

SEBASTIAN, NEERAJ P., M.F.A. *Belonging and Distance*. (2022)
Directed by Jennifer H. Meanley. 51 pp.

Through painting, I explore relationships, both between two individuals and between individuals and the communities they are a part of. I consider what is received and what is given up in order to belong. I am interested in thresholds in life, such as marriage and death, and the rituals that accompany them. I like to stage my paintings in worlds that might belong to dreams: these are spaces where emotions are amplified and small gestures—a hand on a shoulder—become the subjects of these paintings; the spaces range from the domestic to fantastical. The couple-form—a man and a woman—recurs often; the man and woman take on different roles. There is a sense of melancholy in many of these paintings; sometimes the specter of death, in the form of a skeleton, intrudes upon the figures. Colors are used to suggest emotional and psychological states of the figures depicted in the work. The imagery in these paintings is often discovered in the process of making marks.

BELONGING AND DISTANCE

by

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A Thesis

Submitted to

the Faculty of The Graduate School at

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro

2022

Approved by

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DEDICATION

Dedicated to Eeshita Kapadiya. I am carried by your love.

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by Neeraj P. Sebastian has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee: Jennifer Meanley, Michael Ananian, Mariam Stephan and Dr. Emily Voelker for the many wonderfully productive conversations I had over the course of my time here.

I want to thank my family for supporting and believing in me as I took this circuitous and uncertain journey to get here.

I would like to thank Hedyeh Bondar who helped me install the show, and Rob Igoe for transporting the paintings to Greensboro Project Space and for many insightful conversations about painting.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Before coming to graduate school, I worked primarily from direct observation. The paintings I had made were a record of my presence, of looking intently, whether at a person or the environment in front of me. When I came to graduate school, the way I worked shifted from working from observation to working from my imagination. This allowed me to explore subject matter I hadn't before, as well as use color in more subjective ways, and let the images that had lingered within me take shape on the canvas.

Different thresholds in life are represented in the paintings—marriage, death—as well as the rituals that accompany them. A couple—a man and a woman—recur in a lot of the paintings: they take on different roles in different contexts. Relationships, whether between the man and the woman or between an individual and a broader community they belong to, are considered. What is received and what is given up in order to belong? The settings for these paintings range from domestic, intimate spaces to the outdoors—water, a forest, and rocky terrain. Some of these paintings are “dream-restagings,” with imagery inspired by memories, dreams, fears and myths.

When it comes to belonging to a community or a group, I wonder what it means for an individual. Does one have to change something about oneself in order to be accepted? What are the kinds of problems that members of the group might overlook or choose to ignore when it comes to accepting someone? I thought about young men who find themselves without a place in the world and behaving in self-destructive ways, without considering how their actions affect those closest to them.

I use the couple-form, the man and woman, to explore intimacy: love, sex, what it means to share a life with another person. Is there always an unbridgeable distance between two people who are completely intimate? Fear accompanies love—the fear of separation, death. There's a

reminder that life is transient: that there is an end to everything that can't be escaped. This knowledge makes those shared moments so precious.

Death takes on a more literal form as a skeleton that appears in several paintings. Death is also considered in the context of the private and the public. Those affected by death are alone in their grief. What makes individuals choose a course of action that leads to their own death? Do they consider the effect that it might have on those closest to them?

I am interested in myths: human beings have always wondered where we came from, what the lives of our forebears were like. There are myths that have common points of reference for people all over the world. Myths can point us to idyllic realms, to worlds in which there is no death and suffering, others point to the violent origins of life.

As a painter, I am interested in translating hard-to-describe emotions and feelings onto the canvas. I use figures as well as passages of more abstract shapes and forms to communicate these ideas. Color takes on more symbolic meanings in order to represent love, fear and sorrow in these paintings.

CHAPTER II: A PAINTER OF PEOPLE AND PLACES

I first used oil paint in Philadelphia, when I took an introductory class at Fleisher Art Memorial, a community art center. I had gone in without any expectations, but as soon as I began to mix colors on the palette and brush them onto the canvas, I realized that this is what had been missing from my life, I just hadn't realized it yet. My first teachers were graduates of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts; they come from a tradition of Western academic art training that is hundreds of years old. I worked from life; when I worked with a person in front of me, what brought me satisfaction was when I began to recognize a "likeness" between the sitter and the image being formed on my canvas. Complicated elements I was observing became simplified forms on the canvas—a few marks of the brush or palette knife—that just seemed to "work" in the context of the painting. There was a process, a way of working, that I came to trust.

I was in Bangalore, the city I grew up in, before coming to Greensboro. I knew I wanted to continue to paint people. But it proved difficult to get my friends to commit to sitting for me. Looking back to that period, I don't think I paid enough attention to how I was composing; I don't think I was comfortable nudging the color and form relationships too far away from what I was observing. I cared mostly about the heads of my sitters and made decisions based around where heads were placed and how they were lit.

I thought I should consider the spaces people occupied, starting with myself. A painting I made of my living room is one that I remember fondly. I spent a lot of time on that two-and-a-half by two-foot canvas. I look back at this piece with fondness, even though I recall the frustrations in the process. The houses in India often have metal bars in the window frames as a measure to prevent break-ins; I was painting these horizontal bars, and after I had spent several

sessions on the painting, I realized I had to repaint the whole passage to correct the angle. What I like is that the painting—the surface of the painting—has traces of this process: the paint had built up because of these adjustments and I remember being intrigued by the textures: the furrows and ridges in the surface of the canvas; I didn't intentionally pursue effects like this one in other paintings.

I made several paintings of the neighborhood and continued to paint friends and also people I didn't know very well. Whenever I was painting, I told myself that what I was doing was recording an experience of a time with a person or recording moments in a place that was changing rapidly—there were always new houses being constructed; plots of land that were overgrown with plants cleared very rapidly before the ground was dug into in order to set the foundation for a house. I was there to capture those moments, those overlooked spaces. I was inspired by the writing of Charles Hawthorne—some notes of what he said when he was teaching were collected in *Hawthorne on Painting*, and he said that we must “teach ourselves to see the beauty of the ugly, to see the beauty of the commonplace.” So I looked for subject matter whose appeal may not be immediately apparent—abandoned rusty vehicles, overgrown abandoned structures, for example.

I had no personal connection to the individuals I painted when I was learning how to paint. “Likeness” in these cases meant a superficial likeness. It was hard to break out of this way of working when I was painting people close to me—people I knew well, or others that I didn't but asked to sit for me—I looked for a surface-level likeness.

When I worked outdoors, I liked taking pictures that showed what I was looking at while painting as well the canvas I had worked on—that connection to the real, the observed, had been important to me.

Looking at the paintings I had made together, I began to feel that they weren't really capturing the sense of place in a way that I wanted to. The paintings felt a little conventional, "pretty," and didn't seem to communicate the breadth of feelings that I had for the area in which I was living before coming to graduate school, an area in Bangalore called Kodigehalli.

When I applied to graduate school, I had written that I hoped to explore narrative, perhaps without fully understanding what I meant by that word or what it encompassed. I realized that I wanted the paintings I made to be about more than just what was in front of me. I liked painting people; I wanted to tell stories—but the difficulty, for me, was using people I knew to stand in for something other than what they were; the portrait, the likeness, the relationship between the sitter and the image on the canvas, came in the way.

CHAPTER III: MEMORY AND FEELING

In my first semester I had made a painting of a group of people in a gathering of some kind. I worked from my imagination and images that had been with me came out onto the canvas. The painting was rather unfocussed; it was an outpouring of images and ideas—without too much connecting them. Among the figures was a couple, a man and a woman, whose bodies, together, formed a strong vertical dividing the composition. For the next painting, I wanted to take the lessons learned from this one and use them on a more focused idea. I wanted to work slightly smaller and I wanted two figures to be the subject of the painting. I had been thinking about Matisse: in his paintings, especially when he's working with the human form, the figure or figures are often set apart from the environment they're in in a strong, graphic way. The way he interlocked shapes and relationships between the forms in his work are the qualities that keep me returning to his pictures. I started the painting *Close, Step* (Figure 1) keeping in mind what drew me to Matisse.

