



JULIAN HATTON



*Bunk*, 2022, 10 x 10", oil on panel

cover: *Mystic*, 2023, 60 x 60", oil on canvas

# Julian Hatton

## Pollen Path

recent paintings

**April 15 – May 27, 2023**

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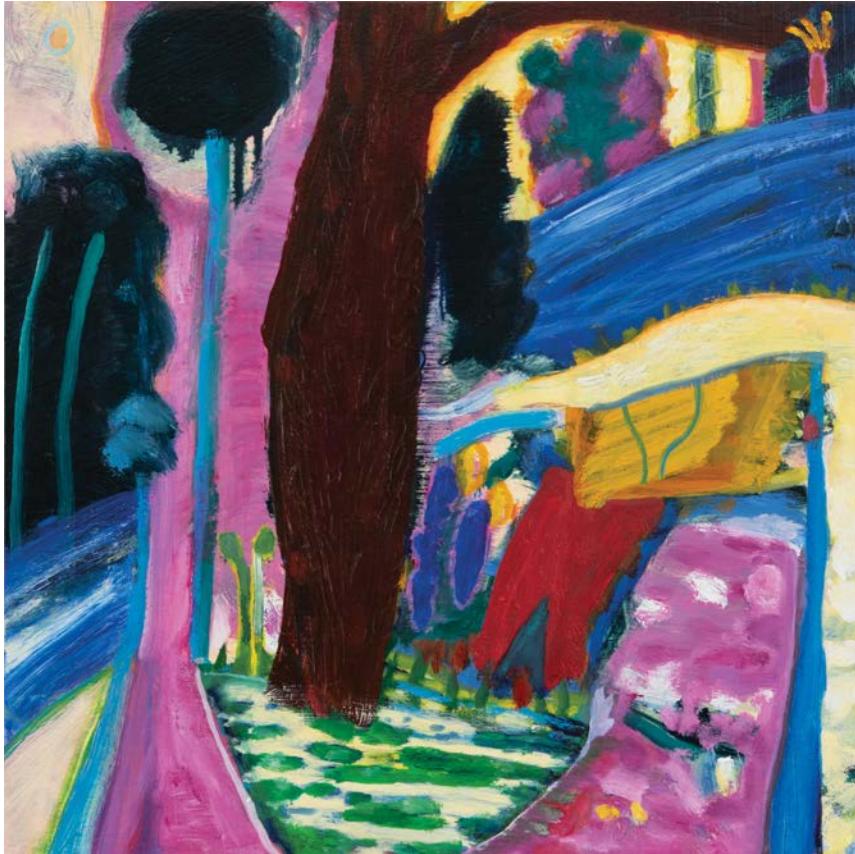
Duende, 2023, 10 x 10", oil on panel

## A Good Picture

By David Brody

Landscape abstraction in the sense of pictorial invention with allusions to natural topography has been around since at least the Tang Dynasty. While propagandistic ends have always attached themselves, the true subject of all great landscape paintings—and this goes even at the avowedly realist end of the spectrum—is sheer aestheticism, artistic praxis for its own sublime sake. Morality, philosophy, religion and myth are welcome to hitch a ride, but on painting's terms.

The remarkable persistence across so many cultures and eras of the landscape paradigm cannot, however, be taken for granted. Although Modernism detonates with the *plein air* breakthroughs of Van Gogh and Cezanne, by the 1970s serious landscape painting, let alone abstraction with nominative vestiges, was on life support. Pop Art, Color Field, Photorealism, Light and Space, Minimalism, Conceptualism and, perhaps especially,



*Country Life*, 2023, 10 x 10", oil on panel

Land Art seemingly had done away with all that bourgeois waffling, all that mucking around. Later developments steeped in post-modernist theory and semiotics, along with, arguably, the excesses of Neo-Expressionism, assured that this particular painterly ground remained fallow.

