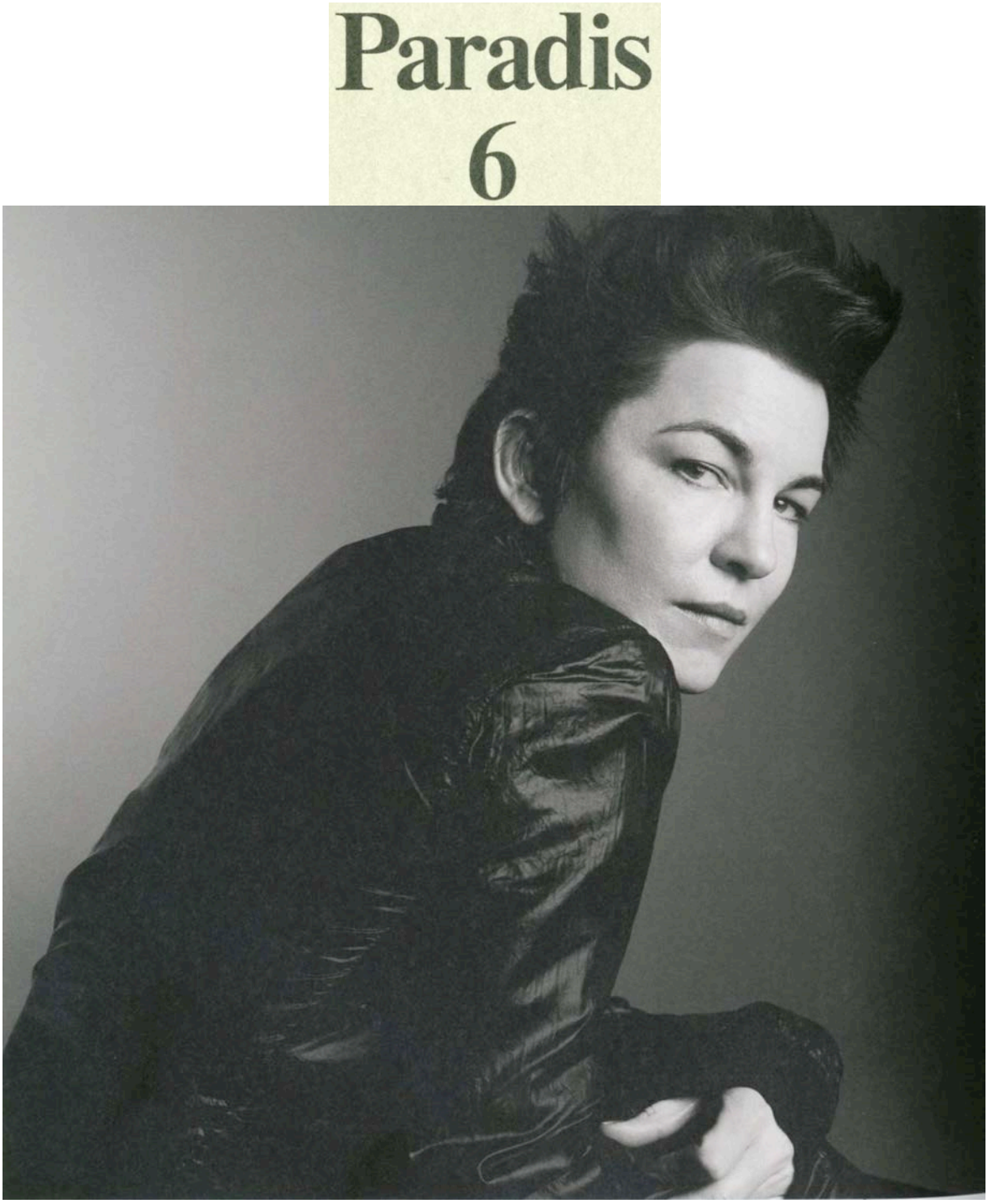
Hans Ulrich Obrist, “It’s not like science or anything: there is more of an urgency about making these pictures,” *Paradis,* June 2012



"It's not like science or anything: there is more of an urgency about making these pictures."

A conversation with Elizabeth Peyton by Hans Ulrich Obrist
Portrait by Inez van Lamsweerde & Vinoodh Matadin

Elizabeth Peyton's paintings have a refreshingly simple message: the celebrities, artists and pop stars of our time can be objects of a deep and genuine love affair. Her frail-framed models include a deathly-white Kurt Cobain, a young and androgynous David Hockney, and brooding takes on John Lennon, John Lydon and Liam Gallagher. She paints living artists and deceased superstars as cultural icons whose creative talent is matched only by their wan, impossible beauty.

Peyton often bases her paintings on photographs found in magazines. But she edits out the red carpet confusion of the paparazzi snapshot and the hard details of the portrait. Her seem comfortable and removed from the limelight: they share cigarettes, lounge around and even fall asleep. Her paintings are similarly intimate in scale, and her familial titles often only give the sitter's first name: *Kanye* (West), *Patti* (Smith), and *Em* (Eminem). She is not just a fan of these people – often, she is also close friends with them. Having worked alongside some of the most influential art world figures of the past two decades (she was championed by gallerist Gavin Brown and was married to artist Rirkrit Tiravanija) her subjects include painters, sculptors and video makers. Importantly, she does not actively seek to flatter her sitters, and is not commissioned to paint them. Rather, her images express a star-struck perspective: wowed and dazzled.

Hers is a love affair with the image, an unashamed adoration of the elegance of her peers and heroes. She literally idolizes them, using her skills as a draughtswoman and colourist to imbue artists, actors and musicians with a grace they may not always have in real life. Recently she has focussed on still lifes (flowers, vases, tabletops), which allude to celebrities of an older sort (including Wagner, Balzac and Cezanne). Peyton has even suggested that her images are, in a sense, political: all of her subjects are individuals that we too might love and admire.

Hans Ulrich Obrist: We've known each other for a long time but I've never asked you about the very beginning. How did you come to art or how did art come to you? Did you have a kind of epiphany?

Elizabeth Peyton: Even as a child I was always making art; making pictures of people even though it was a little unfocused at the time. Then as I got into school, I had some good teachers – maybe they could see the world I needed to be pointed in the direction of, pointing Balzac novels in my face and stuff like that – and I felt like I was discovering my interests. Then I had this really bad summer when I was very depressed and poor. I had no money but I did have a couple of books: the biography of Napoleon and the biography of Marie-Antoinette, and while reading that book about Napoleon I did have 'a moment', as you say, a kind of epiphany. I remember thinking to myself: 'Ah! This is what it is about; history is in people, they contain everything about their time. One person really can change the world.' That helped me to realise why I wanted to make pictures of people... that's my interest in life. And so from there on I became much more focused. It's not like science or anything: it had more of an urgency about it, like a real necessity, which is why I felt it was so important to make these pictures.

Where would you say your catalogue raisonné starts?

There's one picture: a charcoal drawing of Napoleon. That was the first picture where I thought this is really what I wanted to do and thought it just contained every thing I felt strongly about...

So it was related to reading the biography?

Oh yes, it's kind of like in those Anne Rice vampire books: the vampires bury themselves underground for 200 years at a time and then they resurface super powerful. That summer was a bit like that for me, not that I'm super powerful, but I really didn't do anything other than read those books and then something just happened.

And when did you exhibit for the first time and make your work public?

Actually, right when I got out of school I showed in a gallery. I was making pictures based on reading Proust, like just imagining what the people looked like and stuff, but the work wasn't really there yet. The first 'real' show was with Gavin [Brown]. Gavin didn't even have a gallery at the time, but somebody said, 'Just get a room at the Chelsea Hotel.' It was room 828 and I showed these drawings I'd been making: the King of Thailand, Marie-Antoinette, kind of forbidden drawings. Everyone would just laugh when I told them what I was doing!

So it started with drawings rather than paintings?

Yes, because back then I didn't really have a studio. I had a job and drawing was what I could do at the time.

When you started to do your first projects, who were your inspirations in art?

At that moment my inspirations were people who weren't alive, like Ludwig or Balzac or Proust. That made a lot more sense to me.

So a lot of writers?

