

Vitalistic Fantasies



contemporary
british
painting

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4th June - 16th July 2022

elysium
gallery

Elysium Gallery
210 High Street
Swansea
SA1 1PE



Susan Absolon
David Ainley
Iain Andrews
Amanda Ansell
Karl Bielik
Claudia Böse
Day Bowman
Julian Brown
Marco Cali
Ruth Calland
Jules Clarke
Deb Covell
Lucy Cox
Gordon Dalton
Pen Dalton
Lisa Denyer
Natalie Dowse
Nathan Eastwood
Geraint Evans
Susan Gunn
Alex Hanna
Suzanne Holtom
Marguerite Horner
Barbara Howey
Phil Illingworth
Linda Ingham
Rachel Lancaster
Bryan Lavelle
Andrew Litten
Paula MacArthur

David Manley
Enzo Marra
Nicholas Middleton
Paul Newman
Stephen Newton
Joe Packer
Stephen Palmer
Ruth Philo
Alison Pilkington
Narbi Price
Freya Purdue
James Quin
Katherine Russell
David Sullivan
Harvey Taylor
Molly Thomson
Ehryn Torrell
Judith Tucker
Casper White
Joanna Whittle
Sean Williams

A Contemporary British Painting exhibition, bringing a visual conversation to ideas discussed in Isabelle Graw's book, *The Love of Painting*

Curated by Paula MacArthur and Casper White

Essay by Catrin Webster

Special thanks to Jonathan Powell at Elysium Gallery

Vitalistic Fantasies

by Catrin Webster

The essay was written for the first showing of Vitalistic Fantasies as part of the BEEP biennial in Swansea

Contemporary painting is in a very exciting place and exhibitions such as the BEEP biennial, in Swansea, have become regular events to reflect and review current painting practice, nationally and internationally. This year's BEEP exhibition is held in ten venues across Swansea and Cardiff and also features a satellite exhibition in the Elysium's College Street galleries. *Vitalistic Fantasies*, inspired by Isabelle Graw's publication, *The Love of Painting: Genealogy of a Success Medium*, 2018, showcases the paintings of thirty artists, who are all part of the Contemporary British Painting society, which Paula MacArthur states is, 'an attempt to bring a visual conversation to Graw's ideas and consider how her argument resonates within their own individual practices.'

Perhaps it can be agreed, when reflecting on the paintings included in this exhibition, that contemporary painting is a fluid space, open and therefore not fixed to a certain type of material, nor to less certain cultural trends: It is malleable, mutable, free. Painting, however, for many years was seen differently, when compared to the culturally dominant, omnipresent lens-mediated images. For some, painting had 'downfalls' which perhaps could be diagnosed through its subjectivity, its expressive

qualities, its sometimes-primal ingredients, of earth-based pigments and oil; its low-tech accessibility. The physical nature of painting; its haptic, tactile, material properties, have arguably worked against it. *Vitalistic Fantasies*, which brings together artists with diverse perspectives and a wide range of methods and intent, proposes an alternative theoretical position; a different way to conceive of and experience painting. This exhibition, which holds a dialogue with the theoretical discourse suggested by *Vitalistic Fantasies*, proposes a different position from which to look at and to encounter painting. This approach connects painting with emergent thinking surrounding subjectivity, materiality, and affect. Graw states, 'it is painting that provides a material basis for our vitalistic projections of subjectivity.' Establishing an alternative theoretical approach to thinking about painting and the connection to an individual's interpretation and life (Graw. 2018, p. 257).

