

Valise¹

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People cannot be carried around like keys or bits of change in one's pocket.





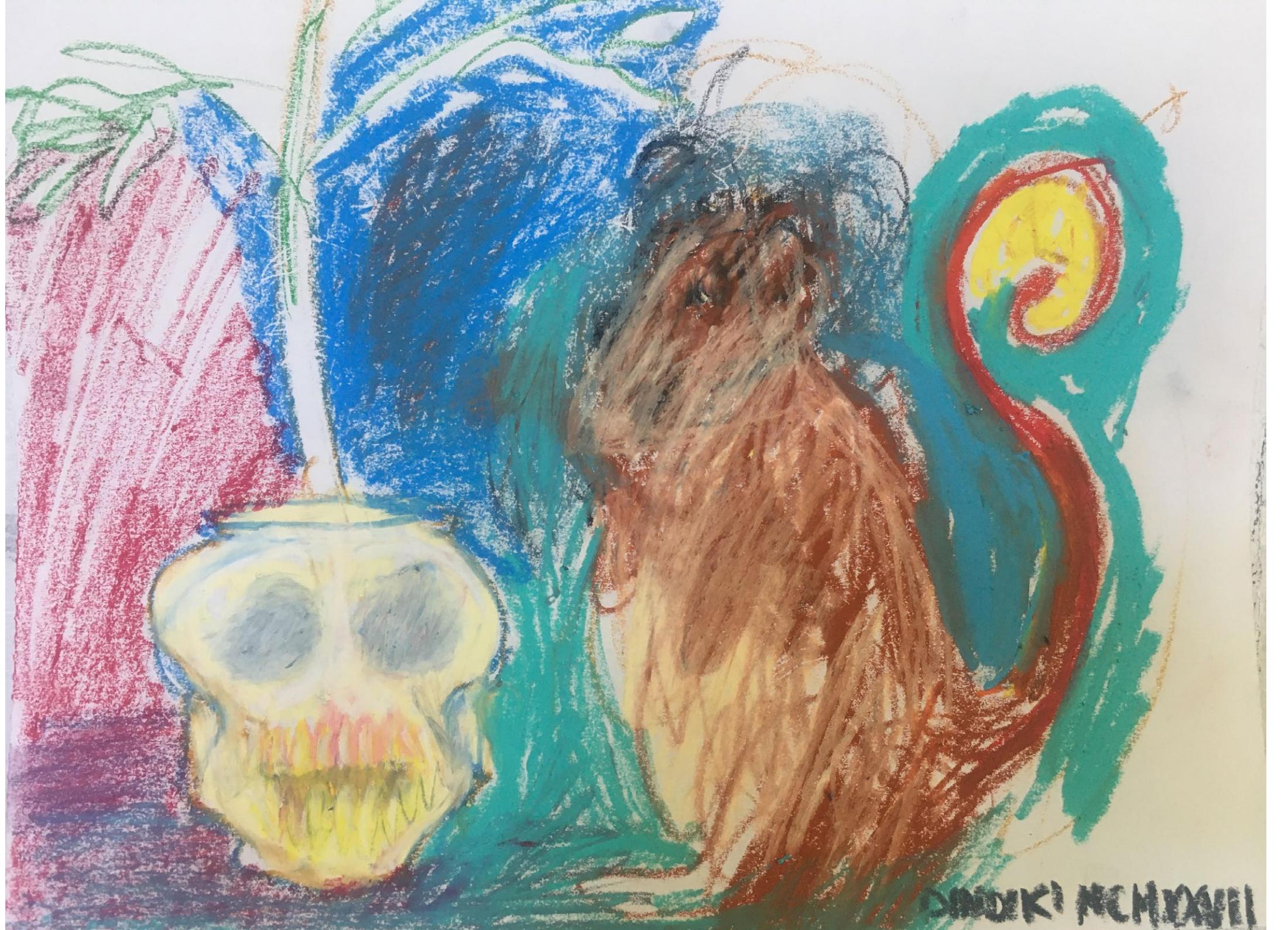
First

Much of my practice has to do with thinking about how a painting works discretely, and how it works in relation, whether to an image, text, or statement by the artist. I am quite taken up with the idea that a painting is a mechanism all of its own, and that it can be meaningful in terms of this. That is, that it operates independently of context or any conscious, logical comprehension. It is in this sense that I think of the reality of a painting.



An important part of a painting's reality, is that it functions primarily as a self-contained object, not as an image among other images. It is from this point that the painting works relationally – not in a way that is necessarily contingent, but in that it re-directs rhythms and associations, and offers space through the ambiguity between paintings.

