

An abstract painting featuring bold, expressive brushstrokes in a variety of colors including deep blue, light blue, ochre, magenta, and brown. The composition is dynamic, with a central vertical stroke of light blue that seems to flow or divide the space. The background is a mix of dark and light tones, creating a sense of depth and movement. The overall style is gestural and painterly, with visible textures and layering of paint.

RICHARD HEARNS

RICHARD HEARNS

N O M A D

C A D O G A N



## RICHARD HEARNS AND LANDSCAPE'S ATTRACTION

BY RAPHY SARKISSIAN

“The landscape thinks itself in me, and I am its consciousness.”<sup>1</sup>

—Paul Cézanne

Both intentional and accidental marks of the artist's hand, both purposeful and irresolute expressions of gesture, both vigorous and reticent swathes of paint: such are the opposite and dialectical givens that constitute the gestural vernacular of Richard Hearn, a virtuoso of the abstracted landscape, whose paintings are aesthetic investigations of visibility suspended between abstraction and non-abstraction, suspended between random smears of color and their organization directed toward the representation of nature as a primordial intuition, suspended between vision's own shift and stability.

As Maurice Merleau-Ponty explains, Paul Cézanne “did not want to separate the stable things which we see and the shifting way in which they appear; he wanted to depict matter as it takes on form, the birth of order through spontaneous organization.”<sup>2</sup> Rather than protractions of Cézanne's vision, however, the thirteen paintings of Hearn, collectively titled *Nomad*, come across as continuations and reinventions of Willem de Kooning's compositional language, a language

that indeed remains inseparable from Cézanne's phenomenological undertaking.

The *Nomad* paintings of Hearn evoke such innovative abstractions of de Kooning as *Ruth's Zowie* (1957), *Suburb in Havana* (1958), *Black and White* (1959), *Merritt Parkway* (1959), *Door to the River* (1960) and *A Tree in Naples* (1969). The motif of the landscape within such paintings of de Kooning is as evident as it is ambiguous, as unmistakable as it is slippery, as legible as it is illegible. Through composition, coloration, gestural and figure-ground reciprocity, the *Nomad* series of Hearn redefines the landscape as a duality: a pictorial representation of a vast vista that is apprehended by means of the visionary paths paved by de Kooning and Cézanne. Through their poetic titles—*Idyll*, *Oar*, *Vessel*, *Pilgrim*, *Bedouin*, *Icarus*, *Cavalcade*, *Wayfarer*, *Vinculum*, *Mantle*, *Arroyo*, *Link*, *Thole*—these paintings of Hearn invite us viewers to grasp them on their own as possibilities of visual articulations of landscapes, as much as they call forth renewed conversations with two of the harbingers of modernity.



“ I’m interested only in expressing basic human emotions—tragedy, ecstasy, doom, and so on. And the fact that a lot of people break down and cry when confronted with my pictures shows that I can communicate those basic human emotions .... If you ... are moved only by their color relationships, then you miss the point.”<sup>3</sup>

—Mark Rothko

In his 2020 *Absence* series, comprised of five thought-provoking works, Hearn has evocatively embedded remarkably gestural, abstract painting within a significantly larger, blank one, a pairing that brings to mind the existential conundrum of “being and nothingness,” now shifted from its philosophical context to the artist’s self-interrogatory isolation during our global pandemic. Isolation and connection, insularity and unity, locality and globalization, presence and absence: such are a few of the dialectical allusions this enigmatic suite hypnotically incants.

Enwrapping the observer with an unrestrained revelry of vibrant colors and expressive gestures, each of the seemingly abstract, large-scale paintings of the *Rainbow* series of Hearn testifies to the artist’s veneration of the pictorial grammar of Abstract Expressionism and his commitment to resuscitate that movement and redefine its degree of abstractness, its sensory exaltation of

color, now directed toward socially-conscious art.

