is retrogressive or reactionary stems from an adherence to a belief in the development of art as a linear trajectory from the representational to the abstract, the material to the conceptual. These teleological notions of progress might be outdated and not fit for purpose,

Louisa Gagliardi, *In Hot Water*, 2018
Ink, gel medium on PVC, 170 × 170 cm

Issy Wood, *IW high gloss*, 2017
Oil on velvet, 51 × 41 cm

but they retain an unspoken attraction.

Without a sensitivity to both the enduring past life of painting as an idea and a process, and painting's present situation in the contemporary world, the result can be paintings that are comments on something, with the feel of a designed product, and most probably a dead end for artist and viewer.[5] Zombie forms of all sorts of culture float around out there. The most interesting paintings today, as has always been the case, are aware of absurdity and artifice. They know the limits of what painting can do, and examine these limits closely, pushing and pulling them into precarious new shapes rather than glossing over them. The struggle and engagement, in both the present moment and the past paths taken by others, are key.

There is a radicalism in reclaiming modes of art-making that have previously been marked as out of bounds by a critical consensus. It's refreshing for shibboleths to be shaken up and moved aside. But this is not to advocate for figurative painting as a panacea for all of today's ills. Assertions that pigment on canvas is automatically a cure for the digitally afflicted can easily come across as bland. Although the tactile connection to an act of making holds a power, it does not follow that all, or even most, paintings that emerge from studios are brilliant works of art. Within every field there is the interesting and distinctive, and the less so. The most engaging paintings today are often responses to current technological, cultural and political issues. And what emerges from this aesthetic and intellectual dialogue in the form of paintings is bracingly unpredictable.

A prevalent feature of the dialogue around painting today is the acknowledgement of influences from the past and the need for tenacity and longevity in art practice. The distinctive approaches of three landmark figures – Dorothea Tanning, Philip Guston and Maria Lassnig – found in the Zabludowicz Collection connect to a thread of surrealism that runs right through *The Stand–Ins*. This is not the surrealism of a particular past decade, city or unified style, but more an impulse towards the impure and irreverent, showing an interest in the absurd, unsettling aspects of the human psyche.

Tanning developed her own realm of domestic disquiet and dreamlike myth, fluidly moving from paintings to room-sized sculptural installations and poetry. Guston used humour and awkwardness to point directly at the injustices and absurdities he saw around him, and to explore how paintings could be self-contained but could also tell stories, in 1968 famously taking a bold step away from abstraction to a cartoon-like figuration to do so. And in an approach she termed 'body awareness', Lassnig placed herself at the centre of an unflinching take on how flesh and mind intertwine, shift, and sometimes come apart.

The vulnerability of bodies has been brought into sharp focus for us all over the course of the Covid-19 pandemic. Those fortunate enough not to have experienced loss or illness first-hand have, at the very least, been separated from people precious to them. Time has been stretched and pulled, and the notion of painting as a marker of duration, with its repetition of touch on a surface, feels particularly pertinent. As we step back into the physical, social world after such a period of separation, how might we have changed? Who, or what, will we choose to present to others? Are we sending stand-ins in place of our authentic selves? This air of uncertainty about our interactions with others in the world permeates artists' studios today, but such considerations are as old as the history of painting itself.

The ability to remain responsive and reflexive in one's practice is evident in the work of the artists brought together here. Some have had long careers; others are right at the beginning of theirs. Many look to, or indeed work in, different mediums, such as moving image, sculpture or music, alongside their painting practice. But for all these artists, painting is a point of departure as well as arrival. Acting as an enduring frame of reference and a history to be kicked against, painting remains joyfully anachronistic in our digital age. The representation of the human body in art is not going away – and right now, expressing this as a painted image feels resolutely urgent. We are fortunate to have artists working today who acknowledge both the absurdity and the power of image-making and who wrestle with the challenge, often alone in their studios, of creating new sets of encounters between eyes and bodies, of making the familiar strange.

1 Exhibition guide and web page for the exhibition *Christina Quarles: In Likeness*, South London Gallery, 18 June–29 August 2021. See https://www.southlondongallery.org/exhibitions/christina-quarles-in-likeness/.

2 Mixing It Up: Slippery Images panel discussion. Allison Katz, Caragh Thuring and Vivien Zhang in conversation with Hayward Gallery director Ralph Rugoff, Southbank Centre, 11 November 2021.

3 'All the world's a stage' is the opening line of a monologue by Jaques in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. See also Erving Goffman's 1956 sociology book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (the most recent edition is by Penguin, 2022).

4 Dean Kissick, 'The rise of bad figurative painting', *The Spectator*, 30 January 2021. See https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/the-rise-of-bad-figurative-painting.

5 See the discussion of 'zombie formalism' in Barry Schwabsky's book *The Observer Effect: On Contemporary Painting* (Sternberg Press, 2019, p. 209).

Swamp Thing, 2019 (detail)
Acrylic, oil and oil stick on canvas, 198 × 155 cm

Robin F. Williams in conversation with Paul Luckraft

Edited transcription from a live online talk, 15 December 2021.

PL Your most recent solo exhibition, *Out Lookers*, at P·P·O·W Gallery in New York looked amazing; congratulations on the show. I imagine these paintings would have been made during the pandemic? How was it putting together a whole new body of work, both in the practical sense of having a space to work in, but also responding to the difficult, shifting atmospheres we've all felt over the last couple of years?

RFW It was really challenging for me. I was very lucky that the pandemic didn't interfere with my ability to make work in a major way. As an artist that works alone, I didn't have a big shift in my day-to-day. But existentially, in terms of all the different ways that we've had to become more insular, it was harder to remember or think about how the work would connect and resonate for other people.

PL The overall feeling of the show seems bold and confrontational, by turns really aggressive but also humorous. There is a linked theme of ghosts, ghouls, Yetis and trolls, but deployed in varied compositions. When you bring together a solo show, at what point in the process does it feel like a unified whole? At what point do you feel like these were a set of characters or set of motifs coexisting in an interesting way?

RFW I like to create a body of work for a solo show, and then a separate body of paintings that wind up in group shows or art fairs. More often than not, the secondary body of work starts to coalesce into a show. I think I made the first couple of paintings that ended up in *Out Lookers* slightly before the pandemic. There's one painting that bridges the before and after. For me, it takes quite a long time to put together a show – anywhere from two to three years. I had been using a lot of references from film and print advertising, and I still have some of those references in this show, but as everything changed it felt more natural for me to lean into supernatural beings – kind of confronting the unknown. Trying to make friends with uncertainty, you know? More of a mythological, spiritual or philosophical jumping-off point, as opposed to the conversations I was having more directly about the media.

PL The figures in *Out Lookers* are rendered as transparent, not necessarily as fleshy beings. They're spectres that hover over a background and contain portals to different spaces. Perhaps you could talk a bit about that layering and texture in the paintings.

RFW As far back as 2016 I was working with stained raw canvas and experimenting with letting portions of this feel like foreground elements, incorporating them in the spatial imagery. That started to feel like a real metaphor for something that I could weave further into the content. I really like the idea of working on every level of the canvas. There's a lot of texture in my work, which doesn't come across at all on a screen. At times I'm actually painting on the back of the saturated canvas and the paint is bleeding through to the front.

With the painting *Speak of the Devil* [2021], the first step in making the piece was to wet down raw canvas, unstretched, and crumble it into a ball, like a mountainous landscape. And then I splatter-painted all of these colours. On a screen it just looks like a lot of green, but if you're able to put your nose in it, you're going to see a pixelated neo-impressionist pointillism. Then when that had dried, I left it in its crumpled-up state to accentuate the topography, then I stretched it. And then the figure form is rendered out with airbrush, which involves masking areas off. If you look closely enough, there's a lot of transparency and that first abstract layer is undergirding everything. Then the leaves and the eyes are a more textured acrylic medium – the type of thing you can imagine running your hands over.

PL These works certainly evoke an immediate sensory experience. The whole process sounds incredibly physical and experimental. Could you talk a little about the characters in the two paintings titled *Troll* and *Trolling* [both 2021]? They feel as if they're from somewhere in the past, and folky, but they also carry an overt reference to current social media.

RFW *Troll* and *Trolling* are both loosely based on a set of illustrations that were created between the 1950s and 1970s by American illustrator and pin-up artist Duane Bryers. His recurring character was a woman named Hilda. They're very interesting images because they're certainly meant to be sexy, but there's a dated fat joke in all of them. She's sort of the butt of the joke, this kind of foolish bimbo character who's very sexualised. But they're complicated images because you can also feel the genuine love and care of the artist. I don't think he thought she was a joke, but you can read these commercial images as being complicit in the idea that a fat woman cannot be strictly fat and sexy; she must also be funny. She couldn't just be a pin-up. So, I love these images, and they have this new life now that transcends this dated joke. I think a lot of women find them interesting, and I think Hilda feels like a feminist icon.

PL In your pair of paintings, do you see the characters as the perpetrators of trolling, the bullies, or are they pushing back against it – the butt of a joke, then they somehow take revenge?

RFW Both. I've been holding on to these images as reference, and at the same time thinking about language and how we typically think of a male troll as someone causing havoc and harassing women. Agents of chaos. But to be called a troll as a woman is a pretty direct insult about your appearance

Troll, 2021
Oil, acrylic and Flashe on canvas, 183 × 127 cm

Trolling, 2021
Oil and acrylic on canvas, 193 × 152 cm

or your worth in terms of conventional beauty standards. I wanted a woman character who was really unconcerned with that title. When I hung these paintings in the P·P·O·W show, they actually hung opposite each other in the gallery. There's an expectation from the viewer that when you enter a space and are presented with paintings of female bodies, we're socialised to expect them to be there for us: they're there to be beheld, consumed and sort of claimed. I wanted to create the feeling of the trolls waving at each other. It's that feeling of walking down the street and someone waves. You think they're waving at you, and you wave back, and then you realise they're waving at someone behind you. The embarrassment or shame. So the paintings are trolling the viewer in that way, pulling the rug out from under them, entering our universe for the sake of causing trouble.

PL That's really interesting on the undercutting of the expectation of the viewer. The critic Barry Schwabsky in his book *The Observer Effect* argues that the archetypal abstract painting will tend to be of a square, and the archetypal representational painting will be of a woman – as you say, subject to our gaze and assessment. How do you go about looking to different parts of art history and cultural history for inspiration, whether this is the authorised canon or a more folk tradition? In the past you've mentioned looking at contemporary forms, like advertising, and social media sites such as TikTok or YouTube. How do you start to filter down from this infinite range of influences, from the official space of art to all the other visual material that circulates, then piece it together into something that feels connected to your interests?

RFW That's a great question. I'm not sure how it works. There's sort of a feeling to certain things that I know are connected. I certainly have a set of interests that all have a visual link. It's just a matter of time and working through the images until it just kind of gels. But you know I also have some threads that have gone throughout my entire body of work that I'm interested in. The hierarchies of gender roles is a key one – the question of what it means to make a painting in this type of paradigm, what it means to make a painting of a body today. And so I'm looking for people's takes on that, how people have done it before, and these days I tend to be most attracted to things that have a folk tradition feeling to them. I watched a lot of 1970s slasher movies this last year.

PL The painting *Final Girl Exodus* [2021] really feels cinematic.

RFW Yeah, it's speaking to a trope in slasher films – the 'final girl' is the female protagonist who manages to make it to the end. She's terrorised the entire time, watches all of her friends be slaughtered, barely escapes her own death multiple times, and then she usually either gets to kill the killer herself, or she just escapes and lives another day, to be put in a sequel and go through it all again. B-movies, and the genre of horror movies in general, have a folk tradition. They're very repetitive and have a similar form that's remade with slight tweaks over and over again. It's a shared space, it's collectively made. We like to insert a hierarchy of taste – you know, according to what we've decided is high and low – but within the horror genre that's not the point. The point is not to make the classiest movie. Some people try, but it's all about whether it functions inside the genre. It's like 'Oh cool, you made an arthouse horror, but did it make me jump? Did it cause my body to have sensations?' Things connected to the body tend to be more shared than others: they tend to be part of a collective tradition more than intellectual forms, perhaps.

Mood Swing, 2020
Oil, acrylic and oil stick on canvas, 198 × 135 cm

PL That makes a lot of sense, especially in relation to the repetition of your characters across your work. They're kind of interchangeable and form a cohort of characters that can appear at different times, a bit like you're saying about working within a particular genre. There are expectations that can be overturned. And perhaps that's the key tension in where we are with painting today: it has such a long tradition that so much has already been explored. You can't help being self-aware as an artist, or the paintings themselves can't help being aware that they're paintings – an artifice playing by certain rules. Which leads me to the knowing looks and expressions on the faces of the protagonist in the works. They convey that the characters themselves know that the space of the paintings is a constructed image. And perhaps this knowing quality pushes towards kitsch? I wonder whether you agree, and whether you feel it is provocative or not that you're making work today that could be characterised as kitsch? For example, in the painting *Mood Swing* [2020], its energy is so much about the movement of these sugar-rush candy colours and the figure swinging in a fleeting moment of joy across the surface. Does it feel like you're taking risks with the ideas of taste?

RFW It's a tension point for sure. I'm interested in the way we pretend there are hard lines, you know. I think it's funny that we spend so much energy trying to create clear distinguishable boundaries or parameters around these definitions. In *Mood Swing* I'm trying to do a bunch of things: I'm referencing a Fragonard painting of a woman on a swing [*The Swing*, 1767], but I also set out to make a Monet *Water Lilies* background. There is stained raw canvas, and every time I do that I think of Helen Frankenthaler and the debate over gender inside the twentieth-century Abstract Expression movement: which gesture is

Unphased, 2021
Acrylic on canvas, 168 × 127 cm

masculine and which is feminine? As a woman, was Helen Frankenthaler making stain paintings because they were about menstruation? These conversations are so essentialist and gendered, with critics and historians bending over backwards to make sense of something that may be much more ephemeral and mysterious than identifying a gesture and trying to give it a gender. I'm trying to mash all of these things up and compress them. I wanted a sense of movement in a static painting, and to make the character in the painting feel self-aware, like she's doing something impossible.

And the references I chose are kind of kitsch – something sits around in art history long enough and gets popular, then it becomes kitsch. When does that happen, and why? I went to see Monet's *Water Lilies* at MoMA. Maybe it's not kitsch in the gallery, but is the painting kitsch on a postcard in the MoMA shop? And does it make it more kitsch if you smack a big smile on top of the image? I like these ideas, as I'm in a sense trolling the viewer around questions of who decides where the line of good taste is.

PL The viewer can't really ever know about an artist's intentions. That's the great thing about painting in particular: it's such a familiar language to many people that it offers an instant sense of engagement, and gives the artist a chance to draw people in. But there's no way people can fully know all the things you as an artist have looked at and thought about. Here I want to turn to *Teenage Witch* [2018], which can be seen as a bridging work for you between different styles of painting. It's more of a solid fleshy body than the figures depicted in *Out Lookers*, but it's still stylised, hovering strangely in space, with heightened areas of colour. Can you tell us a bit about this work and some of the ideas you were working through in 2018?

RFW I was making work for a solo show that went up in LA in 2019 [*With Pleasure*, at Various Small Fires] when I was making *Teenage Witch*. I knew it didn't quite fit into the show, but it related to a set of ideas that were adjacent, and I think it eventually led to my most recent show [*Out Lookers*]. The witch was a version of this mythological being that I was thinking about, but I hadn't quite figured out how to build those bodies yet. I was asking myself how we build gender, how we build our parameters around propriety or appropriate gender roles, and the figure in *Teenage Witch* was something a little on the fringes. I also made a series of paintings of women outside at night – nude women outdoors in dangerous situations but owning the power of the moment and not feeling in danger.

PL The painting *Swamp Thing* [2019] feels related to this. It's a really evocative image of self-pleasure and about who has the right to claim their sexuality. It also shows an explicit blending of the body and landscape, which seems to have come through a lot in your most recent works. Here it's a striking composition, with the protagonist dipping their fingers into the swamp in the foreground, echoed by the roots of the trees behind. It's an amazingly iridescent glowing image. There are definite facial similarities to the *Teenage Witch* – that manic smile. In the painting *Alive with Pleasure* [2019] we find a similar smile on the face of a male figure. You have made a series of works that reference advertising, and I believe this is one of those – is that right?

RFW Yes. The show was called *With Pleasure*, and this painting used a piece of copy – 'alive with pleasure' – that was part of a long-standing Newport cigarette ad campaign. The print advertising campaign ran for decades. It's an interesting document: you get to watch as cigarettes disappear from images as regulations for how you could advertise cigarettes came in. I found it interesting that, rather than pivoting from this campaign, they doubled down and aggressively papered over the open secret that smoking is deadly using images of lightness and vitality – sort of immortality, in a way. They're often pictures of paradise. For me, this related to the #MeToo movement – finally the airing of an open secret, of just how fundamental the abuse of power is to the wheels of commerce. Women have been saying it forever. Again, it's like, 'Well, let's just remove the cigarettes from the ad, you know?'