This painting felt like a breakthrough for me. In the past I found that the drawings I made based on images I had in my mind were unsuccessful: they didn't resemble what I had imagined. When it came to inventing figures, I was worried about the anatomy of my figures being off or not being able to integrate light in a cohesive way. In *Close Step*, once I placed the figures on the bed, I began to model the forms, give them volume and weight—but also began to allow the marks I had made to suggest the imagery: marks I had made to indicate a cupboard suggested the form of a house; I decided to take the painting in that direction. Time and memory also became the subject of this painting. The woman's eyes are open; the man's are closed: there seems to be a distance between them: and this distance is something that became a significant part of the vocabulary of the paintings I made going forward.

Compared to the painting of the crowd, in which I spent a lot of time working out multiple color relationships, in *Close, Step*, I knew I wanted the brown skin of the couple to be the dominant color of that form—but I also knew I wanted areas of bright, saturated color, which pushed the browns towards orange in places. This led to some of the other decisions on the canvas, such as trying to “integrate” the light all across the painting. I gave the light a sense of direction because I thought this would unify some of the disparate elements of the composition.

I made a painting called *Two Trapped Giants* (Figure 2)—which I didn’t include in the show—which came into being through a set of transformations. Memories and more abstract ideas came together to form this painting. The theme of a failure to recognize a looming threat—“looming” is a word that had been on my mind; “constriction” another. I had a desire to capture the cityscape of Bangalore—boxy, brightly-colored buildings nestled together. I used to cycle to Eeshita’s house when we were dating. I remember seeing a cityscape across a dried lakebed and thinking that I should come back with my easel to make a painting. There were many lessons learned in this painting that I carried forward into my work. The paintings of the buildings aren’t of specific buildings, but they come from an accumulation of such sights—having lived in Bangalore, seen many such buildings, having noticed the boxy architecture and unusual choices, as well as the color: bright and saturated.

In making this painting, I learned how to allow both imagery inspired by memories and experiences as well as more abstract ideas to come together intuitively. The space depicted wasn’t just a translation of a memory, but something else I discovered on the canvas, managing to surprise myself in the process.

CHAPTER IV: FRONT-FACING

The world is what it is; men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it. – V. S. Naipaul, *A Bend in the River*

What does it mean to have a place in the world? Is it to be seen, to be recognized? What does a life without connections to other human beings look like? What decisions would we make if we knew there was no one watching? No judgment from family, friends, a larger community?

I get a sense that there are a lot of young men who find themselves without a place in the world. Young men who want to be seen, want to be recognized by their peers—recognized by young women—as men, as sexual beings—but find themselves in situations where this isn't a possibility. There might be expectations and obligations from family; passions might have been discouraged for the sake of being pragmatic. Pressure builds up; there is a sense that life will pass by them; anger turns inward. There is a sense that there isn't much place for men like that in the modern world—that lives have to be fit into predefined boxes or trajectories and there isn't space for negotiation and there is little possibility of returning to the fold if one embarks on his own path. Now whether this is true or not is another conversation—this might be some kind of perceived reality in which these individuals feel trapped. And this can be their own fault—having assumed that there is a boundary or border without having attempted to press against it. These young men might take off on a course of action that leads to self-destruction. I was interested in how the death of a young man would affect those around him. These ideas were on my mind when I made *Death of a Mimic-Man* (Figure 3). The idea of thresholds, between the public and the private, between life and death, are considered in this painting. After the funeral, family and friends of the dead young man will be alone in their grief.

At one point, the painting that became *A Hand to Part Skin* (Figure 4) was what I thought of as a “dream-restaging” of the death of the Japanese writer Yukio Mishima, who committed ritual suicide (seppuku) in 1970. He was one of the most celebrated writers in Japan at the time; a recurring theme in his work is the loss of direction in Japanese society after the war: he was against westernization. He had staged seppuku in a film; in one of his last novels the main character dies in this manner. He had planned his death for over a year. I suppose what I was thinking about was the public, the audience; if he wasn’t one of the most well-known literary figures in Japan, would he have done it?

While making *Coronation of a Pale Man* (Figure 5), I was considering the relationship between an individual and the community they belong to as well. What is willfully overlooked in order for one to be or feel accepted? This painting grew out of drawings I made in the beginning of my second year in Drawing Marathon. I started with the image of a sickly emaciated king and a group of people around him who don’t recognize or choose not to recognize his condition. When I started on the canvas, the images—the thin king, the coronation—were literal: there was a simple crown on his head that brought to mind the crowns in paintings by Max Beckmann or Philip Guston. This painting or the image that I had made didn’t quite hold me the way the image of the couple on the bed in *Close, Step* did. I knew I wanted to work back into it and so I did in the spring semester, starting with a semi-opaque glaze on the two sides of the canvas—the darker side on the left and the brighter interior on the right. And I pulled the forms out from the surface; this time, keeping the marks looser and being less literal.

The painting *A Certain Way on a Certain Day* (Figure 6) has a woman in the middle of the composition in a golden-yellow sari: a bride surrounded by people, with a bald man holding a garland in the foreground. This painting started out as something dramatically different—though

some elements, compositional and in terms of ideas—carried through the whole process. Having made the painting of the couple on the bed, I wanted to return to a painting of a group of people. I was already beginning to think about belonging to a group and what it might be like to be cast out or expelled. The resulting painting felt too literal—a man was being pushed out of an interior space. Several months passed; I wanted to start another composition on top of this one—but I thought there was something interesting happening with the figures. Removed from the big “idea” I had, I began to make moves on the canvas, working with what I already had. I combined the two figures—the man being pushed out and the man doing the pushing—and allowed the two women who were on the sofa in the middle of the composition to take up more space. I became intrigued by the expression one of the women had, her look of ambivalence. I began to wonder what she was ambivalent about. I continued working on the painting without really knowing where it was heading. I worked to reinforce the rhythms that began to emerge on the canvas, for example, the shapes of the characters’ arms. Decisions led to other decisions—but there was still a lack of clarity when it came to what the picture was “about.” When the woman’s situation—that she was an ambivalent bride—became clear to me, I made decisions on the canvas to push the painting in that direction. A character closer to the viewer holds two dolls in her arms; this is a variation on a game which was in the earlier iteration of the painting—the dolls invite a comparison with the other characters in the room, perhaps most directly with the bride and her situation. In this painting, we are at another threshold: marriage. Again, there is a consideration of the public-facing ritual that signals a transformation in a relationship between two individuals. A wedding is a public acknowledgment of two individuals’ relationship.

This painting was transformed from the initial conception I had. It was discovered in the making, in marks suggesting forms that I developed, discovered along the way. It was a

journey—full of frustrations but also possibilities—and I ended up far away from where I thought I was going. These customs, rites and rituals are more than traditions which are mindlessly repeated and propagated; they are a connection to a past that we don't have a clear view or memories of.

CHAPTER V: BY LAMPLIGHT

I had been making drawings and paintings of a man and woman in different contexts. I thought of these smaller canvases as ones in which I might explore ideas at a smaller scale and more quickly than the larger paintings. The humor involved in sex—accidental elbowing, clothes getting stuck when undressing—is sometimes elided in popular representations of sex. I thought the humor might work as a counterpoint to some of the sentimental imagery and make the couple a little more relatable: in some of the other paintings, the settings can be otherworldly and the mood more somber. That's how the painting *Twist Off* (Figure 7) came into being—I thought the image of the bra stuck on the woman's shirt as the man took it off was funny.

I had written off *Twist Off*—the earlier iteration—as not being successful: there was something about the composition, with the man squeezed off to the right side of the composition, that felt awkward to me; but there were things in that painting I was drawn to: in particular, the intervals between some of the forms, such as the figures' legs. I wanted to make another painting of a similar scene—man and woman in the bedroom, undressing—but focus more consciously on the shape, and try to hold on to the flatter, more simplified forms that I had a habit of losing by modeling too much. This is how *Slowly* (Figure 8) came together. This painting felt like another breakthrough for me, because the environment—the bedroom—and the figures themselves felt of equal importance or were integrated in a way that I thought was particularly effective: this painting felt like it held a world in a way that I had found it difficult to do previously. By this I mean that the painting felt contained: it was about this moment between these two figures. A world might exist beyond the bedroom they are in, but I wanted to keep the viewer within that intimate space.

Pants Off (Figure 9) and *Unclasping* (Figure 10) continue to engage with these concerns—the forms the two bodies make coming together, undressing. *To Kiss and to Touch* (Figure 11) and *Touch-Traces* (Figure 12) are of a similar vein but perhaps a little more direct in the representation of sex.

