

JENNY MORGAN



NOW YOU SEE ME (NOW YOU DON'T)

Paintings from the Collection of Wayne F. Yakes, MD

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Simon Zalkind, Curator

September 10 – November 5, 2015

The Art Gallery

Fulginiti Pavilion for Bioethics and Humanities
University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus
13080 East 19th Avenue, Aurora, Colorado 80045
303.724.3994

Map and directions at: www.coloradobioethics.org

Gallery Hours

9:00am - 5:00pm, Monday - Friday, free and open to the public



Introduction and Acknowledgements

I pose, I know that I am posing, I want you to know that I am posing, but...this additional message must in no way alter the precious essence of my individuality.

Roland Barthes

Portraiture is having a renaissance of sorts. It never really disappeared, but from the mid-20th century to the present, portrait-making was regarded with the same mistrust and unreliability as other forms of realist or representational art. The painted portrait surrendered its traditional functions to the photograph, and post-modernism completely abandoned the innocent, quasi-mystical notion that the truth of someone's interior life could be conveyed by a representation of her outward appearance. Thus, the essential questions for any contemporary artist who paints portraits are two: Is she able to go beyond the photograph's capacity to accurately render the face and body? Can the painted portrait function as a form of knowledge as well as a strategy for encountering truths about a subject's interior life that expands and transcends the image's representational accuracy?

One is no longer required to believe that the portrait is a manifestation of the soul, but one needs to be receptive to the intuition of something deeply human that imprints itself on our psyche – something that speaks to our innate fascination with looking at the face of another and our solidarity with that face's inner condition. We want that which is most interior and “private” to be publically exposed. We look for the artist

to illuminate not only the unique elements of a person's appearance but also to apply her ingenuity and capacity for empathic insight to reveal that which is hidden.

We can't help but notice Jenny Morgan's astonishing technical bravura – sumptuous and ravishing in its seemingly effortless fluency. Her paintings are made hyper-real by her use of scale, by her painstaking attention to the most minute of details, and by her allegiance to the formalities of the photograph. Everything is accounted for with tremendous clarity. Unencumbered by props or superfluous staging, Morgan is able to conjure both her subject's humanity as well as the singular “condition” that describes her existence in the immediacy of the moment. She also has a terrific knack for making pictures that are beautiful – beautiful in the sense that an encounter with them can leave us powerless to express the fullness, both intellectual and aesthetic, in which we recognize the beguiling radiance of our own transcendent source. Morgan's paintings are “pure” – not in the sense of a “moral purity” that might easily succumb to sentimentality but in her constant refinement of her sense of truthfulness and on the single-mindedness of that intention. I look forward with great anticipation to seeing her work further ripen and evolve.

I'm grateful to Ivar Zeile for introducing me to Jenny Morgan's paintings almost ten years ago. I have been riveted by them ever since, and I'm very pleased to have been instrumental in introducing them to Dr. Wayne Yakes. Many thanks to Jenny herself as she patiently and generously endured my badgering and probing through the course of producing this exhibition and publication. As always, I'm grateful to Dr. Therese Jones for her insights, her humor and the apparent ease with which she is able to keep our projects moving and flowing in the right direction.

All of the works in this exhibition were loaned to us by Dr. Wayne Yakes. Wayne and I have worked together on exhibitions culled from his remarkably diverse collection for fifteen (!) years. Those projects have been among the most satisfying experiences of my career. In large part this is due to our deepening regard for each other as well as to my admiration of him which grows stronger with each exhibition that we produce together. I've often closed our exhibition catalogues with an acknowledgement of Wayne's “unstinting generosity” in lending the works that comprise the exhibition and in supporting every aspect of its realization. However, there's much more that I could say about his qualities and accomplishments that are perhaps, only tangentially relevant to his unwavering commitment to art and artists. I hope an occasion quickly arises that makes it possible for me to write a more amplified appreciation of such an amazing man.

Simon Zalkind, Curator
August, 2015

Jenny Morgan and Simon Zalkind in Conversation

This “conversation” between Jenny Morgan and Simon Zalkind took place primarily through email exchanges in July, 2015.

SZ OK. For starters can you tell me something about your history? Where did you grow up? When did you first intuit or know that you were an artist? What experiences influenced that “calling?” Where did you go to school? Did you have any mentors or teachers who validated and encouraged your aspirations?

JM I grew up in Salt Lake City, Utah. I was not raised Mormon. I say this because it is inevitably asked. But, the overwhelming presence of the Mormon Church did have a great effect on my growth as a woman and an artist. My sense of “being” an artist feels as if it was always there. My father nurtured my artistic skills from a very early age. I can’t locate with any certitude a moment of “knowing,” but multiple examples of reinforcement and encouragement occur to me. I left Utah in 2000 and studied as an undergraduate in Denver, Colorado at Rocky Mountain College of Art and Design. After graduating, I drifted into the local artists community and gained a few life-long support systems. I moved to New York City for Graduate school in 2006 and attended The School of Visual Arts. Graduate school is where I encountered the most challenging resistance and criticism for being a figurative painter- the scars still linger as a negative voice in my head. But, I am thankful for the challenge because it continually forces me to question myself and grow.

SZ Self portraiture by its very nature engages with identity. But how that identity is represented is heavily influenced by the status and gender of the artist and by the historical and cultural moment in which the work is created. How do you locate yourself in the history of self-portraiture?

JM As I mature with the work, I have a greater understanding of my position as a woman. It’s a natural instinct for me to be self-reflective. The self-portraits started purely as a way for me to investigate my own head-space and the viewer just happened to be along for the ride. But recently, a shift is taking place where I am being asked, or even pushed, to view myself specifically as a white female and question what that means. This questioning implies a level of responsibility to it – I can no longer separate myself from my cultural and historical contexts. When I sit for my own portrait, I now feel more aware of my body and my skin and how others view that skin. I follow in the footsteps of women before me who use their own bodies as vehicles for expression and I am developing a greater understanding of what it means to truly expose yourself. Through previous examples set by woman such as Jenny Saville, Alice Neel, Carolee Schneemann and Ana Mendieta I have taught myself that vulnerability is necessary for truly strong and honest work – but there is great risk within that vulnerability. Culturally, there is either power or submission present when a woman chooses to reveal her body to a large audience and I hope to find and harness the power.

SZ Although these qualities have been present in your work to some degree for a long time I feel like the subjects of the more recent paintings convey a sense of – for lack of a better word – beatitude and astonishment. The indifferent or haunted gaze of the subjects of many of the earlier paintings seem to have lessened. Does that observation connect with any shift in your own view of the human condition?

JM I see the shift as a wall being dissolved. The indifference or haunted gaze of the earlier work was a result of the intensity I felt when faced with my vulnerable and most often nude models. I think there was an energetic separation built up between us, to give space to the emotional exchange taking place. But as of late, I personally have a much higher tolerance for that one on one psychic relationship. This tolerance does come from my own deepening view of the human condition. It is one of my life long goals to peel back the layers of the psyche and within the past few years I felt an acceleration of that process.

SZ There's almost a sense of a physical encounter between your subjects and the viewer. Your subjects are clearly physical in that they possess weight, density and mass. What makes your paintings most successful is that the condition of the subject – emotional, psychological, spiritual – seems to radiate from that person's physicality, linked to the fact of the body – restoring the body to its primacy as the vehicle through which self and world interact. Can you speak to the significance of “embodiment” and physicality in your work?

JM As I dive into the psychic and subtle realms in my spiritual life, I often ask myself why my paintings are not more abstract and immaterial to reflect this deeply cherished understanding. Upon reflection though, I realize that as much as I want to exist in the “ethereal” and investigate inner realms, at some point I am always brought back to hard, earthy physical reality. There is no escaping the physicality of the body as long as you are breathing. I have respect for that physicality. I am endlessly fascinated by supersensory links between people that occur through dreams and synchronicity – I see these events as evidence for deeper levels of connection. I am also interested in the relationships we are able to develop digitally and the subtle worlds we are just starting to create through social media.