My feeling about drawings is different. I think that they tend towards attachment and flimsiness. They feel manipulatable, as well as elaborative, like footnotes. I've included my drawings in this presentation because I haven't achieved the quality I'm looking for in any individual painting, and I'm hoping that something of it might sit between them and the drawings. This is of course in opposition to how I've described the mechanism of painting. But, considering that these drawings were made as preparatory steps in the painting process, this is a tentative, disassembled vision of paintings, until I can reconcile them into a single image. It is also an articulation of painting's destructiveness, of the quite brutal process of bringing things together, which is in contrast to the peaceable act of leaving them separate.



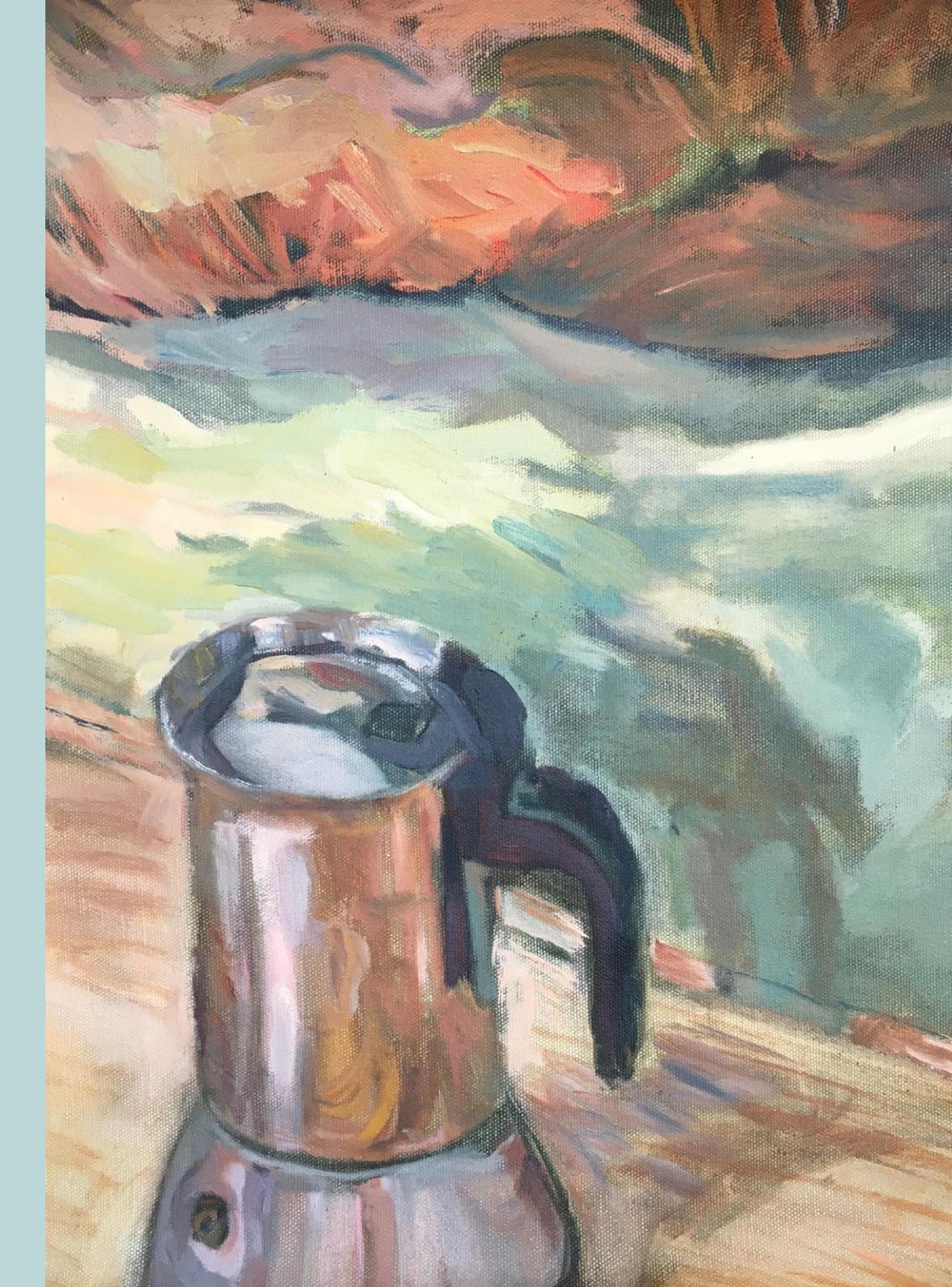
DANIEL MICHAIL



In the winter as the snow falls,
a terror grips the minds of the
mountain folk.
It is the threat of white death.
Brother upon brother imagines
his solitude. But they are not
imagining it, they are testing it
out.



The girl became accustomed to this way of life, you would never have said it was in any way misaligned.

