

PAUL WALLINGTON

VOWELS AND HISTORY AND THE DEAD WEIGHT OF THE NEGLIGIBLE STORY.

For my family

Thanks to Virginia Mackenny for the help and advice throughout the year.

Thanks to the visiting supervisors and classmates for their input during group critiques.

Thanks to Stanley Amon, Thomas Pienaar and Moeneeb Dalwai for their continual help and support.

And lastly thank you to my parents for always being there for me. I could not have done this without you.



Handwritten notes on a piece of paper pinned to the wall. The text is mostly illegible but appears to be a list or set of instructions related to the artwork.



- I Can Feel the Bitumen Well in Your Heart

My name is Adagm.¹ My mother created an anagram of her mother's, mother's, mother. I live in Cape Town although I am not from here. This is one story.

Near the park I could feel the heat swell in my pants. When I slid my hand down my backside and pulled it to my face it was covered in a crimson liquid. The asphalt ground was scattered with droplets of blood. Behind me men were moving tar over the ground. I saw insects get eaten by seagulls that later fell out of the sky when their stomachs rotted from the poison in the bitumen. When I went to my doctor she told me to plant the ribs of dogs who's bodies were sent to the infirmary. That I must speak to the man with the burnt face who doesn't beat their bones with shovels when they grow stiff with rigor mortis before he burns them.²

When I cut open their bony vessels there was little smell because the sun had eaten away what little they had to give. I stuck the ribs into the base of the mountain and drove back home. On the way I saw men chip away at bodies who'd sunk into cement. Grey hands tightly clenched while their torsos disappeared into the concrete from when the road swallowed them. I passed an old woman who had fainted underneath the bridge. Two boys were over her. One peering in her mouth, looking for gold teeth with a stick.³ The other carried a rock with a pointed tip. I turned away.

I arrived home but the pain didn't stop, nor did the bleeding. Each time I sat down there would be a stain. I went to buy bandages from the store and I wrapped them around and under my behind. My father was home, sitting on the patio with his eyes fixed on the ground singing songs I struggled to hear.

I went back the doctor she told me I would have to bury one of my own ribs in the mountain. When I arrived back at the base of the mountain I slit the side of my chest and pulled out the rib. It was easy to take out. Most of the blood seemed to have drained below my stomach which soaked my rear end. There was little excess. When my rib was planted next to the others it was strange to see them there in a row. The dog ribs had been gnawed at by something small. Bloodied sticks protruding from the ground which were losing their colour from the sun. The luminous soil was moving underneath. Heating and shouting at things only ghosts understood. I saw a man with the same face as me trying to bury his heart in a scraped grave but the ground was always melting.⁴

When I left there was little change in my condition. I clambered down the hill. Using a stick to hold me straight the bulging mass of soaked bandages hung off my backside like a deformity. I was a time-traveler stuck in an age that didn't want me to belong, wading through a quagmire of sand and dust. I questioned what those ribs were doing? They only seemed to be food for the for rats and birds. Nothing more. Again I saw men moving tar up the mountain side. Hands working the blue, black heat that stuck and unstuck itself the way insects mate in pits.

I arrived home and found my father where I had left him. The air was heavy with his smell. There were flies picking at the wound which was black by now. Bitumen seeping into his gut where the bullet had pierced him.⁵ I locked myself in my room waiting for the pain to ebb away. I remembered the time I forgot I killed someone with a grin beneath my bloodied gums. Then a fever clutched me so fiercely that a dark coldness coughed its way up my throat. I groped a faded picture of an old life and put it to my chest.

I do not know how much time passed but I woke to men knocking on my door.

When I didn't answer they broke through and started to mow the tar inside. I lay in my bed while they set about pushing and flattening the mortar into the tiles and carpet. They moved in silence with rakes and spades. I closed my eyes and held my breath before they started covering me.

The coating was dark and hot. I held my headache in my mouth. When I moved, the bitumen would fall into the places that it hadn't found and the stones would find cracks in my body where they couldn't have fallen before. Darkness overtook and the smell was taking me away from this place until I heard a light whispering from my chest.

*I'm loving you the only way I know how, and it's for this reason that I have failed.*⁶

Through vascular thumps it told me stories of a bearded man whose pen has run out of ink and whose blood now belongs to the veins of blue gums.⁷ It said to me that I must read the third testament with my head in a noose⁸ It said: *I am searching for the past tense of the word 'hurt'*⁹

When I wake in the morning. I see my father in the lounge with his mouth now stitched up while he rocks back and forth. There is paint on his belly where I thought I shot him. I place my head on the oily smear and listen to the sounds that groan and squelch in his gut.

I remember the look in the eyes of one of the men who was covering me with tar. Our souls are entwined because we have made another.¹⁰

References

¹ Magda is the protagonist from J.M Coetzee's Novel *In the heart of the country* (1976). England: Secker & Warburg.

² David Lurie from J.M Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999) beats the bodies of dogs before he burns them. England: Harvill Secker.

³ Mr's Curren is the protagonist in J.M Coetzee's book *Age of Iron* (1990) who falls asleep underneath a bridge while children poke a stick in her mouth looking for gold. England: Harvill Secker.

⁴ A line Borrowed from Peter Anderson's poem *In a Free State*. (2018) South Africa: uHlanga.

⁵ Magda shoots her father in the stomach. J.M Coetzee's *In the heart of the country* (1976). England: Secker & Warburg.

⁶ A line referencing Damon Galgut's quote from his book *In a Strange Room* (2010) England: Atlantic books.

⁷ Hedley Twidle's essay Getting past Coetzee (2012) mentions how J.M Coetzee has moved to Adelaide, Australia. <https://www.ft.com/content/d2a3d68a-4923-11e2-9225-00144feab49a#axzz2Gk4csP8i>

⁸ Lara Foot Newton. *Thsepang: the third testament* (2005) Johannesburg : Wits University Press.

⁹ A quote from Bongani Kona's Story *The Museum of Lost Objects* In Simphiwe Ndube's catalogue *Uncharted Lands and Trackless Sea's*. (2019) Hansa Print: Cape Town.

