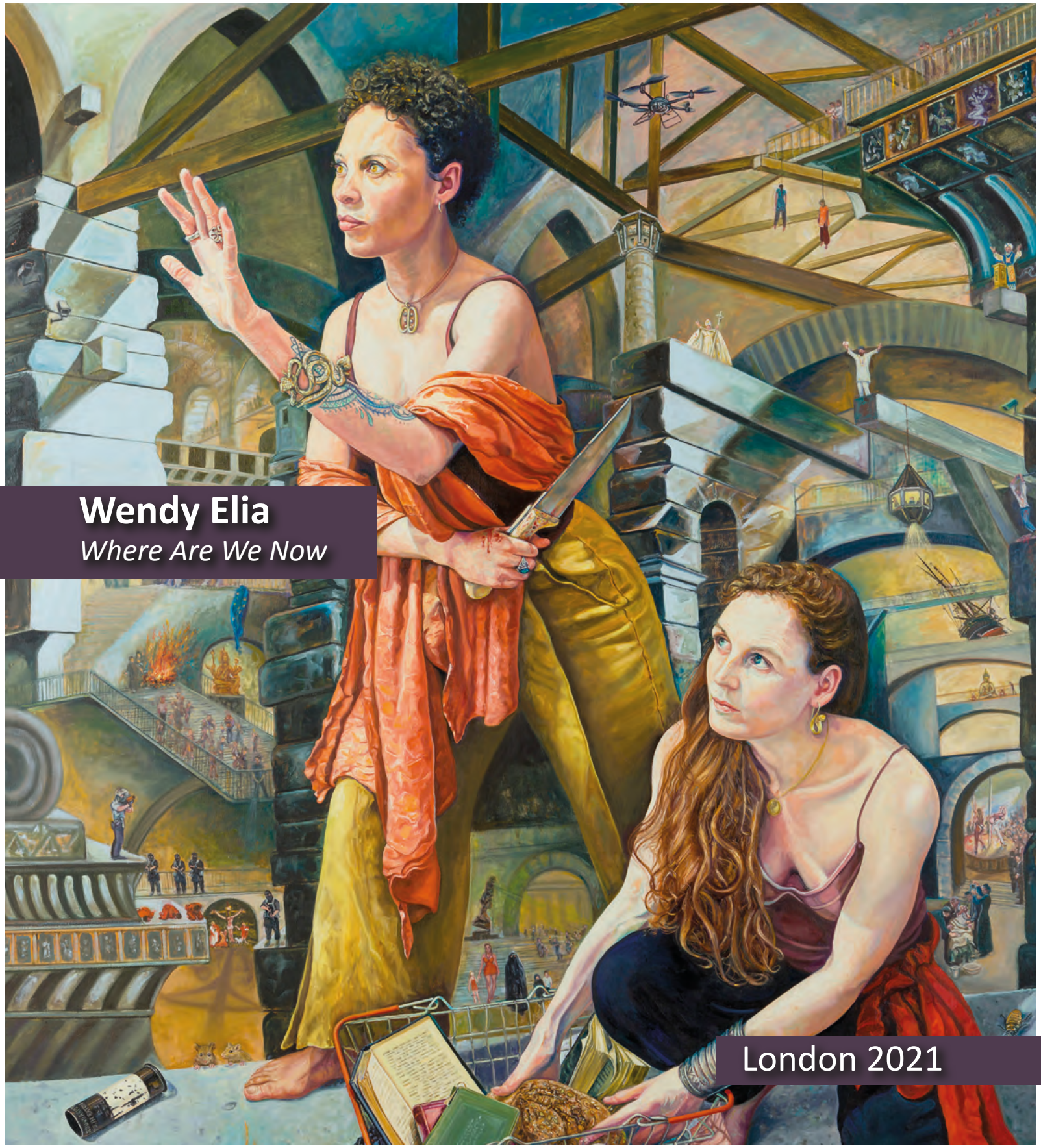
Wendy Elia
Where Are We Now
London 2021

COVER

Where Are We Now 2021
Oil on canvas | 160 x 130cm
(detail)

Wendy Elia

Where Are We Now

13 - 17 July 2021

BERMONDSEY
PROJECT SPACE

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Where Are We Now

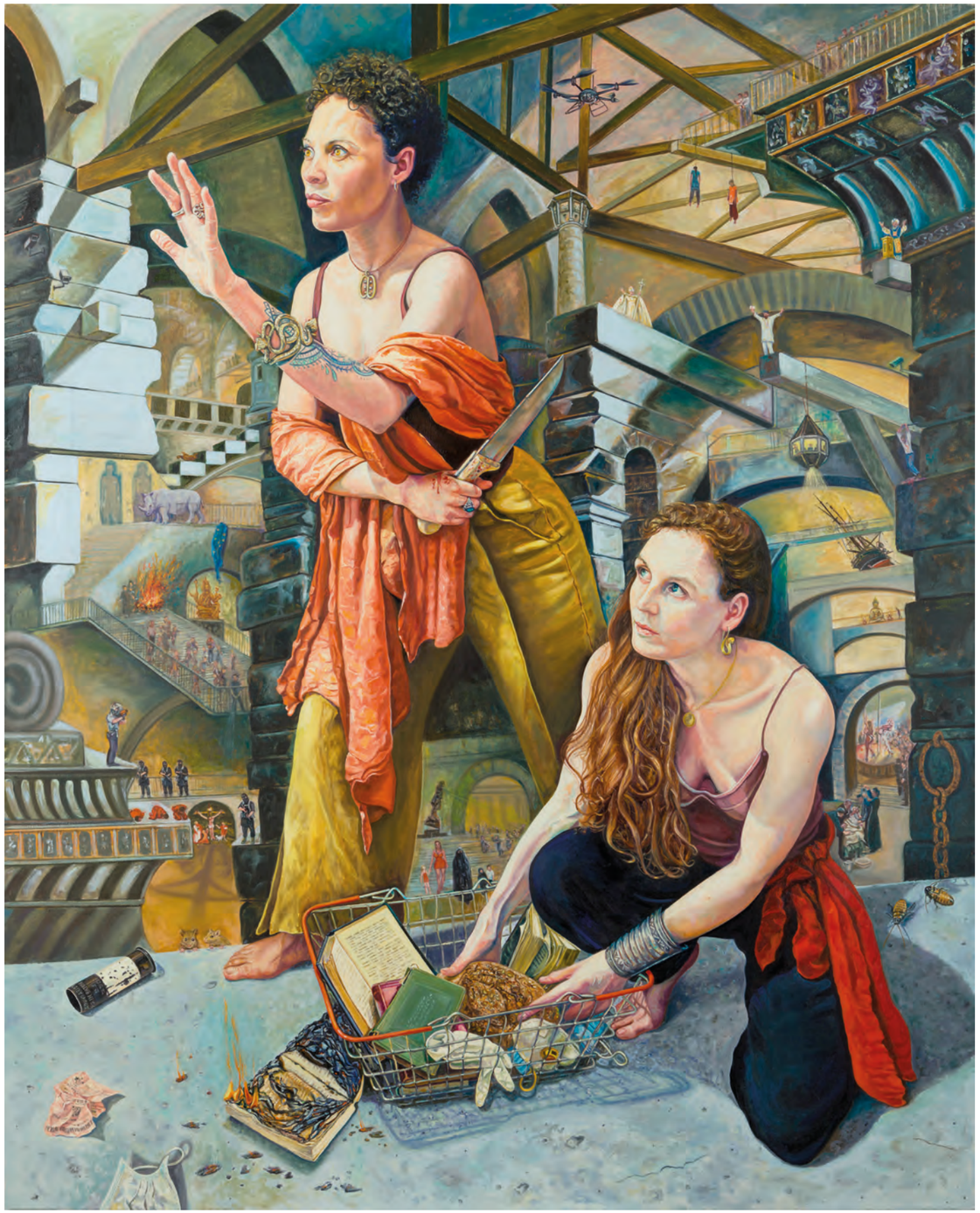
Marie-Anne Mancio

Like Bowie's 2013 song of the same name, Where Are We Now is a meditation on time and history. Featuring bold new works that re-imagine Artemisia Gentileschi's 'Judith and Holofernes' as well as representative paintings from Elia's key series, the exhibition creates slippages between past, present, and future. Poussin's seventeenth century 'Dance to the Music of Time' about the turns of Fate is re-interpreted as 'Dance to the Music of Time II' that itself alludes to an absent, earlier Elia work 'Dance to the Music of Time I' from the mid-'90s. Both feature Elia's daughter Madeleine who has appeared in many of Elia's works and is one of the protagonists of the three new paintings in this show: 'Where Are We Now,' 'The Messenger,' and 'We Need A God Who Bleeds.'

