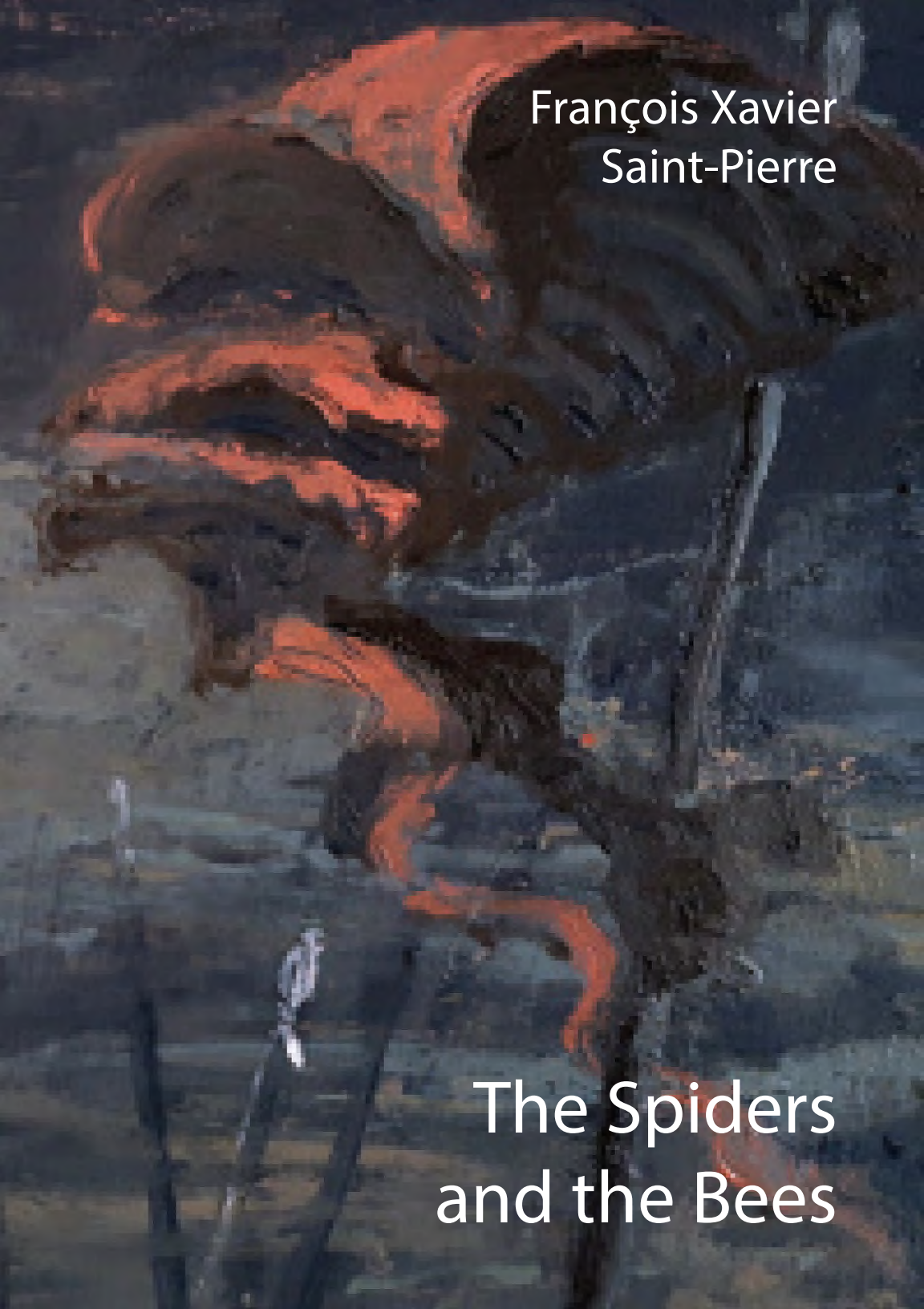
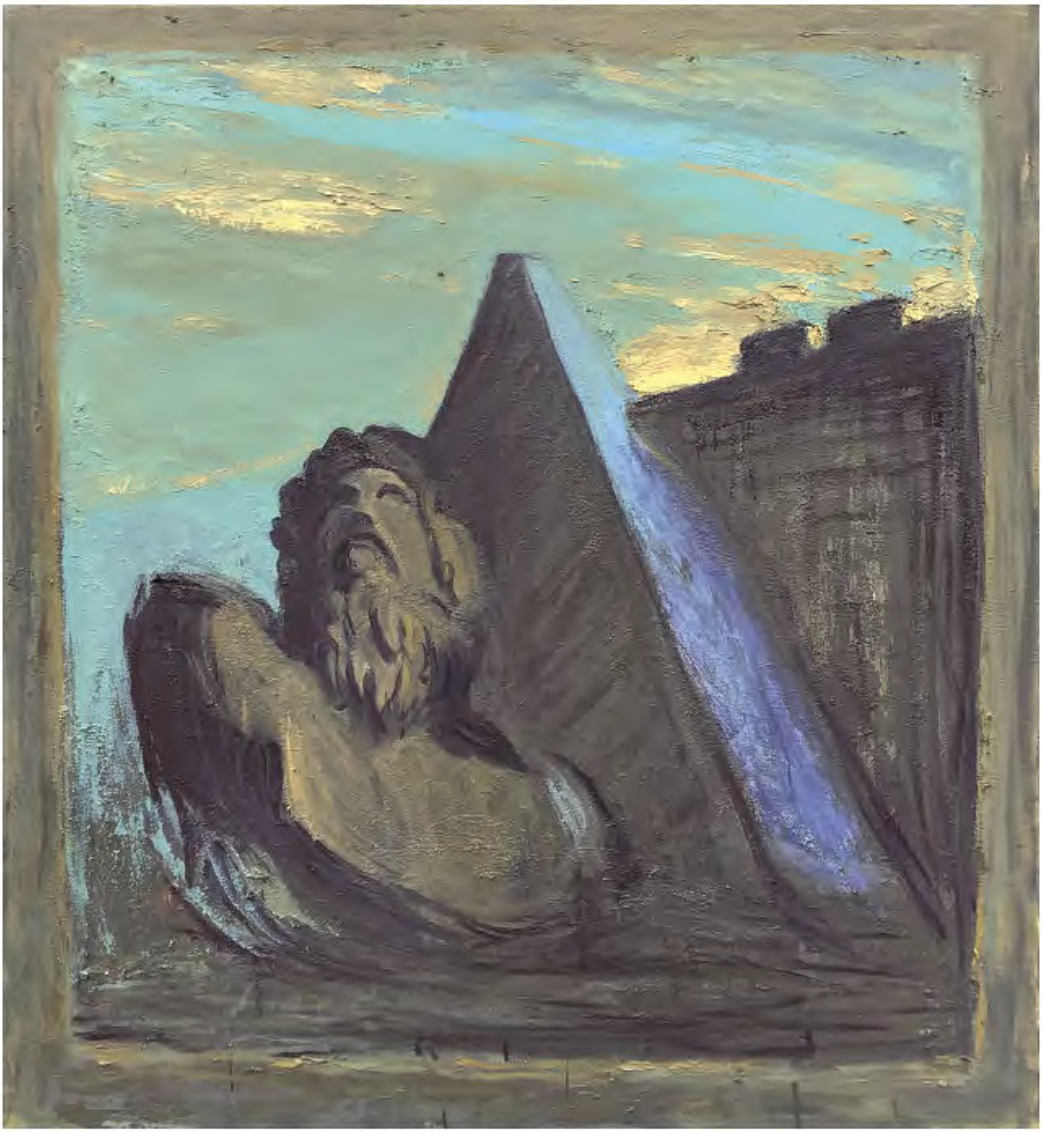


