



REZA DERAKSHANI

WORKS FROM THREE DIFFERENT SERIES

I PAINT YOUR GRACE

I PAINT YOUR PAIN

I PAINT LOVE

MARCH-APRIL 2025

**I PAINT YOUR GRACE
I PAINT YOUR PAIN
I PAINT LOVE**

Leila Heller Gallery is pleased to present *I Paint Your Grace, I Paint Your Pain, I Paint Love*, a solo exhibition of paintings by renowned Iranian-American artist, Reza Derakshani. A pivotal figure in the canon of contemporary art, Derakshani has established a legacy that spans decades, with works housed in major institutional and private collections worldwide (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; British Museum, London; Museum Gunzenhauser, Germany; State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg). In this latest presentation, Derakshani presents a selection of never-before-exhibited works that engage with themes of memory, identity, and transformation.

On view from March 11, 2024, the exhibition features works from three of his celebrated series: *The Hunt / Riders*, *Day and Night / Fig Leaf*, and *Migration / Grey Zone*. Marking his first solo show in half a decade, these works offer a rare opportunity to experience the breadth of Derakshani's artistic vision, where past and present converge in a thoughtful exploration of form, color, and narrative.

Derakshani's work is deeply rooted in Persian artistic traditions while simultaneously engaging with broader personal and socio-political themes. His *Hunting* series, inspired by Persian miniature painting and poetry, recalls the grandeur of medieval iconography while referencing his childhood in the mountains of northeastern Iran. Horses, a recurring motif, embody both physical and spiritual freedom, their elongated forms rendered in layers of intricate color. The hunt, ever-present in his compositions, is not merely a literal pursuit but a metaphor for the ceaseless human search for meaning, power, and transcendence.

The Day and Night / Fig Leaf series similarly explores the dualities that shape human existence—light and darkness, presence and absence, ornamentation and ambiguity. These paintings weave together Persian metaphors of paradise, where lush garden imagery evokes communal gatherings and the afterlife. Derakshani's expressive brushstrokes, bold colors, and luxurious metallic paints create a visual tension between materiality and transcendence, positioning his craft as both an aesthetic and spiritual endeavor .

In the Migration / Grey Zone series, Derakshani reflects on displacement, cultural identity, and modernity—shaped by his own movement between artistic and geographic landscapes. His deep engagement with the Western canon, despite not encountering its masterpieces until later in life, underscores the impact of pre-revolutionary Iran's rich cultural environment on his artistic development.

Synthesizing abstraction and figuration, his practice explores the fluidity of belonging, navigating the intersection of memory, place, and identity. The motif of the turtle, symbolizing migration and endurance, appears throughout his compositions alongside subtle cartographic references to Iran, reinforcing a nostalgic and contested relationship with homeland.

Derakshani's ability to interweave historical symbolism with contemporary expression solidifies his position as a master artist. His work is an ongoing dialogue between tradition and innovation, personal history and collective memory. *I Paint Your Grace, I Paint Your Pain, I Paint Love* invites viewers into a space where painting is both poetic and political, a site of beauty and existential contemplation.



Sosi Mehren in conversation with Reza Derakshani

My first encounter with Reza Derakshani's work was through his luminous, richly textured paintings. His canvases, layered with color, symbolism, and lyrical abstraction, felt like a conversation across time - between past and present, tradition and reinvention. It was only when I visited his studio in Istanbul this past fall that I truly began to understand the man behind the work.

Over the course of a week, I spent long hours with Reza, watching him work, listening to his stories, and discussing the inspirations that shape his artistic vision. We spoke about music, poetry, history, and contemporary culture - threads that are woven into every stroke of his brush. His presence is magnetic; at once deeply thoughtful and effortlessly charming, he carries the experience of a life lived across continents and artistic disciplines. Our conversations ranged from the technical - his use of metallic pigments, tar, and unconventional materials - to the philosophical, exploring the nature of identity in an increasingly globalized art world.

Despite his towering reputation, Reza approaches his work with a refreshing humility. He paints not to please trends or adhere to expectations but out of a necessity to create, to give form to the ineffable. His process is instinctual, often improvisational, much like the music he so admires. There is a dance in the way he applies paint, an orchestration of destruction and reconstruction that defines his practice. In his newest works, featured in *I Paint Your Grace*, *I Paint Your Pain*, *I Paint Love*, he revisits themes that have preoccupied him for decades: the mythic hunt, the ever-present horse, the shifting landscapes of migration. Yet, as always, each work offers something new, a reinvention within a deeply personal visual language.

This interview, conducted formally yet informed by our growing friendship, offers a small window into Reza's mind and artistic practice. It reveals an artist unafraid of contradiction, one who embraces the tensions between heritage and experimentation, the poetic and the political. As he himself says, "At the end of the day (...), it does not matter what you paint but how you do it..."

Sosi Mehren: Your work has long explored the interplay between abstraction and figuration, often weaving in Persian cultural references with contemporary themes. How do the Gray Zone & Migration, Hunt, and Day & Night / Fig series continue or challenge this trajectory in your practice?

Reza Derakshani: The fact is that any visual representation could fit in that framework, which is at the edge between figuration and abstraction. In that context, those visual topics that are inspired by my cultural heritage are as challenging as any other subject matter, except that they have given a different taste to my work. All the ingredients are the same as those not involving anything from Persian culture. At the end of the day, the goal is to create a solid and unique piece of work.

