Still Well

Edited by Cindy Wright in conversation with Luc Derycke
Text by Michael Petry
Interview by Femke Vandenbosch
Anthology texts by Libby Lumpkin, Max Presneill
Text contribution by Joannes Késenne
English translation interview by Yasmin Van 'tveld
Photography by Dominique Provoost, Tom De Visscher
Graphic design by Luc Derycke, Jeroen Wille, Viktor Van den Braembussche, Studio Luc Derycke
Printing and binding by Die Keure, Bruges

Published by MER. books
Art imprint of Borgerhoff & Lamberigts
www.merbooks.be

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ISBN 9789464778557
D2023/11.089/212
NUR 642

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CINDY WRIGHT

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ill. 1 *Nature morte 2*, 2010

Cindy Wright
– Michael Petry

In the early twentieth century, the visual arts world seemed to split into two main camps when Marcel Duchamp introduced his series of “readymades” (1914), which were unaltered, pre-existing objects. These works, made over a hundred years ago, are still outraging more conservative viewers who often wonder how long this conceptual fad will last. James McNeill Whistler was said to have outraged the public with mere painterly daubs that he dained to charge for. Whistler had been best known for his figurative works like *Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1* (1871), often referred to as “Whistler’s mother”. While figurative, the work has within it many conceptual ideas that led him to make *Nocturne in Black and White: The Falling Rocket* (1875), the painting at the heart of a lawsuit Whistler took out against John Ruskin. In a review Ruskin had stated: ‘I have seen, and heard, much of Cockney impudence before now; but never expected to hear a coxcomb ask two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public’s face.’ On the stand, Whistler was asked whether it was true he was asking such a sum for a mere two days of work. Whistler replied: ‘No, I ask it for the knowledge I have gained in the work of a lifetime.’ Whistler won the case, but the judge awarded him only a single farthing as damages (1/960th of a British pound) and Whistler went bankrupt.
The social and artistic backgrounds which conceptual art found itself in were very negative towards this new school of art. Perhaps the last great pre-conceptual “retinal” artists (as Duchamp would have said) was Pablo Picasso. Duchamp did not trash retinal art in the manner of Ruskin, but showed that there was a new way to think about and make contemporary art. Duchamp was a very skilled draftsman and his painting *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* (1912), while beautiful, and conceptual, was as scandalous as his readymade *Fountain* (1917) a men’s urinal. Picasso took nineteenth century art to its logical end in works like *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* (1907) and the birth of the Cubist movement with Jaun Gris and George Braque, which had a direct influence on Duchamp’s painting. The main difference between this new form of modern painting and Duchamp’s conceptual art, was that for Duchamp, a work of art need no longer be made by the hand of the artist.
The long-term result of this development is that contemporary artists fell into one or the other camp and became the children of Duchamp or Picasso. Few have straddled the divide nor cared to. A mistrust in craftsmanship solidified in the 1960s, and many artists stopped creating physical objects preferring to make performance and installation art. Painting, until it became vogue again in the 1980s, was seen as a product for wealthy consumers, which recent trends in the marketplace have solidified. So where might Cindy Wright place herself in this dialogue of competing methodologies? She is of course gifted in the hand, that is to say she too is a superb draftsperson and her large photorealistic works often fool the eye. She instinctively seems to know how to paint and how to compose an image, and the resultant works appear life like regardless of their scale.
But it is the scale (and the content) of her works that perhaps place her in the conceptual school. Wright’s large-scale still life paintings often bleed into abstraction. From a distance, her cropped compositions,

and intense single source lighting make the works liminal, hovering between abstraction and figuration, while all the time depicting death and the results of it. Her works *Taste of Blood* (ill. 13, 2018) or *Baconcube 3* (ill. 17, 2004) recall the hanging meat of Rembrandt's *Slaughtered Ox* (1655). We feel the skin being ripped from the flesh, we see the resultant "meat" which is of course the muscle of the dead animal, and it reminds us that we, human animals, are no different. In Géricault's studies for *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818/9) the artist disinterred actual human body parts to paint. He longed for the images of decay, and the destruction to be as "lifelike" as possible. Joel-Peter Witkin has gone so far as to pay Mexican morgues for the right to use human body parts in his photographic tableaux in a search for a macabre surrealism.

