



portrait without a face

Left: Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni
The Awakening Slave, 1525-30
Galleria dell Accademia - Florence Italy



Sofie Muller
Painting Three, 2023
Aquarelle on Alabaster
21 x 29.7cm

"L'existence précède l'essence."

Jean-Paul Sartre

Sofie Muller's confronting sculpture, more than any other work in this exhibition, retains a portion of the physical coordinates of a face. Indeed, it is the case that the top half of the face remains largely present - however with the bottom half excised, the figure simultaneously loses and gains an unexpected communicative authority. The sculpture is both muted and insistent. Like Edvard Munch's silent 'scream', Muller's figure, with its closed eyes and lower portion missing, is somehow deafening...

Muller regularly presents fragments of the human body, most often the head and the hands, as wounded but belligerent, organic vessels - unexpectedly resilient against the harm that has befallen them - natural and not. Yet as marred as her figures can be, there is an implied tenacity to them, a psychology that speaks to qualities of inner fortitude. Art history has long offered images of the human figure, disabled, harmed by the misadventures of belief and the cost of conversion. From St Sebastian to John the Baptist, from Adam & Eve to Christ, theirs have been tales of spiritual triumph - physical and moral, over the very cruellest kinds of adversity - so called 'tests of faith.'

Given Muller's extraordinary facility for working with traditional materials and her (neo)neo-classical approach to imagery, one might think that there would be some latent religiosity in her work. However, these head and hands, these torsos, feel secular. Such is their authenticity, that claims of spontaneous healing, of miracles bestowed by another's hand, feels the stuff of fairy tales. Not surprising you might say, but there is a deeply held sense of human credibility to these sculptures. They speak to our hearts through a shared understanding of sorrow, but they make no promises of redemption.





Muller's small headless torso however even hints at something more. Here Muller's introduction of crystals feels symbolic of purity and tender innocence. The childlike scale of the work seems to imply an incorruptibility and guiltlessness. Here absence is openness and hope – a portrait of possibility.

Yet art can be filled with false prophecy – it has long been in the employ of it. But what claims does Muller make for her sculpture? She simply asks us to look with an open and sensitive gaze, to apprehend the synchronal beauty and difficulty of existence. In this sense Muller's works is affiliated with the aura of Dostoevsky, of Kafka, of Sartre. Where it sets itself aside is that instead of deferring to the absurdity of existence, Muller speaks to the resolve to live life – hers and ours.



Left: Saint Denis holding his head
Left portal of Notre Dame de Paris

Sofie Muller
Boy Without a Head, 2022
Alabaster white with crystals
33 x 13 x 17 cm



"I should like to tidy things up and disappear."

Virginia Woolf

The paintings of Hanns Kunitzberger demonstrate something of Virginia Woolf's inclination. However, it is not that the paintings of Kunitzberger are "tidy". In fact, these are paintings, like those of Federle, have always resisted on the strongest terms, the formalist proclivities of 'Konkrete Kunst' and their desperate urge for orderliness. However, if tidy insinuates an essential quality, one that is less about conformity and more about distillation - well then it makes sense.

As much as any painter I know, Kunitzberger paints with a subtlety of touch that feels unquantifiable. Colour exists as subtle drifts of pigment that have only gently embraced the weave of the linen. The colour assembles towards the interior, endowing the painting with a resonant space, but towards the edges we apprehend just how delicate (it's) existence is.

Language for painting can be elusive and perhaps it should be. Description can't possibly approach the experience of vision especially when it is tethered to the ineffable. Despite that, many try to make sense of paintings' capacity to communicate otherwise unaccountable experiences. I try and come up short on a daily basis.

The impact of *Mitte 2022 Früher, 2022* is therefore not easy to express. I saw it in Berlin in the autumn of 2022 and was immediately moved by its fervency and profundity. Paintings whose atmosphere is so psychologically encircling are rare and often lean on scale to achieve this. This is a painting of competing characters - vaporous and yet it has such a molecular density that it speaks to mass, to the notion of the body so completely.

Left: Hanns Kunitzberger
Ende 2008 Früher, 2008
Oil on linen, stretched on wooden frame
80 x 65 x 4cm

Marble sculpture, 1926 by Regina Kernstok (1875-1959)

Hanns Kunitzberger
Mitte 2022 Früher, 2022
Oil on mollino, stretched on wooden frame
58 x 50 x 4cm



"Forensics is eloquence and reduction."

