

**contemporary
british painting
prize 2021**



the contemporary british painting prize 2021

Huddersfield Art Gallery

Unit 7, The Piazza Centre, Princess Alexandra Walk, Huddersfield HD1 2RS
6th November 2021 - 15th January 2022

Unit 1 Gallery | Workshop

Unit 1, 1 Bard Road, London W10 6TP
27th January - 12th February 2022

Susan Absolon | Tony Antrobus | Roland Hicks | Martyna Lebryk
Hannah Murgatroyd | Christina Niederberger | Donna Mclean
Sarah Poots | Daisy Richardson | Tom Robinson | Jesse Leroy Smith
Gary Spratt | Bill Stewart | Zack Thorne | Jan Valik



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Introduction by Joanna Whittle
Essay by Matthew Burrows
Statements made by the artists in their own words
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Introduction

The Contemporary British Painting Prize 2021

Selectors:

David Ainley | Karl Bielik

Sikelela Owen | Joanna Whittle

It has been a privilege to be a selector for the Contemporary British Painting Prize this year alongside such considered painters who have approached the process with a commitment to unearthing the fundamental significance of painting in 2021. Our varied approaches to our practices has made for an exhibition which embodies the richness and diversity in painting today. It has been two years since the last prize in 2019, in which time the world has changed irrevocably. As painters we have been uniquely placed to explore this new territory; adept as we are at reflecting on the world and translating this into pigment. As such, this year's submissions have shown the tenacity of painters to negotiate adversity and to flourish through their enduring practices.

During these times we have been more than ever aware of the 'inside' and the 'outside' and somehow the painted surface intercedes on the boundary between. In Gaston Bachelard's 'Poetics of Space' he considers such a tension:

If there exists a border-line surface between such an inside and outside, this surface is painful on both sides [...] The centre of 'being-there' wavers and trembles. Intimate space loses its clarity, while exterior space loses its void.¹

In many of the submissions this year, we have found ourselves in this place, in an unsettling confusion of space which spills and expands within and beyond its parameters, questioning certainty and unravelling this malleable surface within the discourse of painting.

In our final selection we encounter surfaces where paint slips and glides; where some marks are buoyed and pasted upon uncertainty whilst others are tightened and stapled into trompe l'oeil. Where are we, where is this place? We are looking for

ourselves in the gap, which has always been the space between painter and viewer; this hinterland where we share perception (share ourselves), each as lost and as mesmerised as the other.

So we find ourselves in the work of these fifteen painters, passing through thin veils of paint, diaphanous curtains concealing or pulling back to reveal spaces half defined, limbs piled up and half running, strange territories which elude, causing a misstep in our perception which pulls us back to the full press of the painted surface, lurid and layered with plastic colour or chalky, discreet imaginings. We retreat into darkened, empty rooms and woven surfaces which reveal themselves to be only paint (*only* paint). These are spaces where trees vibrate and faces loom, whilst darkness sits upon the stark light of the ground beneath and fragmented objects are laid out in intimate archaeologies.

This is an exhibition borne of uneasy times, of fleeting thoughts punctuating surfaces, anxieties splaying bushes into spaces of assignments and half formed somethings skidding into being. But is also an exhibition which exemplifies the Contemporary British Painting Prize, which affirms the vigour and innovation in the painted mark and celebrates the continuing evolution of this language to reflect its times. And however these selected painters have chosen to make these marks, be it reflectively, precisely or wildly, paint remains stubbornly itself. This unique object, this sticky thing, bedraggled and emerging with its own authority of materiality.

Joanna Whittle, 2021

Footnote: Bachelard 'Poetics of Space' Translation 1964, Orion Press, p218.



The artists...

Susan Absolon

CONTEMPORARY BRITISH PAINTING PRIZE 2021 WINNER

I make each painting up as I go along, looking for a space, mood or form that I feel excited to work with in order to take it in a specific direction. It's a reactive process of trial and error, slippage and disruption from which different types of picture can emerge, sometimes in series that are united thematically over an extended period of time.

I like the abstract and the representational to rub along together in my work, allowing latitude for more than one interpretation. Beyond process, I make paintings in order to convey something about female experience, mortality, loss and sleep, often embedding more than one of these themes concurrently in a single painting.

Working with paint generates a lively inner monologue with rich associative potential. The slippery nature of both visual and verbal semantics allows me to combine, rearrange and visualise often unrelated terms inside my head. The interaction between words and an evolving painting generates an energy that allows me to take a painting in an unplanned direction to see what thing grows. It's a way of working that helps me to shift a painting from being an aesthetically pleasing approximate thing into something articulate and authentic with its own internal logic and voice.



Inflatable
Oil on calico, 30.5cm x 40.5cm, 2021



Ten Thousand Fathoms
Oil on canvas, 30.5cm x 40.5cm, 2021



Dugout
Oil on canvas, 91cm x 91cm, 2021

Tony Antrobus

I work in oil paint and on many different paintings simultaneously. Starting points and influences come from many eclectic sources, drawings, magazines, photographs, studio, memories, fantasies which set the process off. Layers of paint and structures are built up over time to create often unexpected collisions and unintended juxtapositions of colour, marks and textures. Paintings can be left for weeks and months before recommencing. It is a physical process and all manner of mark-making is employed, adding, subtracting, modifying even destroying in an endless continuous progression or cycle. The process is largely intuitive incorporating the body as tool, through gestures and impulse. It is a playful and irreverent series of painterly acts largely unscripted which bestow the pieces with unknown, implicit and unconscious intentions.



Faraway from here
Oil on canvas, 70cm x 55cm, 2021



Narcissistic wounds
Oil on board, 50cm x 40cm, 2021



Something inside
Oil on canvas, 40cm x 40cm, 2021

Roland Hicks

Perhaps I should clarify that what at first might seem to be minimal abstract works, somewhat primitively assembled from bits of chipboard, staples and so on, are actually painted 'trompe l'oeil' illusions. Deception would appear to be nailed [or stapled] on as the intention.

I do find purely illusionistic painting fairly limited as a basis for making art though. It seems to me that once the fooled eye realises it's been duped then much trompe l'oeil painting risks falling flat, both literally and figuratively.

So, I've always wanted something more than this to sustain my work. Which is where and why everything else comes in. The paintings are not, in fact, based on direct observation of any pre-existent model, so are arguably works of pure, albeit deliberately limited, imagination.

My work is clearly ambiguous.

I do and don't enjoy a paradox.

I want it to connect on multiple levels, and for all of these to be equally important or valid.

But I suppose it might appear that I'm just trying to deceive you.

If I am, then I hope it's an open, generous and curious form of trickery - with a genuine enjoyment of humble materials and creative acts both real and imagined.