Yes, but I guess as soon as I started exhibiting, I got more excited about other artists around me. I was very inspired by Gavin Brown, of course. I liked Manet a lot, but at that point I had no idea who Hockney was or Alice Neel or Georgia O'Keeffe...

So it was more literature at the beginning and then little by little art?

Well, I got more into music around that time, then I got into art.

Could you talk a little bit more about this whole connection to literature? It's quite rare in contemporary art whereas back in the Dada and Surrealist times it was common.

Yes, you don't see that very often now; writers seem to be in their own cultural

sphere. I was reading a lot and thinking I'd like to see pictures of what I was reading about. With a lot of older things those pictures just wouldn't exist; I think that's where the urge came from.

And who were, and still are, your inspirations in literature? You've mentioned Balzac...
I love Balzac, how he sees the world. My book entitled *Reading and Writing* was inspired by re-reading Madame Bovary. I kind of had an epiphany about it, that sounds so stupid, but a couple of years ago I re-read it in a day and it made me rethink my feelings about being romantic. I realised I had moved on from where I had been when I was 25, where I just maybe wanted to be stuck in the same romantic reverie. I saw more darkness when I read it again and understand that that isn't the goal. So the texts in my book are to do with this and the way they are connected is the realisation of that.

And what's the connection to Flaubert?
I guess there is part of him that is very romantic. I don't know, I'm sorry, I'm not being very articulate. I like how he identifies with Madame Bovary, it's like while he ridicules her, he knows he too is Madame Bovary, in the same way we all are. Someone supposedly asked him, "How could you write about someone you hate so much?", to which he replied, "What? I *am* Madame Bovary!"

That is so contemporary!
Do you know the book about him by Francis Steegmuller called *Flaubert and Madame Bovary*? It's kind of a double portrait of him writing the book. It's one of my favourite books. He also translated the Egyptian diaries.

What's your connection to photography?
Well I guess it's not something I think about too much anymore, I just use it when I need it. In the past I would have a painting of Napoleon that I would use as a reference to make the portraits. In a way, I find the still lives that I'm making right now a way of using my imagination more, especially when people are in it because I'm using the cover of a book or something like that. It's not really about them in a way, it becomes more imaginative.

So they are like a continuum of that work.
Yes, a bit. I feel like my head is a bit more there.

And when did the first painting of photography enter the scene?
The first painting show I did with Gavin was mostly from photographs, a lot of Kurt Cobain. With rock photography there can be really crazy light and colour that you would never see in everyday life. For me bad photography and mistakes, particularly my own, can suggest something I wouldn't have otherwise seen.

How do you make the transition from Napoleon to Kurt Cobain?
Well, I think it's really similar, the idea that somebody could just have easily taken drugs, for instance, and that would have summed up his life, but that he found a way to express his feelings and just fulfilling his own needs really. But it also reflected a need outside of him and what was around him at the same time, which was like an explosion. It's so powerful, that just one person doing what they had to do can change everything.

But he also became a kind of compressed idea of a whole generation within one person.
Yes, yes, that's the other thing that is so interesting, that we really need that from people and that we want them to be that. But on the other hand he needed something too.

The Cobain thing is also a generational thing, our generation, because he was the same age as us, right?
Yes, a little younger I think, maybe, but just a couple of years...

Moving on from Kurt Cobain, how have you felt about being loosely part of a movement of artists, or perhaps you've never felt part of a movement.
I've never felt part of a movement, especially when I was starting out. There were a lot of artists around me I really liked but they weren't painters; I felt very strongly about their work and how beautiful it was and how necessary it was. I didn't really see that around painters and it felt like nobody wanted to see my work at that time. So I didn't feel part of anything. Ultimately, I think it's more the fact that people kind of throw me in with certain other artists, but it was never as conscious as that. Sometimes it's hard to tell how you feel about being part of a group because you don't know any different really. I suppose in the 90s there was an international group show that a lot of people started in, that ended up with that Nicolas Bourriaud title, *Relational Aesthetics*, would you say that's a group?

But it was never really a movement with a manifesto.
No, nobody put their foot down to say it's this way or no way.

So what were the next steps? I think it's interesting to look at the practice and see what were the explosive moments.
I guess the next one would be the Kurt pictures, because they were a recognition of my time. You know, he had just died, he was just a little younger than myself but I thought "Wow, this is my time and this person existed now." And then I sort of looked around me a little bit and I started making paintings of artists. At the time I was specifically finding out about David Hockney and I was very interested in his sense of humanism and how important that was in art.

So we could say that was your third epiphany?
Yes, that was a pretty big deal. Georgia O'Keeffe too. On discovering her work,

"While reading about Napoleon, I remember thinking, 'One person really *can* change the world.' That made me realise why I wanted to make pictures of people."

I didn't know why I hadn't grown up looking at it and why nobody had ever suggested that it would be kind of obvious for me. But seeing her paintings in real life was so exciting, to see the paint. People overlook certain artists so much and then you actually see the work and it changes everything.

And did that Georgia O'Keeffe experience produce a show also, like the Cobain show?
Kind of, there was one show in around 2007 where I would say she was the underlying anchor. That quite often happens with me where there'll be one painting I've been trying to make in the beginning, or throughout the whole period, and that becomes the anchor, the focus.

So that was the Georgia O'Keeffe moment.
Yes, 2006 or 2007. Also around that time I started painting more women. Not in a conscious way but it just started happening. There was a painting I made of two writers that are friends of mine, two sisters and that was part of that show too.

Who are they?
Liz and Diana Welch.

So in the 2000s more women entered your work?
Yes, it just sort of happened naturally.

You once said in an interview that people change every second and that is a good reason to paint... and so there's this idea that it always changes and you can't really freeze it.
But it's perfect for painting in a way because painting isn't made in a flash. It's a way of containing a lot of different things about a person so you can have a bigger grasp of the person inside of that.

Do you think there can be a definitive portrait of someone?
I think it is possible to grasp something very essential in people that's – it's going to sound corny – to do with their soul. It's more than just how they look.

To capture someone's soul, so to speak?
Yes, and it comes out in ways in the painting other than just the description of how somebody looks. There's just more feeling.

Do you ever have the feeling when you're making or completing a portrait that, 'Yes, that's it, that's how they are' or are you constantly calling your work into question?
No, I'd never think that way! I'm just trying to respond to what I'm seeing. But, then again, and I'm thinking of that Gertrude Stein painting by Picasso, which is like a piece of stone, it's so there, that's so it. Yes, yes that is her and it is so beyond any physical description of her.

The subjects of your many different portraits are so varied: your friends, people you've encountered along the way, people who are very well known in their particular field... Let's talk about how you choose these varied subjects for what I consider to be your ever-growing portrait gallery.
I wonder if it would be somewhat similar to how you go about selecting your interviewees actually. I don't really choose, and it's not like I am trying to 'complete the library.' It's either a case of me seeing a person or seeing their work, and it happens to correspond perfectly to what I'm thinking about at any one time.

So chance plays a role?
Yes, a big role.

Do you have unrealised portraits? Portraits that you always wanted to do?
Yes I do actually. A couple of people have said no to me!

Who turned you down?
I can't say (laughs). Oh, and there's someone right now who I've been trying to call. Although I'm not making as many portraits lately; I haven't met so many people who I've wanted to do. There is one person, an artist, who I have been trying to contact. But I can't do something on someone who doesn't want to. Well, I could scour the internet but when it's somebody who is alive and who's in my orbit, it's nice to do it live. I really trust my instinct to do things, when they feel right... and often later you find out why.

And you've done politicians too.
When I was much younger I painted Mitterrand.

Yes, Mitterrand and now Obama.
Yes, I've done a painting of Obama, it's hiding in my studio at home and I made another painting that was in Basel last year. And then there's a painting of Michelle that I've done. I would have thought I would be making lots of pictures about Obama but I find the whole structure so disappointing, hope isn't located in there, things aren't changing...it's so impossible for him to get anything done...

So it has to do with hope? That's fascinating.
Yes, like something you believe in.

Gerhard Richter once said that painting is the highest form of hope.
Yes, belief.

What would be your definition of painting?
That's a really good one. I guess I would say love.

And what would be your advice to a young painter. Rainer Maria Rilke wrote this little book which contains advice to a young poet.
I read that when I was younger. It's so nice. I think I would say to just create what you most want to see.