When asked to contribute to this publication, I immediately recalled a 1997 exhibition I was invited to show a painting in, entitled, *Pure Fantasy: Inventive Paintings of the 90s*. The exhibition considers fantasy in a completely different way to Graw, and perhaps helps to create a context for this new contemporary thinking about painting. *Pure Fantasy*, curated by the Mostyn Gallery, show cased eight artists; two women, six men, including, Glenn Brown (b. 1966) and Chris Ofili (b. 1968). 'Fantasy' as a premise for this exhibition, seemed to offer an alternative to 'reality' (a time when painting was perhaps not celebrated). The exhibition, as many painting

exhibitions of this period such as Hayward Gallery *The Painting of Modern Life: 1960s to Now* (2007), positioned painting in relation to photography, as do a good number of celebrated and significant painters of the 20th and 21st Centuries, Gerhart Richter (b. 1932), Peter Doig (b. 1959), Vija Clemins (b. 1938), who challenge, head on, the dialogue between these materialities. The 1997 catalogue for, *Pure Fantasy* begins:

One hundred and sixty years have elapsed since the invention of photography appeared to signal the end of the importance of painting. New ideas and contributions to the activity have quietly continued over the past years and painting survives still as a valid form of expression, whilst the merit of the process has been questioned repeatedly by artists and academics.[...] painters emerge with new energy to vitalise the practical and intellectual processes of painting. (unknown 1997)

Photography and lens-based approaches, together with the conceptual turn in art practice in the 1960s-70s and the dematerialization of the art object (Lippard 1997), had again in the 1990s problematised painting, expelling it to the muddy edges of culture. But still, as painters we are here. Painting did not go away. Indeed, perhaps now, there has never been a more visible place for painting. In the contemporary digital world, photography is in flux; the image as data set forces a rethinking of photography beyond Roland Barthes', *Camera*

Lucida (Elkins 2011) signaling that the visual world is now very different from twenty years ago, and thus necessitates a rethinking of painting, but also a 're-seeing' of experience.

The premise of this show, *Vitalistic Fantasies*, is perhaps to take painting, with its multiple potentials and materialities, out of a binary correspondence to lens-based media, which has been such a central discourse for so long. New alternatives to thinking, looking and feeling a subjective connection to painting are being opened-up; perhaps a space to reconsider painting within the realm of 'dreaming' is being made possible through theoretical approaches such as affect theory and the discourse around new materialities.

Charles Baudelaire, in his writing in response to the Salon of 1851, witnesses the first impact of photography on painting, and not just on painting as a medium, but the impact photography might have on our way of seeing and being in the world:

... each day the painter becomes more and more given to painting not what he dreams but what he sees. Nevertheless it is a happiness to dream, and it used to be a glory to express what one dreamt.[..]

Could you find an honest observer to declare that the invention of photography and the great industrial madness of our times have no part at all in this deplorable result? Are

we to suppose that a people whose eyes are growing used to considering the results of a material science as though they were the products of the beautiful, will not in the course of time have singularly diminished its faculties of judging and feeling what are among the most ethereal and immaterial aspects of creation?'

(Baudelaire 1955, p.231)

Perhaps this is the crux, 'that it is a happiness to dream' and in spite of the impact of seeing the world through a lens of 'material science' (Baudelaire 1955), for one hundred and eighty years, painting still offers, enables, enacts a place for 'dreaming'. Dreaming is not a dead or purely sleeping art, dreaming is alive and present in the waking world. Painting, like dreaming is mutable, plastic (Malubou 2012), open-ended. As the assemblage of paintings brought together in the collection testify, painting does not rely on paint and canvas, nor on the frame of the picture, nor wall of the gallery (O'Doherty 2000), painting as shown in this collection of work for the *Vitalistic Fantasies* exhibition, is not connected by theme, method, or material, but through a propensity to 'dream' as an essential understanding that painting, '...provides a material basis for our vitalistic projections of subjectivity' (Graw.2018, p. 257): This premise is the axis upon which this exhibition pivots.

Vitalism of material, as an abstract theoretical concept, is under much debate as part of the New Materialism turn and there is considerable writing on the subject. Jane Bennet, in

her book *Vibrant Matter*, (2010) develops an understanding of the materialism of things connected back to the self, Bennett writes:

My aim, again, is to theorize a vitality intrinsic to materiality as such, and to detach materiality from the figures of passive, mechanistic, or divinely infused substance. This vibrant matter is not the raw material for the creative activity of humans or God. It is my body ...
(Bennett 2011, p. P11)

Taking this as a premise, and a way of conceptualizing how to approach the paintings brought together here, creates a space in which paintings have a 'vitality intrinsic to [their] materiality'; they have an independent agency and life force. This is the key, whether the material is cloth, canvass, oil paint or object-based, that material acts on us as material beings, in a visceral way: We share a vitality with the world around us.