As humans we are preoccupied with death as much as we are with living our lives. We are aware as perhaps no other animal is, that our death is always with us, always around the corner, is always something we must think about. Other animals certainly fear death, and usually run from it (as do humans) but as far as we know, we are the only animals who dream of an afterlife. We believe in concepts like heaven and hell, and gods and goddesses, whereas in their spare time, it appears that dogs simply like to lie in the sun and contemplate their next meal. Dogs might dream of a cube of bacon or an ox leg, but it is unlikely the great god Anubis (the Egyptian god of the dead) who was depicted as a black dog, has ever held much cause of fear for them. Dogs usually fear men, and while we do fear each other, most humans fear the eternal wrath or displeasure of some god or the other. The still life tradition is one that was designed to remind humans of our own mortality, which was corrupted by Christians to include a fear of morality. In either case, Wright's paintings foreground the flesh of the viewer as tantamount in the battle between life and death. A viewer may turn away from her bloodied salmon in a child's pet fishbowl (ill. 1, *Nature morte 2*, 2010) but they will remember its impact, how the scales glisten and the great fish's eye stares out in accusation—was it you who took my life? Her work is aligned with Francis Bacon's nihilistic treatment of human and other animal flesh as in *Figure With Meat* (1954), where a carcass hangs behind a seated cleric. The animal flesh recalls Rembrandt's treatment of the ox, but it is the inclusion of the priest (a figure Bacon reviled as much as feared) who represents the idea of an afterlife, that scared Bacon the most. His whole life he feared nuns and sadly spent the last days of his life (1992) in the Handmaids of Maria clinic in Madrid, too weak to run away from the ministries of the nuns.

The religious tradition in Western painting as seen in works like *Agnus Dei* (Lamb of God, 1635-40) by Francisco de Zubaran, echoes in Wright's work. In Zubaran's work, a lamb is seen bound and ready for slaughter, the metaphor coming from Christian texts, wherein an animal is readied for slaughter to their god. Such a tradition of course is much older as the ancient Greeks performed ritual slaughter of animals long before, as did the Jews. Abraham, the father of that faith, was even commanded by his god to bind his son Isaac and slay him as an offering. An angel is said to have stayed his hand as he went to butcher his own, and was given a ram to place in his son's stead. There are of course many religions which have asked for human sacrifices to appease their gods. But Wright sticks to the depiction of non-human animals that appear as if they have been slaughtered,