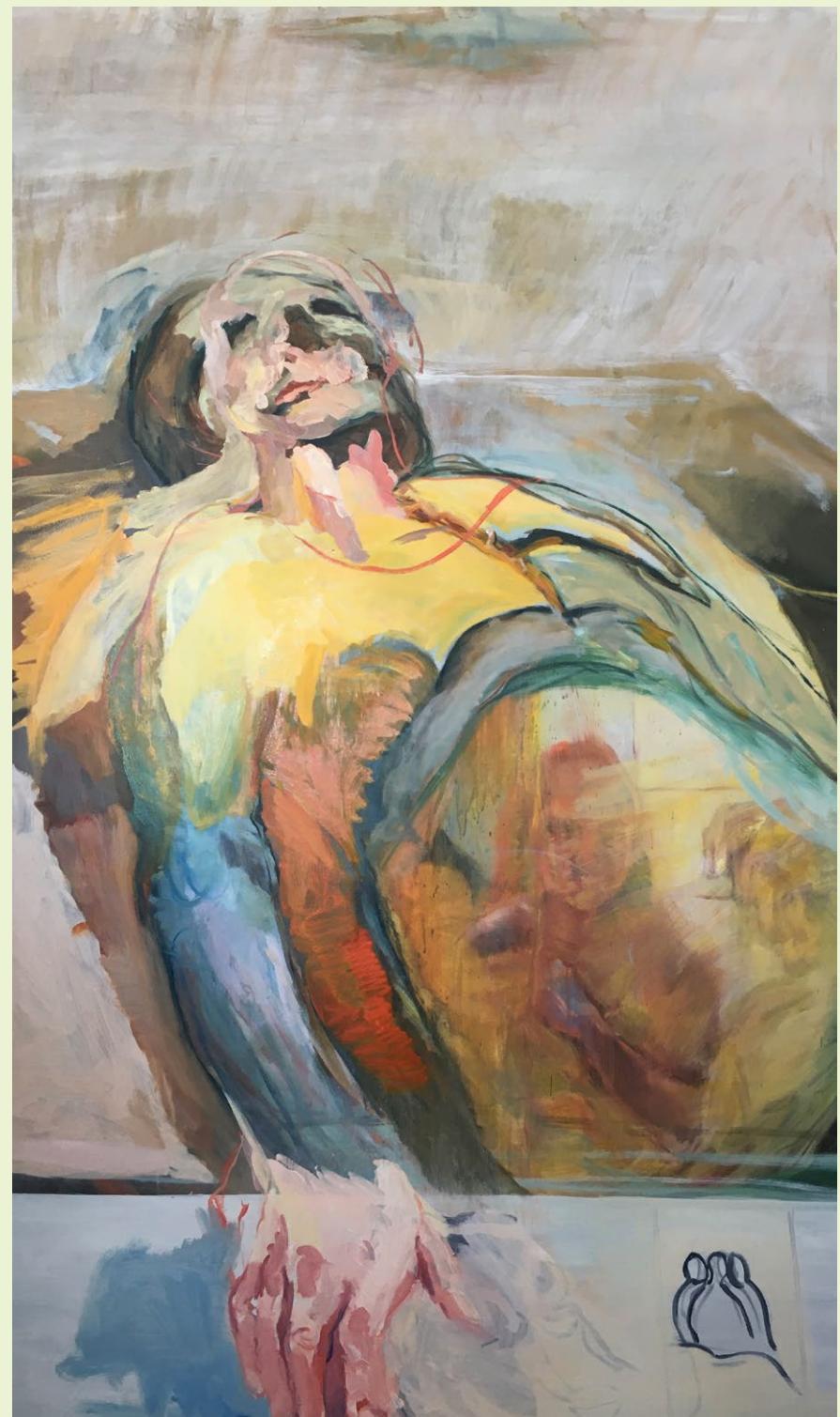


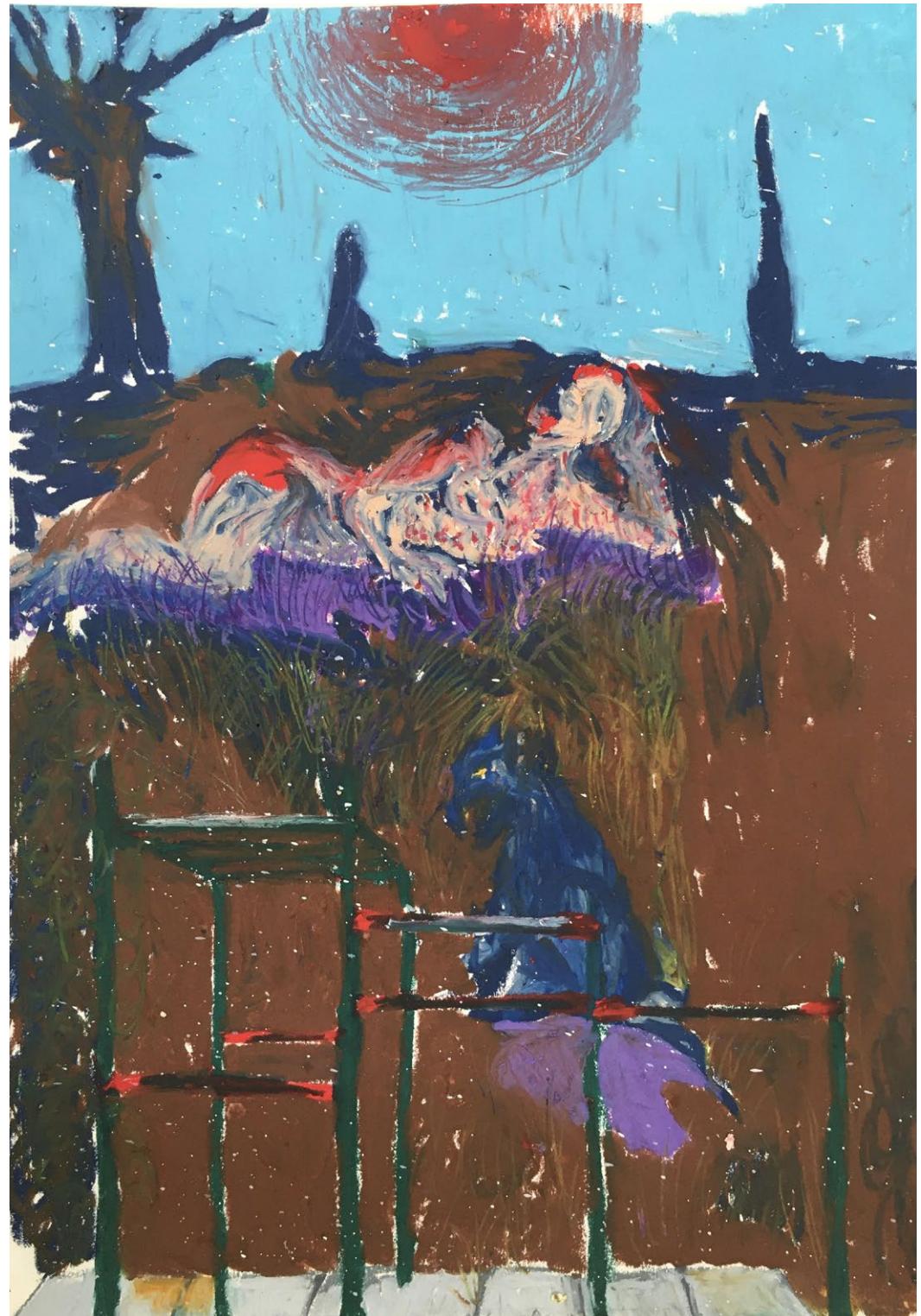




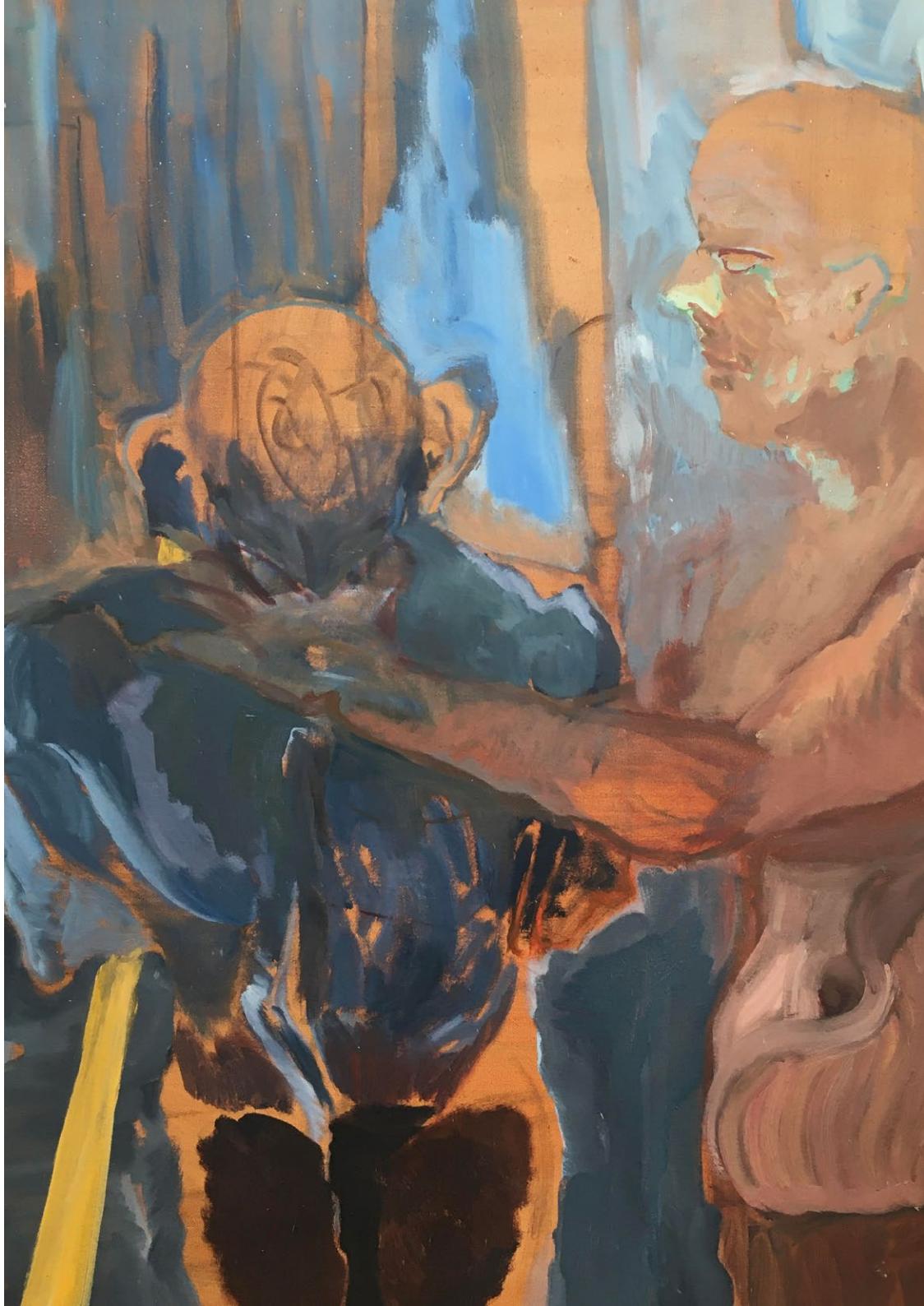
In fact, they say that she was born out of a shell, and then fell ten meters to become obliterated at the foot of the mountain.

