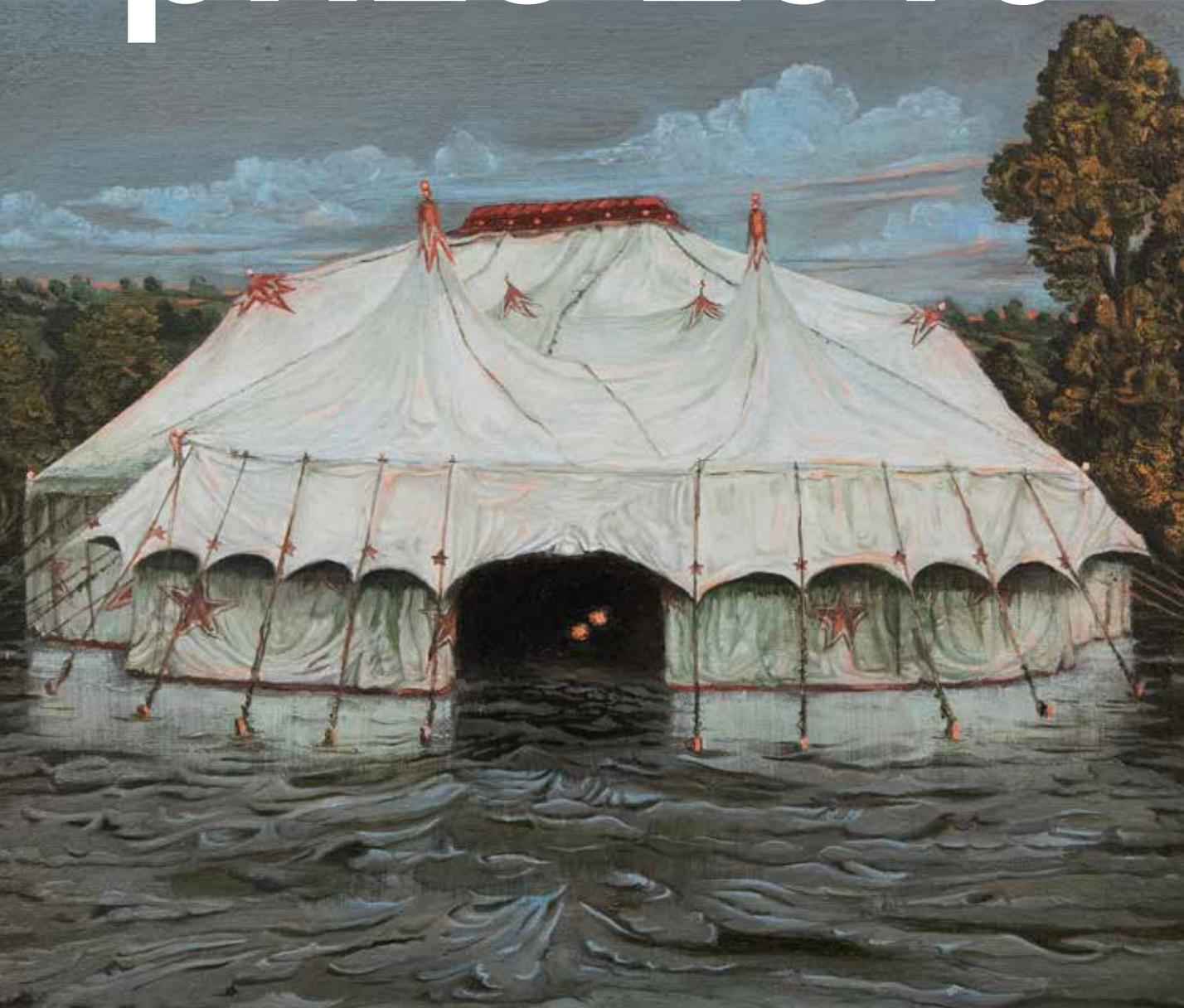


# contemporary british painting prize 2019



# the contemporary british painting prize 2019

## **Huddersfield Art Gallery**

Princess Alexandra Walk | Huddersfield | HD1 2SU  
9th November 2019 - 18th January 2020

## **ASC Gallery**

The Chaplin Centre | Taplow House | Thurlow Street | London | SE17 2DG  
7th February - 6th March 2020

Louise Bristow | Stephanie Douet | Kirsty Harris | Helen Hayward  
Adam Hennessey | Juliette Losq | Scott McCracken | Jo McGonigal  
Ruth Murray | Diana Taylor | Joanna Whittle | Maddie Yuille



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Introduction by Judith Tucker  
Essay by Griselda Pollock  
Statements made by the artists in their own words  
Catalogue design by Natalie Dowse

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[www.contemporarybritishpainting.com](http://www.contemporarybritishpainting.com)



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# Introduction

## The Contemporary British Painting Prize 2019

Selected by

Lisa Denyer | Geraint Evans

Judith Tucker | Joe Packer

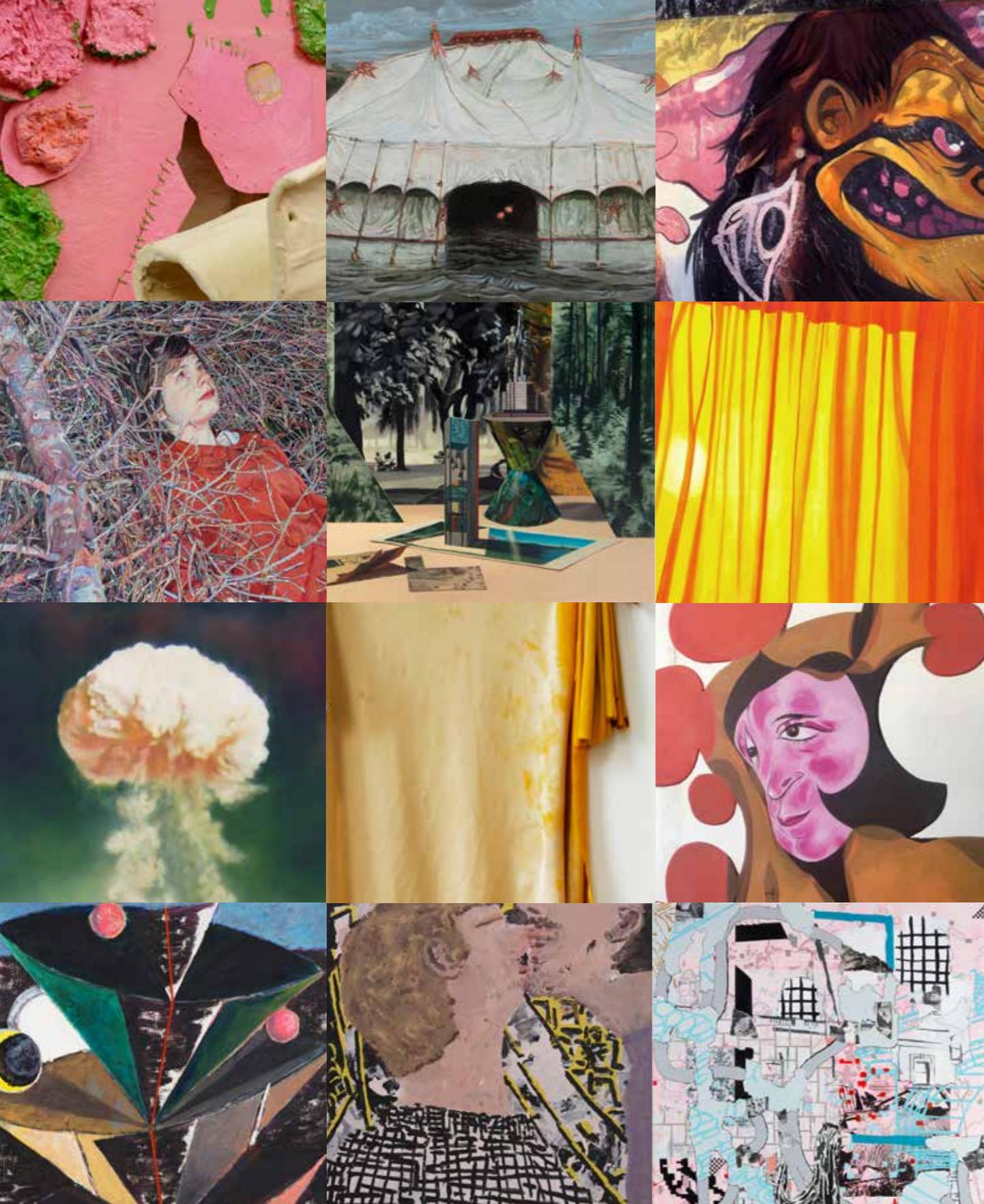
'Contemporary British Painting' is an artist led organisation. It is one that invites questions, encourages conversations and inspires active debate about painting between painters and all those interested in painting. It is a lively and vital group: members think about painting, paint about painting, show painting, ask questions of painting. What is it that painting can do? What can it now do differently? How can painting argue, describe, consider or reflect? What happens to the language of painting when it includes the architectural and theatrical space of the exhibition? Why paint now? Can painting think? Such questions are, of course, open ended and are more often than not only answered by further questions. The conversations arise through exhibition, through discussion, person to person, painting to painting, but also perhaps ironically, through social media. Contemporary British Painting's 'Painting of the Day' is testament to the wealth of current activity in the field. The prize, now in its fourth year, is a high point in our painting year.

The twelve painters who are exhibiting as finalists in 2019 reflect the vitality, variety and rigour of what is happening in painting now. As always though, they are but the tip of the iceberg, there are many alternative shows which might have been, the standard of application was extraordinary, the selection process itself another conversation. Selecting from the seven hundred and forty-six submissions was challenging, eye opening, humbling and ultimately exciting: there are so many interesting and serious painters out there, some of whom have been working for

decades, others just starting out on their adventure in paint. In our long and involved discussions over selection Lisa Denyer, Geraint Evans, Joe Packer (winner of the Contemporary British Painting Prize 2018) and I found ourselves looking over and over again at works, reassessing, reconsidering, re-examining and re-evaluating choices in the light of the other's views. It was an extraordinary privilege, here was a snapshot of what is going on in painting here and now, and we were able to look, consider and discuss this.

These paintings are, of course, made somewhere. These paintings have been made in all kinds of studios: from small domestic spaces to large industrial warehouses, some in the happening inner cities, some in the post-industrial edgelands of those cities, some in the relative quiet of what once might have been, and still just might be, a rural idyll. Scattered far and wide across our green and not always quite so pleasant land there are very many painters, very many people with the widest possible demographic, all committed to making sense of the world they inhabit through making marks on a surface. Painting and painters have demonstrated extraordinary staying power here. The paintings that result, of which those included in this 2019 prize exhibition take on as diverse a variety of visual forms as the places they were made in, all share integrity, vitality and a preoccupation with what painting can offer in the twenty-first century.