Do you have any unrealised projects aside form the unrealised portraits? Dreams or utopias?

No, I think it's all already in there, the dream is doing this. Once when I was younger I thought I was going to die. I had what I thought was a dying moment and I thought it would be great to make a video, which I never did. Or make a film. I only ever wanted to make pictures.

Have you ever done any public commissions?
No, but I once did a public art fund commission that was making pictures for a hotel.

Can you tell me more about this?
That was when I first started making prints actually, and they were both commissions, they commissioned me to make five prints for a hotel downtown and they were going to put it in the rooms. I thought that was fantastic. And I loved the idea of making prints, something repeatable and reproducible. They were lithographs of Prince Harry, Prince William, Jackie Kennedy...

Art for all.
Yes, that is an aspect to my work. On the surface, it's very accessible. Anybody can come to it. Like when I had a show in a pub in Brixton, I like how things like that work.

So basically you would subscribe to the Gilbert & George idea of art for all.
Yes. Oh, actually, I don't know though. I was in the Musée d'Orsay recently and I was questioning whether this should be for everybody. I thought maybe it would be a little bit better if it was private and you maybe had to make an appointment to go there.

Like it used to be with the Soane's Museum in London.
We went there today, it was really good.

So what is your favourite museum?
Gosh, I have a lot. What about you, what's your favourite museum?

My favourite childhood museum is the Kunsthaus in Zurich because that was where I discovered Giacometti's long thin figures.
For me the first museum was the Metropolitan Museum of Art. But the art museum in Vienna, the Kunsthistorisches... ahh, it's so great, the quality of the work, the rooms. I love all those painters, Van Dyke, Velázquez. I love museums so much.

One gets the sense that the worlds of dance, music and fashion are particularly attracted to your work. But my question is how do you connect to these fields and if you have any collaborations?
I'm a lover of all those things but what I do doesn't really lend itself to collaboration with a dancer or a musician, do you know what I mean? Having said that, Michael Clark performed a small dance piece for the opening of my show at the Whitechapel – he danced with my paintings, it was so amazing. It wouldn't have been anything I could ever have suggested, he just did that on his own. Even the costumes they were wearing were from colours specific to the paintings and they were looking at the paintings and the faces, and because they had faces, it worked really well. I've never seen my work mixed in with another medium like that, but I loved it.

And what about your link to fashion?
I love clothes [laughs] and I'm really interested in how fashion is kind of a distillation of everything that is out there in a way that definitely isn't forever, the way art can be. It doesn't have that other component. But it has to be useful on some other level; you have to be able to wear it. So I'm interested in fashion but it's not like I seek out people to do things with. I've done some pictures with some people and clothes.

Like?
Like Marc Jacobs, Dries van Noten...

You've not done like Jeff Koons who designed for Stella McCartney?
I was once approached by a very popular shoemaker to design a shoe – so I wanted to design a shoe in homage to Queen Elizabeth, which I thought was great, but I guess it was a little dowdy.

So that's an unrealised project, an unrealised shoe!
I'd forgotten about all these unrealised things!

So the way you disseminate your work into multiples is more through the prints.
It's been important since I started doing it; it's always a way to get me going when I'm starting on new work or whatever, I love making prints.

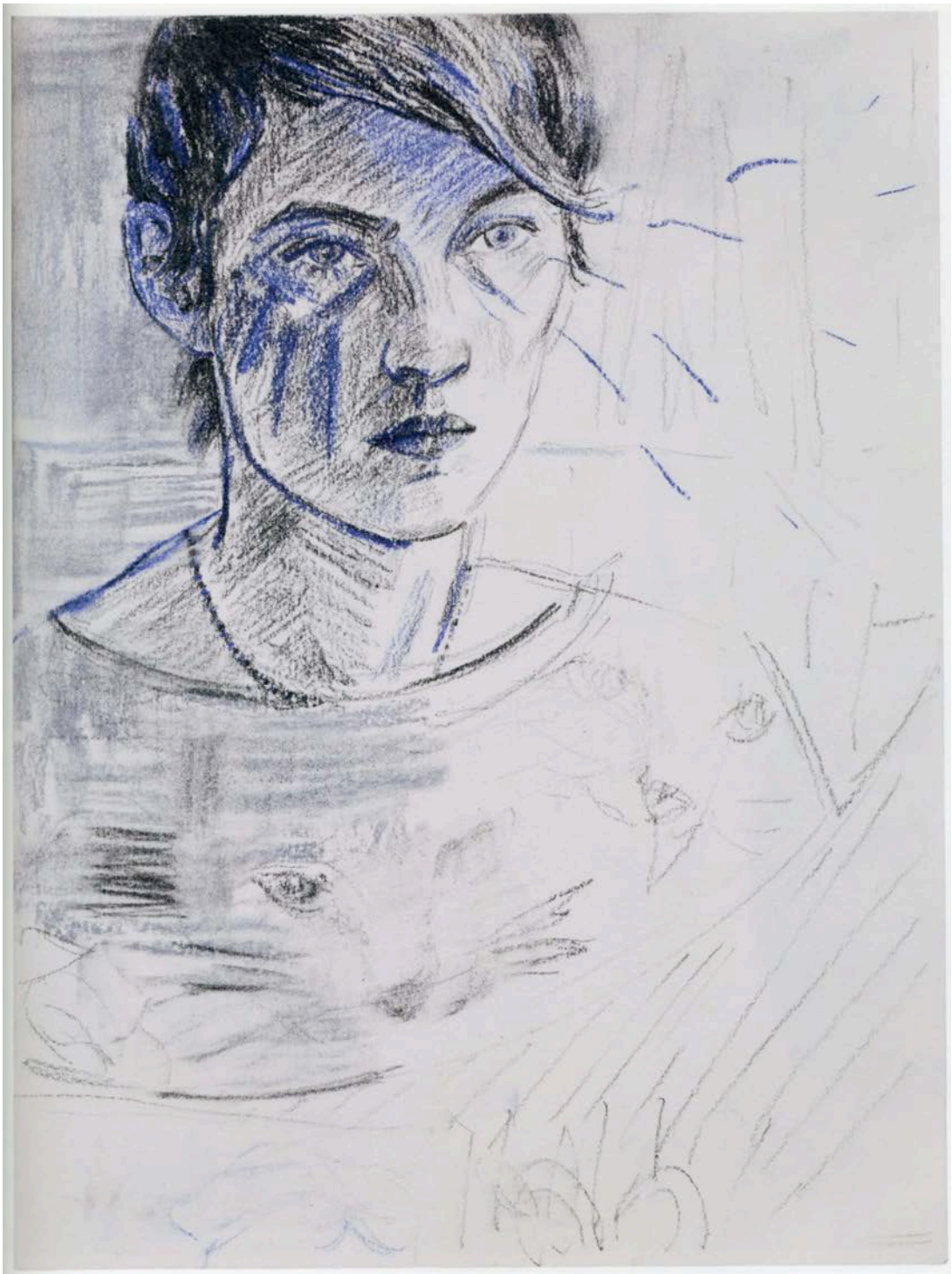
And you've done so many prints that they can form a show really.
Yes and they're weirdly all from one week in 2002 when I first started making them. It really was like an explosion of printmaking. I didn't know what monotypes were or anything and I'd thought, "Why would anyone ever do that?", but then again it was so much fun.

The new prints are based on your exhibitions at the Metropolitan Opera. They're not illustrations of Wagner, they're more sort of details...
Yes, they're 'to do with'. They're bigger than the work I usually produce too. So much of Wagner is about giants, everything is larger than life and huge. The singer is such a giant, I love how big he his and I wanted to make something big.

What's the biggest work you've ever done?
I once made a huge painting of Jake Chapman which is probably six and a half feet tall, and I also did one of Piotr lying down on the couch that was probably bigger than life-size. It wasn't one of my most successful works. I mean, they're all right.

What's your smallest work?
Oh, I don't know *(continued on page 397)*

"I was in the Musée d'Orsay recently, and I was questioning whether it should be open for all to see. Maybe it would be better if it was actually private."



