Hypersensitive Romantic
Diego Gutierrez

Right angle, 2019
Acrylic, oil, crayon, wood on paper
6.¼ x 10.¾ x 5 in.

Surface, 2019
Ceramic, acrylic, crayon, oil on wood and paper
9 x 14 x 3 ¾ in.

Diego Gutierrez: Hypersensitive Romantic

Amy Galpin
Chief Curator at the Patricia & Phillip Frost Art Museum, Florida International University

In his rigorous studio practice, Diego Gutierrez questions the function of painting. Synthesizing varied art-historical approaches, he pushes formal boundaries by tearing surfaces, adding sculptural elements, and reworking subject matter obsessively. Through this dedicated process, he investigates the construction of meaning and ruminates on how his work exists in his studio versus in a public setting, where it might be activated by viewers in unexpected ways. Gutierrez is informed by nostalgia and confesses to over-romanticizing both lived and imagined experiences. His works are simultaneously a response to deep political and social concerns and playful, humorous ruminations on childhood and popular culture. In Gutierrez's work, there are references to gun violence and the treatment of women in contemporary society but also allusions to comics, a day at the beach, and conversations with loved ones. Across his oeuvre, Gutierrez ultimately asks whether painting can exist as a safe space connected to everyday life, a question proposed by some of his closest influences but one he answers in a distinctly different manner through his own aesthetic approach, which richly deserves a place among debates about contemporary painting.

Born in Los Angeles, home to many significant painters such as Hans Burkhardt (1904–1994) and Judith Baca (b. 1946), Diego Gutierrez acknowledges multiple art influences both near and far. Philip Guston (1913–1980) and Richard Diebenkorn (1922–1993) are two references who, like Gutierrez, spent years in California. Associated mostly with the San Francisco Bay Area, Diebenkorn also lived in LA from 1966 to 1986. His choice of color palette, mix of rigid and irregular lines, and dedication to a combination of abstraction and figuration made him a distinctive painter among his contemporaries. Works by Gutierrez and Diebenkorn share an interest in individualistic approaches to painting that reject the prevailing expectations of the medium. In 1957, Diebenkorn described his evolving views, saying, "All paintings start out of a mood, out of a relationship with things or people, out of a complete visual impression. To call this expression abstract seems to me often to confuse the issue. Abstract means literally to draw from or separate. In this sense every artist is abstract. . . . A realistic or non-objective approach makes no difference. The result is what counts."[1] For Gutierrez, he embraces a connection between his paintings and the experience of daily life, mood, and relationships with others, whether a partner or a boss, as catalysts for his work. He cautions against viewing contemporary art as separate from everyday experience.

Philip Guston, who was born in Montreal, made murals and social-realist paintings in Southern California before moving to New York and turning, for a time, to wholly abstract compositions. His mature and most highly regarded work incorporates an unusual pink palette and humanoid forms that can appear exaggerated and even cartoonish. Like Guston, Gutierrez plays with the manipulation of human form and incorporates pop-culture references. Paintings by both artists oscillate between representation and abstraction. Moreover, Gutierrez wrestles with materials and then reimagines their use. This approach to materials is also echoed in the way he digests art-historical sources and reinvents them across his own compositions. Other artists he acknowledges include self-taught figures, many of whom were based in the American South, such as Thornton Dial (1928–2016) and, from Florida, Purvis Young (1943–2010). Guston spent a year at the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles but was also largely self-taught.

Although Gutierrez embraces experimentation, art-historical references abound in his practice. Many paintings in this exhibition are made on wood panel, and the show overall incorporates large graph paper and sculptural elements—but for Gutierrez, these works are all classified as paintings. The relevance of painting persists despite periodic assertions from critics that the enduring medium is fading away. Two painting exhibitions in the last decade dovetail closely with Gutierrez's work. *Painter Painter* (2013), curated by Eric Crosby and Bartholomew Ryan at the Walker Art Center, presented new work by fifteen artists with an emphasis on abstract painting and studio practice. The exhibition acknowledged the ever-evolving relationship between the artist and society. The curators offer that "for these artists, painting is a generative process—one that is rooted in the studio yet open and receptive to the world. . . . Painting becomes a conduit—a way to make contact beyond the closed frame of their formal invention."[2] This description relates closely to Gutierrez's rumination on the complex relationship between a given composition and society.

Additionally, *Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World* (2014), curated by Laura Hoptman at the Museum of Modern Art, offered the work of seventeen artists who synthesize styles and genres across decades. "Their work represents traditional painting, in the sense that each artist engages with painting's traditions, testing and ultimately reshaping historical strategies like appropriation and bricolage and reframing more metaphysical, high-stakes questions surrounding notions of originality, subjectivity, and spiritual transcendence," notes MoMA.[3] Many of Gutierrez's works are not atemporal, as they relate quite specifically to the contemporary present of the artist's own life. Yet the multiple layers of the work, both literal and metaphorical, allow for numerous moments to be depicted simultaneously. Moreover, the artist's nostalgic approach invites viewers to consider their own past and present concurrently.

Gutierrez's work can have political dimensions; recent paintings like *When nostalgia and facts blur* (2019) reference gun violence. The artist acknowledges that the political side of the work is not intentionally invoked, particularly when the paintings live in his studio or home. In his view, "People do not flock to paintings to get informed. Painting simply does not work the same way it once did."[4] Despite this, the artist desires to be conscious of representation. He writes, "I have decided to try and paint as honest as possible. Therefore, I want to make my Mexican presence and perspective known not just to the viewer but more importantly to me. It's a reminder that I am the filtration, I am the one in the studio, and it is important that I don't run away from who I am."[5] Gutierrez aims to reflect his own experience and his own culture within his work. In this regard, the large-scale painting *Pack Hunters* (2017–19) derived from thinking about the treatment of women. Following the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the artist considered how women are criticized in the public sphere and, more personally, the challenges his mother has faced in her life. The work, with a bright palette and asymmetrical torn edges, presents an animal-human hybrid form attacking a lone female figure.

Gutierrez interrogates multiple vantage points simultaneously. Just as he considers the way paintings exist in different physical spaces, he also considers varying relationships with nature. How do we interact with nature through screens? How is nature mediated through technology different from a walk outdoors? Gutierrez does not propose that one is better than the other, only that the way we experience nature is multifaceted and complex. Gutierrez's wife, the painter Nabila Z. Santa-Cristo, is an avid birdwatcher. She points out different birds on their walks in Miami Beach. Yet when selecting a bird for *Eden* (2019), the artist sorts through his archive of images and renders a rather cartoon-like bird in the painting. Gutierrez is constantly playing with the tension between what is real and not real. This playful approach is echoed in *I need to get away from all of you* (2019). Despite its serious subject matter, the artist includes small turtles in the foreground that recall coloring books and cartoons.