In fact, the Gray Zone series does not have much to do with the visuals of Persian culture. How it becomes unique is in the way it occasionally rubs shoulders with the historical, poetic, and philosophical elements of the culture - but not always. At times, it borrows from the daily news and politics, as well as some sort of poetic sensationalism.

However, the one thing I have discovered is that it really does not matter what you paint, but how you do it - the quality, uniqueness, and timeless artistic value. That has always been the case in art history.

Sosi Mehren: You've spoken before about the influence of Persian music and poetry in your work, and even likened your painting process to an improvisational musical performance. How does this approach manifest in your newest works, particularly in Gray Zone & Migration, which seem to suggest movement and displacement?

Reza Derakshani: That, of course, has become the main manner of my work, meaning there are no sketches for any new work, but in an improvisational process, it would suggest what I probably had in mind. My best works were created this way. One more important element of my work is destruction and rebuilding. Even though I have the complete capability of doing any style of painting, I tend to destroy the perfection and reconstruct it differently. I can say that the improvisational element in my work comes from my practice of Persian music, which I've engaged with for a few decades.

Sosi Mehren: In earlier interviews, you've described your painting process as almost trance-like, a surrender to creative flow. Did these new series require a different mindset or approach compared to your previous works?

Reza Derakshani: That should always be the case regardless of the style or type of work I do; otherwise, it won't become what I desire. Sometimes it takes time to get to that state of mind, but once there, you need uninterrupted long hours to give birth to a piece of art out of pretty much nothing - a piece of fabric (canvas) and some paint and brushes, which turns into something rare and valuable.

Sosi Mehren: You've often referenced your admiration for abstract expressionists like Pollock and De Kooning, as well as Persian miniatures. Do you see your recent works engaging more with one tradition than the other, or are you still operating in that rich, hybrid space between the two?

Reza Derakshani: Yes, always at the edge. It's a bit risky, and I like it that way.

I was very much captivated by the abstract expressionist movement of American art when I moved to New York in the mid-80s and got engaged in finding my brand of abstract art after decades of doing figurative art. However, soon I realized that absolute abstraction was not for me, but it had a huge effect on my way of looking at the world, and since then, I have been at the edge and happy with the outcome.

Periodically, I tend to swing one way or another, and that has to do with personal mood, certain events in life, geographic and cultural surroundings, and some unknown brain buzz, which is always a mystery in the creative process. In some ways, I always tend to swim against the wave, sort of. I remember in the early days of the fake revolutionary environment in my homeland, most fellow artists were going with the flow and doing revolutionary art with an expiration date. That was when I started doing colorful florals. And when everyone was tired of the ugliness of life, I was doing dark paintings like the Identity Crisis and the Gray Zone series, which rubbed edges with the politics of the land.

Sosi Mehren: Many contemporary artists are addressing themes of displacement and migration, but your work does so with a poetic, almost mystical quality. Do you see yourself as engaging with global contemporary discourses on migration, or do you feel your approach is rooted in a more personal or spiritual perspective?

Reza Derakshani: The answer is almost hidden in your question and what I mentioned in response to your previous question. No doubt the day-by-day events of life affect a sensitive person, and an artist has a gift of expressing that feeling. But I believe it's crucial how to incorporate politics into art in a way that won't be a time-sensitive slogan - unless you are a political prisoner, being tortured and wanting to express yourself through art. However, an outsider intellectual artist trying to play that game for attention is fake and expires as the event fades in time.

Political events have to be absorbed over time to be integrated into art in an artistic manner that is timeless. For me, it has to be poetic, even if a dark poem, and above all, a good, solid - quality piece of art.

Sosi Mehren: Your career has spanned continents, revolutions, and shifting art movements. Looking at these new works, do you see them as a culmination of your past, a departure, or a completely new direction for your artistic journey?

Reza Derakshani: There are always some new directions in every new show. However, the past is always present, although it manifests as a new version of my past series, which is a never-ending story. At the end of the day, in my opinion, it does not matter what you paint but how you do it as a creator. I can get inspired by a small leaf and create a whole series of works. I never understood those artists who say they don't know what to paint - there are always a thousand things to be inspired by if one has the right lens to capture and develop it.

Sosi Mehren: You've spoken about resisting regional categorization - labels like Middle Eastern artist or Iranian contemporary artist - despite the frequent framing of your work within these contexts. How do you see your identity as an artist evolving beyond geographic or cultural classifications?

Reza Derakshani: That has always been an issue, and it is a bit depressing.

Obviously, there are attempts and trends to put you in certain categories because of your birthplace or the sound of your name, even if your work is not necessarily deeply local and traditional. Worse than that is when you are praised because of your ethnicity, even if the art is not up to the level it should be. The funny thing is that this is done by supposedly very intelligent and open-minded people. I have no choice but to think that this is done consciously.

My suggestion is that the Western/international art scene should push away identity, politics and ethnicity when it comes to art. The mainstream art scene should embrace high-quality art and reject it when it's not, regardless of where it comes from.

The fact is that visual art is an international art form that doesn't need any translation or subtitles - a timeless language for everyone on the planet. Dance moves have the same quality.