Poised vertically upon the perennial ryegrass underneath a partly clear and partly cloudy sky, the seven dazzling and resplendent paintings of the *Rainbow* series were cunningly exhibited in Ireland in a “museum without walls” on August 3, 2020. Against the backdrop of the Burren, a glaciokarst landscape on Ireland’s west coast, the County Clare-based photographer Eoin Collins has elegantly bracketed this breathtaking suite of paintings by the slopes of two limestone hills. The image of Collins brilliantly reveals a set of formalist and conceptual exchanges between the self-contained iconicity that Abstract Expressionism has procured over the past seventy years and the majesty of nature, now redirected toward the relatively recent social significance of rainbows as signs of hope, solidarity and gratitude. Emitting a luxurious continuum of hues across a celestial backdrop, this beguiling photograph of *Rainbow* ultimately reveals a poignancy in



Above: Richard Hearn, *Rainbow*, 2020. Comprised of seven paintings, oil on canvas, 150 x 150 cm each. Exhibited outdoors in the Burren, County Clare, Ireland. Photograph by Eoin Collins.

Below: Richard Hearn, *Absence*, 2020. Featured here are *Untitled I, II and III* in a series of five works painted in 2020.



“ For me the act of painting does not always exist on a linear timeline. ”

—Richard Hearn

interweaving the sublimity of coloration and a sense of communal responsibility.

The dialectic between the legacy of Abstract Expressionism and the phenomenal *Rainbow* series is evident in the self-referentiality of the medium of oil paint and the painting’s potential links to humanity’s cultural fabrics, between the cloud-like formlessness traced upon a given canvas and the quadrilateral, architectonic frame through which Hearn implicitly connects the canon of Abstract Expressionism to a current crisis within our social field. The *Rainbow* series thus points at a collective consciousness that has come to demand awareness, attitudes and actions amidst the pandemic. Indeed, the innovative manner whereby Hearn has reformulated the tenet of that radical art movement that began in New York in the late 1940s is evidenced through the provocative motif of the hovering pyramid manifested in the paintings titled *Green (royGbir)* and *Indigo (roygbIr)*, as well as the recurring motif of the arc palpable upon each of the seven canvases of Rainbow. The heroic rhetoric of Abstract Expressionism has thus become

astoundingly reformulated through emblems of architecture and expansively-defined colors of the rainbow that operate as socially-engaged signs of our time.

Within both of these intriguing cycles of Hearn—*Absence* and *Rainbow*—the viewer is invited to decrypt the codes of the briskly executed paintings, interpreting them through the historical trajectory of abstract art, alongside the crucial prospect of expanding and redefining those historical tenets. Both of these cycles of Hearn, realized during an insulated voyage of self-discovery, compel the spectator to reflect upon the absorbing paintings through intuitive associations that are nonetheless framed by the social phenomenon of our times: a pandemic that ought to be countered through vigilance and resilience.

In an *Artforum* roundtable of a couple of decades ago, Thierry de Duve had remarked, “It is both amusing and pathetic that about once every five years the death of painting is announced, invariably followed by the news of its

resurrection.”<sup>4</sup> Seemingly indifferent to academic theories, intellectual currents and the state of criticism, Hearn has explained his impulse to paint on canvas: “I was always strongly drawn to abstraction—in museums and galleries I would hone in immediately—almost magnetically on an abstract composition. There would be a resonance that I would attune to and that vibration would carry me across space and time, connecting deeply with the work. An Antoni Tàpies, a Cy Twombly, a Sean Scully or a Barrie Cooke would be such a work.”

Through brushes, through his hands to mark and maneuver paint upon the surface of the canvas, through rags to push and pull wet paint, through charcoal to delineate and mark, and occasionally through tape to mark off and render sharp edges, Hearn portrays his visual commentaries on painting, negotiating the passage of time and painting’s temporal conditions, negotiating what

may lie behind, before and upon the pigmented picture surface. Whether the impetus for a given series of paintings by Hearn is directed toward the embodiment of the experience of visual perception of the glaciokarst landscape of the Burren or toward pairing that type of an experience with a given social objective, an abstracted landscape from the *Absent, Rainbow* or *Nomad* group registers as an homage to Cézanne and de Kooning at once.