Thus, when Julian Hatton began haunting shaggy precincts of Prospect Park with a portable easel and paint-smear messenger bag in the mid-1980s, he was very much off on his own guerrilla tangent. It happened, however, that some of the most advanced artists of the previous generation were simultaneously busy “reinventing abstraction”—to borrow the title of an exhibition curated by Raphael Rubinstein at Cheim and Read in 2013, which included such disparate originals as Tom Nozkowski, Bill Jensen, Joan Snyder, Carroll Dunham, Stanley Whitney, Elizabeth Murray and Terry Winters. Their paintings, writes Rubinstein, “began to feature gesture, stylistic variety, relational compositions, figure/ground relationships and aspects of figuration and landscapes, as well as art historical and cultural allusions, high and low.”<sup>1</sup> It turned out that while Hatton, deeply infused with the more ecstatic, feral traditions of early Modernism, was undertaking a sustained encounter *sur le motif*, discerning studios in New York were heading back to the same fountainhead from the opposite direction.



*Bight*, 2022, 10 x 10", oil on panel

And nowadays, in the third decade of a new millennium, who *isn't* painting landscape abstractions? "A painter today most likely takes the pictorial nature of his or her painting not as something to be avoided but as an object of fascination," writes Barry Schwabsky in a 2019 coffee-table book called *Landscape Painting Now*, featuring splash pages of 82 more-or-less depictive abstractionists, from Inka Essenhigh to Julie Mehretu to Alex Katz<sup>2</sup>. I would have included Hatton among the 82 (and not a few others as well), but the point is the sheer ubiquity, these days, of what had once been a lonely pursuit. And if the zeitgeist has veered toward Hatton's conception of painting, he too has shifted: his increasingly fresh, magnetic and ravishing landscape abstractions have been painted entirely in the studio since 2012.

Hatton's transition from *plein air* took place over the course of a decade—so gradually that one cannot discern any fundamental difference in approach between works from, say, 2007 (onsite, by then in the Catskills) and 2017 (studio). Indeed, from the very beginning of his immersion in nature, Hatton was cultivating a personal vocabulary of gestures and shapes, moves and processes, which, coming into certain configurations, can stand for one recognizable landscape form or another. In *Grazing*, these forms are relatively unambiguous, if loopily distorted: we infer a spiraling inlet on a lake



*Ramble*, 2023, 10 x 10", oil on panel

with a mountain range beyond and an upturned green field in the foreground pierced with flowers. (But what flowers! Each heartbreaking, gently fanatical cluster is like a bouquet to the Nabis.)

The undulating pink and blue stripes at the bottom left of *Embrace* are harder to interpret. They might signify either a raging stream or a newly plowed field, while the compressed swath of trees on the right seems to contain a road and a trussed structure, rare intrusions of human artifacts in Hatton's world. What matters in any case is the pictorial drama: a sweeping, warping movement stubbornly counterbalanced like a cathedral roof by an intricate yet massive buttress.

Abstraction often gets the upper hand in the smaller panels, some of which seem to aim, like early O'Keeffe and Dove, or like Jensen and Nozkowski, at sheer organic essence. The exquisitely buoyant, inchoate forms of *Drop* or the torn and carved fields of *Mirage*, for example, do not ask to be named. By contrast, *Ramble*, another small panel, is straightforward about describing a river valley with a mountain range and clouds beyond; although a liberating grove of bulbous and speckled trees in visionary colors, reminiscent of the Alpine raptures of Kandinsky or Nolde, lies, if you will, just across Die Brücke.<sup>3</sup>



*Jam*, 2023, 10 x 10", oil on panel

Imagery follows gesture as much as the other way around. Some paintings come out map-like (*Bunk*), others cubistically intercut (*Pollen Path*), and others as flowingly pastoral as Prospect Park, that original work of Land Art (*Underbrush*). It would not be so farfetched to say that the artist has followed Max Beckmann's advice: "Learn the forms of nature by heart so you can use them like the musical notes of a composition."<sup>4</sup> Hatton's color is especially virtuosic—experimental, moody, revelatory, lyrical. *Mystic* is a violet winter nocturne richly embroidered with shards of gleaming dissonance, like a Brahms clarinet trio. *All the Little Live Things* turns a forest glade into the Las Vegas Strip, a glorious cacophony of honking strokes. *Caldera*'s somber palette is dominated by dark, rumbling reds and greens—indeterminate colors that "no one knows the names of," as the Byrds sing in *Wasn't Born to Follow*.<sup>5</sup>