Sosi Mehren: How does your movement across countries influence the way you approach medium and technique? For example, do you find your work shifting when you're in the U.S. versus in Dubai or Italy?

Reza Derakshani: There are some influences, for sure. Not only the local products and materials but also the effect of the local cultural scene, people, lifestyle, nature, and art scene.

For one thing, every new move requires setting up a new studio, and the change starts right from there - new space, different materials, and a new frame of mind.

Sosi Mehren: Looking at this exhibition, do you see your work as existing within a specific tradition, or is it now something entirely of its own? If you could redefine how your work is discussed in the art world, what would you want people to say?

Reza Derakshani: I believe I have my own brand, which evolves and transforms over time. I have influences from different sides, but they have been purified in my head and heart before becoming a reality.

I have a few different series that I continue to work on, and each has its own characteristics and style, but they are all original. Some series are more fun and colorful, and some are a bit darker and more narrative.

Some function as a door to heavenly beauty, but some are more dramatic. They are reflections of different moods every being goes through, and naturally, they are more dramatic for an artist.

My work connects to a wide range of people, and I consider that a success.

I leave it to my viewers to think what they want, but I wouldn't mind it if they thought of me as an honest artist who knows what he is doing and does not bend to trends and political games in the art scene.

Sosi Mehren: Do you think the future of contemporary art is moving toward a more borderless, globalized identity, or do you think geography and cultural heritage will always play a defining role in how artists are categorized?

Reza Derakshani: I think it is already on the road to globalization because it is a universal language. But as much as international politics plays out, categorization moves in parallel. But I hope it will get to a point where ethnicity, money, and geopolitics do not play a role in the art world - only artistic values, which are essential.

Sosi Mehren: In one sentence, how would you define yourself as an artist?

Reza Derakshani: Passionate, honest, hardworking, demanding, madly in love with the beauty of life, and at times eccentric.

FIG LEAF/ DAY & NIGHT SERIES









EVERY DAY & EVERY NIGHT
2023
Oil, Enamel, and Tar on canvas
Diptych
180 x 400 cm





EVERY GOLDEN DAY

2024

Fig leaf, Oil, Tar, Rose Gold paste, Resin, and Enamel on Fiberglass

Diptych

227 x 100 x 6 cm each





EVERY ELEGANT GOLDEN NIGHT
2024
Oil, Tar, and Gold Paste on Canvas
Diptych
150 x 400 cm





