

Alex Ruthner

Fix



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Ibid. London



DIRTY PRETTY THINGS

Kenny Schachter



Like Dickens' descriptions of London fog in *Bleak House*, Alex Ruthner spins a fragmented narrative that plays out on a polluted field: paint becomes yellow, brown, grey, and fleshy toned muck. His paintings are not unrelievedly bleak, however; in amongst the grime are winks of paradise: fields of poppies, stands of trees. The paint in these works is splattered, stained and slathered with pictorial fragments from rural and urban landscapes along with shards of historical references from Picasso to Alex Katz.

Ruthner studied under Albert Oehlen at the Dusseldorf Academy and Daniel Richter at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, and in some ways his work evinces a merging of these two teachers: Oehlen the post-mod, cut-and-paste poster boy, equal parts painter and digital collagist and Richter, the painterly fantasist spinning idiosyncratic, convoluted tales. Ruthner has twisted their lessons into something distinctly his own.

Just six months ago, Ruthner had his first solo exhibition in the UK, at London's Ibid gallery. Since then, his restless talent has led him in different directions. A Ruthner canvas is a poetic wreck, an explosion of abstraction, figuration and the barest, reductive making of marks. These are risky works that revel in process and material: he courts failure, and achieves success.

These paintings are not definitive statements. They are open-ended questionings and provocations initiating conversations about a fragmented world that mirrors

our media-saturated short-attention-spanned lifestyles. Ruthner serves up his aesthetics with a thick helping of politics, taking the temperature of society, often handing us an unpleasant report.

There is as much subtraction as addition, as much synthesis as analysis. Each work is like an environmentally destructive act—fracking and strip mining come to mind—gnawing into the surface, only to build it back up. The mix of materials lends these paintings an olfactory dimension: you can smell Ruthner's devotion to the act of painting, and sometimes that odor is putrid.

In all this dejected mayhem, there is a generosity in Ruthner's work. He demystifies the act of painting by using the canvas itself as a palette, creating pictures within pictures. Pigment residues, stains, smudges and traces become integral to his compositions while lending insight into their very making. In front of this new body of work, we are all voyeurs, peeping at a methodology that brings to mind the Bruce Nauman's early videos about the act of drawing, the heavy metal splatters of early Richard Serra works and post-industrial (and, in Ruthner's hands, post-internet) entropy of Robert Smithson.

Occasionally, horizontal slats appear in the works that reference fashion as well as Venetian blinds—the most economical way to let light (and life) in and keep it out by the mere yank of a cord. Ruthner has said that he imitates haute-couture fabrics, but favors the soiled-looking variety. If his paintings recall any number of glamorous runways, they are also the pictorial equivalent of the squalor of a dirty dorm room. Per Wilde, we are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.

Sometimes Ruthner incorporates bits and pieces of distorted cartoon imagery, like a drugged-looking Mickey Mouse, cute but sinister references that draw the viewer in even as they unnerve him. Anxiety lurks just beneath the surface of these paintings. Like certain ill-advised affairs, they are sweet in the moment, but leave an aftertaste of frustration that makes them difficult to shake.

When the new works arrived for installation, I noticed lipstick kisses strewn across the surface of a painting. Marks too strong not to register on the PDF file I'd been sent, they had clearly been administered after the works had been photographed. These ex post facto smooches—made, one assumes, by lips not belonging to Alex—are indicative of an artist in a state of constant flux and progress where even completed works (documented and sent on) are fluid up until the moment the transport van arrives to whisk them away.

His practice marks a convergence of painterly conceptualism with that bogeyman of today's instant gratification, turbo-charged buying and selling: traditional skill. Ruthner himself has said he is not a "supermarket artist" making product for a greedy market in search of the next thing, but his work also does the talking for him: with some of these paintings bordering on the downright tough, he should hardly be concerned about being confused with the commercially-minded.



