

JUSTIN MORTIMER



JUSTIN MORTIMER

Parafin, London



Justin Mortimer in his studio,
Elephant & Castle, London, 2014
Photo: Kevin Davies

CONTENTS

The Unsayable	4
—	—
Martin Herbert	
Slow News	8
—	—
Coline Milliard	
Paintings 2013-2015	14
—	—
Der Besucher	
Painters	
Kid	
Seeders	
Parasol	
Nes Ziona	
Joker	
Haus	
Jabalya	
Loa	
Schluss	
BZ	
Evangelist	
Lilith	
Hijab I	
Hijab II	
Juju	
Tract	
Hausmeister	
Plantation	
Donor VI	
Hex III	
La Peste	
Kult VI	
Kult V	
Kult IV	
Kult III	
Hex II	
Patriot	
Biography	71

—

Martin Herbert

Midway through Don DeLillo's 1985 novel *White Noise*, a chemical accident occurs and a giant poisonous cloud blooms above a placid suburban community. An evacuation takes place: in the extended, Boschian crowd scene that ensues, swirling with misinformation and protective-suited operants, the main character receives a possibly fatal dose of contamination. Then the 'airborne toxic event' disperses, leaving everyone beneath it inwardly altered somehow, and news—or its opposite—arrives via someone carrying a television:

"There's nothing on network," he said to us. "Not a word, not a picture. On the Glassboro channel we rate fifty-two words by actual count. No film footage, no live report. Does this kind of thing happen so often that nobody cares anymore?"

The coming of the cloud, in the context of a book about fear of death, is metaphorical. It is the grim consciousness of inevitable demise—the broader recognition, too, that something really bad and life-changing can happen at any moment—with the terrible codicil that this is, apparently, *ordinary*. It doesn't make the news. Later, the main character and his wife confess to each other their core-shaking fears of dying, allied to seemingly even greater fears of the other dying first. Each, it's clear, has carried this burden—in the wife's case, to the point where she's taken an experimental drug designed to paralyse the fear-of-death receptors in the brain—alone, as we all do. The irony of the human condition, DeLillo writes elsewhere, is that the most evolved creature suffers most, being the only one that is aware that it will die. The ubiquity makes the fact almost a banality. But to someone involuntarily focused on that fact, nothing matters more.

Consciousness of the widescreen melancholia that comes with knowledge of the fragility and mindless cruelty of life is not easily represented. It can descend into howling illustrative kitsch so easily, the easiest route into triteness being to use the iconography, call a skull a skull. In his essay 'Vermeer in Bosnia' (2004), Lawrence Weschler discusses how the painter, within scenes of apparent placidity, subtly and contrarily points to a consciousness of perpetual, brutal human conflict, which flickers at their edges; in *The Sight of Death* (2006), T.J. Clark extensively unpacks the equally unassuming pictorial strategies that Poussin used to represent death within a pair of landscapes. (If this is notable, it's not least because Vermeer and Poussin might be considered two of the

most Apollonian and untroubled painters in history.) A presentation of abiding mortal hurt requires strategies, proxies, perhaps a cloud that creeps across your face, that you breathe in before you even know what it is. Those proxies need not be serene in themselves.

—

It's night. We're out in the scrubby woods and something undefined but rough and ominous is going on. A naked young man stands, trousers dropped and genitals exposed, face dehumanisingly obscured by pinkish balloons. In a further humiliation, a dog rises up towards his crotch; another figure—clothed—is half cropped off, veering, on the left. In the background are tents, as if this were a camping trip gone badly awry. The main figure's skin is greenish, as if decaying, but it's just the light—the painting shows all the signs of descending from the everyday chill of flash photography, down to the giveaway white circlets on the balloons. The landscape is at a weird tilt. The whole thing is at a weird tilt—the image owes something to amateur porn, and also echoes the ritual disgracing we're familiar with from photographs of Abu Ghraib. Move the canvas a bit to the left, and you imagine that the cropped-off figure—perhaps the one who put the balloons there, in a grim hey-prisoner-it's-your-birthday move—is grinning.

But we're projecting. None of this might be happening except in our heads, where it sets off blackened, discordant bells. Let the eye move down the canvas. In the foreground everything falls apart; it's just paint, materiality. This is a construct, we're reminded: the work originates in a digital collage of fragments, which Justin Mortimer has used as the starting point for a painting that has developed its own compositional and mood-driven rationales and needs. The imagery has been artfully pulled together to create an atmosphere of palpable disquiet, and the work advertises its demotic photographic origins. And this one is relatively coherent. In another work, a cavalcade of masked protestor-type figures, one wearing a Joker T-shirt, seemingly slide down a snow-bank before a Tudor-style house (passing by a washing-line, apparent symbol of civility) into painterly non-space on the canvas's extreme right. It feels like a crevasse, but it might as well be the mental sinkhole you fall into when you broach the ever-swelling imagistic archive of the Internet,

when—like Mortimer—you lose hours to typing words into Google Image Search and get confronted with images far too extreme, too literal, too obscene—in the sense that postmodernist theorists used to talk of an extreme, dismaying, all-on-the-surface literalism of images—to do anything with.