With both experimentation and traditional painterly approaches operating at the core of his practice, Gutierrez does not shy away from questions about art's purpose and the relationship (or perhaps non-relationship) between the artist and society. A bright, spirited disposition emanates across the works even when the subject matter wrestles with society's darker ills. These paintings express the challenges of grappling with a desire to be optimistic amidst societal chaos, injustice, and economic challenges. Amid such serious issues, does contemporary painting have a role in society? Through vigorous aesthetics and a multitude of perspectives, Gutierrez continues to ask that question and to seek a safe space within the picture plane.

1
Quoted in Charles Chetham, *Modern Painting, Drawing and Sculpture Collected by Louise and Joseph Pulitzer Jr.* (Cambridge, MA: Fogg Art Museum, 1957), 31.

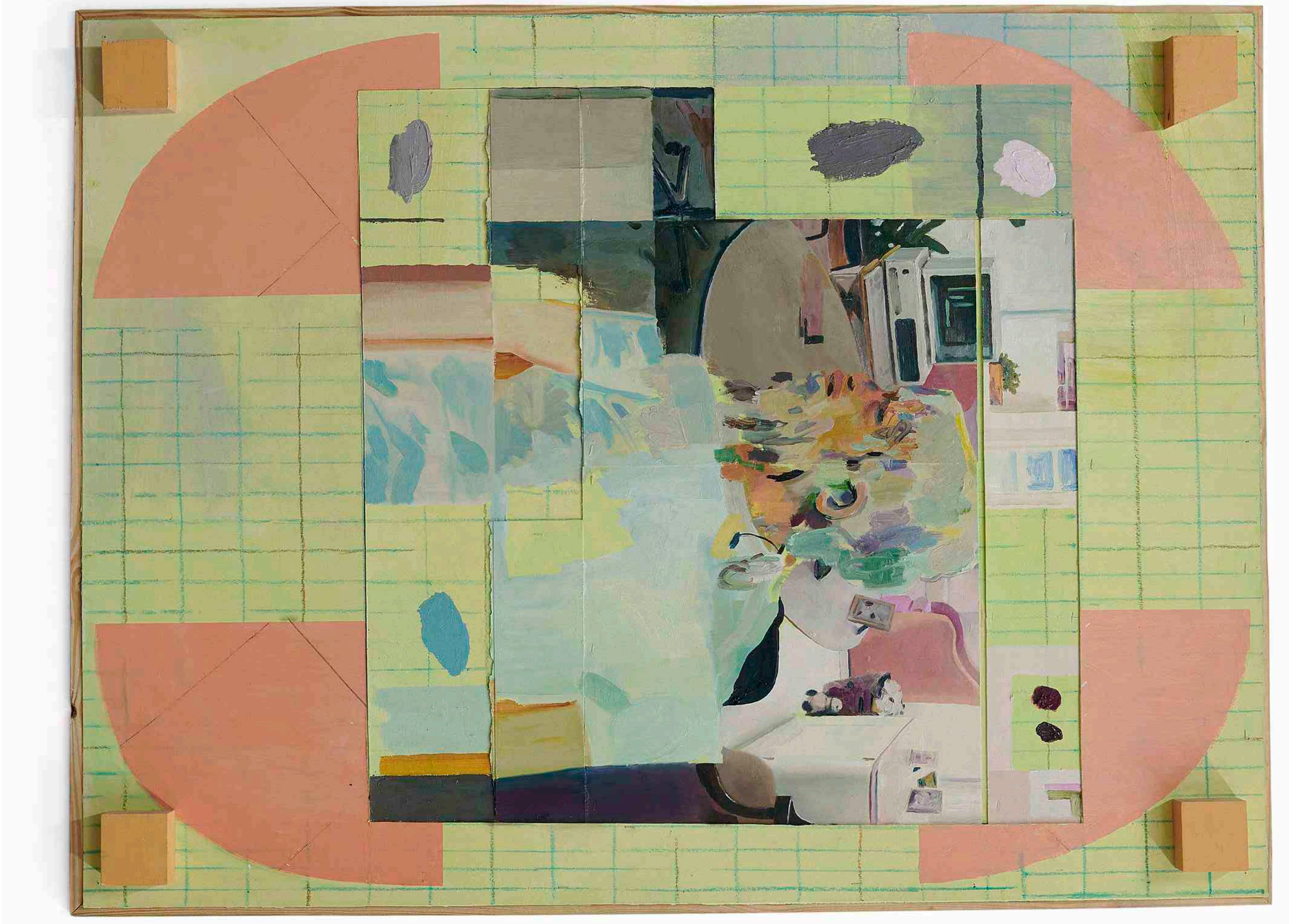
2
See "New Painters, New Paintings Showcased in Walker Exhibition About Abstraction in and out of the Studio," exhibition press release, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN; https://www.walkerart.org, posted January 8, 2013.