François Xavier
Saint-Pierre

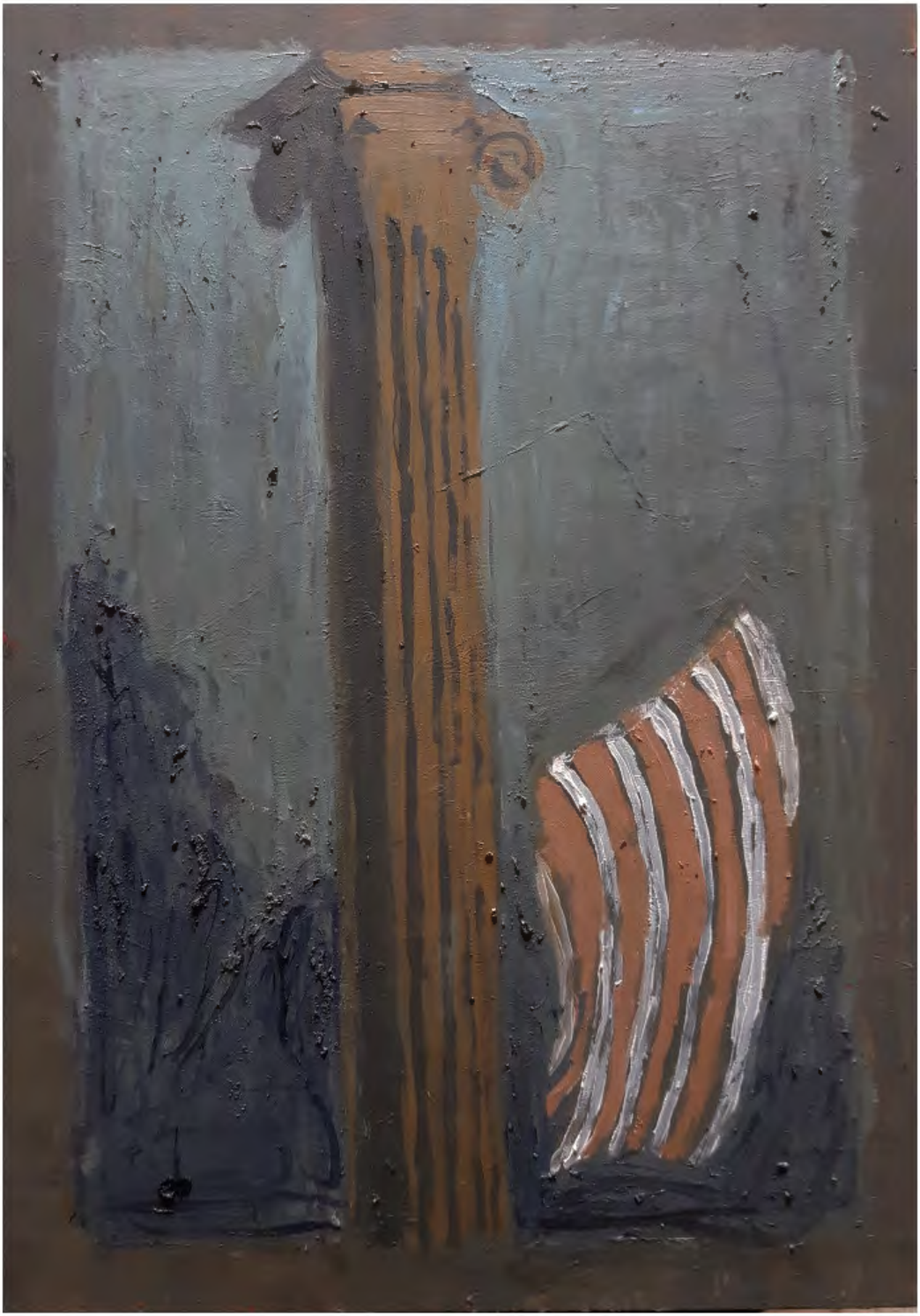
The Spiders and the Bees



François Xavier Saint-Pierre

The Spiders and the Bees

Guest Curator: David Jager
Koffler Gallery
December 3, 2021–January 23, 2022



The Spiders and the Bees

A conversation between artist François Xavier Saint-Pierre and curator David Jager

DJ: Your painting delves into the history of painting, not only its subject matter but also its palette and specific historical techniques. One possible way of putting this is to say that you are attempting to paint the history of painting itself. Can you elaborate?

FXSP: Yes, that could broadly contextualize what I do. Painting requires spending time alone in a room, engaged in a conversation that implies historical reflection. It is a discipline that is linked to the power of images, stretching as far back as cave painting, and encompassing idolatry, propaganda, the tension between the names of images and images themselves and, more recently in history, the recording of perceptual effects and self-expression.

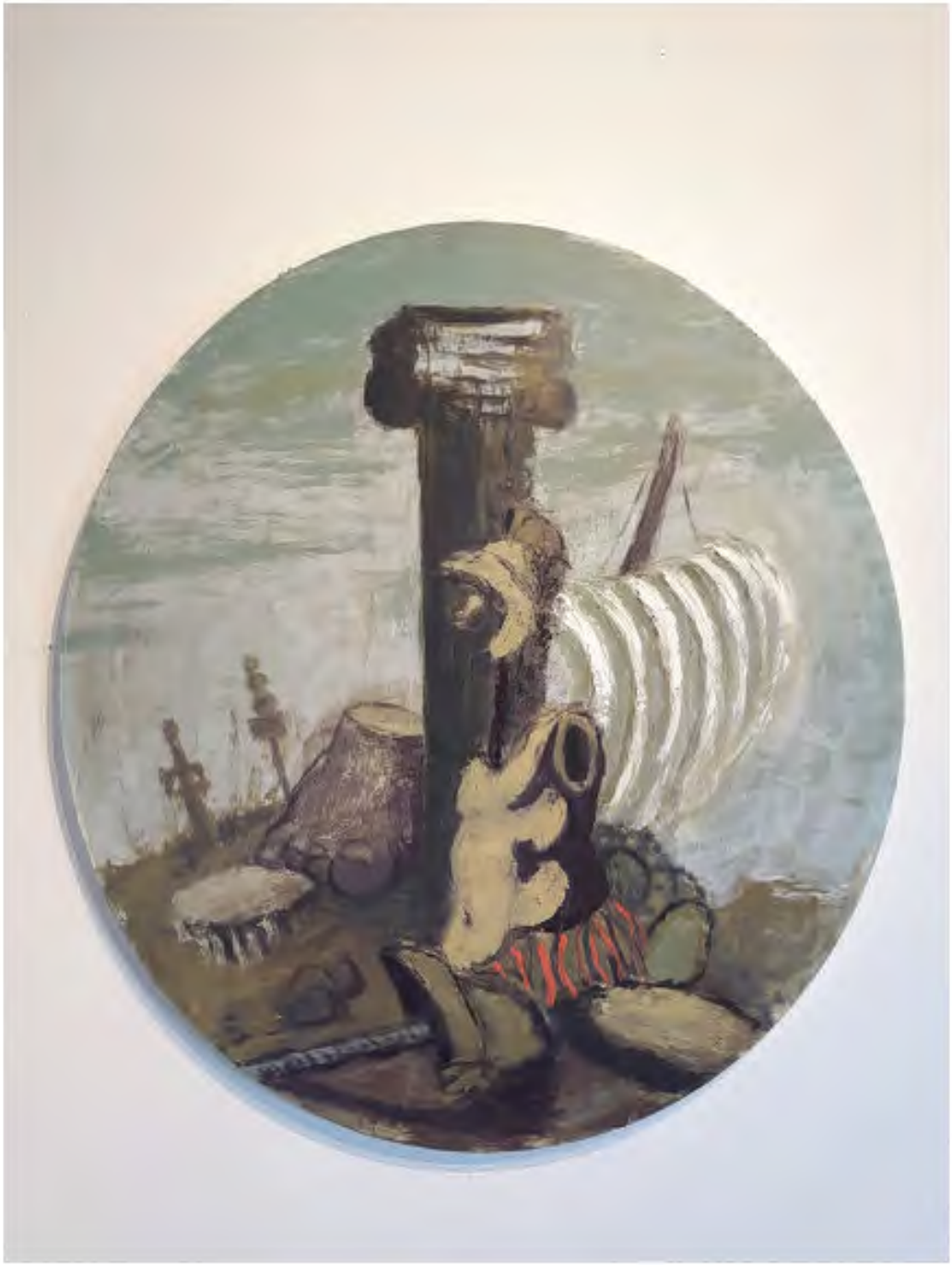
In my work, pictorial ambiguities problematize the determinacy of historical motifs. The paintings I'm exhibiting at the Koffler Gallery are linked to 18th-century print culture, with motifs that include ancient structures, Greco-Roman forms, garden landscapes and stylized architectural vestiges. But the fragmentary forms within the work function less as symbols of loss or decay than as metonymic props. They are emblems for the repetitions and patterns of intention that emerge within the history of painting.

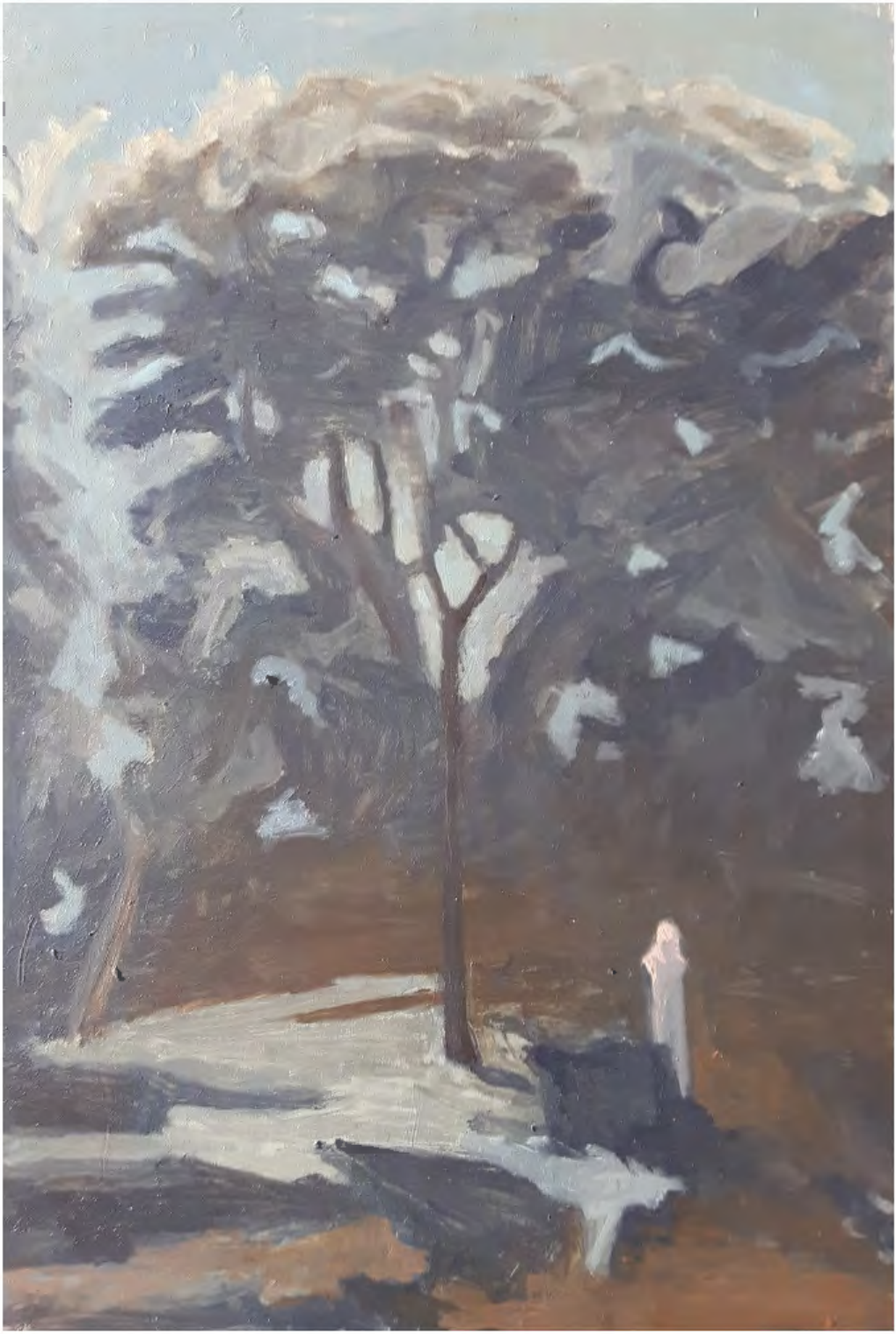
At the conscious level, I am organizing pictorial ideas – space, light, volume, surface, touch – and these formal, practical considerations are contaminated by unconscious needs and problematized by things like our desire to want to name things. Outside of the activity of painting, and sometimes during the act of painting, I do consider the fact that painting has a history. I'm interested in the "period eye," that is, the cultural and social context in which paintings were looked at and executed in different time periods. There is a desire on my part to be sensitized to experiences or criteria that previous painters or viewers would have had access to.