Such a painting pulls in two directions. On the one hand it partakes of a heavily vectored, Baroque pictorial logic that naturally, insistently moves the eye around. (Compositionally, Mortimer's other main tendency is to agglomerate disparate subjects together into an architectonic form on a ground, like the surging flow of a nightmare.) On the other, what the eye is carried through is a discontinuous orchestrated chaos that's clearly set in a number of places at once. Mortimer—a former portrait painter, replete with academic training—has rendering skills in spades, but he'll also go to work with rags and newspapers to abrade his surfaces, so that the picture veers between being a window and a wall. On multiple levels the result is that, effectively, the work *stutters*. There are several reasons for that. First, clearly, Mortimer has something blue and internalised to get out, but doesn't trust a single image to act metaphorically, is clearly even suspicious of the process: any one image is too bounded, too narrow for the condition he's carefully approaching. Secondly, the anxious experience of navigating the canvas, of being on-course for a while and then falling in an optical ditch, is germane to that condition also; but it's something to be felt physiologically, rather than decoded. And thirdly, this process sets up the idea that the painting is only an *attempt* to say something. The thing itself won't be said and thus it becomes, to rehearse a well-worn metaphor, the thing behind the door in the suspense movie; the door that the smart director keeps closed.

—

Mortimer has spent some years getting to this apprehensive point, accumulating along the way a handful of skewed ciphers. From paintings circa 2007-9 featuring contextless explosions, hanged figures and clean-up crews, he's departed ever further from his origins and training as a portrait painter (albeit one who, he says, would tend to knock out a painted eye in order to get closer to the physical experience of seeing the world in fragments). Around 2010-11 his paintings gravitated towards crepuscular hospital situations:

here, Mortimer would zoom in on wounded limbs—legs, often. These were marooned, ominous edits, as was a work like *Contestant* (2011), a young, close-cropped man sucking his thumb above some abstract flesh, a Bacon-esque blat of bloody paint coursing neatly off his skull. The continuity here, and in the most recent paintings, is the sense of being in what Mortimer calls a ‘perimeter world’: an involuntary observer placed on the edge of something unnerving and unfixed. When, as recently, he has painted party scenes, the party has already spun out of control and become, potentially, something sick and violent. In a reverse of that, scenes already brutalising become, with the addition of balloons, parties. See those woodland escapades; see the half-hidden hospital scenarios *Crèche* and *Annexe* (both 2012).

Mortimer’s balloons are often placed over bodies. Balloons are a fullness that is always menaced—they’re also, Mortimer notes, less perfect than they appear, thinner in certain places and prone to bulging—and liable to violent, instantaneous destruction. This sense of an object that is barely sustained dates back to

earlier paintings in which Mortimer limned polythene wrapping around boxes, sliding it off so that it retained its shape, and painting it. This might have been a technical exercise; but it was actually a way of presenting something at once fixed, specific and utterly tenuous. What the balloons and their interlacing with bodies did was clarify that bodies are tenuous too. Look at the figures in landscape; the branches become brachial. Everything’s a bodily synecdoche here, as temporary as a body, even as bodies are reduced to things.

Full-on articulation can make subjects go dead. Saying, directly, that reality is fucking fearful doesn’t get us very far; semaphoring that what you want to say can’t really be said gets us further. There are figures wearing makeshift gas masks in Mortimer’s recent paintings; protestors, evidently, and protest is generally necessitated by prior brutalising, but also, as we’ve seen, the site of the protest now is previously peaceable urban space. Consider that these paintings, then, are not directly about protest but about a world you knew and could navigate—somewhat like old-fashioned, perspectival painterly space—being turned



