

Hartmut
Austen

*Here
r
more*

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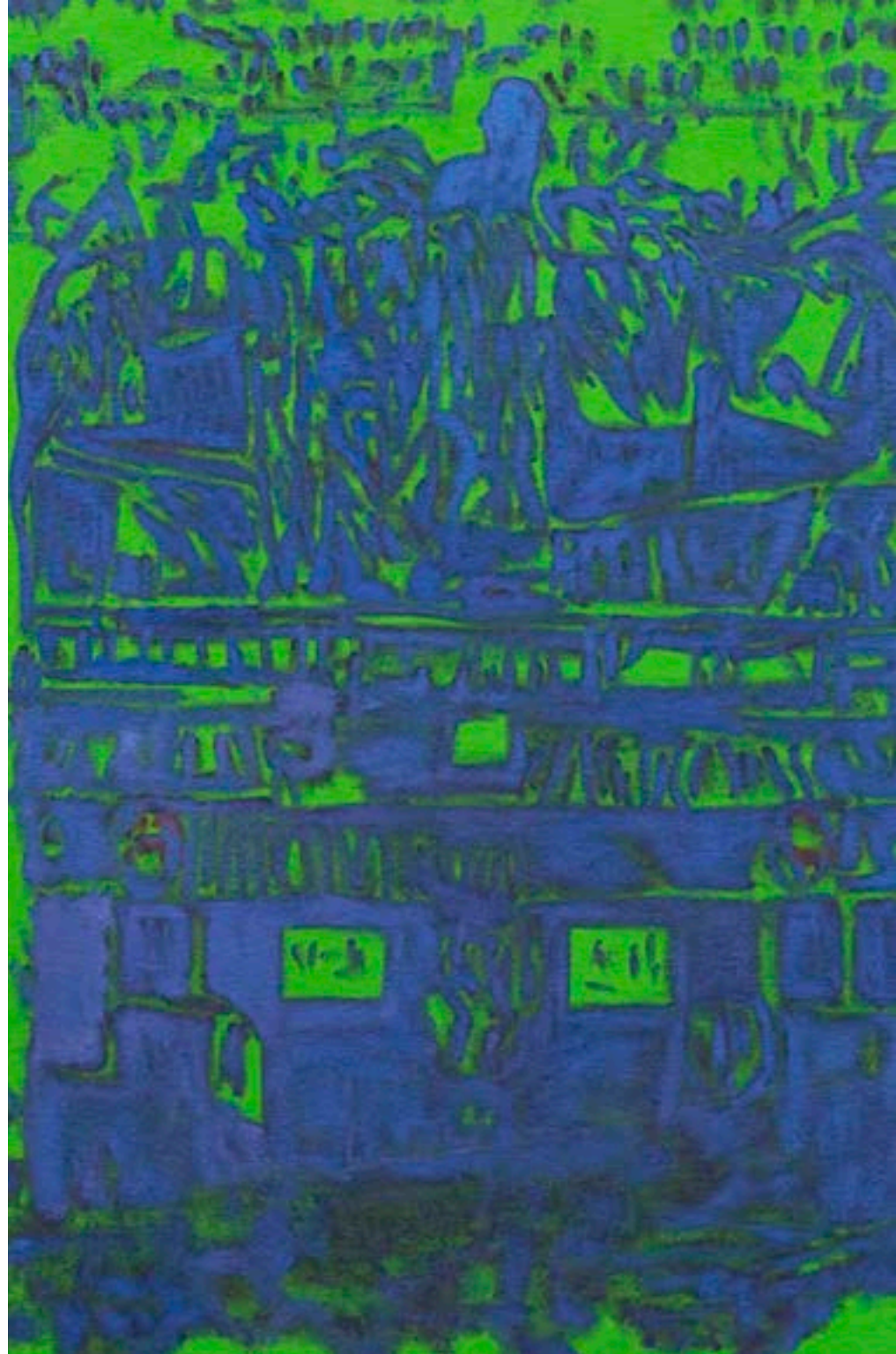
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