This trio examines Gentileschi's paintings on the subject of Judith and Holofernes. The latter's subtext lies not just in the moral of the apocryphal story of how the Assyrian general was cut down, as it were, by the 'underdog' – a Jewish widow and her maidservant – but the oft repeated narrative of the artist's own rape by Agostino Tassi, her teacher and father's friend. Yet the later works which are the ones that concern us most here should also be viewed through the prism of Gentileschi's subsequent successes in Florence and Naples where she went on to have a productive career. In referencing them, Elia's paintings are as much a celebration of female triumph as an investigation into the dangers women face.

Elia's paintings are as much a celebration of female triumph as an investigation into the dangers women face.

The composition of 'Where Are We Now' is clearly an homage to one of these late works: Gentileschi's 'Judith and her Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes,' c. 1625. Although Elia deploys some of the original's colours, its golds and crimsons, hers is a cooler, more high-key colour palette. Elia's oeuvre has consistently mined the rich traditions of western history painting, deftly juxtaposing quotations of iconic works with references to contemporary events as seen through news reports, film or TV stills and footage. The setting recalls Piranesi's torturous architecture which she used in an early work called 'What Is

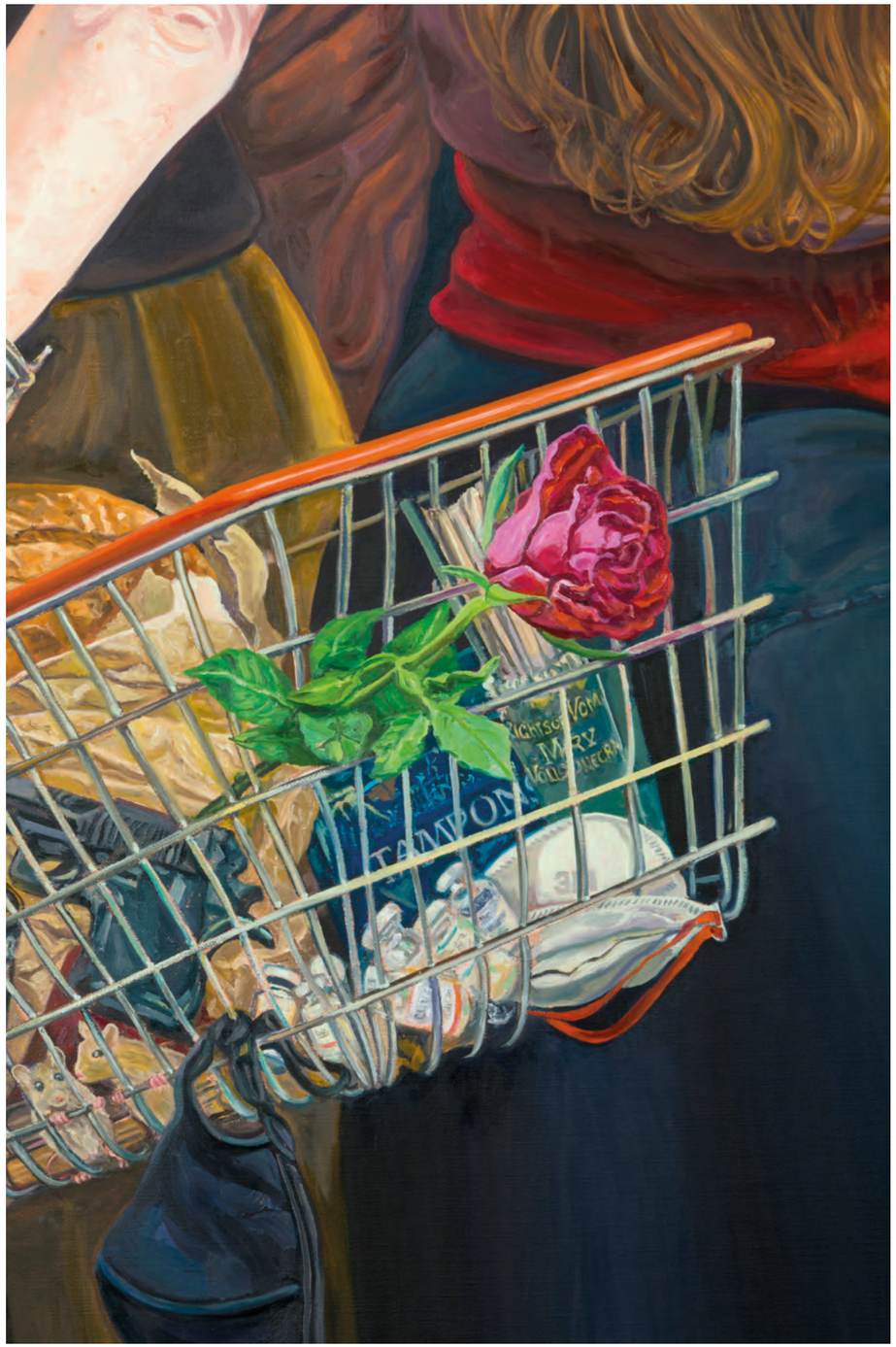


Where Are We Now 2021
Oil on canvas
160 x 130cm

Truth' (1994-5) but in 'Where Are We Now' she rejects chiaroscuro in favour of a well-lit scenario. Where Gentileschi's characters must operate by stealth in the flickering light of a candle, Elia's are exposed to an artificially bright interior that denies them the safety of hiding in shadows and becomes an accomplice to their surveillance. From the eponymous security cameras to drones to spectators that peer over a balcony like figures in a Veronese painting, watchers are everywhere. The setting is the most intricate of the three works, certainly in comparison to that of 'The Messenger' where the protagonists are alone, save for a couple of mice and the ominous shadows of hung men, thrown against a wall behind them. These mice and a pair of seemingly indestructible cockroaches resurface regularly in Elia's oeuvre, taking on roles as guides through her purgatory, inviting us to follow them through cracks and fissures, the ultimate survivors.

She destabilises the racism inherent in most history paintings and portraits whereby the black servant figure is all too often an afterthought. Reversing those roles, she positions her white daughter as the maid.

Judith and her maidservant are modelled by family friend Danielle and Madeleine respectively. Elia's own background – she is British born, Greek Cypriot – has always seen her explore questions of identity and immigration against the backdrop of British history. Here, by choosing a protagonist of mixed British and Caribbean descent, she destabilises the racism inherent in most history paintings and portraits whereby the black servant figure is all too often an afterthought. Reversing those roles, she positions her white daughter as the maid. Together, they echo the sense of female solidarity apparent in Gentileschi whose Judith and maidservant Abra deviate from countless other versions that emphasise the women's respective differences in status and often depict them at either end of the age spectrum. (Caravaggio's 'Judith and Holofernes,' is a prime example.) Danielle wears an African ese ne tekrema ("the teeth and the tongue") pendant, a symbol of friendship and interdependence. The force of Gentileschi's characterisation is that we believe in her women's ability to carry out their allotted task. The determination and physicality with which they subdue the struggling Holofernes in her most famous work and the first of her treatments of the narrative ('Judith Slaying Holofernes' of 1612-13) is reflected in Elia's 'Where Are We Now,' where both the dagger – more butcher's knife than ornamental sword – and killer's hand are bloodied.