Gertrude Stein



Hanns Kunitzberger
'2. Hälfte 2022 Spät', 2022
Oil/ mollino
225 x 150 x 4 cm
Installation: Fox Jensen McCrory Gallery
Auckland, New Zealand, 2023

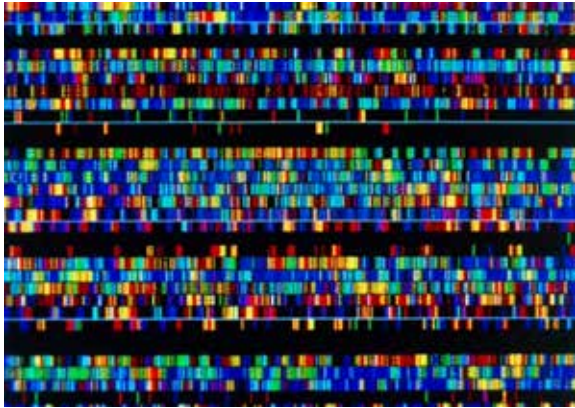


"Concerning matter, we have been all wrong. What we have called matter is energy, whose vibration has been so lowered as to be perceptible to the senses. There is no matter."

Albert Einstein

Mark Francis's paintings sit at a somewhat unexpected intersection of science and aesthetics. It is a place where feeling and intuition dovetail with rigorous material and procedural testing – and what's more, all this experimentation isn't in aid of what ails or benefits us - instead it is in the name of wonder – but if that isn't worthy, then what is?

Regime is at the heart of all Francis's painting. His controlled coercion of oil paint has an exactitude and refinement that is not just rare, but counterintuitive to the vagaries and shenanigans of oil paint. Such careful governance of process might lead to an unwelcome formalism but in Francis's hands (& mind) he is simply seeking some measure of authority over the accidental so that he might welcome the unforeseen.



These newest works introduce a considerably more diverse colour palette than he has used to date. The juxtapositions of colour cause even greater oscillation in his painting. The highly nuanced vibrato, a quality that is central to his brushstroke is given greater pulse by the collision of colours and their actions upon each other. The space in the painting begins to open as pigments dance and bend. The dimensionality of the picture plane, a field that he was inclined to work across, as much as into, now reverberates with a relentless energy, as if the body of the painting had been electrified. Whatever the case, these new works have a pulse to them – a subterranean heartbeat that signals life, and, in a way, seems to be attempting to measure and record it.

I know less about genome sequencing than my dog, but these deliciously code-like paintings elegantly express a macroscopic expression of the very microscopic threads that bind us together as one and many. As such they might be seen as a potent analogy to our very material existence.

Left: Genome sequence

Mark Francis
Echo Mix, 2023
Oil on canvas
153 x 122cm



"I am not one and simple, but complex and many."

Virginia Woolf
The Waves

Mark Francis
Audio Mix, 2023
Oil on canvas
153 x 122cm





"I defy gravity."

Marilyn Monroe

Erin Lawlor's paintings are without question a celebration of gesture. Such facility could suffocate possibility in a sea of self-consciousness, but for all Lawlor's flamboyance and the glorious, roiling drama of her work, these paintings are utterly without painterly conceit. Not one jot of the smugness that can so easily infect gesture is present in Lawlor, because she retains a deep self-awareness, as do the paintings themselves, of the dangers of self-satisfaction. These are paintings about journey and doubt, about time and uncertainty, but undeniably they affirm existence through performance, and like Monroe - "they defy gravity."

Spend any time with her work and the endowments of art history are evident – Titian to Soutine, Manet, Auerbach and Mitchell – all painters whose personal DNA is ensnared in and by, the act of making. This reciprocity between material, process and painter makes portrayal inevitable.

Marilyn Monroe's 1953 film-noir *Niagara* pushed her towards real stardom. Playing femme fatale Rose Loomis, Monroe is dark, seductive and sensual - all curves and Technicolor – beauty to rival the sweeping nature of the setting. Lawlor's extravagant painting *Silver Screen (Niagara)* captures the foreboding and allure of Loomis, not as portrait but as a cocktail of vigour and temptation. It is a truly seductive painting that is glamorous and magnetic, with more than a touch of the "come-hither" and yet it doesn't rest on any overt ploys to entice us.

I sense Rose Loomis in Lawlor's *Niagara* not because Lawlor depicted her, but because she didn't – and ultimately this is what is so enticing about Erin Lawlor's work. She gives the viewer so much, opens multiple avenues, but never is she dictatorial about which looping arc to follow.

Left: Marilyn Monroe

Erin Lawlor
Silver Screen (Niagara), 2023
Oil on canvas
190 x 130cm



"I'd luv to kiss ya but I just washed my hair."