EVERY WHITE NIGHT

2024

Oil on Canvas

Diptych

200 x 300 cmv



SUMMER TIME
2025
Mixed Media on Molded Fiberglass
230 x 100 x 25 cm







WINTER TIME
2025
Mixed Media on Molded Fiberglass
230 x 100 x 25 cm

GRAY ZONE / MIGRATION SERIES

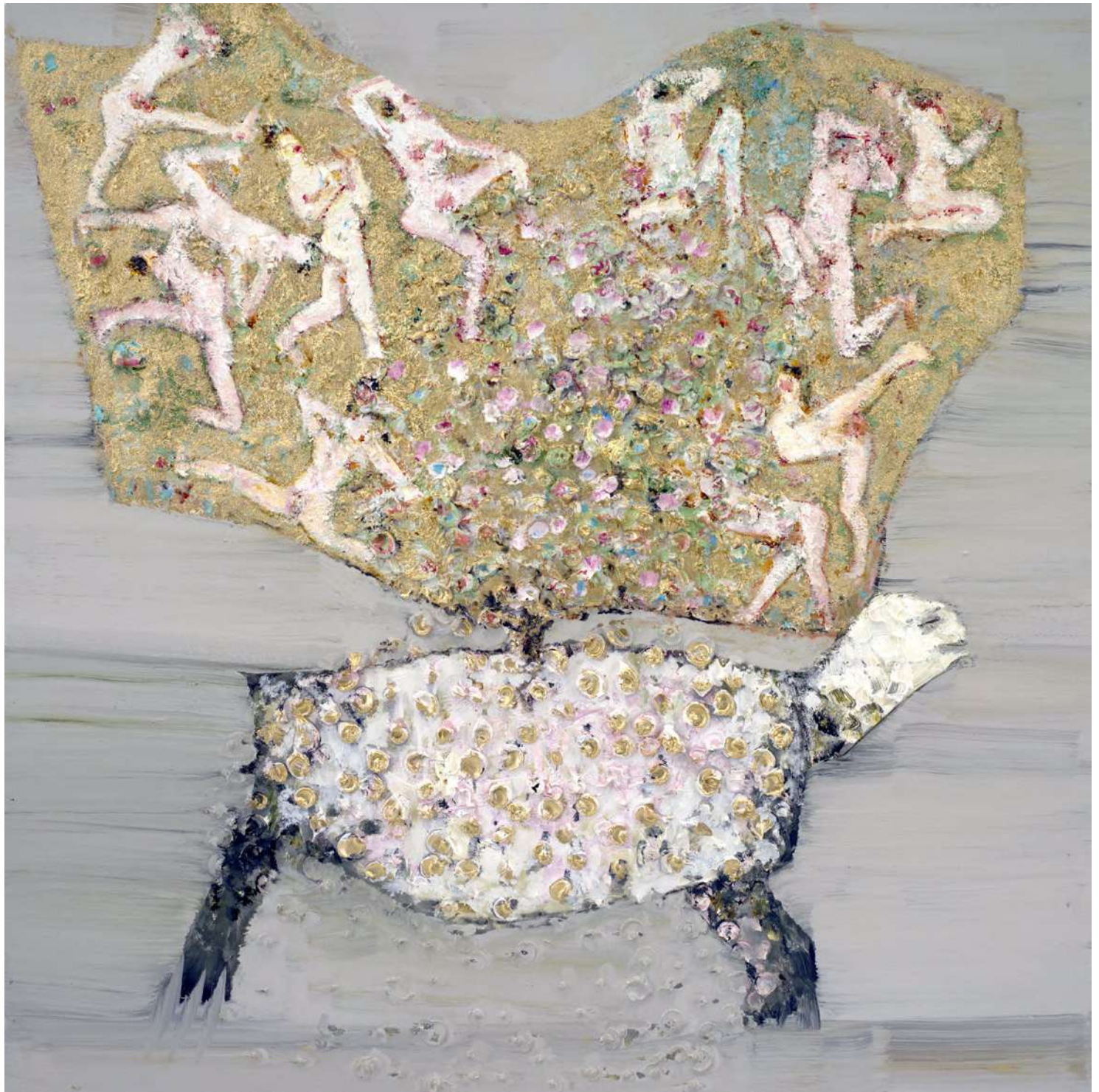






ANCIENT KING IN EXILE
2018
Oil, Tar, and Enamel on Canvas
91 x 91 cm





FARVARDIN FEVER

2018

Oil, Tar, Gold Paste, and Enamel on Canvas

91 x 91 cm



LOOK! IT'S BLOOMING

2018

Oil, Tar, Gold Paste, and Enamel on canvas

91 x 91 cm