By Lamplight (Figure 13) is a painting in which I return to the motif of the man and woman in the bedroom. In this painting, the focus is on the woman: the man is turned away from the viewer, his head partially obscured by the lamp. The woman appears to be tucking him in. There are bright, saturated colors in this painting—light, without an apparent source, like in *Death of a Mimic-Man*, illuminates parts of the floor below the bed. Light from the lamp that should be striking the woman doesn't illuminate her. The paintings I am making now feel less beholden to the laws of the “real world”—there are moments and feelings that are recognizable, but the physical laws of the real world don't matter as much to me because I think of the world in which these paintings are set as different but adjacent to our own.

In *A Public Display of Affection* (Figure 14), the couple is outdoors, on a bench. There are no other people, just the two of them. The woman's hand is on the man's head, which is resting on her lap; he reaches up towards her face.

CHAPTER VI: WATER WAITS

In December, 2021, I returned to India. Eeshita and I went to Goa for a few days. I don't know how to swim; Eeshita tried to teach me to float with a lot of patience and care; she supported me with her arms, keeping me at the surface. When I came back to Greensboro, I made a small painting inspired by those memories, *Head Above the Water* (Figure 15). This led to a few more paintings in which water formed a setting for the couple. The couple takes on different roles: in some, the psychological distance between them is amplified.

The atmosphere in these paintings is different from the memories that inspired them: in *Water Waits* (Figure 16), for example, it is night: the water is full of deep saturated hues of blue, the tonal range of values in the painting is narrow. A man and woman are in the water; the man holds a fish; there is a skeleton in the distance. The small paintings *We Are Distanced* (Figure 17), *Two Towards You* (Figure 18) and *Back to Me, a New Trajectory* (Figure 19) are also explorations of the theme of the man and woman in the water.

I had explored the idea and composition for the painting *Come into the Water* (Figure 20) in drawings: a woman in the water and a man behind her, stepping in. I had been thinking about Titian's painting *Diana and Acteon* and also the story—a man stumbling into a place where he isn't wanted, which is something I think most men have experienced—as a starting point for a painting. I wanted to distill it to one man and one woman; then I thought that I didn't want that element of intrusion or voyeurism: I wanted something a little more tender: the woman is aware of the man in the water. But then when I thought about the image in my mind—naked woman and man, water, forest—something about it felt cliched and I stopped myself from going further, but after I made the series of water paintings in the spring semester, I decided to return to the subject and *Come into the Water* came together quickly.

Come into the Water came after *Water Waits*; in the latter painting, the fact that there was not much for me to hold on to in terms of compositional strategies—the openness of the water, in which there weren't clear shapes for me to work with—made me uncomfortable; I was certainly tempted to introduce more shapes in the water, but instead of forcing certain compositional strategies onto the painting, I decided to move onto a different canvas. In this painting I tried to move across the surface of the canvas quickly. I put down the image that I had carried with me for some time. The woman is bending down, as if retrieving something from the water.

In October, 2021, I went to the New Bedford Whaling Museum to see the paintings of Albert Pinkham Ryder. The show, *A Wild Note of Longing: Albert Pinkham Ryder and a Century of American Art*, brought together several of his paintings as well as work by artists who had been influenced by him. The sense of dynamism in the water in his paintings informed some of my decisions in painting water.

I think at this point, I had become more confident about making big marks with my brush and covering the surface of a large canvas in the same session, rather than fussing around focusing on a single section, which I had a habit of doing previously. In this painting, I used formal strategies that are different from *Water Waits*: the forms of the trees echo some of the forms of the figures' limbs. The idyllic imagery was something that I was worried about in my first attempt. I was afraid that the world embodied in the painting felt disconnected from the realities of everyday life—the imagery, I thought, might be too close to the idylls made by nineteenth century neoclassical painters, which isn't a comparison I wanted to invite. But then I thought that I should get out of my own way, and make the painting, see what happens, and not worry about what it might look like or not.

CHAPTER VII: INTRUSION AND TRANSFORMATION

The skeleton, the specter of death, has been a recurring image in my paintings. The first appearance of the skeleton was in *Death, Mask* (Figure 21). I had been considering the metaphorical possibilities of the mask. In the case of *Coronation of a Pale Man*, I had been thinking about a sense of sickness or weakness that is ignored by others because conformity is more important than wellbeing; in the case of *Death, Mask*, I had been thinking about an individual not recognizing a threat that should be obvious. Why do we choose to do things that hurts us or hurts others? Why do we ignore warnings? Perhaps the skeleton represents an intrusion or stands for mortality: it takes on different meanings in different paintings, like the couple themselves. The skeleton has intruded upon the domestic space in *We Are Turned Away* (Figure 22).

In the past two years, color has taken on a subjective role in translating experiences and feelings. When I was working from observation, I began to become frustrated by the fact that the paintings I had made didn't feel like they were communicating what I was feeling. When I tried to "match" the color of the sky on a sunny day, I don't think the resulting painting was able to communicate the feeling of being outdoors, the sun on my face.

In *Close, Step*, I wanted the shape the couple's bodies to form to be the primary compositional element. I started by placing them in the space in a more graphic way, in the manner of Matisse. But when I began to model the forms to give them more volume, I thought I could use light and more saturated colors to achieve that. For the brown bodies, I thought orange would work well and used saturated orange in many places in the painting. The relationship between brown skin and saturated orange was something that has continued through a lot of the paintings.

Some of the color choices were also informed by practicality and accidents. I had bought a tube with a pigment, perylene red, that I later found out wasn't as lightfast (which is a measure of how well the pigments hold up over time) as I would like. I thought I would use this pigment to establish a tone into which I could work. I covered a five foot square canvas with this red and as I started working on this painting, I realized that the atmosphere was quite different from the paintings I had made previously. It was ominous and somewhat suffocating. I wanted to explore this further in other paintings—establishing a dominant color and allowing that to dictate the mood. Winsor & Newton makes a color they call “Bright Red” which contains the pigment pyrrole red; it costs the same amount as the earth tones (saturated colors, such as the cadmiums, tend to be more expensive). So when I used some of this pigment, I was able to create a bright field of red without being too concerned about the cost of the material. The bright red color brought intensity and hostility to the world of the painting that became *The Gatherer of Seeds and Memories*. I had also played around with nighttime imagery—working with cooler, darker colors: these created a different emotional pitch than the harsh bright reds. In a painting like *Water Waits*, I worked quickly, covering the surface of the canvas with various shades of blue. Unlike *Head Above the Water*, in this painting, I considered water at night, and worked within a narrower range of values to convey this.

In *By Lamplight*, I try to manage the relationship between multiple saturated colors. The blue outside the windows, the orange below the bed, that surround the couple on the bed. The woman's yellow nightdress forms a bright shape in the middle of the composition. The woman herself is almost in shadow, her head silhouetted against the blue window and green wall behind her. Having to manage the relationship between multiple colors felt different than some of the earlier paintings in which one color dominated the composition and established a mood.

CHAPTER VIII: DREAM-RESTAGINGS

In the summer after my first year, I thought I would make paintings of myths. Primal stories that exist in our consciousnesses, across cultures. The story of the flood is one example. A flood that covers the whole world. A survivor of the flood who has to then rebuild civilization. Water—destructive, cleansing. Our grand myths: stories of life, death, regeneration. I wanted to take some of these stories and make them personal, connected to my life—use these myths as a point of departure for other ideas that I am interested in.

Titian did this in his paintings inspired by Ovid's *Metamorphoses*—I had a chance to see these paintings in Boston. More recently, in Kyle Staver's work. I think I wanted to use myths as a loose framework into which I could stage my own stories. When we reflect upon our lives, events and encounters that might seem like everyday occurrences take on a grander significance because of what they meant to us—and this is the quality that I wanted to bring to these pictures. I wanted to make them feel not of this world.