PL As well as the cigarettes being removed from the images, you chose to remove the clothes from the characters.

RFW And in the original ad the women are smiling, having the time of their life, propping up this guy.

PL In the painting *Spa Night* from 2016 there is a group of three female figures standing together. It's as though they are supporting each other. Is that a different atmosphere you were working with there, in terms of ideas about escaping to a space of support and community, or is that too simplistic a way of describing it?

RFW Well, in that work I wanted a tension between the desire to have a space of one's own or a safe space among people who understand you, and the feeling of being surveilled. And the impossibility, as a painter, of painting a group of women who just want to be left alone, who don't want to be looked at. I'm always interested in paintings that feel impossible, or that have an inherent conflict that cannot be resolved. I want paintings to be sentient, but of course they're not; they're just paintings. The women depicted might want to be left alone, but they're a painting and their purpose is to be seen. I like allowing that tension.

‘I was wrestling with the idea that I wanted to paint women, but it was a completely different era in the art world, so I didn’t know how yet. There really wasn’t an audience for it, and figurative painting in general was not well received, especially paintings of women, which were seen as exploitative, conservative or overly sentimental.

We’re talking just a decade ago.’

PL If we look back a bit further to 2014, you had a show at P·P·O·W called *Sons of the Pioneers* featuring works like *Cave Painting* [2014]. It was all male figures you depicted, and always in relation to the American landscape, right? Was the show trying to deal with this idea of the pioneering spirit and ownership of space?

RFW It was more the idea of manifest destiny that was the underlying narrative. The crystallising part of it was a spiritual let-down, a kind of reckoning with how interwoven manifest destiny is with masculinity. If you removed it, what would be left? It was about the fear and ecstatic nature of that.

PL Although the series critiques the notion of the male American West, the actual figures are far from grotesque characters. They are sensitively and naturalistically painted. It could be argued that your more recent work is more overtly confrontational in terms of the attitude of the figures, while in 2014, the male figures in your landscapes seem more at ease – perhaps resigned to something rather than being in conflict with something?

RFW Yeah, although the male figures that showed up in the *With Pleasure* show were more like caricatures. They got a similar treatment to the female figures, you know. But in 2014 I think I was speaking about gender more abstractly. It didn’t feel fair or satisfying to make the males two-dimensional characters. I’d made this body of work before I had started to paint women at all. And the body of work before this featured children [*Rescue Party*, 2011, P·P·O·W, New York]. I was wrestling with the idea that I wanted to paint women, but it was a completely different era in the art world, so I didn’t know how yet. There really wasn’t an audience for it, and figurative painting in general was not well received, especially paintings of women, which were seen as exploitative, conservative or overly sentimental. We’re talking just a decade ago. That was a period when it was very hard to find a contemporary show of figurative painting.

PL These cycles of taste are fascinating, the way things shift so quickly. How did you manage to keep the practice going? Did you share ideas and support with other artists? Making any kind of art is a huge investment of time and energy, both intellectual and emotional, but particularly making these highly complex, time-consuming paintings. I imagine it’s intensive to sustain a practice, especially somewhere like New York, which is probably not an easy place to keep going if you’re confronting an inhospitable landscape.

RFW Yeah, it was brutal. I graduated art school in 2006, and then pretty soon the recession hit and the market for emerging art in general just sort of evaporated. The work that was being shown by emerging artists was abstract, material-based or conceptual. Around 2014 I was invited into a crit group made up of women artists, and it saved my life. I had five or six jobs, none of which were paying my bills, and I was trying to produce really time-consuming paintings for no audience. It was incredibly demoralising. So when I found that group I felt like I had people to paint for, and that was when I started to paint women. I felt supported enough to make those images, and I had people who I could talk seriously to about them. I didn’t have to explain why I wanted to paint. There was no defensive stance; it was freeing. That’s when my practice expanded in materials and experimentation and I allowed myself to follow my desire, which I think is a huge conceptual piece of my work. I paint so much about desire.

PL Absolutely. I wanted to round off the conversation by looking at some more recent works. There is the work *Leave Britney Alone* [2019] and

a couple of works from a series called *Siri*, which use iconic cinematic stills as a starting point. They return us to ideas of coercion and control. The meaning of *Leave Britney Alone* is explicit, but it's not really a portrait of Britney Spears. Did it feel risky to start referencing music and movie stars?

RFW It did feel a little risky, but part of my practice is recognising where I feel like something's untouchable. This painting feels connected to my most recent body of work in *Out Lookers*. She is this monster archetype; she's Britney, but she's not. She's an architectural dream version of Britney, or a collective Frankenstein's monster that we made Britney into. She felt like the last gasp of the Madonna–whore complex in the face of internet tabloid culture. She was where cultural neuroses crumbled. We thought that we could create a celebrity who satisfied us in both of these impossible ways, that we could make one person hold it all. She couldn't, and she won't.

PL The two *Siri* paintings we're looking at are *Siri Defends Her Honor* [2019] and *Siri Keeps the Faith* [2021]. Both feature female actors in head-and-shoulders framing, smoking. In the first we see Uma Thurman appearing in *Pulp Fiction*, and the second is taken from a scene from *The Shining*, with Shelley Duvall. Could you talk about the idea of titling them *Siri*? And what was the starting point for these paintings?

RFW The first time I painted *Siri* was for the *With Pleasure* show, so it might have been 2017 or 2018 that I painted her. She was actually taken from a still from Mia Farrow in *Rosemary's Baby*. The painting was called *Siri Calls for Help* [2018]. We've enlisted her in this horrible role to serve all of us. It felt analogous to *Rosemary's Baby*, with Rosemary being conscripted into the satanic cult and forced to carry a demon child. I liked the idea of finding a scene in the movie where she's trying to escape and is foiled. She's using a phone to try to get *out* of the phone. She can't use an iPhone, so she has to go into a Roman Polanski movie. And of course Polanski is a problematic character. I just kept finding movies with all these layers in them. [Uma] Thurman was a big star of the Weinstein era. She worked with Quentin Tarantino over and over again, and she's accused Tarantino of being an abusive boss and putting her life in danger. And it's widely known that Shelley Duvall was mistreated by Kubrick on set, and sort of psychologically gaslit to get a performance out of her.

PL The notion of inflicting trauma for the sake of art – does that change our perception of a great work or an important film? Once we know what's gone into the making of it, it opens up a set of questions around how we assess the value of art objects once we know how they've been formed. It's really complex.

RFW Yeah, I don't have good answers for those questions. But I feel like I'm *Siri*. What I don't want to do any more, and what I think I felt pressured to do before I started painting women, was to avoid the subject matter, either because it had already been covered brilliantly by these problematic men or because I was going to further exploit people. I realised that double bind kept me out of the discourse, kept me from following my desire. So my answer is to reinvent it, remake and reclaim it – you know, make it into something that doesn't rule me or doesn't have to continue to rule us.

PL I wanted to end on your painting *Unphased* [2021]. It's somehow more contemplative and has a different energy. It feels pertinent to the present moment – living through a pandemic – during which we've been made more aware of how vulnerable our bodies are. The work hovers around ideas of self-reliance and self-reflection. I think it's amazing how you're able to include such different energies in your work, while taking an experimental approach to stretching and exploring what painting can be, fuelled by a desire to see what you can produce and how that feels to you as an artist in the world.

RFW I'm glad we ended on the last piece, *Unphased*. That was one of the last paintings I made for the show. It's one of the only paintings where the viewer is not the subject, the gaze is not looking out at the viewer. The evolution of my bodies of work, as I mentioned, has gone from children to men to women, and I've been very interested in gender the entire time. I've been thinking hard about what it means to represent a non-binary body, because that is more about an internal source of identification and less about external signifiers. In *Unphased* I conceived of that body as a non-binary body. But obviously, the viewer brings their own interpretation.

There are also parallels between bodies and ecology. The policing of gender in general, and the compulsion towards binary taxonomy, breeds hierarchical thinking. It's a sensibility inclined towards domination, extraction and consumption. And if we're so convinced that we're separate in terms of gender, so convinced that we're separate in terms of our position in our ecosystem, we're not able to understand when we're doing harm to ourselves. This pursuit of naming and categorising is a relic of the Enlightenment. It's completely separated us from the actual source of life and connection – the planet. It's deluded to believe that we can just exploit it indefinitely. For me, these things are all connected. Binary thinking is a state of mind that keeps us in a sick cycle of self-harm.

Siri Keeps the Faith, 2021
Oil and acrylic on canvas, 122 × 142 cm

Tesfaye Urgessa in conversation with Kami Gahiga

Edited transcription from a live talk, 26 November 2021, Zabludowicz Collection, London.

Sleeping baby bird 2, 2021 (detail)
Oil on canvas, 200 × 200 cm

KG Tesfaye, your paintings have this tremendous power and appeal which strike you from right across the room. They convey a strong physical presence, as if the figures were here with us. Before we delve into your larger body of work, history, and influences, it would be interesting to talk about your work's figurative imagery. Here, we have *VUPs 7* [2019], *Very Unimportant People* and *The holy family despair* [2021]. Could you tell us more about these two works and the imagery that we find in your paintings more generally?

TU Before I speak specifically about these two paintings, I want to talk about how I work in the studio, because that's what I think is essential and important to explain. I came into art because of figures. When I was a teenager, I was fascinated by the realism of images in drawings and paintings because I couldn't believe a human being could do that! My dream was to do something like that – that was my whole motivation. Then after that, I found out that painters were called artists, and there were genres and styles. It's a long story but, to cut to the chase, my fascination for figures didn't change; it became even more robust, the more time I spent painting and drawing anatomy. I learned that by slightly changing the scale of the figure or a body part, one could convey certain emotions that people could sense and feel. That is the most enduring quality of painting for me.

Let me start with the *VUP* series. I started working on this in 2019, but the idea behind it was from 2014. I was watching a movie about Martin Luther King. Before I watched the movie, I already knew about him. I'd been taught in school and read about him. But after I watched the film, it got me thinking about his assassination. I went on the internet and started to read about other people who met the same fate because of their ideas about how

VUPs 2, 2019
Oil on canvas, 120 × 110 cm

VUPs 4, 2019
Oil on canvas, 120 × 110 cm

society should be more egalitarian and fairer, you know? They're preaching about love and freedom, but they were assassinated. This stuck with me for a long time – that somebody could decide that another human being is not allowed to exist any more. It's weird and I was obsessed by that idea. Then I started to make the first painting in the series. I was not exactly trying to make a work directly out of this thought, but I titled the paintings *Very Unimportant* or *Very Unwanted Persons*.

KG There's something intriguing about your painting, especially from this series of works, of the repeated motif of human feet. Could you tell us a bit more about that?

TU Hands and feet have the same character as a portrait for me. If I don't have a portrait in my paintings, I play a lot with the body, especially the hands and feet. The interesting thing about the series *No Country for Young Men* is that I started from the bottom and worked to the top of each canvas, because at that time I was only seeing the feet walking, not the rest of the body. You don't know what's coming at the top, so sometimes I wait for the process.

KG Could you tell us what sparked the shift to this specific series of work, *No Country for Young Men*, and whether the work *The holy family despair* relates to or differs from it?

TU When I painted *No Country for Young Men*, it was 2016. There was a lot of discussion about the refugee crisis in Europe, which was at its peak. My wife and I used to work in a refugee centre in Germany, but we weren't familiar with their situation and we didn't know exactly what they had gone through. Then I heard on the news that around 56 million people had already left their own country and were looking for a new one. This figure shocked me, and I was upset, because this is over half the population of Germany – how could it be possible? And, after that, when I tried to sleep, during the first hour many images came to my mind – you know, the feet, walking in a certain kind of rhythm, and that was the beginning of *No Country for Young Men*. Narratively, it is not far from the *VUP*s or *The holy family despair* series. When I was halfway through the painting, I noticed that it looked like the flight of Mary and Joseph with baby Jesus to Egypt, so perhaps this is another interpretation of this famous motif from art history, depicting the holy family moving from one place to another. It's migration and movement. I wanted to make something holy, and so the female figure got a halo.

KG It would be interesting, perhaps, to speak about the symbolic and Ethiopian iconography that is present in your work, and the presence of Christian icons that can also be seen in Ethiopian paintings. You grew up in Ethiopia. How much did that influence you? And is it something that is expressed here in your paintings as well?

TU Yes, I think so. There is clearly an influence because before I knew what I was doing I was painting and drawing the local saints and the imagery ritualised in Ethiopia. It has rigid forms and structures and the saints have to look a certain way and sit straight. So, I had that background when I came to Germany before I started exploring things and making completely different stuff. Then at some point, I just noticed that my figures were taking on this iconic quality, an almost religious character. I thought perhaps I'm going somewhere, back to where I learned how to paint.

KG You studied at the Addis School of Fine Arts in Addis Ababa, which is a prestigious school of art in Ethiopia, before you moved to Stuttgart to the Academy. Can you tell us about how all these academic experiences informed your practice?

TU Well, in both Ethiopia and Germany I had a really great time in the academies. The school in Ethiopia was very academic and most teachers at the time had studied in Russia, so they were mostly concerned with socialist realism. They had the skill – you know, painting figures and anatomy – and that was what I wanted. After my graduation, I sensed that I needed something a little freer and different, something that doesn't always follow the correct anatomy. When I came to Germany, we were encouraged to experiment a lot. So, I combined both, and it was fantastic for me.

KG You now live with your wife and family in Nürtingen, near Stuttgart, is that right? And you share your studio with your wife and your children as well. Could you tell us a bit about a typical day in your studio?

TU Yeah, it depends, because my wife is also a painter, so there are days when we will all paint in the studio, and days when I'm alone. But during the Covid-19 lockdown we had quite a lot of time in the studio together as a family. When you can't take the kids to the park any more, it's very difficult. Sometimes I wanted to have my privacy or a quiet moment in the studio, but most of the time it's been amazing. Especially with my daughter – she's nine now and we've had many artistic collaborations since she was five. It's been amazing, the progress in her work, and she's even exhibiting herself now! I'm trained in a certain way, and then she comes in the studio, she makes movements and marks, and I say 'Wow! OK, I want to keep that' – you know? We have great moments in the studio.

KG I would like us to focus on the influences that some key artists had on you and your painting technique. In past interviews you've mentioned Lucien Freud, Philip Guston and Caravaggio. Especially with Lucien Freud, I find there's a strong dialogue and an affiliation between you, in that he uses paint almost as an equivalent for flesh and skin. Could you say why Lucien Freud influenced your work?

TU The first time I saw Freud's work was probably in 2004. I wouldn't say I liked it the first time I saw it. It was a reproduction, and I thought the strokes were very short and rough. At the time, it was challenging for me to accept his style. But after I moved to Germany, I saw his work again and was struck by it. Especially the painting of the eyes. The energy he puts into his figures. You see all the dedication that has gone into that work, and I'd never seen anything like that. I studied his work very intensively for the next three or four years. I feel like Freud is loyal to what he is looking at. Thinking about my work, I wanted to go a little bit wild – you know, just for my fantasy. But at the same time I wanted to have that Lucien Freud intensity in my figures.

When I went to Florence in 2014, I saw a couple of works by Caravaggio. I noticed that he hid parts of the bodies that he didn't want to show – perhaps through wildly exaggerated shadows and light combinations. And at that moment, I felt like, 'OK, why am I painting everything relating to the human figure with two hands? When I need to, I can leave one out.' But the question was, how could I do this in a way that I could accept? The solution was that the shadow shouldn't always be black; instead you can use colour for the shadow. And a combination of the intensity of Freud's figurative work and Caravaggio's masterful depiction of shadow and light was the result. Speaking of that, the result almost looks like a work by Francis Bacon, and people started to recognise this. OK, but this wasn't on purpose. It resulted from combining my technique, derived from the intensity of Freud's brushstrokes, and looking closely at Caravaggio's shadows, then changing that. I also like the work of Bacon – it gives me a kind of certainty. It's not like a dark influence or a worry that my works look like his. But it's OK; I acknowledge it. My figures are not as violent as Bacon's, though, because his figures are sometimes just too much, such as when a shoulder is missing from a human figure. It looks like violence has been committed.

KG I think it's intriguing what you say about violence. You perhaps want to showcase figures with a stark, almost fraught look, but you're not trying to depict them as violent or scary; they look like honest models. Could you talk to us about what you're trying to evoke through this?

TU I want my figures to have this fragile quality, on one hand, while presenting themselves to the audience without hiding anything so you see that they have self-esteem, but at the same time showing that they're sensitive, they're fragile, which is our reality. We have both sides. And I want to make the viewer look at something private, to view the figures in my paintings with empathy and care. I want to have that effect.

KG The feeling you have when you look at your recent work is one of entering a very intimate room. In *The holy family despair*, you see almost nude bodies who have just had a baby. It's a very intimate scene. At the same time, you feel that they are watching you, not that you're watching them. It's quite an interesting perspective.