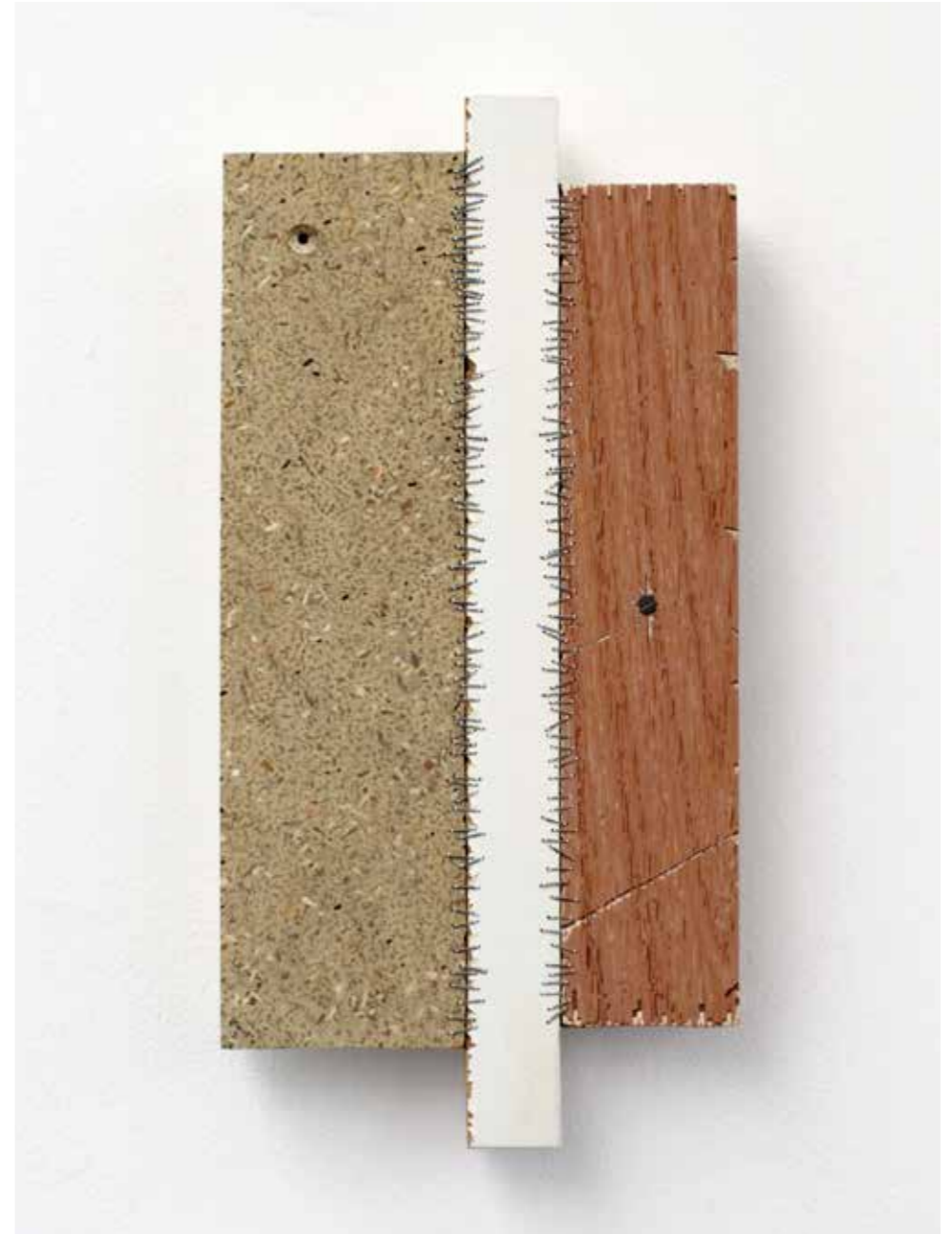
Opposite: Blueshady

Acrylic and acrylic gouache on shaped MDF panel, 60.5cm x 21cm x 3cm, 2021





Triple Zip Board Chord
Acrylic and acrylic gouache on shaped MDF panel, 60cm x 29cm x 3cm, 2021



Chipplystickzips
Acrylic and acrylic gouache on shaped MDF panel, 37.5cm x 18.5cm x 3cm, 2021

Martyna Lebryk

My work deals with themes of social agency, power and control. The initial inspiration came from observing a contemporary street protest, a transitory interplay of corporeal beings, urban structures, and the performative: a moment of body kinetics.

These works on paper sit somewhere between a painting and a drawing. The crude materiality suggests references to urban aesthetics where things happen fast, bodies pass in transit, assemble, become visible, and, through that, political.

Limbs occupying the space of the paintings are falling, becoming trapped, piling up and losing balance. Their precarity and instability reflect the anxiety of times where no one seems to be in control, yet all appear to be under control. This power affects and works through the body. Cartoonish forms struggle – they are both silly and tragic. This awkward tension explores a sense of confusion, which affects our moral, social and political hopes.

It all might crumble at any moment. But we, like Winnie, in Beckett's 'Happy Days', appear to be somewhat awkwardly stuck in a muddle of the world. A procession of limbs keeps pressing ahead through the feelings of uncertainty and frustration. There is no other way. We must keep going.



Sirens

Oil and oil pastel on Fabriano paper, 70cm x 83cm, 2021



Bunch of legs
Oil and oil pastel on Fabriano paper, 70cm x 83cm, 2021



Three riders of my fate
Oil and oil pastel on Fabriano paper, 70cm x 83cm, 2021

Donna Mclean

The paintings I submitted are different in subject matter. I considered sticking to a stronger theme in the spirit of giving you a very cohesive body of work but I would like to have a strong identity as a painter without adhering to the same theme. I want to surprise the viewer with my next painting - I want to surprise myself.

It is light that unifies these subjects. I pay great attention to it and I can think of no other tool that is more powerful in creating a mood. If I am to have a subject I would like to be a painter of atmosphere and light.

Every formal decision I make takes this into consideration, each component that goes into making a painting works like a scaffold on which to drape the mood I want - to conjure up a strange hushed world - somewhere seen in a dream, recognised but unfamiliar.

I minimise my use of white paint preferring to allow the prepared ground to shine through. This is closer to how light behaves in life - not a thick opaque matter smeared onto a flat surface, but transparent, luminous - everywhere and nowhere - hard to pin down. In the studio I can spend more time removing paint than putting it down in my attempt to catch the glow.

I am interested in a beauty that isn't too decorative or easy on the eye. I want some grit along with the pearl, so I'm drawn to uneasy subjects - sometimes screen grabs from the tv, my own photos or my imagination. I want to imbue these scenes with an eerie beauty, to make images that simultaneously seduce and disarm, comfort and disturb.



