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- 8 **On Memory, Mirroring
and Slippage**
Febe Lamiroy
- 93 **'I enjoy spontaneity in my work:
my colours come into being
during the act of painting itself'**
A conversation between Karen Van Godtsenhoven
and Shirley Villavicencio Pizango
- 206 **Colophon**





On Memory, Mirroring and Slippage

Shirley Villavicencio Pizango's art unfolds in memory – not as something stable or archival, but as something errant and generative. What emerges in her paintings are not recollections per se, but confabulations – images that hover between the remembered and the invented, painterly afterlife. Painting becomes a tool to navigate layered terrains of memory, identity and the lived experience of being a woman.

In *A Tear for Power*, many eyes stare straight-faced, peer over shoulders, or glance back at the viewer via a pond-like mirror image. Eyes proliferate, they watch, they return the gaze; the pictorial world envelops the viewer and underscores the act of looking itself. The effect is that the viewer becomes subtly aware of their own position within a network of reciprocal observation. The paintings illustrate a feeling, or a thought not ready to be translated into words just yet. Indicating her need for a visual language, Shirley notes: 'If I could write, I wouldn't have to paint.' The result is a vernacular marked by expressive colour, a swift and assured painterly touch and, most of all, a personal symbolism found in alluring bodies, an abundance of vegetal forms, and a sustained engagement with the history of painting. Working with classic formats such as portraiture and still life, she generally depicts herself, her friends and her family in overlapping spaces that evoke lush gardens and chequered tiled interiors. Vibrant colours such as cobalt blue, cherry red, tangerine orange and meadow green are juxtaposed, often separated from one another by a black outline.

For *A Tear for Power*, Shirley exhibits a series of self-portraits alongside painted totem-like sculptures. The multiplied portraits have a similar neutral expression, are white lipped, and often partly nude. The general atmosphere unfurls into an immersive overlapping of ornament, punctuated by recognisable themes such as narcissi and the artist's self-portrait. Crane flowers in a blue and white vase, as well as fruit – oranges, pears, pomegranates – fill the pictorial plane, contributing to dense, almost overflowing compositions. A tendency towards *horror vacui* becomes apparent in the way the surfaces are saturated with colour and pattern. This richness can be traced back to Shirley's practice as a collector of plants, cultural

trinkets, stationery, pottery and tiles, all of which populate her bright and organised studio. These collections, as well as her carefully assembled herbarium – containing dried Amazonian and European flowers and herbaceous specimens – and the memories they embody, inform her vocabulary, a language she now inhabits with such fluency that imagination increasingly precedes observation. Various elements within her painted botanica appear as hybrids, forms that have been untethered from specific origins and have instead sprouted from imagination and reverie.

