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# Protean Dreams

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*Paintings by David Molesky*  
*intro by Bill Gilmartin*  
*and an essay by Mark Van Proyen*





## INTRODUCTION

One night several years ago by chance, I flipped on my television, when a movie had just begun, “Modigliani” (2004), directed by Mike Davis.

The movie is set in 1919. It describes the artistic milieu of post-war Paris, and recounts the friendship and rivalry that attended to some of the great names in 20th Century art: Pablo Picasso, Diego Rivera, Chaim Soutine, Maurice Utrillo and Amedeo Modigliani, among others. Specifically, the film focuses on Modigliani’s relationship with Jeanne Hebuterne, a beautiful young Catholic girl with whom he has a child. Hebuterne’s father, who disapproves of the marriage since Modigliani is Jewish, has the baby taken away to a convent, thus setting up the dramatic tension of the film.

Desperate for money to care for his family, Modigliani enters Paris’s yearly art competition, which promises a cash prize and the kind of publicity that can make a career. Prior to this, we learn that Modigliani and Picasso have both been critical of the yearly competition because the very notion of letting someone declare them the winner of an art competition – somehow is at odds with being a true artist. But now, Modigliani is desperate and doesn’t care. He enters the competition as does Picasso, and many of their friends, which propels the film into an exploration of the intense rivalry between the artists.

Without giving away the ending, let me say that watching this movie motivated me to play a greater role as an art collector. It wasn't enough, in my opinion, to support well-known artists whose value was already certain. I wanted to encourage and impact what art might become.

My friendship with Theophilus Brown allowed me to inquire as to how the artists associated with the Bay Area Figurative Movement got their start. What happened that caused them to be associated together? How did they gain attention? Who helped them? In many ways, what Theophilus said could be reduced to a single vignette, about a comment a fellow painter, Richard Diebenkorn, made to David Park. He told Park "I bet you can't paint a portrait". This comment, taken as a challenge and perhaps meant as such, triggered a motivation to make the work and also placed the challenger in the collective enterprise of a movement. Sure, there were other things that made this group what it is known for today, but this story distilled for me that something can happen when you ask artists to make work for a reason, for a specific occasion.

I met David Molesky through a competition that was formed as a result of Theophilus's story. David was one of a group of artists who contributed work to a competition we formed entitled "I'll bet you can't paint a portrait." The idea was to ask artists to submit images that related to their own sense of where bay area figurative painting was today. Theophilus Brown selected the winners, all of whom received cash prizes. David was among the winners and now we are honored to present his work in a solo show.



David, of course, is not a bay area figurative painter in the tradition of Diebenkorn, Park, and Brown. But he is part of a circle of painters who has worked with Norwegian figurative painter Odd Nerdrum and who utilizes figurative and narrative elements in his artistic practice. David Molesky has described his own work as follows:

“For me painting has become a way to chronicle things like environments, people, animals, atmospheres and moods. I especially want to translate into paint those things, which I would like to resonate and carry with me. By making paintings, I actively etch an image into my memory and capture with it the thoughts and inspirations that drove the will of that creation. My paintings as objects provide a window back into the emotional body that predominated the experience of empathy for the subject matter.”

We present his work as someone who is developing into a mature style and who deserves greater attention.

We are proud to introduce to you, David Molesky.