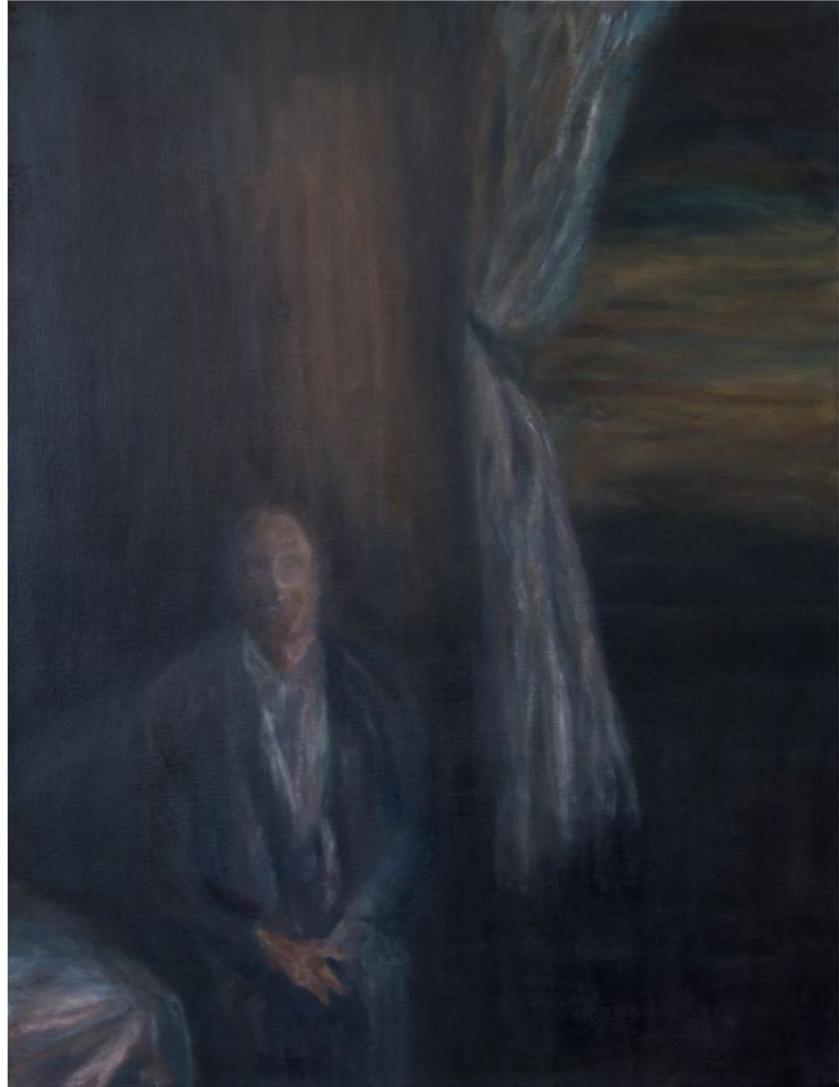
¹⁰ A quote from Jonny Steinberg's Online article (2015) *Why I'm Moving Back To South Africa*. <https://www.buzzfeed.com/jonnysteinberg/why-im-moving-back-to-south-africa>