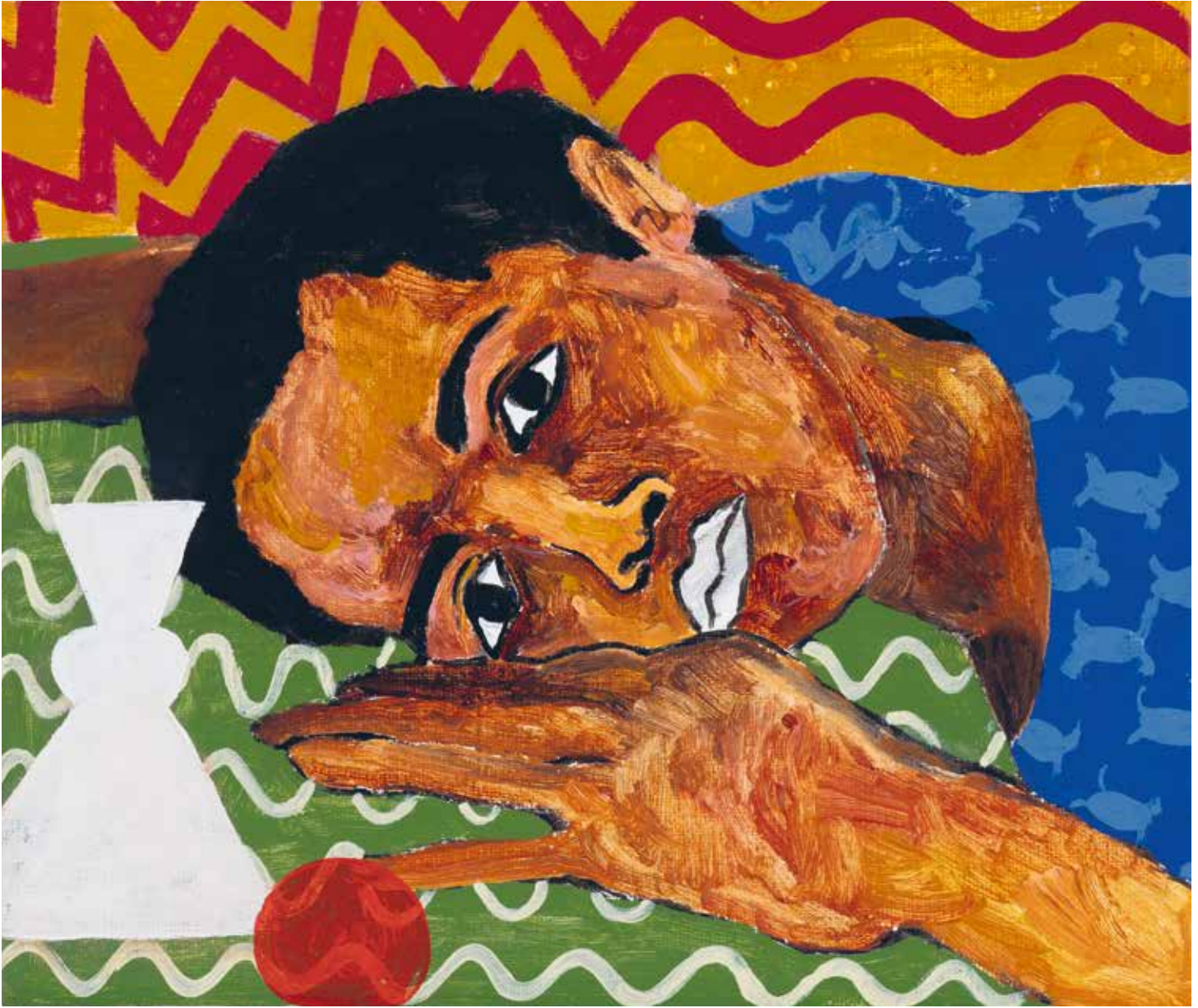
One flower that is very recognisable, however, is the recurring daffodil or narcissus, held between fingertips, arranged in vases, rendered as a pattern on a jumper, or scattered across ochre fields. In the background of *Masks of My Tears*, 2026, hollow-eyed masks amplify the sense that the direction and flow of the gaze are central to the paintings on display. The title *A Tear for Power* introduces a kind of ambiguity. Shirley Villavicencio Pizango refers to the emotional and connecting force of crying, but also suggests that tears may operate as an instrument of influence. The psychological concept of narcissism, as well as the mythological figure of Narcissus himself, provide points of departure – frameworks that Shirley gently unsettles. What has often been framed as excessive self-love or a set of manipulative – at times toxic – traits is here reconfigured as a form of affirmation, even pride. This is highlighted in *The Snake and the Fox*, 2026, where a pair of mirrored self-portraits presses their cheeks together while locking eyes with the viewer.

Simultaneously, 'a tear' calls to mind a crack, a rip, a fissure within or even preceding power itself. Shirley Villavicencio Pizango's work typically inhabits this dual in-between space: between Peru and Belgium, the Amazon and Ghent's beguinage, between past, present and future imaginaries. The paintings emerge from an affective register; at the same time, they are marked by subtle ruptures between places, identities, cultural references and painterly traditions. References to canonical paintings such as Manet's *Olympia* (1863) or Michelangelo's frescoed ceiling of the Sistine Chapel (1508–1512) appear throughout Shirley's repertoire. These are not citations in the strict

