



# FRANCES.

SUSIE ORBACH EDDY FRANKEL CORINNA LOTZ







# FRANCES.

**SUSIE ORBACH   EDDY FRANKEL   CORINNA LOTZ**



## DISCONCERTING

There's a condition called prosopagnosia. You might know it as face blindness; the inability to recognise familiar faces, sometimes even your own. People who suffer from it can't tell one face from another, in a crowd or in their own family. Everyone is anonymous to them, they live in a world without individuals, where every face is a new one.

It can be the result of a brain injury, or you can be born with it. But just imagine looking at someone and knowing you should recognise them, but finding nothing to cling on to, no features that are familiar, seeing no curved lips that you know you once kissed, no eyes that you once stared into, no beauty marks you once admired, nothing, just blankness.

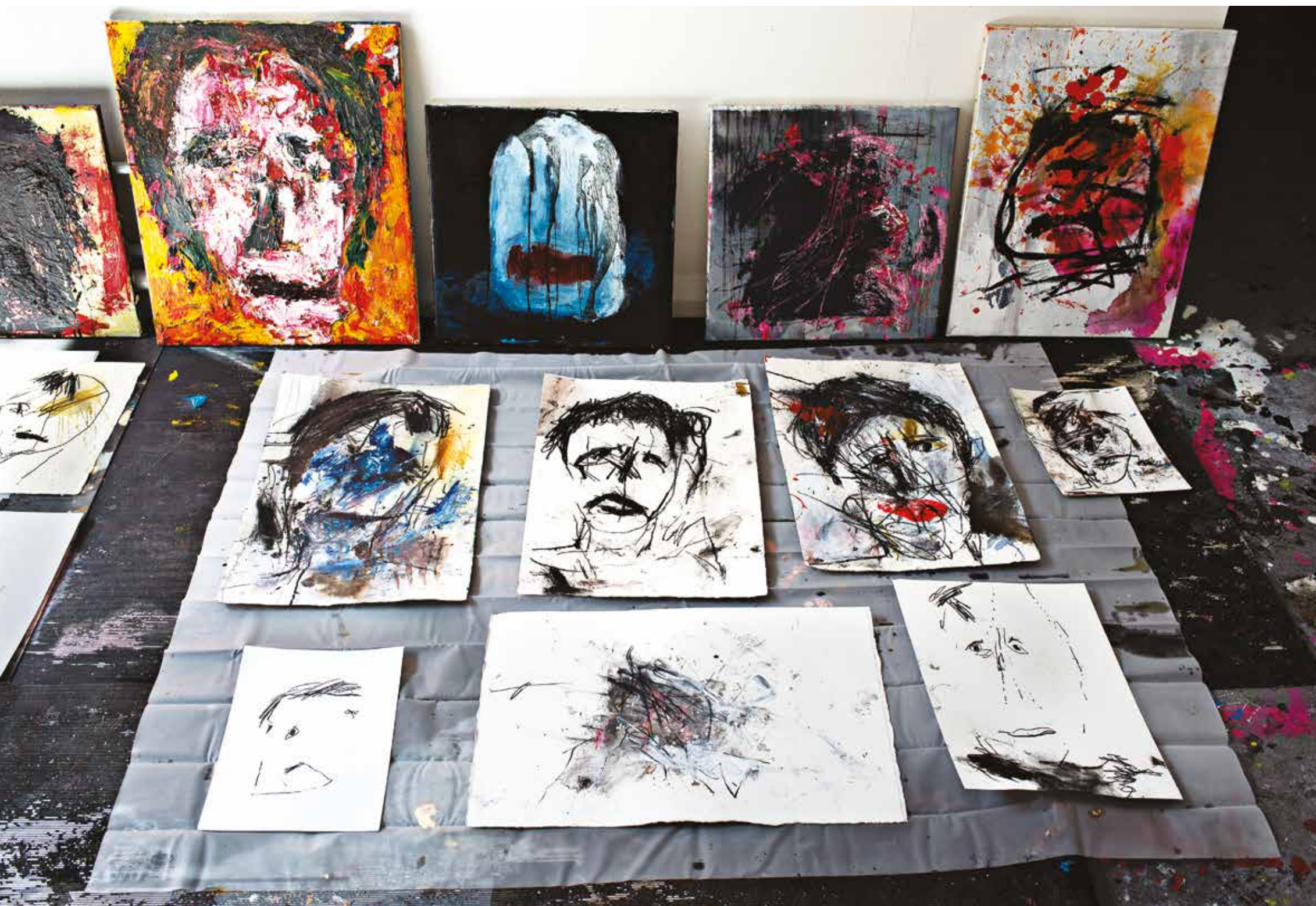
There's a similarly disconcerting, discombobulating, discomfiting feeling in Frances Aviva Blane's head paintings. Laid out in front of you like a line-up of suspects in an American cop film, you scan the jawlines and mouths and eyes laid out in front of you. You know for certain, deep within you, that you should know what's happening in

these faces, that you should be able to pick one out of the line-up, but the meaning is just out of reach. Every painting is both immediately familiar, and somehow totally alien.

So you search further through the features on display on each canvas, and eventually you ask yourself: are these heads all Frances herself, are these self-portraits? Shocks of red lipstick, splodges of black hair, they must be. Slowly, creepingly, familiarity feels like it's inching its way back into your mind, you are no longer face blind, you know what you're looking at. But just as quickly, it slips away: that one can't be her, nor can that one.

Then you ask if these might be people Frances knows, her friends, loved ones: big mops of blonde hair here and there, wide smiles, blue eyes. Maybe. But they still feel somehow out of reach, ungraspable.

Instead, could these paintings depict pure emotion? Are these visions of anger, torment, joy, love and pain? Are they feelings rendered in paint? The aggressive marks,





the flurries of black, the searing reds, all these things point towards physical expressions of feeling. But there's a narrative complexity at play in them that drags you away from such a simplistic interpretation. They feel too rooted in reality to be quite so clearly emotional.

The heads have always been part of her practice. 'When I was at the Slade, everyone told me I had to choose between abstraction and figuration,' she says. 'But I couldn't choose, I just couldn't.' The abstracts helped her establish herself as a painter, but the heads bubbled away, always in the background, like naughty figurative secrets, going unshown for 30 years.

'I always did heads, but I was kind of embarrassed by them because I wanted to be a sophisticated abstract painter!' she laughs. 'But now, I can see that really they each help the other make sense'. The abstracts, it turns out, make the heads less figurative, give them context, a universe in which to exist. The heads, then, give the abstracts grounding, pull them away from the theoretical and make them, somehow, more real.



I ask her if all the figures pictured in the head paintings are imagined, if they're depictions of people in her mind. 'Some of them are self-portraits. But I try to make them about experiences, and moments, and things. I'm trying to paint the surface of an emotion,' she says enigmatically.

But most telling is when she says 'my subject matter, really, is the disintegration of paint and personality.' And so we come back to prosopagnosia, face blindness. The figures here, the heads, are so hard to grasp, so unknowable yet so hauntingly familiar, because they capture people and feelings at the moment of falling apart, like a photograph taken just as a bullet hits, or just as a bomb explodes. Even the paint – it's laid on so thick that the canvases are heavy with the stuff – is barely holding on.

And the truth is that these paintings are all of the things we've mentioned. They are self-portraits, images of her friends and loved ones, and depictions of emotions. They're all these things at once. They are familiar and alien, abstract and figurative, earthly and ethereal, real and fictional.

Frances Aviva Blane is asking you to try, really try, to hold on to something when you look at these works, to try to grasp the feelings and personalities and stories on display. But she also knows it's an impossible task, because she has painted all of these things just as they're about to fritter away. It's like trying to remember a dream, or keep hold of an old love. Reach, reach, reach, but you'll never ever manage to truly grasp.

That's what makes them so enigmatic, that's what makes them work: their powerful mixture of possibility and total, absolute impossibility.