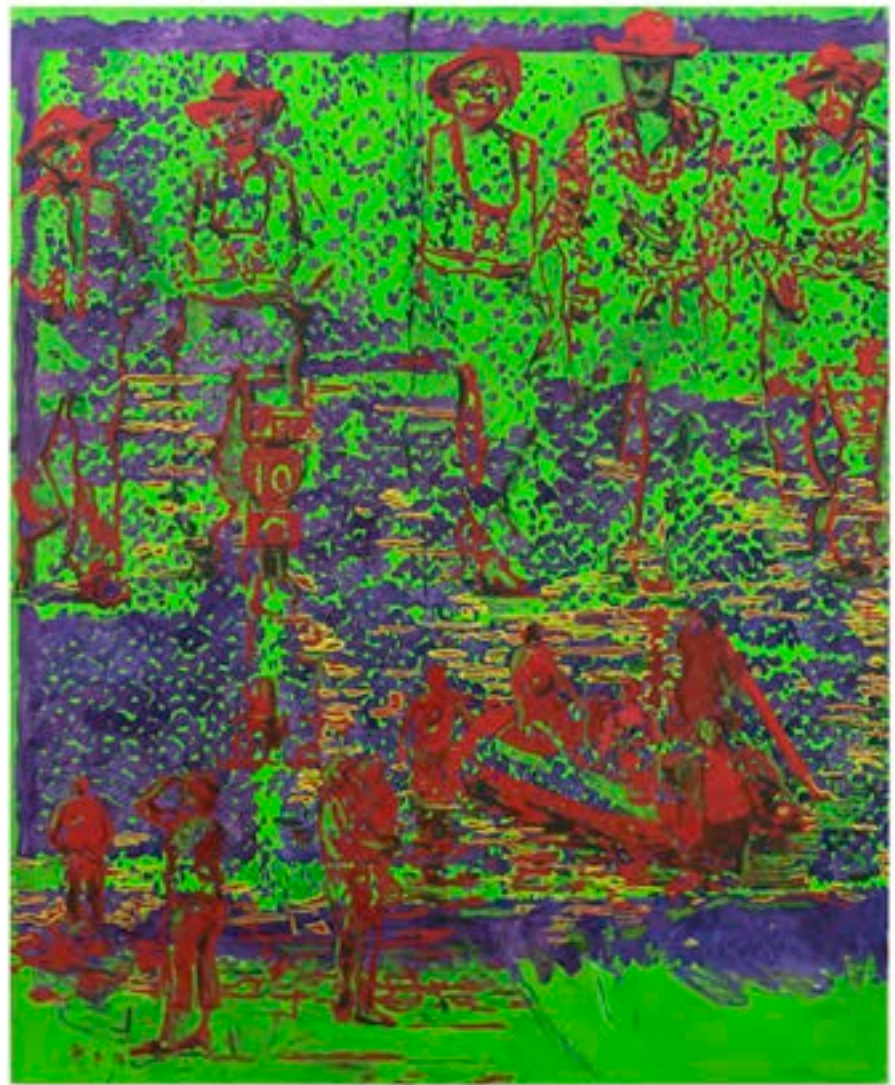
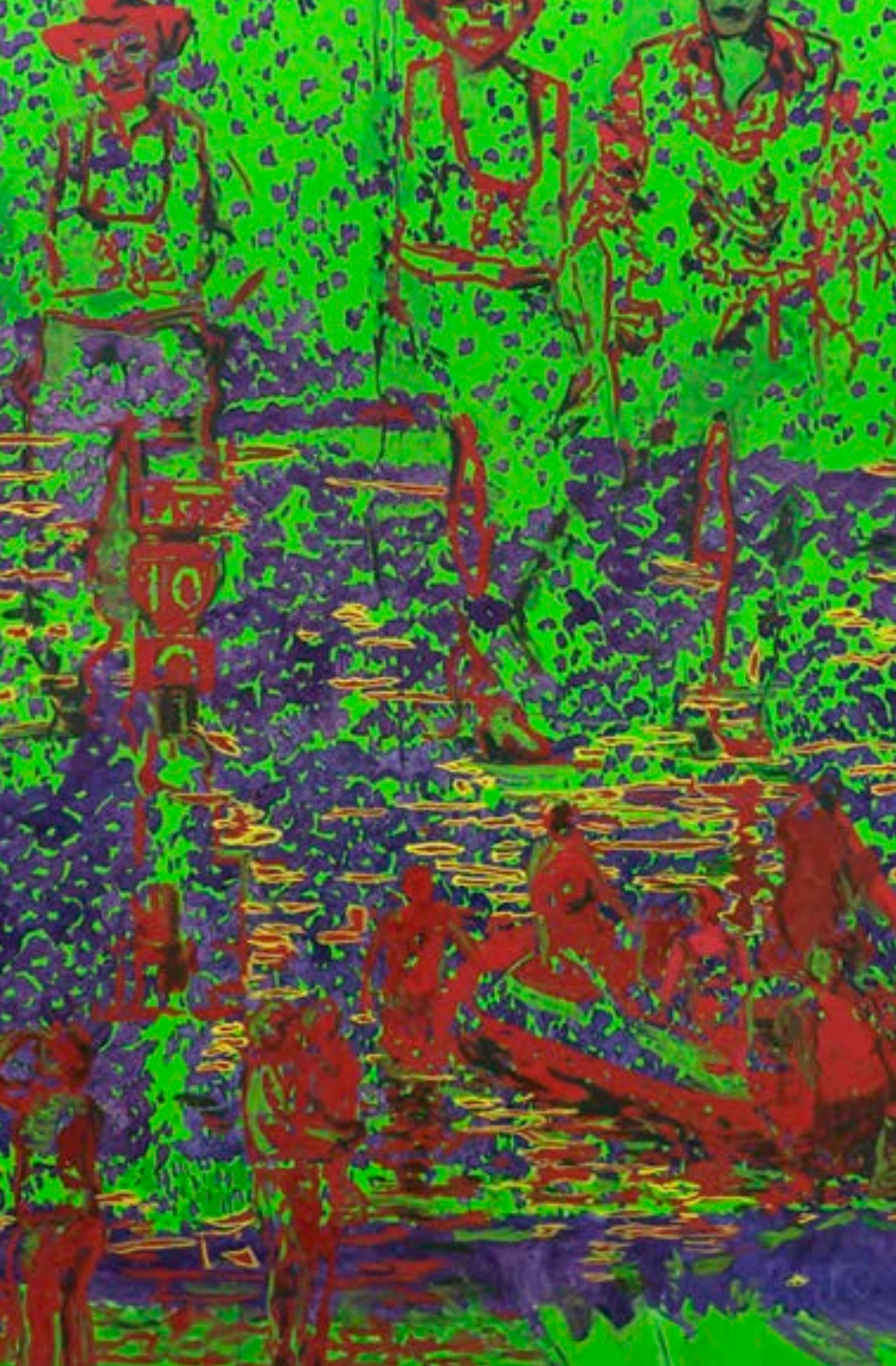
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Sabine Pass