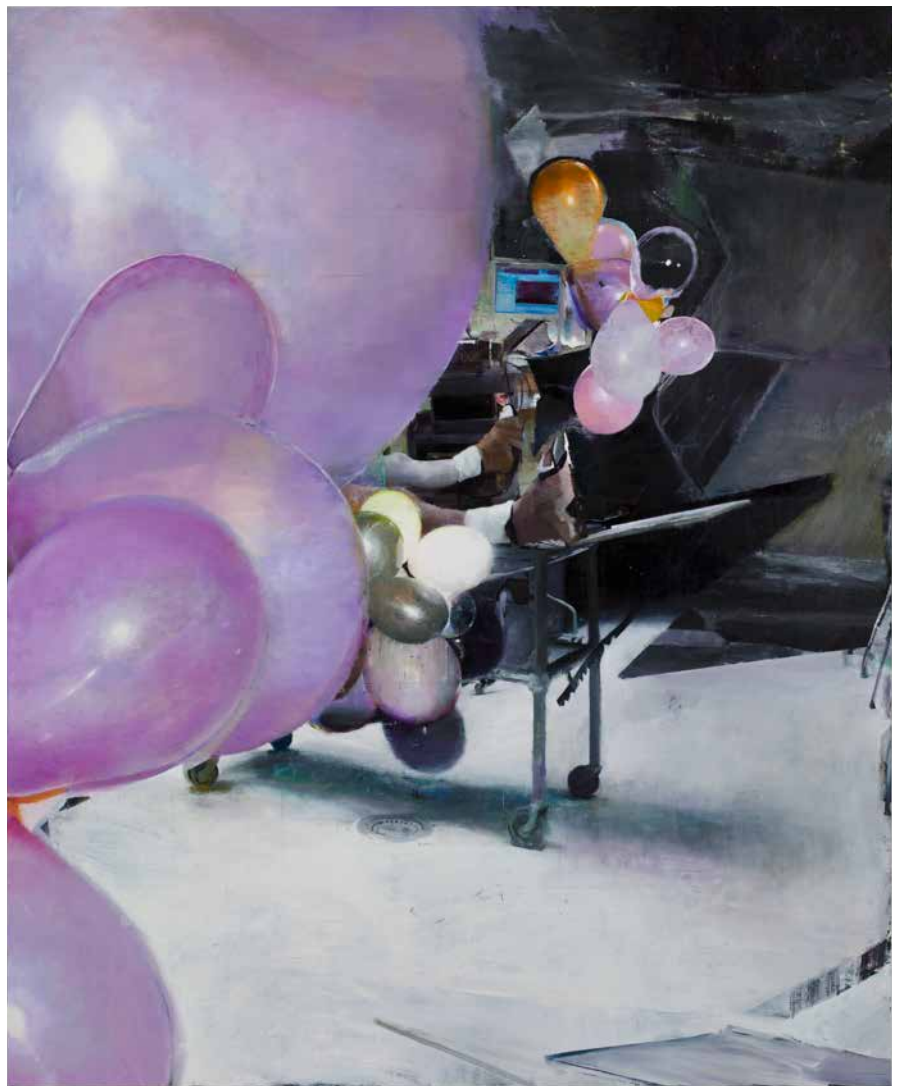
Contestant, 2011

Oil on canvas

43 × 43 cm

Private collection

Crèche, 2012
Oil on canvas
210 × 180 cm
Kate Smith
Collection,
Australia



upside down. That, on some level, has happened to all of us at some time, and for many of us there's a constant, shifting sense that it could happen again, at any time, and worse: a thrumming electricity in the blood, a sense of premonition. We used to have a vocabulary for this nervy movement through the world, but then existentialism became an intellectual fashion and, as happens to fashionable things, it fell out of favour. But the world didn't get any easier, and we need a vocabulary still. We need a vocabulary for realists; we need it for escapists, too.

In Mortimer's art, as we've seen, the answer is a compelling economy of substitutions. But for all its darkness, at the same time this stuff is shot through with aesthetics. Art can balance opposites, and Mortimer does that; his paintings have compositional savvy, controlled textural abandon, and seductive colour. You'll want to look, in other words. So you look

at a painting whose background is orange and pink like a radioactive sunset blacking out trees and grass seen queasily at a couple of different points during the day. A welcoming garden umbrella is detached and airborne like a flying saucer, underneath which are smears of contaminated aqua paint, bursts of coloured smoke bomb, a soldier's legs, and a hectically upended topless girl—a party girl—with male arms holding her up. We're barrelling through about seven messy subworlds at once here: equalised, as they are in digital reality, just a click away. You notice that the sky looks like a Rothko, that the umbrella which won't protect you and has become weaponised nods back to Bacon, that there's a degraded sliver of English landscape in there. It's seductive and scary and you wonder what this could be the acceptable face of. It's limned limned there limned in limned your limned mind's eye, and you should make yourself look at it.

Mainstream media and the digital world played a role in Mortimer's practice long before the artist turned his attention to Pussy Riot and Femen's web-savvy campaigns. "I was always looking for something beyond the life model," he says, reminiscing about his student days at Slade School of Fine Art in London. His attraction to news images first led him to magazines. He remembers picturing Romanian orphans when their scandal first broke in Western Europe in 1990: "The first painting I made of the poor person outside of society," he says, musing on the reoccurrence of outsiders in his subjects. As soon as the Internet was more widely available it became a natural hunting ground for the artist, sucked in by the bottomless wealth of images it offered. The moment a found image is painted, he continues, "it becomes impotent and neutral because you are not saying anything else than what already exists. So one has to choose an image that is loaded but also somehow twist it, or manipulate it, in a way that has mystery."

Mortimer's technique echoes the way information is broadcast, passed on and degraded over time on the World Wide Web. In his work, images are also appropriated, transformed and eventually shared in a visual game of Chinese whispers. His take on the heart-wrenching portrait of Ukrainian anti-government journalist Tetyana Chornovol, *Donor VI* (2014), is a case in point. The original snapshot shows the Euromaidan leader lying in bed, disfigured, after she was severely beaten up in December 2013; it went viral in hours. In his depiction, Mortimer turned the image forty-five degrees up, creating an awkward tension. Originally a supine figure, Chornovol is now upright, her head at a peculiar angle. She could be a hanged woman. "It's almost impossible to negotiate that plethora of instant imagery," says Mortimer. "Everything is there, bang, when you want it. It's so seductive, but it's up to the artist to negotiate a way through that." Although artists have explored the challenges and opportunities offered by mainstream media imagery since the rise of Dada in the early twentieth century, the sheer volume

of pictures that have become available online in the last decade has radically changed the deal, irreversibly altering the meaning of 'mass media'. With his casual remark, Mortimer suggests a paradigmatic shift in the role of artists—particularly those tackling the web's tantalizing cornucopia of imagery. From image-makers, artists have become image-filters, helping us to navigate an ever-expanding sea of images.