Chasing After the Wind, 2020
Oil on canvas, 250 × 400 cm

No Country For Young Men 16, 2021
Oil on canvas, 180 × 180 cm

TU The figures' gaze being directed towards the viewer appeared somewhere around 2014. It was a difficult time for me because of the police surveillance in Germany, especially in big cities. It was very difficult for me because I was somewhat new to the country, and no policemen had ever confronted me before, not even when I was back in Ethiopia. When I moved to Germany, I became kind of self-conscious whenever I went to the central station, especially when I looked at the police. I thought, they're looking at me now, and they are coming, and they're going to ask for my ID in front of all these people. And those thoughts made me kind of anxious about myself. Made me self-conscious, and not in a positive way. So after that I wanted to create paintings that made the audience feel the way I felt when I was outside – being stared at and being watched all the time, experiencing that uncomfortable feeling of being gazed upon because you are different. And that's how it started, this stare that the figures have – but it says nothing too explicit to the audience.

KG Perhaps I can ask about Philip Guston here, an artist who was also part of *The Stand–Ins* exhibition. There are some motifs that echo each other in your work and his: the books and gloved hands. Can you tell us whether he had an impact on the way you approach painting?

TU In 2013, I think, we went with our class to Frankfurt and saw a huge show by Philip Guston. I was disappointed because I didn't like the work – it wasn't mine, you know, at that time. But in 2018 I saw his work again in Venice and I thought, why couldn't I accept it before? I found his work strong, especially because of his freedom, you know. He seemed to have little awareness of his ego as an artist. I was fascinated and watched a documentary about him after that, *A Life Lived*. He talked about his painting practice and his life. I've watched it twenty times, I think. Every time I watch it, what he's saying is absolutely like … enlightenment, you know. Especially works from the last ten years that he painted in Woodstock after he left New York – those paintings are unbelievable. And I'm very happy to be exhibiting in the show alongside him because he showed me how much you can do with figures. You can broaden how you reflect on things.

KG Could you explain what you mean by that?

TU I think the most difficult thing as a painter is that you kind of judge yourself. You want to make sure that everything you paint is going to contribute to the totality of painting or take painting to another level. But I can't make sure I do that. Which means you have to trust the next step. That's all you can do. I can spend a long time on one painting, and it's hard to plan everything from the beginning to the end. So, what Guston did was land on that sense of pressure. Guston says when you first paint in your studio, it feels as if everybody's there in the studio, and everybody is talking about your painting. And then, one by one, they leave the studio, and you are alone. And he said, after that you will leave. You want to leave your studio, which means you are not judging your painting any more. You are not pushing your painting to satisfy yourself; instead you just kind of accept what's happening in the studio. And this is real freedom because the opposite way of working is very judgemental and exhausting.

KG What are you are currently working on?

TU Yeah, well, I don't plan any more about the way my painting should go, because I trust where the paintings come into my life, my situation, my surroundings. That's what my past showed me: trust. I feel that my purpose as an artist is to give recognition to the images I collect in my head, and I want my paintings to be like a basement, where you keep the stuff you want to keep, you know? And sometimes these things have no link to one another, and sometimes they do. Like the memories I have, they just co-exist. I see that as being much more honest than trying to make a statement or trying to tell a story. Once I get to an image, the story, most of the time, is not important. I'm playing with images. That's the most important thing, because those images, often everybody knows them, people see them every day. Once I get the right combination and composition then it's very easy to make viewers feel the same way I felt.

KG Going back to what you mentioned earlier about not revealing all parts of your figures and keeping some parts hidden, perhaps this goes back to the idea of not wanting to be overlooked but also not singled out, and this connects to your experiences as a newcomer in Germany. It really echoes to me Edouard Glissant's book *Poetics of Relation* [1990] where he talks about the right to opacity. Glissant talks about the theory of concealment, but not invisibility: wanting to be seen but not looked through. I would like to round off this conversation with a quotation from a recent essay by Fernando Domínguez Rubio, who adopts Glissant's concepts around opacity. I quote: 'An art of opacity is an art that accepts the simple truth that the artwork is never one, but is always many, endlessly open' and 'An art of opacity is an art that … works by multiplying … and opening up meanings, rather than reducing them.'

Thank you, Tesfaye.

Exhibition views

7 October 2021–13 February 2022, Zabludowicz Collection, London

Maxwell Alexandre, Anna Glantz, Philip Guston, Jamian Juliano-Villani, Jordan Kasey, Ella Kruglyanskaya, Maria Lassnig, Kate Lyddon, Christina Quarles, Avery Singer, Dorothea Tanning, Henry Taylor, Caragh Thuring, Tesfaye Urgessa, Willem Weismann, Robin F. Williams, Issy Wood, Rose Wylie, Jakub Julian Ziółkowski


BATTLES
in
Heaven




Artists

Trey Abdella

b. 1994, Manassas, Virginia, USA. Lives and works in Brooklyn, New York, USA.

Abdella's work is an amalgamation of sculpture, painting and ready-made: a reflection of the hybridisation of contemporary life. Drawing on his childhood obsession with gleeful, gaudy cartoons such as *Tom and Jerry* and *Looney Tunes*, Abdella's approach to painting fuses oversaturated imagery with moments of personal trauma. Just like the eponymous cat and mouse, Abdella softens tragic moments by making them absurd and visually sumptuous. This nostalgia is amplified using source materials such as library image collections and advertising and screenshots from movies, video games and online videos.

Washed Out (2021) presents a human skeleton – perhaps belonging to an unfortunate surfer – sprawling from the sliced-open abdomen of a shark carcass. Both bodies are washed up on a tropical beach. In the hazy background, a family enjoys their day out, metres away from the incident. Slowly the water erodes the cadavers, carrying with it a melange of debris into the sand. The resin and fibreglass shark head protrudes out of the painting like a natural history diorama, complete with rows of spiked teeth. Similarly, the 3D human skeleton juts out, half-buried in the sand, a red lightbulb glowing from inside its skull.

Front Row Seats, 2021
Acrylic, glass, resin, fabric, thumbtack and denim on linen
198 × 218 cm

Washed Out, 2021
Acrylic, fibreglass, resin, plastic, lightbulb, glass, rocks, sea shells and dollar bill on canvas panel
114 × 206 × 38 cm

Rebecca Ackroyd

b. 1987, Cheltenham, UK. Lives and works in London, UK.

The metaphorical association between body and building is a recurring motif in Rebecca Ackroyd's work: pipes become limbs, vents become orifices, and frames become rib cages. Ackroyd's practice involves digging down into existing objects and memories and reconfiguring them into something new. Her installations offer dreamlike fictional landscapes informed by harsh realities. Through shifting scales and moods, from the arrestingly bold and absurd to the subtle and intimate, the work pursues a feminist exploration of the psychology of space and the ownership of bodies.

Alongside sculptural installations using materials such as metal, resin and paper collage, Ackroyd makes coloured pastel drawings, often on a large scale. These use curves and spirals to suggest the symmetrical petals of flowers; exaggerated body parts, such as eyelashes and lips, in combination with brick walls; or close-ups of skin through distressed denim, as in the work *100mph* (2020).

Sensual but also tough, these enigmatic images evoke *fin de siècle* decadence and the pioneering feminist works from the 1960s and 1970s of artists such as Lee Lozano, Lynda Benglis and Judith Bernstein. The works feel personal to the artist, but have a universality that allows them to float free of any particular grounding in meaning or historical reference.

100mph, 2020
Gouache and soft pastel on Somerset satin paper
180 × 150 cm

Left: *Familiar ground*, 2020
Gouache and soft pastel on Somerset satin paper
145 × 184 cm

Right: *Time Piece*, 2018
Gouache, charcoal and soft pastel on Somerset satin paper
110 × 71 cm

Maxwell Alexandre

b. 1990, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Lives and works in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Maxwell Alexandre's work observes the forces at play in the Rocinha favela, Rio de Janeiro, where he was raised and still lives. It is a diverse, densely populated neighbourhood in which the trinity of the evangelical church, organised crime and state violence is constantly present. In the artist's ongoing *Pardo é Papel* series he plays on the Portuguese word *pardo*, meaning 'brown', which refers to the widely available kraft paper he uses as a support for his work, as well as to the census category used to describe Afro-Brazilian people and others of mixed race. The work *I saw things I imagined* (2020) is a frenetic scene from a music concert. As the performers leap and crowd-surf, the crowd hold up phone screens, painted as glowing rectangles of warm yellow that cascade down the picture plane. What may look, at first glance, like gestural sweeps in the liquid shoe polish that Alexandre has used as his paint turn out, on closer inspection, to be the outlines of individuals in the crowd, linked in a celebratory mass. The scale and composition position the work as a contemporary take on monumental history painting.

I saw things I imagined, 2020
Liquid shoe polish on brown kraft paper
320 × 480 cm

Hurvin Anderson

b. 1965, Birmingham, UK. Lives and works between Cambridge and London, UK.

Hurvin Anderson has become known for his enigmatic images of spaces marked by human presence. His paintings shift between figuration and abstraction, and often focus on landscape and place. Public parks, urban streets, country clubs, and the swimming pools of his youth are evoked in paint as lingering memories. These 'sites of leisure', as he describes them, recur as motifs across Anderson's works, visual traces and states of mind that evoke both England and the Caribbean heritage of his parents. Seemingly tranquil scenes contain a latent tension, exploring layered and conjoined histories.

The painting *Peter's Sitters II* (2009) reflects on the fragmentary nature of diasporic identity. Formally, the work fuses abstracted pattern and flat blocks of colour with elements that suggest a person's identity, while avoiding the directness of portraiture. Inspired by childhood visits with his father to a barber named Peter who cut customers' hair in his attic, Anderson conveys the importance of these makeshift spaces for migrant communities as hubs for gossip and conviviality, and refuges from an often hostile British society.

Peter's Sitters II, 2009
Oil on canvas, 187 × 147 cm

Michael Armitage

b. 1984, Nairobi, Kenya. Lives and works in London, UK, and Nairobi, Kenya.

Michael Armitage's dreamlike paintings spring from his birthplace of Kenya. Using his own childhood memories alongside first-hand sketches and research, Armitage combines these elements with motifs from Western art history, popular culture and news media events. Armitage first assembles ideas in a studio in Nairobi, then develops them into large-scale canvases back in his London studio.

The complex questions raised by the blending of sources from the European tradition with contemporary East African life are made evident by Armitage in the disjuncture in his processes and compositions. His paintings are full of latent tension, operating alongside seductive colour and texture. A significant aspect of the work is its materiality. Armitage paints on Lubugo, a rough cloth made using a traditional method, cut from the bark of a living tree and used in the religious traditions and ceremonies of the Buganda people. The artist first came across the material when he picked up a place mat in a tourist shop in Nairobi. For Armitage the surface itself, with its texture and points of resistance, directs the evolution of each of his compositions.

Layering washes of colour, Armitage constructs scenes that disarm in their beauty and then jolt with moments of violence or strangeness. The natural landscape and green tones in *Followers* (2016) contrasts sharply with the large neon-pink rabbit carried by a man being watched by a crowd. A cutaway section in the top right of the canvas depicts the outline of another man being watched by police.

Followers, 2016
Oil on Lubugo bark cloth
220 × 170 cm

Emma Cousin

b. 1986, Yorkshire, UK. Lives and works in London, UK.

Portraying the inherent elasticity and strangeness of flesh, Emma Cousin's teetering bodies swing precariously around her canvases. Her figures are intertwined and interdependent, exploring the space between realism and fantasy. Reflecting the complexity of interpersonal communications, Cousin depicts a range of female characters who seem to distort the normative expectations of society. Her often carnivalesque figures are both erotic and sinister.

In *Vimto* (2019), an assemblage of three bodies in reds and purples seems stoic and serious. One figure lies prostrate, allowing themselves to be walked over. But in the interlocking fingers of the hands that support each other there is a sense of cooperation and even tenderness. Ambiguous and double-edged, Cousin's layered compositions imply a breakdown of social structure, something raw and primal, while also pointedly celebrating the dark humour present in the essential unpredictability and fallibility of the human mind and body.

Ping Pong, 2018
Oil on linen, 250 × 160 cm

Left: *Healers*, 2018
Oil on linen, 190 × 210 cm

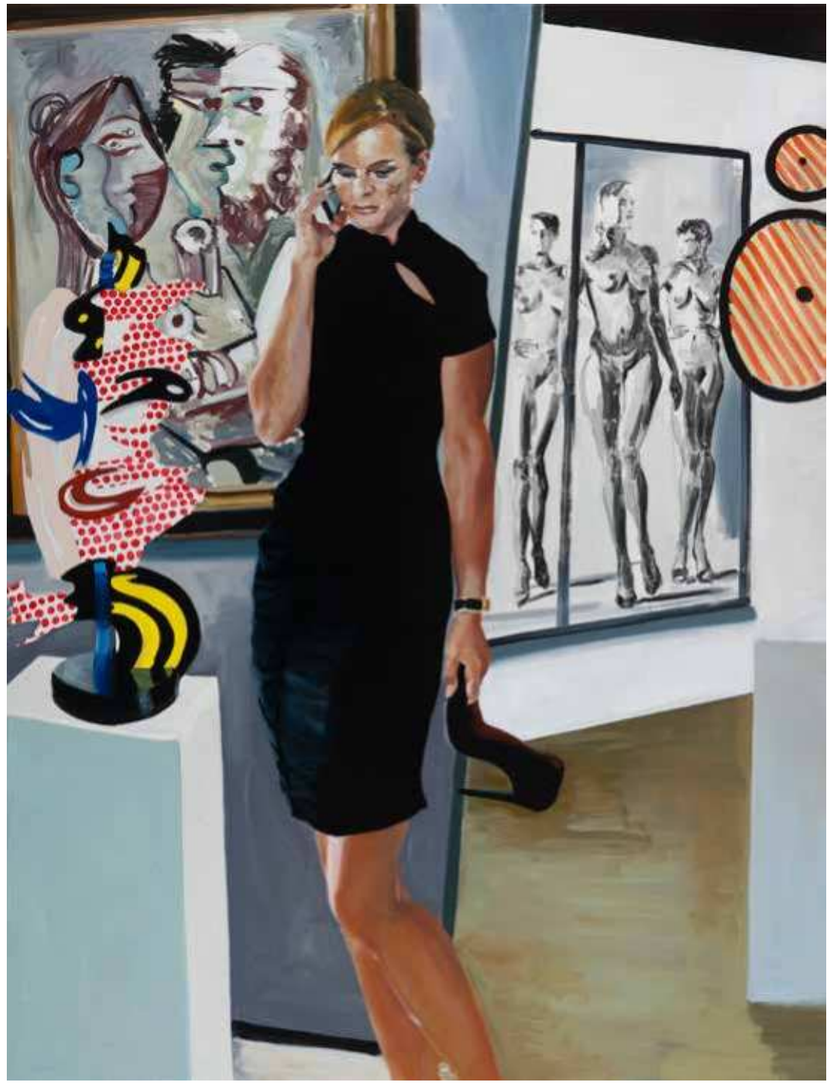
Right: *Vimto*, 2019
Oil on linen, 190 × 190 cm

Eric Fischl

b. 1948, New York, USA. Lives and works in Long Island, New York, USA.

Eric Fischl's paintings combine the disturbing and mundane aspects of an affluent slice of American life. Since the late 1970s his work has reflected on aspects of decadence and privilege, and the ways in which these complicate the relationship between self and other. Often emphasising the voyeurism inherent in viewing bodies, Fischl's compositions manipulate light and shadow to permeate scenes with a sense of unease.

The painting *Her* (2016) is from a series of satirical portrayals of contemporary art fairs. Claustrophobic displays of images and objects are populated by people in a state of heightened looking, but also heightened distraction. In *Her* a glamorous woman, potentially an art buyer, stands in a booth, on her phone, with a stiletto shoe in hand. She is beside a Roy Lichtenstein–esque sculpture, what looks like a Picasso painting, and there is probably a Helmut Newton photographic nude in the background. The protagonist's profile and pose are echoed in the female subjects of the art that surround her, and Fischl's enduring questioning of what it means to picture and observe the female figure here takes place in an idiosyncratic environment of high culture and consumption.



Her, 2016
Oil on linen, 203 × 173 cm

Aaron Fowler

b. 1988, St Louis, Missouri, USA. Lives and works in Los Angeles, USA.

Informed by his surroundings, his family and his wider community, Aaron Fowler creates large-scale assemblage paintings and multimedia sculptures that are infused with personal and local history. Fowler often portrays himself or people from his friendship circle in his works. This approach extends to the formal way in which he works, sourcing his disparate material from nearby, emphasising the locality of his work in both a physical and an emotional sense.

Free Easy (2015) is a mixed-media assemblage composed of photographic prints, CDs, textiles, spray paint, timber and rope. The overall composition suggests a huge medallion spelling out the title, with the protagonist, 'Easy', seated in an electric chair at the centre. By using the composition of the logo from the seminal hip-hop label 'Death Row Records', Fowler produces a portrait of a specific person, while also protesting against structural racism and celebrating the culture of resistance that has been shaped by it.