ill. 2 *Rabbit Hole*, 2017

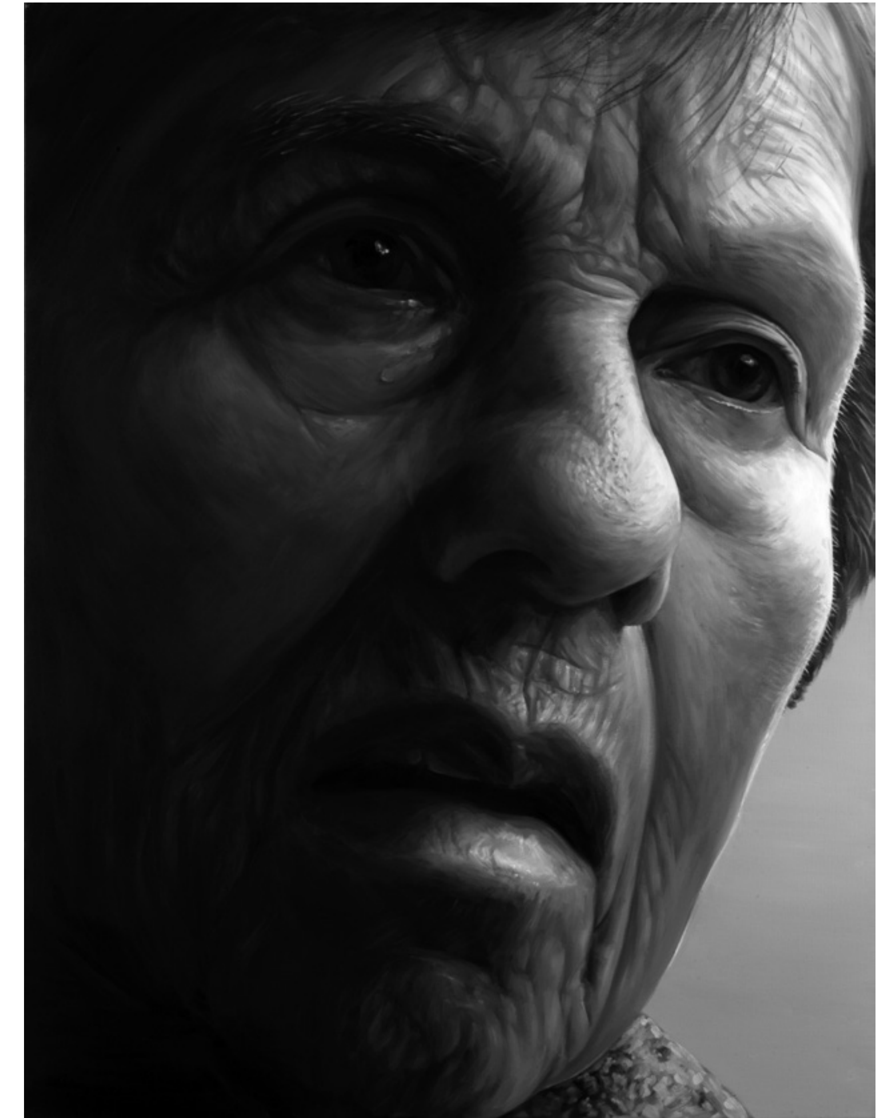
ill. 3 *Tiger and Squirrel*, 2017

or await it as in *Rabbit Hole* (ill. 2, 2017) where a white furry bunny lays dead with a few specks of red matted in the fur around a head wound. In *Tiger and Squirrel* (ill. 3, 2017) a life-like grey squirrel appears to be asleep in a child's cot, curled up into a white toy tiger, both on the whitest of sheets. The viewer cannot see a wound and must decide if the furry animal is resting, or if it is dead, and in either case stands in for a missing human child. A feeling of warmth and cuddliness is overpowered by dread, as Wright's previous works stray into mind, and the viewer wonders if either the child or the squirrel are in immediate mortal danger.

Wright has also taken in the imagery and metaphors found in the work of Jan Weenix (1640-1719) and a century later of Francisco Goya (1746-1828). Weenix was one of the first painters to document the new landed gentry lifestyle by constructing paintings of the bounty of the missing sitter. Hares and other field animals are seen heaped on the ground, a veritable cornucopia of "food stuffs" that shouted the wealth of the owner. Guns and hunting dogs are also often found in these scenes, again totems of privilege. Goya, on the other hand, was known for his realism and not flattering his famous sitters. His *Disasters of War* prints graphically show humans killing and maiming each other, making a bloody sacrifice to Mars, the god of war. The Chapman Brothers have made a series of large-scale sculptures based on these drawing that bring home the violence. Equally Goya's paint brush violently depicted his sitters in scalpel sharp portraits, depicting warts, ruddy complexions, wrinkles and all other unflattering signs of age. Goya showed the sitter as others saw them, as opposed to idealised imagery that most other artists of the time (of any time) presented their patrons. Wright has used images of bowls of fish (ill. 16, *Fish Tank*, 2012) that directly echo Goya, yet it is in her portraits of her contemporaries where she too spares no blushes, that his hand can most be seen.