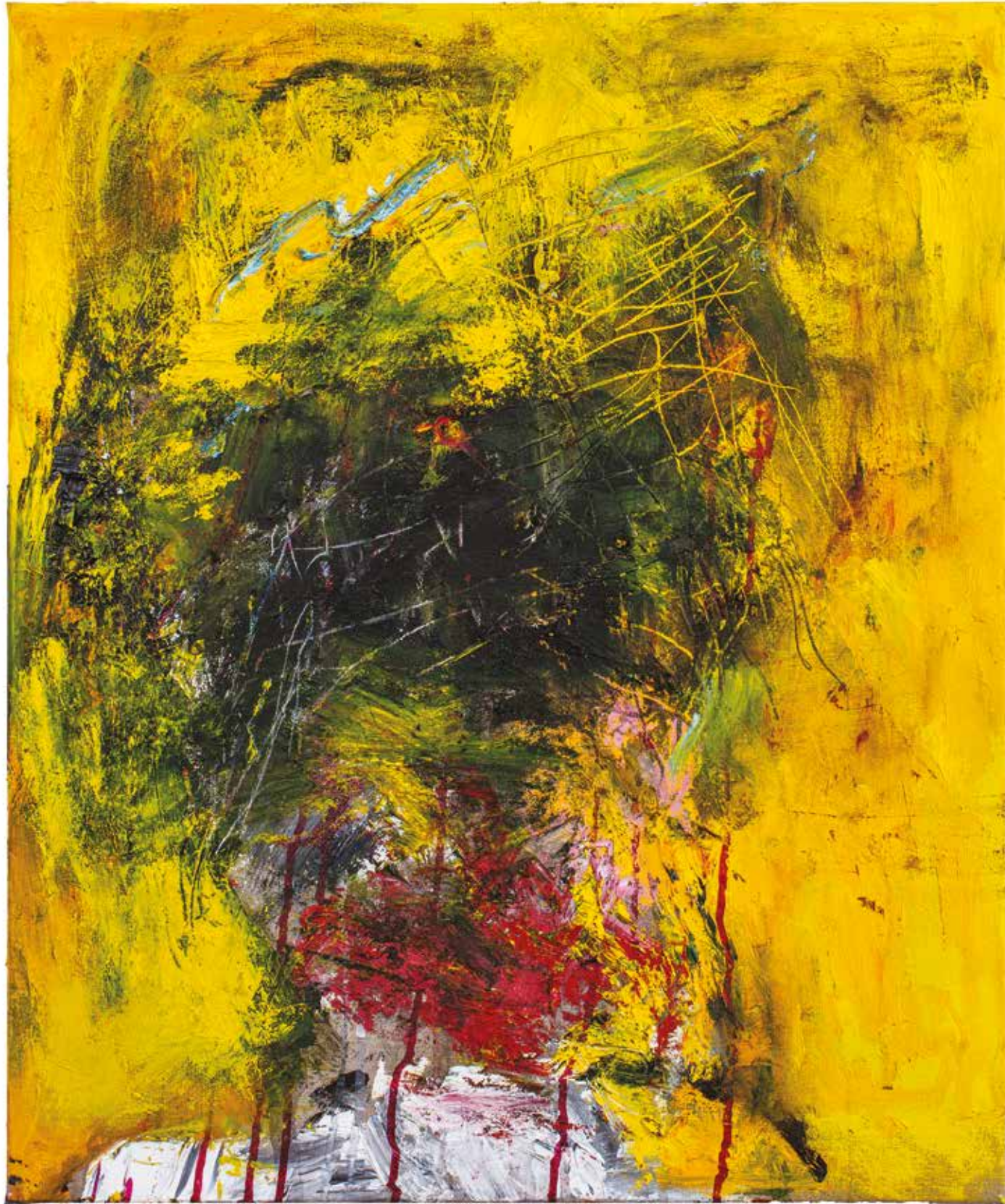
© **Eddy Frankel** 2021

**Eddy Frankel** is a London-based art critic. He's *Time Out's* Art & Culture Editor, and has written about art for publications including *The Guardian*, *ArtReview*, *The Art Newspaper* and *Vanity Fair*. He's also the founder and editor of *OOF*, a magazine about the intersection of art and football, and has curated a series of exhibitions on the topic.

An abstract painting featuring thick, expressive brushstrokes. The left side is dominated by vibrant pink and magenta hues, while the right side is a deep, swirling blue. A horizontal band of bright red paint cuts across the center, creating a focal point. The overall texture is highly tactile, with visible ridges and valleys from the paint application.