*Judith Tucker 2019*



The artists...

# Louise Bristow

I paint directly from arrangements of models and collage elements that I compose in my studio. To make these set-ups I draw upon my resource bank of imagery and themes, comprising a large collection of books, magazines and printed ephemera that I have amassed over time, along with photographs I have taken and models that I create.

One of the pleasures of making my work is putting together things that in reality wouldn't be found in the same time or space. Elements are re-contextualised and hierarchies of importance are discarded. Often there is a mismatch of scale and a collision of visual languages in the set-ups: I will place a realistic three-dimensional architectural model next to a flat image of a landscape, an abstract geometric form and a scrap of coloured paper. I view everything simply as 'material' and there is a democracy to how it is all treated.

The fact that these works exist as paintings is important. People seem to enjoy the models, but the models and set-ups are only half the story. Translating them into paint in the particular way that I do is very important to their meaning, not least because making the painting involves crystallising the relationships between each of the elements represented. My paintings depict connections, and from these connections comes narrative.



Clearing  
Oil on wood panel, 60cm x 30cm, 2018



Public Space  
*Oil on wood panel, 100cm x 50cm, 2019*



Memphis  
*Oil on wood panel, 80cm x 40cm, 2018*

# Stephanie Douet

My current work is painted 2D plywood cut-outs inspired by the human face and form. The paintings evolve from pencil drawings of imaginary and observed faces and limbs, drawn onto ply. As I paint the cutouts, the form plays with the edges of the wood, conforming or challenging it. Mark-making is an obsession, and I contrive and explore accidents, pushing the marks until the forms tell me where they need to go. Colour has a sculptural role, and what particular shade it is matters less than its place in the atmosphere of the painting. I like to start with colours I find a little disagreeable or irksome.

Improvising the placing of the paintings is a matter of fun - sometimes on the wall, sometimes in immersive 'scenes' combined with other works. New combinations generate ideas for new works. This way of working allows me to make fantastical figures, combining experimental painting with a sense of sculptural form. Mughal painting, visits to museums, collections and displays, archival photographs of the Raj and reading about Britain's involvement in India – history, anthropology, culture and fiction – continue to inspire me, as do cartoon drawings, diagrams, fashion and folk art from all parts of the world.

I paint to discover what is going on in my imagination; reading feeds my mind and how I look at the world, aiming to create a uniquely enchanting and bewildering visual experience.



Born in a museum  
*Acrylic on plywood, Dutch gold leaf, rhododendron stick, 74cm x 92cm, 2019*



Major  
*Acrylic on plywood, Dutch gold leaf, 120cm x 74cm, 2019*

Dancing Skinny  
*Acrylic on plywood and Dutch gold leaf, 99cm x 52cm excluding 'sticks', 2019*

# Kirsty Harris

My paintings of nuclear tests are often vast and confrontational, depicting moments of manufactured violence that radically disrupt the landscape. Often in the works the square inches of linen represent the yield of the explosion. I'm interested in the decisive moment, a meditation on a split second. The beauty and awe of the landscape, the dust, the glow, the force of the explosion. The fight for survival. We've shown ourselves THE END.



Buster Jangle Easy  
*Oil on linen, 127cm x 152cm (50" x 60"), 2016*



Ranger Able  
*Oil on un-stretched linen, 160cm x 203cm (63" x 80"), 2019*



Test No.6  
*Oil on linen, 127cm x 168cm (50" x 66"), 2016*

# Helen Hayward

Paint offers itself as a skin; fabric and paper-mache as a body. Working in series and narratives, with paint, print, sculpture, installation and ceramics I find painting the most intense of all the making processes, a wrestling tug of war.

My works are performative. They aspire to seek, inhabit, occupy and sometimes attain a grandiose position. They are aware of their own lack of genius, of their precarious position and try to get away with the form they take and the environment in which they live.

The paintings on show in The Contemporary British Painting Prize 2019 are from a body of work I produced for a show called Don't nobody know my troubles with God (2018), at Intercession Gallery, Northampton alongside artist Pauline Wood. The starting point for our collaboration was the writings of Christian mystic Jacob Böhme (1575-1624). Böhme saw beams of sunlight reflecting upon a burnished pewter bowl. In that moment of inward ecstasy the structure of the universe was revealed to him. Pauline and I liked the sound of mystics having visions and although we did not know what that meant the idea of Jacob having that vision opened up a reactive space of making.

Pierro De La Francesca's painting Madonna del Parto 1460, resonated with Pauline and I and our endeavors to wrestle with substance and the becoming of things. Here, my wrestling with painting can be likened to wrestling with God.

Pauline and I worked in our own studios, closely discussing, sharing ideas and works. I made many sculptures, prints and paintings over an intensive nine-month period. I had found twelve large bags of African clothes and Nigerian head scarf fabric on my estate, left out for the bin man. I saw this as a gift from god, and that the fabrics were of course for works for the show. I cut out ruffles and decorative elements from the clothes, which I stretched onto wooden frames as a body for my paintings.



Grizzly Goliath  
Oil paint, embroidery thread, paper mache, emulsion, wool, canvas  
23.5cm x 27.5cm x 24cm, 2018



The Cerallbo Ball  
*Oil paint, canvas, paper mache, cord, chickenwire, 36cm x 51cm x 17cm, 2018*



The Fool  
*Oil paint, fabric, 39cm x 43cm x 8cm, 2018*

# Adam Hennessey

*Adam Hennessey writes comics from a first-person singular point of view about impactful moments in his life. In these comics he uses text alongside drawings to tell a story. Through writing he relives an experience to better understand it for himself and it's this dialogue with his personal life which is the basis for the paintings he creates in the studio.*

## Sexy Hands

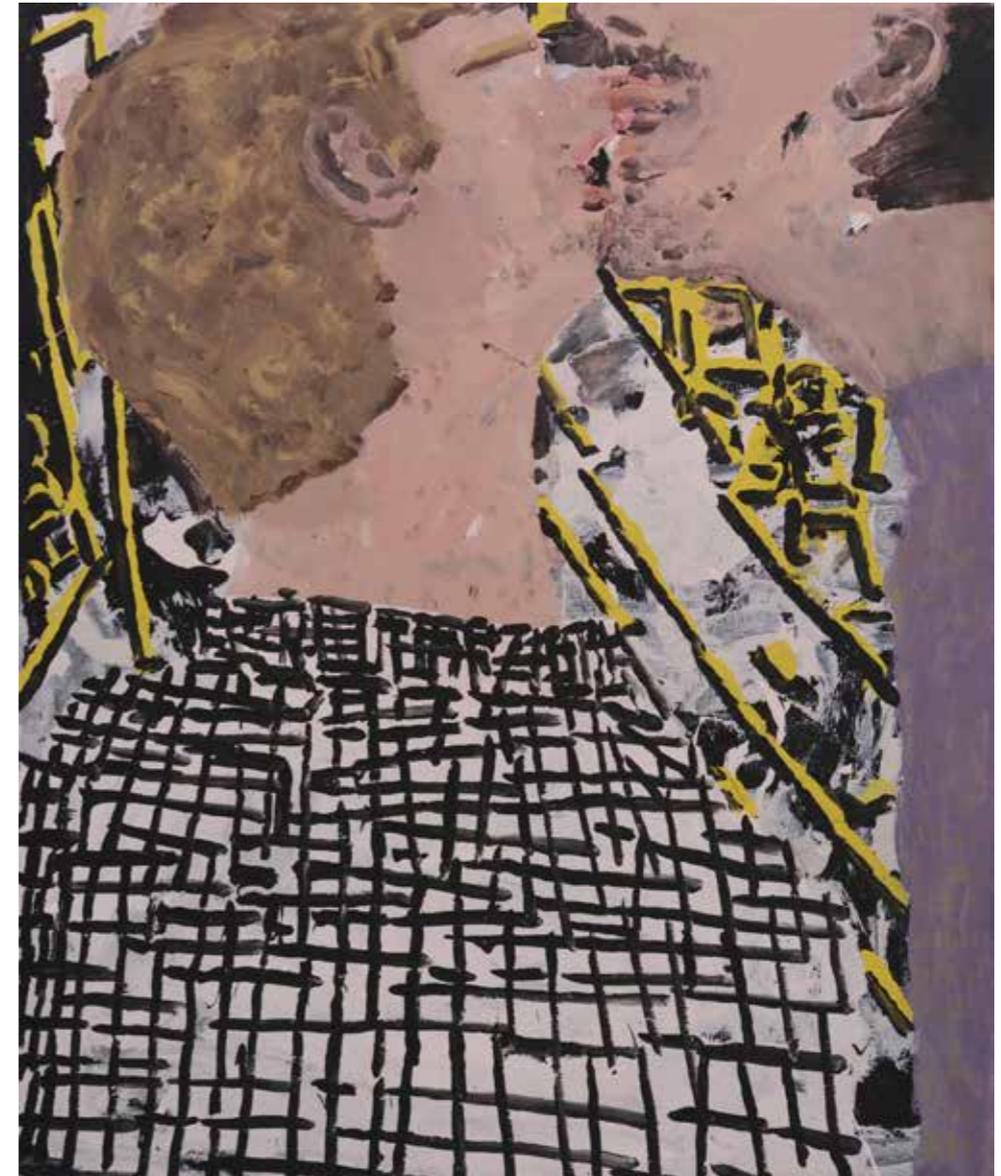
Hennessey had a doctor's appointment with a new GP because he was concerned about a small blemish on his private parts. Somewhat embarrassingly he knew the doctor from a gay badminton club he goes to. The GP asked a chaperone to observe the examination, during which he noticed the GP's nice hands.