Bette Davis



Portrait of Bette Davis by George Hurrell, June, 1938

Erin Lawlor
closer than close (Bette D), 2022
Oil on canvas
190 x 130cm



"I loathe my own face. I've done a lot of self-portraits, really because people have been dying around me like flies and I've nobody else left to paint but myself."

Francis Bacon



Tomislav Nikolic, Beyeler Foundation, 2018
Basel, Switzerland

Tomislav Nikolic
I still find it so hard, To say what I need to say, 2023
synthetic polymer, marble dust, 16.9ct lemon
gold leaf, 22.5ct champagne gold leaf, acrylic
on linen, composition and wood
138.5 x 112.2 x 17.2 cm



"I prefer living in color."

David Hockney

Tomislav Nikolic's paintings are made in the service of communication. They express the strongest desire to engage in multiple conversations, not only with the viewer, but retrospectively, with paintings from history, both recent and far. On occasion, paintings are made in response to overtures he infers have been made to him by other works of art. Of course such conversations are subjective, imagined - one might even say they are a function of fantasy, but ultimately they are tangible for Nikolic and therefore legitimate. And of course when art is reciprocal then the engagement is more open and reflexive.

So much work is made in the spirit of pious monologue - it speaks, you listen or more accurately, it lectures, and you decode... if you can or even wish to. The works conceptual value is inferred by its ability to be simultaneously didactic and slightly haughty. How very silly.

Amidst this tide of gratuitous obfuscation, it is Nikolic's unflinching candour that appeals. His paintings can be brazen and immodest but these are qualities that contribute to the works legibility and communicative clout. I wrote a small piece in his recent monograph, about "approaching a Nikolic painting". The reality is that they come out to greet you, sometimes demurely, often in a party frock, but always, always they announce themselves as ready to dance.

So given all this character-filled behaviour, it isn't any wonder that I would regard his paintings as portraits, even if they were encouraged by Manet as much as Bacon, by Pissarro as much as Picasso. These are chromatic portraits that are most always effusive and warm and even when we are shocked by them, we revel their company.

Of course, it is colour that underwrites Nikolic's extraordinary capacity to communicate. He understands that colour comes pre-loaded with personality, as well as the investments we make in it psychologically and emotionally, and so his work carefully interrogates and celebrates this capacity. But critically, Nikolic's colour is never out of the tube. His pigments are mixed by hand and eye and then applied gradually in thin veils so that his "response" and indeed the personality of the painting emerges only with time. In this sense, and despite the relationship of his work to other paintings, he cannot be sure of the character of his own work until it is complete.

All the works in *Portrait Without a Face* possess a depth of soul, a sincerity that is unmistakable. Of course, there is an array of personalities gathered together and they speak to us in highly individuated ways. Perhaps of all the works assembled here, Nikolic's paintings borrow the orthodox form of a portrait painting most evidently. The portrait format is one thing, but the frame proclaims both history and celebration. These ornate elements which have joined in so happily with the rest of the composition say - "here I am" - a wild, joyful, charismatic, sensual, mis-behaving portrait without a face.

Tomislav Nikolic
Lift you to your higher ground, 2023
synthetic polymer, marble dust, 15.3ct green
gold leaf, 23.5ct gold leaf on linen and wood
146.2 x 105.3 x 6 cm