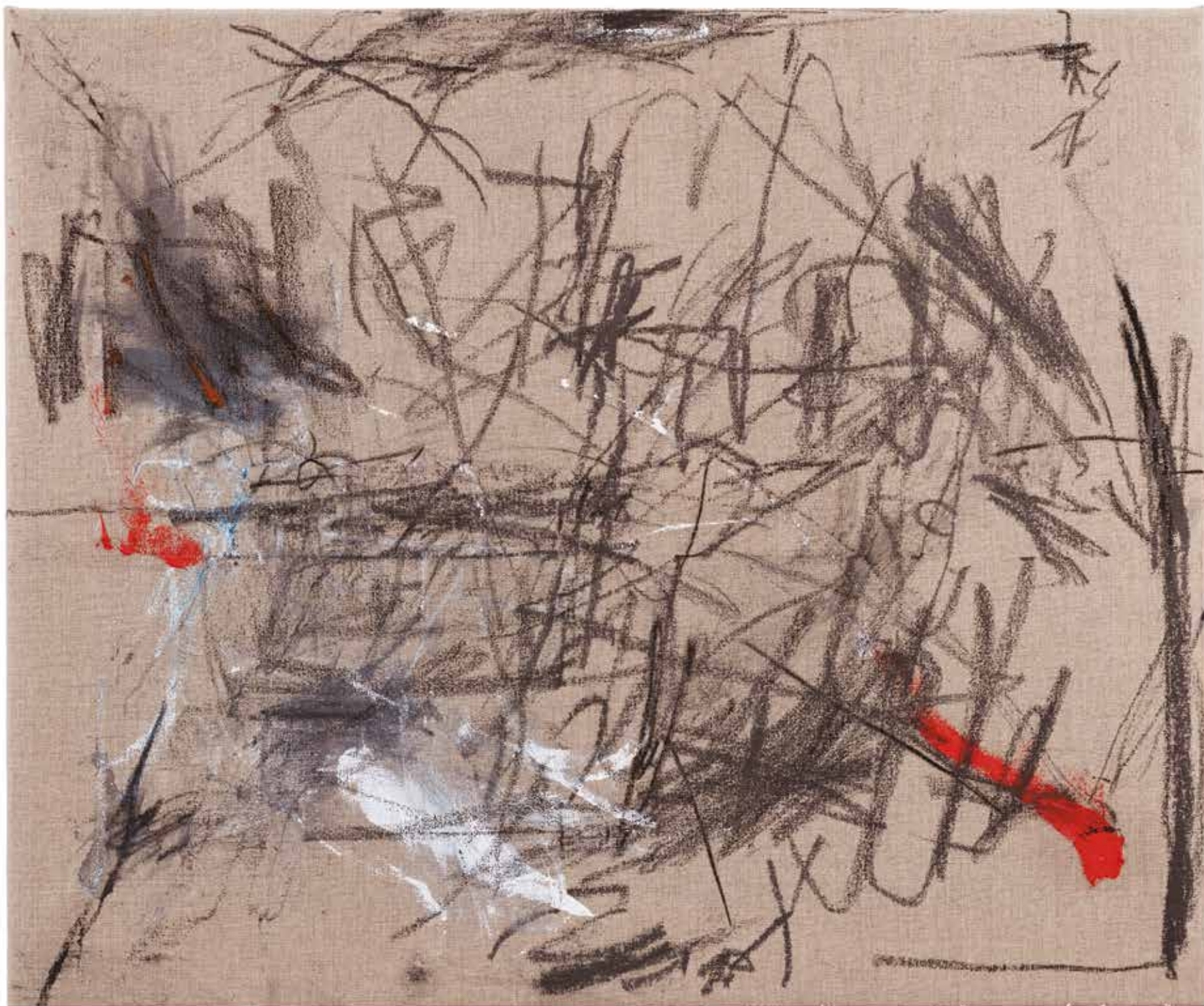
# **PAINTINGS**





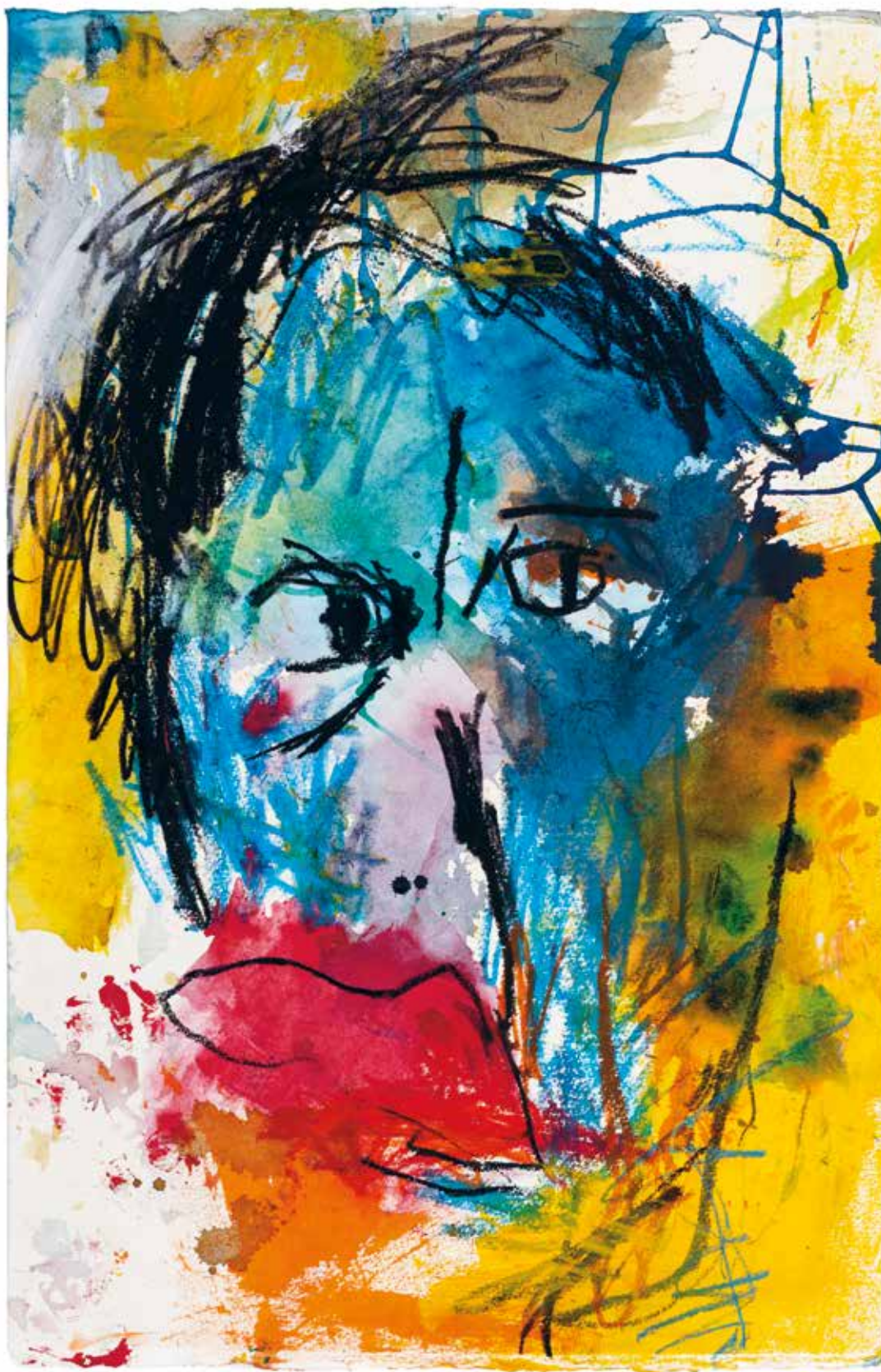
**Yellow Head 5**  
oil/linen 60x50 cms





**Tracked 2**  
charcoal/oil/linen 50x60 cms





**Blue/Black Head**  
acrylic/pastel/waterford 76x56 cms





**Blue Head 2**  
oil/linen 60x50 cms





**Summer 2021**  
oil/linen 60x50 cms





**Burgundy Head**  
oil/linen 60x60 cms





**Fool**

oil/linen 198x198 cms



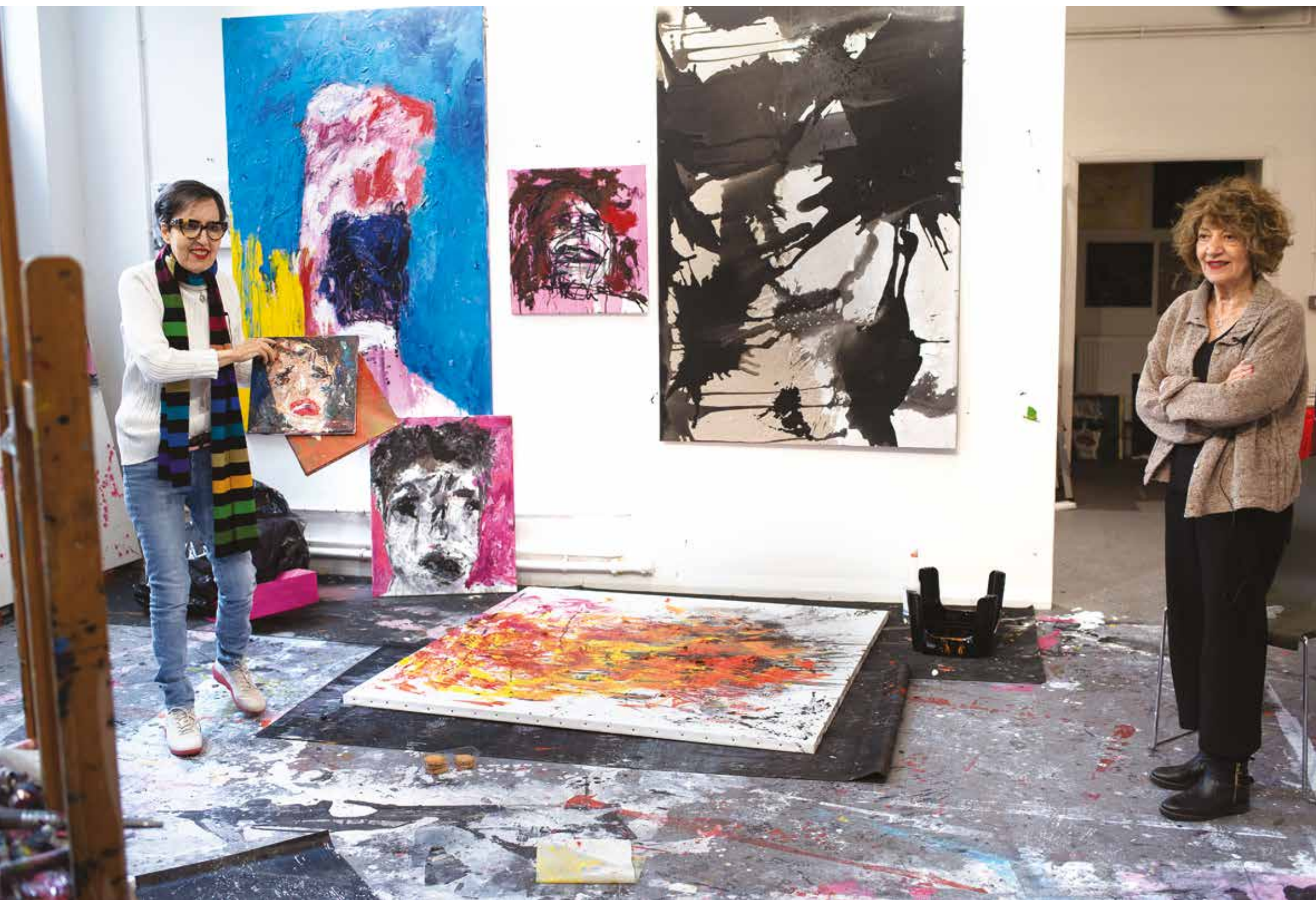


**Blue Head 3**  
oil/linen 60x50 cms





**Wired 3**  
oil/linen 198x198 cms



# FRANCES

Frances' heads go from disarming, to shocking, to haunting, and back again.

Masked in the street or flattened by the zoom screen, faces during lockdown became the most prominent and yet strangely distorted part of a self. We look at faces but do we see?

Frances' great gift is to see. She sees for us and gives us back what, many times, we might rather not see.

Frances' heads are expressed in three different media. Her oils, I call Frances-paint. There is a density, depth and 'chutzpah' which inevitably sends me wondering how she puts layering to such effect. Her paintings vibrate, but not with joy. We meet stranded heads, frazzled heads, ghostly heads, flaming heads, staring heads, discombobulated heads, grotesque heads, and an amoeba like head. They are, as the phrase goes, in your face. Inescapable.



Her works on paper almost feel of another hand but not another mind. The marks she makes are spare, but the effects are equally compelling, equally Frances. No-one else captures, as she has done - yet again - the pain, the dismay, the sorrow, the anguish, the hurt, the scream, the beseeching, the wish for meeting and understanding.

The third medium Frances uses is acrylic paint and charcoal. The paint looks smeared across the charcoal. The heads have a mixture of imploring within the disconcerting. They call to us. The material and framed work convey an invitation that at first glance has a certain lightness. The lightness doesn't last. Tonally, we experience the weeping, the alarm, the 'no' and the trapped. We look at what she is able to see.

The emotional range Frances depicts is one I know from the consulting room. And perhaps we can all recognise inside ourselves. Certainly, if we didn't acknowledge these feelings or know them before the dolorosa of Covid, we recognise them now. They are our sorrows. As we recognise them, we move from isolation to an uncomfortable acceptance.

But Frances doesn't leave us there. She takes us to the delight of her abstracts. The pulsing colours, the breaking through of colour upon colour. Thickness, sensuality, richness. Paintings that beg you to enter them. The ambivalence of looking and turning away, unnerved by her heads, dissipates as we marvel at what she can do with paint, with colour. They hold us with questions and wonder.

It's tempting to see the heads and the abstracts as two sides of Frances, her passionate fury – the one that jostles with a love of life, the other, the pains she makes us face.

© **Susie Orbach** 2021

**Dr. Susie Orbach** is an author, psychoanalyst and political activist. She has written 12 books and holds numerous academic posts. Orbach founded the Women's Therapy Centre in NY and London. Her book *Bodies* won the Women in Psychology award for best book. She is the recipient of the first Lifetime Achievement Award for Psychoanalysis given by the British Psychoanalytical Society and has a strong interest in social policy.