Sarah Lund
Oil on canvas, 150cm x123cm, 2019-20



Cloud
Oil on canvas, 39cm x 35cm, 2021



Tarwater Road
Oil on board, 32cm x 30cm, 2021

Hannah Murgatroyd

CONTEMPORARY BRITISH PAINTING PRIZE 2021 HIGHLY COMMENDED

Painting starts in the dream, a flicker at the edge of the eye. There is a feeling – the body is a vital force – the dream tells me this. There is no distance from the body to the world, whether in nature or cityscape, all hum together in the moment of being, in the act of surviving. Life leading into the lockdown of 2020 was a muffled sensation as I was in the early months of new motherhood. This primal experience transformed my paintings. Figures moved into the shadows to inhabit a verdant, hushed world. Surrounded by sky, shore and forest, bodies have become as fleeting and enduring as the platforms and indices of buildings in which they are housed, remnants of constantly dissolving dynasties. These paintings, whether peopled or unpeopled, are propelled by thoughts around an architecture of the gaze. The human looking upon landscape, of looking inward, of defining a physical and emotional space to worship the tangible and intangible. It is this search that turns under my hand as sensations of mark, light and colour lead me through each painting's construction and deconstruction: toward the canvas's potential to hold gazes of reverie, revelation and hope.



Perigee
Oil on canvas, 120cm x 150cm, 2021



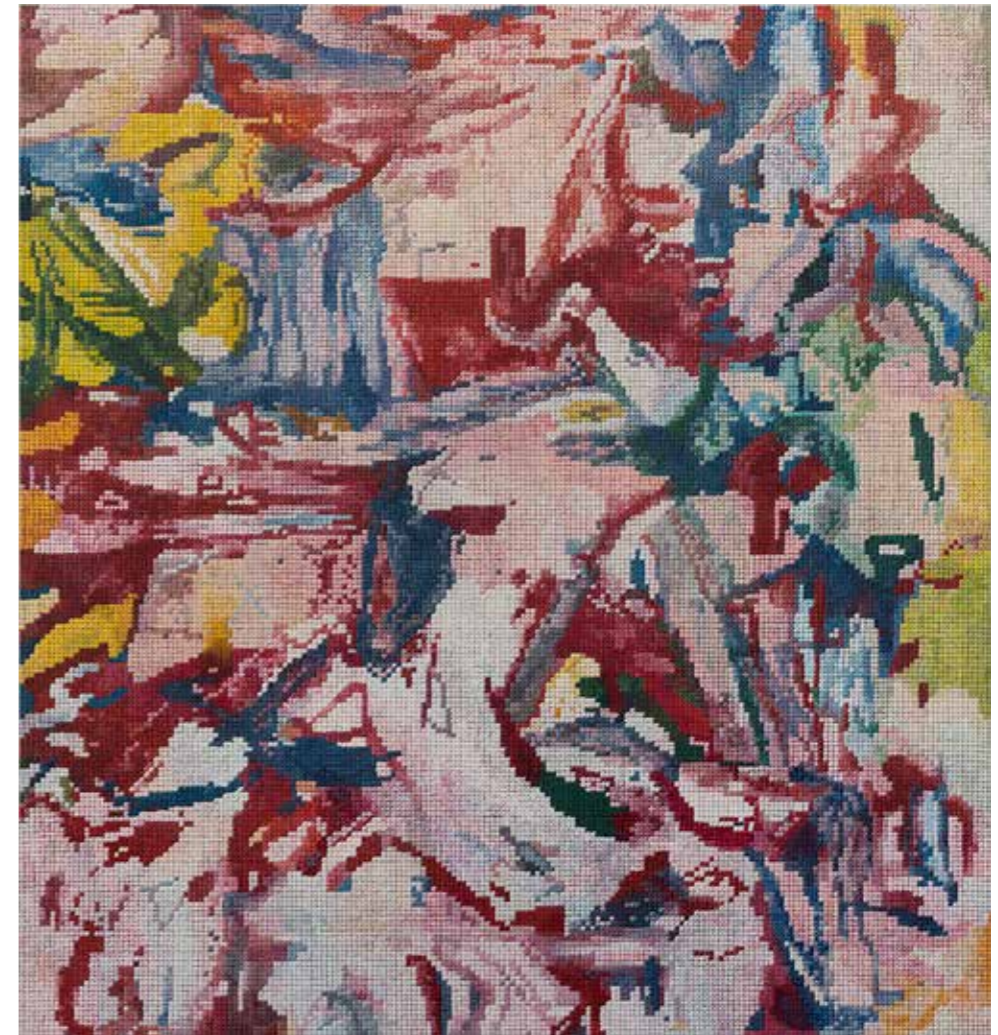
I Wish You Wild Impossible Dreams
Oil on canvas, 180cm x 160cm, 2021



Night Mapping
Oil on canvas, 130cm x 150cm, 2021

Christina Niederberger

I am interested in the language of painting, how this language has been framed by its cultural conditions, art history and traditional notions of the masculine and feminine. For several years I have explored these interests with paintings that deal with re-interpretations of modernism's vocabulary by 'translating' modernist stylistic devices into an illusionistic mark making which mimics embroidery/textiles. These paintings evoke the sphere of craft and design whilst their formal characteristics and rendition in oils allude to the domain of fine art. During the first lockdown and influenced by the story of Penelope in the Odyssey, especially by Homer's use of her weaving as a metaphor for the passing of time and female empowerment, I started to focus on paintings depicting woven patterns. At the same time and inspired by a quote by Lubaina Himid who describes textile design as "a secret and yet visible language between women," I began to work quasi in reverse: rather than reworking modernism into paintings that look like textiles I started to remake the textile designs by women from the Bauhaus weaving workshop as paintings. Borrowing from both the vocabulary of modernism and of textile art, my painterly translations from one visual language to another can be read as hybrid texts engaged in a process of interpretation between languages and cultures, between modernism and contemporary art, between painting and textile as well as between a culture dominated by masculinity and a feminist perspective.



Revue (after de Kooning)
Oil on canvas, 133cm x 125cm x 4cm, 2018



Untitled II (after de Kooning)
Oil on canvas, 76cm x 51cm x 4cm, 2019



Hedwig
Oil on canvas, 40cm x 30cm x 2cm, 2021

Sarah Poots

Sarah Poots makes paintings that are intimate and quiet. Taking objects and surfaces from everyday archaeologies her work plays with placement, arrangement and order. The paintings are immersed in the role of touch in our increasingly remote lives. Often, works are paired or presented in trio's creating a painterly game of compare and contrast. Layered compositions create an internal conversation that resonates between works, and creates its own sense of order and logic.

These works play with the grid, the broken shapes of an object in shallow space, that drive us to re-imagine the object in its original three dimensional form, in a continuing making and unmaking loop. Apparently simple and serious, the works, on looking, reverberate with multiple references and often unexpected humour.