This questions whether paintings are to be 'viewed', which is essentially a distancing and passive action, or 'encountered', through an acknowledgement of the paintings' independent vitality and in apprehension of 'immanent experience' (O'Sullivan 2001, p.126). To consider the paintings brought together here as being a 'trace of aliveness', through their essential materiality, connects the paintings to the material world of the viewer and renders the paintings re-sung, sensations, in the subjective, experience of the beholder. 'In fact', O'Sullivan writes, 'we might say that the affect is [...]

the matter in us responding and resonating with the matter around us' (p128. O'Sullivan 2001).

Each image in the exhibition vibrates with its own vitality which 'resonates' with us when we encounter them; layers of colour held together in oil, acrylic, or interwoven with other materials, all 'responding and resonating' internally within in the matter of the image/object and out into the world around; threads, timber, found objects, all imbued with individual affective properties. Surfaces articulated through mark, gesture, figuration, colour block, abstraction, symbolism, all need to be encountered as physical objects, images, projections; 'waiting to be reactivated by a spectator or participant'; they cannot be 'read [...] you can only experience them'(O'Sullivan 2001, p.126), or as Wittgenstein in his last work, *Remarks on Colour*, observes 'The colour concepts are to be treated like the concepts of sensations' (Wittgenstein 2007, p. 26c), they need to be felt.

Painting's material vibrancy can be understood in this exhibition as Baudelaire's 'dream', Graw's 'fantasies' or O'Sullivan's 'portals [...] situated on the borderline between actual and the virtual [...] (which) gives art an ethical imperative, because it involves a kind of moving beyond the already familiar (the human), precisely a kind of self-overcoming. (O'Sullivan 2001 p.128.)

Perhaps we need to consider how exhibitions such as BEEP

open up painting to a city like Swansea, using non-traditional venues, together with established art galleries; how painting itself can affect both those who are familiar and unfamiliar with it. In Catherine Lampert's recent book on the artist, Frank Auerbach is recorded to have said,: 'People who are responsive to painting are a particular set of people who respond to painting' (Auerbach in Lampert 2015, p. 207). I hope that the BEEP exhibitions reveal to new as well as established audiences an inner response to painting and its potential to engender *Vitalistic Fantasies*.

References:

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Wittgenstein, L (2007, first published 1977) *Remarks on Colour*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford