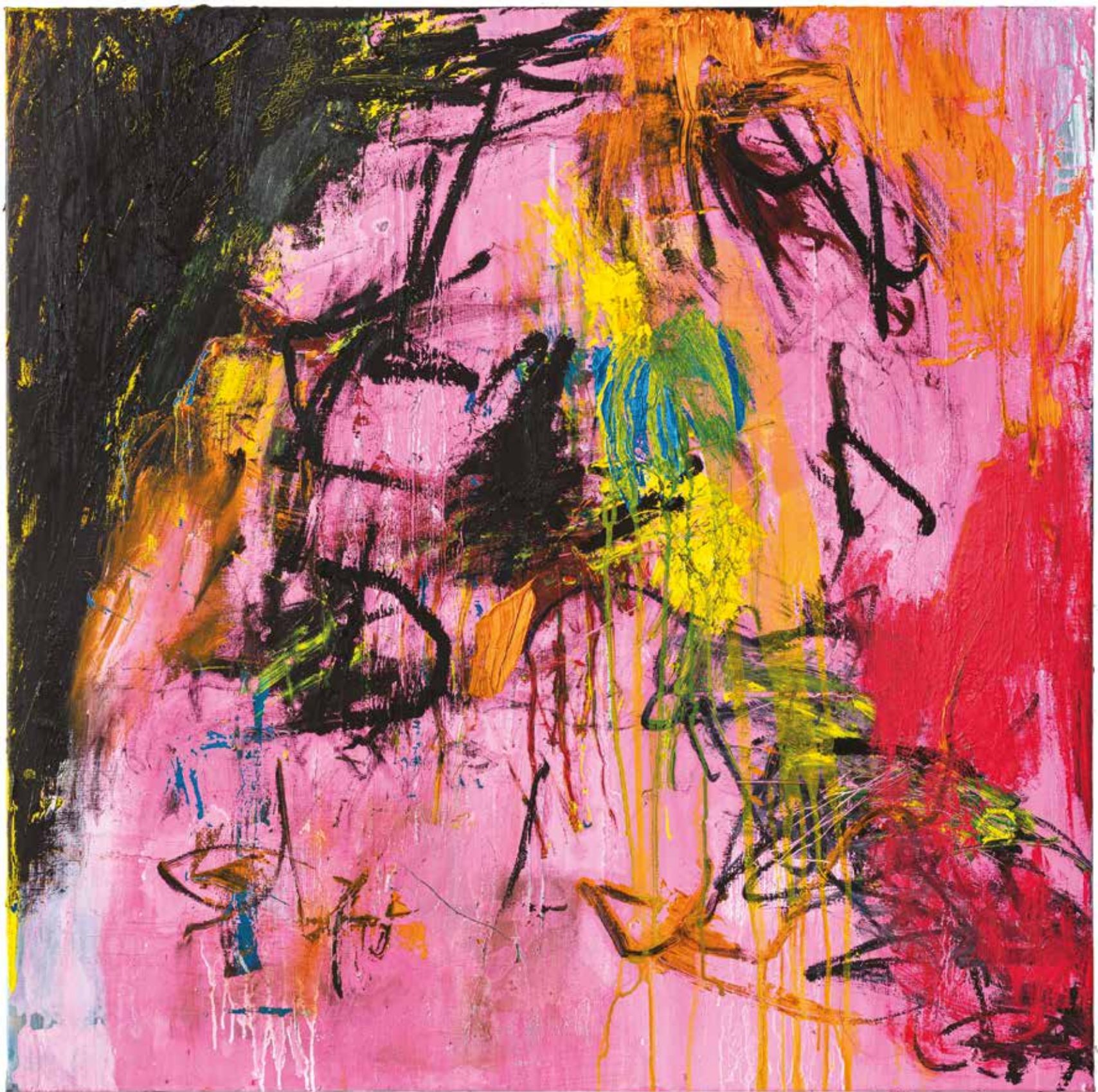






**Pink Head**  
oil/linen 60x60 cms



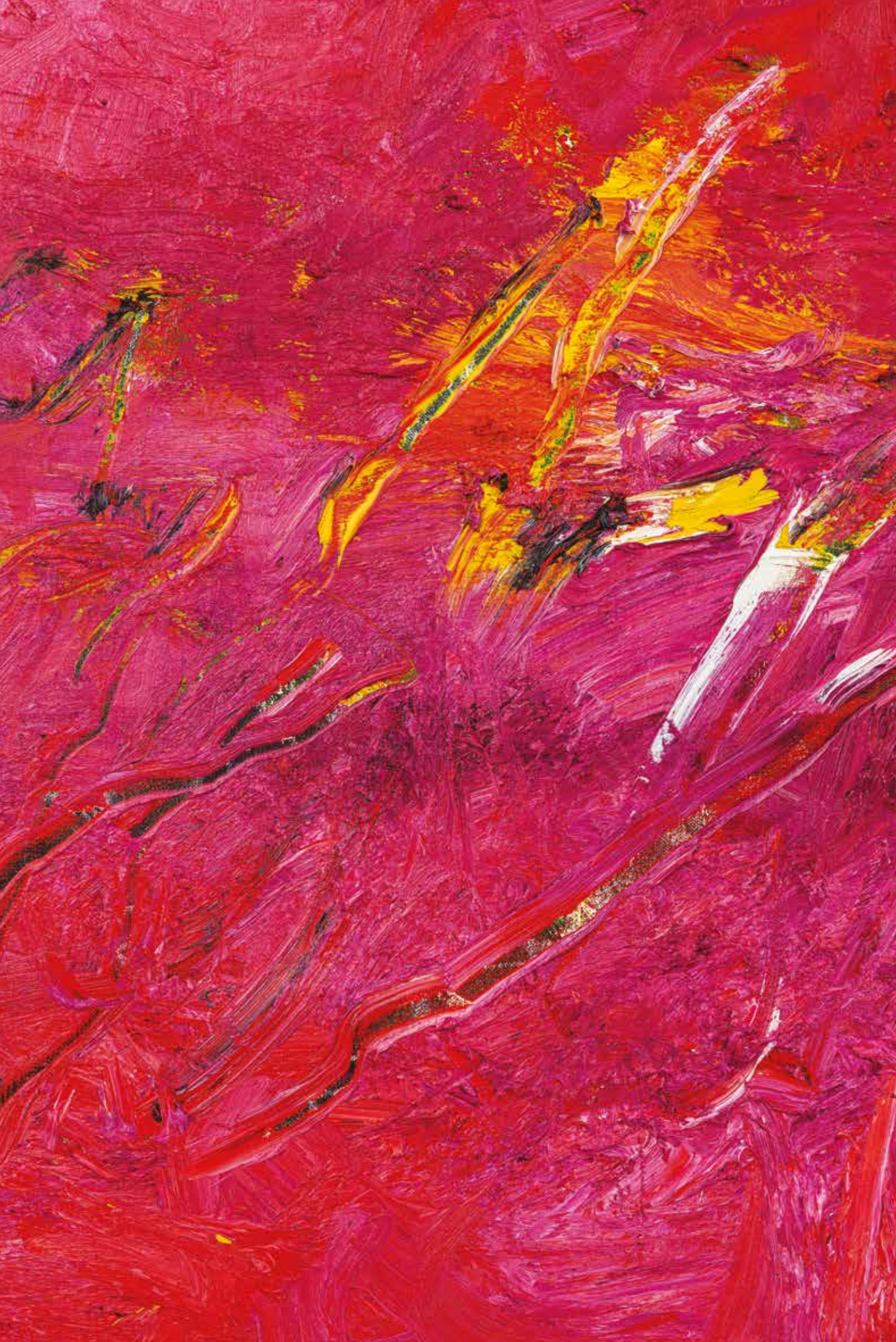


**Portrait Susie Orbach**  
oil/linen 90x90 cms





**Closed**  
oil/linen 45x45 cms



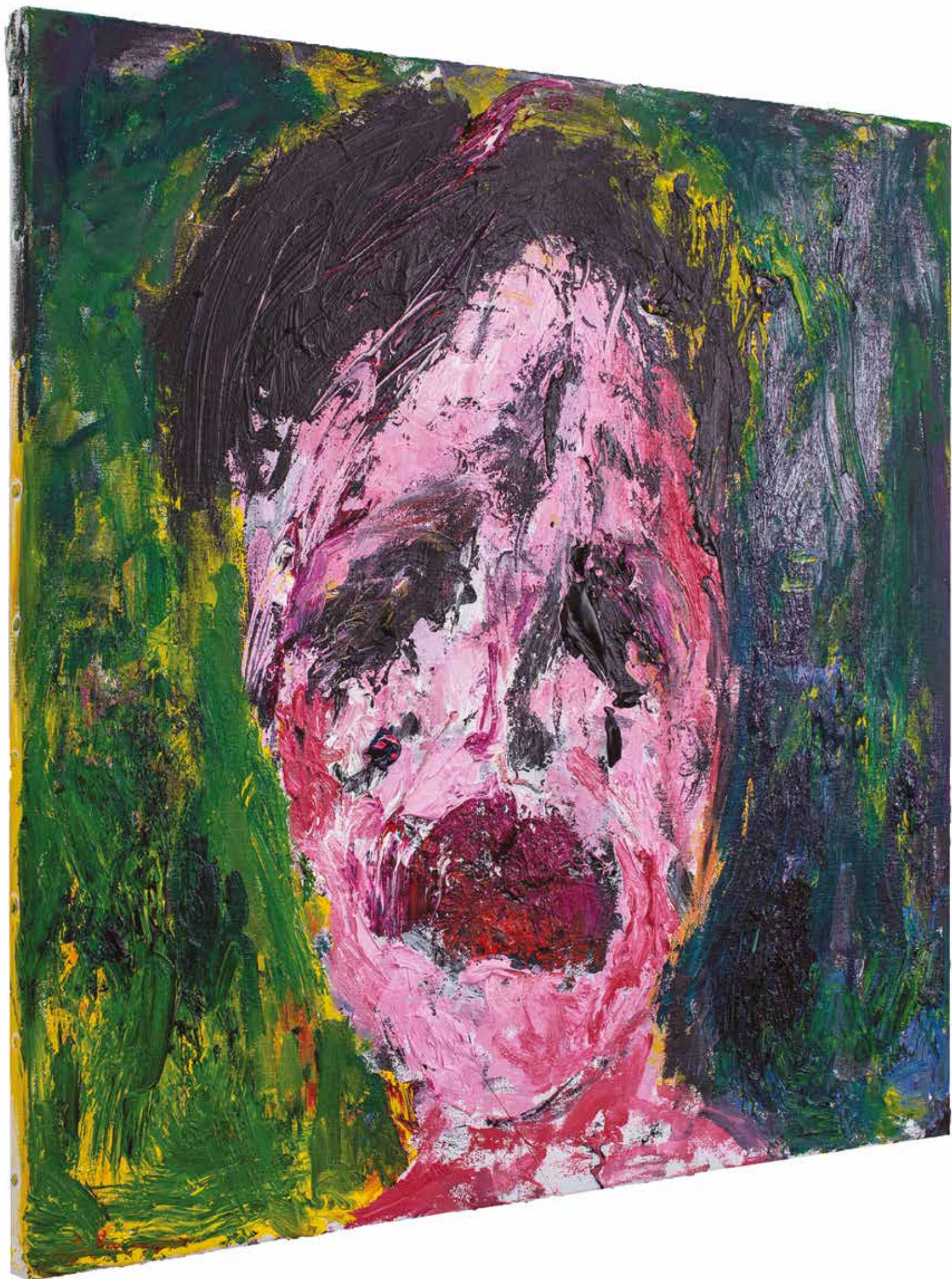


**Letter 2**  
oil/linen 60x60 cms