The painting in which I had used Mishima's last moments as a starting point was one I wasn't happy with. It felt both too connected to the historical event and at the same time, not enough so. In my mind, it was a "dream-restaging," which to me meant that there were elements from his death, but also questions about the event and story that had been on my mind. Again, curious about the relationship between the individual and the public: I asked myself: Would he have killed himself in such a dramatic way if there was no audience? The painting I had made over the summer felt awkward: I wanted to open it up and try new approaches. I knew I wanted one man to be the focus; I wanted to keep the feeling of ritual with a group of people present. I placed the man in a pit, with other figures above him. I used my hands to push around paint; some of those marks led to the forest-imagery in this painting. This painting, with the two figures

in bright red, also took on a fairy-tale imagery. The specter of death, the skeleton, lurks over the group, silhouetted against something bright.

Searching for creation myths—late-night Wikipedia browsing led me to stories that involved two brothers, one of whom was a giant and had to be killed in order to bring life to a barren world. I've also been inspired by science-fiction stories—*Dune*, for example, in which transformation and terraforming are major parts of the story—and I thought of making a painting in which two characters had arrived on a lifeless hostile world. I had been thinking about shipwrecks and the story of the flood—perhaps these characters were flood survivors who had to embark on the business of rebuilding civilization or bringing life to the barren place that they had come to. I thought I might combine science-fiction elements with mythological elements: instead of a ship, it was a crashed spaceship that these two figures came from, climbing out from a pit in which the spaceship had crashed. There was a churning quality to the pit that I thought was interesting; this was transformed into viscera when I reworked the painting and transformed it into *Gatherer of Seeds and Memories*.

In Philadelphia, at the Barnes Foundation, I saw a show called *Soutine / De Kooning: Conversations in Paint*. The small Soutine paintings really packed a punch: they were dense, visceral pictures. When I thought about the show several months later—and thinking about the pairing of Soutine's work with De Kooning's made this more apparent—that the power of these paintings came from how the paint itself was pushed across the canvas: heavy, impasto mark-making added pressure around the forms—this was true in the work of both of these painters. I don't think I had really thought about the quality of the marks in my painting very much: I had been thinking about the color relationships and put the paint down without thinking too much about individual marks. I realized at some point that the palette knife would make readdressing

passages a little difficult because the surface or mark would be flat—marks made with the brush gave me texture that I liked and tried to be conscious of in the future. (For example, the scumbled paint in *Two Trapped Giants* was something I thought worked really well in capturing a quality of light that an opaque passage may not have had.) I made a small painting *Unsurveyed Emergence* (Figure 23) in which I tried to emphasize the connection between the mark-making and the image. I was thinking about excavation, unearthing, violence—and I wanted the painting to embody those qualities. (*Excavation* is also the title of a 1950 painting by De Kooning.) I thought that that painting came together well and wanted to make a larger painting with similar qualities. Instead of starting on a new canvas, I went back to the painting of the figures emerging from the pit and decided to “excavate” a new image from it. The canvas that became *Gatherer of Seeds and Memories* (Figure 24) perhaps also allegorizes the process of excavation. The insides of the disemboweled man on the canvas are remnants of the earlier composition. That being said, this really wasn’t an “excavation” because the viscera of the man are actually what’s left of the previous iteration—everything else has been covered up and repainted.

In *Gatherer of Seeds and Memories*, there’s a woman standing over the man, whose eyes are open, tongue out, holding a flower towards him. At first, when I made this painting, I thought the impulse that brought out some of the imagery in this painting—the violence—is very different from the one that drove paintings that were more intimate—but having installed the paintings at the Greensboro Project Space, I recognized shared elements across the pieces: there is a tenderness with which the woman is approaching the disemboweled man—her gesture, her hand reaching towards his head, is of the same vein as the gentleness with which the woman in *By Lamplight* is tucking the man in. The woman in *A Hand to Part Skin With* also has her hand on the shoulder of the man in the pit. Her expression isn’t clear—is she trying to stop him and

There are echoed moments across the paintings—gestures, clothing, faces that recur in the paintings suggest that these might be the same characters in different contexts. There were stories here—stories that reflected stages in life: love, death. There were heightened emotions. There was violence, there was fear. I don't think I recognized these connections as I worked.

CHAPTER IX: CONCLUSION

On the walls of Greensboro Project Space my paintings had a different presence than they did when they were in my crowded studio. Each painting was carefully lit and had enough space around it to be considered on its own. Each of the four galleries had a distinct feeling. The reception, which my friends and family attended, was celebratory. This was a culmination of two years of hard work. I couldn't have anticipated my transformation as a painter. In the past, I think I may have been afraid of the images within me. I'm not anymore. The paintings, hung together in space, felt as if they formed a cohesive body of work. These paintings were the traces of my hand at work, a record of the choices I made over time. Some paintings had more detailed modeling on the forms, some were much looser, more open and suggestive.

Our forebears had the impulse to leave marks on the inside of the walls of caves. And those marks they made—those traces that have remained over millennia—speak to us still. The impulse to make marks, to create, will endure. What the future holds is uncertain. I couldn't have imagined making such a shift, such a break, from a path that had seemed so clear to me—I couldn't have imagined being in graduate school for art, making the kinds of paintings I am now. I let these images come out of me. I don't usually know how a painting might develop.

A lot of my paintings have images buried beneath them. There are traces of these other iterations: traces of forms onto which other forms were placed. Those marks informed the image that arose above it. The interactions between layers, accidental marks—these all drive the imagery in my paintings in ways that I'm not conscious of. As much as this document serves as a record of some of my thoughts and considerations as I worked and made paintings, it also entails what I'm not yet aware of. So many decisions are made purely because they served a structural purpose in the moment. Why did you place an object of this color over here? one might ask, and

often, the answer is that that choice would add to the tension or balance visual elements in the composition. I became aware of “meaning” and other ideas much later, after I had stopped working. Transforming, discovering, excavating images from the dense accumulation of marks is what causes me frustration and also brings me joy. I can’t imagine my life without painting.

Something happens on the canvas that I can’t anticipate—the connections my mind makes when I look at the marks on the surfaces surprises me. I don’t know what kinds of images I’ll make in the future, but I’m excited by what’s to come.

EPILOGUE

My friends had come to Greensboro for my thesis exhibition. On Sunday, I spent some time alone in the gallery taking photos of the paintings. These were my paintings; I had made them. I couldn't have imagined this moment a few years ago, or even when I started the program. I remember feeling so out of place and out of my depth in the first semester. I walked through the galleries of Greensboro Project Space, spending time with each painting. They felt so different on the gallery walls.

Then it was time to take them down. My friends came to the gallery and helped me remove the screws from the walls and patch the holes and paint. The paintings came to my apartment and are now stacked against the walls: two years of work. My friends left on Sunday. I was alone in my apartment with my paintings and the familiar smell of linseed oil.

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APPENDIX A: CATALOG OF IMAGES

- Figure 1. *Close, Step*, oil on canvas, 50 x 63 5/8 in., 2021-22
- Figure 2. *Two Trapped Giants*, oil on canvas, 55 x 70 in.
- Figure 3. *Death of a Mimic-Man*, oil on canvas, 60 x 80 in., 2021-22
- Figure 4. *A Hand to Part Skin With*, oil on canvas, 58 x 78 in., 2021-22
- Figure 5. *Coronation of a Pale Man*, oil on canvas, 55 x 70 in., 2021-22
- Figure 6. *A Certain Way on a Certain Day*, oil on canvas, 72 x 60 in., 2021-22
- Figure 7. *Twist Off*, oil on canvas, 42 1/2 x 28 7/8 in., 2021-22
- Figure 8. *Slowly*, oil on canvas, 46 x 36 in., 2021-22
- Figure 9. *Pants Off*, oil on canvas, 13 x 19 1/8 in.
- Figure 10. *Unclasping*, oil on canvas, 16 1/2 x 20 1/8 in., 2021-22
- Figure 11. *To Kiss and to Touch*, oil on canvas mounted to wood, 11 x 14 in., 2020-22
- Figure 12. *Touch-Traces*, oil on canvas, 46 x 36 in. 2021-22
- Figure 13. *By Lamplight*, oil on canvas, 55 x 70 in., 2021-22
- Figure 14. *A Public Display of Affection*, oil on canvas 17 x 13 in., 2022
- Figure 15. *Head Above the Water*, oil on canvas, 11 x 14 in., 2022
- Figure 16. *Water Waits*, oil on canvas, 70 x 60 in., 2022
- Figure 17. *We Are Distanced*, oil on canvas, 12 x 11 in., 2022
- Figure 18. *Two Towards You*, oil on canvas, 16 x 12 in.
- Figure 19. *Back to Me, a New Trajectory*, oil on canvas, 16 x 12 in.
- Figure 20. *Come into the Water*, oil on canvas, 63 5/8 x 50 in., 2021-22
- Figure 21. *Death, Mask*, oil on canvas, 11 x 14 in., 2021
- Figure 22. *We Are Turned Away*, oil on canvas, 16 1/2 x 20 1/8 in., 2020-22

Figure 23. *Unsurveyed Emergence*, oil on canvas, 12 x 16 in., 2022

Figure 24. *Gatherer of Seeds and Memories*, oil on canvas, 60 x 60 in., 2020-22



Figure 1. *Close, Step*, oil on canvas, 50 x 63 5/8 in., 2021-22



Figure 2. *Two Trapped Giants*, oil on canvas, 55 x 70 in.