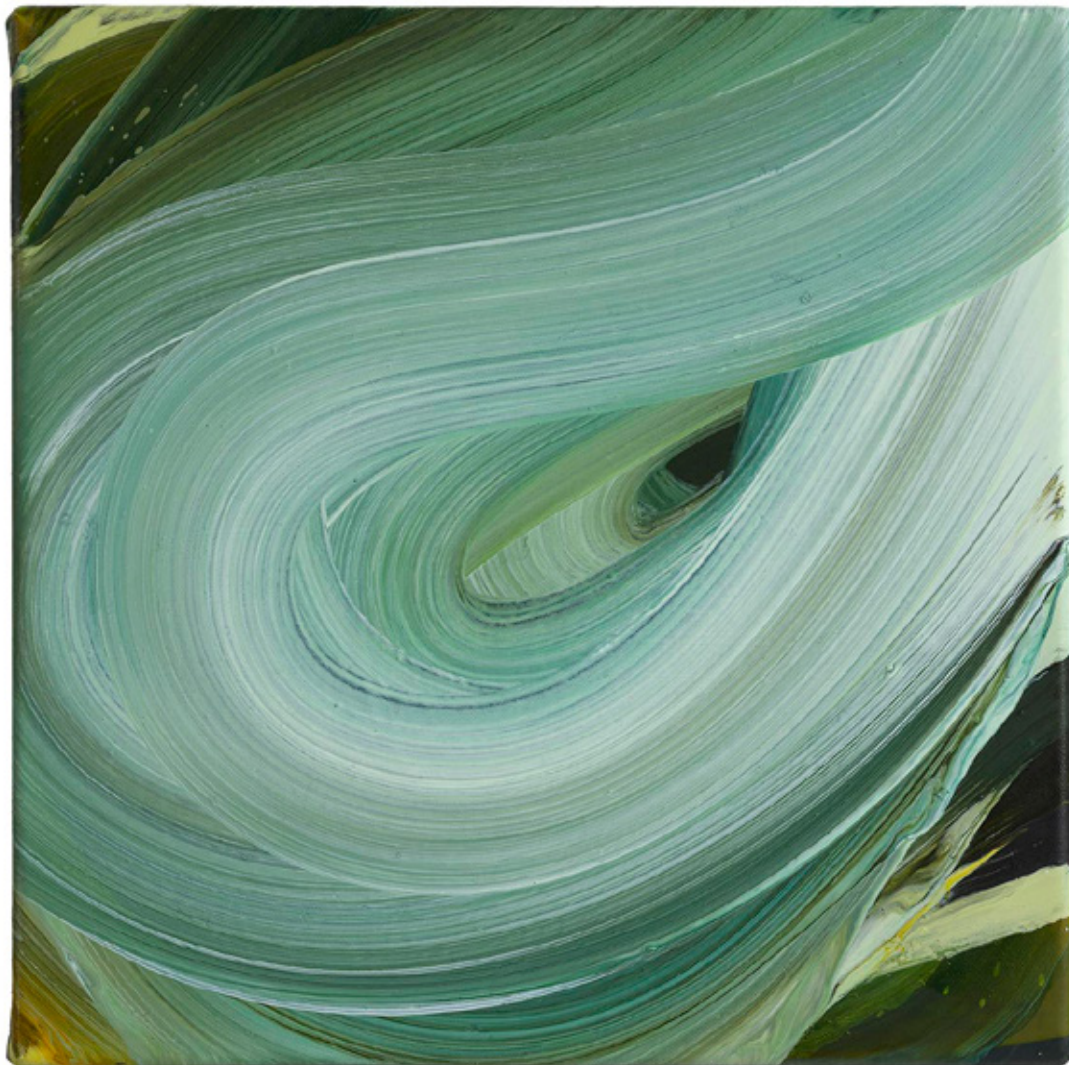
Impostor
Oil on calico, 20.5x25.5cm, 2020



Dovegang, a Mined Field (More than Meets the Eye)
Acrylic on drilled panel, 33.5 x 27.5 cms, 2008