Free Easy, 2015
Mixed media, 290 × 152 × 18 cm

Untitled (Foot Locker), 2013
Oil, acrylic, glitter, charcoal, pastel on paper, painted card and fabric collage, nails and plastic on carved panel, in three parts
203 × 305 cm

Michael Fullerton

b. 1971, Bellshill, Scotland. Lives and works in Glasgow, Scotland.

Michael Fullerton's oil painting portraits explore surface appearances and the making of meaning, thinking about how the identities of individuals enter into popular culture. He often depicts contemporary figures with ties to specific newsworthy events, or those who carry wider connotations for culture at large, from philosophers to DJs and benefit fraud investigators. His work asks how the traditions of art history might provide insights into the balance of power in present-day society.

The work *Kim Dotcom Under House Arrest, Dotcom Mansion, Auckland, 2013 (Third Version)* (2014) is one of three paintings produced after Fullerton travelled to New Zealand to meet and photograph Kim Dotcom, a German-Finnish internet entrepreneur who was wanted for extradition by the US authorities. With its bucolic setting and the subject's confidently jaunty pose, the portrait is reminiscent of those by Thomas Gainsborough, who recorded the elite of his day in natural landscapes rather than using urban interiors.

Kim Dotcom Under House Arrest, Dotcom Mansion, Auckland 2013 (Third Version), 2014
Oil on linen, 200 × 105 cm

Louisa Gagliardi

b. 1989, Sion, Switzerland. Lives and works in Zurich, Switzerland.

Louisa Gagliardi's practice exists under a veil of deception: although her work appears to be painted by hand on canvas, it is digitally designed and printed onto PVC. The duality of online (mis)representation and a supposedly more authentic physical presence is central to her work. Her ambiguous and ghostly images pose questions around conceptions of figure, flatness and depth. As a final layer Gagliardi adds areas of clear medium, bringing parts of the image out to catch the light, adding a subtle sense of life to her images. Gagliardi recaptures and warps the essential codes of classical painting, creating works that draw equally on the legacies of surrealism, commercial illustration and contemporary internet memes. However, for Gagliardi, the term 'digital art' is reductive; it ignores the fact that the digital is now inherently embedded in our daily life and art practices.

In *Overflow* (2017), a flawless, hairless and unidentifiable body floats atop a misty white mattress. Though it is partially obscured, the shadowy figure dominates the piece. The surreal softness leaves the viewer unsure whether the subject is expressing feelings of joy or pain (or both). The body is gently covered by a transparent piece of patterned lace and wears a collar and bracelet made of the same material. This highlights the ambiguity between violence and sexuality, as well as the duality between private and public life that influences Gagliardi.

Overflow, 2017
Gel medium, ink on PVC
115 × 170 cm

Left: *A door closes*, 2017
Gel medium, nail polish, ink
on PVC, 112 × 115 cm

Right: *Hanging Out*, 2018
Gel medium, ink on PVC
195 × 116 cm

Right: *9:30 pm (dropped and dripping)*, 2016
Ink and gel medium on PVC vinyl
163 × 115 cm

Left: Detail

Anna Glantz

b. 1989, Concord, MA, USA. Lives and works in Los Angeles, USA.

Varied in style, composition and execution, Anna Glantz's paintings are linked by the way in which they blend autobiography and fiction. Domestic interiors, still lives, cats and the artist's partner have all been topics in her recent solo exhibitions. In *Imagined Pregnancy* (2020) Glantz anchors a self-portrait within the history of painting, specifically a setting and style that speak of the Italian Renaissance. Imagining her own possible future pregnancy, the artist is incising a mark in time. The intense searching expression she wears as she gazes back at the viewer feels apt for a work that will shift in meaning and significance as the artist's life unfurls.

Saintsation (Enlarged Hand), 2019
Oil on canvas, 198 × 158 cm

Imagined Pregnancy, 2020
Oil on canvas, 203 × 163 cm

Philip Guston

b. 1913, Montreal, Canada. d. 1980, Woodstock, New York, USA.

Today, Philip Guston is recognised as one of the most important post-war artists. His cartoonish, seemingly crude, and hugely influential later paintings reflected his disquiet at the state of American society. In 1968, when Guston controversially switched from abstraction to a type of representation, his work began to include boots, light bulbs, Ku Klux Klan hoods, Richard Nixon, cigarettes, food and clocks. As well as being interested in telling stories about the society in which he lived, Guston simultaneously pointed to – and marvelled at – the strangeness of translating such things into the medium of painting.

The Canvas (1973) is a spare, still work that possesses a melancholy air and displays links to the surrealist notion of the metamorphosis of objects. In a wry comment on the utility, and possible redundancy, of art, a chunky, fleshy pink canvas, its surface reminiscent of Guston's earlier abstract expressionist paintings, leans casually against a grey brick wall like an abandoned mattress, its single red eye staring intently into the distance.

With a healthy dose of self-parody, he deflated the aura of the heroic male artist and transformed objects and symbols, both mundane and shocking, into compositions with lasting power and mystery. *Rock* (1978) shows a mound rising from a sea-like horizon. Comprising heads, lidded eyes, limbs and heavy boot-soles painted in dark brick reds and browns, the form feels impenetrable. But, rather than solidity, the absurdity of the assembled object, staring and mute, suggests vulnerability and doubt.

The Canvas, 1973
Oil on canvas, 170 × 200 cm

Mirror Head, 1977
Oil on canvas, 173 × 284 cm

Rock, 1978
Oil on canvas, 132 × 152 cm

Trulee Hall

b. 1976, Georgia, USA. Lives and works in Los Angeles, USA.

Moving between painting, digital video, stop-motion animation, live action, soft sculpture and set-building, Hall creates multi-channel installations where characters shift across her chosen mediums, telling a story via music, improvised dance and carefully composed colour schemes. Painting, Hall says, is the start of it all: the place where an idea coalesces: the colour, the character, the action and the scene all begin on the flat plane of a painted surface. Her paintings are often included in larger installations that emerge from the paintings, and are a mash-up of styles and processes: they are part-sketch, part-collage, at once surreal, naïve, abstract and photorealist. In *Two Heads, Two Ways* (2018) the finely rendered photorealist faces have magazine-cut-out eyes and blobby body parts that separate and multiply as the subject's other self, her alter ego, becomes her lover. Hall's brand of erotic grotesque is underpinned by an absurd humour, a clunky gothic tactility, and sexy abjection.

Hall's work is informed by her childhood growing up in the southern state of Georgia in the USA, her current home of Los Angeles, and her background working on film sets, in artists' studios and as a tech for major theme parks. The worlds Hall creates, full of lavish simulacra, are enchanting and enticing, yet they retain an underlying seediness that permeates their experience. They invite the viewer to question whether the discomfort they feel is warranted, or is a result of internalised societal pressures.

Eve and Eve (from Serpent Dance for the Red Witches), 2018
Acrylic, collage and oil on panel
152 × 163 cm

Left: *She/He, Down/Up, In/Out, White/Black (Relations)*, 2018
Collage, acrylic and spray paint on board
122 × 152 cm

Right: *Two Heads, Two Ways*, 2018
Acrylic, oil and collage on panel
152 × 152 cm

Sophie von Hellermann

b. 1975, Munich, Germany. Lives and works in London and Margate, UK.

Drawing inspiration from fables, legends and classical mythology, Sophie von Hellermann's paintings are lush, lyrical compositions that express emotional and psychological sentiment. Rendered in the same loose, painterly style, von Hellermann's figures and their surroundings dissolve into each other. Applying pure pigment directly onto wet, unprimed canvas in broad-brushed washes infuses the paintings with a sense of weightlessness. Spontaneously translating and combining both found and mental images into paint allows the artist to explore the invented space of her unconscious, rather than the perspectival stance of direct observation. Von Hellermann's paintings are deeply influenced by German expressionism and German romanticism, and this is visible in her work *Schlange hier? (Snake here?)* (2019). A delicate nude woman poses with a soft green-striped serpentine shape. The overt biblical reference brings to mind ideas of yielding to temptation and a fall from a state of innocence. It's unclear whether we are looking at a live animal or a piece of clothing, a trusted pet or a threatening presence.

Schlange hier?, 2019
Acrylic on canvas, 67 × 81 cm

Chum Pain Party, 2002
Acrylic on canvas, triptych
180 × 130 cm (part 1)
204 × 305 cm (part 2)
200 × 236 cm (part 3)

Celia Hempton

b. 1981, Stroud, UK. Lives and works in London, UK.

Celia Hempton's graphic, sensual depictions of flesh explore voyeurism in the post-digital age. Through her work, Hempton challenges tropes of the male sexual gaze by empathising with the nude body rather than objectifying it. Her intimate, yet bold, paintings examine ideas of gender, representation, fetish, subculture and online sexuality. Hempton often finds her subjects through online video chat websites: spaces that are overpopulated with sexual exhibitionists and voyeurs. At other times she works in her studio with real-life subjects sitting for her. Both of these settings allow her portraits to retain a freshness and immediacy that compels the viewer to confront their own feelings of comfort and consent, desire and subjugation. One question is present in all of Hempton's work: when does an act of looking become an act of trespass? The painting *Ben* (2016) is a gentle, intimate suggestion of person: visible, yet opaque. Here, Hempton's empathy is clear. Sexual desire is replaced with delicate familiarity.

Kajsa, 2016
Oil on linen, 180 × 140 cm

Ben, 2016
Oil on wood, 60 × 50 cm

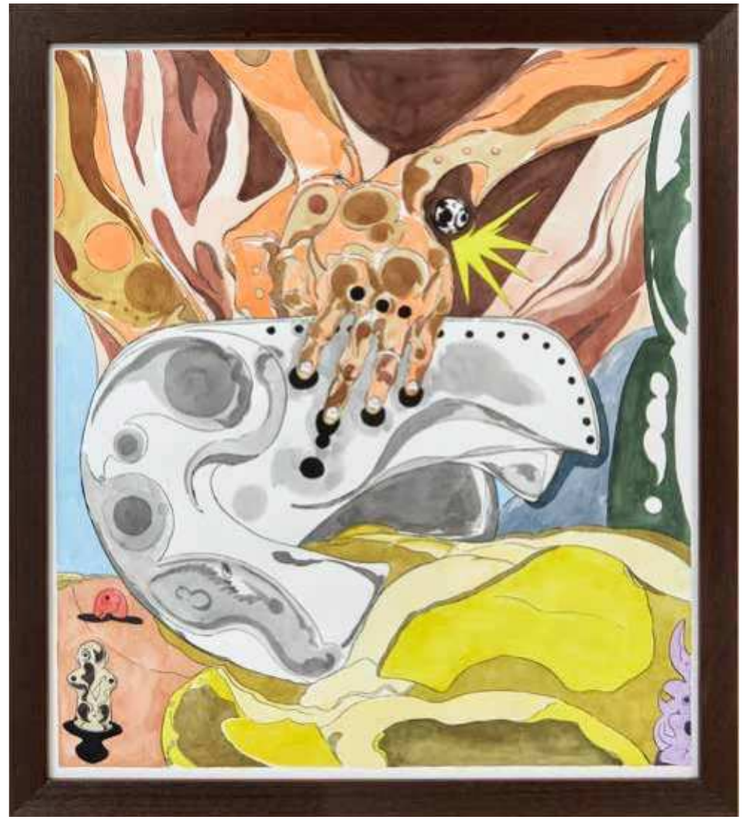
Richard Ayodeji Ikhide

b. 1991, Lagos, Nigeria. Lives and works in London, UK.

Exploring the creation of a personal mythology, Richard Ayodeji Ikhide's work reflects on the importance of symbolism in human culture. Inspired by his Nigerian heritage and a passion for graphic novels, Ikhide's pictures weave together depictions of artefacts from museums, books and online archives with direct observations from life to form scenes from what he terms a 'future–past'. Drawing as an everyday act of recording and thinking is fundamental to Ikhide's practice, and his sketchbooks contain the seeds of all his larger pieces. The characters that populate the worlds he builds have patterns of decoration that can be read as armour, amulets, scales or cyborg components.

In the large watercolour *Arabinrin* (2019), a strong, poised androgynous figure gazes out to the left. A flash of red pattern in the background frames their features and a small jade-coloured sculptural head hovers in the heart area of their chest. Ikhide creates his own imaginative realm through a process of visual world-building, and invites the viewer into a network of connections across time and space.

Arabinrin, 2019
Watercolour on Waterford paper
76 × 56 cm



Left: *Siseda Owo (Creating Hands) 1*, 2021
Acrylic ink and watercolour on
300 gsm Waterford paper, 63 × 57 cm

Right: *Siseda Owo (Creating Hands) 2*, 2021
Acrylic ink and watercolour on
300 gsm Waterford paper, 63 × 57 cm

Chantal Joffe

b. 1969, Vermont, USA. Lives and works in London, UK.

Chantal Joffe's portraits, mostly of women and children, express a strong psychological and emotional force with a humorous touch. The figures possess a down-to-earth realism, which turns them into individual characters and triggers a personal relationship with the viewer. Joffe's use of rough, dynamic brushstrokes brings the images to life, as the paint also finds its own way by dripping down the canvas. Works such as *Carolyn* (2007) and *The Pink High Heels* (2004) complicate reductive definitions of womanhood. These paintings portray women who embrace their femininity – without it being idealised or simplified into tropes. Instead they are imbued with unique personalities, accentuated by the physicality and fluidity of Joffe's handling of paint.

Carolyn, 2007
Oil on board, 305 × 152 cm

Jamian Juliano-Villani

b. 1987, Newark, USA. Lives and works in New York, USA.

Jamian Juliano-Villani's work is assembled from a kaleidoscope of imagery selected from internet memes and archives, personal photographs, television and film stills, and fragments of historical artworks. This motley crew of material is collaged and reproduced via airbrush, unifying the disparate parts into highly idiosyncratic compositions full of deadpan humour. The resulting pictures, often reminiscent of frozen moments from a feverish dream, are direct, affecting, and shot through with the artist's personality.

Constructive Living (2019) presents a downcast figure in heavy make-up, suggestive of 1970s glam rock, a British circus clown or Japanese kabuki theatre. Despite the age of the protagonist, Juliano-Villani has talked of the piece as being connected to teenage angst and driving around late at night 'crying and chain-smoking'. As the figure reaches out to sort through a pile of CDs on a white sheet, studio light illuminates the darkness. Its lens-flare pattern is painted in a manner that reinforces the feeling of glimpsing a movie or TV set, and of life being like a performance in a melodrama.

Venutians, 2021
Acrylic on canvas, 46 × 91 cm

Constructive Living, 2019
Acrylic on canvas, 127 × 188 cm

The Second Alarm, 2018
Acrylic on canvas, 152 × 183 cm

Sanya Kantarovsky

b. 1982, Moscow, Russia. Lives and works in New York, USA.

Sanya Kantarovsky works across many artistic mediums, including painting, film, animation, sculpture, curatorial projects and written texts. His paintings open up the narrative richness of human subjects entangled in a variety of discomforts, visibly grappling with psychological and physical crises. His figures are exposed and gawked at, propelled into public view. Incorporating drastic shifts in scale, paint application and stylisation, Kantarovsky's darkly humorous work plays with notions of artifice and affect.

In *The Master is Released: Behemoth cut himself a slice of pineapple, salted and peppered it, ate it and chased it down with a second glass of spirit with a flourish that earned a round of applause* (2015), sinewy, morose figures congregate against an abstract backdrop. A cast of figures vie for the viewer's attention: a Joker-esque man drinking a martini, an uncomfortable Pre-Raphaelite woman, a mysterious black cat. Part of a series of paintings inspired by Mikhail Bulgakov's novel *The Master and Margarita* (written between 1928 and 1940), this work exemplifies Kantarovsky's painterly self-aware satire, where figures interact with each other as well as with the edges of the canvas itself.