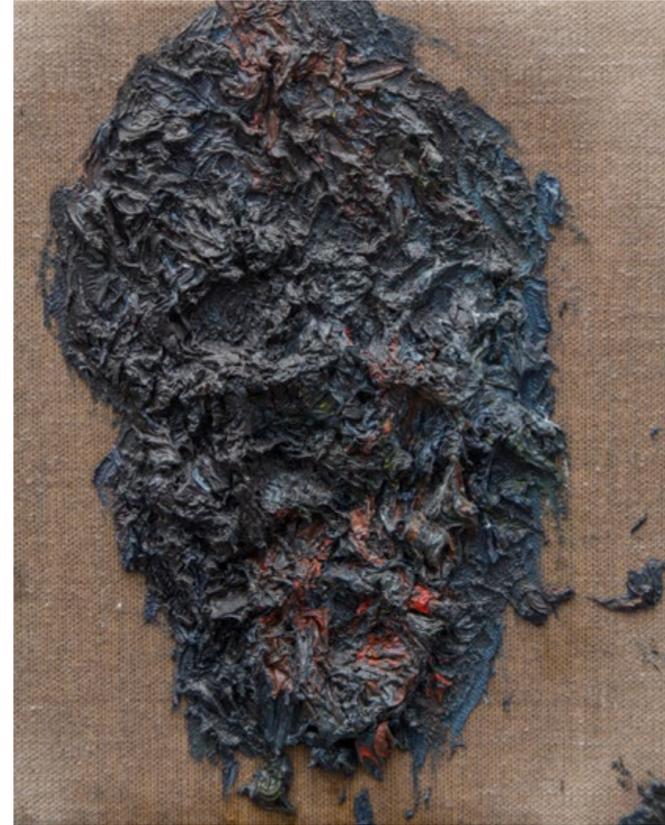








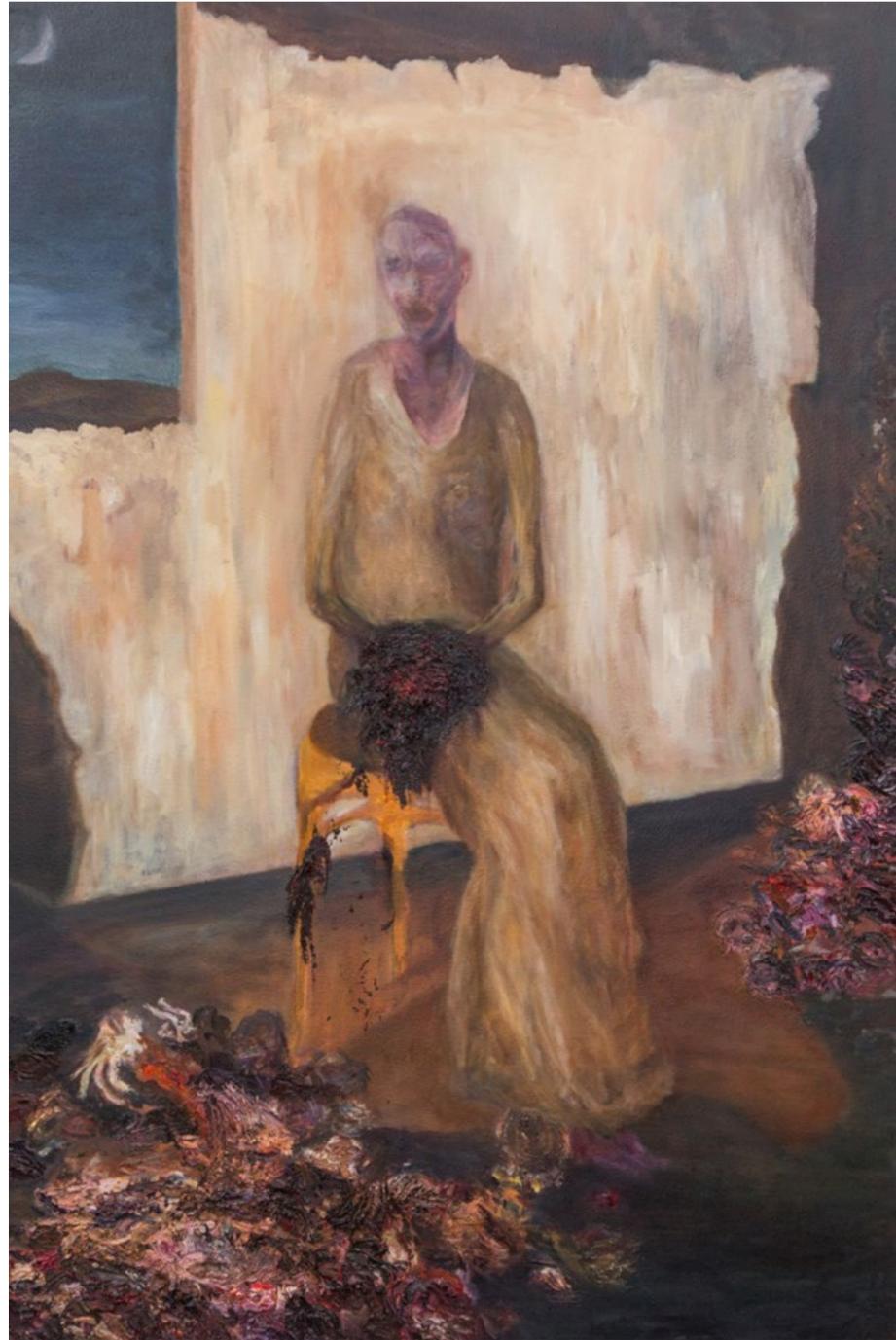


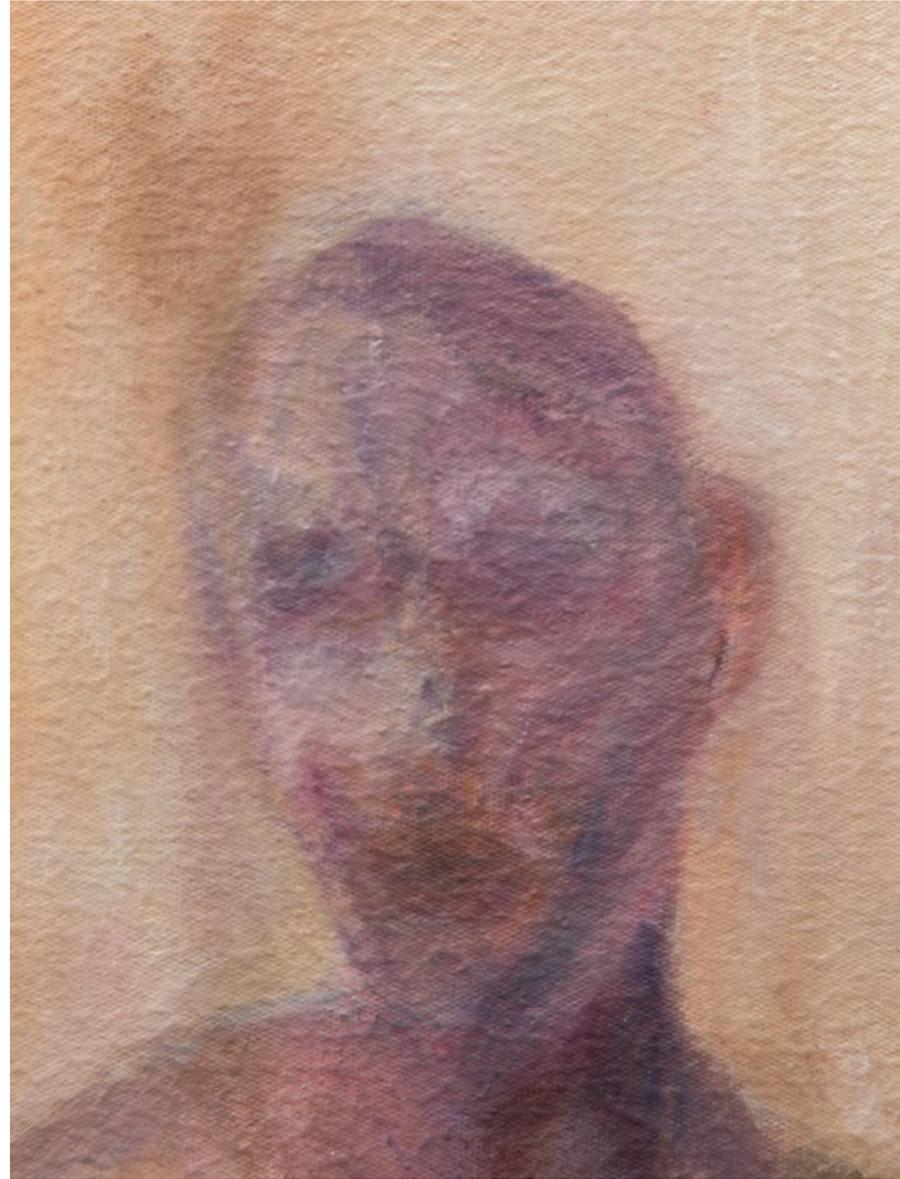