But all of this is trumped by the intensity of standing face to face with another person and looking them in the eye. The body still commands respect and a kind of “primal” recognition.

SZ It's rare and startling to find – in the world of contemporary art – an artist whose work embraces the conjoined themes of human beauty and human brokenness. Angst, doubt and indifference proliferate in contemporary art but those themes are rarely linked to beauty. The interaction between beauty and pathos in your work locates it within a humanist tradition – one that privileges the dignity that people achieve through a complete acceptance of their condition – both it's universality as well as its un-duplicable uniqueness. Beauty and brokenness – can you say something about their connection?

JM As a young artist I looked up to painters such as Francis Bacon, Jenny Saville and Lucian Freud who I also see as embracing the beauty in brokenness. My understanding was that it is precisely the tragic nature of their work that made it so appealing to me. I think the beauty comes from the connection we allow ourselves to make to that brokenness – we empathize with the pain of another. The joy of standing in front of a challenging painting is found in the moment we see a bit of ourselves there and immediately feel less alone.

SZ I remember seeing your earlier painting – works from the late '90's – early 2000's. I remember liking them very much but they were much more stylized, less “vivified,” less alive, less psychologically and visually arresting than the current work. Can you say something about what compelled/propelled the evolution from those works to the more recent paintings in this exhibition?

JM I was young, still finding my voice, the root of my work. Looking back, I understand the fear I had in dealing with the figure in general and my own body in particular. The early works were nearly all self-portraits, but with no identity. I was painting the figure draped in cloth or highly cropped. The head was always outside of the frame and I focused more on body positioning and background color to denote emotion and narrative. There are certainly sexual and sensual undertones in the early work, but I didn't quite understand or see it fully at the time. I'm not sure that I can claim that I totally understand the sexuality in my work now, but I'm more accepting of its presence. A great transformation occurred once I entered graduate school and moved to New York. In that environment I was forced to ask myself why I eliminated the face and identity of the figure. Up until that point I had not realized that I was detaching from something of central importance. Bringing the eyes back to the figure gave personality and weight to the sitter and revealed the psychological doors that I had not previously dared to open – it's a process of taking ownership, of reclaiming the body.

SZ Traditional portraiture proposed to delineate the identity, the temperament and the character of the individual whereas you seem more concerned with the portrait – particularly the body – as the point in which art and life converge. Your work appears to be less interested in portraying “characters” than in evoking human “conditions” beyond physical and psychological limits. The work feels immediate and personal but also seems to aspire to connect with something limitless and vast – something beyond the figurative, the narrative and the symbolic strategies which are conventionally linked to portraiture. Any comments?

JM Early on I removed the backdrop to the portrait. I found that an “environment” for the subject to exist in was no longer important to me and I had no desire for objects or clothing in the narrative sense. The portrayal of the idiosyncratic character of my subject was secondary to the over-arching “condition” or “state” that the subject was conveying. Through the years it had been drilled into me that figure painting alone was no longer interesting. So I pushed to find a way to still use the figure in my work, but also allow for formal experimentation. Many of the techniques I developed were a way to side-step my realist hand. I felt the need to destroy what I had painted by blurring, sanding down or thickly covering any evidence of the intense labor required so that the “realness” would be disguised. As I worked this way, consciously destroying the painting, I began to understand the meaning behind the formalistic actions – I wanted to escape the real and push the body into another plane. The decisions being made in the work do connect to the individual being painted, but also feel like they emanate from distinct layers of concern.

SZ The self is a constantly changing and shifting condition – how long does the presented “self” last? All a self-portrait can ever be is an illusion of the painter's self. It can never be a substitute, an embodiment, the last word or a whole summation and yet the artist paints, uncertain of whether anything of herself will come through. This is the pathos and uncertainty of the self-portrait – I'm here but yet I'm not. Does that resonate with you at all?

JM Yes, I have been asking myself “why a self-portrait?” more and more often. I always come back to the self-portrait because of its comfort and personal intimacy. I understand that each piece is a snapshot in time and that temporary states are what I am drawn to – I use them to work through something on a subtle and emotional level. It's a place where I don't owe anyone anything and I automatically

force myself to remove judgment of my body and face. Lately, I have been moving between two sides of the spectrum with the self-portrait. At one end I feel so detached from the image that I let go of myself completely and enter a state of “flow” with the subject. However, I also have moments when I look at a self-portrait I’ve made months or years ago and feel such shame and exposure that I want to never paint myself again. Those moments of shame or feeling overwhelmed by the portrait are a result of seeing something peering back at me that I was unaware of at the time. Sometimes it feels akin to when you hear your voice recorded and played back – the familiarity is there, but something wholly new is being projected forward. The act is a delicate balance between self-doubt and preening narcissism.

SZ The people you paint – including yourself – can look haunted, stunned, vulnerable or indifferent, but with a startling sense of turbulent, mysterious and voluptuous immediacy. You seem to be striving to claim the qualities of “authentic presence” – precisely the claims that modern art orthodoxy, for the most part, repudiates. Any thoughts?

JM Standing in front of a lens is a vulnerable experience for most people except for natural extroverts and professional models. I am more interested in working with people who I am close with and most often they are not “professionals.” Once my subject is undressed and standing in front of the camera, all I usually ask of them is that they not smile. For me, this allows for an odd truth to be revealed. The smile that can be used to “mask” the person is taken away. I certainly feel fear once a lens is pointed at me and it’s difficult to get through that process without deliberate positive inner dialogue and some degree of detachment. I think I create that same environment when photographing someone for a painting – I want them to feel a bit on edge and exposed. This allows me to feel as if

I’ve gotten something true from them, but it’s still only my version of truth. I agree that “authentic presence” may not exist when a sitter is posing for a photograph or painting – they are “posing” or presenting themselves knowingly, which inherently creates a performance on their part. Translating the photograph to paint is where I begin to understand the energy and connection between model, camera and artist.

SZ Some of your recent paintings – I’m thinking particularly about *Breakthrough Sharona* – convey a sense of “beatitude” – in this painting the radiating light of the subject’s halo is a traditional device used to convey holiness or blessedness. In other paintings there’s a palpable sense of “evanescence” – as if the subject was in the process of vanishing, dissolution or fading which calls into question the ways in which we habitually solidify or reify our identity, our response to our experience and our relationship with the “other.” You and I have spoken about your experiences in shamanic ceremonies whose central sacramental substance is a powerful “entheogen”¹ called ayahuasca – a brew made of various psychotropic plants which are known to induce extraordinary visionary and spiritual experiences, insights, “healings” and awakenings. How have those experiences manifested in your recent work? I intuit that your access to the profound revelatory insights that ayahuasca produces has informed a number of recent paintings – infusing your subjects – including yourself – with either a beatific radiance or “aura” or a sense of the dissolution of the conventional self. Can you speak about that?

JM I have only used entheogens in guided ritual with the intention of self-healing and insight. Both experiences were extremely profound and the effects continue to ripple through my life years later. These experiences have amplified my already present interest in the non-material and ethereal or

dream-like nature of the human condition. The personal insights I gained from the ceremonies have enriched the narrative of the work and have had a strong influence on the color palette. I am still exploring the doors that have been opened for me and I am beginning to see and understand the deeper layers and inherent patterns of human story telling. For example, the work in my most recent show “All We Have Is Now” strongly mirrored the narrative described in the hero’s journey or the voyage that “the Fool” embarks on through the major arcana of the tarot. There is a hidden structure to self-discovery! There is a path with landmarks and signs that we follow, most often, unknowingly. For me, the ayahuasca ceremony set me on such a path and as a student of the occult and esoteric disciplines I was able to start to recognize where I was along the trail. Two important themes that arose in the recent work are “death” and “The Doppelgänger.” I met both, in real life, not just metaphorically. Through strange circumstances, I saw a woman who I believe to be my doppelgänger and was able to track her down in my hometown and photograph her for a painting. Not long after meeting my doppelgänger, I experienced a profound loss in my family. This grief and the presence of death is what generated the skeletons and skull imagery in my work. For a brief time, I needed to let go of the skin and get to the root or down to the bones of it all.