Figure 3. *Death of a Mimic-Man*, oil on canvas, 60 x 80 in., 2021-22



Figure 4. *A Hand to Part Skin With*, oil on canvas, 58 x 78 in., 2021-22



Figure 5. *Coronation of a Pale Man*, oil on canvas, 55 x 70 in., 2021-22

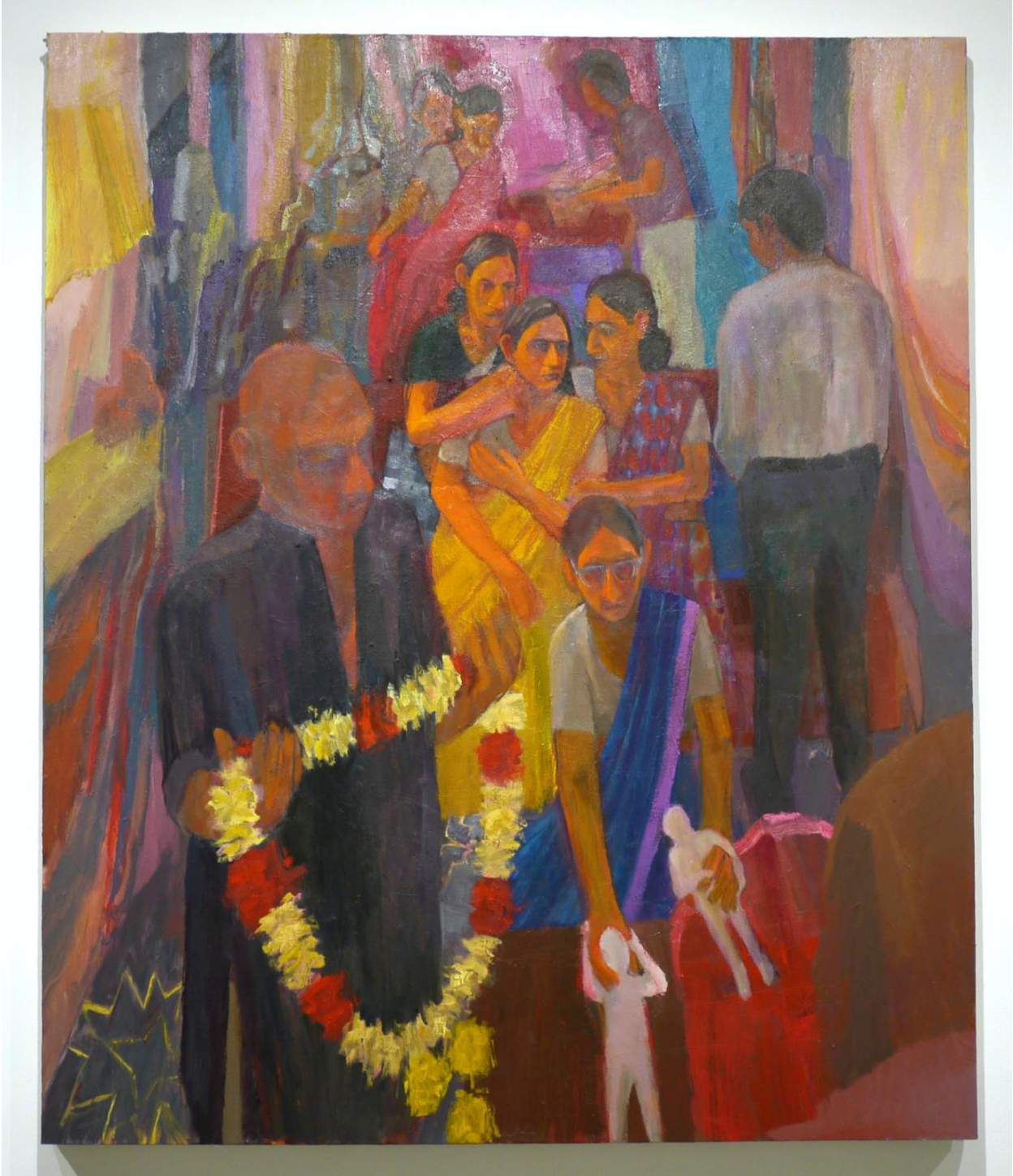


Figure 6. *A Certain Way on a Certain Day*, oil on canvas, 72 x 60 in., 2021-22



Figure 7. *Twist Off*, oil on canvas, 42 ½ x 28 ⅞ in., 2021-22



Figure 8. *Slowly*, oil on canvas, 46 x 36 in., 2021-22

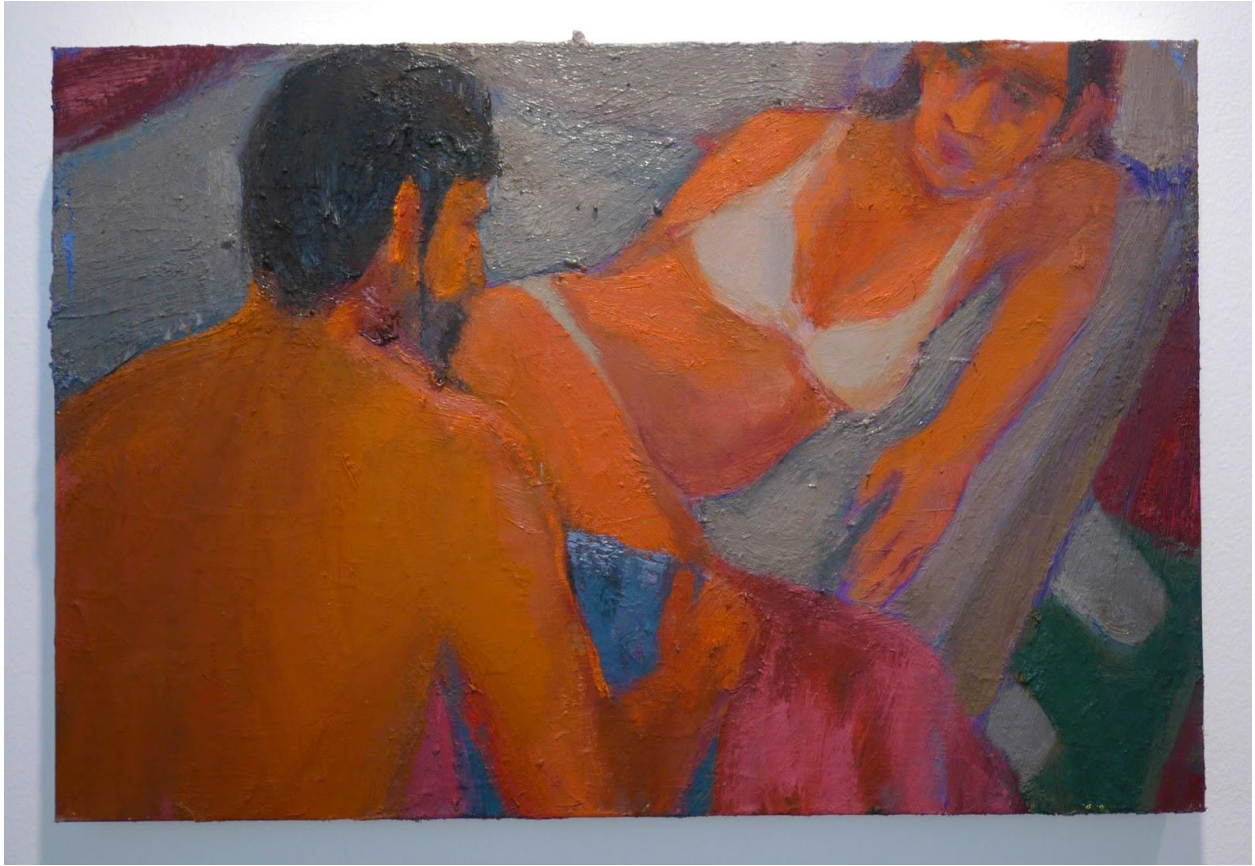


Figure 9. *Pants Off*, oil on canvas, 13 x 19 1/8 in.