And choice is not all. The distance between the original snapshot of Chornovol and Mortimer's painting is incommensurable. The former is immediate: instantly taken, instantly processed, shared and consumed. The latter requires the investment of this all-too-rare currency: time. The time the artist has spent scrutinizing the image, learning it intimately enough to be able to reinvent it on the canvas, is added to the time it will take a viewer to receive the work, as her eyes stumble on semi-abstract patches and her mind finds a way among the manifold stories unravelling on the canvas. Mortimer's work uses the perpetual stream of online images defining our frantic contemporary life to decelerate our visual processing of the world.

1. The Pussy Riot members were charged with hooliganism for their performance at Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior on February 21, 2012. They were convicted and sentenced to two years imprisonment on August 17, 2012. Žižek, Slavoj. "The True Blasphemy: Slavoj Žižek on Pussy Riot." Chtodelat News, August 7, 2012. <http://chtodelat.wordpress.com/2012/08/07/the-true-blasphemy-slavoj-zizek-on-pussy-riot/> [Accessed March, 2014]
2. Chehonadskih, Maria. "What is Pussy Riot's 'Idea'?" *Radical Philosophy*. Nov/Dec 2012. <http://www.radicalphilosophy.com/commentary/what-is-pussy-riots-idea/> [Accessed March, 2014]