If Wright's portraits have been influenced by Goya and his commitment to the inspection of the flesh, Diane Arbus and her dissection of the social context for a photograph must also be influential in the construction of Wright's imagery. Her early portrait work like *Moe* (ill. 4, 2003) depicts the face of an older woman in close-up, and it reveals all the wrinkles of age and the passing of time. "Moe" is short for *moeder* (mother), and in Flanders it means "grandmother" and can also be translated as "tired". We see her harshly rouged cheeks, her unsophisticated haircut, and a slightly open mouth, which might be in mid-sob, as we also see a tear rolling down from her right eye. We do not know why she is crying, or anything about her, but we do know that Wright has not sentimentalised her. In what could be a mawkish painting, Wright manages a true feat, allowing the viewer to empathise with this fictional image (literally a tear-jerker). We really should look at it, and turn away in disgust at such a blatant attempt at getting our sympathy, yet the painting holds our gaze and forces us to wonder what has happened to this woman, and not only do we want to know, Wright makes us care about the missing narrative.

Wright's *Young Woman in London* (ill. 6, 2007) recalls the work of the photographer Martin Parr who, like Arbus, captures the oddities of modern life. The young woman in question's features are all wrong, her eyes are too small, her cheekbones way to big, and her haircut (a '40s style) is all out of place, yet we trust Wright that they are those of this young woman. The look on her face, of slightly amused



ill. 4 *Moe*, 2003

ill. 5 *Shadow Sleep*, 2003

ill. 18 *Underground*, 2014

Encounter Between a Beating Heart and Technique
A conversation between Cindy Wright and Femke Vandenbosch

A skull plastered with brightly coloured candy, shreds of crushed autumn leaves, a bag of deep-blue butterfly wings, grey-green and hairy rotten fruit under a bell jar, a porcelain tureen with a delicate floral motif houses two wafer-thin crane flies, and a half-burned newspaper gives a glimpse of the news coverage of ferocious wildfires: Cindy Wright's studio bears extraordinary traces of production. 'Bored', Wright replies to the question of what she would have been if she hadn't been an artist. Bathing in natural sunlight, her studio and response illustrate Wright's glowing desire to create and to keep challenging herself.
The canvases harmonise an impressively rich palette of glistering colours with infinite shades of grey, until the compositions appear illuminated from a shoreless depth. The black-and-white charcoal drawings are gleaming even more intensely, if at all possible, and prove that Wright works with colour but thinks in light. The monumental depictions of fauna, flora, and various found objects harbour a keen eye for detail, and reveal an enchanting, aesthetically generous universe. The overwhelming technicality is evident right away.

FV Why do skill and technique take up such a central position in your work?

CW I see technicity as a tool, not as a goal. From very early on, I was fascinated by observing, and I tried to make images of what I saw. But in order to do so, I, inevitably, had to train myself to give shape to things as well as possible. It was a long journey in and of itself. I remember that as a child, I used to enjoy drawing matchboxes and hands; later, the joy I gathered from the possibilities offered by various materials became a part of that. It became clear to me that painting challenges me the most. I studied at the Academy of Antwerp, where, in the early years, we were given fairly traditional assignments that I liked a lot—still lifes, life drawing, and portraits provided ample opportunity to explore the art of painting and drawing, to search, fail, get lost, experiment, and find your own way (back). Figurative work based on perception is still close to my heart.

FV Your work is often described as "hyperrealism", but that's not quite right. I refer to your work as "deceptive photorealism" in my writings. I describe it as "a visual analysis of structures". What do you make of this interpretation?

