

# BE PREPARED TO BLEED

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Underbelly 2020. Mixed media on paper 70 cm x 50 cm

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“To grow up is to accept vulnerability. To be alive is to be vulnerable”.

Madeleine L'Engle, American author

## CONTEXT

Patriarchy is a social system in which men strive to hold primary power (Meagher, 2011: 441). According to Dr Robert Morrell, South African academic and author, in the South African context, a considerable number of adult men occupying the role of husband, parent or business leader, grew up in the apartheid era – a society dominated by patriarchy. Morrell asserts that men were the head of most households, and that the white politicians who governed the country espoused predominately puritan values, a sentiment echoed by Professor Kobus du Pisan in *Puritanism Transformed* (2001: 158). These men ruled with a moral harshness that divided the economic and political arena along lines of race, gender and social class.

At the time, this was considered the most putative way of being a man, almost akin to a societal blueprint, and men accordingly positioned themselves in relation to it (Donaldson, 1993: 643-657).

This system started showing signs of disintegration in post-apartheid South Africa, with the new constitution (1996) heralding the beginnings of a more egalitarian approach. Nelson Mandela was elected president of the “new” South Africa, introducing into society a different kind of masculinity; one that challenged much of the aggressive male attitudes of the past (Unterhalter, 2000: 157-158). The time coincided with the emergence of studies on masculinities as they occurred in South Africa.

Australian sociologist, Raewyn Connell, considered a leader in the area of men's studies, introduced the concept of hegemonic masculinity, which interrogates the gendered role of men (2005: 305-320). Connell expanded on male power and weakness, as well as the fluidity and contradictions in constructions of masculinity (Morrell, 2012: 25).

According to the research, anything that embodied traditional feminine characteristics and behaviour was considered a weakness. Connell also challenged the gender binary – a social construct society uses to classify gender into two distinct forms – masculinity and femininity, recognising that multiple masculinities coexist in society today.

My work, theoretical and practical, comprises three separate themes, or elements. The first theme seeks to examine how certain men strive to achieve a hierarchy of inter-male dominance, while the second theme concentrates on the dominant male's attitude towards men who exhibit other, or feminine, characteristics. Thirdly, through a series of self-portraits and anatomical details, I examine myself as a contemporary male, vulnerable against life's challenges. My work is an exploration of male vulnerability and tenderness.

**Antagony**  
2020  
Mixed media on paper  
107.5 cm x 148 cm





Writer Torey Akers, in her 2019 article, *What is Masculinity in Art?* wrote, "They wield power because they feel abandoned and redundant. A bunch of powerful white guys who cannot stop assaulting anyone within a cufflink distance of themselves."

LEFT **Stain** (Diptych) 2020 Mixed media on paper 50 cm x 70 cm  
RIGHT **Abstain** (Diptych) 2020 Mixed media on paper 87 cm x 70 cm

## PROLOGUE

I relocated back to Cape Town in late 2019, after living in a small Karoo town for 10 years – a period in my life characterised by bereavement, isolation and separateness. The hurt of losing my family left me feeling vulnerable and alone. This state of mind proved the catalyst I needed to escape the void that was threatening to engulf my life. I found myself driven by the need for fresh inspiration and new beginnings.

My new beginning, it transpired, was to explore my long-held passion for painting. I enrolled at art school at the University of Cape Town, a move that would ultimately serve to free me, both as a painter and as a person.

On a social level, I endeavoured to connect with like-minded people; to pursue and form new friendships and revisit old ones. The more socially immersed I became, the more I noticed how the men I encountered often exhibited a stoic and defensive demeanour. I found this starkly contrasted the women in similar social settings and I came to realise that men, for the most part, have been taught that to feel or show emotion is to be perceived as being weak.

My adventure was short-lived. The global pandemic took me back to a place of isolation where once again I was left to contemplate my aloneness. However, I found that the months of being physically confined to a limited space also presented me with the opportunity to examine what I really wanted for my life, and importantly, what I needed to discover in my art.