Figure 10. *Unclasping*, oil on canvas, 16 ½ x 20 ⅛ in., 2021-22

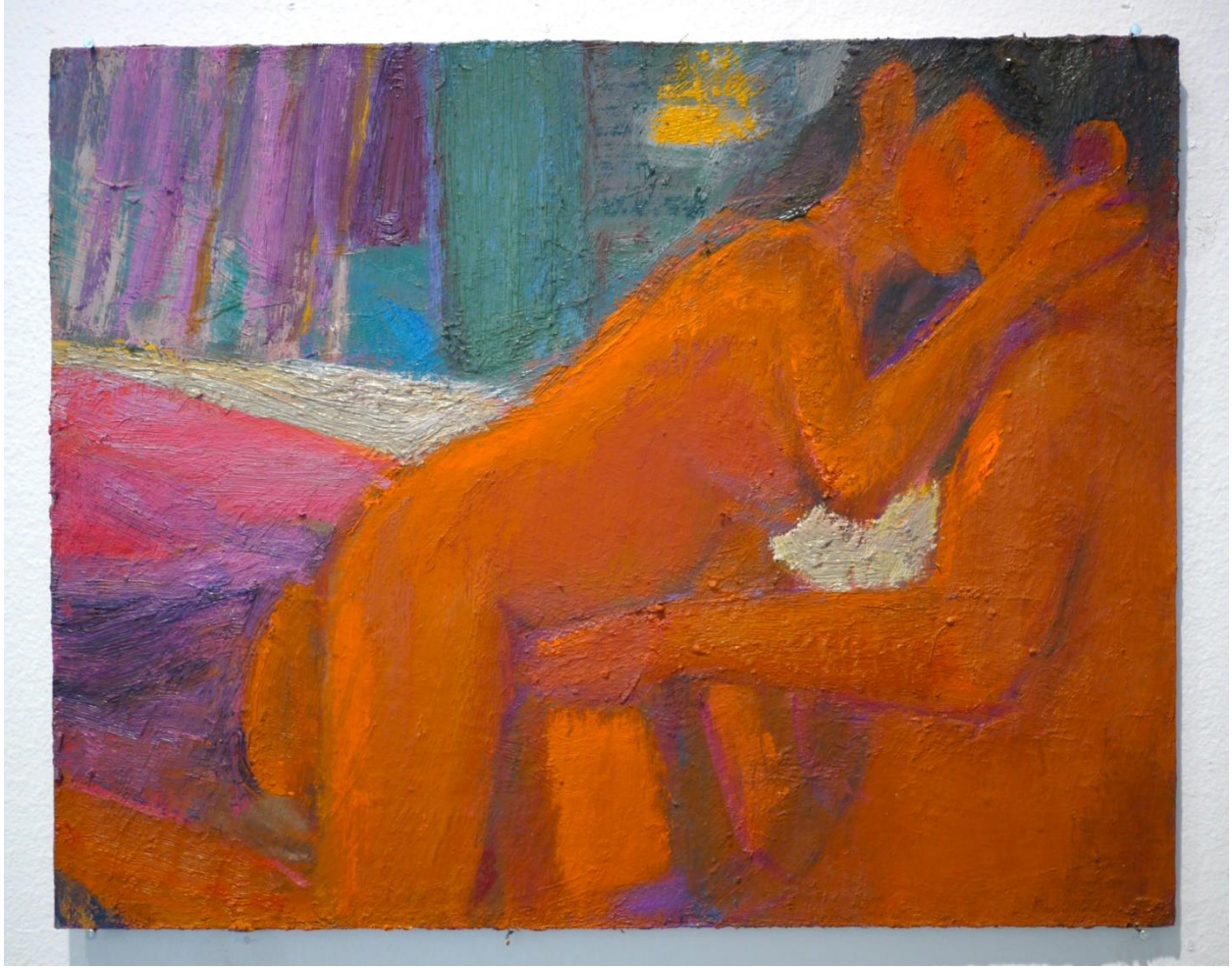


Figure 11. *To Kiss and to Touch*, oil on canvas mounted to wood, 11 x 14 in., 2020-22