CV I also work with photographs, but hyperrealism or superrealism have never been my point of departure, though I understand the stylistic connotation. Hyperrealism aims to represent reality as realistically and neutrally as possible. It is precisely this neutrality I have no connection with. It's more about interpretation for me. I ask different questions: what is reality, how do we observe, how do I communicate about it, and how do I turn a photograph into a painting? I don't see it as a goal to surpass reality or the photographic image. The camera allows me to structure and unravel reality, as well as to observe textures up close. Of course, along the way, I've asked myself questions in my work. I searched for sterility and encountered it. I want to avoid being corny, so I have learned to use photography's detachment

used to visualise and discuss aspects that evoke aversion and fear. The paintings of Lucian Freud, Francis Bacon, Jenny Saville, Damien Hirst's cut-through cows, Rembrandt's carcasses, and Duchamp's urinal were all important sources of inspiration. The visualisation of transience causes you to reflect on how brief your own existence is, and how you may make it valuable. On the one hand it can provoke profound and sad feelings, on the other hand it can incite a lust for life. Death seems like a lonely experience to me, no one can tell you what you will go through in that moment. It is not until you realise that life is finite that you begin to consciously make something of it. Life has moments of isolation; everyone lives in their own interpretation of the world. Connecting with others tempers our fears. Recognising that we all share the same fate can help us ease our anxiety.

FV Your oeuvre also challenges the beauty of nature, the beauty of "dead nature". In that sense, the French term "nature morte" fits your oeuvre better than "still life". You show death as a necessary breeding ground for new and different life, which also brings solace. With your own symbolism, you add a contemporary and conceptual meaning to the genre, the key of which is sometimes hidden in your work's titles. Why are still lifes still relevant today?

CW Historical still lifes tell a story about an other era and its customs. I find it fascinating to connect it to our time. Where has the Golden Age's newly acquired wealth led us? Was this the basis for our current consumer society and ecological terror? Nature itself has no meaning: people search for meaning. It has intrinsic value independent of humans. Nature doesn't think about profit or spirituality, it isn't concerned about morality. We often don't realise that we are part of that same nature. We seem to feel the need to request a separation between nature and culture. As if we are able to detach ourselves from our own organic existence. At the same time, we treat nature—in which we have included cheap labour forces—as a cheap commodity, leading us to overconsumption and decay. Instead of falling into nihilism, I see value in looking for images that can connect us or communicate about topics that concern us all today. Nature can do without humans, but we cannot do without nature. The titles can further explain the works. Art that evokes a sensitive ambience can attempt to touch or explain that atmosphere through a more poetic title. Language and image can reinforce each other. When you look at the work *African Roses* (ill. 19, 2022), you see an exuberant still life. But it is impossible to deduce the bitter side from the image; that these are roses grown in Ethiopia, and have therefore consequences regarding the local population and the environment. The title of *Invasive Bouquet* (ill. 20, 2022) also informs the audience that the depicted flowers are invasive exotic species, again a consequence of the trade that originated in the seventeenth century.

FV The title of your exhibition in 2022 at the Adornes Estate, *Trash & Treasure*, nicely encapsulates this dimension of your oeuvre. You illustrate the traces left by humans in the form of non-recyclable waste and an ecological footprint. The artwork *Big Wave* (ill. 22, 2020) refers to Hokusai's nineteenth-century woodcut. But the wave is, like the cloud of *Blue Skies* (ill. 23, 2019), constructed from plastic waste. Kathy Poh describes it in her research project *Still Life for a*