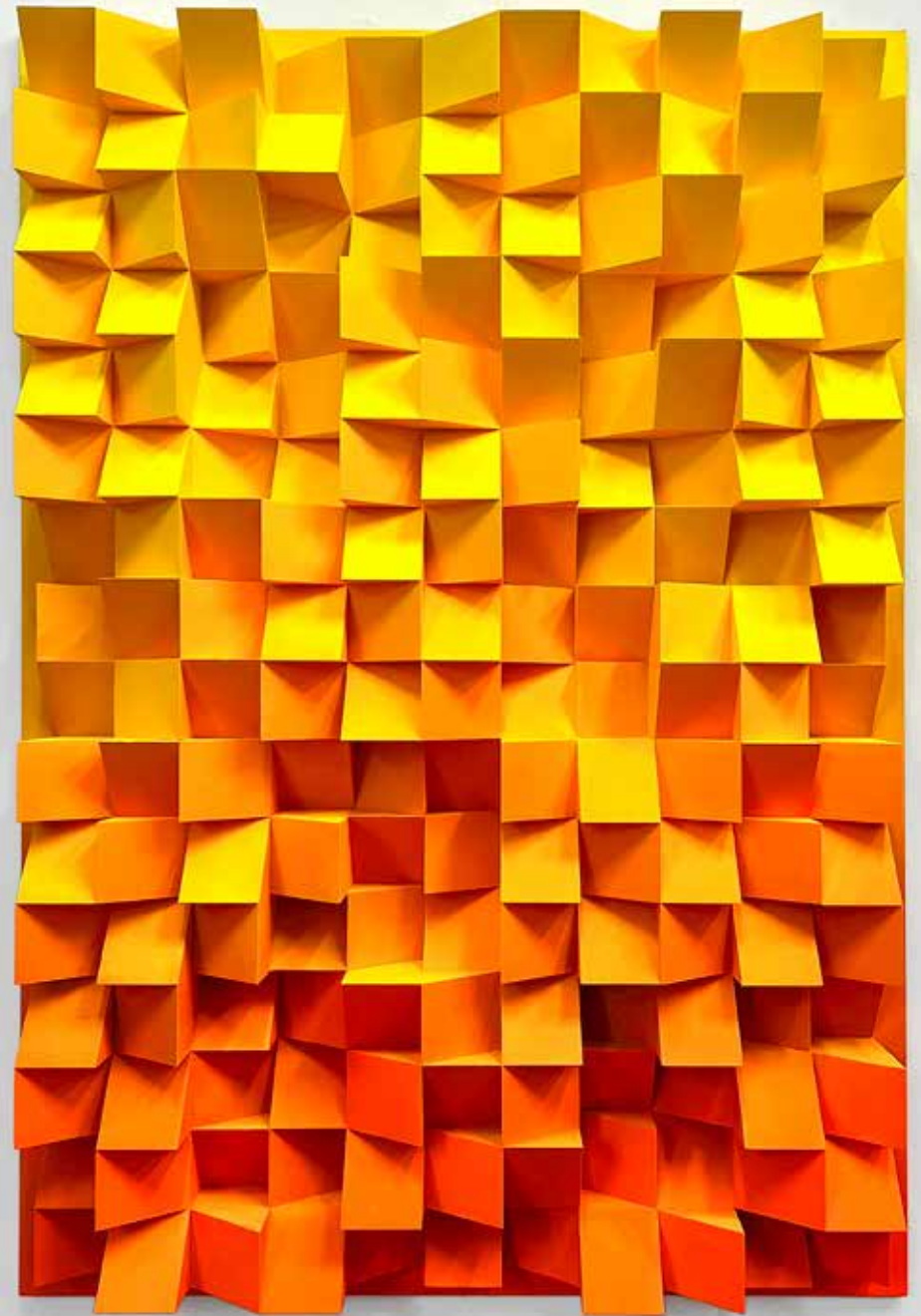
Left: Francis Bacon
'Chicken' 1982
Oil, pastel and dry transfer lettering on canvas
78 x 58 in. (198 x 147.5 cm)
© Francis Bacon. DACS/Copyright Agency, 2023.

There is much about the act and the fabric of painting that Jan Albers has set aside. The undergarments of the painting, the cedar stretcher and raw linen, with its neatly folded corners, offering a two-dimensional plane readied for depiction - all gone. For Jan this was never going to work. However, there is much about painting that remains. Most evidently the relationship of the object to the wall, the clear architecture of the rectilinear form - both portrait and landscape, but also the deftly modulated use of colour and its undoubted capacity to communicate.

The hyper-physicality of the relief sculptures he makes, alter the dynamics of the object and the space in which it sits. Faceted and creased with shadowy ravines and sharp edges, it can feel as if these objects were honed by a determined neo-cubist set on bringing the flattened angularity of synthetic cubism back to life. Having depressed the magical origami of both figure and form so that it could be rendered on a picture plane, Albers has set about unfolding the Cubist vista so as to reassert its animated, dimensional character.

Jan Albers sculpture are positively alive. Their extravagant colour and their jaunty construction make them feel garrulous, in the best sense. They barely draw breath as their colour and form fuse, luring you into speedy conversations that turns this way and that, and all the while responding to the shared space in which they so evidently exist. These are works that come out to greet you, entertain and seduce you with their spirited ways. What better kind of portrait can there be?

Jan Albers
hOkusailemOntrEE, 2023
Spray paint on polystyrene and wood
170 x 120 x 29 cm



"Maybe Cubism started this way.
Memory re-arranging a face."

Mary Rakow
The Memory Room



Left: Juan Gris
Portrait of the Artist's Mother, 1912
Oil on canvas, 55 x 46 cm
Private Collection

Tomislav Nikolic
l'Egrand Petit, 2023
Bronze
40 x 30 x 30 cm





"Were it not for shadows, there would be no beauty."