## Ned

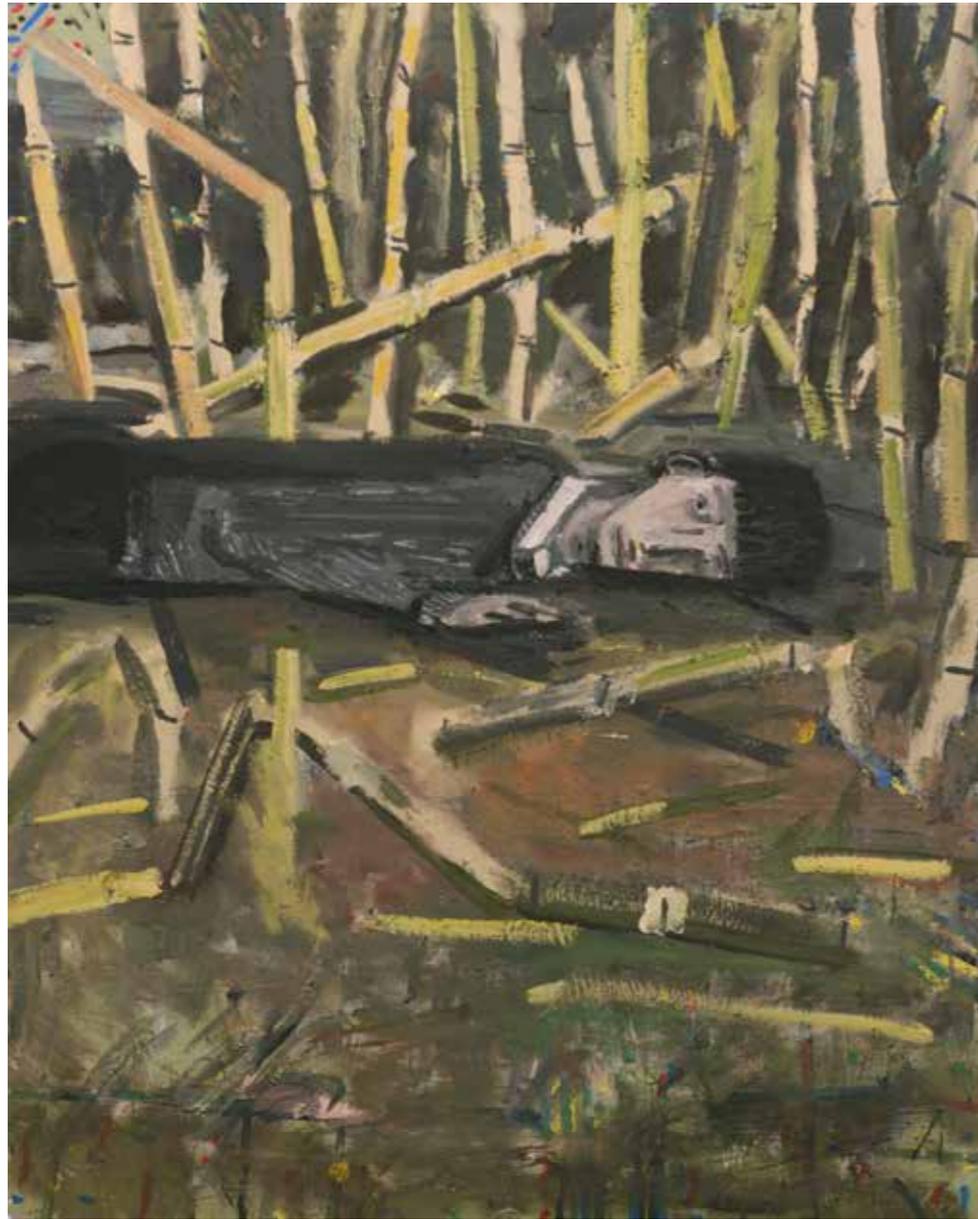
Back in school when he was about eleven, his whole school played hide and seek. He and a kid called Ned hid in the bit with tall bamboo. They lay opposite each other and whispered. They never got found and laid there until the whistle blew. He recently saw Ned's profile on a dating website. He had no idea he was also gay. This was another kid in his class at school in a class of 9 boys. He wonders what Ned's life is like and if he is happy?

## Man in high-vis

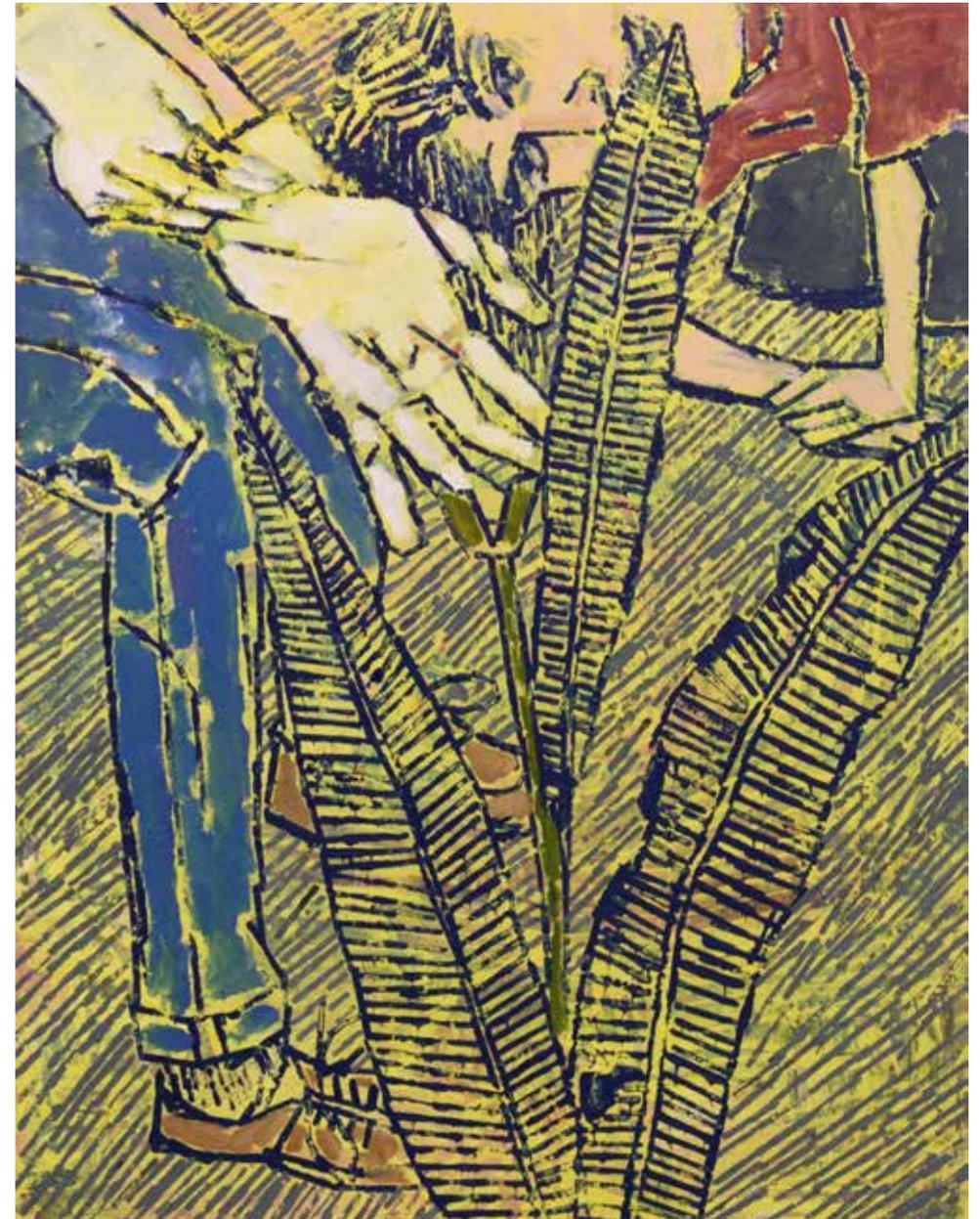
Coming home late on the tube in London he stood behind a couple on an escalator who were holding hands and snogging. Some men in high-vis jackets coming down the other side started pointing at them and shouting homophobic abuse. Amazingly the couple were completely oblivious and carried on kissing.



Man in high-vis  
Acrylic on canvas, 90cm x 110cm, 2018



Ned  
*Acrylic on canvas, 120cm x 150cm, 2018*



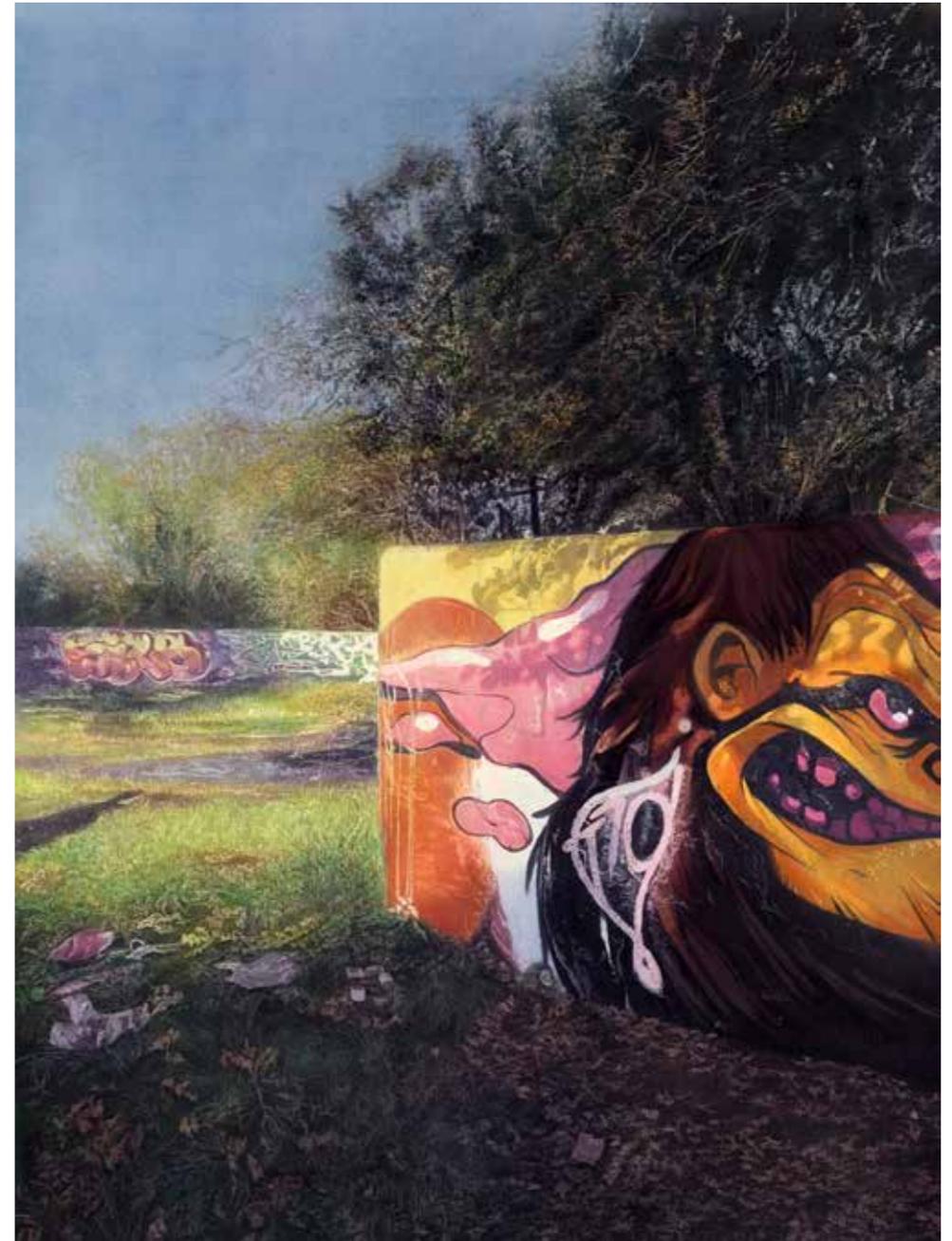
Sexy Hands  
*Acrylic on canvas, 115cm x 87cm, 2019*

# Juliette Losq

I make detailed ink and watercolour paintings. Through their complexity and depth I aim to challenge the notion of watercolour as being a medium that is traditionally used for preparatory sketching. Using resist, a conventional material of the watercolourist, I work over the surface repetitively, creating multiple painted layers that simultaneously obscure and reveal those beneath, in a process that references the building up of an etching plate.