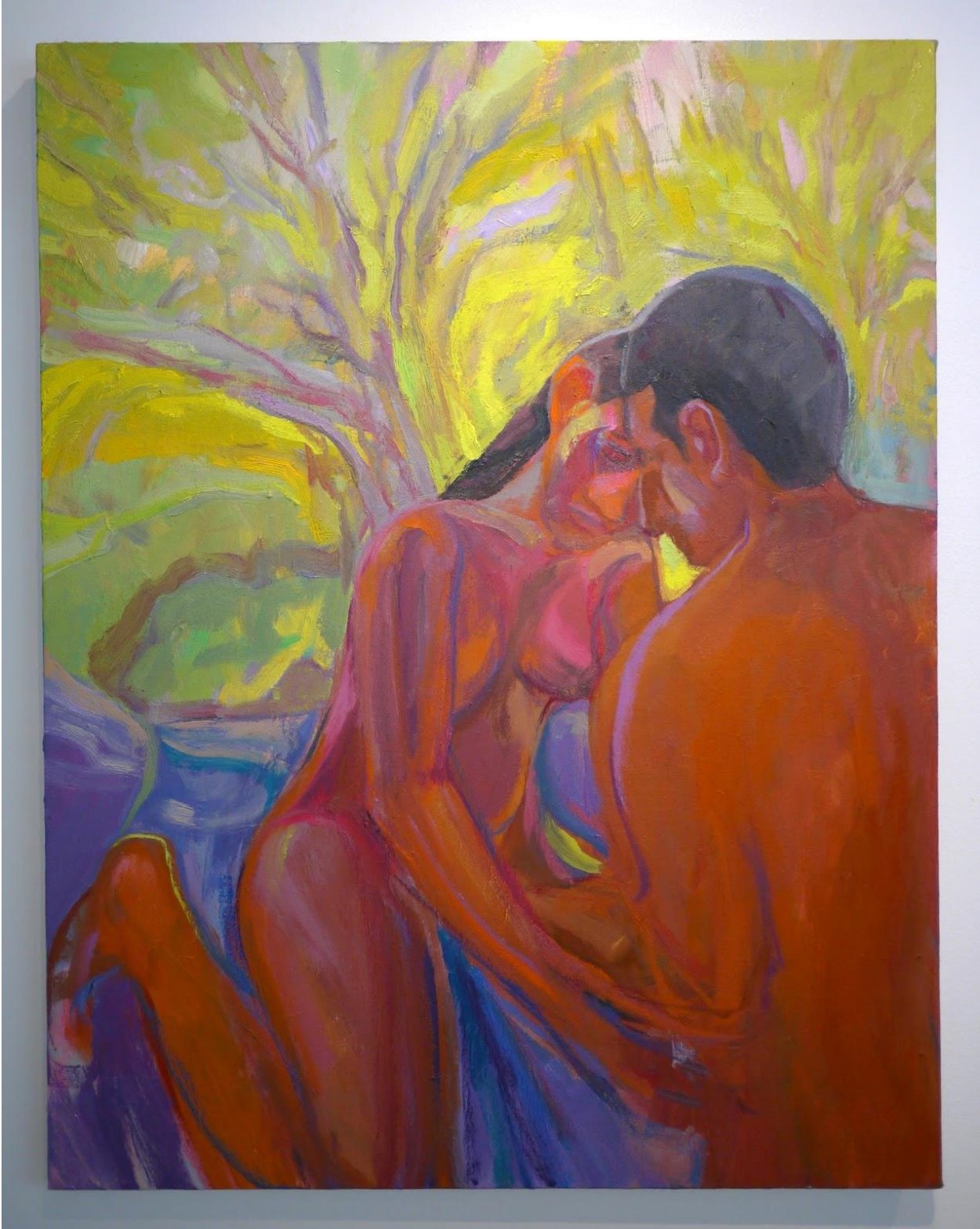


Figure 12. *Touch-Traces*, oil on canvas, 46 x 36 in. 2021-22



Figure 13. *By Lamplight*, oil on canvas, 55 x 70 in., 2021-22



Figure 14. *A Public Display of Affection*, oil on canvas 17 x 13 in., 2022

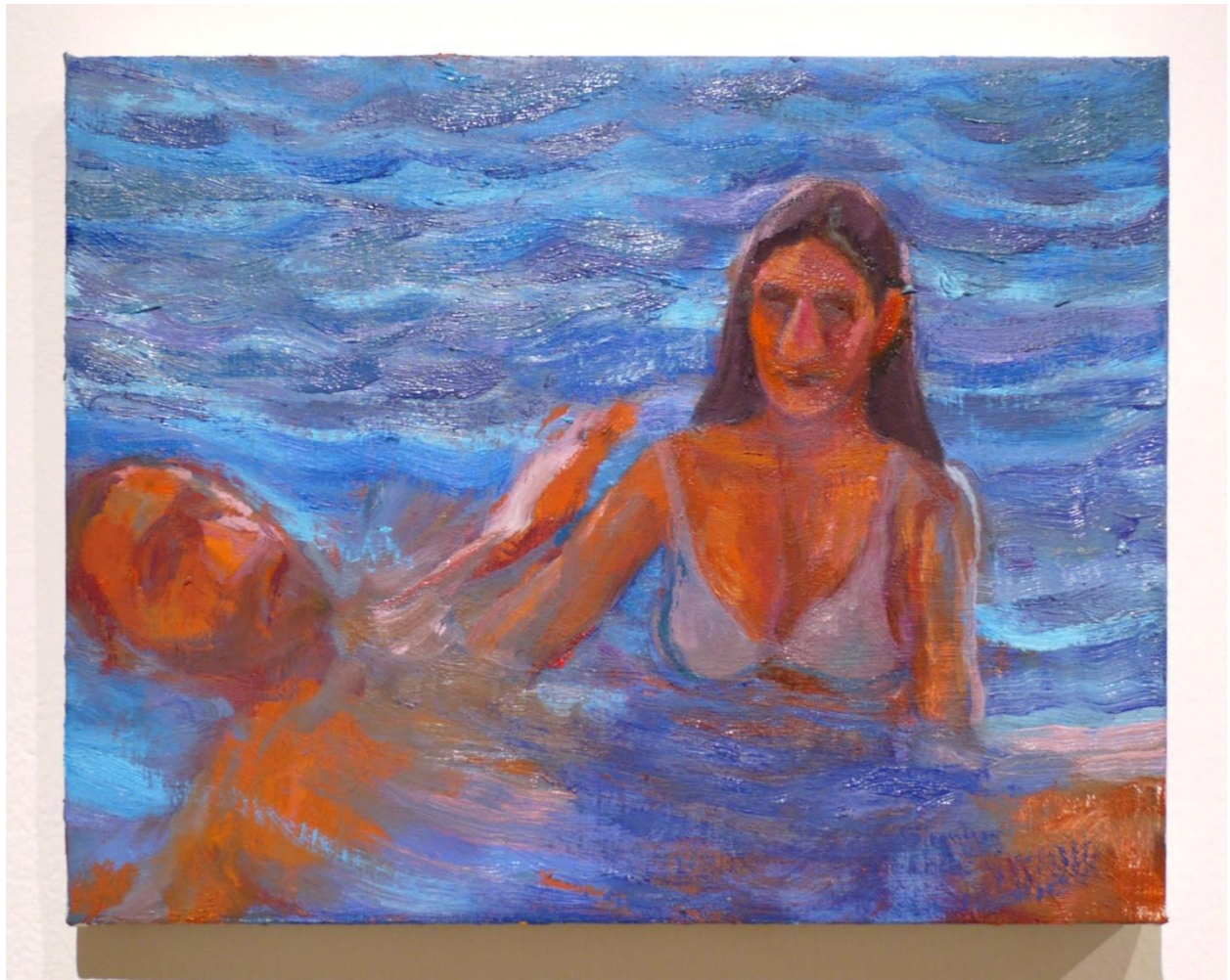


Figure 15. *Head Above the Water*, oil on canvas, 11 x 14 in., 2022



Figure 16. *Water Waits*, oil on canvas, 70 x 60 in., 2022



Figure 17. *We Are Distanced*, oil on canvas, 12 x 11 in., 2022

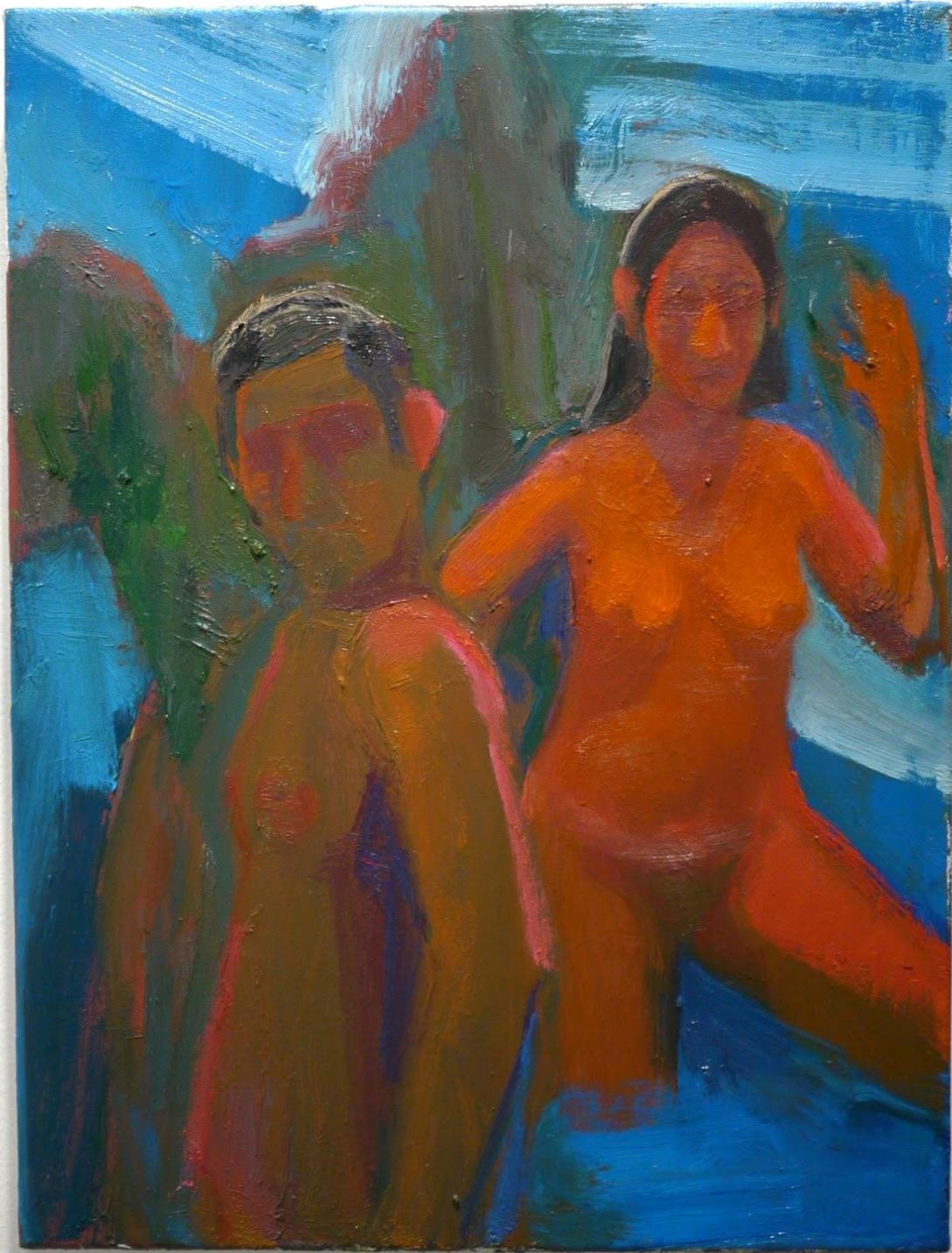


Figure 18. *Two Towards You*, oil on canvas, 16 x 12 in.