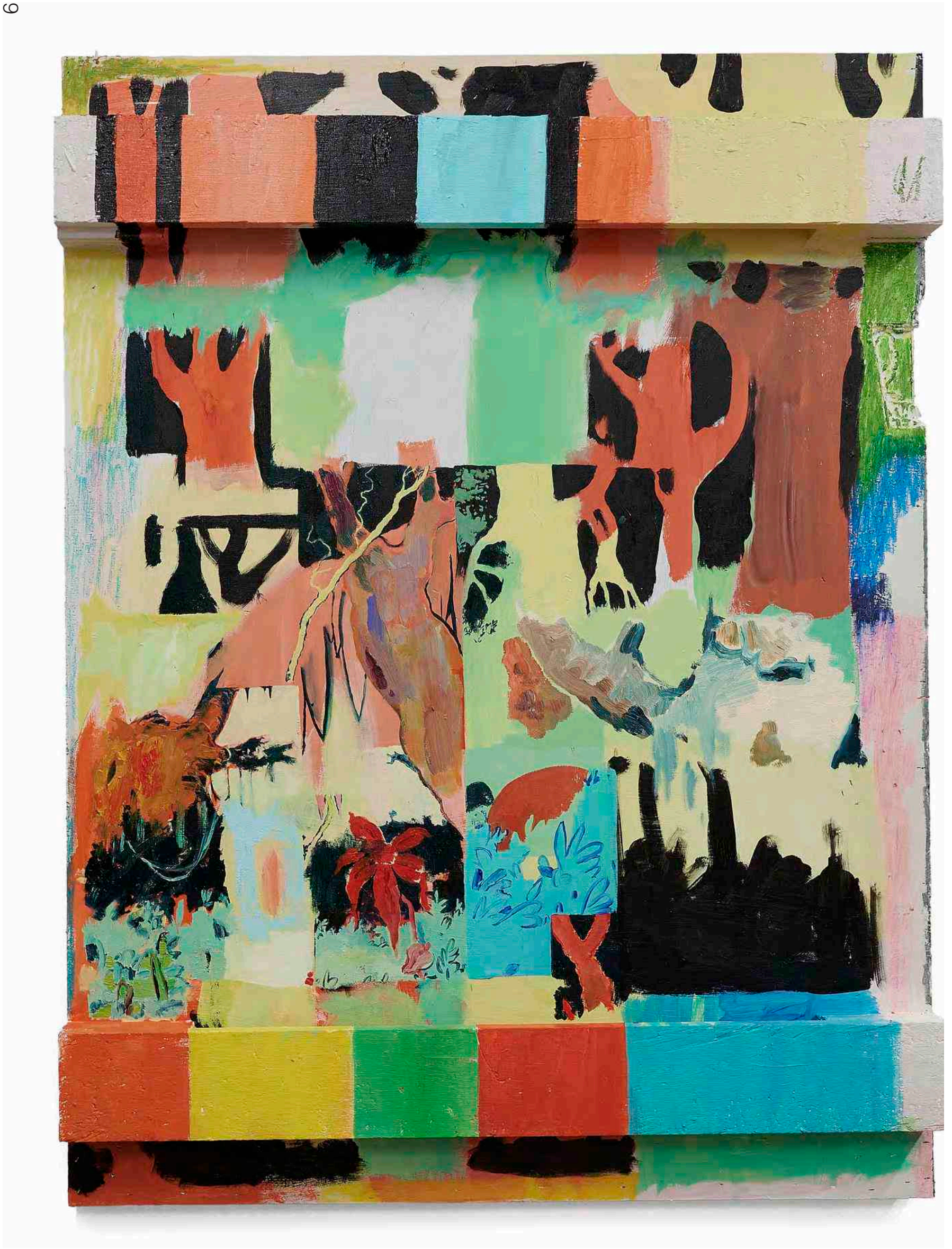
3
See "The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World," exhibition webpage, Museum of Modern Art, New York; https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1455.

4
Author email correspondence with the artist, October 2019.

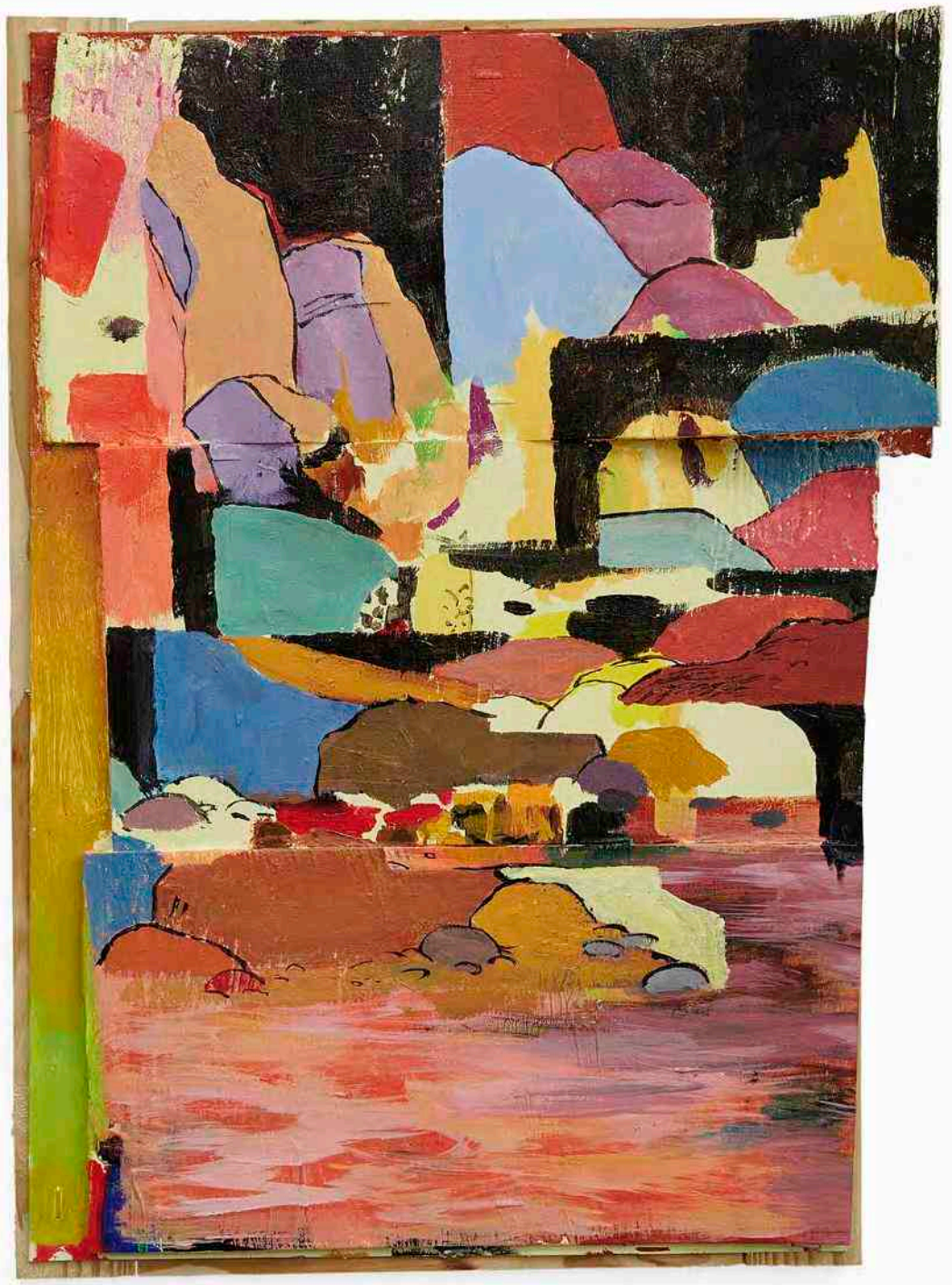
5
Ibid.

Why do I keep returning to you?, 2019
Acrylic, oil, crayon, wood on mat board
33 x 44 in.