It became clear to me that I needed to focus on what was closest to me: male vulnerability and male gentleness, a sentiment magnified by isolation during the time of lock-down.

My research is about numerous masculinities within society. Through this process I have learned that we all exhibit a degree of competitiveness, the inability to express emotions or an unwillingness to admit weakness or dependency at times. In my own life, as I progress and evolve, I strive to find a healthy balance between all my male dimensions; make peace with the disappointments, and anticipate the good things life has to offer. At the same time, I want to nurture my deep respect, love and appreciation for women in my life, the very people who taught me how to feel.

**Fade 1** (Diptych) 2020 Mixed media on paper 70 cm x 50 cm





## THE DISCOVERY OF DEFINITION

A normative heterosexual masculinity is built on notions of strength, both physical and emotional. Rather than creating an environment of connection and inclusion for all men and women (Donaldson, 1993: 643), this ideology has led to insecurity and exclusion across the gender landscape (Connell, 2005: 212).

Thus, I begin my story with a portrait of a male figure in a dark jacket, titled, *Antagony*. He is represented in black and white on a burnt-orange background, appearing forbidding and detached. He doesn't represent a particular person; but embodies a vitriolic presence. In my life, the suited figure is a metaphor for the feelings of loss from which I am trying to escape.

In this theme, I look at how normative heterosexual men strive to achieve power over other men. To illustrate the callous nature of this type of masculinity, I refer to a painting by Portuguese-born artist, Paula Rego. One of her early paintings, *Salazar vomiting the Homeland*, depicts a scene of Portuguese dictator, Salazar, bloated as a balloon, defecating on his country and people (Searle, 2019: 2). Salazar was a fascist dictator who ruled Portugal for almost 30 years. An authoritarian, he rejected anything that threatened or undermined his power.

I have incorporated the bloated shape of the rotund male belly in my own work, as it represents a variety of characteristics. In my paintings, the exposed male belly is an allegory for an area of vulnerability, a point of weakness easily open to harm. The belly's primary function is to hold, receive or to protect, implying passivity and surrender, and also references feminine aspects of gentleness and tenderness. The belly is also the central part of the body, a concentrated place of power – a dark and seamy area that denotes greed – effectively the underbelly of the establishment.

The full, bruised, bellies of my male figures, both the powerful and the vulnerable, are enrobed in dark suits. I allude to the paintings of South African artist, Robert Hodgins, whose larger-than-life businessmen and generals bedecked in stuffed suits are a recurring theme in his work (Geers, 2002: 67). Behind the pinstripes and safety of their suits, lurk the brutes of rapacity and emotional remoteness.

LEFT **Fade 2** 2020 Mixed media on paper 35 cm x 50 cm  
RIGHT **Fade 3** 2020 Mixed media on paper 35 cm x 50 cm



**Paula Rego**  
*Salazar Vomiting the Homeland*  
Oil on canvas, 1960



**Robert Hodgins**  
*If You've Got It Fash It*  
Oil on canvas  
2002



**Bloated** (Diptych)  
2020 Mixed media on paper  
66.5 cm x 89 cm



**RIGHT Naked** (Diptych)  
2020 Mixed media on paper  
66.5 cm x 89 cm

To speak to a certain superiority and status, I too have adopted the symbol of the dark suit in this series of paintings, employing it as a metaphor for the deceptiveness of the external appearance. I have painted my suits in heavy, dark shapes, repeated to suggest unity, but by virtue of their overtly belligerent presence, serve to divide. The surfaces of the shapes are disturbed by vertical slashes – suggesting pinstripes – but in my mind, they represent self-imposed cages. The suit can be viewed as an encumbrance, trapping the wearer into a place of isolation (Atkinson, 2002: 60).