Although I have explored historical techniques in previous works, the paintings presented in The Spiders and the Bees are made with store-bought paint in tubes, as was prevalent throughout the 20th century. The palette I employ, however, does recall historical painting in that it is limited to a handful of pre-industrial pigments. Natural earth pigments such as Raw Umber, Red Oxide, Yellow Ochre, Naples Yellow, Lead White, Ultramarine Blue and sometimes a modern Cadmium Red make up my palette. I'm looking for a colour experience that differs from that of CMYK printing or the screen. I aim for a certain quality of light and an economy of means, and I don't generally work from photographs. I'm more interested in the functioning of the eye and how it perceives the world and how that is translated in a painting.

The techniques I employ reflect a number of interests, including my strong affinity for ideas that emerged in early modern art. This period focused on concepts of time, the role of the individual in relation to society and the sensory relationship to the world.

DJ: I'm reminded of Merleau-Ponty's notion of perception as a gestalt phenomenon – not a formal process between an abstract subject and object, but as something both pre-conscious and conscious, centred in the total experience of lived bodies. For example, I get the sense that the monuments that feature so prominently in your work really stand out as living forms we can relate to in a very intuitive and pre-conscious fashion, even as they contain conscious traces of monumentality and historicity.





The poet Clark Coolidge wrote about Philip Guston, a painter that you feel a great affinity for: "Perhaps art is merely the translation of the external into an obduration of mind that erodes neither to the side of memory nor conception." Painting doesn't represent so much as it "concretizes" perceptions into something, a living form or body, that remains stubbornly halfway between its being remembered and being conceived. Folded into this are all our unconscious needs surrounding the object: the desire to name it, to monumentalize and historicize it, to subject it to the "period eye" as you call it. Is this a fair description of what you are doing?

FXSP: I think Merleau-Ponty's questions were also addressed practically by cognitive scientists. I'm particularly interested in ideas associated with the Frankfurt school of gestalt theory. The Gestaltists' explanation of the mechanism of perception informed all of 20th-century art and design education and is a fascinating key to understanding modern art. Gestalt theory is an exciting but reductive attempt to make the experience of seeing less messy. In particular, I admire the many diagrams that were developed by Gestaltists to explain the process of perception. In many ways, their interest in the fundamentals of perception ran parallel with the project of modernist painters. They both focused on seeing as a construction, one that also involves a great deal of editing out and selection.

Images have a long history of standing in for other things. The presence of rulers was disseminated across conquered lands through coins, for example. Painting and sculpture have long been used to represent heroic examples of sacrifice, martyrdom or generosity. The act of painting does have the ability to concretize or reify.

In my work, I like to explore the fact that a painted image may be visible in all its marks and component elements but not be fully legible. Indeterminacy within the history of painting is something that I find very seductive. I think it is Picasso who said, "to know what you want to draw you must first begin by drawing." This is useful to me, as it illustrates the creative act as one of imagination and recollection. Drawing involves a process of making and refining schemata.

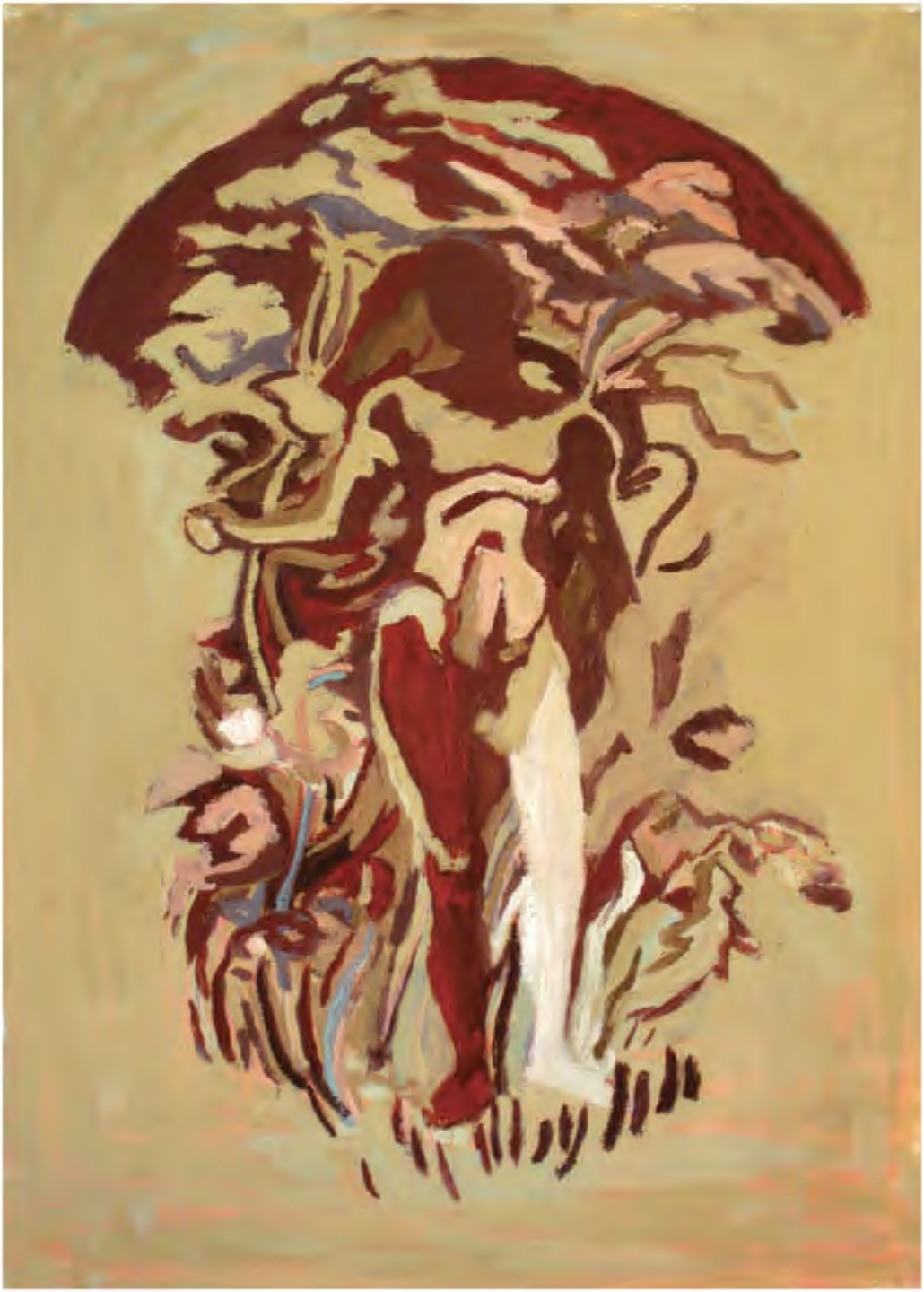
The legibility of objects in an image is definitely something that interests me. The early 20th-century poet Stéphane Mallarmé said that "to name an object means to suppress three-quarters of the pleasure of a poem." One of my main motives for painting is to conceive of an image that is discrete and remarkable, to reveal a way of seeing that transcends the filters through which we often see the world.