**Blue Head 4**  
oil/linen 60x50 cms





**Self - summer 2021**  
oil/linen 60x60 cms





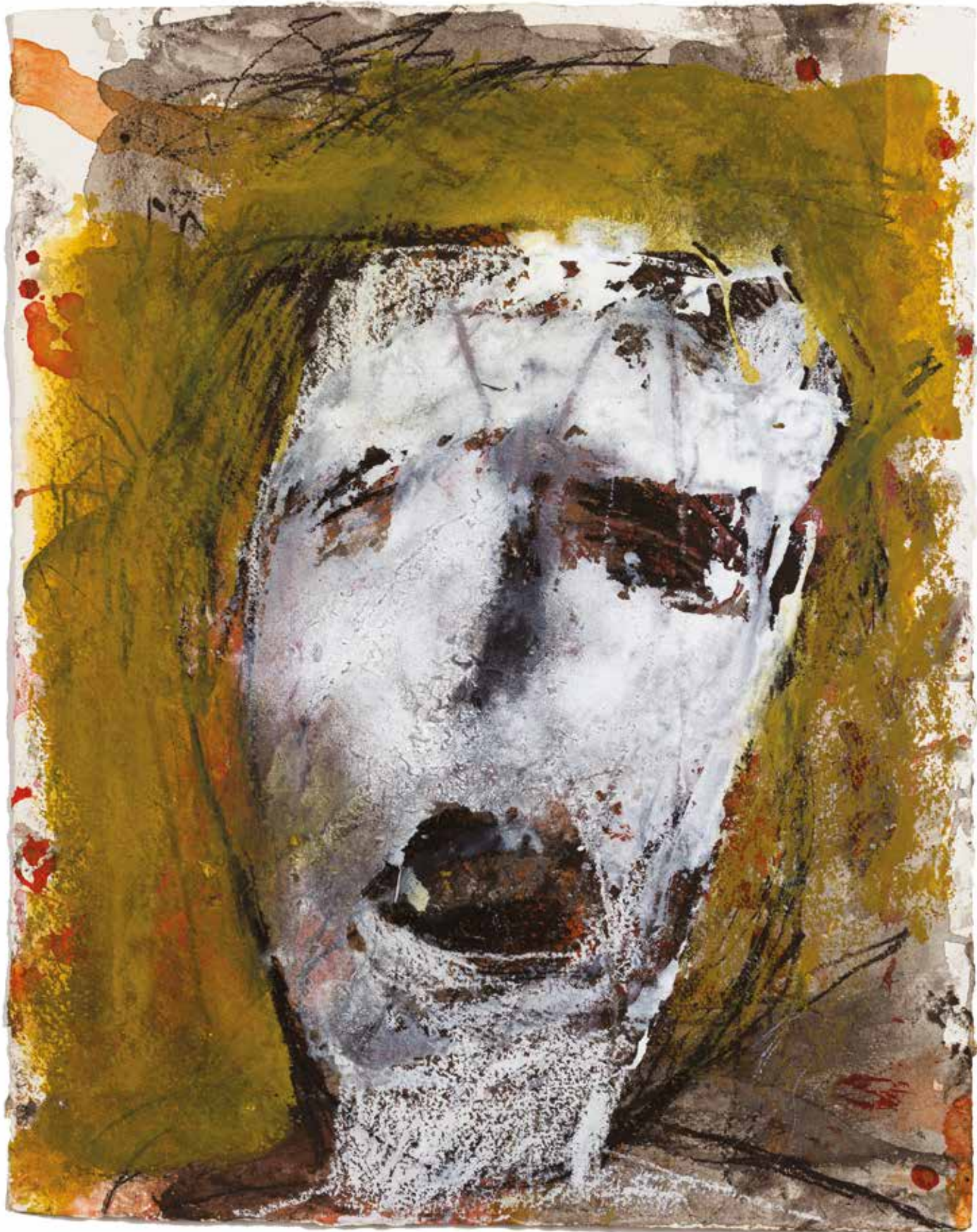
**DRAWINGS**





**My summer**  
charcoal/acrylic/fabriano 38x38 cms





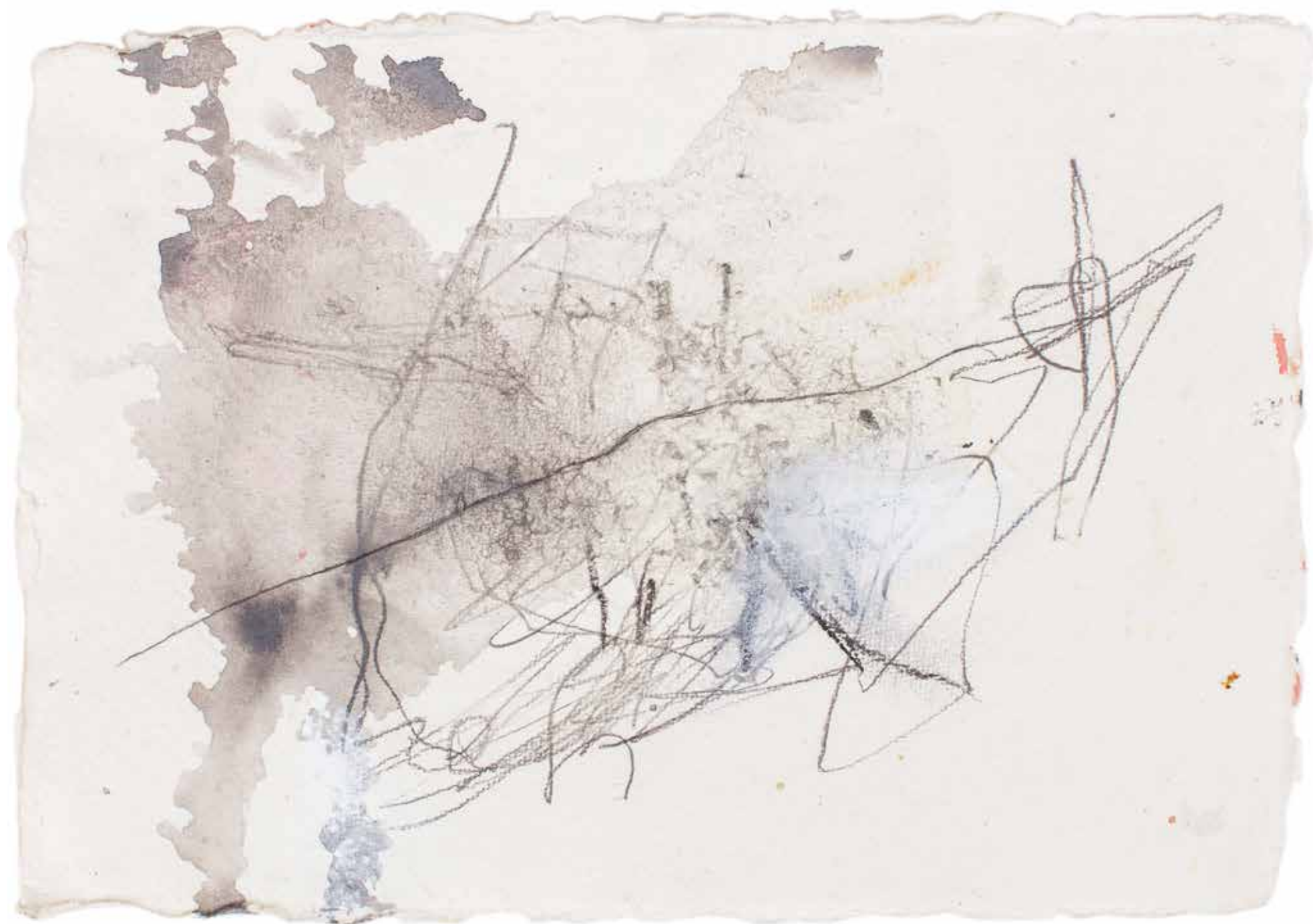
**Yellow head 4**  
charcoal/pastel/fabriano 47x38 cms