Ruthner's is a tightly wound world characterized by dejection and outright despondency—but it is shot through with glimpses of hope and happiness. His paintings are not transcendent; they don't transport you anywhere, but instead anchor you to material reality, and this they do with grit, finesse and great beauty. Ruthner is at once a storyteller and a portraitist. His portrait is an abstract, collective one, of youth culture seen both in the present and through the lens of history. The story he tells is both classical and contemporary; it looks both forward and back.

Kenny Schachter, London 2014.





WALLS, WINDOWS AND OTHER SURFACES

Alex Ruthner in conversation
with Gabriel Coxhead



Gabriel Coxhead: I'd like to start with a question about your process. I'm interested in how you go about composing a painting, arranging its various facets. How much of it is spontaneous and how much is predetermined?

Alex Ruthner: The paintings are very designed. I prepare various backgrounds, determining the colour, the light, the energy of the work. Then I narrow the subject of each painting down by laying out and composing certain elements on that background, layer-by-layer and step-by-step.

GC: So the abstract marks, the splashes and smudges and scribbles - is it never a case of letting go while you're painting, of losing yourself in the moment? I ask because, obviously, it's that sort of spontaneous, gestural abstraction that your works refer to. But you're saying in your case it's much more calculated, more ironic than that?

AR: I'm quoting that gestural approach - but it's actually a very slow process, as I'm very conscious about each decision and step in a painting.

I'm depicting urban surroundings, a certain kind of lifestyle... I like the decorative aspect of dirt splashes in the street; and a painting can turn these simple marks into something beautiful, something very powerful and emotionally accessible. I think that a very trashed wall in the street or a room after a party has something very elegant, very sublime about it. So I'm referring to that, but I'm also underlining the medium and techniques of painting by including these gestures in my work.

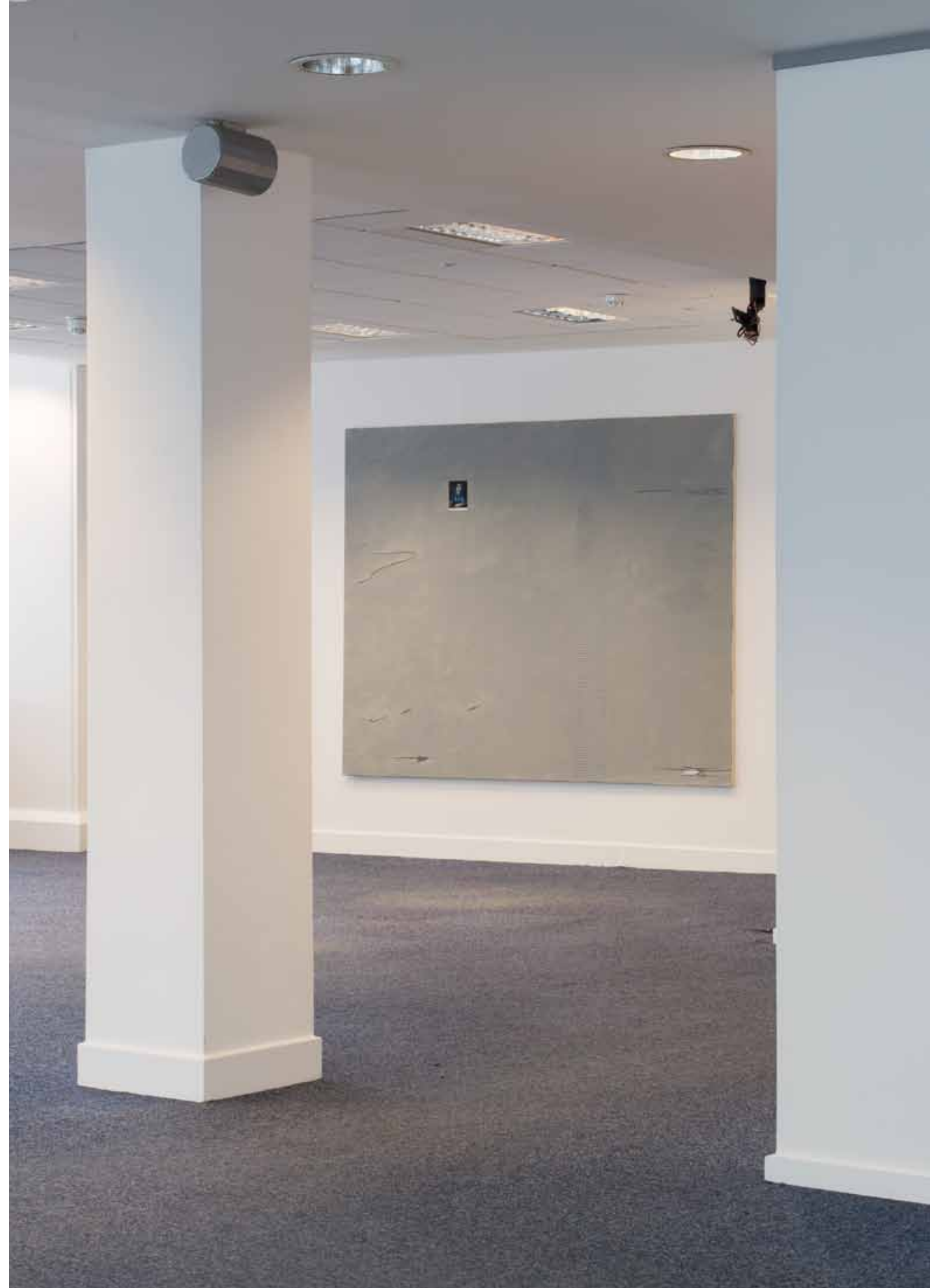
GC: Yes, and this seems to be one of the core concerns of your work, this question of whether the marks are abstract or figurative. They're both depictions of dirt marks on a wall, and they're also literally marks on the surface of canvas - the latter, as you say, tapping into a whole history of abstract