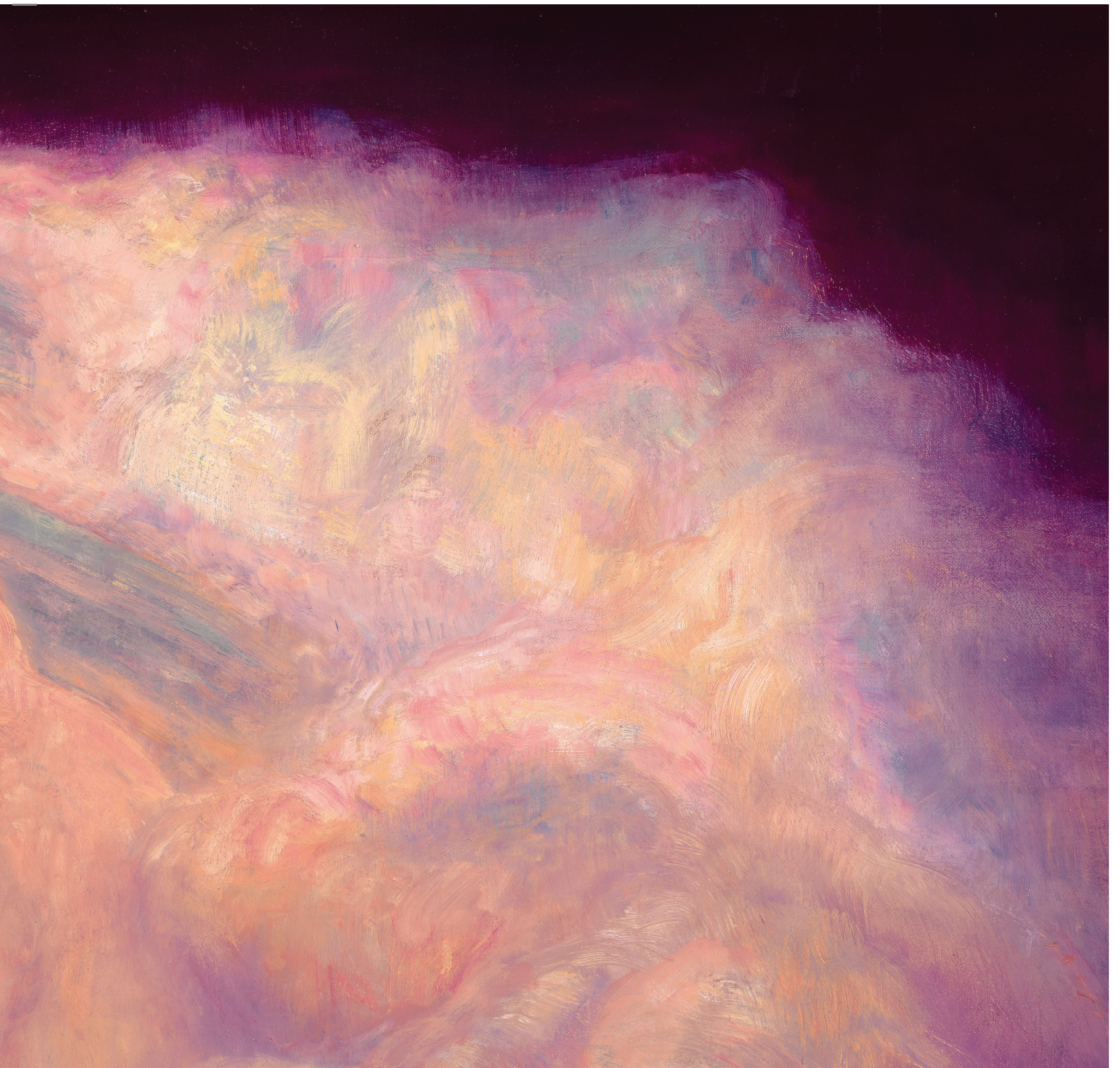
—William Joseph Gilmartin III

I want to thank Daniella Gilmartin, Mark Van Proyen, and Matt Gonzalez for their contributions to this project.

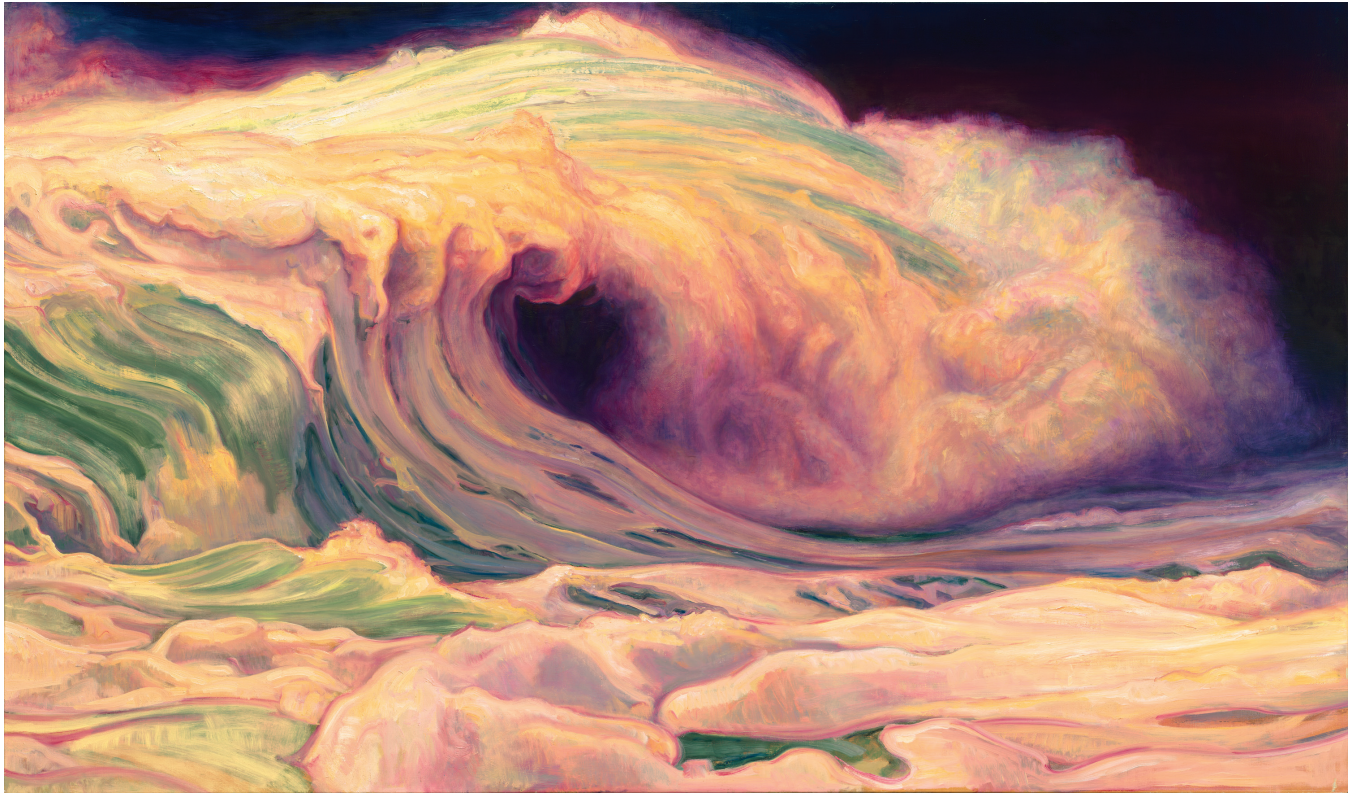












*Sliding Down Tongues*, 2010  
50x85 inches, 127x216 cm  
oil on linen





*La Crescenta*, 2010  
20x30 inches, 50x76 cm  
oil on chalk gesso panel



*Eclipse of an Undercurrent*, 2011  
36x48 inches, 92x122 cm  
oil on linen





*Spilling into the Void*, 2010  
30x48 inches, 76x122 cm  
oil on canvas on board