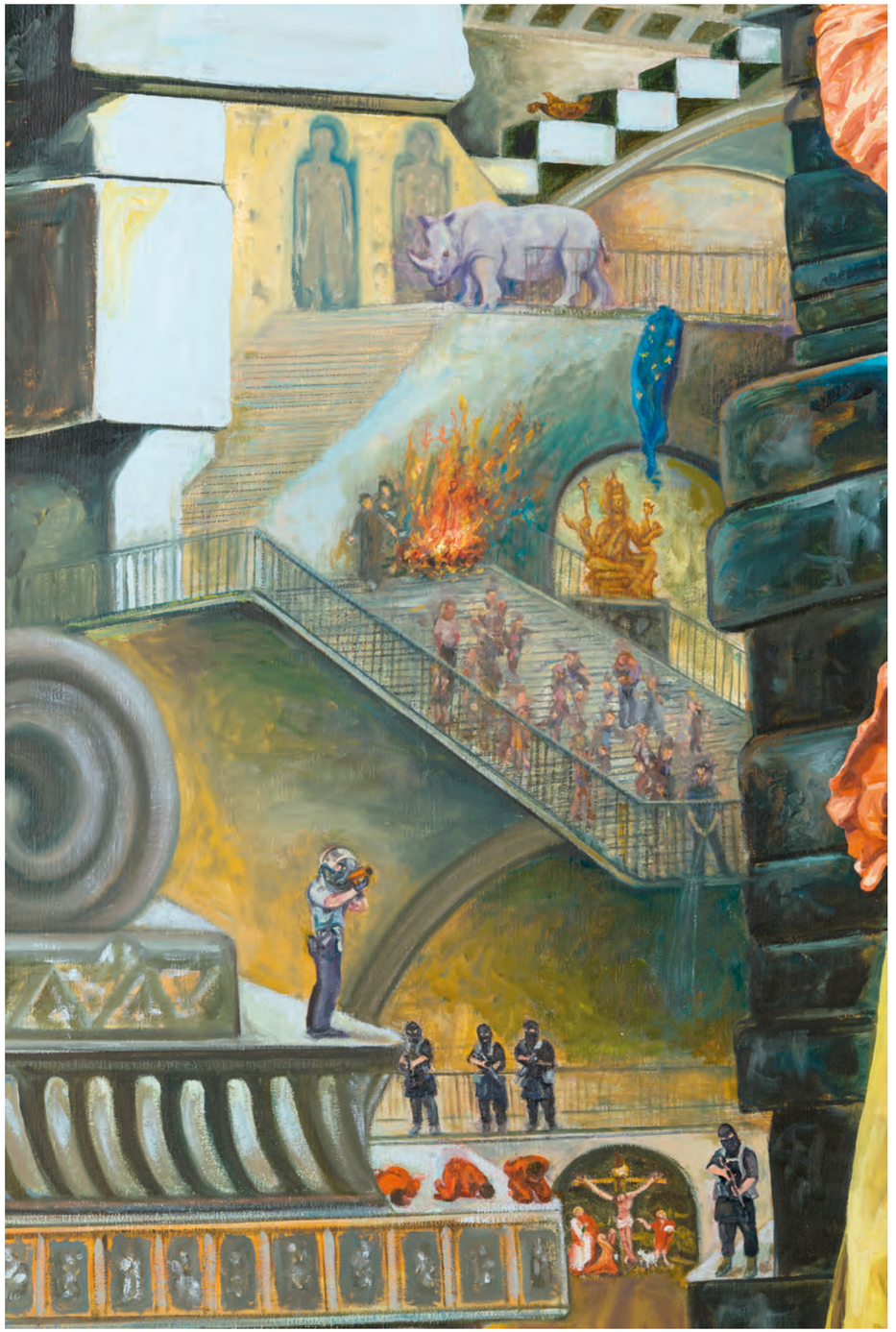


We Need A God Who Bleeds
2021
Detail

'We Need A God Who Bleeds' takes its title from Ntozake Shange's poem and

features the same protagonists and models except the butcher's knife is now a more elaborate sword and clean of blood. In place of Judith's wicker basket, Elia gives us a supermarket shopping basket in wire. Inside it, is a contemporary survival kit for the twenty-first century woman. This includes a flourishing red rose - poetic symbol of love and charity – with impossibly green leaves and a handgun nestled beside it. Such a juxtaposition replays the familiar battle between Venus and Mars, between love and war. Inevitably for paintings conceived and executed during a global pandemic, the basket also contains two types of mask and surgical gloves, as well as vials of AstraZeneca and other vaccines. The rubber bullet in 'Where Are We Now' and 'We Need A God Who Bleeds,' appeared in 'The Visit V,' a portrait of Elia's mother who served in the Land Army during the Second World War, thus drawing parallels between the Second World War and today's pandemic which seems closer to biological warfare. This link is reinforced by a reference to Bacon's indeterminate form from his 1944 triptych 'Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion' – a work that captured the horrors of a post-Auschwitz zeitgeist. There's a wholegrain loaf in the basket too ('Give us this day our daily bread' from The Lord's Prayer) which, ironically, has become a symbol not so much of a staple peasant food as of an urban middle-class able to afford artisan breads. There are also a few well-thumbed books, including a first edition of 'A Vindication of the Rights of Woman' (1792) by Enlightenment philosopher and educational reform advocate Mary Wollstonecraft. Often seen as a proto-feminist, Wollstonecraft was lambasted for her views on female sexuality and desire. Nineteenth century suffragettes abandoned many of her ideas, arguably leading to current tensions between radical feminism and sex positivism. Hence in 'Where Are We Now' we see a woman in a hijab positioned next to a woman in a red fitted dress and visible nipples, articulating the prejudices we hold about each stereotype. As we swing between outdated dualistic notions of repression versus freedom, modesty versus immodesty, invisibility versus exposure, Elia asks us to address contemporary critiques of second wave western feminism for failing to accept there might be power in so-called invisibility whilst also reminding us through a reference to Michelangelo's ignudi that the secular (male) nude so beloved of Renaissance humanism was problematised to the point of being covered up in religious spaces and it was female virtue that was always on trial. Look closely and you'll see Elia's tiny transcription of Artemisia Gentileschi's

Where Are We Now 2021
Detail



‘Susannah and the Elders’ which has taken on new relevance in the light of the #MeToo movement.

The theme of control runs through Elia’s paintings, inscribed in panopticon architecture and uncomfortable power shifts between viewer and viewed. She shows us instances of institutional control from repressive policing through to religion (almost every faith is represented, Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism…even scientology), censorship and coercive control and domestic violence. The ominous presence of a burning book in ‘Where Are We Now’ recalls not just the horrors of the Nazis or similar totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century, but Savonarola’s bonfire of the vanities which demanded women give up their mirrors and hairpieces and focus on prayer. Elia shows us police in riot gear; dead hostages shot by Isis, their jumpsuits as orange as those of American prisoners and the backgrounds of Bacon’s iconic crucifixion (deliberately titled a not the, crucifixion, he stated, to symbolise the worst kind of cruelty one human can perform against another). The women in ‘The Messenger’ wear masks from their waists like latter day chatelaines. Yet even these seemingly innocuous pieces of cloth have invited conspiracy theories; attempts to enforce their use characterised by some as an assault on their ‘freedom’.

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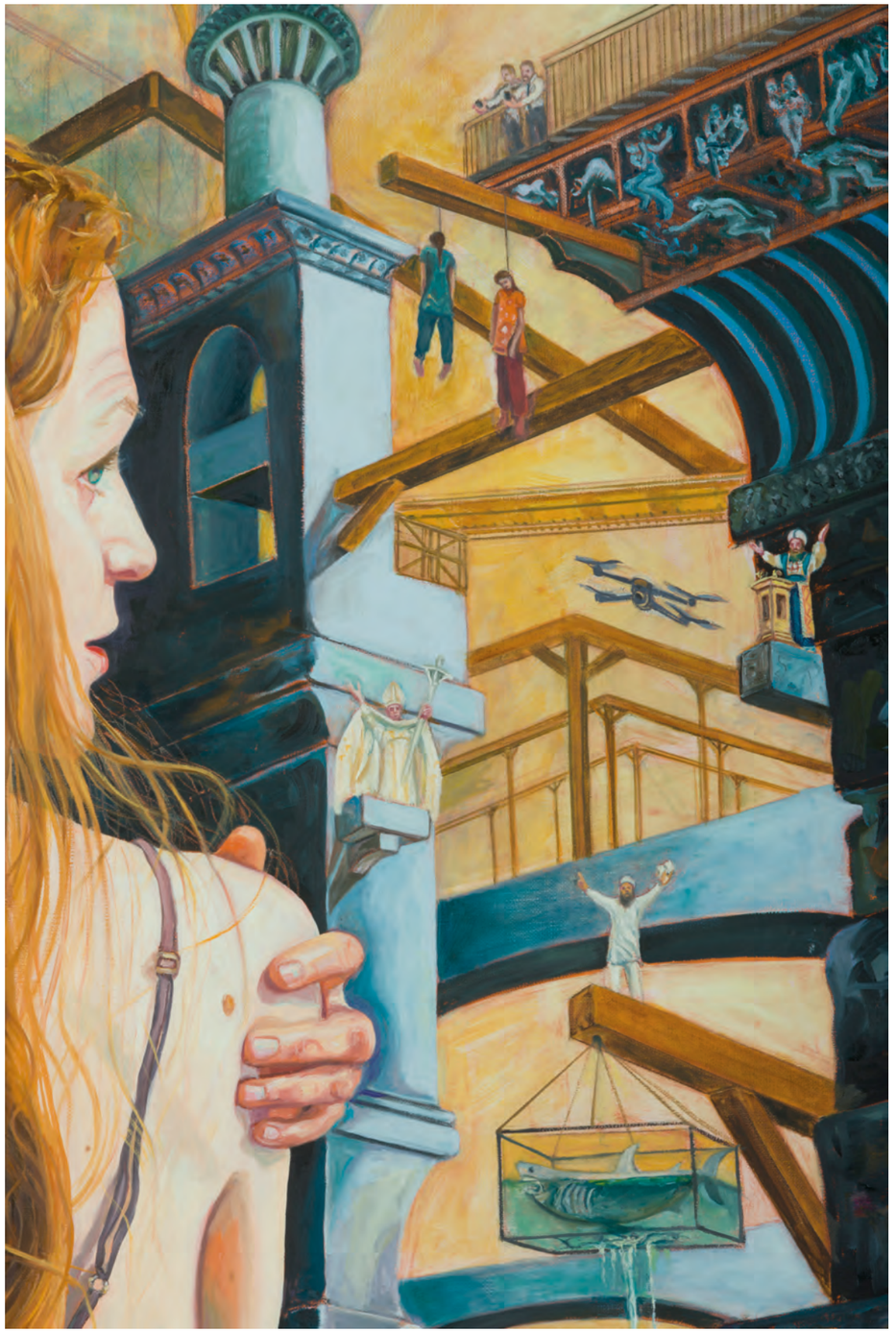
A witty reference to bloodshed, Holofernes’s severed head has been replaced in Elia’s ‘We Need A God Who Bleeds’ by a box of tampons. This symbol of menstrual blood – something undiscussed, taboo, traditionally viewed as abject, ‘unclean’ (Leviticus 15 refers to any bodily discharge this way, be it from a man or a woman) reminds us of the women’s ages and, of course, the painting’s title. Tampons and the marketing of them to take account of transgender and gender-nonconforming people who menstruate have also been the subject of recent controversies. Between an ad being banned in Ireland for being too explicit, Proctor and Gamble’s Tampax tweets ‘Fact: Not all women have periods. Also a fact: Not all people with periods are women,’ (2020) and the UK scrapping of tax on sanitary products (January 2021), tampons have become the new battleground. The association of monthly cycles with lunar cycles connects the painting to Gentileschi’s where a shadow in the shape of a crescent moon falls across Judith’s face as a reference to Artemis, goddess of the hunt and chastity.