#### Notes

1. Paul Cézanne, cited in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt,” in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen A. Johnson and Michael B. Smith (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1993), p. 67; originally published in the September 1949 issue of *Partisan Review*.
2. Merleau-Ponty, pp. 63-64.
3. Mark Rothko, cited in *MoMA Highlights* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2004), p. 196.
4. See “The Mourning After: A Roundtable,” *Artforum*, Vol. 41, No. 7 (March 2003), pp. 206-211, 267-270.

B E D O U I N

oil on linen  
178 x 132 cm





I C A R U S

oil on linen  
178 x 132 cm









C A V A L C A D E

oil on canvas  
178 x 132 cm



L I N K

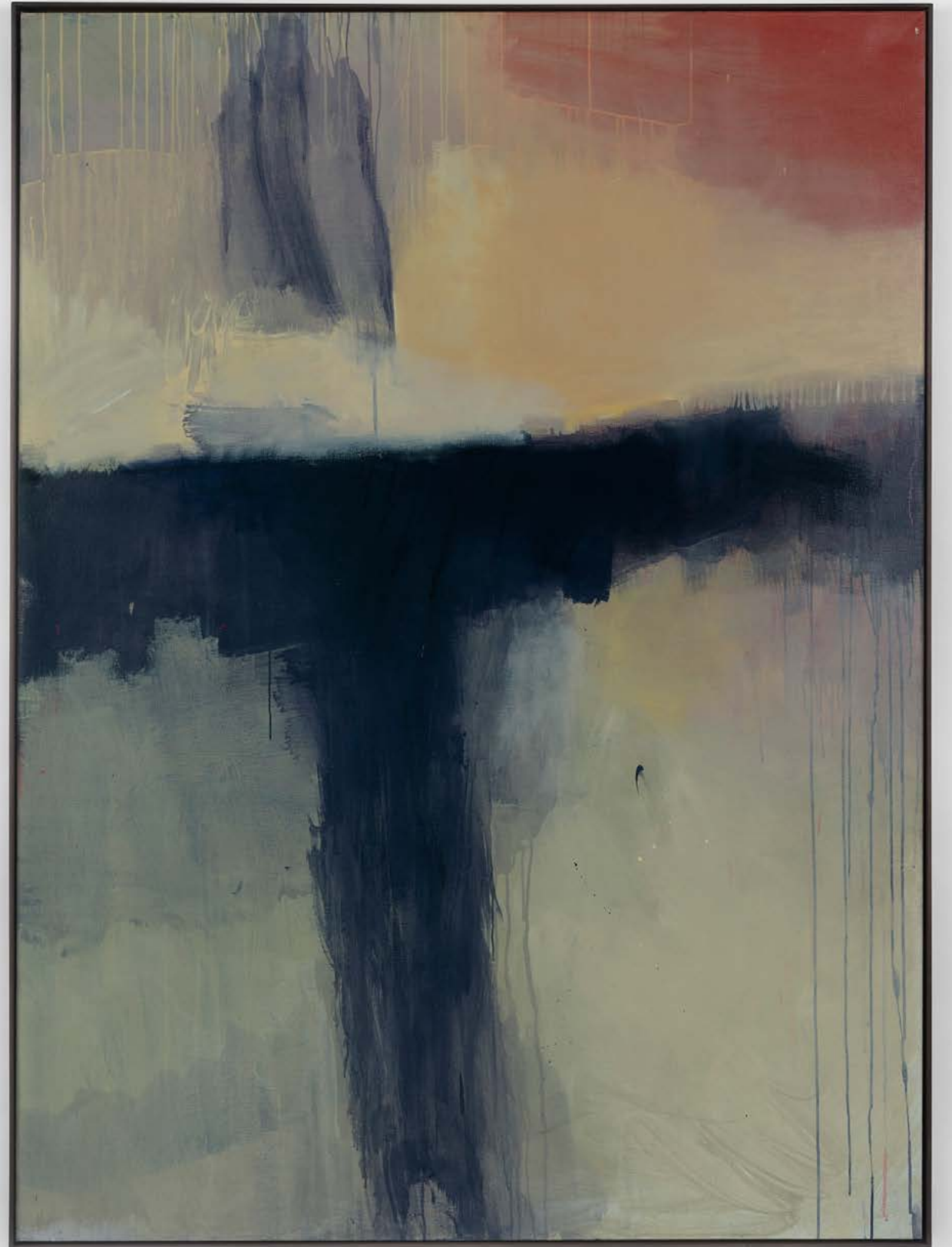
oil on linen  
61 x 46 cm





P I L G R I M

oil on linen  
178 x 132 cm



M A N T L E

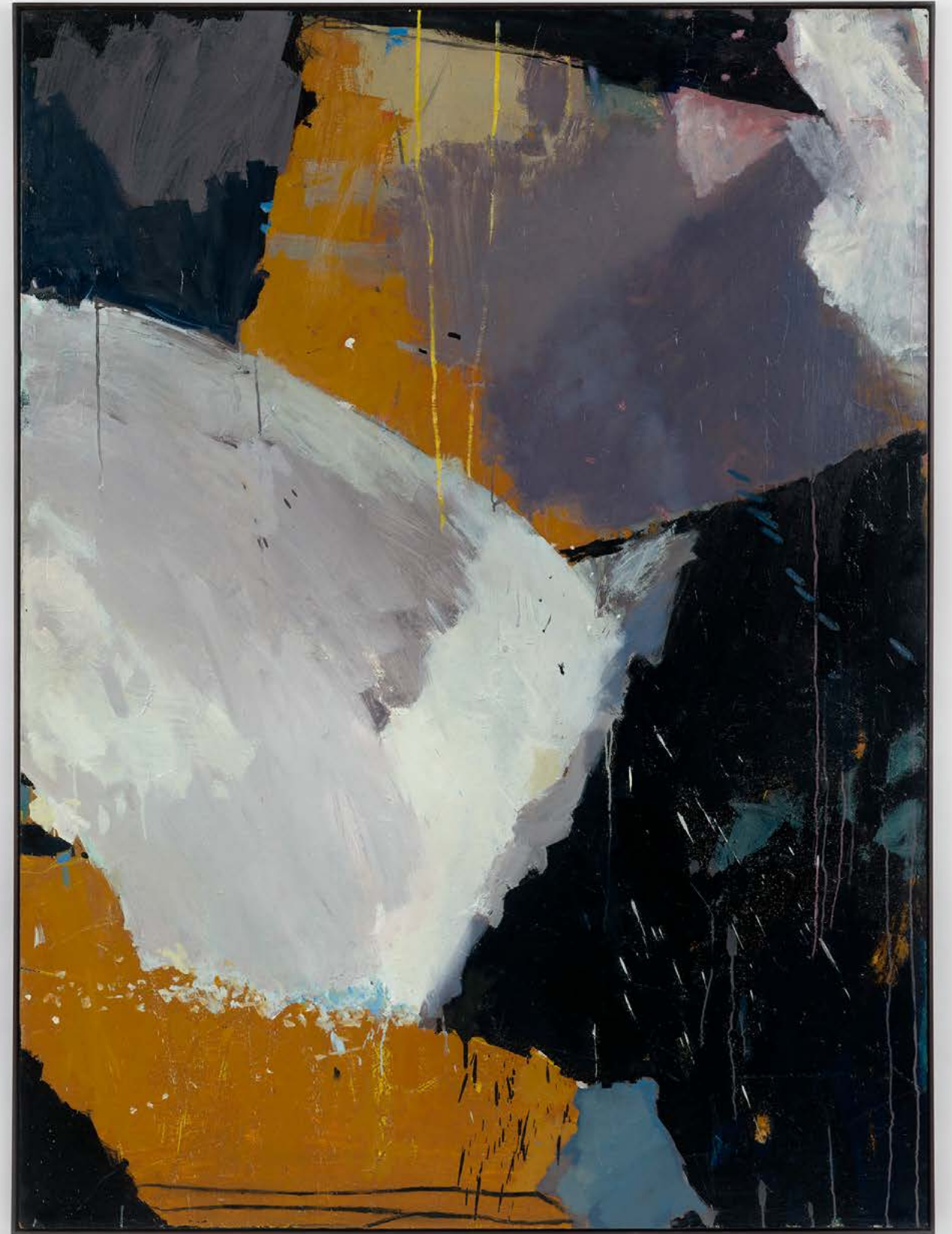
oil on linen  
61 x 46 cm





W A Y F A R E R

oil on linen  
178 x 132 cm









I D Y L L

oil on linen  
178 x 132 cm



10X



A R R O Y O