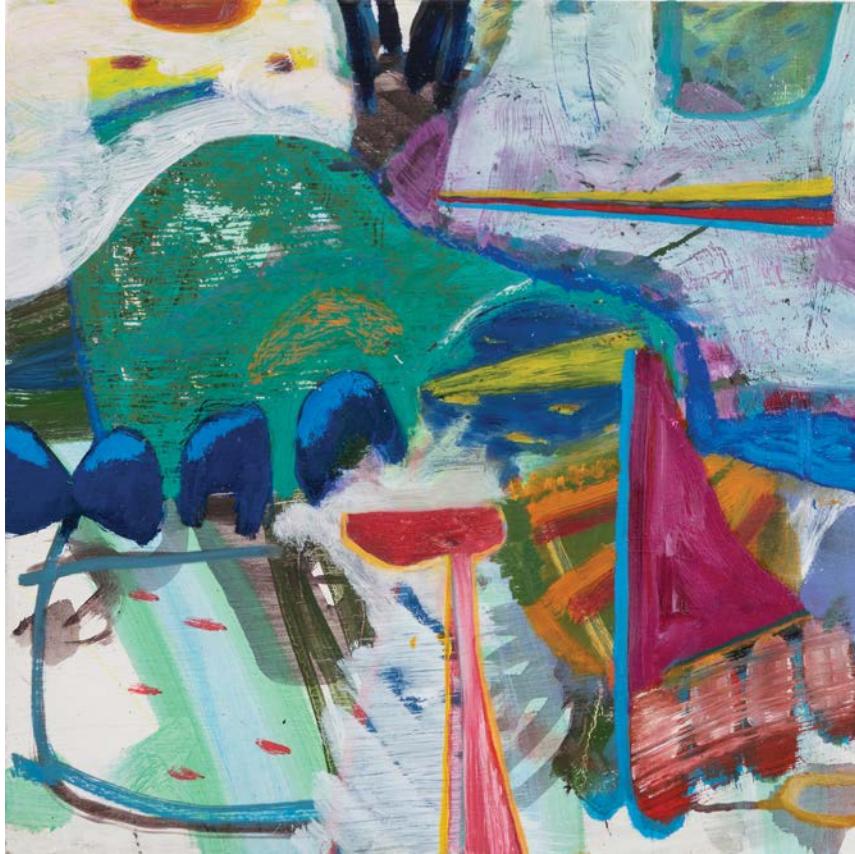
In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was a split between two rival conceptions of nature, or Nature: the terrifying new Darwinian view of infinite variety without ultimate purpose, and the consoling, quasi-religious view of a cosmic wholeness transcending the infinitude of Nature's details, the view elaborated by von Humboldt, Emerson, and Ruskin. In an age of widespread religious skepticism, landscape painting was enlisted in the latter cause; only through the artist's seer-like intuition could one hope to grasp Nature's unity and purpose.<sup>6</sup>



*Aureole*, 2022, 10 x 10", oil on panel

In the new century, this intuition splintered into a thousand movements and trends. And it has seemed ever since that the avant-garde is aligned with fragmentation as a matter of Darwinian principle. Artists who puncture balloons, making war on smug, teleological attempts at ultimate answers, prevail in today's biennials and grad crits, just as leading cosmologists, physicists, and biologists find that behind every explanation lies another question. The center does not necessarily hold.

But it never did, not for Wang Wei, not for J.M.W. Turner, and certainly not for Max Beckmann, whose advice, cited earlier, continues: "Nature is a wonderful chaos to be put into order and completed."<sup>7</sup> This wonderful chaos—one which, let us note, is beginning to flex its terrible judgment on human folly—is the *nature* within which artists, in a long tradition, have sought their own peculiar visions of *Nature*. Even the icily ambivalent Gerhard Richter seems to believe in the artist's role as aesthetic arbiter of order versus disorder. Noting in his journal that "there is no central image of the world (world view) any longer: we must work out everything for ourselves, exposed as we are on a kind of refuse heap," he then concludes: "And this theory is no less useless than ludicrous, if I paint bad pictures."<sup>8</sup> Painting a good picture, as Julian Hatton does on his own terms with astonishing variety and consistency, is no small matter. It is apprehending the world.