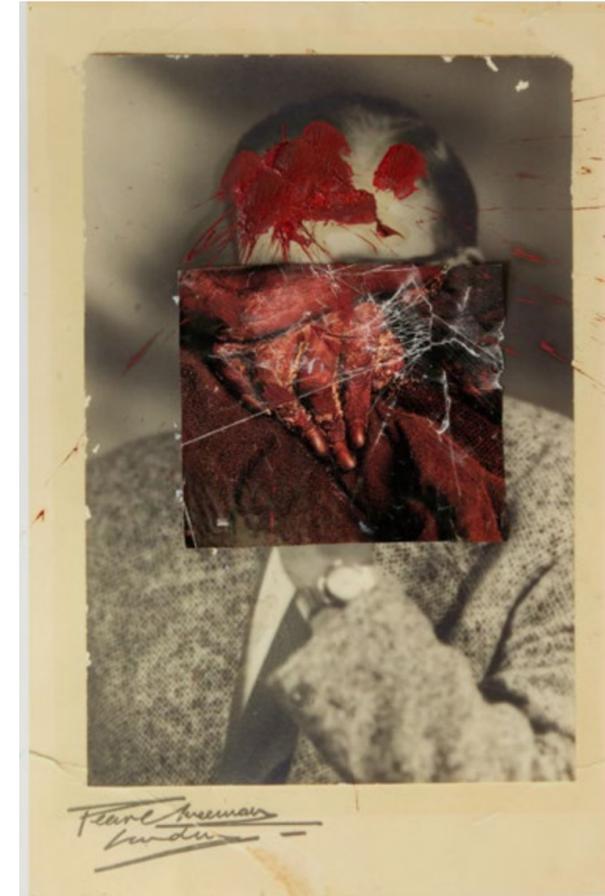










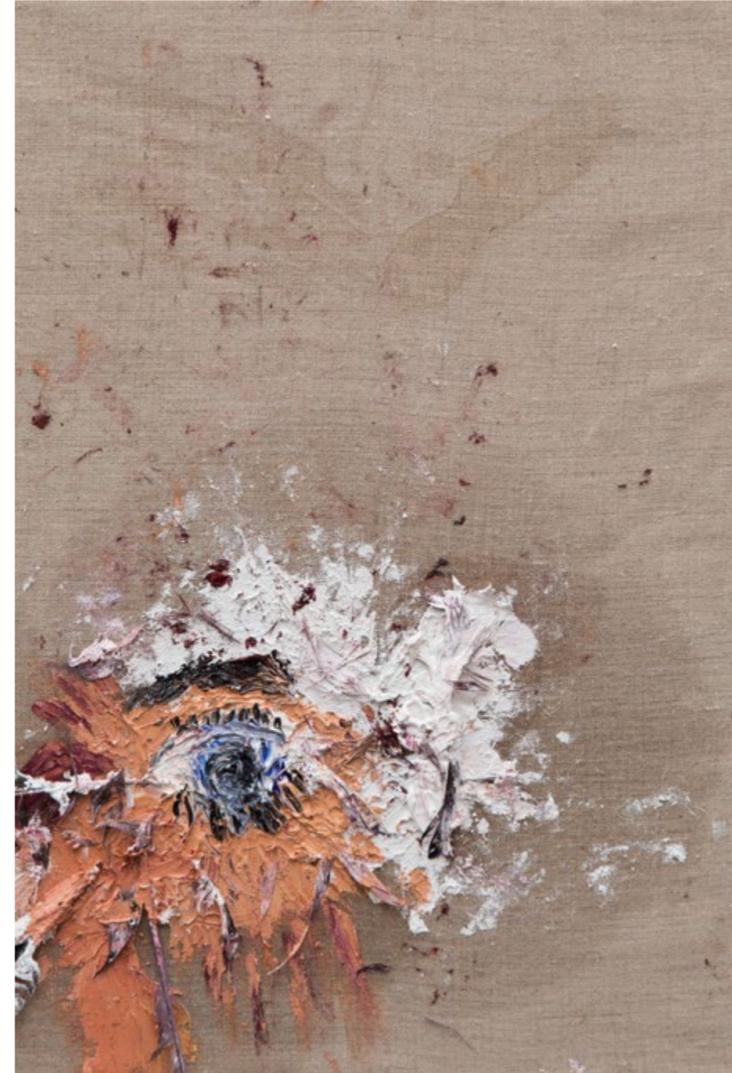
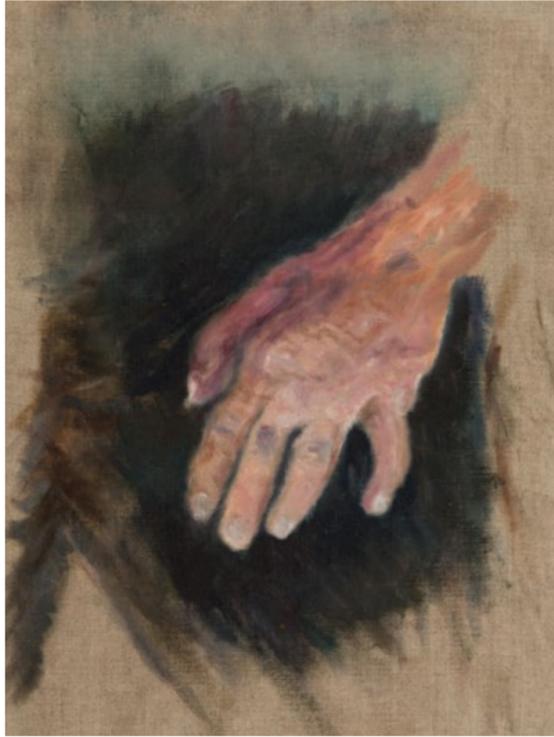