TREE OF LIFE

2024

Oil, Enamel, and Gold paste on Canvas

203 x 153 cm





YOUNG KING IN EXILE

2016

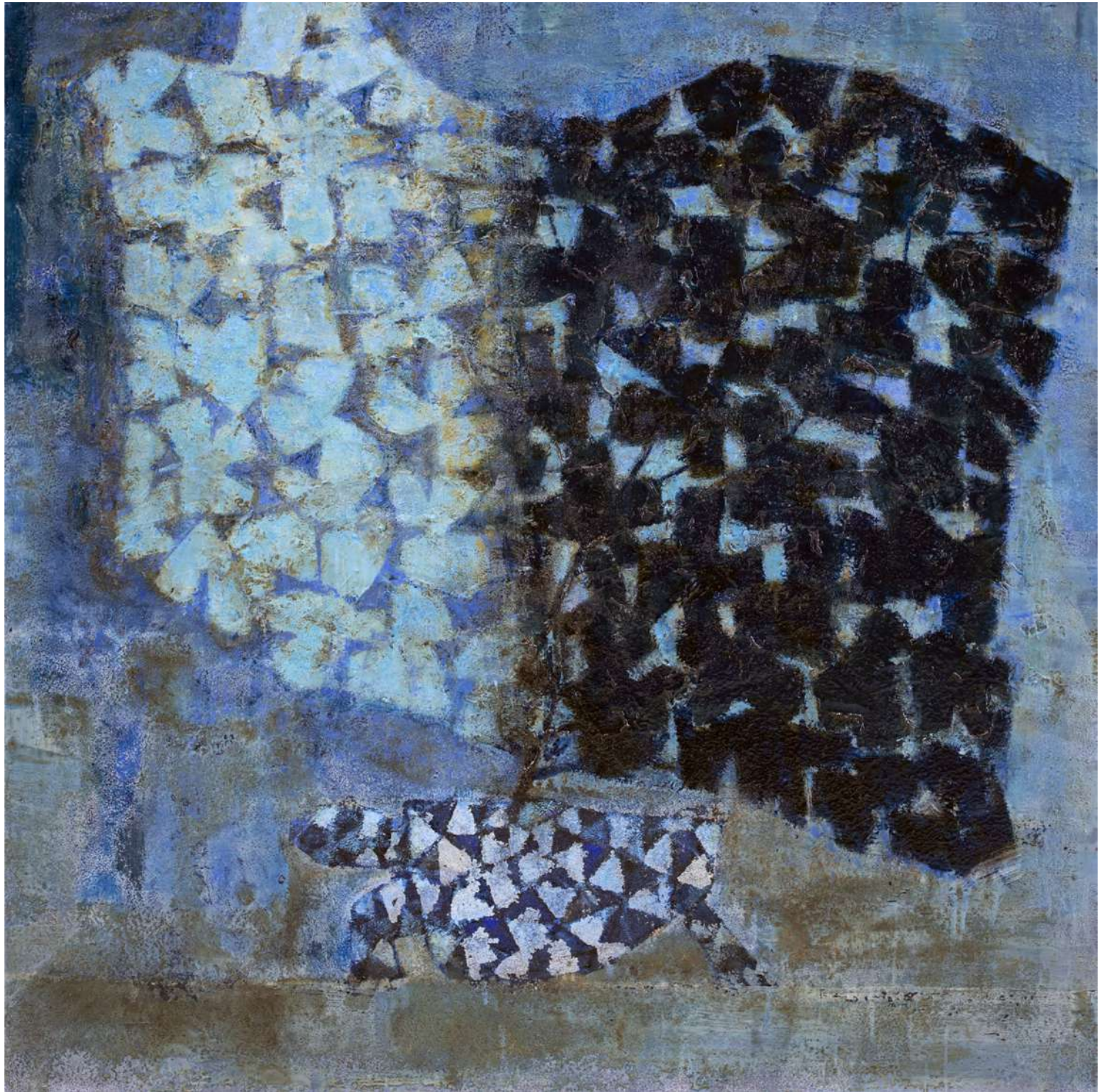
Oil, Tar, Gold, and Enamel on Canvas

122 x 122 cm





WORSHIP & TRANCE
2015
Oil, Tar and Enamel on Canvas
60 x 60 cm



ZOROASTER CALLING
2016
Oil, Tar, and Enamel on canvas
122 x 122 cm



PRECIOUS ENDLESS JOURNEY
2017
Oil, Tar, and Enamel on Canvas
122 x 122 cm





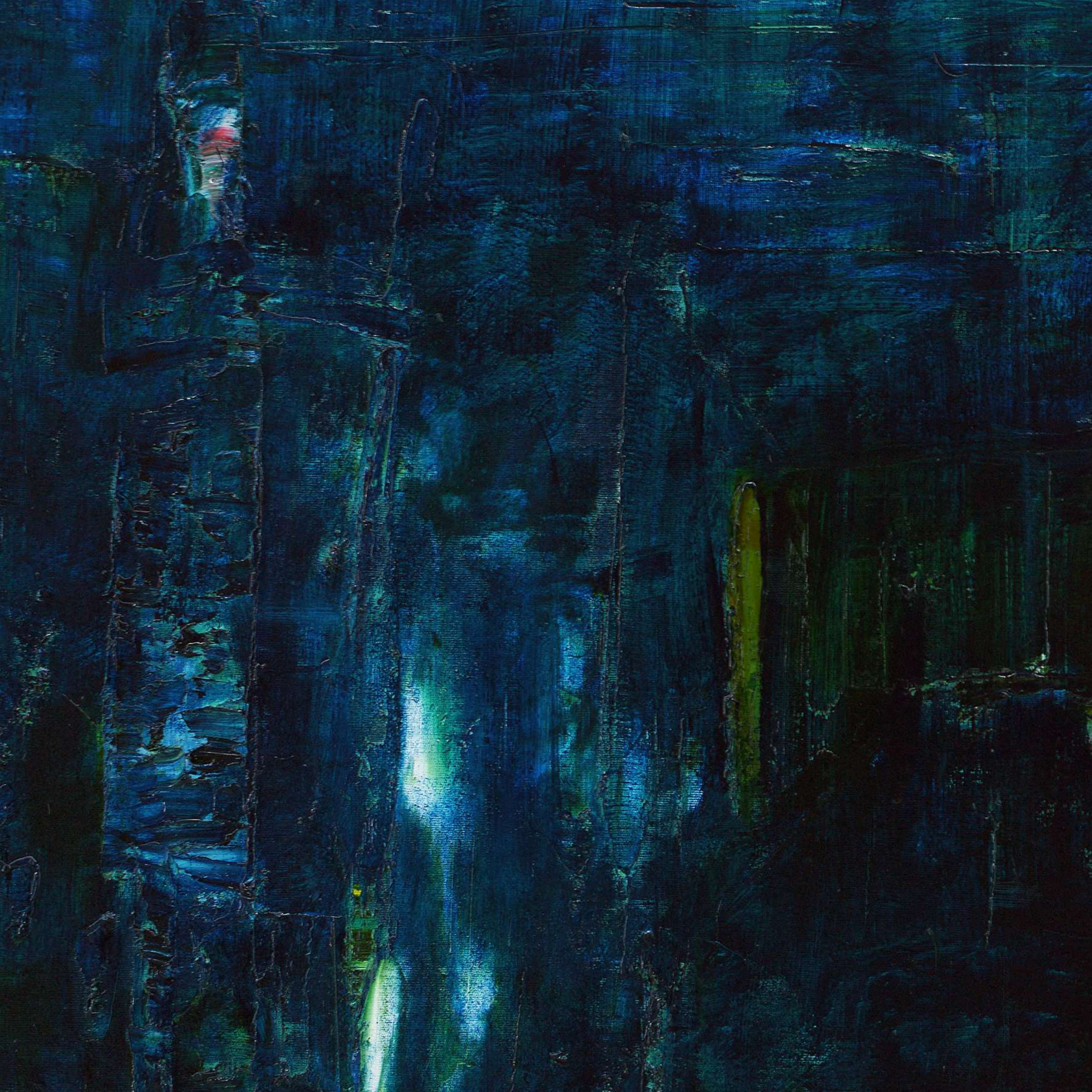
ZOROASTER CALLING #2
2015
Oil, Tar, and Enamel on Canvas
60 x 60 cm