I depict marginal landscapes that spring up in the overlooked borderlands of cities and towns. These become sites of speculation on what might have gone before and what may be occurring out of sight. Cyphers of the passage of time, ruins embody the past and present at once whilst projecting a potential future. Whilst picturesque ruins are allowed to decline slowly within the landscape and are preserved as heritage sites, those of modern buildings are often considered unsightly and are frequently awaiting redevelopment. Their changeability is what has attracted me to ruin sites so frequently in my work.

Through the process of making very detailed interpretations of these sites I am in a sense preserving something that is considered unworthy of preservation. I allude to the Picturesque and the Gothic of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, interweaving their motifs and devices with the marginal areas that I depict. By referencing art history, and embedding marginal sites within this pantheon of ruination, I am drawing attention to their ephemerality whilst at the same time 'fixing' them at a particular moment of collapse / decay / time.



Gorilla

*Watercolour and ink on paper, 96cm x 130cm, 2016*



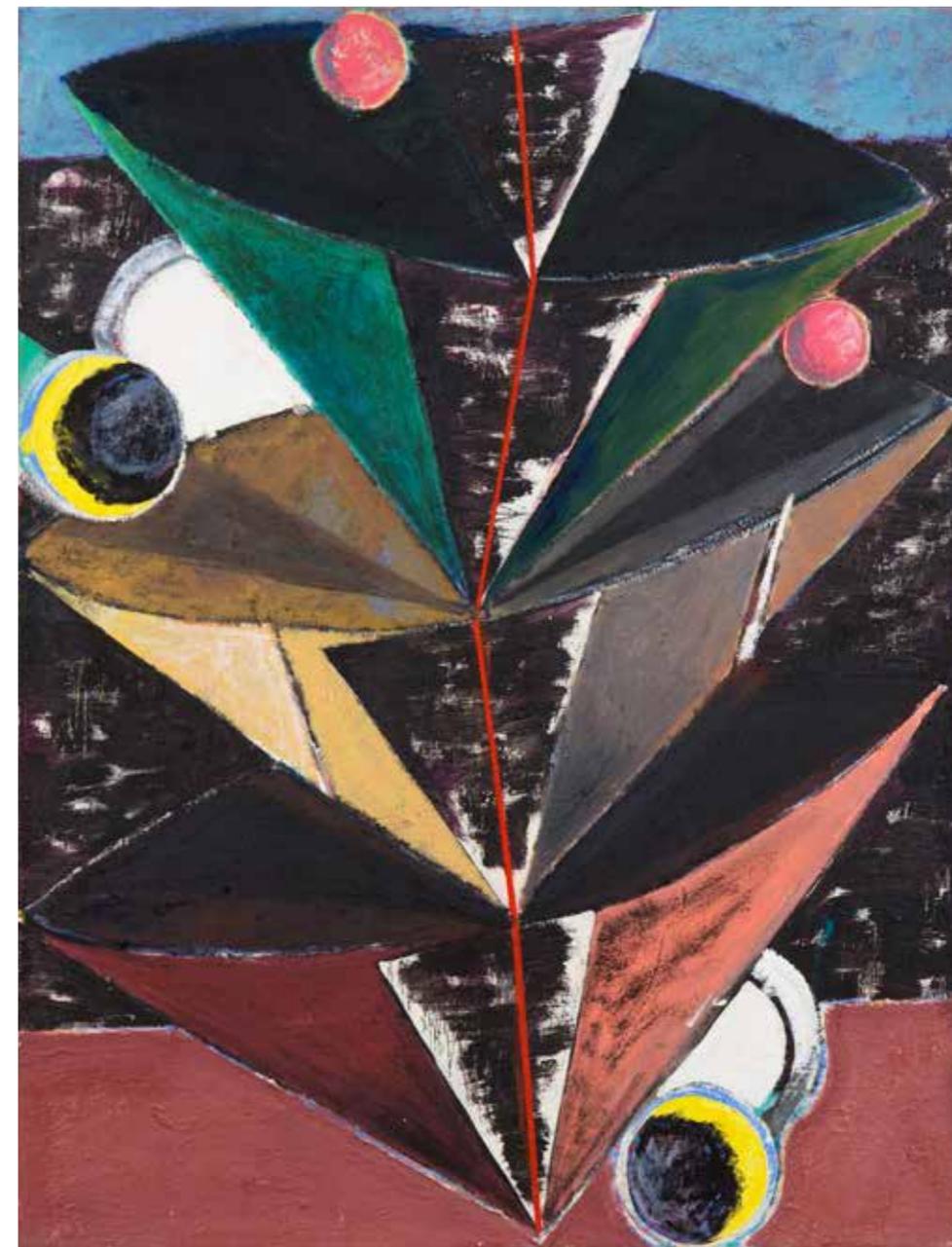
Maeander  
*Watercolour and ink on paper, 63cm x 44.5cm, 2016*



Spatter  
*Watercolour and ink on paper, 60cm x 44cm, 2016*

# Scott McCracken

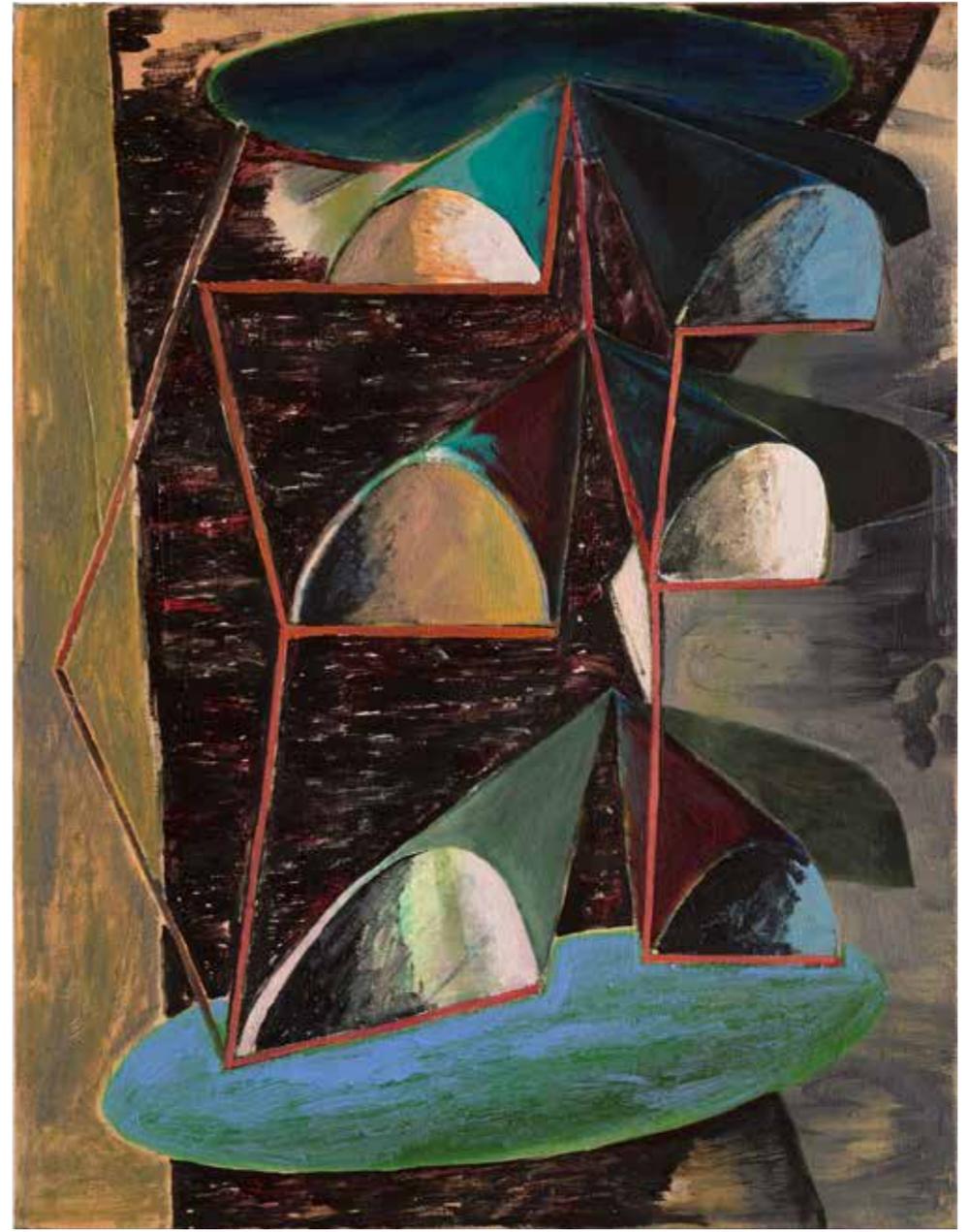
Geometric shapes and volumetric forms are used to generate ideas for paintings. These motifs are recycled and reconfigured into different pictorial situations and through this process of repetition, rhythms are created within, around and across the paintings. The consistent size and format of the works gives them a serial nature, points plotted along a trajectory that continually loops back on itself. Pictorial space shifts between a modelled depth and a graphic flatness. While rooted in the vocabulary of early modernism, shape and form become almost animated as individual components move, rotate, come together and break away.



Backbreaker  
*Oil on canvas, 45cm x 60cm, 2018*



Brainwaving  
*Oil on canvas, 45cm x 60cm, 2019*



Sideparter  
*Oil on canvas, 45cm x 60cm, 2019*

# Jo McGonigal

I make spatial paintings out of real things in real space.

I begin with a close visual analysis of historical Baroque painting (e.g. Poussin, Vermeer, Caravaggio) as a basis for understanding painting, not as a fixed identity but as specific spatial construction with a pictorial vocabulary that articulates notions of the seen and unseen and movement on a flat surface.