SZ I know that most people will locate or interpret the presence of the skull in your recent paintings within the art-historical traditions of “Vanitas” or “Memento Mori” paintings – images where the skull functions as a reminder of the brevity and transience of life and encourages us to remember our inevitable death. But I intuit that the skull image that has emerged in your paintings, while choicelessly participating in those traditions, has other associations for you. I feel like they would incline us to see death almost as a “friend” or teacher – as something to get to know intimately, as something that can actually function to make us more alive. Any thoughts?

JM I now view the skull and skeletal structure as directly related to the archetypal meaning associated with the Death card of the tarot. I don’t view the skull as a reminder of mortality as much as an actual independent being. Death in this way is a teacher and a friend – simultaneously an ending and a beginning. The hooded figure enters your life and with his scythe, clears away all that is unnecessary and obstructing your path. The experience is not pleasant – it’s very painful, but not without a deep and profound purpose.

SZ One of the insights to emerge from “second wave” feminism that’s of particular relevance to artists – especially women artists – is the concept of the “male gaze.” The male gaze occurs when a work of art – a painting, a film, a photograph, etc. – puts the viewer into the perspective of a heterosexual man. The woman is displayed as an erotic object both in the work of art as well in the experience of the work’s audience. Further, the theory asserts that the female gaze is the same as the male gaze, meaning that women – and particularly women artists - have come to look at themselves through the eyes of men. From this perspective an objectifying gaze may simply be conforming to habitual norms of objectifying women that seem “natural” or “normal.” As a woman artist whose subjects – including yourself – are often nude women are you ever conscious of their erotic power and of the particular pleasure that may arouse in the (male) viewer?

JM I don’t often allow myself to think of the sexual feelings that my work may elicit from male viewers – especially my the self-portraits. If I did, it would freeze and inhibit me. I would worry about the “perfection,” – or alternately the “flaws” of my body. I may be naive to think of the portraits as non-sexual, but when painting the female body I have little awareness of the erotic dimension implicit in the painting – I simply tune it out. The idea of displaying myself or the other female nudes in an

intentionally erotically arousing manner makes me uncomfortable- with the exception of my model, Syrie. I love working with my friend Syrie because she is a practicing model/actress- she brings her own sense of sexuality to the images and I have noticed that her portraits are often ones in which I direct and discover my own sexual voice. But even with Syrie, her sensual allure is self-possessed and I believe that it's something she is sharing with me and my camera and together we are choosing to share that with a male audience. There is power in that choice – we are the active agents of our choices rather than the passive objects of the male “gaze.”

SZ For Emanuel Levinas (1906 – 1995), the great French philosopher of the 20th century, ethics begin with the encounter with the face. Where every other experience placed before consciousness is an experience of knowing – a theoretical consciousness – the experience of the face of the Other is of a wholly other kind. This experience is ethical because rather than knowing, and hence objectifying the Other, “face to face” with the Other one is compelled to respond to the call expressed in that face. As an artist whose work, to a significant degree, depends on a continual and intimate encounter with the face of “the Other” have you ever conceived of your work as having an ethical or moral dimension?

JM I'm aware of the confrontation that the eye-to-eye contact ignites and that may be one of the deepest dimensions in the work. The response to such facial expressions is why I ask my subjects to maintain a neutral or extremely soft expression. I want the viewer to resonate as much as possible with just the eye contact. My view is that the more subtle and neutral the face, the more the viewer can project their own psyche onto the subject. Outside of that premise, I assume that any moral or ethical lines would be within the viewer and their response to such confrontation. And maybe the most sensitive

aspect of this is the fact the most of the bodies and faces being confronted are female- culturally that does create an ethical tipping point. I feel as if I ask for the viewer to not sexualize or “objectify” the female body – which would require a dehumanizing of the subject, but I have no control over their true response.

SZ Thank you, Jenny. It's been a pleasure working and speaking with you.

JM Thanks—for me as well.

¹ An “entheogen” (“generating the divine within”) is a chemical substance most often of plant origin that is used in a religious, shamanic or spiritual context. They have been used in a ritualized context for thousands of years and their religious or psychologically transformative significance is well established in anthropological and modern evidences. For those who want to know more about the use of these substances in a modern context I recommend *Breaking Open the Head: A Psychedelic journey into the Heart of Contemporary Shamanism* by Daniel Pinchbeck.

Anchor, 2012
oil on canvas
52 x 36 inches



Can't Believe, 2012
oil on canvas
28.5 x 24.5 inches



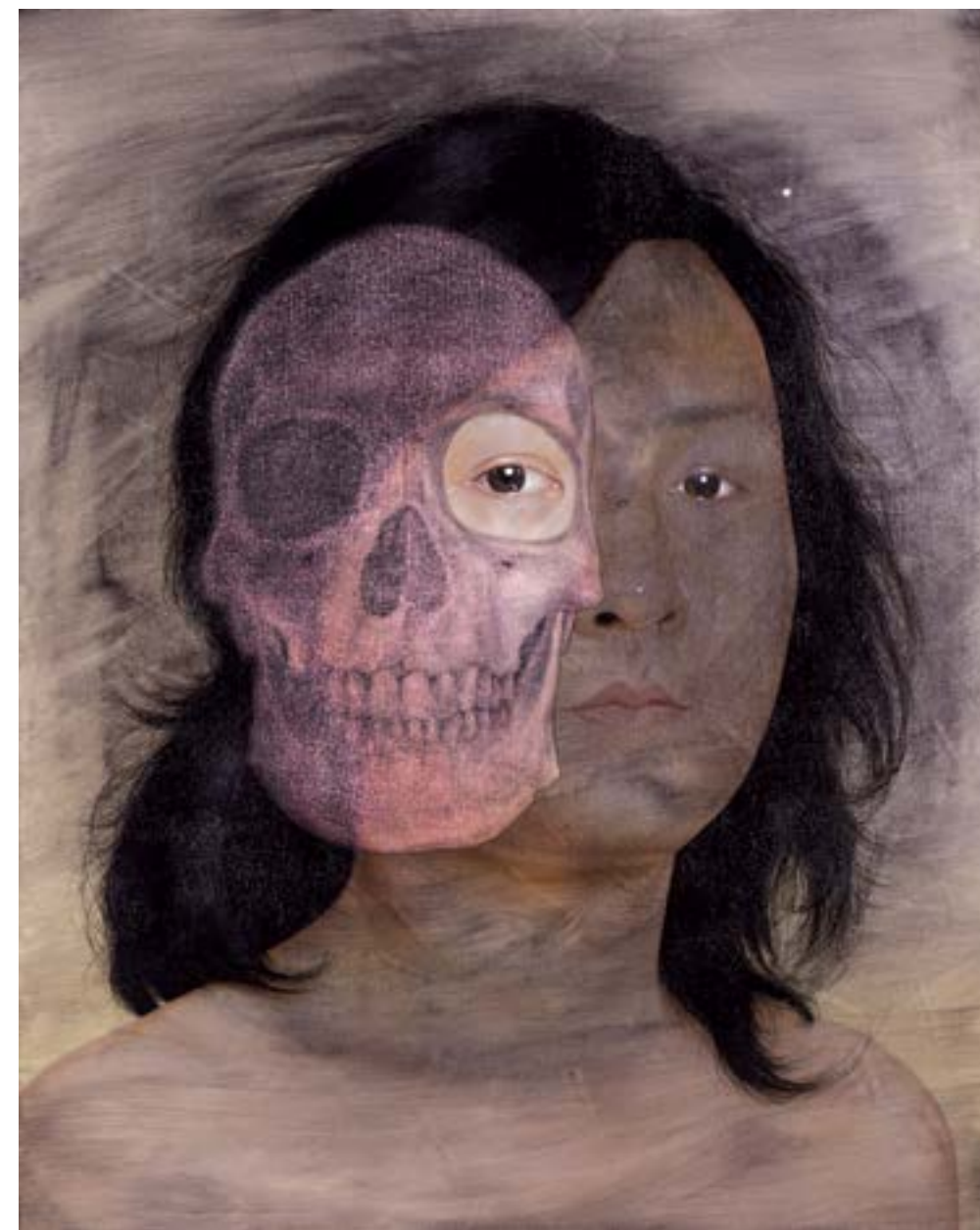
Don't Leave Me Mother, 2008
oil on canvas
19 x 15.5 inches