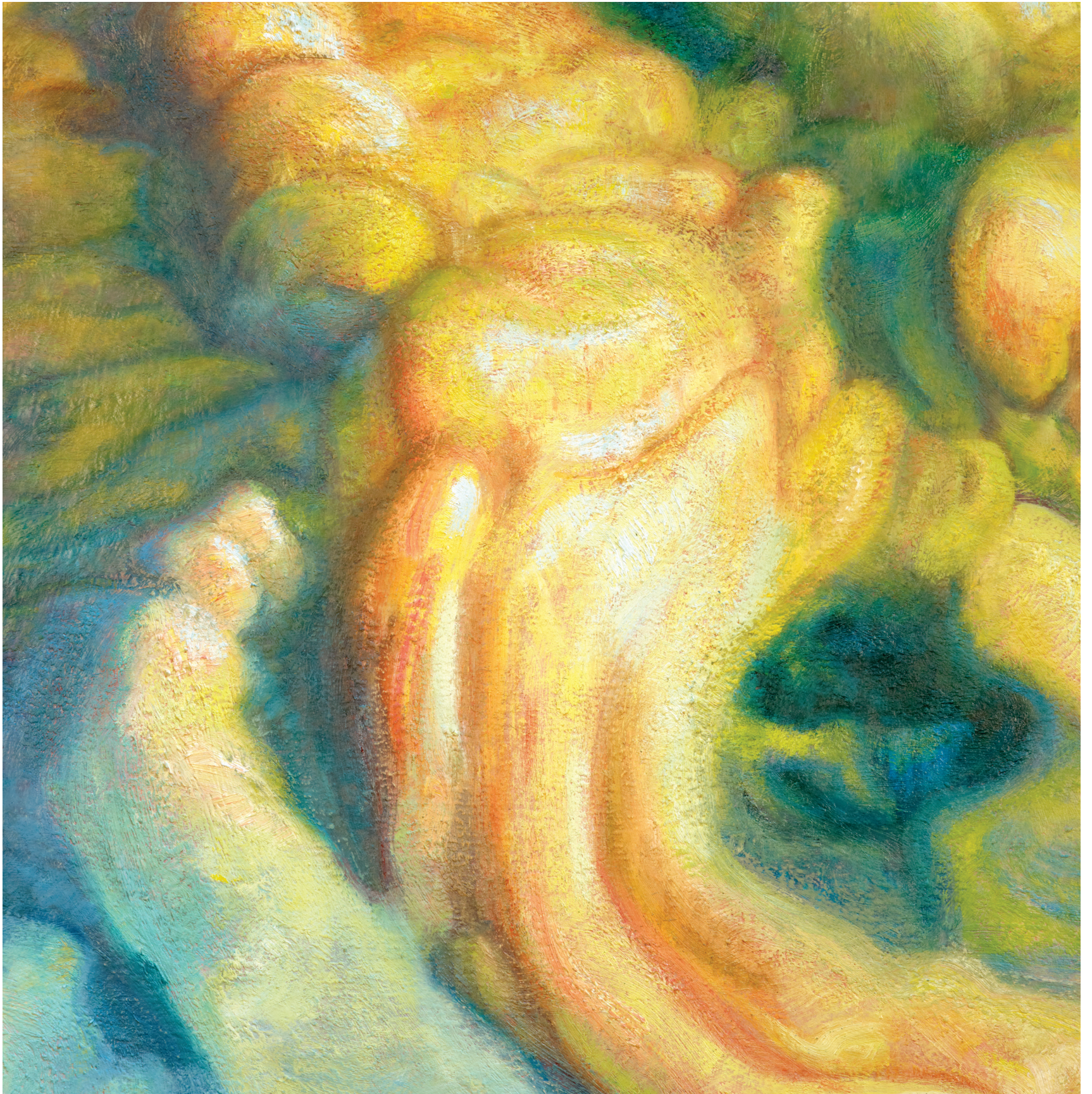
*Harvest the Excess*, 2010  
40x40 inches, 102x102 cm  
oil on canvas on board