painting. It's a bit of a cliché of art criticism (which I'm as guilty of using as anyone!) to talk about works 'oscillating' between abstraction and figuration - usually, that simply means going up close to a painting till the image dissolves and then standing back a bit. But in your paintings, there really is this quite discomfiting shift between two entirely different, phenomenologically incompatible ways of reading the splashes and dribbles: either as *literal* marks on a surface of the canvas, or as *depictions* of marks on a surface of a wall. I wonder if you could expand a bit as to why this is such a point of interest for you?

AR: I don't really want to distinguish between notions of abstract and figurative, because each one automatically brings with it certain values and associations. But of course it's true that you can see the marks as either as abstract or figurative, but never half-and-half at the same time.

I try to compose every painting according to its own parameters, its own values. It's always a similar thought process that occurs, but the elements in each painting can vary a lot, and so their final appearance does too. Of course, there's a visual aspiration, an overall scheme - but it's more that the attitude dictates the visual appearance and energy in the paintings.

GC: We've mainly been talking about the abstract marks and backgrounds which take up most of the space in your canvasses - and, of course, there are some works that are entirely composed in this way, like *In My Secret Life* or *Rum and Coke*. But in about half the pieces there's an additional, distinctly figurative element: an image of some sort that occupies a small surface area, often as if taped to a wall. Sometimes these seem to be fashion-magazine or snapshot images, other times they could be images taken from art history. Pictures of birds feature a lot. On what basis do you chose these images?



AR: These elements come from drawings, pages torn from magazines and books, postcards, photographs... I'm looking for images that feel like something familiar and trustworthy, something real that people can relate to. I want the feeling that the images have been added in, but in a way that's spontaneous and easy – so they mostly appear like they're loosely attached to the surface of the main painting with tape. They're like miniature paintings themselves – they work like a window, a classic panel painting. And, of course, they often quote the history of painting itself. The themes differ in each one, and every detail is very important to the overall impact of a work – but in general I'm trying to convey the idea of the traditional role of a painter, a classic attitude towards painting.