In *The Alchemist*, Paola Coelho's main character, Santiago, carries a jacket with him on his journey. The jacket in this story is a symbol for life's burdens. By carrying the jacket with him, he bears these burdens and obstacles with perseverance. A jacket or suit can represent exposure or concealment. In some instances, I employ the suit as a symbol of power; in others, I wrap my male figures in this shelter to safeguard their fragility. It becomes a place to hide, to pause and take refuge until the harshness has passed. Like Santiago, I wear my suit with perseverance. I lean into the discomfort of the present and assimilate the wisdom on offer. Maybe one day I will be able to remove it.

I expand on my first theme by looking at the implications of young boys trying to conform to prescribed masculine ideals. As boys, we are repeatedly told that "boys don't cry". We are raised to repress emotions not usually associated with "manliness". When a boy does cry, he is seen as embracing more tender and gentle characteristics, exposing him to aggression and rejection from the very group to which he yearns to belong.

To survive in a hyper-heteronormative world, most boys adhere to hegemonic standards, ideals that dictate how young men should perform their masculinity (Lindegger and Maxwell, 2007: 94-112; Morrell: 23). Joe Ehrmann, coach, author and former NFL player said, "The three most destructive words that every man receives when he's a boy is when he's told to be a man."

Judith Butler, American social theorist, maintains that identity and gender are constructed through performance. Rather than being fixed, they are fluid and change at different times, in different contexts (Linehan, 2002: 65). So teenage boys develop a range of heteronormative characteristics to find a gendered sense of place.

Having limited viable masculine role models, and/or secure places of belonging, causes confusion over the natural order of building a young man's individuality. It stifles his creativity and freedom, and often means he will evolve into adulthood without a mature understanding of feelings and vulnerability (Oransky, 2009: 57-72). Besides this impacting on how he views himself, he could ultimately also lack the adequate tools to form intimate and lasting relationships.

LEFT TO RIGHT

**Fragile 1**  
2020

Oil on oil paper  
50 cm x 65 cm

**Fragile 2**  
2020

Oil on oil paper  
50 cm x 65 cm

**Fade 4**  
2020

Mixed media on paper  
35 cm x 50 cm

**Beast**  
2020

Oil on canvas  
60 cm x 80 cm







Vulnerability is viewed as the binding element that secures these relationships (Young, 2015), and to best illustrate this area, I have created one large work, titled, *Passage*. A mixed-media drawing of a young man, delicately articulated, pictured partially clothed. I created this drawing in direct response to *Antagony*, referred to earlier. The two works are matched in scale; but differ in their creative approach and rendering – establishing a dialogue between the two works when they share exhibition space. By standing strong in his innocence and tenderness, my young man provides a counterbalance to *Antagony*. My aim is to balance out the heavily sullied with the pure.

In this artwork, my young model is portrayed exhibiting both masculine and feminine qualities. His left hand hovers gently over his exposed belly area, as if he is trying to shield himself from anticipated harm. His right hand, in a ghost-like rendering, frees itself from the grasp of protection, in a gesture of escaping restriction. The right hand is positioned above his head, yielding him vulnerable, but also brave and courageous in his firm stance. Although embodying androgynous innocence, my model has the frame of an athlete, honed for speed and agility, able to compete on any social terrain.

I am fascinated with the anatomic complexity of hands and what they signify, and they feature frequently throughout my work. Hands are the part of the body we use primarily for human interaction, denoting active participation in a direct and practical way. To demonstrate an alternative to violence, I have used the hand image to illustrate desire, indifference or benevolence.

Emerging American artist, William Brickel, says that through touch we understand and are understood. He paints slender young men with enlarged hands. Their touches are tender, but because they convey such need for intimacy, a sense of violence emerges (Malone, 2020). They tussle with each other in a way that can be interpreted as either pugilistic or embracing – or they are simply too awkward or afraid to exhibit affection.

To further elaborate this topic, I refer to the work of British painter, Keith Vaughan. Vaughan frequently expressed, "I find myself alone, despite the fact my wish is to be on intimate terms with my fellow man." Vaughan's art, in its negotiation of the experience of belonging, attempts to capture the unobtainable and the intangible. What he struggled with in life, as boy and into manhood, selfhood, kinship and community, he tried to secure in his art (Salter, 2015: 559).