Self-Portrait (Berlin), 2009. Pastel pencil on paper, 8 3/8 x 7 inches (21.3 x 17.8 cm)

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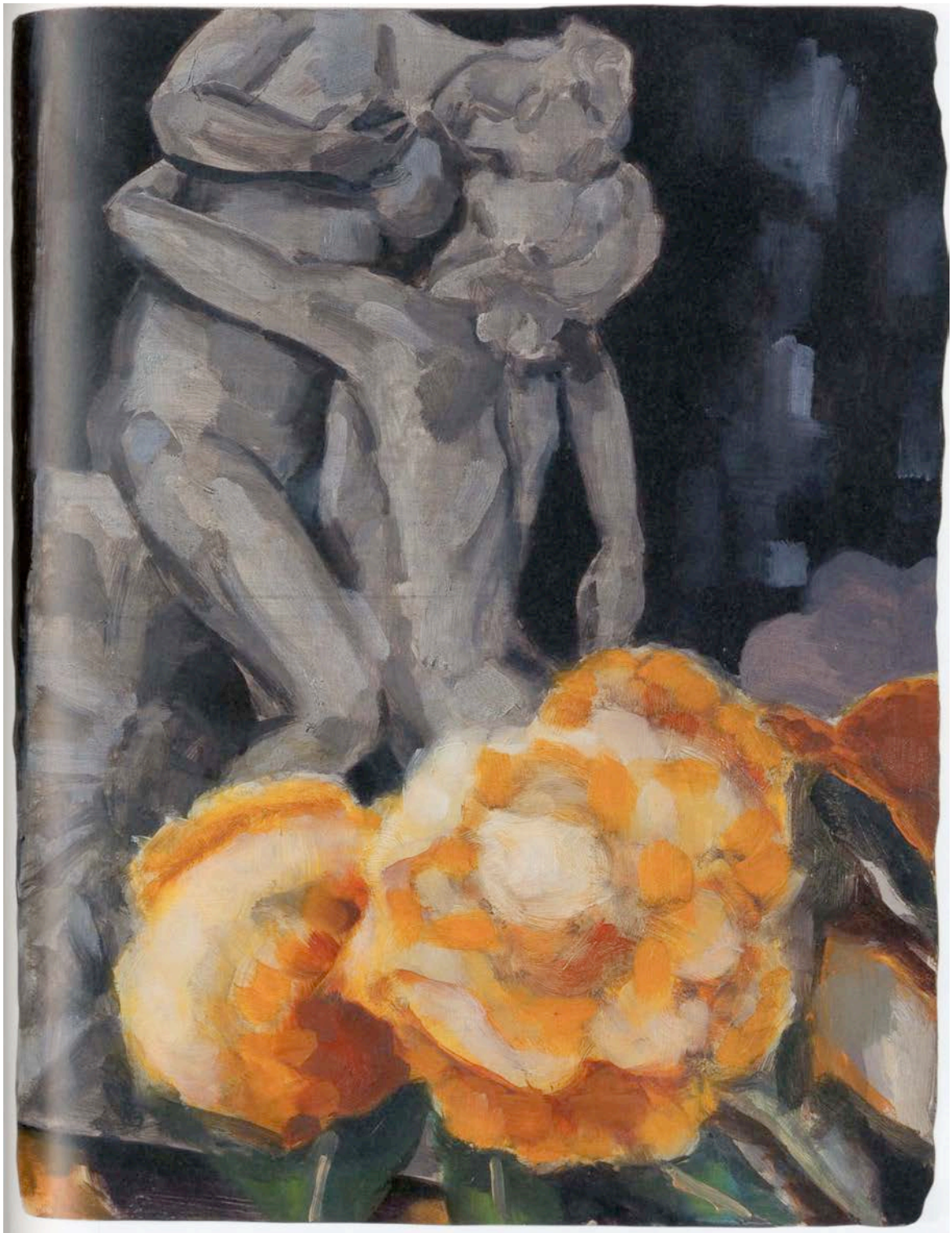

Camille Claudel Book and Flowers, 2010-2011. Oil on fiberglass honeycomb panel, 12 x 9 1/4 inches (30.5 x 23.5 cm)

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Acteon, Justin Bieber and Grey Roses, 2010-2011. Oil on fiberglass honeycomb panel, 12 1/4 x 9 1/4 inches (31.1 x 23.5 cm)

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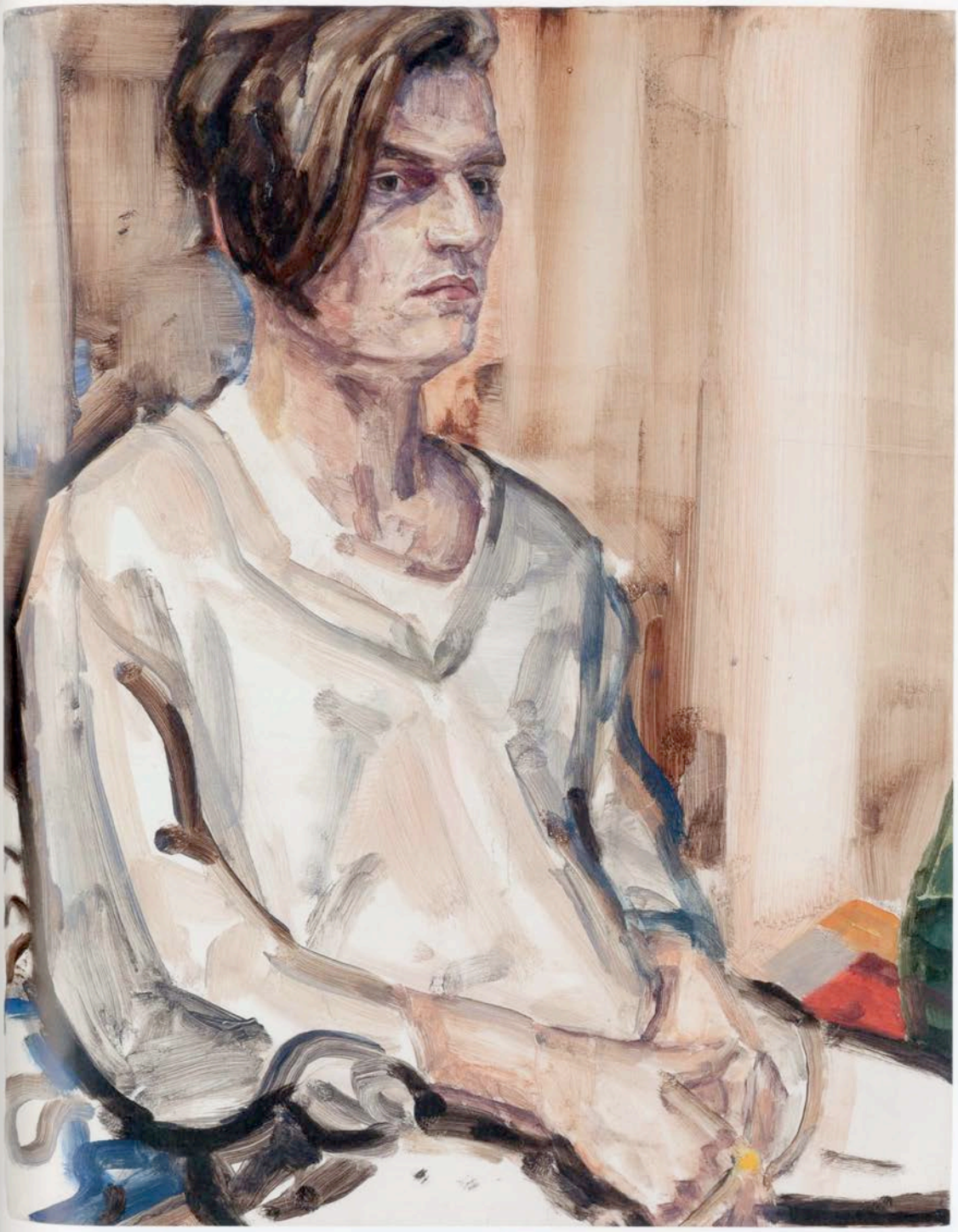

Nate (Nate Lowman, NYC, 2011), 2011. Oil on board, 14 x 11 inches (35.6 x 27.9 cm)