Eliza Bonham Carter, Fully Awake 6 catalogue



Endless
Oil on canvas, 30cm x 25cm, 2021



Temporary Sculptures
Oil on canvas, 24cm x 18cm (each), 2021



Backbone
Oil on canvas, 30cm x 25cm, 2021

Daisy Richardson

I'm interested in the crossover between geology, time, the formation of the world and lived human experience. The beginning of this series of paintings was the memory of a ruined house I once saw while walking in the Southern Hebrides. I've returned many times in memory and imagination to this uncanny and unknowable place; white goods, a kettle and other fairly new paraphernalia lying open to the elements under the half destroyed roof. I imagined the condensing of time as millennia-spanning geological events occurred within its collapsed walls as I watched. 'Tourmalination' suspends needles of tourmaline within one of the rooms, a ripped blue curtain traversing the top of the picture plane signalling both the sacred blue of Italian religious painting and the folds in the fabric surrounding Venus in Botticelli's 1485 painting. 'Rutilation (DOMESTIC)' is a kind of 'war of the worlds' where I focussed on a tiny piece of rutilated quartz and extended it to room size, referring to the lance and cloud in Uccello's 'Saint George and the Dragon'. It's a war between two people and a war fought between everyone, set in stone. 'Rag and Bone', painted from a wider viewpoint, shows more human remnants with its smashed mirror, chair, old sheet and cruciform arrangement of broken planks on the floor.

I want these paintings to give the sense of being both inside and outside, trapped and free. I'm fascinated by living spaces, interior spaces and their history and psychology. Over this last year, like most people I have had a very different experience of my living environment, which I think has seeped into these paintings.

My practice includes painting, drawing, collage, animation and sculpture. With each piece of work, I am always trying to learn something new.



Rutilation (DOMESTIC)
Oil on canvas board, 21cm x 21.5cm, 2021



Tourmalination
Oil on primed paper, 18.5cm x 18cm, 2021



Rag and Bone
Oil on primed paper, 20cm x 23cm, 2020

Tom Robinson

Each of these paintings was made in the course of the last twelve months. They are part of a larger body of current work that is concerned with a series of oppositions (any formal property appears to have a polar opposite; the tension between these oppositions generates energy). Movement plays against, and through, concrete forms. Their space is multiple perspective rather than linear. They reach for, in particular, the effect of discord on the light an image makes. In common with my practice as a whole these paintings are caught in the impossibility of the ideal image they are chasing.



Stop
Oil on panel, 122cm x 100cm, 2021



Telmah
Oil on panel, 160cm x 122cm, 2021



Idol
Oil on panel, 145cm x 122cm, 2021

Jesse Leroy Smith

The core of my practice is figurative painting. Collaboration, curating, teaching and travelling have allowed film, installation, performance, print and drawing to inspire its changes.

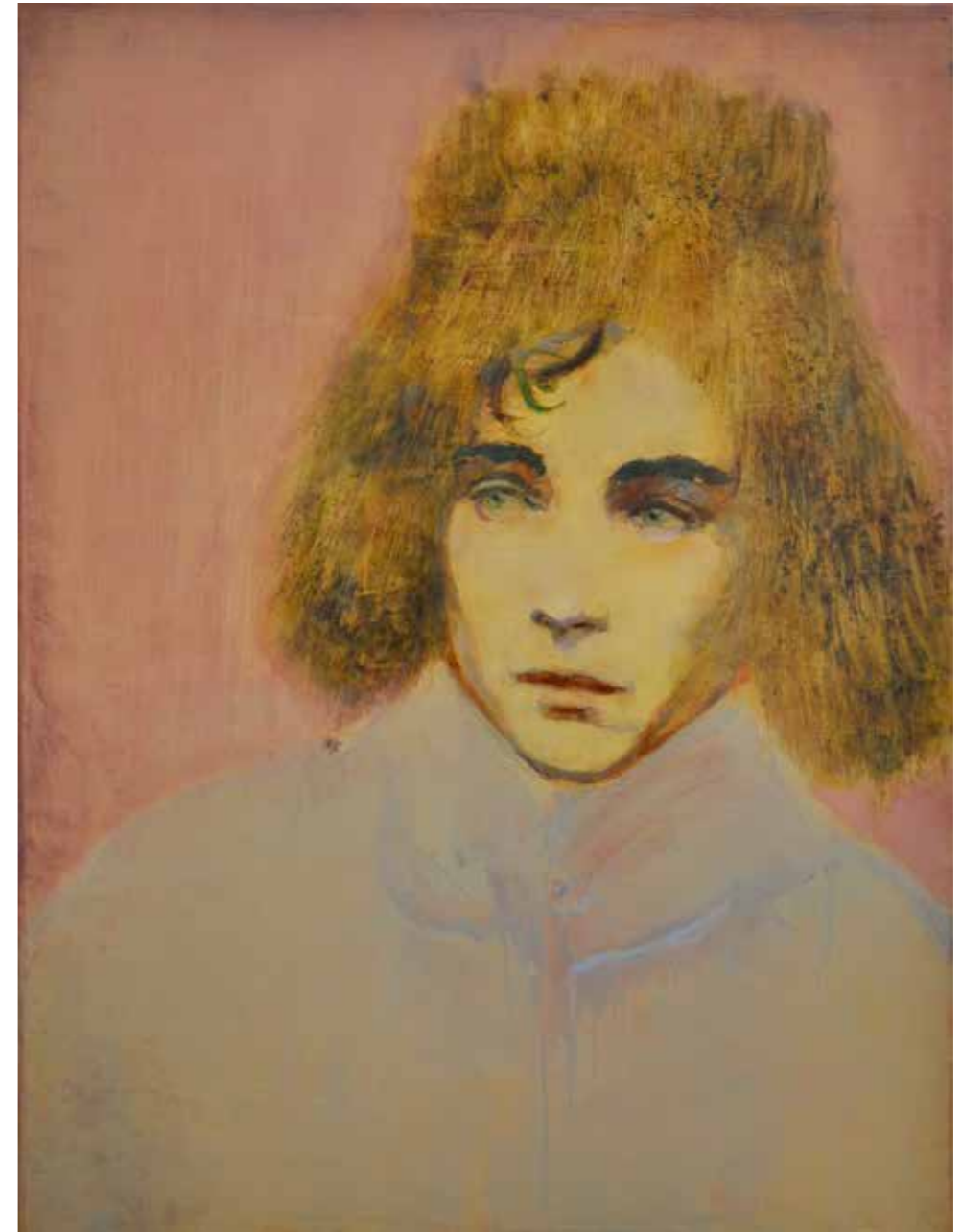
Painting for me can be both refined and raw, quiet and raucous. It connects personal experiences with the influences of art history. The central theme of my work is my family, an ever-evolving set of relationships in which emotion, desire and identity are tangible, fluid and vivid.

I collate scrapbooks in which friends, family and heroes montage with ancient art alongside film stills, creatures and landscapes from my travels. These collections of collaged, dreamlike, juxtaposed memories often form the basis of my paintings.

The paintings here, of influential figures in my life are from a series called 'Descendants'. I choose to paint these individuals as they convey the resilience, empathy and vulnerability that arise from their experiences of trauma and solace. They form a collective portrait based on the ancestries we all resist or embrace.