ill. 19 *African Roses*, 2022

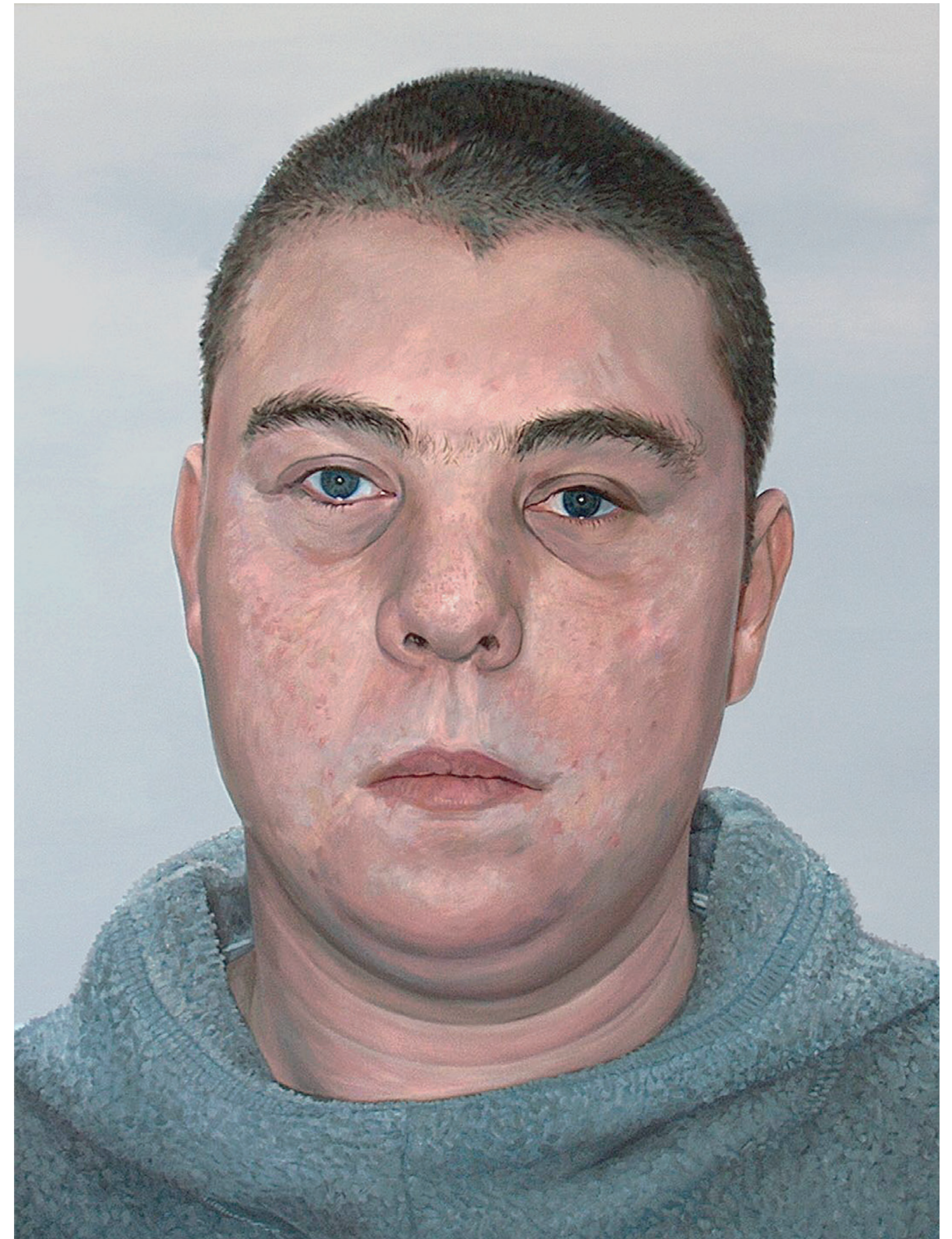
ill. 20 *Invasive Bouquet*, 2022

ill. 21 *Pillow of Dreams*, 2019

Monique, 2002 Oil on linen, 170 × 127 cm. Collection of the artist