We Need A God Who Bleeds
2021
Detail

Her owl flies in and reappears on a signet ring, oscillating between meanings: in one context, it may be associated with wisdom; in eastern mythology and Goya's dystopian nightmares, it represents folly. The reference to menstruation also creates a possible connection to Ntozake Shange's poem which tells us, i am not wounded / i am bleeding to life.

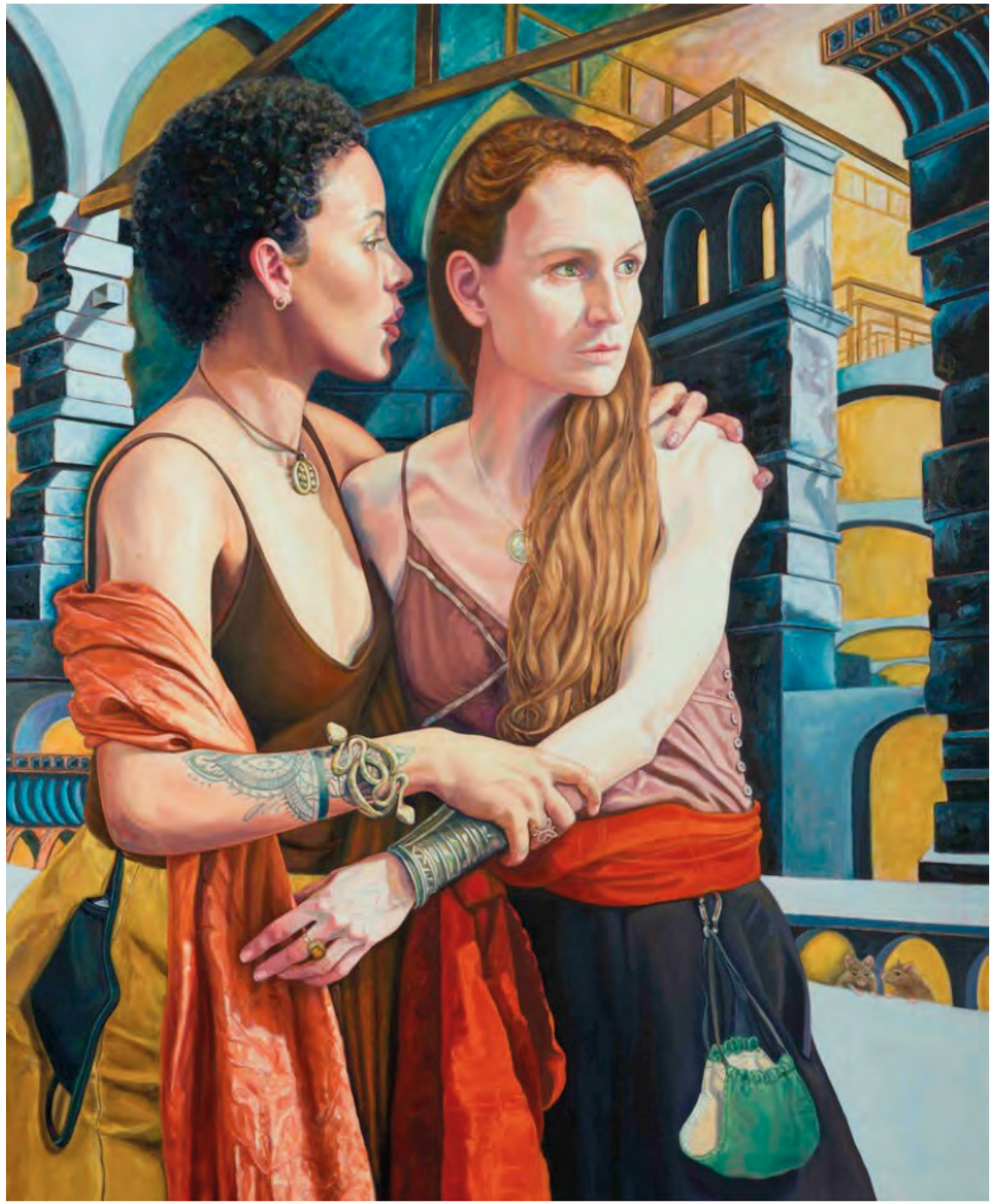
Time takes on an elastic quality in Where Are We Now. If past and present collide, the future is uncertain too. In 'We Need A God Who Bleeds,' Damien Hirst's infamous tiger shark sculpture 'The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living' (1991) conceived as a contemporary expression of horror to force the viewer to confront their own mortality, is suspended from a rafter as if in a game of 'Hangman.' But it has sprung a leak, water dribbling away like sand in a timer – a witty nod, perhaps, to the sculpture's own troubled history (it was rumoured that the original shark deteriorated to such an extent that it had to be replaced). Even conservation in formaldehyde, it seems, is no guarantee of immortality.

Time takes on an elastic quality in Where Are We Now. If past and present collide, the future is uncertain too.

A discarded lottery ticket (recognisable as a Euro Lottery ticket) lies crumpled on the floor. Representing the loss of an ideal and imagined future, a Europe the United Kingdom has Brexited, or, more cynically, a stealth tax on the poor, it acts as a warning that someone's luck has run out. But whose?

Time is running out too for Colston's statue which is being toppled. Once an ode to Colston's philanthropy, this statue has come to represent the nadir of British imperialism, the evils of the sugar trade and its history of slavery. The statue acquired new significance when it was pulled down during a Black Lives Matter protest in Bristol on June 7th 2020. Like Elia's models, some symbols migrate between paintings. Dürer's Rhinoceros, for instance, appears in 'We Need A God Who Bleeds' and 'Where Are We Now.' Trafficked from Goa to Portugal in the early sixteenth century, the real rhinoceros stunned Europe, though Dürer's drawing was not made from life. He created it from other people's accounts. The creature drowned when its recipient King Manuel I sent it to the Pope as a present and the ship sank on route to Rome. As if to remind us, a ship keels over in 'Where Are We Now.'