SOONER OR LATER
2015
Oil, Tar, and Enamel on canvas
60 x 60 cm

THE RIDER / HUNT SERIES

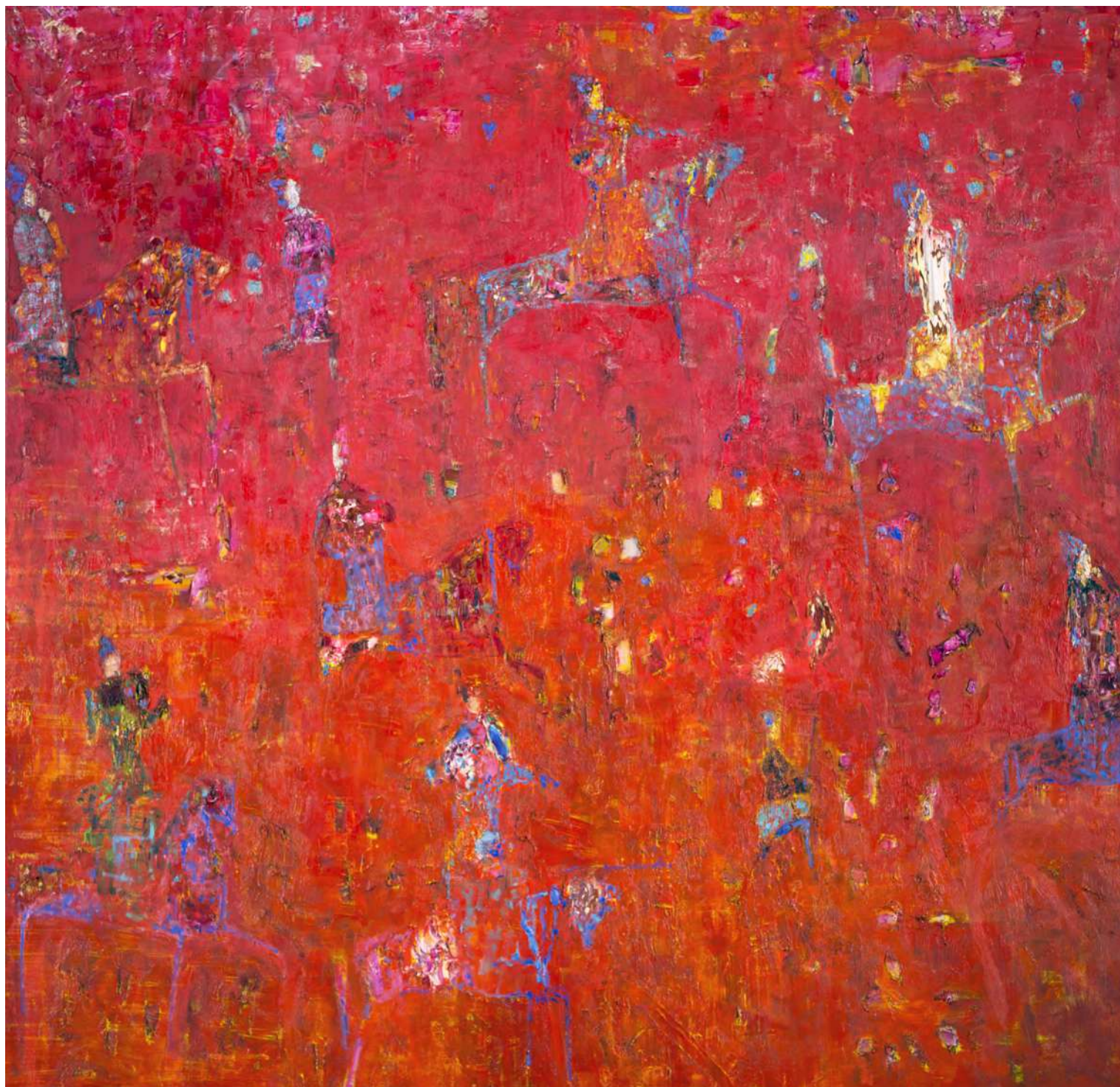








AIMING IN THE DARK
2025
Oil, Tar on canvas