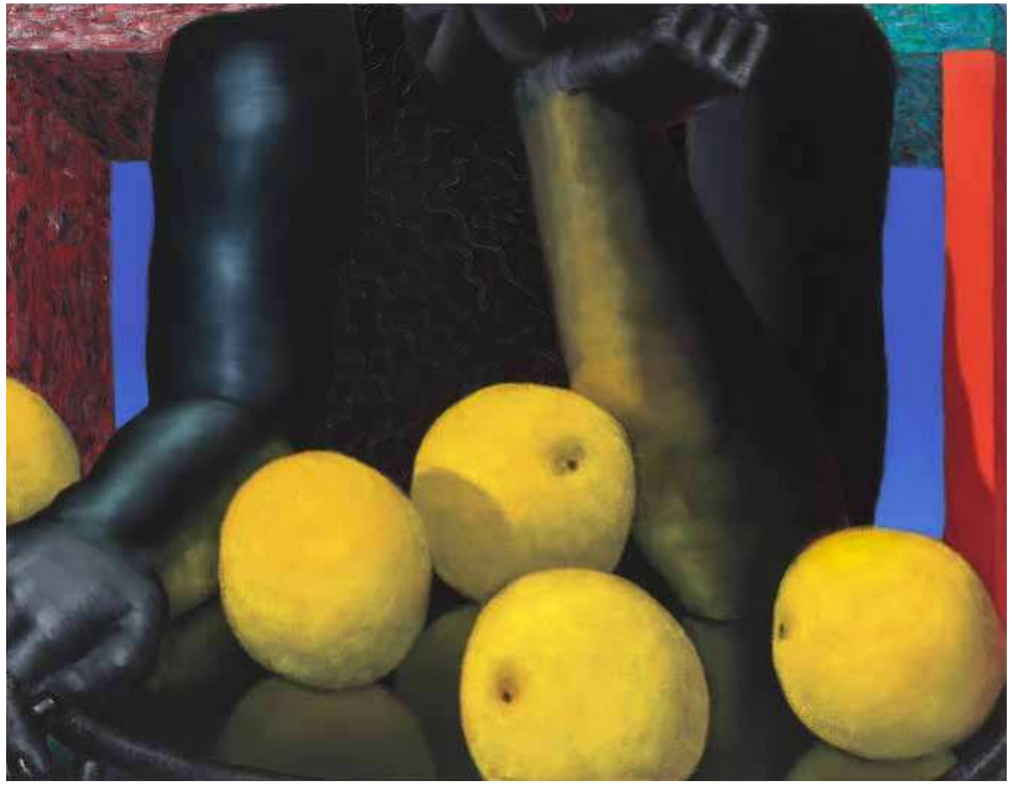
The Master is Released: Behemoth cut himself a slice of pineapple, salted and peppered it, ate it and chased it down with a second glass of spirit with a flourish that earned a round of applause, 2015
Oil, oilstick, pastel and watercolour on canvas, 280 × 180 cm

Jordan Kasey

b. 1985, Chicago, USA. Lives and works in Brooklyn, USA.

Jordan Kasey paints bodies in enclosed domestic spaces with close zoomed-in cropping, giving a feeling of intimacy – and perhaps claustrophobia. The characters occupy the majority of the scene and are painted in shades of dark grey and black, as if in deep shadow or made of polished stone. The figures are heavy objects, in both senses of the word – alive but burdened, and static and volumetric like statues. Kasey's wry suggestions of confinement and boredom feel highly topical, but they are in dialogue with the history of still-life painting as much as with contemporary art. Cézanne's instruction in a letter from 1904 to 'deal with nature by means of the cylinder, the sphere, and the cone' seems particularly relevant to the way Kasey analyses and renders forms. In *Grapefruits* (2018) the breakfast citrus fruits are the focal point, glowing like orbs. The light they reflect shimmers on the surface of the figure looking down on them, chin in hand: thinking, wondering, waiting.

Summer Evening, 2019
Oil on canvas, 173 × 244 cm



Left: *Grapefruits*, 2018
Oil on canvas, 143 × 183 cm

Right: *The Fan*, 2016
Oil on canvas, 132 × 183 cm

Tired at Breakfast, 2016
Oil on canvas, 155 × 165 cm

Allison Katz

b. 1980, Montreal, Canada. Lives and works in London, UK.

Allison Katz's work takes the form of pun- or riddle-making. Her incongruous imagery has multiple meanings, often providing symbols without a neat narrative. For over a decade she has explored questions of identity and expression, selfhood and voice, acting as a refreshing antidote to the dogmatism that can sometimes prevail in the art world. Katz treats her own biography as source material, in addition to drawing from art historical references, cultural mythologies and embodied experience. Through her work, she seeks to give form to a world of apparent chaos – where her own subjectivity and chance collide with the structure of the world.

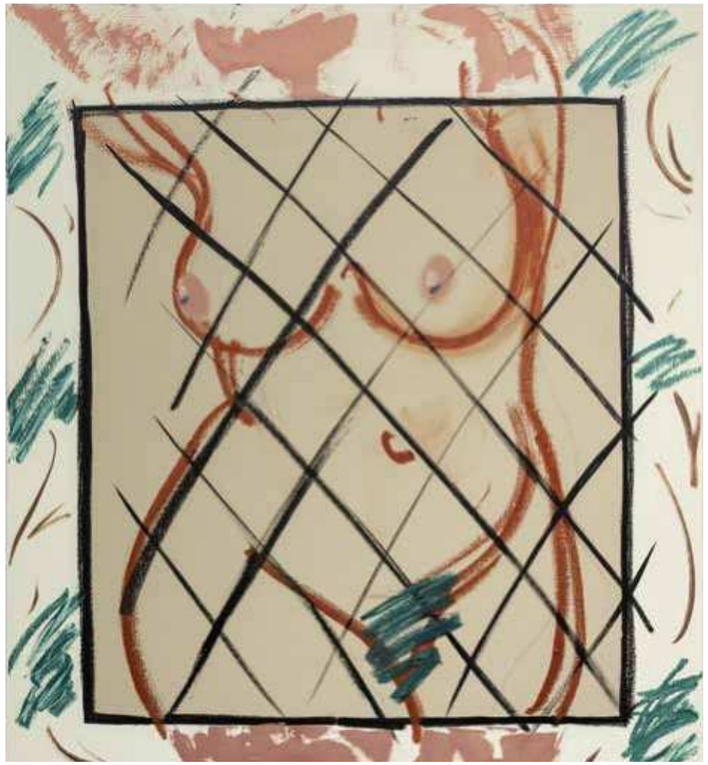
In Katz's self-portraits, she uses letters and initials to denote her presence: 'MASK' (Ms Allison Sarah Katz) is visible in *AKgraph (Tobias + Angel)* (2021). The scene references Andrea del Verrocchio's *Tobias and the Angel* (c.1450–75), which can be seen in London's National Gallery, and is a story about restoring vision. In Katz's version, the orientation of the figures is reimagined, and they are painted as if seen from behind. This layer appears as a phantom presence behind her physiognomic signature, disrupting the tension between what is conveyed and what is perceived.

AKgraph (Tobias + Angel), 2021
Oil on linen, 170 × 130 cm

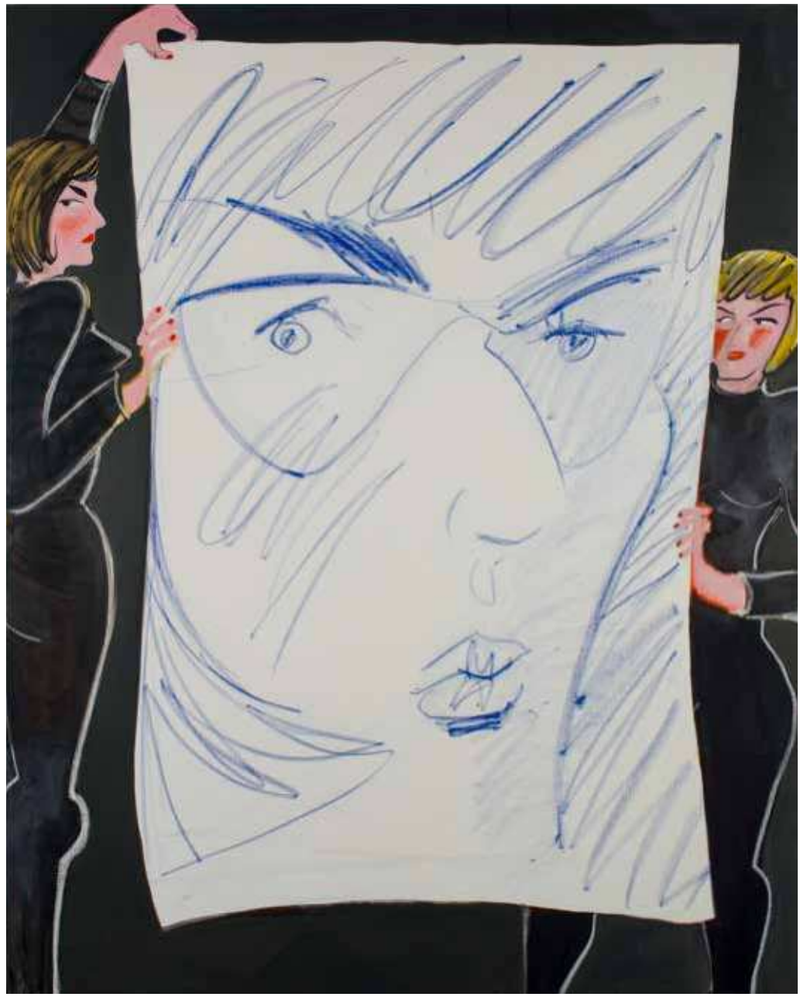
Ella Kruglyanskaya

b. 1978, Riga, Latvia. Lives and works in New York, USA.

Weaving together the graphic and the painterly, Ella Kruglyanskaya's work focuses on bawdy sexuality and the often fraught dynamics of social interaction. Although overtly drawing on cinema and advertising of the 1950s and 1960s and the history of European expressionist painting, the artist wears her references lightly, inviting a viewer's eyes and mind to leap into her compositions. *Puppeteers with a Big Face* (2015) shows two clearly unimpressed protagonists dressed in black holding up a sheet on which a line drawing of a third face appears, executed in the style of a confident sketch. The third face's severe bob, its glasses and angular features are reminiscent of a stereotype of an art or fashion impresario. Have the puppeteers been roped into an egotistic stunt by their employer? Is there rivalry between them for a promotion? Or maybe they are part of a performance that has gone awry.



Untitled Nude (Inner Style), 2021
Oil and oil bar on linen, 98 × 88 cm



Left: *Trench*, 2013
Oil on canvas, 198 × 137 cm

Right: *Puppeteers with a Big Face*, 2015
Oil and oil stick on linen, 229 × 183 cm

Maria Lassnig

b. 1919, Kappel am Krappfeld, Austria. d. 2014, Vienna, Austria.

Maria Lassnig repeatedly used her own image as the focus of her work, depicting its changes over time. Across her paintings, drawings and animations, Lassnig focused on what she termed 'body awareness': the physical and emotional experience of being in the world. Building on the colour and drama of early-twentieth-century Viennese expressionism and the strange psychological spaces of surrealism, Lassnig created raw, highly engaging images.

Der Ritter (The Knight) (1991) is a blunt, unsettling picture. A phallic shape resembling a head on a neck – or, as the title hints, perhaps a body encased in armour – stands frozen, filling the frame. The gash that runs across the form resembles a razor blade. This connects to other paintings by Lassnig in which a body is morphed with domestic objects, such as saucepans or cheese graters. The left section of the image could be read as a downturned mouth, caught in a shout or a scream. Narrative associations play a central role in Lassnig's work. *Froschkoenigin (Frog Princess)* (2000) references an old Russian or Eastern European fairy tale about three princes who are set challenges to identify their rightful brides. A magical frog helps one prince to complete all his challenges, but he remains ashamed of the creature – until, that is, it transforms into a beautiful young woman. Lassnig's painting features a luminous, but aged, female protagonist whose face is pensive and mask-like. A frog sits on her knee, attentively poised. Is the human figure in the painting the person who cast the spell to create the animal bride? Or perhaps it is the bride herself, looking back at events from the past.

Der Ritter (The Knight), 1991
Oil on canvas, 200 × 144 cm

Froschkoenigin/Frog Princess, 2000
Oil on canvas, 125 × 101 cm

Dale Lewis

b. 1980, Harlow, UK. Lives and works in London, UK.

Painting from personal experience and observation, most often in relation to his surroundings in London, Dale Lewis draws on the realities of contemporary urban life. Social immobility, consumerist excess, the binge-drinking culture, gang violence, class divides and mundane family life are all prevalent themes. While unsanitised and often overtly horrific, there are large slices of humour and affection present for the carnivalesque energy of human experience.

In *Good Morning America* (2017), painted while on a Times Square Space residency organised by Tiffany Zabludowicz in New York, a labyrinth of bodies traverse surrealism and realism, absurdity and satire. A naked woman straddles multiple grotesque figures, such as a half-human, half-dog hybrid and black-and-yellow beaked beasts. A figure in a wheelchair lights a cigarette from a man's flaming head. Lewis's mural-scale works explicitly reference the symbolic conventions and compositional drama of medieval and Renaissance painting in his veneration of bodies punctuated by sin, virtue and status. The fleeting moments of contemporary urban life are treated with the gravitas of grand history painting.

Fleet Week (Broadway), 2017
Oil, acrylic and spray paint on canvas
198 × 398 cm

Corn Dogs, 2017
Oil, acrylic and spray paint on canvas
198 × 398 cm

Good Morning America, 2017
Oil, acrylic and spray paint on canvas
198 × 398 cm

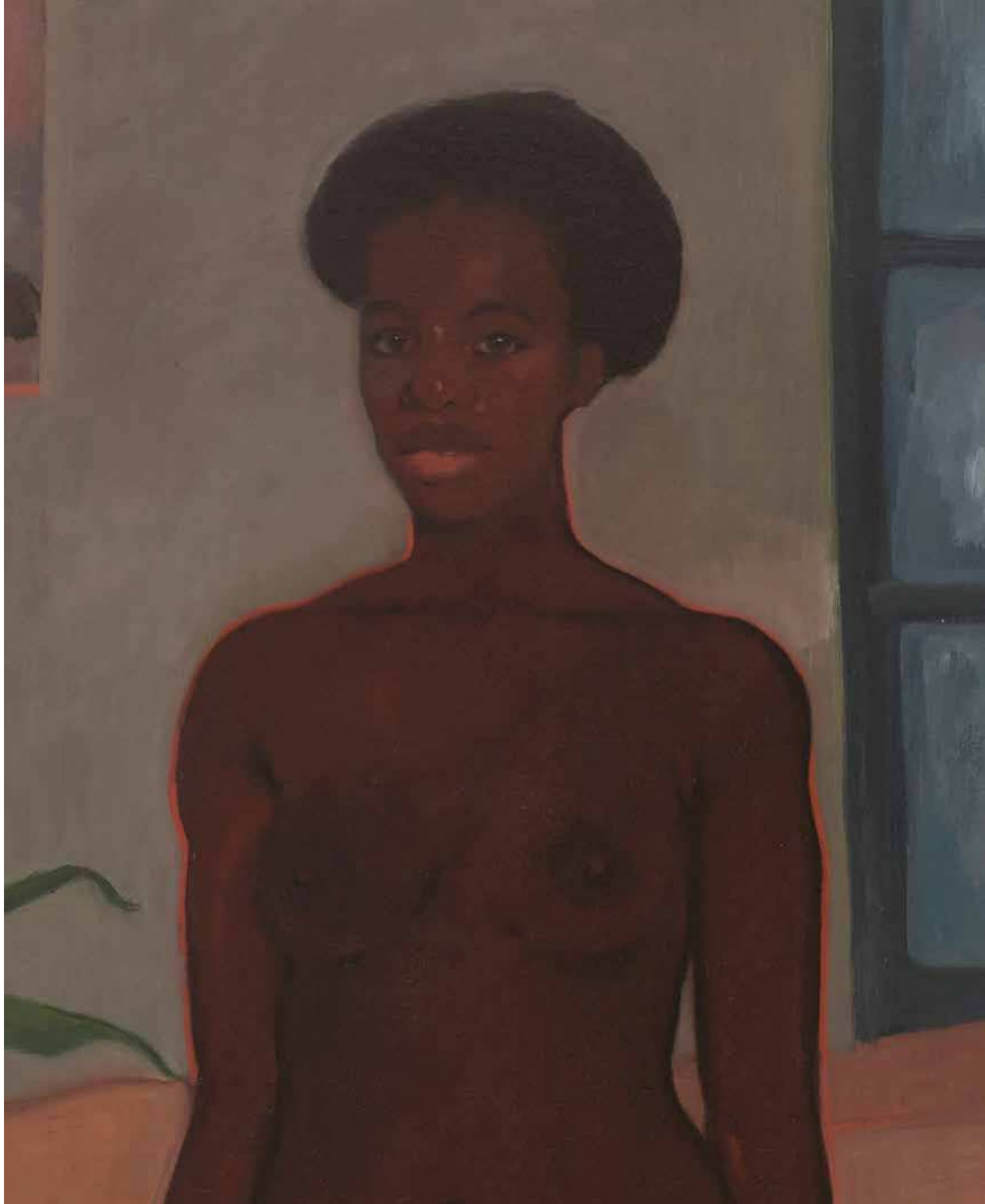
Sahara Longe

b. 1994, London, UK. Lives and works in London, UK.

Sahara Longe's figurative paintings place Black bodies in classical backdrops, often interiors, that are more often associated with white biblical and aristocratic figures. Longe points to the omission of people of colour in the history of European art, offering a glimpse into a hypothetical alternative. Questioning age-old dichotomies of past and present, West and non-West, and the male genius and female muse, Longe elegantly inverts the status quo.