We cannot say for certain then if she was born inland or by the sea. But we have developed the turn of phrase 'if you return to the coast, are you giving up?', in reference to the girl, because she was so tenacious.





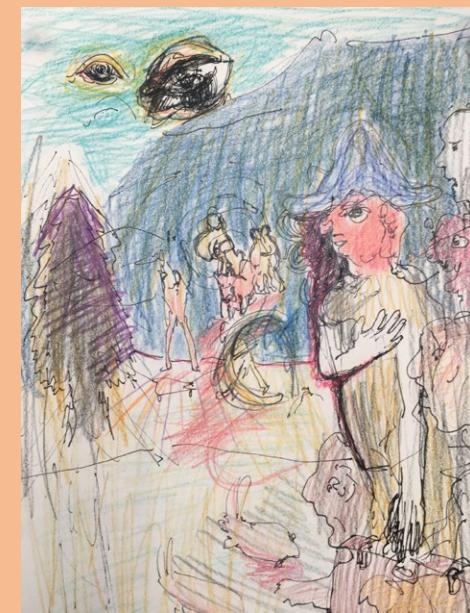
She was also sentimental, in her deeply felt attachment to old fashioned things. Especially things that can be carried out in monosyllables: paint, write, fuck, eat, fight, dance. That is, she wasn't into video, cooking, collaboration, or self-harm.







The feeling-ness of self-destruction doesn't come in a single act; there's a quality of dragging the rag over an extensive surface to pick up all the bits that a non-destructive person might leave scattered.



But people cannot be carried around like
keys or bits of change in one's pocket.



Thoughts on narrative and sense in painting

This final-year body of work is made up of oil paintings on canvas and board, along with numerous drawings. These drawings were done largely as preparatory exercises, but I'm choosing to exhibit them alongside the paintings, that they may serve as elaborative, associative counterpoints to a painting practice that is still finding its feet. This is not to say that I consider this combination of registers – the 'complete', stretched oil painting along side the crumpled pencil sketch – to necessarily be only a provisional way of working. On one hand it is very much a feeling and aesthetic I'm drawn to. What I am admitting however, is that this question of the relationships between images, and the capacity for a painting to stand as a discreet, self-contained image, troubles me. The strategy is at least partly as a result of failing to get the paintings to speak by themselves, in other words, a way of teasing out a resonance, a bit of a subscript to get the conversation going. This might be something interesting in itself. I think it speaks to my second point of enquiry – am I engaging in painting discursively, with a mind of meaning being relational and historically located, or can I talk about such things as 'essence' and 'reality' within painting. These two views can be broadly categorised under 'nominalism', which I will unpack in terms of the discursive models of Donna Haraway and Michele Foucault, and 'structuralism', which I'll consider specifically in terms of psychoanalysis and the work of Lacanian scholar Joan Copjec.

