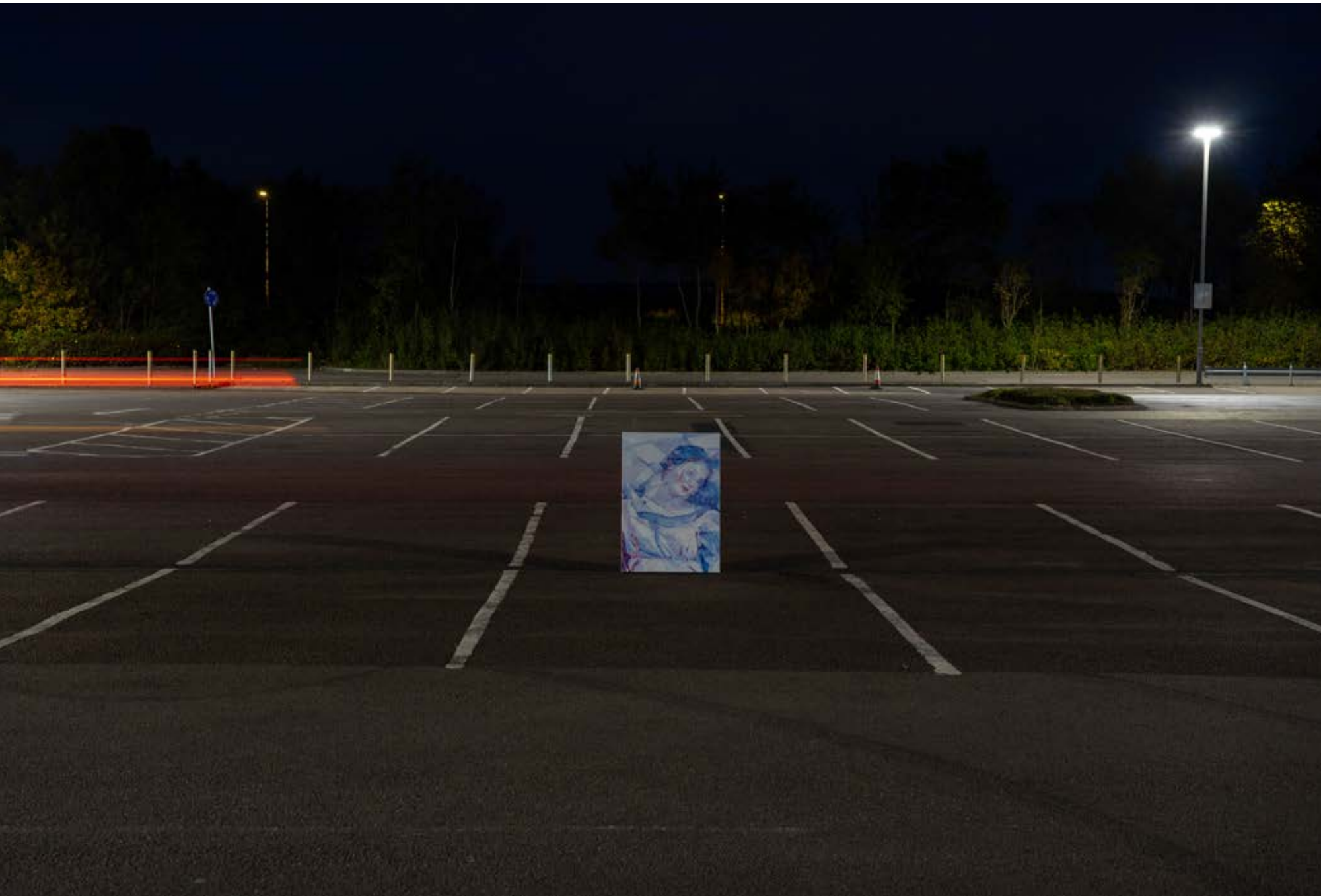


Darkness at Noon

Alchemical Nigredo of a Pandemic







Darkness at Noon

Alchemical Nigredo of a Pandemic

Curated by Ruth Calland

Above: Casper White, image at night, 2020

Cover: Salomon Trismosin, A black sun with a face descends behind the horizon of a marshy landscape; representing the state of putrefaction in alchemy, 1582. Watercolour, 35.2 x 27.9 cm. Wellcome Library, London.



Attributed to Zoroaster, Woman with dragons, 1738. Watercolour from the Clavis Artis alchemical manuscript, National Academy of Lincei, Rome.



Anubis, Egyptian god of mummification and the afterlife. Scene painted on wooden sarcophagus, c. 400 BCE. Egyptian priests were early practitioners of alchemy.

Art in Perpetuity Trust Gallery, London 4 - 14th November 2021

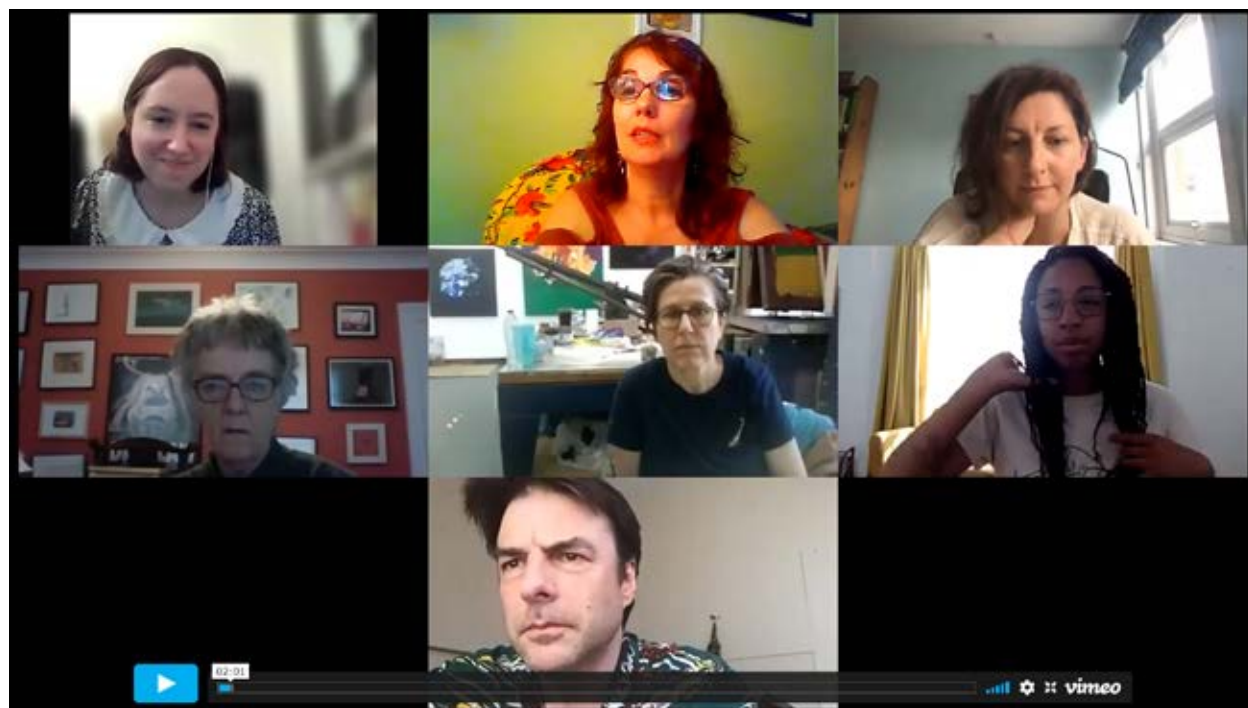
Selected by Ruth Calland and Mimei Thompson

Contemporary British Painting members

Karl Bielik, Ruth Calland, Jules Clarke, Deb Covell,
Gordon Dalton, Jeff Dellow, Natalie Dowse,
Susan Gunn, Susie Hamilton, Ruth Philo, David Lock,
Enzo Marra, Paula MacArthur, Monica Metsers,
Paul Newman, Sikelela Owen, Harvey Taylor,
Casper White, Joanna Whittle

Guest artists

Anna Sebastian, Sekai Machache, Cherelle Sappleton,
Sarah Sparkes, Andi Magenheimer, Chantal Powell,
Mimei Thompson, Jonathan Waller



Online panel discussion 5/6/21. From top left: Lucy Cox, chair; Ruth Calland, Stephanie Moran, Susie Hamilton, Paula MacArthur, Cherelle Sappleton, Nick Medford.