Jun'ichirō Tanizaki
In Praise of Shadows

For a painter who is so deeply wed to figuration Gideon Rubin's erasure of the face can appear inexplicable and at times shocking. We assume that character and identity are held - expressed in the complex co-ordinates of the face. Rubin however chooses to annul the orthodox evidence of identity as he continues his own deeper metaphorical search for it, convinced that it resides elsewhere, trapped between memory and loss.

Of course, the body, clothed or otherwise, its deportment and its implied location, combine to insinuate more data about character and circumstance than we need. In fact, by not identifying his figures he allows them to take on a symbolic ubiquity. Rubin's capacity to invest his subjects with this loading and yet liberate them from the confines of particularity is both disarming and compelling.

What Rubin invites us to do with each figure is to apprehend them rather than recognise them. Recognition of what one sees can act as a handbrake to understanding. The best painting offers experience rather than data and despite appearing to give us an "edited" accounting of personality, Rubin's distilled paintings embrace us with an open and warm familiarity - with essence. He doesn't just let us know them; he invites us to be them.

This overture - to be inside the skin of both the subject and the painting means Rubin's paintings act as profoundly intimate portraits. In a sense they behave as silhouettes of existence - shadows of presence - and as Tanizaki suggested - it is in the shadowy spaces, where we cannot quite see, that meaning (and beauty) exists.



Gideon Rubin
Untitled, 2023
Oil on linen
30 x 20 cm

Gideon Rubin
Grey Shirt, 2023
Oil on linen
71 x 66 cm

"And I sit here without identity: faceless. My head aches."

Sylvia Plath



Gideon Rubin Studio, London

Gideon Rubin
Swimsuit, 2021
Oil on linen
150 x 105 cm





*"To me, every hour of the day and night is
an unspeakably perfect miracle."*

Walt Whitman

Lawrence Carroll was terribly special and when I think of him, despite the brevity of our connection, I feel he could so easily have uttered Whitman's words - *to me, every hour of the day and night is an unspeakably perfect miracle*.

Almost within arm's reach of my desk in Sydney, is an object, *Untitled (cocoon painting)* that Lawrence worked on between 2014 - 2017. At times it can appear to be a flimsy, physically impoverished object – a fragile skein of cardboard, held together with tape and optimism in the most tenuous way. It feels like the remnants of a cocoon – an alien web of sorts. I don't really know what it is or where it came from, but I remember seeing it in Italy when we first visited Lawrence's Bolsena studio in 2017. I saw it, didn't forget it and now we are blessed to be custodians of it.

I said I didn't know what it is, but I do. It is a portrait - a self-portrait by and of Lawrence. As a remnant, it is now even more powerful, if that is possible - as it is the metaphorical skin that he occupied, a three-dimensional drawing made from the forensic residue of his studio and most sadly I also see it as a drawing of his fragile heart.

So, it is an object flooded with emotional resonance. True to his adopted and cherished Arte Povera roots, it is simultaneously deeply symbolic, and it is what it is – rudimentary, humble and magnificent.

Left: Lawrence Carroll
Untitled, (cocoon painting) 2014/17
Corrugated paper, oil, tape, house paint, glue and wire.
40 x 14 x 13 cm
Installation: Kunstmuseum Magdeburg, Germany, 2018

Right: Lawrence Carroll
Untitled, (cocoon painting) 2014/17 (detail)
Corrugated paper, oil, tape, house paint, glue and wire.
40 x 14 x 13 cm
Fox Jensen Gallery, Sydney, Australia, 2020



*"As I change, the painting changes,
and as the painting changes, I change."*

Lawrence Carroll

In *Portrait Without a Face* we are presenting a slightly more orthodox portrait. It sits on the wall and is rectilinear and vertical in disposition – so it has the scale and proportion of a portrait. Like the sculpture it is fundamental in its material although it does have a synthetic bouquet of flowers at its approximate centre.

Like the sculpture it couldn't be more symbolic if it tried. Cloth that Lawrence was photographed with draped over his shoulder many times, is fixed to the lower portion of the painting and the surface is punctured, somewhat in the manner of Fontana. One can't look at it and not see Lawrence's nature – happy scavenger, giver of life to discarded material and an endless maker of self-portraits – some painful, many loving, others raw and carnal but always profoundly human.