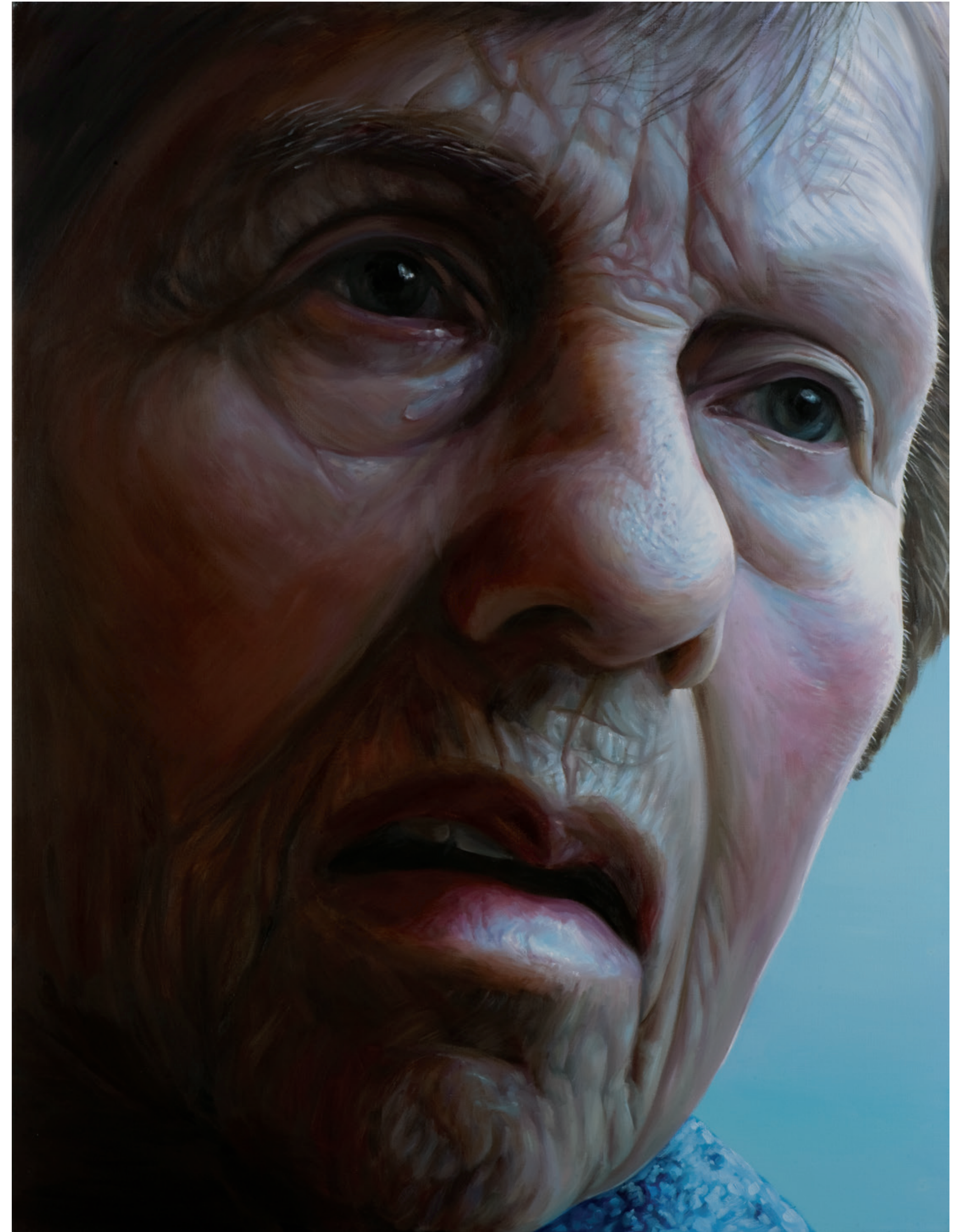
Mounty, 2002 Oil on linen, 170 × 128 cm. Private collection

Baconcube 1, 2003 Oil on linen, 130 × 135 cm. Collection of the Royal Academy of Fine Art Antwerp (BE)