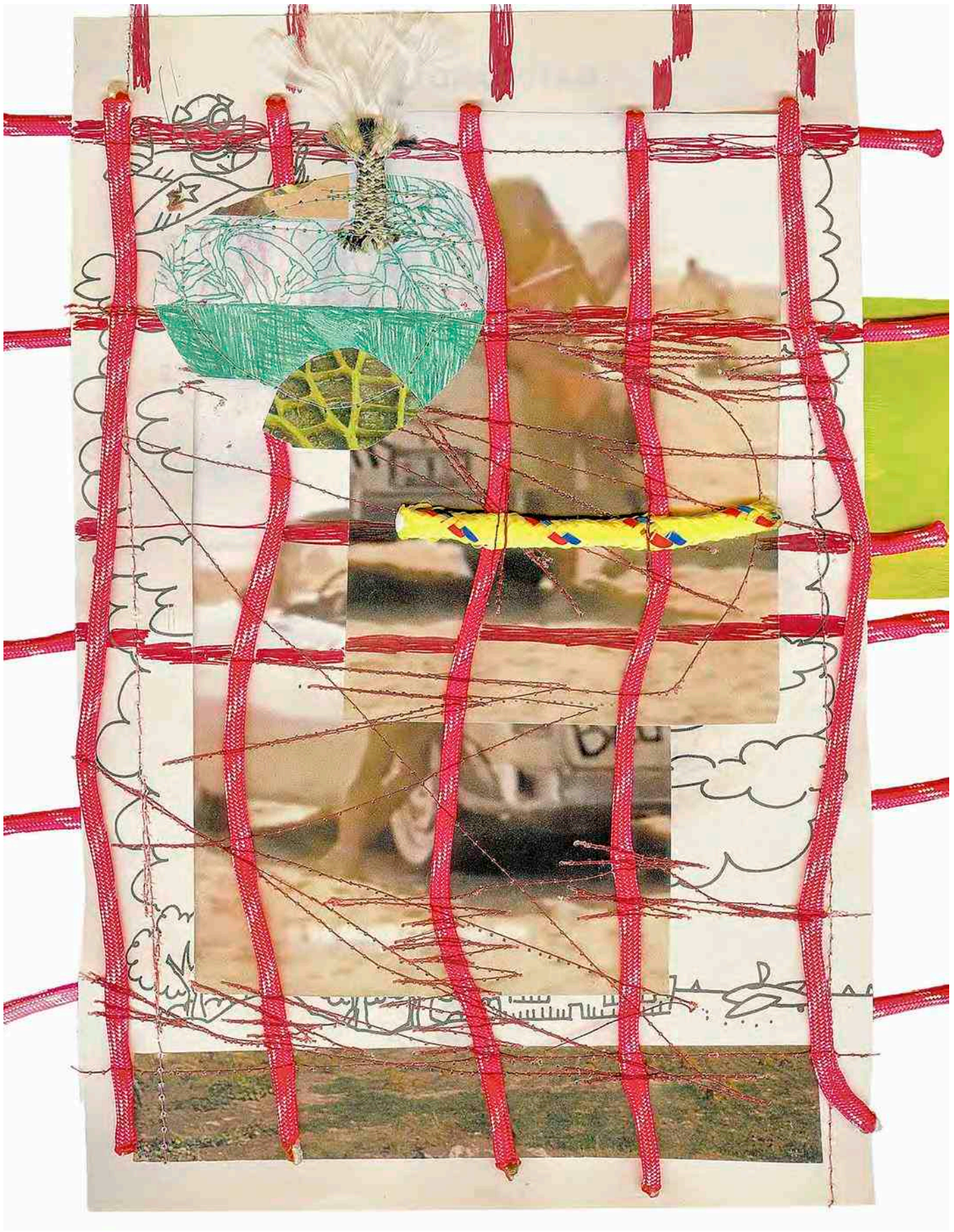
The earth will end, 2019
Acrylic, crayon, wood on paper
44 x 43 in.



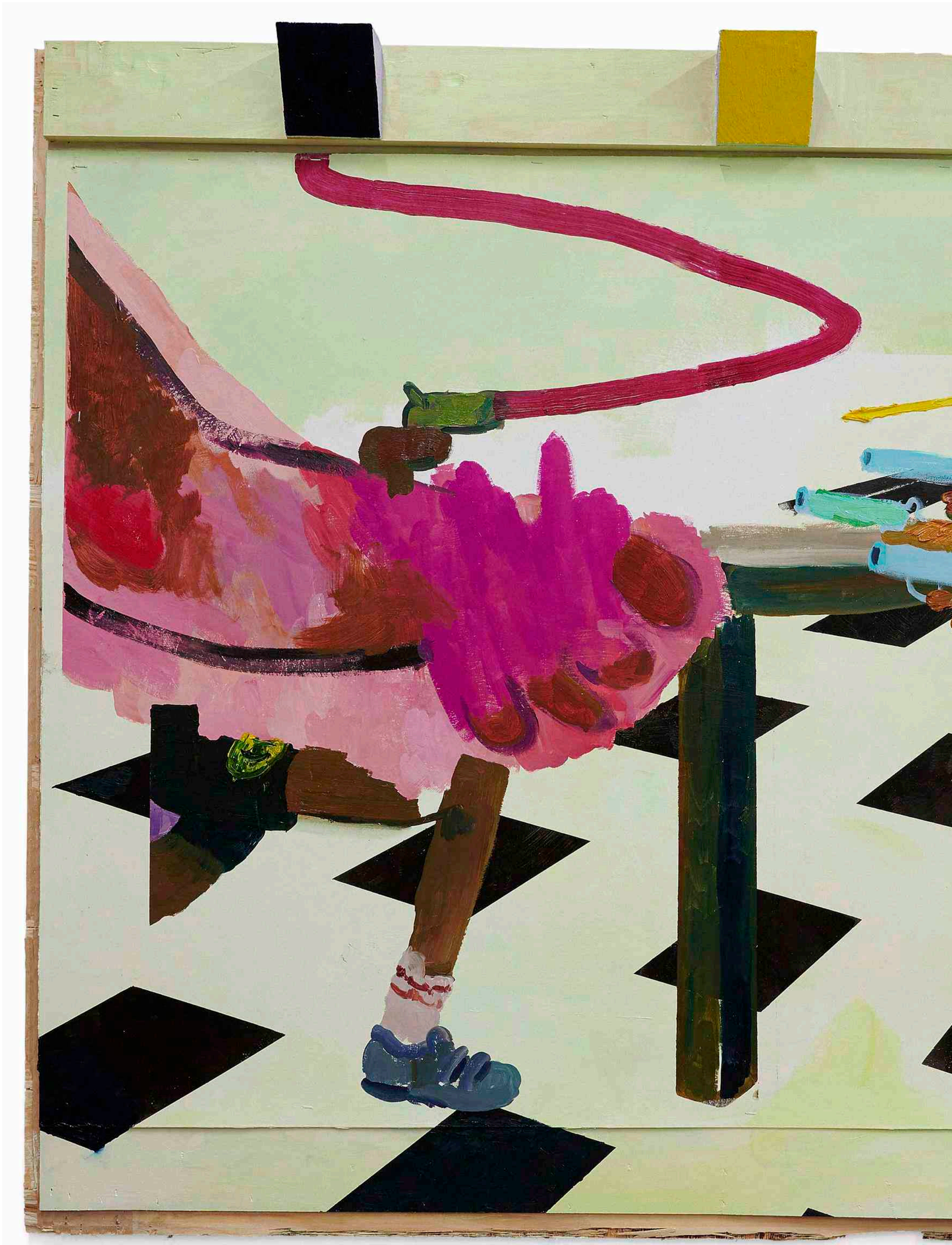
When I don't want to feel at all, 2019
Acrylic, wood on paper
13 ¼ x 18 ¼ in.