I am particularly interested in his *Assembly of Figures* series, groups of male figures appearing isolated against a landscape. The poignancy of the painting lies in the figures represented separately, arms folded, their stances indicating curiosity towards touch and embrace, a haptic progression, demonstrating man's need for intimacy and comfort.

While imagining my own escape from isolation, I wanted to reveal, through my art, a way to unburden these young men from the confines of adolescent insecurity and loneliness. I may have only scratched the surface of a much larger issue, but in so doing, I was able to discover, "what makes men vulnerable, also makes them beautiful." (Brown, Tedtalk).



**William Brickel**  
Two Figures  
Oil on canvas  
2020



**Keith Vaughan**  
Assembly of Figures  
Oil on canvas  
1951

**Passage**  
2020  
Mixed media on paper  
106.5 cm x 137 cm



LEFT  
**Grip 1**  
2020  
Charcoal on paper  
35 cm x 50 cm

BELOW  
**Grip 2**  
2020  
Charcoal on paper  
35 cm x 50 cm

## FINDING FORM

At the beginning of the academic year, I painted a series of woman in a recumbent, sleeping position, dressed only in a white slip dress. In art, women are traditionally rendered in a horizontal pose, with the vertical pose being reserved for men. The slip is seen as conventional female attire. The model I painted exhibited androgynous characteristics, which subsequently inspired me to paint men in a similar pose, also dressed in flimsy items. I then turned my focus to the sexual subjectivity of men who demonstrate gentler, more sensitive characteristics, the second theme in my body of work.

From this emerged a series of paintings of men dressed only in pastel-coloured singlets. They lie in vulnerable (recoiling), yielding positions, some with their backs to the viewer, with slightly parted legs. They avoid eye contact. These men defy normative constructs of maleness in society, establishing alternative models of manhood (Hill, 2006:154). They reconceptualise masculinity by embracing their tenderness.

Heteronormative masculinity aims to establish superiority over women and a subordination of males who don't live up to this male archetype. According to Morrell, this propels women, gay men and men who are perceived as weaker or feminine, into a subordinate gender alliance.





The New Normal 1 2020 Oil on oil paper 65 cm x 50 cm



The New Normal 2 2020 Oil on oil paper 65 cm x 50 cm



The New Normal 3 2020 Oil on oil paper 65 cm x 50 cm



The New Normal 4 2020 Oil on oil paper 65 cm x 50 cm

I refer to the work of Egon Schiele, Austrian painter and expert draughtsman. Although he was a recognised artist in the early 1900s, his concerns, both as an artist and as a man, are pertinent to contemporary forms of masculinity.

As a man, Schiele felt marginalised. In a culture that placed enormous significance on the manly virtues of virility and success, traits such as enterprise and pragmatic efficiency were thought to encapsulate the “stereotypical” male. As an artist, Schiele felt his masculinity and art were under threat (Izenberg, 2006: 464), as at the time, art was viewed largely as something that belonged in the feminine domain.

Despite his many obstacles, Schiele maintains an honesty in self-depiction: emaciated, contorted and truncated, he represents a bold deviation from the ideal of masculine physicality and beauty (Izenberg, 2006: 465). He boldly exposes his sensitivity and insecurity without the veiled filters of expected norms. Schiele courageously consolidates his territory by revealing his authentic self through his work.



**Egon Schiele**  
Self Portrait  
Watercolour and charcoal  
on paper, 1913



**Sam Taylor Wood**  
Beckham Sleeping  
Video  
2002

A modern-day version of this is Sam Taylor Wood’s video of a sleeping David Beckham. To provide context, film critic, Laura Mulvey, coined the term “male gaze”, which refers to the way in which male filmmakers visually positioned women as an “object” of heterosexual male desire.