Figurative painting naturally seems to transform and subvert the image of ourselves. By replacing or stripping away cultural and psychological references this group of seemingly disparate, individual portraits evolve towards a cohesive palette and sense of 'touch'. Passages arise from poured washes and pigment properties, some are repeatedly scratched, and others become open simplified forms.

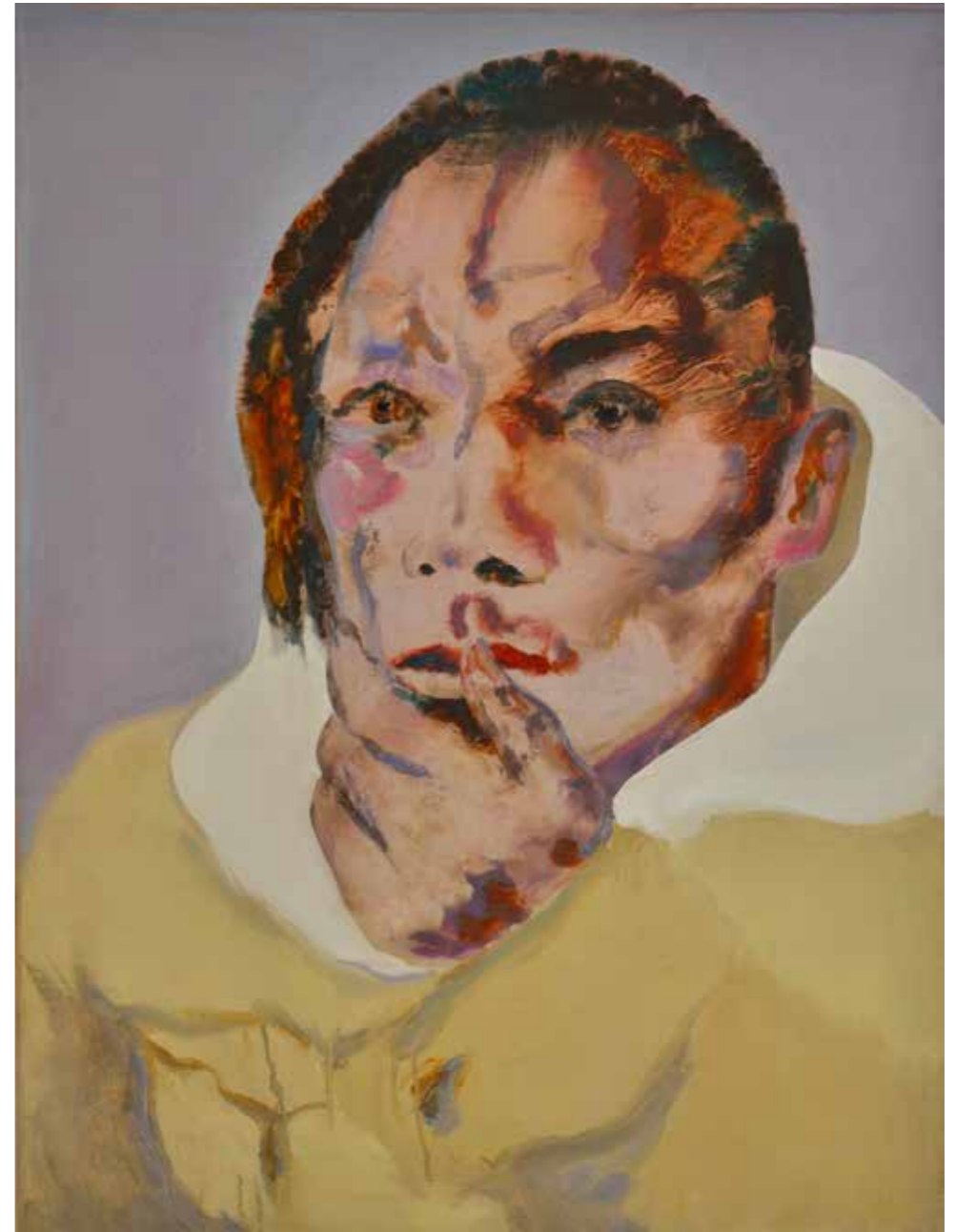
I find as singular images they emerge more layered and unique for me from this collective process and veer between the veneration and iconoclasm of portraiture.



Father Figure
Oil on panel, 82cm x 62cm x 4cm, 2021



Blowback
Oil on panel, 82cm x 62cm x 4cm, 2021



Creator - Tricky
Oil on panel, 82cm x 62cm x 4cm, 2021

Gary Spratt

In practical terms, I am quite a traditional painter in that I make drawings and work in all the usual media.

Starting points are mixed and often contrary. Objects, scenes or memories are all used with an intuitive approach. A sense of freedom is vital to get the varied results I find necessary to move drawings towards larger work.

From a jumble of pulled apart sources I identify, contrast or adapt, and in putting them back together find what has value. Linear and non linear thinking are given equal weight here. Mentally leaping about until something appears. I cultivate ideas within the painting, as a sort of psychic natural history, creating an environment within the painting in which things can exist. The painting is an opening. It's really an excuse or context to use imagery and language that I find appealing, to make visual sense from it, and with that, some sort of meaning.

Painting for me is part luxury, part sacrifice and part privilege. Its lack of commercial viability in a consumer society makes it my small rebellion, and with that in mind, even a political statement.