Can't seem to get started, 2019
Acrylic, oil on fabric and wood
14 x 17 ¼ in.

Let's burn together, 2019
Rope, plastic, acrylic print on paper
9 ¼ x 12 in.



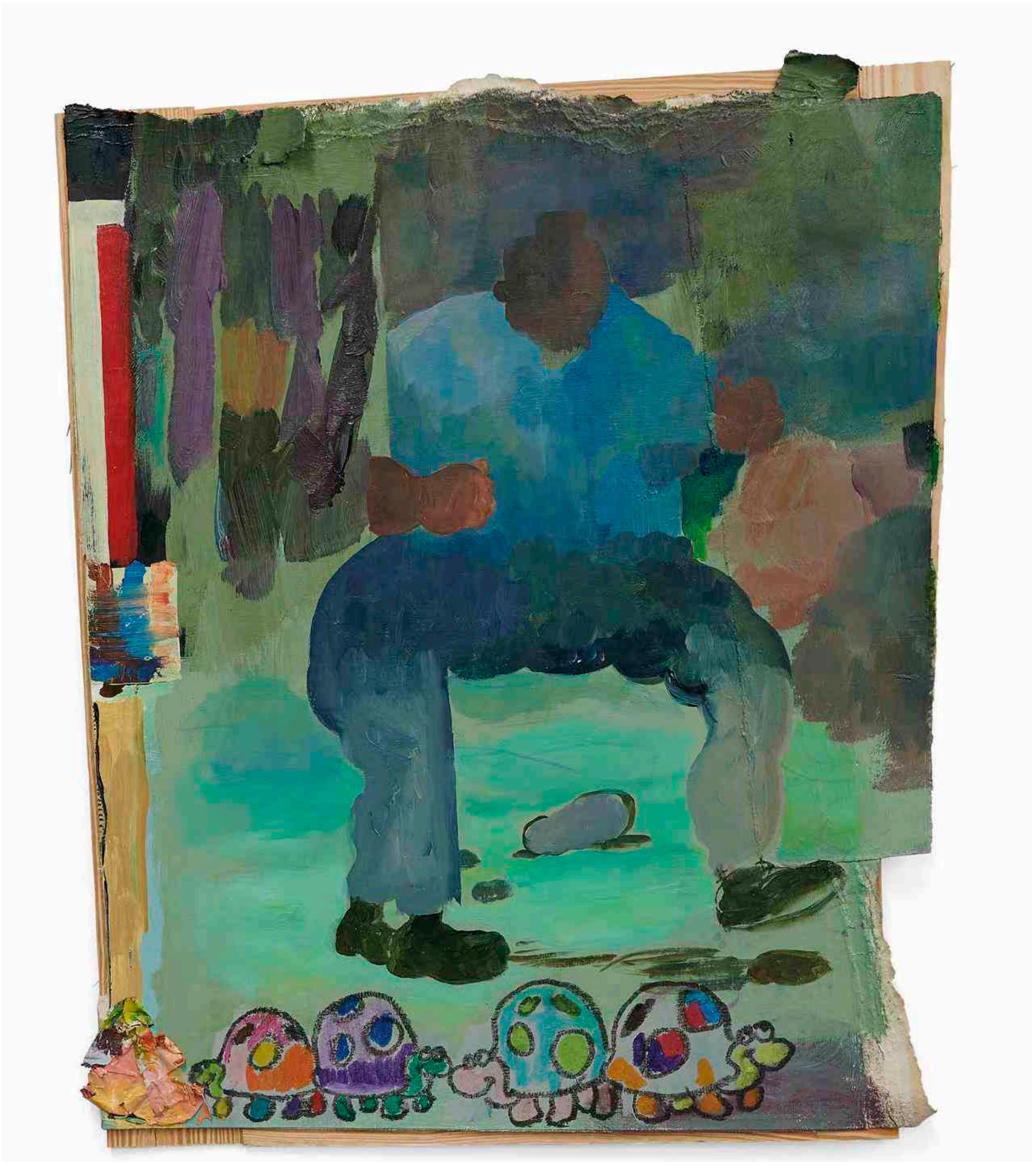
Deep paper cuts #2, 2019
Mixed media on paper
8 ½ x 11 in.



When nostalgia and facts blur, 2019
Oil, crayon on paper
44 ¼ x 44 ¼ in

I just need to breathe, 2019
Acrylic, oil, crayon, wood on paper
43 x 44 in.