Golem V
Acrylic and oil on wood, 20x22cm, 2022



Supernova
Oil on canvas. 30x30cm. 2020



Puppet
Oil on Canvas, 36x30cm, 2022



Clan
Mixed media on canvas, 50x50cm, 2022



Tidepool 1
Oil, charcoal and conte on canvas, 26x30x4cm, 2019



Mountain Road
Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 50cm



Untitled

Watercolour & gouache on paper, 29x42 cm, 2020



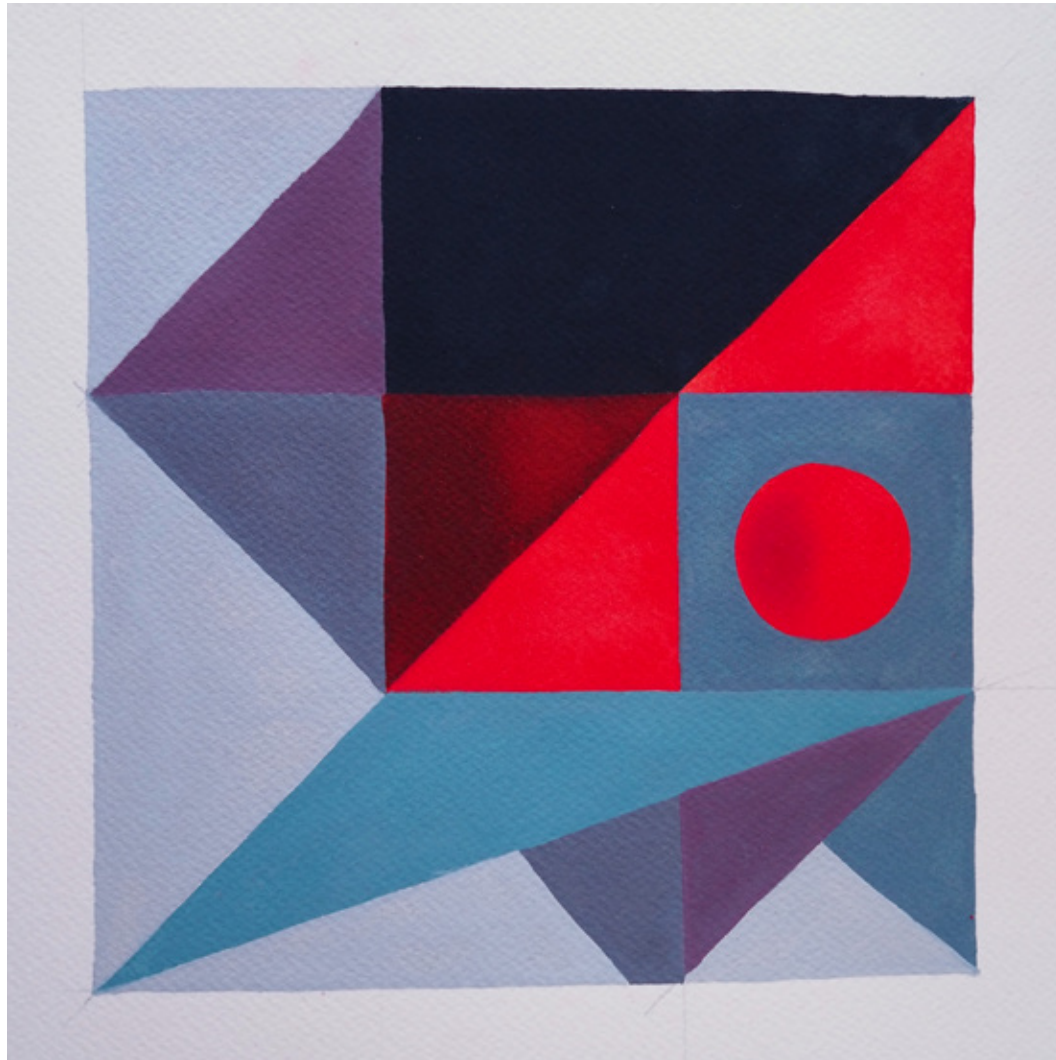
Maddened (study)
Oil on canvas, 21x26cm, 2021