The Messenger
2021
Oil on canvas
120 x 100cm

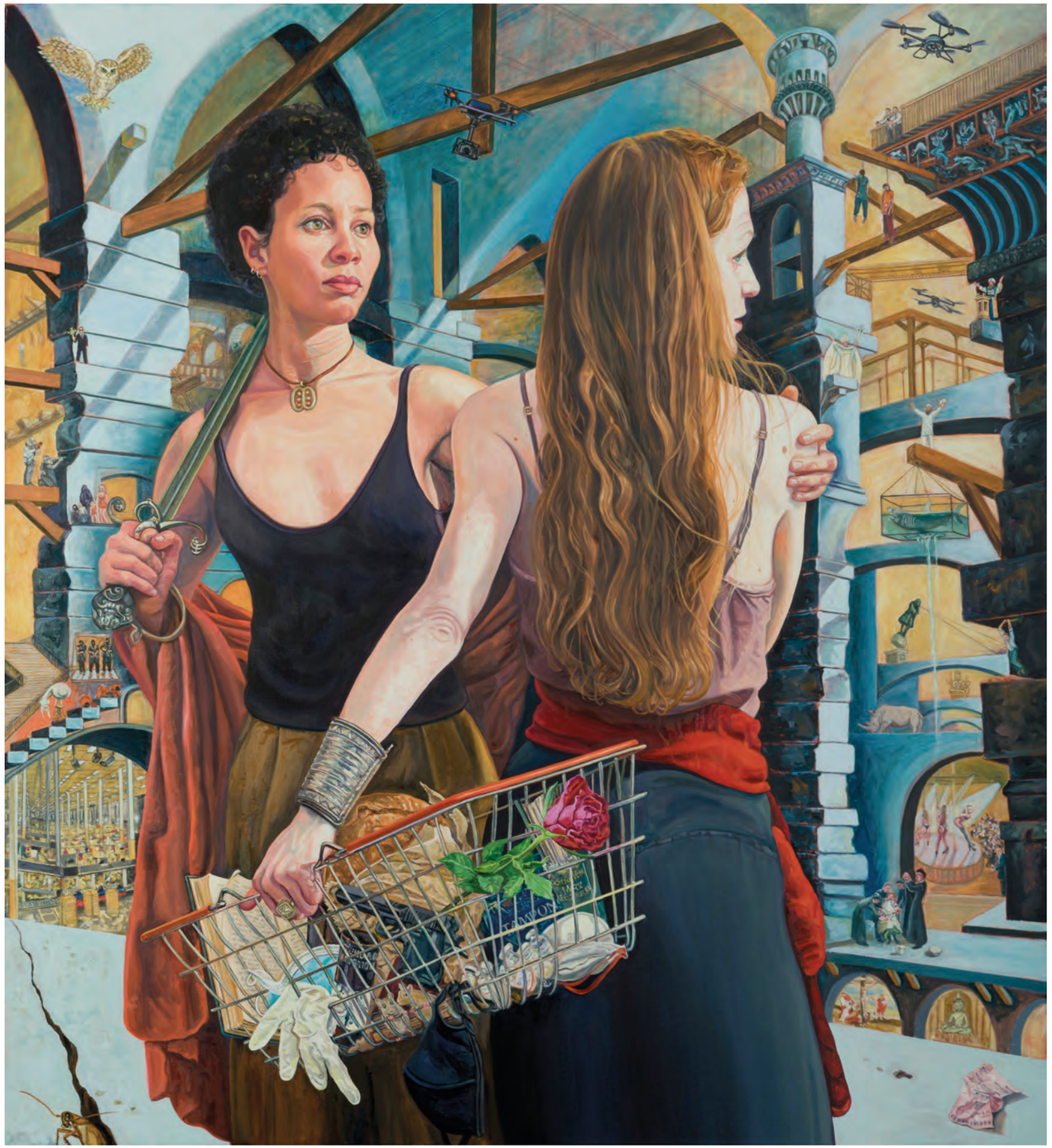


Time takes on an elastic quality in Where Are Is Elia decrying the fact that whilst at one time feminists fought for equality and control over their bodies, contemporary women argue that erotic dancing is a valid expression of their autonomy? We Now. If past and present collide, the future is uncertain too.

Yet if disturbing images pervade these paintings, it is not just through the guise of violence. It is there too in the details in varying forms of punishment against them. There's a suffragette being restrained by dourly dressed matrons, a male doctor's hand clamping a tube to her mouth as she is force-fed whilst, through an arch, pole dancers hold court on a podium. Both vignettes show women under scrutiny: the former under the brutalising gaze of the medical establishment, the latter as so-called objects of desire. Elia has alluded to the suffragette struggle before. In 'Made in Britain' the faint image of Emily Davison and the King's horse is drawn in pencil on the room's floorboards; it is also the subject of an Elia print. What does it mean to see a suffragette and erotic dancers in the same painting? Is Elia decrying the fact that whilst at one time feminists fought for equality and control over their bodies, contemporary women argue that erotic dancing is a valid expression of their autonomy? Or is she saying that today's erotic dancers are yesterday's activists, operating on the front line of patriarchy, their bodies still being 'policed' by men as well as by other women who disagree with their politics?

Certainly the 'problem' of female sexuality is shown to be much more complex than the Madonna/whore syndrome pretends. Elia's protagonists seem to embrace the qualities for which women are routinely castigated: Madeleine wears snake earrings in 'Where Are We Now;' in 'The Messenger,' Danielle sports a double-headed snake bracelet (which also appears in 'Dance To The Music of Time II' 2018-19). As a symbol of temptation, the snake plays to the broader misogynist trope of 'woman as temptress' so beloved of several religions and certainly popular during the Catholic Counter-Reformation (Eve, Delilah) in which Gentileschi operated. Yet the same tactics of entrapment were applauded if they were deemed to be for the greater good: self-sacrificing Judith who uses her wiles to trick Holofernes and gain access to his tent when he is drunk was considered an exemplary woman. The rusty manacle and chain in the foreground of 'Where Are We Now' signals how high the stakes are for transgressors: prison awaits. Little wonder Danielle also wears an African fawohodie ('independence') ring that signifies independence, freedom, emancipation.

In drawing attention to how women are still at risk from myriad forms of control,



We Need A God Who Bleeds
2021
Oil on canvas
130 x 120cm

Elia's work could not be more timely. As I write, pop singer Britney Spears is requesting a legal end to the court conservatorship which has controlled her life since 2008. She cites being forced to take psychiatric drug lithium and not being permitted to remove an IUD from her body as examples of abuse; she has accused her father of relishing his control over her. This theme of paternalistic domination is anticipated in Elia's retelling of two classic fairytales in Where Are We Now: Rapunzel and Rumpelstiltskin. In both stories, which were assembled like Dürer's Rhinoceros from oral re-tellings, men compromise their daughters for their own gain.

This theme of paternalistic domination is anticipated in Elia's retelling of two classic fairytales in Where Are We Now: Rapunzel and Rumpelstiltskin.

In keeping with her practice of choosing models from amongst her family, friends and peers, Elia recreates their protagonists as contemporary figures. In 'Rapunzel (Adelaide Damoah)' (2020), British-Ghanaian artist Adelaide Damoah sits majestic on her concrete throne, holding her braids in her hands as if she is weighing them. She is not Disney's blue-eyed, doll-like animation; indeed, Damoah's own practice, both in the studio and through performance, focuses on interrogating the history of colonisation. Nor is she the Brothers Grimm twelve-year-old child with hair 'fine as spun gold' who is locked in a forest tower by a vengeful old sorceress. She is fully adult, her black-brown-blonde hair thick and strong. She is set against a sky of ultramarine – a colour typically associated with the spiritual in western art and thus a reference to the saint that inspired the Brothers Grimm's 'Rapunzel': Barbara, locked in a tower by her father because he feared the male attention she was attracting. More icon than martyr, Damoah looks her viewer in the eye, no hint of the distressed maiden abandoned to roam the forest with her twins until her blind prince turns up.

In 'Maxime Spinning' (from the 'Half-Naked' series of 2002-2011), Elia's model is a pre-op transsexual who also features in 'The Visit' paintings (2006-2010). She exudes a touching combination of vulnerability and strength: her blistered feet crammed in too-tight pointy heels, a Tiffany's love heart bracelet on her arm. Her clothes hint at bondage gear and she sits on a high, chrome stool, as remote perhaps as the miller's daughter in 'Rumpelstiltskin' who, like St. Barbara and Rapunzel, is imprisoned in a tower. Her life depends on the imp spinning straw into gold, the only way of fulfilling her father's lying boast to the King. But this comes at a price: she must give up her future baby in return. Fortunately, she outwits the imp who flies out of the window on a ladle in a fit of fury when she guesses his name. In 'Maxime Spinning,' Elia leaves us guessing which character Maxime represents. A basic hand spinner hangs low between her legs like a joke phallus. She twists it as a form of meditation, akin to Gandhi's wait for change to come, for 'the long and arduous quest for Truth.'

Illusion not truth is Elia's survival strategy; painting is her way of dissecting the world, of blowing it apart.

Illusion not truth is Elia's survival strategy; painting is her way of dissecting the world, of blowing it apart. In placing works from different series side by side, she is reassessing her own history as an artist. Furthermore, Elia's constant representation and renegotiation of women's roles leaves us questioning not just where are we now or, as Gauguin would have it, Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going? but who - and where - do we really want to be.