The figures she depicts are far from being impersonal instruments of protest, however; instead she pays close attention to the small, but important, gestures that make up life. Inspired by resplendent allegorical Renaissance paintings and the psychological intensity of twentieth-century European expressionism, Longe uses layers of thinly applied luminous paint to highlight and reflect spots of light, instilling figures with an iridescent quality. Often richly coloured and large in scale, her paintings possess a languid, soft-edged feel that speaks of time slowed and warped. With their shallow depth of field, Longe's paintings compress space and bring the figures they depict close to the viewer. In *For You* (2021) a naked woman stands naturally in a bedroom: she feels as at home here as she would in the Garden of Eden.

Untitled, 2021
Oil on jute, 120 × 110 cm



Left: *For You*, 2021
Oil on jute, 210 × 120 cm

Right: Detail

Che Lovelace

b. 1969, San Fernando, Trinidad. Lives and works in Port of Spain, Trinidad.

Che Lovelace's joyful, vibrant paintings are inspired by his surroundings in the Caribbean. Figures, fruit and trees appear as composites, part abstracted into planes of colour and texture, offering new visions of the tropical landscape. Carnival (known locally as Mas) has influenced Lovelace so profoundly that it has become vital to his work. Masquerading in the festivities each year gives him the chance to act as a character outside of himself and paint from a different perspective.

Lovelace's subject is painted with a rich palette and an authority that makes for distinct, arresting work. Combining several panel boards to produce a stable, inexpensive material substrate, Lovelace renders acrylic directly onto board. In *The Broken Fence* (2019) a cubist style is used to portray a typical vibrant Trinidadian vista. The bright pinks, oranges and yellows of the background contrast with the black silhouettes and emerald greens of the foreground tree and half-torn-down chain-link fence, and the sombre expression of the man who walks alone in the foreground.

The Broken Fence, 2019
Acrylic and dry pigment on board panels
127 × 152 cm

Kate Lyddon

b. 1979, Brighton, UK. Lives and works in London, UK.

Working across painting, drawing and sculpture, Kate Lyddon creates scenes of bodily absurdity and dark humour. A cast of characters, sometimes cartoon-like and often grotesque, enact a variety of nonsensical actions and poses. Resisting stability or repetition, Lyddon allows chance to play an active role in determining the direction in which her imagery grows. *Cloakroom Exchange* (2016) originated in a joke between the artist and a friend when queuing outside an art fair. Realising he had nothing to check in to the cloakroom, he suggested he might check in his belly instead. Running with this visual idea, Lyddon painted a fleshy part of the body hanging over a structural support. As she developed the work the body changed from male to female, shifting the theme to the effects of pregnancy and ageing. In balancing the composition, the head of the character became tree-like – a motif Lyddon often utilises. It acts to pull her contemporary and autobiographical starting points in the direction of the fantastic, but brutal, realm of folk tales.

Cloakroom Exchange, 2016
Oil on canvas, 102 × 76 cm

Left: *Man Up*, 2013
Oil, acrylic and collage on canvas
180 × 130 cm

Right: *Superhuman Clock Ticking Backwards Forever*, 2015
Oil, acrylic, ink and collage on linen
225 × 170 cm

France-Lise McGurn

b. 1983, Glasgow, Scotland, UK. Lives and works in Glasgow, Scotland, UK.

Whether she is suggesting lone individuals or small groups, France-Lise McGurn uses form and gesture to convey intimacy, sexuality, confidence and awkwardness. Her bodies are free and unconstrained, their limbs depicted by elegant lines hovering over exuberant washes of colour, the combination generating a sense of movement and energy. However, the loose outlines of McGurn's bodies, and the often spare background of her paintings, also signify weightlessness and abandonment. McGurn's artworks often exist as room-size installations, escaping the canvas edge to bleed onto the gallery walls and spill across the floor.

In *Earth Girls are Easy* (2019), McGurn's protagonist sits naked and cross-legged in yellow shoes. Seeming withdrawn and pensive, the figure also has statuesque assertiveness. Disembodied gesturing hands, a recurring motif in McGurn's work, circle the top half of the canvas. McGurn's practice is defined by a fluidity of form and meaning: her archetypal women experience both ecstasy and agony in their bare, languid bodies. These subjects are born in McGurn's imagination, encouraged by a collection of found materials such as *Jackie* magazine, Hollywood movies (*Earth Girls are Easy* takes its title from a 1988 sci-fi comedy) and her own identity as a Glaswegian woman.

Earth Girls are Easy, 2019
Oil, acrylic, spray and marker on canvas
250 × 200 cm

Solo exhibition *Percussia*, 2020
Installation view at Simon Lee Gallery, London

Sofia Mitsola

b. 1992, Thessaloniki, Greece. Lives and works in London, UK.

The invented characters in Sofia Mitsola's paintings are informed by ancient Greek and Egyptian tropes of goddesses and mythical creatures. Through the exploration of these motifs Mitsola addresses ideas of voyeurism, confrontation and power. The female body is central to Mitsola's work, often colossal in scale and possessing a penetrating stare. This visual device both seduces and challenges the viewer and their presumed notions of femininity and womanhood. These figures are like Medusa and the evil eye: if you stand with them, you are protected. If you stand against them, you will be tormented. This confrontation between viewer and painting is carefully composed by Mitsola and clearly evident in *Solo* (2019). Here, a larger than life-sized female form lounges naked, legs apart and toes entwined, seemingly staring into the viewer's psyche. She is descended from previous figures found in Mitsola's work, the sphinxes and sirens of past realities, linking like a bloodline across different canvases.

Solo, 2019
Oil on canvas, 220 × 160 cm

Ebecho Muslimova

b.1984, Makhachkala, Dagestan, Russia. Lives and works in New York, USA.

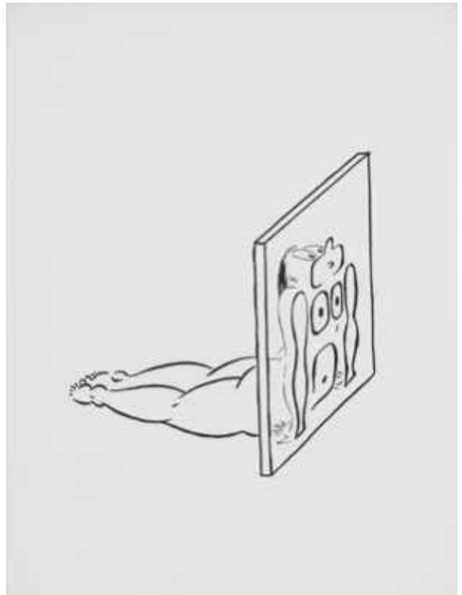
Ebecho Muslimova's practice is centred on Fatebe, a wide-eyed, uninhibited character who ends up in impossible and ridiculous slapstick situations. Fatebe was conceived as a side project executed as black-and-white ink drawings during the artist's days as an undergraduate at Cooper Union in New York, but has since grown to occupy her own universe. Shameless and free, Fatebe operates as an alter ego for Muslimova, allowing the artist to enlist her in various performative scenarios. Humorous and unsettling, Fatebe celebrates carnal curiosity and bodily processes through her raucous sexual liberation. Disrupting social expectations of female behaviour, she is both vulnerable and brazen, self-conscious and bold.

In *FATEBE ham on the balcony* (2019) we find Fatebe joyously contorted around a table, as if in an absurd yoga pose. The manner in which the ham and the diaphanous tablecloth are painted evoke the *Looney Tunes* cartoon shows or 1950s aspirational adverts for domestic products. The way that female artists of the second half of the twentieth century challenged assumptions about their place in the world through staging bodily performances – often involving feats of endurance, which hovered between high sincerity and a self-aware humour – permeates all of Fatebe's exploits. Muslimova acknowledges the pioneers of the past while being honest about her own neuroses and uncertainties as a young female artist navigating contemporary codes of behaviour.

FATEBE COWGIRL, 2018
Ink on paper, 30 × 23 cm

Left: *FATEBE pool under*, 2019
Oil and acrylic on canvas
137 × 107 cm

Right: *FATEBE ham on the balcony*, 2019
Oil and acrylic on canvas
137 × 107 cm



Left: *Untitled*, 2014
Ink on paper, 31 × 23 cm

Middle: *Untitled*, 2015
Ink on paper, 31 × 23 cm

Right: *Untitled*, 2015
Ink on paper, 31 × 23 cm

Albert Oehlen

b. 1954, Krefeld, Germany. Lives and works in Bühler, Switzerland and Segovia, Spain.

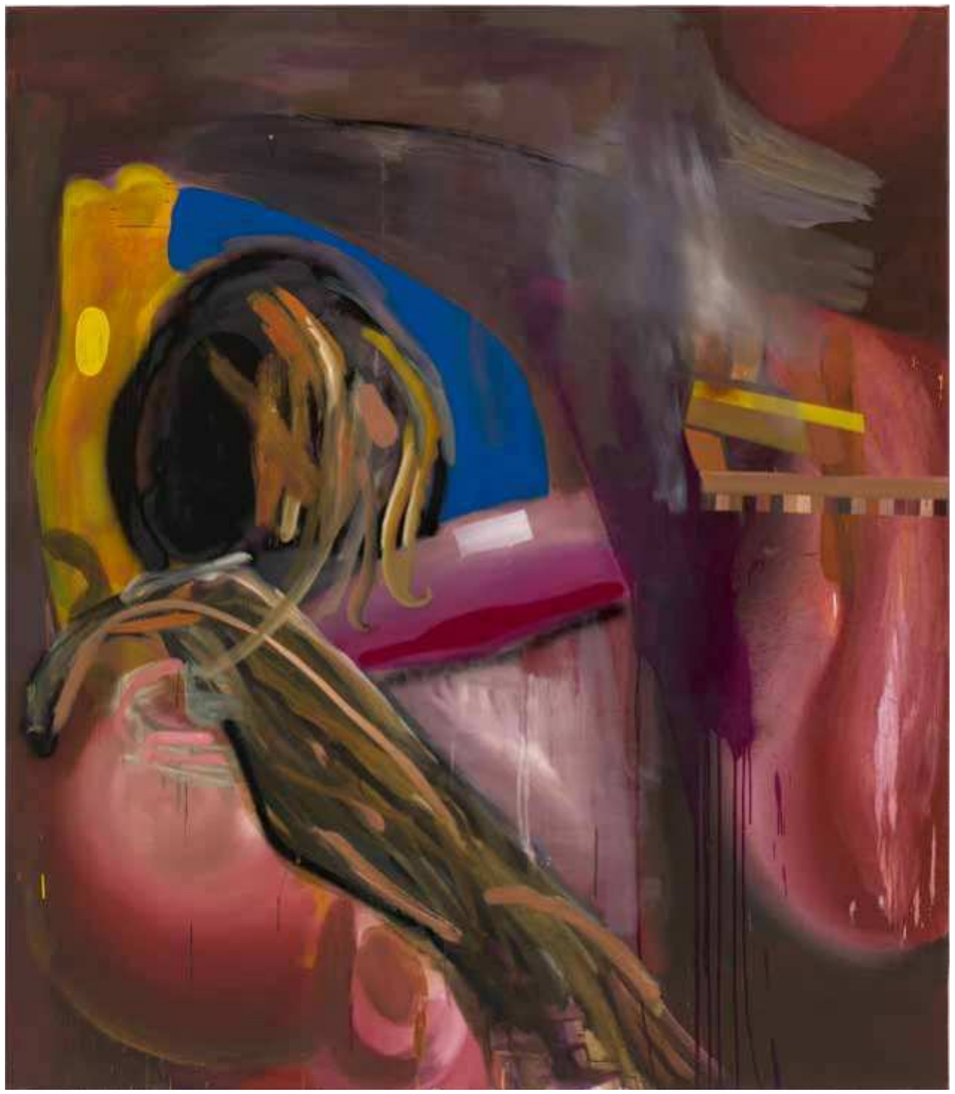
Albert Oehlen has been a key figure in contemporary painting since the 1980s, avoiding stylistic cul-de-sacs and repetition by retaining a punk spirit that resists the hierarchies of his chosen medium at every turn. He has consistently questioned and played with the conventions of the medium, with notions of propriety and good taste regular targets of his constantly shifting approach.

Materials range from oils to installations, digital printing and collage. His canvases are frequently rotated during their making, and sound or projection is used to disrupt their reception and stability even further. The exceptional energy of his work speaks to Oehlen's questioning attitude towards the practice and meaning of image-making today. Oehlen often paints series with systematic rules and limitations that guide and restrict the outcome, and his works defy the boundaries that would define them, teetering on the edge of figuration and abstraction. He is included in both this publication, with its focus on figurative painting, and the 2013 *Painting from the Zabludowicz Collection* publication, which foregrounded abstract works, showing his range and adaptability.

In Oehlen's paintings, each line and colour has a meaning and a role, which convey the artist's attitude. The paintings require the bodily presence of the viewer and a careful looking, for the work to make sense. The viewer has to engage with the work as both conceptual and painterly endeavours. From his early brown paintings such as *Untitled* (1982), in which an architectural interior is broken up with the inclusion of mirrors, to works he has referred to as 'post-non-representational', such as *u.b.B. 16* (2020), in which a figure is ambiguously indicated in a set palette, to the explosions of colour and impasto in *Evilution I* (2002) and the restricted grey palette of *Bad* (2003), one finds in Oehlen an artist resistant to settling into a predictable practice.

Untitled (9½ Weeks) (1995) consists of the Hollywood erotic drama projected over one of his own paintings. The painting can change depending on where and who shows the work. It stages a competition between the forces of painting and those of film. The characteristics of these two disciplines bleed into one another, and the winner remains undecided. As Oehlen says, 'You want to see the movie and you forget about the painting, but actually you stare at my painting for an hour and a half and it is burned into your eyes.'

Bad, 2003
Oil on canvas, 280 × 300 cm



Left: *u.b.B. 16*, 2020
Oil and lacquer on canvas
230 × 205 cm

Right: *Nr 9*, 2007
Acrylic, oil and paper on canvas
230 × 290 cm

Evilution 1, 2002
Oil on canvas, 220 × 340 cm

Christina Quarles

b. 1985, Chicago, USA. Lives and works in Los Angeles, USA.

In her expressive, technically complex paintings, Christina Quarles strives for what she describes as 'the experience of living in a body rather than looking at a body'. Formal devices such as stencilled areas of pattern offer a scaffold for figures that stretch and contort around and through the picture plane; the dynamics of their interrelation are left open to the viewer's interpretation. Quarles's interest in indeterminacy comes from her lived experience as a queer cis multiracial woman who is often presumed to be white. *I'd a Scope Eyes* (2018) features figures in a horizontal arrangement. Long limbs reach, kick, pull and caress, while the two bodies are linked across zones of time and space by sweeping red-brushed gestures. A monumental yellow flower with a needle-sharp stem stands on the left of the unprimed canvas, conveying a mix of joy and threat.

I'd a Scope Eyes, 2018
Acrylic on canvas, 196 × 245 cm

Tal Regev

b. 1985, London, UK. Lives and works in London, UK.

Tal Regev creates luminous, ethereal spaces on the surface of her canvases. Bodies and objects oscillate in mysterious territories conjured from light washes of colour, often threatening to slip from a viewer's grasp completely. Conceptualising the body as a porous vessel through which forces flow, Regev engages in a highly personal meditation on her experiences, while also alluding to more universal questions of political histories, borders and health. Regev looks to the invisible things we carry within us: how memories and feelings become embodied rather than stored solely in one's mind. This 'psychic map', as she describes it, unavoidably incorporates troubling darkness alongside lightness and joy. An acute sharpness resides in the subtle delicacy of Regev's paintings

Flames in May (2020), made during the first months of the Covid-19 pandemic, features a seated figure with a glowing chest, seeming to be serene, apart from the violent heat that rises up from their head and off the canvas. The impact of a new virus, highlighting the imbalances within our social and economic structures, cast Regev's pursuit of invisible forces in an even more urgent light. At the heart of Regev's practice is an exploration of tension: that which we feel within our own bodies, and that which exists between ourselves and others.

Flames in May, 2020
Oil on canvas, 180 × 100 cm

Left: *Rapid shifts*, 2018
Oil on canvas, 160 × 190 cm

Right: *Viscera*, 2017
Oil on canvas, 170 × 150 cm

Rachel Rossin

b. 1987, Florida, USA. Lives and works in New York, USA.

Self-taught programmer Rachel Rossin works at the forefront of virtual reality technology and painting to investigate the slippage between the physical and the digital. Through the use of algorithms and photogrammetry, Rossin merges images from sources such as video games and stock computer illustrations with three-dimensional objects such as plexiglass, computer casings and LED fans to create multi-layered virtual and painted worlds which stretch and explode notions of space and time. Central to her practice is an interest in escaping from and augmenting bodily presence and individual subjectivity through a merger with technology.