*Notes*, 2022, 10 x 10", oil on panel

#### References:

<sup>1</sup> Raphael Rubinstein, *Reinventing Abstraction; New York Painting in the 1980s* (New York: Cheim and Read, exhibition catalogue, 2013), unpaginated. The other artists in the exhibition were: Louise Fishman, Mary Heilmann, Jonathan Lasker, Stephen Mueller, David Reed, Pat Steir, Gary Stephan, and Jack Whitten.

<sup>2</sup> Barry Scwabsky, *Landscape Painting Now: From Pop Abstraction to New Romanticism* (ed. Todd Bradway, New York: D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers, Inc., 2019), p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> For the literal-minded, Emil Nolde was (briefly) a member of Die Brücke, founded in Dresden, while Wassily Kandinsky, co-founder of Der Blaue Reiter in Munich, never was; the two groups had close links, however, and shared in the birth of German Expressionism.

<sup>4</sup> Max Beckmann, "Letters to a Young Woman Painter," reprinted in *Self-Portrait in Words: Collected Writings 1903-1950/ Max Beckmann* (Barbara Copeland Buenger, ed., Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 316.



*Forest Bathing*, 2022, 10 x 10", oil on panel

<sup>5</sup> The Byrds recording of *Wasn't Born to Follow* was featured in the 1969 film *Easy Rider*; music by Carole King/lyrics by Gerry Goffin. The first verse is worth quoting in full in regard to Hatton's practice:

*I'd rather go and journey/Where the diamond crescent's glowing/And run across the valley/Beneath the sacred mountain/And wander through the forest/Where the trees have leaves of prisms/And break the light in colors/That no one know the names of.*

<sup>6</sup> See: Jennifer Raab, *Frederic Church: The Art and Science of Detail* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015) for an account of this split and its impact on painting. On p. 60, Raab writes: "Thus 'Nature' versus 'nature' becomes a distinction between wholeness, order, divinity and transcendence, on the one hand, and microscopic complexity, empiricism, science, and physicality on the other."

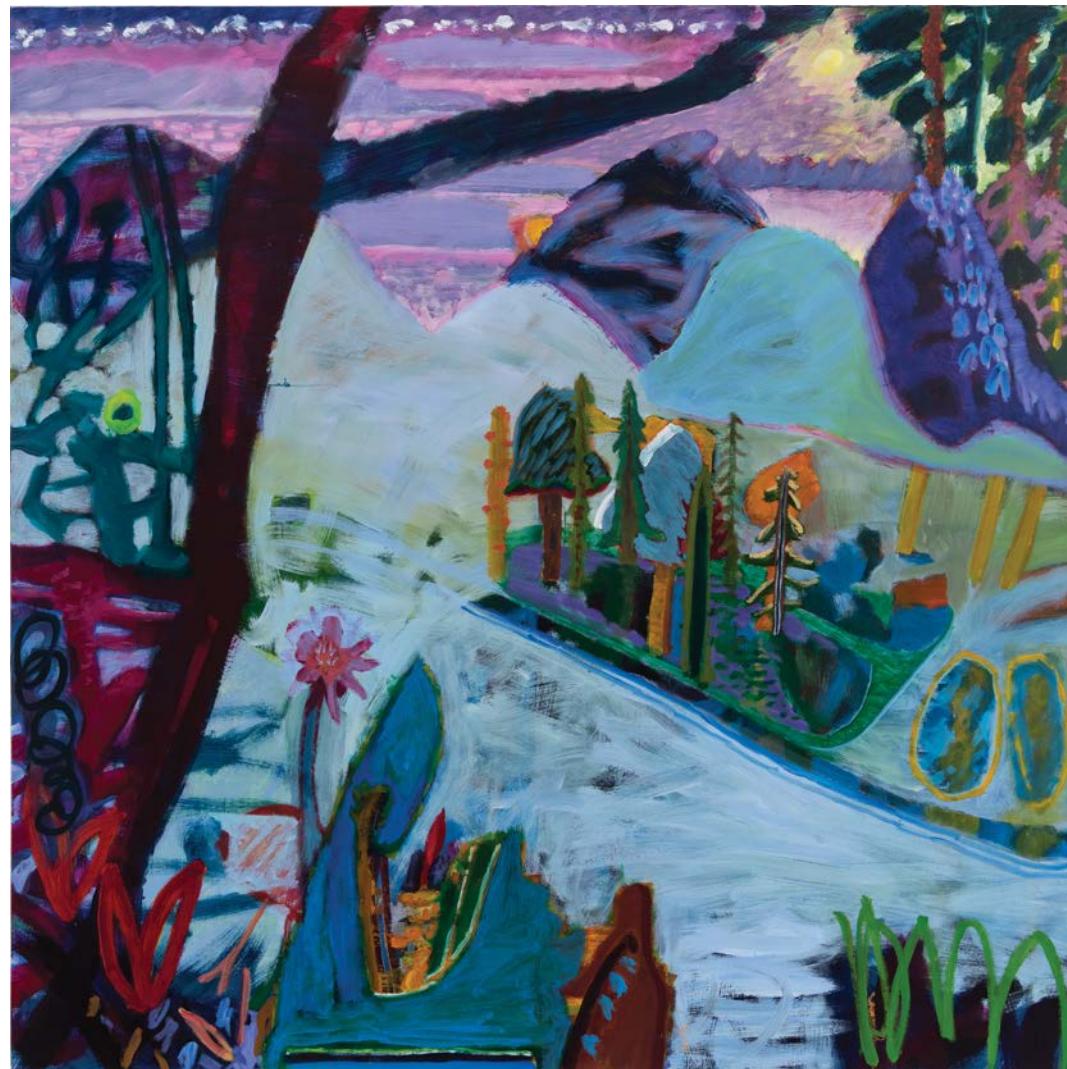
<sup>7</sup> Max Beckmann, op. cit., p. 316.