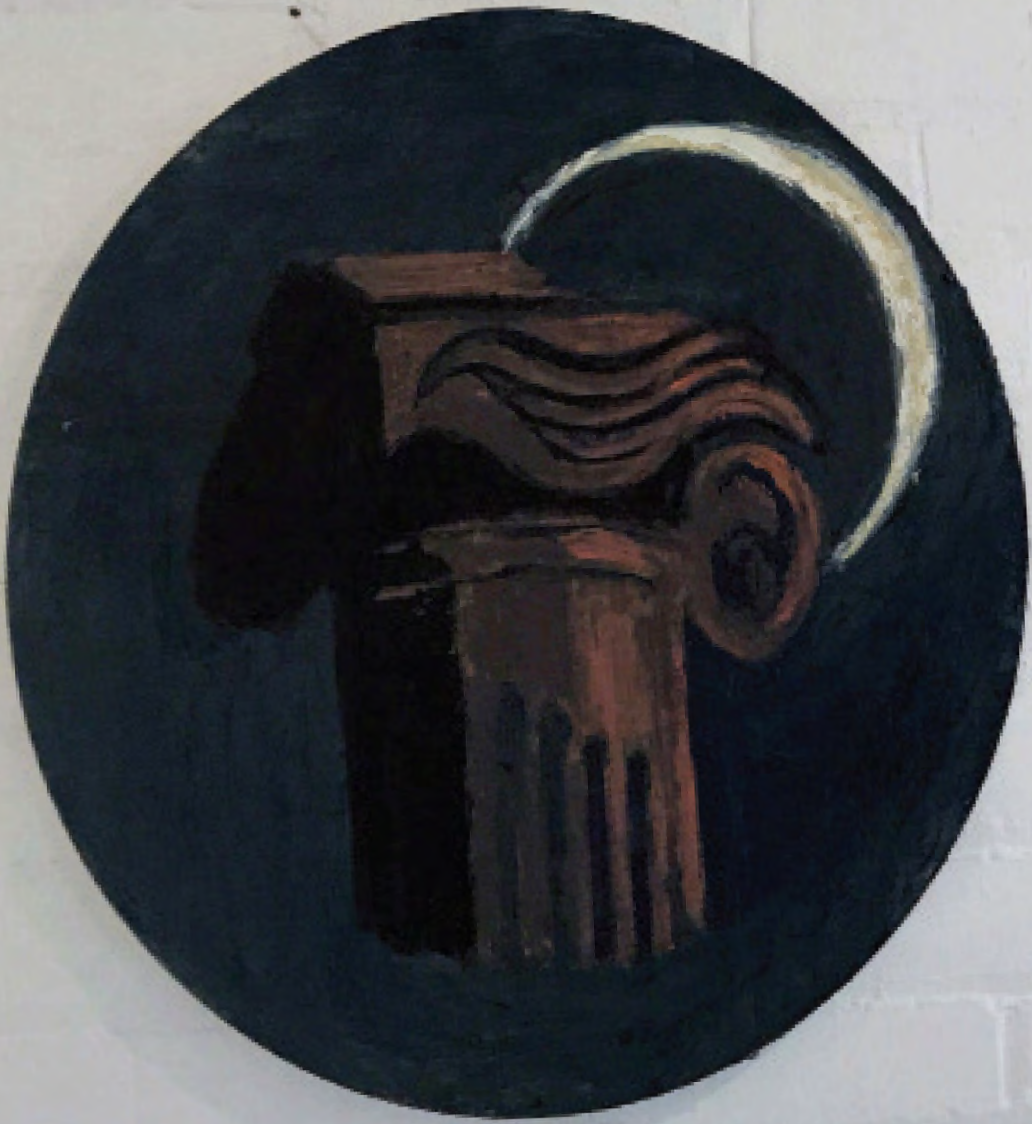
DJ: I can see how your work addresses problems that arose in the early history of modern art, and how it specifically looks at the legibility of objects.

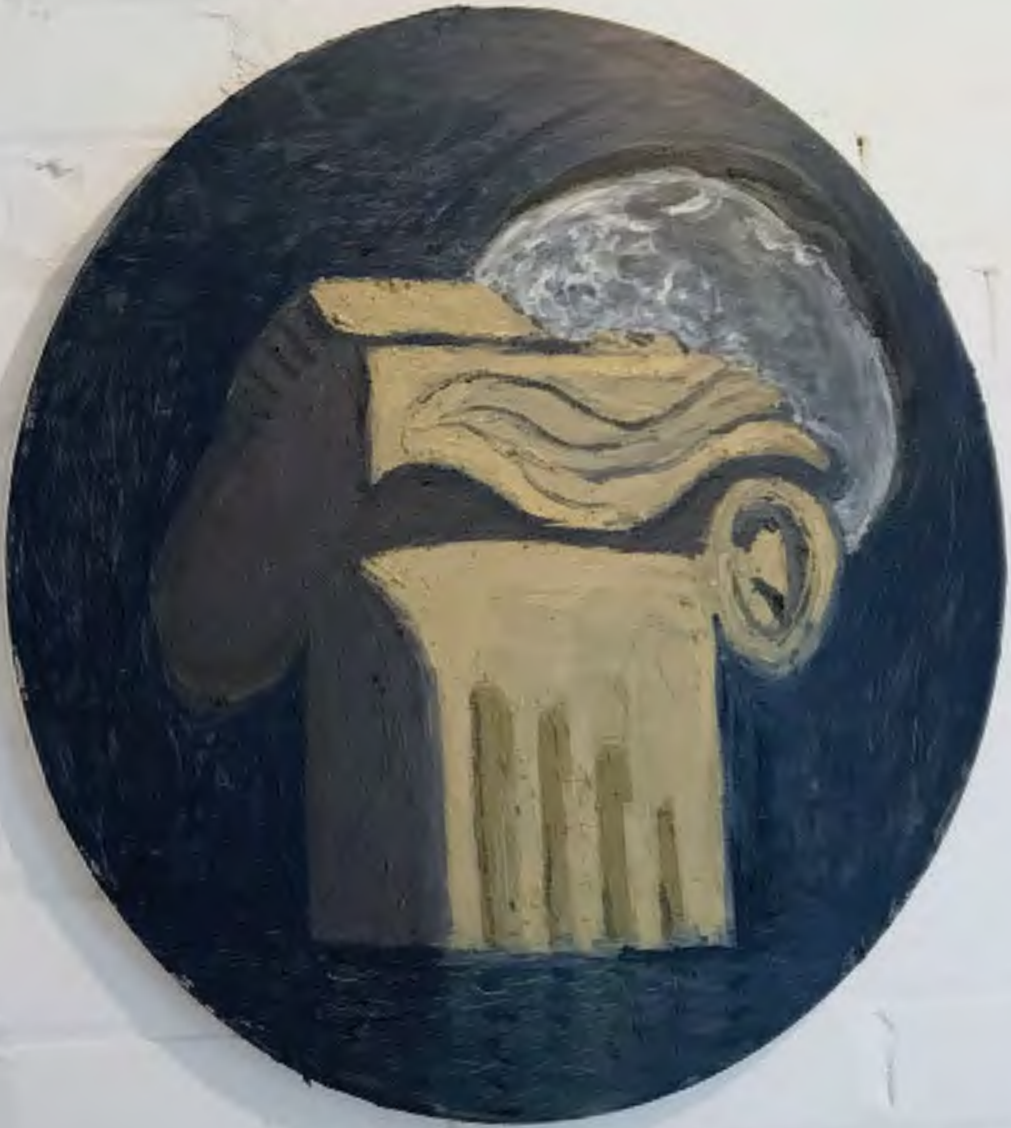
You also introduce a central problem that was taken up by Heidegger in his famous essay "On the origin of the work of art." In this essay, Heidegger echoes Hegel's notion of The Death of Art: that the art of the 19th and early 20th centuries is cut off from its original gestalt or "world" – not merely artistic but also cultural, historical and religious – devolving into what he calls the "aesthetic," or a mere preoccupation with the formalities of representation. He points to a Greek temple on a mountain as an example of this older, more ancient approach to art and the integrated embodiment of an entire era – a "world opening," as he calls it. The temple cannot be separated from the mountain it rests upon without losing its power of "world-opening." He argues that it would otherwise become withdrawn from its religious and cultural associations and therefore impoverished. This includes a retreat into the specialized worlds of the studio, gallery and museum, along with a more pointed fascination with formalities of representation seen in Impressionism, Fauvism, the Nabis, Cubism, etc. Picasso could be seen as the master of many of these.