To begin, I'd like to clarify the meaning of my use of the term 'painting'. The word can be used as either a noun or a verb. When I use it in this essay, I am referring to both together, in that it is always referring to the painting object, but also to the fact that it is a depiction, an artifice, and that this fact, along with the process by which it is made, is constantly inscribed in

the work and integral to its 'meaning' or 'reality'.

In his book 'Francis Bacon – the logic of sensation' (2003), Giles Deleuze makes a distinction within painting between the abstract, as appealing to the intellect, and the figurative, as appealing to emotion. Francis Bacon has frequently referred to the importance of the activation of the nervous system in the effectiveness of a painting. (Deleuze, 2003:10) For Deleuze and Bacon, the trouble with figurative painting is that its ability to elicit feeling is impeded by its reliance on imagery. Imagery reinstates itself, as its previous iterations, in the painting, and that recognisability creates cliché. For a painting to work, there has to be some shift of representation, which comes about through the manner in which it is painted. It has to be made real to the viewer, as opposed to illustrative.

When I conceive of painting holding 'reality' as opposed to being illustrative, I cannot help but try and enclose my painted



subjects, make them static and disconnected from each other, like rice-balls. It is an inclination towards the iconographic, and a stumbling upon an aesthetic of embalmment, hieroglyphics, and tunnels. The evolving practice of painting could be conceived as the breaking up and remoulding of rice balls, as each ball creates a new potential for cliché. This is a very tricky matter however, the breaking up of the ball. As Deleuze points out, the manner of breaking up established painting strategies can be its own cliché. This is most apparent in instances of the painter trying to shock, or to illicit an emotional response. [Deleuze, 39] Paul Cezanne stated that painting should only be a matter of “record[ing] the fact”, and Francis Bacon claimed that he “wanted to paint the scream more than the horror.”

Trying to have a painting elicit emotion by not trying to, begs the question, to what point am I working? What actually is ‘the fact’? If, as established, the function of the painting depends on the newness of the image, but attempts at transgression or originality as an end in itself gives rise to cliché, there has to be some other factor. To this, I would like to appeal to the idea of ‘the real’, both in terms of my own formulation – a sense, an urge, an intuition [about the fact] – and to that of Jaques Lacan, who theorised it as structures or principles that cannot be located within the relationships that constitute the everyday. [Copjec, 1994: 11]

This idea of ‘the real’ is, of course, a problematic one. Theorists such as Michel Foucault and Donna Haraway have taken issue with its claim to objectivity, and argued convincingly for its political failings, as a methodology that entrenches hierarchy by how it creates units of power by falsely separating the subject and institutions that form it. Foucault argues that societal discipline is maintained through the micro-workings of small-scale systems of power relations, that produce people with internalised surveillance structures. [Copjec, 5] While he is focused on details, “the minimal unit of his investigation is never simply

an isolatable point, whether this be a person or a position, but always a relation.” [Copjec, 5]

Similarly, Haraway takes issue with the way in which the idea of the subject is inscribed through Christian myth (the idea of a natural state of being, the stable, unified self), and of psychoanalysis and structuralism (that there are fixed structures that govern the subject, and through which the subject can be interpreted. Haraway theorises an alternative model that “skips the step of original unity, of identification with nature in the Western sense.” [Haraway, 8] The figure that embodies this is the cyborg – that which is constructed of multiple parts, organic and artificial, existing not in relation to the notion of ‘the whole’ or in terms of fixed structures, but as an endlessly articulating state of relation.

The relationships for forming wholes from parts, including those of polarity and hierarchical domination, are at issue in the cyborg world. [Haraway, 9]

Haraway argues for an account of the world that is imbedded in relations, not existing outside them. The topic of ‘truth’, she thinks, cannot come down to internal convictions, or being a matter of which perspective you see something from. Instead, she says, it “is a matter of worlding and inhabiting, it is a matter of testing the holdingness of things” [Haraway in Weigel, 2019].

Foucault’s anti-structuralist stance is similar in denouncing fixed structures in favour of attending to the way relations arise through history, and shift accordingly. It is an attempt at a tangible, embodied account of social relations of power and knowledge, in other words, to not fall prey to the way a language-based analysis “flattens out” what it attempts to study. [Copjec, 8] This prevention of stratification of phenomena in a language-based analysis, is due to the impossibility of a meta-language within that system. That is, no phenomena appearing

in such an analysis can be taken to account for all the others. [Copjec, 8] Foucault asserts that

It is not to the great model of signs and language that reference should be made, but to war and battle. The history which bears and determines us is war-like, not language-like. Relations of power, not relations of sense. [Foucault cited in Copjec, 1994: 4]