PAINTINGS

2013-2015

—

Der Besucher

Painters

Kid

Seeders

Parasol

Nes Ziona

Joker

Haus

Jabalya

Loa

Schluss

BZ

Evangelist

Lilith

Hijab I

Hijab II

Juju

Tract

Hausmeister

Plantation

Donor VI

Hex III

La Peste

Kult VI

Kult V

Kult IV

Kult III

Hex II

Patriot

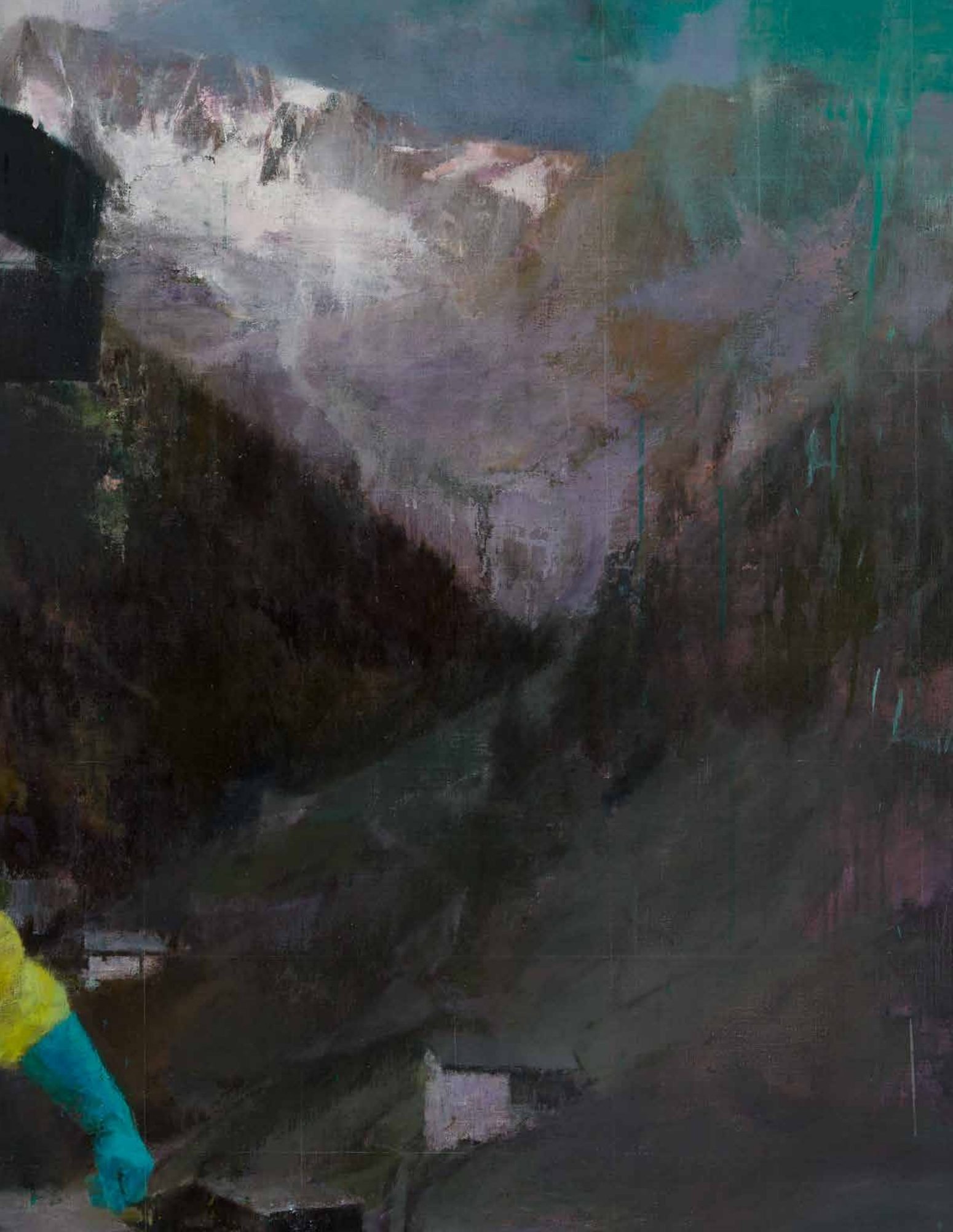