oil on linen  
61 x 46 cm



O A R

oil on linen  
178 x 132 cm



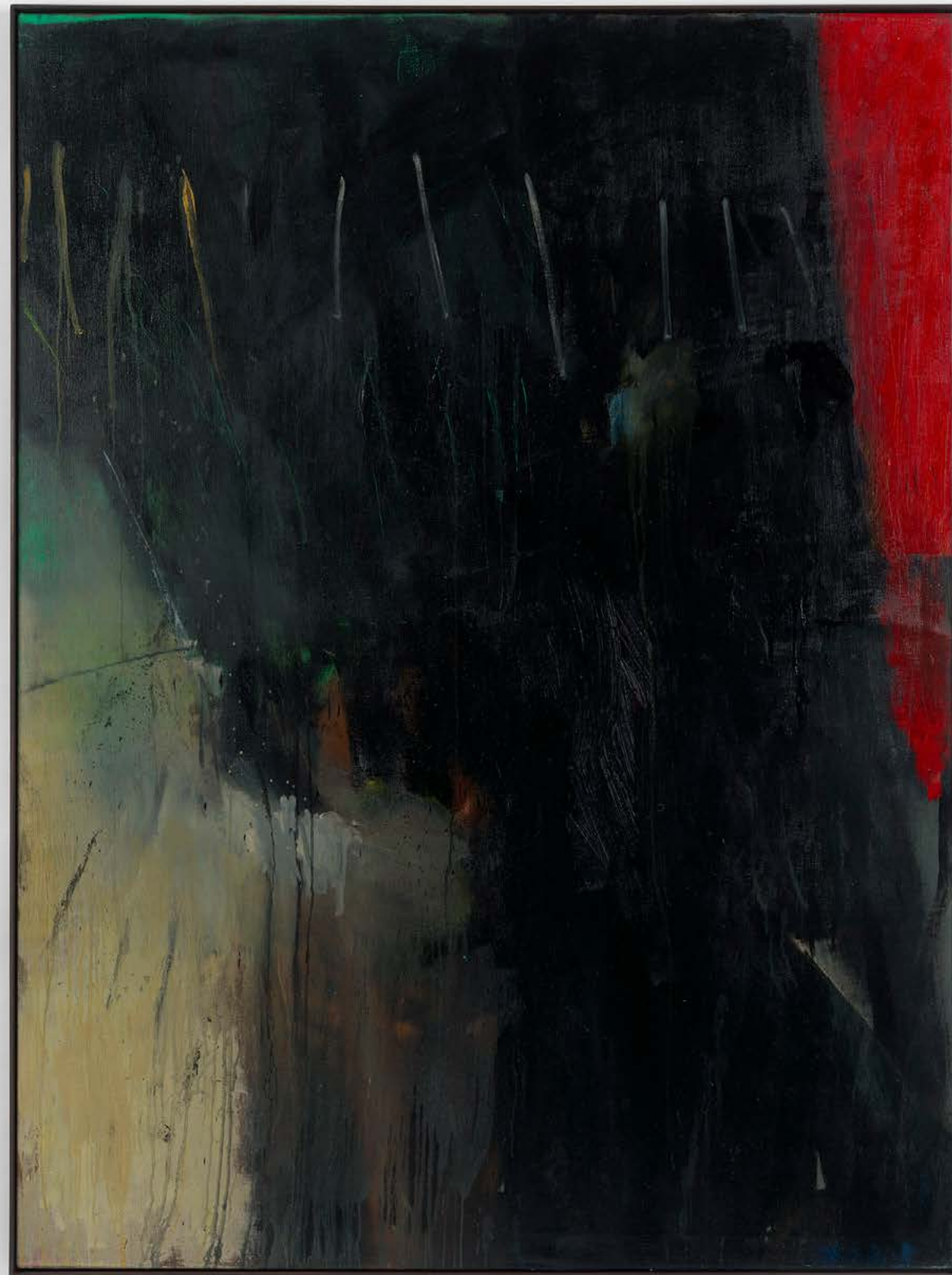






V E S S E L

oil on linen  
178 x 132 cm





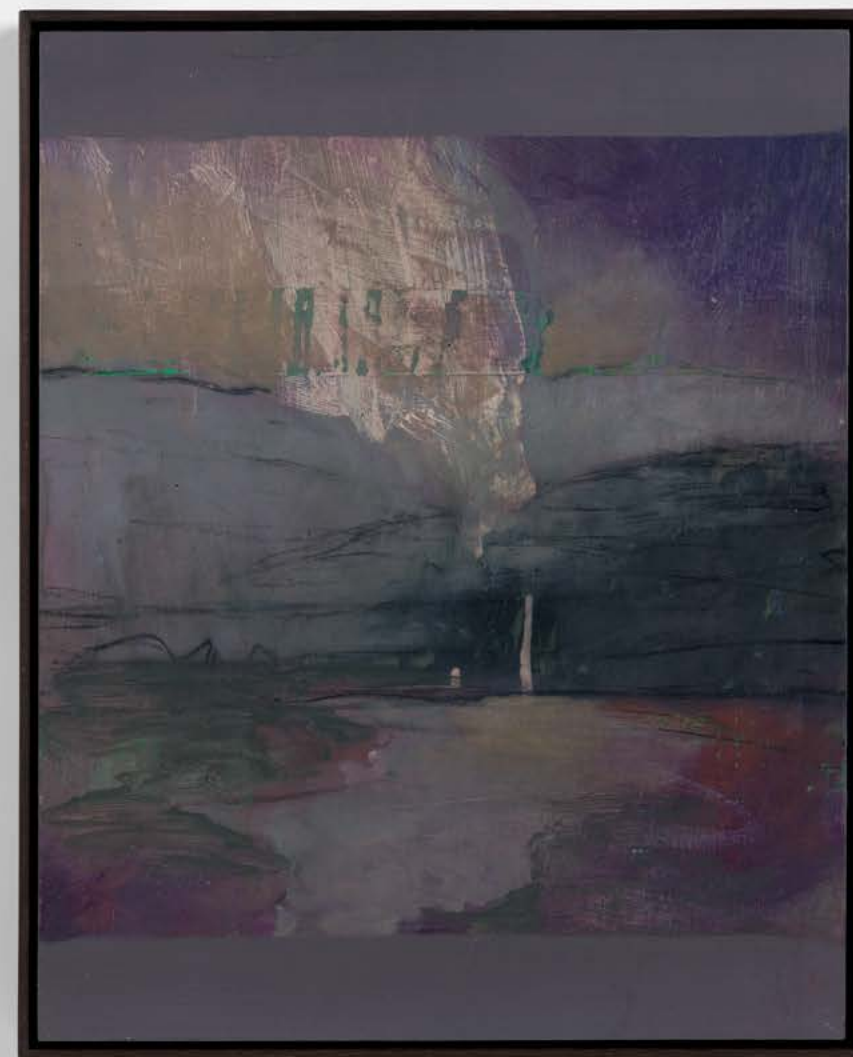
V I N C U L U M

oil on linen  
178 x 132 cm



T H O L E

oil on linen  
50 x 40 cm









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