For me these small images symbolize a certain viewpoint, a way of looking out onto the world – like the seemingly boring activity of bird-watching, for example.

GC: So they're like windows onto a different world – a 'prettier', more ostensibly stable and decipherable world? While the surrounding surface, with its abstract marks, is more violent and inchoate? You mentioned earlier how the backgrounds signify urbanism and decay, something trashed and damaged – while it's noticeable that the figurative elements denote contrasting ideas to do with nature: birds, flowers, landscapes... and also women, in terms of what seem to be models and sexualized fashion shoots. Is there an explicit point you're making about gender, and the way certain images are held up for our visual delectation?

AR: No, not at all – I'm simply trying to represent the different genres of painting: still life, portrait, landscape, etc. When I depict nature in the small windows it's putting forward an idealized concept of a different world, a place of escape. Not that the paintings-within-paintings are put 'against' the background, really – they are more integrated within the whole surface. With the pictures of models, it's more a slightly ironic comment about the relationship between painter and canvas, and viewer and canvas – in these paintings a sort of palette of colours also appears sometimes...

GC: What sort of relationship do you mean? One of desire – a yearning for recognizable, mimetic imagery?

AR: I mean the act of painting itself... These works, with the models and the palettes, are a comment on the aim of the painter to produce something unpretentiously, purely beautiful; and yet they also make visible the failure to achieve that. The images wouldn't necessarily have to be of models – but I wanted the viewer to recognize his own desire, to feel attracted and quickly drawn in to the painting.

GC: What about in other works – how does the relationship between the surrounds and the small, figurative element function in those? It seems to shift from painting to painting: in a work like *State*, for instance, one of the smaller windows contains cartoon angry faces (a recurring motif in your work) which have been obliterated – but then more cartoon faces have been added like graffiti to the background, as if to compensate. And in *Fountain of Youth*, again there's this sense of the background continuing the motif of the small, window element, in this case a floral theme – but in a way that here becomes much more manic, more crude and exaggerated.

AR: The basic unit of each piece is a symbolic wall, the 'background' – on which different sorts of 'notes' or references are mounted and mixed together. So, *State* shows a rainy, cloudy landscape which could be Courbet's *Burial in Ornans* seen from far away, while the painting's other image full of little oranges and lemons is like a quickly painted still life but also just a colourful pattern, though its faces also turn it into a kind of angry mass. And the trick of 'erasing' these faces is ironic, a way of partly drawing more attention to the



image. *Fountain of Youth* was more about elevating a simple, traditional subject matter to dramatic level.

So I always try to balance the epic sweep of art history with a playful, unpretentious use of connected references and gestures. As for my use of comics or styled figuration, a lot of people fear these sorts of low art forms – but I use them as a way of simplifying, a symbol for accessible, direct creativity.

GC: This seems to be something that's very important to you – this idea of making your work accessible, of giving viewers a direct way in.

AR: Well, my own judgment is most important to me. I like to achieve an effect with a simple gesture in a painting. I also certainly don't want to unravel every mystery in my paintings or explain my work too much. But I have no problem with the more catchy aspects of my work, the poppy colour and images, attracting attention.

GC: Apart from the wall/background and the notes/windows, other paintings of yours that I've seen often feature a further element: an area of stripes or slats – a nod towards geometric abstraction, perhaps, another visual language to add to the mix? At the same time, of course, and in keeping with the abstract-figurative dichotomy, they seemed to me to possibly signify some sort of venetian blind or wall covering. But in this current suite of paintings, the only work to really feature this is *L'Uomo*. Is it a motif you're consciously moving away from?

AR: The stripes refer to fabric patterns of different heritages. In this group of paintings they appear only once, but in my system they will undoubtedly appear again. My painterly universe is built on a reservoir of certain forms and gestures – the plants, the smaller panel or window images, the tape stripes, etc.– from which I can produce my paintings. They are themes that have emerged through a constant revision

of my own painting practice and the inevitable reflection of media, art, history, and other influences.