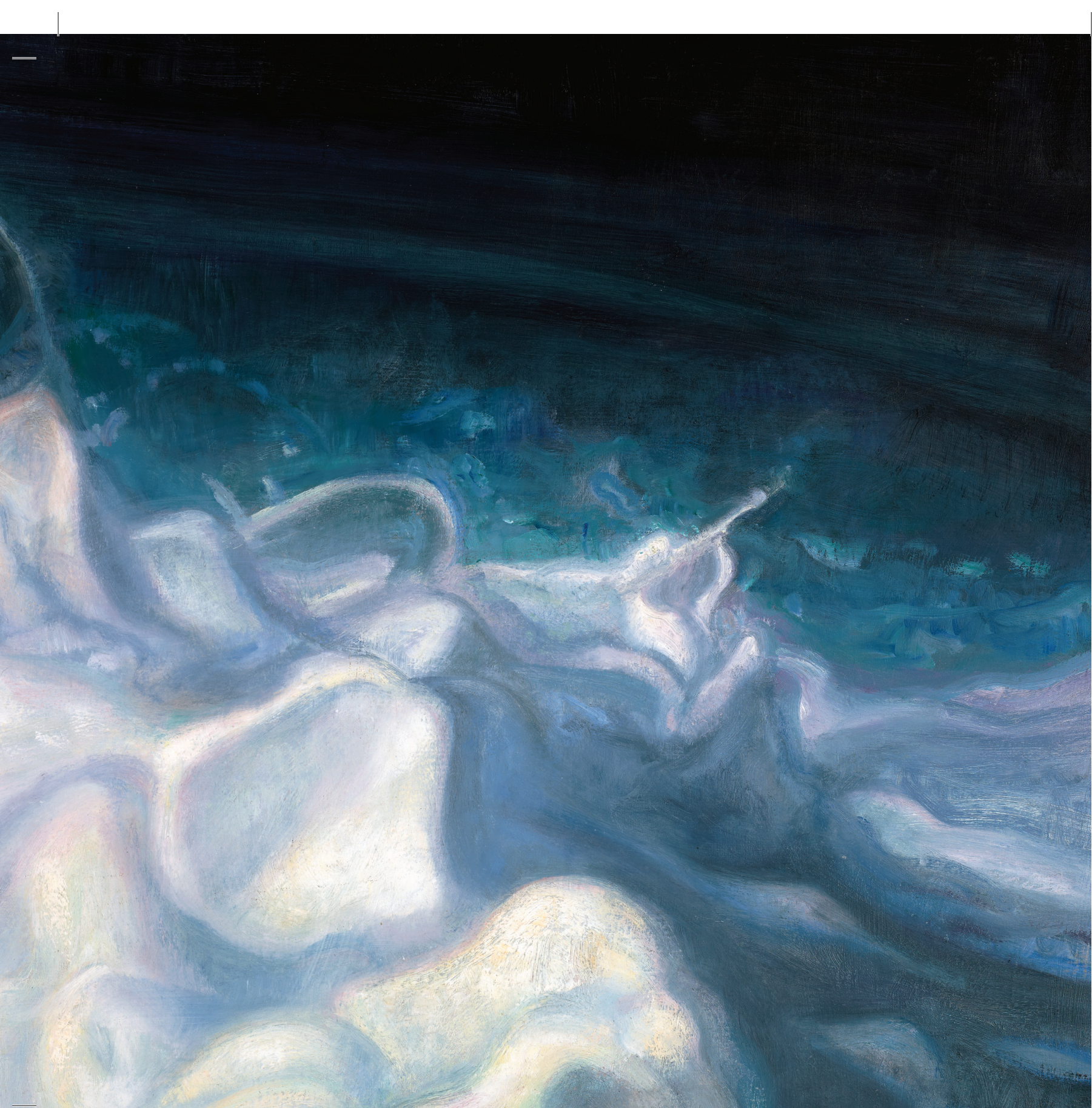


*Octopussian Waystation*, 2011  
54x78 inches, 137x198 cm  
oil on twill linen













*Ethereic Impulse*, 2010  
41x53 inches, 105x135 cm  
oil on linen





*Punch Bowl*, 2010  
47x55 inches, 120x140 cm  
oil on linen

















*Flying Pig*, 1999  
68x64 inches, 173x162 cm  
latex and road bead on canvas





*Havana Fog*, 1998  
108x84 inches, 213x274 cm  
acrylic, latex, and copper pigment on canvas





*Feather Bed*, 1999  
68x62 inches, 173x157 cm  
latex, acrylic and oil on canvas





*Reindeer Lichen*, 1998  
72x96 inches, 183x244 cm  
acrylic, latex, and copper  
pigment on canvas