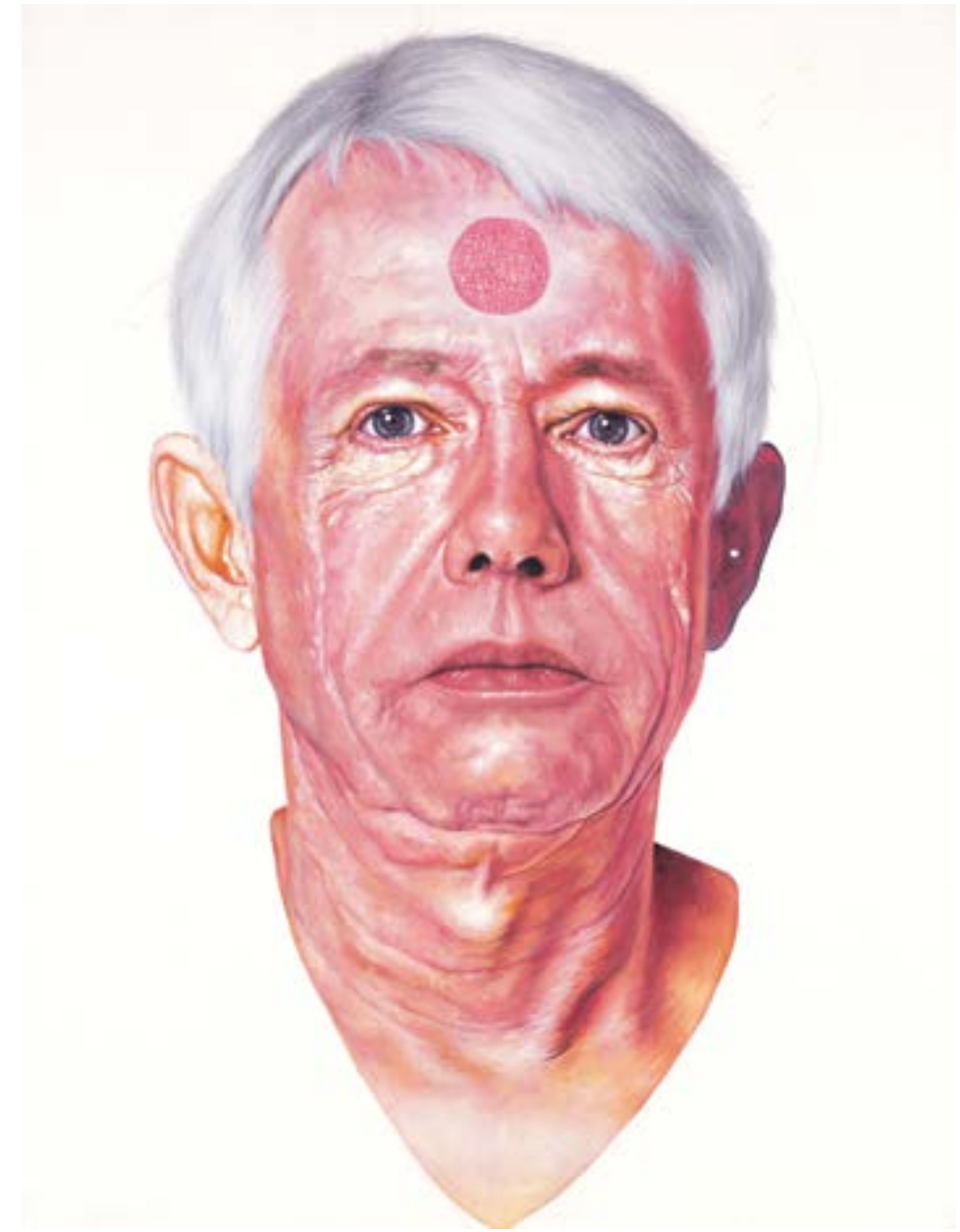
Self-Portrait #27, 2009
oil on canvas
44 x 30 inches



Shadow, 2012
oil on canvas
42 x 32.25 inches



Thank You, 2013
oil on canvas
25 x 19 inches



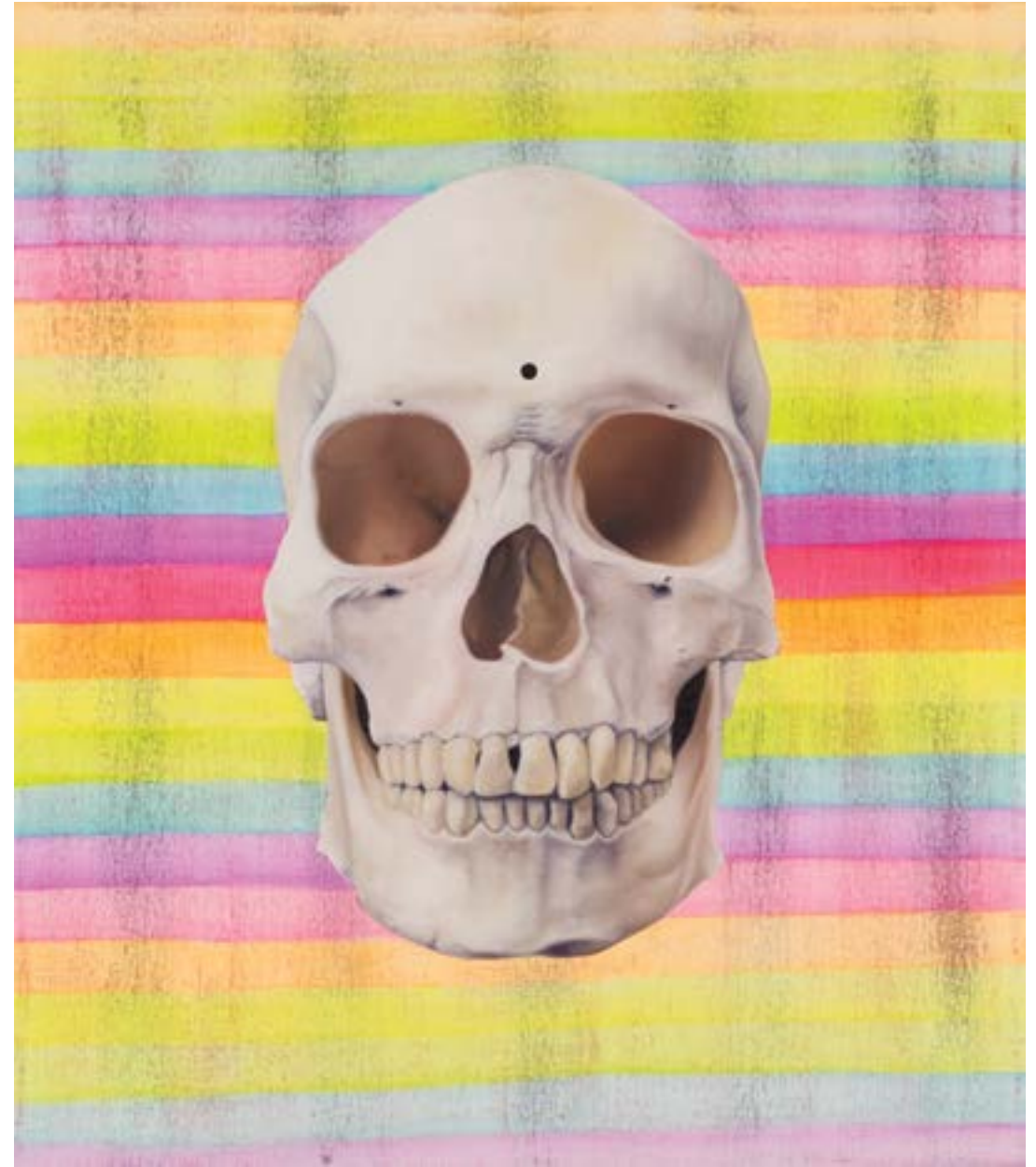
The Mirror, 2011
oil on canvas
75 x 55 inches