**softly 1**  
pencil/acrylic/khadi 16x28 cms





**softly 2**  
pencil/acrylic/khadi 16x28 cms





**softly 3**  
pencil/acrylic/khadi 16x28 cms





**Lockdown Head**  
charcoal/waterford 38x28 cms





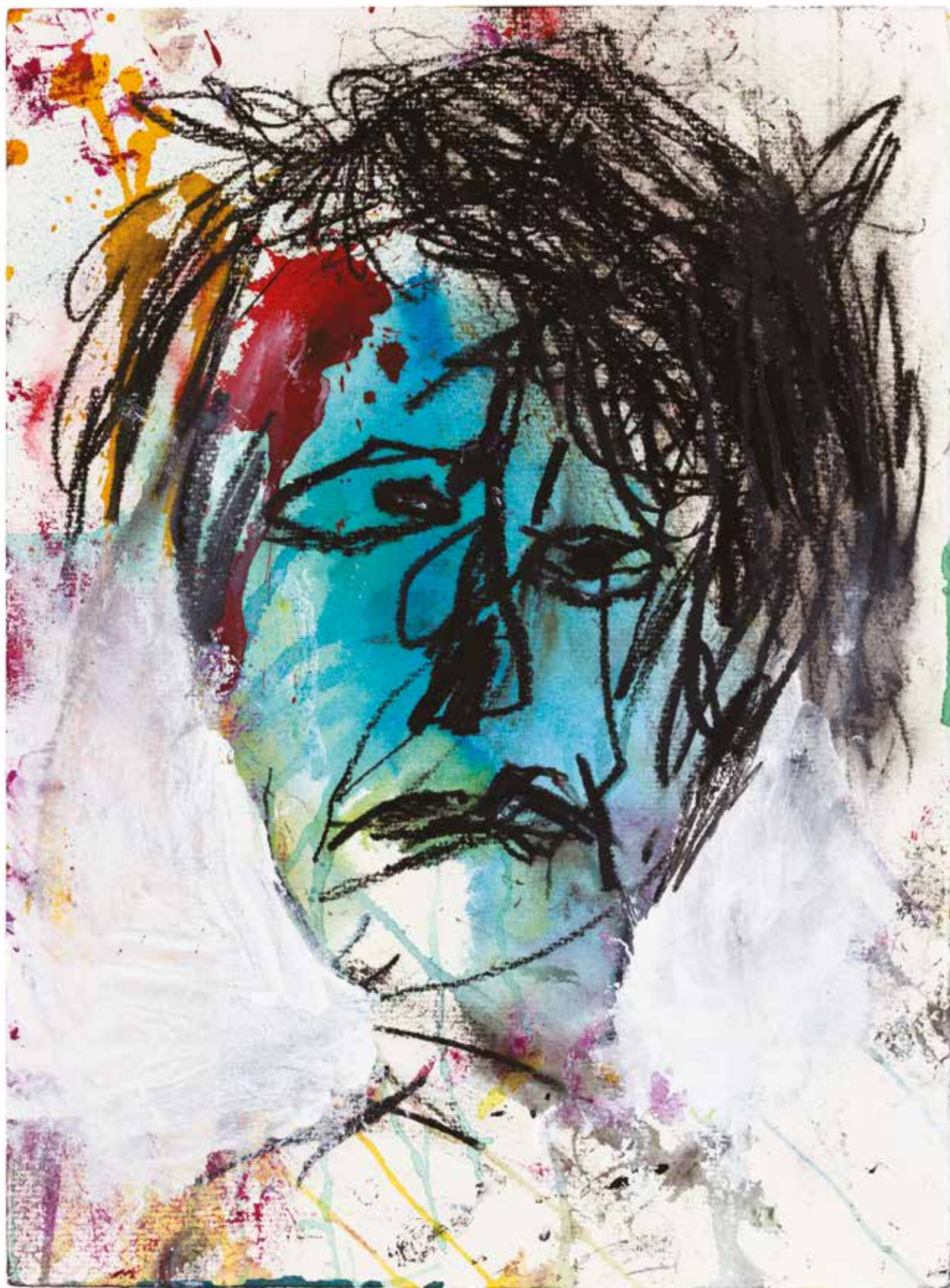
**October Head**  
charcoal/waterford 38x28 cms





**Portrait 5 2021**  
charcoal/acrylic/fabriano 36x28 cms





**Portrait 2 2020**  
charcoal/acrylic/fabriano 36x28 cms





**Red Head**  
charcoal/acrylic/waterford 38x28 cms



# ONE EYE, OPEN

– *Paul Celan*

Eight scrawly, higgledy-piggledy lines – not even connected – and yet a face looks out at us. The minimal grows into maximal – humanity. Just as we love the way Charlie Brown and Snoopy tell us something about ourselves, so Frances Aviva Blane’s lightly-sketched charcoal heads affect us. Just a single eye, just a curved line for a chin, a short line for a mouth, a mere squiggle for a nose and a few smudges evoke not any face, but a sad and thoughtful one.

And yet they aren’t cartoon characters, even though Blane’s work, especially her oil paintings, sometimes call to mind images of sad clowns. They stir up the memories of white-faced Pierrots, especially the lovelorn ineffably mournful Jean-Louis Barrault in *Les Enfants du Paradis*. There is a languor, a wistfulness about them – ennui or spleen – as Baudelaire might have described it.

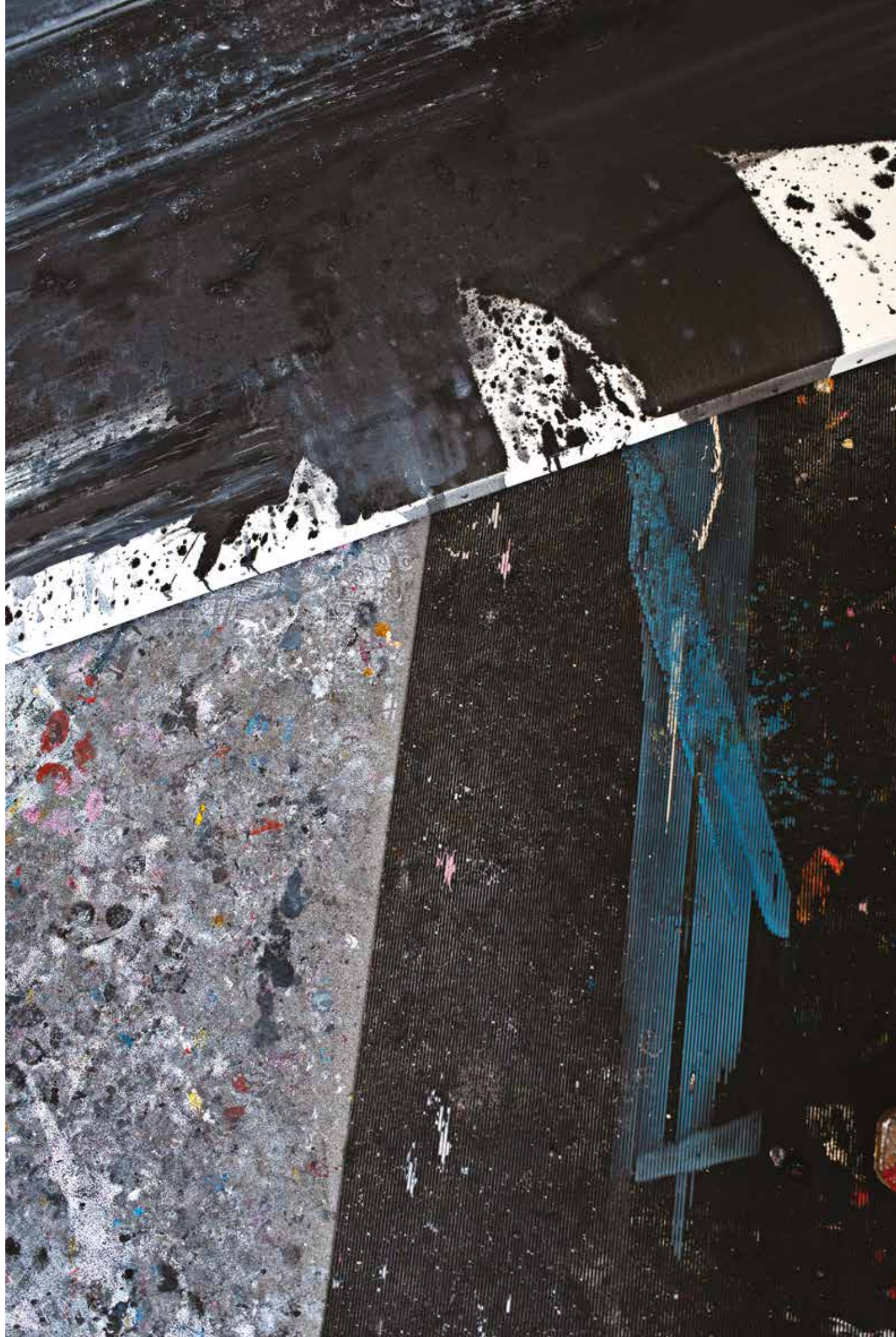
So, there’s a kind of magic about these heads. Leafing through this book, you begin to realise that many are actually self-portraits, transmuted into Every Woman.

Blane's minimal charcoal drawings evoke the poetry of Paul Celan, whose centenary we celebrated in 2020. Celan, who lost his parents to the Holocaust, navigated between central Europe, Germany and France. He tore the German language apart and rebuilt it from almost less than nothing (coincidentally the title of a book by Blane). He made poetic language a metaphor for survival.

We are living in another age. But the experiences of those times live on in collective memory. Blane is only too aware of today's horrors: the countless deaths of the pandemic, attempts to extinguish whole cultures and peoples, the cruelty of social inequality.

Through her harsh deconstructions, just a few touches of a charcoal stick on paper, Blane conveys a whole range of emotions: anguish, but also a powerful anger, rebellion, revolt, resistance. This is not a morbid negativity or victimhood, but one pregnant with potential.

The tearing apart of a face, whereby features escape from edges of a head, the simple dabbing of a colour, strangely become signs of life. Blane's drawings and



paintings “write” the living. In an affirmation of negativity, gaping absences gather weight and significance.