Joanna Whittle, Memorial Gate (Ingress), 2020, on arch. Oil on perspex, 9.5 x 14.5 cm

Forward

When a global pandemic was announced by the World Health Organisation on March 15th, 2020, closely followed by the first UK lockdown, I'd thankfully just had a few days away in Dorset. Shops and cafes were mostly empty; people huddled nervously together or kept their distance. Covid cases soon began to overwhelm the NHS. At Portland Bill lighthouse I bought a bag for my niece, a hospital matron, in the giftshop. It said 'My superpower is...I'm a nurse', underneath a picture of a bouncy unicorn. Later she would recount the horror of it all to me over the phone: the lonely deaths, the unstoppable disease, the impossibly long hours, the emotional and physical toll, not being able to see her young children, catching it herself and feeling guilty for not being at work, frustration with those in denial about the danger and the chaos. This project is dedicated with love and pride to Annabel Kane, and to all the other incredible people who have kept some of us alive with care and dedication, and given comfort and dignity to the dying, as best they could.

Mostly of course, artists have not been working on the frontlines. And yet, the question of response is still there. The experience we have all shared, of feeling 'in the dark' about what is happening, is a nigredo phenomenon: the term used by alchemists for a time of falling apart, putrefaction, chaos, paralysis and closeness to death. Covid-19 has exposed the continuation and repercussions of long-standing inequalities and socio-political failings both in Britain and globally, further amplified by the Black Lives Matter movement, against a backdrop of failure to protect the earth and its ecosystems. In these uncertain times, the private space of the painter's studio has offered a way to find a path through the darkness, relief even, by focussing on what is in front of us: conjuring new forms from base

matter. Each artist transforms their chosen materials in their own way, bringing deep personal integrity to their exploration of a process of transformation. This is a parallel process to our global situation: how do we not only survive, but process and transform what is base in us, individually and collectively?

It has been a joy to have the support of Mimei Thompson in selecting the work. The show has benefitted from her keen eye and warm appreciation, and I have benefitted from having someone to engage with during such isolating circumstances. Purposeful relationships with other artists have always been an important complement and context for the often hermetic practice of painting. Sharing experiences and passions, debate, success, struggle and failure, celebrating each other, cheering each other on, has flourished online in these times, and is a hallmark of what the Contemporary British Painting group is about, together with bringing painting and painters to a wider audience. The Darkness at Noon team held a public zoom event online as part of the project, discussing the transformational effect of the pandemic on artists and our practices. I am deeply grateful to Stephanie Moran, Nick Medford, Paula MacArthur, Cherelle Sappleton and Lucy Cox for their contributions to the online event, to Stephanie and Nick for their wonderful catalogue essays, and to Cherelle for her haunting and poetic slideshow trailer for the exhibition. Many thanks too, to Sarah Walsh and the Art in Perpetuity Trust committee, the Contemporary British Painting committee for their support, and to the artists for their participation.

Ruth Calland, August 2021



House front in East London, 2020

Johan Daniel Mylius, Philosophia Reformata, 1622. Engraving, emblem 6 in Fabricius, Alchemy fig. 173, p. 102



From the soil of the soul to the gold of the sun: alchemy in the time of Covid

By Nick Medford

Alchemy and transformation

Like most things of interest, alchemy resists straightforward definition. It encompasses an array of theories and practices that span two thousand years or more, across widely varying cultures in many parts of the world. Its essence, however, is working with natural materials, such as plants or minerals, to purify, combine and transform them in pursuit of an end product. This product might be a medicine or precious metal, or something rather more mysterious and implausible, such as an elixir of immortality. It is often claimed that alchemy was the forerunner of modern scientific chemistry, although the degree to which this is true is debatable.

In the Western world, alchemy is associated with a large and baffling body of texts and images that appeared across Europe from about the 12th century onwards. The overall theme of these is generally the 'transmutation of base matter': the transformation, by means of complex and obscurely described operations, of some prima materia into the 'Stone of the Philosophers', a substance described as holy and perfect, and to which all manner of extraordinary properties may be attributed. It is often popularly supposed that the aim of the alchemists was the production of gold, but it is by no means clear that this is the purpose of most alchemical texts: inasmuch as these texts give details of recipes and procedures, they do so in a strange and veiled manner, which appears to draw heavily on Hermetic philosophical traditions.

It is possible to read some of these treatises as allegories of sexual reproduction, in which opposing but complementary elements and principles are fused to generate new life. More commonly, though, they are interpreted as allegories of spiritual and existential transformation, with the alchemist's laboratory operations seen as a representation of work on the soul, or inner self. In this reading, the prima materia is the alchemist's own being, soul, or psyche. C.G. Jung is the figure most associated with this interpretation of alchemy, seeing the alchemical process as an extended allegory of individuation, and developing this core idea over the course of many writings. Jung does not find it necessary to claim that alchemical authors were being intentionally allegorical; indeed he assumes that, for the most part, they were not. Nevertheless it is possible to argue that the esoteric symbology of alchemical terms and ideas was ultimately driven by a striving towards perfection, or at least self-transformation, which operated at an unconscious level.

It should be noted that this interpretation of alchemy is not universally accepted, and in any event it can never be proven, can never be more than speculative. But it does provide us with a model for reading and pondering our own contemporary concerns in the alluring treasure trove of imagery and poetic language that the alchemists have bequeathed us. Here, I will use the alchemical concept of nigredo to inform a consideration of our current predicament as we emerge from the shadow of global pandemic. One may or may not feel that an alchemical angle on current events has any objective validity, but here the point is simply that it is a way of looking at things.

Nigredo (blackening) is the first stage of the alchemical process. In this phase, the prima materia is broken down, becoming utterly decomposed and debased, perhaps even foul. From this seemingly inauspicious state, the material is subjected to further processes and operations which will lead to the subsequent stages of albedo (whitening) and rubedo (reddening, indicating the formation of the Philosopher's Stone). If we allow that the alchemical process can be interpreted as an existential allegory, then the stage of nigredo can be seen as representing a time of crisis, loss, or calamity, but one with the potential for transformation into something new, better, maybe even revelatory. Out of darkness, cometh light.

To put this in its most banal form: in the state of nigredo, things are bad, but then they get better. Or rather, they might get better. It is important to note that in an alchemical framework, it is by no means certain that things will improve: this will only happen if the work is performed correctly. The right operations and procedures, at the right times, in the right fashion. This is quite a lot to ask, and it may be more likely that the potential for transformation will remain unrealised, failing to reach fruition.

The Covid pandemic as a state of nigredo

During the first lockdown, in March 2020, our collective experience of our environment changed. Towns and cities were suspended in an unfamiliar quiet. The volume and variety of birdsong increased, even – perhaps especially – in the most urban areas. Social media users shared video clips of wild animals taking over town centres (albeit some of these turned out, in the modern way, to be fake news). At this stage of the pandemic, even as the death toll mounted there was nevertheless a strand of optimism discernible in media coverage and comment. Perhaps the suspension of

normal ways of doing things, with their associated noise, anxiety and pollution, could lead to a re-evaluation of fundamental questions about how we live: our jump-cut, attention-overload culture and, in particular, the terrible toll it is taking on our environment. The sounds of Nature, with the all-pervasive roar of traffic strangely and suddenly absent, seemed like a transmission from the pre-industrial past, and perhaps from the future too: a possible future in which the benefits of industry and technology might co-exist with, and better enable, our relationship with the natural world. If we consider the global tragedy of the pandemic as a state of nigredo, then there was at this time some collective sense of possibility, of the potential for re-orienting and reconfiguring ourselves.