Left: Lawrence Carroll
Lawrence Carroll
Untitled, 2014/17
Oil, wax, house paint, plastic flowers and canvas fabric on wood
64.5 x 47.5 x 7 cm

Oil, wax, house paint, plastic flowers and canvas fabric on wood
64.5 x 47.5 x 7 cm

Below: Tea Bowl, Mino Ware, Black Oribe type
Momoyama period, 17th century
Collection: Helmut Federle

Right: Helmut Federle
Waterfall (blumen ersticken im holz), 2021
Synthetic resin, acrylic, vegetable oil on canvas
60 x 50 cm

Federle's paintings have long acknowledged the responsibility painting has to shoulder the metaphysical burdens of existence. The yearning for painting to rise to this ambition is more common than it is sustainable, however Federle is part of a rarefied lineage whose paintings not only possess the anatomy, but also the temperament and substance that allow for painting to simultaneously approach material modesty and transcendence.

One thinks of both Malevich and Mondrian and of course Rothko but as Federle increasingly erases the supports of modernist architecture from his late work, we see him finding a deeper companionship with the aesthetics of Shinto and Buddhism – certainly in the sense that paintings exist as a memento to transience and flux.

It is in this half-light that I see Federle's paintings as behaving as portraits. Whilst their proportion and disposition encourages this potential, it is their benevolence and their unobtrusiveness that one senses the welcome apparition of a soul.



God is absence. God is the solitude of man.

Jean-Paul Sartre



Federle Studio, Vienna, 2023

Helmut Federle
Basics on Composition A, 2019
oil on canvas
40 x 50 cm





"I don't want to dress up a picture with just my face."

Grace Kelly

You'd have to be visually impaired not to see just how beautiful Grace Kelly was. Unlike Marilyn (a few pages back in this catalogue) her beauty was perhaps gentler, more approachable, less carnal - but no-less overwhelming. They both had a beauty that was radioactive, though with Grace Kelly you may not have been immediately aware of the risk.

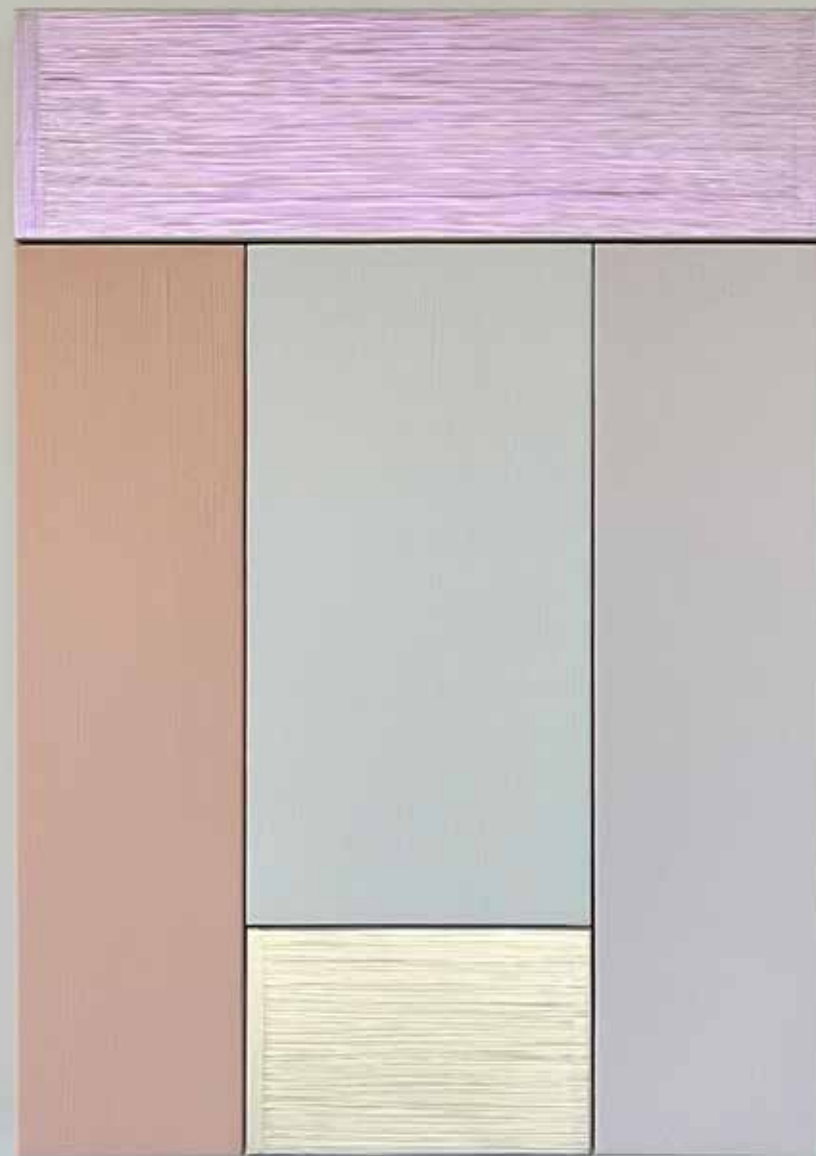
Good paintings can be like this ... their impact delayed. Form and colour can conspire to seduce you subliminally. I'm not suggesting the allure of Knoebel's *Grace Kelly Portraits* are subliminal, they are certainly seductive, but alongside many of Knoebel's more chromatically authoritative paintings, it feels unapologetically beautiful.