Marie-Anne Mancio,
June 2021

PRINTS

Lithographs
Etchings

Where Are We Now 2021
Lithograph on Somerset soft white 300gsm | 60 x 49cm

Self Portrait in Uplift Bra

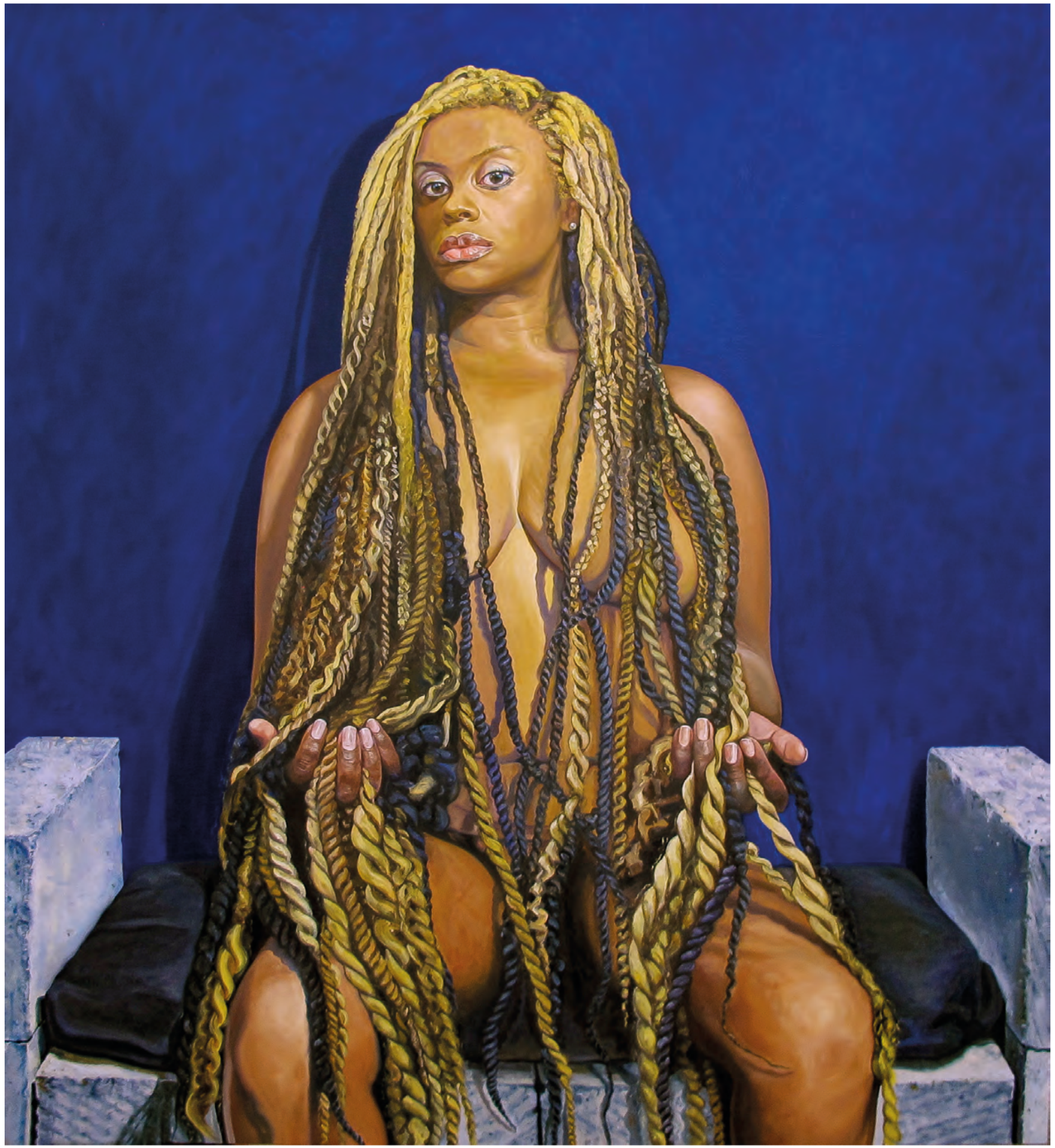
Etching, edition of 20 | Paper 40 x 27cm | Image 22 x 18cm

Night Studio

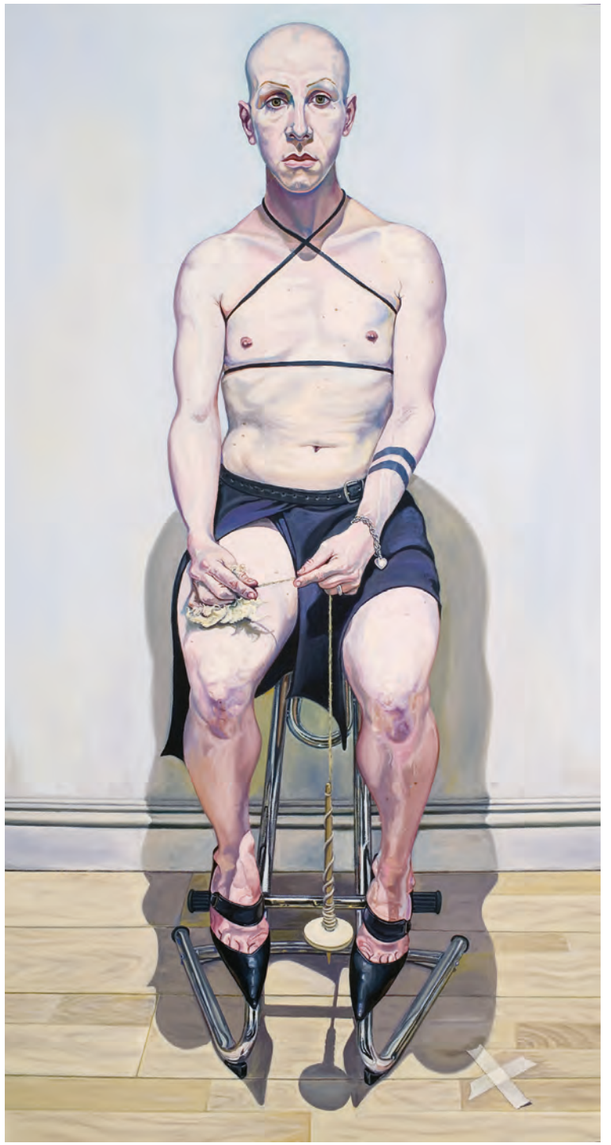
Etching, edition of 20 | Paper 40 x 27cm | Image 22 x 18cm