These observations become translated through the construction of three-dimensional spatial paintings that are a process of visually undoing these pictorial compositions and re-constructing using specific material objects and fragments. The exhibitions have developed the work through the demands of architectural space. I use both found and everyday materials alongside the made, to closely examine the formal grammar of pictorial language – the vernacular of painting, but taken apart, where distance, perspective, edge, line, translucency and structures of colour, operate to develop an understanding of painting as a physical and spatial event.

I am concerned with how the compositional and material components of painting affect the experiential basis of the viewer, to reveal not what the painting means but what it does. The work evolves and establishes itself through 'following the materials,' assembling and disassembling, putting something down, adjusting it, editing it to explore the material condition of each thing, how they might act according to their own materiality and the relations they set up to each other and to the viewer. This intimate engagement with materials becomes a conceptual device to mobilise participation and encourage tactile engagement, testing the divisions between painting, architecture and theatricality. All works insist upon close-up/close-range and distant looking where legibility depends upon the viewer moving, experiencing the work from side to side, or leaning against the gallery wall, so the work is not perceived as a static field but a network of shifting viewpoints. My work looks at how painting, through its relationship to space, architecture and the body, contributes to emergent debate on painting as a post-medium practice.

Opposite: Dirty Gold  
*Lycra, pigment, wood, 80cm x 100cm, 2016*





Side (Cadmium yellow deep)  
*Lycra, pigment, wood, 15cm x 35cm, 2016*



Unsaid. So-said. Missaid.  
*Tights, lycra, neon, plinth, electronic flicker box, string, metal trestles,  
graphite paint, black latex, Dimensions variable, 2019*

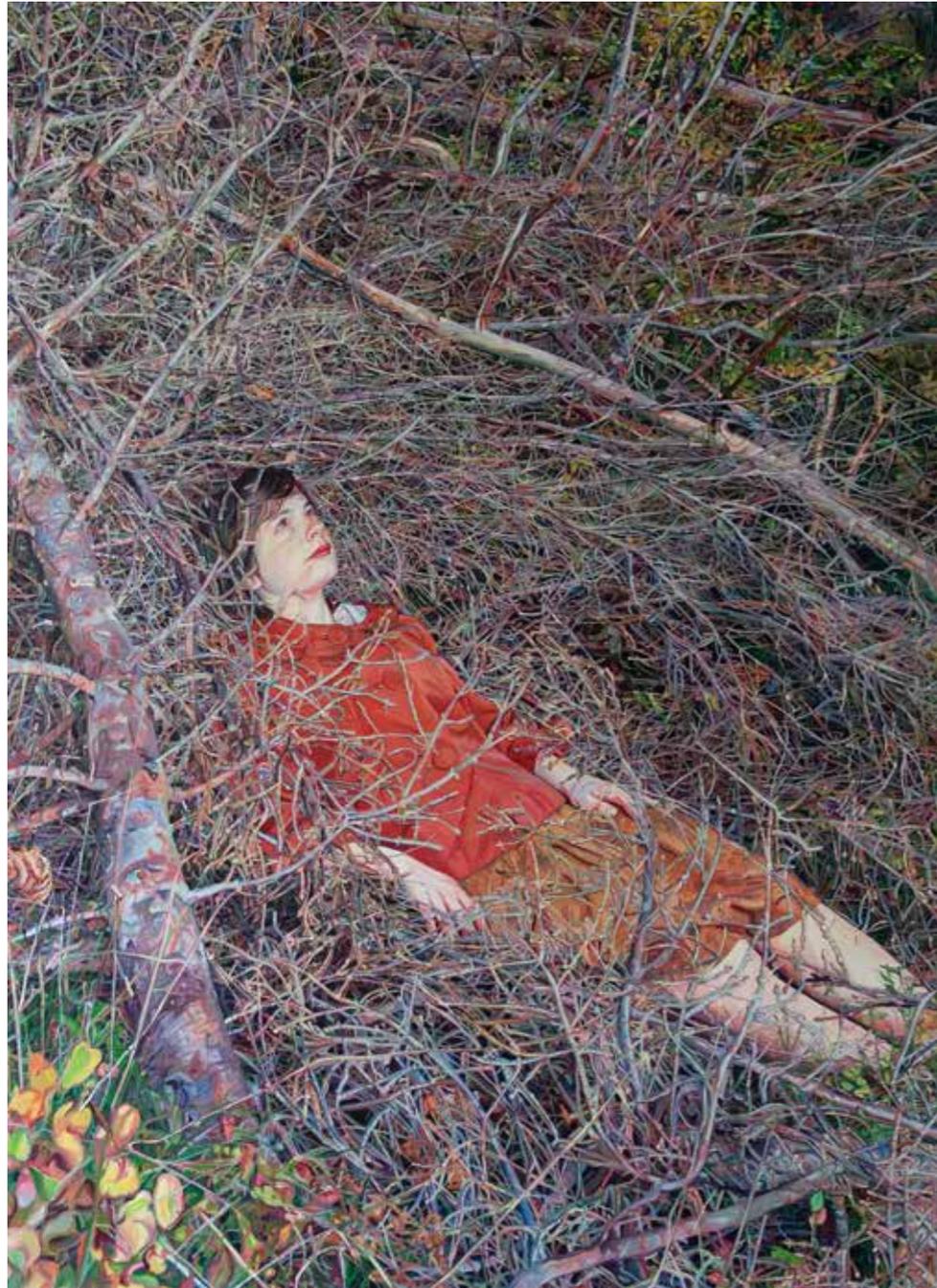
# Ruth Murray

My paintings are about the experiences of women - most of my paintings are of women in a scene. It's the hidden thoughts and the psychology of the situation that interests me most. I use pattern and light to transform the ordinary, tangible objects into pliable masses and ugly squiggles. Sometimes these dynamic patterns and shapes take centre stage, leaving a stationary, solitary protagonist seeming distant, bored, trapped or lost. I am excited by light and colour, which paint serves best, and love how the playfulness of this can, paradoxically, add a sort of melancholy to the thing it's depicting.

Sometimes I'll confront the viewer with enigmatic behaviours (there's always something private and inaccessible about the subjects); and at other times I'll use rituals, symbols and tokens to disrupt the reading of the image. It's not a radical effect: more a gentle skewing. Sometimes it's the slightest gesture that feels most significant.

Opposite: Blue Rosie  
*Oil on canvas, 120cm x 170cm, 2019*





Duff - Oil on canvas, 150cm x 210cm, 2017



Puddle  
Oil on wood panel, 30cm x 21cm 2019

# Diana Taylor

The merging of Cypriot and English cultures of my genealogy has undoubtedly shaped the assemblage based approach to my painting, in which a bricolage of Baroque ornament, Modernist tropes, Ancient Greek sculpture, Victorian patterns and contemporary motifs are appropriated from the cultural landscape.

Low-res, poor reproductions of ruins are woven through motifs, diagrams, digital clip art and analogue stock imagery from printers' catalogues. These images and processes are linked by my pre-occupation with loss, redundancy and the ruin in visual culture. Through this appropriation of images jumping from one epoch to another, a sense of a temporality and displacement is conveyed; new meanings are created.

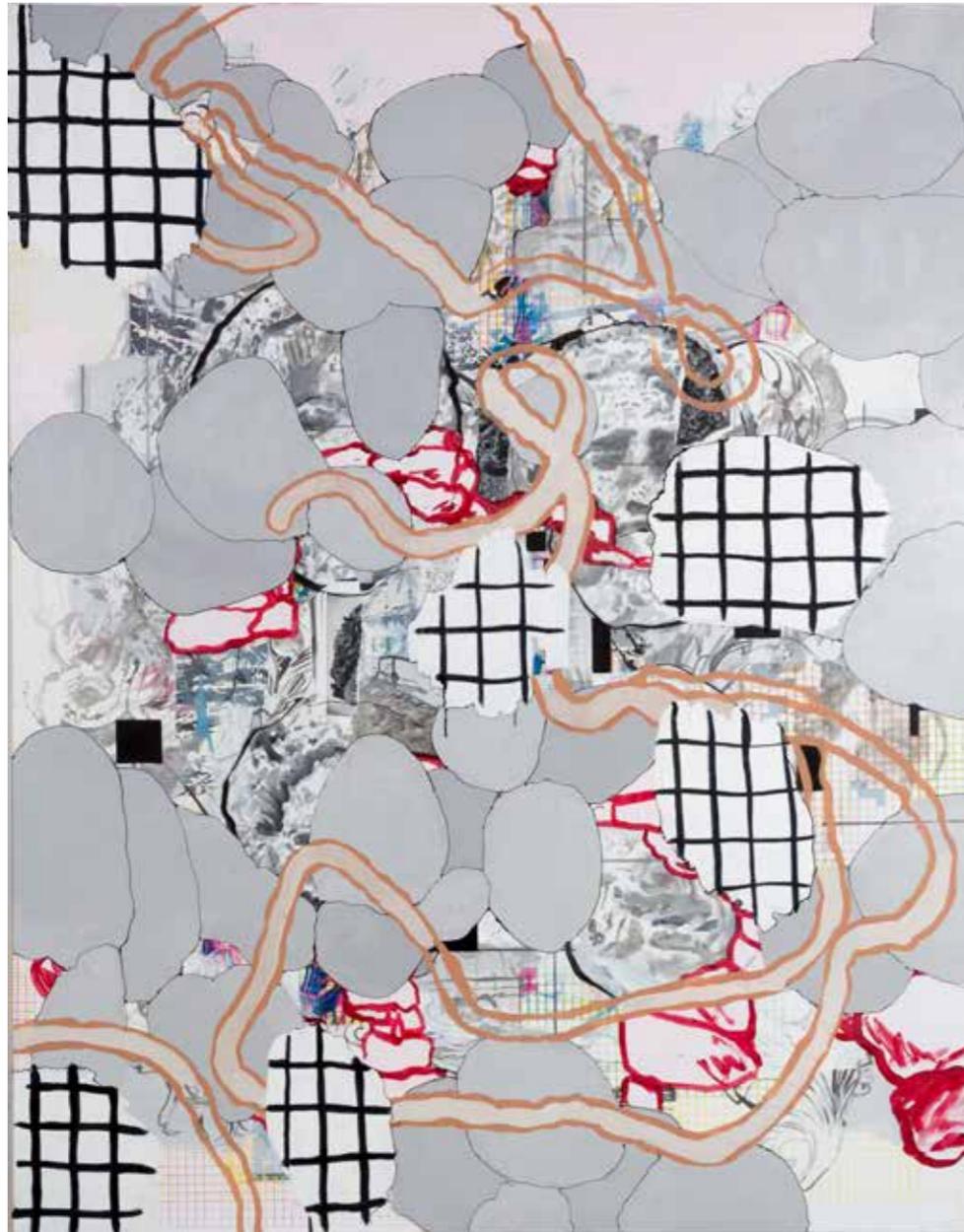
My painting practice is littered with paradoxes which echo the contradictory nature of the decision-making process... painting/un-painting, stitching/unstitching, skilling/deskilling, shifting from and between states of completion. The question of 'what is at stake' with painting activates the work, oscillating between hand, machine and computer, pushing digital methods beyond the screen back into the material realm. The trace of the hand, and its inevitable slippages are embraced.