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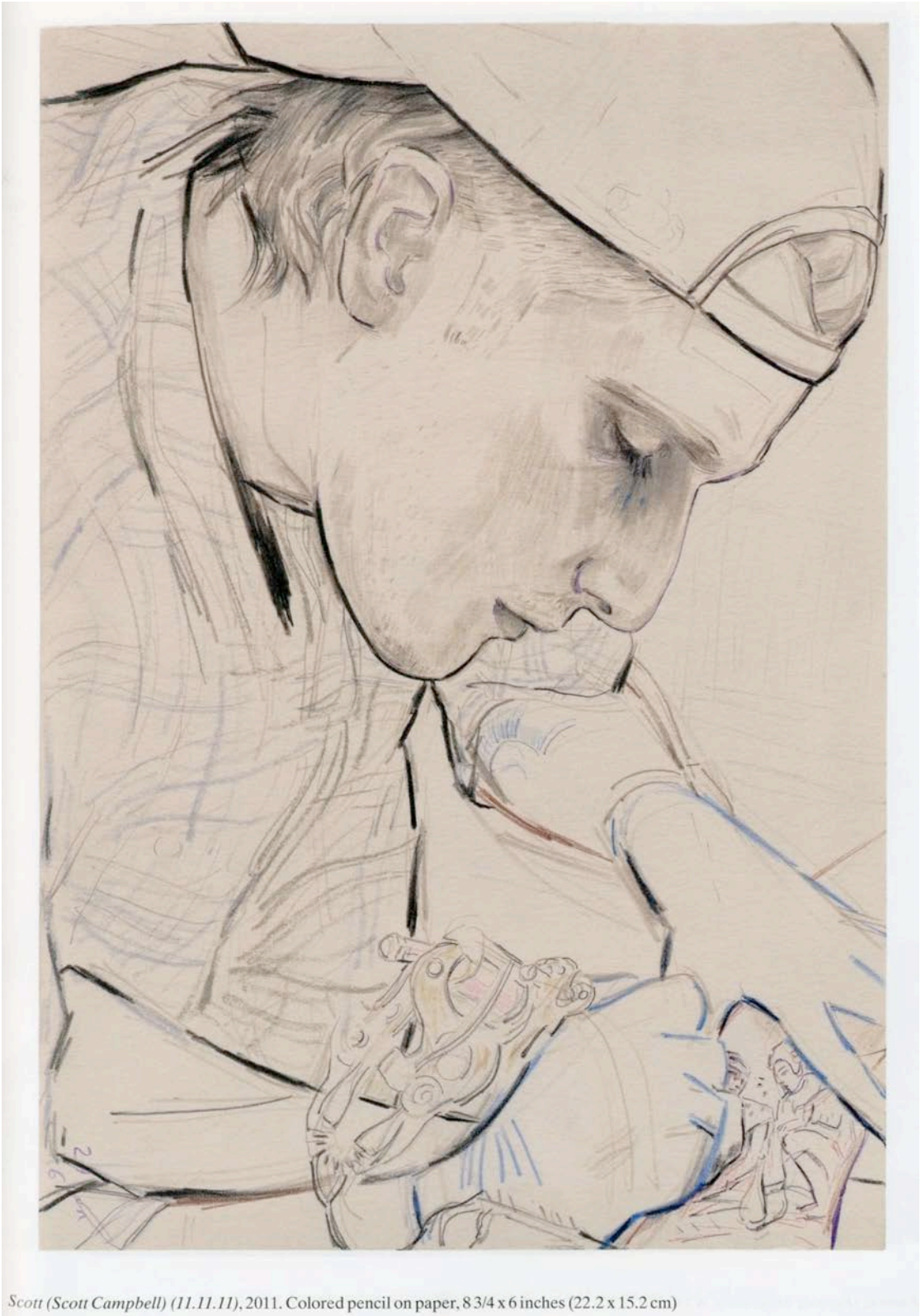
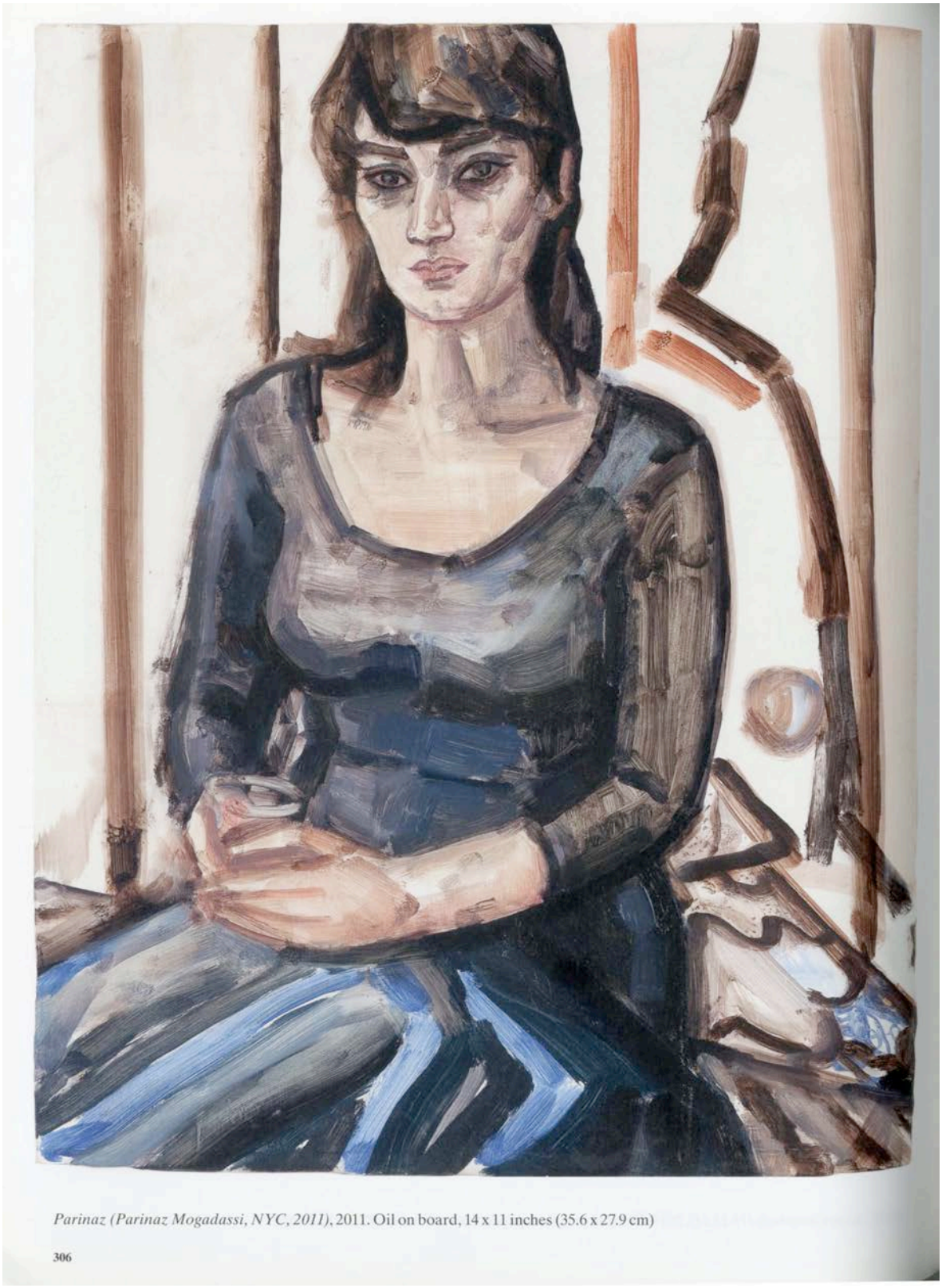


Scott (Scott Campbell) (11.11.11), 2011. Colored pencil on paper, 8 3/4 x 6 inches (22.2 x 15.2 cm)



Parinaz (Parinaz Mogadassi, NYC, 2011), 2011. Oil on board, 14 x 11 inches (35.6 x 27.9 cm)