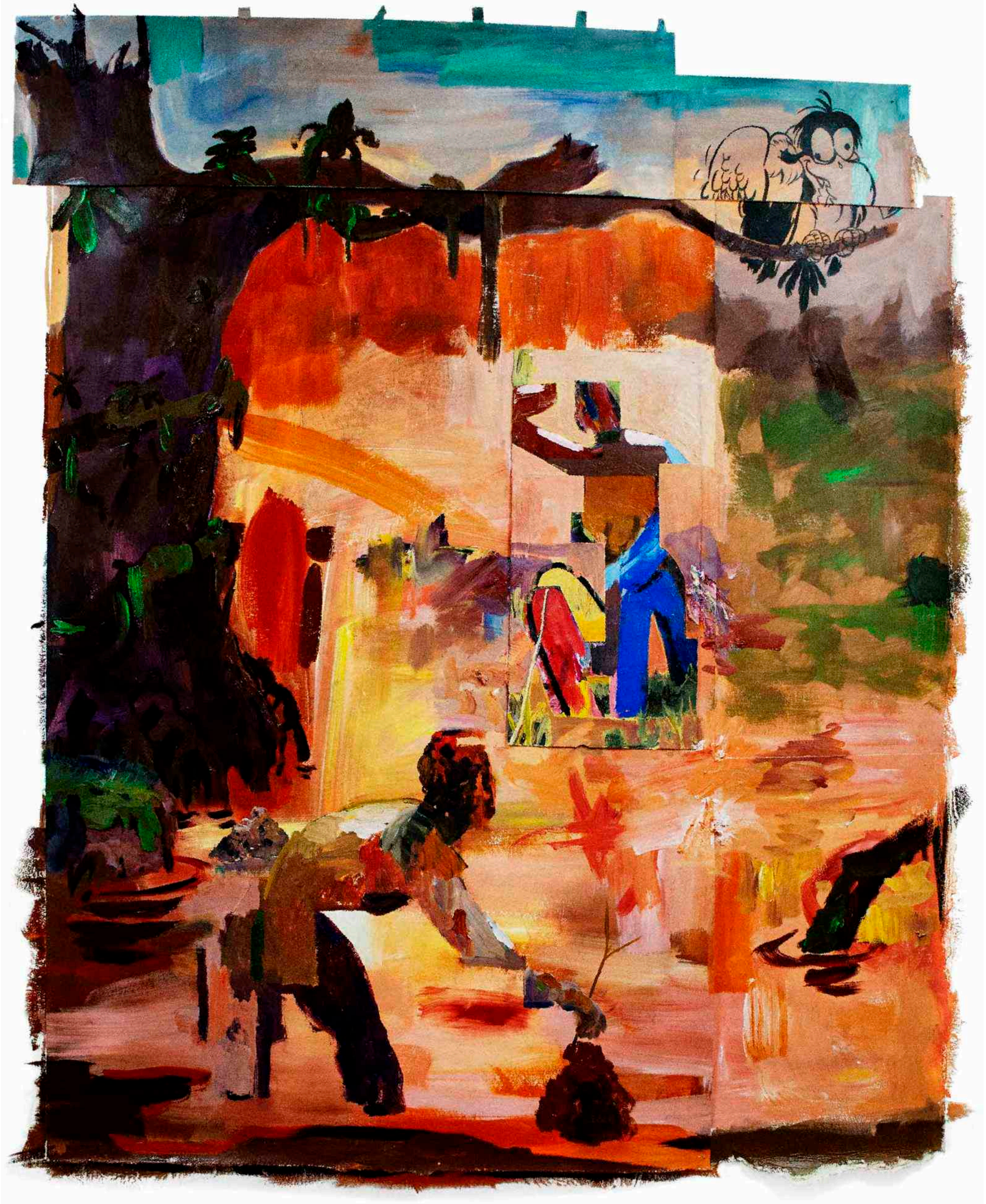
There is no room for us, 2019
Acrylic, oil, crayon on wood
29 ½ x 38 in.



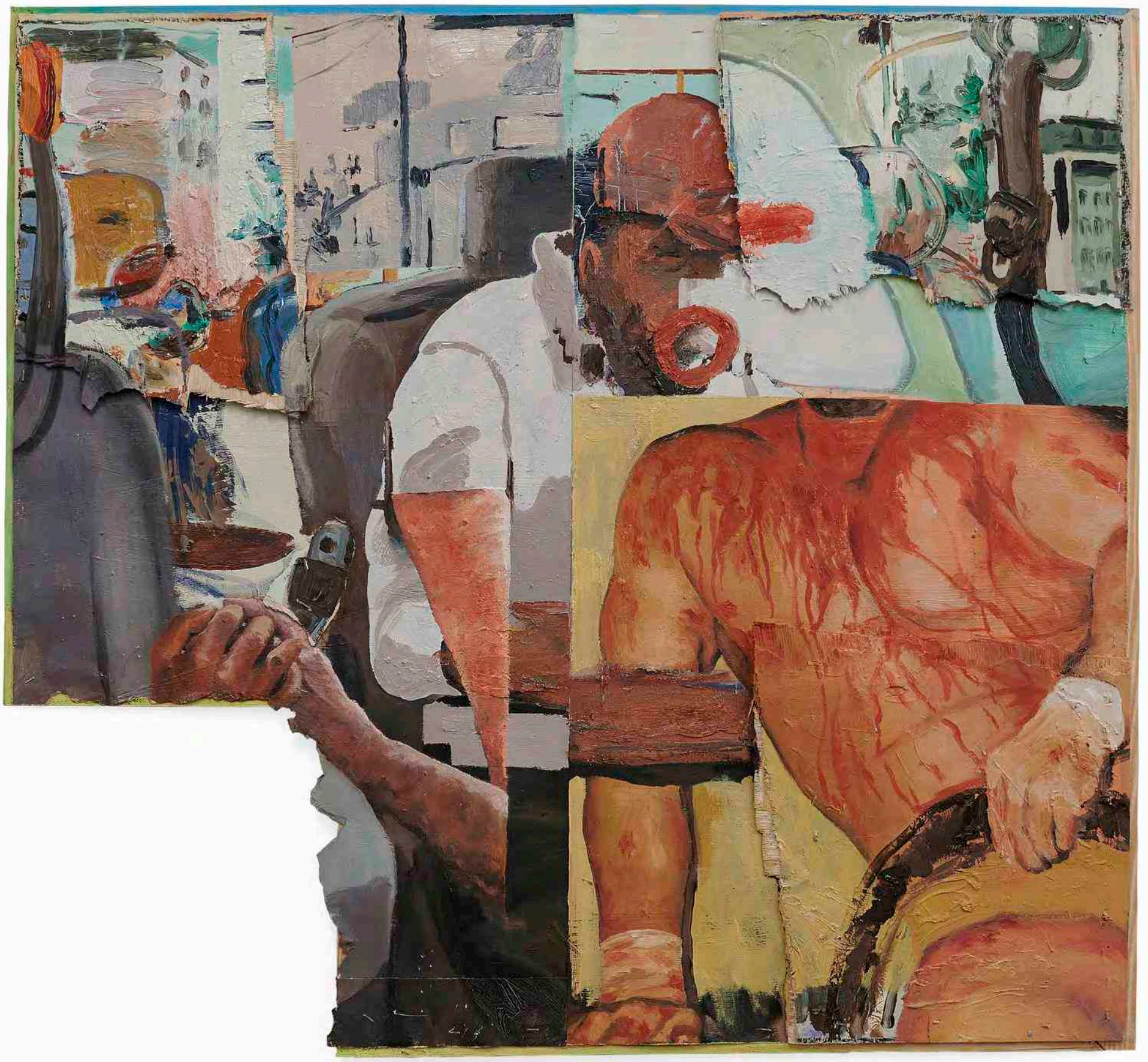
I need to get away from all of you, 2019
Oil, acrylic, crayon on mat board
21 x 25 in.

Pack hunters, 2017-19
Oil, acrylic on wood and paper
42 ½ x 41 ½ in.

They don't speak for us, 2019
Acrylic on paper
17 ½ x 20 in.