But as we have seen, the alchemical process does not unfold passively or inexorably. In some alchemical texts, the Great Work is described as an opus contra Naturum: a 'work against Nature'. This may seem an odd characterisation of a process which seems so rooted in the natural world: after all, the same texts reference such natural phenomena as plants, metallic ores, the changing of the seasons and the phases of the moon. But the point is that the alchemist must intercede in the processes of Nature, rather than simply letting things take their course. Knowledge, intuition, will, and artistry must be brought to bear on things if they are to be transformed. Daydreams and vague hopes will not achieve this.

At the time of writing, as the restrictions of the third lockdown are lifting, this sense of possibility seems much less tangible. Just over a year into the pandemic, some parts of the world are experiencing the highest death tolls yet. But here in Britain, the mass vaccination programme appears to have put the country in a better position, something that could not have been said until recently. The light at the end of the viral tunnel is becoming more visible. But what kind of light is it? The collective mood seems

less concerned with transformation, and more preoccupied with 'getting back to normal', an aspiration that might be more tellingly expressed as 'going backwards to how things used to be'. Understandable, perhaps – but then again, most errors of judgement, or failures of nerve, are 'understandable'. Shouldn't we be aiming higher?

But how to do that? There are any number of causes to which we could pledge ourselves, demands we could make of those in power. But I want to suggest that if the alchemical transmutation really is, as Jung suggested, an allegory of individuation, then we may need to start with

ourselves – or, more accurately, our selves. It is very likely that each of us has inhabited our own personal nigredo in this last year, whether through the grief of bereavement, the trials of serious illness, or more generally through immersion in a miasma of dread, submerged by the tide of bad news. Somewhere in the darkness of base matter, in the soil of the soul, there is a seed. How you find it, how you nurture it, this essay cannot presume to tell you. But if it can germinate, something can grow, and rise up from the depths, into the light of the alchemical Sun.

Nick Medford, 2021



Saloman Trismosin, A black, red and white man emerges from a foul stream (detail), 1582. Watercolour, 40 x 25.2 cm. Splendor solis manuscript, British Library.



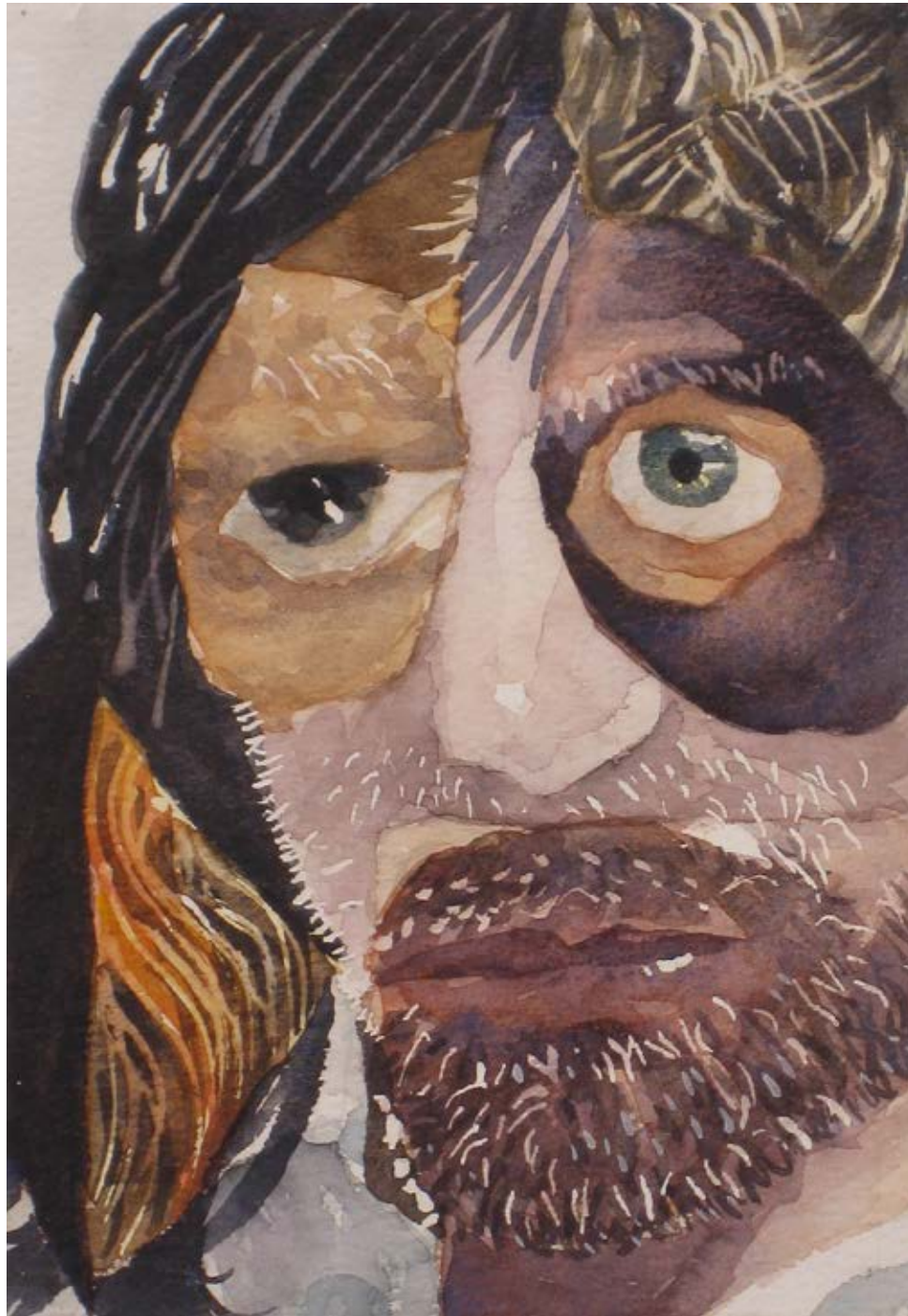
Attributed to Zoroaster, Lion and dragon with sun and moon, 1738. Watercolour from the Clavis Artis alchemical manuscript, National Academy of Lincei, Rome.

Top: Paula MacArthur image at dusk, 2020.





Sikelela Owen, The Owens, 2019. Oil on canvas, 280 x 150 cm



David Lock, Misfit (Ferryman), 2018. Watercolour on paper, 21 x 14.5 cm



Cherelle Sappleton, Untitled 2019, digital collage, 165 x 135 cm



Harvey Taylor, Walton-on-the-Naze, 2020. Oil on canvas, 122 x 152 cm
20



Monica Metsers, SjoHarta, 2017. Oil on board, 60 x 38 cm



Jeff Dellow, Route, 2020. Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 61 cm



Sarah Sparkes, 101 GHost Stories 24, Solstice Sleeper Awake, 2021. Gouache on paper, 10.5 x 14.8 cm



Sekai Machache, The Divine Sky 1, digital image from the series The Divine Sky (2020).