As handwriting has become almost archaic in our digital age, marks of sooty charcoal sticks held close to paper mediate the stirring of the artist’s hand. And that hand connects us to the mind and heart. There’s a closeness, an intimacy. They seem embarrassingly naked. Mostly made during the year of lockdown, they share a universal introspection: “straight from the heart to the canvas”, as Blane’s one-time teacher Tess Jaray has said.

The ability to infuse a gesture with meaning – make meaningful marks – is also true of Blane’s large oils on linen. Letter 5 is just red oil paint. But there is a joy, an elation in heavily worked textures, welters of brushstrokes, overlaying and moving in opposite directions as they catch the light. So many different shades: vermillion, ruby, crimson, burgundy, scarlet, cardinal – how many reds can there be? With a palette knife she has scored her signature calligraphy, revealing black underpaint, which intensifies the red. The gashes surge, carrying the paint along with them, yellow flames leaping in and out of a red ocean. The lacerations cry to be interpreted, floating messages.



Wired 3 takes a different approach: the structure is horizontal. It's decentred, with a lighter touch: orange, yellow, magenta, blue dance and play, defying the dark. There is a relaxed symphonic quality in these grand colour abstractions. Are they a million miles away from the personality encountered in the drawings? Yes and no. The scratched, etched lines we saw earlier remain, but now liberated from any descriptive responsibility they are free to hover and sway like musical notes.

Blane is steeped in the history of Abstract Expressionist art, its public story overshadowed by a few notorious male American exponents. But in recent years, virtually unknown 20th century female artists have begun to shine through. Abstract Expressionism / the Informel / Tachisme / Lyrical Abstraction / Matière styles had not only European but global practitioners, many of them working in the aftermath of World War II. For some artists languishing under brutal dictatorship it was and remains a form of opposition and resistance. They include the likes of Rafael Canogar, Joan Miró and Antoni Tàpies in Spain, and Ha Chong-Hyun in South Korea, to name only a few. Thus, Abstract Expressionism has a wider, more complex trajectory than hitherto apparent.

Blane's version embraces many of these innovations, along with their emotional and political charge. She helps us appreciate that deciphering this often hermetic form can give rise to so many dimensions, a richness holding more and more potential in this, our time of global pandemic. Like Celan, Blane navigates "the impossible path of the impossible". "Writing the living" in charcoal and paint is a tough call, but she does it.

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**Corinna Lotz** is a critic who explores the dynamics of art, philosophy and politics. She writes for [realdemocracymovement.org](http://realdemocracymovement.org) and has contributed to *Apollo*, *Galleries* and *Museums Journal*. She is a cosmopolitan who lives in London.