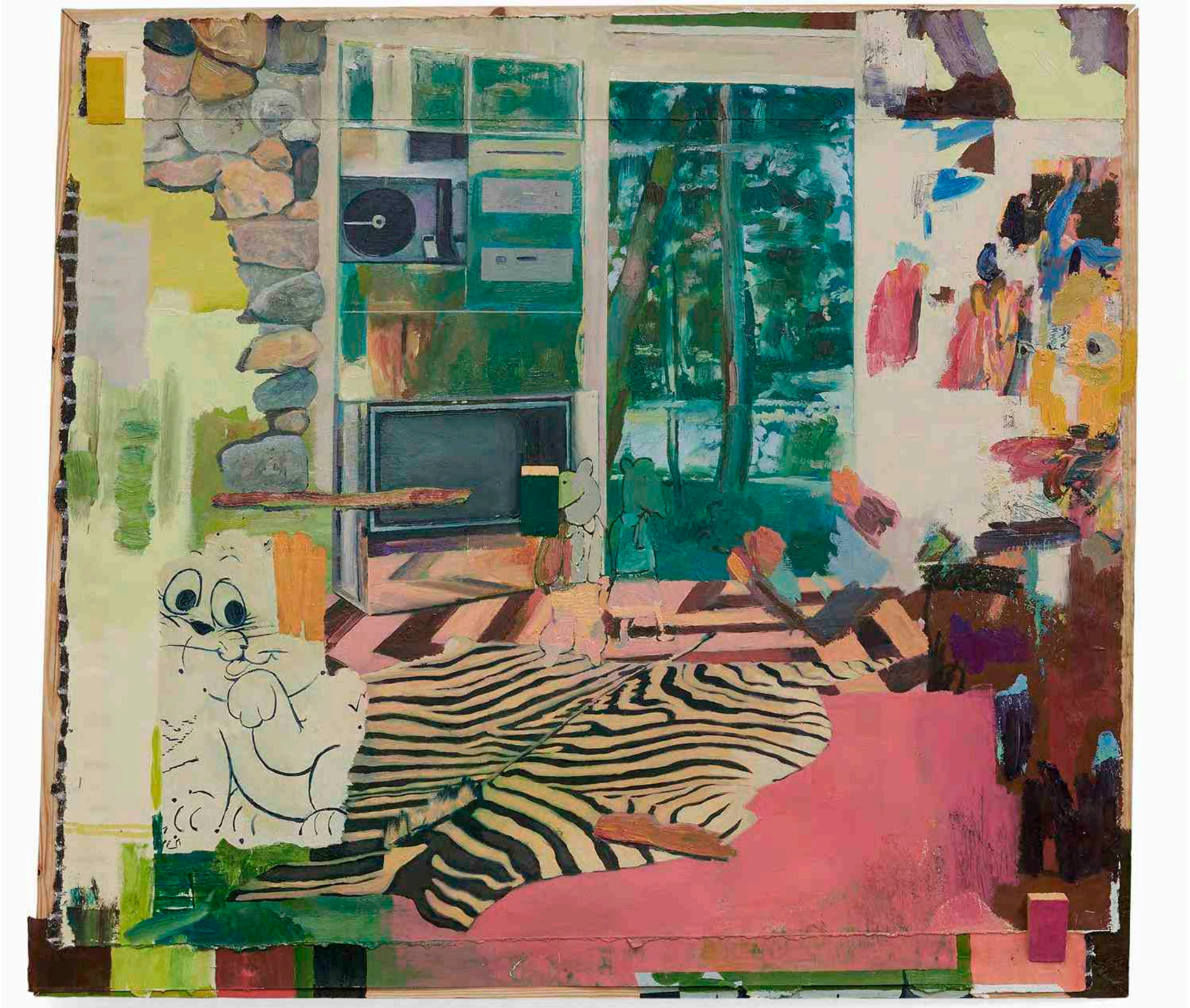


Eden, 2019
Acrylic on paper
61 x 74 in.



45 minutes to myself, 2018
Acrylic, oil, crayon wood on paper
43 x 43 in.

I wish it was just the two of us, 2019
Ceramic, acrylic, crayon, oil on wood and paper
24 ¼ x 27 ¼ in.



I don't want to hear your voice, 2019
Acrylic, oil, crayon, wood on paper
44 x 43 in.

Interview with

Omar Lopez-Chahoud, Artistic Director, UNTITLED, ART., and independent curator

Omar Lopez-Chahoud - OLG

Tell me about your work process, is it autobiographical?

Diego Gutierrez - DG

Primarily, what I'm focusing on is just painting itself, the construction of painting. It started off with me really concentrating on the image. Eventually, I felt that I had reached a plateau where I wanted more than what the painting was giving me, so I felt I needed to add to my ideas about deconstructing and reconstructing. I needed to enlarge the scope. So I started thinking about how a painting is put together. What are the elements? It's not just about images, it's also about the surface, the structure in the back. All these things, the materials, and ideas that happen within the studio. I decided to deconstruct and reconstruct everything, all my ideas of what makes up a painting and studio practice. That's when I started really playing with the surfaces. It took a long time to get there, though, because it happened in New York. I was in New York and working at Sotheby's as an art handler.

OLC

The art handling was probably good for you.

DG

Yeah, I think so. It was good for two different reasons. When I was attending school in Chicago, there was always a myth about what painting, art, and the art world was. This was because everything was through other people's experiences and not my own. When I went to New York, it felt like that myth was unveiled for me. You know, especially coming to Sotheby's where it is all about that myth of whatever they're trying to sell you, and you finally go and see what's behind the curtain. Like, "Oh, okay." [LAUGHS] So it was good for that reason. And then the other reason was that in New York I didn't have a studio. It was just me and my wife, who's also a painter.

OLC

How did you end up here?

DG

When I finished my bachelor's, I really wanted to get out of Los Angeles. It was mostly because LA was just a very competitive town. It seemed like everyone was kind of cutthroat about it.

OLC

It's very disjointed with no community and depending on where you live as well as what school you went to. Things don't overlap.

DG

That's why I started applying to grad schools. My professors really helped me out, and then I got into the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Chicago's really awesome, really cool. And then once I graduated, things changed. The reality of finally finishing school and having to get a job wasn't really working in Chicago. I thought, if I'm going to struggle, I might as well struggle in New York.

OLC

There are more opportunities in New York.

DG

There are a couple of large collections of artists at Sotheby's that nobody knew about. I would go through them, because I was an art handler there. I could see how the painting trends influenced their work and then that little flicker of experimentation. I was like, oh my gosh, this is so amazing! But when I would see the artists go back to the trendy stuff, I thought, you almost had it! I had a lot of experiences like this. But I was really busy. I didn't have time to be making these old large-scale narrative paintings. So I wasn't painting at all. I was getting really scared, because I wasn't making. I had to reevaluate.