Jules Clarke, Red Curtains, 2020. Oil on canvas, 40 x 50 cm



Natalie Dowse, *Between Dog and Wolf 2*, 2018. Oil on canvas, 90 x 120 cm



Joanna Whittle, *Forest Shrine (Rock)*, 2021. Oil on copper, 15 x 10 cm



Mimei Thompson, Green Cave (Seeker), 2021. Oil on canvas, 50 x 60 cm



Susie Hamilton, ICU, 2021. Acrylic and pastel on canvas, 132 x 132 cm

Crow Black

by Stephanie Moran

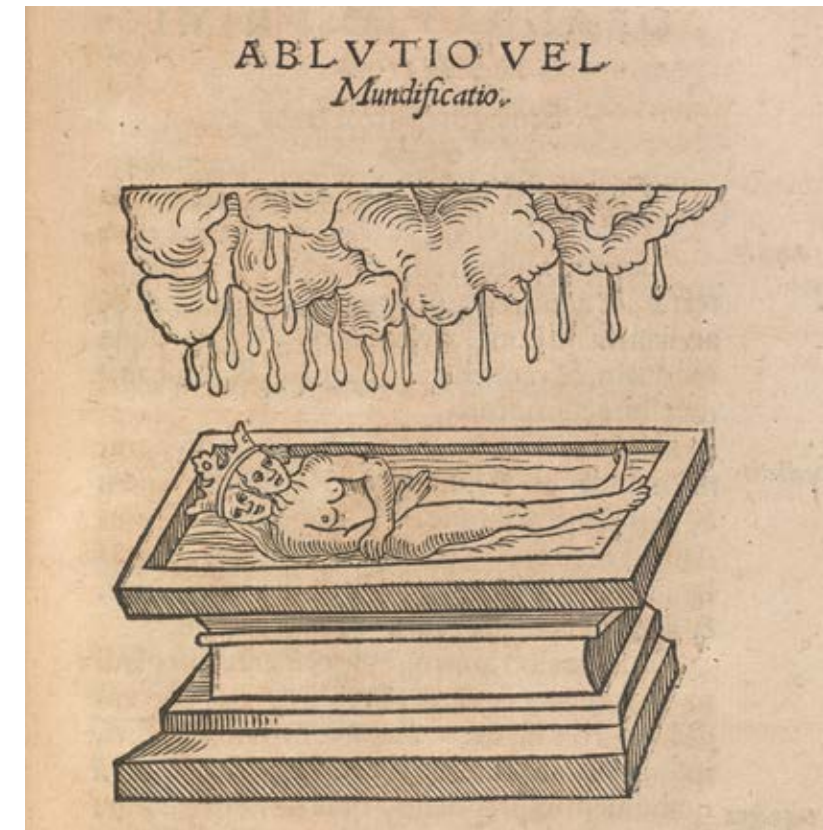
“The chief principle of the art is the Crow, which is the blackness of the night and clearness of the day, and flies without wings. His houses are the darkness and blackness that is in them and by them he ascends into the air, from his rising.”

(Aureus or The Golden Tractate of Hermes. As quoted in ‘Soul Alchemy - The Alchemical Process of the Crow’, by Paul Francis Young)

“he [sic] who ‘makes’ real things is he who knows the secrets of making them”

(Eliade, 1978, p102)

Rosarium Philosophorum plate 8, cloud of putrefaction leading to dew of purification, 1550. Woodcut in alchemical manuscript, Wellcome Institute, London



I.

Nigredo is often described as the first initiatory level, representing loss of self or transcendence of the I, corresponding to the alchemical processes of putrefaction, decomposition or oxidation:

“The first phase of the work... in which the lead is dissolved and the solution becomes black. This is the ‘dark night of the soul,’ the point at which the persona has been dissolved and the Self has not yet appeared on the horizon. Hence the skeleton, the death of the ego, and the black sun, representing acute depression”

(Berman, p86)

Psychoanalyst Carl Jung adopted the processes of alchemy as a metaphor for psychological transformation. He viewed alchemical imagery as inherent to subconscious human minds, corresponding to a “primal substrate of the unconscious”. This is supported by alchemical imagery observed to be produced in psychotic episodes¹. Morris Berman suggests that alchemical practices of the Middle Ages also represent subjective, experiential and psychic realities that are just not available to contemporary western culture. As the concept of the unconscious is a modern filter, Berman makes the reasonable proposal that in medieval times, matter really did possess mind; that, as in modern science, “our ancestors constructed reality in ways that typically produced verifiable results” for them². This is not so much a question of truth or progress as one of acknowledging different epistemologies or knowledge systems and embodied knowledges that may be as phenomenally alien to us as the inner lives of crows.

¹ Berman, M., 1981, p91

² ibid. p93

Alchemy was an experimental practice and initiatory path of knowledge deeply connected to painting; a balance of art and science. In the sense that occult texts may be understood or interpreted only by those with the practical esoteric knowledge to decode them, there is nothing I can give away here that is fully comprehensible to a non-initiate, and possibly nothing of alchemy itself as practiced in the Middle Ages that is fully comprehensible to a contemporary western reader. The description by twelfth century Benedictine monk Theophilus of heating sulphur and mercury together to produce a black compound that when ground and heated again becomes vermilion red is perfectly understandable to contemporary chemistry³, but the ways colours were understood as entities in their own right is harder to comprehend, and the exact significance of each process to those alchemists and artists is entirely unknowable. What is clear is that colours were not just descriptive, they were both spiritual and symbolic entities, and they were entwined with the ways chemistry or alchemical processes were practiced.

In the Middle Ages, alchemy was intrinsically concerned with the manufacture of coloured pigments; this was connected to the transformation of matter, and so also immanently entwined with artistic practice. Colours were understood to possess material, scientific, and medicinal properties. The most meticulous painters from the Renaissance until at least the seventeenth century were alchemists, to varying degrees, as they mixed their own paints (no convenient pre-mixed paint and no A.P. Fitzpatrick, Jackson’s or Cornelissen’s in those days; at best it was a trip to the apothecary, who may or may not cut your vermilion with brick dust). Black is the first stage of alchemy, the first colour produced, given the substantial aspect of a crow in alchemical texts. In this text I attempt to reconstruct some alchemical meaning on the basis of crow black. The artworks here were selected by the curators for their connection to some aspect of nigredo. I have divided this into two aspects that I see as resonating with nigredo in painting: those of ritual processes and those of mediatory-divinatory sites, as channelled through the black of paint pigments and crows.

II.

“in the Middle Ages, colours and odours were substantial entities, not secondary qualities”

(Berman, p89-90)

There is a long history of black in painting. In Ancient Greece, black features as one of the four primary colours of the classical palette. Black has been produced from a variety of natural and synthetic substances, the first of which was a pigment made from charcoal. Alchemical experiments contributed to the development of a number of more recent black pigments (along with other colours), as a result of the complex processes applied to the raw materials. Current research into the materials used to produce the beautiful colours of

J. Wagner, An alchemist holding tongs at his furnace, after D. Maggiotto (1713-1794). Etching with the motto in Latin: 'And he who wants gold sends it up in smoke'.



manuscript pages from the Middle Ages shows that the enormous range of pigments were derived from plants, minerals, and metals. What does it mean to paint with these ghosts? Do they still contain the spirits of trees and fruit from which they are derived? Do they imbue a painting with a peachy or cherryish memory, or the memory of a previous colour they held? Do the paintings dream of forests and orchards, fire, bones, precious stones and metals?

Mineral-based blacks:

Iron oxide blacks, mars black, magnetite, manganese oxide black, copper chromium iron oxide, copper chromium manganese oxide, iron titanate, spinel black, Jacobsite.

Mars black is a synthesised iron oxide and magnetite, a naturally occurring iron oxide. Mars yellow was also called crocus martius, with crocus referring to saffron or yellow, martius being Latin for ‘of or belonging to the god Mars’ as well as the ancient alchemical name for iron. Together, these words describe the colour and origin of this pigment. Mars yellow was the starting material for the other mars colours, further roasted and processed to produce oranges, brown, red and violet. The mars yellow compound was calcined and oxidised to form red shades of iron oxide(III). The Latin caput mortuum (meaning “dead head”, and variously spelled caput mortum or caput mortem), is the name given to a purple variety of hematite iron oxide pigment. This name may have come from alchemical usage, since iron oxide is the oxidized residue (caput mortuum) or rust. Mars black is dense and opaque with a warmish brown undertone.