In her Beckham piece, Wood employs the “female gaze”. Beckham is portrayed close up, resting on his side, cradling his head and naked upper body. He is shown exposed and tender, almost innocent, while a jarring soundtrack of riotous noise (possibly a cheering crowd at a football match) can be heard in the background.

Often a benchmark of male prowess, we are accustomed to seeing Beckham upright, usually in motion. Filmed horizontally, his vital power is lost, and his vulnerability brought to the fore. This is intensified by the way he was filmed: delicately lit, sensual, and unashamedly beautiful (Higgins, 2004). And he surrenders to it. In my paintings of recumbent men, I have attempted to replicate this surrender.

Somnologists sometimes see sleep as a reluctance to connect meaningfully with the world, or a way to escape from persistent sorrow. My male models, trapped in an unwanted place, are asleep or reclining in a state of temporary escapism. Some of them assume the foetal position with the spine curved forward, legs tautly against the abdomen, the head bowed inwards, arms protectively wrapped around the head. They cling to the bed sheets, in a desperate act to cling to life.



**The New Normal 5** 2020 Oil on oil paper 65 cm x 50 cm



**The New Normal 6** 2020 Oil on oil paper 65 cm x 50 cm



**Self 1**  
2020  
Oil on canvas  
50 cm x 60 cm



**RIGHT**  
**Self 2**  
2020  
Mixed media on paper  
50 cm x 60 cm

## THE ART OF SURRENDER

The work I began in isolation was rich in vulnerability and tenderness. The Oxford English dictionary describes vulnerability as “the state of being exposed to the possibility of being harmed emotionally.” But, while the Covid-19 virus ran rampant, my makeshift studio became a place of refuge and peace.

My cramped workspace birthed a new way of creating art. Previous brushstrokes of opaque solidity gave way to a lyrical fluidity in mark-making, and I began to paint smaller, more intimate works. This gave rise to the third and final theme of my work, a series that examines the male self and foregrounding of subordinate elements of the male body, all of which speak directly to vulnerability.

Working with a small mirror (representing reflection) forced me to confront my own vulnerability. I started to visually map on paper the sadness and longing I was feeling, delving beneath the surface to identify and reveal my internal condition.

The project of creating identity, using a mirror, is deeply embodied in Schiele's work. His self-portraits were created in front of a mirror, and this appears to pose the questions his portraits attempt to address: Who am I? Where do I fit in? (Izenberg, 2006: 437). For me, the answers are contained within my self-portraits – they forced me to look closely at myself and the space I was occupying. It also allowed me profound insight into the people, and indeed the life, I had lost.