<sup>8</sup> Gerhard Richter, *The Daily Practice of Painting: Writings 1962-1993*, (Hans Ulrich-Obrist, ed. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995), entry dated 21 April, 1986, pp. 128-129.

*All the Little Live Things*, 2022, 60 x 60", oil on canvas



*Mystic*, 2023, 60 x 60", oil on canvas



*Grazing*, 2022, 60 x 60", oil on canvas



*Pollen Path*, 2022, 60 x 60", oil on canvas



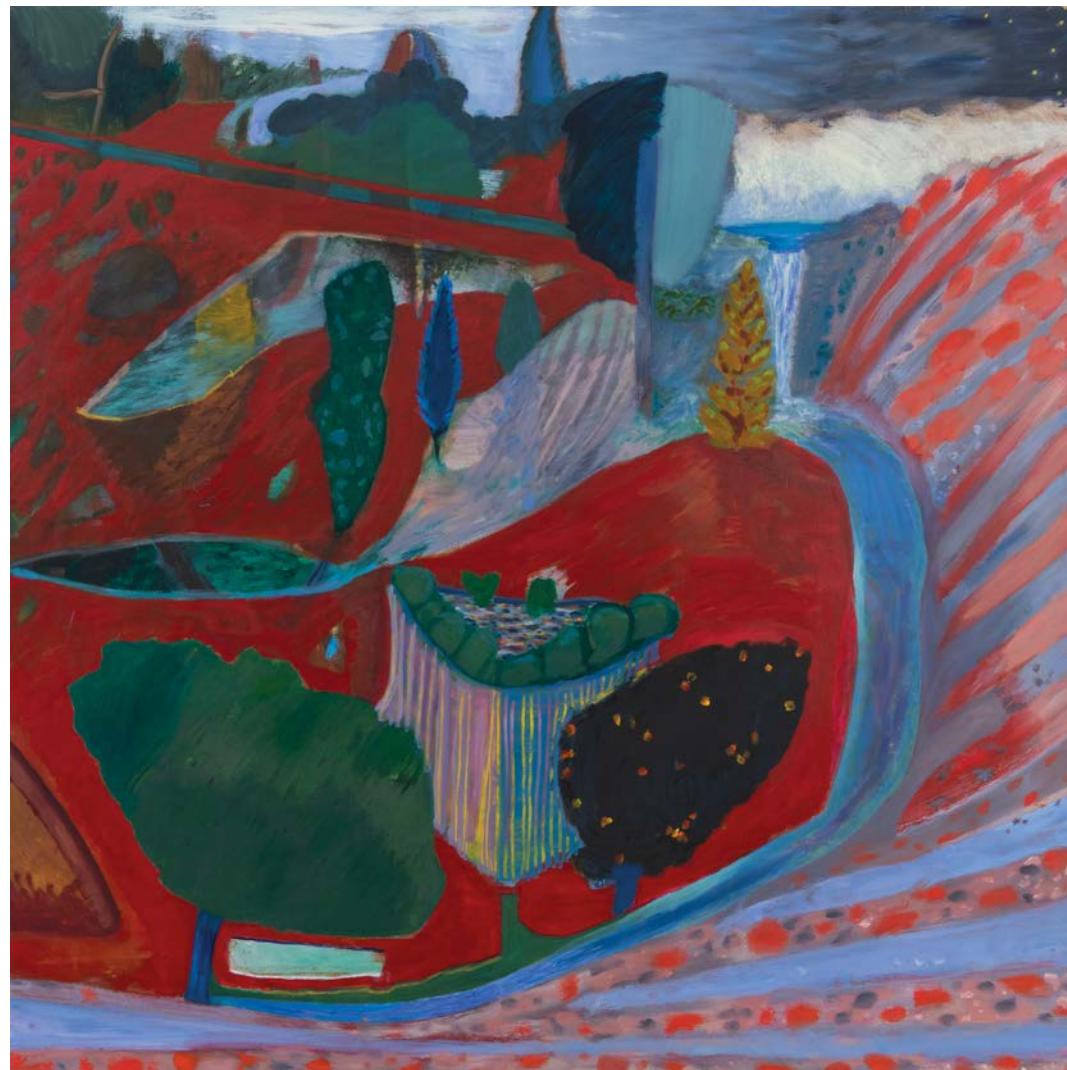
*Tempt*, 2023, 60 x 60", oil on canvas



*Vagabond*, 2023, 60 x 60", oil on canvas



*Caldera*, 2022, 60 x 60", oil on canvas

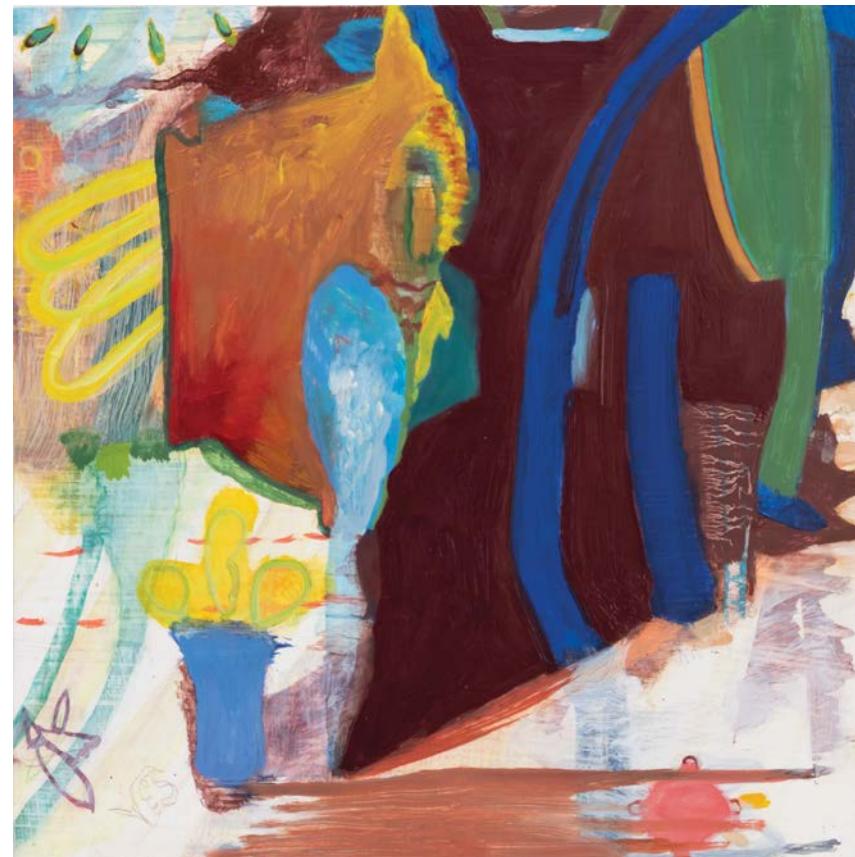