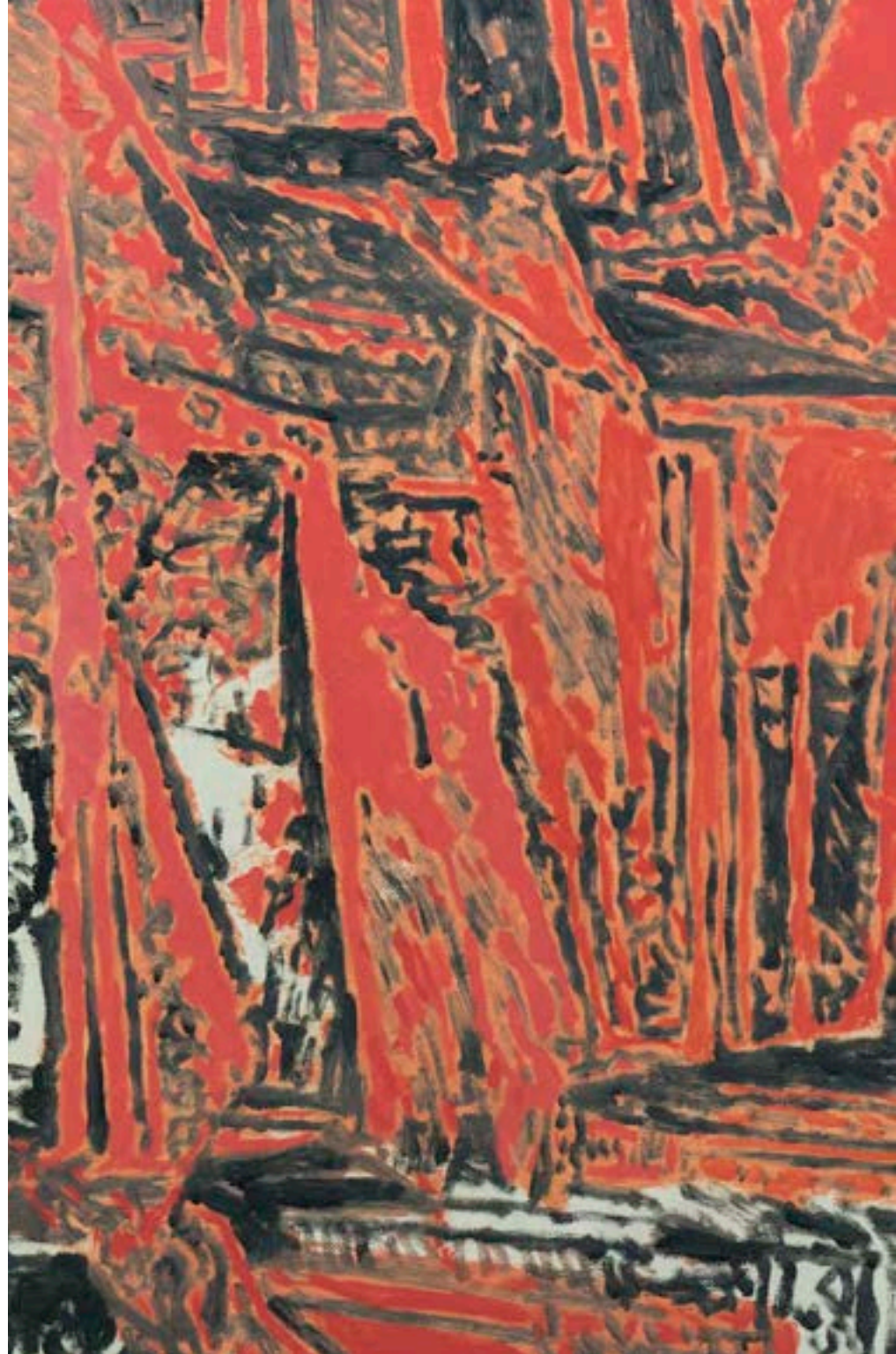


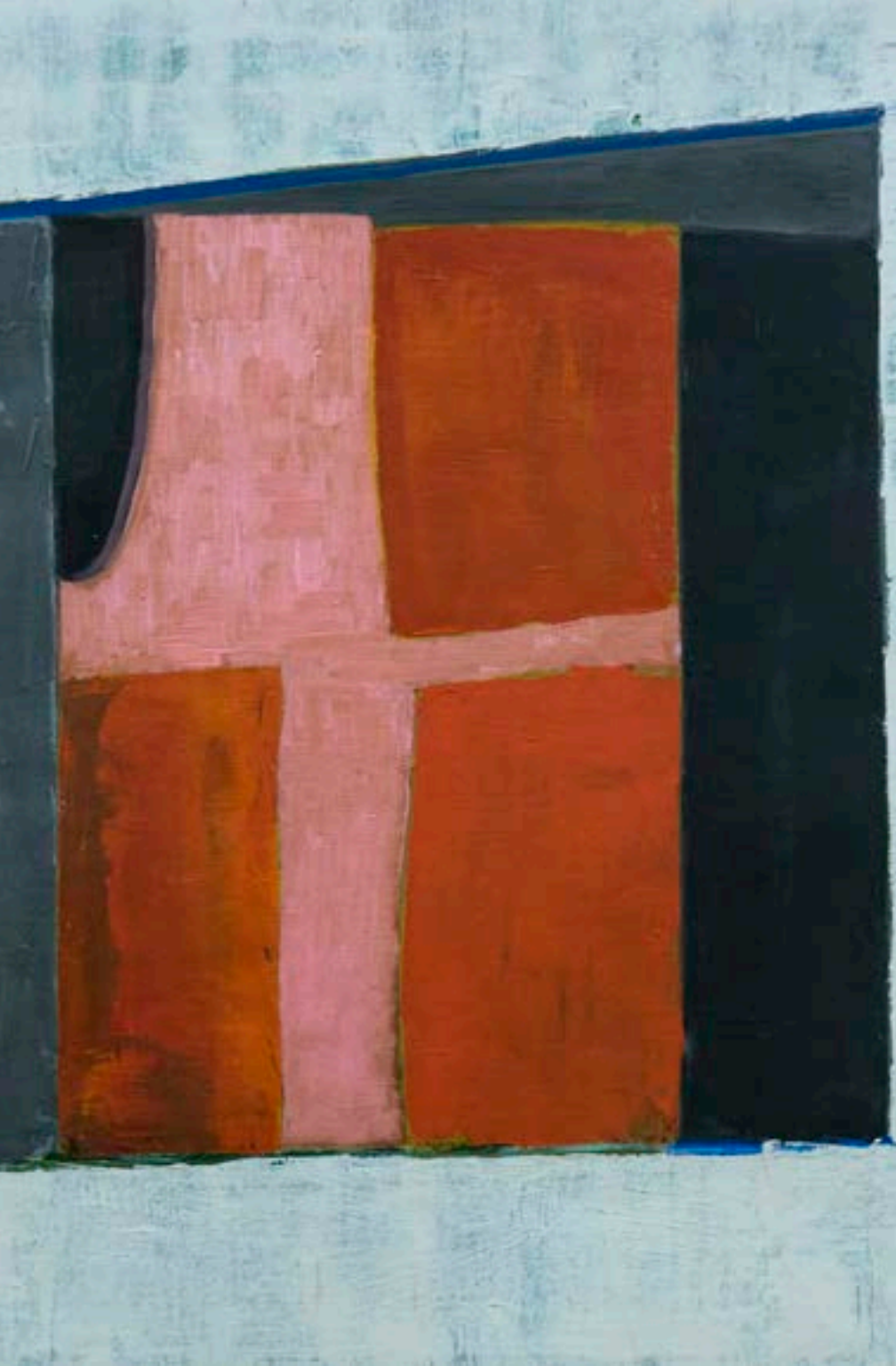


S.D.S



Storage

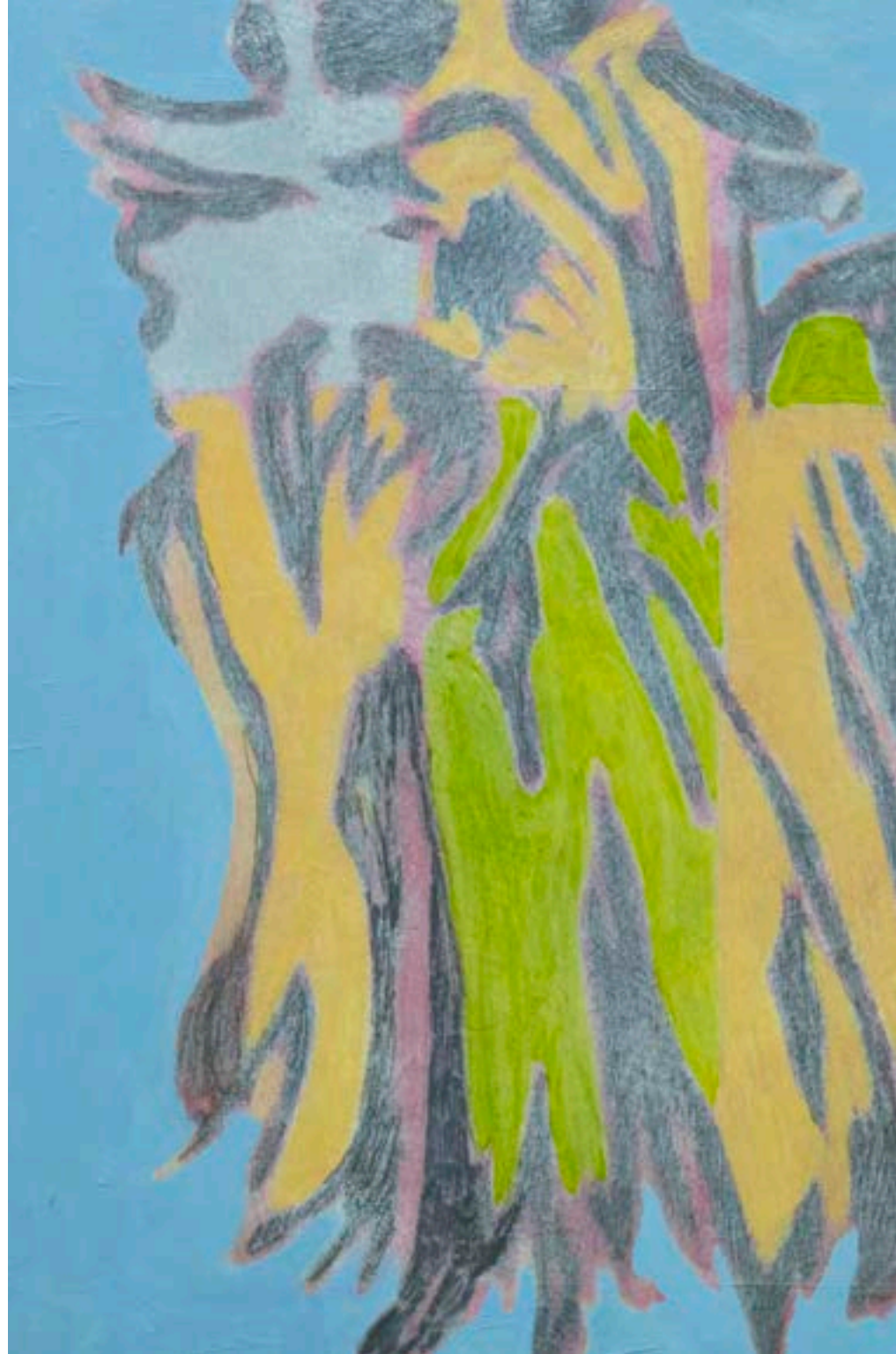