133 x 133 cm



BLUE HUNT RED
2024
Oil on Canvas
200 x 233 cm



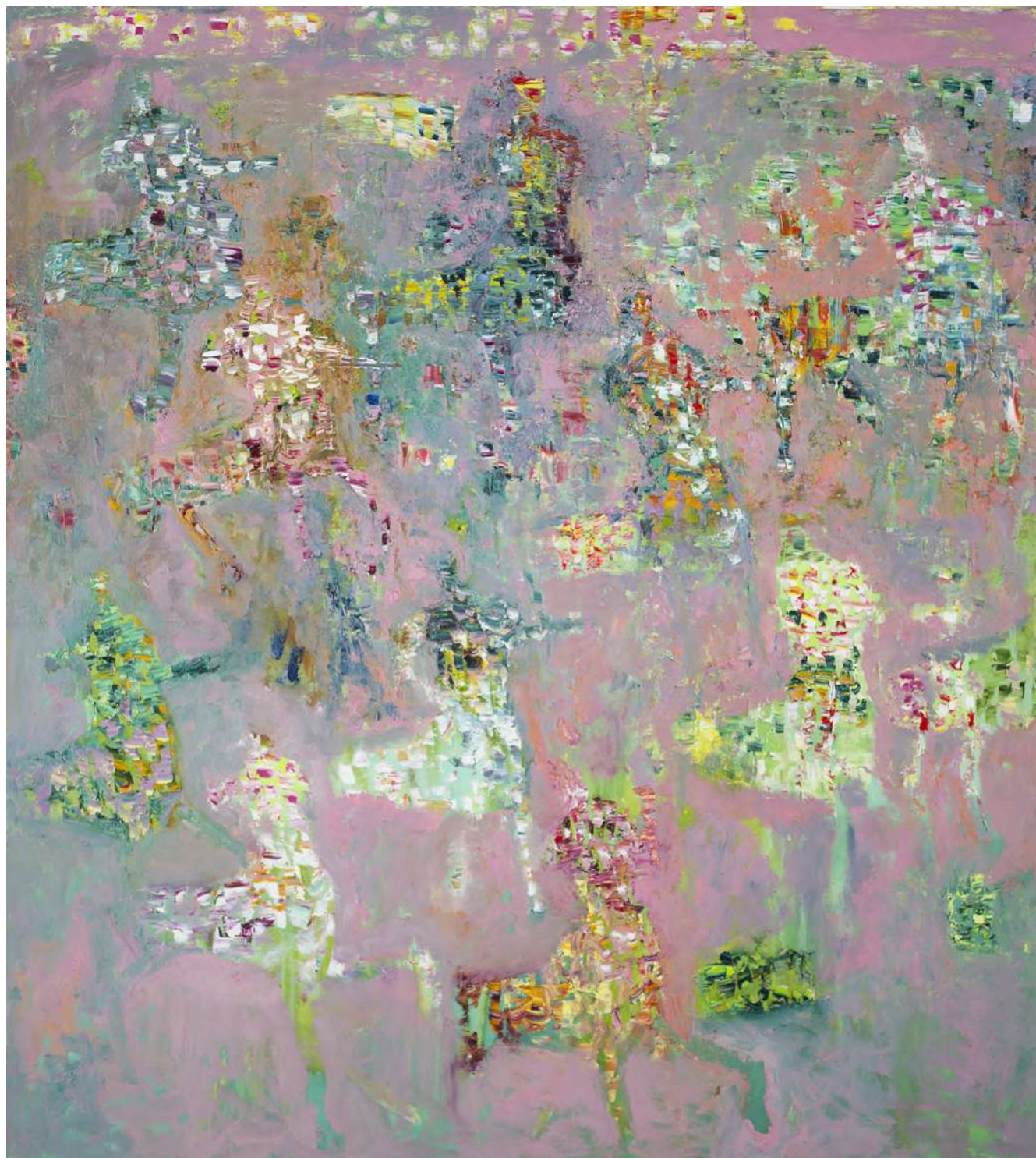
BOW HUNT, GREEN FIELD TARGET
2025
Oil on Canvas
178 x 168 cm