However, Foucault's critique of a linguistic model of analysis as unfolding the whole of the society it analyses, and putting it all on the same plane, forces him to accept the exact opposite. For to acknowledge metalanguage's impossibility is to "realise that the whole of society will never reveal itself in an analytical moment, no diagram will ever be able to display it fully." [Copjec, 8] This acknowledgement does not compel one to conceive of a society that never quite forms, where events never quite take place, and about which nothing can be said. [Copjec, 8-9] Rather, to "say that there is no metalanguage is to say [...] that society never stops realizing itself, that it continues to be formed over time." [Copjec, 8] This is to say, that to recognise the impossibility of metalanguage is to "split society between its appearance – the positive relations and facts we observe in

it – and its being, [...] its generative principle, which cannot appear among these relations." [Copjec, 9] This principle, is what Lacan refers to as "the order of the real." [Copjec, 11]



At this point I will depart from the debate, before I get sucked too deeply into philosophy and away from the concerns of painting. I think I've laid out enough in order to unpack the implications of each view, and how that might affect my approach to painting. The revelatory process that Copjec refers to, which infers a 'generative principle' separate to societal relations, is defined by the psychoanalytic philosopher and painter Bracha Ettinger, in terms of the act of painting. Using painting as a means through which to theorise, she employs the moments of confrontation and revelation within the process as a way of thinking through the formation of the subject, which is formulated as occurring through the act of looking and encounter with the other. She is not painting about the phenomenon, but investigating it through her process of applying thin washes of paint, adding and removing, blurring and isolating forms. It is attention to the way in which a painting might demonstrate rather than express ideas and sensations. [European Graduate School Video Lectures, 2007] Just as Francis Bacon's paintings should not be said to be expressing loneliness, anguish or metaphysical doubt. Instead, the vacant faces and contorted figures held in glass cases "demonstrate how alienation may provoke a longing for its own absolute form – which is mindlessness." [Berger, 384]

Painting's mechanism of demonstration is not, however, that of narration. The painting is a mediator and not a direct expression. Its purpose is one of affecting that expression, not of narrating a sim-





ulation of it. Bacon talks about painting's capacity for this as its distinct characteristic, when he describes the hindrance of narrative within painting:

the story that is already being told between one figure and another begins to cancel out the possibilities of what can be done with the paint on its own. And this is a very great difficulty. (Bacon in Deleuze, 2003:4)

By this he did not mean that multiple figures in a painting were necessarily narrative, he was simply remarking on the difficulty, and importance, of not making it so:

many of the greatest paintings have been done with a number of figures on a canvas, and of course every painter longs to do that [...] But at any moment somebody will come along and be able to put a number of figures on a canvas. (Bacon in

Deleuze, 4)

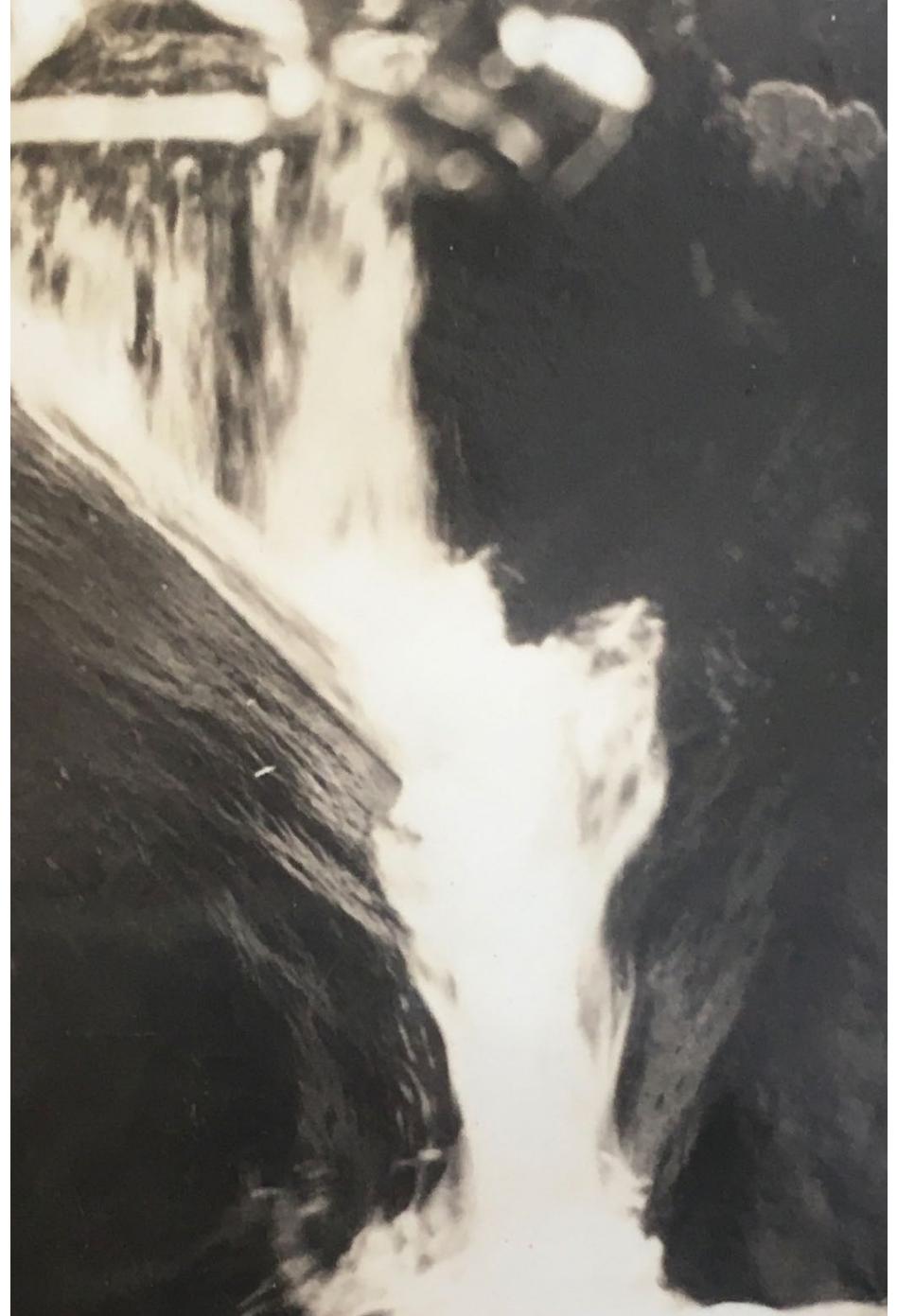
Deleuze hones in on this, asserting that "if painting has nothing to narrate and no story to tell, something is happening all the same, something which defines the functioning of the painting. (Deleuze, 12)