The Source, 2009
oil on canvas
42.5 x 28.5 inches



Trendsetter, 2010
oil on canvas
23 x 20 inches



Breakthrough Sharona, 2014
oil on canvas
35 x 27 inches



Everything Will Be OK, 2014
oil on canvas
48 x 36 inches



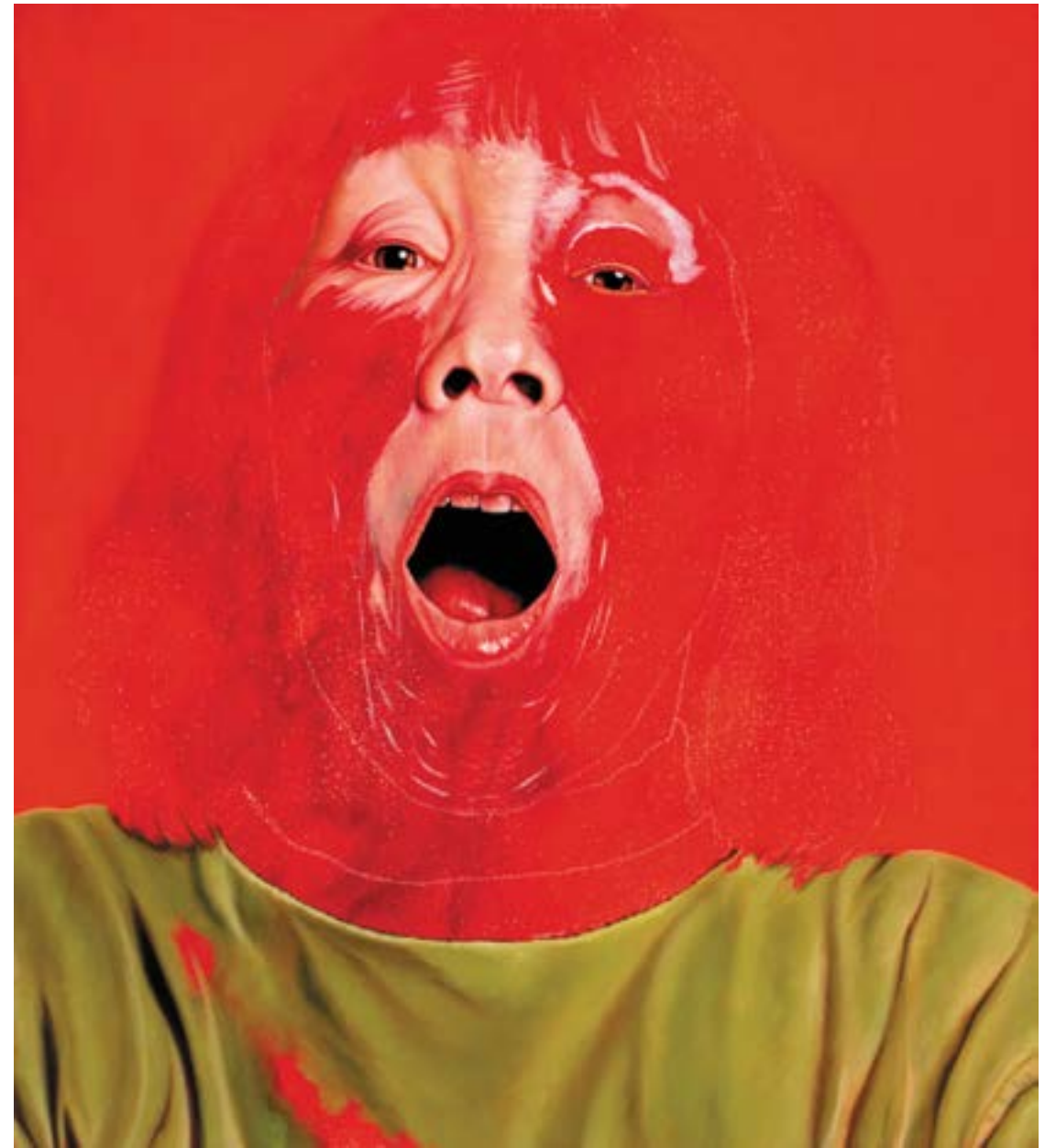
Shadow Play, 2014
oil on canvas
35 x 35 inches



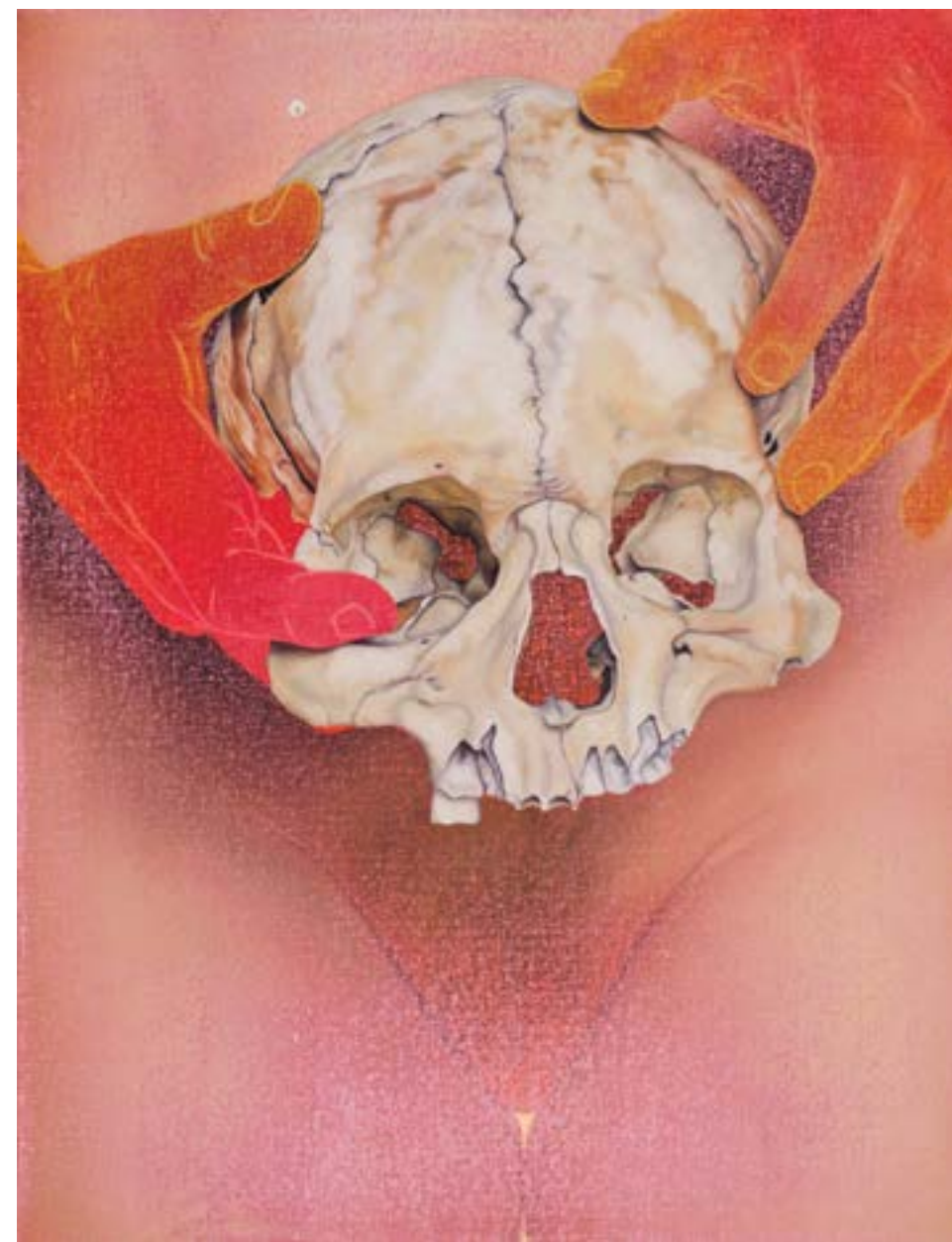
How Strange It Is To Be Anything At All, 2011
oil on canvas
28.5 x 24.5 inches