GC: Finally, I'm intrigued by the titles of your works. They seem like free-floating signifiers, sometimes only tenuously connected to the paintings themselves, like another level of quotation.

AR: The titles are more contributions to my painterly universe, and come from all different sorts of sources and influences, quotations, personal dreams and ambitions, fantasies, etc. I want to tap into the mythic importance that painting traditionally claims for itself – so sometimes the titles carry a specific message, but sometimes I just like the images that the words suggest or the way they sound.



The Leader in a group, 2014
acrylic and oil on canvas
180 x 200 cm
70 7/8 x 78 3/4 in



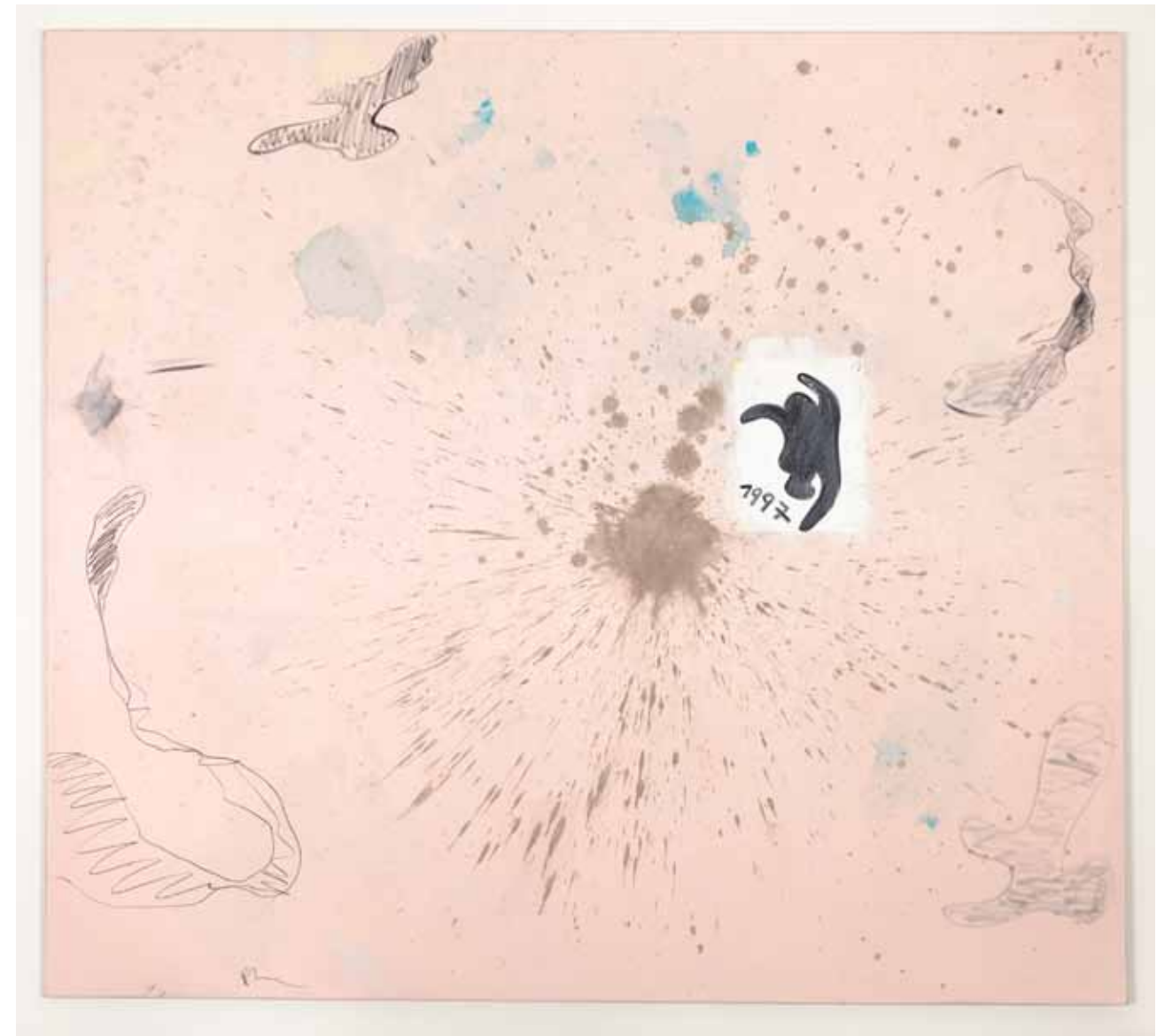
State, 2014
oil on canvas
180 x 210 cm
70 7/8 x 82 5/8 in