PAINTINGS

Portraits
& oil sketches

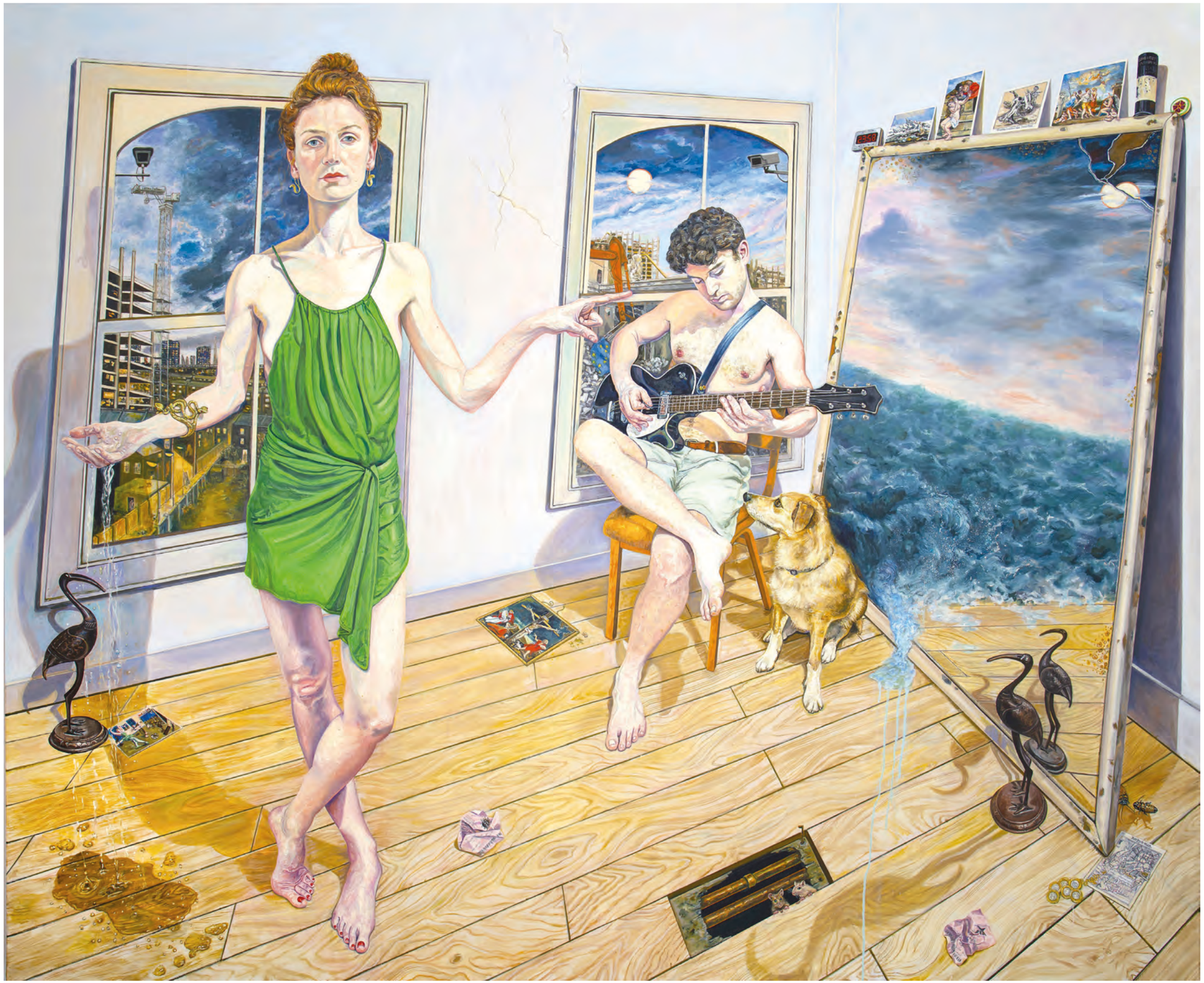


Rapunzel (Adelaide Damoah) 2020
Oil on canvas | 150 x 130cm

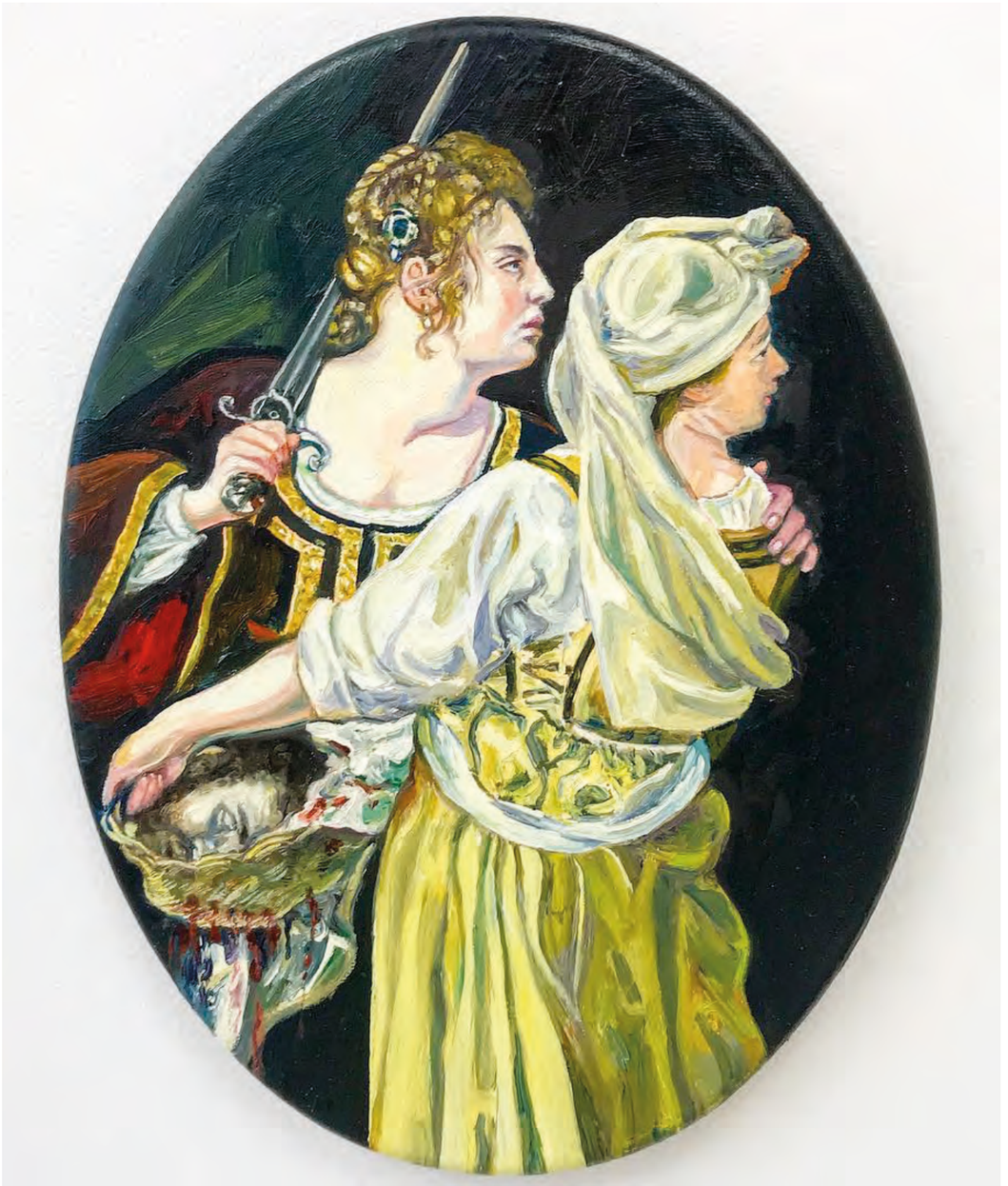


Maxime Spinning 2011

Oil on canvas | 166 x 91cm | £9,000

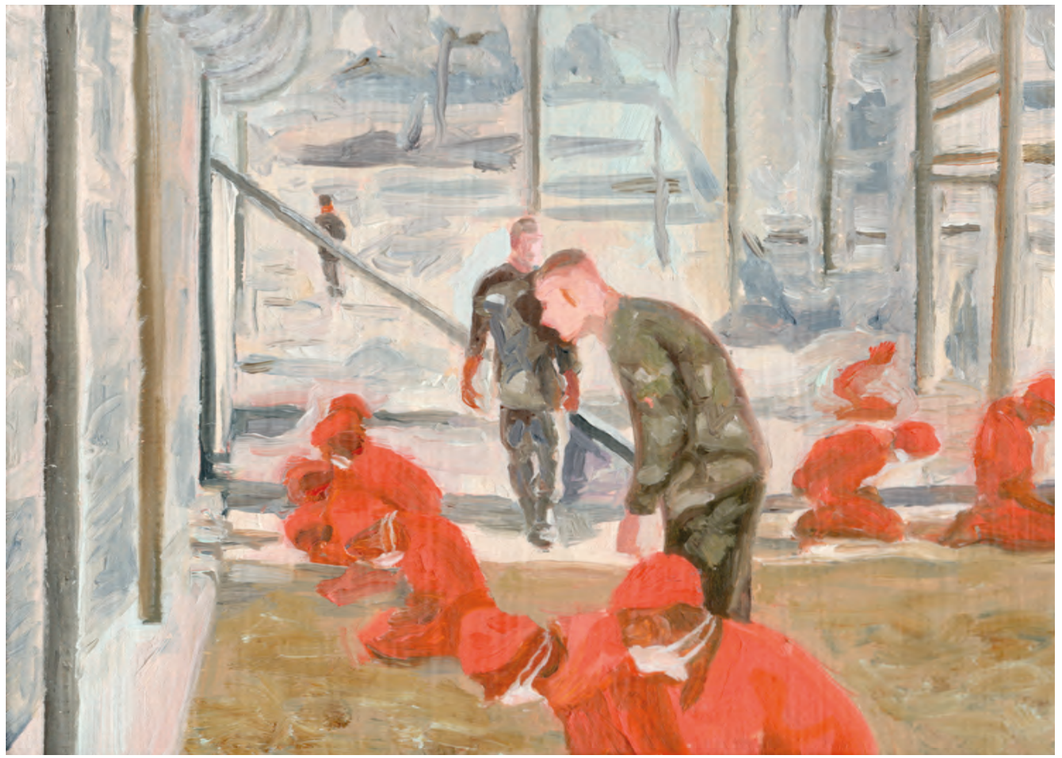


A Dance To The Music Of Time II
2018
Oil on canvas
180 x 220cm



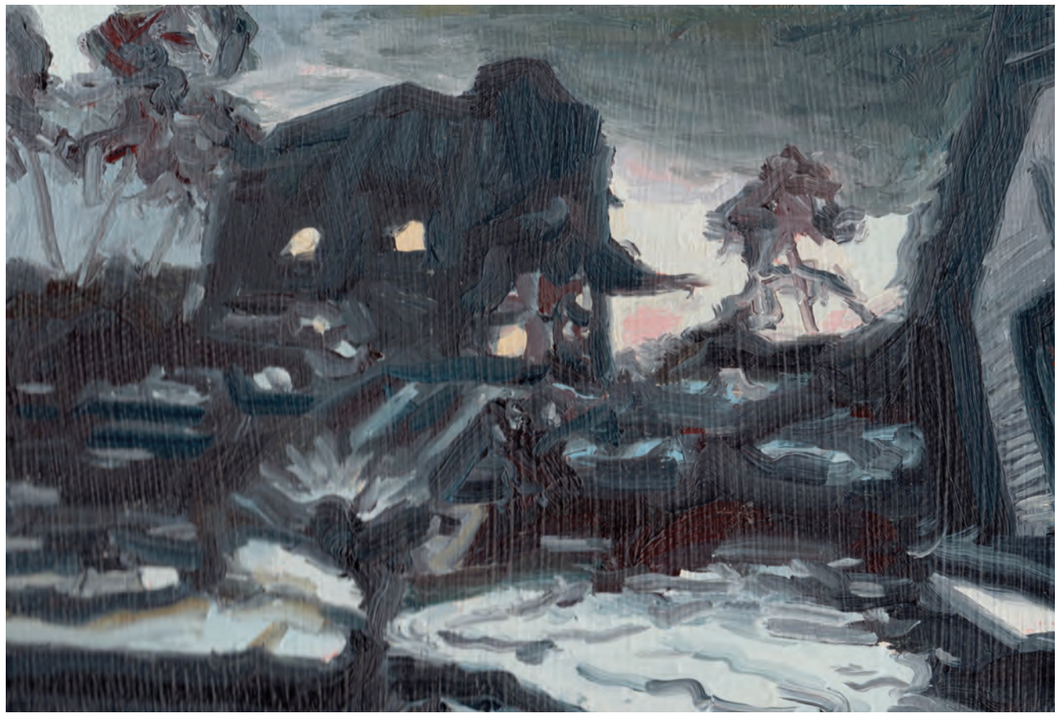
Homage to Gentileschi (Judith and her Maidservant) 2019