Screen-printing, photocopiers and analogue projectors are used as much for their visual qualities as for their inherent ability to produce failures.

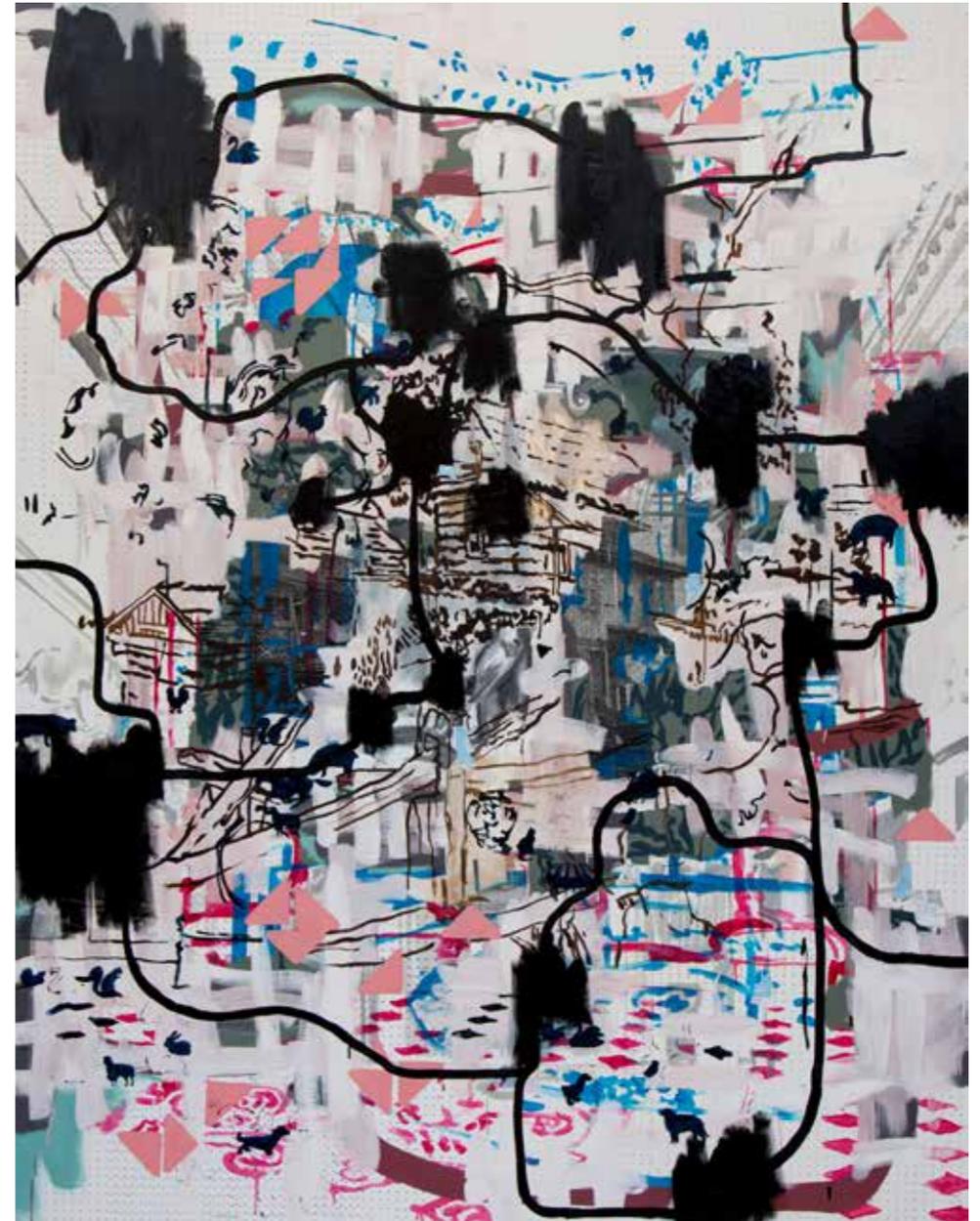
The reproduced image is once again scanned, photocopied and digitally edited and so subjected to a kind of entropy, highlighting the contradictions and failures of our times, towards a kind of collapse. The image itself becomes a ruin.



An argumentative night under the bridge  
*Oil, acrylic silkscreen, newsprint paper, graphite and embroidery thread on canvas, 140cm x 180cm, 2019*



Museum Ghosts  
*Oil and acrylic silkscreen on canvas, 140cm x 180cm, 2019*



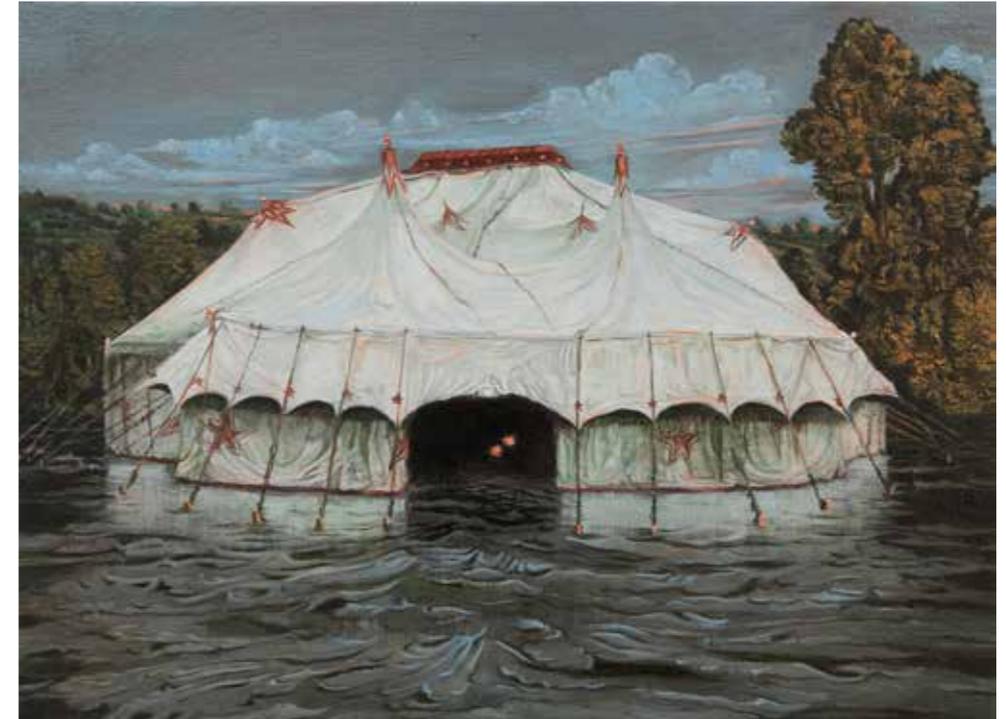
Ages and ages, returning at intervals  
*Oil, acrylic silkscreen and paper on canvas, 140cm x 180cm, 2018*

# Joanna Whittle

The paintings are small scale landscapes and explore the intensity that smaller works or miniatures have. They have a discreet yet heightened method of persuasion, subversive in their intimacy with the viewer and in the privacy and concealment of small things.

The subjects of the paintings often take the form of ruins and re-evaluate how these operate in contemporary settings. However the works are not descriptions of dereliction but rather an exploration of romantic themes. They are reminiscent of paintings of crumbling follies and falling empires but depicting modern structures with fading sherbet colours and acidic electric lights. Through an enquiry in to picturesque themes the paintings push to the edges of these romantic reflections in order to understand their undercurrent in contemporary painting.

Most recently fairground equipment and tents have been used as devices to represent make-shift ruins and themes of fragility, vulnerability and impermanence. Canvas sits in water; ropes are pegged in to fluid land. They are constructed scenes which seem to hold different moments of time concurrently- canvas rots and weeds scramble over surfaces, but some lights remain on or have just been lit. They hold their own histories, ideas of vanished circuses or fairgrounds - events once frenetic now silenced and ominous in dusk or rain. They feel like spaces where furtive and obscured events have taken place but clues to this are few or misleading. And whilst they have a feeling of oppressive static the motile elements such as mud or water seem to be slowly moving the scenes towards a foreboding conclusion.



Gloaming  
Oil on canvas, 24cm x 18cm, 2019



Pyramid  
*Oil on linen, 22cm x 16cm, 2018*



Memorial Postcard  
*Oil on perspex, 15cm x 10cm, 2019*

# Maddie Yuille

I create paintings of interior spaces devoid of people, in which I explore the interaction between the space itself and the light falling within. Openings between the inside and the outside reveal a world beyond the interior space, although ultimately it is unknowable, either a single stroke of blue paint sitting on the surface of the canvas, or a simplified landscape obscured by the reflection of the light from within. Depicting unidentified spaces of repose, an indulgence is given to a prolonged looking.

Working from my own photographs, it is through the process of painting that a new space is created in which the ordinary appears momentarily strange; the agency of the inanimate and the immaterial is illuminated. A beauty is revealed, paradoxically tinged with boredom; each painting held in a space of extended time between events, where there is an expectancy that something has just happened, or may be just about to occur. The timeless space of the motel is hinted at – an uncanny ‘non-place’, where the generic interior offers the viewer a sense of pleasant anonymity. Alone, gazing, they could be anyone, anywhere.

I apply thin, translucent paint in layers, allowing strange, shifting colours to arise, reminiscent of the material of a curtain that is transformed as light filters through. A heightened colour palette recreates a moment at which the senses are similarly heightened – temporarily more alert to how the world appears. Playing with illusion, the paintings oscillate between the depiction of a recognisable space and a simple collection of brush marks on a flat surface. Applied in a deadpan manner, and with a speed and immediacy, they are reflective of the ordinary subject matter, and allude to the transitory nature of the ‘non-place’. There is a tension held in the simplicity of each brush mark that has to be placed ‘just so’.