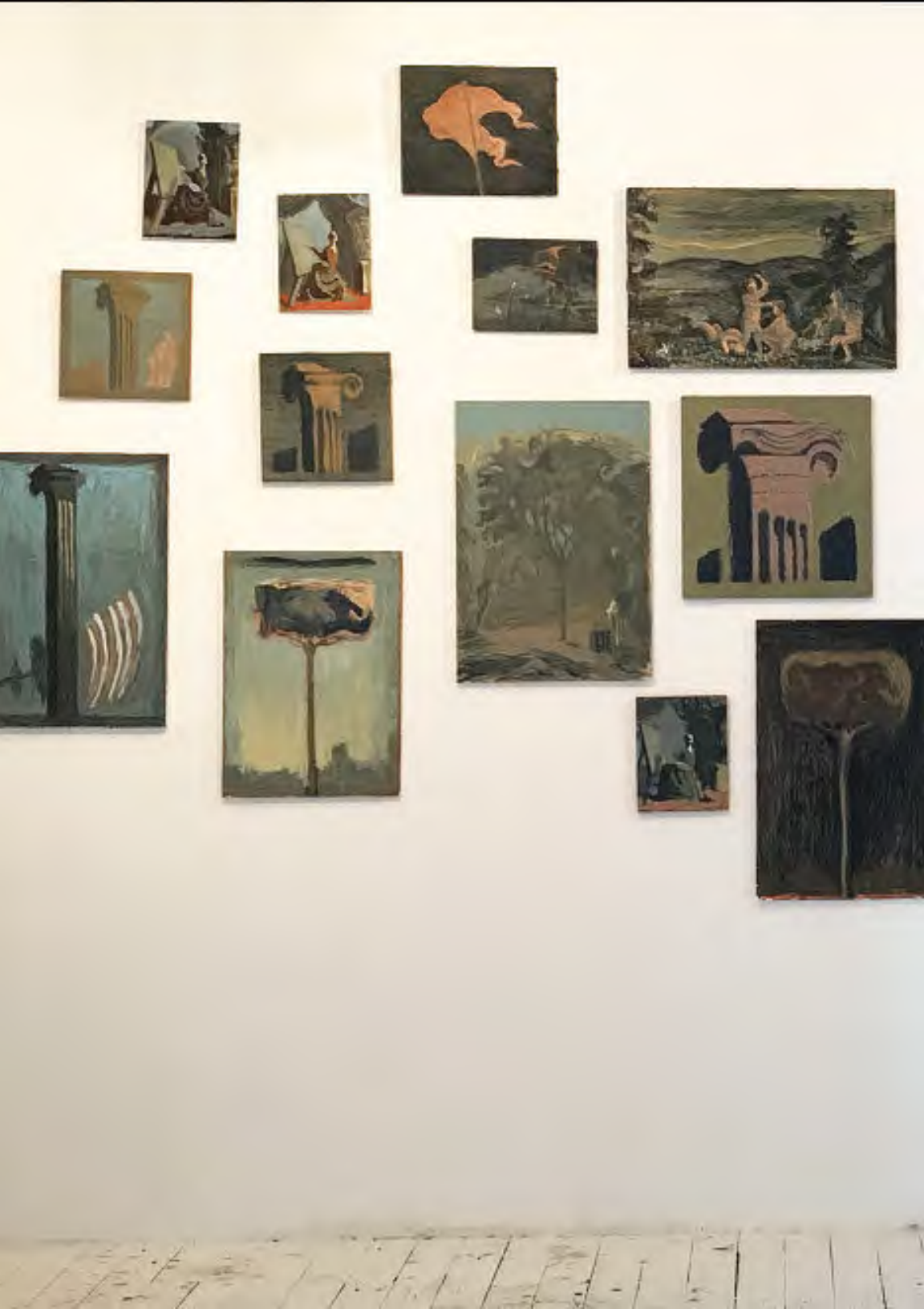
So I'm fascinated to see that you have several works devoted specifically to the image of the Greek temple on the hill, works that often play, as you say, with the very edges of their own legibility. It seems to me that you are deliberately invoking this more ancient "world-building" legacy of art and perhaps subjecting it to the modernist, "aesthetic" lens that plays with modes of perception and representation.

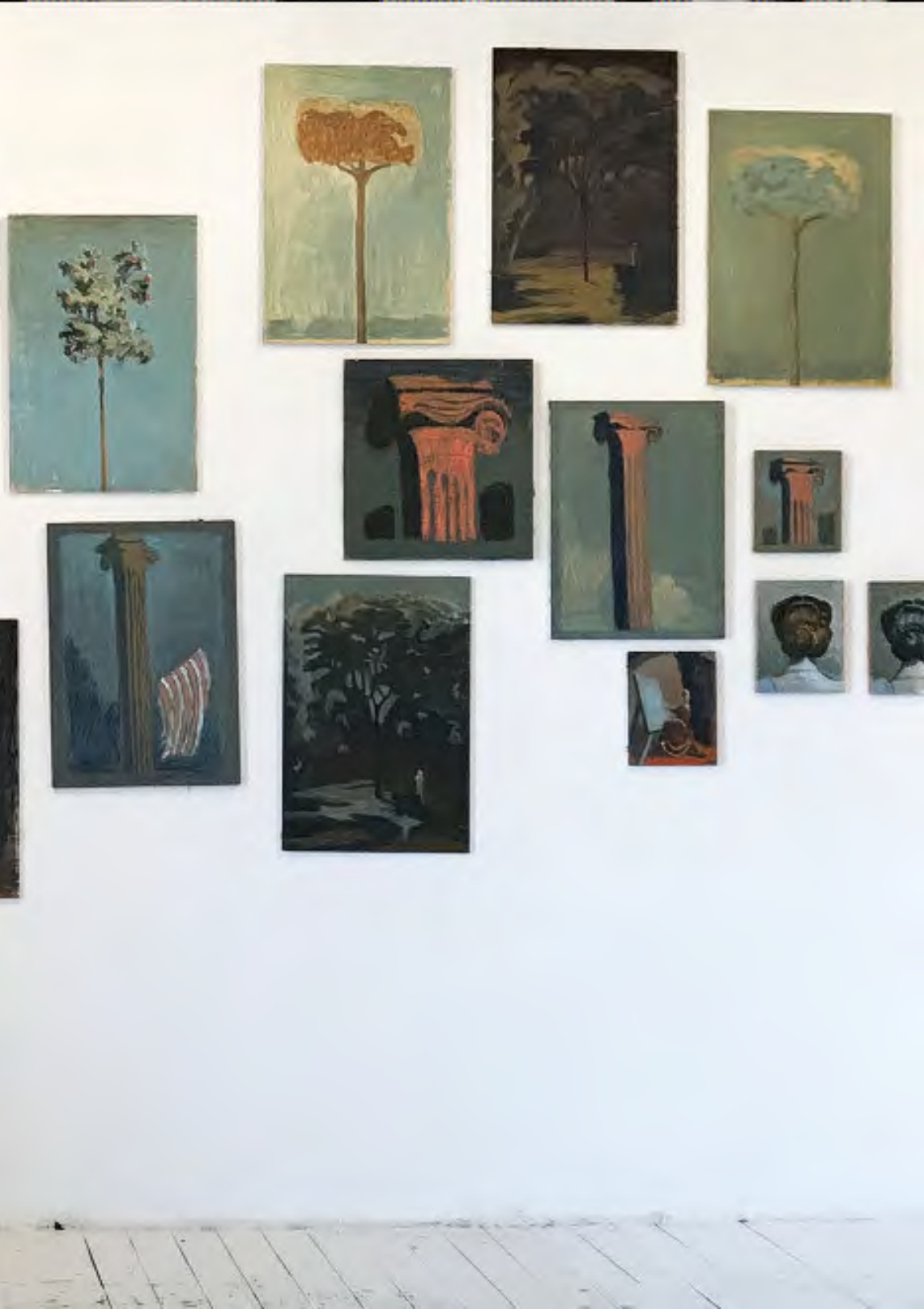
Could you elaborate on your Greek temple series further in light of this tension?

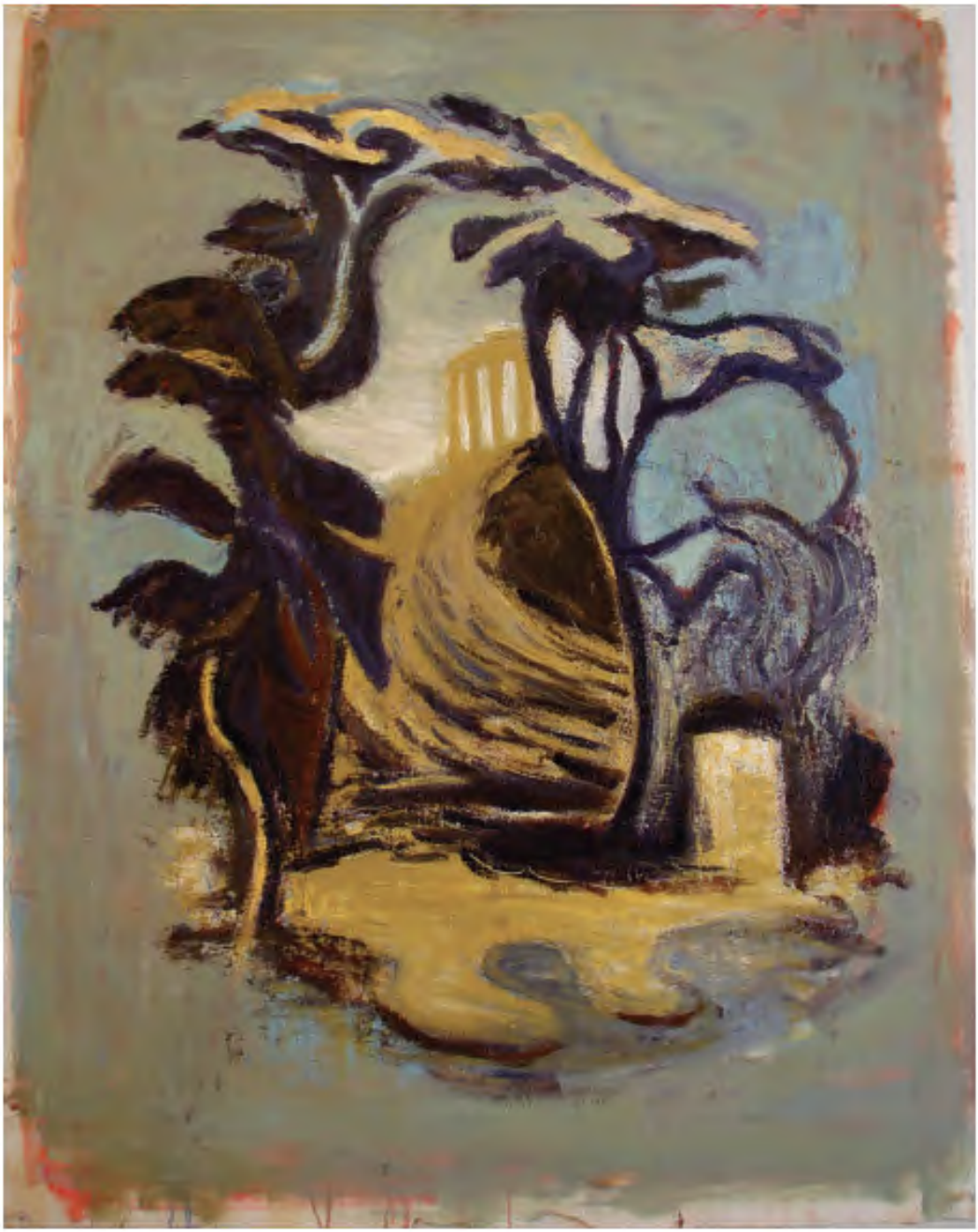












FXSP: The motif of the Greco-Roman temple in the landscape appears a few times, primarily in works titled Temple through a Clearing. This motif of an antique structure, or a ruin, in a landscape was chosen and developed because of its Romantic- and Enlightenment-era associations. Such imagery explores the idea of the fragment and the passage of time. Over time, something monumental can become a forgotten remnant. It evokes both the viewers' relationship to those who came before and the dissolution of their greatness.