Untitled (Iowa City)



Untitled

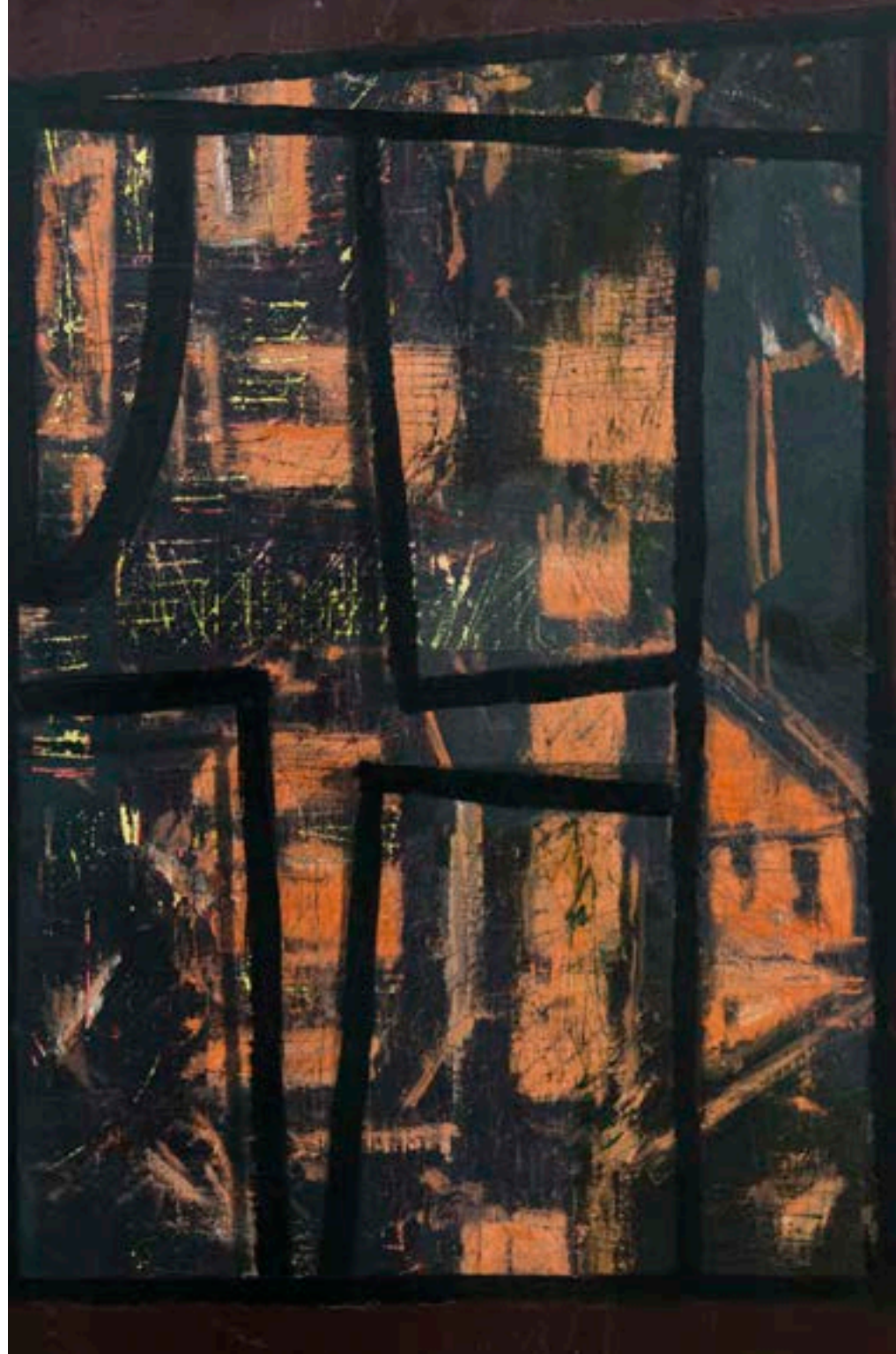




Rabbit



Untitled (Iowa City II)