Gate Leg
Oil on canvas, 90cm x 80cm, 2021



Roars, Bangs, Booms
Oil on canvas, 100cm x 90cm, 2021



Odd Legs
Oil on canvas, 100cm x 90cm, 2021

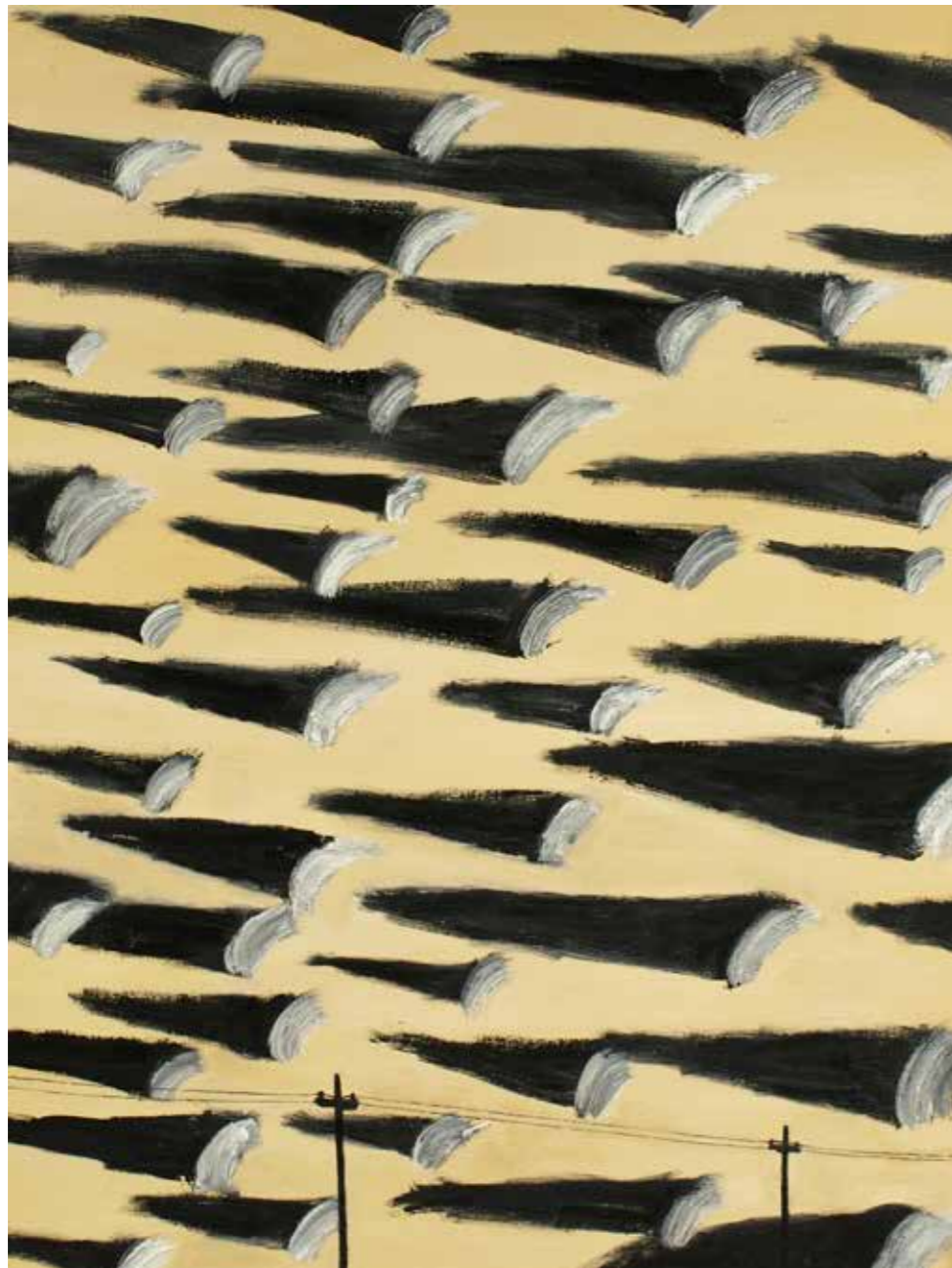
Bill Stewart

These paintings are from an ongoing series with a working title Head Highway. They are driven by my memories of hitchhiking around the USA a couple of times many moons ago. When I started the series, I thought that I was painting lost photo opportunities (and may still be), but I may be painting flashbacks to the hallucinogenic result of tiredness, wired-ness, awe, fear, fun all scrambled by time and memory. Something real to me, making sense of things that I thought I'd forgotten about. I hadn't even done art at school back then. I didn't have an artist's eye so I had experienced it all directly, unfiltered, unabstracted.

Painting gives me the means to revisit those days and those days give me a chance to revisit my painting. The journey across time of that hitchhiking 'psychosis', becomes a door to a hidden room that painting gives me the chance to truly explore, and permission to challenge how I work in order to explore it. The unexplainable feeling of 'being'. Like the paintings, always one step behind knowing and being thrilled at the helplessness, being in a place where a splodge of paint is the equal of a spangled night sky.



TheDancingTreesOfYellowstoneAnthemStandingVibrationWyoming1981-2021
Oil on canvas, 76cm x 102cm, 2021



Oklahoma!
Oil on canvas, 76cm x 102cm, 2021



Badlands50BlackStarCalvaryVibrationsSDakota1981-2021
Oil on canvas, 76cm x 102cm, 2021

Zack Thorne

My practice explores themes of the uncanny in a series of semi-banal, semi-theatrical paintings of familiar objects and familiar spaces. Using film stills as well as my own images as source material, I paint quiet or understated moments from a larger sequence of events. My paintings are intended to be viewed as part of a grand narrative to reflect my ongoing engagement with the cinematic. My paintings provide starting points for a wider personal dialogue, where viewers are invited to create their own narratives and interpret works with their own understanding and from their own experiences.

My recent work *The End* is a series of paintings based on my own photographs taken during house clearances. Familiar settings such as living rooms, bedrooms and bathrooms bear traces and glimpses of previous occupants who no longer reside there. Furnishings and commonplace objects sit quietly in empty domestic spaces, now obsolete and destined for landfill. Once the private dwelling of comfort, these spaces are now shells of a former home where wallpapers, carpets and dated furniture are a harbinger of the past.