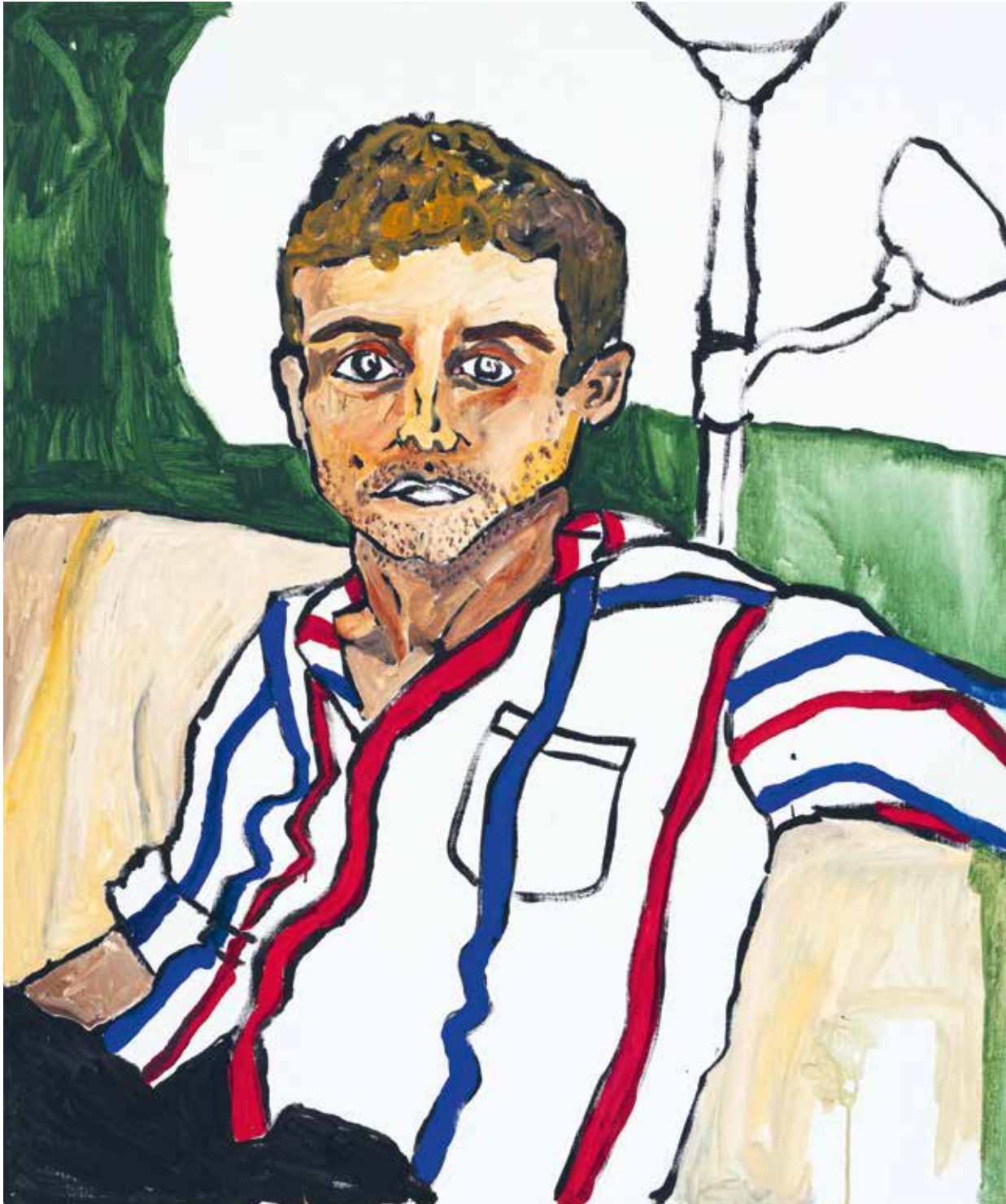
sense of the term, but rather fragments absorbed into her language, reappearing in altered configurations where the bodies of women and people of colour are foregrounded. Her engagement with art history is neither deferential nor oppositional. Echoing the more introspective meditations on painting found in the writings of Virginia Woolf, Shirley approaches the tradition as something to be inhabited rather than surpassed. This is particularly evident in her repeated return to the female nude – a subject long entangled with its own sexualisation. Yet where such historical images often relegated Black and Brown bodies to the periphery, she repositions them. Her unironic romantic stance can be understood as a refusal to disavow pleasure, beauty or sincerity in the face of critical expectation. At the same time, this embrace of affect does not resolve into a sense of ease. Shirley's art-historical references intersect with the cultural multiplicity of Lima, where Indigenous, colonial and diasporic histories coexist. Within this context, identity is never singular or fixed: it is relational, marked by difference.

Shirley's practice unfolds through repetition and variation. Geographies collapse and reassemble, fragments of the cultural paraphernalia she collects resurface, again and again, in new constellations. In the studio, she works assiduously, rarely developing more than two canvases at a time. Themes migrate across her works, forming loose constellations rather than fixed series, coming together into one all-encompassing body of work. This rhythm extends beyond the canvas. The studio, the domestic interior, the body and the image exist in continuous exchange – life bleeding into art and back again, forming an ongoing swirl of the lexicon. Pattern, colours inscribed within art history, and the exoticising male gaze are flipped, absorbed, turned into something else. Shirley Villavicencio Pizango proposes a way of seeing, offering the viewer a lens to the in-between, while her gaze extends across pictorial planes covered in hibiscus, grapevines and narcissi.

Febe Lamiroy is a writer with a background in art history, based in Brussels.