*Brace*, 2022, 20 x 24", oil on panel

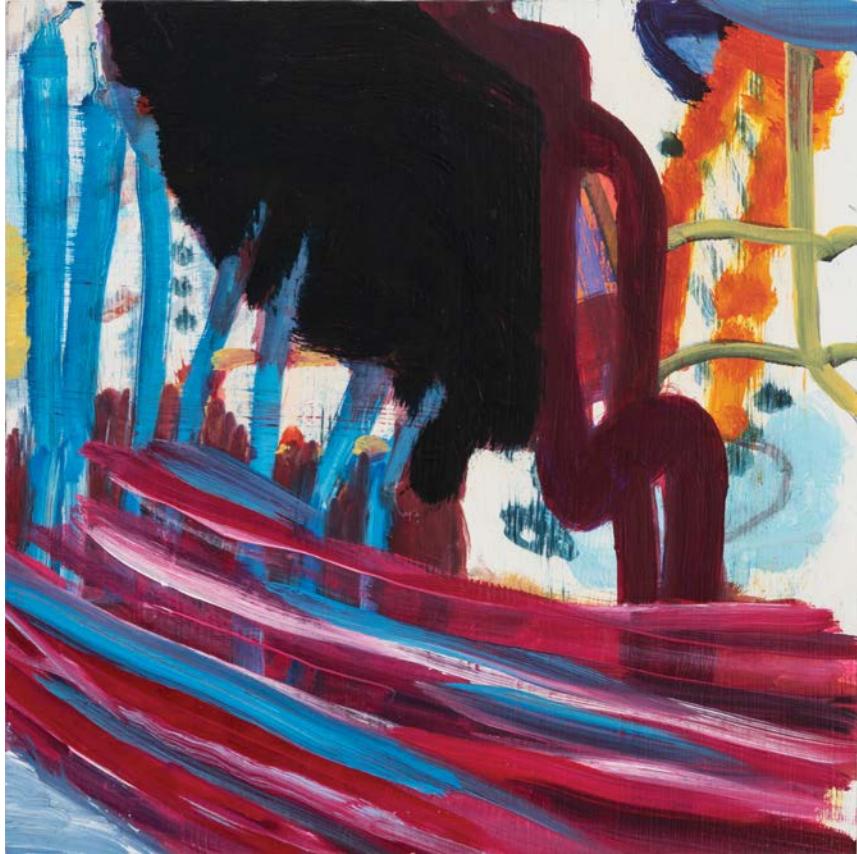




*Mirage*, 2023, 10 x 10", oil on panel



*Slot*, 2023, 10 x 10", oil on panel



*Posh*, 2023, 10 x 10", oil on panel



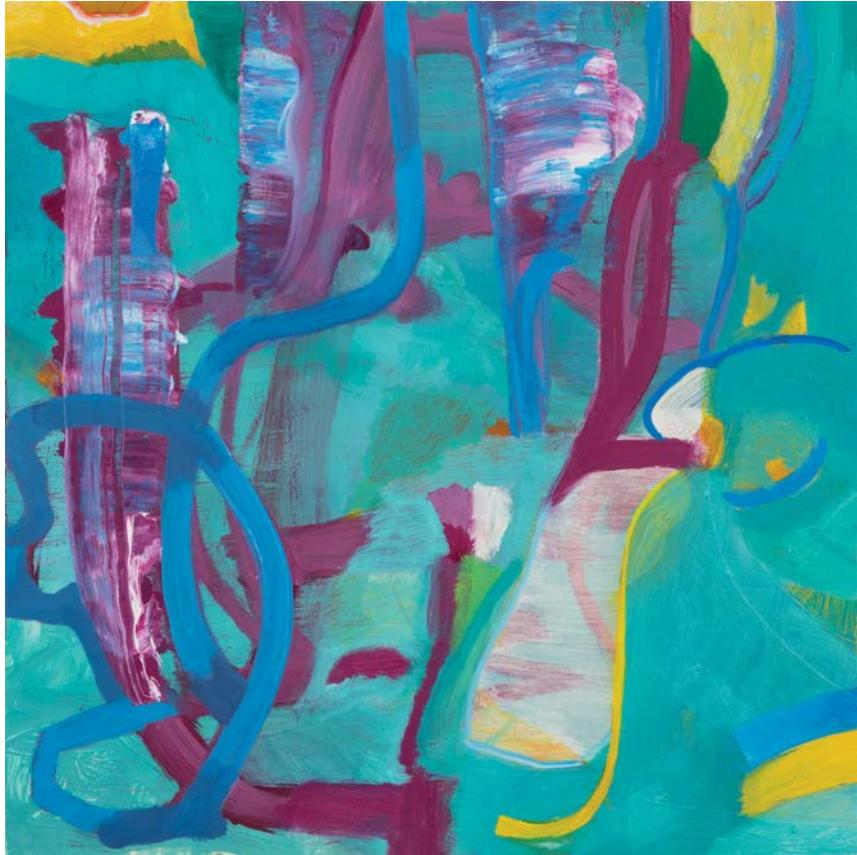
*Furnace Creek*, 2022, 10 x 10", oil on panel