This thing that is happening, could, partly at least, have to do with the mechanisms by which we see ourselves and others. Lacan's ideas of the creation of the subject through the operations of the 'gaze', has been demonstrated to be, among other things, a painterly phenomenon. This is in evidence in how a painter takes the way the viewer looks into account. This is shown most clearly in Lacan's example of Hans Holbein's painting 'The Ambassadors', where the technique of anamorphosis is used. The painting depicts two rich merchants surrounded by their accumulated



wealth. The viewer's eye is drawn however to a large stain on the floor, which can be identified as a skull only when viewed at an angle from the top right-hand corner. The skull is suggestive of the fact that, in spite of all their worldly treasures, death awaits the men. What is key is that the painter does not paint the scull simply as a signifier. The rendering of it suggests that the image takes the position and subjectivity of the viewer into account. The painting therefore doesn't exist on its own, but exists to be seen, and in that way includes the viewer in the image. [Todd McGowan, 2024, 15:05]

Lacan's theorisation is that the 'I' establishes itself through rejection of that which is not 'I', and is metaphorically inscribed by the separation of the child from its mother. Ettinger describes it as a mechanism of the 'phallic gaze', whereby one is revealed to oneself through how ones' subjectivity or 'desire' constructs the image of the other. [Emancipations with David Tutt, 2021, 13:58] This is an insight about looking that painting provides.





Ettinger however provides an alternate model of subject creation, formulated through the act of painting. She hypothesises the 'Matrixial border-space', whereby the subject is created not via the rejection of the other, but through a process of 'co-emergence', of "becoming as separating in jointness" [European Graduate School Video Lectures, 2007, 2:09]. Within this conception, the birth or beginning of a subject "has never been anew, neither symbiotic nor separate" but one existing in "an act of continual co-emergence and co-fading of the I and the non-I". [European Graduate School Video Lectures, 2007, 2:28] The idea of co-emergence and co-fading, I think, speaks to the heart of the logic, or illogic, of painting. The subject constructs itself vis-à-vis the fantasy. These shapes, which are the fragments of the subject, the I and not-I, the real and the imagined, get their final, definitive moment when there is an "interpretation or a cut, and they become flattened like a disc". [European Graduate School Video Lectures, 2007, 3:08] This disc is the painting.



In conclusion, the aim of my practice this year has been, firstly, discerning the 'reality' I'm aiming for in painting, defined negatively as that which is not cliché, that which is new. Secondly, in terms of the conceiving that making un-cliché (figurative) paintings is a matter of getting the image to work anew, how does narrative hinder painting's ability to revive imagery, such that it appears to us vividly and as if with reality, not as a cliché? My third question has

been, how to deal with paintings as both discrete and relational objects, and whether one quality is more important in painting than the other.

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Endnotes

1 Blood in the cradle. Forrest. Spread. Valise.

I don't think it get's to a point. People get going, or get tired. Speed helps all the people.

Even my dog at this point.

My point at this point. What's the appeal?

Have you seen it? Need is a strong word. Can't sustain it. can't at all. No not at all. Egypt.

Does it show up on the skin?

I don't think I have many secrets in general [That's not me, that's someone else.] I do have secrets?

Secrets are not so intersting. I have nothing to say.