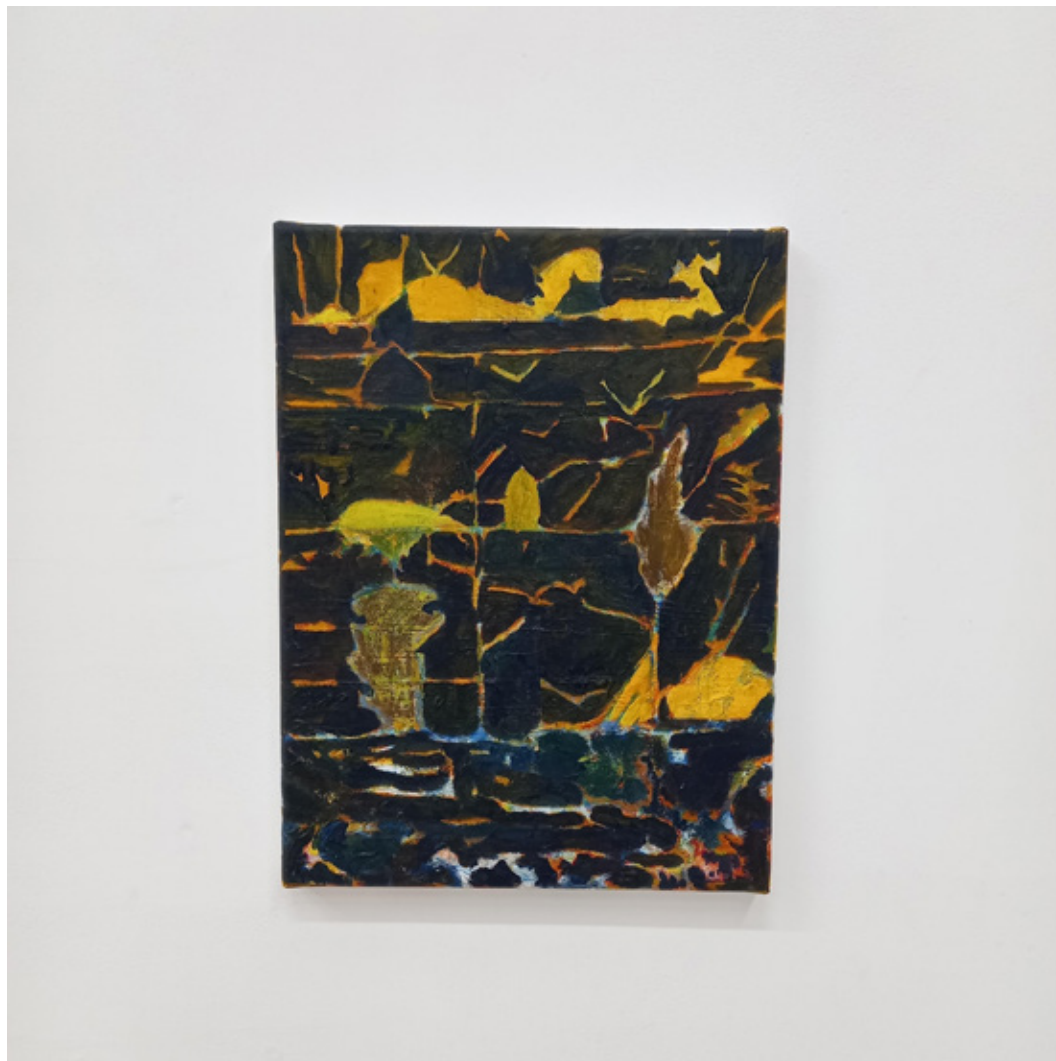
Cabin
Oil on canvas, 50 x 40cm, 2022



Yellow, Blue and White Constructive Painting 2
Acrylic paint skin, 22 x 30cm, 2019



Construction (study)
Watercolour on paper, 15x 5cm unframed, 2020



It breaks you every time
Acrylic on canvas, 40 x 30cm, 2021



Inside Out
Acrylic paint and resin on mounted plywood panel, 30x30cm, 2022



Parallels
Acrylic, collage and filler on hardboard, 30x30cm, 2022



Song of the Siren 3
Oil on canvas, 59x39cm, 2020



Enter the Proletariats (2nd Fragment)
Enamel on primed gesso board, 22.9x30.5cm, 2021