OLC

Did you work at home? It's expensive to live in NYC.

DG

Yeah, I did. I had to reevaluate basically what art meant and what the studio meant.

OLC

What are people doing here in Miami? I want to hear how you made that decision to move from New York to Miami and why.

DG

I was talking to a lot of people in New York, a lot of friends, and a lot of artists.

They were all telling me how they got there and repeating the same thing about paying your dues in New York. Spending three to five years chasing a gallery. That way of changing your art practice to fit into the mold of what is already established didn't make sense to me at all. Why would you make your art for someone that you don't know? You don't owe them anything, and at the same time, they don't owe you anything. So why are we meeting in the middle? It doesn't make sense to me. So my wife and I decided that we needed to leave and go to a place where there is more freedom.

My wife is from Miami. Her name is Nabila Santa-Cristo. We met in Chicago. I'd rather go someplace where I haven't looked before. And she has family here, so I was like, okay, let's go to Miami.

OLC

That makes sense.

DG

At first I really hated Miami, and everyone was asking me, "Why are you here?"

For almost five years, everyone was telling me, dude you're making a mistake. Miami sucks, blah, blah, blah. On some level, you know, they weren't lying. It was very true.

In my painter way of analyzing things, I was like okay, I'm noticing that we can have the best art show in Miami, and it won't matter because no one's going to show up. You can have the worst art show in Miami, and it won't matter, because no one's going to show up. There is a community here, you have to be a game player.

But being a game player on Miami's terms is not like in Chicago or New York. It's totally different.

OLC

It's starting to change. They need to work on the art schools.

DG

And that's what I've always been saying. Since I first got here. [LAUGHS]

OLC

Rich people don't pay attention.

DG

I think it's because they're just paying attention to the art market, you know? They're not thinking about the long term. But it's fun, I think.

OLC

So you were excited to come here?

DG

Yeah, I found freedom in the idea that it doesn't matter what I do, no one's going to pay attention, so it's really okay to do anything. At least in my practice I thought, okay, now let's do the things I've always wanted to do.

OLC

Have you been showing in Miami?

DG

Here at Oolite and donating my stuff to local projects.

I was introduced to Amy Galpin at the Frost Art Museum. Then I got to show there as well, on the Florida International University campus. It sometimes gets confused with the Frost Science Museum, but that's totally different.

OLC

What's your background, Mexican? Not Chicano? Third generation? You speak Spanish as well?

DG

I'm definitely second-generation Chicano, and I speak Spanish.

OLC

You're very connected to your heritage. You're creating a language.

DG

It's something that's always on my mind. For me it just adapts to wherever the studio is. I like to include ideas and things that are happening there. The political things are on my mind while in the studio, so it's going to be in the painting, you know?

OLC

I like that it's touching the floor [referring to the artwork *Pack Hunters*, p.15]. It's still a painting.

DG

For me that goes with the idea of how a painting is really functioning. Though there are political things in there, does that make it politically activated? No, it's not, because it's inside my house. It's inside a gallery, it's inside the studio. It's not activated in any way. Let's say years from now, someone uses it for some activism, that's something that's totally outside of my control.

I can't think about it as activism, I have to think about it as painting because that's the reality. That's what it is. For me the political subject becomes the same as any other element, just like color. It's just because that's how it's functioning right now. I think a lot of painters want that provenance quickly. It doesn't happen quickly. It happens through several years, through other people putting their interpretation into it and taking it somewhere else. I just have to think about

how it is currently functioning, and that's where a lot of these ideas are now coming from.

OLC
There is an assurance, a confidence. You open it up. It's about the time you put into the work. Who do you see as inspiration?

DG
Paul Klee is someone who really helps me out whenever I feel not confident to do something. Also Sigmar Polke.

When I went to New York and saw his MoMA show, I felt like I'd been cheated by my professors who never introduced me to him. I knew of him before I went to this show, of course, but I was like, why aren't we studying this in Painting I !

Also outsider artists. Howard Finster, Purvis Young, Mose Tolliver. Just seeing bold moves that make me think, oh, I can do that? I didn't know that we can do that. Image-wise, I feel like I'm always reaching that plateau of seeing the same images coming back. When that happens to me, I have to readjust my aesthetics and start incorporating things that I would generally not see myself doing. Because, one, it's not my taste, and two, I just don't see it happening ever. But I do it in the sketches, and then I just bring it into the work.

OLC
You seem to always go back to playing between the outside and the interior. You seem very aware of architectural spaces

DG
I think for me it's an old habit from being a figurative painter. [LAUGHS]

OLC
You're a very good painter. You like high and low.

DG
I like the idea that painting can be anything. I can accept that this is a turtle because of what it's next to, this thing next to that [referring to the artwork *I need to get away from all of you*, p. 14]. I go back to the idea that the paintings don't translate well to image, a photo, and seeing them online. I think that's where painting is right now, everyone's seeing them online. And that goes back to the idea that no one's going to shows.

OLC
It's a generational thing.

DG
Yeah, I'm teaching high school students and seeing the same thing in my kids. It's really interesting.

OLC
I'm glad they have you there. Is your wife a painter?

DG
Yeah, we share the same ideas. I think if anything, we're always in competition as far as who's pushing ideas more. We just go back and forth with each other. [LAUGHS]

It's interesting because the function of painting is changing now. Painting no longer has this direct conversation with people the way we used to think about it.

OLC
Technology leads to that.

DG
I feel that the way painting was functioning before was similar to the way memes are functioning now. And memes function the way painting used to function. It's not that painting is dead, it's just that its function is shifting.

OLC
That's a good point. I thought there was too much painting. It's connected to technology. The Instagram effect. You can tell they're making these paintings quickly. It's like, what the hell is happening?

DG
I think the market is about a flirtation. I just don't want it to govern what happens in the studio. I'd rather just concentrate on the things that I can control and run with it, which is why the work is the way it is.

OLC
Right. You just need to keep at it. The gallery will come eventually. It's not bad to put it out there. It could help you. Does it come from different sources?

DG
It's all of the above. I read somewhere how de Kooning loved leaving doors open for opportunities to occur. One of his acquaintances described the way he painted, and when he considered a painting done. There was a story about how a painting had already gone to a gallery, and then it was in transition to somewhere else. And in that small transition, he went back into it and worked on it. So every time someone would get it, it would be totally different. I kind of feel the same way, where I'm allowing anything to happen in the painting.

I try not to take any moment for granted. In terms of where these ideas come from, for me it's important for it to come from anywhere or allow it to come from everywhere. I save all these things, ideas, and images. When the moment is right, when it's appropriate to actually put an image reference in there, that's when I pull it out and use it.