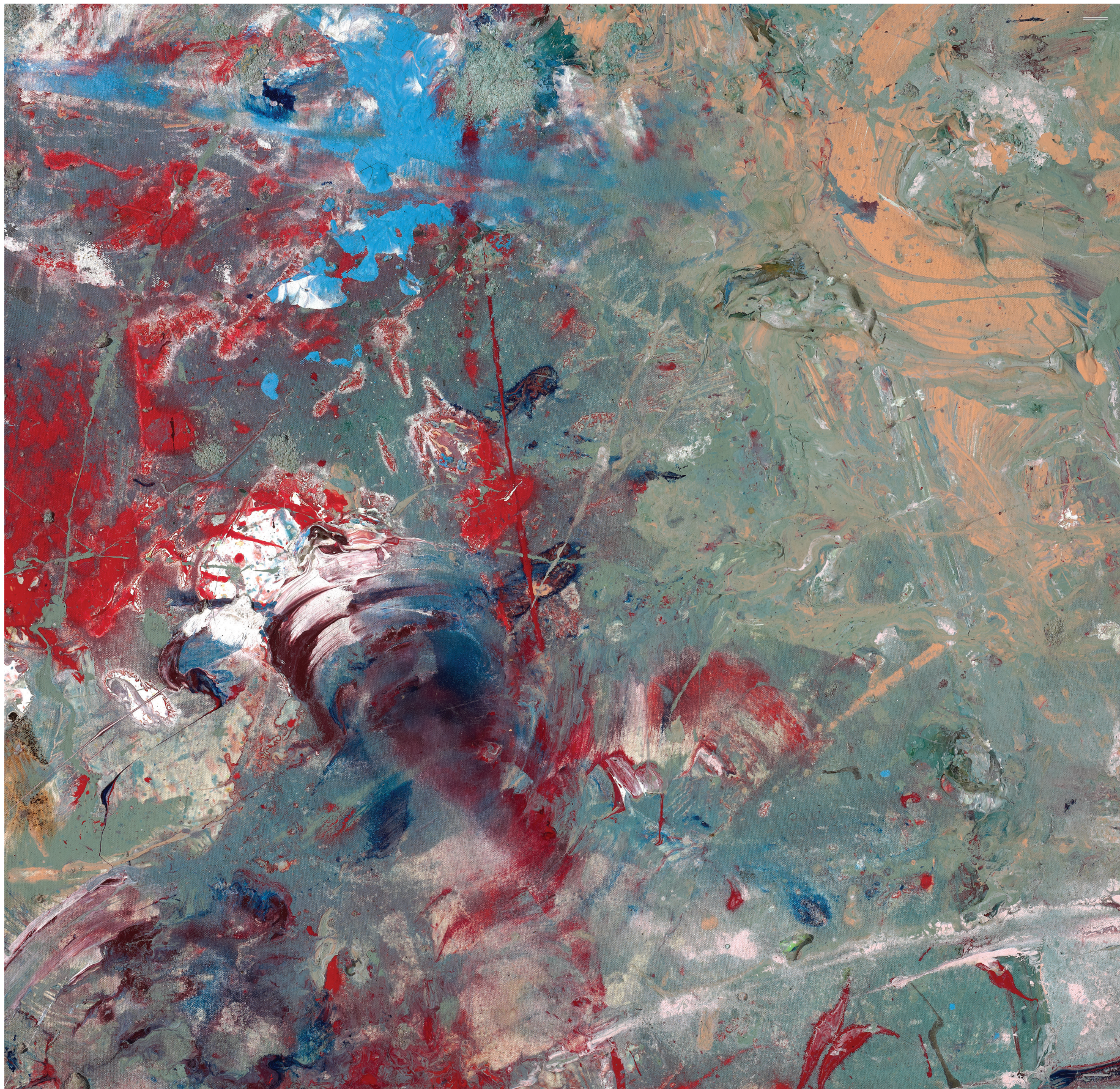


















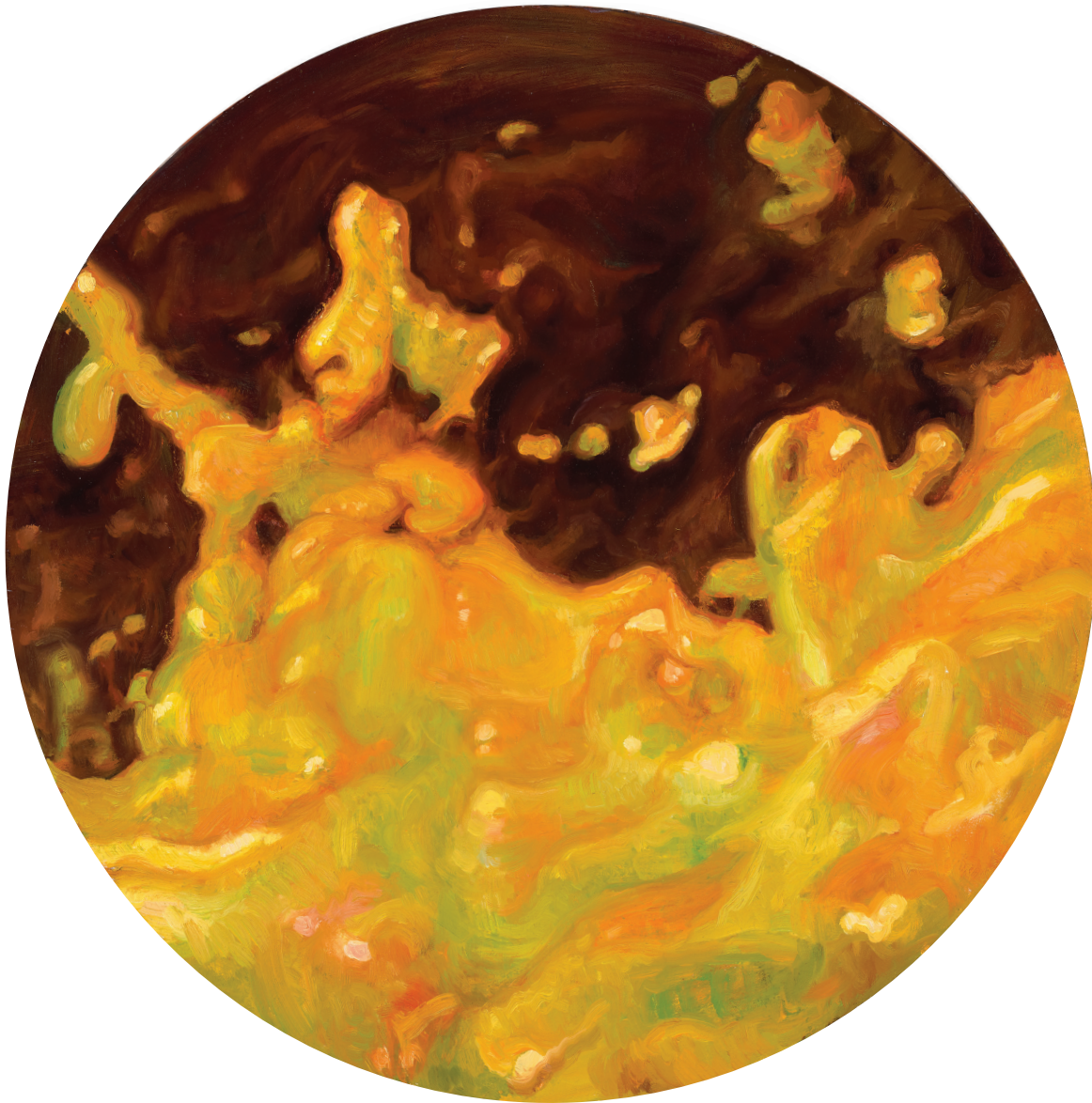






*Electric Waterlilies*, 1999  
80x208 inches, 203x528 cm  
latex, acrylic and oil on canvas





*Microstudy In Cobalt Yellow, 2010*  
24x24 inches, 61x61 cm  
oil on canvas on board





*Microstudy in Cadmium Green, 2010*  
24x24 inches, 61x61 cm  
oil on canvas on board





*Bubble Gum Pop*, 2010  
18x24 inches, 46x61 cm  
oil on canvas





*Microstudy In Pthalocyanide*, 2010  
24x24 inches, 61x61 cm  
oil on canvas on board