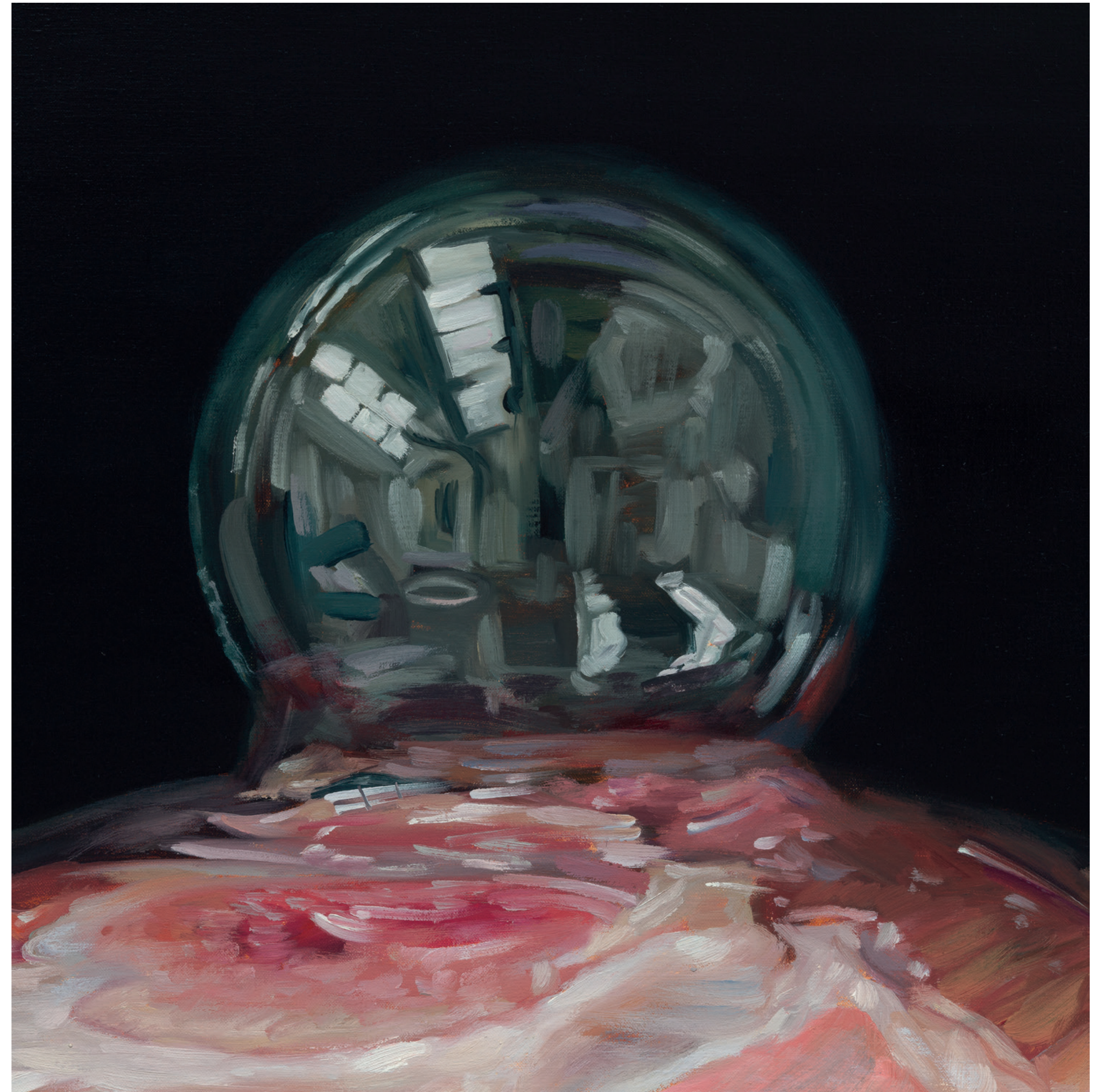


Sven, 2003 Oil on linen, 170 × 128 cm. Collection San Diego Art Museum (US)

Nipple, 2003 Oil on linen, 120 × 120 cm. Private collection



Moe, 2003 Oil on linen, 170 × 130 cm. Collection of the artist



Lam Gods (Lamb of God), 2018 Oil on linen, 210 × 135 cm. Private collection

Taste of Blood, 2018 Oil on linen, 135 × 200 cm. Collection of the artist

Ché at the Ramblas, 2004 Oil on linen, 170 × 145 cm. Collection of the artist

African Roses, 2022 Oil on linen, 155 × 100 cm. Private collection

Autumn Tint of Gold, 2018 Oil on linen, 180 × 220 cm. Private collection