DER BESUCHER

—

2014
Oil on canvas
240 × 190 cm



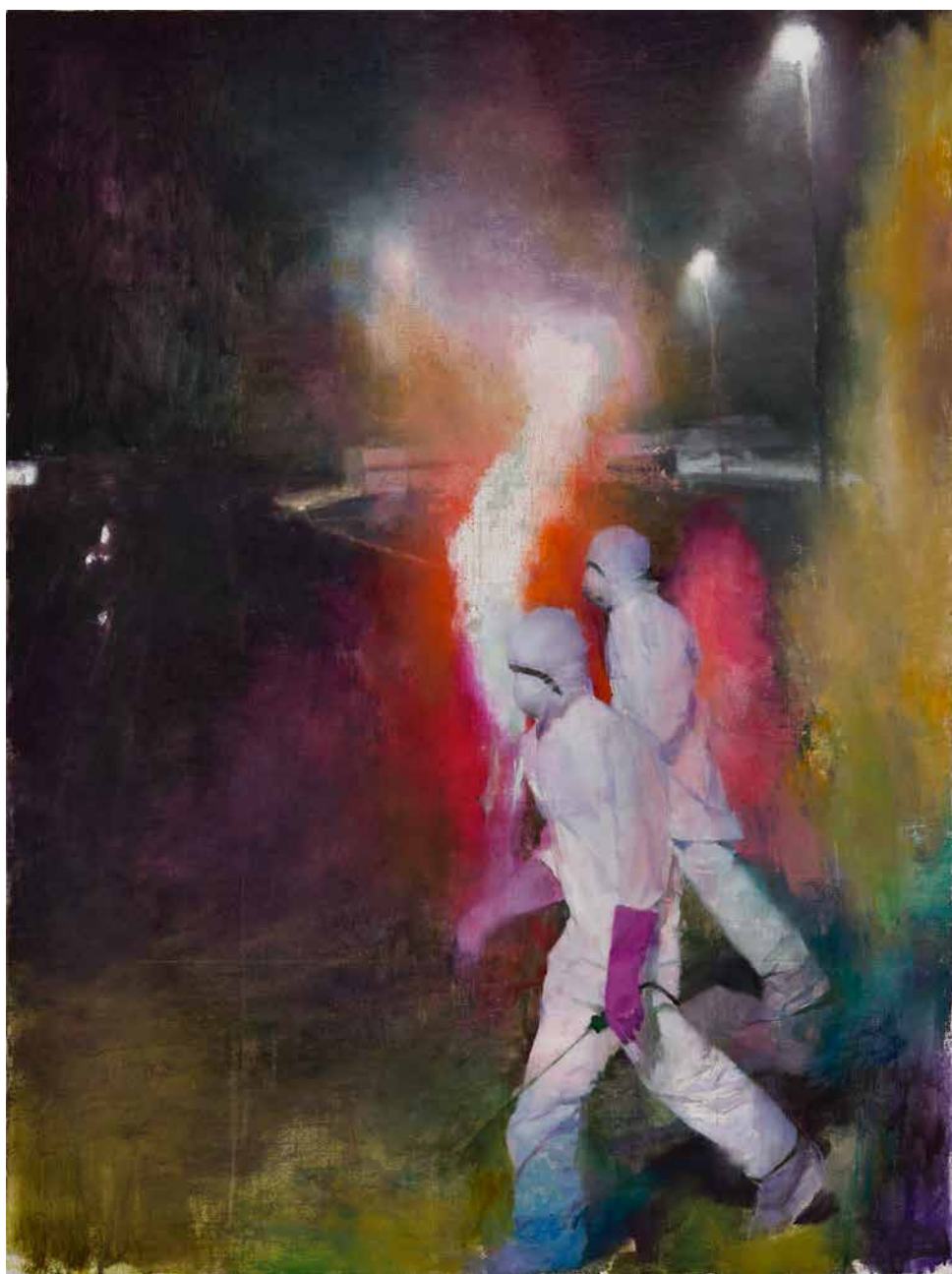




PAINTERS

—

2014
Oil on canvas
122 × 91.5 cm



KID

—

2015

Oil on canvas

91.5 × 122 cm



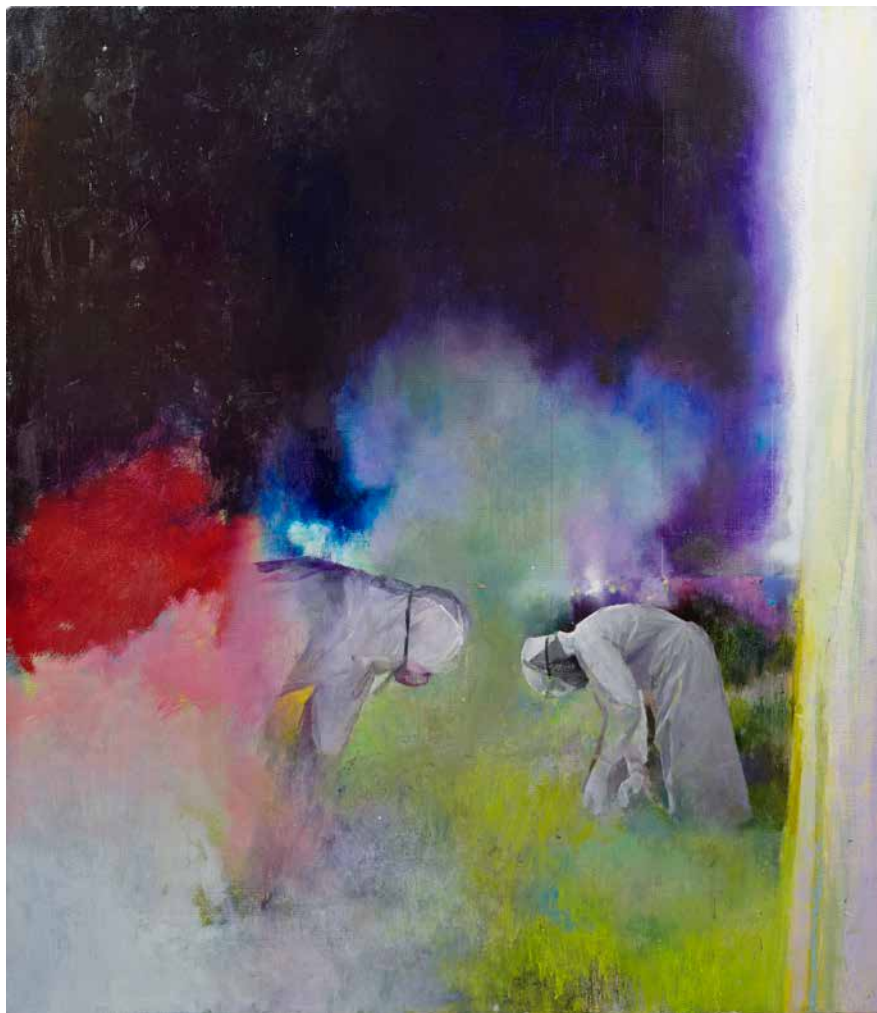
SEEDERS

—

2015

Oil on canvas

122 × 91.5 cm



PARASOL

—