This image of a temple viewed through a crack in the forest also resonates with 18th-century print culture, which would often use the graphic tool of an elliptical frame. This decorative framing device is in contrast to the view through a window approach used by many painters. The ellipse is a form that recurs in my work as well. It is more unstable and has many interesting formal and historical associations.

Since Plato, the circle was believed to be the model of perfection, an idea that persisted for centuries in astronomy and visual art. Within the mythology of painting, Vasari and others offered the anecdote of the painter who draws a perfect circle freehand before an onlooker, reinforcing the association between geometry, mastery and perfection. But what happens when you view the circle from a skewed angle? It becomes an ellipse.

17th-century mathematician and astronomer Johannes Kepler challenged the circular motion of the planets. The ancients had assumed that celestial bodies reflected a divine order and were therefore associated with the circle. Kepler's studies showed that the orbit of the planets was not in fact regular. He determined that they moved not in perfect, circular form but rather in an elliptical motion. So, for me, the ellipse represents both the imperfection of the universe and a reversal of the ancients.

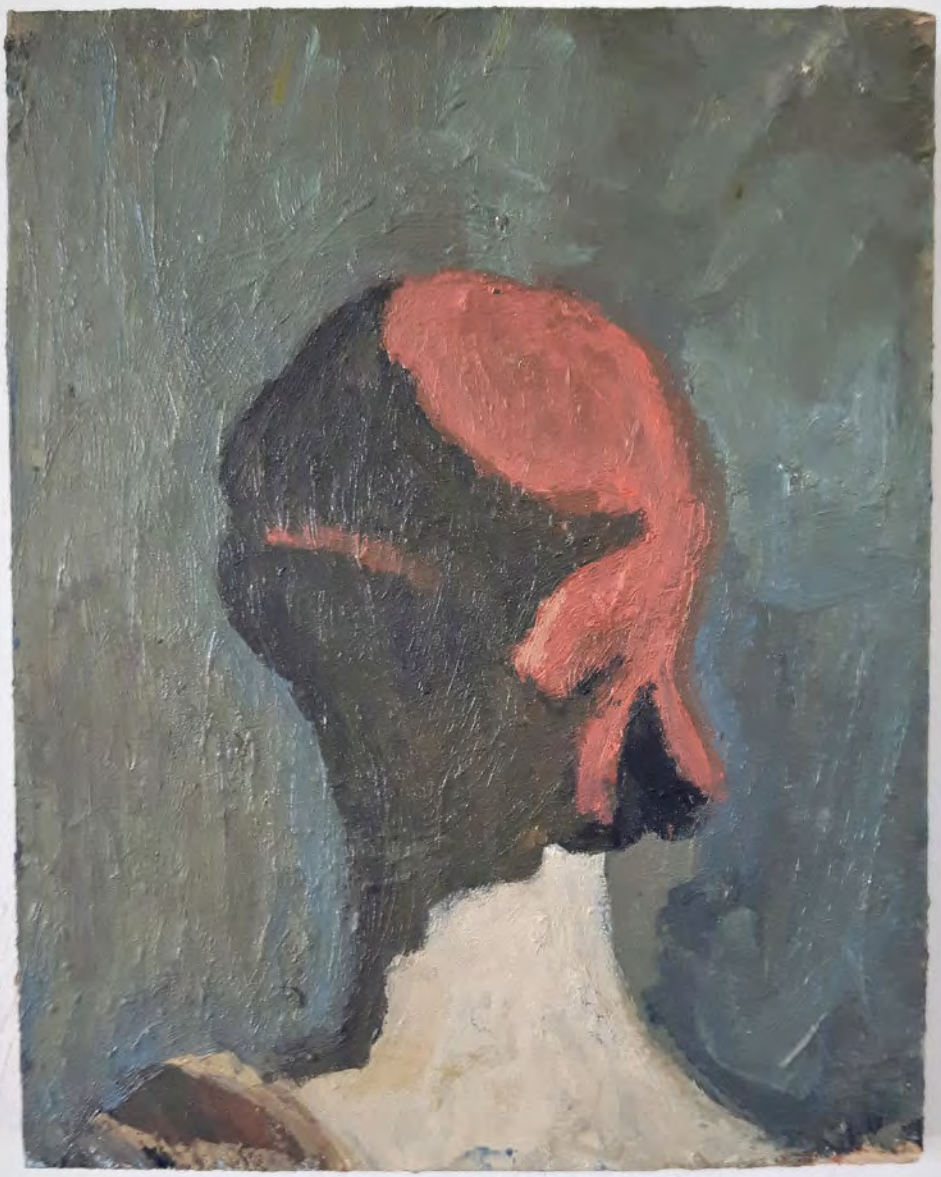
This brings us back to the title of the exhibition, The Spiders and the Bees, which references the ancients and the moderns and how we consider

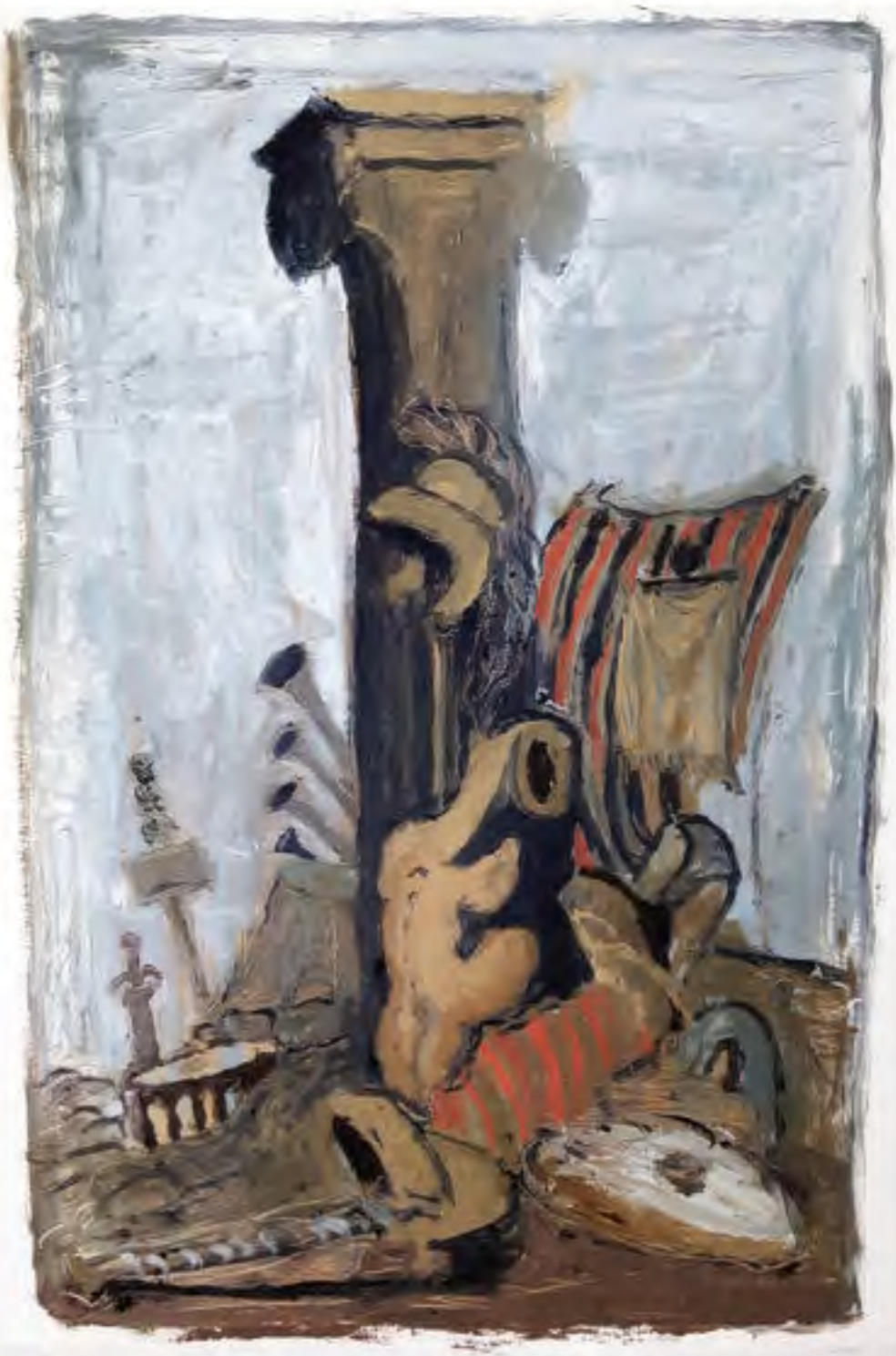
what has come before. In an exhibition called Stop Painting, on view in Venice right now at the Fondazione Prada, artist and curator Peter Fischli considers the history of painting in the 20th century as a series of ruptures. But looking to historical continuities gives painting a sense of coherence that is very useful to me. Considering art's earlier social and civic functions can lead us beyond the model of contemporary painting as a disposable, peripheral experience.