The End Part IV
Oil on canvas, 45cm x 60cm x 2cm, 2020



The End Part XI
Oil on canvas, 60cm x 45cm x 2cm, 2021

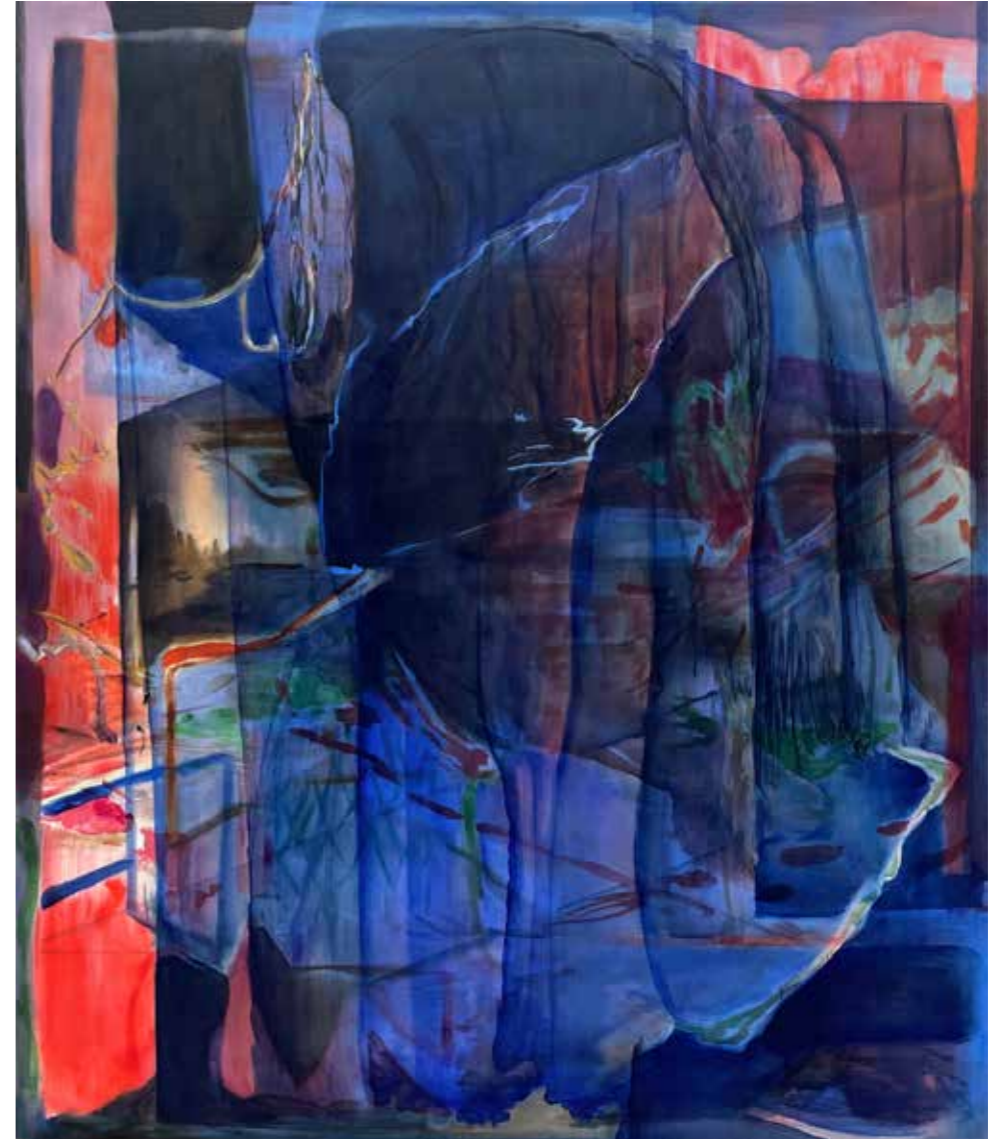


The End Part XVII - *Oil on canvas, 61cm x 46cm x 3cm, 2021*

Jan Valik

My work is tangentially connected to the idea of landscape as a psychological space where relationship between human perception and the landscape consists of complex ties but also of fine nuances. I am deeply interested in the edge of perception where abstract and figurative inform each other, evoking a spatial and pictorial ambiguity, a tension of simultaneous presence and absence. Throughout the painting process, I balance and play with gestural traces and atmospheres of various spaces, experienced and imagined, which merge with fragments of sensory memories.

The contradictory experience of spatial fluidity, an indoors-outdoors duality, stillness and shifting locations are ideas which fascinate me as I create. I want my work to invoke this and to engage the spectator in this simultaneous action, one in which paint can be seen both for its intrinsic properties and for its ability to imply fictive spaces. The dialogue oscillates back and forth between evocation and abstract traces that are open for interpretation. For me, painting becomes a way of existence, both as an activity and an object.



Over Stranger Days (Blue Cloak)
Oil on canvas, 160cm x 135cm, 2021



Fragile Veils I
Oil on canvas, 51cm x 66cm, 2021



It's About Time
Oil on linen, 160cm x 135cm, 2021



THE WINNER OF THE CBP PRIZE 2021: SUSAN ABSOLON

Leap Before you Look

Essay by Matthew Burrows

*'A solitude ten thousand fathoms deep
Sustains the bed on which we lie...'*

- W. H. Auden

In an age which worships speed in nanoseconds and a culture that expects immediate satisfaction, despite our acquiescence, the paintings of Susan Absolon may seem archaïse. They quietly tip from the corporal to the metaphysical without pretension or need for explanation. And, whilst at first glance appearing abstract in form, they seem to bear a stark familiarity with *'the gritty reality of everyday'*. Is it the earthy colours and subdued light (the whites absorb as much as they reflect)? Or, is it their granular tactility, which owes more to the natural surfaces of linen, cotton duck, wood or even stone, than the now familiar digital aura of screens? Whatever it is (and perhaps we need not know), it isn't a cloying nostalgia or need to be recognised as being like 'this' or 'that'.

Absolon's relationship with art started early. The daughter of a painter, she grew up 'surrounded by paintings and books' and formed her deeply personal relationship with art. Despite this she didn't arrive at art school until her late twenties having turned down previous offers of a place. Before studying art at Farnham and Central St Martins Absolon had read Spanish and South American literature at University College London and has a keen eye for the ambiguities of language. Her paintings speak with the same layered epistemology, and it takes a little time to allow the surfaces folded in veiled areas of paint to work on the mind's eye. These are paintings which cannot be rushed, their uncertainty must be lived with in a spirit of trust. 'It took a long time to craft a language that enables' she tells me. 'Enables' - I kept reflecting on that word as it stuck in my teeth like a pip. It suggests a call to knowledge, or opportunity. Or perhaps opportunity that 'enables' knowledge.

Absolon's paintings suggest a 'drawing' from 'something'. They have solidity and form, perhaps organic, pertaining to a geology of some kind. There's also time and

space, a before and after, in front and behind. To look at them requires the eye to excavate the surface, picking at what might or might not be something that can or cannot be recognised and read. Their ambiguity sits between landscape and the forms revealed from erosion. It is an ancient topography. An uncultivated landscape, where the slow-time of earth's natural cycles take centre stage with only the occasional suggestion of industrialisation.



Dugout, oil on canvas, 91cm x 91cm, 2021

If our familiar traditions of landscape painting had not existed, borne as they were out of industrial society, we might very well call Absolon's paintings landscapes. But is this to evade the challenge of 'looking' that Absolon's vision proposes? There's a weight to the forms and a need to live with and reflect on the presence of their space and surface with the discreet hints of human presence. The dynamic between these qualities is where medium and shape find a coalescence which gives the viewer confidence to explore. *Dugout*, at 91 x 91cm a large painting by the artist's usual standards, offers a space entangled in a web of drawn lines. The bottom two thirds of the painting feels earthbound and gives contrast to the dusky pinks at the top, held

in place by a strip of ochre. The web breaks the certainty of these familiar motifs linking the top and bottom of the painting. At times the pink and earthy pigments break into and dissect the authority of this web. It might suggest the stratification of geology or an internalised reality stitching itself together through our experience. Absolon explains that the title *Dugout* can refer to a two-chambered box for marijuana smoking, or to a command bunker or a shelter from enemy fire. These ambiguities enlarge our sense of reality as a complex interplay of advance and retreat, like the evolution of painting itself.

A liquid blue light fills the centre of a small painting titled *Inflatable*. It has a glow more akin to bioluminescence, a natural defence mechanism of marine creatures like phytoplankton, shrimp and squid. Its light seems to be emitted by its very nature rather than a source outside the painting. There is the hint of an external light in the background. It is faint, but acts to give prominence to the internal light of the blue shape forming within the painting's darkness.



Inflatable, oil on calico, 30.5cm x 40.5cm, 2021

The painting, says Absolon, 'is a motif of failure, a plump presence, weighed down by its buoyancy, with an inner light that fails to illuminate a dark place'. The title offers a playful ruse, a puzzle, not to be completed but to be pondered. If it is an 'inflatable' then it has seen better days, but is that my assumption that anything inflatable has to be driven by the 'sleek perfection' of industrialisation!?