Mixed metal blacks are a group of compounds which are mixed oxides of metals, that produce dense, very deep blacks. Natural black spinel is a gemstone made of magnesium oxide and magnesium-aluminum oxide, one of the rarest and most valuable gemstones. The Spinel consists of hard, vitreous

³ Ball, P., 2008

magnesium aluminium oxide or magnesium aluminate. Its name comes from the Latin word spinella, meaning spine or thorn, in reference to its pointed crystals. The rare black Spinel is one of the hardest gemstones in the Spinel family. Spinel black is the blackest of all known pigments except for the recently produced Vantablack, as it is evenly non-reflectant across the spectrum. It is an intense, dense, cool black. When white is added it tints with a blue edge; darker tints have the depth of a natural Indigo.

Carbon-based blacks or char carbons:

Almond shell black, cherry pit or cherrystone black, coconut shell black, cork black, peach stone black, vine black, frankfort or drop black, wood charcoal black, Swedish black, lamp black, acetylene black, channel black, furnace black, Chinese ink. Carbon black was the first black, derived from charred, organic substances that have been heated or carbonized. It is generally opaque.

Dull carbon black is made of charcoal. Peach black is an impure carbon black derived from the shells and kernels of fruit that has been used since the Middle Ages. It is an opaque deep blue-black, time-consuming to produce. Vine black, also called Frankfort or drop black, is a medieval bluish black traditionally made from charred marc, the desiccated vines and stems that comprise the residue from winemaking. These make the deepest of rich blue blacks for ink or paint. Swedish black is from birch bark, cherrystone black from cherry stones.

Acetylene black, channel black, furnace black and lamp black are flame carbons, originally gases, that derive from the incomplete combustion of hydrocarbons (soot). Lamp black is the strongest, most opaque black pigment, allowing the deepest blackest black coverage. It is one of the oldest pigments, made of pure carbon, originally from the residual soot of burnt oil lamps. A pure carbon, made from the residual soot when burning oil, it is a fluffy, fine pigment with a bluish tint that produces a variety of cool blue greys. Chinese ink, known for the rich depth of its blackness, is made from a mixture of lampblack, carbon black, and bone black pigment ground together with hide glue.

Bone black, ivory black:

Bone black, made of burnt bones since prehistoric times, is the deepest available black. Rembrandt used it for the black clothing worn by his sitters in order to distinguish them from the already dark night surroundings. Ivory Black is semi-transparent, valued as a particularly intense and fine black. Genuine ivory black was traditionally made from burnt ivory, from tusks, horns or antlers, but contemporary ivory black is a variety of bone black with a finer particle size and enhanced carbon content.

Other synthetic blacks:

Perylene black is a permanent strong black with a green undertone. It is so green that in watercolour and acrylic it is called Perylene Green. It is good for green and blue mixtures and tweaking complementaries. Vantablack is claimed

to be the blackest black, absorbing 99.96 percent of all light. It was developed by British company Surrey NanoSystems for military equipment, who maintain it can make the crinkliest piece of aluminum foil look like a flat surface. But vantablack is not really a paint. It is made by growing carbon nanotubes, each a ten-thousandth of the width of a human hair, structured like a field of carbon grass. Light goes in, but it can't get back out. The rights were infamously acquired by artist Anish Kapoor for his sole use in painting. More recently, in response, artist Stuart Semple developed a series of black acrylic paints that he claims is the blackest paint available⁴. Semple's Black 3.0 has an acrylic resin base that is capable of holding high levels of their matt pigment in a dense configuration. It uses mattifiers from the cosmetic industry to attain the highest level of non-reflectivity possible.

⁴It is available to anyone who can prove they are not Anish Kapoor.



Okuhara Seiko, Crow on a Willow Branch, circa 1890. Japanese woodblock print 24.4 x 25.3 cm. Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

III.

“The first is black, which is called the Crow’s head, because of its extreme blackness whose crepusculum sheweth the beginning of the action of the fire of nature and solution, and the blackest midnight sheweth the perfection of liquefaction, and confusion of the elements. Then the grain putrefies and is corrupted, that it may be the more apt for generation.”
(Jean d’Espagnet 1564-1637. Hermetic Arcanum. As quoted in ‘Soul Alchemy - The Alchemical Process of the Crow’, by Paul Francis Young.)

Crows appear to have an understanding of death. They exhibit a range of complex responses to their dead kin. They have been observed to hold their own ‘funerals’, gathering around a dead crow in silence. Scientists speculate

that by remaining close to a crow that was killed, other crows may improve their chances of learning about predators they need to avoid. They feed on carrion, the flesh of the dead, and early Celts viewed them as mediators between human and spirit worlds. They symbolize transformation and change. The Crow in alchemy represents the beginning of the “Great Work of the Soul”; in traditional alchemical texts, this is known as ‘the dark night of the soul’.

The Morrígan (or Mórríoghain), the shapeshifting Irish warrior queen of the mythical magical tribe Tuatha dé danann, is associated with the crow. There are various translations of her name: Great Queen, Nightmare Queen, Phantom Queen, Terrible Queen, Faerie Queen, Queen of the Slain, Witch Queen. She sometimes takes crow form and is said to come with a triad of birds called the three, associated with fate, doom and death during battle. They wait to consume the flesh of the dead in battle. The Morrígan is known for warfare, but also has a healing aspect. Her devotees find her demanding but also a healer of traumas. She asks her followers to do battle when needed, and provides them with a source of strength. She is one or three prophetic goddesses; she is associated with or made up of Badb, Macha and Morrighu or Morrigan.

Crows have acute extra-human vision: like all birds, their visual spectrum (the range of colours they can detect) surpasses the human spectrum, giving them the ability to perceive more contrast from their environments; they have excellent long-distance vision; a protein in their eyes can sense magnetic fields; they possess an awareness of the spatial, of the geometric relationships between objects seen from above; they are mathematicians constantly calculating flight vectors and familiar locations. These capabilities, together with their relationship to death, is perhaps the origin of the idea of crows possessing far-seeing abilities and divinatory powers. The Greeks used crow flight for augury. In witchcraft, crow feathers are thought to be a powerful anchor for a divination altar, as these are the messenger wings into the InBetween and Other Worlds. Divination workings may begin with a deep meditation on crows’ wings, to fly the worker into spaces where the Unseen can become Seen. Crow feathers are also used as powerful activators to send a message across the ethers, tying a message to a feather and keeping that with a lit candle on the altar so the wings carry it to its destination.

“that which is born of the crow is the beginning of Art. Behold, how I have obscured matter treated of, by circumlocution, depriving thee of the light. Yet this dissolved, this joined, this nearest and furthest off I have named to thee. Roast those things, therefore, and boil them in that which comes from the horse’s belly for seven, fourteen, or twenty-one days. Then will the Dragon eat his own wings and destroy himself; this being done, let it be put into a fiery furnace, which lute diligently, and observe that none of the spirit may escape.” (Hermes Trismegistus <https://www.sacred-texts.com/alc/goldtrac.htm>)

Artists in this exhibition use ritual process and symbolic colour in a variety of ways; their practices constitute ritual processes, or their work as sites of mediation or divination. Mimei Thompson mediates processes in nature and paint, with the often bright and unnatural colour appearing symbolic. Sikelela Owen depicts family rituals and snapshots grounded in a rich range of umber and sepia chiaroscuro. Paul Newman's work is a process of self-transformation he calls ‘English gothic’. Enzo Marra is a painter of metamorphosis. Karl Bielik’s abstract paintings come out of experimental process. Susan Gunn experiments with natural materials and pigments. Sekai Machache’s work uses symbolism in mediating a ritual process of healing. Deb Covell’s effects material transformation. Harvey Taylor’s paintings emerge out of confronting the unknown. David Lock’s Frankenstein-like portrait is a patched-together face with skins and features from different models. And Sarah Sparkes’ work engages with occult practices and knowledges. Anna Sebastian deals with ritual symbolism, including in alchemy and other initiative processes, using colour as a key component of the ritual; her paintings employ large areas of black behind bright symbolic colour.