I'm interested, for example, in Jacques-Louis David's painting The Death of Marat (1793), which was originally a cult object in a public procession and not an object within the context of the Salon. This rather large painting was carried aloft like a relic during a demonstration in Revolutionary Paris. In that parade, it was a strange conjunction of ancient cult object and modern propaganda. The possibility that a painted image could serve daily life, invoke powerful feelings or offer protection is interesting to me, in contrast to how the proliferation of images in contemporary culture can make them feel disposable. I like to consider past ways of knowing and the role of the image, what it has been and what it can be. Overall, The Spiders and the Bees addresses issues of tradition and innovation.

DJ: Yes, with that in mind, let's return to the show's title, The Spiders and the Bees. It references an allegorical and philosophical quarrel between the ancients and moderns. As you have noted in our conversations, there are many iterations of this quarrel throughout history, starting with the Greek poet Hesiod and the "four ages of man" where he proclaims that the Golden Age, or the most ancient age, was the greatest. It reaches its peak when the French court poet Charles Perrault proclaims that the era of Louis XIV is the summit of all civilization, eclipsing antiquity.

FXSP: The quarrel, indeed, is ongoing. It's useful as a framework for examining how creative individuals have addressed tradition and the significance of established foundations and precursors, and how we balance that with the need for practices and modes of knowledge that serve today.





The title The Spiders and the Bees references Jonathan Swift's satirical take, in 18th-century England, on the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns – those who valued tradition as the basis for artistic creation, and those who favoured innovation and the new. In Swift's telling, in The Battle of the Books, the two warring camps were portrayed as insects. He likened the ancients to bees, who took from various flowers to create something beautiful, and the moderns to spiders, who spun something new literally out of nothing.

I reference this framework in order to navigate artistic forms and the notion of progress and to examine the way we evaluate both the present moment and the intellectual and artistic creations of the past.

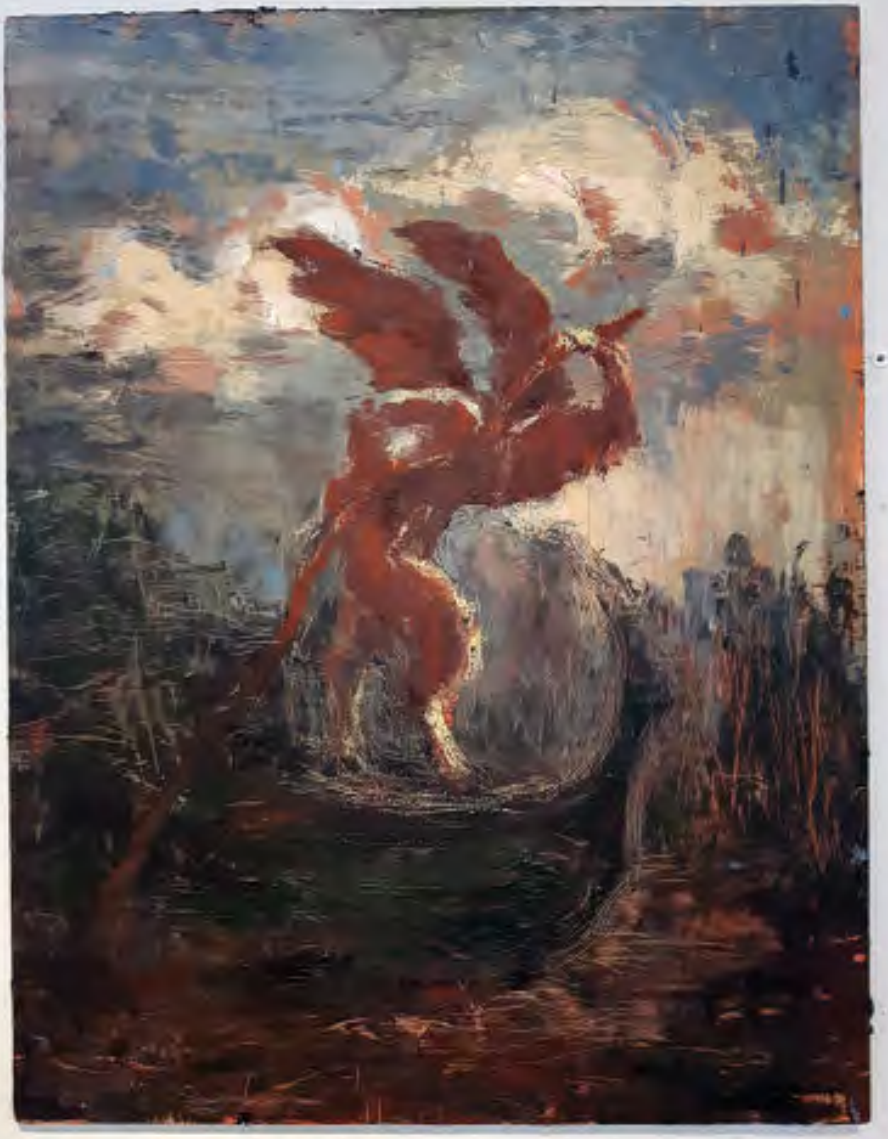
DJ: So we return again to the subject of history, how it is constructed and mediated through the painted image and the "period eye," and how it is ultimately decided in this continuous squabble between moderns and ancients. You also show how the image is used to propagandize and solidify entrenched regimes of power, as your coins show, equating an image of military victory with wealth and value. But your Heap paintings appear to have a more ironic view of this process, showing us large piles of historical detritus heaped around a column. Is this closer to your view of the history of the painted image?

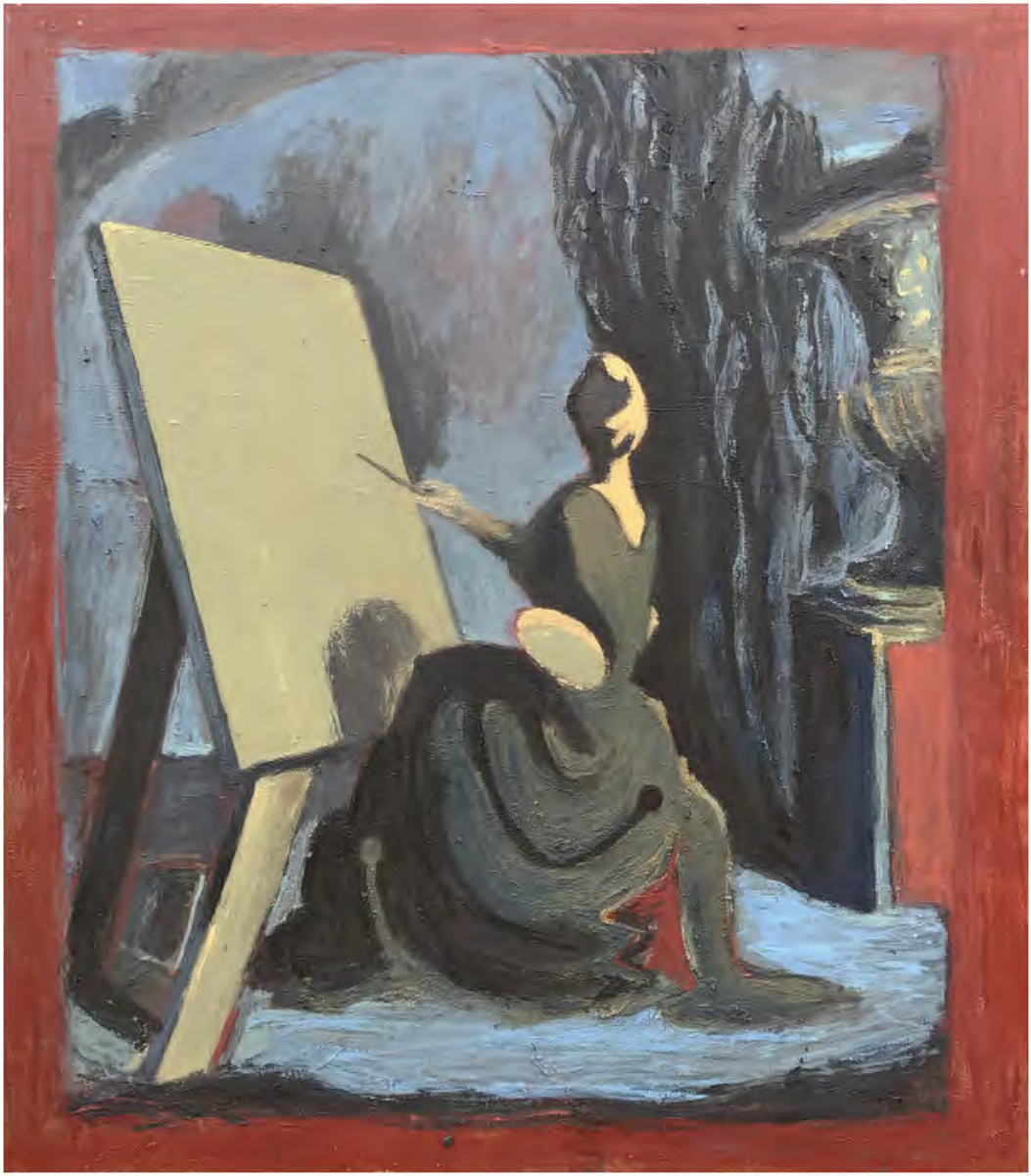
FXSP: My series of small coin paintings, which open the exhibition, point to the use of the image as representation, but also as an instrument of power – they are from a series entitled Currency and show a quadriga. I'm referencing a type of coin that was used to commemorate a victory in 5th-century BC Athens. The recurrence in some of my work of architectural fragments recalling ancient Greece and Rome (a capital, a temple, a statue) can open up questions about how images have been used, who uses them, and for what reason. Symbols of ancient Greece and Rome can call to mind authoritarian regimes, and the representation of ancient Mediterranean material culture may be viewed with suspicion in an environment in which there is a move to decolonize all fields of knowledge.