Ten Thousand Fathoms is the title of another small painting. Landscape in format yet split in two by a divide of light and shade. At first glance it seems to be a repeated motif on the left and right. But careful inspection shows only a familial relationship. We are pattern seekers, we look for relationships of type and regularity. It is the basis of language and our ability to 'understand'. Breaks in these patterns draw our mind's attention, it may be an evolutionary quirk that allows us to quickly spot danger lurking undercover, but it's also the fulcrum around which the objective and subjective world pivots. *'The gritty reality of everyday'* is so often stained with the hopes of our internal lives, hopes that have a real world impact. Absolon keeps a copy of 'The List' in her studio; which documents the 40,000 plus deaths of refugees and migrants due to European political policies: "its succinct narratives of finality always shock me" she says. This is a central paradox to this and many of Absolon's paintings. At their heart is a need to see, to not turn away from reality, but towards it, whilst recognising the deep mystery of our internal narratives, stories we tell ourselves and others to give shape, form and colour to our imaginative universe. Absolon feels deeply about the horror of injustice, yet she does not tell you what to think, but patiently gives space for our minds to grasp its portent.



Ten Thousand Fathoms, oil on canvas, 30.5cm x 40.5cm, 2021

I was surprised to discover that Absolon does not draw - in the traditional sense - instead she finds creative sustenance in the opportunity that the first marks made on the painting's surface give. Indeed they are not drawn from anything 'seen' and

'observed' but from a deep poetic reverie and the urge to 'strike out'. They skirt close to being an image but resist the mundanity of recognition. Closure is not on the cards only a cyclical need to listen and bring forth into sight.

Ultimately any desire to see an illusion is just that, it's a trick of language, a deception that allows a 'reading' of signs and symbols. The word symbol derives from 'symbolon' which means 'to throw together'. It is always tempting to want a symbol to mean something specific, to have a definition which can neatly end any doubt about the mystery of things. Absolon repeatedly throws together, then patiently waits and listens.

Anyone familiar with the process of painting will know the discipline this waiting requires. There isn't an end to it, it can be and often is tinged with despair, frustration and be weighted with self doubt. It takes a certain kind of faith to live with this, to allow its poetic reality to reveal itself when it is right to do so. We can all experience this at times, repeating it time and again demands a kind of painterly wisdom.

'Leap Before you Look' is the title of W.H. Auden's poem from which the title is derived. Making that leap into the unknown is the alpha and omega of Absolon's paintings. It is a slow-time, one tinged with melancholy, a time that is *'A solitude ten thousand fathoms deep'*. We all see the way the world 'is' from who and where we are. Absolon shares this experience trusting that we too may draw out of this 'throwing together' something like our reality too.



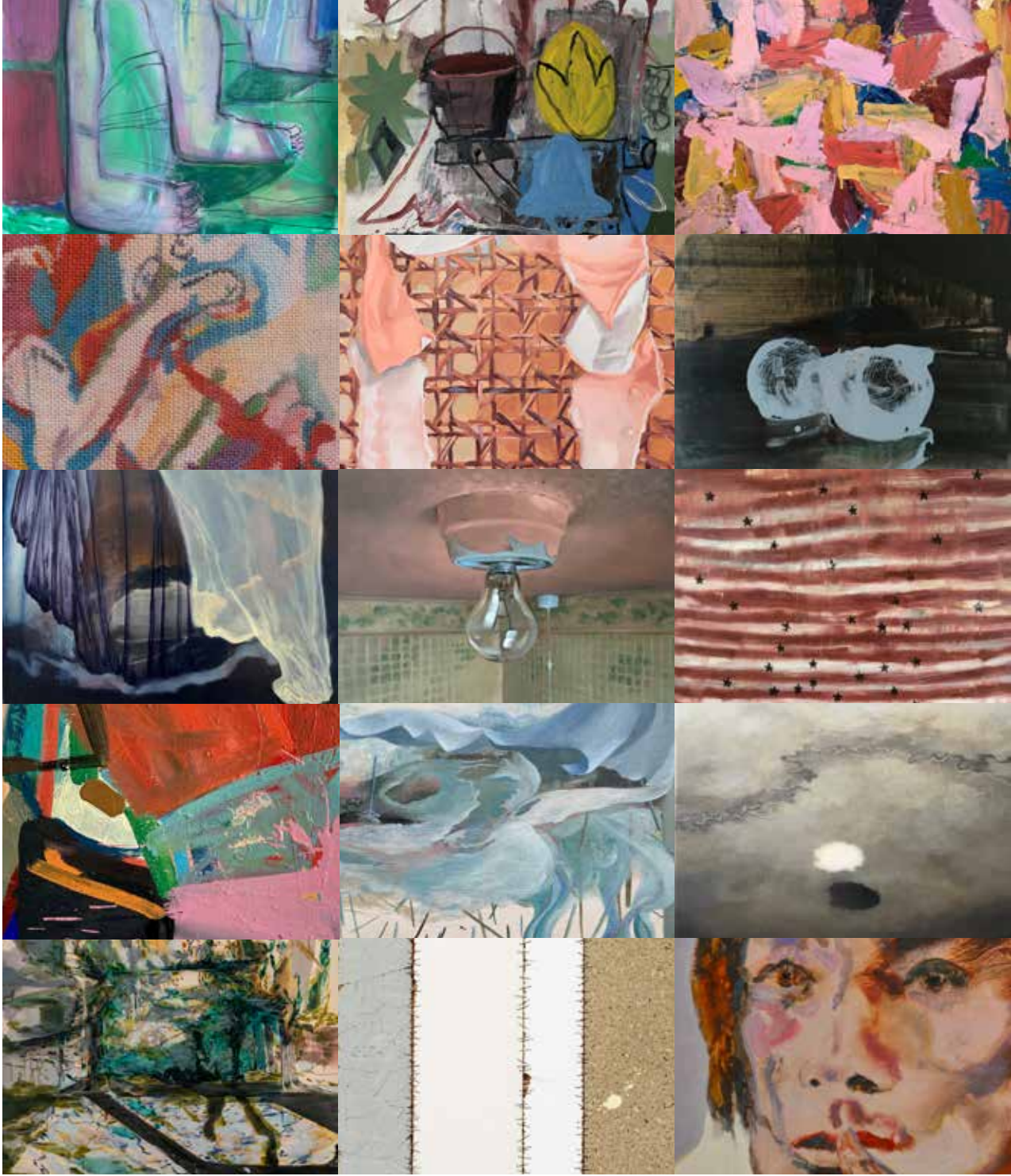
Matthew Burrows and Susan Absolon at the prize announcement, Huddersfield Gallery, November 2021.

Acknowledgements

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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'.

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