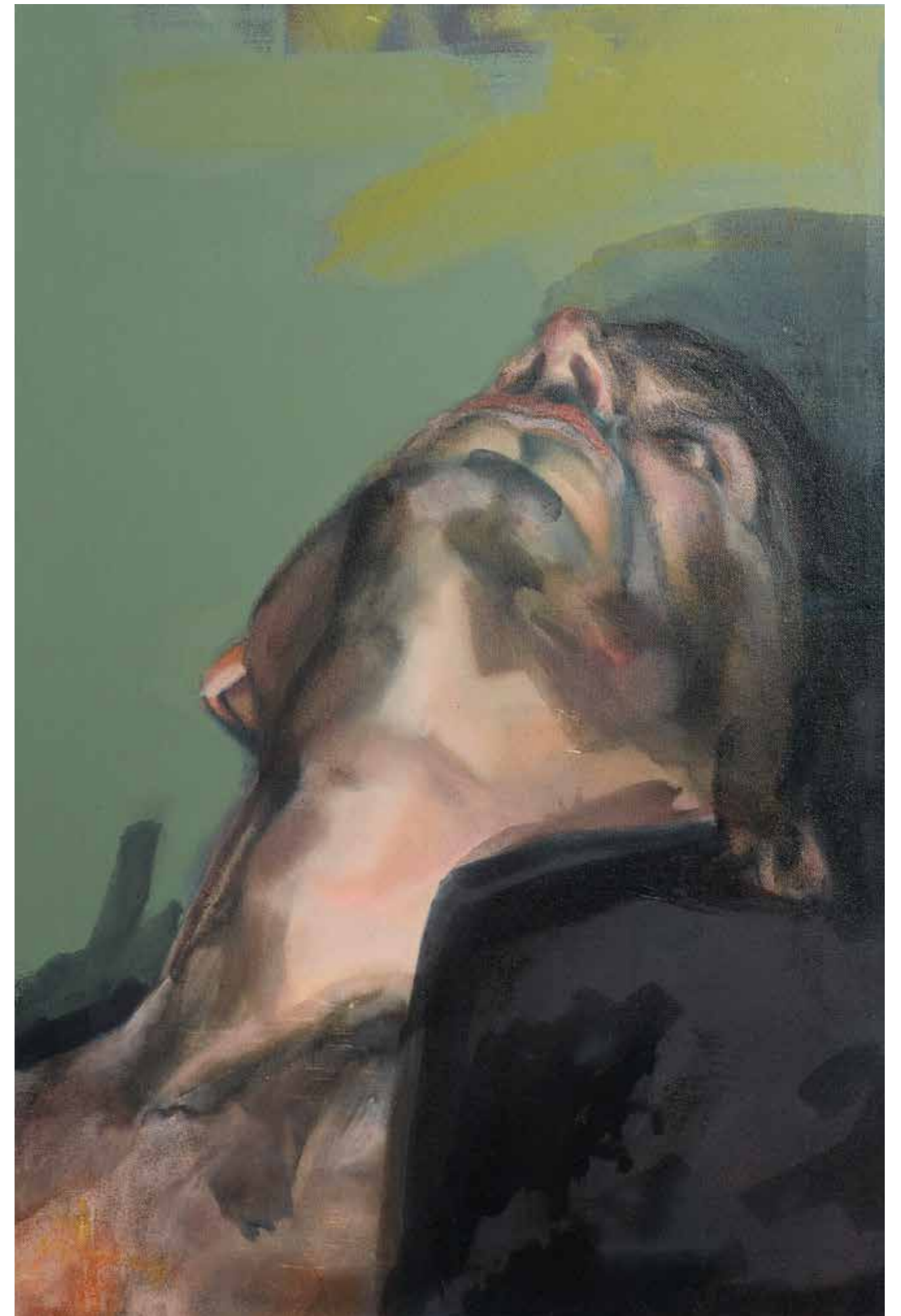
My new approach to painting, as referred to later in this section, resulted in the dissolving image. For me, this represented the fading of something, a memory that I was trying to hold on to. My process became about excavating something tangible from the haze of paint. As one might do with a memory, I was attempting to retrieve something that was lost, securing it in the present and giving it meaning and place.

My reflection in the mirror drew my attention to my neck area. I became fascinated with the textures and shapes of this aspect of the body and set out to magnify this area. This led to a close-up “portrait” of the neck, painted on a large scale. My handling of this area was inspired by the photographer, Robert Mapplethorpe, who magnified the neck. He exposed something simply viewed as a joining or supporting element, with the exactitude of still life or portraiture photography.

The way in which I capture the neck/Adam's Apple is also reminiscent of the way South African artist, Andries Gouws, depicted paintings of feet. In this series, Gouws's focus is on old, dirty, often calloused or thrombosed feet. He says, “As I paint feet, they sometimes seem intensely personal, exposed and private like bare breasts, at other times they exude a raw, animal power – possibly because the feet unnerve me.” (Godby, 2011).

My paintings of the neck show the head awkwardly bending backwards or contorting to the side, exposing the area around the throat as raw and intensely bare. The visibly protruding Adam's Apple is predominantly identified as a male feature – and I use this to examine masculinity. The throat is the vital connection between the brain and the body's vital organs, a conduit for blood-flow. A deep cut in this area, the severing of a main artery, means death by exsanguination is imminent. I often allude to this with the symbolic foregrounding of the area in alizarin red.