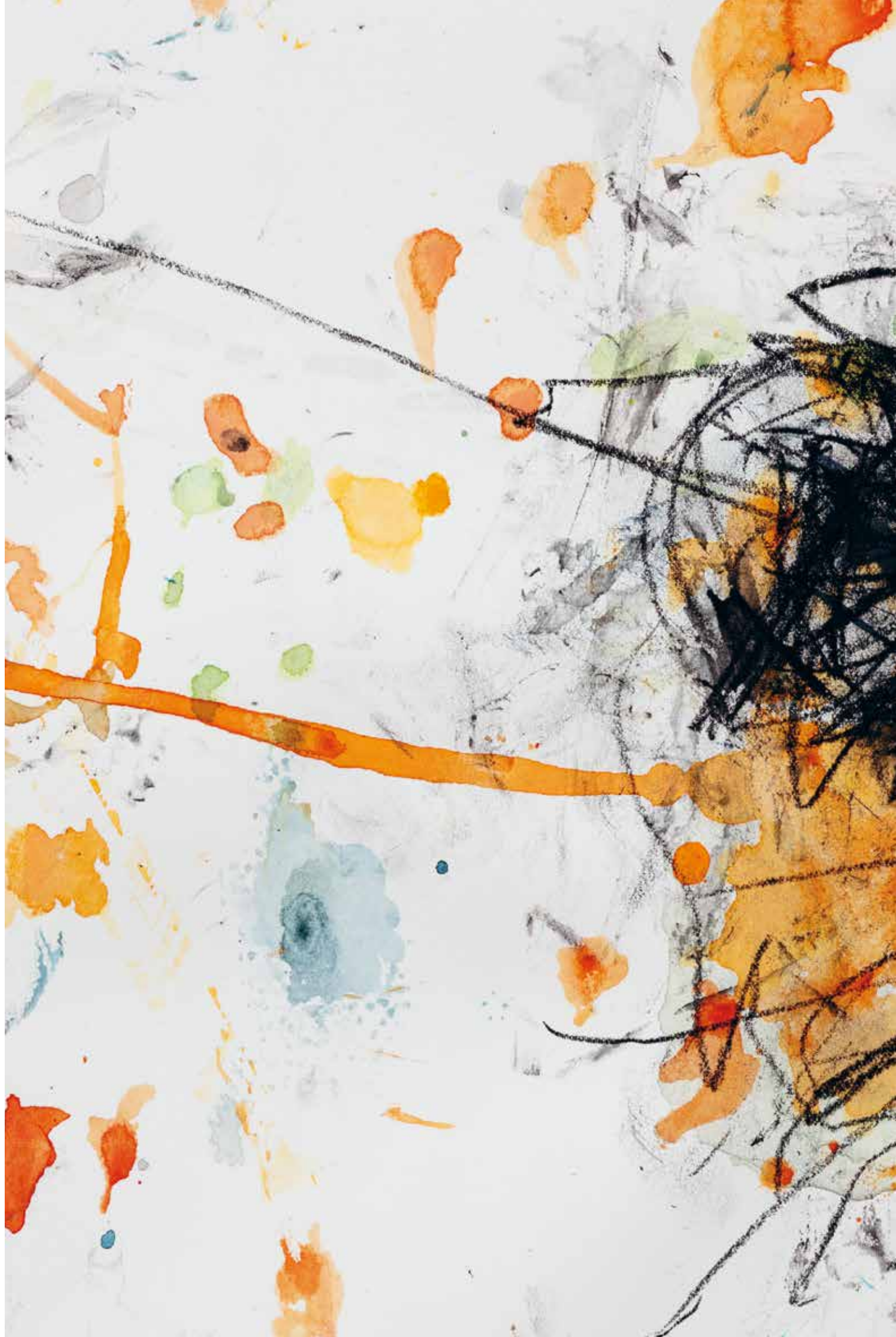


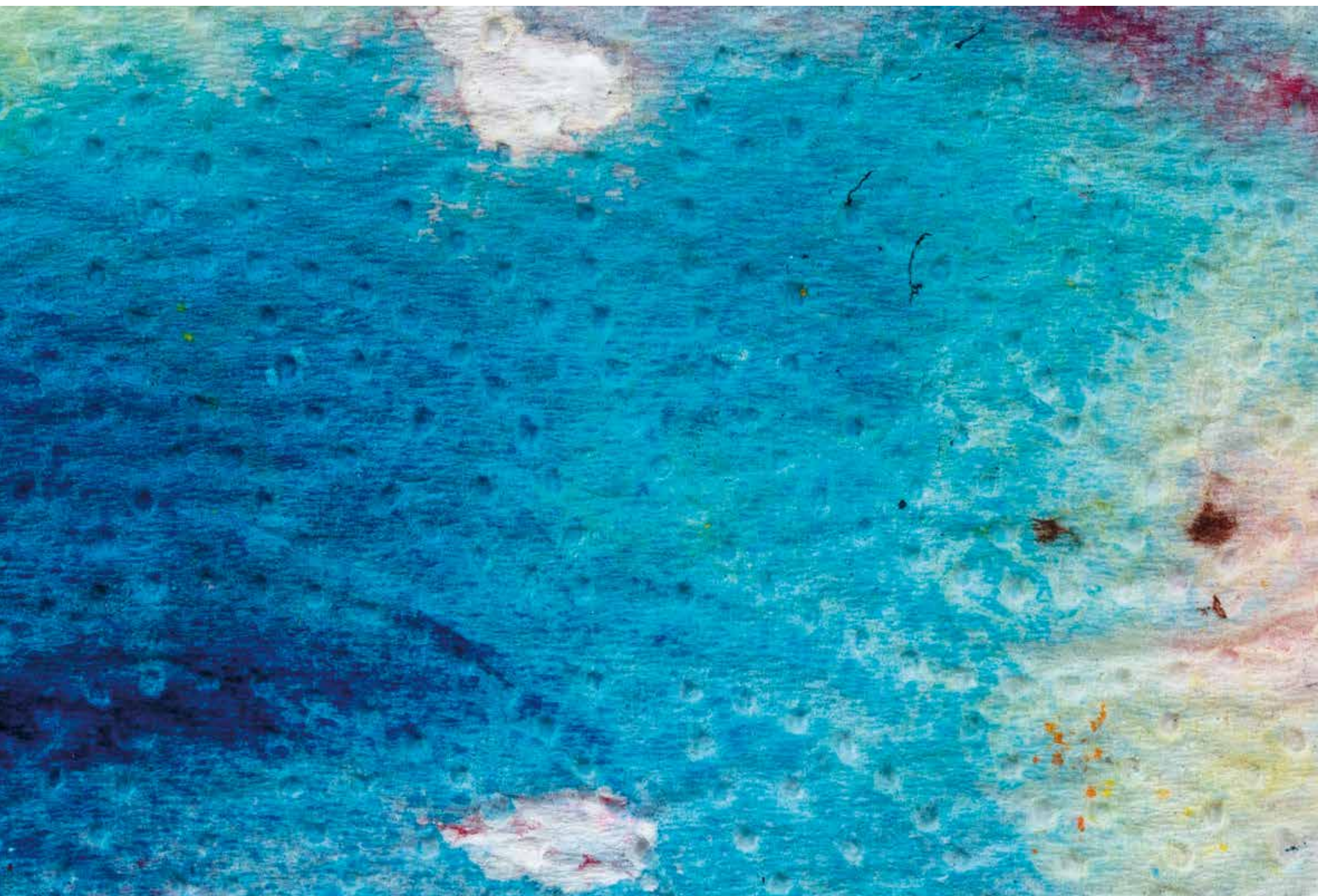
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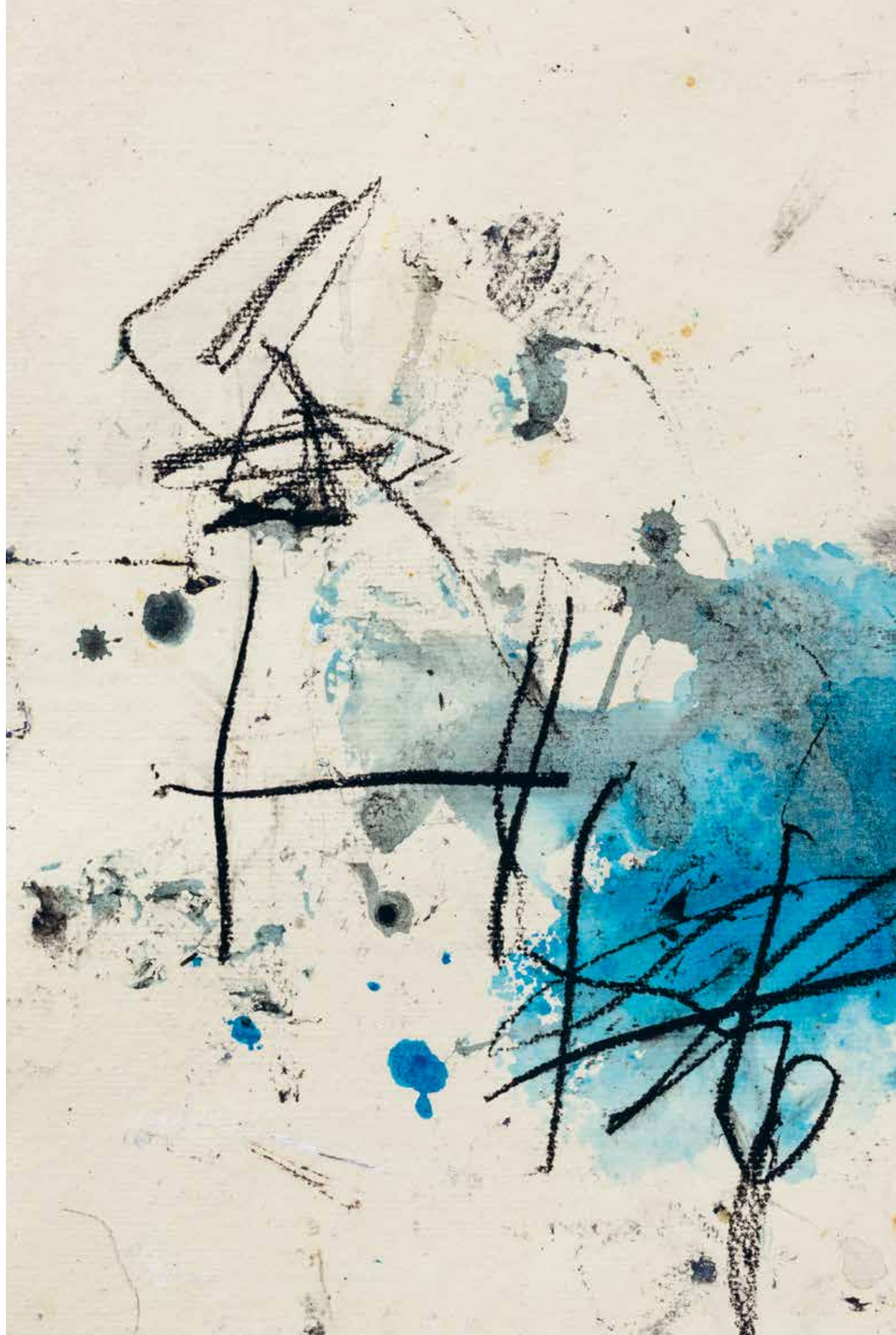
























## **Frances Aviva Blane**

Slade School of Fine Art, UCL (University College London), 1991 – 1993

Byam Shaw School of Painting and Drawing, London, 1988 – 1991

Chelsea College of Art, London, 1987

### **Selected solo shows**

`dark', De Queeste Kunstkamers Abele/Watou Belgium, 2018

BLANE. Broken Heads, Broken Paint, 12 Star Gallery at Europe House, London 2018

TWO FACES. Painting/HEADS, The German Embassy Belgravia, London 2016 – 2017

DECONSTRUCT. Solo show alongside exhibitions of Louise Bourgeois and Francis Bacon

De Queeste Kunstkamers, Abele/Watou, Belgium, 2014

BIG BLACK PAINTINGS. Bay Hall, Kings College, London, 2014

### **Selected group shows**

'Moi et Les Autres' with Daniel Enkaoua and Eric Monbel

De Queeste Kunstkamers Abele/Watou, Belgium, 2021

Ruth Borchard Self Portrait Prize 2021

'Sea of Change' with Susan Stockwell & Jason Oddy

Lemnos Greece and EcArtspace.com 2021 - 2022

'Fragmented' with Claudia Clare, Zuleika Gallery, London, 2020

'INTERMEZZO' De Queeste Kunstkamers Abele/Watou Belgium

including Paula Rego and Daniel Enkaoua, 2020

'Distancing'. Ecartspace.com, 2020

with Basil Beattie, John McLean and Susan Stockwell - online, 2020

The Desire of Looking. with Daniel Enkaoua, Paula Rego, Marcelle Hanselaar

De Queeste Kunstkamers, Abele/Watou, Belgium, 2020

Age Is Just A Number. Summer Show, Zuleika Gallery, London, 2019

Abstract Allies, Zuleika Gallery London curated by Tim Sayer MBE

with Naum Gabo, Nigel Hall, Howard Hodgkin, 2019

IKONOCASH #01

with Anton Kannemeyer, Roel Goussay, Marcelle Hanselaar De Queeste Kunstkamers

Abele/Watou Belgium, 2019

John Moores Painting Prize 2018 Walker Gallery Liverpool, 2018

No Man is an Island, with Susan Stockwell and David Connearn, Art Dialog, Bonn, 2018

HUMAN, The German Embassy, London, 2017

Creekside Open, selected by Jordan Baseman, 2017

Liquid Thought, with Daniel Enkaoua and Chris Stevens,

De Queeste Kunstkamers Abele/Watou Belgium, 2016

Impact, with Marthe Zinc, Louise Bourgeois, Mark Anstee,

De Queeste Kunstkamers Abele/Watou Belgium, 2016

De Vage Grens, with Frank Auerbach, Reniere & Depla,

De Queeste Kunstkamers, Abele/Watou, Belgium, 2015

Jerwood Drawing Prize London and tour 2015

Drawing Breath, Jerwood Anniversary Exhibition, Award Winners

London, Sydney, Bristol, 2006 – 2008

Annely Juda, a Celebration, Annely Juda Fine Art, London, 2007

PRIME TIME, German and English Painting, Berlin, 2006

London Gallery Swap, sponsored by the British Council and Goethe institut, 2002

Drawing with Basil Beattie, ecArtspace, London, 2001

Painting with John McLean, ecArtspace, London, 2000

## Awards

Jerwood Award for Drawing, 1999  
Cheltenham and Gloucester, Open Drawing Show (award winner) 1999  
Mid-America ART Alliance Fellowship for Visual Arts, 1998  
Residency at Djerassi Artists' Foundation, California, 1998  
Graham Hamilton Drawing Prize, 1991

## Collections

Blind Art, London; Jesus College, Cambridge; The London School of Economics;  
Moorfields Eye Hospital, London; The Sternberg Centre, London;  
The Usher Gallery, Lincoln; The Faith and Belief Forum, London;  
The Tim Sayer Collection, London; The Doris Jean Lockhart Collection

## Publications

### FRANCES.

Essays by Eddy Frankel, Susie Orbach and Corinna Lotz

### COVID.

Essay by Susie Orbach

### WHO IS FRANCES AVIVA BLANE?

Frances Aviva Blane, Susie Orbach, Penny Woolcock

### FAB.

Essay by Susie Orbach

### BROKEN HEADS BROKEN PAINT.

### MORE.

Essay by Mark Gisbourne

### EMBASSY.

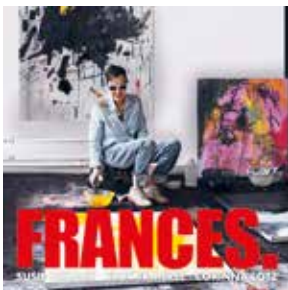
Essays by Tess Jaray RA and Dr Peter Ammon

### NOTHING.

Essay by Diana Souhami

### frances aviva blane DRAWINGS

Essay by Doris Lockhart Saatchi



## Film

**Who is Frances Aviva Blane?** Directed by Penny Woolcock, 2021

**Two Metres Apart with Susie Orbach** Directed by Penny Woolcock, 2020

**Studio Visit in COVID Time** Directed by Penny Woolcock, 2020



Frances Aviva Blane

for more information on Frances visit: [www.avivablane.com](http://www.avivablane.com)

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