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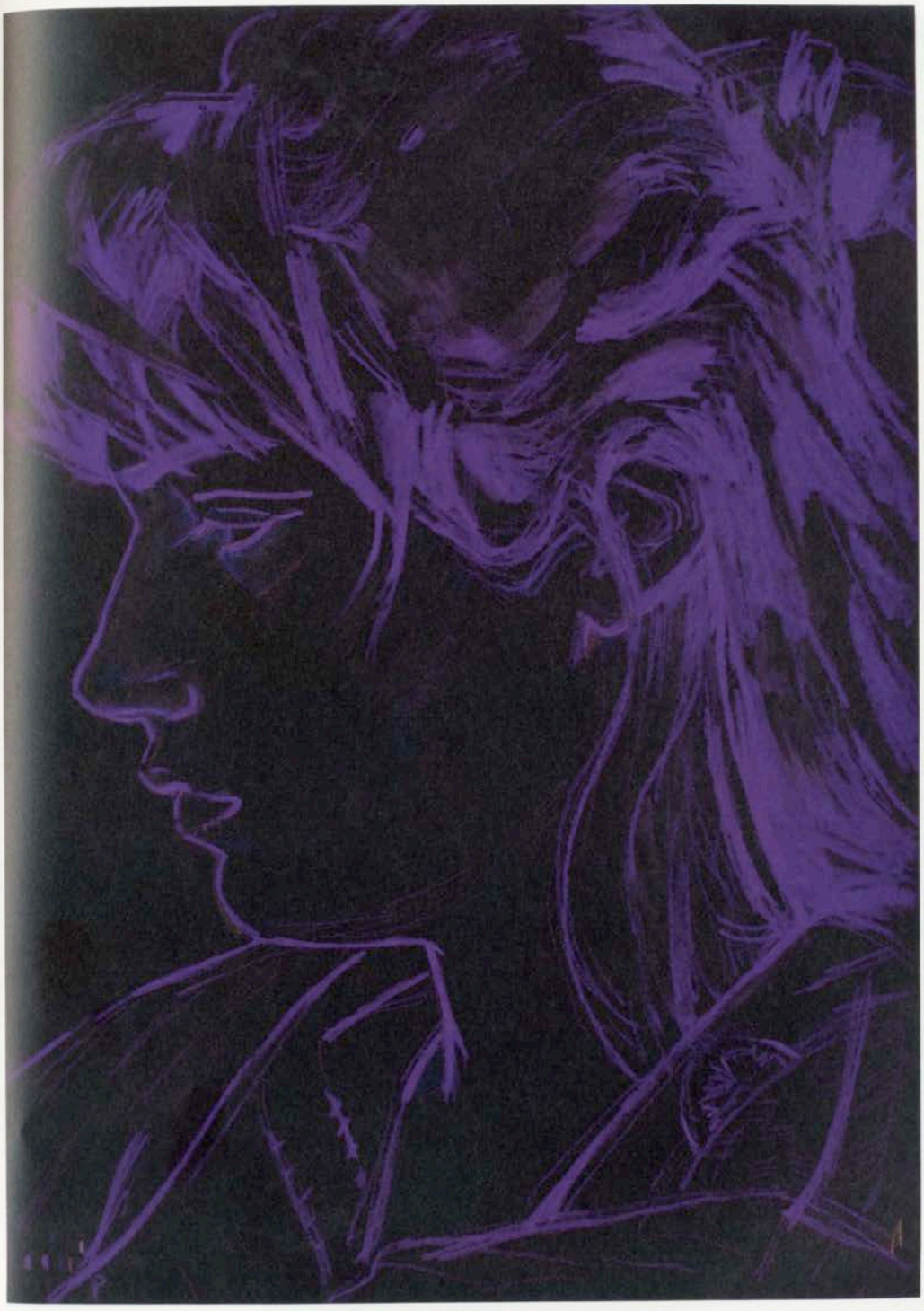

Parinaz (Parinaz Mogadassi), 2011. Pastel and pencil on black paper, 11 1/2 x 16 1/2 inches (29.2 x 41.9 cm)

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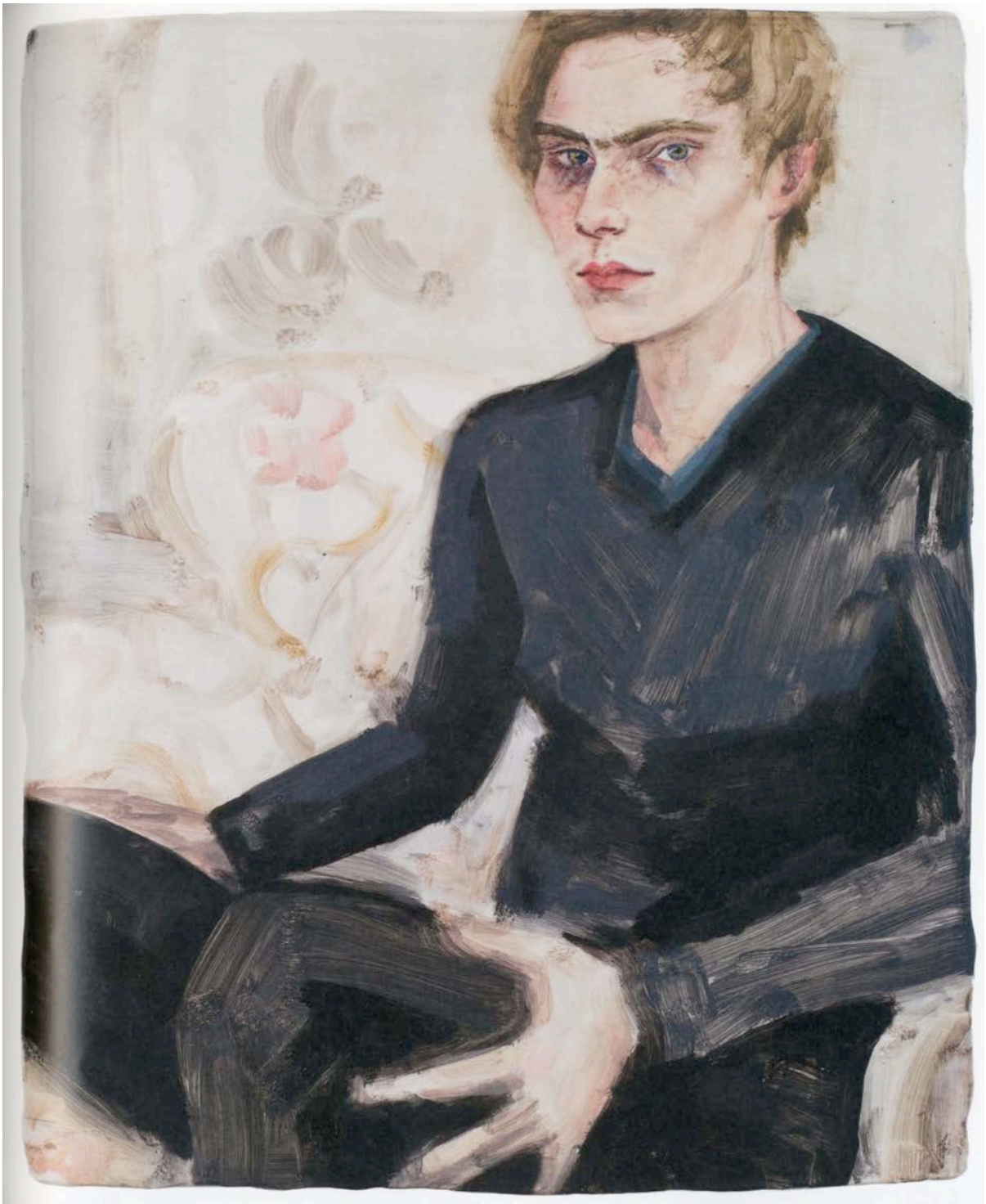

Klara, NYC, 2009-2010. Oil on board, 10 x 8 inches (25.4 x 20.3 cm)