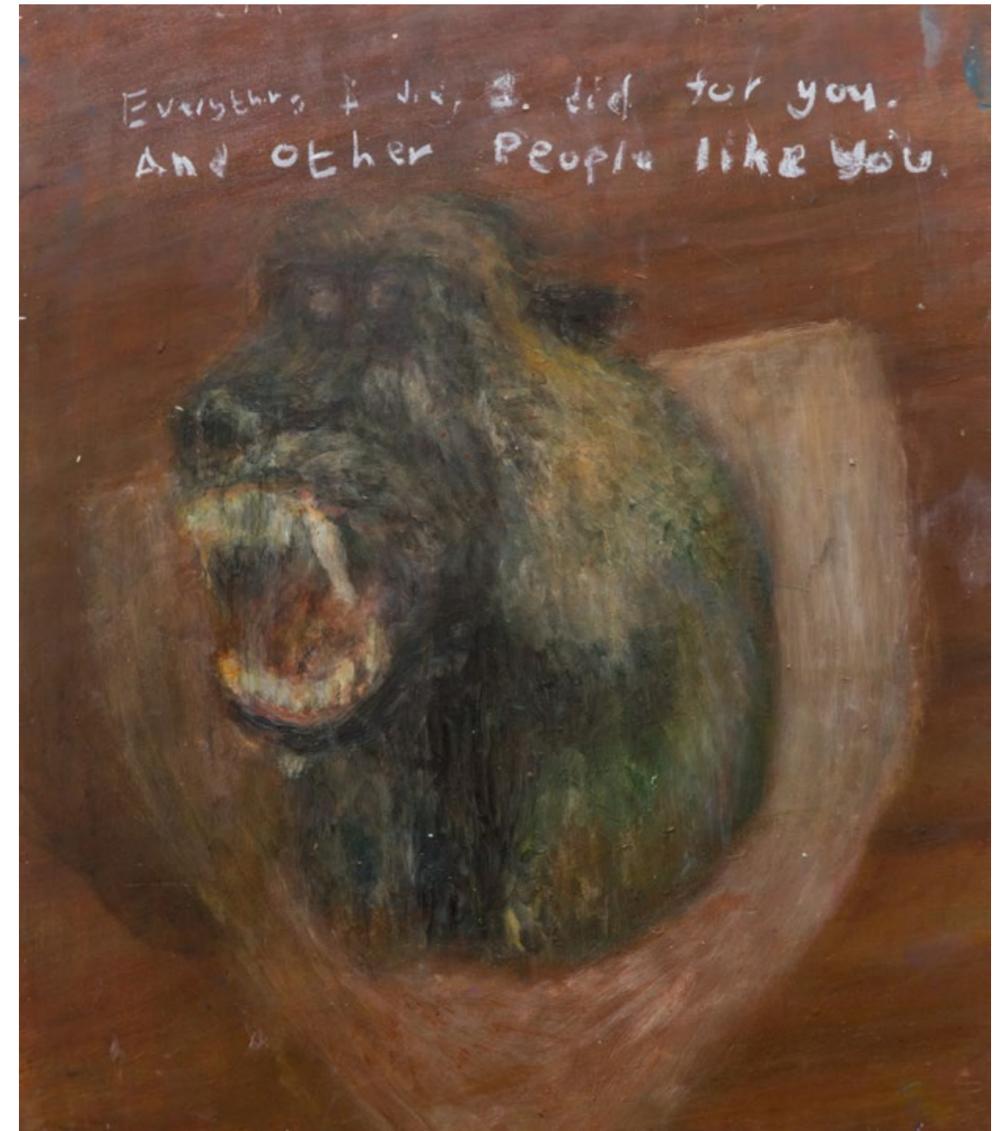






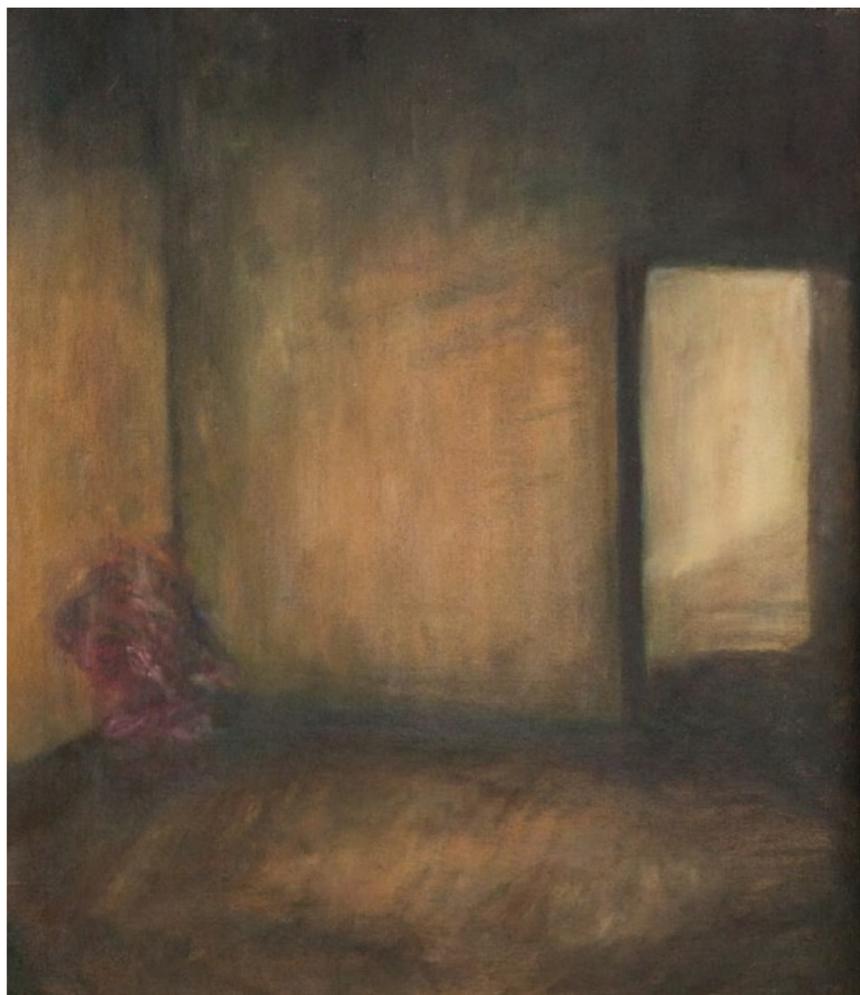






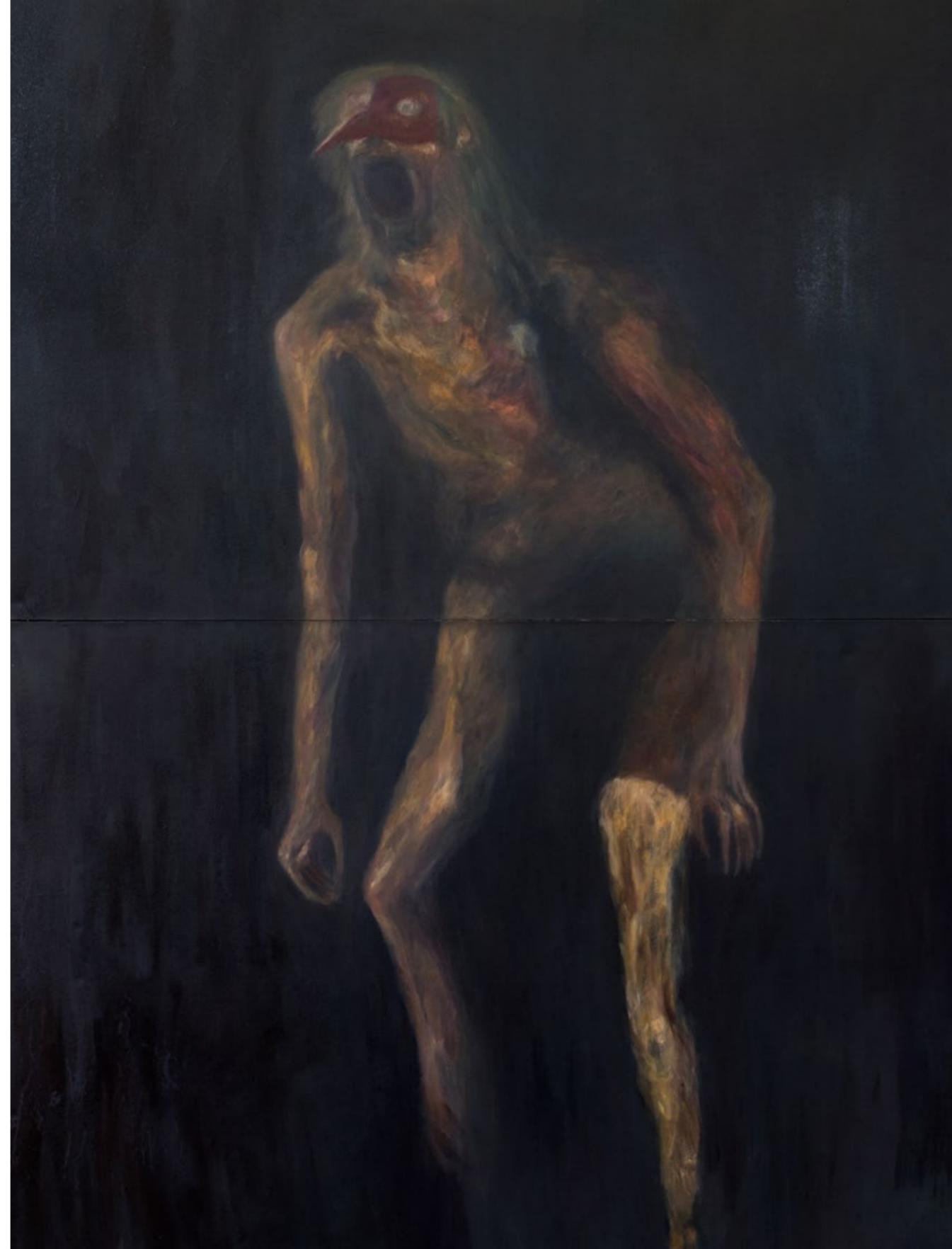




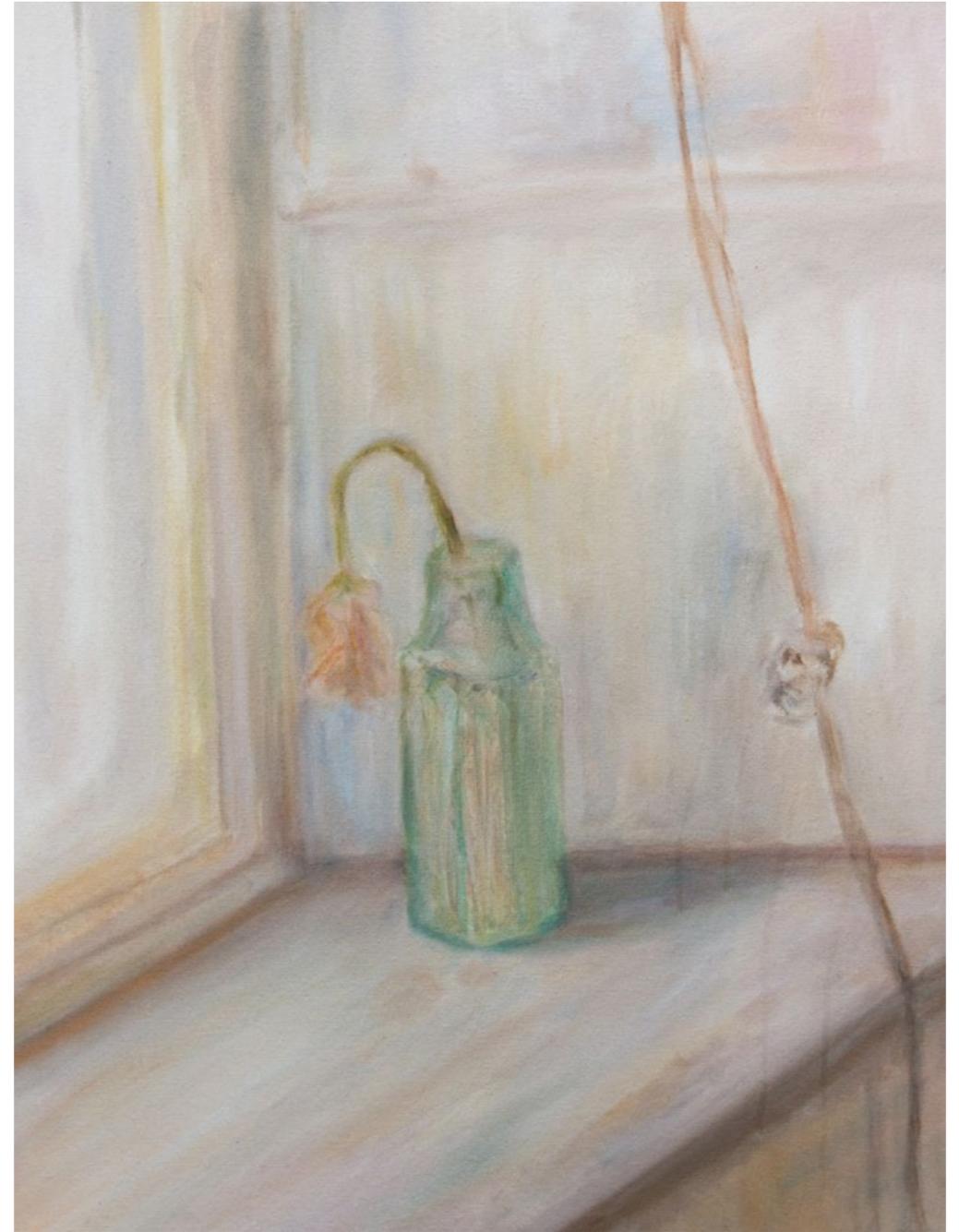














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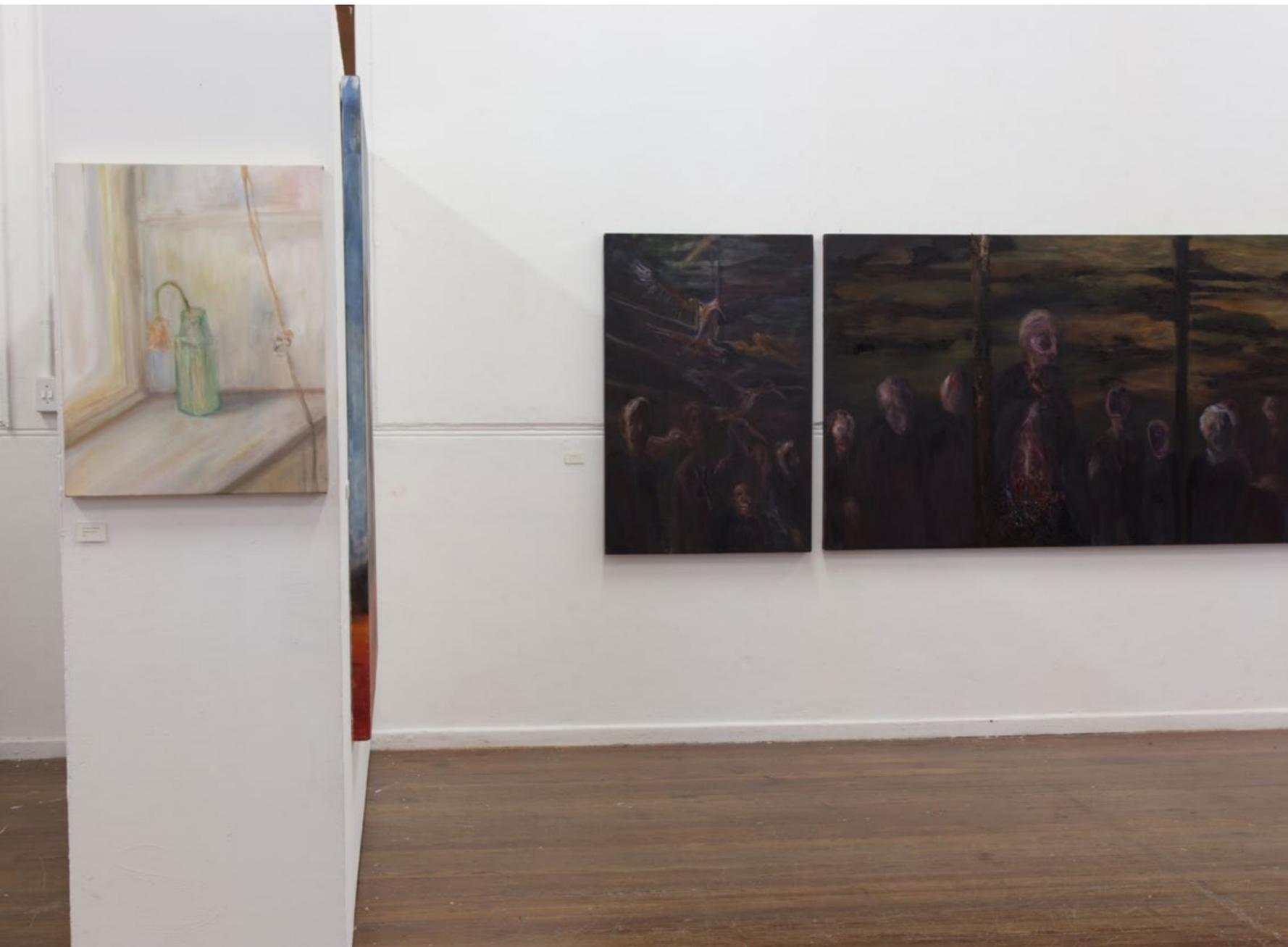


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J.M Coetzee's introduction to his book *White Writing: On the culture of letters in South Africa* states that there was a quest by white settlers to find a language that would not only allow them to describe the landscape before them, but that would allow them to feel it within their hearts. It's a quest to find an "authentic" language, for a race "no longer European, not yet African" (Coetzee, 1988: 11). This line, like so many others of Coetzee's, has had a profound effect on me because it reveals how Coetzee's vision - one that is often darkly twisted and morbid - has become the nucleus for my work.