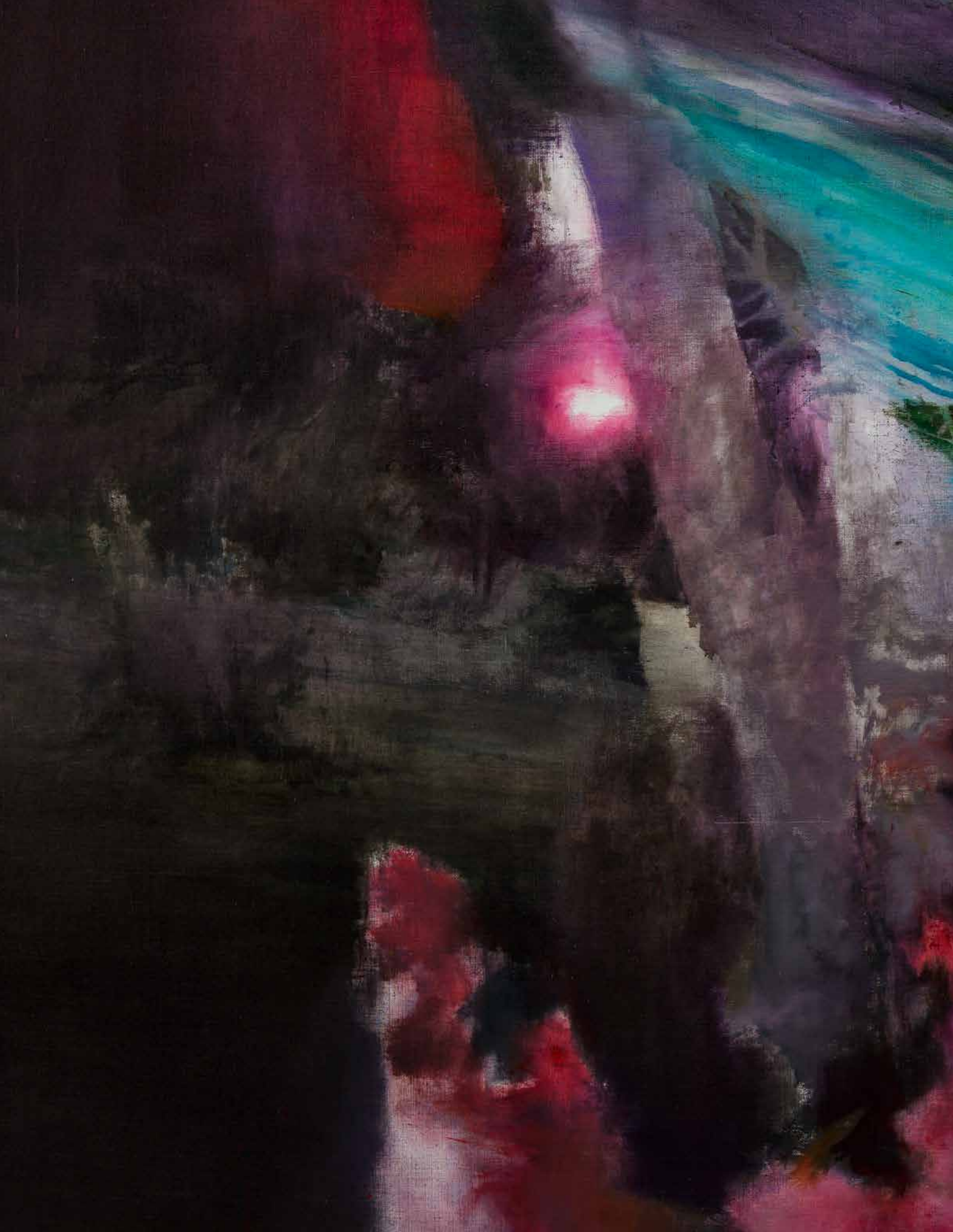
2014

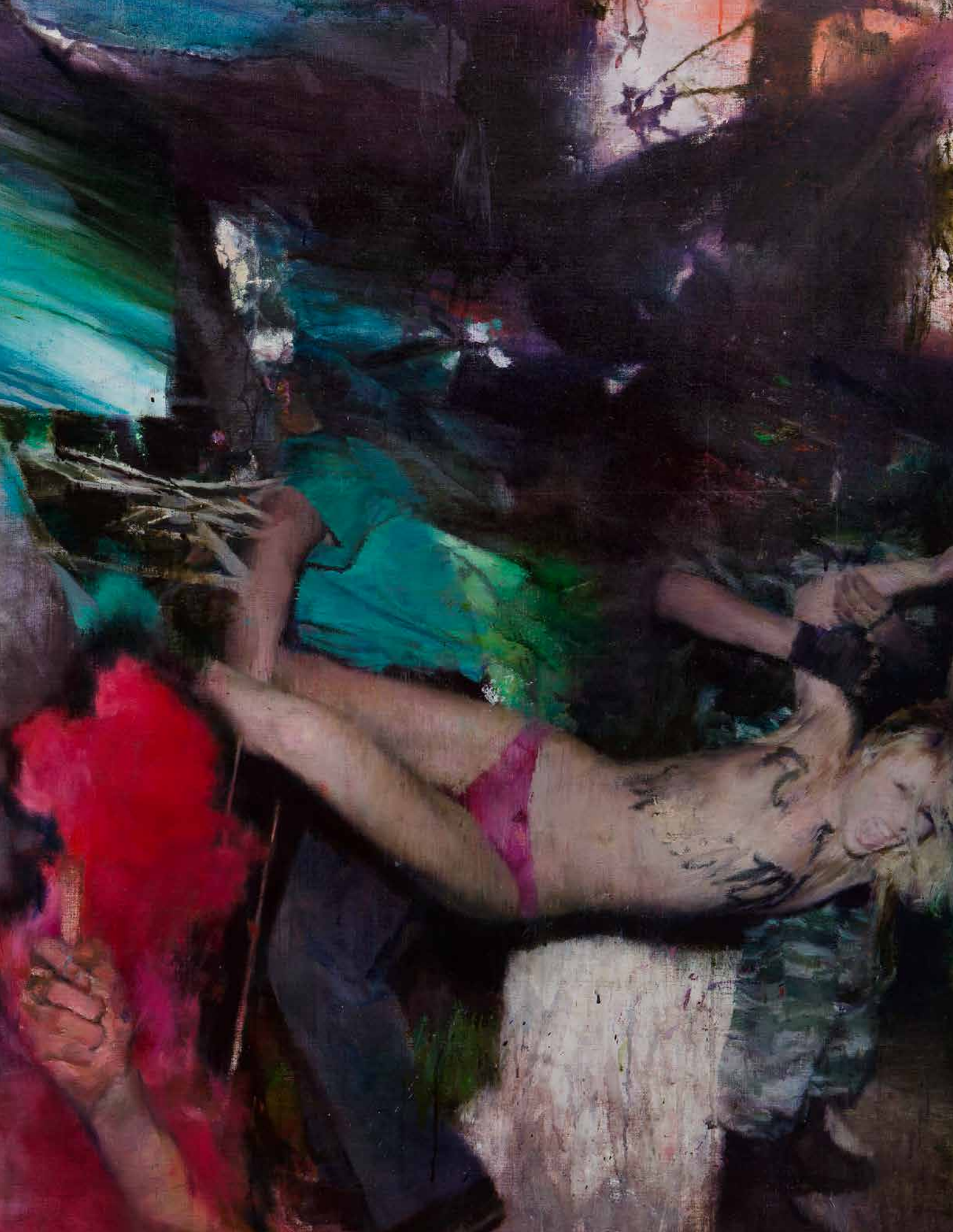
Oil on canvas

240 × 190 cm

AmC Collezione Coppola, Italy



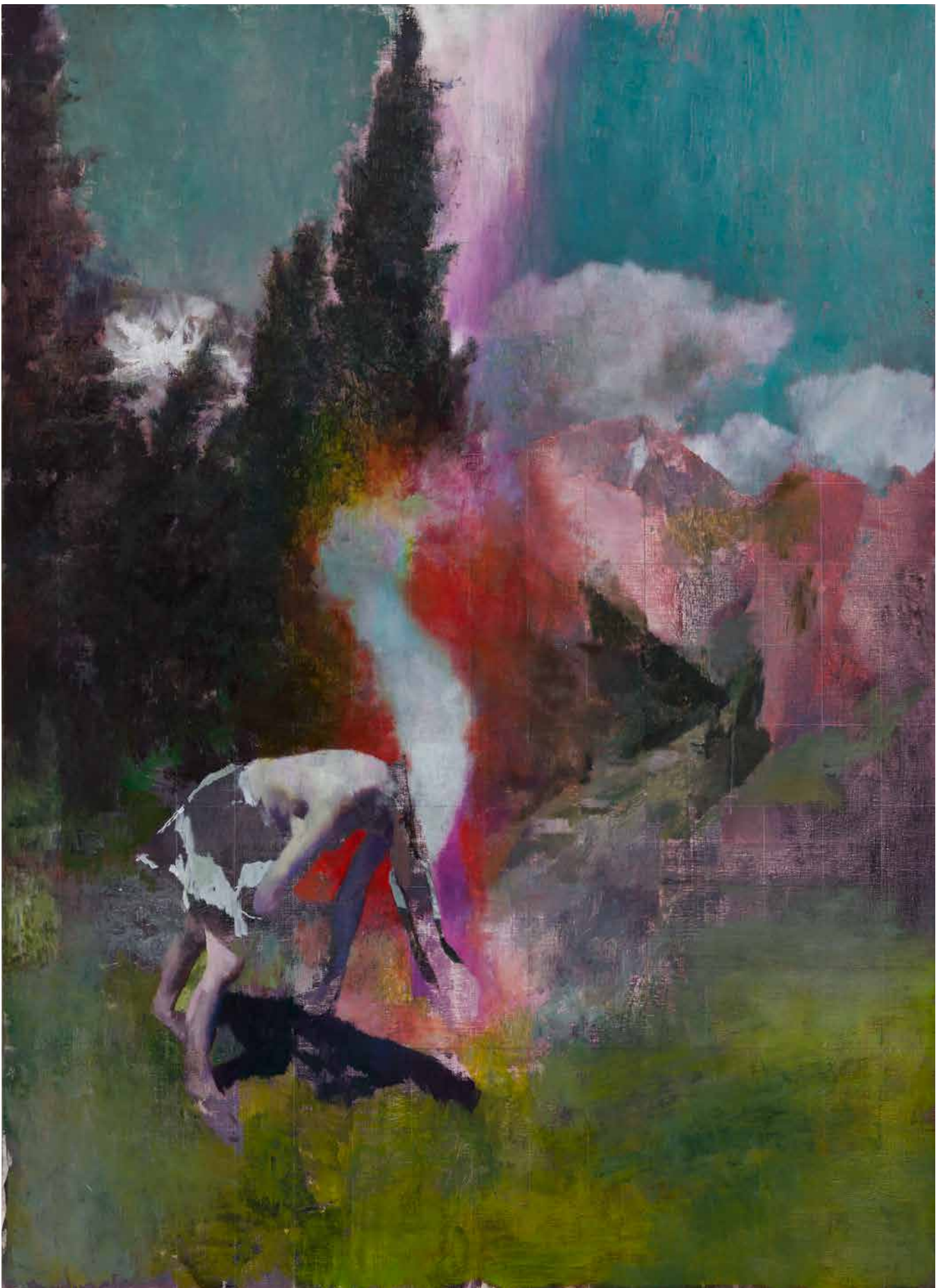




NES ZIONA

—

2014
Oil on canvas
220 × 160 cm



DONOR VI

—

2014

Oil on canvas

40 × 50 cm

Kate Smith Collection, Australia



HEX III

—

2014

Oil on panel

62 × 40 cm

AmC Collezione Coppola, Italy



LA PESTE

—

2014
Oil on panel
100 × 70 cm



KULT VI

—

2015

Oil on canvas

45 × 45 cm

—



KULT V

—

2015

Oil on canvas

60 × 40.3 cm



KULT IV

—

2015

Oil on canvas

50.5 × 40 cm



KULT III

—

2014

Oil on canvas

50 × 40 cm