Odd too, that a face that is all curves and silken contours can be insinuated by crisp geometry, though rectilinear architecture has dominated Knoebel's painting for many years. Curiously in recent years he has welcomed the sweeping arc, most notably in a series of works called *Big Girls*.

Whatever form Knoebel's paintings take, they have always carried the atmosphere of personality. They can be jaunty and irreverent, they can clash and make-up, they can be overt or demure. In many ways when one considers his grand *Anima Mundi* series he seems to be painting humankind.

Left: Grace Kelly

Imi Knoebel
Portrait, 1998
Acrylic on wood
50 x 35 x 9 cm





Imi Knoebel
Untitled Nr 0, 1999
Acrylic on aluminium
135 x 100 x 7 cm

Left: *Subject as Object*,
Fox Jensen, Auckland 2011

Gunter Umberg
Ohne Titel / Untitled, 2010
poliment, pigment, dammar on wood
38 x 36 cm

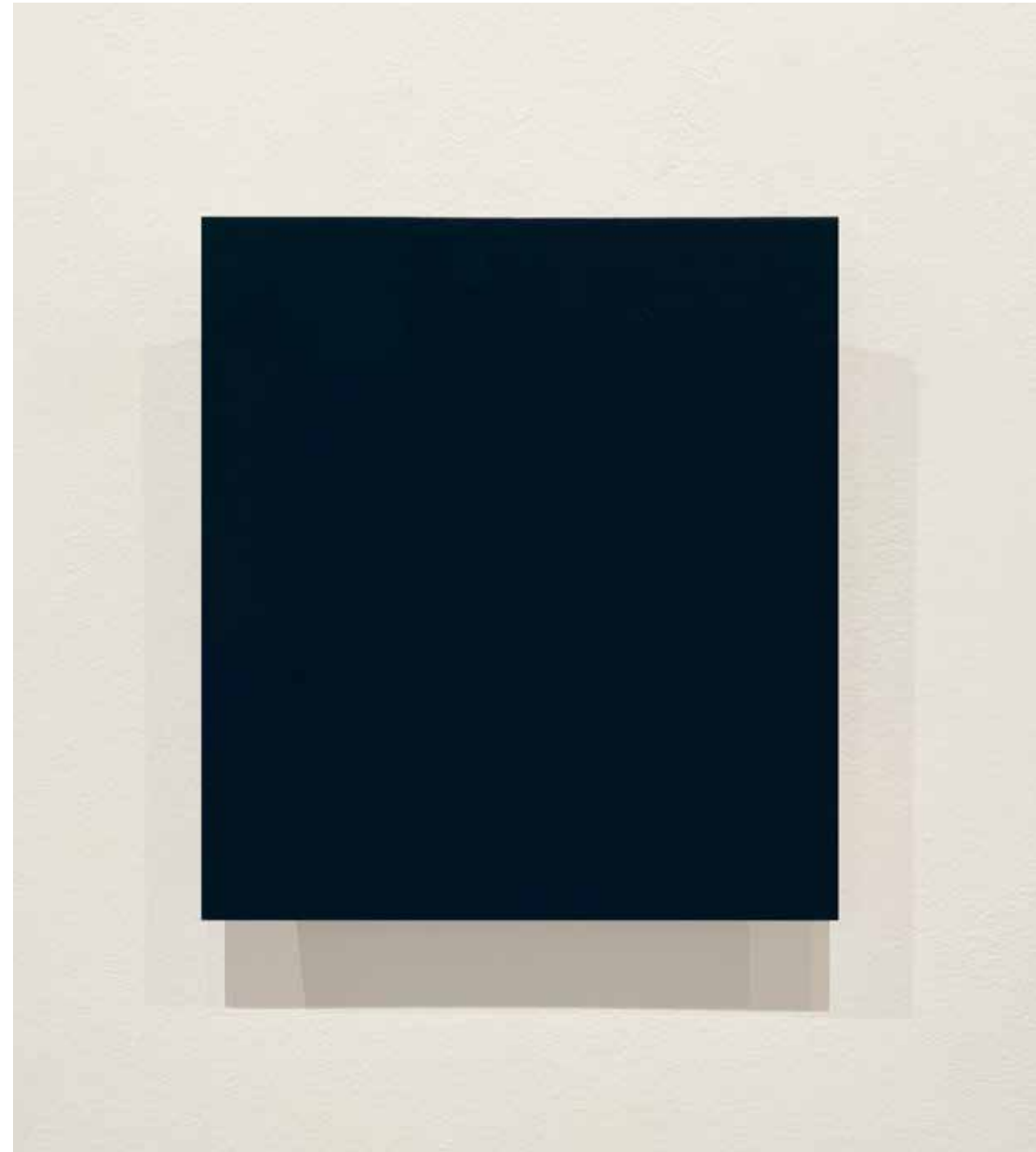
Umberg's paintings have inserted themselves into many projects that we have done, dating back to *Six Degrees of Separation* in 1999. For paintings that at first might appear to be the most defiant, the most belligerent, or as Ad Reinhardt suggested of his late black paintings, the most "final", I continue to be thrilled by their openness and conceptual malleability.