I have created a body of work that seems to fit in with the general theme of Coetzee's writing - paintings that are dark in tone, sombre and often make strong reference to Francisco Goya who, I think, is Coetzee's visual counterpoint - but which is also influenced by other writers and artists.

Hedley Twidle's essay *Getting past Coetzee* (2012) provides a humorous account of why South African writers should move away from Coetzee's "seriousness". Yet even though Coetzee's writing and Goya's imagery have set the basis of my practice, by working through these paintings (and this essay) I can attempt to move on from creating dark, Goya-inspired paintings to creating images which are more process-based and self-reflective of who I am as an individual in South Africa, and who I am as an artist.

J.M Coetzee's book *White Writing: On the culture of letters in South Africa* speaks about the problematics of the encoding and decoding of the terrain as "landscape" and that "The literature of empty landscape... is thus a literature of failure, of the failure of the historical imagination" (Coetzee, 1988: 9). This sentence describes a failure within the hearts of the mythographers who tried to understand the South African landscape. If history is meant to serve the purpose of understanding the past, then what can we South Africans do with our own history? A history that was, quite literally, constructed in order to justify colonial power. A history that does not allow us to feel, or to move past certain events. As Coetzee says, it is the place where the "Landscape remains alien, impenetrable, until a language is found in which to win it, speak it, represent it" (1988: 7). A quest which will ultimately fail,

because white speakers are not speaking a language that is inherently "African". English has never made a claim that it is African, thus white settlers in South Africa are a people waiting for an echo from the 'empty' African landscapes that will allow them "an identity better than that of a visitor, stranger, transient" (Coetzee, 1988: 8). An echo which receives no answer.

If I had to look at the painting which depicts the scene of Jacobus Coetzee squeezing his anal caruncle (page 17), there is a sense of the empty landscape, but not a hospitable one and certainly not one that can be seized or won. My paintings portray figures which I have borrowed from Coetzee's vision - a world which has inherited a lack of love¹. The landscapes are fictional places, partly based on the South African landscape, partly based on an imaginative one. They are mythological and fragmented spaces in a world that draws strong inspiration from Goya's series *The Black paintings* (1819-1822) and Coetzee's vision because their world, like mine, is a world of failure. The figures who inhabit these landscapes are fragile, broken and disjointed. A people created from a separate world and where Peter Anderson's poem² sounds more like a twisted ritual than anything else.

Other paintings which echo this thought are Magda's father from Coetzee's book *In the heart of the country* (Page 9-10) or the Jan Van Riebeeck figure, whose face is in slow pulpy, decay, while the background burns in smoke (Page 12).

Both paintings are my own interpretation of Coetzee world. In Ian Glenn's essay *Gone for Good - Coetzee's Disgrace* (2009) uses the phrase "cultural trauma" (2009: 90), a phrase which he borrows from Jeffery Alexander's book, *Cultural trauma: meanings of social life* (2003). Glenn talks about the distress of white South Africans emigrating after 1994 and the deep cultural and ethical trauma that those actions invoked. Even though Nelson Mandela criticized emigration after the democratic elections, white South Africans showed that "modern citizenship, like modern marriage is a matter of convenience and advantages, not of final unwavering commitment... [and] are free from any historical guilt or obligation" (Glenn, 2009: 92). It seems that the "carriers" (as Glenn calls people who create a mythology and make meaning of extremely vi-

olent events) of this trauma exist in the space where they find their relationship with the land a problematic and contested space.

Therefore, my work now sits in the space between two worlds. The one is the awareness of this inevitable failure of love, while on the other hand I am drawn to connections rather than failures.

Hedley Twidle's essay, as I have mentioned earlier, provides a humorous account of why South African writers should move away from an infatuation with Coetzee. Twidle's main objective in the essay, written in 2012, was to put forward the question of taking "a 10-year moratorium on Coetzee studies" at the University of Cape Town. This was because Twidle, like me, is Coetzee-obsessed but concludes his essay by stating that Coetzee, for all his genius, has also failed in many ways himself. He says that to use Coetzee as a benchmark or standard for South African literature is wrong because he misses out on the humour, the fun and the joy that create South Africa's societies.

To reinforce this point of connections, I look at Jonny Steinberg - a journalist who moved back to Johannesburg from Oxford in 2015 - and how he explains an inherent and deeper connection we as South Africans have with one another. That everything which has happened has led to this present moment in which "our souls are entwined because we have made another." (Steinberg, 2015).

It seems that I cannot give the reader a proper ending other than that there is ultimately an attempt at connection. A connection that has its own limitations and barriers. One could say that rather I am attempting to fail, because it is in the act of failure that shows that I have tried to love. That I have tried to love here, in South Africa, as I am. These dark paintings that strongly reference Coetzee's and Goya's world of decay and turmoil do not suggest a message that is final and didactic.

If one looks through the violence, there is also a humour found in the muddled stories of paint and canvas. The obvious reference to the "old masters" is contrasted with the purposeful Non finito³ works, or works done on non-archival pa-

per such as newsprint. I have built up the barrier of Coetzee, only to bring it down because even though the process of creating Coetzee's world is important, it is the act of bringing down the serious that is equally so. It is to paint against him "as strongly as possible" (Twidle, 2012).