*Dosey Doe*, 2008  
18x21 inches, 45x55 cm  
oil on linen





*On a Detour from Valhalla*, 2008  
58x45 inches, 150x115 cm  
oil on linen





*Chasing Tales*, 2008  
20x26 inches, 50x65 cm  
oil on linen





Geyser, 2008  
32x24 inches, 81x61 cm  
oil on linen





*Flipping Saucers over Esja*, 2010  
31x42 inches, 80x110 cm  
oil on canvas





*Passing Breakers*, 2009  
39x43 inches, 100x110 cm  
oil on linen



## In A Larger Moment: David Molesky's Painterly Allegories of Being by Mark Van Proyen

Not so long ago, painters would often say that they found their images and ideas “in the paint,” meaning that they had a sufficient faith in the power of spontaneous improvisation so as to feel no need for any preconception before starting any given work. It was only after the influence of conceptual art had been felt did painters start to resort to those terminological enhancements called “artist’s statements” as a way of organizing their efforts. The jury is still out as to whether this shift in focus can be said to have improved the painter’s art in any measurable way. Painting needs to be painting before it can be other things such as decoration, illustration or metaphysics, and this is true simply because the problem of tangible embodiment always has to be solved in a tangible way. Some painters ignore this fundamental problem at the peril of their art, regardless of any other considerations that they their work might deserve.

Even the most cursory look at David Molesky’s paintings tells us that he is fully invested in the physical tangibility of paint as it relates to the psychological tangibility of the myriad subjects that populate his work. Over the years, these have ranged widely, running the gamut from thickly painted abstractions to fantastic, quasi-mythical landscapes, and on to solitary human figures executed in the kind of thick impasto brushstrokes of the type that have come to be associated with Bay Area Figuration. But every time that Molesky takes on any subject, he always makes it his own by way of an unmistakable painterly touch. It is something akin to a Midas touch and something that cannot be taught—it is, in fact, a sign of the confident grace that emanates from an untroubled mind that is capable of fully being in any given moment where his paintbrush conveys pigment to any waiting surface.

It is worth noting that Molesky has done a great amount of traveling, mostly in Europe, and this is especially impressive considering the fact that he is still in his early thirties. He has spent extensive periods of time working in Austria, Poland, France and Italy, which has given him a first-hand familiarity with a great



sampling of the grand tradition of European painting, as well as the complex cultural habitats that frame the local understanding of that tradition as an extended family history. This leads us to an important point to be made about Molesky's work, in that it bespeaks an almost completely unmediated relationship to the historical practice of painting, one that is uncontaminated by the way that the mass media skews and dilutes the experience of that tradition. Whereas most American painters of Molesky's generation have chosen to position their work in relation to the various pop media clichés that are loosely arrayed beneath the shopworn banner of Pop Surrealism (for example, the artists championed by the southern California publication *Juxtapose*), Molesky has instead aligned his practice with the mythopoetic wellsprings that have sustained painterly embodiment as a primary mode of cultural self-understanding for over 500 years. Along with that position come the analogies that can be drawn between painting as a composite layering of colored surfaces and individual subjectivity as a composite layering of experience. Both need to take place in their own time and at their own pace, even if the demands of the world that surrounds them always call for more velocity, more efficiency and, above all, more abbreviation—that being coded communication called by a more descriptive name. Whereas many artists make their work to reflect and accommodate those calls, Molesky's reverses that polarity by making paintings that slowly reveal themselves to the viewer. By insisting on a slow, gradually unfolding revelation of their semi-secret contents, his paintings remind the viewer of the truism that runs "life happens pretty fast—if you don't slow down once in a while, you might miss it."

Molesky cites an art teacher named Walt Bartman as being a positive influence during the time that he attended the Walt Whitman High School in Bethesda, Maryland—a school that had gained significant national acclaim in the early-middle 1990s for harboring a consistently high level of artistic accomplishment. It is worth noting that Bartman studied with Wolf Kahn, an artist world renown for his chromatically saturated landscapes, locating Molesky's own interest in painting the land within a longstanding tradition. But even at that early age, Molesky was signaled out for his artistic abilities and heralded as something of a golden



boy, selling quite a few paintings when he was a teenager. He eventually landed at UC Berkeley, completing both a pre-med sequence and a degree in Art Practice in 1999. After that, there was more travel, with extended stays in Austria, France and Poland.

Perhaps most significantly, from 2006 to 2008, he apprenticed with Odd Nerdrum in both Norway and Iceland. Nerdrum is an internationally recognized artist who has adopted the old master techniques of Rembrandt and Casper David Friedrich to make compelling allegorical images of the starkest aspects of the human condition, and more than anyone alive today, he is the practical keeper of the grand tradition of European painting. He is the senior living practitioner of what art critic Donald Kuspit has called “The New Old Masterism,” a recent phenomena in contemporary painting that willfully turns its back on a now over-institutionalized (pseudo) avant-garde art that has degenerated into tourist-oriented “postart” spectacle. The premise of New Old Master art is that painters can synthesize modern content and traditional technique to make images that give a unique dramatic form to post-modern consciousness. As Kuspit writes, “New Old Master art brings us a fresh sense of the purposefulness of art—faith in the possibility of making a new aesthetic harmony out of the tragedy of life without falsifying it—and a new sense of art’s interhumanity.”<sup>1</sup>