Fix, 2014
oil on canvas
180 x 220 cm
70 7/8 x 86 5/8 in



Moving Shadow, 2014
acrylic and oil on canvas
180 x 200 cm
70 7/8 x 78 3/4 in



Moving Shadow, 2014
acrylic and oil on canvas
180 x 200 cm
70 7/8 x 78 3/4 in



Fortuna left in the street, 2014
acrylic and oil on canvas
180 x 200 cm
70 7/8 x 78 3/4 in



Inferninho, 2014
acrylic and oil on canvas
180 x 200 cm
70 7/8 x 78 3/4 in



Addicted, 2014
acrylic and oil on canvas
200 x 180 cm
78 3/4 x 70 7/8 in



Losing the taste for the nightlife, 2014
acrylic and oil on canvas
180 x 200 cm
70 7/8 x 78 3/4 in



*The reception of the present against
the background of history, 2014*
acrylic and oil on canvas
200 x 180 cm
78 3/4 x 70 7/8 in



L'uomo, 2014
oil on canvas
180 x 220 cm
70 7/8 x 86 5/8 in



Fountain of Youth, 2014
oil on canvas
180 x 210 cm
70 7/8 x 82 5/8 in



Real skeleton, 2014
oil on canvas
200 x 180 cm
78 3/4 x 70 7/8 in



New image painting, 2014
oil on canvas
180 x 220 cm
70 7/8 x 86 5/8 in



We are the future, 2014
oil on canvas
180 x 210 cm
70 7/8 x 82 5/8 in



Grand bodily harm, 2014
oil on canvas
180 x 220 cm
70 7/8 x 86 5/8 in



Amnesia, 2014
oil on canvas
170 x 190 cm
66 7/8 x 74 3/4 in



Voyager, 2014
oil on canvas
170 x 190 cm
66 7/8 x 74 3/4 in



Milky way, 2014
oil on canvas
170 x 180 cm
66 7/8 x 70 7/8 in



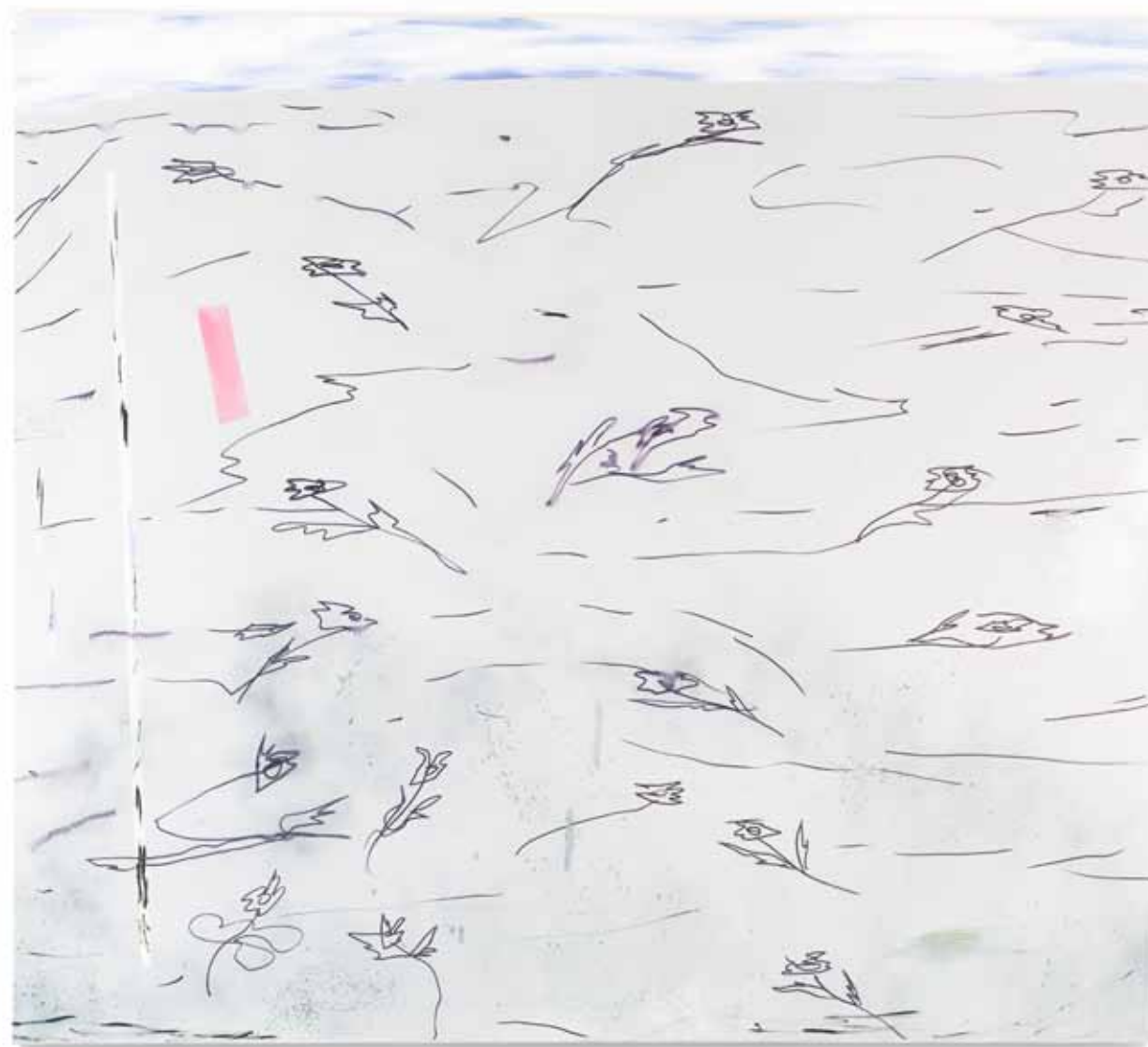
Fantasy of a 14 year old, 2014
oil on canvas
190 x 210 cm
74 3/4 x 82 5/8 in