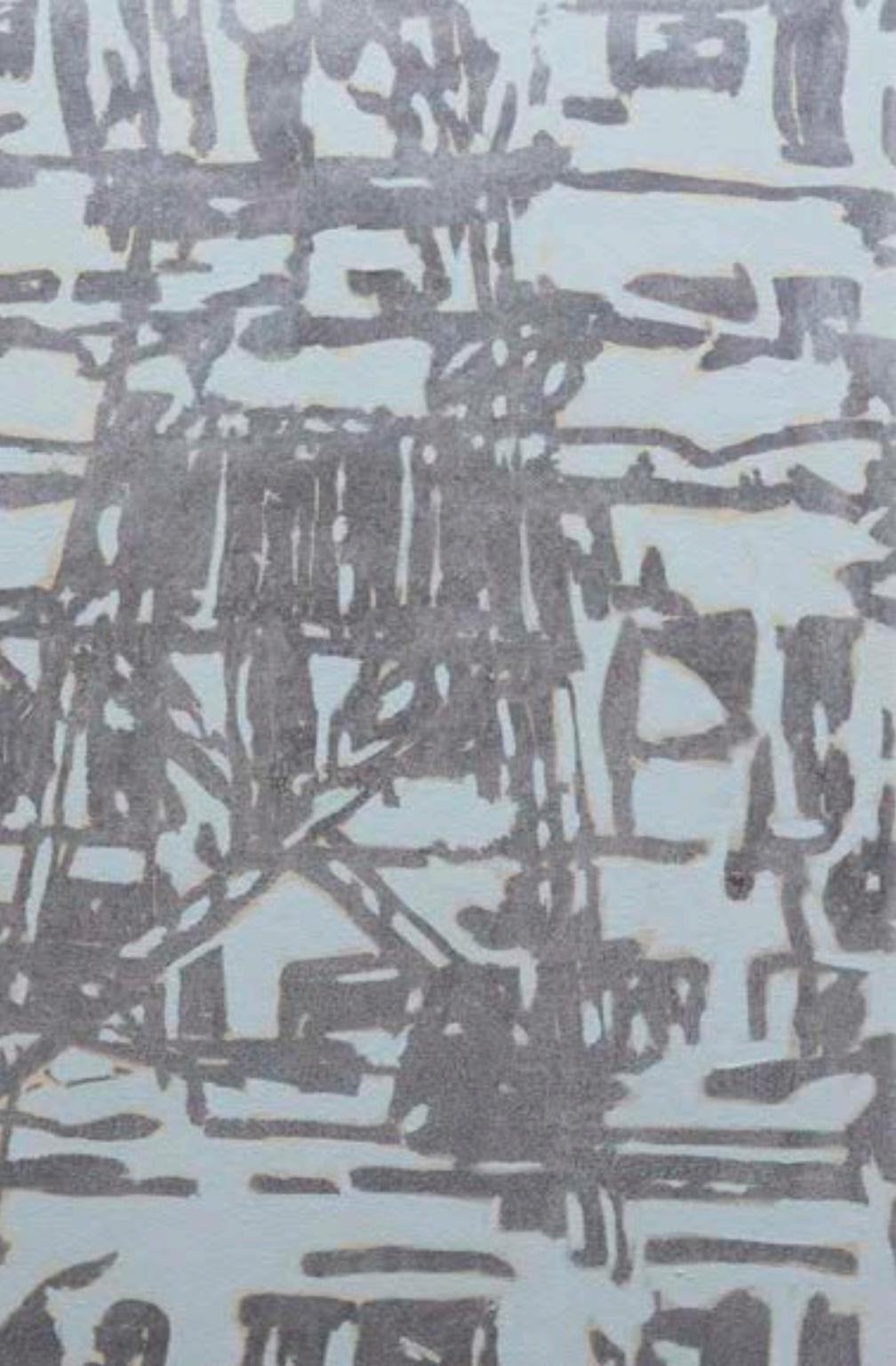


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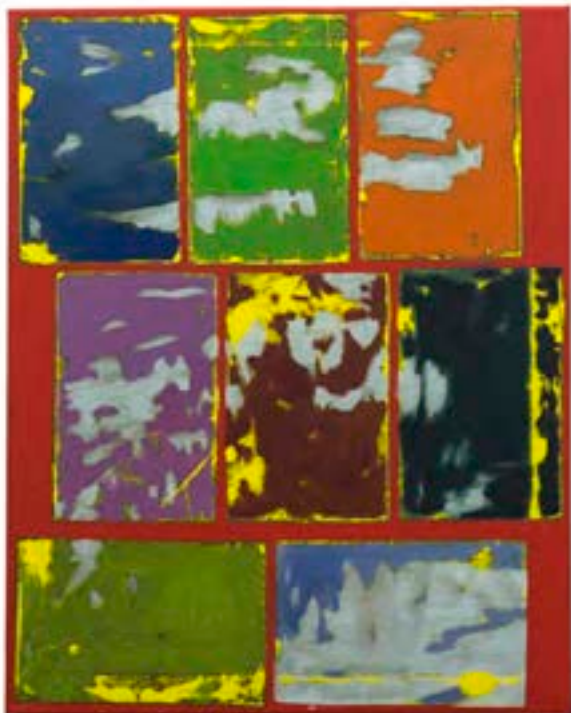