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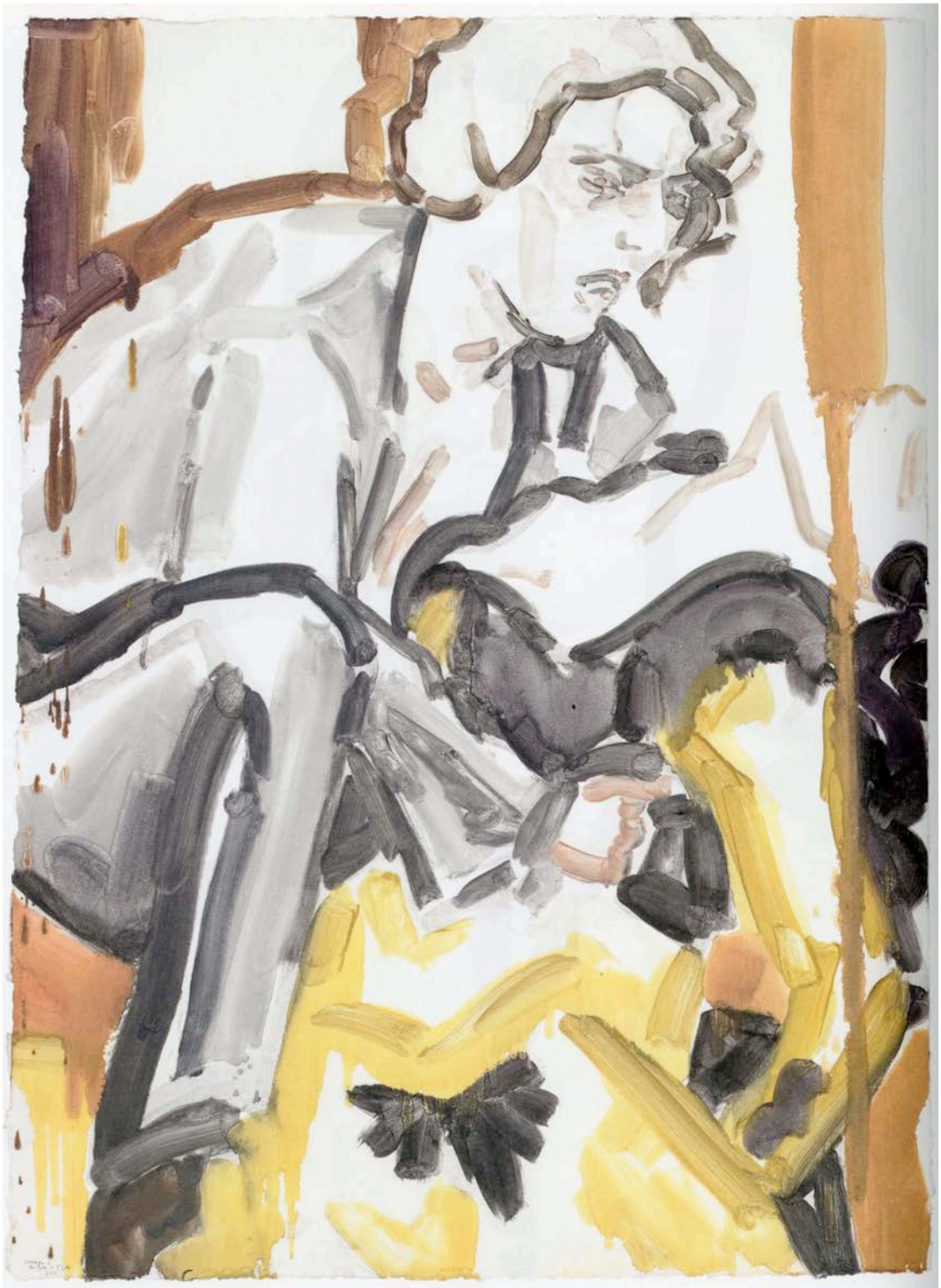
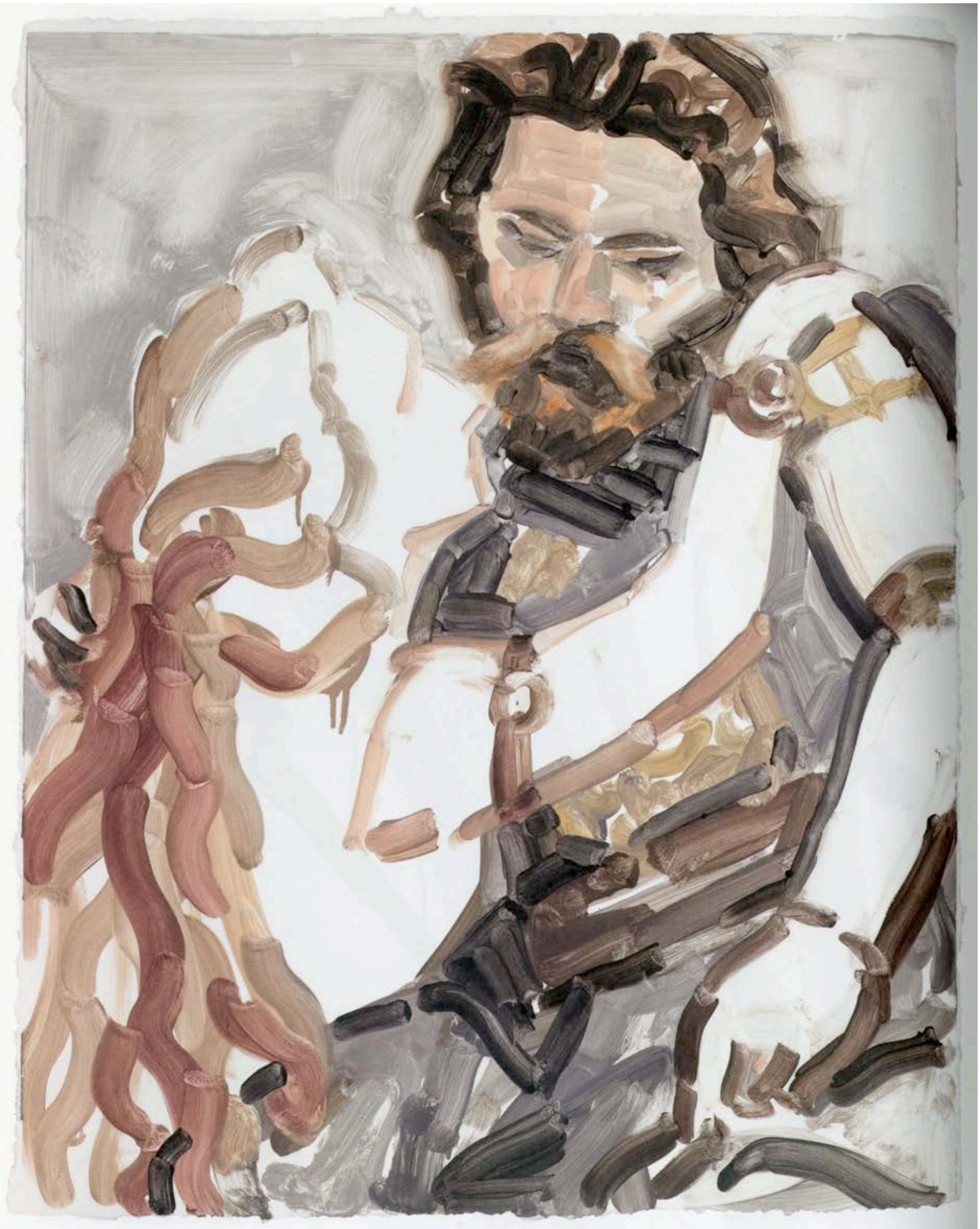


Carmen 3, 2011. Monotype on handmade paper, 47 x 33 1/2 inches (119.4 x 85.1 cm)

Carmen, Jonas Kaufmann (2), 2011. Monotype on handmade paper, 47 1/2 x 34 inches (120.7 x 86.4 cm)

Larry Gagosian, July 2010, #1. Monotype on handmade paper, 30 x 22 inches (76.2 x 55.9 cm)



Giant, Tristan and Isolde (Ludwig and Malvine Schnorr Von Carolsfeld, 1865) #1, 2010. Monotype on handmade paper, 38 1/4 x 30 1/2 inches (97.2 x 77.5 cm)