At first sight these works might seem to have shut the world out, but the reverse is true. Their apparent closure quietly commutes, and the space opens up to unfathomable depths. Then there is the architecture of the object itself. Rectilinear, vertical or rather "portrait" format (mostly) and sitting out from the wall, simultaneously asserting 'objectness' and presence whilst signalling mystery and absence.



The very evident thickness of the support suggests the body of the painting is a critical aspect to its existence, even if the face of the work inverts that implication. The pigment itself has its DNA in carbon, the most basic element - and it should be noted, albeit in a low voice, that we ultimately amount to little more - dust to dust and all that... so, what indeed Umberg presents is an accumulation of loss - assembled together, bound in dammar - the final residue of our common existence.

Untitled may be the most existential portrait in this exhibition. For whilst each of the others paintings and sculptures acknowledge our existence in the world through compelling analogies, Umberg has succeeded in painting himself almost entirely out of the picture. Umberg's paintings then can be said to be, much more than portraits without a face, but portraits without *his* face.





"It's so much darker when a light goes out than it would have been if it had never shone."

John Steinbeck
The Winter of Our Discontent

“There is in me an anarchy and frightful disorder. Creating makes me die a thousand deaths, because it means making order, and my entire being rebels against order. But without it I would die, scattered to the winds.”

Albert Camus

Over the last decade Coen Young has made an extended group of paintings that fall under the overarching title *Studies for a Mirror*. Youngs paintings conflate orthodox aspects of paintings with a material culture whose chemical cocktail and behaviour mimics certain aspects of photography. Between these strategies for capturing, reflection and depiction, one might assume that they would be an ideal vehicle for portraiture. However, built into this ostensibly clear mirroring procedure, Young welcomes a constant flux that borders on visual disorder.

The materials and the pressures they are subjected to, have made for a surface that releases rather than holds image. Thus, the viewers' experience is, at best, one of partial recognition. Images twist and morph in a wilfully analogue resolution, failing to stabilise but succeeding in folding the wider ambient environment into the body of the work. Colour and light, depth and shimmer all jostle for primacy. But Young's works fail to recognise any such hierarchy, instead offering us a seductive, volatile reflection of our world that is variously light-filled, shadowy and always mysterious - and “rebels against order.”

Amidst a culture that is unreasonably committed to greater and greater pixelation – presumably so as to witness even more of oneself, Young's *Mirror* are at odds with this utterly irrational inclination. He understands the Narcissian urge that frames contemporary cultures vanity so disturbingly, and though social commentary is not first and foremost Young's position, it is undeniable that his grand works, these portraits that simply refuse to provide the sitter with affirmation they seek, are capable of providing more contemplation and rumination than mere depiction ever could.



Left: Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571 – 1610)
Narcissus, 1597 – 1599
Oil on canvas
110 x 92 cm

Coen Young
Untitled (mirror painting) 3-2, 2023
Acrylic, enamel and silver nitrate on paper
144cm x 182 cm x 9 cm

Next page: Coen Young Studio, Sydney, Australia



"You use a glass mirror to see your face; you use works of art to see your soul."

George Bernard Shaw



For Jack, whose character and presence inhabit every corner of his DNA



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