Mirror

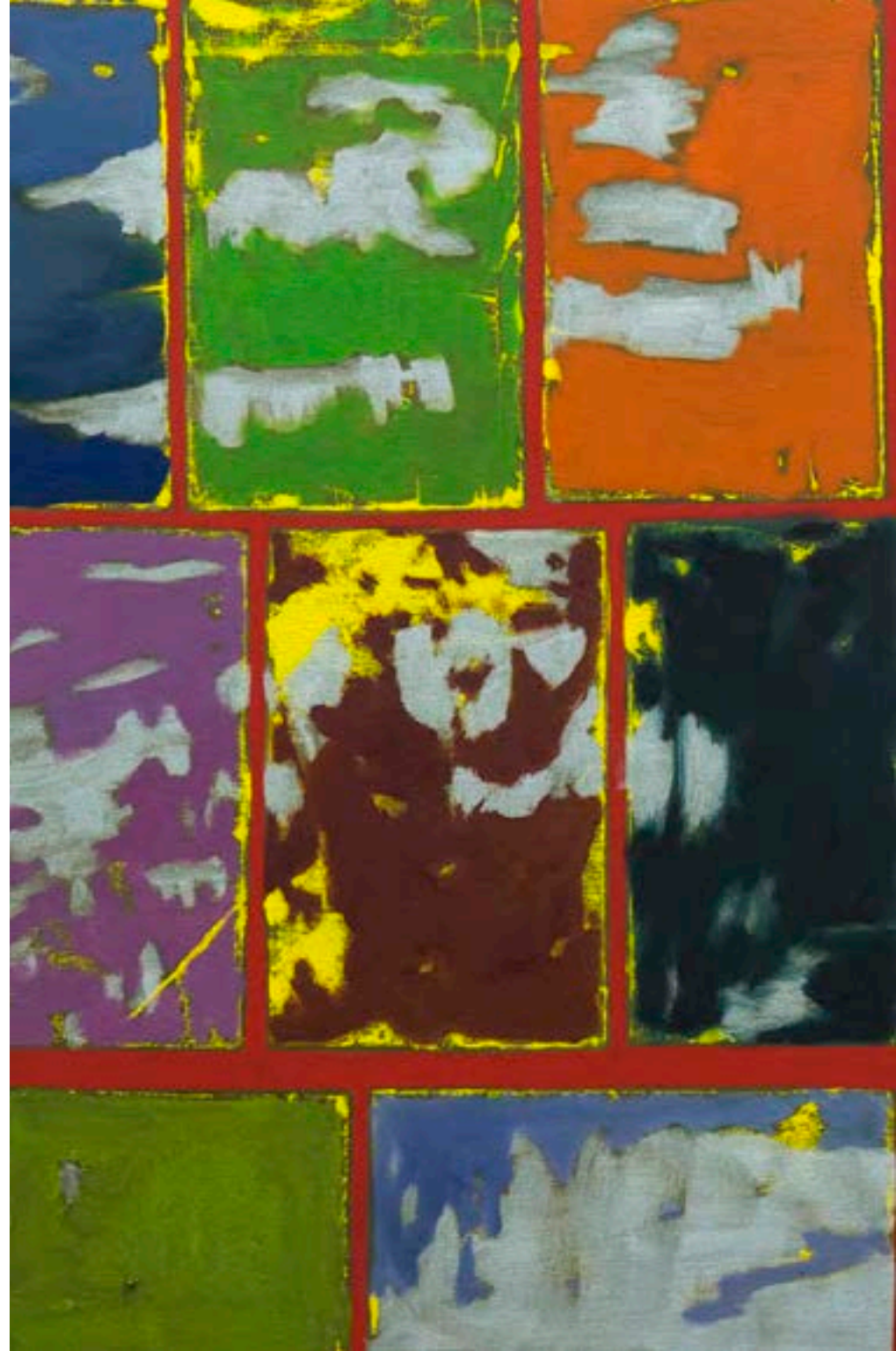




Untitled (Tower)