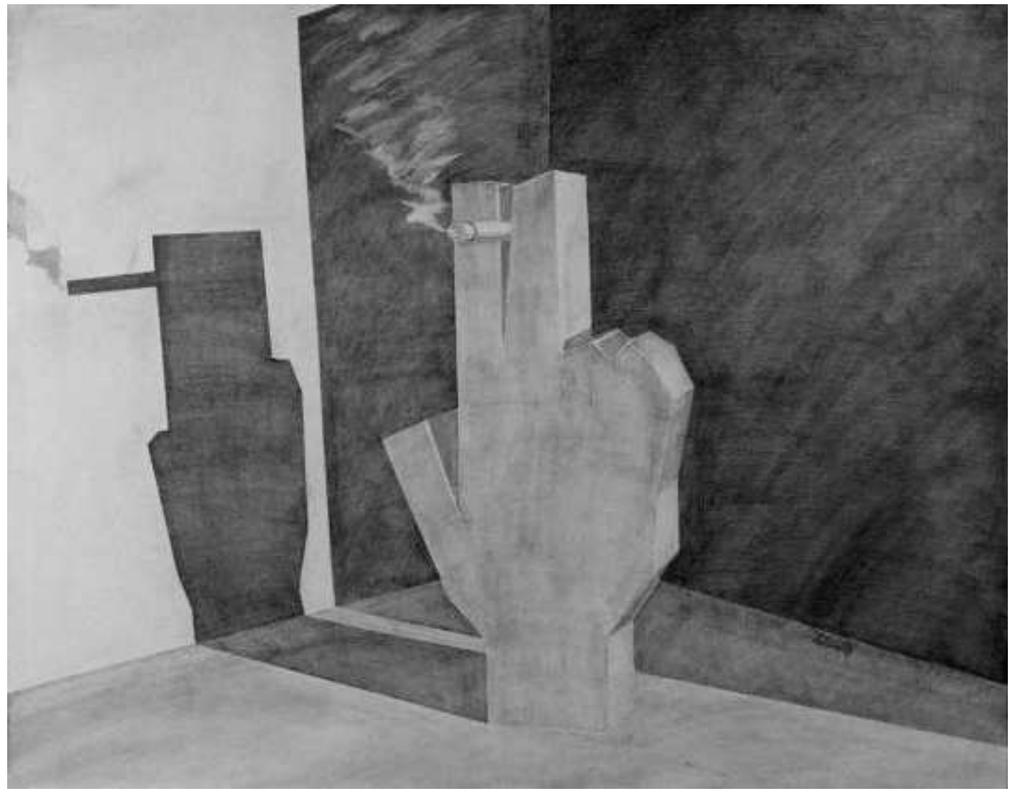
RSNBL PRSN I (2016) is one of three paintings derived from Rossin's virtual reality headset-based work *Source: Claude Glass* (2016) in which the viewer encounters deconstructed ghosts from commercial video games, suspended in a surreal, unstable landscape. *RSNBL PRSN I* features imagery relating to *Call of Duty*, the hugely popular first-person shooter franchise. A searing sun is reflected off a wall, and linear shadows from surrounding fencing fall across the crumpled body of a faceless figure dressed head-to-toe in camouflage combat gear. The implicit violence in the scene is undercut by the sense that the oil paint is depicting hollow computer models rather than concrete and flesh. A fluid movement between the digital and the physical, and between different emotional states, is typical of Rossin's oeuvre, creating a zone for questioning and uncertainty.

RSNBL PRSN I, 2016
Oil on linen, 107 × 142 cm

Avery Singer

b. 1987, New York, USA. Lives and works in New York, USA.

Avery Singer's parents are both artists, and she grew up in a creative community. Fusing the tradition of painting with digital technologies, Singer builds and executes complex and theatrical images produced by hand using an airbrush. The initial stages of making take place inside 3D computer modelling software more often used by architects and designers. Singer's recent works have become highly layered and abstracted, with the picture plane often compressed to near impenetrability. *Happening* (2014), from an earlier series, features a clearer image, although it is still disorientating. A group of figures – assembled as geometric, articulated forms reminiscent of life drawing mannequins – leans towards an assemblage on a pedestal. The room they occupy is fractured by shadows. As the title suggests, the work can be read as a satire on the assumed power of an art object or art moment, specifically in the context of the history of experimental art in New York, but also operates as a sincere homage to the importance of mystery and wonder.



Guston Monument, 2011
Pencil on paper, 46 × 61 cm

Happening, 2014
Acrylic on canvas, 254 × 306 cm

Sarah Slappey

b. 1984, South Carolina, USA. Lives and works in Brooklyn, New York, USA.

In Sarah Slappey's work, tropes of her South Carolina girlhood abound: daisy chains, phone cords, braided hair and gingham dresses are recurring motifs. Far from giving an impression of saccharine innocence, however, these deceptively sinister objects of restraint reflect the cruelty inherent in rigid notions of femininity.

Imbuing her subjects with a fleshiness that is at once darkly humorous and delicately feminine, Slappey examines the paradoxes of aesthetic pleasure and discomfort using the human form. Jarring details disrupt girlish vulnerability: smooth, hairless limbs are revealed to be razor-sharp, and in *Flame Fingers* (2020) nails tangled around a cord are sharpened to a blade, and at one point catch light. Slappey often reduces the human figure to only hands and feet, leaving it unclear whether they are attached to a person at all. In her nuanced work, Slappey explores the paradoxes within the natural and the human worlds: softness is counterbalanced with aggression, comfort with vulnerability.

Flame Fingers, 2020
Oil and acrylic on paper, 66 × 61 cm

Girl Talk, 2021
Oil and acrylic on canvas, triptych
28 × 25 cm each

Anj Smith

b. 1978, Kent, UK. Lives and works in London, UK.

Anj Smith has been producing intricately rich paintings for over two decades. These works embrace complexity in defiance of simplicity and easy categorisation. Luxurious in detail, Smith's paintings represent her own personal reinterpretation of traditional technique, and are a meditation on the many threads present in the history of painting.

Themes of delicacy and beauty are counterbalanced with the ever-present sense of decay and entropy; layers of skin and fabric have worn away to nothingness, only to be stitched together again by magic spells. Smith's paintings can take the form of dystopic landscapes, such as *Ex-Plexus* (2004) or *Evolution in Poetic Language* (2010), or eccentric portraits, such as *The Combatant* (2010) and *Landscape with Lagerstätte* (2017). The title of this work includes the German term for a sedimentary deposit that contains exceptionally well-preserved fossils, and sometimes even soft tissue. The subject of the painting is a reclining face, its eyes closed and covered in a gauze that contains stars, tendrils and pill-shaped lozenges. Smith's gnomic paintings have their own self-contained logic and unique visual and emotional language that reward the viewer for time invested in looking.

Satyricon, 2011
Oil on linen, 43 × 35 cm

Left: *Landscape with Lagerstätte*, 2017
Oil on linen, 15 × 20 cm

Right: *The Combatant*, 2010
Oil on linen, 54 × 44 cm

Polyesteria, 2004
Oil on linen, 26 × 31 cm

Emily Mae Smith

b. 1979, Austin, Texas, USA. Lives and works in Brooklyn, New York, USA.

Emily Mae Smith creates lively compositions that offer sly social and political commentary, borrowing strands from painting styles of the past, such as symbolism, surrealism and pop art. A recurring motif in her work is an anthropomorphic broomstick figure, which stems from Smith's obsession with signs and symbols. The broomstick simultaneously represents a painter's brush, a domestic cleaning tool historically reserved for women, and a phallus.

This bewitched and multifaceted avatar confronts contemporary issues such as gender roles, domestic work, sexuality, capitalism and violence. At the same time, Smith's paintings challenge art history's phallocentric myths, creating instead imagery from a feminist perspective. *Rogue Wave* (2016) is a hybrid of the feminine and the natural, overtly inspired by Hokusai's *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* (1830). The surging water, symbolising the overwhelming force of nature, is here reflected in red in the lenses of the sunglasses worn by an imperiously cool figure with a razor-sharp fringe.

Breaking Eggs, 2014
Prepared ground, watercolour and acrylic on linen
36 × 28 cm

Rogue Wave, 2016
Oil on linen, 183 × 249 cm

Dorothea Tanning

b. 1910, Galesburg, Illinois, USA. d. 2012, New York, USA.

Dorothea Tanning was a pioneering artist who developed her own pictorial realm of domestic disquiet and dreamlike spaces. Encountering surrealism in New York in the 1930s, she went on to produce highly influential paintings in the 1940s and 1950s involving aspects of self-portraiture, where the familiar was made strange, and desire and sexuality were brought to the fore. Over the subsequent decades Tanning experimented with abstraction, produced powerful installations of soft fabric sculptures, and was also a prolific poet. The painting *Early Politics* (1988) suggests, in an open-ended way, a dynamic of control, with the figure with raised arms in the foreground engaged in a ritual of sorts. A female figure seems to be in the process of being lifted from a blue slab into the sky, and a mysterious bug-eyed entity floats above. In interviews Tanning has suggested that the piece is a reflection on violence, and an affirmation of 'the wonderful will of human beings to prove their ancestry over the forces of so-called civilisation'.

Early Politics, 1988
Oil on canvas, 162 × 130 cm

Left: *Project for a Fainting*, 1979
Oil on canvas, 144 × 113 cm

Right: Detail

Henry Taylor

b. 1958, Ventura, CA, USA. Lives and works in Los Angeles, USA.

Henry Taylor paints representations of reality but rejects the label of portraitist. His pictures of people map an American cultural landscape that he is part of and witnesses first-hand but, rather than being documents, the paintings remain enigmatic, empathetic and open-ended. Taylor's subjects, which range from members of the Black community to symbolic objects that represent historical struggle, come from a combination of memory and archival images gathered on studio walls. The breadth and nuance of the human condition are perhaps his primary topics. In the painting *Clean* (2006) a slender woman stands in an off-white ground in which the painting title has been written. The brush marks are loose and confident, lending the work an urgent feeling, partly abstracting the figure, or at least obscuring their facial features. Feelings of assertive confidence coexist with an impression of vulnerability, giving the painting an emotional charge.

Untitled (Jade in White), 2012
Acrylic on canvas, 152 × 122 cm

Left: *Untitled (Stripper)*, 2005
Acrylic on canvas, 199 × 173 cm

Right: *Clean*, 2006
Mixed media on linen, 196 × 121 cm

Oscar Murillo's family, 2015
Acrylic on canvas, three panels
Overall: 295 × 491 cm

Another Wrong, 2013
Acrylic on canvas, 295 × 192 cm

Caragh Thuring

b. 1972, Brussels, Belgium. Lives and works between London and Argyll, UK.

Caragh Thuring's paintings display the active work of looking, taking apart and then reassembling our surroundings. The structural aspect of making pictures is brought to the fore through multiple techniques of printing, stitching and spraying. Objects that point to interior and exterior spaces – such as windowpanes, volcanoes, patterned cloth, cranes and bricks – recur across Thuring's canvases, showing her ongoing interest in the industries and processes that have built up around modern society. *Handelaar* (2008) (Dutch for 'trader' or 'seller') is a composition based around the sketched silhouette of a body in a dress, leaning dramatically, one arm and leg thrust out. The image feels as if it's been taken from an advertising or fashion spread. Thuring introduces criss-crossing white lines and triangular areas of thin pink and red pigment that overlay and encase the figure within a window structure. The body leans into this architecture, involved with it, but also out of scale relative to it, and somewhat out of place.

Man, 2010
Oil, acrylic and gesso on linen
210 × 275 cm

Left: *Handelaar*, 2008
Oil on linen, 244 × 183 cm

Right: *Wethouder's Room*, 2011
Gesso, acrylic, graphite and oil on linen
213 × 274 cm

Aggregate Man, 2015
Screen printing ink, oil and charcoal on linen
122 × 183 cm

Tesfaye Urgessa

b. 1983, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Lives and works in Nürtingen, Germany.

Tesfaye Urgessa's paintings feature distinctively posed figures in settings that sit somewhere between the domestic and the surreal. Urgessa emigrated from Addis Ababa to Stuttgart in 2009 to study, and his work brings Ethiopian iconography into dialogue with the styles of diverse European artists from the modern canon. Urgessa's paintings pointedly address the contemporary moment, in terms of both the highly charged intimacy of personal relations and the wider topics of identity and migration. *The holy family despair* (2021) is simultaneously tender and fraught. The couple cradle a new baby, and the parents' legs are entwined as they sit. The pair's facial expressions are intense and distracted, however, implying conflicting emotions. The white-gloved hand belonging to the statue on the wall behind, which lifts the foliage headdress of the seated man, adds a layer of unreality.

VUPs 7, 2019
Oil on canvas, 120 × 110 cm

The holy family despair, 2021
Oil on canvas, 200 × 200 cm

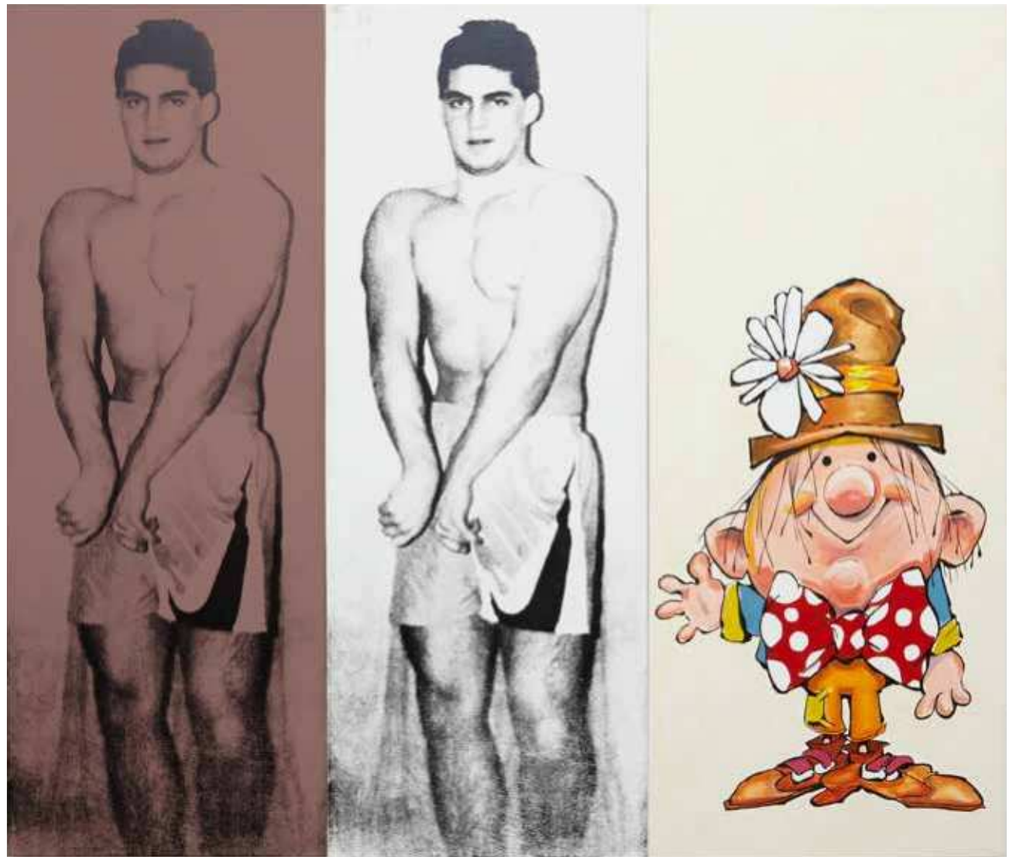
Julia Wachtel

b. 1956, New York, USA. Lives and works in New York, USA.

Mining the depths of popular culture, Wachtel is known for producing work that actively unsettles our vast visual vocabulary. Her method of constructing paintings involves placing found images into compositions that juxtapose the frivolous and the significant. Photographic and illustrated imagery come together to create new and absurd scenes.

In *Untitled (Body Builder)* (1989) a screen-printed image of a young man flexing his muscles is doubled, and butted up against a hand-painted but equally appropriated image of a geeky greetings-card character, who waves out at the viewer. With his androgynous face, patched trousers, messy hair and elongated shoes, he looks like an approachable clown, offering a witty retort to the Nike-clad body builder.