The paintings entitled Heap present forms associated with antiquity and with the Roman Empire piled up on top of one another. Columns, sculptural fragments, an aegis, banners or flags, are rendered in a way that makes them seem informal and pathetic.

The sources of my imagery are actually very wide-ranging. There are several paintings on view at the Koffler Gallery of a painter before a canvas that were inspired by an 18th-century manual on painting. The image also recalls Agnes Martin's injunction to "paint with your back to the world." And there are works informed by early print culture, such as the Traghetto series, which take as a starting point a traditional depiction of the figure of Time. Others are based on my own memory, of the strangeness of a garden at night, for example, or both the manicured and the wild orange trees I saw on my first trip to Rome.

It's no accident that there are neither any spiders nor any bees in the exhibition. I'm interested not only in the history of the painted image, but also in how we may relate to both the contemporary moment and to different ways of knowing and seeing, how we engage with past knowledge and cultural production.





Biographies

François Xavier Saint-Pierre is a Canadian painter and sound artist based in Venice, Italy. His interests include connections between classical and contemporary culture, the history of perception and perceptual psychology as they relate to art history, and the relationship between colour and language. He has exhibited since 2003 in Canada and the UK, and has been an artist in residence in London, in Sweden and at the French Academy in Rome, Villa Medici.

David Jager is a writer and musician living in Muskoka, Ontario. He was an art reviewer for NOW magazine for over ten years, and wrote several cover features and reviews on contemporary artists for Canadian Art magazine. He is currently a freelance curator, art writer, gallery owner and academic. He also writes rock musicals.

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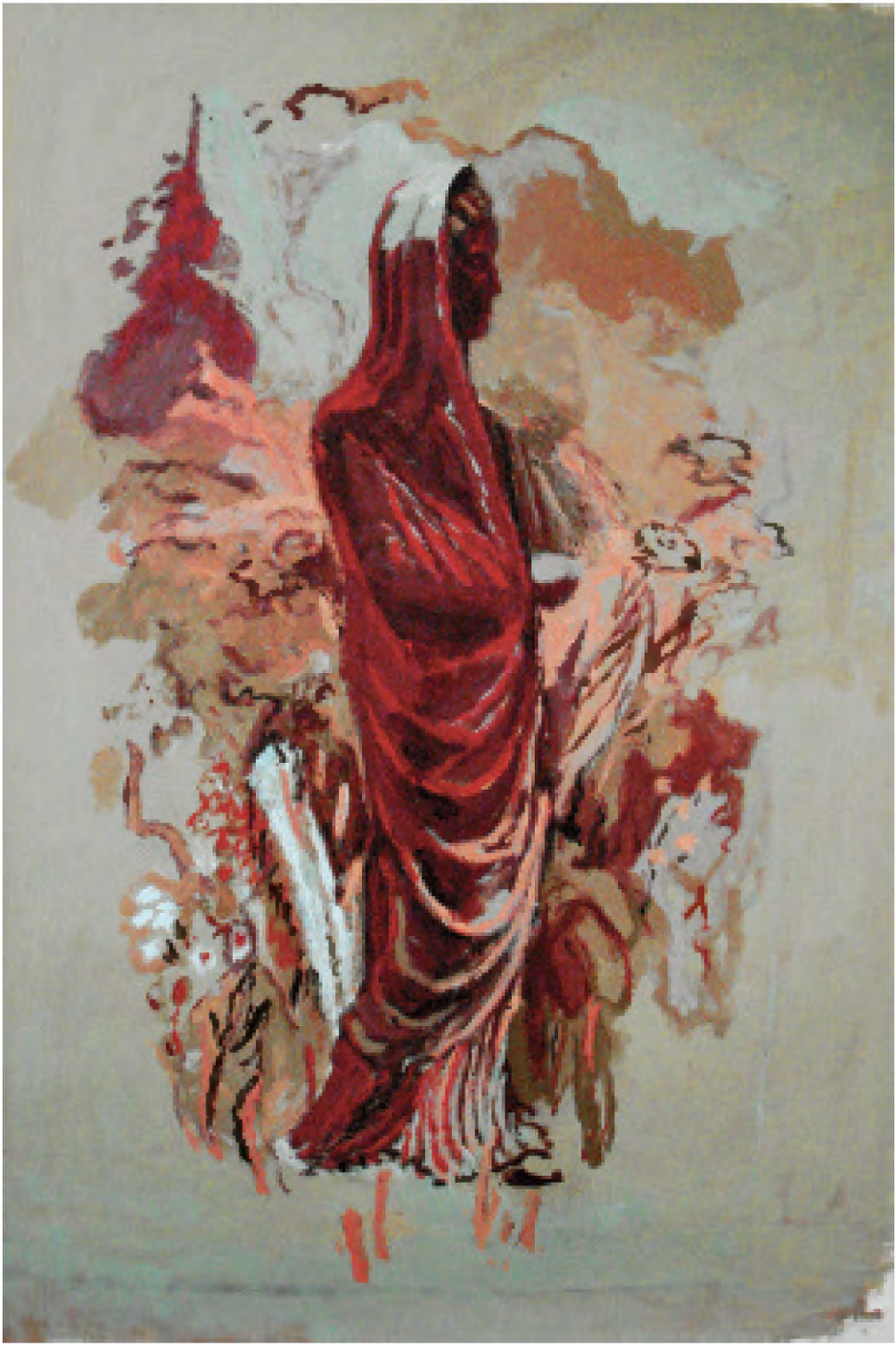

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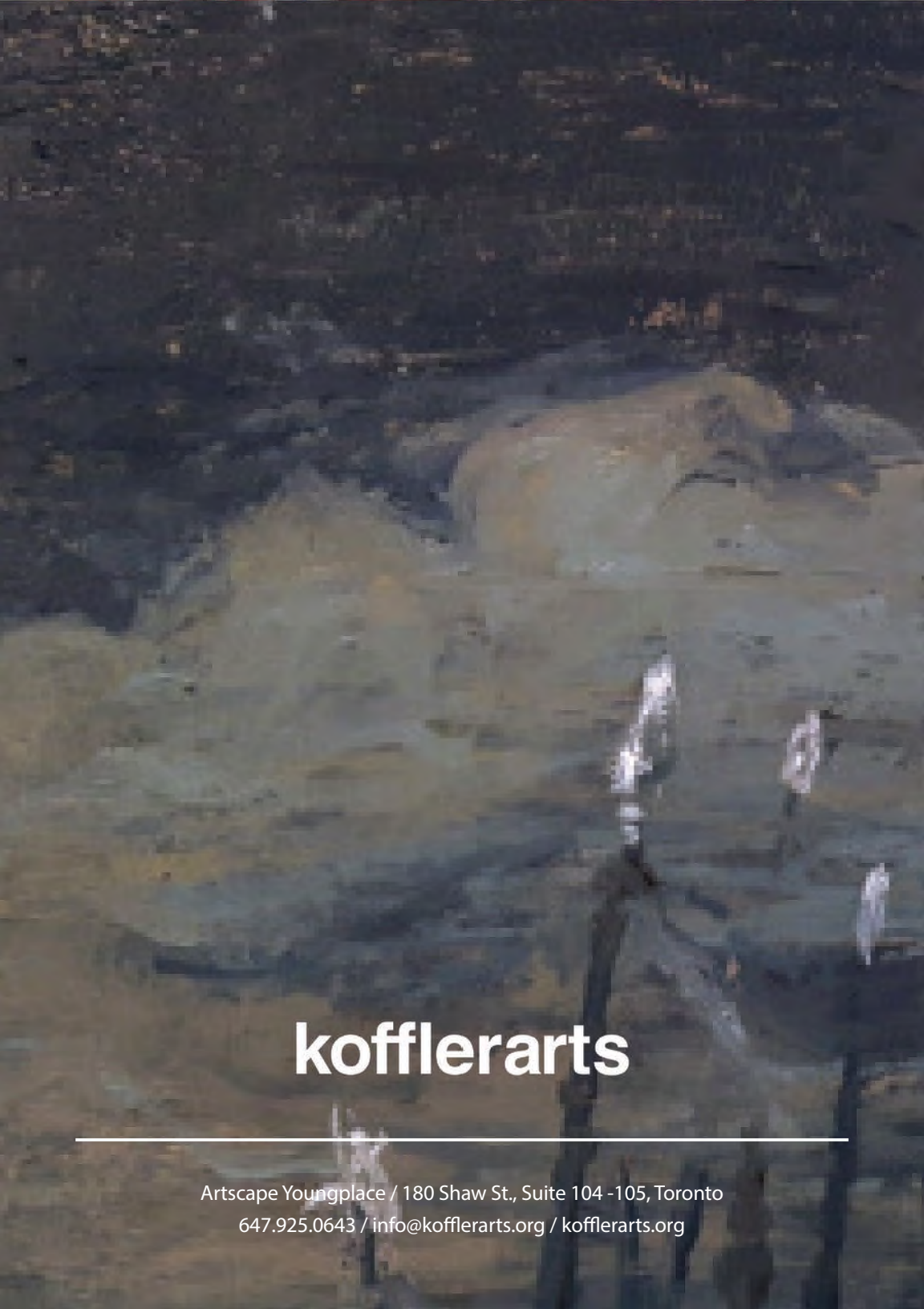

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Artscape Youngplace / 180 Shaw St., Suite 104 -105, Toronto
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