Dissolving Contract, 2008
oil on canvas
19 x 17 inches



Release, 2011
oil on canvas
19 x 15 inches



The General's Daughter, 2007
oil on canvas
40 x 30 inches



Exhibition Checklist

Anchor, 2012
oil on canvas
52 x 36 inches

Can't Believe, 2012
oil on canvas
28.5 x 24.5 inches

Don't Leave Me Mother, 2008
oil on canvas
19 x 15.5 inches

Self-Portrait #27, 2009
oil on canvas
44 x 30 inches

Shadow, 2012
oil on canvas
42 x 32.25 inches

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23 x 20 inches

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oil on canvas
48 x 36 inches

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oil on canvas
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How Strange It Is To Be Anything At All, 2011
oil on canvas
28.5 x 24.5 inches

Dissolving Contract, 2008
oil on canvas
19 x 17 inches

Release, 2011
oil on canvas
19 x 15 inches

The General's Daughter, 2007
oil on canvas
40 x 30 inches

Additional Works by
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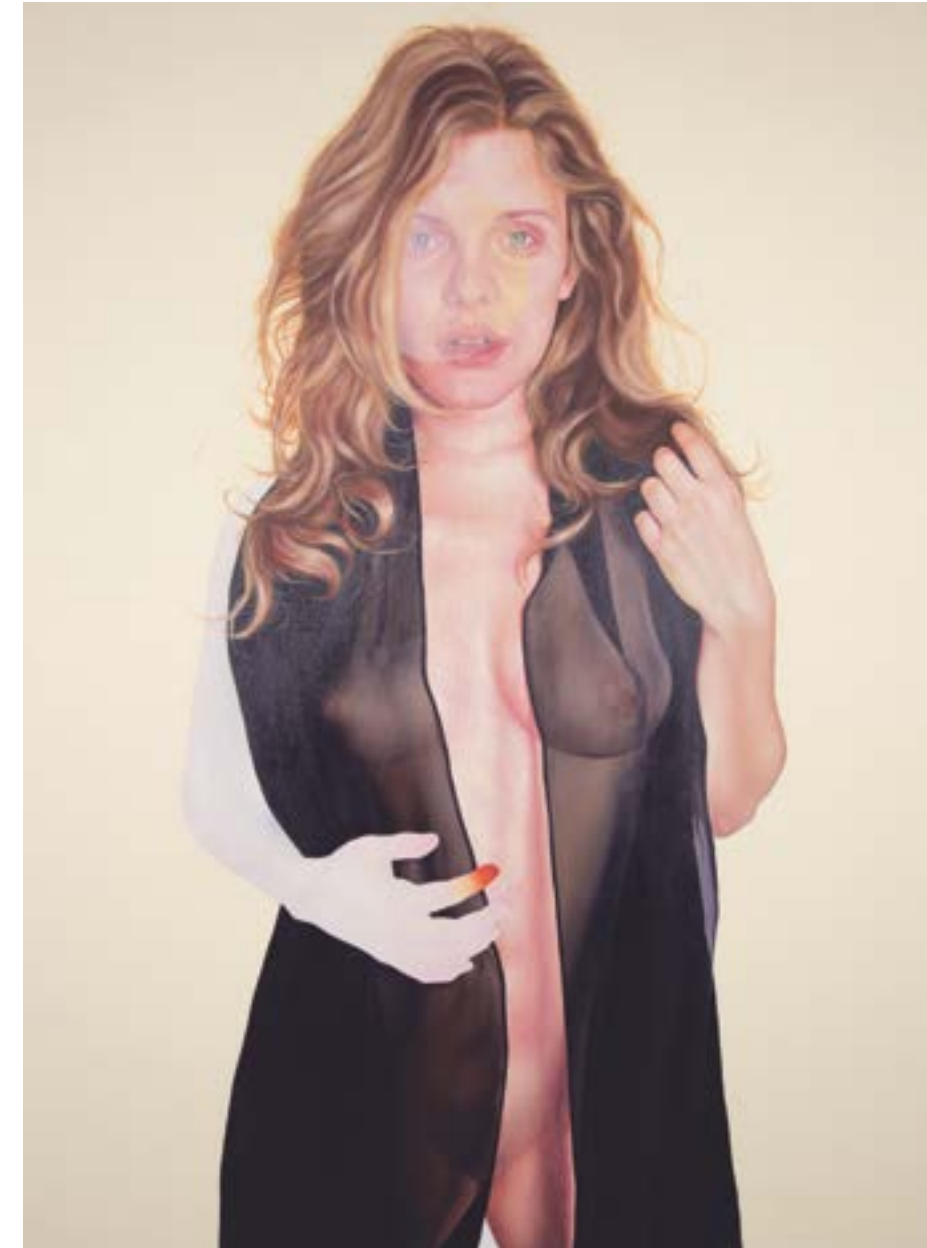
Sia, 2014
oil on canvas
29 x 24 inches
commissioned by *The New York Times Magazine*