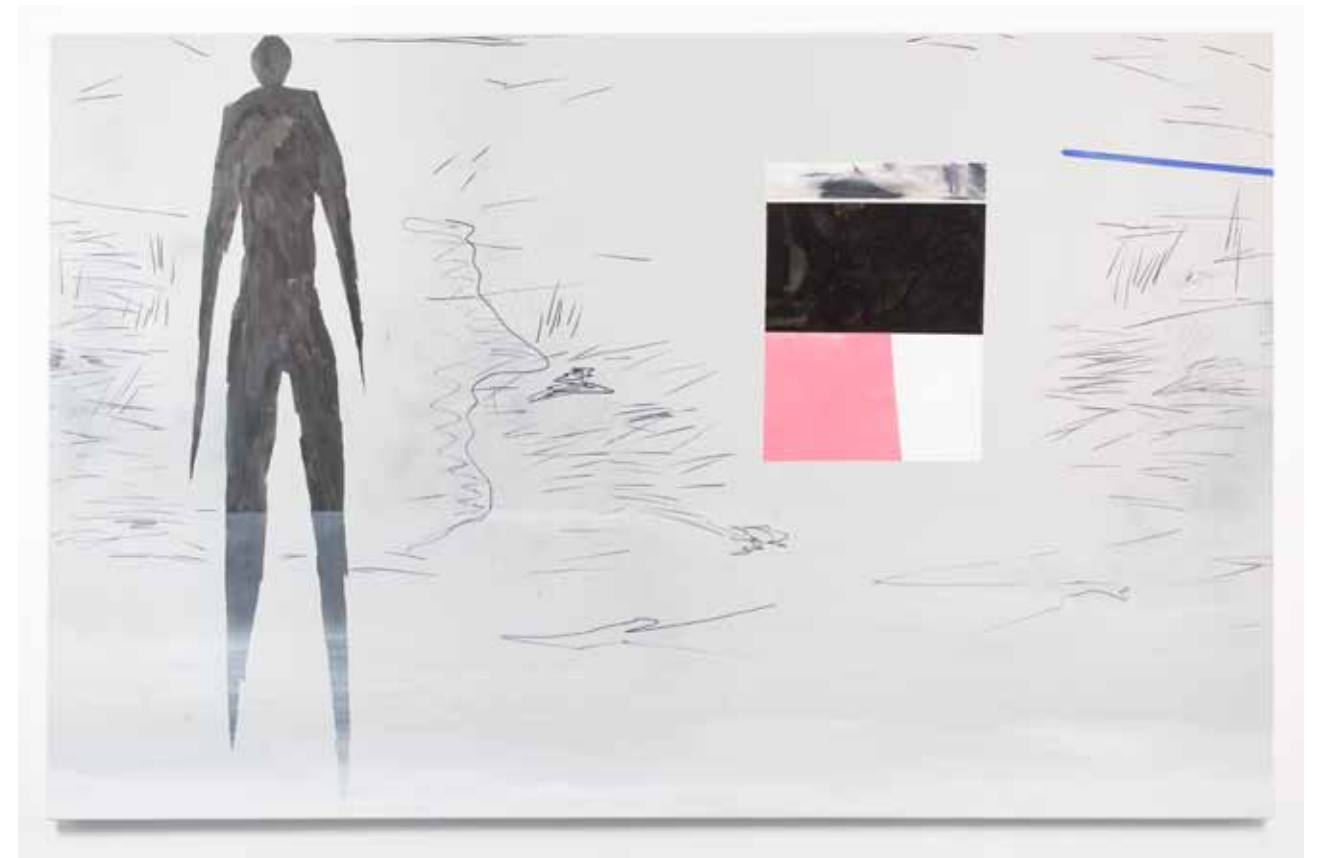
In, 2014
oil on canvas
190 x 210 cm
74 3/4 x 82 5/8 in



Modelled, 2014
oil on canvas
180 x 200 cm
74 3/4 x 82 5/8 in



Body high, 2014
oil on canvas
190 x 300 cm
74 3/4 x 118 1/8 in



Body of day and night, 2013
oil on canvas
200 x 180 cm
78 3/4 x 70 7/8 in



Equilibrium, 2013
oil on canvas
200 x 190 cm
78 3/4 x 74 3/4 in



Naked/nu, 2013
oil on canvas
200 x 180 cm
78 3/4 x 70 7/8 in



In my secret life, 2013
oil on canvas
200 x 150 cm
70 7/8 x 59 1/8 in



Tour de France, 2013
oil on canvas
200 x 190 cm
78 3/4 x 74 3/4 in



Rum and Coke, 2013
oil on canvas
150 x 220 cm
59 1/8 x 86 5/8 in



Old fashioned, 2013
oil on canvas
150 x 150 cm
59 1/8 x 59 1/8 in



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