SILENT GOLD HUNT
2023
Oil, Gold Paste on Canvas
200 x 238 cm



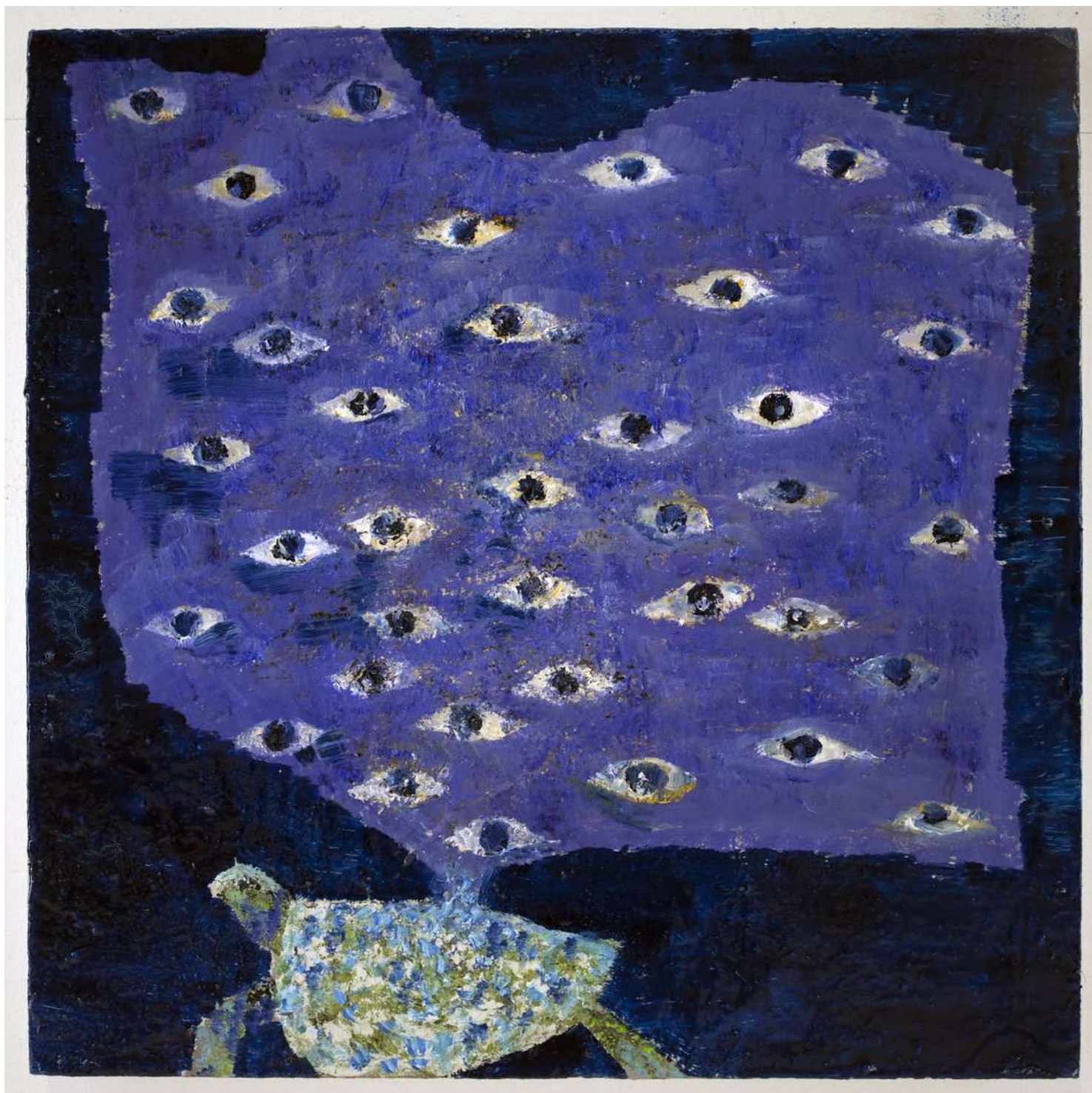


HUNTING THE SOUL
2025
Oil on Canvas
200 x 180 cm

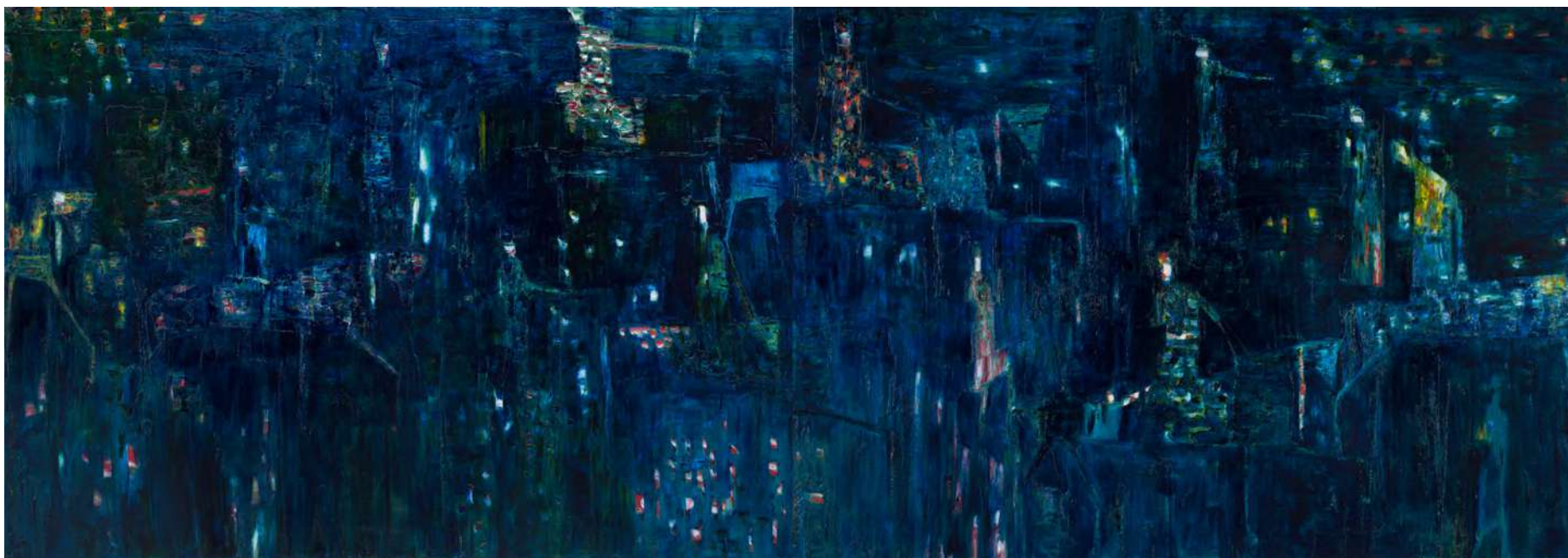




THE FIELD IS PINK TODAY
2024
Oil on Canvas
203 x 193 cm



WATCHING YOU THROUGH THE NIGHT
2015
Oil, Tar, and Enamel on Canvas
60 x 60 cm



MIDNIGHT HUNT
2024
Oil, Glaze on Canvas
Diptych
140 X 400 cm



BLUE MORNING HUNT
2024
Oil, Enamel and Tar on Canvas
205 x 185 cm

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WINTER TIME
2025

Mixed Media on Molded Fiberglass
230 x 100 x 25 cm

SUMMER TIME
2025

Mixed Media on Molded Fiberglass
230 x 100 x 25 cm

Interview by *Sosi Mehren*

Portrait photo by Kaaran

Conceptual Statement by *Reza Derakshani*

LEILA HELLER GALLERY
I-87, Alserkal Avenue, PO Box 413991,
Al Quoz 1, Dubai, UAE
www.leilahellergallery.com

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