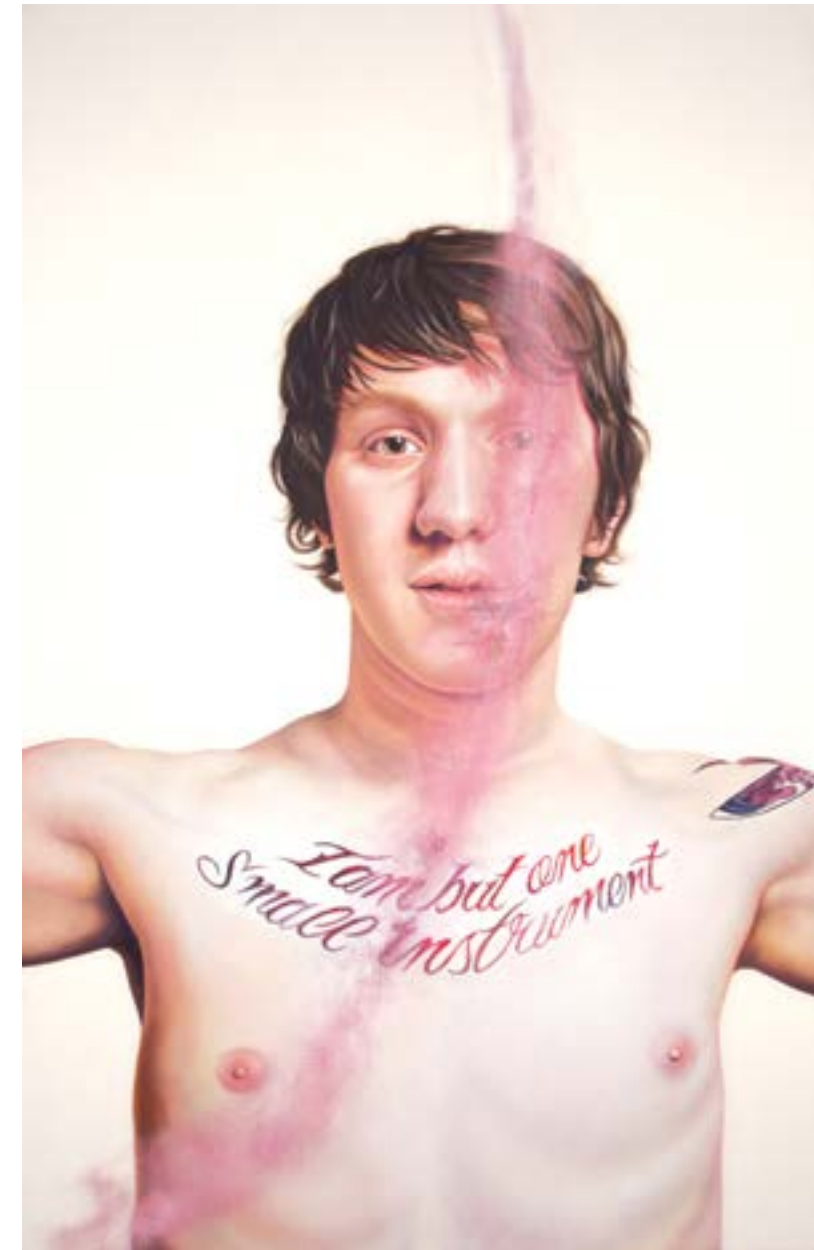
Mentor, 2012
oil on canvas
77 x 52 inches



Credence, 2011
oil on canvas
75 x 55 inches



I Am But One Small Instrument, 2009
oil on canvas
64 x 41 inches



His Return, 2012
oil on canvas
40 x 32 inches



Let It Bleed (Courtney Love), 2010
oil on canvas
40.5 x 31.5 inches
commissioned by *New York Magazine*



Wikileaks, 2011
oil on canvas
33 x 27 inches
commissioned by *The New York Times Magazine*



Gwenyth, 2010
oil on canvas
34 x 26 inches
commissioned by *New York Magazine*



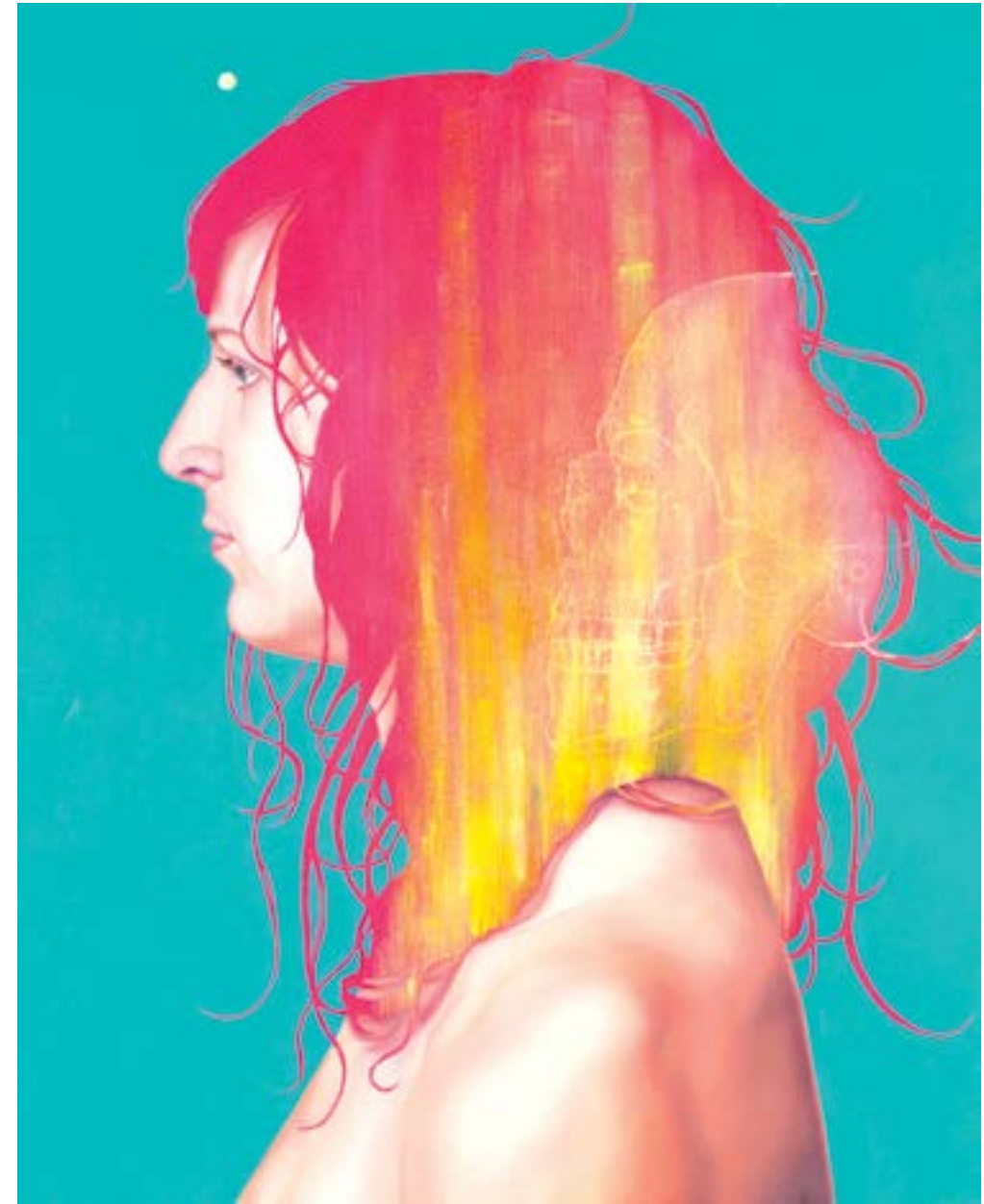
Lauren Santo Domingo, 2010
oil on canvas
34 x 24 inches
commissioned by *New York Magazine*