The transformative and transmutational aspects of alchemy are represented in the work of many of the artists. Chantal Powell's sculptures explicitly address Jungian alchemical metaphor, exploring psychical metamorphosis through symbolic processes and materials. Susie Hamilton plays with light and dark inversions, revealing light in dark and dark in light. Paula MacArthur’s crystal paintings reflect on the impenetrably hard but translucently shiny surfaces of tightly compressed matter. Jeff Dellow’s work channels flows, Joanna Whittle’s are sites of transition, and Gordon Dalton's landscape depicts a site that has been transformed by industrial processes. Jonathan Waller’s portraits of the (long) dead and Casper White’s icons are shrines of a sort. Ruth Philo's work is site of mourning and grief for her daughter. Andi Magenheimer’s paintings mediate death and nonhuman entities, like Natalie Dowse's depictions of liminal states and Jules Clarke’s liminal materiality mimicked in paint. Monica Metsers reveals surreal magic in the everyday. Cherelle Sappleton uses collage and mirror to expose multiple fractured realities. Ruth Calland’s dark vampiric immersion operates a nigredo phenomenology.

Stephanie Moran, 2021

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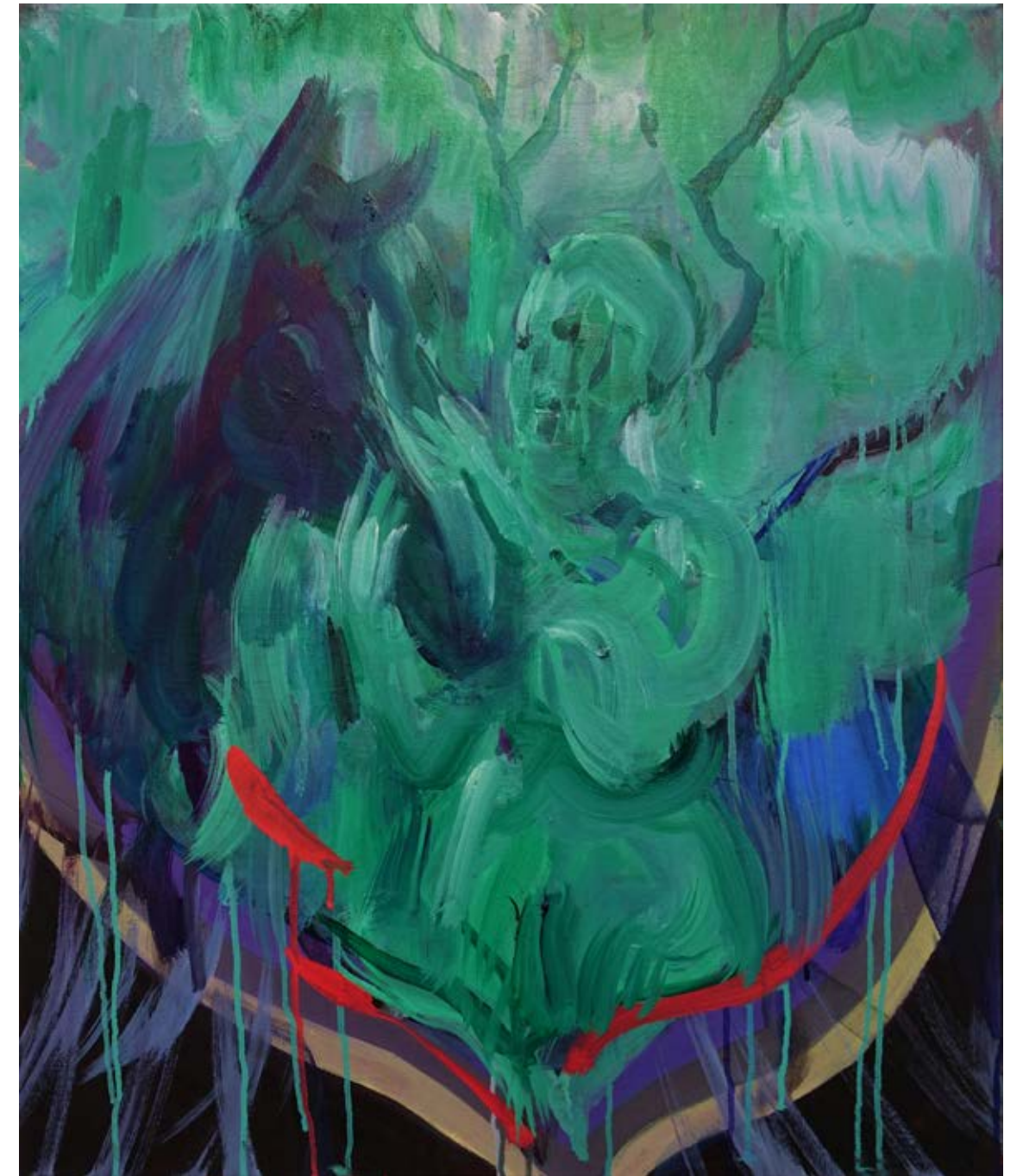
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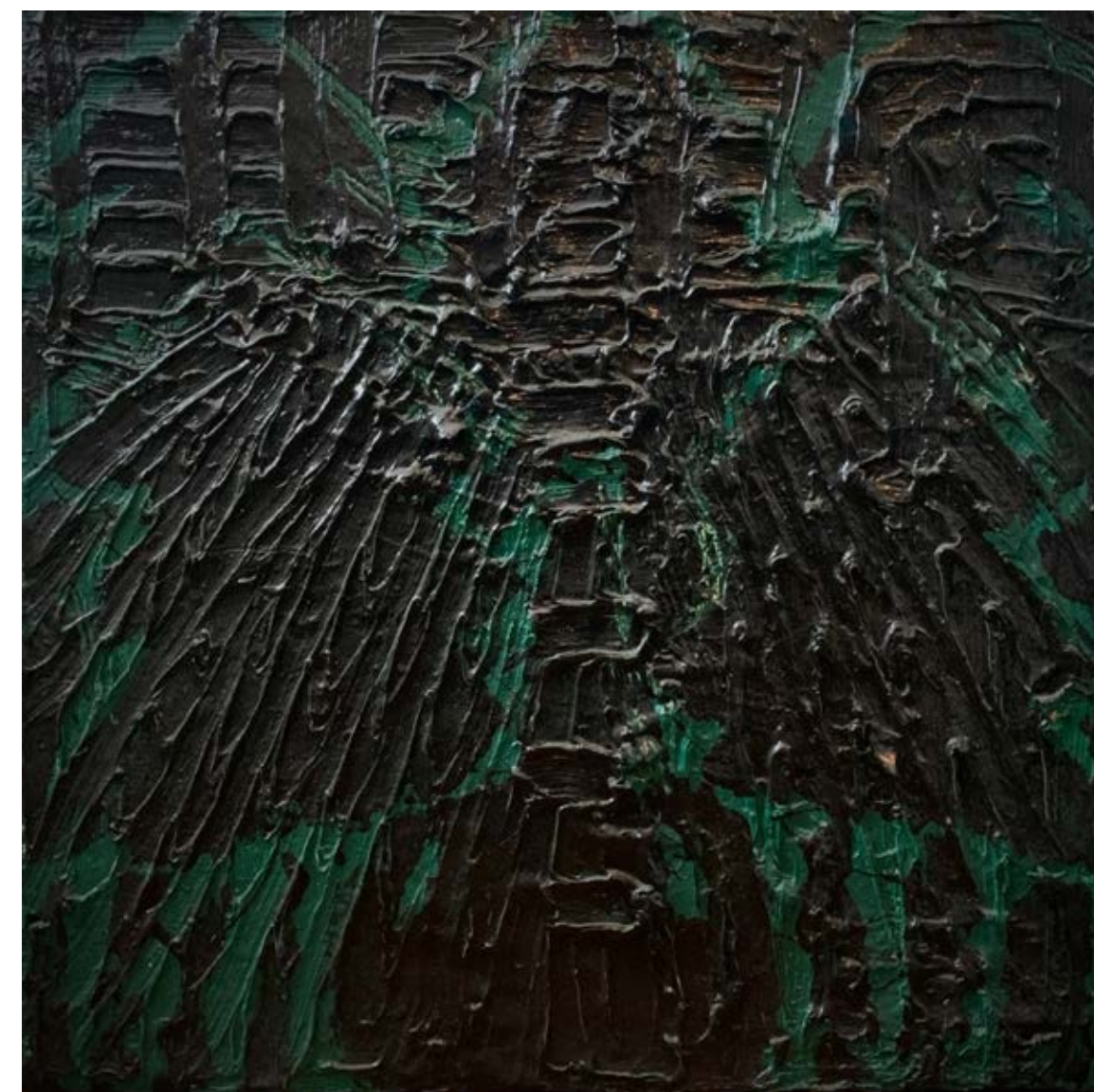
Karl Bielik, Coda, 2020-21. Oil on canvas, 86 x 76 cm