Pyramid
Oil on canvas, 20x25cm, 2022



Mona Lisa
Triptych 3 panels (19x13cm per panel) 2019



Re reposed
Oil on panel, 15x20x2cm, 2022



The Sparing Ones
Oil on canvas, 40x50cm, 2019



Lost
Oil on canvas, 50x50cm, 2011



Little Monster

Antique wooden panel, MDF, acrylic paint, steel, 38x32cm, 2019



Open series, Trinity
Oil & Stitch on Linen, 25 x 20cm each, ongoing



Parcel III
Oil on canvas, 40x50cm, 2021



Tipping Point (Vivid Lime Green Cobalt Blue Hue) 3
Acrylic on MDF, 30x30cm, 2020



Nature Study 2
Oil on canvas, 35x25cm, 2022



And blazed through the sky
Oil on canvas, 100x100cm, 2020



Black Bones
Acrylic on canvas, 55.5x45cm, 2020



Pointed
Hammerite and oil on canvas, 25x20cm, 2022



Painted Over

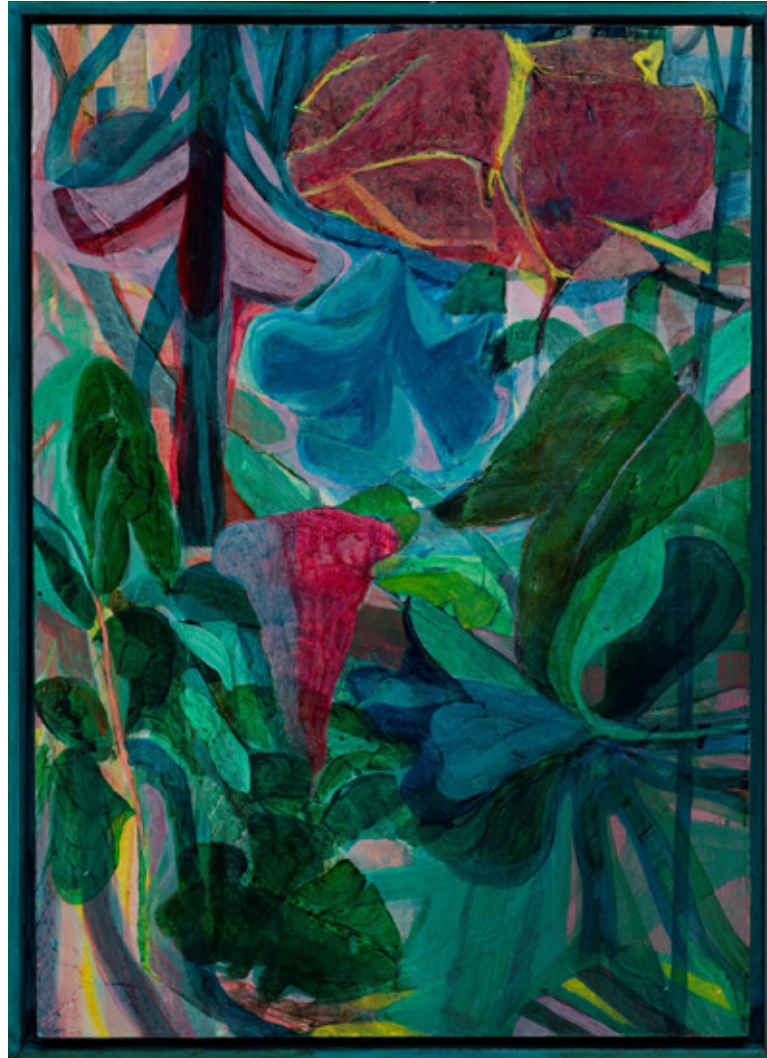
Oil on primed paper, 24 x 30.5cm including painted white border, unframed, 2021