Oil on canvas | 18 x 13cm

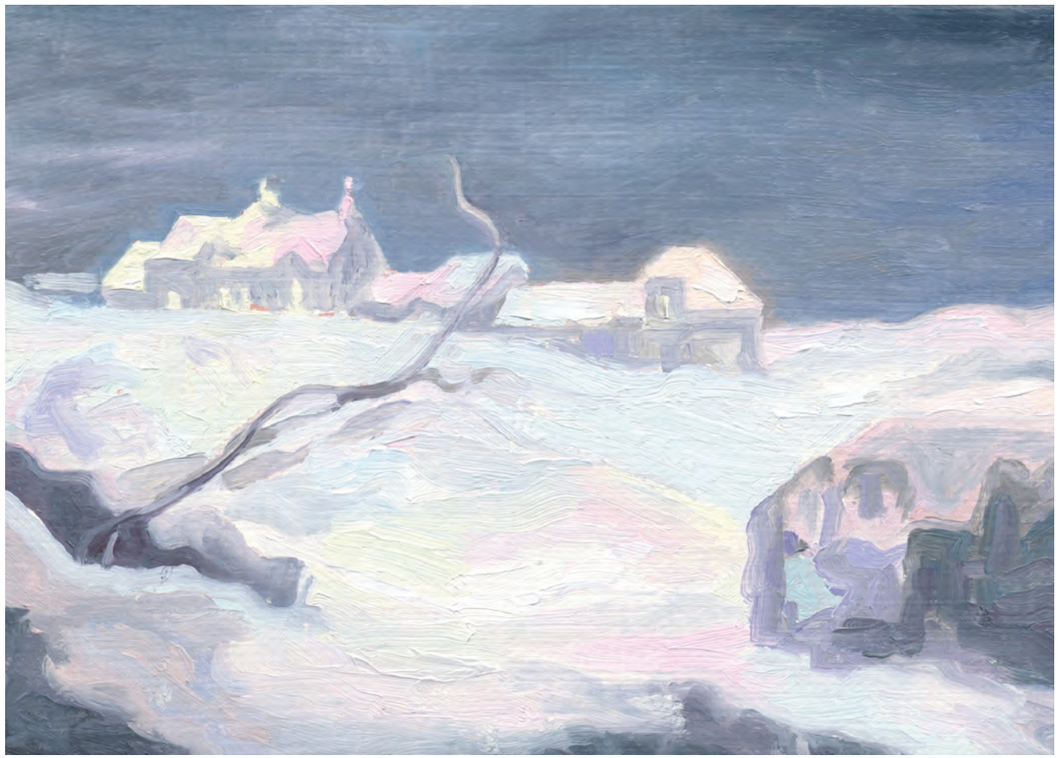


So What 2009
Oil on canvas | 13 x 18cm

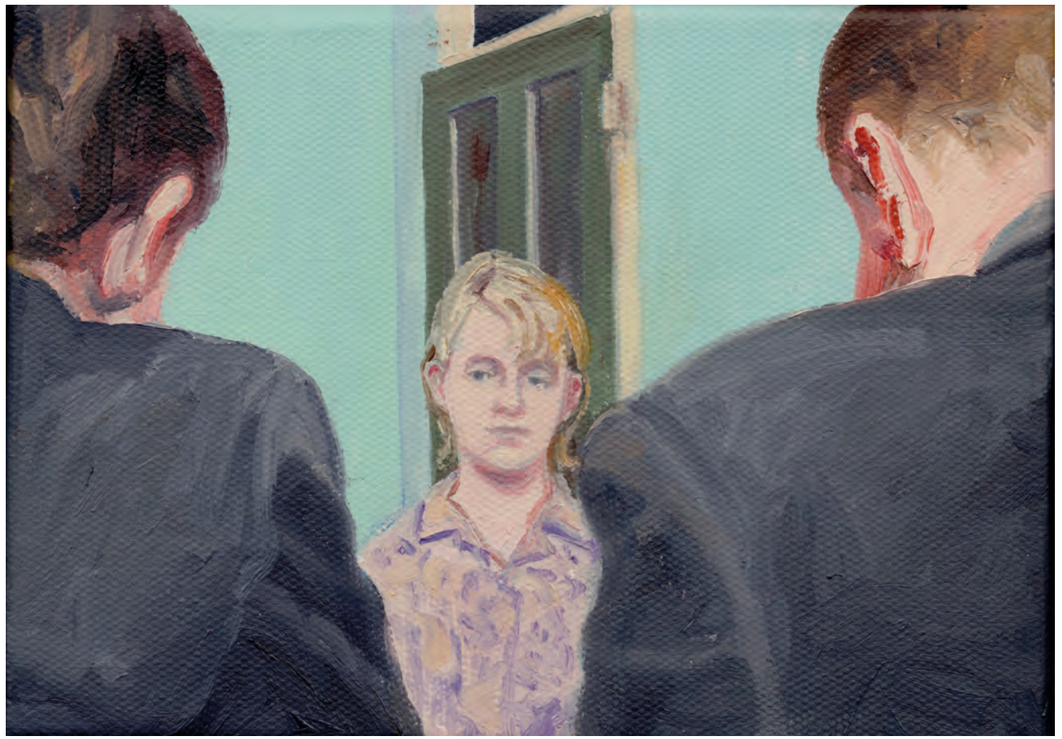
Elsewhere 2010
Oil on canvas | 13 x 18cm



House (Psycho) 2017
Oil on canvas | 13 x 18cm

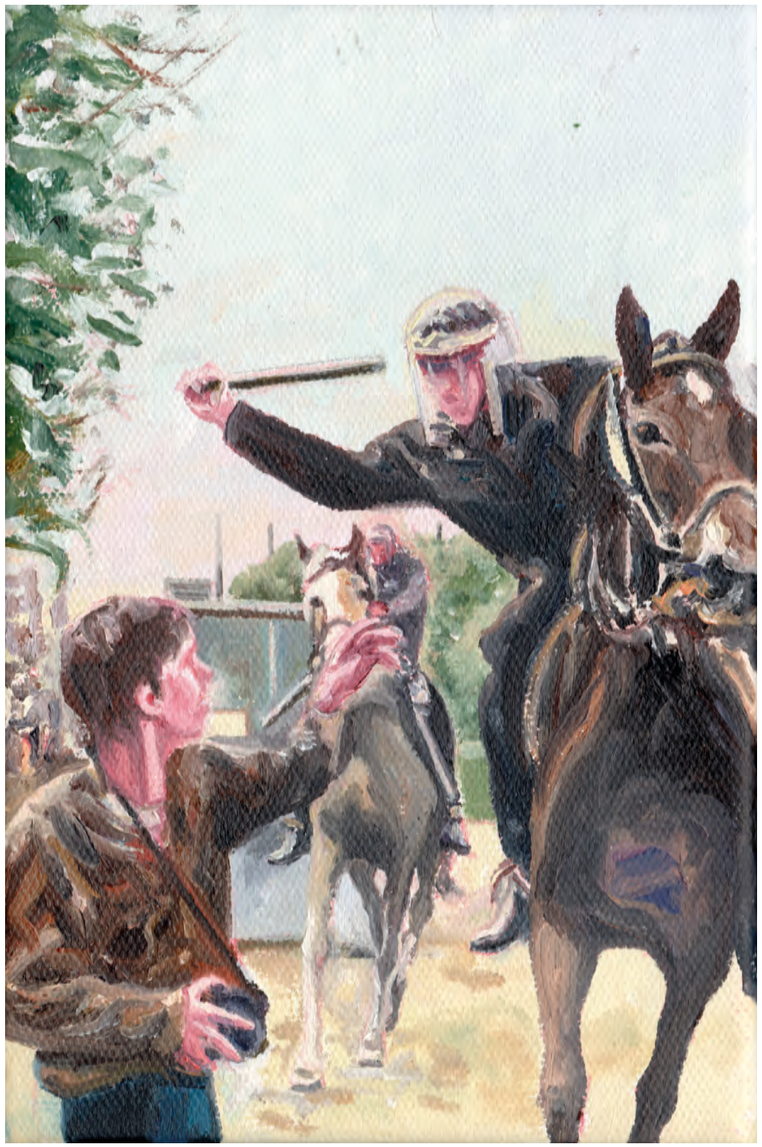


Home Sweet Home 2017
Oil on canvas | 13 x 18cm



Social Control 2017
Oil on canvas | 13 x 18cm

right
Coal Not Dole II 2017
Oil on canvas | 18 x 13cm



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BACK COVER

We Need A God Who Bleeds 2021
Oil on canvas | 130 x 120cm
(detail)