**Conduit**  
2020  
Oil on canvas  
56 cm x 80 cm





**Reveal** (Triptych) 2020 Mixed media on paper 25 cm x 35 cm per panel  
LEFT **Bare** 2020 Mixed media on paper 50 cm x 70 cm per panel

My working substrate was made up of small sheets of salvaged paper of different weights and textures. Working with the limited materials available at the time, I began painting heavily diluted oil paint directly onto the paper, not an ideal combination. This presented the challenge of possible future disintegration; it was uncertain and precarious, mirroring what was happening in and around my life.

I was inspired by the painting technique of South-African born painter, Marlene Dumas, who deliberately degrades paint beyond its perceived capacity. While she chooses to paint in oils – a medium lauded for its rich colours and creamy surfaces, she actively works against these qualities, dulling down both the colour and the viscosity of the paint (MacKenny, 2008).

In my response to this, I found working with a heavily leached medium on a particularly absorbent surface, an exercise in accident and chance. Forms were best realised with immediate and gestural mark-making. As I tried to inject vulnerability into my figures, working in this perilous way intensified my own vulnerability. I realised that by surrendering to the unpredictability of the materiality of the paint, I was ultimately surrendering to the unpredictability of life.

Part of the process required letting the paint flow and run across the surface. Once absorbed, marks were fixed, essentially allowing me to gradually build the image out of thin layers of paint. This became an exercise in enormous patience and tenderness and delivered a fragile and nuanced image.

Dumas' *The Blindfolded Man* (2007), through its leanness of paint, relies on the painting's surface to manifest the content. The blindfold has virtually no paint on its surface, relying on the white of the canvas to provide its "colour" (MacKenny, 2008). Similarly, the white of the paper became a colour for my work and an underlayer to hold my transparent layers.

Achieving success through the evisceration eluded me in some instances. While some of my paintings were successful in their leanness, upon drying, the painted surface had the potential to become lacklustre. To keep the luminosity of the materiality of the paint alive, I introduced a delicate top layer of vivid colour. Because I was working on paper, the sensation is further reinforced with rapid marks of charcoal and pastel.

The bleeding of the paint and the charcoal dust created movement across the surface and a ghosting of the image, not unlike a film being shot in slow-motion. I recognised how the image's blurring and the shift in register represented the shadow-self. This is our unconscious side, elements of our personalities we prefer to keep concealed or deny, even to ourselves. Like the normative heterosexual men mentioned earlier, exposure of these traits deem them weak or fallible. Rendering them viscerally is intended to reveal their fragility.

I learned, through this newly acquired painting method, that I can fluently tell a story with brevity, a limited palette and economic mark-making. I came to understand, that quite simply, it was enough. American research professor, Brene Brown, says we start to live truly honest, vulnerable lives when we start believing that we are enough.