Woodland Painting I
Acrylic paint and collage on canvas, 100x150cm, 2021



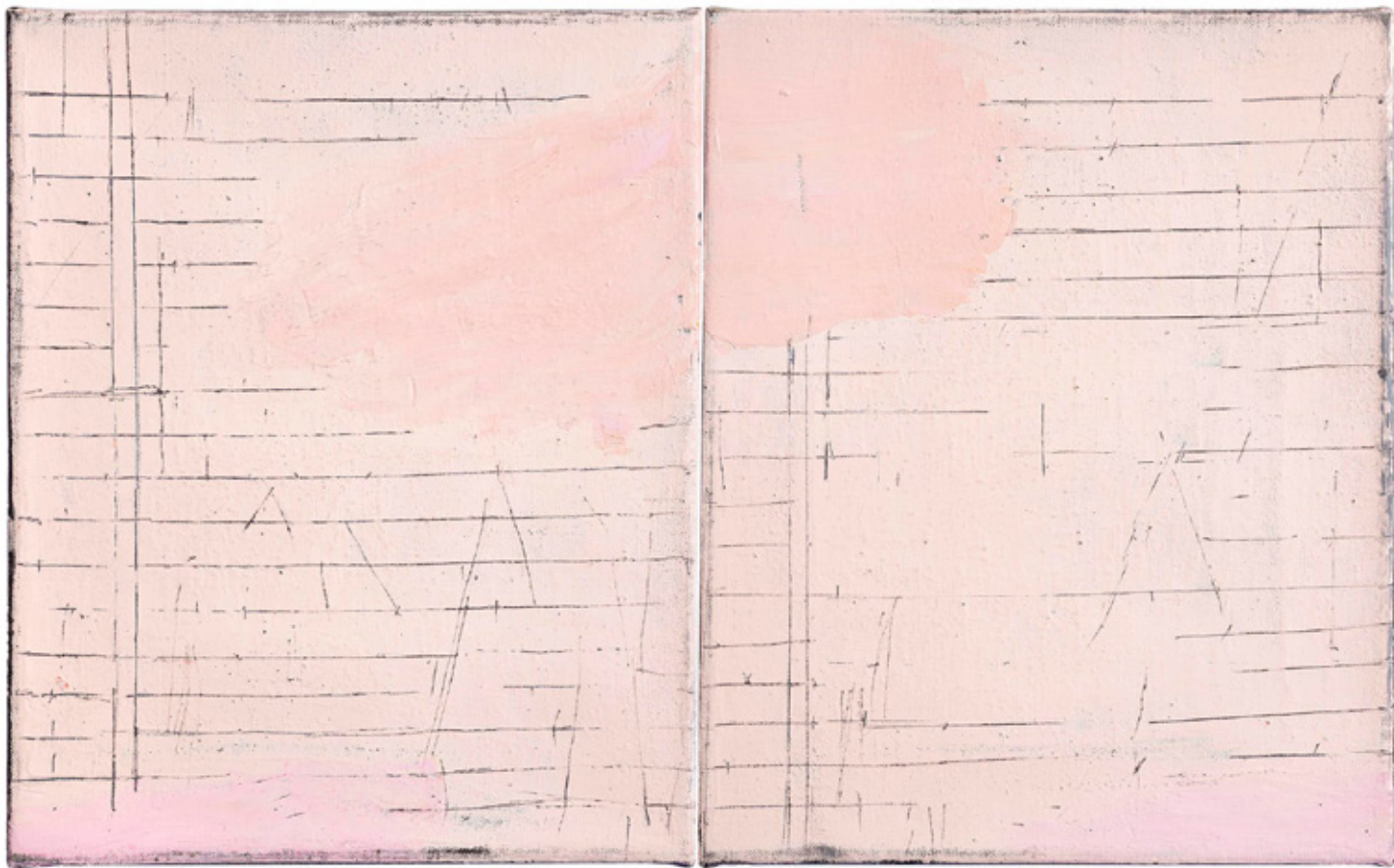
House on the beach Edge
Oil on canvas, 25.5x30.5cm, 2018



LeefDreem II
Acrylic & collage on beechwood, 44x32cm, 2021



Just about finally done
Acrylic on panel on paper, 29.7x21cm 2022



Unwritten (diptych)

Acrylic, wax & graphite on linen, each panel 30 x 25cm, 2018



Thinking Thing
Oil on canvas, 35x27cm, 2019



Untitled Flowers Painting 3
Acrylic on canvas, 45x60cm, 2015



Orb Under Heaven
Oil on canvas, 60x75cm, 2021



Natalya Bondarchuk
Oil on canvas, 45 x 40cm, 2021-22



Untitled I
Oil on Canvas, 45x40cm, 2022



The Fashion
Oil on canvas over board, 31x26cm, 2009



Alongside the River Colne
Oil on canvas, 100cm x 70cm, 2020



Untitled (restless painting with points)
Acrylic on panel, 45x46cm, 2022



Spring Resistance
Collage Painting, 31.5cmx35.5 cm, 2022



Hideaway 2

Oil on canvas, 30x40cm (part of a diptych), 2022



TikToker crying online
Oil on linen with brass candle holder, 24x18cm, 2020



Forest Shrine (Forest)
Oil on copper, 15x10cm, 2021



Forest Shrine (Knock)
Oil on found postcard, 15x10cm, 2021



Private Kingdom
Acrylic on paper, 32x21cm (unframed), 2020



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