Ruth Calland, Actress and Horse, 2020. Oil on canvas, 61 x 51 cm



Susan Gunn, H A L O Study, 2019. White gold leaf, gesso and natural earth pigment on canvas and aluminium stretcher, 50 x 30 x 4 cm



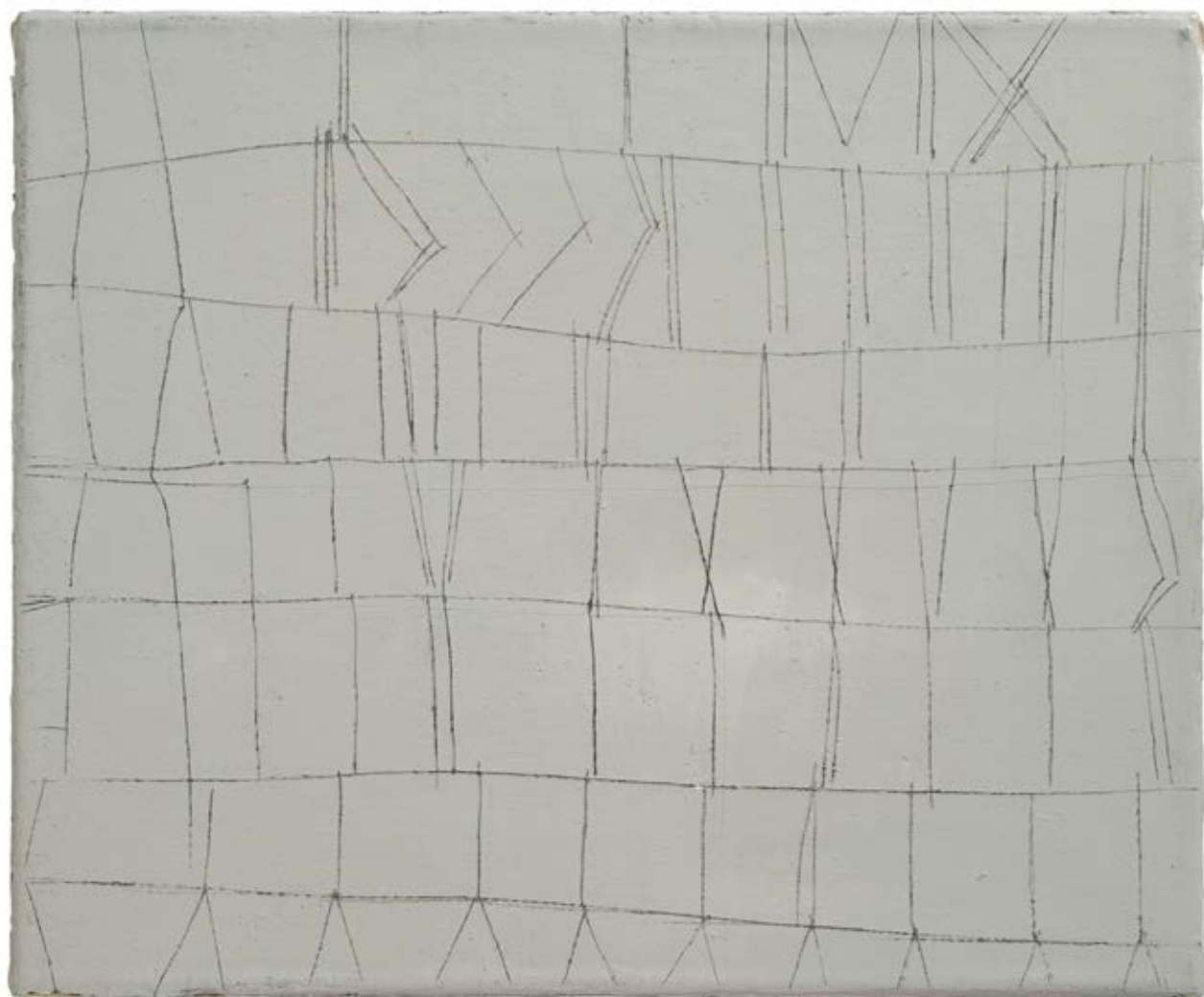
Enzo Marra, Bird head and trees, 2020. Enamel and hammerite on canvas, 50 x 50 cm



Andi Magenheimer, Funeral for a Mouse, 2019. Oil on canvas, 51 x 41 cm



Jonathan Waller, Lockdown Gouache No.19, 2020. Gouache on paper, 29.8 x 20.9 cm



Ruth Philo, Where the days have no numbers, 2017. Oil & graphite on linen, 25 x 30 cm



Casper White, Neapolitan Creche Figure From The Met, 2020. Oil on canvas, 120 x 80 cm



Deb Covell, *Forever In Our Thoughts*, 2020. Silver leaf and black gesso on acrylic paint support, 17 x 23 cm



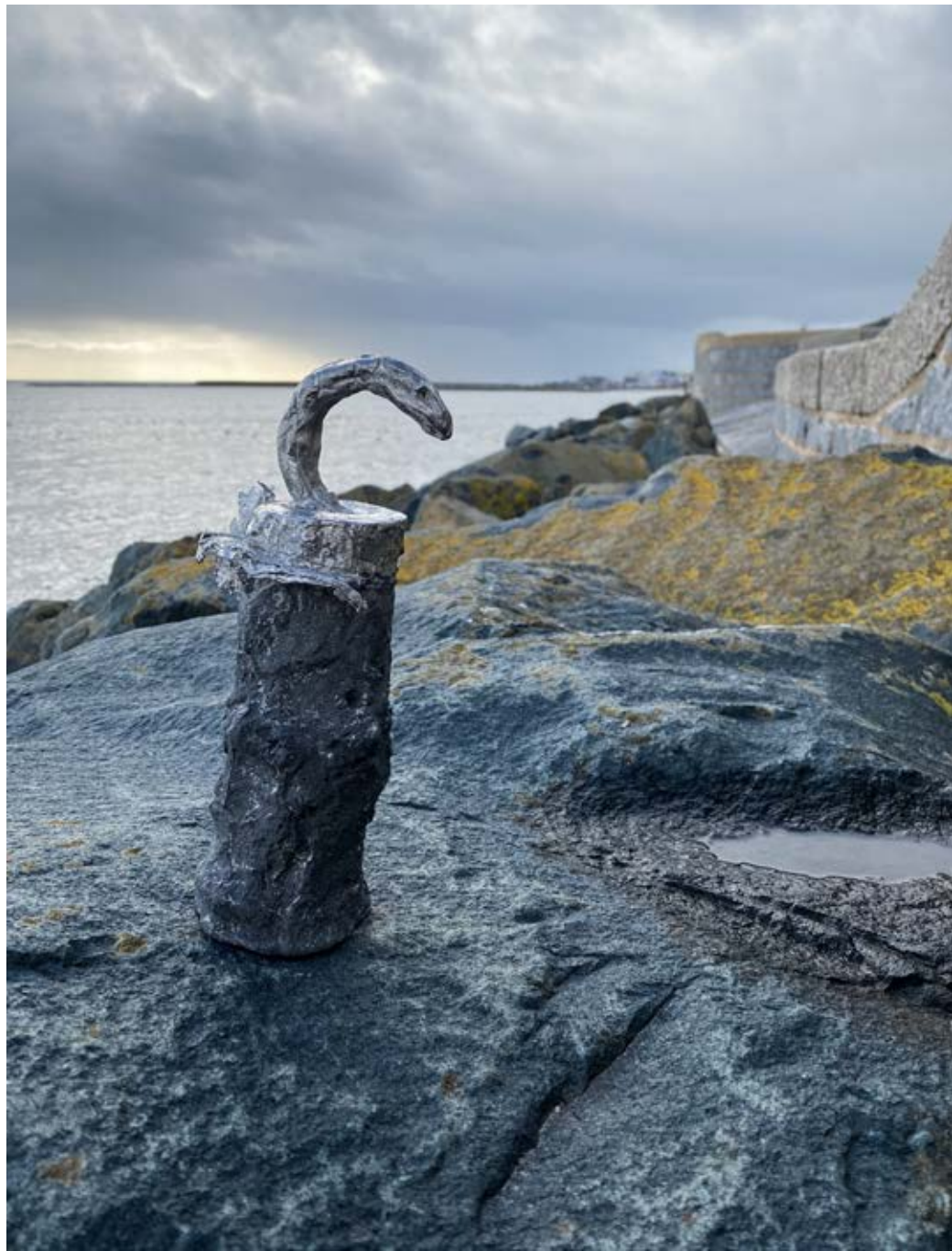
Paula MacArthur, *In her own mad mind*, 2020. Oil on canvas, 100 x 100 cm