A Neruda Poem, 2022, 122 × 102 cm

‘I like to let myself be guided by spontaneity. In life too, I don’t like to plan – things never turn out the way you expect anyway.’

Shirley Villavicencio Pizango



Mind in Search of Love, 2026, height: 180 cm







A conversation between Karen Van Godtsenhoven
and Shirley Villavicencio Pizango

**'I enjoy spontaneity in my work: my colours
come into being during the act of painting itself'**









À mon regard tu te dérobes, installation view,
Gallery Sofie Van de Velde, Antwerp, 2024



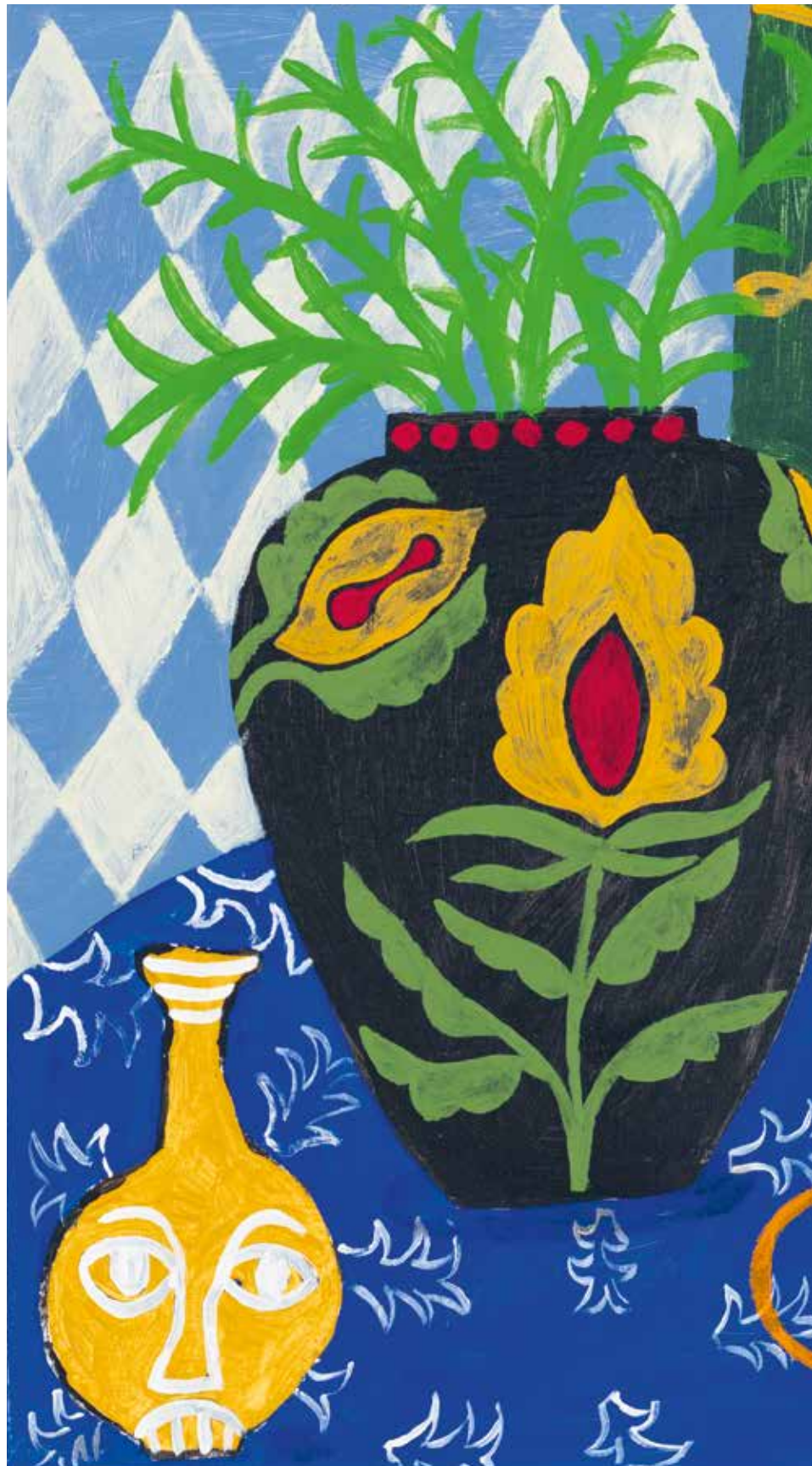


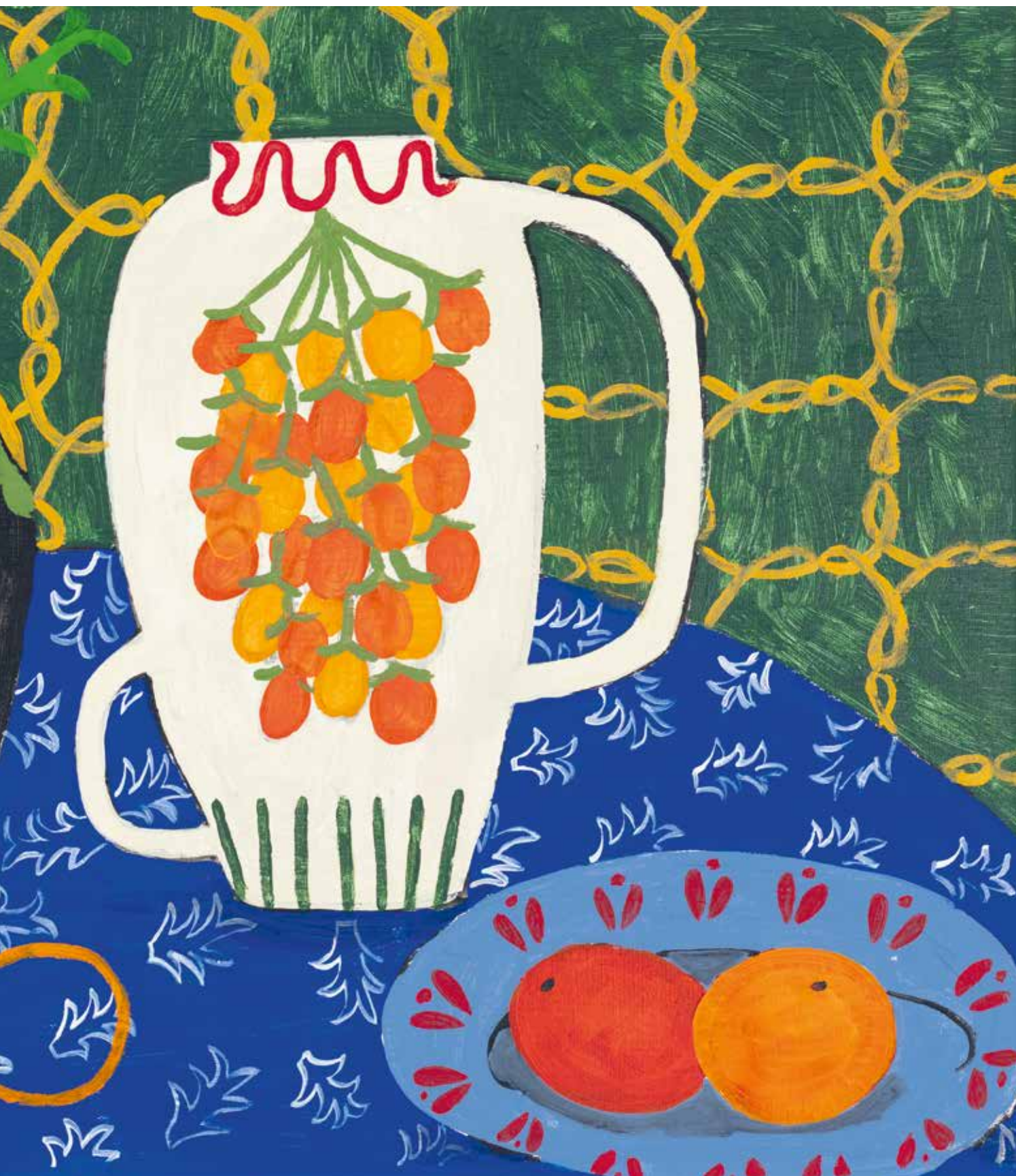




‘People of colour are often depicted in a serving role – I want to break that.’

Shirley Villavicencio Pizango





Colophon

Works

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Texts

Febe Lamiroy

Karen Van Godtsenhoven

Copy editing

Derek Scoins

Project management

Hadewych Van den Bossche

Graphic design

Tim Bisschop

Printing & binding

Graphius, Ghent

Publisher

Gautier Platteau

ISBN 978 94 9341 675 8

D/2026/11922/18

NUR 642



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BOOKS

© Hannibal Books, 2026

www.hannibalbooks.be

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Stephanie Van den Bosch,

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In collaboration with

Gallery Sofie Van de Velde, Antwerp

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Photo credits

Elias Derboven and Marte Sledsens

(pp. 54–55, 56, 138, 139, 142–143)

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(p. 92)

All other images: courtesy of the artist
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