It is clear that Molesky learned a great deal from his sojourn in the northern climes in general and from Nerdrum in particular. Many of the subjects that he has chosen to paint during and immediately after his apprenticeship show telltale signs of Nerdrum’s influence, for example, the Wagnerian theme of *On a Detour from Valhalla* in the billowing clouds featured in *Chasing Tails* and *Geysir* (all 2008). That influence also goes beyond subject matter and into the realm of style, as is evidenced in the way that Molesky paints some of his landscapes as vast impersonal spaces suffused with a crisp Nordic light. But some of the other landscapes start to show Molesky slowly breaking away from Nerdrum’s influence, particularly those that portray surging ocean waves as their primary subject. These works might seem to be picturesque at first glance, but closer inspection has them being something very different. As is revealed in works such as *Sliding Down Tongues* or *Punch Bowl* (both 2010), Molesky’s wave paintings reveal themselves to be lush and lavish



fantasies that explore complex Baroque notions of form understood as being the kind of spaces that fold back upon themselves to reveal hidden realms of visual surprise as well as the stunning, gem-like luster of the oil paint used to describe them. We might remember that the word Baroque was originally derived from the Portuguese term that describes an irregular pearl, and that it quickly took up a memorable art historical residence when it was used to describe the dramatically folded spaces of Bernini's saintly sculpture and the grandiose and opulent ecclesiastical architecture of the 16th century. Working with these narrow guidelines, it seems clear that the only well-known painter whose work truly earned the ascription "baroque" was Peter Paul Rubens, as most of his contemporaries should more rightly be called mannerists if they were from southern Europe, or allegorical naturalists if they were from the north. It is also worth mentioning that there is something of a baroque current that runs through that genre of still-life painting called banquet scenes. These usually feature close views of table tops supporting opulent assortments of exotic food that simultaneously seem intriguing and even a bit disgusting, slyly bespeaking a time and a world view where colonial enterprise had made gluttony a topic of ambivalent cultural reflection.

I bring this up because many of Molesky's post-2010 wave paintings are so distinctly Rubenesque, doing something similarly lavish for the archetypal elements of elemental forces as Rubens did to the human form. Clearly, both artists make an equation of the sumptuousness of oil paint with human flesh, although Molesky extends that equation to the fleshiness of the entire world that he paints. This is not simply an expedient equation of subject and portrayal, but rather something that is its reversal, as he has chosen subject matter that in various ways can be taken as allegories for the alchemical processes and psychological dilemmas that come part-and-parcel with the painter's art. In other words, his work tells visual stories about the challenges of visual storytelling, and they do it a great deal of style and finesse that seizes on the drama of air and water as signifiers for two of the four cardinal modalities of nature itself. Thus, it was only a matter of time before earth would be added to Molesky's roster of artistic themes, because, concurrent with the wave paintings, he had already addressed the subject of a world on fire.



At one rather telling point after the financial crisis of 2008-2009, Molesky focused his painterly attention on a series of nocturnal images of large wildfires burning in the Hollywood Hills, as is exemplified by paintings such as *La Crescenta* (2009). These are uniquely stunning works, not just for their apocalyptic take on recent events, but also in their almost perverse articulation of the sublime beauty that underlies tragic events. From the standpoint of pictorial realism, fire is one of the most difficult things to paint, which is why it so often looks so over-stylized in many artists' work. This is not the case for Molesky, who thoroughly nails the realistic look of terrifying conflagration while also grasping its sublime character with a kind of philosophical detachment. These works are brilliant expositions of the power of bright red and orange glowing against a dark background, calling to mind an apocalyptic tradition in painting that stretches back to Bosch and Breughel, as well as to our daily barrage of media images of oil well fires and military airstrikes.

All of this leads to the most recent works in this exhibition, which show Molesky turning his artistic attention to the earthly elements, but with a unique and innovative twist that gives us hints of something that only vaguely resembles the human figure. These paintings seem to have naturally evolved out of the paintings of clouds and waves, but they are also much less specific, almost non-objective in a way that connects to earlier abstract paintings such as *Electric Waterlilies* or *Featherbed* (both from 1999). The earlier works show Molesky exploring both the potential for and the negation of pictorial differentiation that naturally inhabits painterly substance, suggesting a condition of formless primordiality. Yet, in the recent works, something specific starts to emerge from the painterly fields. Take, for example, the large painting titled *Eclipse of an Undercurrent* (2011). Here, you will see a complex yellowish shape that suggestively resembles glowing lichen centrally located against a cluster of less distinct bluish shapes that teem with subdued energy. Look closely at the yellow form and you will note that it bears a vague resemblance to a human figure, albeit one that has become a kind of octopussian way-station for multiple visual networks comprised of fantastic baroque forms. Some of its facets seem to be demons forming themselves out of the earth's clay, perhaps representing some new form of damned soul that can only observe its own slow



decomposition into undifferentiated form, retaining but a dim memory of an autonomy that was lost long ago. This work, and its close cousin titled *Etheric Impulse* from 2010 do something very innovative: they portray the human figure in a state of having been almost completely dissolved into its multiple connections to its complex environment—this being a distinctly 21st century rejoinder to the 20th century idea of the figure revealed as the singular existential actor taking a position of anxious nobility in the great tradition of western portraiture.