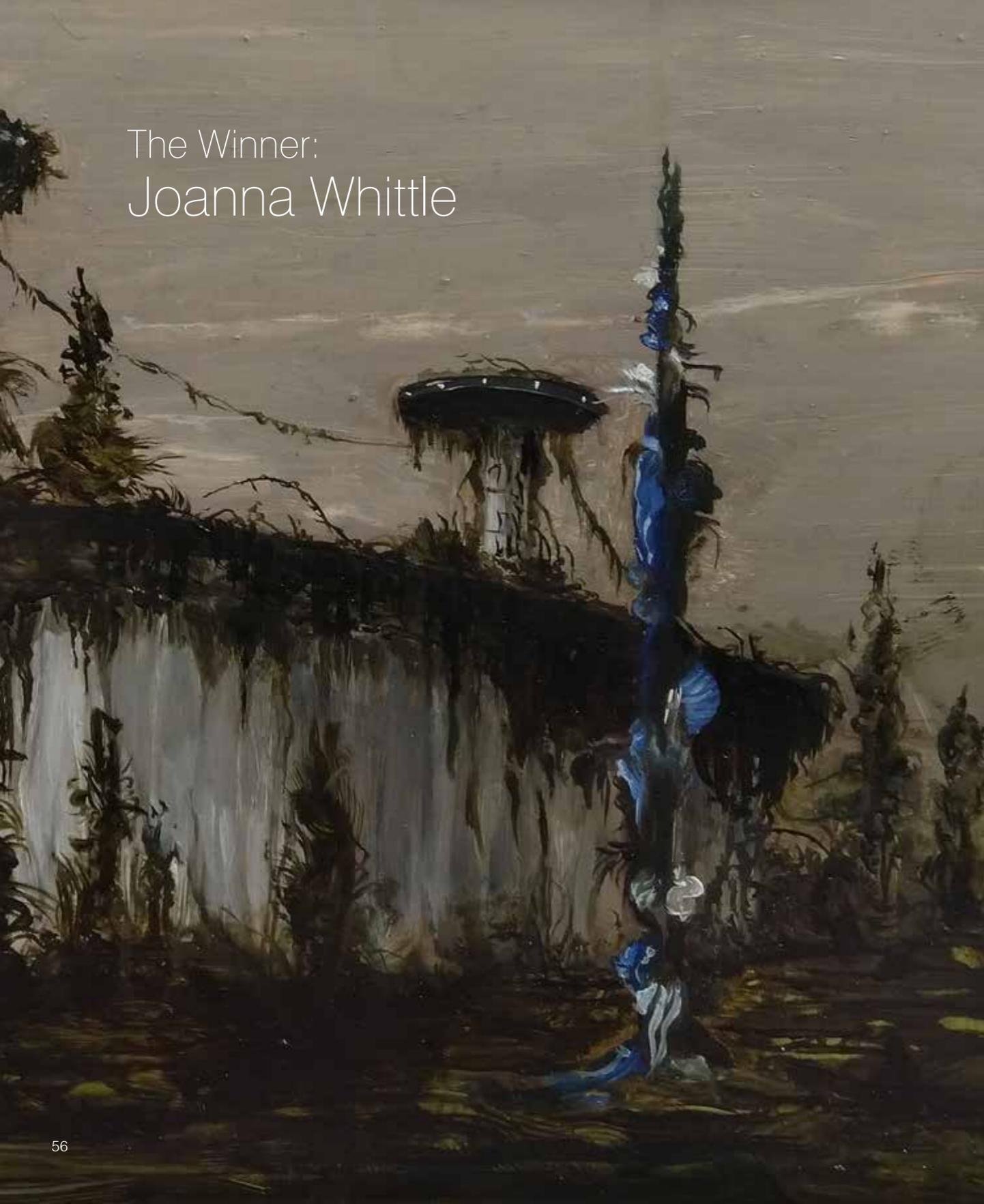
It did not fall to my lot to give you everything as I ought  
*Acrylic on canvas, 220cm x 140cm, 2019*



We were together, all else has long been forgotten by me  
*Acrylic on canvas, 140cm x 140cm, 2019*



She has the golden eyes of the Woodland Queen  
*Acrylic on canvas, 220cm x 140cm, 2019*



The Winner:  
Joanna Whittle

## A Celebration of Painting: From a Conversation with Joanna Whittle

Griselda Pollock

The winning painter of the Contemporary British Painting competition in 2019 painted the smallest paintings in the exhibition. They were also the most profoundly painterly.

This combination of qualities is already intriguing in an era that has inherited the massive expansion of size effected by the Abstract Expressionists in the mid-twentieth century in order to make us acknowledge painting for itself. It is also fascinating that Joanna Whittle began in that tradition, making large, gestural, layered, abstract paintings about painting. Her works, she tells me, were immersive seeking and creating a sense of ever-expanding or even limitless space.

I then discover that she grew up in desert landscapes in the Middle East. Deserts are remarkable places. They dispossess us of own sense of scale, place, and confound our rationality. It is no surprise that in three inter-relating monotheisms of the world, the invisible deity is encountered 'behind the desert'. In more banal Western artistic terms, deserts might be considered the defeat of landscape. Deserts are endlessly fascinating and yet without the stabilizing features that engender form and create a scene to delight the roving eye.

Some years ago, I was writing about American painter Georgia O'Keeffe and went to see her former home and studio in Abiquiu. Driving across the vast plains of New Mexico from Albuquerque airport towards Santa Fe, I saw no 'landscape', just apparently featureless land stretching flatly to the horizon or dipping unexpectedly into deep ravines carved by the Rio Grande. As the car rolled on, I wondered to myself: how could O'Keeffe have found a way to paint landscape *here*? Then I arrived at Abiquiu. I looked out of the window of her strategically positioned studio. I saw a view: elements of land, hills, rocks, crags, erosions, and trees that would enable the making of a painting because of a play planes, horizontals and verticals. I was invited to write about O'Keeffe when the Tate Gallery mounted its major show in 2016. I chose the title 'Seeing Georgia O'Keeffe Seeing'. I tried to trace, for myself,

the slow process of her becoming a painter via formal experiments with abstraction and real encounters with the desert. I think a key moment occurred in 1917 when she was living in Texas, a state of vast, flat expanses that have blown the minds of several 20th century painters from Agnes Martin to Walter de Maria. What O'Keeffe discovered there led to her produce a series of watercolours that were neither abstract nor non-abstract, neither landscape nor not-landscape. What she 'saw' was where the infinite plains met the immense skies or the sun rimmed the night horizon which only paint freed to be colour, texture, shape could convey. What made these works possible was not description but revelation through a pure economy of colour, water and the sureness of her gesture.

O'Keeffe is not usually classed in the world of painters' painters. Nor is she considered alongside her apparently abstract New York contemporaries who sought to destroy the 'view' by defeating the frame (either abolishing it [Pollock] or taking it inside the painting [Rothko]). I evoke her as part of my journey to seeing what Joanna Whittle is seeing in, and with, painting.

There were precious few women amongst Joanna Whittle's tutors either on her BA degree in Fine Art at St. Martin's in the late 1990s or among the artists she was encouraged to study. She nonetheless found the environment at the Royal College, where she completed her MA in 2000, very supportive both artistically and intellectually. Amongst those artists she studied with deep interest at this time were Robert Motherwell, whose gentleness of gesture she valued, and Mark Rothko at the Tate (when on show). Rothko's close-hued, subdued and moody Seagram Murals (1958) generated both a deeply bodily sensation of being surrounded in an expanded space that had no ground and, at the same time, generated, out of that very groundlessness, a desire to stay there with and within this ungraspable colour-space while giving an elusive form to the melancholy of a profound lostness. Her thesis at the RCA drew upon the concept of Being founded on the abyss – Abgrund – articulated by the German philosopher Heidegger. Each offered a different quality to the young painter asking practically – and theoretically – informed questions about how we find our place in paintings that virtually expand space beyond the positioned, historically mastering gaze before which landscape painting typically exposed the world it formulated to be thus seen. Making works so big that finding a place in their virtual worlds becomes impossible was a 20th century ruse. Immersion is not, however, the same as experiencing space. From reading Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the artist might learn that the experience she was after arises from the phenomenology

of being in the world of which you are its flesh. From Gaston Bachelard on the other hand, comes insight about the uncanniness of space and spaces that evoke both our own unseen bodily interiors and our psychically inflected sense of *the* body, namely the first body we sensed – the maternal body that evokes both unimaginable beginnings within a no-space and our fearful ending – not-being. What if the artist also searches for a way of painting that defies the positioned gaze and the mastering eye precisely because what is being sought in painting is a sensation of spatial being, and an effect that is associated with the painter's earliest intimations of being in the world, living in space, and sensing that these hold the powerful affects for which painting becomes an always provisional promise and also an ever-exciting threat?

To say that Joanna Whittle lived her childhood in a desert landscape, a desert irregularly interrupted by half-finished, abandoned, or straggling structures at the edges of incipient urban encroachments into the endless sand will illuminate everything and explain nothing. It points to the formation of an imagination and an aesthetic sensibility that will be sensitive to a specific range of effects we meet, the disturbing absences and absentings of the uninhabited (ruins, remains, empty structure). These touch on homelessness or rather unbelonging. They imply radical, alluring and terrifying otherness. They evoke both timelessness and vastness. They may imply a force or presence indifferent to the human and beyond its rationalizing grasp.

The desert and its rich associations serve me as cue to discover the continuities between two moments in Joanna Whittle's career as a painter. The first moment concerns *beginnings*. These were played out across undergraduate (St Martins) and graduate (Royal College) fine art study as an abstract painter turned landscape painter to be succeeded by a very well-received professional painting practice with sold-out shows and a distinguished commercial gallery behind her. The second, unnamed moment, emerged after a decisive break from, and then a considered and committed return to, painting with the conviction that what mattered for her life was that she knew herself to be a painter. This word does not describe an activity or a choice of medium so much as but a way of being in the world.

In our conversation in her studio, Joanna Whittle told me about one of those major moments in her life when she stood – for days – before Giovanni Bellini's painting *St Francis in Ecstasy* ca.1480 in the Frick Collection, New York. It is also known as

*St Francis in the Desert*. The still abstract artist had, in fact, gone to New York to be immersed in a major retrospective of Jackson Pollock and unexpectedly found herself transfixed by so different a painting practice before the Bellini. There she saw how abstract qualities of painterliness and expanding space co-emerge with a kind of acute attention and rendering of objects. Conjure this painting up before your eyes or check it out on the web, and immediately you might feel what I did when she told me the story. Seeing the image allowed me to understand exactly this lovely deviation from 1990s abstraction into the other 'beginnings' of painting at the inception of the Italian Renaissance. Then Christian painters, armed with the novel technology of oil paint, were tasked with making real the unreal. This insight could offer a resource for what emerged later in our conversation about how the real is realized by means of both the unreal and the sur-real.