Figure 19. *Back to Me, a New Trajectory*, oil on canvas, 16 x 12 in.

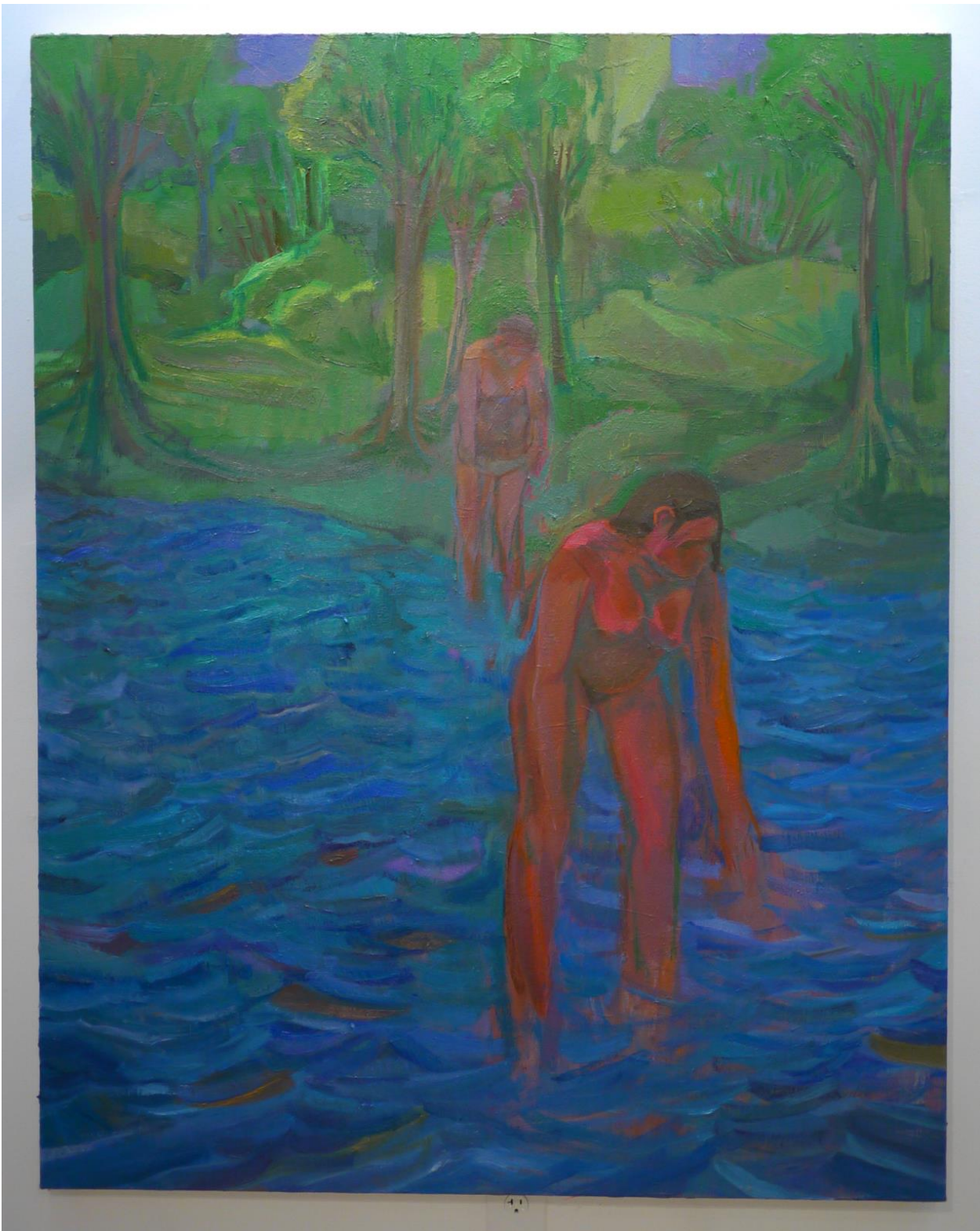


Figure 20. *Come into the Water*, oil on canvas, 63 5/8 x 50 in., 2021-22

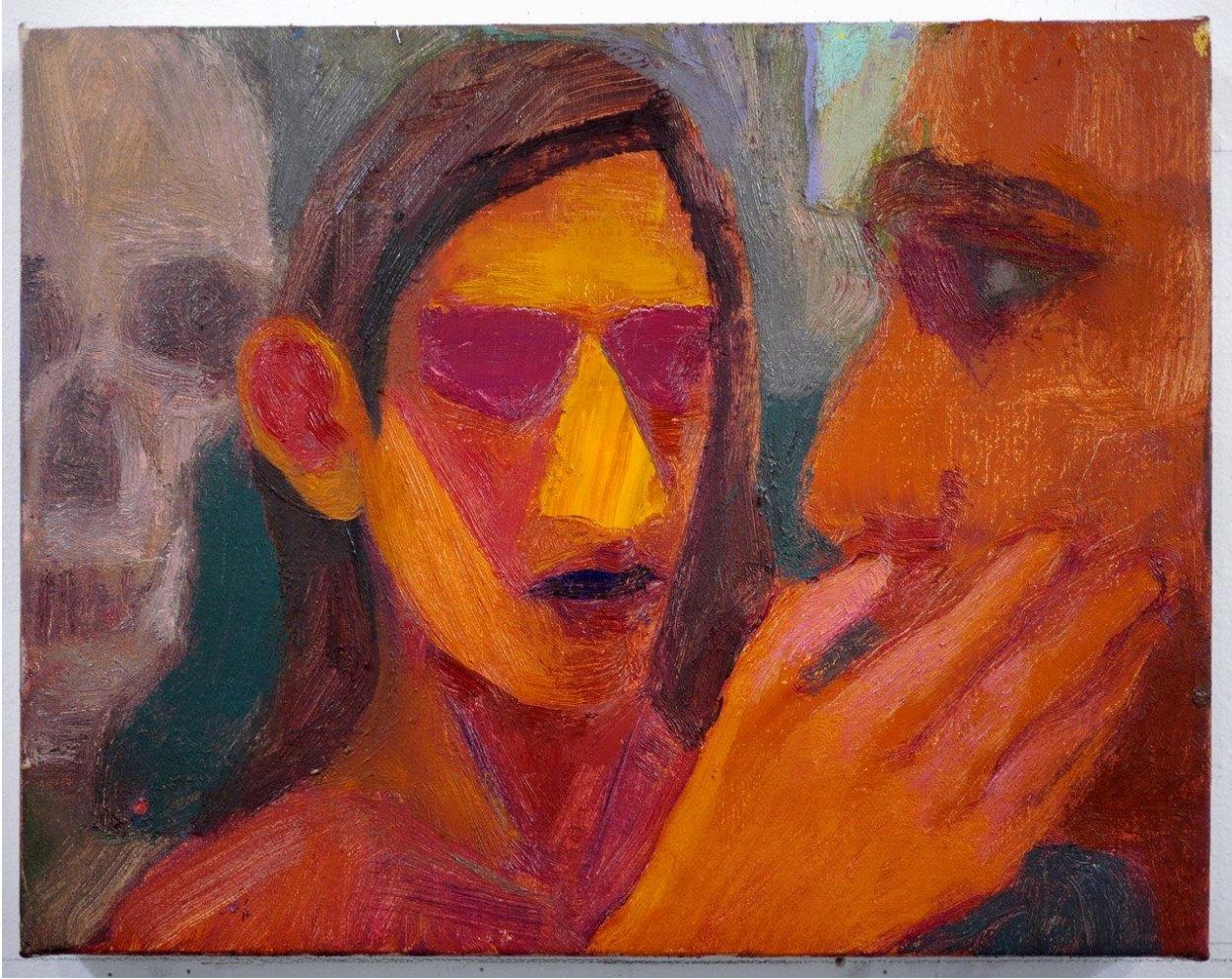


Figure 21. *Death, Mask*, oil on canvas, 11 x 14 in., 2021



Figure 22. *We Are Turned Away*, oil on canvas, 16 ½ x 20 ⅛ in., 2020-22



Figure 23. *Unsurveyed Emergence*, oil on canvas, 12 x 16 in., 2022



Figure 24. *Gatherer of Seeds and Memories*, oil on canvas, 60 x 60 in., 2020-22