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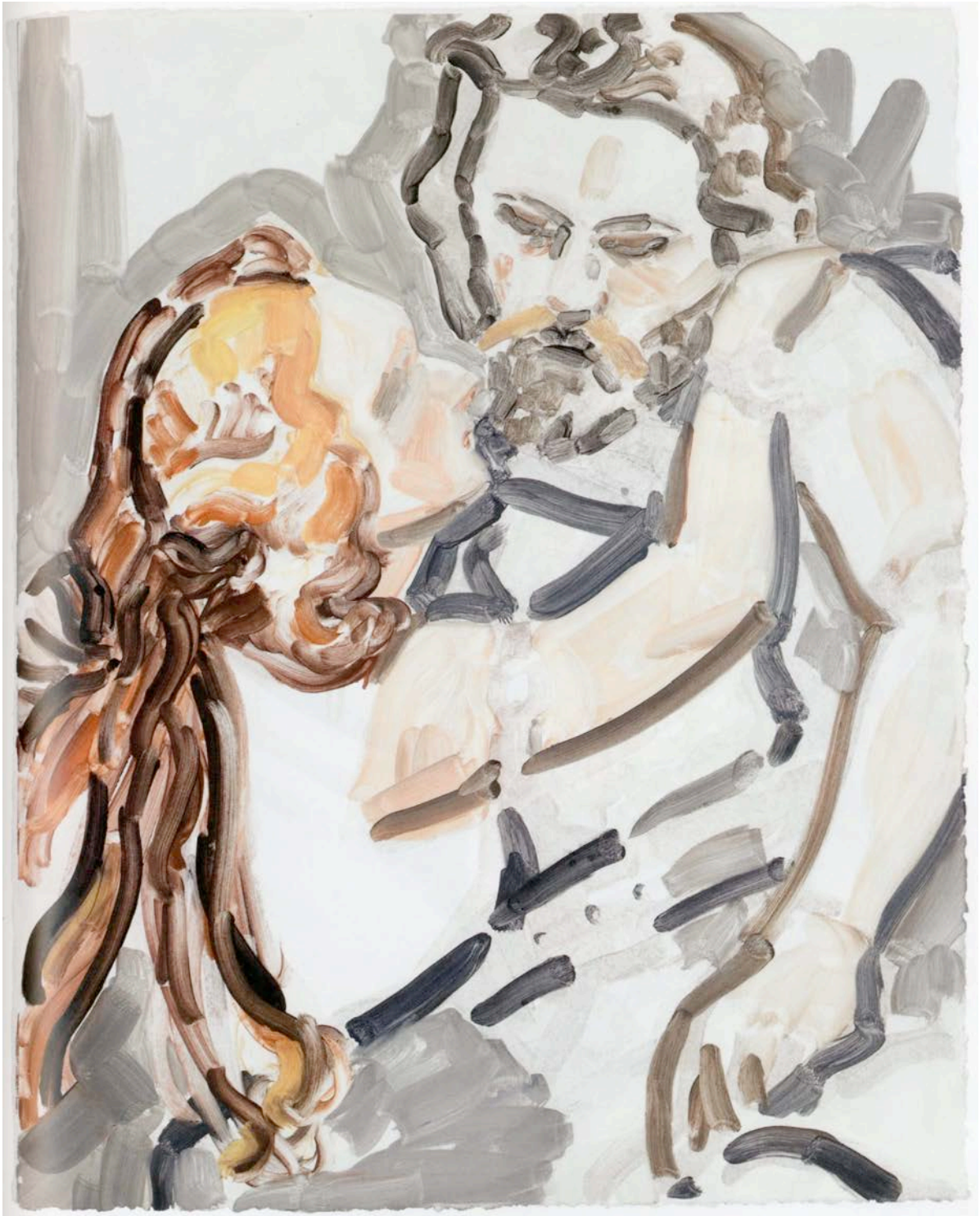

Giant, Tristan and Isolde (Ludwig and Malvine Schnorr Von Carolsfeld, 1865) #2, 2010. Monotype on handmade paper, 38 1/4 x 30 1/2 inches (97.2 x 77.5 cm)

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Giant, Tristan and Isolde (Ludwig and Malvine Schnorr Von Carolsfeld, 1865) #3, 2010. Monotype on handmade paper, 38 1/4 x 30 1/2 inches (97.2 x 77.5 cm)

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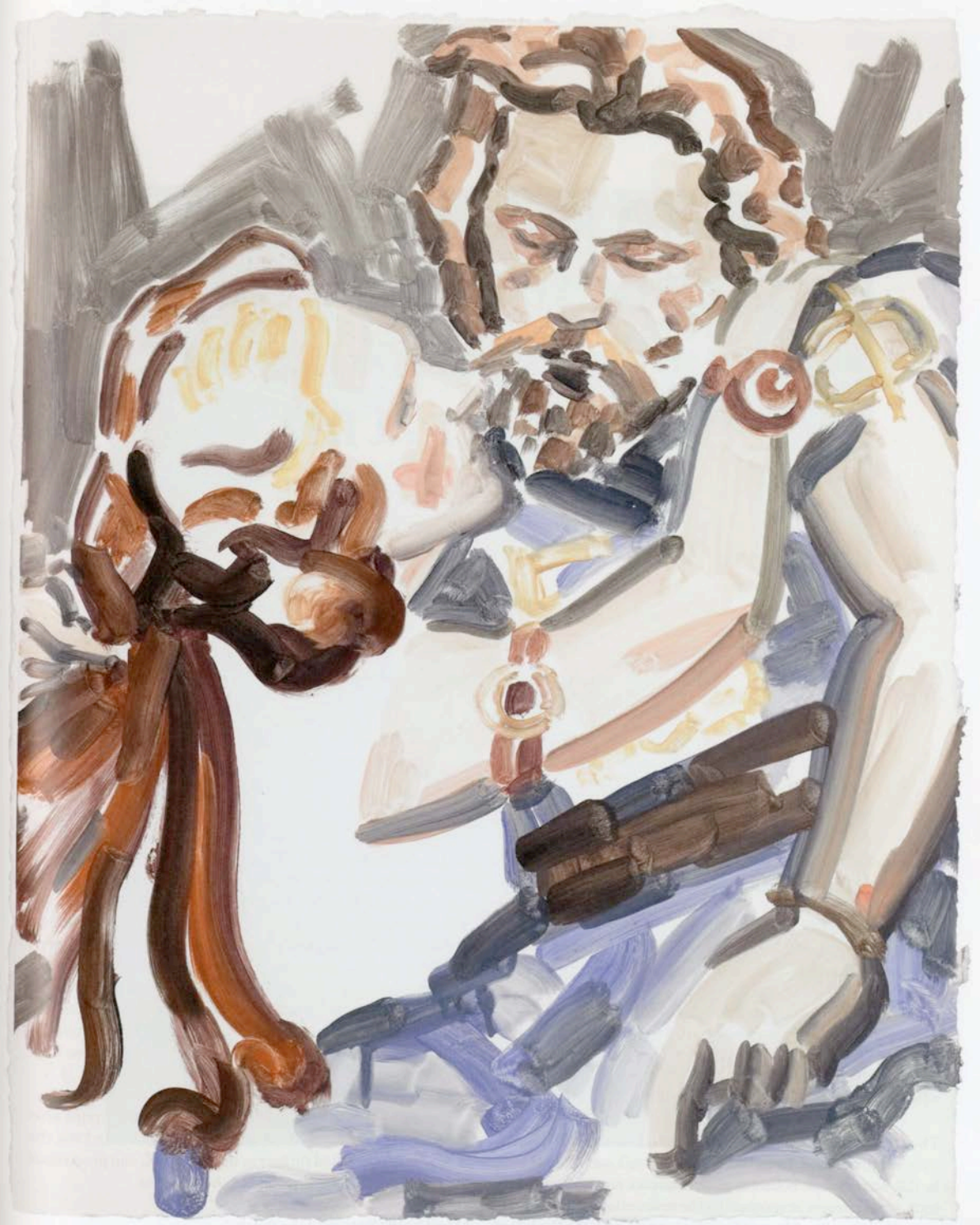

Giant, Tristan and Isolde (Ludwig and Malvine Schnorr Von Carolsfeld, 1865) #4, 2010. Monotype on handmade paper, 38 1/4 x 30 1/2 inches (97.2 x 77.5 cm)