*Drop*, 2023, 10 x 10", oil on panel



*Underbrush*, 2023, 10 x 10", oil on panel



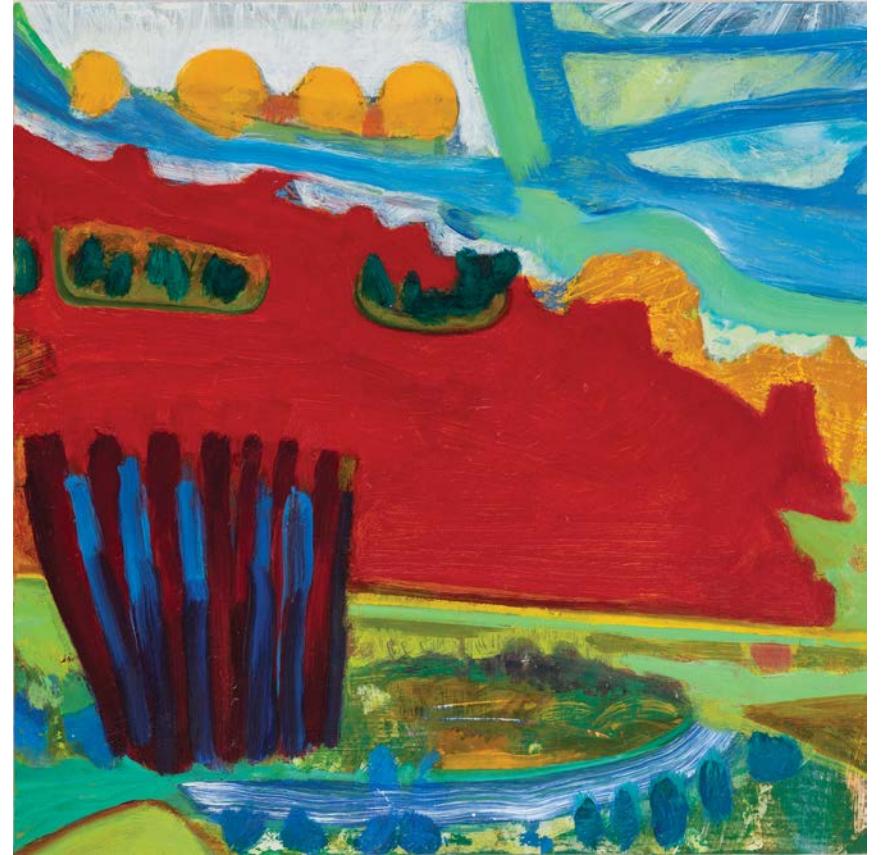
*Catch*, 2023, 10 x 10", oil on panel



*Swell*, 2022, 10 x 10", oil on panel



*Pulse*, 2023, 10 x 10", oil on panel



*Verge*, 2023, 10 x 10", oil on panel



*many thanks to:*

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*Cul de Sac*, 2022, 19 x 17", oil on canvas

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