Granted, my reading of these works as having a figurative subtext may err on the side of being too imaginative. But given the reality of what the psychoanalysts call “projective identification,” it is common enough to imagine that we see the shapes of figures and faces suggested by cloud configurations or the rhythmic leap of flames. Ever since the time of Leonardo, painters have toyed with this psychological phenomena to translate hallucinations into visible fantasies. Molesky’s most recent work follows in that tradition. His version of it carries a uniquely 21st century spin that redefines the traumas that threaten the illusion of autonomous selfhood upheld by earlier figure and portrait painters. Allow me to clarify: figure painting in the 20th century tended to reveal the self as a tragic-comic antagonist to a world drenched in violent upheaval; think of the examples of Cubism, Pre-war German expressionism and the terrifying figures painted by Francis Bacon and Willem De Kooning. These are figures that seem to nervously expect a sudden trauma that would forever rupture the tenuous structures of their self-experience, leading to the anticipation of a sudden psychological disintegration. We should remember that the 20th Century was one of dramatic technological and political upheaval that reshaped the rules that govern social relations, and to a certain extent, subjectivity itself. Given such a legacy of disruption, using the human figure as a lightning rod for exaggerated anxiety (or the triumph over anxiety) could be understood as an existentialist antidote to the social upheavals that were and continue to be a common feature of everyday experience. But it seems that the tale of the 21st century will emphasize other modalities of experience, leading to other ways of using figural forms to address new anxieties.



It is now clear that the 21st century will become the age of electronic network, meaning that the most terrifying things on our horizon of fear may no longer be nuclear devastation. In its place live the more insidious possibilities of cybernetic viruses that can cripple the automatic servomechanisms upon which we all depend, or biological weapons that can decimate whole populations without revealing who might have put them into play. Certainly, these are extreme illustrations, but they are now possible in a way that was unimaginable even a decade ago, and in any event, we do not need to resort to them to make the point about the new age of the network defining 21st century experience. All we need do to confirm this fact is to look at recent political upheavals in the Middle East, caused in no small part by the way that instantaneous communications technology now makes it impossible for dictatorial political regimes to control the flow of information. Indeed, the new fears are not the same as the old—biological weapons and computer virus are the new *bête noirs* of our century's imaginary apocalypse, replacing the mushroom clouds of yore. That much being said, we might then ask a somewhat more delicate question: what does this new age of networks do to the introspective solitary self that has been at the mythical center of artistic creation since the time of Rembrandt? As has already been mentioned, the 20th century witnessed the positioning of that self in a state of siege vis-à-vis the prospect of a quick, technologically assisted annihilation, and the figure painting of that century registered that threat in images of anxiety and anguish. I would submit that the new network assisted threat to subjective autonomy lies not so much in any portent of instantaneous demise so much as it would manifest itself as a kind of slow death by a thousand cuts of distraction leading to the point where autonomous subjectivity finds itself slowly dissolving into the position where all meaning is diluted out of existence. If this is indeed correct, then we can say with some certainty that Molesky's new paintings are doing what the art of any time should do: chart the subtle psychological character of a fall into a new kind of oblivion, and report faithfully and even dramatically on the experiential consequences of that descent.

— Mark Van Proyen

<sup>1</sup> Donald Kuspit, *The End of Art* (Cambridge University Press, 2000). 192.







## CURRICULUM VITAE

Born 1977 in Washington, D.C.  
Moved to the West Coast in 1995  
Lives and Works in San Francisco

### EDUCATION

- 1999 University of California at Berkeley, BA  
Dept. of Art Practice & PreMed emphasis in Neurobiology
- 1997 Semester at Universitas Gadjah Mada, Jogykarta, Indonesia
- 1994 Cornell University Summer College, Ithaca, NY

### STAGIAIRE

2006 - Apprentice to Odd Nerdrum Iceland and Norway  
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### SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2011 Protean Dreams, ArtSpace 712, San Francisco, CA  
Eclipse of an Undercurrent, Marjorie Evans Gallery, Sunset Cultural Center, Carmel, CA
- 2010 Turbulent Mirror, Rae Douglass Gallery, Berkeley, CA  
Spume, Canessa Gallery, San Francisco, CA
- 2007 Equinox, Terrence Rogers Fine Art, Santa Monica, CA  
Radhus, Tonsberg, Norway
- 2005 Recent Landscapes, Las Fuentes Villa, Carmel Valley, CA  
State of Being, Municipal Building, Raleigh, NC
- 2004 Pan in Arcadia, Lisa Coscino Gallery, Pacific Grove, CA



## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2011 Suggestivism, Grand Central Art Center, Cal State Fullerton, Santa Ana, CA  
Ground Swell - Surfrider Foundation, Bay Model Building, Sausalito, CA
- 2010 A History of Flight, Terrence Rogers Fine Art, Santa Monica, CA  
Empty Time, the fridge Gallery, Washington, D.C.  
100 Artists See Satan, Grand Central Art Center, Cal State Fullerton, Santa Ana, CA
- 2009 The Genesis of Bay Area Figurative Art Now, ArtSpace 712, San Francisco, CA  
Kitsch mer unn kunst, Telemarksgaleriet, Nottoden, Norway
- 2008 Kitsch Biennale, Pasinger Fabrik, Munich, Germany
- 2007 Intimate Landscape, Sesnon Gallery, University of California, Santa Cruz
- 2006 All Wet, Lisa Coscino Gallery, Pacific Grove, CA
- 2005 Auto Show, Charles Campbell Gallery, San Francisco, CA  
My California, National Steinbeck Center, Salinas, CA
- 2004 Art of the Mediterranean Games, Italian Institute of Culture, San Francisco, CA  
Objects of Obsession, Lisa Coscino Gallery, Pacific Grove, CA

## SELECTED TRAVEL AND RESIDENCES

- 2010 Artist in Residence Award at Monterey Peninsula Yacht Club, Monterey, CA
- 2009 May Artist in Residence, Fine Art Base, Sand City, CA
- 2008 Summer-Winter Studio in Vienna, Austria  
Late Spring Artist in Residence, Fundacia Nakjelska, Naklo Palace, Poland  
Spring Artist Retreat, Jackowo Dolne, Poland
- 1999 Summer Studio Rome, Italy



***Protean Dreams: Paintings by David Molesky***

At ArtSpace 712

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