Windows





Merzhütte



Merz





Seminar



Hjertoya

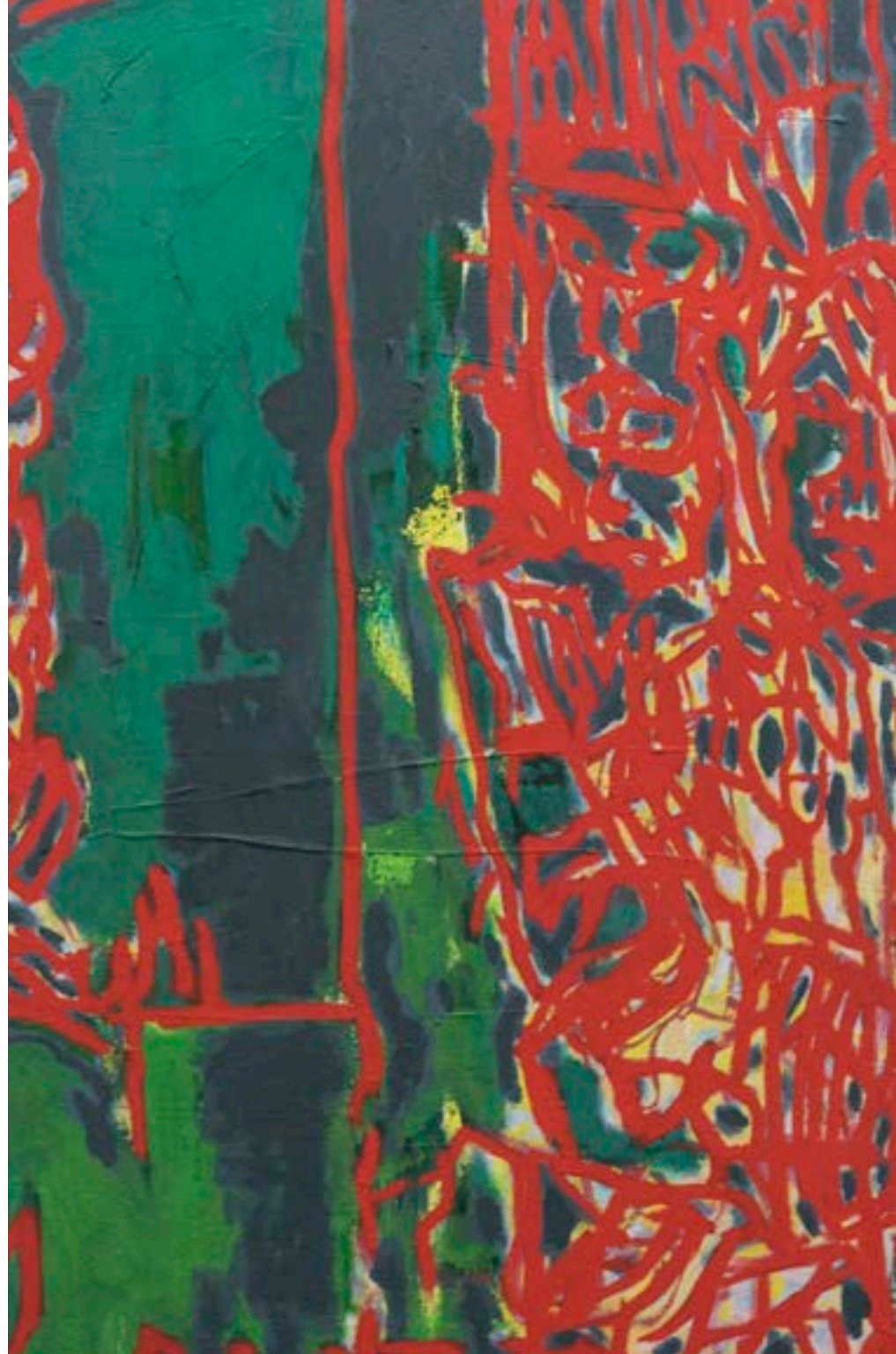




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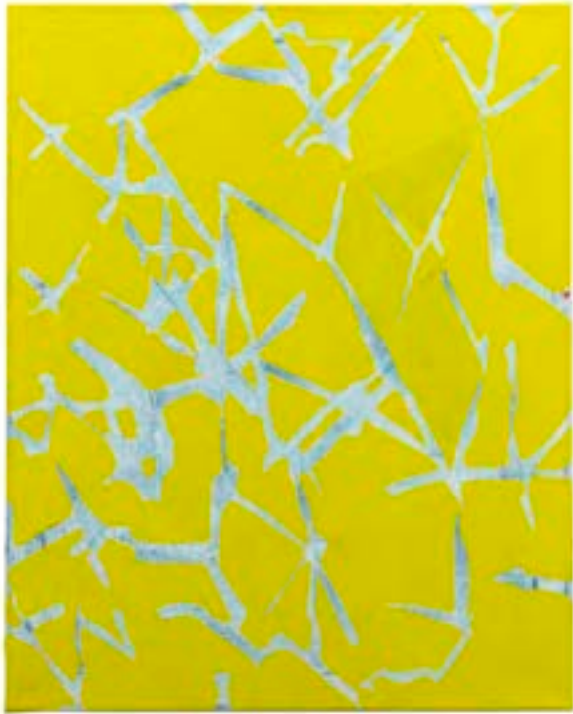


Billboard 2



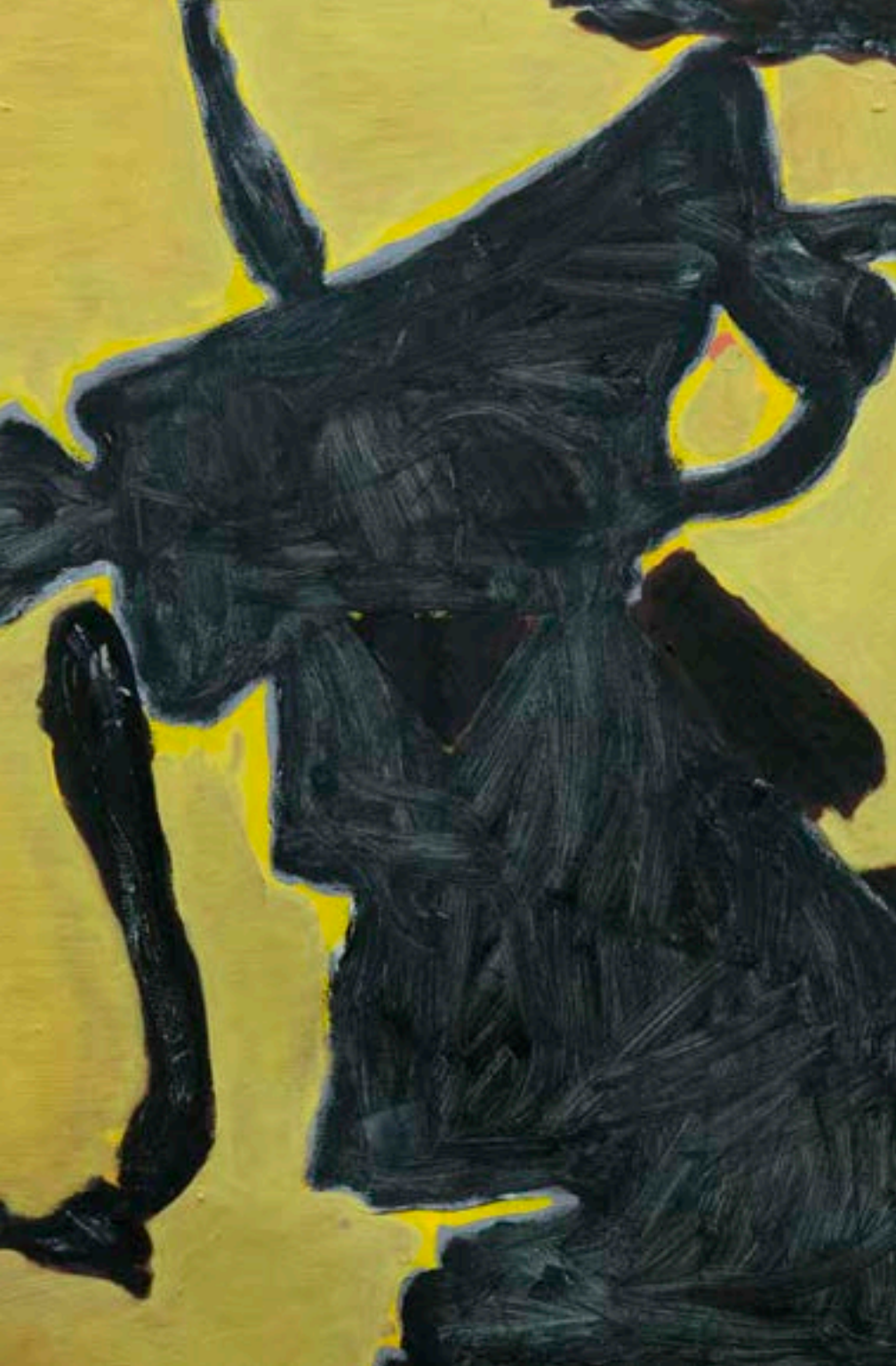


Untitled



Zornig





Zweimal



Zweimal





Untitled

Spoiler Alert

The Paintings of Hartmut Austen

I don't know how to make a painting. I suspect that the German-born, American painter Hartmut Austen doesn't either. Rather than view this speculation pejoratively, we might view this state of not-knowing as a valuable characteristic of artists like Austen. In the Tao Te Ching, Lau Tzu states that "It is beneficial to know nothing. Pretending to know is a disease." For Austen, knowing seems antithetical to his process of creating abstract paintings, and he doesn't allow the pathos of pretense into his studio. His skill lies in his ability to balance knowledge (of history and the medium) with its inverse, not-knowing.

How does Austen journey into the unknown without a guide? How do we as viewers? What good would a guide do anyway when the only maps artists tend to use are false ones, didactics, like idols in the Bible. As Dr. Emmett Brown (Doc) in *Back to the Future* extolled, "Where we're going, we don't need roads." Most abstract painters, the great ones at least, don't need roads or maps or even ideas. Like Austen, they need only paint, canvas and time.

Austen employs this trifecta (paint, canvas, time) as the core triangle of his work. His mode of communication is the formidable medium of oil. When one uses oil, one tackles not only the medium but also the history of the medium and all of its baggage. This has become the oil-painter's cliché, along with the fictitious "death of painting," yet it serves as a foil for many contemporary painters, Austen among them.

A painter must have a short-term memory to tackle the medium without feeling crippled by the burden of its history. Remember the old wives' tale of the feckless goldfish brain? Apparently a goldfish in a bowl has such a short-term memory that it's life vacillates between remembering and forgetting. Remembering: Oh, I'm stuck in a glass fish-bowl. Forgetting: Let me swim in this vast ocean of water.