Footnotes:

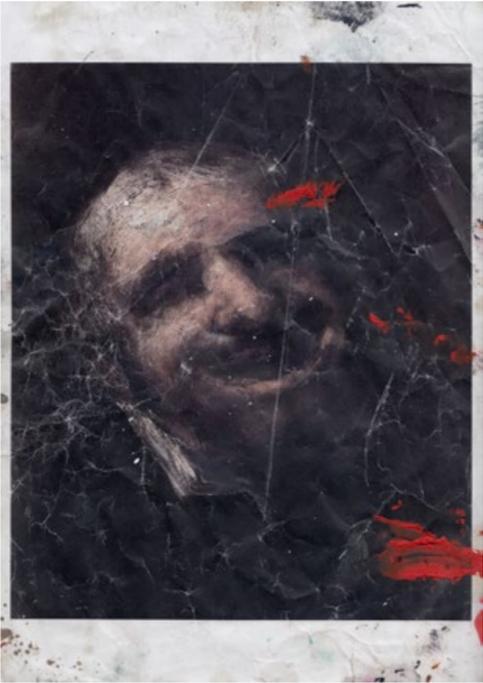
¹ J.M Coetzee said in his 1987: Jerusalem prize acceptance speech in: "At the heart of the unfreedom of the hereditary masters of South Africa is a failure of love" (Attwell, D. 1992. *Doubling the point : essays and interviews*)

² 1
All their days are travelling through them as is the borrowed God given and dissolved
2
They are towards a country of shadow.
A country of mountains, a country of shadow.
3
They are trying to bury a heart in a scraped grave,
but the ground is always melting
Anderson, P. 2018. In a free state.

³ Non finito is a term used by sculptors, most famously used by Donatello, to describe a work that appears to be "incomplete" but has been purposefully done so. Angier, J. 2001. *The Process of Artistic Creation in Terms of the Non-finito*.

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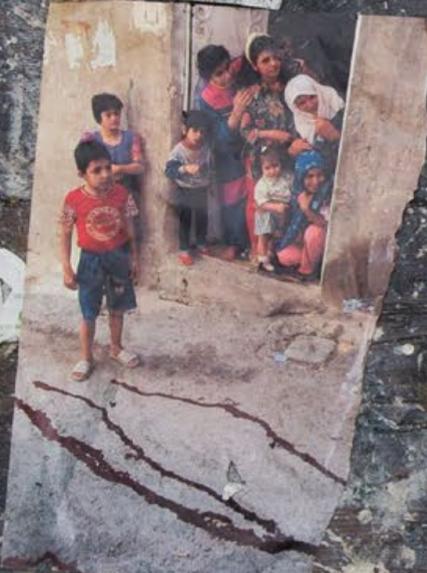
Pathways of Pain and Placebo

Pain From that "Oh the heart!"

The brain's placebo

The memory of pain

Placebo



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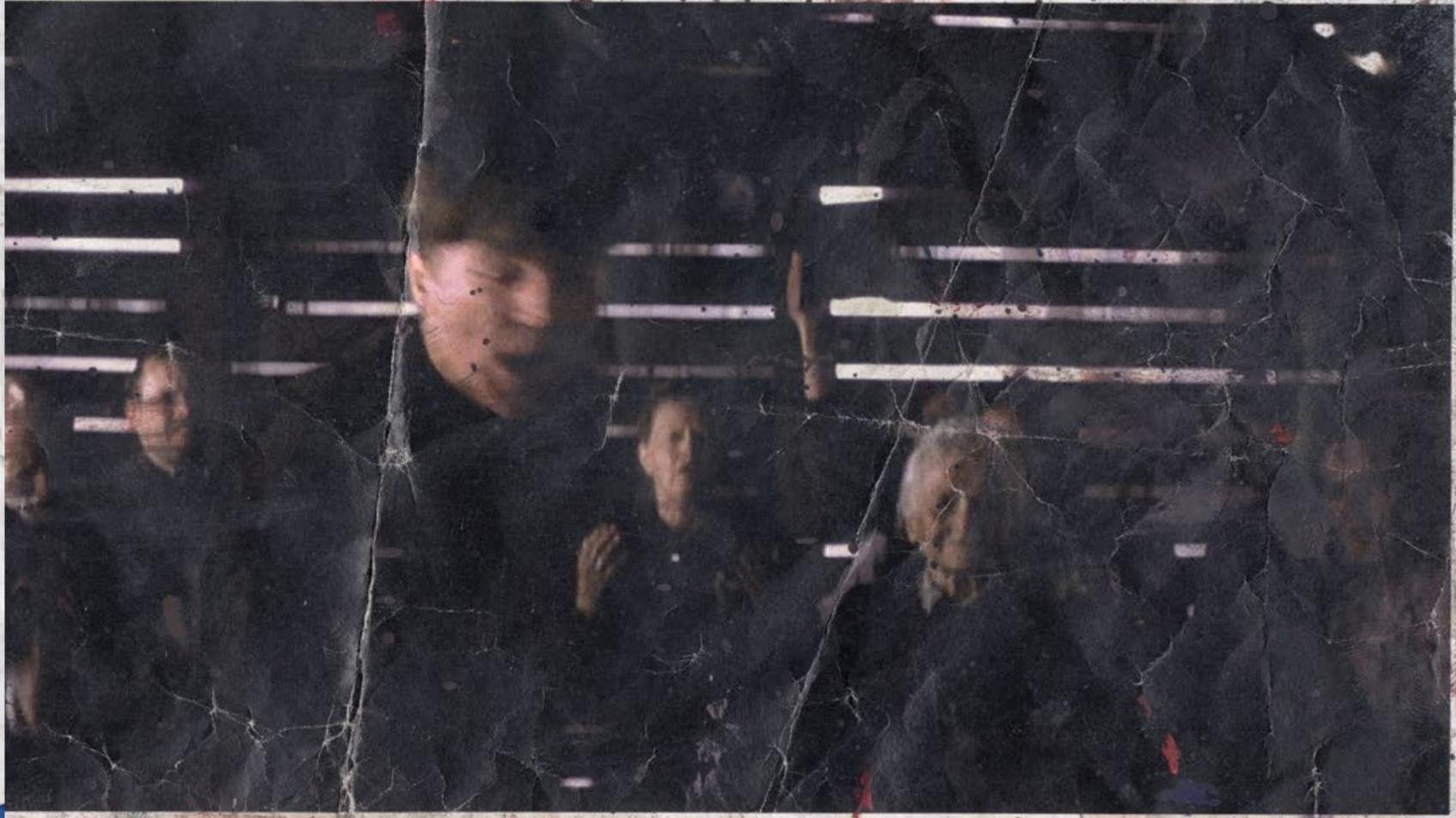
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Paul Wallington
Vowels and history and the dead weight of the negligible story
2019
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Photographs on Pg. 8-9 ; 36-37 were shot by Matthew Slater

Title of the show extracted from Peter Anderson's book
In a free state (2018)

Titles of my works come from the following books:

Peter Anderson. 2018. *In a free state*.
Herman Charles Bosman. 1987. *Makapan's Caves And Other Stories*
J.M. Coetzee. 1990. *Age of Iron*
J.M. Coetzee. 1999. *Disgrace*.
J.M Coetzee. 1974. *Dusklands*.
J.M Coetzee. 2003. *Elizabeth Costello*.
J.M Coetzee. 1976. *In the heart of the country*.
J.M Coetzee. 1980. *Waiting for the Barbarians*
Damon Galgut. 2003. *The good doctor*.
Damon Galgut. 1999. *The impostor*.
Masande Ntshanga. 2014. *The Reactive*.
Sol Plaatje. 1930. *Mhudi*.
Ivan Vladislavic. 2018. *The Distance*.