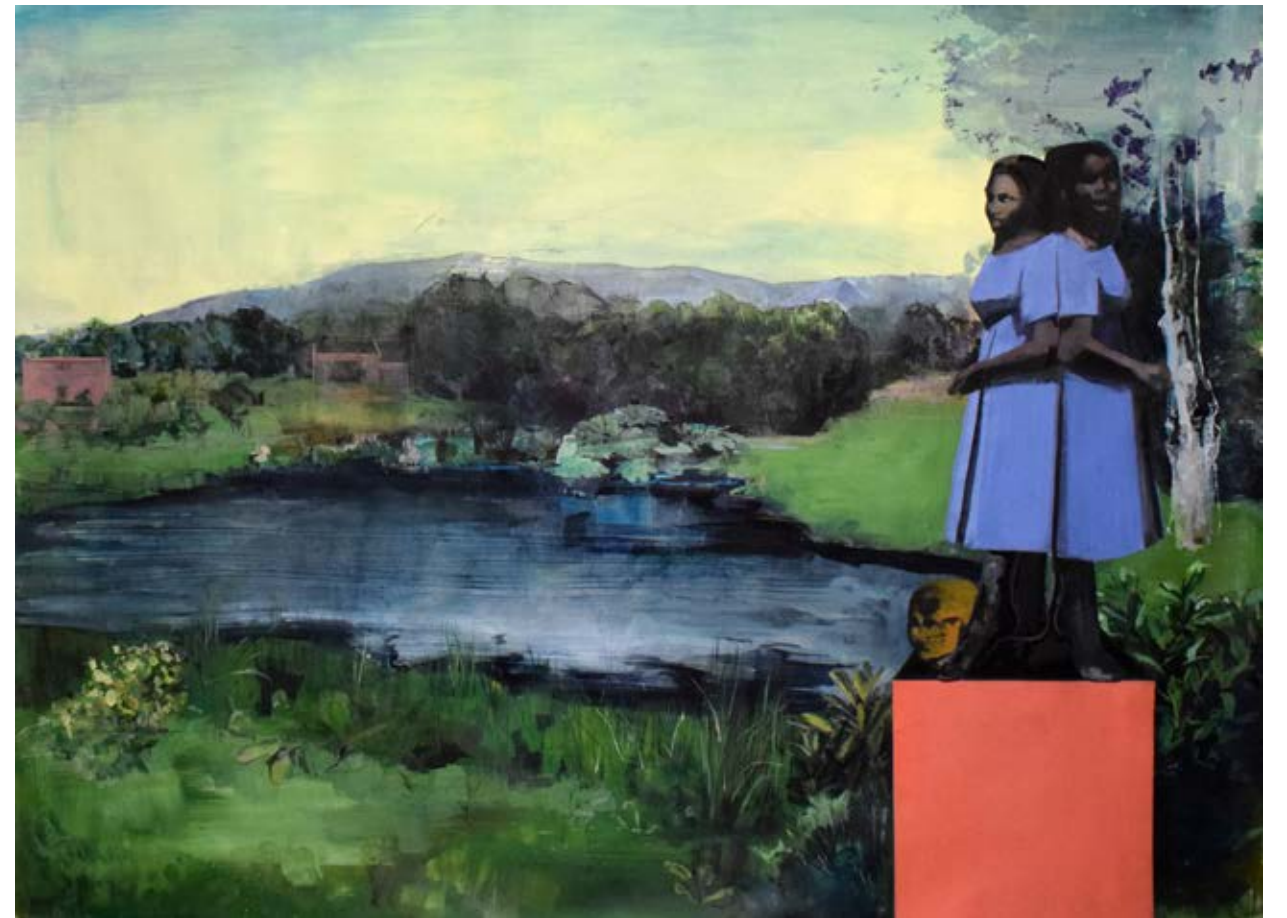
Gordon Dalton, Monument to an invented age, 2020. Acrylic on canvas, 150 x 110 cm



Paul Newman, The Last Day Revisited, 2021. Acrylic paint on C-type photographic print, 90 x 60cm



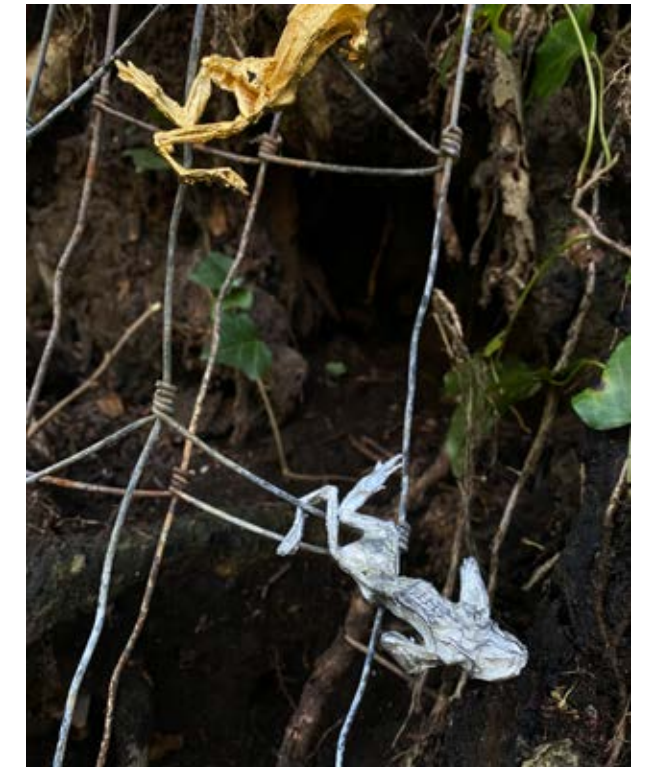
Chantal Powell, Alchemical totem (Serpent), 2019. Tin, concrete, pigment, 23 x 10 x 7 cm



Anna Sebastian, Janus, 2019. Oil on canvas, 200 x 150 cm



Georges Aurach, 1475. Nigredo, first of the three phases of the Magnum Opus: Nigredo, Albedo, Rubedo (from Pretiosissimum Donum Dei).



Chantal Powell, Ascension (detail), 2020. Steel, tin, gold.

DARKNESS AT NOON
Alchemical Nigredo of a Pandemic

An exhibition at APT Gallery
4th to 14th November, 2021

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The Art in Perpetuity Trust
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