How can Bellini's painting make its viewers *see* and *witness* a moment of transformative spiritual ecstasy? The answer lies in two elements. I suggest the first element is an almost forensic pictorial representation of the world (here trees, rocks, tiny mice and munching donkeys, curling vines and peeping weeds under the canopy of sky with floating clouds and receding into space in graduated planes). The second element is light. To be a world everything must be there, in its finest detail. Yet it can only be realized in this to-be-seen object through technique and materials: drawing and painting, and the knowing and confident manipulation of paint.

I watched a series of talks and films about this recently restored painting where magnification allowed me, remotely, to see into the work of Bellini's fine haired brush, its load of carefully sculpted paint on the friar's belt, its layered glazing of hinted at stigmata. What do you do, as an artist trained in post 1950s abstract painting, having then *seen* Bellini and known that this is what you want to do? Perhaps you call on your contemporaries, who did not live in a world of saints and ecstasy but knew about multiple coexisting realities, material and psychic, and had looked on the horrors of war and death. I am thinking of the painterly Surrealists, Paul Nash perhaps, and in technical terms, of Max Ernst's decalomania which technique popped into my mind before Joanna Whittle mentioned his name. She did so, however, to reference some of his effects, but also to differentiate herself from Ernst's transfer methods. Hers is a layering process, field on field, working colour to prevent its dying back and to bring it forward, to hold its capacity to evoke while asserting its playful autonomy as manipulated substance. It owes something more to a belated recognition of the painterly language of a Suffolk artist, John Constable.

These rather, perhaps inevitably art historical, perambulations, help me build a road to the tiny, immense paintings to which we the judges gave this year's prize. A prize about contemporary painting has to make us think about painting, that baggy word, made a tad more self-conscious substantive by the modernist turn and the modernist eye it created through which to review all of art's history. From this opening – all about space, big paintings, landscape and a haunting sense of a world that exceeds our visual grasp and aesthetic formulation – let me return to the opening statement: the fact that her current paintings are small. We should, of course, never confuse size with scale. That is what we discover above all in long and close looking at Joanna Whittle's current oil paintings on Perspex.

In her recent work, Joanna Whittle has found a 'motif'. Not a Cézannian mountain in brilliant Provençal sun, her motif is a festival tent at night pitched amidst sodden mud or sailing on muddy floodwater. The tent as object is rich in possibilities.

Unlike the solid rocks of the landscape tradition, or the stony monuments of the Claudian or Turner-esque or the rustic brick buildings of Constable, these are fragile, temporary, vernacular and disturbing. An invisible scaffold shapes draped fabric which retains the fluency of classical drapery, the signifier of movement and hence the symbol of emotion and life. As a form, the tent fills a landscape monumentally with a characteristic shape. Its whiteness and gaudy lights challenge the brown-green palette of earth and trees. Yet it has an opening. A cavernous entrance or a blown-open flap reveal impenetrable darkness beyond. This in turn implies a vast, empty, unpeopled void within. Body and/as building, the viewer is tipped into the realm of the uncanny (the term in German is *unheimlich*, the un-homely). All tents are also instant ruins for they imply a temporary emplacement. Roaming around festival sites in the hours of silent darkness, the artist makes us encounter day-time sites of noise, crowded entertainment, food drink and music in their silent, secret otherness. Great relics of the culture of the summer festival, they become tomb-like, mournful, rudely colourful or absurdly illuminated by unnatural pink and blue lights, bedraggled pennants. To be a bit inflated, set against trees turned sombre by the night, they perform an encounter between the culture (the festival) and nature (their setting).

Tents and deserts resonate with each other while seeming to be each terms' opposite. Yet while deserts are imagined, painted and film in wide-format, endless and unbounded, the tent has found its scale in the small paintings. The stately tent is perceived under that strange and uncanny moment of dusk when slowly fading



*Ghost Lights, oil on canvas, 16cm x 22cm, 2019 (private collection)*

light makes ghostly shapes fade into and loom up in the gloaming. The tent stands guarded by free-form Ernst-like trees emerging out of unseen layers as the painting is slowly realized under the laws of its own dynamic of hot and cold, push and pull, surface and ground, unexpectedly conjoins landscape and figure in a haunting covenant. The tent's non-natural colours clash with the vegetation and the water in which it is sometimes reflected to assert itself as a surrogate figure. Is it the ghostly shape for a painter's subjectivity? The temptation to evoke the Surrealists, the Uncanny, and a streak of British Romanticism, while perfectly valid as a way of situating a specific project like Joanna Whittle's, should be resisted – a little. The freight of the paintings is not a projection of a given mood, a known feeling, an existing condition. Painting is always a discovery and creation of a form through which affects can arise and, in retrospective understanding of the driving impulse, may surface in consciousness. Writing about painting, and these in particular, has been my own wandering journey to recognize what these paintings hold and thus prompt me to explore through language.

The physical smallness of Joanna Whittle's paintings – where-ever they arrive from and resonate with – make the viewer come physically close, leaving the safe space of the casual stroll past pictures glanced at. They make us really look. Only then, when near and attentive, do we see how intensely painterly they are, how much the effect and the affect arises from the sure confidence of the artist's touch, the delight of the experienced brush that has animated a tiny inflection on a tree or placed two dots of paint upon each to create a single pink light piercing the damp gloom of the lonely night. Her work is, as the artist said to me a 'celebration of painting' in its technical mastery, its knowing relation to its peers and antecedents and ultimately its deeply affective and hence philosophical meditations on being in the world, when human relations to the environment are more acutely significant than ever. This evolution of a landscape painting practice so affectively attuned to the hurt of human alienation and to mourning strikes a deep chord in this moment.

*Griselda Pollock, January 2020*



*Red/White - Tree Lights, oil on canvas, 16cm x 22cm, 2018 (private collection)*

# Acknowledgements

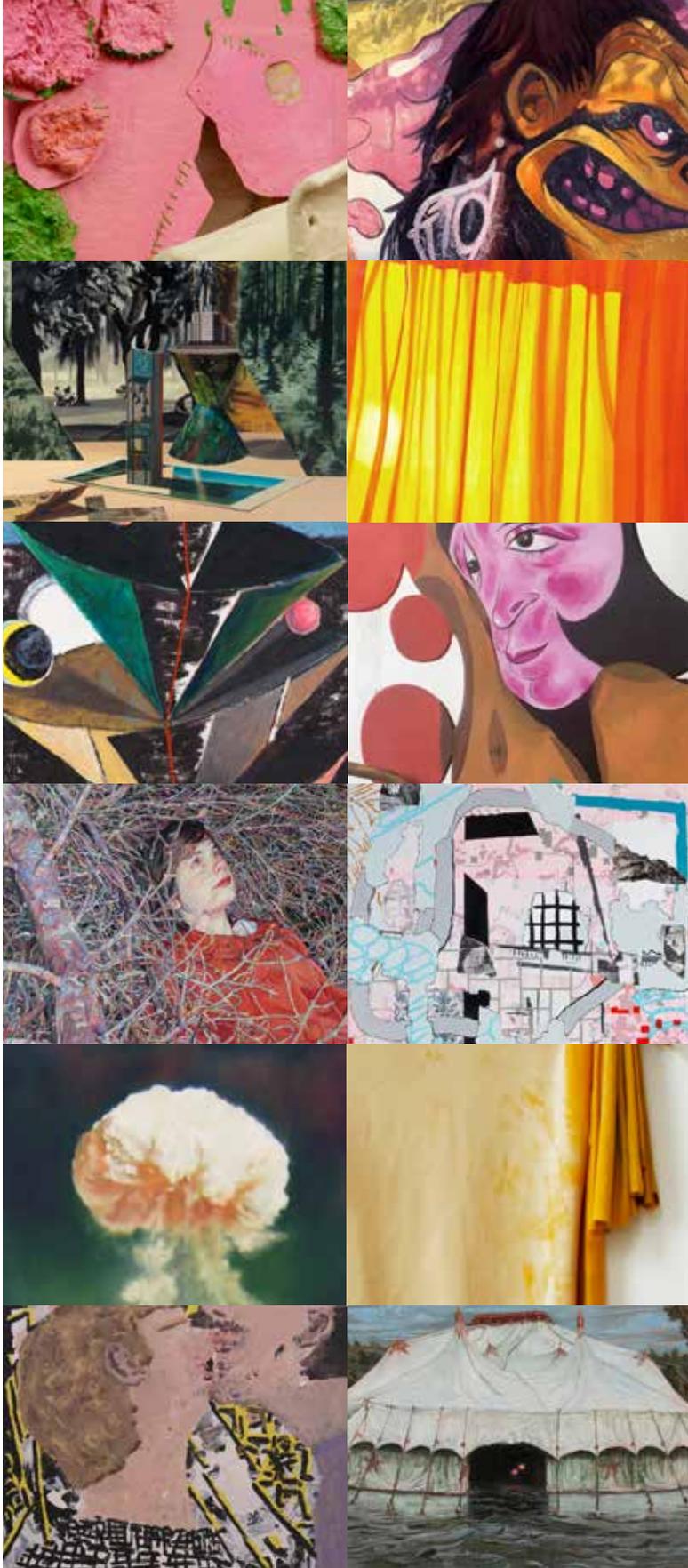
'Contemporary British Painting' sincerely thank our artist selectors Lisa Denyer, Geraint Evans, Joe Packer and Judith Tucker for choosing such a striking shortlist with so much integrity. We also thank our judges Griselda Pollock, Graham Crowley and Grant Scanlan, for lending a serious critical eye to the show, and to Griselda Pollock for her essay. Thanks of course to Huddersfield Art Gallery and ASC Gallery for hosting us, Natalie Dowse for producing the stunning posters and catalogue and for all her and Phil Illingworth's work on the 'Contemporary British Painting' website, and also Lucy Cox and Narbi Price for promoting the prize and Painting of the Day on social media. Paula MacArthur has not only taken over as the new chair of CBP but has done excellent work promoting the prize and guided the selectors through the process, special thanks to her. Thanks also to John Wallett for his help in this year's painting prize application processing and website. We also thank Robert Priseman and Simon Carter for founding the CBP Prize in 2016.

Most importantly we wish to thank all the painters who submitted their work to this year's prize. Many of these works will be appearing as 'Painting of the Day'.

*Judith Tucker and the Contemporary British Painting Prize 2019 organising team*



*The three judges, Grant Scanlan, Griselda Pollock and Graham Crowley at the prize announcement, Huddersfield Art Gallery, November 2019 (photo: Narbi Price).*



- Louise Bristow
- Stephanie Douet
- Kirsty Harris
- Helen Hayward
- Adam Hennessey
- Juliette Losq
- Scott McCracken
- Jo McGonigal
- Ruth Murray
- Diana Taylor
- Joanna Whittle
- Maddie Yuille