Remembering

Forgetting

Remembering

Forgetting

According to the story, this cycle forever traps the fish in an infinite circuit of imprisonment and freedom. I often feel that this metaphor encapsulates the painter's dilemma. Yet

when looking at Austen's adept paintings, one doesn't see this dialectic of angst and obliteration so much as an understanding of the inherent openness of abstraction coupled with an unwavering commitment to the unknown. If Austen were the goldfish of our story I imagine that he wouldn't waste his time remembering and forgetting; he would be content to swim.

Lets examine, for instance, the painting *Hjertoya*. The image feels like an interior. One can see echoes of Henri Matisse's *Red Room* or an Edward Vuillard bedroom as simplified by the Venezuelan artist (now in Berlin) Arturo Herrera. But this painting also seems ignorant of these precursors. What makes *Hjertoya* stand out is how the green "background" and red linear "foreground" each battle for prominence in the composition. The forms—like children in line at the playground—can't decide who goes first.

No guide can show us how to view this vacillation or this ambiguity. Austen does, however, provide a structure for the eye and the mind. Similar to *Hjertoya*, the painting *Seminar* confers an architectural armature that anchors the picture but also gives very little respite from the discomfort of indeterminate-

ness. Austen manages to deftly transform the discontent of the indefinite into a pleasurable experience.

Austen himself has said that his emphasis is less on representation than on tactility and the visceral. In an interview with Dick Goody for the Museum of Contemporary Arts in Detroit, Austen says, "I generally like it when things do not immediately have a clear motif, but rather evoke the sense of touch and curiosity."

His work certainly evokes curiosity, one can get lost gazing at Austen's paintings; this happened to me when I visited his studio. When contemplating Austen's work, the paintings feel less like empirical objects and more like day-dreams.

As it is with dreams, we only typically recall slivers or facets of the narrative. Images pass by in fragments like a Jean-Luc Godard "jump-cut" in *A bout de souffle*. Just as the Dutch painter Daan Van Golden uses literal parts of Jackson Pollock paintings, Austen's paintings feel like hip-hop samples, fragments with colors and forms cut and pasted together. In lieu of sounds, we're given visual information that appears vaguely familiar but is also hard to pin down. Hard to know.

Ultimately we must decode Austen's images from the clues he provides using color, formalism and narrative. Yet it is this last element—narrative—that seems opportune for exploration. For in these paintings, as in most abstract Western paintings, the narrative has been eschewed for a sort of infinite present-tense.

In this space of the eternal present, the past and future are irrelevant, as is knowledge. We aren't learning as we view these abstract paintings, we are witnessing. As Austen traverses the unknown and discovers new territory in the work so do we. When Austen marks upon the canvas he marks upon our minds. We mustn't view these paintings as stories but rather as present experiences.

Without a narrative, it may even be possible for viewers of contemporary abstract paintings like Austen's to mentally circumvent even the most overbearing of stories: the history of painting, for example. To reinforce this notion, one can think of the concept of the "spoiler alert" as used in the language surrounding popular television and film. The key to keeping friends in the age of social media is to avoid giving away the ending to the past week's

episode of the hot television drama. In the case of the spoiler as it pertains to Austen's process it is better to not know than to know.

Furthermore, because his paintings lie outside the boundaries of narrative in the present tense, the plot becomes irrelevant. Without a plot or a linear time-based structure, there can be no ending. This, then, negates any argument for a "death" of painting—death or an ending is predicated on a linear architecture in time which also includes a beginning (birth) and a middle (life). Austen's abstract paintings reside outside of this arena of time, holding court in the here and now, in a space where all that is known is right in front of us. And there is no need for the aforementioned spoiler alert in these paintings because they refuse to tell us a story. With their visceral qualities grounded in the present, Austen's paintings say simply, "we exist."

Ruben Nusz

Sabine Pass
2009
20 × 16
Oil, enamel, and
gouache on canvas

S.D.S
2010
75 × 60
Oil and enamel
on canvas

Storage
2011
20 × 16

Untitled (Iowa City)
2012
20 × 16

Untitled
2012
20 × 16

Rhabbit
2012
20 × 16

Untitled (Iowa City II)
2012
20 × 16

Untitled
2013
60 × 48

Mirror
2013
20 × 16

Untitled (Tower)
2014
20 × 16

Windows
2014
20 × 16

Merzhütte
2014
18 × 14

Merz
2015
75 × 60

Seminar
2015
75 × 54

Hjertoya
2015
75 × 54

Untitled
2015
20 × 16

Billboard 2
2015
20 × 16

Untitled
2015
20 × 16

Zornig
2015
20 × 16

Zweimal
2016
20 × 16

Zweimal
2016
20 × 16

Untitled
2016
60 × 48
Acrylic on canvas

Works are oil on
canvas unless
otherwise noted.

All dimensions are
in inches.

Hartmut Austen studied painting and drawing with H.J. Diehl at Hochschule der Künste (University of the Arts) in Berlin. His first arrival in the United States was marked by a 1998 group exhibition titled *Void* at Unfinished gallery in New York City. He has since exhibited widely in the United States and Germany, most recently at Waiting Room in Minneapolis, Butchers Daughter Gallery in Detroit, and Good Weather in Arkansas. As a member of the Telegraph Art Collective, he has worked and exhibited with artists of diverse disciplinary backgrounds. In 2009, Austen was awarded a prestigious Kresge Arts in Detroit Fellowship and was the Grant Wood Fellow for Painting and Drawing at the University of Iowa in 2012/13. He taught at the University of Minnesota for the past three years and most recently joined the faculty of the Fine Arts department at Boston College.

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Ruben Nusz is an artist, painter, writer, and color theorist based in Minneapolis/Saint Paul. Winner of numerous awards and grants, including one from the McKnight Foundation in 2013, he has exhibited widely throughout the United States including at the Walker Art Center, the New Orleans Museum of Art, the Phoenix Art Museum, the Museum of Contemporary Art (San Diego) and the Blanton Museum of Art. He is represented by Weinstein Gallery in Minneapolis.

Haynes Riley is an artist, curator, and designer with an MFA from Cranbrook Academy of Art. He is founder/ director at Good Weather in North Little Rock, Arkansas. Recent solo exhibitions include *An attitude you can wear* at TOPS (Memphis) and *Always* at The Hills Esthetic Center (Chicago). Recent group exhibitions include Threewalls (Chicago), Cranbrook Art Museum (Bloomfield Hills), The Bedfellow's Club (Minneapolis), and EMBASSY (Los Angeles). He is Design Director at *Contemporary Art Review Los Angeles (Carla)*.