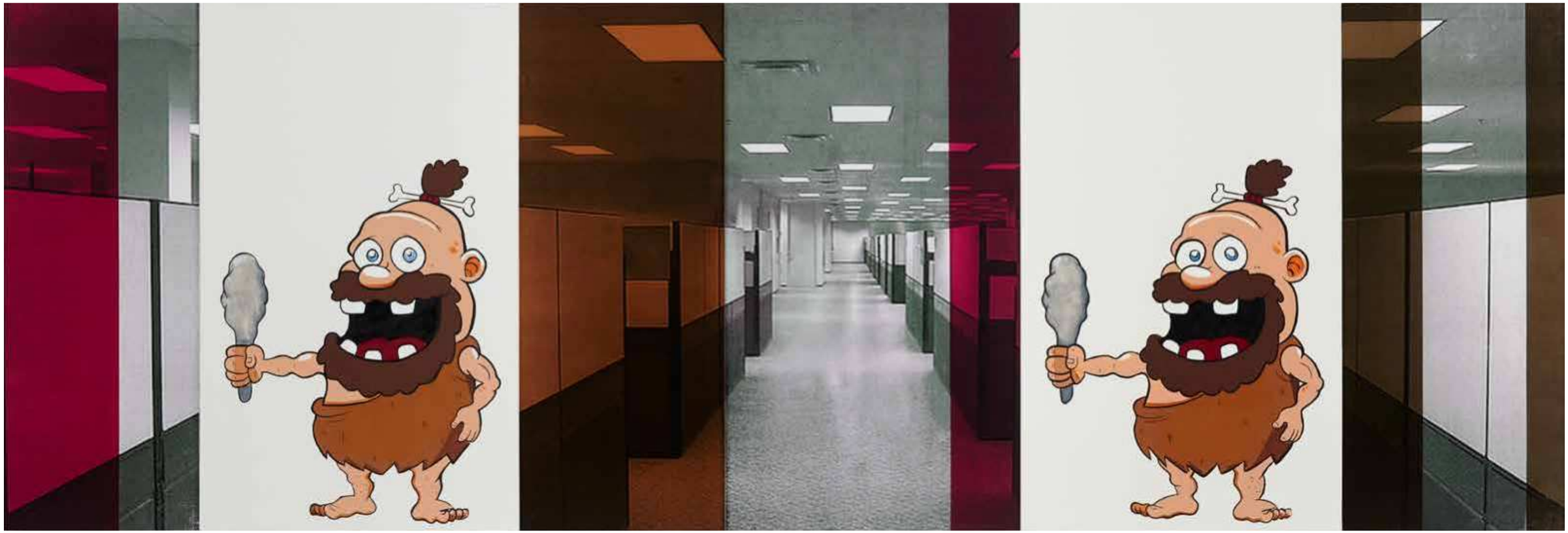
More recently Wachtel has almost exclusively used imagery drawn from the internet and has repeatedly turned to representations used in advertising and the media, in what the artist describes as acts of 'reclamation'.



Untitled (Body Builder), 1989
Oil, acrylic and lacquer ink on canvas
163 × 191 cm

Left: *We Won the Cold War*, 1992
Acrylic and screen ink on canvas, two parts
Overall: 127 × 241 cm

Right: *Untitled (crucifixion/stuffed animal)*, 1994
Oil on linen, 125 × 104 cm



Landscape No. 20 (Cubicle), 2013
Oil, Flashe and acrylic ink on canvas
152 × 447 cm

Willem Weismann

b. 1977, Eindhoven, Netherlands. Lives and works in London, UK.

Willem Weismann explores the possibility of paintings acting as 'information systems' and stores of meaning. His work explicitly makes connections to other forms of archives, both physical and virtual: the memories we carry in our heads, libraries of books, vast online stores of data, and the stratified layers of history beneath our pavements and soil. The surfaces of Weismann's paintings make evident his active efforts to make sense of a world in flux. *Reading about painting* (2014) and *Reading about writing* (2014) feature characters with their faces obscured and pressed up against the pages of books. Although the titles suggest people seeking a deeper connection to something, but possibly struggling to find it, the works can also be read as a heartfelt tribute to the act of getting lost and absorbed in thinking about art.

Reading about painting, 2014
Oil on canvas, 60 × 50 cm

Left: *Photocopier (colour)*, 2014
Oil on canvas, 95 × 80 cm

Right: *Reading about writing*, 2014
Oil on canvas, 60 × 50 cm

Michael Williams

b. 1978, Doylestown, Pennsylvania, USA. Lives and works in Los Angeles, USA.

Combining surreal and psychedelic abstraction with cartoon and desktop computer aesthetic figuration, Michael Williams responds to painterly conventions with a sincere irreverence. His paintings are melting pots that an audience can choose to try to decode – or they can simply enjoy the ride. His titles maintain this unassuming attitude to art-making. In *Morning Meditation with Mud* and *Jenny Mac* (2013) the processes and variations of technique are revealed, from translucent sparse washes to globular daubs, giving the work a seductive materiality.

Elsewhere on the canvas humorous cartoon elements bounce off the more cryptic details, creating a colourful feast for the eyes. The work *DAD* (2014), an inkjet on canvas, is far more legible. A computer-created image shows a beaming topless man in purple dungarees: a touching, affectionate family portrait, its sense of absurdity heightened by the Adobe Photoshop 'save' window being used as the top layer of the composition.

DAD, 2014
Inkjet on canvas, 198 × 262 cm

Left: *Final Whatever*, 2013
Oil and airbrush on canvas, 175 × 140 cm

Right: *Morning Meditation with Mud and Jenny Mac*, 2013
Oil, airbrush and inkjet on canvas, 251 × 193 cm

Robin F. Williams

b. 1984, Columbus, OH, USA. Lives and works in Los Angeles, USA.

Robin F. Williams paints stylised, almost architectural figures that fill her canvases: her work questions why images of women have consistently been so problematic across visual culture. Williams's cast of characters includes supernatural entities such as ghosts, trolls and angels, and more earthly beings, such as sunbathers and joggers. Exaggerated facial expressions that demand the attention of the viewer, such as grins and wide-eyed stares, recur in her paintings. In *Teenage Witch* (2018) the cat and girl form a charismatic double act, possessing an element of threat. Williams uses the imaginative space of painting to playfully explore the boundaries of normative behaviour.

Teenage Witch, 2018
Acrylic and oil on canvas
127 × 178 cm

Chloe Wise

b. 1990, Montreal, Quebec, Canada. Lives and works in New York, USA.

Drawing inspiration from a wide spectrum that includes modern advertising and the seventeenth-century Dutch Golden Age, Chloe Wise's paintings accost the viewer with sharp, humorous critiques of the contemporary sociopolitical climate, while playing with the layered, timeless metaphors of food and the transience of youth. *I Remember Everything I've Ever Eaten* (2015) encapsulates Wise's signature style, displaying the permeable relationship between femininity and consumption and mimicking the advertising world's sensualisation of food items. Wise handpicks sitters for her paintings from her circle of friends. These sitters are captured in a glistening light alongside food that represents bountiful indulgence and also a satirical fantasy. Here American actress, writer and model Hari Nef is portrayed on a chequered cloth with fresh fruit, flowers and almond milk.

I Remember Everything I've Ever Eaten, 2015
Oil on canvas, 122 × 183 cm

Left: *He probably thinks you're a stressful phenomenon*, 2019
Oil on linen, 183 × 152 cm

Right: *Breakfast Epiphanies*, 2019
Oil on linen, 183 × 153 cm

Issy Wood

b. 1993, Durham, NC, USA. Lives and works in New York, USA.

Issy Wood's paintings combine elements of the past and the present to create pictures that are familiar yet startling. Blurring the boundaries between different worlds, Wood uses pictures from her phone, objects from auction catalogues, the faces of celebrities, images from advertising, fragments of architecture and motifs drawn from surrealism. Wood also publishes her writing and releases pop music: her work is preoccupied with slippages of language and meaning. In addition to canvas and linen, Wood also uses velvet as her support – skin, teeth, silverware, hair and leather glisten against its texture, but are far from straightforwardly alluring. The painting *Will he* (2019) features a nude, perhaps transposed from an old master painting, framed and overlaid by a Gothic arch. The figure, her face obscured, seems both partially trapped by the delicate white tracer and resolutely at one with the stone that grows around her.

Giantess 2, 2017
Oil on canvas, 210 × 164 cm

Left: *Car interior/snacking on your faculties*, 2019
Oil on velvet, 300 × 200 cm

Right: *Mad at me*, 2018
Oil on canvas, 218 × 269 cm

Top: *JOAN CIRCA 1972*, 2017
Oil on canvas, 10 × 7 cm

Middle: *JOAN CIRCA 1988*, 2017
Oil on canvas, 10 × 7 cm

Bottom: *JOAN CIRCA 2002*, 2017
Oil on canvas, 10 × 7 cm

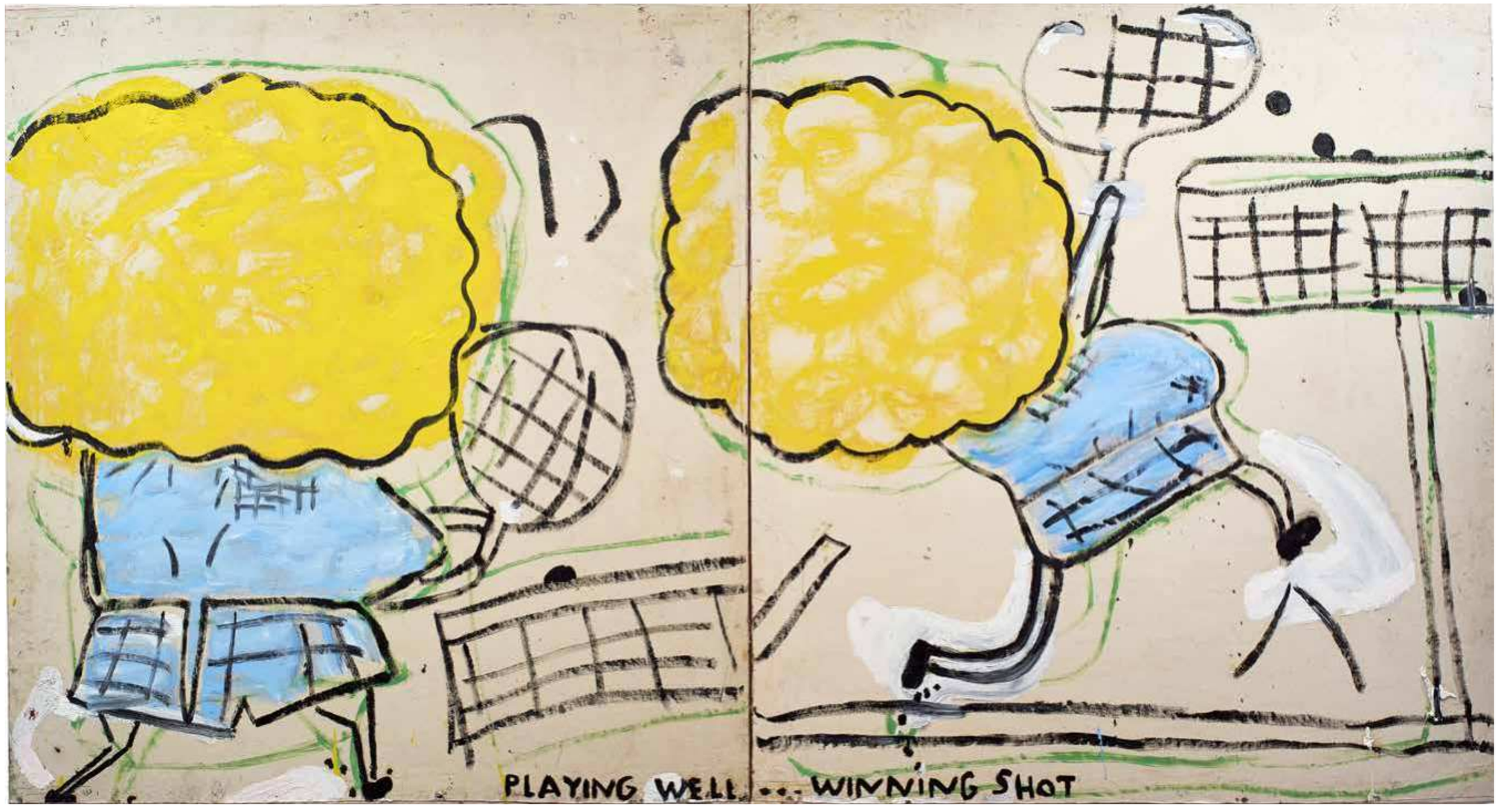
Will he, 2019
Oil on linen, 225 × 150 × 5 cm

Rose Wylie

b. 1934, Kent, UK. Lives and works in Kent, UK.

Rose Wylie paints in a direct, effervescent style, full of texture and personality. Figures, objects, signs and words appear together in a distinctive lexicon that draws from the popular culture of entertainment and sport, but retains a renegade individuality. Humorous and emotional, Wylie's art uses seemingly simple forms to ask serious questions about what painting can do, and generously invites the viewer on a journey to experience the world as she perceives it. *Battle in Heaven (Film Notes)* (2008) is one of Wylie's ongoing cinema-inspired paintings, in which she works with memorable scenes from films she has watched. In this case it is a confrontational, violent Mexican film, *Battle in Heaven* (2005), by director Carlos Reygadas, which features an opening and closing shot of the back of a woman's head as she engages in a sex act. On the raw canvas, Wylie started by applying pale green underpainting to add vibrancy, much as Renaissance masters did. The bold, textured brushstrokes of hair and skin laid on top disarm, and the work takes on an air of romantic adventure, creating a distance from the atmosphere in the source material.

Battle in Heaven (Film Notes), 2008
Oil on canvas, 185 × 335 cm



Playing Well, 2016
Oil on canvas, 185 × 340 cm

Jakub Julian Ziółkowski

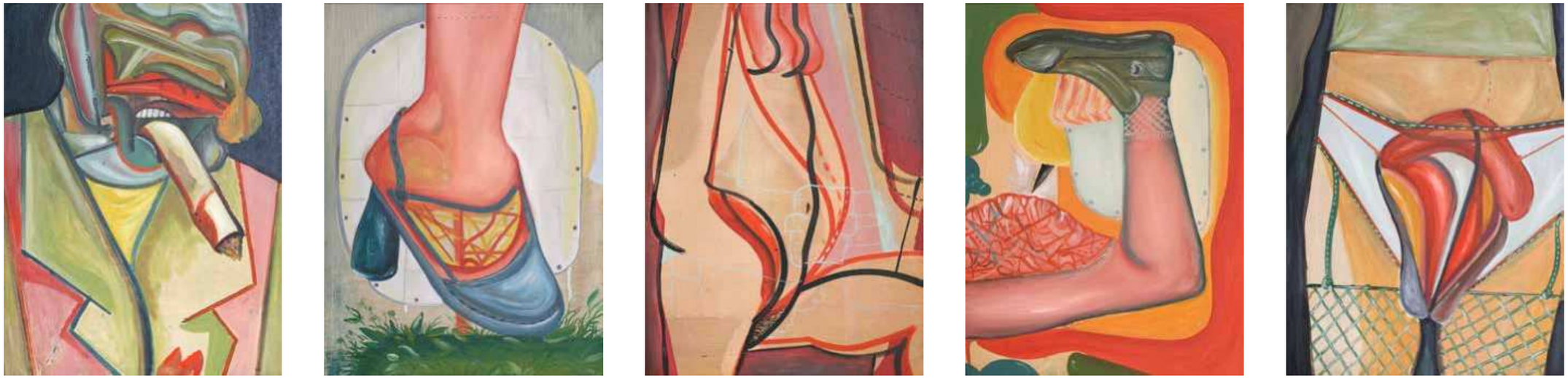
b. 1980, Zamość, Poland. Lives and works between Kraków and Zamość, Poland.

Jakub Julian Ziółkowski turns the canvas into a laboratory, in which myriad interrelated motifs create phantasmagorical narratives. His paintings encompass multiple stylistic references from art history and popular culture, such as Renaissance and baroque painting, Hieronymus Bosch's grotesque figures and visions, surrealism, German expressionism, graphic novels and street art. Ziółkowski transforms this archaeological take on visual imagery into a darkly humorous personal universe. *Untitled* (2006) comprises five small paintings, each offering a partial view of a body. Cigarettes, shoes, muscles and organs are painted in an exaggerated visceral manner, suggesting temporary adaptations and additions to an anonymous figure – or figures.

Untitled ('Emperor's Delight'), 2010
Oil on canvas, 170 × 200 cm

Left: *The Great Battle Under the Table*, 2006
Oil on canvas, 190 × 165 cm

Right: Detail



Untitled, 2006
Oil on canvas, five parts, 40 × 31 cm each

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The Stand–Ins: Figurative Painting from the Zabludowicz Collection

This publication was developed from the exhibition of the same name, presented at Zabludowicz Collection, London, 7 October 2021–13 February 2022. Curated by Paul Luckraft.

Edited by Paul Luckraft and Elizabeth Neilson
Designed by Burgess & Beech and Benjamin Bostock
Copy-edited by Jane Hammett
Proofread by Louise Glynne-Walton
Artist text research and drafts: Rosie Halford
Printed in an edition of 1,000 by Cassochrome, Belgium
Paper: RAW uncoated 140 gsm
Typeset in Burgess by Colophon Foundry
Cover image: Christina Quarles, *I'd a Scope Eyes*, 2018. Acrylic on canvas, 196 × 245 cm. © Christina Quarles. Courtesy the artist, Hauser & Wirth and Pilar Corrias, London. Photo: Damian Griffiths.

ISBN: 978-1-907921-39-1

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176 Prince of Wales Road
London NW5 3PT

Zabludowicz Collection is a trading name of Zabludowicz Art Projects. Zabludowicz Art Projects is a company limited by guarantee (company registered number 626959). Registered charity number 1120067. Registered office: 41 Dover Street, London W1S 4NS.

A catalogue record of this publication is available from the British Library.

Acknowledgements

The Zabludowicz Collection would like to thank all the artists and their galleries who have contributed to the exhibition and this publication.