**Robert Mapelthorpe**  
Neck  
Gelatin silver print  
1988



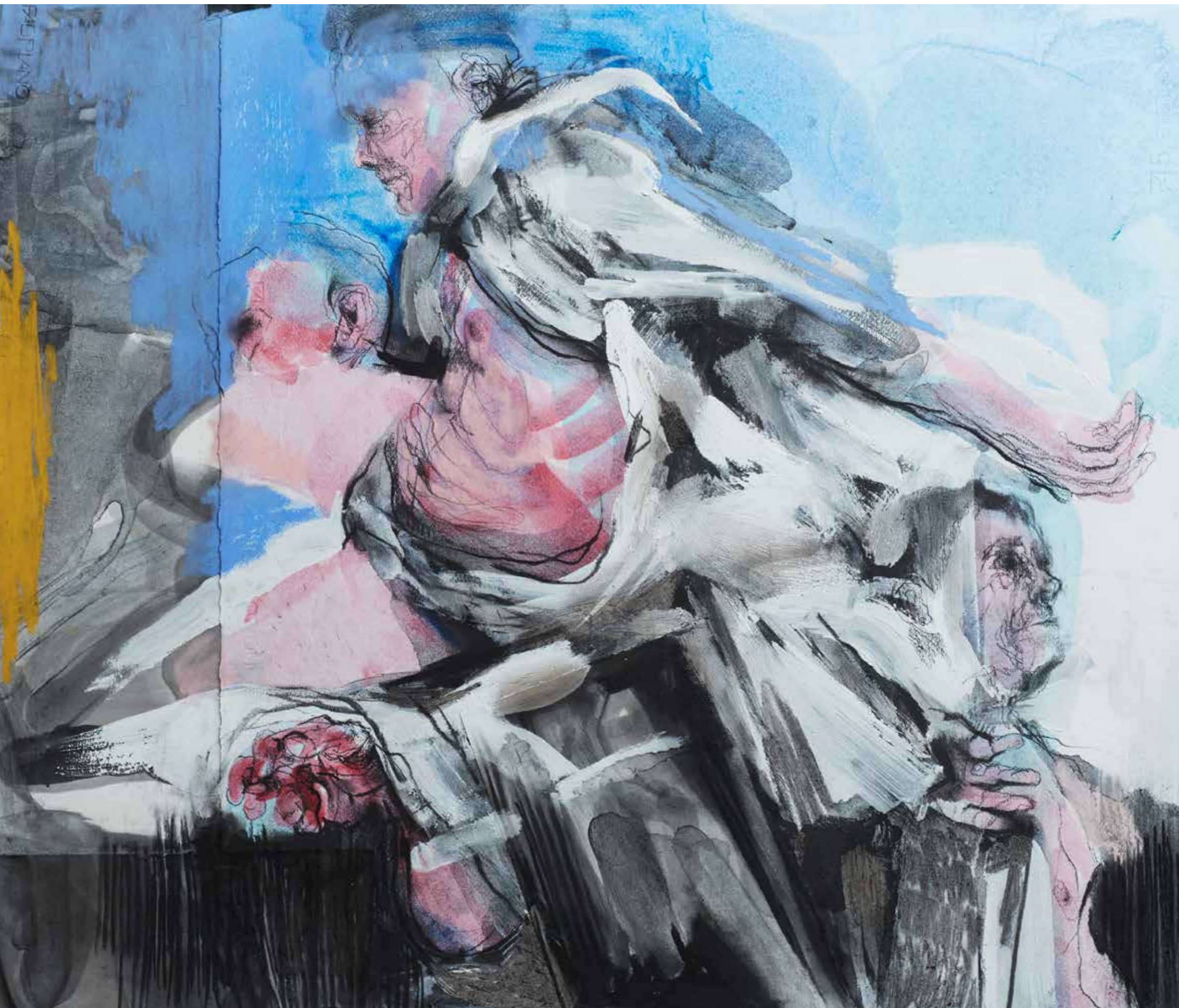
**Andries Gouws**  
Feet  
Oil on canvas  
2001



**Marlene Dumas**  
*The Blindfolded Man*  
Oil on canvas  
2007







## BLOOD AND BELONGING

Mine is a body of work that examines male vulnerability by exploring and confronting my own hurt. By exposing it, I elucidate the underlying issues, and through my art, try and succeed to find assuage.

Losing my familial tribe exposed me to feelings of palpable hurt. However, it also set in motion the journey from emotional repression to living my life with an open heart. I came to understand that vulnerability is the birthplace of joy, creativity and belonging.

**Fly** 2020 Mixed media on paper 70 cm x 90 cm

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**Blue Self** 2020 Mixed media on paper 50 cm x 65 cm



**Matriarch (Diptych)** 2020 Mixed media on paper 50 cm x73 cm



**Surrender** 2020 Mixed media on paper 50 cm x 65.5 cm

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