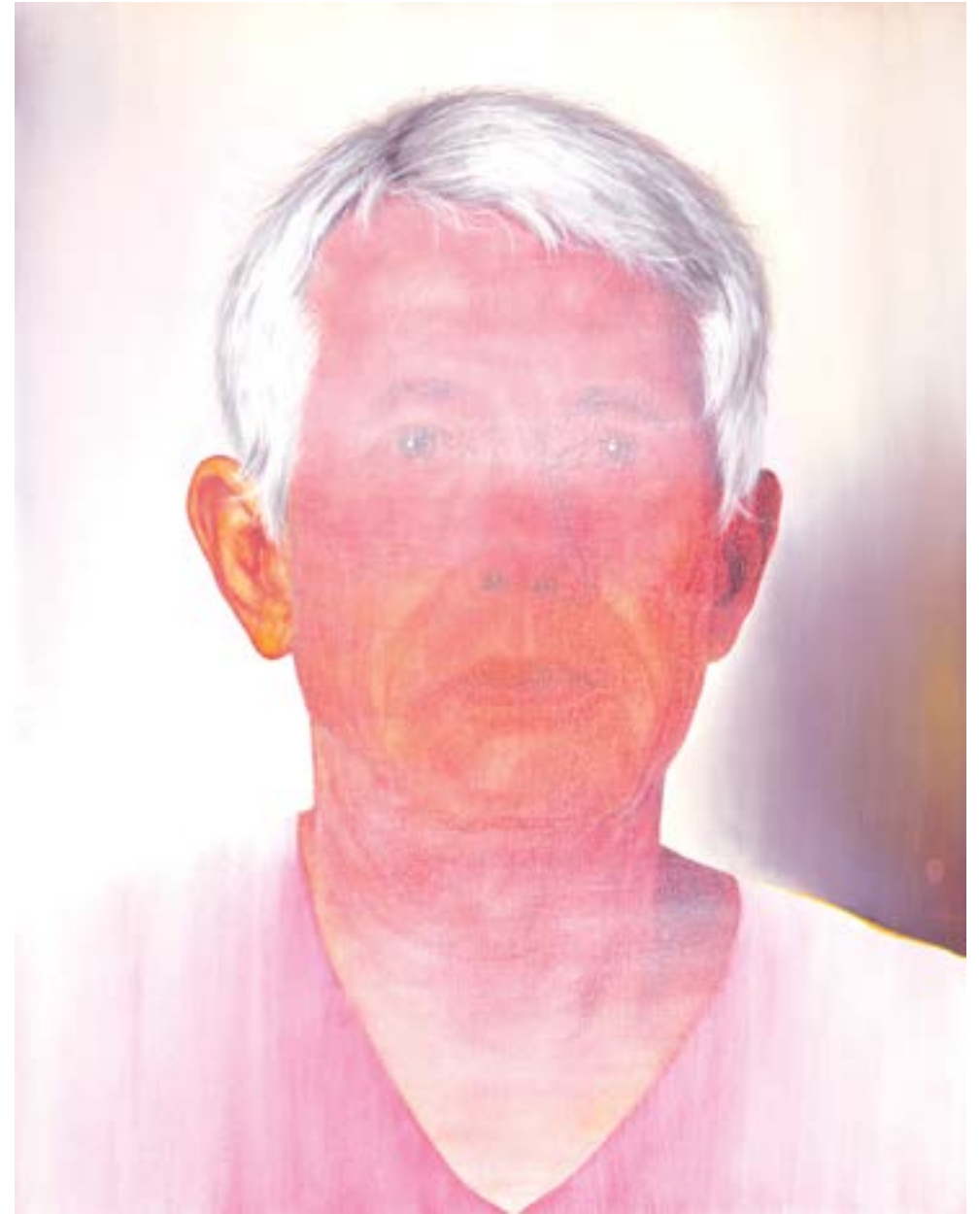
Jill in 1994, 2011
oil on canvas
31 x 24 inches
commissioned by *New York Magazine*



Warrior, 2010
oil on canvas
31 x 25 inches



The Staircase, 2011
oil on canvas
23 x 18 inches



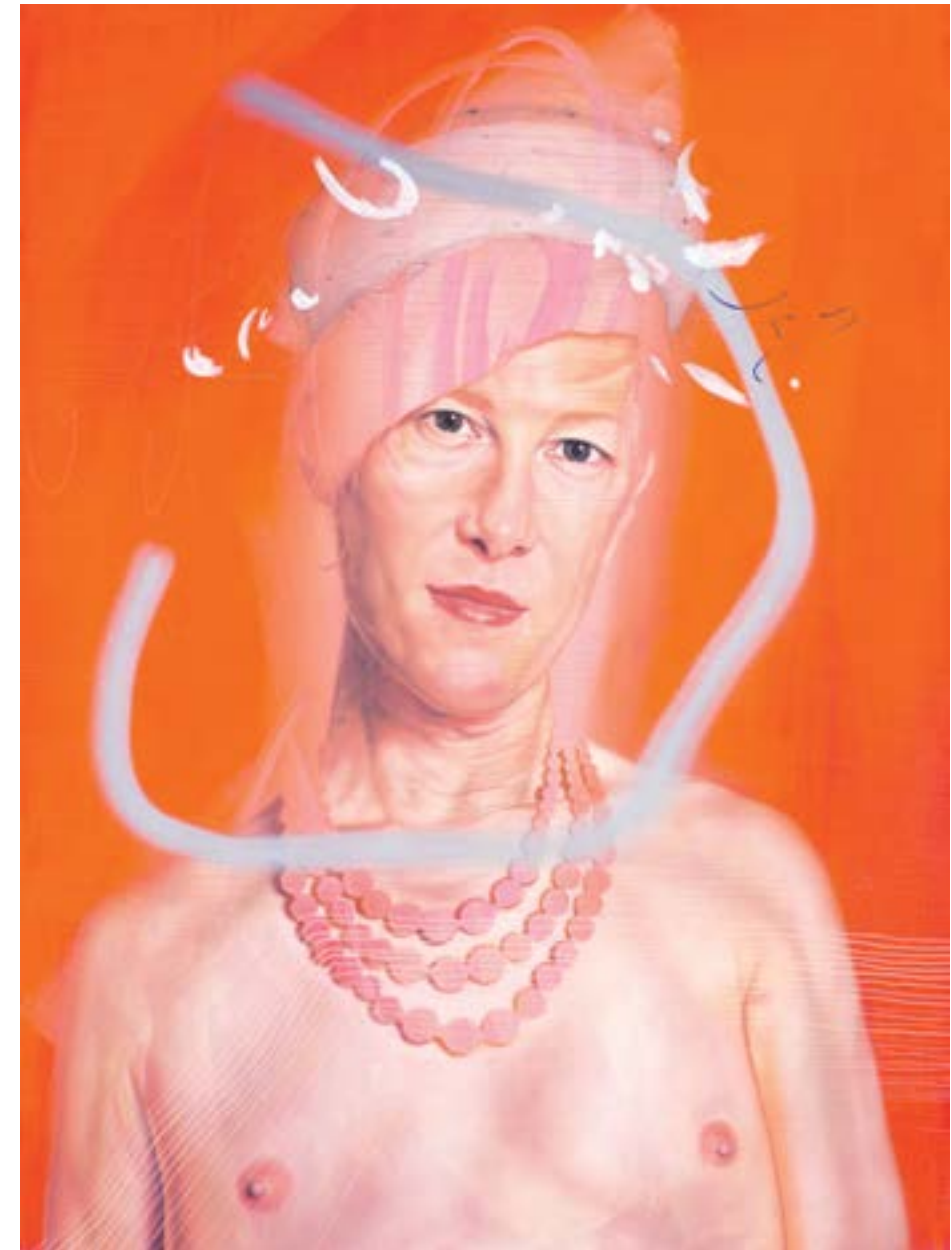
Jenny Morgan and David Mramor
Kuan Yin, 2009
oil and mixed media on canvas
50 x 42 inches



Jenny Morgan and David Mramor
Touched, 2009
oil, acrylic and pencil on canvas
44 x 33 inches



Jenny Morgan and David Mramor
Mother's Pearls, 2009
oil, spray paint and pencil on canvas
43 x 32 inches



Jenny Morgan and David Mramor
Amethyst, 2013
oil, cold wax and acrylic on canvas
37 x 32 inches



Jenny Morgan and David Mramor
Northern Light, 2009
oil and acrylic on canvas
24 x 21 inches



Jenny Morgan and David Mramor
The American Boy, 2009
oil on canvas
25 x 19 inches



Jenny Morgan and David Mramor
I, 2009
oil on canvas
22 x 20 inches



Jenny Morgan and David Mramor
Mystic, 2009
oil, spray paint, pen on printed canvas
24 x 24 inches



Jenny Morgan and David Mramor
Self-Portrait With Lashes, 2006
oil, acrylic, pencil, collage on printed canvas
14 x 11 inches



Jenny Morgan and David Mramor
The Hunted, 2009
oil, acrylic and pencil on canvas
8 x 8 inches





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Cover Image

Can't Believe, 2012, oil on canvas, 28.5 x 24.5 inches

Back Cover Image

Dissolving Contract, 2008, oil on canvas, 19 x 17 inches

